

THE FOUR DOMINATING ELEMENTS IN THE PIANO
LITERATURE OF SERGEI PROKOFIEFF

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

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Denton, Texas

May, 1972

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the piano works of Sergei Prokofieff, four distinct elements are found: classicism, innovation, toccata, and lyricism. Scherzo, a fifth element, Prokofieff regarded as merely a deviation from the other four. In his autobiography he states:

The first was the classical line, which could be traced back to my early childhood and the Beethoven sonatas I heard my mother play. This line takes sometimes a neo-classical form, sometimes imitates the eighteenth-century classics. The second line, the modern trend, begins with that meeting with Taneyev when he reproached me for the "crudeness" of my harmonies. At first this took the form of a search for my own harmonic language, developing later into a search for a language in which to express powerful emotions. Although this line covers harmonic language mainly, it also includes new departures in melody, orchestration and drama. The third line is the toccata, or the "motor" line traceable perhaps to Schumann's Toccata which made such a powerful impression on me when I first heard it. This line is perhaps the least important. The fourth line is lyrical: it appears first as a thoughtful and meditative mood, not always associated with the melody, or, at any rate, with the long melody, sometimes partly contained in the long melody. This line was not noticed until much later. For a long time I was given no credit for any lyrical gift whatsoever, and for want of encouragement it developed slowly. But as time

went on I gave more attention to this aspect of my work.¹

In explanation of the fifth element, he continues:

I should like to limit myself to these four "lines," and to regard the fifth, "grotesque" line which some wish to ascribe to me, as simply a deviation from the other lines. In any case I strenuously object to the very word "grotesque" which has become hackneyed to the point of nausea. As a matter of fact the use of the French word "grotesque" in this sense is a distortion of the meaning. I would prefer my music to be described as "Scherzo-ish" in quality, or else by three words describing the various degrees of the Scherzo--whimsicality, laughter, mockery.²

These first four elements are found in all of Prokofieff's music. But before discussing them in detail, it would be helpful to examine the general style characteristics of his piano music.

Prokofieff's creative life is divided into three periods: his youth (1907-1918), a very productive period in which he exhibited a strong dislike of late-romantic chromaticism and the techniques of impressionism; the foreign period (1918-1933), when he left Russia to travel to America, France, and Germany; and finally the Soviet period (1933-1953), during which adherence to official Soviet doctrine often led him to conventional academic paths.³

¹Sergei Prokofieff, Autobiography (Moscow, 1959), pp. 36-37.

²Ibid., p. 37.

³André Hodeir, Since Debussy: A View of Contemporary Music (New York, 1961), p. 217.

During the early period, Prokofieff's music symbolized a rejection of the musical trends which had preceded him. He rebelled against the chromaticism of Scriabin, the fragmentary suggestiveness of Debussy, and ambiguous harmonies. What resulted was a direct, clear, and straightforward, and vigorous style; a simplified harmonic texture, clear-cut melody, and sectional form in his music.

While opposing the immediately previous musical trends, Prokofieff was influenced favorably by some of his great predecessors, the most important of whom was Beethoven. He also admired Haydn, Mozart, and Scarlatti, who show their influence mostly in the classical forms of Prokofieff's music. Schumann's rhythms, especially the motor rhythms of his Toccata, Op. 7, were influential in Prokofieff's writing. It was from Rimsky-Korsakov that he inherited his interest in the humorous Russian fairy tale and in the use of novel harmonies for the purpose of tone-painting. Prokofieff admired Moussourgsky above all as one of the greatest innovators. From him he inherited a gift for bold description and an interest in the comic aspects of life.⁴

Prokofieff consistently advocated clear-cut, functional harmony. In a letter to the Composers' Union in 1948 he said,

⁴Israel V. Nestyev, Prokofiev (Stanford, California, 1960), p. 463.

. . . I clearly realized that the construction of a musical work tonally is like erecting a building on a solid foundation, while a construction without tonality is like building on sand.⁵

Many elements in his harmonic idiom are striking in their deliberate simplicity. He took ordinary and commonplace harmonies and treated them in a new way, presenting them in unusual combinations. In rebelling against impressionism he returned to the simplest and clearest tonalities, to the transparent C major (one of his most frequent keys), B-flat major, D major, and the simplest minor keys. In a 1937 interview Prokoffieff said,

I strive for greater simplicity and more melody. Of course, I have used dissonance in my time, but there has been too much dissonance . . . We want a simpler and more melodic style for music, a simpler, less complicated emotional state, and dissonance once again relegated to its proper place as one element in music, contingent principally upon the meeting of the melodic lines.

Music, in other words, has definitely reached and passed the greatest degree of discord and of complexity that it is practicable for it to attain.⁶

But his basic tonalities are always combined with unusual chord combination, and given rich modulatory development.⁷

⁵William W. Austin, Music in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1966), p. 460.

⁶Sergei Prokofieff, "The Composer Speaks," The Book of Modern Composers (New York, 1942), pp. 141-142.

⁷Nestyev, op. cit., p. 478.

One of his favorite devices was wandering from a conventional harmonic environment into many distant keys, and then turning suddenly back to the original key.⁸

When Prokofieff did use dissonances, he used them to establish points of tension and not as the normal harmonic climate. He occasionally wrote polytonal passages and sometimes used the major and minor third simultaneously or in close connection:⁹

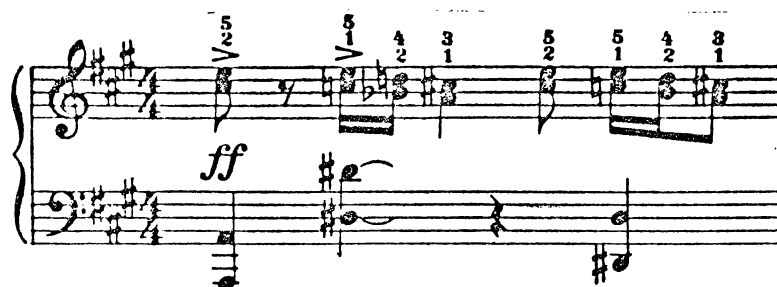


Fig. 1--Sixth Sonata, Op. 82, first movement, measure 1

Prokofieff's music shows effective use of cadences (deceptive cadences, unexpected transitions to distant tonalities). He was particularly fond of the plagal cadence:¹⁰

⁸ Richard Anthony Leonard, A History of Russian Music (New York, 1966), p. 460.

⁹ Peter S. Hansen, An Introduction to Twentieth Century Music (Boston, 1961), p. 277.

¹⁰ Paul Collaer, A History of Modern Music (Cleveland and New York, 1961), p. 294.



Fig. 2--Visions Fugitives, Op. 22 #3, measures 27-28

Prokofieff often enriched his harmony by introducing incidental, unrelated tones, which add color and sharpen the sound of ordinary triads. The addition of these tones strengthens the independent chromatic movement of each voice. Sometimes he used these means of alteration to give the repetition of a musical section new emotional meaning.¹¹ (See Figure 3.)

As the melodic element assumed more importance in Prokofieff's later music, polyphony became more prevalent. By no means did he adhere to the strict rules of classical counterpoint--he did not like imitative counterpoint and made fun of his contemporaries who wrote fugues and fugatos.¹²

¹¹Nestyev, op. cit.

