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by Derek Katz

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953), Lera Auerbach (b. 1973)
Trio for Oboe, Cello and Piano after the Sonata for Flute and Piano, Op. 94

Like the Shostakovich Piano Trio that will close this program, the Prokofiev Sonata that opens it is a major chamber work written in the depths of the Second World War by one of the Soviet Union's two most famous composers. Unlike Shostakovich, however, Prokofiev was a Soviet citizen by choice. Already a conservatory graduate and a composer well-established in Western Europe by the time of the Russian Revolution, Prokofiev was encouraged by the favorable reception of his works in the Soviet Union and moved there permanently in 1936. The two composers' works have historically been evaluated differently. Fairly or not (and I would vote for "not"), Shostakovich's output has tended be received in terms of its compliance with (or resistance to) Soviet cultural policies. Prokofiev, meanwhile, by his own account was searching for a "new simplicity" in the 1930s, and voluntarily adopting a new and more accessible style that proved conveniently compatible with the emerging doctrine of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union. As Prokofiev told The New York Times in 1930, "we want a simpler and more melodic style for music, a simple, less complicated emotional state, and dissonance once again relegated to its proper place as one element in music."

The Sonata was composed in 1942 and 1943, mostly in Alma-Ata in modern-day Kazakhstan, one the places to which Prokofiev was evacuated during the war. The stimulus was not a desire to collaborate with a particular performer, but rather a commission from the Union of Soviet Composers. Bizarre as it seems now, even in the midst of the siege of Leningrad and the darkest moments of the war, the Union of Composers not only had a budget for chamber music, it had quotas. The Soviet Union needed sonatas, and Prokofiev was charged with providing one. Prokofiev wrote in his autobiography that he had "long wished to write music for the flute, an instrument which I felt had been unjustly neglected," but does not seem to have had any particular flutist in mind.

Prokofiev also wrote that he wanted the Sonata "to sound in bright and transparent classical tones." These are excellent adjectives for the Sonata, but the use of the word "classical" is interesting. The Sonata is a fine example of Prokofiev's "new simplicity," but it neither resembles Prokofiev's own 1917 "Classical" Symphony, nor has any kinship with the ironically distanced "neo-classical" post-World War I works of Igor Stravinsky, which Prokofiev notoriously described as "Bachism with wrong notes." In fact, the Sonata is notable for the absence of "wrong notes." On a moment-by-moment basis, Prokofiev's harmonic materials are very simple, and are usually restricted to the same collection of major and minor triads and seventh chords that constitute the basis of the harmonic language of the Classical era. The difference is that Prokofiev uses these simple materials in orders and combinations that Haydn and Mozart never would have considered. This creates a richness and variety that comes from unexpected sequences, not from the pungency of individual chords.

The "classicism" of the Sonata lives mainly in its forms and characters. Each of the four movements follows the basic scheme familiar from the Classical era. The first movement is in a textbook sonata form, complete with two contrasting themes and even a repeat of the exposition, and it is followed by a scherzo, a slow movement and a rondo finale. What makes it distinctively Prokofiev is that these structures are filled with melodies that are both sincere and personal, from the lyrical theme of the first movement, to the ebullient scherzo with a hurdy-gurdy trio, the brief but elegant andante with a bluesy middle section and the rousing finale. This emphasis on melody as the carrier of meaning and a lack of interest in harmonic experimentation for its own sake is, again, completely in line with Prokofiev's goals. As he said in a 1926 interview, "the most novel harmonic discoveries can be imitated and adopted by others, whereas a melody is a personal creation and stands as such without possibility of imitation."

Although first conceived for the flute, Prokofiev quickly adapted the Sonata for violin at the request of David Oistrakh, and the piece has subsequently been transcribed for other instruments, including clarinet and bassoon. Lera Auerbach's transcription of the Sonata for oboe, cello and piano brings the Sonata into the realm of larger chamber music and also combines the wind and string approaches already sanctioned by the composer. Auerbach has also created a version for violin, cello and piano, further expanding the already rich collection of ways to enjoy this work.

