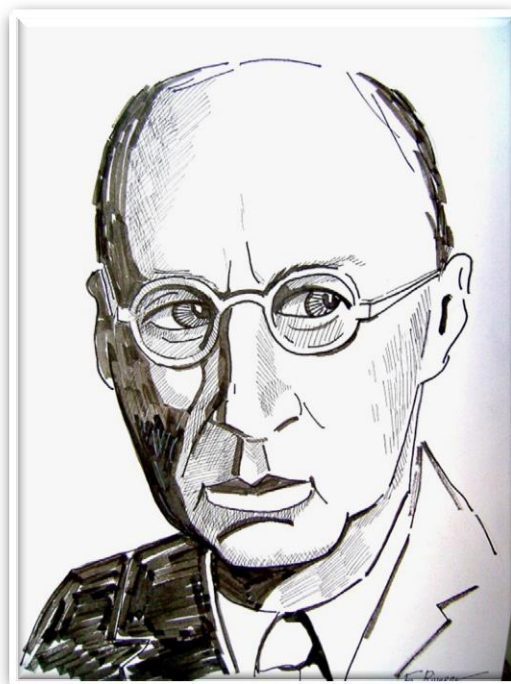


# PROKOFIEV

## Piano Concerti Survey

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## Piano Concerti Overview

As anxious as I was to dig in and get started on this survey of a 120 concerto recordings, I spent a week immersing myself in Prokofiev's sound world listening to anything but his piano music: the B-minor String Quartet, the violin concertos, the Fifth Symphony, Abbado's Nevsky and Kije, and of course, the ballet suites. I wanted to be able to place his piano works within his overall creative language.

After completing the listening phase of the survey but before finalizing my thoughts in this survey, I spent a few days cruising the internet and YouTube to discover how other listeners were reacting to the music, and to try and get in the mind set of those who have different perspectives. I was fully prepared for the usual rants and raves of rabid fans espousing their favorite performer, using bold caps and a million exclamation points to demonstrate their righteous declarations. I was prepared for the catty back and forth commentaries, dissing whole performances with the wave of a hand and a few choice vulgar expressions. What I wasn't fully prepared for was the numerous outright attacks on the music itself: "Too atonal," or, "No sense of melody" being common comments. An online review by a professional reviewer from Britain in essence reduced Prokofiev to the status of a very minor composer, complaining that "There's no sense of structure, the concerti are simply a patchwork quilts of episodic textures."

To me, and doubtless all readers here, Prokofiev is an entirely mainstream composer. It is difficult for classical enthusiasts of our time to comprehend how the premiere performance of Prokofiev's First Piano Concerto was met by boos and hisses and people walking out in mass. Not only that, but some actually stood up and yelled derisive comments such as "cats on a rooftop make better music than this" which is an actual quote according to at least three witnesses. I can understand how Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* would elicit such a reaction, with its savage pounding bass drums and howling trombones, not to mention that it used none of the then traditional compositional idioms such as sonata form, or symmetrical phrase groupings. In a way, the *Rite of Spring*, written with the vivid visual elements of ballet in mind, was sort of a precursor to the film score genre with its through-composed progression of linear action and sound-effects-laden orchestration. Or one could easily cite Bartok's first two piano concertos as being more 'difficult' for listeners of that time, not to mention something like the Schoenberg concerto.

By comparison Prokofiev's First is far more conservative and resoundingly tonal, even simple in its diatonic harmonic foundation. It's only the use of a few shards of off-accidental color and the driving metric pulse that give it a spiky feel. Our first reaction to these historical anecdotes is to just shrug them off bemusedly and realize how much things have changed. But piano enthusiasts, the type like me, and probably most readers here, enjoy talking shop to fellow enthusiasts at concerts or piano competitions, and the internet is full of chatter about pianistic esoterica such as

whether it was Moissewitsch or Solomon Cutner who was the greater artist in pre-war London. Real classical enthusiasts may consider Busoni's music completely mainstream, and have to venture further afield to Arvo Pärt or Rautavaara to find something more fringe. But at the grassroots level there is much about classical music that continues to alienate the novice listener, and in a psychologically fundamental way that probably won't change for some time.

In attending some student piano recitals given by local teachers at churches, schools, and piano stores, I always observe and listen to how people react to different music. At one teacher recital (a doctoral graduate from Peabody) I was amazed that several people in the audience didn't like the Prokofiev Seventh Sonata. This is a work that is guaranteed to bring down the house at any piano competition. The manager of the piano store who has been in the piano retail business for thirty years, and listens almost exclusively to classical music, sat in the back scowling. Afterward he told me that he found the Prokofiev to be "bangy noise imitating some out-of-kilter mechanical apparatus!" He also found the opening Bach piece a waste of time, a mere "warm up exercise" and too academic. Upon further exploration I determined that his listening preference is for the more extrovert works of Chopin (Scherzi, Ballades, Polonaises, and Etudes) and the Rachmaninoff concerti. At another recital a woman told me she enjoyed the Chopin and 'respected' the Beethoven, but was quite adamant that she didn't like the Debussy *L'Isle Joyeuse*. Since I play this piece myself, I wondered how anyone could not like it. "It's like a foggy daydream and gives me a bad feeling," she complained.

I know from exposing novice listeners to classical music that there are many issues that are challenging to them. It takes time to fully embrace all the varied expressions of classical music from Purcell to Prokofiev and Pärt. You don't take a person reading first grade primers to James Joyce as the next step. There is a natural progression of understanding that takes some time and experience before the musical language becomes a natural part of the listener's expressive vocabulary. So when people in casual conversation say they like classical music (like my dental hygienist), generally you discover that they may have gone to a concert once, maybe they have a CD set of the "100 Greatest Classical Tunes," that they consider Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Phantom of the Opera* classical music, and maybe they would recognize Beethoven's Fifth.

The matter of how people react to dissonance still puzzles me. Somebody reared in the simplistic harmonies of popular music might be startled by certain dissonances. But then again, soundtracks are full of startling effects. Personally I'm more perturbed by "fuzz" distortion and phase manipulation in some rock music than I am with dissonance, not to mention the primal screaming which goes right to the reptilian core of the brain.

As for Jazz music, some of it is even more sophisticated harmonically than anything Prokofiev ever conceived, but it rarely employs the jabbing and jarring dissonance or sardonic tone of Prokofiev as part of its semantic. For most experienced listeners, dissonance is merely a tool by which to create added psychological intensity when all

other means of intensity (dynamic and textural) have been exploited. In this sense we might say that a pop tune is like a simple comfort food like macaroni and cheese while Prokofiev or Bartok might be compared to a spicy dish of Wasabi Sushi. I can imagine a young person's first reaction to spicy food as something of a challenge to the palate, but it still confounds me when mature adults haven't yet acclimated their ears to dissonance.

All this to say that when Prokofiev first came on the scene, most classical concerts programmed the same popular and accepted works of Beethoven, Brahms and Mozart. The 'modern' French composers of the time were considered incorrigible dreamers, while the modern Russian composers like Stravinsky and Prokofiev were seen as a scourge to civility. The press dubbed the young Prokofiev an *Infant Terrible*, and he actually encouraged such scandalous attention with his taciturn and disrespectful attitude to the musical conventions of the time.

Prokofiev's first two concerti were composed while he was still a student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. The First Concerto makes use of a modified Lydian scale and is chock-full of bravura passagework and acrobatic leaps. The hands are seldom idle in this work which was intended to show that Prokofiev had virtuoso credentials. Indeed, he took top honors as a piano student, but barely passed graduation requirements in composition. It didn't help that he did everything in his power to be the provocateur, making insular statements against the musical establishment such as decrying all of Chopin's work as "syrupy, saccharine, sentimentality" or that he averred that the historical significance accorded Mozart was "somebody's bemused joke." This sense of caustic wit, often brash and brutish, did not abate until much later in Prokofiev's life.

The darker subcast of the Second Concerto may reflect the composer's reaction to the suicide of a close friend. Though the work was first written in 1913, it was not published until after the Third Concerto. This is because the original manuscript was lost in a fire during the Revolution of 1917. Prokofiev later wrote out what he could from memory and then made changes and improvements (especially as regards orchestral color) in 1923. He said these revisions were substantial enough that he almost considered the newly re-minted work as his fourth concerto. This revised Concerto No. 2 received its premiere in 1924.

