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Prokofiev and His Last War Sonata

By

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The last “War Sonata” is not only perhaps the best piano music written by Sergei Prokofiev but also the most advanced pianistic writing of the time in terms of harmony and sound, emotional intention and use of the instrument. It could be argued that this piece is also the most distressful music composed for piano. This sonata is definitely not “easy on the ear” or a “pleasure to listen to”. It seems clear that Prokofiev no longer intended his music to please or satisfy the listener. This composition was written at a time of terrible anguish and horrors. Art creation was therefore affected greatly – aesthetics and beauty were questioned and new forms and expressions were being represented in art such as reality, sarcasm, irony, Dadaism, brutality, aggression, terror and horror. In the War Sonatas we see Prokofiev extend his immense talent as a composer to meet these challenges.

Prokofiev is acknowledged as one of the greatest pianist/composers of the twentieth century. Thewide range of his talent can be seenby looking at the vast amount of genres he composed for; operas, ballet music, film music, instrumental works, symphonies and of course a huge amount of piano compositions. He often played piano recitals and there are recordings of him playing his own compositions. It can be heard how strong and accurate his fingers were even with the most difficult of passages. Unfortunately due to Prokofiev being reluctant to record or give recitals during the period when he composed the war sonatas, there exists no recording and therefore no interpretation by the composer for these sonatas.

The three war sonatas were written from 1940 – 1944. Sonata no.6 was written in 1940, sonata no.7 in 1942 and sonata no.8 in 1944. Although Prokofiev did not actually name them the “War Sonatas”, this title is appropriate not only because that they were written at the epicenter of the Second World War, but also because of their violent and dissonant nature.

The three “War Sonatas” can be seen, to some extent, as paralleling transitions through the Second World War. The Sixth Sonata expresses the anxiety in anticipating the full terror of a worldwide conflict. The Seventh brings forward the menacing, vicious and malicious machinery of a great armies and the emptiness that is left after the battle has stopped. The Eighth is perhaps the most complex of the three, in terms of the composition of its unique language, structure and its expression. The last “War Sonata” can be seen as presenting the aftermath of war.

It was shortly before the composer began these sonatas that his long-time friend, Vsevolod Meyerhold, was arrested by the NKVD (Stalin’s Secret Police). Meyerhold was a theater director and a close colleague of Prokofiev. Meyerhold was arrested just before he was scheduled to rehearse Prokofiev’s new opera *Semyon Kotko*. Shortly after Meyerhold’s arrest, Meyerhold’s wife, Zinaida Raikh, was found brutally murdered. This affected Prokofiev greatly, but a few months later Prokofiev was ‘invited’ to compose a piece to celebrate Stalin’s 60th birthday. The cantata “Zdravista” (better known as “Hail to Stalin”) sounds positive and cheerful but to a trained ear and someone who is looking carefully, sarcasm and bitter irony can occasionally be heard. Meyerhold was shot on 2 February 1940 (though it was not publicly known) and Prokofiev’s Piano Sonata No.6 was premiered two months later. It could be that the three “War Sonatas” that were composed after the cantata “Zdravista”, were so aggressive and full of ugliness because Prokofiev had restrained composing his true feelings in the cantata for Stalin. {5}

Prokofiev’s compositions were seen by the Soviet regime as an important expression of ideology, and he had no choice but comply. For example, when the Soviet Union signed a non-belligerent pact with the Nazis in 1939, he was asked to change the operatic enemies of his opera *Semyon Kotko*, from the Germans to the *Haydamaks* (Ukrainian Nationalists). This he did even though he himself was a Ukrainian national. The invasion of the Soviet Union by the Nazis in 1941 brought an end to this pact and the terrible struggle between these two mighty armies ensued.

The Second World War had the most horrific effect on the Soviet Union. It suffered the highest military casualties of any country involved the war, sacrificing an unfathomable amount of men, twenty million, in order to fend of the German invasion and secure a victory in the east. During the war the whole of the Soviet Union became dedicated to the war effort. The Second World War impacted greatly on Soviet citizens because it was fought on their territory and caused massive destruction. In Leningrad over a million people died from starvation and disease during the war.

