

## **Program Notes for VSO Concert – November 29-30, 2024**

### **Stravinsky – Violin Concerto; Prokofiev – Symphony #1 (Classical) and Symphony #7**

**By Jonathan Berkowitz**

We opened this season with Stravinsky's *The Firebird*, written in 1910. Now we have a chance to hear his more mature *Violin Concerto* written in 1931. A biography of Stravinsky accompanied the extended program notes for the opening concert. It is reprised here, with a short postscript.

#### **IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882 to 1971)**

Stravinsky's musical talents did not become evident until his early twenties, when he began to create truly revolutionary works. But the fireworks fizzled out after a couple of decades. Above all else, he was an experimentalist.

Although Stravinsky's parents paid for his piano lessons, he had to learn the basics of harmony and counterpoint on his own. Not especially dedicated to music at first, he followed his mother's wishes and attended law school. It did take him some time to mature and find his metier.

The first turning point in his musical life was meeting the son of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov at university, and later the father. Upon seeing Stravinsky's first attempts at composition, Rimsky-Korsakov Senior advised him to continue with law but agreed to look at any future compositions. It took five years of effort before Stravinsky produced anything that Rimsky-Korsakov judged suitable for performance.

His early works barely captured public attention. But by 1908, he was working on an opera, an orchestral Scherzo fantastique, and a small tone poem called *Feu d'artifice*. The latter two were first performed in 1909. In the audience was Sergei Diaghilev, one of the greatest "talent scouts" of the century. Diaghilev was enthralled and immediately commissioned Stravinsky to orchestrate a Chopin nocturne and valse for the Ballet Russe's version of *Les Sylphides*. Stravinsky's career was truly launched. Diaghilev asked Stravinsky to compose a completely new work for the 1910 season of the Ballet Russe. The result was *L'Oiseau de feu (The Firebird)*, the first real modern ballet. Stravinsky went to Paris and very rapidly achieved fame by age 28; his name spread worldwide.

A year later came *Petrouchka*, a ballet based on the ancient pagan rites of Stravinsky's native land. It was performed in Paris, with the great Nijinsky. It was considered the perfect ballet: a combination of completely danceable action and vividly illustrative music. Its polytonality would have a considerable effect on European music.

His third great work was *Le Sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring)*. First performed in 1913, it created a scandal unmatched in the annals of music. Harold Schonberg wrote, "Hardly anybody in the audience was prepared for a score of such dissonance and ferocity, such complexity and such rhythmic oddity. Nobody connected with the production had the faintest idea that the music would provoke a visceral reaction." But acceptance of it did come. In 1940 it was featured in the memorable Disney film *Fantasia*, where many people first heard the piece.

These compositions made him a star and the champion of modernism. There is much to explore about the subsequent strange serpentine line of Stravinsky's career. He turned away from big scores and big orchestras to small groups and precise writing. His preoccupation with rhythm

overshadowed his lack of melodic gift. He left Russia after the Revolution, never to return. He became a French citizen in 1934 and an American citizen in 1945.

Stravinsky's music is anti-sentimental, and anti-romantic. He believed that music was, at its heart, form and logic and, by its very nature, cannot express anything but music. He said, "Composers combine notes. That is all." Harold Schonberg commented, "Where Beethoven, Schubert, or even Bach appear to appeal to all listeners on all levels, Stravinsky does not have that universal quality. Stravinsky will end up living more on what he did to music rather than for what his music did to the majority of his listeners."

#### POSTSCRIPT:

Stravinsky himself provides the best summary and explanation of his later compositions. In his 1935 autobiography, he predicted that his new type of music would not be as popular as his early ballets. About his 1921 *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* he wrote, "It lacks all those elements that infallibly appeal to the ordinary listener, or to which he is accustomed. It is futile to look in it for passionate impulse or dynamic brilliance... The music is not meant to 'please' an audience, nor to arouse its passions. Nevertheless, I had hoped that it would appeal to some of those persons in whom a purely musical receptivity outweighed the desire to satisfy their sentimental cravings." That is an accurate summary of what his music, post-*The Rite of Spring*, represents.

### **Violin Concerto in D – Igor Stravinsky (1931)**

**Scored for:** piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, E-flat clarinet, 3 bassoons (3rd = contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, strings, and solo violin

Stravinsky's *Violin Concerto* was composed many years after the decade which produced *The Firebird*, *The Rite of Spring*, and other famous works. After the carnage of World War I, Stravinsky joined other European artists in a new movement known as "neo-classism", because of its references to styles and forms of the past. This concerto, with its playful character and light touch, exemplifies neo-classism.

