


STRINGS

FOR PLAYERS OF VIOLIN, VIOLA, CELLO, BASS, AND FIDDLE

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PLAY: ON MY MUSIC STAND



Composer Sergei Prokofiev
Title of Work *Symphonie Concertante*
in E minor, Op. 125
Edition International Edition (1963);
Boosey & Hawkes (1951)
Considered by Ovidiu Marinescu, cellist, conductor, educator, and highly sought-after soloist and recitalist. He is the director of the West Chester University Symphony, which under his leadership made a sold-out debut at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia and embarked on its first European tour. His most recent recording is of the *Bach Solo Cello Suites* on the Navona label.

YOU HAD ME AT 'ONE OF PROKOFIEV'S MOST MOVING MELODIES'

Written for Rostropovich, this cello work is challenging but worth the effort

By Ovidiu Marinescu

Recently, I have been working on the *Symphonie Concertante* in E minor, Op. 125, by Sergei Prokofiev, preparing for performances with the West Chester University Symphony and Helena Symphony. The work was composed between 1950–51 (revised in 1952). Politics and drama affected the approval of the work by the censors at the Composers' Union, for whom the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and pianist Sviatoslav Richter had to present a private performance. In addition to Prokofiev having been declared "an enemy of the people" in 1948 by Soviet Union officials, the work raised concern for his paraphrase of a theme by composer Vladimir Zharov.

The piece is based on his *Cello Concerto*, Op. 58 (1933–38), which had been poorly received at the premiere—after years of insistence, Rostropovich persuaded Prokofiev to revise the earlier work.

I am using the International Edition (1963) with the cello part edited by Zara Nelsova. I have adapted many editions to fit my musical ideas—musical decisions always come first. Nevertheless, one must pay careful attention to a few misprints in the cello part. I am also working with the score

published by Boosey & Hawkes (1951), especially to assimilate the dialogue between the solo and the orchestra.

This is a great cello concerto, and one of the most challenging for the technique and stamina required. The work displays exceptional orchestration, with many moments of extraordinary orchestral colors, complementing the character of the cello. One of my favorite moments is the second theme in the first movement, where after the initial march-like, heavy first theme, the texture thins out and the harmony adds a transparency of impressionistic feel. The 18-minute middle movement requires maximum technical virtuosity, with fast blazing passages, double-stops in all registers, and a cadenza worthy of Rostropovich. The lyrical second theme, perhaps one of Prokofiev's most moving melodies, leads to a short soliloquy, interrupted by an ominous motive in the winds (I imagine Prokofiev in his apartment on Chkalov Street interrupted from his work by KGB shouts in the hallway).

The calm soliloquy returns.

Nevertheless, the end of the movement brings back the ominous motive and this time the danger is real—the cello is brought

into the argument with the winds, leading to a furious outburst concluding the movement. There is a heavenly moment in the third movement in which the cello softly plays the first theme of the opening movement accompanied by the celesta.

I own two recordings of this work: a spectacular, mercurial 1961 live performance with Daniil Shafran and the USSR State orchestra, with Rozhdestvensky conducting (Brilliant Classics 93096—a seven-CD box set) and Mischa Maisky's 1996 version with Mikhail Pletnev conducting the Russian National Orchestra (DG 449821). I heard the piece live twice: in the '80s in communist Romania with Russian cellist Mikhail Khomitzer, and with Alexander Rudin on tour in the USA.

I worked first on the middle movement and performed it in recital last April, and by the end of July I had the whole piece ready and memorized, four months before the first concert. Having played Prokofiev's *Cello Sonata*, the two concertos by Shostakovich, and the one by Nikolai Miaskovsky prepared me musically to give the piece grit, lyricism, and élan.

What a powerful piece!