



**Prokofiev: Fingers of Steel**  
**Professor Marina Frolova-Walker**

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Prokofiev the Pianist

Prokofiev's two careers of composer and concert pianist were tightly entangled up until the last decade of his life. He premiered all his significant piano works through to the Sixth Sonata in 1940. He attained international fame through the performance of his own piano concertos and through his solo piano recitals, which featured his own works alongside other music. His pianist innovations also had repercussions for his evolving compositional style in general.

Prokofiev was a beneficiary of the comprehensive and highly developed Russian musical education system, and he was able to graduate from St Petersburg Conservatoire not only as a composer but also as a pianist and conductor. For the piano, he studied with the internationally renowned Chopinist Anna Yesipova (Esipoff).

*"Prokofiev has only assimilated my method to a limited degree. He is very talented, but rather crude."*

Anna Yesipova

Despite her reservations, she took pride in his early successes as a pianist-composer and even assisted in the editing of his First Piano Sonata. His incipient modernism was still more at odds with Glazunov, the great symphonist, but even he acknowledged Prokofiev's pianistic abilities:

*"An original virtuoso of a new kind with original technique, he tries to produce effects that are often beyond the piano's capabilities, often at the expense of beauty of tone."*

Alexander Glazunov, then the Director of the Conservatoire

According to Prokofiev himself, the great highlight of his early career was his graduation performance as a pianist, when he premiered his own First Piano Concerto. This was an unprecedented and risky step, since the examiners' opinion of the piece was liable to cloud their judgement of the quality of the playing. To boost his credibility, Prokofiev managed to have his concerto published in advance of the exam and provided each of the examiners with a freshly printed copy. Prokofiev's Diary contains an extensive and highly amusing account of his success (he won the concerto competition with the prize of a grand piano). Here are some brief excerpts:

*"Will my Concerto be my salvation or my doom? Will the judges be repelled by its dissonant harmonies, or will they, on the contrary, be stunned by its brilliance and ardour? Perhaps it would be better, while there is still time, to choose another work? No, I still think that I will succeed in giving it the kind of performance that will stun the jury, and that is the route to victory. In any case it will be a first: no one in the history of the St Petersburg Conservatoire has ever graduated performing his own concerto."*

*We have all listened to your Concerto and come to a decision that it is not in principle an appropriate work for you to perform for your examination, since it is difficult and unsuitable work on which to judge you as a performer. However, in view of the fact that you will not now*

*have time to prepare an alternative concerto, the committee recommends that you perform the Tannhäuser transcription from your recital programme, and following that, your Concerto”.*

*Overall, the performance achieved a rare success, and when it finished there was a terrific uproar with applause and booing...*

*Glazunov was so distressed by the result that he did not want to announce it...*

*Yes, it was indeed a triumph for me, all the sweeter for having been achieved in my beloved Conservatoire, and even more so in that it represented not the pat on the head proper to a model student, but on the contrary the striking out of a new path, my own path, which I had established in defiance of routine and the examination traditions of the Conservatoire.”*

Prokofiev’s Diary, 1914

Prokofiev’s fresh, irreverent and energetic “anti-Romantic” pianism won over the Paris audience a few years later, in the early 1920s. The initial impulse to his European career came from Diaghilev, with the commission of the ballet *Chout*, premiered in 1921, but Prokofiev’s advocacy of his own concertos (the First, Third, and then the revised Second) attracted still more attention, and he could even be credited with revitalising the piano concerto as a vehicle for modernism, prompting responses from Stravinsky, Ravel, Poulenc and many others.

Throughout his émigré years (1918-35), Prokofiev made his living chiefly through his work as a touring concert pianist, and this, together with the much greater time spent in practice, soaked up time that he would have preferred to devote to composition. This is one of the reasons why the invitation to return to the Soviet Union was so attractive to him: he was assured that he would make a good living solely from his compositions, with no obligation to continue performing. Prokofiev still took on international engagements as a performer, to maintain his international prestige, but this came to a halt with the outbreak of the Second World War. He had hoped to resume his tours after the War, but the Soviet authorities never allowed him to leave the country again. There were very capable Soviet pianists eager to play his music, with Sviatoslav Richter foremost among them, so Prokofiev felt no further need to perform as a pianist.

