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*À la recherche d'un texte :
Prokofiev et la littérature*



UNIVERSITÉ FRANÇOIS-RABELAIS – TOURS

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Prokofiev, opera and theatre :
a case study of *The Gambler*

Prokofiev's fascination with the stage and commitment to opera in particular came early and lasted a lifetime. His first opera, titled *The Giant* was written when the composer was only nine years old. Three other childhood operas preceded his conservatory opera, *Maddalena*. Thus, by the time Prokofiev came upon Dostoyevsky's novella *The Gambler* and decided to turn it into an opera, he had developed some very specific and idiosyncratic ideas on the operatic genre and its relationship to theatre more generally. He therefore approached this opera with a radicalism and ambition that cannot be solely attributed to his youth.

This essay critically engages with *The Gambler* as an opera that was in many ways ahead of its time and yet, simultaneously, was a development of ideas about the operatic genre that had roots in conventional opera. This article also provides an analytical reflection on some of the changes that Prokofiev made to the 1917 version of *The Gambler* when he came to revise it a decade later. The two versions of *The Gambler* provide us with crucial insights into his developing theatrical instinct and into his understanding of dramaturgy.

Throughout his career, Prokofiev engaged with literature in a personal way, writing his own librettos, working closely with other collaborators on his stage and later on, film productions, his collaboration with the film director Eisenstein perhaps being the most well known and frequently documented. Prokofiev's understanding of the stage evolved throughout the course of his compositional career, as did his dramaturgical experience although many of the fundamentals of his theatre, such as his preoccupation with dramatic pacing, an animated stage and declamation as a way of providing ongoing

movement remained. Prokofiev's theatrical ideal depends on a hectic sequencing of events, and on stage activity that would generate its own internal rhythm. This rhythm would then provide the pacing for the entire opera, within which various scenes, such as the Gambling Scene for example, would develop their own rhythm and pacing. Characterization also played a crucial role in this rhythm, as the gradual exposition of the characters and their interaction played an important part in sustaining continuous action. Finally, through declamation, Prokofiev planned on achieving a type of realism on stage that did not immediately subscribe to operatic conventions.

First attempts at operatic composition

When Prokofiev started working on *The Gambler* in 1915, his reputation as an outstanding pianist of considerable technical prowess as well as an idiosyncratic composer for the piano was by now, well established in musical circles. Prokofiev was known as a composer-pianist and his performances of his own piano music had garnered some very strong critical reviews ¹. In spite of this fame however, Prokofiev yearned to compose for the stage and to establish himself as an operatic composer, an area in which he had yet to make his mark. His first opportunity came when he was asked to write an opera to be staged by students of the St Petersburg Conservatory. He describes the enthusiasm with which he went to work, noting that he was « tremendously excited by the notion of writing a one-act opera [...] Never have I been as excited about my future work as I am now » ². Nikolay Tcherepnin, Prokofiev's conducting teacher at the Conservatory, gave the young composer some guidance on operatic composition, particularly in terms of the choice of subject :

« For a first attempt at opera, the subject should be as simple as possible, intimate and not too exotic, without over-ambitiously aiming at anything too original. The most important thing for an opera is that it should have plenty of life and movement, otherwise the characters run the risk of simply turning into wax figures » ³.

(1) On the one hand Prokofiev was hailed as a modernist by the avant garde circles of St Petersburg, on the other his music was often condemned for being too dissonant and experimental. In his 'Diary', Prokofiev notes that Glazunov, on looking through Prokofiev's student symphony, « approved the first movement least, the second movement more so and the third still more. The first movement was too dissonant for him, particularly the second page of the exposition ». (See *Sergey Prokofiev : Diaries 1907-1914 : Prodigious Youth*, translated and annotated by Anthony Phillips, London : Faber and Faber, 2006, p. 67.)

(2) *Sergey Prokofiev : Diaries 1907-1914 : Prodigious Youth*, op. cit., p. 217-218.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 217.

Prokofiev hardly took Tcherepnin's advice to heart. If anything, the composer's choice of librettos, particularly in his early operas, may seem rather singular, not being easily amenable to adaptation for the operatic stage, however there are significant thematic constants. Above all else, Prokofiev was ambitious, yearned to be original and was attracted by « exotic » plots. In *Maddalena*, composed to a libretto written by a society lady writing under the nom de plume of Baron Lieven ⁴, Prokofiev was attracted to the gothic qualities of drama, suspense and violence, qualities that fuelled his imagination. The action, he notes « abounded in conflicts, love, treachery and murder, and offered a host of interesting problems for the composer » ⁵.

Prokofiev was particularly taken with the main character's unpredictable and almost hysterical nature, in which we can already see a prefiguring of his other female characters, notably Paulina in *The Gambler* and Renata in *The Fiery Angel*. These Prokofievan female characters all have a destabilising and dangerous presence in his operas. They are half-witch, half-madonna : characters around them are simultaneously drawn to them and yet are repelled by their schizophrenic personality. The failure of *Maddalena* to reach the stage (because it was far too difficult an opera for the Conservatory students to stage) did not deter Prokofiev from embarking on yet another opera. He now turned enthusiastically to a much more ambitious project for the stage.

In writing his first major opera, Prokofiev turned to Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler*, perhaps encouraged by the fact that close friend Miaskovsky was also planning a work based on Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. Arguably, both composers may have been influenced in their choice of author by the recent popularity of the writer's dramatized works, notably *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*. Thematically, *The Gambler* is concerned with the obsession of gambling and Prokofiev must have been attracted to the potential of portraying the extremes of human nature that this narrative provided.

Prokofiev's adaptation of Dostoyevsky's novel : establishing an internal rhythm

Prokofiev's concern with avoiding a static stage and maintaining continuity of action is a dominating feature of his stage and posed the greatest adaptation challenge. In a 1916 interview Prokofiev noted that in this work, he had been « paying particular

⁽⁴⁾ The lady's real name was Magda Gustavovna Lieven-Orlova.

⁽⁵⁾ *Autobiography*, in *Sergei Prokofiev, Soviet Diary 1927 and Other Writings* translated and edited by Oleg Prokofiev, London : Faber and Faber, 1991, p. 243.

attention to the scenographic plasticity of opera because in recent times the interest of composers in this aspect appears to have declined markedly. »⁶ Dostoyevsky's novella provided Prokofiev with a narrative in which he could explore the timing and pacing of sequences of events on stage. The composer's first task was to compress the novel, which is written in the first person and narrating events that have *already* happened, into action unfolding on stage. Given the psychological nature of the work, this was never going to be an easy task. Prokofiev's approach to the creation of such a libretto reveals that his sense of the theatrical and staging was both resourceful and creative⁷. The libretto, and the opera itself are propelled forward at a punishing pace. Prokofiev was determined to maintain the hectic pacing of the story line from the moment the curtain went up. His libretto starts with Alexey's question : « What will I tell Paulina ? ». This immediately throws us into the middle of the action, and right from the start the audience is forced to make sense of the sequence of events into which it has been plunged. The frenetic pacing of the opera is set up from the outset.

