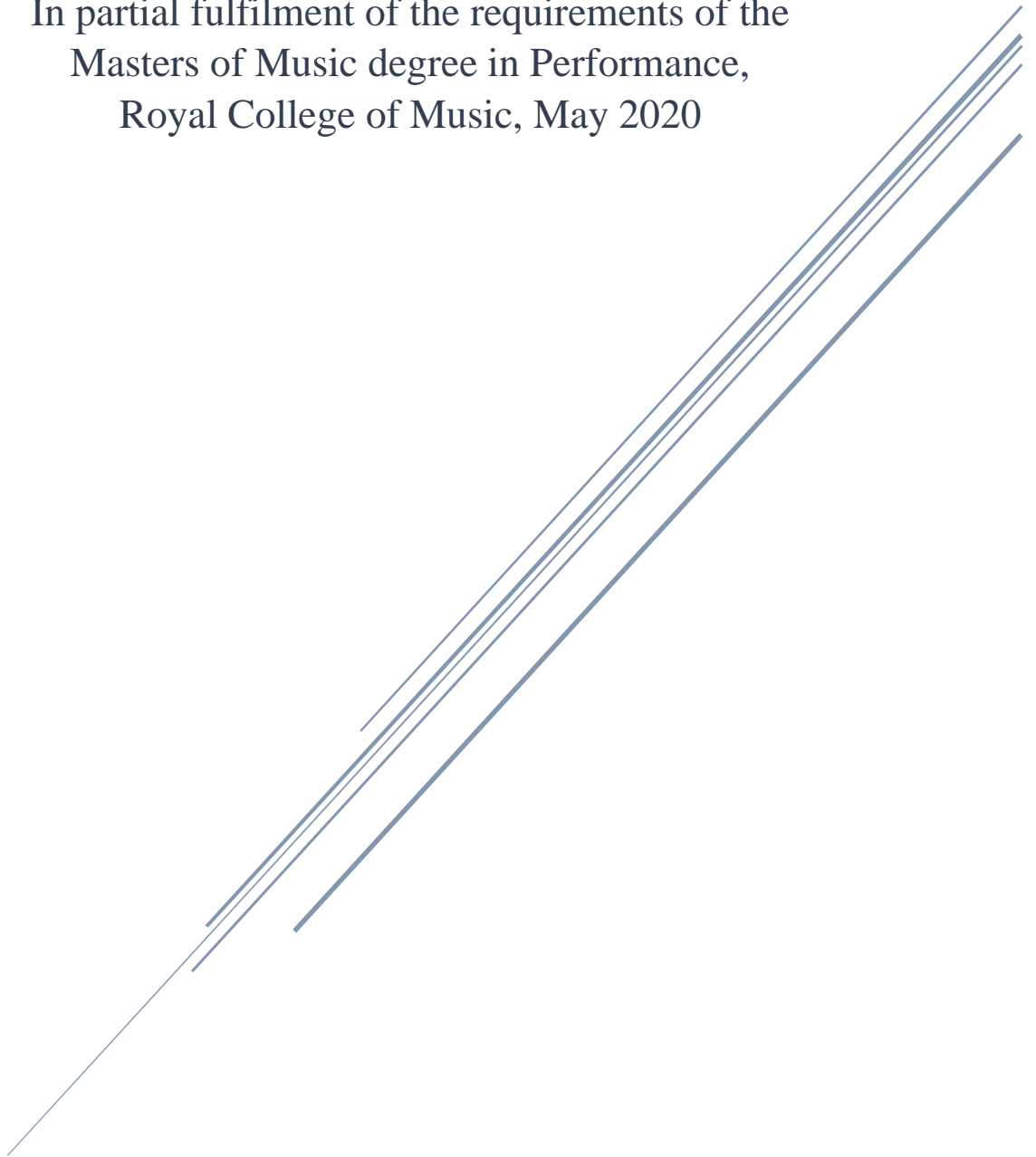


CRITICAL PROJECT

Submitted by **Nuno Lucas**

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Informing Performance of Prokofiev's Piano Music

Researching the Musical Score

Introduction: Prokofiev's first musical steps

Sergey Prokofiev's early contact and involvement with music are inherently associated with the maternal figure in his life. In 1878, just after getting married, his parents had moved to Sontsovka, a remote rural village in today's Ukraine. Before the young Prokofiev had been born, his mother, Maria Grigorevna, had the misfortune of losing two daughters at very early age. These tragic experiences had traumatically shaped the family's behaviour, revealed by Maria Grigorevna's close relationship with her son, and her active role in his education.

His parents were both teachers of a great variety of subjects: his father taught Russian, geography, arithmetic and history; his mother taught foreign languages and biblical studies. Pervaded by diligence and care, this background provided an important support and was of great advantage for Prokofiev's education. From a very early age, he had already developed a good affinity with foreign languages, certainly prompted by his mother. He was also an avid chess player, which was a passion that stayed with him throughout his life.

Ultimately, it was Prokofiev's mother who instigated her son's love for music, through her own *ethos*. She loved music deeply and devoted a lot of time to her piano practice during her time at home in Sontsovka. According to him, it was not talent that brought her the musical accomplishment, but rather the "persistence, love and taste"¹. In fact, Prokofiev also admits that his mother's musical taste shaped the development of his own musical preferences. He grew up listening to his mother playing works by Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt, and she always aimed for a most accurate and polished execution she could.

¹ Sergei Prokofiev, ed. *Prokofiev by Prokofiev: a composer's memoir* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 12.

The fact that Prokofiev was an only child, along with Mara Grigorevna's troubled past experiences with her daughters, contributed to the great focus and care that Prokofiev received for his education, mostly tailored by his mother. Even though his father appreciated and valued the importance of music and arts as a manifestation of human intellect and spirit, it was his mother who was the prominent pedagogue in her son's education and musical development. However, it is important to note that the Prokofiev's reminiscences do not denote his mother as an authority figure with demanding temperament. She is portrayed as a musical *stimulus*, personalising his practice regime in a way that would avoid emphasis on laborious discipline for polish and technical development, and prioritising the acquaintance with a great deal of repertoire, acquiring familiarity with different musical worlds. As a result of their musical discussions on the piano works his mother played and/or picked for him to play, Prokofiev developed an independence in musical judgement very early on. It had also lighted his curiosity to explore what musical resources were at his disposal, which led to his prodigious interest for composition. The piano was just the instrument that worked as a means through which he could access the music.

