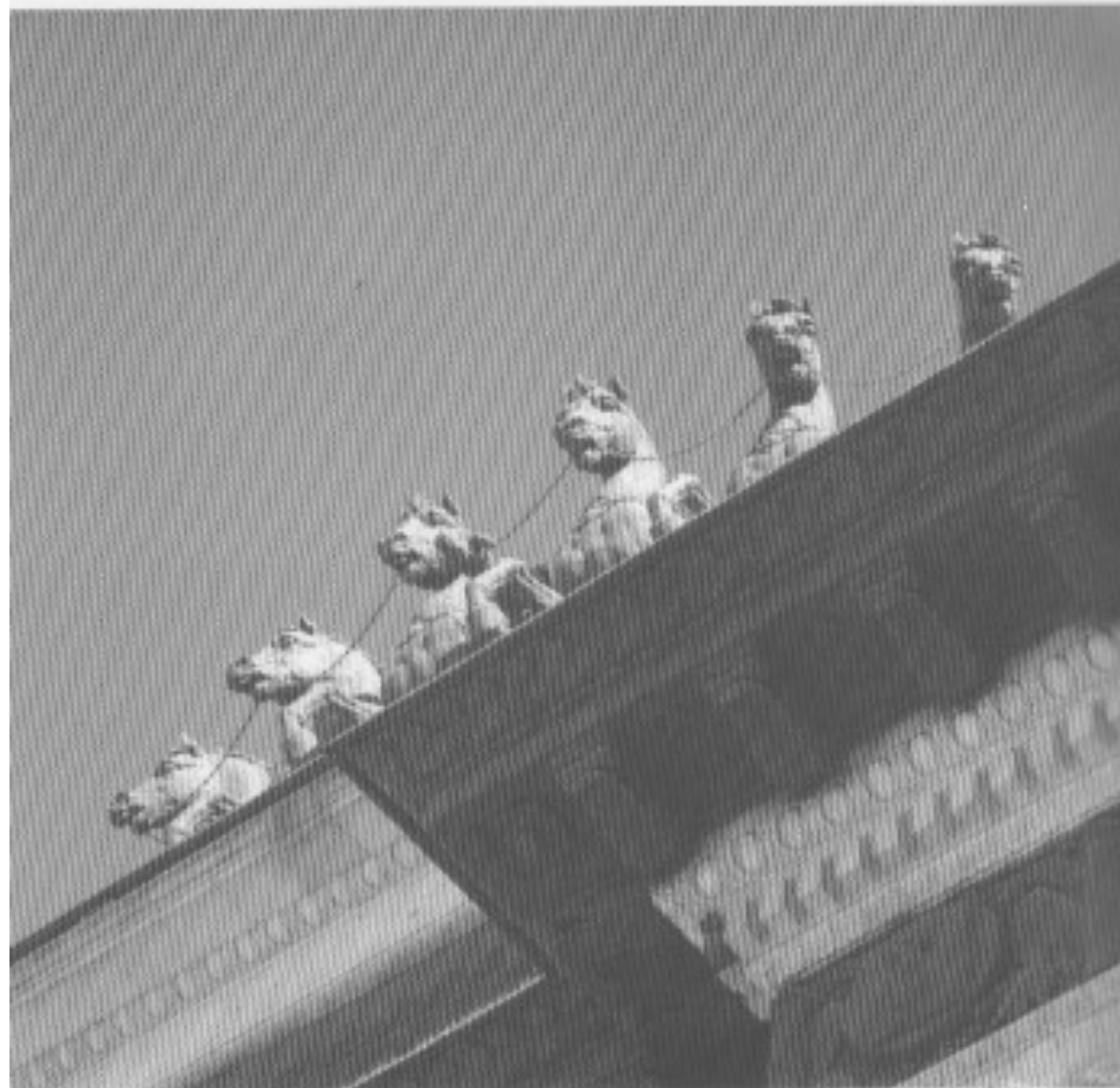
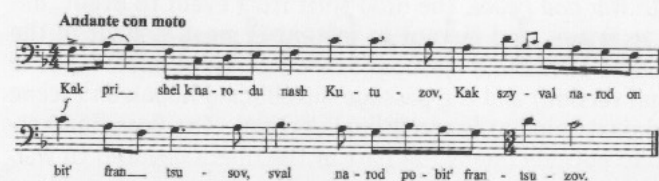