In 1930, Stravinsky's music publisher suggested he write a violin concerto for Samuel Dushkin, a young Polish American violinist who was a student of Leopold Auer and Fritz Kreisler. Stravinsky was hesitant because, although he was a talented pianist, he was not a violinist. However, he agreed to undertake the project with advice from composer Paul Hindemith and the assistance of Dushkin concerning technical issues. Hindemith reassured Stravinsky. He said that not being a violinist meant Stravinsky would not rely on routine technique or standard ideas based on familiar movement of the fingers.

Here are Stravinsky's own words about it, written 30 years later, "[The concerto] was commissioned for Samuel Dushkin by his patron. Dushkin came to confer with me during the months of composition, and thus began a friendship and a musical collaboration that have lasted 30 years." The world premiere took place on October 23, 1931, with the composer conducting the Berlin Radio Symphony featuring Dushkin as soloist.

Dushkin would recall the earliest stages of work on the concerto. “One day when we were lunching in a restaurant, Stravinsky took out a piece of paper and wrote down this chord and asked me if it could be played. I had never seen a chord with such an enormous stretch, from the E to the top A, and I said ‘No.’ Stravinsky said sadly, ‘Quel dommage!’ [What a pity!] After I got home, I tried it, and, to my astonishment, found that in that register, the stretch of the eleventh was relatively easy to play, and the sound fascinated me. I telephoned Stravinsky at once to tell him that it could be done. When the concerto was finished, more than six months later, I understood his disappointment when I first said ‘No.’ This chord, in a different dress, begins each of the four movements.” Stravinsky himself calls it his “passport” to the concerto.



After the opening “passport,” the first movement—**Toccata**—begins with the trumpets presenting the main theme. After the soloist reinterprets it, the theme is restated and developed throughout the movement, returning in its original form near the end. The structure of the movement is reminiscent of Bach, a source of inspiration to Stravinsky during his neoclassical phase. The movement is called a toccata, which is a type of baroque piece meant to showcase dexterity. Although full of changes in meter and rhythm that are Stravinsky’s signature, the music has a baroque feel with a steady, walking pace tempo throughout. But the music itself is modern. With careful listening one can hear bits of musical allusions: a violinist practicing Brahms’ *Double Concerto*, a popular waltz, a baroque gavotte, and a barrel organ imitating Tchaikovsky. One writer commented that it would be easy to imagine Stravinsky concocting this music during a walk through Paris on a spring day.

The second movement—**Aria I**—is more melancholy, but cleverly cheeky. Just as in the first movement, after the opening “passport” chords, the soloist presents a sad melody adorned with ornamentation, reminiscent of singers in the baroque era. The strings play a lighter passage while the soloist plays high, whistling harmonics by barely touching the violin’s strings. The music becomes more fragmented. Listen for a chord in the winds and brass resembling those from the silent movie era when the villain ties the heroine to the train tracks. The main theme returns and ends abruptly with a mischievous final note.

The third movement—**Aria II**—is less ironic and more sincere. Once again, the “passport” chord begins the movement, followed by a poignant melody for the soloist. The tempo speeds up for a contrasting passage with a pulsating accompaniment before the main theme reappears.

The mood of the two arias is replaced with a playful finale—**Capriccio**. It, too, begins with the “passport” chord And, in a nod to the baroque period, sets up a folksy ambiance. The soloist plays a rustic fiddle tune with a humorous bassoon accompaniment. There are references to Bach’s “*Double*” *Violin Concerto in D minor, BWV 1043*, which was one of Stravinsky’s favourite pieces. The tempo speeds up and the concerto ends with a virtuoso presto finale.

Compared with other famous violin concertos, this one feels more like chamber music than orchestral music. Stravinsky commented, “I did not compose a cadenza, not because I did not care

about exploiting violin virtuosity, but because the violin in combination was my real interest. But virtuosity for its own sake has only a small role in my *Concerto*, and the technical demands of the piece are relatively tame.” Tame, perhaps, but compelling, nonetheless.

Postscript: George Balanchine choreographed the concerto twice, first in 1941, ten years after its premiere, and in 1972 created a new ballet to the music. The first version quickly disappeared. But the second one written for the New York City Ballet was a great success, and possibly inspired concert violinists to perform this concerto.

