

Prokofiev encounters Gershwin, Gershwin encounters Prokofiev: A Performer's View

Barbara Nissman

EVEN BEFORE I actually discovered that Sergey Prokofiev and George Gershwin had met each other on at least two occasions, I sensed that there might be a musical connection between the two. This was reaffirmed every time I sat down to play Prokofiev's *Third Piano Concerto* and started the trill at the beginning of the second movement (after the orchestra finishes their statement of the playful Andante theme). Perhaps I should blame my American genes, but that piano scale up to the high B-flat always reminds me of the famous opening clarinet slide in Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.





The author with Prokofiev in Sontsovska, Ukraine

According to Duke, the Paris premier of Gershwin's Piano Concerto in F took place on May 29, 1928. The soloist was not Gershwin but a young Dmitri Tiomkin who would years later acquire fame as a Hollywood film composer. (He won an Oscar for the film score of *Giant*.) Vladimir Golschmann was the conductor. Dukelsky states that he invited two friends to join him for the gala concert at the Paris Opera: Sergey Diaghilev, famed director of the Ballets Russes for whom he had composed a few ballets, and his old friend Prokofiev. The evening is described by Duke in his delightful memoir *Passport to Paris*.

Whether the fault lay with the French musicians, notoriously allergic to jazz, or with Mr Tiomkin – an able pianist, but certainly no Gershwin, I cannot say. Diaghilev shook his head and muttered something about “good jazz and bad Liszt” whereas Prokofiev, intrigued by some of the pianistic invention, asked me to bring George to his apartment the next day. George came and played his head off! Prokofiev liked the tunes and the flavorsome embellishments but thought little of the concerto (repeated by Gershwin the next day), which, he said later, consisted of 32-bar choruses ineptly bridged together. He thought highly of Gershwin's gifts both as composer and pianist, however and predicted that he'd go far should he leave “dollars and dinners” alone.²

Prokofiev, writing in his personal diary, tells a different tale of that evening. In his entry of May 29, he writes: “In the evening Lina [Prokofiev] and Dukelsky went to Gershwin's concert, but I played bridge with Zakharov at the Samoylenkos. [...] Dukelsky for some reason defends Gershwin; he says that Diaghilev was criticizing Gershwin, but if Diaghilev goes to America in the winter, they will force Gershwin upon him as the latest new thing.”³

So Prokofiev did not attend the concert, but the

question remains: Did he meet George Gershwin in Paris? If we examine the diaries of Gershwin's brother, Ira, the mystery is solved as to the exact date of their initial meeting in Paris. It was not on May 29, 1928 but April 8, 1928. Ira kept extensive diaries of his European travels, and he notes that on April 8, “he and his wife Lee decided to go to Versailles but George did not join him – he went off with Duke to meet Prokofiev.”⁴ Unfortunately, we have no entries in Prokofiev's personal diaries for this date, as no entries were recorded for the period March 16 through May 24, 1928.

Prokofiev's second encounter with Gershwin took place in the United States on January 14, 1930. According to Duke, Prokofiev had just arrived in New York from playing concerts in Cleveland, and Duke took him to the Broadway opening of Gershwin's *Strike up the Band* followed by a midnight party at the Warburgs. (James Warburg, a member of the well-known banking family, was married to the composer Kay Swift, Gershwin's old girlfriend and sometime collaborator.) Here is Prokofiev's version of the evening:

Dukelsky calls and persuades me to attend a party being given by some millionaire in honor of Gershwin, after the premiere of his latest *operetka*. Gershwin is operetta's American God; he also attempts to compose serious music, and sometimes he even does that with some flair, but not always successfully. Dukelsky said that since Gershwin once visited me at home in Paris, he is hopeful that we will show up today. [Proof that they had indeed met!]

“All the stars of the world of operetta and the music-hall will be there – the most glamorous party of the season,” Dukelsky says breathlessly. At midnight he came by for us, we got dressed and went out, although I felt like going to bed. The party turned out

to be rather strange. A cabaret diva sang in a bass voice, a pretty woman who earns about 4,000 dollars a week; Gershwin himself played. And his *papasha*, a small, half-intellectual little Jew who no longer knows Russian well, stood next to me (I was sitting) and provided commentary: and now he is playing his 'drunken' concerto (his piano concerto). [A pun: In Russian, the word for drunk is *p'yaniiy* and piano is *fortepianniiy*.]

