

Russian Violin Concertos

Conus • Weinberg • Arensky

The number of violin concertos written by composers working in Russia and the Soviet Union makes for an impressive tally, with any surprise that there were no significant pieces written before that of Tchaikovsky in 1878 explained by its having been intended for Leopold Auer: a musician commonly held to be the founder of the Russian violin tradition. Concertos were regarded with some suspicion by adherents of the 'nationalist' school as products of a Western tradition they were intent on avoiding, but composers of the next generation found little problem in accommodating form and expression – not least two of those who feature on this disc.

Julius Conus was born Yulij Eduardovich Konyus in Moscow on 1st February 1869 (Gregorian calendar). His father was the piano teacher Eduard Conus, and his brothers were the teacher Georgi Conus and pianist Lev Conus. All three studied at the Moscow Conservatory under Sergey Taneyev and Anton Arensky. In 1888 he was awarded the Gold Medal, journeying first to Paris, where he played in the opera orchestra, then to New York, becoming concertmaster of the orchestra. During 1893-1901 he taught at the Moscow Conservatory and formed a friendship with Rachmaninov, with whom he gave numerous chamber concerts. The Bolshevik Revolution saw him move to Paris, where he taught at the Russian Conservatoire from 1921. The rise of Nazism led to his return in 1939 to what had become the Soviet Union. He died in Moscow on 3rd January 1942.

Conus left no major work other than the *Violin Concerto* of which he gave the première in Moscow during 1898. An effective showpiece, it was once hardly less popular than that by Tchaikovsky. Fritz Kreisler championed it early in the twentieth century, giving its London première in 1904, while Jascha Heifetz made it central to his repertoire. Later generations ignored the work, though it has enjoyed high-profile exponents – not least Itzhak Pearlman.

The opening orchestral tutti sets a restless and

passionate mood, subsiding to make way for the soloist who reinterprets its main idea as a plangently expressive theme against woodwind and strings. This soon builds to a brief orchestral passage, from which the soloist continues in more resolute mood to bring about a vigorous climax which is, however, shot through with the initial sobriety. The soloist engages in a heated dialogue with the orchestra, building to a forceful transition which leads into the work's second main section and an eloquent if discursive theme for the soloist lightly supported by orchestra. At length the music fades in the lower strings, the soloist continuing with greater inwardness before the orchestra briefly takes over the theme. A reference to the opening section brings a peremptory orchestral response that makes way for the cadenza, which alludes to earlier material during its often rhetorical course before recalling the work's initial theme. The soloist then heads into a rapid interchange with the orchestra that brings about a decisive conclusion.

Mieczyslaw Weinberg was born in Warsaw on 8th December 1919, studying there as a pianist until the Nazi occupation led to his flight to Minsk (in the course of which, his documents were inscribed as Moisey Vainberg, by which name he was 'officially' known until 1982). During 1939-41 he studied with Vasily Zolotaryov then, after the Nazi invasion, headed further east to Tashkent. There he wrote his *First Symphony*, which impressed Shostakovich and led to his settling in Moscow. In spite of various setbacks (his father-in-law, actor Solomon Mikhoels, was executed in 1948 and he himself was imprisoned prior to Stalin's death), he built a reputation as a composer championed by leading Soviet musicians. Despite official honours his fortunes declined over his final two decades, with his death in Moscow on 26th February 1996 largely unnoticed. Since then his large output, central to which are 26 symphonies and seventeen string quartets, has been held in increasingly high regard.

Weinberg left nine works for solo instrument and orchestra. The *Concertino for Violin and Strings* was the earliest, composed in July 1948 and pre-dating his *Violin Concerto* [Naxos 8.557194] by over a decade. No immediate performance seems to have taken place, however, and it was only published as recently as 2007.

The first movement opens with a plaintive theme lightly accompanied by strings, whose brief transition leads into a livelier idea which proves short-lived. This exposition is now repeated literally, after which soloist and strings restate the initial theme in subtly intensified terms before a shortened reprise sees the themes recalled in reverse order, the initial theme leading out in a brief coda. Without pause a cadenza draws on both themes in compact and resourceful terms, before full strings forcefully launch a slow movement whose bittersweet main theme is eloquently stated by the soloist. This is repeated more intensely in a higher register, before heaving strings effect a restrained climax, soon subsiding into a regretful close. The finale sets off with a theme whose wistfulness is accentuated by its graceful lilt, and contrasted with a scurrying idea accompanied by pizzicato strings. The central interlude is arrestingly scored for muted strings, before the soloist recalls both themes in modified form, the scurrying idea gaining momentum as it propels the work to an unexpectedly hectic close.

Anton Stepanovich Arensky was born in Novgorod on 12th July 1861. Musically precocious, in 1879 he moved to St Petersburg, where he studied composition at the Conservatory, graduating in 1882 and soon afterwards became a professor at the Moscow Conservatory. In 1895 he returned to St Petersburg as director of the Imperial Choir (to which he had been recommended by Balakirev), retiring in 1901 to concentrate on composition, piano playing and conducting. Unfortunately drinking and gambling had already conspired to undermine his health, and he died

of tuberculosis in a sanatorium at Perkjärvi (now part of Finland) on 25th February 1906.