Prokofiev was living as an artist and composer through the most horrific period of Soviet history, a situation that presented an enormous challenge. And it is clear by the expression of the first war sonata that Prokofiev entered a totally new era of composition. I will be describing and analyzing the last two war sonatas in the context of this terrible and oppressive period.

The final “War Sonata”, Sonata No.8 in B flat Major Op.84, was composed in 1944 and was first performed on 30 December 1944 in Moscow by Emil Gilels {7}. Richter turned down the opportunity to give the premiere performance of this sonata and Gilels was invited by the composer to give the first performance of it. During the Second World War, Gilels was known to have entertained Soviet troops with morale-boosting open-air recitals on the frontline, of which film archive footage exists {13}. Gilels said that “the eighth sonata is a profound work demanding a great deal of emotional tension. It impresses one by the symphonic nature of its development, the tension, breadth and charm of the lyrical passages” {11}. Richter’s initial opinion of the piece is wonderful and complimentary, something must have changed his mind, with some speculating that Prokofiev didn’t approve of Richter’s interpretation. Richter describes the charm and depth of the piece – “It is the richest of all of Prokofiev’s sonatas. It has a complex inner life with profound contrapositions. At times it seems freeze, as if listening to the inexorable march of the times. The sonata is somewhat heavy to grasp, but heavy with richness – like a tree heavy with fruit” {12}.

The eighth sonata was dedicated to Mira Mendelssohn who was Prokofiev’s second wife. Mira was a talented poet and she co-wrote the librettos for his operas “Betrothal in a Monastery” (1940), “War and Peace” (1942), and “The Story of a Real Man” (1947), and the scenario for the ballet “The Stone Flower” (1954). She was his partner for the last twelve years of his life {10}.

Of the three “War Sonatas”, this sonata is the least performed, possibly due to the enigmatic nature of the music {2}. This sonata is the lengthiest of the nine piano sonatas of Prokofiev. The sonata’s lyrical and tender qualities are unquestionably appealing. It has been described as “sweet and dreamy” which are words that we would rarely associate with Prokofiev’s music but occur surprisingly often in the eighth sonata {9}.

Unusually, Prokofiev began this sonata rather indolently. The first movement is indicated *Andante dolce*, already a surprising marking for a “War Sonata” – “sweet”. All thematic materials used in the first movement are long, sweet, tender and song-like. Though it would be very difficult to sing this because the first sentence is spread out over three octaves, the linear form of the sentence distributes the notes carefully and without disturbing the peace of the melody. The first and second themes of the exposition are both calm and somewhat lazy but hiding something that is very wrong. The first theme is very long and each sentence is in itself very lengthy and spaced out, both in tempo and in register. Each musical phrase of the exposition has somewhat of a climax and then disappears into a close towards the end of the phrase. Prokofiev mixes the end of one sentence and the beginning of the next in order to blur the clarity of when a sentence begins and when it ends (bars 5-6, bars 17-18, bars 21-22, bars 25-26, bars 30-31). This creates and ambiguity for the listeners of what each sentence is actually trying to state while still being able to follow the contour of each phrase.

The continuation of the exposition is slightly interrupted with a new tempo marking: “*Poco piu animato”* (bar 35). The left hand stays on the same bass and similar harmony as the first theme while the right hand begins introducing some alien harmonies in an eerie and nervous descending fashion. This new subject soon turns into an even more nervous pattern where Prokofiev introduces sixteenth notes in a running pattern in the right hand, but in pianissimo (bar 42), possibly hiding the horrors this will yet turn into. In bar 44 the sixteenth notes become an unusual rhythmical pattern of polyphonic arpeggiated chords that is only in the right hand. With this new texture comes new energy, musical tension and movement, but still in pianissimo. This transitional material soon reaches a local climax and dissipates towards the bridge into the 2nd subject. The bridge is marked Andante 1 (bar 54), indicating to the performer to return to the original tempo. The bridge is strange and full of dissonance and opposing movements of voices until this too reaches a local climax on the dominant of G minor (bar 60).

