

Prokofiev & Brahms
September 25, 2026

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Notes on the Program
By Aaron Grad

Violin Concerto No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 63 [1935]

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born April 15, 1891 in Sontsovka, Ukraine

Died March 5, 1953 in Moscow, Soviet Union

Sergei Prokofiev was at the start of a brilliant career as a composer and pianist when his native Russia was upended by revolution in 1917. He had enough resources and connections to get out of the country, and he planned to build a new life in the United States, but he never managed to gain much of a foothold with American audiences, and when he moved on to France a few years later, he found he was still underappreciated.

The trouble was that Prokofiev found himself drawn toward a more direct and heartfelt musical language he described as “new simplicity,” at a time when radical experimentation and edgy irony were all the rage. The one place that actually embraced Prokofiev’s music wholeheartedly was the Soviet Union, which he first visited for a concert tour in 1927, after a decade away. He made the momentous decision in 1936 to resettle there permanently.

The Violin Concerto No. 2, from 1935, turned out to be Prokofiev’s final commission outside of the Soviet Union. Supporters of the French violinist Robert Soetans funded the work, which Prokofiev composed in Paris and during a concert tour through the Soviet Union. Soetans debuted the concerto in Madrid, Spain, where the local audience surely appreciated Prokofiev’s inclusion of castanets in the orchestration.

The concerto fulfills the promise of a “new simplicity” from its opening measures, entrusting an unadorned theme to the solo violin. That melody haunts the first movement, ultimately silencing a contrasting lyrical strain and returning for a charged final statement with stern plucks.

The slow movement takes up the same rising pattern that began the first movement, transporting it to a peaceful accompanying texture for clarinets and pizzicato strings. The

solo violin floats above with a melody of timeless beauty and grace, soaring into the instrument's highest range as the theme passes to the orchestra.

The finale confirms that Prokofiev's move toward simplification did not dampen his wry humor. The music builds to a propulsive coda, the violin's perpetual motion figures urged forward by a thudding bass drum and throbbing accompaniment.

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73 [1877]

JOHANNES BRAHMS

Born May 7, 1833 in Hamburg, Germany

Died April 3, 1897 in Vienna, Austria

"I shall never write a symphony," Brahms huffed in a letter to a friend, at a time when he was nearing 40 and already one of Europe's most famous composers. "You can't have any idea what it's like always to hear such a giant marching behind you!" That giant was Beethoven, and the shadow he cast over Brahms was nearly inescapable. In the First Symphony, completed in 1876 after an arduous process that spanned fourteen years, Brahms squared directly with his hero and tormentor, following the same fateful path from C-minor to C-major that Beethoven traversed in the Fifth Symphony.

Brahms' Second Symphony, written just a year later, could not have been more different in its origins. He wrote it that summer at a lakeside village in the Austrian Alps, describing the work as "all blue sky, babbling of streams, sunshine and cool green shade!"

The cellos and basses begin the symphony with a four-note figure, that, by coincidence, corresponds exactly to the start of Stephen Foster's 1864 song "Beautiful Dreamer"—clearly both composers appreciated the motive's idyllic lilt. Another recognizable snippet comes from Brahms' own pen: the famous Lullaby he published in 1868. The violas and cellos, instructed to play in a singing manner, introduce a variant of that soothing tune.

The main melody of the slow second movement is another marvel of songlike expression, with the cellos once again placed in their sweet tenor range to deliver the long, slurred phrases. With Brahms' typical grace, the rhythms sometimes morph effortlessly into triplets, recalling the smooth contours of the first movement.

The third movement begins with a woodwind ensemble supported by plucked cellos, an outdoorsy sound that recalls the refreshing wind bands that were a staple of Austrian life in earlier generations. Instead of a typical scherzo interrupted by a contrasting trio section, this movement oscillates between two conflicting tempos in a five-part form. The transitions that dovetail the mismatched rhythms show Brahms at his most playful and ingenious.

The finale begins with a type of surprise that Haydn (the “father of the symphony”) used so effectively in his influential examples. Once the extremely quiet music has you craning forward expectantly, the full orchestra rocks you back with a sudden *forte* arrival, pointing this sophomore symphony toward its radiant conclusion.

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