

Stylistic Multiplicity in Prokofiev's War Sonatas

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Abstract:

This article will explore Sergei Prokofiev's stylistic multiplicity in his three piano "War Sonatas" (Op.82, Op.83, Op.84). Prokofiev (1891–1953), a prominent Russian composer and pianist of the 20th century, drew from diverse musical influences shaped by his upbringing, education, and exposure to European and Russian traditions. The article delves into four of Prokofiev's compositional styles, emphasizing neoclassicism, metallic or bell-like sounds, lyricism, and unconventional harmonies ("wrong" notes). These elements are analyzed within the context of his life experiences, musical training, and the turbulent historical backdrop of World War II. By examining and analyzing specific musical examples from the war sonatas, the study illustrates how Prokofiev's compositions reflect a fusion of traditionalism and modernism, contributing to his unique musical voice in the realm of piano literature.

Keyword:

Prokofiev
War sonatas
Stylistic multiplicity
Neoclassicism

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1. Introduction

Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953), one of the greatest Russian pianists and composers of the twentieth century, spent a long time traveling abroad in the US, France, and Japan where he met many professional musicians, composed and performed a lot, struggling to get himself a respectable reputation as a foreign composer. He experienced turbulent times later in his life due to World War II. Those experiences influenced his musical language by giving him several basic musical styles, which this paper will use the word "multiplicity" to

describe his compositions. This paper will focus on his piano works and argue that Sergei Prokofiev's three "War piano sonatas" (Op.82, No.6, Op.83, No.7, and Op.84, No.8) are a combination of stylistic multiplicity, reflecting in the styles of neoclassicism, metallic or so-called bell sound, lyricism and "wrong" notes set. The paper will discuss the historical elements of where those different styles originated from and how they influenced him in his piano writing by analyzing the pieces with the background of the composition.

2. Background and education: Sergei Prokofiev as a composer and pianist

The development of music in the 20th century presented a complex and patchy situation, and Prokofiev was born in such a “diversified” society. As an outstanding pianist and composer, Prokofiev’s musical styles are also diverse. It seems that many of Prokofiev’s musical works are a combination of traditionalism and modernism. This could explain the reason why Prokofiev is somehow categorized as one of the neoclassical composers, others include Igor Stravinsky, Paul Hindemith, and Darius Milhaud. To explore the multiple styles in his composition, this paper has to go back to his living circumstances and musical background first.

Prokofiev is defined as a “Russian composer” due to the long period he spent in what was then the Soviet Union. He was born into a middle-class family who lived in a small town called Sontsovka which used to be part of the Soviet Union, but now a place in Ukraine. His father was a manager of an estate while his mother, a wise woman who influenced the young Prokofiev in his childhood, was herself an amateur pianist with classical music taste. She was his first piano teacher and developed his musical talent by playing musical works of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, and other musicians in their house as Prokofiev has written in his “Notes from Childhood”:

When I was put to bed at night...I would lie there and listen as the sound of a Beethoven sonata came from...several rooms away. More than anything else, my mother played the sonatas of Volume I. Next came Chopin’s preludes, mazurkas, and waltzes. Sometimes there was a piece by Liszt ^[1].

Even since she was pregnant with Prokofiev, she insisted on practicing piano hours every day ^[2]. A lot of musical memories were stored in his head, becoming the supporting substances for him to start writing his own tunes. Therefore, around the age of four, he “composed” his first music *Idian Galop* (**Figure 1**) which was written down by his mother ^[3]. This piece was very traditional like the works his mother played for him, with a standard phrase structure: balanced two repeated short phrases and alternated tonic and dominant notes in the left hand and

a cadence at the end. This could be seen as a potential foreshadowing of the classical sonata structure he would apply for his piano sonatas years later.

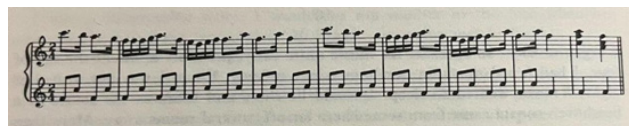


Figure 1. *Idian Galop*

Later, after a friend’s recommendation, they met the most famous and greatest composer in Moscow at that time, Sergei Taneyev ^[4]. He gave young Prokofiev a suggestion that he should start to take lessons that summer with one of his students from the conservatory, Reinhold Gliere ^[5]. Under the training of Gliere who emphasized the traditional compositional aspects of music style, Prokofiev started to compose some music in 4+4 phrases in what Gliere called song form. In addition to this, Prokofiev finished his first composition of symphony with four movements which he argued with his teacher for three days before he was allowed to write this piece ^[6]. Thus, Prokofiev stepped in the way of becoming a professional musician.