Throughout this work, Prokofiev's main preoccupation was to maintain continuous action through a sustained rhythmic drive. The sense of ongoing motion is present in Dostoyevsky's novel to a much lesser extent since the events are narrated *after* they have happened. Furthermore, each scene is psychologically analysed and Alexey dwells over cause and effect in depth in the course of his narrative. This aspect of the novel is naturally much diluted in the libretto. Alexey's interior monologues in the novel temporarily blur our perception of the passing of time as we go over various events with Alexey. In Prokofiev's narrative this blurring of time is never felt – rather, often left breathless by the action, the audience is more conscious of a sense of time *flying* – that sensation remains uppermost in our mind. Furthermore, the opera plays with the boundaries of reality, floating between the real and the surreal, so that we are never entirely sure whether the nightmarish gambling scene happened in a real sense or whether we were living it as a Kafkaesque moment through Alexey's befuddled mind.

Nevertheless, Prokofiev has his own techniques for applying breaks upon the action. As a composer-librettist, he does this in two related ways. Firstly, he highlights specific lines in the text around which the action hinges. Prokofiev's music defines these key statements, which then direct the course of the action and acquire a structural

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

(7) Harlow Robinson provides a detailed sectional comparison between the layout of the novella and the libretto in his article « Dostoevsky and Opera : Prokofiev's 'The Gambler' », *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (Winter, 1984), pp. 96-106.

role. Prokofiev's music transforms these statements into cinematic close ups. Notable examples include : « You won't get a penny from me ! » (Babulenska, Act II), « You are so ungrateful to me Blanche ! » (General, Act III) « Who would have thought that red would turn up twenty times in a row ! Ha-ha ! » (Alexey, Act IV). In this way, Prokofiev's musical dialogue within the context of the operatic genre, goes a step further than the experiments of Mussorgsky and Dargomyzhsky – rather than simply setting the words to music, Prokofiev wanted to turn specific moments into exaggerated emotional states.

Apart from such moments of psychological tension, Prokofiev also zooms in on specific scenes in the novel that could be used as epiphanical points : moments of heightened action followed by a freezing of a particular scenic moment. The Baron scene at the end of Act I and the finale of the opera are two examples of these epiphanical points. During such moments, time stops and this creates a rupture in the otherwise unrelenting pace of the work. Prokofiev achieves this through what Morrison notes is a « freeze-frame *fortissimo* fermata » technique ⁸. Through the fusion of music with a visual image a cinematic static moment is created - a moment that is intended to remain etched in the audience's memory. Prokofiev worked out the pivotal scenes of the libretto in advance, perhaps even as a series of tableaux or visual images, and then worked his way to and from those scenes : « The ending of the opera I had worked out in my mind long ago, in September, and somewhere or other I even have a sketch of Alexey's valedictory phrase, which, however, I am not making use of. » ⁹

While Act I is action packed and displays an unflagging tempo and relentless dramatic movement, Act II is more conversational. Prokofiev needed to create a smooth second act that had the dual function of counterbalancing the breathless first act and preparing the audience for the next two climactic acts. The first half of this second act is concerned with the consequences of Alexey's conflict with the Baron. It is composed around the conversations between Alexey and the General and that between Alexey and Mr. Astley. The second half of the Act, which start from Babulenska's (Granny) unexpected arrival, is composed around that very Russian figure. Alexey introduces her to the Marquis, Mlle Blanche, Prince Nilsky and Mr Astley. Like Act I, which ended with the Baron raining blows on Alexey. Act II finishes very theatrically, with Babulenska demanding to be taken to see the roulette tables that everyone is talking about, she

⁸ Simon Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement* Berkeley : California University Press, 2002, p. 282. Morrison is referring to the last scene of *The Fiery Angel* but the concept is equally applicable here.

⁹ *Sergey Prokofiev : Diaries 1915-1923 : Behind the Mask, op.cit.* , p. 106. Actually, Prokofiev's revised version of the scene, not the one he was referring to in this Diary entry, ends with this phrase.

concludes the act with admonishing words to the General « You shall not get any money from me ». In closing every act with a cliff-hanging episode, Prokofiev ensures that the dramatic intensity of the plot and the ongoing flow of the work are sustained.

The third act centres on the character of Granny, Babulenska, and her acquaintance and new-found addiction for the game of roulette. Structurally, this act is again a series of conversations strung together with the purpose of giving the audience an insight to what is happening in the casino, the physical centre of the action. In the novel, Babulenska gradually succumbs to the lure of the casino and to the game of roulette itself. The spectacle of it draws her in almost imperceptibly : « Granny watched from a distance with wild curiosity. She was much delighted at a thief's being turned out [...] she was more pleased at roulette and the rolling of the little ball »¹⁰. This carnivalesque atmosphere captures Prokofiev's imagination and is encapsulated in the Gambling Scene in Act IV, which is a testament to his ingenious ability to depict characters musically, some overtly as caricatures, others less so. Equally, he captures the feverish atmosphere within the casino and the hypnotising power of the « little ball ».

Dostoyevsky's novel provides a razor-sharp analysis of the way the game plays upon the gamblers' desire of winning and their inability to stop playing even though they are close to losing everything. Babulenska, aided by Alexey, hastily acquaints herself with the rules of the game and starts playing. Her stakes are instinctive and she wins enormous sums of money, to the surprise of Alexey and of her family, who are none too happy to watch her gambling away what they view as their rightful inheritance. Spurred on by her first success at the gaming tables, Babulenska goes back to the game – this time losing everything she had won previously. But the tempting possibility of winning continues to haunt Babulenska and she returns to the casino in an attempt to win back what she had lost. Finally, after a second impulsive and unsuccessful trip to the casino, this time unaccompanied by Alexey and therefore prey to the unscrupulous gamblers at the casino, Babulenska decides to go back to Moscow.

Act III of the opera is therefore enacted only in a passive sense. This act posed a dramaturgical challenge – while it works well in the novel, telling the story through various different characters deprives the stage of a focal point, creating the impression of unrest, panic and instability. As an audience we are not invited into the Casino and we are not part of Babulenska's play. Rather, in the opera, we see the action only through the reaction of other characters. The General paces up and down the corridor in agitation, the

⁽¹⁰⁾ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Gambler* translated by Constance Garnett, New York : Dover Publications Inc., 1996, p. 57.

Marquis and another character, Prince Nilsky, provide regular reports on the total loss sustained by Babulenska. All of this allows us to come to terms with the importance of Babulenska's wealth in the eyes of these characters. So much of their happiness is hinged upon the promised inheritance – the General, the Marquis, Mlle Blanche, Paulina – all have something to gain from the old lady's fortune.

Thus the audience are left with a fragmented, key-hole view of the action, and, in contrast to Dostoyevsky's narration of events where we see them through the eyes of Alexey, Prokofiev's audience cannot help but sit at the edge of their seats and empathise, if for different reasons, with the agitation felt by the characters on stage. The music reflects this distance between the audience and the action in the casino : the gambling themes that will feature in Act IV can be heard from rehearsal number 358 onwards. They function as overtones to the characters' conversations and are thus an externalisation of what is preoccupying them above all else. As Alexey muses on the General's request to try and stop Babulenska from playing at roulette, the love theme is heard over the gambling theme : Prokofiev thus in no uncertain musical terms articulates the dilemma that has been haunting Alexey right from the start of the opera.

In only permitting the audience a kaleidoscopic view of the events as they unfolded and in excluding them from the action in the casino, Prokofiev heightens the audience's suspense and paves the way for his masterly Gambling Scene – the opera's climactic moment. Prokofiev turns the Casino, around which the town of Roulettenburg revolves, into the point of activity of his opera. His narrative is driven by an internal or « theatrical » rhythm ¹¹, a rhythm that accelerates as the work approaches the Gambling Scene in Act IV. This internal rhythm of the work, manifest through Prokofiev's sequencing of events works as a dramatic crescendo – an important element of Prokofiev's theatre.