There is a distinctive correlation between Prokofiev's educational background and its developmental outcome, which feeds back to our perceptive knowledge and information about his own mind and musicality. Nevertheless, there were also consequential adverse aspects to this upbringing, which were later acknowledged by the composer himself. Prokofiev had a tendency to play the works in a careless manner, primarily because of his clumsy finger positioning on the keyboard, and also due to the fact that his learning process was not thorough enough. In fact, this issue of lacking polish and refinement stayed with him for a very long time, with which he struggled to overcome, particularly during his time at the conservatoire.

The discussion of the performance of Prokofiev's music for the piano asks for an understanding of the composer's technical assets and limitations. Not only are they central to the conception of the figurations in his piano writing, but they also play an important role in the concretisation of his musical ideas. The investigation of the characteristics of his playing can be fundamentally supported by several primary and secondary sources, derived from specific

periods of the composer's life. His time at St. Petersburg Conservatoire, where the young Prokofiev was enrolled as a student for nearly ten years, constitutes an unprecedented mark in the research of this specific topic. Not only was this a time of focused technical and musical development, but above all a time of confrontation of colliding opinions, personalities and artistries, with or against which Prokofiev showed instinctive assertiveness. An open door to his musicianship and strong personality, vividly documented in his Diaries.

The Conservatoire years: Anna Esipova

For the first years of study at the music institution, Prokofiev's focus was directed to his music theory studies, which comprised of music theory classes with Anatoly Lyadov, orchestration classes with Rimsky-Korsakov, and theory of musical forms classes with Joseph Vitols. Later in 1905, Prokofiev started piano lessons with his professor Alexander Winkler.

It is of the utmost significance to discuss his piano classes with his professors Winkler and Anna Esipova. During the final years of his studies, his professional ambitions were being pondered with greater seriousness, and the option of a performing career as a pianist was dearly contemplated. By the time of his graduation in 1909, the eighteen-year-old Prokofiev was certain that Winkler would not be the best choice for the continuation of his piano studies, and ultimately the attainment of his professional aspirations. Winkler's pedantic advice to his pupil had reached a monotonous threshold, lacking novelty in interpretative ideas, nuances and colours.² After his graduation with a Free Artist Diploma, Prokofiev was accepted into the prestigious piano class of Anna Esipova to continue his piano studies at the institution. Following the recommendation from friends and colleagues Miaskovsky and Zakharov, the latter introduced Prokofiev to Esipova, who was not only impressed by his prodigious dedication to composition, but also for his imposing performance of the Rubinstein Etude Op.23

² Christina Guillaumier, "From piano to stage: a genealogy of musical ideas in the piano works of Sergei Prokofiev (1900- c.1920)" (Ph.D. thesis. University of St Andrews, 2010), 70.

N.2 in C major in a student recital.

Anna Esipova was considered a pedagogue of excellence, and the most illustrious piano teacher in the conservatoire's piano faculty at the time. The acceptance into the student cohort of Esipova's class was regarded with high prestige, as a proof of pianistic command and potential to meet the high standards demanded by the tutor. Before accepting her professorship at the conservatoire in 1893, she enjoyed a busy and successful performing career around the world, particularly in Europe. Fortunately, a number of piano rolls of Esipova's Welte-Mignon recordings for the M. Welte & Söhne have survived until our days. Despite the undermined sound quality, the 1906 recording of Verdi-Liszt's *Rigoletto* Paraphrase embodies many qualities of her playing that can still be audibly perceived, such as the her technical command and fluidity, combined with gracious agogic use and rich singing tone³.

It is an interesting fact that both of Prokofiev's piano teachers at the conservatoire, Winkler and Esipova, had studied with the same teacher, albeit at different times and circumstances. An eminent figure of notable musical heritage who needed no introduction: Theodor Leschetitzky, who was also former pupil of Carl Czerny. Leschetitzky became a figure of influential stature in the musical world, acquainted and respected by many of the great composers at the time, such as Liszt, Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Grieg and others. Alongside his outstanding performing career, he was also one of the most sought-after piano teachers of his time, and highly renowned for his long list of remarkable pupils, to mention a few Ignacy Paderewski, Artur Schnabel, and Ignaz Friedman.

Winkler had studied with him in Vienna, before moving to Saint Petersburg and starting his teaching position at the conservatoire, under his teacher's recommendation. Yet, Esipova's case was somewhat more intricate. She came to study with Leschetitzky at the conservatoire in 1863, while he had just started his position as head of department of piano in 1862, after invitation from his great friend and composer Anton Rubinstein. Leschetitzky had a distinct

³ Anna Esipova, "Anna Yesipova plays Verdi-Liszt" (audio performance), posted January 24, 2008, accessed May 8, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQB1kmFfyJk>

fascination for Esipova's talent and playing, which later turned into fondness as their bonds became tighter. Years later, Leschetitzky decided to leave his teaching position at the conservatoire, and moved back to Vienna with Esipova, initially as his assistant, to his house in Carl-Ludwigstrasse in 1878. Finally, the two married in 1880.

Leschetitzky's fame preceded himself. Soon after moving to Europe, he began to receive lesson requests from students all over the world. There, his teaching career continued for years with great vehemence and tradition. As his assistant and wife, Esipova often performed in his classes for other students, as a demonstration of what Leschetitzky considered to be exemplary outstanding performance. The following paragraph from one of his pupils' diary describes his reaction after one of Esipova's performances for the class:

«She came down a few moments later, and gave us the 'Handel-Brahms Variations.' It was one majestic sweep from beginning to end. Professor sat quite still the whole time, drinking it in, his face lit up with tender pride as he listened. When she rose from the piano he took both her hands and kissed them reverently, but without a single word, for he could not speak, and his eyes were full of tears.»⁴

Perhaps one might argue that Leschetitzky recognition as a performer became somewhat overshadowed by his staunch commitment to Esipova's talent and career after their marriage. It is known that he turned down most of his concert arrangements to her, while her performative prowess also helped to highlight his own teaching proficiencies and achievements. Invariably, the successes of the pupils make the face of their own teacher, and Esipova case was certainly an accurate example of this.⁵

However, Prokofiev was undoubtedly not as exemplary in pianistic achievement as Esipova would perhaps have hoped for. Unlike the case of her mentor, the relationship between the Prokofiev and his distinguished teacher was breached in communication and understanding.

⁴ Annette Hullah, *Theodor Leschetitzky* (London: John Lane, 1906), 70.

⁵ Ethel Newcomb, *Leschetitzky as I knew him* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1967), 157.

