

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Composer, Pianist

(Sontsovka, Russia, 1891 —Moscow, 1953)

SYMPHONY NO. 1 IN D MAJOR, OP. 25, “CLASSICAL”

Composed: 1916

Premiered: April 21, 1918 in St. Petersburg, conducted by the composer

Duration: ca. 14 minutes

Scoring: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, timpani and strings

Overview

“In the field of instrumental music, I am well content with the forms already perfected. I want nothing better, nothing more flexible or more complete than sonata form, which contains everything necessary to my structural purpose.” This statement, given to Olin Downes by Prokofiev during an interview in 1930 for *The New York Times*, seems a curious one for a composer who had gained a reputation as an ear-shattering iconoclast, the *enfant terrible* of 20th-century music, the master of modernity. While it is certainly true that some of his early works (*Scythian Suite*, *Sarcasms*, the first two Piano Concertos) raised the hackles of musical traditionalists, it is also true that Prokofiev sought to preserve that same tradition by extending its boundaries to encompass his own distinctive style. A glance through the list of his works shows a preponderance of established Classical forms: sonatas, symphonies, concertos, operas, ballets, quartets, overtures and suites account for most of his output. This is certainly not to say that he merely mimicked the music of earlier generations, but he did accept it as the conceptual framework within which he built his own compositions.

Prokofiev’s penchant for using Classical musical idioms was instilled in him during the course of his thorough, excellent training: when he was a little tot, his mother played Beethoven sonatas to him while he sat under the piano; he studied with the greatest Russian musicians of the time — Glière, Rimsky-Korsakov, Liadov, Glazunov; he began composing at the Mozartian age of six. By the time he was 25, Prokofiev was composing prolifically, always brewing a variety of compositions simultaneously. The works of 1917, for example, represent widely divergent styles — *The Gambler* is a satirical opera; *They Are Seven*, a nearly atonal cantata; the *Classical Symphony*, a charming miniature. This last piece was a direct result of Prokofiev’s study with Alexander Tcherepnin, a good and wise teacher who allowed the young composer to forge ahead in his own manner while making sure that he had a thorough understanding of the great musical works of the past. It was in 1916 that Prokofiev first had the idea for a symphony based on the Viennese models supplied by Tcherepnin, and at that time he sketched out a few themes for it. Most of the work, however, was done the following year, as Prokofiev recounted in his *Autobiography*:

“I spent the summer of 1917 in complete solitude in the environs of Petrograd; I read Kant and I worked hard. I had purposely not had my piano moved to the country because I wanted to establish the fact that thematic material worked out without a piano is better.... The idea occurred to me to compose an entire symphonic work without the piano. Composed in this fashion, the orchestral colors would, of necessity, be clearer and cleaner. Thus the plan of a symphony in

Haydnesque style originated, since, as a result of my studies in Tcherepnin's classes, Haydn's technique had somehow become especially clear to me, and with such intimate understanding it was much easier to plunge into the dangerous flood without a piano. It seemed to me that, were he alive today, Haydn, while retaining his style of composition, would have appropriated something from the modern. Such a symphony I now wanted to compose: a symphony in the classic manner. As it began to take actual form I named it *Classical Symphony*; first, because it was the simplest thing to call it; second, out of bravado, to stir up a hornet's nest; and finally, in the hope that should the symphony prove itself in time to be truly 'classic,' it would benefit me considerably." Prokofiev's closing wish has been fulfilled — the *Classical Symphony* has been one of his most successful works ever since it was first heard.

What To Listen For

The work is in the four movements customary in Haydn's symphonies, though at only fifteen minutes it hardly runs to half their typical length. The dapper first movement is a miniature sonata design that follows the traditional form but adds some quirks that would have given old Haydn himself a chuckle — the recapitulation, for example, begins in the "wrong" key (but soon rights itself), and occasionally a beat is left out, as though the music had stubbed its toe. The sleek main theme is followed by the enormous leaps, flashing grace notes and sparse texture of the second subject. A graceful, ethereal melody floating high in the violins is used to open and close the *Larghetto*, with the pizzicato gentle middle section reaching a brilliant *tutti* before quickly subsiding. The third movement, a *Gavotte*, comes not from the Viennese symphony but rather from the tradition of French Baroque ballet. The finale is the most brilliant movement of the Symphony, and calls for remarkable feats of agility and precise ensemble from the performers.

