A Recorded: Rundfunk Sinfonie Hall,
Berlin, Germany,
October 20, 1988
Engineers: A. Seyfarth and E. Ulmann
Producer: H. Hubner
Publisher: Belwin Mills Corp.

B Recorded: Slovenija Philharmonic Hall,
Ljubljana, Yugoslavia,
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Engineer: R. Cedilnik
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ARAM
Khachaturian
PIANO CONCERTO
IN Db MAJOR

SERGEI
Prokofiev
PIANO CONCERTO NO.1
IN Db MAJOR, OP.10

DIMITRI
Shostakovich
PIANO CONCERTO NO.2
IN F MAJOR, OP.102

PIANO
Joshua Pierce

Rundfunk Sinfonie Orchestra Berlin
RTV Sinfonie Orchestra Slovenija
PAUL FREEMAN, Conductor

KHACHATURIAN • PROKOFIEV • SHOSTAKOVICH

There is something generic about the idea of a Russian Concerto.

It goes back, perhaps, to the days of the leonine Anton Rubinstein or the Tchaikovsky B-flat minor or the more recent but entirely romantic Rachmaninoff. Modernism and the Russian Revolution overthrew a lot of things but not the Russian Concerto which has survived, not quite unscathed, but more thunderously Russian than ever.

Even an iconoclast like Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev turned to the virtuoso concerto as a way of making his mark. In fact, all three of these concertos were calling cards. Amid the vissicitudes of Russian and Soviet music in this century, the romantic ideal of the concerto as a bravura showpiece and a dialogue between individual and ensemble has held its own.

Prokofiev was born on April 23, 1891 in Sontsovka, the Ukraine, where his father was the manager of a large estate. His mother played the piano and encouraged her son's precocious musicality. The composer Rheinhold Gliere was brought out to the estate to give the boy lessons. Later, in 1904, he was enrolled in the St. Petersburg Conservatory where he remained for ten years, studying composition, conducting and piano.

He was an *enfant terrible* from the start, unruly, rebellious, openly siding with the avant-garde against his more conservative teachers. In a way, his rebelliousness and hatred of authority mirrored the unrest and unsettled conditions of the country and, even at a young age, he became the musical voice of his time. While still a student, he established connections with the most advanced artistic circles of the day and began composing and performing in a rough, driving, dissonant style that earned him considerable attention.

The composer himself described his Piano Concerto No.1 as his first "more or less mature composition, both with regard to the conception and its fulfillment." It was begun in 1911 as a brief one-movement showcase for himself but, by its completion the following year, it had grown into a considerably more ambitious project. He played it for the first time on July 25, 1912 at the Moscow People's House, Sokolniki Park, with an orchestra conducted by Konstantin Solomonovich Saradzhev and again in August at an outdoor concert in Pavlovsk, an eighteenth-century palace and park near St. Petersburg. The results, both times, were sensational.

"This energetic, rhythmic, harsh, coarse, primitive cacophony hardly deserves to be called music" sputtered one well-known critic; another recommended strait-jackets for all concerned. But there were critics who recognized the brilliance, wit and rich imagination of this new talent and, remarkably, the public was enthusiastic. One does not think of summer pops as a place for difficult new music but, in fact, the piece seemed to catch the mood of the public. One observer called it a new era in Russian music. It propelled the composer, age 21, to a place in Russian and even European music which he retained for the rest of his life.

As fresh and new as this concerto sounds even today, it is also a work in the grand tradition — of Liszt perhaps rather than Rubinstein or Tchaikovsky. The tonality is a solid D-flat major (the relative major of Tchaikovsky's notorious B-flat minor). The one-movement structure holds all the elements of a three - or four-movement Concerto but in a tight, terse form.

Cacophony? The opening *Allegro brioso* (a tempo marking that seems to be unique to Prokofiev) sits right on top of a pure D-flat triad which underpins the simplest and grandest of motifs — a melodic decoration of the triad itself. The dotted pick-up and quarter-note tread are the rhythmic keystones of the entire piece.