¹²Nicolas Nabokov, Old Friends and New Music (Boston, 1951), pp. 169-170.

Fig. 3--Second Sonata, Op. 14, first movment, measures 64-67, 255-288.

Contrapuntal devices are frequently found in the piano sonatas. Often themes are combined contrapuntally to dramatize the development sections or to make the recapitulations more powerful.¹³ But the texture always remains fairly simple, with never more than three melodies going at one time. Prokofieff felt that three voices were the most the average ear could grasp and follow at one time.¹⁴

¹³Nestyev, op. cit., p. 483.

¹⁴Prokofieff, "The Composer Speaks," op. cit., p. 141.

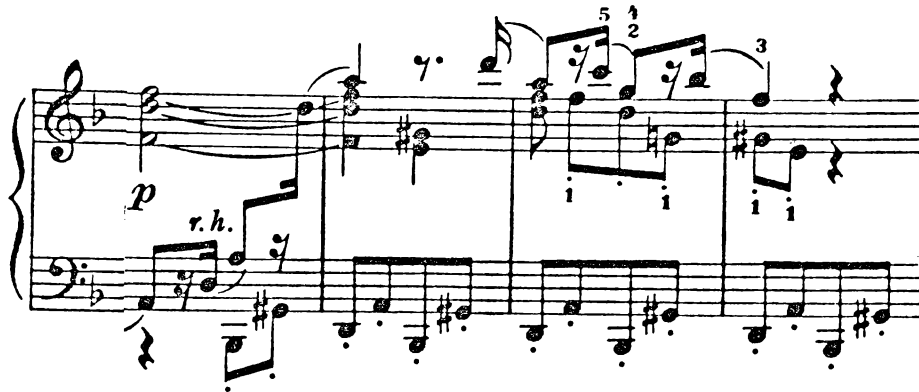


Fig. 4--Second Sonata, Op. 14, fourth movement, measures 305-308.

Prokofieff's rhythms are usually quite conventional; his music is for the most part devoid of the modern preoccupations with rhythmical complexities often seen in the music of Stravinsky and Bartok. In his early works, Prokofieff employed distinct rhythms and fast tempos. But later, when his interest turned to the invention of themes, this became the least important element in his music.

Prokofieff was partial to 4/4 time, 6/8 time, and various kinds of triple meter and basic rhythms. He was fond of passages of reiterated eighth notes with unexpected and unpredictable accents. An exception to his usual habit of using regular rhythms is found in the last movement of the Seventh Sonata where the prevailing meter is 7/8.

Prokofieff had a strong sense of national pride, and the Russian character of his music is revealed in his melodic and harmonic idiom, which is tied by many threads to folk and

classical traditions.¹⁵ Many of his melodies have characteristics that can be traced directly to the Russian folk song: diatonic style, alternation of modes, and a tendency toward free rhythm.¹⁶ The dance-like fifth variation of the Third Concerto (second movement) is typically Russian with its syncopation of the theme in the orchestral accompaniment and the use of the Phrygian mode in both the solo and orchestral part. (See Figure 5.)

Prokofieff strove for brevity, economy, and terse musical expression, with no redundancy. Each thematic idea is concise with a distinct cadence. He disliked drawn-out endings and long codas. In an article in the The Musical Observer in 1918 he said,

I am not ashamed to say that essentially I am a pupil of my own ideas. In all that I write, I have two leading principles--clarity in the presentation of my ideas and economy of expression, the avoidance of everything superfluous in expressing them.¹⁷

Prokofieff nourished a genuine contempt for most twentieth-century theory. He found no use for Schoenberg's twelve-tone system.

¹⁵Nestyev, op. cit., p. 457.

¹⁶Ronald Edwin Lewis, "Influences Seen in Prokofiev's Style," unpublished master's thesis, School of Music, North Texas State University, Denton, Texas, 1970, p. 13.

¹⁷Nestyev, op. cit., p. 459.

The image shows a page of a musical score for measures 146-148. The score is for the Third Concerto, Op. 26, second movement. The instruments listed are Tr. (Trumpet), Cor. (Coronet), Timp. (Timpani), Gr.C. (Gong/Cymbal), Pte. (Percussion), VI. I (Violin I), VI. II (Violin II), Vla. (Viola), Vc. (Violoncello), and Cb. (Contrabasso). The score is marked with 'energico' and 'Sul G'. The measures are numbered 146, 147, and 148. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *mf*, *mp*, and *f*.

Fig. 5--Third Concerto, Op. 26, second movement, measures 146-148.

He was greatly influenced by Stravinsky but felt he was more a composer absorbed in his own music than a man of deep feeling.

Prokofieff felt that artistic dogmas constricted a composer's creative thought.¹⁸

Within this structure of stylistic characteristics lie four dominating elements, of which at least one can always be found in Prokofieff's piano music. The one that had its origin earliest in his life is the classic element.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 455.

CHAPTER II

CLASSICISM

Prokofieff traced the origin of the classic element to his early childhood when he heard his mother playing Beethoven sonatas. After that there was hardly a year in his creative life during which some one of the classic forms did not engage his interest.¹ Another important influence on Prokofieff was Nikolai Tcherepnin, who drew Prokofieff's interest to the classical style, particularly Haydn, Mozart and early Beethoven.

The classic element is one of the several results of Prokofieff's rebellion against impressionism. He strove to express completely fresh, contemporary content in traditional forms. He wanted simplicity in his music. In a 1937 interview, Prokofieff said,

. . . it is obvious that there is an immense desire to win back to simplicity, to reach again, as it were, a clear-cut spot in the forest and chart the course of music anew. And here is a striking theme: there is a return to classic forms which I feel very much myself.²

¹Richard Anthony Leonard, A History of Russian Music (New York, 1957), p. 311.

²Sergei Prokofieff, "The Composer Speaks," The Book of Modern Composers (New York, 1942), p. 143.

The classical element is found mostly in the large instrumental forms Prokofieff used, for example, sonata, variations, rondo. The traditional forms held his allegiance throughout his career because he appreciated their flexibility.³

The most important form in Prokofieff's music is the sonata form. With modifications, he considered it wholly sufficient for his purposes as a composer.

In that field [instrumental music] I am well content with the forms already perfected. I want nothing better, nothing more flexible or more complete, than the sonata form, which contains everything necessary to my structural purpose.⁴

There was no other composer of Prokofieff's generation who gave quite the importance to the sonata that he did.

Prokofieff stands out not only in his preoccupation with the genre, but also in his taking it as a large expressive form that he then submitted in his own individual idiom without, however, significantly altering the form.⁵

All of the piano sonatas except two adhere to the usual three- or four-movement plan (numbers one and three are one-movement). They also employ the standard form with thematic

³William W. Austin, Music in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1966), p. 465.

⁴Prokofieff, "The Composer Speaks," op. cit.

