

# SHOSTAKOVICH STRAUSS

audite

FRANZISKA PIETSCH VIOLIN

JOSU DE SOLAUN PIANO

**RICHARD STRAUSS**

**Sonate Es-Dur für Violine & Klavier op. 18**

- I. *Allegro, ma non troppo* 12:35
- II. *Improvisation. Andante cantabile* 8:58
- III. *Finale. Andante – Allegro* 8:29

**DMITRI SCHOSTAKOWITSCH**

**Sonate für Violine & Klavier op. 134**

- I. *Andante* 11:51
- II. *Allegretto* 6:41
- III. *Largo – Andante* 15:22

**FRANZISKA PIETSCH** violin

**JOSU DE SOLAUN** piano

## Celebration and Mourning: A Life Cycle Complete

Scarcely 80 years separate the composition of the two masterpieces featured in this album. 80 years – the average span of a human lifetime... And yet, despite their relative closeness in time, no two pieces in the repertoire could be more diametrically opposed. If so, then why program them together?

The Strauss – an unambiguous ode to life: a life-affirming testimony of youth's naive and jubilant passions; a hymn to romance, love, and beauty, full of heroic and crusading fervor, amorous feelings, flamboyance, panache, excitement, zest, virtuosity, gusto, theatricality, enthusiasm and courageous impetus. The Shostakovich – an almost spartan, personal threnody: a musical journey through the uncompromisingly bleak asceticism necessary to confront our mortality; an aesthetic treatise on stoicism and austerity in the face of suffering. One written at the beginning of one's life (Strauss was 23), while the other written in the twilight of existence (Shostakovich was 62). Moreover, the Strauss, participating of the decadent aestheticism typical of fin-de-siècle Europe, almost innocent in the face of the two World Wars yet to come, depicts, in a sense, a world of celebration (the image of an orchestra playing while the Titanic is sinking comes readily to mind, though). The Shostakovich, with a musical language already eroded by a revolution, two World Wars, and so much more, staring grimly at the future, and having abandoned all hope, as Dante would have it, already depicts a world of mourning, no longer one of celebration. Perhaps this is the difference between youth and old age, or between 1888 and 1968, or between Munich and Moscow. Alternatively, maybe, and more probably, these are two sides of the same coin.

So in fact, it is precisely to bring together these two incommensurable extremes what we set to do here: to show the tears in laughter, and the laughter in tears, as the old saying goes. Contemplating these two archetypal moments in life, so close to each other – those of celebration and mourning – one cannot but recognize the unavoidable existential fact that we all navigate between them as lost wooden logs in the water. Their dramatic contrast presents both a complete picture of human existence and the almost infinite gamut of emotion that music can so mysteriously tap into. One side would surely be incomplete without the other: bringing these two works together, a kind of life circle is closed, a cycle completed for our listeners. There is, of course, some darkness in the Strauss, and some moments of apparent respite in the Shostakovich, for nothing significant in the world of the arts, and especially of music, is without infinite nuance. However, these two works are almost iconic in their depiction of a particular territory of emotions to which they uncompromisingly commit, each important and necessary in its own right.

Strauss wrote his *Violin Sonata* between the years of 1887 and 1888, in the city of Munich, at a time when he was Music Director at the Münchner Hofoper ('Munich Court Opera'), as a 23-year-old young composer and conductor, full of hopes and dreams for a promising future. He had made his public debut as a conductor only three years earlier, in 1884, conducting his *Suite for Winds*, Op. 4, also in Munich, as a protégé of Hans von Bülow, who had met Strauss in Berlin in 1883 (the year of Wagner's death), and who thought he was the next great musical personality after Brahms. Incidentally, Brahms was still very much alive – he died in 1897, ten years after the *Violin Sonata* was composed. Also, as a composer, Strauss had already enjoyed his first crucial public appearance about five years earlier, in 1882, with the first performance of his *Wind Serenade*, Op. 7. The composition of the *Violin Sonata* coincided, too, with the first meeting of Strauss with the great soprano Pauline de Ahna in Feldafing, and the amorous feelings and joyful exuberance of the encounter indeed permeates the general tone of the work. Seven years later, she would become his wife.

