

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born 23 April 1891 in Sontsovka, Russia; died 5 March 1953 in Moscow

Concerto No. 1 for Violin and Orchestra in D major, Opus 19 (1915-1917)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Paris, 18 October 1923; Paris Opéra; Paris Opéra Orchestra; Sergei Koussevitzky, conductor; Marcel Darrieux, soloist

PSO PREMIERE: 3 March 1944; Syria Mosque; Fritz Reiner, conductor; Joseph Szigeti, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 24 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, tuba (without trombones), timpani, snare percussion, harp and strings

Very early in his career, Sergei Prokofiev classified his music into four distinct styles: classical or neo-classical; modern; toccata or motoric; and lyrical. It was largely in this last style that he composed his First Violin Concerto. Indeed, the composer himself cited the lovely opening theme as an example of his lyricism. Given that Prokofiev was one of the foremost disciples of modernity at the time, such a romantic notion of melody raised a few eyebrows. It was, however, Prokofiev's penchant when he was young to compose works in more than one of his four manners simultaneously, and just when a particular faction would hold him up as a model of its specific bias, out popped a Prokofiev piece that just did not do what it was expected to do. He took the greatest delight in this kind of surprise, and one of the continuing themes running through his early works is a dedicated nose-thumbing that missed few musical camps.

The gentle mood that pervades the Violin Concerto No. 1 is established immediately at the beginning by the beautiful principal theme. A quickening of the tempo introduces the second theme, a melody filled with flashing ornamentation and insistent rhythmic motion. After a pause, the development begins quietly with the woodwinds chanting the main theme. The second theme is soon added, and the two melodies are explored simultaneously to reach the highest point of intensity in the movement. Only the lyrical main theme returns in the recapitulation, reaching an ethereal close among the sounds of harp, winds and solo violin in the movement's final pages.

The central scherzo, an example of Prokofiev's toccata or motoric style, is in the form of a compact rondo. The theme flies upward into the soloist's glistening high register, a signal that this movement is to be more overtly virtuosic than the preceding one. Two episodes are placed between the returns of the main theme: one is a rhythmically steady motive in walking eighth-notes; the other, an off-beat, repeated-note figure comprising a melody of small intervals. A quick punctuation brings the movement to an abrupt close.

The finale returns the introspective mood of the first movement. Two themes are employed here — a descending one of melodic sequences winding through the low instruments and an arched motive for the soloist. The grandfatherly low theme is treated in the development. The recapitulation is ushered in not by the main theme of the finale, but rather by the principal melody of the opening movement in an elaborate trilled version for the soloist. Fragments of the arched theme appear as accompaniment in the woodwinds. The Concerto closes with a coda similar in mood, style and melody to that which concluded the first movement.