⁵F. E. Kirby, A Short History of Keyboard Music (New York, 1966), p. 433.

contrast and development (all the first movements are in this form), simple ternary form in the slow movements (all those with three movements employ this form in the middle movement), and in several cases, rondo or sonata-rondo form in the finales (numbers four, five, eight, and nine). While the harmonic vocabulary is new and characteristic of Prokofieff, the conception of the sonata as a large and expressive work using certain conventional forms and procedures represents the direct continuation of the nineteenth-century sonata.⁶

While he preserved the basic properties of the classical form, Prokofieff often modified some of their characteristic features. He often altered the recapitulation by conceiving it as a continuation of the development, as in the Third Sonata, or by combining two or more themes contrapuntally, as in the finale of the Second Sonata (also in sonata form).⁷ Sometimes he reduced the sonata to one movement, as in the Third Sonata and First Concerto. Common thematic relationships between movements can be observed in several of the sonatas. In the Sixth Sonata, a theme from the first movement is brought back in the finale. After all three themes have been stated, Theme I of the first movement returns in Andante:

⁶Ibid., p. 431.

⁷See Figure 4, Chapter I.

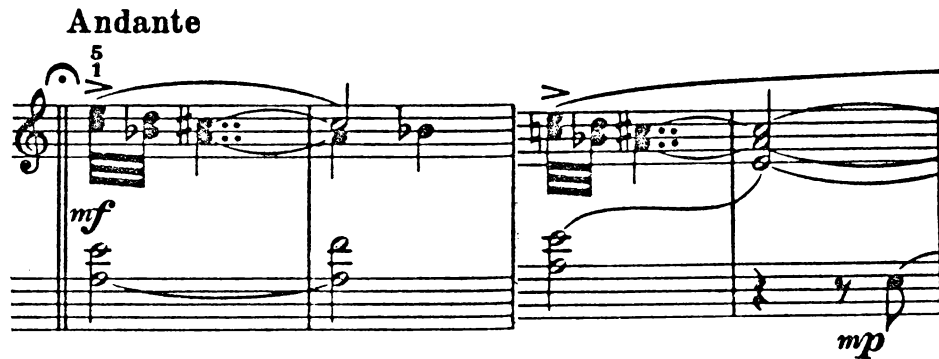


Fig. 6--Sixth Sonata, Op. 82, fourth movement, measures 185-188.

and recurs periodically until the end of the sonata. The Ninth Sonata employs a completely original use of this compositional device. Here each movement concludes with the opening material of the movement to follow. The finale recalls the initial theme of the first movement.⁸ Even when Prokofieff does adhere strictly to the sonata form, he enlivens it with unusual tonal relationships, as in the Seventh Sonata where, in the exposition, Theme I is in B-flat major, and Theme II is in A-flat major.

One example of Prokofieff's treatment of the sonata form is the first movement of his Second Sonata. Theme I, an eight-measure phrase in D minor, begins *Allegro ma non troppo*, is followed by a cadential extension, and then repeated with

⁸ Jack Roberts, "Prokofieff's Piano Sonata No. 8," unpublished notes from lecture recital, School of Music, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, August, 1969.

only slight modifications ending on a strong cadence on the dominant.

Allegro, ma non troppo
non legato

mf *cresc.*

Fig. 7--Second Sonata, Op. 14, first movement, measures 1-8.

A thirty-two-measure bridge passage moving through a sequence of keys, ends on E minor and begins the lyric second theme at that tonal level:

Fig. 8--Second Sonata, Op. 14, first movement, measures 64-71.

A codetta, based on a motive from the bridge, ends the exposition.

Instead of beginning traditionally with the first theme, the development begins with the second theme, in the same key as the end of the exposition. After a codetta, the bridge

motive occurs again, this time in an ostinato. The bridge motive and Theme II (in augmentation) are then combined contrapuntally to lead to a cadence in C-sharp minor.

The musical materials in the recapitulation are handled in the traditional manner. The two themes are both stated in D minor, and the movement ends with a coda based on the first theme.

Prokofieff's usual form for the slow movement is ternary. A typical example is the Andantino movement of the Fifth Sonata. After an accompaniment figure is established, Theme I, a sixteen-measure phrase, enters in G-flat major:

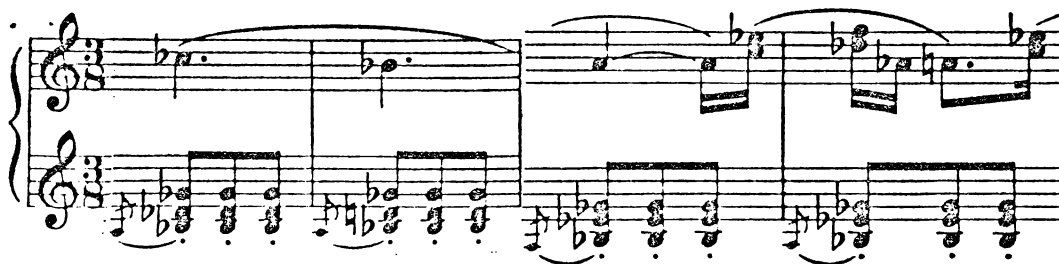


Fig. 9--Fifth Sonata, Op. 38/135, second movement, measures 5-8.

The following twenty-nine measures consist of fragments of the theme, a repetition and some new material. The end of the section evolves into the second theme in E minor:



Fig. 10--Fifth Sonata, Op. 38/135, second movement, measures 59-61.

The four-measure phrase is followed by modified repetition and an interlude of which includes reminders of the rhythm of the first theme. The accompaniment is then re-established and Theme I returns, modified, but without any repetition. The Coda opens with a brief excerpt of Theme II, and the movement gradually dissolves with the accompaniment supporting fragments from the first measure of A_2 .⁹

In several of the sonatas' finales Prokofieff used sonata-rondo form, the Eighth Sonata being a notable example.

After the key of B-flat has been firmly established in Theme I, there is a sudden shift to E minor, establishing a key-relationship which is apparent throughout the finale.

⁹David Leslie Kinsey, The Piano Sonatas of Serge Prokofieff (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1959), pp. 102-103.



Fig. 11--Eighth Sonata, Op. 84, third movement, measures 1-2.

Theme II is in B major, showing the half-step relationship between the first and second themes:

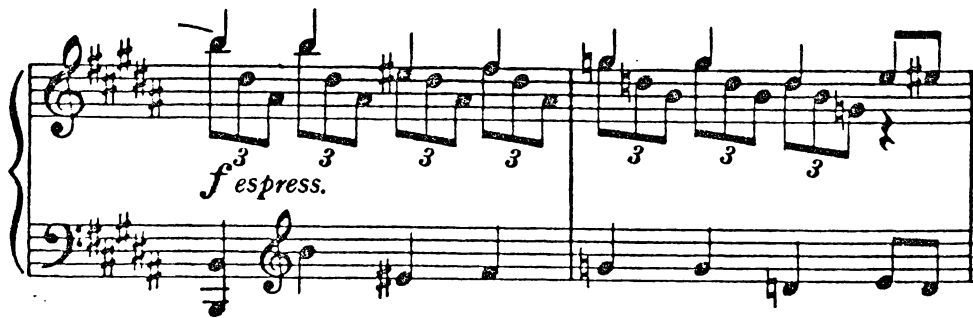


Fig. 12--Eighth Sonata, Op. 84, third movement, measures 42-43.

The second theme is recalled in E major, preserving the classical fifth relationship.