The second subject is in G minor with an incredible symphonic quality (bar 61). To be able to create the effect and sound of many instruments playing quietly and evilly, I personally use the sostenuto pedal (middle pedal) in order to hold the bass notes while the higher registers sing out independently in a crying way that will make the listener shiver with fear. This second theme is indeed a new kind of composing for Prokofiev and could suggest an homage to Scriabin {3}. The transition into the development section is one of the saddest sections, full of grief, in the whole sonata, only mirrored by the return to the recapitulation. The bridge into the development begins in bar 84 with a held harmony while the left hand uses a descending major third to create the feel of a distant bell. The bell continues for an extra three bars while in bars 86 and 87 the harmony changes to color the bells much more dissonantly. These bells are part of a diminuendo and a gradual approach to an unusual and unexpected resolved chord of G major chord (bar 89). The dying away of these bells can remind the listeners of funeral bells or that the bells are distant from us and that they create a nostalgic wish to reminisce and to be with them and not where we stand.

The development begins with a new tempo marking – *Allegro moderato* in bar 90 abruptly but extremely quietly in the murkiest registers of the piano with a horrific passage of running sixteenth notes that can create the image of rats in trenches or on dead bodies. After two bars of rats, the typical writing of Prokofiev reappears where the left hand begins the final theme of the first theme package in the bass with a deep and ominous theme (bar 100 relative to 18). The lyrical quality of the movement is diminished with the running chromatic passages in the right hand. The development then takes the interesting rhythmical pattern in sixteenth notes from the first theme and uses it predominantly throughout the rest of the development in order to build up the energy more and more. The increasing dynamics from pianissimo to fortississimo and the eventual demand for an extremely percussive touch finally bursts through in a horrific climax of pain, anguish and horror. The development easily represents the emotional climax of this movement {3}. It is extremely aggressive and unforgiving and uses the second theme in such a forceful and unpleasant way that it taints our memories of that questioning and eerie symphonic melody (bar 170). The second subject’s development uses horrific clusters in the bass to create a devilish explosion while the melody continues to cry out much louder this time. The development reaches its extreme in bar 183 where the register changes and amount of noise created is almost unbearable. This section can remind the listeners of rockets and bombs. The desperation of the want for it to stop, the begging for this nightmare to end is clear, where amongst the rockets, triplets begin to shout out in such a heart-wrenchingly human way (bars 187-190). This too soon disappears and becomes very quiet. The triplets are repeated in pianissimo in a hesitant and distant war-drum feel (bar 191) and soon the development is concluded with a terribly quiet and shockingly dissonant chord (bar 194) which brings us back to the bell transition period. This parallel image of the bells we heard at the end of the exposition is enhanced by the fact that both left and right hand are playing the bells while the harmony that is coloring them descends lower and lower into the ground (and register) (bars 196 – 203). The first time we heard the bells they rang out four times, but this time it is eight times making the gradual descent longer and each extra bell that much more painful. With a final echo of the last bell still lingering on (bar 204), we slowly resolve to the recapitulation.

The recapitulation is a complete copy of the exposition (bars 205 -229 = 1-25) but this time the pain and sadness of the calm and lyrical is much more clear after we went through the frighteningly realism of the war, during the development section. After the recapitulation has slowly and quietly disappeared it moves immediately into the coda which begins almost identically (except for the tonality) to the development section (bar 259). The only important difference is that instead of having the tempo marking – *Allegro moderato*, Prokofiev writes just – *Allegro*, meaning – no holding back this time. The speed and fervent development of the coda is similar to the development using similar themes and bass lines to create ominous and scary visions. The coda soon takes a new turn with both hands in the highest extremity of the piano bringing listeners to thoughts of screaming and crying out. After a long chromatic passage of crying and descending and begging it reaches a new climax where the pianist descends seven octaves in the space of four bars (bars 284 – 287) with accents of aggression and anger. In bar 288 the most horrific ascending scale and a final dissonance is used to show possibly a definitive blow to an enemy, this is repeated exactly the same again in bar 289. Bar 231 begins in piano, to our surprise, with descending unison of the most devilish intervals to eventually bring us to a higher and brighter chord that slowly, and with a ritenuto, resolves into the brightest and most positive, high register B flat major chord. In my own interpretative analysis of these drastic emotional changes in the last eight bars, I see the transition from the aggression of completing the feat of destroying the enemy to the fear and horrified anguish of having killed a human into the slow relief and satisfaction of your own survival, regardless of it being on account of the loss of another human’s life.