The second concerto is solidly tonal, not nearly as adventurous as Scriabine, Debussy, or Szymanowski, nor as chromatic as Reger, just to compare it with some near contemporaries. The tonality is pretty straight forward, not even as bi-tonal as the third concerto, and the unusual shifts in harmonic progressions provide a sense of drifting from center, but they are hardly as adventurous in this manner as Busoni. Even so, this is a work that would never be confused with the weeping romantic confections of Rachmaninoff. There is a seething and manic intensity here which are entirely foreign to Rachmaninoff, Medtner and those last bastions of the Late Romantic era.

With the advent of the internet, the Second Concerto has become the new “Rock III” with excited debate on all the forums as to which pianist has most thoroughly conquered the technically demanding cadenza. As incredible as the cadenza can be the re-entry of the orchestra with harrowing trombones is a truly hair-raising moment. The second movement, a scintillating scherzo written as an unrelenting *moto perpetuo*, requires fleet fingers and utmost concentration on the pianist’s part or the whole thing can unravel. The use of angular, unresolved intervals in the third movement anticipates the barbaric *Dance of Chuzhbog* from the Scythian Suite (written in 1915). Overall, there is much more than just the massive cadenza to captivate the listener’s interest.

I recall back in the Nineties when I was doing some concert management trying to get engagements for an artist who wanted to play the Second Concerto, and I remember specifically that the management of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra responded by saying that, in essence, nobody would pay to come and hear the Second, that it was the Third that everybody wanted to hear. I can only hope that with changing times and new management that these orchestral administrators have changed their tune.

The Third Concerto was well-received at its premiere, and has been steadily performed ever since. It is programmed more often as all the other four combined. This concerto’s reputation is well deserved, because it truly is one of the great masterworks of the Twentieth Century. Stylistically, it is decidedly romantic, and less overt in its use of mechanistic piano writing. But Prokofiev didn’t go entirely soft; there is still plenty of textural contrast, imaginative color combinations, and the ever-present sense of irony. This is a work of myriad moods, from the dark and atmospheric opening using the lower range of the clarinet, to the more percussive, yet triumphant hammered themes in the finale. The middle movement, written in variation form, is a veritable lexicon of Prokofiev’s orchestral language, embracing the sounds of simple Russian folk tunes to more exotic color from the far-Eastern reaches of the realm.

The Fourth and Fifth Concerti are rarely heard in concert. In fact, the Fourth was never even performed during the composer’s lifetime, and did not receive its first performance until 1956. The reason is understandable in the case of the Fourth which is written for the left-hand only. It is a smaller-scaled work with reduced forces employed in the orchestration, and in many regards may be considered a sort of ‘Chamber Concerto.’ Most two-handed pianists would rather play something with two hands, and those who do want to do something more adventurous and specialized would almost always opt for Ravel’s more flamboyant and more flattering concerto, also for the left hand. The Fifth is really an enjoyable work, full of prismatic color and texture, but unfortunately, has the undeniable greater inspiration of the first three concerti to contend with.

A final note on the appropriate sound and tone quality for Prokofiev. One reads reports of his dryness of touch, sardonic disposition, anti-sentimental severity, and

overall spiky articulation and phrasing. By the time Prokofiev recorded some of his own works, including with Concerto No. 3 in London in 1932, some of his earlier antics may have been tempered by a more pragmatic and mature outlook. I re-listened again to all of Prokofiev's own recordings and found nothing in his manner that we wouldn't recognize in any performance by today's pianists. Some pianists such as Gould, Mustonen, Paik, or Pletnev, are, in fact, even more spiky and pizzicato playing Prokofiev than the composer was himself. As for the supposed dry touch, yes his playing is very clean and generally eschews any buildup of pedal sonority, but his metric drive and "spiky articulations" are all quite reasonable for the musical context, and certainly never harsh or bangy.

I tend to prefer pianists who utilize the full resources of the piano and demonstrate a full range of tone from deep powerful bass to sparkling treble, for example, Kissin's recording of the Second Concerto. A current favorite on the internet is Yuja Wang, and I have followed her career with interest and appreciation, but I find her Prokofiev too lightweight and lacking in sonority from the bass end of the piano. Part of that is just physical strength, but I think some of it is interpretive outlook which views Prokofiev more as a sparkling firework than as booming rounds of artillery. Another pianist who is too lightweight is Freddy Kempf. Even the most inward passages should never be perceived as *delicato*, as we hear from Kempf. On the basis of most of the composer's orchestration, starting with the primitive percussiveness of his Scythian Suite, I believe Prokofiev was after as much theatrical impact as he could muster. His own recordings seem to indicate a middle ground between the more muscular style of Gavrilov or Kissin, and the lighter, more etched quality of Yuja Wang or Lise de la Salle. But we must remember that when Prokofiev made his recordings the technology was very limited in the terms of capturing bass sonority. My best guess is that the Russian school has fairly faithfully passed down Prokofiev's authentic style; anything else is just revisionist tinkering.

Well, that's the "Cliff's Notes" version of the Prokofiev Piano Concerti. Now, let's take a look at each concerto and see who makes the strongest case for them.

### **Concerto No. 1 in D-flat, Opus 10 (1911)**

The music here may be solidly tonal, even rudimentary in its neo-classical mold of diatonic scales and figurations, but it sure exudes attitude. It's almost as if Prokofiev turned Hummel upside down and spiced up some Czerny exercises with a few "wrong notes" thrown in. One unusual aspect of the concerto is how it throws the listener right into the scene of a victory celebration without any buildup to the festivity. It's like we've walked into the charged atmosphere of a post-game celebration party. The *piu mosso* at rehearsal number 3 is then like a soccer player's boastful recounting of some clever play and score. I doubt Prokofiev had this imagery in mind when he composed the work, but he may have had lingering subconscious impressions of

Tchaikovsky's Allegro Brilliant, which is about the only other work I can think that throws us right into the middle of the action like this.

The first concerto is well-liked by audiences, and fun to play for the pianist with a bit of virtuosic swagger, but it does present a problem in programming because most orchestral managers are reluctant to hire a pianist for a scant fifteen minute work. What other short work to program with it? My vote would be for something contrasting in style, such as by Liapunov, or maybe Rimsky-Korsakoff's short Piano Concerto. Anyway, let's look at who makes the most of what's here, cut and polished like a gleaming precious gem.

Varying moods have been captured by different artistic collaborations (even the same pianist with different conductors) and listeners obviously respond differently depending on which elements of the score are emphasized or recessed. In my final recommendations I selected what I consider the best overall performance that captures the most potential, but I've also offered up two contrasting alternative performances that bring out different inflections. I wouldn't want to be without any of the top picks. Let's talk about what accounts for these differences, and why some listeners might prefer it one way or the other.

The very opening may be either big and symphonic, with blazing brass and surging strings, or it may be more neo-classical like a chamber concerto. Most of the bloggers with an adamant opinion on the matter insist on big and bold. If that's what you like (I do too), none is more hair-raising than Argerich with Rostropovich and the New York Philharmonic. This recording, taken from a live concert in 2005, was intended for radio broadcast, and as far as I know, is not available commercially. One can only hope that somebody will clean up the sound and make a CD version available; in the meantime, check YouTube. Slava comes out with full guns blazing, and this is all the invitation Argerich needs to take off the gloves and give it her all. This is the best of her numerous versions, by far, and every page just seethes with bristling energy. The various piano solos interspersed throughout are perfectly gauged and nailed with pianistic perfection. The only mishap of the whole live concert is the very last note where she hits a low C instead of the final D-flat. In terms of excitement, this and the Gavrilov with Rattle stand as the two titans at the top. Argerich's live concert from Lugano (part of a 4-CD set from DG) is the best of her commercially available recordings.

