

On Prokof'ev

By Sviatoslav Richter

A Foreword and a contribution by Valerij Voskobochnikov and Lorenzo Seno

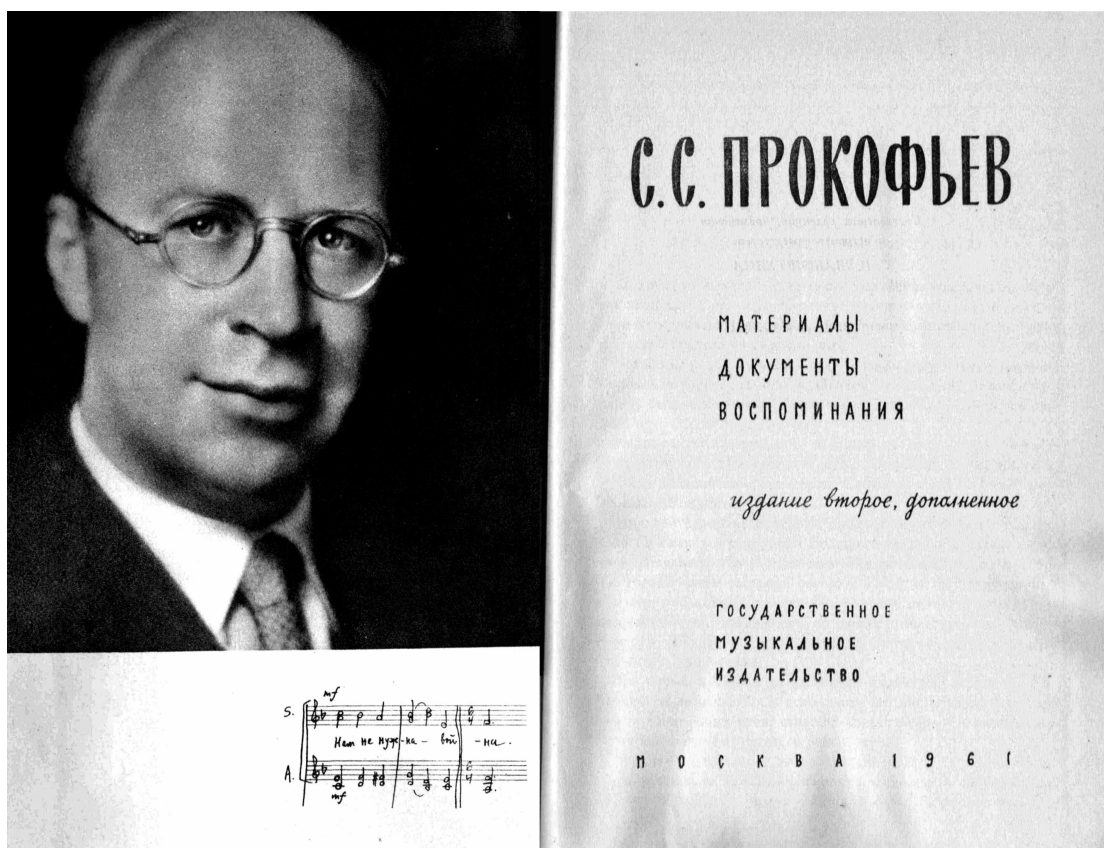
Translation from the Russian by Valerij Voskobochnikov and Lorenzo Seno
Notes by Valerij Voskobochnikov and Lorenzo Seno

Rome, Italy, November 2000
Third revision February 2002

Further information and documents:
<http://www.neuhaus.it>

About copyright

The copyright of this document is owned by Valerij Voskobochnikov and Lorenzo Seno. You can freely copy, reproduce and send this document to others, provided that you do not modify it in any way, and you left unaltered this copyright notice.



These are the first two pages of the original book from which the text here quoted or translated originates. On the left you can find two staves of a fragment of the “Hymn to Peace”, whose lyrics are: “We don’t need war ...”. Right side: “S.S. Prokof’ev – Documents, Materials and Recollections – Second updated edition. State Music Editions – Moscow 1961.

