



# *Mozart & Shostakovich*

**March 16–17, 2024**

## **Program Notes**

**Overture to *Don Giovanni*, K. 527**

**Wolfgang Amadè Mozart**

**Born 27 January 1756 in Salzburg, Austria**

**Died 5 December 1791 in Vienna, Austria**

*Approximate duration 7 minutes*

*This is the Charlottesville Symphony's first performance of Mozart's Overture to Don Giovanni.*

- Mozart composed *Don Giovanni* in 1787, one of his most productive years.
- It was his second collaboration with the Italian poet and librettist Lorenzo da Ponte.
- The opera's subtitle is *Il dissoluto punito*, or "The Libertine Punished".
- Ominous D minor chords at the start yield to a lively *allegro* movement.
- Mozart's music captures the opera's spirit but does not quote any of its arias.

Anyone who has attended a performance of *Don Giovanni* knows the shivering impact of the overture's opening D minor chords, with their ominous foreboding of the drama to follow. Rarely one to dwell at length on the dark side, Mozart soon switches gears. The overture shifts to D major and an *allegro* tempo. We move from music of menace and revenge to music

reflecting the manic gaiety and determined pleasure-seeking that dominate much of the opera's action.

The concert version of the overture is like an eighteenth-century symphonic first movement: a slow introduction in minor mode, followed by a fully developed sonata-allegro in the parallel major. We would expect no less of Mozart. The genius of the overture lies in the success with which it captures the spirit of the opera without quoting from all its famous numbers. Only the Commendatore's vengeance music, the D minor chords alluded to above, return during the stage action proper. The overture's entire D major portion is made up of new themes, expressing perfectly the Don's devil-may-care bravado.

The overture is scored for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets; three trombones, timpani and strings.

### **Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major, Op. 26 (1921)**

**Sergei Prokofiev**

**Born 27 April 1891 in Sontsovka, Ukraine, Russian Empire**

**Died 5 March 1953 in Moscow, Russia, Soviet Union**

*Approximate duration 27 minutes*

*The Charlottesville Symphony previously performed Prokofiev's Piano Concert No. 3 in April 1987 and February 2016.*

- This piano concerto secured Prokofiev a permanent niche in the repertoire.
- Notice the shifts between lighter moments and deeper passages.
- The second movement variations are based on a baroque dance, the gavotte – but the piano has some gymnastic moments that require athletic prowess as well as dancing ability.
- Prokofiev's biting humor is particularly noticeable in the finale.

Prokofiev's five piano concertos may be the richest such legacy for the keyboard since Beethoven's five. Among 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers, only Rachmaninoff and Bartók come to mind as contenders for that distinction. Prokofiev shared with both of them, as with Beethoven and Mozart before him, prodigious experience as both virtuoso performer and conductor. Understandably, his first two concertos for piano and orchestra are heavier on youthful exuberance and dazzling technique, while somewhat weaker on formal discipline and effective use of orchestral resources. In the Third Piano Concerto, Prokofiev struck a far more satisfying balance. The piece succeeds both as an orchestral composition and as a solo work. Contemporary with his *Classical Symphony*, the Third Concerto sprung from the same rich vein of musical thought. Like that miniature masterpiece, it required virtually no revision, for in both works Prokofiev struck gold on the first try.

Prokofiev dedicated the Third Concerto to the poet Konstantin Balmont, five of whose texts he had set the same year in his songs, Op. 36. Balmont heard portions of the concerto's score as it was nearing completion and reacted by writing a sonnet. Theirs was one of the richest friendships of this period in Prokofiev's life. The composer's biographer, Harlow Robinson, has described the concerto in comparison to the songs.

Like the Balmont Songs (Op. 36), it balances flashiness and introspection, irony and romanticism, yielding a felicitous synthesis of Prokofiev's harmonic experiments, his rhythmic genius and his instinctive understanding of the possibilities of the piano. Mature and confident, the Third Concerto does not strive to shock, like much of his early piano music.

Prokofiev finished the Third Concerto in 1921, two years following his arrival in New York, but it is far more Russian than it is a reflection of his new life in America. Many of the sketches date from his Russian years, and some evidence indicates that certain of its ideas date as

far back as 1913. The work was actually completed in France, while Prokofiev sojourned in the coastal Breton village of Saint-Brevin-les-Pins. In some respects, the concerto is a curious and startling precursor of his later Soviet works; at the same time, it shares the irrepressible energy and dazzling keyboard bravura of the first two concertos, always reminding us what a splendid player Prokofiev himself was.

The composer played the premiere of the Third Concerto with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Frederick Stock on 16 December 1921. In a letter to Natalie Koussevitzky written shortly beforehand, Prokofiev commented:

My Third Concerto has turned out to be devilishly difficult. I'm nervous and I'm practicing hard three hours a day.

The concerto was enthusiastically received and became one of Prokofiev's major vehicles for his concert tours. A highly personal work, it lacks the sardonic, mocking qualities of the *Classical Symphony*, to which it is often compared. While it shares with that work a compact structure reflecting more discipline than the two earlier concertos, it achieves a more rewarding balance of drama, whimsy and introspection. The slow movement *Andante* with variations highlights Prokofiev's extraordinary gift for melody, and the dazzling finale reveals an odd and delightful kinship with the young, caustic Dmitri Shostakovich.

Prokofiev's score calls for two flutes, piccolo, pairs of oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, castanets, tambourine and strings.

