



Sergey
PROKOFIEV

Piano Concerto No. 3

Visions fugitives, Op. 22

**Suggestion diabolique,
Op. 4, No. 4**

**Sonatine Pastorale,
Op. 59, No. 3**

Sergey Prokofiev,

piano

**London Symphony Orchestra
Piero Coppola**

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Piano Concerto No. 3 • 18 Solo Piano Works

Sketches for the *Third Piano Concerto* go back to 1917, but it was during the summer of 1921 in Brittany that Prokofiev completed the work. He had left revolutionary Russia arriving in New York in September 1918. The première of the Concerto was given in Chicago on 16th December 1921 with Frederick Stock conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In January 1922 Prokofiev played the work in New York with Albert Coates conducting, then travelled to Europe to give performances in Paris and London in April 1922. On 25th April 1922 he performed the work at the Queen's Hall in London with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Coates. After denigrating the previous work on the programme, a critic of the day began his assessment of the concerto with the following: "Music entered the room with Mr. Prokofiev. His concerto is of absorbing interest all through. The pianoforte part is practically continuous, and is a real orchestral part, not concertante; the interesting thing about it is that the orchestral tonalities are used with great adroitness to emphasize and give zest to the tonalities of the piano, seldom to contrast with it." There is no doubt from hearing this recording made ten years later that Prokofiev was a great composer-pianist of the rank of Rachmaninov and Medtner who excelled in performances of his own music rather than just being a composer who played his own music in public. "We must honestly confess we never understood Mr. Prokofiev's music until he played it himself. As he plays it, the orchestra is like a vast resonator applied to the piano; and, without wishing to whittle down any credit due to Mr. Coates, it certainly seemed as if no orchestra could have a moment's doubt what to be at, with these trenchant rhythms and fiery passages being hurled at them."

In the autumn of 1923 the great Russian pianist Samuel Feinberg gave the Russian première of the *Third Concerto* in Moscow and on the 24th January 1927 Prokofiev himself was in Moscow to perform the work. In 1962 Yakov Milstein remembered this occasion: "Prokofiev's playing at the concert was remarkably original, integral and clear. Many of us had expected a tempestuous, daring, superficially striking Prokofiev. But instead we heard a pianist who played austere, laconically and very simply. The rhythm was clear-cut, the sound resilient and full, the phrasing clear and brilliantly moulded, the accents sharp and rapidly alternating. Yet there was no harshness or unnecessary noise in the playing. We were listening to a performance full of exhaustible creative energy, optimism, and wit, which was at the same time organically integrated and structurally well-balanced. We were listening to a pianist who played not only with remarkable forcefulness and rhythmical fervour, but also with warmth, sincerity, poetic softness, the ability to handle the melodic line fluently and smoothly. Only very few musicians could equal Prokofiev in integrity and conviction of performance" (*Sovietskaya Muzyka No. 8, 1962*).

In April 1932 Prokofiev was again in London to perform the concerto, this time with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Henry Wood. The concert was broadcast by the BBC from the Queen's Hall but almost certainly this broadcast has not survived, along with the Queen's Hall itself. Two months later, however, in June of the same year, the 42-year-old Prokofiev went to the HMV studios at Abbey Road in London to make a commercial recording of the concerto with the London Symphony Orchestra. On this occasion the conductor was the Milan-born musician Piero

Coppola. Born in 1888 Coppola had first worked at La Scala before settling in Paris, where he became artistic director of the French branch of HMV. With Henry Wood contracted at the time to Columbia, HMV probably brought Coppola over from Paris to conduct these sessions, although Fred Gaisberg in his autobiography states that Coppola personally brought Prokofiev to London to record the work.

By any standards the performance is one of the highest quality. Prokofiev's rhythmic drive and exemplary technique are abundant and the last movement is still one of the most fast and exciting accounts to have been recorded. The work was instantly popular and was taken up in following decades by such pianists as Kapell, Van Cliburn, Argerich and Pogorelich.

Late nineteenth-century Russia produced a number of composer-pianists: Rachmaninov, Medtner and Scriabin all had careers as concert pianists as well as being remembered as composers. Rachmaninov and Medtner's art was captured by the gramophone and we have ample evidence of their wonderful capabilities. This is also true of Sergey Prokofiev and it is worth noting his pianistic pedigree. After piano lessons with his mother, Prokofiev entered the class of Annette Esipova in the spring of 1909, beginning work with her in the autumn of the same year. He took the graduation examination in the spring of 1914. As one of the five best students that year Prokofiev was entered for the Anton Rubinstein Competition, where he played his first *Piano Concerto* which he had written in 1911-1912 and had published in 1913. He won first prize.

