Program Notes for VSO Concert – Scriabin, Shostakovich, Prokofiev – November 6-7, 2026
Scriabin – Rêverie; Shostakovich – Violin Concerto No. 1; Prokofiev – Cinderella Suite

By Jonathan Berkowitz

ALEXANDER SCRIABIN (1872–1915)

Alexander Scriabin remains a fascinating and unusual figure in music history. Born in Moscow in 1872, he was educated at the Moscow Conservatory, where Sergei Rachmaninoff was a classmate. Both were gifted pianists, but their musical paths diverged dramatically. Rachmaninoff remained rooted in the late Romantic tradition; Scriabin gradually moved beyond it, emerging as a visionary who believed music could help transform human consciousness.

His early piano works—preludes, études, mazurkas, and sonatas—clearly reflect Chopin's influence. But Scriabin's individuality is unmistakable: compressed emotion, unusual harmonic turns, and an intense inward quality. By the time of his Third Symphony, *The Divine Poem*, and especially *The Poem of Ecstasy* and *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire*, his musical language had become far more daring. Scriabin became increasingly absorbed in mysticism, philosophy, Theosophy, and ideas about the spiritual power of art. He came to believe that music was not merely entertainment but a force capable of transforming humanity. His most ambitious unrealized project, *Mysterium*, was intended to combine music, poetry, dance, coloured light, perfume, and architecture in a vast performance in India that he imagined would usher in a new spiritual age.

His interest in colour was particularly striking. Scriabin associated specific musical keys with colours and included a "colour organ" part in *Prometheus*. Whether he experienced true synesthesia remains debated, but his fascination with the relationship among sound, colour, and sensation was decades ahead of its time.

His harmonic language also became increasingly original. Instead of conventional major and minor harmony, he developed chords built from unusual intervals, most famously the so-called "mystic chord." His later music seems suspended between tonality and atonality, creating an atmosphere that can sound sensuous, ecstatic, mysterious, or unsettling.

In 1915, Scriabin died suddenly at 43. Before the age of antibiotics, a seemingly minor infection proved fatal.

Scriabin's music sounds like no one else's. It continually reaches upward. Even quiet passages seem to strive toward illumination, while climaxes often feel less like conventional resolutions than states of ecstasy. In *The Poem of Ecstasy*, enormous orchestral forces build toward an almost overwhelming blaze of sound. In the late piano sonatas, a few minutes of music can create an entire psychological universe. Scriabin may not have achieved the spiritual transformation of humanity that he envisioned. But more than a century after his death, his compositions can still make us feel that music contains possibilities we have not yet fully imagined.

Rêverie, Op. 24 – Alexander Scriabin (1898)

Orchestration: *2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, harp, and strings*

Scriabin's first standalone work for orchestra was composed in 1898 in total secrecy and without advice from anyone. He initially titled it simply *Prélude* and presented it as a gift to his patron and publisher, M.P. Belyaev. Feeling that the title did not suit an orchestral piece, Scriabin and Belyaev renamed it *Rêverie* in French and *Myechty* in Russian, meaning "daydreams." Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov praised its piquant harmonies and orchestration. After first trying it out on the piano, he conducted the premiere in Saint Petersburg and was so charmed that he requested an immediate encore. Scriabin followed the orchestral performance by playing a short solo set of his own études and preludes. *Rêverie* is a five-minute miniature that provides a glimpse of the young Scriabin before his music took its famous mystical and visionary turn.

Scriabin was 26 and a piano teacher at the Moscow Conservatory when he composed *Rêverie*. He was already established as one of Russia's most gifted young composers and pianists, admired particularly for piano music that reflected the influence of Frédéric Chopin. Little of Scriabin's later musical daring ise yet fully apparent here. *Rêverie* belongs to the lyrical, Romantic Scriabin, stylistically somewhere between Chopin, Wagner, and the lush orchestral world of Tchaikovsky.

The title is significant. A *rêverie* is a waking daydream, a quiet state of reflection in which thoughts drift freely. Scriabin invites listeners into just such an atmosphere, free of dramatic conflict or conventional symphonic development. Ideas appear, blossom, and dissolve, just as thoughts do in a peaceful meditation.