War and Peace and Prokofiev's Late Operatic Aesthetic



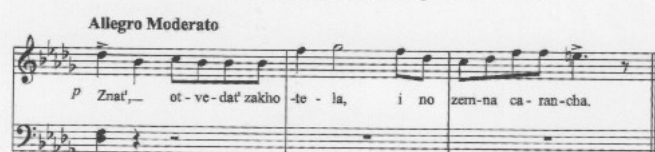
Christina GUILLAUMIER

As the curtain rises we are privy to the work of the peasants: this vignette provides their point of view. They describe the enemy as "strong," but have faith in their power as citizens of a united nation. The word "Moscow" (as symbol of Mother Russia) becomes their sacred battle cry. Their confidence in General Commander Kutuzov is equally resolute, and their chorus is thematically and harmonically held together by a memorable theme of the people.

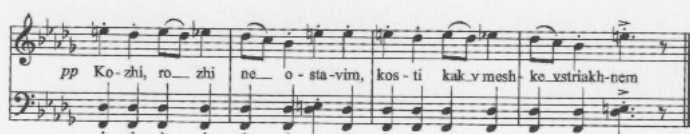


This theme is orchestrated for woodwinds (flute, clarinet, bassoon) and horns, which creates a rich warm accompaniment to the peasants' chorus.

The peasants' chorus moves through a variety of keys. From F major it modulates (by tritone) to B major, followed by A-flat major, up to A major (Prokofiev's characteristic chromatic sideslip), and finally resolves to the original key of F major. These key relationships are important in understanding how Prokofiev depicts the peasants: The quick modulations mirror their enthusiasm and heightened excitement at the onset of battle. Their voices are unified, and the orchestral accompaniment is strident and richly orchestrated. But the music is repeated rather than extended or developed; the only elaboration comprises counter-motifs in the orchestra. The repetitions lend a sense of common purpose and suggest a united front. The chorus falls in two parts: The first, starting from "Our Kutuzov called us forth to battle," is 40 bars long. The second part of the chorus is ostensibly in B-flat minor, although the presence of the raised subdominant blurs the key centre, and presents different thematic material as well as a more violent text: "It looks like you wanted to eat us, you foreign locusts!"



The music to this line is answered by a detached chromatic motif and the words, "Skins, heads, we shall not spare; we'll shake and rattle their bones".



The entrance of the women bringing food is suitably announced by a gentle motif in the flute and oboe. Marked *Allegro ma non troppo*, the motif is accompanied by off-beat pizzicato strings that lend a dance-like character to the music, such that the energy of the episode is not lost and the theatrical rhythm of the whole scene is kept tightly under control. While the women distribute food to the men, Denisov enters and introduces himself to Prince Andrei, describing his partisan plan of attack. This is the first vignette. The introductions are spoken, but Denisov moves from speech to declamation when he asks for five hundred peasants to execute his plan. This is Tikhon's cue to join the conversation between Bolkonsky and Denisov: He is certain that not only will there be five hundred men ready to assist in the plan, but thousands. The figure of Tikhon links the vignette between Andrei and Denisov to the main scene, wherein the men agree with Tikhon and Kondratieva voices her desire to

bring down these "damned marauders". Vasilisa continues in the same vein, urging the peasants to "slaughter the devils". Fedor cannot resist teasing the women, asking "and with what, grannies, are you going to do that?" But the women are not to be silenced: "We'll greet uninvited guests with scythes; we'll comb them with pitch forks". This episode is both humorous and humane, at once personalising and universalising the experience of war. The quick and sometimes light-hearted exchanges between the peasants serve to tighten the theatrical rhythm of this section.