Before he returned to the Soviet Union in 1936 Prokofiev gave many recitals in Europe and America. (Even after his return to the USSR he travelled to London, giving a recital in January 1938 at the Soviet Embassy.) In January 1931 a Wigmore Hall recital was greeted with lukewarm praise. The reviewer

commenting on the selection of the composer's works, which included the *Andante* from the *Fourth Sonata* and three *Gavottes*, stated, "But, if we are to take this selection as typical of his work as a composer, there was nothing to justify the important place among modern composers which has sometimes been assigned to him." Although the reviewer found him "more at home in the picturesque descriptions of four movements from Mussorgsky's *Pictures from an Exhibition*", Prokofiev obviously made an effort to include works of his own that would appeal to the public. In 1935, whilst in Paris, Prokofiev was persuaded (probably by Coppola) to record some of his solo works for French HMV. He probably had a group of his own works that he specifically chose to play before the public, as he selected the *Andante* from the *Fourth Sonata* as well as some *Gavottes*, the popular *Suggestion Diabolique, Op. 4*, excerpts from *Visions Fugitives* and two new works from *Op. 59* which he had just written. The *Etude* from *Op. 52* had been written a few years before and is an adaptation of music from his ballet *The Prodigal Son*.

Four sessions were needed to complete the recordings – 12th, 25th and 26th February and 4th March 1935. The *Andante* from the *Fourth Sonata* was recorded at the last session in one take along with a fourth take of *Op. 31* and *Op. 25* which, in the end, proved unnecessary as take three was published. Not surprisingly, the *Etude, Op. 52*, required the most takes, six in all, with take four being selected for release.

Although this CD presents all of Prokofiev's known commercial recordings one would hope that radio broadcasts (particularly of his last sonatas) survive in Russia. There is some sound film with a few extracts of Prokofiev at the piano, but these discs of his only commercial recordings from 1932 and 1935 represent Prokofiev at his best, and as such are a valuable document.

Jonathan Summers

Mark Obert-Thorn

Mark Obert-Thorn is one of the world's most respected transfer artist/engineers. He has worked for a number of specialist labels, including Pearl, Biddulph, Romophone and Music & Arts. Three of his transfers have been nominated for Gramophone Awards. A pianist by training, his passions are music, history and working on projects. He has found a way to combine all three in the transfer of historical recordings.

Obert-Thorn describes himself as a 'moderate interventionist' rather than a 'purist' or 're-processor,' unlike those who apply significant additions and make major changes to the acoustical qualities of old recordings. His philosophy is that a good transfer should not call attention to itself, but rather allow the performances to be heard with the greatest clarity. There is no over-reverberant 'cathedral sound' in an Obert-Thorn restoration, nor is there the tinny bass and piercing mid-range of many 'authorised' commercial issues. He works with the cleanest available 78s, and consistently achieves better results than restoration engineers working with the metal parts from the archives of the modern corporate owners of the original recordings. His transfers preserve the original tone of the old recordings, maximising the details in critical upper mid-range and lower frequencies to achieve a musical integrity that is absent from many other commercially released restorations.

Producer's Note

The present disc contains all of the commercially-issued disc recordings made by Prokofiev as a pianist. Prior to recording these fourteen sides, the composer had cut some piano rolls in the 1920s. In addition, there exists a broadcast of Prokofiev's chamber-scored *Overture on Hebrew Themes*, first released on a Melodiya LP, which purportedly features the composer playing the piano part. Several items which had been omitted from a recent EMI 'Composers in Person' series CD (both *Contes de la vieille grand-mère*, the *Etude* and *Paysage*, and the *Sonatina Pastorale*) have been restored here.

Some distortion is inherent in the master at the start of the third movement of the piano concerto, a recording which is otherwise particularly vivid for its time. All the transfers have been effected from pre-war US Victor pressings.

Mark Obert-Thorn

PROKOFIEV PLAYS PROKOFIEV

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C, Op. 26

1 Andante - Allegro

2 Tema con variazioni (Andantino)

3 Allegro ma non troppo

Recorded on 27th-28th June, 1932, at EMI Abbey Road Studio No. 1 on Matrices 2B 2950-4, 2951-2A, 2952-1A, 2953-1, 2954-1A and 2955-2. First issued on HMV DB 1725/7.