The complete text “On Prokof’ev” by Sviatoslav Richter, in English, can be found at this address:

<http://users.bluecarrots.com/rossik/>.

The present work represents a further commentary and integration of the above text.

It is made up of a Foreword, a note set Valerij Voskoboynikov with the help of Lorenzo Seno, and a small supplement consisting of an episode about Richter and Rostropovic playing a Prokof’ev concerto together, with the former as a Conductor.

This episode is missing in the English text quoted above. The present contribution is a translation from the Italian of a similar (but complete) publication of the paper on Prokof’ev, by Sviatoslav Richter. This publication, in Italian, can be found on the Italian Neuhaus, bilingual site, at <http://www.neuhaus.it>.

Foreword

By Valerij Voskobojnikov and Lorenzo Seno

We got the idea of publishing Richter's article on the Russian composer Sergej Sergeevic Prokof'ev from the site <http://users.bluecarrots.com/rossik/>, which was the first to publish it on the Internet in English. The present contribution includes a note set by Valerij Voskobojnikov, who was H.Neuhaus's pupil in Moscow. Besides adding explanations to the episodes related by Richter, the notes are enriched by Voskobojnikov's personal recollections about Neuhaus, Richter and their times.

Sviatoslav Richter, to our knowledge - besides his famous *Diaries* - was not much inclined to write anything. Several publications by other people appeared from time to time: the *Conversations* with his friend Jakov Milstein, *Travelling with Richter* by Valentina Cemberdži, and recently the *Du coté chez Richter* by Jurij Borisov. A personal text about Prokof'ev is thus a rather rare if not unique gift. Richter's article originates from the book *S.S.Prokof'ev - Materialy Dokumenty Vospominanija*, 2nd Muzgiz' edition (State Music Editions), published in Moscow during 1961. The first edition was dated 1956. The editor Semën Isaakovic Šlifštejn (Schlifschtein) (1903-1975) informs the reader that the published papers - Gilels' and Richter's recollections, together with the contributions by Director Natalia Sac (Satz) and by Composer Vladimir Vlasov - were expressly written for the Volume. Richter's paper appears on pages 455-470.

In the Internet published version cited above, the Rostropovic-Richter episode, concerning the joint concert of the Symphony-Concerto op.125, is completely missing. This episode assumes some importance - in our opinion - because it refers to the one and only time Richter conducted an Orchestra - an apparently very promising debut, referred to in several of Neuhaus's articles about Richter.

Reading Richter's paper we cannot help noticing the feeling of deep contentment, when he cites his preferred masterpieces by his favourite composer. We refer here to his judgment about the work *Semën Kotko*, which is today hardly represented either on Italian or Russian stages, to the Cantata *Zdravica*, dedicated to the Stalin on his 60th anniversary, and

also to his pianoforte works. Among the latter, are the war-time Sonatas (the 6th, 7th, 8th) and the rare, intimate and “domestic” 9th, as well as the beautiful *First Concerto* for violin, and finally the marvellous *Cycle* of Lieder on the Poems by Anna Achmatova.

Richter’s performances of all these works are renowned. We remember particularly the *Cycle of Achmatova*, which was performed together with his wife, the singer Nina Dorliak. We cannot disagree with Richter’s opinion about these works.

The present paper contains some surprises: in it Richter managed to overcome his deep-seated inclination to strictly avoid any mention of political issues. We refer to what he writes about the *Semën Kotko*, and to his short statement about the situation of Soviet music during 1948. *Semën Kotko* is definitely one of the best works devoted to the Soviet society. When Prokof’ev came back to Soviet Union during thirties, he made many efforts to please the regime. He composed for this purpose *Semën Kotko*, based on the novel “*I’m a son of the workers*”, by Valentin Kataev. This is a vast work, though difficult to perform, and includes many Ukrainian folklore recitatives and plenty of autochthonous intonations both in the speech and in the singing. Prokof’ev, of course, spent his childhood, in the Ukrainian village of Soncovka.

