

SERGEY PROKOFIEV

Violin Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 63

BORN: April 23, 1891, in Sontsovka, Ukraine

DIED: March 5, 1953, in Moscow

WORK COMPOSED: 1935

WORLD PREMIERE: December 1, 1935, in Madrid. Robert Soetens was the soloist, and the composer conducted.

The violin is an exceptionally versatile instrument, one capable of a wide range of expression. Most conspicuously, it can perform feats of athletic virtuosity and also sing in a sustained, melodious manner. Both of these modes are on display in Sergey Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 2 in G minor.

Prokofiev wrote this work shortly after returning to the Soviet Union in 1933, after some 15 years of composing and concertizing in the United States and Western Europe. While he maintained ties with the West for the next three years, he increasingly came to regard himself as a Soviet composer. Indeed, he would be fully and permanently repatriated by 1936.

There remained, however, one obligation dating from his ten-year residence in Paris: a work promised to the French violinist Robert Soetens. Prokofiev originally thought to fulfill Soetens' commission with a sonata for violin and piano, but as the piece developed he decided that a larger format was required. He therefore recast his sketches as a work for violin and orchestra.

Although written for a Western artist and audience, the Violin Concerto No. 2 in G minor reveals the melodic warmth that emerged in Prokofiev's music following his repatriation. There are, to be sure, some of the brittle textures, driving rhythms and touches of sardonic humor that had long marked his style, but these are now tempered by the lyricism that came to distinguish the music of Prokofiev's Soviet period. Like many composers at the time, although perhaps for different reasons, Prokofiev sought in the 1930s a more accessible idiom after some daring modernist experiments during the previous two decades. The Second Violin Concerto testifies to his success in achieving this without sacrificing his own compositional voice.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: Formally, this concerto adheres closely to classical models. Its first movement presents a venerable design of statement, development and reprise of two distinct themes. The first subject is announced at once by the soloist, playing alone. The featured instrument also gives out the second theme, this time over a soft accompaniment from the orchestral strings. Prokofiev's development of these two melodies is extensive and makes considerable demands on the solo performer.

The second movement is entirely different. After two measures of introduction, the violin enters with a beautiful song-like theme, deceptive in its apparent simplicity. From this subject the entire movement unfolds in a nearly unbroken stream of melody. The finale follows a rondo pattern: a primary theme alternating with digressive episodes. Dance rhythms mark the recurring principal subject, and the solo part requires no small degree of virtuosity from its executant.

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