He studied with Esipova from 1909 up until her death in 1914, and it was during this period that Prokofiev was confronted with ample criticism towards his playing. Several of these stirring moments in lessons are documented in his own diaries from conservatoire years, not only describing and detailing the Esipova's observations, but also his own critical feedback about his performance which did not always comply with the tutor's criticism. Undeniably, Prokofiev's character was bold enough to show unconformity to the teaching principles and repertoire choices of Esipova. On the other hand, she often felt dissatisfied by her pupil's rebellious demeanour, which would become hostile and provocative in his musical opinions.⁶

Esipova's teaching style is rooted in the strong influences that Rubinstein and Leschetitzky had on her pianism from very early on. During her student years, the nationalistic principles of the Russian school of pianism had fomented her interpretation and musical taste, which reflected itself in her artistry in several ways. These compositional principles make up several techniques that became staple in the embodiment of Russian piano music, such as continuous tonic pedals, sudden changes of mood and textures, the religious elements pertaining the use of resounding church bells, and the repetitive use of melodies of folk origin, among others.⁷

With time, many desired characteristics excelled in her playing: effortless technique, deep understanding of the score, simplicity and graciousness, warm and focussed sound, skilful expressiveness, songful Russian cantabile, and a predilection for composers and works from the Classicism and Romanticism. Bertenson's research on Esipova's life and work accounts of several important details such as observations on her playing, as well as teaching aphorisms and routines with her students. On the aspect of sound production, it is reported that her sound was never aggressive or percussive in quality, as she gave clear and objective instructions to the students on how to attain this: "Rest your hand on the keyboard in position to play the intended

⁶ Nikolai Vasilyevich Bertenson. *Анна Николаевна Есипова. Очерк жизни и деятельности*. (Saint Petersburg: State Music Publishers Muzyka, 1960), 130.

⁷ J. Jones, "Nationalism" in *Cambridge Companion to the Piano*, rev. ed., edited by David Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 183.

chord, and move your hand in such way as if you were to push a table drawer”⁸. Other claims include her teaching instructions on the use of staccato and its different ways of employment in a scholarly manner, and her firm belief on finger activity.

The reports of her impeccable performances, both in polish and accuracy, are reflective of the aims she also instigated in her students. Yet, the young Prokofiev did not abide to his teacher’s efforts to shape his musicianship. Later on in his life, his thoughts on Esipova’s teaching were clearly stated in his autobiography, avowing that her method was not tailored for her pupils’ persona, but prioritising her rather categorical standardisation of their pianism, which consequently aimed to suppress the individuality those who were, like Prokofiev, of an “independent cast of mind”⁹. One should argue that these claims must be taken with a pinch of salt, since there was some animosity involved between the two of them. Esipova had great accomplishment with several other conservatoire students who achieved subsequent success and acclaim, such Maria Yudina, Leo Orstein, Leonid Kreutzer, to mention a few. Intriguingly, Prokofiev had also made contradictory remarks to this point regarding his own teaching strategy: “My manner is like Yesipova squared: I impose very precise demands and know exactly what it is I want to achieve. In my opinion I am an excellent teacher and my students should do very well”¹⁰. Besides, it is also clear that Prokofiev had more important concerns in mind rather than improving his pianistic finesse, as he confesses, “at that period I was too preoccupied with the search for a new harmonic idiom to understand how anyone could care for the simple harmonies of Mozart.”¹¹

From these early years, Prokofiev possessed the necessary curiosity, insatiable enough to guide him in his quest for a unique and distinctive musical idiom. His pursuit was of great

⁸ Bertenson, *Анна Николаевна Есипова. Очерк жизни и деятельности*, 113.

⁹ Sergey Prokofiev, *Sergei Prokofiev: Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2000), 28.

¹⁰ Sergey Prokofiev, ed. *Diaries 1907 – 1914: Prodigious Youth*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 746-747.

¹¹ Prokofiev, *Sergei Prokofiev: Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences*, 28.

importance to him, and the restricted repertoire choices set by his tutor would not help him to find novelty, and deviate his concentration to the conventional and already explored harmonic worlds of past composers. In opposition, it was also during these years that Prokofiev had found common ground and inspiration among the musical forward-thinkers of his time, in a music society named Evenings of Contemporary Music. The society was founded in 1901, and Prokofiev began participating and performing in their gatherings from 1908. Even though they were often reported in the press, their meetings were private, designed at their core “to perform and popularise European and Russian chamber music from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries”.¹² Here, Prokofiev made his first appearance as a professional composer in December 1908, performing seven of his short piano pieces written in the previous year.¹³ He was a regular attendee and performer in these events up until 1912, and they constituted a vital stimulus for his musical inspiration. Furthermore, this circle provided him with indispensable contacts and connections for the future. Many other composers found great interest in this society, such as Miaskovsky, Tcherepnin and Stravinsky.

Indeed, Esipova was keen on prompting her students to Classical and Romantic repertoire, and this methodology was another reason for their aloofness, only instigating defiance in the young Prokofiev. However, assigning works of Mozart and Chopin might have been the required doctor’s prescription, and more so to her *enfant terrible* than anyone else, from a pianistic point of view. The performance of these works requires a lot of discipline, polish, clarity, and attention to sound production, in which case the attention to these details during the learning process would certainly aid to cleanse the unrectified aspects of Prokofiev’s playing.

Prokofiev’s tendency to play in a careless manner had been reported several times, initially by his first piano teacher at Sontsovka, Reinhold Glière, and then later by Esipova at

¹² A. L. Porfiryeva, "Evenings of Contemporary Music, musical society." *Saint Petersburg Encyclopaedia*, accessed May 8, 2020, <http://www.encspb.ru/object/2804033806?lc=en>

¹³ Dorothea Redepenning, "Prokofiev, Sergey (Sergeyevich)" *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed November 30, 2019, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e0000022402>

the conservatoire. Prokofiev himself had later acknowledged his struggle to break this persistent bad habit¹⁴. Other reports from documented text include problems with his accuracy, tempi choices, pedalling, and his predisposition to take interpretative liberties with the score, all recurrently criticised by Esipova. It is true that these tendencies are arguably common in the vast majority of piano students, but his astute character and strategic thinking proved to know how to hold them to his own advantage in crucial moments. While acknowledging these limitations in his playing, Prokofiev gives up on the laborious path of polish, as he allies his pianistic strengths to his idiomatic exploration in his new compositions. Such strategy is most remarkably evident in his final piano examination at the conservatoire, in which his performance of his First Piano Concerto coveted the Rubinstein Prize. In reality, there was no better way to demonstrate originality and musicianship suitable to his pianistic capabilities than performing a work of his own. Even though it was a performative adjudication, not only did Prokofiev leveraged with the respectful status of composer and pianist to his own advantage, but he also knew he would excel performing within his own world of imaginative technical preferences, married in this work with appropriate length, inner contrasts and virtuosic bravura for the prize.

