

Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra

Prokofiev Re-Imagined

The idea to re-imagine Sergei Prokofiev's sonatas for chamber orchestra did not begin as a grand concept. It began as a relationship.

For more than three decades, violinist Steven Copes and pianist-composer Stephen Prutsman have shared a musical language that stretches back to their days at the Marlboro Festival. Over the years, that language evolved — through concertos, collaborations, artistic partnerships, and countless conversations.

And a shared relationship with a particularly special orchestra.

The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra (SPCO) has built its identity on artistic flexibility, collaborative leadership, and an unusually democratic structure. Founded in 1959 and long admired for its stylistic range, the SPCO operates without a traditional music director, instead working through artistic partners and a musician-led model that places interpretive responsibility directly in the hands of its players.

It is precisely that structure that made *Prokofiev Re-Imagined* possible.

This recording is as much about the orchestra itself as it is about Prokofiev. "We call it player-led," Copes explains. "There's no one waving their hands. Everyone has to know more — not just their part, but everyone else's." That culture of collective responsibility shapes the sound from the first note.

For an ensemble of The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra's size, Prokofiev's orchestral catalogue is limited. "This project adds something meaningful to



album artwork

our repertoire," Copes says. "It allows winds, brass, percussion — everyone — to be fully involved in Prokofiev in a way that fits our ensemble."

Take the Sonata for Violin and Piano in F Minor, Op. 80. Copes had long imagined orchestral color within its piano writing. "I'd scribbled instrument ideas into my score," he recalls. "I could hear winds in certain places. Low strings in others. But I knew I wasn't the one to orchestrate it."

He turned to Prutsman, a former Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra Artistic Partner and longtime collaborator whose career spans performance, composition, and production.

"These are orchestrations," Prutsman says carefully. "Not arrangements. Not fantasies. Not transcriptions. Not a note was harmed. The pitches are Prokofiev's. Almost entirely in their original register. What changed is the color."

Prokofiev's sonatas were written during wartime — music of urgency, volatility, and sharp clarity. But for Prutsman, the orchestral impulse was already embedded in the writing itself.

“While teaching or rehearsing,” he explains, “we will often use exogenous language and metaphor. ‘Play that more trumpet-like.’ ‘Maybe that phrase could be warmer.’ Why might that change an interpretation? We don’t really know — but it often does. With Prokofiev, I always heard specific timbres hidden in his musical textures.”

Color, for Prutsman, is not only decorative. It is interpretive.

Piano Sonata No. 7 in B-flat Major, Op. 83 “Stalingrad”

Composed in 1942, during the height of World War II, Prokofiev's Seventh Piano Sonata is music of volatility and propulsion — one of the three so-called “War Sonatas.” In its original form, the piano must generate every layer of sound. The new orchestration allows those layers to separate and breathe.

I. Allegro inquieto

The opening movement's angular themes ricochet across The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra's sections, motives passed between strings and winds with chamber precision. Instead of a single percussive engine, tension is distributed across the ensemble.

II. Andante caloroso

The central movement glows with fragile lyricism. Here, The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra's transparent texture becomes an asset: inner voices that sit in the piano's middle register emerge in clarinet and muted strings, lending warmth without sentimentality.

III. Precipitato

The finale remains one of the most electrifying movements in twentieth-century piano literature. Translating its mechanistic drive was a challenge.

“The notes are all there,” Prutsman explains. “But I had to re-bar certain passages so the ensemble could physically play it together. The energy had to remain unstoppable.” In The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra's hands, propulsion becomes collective — rhythmic cells surging through strings, winds, and percussion with shared urgency.

Sonata for Violin and Piano in F Minor, Op. 80

Begun in 1938 and completed in 1946, the F minor Sonata spans years of political tension and artistic uncertainty. It is one of Prokofiev's most emotionally complex works — bleak, biting, and unexpectedly tender.

For The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, this sonata is not accompaniment to a soloist; it is chamber music at orchestral scale. “It wasn’t meant to be backup,” Copes emphasizes. “The orchestra plays the entire piano part. It’s a real sonata.”

I. Andante assai

Low, tolling chords open the movement. In orchestral form, those sonorities deepen — winds and low strings evoke the spectral atmosphere performers often describe as “wind over the graveyard.” The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra's ability to sustain pianissimo intensity heightens the sense of suspended breath. Prutsman points to the haunting close of the first movement of the F minor sonata — muted violin scales flickering over chords. “How many times have we called that the ‘wind over the graveyard’?” he asks. “What happens if you actually let the winds breathe there? What happens if you let those colors emerge? We are then able to reveal another layer — like seeing the same image in 4K instead of standard definition. The structure is the same. The soul is the same. But the light is different.”

