

Visions Fugitives, Opus 22:  
Insights into Sergei Prokofiev's Compositional Vision

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PREVIEW

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University of Nebraska, 2007

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In his autobiographical notes, Sergei Prokofiev detailed “five lines” along which his early work had developed. This analysis concerned works composed until his graduation from the St. Petersburg Conservatoire in 1914. The five lines are termed: classical, modern, toccata, lyrical and grotesque. The analysis portion of this document will incorporate these five lines. Furthermore, I will concurrently analyze the *Visions Fugitives* using my own list of 10 characteristics as a foundation. The 10 characteristics are: (1) dissipating endings - or, endings that do not end emphatically, (2) sharp dynamic contrasts, (3) disjunct melody, (4) chromatic melody and free counterpoint, (5) homophonic accompanimental figures (as one might find in a Romantic nocturne), (6) structures based on the tritone, (7) frequent use of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, (8) use of the 7<sup>th</sup> - creating an unstable harmonic function, (9) ternary form - providing contrasting sections and (10) abrupt shifts to distant tonalities (in the pieces that do have a sense of some tonal center). These 10 characteristics create both variety and unity within the set: they link the pieces together while creating contrast. Chapter 4 provides an aural examination of Prokofiev's gramophone recording of the *Visions Fugitives*. From this recording, I will focus on Prokofiev's style of interpretation and pianism concerning the *Visions*. This recording also offers evidence that the Opus 22 does not need to be performed in its entirety nor in numerical order. Finally, a chart in the appendix outlines the analysis of chapter 3.

*I respectfully dedicate this thesis to my mother, who, through her tireless efforts,  
continues to encourage and support my musical endeavors.*

PREVIEW

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## Introduction

I will begin with a brief account of the development of Prokofiev as a pianist-composer, including his early teachers and influences. Prokofiev's childhood experiences led to his entrance into the St. Petersburg Conservatoire in 1904; the first chapter will provide an explanation on why this was an important artistic event for the composer, who was barely 13. In chapter two, I shed light on the many similarities found between the works of representative composers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the *Visions Fugitives*. I will also contrast the Opus 22 with Prokofiev's earlier miniature forms for piano composed throughout his Conservatoire years. These pieces demonstrate a remarkable compositional evolution. In the autobiography, Prokofiev provided a brief analysis of his compositional development during the Conservatoire years. In the analysis portion of my document (chapter 3), I incorporate Prokofiev's own analysis, consisting of his "five lines". I will reveal which line the composer favored. Furthermore, I have devised another means by which to analyze the Opus 22: how the 20 pieces in the set are related using my list of 10 characteristics. These elements also create remarkable variety within the pieces. Chapter 4 focuses on Prokofiev as a recording artist and technophile. My aural analysis of the primary source material (Prokofiev's recording on a gramophone) will support the argument that he was, contrary to many critics' accounts, a sensitive and highly polished pianist. With an unedited version of the score, I will show that Prokofiev, the performer, did not always heed his own indications.

## Chapter 1

### Prokofiev: Developing Composer: 1891-1918

The piano was a prominent vehicle for Sergei Prokofiev's musical expression. The piano works have been steadily composed throughout his life, from the Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 1 (1909) to the Piano Sonata No. 9, Op. 103 (1947) and the revised Piano Sonata No. 5, Op. 135 (1952-3). During his youth, Prokofiev's miniature pieces for piano were often more forward-looking than his larger forms (compare Sonata No. 1 to the four pieces of Opp. 3 and 4). The *Visions Fugitives*, Opus 22, may be redolent of sets of preludes by other composers. But Prokofiev's Opus 22 contains only 20 pieces, not the traditional 24 found in the sets of Bach, Chopin or Shostakovich, nor do they conform to any key scheme such as the circle of fifths. Prokofiev, from his early years, was aware of the current compositional techniques of the time: planing, symmetrical pitch structures (whole tone and octatonic scales), modality and bitonality. These elements are also manifest in Opus 22. Prokofiev utilized unusual meters in his compositions (Etude, Op. 2 No. 2), however, there are no unusual meters in the *Visions Fugitives* with the slight exception of No. 20: 6/8 in the right hand and 3/4 in the left hand. Rhythms employed throughout the Opus 22 are not groundbreaking. Stravinsky can be credited as the figure responsible for the emancipation of rhythm; the dissonant repetition and frequently changing meters in Prokofiev's fifth *Sarcasm* may have been influenced by the *Rite of Spring* (1913). The *Visions Fugitives* do not contain such daring rhythmic structure.

Many of the *Visions Fugitives* are in ABA form. Prokofiev's use of formal structure is based on traditional models, and he was satisfied with traditional forms:

In that field [instrumental or symphonic music], I am well content with the forms already perfected. I want nothing better, nothing more flexible or more complete, than the sonata form, which contains everything necessary to my structural purposes.<sup>1</sup>

Prokofiev's mother, Maria Grigoryevna, was the first musical influence for him.

