



Research Article

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In Between Perfectly Alive People and Symbolic Figures. Prokofiev in Search for a Plot in the 1920s — the First Half of the 1930s

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Abstract: S. Prokofiev's search for a plot reflects how broad his interests were: from biblical and cosmic themes to stories with symbolic characters from the world of music notation and ordinary objects. His creative concepts combine ancient mythologemes, connotations to classical plots with swift, captivating development of action, with marks of the detective genre, with sharp dialogue and baffling finale (the so-called "point-ending"). His interest in Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind* seems strange only at first glance. The novel's motives seamlessly blend into contexts of the Prokofiev's concept of theater. Situations, scenes, some characters and even anticipated main dramatic moments of the *Gone with the Wind* can be found in Prokofiev's theatrical works.

One of the archival findings of last years is the libretto titled *Chess*. Its plot originates from *Queen of Spades* and *The Gambler* and it accumulates themes of passion to win, sacrifice, madness and vengeance. Chess play itself forms the storyline in a great measure. In this way Prokofiev's concept anticipates Nabokov's novel *Luzhin's Defense*. Chess affects the structure of the whole and the nature of conflict drivers. It becomes symbol of life, which constructs itself on the principle of chess play. The main motives of the plot are highly associative, they have rich background and various approaches for staging. The fantastic sphere of *Chess* follows romantic tradition and is inseparable from everyday life. The libretto's draft suggests notable Prokofiev's dramaturgy methods: contrasting inclusions, repeated sharp striking phrases, extra-musical and extra-textual devices for the enrichment of vocal speech.

Keywords: S. Prokofiev, V. Nabokov, M. Mitchell, *The Gambler*, *Luzhin's Defense*, *Gone with the Wind*, plot in Prokofiev's concept of theater, mythologemes in Prokofiev's oeuvres, chess


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Научная статья

Между совершенно живыми людьми и символическими фигурами. Прокофьев в поисках сюжета в 1920-х — первой половине 1930-х годов

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Аннотация: Поиски сюжета С. Прокофьевым отражают широту его интересов: от библейских тем, космических мотивов — к историям с действующими условными фигурами из мира нотных знаков и предметов обыденности. Древние мифологемы, ассоциации с классическими сюжетами сочетаются в его замыслах с быстрым, увлекательным развитием действия, с приметам жанра детектива, с острым диалогом, яркими point-концовками.

Интерес композитора к роману М. Митчелл «Унесенные ветром» только на первый взгляд кажется удивительным. Мотивы романа органично включаются в контексты прокофьевского театра. Ситуации, сцены, отдельные персонажи, даже предполагаемые драматургические узлы «Унесенных ветром» встречаются в театральных сочинениях Прокофьева. Одна из архивных находок последних лет — набросок либретто под названием «Шахматы». Сюжет восходит к «Пиковой даме» и «Игроку», аккумулируя мотивы страсти к победе, жертвоприношения, безумия, возмездия. Фабула в значительной мере организована шахматной игрой, этим замысел Прокофьева предвосхищает роман В. Набокова «Защита Лужина». Шахматы воздействуют на структуру целого, определяют характер движущих сил конфликта, становятся символом жизни, строящей себя по принципам шахматной игры. Главные мотивы сюжета высокоассоциативны, имеют богатую «родословную» и изобилуют возможностями сценического воплощения. Фантастика «Шахмат» наследует романтической традиции, она неотделима от реальной, бытовой жизни. Набросок либретто предполагает характерные прокофьевские драматургические приемы: контрастные вкрапления, повторения коротких «ударных» фраз, внемузыкальные и внетекстовые приемы обогащения вокальной речи.

Ключевые слова: С. Прокофьев, В. Набоков, М. Митчелл, «Игрок», «Защита Лужина», «Унесенные ветром», сюжет в театре Прокофьева, мифологемы в творчестве Прокофьева, шахматы

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While living abroad, as well as throughout his entire career, Prokofiev was searching for plots for his theater works. The echoes of these searches are scattered in the composer's letters and his Diary, and can be even deduced from his literary taste.

Prokofiev asked himself:

...Should I head for the depth of my skills or rather for the width of space? Scriabin or Stravinsky? The answer is: both, merged into one! [7, II, 231]¹

This dichotomy is certainly simplified. So he headed inwards as if it were outwards; straight into the depths of the human soul, like into the vastness of Earth and Heaven.

He referred to ancient times, mythology, space... He was debating between religious poems and quotes from the Scripture. In 1914, he wrote about wanting to compose a panikhida (a memorial service): "austere, sorrowful and heartfelt" [7, I, 497–498].² In 1927, Prokofiev took an interest in apocalypse scenarios, and once wrote down psalm lyrics from *Christian Science Sentinel*.³ Warren Klein⁴, an acquaintance of Prokofiev and a proponent of scientism sent his poems to the composer ("Stilling of the Tempest", "Thine and Mine", and others). On December 8, 1929, Prokofiev replied:

My dear Mr. Klein <...>

I liked your verses very much and I often think that I have to write something for the church music. I am not sure yet whether I will take poems for this occasion or I will write music directly on the texts of the Bible.⁵

God, angels, and demons — he was able to comprehend it all. In his *Cantata on the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution* some images of *The Fiery Angel* and the Chaldean invocation "They Are Seven" are sometimes resurrected — astonishing sounds, transcendental processes, uncontrollable elements.

