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PROKOFIEV

Piano Sonata No. 2

SCHUBERT

Impromptus D 899

Elisso Bolkvadze



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SERGEJ PROKOFIEV

PIANO SONATA NO. 2 IN D MINOR, OP. 14 18:27

- I. Allegro, ma non troppo 6:35
- II. Scherzo. Allegro marcato 1:57
- III. Andante 6:05
- IV. Vivace 4:50

FRANZ SCHUBERT

IMPROMPTUS, OP. 90 (D 899) 28:57

No. 1 in C minor:

Allegro molto moderato 10:50

No. 2 in E flat major: Allegro 4:24

No. 3 in G flat major: Andante 6:36

No. 4 in A flat major: Allegretto 7:07

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Funkhaus Berlin Nalepastraße, Großer Sendesaal – Saal I

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**“Virility, confidence,
steely determination”**

“A young man with the expression of a Petersburg student comes on stage: Sergei Prokofiev. He sits down at the piano and starts playing, sometimes brushing the keys, sometimes trying out which are higher and which lower, all with a pointed, dry touch. Audience members are disconcerted, some visibly agitated, others getting up and rushing to the exit: ‘Such music drives one to insanity!’ The hall becomes empty...” In his autobiography, Prokofiev evidently savours citing this review of the premiere of his Second Piano Concerto in September 1913, published by the *St. Petersburger Zeitung*. “This is music for dogs”, Alexander Glazunov reportedly said of Prokofiev’s music at that time, and the influential ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev complained about the “pestilential” taste at the St Petersburg Conservatory which no longer allowed any true Russian music. This was, of course, a dig at Prokofiev, the “Petersburg student”, who was, even at the age of twenty-two, considered an *enfant terrible* of Russian music.

One year before the outbreak of the First World War, the young provocateur was not alone in this. Not only the Tsarist regime which perished during the October Revolution in 1917, but also European art underwent a transformation of abrupt radicalism. The Italian futurists were met with fervent resonance from the St Petersburg avant-garde; figurative painting was dealt a deathly blow by the Russian artist Kandinsky; and tonal music was struck down by Scriabin and Schoenberg. And Prokofiev, coming from the

Ukrainian countryside, swept the *fin-de-siècle* depression out of his works with an iron broom, hammering home the pulse of the machine age. In his memoirs of 1941, out of his five main styles he emphasised the “innovative” and “that of the toccatas”, “the motoric one which probably emanates from Schumann’s Toccata that made a great impression on me at the time”.

Although orchestral works such as his *Scythian Suite*, inspired by Diaghilev, or his opera *The Gambler* (after the novel by Dostoyevsky) document the dissonances and breathlessness of the pre-revolutionary era, Prokofiev mainly turned to the piano for his new aestheticism. He had honed his pianistic skills under the renowned piano pedagogue Anna Yesipova; later on, Prokofiev earned his living mainly through concert tours across the USA and Western Europe – in this, he shared the same fate as the Russian émigré Sergei Rachmaninov. His playing was technically impeccable, non-dramatic, realising the score almost “objectively”, if such a thing is possible. The Moscow piano professor Heinrich Neuhaus, who taught such musicians as Sviatoslav Richter, Emil Gilels and Radu Lupu, once came up with a particularly beautiful description of Prokofiev’s playing: “His playing was characterised by virility, confidence, steely determination, an iron sense of rhythm, colossal sonority, an idiosyncratic ‘epic’ aspect, carefully avoiding any overly refined or intimate elements. The most crucial attribute of Prokofiev’s playing, however, was the vividness of his compositional thinking.”

Prokofiev wrote his Second Piano Sonata in 1912, dedi-

cating it to his university friend Maximilian Schmidthof who had, in desperation, shot himself in a Finnish wood in spring 1913. “Dear Seryozha”, began the letter which Schmidthof had sent to the composer shortly before his death, “I am giving you my final news – I have shot myself.” This sarcasm could not be outdone by the Sonata Op. 14, whose tone is characterised by machine-like precision as well as contours of a crystal clear sharpness. In the structure of the sonata, Prokofiev takes his cue from Beethoven’s middle period, presenting several subjects in the first movement – a restlessly ascending one, one reminiscent of little bells, and a lyrical one – which he develops and repeats in the recapitulation. However, his proportions are terse, the presentations of the subjects seem cursory, his harmony appears void of any real gravitation, and the piano writing feels unromantically transparent. The *Scherzo*, with a duration of barely two minutes, appears as a “fugitive vision” (the title of his perhaps most famous piano cycle), whilst the *Andante*, with its stylised knells, the elegiac, Rachmaninov-like melody and the instruction “con tristezza” (with sadness), seems the most likely elegy on the death of his friend. The final *Vivace* releases the accrued energy in an outburst of great speed and “insane” delicacy. The *moderato* middle section, “Dolcissimo e molto espressivo”, revisits the dreamy theme of the first movement which appears as a hazy reminiscence, before being swept away in a frenzy.

A sonata in disguise?

“Never will I forget the exclamation of the famous Monsieur de Fontenelle who, during a performance of an eternally long *symphonie*, became so overwrought that he cried out, in an outburst of impatience: ‘Sonate, que me veux-tu?’” The dictum of the French nobleman which Jean-Jacques Rousseau quoted in the article “Sonate” of his *Encyclopédie* not only refers to the sonata in the narrower sense, but to instrumental music in general, which apparently was no match for the concrete action in opera. Wordless music, one might paraphrase Mr de Fontenelle, was simply worthless, an “empty titillation for the ears”, as the poet Wilhelm Heinse put it. “Tobacco for nose and tongue, we delight in it out of habit.”

