Program Notes: The Russian Violin

Notes on the program by Dr. Richard E. Rodda

CÉSAR CUI

(Born January 6/18, 1835, Vilnius, Lithuania; died March 26, 1918, St. Petersburg)

Sonata in D Major for Violin and Piano, op. 84

Composed: 1860–1870

Published: 1911

Dedication: Mr. Boris Mickhalowksy

Other works from this period: Scherzo no. 2 in g-sharp minor for Piano, Four Hands, op. 2, *à la Schumann* (1857); *Chorus Mysticus* for Female Chorus and Orchestra, op. 6 (1871); Tarantella in g minor for Orchestra, op. 12 (1858); *The Mandarin's Son* (comic opera) (1859)

Approximate duration: 16 minutes

César Cui was the son of a French army officer who had stayed behind when Napoleon retreated from Russia in 1812; the elder Cui settled in Vilnius, Lithuania, where César was born in 1835. César was educated in music and general studies at the school where his father, an amateur pianist and music lover, taught French, and he had some lessons in harmony and counterpoint with Stanisław Moniuszko when that noted Polish composer was in Vilnius for the premiere of his opera *Halka* in 1848, but he took his professional training in St. Petersburg at the Engineering School and the Academy of Military Engineering. Cui joined the faculty of the academy upon his graduation in 1857 and became an acknowledged expert on military fortifications, eventually rising to the rank of Lieutenant General. Paralleling the military duties in Cui's life was a comparable dedication to music, which he began to pursue zealously after meeting the pioneering Russian nationalist Mily Balakirev in St. Petersburg in 1856. Cui and Balakirev became allies with three other young composers—Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Borodin (all banded together by the influential critic Vladimir Stasov as "the Mighty Handful," known in the West as "the Five")—who were seeking to throw off the influences of Germany, Italy, and France to establish a distinctive character for the country's concert music.

Cui, eager to find a specifically Russian accent for his musical voice, devoted most of his creative energy during the 1860s to opera, and he finally found some success in 1869 with *William Ratcliff,* based on Heine's play. He also became a spokesman for the Five and their nationalistic philosophy during those years with his many reviews and essays for a wide variety of music journals and his study of *La musique en Russie*. While remaining active in his military career (he fought in the Russo-Turkish War in 1877), he composed prolifically throughout the rest of his long life: sixteen operas (as well as collaborating with Rimsky-Korsakov to complete Dargomyzhsky's *The Stone Guest* and Mussorgsky's *Sorochintsï Fair*), numerous orchestral and chamber works, choruses, songs, and many piano miniatures. Though he gained a certain notoriety in his day—there were jubilee celebrations in Russia for the twenty-fifth anniversary of *William Ratcliff* in 1894 and for his fiftieth year as a composer in 1909, he directed the St. Petersburg division of the Russian Music Society from 1896 to 1904, and he was made a member of the Institut de France in 1894—Cui has remained the least-known member of the Five, and today his works are only occasionally performed, even in Russia. He died in St. Petersburg in 1918.

Cui completed his only sonata, for violin and piano in D major, in 1870, though the first sketches for it may date from a decade earlier. The work is suffused with melody and agreeable emotion, but it was not published until 1911 and has remained a rarity in the recital repertory. The sonata-form first movement, lyrical throughout, takes a genial, arching melody as its main theme and a broad, poignant strain as its subsidiary subject. The development begins with a reference to the genial theme but soon abandons that for a new melody that soars high into the violin's compass. The exposition's materials are fully recapitulated to round out the movement. The *Andante* is framed by a pensive, pleading theme whose mood is balanced by the brighter strains of the movement's flowing central episode. The finale is in four formal stanzas. The first and third are given over to a showy, *moto perpetuo* bit of fiddling; the second and fourth sections each introduce a new lyrical melody, the last played at the speed of and mixed with some of the *moto perpetuo* figurations of the opening.

IGOR STRAVINSKY

(Born June 5/17, 1882, Oranienbaum [now Lomonosov], Russia; died April 6, 1971, New York City)

***Suite italienne* for Violin and Piano**

Composed: 1932

Published: 1934

Other works from this period: *Symphony of Psalms* for Chorus and Orchestra (1930); Violin Concerto in D Major (1931); *Duo Concertante* for Violin and Piano (1932)