At the opposite spectrum from this big symphonic style, we have the de la Salle and the Gulbenkian Orchestra, who give us the finest performance in a more sculpted, neo-classical style (I like that, too!). What precision and articulation, and de la Salle is every bit as micro dynamic as Argerich, just with the heat turned back a bit from the boiling point. Lawrence Foster elicits amazingly detailed and colorful playing from the modestly-sized orchestra. The section at rehearsal 12 is one of only three versions I heard that got the phrasing and inflection right. This is how it should be done! The pizzis at rehearsal 29 are sometimes fudged, but here the ensemble cohesion is absolutely perfect. Well done! The only detail I question is the clarinet soloist in the

andante adding tails to the trills (the tail leading to upper leap doesn't bother me, but the one leading to the octave drop is less convincing; I don't recall any other soloist adding tails). At rehearsal 30 in the finale de la Salle gives great characterization to the solo, especially in the coquettish appoggiaturas. The only disappointing moment from the pianist comes in the expressive solo in the andante where she lets the mood break by fragmenting the melodic line. This passage is more difficult than it sounds, even Ashkenazy smudges with pedal in order to get a connecting line (the best in terms of melodic sustain and clarity is Gavrilov, who must have Gumby fingers to play such a legato without the pedal!).

In the second movement, we again see temperamental differences in performance which yield entirely different moods for the listener. Abbado with Berlin for Kissin's early recording is very sober and emotionally reticent, and throughout this movement Abbado's accompaniment is very deadpan. The most languorously evocative is Dutoit with Montreal (is it the French Connection?). But despite Dutoit setting a perfect table, Argerich didn't seem especially inspired. Another very ardent andante is served up by Gergiev, but unfortunately, his continual low moans are most disruptive to the evocative atmosphere. Ashkenazy, despite the pedal smudging mentioned before, is highly communicative here, and his feathery light scales are like the balmy breeze teasing the sheer diaphanous veils of some sultry temptress.

After all the teasing and innuendo there is the big moment of climax at number 29, which, depending on your interpretation may either be a moment of transcendent ecstasy or shuddering orgasm. This is where Argerich will always have the advantage over slight pianists such as Yuja Wang or Lise de la Salle, because she has the bass octaves roaring and the piano shaking with sonority. I'm talking especially of the performance with Rostropovich, but she's good in all her versions.

This big moment in the Andante, which I described as soaring release, may play out with an entirely different narrative to some listeners (who may in turn respond to performances with a different inflection). They may hear the mute-covered trombones not as sultry temptations to pleasure and vice (of any type), but as veiled cries of torment and suffering. And this is where pain and pleasure, gain and loss are so intricately interwoven. One could even picture this music with a film of grieving and sobbing survivors tenderly holding the bodies of loved ones lost in some brutality of wartime carnage. The common connection between how listeners could have such varied responses is that love inevitably encompasses loss, or at least transmutation. The moment a runner breaks the ribbon in an Olympic race, there is also a sigh of release, of giving way to all the hours of hardship in training, to crossing a threshold where the driving motivation must now change to a new goal. Something lost, something gained. It's a bittersweet dance of human emotional need. As cocky and disrespect as the young Prokofiev was, he tapped into something larger than his own ego here, and that's another indicator of how true genius (and ultimate purpose of musical art) transcends the limitations of its mortal host.



In the final movement we have several different moods, and I've already talked about how crisp articulation from the orchestra works so effectively for Foster and the Gulbenkian Orchestra, and how de la Salle shapes and characterizes the final quasi-cadenza so nicely, but there is also the final *animato* to talk about. This is where Gavrilov's unmitigated energy and drive pay off big time, because his is the most rousing finish of all (followed by Argerich with Rostropovich).

Some of the versions were simply too old or in such poor sound to be considered seriously: Richter (1954) and Sokolov. And some were just too indulgent and eccentric like Toradze who plays big chords à la Tchaikovsky in the opening tutti (version with Ivan Fischer).

Considering all the most desirable elements of performance, I selected Gavrilov as the overall best. He gives us energy and drive in the opening, a superb lyrical solo in the *Andante*, and staggering technical aplomb in the finish. The current CD, with excellent re-mastered digital sound, offers the *Suggestion diabolique* and *Islamey* as an attractive bonus.

My two alternative picks are for Argerich with Rostropovich and Lise de la Salle with Lawrence Foster. Since the Argerich version with Rostropovich is not commercially available that leaves the Lugano version with Dutoit as the default recommendation. One can only hope that DG will soon pair the Concertos 1 & 3 on a single disc, rather than bury these fine performances in a 4-CD set of mixed odds n' ends (the Mozart Three Piano Concerto with the Guldás is an oddity, for sure).

If you are looking around for samples of De la Salle's recording don't take as a representative indicator the live concert version with Conlon in Paris posted on YouTube which is marred by orchestral imbalances, some sloppy passagework, and an *andante* solo that is overly milked and worked too much to find expressive depth. If you are a download person get the Prokofiev concerto for sure, and the Shostakovich concerto if that is of interest. If you are a CD buyer, the Prokofiev and Shostakovich are worthy additions to your library, and well worth the cost of the disc even though the third work on the disc, the Liszt E-flat Concerto, is better served by other recordings. De la Salle's etched articulation and finesse of phrasing work best for neo-classical works, not full-blown romantic warhorses.

I also wouldn't want to be without Ashkenazy and Previn, especially for the *Andante*. Last time I checked the 2-CD budget Double Decca set was selling for under ten dollars on sale. As good as the recordings sound, and as consistent as Ashkenazy is in every concerto (always among the top contenders even if not always my final reference pick) this set is my top recommendation for an integral cycle, and also my best budget pick (far eclipsing in both performance and sound the only other budget contender from Naxos).

Finally, we should all keep our eyes on Denis Matsuev who, on the basis of a televised broadcast with Temirkanov, is sounding like he could be a top contender should he ever get around to an official recording for commercial release.

## Concerto No. 2 in G-minor, Opus 16 (1913-1923)

There were a lot of postings on YouTube focusing on just the cadenza of the second concerto. This is a topic of great interest amongst pianists, as this monster cadenza is considered to be one of the most difficult passages in the piano repertoire, and—along with the Rachmaninoff Third—a veritable gauntlet of pyrogenic hurdles by which to measure all who have the audacity to attempt ascending this mighty Mount Everest. Naturally many casual listeners are attracted to postings that talk about the “Most difficult piano piece written” or “Best ever performance of the monster cadenza.”

For what it’s worth, my vote for best cadenza goes to Gutiérrez. But as spellbinding as the cadenza can be, I really want more in a reference recording than just the best cadenza. I don’t want the cadenza to be an isolated volcanic island in the middle of a calm and featureless sea. What happens before and after, and how do they connect?

The overall mood of the first movement, including the cadenza, should incorporate all the diverse emotions that inform a typical human response to a dear friend who unexpectedly commits suicide: Numbness and an empty void, bittersweet reminiscence, anger, confusion, sadness, and above all, the pervasive ‘why?’ Even if we didn’t know the real-life connection to Prokofiev’s friend who committed suicide, it is still plainly obvious that the movement is turbulent, even defiant, in its lashing out of wild emotion. I think we can all agree, at least, that the noisy dissonance has its foundation in emotion and isn’t merely some stoic study in abrasive sonority.

There are a lot of surface details which can affect the overall gestalt, and these would include use of tone color to help define the shifting moods, dynamic nuance that shapes passagework in the present-tense, a full range of sonority to balance against the full-scale orchestration, and an ability to gauge reserves so that there is a little left for the places that need it. It is also important that the conductor sees more in this concerto than just a irksome long cadenza to sit idly through. The pianist must also realize the difference between projecting thematic content and playing textural content where the orchestra may need to be heard with prominence. But beyond all these surface details, there must always be a legitimate and authentic sense of emotional connectivity, or *Spannung*.

*Spannung* is difficult to explain, or even demonstrate at the piano, as it is so easy to fake with affected externalizations in body language. But the most convincing artists have real *Spannung*, or inner tension. The great piano pedagogue, Rosina Lhevinne, always struggled with how to convey this to students, and ended up settling with “You must feel a knot in your stomach when you play this this.” I bring this up

because the Second Concerto, more than the First or Third, really needs this authentic sense of experiential turmoil, and at least a good quarter of the recordings I evaluated did not have it (most prominently Kempf, Beroff and Bavouzet).

