SERGEI SERGEIEVICH PROKOFIEV was born in Sontsovka, Ekaterinoslav district, in the Ukraine, on April 23, 1891, and died at Nikolina Gora near Moscow on March 5, 1953. The first part of this concerto to be composed was the theme of the second movement, in 1913. Prokofiev did some work on the score in the winter of 1916-17 but completed it only in the summer of 1921. He himself was soloist in the first performance, on December 16, 1921, with Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO PIANIST, the score of the concerto calls for an orchestra of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, bass drum, castanets, tambourine, cymbals, and strings.

Prokofiev was the only child in a cultural and affluent household; his early development was directed first by his doting pianist mother, who gave him his first lessons on the instrument, and then—when his talent proved to be unmistakable—by the young composer Reinhold Glière, who was hired to come as a private music tutor to Sontsovka. By the time Prokofiev entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1904 he had already completed a remarkable number of youthful works, mostly for the piano, but also including a violin sonata and an opera. During his first four years in St. Petersburg he pursued the course in composition. It was a difficult time: 1905 brought the first rumblings of the coming revolution, disturbing the tranquility of academic life (Rimsky-Korsakov was fired for anti-government activities, and other leading teachers resigned in protest). But Prokofiev himself was responsible for most of his own difficulties. Rather arrogant by nature, he was also younger than the other students and found it difficult to make friends with them. Most of his teachers were conservative pedagogues whose tutelage Prokofiev found dull; eventually he found himself in open clashes with his harmony teacher Liadov. Within a few years, the headstrong young colt had appeared in a recital of his own music that marked him as an enfant terrible, an image he assiduously cultivated for some time.

Prokofiev’s experience in the composition program so disillusioned him to the prospects of teaching that he decided to pursue a career as a performer. Thus, though he had maintained at best a love-hate relationship with the St. Petersburg Conservatory—somewhat skewed to the latter—he decided to stay on for the study of piano and conducting. Here, too, his willful self-assurance made difficulties, but his piano teacher, Anna Esipova, proved as strong-willed as he. Prokofiev disdained to play the music of the Classical era without adding his own “improvements,” and he found the discipline of technical drills a waste of time. Only when Esipova threatened him with expulsion did he see the light. His four years of study proved essential to his career as a soloist. He already played brilliant pieces brilliantly, but Esipova nourished a strain of lyricism that was to become as important to his composition as it was to his playing.

Needless to say, he did not give up composing during this time. Before completing the piano program, Prokofiev had already finished his first two piano concertos (obviously designed as showpieces for himself) and had even boldly chosen to play the First Concerto as his piece for the final keyboard competition, although it was expected that the participants would choose a work from the established repertory.

The years following Prokofiev’s graduation in 1914 were marked by war and revolution in the world at large and in Russia in particular. Yet in spite of this, Prokofiev began to achieve renown, composing some of his best-known works, including the Classical Symphony and the First Violin Concerto. Eventually, though, the unsettled condition of musical life and almost everything else persuaded him to go abroad, at least for a time. He set out with high hopes for New York, going the long way, through Vladivostock, Tokyo, and San Francisco. While on this long journey he began sketching a new opera, The Love for Three Oranges, as well as two movements of a string quartet. Though the opera was eventually to become his most successful stage work, its first production was fraught with difficulties. After signing a contract for a 1919 production in Chicago, Prokofiev finished the score in time for rehearsals. But the sudden death of the intended conductor postponed the premiere for one year, then a second. Increasingly disillusioned with the United States, Prokofiev left for Paris in the spring of 1920.

Paris was a good place for a Russian composer of advanced tendencies. Diaghilev’s brilliant Ballets Russes was open to the newest ideas, especially from Russian composers, and Serge Koussevitzky had founded his own concert series emphasizing new works. After the exciting premiere of his ballet The Tale of the Buffoon by the Ballets Russes (Paris loved it, London hated it), Prokofiev adjourned to the coast of Brittany for a summer of composition.
There he achieved his long-held plan to write a Third Piano Concerto. Much of the material was already in hand, since he had been thinking about such a work since completing the Second Concerto in 1914, and some of the musical ideas go back even before that. He was still committed to the premiere of his opera in Chicago that fall, so he took the opportunity of introducing the new piano concerto there during the same trip. The Love for Three Oranges was premiered (in French, rather than the Russian in which it had been composed) at the Auditorium Theater in Chicago on December 30, 1921—two weeks after Prokofiev himself had introduced his new concerto with conductor Frederick Stock and the Chicago Symphony. Here, too, Prokofiev received diverse reactions: Chicago loved both works, New York hated them. Following this experience, Prokofiev returned to Paris, where he lived until his permanent return to the Soviet Union in 1938. Only concert tours brought him back to the United States during that period. By now, though, his two major “American” pieces are well established as favorites among Prokofiev’s output.

The Third Concerto, in fact, is the most frequently performed of Prokofiev’s five contributions to that genre. Though it is not a whit less demanding technically than the first two concertos, it opens up a new and appealing vein of lyricism that Prokofiev was to mine successfully in the years to come. At the same time his biting, acerbic humor is never absent for long, especially in the writing for woodwinds and sometimes for percussion.

The concerto opens with a yearning lyrical theme in the clarinet, immediately echoed in flute and violins; its simplicity makes it memorable, and it will mark several stages of the form later on. Almost at once a bustling of sixteenth-note runs in the strings ushers in the soloist, whose nervous theme grows out of the first three notes of the opening lyrical theme (a major second down and a perfect fifth up) turned backwards (a perfect fifth down and a major second up), then sweeps farther afield harmonically in its headstrong energy. An austere march of pounding chords leads to a faster passage of whirling triplets to conclude the exposition. The basic material is developed and recapitulated in a free sonata form.

The main theme of the second movement is one of those patented Prokofiev tunes, dry and sardonic. But it doesn’t stay that way long. The first variation is a Chopin nocturne with a twist; each ensuing variation has its own special color and character, by turns brilliant, meditative, and vigorously energetic. A climactic restatement of the theme with further pianistic display dies away mysteriously into nothing.

The finale begins with a crisp theme in bassoons and pizzicato lower strings in A minor; the piano argues with thundering chords, clouding the harmony. Despite various contrasting materials, some lyrical, some sarcastic, the opening figure provides the main basis for the musical discussion, ending in a brilliant pounding coda.

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