

“In the Face of Aggression and Oppression”

“Every artist, everyone who considers himself an artist, has the right to create freely according to his ideal, independently of everything... We must not stand with folded hands and let chaos develop as it pleases. We must systemically guide this process and form its result.”

-Vladimir Lenin, on the liberty of music and the arts in the Soviet Union

The three pieces presented in this concert set were written by three musicians navigating what it meant to express their own musical ideas under the yoke of an oppressive and totalitarian regime in the years surrounding the end of World War II. Each of these three composers—Myaskovsky, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich—faced censure at the hands of the USSR, notably after Andrei Zhdanov’s “Resolution on Music of the Central Committee of the Communist Party” was published in 1948 calling for an end to “formalism” in music for its own sake and specifically naming Myaskovsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Khachaturian as composers who overstepped this line, creating music unsuitable for the average person’s enjoyment. The anti-intellectualism and fearmongering of postwar Soviet policies surrounding cultural output might have been a distant memory, but recent events have brought to light just how important it is to learn lessons from the past. For the composers featured today, this involved measures to adapt their musical works to pass unnoticed through government censors, all the while refusing to let go of the creative and moral voices that underpinned their music. Indeed, Myaskovsky, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich all earned Stalin Prizes for these three works.



From left to right, Myaskovsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Myaskovsky: *Sonata No. 2 Op. 81 for Cello and Piano*

Nikolay Yakovlevich Myaskovsky (1881-1950) was a military engineer by training and a composer by passion for the first part of his career. Born in Novogeorgiewsk, Poland (then a Soviet-held territory) to a military family, he was quickly funneled into his father's career despite showing early precocity on the piano and violin. He graduated from a military engineering academy in 1902, but his most formative experiences were with his group of friends who gathered to study the greatest hits of Russian national music (e.g., Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky). In 1906, at the ripe old age of 25, he took a big step towards his lifelong dream and enrolled as a new student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory under the tutelage of Rimsky-Korsakov and Lyadov. While there, he became close friends with a young man, ten years his junior, named Sergei Prokofiev.

After graduation, Myaskovsky began a musical career in the same city but was drafted for the war effort in World War I. After being injured, he worked behind the scenes on his fourth and fifth symphonies (of which he ended up composing 27 over the course of his life). After the war, Myaskovsky won a position at the Moscow Conservatory, where he taught from 1921 until his death in 1950. While there, he counted amongst his students Aram Khachaturian and Dmitry Kabalevsky, in whose works one can clearly see resemblances with Myaskovsky's harmonic styles. In 1948, he composed his *Sonata No. 2, Op. 81* for cello and piano and it was premiered by the erstwhile Mstislav "Slava" Rostropovich on cello and Alexander Dedyukhin on piano on March 5, 1949. Seemingly in line with Zhdanov's ideals for what constituted good Soviet music, it was awarded the Stalin Prize the same year.

Allegro moderato: The first movement of the sonata opens with a simple folk melody in the cello overlaid on a bed of arpeggiated chords in the piano, setting a straightforward (and perhaps even slightly heroic) tone for the piece. Moments of frivolity are few and far between and fleetingly lead back to the no-frills texture of the primary theme. Decades after the bedazzling fireworks composed for the cello by the likes of Elgar and Schumann, there is seemingly little virtuosity in Myaskovsky's second sonata. But the lack of pyrotechnics is precisely what makes this sonata all the more virtuosic, for the cellist must communicate his inner soul through a much more limited vocabulary. Indeed, it almost feels throughout the piece as if we are holding something back, musically constraining ourselves due to some outside pressure. Our pains and joys are omnipresent but forever wrapped up in an impenetrable veil. This is far from the musical world of Brahms or even Tchaikovsky. The seemingly forced and affected simplicity of the movement is quite likely Myaskovsky's response to Zhdanov's "Resolution on Music," in which formalism (i.e., playing with the structure of music towards an intellectual end) was all but rendered taboo. Despite these constraints, Myaskovsky made his voice heard and indeed created a meta-commentary on censorship in the process.

Andante cantabile: The second movement follows in the shoes of the first. But where the first is an exercise in melodic simplicity, the second is a demonstration of the difficulty surrounding melodic phrasing. With long and unbroken melodic lines, Myaskovsky gives the cellist nary a rest in which to breath and reset, a stark contrast from the studied form of Classical era sonatas in which the eight-bar phrase reigned supreme. A metaphor for the working class, just as we work tirelessly and smile in the face of our troubles for the betterment of the world, so too does the cellist. The calm demeanor of the sonata in fact is an act of defiance to his detractors, who themselves noticed nothing more than a simple folksy melody. To them, it mattered not the intent behind each note, simply that it was enjoyable to listen to. Myaskovsky complied on that front, but subtly turned this simple tune into a commentary on the average person's plight in a society whose art was so tightly controlled; art cannot be "guided" by the government's benevolent hand and retain its originality.

