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## Prokofiev's Eight Piano Sonata

A personal narration of a unique gem of the 20th century

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### Introduction

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The sixth, seventh and eighth Prokofiev's piano sonatas are at present extensively treated as a whole unit under the denomination of "War Sonatas" and each of them has gained within the last eighty years a reputation of 'jewel' not only with regard to the last century, but also to the entire piano repertoire. With no doubt, these compositions constitute a new explosion of creativity by one of the most gifted composers of the last century and strongly refute the idea that the genre of the piano sonata could not produce interesting innovations any more.

Around the year 1939 the composer was committed to undertake a cultural crusade of reaffirmation of Russia's identity. This Soviet cultural renaissance was nourished by the writing of new works of massive scope and importance like "Zravidza", "Semyon Kotko" and "War and Piece", an activity destined to occupy most of his time. Therefore, it is striking

how this outburst of creativity in a genre so dear to him as the piano sonata recalls an urgent need to communicate something particularly significant. Prokofiev knew that exceptional times necessitate exceptional music and in 1939, about sixteen years after completing his fifth piano sonata, ideas and sketches of the Opus 82, 83 and 84 began to appear in his notebooks.

### ***The sixth and seventh sonatas***

As much as the sixth, seventh and eighth sonatas seem to represent different faces of a unified reality, it is the very last one which always seems to struck for its inaccessibility. From the very first notes of both Op.82 and 83, the listener is presented with such a strong character or scenario that with its disturbing and unsettling peculiarities grabs our attention with incredible force. Possibly resembling the atmosphere of the world during those years, the brutal march in the first bars of the sixth sonata generates a merciless succession of chords that sets the tone for the entire piece. By means of its sharp and compact pianistic texture, the whole composition exude a constant feeling of terror, present and real, a nightmare happening in front of our eyes from which we cannot escape.

On the other hand, the seventh sonata seems to opt for a more introspective representation, as the reference “Allegro inquieto” of the first page of the score suggests. The heterogeneity of the lines and the unpredictable paradigm with which musical shocks and sections of opposite character follow one another, perfectly represent the fear, hope, disillusion and destruction of the events from a much more psychological perspective. Even the bells appearing at the very end of the second movement, instead of elevating us to share our suffering and despair with the whole of humanity, they just tear us down into the darkest caves of unconsciousness, depriving us even of our own consolation.

## ***The Eighth***

With the emotional content of a symphony and by far the longest of the piano sonatas, the eighth consists of three movements, completed in the summer of 1944, and is dedicated to Prokofiev's second wife, Mira Mendelson, a vital figure who accompanied him during his later years. From a closer look, this composition seems to transcend both, the dimension of sound characteristics research, which always makes Prokofiev's style so recognisable and unique, and the modern cinematic way of assembling musical material. Its narrative process, to be analysed in the following chapters, develops in a novel-like structure comprising elements and the emotional content of a much broader spectrum than its predecessors, embracing the faith of all humankind on par with works of Beauty such as "Pictures at an Exhibition", the "Brothers Karamazov" or "War and Peace".

## ***In search of a clue***

Except for the dedication to his wife, Prokofiev did not leave any particular mention or reference with regard to the composition, and neither his letters nor writings can help us in the understanding of its content. In fact, it is this very coincidence which could lead us to some ventured hypothesis. We often find ourselves keeping our most precious and dearest things away from indiscreet looks, and similarly the eighth piano sonata could be a homage to the suffering world of those years. Not an extrovert novel exposed at the centre of the library,

but more like an inestimable poem regardless of the attention, awaiting in the bookshelf for someone willing to discover again all its immensity.

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## First Movement - Exposition

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### ***Primary section and first theme: Light and Darkness upon the world***

Like every other piano sonata by Sergei Prokofiev, the first movement starts directly with its theme and no introduction is offered. A rather intimate phrase, primordial element of the entire first movement, surrounds the atmosphere in a deep and comforting B flat major which yet, following its development in the third and fourth bars, it already adventures in mysterious grounds. No specific images or particular sensations are evoked at the beginning, and where its compositional texture might recall the intimate world taking place in the beginning of the fourth piano sonata, here the musical content hides a message or story of a much greater content, a broader feeling conveyed by the specular placement of the four voices constituting the initial polyphony.

The narrative process of the first entire section is characterised by a singular fluency and linearity, despite being organised in defined separated sections. The elements or instruments which one after the other take on the scene, contribute to broaden this sense of constant stillness and annunciation rather than stop the phrase. Moreover, the wisely chosen

chromatic and harmonic counterpoint in which they develop creates a unified texture dense of subtle but significant changes, and the apparent distant harmonies relations are melted together by a circular structure of twin four-bars phrases.

After one last come back to the primary theme-group sentence of the very beginning, this time the music expands and reach the highest and most intense pinnacle of the primary theme section, a brief eruption before it calms down and retreats in the abyss, where the pure unknown is what the listener will be faced with.