The best way I can think of describing *Spannung* is to compare it with a physical task that requires an expenditure of energy from the start of the task until the moment of relaxation when the task is complete. Let's say you are required to move a fifty pound object from the floor to a table. One may lift properly, bending the knees and lifting with the back straight, rising with load and then walking to the table to place the object down. But in musical terms that method demonstrates an initial sense of struggle, and then very little or no effort to walk the object to the nearby table to complete the task. Musical *Spannung* connects like an elastic spanning between the start of the task and the finish of the task. There should always be tension on this elastic band until the moment of relaxation. If there is variation in tension, it must coincide with the contour of the musical line, for example rising in a crescendo of intensity to peak of the line, and then gradually releasing until the point of resolution.

To demonstrate *Spannung*, I would ask the student to crouch down to lift the object and while remaining stooped and with knees bent awkwardly hobble over to the table, then lift the object upward using a lot of upper body strength to place the object up and on to the table. That requires a lot more work and strain on the body, but it is a fluid and conterminous expenditure of energy from the first lift until the final placement. The initial desire and completion of the task occupy one continuous arc of effort.

There are numerous indicators which convey authentic *Spannung* in contrast to preconditioned mimicry, but that would be an entire separate essay. With all the dense chordal writing in this concerto, voice-leading becomes one of the most important components of *Spannung* in terms of how it directs the ear to the most active path of the musical progression. When this leading line, acting like a flashlight on a dark pathway, dims or falters, the listener is left to flounder, and this in turns creates a disconnect. It creates a disconnect because when one is making an emphatic point or trying earnestly to explain something important to another person, one doesn't just trail off onto another unrelated thought or comment about the weather. That negates the importance of the initial thought. Let's just say simply, that at its most elemental, physical and psychological tension should go hand in hand, and the listener will usually perceive a disconnect of authenticity when one is present without the other.

With all that in mind, let's talk about some performances. Except for the three aforementioned performances nearly all of the 27 versions I heard had something of interest to offer. Even Toradze and Gergiev who are really pretty far out in left field and very free with interpretation of the text managed to captivate my interest in a generally positive manner, and often with compelling theatrical impact. Be sure to listen to the commercial recording, now available as a budget 2-CD set on Decca, and not the live versions found on YouTube which are not ideal representations of the

artist's conception. The recorded version gives us a unique and thought-provoking account that is highly personal and passionately rendered. There is some value in having a good alternative perspective, sort of like a palate cleanser. From the dream-like stasis of the opening to the jabbing cross-accents of the finale, Toradze and Gergiev offer unique felicities and nuances of inflection—and that all-important sense of authentic inner connection—which, for me, make this recording more valuable than all of the erstwhile second-tier performances. But such a highly idiomatic conception can never be considered for a reference recording.

There is a group of highly proficient and musically communicative second-tier performances which fall just shy of being considered among the top contenders. I would cite Bronfman with Mehta, and Gutiérrez with Jarvi as being the best among these right near the top. Both are clearly more mainstream than Toradze, both are impressively recorded in terms of sound quality, and Gutiérrez especially has a powerfully-rendered cadenza that truly captures the *colossale* effect that Prokofiev intended. Yet, such a mainstream conception will inevitably fight it out with other likeminded artists, each hoping that myriad details of ensemble cohesion, recording quality, even the advantage of an ideal instrument, will carry the day and give them a prevailing edge against the competition. Even if the artists aren't thinking that way, the record producers and the record consumers certainly are. In this sense, it almost makes sense to try for a slightly more individualized inflection that gives the performance something entirely unique. That is how Toradze won me over, and Yuja Wang and Anna Vinnitskaja also fall into that category.

I already talked about Yuja Wang in the preface where I said I thought her lightweight performances were sparkling and fun, but generally lacking in both sufficient sonority and psychological intensity when needed. Therefore, I would never consider her performances for reference contention. However, as an alternative perspective, her performances are highly engaging. I prefer her televised performance with Dutoit which is more energetic in the cadenza and am less taken with the commercial recording with Dudamala which finds the pianist less focused, and the young maestro making some errors in textural balance.

As for Anna Vinnitskaya, I have actually listened to her recording more than any other performance, so that tells you that something is right. Without question, she has that authentic *Spannung* which is so important. And she is probably the most accurate in terms of observing all the details of the composer's score, as for example, the contrast between accents and *sforzandi* at rehearsal number 7 (measures 52-56). But I find I like her performance more when I close the score and just listen. What I like is how it finds moments to balance the rage with a more expressive range of emotions such as sadness, despondency, or dreamy denial. I suppose the only thing that is missing to keep this from being my top pick is the ability to make the onslaught of dissonance seem utterly overwhelming and beyond any capacity to make sense of the existential chaos of fate's cruel hand. Even at the wildest moments one always feels that Vinnitskaya is in complete control. Also, in terms of sonority, even

though she is made of much sterner stuff than Yuja Wang, she still doesn't have quite the reserves of overwhelming power that Toradze or Gutiérrez have.

My choice for top reference recording came down to two choices: Tedd Joselson with Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, and the newer recording with Evgeny Kissin and Ashkenazy conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra of London. Like Vinnitskaya, neither of these pianists have quite the overwhelming power of Toradze or Gutiérrez, but they both have other techniques to compensate for this. In the case of Kissin, he has an unrelenting psychological intensity (*Spannung!*) which has its own cumulative power, and Joselson has an incredible sense of tone color, taking elements of Horowitz' style in contrasting unpedaled melodic line with deep anchoring bass sonorities often enhanced with octaves or fifths.

I have never seen a CD version of the Joselson (which I have on LP) but there is a good-sounding posting on YouTube. I don't know whatever became of Tedd Joselson but this performance from 1974 was the version that originally got me excited about this work. The only other version I had at that time was with Browning and Leinsdorf which by comparison seemed cooler and less passionate (part of that was the distant recording perspective). The problem with the Joselson is the horrible piano. New York Steinway was putting out some terribly clangorous pianos during this period (probably the worst ever was the one used by Gary Graffman for his recording of the Tchaikovsky Second Concerto); the entire tenor range sounds opaque and garish in complexion, and projected tones in the mezzo-soprano range sound so twangy they seem as if the unisons are off (and after the cadenza they *are* off!). Such a shame because he really understood the importance of how Prokofiev has written for the melodic sustain to juxtapose against the surrounding moving textures, much like the solo instruments are sustained and expressive against a moving and dissonant backdrop. Prokofiev actually had a keen melodic sense and this is often underplayed in favor of pointillistic poke and prod. But as valiant an effort as Joselson puts forth, that damn piano spoils all the good work.

So that leaves Kissin as the last man standing. He has the advantage of one of the best pianos on record for this work, a Steinway with depth and resonance in the lowest register and a treble range of clarity and carrying power without any sense of stridency. EMI has also thankfully done him better justice than either RCA or DG ever did, with the pervasive shallow and thin tone of those recordings. Here the piano is solid and well-balanced with the orchestra. Just listen to the very beginning of the concerto and how the piano's upper octaves seem to soar outward into the acoustic to create a transporting sense of other-dimensional reality.

Of course, a good piano and good concert hall acoustic are for naught if the artist doesn't have the talent to utilize these advantages. Kissin sculpts and directs even the most minor passages to an expressive purpose. We haven't even talked about anything but the first movement, but as it turns out Kissin is also the most consistently excellent in all four movements. The second movement scherzo is imbued with tremendous micro-dynamic frisson, so often just a one-dimensional run-

on sentence of unison scales. The third movement is especially well-characterized with superb razor-edged cross accents. If there were anything slightly less than ideal I would point the finger at Ashkenazy who seems to hold back just a bit, and in some places like measures 109-112 of the first movement allows the line to go slack. In terms of conductors, my top honors go to Gergiev and Jarvi for maintaining proper balances, and also with a nod to Ormandy who seems to enjoy bringing out some over-the-top characterization from the Philadelphia Orchestra which was at the peak of its powers.

