

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Composer, Pianist

(Sontzovka, Russia, 1891 — Moscow, 1953)

CONCERTO NO. 2 FOR VIOLIN IN G MINOR, OP. 63

Composed: 1935

Premiered: December 1, 1935 in Madrid, with Robert Soetens as soloist

Duration: ca. 26 minutes

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

Overview

When Prokofiev returned to Russia late in 1933 after his long residency in the West, full of allegiance to the socialist cause, he dedicated his art to fulfillment of the dream of the Revolution. In his brief *Autobiography* of 1946 he wrote, “It is the duty of the composer, like the poet, the sculptor or the painter, to serve his fellow men, to beautify human life and point the way to a radiant future. Such is the immutable code as I see it.” He had already mapped out (in an article for *Izvestia* in 1934) the stylistic direction that music should follow in order to achieve his lofty aim: “The question of what kind of music should be written at the present time is one that interests many Soviet composers today.... It is not easy to find the right idiom for this music. To begin with, it must be melodious; moreover, the melody must be simple and comprehensible, without being repetitive or trivial. Many composers have difficulty in composing any sort of melody; all the harder is it to compose a melody that has a definite function. The same applies to the technique and the idiom: they must be clear and simple, but not banal. We must seek a new simplicity.”

Once back in his homeland, Prokofiev wasted no time in putting into practice his theory of creating music that would communicate simply and directly to listeners, and within three years, he wrote some of his most enduringly popular scores: *Lt. Kijé*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Peter and the Wolf* — and the Second Violin Concerto. The commission for the Concerto came from a group of admirers of the Belgian violinist Robert Soetens just at the time when Prokofiev was considering such a work, and the proposal was accepted quickly. The Second Concerto is music of warmth and lyricism, with barely more than a hint of the spiky harmonies, motoric rhythms and *diablerie* that marked many of his earlier works. Gerald Abraham assessed, “Prokofiev’s formula for turning himself into a Soviet composer was to emphasize the lyric side of his nature at the expense of the witty and the grotesque and the brilliant sides.” Edward Downes thought this Concerto should be labeled neo-Romantic “or even neo-Mendelssohn.” The work has an undeniable emotional effect. It was an immediate success at its premiere in Madrid late in 1935, and so moved the Boston audience when Jascha Heifetz first played it in America two years later that many wept openly at the sentiment of the slow movement. Heifetz called it one of the half dozen greatest concerted works ever written for the violin, grouping it with the examples of the form by Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Sibelius and Elgar.

What To Listen For

The work’s direct lyrical expression and clean formal lines are evident from its first gesture. The

slightly melancholy main theme, built around a simple triadic configuration, is presented simply by the unaccompanied violin. The orchestra takes over the melody, allowing the soloist to apply to it some figurative arabesques which serve as the transition to the second subject. This theme, one of Prokofiev's greatest melodic inspirations, is sung by the violin above a quiet, undulating accompaniment in the strings. The development section, an elaboration of the two main themes, achieves a masterful balance of flashing virtuosity, thematic manipulation and lyrical effusion. The recapitulation is begun by cellos and basses, and continues with the second theme soaring high into the soloist's range. A brief coda, based on the main theme, brings the movement to a hushed, mysterious close.

The second movement is one of the most rapt, transcendent inspirations of 20th-century music, and, like the opening movement, is unabashedly romantic and filled with a haunting bittersweet emotion. The finale is in the traditional rondo form. Its theme is an ebullient dance melody that exudes some of the fiery spirit of a Gypsy fiddler.

Charles O'Connell noted of this Concerto, "Prokofiev writes here from the heart, and from a profound intellectual appreciation of the resources upon which he draws and the territory upon which he enters.... He is not ashamed that his music, while incidentally exploiting anew the resources of violin versus orchestra, should speak eloquently of beauty and of the things that remain remote and hidden in the recesses of the human heart and mind."

SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

(Oneg [near Novgorod], Russia, 1873 — Beverly Hills, California, 1943)

SYMPHONY NO. 2 IN E MINOR, OP. 27

Composed: 1906-1907

Premiered: January 26, 1908 in St. Petersburg, conducted by the composer

Duration: ca. 60 minutes

Scoring: piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings

Overview

How much Rachmaninoff's life changed in just a half dozen years! The premiere of his First Symphony in 1897 was a complete failure, a total fiasco. The Russian nationalist composer César Cui ranted, "If there is a conservatory competition in Hell, Rachmaninoff would gain first prize for this Symphony." Rimsky-Korsakov did not find it "at all agreeable." Young Rachmaninoff — aged 24 — was plunged into a Stygian despair. For over two years, he entertained the darkest thoughts and composed nothing. Then in 1900, he began consulting one Dr. Nicholas Dahl, a physician specializing in the treatment of alcoholism through hypnosis. Dahl's method of auto-suggestion (and probably his enlightened conversation about music) restored the composer's confidence and desire to work. Within a year, the grand Second Concerto was produced and successfully launched into the world, and Rachmaninoff was on his way to international fame. By 1905, he was one of the most important figures in Russian music.

Beside his prodigious talents as pianist and composer, Rachmaninoff was also a first-rate conductor, and when his stock began rising after the Second Concerto carried his name into important Russian circles, he was appointed opera conductor at the Moscow Imperial Grand Theater. As with his music, he found excellent success with his conducting, but he had understandable misgivings about the way it interfered with his creative ambitions. In an interview with Frederick H. Martens, he said, “When I am concertizing I cannot compose. When I feel like writing music I have to concentrate on that — I cannot touch the piano. When I am conducting I can neither compose nor play concerts. Other musicians may be more fortunate in this respect; but I have to concentrate on any one thing I am doing to such a degree that it does not seem to allow me to take up anything else.” There was much music in him that needed to be written, and he knew that a choice about the direction of his future work was imminent.