The *Classical Symphony*, in the words of American musicologist Milton Cross, "was an attempt to approximate how Mozart would have written a symphony had he lived in the 20th century. Each of the four movements is epigrammatic in its brevity, and given to pellucid writing, old-world grace, and bright-faced wit."

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

Composer, Pianist

(Salzburg, 1756 — Vienna, 1791)

CONCERTO NO. 26 FOR PIANO IN D MAJOR, K. 537, "CORONATION"

Composed: 1788

Premiered: April 14, 1789 in Dresden, with the composer as soloist

Duration: ca. 28 minutes

Scoring: flute, two each of oboes, bassoons, horns and trumpets, timpani, strings

Overview

By the closing decade of the 18th century, the end of the millennium-old Holy Roman Empire was only a few years away. Already the rising tide of revolution was breaking against this

ancient imperial rock, but that did not prevent Leopold II (whose son Francis II was to dissolve the Empire in 1806) from planning a glorious coronation celebration for himself when he was crowned Emperor in Frankfurt on October 9, 1790. The ceremonies were organized from the Habsburgs' home city of Vienna, where Mozart had been living for nearly ten years. Though Mozart had enjoyed a considerable vogue when he first arrived in 1781, his popularity had declined alarmingly during the preceding four years, and, by 1790, his financial and family situations were in steep decline. He held a small position at court as a supplier of dance music, but if only a better job — perhaps a job composing opera — would come his way, all would be fine, he wrote to his wife, who, nearly exhausted by worry and almost constant pregnancy, was often away seeking relief at various mineral baths. A retinue of more than a dozen musicians, including court music master Antonio Salieri and his assistant Ignaz Umlauf, was being assembled to supply music for the coronation, and Mozart felt that he could make a fine contribution to the proceedings and at the same time convince the Emperor of his qualifications for a promotion. When the final personnel list was posted, however, Mozart's name was not included on it. He thought that he might still attract favorable attention if he went to Frankfurt and produced an independent concert during the coronation activities. He enlisted his brother-in-law, the violinist Franz Hofer, in the venture, and the two headed for central Germany, delaying only as long as it took Mozart to pawn enough silver to hire a coach for the trip. They journeyed through Ratisbon, Nuremberg (“a hideous town” judged this man of the Enlightenment about that splendid Gothic city) and Würzburg, and arrived in Frankfurt on September 23rd.

Mozart made arrangements for a concert on October 15th in the Stadttheater, and then went around town trying to stir up some business. The 11:00 a.m. starting time he had chosen proved to be filled with stiff competition. “Unfortunately, some prince was giving a big *déjeuner* and the Hessian troops were holding a grand maneuver,” he reported to his wife. The concert went on as planned — a giant affair, lasting over three hours — but it was little noticed and poorly attended. (“There were not many people,” Count von Bentheim-Steinfurt noted in his travel diary.) Mozart called it “a splendid success from the point of view of honor and glory, but a failure as far as money was concerned.” He suffered another disappointment before he left Frankfurt. His *Don Giovanni*, which was originally scheduled to be performed as part of the official coronation celebration, was replaced by an opera of Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf: *Die Liebe im Narrenhaus* (“*Love in the Asylum*”).

Mozart included on his concert program a piano concerto that he had composed two years earlier, in 1788. Though this piece, the Concerto in D major (K. 537), was first heard in Dresden a year and a half before Leopold's accession, it came to be known as the “Coronation” for its association with the Frankfurt festivities. Musicologist Edward Downes speculated on Mozart's revival of the work in 1790: “The ‘Coronation’ Concerto was an apt choice for the occasion, for it contains not a note of the emotional depth or the storm and stress which Mozart knew often upset his conservative listeners.” It is possible that the popular, expressively untroubled character of this piece arose from his wish to regain some of the favor he had lost with the Viennese public. “But the gap between the average *gallant* taste and his ideal had grown too wide for him to bridge in so important a work,” concluded Cuthbert Girdlestone in his study of the piano concertos. By 1788, Mozart's days of being Viennese society's darling were over. In an overview of the “Coronation” Concerto, Alfred Einstein wrote that this is “the proper work for festive occasions. It is very Mozartean, while at the same time it does not express the whole or even the

half of Mozart. It is, in fact so ‘Mozartesque’ that one might say that in it Mozart imitated himself — no difficult task for him. It is both brilliant and amiable, especially in the slow movement; it is very simple, even primitive, in its relation between the solo and the tutti, and so completely easy to understand that even the 19th century grasped it without difficulty.” For many years before World War II, it was the most popular of Mozart’s piano concertos except for the tempestuous Concerto No. 20 in D minor, K. 466.

