

Sergei Prokofiev: Cello Concerto in E minor, op. 58

By Jeffrey Solow

"It is very difficult to write a concerto. One has to be inventive. I advise you to jot down all the ideas as they occur to you, without waiting for the whole thing to mature. Write down individual passages, interesting bits, not necessarily in the correct order. Later on you will use these 'bricks' to build the whole." Sergei Prokofiev gave this advice to Aram Khachaturian around 1933, about the same time that he began composing the Concerto in E minor for Cello and Orchestra, op. 58, the last orchestral score he commenced in Paris before his return to the USSR.

Prokofiev began the concerto at the instigation of Gregor Piatigorsky, an early champion of Prokofiev's music, who had performed the composer's youthful *Ballada* on several recitals in Moscow. They likely met in Berlin in 1927 when Piatigorsky was solo cellist of the Berlin Philharmonic. Later, in Paris, Piatigorsky played for Prokofiev and persistently urged him to write a concerto in spite of Prokofiev's initial protestations: "I don't know your crazy instrument." Prokofiev's diary entry for May 22, 1932 states: "Piatigorsky very much wishes me to compose a concerto for him, and begs to play it everywhere. I already have a plan (and themes) for a Fantasy for Cello and Orchestra. If Piatigorsky could stump up the money, I'd do it . . . He brought his cello and played the Ballade with me, very well." Piatigorsky relates in his memoir Cellist: "I played for him and, demonstrating all possibilities of the cello, saw him from time to time jump from his chair. 'It is slashing! Play it again!' He made notes in the little notebook he always carried with him. He asked me to show him some of the typical music for cello, but when I did, he glanced through it and said, 'You should not keep it in the house. It smells.'" (He made a similar comment to Rostropovich after Prokofiev asked to see some idiomatic cello music and Slava brought him works by Davidoff and Popper.)

Finally, in the summer of 1933, Prokofiev started to sketch the concerto, visiting with Piatigorsky several times. Piatigorsky says: "Finally he completed the first movement. I received the music and soon we began to discuss the other movements to come. The beginning of the second, which followed shortly, appeared as excitingly promising as the first. 'Even so, it will lead to nothing. I cannot compose away from Russia. I will go home.'" Soon, with his wife and two little children, Prokofiev departed for Russia.

He returned to the sketches early in 1934 but told his friend composer Nikolai Miaskovsky, "As before, it is still in a somnolent state." Despite the concerto's being substantially drafted it remained dormant until 1937, at which point Prokofiev, now in Moscow, slowly resumed work on it. "The first sketches did not satisfy me," he wrote. "I clearly felt 'seams' between the various episodes, and not all the music was of equal value. After the long interruption I revised the Concerto, adding some new material."

Piatigorsky did not have much opportunity to discuss the concerto with Prokofiev in 1938 as the composer toured France, England and the US on his last trip out of the Soviet

Union. Terry King (to whom I am appreciatively indebted for many fascinating details and quotes), recounts in his book Gregor Piatigorsky: The Life and Career of the Virtuoso Cellist (McFarland & Co., 2010) that as the two crossed together from New York to France on the steamship *Normandy*, Prokofiev apologetically announced to Piatigorsky that the concerto was nearly finished but that he could not dedicate it to Piatigorsky or offer him the first performance. As a Soviet citizen, Prokofiev could not allow the premiere to be given outside of Russia by a famous expatriate who had been erased from the public record; this could be interpreted as an act of defiance that might endanger Prokofiev's family. The work needed to be presented in the Soviet Union first. (When they both left post-Revolutionary Russia to pursue careers in the West, the government viewed Piatigorsky as a defector while Prokofiev was considered a cultural emissary. Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar for Education, told Prokofiev: "You are a revolutionary in music, we are revolutionaries in life. We ought to work together. But if you want to go to America I shall not stand in your way." Piatigorsky eventually received an invitation to perform in the Soviet Union but this never came to pass; Prokofiev returned to become a permanent citizen.) Prokofiev urged him to give its American premiere and promised that the music would reach him as soon as possible. Piatigorsky had to be satisfied with the consolation of knowing that the concerto he had caused to be written would be published and that he would not be prohibited from touring with it outside of Russia.

