A DISCUSSION OF THE PIANO SONATA NO. 2 IN D MINOR, OP. 14,

BY SERGEI PROKOFIEV

A PAPER ACCOMPANYING

A THREE CREDIT-HOUR CREATIVE PROJECT RECITAL

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF MUSIC

BY

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JULY 2010
Preface

The goal of this paper is to introduce the piece, provide historical background, and focus on the musical analysis of the sonata. The introduction of the piece will include a brief biography of Sergei Prokofiev and the circumstance in which the piece was composed. A general overview of the composition, performance, and perception of this piece will be discussed. The bulk of the paper will focus on the musical analysis of Piano Sonata No. 2 from my perspective as a performer of the piece. It will be broken into four sections, one each for the four movements in the sonata. In the discussion for each movement, I will analyze the forms used as well as required techniques and difficulties to be considered by the pianist. The conclusion will summarize the discussion.
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Introduction

Sergei Prokofiev was born in 1891 to parents Sergey and Mariya and grew up in comfortable circumstances. His mother, Mariya, had a feeling for the arts and gave the young Prokofiev his first piano lessons at the age of four. Young Sergei also started his first compositions at this time and heard several operas around 1899-1900. In 1902, the young composer met Sergei Taneyev who recommended that Prokofiev start taking theory, composition, instrumentation, and piano lessons from Reinhold Glière during the summer months. Prokofiev grew up influenced by the traditional style of his mother and Glière. He later entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory, and in 1908, started attending "Evenings of Contemporary Music," a series of concerts that opened the composer’s mind to understanding more creative works. It was at these series of concerts that Prokofiev would later premiere several of his first pieces, including opus 2, 3, and 4.¹

Prokofiev was interested in new trends, and it shows in his works. He experimented with several different styles such as neoclassicism, evident in his Piano Concerto No. 4, Op. 53, and expressionism, evident in his opera The Fiery Angel, Op. 37.

As the composer aged, his music became more melodic. Prokofiev's musical style

changed throughout his career to suit the musical tastes of the audience. This was not uncommon as several other composers went through the same transformations as well. Nevertheless, the composer maintained several stylistic facets. He describes the “basic lines” of his style as having a classical line, which started when he first heard Beethoven’s sonatas; a modern trend that started from Taneyev's reproach of thecrudeness of his harmonies; a Toccata or "motor" line that perhaps originated from Schumann's Toccata; a lyrical line that was present in his early works but not developed until much later in his life; a "Grotesque" or whimsicality, laughter, mockery line; and finally a patriotic style that is evident in his later works like Alexander Nevsky and War and Peace. The composer’s music is mostly based on a firm sense of tonality, and he was quite adept at combining previously composed material with new music into a coherent whole. Prokofiev was a piano virtuoso and has been described as a "Lyricist-pianist" and "Destroyer-pianist."  

Prokofiev completed eight piano sonatas during his lifetime, with a ninth that was half complete and a further tenth and eleventh planned. When put into context, he wrote more sonatas than many other great composers like Chopin, Brahms, Schumann, and

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2 Ibid, 10-14.
3 Ibid, 43.
Liszt. The harmony of these eight pieces was considered to be modern at the time, but the sense of tonality is very strong except in occasional passages. The harmonic dissonance seems to be linear and the voices move with great contrapuntal freedom. The conflicting claims of harmony and counterpoint are very well balanced.4

He composed his first piano sonata at the age of 18. While the first piece may not be mature in some respects, and perhaps not in his own Prokofiev style, his second piano sonata is another matter. Composed in four movements, the opening Allegro has been described to be “real Prokofiev” in shape and treatment. Although Prokofiev’s music language is not new and his themes sound traditional, the treatment of the material is quite novel. The second sonata stands out because of the huge variety of styles presented in a carnival atmosphere. Prokofiev pushes the limits of contrasts in this piece, more than any of his other sonatas. It covers an enormous emotional range, from Romantic lyricism to a parody of cabaret music. The sheer number of personalities presented in this piece means that there is little emotional development of the material, the cornerstone of the Romantic sonata. Prokofiev relies on variety of textures, superimposition of different themes upon one another, and unexpected dissonances to present his sonata.5

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5 Berman, 57-58.
Prokofiev’s later piano sonatas were different in style and character. The third and fourth piano sonatas were “from the old sketch-books,” with the former having been described as a “hackneyed” piano concerto.6 The fifth piano sonata is the only one composed outside of Russia, and in fact the only one that was changed later in the composer’s life. The piece was created during the composer’s experimentation period; at the time, he resided in Paris and saw Stravinsky’s popularity with the French crowd. As a result, Prokofiev tried to use Stravinsky’s musical style as a means to gain popularity with the French audience. The experiment failed but was crucial to allow the composer to reaffirm his own style and develop further.7 The sixth, seventh, and eighth piano sonatas are considered to represent the composer’s advanced step of sonata writing. All of the sonatas seem unpretentious and have a child-like simplicity. While some critics consider the last four sonatas, the fifth through to the eighth, to be more representative of the composer’s style, piano sonatas two through four have stood up considerably well over the decades.8

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6 Merrick, 14-15.