After a climactic slow-down, the music drops half a step to C, the tempo picks up and the piano leads a hard-drive of eighth-note scales and triplets. These are the elements of the discourse: the contrasting keys of D-flat and C, the rhythmic march, the ascending and descending scales and triplets. And always, a brilliant, percussive virtuouity.

The next section, led again by the piano, is based on the dotted figure and a descending quarter-note tread in alternating D-flat and C. The orchestra now leads in E minor with a very different, dirge-like profile. The tempo picks up yet again to a dashing *accelerando* and *Animato* in E, based mostly on descending scales and leading — surprisingly and yet with great inevitability — right back to that D-flat opening.

This all subsides into a lyrical *Andante assai* (another curious tempo indication) in B, a movement that anticipates the Prokofiev of *"Alexander Nevsky"* or the Fifth Symphony. The material is elaborated and intensified by the piano and, in turn, it too falls back. *Allegro scherzando*, beginning quietly and ambiguously, turns out to be the sum-up finale. It plays its hand bit by bit: staccato scales, accompaniment motifs and a kaleidoscope of keys, all suggesting earlier material. After a *fortissimo* exchange between piano and orchestra, the tempo relaxes a bit and the dotted-note/descending-scale motif recurs, first in the orchestra, then solo. There is a rather flashy cadenza and a recapitulation that starts with the old E minor theme, now in C-sharp (=D-flat) minor and continuing through the *accelerando* and *Animato*, again in E. There is no secret about what will happen next and yet the return of the opening is no less of a *coup* and just as hairraising as it was before.

Sometimes history does repeat itself. Almost exactly a quarter of a century later, another new concerto by a young composer had a big success in Sokolniki Park. The pianist was Lev Oborin, one of the leading young Russian lions of the day; he played with the Moscow Philharmonic under L. Shteinberg. The composer was the still little-known Aram Khachaturian.

Khachaturian was a late starter in music and largely self-taught. He was born in Tblisi (or Tiflis), Soviet Armenia, on June 6, 1903 and died in Moscow on May Day, 1978. He arrived in Moscow at the age of 18, began his formal studies at the Gnesin Music Academy a year later and was admitted

to the Moscow Conservatory only in 1929. Like both Prokofiev and Shostakovich, he burst on the Soviet music scene while still a student but, unlike his precocious confreres, he was already well into his thirties. His Piano Concerto, one of the two or three works that brought him to public notice, was written in 1936 and premiered on July 12, 1937, the year he completed his studies at the Conservatory.

Prokofiev's and Shostakovich's work came to international notice almost immediately; Khachaturian's reputation took a little longer to spread, probably because of World War II. In 1942, the orchestra of the Julliard School in New York under its then director, Albert Stoessel, was scheduled to give a benefit concert for Russian War Relief with the gifted young pianist of Armenian descent, Maro Ajemian. Ajemian, looking for a new Soviet work at Am-Russ, the official Russian-American trading corporation, discovered the Khachaturian score and subsequently played it with great success. One of the members of the audience was her good friend and classmate William Kapell who won a Leventritt Award shortly thereafter and, as part of his prize, got to play with the New York Philharmonic — at an outdoor summer concert at New York's Lewisohn Stadium! He played the Khachaturian Concerto and subsequently made a landmark recording of it with the Boston Symphony and Serge Koussevitzky.

(Some footnotes. Maro Ajemian's Town Hall debut a few years later including piano versions of music from Khachaturian's ''Gayne'' Ballet, one of which was the notorious *Sabre Dance*. She was scheduled to play the Khachaturian Concerto in Moscow under the composer's direction for an audience that was to include Nikita Khruschev and Dwight D. Eisenhower; unfortunately, Gary Francis Powers and his U-2 spy plane were shot down, Eisenhower's Russian visit was cancelled and so was the concert. And, Maro Ajemian's last performances and recordings included her two-piano John Cage collaboration with Joshua Pierce.)