Approximate duration: 18 minutes

So successful was the premiere of the Violin Concerto in D Major that Igor Stravinsky wrote for violinist Samuel Dushkin on October 23, 1931, in Berlin that composer and violinist received invitations to present the piece all over Europe, from Florence to London to Madrid. The resulting series of concerts made Stravinsky realize, however, that a good performance of the concerto demanded both a first-rate orchestra and an adequate number of rehearsals, circumstances that could not be taken for granted in all cities. So for a subsequent tour with Dushkin, he devised several recital pieces for violin and piano that would enable them to play almost anywhere without difficulty. The centerpiece of the tour program was the *Duo Concertante* of 1931–1932, but to round out the concert together they arranged excerpts from some of his ballets, including *The Firebird, The Fairy's Kiss, Pétrouchka,* and *The Nightingale*. (Dushkin extracted the violin parts from the orchestral scores; Stravinsky made the piano arrangements.) The best known of this set of transcriptions is the *Suite italienne,* derived from Stravinsky's luminous score for *Pulcinella,* the 1920 ballet based on works of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710–1736), a musical meteor who flashed briefly across the Italian artistic firmament during the early years of the eighteenth century and created several important instrumental and operatic pieces that laid the foundations of the Classical style. In 1933, Stravinsky arranged five of its numbers for violin and piano as the *Suite italienne*.

The plot of *Pulcinella* was based on an eighteenth-century manuscript of *commedia dell'arte* plays discovered in Naples. Stravinsky provided the following synopsis:

> All the local girls are in love with Pulcinella; but the young men to whom they are betrothed are mad with jealousy and plot to kill him. The minute they think they have succeeded, they borrow costumes resembling Pulcinella's to present themselves to their sweethearts in disguise. But Pulcinella—cunning fellow!—had changed places with a double, who pretends to succumb to their blows. The real Pulcinella, disguised as a magician, now resuscitates his double. At the very moment when the young men, thinking they are rid of their rival, come to claim their sweethearts, Pulcinella appears and arranges all the marriages. He himself weds Pimpinella, receiving the blessing of his double, who in his turn has assumed the magician's mantle.

Though the *Suite italienne* is a sort of vest-pocket version of *Pulcinella,* it fully captures the ballet's wit, insouciance, and *joie de vivre*.

*Bolded terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 90.

LEONID DESYATNIKOV

(Born October 16, 1955, Kharkiv, now in Ukraine)

***Wie der alte Leiermann (Like the Old Organ-Grinder)* for Violin and Piano**

Composed: 1997

Other works from this period: *Du côté de chez Swann* for Two Pianos (1995); *A Captive in the Caucasus* (film score) (1996); *The One Who Is More Tender* (film score) (1996); *The Rite of Winter 1949* for Chorus, Soloists, and Orchestra (1998)

Approximate duration: 15 minutes

"I was born and raised in Kharkiv," explained St. Petersburg composer Leonid Desyatnikov in a 1998 interview. "Like most Jewish kids, I was taught to play a musical instrument (in my case it was the piano). I was making feeble attempts to compose music from about the age of ten. I had a few lessons with the Kharkiv composer Valentin Bibik and then I went to a specialized music school. There I was given the basic technical grounding that any artist needs: harmony, **solfeggio,** and the history of music. In 1973, when I was seventeen years old, I got a place as a composition student at the Leningrad Conservatory without too much difficulty. I came in second out of all the entrants in the musical disciplines. Our teacher was Boris Arapov." Desyatnikov graduated from the school in 1978, and he was accepted into the Union of Composers the following year at the extraordinarily young age of twenty-three. He explained what happened:

> I'd just been called up into the army and was serving in a regimental band somewhere on the Arctic Circle. I wrote a letter to a friend saying that it was terrible and I was horrified by the idea of wasting eighteen months of my life in the middle of nowhere. I asked if it would be worth my while to enter the union. He replied that I'd have to get out of Allakuri, where I was stationed, and somehow make my way to Leningrad. My CO organized a fictitious business trip—I was supposed to be buying cases for flutes and piccolos. When I got to Leningrad, I played some of my recordings and showed them a few compositions from my conservatory days. I think I was still in uniform at the interview. They listened and then voted me into the union with only one abstention. I returned to my unit, and my documents were sent off to Moscow. Then my discharge papers came through, and I became the youngest member of the Union of Composers at that time.

With the imprimatur of union membership, Desyatnikov was quickly accepted into Soviet musical life. His opera *Poor Liza* was premiered in Moscow in 1980, within weeks of his discharge from the army, and he has since composed steadily and received frequent performances. In addition to a ballet and three more operas, he has composed numerous vocal pieces on Russian and English texts (settings of poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins and an excerpt from an English textbook for Soviet schools which he titled *The Rite of Winter 1949*) and several instrumental works in a wide-ranging style whose eclecticism is reminiscent of the late Russian master Alfred Schnittke. Desyatnikov has summarized his musical style as "the emancipation of consonance, the transformation of the banal, minimalism with a human face."

Desyatnikov became associated with Gidon Kremer as Composer-in-Residence at the 1996 Lockenhaus Festival, and for Kremer's "Schubert Today" project the following year in Gstaadt, Switzerland, he wrote *Wie der alte Leiermann (Like the Old Organ-Grinder)* for Violin and Piano, a "commentary," the composer called it, on the closing movement of Schubert's *Winterreise,* the incomparable song cycle on poems of Wilhelm Müller that he wrote shortly before his premature death in 1828. The cycle tells of a nameless character's hopelessly lost love, his frigid emotional world, and his welcome acceptance of his own mortality, personified in the organ-grinder who appears as a grim escort at the sad journey's end: "There, behind the village, / Stands an organ-grinder, / And with numb fingers / He plays the best he can...Strange old man, / Shall I go with you? / Will you grind out my songs / On your hurdy-gurdy?"

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

(Born April 11/23, 1891, Sontsovka, Ukraine; died March 5, 1953, Moscow)

Sonata no. 1 in f minor for Violin and Piano, op. 80

Composed: 1938–1946

First performance: October 23, 1946

Other works from this period: *Betrothal in a Monastery (The Duenna),* op. 86 (opera) (1940–1941); *Cinderella,* op. 87 (ballet) (1940–1944); Symphony no. 5 in B-flat Major, op. 100 (1944); Suite no. 3 from *Romeo and Juliet,* op. 101 (1946); *Ivan the Terrible,* op. 116 (film score) (1942–1945)

Approximate duration: 29 minutes

Israel Nestyev headed the chapter of his biography of Prokofiev dealing with the composer's life from 1945 to 1948, "The Difficult Years." In January 1945, Prokofiev conducted the premiere of his Fifth Symphony with great success, and it seemed that, at age fifty-three, he had many years of untroubled service to Soviet music in his future. Such was not to be the case. Only two weeks after the Fifth Symphony was introduced, Prokofiev was leaving a friend's Moscow flat when he was suddenly stricken with a minor heart attack. He lost consciousness, fell down a flight of stairs, and was taken to the hospital, where a heart condition and a concussion were diagnosed. From that moment, his vigorous lifestyle and busy social and musical schedules had to be abandoned. He spent the rest of his life—he died in 1953, on the same day as Joseph Stalin—in and out of hospitals, constantly taking precautions against a relapse.

Late in the spring of 1945, Prokofiev went to the country retreat at Ivanova provided by the government for Russia's professional composers and spent the summer there working on his Sixth Symphony. He returned to Moscow in the fall but was too ill to participate in the bustling artistic and social life of the capital or to attend the premiere of his opera *Betrothal in a Monastery* at the Kirov Theater or a production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Bolshoi. The commotion of Moscow proved too much for his fragile health, and early in 1946, he acquired a country house in Nikolina Gora, a village some forty miles west of Moscow. The dacha was hidden away in trees and thick underbrush a short distance from the Moscow River, with Prokofiev's studio facing a dense patch of forest. He loved the place and left it only for the most pressing appearances and appointments, preferring to meet his colleagues on his glassed-in back porch so that he could show off the flower garden and the large yard and perhaps engage them in a proscribed game of chess. During the summer of 1946, Prokofiev completed the f minor Sonata for Violin and Piano that he had begun eight years before.

"The Violin Sonata no. 1," Prokofiev wrote, "is more serious in mood than the Second Sonata [op. 94a, a reworking of the Flute Sonata]. The first movement, *Andante* ***assai,*** is severe in character and is a kind of extended introduction to the second movement, a sonata-allegro, which is vigorous and turbulent but has a broad second theme. The third movement is slow, gentle, and tender. The finale is fast and is written in complicated rhythms." Though Prokofiev gave no hint of any extramusical associations in his brief description, his biographer Israel Nestyev believed that "the sonata has something of the quality of a narrative poem and seems to contain a hidden program." He explains:

> The four movements present four sharply contrasting scenes, which might have been inspired by Russian epic poetry. The first movement is a compact *bylina*-like melody, suggesting the meditation of an ancient bard on the fate of the motherland; the second presents a scene of brutal encounter between warring forces; the third creates a poetic image of a young girl's lament; and the finale is a hymn to the might of Russia in arms, a paean to the people's freedom and strength. At the very end of the finale, material from the opening *Andante* returns, underscoring the basic epic-narrative quality of the work...Prokofiev here succeeded in filling the modest framework of a violin sonata with epic content of truly symphonic proportions.