

Concerto for Piano No. 3 in C Major, Op. 26 • Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Scored for: solo piano, 2 flutes (one doubling on piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, cymbals, castanets, tambourine, bass drum, and strings

Sergei Prokofiev was a prodigious pianist. He began playing (and composing) before he was six years old, and by the time he was nine he had completed his first opera. His talents were nurtured by his well-to-do family, who encouraged his enrollment at the St. Petersburg Conservatory at the tender age of thirteen. Though Prokofiev was the youngest person in his classes, he consistently out paced and out performed his colleagues. (Pictures from his early days at the conservatory show a group of students, most of them bearded, sitting alongside the almost comically infantile Prokofiev.) He was fortunate to study composition with Rimsky-Korsakov and the famous pianist Anette Essipova, and within eight years he was recognized as one of the one of the most promising young Russian pianist-composers of his generation. As his skills developed and his musical tastes evolved, he rapidly attained a firm reputation as composer of advanced tendencies with biting, angular, abrasive melodies, a delight for the grotesque, an incessant rhythmic drive, and a peculiar knack for combining satire and beauty. His piano concertos, with the exception of the fourth, were written as a vehicle to display his dual talents as pianist and composer.

Prokofiev had been collecting thematic material for his Third Piano Concerto since 1911; however, it was not until 1917 that he began composing in earnest. Even then, the work was slow in coming and it was a further four years before the work began to take shape. In the summer of 1921 he spent a holiday in Brittany, France, where he finally completed the concerto. In December 1921, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra premiered the concerto with Prokofiev playing the solo part. Depending on which source you read, the work was either received with little enthusiasm or rave reviews. However, all sources agree that the press heavily criticized the subsequent performance in New York. It was only after Serge Koussevitzky conducted a well-received performance in Paris in 1922 that the work was truly accepted.

In a 1962 interview, Lina Llubera Prokofiev, the composer's first wife, recalled her husband's working method at the time he wrote the C major Piano Concerto: "Prokofiev toiled at his music. His capacity for work was phenomenal. He would sit down to work in the morning 'with a clear head,' as he said, either at the piano or at his writing desk. He usually composed his major works in the summer, in the mountains or at the seaside, away from the turmoil of city life. Always he sought places where the rhythm of work was not interrupted, where he could rest and take long walks. So it was with the Third Piano Concerto, which he completed during the summer of 1921 while staying at St. Brévin-les-Pins, a small village on the Atlantic coast of Brittany in France."

Prokofiev himself provided the following description of the score:

The first movement opens quietly with a short introduction (Andante, 4/4). The theme is announced by an unaccompanied clarinet and is continued by the violins for a few bars. Soon the tempo changes to Allegro, and the strings have a passage in sixteenths, which leads to the statement of the principal subject by the piano. Discussion of this theme is carried on in a lively manner, both the piano and the orchestra having a good deal to say on the matter. A passage in chords for the piano alone leads to the more expressive second subject, heard in the oboe with a pizzicato accompaniment. This is taken up by the piano and developed at some length, eventually giving way to a bravura passage in triplets. At the climax of this section, the tempo reverts to Andante, and the orchestra gives out the first theme, fortissimo. The piano joins in, and the theme is subjected to an impressively broad treatment. In resuming the Allegro, the chief theme and the second subject are developed with increased brilliance, and the movement ends with an exciting crescendo.

The second movement, Andantino, consists of a theme with five variations. The theme is announced by the orchestra alone. In the first variation, the piano treats the opening of the theme in quasi-sentimental fashion, and resolves into a chain of trills, as the orchestra repeats the closing phrase. The tempo

changes to Allegro for the second and third variations, and the piano has brilliant figures, while snatches of the theme are introduced here and there in the orchestra. In Variation Four the tempo is once again Andante, and the piano and orchestra discourse on the theme in a quiet and meditative fashion. Variation Five is energetic (Allegro giusto). It leads without pause into a restatement of the theme by the orchestra, with delicate chordal embroidery in the piano.

The finale (Allegro ma non troppo, 3/4) begins with a staccato theme for bassoons and pizzicato strings, which is interrupted by the blustering entry of the piano. The orchestra holds its own with the opening theme, however, and there is a good deal of argument, with frequent differences of opinion as regards key. Eventually the piano takes up the first theme and develops it to a climax. With a reduction of tone and a slackening of tempo, an alternative theme is introduced in the woodwinds. The piano replies with a theme that is more in keeping with the caustic humor of the work. This material is developed, and there is a brilliant coda.