Strauss had studied violin with Benno Walter, at the Königliche Bayerische Musikschule ('Royal Bavarian Music School'), now the Hochschule für Musik und Theater München ('University of Music and Performing Arts Munich'), and composition privately with both Friedrich Wilhelm Meyer and with his father, a horn player at the Münchner Hofoper, who instilled in him a love for chamber ensembles as the epitome of abstract instrumental music, in the German tradition of Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Brahms, but also of the Viennese classics. It was an academic, canonic, scholastic music training, in the best sense of these words – full of guild-like patterns of tradition and disciplined craftsmanship. His piano tuition was in the hands of other musicians of the Munich Court Opera Orchestra, who were not professional pianists: the harpist August Tombo and the horn player Carl Niest. Strauss' keyboard training was therefore not centered in a kind of idiomatic virtuosity, but in an image of the piano as either a chamber music instrument or as a platform for sketching orchestral music, learning of course solo repertoire and exercises, but also, and probably more importantly, using it as an aid in the study of score reading, orchestral reduction, transposition, sight-reading, and other such skills. So in general, one can affirm without qualms that Strauss' piano writing is, most of the time, symphonic in nature, and thus very un-pianistic. Whether this is a virtue or a fault is not our task to decide here. The *Violin Sonata's* extreme and awkward technical demands for the piano are ample proof. His violin writing, only slightly more idiomatic, is also very symphonic in nature, always exceeding the chamber music realm and its expectations, sometimes sounding like a full string section, sometimes wood-winds, sometimes like a concerto soloist.

Strauss' first compositional years were thus largely devoted to writing chamber music pieces, which he evidently considered a kind of apprenticeship workshop of sorts. His first important compositions consisted then of such works as two piano trios (TrV 53 and 71, 1877/78), a string quartet (TrV 95, 1880), three piano sonatas (TrV 47, 79 and 103, 1877-81), a cello sonata (TrV 115, 1881), a piano quartet (TrV 137, 1885), a violin sonata (TrV 151, 1887/1888), as well as a serenade (TrV 106, 1881) and a more extended suite (TrV 132, 1884), both scored for double wind quintet plus two additional horns and contrabassoon. The *Violin Sonata* was, in essence, his last essay in this tradition, and in a sense, it marks the end of this apprenticeship period which focused on the chamber music genres.

In fact, after 1888, Strauss actually composed very little for chamber groups, his compositional impetus being almost completely absorbed with symphonic poems, of which he wrote ten, and operas, of which he wrote sixteen. Moreover, the *Violin Sonata* not only marks the end of this youthful period, but also the abandonment of his devotion to Brahms and to what he represented: the tradition of pure, absolute, instrumental music. Moreover, it signaled his progressive entry into the world of tone poems and opera, that is, of music which is much more programmatic and less abstract in content.

In this sense, one already observes in the *Violin Sonata* an evident struggle and tension between surface characterization and deep structure – the themes have much more rhetorical features than ever before in his music, already suggesting non-musical physiognomies and programs; they are clearly pointing towards his future, theatrical, quasi-cinematic way of organizing musical material in the symphonic poems.

In fact, Strauss was already writing the symphonic poem *Macbeth* at the same time as the *Violin Sonata*, and he would write *Don Juan* immediately after. Wagner had died in 1883, Liszt (the creator of the symphonic poem) in 1886 and Brahms would die in 1897. It is clear that by the beginning of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Strauss would slowly come to consider himself as the most important German composer, and one which in a way would bear the vital responsibility of disavowing the inherent dichotomy between the Liszt/Wagner (New German School) and Brahms camps, almost proudly integrating both approaches into a new musical language that fused the programmatic (theatre) and abstract (concert hall) traditions.

The first movement of the sonata starts with a statement that is full of a youthful and exuberant élan. The treatment of the music is, from the very beginning, symphonic in scope, with declamatory phrases, constant imitation, sequences that create cumulative drama, and build-ups to climaxes that are epic, theatrical, almost operatic in scope. Both violin and piano parts resemble concerti in their unabashed virtuosity and large-breadth lyricism. Here and there, there are hints of wistfulness and nostalgia too, and even of rugged conflict, but the general tone is that of optimism and elation.

The second movement is an almost Mendelssohnian “song without words,” although with more of an urban, cosmopolitan charm, full of piquant dissonances and unexpected harmonic turns. The middle section suddenly turns dramatic, in an almost Schubertian nod to *Erk König*, with its passionate repeated octaves in the piano part. This section magically and suddenly dissolves into music filled with lace-like, delicate filigrees that express a most intimate and bittersweet yearning for the past. Here is Strauss at his best. The music is full of enchantment and highly refined writing for both instruments, almost Viennese in its elegant sophistication.