8 Berman, 17-21.
The First Movement: Allegro, ma non troppo

The first movement of this sonata is in sonata-allegro form consisting of exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda. Starting from the exposition (m.1-102), the first main theme (mm. 1-8) is made up of an ascending pattern of syncopated broken thirds (example 1).


\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Allegro, ma non troppo} \\
&\text{non troppo}
\end{align*}
\]

It is interrupted by a twelve-measure episode of striking dissonances, obscuring the D-minor tonality (mm.8-19). The first theme is repeated in a more angular way after a fermata stop (mm.20-27). A four-measure episode separates it with a dreamy, fairy-tale-like but mechanical bridge section in G minor, leading directly into an episode that separates it from the lyrical second theme in the Phrygian E minor (m.64). This theme is
accompanied by an arpeggiated bass, repeated, and then embellished with a weaving chromatic line in the upper voice (example 2).

Example 2: Prokofiev, Op. 14, first movement, mm. 64-84.
The closing section is mixed with a quick motive in part derived from the bridge theme; this closing winds down to a cadence in E-minor and a fermata, ending the exposition.9

The piece shifts to the development (mm. 103-204), beginning with the reappearance of the second theme with changed accompaniment. The music gradually turns darker and more serious from m.105 with the pleading four-note motive related to the theme of the bridge section (mm. 32-63). As the audience starts to sway with the emotions, the mood suddenly changes (m.115). The twelve-measure section, also used in the closing section of the exposition, starts whimsically but grows stubborn soon after. A lengthy sixty-measure section starting from m.127 emanates a feeling of trouble. From m.143 to m.186, the same material is heard repeatedly; the familiar motive in the ostinato accompaniment, a faster version of the same in the treble, and a plaintive intonation of a descending second in the middle register. More tension is presented with the appearance of the second theme augmented in the upper voice and the descending bell-like motive first heard in m.8. The melody increases in tone at m.159 and again at m.175. At m.187, the ending of the first theme appears again in augmentation in the key of C-sharp Minor.

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9 Berman, 58-59.
Tension is released. The bass motive of the ostinato section (m.143-186) reappears in the low register at m.197 to give a frightening sensation.\textsuperscript{10}

The recapitulation begins in m.205. This section is almost exactly the same as the exposition except that the first theme is truncated, with the left hand playing the melody while the right hand accompanying in sixteenth notes instead of triplets. Tonalities are changed to suit other expectations in the recapitulation. The coda reuses the first theme. There is a feeling of restless energy and decisiveness as the piece grows in dynamics and tonal range. The first movement ends in an explosion of a series of chords where the pianist’s hands are playing at the opposite ends of the keyboard.\textsuperscript{11}

In this movement, the pianist needs good \textit{legato} and the ability to bring out the melodic line against the accompanying figure between voices. The ability to alternate duplets and triplets is essential in this movement. Furthermore, the pianist needs to pay attention to keeping the balance and coherence of tempo between different and disjoint sections.\textsuperscript{12}

From m. 1 to m. 8, the pianist must use a different touch to bring out the first main theme hidden in the other voices. At m.8, the bell-like notes in the middle voice

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid, 59-61.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid, 61.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 66-69.
should be played from above using the weight of the forearms, and one should play the second theme (m.64) lightly, making sure not to break the long melodic line. In following the dynamic and tempo directions exactly from mm.85-102, notice that there is no *ritard* at the end. Play the second theme that appears in augmentation in the top voice of m.143 with a more expressive sound. The repeated chords in the middle starting from m.159 should be relatively light but well articulated.¹³

**The Second Movement: Scherzo**

The second movement is a toccata-like scherzo made up of short ostinato motives and rhythmically uniform non-*legato* chords. One can hear the mechanical, puppet-like regularity of the rhythm (example 3).

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¹³ Ibid.

The movement uses the form AA’BAA’. At the start of the B section, there is
great contrast in m.27 and a sense of pity in the plaintive intonations in mm.38-39 and
mm.55-57. There is a change in tonality to D-flat major in m.39 and from D-flat through
C-sharp to A-major in m.47. The slight slowdown of tempo enhances the puppet-like feel
of the movement. There is a return back to the AA’ form from m.58 at the lower register
of piano. The movement ends powerfully and abruptly.14

In this movement, the steadiness of the tempo and the executing of even staccato
chords as well as accurate hand crossings in the A section are the crucial technical
requirements. It is important to steadily and rhythmically play this movement. The hand

crossings required for this piece should not affect the pulse of the eighth notes. In particular, the right-hand requires strong and well-articulated fingers. In the B section, it is important to avoid accenting the first notes of the upbeats too much or ignoring the last notes of the downbeat too much. One should use a deeper tenuto touch for the more expressive inflections in mm.38-39, mm.47-48 and mm.54-57. In m.58, although marked pianissimo, it should be played with great clarity.15

The Third Movement: Andante

The third movement is a skazka, which is Russian for fairy tale. It has monotonous but soothing harmonies, a slow unfolding of the melody, and a mysterious ostinato that endure throughout the entire movement. This slow movement has the form of ABA'B’, and one can sense the dark and somber texture clearly from the beginning. Prokofiev quickly evokes this very specific mood within the first few measures but there is not much thematic development. The first theme has three layers of sonority: a monotonous harmonic background in the bass, the ostinato in the middle voice, and a folk-like melody in the top voice (example 4).

