Five Melodies for Violin and Piano, Opus 35bis
SERGEI PROKOFIEV
Born April 23, 1891, Sontsovka
Died March 5, 1953, Moscow

Prokofiev fled Russia in 1918 to escape life under the new communist government, and at first he intended to make the United States his home. His two years in this country were unhappy, however, and in April 1920 he moved to Paris, which was then the musical capital of the world. But Prokofiev quickly returned for a tour of the United States, and on that tour he visited a place he particularly liked: California. It was in California in December 1920 that Prokofiev composed a sort of novelty, a set of *Five Songs without Words* for the Russian soprano Nina Koshetz; the première took place in New York City on March 27, 1921.

Songs without words were not unheard of–Rachmaninoff's famous *Vocalise* had been composed only eight years earlier for the soprano Antonina Nezhdanovka–and as a form it emphasizes the sound of the voice and its ability to sustain a lyric line. In 1925, while living in Paris and working on his ballet *Le Pas D'Acier*, Prokofiev returned to his wordless songs and arranged them for violin and piano. In fact, this took almost no arranging at all: he simply edited the soprano's vocal line for violin, and in this form the music becomes a set of lyric miniatures for violin and piano. This music is full of the characteristic pungency of Prokofiev's harmonic language in these years, so full of accidentals that it seems to hover uneasily between different keys, and the melodic line can be angular and twisting. But there is a haunting, bittersweet lyricism about these short pieces that makes them very appealing: Prokofiev's arrangement in effect creates five brief songs for violin.

The Rite of Spring
IGOR STRAVINSKY
Born June 17, 1882, Oranienbaum
Died April 6, 1971, New York City

In the spring of 1910, while completing the orchestration of *The Firebird,* Igor Stravinsky had the most famous dream in the history of music: "I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite: wise elders, seated in a circle, watching a young girl dancing herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring." This idea became *The Rite of Spring*, which Stravinsky began composing in the summer of 1911, immediately after the première of *Petrushka*. For help in creating a scenario that would evoke the spirit of pagan Russia,

Stravinsky turned to the painter-archaelogist-geologist Nicholas Roerich, who summarized the action:

> The first set should transport us to the foot of a sacred hill, in a lush plain, where Slavonic tribes are gathered together to celebrate the spring rites. In this scene there is an old witch, who predicts the future, a marriage by capture, round dances. Then comes the most solemn moment.
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> The wise elder is brought from the village to imprint his sacred kiss on the new-flowering earth. During this rite the crowd is seized with a mystic terror. After this uprush of terrestrial joy, the second scene sets a celestial mystery before us. Young virgins dance on the sacred hill amid enchanted rocks; they choose the victim they intend to honor. In a moment she will dance her last dance before the ancients clad in bearskins to show that the bear was man's ancestor. Then the greybeards dedicate the victim to the god Yarilo.

This story of primitive violence and nature-worship in pagan Russia–inspired in part by Stravinsky's boyhood memories of the thunderous break-up of the ice in St. Petersburg each spring–became a half-hour ballet in two parts, "The Adoration of the Earth" and "The Sacrifice."

In the music, Stravinsky drew on the distant past and fused it with the modern. His themes (many adapted from ancient Lithuanian wedding tunes) are brief, of narrow compass, and based on the constantly-changing meters of Russian folk music, yet his harmonic language can be fiercely dissonant and "modern," particularly in the famous repeating chord in "Dance of the Adolescents," where he superimposes an E-flat major chord (with added seventh) on top of an F-flat major chord. Even more striking is the rhythmic imagination that animates this score: Stravinsky himself confessed that parts of the concluding "Sacrificial Dance" were so complicated that while he could play them, he could not write them down. And beyond all these, *The Rite of Spring* is founded on an incredible orchestral sense: from the eerie sound of the high solo bassoon at the beginning through its use of a massive percussion section and such unusual instruments as alto flute and piccolo trumpet (not to mention the eight horns, two tubas, and quadruple woodwinds), this score rings with sounds never heard before. The première may have provoked a noisy riot, but at a more civilized level it had an even greater impact: no composer writing after May 29, 1913, would ever be the same.