Yet another theatrical ploy that Prokofiev uses in a structural fashion is the cliff-hanging ending. Each act finishes on a high-intensity moment, thus ensuring that action continuity is maintained. The first act ends with the Baron beating up Alexey, the second with Babulenska telling the General that he will not be getting any money from her, the third with the General in a frenzied mood of desperate love for Blanche, a love he knows is doomed because Babulenska is squandering the inheritance at the gambling tables. The last scene, as noted above, ends on a high note of action, with Alexey feverishly looking at an invisible roulette wheel following Paulina's humiliating rejection of his financial help. Prokofiev has in fact telescoped the novella's ending as he eliminates the

⁽¹¹⁾ Prokofiev uses this term in a letter to Demchinsky, dated 18 June 1926, published in *Three Oranges*, N°3, May 2002, pp. 16-18.

Epilogue and focuses instead on the power of the addiction of gambling over his love for Paulina. The composer made that choice because « in view of the fact that the dramatic action is considerably declining towards the end of Dostoyevsky's novel and thus turns into psychological emotional experiences, and that this would have affected the closing scene and weakened its effect and that of the whole opera, I thought it better to end the opera at the point where Paulina leaves the main character »¹². Such scenic moments are cinematic in nature and Prokofiev has purposely designed them to be so. The curtain comes down on a visual image that the audience cannot help but memorise and this image is adroitly accompanied by music that sustains that moment for as long as possible.

Composing *The Gambler* : chronology of the two versions

Prokofiev's opportunity to write *The Gambler* came after Siloti introduced him to Albert Coates, an English conductor at the Marinsky Theatre, who reportedly told him « Write your *Gambler*, we'll stage it. »¹³ Prokofiev intended *The Gambler* to be a powerful statement on the operatic genre and on the future direction he thought Russian opera should be taking. In interviews that the composer gave in 1916, his intentions for this opera appear ambitious and mould-breaking. Prokofiev was set to make a sensation, or so he thought. The younger members of the directorate of the Maryinsky Theatre wanted to update the operatic repertory and to include works by contemporary composers : this was certainly a motivation for Coates to urge Prokofiev to write *The Gambler*. Accordingly, Prokofiev set to work on both the libretto and music, swiftly and with great enthusiasm. In less than six months, the piano score was completed and then presented to the Maryinsky Theatre Directorate for inclusion in the 1916-1917 season. Prokofiev was offered a contract and preparations were underway for the first performance. The radical theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold, had first heard Prokofiev play through *The Gambler* in October 1916 at an evening hosted by the conductor Coates at which the singers of the leading roles were also present. The theatre director was impressed by what he heard and enthusiastically applauded what he saw as an innovative and controversial contribution to the genre of opera. Meyerhold, who was staging productions at both the Alexandrinsky and Maryinsky theatres in St Petersburg

⁽¹²⁾ *Sergei Prokofiev : Materials, Articles Interviews*, compiled by Vladimir Blok, Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1978, p. 28.

⁽¹³⁾ *Autobiography*, in *Sergei Prokofiev, Soviet Diary 1927 and Other Writings* translated and edited by Oleg Prokofiev, London : Faber and Faber, 1991, p. 253.

was chosen as director of *The Gambler* while Golovin was creating the stage sets. Their projected roles in the production became official in February 1917 and notices to that effect appeared in the press.

During the summer of 1916, while juggling a hectic performing career, Prokofiev set to work on orchestrating the piano score. The first performance of *The Gambler* was set for February 1917 and rehearsals started in late January but almost immediately rumours were emerging in the press that the production was not running smoothly. Tales of singers unhappy with their parts began to emerge. Furthermore, Dostoyevsky's widow claimed that royalties were due to her for the use of the novel as libretto and this protracted the negotiations although in the end, Prokofiev came to an amicable financial agreement with the lady on the matter.

The historic events of February 1917 however, were to put a stop to this first performance of Prokofiev's beloved « Gambler ». Soon after the February Revolution, singers and orchestra alike, in keeping with the revolutionary spirit of the times, turned against *The Gambler*, refusing to perform it, ostensibly because the parts were too difficult. Had the planned premiere taken place with such a highly distinguished set of collaborators, it would have indeed been a landmark moment in the cultural life of St Petersburg and could possibly have changed the course of Prokofiev's operatic career. In any case, Prokofiev, tried, though unsuccessfully to set up a performance of the work at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. Plans for its performance were temporarily suspended and in August 1917, Prokofiev took the pre-emptive step of removing *The Gambler* from the repertoire (since there were no funds available for the production) rather than having his production cancelled. Meyerhold however was loathe to give up on the work and in 1918 informed Prokofiev that *The Gambler* was in the repertoire for next season. Eventually however, plans for the performance of *The Gambler* were shelved and it was not until a decade later that Prokofiev revisited this work. This was the first in a series of abortive efforts of the artistic duo to work together.

In autumn of 1927, Prokofiev began a revision of *The Gambler*. After Leningrad's successful run with *Love for Three Oranges*, the Marinsky Theatre had expressed an interest in staging *The Gambler*. In his *Autobiography* Prokofiev notes that after ten years he was able to see « quite clearly what was genuine in it and what was sheer padding disguised by thunderous chords. I discarded these parts and replaced them by new ones built mainly on the material which I considered worth preserving. I also polished up the vocal parts and simplified the orchestration »¹⁴. These changes reflect Prokofiev's

⁽¹⁴⁾ *Autobiography*, in *Sergei Prokofiev, Soviet Diary 1927 and Other Writings*, op. cit., p. 285.

maturity as a stage composer and his move toward a less literal musical reading. However, while the score may have been refined during this revision process, the fundamental theatrical principles underlying the work underwent very little change. The revised orchestral score of the opera was ready by February 1928 and *The Gambler* finally had its first performance on 29 April 1929 at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels ¹⁵. The composer notes that he was pleased with this production because although the theatre had modest resources, their production of the opera showed an empathetic understanding of Prokofiev's theatrical principles : « For me the main source of satisfaction was that the dramatic tension was built up gradually and was sustained until the very end » ¹⁶.

Following the opera's successful staging in Brussels, Prokofiev yet again turned to the score to make some further small revisions in the wake of the live performance that he had seen. In a letter to Paul Spaak following the first performance of *The Gambler*, Prokofiev details some suggestions for improving on the performances he had seen ¹⁷. Interestingly his comments address the visual impact of the opera, highlighting the need for naturalness on stage and suggesting that Alexey needs to be more animated at the start of Act II, Paulina needing more feminine charm in her interpretation and Babulenska also needing to take the time to be more lyrical in Act III. Furthermore, Prokofiev notes that as Alexey leaves the roulette table after his win, he should let gold pieces drop to the floor as these would have a better visual effect than bank notes.

Structural revisions : the importance of the visual image

In a 1916 interview, Prokofiev notes that in composing *The Gambler* he was very preoccupied « with the stage aspect of the opera and tried wherever possible not to burden the singers with unnecessary conventionalities so as to give freedom to the dramatic presentation of their roles. »¹⁸ Structurally, this opera was not divided into conventional operatic sets, ostensibly to allow the singers to better act out their roles. Rather, it was the sequence of events, the inner pacing of the narrative and the exposition of the characters that would determine the structure of the opera. Prokofiev's faithfulness to the spoken word at the expense of set ensembles and solo arias created a different sort

⁽¹⁵⁾ The opera was performed a total of eight times during the 1928 - 1929 and 1929 - 1930 seasons.