What To Listen For

The Concerto’s first movement is large in size but unadventurous in form. Its orchestral introduction opens quietly with a simple, four-square theme in the strings. Other melodic fragments tumble forth before the second theme is reached following a brief phrase for unaccompanied violins. The soloist then takes up the themes and wraps them rippling, decorative filigree. After the movement’s central portion, more free fantasia than a true development of the exposition’s themes, the reprise of the earlier melodic material and a cadenza for the soloist round out the movement.

The graceful, A major *Larghetto* is in three-part form (A–B–A). The *gallant* main theme is presented immediately by the soloist, then repeated by the orchestra. The movement’s second section, also in A major, is begun by a falling phrase from the piano. These pages are stirred ever so slightly as they progress by some expressive harmonies before the opening music returns. The finale is a vivacious rondo built on a folk-inspired theme that looks forward to Papageno’s infectious music in *The Magic Flute*.

JÖRG WIDMANN
composer, clarinetist
(Munich, 1973)

CON BRIO

Composed: 2008

Premiered: September 25, 2008 in Munich conducted by Mariss Jansons

Duration: ca. 12 minutes

*Scoring: pairs of piccolos, flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons,
horns and trumpets, timpani and strings*

Overview

German composer and clarinetist Jörg Widmann was born in Munich in 1973 and studied clarinet with Gerd Starke at the Hochschule für Musik in Munich and with Charles Neidich at the Juilliard School in New York. After winning the Carl Maria von Weber Competition, Competition of German Music Colleges and Bavarian State Prize for Young Artists, Widmann was appointed professor of clarinet at the Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Freiburg in 2001; he continues to be recognized as one of his generation’s finest clarinetists. His parallel interest in composition began when he started lessons with Kay Westermann in Munich at age eleven, and continued with his studies with Hans Werner Henze, Wilfried Hiller and Wolfgang Rihm; in

2009, he was also named to the Freiburg Hochschule's composition faculty. Widmann's residencies include those with the Berlin Symphony Orchestra, German Radio Orchestra of Saarbrücken-Kaiserslautern, Cleveland Orchestra, Salzburg Festival, Lucerne Festival, Cologne Philharmonic, Vienna Konzerthaus, Oxford Chamber Music Festival, Dortmund Konzerthaus, Essen Philharmonic and Heidelberg Spring Festival. Among his many distinctions as a composer are the Stoeger Prize of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Arnold Schoenberg Medal, Belmont Award for Contemporary Music of the Forberg-Schneider Foundation, Schneider-Schott Music Award, Honorary Award of the Munich Opera Festival, Paul Hindemith Prize, Ernst von Siemens Foundation Encouragement Award, Composition Award of the Berlin Philharmonic Academy and Kaske Foundation Music Award, and election to membership in the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin, Bavarian Academy of the Fine Arts, Free Academy of the Arts in Hamburg and German Academy of the Dramatic Arts. Widmann's creative output includes a large number of chamber compositions (many featuring clarinet), the 2003 opera *Das Gesicht im Spiegel* ("The Face in the Mirror") and other music theater works, and several large-scale orchestral scores.

