

Program Notes for VSO Concert – May 30-June 1, 2025

Prokofiev – Piano Concerto No 3; Strauss – Alpine Symphony

By Jonathan Berkowitz

Note: An earlier concert this season included Sergei Prokofiev’s symphonies No. 1 and No. 7. His biography from that concert is reprised here.

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 included 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 five 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.

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

Orchestration: 2 flutes (both = piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, percussion (bass drum, castanets, cymbals, tambourine), strings, and solo piano

Personal note: I first became acquainted with Prokofiev’s *Piano Concerto No. 3* when it was featured in the 1980 film, *The Competition*, starring Richard Dreyfuss and Amy Irving. The film is set at an international piano concerto competition where Dreyfuss plays Beethoven’s *Emperor Concerto*, and Irving plays the Prokofiev. Spoiler alert: She wins. I have been in love with this concerto ever since. No matter how often I hear it, and whatever the medium I get a chill up the back of my neck and head, a frisson of delight. If you’ve ever experienced this with music you’ll understand the “thrill of the chill”. (The length of these notes is also a testament to my love of this concerto.)

As Beethoven did, Prokofiev wrote five piano concertos. The Third is a guaranteed perfect listening experience. It has wonderful melodies with sparkling orchestration, and unquestionably the most thrilling writing for piano. While it is indeed melodic, it is also an outstanding example of the piano as a percussion instrument.

Prokofiev took an uncharacteristically long time to write this concerto; he began it in 1911 but didn't complete it until ten years later, during his self-imposed exile from Russia. At the premiere with the Chicago Symphony on December 16, 1921, Prokofiev played the piano part. He wrote to the conductor Serge Koussevitzky, saying "My Third Concerto has turned out to be devilishly difficult. I'm nervous, and I'm practising hard, three hours a day." The next year, Koussevitzky conducted it in Paris, where it received lavish praise, and was confirmed as one of the finest works in the 20th century canon. It has been an audience favourite ever since. The Concerto has all the sharp, vigorous, rhythm-driven elements that Prokofiev is known for. His ability to blend rapid and percussive playing with lyric harmonies and dissonance make his music instantly recognizable.

The first of more than 120 commercial recordings of this Concerto was made by Prokofiev himself in June 1932 with the London Symphony Orchestra at London's Abbey Road Studios. It is the only recording that exists of the composer performing one of his concertos.

The first movement—**Andante - Allegro**—begins with a slow, haunting clarinet solo that the orchestra then expands on. But don't be fooled into thinking this will become a grand symphonic piece. It's a taste of Prokofiev's sense of humour. Very quickly, energetic strings accelerate, leading to the piano's entry. That's it for the "andante". The mood changes to one of brilliant rhythm with exciting staccato piano work using bits of the first theme. The piano and orchestra continue their dialogue until the piano prepares for the second theme with a march-like climax.

The second theme, more dissonant than the lyrical first theme, is presented by the oboe and paired with castanets, making intriguing clicks. First the orchestra and then the soloist expand on it, leading to perhaps the most characteristic and one of the most compelling passages of the movement. The pianist plays several lines of octaves interwoven with notes above or below, in triplets, travelling up and down the keyboard with the hands usually on top of one another. Next is a respite with the opening clarinet theme being restated and then played loudly by the full orchestra. That transitions to a somewhat introspective variation of the theme by the piano with woodwind accompaniments.

Now comes a rapid and technically difficult passage as the pianist works their way up the scale, leading to an exact recapitulation of how the piano began the movement. A brilliant coda follows. Listen and watch for treatments of the octave-triplet idea: piano runs of ascending triads and glissandi. The second theme now reappears as chords and then frenetic arpeggios, all in the upper register of the piano. The music winds down to a pulsing, dissonant piano chord with backing by the orchestra. Then the piano gives a shorter version of the passage that began the recapitulation. The castanets reappear. The changes in harmony and compelling dissonances drive at breakneck speed to the final thump of the bass drum. As Prokofiev described it rather understatedly, "The movement ends with an exciting crescendo."