Undoubtedly, Prokofiev was an innate performer with a very strong intuition in his essence. Even if his technique would not often follow the orthodox standards of his teachers, Prokofiev's gut instinct would prevail. On his performance of the Rubinstein Etude prior to his acceptance in Esipova's class, Prokofiev later acknowledges that "I had never used the wrist staccato, which seemed to me not to be trusted, so I played the chords with an absolutely stiff wrist."¹⁵ It is interesting that neither Winkler nor Esipova showed any kind of dissatisfaction towards his approach, as it seemed to work for him with impressive effect and command. This feature is exemplary of the technical characteristics that are derived and belong to Prokofiev's pianistic genome, and that are also present in several of his piano works.

¹⁴ Prokofiev, *Sergei Prokofiev: Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences*, 28.

¹⁵ Prokofiev, *Prokofiev by Prokofiev: a composer's memoir*, 280.

The Composer-Pianist: Concert Reviews and Recordings

The investigation on the characteristics of Prokofiev's own playing would be incomplete without resorting to the invaluable recordings and concert reviews of his own performances, particularly made during his time in America from 1918. This period was especially noteworthy for Prokofiev's ten-year association with the Aeolian Company and the Duo-Art reproducing piano. The first contract was signed in the beginning of 1919, for a total duration of 5 years, and bound to record a minimum of five rolls per year. This came to be a very significant means of financial subsistence to Prokofiev in those days, since he was to be paid \$250 per roll (nearly worth \$3400 nowadays).¹⁶ Only seventeen rolls have survived until today from this first contract, some of which were not published during his lifetime.

At the time, the Duo-Art was one of the most successful systems in terms of accuracy, as note values were recorded with great precision. However, the dynamics could not be recorded in real time, and they would have to be manually input during the editing process. The subjective nature of this process required close work and communication between the company and the performer to guarantee the desired outcome. As evinced in correspondence from the first four years of this contract, Prokofiev was involved in the editing of his rolls on a regular basis. For the company, he recorded some of his own works, and also music from other Russian composers, including Rachmaninoff, Glazunov, Scriabin, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and also from his great friend Miaskovsky. These rolls constitute the earliest available recordings of Prokofiev's authentic interpretations, and several inferences could be made from the analysis on his playing. From this set of rolls, his performance of Scriabin's Prelude Op.45 No.3 and Winged Poem Op.51 no.3, recorded in 1922, displays very limited nuances in the dynamic range, which are kept on the louder side of the spectrum. As a consequence, the voicing is unclear and almost imperceptible.

¹⁶ "Calculate the value of \$1.00 in 1920" *DollarTimes*. Accessed May 8, 2020.
<https://www.dollartimes.com/inflation/inflation.php?amount=1&year=1920>

It is important to note that these recordings are finished products that passed the editing process under the supervision of Prokofiev himself. Interestingly, the quality of his tone in these recordings was observed by Frank Dawes under the following terms: “The piano was used percussively long before Prokofiev, of course, but he was largely responsible, through his own music and playing, for a new kind of percussiveness based on sheer piano pounding than on a brittle, sharp attack producing effects comparable in their sphere to the dry orchestral scoring of Stravinsky”.¹⁷ These characteristics pertaining his playing are also supported in several reviews of his concerts. One of the most weighty and progressive reviews was of Prokofiev’s Manhattan solo debut on November 20th 1918 at the Aeolian Hall, made by Richard Aldrich of the *New York Times*, who mentioned that his playing “had too little gradation, but that I [Prokofiev] had ‘steel fingers, steel wrists, steel biceps and triceps’”¹⁸. It also mentioned the “tremendous rhythmic urge”, “special aptitude in the performance of double notes, octaves and chords taken at a dizzy tempo”¹⁹, and his orchestral style in which “the instruments of percussion rule in his Scythian drama”.²⁰ Later in May 1922, another review of his Parisian debut as a pianist, with his performance of his Third Piano Concerto under the baton of Koussevitzky, praised Prokofiev’s execution for the clarity and precision in his somewhat dry playing, filled with superb freedom.²¹

In essence, the composer and the performer within Prokofiev’s persona are interdependent. The interpretation of the unique technical elements found in his piano music call for an understanding of the strong association between the creative persona and the musical

¹⁷ Frank Dawes, “Piano Recital by Serge Prokofiev” *The Musical Times*, April, 1968, accessed May 8, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/953213>

¹⁸ Stephen Press, “I Came Too Soon: Prokofiev’s Early Career in America” in *Prokofiev and His World*, rev. ed., edited by Simon Morrison (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.), 340.

¹⁹ Guillaumier, “From piano to stage: a genealogy of musical ideas in the piano works of Sergei Prokofiev (1900- c.1920)”, 84.

²⁰ Press, “Prokofiev’s Early Career in America” in *Prokofiev and His World*, 340.

²¹ B. De Schloezer, “La musique en France et à l’étranger. [Section] Les concerts p.159”. *La Revue musicale*, May 1, 1922, accessed May 8, 2020, <https://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=14&sid=11479856-40b9-4859-9406-9451ee0e7bce%40sdc-v-sessmgr03&bdata=JmF0aGVucy5hc3Amc2l0ZTl1aG9zdC1saXZlJnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#AN=REV001033&db=rip>

purpose. This does not only encompass the evaluation of Prokofiev's own pianistic proficiency based on his educational background, recordings and concert reviews, but also the inspirations and driving forces behind the writing of his oeuvre, which are fundamentally linked to the character of his music. Prokofiev's early musical experiments from his Juvenilia are the resonations of his wunderkind status, as they are strikingly reflective of this connection between inspiration and musical character. From a broader outlook, it is very interesting if one analyses his choice of titles for the vast majority of his pieces from this period. Since they appear to be intrinsically articulated with their respective musical content, these titles seem to fall under two concrete typologies.