The bass clarinet links this scene to the next vignette, in which Prokofiev musically depicts what Boris Eikhenbaum terms the "fluidity and capricious alternations of psychic states" in Tolstoy's characters.¹⁰ Prince Andrei's thoughts turn to Denisov, Natasha's first fiancé. The thickening string texture, as well as counter motifs in the oboe and cor anglais, separate Andrei from the battlefield and enclose him in his own sound world as his thoughts turn to the past. The orchestration of this vignette gradually incorporates all the woodwinds (except the piccolo), horns and tubas (a favourite Prokofiev combination), plus full strings. His fluid reminiscences are mirrored by changes in tempo that imbue the passage with psychological realism: *Adagio* becomes *Più Mosso* and then *Moderato* as his thoughts move to Kuragin, Natasha's seducer. The changing orchestration likewise underlines Andrei's shifting emotions. Prokofiev follows Andrei's flow of thought by deploying broken chord, triplet undulations in the flute while outlining a short scalar motif (sometimes chromatic) on the downbeats, which fully support Andrei's line. The motif is then taken over by the second violins. When Andrei's thoughts turn to the seducer Kuragin, Prokofiev deploys a simple but dramatically effective scalar figure in the violas and cellos to project the intensity of his emotions. The orchestration is pared back to strings, tuba (interjecting only to support the double bass line), and bassoons. But Andrei's heightened emotion is reflected in the gradually augmented orchestration. The chromatic motif (often used by Prokofiev to suggest evil or supernatural moments) is embedded in the lines of the bass clarinet, bassoons, cellos, and basses. Peace returns to Andrei as he reflects on his own feelings for Natasha, and the orchestration again mirrors this psychological state closely. The orchestra is reduced to strings, oboe, and cor anglais, followed by flutes and horns. The chromatic motif is replaced by triadic figurations, and the addition of the harp reinforces the gentler atmosphere.

Pierre's entrance marks the beginning of the third vignette, and inspires a moment of merriment with the peasants, who tease him by knocking off his hat. His interaction with Prince Andrei is interrupted by the appearance of the orderly; Andrei and Pierre make their farewells. The orderly says that Kutuzov's command has strengthened the nation's courage. As Andrei prepares himself for battle and death, Pierre utters his presentiment that he will never see the Prince again. This brings us to the second part of the scene, which will be dominated by the soldiers rather than the peasants. In dividing his scene in this way, Prokofiev presents us with the two crucial forces that won the war: the ordinary people and the soldiers.

Following this reflection, and in stark contrast to the preceding vignette, the chorus of soldiers sings a cheerful marching song, orchestrated for bass clarinet and pizzicato strings in C major. Such contrast is integral to the rhythm of the scene. Prokofiev includes the snare drum as a military trope suggesting the proximity of war. The song modulates briefly (for six bars), and muted horns, tuba, and harp are added to the orchestration. Peasants join the soldiers on-stage, and the music transitions briefly to the key of B mi-



Sergo Prokofiev. Nikolina Gora, 1949.

nor: the full woodwind complement, as well as a tambourine, now pairs up with the full strings, playing *col legno* chords on the downbeat. The modulation is only transitory, and the chorus is soon back in C major.

As the soldiers exit, Pierre, a kind of "tourist of death",¹¹ ponders the stoic attitude of both peasants and soldiers in the face of war. The orchestration is pared back here so that his reflections come to the foreground. His modally inflected melody is shadowed by the cello, which lends a special poignancy to his utterance (Prokofiev often uses the cello to accompany declamatory moments of great importance). Pierre's reflections on death are crucial here—not least because the audience has the chance to see deep into his soul, and also because to some extent Pierre may be seen as Tolstoy's mouthpiece in the novel. As his reflections progress, the orchestra returns to the cheerful marching song of the soldiers with Pierre's line superimposed; he only half-heartedly joins in, following parts of the rhythm instead of the melody. Pierre is still battling his fear of dying, after all.

His reflections are interrupted by jubilant "Hurrahs," and Kutuzov's entrance is heralded by an epic theme of the nation (in B flat major), suitably orchestrated for cor anglais, clarinet and bass clarinet, bassoons, and horns. The addition of the horns endows the theme with rich, warm overtones. Kutuzov takes up this melody at R. 313.¹² The sung statement of the theme (nine bars) is interrupted by the off-stage band; this gives us a panoramic shot of the battlefield. Prokofiev uses tonality as though it were the lens of a camera, so that our attention is drawn alternately to what is happening onstage and off-stage. As the soldiers pass, introduced by the adjutant, the military rhythm and the two-bar phrase construction remain, but the key shifts from B-flat major to E-flat major. The passage with the off-stage band then returns to B-flat major. The music at R. 321 is marked by a move to C major, indicating a shift in the musical panorama. This bitonal passage, with the off-stage band in B flat major sounding against C major, lasts only six bars before the band shifts back to B flat with the appearance of the Cossacks. The chorus' entrance is introduced by a tuba reinforcing the tonic (R. 323¹³). The chorus heaps praise on the Cossacks in a passage of 47 bars in triple time, rather than the quadruple time used in the first chorus of soldiers.

