

# February 2023

by Derek Katz

## **Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)** **Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano in F Minor, Op. 80 (1938-46)**

Both Sergei Prokofiev and Joseph Stalin died on March 5, 1953, allegedly within an hour of each other, and possibly even of the same cause. Stalin's death pushed everything else in the Soviet Union far into the background, and Prokofiev's memorial service two days later was a small affair for such a famous musician. Only fifteen people attended his interment, and no flowers were available for the few mourners to purchase. At the memorial service, David Oistrakh played the first and third movements of Prokofiev's Sonata No. 1 for Violin and Piano. Apparently, from all of Prokofiev's vast and varied output, only these two movements seemed appropriate for a solemn occasion.

Prokofiev published two sonatas for violin and piano. The Sonata No. 2, a transcription of his Flute Sonata, has already been heard this season, in a version for oboe, cello and piano by Lera Auerbach. That sonata is much easier to describe as typical of Prokofiev's later output, exemplifying both his campaign for a "new simplicity," and the general tunefulness and optimism of his Soviet works. The Sonata No. 1, on the other hand, seems to stand apart from Prokofiev's other works and inhabit a different and unexpected emotional landscape. If this difference is due to Prokofiev's life circumstances, it is difficult to know which ones they might be. The Sonata was begun in 1938, soon after Prokofiev's successful move to the Soviet Union, but also in the immediate wake of Stalin's Great Terror. Prokofiev soon put the Sonata aside, finding it "difficult" to proceed with. He took it up again in 1946, soon after the Soviet Union's victory in the Second World War (and the triumphant premiere of Prokofiev's Symphony No. 5), but during a time of increasingly poor health for Prokofiev.

Prokofiev was presumably motivated to complete the Sonata eight years later by his increasingly close collaboration with Oistrakh, at whose behest he had transcribed the flute sonata for violin. The Sonata is dedicated to Oistrakh, who premiered the work with Lev Oborin in 1946, and featured it prominently in his repertoire for the rest of his career. The Sonata was an immediate success at all levels. His fellow composers hailed it as "brilliant," and as "a work of genius," and Prokofiev was both highly praised in the official press and received a Stalin Prize for the Sonata. The Sonata also flourished in the West, where it was championed by the violinist Joseph Szigeti.

The emphasis on the Sonata as a dark (or even funereal) work seems most appropriate for the first movement, which is dominated by a steady, ominous tread in octaves in the lower reaches of the piano. Part of the effect is caused by the meter, which mixes bars of different lengths, rather than falling into predictable patterns. There is a very striking passage at the end of the movement when the ominous octaves are joined by very rapid scales from the violinist, who is instructed to play "coldly." Prokofiev described this passage as sounding like "autumn evening wind blowing across a neglected cemetery grave." The mood is broken by the second movement, which is fast, loud, heavy, and brusque. The violinist plays much of the movement with repeated downbows, often on open octaves or crunchy chords, creating maximum emphasis. This movement does contain one of the great Prokofiev tunes, a contrasting theme marked "heroic." Even here, however, the violinist and pianist don't seem to completely agree about the relationship between the melody and the harmony. The third movement (the other movement played at the memorial service) is more wistful than sinister. Delicate passage work moves from the piano to the muted violin, and the movement remains subdued almost throughout. One of the notable textures here finds the murmuring piano scales sandwiched by a melody, played below in the left hand of the piano, and doubled two octaves above in the violin. The final movement again unpredictably mixes bars of different lengths, and, like the second movement, combines spiky and aggressive material with a lyrical contrasting theme. The "neglected cemetery" music from the first movement returns to close the Sonata.

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## **Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998) Prelude in Memoriam Dmitri Shostakovich (1975)**

Like Valentin Silvestrov (born 1937), whose Postludium was heard on the first concert of this Camerata Pacifica season, Alfred Schnittke was a Soviet composer who was part of the "Thaw" generation and who began his career in the relatively tolerant years after Stalin's death. Schnittke's Prelude, again, like Silvestrov's Postludium, is a short piece composed in the wake of Shostakovich's death in 1975. It is difficult to overstate the monumental stature of Shostakovich in Soviet musical life. An international celebrity since the 1920s, seen as a hero of the Allied war effort, a composer not just of world-renowned concert works but also of film scores and popular music, a teacher of multiple generations of younger Soviet composers; Shostakovich was a living embodiment of the Soviet state in music and his compositional style had become the de facto voice of Soviet music.

Schnittke's Prelude is one of many musical tributes to Shostakovich composed by younger Soviet musicians soon after Shostakovich's death. These are pieces that simultaneously constitute heartfelt memorials to a composer who had shaped the only Soviet musical world that the younger musicians had known, while also grappling with the problem of musical expression in a post-Shostakovich Soviet Union. All of these tributes make use of Shostakovich's four-note musical monograph. This was created by taking Shostakovich's initials in German (D. Sch.), and associating each letter with a musical pitch. Shostakovich himself used this monograph in multiple works, and it was an easily recognizable symbol that allowed composers to refer to

Shostakovich without mimicking his compositional style. Schnittke both uses the DSCH monograph and a very similar BACH monograph to represent Johann Sebastian Bach.