The plot develops during the earlier years of the civil war and tells us of the struggle of the Bolsheviks against the “Revolution’s betrayers”, the “*gajdamaki*” (nationalist gangs) and against “German soldiers”. In the invasion scene Prokof’ev’s mastery reaches its highest point and attains some highly dramatic effects. One of his preferred expressive resources is the “mechanical Crescendo” (used for instance in the Finale of the 7th Sonata, in the *Toccata*, and in the central Trio during the Finale of the 8th Sonata). This often implies the use of the obsessive repetition of the same leitmotif.

During the main scene of the *Semën*, over the short refrain sung by the girl, who has gone crazy after the killing of her beautiful sailor boy-friend, there is a huge Orchestral and Choir Crescendo. The village invaded by “German soldiers” burns down, and the supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution are tortured. Despite the solemnity of the events, the Opera contains traces of Ukrainian humour, typical of Gogol’ and Musorgskij. The reason why this Opera encountered such misfortune in the past is difficult to understand. Fortunately, the passionate and clever Conductor Valerij Gergiev is today recreating this work at the Mariinskij Theatre.

During 1958 there was a performance of *Seměn* at the Actor's Society (VTO) thanks to a group of volunteer singers and the work of the fantastic pianist Grigorij Zinger, who was able to replace an entire orchestra. Among the small audience, the presence of Neuhaus and Richter could be noted.

It isn't the first time in which Richter praises this work, but it is the very first time in which he offers us a judgement having some political nuance: "It is the best Opera on a Soviet subject".

In the paper you can find another mention of the politics of that time, specifically related to the situation in Winter 1948: "Personally, I can't understand the attitude during that time against Prokof'ev's works". As a matter of fact, this short sentence shows a quite firm personal judgment about the well-known question of the "formalism" in the arts. During that winter Ždanov, the ideologue of the Party, carried out his attack on musicians. When he called for the First Composer's Congress, in April, he published on the 10th of February a Party's Provision (Postanovlenie) against composers who were accused of "formalism" – of one of the worse betrayals of their Homeland.

In that terrible hanging atmosphere Richter and his wife Nina Dorliak performed the "forgotten" Prokof'ev's works. Those works were practically "forbidden" in the subsequent years.

Regarding the personal fate of the composer, we quote here an excerpt from the Italian edition of the Sergej Prokof'ev *Diary (Diario. Viaggio in "Bolscevisia"*, published by ESI (Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Napoli), edited by Franco Carlo Ricci and Valerij Voskobojnikov. The following excerpt is part of a note on the composer's first wife: "Lina Ivanovna Ljubera Codina-Prokof'eva (1897-1989), who was of Spanish origin. The composer never divorced her, in spite of the fact that from 1941 his former secretary, Mira Aleksan-drovna Mendel'son, was actually his partner. Following Stalin's directives, after the end of the second World War, every marriage between Soviet and foreign citizens was legally cancelled. The wedding between Lina Ivanovna and the composer, as a consequence, was considered never to have taken place. On February 20th 1948 – immediately after the tremendous "Postanovlenie" against formalism in music – she was seized and jailed in one of Stalin's gulags, where she remained from 1948 until 1956".

A last note for the reader of these Richter recollections. The final sentences dedicated to the composer tell us of the dreadful plane trip from Tbilisi to Moscow, the snowstorm and the consequent emergency landing in Suchumi. Richter doesn't give us any explanation of this story, because he was probably thinking that it would be absolutely obvious to any Soviet citizen having at least some basic historical knowledge. He was actually summoned from the welcoming Soviet Georgia to Moscow in order to play at Stalin's funeral. The Tyrant died on March 5th, 1953 – the same day on which Prokof'ev also passed away. There is a strange Russian destiny around this date: it was the day - some years after, in 1966 - on which the great Russian poetess Anna Achmatova also died. Achmatova had hated Stalin all her life, because he jailed and deported her only son, and because of the enormous damage he did to their Country.