Biblical themes fell into Prokofiev's field of view mainly as orders. An offer that nearly came to life was made by Ida Rubinstein. She had already had librettists: Paul Demasy⁶ and Paul Valéry.⁷ Prokofiev and his customer went through several stories: Judith, the Tower of Babel, Semiramis, Solomon's Temple.

One of the most promising projects was a ballet to the music of the *Scythian Suite*.

...There was A. Benoit, I played the Scythian Suite. Ida wants it to be staged like a ballet. I told Diaghilev about this long ago, but he turned a deaf ear [7, II, 314].⁸

...Benoit must invent a plot. Of course, Ida's role should be apotheosis [7, II, 332].⁹

¹ January 5, 1922.

² September 13, 1914.

³ Magazine published by the Christian Science Publishing Society, Boston. Prokofiev was a subscriber and especially enjoyed reading their testimonials of healing.

⁴ Warren Charles Klein, a Christian proponent of scientism, journalist, poet.

⁵ SPA_6998 (Goldsmiths locator: bd. XXII. P. 399). Published in Russian in: [12, 20].

⁶ Paul Demasy (1884–1974), a Belgian and French playwright.

⁷ Paul Valéry (1871–1945), a French poet, philosopher, and essayist.

⁸ April 16, 1925.

⁹ June 25, 1925.

However, when Prokofiev came to play the music, the diva was not at home. He left, leaving a note: “Fascinated by the welcome. I won’t come again” [7, II, 317].¹⁰

Suzanne Avivith, an actress, also chose biblical plots, and they all were particularly violent: “I was horrified; I had no idea the Bible talks about such terrible things” [7, II, 400].¹¹

The historical and mythological epic literature had attracted Prokofiev long before the *War and Peace*. At the beginning of 1924, after meeting Dmitry Merezhkovsky and Zinaida Gippius in Paris, he became interested in the philosophical and historical novels of Merezhkovsky; while reading *Babylon*, he was carried away by the myth of Gilgamesh.

That’s what an oratorio like Honegger’s could be written on — and how much more interesting it is! [7, II, 246]¹²

Having joined Christian Science, Prokofiev set his heart on seeking the light; he wanted something positive. By the way, in his interview ahead of the premiere of *The Gambler* in Brussels, the composer called his opera a comedy.¹³ But there weren’t any comedy stories just yet. Even before his departure from Russia he had envisaged Gogol’s story not as a comedy, perhaps, but as an opera with vivid genre scenes:

...And what a wonderful opera could be written after Gogol’s *Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich*. The most striking poetry is born when you step away from the commonness. So, in the midst of this very commonness quarrel of two gentlemen, what wonderful pictures of Malorossiia could be sketched! [7, I, 589]¹⁴

He sketched such pictures more than twenty years later in *Semyon Kotko*.

Also in Russia, in March 1916, Prokofiev came up with a storyline for the opera: *Une fantaisie du Doctor Ox*, a novel by Jules Verne:

Yes sir, none other than Jules Verne. With all the ensembles, wailing, and running [7, I, 595].¹⁵

Julesvernism as a behavioral and plot creation model fascinated him throughout the whole life. A very dark and barely legible piece of paper has been found in the Serge Prokofiev Archive (SPA); it is titled “The Adventures of the Count. October 15 [?], 1929”.¹⁶ Here are a few decipherable phrases:

Steamship to China. Started shooting <...> O. Wilde — the idea of the picture <...>
Diver. Steamship at a depth of <...>

Each short phrase contains countless possibilities. From the time of the premieres in Sontsovka, he had been fascinated by “human drama with an indispensable duel” [6, 66].

¹⁰ April 29, 1925.

¹¹ May 11, 1926.

¹² March 20, 1924.

¹³ An abridged translation of this interview from French is published in: [1].

¹⁴ February 17, 1916.

¹⁵ March 5, 1916.

¹⁶ ID: SPA_6793 (Goldsmiths locator: bd. XXII. P. 168).

Pushkin was the most lamentable of ambitions that never came to life. In approaching a topic that can easily turn trite, Prokofiev always aimed to give an unusual angle, an unexpected turn of the plot. He would achieve it in 1941, opening his *War and Peace* with Bolkonsky's servants whispering, "The Young Prince's Fiancée", and releasing the great commander from his attributes of honor. That was his approach to Pushkin, which he had been conceiving since 1914.

