

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

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PIANO

Sergei Prokofiev (1891 - 1953)

Sonata no. 1 in F-minor, Op. 1

[1] Allegro 6:50

Four Pieces, Op. 3 4:36

[2] 1. Story 2:33

[3] 2. Jest 0:40

[4] 3. March 0:39

[5] 4. Phantom 0:38

“Tales of an old Grandmother”, Op. 31 10:19

[6] 1. Moderato 2:42

[7] 2. Andantino 1:15

[8] 3. Andante assai 3:05

[9] 4. Sostenuto 3:11

Three Pieces, Op. 59 10:09

[10] 1. Promenade 3:11

[11] 2. Landscape 2:19

[12] 3. Pastorale Sonatina in C 4:34

Sonata no. 8 in B-flat major, Op. 84 31:40

[13] i Andante dolce - Allegro moderato - Andante, come prima - Allegro 16:14

[14] ii Andante sognando 5:21

[15] iii Vivace - Allegro ben marcato - Andantino - Vivace, come prima 9:59

Oleg Marshev, Piano

The gradual undermining of traditional tonal relationships that characterises late 19th century music from Wagner through Liszt to Richard Strauss, Mahler and Debussy, presaged the complete breakdown of tonality in the works of Schönberg and his pupils. This crisis may be seen as the logical outcome of increasingly highly charged Romantic expression, and it created particular problems for the Romantic instrument par excellence, the pianoforte. What the visionary Liszt had already demonstrated in his exploratory late piano works became clear to composers in the first decades of this century: dense textures and traditional keyboard virtuosity were incompatible with the new refined tonal language. The realization spawned several parallel schools: uninhibited by a strong national tradition, Debussy forged a totally new approach to piano composition and keyboard colour, elegantly avoiding the issue altogether; other composers sought refuge beneath the umbrella of neo-nationalism, an eclectic approach in which classical/romantic techniques could be

adopted to individual needs (Rachmaninoff, Ravel, Albéniz etc.); others sought to impose the grand keyboard approach with some modifications on the extended harmonic language (Berg, Scriabin, Busoni); others still reacted by reducing expressive means to a bare minimum (Webern, late Schönberg).

SERGEI PROKOFIEV conformed to none of these trends - and to all of them. Though his often percussive use of the keyboard may be considered anti-Romantic *per se*, he does not shun traditional large forms bristling with notes that demand a highly virtuoso piano technique. On the other hand he is capable of the conciseness and extreme abstractions of the minute 'Sarcasms' and 'Visions Fugitives'. Yet his entire output is characterised by the brilliant sonorities and incisive rhythm typical of many of the 'neo-nationalists'. He shares all these characteristics with his great contemporaries Béla Bartók and Igor Stravinsky; together they are responsible for giving new impetus to piano music in the 20th

century. It is symptomatic that all three were also virtuosi of the first order.

When Prokofiev swept forth from Russia in the wake of the Revolution of 1917, he astounded audiences in Europe and the United States with his aggressive, muscular approach to the keyboard and his complete disdain of tradition. He conformed perfectly to Western preconceptions of a 'Bolshevik Artist': austere, uncompromising and totally dedicated. And whilst these traits may well have been characteristic of the man himself (he was notoriously abrasive), we see now that his style differs from that of his Russian predecessors less in essence than in degree: the boldness and vivid colours so typical of the Russian nationalist school may be detected in condensed form in the sardonic, concise idiom that Prokofiev made his own, often underpinned by the yearning melody and poignant harmony that reveal him as *avant-garde* and Romantic traditionalist in equal measure. And if some of his early piano output is more uncompro-

mising in its truculent negation of tradition and its fascination with the percussive aspects of the instrument sometimes bordering on the manic, yet his mature works are characterised by the attempt to reconcile these contrasting schools, and to this his music owes its unique appeal.*)

Prokofiev's aim was that of expressing primitive emotions without resorting to traditional romantic means, and his music may be heard as a constant quest for ways of communicating directly and profoundly with his audience in a language that did not conform to a received aesthetic norm. In this respect his piano music, and in particular the nine completed piano sonatas, enshrines his most personal utterances. As a consummate pianist himself (he won the Rubinstein Prize in 1914 playing his own D-flat Concerto) it was only natural that his profoundest intuitions should be expressed in terms of his own instrument. The eleven sonatas (including two unfinished works) span Prokofiev's entire

creative career from his student years at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire in 1907 to his death in 1953. In addition to these works he composed over sixty smaller piano pieces collected in groups under single opus numbers, including the “Visions Fugitives” and “Sarcasms”, not to mention the transcriptions of his ballet music for “Cinderella” and “Romeo and Juliet”.

