

Piano Concerto No. 1 in D-flat major, Op. 10

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

B. April 23, 1891, Ekaterinoslav, Ukraine

D. March 4, 1953, Moscow

Prokofiev premiered this concerto August 7, 1912 at the People's House in Moscow, K.D. with Sarazhev conducting.

Scored for solo piano, two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four French horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion and strings (approx. 16 minutes).

It was Prokofiev's mother who introduced him to music and gave him his first piano lessons. He began composing at age 5, and in 1904, Prokofiev became the youngest student to enter the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Drawn to music of Reger and Scriabin, rather than Mussorgsky and Glinka, Prokofiev pressed the limits of tonality and rhythmic expression.

The premiere of his piano concerto, in 1912, though a success, was a trial for Prokofiev. This was the first time he had performed with an orchestra, and the rehearsal did not go well; the suit he planned to wear for the performance was stolen on the way to Moscow; the piano provided was only adequate; and the horn players refused to play from his untransposed score, forcing Prokofiev to spend hours in the August heat, quickly writing out new parts.

In 1914, Prokofiev performed this piano concerto again, as a graduation piece. For this performance, he won the coveted Anton Rubinstein Prize, along with a grand piano - a crucial asset for a young artist beginning his career.

After graduation, he spent time in the United States and Paris, interested in the music of Stravinsky and productions of Diaghilev's Ballet Russes (Prokofiev eventually wrote several ballets commissioned by Diaghilev). He performed in New York in 1916, where critics described his music as "barbaric." When he toured Russia in 1927, he was lauded as a revolutionary hero whose music had conquered the West. He settled in Moscow in 1936, under Stalin's watchful eye. Prokofiev's music was considered too bourgeois and Western. Finally, in 1948, during a sweep of censorship and intimidation known as "Zhdanov's Terror," Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and others were renounced as too cosmopolitan and formalist. Prokofiev's death, occurring an hour before Stalin's, was overshadowed by official mourning of Stalin.

This is the shortest of his five concertos for piano, and he called it his "first more-or-less mature composition." It is written in three movements that are played without pauses.

The first movement opens with a powerful theme that is heard three times throughout the work, with vibrant themes and episodes in between. The second movement stands in contrast to the rest of the work in its romantic ardor. When the theme appears in the third movement, it brings closure to the work. Prokofiev called these appearances "The three whales that hold the piece together."

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 1 on April 8, 2000 with Eri Klaus conducting.

DSO SHOP @ THE MAX RECOMMENDS:

Prokofiev, Piano Concerto No. 1, Vladimir Ashkenazy (piano), André Previn conducting the London Symphony Orchestra, Decca 452588.

Program note by Kelly Yoakam, a master's candidate in Musicology at Michigan State University.