### **SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891 to 1953)**

Before World War I, when Rachmaninoff and Scriabin were at the “top of the charts” in Russian music, a young student enrolled in the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. Descriptors of the teenage Sergei Prokofiev include arrogant, rebellious, stubborn, ill-tempered, surly, and eccentric. But he was undeniably talented and unique.

Born in rural Ukraine, Prokofiev was a precocious child. Hearing his mother practise Chopin and Beethoven inspired him to learn the piano. He composed his first piano piece by age 5 and an opera before he was 10. Opera remained the genre Prokofiev was most fond of working in, but not what he became best-known for. In another sign of genius, he met and played two world chess champions at age fourteen, beating one of them. Chess remained a passion throughout his life.

Prokofiev graduated from the Saint Petersburg Conservatory and won the Rubenstein Prize for playing his own *Piano Concerto #1*, instead of the prescribed classical one. As part of the local music scene, Prokofiev developed a reputation as an *enfant terrible* and a musical rebel. His highly dissonant and virtuosic piano compositions garnered praise. But there were critics. According to one account, after he played the premiere of his *Piano Concerto #2*, the audience exclaimed, “To hell with this futuristic music! The cats on the roof make better music!” But the modernists loved it. Prokofiev insisted that the piano was a percussion instrument and must be played that way, with propulsive rhythms and stark, for that time, dissonances.

By 1915, Prokofiev was ready to venture into the orchestral world, with ballets commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev, who had done the same thing to launch Igor Stravinsky, and operas. One of the ballets, *Chout (The Buffoon)*, was called by Stravinsky “the single piece of modern music he could listen to with pleasure”, while Maurice Ravel called it “a work of genius”.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Prokofiev received approval to leave Russia and tour the United States as a pianist. Critics said he had “steel” in his fingers. Following his recital debut in Manhattan, *The New York Times* reviewer, floored by Prokofiev’s dissonances and rhythms, wrote, “He is a psychologist of the uglier emotions: hate, contempt, rage—above all, rage—disgust, despair, mockery and defiance... Occasionally, there are moments of tenderness, exquisite jewels that briefly sparkle and then melt into seething undertow.”

In the 1920s, Prokofiev also lived in Paris and then Germany. In Paris, he finished his most successful opera, *The Love for Three Oranges*, written for the Chicago Opera, and his *Piano Concerto No. 3*. His fortunes in the U.S. and Western Europe were greatly diminished in the early

1930s by the Great Depression. He thought of himself as a composer first and touring pianist second. In 1936 he returned to composing in the Soviet Union where he had tremendous successes with *Lieutenant Kijé*, *Peter and the Wolf*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cinderella*, *Alexander Nevsky* (scored for the Eisenstein film), the *Fifth* and *Sixth Symphonies*, and the *Piano Sonatas Nos. 6–8*. During World War II, Soviet restrictions on how composers must write were loosened, allowing Prokofiev more musical freedom. This is when he wrote his most ambitious work, an operatic version of *War and Peace*.

In 1948, the Zhdanov Doctrine denounced six artists, including Dmitri Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Aram Khachaturian, for the crime of “formalism”. This is described as a “renunciation of the basic principles of classical music” in favour of “muddled, nerve-racking” sounds that “turned music into cacophony”. Eight of Prokofiev’s works were banned from performance. Fear prevented the performance of other works and opera projects to go forward. This put Prokofiev into severe financial straits. His health declined and he withdrew from public life. But a new generation of Russian performers, notably pianist Sviatoslav Richter and cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, rallied to his support and offered him their friendship. Prokofiev composed landmark cello works for Rostropovich.

The premiere of his *Symphony No. 7* was the last public performance he attended. Prokofiev died at age 61 on March 5, 1953, the same day Joseph Stalin’s death was announced. He had lived near Red Square, and for three days throngs gathered to mourn Stalin, making it impossible to hold Prokofiev’s funeral service at the headquarters of the Soviet Composers’ Union. His coffin had to be moved by hand through back streets. Shostakovich was one of about 30 people who attended the funeral. Shostakovich had written to Prokofiev, “I wish you at least another hundred years to live and create. Listening to such works as your *Seventh Symphony* makes it much easier and more joyful to live.”

