

MUSIC FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO OF ALFRED SCHNITTKE

LINER NOTES BY HARLOW ROBINSON

My first meeting with Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998) remains vivid in my memory.

It was late autumn 1982. Moscow was already cold and wintry. Leonid Brezhnev had just died, and the Soviet Union teetered on the brink of a new era. My Russian friends wondered what sort of future they would face under Yuri Andropov, former head of the KGB and Brezhnev's dour successor in the Kremlin.

Many artists and intellectuals—including Schnittke—whose work was banned or suppressed under Brezhnev thought it entirely possible that their situation would worsen. None of us knew at the time that Brezhnev's death would instead be the first scene of an unbelievable drama: the collapse of the USSR and the Communist system of censorship.

Schnittke came to pick me up in a drafty Soviet car, purchased with the money he made from writing film scores—eventually he scored more than 30 features and documentaries. At the time, it was the only way he could make a living. (Perhaps his best film score was written for the 1967 feature *Commissar*, a harrowing and compassionate tale of an unlikely friendship between a pregnant Communist commander and a Jewish family set during the Civil War following the Bolshevik Revolution.) Over tea and cookies in his small apartment, Schnittke told me that between 1962 and 1978, he sold only a single serious composition. Because of his refusal to pander to those in power or to compose in the popular and "optimistic" spirit favored

ALFRED SCHNITTKE PHOTOGRAPH BY BETTI FREEMAN; MUSIC BY ALFRED SCHNITTKE

by Soviet musical bureaucrats, his music (even chamber works) was almost never performed in public. As violinist Gidon Kremer (an early and enthusiastic champion of Schnittke's music, and the dedicatee of the Violin Concerto No.4) bluntly recalled in a 1988 glasnost-era interview with a Soviet magazine, Schnittke was regarded by those in power with suspicion and distrust; his name was "undesirable for some, and odious for others."

Perhaps that explains why Schnittke seemed so amazed that I wanted to meet him on that cold day in 1982. With many friends and admirers abroad, he was used to being under surveillance, having his phone calls and mail monitored. It took great energy and effort to maintain contact with Western music and composers. So despondent was Schnittke over his future in the USSR that he was seriously considering permanent emigration to West Berlin.

But in 1982, emigration to Germany would have meant never-ever-returning to Russia. Despite all the pain and hardship he had endured there, Schnittke was unable to permanently abandon his homeland-and the homeland of Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Shostakovich and Gogol.

Schnittke was luckier than many older Soviet composers. He lived long enough to see a new Russia, liberated from stifling totalitarian ideology, and to experience the freedom to travel and live where he chose. He also lived long enough to see his music played and celebrated all over the world. In the late 1980s, Schnittke moved to Germany, where he lived (with frequent visits to Russia) until his death on August 3, 1998, in Hamburg, after several years of poor health. Since both of his parents were of German heritage, Schnittke always felt a particular affinity for German music and culture. His mother was born in Russia, but her family was descended from the "Volga Germans" who came as colonists at the invitation of

Catherine the Great. His father was born in Frankfurt and came to Russia in 1926. Later, just after World War II, when the composer was a teenager, he lived with his parents for two years in Vienna, where his father was working as a correspondent for Soviet newspaper. There, he hungrily absorbed the city's multi-layered musical culture, whose echoes frequently resurface in his own "polystylistic" compositions, including those for violin. After the family returned to Moscow in 1948, Schnittke was enrolled in a special musical school. In 1953 he entered the department of composition at the Moscow Conservatory. He remained there as a student, graduate student and instructor for almost 20 years, until 1972.

Schnittke composed music in a wide variety of genres, from symphonies to operas, concerti (for violin, piano, viola and cello) and oratorios. His many works for chamber ensemble include sonatas for various solo instruments, string quartets and piano pieces. In none of these could anyone accuse Schnittke of writing down to his audience. Many of his large symphonic compositions are works of awesome complexity, density and cosmic sorrow. This is not "Have a nice day" music. It resounds with the terrible modern tragedies Schnittke had witnessed: the Holocaust, World War II, Stalin's purges, the Cold War.

In much of his music, especially after 1968, Schnittke employed a technique variously called "eclectic," "polystylistic" or "pluralistic." What this means in simple terms is that Schnittke blended seemingly disparate musical styles and traditions from different eras, often inserting direct quotations from the works of classical composers into his own compositions, but deforming and "deconstructing" them through the lens of post-modernism. Many of Schnittke's works use tape (like the "Prelude in Memoriam Dmitri Shostakovich"), amplification and electronic effects. Serialism has also fig-

ured prominently (as in the Sonata No.1 for Violin and Piano), although Schnittke most often leavened serialist technique with tonality.

