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PROKOFIEV
Violin Concertos 1 & 2

Matthew Trusler
BBC National Orchestra
of Wales
Grant Llewellyn



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SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)

Violin Concerto No.1 (1916-17)

1	First movement: Andantino	10.51
2	Second movement: Vivacissimo	4.01
3	Third movement: Moderato – Allegro moderato	8.53

Violin Concerto No.2 (1935)

4	First movement: Allegro moderato	11.33
5	Second movement: Andante assai	10.18
6	Third movement: Allegro, ben marcato	5.55

Total time **51.42**

Matthew Trusler, violin
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Following a performance of his Violin Concerto No.1, given by Joseph Szigeti under Aleksandr Khessin in Moscow on 19 October 1924, Prokofiev wrote to fellow composer Nikolai Myaskovsky:

Thanks for sharing your extremely interesting impressions of the orchestral performance of my Violin Concerto. In my arrogance I can't help thinking that many of your reproaches can be blamed, however, on insufficient rehearsing by the orchestra and the second-class quality of the conductor. The straining tuba, the bleating trumpet, the fading violas – all these are symptoms of one disease: a poorly balanced orchestra. The concerto is orchestrated in such a way that if the sonorities of the various sections are not balanced, the result is God only knows what. Koussevitzky achieved this balance – under his baton, the violas played their theme through to the end, and the trumpets sounded as though from a distance, and the tuba emerged as an endearing bumpkin. When I heard the same concerto under a French conductor, I almost fled from the hall. I took the score, looked it over, and didn't find a single thing that should be changed.

This letter reveals as much about Prokofiev's personality as it does about the concerto itself: supremely confident in his own abilities, patriotic, and a man who made exacting demands of his musicians. The Soviet ballerina Galina Ulanova, who danced Juliet in Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, corroborates this impression of the composer: "... I became aware of the presence of a tall, somewhat stern-looking man who seemed to disapprove heartily of everything he saw... It was Prokofiev."

Prokofiev composed his First Violin Concerto during 1916-17, a period of political turmoil for Russia; with 1917 came the February and October Revolutions. Prokofiev left the Soviet Union for America in 1918, although in contrast with Stravinsky he did not permanently distance himself, making return visits from 1927 onwards.

Prokofiev had conceived the main theme of his Violin Concerto No.1 in 1915, but for nearly two years his attention was absorbed by work on his opera, *The Gambler*, which prevented him from devoting his time to the concerto, despite the fact that he was keen to progress with the work. As the composer explained, "I often regretted that other work prevented me from returning to the pensive opening of the violin concertino". This "concertino" soon became a full-scale concerto, the emotional structure of which is unusual, with the tender, lyrical outer movements framing a sardonic scherzo. Szigeti wrote of the work's "mixture of fairytale naïveté and daring savagery...".

Prokofiev explored the full range of violin techniques available to him in the concerto, creating innovative virtuosic effects including abrupt shifts from *pizzicato* to *arco*, long-breathed melodies juxtaposed with vertiginous scalic passages, and the purity of harmonics contrasted with the more astringent *marcato sul ponticello* (accented; with the bow near the bridge). With characteristic precision, he consulted an expert on these matters: the celebrated Polish violinist Paul Kochanski, who was teaching at the Petrograd Conservatory at the time. It was planned that Kochanski should give the work's premiere in November 1917. By the summer, Prokofiev had completed the piano score version of the concerto, but circumstances in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) during

the Revolution prevented the scheduled premiere, which eventually took place in Paris on 18 October 1923, conducted by Serge Koussevitzky.

The first movement opens with a radiant, shapely melody which resurfaces in the finale's coda. Its nuances are thrown into relief by contrapuntal exchanges between violin and orchestra, but in the development section the opening themes are distorted into something more astringent before disintegrating into rapid, skittish scalar motifs. The warmth of the opening is transformed into barely recognisable, biting bitterness, reminiscent of the composer's *Sarcasms* (1912-14). Ultimately, however, serenity prevails, and is felt all the more profoundly for its contrast with the acerbic central section. Marked *dolce*, the opening theme is played by the orchestra, with the muted violin soaring sweetly in its highest register.

The first movement's structure reflects that of the work as a whole. After a humorous, brilliant Scherzo which is structured as a five-part rondo, with the first theme based on an ascending chromatic line, the finale returns us to the dream-like atmosphere of the opening movement. The first movement's principal theme is played by the first violins with the soloist trilling an octave above. In common with the end of the first movement, the flutes have the final word, a gleaming postlude to the violin's voice-like articulations. As the violinist David Oistrakh said of performing Prokofiev's music, in 1954: "...nothing can be omitted, not a single turn of the melody, not a single modulation. It requires the strictest attention to every detail of expression, a fine, but not over-refined, execution of each individual intonation, as in the case of well-enunciated singing..."