Allegro con spirito: Finally, we get a fleeting moment of virtuosity. Where the first two movements held back their technical difficulty, the final bursts forth with a brilliant *moto perpetuo* for the cello, an unforeseen show of virtuosic prowess for both instruments colored with mechanical elements not unlike those found in Prokofiev's *Fifth Symphony*. The *age of man* meets the *age of machine*, where we are simultaneously confronted with our deepest sorrows alongside the robotic roar of progress. But this sonata asks us, what are we willing to sacrifice to remain human in the face of this so-called "progress?"

Prokofiev: Sonata No. 1, Op. 80 for Violin and Piano

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953), close friend of Myaskovsky and a star composer of the Soviet Union, was himself not safe from the oppressive policies of Zhdanov. While Myaskovsky's sonata was a studied response to the 1948 "Resolution," Prokofiev's first violin sonata was in fact a flowering of his interest in *form*.

Having mentioned the terms, "formalism" and "form" multiple times, it would perhaps be useful to define what they mean in terms of music. Just like its colloquial usage, *form* means shape and structure, but in music we take it a step further to classify the very structural elements which make up the work. Does the primary theme repeat itself? How many times? How many bars is it, and does it have a balanced countertheme? How many movements is the work and what are their general *tempi* (i.e., speeds)? These questions all come together in the notion of *formalism*, in which composers will focus on these structural elements and manipulate them in deeply studied ways to produce novel musical ideas and even make commentaries on the musical tradition.

Returning to sonata at hand, Prokofiev's *Violin Sonata No. 1, Op. 80* was apparently inspired by the works of George Frideric Handel and formally to the four alternating slow and fast movements popular during the Baroque era. Premiered in 1946 with the celebrated David Oistrakh on violin and Lev Oborin on piano, the two slow movements (first and third) were reprised by Oistrakh and Samuil Feinberg a few years later for Prokofiev's funeral.

While formalism might seem to be an abstract concept to grasp, think of it this way; many pieces of music can be separated into component parts and still stand on their own as musically interesting objects. You might hear the piano accompaniment to a violin concerto and find it to be a beautiful song in its own right. You could listen to a violinist practicing said concerto by herself, and still sense get a good sense for what the piece would sound like. These elements of the form, in a large majority of music, can often stand alone. However, listen to the opening bars of Prokofiev's sonata, and you will deeply question this premise.

Andante assai: The sonata begins with the piano rambling, listlessly traveling from one note to another with seemingly no purpose. The violin interrupts this with low A \flat trills, and the fifth iteration is when the two finally start to musically interact and the violin's insistence on this A \flat gives focus to the piano's meandering melodic line. Neither of these two elements would have made any musical sense on their own, in fact they would have just seemed like the bored musings of two musicians on their instruments. It is only when the sonata takes form—when the piano line meets the violin line—that the *form* of the sonata is realized. It is a sonata boiled down to its essence; the two voices are not simply equally important, but rather rely on each other to retain their identity as

music. The two exist only to give purpose to each other. It is precisely this studied play with music's structure that gave Zhdanov reason to fear that music was going over the heads of the average person. But does such intellectual play with music structure cause an untoward moral dilemma? Is it an ethical imperative to prevent musicians and artists, writ large, from creating works impenetrable to a wide audience? Certainly not, for this level of censorship is what prevents art from being art and relegates art to the realm of regurgitation of old ideas already familiar to us. A pertinent analogy might even be made to the times we are living through today!

Allegro brusco: In classic Prokofiev style, the violin and piano are turned into instruments of violence. Both wreak havoc not only on our ears—but also on their very instruments—in the opening bars of this frenetic dance. Prokofiev once admonished Oborin during the rehearsals leading up to the premiere that he should not shy from playing a *forte* passage as loud as he possibly could. When Oborin protested, saying that he would drown out the violin, Prokofiev was exasperated: “It should sound in such a way that people should jump in their seat and people will say, ‘Is he out of his mind?’” Whatever violence our ears experience in this movement is fully intentional, and the extended techniques employed by the duo amplify the effect even further.

Poco meno mosso: While the first two movements are brutal in their approach and form, in the third, the piano takes us on a meandering stroll through a flower field, mirrored by the violin. In the piano's breezy flutterings, we see the tall grasses and spring blooms around us dancing to and fro while the violin's melodic statements follow our own thoughts. The “harmonic” counterpoint blends perfectly into the background and we let ourselves float through the clouds on the melody's back. Halfway through the violin has climbed all the way into the upper stratosphere, climaxing in the highest skies, before we slowly drift back down to Earth together.

Allegrissimo—Andante assai, come prima: A most uncommon tempo marking, *allegrissimo* indicates that the movement should be performed in the happiest way possible (and of course very fast)! Another *moto perpetuo* showpiece, this final movement slides through a series of variations on a theme, each increasingly more difficult than the last. Prokofiev pushes our violinist to her limits as she navigates through this *formal* play on idiosyncratic techniques. At last, all hell breaks loose in the leadup to the coda. Reminiscent of the formal interdependence of voices, the piece ends on a series of scales going through the full range of the violin—supported by simple chords in the piano—giving way to one final statement of the first movement's primary theme.

