

SERGEY PROKOFIEV

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major, Op. 26

BORN: Sontsovka, Ukraine, April 23, 1891

DIED: Moscow, March 5, 1953

WORK COMPOSED: 1921

WORLD PREMIERE: December 16, 1921, in Chicago. The composer played the solo part, and Frederick Stock conducted the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

After beginning the concerto in a lyrical vein, Prokofiev moves on to his rhythmic manner: the tempo quickens and the piano joins the proceedings with staccato figuration. Soloist and orchestral winds extend this idea in a series of exchanges.

The next theme derives its oriental flavor not only from the sinuous shape of its melody but also its introduction by oboe to a rhythmic accompaniment from castanets.

Late in the movement, a reprise of these two themes takes on added interest through strangely colorful instrumentation and some pungent harmonies.

In the finale, high-speed brilliance gives way to a warmly romantic interlude. A return to the energetic material that opened the movement rounds the proceedings into a large-scale A–B–A design.

“Prokofiev’s Third Piano Concerto has some of the most intelligent, clever and witty writing that I can think of, and still reveals beautiful and passionate melodies throughout the concerto. It’s a rare combination of geometrical architecture and deep emotions. I played this concerto for the first time back in 2013. Being a ‘consummate’ performer of Prokofiev’s Second Concerto, which is incredibly dramatic and tragic, it felt very refreshing.”

– Beatrice Rana

Sergey Prokofiev’s Third Piano Concerto is the most brilliant and in all ways the most successful of his five contributions to its genre. Although the composer wrote the work during a vacation in France in 1921, most of the musical ideas that went into it had originated some time earlier, during his early career in Russia. He salvaged much of the third movement from a string quartet begun but abandoned three years previously. The second movement had been sketched in 1913, and some of the passages in the first movement date from 1916 and even earlier. So rich in ideas were Prokofiev’s sketch books that he could later declare: “When I began working on the concerto ... I already had all the thematic material I needed except for the third theme of the finale and the subordinate theme of the first movement.”

The composer performed the solo part when the piece received its premiere performance on December 16, 1921, in Chicago. This duty proved more demanding than Prokofiev had anticipated — “I’m nervous and practicing hard ... every day,” he wrote shortly before the event — but the performance went well and the music was warmly received. It has since gained a secure position as the most popular of the composer’s concertos and, indeed, as one of the most popular of all his works.

In his autobiography, Prokofiev identified four traits that he considered characteristic of his style. The first was an allegiance to classical ideals of form and thematic development, which he credited to his early contact with the music of Beethoven. To this he added a penchant for searching out new harmonies, instrumental sonorities and melodic shapes. He identified rhythm as the third aspect of his music —

specifically, a tendency to use a driving pulse and steely rhythmic figures within it. The final quality was lyrical expression.

All four of these traits shape the Third Piano Concerto. Its broad form follows the classic concerto design of three movements in a fast–slow–fast sequence. The first opens with an introductory passage featuring a lyrical melody with something of the flavor of a Russian folk song. Subsequent developments tap Prokofiev’s penchant for strong, driving rhythms, as well as the impish humor we often encounter in his music.

The second movement unfolds in theme-and-variations form, a curiously somber march theme stated at the outset by the orchestra giving rise to five contrasting paraphrases. In the finale, Prokofiev recaptures the drive of the opening movement in passages of impressive keyboard virtuosity.

Scored for solo piano; 2 flutes (the 2nd doubling piccolo); 2 oboes; 2 clarinets; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; timpani and percussion; strings.

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