In the first one, the genre title, the representation of conventional musical forms are clearly intended, as experimental exercises to articulate the established forms under his developmental idiom, still at embryonic state. The second, is the representation of a certain mood or temperament, either through reiteration of common tempo designations for performance (*Allegretto*, *Vivo*, and *Lento*, to mention a few) or definition of extra-musical ideas in itself, more distinctive in his 'character pieces'. The piano pieces performed by Prokofiev at his debut at the Evenings of Contemporary Music in 1908 fit in this category to perfection: 'Tale', 'Snow', 'Reminiscences', 'Elan', 'Imploring Requests', 'Despair', and the famous 'Suggestion diabolique' from his Op.4. The vast majority of his unpublished early experiments had been produced before this time, in a period spanning from his five years of age when Prokofiev composed his first piece *Indian Galop*, nearly up until his Free Artist Diploma graduation. Prokofiev elucidated later on the inspiration behind that initial musical outpouring: "As it happened, there was a famine in India in those days, and the adults read about it in the newspapers and discussed it while I listened".²² His innate attentiveness to what was adjacent to him was developed within his upbringing, sourcing his musical inspirations from active observation or external intervention. These mainly include the early musical connections through his mother's piano practice at home, the contact with the important dramatic element

²² Prokofiev, *Prokofiev by Prokofiev: a composer's memoir*, 14.

from his regular attendance to the opera in Moscow, and the stimulation of his literary interests through his father's instigation of reading habits on him. These elements were inevitably transported to his experiments at the piano, and did not leave him for once, only to be transformed by his evolving creativity.

The Piano Music: In Movements and Lines

From his autobiographical writings, Prokofiev's explanation of the five principles that clarify and qualify the musical trends in his works constitute a point of departure for the formulation of interpretative advice. In essence, the composer argued about the fundamental five 'lines' or trends that underline his oeuvre: classical, modern, motoric, lyrical and 'grotesque'. This investigation on the characteristic features of his piano oeuvre will refer to 'horizontal' and 'vertical' movements as conceptual definitions for the summarisation of the different kinetics involved in the analysis and performance of the musical speech. These movements will also be analysed in relation to the composer's lines mentioned above. Horizontal movement should be understood to pertain the relationship between other interdependent musical features, such as formal structure and phrasal length, and the performer's approach to melody and agogic rhythm. As for vertical movement, it should comprehend harmonic features and chordal progressions as foundations that relate to rhythm and texture.

Relating back to Prokofiev's articulation, the musical elements concerning horizontal movement appropriate the classical and lyrical trends in his music. The classical principle does not refer back to the musical idiom of the Classicism or the First Viennese School, but rather to Prokofiev's use of neoclassical musical forms. The employment of established forms has a consequent impact on phrasal length, which frequently displays uniformity and meter regularity, in opposition to the long and never-ending phrases that were so desired in the egotistic outpourings of the Romanticism. His music tends to feature binary length predominantly, or

multiples of two, preserving some sort of the primitive simplicity of the musical speech, as shown in Examples 1 and 2. The neoclassical quest for simplicity happened as a natural urge from the aversion of the Romantic musical trends, even though the pursued musical primitivism took individual routes in accordance to different compositional minds, such as those of Prokofiev and Stravinsky. The predominance of binary length affects the performer's interpretative approach to the line. The identification of the beginnings and ends of musical phrases is of great importance to acquire a sense of unity in the overall architecture of Prokofiev's works.

The musical searches of this time enriched the musical vocabulary in ways of defining cultural and national identity, most effectively done through implementation of national folk music. Fairy tales were a recurrent theme in the Russian culture, and became central in inspiring



Example 1. The primitivism within the left hand ostinato, and the binary phrasal length in his Phantom Op.3.



Example 2. Second theme in Prokofiev's 2nd Piano Concerto, 4th movement. The folk-nature of this melody resembles some of the pieces in Mussorgsky's *Pictures of an Exhibition*.

the melodic nature of the Russian music of the twentieth century, including Prokofiev's oeuvre. His affinity for his Russian culture and language resides at the heart of his music. His vocal and operatic output are illustrative of this. The vast majority of the librettos for his operas were written in Russian by himself, and often inspired by important Russian authors and novelists. Folk music is closely embedded in the culture, words and language of a nation, and consequently, a facilitating element in the drawing of melodies from the Russian linguistics and phonetics that were so close to Prokofiev. This is not only reflected directly in his vocal music, but the sound of the language can be translated into his instrumental music as well.

On the topic of horizontal movement, it is important to clarify Prokofiev's own perception of lyricism in his musical trend, which is defined in his own words as follows: "a thoughtful and meditative mood".²³ This well-pondered expression objects to the Romantic affections for brilliancy and singularity of the vocal line, cultured within the desired *bel canto* technique, and presupposes an intersection between the horizontal and vertical movements in the characterisation of lyricism. In other words, the interaction of other musical elements in a certain melodic idea have an essential role in the evocation of a more expressive musical

²³ Prokofiev, *Sergei Prokofiev: Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences*, 36.

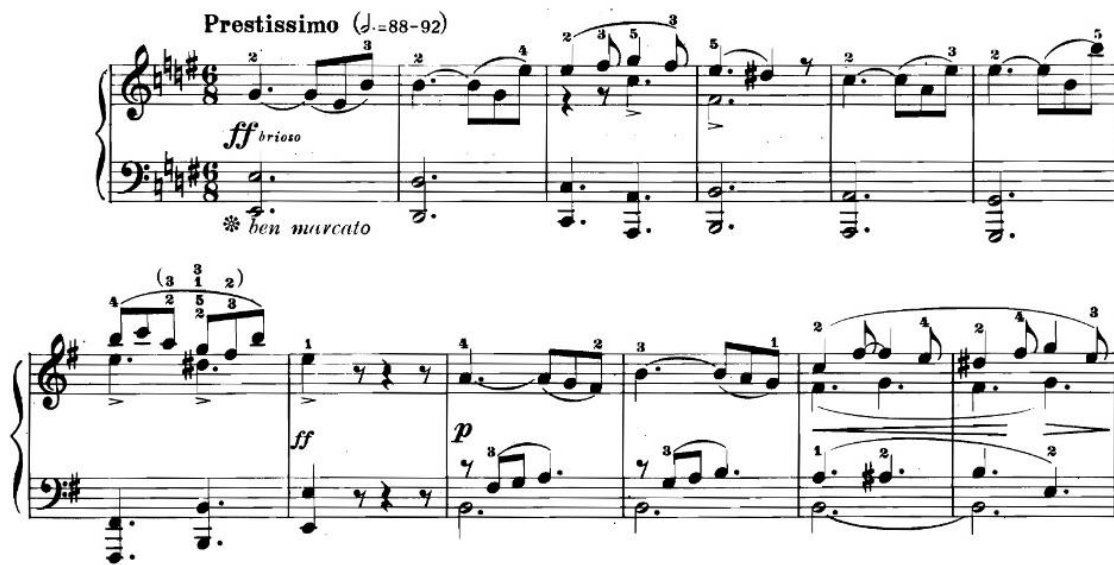
outcome. After further investigation and analysis of the musical scores of his piano music, one can claim with a substantial degree of certainty that Prokofiev's understanding of his lyrical line is also reinforced by his rich use of vocabulary in performance directions. Generically written in Italian, a vast number of them reveal a clear adjectival instruction, establishing an association between tempo and character. This feature is also relevant to the directions given at the beginning of his works, in which Prokofiev often follows a construction pattern commonly found in Beethoven's markings in his later piano works: a tempo indication, followed by an instruction for expression and mood. Indeed, the Beethovenian influence on Prokofiev musicality came very early on through his mother's playing of Beethoven sonatas, which she did "more than anything else", as he recalls in his autobiographical writing.²⁴ This musical exposure had also been reported during Glière's piano lessons in Sontsovka. On another important autobiographical remark, Prokofiev mentions that "the former's [Beethoven] influence was permanent and the latter's [Chopin] incidental."²⁵