**Symphony No. 9 in E-flat major, Op. 70**  
**Dmitri Shostakovich**  
**Born 25 September 1906 in St. Petersburg, Russia**  
**Died 9 August 1975 in Moscow**

*Approximate duration 27 minutes*

*The Charlottesville Symphony previously performed Shostakovich's Symphony No. 9 in February 1976.*

- The Ninth is one of three wartime symphonies, but it is not at all war-like.
- Prepare yourself for a surprise: Shostakovich with a big grin and a twinkle in his eye.
- Chamber music sonorities and a light touch make this a cousin of Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony*.
- Listen for sassy flares from the trombones in the first movement.
- The last three movements are played without pause.

When we consider commentaries about politics and international conflicts, we do not tend to think of music, or even the arts. During the Second World War, however, that was not the case. In the United States and Britain, as well as the Axis countries, music was another way to express patriotism. Art works could also reinforce propaganda.

Through his music, Dmitri Shostakovich was a powerful spokesperson for Joseph Stalin's Soviet regime. Whether he intended to serve the needs of the state remains controversial (see sidebar). Regardless of his intent, there is no question that his Seventh Symphony, the *Leningrad* (1941; premiered 1942) was construed as an indictment of Hitler and a morale-booster for a long-suffering Soviet population. His Eighth Symphony, which followed in 1943, was a different kind of indictment, illustrating the horror of war in a different way, with its emulation of missiles shooting through air, grenades exploding and the deathly silence of

carnage following battle.

This background is important to an understanding of the symphony on this program. When audiences in the USSR learned that Shostakovich was composing another symphony, the war was nearly over. His public expected him to celebrate victory over the Nazi tyrants and to extol the superiority of Soviet forces and the spirit of the Soviet populace.

Confounding expectations, Shostakovich composed a work that was a celebration of life, energy, optimism: things not available to people during a time of deprivation. The contrast with the *Leningrad* and Eighth Symphonies is enormous. Those two works weighed in at an hour plus; the *Leningrad* can easily exceed 70 minutes. The Ninth is concise: five succinct movements totaling less than thirty minutes. Where its two immediate predecessor symphonies demand enormous orchestras with quadruple woodwind, expanded percussion and extra brass, the Ninth employs a smaller orchestra like those of the mid-19th century. The scoring is similarly restrained, often approximating the textures of chamber music.

Most dramatic is the change in character. Instead of ponderous, weighty statements, Shostakovich seems intent on emphasizing life's brighter moments. From the bouncy opening theme, his mood is upbeat and energetic. At times the atmosphere is almost circus-like, even slapstick. In the outer movements, his style resembles that of the popular *Festive Overture*.

Shostakovich was a man of complex psychological layers, however, and he finds room for exploring different moods in his inner movements. Specifically, the second movement *Moderato* is the emotional heart of the work, and the cryptic *Largo* reminds us that this composer did not hesitate to ask probing questions through his music. Still, he also had a wicked sense of humor, and it is his wit that prevails at the end of the Ninth.

Shostakovich scored his Ninth Symphony for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two

oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, triangle, cymbals, bass drum and strings.

### **About the Music: A Listener's Guide to Shostakovich's Ninth Symphony**

Many of Shostakovich's large orchestral works are major political statements. That was certainly what his audience expected when the Second World War ended with victory over the Nazis. Instead, Shostakovich surprised his public with the Ninth Symphony, a relatively small-scale work almost Haydnesque in its proportions.

Indeed, the perky first movement is a textbook sonata form, right down to the repeated exposition. The style is traditional, the musical language conservative and the mood light. A persistent, unsuccessful interruption from the trombone invites ridicule and makes it clear that Shostakovich wants to have some fun.

A lovely clarinet solo opens the slow movement, which – at nine minutes – is the longest in this brief symphony. The clarinet introduces a veritable woodwind serenade. Other than cellos and basses playing pizzicato at the start, strings are silent for the entire first section. Only rarely do the strings seize the melodic foreground. It is the clarinet, flute and piccolo solos that you will remember from this thoughtful meditation.

The scherzo is virtuosic. It goes like the wind and requires great precision from conductor and orchestra. Solo trumpet in the trio section recalls the circus atmosphere of the first movement, but only for the blink of an eye. This entire whirling dervish whooshes through in a scant two and a half minutes. Without pause, Shostakovich plunges us into a grim conversation between low brass, intoning an ominous fanfare and an extended bassoon recitative.

Bassoon also provides transition to the finale and its first thematic statement. A brisk

march restores the resolute good cheer of the opening. It might not be the celebration that the Soviet authorities anticipated, but Shostakovich was clearly celebrating *something*.

### **The Ninth Symphony: A Contemporary Reminiscence**

In an article that remained unpublished until 1990, the Soviet musicologist and critic Daniil Zhitomirsky recorded his reminiscences of Shostakovich and reflections on his music. The article, which is translated in Elizabeth Wilson's *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, contains the following observations about the Ninth Symphony.

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Shostakovich had developed a fatalistic attitude toward what was “demanded” of him, which often had an oppressing effect on him. But actually, in his work on the Ninth Symphony, he could no longer subjugate himself to this oppression. As far back as the spring of 1944 Shostakovich had said to a certain Moscow musicologist, “Yes, I am thinking of my next symphony, the Ninth. I would like to employ not only full orchestra but a choir and soloists, if I can find a suitable text; in any case I don't want to be accused of drawing presumptuous analogies.”

But in fact in August of that year, at his crude country table at Ivanovo, Shostakovich was creating something entirely different, indeed totally contrary ... Instead of a lavish glorification, a modest chamber score emerged. In one of the more favorable reviews of the time, it was called a “Symphony-Scherzo.” I remember how clearly I sensed the novelty of this symphony, its inherent relevance and manifold implications, which were by no means immediately obvious. Superficially there was much that was playful and carefree in the music, even at times a sort of festive swagger; but this then was transformed into something tragic and grotesque. It showed up the senseless vacuity and triteness of that everyday “rejoicing” which so gratified our authorities.

– Daniil Zhitomirsky

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