

Shostakovich Schnittke – Piano Concertos (Krainev) (1979)

Written by bluesever

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Dmitri Shostakovich – Piano Concerto No.1 Op. 35 1. *Allegro Moderato* 5:29 2. *Lento - Moderato - Allegro Con Brio* 17:12 - 3. *Alfred Schnittke – Concerto for Piano and String Orchestra* 24:56
Vladimir Krainev – piano
Saulius Sondeckis (Orchestra) Vladimir Spivakov – conductor

Shostakovich was the soloist at the premiere of this concerto, also known as Concerto For Piano And Trumpet because of the prominent part for the trumpet. At the premiere, Shostakovich had the trumpet player sit next to the piano instead of with the rest of the orchestra, which is usually done in modern performances too.

The concerto was premiered in 1933, before Shostakovich's first official government censure. The concerto is in 4 movements: I. *Allegretto* - The piano and orchestra toss out the themes in this movement while the trumpet comments on them. The mood of the movement changes quickly. This is some of Shostakovich's most sarcastic, witty and pithy music and it is reminiscent of the spontaneity of the first symphony. The movement ends with a dialogue with piano and trumpet.

II. *Lento* - This movement opens with a slow waltz-like melody. The piano enters, and expands the waltz into a passionate outburst from the piano and orchestra. After the climax fades, the strings re-enter gently, with the trumpet playing the waltz theme (with none of the sarcasm of the first movement) over the accompaniment of the orchestra. The piano and orchestra combine for a heart-felt, gentle close to the movement.

III. *Moderato* - This movement is less than 2 minutes long, and is generally thought to act as an

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introduction to the final movement. It is played with weight and depth of tone by the strings, but the piano shines through the quasi-seriousness and the music segues into the finale...

IV. Allegro con brio - The tempo increases, the piano chatters away. In this movement the trumpet becomes more prominent, almost on a par with the piano. The music becomes manic in tempo and intensity. Shostakovich was fond of quoting motifs from his and other composers music. This movement makes reference to Haydn, Mahler, a Jewish folk song, and others. The cadenza for solo piano is derived from Beethoven's *Rage Over A Lost Penny* for piano solo. The music gets more and more animated, until the trumpet plays a repeated figure while the piano and orchestra pound out chords. The entire ensemble joins together to bring the music to a rousing finish.

Shostakovich was in his late 20's when he wrote this concerto. His music was everywhere, his fame and popularity assured. In this period of relative freedom to do what he pleased, he composed a concerto that wavers from giddy to serious, music that toys with the listener. After the fiasco instigated by his opera of 1936 *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, Shostakovich's life would change, along with his music to a certain degree. But all that was to come. For the moment, Shostakovich wrote a concerto that thumbed its nose at tradition. ---

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Schnittke's *Concerto for Piano and Strings* is one of his most popular works, but it's been a slow burner on disc, a recording every couple of years since early 90s (it was composed in 1979). The concerto is unquestionably one of Schnittke's greatest works and, despite its often intense dissonance, it's one his most accessible too. Those unfamiliar with the composer's work could do worse than starting here, and Denys Proshayev's reading makes an excellent case for it: clear, lucid, and engaging throughout.

A brief word on nomenclature: The cover describes the work as "Piano Concerto," a singularly unhelpful designation, given that Schnittke wrote four. But each is for a different ensemble so the full instrumentation will usually suffice, in this case concerto for piano and strings. There has been a tendency in recent years to number Schnittke's piano concertos, but it hasn't really caught on. If and when it does, this one is No. 3.

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The concerto was written for Vladimir Krainev, who was Proshayev's teacher, and to whose memory this recording is dedicated. Krainev premiered the concerto with Alexander Dmitriev, who also conducts here: valuably continuity indeed. Proshayev has a clear tone and lucid technique. He prioritizes clarity over histrionics, yet never skimps on drama. If the reading occasionally seems overly controlled, that is only by comparison with some of the more impetuous readings out there, which seem messy in comparison to him.

He has an excellent feel for the music's quasi-liturgical atmosphere, something that comes across all the better for the church acoustic in which the recording was made (the concerto was recorded in St. Petersburg, the other works in Berlin). Working with a Russian string ensemble has the advantage that the players really understand the significance and the gravity of the quotations from Orthodox chant. A few more players would have helped though, as the string sound is often very thin (the Russian score gives 6,6,4,4,2; the Western edition 12,12,8,8,4—we're clearly in the former category here). Schnittke doesn't help matters by demanding big, round textures but for harmonies that are intensely dissonant. The smaller ensemble does have the advantage of allowing a very natural sense of balance with the piano—everything is always clearly heard and without any sense that the strings are being restrained for the pianist's benefit. ---classical-cd-reviews.com

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