What To Listen For

For a cycle of the complete Beethoven symphonies with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra in 2008-2009, the ensemble's Chief Conductor, Mariss Jansons, commissioned six internationally recognized composers to write "reflections" that would "last approximately ten minutes and refer to a particular symphony by Ludwig van Beethoven in terms of its form, its concept or the material used. Each of these short orchestral pieces was intended as an introductory gesture, or as a modern afterthought on the performance of the relevant symphonies in the concert hall." (The Fourth Symphony was omitted. In two cases, one commissioned work referenced two symphonies.) Widmann, who took the inspiration for his *Con Brio* ("With Energy," a favorite tempo marking of Beethoven) from the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies, wrote, "I delight in working with music history in order to turn it into something new. Here I see myself very much in the tradition of Arnold Schoenberg, who was only able to revolutionize the tonal system because of his profound knowledge of the history of music. It's an attitude that is very close to my own heart — that is, making progress based on the fact that one loves something.... My reference to Beethoven in *Con Brio* begins with the scoring, because in the Symphonies No. 7 and No. 8 the orchestration is special. There are not four horns or three trombones, as in the Ninth Symphony, but just two horns, two trumpets and timpani, with which he makes that incredible 'noise.' In my view, the reduced scoring is the very reason he unleashes such musical fury in the first place." Though Widmann did not quote directly from the symphonies, their sonorities, figurations, rhythms and buoyancy echo throughout *Con Brio*, a testament to the powerful influence that Beethoven continues to exert almost two centuries after his death.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Composer, Pianist

(Bonn, 1770 — Vienna, 1827)

SYMPHONY NO. 1 IN C MAJOR, OP. 21

Composed: 1799-1800
Premiered: April 2, 1800 in Vienna, conducted by the composer
Duration: ca. 126 minutes
Scoring: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs, timpani, and strings

Overview

“He was short, about 5 feet, 4 inches, thickset and broad, with a massive head, a wildly luxuriant crop of hair, protruding teeth, a small rounded nose, and a habit of spitting whenever the notion took him. He was clumsy, and anything he touched was liable to be upset or broken. Badly coordinated, he could never learn to dance, and more often than not managed to cut himself while shaving. He was sullen and suspicious, touchy as a misanthropic cobra, believed that everybody was out to cheat him, had none of the social graces, was forgetful, and was prone to insensate rages.” Thus the late *New York Times* critic Harold Schonberg, in his book about *The Lives of the Great Composers*, described Ludwig van Beethoven, the burly peasant with the unquenchable fire of genius who descended, aged 22, upon Vienna in 1792. Beethoven had been charged by his benefactor in his hometown of Bonn, Count Ferdinand von Waldstein, to go to the Austrian capital and “receive the spirit of Mozart from the hands of Haydn.” He did study for a short time with Haydn, then universally regarded as the greatest living composer, but young Ludwig proved to be a recalcitrant student, and the sessions soon ended, though the two maintained a respectful, if cool, relationship until Haydn’s death in 1809.

Beethoven was not to make his first impression upon the Viennese as a composition student, however, but as a pianist — a pianist unlike any seen before. In a world still largely accustomed to the reserved, genteel musical style of pre-Revolutionary classicism, he burst upon the scene like a fiery meteor. Rather than the elegant, fluent style of a Mozart (dead less than a year at the time of Beethoven’s arrival), he played with a seeming wild abandon, thrashing upon the keyboard, breaking strings, trying to draw forth orchestral sonorities from the light, wood-frame Viennese pianos that regularly suffered under his onslaught. He repeatedly entreated piano manufacturers to build bigger, louder, sturdier instruments. (By the 1820s, they had.) Like his style of performance, the music he composed reflected the impassioned, powerful emotions that drove him throughout his entire life.

The Viennese aristocracy took this young lion to its bosom. Beethoven expected as much. Unlike his predecessors, he would not assume the servant’s position traditionally accorded to a musician, refusing, for example, not only to eat in the kitchen, but becoming outspokenly hostile if he was not seated next to the master of the house at table. The more enlightened nobility, to its credit, recognized the genius of this gruff Rhinelander, and encouraged his work. Shortly after his arrival, for example, Prince Lichnowsky provided Beethoven with living quarters, treating him more like a son than a guest. Lichnowsky even instructed the servants to answer the musician’s call before his own, should both ring at the same time. In large part, such gestures provided for Beethoven’s support during his early Viennese years. For most of the first decade after he arrived, Beethoven made some effort to follow the prevailing fashion in the sophisticated city. But though he outfitted himself with good boots, a proper coat, and the necessary accoutrements, and enjoyed the hospitality of Vienna’s best houses, there never ceased to roil within him the untamed energy of creativity. It was only a matter of time before the fancy clothes

were discarded, as a bear would shred a flimsy paper bag.

