Sergei Prokofiev
Symphony-Concerto for cello and orchestra, Opus 125

SERGEI SERGEEVICH PROKOFIEV was born in Sontsovka, Ukraine, on April 23, 1891, and died in Moscow on March 5, 1953. The Symphony-Concerto was composed between 1950 and 1952 with collaboration from Mstislav Rostropovich, to whom it is dedicated; it is a substantial reworking of Prokofiev’s Cello Concerto No. 1, Opus 58, which he composed 1933-38. Rostropovich was soloist in an initial version of the reworked piece—designated as the composer’s Cello Concerto No. 2—on February 18, 1952, with Sviatoslav Richter conducting the Moscow Youth Orchestra. The final version, now with the title Symphony-Concerto for cello and orchestra, was premiered in Copenhagen on December 9, 1954, after the composer’s death, with Rostropovich again as soloist and Thomas Jensens conducting the Danish Radio Orchestra. Rostropovich also gave the American premiere, with Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting the New York Philharmonic on April 19, 1956.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO CELLO, the score calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two trumpets (a third is optional), four horns, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, tambourine, triangle, bass drum, side drum, celesta, and strings.

No other single work by Sergei Prokofiev—not even his epic opera War and Peace—endured a longer composition and revision process than the Symphony-Concerto for cello and orchestra. Nearly twenty years passed between its initial conception (in 1933 as the E minor cello concerto) and its assumption to final form in 1952, in the last months before Prokofiev’s death. In fact, Prokofiev did not live to hear Mstislav Rostropovich, to whom the Symphony-Concerto is dedicated, perform its definitive version in Copenhagen in 1954—just as he never saw War and Peace on stage in its final form.

Without Rostropovich’s contribution of energy, enthusiasm, and expertise during an unusually difficult period in Prokofiev’s life, the Symphony-Concerto would likely never have been completed. Before he met the twenty-year-old cellist from Baku in 1948, Prokofiev’s output for cello had been limited to a youthful Ballade (for cello and piano, Opus 15) and an ill-fated Cello Concerto in E minor (Opus 58) written during the mid-1930s. The premiere of the Cello Concerto on November 26, 1938, in Moscow was, in the words of pianist Sviatoslav Richter, “a complete failure.” So devastating were the reviews and the remarks he heard from his colleagues that Prokofiev, who had moved (permanently) back to Russia from Paris only a few years earlier, withdrew the Cello Concerto from circulation. But in early 1948, Prokofiev heard Rostropovich, then a student at the Moscow Conservatory, play the concerto with piano in a recital program. Rostropovich’s brilliant resurrection of this half-forgotten composition inspired Prokofiev to tell the cellist backstage that he would rewrite it for him. Rostropovich reminded Prokofiev of that promise on every possible subsequent occasion.

During the five years remaining to him, Prokofiev came to rely heavily on Rostropovich for musical advice and emotional support. For a young musician like Rostropovich to befriend Prokofiev—who was under almost constant attack from the Soviet cultural authorities after early 1948 for his alleged crimes of “formalism” and inaccessibility—was a courageous and selfless act. Many others in the musical establishment shunned Prokofiev at the time; some took obvious pleasure in seeing the great international master humbled. His income from publications and performances declined precipitously. Also in early 1948, Prokofiev’s first wife, Lina, from whom he had been estranged for some years, was arrested on false charges of spying for foreign powers and sent to a labor camp. All the while, Prokofiev had to face these challenges in a state of chronic illness, having never completely recovered after a stroke suffered in early 1945. Doctors strictly limited his work schedule to no more than an hour or an hour and a half each day. It was difficult for Prokofiev’s colleagues, such as Richter, to see this “giant of Russian music” so “soft” and “helpless.”

In this vale of tears, the appearance of the youthful and extraordinarily talented Rostropovich was a welcome source of happiness. In 1949, Prokofiev completed a cello sonata (Opus 119) for Rostropovich that is now one of the most popular pieces in the cello repertoire. Rostropovich frequently came to visit Prokofiev and his second wife, the writer Mira Mendelson, at their cozy dacha in Nikolina Gora.

