



SOMMCD 259

SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)

PIANO SONATAS
volume III • nos. 6, 7 & 8

Peter Donohoe piano

Piano Sonata No. 6 in A Op. 82 (1940) **(26:28)**

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|------|
| 1 | 1. Allegro moderato | 8:08 |
| 2 | 2. Allegretto | 4:57 |
| 3 | 3. Tempo di valzer lentissimo | 7:05 |
| 4 | 4. Vivace | 6:16 |

Piano Sonata No. 7 in B flat Op. 83 (1942) **(16:58)**

- | | | |
|---|---|------|
| 5 | 1. Allegro inquieto - Poco meno - Andantino | 7:49 |
| 6 | 2. Andante caloroso - Poco più animato - Più largamente - Un poco agitato | 5:38 |
| 7 | 3. Precipitato | 3:30 |

Piano Sonata No. 8 in B flat Op. 84 (1944)

(26:34)

- | | | |
|----|--|-------|
| 8 | 1. Andante dolce - Allegro moderato - Andante dolce come prima - Allegro | 12:31 |
| 9 | 2. Andante sognando | 4:10 |
| 10 | 3. Vivace - Allegro ben marcato - Andantino - Vivace come prima | 9:52 |

Total Duration: 70:00

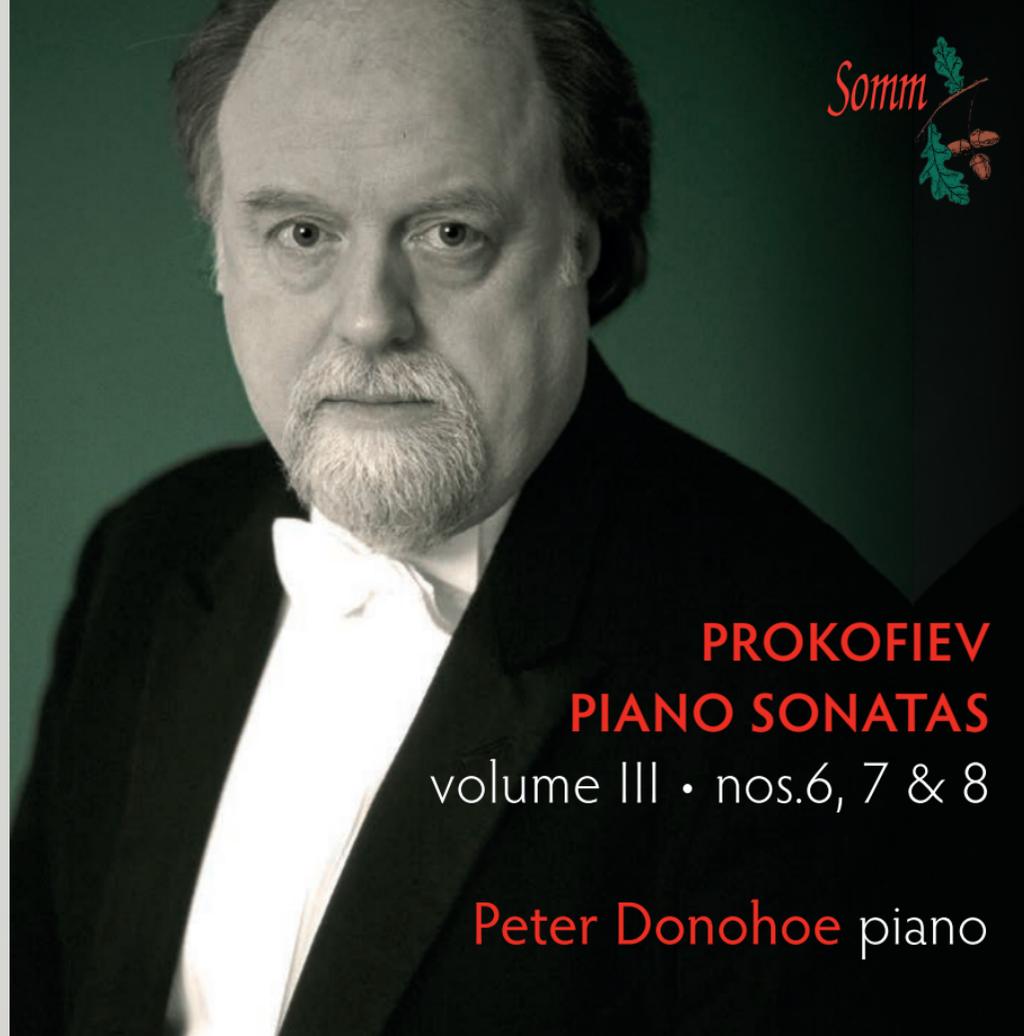
Recorded at the Turner Sims Concert Hall on 23 & 24 September 2014
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PROKOFIEV PIANO SONATAS

