

**Rudolf Serkin** emerged from the environment of post-World War I Austria to become one of the most profound and challenging pianists of the century. Childhood studies in Vienna with Richard Robert (piano), and Joseph Marx and Arnold Schoenberg for composition, led to a 1915 debut performance with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra at the age of 12. After 1920, Serkin was associated with noted violinist Adolf Busch, both as a duo-sonata partner, and with the Busch Chamber Orchestra (and, from 1935, as Busch's son-in-law). An American debut in 1936 with the New York Philharmonic under Toscanini led to Serkin's decision to relocate to the U.S. in 1939. Invited to join the piano faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music, he quickly rose to become head of the piano department, and, from 1968, president of the Institute. He devoted his summers to cultivating several generations of young musicians at the Marlboro Festival in Vermont.

Many observers have remarked that Serkin was not a natural pianist. Indeed, he seemed rather to play by force of will alone, and the strength of his musicianship lies more in the deep insight that he brought to the music of the composers he holds dearest -- traditional Austrian and German masters -- than in virtuosic pianism. In the sonatas of Beethoven, Serkin finds particular inspiration. His Beethoven interpretations do not necessarily please the listener in terms of superficial "beauty," but rather convey the unique mixture of logic, violence, and spiritual transcendence that he feels is the essence of Beethoven's work. In the Brahms concerti, Serkin's vision is nothing short of titanic. On off-nights, however, Serkin's lofty, cerebral brand of pianism sometimes failed him, and the austere, "square" approach to phrasing that makes his playing so immediately recognizable sometimes sounded unnecessarily harsh.

Rudolf Serkin's discography is impressive, spanning most of the general repertory from Bach to the early/mid-twentieth century, and including such relative novelties as the F minor Concerto of Max Reger, a composer Serkin had an abiding affinity for. His work at the Curtis Institute, and, during the summers, at the Marlboro Festival, has made him one of the most influential American teachers of the post-World War II era. Serkin's son Peter is also a pianist of considerable renown.

**Walter Weller** was born in Vienna, Austria, where he studied at the Vienna Hochschule für Musik and first gained renown as a prodigy on the violin. His father, also named Walter Weller, was a violinist in the Vienna Philharmonic. At age 17, Weller became a member of both the Vienna Philharmonic and the Vienna State Opera Orchestras. In 1961, at age 22, he became joint concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic with Willi Boskovsky, and remained in this post for 11 years.

While leading the orchestra, Weller also established and led his own string quartet, the Weller Quartet, from 1958 to 1969. In 1966, he married Elisabeth Samohyl, and the couple had a son.

Weller's first engagements as a conductor were in 1966, deputising at short notice for Karl Böhm. His conducting debut at the Vienna State Opera was in 1969, leading *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. He later served as Generalmusikdirektor (GMD) of Duisburg, Germany, for the 1971-1972 season. From 1975 to 1978, he was principal conductor of the Niederösterreichischen Tonkünstlerorchester. From 1994 to 1997, he was Chief Conductor of the Basel Symphony Orchestra, the last conductor with that title before the orchestra joined with the Radio Symphony Orchestra Basel to form the Sinfonieorchester Basel, and in parallel, was GMD in Basel. He also served as principal guest conductor of the Spanish National Orchestra from 1987 until 2002. Weller served as Music Director of the National Orchestra of Belgium from 2007 to 2012, at which time he became Honorary Conductor of the orchestra. In 2010, he became the first honorary conductor of the Trondheim Symphony Orchestra. He also became Conductor Laureate of the Stuttgart Philharmonic Orchestra and Associate Director of the Valencia Orchestra.

In Great Britain, Weller held several principal conductorships. From 1977 to 1980, he was principal conductor of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic. He then held the same post with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra from 1980 to 1986. In 1992, he became principal conductor of the Scottish National Orchestra, and helped to mediate strained relations between the orchestra's musicians and management at the time. He served as the SNO's principal conductor until 1997, and subsequently became the orchestra's Conductor Emeritus. The Bank of Scotland honoured Weller by printing his portrait on a special 50 pound note.

His widow and son survive him.

# Sergei Prokofiev

## Piano Concerto No. 4

in B-flat major for the left hand, Op. 53

Rudolf Serkin, piano

Eugene Ormandy The Philadelphia Orchestra

# Scythian Suite - "Ala Et Loly" Op.20

Walter Weller London Philharmonic Orchestra



When Sergei Prokofiev first heard Dmitri Mitropoulos perform and simultaneously conduct his Piano Concerto No. 3 so magnificently in Paris, the composer, who had himself toured with the piece, reportedly remarked rather peevishly that "I guess I will have to write another for myself." He had recently squandered his creative talents on an ill-fated Concerto No. 4 for the one-armed Paul Wittgenstein. The normally obstreperous pianist, who initially bridled at performing the distinctive opening cadenza that gives the Ravel work written for his unique circumstances such dramatic power, had also complained that the two compositions fashioned for him by Richard Strauss were disproportionate and unnecessarily modern. Towards Prokofiev, Wittgenstein exhibited the most polite deference while still steadfastly refusing to even attempt to perform his new concerto. In fact, the opus languished unheard until another German concert artist, Siegfried Rapp, lost his own right arm in an even more brutal version of global conflict and contacted Madame Prokofiev three years after the death of her husband, receiving permission to give the world premiere of the piece in Berlin in 1956.