Most commentators, then and now, would tend to emphasize the differences between Khachaturian's grand-scale romantic exoticism and the biting neo-classic modernism of his older colleagues. Perhaps time blurs some of these distinctions; an unprejudiced listener today might wonder if some of the similarities are not as great as the differences. Like the Prokofiev First, this is a cyclical concerto in D-flat, which alternates with C — the black notes vs. the white notes! — and features a bravura solo part full of rhythmic energy and virtuosity. Like its predecessor, it begins with a striking motto motif that will recur throughout at key points.

Khachaturian's motto appears after an orchestral introduction and is worked out into a full-length tune; it takes most of thirty-five measures to run its course and then simply begins again, bigger and better but at half the length. The third time around only the basic motto is left; this subsides to C-major and minor chords and, finally, to a perfumed, exotic second subject in a mysterious modal minor, first in the orchestra and afterwards piano solo. The second half of this melody is made directly out of the motto.

The rest of the movement follows the traditional pattern. An *allegro vivace* development is based on the second half of the main tune and the first half of the exotic second subject. The tempo picks up and the orchestra leads a rather brilliant chase back to the main-key recap of the motto, a transposed second subject, a wide-ranging cadenza and a final punch-through or two of the motto in a clear D flat.

The *Andante con anima* in A minor is, like the first movement, in triple time and it is again exotic in mode; the form is a symmetrical and carefully worked bar form. There is an eight measure introduction, a repeated eight-bar A and a balancing eight-bar B, also repeated. The entire sequence is then repeated with piano and orchestra reversing roles. There is a development section that pushes outward until it runs aground on a repeated C sharp (the equivalent of the D-flat keynote of the entire work). This resolves itself in a very *appassionato* return of the tune in A minor. A version of the introduction serves as the coda.

The opening of the finale is surprising: a series of C major/minor mixtures in duple time and culminating in a few bouncy 3/8 bars as a turnaround. The second time through has an add-on: a jaunty sixteenth-note tune in the trumpet, shortly taken up by the piano. The music eventually moves off C and a series of episodes, including an extended one in 3/8 and another lively F minor, eventually lands on an expansive F-C ostinato under a big D-flat motif. A booming piano cadenza and a brisk return — via an F-C-G ostinato and the bouncy 3/8 again — take us back to the main subject in C. At the peak of all this excitement, the D-flat motif reappears, *Maestoso*, in combination with finale material. A brief pause and then motto and finale motifs race to the finish.

Shostakovich's First Concerto was intended for himself (at one point early on he hesitated between piano playing and composition) but his Second provided a very different kind of calling card: it was written for his son Maxim who is said to have used it as a performance vehicle to gain entrance to the Moscow Conservatory.

Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich was born on September 25, 1906 in St. Petersburg and died in Moscow on August 9, 1975. He studied at the Petrograd or St. Petersburg or Leningrad Conservatory: piano with Leonid Nikolayev, composition with Maximilian Shteyberg. His First Symphony, written in 1925 more or less as a graduation piece, created a sensation, not only in Soviet Russia but around the world. His standing as the first genius of Soviet music was however, severely damaged when Stalin visited his opera ''Lady Macbeth of Mtensk'' in 1936 and he was subsequently attacked in the Soviet press; a second round of condemnation took place in 1948 (Prokofiev and Khachaturian were also under fire but it was Shostakovich who seemed to take the brunt of these serious and threatening vilifications). The accusations included ''formalist perversions and anti-democratic tendencies in music'', an undue love of ''atonality, dissonance and discord'' as well as ''infatuation with confused, neurotic combinations which transform music into cacophony.''

Difficult as it is for us to comprehend these attacks, it is also not easy for us to interpret Shostakovich's musical responses. Take the Second Concerto, a work that is light-hearted almost to the point of seeming manic. The first performances took place in Moscow on May 10, 1957, less than a decade after the second or Zhandov round of attacks. Maxim, who was 19, played the solo with Nikolai Anosov conducting the U.S.S.R. State Symphony. On January 2, 1958, Leonard Bernstein gave the American premiere, playing and conducting the New York Philharmonic. American commentators seemed to treat the work as if it were some kind of children's music but Maxim was hardly a child and sometimes the fun house romp is almost scary. Is this simply high spirits, high jinks and good, ol' socialist optimism? Or is there something else going on?