The third movement, after a somber introduction, starts with dashing brio and swagger, a thematic flourish bursting with full-fledged charisma and vitalism, full of the rhythmic verve of such symphonic poems as *Don Juan* and *Ein Heldenleben*. The contrasting lyrical theme is a vast, soaring line, spanning two octaves, almost ecstatic in its expression, a kind of music that clearly went way beyond chamber-music style expectations and into the grandiose, symphonic realm. The music ends with vigor and bravado, in an exhilarating rush that confirms that all is good with the world and that the future promises lavish fruits.

Like in the span of a lifetime, the music in this album travels from youthful exuberance to the acceptance of old age. So here we enter the world of Shostakovich’s *Violin Sonata*.

Dmitri Shostakovich wrote his *Violin Sonata*, during the year of 1968, in the midst of the Brezhnev era. It was written during the dark Moscow winter season and dedicated to David Oistrakh, as a gift for his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. By this time, and in many senses, Shostakovich was a completely broken man. He no longer could play the piano due to a debilitating condition in his right hand (poliomyelitis), he had already suffered two heart attacks, several falls in which he broke both legs, a looming lung cancer due to his addiction to cigarettes, and he had been both celebrated but also censored and denounced by the Soviet government, with charges of “formalism” and being an “enemy of the people.”

In contrast to the Strauss, this violin sonata is almost entirely suffused by a kind of bleakness, bareness, simplicity, and radical austerity, and one that is both acerbic and imperturbable in its emotional purpose. These are the kind of musings of someone who has long committed to a painful, terrifying, but also necessary existential outcome, and who continues to carry on living despite a black cloud always hovering above; the piece stands as kind of testament, of hidden last wishes – a preoccupation with own’s mortality, but enveloped by stupor and paralysis; maybe even muteness.

There is thus an unflappable, crisp succinctness in the work’s textures that stands in stark contrast with the general feeling of abundance and opulence in the Strauss sonata. The mood here, instead, is that of absolute gravitas from the very beginning – a very slow, hushed unfolding of gloom, asperity, and tragic mystery. There is, as well, a certain tone of rigid coldness, in fact, but one that in reality hides a burning, almost confessional, self-communing intensity; nevertheless, though, a strength which can only be slightly inferred, like dark burning coal hidden in a secret basement and secretly warming us.

Unlike the Strauss, the sonata’s virtuosity is never exuberant, joyful, fanciful, or filled with the enthusiasm of youth. It is a dramatic kind of virtuosity, placing the skills of the instrumentalists to an almost existential purpose.

The principal theme of the first movement contains the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale, a subtle nod to European serialism, played by the piano in both hands in unison, a gesture instantly rejecting the humanizing and dignifying clothing of harmony. There is an inherent lack of immediate meaning in serialism, as it always verges necessarily towards abstraction. And indeed, there is something about the cool detachment of serialism that expresses the chiller of cold-bloodedness, the spirit of the author's times. All twelve notes are equal, but is there any real freedom in this? And thus serialism itself almost becomes here a rhetorical trope, expressing numb indifference and resignation, and not merely a style of musical composition. Shostakovich's use for it here is, in fact, more expressive than structural, a device that sublimates into music the psychological wreckage of being a subject of his time. As the piano plays the twelve-tone theme on an almost mechanical, lifeless, infinite loop, the violin commences with a soul-searching confession based on the famous DSCH motif, the cryptogram used by Shostakovich on occasion to represent himself, consisting of the notes D, E flat, C, B natural (in German, D, Es, C, H), standing for the composer's initials in German transliteration (D. Sch.).

The violin writing in the first movement switches from intimate disclosures to ironic, mocking, grotesque marches; to banal, almost darkly coy perorations, hollow cynicism, and lastly to a spectral, haunting, high-register arabesque that sounds almost like a lunar, whistling spider weaving an inexorable web of evil destiny, punctuated by eerie funeral chimes and tremolos expressing the uncontrollable quivers of fear. The piano, although many times in conversation, unavoidably responds coldly, almost indifferently, to the violin's discourse at most junctures. The movement ends again with tremolos in the violin, this time having progressed dramatically to sound virtually like postmortem spasms that fade into a black hole of silence.