volume III • nos. 6, 7 & 8

From time to time in the history of music one comes across a group of works which, whilst being individual compositions that stand alone perfectly satisfactorily by themselves, nonetheless appear to have an overriding relationship, giving them a sense of what one might term 'belonging' together. Such examples as readily come to mind are the last three symphonies of Mozart, composed as we know within a six-week period in 1788 without any immediate prospect of public performance; we might also cite the three string quartets of Schumann, composed in 1842 – and, as we begin to consider these three piano sonatas of Serge Prokofiev, the last three piano sonatas of Beethoven, or the last three piano sonatas of Schubert.

These works were not intended (so far as we know) to be performed consecutively (although, uniquely, Schumann wrote linking music to join them together should they be so performed), but there is no doubt that a certain 'family atmosphere' surrounds such groups which, however tenuously, overrides the individual qualities of the particular work in question.

In the case of Serge Prokofiev, he was – as were each of the four great composers we have cited – a magnificent pianist, to which those surviving recordings of his playing his own works testify – and, like so many of his predecessors and contemporaries, he would often reserve his most personal and intimate thoughts to the music he wrote for his own instrument. Indeed,

as time passes, and the great swathe of twentieth-century music becomes more suitable for dispassionate comment and analysis (in that those qualities we might have regarded as being contemporaneous recede into history), Prokofiev's considerable body of piano music assumes greater significance than it appeared to do during his lifetime and in succeeding decades.

Prokofiev left five piano concertos, nine solo sonatas and a large body of shorter pieces – suites and individual items – which, even as a body of work, demand that his output be taken very seriously indeed. We may note that on the morning of the day he died (March 5th 1953, the same day as Josef Stalin) Prokofiev was working on the last two (sadly, unfinished) Piano Sonatas – which he had already numbered and to which he had affixed opus numbers. We may see, therefore, that from his Opus 1 (the First Piano Sonata, in one movement) to the day he died, the piano was his first instrument of choice in trying out and developing individual ideas.

For it is Prokofiev's individuality of expression that initially identifies him and leads us to mark him out as a great composer – the definition of which, as Hans Keller astutely remarked, is a composer to whose music we return again and again: not every day, of course, but at those times when the music of no other composer appears to satisfy our needs.

The immediate popularity of certain works did much to establish Prokofiev's name and reputation during his lifetime, but as we turn to his most intimate and personal compositions, it is amongst those that we encounter his original genius at its height.

We have mentioned Prokofiev's nine Sonatas and the grouping of triumvirates of certain works by various composers, and it is in the three Sonatas he composed during World War II (known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War) that we encounter his individual response to the events surrounding and raging in his homeland – to which he had returned towards the end of 1936 after years of exile following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

In Europe in the 1930s, the rise of a gradually more rampant nationalism had seared the continent, both physically and mentally, and the Russia to which Prokofiev had returned soon became very different from that which he had left and had believed in which he had finally resettled. In political terms, by 1936 Germany was on the march, in the grip of political dogma of the most extreme kind – dogma which regarded the Communism of Stalin's Soviet Russia as its sworn enemy. So when, in August 1939, the German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop signed a peace treaty with the Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov in Moscow, the superficial veneer of peace was seen by some as a political figleaf, enabling Germany free to light the fire which soon exploded into a new European war.

In Russia, for the moment, the peace was real, and in 1939, whilst the treaty was being discussed, Prokofiev took his family for a well-deserved holiday to Kislovodsk in the northern Caucasus (a favourite spot for him: two earlier piano Sonatas had been composed there). The three years since his return saw the composer at the height of his popularity. Whilst the socio-political storm clouds gathered, a succession of hugely successful works flowed from him: *Lieutenant Kijé*, *Peter and the Wolf*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cinderella*,

Alexander Nevsky – from ballet to cinema, music for children and orchestral pieces, Prokofiev's creativity appeared in full flood.

