

Violin Concerto No. 1 in D major, Op. 19

Sergei Prokofiev

Sergei Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 1 dates from the fateful moment when the composer was about to leave Russia for a decade and a half, during which he would be based in Western Europe and America. World War I was reaching its end, but while most of Europe would breathe a sigh of relief at the cessation of hostilities, Russia would descend into increasing anarchy, paving the way for the Russian Revolution. Prokofiev was obviously concerned by what was happening around him — concerned enough to begin plotting his exit — although his creative spirit seems not to have diminished. In 1917 he completed not only his First Violin Concerto but also his First Symphony (the *Classical*), the Third and Fourth Piano Sonatas, and his *Visions fugitives* for Piano.

This concerto traces its origins to a Concertino for Violin that Prokofiev had begun in 1915 but left incomplete. Some material for that earlier work ended up in his first Violin Concerto, which in any case adheres to modest proportions. (It retained its deceptively “early” opus number from the projected Concertino.) The work was supposed to be premiered by the famous Polish violinist Paweł Kochański, who was teaching in St. Petersburg (by then re-named Petrograd). But with the turmoil in Russia, not to mention Prokofiev's departure for foreign soil, plans for the performance failed to progress. The premiere was delayed until 1923, when Serge Koussevitzky (by then a Russian expatriate in Paris, just like Prokofiev) programmed it on his own concert series, with his orchestra's concertmaster, Marcel Darrieux, as the adequate but hardly brilliant soloist.

Curiously, the Soviet premiere took place a mere three days later: an undoubtedly stellar performance with piano accompaniment

(rather than orchestra), featuring two 19-year-old musicians at the beginning of their careers, violinist Nathan Milstein and pianist Vladimir Horowitz. But it was the Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti who became the most ardent early champion of this work, playing it all over the world, making the first recording of it, and writing poetically of “its mixture of fairy-tale naïveté and daring savagery in lay-out and texture.” Szigeti had actually attended the world premiere of this concerto. Also in the Paris audience on that occasion were the artist Pablo Picasso, the dancer Anna Pavlova, the pianist Artur Schnabel, and the composers Karol Szymanowski and Igor Stravinsky (with the latter conducting the premiere of his own Octet for Winds as part of the show).

The Paris critics rebuffed this concerto at first — a special disappointment to the composer,

IN SHORT

Born: April 23, as he claimed, or April 27 [according to his birth certificate], 1891, in Sontsovka, Ekaterinoslav district, Ukraine

Died: March 5, 1953, in Moscow

Work composed: summer 1917, drawing on material sketched slightly earlier

World premiere: October 18, 1923, in Paris, with Serge Koussevitzky, conductor, Marcel Darrieux, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 29, 1925, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928), Paweł Kochański, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: January 27, 2018, Stéphane Denève, conductor, James Ehnes, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 21 minutes

as it was the first of his compositions unveiled since he had settled in that city. The Parisians had proved receptive to Prokofiev's extroverted "bad-boy" scores of the time, such as the *Scythian Suite* and the ballet *The Buffoon* (or *Chout*), but they didn't hide their disappointment over this work, which is considerably less confrontational. Just as the *Classical Symphony* departed from the spirit of those pieces in its apparent simplicity and restrained wit, the Violin Concerto No. 1

stood apart with its inherent lyricism and sparkling virtuosity — an almost Romantic concerto arriving late on the scene.

In his "Short Autobiography" (1941), Prokofiev identified five separate strands in his musical language, which he termed the classical, the modern, the toccata, the lyrical, and — with some strings attached — the "scherzo-ish." He related the Violin Concerto No. 1 principally to the lyric strand of his style:

In the Composer's Words

Nikolai Miaskovsky, Prokofiev's close friend and fellow composer, reported back about a performance of the First Violin Concerto given in Moscow on October 19, 1924, by Joseph Szigeti with the conductor Alexander Khessin. Prokofiev's response three weeks later provides insights into details of this work:

Thanks for sharing your extremely interesting impressions of the orchestral performance of my Violin Concerto. In my arrogance I can't help thinking that many of your reproaches can be blamed, however, on insufficient rehearsing by the orchestra and the second-class quality of the conductor. The straining tuba, the bleating trumpet, the fading violas — all these are the symptoms of one disease: a poorly balanced orchestra. This concerto is orchestrated in such

a way that if the sonorities of the various sections are not balanced, the result is only God knows what. Koussevitzky achieved this balance — under his baton the violas played their theme through to the end, and the trumpets sounded as if from a distance, and the tuba emerged like an endearing bumpkin. When I heard the same concerto under a French conductor, I almost fled from the hall. I took the score, looked it all over, and didn't find a single thing that should be changed. Actually, I did make one change, something that you mention in your letter: at the end I added passages for the clarinet and flute, because without some sort of *divertissement* like that, it sounded painfully similar to the overture from *Lohengrin*!



Prokofiev in 1918

The fourth line is lyrical: it appears first as a thoughtful and meditative mood, not always associated with melody, or at any rate with long melody (“Fairy Tale” in the Four Pieces for Piano Op. 3, *Dreams, Autumnal*, the songs Op. 9, the “Legend” Op. 12), sometimes partly contained in long melody (the two Balmont choruses, the beginning of the First Violin Concerto, the songs to Akhmatova’s poems, *Grandmother’s Tales*). This line was not noticed

until much later. For a long time I was given no credit for any lyrical gift whatever, and for want of encouragement it developed slowly. But as time went on I gave more attention to this aspect of my work.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, tuba, timpani, tambourine, military drum, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.

Angels and Muses

In correspondence with a friend about a performance of his Violin Concerto No. 1 in Russia (see opposite “In the Composer’s Words,”), Prokofiev did not fault the soloist, Joseph Szigeti. The Hungarian violinist had picked up the work in 1924, a year after the World Premiere, and became its champion, introducing the concerto to audiences throughout Europe and America. Szigeti performed it with the New York Philharmonic in 1927 and again in 1945; he made the first recording of the work, in 1935, with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham.

The violinist wrote in his memoir, *With Strings Attached*, that he has been fascinated “by its mixture of fairy-tale naiveté and daring savagery in lay-out and texture.” In *The Concerto*, former New York Philharmonic Annotator Michael Steinberg outlined this aspect in the second movement:

a scherzo marked *vivacissimo*, represented the “savage” element as against the generally more lyrical first and third movements. The music, full of contrast, is by turns amusing, naughty, for a while even malevolent, athletic, and always violinistically ingenious and brilliant. It seems to be over in a moment.

— The Editors

Joseph Szigeti, and the first recording of Prokofiev’s Violin Concerto No. 1