The plane trip to Moscow is also narrated, during the Bruno Monseigneur's *Enigma* movie, by a giggling Richter, who also told how he was completely alone in a plane which was full of garlands of flowers.

We hope that our foreword, together with the notes by Valerij Voskobochnikov, will help you in historically completing your reading of the only article personally written by the great pianist Sviatoslav Richter.

ON PROKOF'EV

By Sviatoslav Richter

**Translated by Valerij Voskobochnikov and Lorenzo Seno
Notes by Valerij Voskobochnikov, edited by Lorenzo Seno**

A few words of explanation by Lorenzo Seno

What follows is an integration of the English text cited above, published on the Internet, together with the complete set of notes taken from our Italian edition. The integration consists of the Rostropovic episode, which is completely missing from the Internet edition. The notes are by Valerij Voskobochnikov.

The episode has to be inserted between the “60 Years Old” and the “A Great Musician” chapters, very close to the end of the article. Voskobochnikov’s notes were edited in such a way as to be relatively autonomous from the text. The reader is invited to refer to the above text in order to fully understand them.

The notes are grouped following the original chapters. In this text, Russian names are transcribed following the international phonetic rules, using diacritical marks.

The missing chapter

The second Cello Concert. . Rostropovic, after our performance of the Prokof'ev *Cello Sonata*, grew very fond of Sergej Sergeevic. He became passionate about his music. When they were together, one could think that Sergej Sergeevic was his father – they looked so alike. During one of his recitals, Mstislav Rostropovic performed (with accompanying piano) the same *Cello Concerto* formerly played by Berezovskij. Later they arranged the second version of this Concerto, which became the *Second Cello Concerto*. They however did not think about who would conduct the Orchestra. I had broken one of the fingers of my right hand, and for this reason shortly before I performed the Ravel Concerto for the left hand. My broken finger helped my decision to conduct the Orchestra. Kondrašin gave me a few lessons. Sergej Sergeevic was very happy, and he said: “Well, please play”, then we started our rehearsals. All this excited me very much. During rehearsals, in spite of the kind attitude of the members of the Moscow Youth Orchestra, some quarrels broke out. Some of them was astonished, making humorous grimaces and barely restraining their laughter. These were reactions to such things like the major 7th interval, or to some quite harsh orchestral timbre. The solo part was difficult and to a large extent new, eliciting the uncontrolled joy of the cellists.

Kondrašin was among the Orchestra, following my gestures with his typical fixed glance. We had only three rehearsals, and were scarcely able to get ready. I arranged with Rostropovic that: whatever happened, he would smile at me in a friendly way during pauses, to keep my spirits up. Joking apart, it was a very hazardous accomplishment!

Sergej Sergeevic didn't attend the rehearsals. In Rostropovic's opinion, he would have influenced us badly, and he was right. He simply went to the first performance. When I got on the stage, I froze. Where had I to go? The piano wasn't there ... and, ... I stumbled against the podium. The audience winced. The stumbling immediately drove away any fear. I laughed to myself (“what a subject!”), then I become quiet. A huge applause welcomed us. Anticipated applauses used to annoy me. Rostropovic was bowing, and the audience didn't allow us to begin But what I feared most, didn't happen: the orchestra started all at the same time. The remaining time went like a dream.

At the end, we were all worn-out by the strain, and we didn't believe that it would be possible for us to play until the end. We were so mad that we forgot to call Prokof'ev on the stage: he was shaking our hands from downstairs, from the hall. In the dressing room we were jumping for joy, like madmen.

Generally speaking, the *Concerto* wasn't a success. Everyone was criticizing it, pulling it to pieces. But Prokof'ev said: "Now I'm at peace. Now there is a Conductor also for my further compositions". As usual, he faced the situation in a very business-like way.

