



# Sergei PROKOFIEV

## *Piano Concerto No. 2*

**Sergei Sergeevich Prokofiev** (23 April 1891 – 5 March 1953) was a Russian composer, pianist and conductor. Prokofiev became involved in music at an early age under the influence of his mother, and had already completed 3 operas by the time he entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory at 13. He had an obvious boredom with traditional harmony, complaining that his first teacher taught him "square" phrase structure and conventional modulations, which he subsequently had to unlearn. Prokofiev would go on to graduate from the conservatory in 1914 with 2 piano concertos in his catalogue, and would leave for the United States in 1918 due to numerous premiere cancellations caused by Russia's war involvement. His stay in the United States was short lived, however, as his opera, *The Love for Three Oranges*, was cancelled when the Chicago Opera Association's music director passed away before its performance. Running out of money, Prokofiev moved to Paris in 1920, not wanting to return to Russia as a failure. He found more hardships in Europe, as he admitted that he "was evidently no longer a sensation" after a mild reception of his *Symphony No. 2* (1925). In Moscow, Prokofiev initially fell under the scorn of the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM), who prevented him from premiering his ballet, *Le pas d'acier* (1926) – at the Bolshoi Theatre. When the RAPM was dissolved in 1932, Prokofiev gained the respect of the USSR, and was commissioned to write music for several government-endorsed films, Joseph Stalin's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party, and even won the Stalin Prize twice for his "War Sonatas". Prokofiev would reach the peak of his celebrity as a leading composer of the Soviet Union in 1945, following the premiere of his *Symphony No. 5*, but had much of his music banned in 1948 through the "Zhdanov Decree". Prokofiev would pass away under this censorship, as he died on the same day as Stalin, marking the end of the decree.

The version of Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 16* that we know today was completed in 1923. However, Prokofiev originally wrote the piece in 1913, with that version being destroyed in a fire following the Russian Revolution. In fact, the piece was so different when Prokofiev re-wrote it (actually being finished 2 years following his Third Piano Concerto) that he declared "that it might almost be considered [Concerto] No. 4."

The first movement (*Andantino – Allegretto*) opens quietly with strings and clarinet playing a two-bar staccato theme. The piano takes over, constructing the main theme over a quartal-sounding undulating accompaniment. This theme contains a second half, a rising scale with enough sentimental flavour to perhaps suggest the influence of Rachmaninoff. The second theme is characteristically flippant, as it nearly sounds like a traditional dance, but with interspersed notes being "off". The soloist returns to the opening melody, which begins the cadenza. The music becomes increasingly virtuosic, until the orchestra re-enters at the climax of dissonance.

The second movement (*Scherzo: Vivace*) begins with a jolt and never lets go. Even though the movement lasts only about 2.5 minutes in length, the rapid, unending 16<sup>th</sup> notes make this section a technical nightmare, demanding extreme skill of its soloist.

The third movement (*Intermezzo: Allegro moderato*) provides a surprise for the audience. While an intermezzo following a scherzo is usually lyrical and slow, this particular movement provides another intense round of music. The pulse of this movement is served as a march, both grotesque and humorous in nature. The pianist Sviatoslav Richter said that to him, this movement evoked "a dragon devouring its young."

The final movement (*Finale: Allegro tempestoso*) mirrors the first movement in terms of scope. However, whereas in the first movement, the initial theme was slow, Prokofiev begins the 4<sup>th</sup> movement with a maniacal chaos. With the soloist springing across the keyboard in octaves, the orchestra jostles back and forth with aggressive accented figures. Perhaps in reverse of the first movement, the 2<sup>nd</sup> theme of this finale is a slower, contemplative theme. Like the first movement, an extensive cadenza leads to a fragmented version of the lyrical theme. To close out the concerto, the opening returns and drives the intensity of the entire piece to a grand, bombastic finish.