The work opens almost imperceptibly, with soft strings establishing an atmosphere of calm before the woodwinds introduce a gentle, arching melody that seems to float effortlessly above the accompaniment. Scriabin's gift for harmonic colour is immediately apparent. The harmonies shift subtly beneath the melody, creating an impression of constant motion while preserving a sense of serenity. The melody gradually expands and the orchestral texture grows richer. Brass and full strings briefly illuminate the musical landscape before the music returns to the quiet world in which it began. The final chords suggest a peaceful awakening from contemplation.

There are no memorable themes in the traditional sense. Instead, listen for the constantly changing orchestral colours, subtle harmonic shifts, and sense of suspended time. Notice how each instrument contributes to the dreamlike atmosphere.

Although overshadowed by Scriabin's later symphonies and tone poems, *Rêverie* is important for revealing a composer already fascinated by colour, atmosphere, and harmony, even before his revolutionary musical language fully emerged. One can already hear the seeds of the mystical imagination that would later make him one of music's most original voices. In just a few minutes, Scriabin creates a complete emotional world, reminding us that music need not overwhelm to move us deeply.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)

Music illuminates a person and provides him with his last hope. — Dmitri Shostakovich

During his life, Dmitri Shostakovich struggled not with critics, rival composers, financial insecurity, or changing musical fashion, but with one of the most brutal dictatorships in history. Every note Shostakovich wrote was shaped by the question of how an artist can remain truthful when truth itself is dangerous. His 15 symphonies and 15 string quartets form one of the greatest bodies of music composed in the 20th century, tracing an entire artistic lifetime.

But determining the truth about Shostakovich's inner thoughts and motivations has been frustratingly difficult. Evidence from letters, documents, friends, and the controversial 1979 memoir *Testimony* has been interpreted in very different ways: was he a tool of Stalinism or a deceptive critic of Soviet Communism? Clearly, Shostakovich's music is inseparable from the extraordinary political pressures under which it was created. It speaks in whispers and shouts, in public triumphs and private confessions, often leaving listeners to decide which voice they hear.

Born in St. Petersburg in 1906, Shostakovich displayed prodigious musical gifts from an early age. His mother was a good pianist and introduced him to the keyboard. At 13, he entered the Petrograd Conservatory, where he studied piano and composition. His principal composition teacher was Alexander Glazunov, who quickly recognized his shy young student's exceptional talent. Unlike many child prodigies, Shostakovich was neither flamboyant nor outwardly confident. Thin, bespectacled, and intensely self-conscious, he possessed a memorable dry wit. He was also an enthusiastic soccer fan, following Zenit Leningrad with almost scholarly devotion and collecting scores and league tables with the same precision with which he organized his musical sketches. He was an accomplished pianist; however, severe problems with his hands in later life gradually ended his performing career.

His graduation piece was his First Symphony. Completed when he was 19 and premiered in 1926, it spread rapidly across Europe and America, announcing that a major new composer had arrived. Bruno Walter, Arturo Toscanini, and Leopold Stokowski all championed the work. It captivated audiences with its brilliance, humour, lyricism, and astonishing orchestral imagination. Shostakovich seemed destined for an uncomplicated international career. And then history intervened.

The Soviet Union initially encouraged artistic experimentation, and Shostakovich flourished. His opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* became an international success after its 1934 premiere. But two years later, when Joseph Stalin attended a performance, everything changed. *Pravda*, the Communist Party newspaper, published the notorious editorial "Muddle Instead of Music," denouncing the opera as decadent, chaotic, and anti-Soviet. Although unsigned, it was widely understood to reflect Stalin's personal opinion. Overnight, Shostakovich became a marked man.

The consequences were terrifying. During Stalin's Great Terror, artists, writers, and intellectuals disappeared without warning. Friends and relatives were arrested; some were executed while others vanished into labour camps. Shostakovich was later said to have slept fully dressed beside his apartment door with a packed suitcase, hoping that if the secret police came during the night

they would not disturb his family. Whether every detail of that famous story is true matters less than the atmosphere it captures: a life lived in constant fear.

The crisis transformed his music. His Fifth Symphony (1937) was publicly described as "a Soviet artist's practical creative response to just criticism." It restored him to official favour but left generations of listeners debating whether its triumphant ending represents genuine celebration or bitter irony. That ambiguity became one of Shostakovich's defining artistic signatures. He learned to compose music that could satisfy government officials while allowing perceptive listeners to hear something entirely different.