...Pushkin writing a letter to Heeckeren, a historically accurate letter; what a fabulous scene! Tatyana's Letter to Onegin pales into insignificance beside it [7, I, 212].¹⁷

Prokofiev's efforts to bring the Pushkin theme to fruition would consistently draw a blank: this included *Eugene Onegin* for the Chamber Theater, *The Queen of Spades* (Mikhail Romm's dream), *Boris Godunov* for the theatre of Meyerhold, and an opera based on Bulgakov's *The Last Days* (Pushkin).¹⁸ Prokofiev's archives feature but a few newspaper clippings that aren't related to his own work, and each of them is exceptionally noteworthy. One is titled 'Murderer of Pushkin' and details the wellbeing of d'Anthès after leaving Russia. The key part of the article is a confession of Ivan Turgenev who claims to have committed three villainies in his life. One of them was failing to avoid shaking the hand of d'Anthès once upon a time in Paris, when he was introduced to Pushkin's murderer.¹⁹

The *outside* ideas include an opera about Sten'ka Razin (Fyodor Chaliapin) and Meyerhold's suggestions: an opera based on *The Government Inspector*, *The Bedbug*, which Shostakovich later composed a score for, and music for the stage adaptation of André Malraux's *Man's Fate* (*La Condition Humaine*).

Prokofiev made a synopsis of the novel for Meyerhold, in which there are motives that are consonant with the essential features of his own work. Malraux has a rare ear for a playwright; he differentiates the sound pattern of reality and transforms the sounds into various forces of dramatic action. In the novel, different types of speech coexist, different kinds of silence always strike. The picture of rebellion overwhelms; it is voiced with great temperament, from the very core of events. The sound palette of the scene is full of noises of mechanical and organic origins, screams of struggle and groans of dying, human voices and explosions of grenades. Guns, machine guns, large-caliber guns are fired from the railway and from the sea. The machine gun sounds differently depending on what a bullet hits: a wall, a living person, or a dead body... The writer has many gradations of sounds denoting suffering: groans, screams, wailing, howls of horror... There are a lot of screams, they are all different. It is unlikely that Prokofiev had more impressive samples when he was writing the sixth part of *Cantata on the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution*. Although Malraux's ruthless realism and the truth in the guise of an aesthetic illusion in Prokofiev's music certainly differ.

Of course, the composer carefully examined the proposals coming from the USSR; he arranged his life in France, but he was longing to go home. Therefore, he was attentive to the initiatives of the Soviet officials or people close to power. A letter to the Moscow

¹⁷ January 17, 1913.

¹⁸ Prokofiev approached Bulgakov with a respective proposal on October 3, 1935.

¹⁹ SPA_3099 (Goldsmiths locator: bd. VII. P. 20).

Radio Center dated November 18, 1929 has been preserved; it is about the work that was discussed in Moscow:

...Confirming our conversation on the composition of an opera for the Radio Center, I inform you that this proposal is very interesting to me, and I will wait for a plot or a libretto plan from you so that we can conclude a contract or start work that will require one year, approximately.

With respect²⁰

Among other evidence of interest in proposals from the USSR is a meeting with Sergey Gorodetsky, the co-author of the ballet *Ala and Lolli*.²¹

He talks about libretti, captures me, I ask to send, I do not want any agitation, anti-religious attacks and I take the right to recarve [7, II, 735].²²

Three months later (February 11, 1930) the composer wrote to Gorodetsky:

...If you send the libretto in the very first days of March, then address it like this: care of H & J.²³ If later, then: Grand Edition Musical, since March 25th I will leave America for Paris.

I am writing to you from the borders of Mexico, in a train,²⁴ on the way to California.²⁵

In the documents of Prokofiev there are names of some Soviet writers: Lavrenyov, Leonov, Fadeev, Afinogenov. There were, of course, more of them; the composer sought a Soviet plot and a Soviet librettist in advance, before returning to the USSR; the first ones he found were, as is known, the classics of Marxism-Leninism.

Soviet subjects in Prokofiev's sphere of interests are a separate area; it suggested special authorial strategies, scenic models of action, images new for Prokofiev — and old theatrical canons long rejected by him. Maneuvering between the suddenly arisen requirements of the conjuncture and artistic factors presented a specific difficulty. A particular task was to move away from the stamps of revolutionary art, from the academically oriented socialist-realist canon that was taking shape in those years, from the semantic and stylistic standards. At the same time, it was necessary to hide his nature of *a formalist*. Revolutionary and Soviet plots demanded a democratic (in other words, simplified) style and language. Prokofiev agreed with this in advance, in the 1930s he even declared the intention to compose music separately for connoisseurs and separately for the general public. In the article "Soviet Listener and My Musical Creativity" Prokofiev wrote:

²⁰ Quoted after: [2, 169].

²¹ Gorodetsky, Sergey Mitrofanovich (1884–1967), a poet, translator, author of the libretto of the first Prokofiev's ballet *Ala and Lolli* (1915), rejected by Diaghilev.

²² November 18, 1929.

²³ Haensel & Jones were an American agency representing the interests of Prokofiev.

²⁴ Prokofiev toured the United States from December 24, 1929 to April 4, 1930.

²⁵ ID: SPA_7236 (Goldsmiths locator: Bd. XXIII. P. 157). It is yet unknown which libretto Gorodetsky proposed to Prokofiev.

If in the field of composition <...> I am led by a desire to make my art simpler, bringing it closer to the masses who want to know music, but are not yet prepared for this, then as a musician and teacher I pursue diametrically opposite goals: I seek to introduce young musicians to all the variety of musical language.²⁶

He was criticized for such statements, but in fact such a separation (of course, with complex forms of interaction between the “two kinds of music”) in his work has survived to the end.