By movement these are the performances which I found most effective:

- I. Kissin, Joselson
- II. Kissin, Wang
- III. Kissin, Joselson
- IV. Kissin, Joselson, Toradze

So what are my overall top choices for this concerto? The irreducible minimum of performances that I simply could not be without are: Kissin (overall reference), Wang (alternative perspective), and Toradze (alternative perspective). I'd also want to hold onto Vinnitskaya, Gutiérrez, Bronfman, and Joselson. I'll spare everybody a blow-by-blow account of all 27 versions I evaluated, but many of the versions I didn't single out here can be heard on YouTube . . . not a bad way to entertain oneself on a lazy evening.

### **Concerto No. 3 in C, Opus 26 (1911-1921)**

After being immersed in the darker mood of the Second Concerto for a week, the Third seemed almost like lightweight entertainment. This impression was made more evident with the recent trend for performances that are lighter in sonority and more sparkling in passagework, without any of the lingering romanticism that we heard from the older versions from Cliburn, Janis, or Ashkenazy. Argerich sort of spearheaded this trend for mercurial pianism with finely-etched passagework and propulsive metric drive, and now Yuja Wang is carrying on the torch. Prokofiev's own recording lays somewhere in the neutral ground between these two approaches.

Critics often talk about romantic or neo-classical tendencies in performance, and I don't believe either is right or wrong, just a reflection of artistic temperament and listener preference. Prokofiev's own style leaned more in the direction of anti-sentimental, but he sure scored some passages with a full measure of romantic fervor, and we hear that in works such as the Romeo & Juliet Suite, and in this concerto in the 'glorious transformation' of the *pesante* E-sharp major section at rehearsal number 128 in the finale. I doubt Prokofiev was merely mocking Rachmaninoff here.

I'm confident that most younger listeners who have had an introductory course in art and music history will know what is meant by Romanticism and Neo-Classicism. But I'm not sure that they will readily grasp exactly what the indicators are for one approach or the other in performance. At its most basic Romanticism is an inward response to the music, not merely passive reflection, but actual experiential response

to the music. As such, rhythm and meter are often bent in order to allow a give and take in the manner of response. Romanticism also generally favors a sumptuous and euphoric sound, with predominantly legato musical lines rather than sharply accented lines. Neo-Classicism is more concerned with structural clarity and if the performer so chooses, a strong sense of metric propulsion. In the context of Prokofiev it often means a more assertive and provocative profile to the musical narrative. In this sense, the unfolding narrative is not so much internalized as raw emotion (feelings), but seen as an external event, like watching a fascinating and colorful firework display.

Now, let's look at some specific musical examples in this concerto. For the following examples I have including timings from Argerich's Lugano concert so that interested readers may follow along and hear exactly what I'm talking about. The very nature of the acoustic venue determines from the start whether the sound is more upfront and present, or whether more remote and dreamy. If the venue is drier and the microphones closer to the players, the opening clarinet solo may seem relaxed and conversational, like we have met up with a friend who is feeling just a little blue. If the acoustic is more reflective and the sound soars upward and dissipates into the acoustic, this immediately evokes a dreamy and ruminative response in the listener, not merely empathetic as if listening to a friend, but feeling the mood ourselves.

At measure 5 when the woodwinds taper out and give way to the full spread of strings, a conductor with a non-sentimental, neo-classical tendency will keep a steady progression of beats here, while a conductor with romantic leaning will likely emphasize the change in mood with an agogic hesitation.

The sound of the strings at measure 7 [0:22] also gives an indication of how far in the direction of romanticism the conductor takes us. If the sound is top dominated and the dynamic level steady, that's a fairly neutral neo-classical approach. If the strings take a beat or two to come into full bloom, with a fulsome foundation from the cello and double basses, then it's as if the clouds have parted and ray of a sunshine descends upon us. Walter Hendl and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for Cliburn are probably the most romantically effulgent here, followed by Previn for Ashkenazy. Some of this may merely reflect that second-tier orchestras have been forced to cut down on the number of viola, cello, and especially double bass players that they employ. I remember the days when big orchestras had 8 or 10 double basses, now I regularly see four or five. But even with a big top-tier orchestra such as the Philharmonia of London, Ashkenazy chooses to hold back the basses for a more lean and chiseled sound.

When it comes to the pianist's contribution one way or the other, a good example can be heard in the descending *con brio* triplets two measures before rehearsal ⑥ [1:00]. A legato line indicates a more romantic inclination, dry and etched more neo-classical, dry and with spiky metric punctuations decidedly modernist. Prokofiev's own performance was dry and clean but without propulsive metric accents. Another spot occurs at rehearsal ⑫ [1:55] where a strictly neo-classical rendering maintains a

strict adherence to the tempo, while a more romantic inflection usually manifests as agogic stresses on the beats that correspond to the left-hand octaves.

Another telling indicator may be found at rehearsal number 30 [5:10] with the back and forth between B-flat minor and A-minor; is the rhythm steady or does the pianist imbue each harmonic shift with a swaying arch, leaning forward to the peak and relaxing as it dips? Or in the second movement toward the end when the pianist is playing fortissimo octaves [7:37] are they legato, non-legato or pizzicato? Each of these indicators when considered as a whole may give the listener an impression of the performance as flavored more toward modern romanticism, or neo-classicism.

Of course, it is great to have various approaches on hand to enjoy, but in looking for a single performance that I could consider for a reference recording, I was hoping to find a version that captured the best of both schools, with as few of the drawbacks of each as possible.

In evaluating over forty performances I was surprised to hear some really off-the-wall conceptions that clearly were not concerned at all about taking Prokofiev's own recording as a general guideline for tempo and interpretation. Samson Francois was the most bizarre, with absolutely crazy extremes of touch and tempo. Pletnev was also highly indulgent and seemingly determined to be as different from Prokofiev as possible. How two well-respected musicians such as Pletnev and Rostropovich could make the second movement sound like a third-rate work really baffles me. I was also disappointed with the recording with Toradze and Gergiev. I spoke out with conditional enthusiasm about their highly personal Second Concerto, and I had high hopes when it came time to evaluate their Third. But, there were simply too many indulgent disruptions and quirky inflections even if one can tolerate the slow tempos and off-accents that are not indicated in the score. Those three performances I am not likely to ever listen to again.

Also disappointing was the new version with Kissin and Ashkenazy conducting the Philharmonia of London. It's a mainstream interpretation, confident and professional, but nowhere as compelling as their version of the Second, which was my top pick. I'm hard-pressed to divine an explanation for the success of one and the failure of the other, given that the two concertos were recorded within days of one another, in the same hall, with the same recording engineers, and presumably with the same piano. But neither the sound nor the performance click into place. Even so, the Second is so good, don't let that stop you from obtaining this recording.

There were many decent but undistinguished performances which we needn't discuss, but two interesting versions warrant discussion before we get to the two top contenders. One is Bronfman with Mehta on Sony. What I appreciated was how completely organic and seamless all the transitions were, and how Mehta brings out incisive details that others have missed (or chosen not to highlight). For example, the plosive horn figurations between rehearsal numbers 21 and 24 in the first movement. On the other hand, he may have overdone it with the tuba raspberries in the finale



(though Prokofiev's own recording has some pretty aggressive tuba playing). I really enjoyed the first movement (taken at a brisk 8:54), was satisfied by the color and atmosphere in the second, but was somewhat let-down with the lackluster finale (the timing of 9:20 is not exactly slow, but there just was any bristling energy--except from the tuba!). Good sound from Sony, I'll keep it around just for the first movement.

The other performance worth keeping around is the classic Mercury recording with Janis and Kondrashin in Moscow. The piano and strings are disconcertingly close, but on the right playback system at the right volume setting, the realism is uncanny. Note especially the vivid rasp of the celli and double basses, and the dimensionality of the woodwinds. This kind of three-dimensionality of the soundstage has not been equaled by any of the more modern recordings I heard. As for Janis, he is certainly not as etched and micro-dynamic as Argerich or Yuja Wang, but is always full of color and never far off the mark from Prokofiev's own performance.