The Second World War brought both personal danger and worldwide fame. During the Siege of Leningrad, photographs of Shostakovich wearing a firefighter's helmet while serving on rooftop fire-watch duty became powerful symbols of Soviet resistance. His Seventh Symphony, the *Leningrad*, achieved extraordinary international prominence. Smuggled out of the Soviet Union on microfilm, it was performed by leading orchestras across Europe and North America, becoming a musical emblem of resistance to fascism.

In 1947, Shostakovich began work on his First Violin Concerto. During the war, the Soviet government had relaxed some of its restrictions on artists, but once the war ended, the arts again became targets of ideological control. In 1948, Shostakovich and others were condemned in a campaign against so-called "formalism," launched under Stalin's cultural commissar Andrei Zhdanov. The official accusations denounced music considered inaccessible, overly complex, or insufficiently connected to "the people." Along with Prokofiev, Khachaturian, and others, Shostakovich lost teaching positions and saw many works banned from performance. The composers were forced to acknowledge their supposed errors and comply with official demands for more accessible music.

Parallel to the cultural attack, a new wave of antisemitism was building. Although Shostakovich was not Jewish, he noted that "My parents considered anti-Semitism a shameful superstition, and in that sense particularly I was given a very good upbringing." He was drawn to Jewish culture and music and is reported to have said, "The distinguishing feature of Jewish music is the ability to build a jolly melody on sad intonations. Why does a man strike up a jolly song? Because he feels sad at heart." Several of his compositions have Jewish themes, among them the First Violin Concerto and Symphony No. 13 (*Babi Yar*). As Stalin's antisemitic campaign intensified, Shostakovich commented that the persecution "had started with the Jews but would end up with the entire intelligentsia."

During these years, until Stalin's death in 1953, Shostakovich wrote film scores and officially acceptable compositions to support his family while privately composing some of his most profound music "for the desk drawer," including the First Violin Concerto, the song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, and the *24 Preludes and Fugues* for piano. It was not until 1955 that the Concerto and song cycle would be performed in public. Music historian Boris Schwarz described two idioms in Shostakovich's post-war music. The first was "simplified and accessible to comply with Kremlin guidelines"; the second was "complex and abstract to satisfy [Shostakovich's] own artistic standards."

The puzzle and ambiguity of Shostakovich's relationship with the Soviet regime were explored in Julian Barnes's 2016 novel *The Noise of Time*. This work of historical fiction imagines Shostakovich's inner life during three defining encounters with Soviet power. Barnes portrays a man trapped between artistic integrity and political survival, asking not whether he was heroic or cowardly, but how any human being might behave under such relentless pressure. It is a compelling literary meditation on the relationship between art and totalitarianism.

Shostakovich's musical language is instantly recognizable. He could write melodies of heartbreaking simplicity, only to interrupt them with grotesque marches, savage sarcasm, military rhythms, or brutal climaxes. Humour and horror often coexist within a single movement. He also delighted in musical codes. His best-known signature is the four-note motif D–E-flat–C–B, corresponding in German notation to D–S–C–H, the initials of *D. Schostakowitsch*. This musical monogram appears throughout his later works, most famously in the Tenth Symphony, Eighth String Quartet, and First Violin Concerto. It functions rather like Bach's own B–A–C–H motif—a musical signature embedded within the score.

String Quartet No. 8 occupies a particularly poignant place in his output. Officially dedicated "to the victims of fascism and war," it is saturated with the DSCH motif and quotations from earlier compositions. Many musicians hear it instead as an intensely personal autobiographical work. Shostakovich himself reportedly told friends that it served as his own musical epitaph.

His final years were marked by declining health. He suffered heart attacks, severe arthritis, and a neurological disorder that impaired the use of his hands. Yet his late works possess extraordinary emotional concentration. The last quartets, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Symphonies, and the haunting Viola Sonata seem increasingly preoccupied with mortality while remaining astonishingly inventive. Shostakovich died in 1975 and was buried in Moscow.

Shostakovich restored the symphony to central importance when many believed the form exhausted after Mahler. His 15 quartets rival Beethoven's and Bartók's as a supreme achievement of chamber music. His concertos remain pillars of the modern repertoire. More importantly, Shostakovich demonstrated that great music can bear witness to history without becoming propaganda. His works acknowledge fear, suffering, absurdity, resilience, irony, and hope. Whether one hears coded political messages or simply profound human drama, the music speaks with extraordinary emotional honesty.