### ***Transition and second theme: hieroglyphs***

Prokofiev's talent as a storyteller and his ability to evoke specific images and settings often manage to surprise even the most habitual of its listeners, and the beginning of this transition depict a perfect example. By anticipating one of the main elements which will domain the development of the first movement, the composer creates an effective illusion. Despite a new tempo marking indicates *Poco più animato*, the two voices in counterpoint descending motion almost stop the flow of time and generate a sense of bewilderment and fearful enchantment. Furthermore, the long chromatic pedals in the bass line accompanying this secondary theme complement this sense of standstill like weighty steps in the sand.

Just as explorers in front of the unknown, we encounter a phrase which seems to hide an invaluable secret or a cryptic message from the past, like hieroglyphs heralding a mysterious prophecy. Only a few bars later everything will begin to take a clearer shape. A new line of semiquavers in pianissimo snakes in the right hand and suddenly duplicates itself reinvigorating the new theme. The tempo has not changed and yet, the music starts moving

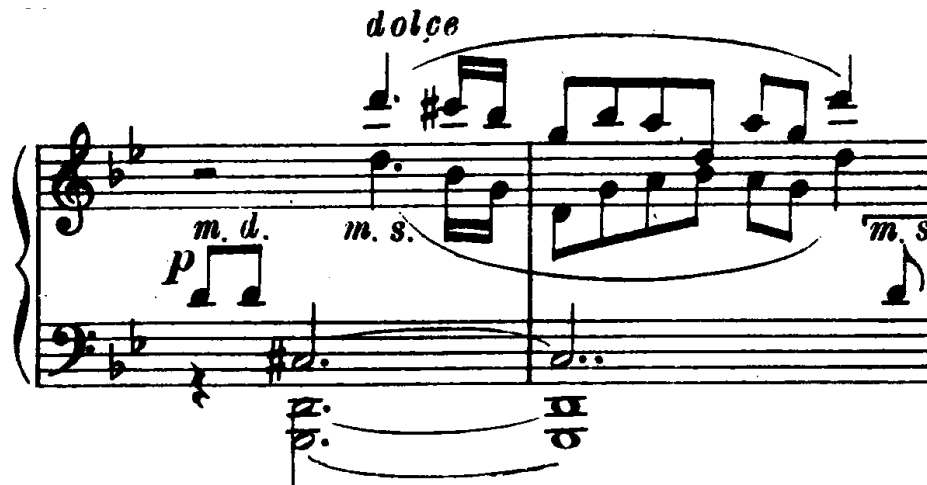
and developing. An eight-bar progression follows in which the very first theme appears twice in the low register and culminates into a seamless *forte* explosion. After reaching the highest point, Prokofiev continues to add tension via a combined *diminuendo* and *allargando* flowing back to the original *Andante I*.

The subsequent six bars are some of the most intense and emphatic of the entire movement. With an intricate chromaticism in five voices, this *espressivo* section returns to a texture similar to the beginning, however the long harmonic pedals of the low register are far gone. As a sort of martyred procession fomented by phrases in anacrusis, this contrapuntal transition characterised by a constant sense of harmonic instability, reach its peak in bar 60, where the voices diverge in contrary motion and it finally reaches a pure d major chord in *mezzo forte*. A new feeling of joyful hope emerges from the sound to fill the soul, and a last low D in the left-hand caresses our face.

### ***Secondary Section and third theme: the apparition***

It is rather surprising how after having travelled through extreme harmonic combinations, Prokofiev decided to abide to an ancient tradition of the sonata form, presenting its secondary theme (a role here played by the actual third theme) in the relative minor key. The previous D major chord reveals its only meaning as the dominant of the new g minor key, and thus, we sink into caves of desperation. The third theme appears: three notes of stunning simplicity but huge emotional content. A collision of the perfect fifth G - D and the C sharp as augmented fourth (the so-called “diabolus in musica”) in the upper octave,

generates a unique sensation of loss and impotence also due to the relentless rhythmic character.



Suddenly, a new melody comes from the sky, like a vision to the exhausted soldier who finds himself alone in the trenches with no way to escape, a place where desires and hopes are far gone.

This *dolce* seems to carry an important but enigmatic message. As the Virgin Mary manifested doubt and almost fear for the apparition of the Archangel Gabriel, the soldier is uncertain whether to trust this vision. The conversation between the two elements develops and reaches a stagnation in a low D pedal before being represented a second time. Now, the dynamics rises and a brilliant arpeggio is placed to introduce the upper melody before the different characters melt together and seem to die away in an E minor chord.

Surprisingly, the ending section of the transition takes the scene again with its intense polyphonic counterpoint and after affirming twice an arrival on A minor, it erupts into the ultimate culmination point of the entire exposition. On a broad G major chord the soldier has found the way to follow and salvation has descended upon him. Yet, the sound fades away

and unexpected bells resonate from afar, accompanied by a formula of prayer repeated four times in *tenuto* notes marked *tranquillo*.



Still a long journey awaits us and later on, the same bells will save us from the terror and abomination which dominates existence, bearing the gift of redemption; whether as tangible hope or vain illusion is to the listener to decide.

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