The second movement—**Tema con Variazioni**—is just what the Italian words indicate, a theme and variations. It has been described as emotional and poetic, as well as dazzling and dynamic. The

theme, introduced by the orchestra, is a gavotte—a French dance in baroque style—but Prokofiev injects his own ballet-like touches. There are five variations, each with a distinct character, and a final coda. Each is an ever-greater transformation of the theme, and each is short and easy to identify and count. Prokofiev had written his *Classical Symphony* in 1917; similar classical influences can be heard in the theme and throughout.

- The first variation begins with a broad, slow restatement of the theme by the piano, starting with a long trill and a glissando-like run up the keyboard.
- The second variation changes the tempo to a gallop while the piano runs up and down the keyboard. Listen particularly to how the brass plays the theme.
- The third variation deconstructs the main theme with strong syncopation, giving it a primitive feeling.
- The fourth variation, a dialogue between piano and orchestra, is the slowest and perhaps most interesting musically. It is marked *Andante Meditativo* (a slow meditation), with an added instruction of *freddo* (cold). That's how the piano sounds—eerie and macabre—an effect accomplished by descending intervals of a third.
- The fifth variation is a rousing *Allegro* for piano and orchestra.
- Coda. The orchestra restates the main theme in its original form and tempo (one-half that of the preceding variation) with the piano providing accompaniment. Or as Prokofiev worded it, “with delicate chordal embroidery in the piano.” The piano then gets the last say.

The third movement—***Allegro ma non troppo***—returns to the brilliant style of the first movement, with rich melody and driving rhythmic energy. Prokofiev called it an “argument” between soloist and orchestra. The bassoons and pizzicato strings state the main theme, while the piano interrupts with its own theme. The interplay between the piano and orchestra picks up speed, and is then followed by a slow, lyrical second theme presented by the woodwinds. The piano replies and the slow theme develops with the soloist travelling up and down the keyboard quietly over muted and slightly dissonant woodwinds. That leads to a climax with piano and strings in unison, before fading into the virtuosic coda.

After the bassoons and then the piano restate the main theme, the coda explodes into a musical battle between soloist and orchestra, including the pianist's famously difficult double-note arpeggi. The layering of sounds drives the music to a brilliant conclusion. The breathtakingly entertaining coda, which displays what William Runyan described as “crackling wit, sparkling style, and supercharged performance,” shows why Prokofiev continues to have immense popularity, and why my one-word description of this concerto is.... Wow!

Postscript: I encourage you to listen also to Prokofiev's other four piano concertos. All are remarkable works and among the finest concerti of all time. Start with the Second, then the Fifth and the Fourth, and finish with the youthful First.

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864 to 1949)

Richard Strauss was a prolific and revolutionary German composer of the late Romantic and early modern eras. He was born in Munich in 1864 to a musically inclined family. His father was a

celebrated horn player and his mother came from a prosperous family of brewers. His middle-class upbringing included a high value on music and money; both were passions of Strauss throughout his life. He showed prodigious talent early, mastering the piano and violin by the age of six. He wrote his first composition at six and didn't stop until his death almost 80 years later.

Strauss was immersed in Munich's cultural and intellectual milieu, with access to the best musical education available. He studied composition and conducting at Munich's Royal School of Music. His early compositions were in classical form, influenced strongly by his father's musical tastes. But he was also introduced to the operas of Wagner, whose progressive style would have a profound effect later in Strauss's career. At 18 he entered university in Munich, where he studied philosophy and art history, but not music. He only stayed one year, leaving for Berlin to serve as assistant conductor to Hans von Bülow and the Meiningen Court Orchestra. When von Bülow unexpectedly resigned Strauss became the interim principal conductor.

At age 21, Strauss found his true style in writing vivid program music, what he referred to as "the poetic, the expressive in music." He would become the leading voice of the tone poem, modelling his compositional style on Wagner and Liszt.

His next position was as opera conductor at the Bavarian State Opera. But it wasn't a happy tenure there, since the opera house lacked the finances to stage ambitious works such as Wagner's operas. He found conducting work in Berlin, Dresden, and Leipzig, where he met and befriended Gustav Mahler, and met his future wife, who would be a great source of inspiration to him. She was a soprano, which explains why all of Strauss's operas have important soprano roles.