Prokofiev explained his view of the future of music, “I could not approve of adopting the idiom of another man and calling it one’s own... I think the desire which I and many of my fellow composers feel, to attain a more simple and melodic expression is the inevitable direction of music of the future.” Arthur Honegger said that Prokofiev would “remain for us the greatest figure of contemporary music.” He created masterpieces in many genres. His music was revolutionary for its time and has outlived most music of that era.

Why are Stravinsky and Prokofiev on the same program? Perhaps it is because Stravinsky described Prokofiev as the greatest Russian composer of his day—after himself.

What do the Prokofiev and The Beatles have in common? Prokofiev recorded his dazzling *Piano Concerto No. 3* with the London Symphony Orchestra at Abbey Road Studios in 1932, where The Beatles recorded. The VSO, with soloist Bruce Liu will perform this piece in the final concert of the Masterworks Gold series, on May 30 and 31, 2025.

*Editorial note:* This is my all-time favourite piano concerto! It was featured in the 1980 movie *The Competition*, with Richard Dreyfuss and Amy Irving. I fell in love with the concerto then; its brilliance never fails to evoke goosebumps whenever I hear it. I’ll write more about it in May.

## **Symphony No. 1 (“Classical”), Op. 25 – Sergei Prokofiev (1917)**

**Orchestration:** two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings (in short, a Classical period-sized orchestra)

*Symphony No. 1* was written when Prokofiev was 25 years old, during a time of great upheaval in Russia: the end of the czarist government, impending military catastrophes of World War I, and the rise of political and social revolution. Prokofiev conducted its premiere in 1918, six months after the Bolshevik coup overthrew the government.

Prokofiev was a prolific and eloquent diarist, so we know his intentions for this piece from his own words. He decided to write “a symphony as Mozart or Haydn might have written it...had either one of them been a contemporary... I christened it the *Classical Symphony* first, because it sounded much more simple, and second, out of pure mischief ‘to tease the geese’ in secret hope that eventually the symphony would become a classic.” He achieved successes on both counts.

Prokofiev composed the symphony on holiday in the country. He wrote, “Musically I ... took an important decision: to do without a piano. It seemed to me that composing with or without a piano was purely a matter of habit, and it would be good to gain more experience with a work as uncomplicated as this symphony.” He relished the challenge of composing everything in his head.

At a time when symphonies were often massive, emotional works, Prokofiev chose to write a concise and playful one written on a small scale, only about 16 minutes in duration. He used traditional classical forms but with modern harmonies, rhythms, and orchestrations. The contrast of musical language from Mozart and from Prokofiev captivates the listener.

Each movement is brief and to the point. Its first—**Allegro**—begins with a two-measure introduction, and immediately presents two contrasting themes, like a modern Haydn. The first takes off like a rocket, with a fast melodic line. The second shows off a new approach to the use of decorative grace notes; they span two octaves rather than staying close to the main notes. A bar of silence announces the clever development section, followed by the usual recap section, but with a witty and charming twist. It starts in the wrong key before righting itself, providing a modern take on a classical form.

The second movement—**Larghetto**—begins with the violins playing a long, lyrical melody. Prokofiev’s sense of humour is then heard in the restatement of the melody by a very high register flute. The winds, brass and timpani play a second theme in short sixteenth notes. The movement ends with a short coda.

The third movement—**Gavotte: Non troppo allegro**—is a send-up of the stately classical minuet. Instead, Prokofiev offers a gavotte, a dance that involves a lot of foot stomping. Listen also for a short droning trio in the middle section. It is reminiscent of Tchaikovsky’s dances in *Sleeping Beauty*, but with a twist.

The fourth movement—**Finale: Molto vivace**—is exactly as its name advertises: fast, witty, exuberant. There are unusual modulations and unexpected twists and turns as it speeds to a conclusion. Prokofiev had scrapped his original finale. He wrote,

*[It] seemed to me too ponderous and not characterful enough for a classical symphony. I composed a new finale, lively and blithe enough for there to be a complete absence of minor triads in the whole movement, only major ones. From my original finale I salvaged only the second subject. I found the movement extraordinarily easy to write, and the only thing I was concerned with was that its gaiety might border on the indecently irresponsible. But in the first place it never actually crosses this line, and in the second, this kind of finale is quite appropriate to Mozartian style. I was hugging myself with delight all the time I was composing it!*

Fun and indecent irresponsibility make for a sparkling finale to a charming symphony.

