

Program Notes for VSO Concert – Prokofiev Violin Concerto #2 and Brahms Symphony No. 1– March 6-7, 2026

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SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891 to 1953)

Note: The following biography first appeared in 2024-25.

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 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,) as well as 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 the country 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 edicts for 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 operas. This put Prokofiev into severe financial straits. His health declined and he withdrew from public life. But a new generation of Soviet 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. He 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.

Violin Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 63 – Prokofiev (1935)

Orchestration: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, percussion (bass drum, castanets, cymbals, snare drum, and triangle), strings, and solo violin

After almost 20 years in the United States and Paris, Sergei Prokofiev decided to return permanently to the Soviet Union. But before he went home, he composed his Second Violin Concerto in 1935. He wrote it for the French violinist Robert Soëmens, with whom he had been on a concert tour. Prokofiev remarked, “The number of places in which I wrote the Concerto shows the kind of nomadic concert-tour life I led then. The main theme of the first movement was written in Paris, the first theme of the second movement in Voronezh, the orchestration was finished in Baku and the premiere was given in Madrid.” This Concerto certainly “had legs”. Shortly after the premiere Prokofiev returned to Moscow.

The Second Concerto stands in intriguing relation to his Violin Concerto No. 1, written in 1917 amid the upheaval of the Russian Revolution. The earlier work, written about the same time as his *Classical Symphony* and *Piano Concerto No. 3* displays Prokofiev’s modernist audacity—sharp rhythms, pungent harmonies, and sardonic wit—yet is suffused with lyricism. Virtuositic but poetic, it reveals the young composer’s progressive voice at its most imaginative.

By contrast, the Second Concerto emerged from a period of stylistic reconsideration. In the early 1930s Prokofiev had already begun moving toward a more direct, melodically accessible language, an evolution that coincided neatly with Soviet cultural expectations. Like the First Concerto, the Second balances brilliance with expressive lyricism, but its themes are more enjoyable and structurally transparent. Audiences responded warmly; the work was an immediate success. The work represents both a culmination of Prokofiev's Western years and a doorway into his Soviet period. It is an eloquent farewell before the complicated homecoming that would shape the rest of his life.

The first movement—***Allegro moderato***—begins with one of the most understated openings in the repertoire. There is no heroic orchestral curtain-raising. The violin alone quietly traces an eight-bar melody built from small intervals and irregular pacing. The theme itself is very simple, just five notes played in the violin's low and rich register. As musicologist William Runyan notes, this theme demonstrates Prokofiev's goal of reaching a "new simplicity" in his style. The orchestra enters in a different and distant key, with pizzicato strings, dry woodwinds, and sharp rhythms. The effect is almost theatrical as the violin seems to find itself in a slightly strange environment that uses different emotional language.

Prokofiev's approach is unconventional and shows his typical brilliance. Instead of contrasting grand themes, he presents contrasting behaviours. The opening theme is inward and rhythmically flexible or "metrically ambiguous". The second theme, also in a different key, is smoother but harmonically unsettled. Transitional figures feel a bit mechanical. The development section does not intensify by expanding the themes. Instead, it compresses them with short motifs that repeat obsessively with abrupt shifts in harmony. The violin oscillates between lyric continuity and percussive articulation. The recapitulation brings back the opening theme in the original key.

Some of the solo passages feel improvised, but of course they are not; they are meticulously constructed. The soloist's technique is tested by double-stops and rapid alternation on open and stopped strings—the technical term is "bariolage" (a new term to this writer, too). The virtuosity is understated. There is no escalation to a climax or triumphant cadence. Rather, the movement ends with a final gesture—a muted horn and pizzicato strings—as if to say that the musical argument the violin finds itself in has not been settled.

The second movement—***Andante assai***—is a sunlit romantic counterweight to the darkly lyrical first movement. It doesn't sound like the Prokofiev we are familiar with. If the first movement presents an individual within society, in the second, only the individual remains. The movement opens with gentle pizzicato triplets, while the violin sings a long, lush melody in a two against three rhythm. It has been suggested that Prokofiev was continuing the romantic feel of his *Romeo and Juliet* ballet, which he was composing at the same time. The simplicity is deceptive. The melody is built from stepwise motion and repeated notes. The composer made minimal material expressive through harmonic shading and orchestral restraint.

Woodwinds then play a counter melody. The development follows with a series of variations in exchanges between the orchestra and the violin. Midway through, the tempo quickens and the orchestra thickens. The equilibrium is slightly disturbed, but the calm soon returns as the woodwinds and brass signal a return to the opening melody in the recapitulation. The ending is a classic Prokofiev surprise where things are turned upside down. Now the violin plays the gentle

pizzicato triplets while the orchestra plays the romantic melody. The low strings get the last word as the movement ends quietly and thoughtfully.