By the beginning of 1906, he had decided to sweep away the rapidly accumulating obligations of conducting, concertizing, and socializing that cluttered his life in Moscow in order to find some quiet place in which to compose. His determination may have been strengthened by the political unrest beginning to rumble under the foundations of the aristocratic Russian political system. The uprising of 1905 was among the first signs of trouble for those of his noble class (his eventual move to the United States was a direct result of the swallowing of his family’s estate and resources by the 1917 Revolution), and he probably thought it a good time to start looking for a quiet haven.

A few years before, Rachmaninoff had been overwhelmed by an inspired performance of *Die Meistersinger* he heard at the Dresden Opera. The memory of that evening and the aura of dignity and repose exuded by the city had remained with him, and Dresden, at that time in his life, seemed like a good place to be. Besides, the city was only two hours by train from Leipzig, where Arthur Nikisch, whom Rachmaninoff considered the greatest living conductor and who had shown an interest in his music, was music director. The decision to move to Dresden was made early in 1906, and by autumn the composer, his wife and their new-born daughter were installed in a small but smart house complemented by an attractive garden. They arrived quietly, and lived, as much as possible, incognito and in seclusion. When he chanced to meet a Russian acquaintance on the street one day, Rachmaninoff pleaded, “I have escaped from my friends. Please don’t give me away.” The atmosphere in Dresden was so conducive to composition that within a few months of his arrival he was working on the Second Symphony, the First Piano Sonata, the Op. 6 collection of Russian folk songs and the symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead*.

The Second Symphony was unanimously cheered when it made the rounds of the Russian concert societies in 1908, and it was an important item on Rachmaninoff’s first American tour the following year. With this work, *The Isle of the Dead*, the Second and Third Concertos, and the ubiquitous Prelude in C-sharp minor, he made a profound impression on the American musical scene. He was twice offered the post of music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and twice declined. For the two decades before his death in 1943, his cross-country concert tours became an institution still remembered with a swell of passion such as can only be engendered by the most important events. Many of his compositions continue to enjoy a popularity greater in America than anywhere else in the world.

What To Listen For

Philip Hale, writing of the American renown that has attached itself to Rachmaninoff's works in general and to the Second Symphony in particular, stated, "The reasons for the popularity of the Symphony are not far to seek. The themes are eminently melodious, and some of them are of singular beauty; there is rich coloring; there are beautiful nuances in color; there is impressive sonority; there are frequent and sharp contrasts in sentiment, rhythm and expression; there is stirring vitality." Underlying these attractive external qualities is Rachmaninoff's philosophy of the emotional, communicative powers of music. He stated, "Music should express the sum total of a composer's experiences." Once asked specifically about the nature of music, he replied, "What is music? How can one define it? Music is a calm moonlit night, a rustling of summer foliage. Music is the distant peal of bells at eventide. Music is born only of the heart and it appeals to the heart. It is love. The sister of music is poetry and the mother — sorrow!" It is easy, as has been frequently demonstrated, to ridicule such an open-hearted theory. However, this Second Symphony generates much warmth, joy, and true sentiment, and can move many listeners more deeply than other pieces of more rigorous intellectual accomplishment.

The majestic scale of the Symphony is established at the outset by a slow, brooding introduction. The low strings and then the violins give out a fragmentary theme which generates much of the material for the entire work. A smooth transition to a faster tempo signals the arrival of the main theme, an extended and quickened transformation of the basses' opening motive. The expressive second theme enters in the woodwinds. The development deals with the vigorous main theme to such an extent that the beginning of the formal recapitulation is engulfed by its surging sweep. The lovely second theme reappears as expected, again in the woodwinds. The coda resumes the energetic mood of the development to build to the fine climax which ends the movement.

The second movement is the most nimble essay to be found in Rachmaninoff's orchestral works. After two preparatory measures, the horns hurl forth the main theme, which bears more than a passing resemblance to the *Dies Irae*, the ancient chant from the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead that haunted the composer for many years. The vital nature of the music, however, does not support any morbid interpretation. Eventually, the rhythmic bustle is suppressed and finally silenced to make way for the movement's central section, whose skipping lines embody some of Rachmaninoff's best fugal writing. Almost as if by magic, the opening scherzo returns amid a full-throated cry from the brass. Once again, this quiets and the movement ends on a note of considerable mystery.

The rapturous third movement, wrote Patrick Piggott, "is as romantic as any music in the orchestral repertory — if by romantic we mean the expression, through lyrical melody and richly chromatic harmony, of a sentiment which can only be described as love." This is music of heightened passion that resembles nothing so much as an ecstatic operatic love scene. Alternating with the joyous principal melody is an important theme from the first movement, heard prominently in the central portion and the coda of this movement.

The finale bursts forth in the whirling dance rhythm of an Italian *tarantella*. The propulsive urgency subsides to allow another of Rachmaninoff's wonderful, sweeping melodic inspirations to enter. A development of the *tarantella* motives follows, into which are embroidered thematic reminiscences from each of the three preceding movements. The several elements of the finale

are gathered together in the closing pages to produce the rich and sonorous tapestry appropriate for the life-affirming conclusion of this grand and stirring Symphony.

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