...One more story cannot be ignored, although among the published materials of the composer there is no mention of it. Prokofiev’s eldest son once said that his father had been reading Margaret Mitchell’s novel *Gone with the Wind*, moreover: this book was on his desk. There were no books on that table without a reason. Incredible: Prokofiev and the mass culture, however, revered by many serious literary scholars for excellent literature. The composer turned to stories from popular culture, to women’s oeuvre, when he saw the possibilities of interesting dramatic development, as in *Maddalena*. *Gone with the Wind* provides an excellent opera interpretation.

We do not know whether Prokofiev considered the novel about the war of the American North and South seriously, but the research interest is based on the fact that in full-blooded images and vivid dramatic situations of Mitchell’s novel, one can often feel a kinship with the creative nature of Prokofiev’s concept of theater. The temptation of an imaginary reconstruction is also irresistible because, as is known, Prokofiev’s thematism roams freely between works.²⁷ Demonstrating the significant role of variability in the formation of the thematic composition of Prokofiev’s works, these examples foster a respectful attitude towards the subjunctive mood. Mitchell’s novel fits perfectly into Prokofiev’s contexts, specifying the theme of the organic nature of this plot in the theater of the composer.

The picture of the world in *Gone with the Wind*, combining melodrama and historical romance, presupposes images, scenic situations, and musical genres traditional for the 19th century musical theater. Prokofiev wrote a similar opera, based on literary material of a completely different level, in the 1940s and it turned out to be more traditional. However, war and peace clash in the another opera of the composer, which marked an innovative turn in the development of musical theater — *Semyon Kotko*.

...Meyerhold dreamed of staging *Hamlet* all his life; he said jokingly that he had placed fragments from *Hamlet* in his performances of the last twenty years, and he hid them cunningly. Sometimes it seems that certain elements of *Gone with the Wind* are also dispersed in the theatrical works of Prokofiev; from time to time we recognize situations, scenes, characters, we can even assume the drama nodes...

²⁶ Cahiers de la Musique (Bruxelles). 1937. No. 3 (fevrier). P. 27–29. Published in Russian in: [8, 127]; the compiler of the collection makes a fair remark that the content of the article gives reason to date it in the second half of 1934.

²⁷ The melodious theme of the second part of the Second Violin Concerto — if the events of the winter of 1930 took a different turn — could enter the *Fiery Angel*, certifying its already audible divine nature. The theme of the *Knight’s Dance* from *Romeo*, due to a change in the same external causes, could complement the sounds of Ruprecht’s duel with Heinrich, etc.

In the masterpiece of mass literature of the American South, the features of the great epic literature are clear. In addition to a comparison with the work of Leo Tolstoy,²⁸ note the proximity to Faulkner's novels. The similarity of the plot moments is determined by the main theme and, accordingly, the popular story model: life ends unexpectedly, history is setting in suddenly and menacingly. People whose fate is crushed by the Great history, exiles from the lost paradise — is an image-formula with a respectable tradition, in particular, in Russian art. Mitchell also outlined a multi-figure composition with a differentiation of plans, reflecting the polyphony of society, which is typical of the historical epos as well as of Prokofiev.

Among the parallels and similarities, the first thing that comes to mind to the Russian reader is the stage constructions that remind of *War and Peace*. Mitchell's novel provides material for strong mass scenes; such is the episode of escapement from Atlanta against a background of a fire, in the midst of fire, among collapsing houses (a powerfully shot scene in the film by Victor Fleming and David Selznik, 1939). A situationally similar episode in the opera *War and Peace* gave the composer the opportunity to bring together in one scene forces that could converge only due to an exceptional situation and thus create a strong dramatic effect. Here are Muscovites, invaders, French theater actors, madmen, the emperor of France...

A huge field covered to the horizon with the wounded (Mitchell has a station square where the wounded lie under the scorching sun) — the picture is also well known.

Among the war episodes: a wounded soldier should have his leg taken away, he screams (an episode with Anatole in *War and Peace* by Tolstoy).

One of the most powerful scenes of the novel: exhausted with hard work, Melanie and Scarlett, sitting on the porch, see a soldier wandering from afar along the road. Prokofiev wrote this scene. Barely living, on the last leg, dragging himself to his own doorstep is the finale of *The Prodigal Son*.

The main character of the novel is naturally included in the context of Prokofiev's concept of theater — a woman who is unpredictable every single moment and who is not a model of virtue. In the foreign period, the postulates of Christian Science and the norms of Soviet aesthetics have not yet become guiding for Prokofiev; later his female characters began to be formed on the basis of notions of the ideal.

The constant arguing between Scarlett and Rhett is akin to the heavy, nervous dialogues between Polina and Alexei, Renata and Ruprecht — men and women forever at war. The situations containing a disguise and dressing up seem to have been created for Prokofiev: *the fake widow* Scarlett dances with the demonically dangerous Rhett Butler at the ball; Ashley's friends pretend to be drunk to hide his serious injury from the police.