"And now the violins are playing the melody."

P: "The violins (*skripki*) are speaking Russian."

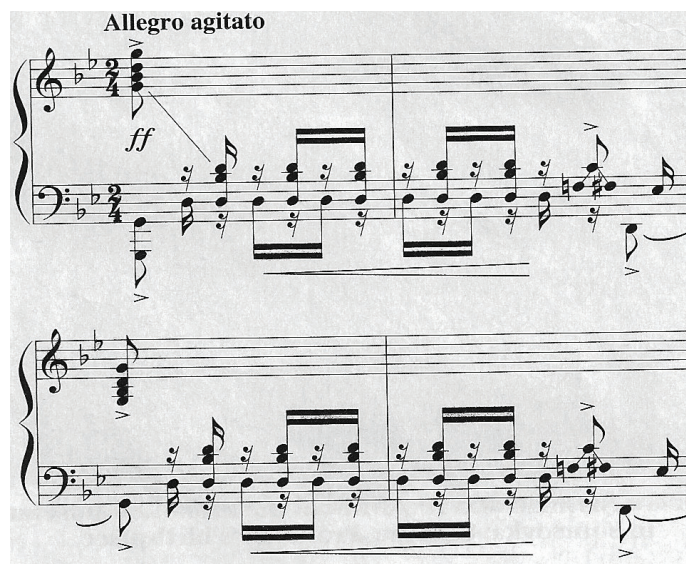
Papasha: "Yes, of course, the strippers." [Once again, the humor here is in the play on words between *skripki*, *violins*, and a nonsense word that papasha comes up with, *striпки*.]

A great deal of champagne was distributed; one stumbling and smiling gentleman was delicately taken away to the depths of the apartment – to reflect upon "dry" America. At two in the morning, drowsy, we went home, laughing at Dukelsky and his "most glamorous party of the season."⁵ Thus we know that Prokofiev did not sit through the opening night performance of Gershwin's *Strike up the Band*, but he and his wife Lina did attend the party afterwards.

Let us return to Gershwin's visit to Prokofiev's Paris apartment when Gershwin "played his head off." There are many anecdotes about Prokofiev's obsession with time (calculating his daily walks in exact minutes and seconds, for example) and his concern with visitors' punctuality (he was known to make people wait outside if they appeared at his door a few moments too early for a scheduled appointment). What was most important to Prokofiev was the sacredness of his work periods.

That Prokofiev chose to spend several hours listening and watching Gershwin play the piano is quite remarkable; obviously Prokofiev did not feel it was a waste of valuable time. Likely Gershwin played for Prokofiev, rather than Prokofiev playing for Gershwin. Gershwin had earned the reputation that once seated on the piano bench, that's where he stayed – immovable. That was where he could always be found at parties, usually flanked by beautiful chorus girls.

When Gershwin sat down at the piano, most likely he began to play his most recent serious piano composition, namely his *Concerto in F*, composed in 1925. Prokofiev's reaction to the regularity of phrase structure of Gershwin's 32-bar choruses is understandable. Since he was a child, Prokofiev had always tried to avoid squareness and predictability of phrase structure; he even criticized his tutor, Reinhold Glière, for the regular four-bar sequences in his music. (Prokofiev's comment about "32-bar choruses ineptly strung together" also focuses on the primary weakness of Gershwin's *Piano Concerto* – namely, its transitions.) But Prokofiev must have recognized his own influence when Gershwin began to play the third movement's toccata finale. Certainly he must have heard that his *Toccata* of 1912 had served as its model. (Perhaps Gershwin had combined elements of Prokofiev's *Toccata* with Bartok's *Allegro Barbaro*, written around the same time.)