The finale—***Allegro, ben marcato***—is a dance, but it is not carefree, fast, or loud. The rhythm, with sharp accents and quick repeated notes, creates great kinetic energy. Prokofiev uses percussion creatively, including castanets. The Spanish influence is likely because the work was going to be premiered in Madrid, but the influence is largely abstract using syncopation and string effects.

A second theme appears briefly but is quickly overwhelmed. The violin alternates between percussive attack and lyrical recall of earlier movements. The movement is replete with dramatic dissonances and heavy accents, but near the end the music shifts into a major key. Winds and brass prepare the way for a virtuosic display by the soloist, playing furiously in 5/4 time over steady percussion and a bass line. Prokofiev used the term *tumultuoso* to mark the final coda. (The word means just what you think.) The Concerto closes decisively, yet without grandiosity.

William Runyan comments, “This attractive work, in so many surprising ways, is yet again eloquent testimony against the foolish temptation to ‘pigeonhole’ the musical style of superb composers. It is not an example of ‘Soviet Realism’ with the attendant simplicities and contortions of that sad totalitarian art.” This work stands apart from Romantic virtuoso concertos. It offers intimacy instead of spectacle and precision instead of excess. Prokofiev redefines virtuosity as the ability to make small gestures carry large expressive weight. The Concerto is an aural metaphor for a voice staying human inside a carefully ordered world.

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833 to 1897)

Note: The following biography first appeared in October 2024.

“It is not hard to compose but it is wonderfully hard to let the superfluous notes fall under the table. So many melodies fly about, one must be careful not to tread on them.” ~ Johannes Brahms

Born in Hamburg in 1833 to the son of a double bass player of limited talent, young Johannes augmented the family income playing the piano in dance halls. The first big turning point in his life came in 1853, when he met violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim, who immediately recognized Brahms’ talent. Joachim introduced him to Robert and Clara Schumann, who took Brahms under their wings.

He taught piano and conducted choirs which left him ample time for composing. By 1863 he had settled into a mostly quiet, regular life in Vienna, except for a few musical altercations arising from his quick temper and the rivalry between the traditionalists and the new romantics such as Wagner and Bruckner. His reputation grew steadily. Brahms remained in Vienna and held various musical positions but devoted his life to composition. He still went on concert tours, where he conducted or played piano, but only for his own works.

Brahms was very exacting but had a rather dual nature. While he could be solitary, morose, and withdrawn, he loved humour. Behind a rough exterior he hid a tenderness that revealed itself in his

music and in his love of children. He remained a lifelong bachelor but had many musical friends and a few close personal friendships. His life was the antithesis of the flamboyant Liszt.

As a composer, Brahms bridged the gap between the musical past and its future. He preserved the structural rigour and formal discipline of Classical music—Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—but incorporated the emotional depth and expressiveness of the Romantic era. A musicologist for *Deutsche Grammophon* wrote, “Brahms blended Beethovenian dynamism, Schubertian lyricism, a love of German folk song and the strict contrapuntal mastery of the Baroque into a synthesis of phenomenal richness. His example was as vital as Wagner’s in the creation of the music of the modern era.”

His music is characterized by a mastery of rhythm, movement, and orchestration. This distinguished him from his contemporaries and influenced later composers, including Antonín Dvořák and Gustav Mahler, who greatly admired his work. Brahms' choral works, especially his *German Requiem*, are considered masterpieces and have had a lasting impact on that genre.

Very self-critical, Brahms didn't complete his first symphony until the age of 43. By then he was in full command of the symphonic style and wrote his other three symphonies within a decade. Gradually, Brahms's renown spread through Europe. His contemporaries appreciated the critical significance of his works, and people spoke of the eminence of the “three great Bs” (meaning Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms). Inevitably, a few detractors, including Liszt and Wagner, thought Brahms' work too old-fashioned and uninteresting.

In addition to his symphonies and monumental concertos, Brahms composed a large body of choral, chamber and piano music, as well as over two hundred songs. He excelled in great virtuoso forms, and in intimate small-scale piano pieces and chamber music. Unlike Wagner, Brahms did not write an opera. In Brahms' works, the music becomes the drama.