⁽¹⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Letter from Prokofiev to Paul Spaak 1 May 1929. The Serge Prokofiev Archive. XX / 328. Paul Spaak was one of the directors of the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels. He also translated the opera from the original Russian into French.

⁽¹⁸⁾ *Sergei Prokofiev : Materials, Articles Interviews, op.cit.*, p. 28.

of challenge for Prokofiev's opera singer : a successful portrayal of each character needed supporting acting skills, and this was one of the main reasons why Prokofiev wanted the theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold to direct this work. For Meyerhold, rhythm, along with gestures, movement and music, was a crucial constituent of the language of theatre. Although they approached the stage from different viewpoints, Prokofiev and Meyerhold's work shared various qualities : in particular, they were both searching for an internal rhythm that would unfold as the work progressed.

Due to the fact that the novel itself is either narrated by the protagonist Alexey or narrated to Alexey by other characters, the creation of direct and dramatic action in the operatic adaptation would have to be delicately crafted. Prokofiev's libretto highlights specific points of action around which the plot revolves and this determines the opera's overall structure. Significant moments of the opera are the unexpected appearance of Babulenska in Act II, the feverish Gambling Scene in Act IV, Scene 2 and the last moments of the opera where Paulina throws back the money in Alexey's face while the curtain comes down on a protagonist still dazed and feverish from the fortune he won at roulette. These significant moments drive the pace of the narrative and thus the pace of the opera itself.

The difficulty of dramatizing many of the interior monologues and conversations of Dostoyevsky's novel clearly caused Prokofiev problems. The second version of the opera tackles this problem more directly by introducing interruptions to the main conversations in Act I. These disruptions break up the monotony that could result from having an entire act written in a declamatory form. Structurally, this is a ploy that Prokofiev will use throughout this opera : each act is held together by one or two principle conversations with clusters of interruptive moments around each. This is an economical way of ensuring that the focus remains ultimately on the issues raised by the main conversation, but the interruptions bring to light other dramaturgical concerns. Aside from making things interesting and creating movement on stage, the various interruptions embody the main themes of the novel. They also effectively draw attention to other related problems, such as the concern shown by all over Babulenska's current state of health, the indebtedness of the General to the Marquis as well as the relationship between the General and Mlle Blanche. Ultimately however, Act I is thematically centred around the relationship between Alexey and Paulina. This underlying theme holds the whole act together and functions as a structurally unifying strand.

The first entrance of the General and his entourage bring to light various issues. The arrival of the telegram hints at the expectancy surrounding Babulenska's death

and touches on a sensitive issue for many of the characters. The arrogant questioning of Alexey regarding his recent gambling exploits reveal the obsession with gambling that pervades the atmosphere. Alexey's heated response, especially through the highly satirical « Vater » episode, immediately gives us an impression of the main protagonist's character. He is proud and impulsive with a strong sense of mischief and the desire to shock, particularly those elements of society, like the Marquis and the General, who are so full of their own importance that they can think of nothing beyond matters that directly involve them and who think that Alexey's paid position as tutor to the children give them authority over him.

The use of the « mute scenes » at rehearsal numbers 105 and 107, the only two that occur in the opera, are highly theatrical. At this point, presumably the General and the Marquis look at one another in displeasure, in order to reinforce to the audience the bad blood that exists between them. This deliberate and highly stylised static tableau-like moment in the Meyerholdian vein, is in direct contrast with the highly charged conversations in Act I. This moment in the scene functions as though it were the lens of a camera : all eyes are drawn to their relationship while all conversations and activity around them stops. Similarly, each of the four acts sketches a different character, although never in enough depth that allows us to get to know the characters in detail. In Act II, the focus is still on Alexey, but in the more numerous interruptions of the second act, we get the chance to learn more about the driving motives of the other characters such as the General, the Marquis and Mr Astley. Act III on the other hand, centres on the General and his difficulties while Act IV again centres on Alexey, and, to a lesser extent, Paulina. Significantly, although the presence of Paulina is felt everywhere in the opera, she is the least developed character of the lot. In some ways, she sometimes seems as though she were a figment of Alexey's imagination. Never defined, always a mystery, her whimsical requests, desire for money, drive Alexey forward but because she is so under-developed, it is sometimes difficult to see her as a real character in her own right, especially because her main interactions are always those with Alexey – she has no arias or moments on stage alone.

The changes that Prokofiev made to the first two acts are not substantial except for the scene between Alexey and the Baron, at the end of Act I, which will be discussed here. Most of the changes that the composer made were to do with the pacing of the narrative and were made to time signatures and to tempo indications ¹⁹. Such alterations

⁽¹⁹⁾ For a perceptive and extremely detailed account of the revisions that Prokofiev made to the first version of the opera, see Margaret Notman McAllister, *The Operas of Sergei Prokofiev*, Ph.D., Musicology, Cambridge University, 1970.

ensure that the pacing of the declamation is kept under tight rhythmic control which also allows the individual characters their specific patterns. The time signatures thus change every few bars to accommodate these subtleties.

Toward the end of Act I, Paulina and Alexey are engaged in a heated conversation during which Alexey is trying to determine what kind of relationship exists between Paulina and the furtively malignant Marquis de Grioux. Alexey suspects that Paulina is having an affair with de Grioux and the sole reason she needs him to play roulette on her behalf is to help her extricate herself from this position. Nevertheless, Alexey's questions to Paulina lead nowhere since she never gives him any straight answers. His suspicion and dislike of the Marquis only increase and he continues to speak to Paulina of his love and desire for her – a love that will do anything for her. Paulina peremptorily and unexpectedly requests that he prove his devotion to her by asking him to say something insulting to the influential Baron's wife, thus creating a social scandal.

Through the couples' heated conversation, Dostoyevsky builds up to this incident gradually. When Paulina makes her erratic request, the readers are just as dumbfounded as Alexey. The request seems completely illogical and whimsical. In the novel, we experience the incident through the main character : he describes his feelings as he goes up to execute his unpleasant task :

« I turned and went in silence to carry out her commission. Of course it was stupid, and of course I did not know how to get out of it, but as I began to get closer to the Baroness I remember, as it were, something within myself urging me on ; it was an impulse of schoolboyish mischief. Besides, I was horribly overwrought, and felt just as though I were drunk. » ²⁰

Something in Alexey resonates with the irrationality of Paulina's request and the overall impression of this Dostoyevskian moment is one of heady drunkenness, a spiralling out of control.