Yet despite their originality, can the sonatas be said to constitute a great 20th century cycle? The question is perhaps irrelevant (in his so-called “Memoirs” - New York 1979 - Shostakovich himself suggests a final summing up to Prokofiev’s music is not yet possible): let the listener decide for himself as to their collective worth. But one thing seems certain: if Prokofiev consciously sought a musical idiom concordant with his principles as to musical expression, he achieved this early in his career. Much of his successive production was concerned less with the evolution of this idiom than on exploiting it to the full, a hermetic

trait that some interpret as a moral flaw (though perhaps justifiable on political grounds). In these terms, despite their crucial importance in the 20th century repertoire, Prokofiev’s nine sonatas cannot be said to embody the questing comprehensiveness which characterises the quartets of Bartók or the symphonies of Shostakovich.

As a cycle-within-a-cycle, the three so-called ‘War Sonatas’, nos. 6, 7 and 8 (featured on this CD), are perhaps an exception to this collective theory. All three were begun simultaneously in 1939, no. 6 completed in 1940, no. 7 in early 1942 and no. 8 was premiered by Emil Gilels in 1944. Though each is a masterpiece with a distinct stylistic unity, all three together prove mutually enriching, displaying not only Prokofiev’s genius for constantly conjuring up new keyboard sonorities (and attendant technical problems for the performer!), but offering new, complementary perspectives on the single emotional climate that they seem to inhabit. The Sixth Sonata is the

more eccentric of the group, its schizophrenic changes of mood and extreme contrasts allowing the listener little time to orient himself in what often becomes a bewildering barrage of shifting impressions. The 3-movement Seventh Sonata is the more concise of the three. The dark, impetuous first movement is followed by a deceptive Andante caloroso. Despite its idyllic opening, this movement is laden with menace and offers little respite before the breathtaking Precipitato toccata finale. The Eighth Sonata is probably the richest of all. Though it too is characterised by strong contrasts and mercurial shifts of mood, the explicit aggression of its companion works seems tempered by reflection: the tonal language is less austere, the lyricism darker-hued, creating an atmosphere that is at once meditative and deeply resigned.

The First Sonata in F-minor Op. 1 dates back to Prokofiev's student period, 1907-09. Its single movement shows little sign of the dramatic change the composer's works were to undergo over the

next few years. The virtuoso piano writing relies heavily on traditional 19th century techniques and harmonically it inhabits the torrid world of superheated romanticism already explored by the young Scriabin (though how far that master had moved on by this time may be heard in his Fifth Sonata in F-sharp major, also cast in a single movement, written in the same year).

The four "Tales of an old Grandmother" Op. 31 stem from 1918 and find the composer in a more intimate mood, the elderly lady often expressing herself in consolatory tones reminiscent of Prokofiev's less radical contemporaries. Twenty years separate the Four Pieces Op. 3 (1907-08, rev. 1911) and Three Pieces Op. 59 (1933-34). The former miniatures are typical of the youthful Prokofiev's acerbic wit and condensed style, whilst Op. 59, written in Paris immediately before the composer's return to Russia, exploits a more lyrical vein; in this 'outdoor' suite he pays particular attention to texture and colour, from the

playful breeze in "Landscape" to the musings of the "Pastoral Sonatina".

*) These same Janus aspects of his music were later to acquire more complex and sinister overtones when his alleged 'formalism', along with that of Shostakovich, Khatchaturian and other leading composers, was condemned by the 1948 Congress headed by Zhdanov. Prokofiev and his colleagues were compelled to 'confess' their shortcomings in an open letter to the Union of Soviet Composers.

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Born in Baku in 1961, OLEG MAR-SHEV trained with Valentina Aristova at the Gnesin School for Highly Gifted Children in Moscow, and with Mikhail Voskresensky at the Moscow Conservatoire where he completed his performance Doctorate gaining the "Diploma with Honour" in 1988. His First Prize in the 1989 "Pilar Bayona" International Piano Competition in Zaragoza, Spain, proved the first in a series of illustrious competition victories which have confirmed Marshev's reputation as one of

the most talented Russian pianists of his generation: in 1990 he won First Prize and Gold Medal at the AMSA World Piano Competition of Cincinnati; in 1991 First Prize at the Concorso Pianistico Internazionale "Città di Marsala" and in 1992 the coveted Primo Premio Assoluto at the Concorso Pianistico Internazionale "Roma 1992".

In addition to engagements in Russia, Marshev has performed in Hungary, Poland, Norway, Italy, Japan, United States, Canada and Spain. 1991 saw his New York debut with a highly acclaimed recital at the Lincoln Center Alice Tully Hall which led to an invitation to give a recital at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw. Marshev's activities also extend to the recording studio: in addition to a Melodiya-CD with works by Rachmaninoff he has recorded for Danacord the complete original solo piano music by Prokofiev (DACOCD 391-395) and Anton Rubinstein's Piano Concertos Nos. 3 and 4 with the Artur Rubinstein Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Ilya Stupel (DACOCD 412).





Sergei Prokofiev

(1891 - 1953)

- 1 Sonata no. 1 in F-minor, Op. 1
- 2 Four Pieces, Op. 3
- 6 "Old Grandmother's Tales", Op. 31
- 10 Three Pieces, Op. 59
- 13 Sonata no. 8 in B-flat major, Op. 84

Oleg Marshev, Piano

Total playing time 63:53

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