The mid-section, in D-flat, switches to triple meter:

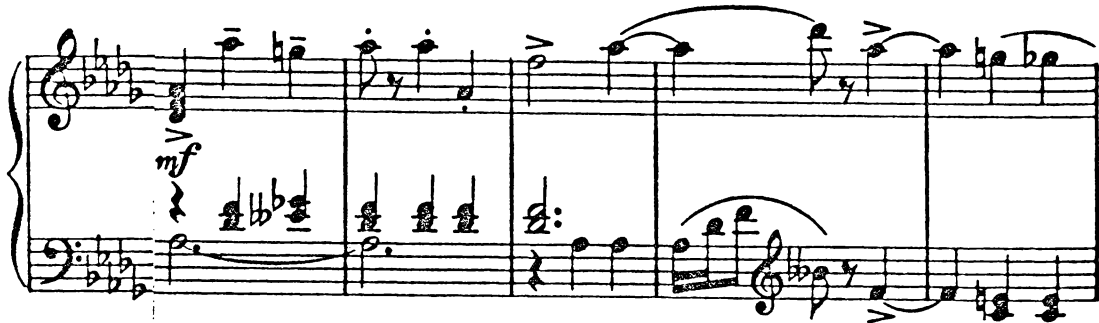


Fig. 13--Eighth Sonata, Op. 84, third movement, measures 137-141.

The entire section is built upon an ostinato half-step, A-flat-G-A-flat. This section closes with material from the first movement.

After the recapitulation, the coda features quick alteration of the keys B-flat and E major, the tritone relationship so important throughout the finale. The movement ends with a long extended cadence.¹⁰

During the twenties, Prokofieff began to avidly strive for simplicity. In an interview in 1936, he said,

I do not imply that the music of today or of the future must necessarily be so complex as to become an enigma which none can understand. On the contrary, I believe that hope for contemporary music lies in a

¹⁰Roberts, op. cit.

new simplicity. After the refinement of Bach came the simplicity of Haydn and Mozart; after Beethoven, the simplicity of Schubert, while "Carmen" followed the complexities of Wagner's opera. For my own part, after my second and third symphonies I have tried for a simpler style. I have also attempted this in the sonatas, but have not, apparently, been understood. Ten years ago, the search for novelty in music had brought such complication that is only natural that some composers should now be seeking clearer and more simple means of expression, but any such simplified expression will only have meaning insofar as it is entirely new.¹¹

His sonatinas are examples of this simplicity. In 1932 he completed Op. 54, a set of two sonatinas; and in 1934 he wrote a one-movement sonatina, the third of a set of pieces for piano, Op. 59. This last one, called "Pastoral Sonatina," Prokofieff thought "purer and more typical of the sonatina form than the previous two, Op. 54."¹²

Another traditional form Prokofieff used was the variation, an example being the second movement of his Third Concerto. The theme, an andantino, is first stated in the orchestra alone. The first variation, very chromatic and mostly homophonic in texture, is given to the piano alone. The orchestra then re-enters with a simple statement of the latter part of the theme.

¹¹Dorel Handman, "The Art of Prokofiev," from program notes of recording of Third Piano Concerto, performed by Prokofieff, Great Recordings of the Century, Angel.

¹²Prokofieff, "The Composer Speaks," op. cit., p. 84.

II

TEMA
Andantino
dolce

B. & H. 8842

Fig. 14--Third Concerto, Op. 26, second movement, measures 1-6.

The second variation, marked Allegro and in the piano part tempestoso, consists of almost constant sixteenth notes in the piano accompanying the theme first in the trumpets and

then in the strings. The third variation is in cross-rhythm, the piano triplets overlaying the duple rhythm of the orchestra. The fourth variation, marked *Andante meditativo*, is a distant echoing back and forth between orchestra and piano of fragments of the theme. The fifth variation returns to an *Allegro tempo* in a style of a dance. In the coda the orchestra plays the theme and is accompanied by a staccato passage in the piano.

Prokofieff wrote over 120 pieces for the piano and many of their titles have classic roots: badinage, march, gavotte, rigaudon, scherzo, allemande, prelude, minuet. The names of many of these pieces can be found in the suites of Bach. Prokofieff's interest in the past is partly owed to his lessons with Taneyev in eighteenth-century counterpoint. The gavottes from Bach's Third Suite for Orchestra and several suites for keyboard were models for Prokofieff's many gavottes.¹³

Along with the traditional forms Prokofieff used in his piano works, classical elements can also be seen in his harmonic structure, rhythms, texture, and phrase structure.

Although Prokofieff's music is full of modulations, all of it is based on tonality and some is strikingly diatonic.

¹³Austin, op. cit., p. 455.

His favorite key was C major. He almost always used the traditional cadence and these cadences helped establish each tonal center he used.

Prokofieff's textures show again his desire to break away from impressionism.¹⁴ His left-hand harmony is often in close position, and he sometimes used the Alberti bass:



Fig. 15--Fourth Sonata, Op. 29, third movement, measures 67-69.

Prokofieff's meter and rhythm are almost always very simple. He preferred duple meter; he used triple meter only a few times. According to Nabokov, "Prokofieff always used to say that his chief interest lay not in rhythms but in the invention of good themes."¹⁵ Prokofieff frequently reiterated a rhythm over a long span:

¹⁴Kinsey, op. cit., p. 261.

¹⁵Nicolas Nabokov, Old Friends and New Music (Boston, 1951), p. 168.



Fig. 16--Seventh Sonata, Op. 83, third movement, measures 1-3.

Accent marks and extremes in dynamics are elements reminiscent of Beethoven. A crescendo or diminuendo is frequently used to negotiate the distance from one extreme to the other, but subito effects are common:¹⁶



Fig: 17--"Suggestion Diabolique," Op. 4 #4, measures 98-99.

¹⁶Kinsey, op. cit., p. 264.

Prokofieff's hand crossing and leaps are elements traceable to earlier style periods, and to Scarlatti in particular. An example is in the "Scherzo" of the Second Sonata:

The musical score shows two measures of music. The right hand (r.h.) plays a sequence of chords and single notes, with hand crossings indicated by 'l.h.' and 'r.h.' above the notes. The left hand (l.h.) plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The dynamic is marked 'p' (piano).

Fig. 18--Second Sonata, Op. 14, second movement, measures 1-2.

Rapid scale passages, reminiscent of Haydn and early Beethoven, can also be seen in his works:

The musical score shows two measures of music. The right hand (r.h.) plays a rapid scale passage, while the left hand (l.h.) plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The dynamic is marked 'p' (piano). The score includes parts for Piano (Pfc.), Violin I (VI. I), Violin II (VI. II), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.).

Fig. 19--Third Concerto, Op. 28, third movement, measures 45-46.

CHAPTER III

INNOVATION

Prokofieff's rebellion against musical convention began at the turn of the century when he began the study of harmony with Reinhold Glière at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. In 1919 Glière said of Prokofieff's music, "I was struck by the extraordinary boldness of the harmony, the harshness of the chords, and angularity of the melodies. . . They were nevertheless basically logical and unquestionably expressive."¹ His years at the Conservatory from age thirteen on were years of struggle with his professors for the assertion of his own individual style.² His studies with Anatoly Lyadov were unhappy, for he often refused to follow the requirements of strict voice-leading. When he entered the piano class of Anna Esipova he was soon in rebellion again. Prokofieff said of her:

The Mozart, Schubert and Chopin she insisted on my playing didn't seem to appeal to me. I was too much

¹Lawrence & Elisabeth Hanson, Prokofiev: A Biography in Three Movements (New York, 1964), p. 78.