II. Allegro brusco

Sarcastic and rhythmically biting, this movement thrives on precision. In a player-led ensemble, timing becomes an act of trust. Brass and winds lean forward rather than react, allowing the music's edges to remain intact.

III. Andante

Here The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra achieves a paradox: intimacy at scale. With more instruments comes a broader dynamic spectrum — extremes of softness and color that intensify rather than dilute the violin's inward voice.

“With a larger group,” Copes notes, “you can sometimes get softer — more fragile — because everyone is listening so closely.”

IV. Allegroissimo – Andante assai, come prima

The finale's restless energy dissolves into muted,

spectral stillness. Distributed among winds and strings, the closing pages shimmer, revealing harmonic nuances often submerged in the piano version.

What distinguishes this recording is not simply orchestration, but The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra's particular method of music-making.

In a traditional orchestra, a conductor mediates tempo, phrasing, and balance. In The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, those decisions are negotiated internally. "If the back of the orchestra is reactive, it's going to be late," Copes says. "So you rehearse until people trust their instinct. Until they lead."

Prutsman frames it as proactive rather than reactive playing. "You're not waiting for a cue. You're stepping forward together."

The result is chamber music consciousness at orchestral scale — a level of engagement that depends on eye contact, shared breathing, and collective risk. That risk yields aliveness. "When it works," Copes says, "it feels almost improvised."

For Prutsman, the responsibility of re-orchestrating canonical music is clear.

"The originals will always be there," he says. "This isn't about replacing them. It's about revealing another facet. If the intention is authentic, it works." For The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, authenticity lies in collaboration. The ensemble's structure — democratic, flexible, artist-driven — mirrors the nimbleness that chamber orchestras have historically required.

This project expands The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra's Prokofiev repertoire while remaining true to both composer and ensemble. It allows the orchestra to inhabit music it might otherwise never perform — not by inflating it, but by illuminating it.

In the end, *Prokofiev Re-Imagined* is a portrait of three forces in conversation: Prokofiev's uncompromising voice, Prutsman's singular ear and vision for color, and The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra's collective artistry.

Not rewritten. Re-imagined. ●

Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra

Prokofiev Re-Imagined

Tracklist + Liner Notes

Album Title: *Prokofiev Re-Imagined*

Piano Sonata No. 7 in B-flat Major, Op. 83 "Stalingrad"

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

1. Allegro inquieto 8:26
2. Andante caloroso 6:40
3. Precipitato 4:07

Sonata for Violin and Piano in F Minor, Op. 80

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

4. Andante assai 6:08
5. Allegro brusco 6:37
6. Andante 6:59
7. Allegroissimo — Andante assai, come prima 7:00

Orchestrations by Stephen Prutsman (b. 1960)

Artists

The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra
Steven Copes, Solo Violin and Leader

The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra
Recorded April 2025
2024–25 Season

VIOLIN

Steven Copes, Concertmaster
Kyu-Young Kim, Principal Violin
Nina Tso-Ning Fan
Eunice Kim
Eunae Koh
Kathryn Bennett
Rolf Haas
Jeremy Lap Hei Hao
Beatrice Hsieh
Clara Neubauer
Rannveig Marta Sarc

VIOLA

Maiya Papach, Principal Viola
Hyobi Sim, Associate Principal Viola
Daniel Orsen
Lisa Sung

CELLO

Julie Albers, Principal
Joshua Koestenbaum, Associate Principal
Sarah Lewis
Richard Belcher

BASS

Zachary Cohen, Principal Bass
Jason Wells

FLUTE

Julia Bogorad-Kogan, Principal Flute
Alicia McQuerrey

OBOE

Cassie Pilgrim, Principal Oboe
Barbara Bishop

CLARINET

Sang Yoon Kim, Principal Clarinet

BASSOON

Andrew Brady, Principal Bassoon
Demetra Alikakos
Emma Plehal, Contrabassoon

HORN

Matthew Wilson, Acting Principal Horn
Michael Petruconis

TRUMPET

Bill Williams
Lynn Erickson

TIMPANI/PERCUSSION

Stephen Kimball

Credits:

Recording engineered by Cameron Wiley
Produced, edited, mixed, and mastered by Michael Fine
Original Artwork by Alex Sopp