The choice for reference recording comes down to a battle between two tigresses of the keyboard: Marta Argerich and Yuja Wang. Either way I chose, there will be elated fans on one side and disappointed fans on the other side. Just keep in mind, that to be considered a close call for top honors in a crowded field of over forty performances is a substantial achievement in itself. Okay, here I go (taking cover from the hurled eggs and tomatoes), but my vote goes to Argerich. Okay, okay, which one, which one, the fans want to know. If you're a fan and you already know all the versions, you won't care about what I have to say anyway. So I'll speak more objectively to those who are just looking for a good version to buy or download for their collection. Here's what I hear . . .

Let's start with Yuja Wang. There are already several versions posted on YouTube from various televised broadcasts (Lucerne, Los Angeles, Amsterdam, Moscow) but as of yet, no official CD release. There is a Blu-Ray disc release of the Lucerne concert with Abbado available from EuroArts, and that is the overall best version we have so far, even though the Moscow version finds her in even more fiery temperament. I already discussed in the preface that I find her Prokofiev too lightweight and lacking sonority, and speculate that she has chosen to focus on the positive attributes of her talent—nimbleness, etched articulacy, buoyancy even in the most awkward passages—and formulated a basic interpretive template that works around her physical slightness. I have no idea really, but on the basis of her videos I can't imagine she weighs much more than a hundred pounds.

Her performances are brisk, lithe, and finely balance balletic grace with scintillating fireworks. Within that template she is completely compelling and winning over new audiences whether she is playing Brahms, Prokofiev, or Ligeti. I just hope when DG gets around to giving her an official CD recording that they don't pair her again with Dudamel. I think a better match of musical temperament might be with the Italian conductor Gianandrea Noseda, even though he just did a set with Bavouzet on Chandos. If it's to be Dudamel again (the young generation tagline), then kick out Rattle for a while and do it in Berlin. I know everybody loves the success story of the

Venezuelan group, but they are no Berlin, Amsterdam or London. If DG does it right (a top orchestra and top recording quality) they may very well have a reference contender on hand.

Unlike Wang, Argerich has no problem getting sufficient dynamic power from bass octaves when needed. Of the four versions I've heard with Argerich, the live radio broadcast concert with Chailly in Amsterdam was the most impressive pianistically. Perhaps someday we will see a commercially-released CD with good sound quality (like they did with her Rachmaninoff Third with Chailly). At the moment there are only poor-sounding YouTube postings, but check it if you haven't already. The new version with Dutoit recorded live at the Lugano Festival is my overall reference pick. The recording quality is excellent, though I wish they had muted out the page turning and shuffling noises of the musicians and conductor between movements (the audience is quite quiet). I'm also not happy that at present you have to buy the complete 4-CD set to get the Prokofiev, and not all four CDs are of the same high quality, not to mention that mixed sets like this are awkward for filing in a system based on composer, not performer. If you are merely buying MP3 downloads, then the problem is solved.

So, what makes this performance a standout from Argerich's previous recordings? First off, the sound is way better than the bleached and dimensionless sound of the old Abbado version on DG, which I keep buying every decade in new packaging hoping for improved sound, and it still sounds pretty bad. Second, all these decades of playing this work—without any diminishing of her technical facility—have paid off in terms of subtle nuances and ensemble interaction that only long experience can provide. Listen to the feathery light chromatic scales at rehearsal 124 in the final movement, so fluid and free (and not a single note out of balance), it's like a magical sprinkling of glittery fairy dust! Thirdly, there is a palpable excitement between the soloist and orchestral players, as in the *meno mosso* section of the final movement (between 116 and 119) where various woodwind groupings play off the piano's trills and frilly bird-call figurations.

We expect the fireworks from Argerich, but it's all the tiny details which hardly register with other performances that come alive as something special in this recording. It's the crowning achievement in Argerich's long history with this concerto. Dutoit also seems more engaged here than his earlier version recorded for EMI. This must have been a memorable concert experience for anybody lucky enough to have been present.

### **Concerto No. 4 in B-flat, Opus 53 (1931)**

Any listeners who might tune-in mid-way through a performance of this work on the radio would probably not suspect that the concerto is written for the left-hand alone. Prokofiev has very cleverly distributed the material across the entire range of the keyboard for this very reason. Yet, as impressive as the compositional craft may be, the actually thematic content and expressive range of this concerto is decidedly

lightweight. Listeners who have a fondness for this concerto have often referred to it as the 'Cinderella' Concerto—a misunderstood, and underappreciated work which really hides great beauty underneath. After listening to a dozen different versions, as I have for this survey, one does indeed find more potential than what is apparent at first blush. But the fact remains, this is one of those light works like Finzi's *Eclogue*, which listeners like when they hear it, but somehow never leaves a lingering impression of transformative greatness. Not compared to the other four concerti.

The first movement is a jaunty neo-classical romp in diatonic scales. The second movement, an expressive andante, digs the deepest of the four movements. The third movement seems like a bit of contrived soundtrack music which might depict frightened children each daring one another to walk through a spooky cemetery at night. The last movement is a scampering *moto perpetuo*, which seems on track to give a satisfying ending to the work except that it is abruptly short (under two minutes) and leaves an impression of an undeveloped compositional fragment.

Obviously, in looking for a reference recording of this concerto, one would want a performance that brings out the most of its charms and distinctive flavors, while minimizing some of the weak material and contrived characterization. In all honesty, I only heard one such performance, and that was Ashkenazy and Previn. Previn gives more expressive arch to the andante than any other conductor (even Gergiev), and Ashkenazy shapes and nuances his part like he actually absorbed and internalized the music instead of just minimally learning the score like some others who play it just to finish a complete cycle.

As for alternative perspectives, Toradze tries a bit too hard with rubato and personal indulgences which weren't convincing to me. Rudolf Serkin with Ormandy was actually more engaging than I expected, but the old mono recording from 1958 sounds fairly harsh and the piano is recorded with suffocating, airless proximity. The only solid recommendation I could make for a second choice would be for the Bronfman and Mehta, simply because the recording captures such vivid and dynamic playing from the orchestra. But these are all a far cry behind the exceptional effort of Ashkenazy and Previn.

### **Concerto No. 5 in G, Opus 55 (1932)**

Back in the Seventies and Eighties I played in fairly regular rotation my LP recordings of Beroff and Richter playing this concerto. I also had the new set from Ashkenazy but found him temperamentally better suited to the first three concerti, or to Chopin and Rachmaninoff. But I enjoyed the spiky textures and jaunty rhythms of the Fifth and played it whenever I was in good spirits and didn't want anything with pathos or dark emotions tugging at my energy level. Over the years I added new versions to my library and CD re-masters of the Beroff and Richter. But in undertaking this survey I looked at my listening logs and discovered I hadn't listened to the Fifth in nearly eight long years.

To start the survey I wanted to hear all the new versions first and save the Beroff and Richter for last, so that I wouldn't be unduly influenced by those inflections which shaped my earlier understanding, and enjoyment, of the work. I felt like a kid in a candy store when I had all these new recordings to listen to: Bavouzet, Berman, Bronfman, El Bacha, Krainev, Marshev, Paik, and Toradze.

After hearing the first new version I had a moment of crisis. I didn't like the music at all. It sounded like a Russian James Joyce staggering around Moscow drunk on Vodka. "How is it I used to like this music?" I wondered. With some trepidation I listened to a few more recordings and, while I gradually got back up to speed with this most modernist of Prokofiev's concertos, and found passages here and there that engaged me, overall, I just didn't enjoy my experience of listening to this music. "What is going on?" I wondered, with both exasperation and also a bit of trepidation as to how I could make an evaluation of performances when I didn't even like the music. Is it possible to become dumber and less tolerant with age? Would this be the basis of another long soul-searching essay??

Thankfully, not. For when I finally got around to Beroff and especially Richter, I was thoroughly enjoying the music. I also enjoyed the Ashkenazy more than I remembered. But it is still Richter who ruled the roost. Critics continue to cite the Richter/Rowicki on DG as the best version for this work, and when the team of reviewers for the American Record Guide had their group huddle to vote for best performances in their Prokofiev Overview, they all agreed that Richter "owned" this one.