Schnittke felt free to draw upon all compositional techniques, both ancient and modern, surveying them from a historical and artistic distance. "Purism is a dangerous thing," he once said. "It is an arrogant opposition to the natural pluralism of the world. Everything exists under the sun, and to deny that in music is wrong."

Within the one-dimensional cultural ideology of the USSR, such bold pluralism was heretical, for it contradicted the prevailing view that there was only one way—the Communist one—to interpret the world and its history. Perhaps this explains why in the confusing post-Communist era, Schnittke emerged triumphantly from the classical-music ghetto as a somewhat unlikely counter-culture hero, a noble veteran of the long wars for self-expression. Like Solzhenitsyn, Nureyev and Rostropovich, he had earned the status of a moral beacon because of his refusal to compromise his individuality—and his musical/artistic vision—in the face of unrelenting totalitarian pressure.

In part because of its ability to produce quarter-tones and other pitches "between the keys" of the piano, the violin has always exercised a special appeal for Schnittke, who began searching for alternatives to conventional tonality from the very beginning of his career. (That the Russian school of violin playing was so productive and inventive was also a factor.) Significantly, his first mature work (in 1957) was a Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, and Schnittke produced three more violin concerti through 1984. The works on this recording were composed over a period of nearly 20 years. Two (Sonatas Nos. 1 and 2 for Violin and Piano) date from the 1960s, while "Prelude in Memoriam Dmitri Shostakovich" for Violin and Tape was written in 1975.

The most recent is "A Paganini" for solo violin, completed in 1982.

The Sonata No.1 is Schnittke's only work for violin to incorporate a strict observance of a version of twelve-tone technique. The principles of this post-tonal compositional style became widely known among Soviet composers only in the mid-1950s, during the cultural "Thaw" that followed Stalin's death. Previously, while Stalin was in power, Schoenberg and the other members of the "Second Viennese School"—the creators of twelve-tone music—were vilified as practitioners of a decadent, elitist and perversely inaccessible art entirely inappropriate for the Soviet audience.

In the first five measures of the opening Andante, the unaccompanied violin plays the twelve-tone row around which the piece is constructed. The rather short movement then continues in a reflective mood, with highly dissonant chords (including cluster chords, regarded as very innovative at the time) in the piano part. Just before the movement's conclusion, the piano plays in reverse the twelve-tone sequence with which it began. The fast second movement overflows with the kind of sarcasm and forced humor so typical of the later chamber music of Dmitri Shostakovich, a composer Schnittke greatly admired and sometimes imitated. Numerous allusions to the music of the serial composer Alban Berg are also present, appearing and rapidly vanishing in the fast-moving whirlwind texture.

In the First Sonata's slow third movement, the mood changes dramatically, adopting a spiritual, even liturgical character. Constructed as a passacaglia, a form used frequently by Shostakovich, the Largo contrasts a repeated chordal theme in the bass with a Bach-like aria in the solo part. Schnittke also varies the basic twelve-tone row here. In both the third and fourth movements, the first three notes become C, E, G, in what sounds deceptively like C major, having

progressed from C, E-flat, G-flat in the first movement to C, E-flat, G in the second. So the Sonata moves gradually from strident atonality to what sounds more like conventional diatonic tonality.

Sarcasm and pronounced dance rhythms (primarily a rhumba) return in force in the concluding Allegretto scherzando. Towards the close, echoes of the themes from the preceding movements appear, first with grotesque overstatement, but gradually assuming a more reflective character. Finally, the liturgical atmosphere of the Largo dominates. After a long pause, the piano sounds a "cathartic" C major pedal point chord, and the solo part plays the movement's opening dance theme, now transformed into the first five notes of the basic 12-tone row: C, E, G, E-flat, G-flat.

In 1968, Schnittke completed a second version of the First Violin Sonata, for solo violin and chamber orchestra. That same year, he composed the Sonata No.2 for Violin and Piano ("Quasi una Sonata"), in one movement. As the work's title indicates, this is an examination and reinterpretation of the sonata form itself, and marks the beginning of the new "polystylistic" phase in Schnittke's career. In bestowing the subtitle "Quasi una Sonata," Schnittke entered into a dialogue with Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata, which bears the descriptive title "Sonata quasi una Fantasia." "What interests Schnittke here," explain Valentina Kholopova and Evgenia Chigareva in their valuable 1990 book on the composer, "is extreme freedom of expression. It is a testimony to the difficulty of repeating today the model of classical form."