This epic panorama is the musical backdrop for the conversation between Kutuzov and Andrei, which is the fourth vignette. The import of their exchange and its theatrical rhythm are emphasised by the change in time signature and tempo marking of *Allegro Moderato*. The military tone is maintained by the repeated note in the clarinet and bass clarinet that runs almost throughout their conversation—or at least until Kutuzov pokes fun at his numerous "advisers" (R. 329). Their conversation, commencing at R. 327, is punctuated by glissandos on the first violins—a significant change of texture from the previous vignette. At the mention of God, the passage modulates to an expansive A flat major, and returns to C major, the key associated with the soldiers' chorus, at Kutuzov's mention of the French.

The entrance of Dolokhov marks the beginning of the last vignette. His declamatory line is simple and crisp. Its pitch contours circle around a fifth (E to B). His exit is followed swiftly by the entrance of the staff officers, who voice their concern that Kutuzov is not up to the task of managing an army given that he cannot even mount a horse. The vignette ends on this note of derision. Kutuzov is leading the army because he is the people's favourite. At the mention of the people's wishes, the soldiers' chorus returns with a recapitulation of the people's theme orchestrated with a full orchestra. The scene concludes dramatically: Andrei comes on stage

to declare that the war has really begun, an ominous statement prefaced by a motif in the oboe and piccolo at R. 338¹⁴.

Another example of Prokofiev's manipulation of theatrical rhythm occurs in the Napoleon scene, in which the composer is economical but enormously effective with his musical materials, ensuring an even tighter rhythm than in the battlefield scene. Prokofiev does not rely on vignettes here; instead, the theatrical rhythm lies in the music. Three short but memorable motifs structure this scene and provide a tight internal musical rhythm.

- (a) an opening four bar motif in first violins, which captures the urgency of an army at war (unsurprisingly it incorporates the tritone);
- (b) a three-quaver ostinato built around the third and heard in the lower strings;
- (c) a fanfare motif introduced by trumpets that is texturally distorted by the muted solo trumpet, at which point it acquires menacing overtones.

Prokofiev offers a humane portrait of Napoleon: This scene presents the French commander's point of view. He muses aloud on the progress of the war, reminding his generals that Moscow will be his at a moment's notice. Prokofiev is as psychologically true to Napoleon in this scene as he was to Prince Andrei in the previous one; this truthfulness to a character's thoughts controls the pacing of the scene, and is reflected in the manipulation of its constituent musical materials. The music follows Napoleon's thoughts closely, and the tightly woven sequence of motifs (a), (b), and (c) is broken only when the French leader refers to the "ancient Asiatic capital of Moscow," accompanied almost to the letter by the cello. The difference in instrumentation here is significant, as it seems to announce Napoleon's wishful thinking. He speaks of his bountiful nature, and declares he would be merciful to the vanquished. No brass or percussion are heard at this point, only full woodwind and harp—a sound combination used in later Prokofiev to suggest otherworldliness; the addition of the tuba lends subtle power to the texture. Similarly, the trill in the clarinet and solo flute enhances the ethereal atmosphere, but seems out of place in the theatre of war. This orchestration suggests that Napoleon is out of touch with the progress of the war and even with his own army. But the reprise of the three opening motifs soon shatters this dream state, restoring the scene's musical and dramatic rhythm, and confining Napoleon's ruminations to a discrete sound world, just as in the previous scene Andrei sought refuge in a sonic space of his own.

Prokofiev uses linking gestures (such as the repeated note) to control the scene's overall theatrical rhythm. The aide-de-camp's vocal line appropriately picks up the repeated note; he is, after all, an instrument of war—or perhaps, more appropriately, a puppet in Napoleon's campaign. As such, equating his vocal line with the orchestral lines dehumanises him. The rhythm of the conversation slows down at the *Poco più sostenuto* section (R. 349), as Napoleon makes his decisions and issues his commands. Here Prokofiev again pares down the orchestration to a minimum, as if to lay bare Napoleon's thinking. His statements are punctuated by an octave gesture in the strings and tuba falling on the last beat of the bar. The section shifts between the time signatures of 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4, which is another way that Prokofiev varies the pacing and rhythm of the scene. The same technique is used at R. 352, when the French commander tries to decide whether or not to send in his reserves. Throughout this scene, the orchestration is suggestive of Napoleon's character. A more pensive and perhaps less aggressive side emerges—testament to Prokofiev's ability to

portray the psychologies of his characters with the simplest of means.

