

Modernism Meets the Midwest:  
Prokofiev's *A Love for Three Oranges*

by

Bethany Marie McNeil  
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**Abstract**

Sergei Prokofiev's *A Love for Three Oranges* is the operatic version of a 16<sup>th</sup> - century Italian fable with a French libretto written in the Russian 20<sup>th</sup>-century modernist style for an American audience. The opera's problematic reception at its première is not altogether surprising, but the reasons for its lack of early critical success merit closer inspection. American audiences did not yet have the grounding in the techniques of modernism then being employed by European composers at the time *Oranges* was premiered in 1921, nor did they understand the *commedia dell'arte* traditions of the story and its stock characters. The musical language Prokofiev chose for his opera was also largely misunderstood by its first audiences. The dramatically logical, declamatory melodies were interpreted as altogether *unmelodic* and the "lack of singable tunes" was taken as a mark of insubstantiality. The considerable number of themes and motives employed to progress the plot are not subjected to extensive development and in many cases are repeated only rarely. Initially, it can be difficult to hear the subtle connections interwoven among the associative material, and as the opera was given only two performances during its premiere run, many critics and connoisseurs were unable to discern Prokofiev's sophisticated compositional ideal. This thesis attempts to assess Prokofiev's theory of opera as a dramatically logical entity and the level of success with which he manifested that theory in *A Love for Three Oranges*. In addition, the reasons for its lack of popular success will be addressed and analyzed.

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## Synopsis

### Prologue

Clowns argue for their respective theatrical preferences  
 Ridiculous People announce the opera  
 Herald explains the premise

### I.i

Doctors' recitation of the Prince's ailments  
 Pantalone suggests hiring Truffaldino to host the bacchanalia  
 Leandro objects

### I.ii

Clarice and Leandro plot to kill the Prince  
 Smeraldina is discovered  
 Invocation of Fata Morgana

### I.iii

Card game between Fata Morgana and Tchelio

### II.i

Prince's sickroom  
 Truffaldino attempts to entertain; throws medicines out the window;  
 carries the Prince off to the bacchanalia

### II.ii

Bacchanalia  
 Fata Morgana is discovered; falls  
 Prince laughs; Fata Morgana curses him  
 Farfarello blows the Prince and Truffaldino towards Creonta's castle

### III.i

Desert; Tchelio invokes Farfarello  
 Tchelio directs the travelers to Creonta's castle;  
 gives Truffaldino the magic ribbon;  
 warns that the oranges can only be opened near water

### III.ii

Cook discovers the travelers  
 Truffaldino entrances her with the ribbon  
 Prince steals the oranges

**III.iii**

Desert; oranges grow  
 Prince complains of fatigue, Truffaldino of thirst  
 Princesses emerge; die  
 Prince awakens; dead girls are carried off by soldiers  
 Third orange is opened; Ninetta emerges – parched  
 Ridiculous People provide life-saving water  
 Love duet  
 Prince departs for the royal court  
 Smeraldina turns Ninetta into a rat; takes her place  
 Royal procession arrives  
 King insists that the Prince marry Smeraldina, who is masquerading as Ninetta

**IV.i**

Tchelio and Fata Morgana meet once again to hurl insults at one another  
 Ridiculous People lock Fata Morgana in their tower

**IV.ii**

Throne room  
 Royal procession, including Prince and Smeraldina, arrives  
 Ninetta-as-rat appears; Tchelio transforms her back into a Princess  
 King orders traitors hanged, chase ensues  
 Traitors escape with Fata Morgana  
 Fairy tale ending, praising King, Prince and Princess

I would like express my gratitude to my committee members, particularly Dr. Michelle Fillion, who provided me with unfalteringly patient guidance throughout this project, and graciously permitted me to steal her idea for the title.

To my friends and family I owe many thanks for providing me with love, encouragement, and sympathetic ears as I struggled through this process.

Very special thanks to my great friend and colleague, Annie Shum. There are a thousand reasons, but you already know what they are. Arigato ne!

## Introduction

Sergei Prokofiev's *L'amour des Trois Oranges* was premiered by the Chicago Grand Opera Company on December 30, 1921, before an audience largely bewildered by what it witnessed. Several factors contributed to the relative critical failure of *Oranges* in America, beginning with the music itself. The modernisms that are woven into the musical fabric were either unintelligible to their initial hearers, or rejected outright as "un-operatic." Ironically, it is these very elements that make it such a fine example of the operatic form. Its musical narrative heightens and comments on the stage action, contributing in a fundamental way to the impression that this is a fully integrated music drama. This thesis will focus primarily on the musical qualities that make *Oranges* exceptional, with specific attention paid to melodic and expressive innovations. Prokofiev was a talented musical comedian and satirist, and he pioneered a new musical language for the expression of these qualities. By placing *Oranges* within its historical and cultural context, I hope to show that Prokofiev did not merely write "an amusing opera,"<sup>1</sup> but also contributed to the development of the genre, adding to the canon a unified, dramatically logical model.