Shostakovich: *Piano Trio No. 2 in E Minor, Op. 67*

Dmitri Shostakovich's (1906-1975) *Second Piano Trio* is a deeply personal work reflecting his own struggles with the moral mission of the Soviet government. Moreover, it is a eulogy to one of Shostakovich's closest friends and collaborators, Ivan Sollertinsky who passed away in February 1944 at the young age of forty-one, six months before the work was completed. Encoded into the very fabric (read: *form*) of the trio are homages to the life and accomplishments of Sollertinsky. Ivan Sollertinsky was a fascinating and incredible man. He was a pre-eminent music critic, often singing the praise of his dear friend Shostakovich. He was an accomplished musicologist, often giving ideas to and collaborating with Shostakovich on his operatic works. He was also a true intellectual, interested, and talented in a variety of subjects, ranging from the sciences to the arts. He was even a polyglot, allegedly able to speak over twenty languages. Finally, he was a dear friend and erstwhile supporter of Shostakovich. The trio is thus a lament to a brotherhood lost all too soon to the all-embracing grasp of Death.

Andante—Moderato: In the opening to this requiem, Shostakovich flips the tessitura (*i.e.*, normal range) of each instrument in the trio. The cello begins in the very highest register, stating the theme fully through the use of artificial harmonics. The violin then enters in canon a 13th below the cello, and the piano yet another 13th below the violin. The instrument traditionally associated with the lowest voice has the highest, and vice versa. With this slow introduction replete with imitative counterpoint, Shostakovich nods to the Classical forms of composers like Haydn, adding fuel to the fire of Zhdanov's backlash against formalism. But a dirge is not everlasting, and the funeral lament suddenly transforms into a hopeful character as the strings dive into a *spiccato* eighth note ostinato at the beginning of the *Moderato*. The ostinato is then picked up by the piano as the violin soars high in a nostalgic ode to Sollertinsky's incredible life. The trio engages in a healthy back and forth, gaining in both cheer and energy. A short *pizzicato* interlude then launches us further into the past as Shostakovich remembers and honors Sollertinsky's accomplishments, including his staunch defense of Shostakovich after the première of his opera *Lady Macbeth at Mtsensk District* which was lambasted for its "Western" influences. Even Sollertinsky was not safe from the formalism witch hunt, for he was subsequently given the (seemingly unflattering) nickname: *Troubadour of formalism*.

Allegro con brio: Following on the heels of this musical remembrance of Sollertinsky's life is a eulogy to his personality, vivacious and biting intelligent. The music of the second movement touched Sollertinsky's sister, Ekaterina Ivanovna so deeply, that she called it a "musical portrait" of her dear brother. The music can best be described as a jaunty waltz that soon evolves into a nearly psychedelic experience. Just as Sollertinsky

wore many hats in Shostakovich's life, he seemed to have had a bubbly personality, full of little quips and quirks that Shostakovich captured so masterfully in the music.

Largo: In this movement we have a true homage, an elegy, to Sollertinsky. The chords of fate ring throughout the hall as the piano's chords strike through the emptiness. The violin sneaks in with a mournful ode entirely contained within the span of a fifth, only venturing up to a major sixth above B \flat in the seventh bar. The cello adopts the same limited range for it repeats verbatim the violin's statement an octave lower. The movement proceeds through a series of mirrored statements between the violin and cello with the piano always providing chordal accompaniment. The two brothers in music exchange one final conversation. Yet before the final chord settles into the dust, the piano swiftly turns a corner with a restatement of the eighth note ostinato from the opening movement, underscoring the dance that is to come.

Allegretto—Adagio: The relentless eighth notes in the piano are soon joined by a jilted dance melody plucked out by the violin. Drawing heavily on Jewish folk melodies, the *pizzicato* turns into a dance as the cello enters with a steady beat. The strings then teeter off into an unbridled show of force, marching in with syncopated *pizzicato* chords which give the impression of a full eighth note texture altogether. Then comes the piano with the first iteration of the notorious Jewish folk theme later quoted in his *String Quartet No. 8* (1960), in the piano. Its original form was not quite as rambunctious as its later counterpart. The violin then brings back the Jewish folk melody, replete with affective *glissandi*, followed by an impassioned statement by the cello. Things continue to heat up and the folk melody is always at the center of the action. Indeed, this Jewish folk melody is inspired by the atrocities endured by prisoners at prisoner camps in the Holocaust; SS soldiers forced prisoners to dig their own graves and then dance upon them. As everything falls apart, the dance takes on this decidedly macabre turn with the strings on the repeated eighth note march, but now *col legno*. The result is a spooky dance of skeletons, from which the haunting finale—colored by harmonics and *pizzicato*, leads us out from this world into the next.

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