

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

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Written: 1935

Movements: Three

Style: 20th Century Russian

Duration: 26 minutes

The West now has many stories about the sufferings of artists in the Soviet Union during the early years of communist rule. Sergei Prokofiev's story is an interesting contradiction to all of that. Prokofiev left revolutionary Russia in 1918 for the USA, spent four miserable years here, and then moved to Paris. He missed his homeland and his friends and moved back to Moscow in 1936. He became a Soviet citizen.

Prokofiev wrote some of his most endearing and charming works during the first few years back in Russia: *Lieutenant Kije Suite* (1934—drawn from his music for a film), the children's blockbuster *Peter and the Wolf* (1936), and the stunningly beautiful score for the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* (1935–36). During those years, he also wrote the lush and romantic *Second Violin Concerto*. For his homecoming, it seems that Prokofiev abandoned the more experimental aspects of his music and tried to return to more lyrical, romantic music.

This is evident in the first sounds of his *Second Violin Concerto*. It opens with a simple and haunting tune played by the violin, without the orchestra. The orchestra elaborates on this melody and then accompanies the violin on a second theme. The rest of the first movement develops these two melodies. The second movement, with its lovely melody, is a theme with subsequent variations. It is here that Prokofiev's departure from the norm in "modern" music is most evident. Contemporary critics made much of the fact that audiences at the various premieres of this work were moved to tears during this second movement. Melody—finally! And for those who were more used to Prokofiev's musical "naughtiness"—his quirky rhythms, and suddenly shifting melodies—the third movement was a return to those good old days. It is a brilliant virtuoso showcase.

Prokofiev seems to have missed most of the recriminations that his colleagues endured during Stalin's rule. His music did encounter the censor's disfavor occasionally, but nowhere near to the extent of other composers. Perhaps it is because he tried to avoid openly political content in his music. Instead, he focused on those aspects that appeal more directly to the human heart: beautiful melodies, interesting and challenging harmonies, and incisive rhythms.

Manfred, Op. 58

Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Written: 1885

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 57 minutes

Mily Balakirev, one of Tchaikovsky's teachers, was the one who suggested *Romeo and Juliet* to Tchaikovsky as a subject for an orchestral tone poem. In 1882 he suggested a more demanding subject, Lord Byron's *Manfred*: "I'm sure that if you exert yourself this will be your *chef d'oeuvre* (masterpiece)." Tchaikovsky didn't like the idea:

To please you I might . . . wring out of myself a succession of more or less interesting episodes: there would be conventionally gloomy music to portray Manfred's hopeless disillusionment,

masses of sparkling orchestral effects in the 'Alpine Fairy' scherzo, sunrise at the top register of the violins, and Manfred's death with pianissimo trombones . . . I might even receive praise as the fruit of my efforts, but that sort of writing has not the slightest attraction for me.

Balakirev kept pestering and Tchaikovsky finally re-read *Manfred*. He then started working on it in April, 1885, and couldn't stop. He admitted to being "in a gloomy frame of mind all the time," and to "have temporarily turned into a Manfred." It took him all summer, but ended up feeling it "might perhaps be the best of my symphonic compositions." While many would not agree with that assessment, Gerald Abraham has called *Manfred* "both the longest and the greatest of Tchaikovsky's symphonic poems."

Tchaikovsky provided a complete description of his setting of *Manfred* in the score:

I. Manfred wanders in the Alps. Weary of the fatal questions of existence, tormented by hopeless longings and the memory of past crimes, he suffers cruel spiritual pangs. He has plunged into the occult sciences and commands the mighty powers of darkness, but neither they nor anything in this world can give him the forgetfulness to which alone he vainly aspires. The memory of the lost Astarte, once passionately loved by him, gnaws at his heart and there is neither limit nor end to Manfred's despair.

II. The Alpine fairy appears before Manfred in the rainbow from the spray of a waterfall.

III. A picture of the bare, simple, free lives of the mountain folk.

IV. The subterranean palace of Arimanes. Infernal orgy. Appearance of Manfred in the middle of the bacchanal. Evocation and appearance of Astarte. He is pardoned. Manfred's death.

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