In his mid-20s, Strauss wrote his first two tone poems, *Macbeth* and *Don Juan*, the latter receiving tremendous critical response. It, and a series of tone poems written over the following four-year period, blazed his name across the world. They include *Death and Transfiguration (Tod und Verklärung)*, *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, *Don Quixote*, and *Ein Heldenleben*. These works shocked the conservative musical establishment and secured his position at the turn of the century as the *enfant terrible* of modern music. He would return to tone poems later, with his *Domestic Symphony* and *Alpine Symphony*.

Strauss became principal conductor of the Staatskapelle Berlin of the Berlin State Opera in 1898. He remained there for 15 years. He enjoyed celebrity status and was a frequent guest conductor in opera houses and with orchestras internationally. With his influence, he was able to promote contemporary German composers such as Mahler. But his compositional career was about to make a major shift. He conquered the operatic stage with his third opera, *Salome*, (based on Oscar Wilde's play of the same name) which premiered triumphantly in 1905.

He followed that with a string of critically successful operas, collaborating with librettist and poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal. These operas included *Elektra*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, and *Ariadne auf Naxos*, all of which are still part of opera repertoire. The international triumph of *Der Rosenkavalier* was the pinnacle of his career. *Salome* and *Elektra*, in particular, shocked audiences with their avant-garde subject matter and daring musical language. They solidified his reputation as a visionary composer unafraid to challenge conventions and provoke controversy. He collected unprecedented fees and royalties for all the scores, dispelling the myth that an artist is better off starving in a garret. He said, "Worry alone is enough to kill a sensitive man, and all thoroughly artistic natures are sensitive."

However, after 1911, Strauss's career took a downturn. Changing musical tastes and the rise of new movements in music left behind the one-time bad boy of music. Then Strauss was confronted with the rise of the Nazi regime in 1933. He was not a reactionary in political thinking and his cosmopolitan circles were not susceptible to Nazi ideology. However, his daughter-in-law was Jewish. He needed to decide whether to stay in Germany or leave as many other artists had done.

In 1933, because of his international stature (Strauss was even on the cover of *TIME* magazine in 1927) the Nazis appointed Strauss as head of the Reichsmusikkammer and principal conductor of the Bayreuth Festival. Accepting these positions likely saved the lives of his daughter-in-law and his Jewish grandchildren. He attempted to keep performing works by banned composers such as Mahler and Mendelssohn, who both had Jewish ethnicity. He used a Jewish librettist, Stefan Zweig, for his opera *Die schweigsame Frau* (*The Silent Woman*). That ultimately led to his firing. In 1935, Strauss wrote to Zweig saying, "Do you suppose Mozart was consciously 'Aryan' when he composed? I recognize only two types of people: those who have talent and those who have none." Thanks to Strauss's influence, his daughter-in-law was protected via house arrest during the war, but despite extensive efforts he was unable to save dozens of his in-laws from being murdered in concentration camps. In 1948, a year before his death, he was cleared of any wrongdoing by a denazification tribunal in Munich.

By the end of the war Strauss had become a victim of irony. He lived in near poverty because huge sums of money owed to him by England and the United States were impounded as war reparations. He was allowed to return to his home in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, West Germany, in the Bavarian Alps. Strauss had a late creative upsurge from 1942 to the end of his life. Major works, written in his late 70s and 80s, include his *Horn Concerto No. 2*, *Metamorphosen*, *Oboe Concerto*, and *Four Last Songs*.

In April 1945, when American soldiers arrived at Strauss's home, he met them with the declaration, "I am Richard Strauss, the composer of *Rosenkavalier* and *Salome*." An "Off Limits" sign was placed on the lawn to protect him. His *Oboe Concerto* was written in response to a request from a soldier who was also a well-known American oboist. By 1948 Strauss's health was deteriorating rapidly. He died shortly after a celebration of his 85th birthday at which he even conducted part of *Der Rosenkavalier*.