The melodic construction in *A Love for Three Oranges* is revolutionary in that it follows a dramatic rather than a musical logic. Prokofiev strove for complete dramatic verisimilitude in opera, to which end he abolished the rhyming of texts, delays in the action for virtuosic display and unintelligible vocalization. His melodies serve to progress the action and to develop the otherwise one-dimensional characters of the scenario. They

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<sup>1</sup> Many critics sought to discover whom exactly Prokofiev was satirizing with his operatic farce. He continually denied the presence of any political overtones in *Oranges*, stating repeatedly that he had been "merely trying to write an amusing opera".

are of an ultimately pragmatic nature. Prokofiev was successful in his effort to bring a measure of dramatic logic to operatic melody, but it was for this reason that his melodies were originally misunderstood.

Prokofiev also sought musical solutions to the problem of dramatic commentary in this opera. The orchestra is an extraordinarily active exponent of the plot in *Oranges*, imbuing the opera's characters with personality and offering its own, often ironic observations on the events onstage. The orchestral commentary employs a substantial number of musical ideas, many of which are quite short and very few of which are extensively developed. The composer had great faith in the musical intelligence of his audiences and with this opera set them the challenge of processing a vast array of musical information, a formidable task on only one hearing.

*A Love for Three Oranges*, despite its breadth of musical ideas, was written with a mass audience in mind; it was meant to be light, comedic, and ultimately entertaining. Prokofiev considered it funny, singable and eminently accessible to a wide range of people. He believed in the ability of the populace to understand his complex artistic ideology and sophisticated music. He did not want to condescend to his listeners, but instead set his expectations for them to a high standard:

The time has passed when music was written for a handful of aesthetes. Today vast crowds of people have come face to face with serious music and are waiting with eager impatience ...the masses want great music, great events, great love, lively dances. They understand far more than some composers think, and want to deepen their understanding.<sup>2</sup>

While this may have been the somewhat naïve surmising of a young composer who had achieved a certain amount of success from the very beginning of his career and lived within an elite musical environment, it is a refreshing outlook nonetheless. Prokofiev

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<sup>2</sup> Sergei Prokofiev, *Materials, Articles and Interviews* (USSR: Progress Publishers, 1978), 13.

was ultimately a musical pragmatist who put very little stock in what he considered to be tired, antiquated operatic conventions, and expected the same attitude from 20<sup>th</sup>- century audiences. In the *Musical Courier* of 18 March 1920, he is quoted as saying,

I believe in my theories of opera. I don't believe in arias and concert numbers being injected into the action of the music. It isn't natural. Why should an individual stop and say, "listen to my concert aria"? It's like putting lengthy and repeated speeches into a play. My opera... progresses like a play.<sup>3</sup>

More naturally visual than literary, Prokofiev had concrete ideas about operatic construction, staging, and production from an early age. In 1900, at the age of nine, he wrote, produced and directed his first opera, *The Giant*, employing his cousins, playmates, and stuffed animals as the cast. His ideas about theatre – that it should be exciting, surprising and lively, with many things happening at once to stimulate and command the spectator's attention – seem to have changed little from the time of his childhood.

The following chapters present the reader with a large volume of information. The density of ideas in the paper are directly proportional, however, to the density of ideas in the opera. At the expense of extended musical development, Prokofiev presents his listeners with an astonishing array of themes, motives and ostinati, all of which require some mention, particularly in the chapters dealing with melodic and musically dramatic material. It is this plethora of musical information which led to the bewilderment of many critics and the opera's subsequent lack of any real popular success, that forms the basis of argument in the final two chapters.

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<sup>3</sup> Noelle Mann, *Three Oranges Journal*, no.10 ([www.threeorangesjournal.com](http://www.threeorangesjournal.com)).

**Chapter One:**  
**History and Background: The Russian Operatic Tradition, *Commedia dell'arte* and  
the Story of the *Oranges***

In order to understand the musical language and structure of *A Love for Three Oranges*, it is necessary to investigate the traditions from which it emerged. The operatic culture prevalent in St. Petersburg at the turn of the century, the conventions of the *commedia dell'arte* that were being revived in modernist theatre circles at the same time, and the means by which the *Oranges scenario* came to be a Prokofiev libretto all figure prominently in the construction of the opera. Only the composer's second mature opera, the influence of his Conservatory teachers and those composers whose operas were in popular rotation at the Mariinsky is prevalent. Vsevolod Meyerhold, a prominent director of both opera and plays, was actively incorporating the *scenari* and stock gestures of the Italian *commedia dell'arte* into the St. Petersburg progressive theatre scene. Meyerhold was also responsible for the first Russian version of the *Oranges* sketch called *Lyubov k tryom apelsinam*, based on Carlo Gozzi's 18<sup>th</sup>-century version. This he gave to Prokofiev with the suggestion that the composer use it as the basis for an opera. Examination of these background elements will shed light on the reasoning behind Prokofiev's compositional and schematic choices for *A Love for Three Oranges*.

