PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Sergei Prokofiev
Born April 23, 1891, Sontsovka, Ukraine.
Died March 5, 1953, Moscow, Russia.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 16

Prokofiev composed this concerto in the winter and spring of 1913 and played the piano solo at the premiere on September 5 of that year, in Pavlovsk, outside Saint Petersburg. The score of the concerto was lost when Prokofiev left Russia for America in 1918; he reconstructed it in 1923. The revised version was performed in Paris on May 8, 1924, with the composer as soloist under Serge Koussevitzky. This score calls for an orchestra of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, snare drum, field drum, cymbals, tambourine, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-one minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Prokofiev's Second Piano Concerto were given at Orchestra Hall on February 28 and March 1, 1930, with the composer as soloist and Frederick Stock conducting.

Maurice Prokofiev wrote his first two piano concertos while he was still a student at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. He was an unusually precocious young musician—he composed his first piano piece at the age of five and at nine he was playing Beethoven sonatas. By the time he was admitted to the conservatory in 1904, at the age of thirteen, he had already written two operas, a symphony, a violin sonata, and several piano pieces. Prokofiev quickly grew bored and disillusioned with the stodgy school atmosphere; he was an unusually rebellious student, and he did poorly in his classes with Rimsky-Korsakov and Liadov, the two most distinguished teachers at the conservatory. With his first two piano concertos, Prokofiev began to assert his musical personality and to distance himself from the prevailing reactionary tastes.

Prokofiev's first piano concerto, completed in 1912, helped to establish his reputation as an enfant terrible; it was discussed by the leading critics in both Saint Petersburg and Moscow, who carped about its superficial bravura and exhibitionistic, "acrobatic" technique. The second piano concerto Prokofiev began the following year was, in part, an attempt to compose a work of greater depth, although it requires even greater virtuosity. (Prokofiev had become a pianist of exceptional brilliance and power during his conservatory days, and he wrote both works to perform himself.)

The composer played the complex, wide-ranging solo part of his Second Piano Concerto at its premiere in September 1913, in the out-of-the-way town of Pavlovsk, near Saint Petersburg. The concert drew curious music lovers from throughout the surrounding area, and the critic for the Saint Petersburg Gazette noted that his fellow passengers on the train to Pavlovsk were talking of nothing but Prokofiev. Here is part of his review, proudly reprinted by Prokofiev in his Brief Autobiography:

On the platform appeared a youth looking like a Peterschule student. It was Sergei Prokofiev. He sat down at the piano and appeared to be either dusting the keyboard or tapping it at random, with a sharp dry touch. The public did not know what to make of it. Some indignant murmurs were heard. One couple got up and hurried to the exit: “Such music can drive you mad!” The hall emptied. The young artist ended his concerto with a relentlessly discordant combination of brasses. The audience was scandalized. The majority hissed. With a mocking bow, Prokofiev sat down again and played an encore. “The hell with this futurist music!” people were heard to exclaim. “We came here for pleasure. The cats on the roof make better music!”
Another critic wrote that the concerto left its listeners “frozen with fright, hair standing on end.” With a major scandal under his belt (in that most scandal-packed year of premieres, this concerto coming only four months after Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*), Prokofiev now felt that he truly was on the threshold of fame. His career advanced quickly. Immediately after graduation from the conservatory in 1914—the recipient of the coveted Rubinstein Prize—he left Russia and later met the hottest names in European music circles, Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Diaghilev. Prokofiev was bowled over by Stravinsky’s music, and *The Rite of Spring* had a lasting impact on his own development as a composer (a debt Prokofiev never publicly admitted). In London, Prokofiev played his Second Piano Concerto for Diaghilev, who at first considered choreographing it but then asked him to write a new ballet score (the ill-fated Ala and Lolli, later revised as the *Scythian Suite*, followed by a second commission, *The Tale of the Buffoon*).

In 1918, Prokofiev talked an official into issuing him a passport with no expiration date, and he set off for the United States. Remembering that he had once met a friendly Chicagoan named Cyrus McCormick in Petrograd, Prokofiev traveled to Chicago, which seemed unusually welcoming and receptive to his music. Frederick Stock invited him to play his First Piano Concerto and to conduct the *Scythian Suite* with the Chicago Symphony, and the Chicago Opera agreed to produce *The Love for Three Oranges*. Stock invited Prokofiev back to play the world premiere of his new Third Piano Concerto in 1921.

When Prokofiev came to this country in 1918, he left the score of his Second Piano Concerto in his Petrograd apartment, where it eventually was used by the new tenants as fuel “to cook an omelet,” as the composer’s friends later informed him. In 1923, then living in Paris, Prokofiev decided to reconstruct the score from memory. “I have so completely rewritten the Second Concerto that it might almost be considered the Fourth,” he wrote to a friend that year. But in his autobiography he claimed that he had merely made “the contrapuntal development slightly more complicated, the form more graceful—less square,” and that he “improved” both the piano and orchestral parts. We’ll never know how different the original 1913 concerto is from the one he introduced in Paris in May 1924. But then, in a city used to being at the center of the avant-garde, it caused little stir.

The Second Piano Concerto has four movements, unconventionally arranged—the last three offer little variety of tempo and there’s no “slow movement” at all. The first movement begins with a delicate, expansive lyrical theme in the piano; it’s the only one of its kind in the work. Prokofiev ingeniously transforms much of the standard development and recapitulation sections into a monumental, unabashedly virtuosic cadenza for solo piano (he marks the climax “colossale”). By the time the orchestra reenters, the movement is practically over.

The scherzo is a fleet perpetuum mobile for the pianist, playing nonstop sixteenth notes in unison octaves throughout. (The orchestra adds terse, colorful comments, but stays out of the soloist’s way.) The subsequent Intermezzo, which doesn’t offer the relief its title traditionally suggests, is a fierce and sometimes grotesque march over a repeating bass line. The finale is more of a battle between piano and orchestra, the former resorting to full-fisted chords to gain the upper hand. Prokofiev makes room for a leisurely interlude with a simple folklike melody and another florid cadenza before the “relentlessly discordant” chords that left the Pavlovsk audience, apparently unaccustomed to healthy harmonic daring, frozen with fright.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

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