The last orchestral concert Brahms attended was a Vienna Philharmonic performance of his own Fourth Symphony a month before he died. An ailing Brahms appeared at the end of the performance and received thunderous applause. Florence May, Brahms' first English language biographer, described the scene, “Tears ran down his cheeks as he stood there [...] and through the audience there was a feeling as of a stifled sob, for each knew that he was saying farewell. Another outburst of applause and yet another; one more acknowledgment from the master, and Brahms and his Vienna had parted forever.”

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68 – Brahms (1855-1876)

Orchestration: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, and strings

When Hans von Bülow famously called Brahms' First Symphony "Beethoven's Tenth," Brahms was half pleased and half irritated.

Brahms was 21 years old when he heard Beethoven's Ninth Symphony for the first time and resolved to write one in the same key. He began it the following year but didn't complete it. He reworked the material into a sonata for two pianos, and again into the first two movements of his First Piano Concerto. The last movement was used in his *German Requiem*.

Brahms himself declared that the Symphony, from sketches to finishing touches, took 21 years, from 1855 to 1876. When Beethoven was Brahms' age of 43, Beethoven had already composed eight of his nine symphonies. Brahms was being hailed as Beethoven's successor—Robert Schumann had publicly proclaimed him the future of German music— but Brahms did not want to compete with the greatest of all symphonists until he felt ready. He told his friends, "Composing a symphony is no laughing matter. You have no idea of how it feels to hear behind you the tramp of a giant like Beethoven."

Schumann, in a letter to the violinist Joseph Joachim advised, "[Johannes] should always keep in mind the beginning of the Beethoven symphonies; he should try to make something like them." And he did. Brahms' First Symphony, with a new key of C minor was inspired and influenced by Beethoven. It was probably in 1868 that Brahms settled on the final structure of the Symphony. He wrote to Clara Schumann sketching the alhorn tune which would feature in the Symphony's finale, along with the famous message, "Thus blew the shepherd's horn today!" What finally emerged in 1876 is not an imitation of Beethoven but a response to him: a symphony that acknowledges its ancestry while quietly redefining symphonic architecture. Beethoven often dramatized fate knocking at the door; Brahms built the doorframe first and then let the drama unfold within it.

The First Symphony is a study in how tension accumulates and then how the resolution must be constructed from within. Beethoven's influence is apparent in the journey from C minor to C major; in the resemblance of the last-movement's theme to the *Ode to Joy* (Brahms himself acknowledged this as something that "any ass could see"); and in the rhythmic construction of various motifs rather than expansive melodies. But the differences are unmistakable. Beethoven's rhythmic drive remains unique to him; Brahms is unequivocally 19th-century-Romantic in manner.

The First Symphony premiered in November 1876. Influential critic Eduard Hanslick, in his review of the first Vienna performance, noted that "seldom, if ever, has the entire musical world awaited a composer's first symphony with such tense anticipation." Its completion opened the floodgates. Brahms followed the work with another symphony the next year, and then came masterpiece after masterpiece: Violin Concerto, Second Piano Concerto, and Third and Fourth Symphonies.

The first movement—*Un poco sostenuto – Allegro*—begins with a formal introduction, the only one of Brahms' symphonies to do so. (An early (1862) version of the Symphony's opening movement

did not have the introduction.) It opens with a famous, ominous, pounding timpani as the strings climb. The introduction establishes three key elements: rhythmic drumming, a rising line in the strings and a falling line in the winds. Brahms slowly reveals all the important materials that will be used in the Allegro. The introduction ends with a single plucked note by the cellos.

The movement shifts abruptly into a stormy Allegro where the earlier thematic fragments will be explored. A short motto leads to an energetic and scherzo-like main theme. It begins with the violins, then moves to the woodwinds, strings and timpani which begin to sound out a da-da-da-DUM rhythm strongly reminiscent of the "fate" rhythm of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. An extended transition is followed by a flowing, more lyrical second theme presented by the winds and then the horns. The violas signal an end to the peace with a new theme leading to a final passage.

The development section is masterful in its structural layering. Rather than fragmenting themes in the usual way, Brahms superimposes motifs—the "fate" motif and parts of the original theme. Then he shifts harmonic centres. A series of modulations leads the way back to the recapitulation. Starting with a murky rumble in the basses, the music gathers strength with a thrilling set of arpeggios in the violins and support from the brass, which repeat the "fate" motif. The stage is set for the recapitulation. The earlier passages return but they feel altered. The coda intensifies the rhythmic pulse from the introduction. It begins with pizzicato strings, and then bowed strings leading to a peaceful, but still tense, closing cadence.