## Modernism

Defining “modernism” as a method of musical composition, can be a contentious undertaking.<sup>4</sup> A movement born largely in reaction to Symbolism and hyper-Realism, a sentiment particularly strongly felt in Russia, modernism is perhaps the first example of the splintered, theory-resistant paradigm that has come to define twentieth-century music. To quote Serge Diaghilev (1872-1929), the Modernist Era was “an age fraught with stylistic contradictions and conflicts.”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, to classify a work as “modernist,” it is important to establish the parameters within which one wishes to define the term.

Daniel Albright identifies the boundaries of musical modernism as 1894/5 – 1951, beginning with the emergent “expanded tonality” of Debussy and Strauss and coming to a close with John Cage’s experiments using aleatory techniques.<sup>6</sup> This is a generous allotment of time to be given to any stylistic movement, but is reasonable if the term is to represent anti-emotive music that, in general, opposes the psyche-probing sentiments of Romanticism. Given the particular span of history Modernism encompasses, it is immediately apparent that it is a term applied loosely to disparate musical styles<sup>7</sup>, running

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<sup>4</sup> For more information regarding definitions and discussions of modernism as it applies to Prokofiev’s music, consult *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources*, ed. Daniel Albright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Brian Etter, *From Classicism to Modernism* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2001); Stephen C Hutchings, *Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Michael V. Pisani, “A Kapustnik in the American Opera House: Modernism and Prokofiev’s *Love for Three Oranges*,” *The Musical Quarterly*, 81/4 (winter 1997): 487-515; and Simon Morrison, *Russian Opera and the Symbolist Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). For more generalized accounts of modernism as a social and artistic epoch, see T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture: 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); and Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*, revised edition (New York: Princeton University Press, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> Hutchings, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Albright, ix.

<sup>7</sup> Albright, xiv.

the gamut of Impressionism, grotesquerie, atonality, and microtonality, to name but a few.

For purposes of defining Prokofiev's general compositional approach, as well as the particular aesthetic of *A Love for Three Oranges*, which Michael Pisani names "one of the first dramaturgically modernist operas,"<sup>8</sup> there are certain 'modernisms' that are more applicable than others. An intellectual, reasoned, and unsentimental approach to both composition and the operatic narrative are the ideals that come to mind when considering this work. Prokofiev was more a craftsman than an ideologue and the concepts of progress, science, positivism, and emotional detachment – the "new" that Modernism had to offer – would have greatly appealed to him. Modernism meant the rejection of tradition, including, to some degree, the rejection of traditional definitions of beauty, an idea close to the sardonic heart of the twenty-something *enfant terrible*.

Perhaps the most important musical modernism to consider when discussing *A Love for Three Oranges* and Prokofiev the musical humorist, however, is irony. In this early opera he references no composer or work specifically<sup>9</sup>, but takes aim at the process of operatic production, and brilliantly. By removing all traces of sentimentality, adding a further degree of separation between the audience and the stage action, poking fun at overblown Romantic personalities through his characterizations, and underscoring the entire business with a sarcastic orchestral narrative, Prokofiev produces the "de-humanized art" outlined so succinctly in 1948 by Jose Ortega y Gasset:

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Pisani, 489.

<sup>9</sup> This being said, however, many scholars have made viable cases for perceived barbs at *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Pelleas and Melisande*, and the various models of heroism and transcendental love in Wagner's oeuvre, including Harlow Robinson in his article, "Love for Three Operas: The Collaboration of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Sergei Prokofiev," *The Russian Review*, 40 (1986): 287-304, and John Harrison in "Deconstructing the Heroic Quest in *The Love for Three Oranges*," *Opera Journal*, 30/4 (December 1988): 4-18.

When we analyze the new style we find that it contains certain closely connected tendencies. It tends, 1) to dehumanize art, 2) to avoid living forms, 3) to see to it that the work of art is nothing but a work of art, 4) to consider art as play and nothing else, 5) to be essentially ironical, 6) to beware of sham and hence to aspire to scrupulous realization, 7) to regard art as a thing of no transcending consequence.<sup>10</sup>

Albright contends that “outside the domain of popular music, every composer in the twentieth century has had to adopt or invent a tongue before he or she could think of finding anything to say.”<sup>11</sup> The musical language Prokofiev chose for *A Love for Three Oranges*, at opus 33 (1921) a relatively early composition, is probably equal parts adoption and invention. While he did not experiment with atonality or the twelve-tone system, Schoenberg’s ideas concerning the emancipation of dissonance are supported by Prokofiev’s rather broad conception of tonality and his far-reaching chordal vocabulary, which Neil Minturn has called “wrong-note music”.<sup>12</sup> Much of that which is onomatopoeic and metaphorical in this rambunctious score is achieved through the use of octatonic scales, an extensive timbral palette, and an increasingly percussive orchestra. These are all techniques that Prokofiev subjected to his own personal treatment, but were nonetheless inherited from his long-time teacher at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, with whom he studied from the time of his entrance into the Conservatory in 1891 until his graduation a decade later.

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<sup>10</sup>Ortega y Gasset, 68.

<sup>11</sup> Albright, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Neil Minturn, *The Music of Sergei Prokofiev* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 5.