Gershwin, *Concerto in F*, finale



Prokofiev, *Toccata*, Op. 11

In the second movement of the *Concerto*, Gershwin does something similar in terms of structure to what Prokofiev does in the third movement finale of his *Third Concerto*: He surprises us with a heart-breaking theme in the middle section and then milks it for all its sentimental worth, with lots of vibrating strings. Prokofiev's romantic theme in that middle section, played in dialogue with the cello and piano and accompanied by thick string writing, offers an unexpected but welcome emotional contrast. Perhaps that tattered, well-studied score of Prokofiev's *Third Concerto* might have also served as a structural model for Gershwin.

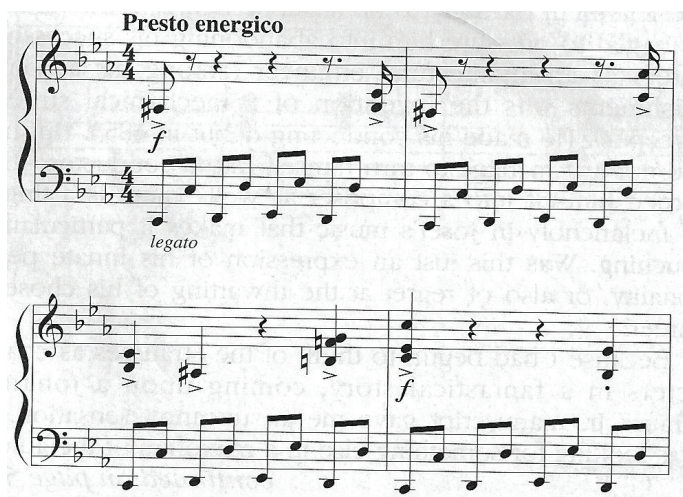
Both Prokofiev and Gershwin were "natural" pianists, possessing great facility at the instrument as well as the uncanny, intuitive ability of knowing exactly what would work and fit easily under the hands. They loved and respected the instrument, and their attitude towards the keyboard was built upon a solid Lisztian foundation of nineteenth-century romantic, bravura pianism; both also possessed a natural gift for melodic invention, and both occasionally revealed a bit of Russian melancholy. Neither could be considered a purely "intellectual" composer whose music was in any

way governed by theories; neither adhered to a school of composition. Both were individuals who went their own way.

Physically they also resembled each other. Both men were tall and lean and well-coordinated. Gershwin wasn't as tall as Prokofiev, but he was also blessed with long arms that could easily span the distance of the entire keyboard. According to Duke, "Gershwin's extraordinary left-hand performed miracles in counter-rhythms, syncopations, shrewd canonic devices, and unexpected harmonic shifts."⁶ Prokofiev also liked unexpected harmonic shifts, and both composers used lots of staccato effects and sharp rhythmic accents, relying on articulation for punctuation points and to highlight musical ideas.

Gershwin was known to go nightly to the clubs in Harlem to pick up the latest stride techniques. He liked to sit very close to the keyboard so that he could study exactly what "licks" the "guys" were using. Gershwin learned from watching Luckey Roberts, and I imagine that Prokofiev likewise sat there observing Gershwin's left-hand – wondering what he also might pick up and use in his piano music.

Back in 1909 while still at Conservatory, Prokofiev had already experimented with left-hand stride rhythms in his *Fourth Etude, Op. 2*, which I've called Prokofiev's answer to boogie-woogie.



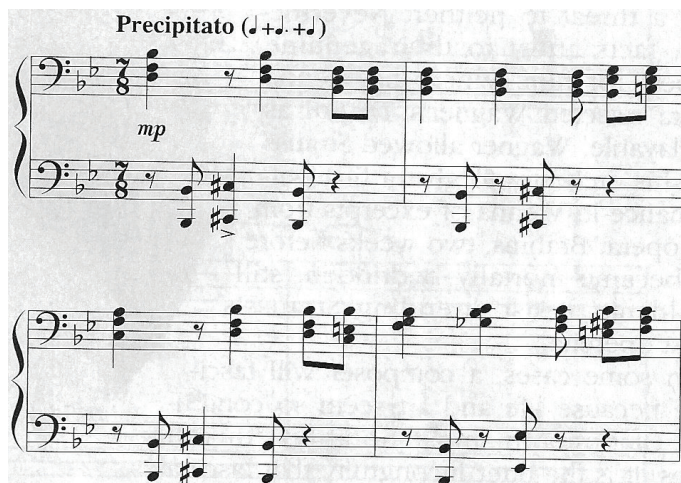
Prokofiev, Etude Op. 2, No. 4

Perhaps it was even Gershwin's left hand that inspired the left-hand descending arpeggio accompaniment figure that Prokofiev uses throughout the second movement of the *Sixth Sonata*.



