

Late Night Violin

Friday, May 31 – 9:30 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor

Simone Porter, violin

PROKOFIEV

Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major, Op.19

(23')*

Andantino

Scherzo: Vivacissimo

Finale: Moderato

BARBER

Violin Concerto, Op.14

(25')*

Allegro

Andante

Presto in moto perpetuo

program subject to change

*indicates approximate performance duration

Note: There is NO intermission in tonight's performance. Please join us in the lobby following the concert.

Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major, Op.19

Sergei Prokofiev

(b. Sontsovka, 1891 / d. St. Petersburg, 1953)

First performed: October 18, 1923 in Paris

Last ESO performance: March 2008

After announcing his presence on the scene with some fiercely virtuosic and cutting-edge piano works, Sergei Prokofiev must have decided that public acceptance might come more readily with a slightly less aggressive approach – reflected in works such as the *“Classical” Symphony* and the *First Violin Concerto*. Ironically, this new, softer stance was occurring as his native land was whipping itself up into the frenzy of the Bolshevik Revolution. Trying to make his way in the music world, touring and concertizing, took

up much of his time, and the concerto was not premiered until years later in Paris. Even still, it did not truly begin to find widespread public acceptance until Josef Szigeti began to champion the piece.

Pensive violin opens the work alone, though woodwinds join in soon enough – the violin was not Prokofiev's instrument, which perhaps led him to a more lyrical use of it than the abrasive bravura piano which was so much a part of his musicianship. The slow, melodic opening increases in pace, but still quietly, as the violin leads the orchestra around a twirling, flight-filled central section. Prokofiev uses unique directions in this movement: the slow opening is marked "*sognando*" (roughly, "as if in a dream"), while the faster central section is labeled "*narrante*" ("as if telling a story"). At the movement's end, the flute takes on the music the violin had played at the beginning. The violin's upper register and an arpeggiating flute close the movement on a whisper.

In a bit of reverse order, Prokofiev's concerto is in a "slow-fast-slow" layout, so its second movement is a dashing Scherzo. This is certainly more in line with the *enfant terrible* composer who had scandalized the St. Petersburg Conservatory with his outlandish pianism. The music jumps out, a series of ostinatos and an almost comically exaggerated heavy-bowed violin lead to a mad dash for all the instruments, especially the soloist's, with a taxing, rhythmic series of challenges, interspersed with brief cries from the orchestra.

The final movement begins entirely unexpectedly, with bassoons against plucked strings, for all the world not unlike the ox-carts depicted by Borodin or Rimsky-Korsakov a generation before. But the violin, once it enters, is now transformed into a beguiling songstress. The music's intensity increases, as do the challenges presented the soloist, until the movement's loudest moment brings the orchestra (spotlighting the tuba!) together in a recollection of the opening bassoon passage. The final moments take us back to the violin which, as if satisfied with the journey it has led, alights gently at the conclusion with another long-held high note.

Violin Concerto, Op.14

Samuel Barber

(b. West Chester, Pennsylvania, 1910 / d. New York, 1981)

First performed: February 7, 1941 in Philadelphia

Last ESO performance: November 2014

Among the first class of students at the new Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia (founded in 1924), American child prodigy Samuel Barber found himself among gifted company. His fellow students included Iso Briselli, a violinist and adopted son of industrialist Samuel Fels. It was Fels who commissioned Barber to write a violin concerto for Briselli, and with the commission fee in hand, Barber left for Switzerland in the summer of 1939 to work on the piece.

Yet trouble soon began with his concerto. Barber sketched out the first two movements with some speed, yet their intended dedicatee did not care for them. The first movement was lyrical and beautiful,

the second resigned and even sad, yet neither presented the virtuosic challenge Briselli claimed to be looking for.

Don't worry, Barber assured both father and son, the final movement will provide all the bravado fireworks you're looking for. And so it did, to the point where Briselli pronounced the piece unplayable. Eventually, the two young musicians went their own ways, and the concerto's official premiere was given by Albert Spalding and the Philadelphia Orchestra – although the Curtis Institute Orchestra performed it the season before, under Fritz Reiner, with yet another Curtis alum, Herbert Baumel as soloist.

Always a composer with a strong melodic feel, Barber wastes no time, giving the violin an extended and tender solo melody from the work's opening bars, to discreet orchestral support. A second dominant motif is hinted at in the woodwinds, but the orchestra picks up the main song of the opening, and whips it into a brief frenzy, which ebbs, bringing back the secondary motif which, with its use of short-long "Lombardic" rhythm and a modal harmonic quality have led many to refer to as Scottish in influence. The development section features a striking counterpoint between the violin's impassioned song (much of it in the higher register) against a darker, more pointed orchestral melody. It is only here, about halfway through, that there is sustained drive and fortissimo, with the Scots-tinged secondary subject leading to a tutti statement of the main theme, grand and noble in full orchestral garb. The orchestra launches the Recapitulation, though the violin leads the charge to the dramatic tutti that winds the movement down to its whispered finish.

The second movement is in E Major, and important melodic ideas are given by oboe, strings, clarinet, and horn (to pizzicato accompaniment) before the violin even enters, fully a quarter way through the movement. But with its first notes, the soloist dominates both the melodic and emotional direction, notwithstanding the important punctuations and comments from the orchestra. The movement ends with violin over a hushed timpani roll, and it is those drums, with a driving triple metre, which launch the fierce "moto perpetuo" final movement. The dashing pace set by the soloist rarely flags, occasionally crossed with a counter-rhythm or secondary subject in the orchestra – but never for long. Only about four minutes long, this daunting finale is a physical as well as technical challenge – one certainly at odds with the tenderness of the preceding two movements.