Influenced above all by Tchaikovsky, Arensky was criticized in his lifetime for a lack of individuality though he was by no means unsuccessful as a composer of large-scale works. Along with three operas, a ballet and several cantatas, his list of compositions (which extends to 75 opus numbers) includes two each of symphonies, piano trios and string quartets (the second of which includes the *Variations on a Theme of Tchaikovsky*, once often heard in transcription for string orchestra), a *Piano Quintet*, four *Piano Suites* as well as concertos for piano and violin. The *Violin Concerto* was composed in 1891 and taken up by numerous soloists over the next half-century.

The orchestra starts with a moody theme quickly taken up by the soloist, which continues against lively responses from woodwind and strings. A second theme is more deliberate and soulful, bringing out the soloist's *cantabile* quality in no uncertain terms, before a resolute orchestral transition prepares for a slow section centred on an evocative theme announced by horn. The soloist takes this up over a lightly scored orchestral backdrop, building to a brief yet ominous recollection of the initial theme from where the soloist leads off with a waltz-like idea, its ingratiating nature reinforced by the delicate orchestral accompaniment. At length a further orchestral reference to the initial theme leads to a truncated reprise of the opening section, the soulful secondary theme poetically rendered by flute, before an orchestral passage rhetorically makes way for a cadenza which focuses on the initial theme. Intent arpeggios from the soloist usher the orchestra back in and the music heads into an increasingly energetic coda which brings about the fateful ending.

Richard Whitehouse

Sergey Ostrovsky



Photo: Eugenia Pilyavina

Sergey Ostrovsky was born in 1975 in Gorky (Nizhny Novgorod) to a family of musicians, began playing violin at the age of six, and studied with David Lapidus as his first teacher. He made his first concert appearances at the age of eight, and performed for the first time with a symphony orchestra at the age of thirteen. He studied with Lazar Gantman and Yuri Gluhovsky at the Gorky Conservatory, and in 1991 moved to Israel with his family and continued his studies with Yair Kless and Irina Svetlova at the Rubin Academy, Tel Aviv. In 1996 he founded the Aviv Quartet, which moved to Europe in order to study with the members of the Alban Berg Quartet at the Cologne Hochschule (1998-2000), and with members of the Daniel Quartet at the Rotterdam Conservatory, where Ostrovsky completed his Bachelor Degree Diploma with Natalia Morozova in 2000, and his Master Degree Diploma at the Amsterdam Conservatory with Alexander Kerr in 2002. He participated in master-classes with Isaac Stern, Hermann Krebbers, Dorothy Delay, Ivry Gitlis, Ida Haendel and has served since 2007 as first concertmaster of the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande in Geneva, and from 2009 has taught at the Geneva Conservatory Haute Ecole de Musique. A winner of various international awards and with appearances in major concert-halls throughout the world, Sergey Ostrovsky plays a 1716 Giovanni Grancino violin, purchased with the generous support of Mr James Mayer and the Tzfonot Tarbut non-profit organization for support of the arts in Israel.

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra



Photo: Chris Zuidyk

Founded in 1893, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra has worked with many famous composers, conductors and musicians including Elgar, Sibelius, Holst, Stravinsky, Vaughan Williams and Thomas Beecham; and more recently with Michael Tippett, John Tavener and Peter Maxwell Davies. Principal conductors since the founder Sir Dan Godfrey have included Charles Groves, Constantin Silvestri, Andrew Litton, Marin Alsop and now by the dynamic young Ukrainian, Kirill Karabits. The BSO has toured worldwide, performing at Carnegie Hall, New York, the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Vienna Musikverein, and Berlin Philharmonie, as well as regular British appearances at the Royal Festival Hall and Royal Albert Hall in London, the Symphony Hall in Birmingham and the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester. The BSO is known internationally through over three hundred recordings, and continues to release numerous CDs each year with Naxos. Recent critically acclaimed recordings have included CDs of Bernstein, Bartók, Sibelius, Glass, Adams and Elgar, and three discs featuring arrangements of Mussorgsky, Bach and Wagner by Stokowski were nominated for GRAMMY® awards in 2004, 2005 and 2006.

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5

Thomas Sanderling



Photo: Clive Barda

Thomas Sanderling grew up in St Petersburg, where his father Kurt Sanderling was conductor of the St Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra. After graduating from the Music School of the Leningrad Conservatory he studied conducting at the Hochschule für Musik in East Berlin. At the age of 24 he became Music Director of the Halle Opera, and at an early age appeared frequently with leading East German orchestras and opera houses, including the Dresden Staatskapelle and Leipzig Gewandhaus. At the request of the composer he gave the German premières of Shostakovich's *Thirteenth* and *Fourteenth Symphonies* and made the world première recording of the composer's last orchestral work, the *Michelangelo Suite*. This recording led to work as assistant to Leonard Bernstein and Herbert von Karajan. Thomas Sanderling has conducted extensively on the international stage, and is equally acclaimed for his operatic work. He was Permanent Guest Conductor of the Deutsche Staatsoper Unter den Linden Berlin from 1978 to 1983, when he moved to the West. Since then he has conducted an extensive repertory of operas at some of the world's leading opera houses. He enjoys a strong relationship with the St Petersburg Philharmonic and since 2000 he has served as Principal Guest Conductor of the Novosibirsk Philharmonic Orchestra and in 2004 became Principal Guest Conductor of the National Philharmonic Orchestra of Russia. He has won wide acclaim and a number of distinguished awards, and in recent years has recorded the complete orchestral works of Taneyev for Naxos. His other recordings, including Shostakovich premières for Deutsche Grammophon, have won considerable critical acclaim and recognition.

6



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