Figure 1

The incident is introduced with a trumpet fanfare, a descending and accented scale pattern followed by an ostinato bass figuration allows Prokofiev to set the scene for the upcoming incident. The giddiness of the whole moment is flawlessly reflected in the music particularly in the use of winding chromatic patterns in the lower woodwind, and loud off-beat, accented chords. Motivically, the ostinato pattern holds the whole incident

⁽²⁰⁾ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Gambler* translated by Constance Garnett, New York : Dover Publications Inc., 1996, pp. 27-28.

together. The tension of the moment is emphasised through the registers of the orchestral texture : the higher the tension levels, the higher the pitch. The curtain comes down while Alexey sustains his cry of « Ja Wohl » over 8 bars. The accompanying texture increases its sound levels to a *fortissimo* and the ostinato bass line repeats an augmented 4th motif that resolves on the final chord by falling down a semitone to A. Prokofiev's skilful sustaining of that purple moment is cinematic. Alexey's long « Ja Wohl » against a grating ostinato is the last image the audience get of the protagonist before the curtain comes down on the first Act. The aural image complements the visual representation on stage thus creating a tableau of that scenic moment. Prokofiev's opera is especially powerful in his theatrical interpretation of Dostoyevsky's text. Tableaux-like moments such as these, when the aural and the visual unite to create the distinctive dramatic moments are characteristic of his operatic stage. Prokofiev's understanding of the theatrical merges the grotesque with lyrical, the absurd with the dramatic (see Appendix 1).

In the first version of the Baron scene, Alexey moves toward the Baron accompanied by a loud *tutti* ostinato lasting thirteen bars : this is replaced with a much more to the point texture : presumably this was one of those sections that Prokofiev realised was « padding » and thus not dramaturgically relevant. The resultant sparse texture is far more dramatic and thus underscores the text. Prokofiev's libretto plays up the Baron incident and pumps it up to a significant moment with which he could end Act I. Since we are not prepared for the incident and neither does the incident have any consequences that are explored at any length in the opera, this episode comes across as a dramaturgically manufactured moment that Prokofiev as librettist felt he needed in order to create some action toward the end of the first act.

The ending of the opera also undergoes substantial changes as Prokofiev refined the visual element of his stage. In a letter to Boris Demchinsky regarding the changes that the latter was making to Prokofiev's libretto of *The Fiery Angel*, the composer makes a distinction between literary and theatrical effectiveness ²¹. The ending of *The Fiery Angel* was undergoing substantial revisions, with which Demchinsky was helping, but eventually Prokofiev opts for the theatrical rather than literary ending ²². Similarly, Prokofiev pays great attention to the closing scene of *The Gambler* and in his revisions, he is anxious to have the opera finish on a high theatrical moment, freezing the action in

(21) Boris Demchinsky was a writer and philologist, a good friend of Prokofiev to whom the composer would continue to turn when seeking advice on his libretto adaptations.

(22) Since Prokofiev was working on his revisions of *The Gambler* at the same time as he was working on a suitable libretto for *The Fiery Angel*, it is entirely conceivable that his theatrical interpretation of the one opera would influence his handling of some of *The Gambler* revisions.

another cinematic stroke. In the first version of the opera, Paulina throws back the money to Alexey's face and storms out of the room. Twenty-two bars of music later, Alexey has recovered himself enough to shout out in disbelief « Red came up twenty times in a row ! » The opera finishes on a quiet note, with most instruments muted and we are left with the motif recalling the « little rolling ball ». There is no mention of Paulina here : Prokofiev's first Alexey is controlled by his addiction (see Appendix 2).

The revised version of this last scene is much more theatrical and again illustrates Prokofiev's sensitivity to the visual element of the stage. After Paulina throws back the money in his face, he feebly calls after her twice and then stutters in amazement : « Paulina ! Paulina !...Even so...Even so...It cannot be...Who would have thought red would turn up twenty times in a row ? Ha ha ! ». Apart from being a tightly structured ending, Prokofiev here makes reference to the dilemma that has been haunting the protagonist all through the opera : his two obsessions are placed alongside each other, but it is ultimately his addiction to gambling that grabs a hold of him. Prokofiev's stage directions notes that the curtain should come down on an Alexey holding on to a table full of money, looking fixedly at an imaginary roulette table. The music ends on an orchestral fortissimo *tutti* while Alexey sustains his cry of amazement and the audience are left with the indelible image of Alexey caught up in the passion of his own addiction. Prokofiev's description of the final scene of *The Fiery Angel* is also an apt description for this scene. He writes to Miaskovsky that « If the audience starts nodding off somewhere in the middle of the opera, then at least they will wake up for the final curtain » ²³ (see Appendix 3).

Extensive changes were made to the Gambling Scene (Act IV, Scene 2) which is framed by two orchestral entr'actes. It is clear that this scene caused Prokofiev the greatest difficulty as both of the scene-setting entr'actes underwent substantial revisions. Framing the gambling scene, the entr'actes function as a prelude and epilogue to the nightmare that is the casino scene. The first entr'acte draws the audience deeper into Alexey's psychotic state, emphasising his uncontrollable addiction and tracing his descent into the depths of this nightmare, a reality taking place on a different plane, a world within a world. The second entr'acte, functioning as an epilogue, pulls us back into the real world, but by this time, we no longer know whether the scene we have

⁽²³⁾ Letter from Prokofiev to Miaskovsky, *Selected Letters of Sergei Prokofiev* translated and edited Harlow Robinson, Boston, Northeastern University Press, 1998, p. 273.

just witnessed was real, a figment of Alexey's imagination, or a figment of our own imagination. This dipping in and out of different realities is characteristic of Prokofiev's opera as a whole, but achieves its apotheosis in the gambling scene.

In the alterations, Prokofiev makes a concentrated effort to engage with the psychological analysis of the gambler that Dostoyevsky's novel presents. This scene, which is the climactic point of the opera and toward which the libretto's internal rhythm has been hurtling, finally exposes the fascination of the gaming hall and unveils the lure of the gambling tables to the audience. Alexey approaches the hall in a state of feverish excitement – it has just occurred to him that he might be able to win enough money at roulette to save Paulina from the malignant clutches of the Marquis. The music now depicts Alexey's two different obsessions, the one fuelling the other : through his obsession with gambling he could win the money that Paulina needed, thus securing her freedom. It is in this casino scene however, that his addiction to gambling is felt at its most intense. In Prokofiev's libretto this is the first time we see Alexey in action and thus the impact it makes upon us is all the more vivid and dramatic.

The conflict between his two obsessions is reflected in two different thematic ideas in the first entr'acte. Before the curtain goes up, the music has already introduced us to these two motives that are embedded in the musical texture and the musical conflict is then played out throughout the scene

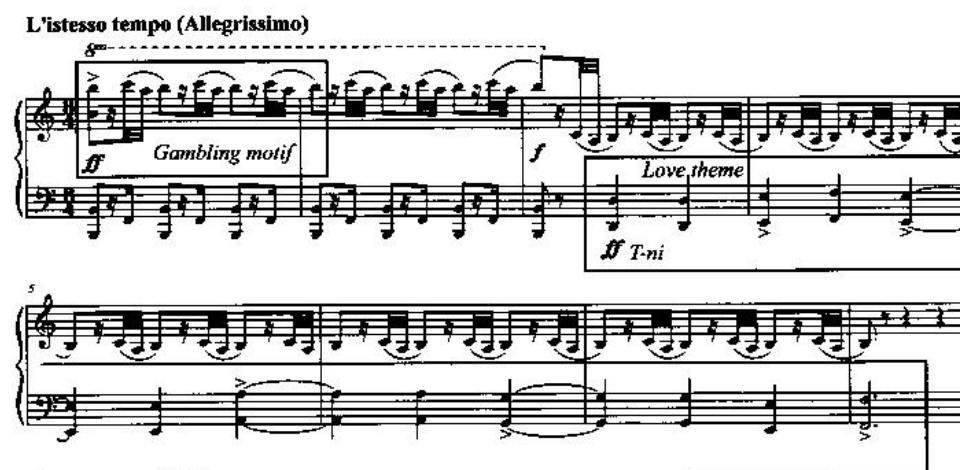


Figure 2

The parallel narratives, the aural and the visual come together and are a crucial aspect of the way Prokofiev's unfolding of events takes place on stage. Further, this is a technique Prokofiev uses to formally structure his entr'acte.

