

# FEBRUARY 1, 2025

## Viola Sonata

### REBECCA CLARKE

Born: 1886

Died: 1979

Composed: 1919

- I. Impetuoso
- II. Vivace
- III. Adagio — Agitato

Rebecca Clarke, who died in New York City in 1979 at the age of 93, was both English and American. Born in a suburb of London to an American father and a German mother, Clarke studied composition with Charles Villiers Stanford and the viola with Lionel Tertis at the Royal College of Music. She became one of the first women members of a professional orchestra in London when she joined the Queen's Hall Orchestra in 1912, and she also composed. Clarke spent much of her career in the United States, where her brothers lived; she was in this country when World War II broke out in 1939, and she decided to stay. In 1944 Clarke married James Friskin, the distinguished piano pedagogue who taught for many years at Juilliard, and she lived in New York City for the rest of her long life. Most of Clarke's own music comes from early in her career, and much of this—largely chamber and vocal works—remains unpublished.

The *Viola Sonata* is Clarke's best-known and most frequently-recorded composition. Information in the review of its first performance suggests that she began work on it in Hawaii in 1916 while on an international tour and completed it in 1919 in Detroit. Clarke entered this sonata in a competition sponsored by the distinguished American patron of the arts Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge for a work for viola and piano. There were 72 entries, and the six-member panel (which judged the works anonymously) split its vote evenly between Clarke's *Sonata* and Ernst Bloch's *Suite*. Coolidge, who was a close friend of Clarke, broke the tie by voting for the Bloch, specifically to avoid the appearance of favoritism. Nevertheless, the Clarke *Sonata* was warmly acclaimed at its premiere at the Berkshire Festival in Pittsfield on September 25, 1919.

Clarke heads the published sonata with a quotation from the French poet Alfred de Musset that translates roughly: "Poet, take up your lute; the wine of youth ferments this night in the veins of God." The sonata is in the expected three movements, with two big-boned outer movements framing a brief scherzo. Clarke's *Sonata* combines a sort of bardic violence with moments of rhapsodic contemplation, and that proves an impressive

mix. The sonata virtually explodes to life (Clarke marks the beginning *Impetuoso*), but within moments this energy has subsided into a dreamy pastoralism that we might associate with Ralph Vaughan Williams (who was in fact a champion of Clarke's music). Piano alone has the second subject, marked *langoroso*, and the movement unfolds across a long span. Along the way, listeners may sense another influence: the wistful, haunting melodies and wide harmonies frequently recall the late music of Claude Debussy (who completed his final work, the *Violin Sonata*, and died while Clarke was writing this sonata). After an active development and many mercurial changes of mood, Clarke brings the movement to a shimmering, soft close.

The scherzo, in which the viola is muted throughout, also recalls Debussy, specifically the scherzo of his *String Quartet*. Clarke's movement, with its dancing harmonics and pizzicatos, is almost elfin in its quickness and charm. The very ending, where the music seems to disappear in front of us, is particularly effective. The last movement seems at first to return to the dreamy side of the first movement, and in fact Clarke recalls themes from that movement. The finale once again alternates episodes of quite different character, and in its center comes a remarkable passage in which the piano sings gently over a sustained ponticello tremolo from the viola. Gradually the movement gathers strength on a recollection of the sonata's opening theme and drives to a dramatic close on a resounding E from both viola and piano.

## String Quartet No. 2 in F Major, Op. 92

### SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born: 1891

Died: 1953

Composed: 1941

- I. Allegro sostenuto
- II. Adagio
- III. Allegro

When the Nazis swept into western Russia in the summer of 1941, the avowedly classless Soviet government quickly evacuated some of its more valued citizens to what it hoped would be places of safety. Along with the composers Kabalevsky and Miaskovsky, Prokofiev was sent to Nalchik, a city in the Caucasus about one hundred miles west of Grozny. Here he continued work on what would be his great project of the war years, an opera based on Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and inspired by Russian heroism in the face of invasion from the west. And at the same time he took on quite a different project. Nalchik was the capital of Kabardino-Balkar Autonomous SSR, and

here Prokofiev came in contact with Kabardinian folk-music. The local arts committee chairman encouraged Prokofiev to make use of this material: “. . . you have a goldmine of musical material here that has remained practically untapped. If you take advantage of your stay here to work up this material you will be laying the foundation of a Kabardinian music.” Prokofiev did make use of Kabardinian themes: on November 2, 1941, he took time away from his work on the opera to begin what would be his *Second String Quartet* and had it done by December 3. The first performance took place in Moscow the following year.

This is an unusual piece of music for several reasons. First, it shows absolutely no trace of the war. Hearing it, one would never guess that the German armies were bearing down on Nalchik or that Prokofiev had to be evacuated to Tbilisi while working on it (in fact, the Nazis occupied and leveled Nalchik, and the arts administrator who had suggested this work was killed). Second, Prokofiev was generally uninterested in folk-music; not for him was the subtle incorporation of folk idioms that so attracted Bartók, Vaughan Williams, and others—the *Second Quartet* is one of Prokofiev's very few works to show any connection to folk material. And third, Prokofiev seemed to take delight in fusing the Kabardinian folk-tunes with one of the most rigorous of classical forms, the string quartet. It seems an unlikely match, yet it works.