### Influences on Prokofiev

Prokofiev was very much a product of his environment, circumstances, and education. Rather than branching out and exploring totally new means of musical expression, as did Schoenberg and Stravinsky, he opted instead to expand further the compositional method in which he had been trained. Consequently, his influences are important to any discussion of his work. Those under whom he studied in St. Petersburg in the last decade of the nineteenth century, including Rimsky-Korsakov (theory and instrumentation), Anatoly Liadov (composition) and Anna Yesipova (piano), rank among the most important Russian musicians of the generation immediately preceding his own. Even more important was the music to which he was exposed through their instruction, and his own participation in the vibrant musical life of Russia's cultural capital. The dramatic music of Glinka, Dargomizhsky, Mussorgsky and of course Rimsky-Korsakov, was thoroughly familiar to and influential upon Prokofiev as a student, as was that, albeit to a lesser extent, of Mozart, Wagner, Tchaikovsky, and Debussy.<sup>13</sup> This becomes immediately evident upon study of his own musico-dramatic offerings, particularly *A Love for Three Oranges*, which is perhaps the score in which all of these influences are most successfully combined. The final, and arguably most important, in terms of this

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<sup>13</sup> Prokofiev's biographers provide useful working chronologies of the composer's experiences and activities as a student, as he does himself in his autobiographies and correspondence. For more information regarding his education and that which influenced his compositional method, see David Nice, *Prokofiev: From Russia to the West, 1891-1935* (London: Yale University Press, 2003); Israel Nestyev, *Prokofiev*, trans. Florence Jonas (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Philippe Olivier, "La Leçon de Rimsky-Korsakov: Sur l'orchestration de *L'amour des Trois Oranges* et de quelques autres grandes oeuvres de Prokofiev," *L'avant scene opéra*, no. 133 (July, 1990): 77-80; Prokofiev, *Materials, Articles and Interviews; Prokofiev by Prokofiev: A Composer's Memoir*, trans. Guy Daniels, ed. David H. Appel (New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1979); Harlow Robinson, *Sergei Prokofiev* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1987); and *Selected Letters of Sergei Prokofiev*, trans., ed., Harlow Robinson (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998).

particular opera, influence upon Prokofiev and his approach to the composition of music for the stage is not a composer or even a musician per se. Vsevolod Meyerhold, a renowned Russian actor and director of both spoken theatre and opera, instigated the entire *Oranges* project in 1918 as its would-be collaborator/director. Though this plan was thwarted on numerous occasions despite the best efforts of both men, Meyerhold's theories about opera would have a significant effect on the finished product.<sup>14</sup>

Rarely does any discussion of Russian opera escape at least some mention of Mikhail Glinka (1804-1857). While Boris Asafiev, Gerald Abraham, and Richard Taruskin have all pointed to developments in Russia that pre-date Glinka's achievements,<sup>15</sup> he is nonetheless almost universally regarded as the first Russian composer of dramatic music to have had a lasting influence on his successors. It was with Glinka that the Russian tradition of integrated music drama began. *A Life for the Tsar* (1836) and, more pointedly, *Ruslan and Lyudmilla* (1842), witnesses a conscious move away from traditional recitative-aria formats and toward a more flowing, melodic style of declamation with fewer pauses in the action for set numbers. This style of composition was highly favoured and strictly employed by Prokofiev throughout his operatic oeuvre, but there are also other, possibly more significant elements of Glinka's compositional approach that are reflected in the construction of *A Love for Three Oranges*. The choice of a fairy-tale subject, the unsentimental treatment of that subject, and an overall

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<sup>14</sup>Refer to Robert Brand, "Meyerhold and Musical Form," *Theatre History Studies*, V (1985): 95-109 and Robinson, "Love for Three Operas."

<sup>15</sup> Boris Asafiev, *Russian Music: From the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Alfred J. Swan (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers Inc., 1953); Gerald Abraham, *On Russian Music* (London: William Reeves Bookseller Limited, 1976); Richard Taruskin, *Defining Russia Musically: Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

suggestion of irony in the composer's approach are traits inherited, perhaps indirectly, from Glinka. The use of "exotic" (octatonic) scale figuration, as well as the designation of diatonic music for human characters and chromatic music for supernatural ones, are techniques common to Russian music and essential to Prokofiev's dramatic language, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century with Glinka's opus. Glinka used a "characteristic" rather than a "leit-motivic" technique for the musical identification of characters, assigning them material appropriate to their development and circumstances as opposed to immediately recognizable melodies. This technique was later adopted for use in *Oranges*. Prokofiev further shows his debt to Glinka in his presentation melodies as epigrammatic events, set continuously against "ever-fresh backgrounds"<sup>16</sup>, rather than as material for extensive development.

The "Russian declamatory style" that began with Glinka and was to become such an integral part of Prokofiev's method was furthered, perhaps most extensively, in the operas of Alexander Dargomizhsky. More on account of his musical *ideas* and the influence they were to have on the younger generation than because of his personal success (or lack thereof) as a composer, Dargomizhsky figures prominently in the evolution of Russian opera. According to Boris Asafiev:

Only HE was up to the task, with his intense experience writing character songs and with his capacity to improvise music and especially its melodic line along a canvas of words, following their meaning and emotional accents, unconcerned about the independence of musical forms...the Russian expressive declamatory style, the melodic recitative, was found...a melodic, purely vocal dialogue, in which the spontaneity of a living speech was combined with a musically organic, logical movement of the melodic line.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Abraham, *On Russian Music*, 36.