The central question surrounding Shostakovich may never be fully resolved. Was he a loyal Soviet citizen, a hidden dissident, or simply a frightened man trying to protect his family while preserving his art? Perhaps elements of all three can be found in his complicated life. Whatever the historical debates, one fact is beyond dispute: Shostakovich transformed personal anxiety into universal art. He composed under pressures that few artists endure, yet created music of astonishing originality, emotional power, and humanity.

Now, more than 50 years after his death, his symphonies, quartets, concertos, and chamber works continue to challenge performers, move audiences, and remind us that while political regimes pass, great art endures. In Julian Barnes's unforgettable phrase, "Art is the whisper of history, heard above the noise of time."

Violin Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 77 (99) – Dmitri Shostakovich (1947–48)

Orchestration: *3 flutes (3rd = piccolo), 3 oboes (3rd = English horn), 3 clarinets (3rd = bass clarinet), 3 bassoons (3rd = contrabassoon), 4 horns, tuba, timpani, percussion (triangle, side drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, xylophone), celesta, harp, strings, and solo violin*

Shostakovich's Violin Concerto No. 1 is a profound psychological journey. The violin transforms from a virtuoso showpiece into an intensely personal voice. One of the greatest violin concertos ever written, it inhabits a darker emotional world than the masterpieces of Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, and Sibelius. It asks not simply how beautifully a violin can sing, but how deeply it can speak.

The story behind the Concerto is inseparable from Soviet politics. In 1948, Soviet composers were ruthlessly attacked by the Communist Party (see the biography of Shostakovich above for details). Although the Violin Concerto was completed in 1948, it was kept hidden and unperformed until after Stalin's death in 1953.

The Concerto was written specifically for David Oistrakh, perhaps the greatest Soviet violinist of the 20th century and a close friend of Shostakovich. Oistrakh advised Shostakovich on technical matters, although far less extensively than Joseph Joachim had assisted Brahms or Joseph Kotek had helped Tchaikovsky. More importantly, Oistrakh, who was raised in a Jewish family in Ukraine, understood the emotional world of the piece. He later remarked, "The composer has written not only for the violin, but through the violin." That observation captures the essence of the Concerto. Technical brilliance is never an end in itself; everything serves expression.

The political thaw under Khrushchev allowed Oistrakh, to whom the Concerto is dedicated, to play its long-delayed and hugely successful premiere in Leningrad in 1955. He played it again shortly afterward at Carnegie Hall, during the early years of post-Stalin Soviet-American cultural exchange. It was followed by a tour of the United States, further confirming Shostakovich's international reputation. The Concerto, originally designated Op. 77, was published as Op. 99. (Shostakovich's Second Violin Concerto, written in 1967, was also dedicated to Oistrakh.)

Shostakovich departed from the traditional 19th-century three-movement concerto with its fast-slow-fast pattern. His four movements trace a dramatic arc from darkness to mockery, then tragedy, ending with defiant laughter. This is not a violin concerto built around memorable melodies and showy virtuosity. Serious and weighty, it is challenging musically and intellectually and, for the soloist, physically and emotionally. Shostakovich referred to it as "a symphony for solo violin and orchestra." Unusually, the score includes neither trumpets nor trombones.

The opening movement—***Nocturne – Moderato***—is one long meditation. It begins with low, slow strings creating an uneasy stillness. The violin enters almost immediately with a long, quiet reflection on the opening, seeming lost in thought. Themes emerge quietly and dissolve again. The orchestra gently surrounds the violin with shadowy colours and unsettled harmonies. The bassoon and other winds contribute contrasting passages. About halfway through, the celesta's intriguing line provides a rare glimmer of light. Throughout it all, the violinist remains front and centre. Silences become almost as expressive as the notes themselves. Some commentators hear loneliness; others hear suppressed grief; still others hear a composer speaking privately when

public speech had become dangerous. The movement ends as it began, in a haunting mood. William Runyan notes, “Some have aptly compared it with the sad, elegiac first movement of Elgar’s Cello Concerto—a reflection of the death and destruction of WWI.”

Listen for the dark orchestral colours, restrained dynamics, and the violin’s extraordinary control of long melodic lines. This is not conventional Romantic lyricism; its beauty is darker and more introspective.