The last one of my recitals which Sergej Sergeevic attended was in the Great Hall, on April 4th, 1952, when I performed a program half of which was made up of his compositions. He sat down in the director's box together with Nina Dorliak and B.A. Kufin¹. He passed away the following year.

¹ Kufin Boris Aleksandrovic (1892-1953), soviet archaeologist and ethnographer, Science Academic of the soviet Georgian Academy, was one of Neuhaus's friend, then also one of the Richter's friend. Both were often guests of him in the town of Tbilisi..

The notes, by Valerij Voskobochnikov

The first meeting.

Richter's father:

Teofil, Sviatoslav Richter's father, was shot by the KGB in Odessa during 1941. He was charged with being in favour of German rule. Details of this occurrence can be found in the story told by Richter himself in the *Enigma* movie.

Moscow.

The Prokof'ev family:

R. is here clearly speaking about the two sons of the Composer and Lina Ljubera (see the *Foreword*): Oleg (born in 1928 who unfortunately died in 1998) and Sviatoslav, born in 1924.

Tolja Vedernikov:

Anatolij Ivanovic Vedernikov, great pianist, Richter's friend and Neuhaus's pupil (1920-1993). Tolja is a pet name for Anatolij used in friendly conversations as is the Russian custom.

Ckalov street:

Today called once again Zemljanoj Val. Valerij Ckalov was a pilot who landed in the USA after crossing the North Pole.

The attitude of Richter against Richard Strauss:

The influence of Neuhaus, who was a Strauss admirer, is obvious.

Berezovskij:

Berezovskij Lev Vladimirovic (1898-1960). He was for several years the 1st cellist of the Persimfans Orchestra, of the Bolšoj Theater Orchestra and of the URSS State Orchestra. When Neuhaus taught the 2nd Brahms piano Concerto, arriving at the cello "assolo" in the Second Movement, he would inevitably imitate the instrument and then exclaim: "Berezovskij!".

The Krivokolennyj Lane:

Literally, "Lane of the wrenched knee".

The “gothic” building of the Composer’s Union:

Its address was, literally: “Small Square of the kennel”. The square has now disappeared.

About the sentimentality and Prokof’ev:

This issue was often the subject of several talks with young pianists (but also with reviewers): Prokof’ev was in principle absolutely against any kind of sentimentality in music

A new attitude.

The role played by the Violin Concert:

I fully agree with those who consider this Concerto the best introduction to Prokof’ev’s music; during Summer 1957, an International Competition was organized for the Youth Festival in Moscow. We were able to listen to the *First Violin Concerto* performed by the violinist Boris Kun’ev – who subsequently became first violin of the Spivakov’ Baršaj Orchestra – with piano accompaniment. I was struck by the beauty and poetry of this music, which ends with the flight of cranes in Spring. Was it this typical sound of flying cranes, that Neuhaus was imitating also in the last bars of the Skrjabin’s *Second Sonata*.

About the young composers who demonstratively left the concert hall during the Oedipus Rex performance:

This remark is obviously ironical: Stravinskij’s music – till his late visit to the URSS in 1963 – was very badly thought of by the musical and ideological authorities. It was thus a good idea, for a youth full of ambition for his career, to remark: “well, I don’t like such stuff”.

The Sixth Sonata.