The second movement – *Andante sognando* (Dreamily Andante) offers an extreme contrast to the first movement already, by just looking at the tempo indication. The whole movement hardly wavers from its original dreamy atmosphere. The movement is in simple rondo form – ABACA. The first theme – A – is a dreamy waltz-like melody that is repeated many times throughout the movement in different tonalities and with slight variations. The overall feeling of the movement is of nostalgic memories and of better times and places to be. The original theme is taken from the incidental music that Prokofiev composed for the staged version of the book “Eugene Onegin” written by Alexander Pushkin. The exact theme is in its entirety in the part of the composition called – “The Larin’s Ball”. The theme is eight bars long and as soon as it has ended it begins again (bar 9) but a semi-tone higher making it sound much brighter.

The B theme is then introduced in bar 17 with a continuation of this very lethargic, dreamy and lyrical melody. The A theme is then brought back but this time with the indication *dolce* and in pianissimo, making this dream even more distant and less vivid. This time the theme is introduced with some slight variations, sometimes of dynamic (bar 30) and sometimes with register changes coloring the melody differently (bar 31).

In bar 34 the C theme is calmly introduced by a base that will recur throughout the whole of the theme, with notes in the higher register, almost like overtones, drifting down the piano only to be suddenly raised again by a scale passage. This drifting down occurs three times in total where the second time (bar 38) is an octave higher and the third time (bar 42) is even more atmospheric with sixteenth notes accompanying the dreamy drift down. This very tranquil section (as it is indeed marked *tranquillo*) can remind listeners of snow drifting down slowly, but always tainted with a curious beauty that seems almost unreal and definitely not present.

The A theme then returns in the left hand (bar 46), this time in mezzo forte, a dynamic which it has not been shown to us in yet. The right hand rises chromatically, bringing some tension and a hint of worry. Just as the theme is arriving at its third bar the alto buts in with the theme again and we realize that there is going to be a small fugato of the A theme (bar 48). The theme is passed to the tenor in bar 50 while the theme continues in the alto. In bar 51 the movement reaches its climax at forte but with the indication *ma dolce* (but sweet), which I think is an incredibly beautiful indication. Though we have reached a loud dynamic and this fugato has caused the movement to pick up quite a bite of momentum and energy, we haven’t left the sweet nature and kindness of this dream.

And soon enough we have returned to the C theme (bar 56) which is this time in pianissimo, that much more tranquil and distant. But while the C theme is continuing it is interweaved with the B theme in the tenor (bar 58) which is very much present and in mezzo forte. This interweaving is repeated again and after a small dissonance (bar 63) at the end of the C section it dissolves into a quite return to the A theme (bar 65).

This time the A theme melody is shared between the two hands, a difficult technical feat for the pianist, while the two hands create a sighing, descending octave feature of A flats that gives it that even more dreaming and floating quality (bar 65-72). In bar 72 the theme takes a chromatic turn towards the coda and in bar 74 a slightly painful dissonance is brought out in the soprano and the tenor that continues to pang out above the dream for three bars. This ringing out from the quiet and calm place we were situated, is almost a wake-up call to the harsh reality of the present war existence. In bar 77 the main subject is brought back one last time and only partially, only to disappear with a chromatic rising scale (bar 79) which eventually resolves, calmly and gracefully, into the chord of the original tonality, D flat major. The only problem with the final chord is that, though it feels like a resolution, it is only a unison D flat without the third or the fifth meaning it is a very sparse resolution, leaving a little bit of a question as to whether it really is a resolution and whether our dream was indeed a calm and tranquil one.