For The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra
Jessica Mallow Gulley, President and Managing Director
Jon Limbacher, President Emeritus
Jonathan Posthuma, Artistic Planning Director
Jason Piehl, General Manager
Matt Thueson, Executive Producer of Digital Media
Kelly MacLennan, Director of Orchestra Personnel
Cassandra Flowers, Director of Operations
Jon Kjarum, Technical Director
Melissa McCarthy Steinberg, Librarian
Maddie Swenson, Operations Assistant

Ordway Performing Arts Center, Concert Hall
Kris Brodersen, Head Electrician
Mark Dalglish, Head of Properties
Collin Sherraden, Head Sound Engineer
For Phenotypic Recordings
Michael Hostetler, Founder & CEO
Stephen Prutsman, Creative Director
Cristin Canterbury Bagnall, BroadBand Collaborative: Fractional COO
Mary Paz Cubero Navarro, Director of Product Development and Strategic Partnerships
Lisa Takemoto, Project Manager
Justin J. Holden, Copy Editor
Christopher Kornmann for Spit + Image, Art Direction & Graphic Design
Eva Chien, writer
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Liner Notes:

About Prokofiev *Re-Imagined*

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Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

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The arrangement of Violin Sonata No. 1 is made possible by support from Michael Hostetler and Erica Pascal.

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IV. Allegrissimo – Andante assai, come prima

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Violinist Steven Copes leads a diverse life as soloist and orchestral leader.

Born in Los Angeles, he became concertmaster of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra (SPCO) in 1998, and since has performed concertos by Berg, Brahms, Hindemith, Kirchner, Lutoslawski, Mozart, Prokofiev, and Weill. A zealous advocate of contemporary music, he gave the world premiere of George Tsontakis’ Grammy-nominated Violin Concerto No. 2, which won a Grawemeyer Award and was recorded for KOCH Records. He also premiered Pierre Jalbert’s Violin Concerto with the SPCO and conductor Thomas Zehetmair.

A frequent guest leader with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Mr. Copes has served in the same capacity with the Budapest Festival Orchestra, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, London Philharmonic, Hallé Orchestra, and the Symphony Orchestras of Baltimore, Cincinnati, Houston, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco. He holds degrees from the Curtis Institute and the Juilliard

School, and studied with Robert Lipsett, Aaron Rosand, Robert Mann, and Felix Galimir for chamber music.

About Stephen Prutsman

Stephen Prutsman is regarded as one of today’s most innovative musicians, as a pianist, composer, and producer across classical, jazz, and global music. Former Artistic Partner of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and Artistic Director of Colombia’s Cartagena International Festival of Music, he has curated and created programs spanning Mozart, contemporary works, and cross-cultural collaborations.

A medalist at the Tchaikovsky and Queen Elisabeth Piano Competitions, Prutsman has appeared as soloist with orchestras worldwide and has released numerous recordings as a composer and performer. Early in his career he was a keyboardist in art-rock bands and a jazz pianist, experiences that inform his wide-ranging creative voice. His compositions and arrangements are performed internationally, and his work bridges concert music, film (scoring 15 silent films from the 1920s), education, and community engagement. He produces Azure Concerts, sensory-friendly performances for individuals on the autism spectrum and their families. Mr. Prutsman is Creative Director of Phenotypic Recordings and a Visiting Artist at Stanford University.

About The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra

Founded in 1959, the Grammy Award-winning Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra (SPCO) is renowned for its artistic excellence, remarkable versatility of musical styles and adventurous programming. SPCO concerts are primarily musician-led and include a broad range of repertoire, from Baroque works to new music, in close collaboration with a dynamic roster of internationally acclaimed Artistic Partners. Through a distinctive musician-led artistic model, SPCO musicians lead and develop the orchestra’s programming, determine members and choose artistic collaborators.

Deeply rooted in its community and committed to accessibility, the SPCO presents performances in venues throughout the Twin Cities, creating meaningful connections between artists and audiences. Through its innovative approach to performance and engagement, the orchestra fosters an environment where music is both intimate and expansive — inviting listeners into experiences that are personal, powerful and profoundly human.

thespc.org

About Phenotypic Recordings

Phenotypic Recordings brings to light new music by world-class musicians and innovative composers, with a focus on music that highlights the most important issues facing the world today. As another way of amplifying artistic voices, Phenotypic donates its revenue from streaming and downloads to support humanitarian causes identified by the artists making the music.

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