Example 3. The similarity between Prokofiev's Elan Op. 4 no. 2 and 2nd movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 109.

²⁴ Prokofiev, Prokofiev by Prokofiev: a composer's memoir, 13.

²⁵ Prokofiev, Prokofiev by Prokofiev: a composer's memoir, 62.



Example 4. Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op.109, 2nd movement.

The terminology used in Prokofiev's performance directions is ample, rich and can be highly descriptive. In the collection of the instructions used in his piano works, some of them do stand out in number by a large margin. These appear repeatedly associated with the lyrical strand of his music, within the calmer and contemplative mood. *Espressivo*, *dolce*, *legato*, *tranquillo* and *semplice* are amongst the most recurrent indications, or derived from these expressions. Other less frequent indications related to melody include *cantabile*, *brillante*, *con eleganza*, *delicato*, *narrante*, *lamentevole* and *caloroso*. It is noticeable that Prokofiev does not limit his vocabularic range to the standardly-used musical instructions, on a pursuit to explore the adjectival terminology that communicates most effectively the envisioned musical outcome. Besides the composer's directions, Prokofiev's use of articulation is very clear on this aspect, and evidences his pianism and knowledge of the mechanics of the instrument. In his melodies, the slur markings are crucially indicative of expressive melodic contours, and are often accompanied by the direction of *legato*. However, the meaning of these markings should be carefully drawn from the character of a certain section or passage. Outside the lyrical trend, the slur may not imply *legato* playing, but an illusory sense of connection of single notes or gestures, allowing for a more pianistic approach of specific technical elements. In the same way, other melodic contours may be apparent to the performer, yet the evaluation of the character in

conjunction to a close adherence to Prokofiev's markings is essential towards performative authenticity of the composer's meanings and intentions.



Example 5. March Op.3: The slur portrays the 'swelling effect', prescribing the use of pedal in the physical impossibility of true *legato* playing.

Prokofiev's modern trend should be understood with duality if one comes back to his own words: "Although this line covers harmonic language mainly, it also includes new departures in melody, orchestration and drama".²⁶ Indeed, the composer had come across new approaches to the musical elements in his idiomatic search. As such, Prokofiev's melodies had also developed alongside the evolving harmonic sphere, even though the melodic features only came to reach full development and maturity much later in his works.

On the other side, the vertical movement is essentially related to the modern trend, which concerns the foundation and distinctiveness of his harmonic use, and motoric trend. As mentioned before, the beginning of Prokofiev's harmonic journey traces back to his attentiveness to the musical vanguards through the Evenings of Contemporary music, his response to the conservative tendencies he was exposed to during his education, which translated into a desire to find a unique way "to express powerful emotions"²⁷. Finally, it was certainly the expansion and development of his harmonic devices that originated the strong divergent opinions and reactions to his music during his life. Yet, it is noticeable the

²⁶ Prokofiev, Sergei Prokofiev: Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences, 36.

²⁷ Prokofiev, Sergei Prokofiev: Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences, 36.

preservation of the neoclassical roots within his language, a fact that is most evident in the several eighteenth-century dance forms that Prokofiev used, such as the allemande and gavotte. The manifestation of conventional tonal principles is still preserved within formal structure. The inherent tension and resolution is particularly felt in cadence points, maintaining the strong tonal relationship between the tonic and dominant chords (perfect cadence) and the tonic and subdominant (plagal cadence).



Example 6. The tonal rooting in the beginning his Allemande from Op.12.

The harmonic uniqueness resides mainly on Prokofiev's realisation of the power of the chromaticism, which often plays a fundamental role in the underlying structure of his works, and a succeeding transformation of orthodox harmonic devices from that principle. Its deployment results in a progressive dialect of discording and "dissonant sound effects", which ironically digressed from (and within) the tonal conventions of Western classical music.



Example 7. The underlying chromaticism in Prokofiev's Story Op.3 No.1.

Again, the performance directions provide important guidance in establishing a cohesive relationship between harmony and character, evinced in the abundance of composer's theatrical lexicon: *misterioso*, *serioso*, *penseroso*, *fantastico*, *fastoso*, *religioso*, *singhiozzando*, among many others. While the close observance and contextual evaluation of these instructions are an essential interpretative necessity, Prokofiev invites the performer of his works to welcome dissonance in the same way that he did while performing Schoenberg's music: "And the strange thing was that the more my ears became accustomed to the discordances the less I felt them, and the music appeared to me wholly and irreproachably admirable; whenever and occasional consonant harmony appeared in place of the expected dissonance, it struck my ears as an equivalent dissonance".²⁸

Prokofiev might have considered the motoric trend to be the "least important" among his musical trends²⁹, but it is certainly paramount in the discussion of the technical and interpretative components of his piano works. This principle is descriptive of a very precise musical idea that is recurrent in his piano oeuvre, and emphatically demonstrative of the

²⁸ Sergei Prokofiev, ed. *Diaries 1907 – 1914: Prodigious Youth* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008.), 215.

²⁹ Prokofiev, Sergei Prokofiev: Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences, 36.

physicality in Prokofiev's playing. The importance of movement shines in this realm, particularly through the composer's use of dance forms, found throughout his entire oeuvre including his orchestral suites and ballet music.