3. Influences and development of Prokofiev’s stylistic multiplicity

3.1. Neoclassicism in Prokofiev’s composition: Classical line and modern trend

Before talking about different styles within his three War Sonatas, it is necessary to discuss the four compositional idioms Prokofiev enumerated himself regarding his music styles.

The first was the classical line, which could be traced back to his early childhood, and the Beethoven sonatas he heard his mother play. This line takes sometimes a neo-classical form (sonatas/concertos) and sometimes imitates the 18th-century classics (gavottes, the “Classical” Symphony, partly the Sinfonietta) ^[2,7].

Indeed, the traditional foundation of his musical taste was laid by his mother. When he was about four years old, his mother always played sonatas by Beethoven, preludes, and mazurkas by Chopin. Young Prokofiev would “practice” with his mother using the

different registers on the same piano while she was playing Hanon's exercises or Czerny's etudes. Prokofiev confirmed that Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) had formed a “permanent influence” on his music ^[8]. Not only by listening to his mother but also Gliere used Beethoven's sonata as the guide of Prokofiev's training on his composition. Additionally, he was assigned arrangement practice with Beethoven's sonatas for string chamber orchestra in Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestration classes and his first piano assignment with Alexander Winkler was Beethoven's first sonata during his education at the Conservatoire ^[9–10].

As mentioned previously, Prokofiev's modernism is also a significant part of his music. According to himself, his second line was the “modern trend, begins with that meeting with Taneyev when he reproached me for the “crudeness” of my harmonies...later into a search for a language in which to express powerful emotions” ^[2, 11]. The development of his modern trend more or less had a certain relationship with the “Evenings of Conservatory Music”, a musical society, that existed between 1901 and 1912. The goal of this group is to gather various pianists, composers, and musical critics. They performed and created music together, inviting popular musicians to promote various music from different regions such as European and Russian, from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The musical society succeeded in arranging 56 concerts, performing hundreds of early unknown works by M.Ravel, C. Debussy, A. Schonberg, and other European composers. Prokofiev started to attend this adventurous concert series in 1908. As its name suggests, it contains many most recent and newest music from Europe and Russia where he could absorb fresh and modern elements from others. Besides, he also brought his own compositions to the concert series which encouraged him to create different languages. He performed some of his music works at those events, such as Four Etudes Op.2 (1909). The positive praise he received for his excellent performances helped him to become a potential modernist musician, which gave him more impetus to develop aspects of modernism in his music.

Both the classical and modern lines contributed to Prokofiev's music style of neoclassicism in the three piano sonatas. It is reflected in the traditional sonata form

with new harmonic arrangements and strong emotional expression. All ten movements are formed in general classical sonata form, especially No.7, a fast-slow-fast paradigm, with dissonance chords, chromaticism, and mechanical strikes, which typically represents the combination of traditionalism and modernism.

3.2. Metallic and bell-like sounds in Prokofiev's music

The third one is *toccata* or the “motor” line “traceable perhaps to Schumann's *Toccata* which made such a powerful impression on me when I first heard it (*Etudes*, op. 2, *Toccata*, op.II...)...This line is perhaps the least important” ^[2]. Even though in Prokofiev's perspective, it might be not as important as other styles, it is still embodied in his piano writing, for instance, the fast passages with distinct rhythm from the fourth movement of No.6 and the third movement of No.7.

In Prokofiev's piano music, percussiveness has become an important element which is called metallic/bell sound, and will be discussed later in detail with music examples. This percussive sound promotes a sonority effect that organically combines dynamic rhythm and rough sound.

3.3. Lyricism in Prokofiev's composition

Lyricism is a significant aspect of Prokofiev's music styles which he described in his fourth line. “It appears first as a thoughtful and meditative mood, not always associated with the melody, or, at any rate, with the long melody...sometimes partly contained in the long melody...as time went on I gave more and more attention to this aspect of my work” ^[2].

The composer often emphasizes the augmentative major seventh as a melodic note. This lyrical component occupies a large proportion in the slow movements and paragraphs, which makes the melody audible with both modernist factors and romantic color, becoming one of his typical characteristics among the piano writings. This lyrical line was at least partially influenced by traditional Russian composers and music as Victor Belyi compliments Prokofiev's lyric side “He has a melodic gift which is in the best Russian traditions of Moussorgsky and Lyadov” ^[3]. This paper agrees with this because the evidence was clearly shown in Prokofiev's own

words, “The pieces I liked were the suite from Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Mlada*, Glazunov’s *Poeme Lyrique...Lyadov’s Russian Songs for Orchestra*”^[1].

