



Prokofiev's Seventh and Eighth Piano Sonatas

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person goes to the opera he has a right to demand effects for the eye as well as for the ear—otherwise he would go, not to the opera, but to a concert. Now movement on the stage is bound up principally with recitative, whereas cantilena to a certain extent presupposes a lack of movement. I remember how painful I found it, in many a Wagner opera, to sit and stare for a whole act—nearly an hour—at a stage where nobody was moving. It was precisely because I feared this immobility that I long refrained from indulgence in cantilena.

I have given careful attention to this problem and have come to the conclusion that in every opera libretto there are places that necessarily call for recitative and other places where arias are the right thing. But there are also places—and they take up a large part of the text—where a composer is free to choose between recitative and arioso. Tatiana's Letter Scene in 'Eugen Oegin' may well serve as an example. It would not have been difficult to set a great part of the letter as recitative. But Tchaikovsky preferred the language of song, with the result that the whole letter-scene grew so to speak into

one huge aria; and, still further in its favour, as it proceeds there is always something happening on the stage, so that satisfaction is offered to the eye as well as to the ear. This is just the direction I should like to take with my new opera which is based on a modern subject, 'A Tale of True Men', by the Soviet writer Boris Polevoi.

The resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on the subject of music is to me a document that expresses the will of the people. It makes special reference to a desire for polyphony, especially in choral music and ensemble singing. This affords a genuinely interesting task for the composer, and pleasure for the listener. In the opera 'A Tale of True Men' I shall include trios, duets and contrapuntally elaborated choruses; and for this purpose I intend to make use of some extremely interesting notes that have been taken of folk-songs in northern Russia. The other ideals towards which I am striving in this opera are clear melodies and the greatest possible simplicity in the language of harmony.

I intend to aim at a clear musical speech that shall be acceptable to my people.

Prokofiev's Seventh and Eighth Piano Sonatas

By FRANK MERRICK

THE last two piano sonatas by Prokofiev, no. 7, op. 83 and no. 8, op. 84, were first performed in England, one in 1944 and the other in 1946, by the writer of these notes and Noel Mewton-Wood respectively. They had both been introduced previously in New York by Horowitz. The composition of both was commenced in 1939, no. 7 being completed in 1942 and no. 8 in 1944. Unlike some of the earlier sonatas they are at present purchasable in England. They are both in B flat, but as they differ in many respects it may be interesting to consider them side by side.

Ex. 1 and Ex. 2 are the two openings: no. 7 very bustling and uncompromising (Edwin Evans wrote in the *Daily Mail* that the sonata started 'in a bitter mood') and no. 8 poetic and reflective, similar in mood to a horn melody in the second violin concerto. Both opening movements have pathetic second subjects, but while that in no. 7 has a certain hopelessness as if one were wringing one's hands in forlorn perplexity, that in no. 8 is more passively sorrowful. In this latter melody it will probably be agreed that there is a hint of Schubert's 'Der Leiermann'. Both development sections pile up the excitement to a degree which may not be expected by those who are unfamiliar with Prokofiev and his ways; in no. 7 it is a delirious frenzy of swirling movement which is attained and in no. 8 an extraordinary grim rage such as that of the bereaved lover who cried 'I hacked him in pieces sma'. When this fury is spent the modulations accompanying the reiteration of a tiny motif which is derived from the codetta of the exposition very beautifully usher in the recapitulation. (See Ex. 3, which leads into the return of Ex. 2.) In no. 7 we are whirled onwards so as to be unaware when the recapitulation actually begins

(a rare thing with Prokofiev) and only realize later that the boundary line must have been passed. The coda in no. 7 consistently retains the rhythmical character of wild revelry, though (as in Debussy's Nocturne 'Fêtes') the sounds are finally lost in the distance. In no. 8 the coda becomes very wild and shrill, but calms down suddenly in the last few bars, ending with amazing peacefulness.

Both slow movements are homely as a general characteristic, but while that of no. 7 opens with considerable fervour, the mood being strangely akin to some of John Ireland's emotional meditations, that of no. 8 is more artless, and, typical as it is of the composer, there seems to be something of Schubert in its easy, unpretentious lilt (see Ex. 4 and Ex. 5). Schubert is again recalled by the accompaniment of falling octaves which gives the final presentation of the opening melody a more flowing effect (see Ex. 6). This movement of no. 8 is a short one and never wanders far from the opening mood. But in the corresponding movement of no. 7 a very big climax is gradually built up, during which there are strange *ff* effects of tolling, recurring softly at a later stage (Ex. 7) before the music sinks to a peaceful conclusion.

Both finales (see Exx. 8 and 9) are rousing in the extreme but otherwise mostly dissimilar. In no. 7 we have unrelieved persistence and the movement is mainly built on one long pedal point. It might depict the throbbing of mighty engines (Edwin Evans wrote that the work 'ended in a munition factory') or the stamping of many hooves as some great herd of quadrupeds crashes onward to its final goal, whether that be the abyss or some transcendental winning-post. In no. 8 we get the 'Dickory-dickory-dock' element which appears from time to time in Prokofiev's works. The opening may make some of us

wonder (as Beethoven has tempted us to do, usually to be confounded in due course) whether it is good for subject-matter to be in itself on the trivial side; but this very peculiarity enhances later effects, especially in the *coda* where the opening triplets, have developed into Ex. 9. The movement is in sonata form and the middle episode is almost entirely built upon a long waving A flat pedal point :



During this episode the thematic material evolves from one thing to another till finally the 'Leiermann' theme from the first movement has be-

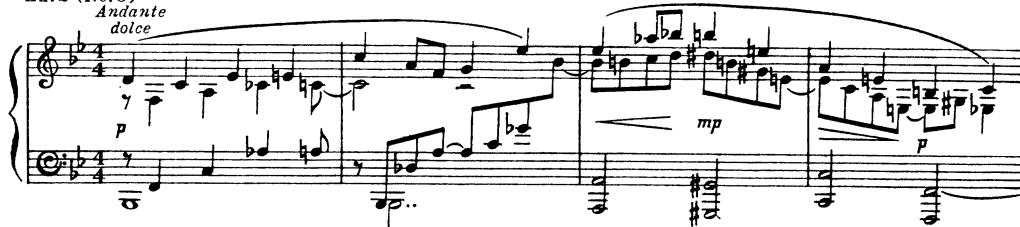
come the main feature. Both sonatas end, appropriately enough, with a swift *coup de grâce*, no. 7 with three rapidly repeated octaves, no. 8 with three final 'dickory-docks'.

Perhaps it is not unreasonable for one who has upheld and played a number of well-esteemed composers in the days of their comparative obscurity to hazard an opinion regarding the not very distant future. At any rate it is here urged that most of the Prokofiev piano sonatas are destined to attain increasing popularity, partly because they need a good deal of technical ingenuity to play, partly because this fact is fascinatingly apparent to the listener, but most of all because of the varied, significant and individual substance in the music itself.

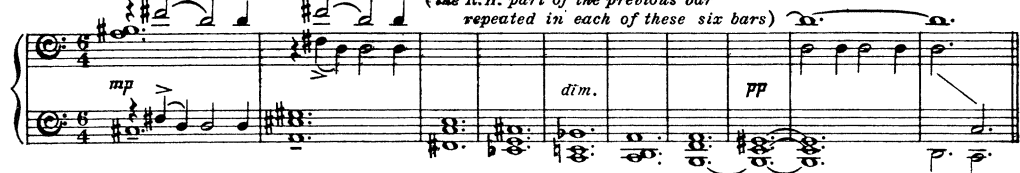
Ex.1 (No.7)
Allegro inquieto



Ex.2 (No.8)
Andante dolce



Ex.3 (No.8) (the R.H. part of the previous bar repeated in each of these six bars)



Ex.4 (No.7)
Andante caloroso



Ex. 5 (No. 8)

Andante sognando
dolce
p

Ex. 6 (No. 8)

p dolce

Ex. 7 (No. 7)

pp

Ex. 8 (No. 7)

Precipitato (♩. ♩. ♩.)
mp

Ex. 9 (No. 8)

Virace
p

Ex. 10 (No. 8)

ff

I.S.C.M. Festival at Palermo, 1949

The Society's twenty-third festival will be held at Palermo on April 22 to 30. Composers are invited to submit works in the following categories: Orchestra; Chamber Orchestra up to thirty players; Chamber Music, including solo instruments and voice; Chamber Opera with small orchestra; Ballet with normal orchestra. (The stage works to last about half-an-hour; no chorus available.) British composers and foreign composers resident in this country are asked to send scores before October 1 to the Hon. Secretary, L.C.M.C., c/o J. & W. Chester Ltd., 11 Great Marlborough Street, London, W.1.

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