Yet it took its toll, and the holiday was needed. But no sooner had he arrived in Kislovodsk than he conceived the idea of a trilogy of piano sonatas: the idea of three loosely interlinked works was there from the start, and indeed it appears that he immediately began noting ideas for each of them. By the time they were finished, five years later, international events had taken a serious turn.

What became known as World War II began on September 3rd, 1939, with Britain declaring war on Nazi Germany. The Soviet Union was not at that time a party to the conflict, Stalin being content to let those horrendous events take place, away from Russia, but his beliefs were shattered on June 22nd, 1941 when Hitler launched a sudden and unprovoked attack on Russia itself. Stalin was thunderstruck, the ramifications of the outbreak of war on Russian soil were soon being felt throughout the Soviet Empire. The great size of Russia was one of its strongest defences; Stalin ordered many creative artists to be relocated in the countryside, away from the fighting, as a consequence of which Prokofiev – along with other composers – found himself far from his normal big-city urban environment.

By June 1944, Prokofiev's sonata trilogy was completed, and had been premiered – but not as a trilogy. Prokofiev himself gave the first performance of No 6 at the Composers' Union in Moscow, later inviting Sviatoslav Richter to give the premiere of No 7 and Emil Gilels of No 8.

The premiere of No 6, completed around March 1940, created an enormous impression. Much was expected from this highly-praised composer, and he did not disappoint throughout the work's four movements. Miaskovsky was amongst its most enthusiastic admirers, as was Gilels, both doubtless astonished by the contrasting fire and lyricism of the powerful opening movement. This eruptive movement is followed, in great contrast, by dance-like new thoughts in the shorter scherzo, a prelude to the profound slow movement – the longest movement in any of Prokofiev's nine Piano Sonatas. Its form, ABA, is deceptively simple, but the broadly-based themes demand extensive treatment and here we glimpse the deepest recesses of this great composer's mind. The myriad moods of the Sonata, thus far, are encapsulated in the brilliant Toccata-like finale, the positivity of the composer's spirit now at full stretch.

The Seventh Sonata – which was to become the most popular and most frequently-played of the nine – is in three movements, ostensibly in B flat major, but its character is not at all joyous or optimistic, being shot through – most clearly in the finale – with a sense of great inner struggle, rarely let up even in the central *Andante caloroso* ('warmth' here applying to phrasing and an intimate sense of self-communing). The finale, *Precipitato* in 7/8 time-signature, is a tremendous inspiration – stretching the technique of the pianist to the limit, and the concentration of the listener – after which the work leaves a breathless sense of hard-won achievement.

The Seventh was first heard in January 1943, with the Soviet Union then locked in a fight to the death with Nazi Germany; Richter later admitted that

he had learned and premiered the Seventh Sonata in just four days, fired by the composer's genius and the quality of this great masterpiece.

Prokofiev's Eighth Sonata, completed as we mentioned the following year, came in complete contrast. It is the longest of the nine, and is dedicated to the woman for whom in 1939 he had left his wife and sons, Mira Mendelsohn. Richter turned down Prokofiev's offer of giving the premiere, although he later changed his mind, playing the work and commenting more than favourably on its quality. In the event, as we have noted, the first performance was given by Emil Gilels, who described it as being "a profound work, demanding a great deal of emotional tension. It impresses by the symphonic nature of its development, the tension, breadth and charm of its lyrical passages".

Despite the individuality of these three masterpieces, there are indeed underlying threads which unite them. What is known as the 'fate' motif, first heard in the finale of No 6, turns up in the first movement of the Seventh, and – much altered – permeates the opening of No 8. But this characteristic is not 'placed,' as in a game; the subtleties which unite these works are such that only, perhaps, the pianist may discover them; as Prokofiev admitted, they were there from the start, long before world events conspired to force a different view of life and the composer's reactions to it.

Robert Matthew-Walker © 2016

PETER DONOHOE

Peter Donohoe was born in Manchester in 1953. He studied at Chetham's School of Music for seven years, graduated in music at Leeds University, and went on to study at the Royal Northern College of Music with Derek Wyndham and then in Paris with Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod. He is acclaimed as one of the foremost pianists of our time, for his musicianship, stylistic versatility and commanding technique.