Without warning, the music explodes into the second movement—***Scherzo – Allegro***. It is wild, sarcastic, and relentlessly energetic, the opposite of the introspective opening Nocturne. The movement introduces Shostakovich’s four-note musical signature: D–E-flat–C–B. In German musical notation, this becomes D–Es–C–H, or DSCH, derived from the German spelling of his name, *D. Schostakowitsch*. The movement has been variously described as triumphant, ironic, and defiant. The violin races through dazzling technical passages while the orchestra responds with biting humour. Grotesque dance rhythms, nervous laughter, and distorted joy create anything but carefree play. Just as the strings were prominent in the first movement, the woodwinds are front and centre here.

Shortly after Shostakovich’s musical signature comes a klezmer-inspired episode. The Jewish-inflected themes here and in the finale reflect Shostakovich’s longstanding interest in Jewish musical idioms and their distinctive mixture of joy and sorrow. Against the background of growing Soviet antisemitism, Calvin Dotsey has suggested that this music may also represent “another veiled protest against the regime.”

Listen for the sharp rhythmic contrasts, biting woodwinds, grotesque dance episodes, recurring DSCH motif, and the astonishing brilliance of the solo writing. This movement displays Shostakovich’s musical sarcasm and virtuosity with teeth.

The third movement—***Passacaglia – Andante***—uses an old Baroque form of the passacaglia, built upon a recurring bass line over which variations unfold. Shostakovich had used the form before, with remarkable effect, in his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which was condemned by Soviet authorities in 1936. Here, he transforms the ancient structure into one of the 20th century’s great slow movements.

The orchestra introduces a solemn eight-bar bass theme played by the cellos and basses, with horns above. After the winds play a quieter variation, the solo violin enters, eventually taking up the bass line and other thematic material. At times the recurring theme moves from the strings to other parts of the orchestra. One intriguing variation features repeated, chant-like notes. There are nine variations in all, each increasing the emotional intensity. At the end of the ninth, the orchestra holds a long note and then falls silent, preparing for the cadenza that acts as a bridge to the finale.

The nearly five-minute cadenza is not decorative but the culmination of the movement. The technical demands are immense. The listener can almost sense exhaustion beginning to set in. Calvin Dotsey comments that placing the cadenza between movements “mak[es] it seem untethered, as if we have passed into some netherworld that is neither here nor there.” The soloist is completely alone, recalling motifs from earlier movements, including the DSCH. The violin reaches into its highest register to reprise the klezmer-inspired material before gathering

momentum and hurtling directly into the finale. William Runyan describes it as a cadenza of "unprecedented power, length, and drama" that "practically takes on the significance of a fifth movement." David Oistrakh is reputed to have pleaded with Shostakovich to give the opening of the finale to the orchestra so that "I can at least wipe the sweat off my brow" after the demanding cadenza.

Listen for the repeated bass theme, the extraordinary architecture of the variations, and the way the cadenza transforms meditation into mounting energy. Few cadenzas in the repertoire have comparable structural importance.

The finale—***Burlesque – Allegro con brio***—bursts forth without pause after the cadenza. The title is a strong hint of what is to come: a celebration bordering on the manic. The movement is a brilliant example of Shostakovich using dark humour as a mask. Russian dances, Jewish-inflected melodies, and other characteristic Shostakovich elements whirl past at astonishing speed. The solo violin scarcely rests. The orchestra is the violin's equal, not merely its accompaniment. Everything accelerates toward an breathtaking conclusion—or, as Marianne Williamson wrote, "a scorching conflagration." The listener may be as exhausted as the soloist and orchestra.

Listen for the dazzling violin technique, brilliant percussion, relentless rhythmic drive, recurring references to earlier themes, and, of course, the exhilarating ending. Ask yourself whether the ending represents victory, survival, or defiance. The music refuses to answer.

In his notes about the work, William Runyan concludes, "Notwithstanding his putative, occasional acquiescence to the oppressive Soviet state, the Violin Concerto, along with its peers, is eloquent testimony to the genius of the real Dmitri Shostakovich."