The *Second Quartet* in three movements. The opening *Allegro sostenuto*, in sonata form, uses Kabardinian folk-songs as its themes, and the sound of these hard-edged melodies (based on shifting meters) must have exerted particular appeal to a composer who had delighted in outraging Parisian audiences during the 1920s with his own hard-edged scores. Still, these themes are treated with a good deal of classical rigor here: Prokofiev brings the exposition to a full stop with a grand cadence and then proceeds directly into a closely-argued development that treats both his main themes. By way of contrast, the *Adagio* is based on love-songs from the region. Its exotic opening section, built on ornate themes stretched across a 12/8 meter, gives way to a slightly faster central episode where the first violin dances above pizzicato accompaniment from the other voices. This section too grows ornate before the opening material returns to wind the movement down to its quiet close. The episodic last movement, based primarily on the Kabardinian dance-tune *Getigezhev Ogorbi*, is remarkable for the variety of sounds Prokofiev generates: *ponticello* bowing, sections played with the wood of the bow rather than the hair, strummed pizzicatos, some passages played entirely up-bow. One curious feature: at one point, the

music comes to a stop, the three upper voices vanish, and the cello has a lengthy cadenza that leads to the florid and agitated central episode. Gradually the opening material returns, and the *Second Quartet* proceeds firmly to its sudden close.

## Suite for Two Violins, Cello, and Piano Left-Hand, Op. 23

### ERICH WOLFGANG KORNGOLD

Born: 1897

Died: 1957

Composed: 1930

- I. Präludium und Fuge. Kräftig und bestimmt
- II. Walzer. Nicht schnell, anmutig
- III. Grotteske. Möglich rasch
- IV. Lied. Schlicht und innig, nicht zu langsam
- V. Rondo — Finale. Variationen

Paul Wittgenstein (1887–1961) came from one of the most urbane families in turn-of-the-century Vienna: his brother was the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Paul studied piano with Theodore Leschetizky, teacher of Paderewski and Schnabel. The young pianist made his professional debut in Vienna in December 1913 and seemed on the verge of distinguished career. And then, disaster: World War I began eight months later, and Wittgenstein—serving on the eastern front—was wounded so badly during the first month of fighting that his right arm had to be amputated. He returned to Vienna after spending the war in a prisoner camp in Siberia.

Anyone might have been crushed by such a fate, but Wittgenstein came home determined to create a piano repertory for the left hand. He turned the family fortune to the creation of such music, and the list of works he commissioned is distinguished. Most famous of these is Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*, and Strauss, Britten, Prokofiev, and others wrote works for Wittgenstein. One of the composers to whom Wittgenstein turned for a concerto was the prodigious Erich Wolfgang Korngold, whose opera *Die tote Stadt* had been premiered simultaneously in Hamburg and Cologne in 1920, when the composer was only 23. Korngold composed a massive and very difficult *Piano Concerto in C-sharp minor* for Wittgenstein, who gave the premiere in 1923. The pianist was pleased with the concerto, and five years later he came back to Korngold and asked for a chamber piece. For this commission, Korngold composed an unusual work for unusual forces: a *Suite for Two Violins, Cello, and Piano Left-Hand*.

Completed in the spring of 1930, it was first performed in Vienna on October 21, 1930, by Wittgenstein and members of the Rosé Quartet (led by Arnold Rosé, Mahler's brother-in-law). Wittgenstein liked the piece and performed it frequently on his tour of the western United States in 1934.

Wittgenstein had every reason to be pleased with this music. The *Suite* is a large-scale work (its five movements span nearly forty minutes), and the writing for the left hand is so brilliant and wide-ranging that anyone just *hearing* this music would imagine that it requires both hands. Further, Korngold's late-romantic idiom, which ranges from a Viennese elegance to a Mahlerian *grotesquerie*, makes for some very appealing music—only the unusual forces required have kept this music from being performed more often and so from being better-known.

The opening movement gets off to an aggressive start. Piano alone has the long opening statement (Korngold marks it "Powerful and determined") before the strings make their own decisive entrance. The main part of this extended movement is a fugue, introduced by the cello with successive entrances from piano and then the violins. Along the way come a rhapsodic interlude and a cadenza-like passage for solo piano before the

movement drives to its soaring conclusion.

The next two movements are sharply contrasted. The second movement is a sequence of waltzes (filtered through a late-romantic perspective), while the aptly-named *Groteske* is a scherzo in ternary form—its skittering, nervous outer sections frame a somber central episode. The fourth movement, called *Lied*, is just that: Korngold based this movement on his song *Was du mir bist?*, which he had composed the year before. This movement is a lyric meditation on the song, and Korngold asks that the performance be "simple and expressive." The powerful finale is a rondo in the form of a set of variations. Korngold marks it "vehement," though the music feels more exuberant than violent. The basic theme-shape, an amiable subject announced by the cello at the beginning, evolves across the span of this movement.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger