# PROKOFIEV

## Works for violin and piano

**Gil Shaham** violin
**Orli Shaham** piano

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By Harlow Robinson

**As a busy virtuoso pianist, Sergei Prokofiev can be forgiven for producing considerably less music for violin than for piano. After all, he knew he could always find someone to play his piano pieces – himself.**

But persuading prominent violinists to play a new sonata or concerto is not always the easiest thing to do, especially for a young composer just starting out. For an irreverant "futurist" like Prokofiev, whose quirky personality and icon-smashing music tended to annoy and alarm members of the establishment, this was even more of a challenge. Even so, the small body of music Prokofiev did compose for violin ranks among the most provocative and appealing written since 1900.

Prokofiev had the good fortune to live in St Petersburg as a student at the Conservatory in the early years of the twentieth century, an era when the Russian school of violin playing was enjoying particular brilliance. In the years immediately preceeding World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, there emerged one amazing violinist after another: Jascha Heifetz, Efrem Zimbalist, Mischa Elman and Nathan Milstein to name only a few. At the Conservatory, Prokofiev also met the young Polish violinist Paul Kochanski. It was Kochanski who advised Prokofiev on bow markings and technical details as he composed his first major work for violin, the *Violin Concerto No.1 in D major*. An energetic advocate of new music for the violin, Kochanski was also planning to give the first performance of the Concerto in late 1917. But something interfered with their plans; the chaos created in the musical and concert world by the two Russian revolutions of 1917. As a result, the First Concerto was heard for the first time only six years later, in Paris on 18 October 1923, under the direction of Prokofiev's friend and promoter Serge Koussevitsky.

Photo: Oliver Rieger

The concerto, compact and concise, with that sweet and sour flavor so typical of Prokofiev, went on to become one of the most beloved modern violin concerti.

In 1918, Prokofiev decided to leave the turmoil and civil war of newborn Soviet Russia. First he travelled to New York, where he lived for a while, although he found the Americal musical scene depressingly conservative and underdeveloped. He felt Americans were not ready either for him or his music. His biggest American success was the commission from the Chicago Opera for his sarcastic fairy-tale opera *The Love for Three Oranges*, which had its premiere in Chicago in 1921. For Oranges Prokofiev composed one of his most memorable "tunes": the ironically ceremonial March. Clumping along in a jerky rhythm punctuated by prominent quaver rests, leaping abruptly by dissonant intervals, displaying conflicting tonalities and mischievous intervals of seconds and tritones with wicked pleasure, it epitomizes the awkward and funny 'wrong note' style with which Prokofiev became most strongly identified. The quirky personality of the *March* from *Three Oranges* also appealed to violinist Jascha Heifetz, who in 1937 arranged it for piano and violin in a version that became very popular with soloists.

Disillusioned with America, Prokofiev moved on to Europe. In late 1923 he settled with his new wife Lina in Paris, the musical center of the world at the time and his home until 1936. In Paris, Prokofiev renewed his contact with Kochanski, who was performing the First Violin Concerto with great success. In 1925 Prokofiev started working in earnest with Kochanski on a new project: an arrangement for violin and piano of the Op.35 *Songs without Words*, a set of five serene romantic pieces composed originally for voice and piano. The idea seems to have come originally from Prokofiev's friend from Conservatory days, the violinist Cecilia Hansen. "July 1, 1925. I was at Kochanski's place, and we fussed around with Op.35, arranging it for violin. It is high time to write something for violin and piano, especially after the success of the Violin Concerto. I had even decided to work on something in August. But then Cecilia somehow picked out the second of the Songs without Words and we had fun arranging it for violin. Then I decided to rewrite the entire opus, but preceeding not with the naïve Cecilia, but rather with Kochanski, who is so gifted for such work. Kochanski readily agreed. As it happens, he has just been working with Stravinsky on an arrangement of Pulchinella. So today I went over to see Kochanski, having already sketched everything out in

preparation... Kochanski and I worked for about two hours and we turned nearly the whole opus upside down and inside out. Kochanski is remarkably talented and inventive, as is very obvious to everyone. He was terribly pleased with the pieces; I think (I hope) his feeling is sincere."

So important was Kochanski's contribution to Op.35-bis that Prokofiev even suggested to Kochanski that he receive credit in the score as co-composer, but he declined that honor. The Op.35-bis pieces were published by Koussevitsky's publishing house in Paris in 1925, and have remained popular with violinists ever since. By turns dreamy (especially No.1) and jokey (No.4) they are lyrical without ever descending into sentimental clichés, and the piano part is wonderfully transparent and understated.

By the time Prokofiev wrote his next work for violin, the *Sonata for Two Violins Op.56*, in 1932, he was dividing his time between Russia and Europe. In Paris he had become friendly with various progressive composers, including Francis Poulenc and Darius Milhaud, fellow members of the contemporary chamber music society Tritone, but he still felt somewhat overshadowed by the dominating presence of Igor Stravinsky. Prokofiev also felt drawn to the many friends and colleagues he had left behind in the USSR, where he had received rapturous receptions on recent tours beginning in 1927. With his childhood friend Nikolai Miaskovsky, now a leading figure in the Soviet musical world, Prokofiev conducted an extensive correspondence, sharing news and impressions of musical events in Moscow and Paris. In October 1932 Prokofiev told Miaskovsky that he was working on a sonata for the unusual combination of two violins that was an example of what he called his "new simplicity". Previously, Miaskovsky had criticised what he saw as Prokofiev's movement in recent years towards a more "intellectual" style that he found self-conscious and lacking in spontaneity. "When they play this piece in Moscow, you will have to leave the hall," Prokofiev joked.

The world premiere of the *Sonata for Two Violins* took place in Moscow in Prokofiev's presence on 27 November 1932, played by Dmitri Tsyganov and Vasily Shirinsky. In his diary, Prokofiev observed that "it was all right – and even had some success". Just a few weeks later, on 16 December, Prokofiev attended its Paris premiere at a concert of Tritone, given by Robert Soetens and Samuel Dushkin. Prokofiev judged that the performance was "better than in the USSR,"

and the piece had "extraordinary success." Among those in attendance was the often waspish Stravinsky, who praised the sonata as "un bijou." More severe, introspective and stripped-down than much of Prokofiev's earlier more exhibitionist music, the *Sonata for Two Violins* has never enjoyed particular favor with performers or audiences, but is a carefully crafted masterpiece of "new simplicity" – precise and trim, a cool jewel.

In 1936 Prokofiev settled with his family in Moscow. They were given a comfortable (at least by Soviet standards) apartment in a building near the center reserved for Soviet cultural luminaries. Among Prokofiev's new neighbours were numerous famous musicians, including the prize-winning David Oistrakh. Their collaboration helped to brighten Prokofiev's extremely difficult and stressful existence during the last period of his life, and gave us both of the composer's sonatas for violin and piano, two of the greatest ever written.

Oistrakh had since his student days in Odessa been a passionate admirer of Prokofiev's music, and had become one of the most distinguished interpreters of the two violin concerti. It was only natural that he would encourage his friend to write a solo piece for him. Prokofiev had begun a sonata for violin and piano in 1938, but other projects – not to mention the outbreak of World War II with its resulting evacuation from Moscow and the breakup of his first marriage – had prevented him from completing it. But Oistrakh was impatient. In 1943, when he heard the premiere of Prokofiev's new *Sonata for Flute and Piano Op.94*, Oistrakh immediately realized that the piece could be very effectively arranged for violin and piano and made this suggestion to the composer. In the spring of 1944, Prokofiev quickly did the necessary rearranging, and then had Oistrakh look it over for a technical evaluation. The number of changes made in the flute part was "minimal," mostly for bowing. No changes were made in the piano accompaniment. Oistrakh introduced what was labelled the *Sonata for Violin and Piano No.2 in D major* (Op.94-bis) in Moscow on 17 June 1944, accompanied by Lev Oborin. In this violin-piano form – more aggressive and biting than the original flute version, and loaded with technical difficulties for the violinist – the sonata has enjoyed undiminished popularity.

The success of the their first collaboration left Oistrakh hungry for more. But Prokofiev was extremely busy during this period with such demanding projects as the film score for Eisenstein's epic *Ivan the Terrible*, the

*Symphony No.5*, the opera *War and Peace* and the *Piano Sonata No.8*. And in early 1945, as the result of chronic high blood pressure aggravated by stress, Prokofiev suffered a bad fall and concussion. He never entirely recovered, and was forced to cut back drastically on the number of hours he could work each day for the rest of his life. Only in the summer of 1946, the first he spent in his rustic new summer cottage outside Moscow, did Prokofiev finally return to the long-abandoned Op.80 *Sonata for Violin and Piano No.1*. He dedicated the piece to Oistrakh.

Prokofiev once remarked that he was first inspired to write this profound and tragic work by hearing some music by Handel. There is really nothing quite like the dense and intellectual First Violin Sonata in all of Prokofiev's œuvre. With its virile themes erupting in violent fits and starts, it could not be more different from the Op.94-bis Sonata, a sunny and transparent piece filled with long, singing lines. The themes are created by subtle sonic and impressionistic effects, such as the chilling run in the solo part (*freddo*) in the first movement. Prokofiev likened them to "wind in a graveyard". In the third movement, the dialogue between trembling pianissimo semiquaver triplets in the accompaniment and a mellow theme in the violin's lower register produces a similarly mysterious, unsettling effect. Metrical oddities abound, such as the alternating 3/4 – 4/4 time in the first movement, and the diabolically ingenious (and very difficult to play!) "off-center" 5/8 – 7/8 – 8/8 pattern in the last. Significantly, the sonata goes out with a whimper, a fragmentary reminiscence of one of the first movement themes, marked *piano*.