That kind of thinking has always perturbed me (even if it's true), that a singular artist could own a piece of music to such a degree that all other comers were rendered irrelevant. That, and old-timer critics who continue to cite the same reference recordings decade after decade, as if nobody will ever have anything of worth to contribute after their hallowed favorite. The Richter Liszt Concerti is such a case. And yeah, DG's newly re-mastered Richter set irks me with the bold title of "Pianist of the Century." Oh, yeah? What of Horowitz, Arrau, Gieseking . . . how can one pianist 'own' such a title?

I had to agree that the Richter/Rowicki recording is the clear standout. That would seem to support the idea that Richter 'owns' this concerto but for the fact that the version with Maazel is less compelling, and the live concert with Ormandy is roughhewn and crass. Clearly, it's not just Richter who deserves all the credit, but the particular serendipity of conductor, orchestra and recording team to best complement his style. Even if we all agree that the version with Rowicki is best, as far as I've seen nobody has bothered to explore why.

So after I listened to the Richter, I went back and listened again to some of the more recent recordings, making note of the specific differences between them and the Richter. What I discovered were the synergistic interaction of three performance

parameters which taken together make a substantial difference in the listener's overall experience.

By far the biggest difference had nothing to do with Richter at all, but with the conductor and orchestra! Most conductors approach this work with a sense of neo-classical restraint, which means less overt expression from the orchestral soloists, less vibrato from the strings, and reigned-in dynamic arch for long melodic lines. Rowicki gives a full expressive range to the soloists, and favors a more romantic arch to the phrases. Not even the Gergiev or Previn, who are the next most expressive, can match Rowicki. Two questions arise: is this approach (which may be argued for a dark and emotive work such as the Second Concerto) correct for this work? And: does it matter, when critics and listeners all seem to prefer it this way? In my case, the difference is so dramatic that I either enjoy the work, or find it irritating.

Many critics argue that Richter must have known best because he was closely associated with this concerto and the later sonatas (of which Prokofiev dedicated his Ninth Sonata). This disregards the fact that his three known recordings all sound so different. He plays very similarly in both the versions with Rowicki and Maazel, yet the conductors each have quite different takes on phrasing and balance. Did Richter not have any say in the matter, or is this a case like his well-documented disinterest in the sound of his pianos that he merely retains a laser-like focus on his part and is oblivious to what else is going on? That's my opinion, and it reinforces the idea that what we like about the classic Richter/Rowicki recording has less to do with the pianist than it does the conductor. This dichotomy between an expressive and colorful orchestra and a neutrally-inflected piano part presents an effective contrast of opposites.

Aside from orchestral expression, the next biggest difference is the nature of the recorded sound. The 2009 re-mastering of the Richter/Rowicki gives us the best sound we've ever heard for this classic recording. The DG recording has a perfect 50/50 balance between soloist and orchestra, whereas the EMI recording favors the piano. The DG recording captures more ambience from the venue, and this gives Richter's popping pizzicatos more breathing room. The EMI recording is much closer and much drier, thus emphasizing the percussive nature of Richter's piano part.

This sense of Gestalt, the relation of the soloist in a space, whether intimate or diffuse, greatly affects how the listener perceives the music. The effectiveness of the *piu tranquillo* (rehearsal number 100) in the finale, an interesting precursor to Ligeti's *Devil's Staircase*, may be attributed to the smooth voicing of the piano, the placement of the microphones, and the how the piano interfaces within the acoustic. Certainly, this section in the EMI recording is less flattering to Richter. The Chandos recording with Bavouzet and Nosedá has the microphones more distant than most recordings, and this combined with Nosedá reigning-in the expressive arch of lines gives a rather cool and detached feeling to the music. Kraïev and Kitaenko have even more ambience and a pervasive sense of greyness. Paik and Wit are recorded closer up but this only emphasizes innate imbalances of the ensemble, with instruments popping

out of context on every page (probably the most irritating version I heard). In terms of optimal microphone placement and recorded quality, I'd say the Decca recording for Ashkenazy and Previn is by far the best. What color and dimensionality from the orchestra (overall my second pick after Richter/Rowicki). Listeners who value good sound quality will prefer this version for its dynamic vitality and soundstage dimensionality.

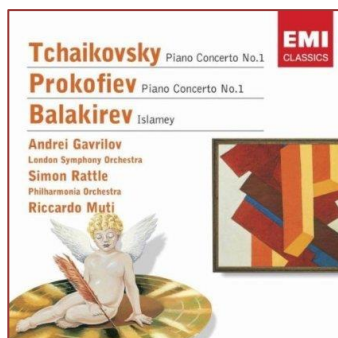
So, does Richter actually do anything to warrant the high accolades? The fact of the matter is that in many passages Richter is surpassed by either Beroff or Ashkenazy. I'm not even talking about technique here (who can play the fastest and loudest), just musical inflection, balance, voice-leading, etc. But of Richter's three versions the one with Rowicki is the most flattering. His tone is never abrasive, and there is a relaxed and unforced sense of elan, often even with balletic grace. His voicing of the simple dolce octaves in the Larghetto also perfectly conveys a tender memory of innocence. For the most part, we may safely say that Richter doesn't do anything that detracts from the orchestral color and expressive characterization that Rowicki brings forth.

Just to finish up on Rowicki, listen to the characterization of the second movement. The loping slurs sound like a deranged precursor to *Masks* from *Romeo & Juliet*. Rowicki is not afraid to use rubato to reinforce the idea of a slightly tipsy bureaucratic in front of a captive audience. If the mirthful ending doesn't bring a smile to your face, I don't know what will. The only other version that even comes close to this level of vivid characterization is Previn and the London Symphony Orchestra for Ashkenazy.

In the end, I was thoroughly enjoying the concerto again, with the exception of the two-minute intrusion of the third movement Toccata, which still sounds to me like kids banging out snippets of Chopsticks on the piano. But elsewhere there is so much color and texture and the general bristling activity and frisson are balanced out by some highly communicative dream-like episodes. I don't think I could agree with one biographer who asserts that the Fifth is actually Prokofiev's crowning achievement in the concerto idiom, not when such a fine line between enjoyment and irritation rides on the most precarious matters of balance and inflection of performance. But at least in the Richter/Rowicki recording, and the Ashkenazy/Previn version, we find much to admire and enjoy. Beroff's Fifth is also a standout from his cycle, and those three are therefore my top picks for this concerto.

## Recommended Recordings

### Concerto No. 1: Gavrilov/Rattle/London Symphony Orchestra (EMI).



Everything on this program is of compelling interest to the avid pianophile. EMI has done an excellent job with digital re-mastering which captures a vivid realism and tremendous dynamic punch. The Tchaikovsky is big-boned and symphonic in scope, different enough from everybody's favorites (Argerich, Horowitz, Cliburn . . .) that it isn't just another redundant run-through of a well-worn warhorse. The solo piano pieces are excellent; many listeners consider Gavrilov's *Islamey* one of the best ever. I keep my disc filed under Prokofiev for the *Suggestion diabolique* and the *First Piano Concerto*, the latter a standout performance that left no question as to its being the *Piano Enthusiast Reference Recording*. Such blazing virtuosity and swagger give us the kind of take-no-prisoners approach Prokofiev had in mind when he composed this work. Nobody can question the flawless and authoritative pianism of Gavrilov here, doing miracles of finger legato in the *andante solo* that would seem to require impossibly flexible Gumby fingers, or riding the tidal wave of adrenalin in the break-neck tempo in the finale. But Rattle deserves much credit here for providing more than just a background accompaniment. If the orchestra has an important thematic line he gives it full dynamic expression where other conductors will limit the dynamic range. For the most part Gavrilov has plenty of power to balance with Rattle's unbridled enthusiasm, and EMI did an excellent job in balancing the soloist and orchestra. This is really one of those iconic recordings that every pianist should have in their collection.

Runner-Ups: Argerich/Dutoit (DG), De la Salle/Foster (Naïve)

### Concerto No. 2: Kissin/Ashkenazy/Philharmonia (EMI).



From the moment we hear the piano's softly ruminative octaves soar upward into the acoustic, we know this will be a performance of immersive mood and deep pathos. If all you care about is the cadenza then cruise around on YouTube to hear postings that have offered up the cadenza as its own *entrée*. But if you want the complete story, the grand overall arch of the work from beginning to end, this is a performance that will seep so deeply into your psyche that it will linger in your consciousness for days. This is the kind of artist Kissin has matured to, a deep and almost tragic figure who puts us into total experiential empathy with Prokofiev's own conception, influenced as it was by the suicide of his best friend. For me, this was probably the single standout performance of the entire concerto survey, I can't imagine any perceptive listener not being both exhilarated and deeply moved by this performance.

