

Programme note by Chris Darwin. Please use freely for non-commercial activities

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) Sonata No. 2 in D minor, Op. 14 (1912)

Allegro, ma non troppo - Più mosso - Tempo primo

Scherzo. Allegro marcato

Andante

Vivace - Moderato - Vivace

The only surviving child of an affluent and cultured Ukrainian family, Prokofiev played the piano and composed from an early age - by 10 he was well into his second opera (a sort of Robinson Crusoe tale)! During the following two summers, the young composer Glière taught Sergei at home and continued by correspondence in the winter. Glazunov encouraged the 12-year-old's parents to send him to the St Petersburg Conservatory. He emerged seven years later an accomplished pianist, but his compositions were more influenced by the St Petersburg 'Evenings of Contemporary Music' music society where his inherent modernist tendencies met a sympathetic reception. The public at the premier of his Second Piano Concerto in 1913 were less sympathetic; many walked out, with the prevailing view being: *'To hell with this futuristic music! The cats on the roof make better music!'*. History has been kinder.

Tonight's Second Piano Sonata was written a little earlier, in 1912, and like the concerto was dedicated to his very good friend and fellow student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Maximilian Schmidthof, who tragically shot himself in April 1913.

Here is an extended quote from Boris Berman's book on the Prokofiev sonatas, which I hope will help you listen to this extraordinary work:

"Compared with the conservatively homogeneous music of the First Sonata, the Second astonishes with its huge variety, even incongruity of styles, presented in a paradoxical carnival atmosphere. In fact, this work pushes the limits of contrast more than any other Prokofiev sonata. It covers a huge emotional range from romantic lyricism to aggressive brutality, from Schumannesque soaring to a parody of the cabaret, or of musical automatons. ... In this music one often feels that there are no sustained emotional values to be relied upon. What has been treated with compassion and tenderness becomes an object of mockery a few short bars later.

"In the aesthetics of early Prokofiev, not much attention is paid to the cornerstone of the romantic sonata, emotional development of the material. Instead, a variety of textures, superimposition of different themes upon one another and unexpected dissonances and accents, discredit the emotional veracity of the thematic material, and prevent our identification with any part of it."