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Max Bruch (1838-1920), Kol Nidrei, Op. 47

Although remembered today exclusively as a composer of instrumental works, especially his first violin concerto, Max Bruch's career was closely tied to the enormous popularity of amateur choral singing in the second half of the nineteenth century in Germany and England. Bruch was employed as a choral director in Berlin, Liverpool and Breslau for over a decade, and had great successes at the time with large-scale works for chorus and orchestra, none of which have stuck in the repertory. The Kol Nidrei, originally for cello and orchestra, is a product both of Bruch's immersion in choral music and also of the connections between German choral music and changes in musical practices in German Jewish communities.

Kol Nidrei was composed in 1880, when Bruch was music director of the Stern Choral Society. The piece is based on two pre-existing melodies, and, according to a letter from Bruch, "I got to know both melodies in Berlin, where I had much to do with the children of Israel in the Choral Society." In another letter, Bruch more specifically credited the cantor Abraham Jacob Lichtenstein for bringing the melodies to his attention. A singer and violinist, Lichtenstein's career was primarily as a cantor and synagogue soloist, but he also played the violin in orchestral concerts and sang solo parts in oratorios outside of the synagogue.

Lichtenstein also was part of the movement in Berlin to "modernize" Judaism and to "elevate" its music by modeling it on Lutheran liturgical music and on secular choral music. Lichtenstein was part of the Berlin "New Synagogue," which, in imitation of Protestant practices, had both a choir and an organ. The Kol Nidrei melody that Lichtenstein shared with Bruch seems to have come from a collection arranged by the choirmaster of the New Synagogue. This collection also includes multiple settings of the Kol Nidrei melody for chorus, including ones with German texts, and even one in which the melody is used for a setting of Psalm 130, thereby taking it quite far from older cantorial practices and even from the original words.

The other melody used by Bruch is even further removed from Jewish liturgical practice. This one is taken from a song composed by the English Jewish composer Isaac Nathan, who published a collection called A Selection of Hebrew Melodies in 1815, with texts by Lord Byron. Nathan claimed to have taken the melodies from traditional services, but, reflecting the state of synagogue music of the time, they seem to be mostly more recent accretions, including folksongs and hymns. Bruch took the middle section of the song "Oh! weep for those who wept by Babel's stream" for his Kol Nidrei, and later included the entire song as part his his three Hebrew Songs, for mixed chorus, orchestra and organ (1888).

The Bruch Kol Nidrei falls neatly into two parts. The first, in minor, is based on the Kol Nidrei melody that Bruch learned from Lichtenstein. Here, the cello is presented as cantor, intoning the melody in short, sobbing groups, evoking some combination of a popular conception of cantorial singing and operatic recitative. In either case, there is an abundance of sentimental expression. After the opening phrase, the cello moves away from the pseudo-cantorial mode, and plays in a more conventional manner, as would befit the slow movement of a concerto. After an unaccompanied passage for the cello, the second half of the piece dramatically shifts to major, with the piano intoning Nathan's melody over quiet, rippling arpeggios. The cello then embroiders and comments on the theme.

For Bruch, the Kol Nidrei was just one of multiple exotic pieces from different places. He described it as a "little companion piece" to his Scottish Fantasy for violin and orchestra, and he also composed works on Icelandic and Indian subjects. Somewhat to his chagrin, the Kol Nidrei became so popular that many assumed that Bruch himself was Jewish. Although neither religious nor programmatically antisemitic, Bruch was a Protestant Nationalist who was not above blaming Jews, Jesuits and Social Democrats for what he saw as negative political developments, or attributing his own professional disappointments to Jewish influence. He presumably would have been dismayed that as late as 1933 his family had to petition the National Socialist government to remove Bruch's name from a register of Jewish musicians.