Recent and forthcoming engagements include appearances with the Dresden Philharmonic Orchestra, the BBC Concert Orchestra, RTE National Symphony Orchestra, Berlin Konzerthaus Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra and CBSO (under Sir Simon Rattle), a UK tour with the Russian State Philharmonic Orchestra, as well as concerts in South America, Europe, Hong Kong, South Korea, Russia, and the USA. Other engagements include performances of all three MacMillian piano concertos with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, a series of concerts for the Ravel and Rachmaninov Festival at Bridgewater Hall alongside Noriko Ogawa, and performances with The Orchestra of the Swan. Donohoe is also in high demand as an adjudicator at piano competitions around the world, including the International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition, Moscow, the Queen Elisabeth Competition, Belgium, and the Hong Kong International Piano Competition.

Recent recordings include two discs of Prokofiev piano sonatas for SOMM Records, the first of which Gramophone described as “devastatingly

effective”, declaring Donohoe to be “in his element”, and a review in Classical Notes identified Donohoe’s “remarkably sensitive approach to even the most virtuosic of repertoire”. His second Prokofiev disc was given 5 stars by BBC Music Magazine. Other recordings include Cyril Scott’s Piano Concerto with the BBC Concert Orchestra and Martin Yates (Dutton Vocalion), and Malcolm Arnold’s *Fantasy on a Theme of John Field* with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and Martin Yates (also Dutton), for which BBC Music Magazine described him as an “excellent soloist”, and Gramophone stated that it “compelled from start to finish”.

Donohoe has performed with all the major London orchestras, as well as orchestras from across the world including Royal Concertgebouw, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Munich Philharmonic, Swedish Radio, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Vienna Symphony and Czech Philharmonic Orchestras. He has also played with the Berliner Philharmoniker in Sir Simon Rattle’s opening concerts as Music Director. He made his twenty-second appearance at the BBC Proms in 2012 and has appeared at many other festivals including six consecutive visits to the Edinburgh Festival, La Roque d’Anthéron in France, and at the Ruhr and Schleswig Holstein Festivals in Germany. In the United States, his appearances have included the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Boston, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Detroit Symphony Orchestras. Peter Donohoe also performs numerous recitals internationally and continues working with his long standing duo partner Martin Roscoe, as well as more recent collaborations with artists such as Raphael Wallfisch, Elizabeth Watts and Noriko Ogawa.

Donohoe has worked with many of the world's greatest conductors including Christoph Eschenbach, Neeme Järvi, Lorin Maazel, Kurt Masur, Andrew Davis and Yevgeny Svetlanov. More recently he has appeared as soloist with the next generation of excellent conductors such as Gustavo Dudamel, Robin Ticciati and Daniel Harding.

Peter Donohoe is an honorary doctor of music at seven UK universities, and was awarded a CBE for services to classical music in the 2010 New Year's Honours List.

Prokofiev – Peter Donohoe on SOMM



SOMMCD 249
Piano Sonatas volume I



SOMMCD 256
Piano Sonatas volume II
plus **Cello Sonata**
with Raphael Wallfisch

Reviews of previous releases in the Prokofiev series

SOMMCD 249 – Piano Sonatas, volume I: Sonatas 1-5

“The combination of Peter Donohoe and Russian music never disappoints. This impressive set of Prokofiev’s first five piano sonatas is the first in a complete sonata series from Somm – it’s certainly whetted my appetite for the second volume due later this year!”
BIRMINGHAM POST

“Donohoe’s authoritative playing shines through in every work – he has lived with these pieces for a long time...In his hands every sonata makes a memorable impression, and the Fifth, with its cool classicality, receives one of the finest performances I have ever encountered on disc. A wonderful anthology. Next instalment, please!”
Michael J Stewart, CLASSICAL EAR

SOMMCD 256 – Piano Sonatas, volume II: Sonatas 9 & 10, Sonatinas 1 & 2, Cello Sonata with Raphael Wallfisch

“This intelligently planned programme, played by musicians fully attuned to Prokofiev’s expressive lyricism and humour, demonstrates how his Soviet period was a rich harvest from the stylistic innovations of his Parisian years... Donohoe’s subtlety and delicacy is perhaps most strikingly demonstrated in the Cello Sonata. Raphael Wallfisch is placed rather immediately before the mic, yet his richly-toned playing can withstand such scrutiny, and he and Donohoe give the music’s opening narrative a compelling sense of direction, making the gentle, inward quality of the exposition’s end all the more captivating.”

Daniel Jaffe, BBC MUSIC MAGAZINE