The third and final movement – *Vivace*, begins with a rapid tarantella. In this movement it is easy to pick up the humor, unlimited spirit and energy of Prokofiev {3}. This movement is written in sonata-rondo form. It also very clearly uses harmonic and thematic sequences taken from the two previous movements. The first theme is full of energy and excited triplets running all over the piano. The middle of the first theme (bar 9) becomes a much more serious section full of fear with repeated duplets creating the feeling of a rattling gun. This soon returns to the ecstatic triplets in bar 19. Throughout this frenzied and energetic section arrives a somewhat sentimental part where it is quite clearly tonal with a rising and prouder feeling (bar 71). This too ends and returns to the rattling guns in bar 79.

The middle section of the movement is introduced by aggressive accents from different registers in the piano eventually turning into the new section which is in ¾ (bar 107). This new section is marked *Allegro ben marcato* (fast and emphasized) and indeed demands (especially later in the section) a lot of accentuated notes and percussive technique. This section becomes a frantic trance but begins quietly and slowly developing the final outcome of an ironic waltz that seems happy but really is hiding something terribly wrong. The waltz melody is only shown in its entirety from bars 136 to 150 after a long period of an almost improvisational transition, as if the waltz were being written and developed on the spot (bars 107 – 136). The melody is produced again with slight variations in bar 163. The melody then takes a scary turn and starts getting louder and louder, more and more frantic and more aggressive. In bar 185 the melody is now shown in fortissimo with more aggressive variations and dissonant chords until we reach the bridge part that is full of anger and persistent banging (bars 208 – 222).

This new section is introduced by a sweeping scale upwards to a very high screech (bars 223 – 225) that then begins a trance that will continue for over one hundred bars, with very low repetitive bases that center around A flat either going a semitone higher or a semitone lower (bars 225 -). This horrific, skeleton dance is the outcome of all the previous themes of the movement and it is the climax. With rockets shooting off and people crying out (bars 234, 235, 236…) and bombs dropping randomly and chaotically, this is indeed a terrifying section. The part that gives me the shivers every time I hear it is when Prokofiev returns on the second subject from the exposition of the first movement but this time extremely high on the piano and with chromatic harmony tainting it to make it that much more evil and horrifying (bars 289 – 335 in comparison with the 1st movement’s bars 61 – 66). After this section ends comes the bridge back to the recapitulation.

The bridge part enters in pianissimo and in addition to this Prokofiev indicates it should be played *irresoluto* (wavering, uncertain) (bar 344). This section is extremely strange, weird and distant. One must strain their ears to hear the exact notes. After this extremely weird section that gives the vision of deformity and sickness we return to the rattling gun theme in bar 360 that begins very quietly in the distance and gets louder and closer until we are finally brought back to the original 1st theme. It is reintroduced this time in forte and with a triumphant feeling (in E flat major in bar 378) after returning on all the themes from the exposition we enter the coda area which is extremely loud and dramatic with high register triplets of harmonies dancing about the piano in the right hand while the left hand bangs out chords of a similar harmony (bars 459 – 466). The left hand then takes an unpleasantly aggressive, octave unison melody that comes out of nowhere and goes nowhere (bars 467 -470). The melody is then picked up from the right hand and is part of an ironically joyous yet scary, jumpy triplet section (470 – 474). The explosive coda then continues with the dramatic harmonies that then turn into repeated notes (bar 477 – 486) while the left hand becomes more and more dissonant, adding in ninths on top of the bass. The pianist must perform incredibly difficult leaps from register to register (482 – 486) until the gun theme returns in forte with hesitant rests in between the shots (bars 487 – 488). The piece comes to an abrupt end with two disgustingly dissonant and ironic triplet questions (bar 489) that are followed by an angry and formidable answer that brings the pianist to almost the lowest note of the piano (490). This movement is full of sarcasm, irony, comedy, aggression, disgust, dissonance and frantic frenzies. The last two bars sum up the whole movement with all of these emotions and more in such a short period of time that the audience is left in awe and breathless from this incredible experience that has been so masterly composed.

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