The second entr'acte was also composed anew for the revised version of the opera. Once again, the aim of the revision was to better incorporate and explore the subtleties of Dostoyevsky's psychological analysis. In the first version of this entr'acte,

which was entirely orchestral, the music was dominated by a chromatic, « gambling » motif, in keeping with the protagonist's more one-sided passion for gambling. In the second, Alexey's conflict is again played out musically through a triplet figuration and chromatic figure. The revised version of the second entr'acte relives the feverish excitement of Alexey's win in what almost sounds like a surrealist musical echo. A four part ensemble section is sung off-stage against the momentum provided by the gambling motif. The chorus disbelievably repeats the sum of money Alexey won, and describes the momentous breaking of the bank in shrill and hysterical chromatic melodic patterns, thus heightening the eeriness and nightmarish qualities of the episode. Significantly, it is the gambling theme that is heard at the end : Prokofiev thus indicates that the gambler has chosen his addiction over love for Paulina. Ultimately, this is the composer's interpretation of Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler*.

The Gambling Scene as *coup de théâtre*

In writing the Gambling scene, Prokofiev was especially conscious of the necessity of realism noting that the « gaming house must be a real gambling den not, as in *The Queen of Spades*, merely a gathering of all the guests [...] I think the scene will make a brilliantly lively and dynamic spectacle even though the actual text and all the hectic activity are pretty vacuous. »²⁴ This scene was intended to be a veritable *coup de théâtre* and to this end, when he was writing it in April 1916, Prokofiev enlisted the help of his literary friend Boris Demchinsky. Prokofiev was having difficulties with the second half of the roulette scene : « To continue in the same style with more cries of 'les jeux sont faits' and 'rien ne va plus' from the croupier would be no good ; it would become tedious. So Alexey must move to another table away from centre stage, whilst in the foreground the players comment excitedly on his unprecedented run of good fortune [...] it was essential that the second half of the roulette scene be even more tense and fevered than the first half. »²⁵ Demchinsky suggested introducing the director of the Casino in the second half of the scene to break up the rhythm of Alexey's spate of luck at the tables.

In comparison with Dostoyevsky's description of the scene, which, from the moment Alexey orders Paulina to remain in his room to the moment he gets back to his room with the fortune he won at roulette is very short, Prokofiev's libretto expands this

⁽²⁴⁾ *Sergey Prokofiev : Diaries 1915-1923 : Behind the Mask*, translated and annotated by Anthony Phillips, London : Faber and Faber, 2008, p.113.

⁽²⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, p.123.

scene to include descriptions that were taken from different parts of the novel. In doing so, Prokofiev highlights and extends this scenic moment. The internal rhythm of the whole opera has been moving toward this climactic moment – it is thus dramaturgically fitting that Prokofiev zooms in it.

In the second version, this scene gains a theatrical quality that it did not have in the first version. In the first instance, Prokofiev works on the pacing of the scene. The revised version of the scene is tightened up and the overall impression we get from the scene is one where all things happening are now beyond human control, as though navigated by a *deus ex machina*, and all the main character can do is go with the flow of the moment. Gradually, Alexey spins out of control and begins to unravel psychologically.

The characterisation in this scene also undergoes alteration. The first version of the score called for two croupiers, five gamblers, a first and second Englishman, a Lady and a group of six gamblers among others. In the second version, five of the gamblers acquire characteristics to individualise them in the process becoming grotesque and nightmarish masks : they are now Excited, Sick, Humpbacked, Unlucky and Old. Similarly the Englishmen are now described as Fat and Tall while the Lady becomes the Pale Lady. This defined characterisation changes the focus of the scene and acquires a whiff of the carnivalesque.

The rhythm of the scene is entirely regulated by the croupier's regular cries of « Rien ne va plus ! », « Faites vos jeux », « Les jeux sont faits » and his calling out of the winning numbers. They are well paced out at the start of the scene with plenty of time in between calls for the other characters to make comments on the game. This ensures that the scene is tightly structured and again reveals the cinematic qualities of the writing. The scene alternates between focussing on the game and the gambler's comments on the one hand and Alexey's monologue on the other, ensuring that the audience's interest never flags as we are presented with two different but overlaid moments of action²⁶. The flow of this scene is further disrupted by the incident between two of the gamblers who are quarrelling over a winning stake. The second half of the scene is then taken over by the gamblers who relive the scene in a surreal atmosphere, as though taken over by the spirit of the game.

As a satirical comment on human nature, the Gambling scene allows Prokofiev to play upon one of his greatest musical strengths – the ability to depict, using the scantest

(26) Alexey's monologue at rehearsal number 483 is written in a different time signature, 5/4, from the rest of the scene. This creates a subtle change in pacing and the music's accents on the first three beats in many of the bars ensure that the pace is somewhat marginally slowed down, almost as though Alexey is trying to catch his breath and remain in control of a situation that is progressively spiralling out of control.

musical means, the main attributes of a character. Prokofiev does this throughout the course of the whole opera, revealing different qualities of the main characters – in this scene, because there is not room enough to humanise the individual characters in each scene, Prokofiev's gamblers appear as caricatures, each possessing the one defining characteristic.

Characters and the creation of atmosphere

Autobiographical in nature, Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler* is constructed almost entirely around Alexey's thoughts and inner psychological drama. The plot is based loosely on Dostoyevsky's own personal experience as a gambler and is thus a finely tuned psychological description and analysis of the nature of this addiction. The theme of the novella suited Prokofiev well, since plots that explored the extremities of human nature attracted him. Exploring those extremities provided the composer with a free hand in his compositional techniques and greater possibilities for dramatic expression. In that respect, *The Gambler* does not disappoint and Prokofiev used the structure of the work to play upon these psychological, thriller-like moments the novella offers. The novella gradually unfolds a web of relationships between characters connected to each other by different motives : obsession, greed and lust being the most obvious. Through various conversations, the readers gain insight into the main character and gambler of the work's title, Alexey. Alongside Alexey develops his love interest, Paulina, who herself is unfortunately embroiled with the Marquis, who in turn is exerting his financial power over her step-father, the General, who is in turn hopelessly besotted with the gold-digging socialite, Mlle Blanche. This circle of ambiguous and tense relationships, tenuously connected to each other through various forceful though ultimately negative emotions, fitted neatly into Prokofiev's theatre of characters. Such characters provide ample opportunity for realistic and clever caricature depictions of which Prokofiev was already a master. The range of emotions displayed by the characters provided the composer with the means of fragmented motivic connections.

In his adaptation of the novel, Prokofiev consistently zooms in on aspects of his characters' behaviour that is erratic. By playing up moments of madness and aberration in the narrative through the visual image and also in the characters, Prokofiev endows his theatre with an element of the grotesque. And in this respect his operatic stage is sometimes more akin to a theatrical stage than it is to a conventional operatic one. Some characters in *The Gambler* represent the essence of a personality, shorn of all

other humanising details, they become a distilled version of a particular human quality. Blanche for example, is reduced to the one defining gesture that Prokofiev encapsulates in the music that envelops her every time she appears on stage. This light-hearted, airy waltz-like music represents her world.