The mood of severity and stiffness is suddenly contrasted by the second movement, a mixture between a macabre dance of terror and a grotesquely celebratory one. One too that strangely metamorphoses from marches to waltzes, to toccatas, all in a relentless, vigorous, and barbarous menagerie of shrieks, cries, appeals, thuds, jumps, bumps, energetic claims, and virtuosic obstinacy – almost inexorability; and all ending in an abrupt crash. The movement makes incredible physical demands on the coordination and stamina of the players, almost as if testing their ascetic endurance.

Soon after, a short, introductory and dramatic, gothic-like version of a French Overture: then the third movement starts. It is a Passacaglia, that Baroque symbol of perpetuation and stagnation, of *tempus fugit* – the *memento mori* of old Rome, traditionally employed as an admonition against seizing the day, which in the context of this album could be said to be the Straussian *carpe diem*. The message here seems to be: resign yourself to the fact that time is inexorably moving forward, and yet also that essentially nothing changes, or at least nothing your individual will could possibly influence. A kind of “purgatorial numbness” as the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* rightly calls it.

The Passacaglia itself consists of an eleven-bar theme – again using all of the twelve pitches of the chromatic scale, played by the violin, at first almost literally carved into the violin's wood by piercing pizzicati, as if inscribing something in stone – maybe one's name in a tombstone. This theme is followed by continuous variations that progressively grow in both dramatic intensity and an almost desperate agitation, until they reach a cosmic breaking point and burst into two different piano and violin cadenzas, of cataclysmic, even apocalyptic proportions. After these two explosive, dramatic monologues, the Passacaglia theme returns, but this time emboldened, free of lethargy and numbness, instead now full of ardor and courage, in what seems like the last attempt at some closure. This is one the most powerfully moving moments in the whole of the chamber music literature.

The piece then ends with the return of the spidery arabesques punctuated by the funeral bells, and the postmortem muscle twitches, the music very gradually sinking into a kind of frozen, stoic darkness; silent, calm, but unresolved.



## FRANZISKA PIETSCH

At first glance, Franziska Pietsch's career seems to have been a fairy tale of good fortune. Born into a musical family in East Berlin – both her parents were violinists – she was celebrated as a child prodigy. Under the tutelage of Prof. Werner Scholz from Berlin's Hanns Eisler Hochschule for Music, Pietsch began at a young age to win contests such as the Bach Competition in Leipzig and made her debut at Berlin's Comic Opera at the age of eleven. There followed a number of years in the "Virtuoso Circus", as she calls it in hindsight. She performed the violin concertos of Bruch, Lalo, Sibelius, and Paganini with the finest orchestras in East Germany; at the age of 12, she made her first recordings for the East German Radio (including Sarasate's Gypsy Airs). But this fairy tale ended abruptly in 1984 when her father defected to West Germany during a concert tour. Two years would pass before his family was allowed to join him, and these two years would change the course of Franziska Pietsch's life. From one day to the next, she was on her own, as all state-sponsored studies and scholarships were suspended.

"And so, at the age of 14, I was forced to ask myself a number of truly fundamental questions. Why do I want to be a musician? What does music really mean?" Franziska Pietsch found answers in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. For an entire year, with no instruction whatsoever, she devoted herself exclusively to his solo works, distancing herself quite consciously from the "circus" life of a child prodigy. After moving to West Germany in 1986, she continued on this path, supported by her teacher and mentor Prof. Ulf Hoelscher. She completed her years of study with the legendary violin teacher Dorothy DeLay at the Juilliard School in New York.

Franziska Pietsch returned to Germany in 1992 determined to expand her musical horizons beyond the solo literature, turning towards all forms of music-making, and especially the great symphonic masterpieces. For more than ten years, she was the concertmaster of prestigious orchestras such as the Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg, the Sinfonieorchester Wuppertal, the WDR Sinfonieorchester, and the orchestras of the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf and the opera in Frank-



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furt. At the same time, she continued to perform as a soloist throughout Europe, America, and Asia. In 2010, Pietsch gave up her activities as a concertmaster to devote herself exclusively to chamber music.

By the end of 2018, Franziska Pietsch will have recorded nine albums in only seven years for the audite label. With the Trio Testore, she recorded a.o. the complete piano trios of Johannes Brahms. In 2014, Franziska Pietsch decided to focus on the chamber music formation closest to her heart, the string trio, founding the Trio Lirico together with violist Sophia Reuter and cellist Johannes Krebs; this ensemble recorded the works of Max Reger for CD. Pietsch's performances and recordings with pianist Detlev Eisinger (e.g. sonatas by Grieg, Franck, and Prokofiev) have been praised by international critics and nominated for the German Music Critics' Prize and the International Classical Music Awards.