Napoleon's discussion with Belliard again reveals a softer touch to the French leader's character. His decision to send Belliard out to survey the condition of the troops is heralded by a gentle falling semitone motif at R. 357, orchestrated with horns alone. Napoleon's vocal melody iterates the falling semitone, and his declamatory line is built around it and the repeated note. The repeated note or fanfare motif runs through the entire section. The projection of orders to the soldiers off-stage conveys the impression of a formidable French army, while the urgency of the situation is highlighted by the continual repeated note motif in the horns, oboes, and cor anglais. The off-beat detached figure at R. 361 heightens the dramatic pacing of the scene and builds up tension: clarinets, double bassoons, and horns are joined by the lower strings (violas, cellos and doubles basses) playing *sul ponticello*.

The interruption of Napoleon's thoughts by the cook is gently, and almost comically, marked by a figure on the flute, while the repeated note persists, with reduced orchestration, in the clarinets and bass clarinets. The cook's simple motif is set apart both by virtue of its orchestration (flutes and bassoons) as well as by a tempo change, ensuring that the pacing of the scene is varied. Berthier's entrance prompts a re-evaluation of their situation: Napoleon's helplessness is most touching in this instance. Despite having the same soldiers, the same generals, and the same tactics as in previous campaigns, Napoleon voices his premonition that he will not win this war. The return of the tremolo figure at R. 335 presages the French commander's more pensive mood. The muted solo trumpet continues to refer to the battle raging in the distance; the descending chromatic motif in the tuba evinces Napoleon's pensiveness.

In terms of scenic plasticity and overall dramatic structure, the original version of *War and Peace* is vastly superior to the final one. The Council at Fili scene in the final version renders the second half of the opera static; no wonder Prokofiev was reluctant to compose it. The ball scene (Scene 2 of the final version) likewise slows the tempo of the opera, and does little to advance the plot apart from providing Natasha with a Cinderella moment. Moreover, in the final version the overemphasis on Kutuzov spoils the balance in the original between his part and Napoleon's. And throughout the revision, the individual is subsumed by the collective.

¹ Taruskin, Richard, *On Russian Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 247.

² Quoted in Malcolm Hamrick Brown, "Prokofiev's *War and Peace*: A Chronicle", *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 63 No. 3 (1977), 297.

³ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁴ Prokofiev's concerns echo those of his Russian predecessors Modest Musorgsky and Alexander Dargomyzhsky. Musorgsky wanted his characters "to speak on stage as living people speak, but in such a way that their essential nature and force of intonation, supported by an orchestra that forms a musical canvas for their speech, shall hit the target squarely. [...] My music must be the artistic reproduction of human speech, as the exterior manifestation of thought and feeling, must without exaggeration or strain, become music—truthful accurate, but artistic, in the highest sense artistic." [Quoted in Richard Taruskin, *Musorgsky: Eight Essays and an Epilogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 74]. Both Musorgsky and Dargomyzhsky considered the spoken word the source of emotional truth. Although Prokofiev shared this respect for the spoken word, the composer's text setting was much more intuitive.

⁵ Prokofiev, Serge, *Sergey Prokofiev Diaries, 1915-1923: Behind the Mask*, translated and annotated by Anthony Phillips (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 734.

⁶ 18 June 1926 letter from Prokofiev to Boris Demchinsky, in *Three Oranges*, No. 3 (2002), 17.

⁷ In his acting handbook, Barry Pineo calls it "an ordered recurrent alternation of strong and weak elements in the flow of sound and silence in speech including the grouping of weaker elements around stronger, the distribution and relative disposition of strong and weak elements, and the general quantitative relations of these elements and their combinations". Barry Pineo, *Acting that Matters* (New York: Allworth Press, 2004), 75.

⁸ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, translated by Christine Shantz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 314.

⁹ Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*, translated by Richard Fowler (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 216. The relationship between Meyerhold and Prokofiev stretched back to the composer's first version of *The Gambler*, 1916, which Meyerhold was meant to direct.

¹⁰ Boris Eikhenbaum, *The Young Tolstoy*, ed. Gary Kern (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1972), 42.

¹¹ Gary Saul Morson, "The Reader as Voyeur", *Tolstoy's Short Fiction*, edited and revised by Michael R. Katz, 2nd edition (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2008), 383.

¹² Rehearsal numbers in this article refer to the performing version of *War and Peace* reconstructed by Rita McAllister for the premiere of the original version of opera.