The very unconventional and visually striking scoring of the Second Sonata uses tone clusters, microtonal phrases, violin versions of sprechstimme, and exhaustive reworking of one small four-note motif: the B-A-G-H (B-flat, A, C,

B) theme spelling out Bach's name. Here (as elsewhere in Schnittke's music), the B-A-C-H motif serves as a link to the classical tradition, a symbol of purity and beauty that is deformed, degraded and transformed by a late twentieth-century sensibility that has witnessed too much evil and vulgarity. Simultaneously with the Second Sonata, Schnittke used the B-A-C-H motif as the basis for his 1968 score for the short animated film *The Glass Harmonica* (directed by Andrei Khrjanovsky), a story of how greedy and envious forces destroy a fragile instrument whose music brings peace and serenity to all listeners.

The fierce battle between the forces of harmony and dissonance that rages throughout the Sonata reaches a shocking conclusion in the coda, where the pianist bangs out the G-minor chord with which the piece began—114 times! In the final two measures, the solo violin intones the B-A-C-H motif, but ending on the disturbing dissonance of B-flat against B-natural. As Kholopova and Chigareva observe, the Second Sonata "affirms that even the most beautiful ideal conceived in the past is incapable of overcoming or pacifying the great turmoil of the present, and that we are wrong today to be satisfied with a sense of peace belonging to a former age."

The B-A-C-H motif also serves as a central symbol and musical idea in the short "Prelude in Memoriam Dmitri Shostakovich," which was written shortly after the death of Dmitri Shostakovich in 1975. Here, B-A-C-H is juxtaposed in collage-like form to Shostakovich's musical "signature"—D-S-C-H (D, E-flat, C, B). Shostakovich frequently incorporated his musical monogram into his compositions, most notably in the Eighth String Quartet and the Tenth Symphony. The piece is written for two violins, or for violin solo with tape (as is the case on this recording). After reworking the two signatures in various question-and-answer

patterns, Schnittke concludes by bringing together the two notes and letters the two great masters shared: C and H (C and B). For Schnittke, Shostakovich was a musical and personal mentor of enormous significance, an "amazing example of unceasing renewal, of constant thirst for all that was fresh, of new flowering with every spring," as he wrote.

"A Paganini" may not possess the deep emotional subtext of the other three works on this recording, but it reveals another, more playful side to Schnittke's creative personality. The piece was written on a commission from Soviet violinist Oleg Krysa, for a performance at a festival in Italy devoted to Paganini. Not having formerly come into prolonged contact with Paganini's music, Schnittke used the opportunity to reinterpret one of Paganini's well-known virtuoso pieces for the violin, the 24 Caprices. In "A Paganini," Schnittke quotes materials from 16 fragments from 13 of the Caprices, and makes clear allusion to other themes by Corelli, Rachmaninoff ("Variations on a Theme of Corelli"), Bach and Berg.

Regardless of the seeming complexity, erudition and difficulty of his music, Schnittke is a composer who always wanted to reach his audience. "It's important to think that what you write will be understood, appreciated and necessary to the public," he told me that winter day in 1982, the same year he wrote "A Paganini." "What I want my audience to do is listen actively, not passively."

Harlow Robinson is author of biographies of Sergei Prokofiev and Sol Hurok, and editor/translator of Selected Letters of Sergei Prokofiev. His articles and essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Musical America*, *Musical Quarterly*, *Stagebill* and *Opera News*, and he has lectured for *The Boston Symphony*, *The New York Philharmonic*, *Lincoln Center* and *Philadelphia Orchestra*.