In this movement, and the fourth, listen for Brahms' utter mastery of composition—his changes of rhythm, dynamics, and timbre. Orrin Howard commented, "... this is as grand a symphonic movement as he ever conceived."

The second movement—***Andante sostenuto***—and the third, give us another side of Brahms, one marked by lyricism and expressiveness. The change from minor key to major is luminous but restrained. The movement unfolds in long, arching phrases featuring prominent solos for violin and oboe. Rather than dramatic contrast, there is variation and subtle harmonic shading. Themes evolve through gentle modulation. The effect is a release from the tension of the first movement.

The movement has three sections. In the first, Brahms sets strings against winds and horns with various flowing themes. In the second, the strings take the lead. Some of the passages foreshadow the third movement. The winds join but then drop out, leaving the strings to transition into the third section when the winds re-enter and play passages parallel to those in the first section. Listen for the oboe theme and Brahms' use of the horn and solo violin. A central highlight is the violin's expressive solo, reminiscent of Beethoven's later works, then answered by horn. It provides a moment of chamber music intimacy within symphonic scale. The movement ends with a final coda in which the solo horn quotes the beginning of the second theme and then elaborated on by the principal violin.

The third movement—***Un poco allegretto e grazioso***—is a light, graceful intermezzo rather than a traditional, fast Beethoven-like scherzo. It is full of complex rhythms and interwoven textures, written in a major key. It continues the respite from the tension of the main battle. Like the second movement, the third has three sections: an Allegretto, a Trio, and a reprise of the Allegretto, plus a coda. A notable aspect of this movement is Brahms' careful attention to symmetry.

The Allegretto consists of four themes. The principal one has a gentle, almost pastoral, lilt, but is kept grounded instead of floating away. The Trio changes key and tempo. Instead of a stately 2/4 time it is in a more dancelike 6/8 time. While more animated, the liveliness remains disciplined. When the Allegretto returns, it has been affected by the Trio. The Trio melody is heard over the melody in the winds. The rhythmic effect of triplets produces polyrhythms. The instruction for the coda is *poco a poco più tranquillo* (little by little, calmer) and the movement ends with the gentle throb of triplets from the Trio section. A few abrupt final bars make the ending seem unresolved and serve as preparation for the finale. By placing this restrained movement third, Brahms avoids exhausting dramatic tension too early. He saves the true transformation for the last movement.

The finale—***Adagio – Più andante – Allegro non troppo, ma con brio***—has vast scope, resolving all the tension that the first movement created but left unresolved. Just as in the first movement, the finale begins with an extended introduction. Dramatic tension and uncertainty are presented via fragmented phrases, ambiguous harmonies, and tremolo strings. It feels as though the Symphony is gathering courage for the grand entrance of the famous alphorn call. The horns and trombones, over shimmering strings, introduce the theme that has been called one of the classic orchestral moments of the nineteenth century.

The main theme starts immediately. It is impossible to miss the resemblance to the *Ode to Joy* (“Freude”) theme in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. But it is not imitative. Brahms saw his use of the idiom as an act of conscious homage. What matters is how Brahms prepared it. The theme feels inevitable because every previous movement has pointed toward it. Various sections of the orchestra play the theme before the full orchestra takes charge. A brief variation of the alphorn tune leads directly to the second theme.

The brief development section begins with a richly scored full restatement of the movement’s main theme; the last time it will be heard in its entirety. Fragmented restatements are thrown back and forth in the winds and horns. Next comes a distinctive “turning” motif, derived from the main theme, that will eventually lead back to the alphorn theme. Just as the music begins to lose momentum, the second theme returns, largely unchanged. A lengthy coda follows without pause, returning to C major, restating the chorale from the introduction, ending with a triumphant pair of plagal cadences. (Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony also started in C minor and ended in C major.) The coda is not an explosive one, but broadens and affirms. Brahms emerges victorious from his struggle.

Marc Mandel, writing for the Boston Symphony Orchestra commented, “The full effect of the symphony is dependent upon the compositional craft that binds the work together in its progress from the C minor struggle of the first movement through the mediating regions of the Andante and the Allegretto to the C major triumph of the finale.”

Readers will not be surprised to learn that, following its premiere and subsequent appearances in across Europe, the Symphony elicited conflicting reactions. Yet again we ask, “What do critics know?” A twenty-year gestation gave the Symphony cohesion, refinement, and interconnectedness. It has become a cornerstone of the repertoire, marking a “second golden age” of the symphonic tradition. It balances intellect and emotion with rare equilibrium. It honours Beethoven without imitation, proving that symphonic drama can emerge from structural integrity without theatrical gesture.