The Prelude opens with a solo violin playing the DSCH motive (albeit initially in a difficult-to-hear form) over insistent pulsing plucked open strings. The solo violin music grows in intensity until it is joined by a second voice, which can be either another violin, played from off-stage and amplified, or a prerecorded tape. (In these performances, the second violin part is played off-stage.) The other violinist's music is based in the BACH motive, and the two motives answer each other before eventually calming and converging. Although none of Schnittke's music sounds like that of either Shostakovich or Bach, the two musical symbols imply a relationship between the two composers, which, according to Schnittke, was one of father to son. Schnittke compared his Prelude to a performance of George Balanchine's ballet *The Prodigal Son*, in which the son moves behind the father, so that "the illusion is created that the son has crawled back into the Father." This absorption is analogous to the blending of the two musical monographs at the end of the Prelude, collapsing into the shared pitches C and H. Although not mentioned in this context by Schnittke, the implication is clearly that he is a "child" of Shostakovich, and therefore a product of the musical history created by Bach and Shostakovich.

## **Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Quintet for Clarinet and Strings in B Minor, Op. 115 (1891)**

There is strikingly little chamber music for winds from the second half of the nineteenth century. This is partially due to changes in musical culture over the century. While earlier in the century outstanding woodwind players were still touring and putting on concerts for their own benefit, later it was pianists and violinists dominating those roles. The wind players that might have been composing or

commissioning works for their own use were increasingly found in orchestras, as civic orchestras sprang up across Europe. Significantly, the Brahms Quintet for Clarinet and Strings, a late nineteenth century wind work that is both unusual and exquisite, was composed for an orchestral clarinetist.

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The Clarinet Quintet is one of four very late works by Brahms that feature the clarinet (the others are a trio with cello and piano, and two sonatas). Brahms had started to make noises about giving up composition in 1890, and had told multiple people that his String Quintet in G Major, Op. 111 (composed that very year) would be his final work. Whether or not Brahms was ever entirely serious about this ultimatum, the event that changed his mind was a March 1891 visit to Meiningen, where he spent some time listening to the principal clarinetist of the court orchestra there, Richard Mühlfeld. Mühlfeld was by all accounts an extraordinary player, and Brahms was deeply impressed, writing Clara Schumann that Mühlfeld was the finest wind player that he had ever heard, and coming up with a number of nicknames for him, including “the nightingale of the orchestra,” “my prima donna” and “Fraülein Klarinette [Miss Clarinet].” It is notable that most of these nicknames position Mühlfeld as feminine. The obvious metaphor that Brahms “fell in love” with Mühlfeld’s playing seems almost too on-the-nose. Brahms composed the present quintet for Mühlfeld the next summer, as well as a trio with cello and piano. Two sonatas for clarinet and piano followed in 1894, and in 1895 Brahms even went on a concert tour through Germany with Mühlfeld.

The Clarinet Quintet has been heard as having a special place in Brahms’s output since its earlier performances. Clara Schumann called it “marvelous,” “moving” and “deep and full of meaning,” and the violinist Joseph Joachim described it as “one of the most sublime things” that Brahms ever wrote. Some of this is due to the acoustic characteristics of the clarinet, which not only has an unusually wide range for a woodwind instrument but also is capable of producing distinctly different tone colors in its different registers. Brahms exploits these characteristics by using the clarinet as a leading voice in all of these registers. This is easy to hear at the very beginning of the Quintet, where Brahms presents the instruments of the string quartet from high to low, starting with the pair of the violins, then the viola beneath them and finally the cello lower still. Only after the strings have been introduced does the clarinet enter, playing an upwards arpeggio that fills in the space established by the strings and exposes the different registers of the

instrument, soaring above the strings before plunging down to the very bottom of its range and supplying a bass line for cello and viola. The Quintet is dominated by music that is lush and warm, almost entirely in moderate and slow tempi and mostly smooth and legato. Some of the warmth can also be attributed to the tonal qualities of the clarinet. When the clarinet is the upper voice in the ensemble, it tends to sit lower than the first violin part does in Brahms all-string chamber music. This both compresses the other string parts into closer proximity in lower (and warmer) registers and allows for glowing moments when the first violinist doubles the clarinet an octave above, suddenly expanding the available musical space.

Other unusual characteristics of the Quintet include the middle section of the second movement, which is filled with improvisatory flourishes from the clarinet and agitated tremolos from the strings in what was understood at the time as a “Hungarian” or “Gypsy” style. The third movement, instead of the expected scherzo, begins as yet another singing movement in a gentle tempo. This eventually does prove to be a long introduction to something faster and more scherzo-like, providing a rare stretch of music that is lively and uses staccato articulations. The last movement is a theme and variations, initially similar in tempo and character to the beginning of the preceding movement. The variations culminate with a wistful waltz, led by the viola over a plucked cello bass line. In a final gesture, the waltz tune is transformed into the music heard at the very beginning of the Quintet, both providing narrative closure and revealing similarities between the themes and motives of the different movements.

It is almost obligatory to describe Brahms’s late works as “autumnal,” and to situate them at the end of Brahms’s career or even of the Romantic era itself. This can obscure their place in a recognizably modern world, both technologically and aesthetically. The year of the Clarinet Quintet was the same year that electric lights were installed in Brahms’s Vienna apartment. The Quintet was first heard in Vienna in a room decorated with panels by Gustav Klimt. No one seems to have felt that it was out of place.