Figure 3

Such economic and precise handling of characterisation found echoes in Meyerhold's theatre practice. He encouraged his actors to first « find the thought of the author ; [...] reveal that thought in a theatrical form. »²⁷ Prokofiev's theatrical form was music. The second version of the opera defines these characters' other worlds more precisely.

Not all of Prokofiev's characters are caricatures or grotesque types. The composer develops in a little more detail some of the more important leading characters and this creates a distinction between those figures that are multisided characters and those that are merely caricatures or masks. Prokofiev's General is in turns pompous, love-sick, pitiful, desperate and arrogant but human nevertheless. The General's first appearance on stage is accompanied by a comic like march, referring to his social status, that Prokofiev gently deflates by writing in waltz time.



Figure 4

⁽²⁷⁾ Cited in James Roose-Evans, *Experimental Theatre from Stanislavsky to Peter Brook* London and New York : Routledge, first published 1970, 4th edition, 1989, p. 21.

In one stroke, the General is set up as a pompous figure proud of his social status and simultaneously a figure of mirth that marches in waltz time. It is of course no coincidence that Blanche's world is a waltz world – the link between the two characters is thus very subtly made. Nevertheless, although the General may first come across as a stock pantomime figure, he is developed through the opera and we can genuinely feel his anguish at the end of Act III. Alexey is also a little more humanised and developed than the rest of the characters in the opera : he can be loving, mocking, enraged and distracted as the situation arises. Nevertheless, the first person narrative, and the hectic pacing of the libretto makes intricate character development almost impossible. The opera revolves around Alexey, we see things through his eyes and at times it is difficult for the audience to tell when we are participating in Alexey's imagination and when we are out with of his psyche.

Finally, Prokofiev took great care over Babulenska's depiction, making every effort to make her seem typically Russian and lovable. Hers is the more lyrical role and the composer was anxious that this lyricism comes across to an audience as can be seen from his post-performance notes to Paul Spaak where he notes that especially in Act III the singer is pushing the tempo and instead should be more lyrical ²⁸. Characterization was so important to Prokofiev that he even prepared a list of characters with a description of their main traits, for the publication of the second version of the vocal score. Drawn from Dostoyevsky's character descriptions across the whole of the novel, they draw our attention to qualities of each figure that Prokofiev saw as critical in his characterisation. The character description was a useful aid to the singers in the preparation of their roles.

The use and role of Declamation

In an interview with *Vechernye Birzhevye Novosti*, 12th May 1916, Prokofiev notes that he had « long been attracted to Dostoyevsky's *The Gambler* as a subject for an opera, precisely because this novella, in addition to its compelling story, consists almost entirely of dialogue. This gave me the opportunity of shaping the libretto according to Dostoyevsky's prose style. » ²⁹ Prokofiev wanted to set Dostoyevsky's actual text to music because the writer's « prose is more vivid, more graphic, and more convincing than

⁽²⁸⁾ Letter from Prokofiev to Paul Spaak 1 May 1929. The Serge Prokofiev Archive. XX / 328.

⁽²⁹⁾ Cited in *Sergey Prokofiev : Diaries 1915-1923 : Behind the Mask*, translated and annotated by Anthony Phillips, London : Faber and Faber, 2008, Appendix 5.

any verse. »³⁰ Aiming to quicken the pace of the action in the opera, Prokofiev interprets Dostoyevsky's text as literally as possible and thus effective use of declamation became one of Prokofiev's priorities. When the composer set himself the challenge of setting such an unconventional text for the operatic stage, he ambitiously also wanted to pave the forward for contemporary Russian opera. Most obviously, he aimed to move away from established operatic conventions of writing music to rhymed verses preferring to write music that faithfully reflects the inflections and rhythms of speech. Through declamation Prokofiev drives the pace of the opera, moving even closer to straight theatre in his quest for a dramatic realism that was not so entrenched in conventional operatic « reality ».

His interest in declaiming the spoken word in this natural style and in a way that preserves its intonation is first evident in Prokofiev's « Musical Letter to Boris Zakharov »³¹. This piece, dating from 1913, reveals the composer's fascination with the declamatory process. The composer further notes that this was the first time that he was composing away from the piano. Written as a piano score with the text written in above the stave, the declamatory line, for the most part, corresponds with the topmost melodic line played by the right hand³². Split into thirteen sections, the letter displays sensitivity to the natural accents and strong syllables of each phrase (see Appendix 4).

Prokofiev's use of declamation however, was not such an innovation in Russian opera. Mussorgsky had already experimented with the technique in his *opéra dialogue* *The Marriage*. In fact, this technique was, as Richard Taruskin points out, crucial to the Russian Realist aesthetic³³. Prokofiev was also familiar with Dargomyzhsky's *The Stone Guest*, noting that he liked the opera much better the second time he heard it. Although he is in raptures about the way that Dargomyzhsky sets the words, he finds the music lacking in brilliance and profundity³⁴.

In the same 1916 interview Prokofiev argues that opera needed to move away from the stifling conventions, as he saw them, of the Wagnerian operatic stage. It was this style of operatic writing that made « even the most progressive-minded musicians [...] to consider opera a dying form [...] given an understanding of the stage, the

(30) Id.

(31) A copy of the RGALI manuscript is held at the Serge Prokofiev Archives, Goldsmiths, University of London.

(32) There are three instances when the declaimed line is written in the bass clef.

(33) See Taruskin's « Russian Realism as Preached and Practiced : The Russian Opera Dialogue », *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 3, (Jul., 1970), pp. 431-454 for a critical overview of the main aesthetic principles of the New Russian School.

(34) Prokofiev notes his impressions of « The Stone Guest » in the Diary entry for 15 April 1916. (See *Sergey Prokofiev : Diaries 1915-1923 : Behind the Mask*, p.122).

flexibility, freedom, and declamatory expressiveness, opera should be the most vivid and powerful of the scenic arts. »³⁵ Prokofiev ambitiously planned opera in a way that would revitalise the genre and take it into the twentieth-century stage. Structural freedom, use of declamation and hectic pacing would form the kernel of Prokofiev's operatic vision for years to come, an operatic vision that owed much to Wagner's stage ideals despite Prokofiev's protestations to the contrary.

Prokofiev's respect for Dostoyevsky's written word meant that for the most part, he was not interested in changing anything in the text itself but rather, adopted large sections of it and set them to specific declamatory musical figurations or « intonatsii ». In his revisions to the opera, the composer paid renewed attention to the melodic shapes and intervals that characterise each phrase. The revised version of *The Gambler* thus makes use of declamatory shapes that are held together by stricter rhythmic patterns whose effectiveness relies a great deal on the appropriate placing of linguistic stress within each phrase.

Vivace scherzando

Xa xa - xa ! Vi di te vii e-tu tol stu tu damu ? E - to Ba-ro - nes - sa Wur - mer - helm.

Vivace scherzando **Poco meno vivo**

Xa xa - xa ! Vi - di te vii e-tu tol stu tu damu ? E - to Ba-ro - nes - sa Wur - mer - helm.

Figure 5

The revised version of Paulina's line is a tone lower than the original, with accents inserted into the fourth and fifth bars of the extract. More importantly, the interval of the fourth gains in importance as it corresponds with the falling accent of Paulina's statement. In revising the opera, Prokofiev makes several similar slight alterations, always with a view to further clarifying the intervallic patterns associated with each phrase.

