

Program Note by Stefan Jackiw

I first encountered Prokofiev's Second Violin Concerto while sitting in a movie theater in 1999. I was watching *Analyze This*, the bro-comedy starring Robert DeNiro as a powerful mob boss with nagging psychological issues, and Billy Crystal as the psychiatrist who is strong-armed into treating the melancholy mafioso. In the film, Billy Crystal's character marries his girlfriend, played by Lisa Kudrow. They hold a lovely wedding, and as the bride walks down the aisle, the most beautiful violin melody soars in the soundtrack. Yet this beauty and purity are short-lived; the ceremony is interrupted by a body falling from an overlooking balcony — an inconveniently timed mob hit. In any case, I was transfixed by the music. I went home and searched through my parents' record collection to try to identify the melody by ear (we did not yet have internet at home, so identifying the track was harder, but more fun, than simply logging on to IMDB).

The glorious processional music turned out to be the opening bars of the second movement of Prokofiev's G minor violin concerto. However, the filmmakers either failed to appreciate the overarching darkness and iciness of the piece, instead simply extracting the concertos' few sweet moments, or perhaps, if one gives the director more credit, the usage of this particular melody was a subtle musical foreshadowing of the terror to come.

Prokofiev puts the listener ill at ease right from the start. The piece opens with the solo violin alone, playing a foreboding melody in G minor that is based on a 5-beat motive. We are used to hearing musical ideas that fall neatly into 2, 3, 4, or 6-beat patterns. Five beats don't feel comfortable. Furthermore, since the violin is alone, the orchestra gives the listener no additional context to find his bearings. When the orchestra finally comes in several bars later, it enters in a completely different tonality, further throwing the listener off balance and compounding the sense of unease. The movement closes with one of the most nihilistic statements in music I know: two short, dry pizzicati thuds from the entire orchestra, like a falling guillotine.

This dark and unsettling quality drives the piece throughout all three movements. Even during more lyrical sections, such as the sweet Juliet-themed second melody in the first movement, played by the solo violin, the underlying orchestral harmonies are tortured and gnarled, twisting a knife into the sweetness. For me, the most hair-raising moments of the piece come in the coda of the finale. Here again, Prokofiev uses meter as a tool to terrify. The movement's rollicking dance in 6-beat time degenerates into a 5-beat stumble, and we are left careening to the finish, which the composer marks "*tumultuoso*" (a great Italian adjective).

All this darkness and mayhem make the opening of the second movement even more precious and beautiful. It is a brief respite, an oasis in the psychological storm. But even in this slow movement, Prokofiev interrupts the aria-like violin line with daggers of ice, in piercing *ponticello* accents from the orchestral strings.

For me, this music is quintessential Prokofiev. The duality of delicate, sometimes seductive, tenderness

and dark, theatrical, menace is everywhere in this violin concerto. It is chilling and terrifying to play and to hear.