Some characters and situations in Mitchell's book vividly resemble "something from Prokofiev": the rival sisters' quarrel; the colorful Mammy is much smarter than her status allows; good for nothing, but wonderfully funny maid Prissy lies constantly.

Everything related to music has the right to exist solely in the form of questions. What would be his musical style in this opera? In what language could it be written? I will note in brackets that this plot did not have the slightest chance to be

²⁸ Some literary historians report that during World War II, the most widely read books in Europe were *War and Peace* and *Gone with the Wind*.

staged in the USSR. However, this is not about the circumstances dictated by politics and ideology.

Prokofiev was fluent in English. But he, being the great master of truthful musical language, was uncomfortable writing music “not in Russian”; he has no works with texts in foreign languages, only rare isolated episodes interpreted as a method. In *War and Peace*, he created Russian epos. What epos would he create in *Gone with the Wind*?

The nature of the novel determines the priority of traditional genre models; among them, for example, the singing of slaves who return from O’Hara plantations in the evening after hard work. In the novel, this is a very poetic episode. And the big scene of the Confederate Ball — how would it be without it? Oh, how unwilling he was to write the ball scene in “War” — “with these waltzes, polonaises of yours”! Mitchell also has more than enough moments for music on stage or offstage (“Back, Claparede’s Division!”).

As is known, Prokofiev greatly appreciated ragtime, he even wrote that ragtime would eventually “enter the symphony like a minuet once” [7, II, 659].²⁹ He loved jazz very much and brought to Moscow from abroad a collection of choice jazz records. The intonations and rhythms of jazz are heard in some of his compositions, the sounds of marching bands can be traced in the Overture for the chamber orchestra, op. 42.

Until now nothing is known about Prokofiev’s attitude to the choral music of America, but the richness of this sphere, especially the music of the American South, opened up great prospects for the composer.

...The idea of ballets for Diaghilev appeared in 1925. Symbolic characters act in a symbolic scenario called *The Treble Clef and the Sardine-Can Key*³⁰ [7, II, 322].³¹ Everything is symbols here. The sardine can and the key symbolize prosaic existence. The treble clef, notes and pauses symbolize art. The story recounts of the impossibility to combine art with daily routines. It ends with the composer’s favorite dissonance: the art recoils from reality; in awe and sadness, the ordinary life accepts the divine beauty of the art and its unattainability.

I cautiously hinted that I had a plot where the characters were notes and pauses. Diaghilev declined the offer. “In ballet, after all, the most beautiful thing is the human body,” — he said, — “and I would not want any symbolic figures or constructive costumes” [7, II, 330–331].³²

Meanwhile, both Diaghilev and Prokofiev were certainly interested in symbolic figures. In their next ballet, the smooth moves of the dancers were already complemented by working mechanisms; spectators saw the performers as elements of the machines; the living seemed inanimate yet movable. In other well-known examples, deep human feelings were given conventional, almost abstract shapes, which were then turned into “perfectly alive people”, as Myaskovsky said admiring the characters of *The Fiery Angel* [9, 278].

Prokofiev also had an idea of a story where people were sometimes symbolic, whereas objects were acting as if they were alive.

²⁹ December 22, 1928.

³⁰ In Russian “clef” and “can-opener” are paronyms.

³¹ May 26, 1925.

³² June 21, 1925.

SKETCH

Prokofiev began working on his plot sketch for a ballet script *The Chess* on February 17, 1926, on his way from Providence to New York. The way episodes develop, the nature of stage action, the remarks intended for the characters, even the odd sounds the protagonist makes after the surgery — all of it hints at the operatic nature of the concept.³³

Not everything on the nine pages can be deciphered: the scenes and their variants are sometimes out of order, while the narration within the episodes now and then resembles a chaotic mosaic.

Dramatis personæ: Chess Player, Chess Player's Wife, Doctor, Son (in some episodes he is Chess Player's son, in others — the son of his archrival and antagonist referred to as "L.", "Kskr.",³⁴ and once as "Ch." (Russian "Ч"); however, Prokofiev checks himself and goes back to "L."). Then he introduces some other characters: Grandfather, guests, other chess players, medical professionals, etc. The composer also mentions characters who will not actually come into play: Daughter and her Fiancé. The malicious fiancé sounds like a good touch of operetta, a paraphrase of the figures of Blanche and Marquis.

Time and setting: right here, right now. Seven scenes.

Scene One. The Chess Player's team analyses the loss. Chess Player comes in. Fugato is planned for the end of the scene, and Chess Player says (Prokofiev's comment: "extended"): "I'd give it all..."

Scene Two. Chess Player and Doctor are making some kind of an arrangement. Professor writes down a price on a piece of paper.

Next scene: Surgery. A hand is holding a bespectacled head. Because of the glasses we know it's Chess Player's head.

After the surgery, Chess Player is wheeled out in a chair. He has a thick layer of bandages around his neck. Chessmen are set up in the same way as when Chess Player was checkmated. All of a sudden, Chess Player kicks the table up. Doctor is pleased: the patient cannot bear the thought of loss and will never lose again.

