

## THE THEME OF THE PRODIGAL SON'S RETURN IN CLASSICAL MUSIC II: SERGEI PROKOFIEV

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**SUMMARY.** The 34th Sunday after the Pentecost is one of the most important in the liturgical cycle of the Christian Orthodox Church, because it is the second Sunday of the Triodion. In connection to this topic, so profound and rich in theological, moral, musical, and human implications, we investigated areas of interest in the history of the modern music in the last century in search for guiding points to approach this topic. In this second part of the study we analyze the work signed by Sergei Prokofiev.

**Keywords:** pray, Triodion, impressionism, religion, faith.

### 1. Introduction

The 34<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Pentecost is one of the most important in the liturgical cycle of the Christian Orthodox Church, because it is the second Sunday of the Triodion. “Apart from these elements which belong to the sacramental life of the Holy Church, the Triodion must represent, at a personal level, a period of consecration. It is a time where everyday worries should occupy a secondary place, and our spiritual efforts should intensify in order to prepare for the great holiday of the Resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ”<sup>2</sup>. It is particularly important as its name refers not only to the prodigal son, but also to the prodigal son's RETURN (with emphasis not on his reckless and proud leaving, but on the contrition and humbleness of admitting his mistake and trying to straighten his life).

“The parable of the Prodigal Son comprises the most constructive lesson for youth. We can see the entire picture of flippant youth: shallowness,

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<sup>2</sup> Pintilie, Nicolae, *A început perioada Triodului (The Triodion has commenced)*, <https://doxologia.ro/taine-ierurgii-slujbele-bisericii/inceput-perioada-triodului>, 22.02.2016.

lack of seriousness, the passion of independence – in a word, everything that characterises most youth. The flippant youngster thus lets himself be deceived by the deluding shine of worldly pleasures and he decided to throw off his shoulders the yoke of obedience and leave his parents' house.”<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Sergei Prokofiev – The Prodigal Son

George Balanchine's work entitled *The Prodigal Son* op.46, based on the music of Sergei Prokofiev from 1928–1929, is composed in a ballet genre in three acts for the Diaghilev Russian ballet group. The libretto is based on the Prodigal Son parable and belongs to Boris Kochno; the librettist chose to create an amplification of the theme that impresses the public in a very special way. Actually, it was the last ballet supervised by Diaghilev, who was reaching the end of his life. The first performance took place immediately in 1929, in Paris, as an end of the career of the Russian ballet group, with the author conducting. The gesture of the author and the librettist is to be noticed, leading to the creation of a new character, which is not to be found in the biblical framework: the siren.

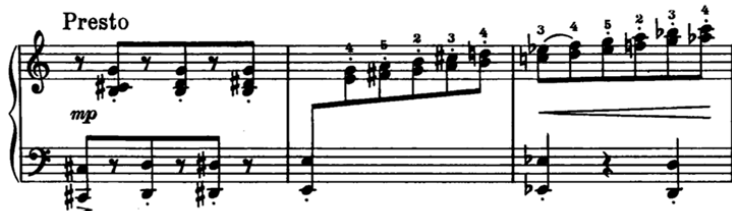
At opus 46 bis, we find again in the creation of Prokofiev the orchestral (symphonic) suite bearing the same name, which has the following sections: 1. *Adagio. Allegretto. Presto. Andantino espressivo. Presto*, 2. *Allegro fastoso*, 3. *Presto (solo de trios clarinettes)*, 4. *Andante assai* and 5. *Andante pomposo. Allegro espressivo*. The work has also inspired an instrumental suite for piano, found at opus number 52 (six pieces for piano – our examples for this article).

Within the first piece from the instrumental suite (1. *Intermezzo*), a short sequence in *Andantino* (*piano dolce*) introduces the first section, *Presto*, that preserves the acid rhythmicity of Prokofiev's discourse. It supposes a sound intervention on each of its eighths, with a staccato attack, in *forte* and with accents on each sound, which adds a great mobility within the multi-octave framework of the unfolding music (with frequent and sudden passages from higher register to middle and lower);

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<sup>3</sup> Maximovici, Sf. Ioan, *Cuvinte pentru viața sufletului, predici și îndrumări duhovnicești* (*Words for soul life, preaches and spiritual guidance*), trad. Elena Dulgheru, Ed. Sophia, București, 2016, p. 113-115.

## E.g. 1



The different accents trigger, at the level of the ternary bar, the dislocation of ordinary ternary pulsation and the configuration of some groups that transcend the original metric dimension.

