

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born 23 April 1891 in Sontsovka; died 4 March 1953 in Moscow.

Concerto No. 2 in G minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 16 (1912-1913)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Pavlovsk, 5 September 1913; A.P. Aslanov, conductor; Sergei Prokofiev, soloist

PSO PREMIERE: 21 December 1973; Heinz Hall; Donald Johanos, conductor; Lorin Hollander, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 31 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings.

Politics was not the only revolution brewing in Russia in the 1910s. A brash, arrogant student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory was helping to forge a new musical language, with a special assault concentrated on that most hallowed of Romantic instruments, the piano. Sergei Prokofiev took the Conservatory by storm, and by sheer dint of self-will bent faculty, students and outsiders to his desires. Shostakovich, a fellow student but never a friend, recalled, "Prokofiev was a hard man and didn't seem interested in anything other than himself and his music." Prokofiev's boundless self-esteem was undoubtedly one of the catalysts of his great international success.

Prokofiev's iconoclastic views of modern music engendered his piano style, one that broke from the Romantic, lyrical, virtuoso manner of Chopin and Liszt to create a new sound for a new age. Harold Schonberg, in his book on *The Great Pianists*, wrote of Prokofiev's pianism, "Young Sergei Prokofiev, the pianist of steel, came raging out of Russia, playing his own music and startling the world with his vigor, his exuberance, his wild rhythm, his disdain for the trappings of romanticism. Gone were romantic color, wide-spaced arpeggios, inner voices, pretty melodies. Prokofiev at the piano attacked the music with a controlled fury, blasting out savage and complicated rhythms, giving or asking no mercy. He went about it almost without pedal, and with a percussive, metallic-sounding tone. Prokofiev decided that the piano was a percussive instrument, and there's no use trying to disguise the fact that it had hammers. So let's face up to it and treat the piano as a percussive instrument.... The anti-romantic age was under way."

Prokofiev's steely piano style was the perfect match for his athletic compositions and his strutting personality. The polite audience of gentry at the summertime premiere of the Second Piano Concerto in 1913 in the fashionable resort of Pavlosk, near St. Petersburg, was "puzzled" by the "mercilessly dissonant combinations," according to one reviewer. The listeners, disdaining the decorum that they were convinced the young composer had already shattered, greeted the work with a sonorous round of hisses and catcalls. Prokofiev responded with his own characteristic rejoinder: he sat down and thundered through one of his noisiest solo works as an encore! It was not long, however, before his playing and his music gained a wide audience, the fascination and innate musicality of his style sweeping away all initial reservations.

The Second Piano Concerto is a work "full of splinters," as Prokofiev wrote to Igor Stravinsky. Through its handling of rhythm, melody and harmony, it achieves a quality of galvanic dynamism unknown in the music of the preceding century. Of it, Leonid Sabaneyeff wrote, "Vigorous, clear-cut rhythms, and naïveté of melody are raised to a cult, the technical methods themselves become a negation of those that had just been in vogue. Savagery and barbarism also become something needed and desirable as a reaction against the refinement of the preceding epoch." This Concerto is music of youth and flamboyance and riveting visceral excitement.

Of the instrumentation of this work, Prokofiev noted, "It seems to me that in general piano concertos are of two kinds: in the first, the composer succeeds in writing an ensemble for the solo instrument with the orchestra; in the second, the solo is dominant, while the orchestra serves merely as an adjunct. My First Concerto is closer to the first kind, my Second to the second." The soloist presents the principal theme of the opening movement; a saucy melody in quicker tempo provides contrast. The formal development and recapitulation of the principal theme are combined into an enormous solo cadenza before the orchestra is recalled to provide a coda. The quiet ending section mirrors the opening measures, bringing the movement round full circle. Prokofiev cited the brief but brilliant *Scherzo* as an example of his "motoric" style, and this movement, is, indeed, a dashing display of perpetual motion. The soloist, in a mighty exhibition of technique and endurance, plays continuously in octaves without a single beat of rest or one long note throughout the entire movement. The slower third movement is in Prokofiev's best nose-thumbing, wrong-note idiom. The opening and closing sections of this movement make much use of a chugging bass ostinato, with the middle section given over to music of a more gentle character. The finale is a dazzling showcase for the soloist. The lightning-flash opening section returns to

finish the movement, but in between are themes of contrasting character in which the soloist frequently charges forth alone, the orchestra sitting silently amid the pianistic fireworks. In his Second Concerto, Prokofiev created a daring, virtuoso tour-de-force of pianism that remains as vibrant and exciting today as when it roused its first hearers from their seats in the waning days of Imperial Russia.