Celebration at Chess Player's. Guests. L. grunts angrily to the Doctor: "Are you sticking the knight inside the skull? Did you know I can stick a sharp knife into a stomach?" In the end, someone brings in Chess Player's fur coat and throws it on an armchair. A black knight jumps out of it. "Who are you?" — "I'm (joyfully) a black knight".

...Final scene. Railway station. A night train. Prokofiev had three potential endings in his mind.

Version one. Railway station. Chess Player and his Wife: she is taking him to a health center overnight, trying to keep his mental disorder under wraps. L. and Son with a doll. Chess Players is clueless about what is going on: "Why are we here? So many chessmen! What a convoluted gambit!" L. shoots Doctor dead. Son's monologue; he picks up Wife and they both leave. Chess Player: "Let us retreat to the very corner of the board". The train draws away. L. is triumphant at the murder.

³³ Information in the archive's catalogue: Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI). F. 1929 (S. S. Prokofiev). L. 2. Stored item 100. P. 8. Ballet libretto sketches. Two versions.

³⁴ The natural guess turns out to be incorrect: the composer spoke of the great chess player with much respect; he and Lasker maintained a wonderful relationship throughout many years.

Version two. Doctor tells L. about his latest invention: “Now I can put in — pointing to L.’s head — a knight and two pawns. It’s much more powerful than just a knight. And it comes with a five-year warranty.” — L.: “How about three?” — Doctor: “Three would be without a warranty.” — L.: “Doesn’t matter”. (They leave.)

Version three. Doctor shares his latest invention. They drop into a café (during the conversation, a mannequin is set near the table). Chess Player is on his own. He sits down next to the mannequin, sets up a chessboard, and offers him a game. “Alekhine’s debut? It opens with a knight!”

To decipher the entire draft sketch would be a mammoth job. At the same time, Prokofiev’s text is brimming with associations; it exists as a complex of different context fields and is open to all kinds of correlations and associations. Anything that could have inspired the composer lives on in the ancestral memory, in the collective unconscious. Here, conceptual horizons and opportunities for the author are endless. That’s why *The Chess*-related materials are presented as comments to the draft, where many things aren’t quite clear, as comments on the sketch of an idea that wasn’t finalized.

A FEW NOTES ON GENESIS

Chess Player is looking for the key to constant winning. Similar to the dreams of alchemists, this dream is characterized by the romantic all-or-nothing mentality, with a willingness to pay any kind of price. The influence of *The Queen of Spades*, the key motifs of the opera, is quite obvious: obsession with a game, lunacy, sacrifices, retaliation. Chess Player is a successor of Hermann and Raskolnikov, as well as Julien Sorel, Eugène de Rastignac, along with all vain and self-entitled characters.

There’s also a lot in common with *The Gambler* — at the time, Prokofiev was working on the second edition of the opera. In *The Gambler*, which took a lot after *The Queen of Spades*, the protagonist’s obsession elevates him, to an extent, to the rank of Hermann’s successor. After Tchaikovsky, no other Russian composer devoted as much attention to the subject of obsession as Prokofiev. *The Chess* and *The Gambler* have a lot in common when it comes to specific characters and settings; the text includes musical playwriting techniques, typical of Prokofiev’s theater work. The impression is that the composer tried to translate the successful experience of *The Gambler* into chess realities, to give him another substantive content.

WORLD AS A GAME OF CHESS

Ever since *The Decameron*, we know full well that life is a game of chess that someone invisible is playing on us. The game packs an array of extreme real-life scenarios: going all-in, facing a disaster and time pressure. Chess can be the content or the allegorical key to understanding a piece of literature.

That’s the structure of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The novel’s characters are good and evil figures in a game that is dealt by Fate. Fate is represented by almighty Dantès. He ponders different combinations, secretly masterminds an attack, then unleashes it unexpectedly, and checkmates — or suddenly becomes generous and cedes to his rival,

“failing to notice” a great opportunity on the chessboard, and sometimes — quickly mixing up all the chessmen together. “Dantès is a queened pawn.” And there is a certain Someone who is controlling Dantès in this game.³⁵

The pinnacle of development of such perspective on life is the novel titled *The Luzhin Defense*.

Author/Fate plays the attack, against which Luzhin seeks protection. The essence of Luzhin’s defense is in sacrifice and salvation. “A game of chess is the main semantic principle underpinning Nabokov’s text” [11].

Nabokov presents an inverted world: a chess paradise and the reality which torments Luzhin. The signs of madness — fantastic monsters — penetrate into the world of Prokofiev’s character from chess. Progressive madness unites both characters.

The changes in the protagonists’ status are quite telling. Nabokov’s Luzhin is a black knight. Prokofiev’s Chess Player starts the game not as a pawn but as a defeated chess piece; it had been checkmated, removed from the board and put into the box for captured chessmen. Luzhin makes a move that conflicts with the normal course of the game. Chess Player also does something unprecedented, that isn’t in line with the reality. As a result, he wins and turns into a triumphant king, and later — into a frantic knight. And he is thrown away once again: not into the box, but simply gotten rid of.