The *Meno mosso* (*piano espressivo*) section offers to the listener a sample of the lyricism typical for Prokofiev, supported by accompanying ascending formulas in the lower register and by a poly-melodic (stratified) discourse in the higher sound range. The two types of expressive sections (*Meno mosso espressivo* and *Presto*) alternate, thus illustrating the fluctuation of the main hero between the dominating rebel (leaving home and denying paternity) and the family-related prevalence. At the moments *Moderato* and *Andante* (*piano dolce, irresoluto*), we find again lyrical mixtures of the highest intensity, some even with a neoclassical odour.

The second work of the suite, *Rondo* is dedicated to Arthur Rubinstein and articulates a rhythmical-melodic type of discourse of the purest tenderness, supported by a quasi-consonant harmony, so that from the moment *Un poco piu sostenuto* onwards, we can notice a complex bimodal sound level, made up of harmonic intervals that succeed one another in the middle and higher registers, forming a dense and expressive melodic layer.

## E.g. 2



Music also has impressionistic tendencies, besides the neo-classical ones, but the lower and middle registers are privileged (a stylistic element typical for Prokofiev). The discourse is very mobile, full of changes of the modal framework state, tempo and attack.

The third part of the cycle is dedicated to another great pianist (like the other parts) and is entitled *Study*. The musical discourse is motoric, fluent and marked by virtuosity, polymodal accents and an often ludic profile.

E.g. 3



E.g. 4



Part 4, entitled *Scherzino* is dedicated to Orlov, and suggests a more impressionistic atmosphere, closer to consonance, based on a barcarole-like accompaniment. The fifth part, *Andante* is the most meditative of all, with the melody oscillating between the medium and the low register. The indications *dolce*, *espressivo* e *cantando* refer to the vocal part; the vocality is evident in a type of music which seems derived from post-Romanticism. The ambitus of the piano composition shows orchestral musical thinking, gaining in volume and resonance.

The last part is dedicated to V. Horowitz and has the name and nature of a *Scherzo* – so specific for Prokofiev. The metro-rhythmic dominant is characteristic for this *Allergo risoluto*, both in the articulation of the upper level, and in the accompaniment.

## E.g. 5

Allegro risoluto 1909 / 1981

*f secco*  
*senza Ped.*

Within the piano suite there are no expressive, emotional correspondences with such rich themes and resonance for the entire human race. The suites were subsequently extracted from the scenic composition. Many musical ideas were incorporated in the fourth part of the author's symphony, which is recorded under the successive opus (47, signed in 1930).

If the piano suite has six components, the orchestral one has only five, exclusively with tempo indications: *Adagio*, extracted from "The Departure" (No. 1) and "The Prodigal Son and the Siren" (No. 5), *Allegro fastoso*, taking over elements from "Meeting Friends" (No. 2), and "Drunkennes" (No. 6), *Presto*, with musical ideas inspired from "The Despoiling" (No. 7), suggesting that the son succumbed to the temptations of the world. The next part is *Andante assai*, which refers to coming to one's senses: "Awakening and Remorse" (No. 8) and "The Return" (No. 10), and in the end *Andante pomposo* (inspired by "Men's Dance" – no. 4, and "Meeting Friends" – no. 2), as a symbol of the return and of finding oneself.

### 3. Conclusion

One of the basic elements of Prokofiev's musical discourse is the polymodal articulation, which gives his music complexity and enhances its expressivity; investigating the bi- and poly-modal universe, Professor Gheorghe Duțică believes that it "displays the principle of correlation in the succession and/or simultaneity of opposed, antinomic sonorous events, entailing different types of sonorous syntax"<sup>4</sup> (our translation).

"Wouldn't the impulses be similar that even today make many people leave, if not their parents' house, then the house of the Father in Heavens, so that they should not be subjected to the obedience to the

<sup>4</sup> Duțică, Gheorghe, *Universul gândirii polimodale [The universe of polymodal thinking]*, Ed.Juminea, Iași, 2014, p. 210.

Church anymore? We cannot serve God without refusing to serve the world. (...) In other words, day by day, he indulges more and more in the world, and he finally leaves to a far away country. Thus, flippant youth exhaust their wonderful powers of body and soul very quickly and destroy everything they did well before for the time of eternity. In the meanwhile, a great famine occurs in that country, and innermost ravaging and discontent occur”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Maximovici, Sf. Ioan, *Cuvinte pentru viața sufletului, predici și îndrumări duhovnicești (Words for soul life, preaches and spiritual guidance)*, trad. Elena Dulgheru, Ed. Sophia, București, 2016, p. 113-115.