Stravinsky's teacher Rimsky-Korsakov once divided composers into two groups–those who could compose away from the piano and those who had to be at one–and he placed Stravinsky in the latter category: Stravinsky needed to hear music as he composed it. But no simple two-hand version could encompass *The Rite of Spring*, so Stravinsky wrote it out for piano four-hands (played at this performance in an arrangement for two pianos); he published this version in 1913, the year of the premiere (the orchestral score was not published until 1921). Inevitably, the piano version loses much of what makes symphonic performances so exciting: the richly-varied instrumental palette and the sheer sonic impact of a huge orchestra. But the original piano version offers unusual insights into this music. Shorn of orchestral color, the simple black-and-white tones of the piano reveal the rhythmic and harmonic complexities of this score with crystalline clarity: here in their purest forms are Stravinsky's wonderful simultaneous rhythms and pungent

polychords. And, beyond these, the keyboard version offers the rare pleasure of watching two virtuoso pianists master the incredible difficulties of a score usually left to a hundred performers.

Quintet in B-flat Major for Flute, Clarinet, Horn, Bassoon, and Piano
NIKOLAI RIMSKY-KORSAKOV
Born March 18, 1844, Tikhvin
Died June 21, 1908, Lyubensk

When we think of Rimsky-Korsakov, we do not think of chamber music–we think instead of opulent orchestral scores and of grand operas on Russian subjects. And so this charming *Quintet for Winds and Piano* comes as the best possible surprise, a reminder that sometimes there are sides to composers that we know nothing about.

In 1876 the 32-year-old Rimsky-Korsakov was struggling to make his way as a composer. He had gotten out of the navy three years earlier and was now working as the inspector of Russian navy bands; he was also conducting, composing, and studying orchestration and counterpoint. That year, the Russian Music Society sponsored a chamber music competition, and for it Rimsky-Korsakov composed two pieces. First he wrote a *String Sextet*, and then he tried something completely different: a *Quintet for Winds and Piano*. Mozart and Beethoven had written such quintets, but they had scored them for oboe, clarinet, horn, bassoon, and piano. Rimsky-Korsakov adopted that general form, but dropped the oboe used by those composers and substituted a flute.

The competition produced mixed results for Rimsky-Korsakov when the pieces were performed (anonymously) that fall. The *String Sextet* was awarded an honorable mention, but the *Quintet* won nothing: the performers assigned to play it were so inferior that they broke down in the course of the performance and were unable to finish the piece. The composer, who believed strongly in this music, was furious, and he took great pleasure in its success when it was subsequently performed by the St. Petersburg Chamber Music Society. The *Quintet* is rarely performed today, doubtless because it is so unusual to have this particular combination of instruments available.

When Beethoven composed his *Quintet for Winds and Piano* in 1796, he freely admitted that he had been influenced by Mozart's *Quintet* (1784). Rimsky-Korsakov in turn was quick to admit the influence of Beethoven on the opening movement of his

Quintet. This movement, in sonata form, is marked *Allegro con brio*, a marking that was a particular favorite of the young Beethoven. Listeners, however, may be more struck by this movement's occasional echo of themes from the finale of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. The *Quintet* gets off to a jaunty start, with winds singing energetically above steady accompaniment from the piano. The second subject is a chorale for winds (this is the point where one senses the influence of the *Ninth Symphony*), and after a lengthy development a coda speeds this movement to its close on a grand B-flat from all involved.

The *Andante* begins with a long solo for horn that will form the thematic basis of this movement, and gradually the other wind players take up this theme. An unusual feature of this movement comes in its central episode, where Rimsky-Korsakov recasts his opening theme as a fughetto (perhaps he was trying to demonstrate to the judges of the competition that he was capable of accomplished counterpoint); the opening material returns to bring the movement to a quiet close.

The finale is a rondo, and it gets off to a fun start: the metric unit is a short 3/8, and the movement begins with the bassoon's playful octaves, over which the clarinet announces the absolutely infectious main subject (try forgetting this theme!). Rimsky-Korsakov marks this *grazioso*, and graceful it certainly is, but one is more likely to be taken with its sauciness and playfulness. There are some surprises along the way here, too. At one point, the winds step aside and allow the piano a long solo passage, and then Rimsky-Korsakov writes cadenzas for the horn, the flute, the clarinet, and finally the piano (Mozart did something similar in the finale of his *Quintet for Winds and Piano*). Soon, though, that inescapable opening theme makes its bouncy (and welcome) return, and a *Più vivo* coda drives the *Quintet* to its close, once again on a ringing B-flat.

That poor première performance may have blinded the judges to the many virtues of this music, and its unusual instrumentation has made for few performances since then. But Rimsky-Korsakov's *Quintet for Piano and Winds* is an absolute charmer, and–132 years after that disastrous first performance–we can take pleasure in discovering this music and hearing it fresh.