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Valentin Silvestrov (b. 1937), Postludium No. 3 for Cello and Piano

Valentin Silvestrov's 1982 Postludium for Cello and Piano is the most recent of the three Soviet chamber works on this program. Silvestrov stands apart from Prokofiev and Shostakovich both by virtue of being from a different generation and of being Ukrainian (technically speaking, Prokofiev was born in a part of Imperial Russia that would later be part of Ukraine). Silvestrov was born in Kyiv in 1937, the year after Prokofiev returned to the Soviet Union, and had not even begun his conservatory studies by March, 1953, when both Prokofiev and Stalin died. While the careers of Prokofiev and Shostakovich were largely shaped by their fraught relationships with Stalin's regime, Silvestrov was part of a generation of composers who came to maturity during the more tolerant post-Stalin Thaw (this generation includes two other composers that will be heard on later Camerata Pacifica programs this season, Alfred Schnittke and Arvo Pärt). More specifically, Silvestrov was part of a "Kyiv Avant-Garde," a group that smuggled in scores of modernist works from the West and from Poland, and that actively engaged with the international modern music scene. Silvestrov was acclaimed in the West in the 1960s, receiving both high-profile performances and prestigious awards. However, Silvestrov found himself in a delicate position. At home, he was seen as dangerously provocative, first denied admission to the Ukrainian Union of Composers, and then expelled from it for two years in the early 1970s, thereby cutting him off from official commissions and causing financial hardships. Abroad, although celebrated for his daring, he (like other Soviet modernists) tended to be viewed somewhat condescendingly as an imitator of the international avant-garde, rather than as a full participant in it.

Beyond these specific issues, Silvestrov found himself frustrated with the development of avant-garde music, and made a dramatic shift in the mid-1970s, writing music that imitated the styles of 19th century Romanticism. This was followed in the early 1980s by another marked stylistic shift, to what Silvestrov called his "post" style. The Postludium for cello and piano that we will hear is not only one of many pieces by Silvestrov that are named "Postludium" or "Postlude," but is also part of a much larger category of pieces that have similar aesthetic intent. For Silvestrov, the postlude is not connected to previous musical works with that title (like the organ pieces used to conclude religious services) but, rather is the opposite of the 19th century prelude as exemplified by Chopin. Silvestrov pointed out that Chopin's preludes stand on their own, and do not precede fugues. Silvestrov further suggested that Chopin's preludes are preludes to life itself, and that Romantic music in general consists of beginnings, or openings. The 1980s, on the other hand, felt to Silvestrov like a time of endings. Things that seemed to be stagnating or in crisis included things specific to music (the symphony, the post-World War II avant-garde) as well as much larger geo-political structures (the Soviet Union, history itself). If Chopin's preludes were introductions to life, Silvestrov's postludes were meant as pieces that answered, or echoed life. One way to think of it would be that for Silvestrov, Chopin's preludes start from nothing and open outward at the end, while Silvestrov's postludes are open at the beginning, and bring something to completion.

The Postludium for cello and piano comes from a set of three Postludes that can either be performed individually or as a cycle. The piece is all very quiet, and largely consists of a series of chords, gently animated by moderate oscillations. The cellist is instructed to sink into the piano sound. This process of collaboration through one part being subsumed by the other is one form of closure, as is the increasing delicacy of the already-fragile texture.

In the early 21st century, Silvestrov's music has been overtly connected to Ukrainian politics, expressing his support of both the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2014 Maidan protests against Russian influence. He and his family evacuated to Berlin in March, 2022.

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Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975), Piano Trio No. 2 in E Minor, Op. 67

Shostakovich's Piano Trio in E Minor is dedicated to the memory of his close friend Ivan Sollertinsky. Sollertinsky, a scholar who held a professorship at the Leningrad Conservatory and was an artistic director of the Leningrad Philharmonic, was probably Shostakovich's most intimate confidant, and they shared passions ranging from the music of Mahler to rides on roller coasters. As Shostakovich wrote to Sollertinsky's widow, "It is impossible to express in words all the grief that engulfed me in hearing the news about Ivan Ivanovich's death. Ivan Ivanovich was my very closest and dearest friend. I am indebted to him for all my growth. To live without him will be unbearably difficult." The piano trio seems to have had a special status as a memorial genre in Russian and Slavic culture. Shostakovich's tribute to Sollertinsky joins a list of Russian piano trios written as memorial works by Tchaikovsky, Arensky and Rachmaninoff, and there are also examples by Dvořák and Smetana (whose piano trio was heard on the opening program of the last Camerata Pacifica season).

