Sergei Prokofiev

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C, Opus 26

SERGEI SERGEIEVICH PROKOFIEV was born in Sontsovka, Ekaterinoslav district, in the Ukraine, on April 23, 1891, and died at Nikolina Gora near Moscow on March 5, 1953. The first part of this concerto to be composed was the theme of the second movement, in 1913. Prokofiev did some work on the score in the winter of 1916-17 but completed it only in the summer of 1921. He himself was soloist in the first performance, on December 16, 1921, with Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO PIANIST, the score of the concerto calls for an orchestra of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, bass drum, castanets, tambourine, cymbals, and strings.

Prokofiev was the only child in a cultural and affluent household; his early development was directed first by his doting pianist mother, who gave him his first lessons on the instrument, and then—when his talent proved to be unmistakable—by the young composer Reinhold Glière, who was hired to come to Sontsovka as a private music tutor. By the time Prokofiev entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1904 he had already completed a remarkable number of youthful works, mostly for the piano, but also including a violin sonata and an opera. During his first four years in St. Petersburg he pursued the course in composition. It was a difficult time: 1905 brought the first rumblings of the coming revolution, disturbing the tranquility of academic life (Rimsky-Korsakov was fired for anti-government activities, and other leading teachers resigned in protest). But Prokofiev himself was responsible for most of his own difficulties. Rather arrogant by nature, he was also younger than the other students and found it difficult to make friends with them. Most of his teachers were conservative pedagogues whose tutelage Prokofiev found dull; eventually he found himself in open clashes with his harmony teacher Liadov. Within a few years, the headstrong young colt had appeared in a recital of his own music that marked him as an *enfant terrible*, an image he assiduously cultivated for some time.

FORTY-FIFTH SEASON, NINETEEN HUNDRED TWENTY-FIVE & TWENTY-SIX

Fourteenth Programme

FRIDAY AFTERNOON, JANUARY 29, at 2.30 o'clock

SATURDAY EVENING, JANUARY 30, at 8.15 o'clock

Moussorgsky . . "Une Nuit sur le Mont Chauve" ("A Night on Bald Mountain"), Orchestral Fantasy

Prokofieff . . . . . Third Concerto for Piano, Op. 26

I. Andante — Allegro.
II. Theme — Andantino.
Variation I. Listesso tempo.
Variation II. Allegro.
Variation III. Allegro moderato.
Variation IV. Andante meditativo.
Variation V. Allegro giusto.
Theme Listesso tempo.
III. Allegro, ma non troppo.

(First time in Boston)

Scriabin . . . Third Symphony, "The Divine Poem," Op. 43

Lento; Luttes — Allegro; Voluptés — Lento; Jeu Divin — Allegro

SOLOIST

SERGE PROKOFIEFF

STEINWAY PIANO USED

There will be an intermission after the concerto

City of Boston, Revised Regulation of August 5, 1898.—Chapter 3, relating to the covering of the head in places of public amusement

Every licensee shall not, in his place of amusement, allow any person to wear upon the head a covering which obstructs the view of the exhibition or performance in such place of any person seated in any seat therein provided for spectators, it being understood that a low head covering without projection, which does not obstruct such view, may be worn.
Attest: J. M. GALVIN, City Clerk.

The works to be played at these concerts may be seen in the Allen A. Brown Music Collection of the Boston Public Library one week before the concert

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Program page for the first Boston Symphony Orchestra performances of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 on January 29 and 30, 1926, with the composer as soloist and Serge Koussevitzky conducting (BSO Archives)

Frederick Stock, who led the premiere of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the composer as soloist in December 1921

ed conductor postponed the premiere for one year, then a second. Increasingly disillusioned with the United States, Prokofiev left for Paris in the spring of 1920.

