



Sergei Prokofiev: Works for Violin & Piano

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Of Prokofiev's three chamber works for violin and piano, only the first sonata was originally conceived for the violin, and that work took eight years to complete. The second sonata was completed before the first, because it is a transcription, organized by David Oistrakh, of Prokofiev's Flute Sonata. The Cinq mélodies were written in California in 1920 as vocalises for mezzosoprano, only to be turned into a popular violin work several years later, in Paris.

Prokofiev, the pianist, did not play the violin, which explains some of the enthusiasm for transcribing his earlier works. His slow progress on the first sonata seems in part to have been from political shock at Stalin's great purge, launched shortly after Prokofiev's return to Russia. In addition, the composer kept putting it aside for bigger commissions, such as the opera, War and Peace.

Even after the first public performance in 1946, Prokofiev continued to alter the score. He was unsatisfied with the sober performance by Oistrakh and Lev Oberin. Prokofiev kept inserting dynamic markings so that their interpretation ("like two old professors") would not establish a standard. Yet at Prokofiev's 1953 funeral, it was Oistrakh who played the first and third movements, which were deemed to be among the few pieces in the composer's legacy which were not fundamentally happy and optimistic.

Franziska Pietsch is a German violinist, once a prodigy in the German Democratic Republic. She and Detlev Eisinger offer big-boned and fully engaged readings of these works. Prokofiev set the dark tone for the first sonata by describing the violin's muted runs in the first and last movements as an "autumn evening wind blowing across a neglected cemetery grave." Pietsch and Eisinger are appropriately disquieting, with dramatic gestures and technical assurance.

Alina Ibragimova and Steven Osborne recorded the same works for Hyperion in 2014, to much praise. Both recordings are quite excellent, but they differ in which Russian composer is imagined to be Prokofiev's musical cousin. Ibragimova and Osborne place Prokofiev in proximity to Stravinsky's aesthetic world, stressing the cool, detached neoclassical elements that exist in both sonatas. In contrast, Pietsch and Eisinger's Prokofiev seems closer to Shostakovich, with anxiety never far beneath the surface. Their performances are less tightly controlled, more boisterous, urgent, and energetic. Thus the Andante of the first sonata soars serenely in Ibragimova's hands, but unsettles a bit in Pietsch. The final Allegro at times sounds merry for Ibragimova but darker and harsher for Pietsch. Both performances

give enormous pleasure, but each is shaped by a different conception of the music.

The Cinq mélodies are more than filler, but are well-played but light-weight companions to the pair of violin sonatas.

The recording has a slightly cavernous, churchly sound. Why do music producers imagine that empty churches offer a happy location for recording chamber music? But as with many audio complaints, this one ceases to be an issue after listening for a few minutes and entering the sound-world of two outstanding performers. The music is recorded up close, with lots of power.