In his diary Prokofiev stated,

*Out of bravado, I wanted to stir up a hornet's nest. When our classically inclined musicians and professors (to my mind faux-classical) hear this symphony, they will be bound to scream in protest at this new example of Prokofiev's insolence ... But my true friends will see that the style of my symphony is precisely Mozartian classicism and will value it accordingly, while the public will no doubt just be content to hear happy and uncomplicated music which it will, of course, applaud.*

This symphony became a classic, in every sense of the word, but it also served as also a precursor of what this brilliant composer would offer the world of music.

### **Symphony No. 7, Op. 131 – Sergei Prokofiev (1952)**

*Orchestration: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, tambourine, snare drum, triangle, xylophone), timpani, piano, harp, and strings*

Completed in 1952, the year before he died, the *Seventh Symphony* was Prokofiev's last completed major work. As his health deteriorated, Stalin's cultural police denounced Prokofiev and banned the *Sixth Symphony* for displaying "decadent formalism." Prokofiev apologized and then wrote the *Seventh*, perhaps to placate censors. It worked; they approved it. It is often called the "Children's Symphony" because it had been commissioned by the Children's Division of (Soviet) State Radio and, perhaps, for its simplicity. But no symphony could ever be called "simple". And this one is harmonically difficult, written in the strange and shadowy key of C-sharp minor—a curious key for a children's piece.

Despite that, it is one of Prokofiev's least complicated and most accessible pieces, without the bold contrasts characteristic of his music. It has been described as offering "a sparkling, colourful world of innocence, fantasy, and wistful nostalgia."

The first movement—**Moderato**—displays the simplicity Prokofiev had in mind. The violins play a melancholic and nostalgic first theme, followed by a contrastingly lush, lyrical second one played by the winds. A brief development is followed by the recapitulation of the two themes. The low-register instruments, including the piano, seem to propel the movement like a quiet but fast-flowing

river. Listen also for delightful chirps from the woodwinds. The movement finishes in a reflective mood with the glockenspiel and xylophone producing sounds like a ticking clock.

The second movement—**Allegretto**—is a waltz, suggestive of his ballet *Cinderella*, with many imaginative instrumental effects, highlighting the distinct voice of each instrument. Prokofiev masterfully sets up the harmony as the listener would expect, but then goes in another direction altogether. The waltz morphs into a rollicking romp. One writer notes that the movement has more drama, but no conflict. Perhaps the censors detected the appearance of a happy hero.

The third movement—**Andante espressivo**—is, as the title says, an expressive and singing slow movement with a warm tone. Prokofiev repurposed themes from his score for Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, especially the opening theme, which returns throughout the movement but with an ever-changing backdrop. Ukrainian conductor Kirill Karabits commented about this recycling, "He was a proud man and liked to show off. If Prokofiev liked something he'd written he'd use it in an opera, a symphony, a suite for jazz band – he'd use it everywhere!" It is the symphony's "slow" movement, but it is not particularly slow. The overall mood is once again serene and calm. The use of several major keys gives it a more hopeful tone than the first movement.

The finale—**Vivace**—is, well, vivacious. The main theme gallops along in perpetual motion for nearly the entire movement. Prokofiev combines instruments in appealing fashion, and variously presents the theme as a march, a dance, and more. Listeners might well have expected that the *Symphony* would end with a bang. But, in a coda, Prokofiev brings back the opening movement's theme along with the flute and glockenspiel. With changing harmonies and chords, the piece ends fervently and mysteriously. Karabits notes, "The music starts ticking towards death like a stopwatch has been started, and yet that theme from the first movement keeps returning, as though trying to resist the inevitable. It's genuinely a shock when the music simply stops." It foreshadows the end of Prokofiev's life.

At rehearsals prior to the premiere, a Russian conductor convinced Prokofiev to add a more optimistic-sounding coda to make the piece more uplifting. Prokofiev agreed, because he was hoping to win the highest honour, the Stalin Prize, worth 100,000 rubles. The revised coda was published as a supplement to the *Symphony's* score. It is not innovative but simply appends the finale's opening material to the end of the movement.

Before he died, Prokofiev indicated that the original quiet ending was to be preferred. Perhaps it was his way of acknowledging old age with quiet acceptance. It was his farewell symphony.

Prokofiev did not win the Stalin Prize, but in 1957, four years after his death, the Lenin Prize was posthumously awarded to him for this symphony.