Prokofiev wrote in his autobiography:

When I was put to bed in the evenings and did not want to sleep, I would lie and listen to the faint sound of Beethoven's sonatas being played several rooms away from the nursery. My mother used to play the sonatas of the first volume mostly; then came Chopin preludes, mazurkas and waltzes. Occasionally something of Liszt, not too difficult; and the Russian composers, Chaikovsky and Rubinstein.<sup>2</sup>

His mother played the piano quite well according to Prokofiev, who recollected his piano lessons with her:

My mother took great pains with my musical education. She believed that a child should be kept interested and not repelled by tiresome exercises, and that a minimum of time should be spent on scales so as to leave as much time as possible for reading music... allowing me to play a vast amount of compositions and discussing them with me, encouraging me to say why I liked or disliked one or another piece. In this way I learned to form independent judgment at an early age.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Prokofiev, interview with Olin Downes on February 4, 1930; quoted in David Ewen, *The Book of Modern Composers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), p. 143.

<sup>2</sup>Prokofiev, Sergei, *Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences*, comp. S. Shlifstein, trans. Rose Prokofieva (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2000), 311.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 16.



By age 5 he composed short tunes at the piano, which were notated by his mother. By age 6, he was able to notate his own music. Also at an early age, he was interested in the ambitious prospect of writing an opera, for at age 8 his parents brought him to Moscow to attend opera performances. Indeed his childhood opera, *The Giant*, was performed for family members in 1900.

Prokofiev studied harmony, form and orchestration with Reinhold Glière in 1902-04. Glière, a composer, taught young Prokofiev the basics of harmony, form and orchestration, and used Beethoven Sonatas to outline form during a lesson. With the help of Glière, he had already composed nearly seventy piano miniatures (Prokofiev called them 'little songs') by the time he was 12 years old. This would later prove valuable, for when Prokofiev was 13 years old he headed to St. Petersburg and applied for admittance to the Conservatoire, and Rimsky-Korsakov was impressed with the amount of original compositions accompanying the boy.

Sergei Taneyev, a close friend of Tchaikovsky, was a composer and pianist who, in 1875, gave the first performance in Moscow of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. When Taneyev heard the twelve-year-old Prokofiev's composition *Symphony in G*, he remarked that the harmony was crude, joking that it consisted mostly of I, IV, & V. According to Prokofiev, once this statement had been planted in his head, it germinated and caused his eventual harmonic experimentation. Eight years later, Sergei and his mother traveled to Moscow to perform some of his little pieces for Taneyev, via an arrangement set by Yuri Nikolayevich Pomerantsev, a friend of the family who was studying at the Moscow Conservatory. Prokofiev played his *Etudes*, Op. 2 for Taneyev, who grumbled, "Far too many false notes". When Prokofiev reminded him of what he

once said about his harmonies, Taneyev clutched his head in mock horror and said, “So it was I who launched you on that slippery path!”<sup>4</sup>

In 1904, Alexander Glazunov, who was a student of Rimsky-Korsakov, urged his parents to send him to the Conservatoire in St. Petersburg and focus on becoming an artist. At the Conservatoire, the composer, Anatoly Konstantinovich Lyadov taught harmony and counterpoint and insisted on a strict observance of voice-leading rules. Prokofiev also studied orchestration with Rimsky-Korsakov, but did not like the overcrowded conditions of the class and felt that he learned nothing. During Prokofiev’s early years as a student in the Conservatoire, contact with older students offered him the opportunity to engage in musical discussion and participate in sessions of listening to music and other activities. Prokofiev noted in 1906 that he loved Schumann, especially his sonatas and *Carnaval*. In that same year, Prokofiev and Nicolai Myaskovsky became acquainted; this was the beginning of a long and productive friendship. Prokofiev and his older friend shared much in common and there are 312 letters from Prokofiev to Myaskovsky (written over a period of nearly 43 years) extant today. Since Myaskovsky was ten years Prokofiev’s senior, he was a sort of musical father figure, encouraging Sergei’s creativity and promoting his work on the stage. Together, they would play 4-hand arrangements of Beethoven’s symphonies, Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade*, and many other works. As they played these works, discourse concerning the work would follow. In addition to playing works of other composers, they would regularly show each other their new compositions, consulting each other on matters of form, harmony and orchestration. This close bond continued until Myaskovsky’s death nearly forty-five

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 20.