All the same – the custom of the sonata could, by the late eighteenth century, no longer be denied, nor the fact that, thanks to Johann Christian Bach and particularly also Haydn and Mozart, the piano sonata had developed into a genre which not only required pianistic brilliance but also considerable compositional craftsmanship. And by 1822, Ludwig van Beethoven had presented a body of sonatas of such impact and compositional intelligence that younger colleagues, including the Viennese teaching assistant, Franz Schubert – incidentally also a protégé of Beethoven’s teacher, Antonio Salieri – almost despaired. Although the outcry “Who can possibly produce anything after Beethoven?” as such almost certainly does not originate from Schubert, his catalogue of works does illustrate the problem: whilst he continuously produced songs, mass settings,

operas and string quartets, the young Schubert found it difficult to compose piano sonatas; even later on, when he wrote his mature sonatas, he left behind numerous fragments documenting his inadequacies within the traditional form. “Sonate, que me veux-tu?”

Schubert, who had composed a remarkable number of piano sonatas since 1817, had found his own solution to Fontenelle’s question not only by introducing a Viennese “dialect”, field-tested in dance music, but also by increasingly dissolving Beethoven’s stringent form, adopting a potpourri approach. The possibility of his *Impromptus* D 899 and D 935 (published as separate pieces) in reality representing sonata cycles in disguise had already been voiced by the perceptive Robert Schumann. Schubert had completed these eight pieces by December 1827; however, apparently due to publishing issues, only the first two numbers of D 899 were issued by Haslinger during the composer’s lifetime. It was also Haslinger who added the term “Impromptu” to the untitled manuscript.

This title seems less to refer to the improvisatory aspect, which it had conveyed ever since the Bohemian musician Jan Václav Vorišek wrote the first impromptu, but rather to express fashionableness or even to serve as a stopgap, shrouding the solid (mostly tripartite) structure and the homogenous character of the pieces. Let us examine the substantial opening piece in C minor more closely. The beginning is fashioned as a game of “question and answer” – or perhaps one should call it the “antiphonal” principle where musical phrases alternate between cantor and choir.

Accordingly, Schubert presents the first phrase as a monophonic melody which becomes a snappy march in the first answer, holding the upper hand at the end of the first section. A variant of the theme in the relative major represents the secondary theme of the sonata form, whilst the ensuing return to the minor stands for the beginning of the development. At this stage it already becomes clear that Schubert interlocks the variational form with elements of the sonata form, with the variants in the development section following one another with increasing rapidity and drama. At times, the *Erlkönig* triplets pulsate restlessly; later, fierce chords are heard pounding along with the theme in the bass line. Once again we hear the lyrical “secondary theme”, but the theme in its original form only reappears at the end with a conciliatory, almost surreally sweet shift to C major.

Thereafter, the E flat major *Impromptu* fizzes along volubly and with a powerful trio; the third piece in G flat major, with its *sfumato* effects created by broken chords, anticipates Liszt’s *Liebesträume*; the fourth lives off the contrast of precipitating tonal cascades and an ascending, lyrical melody. Thus Schubert quotes, from a distance, the succession of tempos and characters of the sonata form, but isolates its components, fashioning them into independent character pieces which, in their completeness, justifiably form part of the base stock of piano lessons.

Michael Struck-Schloen

Translation: Viola Scheffel

ELISSO BOLKVDATZE

Born in Tbilisi, Georgia, **Elisso Bolkvadze** began her musical studies at the early age of four and was immediately accepted at a specialized school for talented children. At the age of seven she performed her first concert with orchestra. She continued her studies at the conservatory of Tbilisi with Prof. Tengiz Amerejibi; in addition she regularly attended master classes with Prof. Tatiana Nikolayeva in Moscow. Later she moved to Austria where French composer and musician Michel Sogny provided important artistic influences to her. Soon after, Elisso Bolkvadze became laureate of the Fondation SOS Talents Michel Sogny. This marked the beginning of her international career.

Elisso Bolkvadze won numerous international piano competitions such as Van Cliburn International Piano Competition (USA), Vianna da Motta International Music Competition (Lisbon), Dublin International Piano Competition (Dublin), Marguerite Long Competition (Paris) and Bach Competition (Leipzig). A superstar in her home country, she received one of the most prestigious national honors “The Medal of Honor of Georgian Government” in 1993. In 2010 she received an award from the City Hall of Tbilisi for her successful cultural commitment in Georgia. In January 2015 she became UNESCO Artist for Peace.

Elisso Bolkvadze is regularly invited to play with international orchestras such as Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Orchestre National de France, Saint Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra, Czech National Symphony Orchestra, Lithuanian National Orchestra and Houston Symphony Orchestra. She played in prestigious concert venues throughout Europe and the United States, among them Kennedy Center (Washington D.C.), Salle Pleyel, Salle Gaveau and Théâtre des Champs Élysées (Paris), Gewandhaus (Leipzig), Herkulesaal (Munich), Alte Oper (Frankfurt), Konzerthaus (Berlin), Saint Petersburg Philharmonic Hall (Russia), Chopin Festival (Warsaw) and Ravello Festival (Italy).

In 2013 she founded her own charity foundation “Lyra” which supports talented young Georgian pianists. Elisso Bolkvadze is Artistic Director of the annual Batumi Music Festival in Georgia.



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