Their friendship eventually became so close that Rostropovich spent summers between 1950 and 1952 living at Nikolina Gora, helping to rewrite the Opus 58 cello concerto. Rostropovich gave the premiere of this revised version, renamed as the Cello Concerto, Opus 125, on February 18, 1952, with the Moscow Youth Orchestra conducted by Sviatoslav Richter (in his first and last appearance
as a conductor). But Rostropovich and others persuaded Prokofiev to make further changes to the piece during the coming months. These revisions resulted in a significantly expanded role for the orchestra, so Prokofiev decided to change the work’s title to Symphony-Concerto—though the opus number remained 125. According to Rostropovich’s biographer Elizabeth Wilson, the Symphony-Concerto represents Prokofiev’s “final thoughts” on the work, which was intended to replace the Second Cello Concerto (which had already been designated Opus 125). After Prokofiev’s death on March 5, 1953 (the same day as Stalin), Rostropovich successfully persuaded Communist Party officials to approve his planned performance of the work in Copenhagen. Soon after that performance, Rostropovich played the Symphony-Concerto in Prague, Leningrad, and then in New York and San Francisco during his celebrated first American tour in 1956.

The Symphony-Concerto impresses by its vigor, harmonic complexity, melodic richness, and masterful interaction of soloist and orchestra. Compared to other works Prokofiev completed during these years (the opera *Story of a Real Man*, the ballet *The Stone Flower*, the symphonic poem *The Meeting of the Volga and the Don*), the Symphony-Concerto is refreshingly free of programmatic intent. It brings us back to Prokofiev the musical adventurer of his early years, creator of such masterpieces in the concerto form as the First Violin Concerto or the Second Piano Concerto. Although Prokofiev does not specify the key, E minor dominates, which is one of the ways in which the three-movement Symphony-Concerto retains its roots in the Opus 58 cello concerto. The first movement opens with an insistently repeated four-note figure in unmistakable E minor (progressing from tonic to dominant), the sort of “motor” ostinato foundation over which Prokofiev constructed so many memorable musical structures. In measure seven, the cello solo states the first theme, a romantically drooping tune that contrasts elegantly with the tart accompaniment and sets the lyrical mood that permeates the entire piece. Indeed, the Symphony-Concerto is a notably pensive and romantic work for a composer sometimes accused of a lack of feeling or emotional warmth. The second theme is more athletic and exhibitionist.

By far the longest and most important movement is the second. Following a four-measure introduction, the cello enters with a short cadenza in sixteenth-notes, the music continuing at a furious pace in another E minor section with the spiky first theme of a sonata form. Soon after a modulation into bright E major, the soloist introduces the movement’s second theme, one of the most seductive Prokofiev ever wrote, a great romantic melody of the sort heard in *Romeo and Juliet*. A spectacular cadenza passage cleverly incorporating elements of all the movement’s themes continues the development section, which proceeds to a remarkable gesture: over ghostly harmonic accompaniment in the strings, the cello again sings that amazing tune, rhythmically displaced, as if calling from another world.

The third movement contains another great lyrical theme, heard in the cello at the very outset in that affirmative E major key. Prokofiev then uses this theme as the basis for variations. The mood changes abruptly in the middle section (Allegretto), which introduces a popular Soviet song of Belorussian origin, “*Bud te zdorov, zhivite bogato*” (“Good health to you”). This theme becomes increasingly more grotesque, assuming something like the quality of Jewish village klezmer music, the sort that Prokofiev imitated so brilliantly in his early *Overture on Hebrew Themes*. There was also an ideological subtext: the theme had earlier been used by Soviet popular composer Boris Zakharov, one of those who most energetically attacked Prokofiev in 1948 for his failure to write accessible melodies. So the inclusion of this sneering little tune can be construed as Prokofiev’s ironic retort to those who had attacked him so mercilessly in recent years.

After returning to another set of variations on the movement’s first theme and ending with what sounds like a funeral march, the movement and the Symphony-Concerto conclude with a furious coda dominated by the soloist playing arpeggios in E major. Unlike the Seventh Symphony composed around the same time, and whose (original) ending sounds wistful and uncertain, this work ends in a spirit of defiance and triumph. Here, in one of his most consistently brilliant and original scores, Prokofiev unapologetically asserted his colorful creative individuality in the midst of gray totalitarian mediocrity, rising—with a little help from his friends—to the full stature of his unique and compelling talent.

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THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE OF PROKOFIEV’S SYMPHONY-CONCERTO took place (as noted above) on April 19, 1956, with Mstislav Rostropovich as soloist and Dimitri Mitropoulos conducting the New York Philharmonic.

THE FIRST BSO PERFORMANCES OF THE SYMPHONY-CONCERTO were on March 1 and 2, 1963, with the orchestra’s then principal cellist Samuel Mayes as soloist and Erich Leinsdorf conducting, followed by performances that same month in Providence, New York, Cambridge, and Brooklyn. There were further BSO performances on two subsequent occasions, all with Mstislav Rostropovich as soloist and Seiji Ozawa conducting: in March/April 1977, and in February 1987 (in concerts celebrating Rostropovich’s 60th birthday), followed by a Carnegie Hall performance in early March.