Strauss himself declared with characteristic self-deprecation: "I may not be a first-rate composer, but I am a first-class second-rate composer." Glenn Gould contradicted that, describing Strauss as "the greatest musical figure who has lived in this century". Joseph Machlis wrote, "Strauss carried to its extreme limit the 19th-century appetite for story-and-picture music. His tone poems are a treasury of orchestral discoveries." Although his reputation fluctuated during his lifetime, his contributions to the world of music are an undeniable and lasting legacy.

Alpine Symphony, Op. 64 –Strauss

Orchestration: 4 flutes (3rd and 4th = piccolos), 3 oboes (3rd = English horn), heckelphone, E-flat clarinet, 3 B-flat clarinets (3rd = bass clarinet and contrabass clarinet), 4 bassoons (4th = contrabassoon), 16 horns, 4 trumpets, 4 trombones, 2 tubas, 2 sets of timpani, percussion (bass

drum, cowbell, glockenspiel, snare drum, tam-tam, thunder machine, triangle, wind machine), 2 harps, celesta, organ, and strings

Richard Strauss composed his *Alpine Symphony* in 1915, during World War I and the tremendous upheaval in Europe. But it is not a symphony *per se*. It is a monumental tone poem or orchestral composition that represents a story or depicts a scene. Strauss was a master of this genre. Although he had switched to composing operas by the early 1900s, Strauss decided to finish an earlier uncompleted work called *Die Alpen* (The Alps), partly to commemorate the death of Gustav Mahler.

It is believed that the concept for the piece first occurred to Strauss after he hiked to the summit of a mountain in Bavaria at age 15. In a letter to a colleague, he referred to writing a piano work about the experience. Because the sketches did not survive, there is no way to know if this formed the basis of the work he wrote nearly 40 years later.

This tone poem reflects Strauss's deep connection to nature and his fascination with the Alpine landscape. It also reflects the influence of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who also inspired Strauss's earlier composition, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, to be performed by the VSO in the first Masterworks concert of the 2025-26 season.

Through 22 individual but continuous episodes, and with a massive orchestra, the composition takes the listener on a vivid musical journey through the various moods and vistas of a mountain expedition. Various motifs evoke the different elements. A central motif is the "mountain theme," a majestic and ascending melodic figure that recurs throughout the Symphony.

The day-long journey begins in the dark, just before sunrise. The trek features rivers, meadows, a hunting party, triumph at reaching the summit, and turbulence from a violent storm during the descent. As the sun sets on the horizon, the hikers return to the same nighttime tranquility from the beginning of the adventure.

The episodes do not need detailed description; it is enough to provide a list of the titles: *Night, Sunrise, Ascent, Entry into the Forest, Wandering by the Brook, By the Waterfall, Apparition, On the Flowering Meadows, On the Pastures, Through the Thicket and Briar, On the Glacier, Dangerous Moment, On the Summit, Vision, Mists Arrive, The Sun Gradually Darkens, Elegy, Calm before the Storm, Tempest and Storm, Descent, Sunset, Echo, and Night*.

The final episode is a return of the opening episode, *Night*, with a final statement of the mountain theme. The Symphony comes full circle as the climbers complete their journey. The music fades away into the distance, leaving a sense of mystery and wonder in its wake.

The work's premiere received mixed reviews. It was praised for its ambitious scope and innovative orchestration but criticized for its excessive length and lack of thematic development. Some critics derided it as "cinema music"; they thought the Symphony was "too programmatic" with an overly literal musical depiction of nature. However, over time, the *Alpine Symphony* has come to be regarded as one of Strauss's most ambitious and compelling works, showcasing his mastery of orchestral colour and his ability to evoke powerful emotions through music.

Bryan Gilliam, writing for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, commented, “Despite its philosophical roots, the Alpine Symphony is outwardly unphilosophical, proclaiming with startling beauty the glories of the natural world. It is unprecedented in Strauss’s output both in terms of duration and orchestra size. The dynamic range, from the near silence of dawn to the explosive alpine storm, is unmatched among the tone poems.” Today, the *Alpine Symphony* is widely recognized as a masterpiece of the late Romantic era.