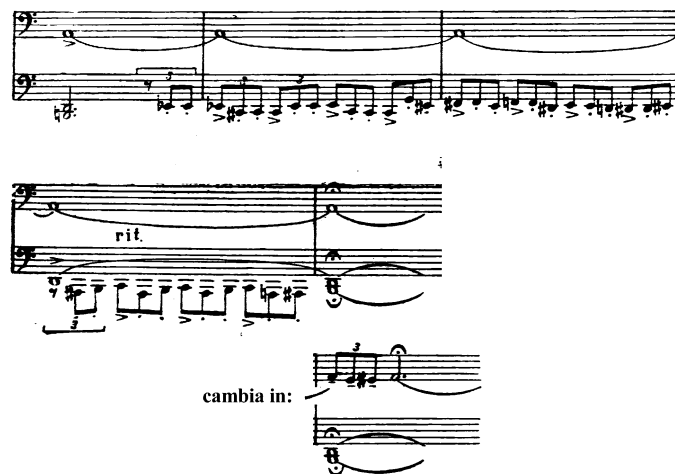
The Lamm:

Lamm Pavel Aleksandrovic (1882-1951), renowned musicologist and pianist, was the author of several restorations of the works of Musorgskij and Borodin, and of several piano arrangements of works of Prokof’ev himself (like the *Third Symphony* for eight hands). During the sixties Mrs Lamm - his wife – was again living in the same building, close to the Conservatory.

Mjaskovskij:

Also in his 1927 *Diary*, on several occasions, Prokof'ev writes about Nikolaj Jakovlevic Mjaskovskij with a great deal of approval and friendliness. When Stalin in 1938 insisted that Prokof'ev toured western countries (after his final return from emigration), his sons Oleg and Sviatoslav remained in Moscow, like hostages. They were committed to the care of Mjaskovskij and his wife. Richter would subsequently learn one of the *Sonatas* of this deep but rather tedious composer.

The rewritten passage:



The Sixth Sonata and its sharp corners:

Richter told me once that this *Sonata* is an ironical sketch about the rapidly increasing urbanization of our civilization. He criticized the explanation that Andrej Gavrilov gave in his CD, calling them "War Sonatas". He said that this music isn't related to any kind of protest against Stalin. This is a trap into which, as well Gavrilov, other Russian musicians, who wanted to consider Prokof'ev as a dissenter at any cost, have fallen.

This is a pointless argument: Prokof'ev life was always a human drama of lack of freedom, till his last day when he passed away "like a musical lackey disappearing together with his lord and master" (These were the words used by the composer's

son Oleg in the interview he gave to the Italian Newspaper "Repubblica" on December 4th 1996).

Aleksandrov:

Anatolij Nikolaevic Aleksandrov (1888-1982), pianist and composer, pupil of Taneev and Igumnov, from 1962 was Professor at the Moscow Conservatory.

Krejn:

Krejn Julian Grigor'evic (1913), Soviet composer, from 1926 until 1932 he studied at the Paris "École Normale Supérieure de Musique", where he got his Composer's Diploma with Paul Dukas. He was influenced by Skrjabin and by the French Impressionists.

The Fifth Concert.

The episode in which Prokof'ev attends the first performance of the Concert by Richter and Vedernikov in piano duet:

At this episode Miliza, Neuhaus' daughter, was also present. She remembers that, after the performance, Prokof'ev exclaimed: "Molodzy" (Bravi!), then gave each one the prize.

Richter and his Fifth Concert performances after 18 years:

One of these *Fifth Concerto* "renewals" was on a remarkable day, April the 21st, 1961. The subsequent day, April 22nd, was the anniversary of Lenin's birth, on which the name of the winner of the Lenin Prize was usually published. The prize was founded in 1957, and among its winners there were, as composers, Prokof'ev post-mortem, and Šostakovic in 1958. Among the performers, the first laureate was David Ojstrach in 1960. The subsequent year, people were obviously expecting that one of the best pianists of that moment would win the prize - either Gilels or Richter. On April 21st, in the Great Hall of the Conservatory, people were waiting for Sviatoslav Richter who had to perform the Prokof'ev *Fifth Concerto*. The concerto was re-transmitted all around the World, or at least to the whole of Eastern Europe. It was a special occasion. In order to broadcast the Concert by Radio, a woman appeared in front of the microphone. She said, after announcing the title of the music and the name of the Composer: "Soloist, Lenin Prize winner, Artist of the People of the

USSR ... Sviatoslav Richter!". But at her very first words, an ovation drowned the announcement. The Muscovite audience showed in this way its appreciation of the beloved pianist. At the end of the announcements in various languages, Richter left. "Left" isn't the best way to describe what happened: Richter literally "flew" over the podium, supporting himself on the piano, thus landing in front of his enraptured audience. He played brilliantly, with virtuosity, fine-tuning the timbre, joking and creating true pearls of sonority. I seem to remember that he even gave the Finale as Encore.