<sup>17</sup> Asafiev, *Russian Music*, 12.

Dargomizhsky achieved the ‘declamatory style’ of which Asafiev speaks through absolute adherence to the written text. It is a technique Prokofiev, who is known to have made careful study of *The Stone Guest*, also used in composing his opera based on Dostoyevsky’s *Igrok* (The Gambler), which immediately preceded *A Love for Three Oranges*. Neither man was completely successful with this particularly strident approach, which sometimes led to a dry, overly rhythmic and wordy effect. It did, however, allow Prokofiev the opportunity of further refining and softening his ‘melodic declamation’ in his next opera, *Oranges*. Were it not for his study of Dargomizhsky’s work and his own experiments with scrupulously faithful text setting, he could never have come to the light, energetic, expressive musical speech he employs so successfully in his fairy-tale farce.

Dargomizhsky’s output seems to have impacted on Prokofiev in other ways as well. Discussion of Dargomizhsky’s work is often peppered with mention of such issues as irony, sarcasm, grotesquerie, musical characterization, raised fifths and whole-tone themes – the same language often used to describe Prokofiev’s aesthetic.<sup>18</sup> These elements are considered much less frequently in conjunction with the music of any of the other composers to whom Prokofiev’s operatic oeuvre owes its most significant debts. For this reason we must consider Dargomizhsky’s operatic achievements – integrated melodic declamation, greater dramatic unity, and a sardonic, anti-romantic operatic ideal – direct forerunners of accomplishments made by Prokofiev in *A Love for Three Oranges*.

Modest Mussorgsky was very much Dargomizhsky’s successor in that he strove for dramatic and textual authenticity in opera and insisted that vocal writing be determined by the nuances of human speech and emotion. He dubbed the combination of

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<sup>18</sup> Refer to fn 13.

recitative and melody into logical dramatic expression “sensible melody,”<sup>19</sup> and called for “psychologically justified harmonies.”<sup>20</sup> Mussorgsky was a more gifted melodist and composer than Dargomizhsky, which explains his lasting popularity and greater success in implementing melodic recitative as a legitimate operatic tool. Prokofiev owes him much in terms of operatic cohesion:

What Prokofiev inherited from Mussorgsky was, above all, his gift for bold description...and his ability to portray a man's appearance and the intonations of his speech in a few deft strokes. Prokofiev also fell heir to Mussorgsky's amazing command of declamatory recitative, his interest in prose texts and themes from everyday life...and his ability to construct forms freely on the basis of content rather than according to ready-made academic formulas.<sup>21</sup>

Prokofiev's relationship to Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, his teacher for almost ten years, is somewhat paradoxical. The younger man did not think much of his master's pedagogical talents, considering them old-fashioned and dictatorial.<sup>22</sup> He did, however, greatly respect and admire Rimsky-Korsakov's music. Letters and autobiographical documents, along with his personal copies of certain scores, prove that Prokofiev studied Rimsky's operas intensively. He also attended numerous performances, often seeing the same opera several times.

Much has been written about Rimsky-Korsakov's influence over his students' orchestration and harmonization techniques. Prokofiev specifically inherited a predilection for novel, spicy harmonies, often supporting clear diatonic melodies, a strong sense of stylization, and a tendency toward “frenzied colouring.”<sup>23</sup> His operatic debt to Rimsky is often played down or overlooked altogether, however (an oversight Prokofiev

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<sup>19</sup> Asafiev, 14; from Mussorgsky's letters to V.V. Stassov.

<sup>20</sup> Asafiev, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Nestyev, 464.

<sup>22</sup> For further information regarding Prokofiev's relationship with Rimsky-Korsakov, refer to his early autobiography, *Prokofiev by Prokofiev*.

<sup>23</sup> Asafiev, 16.

did little to discourage). There is nonetheless ample musical evidence to support a claim of correlation between Rimsky-Korsakov's operatic design and that of his pupil's. *The Snow Maiden*, *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh*, *Sadko*, and most of all, *The Golden Cockerel* offer compelling clues as to where Prokofiev developed his taste for fantastic or fairy-tale themes, chromatic, harmonically dynamic musical characterization, and aggressive stylization. With its sharp characterizations and detailed, evocative orchestral component, *The Golden Cockerel* can easily be considered "the mother of *A Love for Three Oranges*."<sup>24</sup> There is also a certain amount of calculation, or, as Abraham calls it, "mathematical imagination," in the music of Rimsky's fairy-tale operas. It is music designed more to surprise and delight an audience than to engage them emotionally. Prokofiev's predilection for pattern, structure, and a measure of emotional detachment is, at least in part, the result of his first-hand exposure to the music of Rimsky-Korsakov. While the two men certainly achieved different aesthetic results within the genre of fairy-tale opera, Prokofiev being more inclined toward the farcical and humorous potentialities, they used similar means to attain their respective ends.