Every now and again, Prokofiev switches the action to the realm of the game, using chess terminology: “So many chessmen! What a convoluted gambit!”, “Let us retreat to the very corner of the board”, “Move the knight!”, “he castled”. It is unlikely that such expressions are capable of organizing integrity, but they cannot be missed — along with such entries as “ensemble: a5–a6–a7–a8, checkmate!”, and a closing phrase — oh, he had quite a knack for those! — “Alekhine’s debut? It opens with a knight!”

In Prokofiev’s sketch, the game of chess affects the structure of the plot, reveals the nature of the conflict’s driving forces, becomes, to a certain extent, its semantic principle, a symbol of life that has made itself dependent on chess. Life takes revenge on the protagonist — the originator and the victim of this dependency. Chess in this plot is the metacode of the world, both for the composer and for his character. Prokofiev created a story where the composition of the whole by means of allusions, of the finest elements of the chess Universe, of course, could not match the multi-dimensionality and adeptness of the great novel by Sirin. However, Prokofiev and Nabokov did cherish the similar concept. No wonder the composer grew so fond of Nabokov’s novel³⁶ that was published three years later: he had envisioned it with his Chess sketch!

³⁵ These observations were made by S. V. Sakun. See an incredibly interesting article [11].

³⁶ Oleg Sergeevich Prokofiev said his father had smuggled the novel into the USSR. Oleg also mentioned that the composer had burned that book, and perhaps other books and papers as well, in the fireplace at his dacha at Nikolina Gora in 1948, after the actions of Andrei Zhdanov and the arrest of Lina Prokofiev [5, 206].

ON THE CUT-OFF HEAD

The questionable idea of Doctor and Chess Player could be dealt with in terms of medical ethics. Russians, however, tend to perceive themselves in cosmic categories. In Bulgakov's works, mental and cosmic processes are absolutely identical. The decapitation in Prokofiev's *The Chess* looks strikingly similar to the famous fictional episode where the head of an ill-fated literary bureaucrat was cut off by a street-car, and this puts Chess Player on par with the mystical characters of Bulgakov's future novel (*The Master and Margarita*). Next come mythical motifs and Christian symbols: the heads of Osiris, Medusa, Orpheus, John the Baptist... The head motif was especially popular in the fantasy literature of the 20th century; *Frankenstein*, or *The Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley gave the topic a strong boost back in 1818. It was followed by Edward Mitchell's *The Man Without a Body* (1877); and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* by Herbert Wells (1896); Maurice Renard's *Doctor Lerne, Undergod* (1908); *Mr. Vivacious Style* by Carl Grunert (1908); Alexander Belyaev's *Professor Dowell's Head* (1925).

From Prokofiev's sketch: "The person who bought his genius for the price of a headache or other aches." This also evokes multiple associations: Pontius Pilate suffered from migraines, just like the author of the novel about him. And it relates to Prokofiev as well: he also had terrible headaches since young age. Christian Science lesson or a quick stroll usually helped. From January 19, 1945, when the composer fell in a store and hit the back of his head, the pain became especially severe and did not let go anymore.

THE SURGERY

The dreadful surgery that tears the plot like a fulmination is quite futuristic. It raises questions about an individual's right to change his nature, having godlike powers, and gives an outline of how one can transcend empirical existence.

This motif came to Prokofiev at a surprisingly appropriate time. In the 1920s, physiologists worked on incredibly bold and promising projects. In 1925, Sergey Brukhonenko, a Soviet doctor, pioneered the design of a heart and lung machine and succeeded in maintaining life in the head of a decapitated dog through life support. This laid the foundation for modern intensive care and transplantation techniques.

Bernard Shaw ironically admired Brukhonenko's achievements. He wrote to one of his correspondents:

Madam, I find Brukhonenko's experiment extremely interesting <...> I really feel the temptation to let my own head be cut off, so that I can henceforth dictate plays and books not being interfered with illnesses, not having to dress and undress, not having to eat and to do anything other than to produce dramatic and literary masterpieces <...> [4, 139].

Robert White, an American neurophysiologist, who conducted similar experiments and transplanted the head of a monkey in 1970, was severely criticized, as, indeed, were the Soviet scientists. White was accused of trying to populate the Earth with monsters and interfering in Divine Providence. Sergio Canavero, an Italian neurosurgeon, was planning to perform head transplantation (in 2018) on Valery Spiridonov who has muscular dystrophy.

Prokofiev's Chess Player undergoes a horrible surgery in order to be able to win every time — and goes mad. Besides just being the stuff of legends, insanity among great chess players is a significant issue.

KNIGHTS

Vengeance inflicted upon Chess Player in the form of insanity was embodied in the piece of a chess knight — an actable and brightly decorative character that becomes a participant in spectacular mise-en-scenes: a knight jumps out from under the fur coat, or several of them surround Chess Player. In mythology, black horses are deadly — they are shapeshifters: the devil, witches, evil creatures. In Prokofiev's sketch, the allusion to Horsemen of the Apocalypse is quite evident.