Due to its characteristic virtuosic display, the motoric trend encompasses the musical components that most staggeringly impress the listener of Prokofiev's music. It expresses itself in the form of a *toccata*, characterised by its rapid *tempi*, the use of a rhythmic ostinato of unwavering pulsation, which often translates into a constant release of energy in *moto perpetuo*. This style was revived in the twentieth century by many other composers³⁰, contextualising its original essence of showmanship of dexterity and virtuosity into their own language and technical writing. Within Prokofiev's output, there is a preference for the technical elements that belonged to his own pianistic strengths. Scalar ostinatos of running notes are extensively used in light textures, often requiring *non legato* touch for speed and agility. The streams of arpeggios, rapid scalar eruptions, and *glissandi* are often used with the purpose of creating powerful explosive sounds and surging effects, and commonly supported by directions such as *precipitato*, *brioso* and *con effetto*.

Other elements include Prokofiev's predilection for parallel movement of chords, double thirds, double sixths and mainly octave sequences, which not only purpose a dazzling effect but also constitute an important rhythmic driver. His construction of parallel chords frequently displays melodic contours, usually in one of the outer voices, and supported by the repetition of pitch in the remaining. These melodic gestures are recurrently moulded by consecutive adjacent pitches, often chromatically organised, and provide direction to the music speech rather than a display of lyricism. The incorporation of big leaps and jumps belongs also to Prokofiev's brand of virtuosity, functioning as a heightening device of drama and powerfulness in his technical style.

³⁰ John Caldwell, "Toccata (It., from toccare: 'to touch')", Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed May 8, 2020. <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000028035?rkey=s5EvHN&result=1>

Regarding its musical outcome, the term motoric is self-explanatory: it is active and inhumanly power-driven. Interestingly, these sections associated with this musical trend display sparse use of performance directions, in opposition to the more lyrical episodes which definitely receive more attention from the composer. Coming back to the previously mentioned quantitative analysis of his indications, this fact is not surprising since the most abundant performance directions in his piano music comprise expressive and tender instructions, justifying Prokofiev's enhanced treatment of his lyricism. Perhaps this lack of indications in the tempestuous episodes also reflects Prokofiev's subtle understatement of this trend.

In further analysis, the composer tends to limit these instructions exclusively to both sudden or gradual dynamic and *tempi* changes markings. The sudden dynamic changes are frequently employed for dramatic heightening, while the intended *tempi* fluctuations serve to ease off the mechanic drive at specific points. Some of the less recurrent *tempo* markings work with this purpose, giving fuller command to the performer regarding agogic freedom, such as *rubato* and *ad libitum*. In his lexicon, the prolific use of adverbial expressions such as *senza*, *poco*, *pochissimo*, *assai*, *molto*, *meno*, *non* and *sempre* really demonstrate Prokofiev's engagement in attempting to detail the intended musical characteristics in different degrees of their own spectrum. His approach to *tempo* fall under these lines, as the markings are employed with precision in specific sections throughout the music, and reveal the composer's effort in the clarity of his instructions.

Inevitably, the physicality involved in Prokofiev's technical world encompasses many performative demands, not only in dealing with the bodily tension in the playing of the several technical elements mentioned above, but also in the conveyance of the music resultant of an alliance between the brain, fingers and the remarkable body composure that Prokofiev did exhibit in his performances.³¹ Rhythm is the binding element in the performance of motoric

³¹ Prokofiev, "Prokofiev on film" (video and audio extracts), posted April 9, 2018, accessed May 8, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkRS8hPgn5k>

traits. Its almost inflexible continuity should be approached with control and security, and as such, *tempo* should be attentively observed with objectivity.

The Final Principal: Imagination, Narrative and Orchestration

This paper asserts that several analytical features of Prokofiev's music effect its own character. It is in the core priority of his compositional process to draw his imagery into music. From very early on, Prokofiev understood that music and dramatic text could be merged into a single cooperative unit, as he showed a natural necessity to attempt on a genre that met all the desired requirements for their conciliation: the opera. From the music to libretto writing, it is within his operatic output that Prokofiev pours out his love for stage and theatre in its utmost openness. Consequently, it is also in this genre that the themes that cross his imagery become most alive in words, which describe the conflictive meaning of the recurrently attributed 'grotesque' quality³². In the discussion of these themes, the subversion of the expected for bigger dramatic effect is one important feature that is already brought up in *The Giant*, when the King, in a tragic Shakespearian manner, commits suicide after proclaiming his inability to fight the colossal creature.

Aside from the favoured violent ends, the supernatural allusions are persistent throughout his operas (*The Giant*, *Fiery Angel*, *Love for Three Oranges*, et al.). Other regular subjects include death, love, religion, corruption, and hysteria. Curiously, Prokofiev's female role in his earlier operas gains a powerful leading dimension that joins up all these symbols: Maddalena (Op.13) and Renata (Op.37) are similar epitomes of evil, trickery and deceit that entirely control and conquer the course of the storyline. The characteristic fascination for these esoteric themes was heavily exploited by the composers of the Romanticism, but they were also subverted by Prokofiev's humour. The distorted employment of the word 'grotesque' derives

³² Prokofiev, Sergei Prokofiev: Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences, 37.

from the overwhelmed reactions of obnoxiousness produced by the strong artistic content, which completely overlooked the comedy and mockery that it also emanates. The witty and the unpleasant are deeply intertwined, and these two sides are also echoed in his performance directions: on the former, (*il baso*) *tenebroso, serio, dolente, lugubre*; on the latter, *ironico, ridicolosamente, fastoso* and *singhiozzando*, to mention a few.