Prokofiev was an impressionable artist who benefited from exposure to a wide range of musicians and musical styles, the aforementioned being the most significant in terms of opera, but by no means the only ones. He absorbed knowledge and ideas from virtually everyone with whom he came in contact, from his peers and teachers at the Conservatory, to those he met at the Evenings for Contemporary Music, to the various artists associated with the Ballets Russes. He met Vsevolod Meyerhold, who was to become a particularly influential colleague, at a musical gathering in 1916. Any discussion of *A Love for Three Oranges* demands special mention of him. Meyerhold's

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<sup>24</sup> Abraham, 212.

position within revolutionary Russia's artistic community rivalled that of Diaghilev's among Russian émigré artists in the West. As both an actor and a director, first with Stanislavsky's troupe and later in his own experimental theatre studio, and as director of opera at the Mariinsky for eight seasons, coupled with an exhaustive list of collaborative projects with prominent actors, producers, dancers, musicians, and film directors, Meyerhold comes to the fore as arguably the most important figure in early Russian Modernist theatre. From their first meeting, Meyerhold and Prokofiev became friends and colleagues, each finding in the other a like-minded aesthetic sensibility and attitude as to the future of opera. Meyerhold, a gifted amateur musician and outstanding director, already had several successful operatic productions to his credit, including *Tristan und Isolde*, *Boris Godunov*, and *Elektra*. He approached Prokofiev about the possibility of collaborating on an opera after hearing excerpts from *The Gambler*.

From the beginning of his acting career at the turn of the twentieth century, during which he had become famous for his interpretation of Pierrot,<sup>25</sup> Meyerhold had been fascinated with the characters, stock gestures and comic routines of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. He taught *commedia* history and technique to his students, incorporated its elements into the plays and cabarets of the Theatre Studio, and produced traditional *commedia* sketches in their entirety. In addition, he published a theatrical journal that focused on *commedia*-based theory with his colleagues Konstantin Vogak and Alexei

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<sup>25</sup> Meyerhold premiered the role in a 1906 production of Alexander Blok's *The Puppet Show*. For more information about Meyerhold's life and work, consult J. Douglas Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd: The Commedia dell'arte/Balagan in Twentieth-Century Russian Theatre and Drama* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Robinson, "Love for Three Operas"; and *Meyerhold at Work*, ed., trans. Edward Braun (United Kingdom: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1969).

Solovyev, called, incidentally, *Lybov k tryom apelsinam: Zhurnal Dr. Daperttuto* (The Love for Three Oranges: Journal of Doctor Dapertutto). The inaugural issue, published in 1913, contained Meyerhold's own nine-page version of the *Oranges* story, adapted from the 1761 *commedia scenario* of Carlo Gozzi. Meyerhold and his collaborators 'Russified' the tale to some degree, modernizing and contextualizing much of the satirical content, and also added more formal dialogue. It was this version that he gave to Prokofiev with the suggestion that the young composer use it as the basis for the libretto of his next opera.

Meyerhold was therefore instrumental to both the conception and realization of Prokofiev's second mature opera. He exerted subtler influence upon his younger cohort as well, in ways that were to have a permanent effect on Prokofiev's approach to writing music for the stage. Prokofiev had not yet succeeded in getting his first opera staged, and was in the midst of planning his first trip to America when he was given the *Oranges* scenario. Nevertheless he began work on the libretto almost immediately, sketching it out during the journey. The material was funny, sardonic, and eminently theatrical, and in Meyerhold Prokofiev seems to have found an operatic 'kindred spirit'.<sup>26</sup> Contrary to the idea so vehemently fuelled by Stravinsky and Diaghilev that it was a museum medium unable to effectively express modern sentiment, Prokofiev and Meyerhold still believed in the dramatic potential of opera, with the proviso that it was not to be used for virtuosic display or removable set pieces. Continuous musical declamation, stylization of movement and scenery, a strong sense of dramatic irony, and solid plot development were the mutual ideals to which they strove, with *Oranges* in mind as the vehicle for

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<sup>26</sup> At the time both men believed Prokofiev's time abroad would be short, and that the project would indeed be a joint venture, staged initially in Russia.

realisation. Although they collaborated on this and several other projects over the years, the successful mounting of a joint production would always elude them. While Meyerhold was never to put his directorial stamp on *A Love for Three Oranges*, it remains the archetype of modernist opera as he envisioned it, his influence on its composer evident throughout.

*A Love for Three Oranges* does not contain shocking or unique music in terms of its harmonic construction, form, or structure. It follows clearly the path set out for it by earlier Russian opera, refining some elements and testing the limits of others. That Prokofiev chose to write opera at all in a time and place where ballet was the form *du jour* is a testament to his teachers and predecessors. Prokofiev to some degree emulated his teachers and those composers with whose music he had become familiar during his Conservatory days. That being said, however, Prokofiev's music does not necessarily come out *sounding* like that of his forbears. *A Love for Three Oranges* has none of the mythic/epic quality of *Ruslan and Lyudmilla*, nor the strict declamation of *The Stone Guest*. It is not grandiose in the manner of *Boris Godunov*, nor is it even a classic fable in the glittering, easily melodious way of *The Golden Cockerel*. Yet it owes something to each of these operas and the compositional styles in which they were constructed.