Joanna Kurkowicz ~ VIOLIN

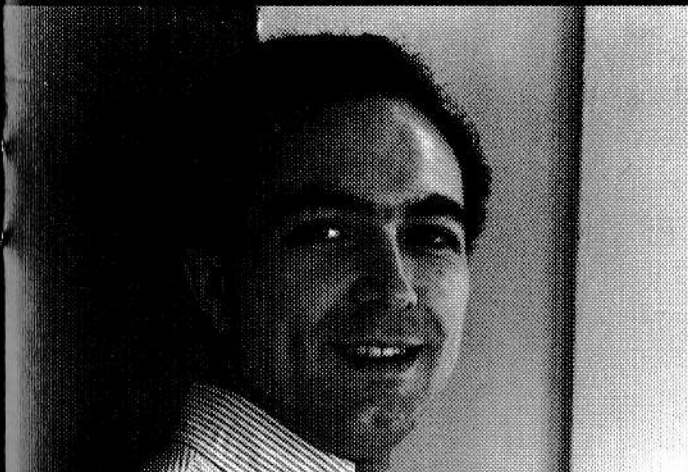
Joanna Kurkowicz enjoys an active and versatile career as a soloist, chamber musician and concertmistress. Praised by the *Boston Globe* as "a very cultivated artist", Miss Kurkowicz has been a prizewinner at many international competitions, including the Irving McKlein International Competition, The Carmel and Coleman Chamber Music Competitions, and the Henryk Wieniawski and Tadeusz Wronski International Competitions in Poland. In the USA Joanna Kurkowicz has performed as soloist with the Metamor-

phosen Chamber Orchestra, Jefferson Symphony, San Luis Obispo Symphony and New England String Ensemble. She has made numerous radio and television broadcasts in the USA, Poland and France.

Miss Kurkowicz resides in Boston and is currently the concertmistress of the Boston Philharmonic and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project. She is a member of the Metamorphosen Chamber Orchestra, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston. She has collaborated in chamber performances with such eminent artists as Jaime Laredo, Charles Treger, Laurence Lesser, James Buswell and James Dunham. A strong advocate of contemporary music, Kurkowicz has premiered works by Ralph Shapey, Poul Ruders and Grazyna Bacewicz. Her festival appearances include the Ravinia, Banff and Weimar festivals, as well as the Mozarteum Summer Academy.

A native of Lublin, Poland, Miss Kurkowicz came to the United States in 1992 to complete her second Master of Music degree as a student and teaching assistant of Charles Treger at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She earned a Master of Music with distinction from the Paderewski Conservatory of Music in Poznan, Poland, in the studio of Jadwiga Kaliszewska. Recently, she completed the prestigious Artist Diploma program at the New England Conservatory of Music, where she studied with Masuko Ushioda.

Joanna Kurkowicz plays on a Petrus Guarnerius violin, dated 1699.



Sergey Schepkin ~ PIANO

Following performances of both books of J.S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Sergey Schepkin was hailed by *The New York Times* as a "formidable Bach pianist." *The Boston Globe* called Schepkin's performances of the same works "a sublime statement" and praised his "Olympian Command."

Although the works of Bach are central to Schepkin's repertoire, he performs works in all styles of music—his repertoire ranging from Byrd and Sweelinck to Schnittke and Cubaidulina. He has won numerous prizes, including the

First Prize and the Chopin Prize in the 1999 New Orleans International Piano Competition, and has appeared as soloist with the St. Petersburg Philharmonic, the Boston Pops, the Oslo Philharmonic, the Norwegian Broadcasting Symphony, among other orchestras. Mr. Schepkin has performed in Russia, Europe, North America and New Zealand, and has been heard on radio and television throughout the world. He has recorded Bach's "Goldberg Variations", keyboard Partitas, and the "Well-Tempered Clavier" for the Boston-based Ongaku Records.

Sergey Schepkin, who was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, started playing the piano at the age of five. His principal teachers at the St. Petersburg Conservatory included Alexandra Zhukovsky and Grigory Sokolov, and he studied composition with Sergey Wolfensohn and Boris Arapov. Schepkin holds an Artist Diploma and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree, both in piano performance, from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, where he studied with Russell Sherman. He currently serves on the New England Conservatory music history faculty and the faculty of the Preparatory School. An avid chamber music player, he has performed with such musicians as Julius Baker, Colin Carr, Laurence Lesser, Masuko Ushioda, and the late Walter Trampler, as well as the Borromeo and New Zealand string quartets. He is a founding member of the Chameleon Arts Ensemble of Boston, a *Boston Globe*-nominated "best chamber ensemble" of 1998.

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Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998)



	Sonata No.1	(18:01)
	<i>for Violin and Piano</i>	
1	1. Andante	2:54
2	2. Allegro	5:13
3	3. Largo	4:38
4	4. Allegretto Scherzando - Allegro-Largo-Allegretto	5:16
5	A Paganini	13:50
	<i>for Violin solo</i>	
6	Sonata No.2 (Quasi una Sonata)	23:50
	<i>for Violin and Piano</i>	
7	Prelude in Memoriam	
	Dmitri Shostakovitch	5:09
	<i>for Violin and Tape</i>	

Total Time: 60:52

JOANNA KURKOWICZ – Violin
SERGEY SCHIEPKIN – Piano