Prokofiev, Sonata No. 6, second movement

Permit me another performer's leap of faith: Perhaps Gershwin's left-hand acrobatics influenced consciously or unconsciously the well-known ostinato rhythm in the finale of the *Seventh Sonata*.



Prokofiev, Sonata No. 7, finale

Certainly what we might label as "Gershwin-esque" elements can already be heard in one of Prokofiev's *Visions Fugitives* dating from 1917, composed while Prokofiev was still in Russia. This set of twenty character pieces was inspired by the poet Konstantin Balmont's lines: "In every fugitive vision I see worlds, / Full of the changing play of rainbow hues." All of the three-part miniatures in the collection are similar to intimate diary entries. Full of seventh and ninth chords, the language of No. 18 (*Con una dolce lentezza*) is harmonically similar to Gershwin's piano writing. Prokofiev likes playing with its bluesy, slinky rhythms.

It is music that seems meant to be choreographed. He almost makes us see the sensuous, slender figures gliding across the stage. Yet in 1917, when Prokofiev composed this piece, Gershwin had not yet written his first hit tune, *Swanee*. That would appear only in 1919. What is quite remarkable is how a Russian could capture so much of America's soul without having yet heard its voices.

When we hear the opening bars of the Prokofiev's slow waltz from *Op. 32*, there is some doubt as to

which composer might have written this piece: Was it Gershwin or Prokofiev? Recently I played it for an American friend of mine who is also a jazz musician. “Why that sounds like something Bill Evans would have written,” he commented. Not by Gershwin nor by Bill Evans, but by Prokofiev, composed in New York in 1918 shortly after his arrival to the States. The harmonic language is indeed similar; Gershwin also makes use of parallel chords and seventh and ninth chords in the orchestral introduction to the second movement of the *Concerto in F*, written years later in 1925.



Prokofiev, Op. 32, No. 4



Gershwin, Concerto in F, second movement

Yet in typical Prokofiev fashion, once all the layers have been stripped away, a rather simple and traditional harmonic skeleton remains: tonic, dominant, and sub-dominant harmonies. He even writes all his wanderings over these three harmonic pedal points; for further emphasis, he visually outlines

the triad for the performer with tenuto markings in the score, also adding sevenths and ninths to create that jazzy feeling. After the middle section, Prokofiev brings back the harmonic structure with much more embroidery, and it is very similar to what he does in the slow movement waltz of his *Sixth Sonata* when the theme returns. Prokofiev seasons the Waltz with a touch of Americana as he experienced it. Perhaps the harmonies were in the air he breathed during those months spent alone in New York.

When the entire *Op. 32* set is heard, it sounds as if that fourth piece (the waltz) was written by a different composer. It does not resemble Prokofiev’s usual voice. The portrait of an extremely vulnerable man with his heart and feelings prominently exposed is unmasked. It is a Prokofiev who is no longer hiding comfortably behind the foil of his elaborate virtuosic pianism; he shares a poignant, heart-wrenching statement with the listener and allows the melancholy within his soul to be plainly heard. Prokofiev’s initial visit to America in 1918 was filled with difficulties: financial problems, professional disappointments, and physical illness; it was generally a very lonely and trying time. The feeling conveyed in *Op. 32, No. 4*, is quite similar to that of a sad Gershwin tune.

Often Prokofiev is accused, as he was on his first trip to America, of being only an “athletic” composer who likes to play football at the keyboard and show off his acrobatic tricks, what usually follows are criticisms of his steely fingers, his arrogance, his coldness, his brutality – the usual stereotype we all have heard many times from his critics. When Prokofiev does not hide behind his pianism, however, his music impresses not with its virtuosity but with its depth of feeling.