### Enfant Terrible

Prokofiev’s early piano works, such as the Sonata No. 2, the *Suggestion diabolique*, and the *Sarcasms* caused much consternation among the Russian critics:

*“A modest single-movement sonata by Mr Prokofiev makes a pleasant impression as his Opus 1. ... Unfortunately, after this successful start in his compositional career, Mr Prokofiev seems to have fallen prey to ultra-modernist trends in contemporary music, and as a result his Op. 3 is already a piece that hails from the fourth dimension.”*

Russian Musical Gazette, 1913

*“In the Sonata [No.2], only the first movement and the Scherzo observe proprieties, while the Andante and the Finale are wild orgies of harmonic incongruities...”*

Russian Musical Gazette, 1914

*“The Second Sonata... leaves the listener frustrated. Prokofiev’s youthful talent is, in essence, healthy, but it has been thoroughly warped, placed within the clutches of modernism.”*

Russian Musical Gazette, 1914

*“Prokofiev’s pieces left a revolting impression – they are like a hideous tumour on the body of Russian music... The most vivid aspect of the pieces is their rhythm, which tyrannically stifles all the other elements of his artistic imagination. ... In melody, the music is pale, often primitive and clichéd, while in harmony, it is like a crazy quilt of patches that don’t match... But rhythm itself in Prokofiev, despite its colour and force, is anti-aesthetic: it has something of the barbarism of savage tribes, something repulsive in its lack of artistic taste and intuition.”*  
Russian Musical Gazette, 1917

But alongside these detractors, there was a growing number of supportive critics. They saw Prokofiev as a representative of a new age, dynamic and unsentimental, and they drew their metaphors from industry or sport, rather than the usual Romantic imagery of nature and sentiment. They also noticed his keen wit:

*“In Prokofiev we have a fertile humourist of the calibre that Russian music has not known since Musorgsky. But in the Sarcasms, his humour is mixed with a good portion of Mephistophelian mockery.”*  
Russian Musical Gazette, 1917

The Sonata No. 2 (1912) exemplified this break with the past: the first movement, starting with a somewhat Romantic theme, is cut off in bar 8 by a loud and dissonant outburst. A sense of irreverent humour dominates all but the slow movement, which is lyrical but sober – it does not wear its heart on its sleeve (it falls into Prokofiev’s category of the “fairy tale” piece, which created an air of storytelling and “old times”). The tarantella opening of the Finale gives way to more demotic music that suggests music hall or street songs. When Prokofiev began touring abroad, a little later, critics who had never heard such music struggled to describe it and fell back on national stereotypes. In 1918, Prokofiev quotes from one American reviewer, who thought he heard in this Finale “a herd of mammoths charging across an Asian steppe”.

However, novel it may have seemed to some critics, Prokofiev’s early modernist style had its precedents. Scriabin was an important influence, although his mysticism was not shared by Prokofiev. The influence of the very early modernist experimental composer, Vladimir Rebikov, was also useful for Prokofiev, and the expert piano writing of Nikolai Medtner helped, even if it was less overtly modernist. Prokofiev was also very much aware of Stravinsky from the outset, but this composer only became a more overt influence a few years later.

### In and Out of Fashion

Prokofiev was largely oblivious to politics and kept himself focused on artistic matters. Since he was not a combatant, he saw the First World War, and then the revolutions of 1917 mainly as obstacles to the furtherance of his career. He had plans to collaborate with Diaghilev in Paris, but this was perpetually postponed as the years of conflict rolled on. Finally, in 1918, he left Russia, not as an escaping refugee, but with a permit from the new Soviet authorities. Heading for the United States, he travelled eastward, through Siberia to the Pacific coast, crossing to Japan and then the Philippines (under U.S. control). He gave concerts in both countries, raising sufficient funds to board a liner across the Pacific to his destination. Rachmaninoff had already established himself in the U.S., and since Prokofiev could not compete on equal terms with this great virtuoso, he created his own niche by giving recitals that mixed standard repertoire with his own music, alongside other recent pieces, and this won him some success. Through his performances, he also built up a reputation as a significant composer, inspiring enough confidence to secure himself a premiere (in Chicago) for his opera *Love for Three Oranges*.

Prokofiev had not forgotten his old ambitions of joining Diaghilev's circle in Paris. And so, though the 1920s, he made Paris his base, although he made frequent tours around Europe and also back to the U.S. (which was more lucrative).

*"I am weary of wrong notes, of Schoenberg, and all that is "modern". At the premiere of your Third Concerto in Paris, when I told you I loved the piece, you seemed to be taken aback. I was happy precisely because you cultivated "the perfect triad", with simple harmony and pared-down melodic writing."*

Francis Poulenc to Prokofiev in 1923

After the first Paris successes (mentioned above), Prokofiev realised that he was doomed to permanent rivalry with Stravinsky, and would often have to take second place, not just within Diaghilev's enterprises, but in the French music world as a whole. Stravinsky was the main trendsetter there, and he chided Prokofiev for his old-fashioned reliance on melody and his overfondness for tonality. It is often forgotten, both East and West, that Prokofiev was one of the leading figures in this French music world, and he both set and followed trends. There was "**machine music**", best known through Arthur Honegger's Pacific 231, an orchestral representation of the sounds of an express train, but the style extended to any imitation of repetitive industrial noise. Prokofiev's prior love for an ostinato-based toccata style was easily adapted to the purpose. The dominant trend in Paris, however, was **neoclassicism**. Prokofiev had already written his "Classical Symphony" in 1917, and one might think that this would place him as the leader of any neoclassical movement. Instead, Stravinsky's rather different approach in several pieces written in the following years established the techniques and character of the trend. Stravinsky, in effect, had "patented" neoclassicism and turned it into the dominant European school of composition, whereas Prokofiev had only seen it as a light diversion or occasional resource. Prokofiev was now caught between the opposite attractions of complexity and simplicity. The only piano sonata of his Paris years, No. 5, illustrates the conflict perfectly, since it contains moments of chromatic complexity together with neoclassical serenity in the form of Alberti-type accompaniment patterns as well as the minuet genre underpinning the middle movement.

Towards the end of the 20s, the "**new simplicity**" finally prevailed. Curiously enough, this was likely due, at least in part, to Prokofiev's adherence to the movement of "Christian Science", which held the material world to be an illusion. This connection is not merely a matter of speculation, since Prokofiev explicitly connected two piano pieces of the time to his new-found faith: the pieces are entitled *Choses en soi*, they are both in C major and have a certain abstract character to them, avoiding obvious genres that would pin them down to earthly concerns. In general, his music from the late 1920s and early 30s often assumes a more "objective" tone, although here we should not exclude the parallel influence of Stravinsky's anti-expressive aesthetic.

*"If God is the unique source of creation and of reason, and man is his reflection, it is abundantly clear that the works of man will be better the more closely they reflect the works of the Creator (in other words the nearer they come to him). I must unflaggingly hold on to this thought all the time I am working. One should not work unless one feels oneself to be sufficiently pure."*

Diary, 1928

### Back in the USSR

Prokofiev's first return to Soviet Russia was in 1927, when he was invited to give a concert tour there. He was overwhelmed by the warmth of the reception he received, and this encouraged him to undertake further over the following decade. As we have already seen, he re-emigrated in 1936, and made Moscow his new base. We have seen that one of the factors in Prokofiev's decision was the guarantee that he could concentrate on composition and would no longer have to earn a living

through piano recitals (for all his later troubles, this part of the bargain was kept). But there were several other reasons that contributed to his decision. There was the sudden death of Diaghilev in 1929, which meant the loss of his main source of commissions as a composer. The rise of Hitler made any lasting peace in Europe a more precarious prospect, and Prokofiev could no longer be sure that he could freely travel around Europe in his tours. The ideological and aesthetic restrictions which were placed on Shostakovich in 1936 did not cause him much worry, since he was convinced that he could write simpler “music for the people” along with more complex and demanding music for the concert hall or opera house. He was only partially correct: while he flourished as a composer during much of his Soviet career, and was venerated by the Russian public, there were also setbacks in the form of official censure and interference, which led to bitter disappointment and eventual decline.

In 1939, after sixteen years’ absence, Prokofiev returned with a vengeance to the genre of the piano sonata, beginning work on what eventually became his Sonatas Nos. 6, 7 and 8, which are collectively known in the West as his “War Sonatas” (for the Soviet Union, the War did not start until June 1941). They are generally considered to form the pinnacle of Prokofiev’s piano music and in various ways, they reflect the complications of Prokofiev’s position in the Soviet Union.

The timing indicates that Prokofiev wanted new sonatas for a planned tour to the U.S. Sonata No. 6 (as it later became known) was not complete by the scheduled date of departure, but this was of no consequence, since the outbreak of war not only in Poland, but now in Western Europe too, resulted in the cancellation of the tour. Because most of the compositional work on the sonatas was carried out while the tour was still imminent, we should think of them foremost as works for the international stage, rather than as works meeting any Soviet demands of the time. This does much to explain the return to modernism, but at the same time, we could say that the monumentality and consummate mastery of these sonatas reflects the influence of Soviet aesthetics on Prokofiev. Although the Sonatas carry no explicit programme, we can recognise some definite musical “topics”, and these tell their own story. No. 6, example, begins with steely, grinding repeated patterns that place us back in the world of machine-music. This is followed by a “pure” and rather abstract lyrical theme that looks back to the composer’s new-simplicity phase, with its Christian Science influence. The third theme, with nervous repeated notes in various registers, returns to images of **demonic possession** that Prokofiev discovered as early as his *Suggestion diabolique* (1908) and developed in his largest opera, *The Fiery Angel*, which he worked on during the 1920s (the first production of the full opera was posthumous). The character of the third theme dominates the development and is magnified to nightmarish levels. Towards the climax of the development is a famous *col pugno* instruction – a cluster of notes in the bass to be played with the fist rather than the fingers.

The second movement is a much brighter Allegretto with **balletic** aspects reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*, Prokofiev’s first ballet, and his first major Soviet work. The movement seems to contain several comic characters, and the overall mood is light and humorous, quirky rather than grotesque.

The third, slow movement finally allows real sentiment to seep in, which Prokofiev had avoided earlier in his career. Sincere emotional expression was a component of the Socialist Realist artistic world he now inhabited, whether valued in its own right, or as a repudiation of the strong “dehumanised” element of bourgeois modernism. Prokofiev, accordingly, found ways of warming up his lyrical manner. The genre is the “Boston Waltz”, the invention of an Italian dance-master in Boston a century earlier, redolent of a Henry Jamesian sophistication caught between the East Coast elite and glamorous Europeans. Prokofiev had just learnt how to dance the Boston when he summered at Kislovodsk, a spa town in the Caucasus mountains, where Prokofiev met his new love, the young Mira Mendelson. In a central episode a clock-like ticking appears, a topic that appears in several of Prokofiev’s works during these years, and very prominently in *Romeo and Juliet* and in *Cinderella*.

The Finale is characterised by a kind of sombre agitation that reveals a humorous core, but the sinister atmosphere of the first movement, as indeed does the Sonata's opening theme.

From this list of "topics", it emerges that Prokofiev was in no way a wholehearted Socialist Realist: the sonata is both too complex and too dark to be fitting in with the mainstream of Soviet music around 1940.

The Seventh Sonata ought to be no less controversial as a piece of Soviet art of this period. The nervous and agitated opening theme ("inquieta") once again harks back to Prokofiev's images of demonic possession, obsessively landing on the same note (B-flat) which acts as a kind of anchor in what would otherwise count as atonal music. In all Prokofiev's toccata-like music, this is the most sinister.

The slow movement, like its counterpart in the Sixth, invokes the languorous atmosphere of a cocktail club or dance hall, down to the voicings, suggestive of the twang of the Hawaiian guitar. The finale is another toccata, this time with seven rapid notes to the bar. There are clear hints that Stravinsky was another model, both in the repeated pattern of the left hand which harks back to *The Rite of Spring* and the syncopated themes that veer close to the same composer's *Piano Rag Music*. The movement is strikingly close to Bartók's *Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm*, but the resemblance is most likely coincidental, since it would have been almost impossible for Prokofiev to have seen a score of these pieces, which were only published in the West in 1940.

But now comes a surprise. For all its Western influences, both popular and modernist, it was *this* Sonata that earned Prokofiev his first Stalin Prize in 1943 (the prize money was a life-changingly large sum). Prokofiev was certainly pleased, but also puzzled in equal measure:

*"Why would they give [the prize] to such a convoluted piece when it had been denied to pieces that were simpler and more transparent?"*

Prokofiev's letter to Myaskovsky

We can take this further: Prokofiev had earlier failed to win the Prize even when the music seemed highly worthy for political reasons, as in the cases of the cantata for Stalin, or the film-score for Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (the failure, in each case, was rooted in the complexities of Soviet politics, national or international). The reasons for the acceptability of Sonata No. 7 are easier to grasp: the beginning of the Nazis "war of annihilation" against the Soviet Union had begun, and darker music suddenly became permissible. The first movement was thus read as the portrayal of the evils of the enemy and the terrible struggle against them. The second movement was praised for its warmth and lyricism. The finale was heard as a victorious surge of Soviet troops at the front.

*"With this work, we are plunged brutally into the anxious and threatening atmosphere of a world that has lost its balance. Chaos and uncertainty reign. We see murderous forces unleashed. But this does not mean that what we lived by therefore ceases to exist. We continue to feel and to love. Now the full range of human emotions bursts forth. Together with our fellow men and women, we raise a voice of protest and share in the common grief. We sweep all before us, borne along by the will to victory. In this tremendous struggle, we find the strength to affirm the irrepressible life-force."*

Sviatoslav Richter on the Seventh Sonata

In this atmosphere, no critic wanted to nit-pick over influences from jazz or modernism, and musicologists helpfully pointed out septuple metres in the venerable Russian classics by Borodin and Musorgsky (although these were much slower). The Sonata No. 7 even became a vehicle for musical diplomacy when Horowitz was invited to perform it at a Soviet embassy reception for American artists in 1944.

Prokofiev's Sonata No. 8 also won a Stalin Prize in the next annual round, even though this work is, if anything, still more complicated and remote from Socialist Realism. The initial reaction was mixed at best, as Richter attests:

*“Prokofiev himself played it at the Composers’ Union, but it was Gilels who gave the first public performance. Prokofiev played it twice. Even after a single hearing, it was clear that this was a remarkable work, but when I was asked whether I planned to play it myself, I was at a loss for an answer. S. S. now had difficulty playing. He no longer had his former confidence, and his hands slapped on the keys. After the second hearing, I was firmly resolved to learn the piece. Someone began to snigger: “It’s completely outdated! You don’t really want to play this?!”*”

The connection with Mira continues in Sonata No. 8: Prokofiev mentions that the main theme of the first movement occurred to him while he was taking a walk with her. He may also have placed Mira in the Sonata through his re-use of two earlier musical themes associated with literary heroines: Lisa's theme from *The Queen of Spades* (from an unused film score), and Tatiana's music from *Eugene Onegin* (from the incidental music for a stage production that was never realised). Nevertheless, the Sonata's musical narrative seems particularly obscure, and the work needed great performers such as Gilels or Richter to win over the public. As for the officials, Prokofiev was in their best books at this point, so they were not about to query the prize nomination.

This lasted until a sudden change at the beginning of 1948, when Prokofiev found himself officially listed as a “formalist” composer, and in a series of meetings for composers, he was castigated for the complexity of his works and their connections to Western modernism. This, together with his failing health and the arrest and imprisonment of his first wife, Lina, cast a dark shadow over the last five years of his life. Prokofiev never lived to see the post-Stalin thaw, and indeed, he died, almost unnoticed, on the same day as Stalin.

Sonata No. 9 is mysterious: it is a most unlikely successor to the great “War sonatas”, since it is much simpler in style, and the technical demands on the pianist are lighter than any of the sonatas since No. 2. This would have made sense if the Sonata had been written in the aftermath of the condemnation of his music in 1948, when Prokofiev had to make his style more transparent and avoid obvious modernist devices. It was premiered in 1951 by Richter, its dedicatee, so the audience would have supposed that it was a recent piece. And yet this Sonata had been completed in 1947, *before* these troubles began. Prokofiev first serious worries about his health came in 1945, and it may be that this rekindled Prokofiev's earlier religious beliefs. The Sonata seems to be close to the “purity” of the music he had written under the influence of Christian Science. This would remove the mystery, but it must remain speculative. While we know much about the earlier period thanks to Prokofiev's finely written diaries, but this activity ceased when he returned to the Soviet Union, so the artist's inner life during the last phase of his career is largely unknown to us – the music has to speak for him.

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### Sources and Further Reading

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