²Israel V. Nestyev, Prokofiev (Stanford, California, 1960), p. 9.

preoccupied by the search for a new harmonic idiom to understand how anyone could waste his time over Mozart.³

It was Sergei Taneyev who actually started Prokofieff on the path of innovation. In 1904, after listening to the first act of the opera The Giant, he said, "The melodies seem to be rather simple," and laughed. Prokofieff never forgot that outburst of hilarity. In his effort to create "complicated" melodies, he developed a taste for innovation in music.⁴ When, some years later, Taneyev expressed bewilderment at the "peculiarity" of young Prokofieff's music, the composer reminded him of his earlier verdict. The professor exclaimed, "Never tell me that it was I who pushed you into all this noise!"⁵

In Prokofieff's youth, his desire for novelty was expressed in a new harmonic language. But later this element developed into a search for a language in which he could express powerful emotions. This element is found mostly in the works of his second period, before he returned to Russia. On a visit with Abram Chasins in 1918, Prokofieff confided that he wanted to create an entirely new music.⁶

³Hanson, op. cit., pp. 74-75.

⁴Reno Moisenko, Realist Music: 25 Soviet Composers (London, 1949), p. 174.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Abram Chasins, Speaking of Pianists (New York, 1957), p. 268.

During all of Prokofieff's creative life, he strove for originality. He regarded passive imitation and conformity to ready-made patterns in art a "deadly sin."

The cardinal virtue (or sin, if you wish), of my life has been the search for an original musical language, a musical language of my own. I detest imitation; I detest hackneyed methods. I do not want anybody else's guise. I always want to by myself.⁷

The society "Evenings of Modern Music," lead by Walter Nuvel and Alfred Nurok was established in St. Petersburg in 1901 for the promotion of new music. Prokofieff began to attend in 1904 and was well-received by the members. He accepted their artistic precepts for many years and they supported him in his most daring creative plans. Once Tcherepnin said, "All his life Nurok longed for new music and in his old age God send him Prokofiev."⁸

One of Prokofieff's most remarkable developments is the personal harmonic idiom he used. The distinction lies not in the chords themselves, but in the relationships. Dissonance occasionally results from added tones:

⁷Nestyev, op. cit., p. 466.

⁸Sergei Prokofieff, Autobiography (Moscow, 1959), p. 43.

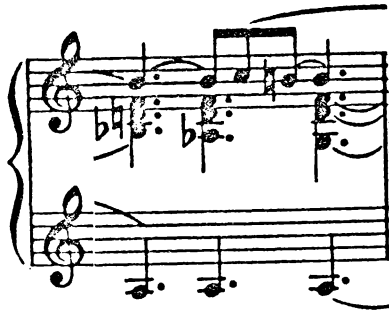


Fig. 22--Seventh Sonata, Op. 83, first movement, measure 129.

as well as from being an integral part of the harmony:



Fig. 23--Seventh Sonata, Op. 83, third movement, measure 1.

The device of consecutive major thirds is used often:



Fig. 24--Second Sonata, Op. 14, first movement, measures 27-28.

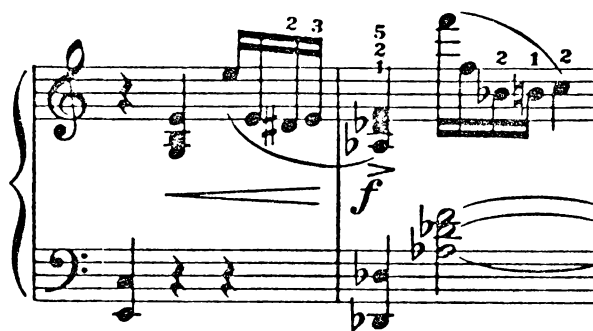


Fig. 26--Second Sonata, Op. 14, first movement, measures 87-88.

Many characteristics of the innovation element--dissonance, mixed meter, angular melodies, "grotesquerie," etc.--can be found in Prokofieff's Sarcasms, Op. 17 (1912-1914). Nuvel and Nurok acclaimed these short pieces as little gems of modernist art, tartly demolishing sentimentalism in piano playing and writing.¹⁰ In the Sarcasms, Prokofieff's fifth element predominates over innovation. In these five pieces are embodied the most extreme manifestations of "grotesquerie."

The first Sarcasm, marked *tempestoso*, is full of sudden contrasts, both in dynamics and in mood. The first theme begins with continuous eighth notes a tritone apart:

¹⁰Hanson, op. cit., p. 103.

Tempestoso

The musical score for Fig. 27 shows four measures of music. The first two measures are marked *ff* and the last two are marked *p*. The tempo is *Tempestoso*. The music is written for piano with a treble and bass clef. The first two measures feature a series of eighth notes with accents, while the last two measures feature a more melodic line with a final cadence.

Fig. 27--Sarcasms, Op. 17 # 1, measures 1-4

The second theme is in the same tempo but quieter and more melodic:

a tempo

The musical score for Fig. 28 shows three measures of music. The tempo is *a tempo*. The music is written for piano with a treble and bass clef. The first two measures feature a series of eighth notes with fingerings (1, 2, 1, 2) and accents, while the third measure features a more melodic line with a final cadence.

Fig. 28--Sarcasms, Op. 17 #1, measures 23-25

The second Sarcasm is one of the few Prokofieff works which is tonally ambiguous and lacks any key signature. There are no cadences and a tonal center is not felt until the last measure. The piece is marked *Allegro rubato*, sounds improvisational, and is full of dissonant chords and arpeggios:

The image displays two systems of musical notation for Prokofiev's Sarcasms, Op. 17 #2, measures 21-26. The first system (measures 21-26) features a piano (*pp*) dynamic and an *accelerando* instruction. The right hand plays a complex, polytonal melody with frequent chromaticism, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment. The second system (measures 21-26) features a forte (*f*) dynamic, an *a tempo* marking, and a *feroce* (ferocious) marking. The right hand plays a melodic line with a measure number '14' indicated, and the left hand provides a bass line. The score is written in two staves per system, with a grand staff bracket on the left.

Fig. 29--Sarcasms, Op. 17 #2, measures 21-26

Part of Prokofieff's experimentation resulted in the polytonality of the third Sarcasm. It is written with two key signatures, F-sharp minor in the right hand and B-flat minor in the left. The right hand in the first section is almost entirely ostinato with a repeated D-F-sharp chord. The left hand has the B-flat minor melody. The transition to the middle section eliminates the sharps and flats which come back only at the return of the main section.