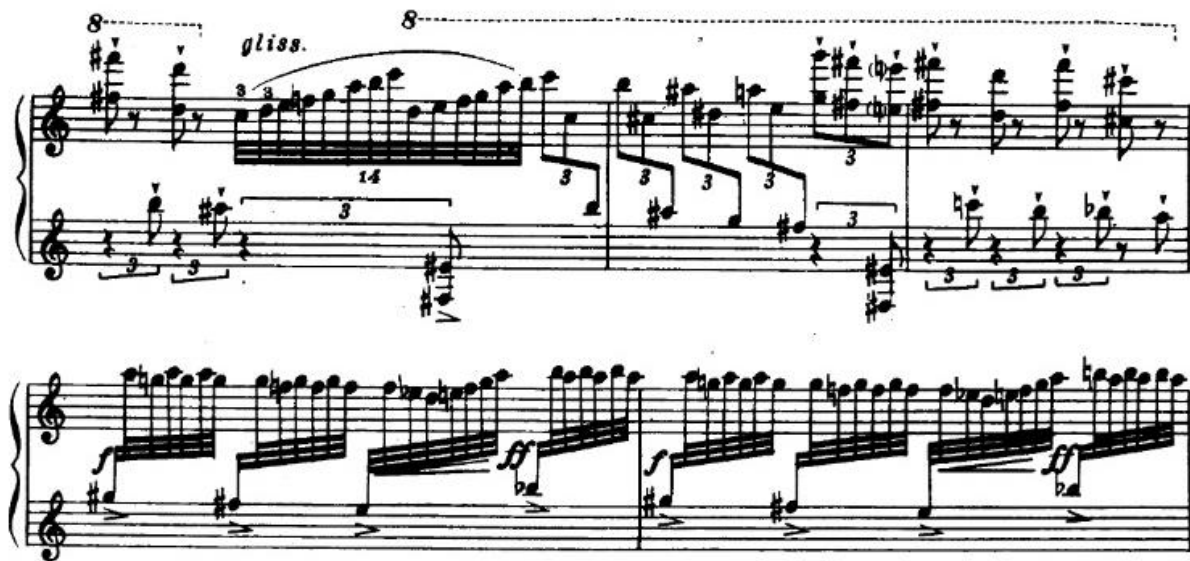
The investigation of the elements reflected within Prokofiev's musical trends also become unified within the crucial considerations on texture. In his pianistic output, one can unmistakably identify the presence of orchestral thought in his writing, which is supported by instructions such as *quasi timpani* or *quasi tromba*.

In his operas, Prokofiev's use of instrumentation is mostly subservient to the course of the dramatic narration. In moments of storyline progression, it can function as sparse accompaniment composed by short outbursts of motives or single chords. Expressive mood depiction of single characters receives a more abundant textural treatment. The alternation between these two narration modes can be very fast, particularly when short side thoughts and commentaries interrupt its progression in rather abounding musical gestures. This shifting aspect is felt in the variable function of the strings and woodwind: repetitive ostinato figures and short ornamentation in lower registers support advancement in the text, while the melodic prominence in the higher registers are preferred in suspended expressive moments. Woodwinds colouristic range is also well exploited as connective tissue between textures, and are often assigned individually to represent specific characters. Surely that this feature comes back to the strong influence of Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestration teachings at the conservatoire, particularly evident if one listens back to Prokofiev's piano arrangement of his tutors' *Scheherazade*³³. Brass instruments play an important role as announcers of conflict and drama in emphatic moments, often with sharp rhythmic outbursts or *pesante* bass structures.

Some of these compositional elements are also present in his orchestral and instrumental music, and the composer's textural preferences become relevant to interpretation

³³ Sergey Prokofiev, "Prokofiev plays Scheherazade" (audio recording), uploaded January 24, 2008, accessed May 17, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsBum-sQvJY>.

when one establishes comparisons between his orchestral music and solo piano works. For example, one common textural idea comes across in the very beginning of *Scythian Suite*, and also his *Third Symphony*, expressed in the strident fast rhythmic ostinatos of the strings in higher registers, often harmonically grounded by loud bass structures in lower brass. The resulted hysterical percussiveness can be seen in the examples below extracted from his Sixth and Eighth Piano Sonatas.



Example 8. The strident effect of trills and glissandi in his Sixth Piano Sonata.



Example 9. The maniac persistence of the ostinato in his Eighth Piano Sonata.

Allegro feroce.

The score is for the beginning of the Scythian Suite, marked 'Allegro feroce.' It features two systems of staves. The first system includes parts for Flauto piccolo, 3 Flauti, 3 Oboi, Oboe contralto, 3 Clarinetti, Clarinetto basso, 3 Fagotti, and Contra-Fagotto. The second system includes Violini I, Violini II, Viole, Violoncelli, and Contrabassi. The woodwind parts (Flauto piccolo, Flauti, Oboi, Oboe contralto, Clarinetti, Clarinetto basso, Fagotti, and Contra-Fagotto) play a complex, rhythmic melody in the upper register, characterized by frequent chromaticism and rapid sixteenth-note passages. The string parts (Violini I, Violini II, Viole, Violoncelli, and Contrabassi) provide a harmonic and rhythmic foundation, often playing sustained chords or moving lines that complement the woodwind texture.

Example 10. At the very beginning of his Scythian Suite, string and woodwind sections show the rhythmic interplay that forms continuous repetition in high registers.

Similarly, the already-discussed toccata texture constitutes a typical preference, identified in numerous of his works. Interestingly, its density varies greatly according to the number of layers in the polyphonic content.

The score shows a climatic point in Toccata Op. 11. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system features a dense, chromatic texture with rapid sixteenth-note passages in both the treble and bass staves. The second system continues this texture, with the bass staff showing a particularly dense and chromatic line. The overall effect is one of intense rhythmic and harmonic activity, characteristic of a toccata texture.

Example 11. Climatic point in Toccata Op. 11. Again, the chromaticism as an important contributor in the textural development.

V-ni I
div.in 3

V-ni II
div.in 3

V-la
div.in 3

V-c.
div.in 3

C-b.

arco pizz. arco

Example 12. The toccata element in the 3rd movement of his Third Symphony, and the resulting ghostly effect.

Another one of Prokofiev's characteristic textures lies at the heart of his martial music, compounded by a strictly rhythmic bass in undivided beats, in simple two-time or four-time meter. The character of the bass line dictates the character of the march. It may again be a sparse accompaniment of short and soft strokes under a more colouristic instrumentation (March from *The Love for Three Oranges*, symphonic suite and piano transcription), or it may acquire a loud

Tempo di Marcia

Example 13. Sparse accompaniment in the March from *Love for Three Oranges* (piano transcription).

and brassy *pesante* quality (Dance of the Knights from *Romeo and Juliet*, ballet and piano transcription).



Example 14. The *pesante* martial quality in Dance of the Knights from *Romeo and Juliet* (piano transcription).

The interpretation of Prokofiev's piano oeuvre meets the different stages in the evolution of his own pianism. This paper concludes that the physical gesture is at the centre of his compositional drive, which traces back to his initial contact with the instrument. The harmonic endeavours result as a consequence of several important factors: his musical exposure and education as a child; his subsequent musical judgement of what was inspiring to him or not; and finally, the necessity to find an individual language that was effective in the reactionary stimulation of the listener. In the same way, the interpretation of his music should aim for this effectiveness, prioritising the character that is often verbally expressed in the score. Ultimately, the performer should be a vehicle of these 'temperaments', not only through his understanding but also through their own musical engagement.

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