The first time Oistrakh heard Prokofiev play through the *Op.80 sonata* at the piano, he "had the feeling of being present at a very great and significant event. Nothing written for the violin in many decades – anywhere in the world – could equal this piece in beauty and depth." Even the Soviet bureaucrats who had been so often critical of Prokofiev's music as excessively complex, elitist and dissonant, recognized the greatness of the piece, bestowing upon in a Stalin Prize in June 1947.

In one of the most ironic twists in musical history, Sergei Prokofiev died on 5 March 1953, the very same day as Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, and thus failed to see the better times that followed. At Prokofiev's funeral, sparsely attended because of he chaos in the streets following Stalin's death, David Oistrakh played the first and third movements of the *Op.80 Sonata*.

# **Gil Shaham,** violin

**Gil Shaham is internationally recognized as one of today's most virtuosic and engaging artists.**

He is sought after throughout the world for concerto appearances with celebrated orchestras and conductors, as well as for recital and ensemble appearances on the great concert stages and at the most prestigious festivals.

In addition to his many orchestral engagements, Mr. Shaham regularly tours in recital with pianist Akira Eguchi. He enjoys bringing together friends and colleagues in chamber music, and also has the good fortune to enjoy musical collaboration with his family, including his wife, violinist Adele Anthony, his sister Orli Shaham and his brother-in-law, conductor David Robertson. Among his more than two dozen concerto and solo CDs are a number of international best-sellers. These recordings have earned prestigious awards including multiple Grammys, a Grand Prix du Disque, a Diapason d'or and Gramophone Editor's Choice.

Mr. Shaham was born in Illinois in 1971, and later moved to Israel where at the age of seven he began violin studies at the Rubin Academy of Music. In 1981 he returned to the USA and began studies with Dorothy DeLay and Jens Ellerman at Aspen. In 1982, after taking first prize in Israel's Claremont Competition, he became a scholarship student at Juilliard, where he also worked with Hyo Kang. He has also studied at Columbia University.

Gil Shaham was awarded the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant in 1990. He plays the 1699 'Countess Polignac' Stradivarius, and lives in New York City with his wife and their two children.

# Orli Shaham, piano

**Orli Shaham is an established pianist with an impressive international reputation as one of today's most gifted pianists.**

Amongst her numerous acclaimed appearances, she has performed with the Cleveland and Philadelphia Orchestras, the Saint Louis, Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco, National, Houston, Montreal and Atlanta Symphonies, Los Angeles and Florida Philharmonics, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Orchestra della Toscana, the Jerusalem, Sydney, La Scala, and Bilbao Symphony Orchestras, and the Orchestre National de Lyon. Ms. Shaham has worked with such eminent conductors as Sir Neville Marriner, Wolfgang Sawallisch, Sir Roger Norrington, David Robertson, Robert Spano, Christopher Hogwood and Leonard Slatkin and toured extensively with her brother, Gil.

Orli has given recitals in New York and Washington, DC., Munich and Frankfurt, and has toured Japan; other international recital engagements have taken her to cities throughout Italy, Spain, France, and Germany with additional festival appearances at Ravinia, Caramoor, Grand Teton, Verbier, Spoleto and Aspen.

Orli Shaham has taught music literature at Columbia University, contributed articles to Piano Today, Symphony and Playbill magazines, and collaborated with Classical Public Radio Network to create the morning show feature Dial-a-Musician.

Orli Shaham was recognized early for her prodigious talents. A recipient of the Gilmore Young Artist Award and Avery Fisher Career Grant, she was a student of Luisa Yoffe, Nancy Stessin, and Herbert Stessin. Orli Shaham obtained degrees at the Juilliard School, the Horace Mann School in Riverdale, New York, and Columbia. She is married to conductor David Robertson and has two stepsons, Peter and Jonathan.

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# SERGEI PROKOFIEV

(1891-1953)

**1. March, Op.12 No.1** **1:41**
(Transcribed by Jascha Heifetz)

**Sonata No.1 in F minor for violin and piano, Op.80** **29:31**

2. Andante assai 7:00
3. Allegro brusco 7:06
4. Andante 7:59
5. Allegrissimo – Andante assai come prima 7:21

**6. 'Masks' from Romeo and Juliet** **2:04**
(Transcribed by Jascha Heifetz)

**Five Melodies, Op.35** **12:18**

7. Andante 2:21
8. Lento, ma non troppo 2:28
9. Animato, ma non allegro 3:23
10. Allegretto leggero e scherzando 1:17
11. Andante non troppo 2:46

**12. 'March' from The Love for Three Oranges** **1:35**
(Transcribed by Jascha Heifetz)

**Sonata No.2 in D major for violin and piano, Op.94** **24:31**

13. Moderato 8:09
14. Scherzo – Presto 4:49
15. Andante 3:58
16. Allegro con brio 7:30

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**Gil Shaham,** violin
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