The orchestra has the first word but the piano introduces the main idea in octaves (the piano plays single lines and octaves throughout the movement). The tune, in F, takes eight bars plus another eight followed by a silly C-major fanfare in four-bar chunks. And so it goes. A slightly exotic and almost equally silly D-minor tune comes from nowhere in particular, makes its presence felt and then goes away, never to be heard from again. This is followed by a substantial and indubitable development based on the opening material and a lively cadenza eventually leads back to a recap of the opening material.

The second movement is so simple, so sweet and so exquisite that there is really no choice but to take it at face value. The first theme, orchestral and in a modal C minor, and the second, a pure and limpid keyboard C major (somewhere between Haydn and Rachmaninoff!) make up the entire substance; essentially the two alternate, slightly decorated or varied.

The finale is a will o' the wisp, a whirl, a galop, a tiny tornado. The main theme, hardly more than a decoration of the note C in the key of F, repeats and extends itself in a few brief variants. The orchestra interrupts in C major with a rude and bawdy 7/8 which the pianist takes up shortly thereafter. A blizzard of piano sixteenths follows on and then a kind of development, alternating fragments of both themes in various keys. The way back is in F with a very plain, unadorned piano version of the main theme, a return of rude-and-bawdy in D flat — that key again! — and carrying through a cycle of keys back to F. Nothing remains except another barrage of sixteenths, a hint of the main theme and a momentary diversion to (once again) D flat before the final F major.

Is it fun? Making fun? High jinks? High camp? Prole art or nose thumbing? Socialist optimism? Social satire? Kiddie music? Kidding around? Classical music? Neo-classical modernism? Formalist, anti-democratic perversion? Acessible art for the masses? Sarcasm? Coded messages for the initiated? Confused neurotic combinations? Popular culture? Pop art before its time? All of the above? None of the above?

There's really no way to tell for sure. Maybe it doesn't matter and that's just the fun of it. A Russian concerto, certainly, but of a very different kind.

—ERIC SALZMAN

Photo: Peter Schaaf

JOSHUA PIERCE

Joshua Pierce was born in New York City to a well-known theatrical family. He showed his talents early, and was a scholarship student and award winner at Julliard and the Manhattan School of Music; his teachers include Dorothy Taubman, Arthur Balsam and Robert Goldsand. He has appeared in recital and with orchestras across the U.S., in Europe and in Latin America playing traditional and avant-garde, classical and popular music. He has also worked in theater, film, television and public radio. But he is probably best known for his recordings — solo, with orchestra and as half of the Pierce/Jonas Duo with Dorothy Jonas. His repertoire is wide ranging from Chopin and Mendelssohn to Tchaikovsky and Liszt to the modern Russians to Morton Gould, Piston, Copland and Ives to Jerry Herman and Richard Rodgers, Andrew Lloyd-Weber, Marvin Hamlisch and Leonard Bernstein to the works of John Cage (with whom he is particularly associated) and of the American Festival of Micro-Tonal Music Ensemble of which he is Artistic Advisor.

PAUL FREEMAN

Paul Freeman was born in Richmond, Virginia and studied at The Eastman School of Music and Hochschule fur Musik, Berlin, Germany. He is Music Director of the Chicago Sinfonietta and Music Director Emeritus of the Victoria Symphony, British Columbia. He has conducted over seventy-five orchestras in sixteen countries and has served as associate conductor of both the Detroit and Dallas Symphony Orchestras. Freeman, like Joshua Pierce, is particularly noted for his recordings — some sixty on twelve different labels. These include works ranging from Mozart, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky to William Grant Still, Ulysses Kay and Rogue Cordero. This recording marks the first in a series of recorded collaborations between Joshua Pierce and Paul Freeman.