In 1938, after finishing the music for the film *Alexander Nevsky*, Prokofiev finally completed the concerto (the manuscript bears the date September 18, 1938) and the young cellist Leonid Berezovsky was entrusted to prepare the concerto for its first performance. Pianist Sviatoslav Richter was asked to work with Berezovsky and he accepted it like any other job, in order to earn his living. "For two solid months I used to walk several miles to Berezovsky's apartment on the sixth floor," Richter recalled. "My attitude was purely businesslike. Although Berezovsky was pleased with the engagement, the music was obviously alien to him. He shrugged, he sighed, and he complained about the difficulties, but he practiced the Concerto diligently, and he was very nervous." Later on, when Berezovsky had finally learned the concerto, Richter went with him to play it for Prokofiev. "Prokofiev himself opened the door, and led us into a small canary-yellow room. To begin with, Prokofiev said sternly to his sons, Sviatoslav and Oleg, 'Children, go away! Don't bother us!' and then he sat down. Berezovsky looked terribly upset. Probably because of this, Prokofiev did not feel like talking to him too much, and went to the piano and began to show him 'this way or that.' Prokofiev never asked me to play a single note, not once, and so... we left."

To be accepted for public performance, the concerto needed to receive official approval from the Union of Soviet Composers. Richter was surprised when the audition met with enthusiasm from the cultural bureaucrats: "A real event! Every bit as fine as the Second Violin Concerto!" There was a lively and positive discussion, and everyone present wished Berezovsky well. No one doubted that the work would be a tremendous success. "This is a new page in our history." The concerto was assigned a prominent place in the

Second Festival of Soviet Music and Berezovsky began to prepare for the public premiere on November 26, 1938 with conductor Melik-Pachayev. Unfortunately, neither the conductor nor the soloist was up to the task, musically or technically, and the performance was a complete fiasco. When the composer came backstage Melik-Pashayev tried to break the awkward silence: "Well, Sergei Sergeievich, what did you think?" Prokofiev replied with an ingenuous smile, "Nothing could have been worse."

The performance was coldly received and the work was soon judged a failure. Even the composer's close friends were disappointed in it. "First-rate music but...somehow it doesn't quite come off," Miaskovsky noted in his diary. For a long time the composer did not agree with these opinions. "The critics remained indifferent out of sheer obtuseness," he said. "The Concerto is very much like the Second Violin Concerto!" Later on, however, heeding the criticisms of Miaskovsky who pointed out substantial flaws in its form, Prokofiev made a number of changes including the addition of a cadenza in the third movement.

After the disastrous premiere it was now Piatigorsky's turn to play the promised first American performance. In 1939, Piatigorsky received the completed manuscript and wrote to Koussevitzky from Paris: "I finally received the Prokofiev concerto...the concerto is superb, and it gives me great pleasure to work on it. I have not yet seen the score, but I am sure that the concerto has been orchestrated with Prokofiev's usual mastery. The cello part is uncomfortable and difficult, but I hope to successfully overcome these difficulties. Where and when should the premiere of this concerto be? The ideal could be only one thing—and that is the Boston orchestra! . . ."

Koussevitzky scheduled it for early March of 1940 in Boston and New York. As the date neared they both had concerns about the concerto but with Prokofiev in Russia communication was difficult. Leaving it in the hands of the performers Prokofiev wrote to Piatigorsky, "Do whatever you find necessary. You have *carte blanche*."