Runner Ups: Gutiérrez/Järvi (Chandos), Vinnitskaya/Varga (Naïve), Toradze/Gergiev (Philips)

### Concerto No. 3: Argerich/Dutoit (DG)

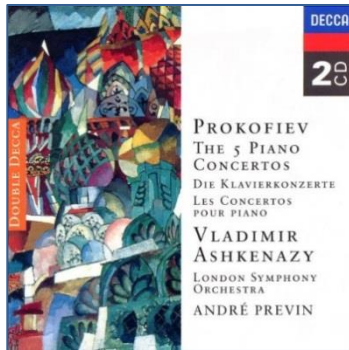


*With over four decades of experience performing this concerto, Argerich has fine-honed her interpretive insight and pianistic finesse to a degree that will make any music lover giddy with delight. This is so much better than the older DG recording with Abbado that you might as well throw that one away. Once you hear this one, there will be no turning back or second guessing who's best. DG has provided us a recording of almost unparalleled realism, like being right on the conductor's podium, and the sparkling details of percussion and wallop of the bass drum are almost visceral (even on my Beyer-Dynamic headphones the bass drum made my head vibrate!). Don't settle for some poor-quality YouTube*

*download, you'll want to experience this one it all its sonic glory. For the many legions of us who were not present at this remarkable live performance, the vividness of this recording allows us to imagine that we are right there. Among all of Argerich's concerto collaborations, this must certainly be her crowning achievement.*

*Runner-Ups: Janis/Kondrashin (Mercury), Wang/Abbado (EuroArts)*

### Concerto No. 4: Ashkenazy/Previn/London Symphony Orchestra (Decca)

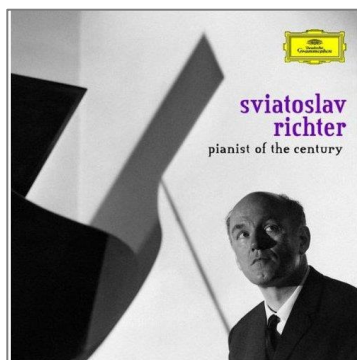


*If Richter owns the Fifth, I'd say Ashkenazy owns the Fourth. No other version came close to this in terms of bringing out the charms and distinctive flavors of this more lightweight concerto, and none plumbed the depths of expression and characterization more while also deftly avoiding some of the more obvious contrivances. Previn gives more expressive arch to the andante than any other conductor, and Ashkenazy shapes and nuances his part like he actually absorbed and internalized the music instead of just superficially learning the score like some others who only play the work to complete their cycle. Pricing at under ten dollars on sale this 2-CD Double Decca is the best overall integral set to own, and the obvious budget recommendation,*

*far eclipsing in both performance and sound quality the nearest budget contender on Naxos.*

*Runner-Up: Bronfman/Mehta (Sony)*

### Concerto No. 5: Richter/Rowicki/Warsaw (DG)



*For decades critics have all been unanimous that Richter 'owns' this concerto. But as discussed in the survey, among several versions that Richter made, this one with Rowicki is the one everybody talks about. Rowicki deserves a lot of credit for making this the enduring success that it is by bringing forth a full range of color and expression from the orchestral soloist to provide a richer and more colorful contrast to Richter's neutral-toned, neo-classical approach. It is this contrast of singular and plural, focused and expansive, expressive and stoic that makes this the most captivating version of this concerto on record. This performance has been packaged and coupled many different ways by DG, but the current 2009 re-mastering for the*

*Richter boxed set sounds best to me. Any way you choose to get it this is a must-have performance for those who enjoy this most bristling and modernist of Prokofiev's concertos.*

*Runner-Ups: Ashkenazy/Previn (Decca), Beroff/Masur (EMI)*



## Reviewer's Discography

Concerto 1: 27 performances compared

Concerto 2: 27 performances compared

Concerto 3: 43 performances compared

Concerto 4: 12 performances compared

Concerto 5: 13 performances compared

- Argerich/Abbado (DG): 3  
Argerich/Chailly (YouTube): 3  
Argerich/Dutoit (EMI): 1, 3  
Argerich/Dutoit (DG): 3  
Argerich/Rabinovitch (DG): 1  
Argerich/Rostropovich (YouTube): 1  
Ashkenazy/Abrevanel (Intaglio): 1  
Ashkenazy/Kondrashin (Intaglio): 2  
Ashkenazy/Previn (Decca): 1, 2, 3, 4, 5  
Ashkenazy/Steinberg (Intaglio): 3  
Atamian/Schwarz (Delos): 3  
Bavouzet/Nosedá (Chandos): 1, 2, 3, 4, 5  
Berman/Järvi (Chandos): 1, 4, 5  
Berezovsky: 2  
Beroff/Masur (EMI): 1, 2, 3, 4, 5  
Bolet/Cox (Genesis): 2, 3  
Bronfman/Mehta (Sony): 1, 2, 3, 4, 5  
Browning/Leinsdorf (RCA): 1, 2  
Cherkassky/Nagano (BBC): 2  
Cliburn/Hendl (RCA): 3  
De la Salle/Conlon (YouTube): 1  
De la Salle/Foster (Naïve): 1  
Demidenko/Lazarev (Hyp.): 1, 2, 3, 4, 5  
El Bacha/Ono: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5  
Feltsman/Thomas (CBS): 1, 2  
Fleisher/Ozawa (Sony): 4  
Frager/Leibowitz (RCA): 2  
Francois/Cluytens (Pathé Marconi): 3  
Freire/Aronovich (Bayern): 1  
Gavrilov/Rattle (EMI): 1  
Graffman/Szell (CBS): 1, 3  
Guitierrez/Järvi (Chandos): 2, 3  
Janis/Kondrashin (Mercury): 3  
Janis/Paray (YouTube): 3  
Joselson/Ormandy (RCA): 2  
Judd/Lazarev (Chandos): 3  
Kapell/Dorati (RCA): 3  
Kapell/Stokowski (M&A): 3  
Kasman/Leduc-Barome (Calliope): 3  
Katchen/Ansermet (Decca): 3  
Katchen/Kertesz (Decca): 3  
Kempff/Litton (BIS): 2, 3  
Kissin/Abbado (DG): 1, 3  
Kissin/Ashkenazy (EMI): 2, 3  
Kodama/Nagano (ASV): 1, 3  
Kraïnev/Kitaenko (Teldec): 1, 2, 3, 4, 5  
Lang Lang/Rattle (Sony): 3  
Li/Ozawa (DG): 2  
Lugansky (YouTube): 2  
Lugansky/Nagano (naïve): 3  
Marshev/Willen (Danacord): 2, 3  
Matsuev/Temirkanov (YouTube): 1  
Matsuev/Gergiev (Mariinsky): 3  
Paik/Wit (Naxos): 1, 2, 3, 4, 5  
Parker/Previn (Telarc): 3  
Pierce/Freeman (Phoenix): 1  
Pletnev/Rostropovich (DG): 3  
Pogorelic/Ozawa: 3  
Prokofiev/Coppola (Pearl): 3  
Richter/Ancerl (IPA): 1  
Richter/Maazel (EMI): 5  
Richter/Ormandy (Doremi): 5  
Richter/Rowicki (DG): 5  
Rodriguez/Tabakov (Elan): 3  
Serkin/Ormandy (Sony): 4  
Sultanev (YouTube): 2  
Toradze/Fischer (YouTube): 1  
Toradze/Gergiev (Philips): 1, 2, 3, 4, 5  
Vinnitskaya/Varga (naïve): 2  
Wang/Abbado (YouTube): 3  
Wang/Dudamel (DG): 2  
Wang/Dutoit (YouTube): 2  
Wang/Gatti (YouTube): 3  
Weissenberg/Ozawa (Pathé-Marconi): 3