3.4. Unconventional harmonies (“wrong” notes) in Prokofiev’s works

Even though the wrong notes setting is not categorized in an individual genre in Prokofiev’s music style, it is still important and pretty much popular so that it can be recognized without any difficulty. It appears not only within one specific line but can be shown as if it cuts across all of them. Unlike something “wrong” that needs to be corrected immediately, his wrong notes are constantly displayed in those sonatas as they gradually become non-strange through the music process.

4. The usage of the four styles in Prokofiev’s war sonatas

How are the general ideas of these styles reflected in this paper correlated with four features as multiple styles? As addressed earlier in the paper, both the classical and modern lines can be attributed to Prokofiev’s music style of neoclassicism in the three piano sonatas. Most of the sonatas by composers in the classical period are in a standard diagram “fast-slow-fast” a three-movement structure which is normally used the sonata-allegro form for the first movement, and then sometimes a minuet or a binary (single or duplex) as well as sonata form for the second movement, at last, most appears a rondo or sonata-rondo form for the third or ending movement. While Prokofiev used the classic forms from the Classical period as discussed in his musical works, he was not just applying those general rules from the early period but also added multiple modern compositional techniques such as complex harmony, polyrhythm, as well as the sharp, dissonant sound effect, incisive timber characteristic in his music producing.

The toccata line somehow has a certain relationship with metallic sound or they both have some similar traits. Performers show off their virtuosic professional techniques through the fast and flexible articulation of the toccata type. It has the features of shortness, fastness, and with clear and strong articulation. Prokofiev tried to insert barbaric quality in his music starting from the

early compositional period after his deep impression by Schumann’s *Toccata*. Those features, to some extent, compared with a metallic sound, have common sound qualities, which are manifested within its sharp, dry, striking, and steel-like sound. This is the same situation in his review in the New York Times describing that he had “steel fingers, steel wrists, steel biceps and triceps.” This conception also applies to his music in the aspect of steel harmonically and rhythmically, which “is” the sound of war. In addition, the Russian tradition of church-like bells is also well represented in each of his three sonatas. It is reasonable to include bell sounds in music because there must be at least one thing unchangeable in troubled times, whether from the universe or the regular call of death.

The opposite style of the strong, tight, intense sonority is the interluded lyricism, which appears in each sonata. Especially in Prokofiev’s late period of composition, his unique lyrical style developed to a highly mature stage. The lyricism in the three sonatas has the feature of a broad, open atmosphere, often along with a wide range in keyboard register, thus providing a sense of inner balance and resistance.

The clever use of unconventional harmonies creates “wrong notes” effects. Traditional harmony is mainly based on the superposition of thirds, however, among these three sonatas, Prokofiev made extensive use of modern, dissonant harmonies, which constitute many minor seconds. This usage not only gives the audience a sense of surprise but also increases the tension of the works. The duration of the “wrong notes” is arranged from the very beginning of the pieces and is not “corrected” but rather “ended” until the last chords or cadences at the end of them.

5. Analysis with musical examples

Following are the discussions on how those elements are embodied in war sonatas. The sentence that came into mind to describe neoclassicism is “New wine in an old bottle.” It could be explained as new conceptions or contents to be intervened in an old framework. Taking the form of three sonatas as an example (**Table 1**) in terms of their overall structure to illustrate how they can be analyzed in a classical aspect.

Table 1. A brief table on the structure of No.6, 7, and 8

Op.82, No.6				
Movement	1st mvt	2nd mvt	3rd mvt	4th mvt
Speed	Allegro moderato	Allegretto	Tempo di vaizer lentissimo	Vivace
Time Signature and Key	4/4 A major	2/2 E major	9/8 C major	2/4 A minor-major
Form	Sonata form	Simple Ternary-Gavotte	Waltz	Rondo (not typical)
Op.83, No.7				
Movement	1st mvt	2nd mvt	3rd mvt	
Speed	Allegre inquieto	Andante calorose	Precipitato	
Time Signature and Key	6/8 ^b B major	3/4 E major	7/8 ^b B major	
Form	Sonata form		Toccata-like	
Op.84, No.8				
Movement	1st mvt	2nd mvt	3rd mvt	
Speed	Andante dolce	Andante sognando	Vivace	
Time Signature and Key	4/4 ^b B major	3/4 ^b D major	12/8 ^b B major	
Form	Sonata form	Minuet	Rondo	

As shown in the table, all three sonatas have a relatively principled classical sonata form established by Vienna classicism representative composer Haydn and developed by Beethoven. During the classical period, sonatas usually consisted of three movements, Beethoven expanded it with 4 movements by inserting another of minuet or scherzo. Prokofiev followed this principle, the example could be the second movement of No.8, which uses the form of minuet. Each first movement is in sonata form with a grand range. In the score, audiences can clearly hear repeated accented notes throughout the piece, enhancing the thematic motif. The dissonant sonority is reflected in his use of modern techniques, for instance, adding minor seconds into chords to create new harmonic language.