The melodic recitative that is interspersed with occasional set numbers in Glinka and Mussorgsky and employed almost too faithfully by Dargomizhsky is mastered by Prokofiev in *Oranges*, a playful, fast-paced setting that ideally suits this method of composition. The equality of voice and orchestra common to much Russian music is again a defining element of *Oranges*. Yet Prokofiev's transitional passages prove to be better constructed and more interesting in their own right than those of composers who

did not have the benefit of a formalized and thorough musical education. Finally, the love of good storytelling, fairy-tale themes, humour and parody were essential characteristics of all the composers from whom Prokofiev drew inspiration.

### Commedia dell'Arte

*The Love for Three Oranges* is a highly entertaining opera in large part because of the quality of its humour. Its subject matter and music can be, on several occasions, laugh-out-loud funny. Appreciation of the genuine comedic nature of this opera is enhanced further when the spectator is knowledgeable about the traditions of the *commedia dell'arte*. Improvised comic theatre in Italy began around the middle of the sixteenth century and was designated *commedia dell'arte* two centuries later, by the eighteenth-century Realist playwright Carlo Goldoni. The improvisatory nature of *commedia* plays led, out of necessity, to the development of stock characters (one of whom an actor would often choose and personify for an entire career), stock gestures, and simple, contrived scenarios. These *scenari* or *canovacci* (canvases) read like schematics and included only character and prop lists, the division of scenes, entry and exit queues, a basic plot outline, and little or no dialogue.<sup>27</sup>

By the early eighteenth century, audiences were tiring of *commedia's* repetitive nature and its popularity waned considerably. Carlo Gozzi, who penned nine *commedia*

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<sup>27</sup> David J. George and Christopher J. Gossip, *Studies in the Commedia dell'arte* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993).

*dell'arte* plays in total for the troupe of Antonio Sacchi,<sup>28</sup> was largely responsible for the *commedia* revival that began in 1761 with the premiere of *L'Amore della tre melarance* at Carnival in Venice. The Gozzi plays were more complex than the original *commedia* scenarios in that they followed a more rigid narrative structure, based on the fairytale model, and included significant amounts of written-out dialogue that emphasised the sarcastic and parodistic elements of which the author was fond. The next resurgence of *commedia dell'arte* that was to happen across Europe between 1880 and 1914 was almost solely based on the Gozzi plays, possibly because they were among the few to be preserved as texts.

*Commedia* tales are, more often than not, contrived, far-fetched and fantastic yet simple stories designed largely as vehicles for *lazzi*, the improvised comic routines of *zanni*, clown-servants who are exaggerated in their movements and speech, some of the more recognizable being Arlecchino (a.k.a Harlequin or Truffaldino), Pantalone, and Pulcinella. The *zanni* perform *lazzi* among more serious characters who keep to the plot and usually include at least one pair of lovers. *Lazzi* are employed to exploit a particular *zanni's* acrobatic or comedic skill, or, as in the case of *Oranges*, to toy with the actor/audience relationship. Either in the form of a play-within-a-play, or in the case where an actor would remove his mask and interact directly with the spectator, these "stage/life duality *lazzi*,"<sup>29</sup> emphasize the artificiality of the proceedings. They also serve as moments of self-reflective critique, always in jest of course, of the conventions of the theatre and of *commedia* itself. It was this self-parodying 'theatre for theatre's sake' that

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<sup>28</sup> Sacchi's troupe of players was one of the most famous in Europe, and he was personally renowned for his Harlequin interpretation. Incidentally, he retired to Russia after accepting an invitation to perform before Catherine the Great.

<sup>29</sup> Mel Gordon, *Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983).

so attracted Modernist artists and led to the *commedia* revival at the turn of the twentieth century.

The stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte* can be traced all the way back to ancient Rome and continue to hold iconic status across various genres, from French paintings that depict forlorn Pierrots to modern-day slapstick comedy that owes so much to the antics and tumblings of famous Harlequins. Along with lesser characters and straight roles, a *commedia* play would always include at least one of the 'four masks of the theatre' – Pantalone, Arlecchino (Truffaldino), Brighella, and Il Dottore.

Pantalone has often been referred to as "the mask least masked." He is a miserly merchant and belongs in the category of *zanni*. Affable, polite, and servile, but at the same time somewhat opportunistic and avaricious, he is smooth and supple in his movements and cleverly diplomatic in his dealings with others. Arlecchino is a foolish but cunning servant, a master of disguises, and a tumbling, stilt-walking acrobat. Brighella is a thieving schemer, known for his cynicism, violent tendencies, and predilection for seducing women when it is personally advantageous. Il Dottore is an old, didactic pedant prone to pompous, boring speechifying, often rife with malapropisms. Other popular *commedia* characters include Scaramouche, Coviello, Pulchinella (Pierrot), Columbine, and Smeraldina.