The year of the First Symphony — 1800 — was a crucial time in Beethoven’s development. By then, he had achieved a success good enough to write to his old friend Franz Wegeler in Bonn, “My compositions bring me in a good deal, and may I say that I am offered more commissions than it is possible for me to carry out. Moreover, for every composition I can count on six or seven publishers and even more, if I want them. People no longer come to an arrangement with me. I state my price, and they pay.” Behind him were many works, including the Op. 18 Quartets, the first two piano concertos, and the *Pathétique* Sonata, that bear his personal imprint. At the time of this gratifying recognition of his talents, however, the first signs of his fateful deafness appeared, and he began the titanic struggle that became one of the gravitational poles of his life. Within two years, driven from the social contact on which he had flourished by the fear of discovery of his malady, he penned the Heiligenstadt Testament, his *cri de coeur* against this wicked trick of the gods. The C major Symphony stands on the brink of this great crisis in Beethoven’s life.

Beethoven’s music of the 1790s showed an increasingly powerful expression that mirrored the maturing of his genius. The First Symphony, though, is a conservative, even a cautious work. In it, he was more interested in exploring the architectural than the emotional components of the form, and relied on the musical language established by Haydn and Mozart in composing it. In its reliance on a thoroughly logical, carefully conceived structure, this work also set the formal precedent for his later music: though Beethoven dealt with vivid emotional states, the technique of his music was never founded upon any other than the most solid intellectual base. Romain Rolland made this point in his insightful, if flowery essay on “Beethoven in his Thirtieth Year”: “The Ego of Beethoven is not that of the Romantics.... Everything that was characteristic of them would have been repugnant to him — their sentimentality, their lack of logic, their disordered imagination.” Thus Beethoven, “at thirty, already the conqueror of the future,” in Rolland’s phrase, first flexed his symphonic muscles in a work reliant on the style and spirit of the past, not simply to “show he could do it,” but rather to explore and set into his imagination the possibilities of the form that he was to electrify as had no other.

What To Listen For

The First Symphony begins with a most unusual slow introduction. The opening chord is a dissonance, a harmony that seems to lead away from the main tonality, which is normally established immediately at the beginning of a Classical work. Though not unprecedented (the well-known and influential C.P.E. Bach consistently took even more daring harmonic flights), it does reinforce the sense of striving, of constantly moving toward resolution that underlies all Beethoven’s works. The sonata form proper begins with the quickening of the tempo and the presentation of the main theme by the strings. More instruments enter, tension accumulates, and the music arrives at the second theme following a brief silence — a technique he derived from Mozart to emphasize this important formal junction. The woodwinds hold forth here, and the remainder of the exposition is given over to two large paragraphs of rising intensity, each punctuated with a firm cadence. The compact development section deals exclusively with the main theme. The recapitulation follows the events of the exposition, but presents them in an intensified setting. The coda again recalls the main theme, and introduces one of the composer’s

characteristic traits — the extended repetition of the cadential chords to release the accumulated harmonic tensions of the movement.

The slow second movement, another sonata form, has a canonic main theme and a delicately airy secondary melody. The development employs the melodic leaps of the subordinate theme; the recapitulation is enriched by the addition of contrapuntal accompanying lines. The third movement is the most innovative in the Symphony. Though marked “Menuetto,” its tempo indication, “very fast and lively,” precludes the staid gait of the traditional courtly dance. This is rather one of those whirlwind packets of rhythmic energy that, beginning with the Second Symphony, Beethoven labeled “scherzo.” Its tripartite form (minuet — trio — minuet) follows the Classical model, with strings dominant in the outer sections, and winds in the central portion. The finale begins with a short introductory sentence comprising halting scale fragments that preview the vivacious main theme of the movement, “let out as a cat from a bag,” assessed Prof. Donald Tovey. Yet another excursion in sonata form, this bustling movement is indebted to the sparkling style of Haydn, and even gives off much of the brilliant wit associated with that composer. All is brought to an end with ribbons of scales rising through the orchestra, and the emphatic concluding measures.

Olin Downes wrote, “Beethoven is trying, in this first symphony of his, to respect the forms and standards of earlier masters than himself, particularly Haydn and Mozart. He is a little constrained in their mold, however, and occasionally cannot help revealing the cloven hoof of the revolutionary beneath the gown of the respectful disciple.”

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