



# Sergei PROKOFIEV

## *Piano Concerto No. 4 in B-flat major for the left hand, Op. 53*

**Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev** (27 April 1891 – 5 March 1953) was a Russian Soviet composer, pianist and conductor. As the creator of acknowledged masterpieces across numerous musical genres, he is regarded as one of the major composers of the 20th century. His works include such widely heard pieces as the March from *The Love for Three Oranges*, the suite *Lieutenant Kijé*, the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* - from which "Dance of the Knights" is taken - and *Peter and the Wolf*. Of the established forms and genres in which he worked, he created - excluding juvenilia - seven completed operas, seven symphonies, eight ballets, five piano concertos, two violin concertos, a cello concerto, a symphony-concerto for cello and orchestra, and nine completed piano sonatas. A graduate of the St Petersburg Conservatory, Prokofiev initially made his name as an iconoclastic composer-pianist, achieving notoriety with a series of ferociously dissonant and virtuosic works for his instrument, including his first two piano concertos. In 1915, Prokofiev made a decisive break from the standard composer-pianist category with his orchestral *Scythian Suite*, compiled from music originally composed for a ballet commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev of the Ballets Russes. Prokofiev's greatest interest, however, was opera, and he composed several works in that genre, including *The Gambler* and *The Fiery Angel*. Prokofiev's one operatic success during his lifetime was *The Love for Three Oranges*, composed for the Chicago Opera and subsequently performed over the following decade in Europe and Russia. After the Revolution of 1917, Prokofiev left Russia with the official blessing of the Soviet minister Anatoly Lunacharsky, and resided in the United States, then Germany, then Paris, making his living as a composer, pianist and conductor. During that time, he married a Spanish singer, Carolina (Lina) Codina, with whom he had two sons. In the early 1930s, the Great Depression diminished opportunities for Prokofiev's ballets and operas to be staged in America and western Europe. Prokofiev, who regarded himself as composer foremost, resented the time taken by touring as a pianist, and increasingly turned to the Soviet Union for commissions of new music; in 1936, he finally returned to his homeland with his family.

Sergei Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No. 4 in B-flat major for the left hand, Op. 53*, was commissioned by the one-armed pianist Paul Wittgenstein and completed in 1931. It was the only one of Prokofiev's complete piano concertos that never saw a performance during his lifetime. It was premiered in Berlin on 5 September 1956 by Siegfried Rapp and the West Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Martin Rich. The United States premiere was in 1958, by Rudolf Serkin and the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy.

The structural peccadillo of this inventive miniature is an insouciant circular design. The first movement, although marked *Vivace*, is indeed a *Rondo*, more suitable in formal musical architecture as an ending section. We enter the fashionable world of the Stravinskian Neoclassical almost immediately and it is easy to recall two of Prokofiev's earlier works, the "Classical" *Symphony No. 1* and the brisk, one-movement *First Concerto*. The opening coolness establishes a certain detachment, reminiscent of Haydn, a holding out of the emotional content at one arm's length. Thoughtful and measured, the *Andante* is the finest Prokofiev slow movement to date, foreshadowing in its patient construction of intensity the great third movement of the *Fifth Symphony*. The composer, who lost the only copy of his *Second Concerto* when his tenants burned it for warmth while he was away on concert tour, almost immediately rescued the main theme of this section once it became apparent that Wittgenstein would never perform the work as a whole, giving it new life and form as one of the loveliest melodies in his ballet *Romeo and Juliet*. In the *Moderato* section, Prokofiev rolls up his sleeve and fashions an entire clinic on the subject of touch, rising to the challenge to make the writing for only one hand as varied as that for both. Wittgenstein claimed a lack of understanding of the piece as his basis for rejection, but it seems more likely that he was afraid of this movement and its wide range of colorful tactile demands. But it is the incredible fourth movement that identifies this composition as uniquely Prokofiev. Only seconds over a minute in length, this razor-sharp distillation of the opening material is an exclamation point that ends like an ellipsis. Satisfying the urge to conclude with a *Rondo* after all, only the composer of a set of solo piano pieces called *Sarcasms* could have written such a signature close.