4 Suggestion diabolique, Op. 4, No. 4

Recorded on 4th March, 1935, in the Salle Rameau, Paris, on matrix 2LA 338-2. First issued on Disque Gramophone DB 5031.

Visions fugitives, Op. 22 (extracts)

5 No. 9: Allegro tranquillo

6 No. 3: Allegretto

7 No. 17: Poetico

8 No. 18: Con una dolce lentezza

9 No. 11: Con vivacità

10 No. 10: Ridicolosamente

11 No. 16: Dolente

12 No. 6: Con eleganza

13 No. 5: Molto giocoso

Recorded on 12th and 25th February, 1935, in the Pathé Studios and the Salle Rameau, Paris, on matrices 2LA 311-3 and 310-1. First issued on Disque Gramophone DB 5030.

14 Gavotte (from the "Classical" Symphony, Op. 25)

Recorded on 26th February, 1935, in the Salle Rameau, Paris, on matrix 2LA 313-3. First issued on Disque Gramophone DB 5032.

15 Andante assai (from Sonata No. 4, Op. 29)

Recorded on 4th March, 1935, in the Salle Rameau, Paris, on matrices 2LA 350-1 and 351-1. First issued on Disque Gramophone DB 5033.

16 Conte de la vieille grand-mère, Op. 31, No. 2

Recorded on 4th March, 1935, in the Salle Rameau, Paris, on matrix 2LA 338-2. First issued on Disque Gramophone DB 5031.

17 Conte de la vieille grand-mère, Op. 31, No. 3

Recorded on 26th February, 1935, in the Salle Rameau, Paris, on matrix 2LA 313-3. First issued on Disque Gramophone DB 5032.

18 Gavotte, Op. 32, No. 3

Recorded on 4th March, 1935, in the Salle Rameau, Paris, on matrix 2LA 351-1. First issued on Disque Gramophone DB 5033.

19 Etude, Op. 52

Recorded on 25th February, 1935, in the Pathé Studios, Paris, on matrix 2LA 335-4. First issued on Disque Gramophone DB 5032.

20 Sonatine Pastorale, Op. 59, No. 3

Recorded on 12th February, 1935, in the Salle Rameau, Paris, on matrix 2LA 312-1. First issued on Disque Gramophone DB 5031.

21 Paysage, Op. 59, No. 2

Recorded on 25th February, 1935, in the Pathé Studios, Paris, on matrix 2LA 335-4. First issued on Disque Gramophone DB 5032.

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ADD

Sergey Prokofiev, piano

London Symphony Orchestra • Piero Coppola

(Recorded in 1932 and 1935)

Playing
Time
56:18

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Piano Concerto No. 3 in C	24:31	11 No. 16: Dolente	1:32
1 Andante - Allegro	8:16	12 No. 6: Con eleganza	0:20
2 Tema con variazioni (Andantino)	7:42	13 No. 5: Molto giocosa	0:24
3 Allegro ma non troppo	8:33	Piano Pieces	
4 Suggestion diabolique, Op. 4, No. 4	2:22	14 Gavotte (from the "Classical" Symphony, Op. 25)	1:20
Visions fugitives, Op. 22 (extracts)	8:13	15 Andante assai (from Sonata No. 4, Op. 29)	6:08
5 No. 9: Allegro tranquillo	1:07	16 Conte de la vieille grand-mère, Op. 31, No. 2	1:25
6 No. 3: Allegretto	0:55	17 Conte de la vieille grand-mère, Op. 31, No. 3	2:53
7 No. 17: Poetico	0:52	18 Gavotte, Op. 32, No. 3	1:20
8 No. 18: Con una dolce lentezza	1:17	19 Etude, Op. 52	1:58
9 No. 11: Con vivacità	0:55	20 Sonatine Pastorale, Op. 59, No. 3	3:54
10 No. 10: Ridicolosamente	0:52	21 Paysage, Op. 59, No. 2	2:13

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Archivist & Restoration Producer: Mark Obert-Thorn

Special thanks to Don Tait for providing source material for this project and to Mike Gray for providing discographic information

A complete track list can be found on page 5 of the booklet

Cover Photograph: Sergey Prokofiev, Moscow, circa 1925 (Private Collection)



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