The American premiere took place on March 8, 1940 and Piatigorsky recalled, "The performance in Boston went well and the response of the audience was gratifying." Critical reaction was mixed, though more positive than in the Soviet Union. Clearly the concerto suffered from the last movement's length and diffuseness. Warren Story Smith of the *Boston Post* wrote: "The first movement is charming; the second, slightly less persuasive and the third, though full of ingenuity, seems to get nowhere." While in the *Boston Herald* Alexander William said, "...it would be presumptuous to condemn the concerto on the ground that we were unable to assimilate easily some of the last movement... This is, moreover, much too interesting a work to be shelved, even if cello concertos were as common as daisies..."

After the performances Piatigorsky wrote to Prokofiev about the concerto: "In my letters, sent through the courtesy of the Soviet Embassy, I asked Prokofiev to make changes, pointing out certain weaknesses of the work. He thanked me for the suggestions and said

that he would take them into consideration.” However, with the onset of WWII no further exploration of the work on the part of Piatigorsky ensued. The concerto was not performed again until Maurice Gendron played it in London in December of 1945 and Prokofiev did not hear it again until Mstislav Rostropovich programmed it with piano accompaniment on a recital in January 1948. The composer later asked Rostropovich to help revise it explaining that, “the structure is not compact enough.” (Working together on the revision, destined to become the Sinfonia Concertante, op. 125, Rostropovich was amused by Prokofiev's vivid conception of the sounds of various instruments separately and in groups. Prokofiev told him that the lower notes played pianissimo on the tuba reminded him of fat and greasy beetles that he would carefully take into his hand and place from one note to another. He also said that in his orchestration of his Cello Concerto the string quintet that follows the cello solo part sounded to him like "poor relatives." Regarding the Sinfonia Concertante, Piatigorsky later noted: “I am grateful that there are now two major works for the cello by this great composer and unforgettable man.”) The concerto was not published until the early ‘50s and as the pre-publication materials are not available for examination, no one knows how many, if any, of Piatigorsky’s suggestions Prokofiev incorporated.

The three movements of the concerto follow a rather unusual sequence—slow-fast-slow—the same sequence of tempi as in Prokofiev’s first violin concerto. (Walton used a similar form in his 1956 Cello Concerto, also written for Piatigorsky.) The first movement, a brief *Andante*, serves as sort of lyrical but dramatic introduction to the whole work; the second, a fast *Allegro giusto*, has several episodes including a march; the third movement, although marked *Allegro*, is a theme with four mostly-slow variations interspersed by two interludes, followed by a return to the first movement and closing with an extended coda, itself consisting of several episodes including a set of short variations on another theme. Almost as long as the first two movements together, this movement has remained the stumbling block for the concerto’s acceptance by cellists. (In the concerto’s transformation into the Sinfonia Concertante, most of the slow parts of the finale were eliminated and the sequence of movements became slow-fast-fast.)

The concerto was first recorded by Janos Starker in 1957, followed by French cellist Roger Albin in 1960 and Christine Walevska in 1973. Recognizing the weaknesses of the last movement, Starker and Walevska introduced large cuts, as did Nathaniel Rosen (heeding his teacher Piatigorsky’s advice) when he performed it with the Pasadena Symphony in 1975 or ‘76. Personally, I have always been more attracted to the concerto than to the Sinfonia Concertante because of its stylistic affinity to the Second Violin Concerto, composed in 1935 during the cello concerto’s dormant period. Many years ago, upon finding a copy of the Albin LP (until recently the only complete recording) and hearing the parts that had been left out, I came to believe that with different and smaller cuts, the concerto could be successful almost as Prokofiev wrote it. The parts that caused the last movement to bog down could easily be removed without sacrificing the integrity of the work’s original concept and what remained would be pure Prokofiev—characterized by his perfect fusion of melody and modernism.

According to the League of American Orchestras, Prokofiev's orchestral music is played more frequently in the United States than that of any other composer of the last hundred years except for Shostakovich and Strauss. Perhaps the Cello Concerto, op. 58 may yet join the ranks of his often-performed works.