years later. This “odd couple” (Myaskovsky was a twenty-five-year-old officer, reserved, educated, grave, while the fifteen-year-old Prokofiev had a reputation as a spoiled trouble-maker) was to break away from the tired conventions of composers who passively imitated the traditional models of Glazunov and Rimsky-Korsakov. It was Myaskovsky who introduced the adolescent Prokofiev to the latest music of Western Europe and Russia, which was especially desired since it was adamantly rejected at the Conservatoire. Their interests quickly turned from Grieg, Tchaikovsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov to Debussy, Richard Strauss and Max Reger. Prokofiev even witnessed Reger conducting his own works at a concert in St. Petersburg in 1906. Prokofiev studied the piano works of Reger, such as the tremendous *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by J.S. Bach*. Prokofiev and Myaskovsky not only studied and performed works for 4-hand piano, but also included such modern symphonic transcriptions as Reger’s *Serenade* in G major and Strauss’s tone poems *Don Juan*, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *Death and Transfiguration*. Prokofiev also adored the work of Scriabin.

The Evenings of Modern Music, which took place on Thursdays in a piano shop, was a host to first performances of works by such modern composers as Strauss, Reger, Debussy, Ravel, Schönberg and Stravinsky. Traditionalists Rimsky-Korsakov and Liadov excoriated these evening performances and the people associated with them, calling them “impudent and earless.”<sup>5</sup> It was at one of these evenings, during the 1910-1911 season, when Prokofiev premiered the work of Schönberg in Russia. During the performance of Schönberg, one critic noted, “Homeric laughter broke out in the hall.”<sup>6</sup> Prokofiev met

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<sup>5</sup> Gutman, David, *Prokofiev* (London: The Alderman Press, 1988), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Nestyev, Israel V, *Prokofiev*, trans. Florence Jonas with a forward by Nicolas

Stravinsky at one of these evenings, where he heard the composer play a piano arrangement of his new ballet *The Firebird*. Prokofiev did not like it at all. These were also attended by leading critics and musicians interested in hearing new compositions. During Prokofiev's "Evening" debut as a composer on December 31, 1908, he played the pieces of Opus 4 plus two other short pieces. Stravinsky attended this performance and later commented that the performance was, "remarkable – but I have always liked his music hearing him play it – and the music had personality."<sup>7</sup> A newspaper review of this performance read:

S. Prokofiev's small pieces for the piano, played from manuscript by the composer himself, were extremely original. The young composer, who has not yet completed his musical education, belongs to the ultra-modernist trend and goes much farther than the French modernists in boldness and originality. The unmistakable glow of talent shines through all the whims and caprices of this rich creative fantasy, a talent that is not yet quite balanced and which still succumbs to every gust of feeling...<sup>8</sup>

Other critics wrote:

If one views all of these rather confused compositions – or, to be more exact, rough drafts and sketches – as a test for the composer's pen, then perhaps here and there one may find a trace of talent in them.<sup>9</sup>

In all the vagaries of this rich creative imagination, one can detect a great and indisputable talent, a talent still unstable, still surrendering to every passion, enamored of extravagant combinations of sound, yet with great skill finding a logical basis for the most hazardous modulations.

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Slonimsky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1960), 43.

<sup>7</sup> Gutman, David, *Prokofiev*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> Prokofiev, Sergei, *Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Nestyev, Israel V, *Prokofiev*, 35.

Lyadov was known to lose his temper when Prokofiev brought his exercises to the counterpoint lessons, which Lyadov considered contaminated by modernism. Lyadov said, “I guess I should be studying with you, not you with me. Go to Richard Strauss or Debussy, but for Heaven’s sake, don’t study with me.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, patrons of the Evenings of Modern Music openly declared the Glazunov-Lyadov school “conservative.” As a result of this discord, Prokofiev never showed his compositions to Lyadov, only the required coursework. However, one must acknowledge the value of Lyadov’s class when analyzing the piano works of Prokofiev. As one glances through the *Visions Fugitives*, the eye can spot diligent horizontal textures that seem to originate from rigid formal training. Myaskovsky later recalled, “I cannot help admitting that his extraordinary rigid requirements (even his carping), the exceptional lucidity of his method, his unusual taste, and his extremely keen critical sense fixed our technique firmly and developed our feeling for style.”<sup>11</sup> The piano miniatures during 1906-1909 reveal more of Prokofiev’s unique voice than his large-scale works, such as the F-minor Sonata, Opus 1, clearly influenced by the German Romantic school (especially Schumann). Perhaps these miniatures were vehicles for the composer’s experimentation with the new musical ideas he was hearing outside of the Conservatoire walls in St. Petersburg. The *Suggestion Diabolique* is a vivid example of this phenomenon. Prokofiev’s reputation would further prove to benefit from performances given in cooperation with a group of musical progressives from Moscow, which was supported by the Russian magazine

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Nestyev, Israel V, *Prokofiev*, 27.

*Contemporary Music* (Rachmaninov and Medtner heard Prokofiev's chamber works performed at an occasion in February 1917).