Paris was a good place for a Russian composer of advanced tendencies. Diaghilev's brilliant Ballets Russes was open to the newest ideas, especially from Russian composers, and Serge Koussevitzky had founded his own concert series emphasizing new works. After the exciting premiere of his ballet *The Tale of the Buffoon* by the Ballets Russes (Paris loved it, London hated it), Prokofiev adjourned to the coast of Brittany for a summer of composition. There he achieved his long-held plan to write a Third Piano Concerto. Much of the material was already in hand, since he had been thinking about such a work since completing the Second Concerto in 1914, and some of the musical ideas go back even before that. He was still committed to the premiere of his opera in Chicago that fall, so he took the opportunity of introducing the new piano concerto there during the same trip. *The Love for Three Oranges* was premiered (in French, rather than the Russian in which it had been composed) at the Auditorium Theater in Chicago on December 30, 1921—two weeks after Prokofiev himself had introduced his new concerto with conductor Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony. Here, too, Prokofiev received diverse reactions: Chicago loved both works, New York hated them. Following this experience, Prokofiev returned to Paris, where he lived until his permanent return to the Soviet Union in 1936. Only concert tours brought him back to the United States during that period. By now, though, his two major "American" pieces are well established as favorites among Prokofiev's output.

The Third Concerto, in fact, is the most frequently performed of Prokofiev's five contributions to that genre. Though it is not a whit less demanding technically than the first two concertos, it opens up a new and appealing vein of lyricism that Prokofiev was to mine successfully in the years to come. At the same time his biting, acerbic humor is never absent for long, especially in the writing for woodwinds and sometimes for percussion.

The concerto opens with a yearning lyrical theme in the clarinet, immediately echoed in flute and violins; its simplicity makes it memorable, and it will mark several stages of the form later on. Almost at once a bustling of sixteenth-note runs in the strings ushers in the soloist, whose nervous theme grows out of the first three notes of the opening lyrical theme (a major second down and a perfect fifth up) turned backwards (a perfect fifth down and a major second up), then sweeps farther afield harmonically in its headstrong energy. An austere march of pounding chords leads to a faster passage of whirling triplets to conclude the exposition. The basic material is developed and recapitulated in a free sonata form.

The main theme of the second movement is one of those patented Prokofiev tunes, dry and sardonic. But it doesn't stay that way long. The first variation is a Chopin nocturne with a twist; each ensuing variation has its own special color and character, by turns brilliant, meditative, and vigorously energetic. A climactic restatement of the theme with further pianistic display dies away mysteriously into nothing.

The finale begins with a crisp theme in bassoons and pizzicato lower strings in A minor; the piano argues with thundering chords, clouding the harmony. Despite various contrasting materials, some lyrical, some sarcastic, the opening figure provides the main basis for the musical discussion, ending in a brilliant pounding coda.

Steven Ledbetter

STEVEN LEDBETTER *was program annotator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1979 to 1998.*

THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE *of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 was the world premiere performance noted above, on December 16, 1921, with the composer as soloist and Frederick Stock conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

THE FIRST BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES *of Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 were on January 29 and 30, 1926, with the composer as soloist under Serge Koussevitzky's direction, followed that February by performances in New York, Brooklyn, Cambridge, and Providence. Prokofiev and Koussevitzky performed the work again here in February 1937, subsequent BSO performances featuring Alexander Borovsky with Koussevitzky, William Kapell and Gary Graffman with Richard Burgin, Alexander Urinsky with Charles Munch and Burgin, Jorge Bolet and John Browning with Erich Leinsdorf, Graffman with Michael Tilson Thomas, Maurizio Pollini with Seiji Ozawa and Tilson Thomas, Jeffrey Siegel with William Steinberg, Browning with Aldo Ceccato, Israela Margalit with Lorin Maazel and Joseph Silverstein, Martha Argerich and Alexander Toradze with Ozawa, John Lill with Yuri Temirkanov, Yefim Bronfman with Charles Dutoit, Browning with Leonard Slatkin, Garrick Ohlsson with Marek Janowski and James Conlon, Argerich with Charles Dutoit, Jean-Efflam Bavouzet with Sean Newhouse (the most recent subscription performances, in October 2011), and Ohlsson with Ludovic Morlot (the most recent Tanglewood performance, on July 28, 2013).*