



Celestial Waters
September 22 & 23, 2023

PROGRAM NOTES

Les Eaux célestes

Camille Pépin (b.1990)

Violin Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 63

Sergei Prokofiev (1891 - 1953)

In 1935, while on tour with violinist Robert Soërtens, Sergei Prokofiev composed his Second Violin Concerto, a work commissioned by Soërtens, who also gave its premiere. This concerto was his final opus during an almost two-decade-long period spent abroad in Europe and USA. Prokofiev's journey in crafting this concerto traversed various locations and influences. He later reminisced, 'The principal theme of the first movement was written in Paris, the first theme of the second

movement in Voronezh (Russia), the orchestration was completed in Baku, and the first performance was given in Madrid! This geographical diversity is reflected in the concerto's multifaceted character.

As Prokofiev contemplated returning to the USSR, he faced the challenge of the Soviet cultural and political climate. Stalin's *Socialist Realism* doctrine, introduced in the early 1930s, imposed strict guidelines on artists. They were expected to create works that celebrated the virtues of socialism, adhering to clear, accessible forms and optimistic themes. Deviations from this ideology could lead to persecution, censorship, or worse.

Prokofiev's solution was ingenious. He incorporated simpler melodies, making his music more appealing to a broader audience, all while retaining his trademark adventurous harmonies and bold characteristics. The fusion of this 'new simplicity' with his distinctive style allowed Prokofiev to preserve artistic integrity while navigating the challenging political situation.

However, the party later denounced him, along with five other composers, in 1948.

The opening of the concerto is a journey through lyrical landscapes. It begins with a haunting five-beat long motif played by the solo violin in the low register. This tune is

joined in canon by the low strings, creating an eerie atmosphere. The second theme emerges in the relative major key of B-flat, which undergoes a colorful harmonic transformation as it passes from the violin to the horn and later to the oboe. The development section takes both themes through a kaleidoscope of variations, offering a rich tapestry of textures. Throughout the movement the solo violin and orchestra exchange in dialogue, often accompanied by arpeggio sequences that evoke a fantasy-world imagery.

The second movement features a lush romantic tune over a lute-like ostinato in the strings. It later introduces contrasting themes, including a hypnotic chromatic section and a sudden burst of playful, energetic music in the middle. At the end, Prokofiev surprises us by turning the opening theme on its head, with the soloist playing the ostinato pizzicato and the “romantic” tune now played by low horn, clarinet, and cello.

The third movement is full of rhythmic vitality, where Prokofiev adds a touch of Spanish flair with the inclusion of castanets, possibly intended for its premiere in Madrid. It's a vigorous dance of contrasts, showcasing syncopation, hemiolas, and irregular time signatures, yet always returning back to the weighty $\frac{3}{4}$ time in its Rondo form. Harmonically, it throws in prominent dissonances

while at interplay between the parallel minor and major tonalities within a single phrase. The rhythmic drive is bolstered by the bass drum in the thrilling coda.

– *Inna Langerman*

Violin Concerto in D minor

Amanda Maier-Röntgen (1853 - 1894)

Amanda Röntgen-Maier was a Swedish violinist and composer born in 1853. She received top grades at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm and became the first woman ever to earn the title of Musikdirector (Director of Music) from the institution in 1873. After graduating, she moved abroad to Leipzig where she continued her studies in composition and violin with notable musicians and teachers including Engelbert Röntgen (concertmaster of the Gewandhaus orchestra), Carl Reinecke (director of the Gewandhaus orchestra) and Ernst Friedrich Richter (professor of harmony and counterpoint at the Hochschule für Musik and cantor of the Thomasschule). In Leipzig, Maier lived at the epicenter of the music scene. In addition to studying, composing and performing, she also attended concerts, listened to rehearsals of the Gewandhaus

orchestra, and participated in musical soirées where she met and collaborated with other prominent musicians. As a violinist, she performed frequently around Europe and appeared as a soloist in over 100 public performances. In 1875 she wrote her Violin Concerto in D minor and premiered it as the soloist on December 10, in Halle. The performance received wonderful reviews and led to several follow-up concerts, including one at the prestigious Gewandhaus in Leipzig.