Unlike the Prokofiev Sonata heard at the beginning of the program, which is laid out in tidy, balanced Classical forms, Shostakovich's Trio evades symmetry in favor of music that expresses itself as on-going processes. In the first movement, that process is one of acceleration. The trio opens with the striking sound of unaccompanied cello in high artificial harmonics, stopping the string with the thumb and touching it lightly with the extended fourth finger, an effect that is both physically awkward and sonically eerie. The theme itself is marked by three repeated notes in a dactylic pattern that will permeate the movement. The cello is joined by the violin (muted, on the lowest string, sounding below the cello) and the piano (at the bottom of the keyboard) creating a very unusual combination of tone colors. This is followed by a series of new sections, each one faster than the last, and each making prominent use of the three repeated note pattern from the very opening. The last of these sections turns to major, and makes use of chords in both stringed instruments. The music returns to minor and becomes softer at the end of the movement, but doesn't lose tempo.

The following scherzo seems to release all of the energy built up in the first movement. It is fast, short, and more aggressive than witty. Sollertinsky's sister heard this movement as "an amazingly exact portrait of Ivan Ivanovich, whom Shostakovich understood like no one else. That is, his temper, his polemics, his manner of speech, his habit of returning to one and the same thought, developing it." The most overtly elegiac movement is the third, which is slow and somber. This movement is built on a series of eight chords in the piano, heard six times and varied only in volume. This cycle could continue indefinitely, as the strings weave lines above it.

The slow movement is followed without pause by the finale, which is Shostakovich's first use of "Jewish" music as a musical topic. At the same time that Shostakovich was completing his Trio he was also completing the opera Rothschild's Violin by his student Veniaman Fleishman, who had died in the Siege of Leningrad. The opera contains music for a band of Jewish musicians that uses the same set of markers of "Jewishness" found in the Shostakovich Trio, including accompaniments built from simple repeated chords, "exotic" altered scales and lamenting two-note sighs. Note that while Bruch's "Jewish" music was evoking the world of the urban, bourgeois synagogue, Shostakovich's come from that of shtetl dance music. Both the themes of the opening of the first movement and the piano chords of the slow movement return before the Trio ends.

This combination of highly unusual musical materials with Shostakovich's desire to memorialize his friend is already moving and powerful. It would be prudent to approach these elements carefully, however. Shostakovich originally intended to base the Trio on Russian folk tunes, and had completed most of the first movement before hearing of Sollertinsky's death. Some of the most otherworldly music in the Trio was almost certainly composed before Shostakovich connected the piece to Sollertinsky. In addition, other layers of meaning have grown up around the piece, especially in liner notes and program notes. Many sources suggest that Shostakovich used the "Jewish" music of the finale as a response to the discovery of concentration camps by Soviet troops, and even that it represents Jews being forced to dance on graves that they had just dug. Similarly, you may read that the Trio was banned by the Soviet Union

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for this very reason. This is, indeed, a very powerful story of Shostakovich responding to enormous human tragedy with deeply moving work, speaking for victims, and being punished by the authorities. Most of this is either unlikely or verifiably untrue, though. The Trio was completed months before the revelations about the concentration camps were published in the Soviet Union. Far from being banned, the Trio was recorded by the state recording company twice immediately after the war, and the Trio received a Stalin Prize in 1945. It is a tribute to Shostakovich's work that these stories felt true to people that knew him, but it is also significant that his music even reached those with whom he was not politically sympathetic.

As one of the members of the Stalin Prize committee (a dedicated Stalinist) wrote, "[The Trio] impresses people who know very little about specific musical issues. It grips those whose souls are alive. It is an outstanding work. I am a person without any musical education, but I was greatly impressed by this work and it left a lasting impression on me"