

# Concert of the Month

By Dr Chang Tou Liang



A Portrait of the Composer Sergei Prokofiev Working on the Opera War and Peace (1941) by Igor Grabar

## Prokofiev Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 16

With Nikolai Demidenko, Piano  
Singapore Symphony Orchestra  
Esplanade Concert Hall  
16 July 2011, 7.30 pm

With Lim Yan, Piano  
Singapore National Youth Orchestra  
Esplanade Concert Hall  
28 July 2011, 7.30 pm

**F**act: the Second Piano Concerto of Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953, composer of *Peter and the Wolf*) has not been performed in Singapore since its local premiere in the mid-90s. There will now be two performances within a fortnight in July! (This sometimes reminds me of that SBS 174 bus service which you have to wait for ages, and then two double-deckers show up one immediately after the other.) The reason is simple – it is one of the most taxing piano concertos in the repertoire, and few pianists have the will or ability to master its sheer multitude of notes. Written in four movements and lasting just over 33 minutes, it is one of the great works of 20th century Russian music. If you love Rachmaninov's spectacularly brooding Third Piano Concerto, this is something you must also experience. Dr Chang Tou Liang interviews young pianist Lim Yan, who will be the first Singaporean to perform it in concert.

Dr Chang Tou Liang – CTL: The Second Piano Concerto of Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev (Prok 2) has had a fearsome reputation, much akin to the Third Piano Concerto by his compatriot Rachmaninov. When was the first time you encountered Prok 2 as a listener and a pianist?

Lim Yan – LY: To be honest, I only really got to know this concerto because of this upcoming concert with the Singapore National Youth Orchestra (SNYO)! I knew of it, and had heard it before, but for some reason did not leave a big impression. Then a few months ago, when SNYO Music Director Darrell Ang and I were discussing repertoire for the concert, this concerto – the Prokofiev Second – came up as his suggestion. So I went away and had another listen. This time, I was absolutely blown away!

CTL: It's a rather unusual concerto, with its four totally unbalanced movements, isn't it?

LY: Yes, this work is indeed very unusual because of its structure, but I would not really say the movements are unbalanced, just because they work so well together! But then again, I do not think Prokofiev ever felt a need to adhere to conventions. Each of his five piano concertos pushes the envelope in a different way. In this concerto, the first movement cadenza arrives almost by stealth, one gradually realises midway through the five-minute long cadenza that the orchestra has been strangely silent for some time!

CTL: Prokofiev and Rachmaninov weren't exactly the best of friends, but there is something in the dark hued melancholy of Rachmaninov that has rubbed onto Prokofiev in this concerto. Care to comment?

LY: This work is about as overtly Romantic as Prokofiev gets. There is however still a strong undercurrent of irony and outright sarcasm in the music. The strikingly angular third movement, for example. I can just imagine Prokofiev with a sardonic sneer as he wrote this! But you also have this hauntingly beautiful melody at the beginning of the first movement, as well as the second theme of the finale, in the Aeolian mode. I do not know if Rachmaninov would have approved. The audience at the premiere in 1913 did not! However this work offers a rare glimpse of Prokofiev's deeper and powerful emotions, which he so often conceals behind his subversive, mocking wit.

CTL: Prok 2 is one of the most difficult concertos to perform, given its many thousands of notes to overcome.

LY: I guess you must have the second movement in mind! Over the course of this movement, lasting about two and half minutes, the pianist plays close to three thousand notes. To be sure, it is no walk in the park, but of course my job is to ensure that come the day of the performance, technical difficulties are no longer a concern; and to present to the audience the musical ideas and emotions rather than some aural pyrotechnics.

CTL: How does a pianist begin to learn this behemoth of a work?

LY: It is no different from any other major project in any field of human endeavour – “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”.

CTL: Do you listen to recordings of works which you will be playing? Which performances of Prok 2 have you been impressed with?

LY: I use recordings in two contrasting ways at different stages of my preparation. The first is to check for misreadings, during the note-learning stage. At a much later time when the notes are fluent and having a better idea of what I want to do with the music, I listen to different performances for fresh ideas and inspiration. I firmly believe that a musician should first formulate one's own ideas about the music before referring to other interpretations – if only to avoid “groupthink”!

My current reference point is Vladimir Ashkenazy's recording with Andre Previn and the London Symphony Orchestra (issued by Decca). I have also heard Horacio Gutierrez with Neeme Jarvi and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, as well as Kun-Woo Paik with Antoni Wit and the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra.

CTL: Given that many in the audience will be hearing Prok 2 for the very first time (the only two performances of it in Singapore were held in the mid-90s), how would you advise listeners to approach it?

LY: This is definitely a piece that grows with repeated hearings. If you already know the work, so much the better. If not, just sit back, relax and enjoy the music and experience! **SMA**



Pianist Lim Yan