Shostakovich's First Violin Concerto is technically formidable, emotionally devastating, intellectually rigorous, politically resonant, and deeply personal. Yet it is universally human. It tells no explicit story, although listeners inevitably sense one. First-time listeners might expect 20th-century music to sound harsh or inaccessible. Shostakovich's musical language is modern but readily understandable. Rather than search for conventional melodies, listen for changing emotional states, recurring motifs, shifting orchestral colours, and the remarkable way silence itself becomes expressive.

The Concerto was composed at a time when Shostakovich did not believe it could safely be performed. Hidden for years, it eventually emerged not as historical curiosity but as one of the defining masterpieces of the violin repertoire. Like the concertos of Beethoven, Brahms, and Sibelius, it transcends the circumstances of its creation. In giving voice to fear, resilience, irony, and hope, Shostakovich created one of the 20th century's greatest concertos—and music that continues to speak long after the dangerous world in which it was written has disappeared.

SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891–1953)

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 at the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. Descriptions 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 ten. The latter remained the genre Prokofiev was most fond of working in, although it was not what he became best known for. In another sign of his remarkable talents, he met and played two world chess champions at age 14, beating one of them. Chess remained a passion throughout his life.

Prokofiev graduated from the Saint Petersburg Conservatory and won the Rubinstein Prize by playing his own *Piano Concerto No. 1* instead of the prescribed Classical concerto. 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 No. 2*, members of 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, for that time, stark 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 completed 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 a touring pianist second. In 1936, he returned to 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 *Piano Sonatas Nos. 6–8*. During World War II, Soviet restrictions on how composers could write were loosened, allowing Prokofiev more musical freedom. During this period, he worked on his most ambitious opera, *War and Peace*.

In 1948, the Zhdanov Doctrine denounced six composers, including Dmitri Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Aram Khachaturian, for the crime of "formalism." This was 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 performances of other works and operas, putting Prokofiev in 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 Prokofiev attended. He died at age 61 on March 5, 1953, the same day Joseph Stalin's death was announced. Prokofiev had lived near Red Square, and for three days throngs gathered to mourn Stalin, making it impossible to hold his funeral service at the headquarters of the Soviet Composers' Union. His coffin had to be carried 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 music's future: "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 much of the music of that era.

Cinderella Suite – Sergei Prokofiev (1945)

Orchestration: *piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, bells, cymbals, snare drum, tambourine, tam-tam, triangle, xylophone, clock chime, pendulum), harp, piano (= celesta), and strings*

Cinderella is proof that a new pair of shoes can change your life.

Two very different love stories, two extraordinary ballets. With *Romeo and Juliet*, written in the 1930s, Prokofiev demonstrated that he could write music for dance and drama that was also rich enough to stand on its own in the concert hall. Conceived at a very different time in his life, *Cinderella* would become his other great full-length ballet. It was begun just before the Soviet Union entered World War II and completed during the final stages of the war. The three orchestral suites came afterward, when Prokofiev reshaped the enormous ballet score for the concert hall.

In 1940, the Kirov Theatre in Leningrad commissioned a new ballet. The scenario would be based on Charles Perrault's familiar version of the fairy tale. Prokofiev completed a substantial portion of the score by the summer of 1941. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, cultural life was upended and a lighthearted fairy-tale ballet suddenly seemed ill-timed. Prokofiev put *Cinderella* aside and worked on other compositions, including his monumental opera *War and Peace*. He returned to *Cinderella* in 1943 and completed the orchestration.

During these tumultuous years, Prokofiev's marriage disintegrated. His new relationship with Mira Mendelson, who became his companion for the rest of his life, offers a tempting—but impossible to prove—explanation for the warm love music in *Cinderella*.

Prokofiev was very clear that the emotional centre of *Cinderella* was neither the glass slipper nor the magical transformation. It was love. He wrote that what he wished to express above all was the poetic love between Cinderella and the Prince: its birth, its growth, the obstacles placed in its way, and finally its fulfilment. That helps explain why *Cinderella* is quite different from a children's pantomime. The Stepsisters are wonderfully grotesque, the Fairy Godmother provides magic, and the midnight scene is spectacular. But Cinderella herself is never treated as a caricature; her music has genuine emotional depth.

Prokofiev also paid homage to Tchaikovsky's great ballets. *Cinderella* contains waltzes, gavottes, mazurkas, galops, and other traditional dances, but they are filtered through Prokofiev's unmistakable modern language of unexpected harmonies, displaced accents, sharp orchestral colours, and sudden changes of mood. The result is simultaneously traditional and modern.