Allegro precipitato

Fig. 30--Sarcasms, Op. 17 #3, measures 1-3

The fourth Sarcasm is marked *Smanioso*, or "maniacally," and begins with a high-pitched fortissimo passage accompanied by chords built on fourths:

Smanioso

Fig. 31--Sarcasms, Op. 17 #4, measures 1-2

The "B" section consists of heavy, dissonant chords in a low register, which carry on through the brief return of "A":



Fig. 32--Sarcasms, Op. 17 #4, measures 14-15

The fifth Sarcasm is the only one with a program:

We often indulge in malicious laughter at someone or somethings but when we pause to look we see how pitiful and sad is the object of our ridicule; and then we grow ashamed, the mocking laughter rings in our ears, but it is we who are its objects now.¹¹

Marked *Precipitosissimo*, this piece features big chords, mostly triads with added tones. It is one of Prokofieff's few examples of mixed meter:

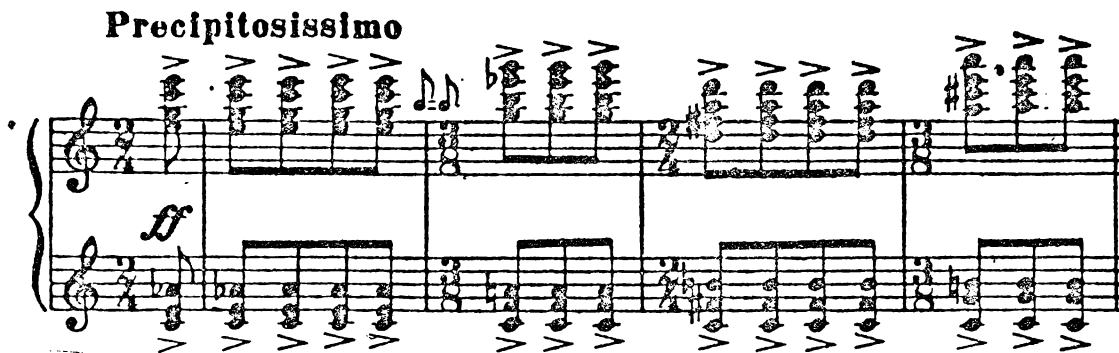


Fig. 33--Sarcasms, Op. 17 #5, measures 1-4

¹¹Prokofieff, op. cit.

The middle section is an Andantino with a pizzicato-like accompaniment (*irresoluto*) under a new theme marked *lamentevole*; *con duolo*:



Fig. 34--Sarcasms, Op. 17 # 5, measures 39-41

The piece ends with the return of the opening chords to the accompaniment of a three-note motive in the bass.

Innovation in Prokofieff's melodies means mainly angularity. The contours of his themes are often distorted by means of wide gaps between notes:



Fig. 35--Visions Fugitives, Op. 22 #2, measures 1-2

or by sudden arrivals on unexpected tones:



Fig. 36--Third Sonata, Op. 28, measures 22-23

He uses a mixture of phrases that are alternately angular and conjunct.¹²

In rhythm, Prokofieff's novelty lies not in complexity, but rather in the sheer mechanical persistence in a single basic pulse. This rhythmic element, in addition to melodic invention, tritonal harmonies, and semi-percussiveness treatment of the keyboard, is found in Prokofieff's "Suggestion Diabolique," Op. 4 #4 (1910-1912).

¹²Richard Anthony Leonard, A History of Russian Music (New York, 1957), p. 311.

CHAPTER IV

TOCCATA

The toccata or "motor" element is, as Prokofieff said, probably the least important of the four elements. It is related to innovation as a result of his desire to free himself of the outworn, arpeggio-ridden techniques and sentimentalism of the nineteenth century. Although the element is found in works of other composers, such as Stravinsky and Hindemith, Prokofieff was one of the first to exploit the new dynamism in the "Scherzo" of the Second Sonata, "Suggestion Diabolique," and the Toccata.¹

It is possible that the toccata element has its roots in many of the works of Haydn, Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven, particularly Beethoven's scherzi and the first movement of that composer's sonata, Op. 53, which uses a rapidly repeated, propulsive chord pattern for its principal motive.²

The toccata element, like that of innovation, is seen most often in the works of Prokofieff's first period.

¹David Leslie Kinsey, The Piano Sonatas of Serge Prokofieff (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1959), pp. 272-273.

²Ibid., p. 272.

But it is also seen in his later works, including the Fifth Concerto (1932) and the Seventh Sonata (1940).

An important element of the toccata technique is the texture: short, staccato tones in rapid succession. An especially characteristic feature in this texture is the use of thirds in the lower register:

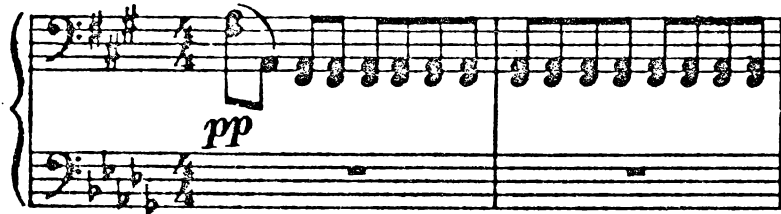


Fig. 37--Sarcasms, Op. 17 #3, measures 1-2

The Toccata, Op. 11 (1912) is the prime example of Prokofieff's motor element. Boris Asafyev made the following comment about it:

When one speaks of kinetics in music--that is, of the embodiment in music of motion in some state or other--and of the disclosure of the purely dynamic nature of tonal material, one thinks immediately of Prokofiev's beautifully constructed, resilient, and powerful piano Toccata.³

This work, which refers explicitly to the Schumann Toccata, Op. 7 (1832), is a large, virtuoso, perpetual-motion piece. It is based on repeated notes:

³Israel V. Nestyev, Prokofiev (Stanford, California, 1960), p. 67.



Fig. 38--Toccata, Op. 11, measures 1-3

and sliding chromatic figures:



Fig. 39--Toccata, Op. 11, measures 35-36

The tempo never slackens, never misses a sixteenth note, and threatens to run down only for a moment before it picks up energy for its fortissimo glissando finish.

Another example of the toccata element in Prokofieff's earlier works is heard in the Etudes, Op. 2 (1909), particularly the first one. It consists of constant sixteenth notes from beginning to finish. The work is full of staccato passages, runs in octaves and thirds, and a steady tempo.



Fig. 40--Etudes, Op. 2, #1, measures 1-2

The toccata element is seen often in Prokofieff's piano concertos, especially the early ones. There are motor passages in both the first and third concertos. The "Scherzo" of the Second Concerto, Op. 16 (1913, rev. ed., 1923) uses the toccata element throughout. Continuous passage work in the piano combines with extremely simple rhythms in the orchestra. The last movement of the Fourth Concerto, Op. 53 (1931), is neither percussive nor heavy, but it is in perpetual motion. The piano part is very light--almost entirely monophonic--and moves almost continuously. The third movement of the Fifth Concerto, Op. 55 (1932) is a toccata--a toccata for orchestra as well as for piano.

Prokofieff's toccata element seems to come to a climax in the finale of the Seventh Sonata, Op. 83 (1939-1942). The finale is in 7/8 time--one of the few times a deviation from the usual duple or triple meter is found in Prokofieff's music. The rhythm of the first two measures is repeated

throughout Part I of the movement. The augmented second in the bass permeates the section:



Fig. 41--Seventh Sonata, Op. 83, third movement, measures 1-2.

Part II uses an ostinato figure in the right hand, while a rhythmic motive enters in the left:



Fig. 42--Seventh Sonata, Op. 83, third movement, measures 52-54.