Maier married her teacher's son, Julius Röntgen, in 1880 and they settled in Amsterdam. Once married, Maier stopped performing regularly and composed much less, but she continued to organize and host musical salons and performances that were attended by local musicians and visiting celebrities like Johannes Brahms, Edvard Grieg, and Anton Rubenstein. She had two sons (Julius Jr. born in 1881 and Engelbert born in 1886) and spent the last seven years of her life very ill. She passed away peacefully in her sleep in 1894.

Maier wrote a number of compositions that were published during her life, which was a rare achievement for a female composer at that time. Her violin concerto is among her most notable works. Written in one movement, this remarkable concerto is imbued with romanticism and covers a range of character and emotion. It features a dramatic opening, virtuosic themes, tender and intimate melodies, and an imposing cadenza to top it off. There are many parallels drawn between her work and those of other composers at that time, including Brahms, Schubert and Mendelssohn, whose violin concerto she performed frequently. Certain themes exude a pastoral quality that is reminiscent of Beethoven, whose violin concerto she studied closely as she composed this work. Maier's violin concerto is brilliant and idiomatic and has its own fiery personality which fully reflects the talents of a highly accomplished composer. While she was virtually forgotten for a century following her death in 1894, her works have been slowly rediscovered in recent years. I am so pleased to have the opportunity to perform this shimmering work so that more people become familiar with this impressive composer!

– *Juliana Pereira*

Concerto for Orchestra, BB 123

Béla Bartók (1881 - 1945)

In 1940, fearing the capitulation of his homeland to the Nazis, Béla Bartók left Hungary for exile in the USA. For three years he wrote almost nothing new; he gave concerts and worked at Columbia University on the folk-music of Asia Minor. By 1943 funds to support his research had dried up, and he was too ill to continue his career as a pianist. At this point Serge Koussevitsky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, visited Bartók in hospital with a cheque for \$1000 and a commission to write a major orchestral work. Moved by this gesture, Bartók recovered the will to write music. The result was the Concerto for Orchestra, his largest mature orchestral work, which he composed at feverish speed between August and October 1943.

Premiered in Boston on December 1st 1944, with Koussevitsky conducting, the concerto was the biggest public success of Bartók's career. He had previously been considered a minority interest, an uncompromising and abrasive modernist. But the concerto was approachable and brilliantly effective, typical of the relatively straightforward style of his last works. It remains today his most performed piece, and was largely responsible for Bartók's popular establishment as a repertoire

composer. Sadly, he only saw the beginning of the process, for he died in 1945.

The form of the piece may have been influenced by his publisher Ralph Hawkes, who in 1942 suggested Bartók compose a series of works along the lines of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos. Bartók's was not the first 20th-century work to bear the title Concerto for Orchestra: there had been several others, notably by Hindemith (1925) and Bartók's great friend Kodály (1939). They used the term to signify something similar to the Baroque concerto grosso, with different sections of the orchestra competing against one another or being displayed in turn. Bartók, however, seems to have been the first to allow equal opportunities for solo display from all members of the orchestra; and unlike the others, Bartók's Concerto is of symphonic dimensions. The five-part form is unusual, but relates to the symmetrical or "arch" forms that Bartók had used in many earlier works.

The first movement is an Introduction: after a slow prelude it is largely occupied by a vigorous allegro displaying the power of the full orchestra. There is a contrasting, gently pastoral second theme with solo oboe, and a brilliant brass fanfare. At different times, Bartók called the second movement "Presenting the

Couples" or "Game of the Couples". It wittily deploys wind instruments in twos, each putting their personal spin on a recurring theme, with a constant rhythm from the side-drum. The third movement is an Elegy, a tragic outcry: Bartók likened its form to a chain, a succession of linked, contrasted episodes.

The fourth movement alternates two melodies in folk style, interrupted by the clarinet which alludes to the march-tune in Shostakovich's "Leningrad Symphony" (a favorite of Koussevitsky's at that time). The Finale starts with a brilliant moto perpetuo until the solo trumpet breaks in with a new tune, which forms the basis of an extended fugue. Out of a mysterious tranquillo episode the moto perpetuo returns, combined with the trumpet tune, and the music builds to a grand climax. After the first few performances Bartók decided the ending was too abrupt, and composed a longer one. Both are included in this score, but it is the longer "Alternative Ending", composed in March 1945, which is now generally used in performance.

– *Malcolm MacDonald*