The full ballet *Cinderella*, Op. 87, premiered in Moscow on November 21, 1945, only six months after the end of the war in Europe. After years of destruction and loss, a ballet about transformation, hope, love, and the chance of happiness after suffering proved enormously successful.

The complete ballet, comprising three acts and about 50 separate numbers, was far too long to be presented in an orchestral concert. So Prokofiev did what he had already done successfully with *Romeo and Juliet*: he extracted three suites for orchestra, Opp. 107, 108, and 109.

They are not simply Acts 1, 2, and 3 of the ballet condensed into suites. Prokofiev selected and rearranged numbers from different portions of the ballet according to their effectiveness in concert. Consequently, the suites do not always preserve the dramatic sequence of the stage work. They are better thought of as three concert anthologies. Nor are they merely excerpts copied directly from the ballet score. Prokofiev sometimes altered transitions, orchestration, and endings so that individual movements could function independently. By creating three suites, he made a large theatrical work available to orchestras that might never perform the complete ballet.

From such a rich treasure trove, conductors have the freedom to choose from the 21 movements in the three suites and rearrange them into a continuous narrative: Cinderella's unhappy home, the Fairy Godmother, the journey to the ball, the palace, the waltz, midnight, the Prince's search, the reunion, and *Amoroso*. Such a compilation tells the fairy tale more directly than any individual suite does.

Conductor Antony Hermus offered these insights about the suite of 11 selections he created:

"What I love about this extraordinary Prokofiev ballet is the wide range of worlds that he creates within one score: humour, cruelty, magic, rhythmic brilliance, and (in the end) disarming tenderness…

When I organized this suite for the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, I wanted to create something more than a collection of 'best-of': I tried to preserve the dramatic journey of the ballet, so that it could function as a self-contained symphonic narrative in the concert hall.

We start in Cinderella's everyday world—the quarrel, sharply drawn character music before the Fairy Grandmother opens the door into another dimension. The palace then becomes the heart of the suite. Prokofiev uses the Waltz not simply as dance music, but almost as a psychological space. The waltzes seem to be glamorous and sweeping, but with a slightly unstable feeling underneath them. The arrival of 'Midnight' feels overwhelming: suddenly the fairy-tale mechanism becomes brutally real; time cannot be stopped. After the escape from the ball and the more playful energy of the Galop, I chose the final parts to move away from 'spectacle' and into intimate feelings. The beautiful Slow Waltz and final Amoroso provide the destination of our journey.

I have attempted to tell the entire story in miniature, with a musical arc that can stand on its own. I hope the audience can 'see' the ballet simply by listening.

For me, Cinderella is not a story about a prince's rescue of a commoner from an unhappy life, but a story of becoming visible and recognizing who you really are. The magic in the story doesn't 'create' Cinderella; it reveals her. Beneath all the theatricality and dazzling orchestration is something remarkably human. And that's why the suite ends with the Amoroso. After all the clocks, waltzes, transformations, and excitement, Prokofiev returns to something very simple: two people recognizing each other and living a long and happy life together."

Introduction. Prokofiev immediately establishes that this is not simply a cheerful fairy tale. We are introduced to Cinderella's emotional world: sadness and loneliness, but also the capacity to dream. Although Prokofiev seems to make fun of the grotesque characters surrounding Cinderella he is always sincere with her. He makes it very clear whose side we are on.

Quarrel. The dysfunctional family enters. Prokofiev transforms the Stepsisters' squabbling into musical slapstick. Short phrases interrupt one another, accents land in unexpected places, and orchestral voices seem determined to have the last word. Prokofiev was a master of the musical grotesque. It is as though the orchestra is sticking out its collective tongue. Listen to the contrast with Cinderella's music.

Fairy Godmother and Winter Fairy. With the arrival of the Fairy Godmother, the world turns supernatural. Prokofiev accomplishes this by using harp, celesta, high woodwinds, delicate percussion, and shimmering strings to transform the atmosphere. Listen to the difference between the sound of these fairies and those of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*. This is an 18th-century fairy tale seen and heard through 20th-century eyes and ears.