Perhaps hearing Gershwin on that day in 1928, seated at his piano, “playing his head off,” consciously or unconsciously influenced the bluesy nostalgia we hear in the slow movements of the so-called *War Sonatas* that Prokofiev would write when he returned to the Soviet Union. I have jokingly referred to the slow waltz of the *Sixth Sonata* as Prokofiev’s take on *The Man I Love*. Their moods are similar, expressing a longing for something that has been lost.



Prokofiev, Sixth Sonata, third movement

The same sadness can be heard in the romanticism of the middle movements from the other two *War Sonatas*.

Gershwin, unlike Prokofiev, did not completely realize the extent of his natural gifts; if he had, he would not have been constantly in search of a teacher to make him a better composer. He was always looking for that "seal of approval" from the classical world. The real tragedy of George Gershwin is that he probably died believing *Porgy & Bess* to be a flawed work, mainly because academics had severely criticized it. Most pianists are aware of the story about Gershwin meeting Ravel and asking him for lessons.

Ravel's immediate response to Gershwin was that not only would he become a "bad Ravel," but would also lose his gifts of spontaneity and natural melody. Ravel then paid homage to Gershwin with his G major *Piano Concerto*. (In that work, Ravel "steals" from Gershwin's *Concerto in F*.) Ravel recommended that Gershwin ask his friend Nadia Boulanger to teach him, but she also turned him down. When Gershwin asked Igor Stravinsky, he received the following reply: "Well Mr. Gershwin, how much money do you make?" Gershwin answered with a large six-figure sum. Typically for Stravinsky, he replied: "Well, in that case, Mr. Gershwin, it is / who should study with you!" Then there was Arnold Schoenberg, Gershwin's old tennis partner who said (and rightly so!), "I would only make you a bad Schoenberg, and you are such a good Gershwin!" Gershwin even asked Prokofiev's old friend, Glazunov to teach him about orchestration; Glazunov was appalled at the prospect. Interestingly, there is no evidence that Gershwin had ever asked Prokofiev to give him lessons.

How different a character was Prokofiev. From a very young age, Prokofiev always knew his worth – even while at the conservatory, when all his professors were criticizing his "modernism" and his "bad boy" antics. Criticism came from Lyadov, Glazunov, Rimsky-Korsakov, Diaghilev, Stravinsky, Rachmaninoff, and Medtner, to name a few. But Prokofiev always had the strength of soul to not be bothered by what they said, and continued to go his own way. He intuitively knew where his music would lead him.

Let's return to the question posed at the beginning about who influenced whom. Of course, the answer is obvious; they both stole from each other, as artists always do. Could these musical ideas have been "in the air" as Bartók had speculated when asked why at the same time in areas geographically far apart, similar motives happen to be used? Bartók talks about



these as "universals." Perhaps T.S. Eliot said it best (if we substitute composers or even performers for poets): "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take and good poets make it into something better or at least into something different."⁷

A shorter version of this article appeared under the title "When Gershwin Met Prokofiev," in Piano Today (Winter 2005): 4-7, 45, 54-55. Reprinted with permission of the author

¹ Oscar Levant, *A Smattering of Ignorance* (New York: Doubleday, 1940), 190.

² Vernon Duke, *Passport to Paris* (New York: Little, Brown, 1955), 209.

³ Sergey Prokof'ev, *Dnevnik 1907-1933*, ed. and introd. Svyatoslav Prokof'ev, 2 vols. (Paris: sprkf, 2002), 2: 629. Like the pianist Boris Zakharov, Boris and Fatma Samoylenko were friends with Prokofiev during this period. Zakharov periodically stayed with him; Fatma Samoylenko was a regular correspondent.

⁴ Robert Kimball and Alfred Simon, *The Gershwins* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974), 95.

⁵ Prokof'ev, *Dnevnik 1907-1933*, 2: 746.

⁶ Duke, *Passport to Paris*, 90.

⁷ T.S. Eliot, *Philip Massinger*, in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1928), 125.