Part III is based on this idea:

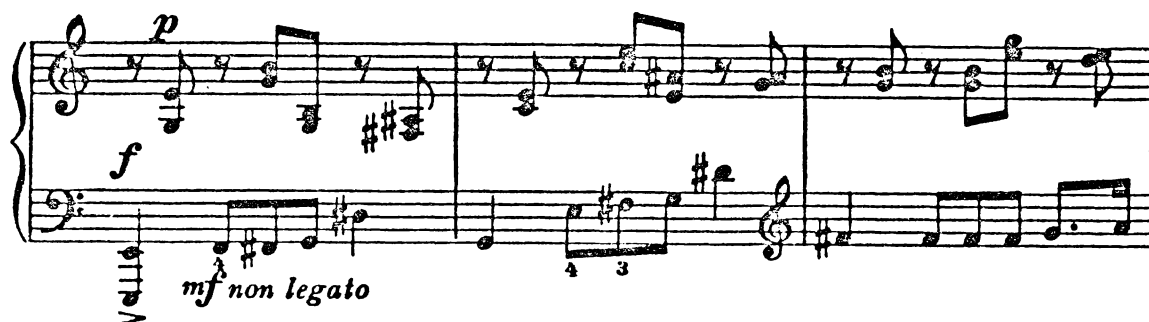


Fig. 43--Seventh Sonata, Op. 83, third movement, measures 79-81.

with a short but important melodic fragment inserted:

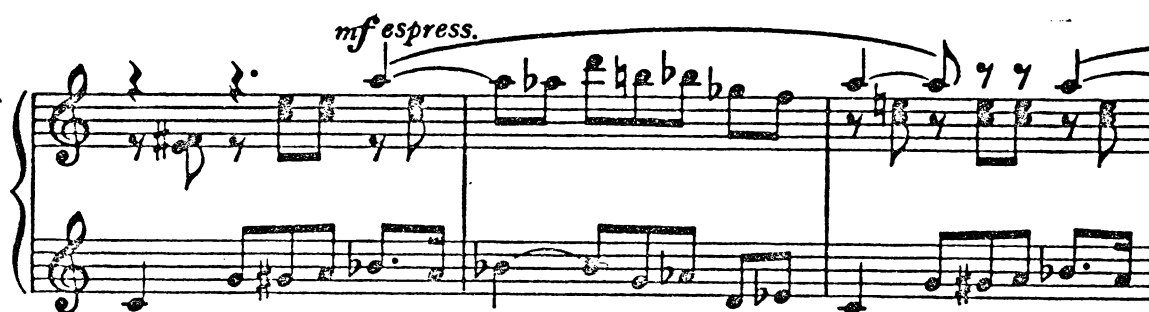


Fig. 44--Seventh Sonata, Op. 83, third movement, measures 83-85.

Part II returns in varied form followed by Part I in a fortissimo, building even more tension than at the first of the movement. The dynamic level rises, the range becomes wider, accents become more frequent, and the right-hand chords become more dissonant and thicker in texture. The movement finally reaches a climax of great proportions and ends in a fortissimo.

CHAPTER V

LYRICISM

A general definition of lyricism is expression. In poetry it is the expression of the poet's inner thoughts, rather than outward objects or events. Webster defines the lyrical in music as "of a quality especially adapted for singing songs."¹ In music, particularly Prokofieff's music, lyricism is found mostly in melody.

Prokofieff considered the lyric element to be the most important of the four in his music. "I always seek beauty in music, and give particular attention to melody, which I consider to be the basic element in my works."² Well-constructed, interesting melodies can be found in almost all of Prokofieff's music.

¹"Lyrical," Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, 2nd ed. (Springfield, Massachusetts, 1951).

²Dorel Handman, "The Art of Prokofieff," from program notes of recording of Third Piano Concerto, performed by Prokofieff, Great Recordings of the Century, Angel.

This element, like all the others, was a reaction against impressionism and the absorption of melody by harmony. Prokofieff's melody was the clear-cut melody of the classicists.³

The lyric element can be seen throughout Prokofieff's music, but reached a peak in the music of his Soviet Period. He believed that a closeness to the audience was necessary for his success and it was during this last period that he admitted he had gotten nearer to the people than ever before.⁴

Most of Prokofieff's early melodies are brief and succinct, but many of his early works contain stretches of pure lyricism, as in the second, third, and fourth sonatas, and Tales of the Old Grandmother. They appear even in his most audacious, barbaric works, such as in the mid-sections of Nos. 1 and 3 of the Sarcasms.⁵

For a long time, this lyric element went unnoticed. Because of its restraint and freedom from exaggerated sentiment, it sounded strange and unfamiliar to many people. Prokofieff made the following explanation:

I am always being advised to make my music full of melody, expression and emotion, whereas it is already so filled, although no one seems to hear and understand it. Certainly, I might continue to write,

³Israel V. Nestyev, Prokofiev (Stanford, California, 1960), p. 62.

⁴Alexander Werth, "The Real Prokofiev," The Nation, CLXXVI (April, 1953), 285-287.

⁵Nestyev, op. cit., p. 470.

as many others have done, tunes sure to please the public, but audiences would quickly be tired of them. A composer who is working with an eye to posterity, must in fact seek out new melodies and shape them differently from his predecessors. This demands hard work on the part of the composer, and receptive audience if his work is to be appreciated.⁶

In addition, Prokofieff felt that his lyricism had grown slowly and that he paid more attention to this element in the later stages of his creative life.

In Prokofieff's early works, the lyric element was neo-classic, but in his later works, his lyricism lay nearer to neo-romanticism.⁷ The middle movements of his later sonatas are all Schubertian in character.

To Prokofieff the most difficult task for the composer was to create a melody that was simple and comprehensible without letting it become imitative or trivial. A melody that was appealing to an audience was not necessarily a lasting one.

If it follows a familiar pattern it will be easily understood, but will soon as easily find its way into the waste-basket. A melody of an unaccustomed design is not accepted as a melody at all at first because it consists of phrases hitherto not considered melodious. But if the author is right, he will have extended the range of melodic possibilities and the listener is bound to follow him, if only at a respectful distance.⁸

⁶Handman, op. cit.

⁷David Leslie Kinsey, The Piano Sonatas of Serge Prokofieff (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1950), p. 274.

⁸Sergei Prokofieff, Autobiography (Moscow, 1959), p. 70.

In a letter to the Composers' Union in 1948, Prokofieff said,

I have never questioned the importance of melody. I love melody, and I regard it as the most important element in music. I have worked on the improvement of its quality in my compositions for years. To find a melody instantly understandable even to the uninitiated listener, and at the same time an original one, is the most difficult task for a composer. Here he is beset by a great multitude of dangers: he may fall into the trivial or the banal, or into the rehashing of something already written by him. In this respect, composition of complex melodies is much easier. It may also happen that a composer, fussing over his melody for a long time, and revising it, unwittingly makes it overrefined and complicated, and departs from simplicity. Undoubtedly, I fell into this trap, too in the process of my work. One must be particularly vigilant to make sure that the melody retains its simplicity without becoming cheap, saccharine, or imitative.⁹

To avoid triviality or sentimentality, Prokofieff would often add something out of the ordinary to his melodies. They were often colored with added tones in the harmony:

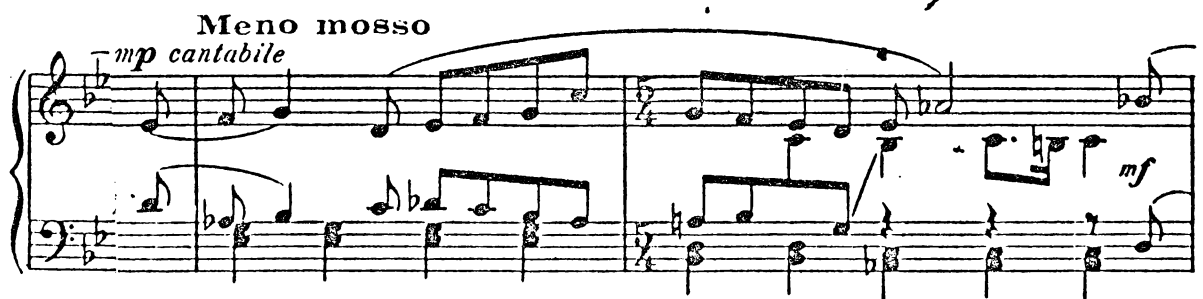


Fig. 45--Pensées, Op. 62 #3, measures 16-17

⁹William W. Austin, Music in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1966), pp. 459-460.

or contrasted with passages of entirely different mood. In the eleventh of the Visions Fugitives, there emerges a conjunct, simple unison melody out of a disjunct, accentuated, and dissonant first theme:

Fig. 46--Visions Fugitives, Op. 22 #11, measures 15-17

And in the third piece, a lively dance rhythm is found:

Fig. 47--Visions Fugitives, Op. 22 #3, measures 9-10

Prokofieff's lyrical ideas are often expressed in diatonic sonorities, often C major. A few times he used both very simple harmony and accompaniment:



Fig. 48--Fourth Sonata, Op. 29, second movement, measures 39-40.

His melodic lines are often very broad in range and change frequently from wide leaps to subtle, chromatic motion.¹⁰

Prokofieff habitually wrote balanced, four-measure phrases which he built into symmetrical periods; such regularity helps to account for the directness of expression in his music.

¹⁰Nestyev, op. cit.

Fig. 49--Second Sonata, Op. 14, third movement, measures 4-8.

Occasionally this regularity is disturbed when a melody is repeated but starts on another part of the measure:

Fig. 50--Sixth Sonata, Op. 82, first movement, measure 1

Prokofieff's practice of displacing a melody from one register of the piano to the other finds precedence in the piano style of Brahms.¹¹

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The second system continues the melodic and harmonic development. The third system includes a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and a crescendo (*cresc.*) marking. The bass line features prominent triplet patterns throughout. The treble line features a melodic line with various articulations and dynamics.

Fig. 51--Second Sonata, Op. 14, first movement, measures 299-307.

¹¹Nestyev, op. cit., p. 133.

After one statement of a melodic line, many times Prokofieff added a chromatic line to the same melody for variation:

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic. It features a right-hand melodic line with a slur over two measures and a left-hand chromatic line with fingerings 1, 2, 1, 2, 1 and 3, 1. The second system is marked with a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic and shows a similar melodic and chromatic structure with fingerings 2, 5 and 3, 5.

Fig. 52--Second Sonata, Op. 14, first movement, measures 63-64, 71-72.

Prokofieff's cycle of Visions Fugitives, Op. 22 (1915--1917), is distinguished by its more lyrical pieces. These pieces became the source of Tales of the Old Grandmother, Op. 31 (1918), and many more of Prokofieff's later works in a fairy-tale lyrical vein. They contain extremely simple diatonic melodies combined with colorful harmonies (sequences of seventh chords), and they resemble Russian folk songs in

their structure. Prokofieff placed the most lyrical pieces at the beginning and end of the cycle; their subdued images set the tone of the whole cycle.¹²

All the pieces in Tales of the Old Grandmother are leisurely in tempo and calm in character. At the beginning there is an epigraph written by Prokofieff: "Some recollections had become half erased from her memory; others will never be erased."

The four dominating elements in Prokofieff's piano style are interrelated, even though each appears prominent in one particular period of his creative life. The classic element is innovative in that it is a deviation from the norm of the period. The toccata element is classical, having its roots in composers such as Bach and Beethoven. The constant tempos seen in Prokofieff's music are especially reminiscent of Bach. The lyric element is related to both classicism and innovation. Some of his melodies are simple and conjunct with classical phrase structures; but in most of his melodies are found angularity, added tones, and unexpected directions--all features of a new way of composing. And with the sum of these four factors is found the distinct piano style of Prokofieff.

¹²Ibid.

APPENDIX

CATALOGUE OF THE PIANO WORKS
OF SERGEI PROKOFIEFF

★

Sonatas

<u>Opus</u>		<u>Composed</u>
1	Sonata No. 1, F minor	1907
14	Sonata No. 2, D minor	1912
28	Sonata No. 3, A minor	1907
29	Sonata No. 4, C minor	1908
38/135	Sonata No. 5, C minor	1923/1953
82	Sonata No. 6, A major	1939-1940
83	Sonata No. 7, B-flat major	1939-1942
84	Sonata No. 8, B-flat major	1939-1944
103	Sonata No. 9, C major	1947
137	Sonata No. 10 (sketch only)	1953
138	Sonata No. 11 (projected but never realized)	

Concertos

10	Concerto No. 1, D-flat major	1911-1912
16	Concerto No. 2, G minor	1913
26	Concerto No. 3, C major	1917-1921
53	Concerto No. 4, B-flat major (Left Hand)	1931
55	Concerto No. 5, G Major	1932

Solo Works

<u>Opus</u>		<u>Composed</u>
2	<u>Etudes</u>	1909
3	Four Pieces	1907-1908
	"Story"	
	"Badinage"	
	"March"	
	"Phantom"	
4	Four Pieces	1907-1908
	"Reminiscence"	
	"Élan"	
	"Despair"	
	"Suggestion Diabolique"	
11	<u>Toccata</u>	1912
12	Ten Pieces	1906-1913
	"Marche"	
	"Gavotte"	
	"Rigaudon"	
	"Mazurka"	
	"Caprice"	
	"Legende"	
	"Prelude"	
	"Allemande"	
	"Scherzo Humoristique"	
	"Scherzo"	
17	<u>Sarcasms</u>	1912-1914
22	<u>Visions Fugitives</u>	1915-1917
31	<u>Tales of the Old Grandmother</u>	1918
32	Four Pieces	1918
	"Danza"	
	"Menuetto"	
	"Gavotta"	
	"Waltz"	

<u>Opus</u>		<u>Composed</u>
45	<u>Chose en soi</u>	1928
54	Two Sonatinas, E minor and G minor	1931-1932
59	Three Pieces	1934
	"Promenade"	
	"Paysage"	
	"Sonatina Pastorale"	
62	<u>Pensées</u>	1933-1934
65	<u>Music for Children</u>	1935
Transcriptions of Various Works		
33-ter	"March" and "Scherzo" from <u>The Love for Three Oranges</u>	
43-bis	<u>Divertissement</u>	
52	Six Pieces from Op. 46, 48, 35, and 50	
75	<u>Romeo and Juliet</u> , Ten Pieces	
77-bis	"Gavotte" No. 4 from the music for <u>Hamlet</u>	
95	Three Pieces from <u>War and Peace</u>	
96	Three Pieces from <u>War and Peace</u> and the film <u>Lermontov</u>	
97	Ten Pieces from <u>Cinderella</u>	
102	Six Pieces from <u>Cinderella</u>	

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