As the most popular or most well-known war sonata, it is not hard to imagine or infer that some of the musical elements in No.7 can describe the scene of the real cruel war vividly. Why the word “metallic” is used to present the sound of specific passages in these pieces? Because all the weapons used in a war are frightening cold,

sharp, steely, and are made of hard metal or steel, which is appropriate to be described as the sound of metal. The music in **Figure 2** gives a precise image of how Prokofiev utilized “metallic” elements. There are two *ff* marked separately in each register, along with accent marks almost in every measure, creating an earsplitting background. The mechanical qualities of inconsonant minor seconds, a big span between two hands, and rest marks between each chords demonstrate the brutal, anxious, threatened, and furious feeling when facing a world of a hail of bullets.

**Figure 2.** Sonata No.7, mvt. 1, mm.21–31

The church-like bell sound is also one of the important features of Prokofiev's late style. In **Figure 3**, it can be inferred that the lowest octaves in the left hand are the imitation of the bell sound. The slow rhythm controls the pace of the paragraph, with stable and full sound, suggesting an omen from a deep place which may symbolize the approach of death. On the contrary, in the slow movement too, mm. 69–74 from the second movement of No.7, there is another kind of bell sound. The highest voice of high A and B in the right hand, again with a calm and slow rhythm, resembles the sound of bells as they can guide people to victory. At this moment, people seem to forget about the harsh reality, expecting back to normal life.



Figure 3. Sonata No.8, mvt.2, mm.39–42

As mentioned before, the lyrical style is associated with relatively slow passages, the following score in **Figure 4** from the first movement of sonata No.7 expresses the long melodic lines. Sometimes it appears in a thoughtful and meditative mood, which is well depicted in this example. In the middle of this movement—or it could be possibly interpreted with imagination that it is the situation in the middle of the war—unharmonious sonority and exaggerated, wondering section bring people to a twisty fantasy. As every ruthless scene comes into people's sight, one cannot help but think about what life will be like after suffering the war and the consequences it will bring to people, or the illusion of peaceful moments during hard, brutal times.



Figure 4. Sonata No.7, mvt.1, mm. 338–341

The last aspect regarding Prokofiev's multiplicity is the wrong note setting. It is possible to imply that

war itself is a huge mistake. As shown in **Figure 5**, the beginning of the first movement from Sonata No.6 is in A major which is strongly introduced in the first chord. However, there are lots of intrusive D# sticks to this movement starting from the second beat on the left hand. Additionally, the syncopated rhythm of the left hand within the first two measures and the setting of octaves enhanced the “wrong” character. A similar writing style is shown in the fourth movement (**Figure 6**) of the same piece which is in A minor and finally ends in A major, with D# serving as an interruption in the movement. But this time shows up in the right hand's fast-running phrase first.

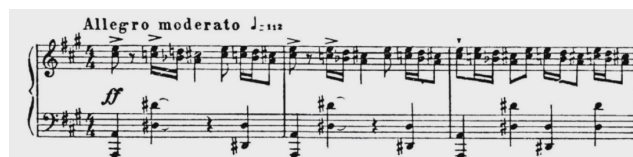


Figure 5. Sonata No.6, mvt.1, mm.1–3



Figure 6. Sonata No.6, mvt.4, mm.1–4

6. Conclusion

Prokofiev's War sonatas are among the greatest contributions to his overall piano repertoire. Therefore, it is of great significance to explore their compositional styles and techniques which can serve as a guide for pianists to perform and to get a better and deeper understanding of how those pieces are formed. As seen previously, this paper discussed Prokofiev's basic compositional styles defined by himself and the way they connected with four categorized stylistic elements. Besides, it also examined several selected musical examples specifically, showing how those multiple styles reflected in three war sonatas systematically, organically, and comprehensively. This concludes the initial argument of this paper that Prokofiev's three “War piano sonatas” are a combination of stylistic multiplicity, which are neoclassicism, metallic and bell sounds, lyricism, and wrong note styles.

Disclosure statement

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