It seems like, in the 20th century, the role of the knight is to be a beautiful victim. *The Seventh Seal*, a movie by Ingmar Bergman, shows a medieval knight playing chess with Death, sacrificing himself to save the people he does not know. In Prokofiev's story, a chess knight is implanted in Chess Player's skull. He subsequently checkmates with the knight three times. Chess knights are haunting the protagonist like scary phantoms. Knights remind us of the genre of Prokofiev's sketch marked in the RGALI catalogue because it's easy to picture their choreographic representation. Perhaps the composer intended to create an opera with elements of ballet? The manner of the plot elaboration and the episode development rather hint at the operatic nature of the original idea. The composer may have conceived an opera with ballet elements or composed a ballet script in which the operatic basis began to come to the fore in the process of work.

FANTASY

Scenarios where evil fantasy was based on real-life events, on everyday activities were popular with romanticists, and Russian romanticists in particular. It was Hoffmannism of sorts.

...A “machine with a cocky face that laughs when hit at” pops up halfway between reality and fantasy. The machine was designed to mimic Doctor, to be his artificial double. Doctor is the Devil's envoy, with the machine being one of his guises. Conceived in a playful form, he offers plenty of opportunities on stage.

A contract with the Devil is a condition and an attribute of the transaction. The creepy doll comes with different semantic layers: the idea of making inanimate objects behave like living creatures, of a character manipulated by someone else's will, of how mechanistic and illusive the existence is.

COMPOSER AND STAGE DIRECTOR

Prokofiev was creating a play, and that idea reveals the peculiarities of his theater.

The composer enjoyed point endings, an important factor of changes in the musical theater of the early 20th century. He was very mindful of endings in general. In the scene preceding the surgery, Prokofiev wrote:

The end: galoshes? Perhaps not for Doctor?

Another note:

After the celebration, Chess Player sees his friend off, and as he's about to go to sleep — he suddenly catches sight of two chess knights, a black one and a white one. The knights sit around Chess Player. "It's stuffy in here". He jumps over with a knight. The scene is not so scary at first, but gets horrible towards the end.

Agrippa's scene in the first edition of *The Fiery Angel* shares similar dynamics: it, too, has a terrifying ending. Author's comment from the script for the piano:

Agrippa is on his own. He locks the door and closes window shutters. Then lights up two big candles in candelabra. He slides a wall apart. There is a group of black dogs with shining eyes. The group is flooded with a mysterious light.

And another comment a bit later:

Agrippa bows before the group of dogs.³⁷

Adding contrasting touches that energize the structure of a storyline is an important part of Prokofiev's thinking. He writes:

Act One needs more energy. Maybe throw in a friend who is worried about him <...> Perhaps, a photographer barges in and takes pictures for a magazine.

The composer comes up with stage settings and stage situations:

Chessmen attacking. A gentleman enters silently. He takes a seat in an armchair. As he approaches, the armchair moves away by itself.

This sketch is a rare opportunity to read the author's thoughts on future scenes, i. e. his musings on the nature of theater. After the surgery:

Perhaps it should end here to keep the mystery unsolved: whether or not he becomes cured. <...> The final scene will be more exciting if we maintain a feeling that something is about to happen all along.

...Prokofiev occasionally mentions specific pieces of music or provides characteristics of certain pieces: the song in the celebration scene (he was also planning to include the drinking song "Ob dir" in the end of the first scene of *The Fiery Angel*), the fugue in the same scene. Chess Player's male assistant reads in duplets, female assistant—in triplets. Page five has preliminary outlines of the rhythm (without pitch).

Prokofiev enjoyed repetitions of short, catchy phrases and prepared texts for them: "He snarled, he snarled...", "What a loss, what a huge loss..." The composer enhances the vocals by using unconventional types of vocal intonations, extra-musical and extra-textual techniques. When Chess Player is wheeled out after the surgery: "He makes a sharp sound, like a short growl of an animal". And after the triumph upon winning: "either a cough, or a dog barking". Remember the famous remark and "text" in the General's scene, end of Act Three of *The Gambler*: "(He wailed). Aw-ee, aw-ee, aw-ee!".

³⁷ A copy of the author's manuscript of the clavier of *The Fiery Angel* is stored in the SPA. Code: SPA_189-193 (Goldsmiths locator: Reel 2 / 101-200 / 023-100, Reel 2 / 201-300 / 001-016).

* * *

Game as a category has numerous representations: the game-related aspect of music, of Prokofiev's aesthetics. "Prokofiev as a player" is a broad subject. The composer, though not exactly a gambler, was nevertheless venturesome, and the idea of a hot-tempered player coming back to the USSR and betting on the red can be regarded as a possible option. That said, I personally think that, of all the reasons in favor of coming back, the interpretation of the category of evil in *Christian Science* was the most important.³⁸

Lastly, the topic of "Chess in the life of Prokofiev" is also incredibly interesting: that's where one can find the gods of chess. I was lucky enough to have discussed Prokofiev with one of them, Mikhail Moiseyevich Botvinnik. The grandmaster was featured in a TV documentary about the composer.³⁹ But that's a different story.

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³⁸ I first proposed this idea in my *Prokofiev and Christian Science* paper, presented on February 8, 2003, at a seminar organized as part of Manchester Prokofiev Festival (UK). It was first published in: [12]. An extended version was published in Russian: [10].

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