Within the vast, virtually limitless piano repertoire, the piano sonatas of
Sergei Prokofiev occupy a special place. Apart from Alexander Scriabin early
in the century, Prokofiev was the only major twentieth-century composer to
pay such consistent attention to the form, which had emerged in the eight-
teenth century, reached its pinnacle in the thirty-two sonatas by Beethoven,
and was further developed through the masterpieces of Schubert, Chopin,
Schumann, and Brahms. While other important twentieth-century com-
posers, such as Rachmaninov, Bartók, Hindemith, Shostakovich, Stravin-
sky, Ives, Medtner, Barber, Ginastera, Boulez, Schnittke, and Carter, wrote
occasional works in this genre, Prokofiev wrote nine piano sonatas, which
became cornerstones of the piano repertoire. They are a constant presence
in concert programs and are considered an indispensable part of the reper-
toire by almost every serious concert pianist. Piano students all over the
world study them.

Prokofiev had a lifelong love of the sonata form. Ever since learning the
basic rules during his childhood years, he strove to master them; a group of
piano sonatas he wrote while a student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory
reflect this interest. Prokofiev retained his fascination with the form for the
rest of his life. In 1941, describing his Sonatinas op. 54 (1931), he remarked,
“I liked the idea of writing a simple work in such a superior form as sonata.”
One can learn a lot about the composer’s growth by tracing his progress
from the early sonatas, which cautiously dare to bend the textbook rules, to the masterful treatment of the form in his late works.

Prokofiev’s piano music has always played an important role in my own work as both a performer and a teacher. While a student at the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, I had the privilege of studying with Lev Oborin. This remarkable pianist premiered both of Prokofiev’s sonatas for violin and piano with David Oistrakh, preparing them under the composer’s guidance. Prokofiev’s works were heard very often in Oborin’s studio, as well as in his own concerts.

In the 1990s, I undertook a mammoth project of recording Prokofiev’s entire output for piano solo. It was released on nine compact discs by Chandos Records. As a matter of course, it encompassed all nine sonatas, including both versions of the Fifth Sonata, as well as the brief sketch of the beginning of the Tenth Sonata. This endeavor, coupled with the performing and recording of Prokofiev’s concertos and chamber works, allowed me to deepen my understanding of the composer’s style and its evolution, as well as his creative process. In my pedagogical work, I cherish the opportunity to discuss Prokofiev’s oeuvre with my students in individual lessons, workshops, and master classes. This book is an extension of my work as a teacher and performer; it is from this dual vantage point that I examine the sonatas here.

While writing this book, I have kept two groups of readers in mind: music lovers who would like to enhance their enjoyment of Prokofiev’s music, and piano students who are learning any of these works. This double purpose has determined the way the book is structured. Each sonata is discussed in a separate chapter, which opens with general information about the work, followed by a detailed discussion of the piece, in which I point out important details and features of the composition. I have tried to minimize the use of technical language in these sections, but some basic terms proved to be indispensable. Lay readers may find it useful to consult the glossary of musical terms provided as an appendix. Those readers who are able to read music can follow the discussion by consulting the sonata scores. For readers who
do not have this ability, referring them to specific points in recordings seemed to be the way to go.

Because I present my personal and subjective views on the interpretation of this repertoire, it felt natural to use my own recordings as a reference source throughout the book. The precise timings provided throughout the book relate to my recordings of the Prokofiev sonatas issued by Chandos Records in a 3-CD set (chan 9637). This set is a remastering of my recordings of Prokofiev’s complete works for solo piano, where individual sonatas appear as follows:

- Sonata No. 1, op. 1: Volume 5 (chan 9017)
- Sonata No. 2, op. 14: Volume 7 (chan 9119)
- Sonata No. 3, op. 28: Volume 6 (chan 9069)
- Sonata No. 4, op. 29: Volume 3 (chan 8926)
- Sonata No. 5, op 38 (original version): Volume 9 (chan 9361)
- Sonata No. 5, op. 38/135 (revised version): Volume 1 (chan 8851)
- Sonata No. 6, op. 82: Volume 9 (chan 9361)
- Sonata No. 7, op. 83: Volume 2 (chan 8881)
- Sonata No. 8, op. 84: Volume 4 (chan 8976)
- Sonata No. 9, op. 103: Volume 8 (chan 9211)
- Sonata No. 10, op. 137 (fragment): Volume 9 (chan 9361)

The latter part of each chapter is titled “Master Class.” I have written these sections with professional pianists in mind, discussing ambiguous passages, suggesting possible ways to interpret them, and giving detailed advice that I hope will help pianists in their work. In order to follow the discussion, readers will need to insert measure numbers in their copies of the scores, since no edition of the Prokofiev sonatas with printed measure numbers is available. Anticipating that many readers might turn to a chapter dedicated to a particular sonata without reading other parts of the book, I repeatedly discuss certain features of Prokofiev’s music that may be pertinent to more than one sonata.

To precede the discussion of individual sonatas, an opening chapter offers
a general overview of Prokofiev’s music. Here I pay special attention to the circumstances that shaped the composer’s life and influenced changes in his musical style. The following chapter examines Prokofiev’s approach to the piano, both as a composer and as a performer of his own works. His playing is discussed as it emerges from reviews and memoirs of his contemporaries, as well as from his own recordings.

The abundance of available recordings of Prokofiev’s sonatas has prevented me from attempting to evaluate or describe them. I have chosen to refer only to the performances of Prokofiev himself and of the two pianists who were entrusted by him to premiere the late sonatas: Sviatoslav Richter (Sonatas Nos. 7 and 9) and Emil Gilels (Sonata No. 8). In addition, Richter was the first, after the composer, to perform Sonata No. 6; he also started playing the Eighth Sonata soon after it was premiered by Gilels.

In spite of the many valuable books available today, the state of Prokofiev scholarship cannot be considered adequate: suffice it to say that the detailed catalogue of his works has not been updated since it was published in 1961. At present, there is no edition of the Prokofiev sonatas free of errors. I have tried to do my best in pointing out some obvious mistakes, as well as certain doubtful readings. Many questions cannot be answered with certainty, as the manuscripts for some of the sonatas have been lost; those that have survived are not easily available for inspection. To get to some of them, I was fortunate to have the help of Russian colleagues in overcoming the restrictions of the current gatekeepers in Russia. As a result, some textual mistakes have been corrected for the first time in this book.

I would like to stress that the interpretive recommendations I make in this book should be viewed as my personal suggestions rather than objective truths. They aim at guiding listeners to appreciate the richness of the music and at helping pianists to build their own artistic concepts. I hope that my readers, professional pianists and music lovers alike, will find this book helpful.