In another letter to Paul Spaak, Prokofiev meticulously outlines further changes that needed to be made to the French translation of the Russian text³⁶. He is especially

⁽³⁵⁾ Sergei Prokofiev : *Materials, Articles Interviews*, compiled by Vladimir Blok, Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1978, p. 29. Prokofiev is referring to Diaghilev and Stravinsky, who were both in agreement that opera was an outmoded genre although the reasons for their position were more financial and practical rather than aesthetic.

⁽³⁶⁾ Prokofiev tabulates sixty-two changes to Act IV in annotations from a letter to Paul Spaak. (The Sergei Prokofiev Archive. XXI / 121) This list of annotations is not dated by the SPA but most likely was enclosed with a letter dating from 27 June 1929. This would tie in with an exchange of correspondence

concerned with maintaining the natural accents of the French language, as he had done with the Russian version, and with making sure that accents never fall on unimportant syllables³⁷. Rhythm is a crucial part of these declamatory phrases. The several meetings and detailed correspondence however, led to a translation that Prokofiev eventually declared himself to be satisfied with.

Prokofiev's theatre : an operatic ideal ?

Prokofiev's stage is a lively and active theatre peopled at all times by diverse and entertaining characters. Especially in *The Gambler* these characters, musically and rhythmically depicted, are defined by their own thematic ideas : they become musical gestures as much as they are onstage characters. Such thematic ideas are structurally interlinked with each other, providing dramaturgical impetus, which then generates musical structure. The circularity of these interconnecting elements is in itself reminiscent of the revolving roulette wheel. Prokofiev's dramaturgy and adaptation of the novel thus plays on an internal rhythm that unfolds simultaneously with the music, although on a different plane of reality.

In his structure, and particularly in the removal of set ensembles and arias for the singers, Prokofiev wanted to make sure *The Gambler* did not participate in the conventional trappings of opera and yet, in his veritable *coup de théâtre*, the gambling scene, Prokofiev takes his work right back into the world of opera – even if this is an edgier and racier version. This is a world where the carnivalesque mixes effortlessly with the grotesque and with the nightmarish. In itself playing a game with different planes of reality, the gambling scene is a brilliant example of this hovering between the nightmarish and the surreal. As an opera, *The Gambler* skilfully places itself in the realm of avant garde operatic writing : it is at once a redefinition of traditional operatic trimmings and a merging of innovative experimentation.

Generally speaking, the changes that Prokofiev made to the first version of *The Gambler* were concerned with structure, characterisation and declamation : three cornerstones of the composer's operatic ideal. While the first version focussed almost

between Prokofiev and Spaak, dating from June to September, regarding further amendments to the text and score to be made after the first performance of the opera.

⁽³⁷⁾ Ludmila Petchenina identifies different types of accents present in the text and notes the subtle ways in which Prokofiev avoids monotony in the declamatory line. (See Ludmila Petchenina, *Une expérience de mise en musique de la prose à travers les deux versions du Joueur de Serge Prokofiev*, Thèse pour obtenir le grade de Docteur de l'Université de Paris Sorbonne ; présentée et soutenue publiquement en octobre 2006.)

exclusively on Prokofiev's obsessive concern with ongoing action and declamatory realism, the revised version reflects the composer's maturing attitude to the stage, refining the work's internal rhythm, manipulating the visual image and achieving a more successful embodiment of the 1916 ideals. The precise characterization as well as use of characters as they interact with each other on stage is convincing both in a dramaturgical and in a theatrical sense. And finally, the revised version of the Gambling Scene does indeed stand out in the operatic repertoire as a unique *coup de théâtre* of which Prokofiev could be justifiably proud.

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APPENDIX 1

The musical score is for the final 14 bars of Act I of S. Prokofiev's *The Gambler*, op. 24, second version. It is written for voice and piano. The score is organized into six systems of staves. The vocal line is written in the upper staff of each system, and the piano accompaniment is in the lower staves. The first system includes the lyrics "Je... u...". The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern in the right hand and a more melodic line in the left hand. The second system continues the vocal line with the lyrics "et l'homme". The piano accompaniment becomes more dense with chords. The third system shows the vocal line with the lyrics "Je...". The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern in the right hand and a more melodic line in the left hand. The fourth system continues the vocal line with the lyrics "et l'homme". The piano accompaniment becomes more dense with chords. The fifth system shows the vocal line with the lyrics "Je...". The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern in the right hand and a more melodic line in the left hand. The sixth system continues the vocal line with the lyrics "et l'homme". The piano accompaniment becomes more dense with chords.

S. Prokofiev, *The Gambler* op. 24, second version, Act I, last 14 bars.

APPENDIX 2

541

$\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ *Al. vivo.*

$\text{♩} = \text{♩}$ *Al. vivo.*

S. Prokofiev, *The Gambler* op. 24, first version, Act IV, Scene 2, last 3 pages of manuscript.

590

324

Handwritten musical score for orchestra and voices. The score includes staves for:

- Hr. (Horn)
- Trp. (Trumpet)
- Ob. (Oboe)
- Fl. (Flute)
- Clar. (Clarinet)
- Bassoon
- Drum
- Viol. (Violin)
- Viola
- Cello
- Double Bass
- Conductor
- Voice (Soprano)

The score is written in a handwritten style, featuring various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The text "324" is written in a box at the top left of the page. The text "Handwritten musical score" is written in a box at the bottom left of the page. The text "Christina K. Guillaumier" is written in a box at the bottom right of the page.

342

Fl. I

Fl. II

U. I.

U. II.

T. I.

T. II.

Cello

Bass

Violoncello

Double Bass

Gambler

K. Prokofiev

APPENDIX 3

Andante assai

Andante assai

I vse zhe... I vse zhe... Na mo-zhet byt'... Kto v moe po - du -

Modérato

Modérato

na? Dva - tsa? na po-dri-ad vy - shla kno - mo-ia? Na!

Na!

Na!

S. Prokofiev, *The Gambler* op. 24, second version, Act IV, Scene 2, Rehearsal Number 627.

APPENDIX 4

Grafton. - Я не бо-юсь - ешь. У-рачно в ра-дос-ти. А счаст-ли-ва, ко-гда
 му-жа на-де-юсь. И ко-гда в ра-дос-ти са-ма. То-
 го, что ра-дос-ти, ра-дос-ти, ра-дос-ти. И ко-гда в ра-дос-ти са-ма. То-
 го, что ра-дос-ти, ра-дос-ти, ра-дос-ти. И ко-гда в ра-дос-ти са-ма. То-
 го, что ра-дос-ти, ра-дос-ти, ра-дос-ти. И ко-гда в ра-дос-ти са-ма. То-
 го, что ра-дос-ти, ра-дос-ти, ра-дос-ти. И ко-гда в ра-дос-ти са-ма. То-
 го, что ра-дос-ти, ра-дос-ти, ра-дос-ти. И ко-гда в ра-дос-ти са-ма. То-

S. Prokofiev, *Mystical Letter to Boris Zakharov*, first page of manuscript.



Photograph from the first season of « The Gambler »
which captures the energy and movement of the Gaming Scene
c. 1929-30 (The archive photo is undated)
La Minute - Bruxelles (Photo Joueur 3.72)