



Sergei Prokofiev: Works for Violin & Piano

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Whenever I confront a new Prokofiev CD—this issue of Fanfare brought four of them—his circumstances in the Soviet Union can't help but come to mind. Biographers find it hard to show Prokofiev's emotional insularity in a good light when Shostakovich was so achingly empathic over the suffering all around him (he once commented that every movement in his symphonies was a memorial). But by 1938, the year the First Violin Sonata was begun, people close to Prokofiev were being arrested, taken away, and quickly killed, including the general director of the Bolshoi, Vladimir Mutnykh, who had commissioned Romeo and Juliet. The only one to survive, after five years in the Gulag, was stage director Natalya Sats, who had commissioned Peter and the Wolf. It took eight years before Prokofiev completed the sonata, but in the end it emerged as almost the only pure expression of grief-filled tragedy in his output. For once, he can't be resented for not being Shostakovich (which, of course, was unfair to begin with—surviving Stalin's terrorist regime took whatever it took).

In this new release the intensely serious violinist Franziska Pietsch expresses a strong personal connection with the piece, in that she was born in East Germany, coddled and supported as a child star by the government, only to be oppressed for two years after her father escaped to the West in 1984. After her own emigration in 1986 and a peripatetic education that included studies with Dorothy DeLay at Juilliard, Pietsch has had a varied career as a concertmaster, touring soloist, and chamber music player. I first noticed her as a member of the accomplished Testore Trio, a group she helped found in Germany in 2000 and only recently left in 2015. I was quite impressed by their disc of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff piano trios (Fanfare 38:5).

All of this is prelude to a powerful performance of the Prokofiev First Violin Sonata that vies with brooding, dark readings from luminaries such as David Oistrakh and Sviatoslav Richter or Gidon Kremer and Martha Argerich. The score's four movements, lasting a few seconds shy of half an hour, are a stark testimonial to a time of horror, yet one feels Prokofiev's struggle to suppress his general extroversion, Romantic lyricism, and cheerful animation. Those qualities were saved for the Second Violin Sonata, written during the war years when the First Sonata was still laid aside. Originally scored for flute and piano, the Second Sonata was transcribed for violin with the aid of David Oistrakh; Prokofiev noted that the transferal of the flute part was relatively easy and that the piano part remained basically untouched.

Pietsch and her longtime duo partner, Detlev Eisinger, concede nothing to more famous rivals in terms of agonized emotion and a willingness to dig deep into the core of the music. To some extent the reading sounds artificially outsized because of

the roomy, boomy acoustic in which it was recorded and the enormous dynamic range captured by the engineers (this isn't an easy CD to find the right volume level for). It's hard to return willingly or often to the dystopian gloom of the First Violin Sonata, and I must admit that Pietsch's approach, although not as savage as some (I have Isaac Stern in mind), left me shaken. In the Second Sonata, best loved for its beautifully lyrical first movement and striding, confident finale, Pietsch and Eisinger remain more serious than other performers who take their cue from the gentle flute original. But it's quite valid to exploit the violin's expressive range in its own right.

The program is filled out with another transcription, the Cinq Mélodies, op. 35b, written in Chicago and California in 1919–20, after Prokofiev's initial exile from Russia. Probably inspired by the vocalises written by Rachmaninoff and Ravel, the original version was for wordless soprano. This proved impractical, however, and the songs only gained popularity after being transcribed for violin. Besides the fact that the melodies themselves are uncharacteristically generic for Prokofiev, the violin part has very limited technical display. One listen-through seemed sufficient. Pietsch's reading is sympathetic and adroit.

Altogether, this new release presents a rare bond between one artist and a particular score. If a single performance could qualify for my 2016 Want List, it would be Pietsch's account of the Prokofiev First Violin Sonata. It won't soon fade from memory.