The Seventh Sonata.

The postponed Concert in 1942:

Around the end of October or at the beginning of November 1941, German troops encircled the Capital City. Richter's teacher, Neuhaus, was arrested and jailed until July of the subsequent year. Richter stayed in Moscow, alone, away from Odessa, where his parents were living. A little later, everything went to pieces: his father was shot, while his mother fled away to Germany, together with the man who later would become her husband.

Richter studying the Seventh Sonata in four days:

Richter stayed for four days in Neuhaus's flat (his teacher was exiled to Siberia in the meantime), together with the Professor's wife, Miliza Sergeevna Neuhaus senior. She would later relate that "Slava" drove her mad studying Prokof'ev's Seventh Sonata. This episode is reported in the *Enigma* movie, by Bruno Monsiegean, cited above.

"Slava" is a pet name for Sviatoslav.

Prokof'ev returning to Moscow after the end of the Second World War:

Prokof'ev, together with his second wife Mira Mendel'son, during the Second World War took refuge in a safe place in Caucasus and in the Urals. His first wife stayed on her own with both their sons for the whole of the war.

The Sovinformbureau:

Contracted form for "Soviet Information Bureau", the propaganda and information Agency about the development of war. It only existed from 1941 until 1945

The Eighth Sonata.

Living with Vedernikov:

Anatolij Vedernikov always lived in the country, on the Kljaz'ma River.

Gedike:

Gedike, Aleksandr Fëdorovic (1877-1957), organist, pianist, and composer, of German origin. He was Professor at the Moscow Conservatory from 1909.

The elderly, intelligent looking man:

In Russian here the word used is "intelligent" - namely a representative of the soviet "intelligentsia".

Char'kovskij:

Char'kovskij N. (likely Nikolaj) (1906) flutist. A valuable suggestion from Richter, to the pianist who has to play this sonata for flute and piano: one must play with the piano lid completely closed, in order to be able to control the sonority balance between the two instruments. The sound of the flute can hardly avoid being overwhelmed by the fortissimo chords of the piano especially in the conclusive moments.

Nikolina Gora:

Richter visiting Prokof'ev:

Perhaps March 20, 1947? The first performance of the *Ninth Sonata* was in 1951.

Nikolina Gora is a beautiful village close to Moscow. It was the residence of several Russian artists. We are speaking here of the typical "Dachas" near the Town. In the village you can find, today, Prokof'ev Street.

The Illness.

Mira:

Mendel'son-Prokof'eva Mira Aleksandrovna (1915-1968), second wife of Prokof'ev, formerly his secretary, then she became his collaborator, and was also a scriptwriter.

60 years old.

The Ninth Sonata:

Neuhaus was very happy in 1962, when two of his pupils started studying this Sonata. They were Aleksej Nasedkin and me.

A Great Musician.

Zdravica:

Richter tells us with enthusiasm about this composition also in the movie mentioned above. It is a very short work for mixed Choir and Orchestra. It was performed on the occasion of Stalin's 60th anniversary, on December 21st, 1939. "Zdravica" ("long life wishes") was composed using folk texts in various languages – Russian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian – and from many other small soviet Peoples. The idea was that a representative of the country was sent to Moscow in order to bring to the Boss the best wishes of the People. The music of Zdravica is nevertheless lovely, without any feel of triumph and solemnity. In Monseigneur's movie Richter says that Prokof'ev actually wanted celebrate himself with this composition.

Rome, November 2000