The structural peccadillo of this inventive miniature is an insouciant circular design. The first movement, although marked *Vivace*, is indeed a Rondo, more suitable in formal musical architecture as an ending section. We enter the fashionable world of the Stravinskian Neoclassical almost immediately and it is easy to recall two of Prokofiev's earlier works, the "Classical" Symphony No. 1 and the brisk, one-movement First Concerto. The opening coolness establishes a certain detachment, reminiscent of Haydn, a holding out of the emotional content at one arm's length. Thoughtful and measured, the *Andante* is the finest Prokofiev slow movement to date, foreshadowing in its patient construction of intensity the great third movement of the Fifth Symphony. The composer, who lost the only copy of his Second Concerto when his tenants burned it for warmth while he was away on concert tour, almost immediately rescued the main theme of this section once it became apparent that Wittgenstein would never perform the work as a whole, giving it new life and form as one of the loveliest melodies in his ballet *Romeo and Juliet*. In the *Moderato* section, Prokofiev rolls up his sleeve and fashions an entire clinic on the subject of touch, rising to the challenge to make the writing for only one hand as varied as that for both. Wittgenstein claimed a lack of understanding of the piece as his basis for rejection, but it seems more likely that he was afraid of this movement and its wide range of colorful tactile demands. But it is the incredible fourth movement that identifies this composition as uniquely Prokofiev. Only seconds over a minute in length, this razor-sharp distillation of the opening material is an exclamation point that ends like an ellipsis. Satisfying the urge to conclude with a Rondo after all, only the composer of a set of solo piano pieces called *Sarcasms* could have written such a

signature close.

In the summer of 1914, Prokofiev, the then-emerging enfant terrible of Russian music, traveled to London to meet with the ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev. Diaghilev commissioned the young composer to write a ballet with a prehistoric or fairy-tale scenario -- hoping, perhaps, for the same kind of success he had recently enjoyed with the like-themed ballets of Stravinsky. Prokofiev returned to St. Petersburg and engaged the services of poet Sergei Gorodetzky in developing an effective story line.

The composer settled on a theme centered on a prehistoric tribe of barbarians, the Scythians, known to drink blood and engage in other similarly gruesome practices. The immediate musical result was *Ala and Lolli* (1914-1915), which Prokofiev first presented to Diaghilev in the form of a nearly complete piano score. Diaghilev, however, rejected the work as too close in spirit to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, fearing comparisons to the still-new *succès du scandale*. To placate Prokofiev, Diaghilev commissioned from the dejected composer a new ballet, *Chout* (1915). Before fulfilling that commission, though, Prokofiev turned his attention back to his orphaned ballet, distilling its most effective numbers into the *Scythian Suite*.

The suite is cast in four movements whose titles readily evoke the ballet's prehistoric themes: "The Adoration of Veles and Ala," "The Evil God and Dance of the Pagan Monster," "Night," and "The Glorious Departure of Lolli and the Sun's Procession." What is most immediately striking about the score is Prokofiev's brilliant orchestration. The music is the product of a 23 year old, yet it clearly demonstrates the unmistakable confidence, control, and imagination of a seasoned master. The vivid colors and instrumental effects are such that the work, despite its relative unfamiliarity, survives as one of the most brilliant orchestral essays of its era.

The first movement begins savagely, the discordant main theme calling to mind a titanic struggle between monstrous forces. The mood turns quiet but restless, and the sound darkens; here the writing for reeds and harp here is especially brilliant and atmospheric. The second movement is fast and brutal, the rhythms pounding and insistent, the themes menacing and ominous; this is the most unambiguously Russian music of the suite. The first half of "Night" is appropriately dark, the second half explosive and unsettling. "The Glorious Departure" begins with a rush of energy, then slows to a colorful march, followed by a menacing yet comical theme. The suite concludes with a brilliant depiction of the rising sun that smites Chuzbog.

The *Scythian Suite* was premiered under the composer's baton in St. Petersburg on January 29, 1916.

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Scythian Suite - "Ala Et Loly" Op.20

Walter Weller London Philharmonic Orchestra

Piano Concerto No. 4 24:18

1. Vivace 4:17

2. Andante 10:24

3. Moderato 8:06

4. Vivace 1:31

Scythian Suite - "Ala Et Loly" Op.20 22:50

5. L'Adoration De Vélès Et D'Ala

Allegro Feroce 6:30

6. Le Dieu Ennemi Et la Danse Des Esprits Noirs

Allegro Sostenuto 2:38

7. La Nuit - Andantino 7:42

8. Le Départ Glorieux De Lolly Et Le Cortège Du Soleil

Tempestoso 6:00 Total Time 47:08

Piano Concerto Released by Columbia records 1963

Transferred from a 15ips 2-track tape

Scythian Suite recorded by Decca records

Engineer - Kenneth Wilkinson Producer - Richard Beswick

Transferred from a 15ips 2-track tape

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