Meanwhile, Prokofiev continued to study with his first piano professor at the Conservatoire, Alexander Winkler, playing pieces such as Rubinstein's *Etude* in C major and Schumann's *Toccata* in C major. A feuilleton published in the *St. Petersburg Gazette* describes in 1913 the manner of Prokofiev's playing on the piano, which was just as famous as his compositions. Referring to a performance of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Concerto, it mentions that he had a sharp, dry touch and some members of the audience were offended by the performance and left.<sup>12</sup> However, the forward-looking critics thought he was brilliant and original.

In 1910, Prokofiev sent some of his work to the Russian Music Publishers, which was founded by Koussevitzky. Scriabin, Rachmaninov and Medtner were among the adjudicators of the compositional submissions. Prokofiev felt that they too easily dismissed works that contained any hint of novelty. In 1911, Prokofiev finally managed to publish some early piano works with the Russian publisher, Jurgenson.

When Prokofiev was eighteen years old and faced with the question of what to do after receiving his certificate from the Conservatoire, he decided to transfer from Winkler to Anna Nikolayevna Yesipova, who graduated from the St. Petersburg Conservatoire where she studied with (and later married) Leschetizky. Prokofiev was known to have outstanding virtuosity as a performer, but with a careless and unpolished interpretation of traditional piano music. Glazunov noted about the young Prokofiev's performance at an examination: "Technical preparation exceedingly brilliant. Interpretation unique, original,

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<sup>12</sup> Prokofiev, Sergei, *Autobiography, Articles, Reminiscences*, 33.

but not always in the best artistic taste.” In fact, Prokofiev developed scorn for traditional music: “They say that you can’t give a piano recital without Chopin. I’ll prove that we can do quite well without Chopin!” Furthermore, he added corrections to pieces he played. For example, in a copy of Tchaikovsky’s *Scherzo a la Russe*, Prokofiev crossed out notes in the figurations he believed to be superfluous, added octaves to bass notes, wrote in staccatos and accelerandos and transposed chords an octave higher. In his own gramophone recording of the *Visions Fugitives*, one can detect Prokofiev taking similar liberties with his own score. Before long, Yesipova and her famous student clashed: “Has assimilated little of my method. Very talented but rather unpolished” was her characterization of Prokofiev at a piano examination in the spring of 1910. With Yesipova, Prokofiev studied Schumann’s Sonata in F-sharp minor, Liszt’s Sonata in B minor, a transcription from Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*, Medtner’s *Fairy Tales (Skazki)* Op. 48, Glazunov’s Sonata in E minor and pieces by Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky. He was familiar with the counterpoint of Bach (which may have influenced the textures of the *Visions Fugitives*). For example, during his final piano examination in the spring of 1914 he played a fugue from Bach’s *Kunst der Fugue* and performed differing dynamic levels on different voices.<sup>13</sup>

Prokofiev did however enjoy his studies in conducting with Nikolai Tcherepnin, who was a student of Rimsky-Korsakov in 1895-98.<sup>14</sup> Prokofiev conducted a performance of Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro* by the end of the course. Throughout the conducting course, Prokofiev conducted many other orchestral works, and developed

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 28.

(or redeveloped) an appreciation for the composers of the classical era, which came through in his own “classical” works. He felt that he learned more about orchestration through the hands-on experience of studying conducting under Tcherepnin than in the orchestration class of Rimsky-Korsakov. As a result, he was composing orchestral works including the First Piano Concerto (dedicated to Tcherepnin) in 1911 and the Second Piano Concerto in 1912-13.

The literary work of Konstantin Balmont found its way into Prokofiev’s compositions as early as 1909 when the composer wrote *The White Swan* and *The Wave* for female voices and orchestra. Prokofiev felt that the poems of Balmont had a musical quality and appealed to him profoundly.<sup>15</sup> He also wrote a song, *There Are Other Planets*, Op. 9, based on Balmont, whose fashionable verses have also been set by Tcherepnin, Myaskovsky and Stravinsky, to name a few. The title with which Prokofiev furnished the Opus 22 is from a poem by Balmont entitled, “I do not know wisdom”. In the poem, Balmont uses the word “Mimolyotnosti”, which means ‘transiencies’. The word has been translated as “Visions Fugitives.” The short poem comes from a set of poems from 1903:

I do not know wisdom – leave that to others –  
 I only turn fugitive visions into verse.  
 In each fugitive vision I see worlds,  
 Full of the changing play of rainbows.  
 Don’t curse me, you wise ones. What are you to me?  
 The fact is I’m only a cloudlet, full of fire.  
 The fact is I’m only a cloudlet. Look: I’m floating.  
 And I summon dreamers... You I summon not.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>16</sup> Nice, David. *Prokofiev: From Russia to the West, 1891-1935*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 129.