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SMALL FEATURE ON THE SINFONIA CONCERTANTE OF PROKOFIEV

Sergei Prokofiev's Symphony-Concerto, equally known as his Sinfonia Concertante, in E minor, Op. 125 is a large-scale symphonic work for cello and orchestra. Prokofiev dedicated it to Mstislav Rostropovich, who premiered it on February 18th, 1952 with pianist Sviatoslav Richter conducting (almost the only instance of Richter conducting!). After this first performance (under the title 'Cello Concerto No. 2'), it was still revised yet again and given its current title. As many cellists know, it is itself a totally revised version of his earlier Cello Concerto, Op. 58, written in 1933-1938. Prokofiev had the common habit of either refusing to touch a note after composition, or making whole large-scale revisions - curious!

All this work by Prokofiev happened during much of 1950 and 1951, a period when Prokofiev was in declining health and official disfavour for musical formalism, despite having been enticed to return to the U.S.S.R. by the Soviet authorities. This indeed is one of his final completed works, it is about 40 minutes long and in three movements:

1. Andante (11 minutes)
2. Allegro (18 minutes)
3. Andante con moto - Allegretto - Allegro marcato (11 minutes)

For a long time, the Symphony-Concerto was considered almost unplayable. Even though many cellists today are now able to play it, it still remains a formidable challenge for any cellist, and one that takes a long time to 'get it into your system'. When I learnt the work in my last year of studies at the London Royal Academy of Music in the '80s it was commented that I was the first student cellist there who 'dared' play the concerto, though of course respectfully I must say that other top students played other very difficult works too!

The original premiere of the earlier Prokofiev Cello Concerto (Op. 58) was generally thought to have been very poorly interpreted by the cellist, though the blame also fell on Prokofiev for writing a "soul-less" concerto. The concerto was seldom played afterwards, until Prokofiev heard Rostropovich play it at a 1947 concert at the Moscow Conservatory. The performance reawakened Prokofiev's interest in the cello, and he rewrote his concerto (with advice from Rostropovich) to create the amazing Symphony-Concerto (Op. 125). Also dating from this period are his cello sonata of 1949, and an unfinished concertino for cello and orchestra, later completed by Rostropovich and orchestrated by Kabalevsky. This work almost surely inspired Dmitri Shostakovich to write his Cello Concerto No. 1, also dedicated to Rostropovich.

Two Questions to think about! -

1] How many of you would rate this composition as the 'pinnacle' of twentieth-century cello writing, like the Dvorak Concerto is often considered in the romantic period ??

2] Who are your favourite performers specifically of this great work?



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'documenting the cello' www.johnstone-music.com

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