Cinderella Goes to the Ball. Cinderella is off to the ball, transformed physically and emotionally. The music conveys more than a musical carriage ride. We also begin to hear the characteristic waltz world that will dominate the ball. Prokofiev loved waltzes, but his are not like those of Johann Strauss: phrases are stretched and harmonies slippery. Something feels not quite secure.

Cinderella at the Palace and Grand Waltz. Here is Prokofiev at his theatrical best. The music is both unmistakably Romantic and uniquely Prokofievian. The Grand Waltz represents the dazzling new world Cinderella has entered and the setting in which she and the Prince fall in love. This is a

traditional Russian ballet waltz, but Prokofiev manages to make three-quarter time both elegant and slightly unstable.

Three Oranges. This is an inside joke, with Prokofiev smiling at his own musical past. Oranges, luxuries in the fairy-tale world, are presented to the supremely ridiculous Stepsisters with comic characterization. The title refers to Prokofiev's own opera *The Love for Three Oranges*. Imagine the composer making a cameo appearance, walking onto the stage himself.

Cinderella's Waltz. Cinderella and the Prince have discovered each other, so the public ball has become personal. We are familiar with the motor rhythms of Prokofiev but often overlook his tremendous skill as a melodist. The romantic arcs of the waltz mask what we know but Cinderella temporarily forgets: midnight is approaching. We know the beautiful waltz cannot last.

Midnight. The romantic becomes terrifying in one of Prokofiev's greatest theatrical inspirations. The clock strikes 12 and time becomes a character. Repeated notes suggest its mechanical ticking; percussion and brass make each stroke increasingly threatening. The genius of the scene lies in our knowledge of exactly what midnight means. Every stroke removes another piece of Cinderella's magical world. The beautiful dress, carriage, and enchantment are disappearing. The regularity of the clock confronts the freedom of the waltz. Fantasy has lost to the number 12. Few composers have made a clock sound so frightening.

Galop. The Prince "gallops" with frantic forward motion in search of the mysterious woman who left the glass slipper. The quest becomes a dazzling orchestral movement—rapid, energetic, and deliberately breathless. Prokofiev's famous "motoric" style is perfect for describing a man who refuses to stop searching.

Slow Waltz. Now the perspective changes and turns inward. This waltz is intimate and reflective. No enormous climax is needed. The fairy tale is moving toward resolution, but the music reminds us that Cinderella's transformation has been emotional as well as magical. The Grand Waltz dazzled; this one speaks with long lyrical lines, relaxed rhythms, and Prokofiev's subtle harmonies.

Amoroso. The title tells us where we have arrived—lovingly. Cinderella and the Prince are finally united. Instead of a spectacular royal celebration, Prokofiev gives us a love scene. Earlier themes return with new meaning. The glowing orchestration and melodic writing recall the great love music of *Romeo and Juliet*, but without its tragedy. The ending reveals what *Cinderella* has really been about. The glass slipper, pumpkin, Stepsisters, and Fairy Godmother are theatrical machinery. The real subject is the transformation of loneliness into love. Prokofiev does not end by shouting "Happily ever after!" He has the orchestra say it quietly.

Cinderella* and *Romeo and Juliet

Prokofiev's two ballets make fascinating companions. *Romeo and Juliet* is about love destroyed by the surrounding world. *Cinderella* is about love triumphing over it. *Romeo* contains violence, menace, and tragedy; *Cinderella* emphasizes comedy, magic, and fulfilment. Yet both contain some of Prokofiev's greatest love music, and both reveal Prokofiev's extraordinary ability to portray character through orchestral sound.

There is another important similarity. Prokofiev never condescends to his subject. *Cinderella* may be a fairy tale, but its emotions are real. Cinderella's loneliness is real; the Stepsisters' absurdity is real; the excitement of the ball is real; and, most importantly, the love between Cinderella and the Prince is treated with complete sincerity. That may explain why the score survives so successfully without dancers. Prokofiev's orchestra does much of the acting.

The woodwinds can sneer, the strings can fall in love, percussion can turn a clock into a threat, and an enormous orchestra can suddenly become transparent enough to suggest fairy dust. Beneath all the dazzling orchestration, however, lies a remarkably simple dramatic progression: loneliness, hope, transformation, love, loss, search, and reunion.

That is the real architecture of *Cinderella*, and that is why the ballet music, in its various forms, remains among Prokofiev's most enduring achievements. Neither fairy tales nor great music ever grow old.