Prokofiev himself described the genesis of his Second Violin Concerto in some detail:

In 1935, a group of admirers of the French violinist [Robert] Soërens asked me to write a violin concerto for him, giving him exclusive rights to perform it for one year. I readily agreed since I had been intending to write something for the violin at that time and had accumulated some material. As in the case of the preceding concertos, I began by searching for an original title for the piece, such as 'concert sonata for violin and orchestra', but finally returned to the simplest solution: Concerto No.2. Nevertheless, I wanted it to be altogether different from No.1 both as to music and style...

The variety of places in which that concerto was written is a reflection of the nomadic concert-tour existence I led at that time: the principal theme of the first movement was written in Paris, the first theme of the second movement in Voronezh, the orchestration I completed in Baku, while the first performance was given in Madrid, in December 1935. This was part of an extremely interesting concert tour which I made together with Soërens through Spain, Portugal, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Besides my own compositions, we played Debussy and Beethoven sonatas.

Although Prokofiev sought to compose something "altogether different" from his First Violin Concerto, there are many parallels between the two works, despite their being composed 18 years apart. Both share a spacious, lyrical nature and a magnificent balance

between soloist and orchestra. The Violin Concerto No. 2 begins with a solemn opening soliloquy, followed by richly melodic material reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*'s love music. The delicate central *Andante assai* is perhaps more serene than anything the younger Prokofiev would have composed, reflecting the 'new simplicity' of his output in the 1930s. This is offset by an earthier finale, full of rustic, folk-like vigour. Reception to the work was warm, as epitomised by the verdict of Soviet writer Israel Nestyev who, in common with Oistrakh, emphasised the violin's voice-like qualities:

It was significant that he should return, after so many years, to writing for the solo violin. Seemingly convinced of the utter futility of formalist experimentation, he renewed his youthful striving to express genuine human emotions, choosing for this effort one of the most singing of all musical instruments.

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Matthew Trusler

Matthew Trusler has developed a reputation as one of Britain's leading violinists, performing with many of the world's great orchestras, and receiving huge critical acclaim for his diverse recordings. He has also founded the record label Orchid Classics on which some of the most important artists of today are recording, and the Lenny Trusler Children's Foundation, which raises money for desperately ill babies.

Trusler made his BBC Proms concerto debut in 2014 having already performed with most major orchestras of the UK, including the BBC Symphony, BBC Scottish and BBC Welsh orchestras, the Philharmonia, London Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic, City of Birmingham, Halle and Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields.

Further afield, he has appeared with the Minnesota Orchestra, WDR Cologne, NDR Hanover, Helsinki Philharmonic, Deutsche Symphony Berlin, Malaysian Philharmonic, Dusseldorf Tonhalle, Flanders Symfonieorkest and Johannesburg Philharmonic.

Alongside extensive recital and chamber music projects, Trusler recently formed *Trio Apaches*, with pianist Ashley Wass and cellist Thomas Carroll. The Trio has been warmly welcomed onto the international chamber music scene and the ensemble released their first disc on the Orchid Classics label.

For more information on all Matthew's activities please visit www.matthewtrusler.com

Grant Llewellyn

Music Director of the North Carolina Symphony and the Orchestre Symphonique de Bretagne, Grant Llewellyn is renowned for his exceptional charisma, energy and easy authority in music of all styles and periods.

Grant Llewellyn has conducted many orchestras in North America, most notably the symphonies of Atlanta, Boston, Houston, Montreal, Philadelphia and Toronto. As Music Director of the Handel and Haydn Society, America's leading period orchestra, Llewellyn gained a reputation as a formidable interpreter of music of the Baroque and classical periods.

Whilst he is currently Music Director of the Orchestre Symphonique de Bretagne, other positions he has held with European orchestras include Principal Conductor of the Royal Flanders Philharmonic, Principal Guest Conductor of the Stavanger Symphony Orchestra and Associate Guest Conductor with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. Enjoying frequent guest conducting invitations, Llewellyn works with such ensembles as the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Helsinki Philharmonic, Philharmonia Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

Deeply committed and passionate about engaging young people with music, Grant Llewellyn regularly leads education and outreach projects, such as *'Feel the Music'* with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales and specialist events with the North Carolina Symphony.



Grant Llewellyn

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Photo of Matthew Trusler by Sheila Rock

Photo of Grant Llewellyn by Nicolas Joubard

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