In 2017, Franziska Pietsch felt the time had come to attempt once again to express her years of musical and personal experience through the great violin concertos. She recorded both Prokofiev concertos with the Deutsches Sinfonieorchester Berlin under the direction of Cristian Măcelaru. She has felt a deep connection to this composer since her childhood: "It is not only the sometimes dark and melancholy sound colors, which possibly speak to my Czech and Polish roots, but perhaps also Prokofiev's own life, his search for an individual artistic identity under a totalitarian regime." The Prokofiev recording – released on audite as well – was a huge critical success and was nominated for the International Classic Music Award and won the "Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik" awarded quarterly.

Beginning summer 2018, three new CDs were recorded, documenting the enormous artistic spectrum of this exceptional violinist: The recording of the solo sonatas by Bartok, Ysaÿe, and Prokofiev which was hailed by the critics (e.g. Gramophone, pizzicato, Spiegel online) and resulted in feature articles in the leading German press (DIE ZEIT, Süddeutsche Zeitung), the current recording of duo sonatas by Shostakovich and Strauss with pianist Josu De Solaun, and string trios by Schnittke, Penderecki, and Weinberg with the Trio Lirico (release Sept. 2019). Franziska Pietsch plays a violin by Carlo Antonio Testore (Milan) of 1751.





## JOSU DE SOLAUN

Josu De Solaun is one of the leading pianists of today. The First Prize at the XIII George Enescu International Piano Competition in Bucharest – succeeding pianists like Elisabeth Leonskaja and Radu Lupu – was a catalyst for his international career. He is also a winner of the XV José Iturbi International Piano Competition (Spain) and the only pianist from Spain to win the Enescu and Iturbi competitions in their respective histories.

Josu De Solaun left his home country at an early age to pursue his studies in the US. A student of the Manhattan School of Music in New York, he grew up in Manhattan for 15 years, making a living playing recitals, chamber music, and occasionally improvising at Café Sabarsky. Until today, improvising is part of his musical life, as well as composing, with future premieres of his Piano Concerto and Piano Sonata.

His training is mainly Russian with some French influences, resulting in an exceptional mastery. In combination with his musicality and versatility, this leads to a broad and varied repertoire with preference for works written between 1850 and 1950. His biggest passion, however, belongs to chamber music – as for the literature itself but also for the non-verbal communication between musicians.

Josu De Solaun's electric performances are characterized by a fine balance of virtuosity, refinement, lyricism, passion and commitment, merging a fiery spirit and well-grounded serenity. His playing is warm and intimate with a cultivated sense of



cantabile in sound, led solely by expression no matter how intense the virtuosity is. His interpretations are intelligent and mature, enriched by a profound intellectual understanding of the works, both in their musical context and their larger cultural frame. A former university student of Western philosophy, he is not only an expressive pianist but also an articulate and imaginative writer.

Josu De Solaun has been invited to perform in distinguished concert series throughout the world, having made notable appearances in Bucharest (Romanian Athenaeum), Venice (Teatro La Fenice), Saint Petersburg (Mariinsky Theatre), Washington, D.C. (Kennedy Center), New York (Carnegie Hall, Metropolitan Opera), London (Southbank Centre), Paris (Salle Cortot), Taipei (Novel Hall), Mexico City (Sala Silvestre Revueltas), and all major cities of Spain.

He has played as concerto soloist with orchestras such as the Mariinsky Theatre Orchestra of Saint Petersburg, Orchestra la Filarmonica Fenice of Venice, George Enescu Philharmonic Orchestra of Bucharest, Orquesta Sinfónica de Bilbao, Orquesta de Valencia, Rudolf Barshai Moscow Chamber Orchestra, Mexico City Philharmonic Orchestra, and Spain's Radio and Television Orchestra (RTVE), among many others.

He has recorded the complete works for piano of George Enescu and *Les Noces* by Stravinsky with JoAnn Falletta as conductor.

Josu De Solaun's two main teachers and main musical influences have been pianists Nina Svetlanova and Horacio Gutiérrez. In addition, he studied chamber music with members of the Guarneri String Quartet and Beaux Arts Trio.

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*Dipl.-Tonmeister Justus Beyer*

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*piano technician: Arimune Yamamoto*



*SHIGERU KAWAI*

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WERKE FÜR VIOLINE UND KLAVIER