15 Ibid, 69.

This opening feels more and more passionate as it progresses before calming down in m.19. From m.23, there is a haunted feeling. The motive is heard four times, descending a fourth each time. There is a return to the first section in m.31 where the ostinato is heard again, although slightly altered in that each note is repeated twice. The B’ section starts in m.53 and is mostly unchanged from the B section, although it starts
one octave higher. The movement ends inconclusively, as if one was lost in thoughts and forgot to finish the story.16

This movement requires the ability to play three voices independently. The pianist must be careful to bring out the melodic shape of the ostinato voice, both in *forte* and in *piano*. Starting in m.5, the long melodic line should be played with a warm and more emphasized sound. The *forte* passage in m.15 should be played passionately and the chromaticism in mm.14-15, mm.16-17, and mm.18-22 should be expressive. The color of the sound should be changed in m.27 when the tonal center shifts to C.17

**The Fourth Movement: Vivace**

The fourth movement is in sonata-allegro form. The range of contrast is quite amazing. The movement begins with a triplet pattern, and then an ascending *crescendo*, followed by a cascading arpeggio (m.9) covering almost the entire range of the keyboard. The first theme (m.17) appears as a lighthearted melody that is marked *scherzando* with the beginning triplet pattern as the bass (example 5).

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16 Ibid, 62-64.
17 Ibid, 70-71.

The bridge (m.35) sounds bright and carries a tarantella spirit. The second theme appears at m.58 and carries a different spirit that resembles cabaret music. It grows into a crescendo starting from m.66. At m.97, the bridge theme is played in the right hand while the left hand accompanies with the second theme. It ends in a mechanical way in mm.124-131.\(^{18}\)

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 64-66.
The development starts at m.133 and shows the cyclic nature of this movement as it recalls the second theme in the development in the first movement (m.103) but at a slower tempo, giving an impression of sadness. The mood suddenly changes back at m.145 and the tempo speeds up to reach *vivace* by m.161. The first theme is then presented accompanied by big leaping and jarring chords. From m.193, a kind of carnival-like section appears as the first theme starts blending into the second theme and a C-sharp note keeps coming back, disturbing the melody; all of this is accompanied by an ostinato bass. The bridge theme comes back again at m.205 but still accompanied by the previous ostinato bass. From m. 210 to m. 228, the music derived from the introduction of the movement is set against the striding duplet eights of the second-theme accompaniment.19

The recapitulation (m.226) seems to slowly change from the development and is almost the same as the beginning; the first theme is heard at m.242, the bridge section starts from m.258, and the second theme arrives at m.282. At m.305, the first theme is superimposed over the second theme. The coda, beginning at m.315, is presented as a

19 Ibid.
mixture of different sections from an earlier part of the movement. The movement ends
with the cascading arpeggio (m.345) to bring the piece to a charismatic end.\textsuperscript{20}

This movement calls for severe technical demands, such as fast arpeggios, rapid
hand crossings, accurate and big chord leaps, quick changes in dynamics from \textit{forte} to
\textit{piano}, and above all, endurance. As seen in other movements, a steady tempo is
important to properly perform this movement. The technical demands increase later in the
movement so it may be wise to begin at a tempo that can be sustained. The first theme
should sound light. The dynamic changes to \textit{piano} in mm.34, 38, 42, and 46 need to be
clear. In m.50, the clarity and steadiness are of paramount importance. There is a large
leap just before mm.71-72 and m. 94-95 so slowing the tempo down slightly will allow
the hands to be prepared for it. In mm.81 and 85, one should depress the pedal lightly to
hold the long chords but to avoid a dirty sonority. Measures 97-113 is a difficult passage.
The left hand plays \textit{piano} continuously while the right hand changes between \textit{piano} and
\textit{forte}. From m.161 to m. 204, the tempo must be steady to create a carnival atmosphere.
The pianist should use the same weight to play every disturbing C-sharp note equally to
create a stubborn, annoying character.\textsuperscript{21}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 71-74.
\end{itemize}
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Conclusion

In this sonata, Prokofiev often builds his themes on short motives, taking them apart and combining them with other material from any part of a movement. The fourth movement shows a cyclic nature as it reuses a theme from the first movement. Prokofiev used this technique to strengthen the structural integrity of the piece. Harmonically, the last movement is the most dazzling. Prokofiev prefers to use dissonances and chromaticism to obscure harmonic direction. The main technical requirements throughout this sonata are a good legato, consistently executed motoric rhythm, steady staccato, accurate leaps and hand crossings, independent voices and physical endurance.

Fortunately, Prokofiev marked detailed dynamic and articulation indications in the score.

The sonata, op. 14, is one of his finest compositions in this genre.
Bibliography