Each of the four main masks is represented in *A Love for Three Oranges*, albeit not all in their strictly traditional guises. Pantalone and Truffaldino (Arlecchino) appear very much as they are described above, the former in a small role as the King's personal assistant and confidant, the latter in a much larger role, first as the entertainer charged with getting the melancholy Prince to laugh, and later as his traveling companion on the

quest for the oranges. Brighella does not appear nominally in the opera, but can reasonably be assumed to be represented by Leandro, the conniving Prime Minister and proverbial “bad guy” out to achieve his own ends by disposing of the Prince and marrying the King’s niece Clarice. Tchelio, the stage wizard who guides the Prince and Truffaldino and endeavors to protect the royal characters from evil forces, closely resembles Il Dottore, both in character and function. The final *commedia* mask to be clearly embodied in *Oranges* is Smeraldina, the craftier, more deceitful incarnation of Columbine.

The *commedia dell’arte* experienced a revival throughout Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. Proponents of the Modernist movement gravitated toward *commedia*, especially its ironic and surrealist elements, because it was representative of the very theatricality, or *unreality*, of theatre. There was a particularly strong *commedia* presence in Russia, due in large part to the long-standing tradition of grotesque comedy in that country’s carnival entertainments, and, on a more immediate level, to the tireless efforts of Vsevolod Meyerhold and his theatre studio. *Commedia dell’arte* had made its first appearance in Russia during the eclectic and dedicated artistic patronage of Catherine the Great in the late eighteenth century. Antonio Sacchi’s troupe visited and later settled in Russia, and many court composers who were imported from Italy based their operas on *commedia* themes. There were also elements of the French *commedia*, or *harlequinade*, that permeated the Russian consciousness. The *balagan*, or fairground show, a staple of Russian street theatre, was influenced by the canvases of Watteau and Lancret. The *balganchik* consisted of traveling players who frequented carnivals, particularly the Mardi Gras celebrations in St. Petersburg. A close cousin of the *balagan*

that also emerged directly out of the *commedia* tradition was the *kapustniki* (literally, “cabbage patch”) – “an improvised skit that often lampooned local themes or matters.”<sup>30</sup>

The years book-ended by revolution in Russia (1905-1917), which roughly correspond to Prokofiev’s years as a student in St. Petersburg, witnessed a veritable renaissance of *commedia* activity in that city. Meyerhold presented several *commedia* and *commedia*-inspired plays at his Theatre Studio, and incorporated classes in the history and movement of *commedia dell’arte* into the Studio’s workshop program. He and his contemporaries staged *kapustniki* as fundraisers at the after-hours cabarets around the city. The Gozzi *fiabe* became a sort of standard by which ‘complete theatre’ was judged in St. Petersburg Modernist circles, *commedia dell’arte* coming to represent anti-Romanticism. Certainly Alexandr Blök’s *Balaganchik* (The Fairground Booth), with Meyerhold in his iconic role as Pierrot, denoted a significant paradigm shift in Russian cultural expression, launching what has been called the “the Petrushka Era.”<sup>31</sup>

Prokofiev had been drawn to Russian *commedia* practices since childhood. The somewhat detached, tongue-in-cheek brand of comedy suited his sense of humor perfectly. He knew of the activities of the Meyerhold theater group, and would surely have seen the *balagan* performances during Mardi Gras while a student in St. Petersburg. He and his cohorts at the conservatory were even known to have staged impromptu *kapustniki* of their own.<sup>32</sup> His connection to *commedia* themes can be traced back still further, to his childhood in Sontsovka. He was given for toys an assortment of animal masks, in which he would dress up his cousins and playmates and direct them in improvisatory dramatic sketches of his own devising. Harlow Robinson has highlighted

<sup>30</sup> Pisani, 488.

<sup>31</sup> Clayton, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Prokofiev, *Prokofiev by Prokofiev*.

many points of contact among these plays and Gozzi's *fiabe*: a proliferation of characters, each with one strongly marked characteristic, a disregard for reality and realistic convention, and a rejection of psychological explanations.<sup>33</sup> *Commedia dell'arte*, the *Oranges* tale in particular, emphasizes imagery and language as opposed to psychology and logic. It is abstract, non-realistic, and open to easy symbolic assignments – exactly the vehicle Prokofiev and Meyerhold were seeking to convey their joint modernist ideals.

### History of the Story

The process by which a sixteenth century Italian folk-tale came to be a twentieth century Russian opera sung in French to mid-western Americans is an interesting and colorful one. Originally published in 1634 in Naples as part of Giambattista Basile's *Pentamerone*, or Tale of Tales, the story comes from early European folklore, dating back to the Italian legend of a Prince and his love of three pomegranates. Structured in much the same manner as the *Arabian Nights*, a series of tales contained within an overall framing story, the *Pentamerone* is a collection of fifty stories to be told, according to Basile, by ten persons over five days, each day ending with a play or song. Aside from *The Three Citrons*, this collection has yielded some of the most popular children's classics of the European tradition, including *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Puss in Boots*. *The Three Citrons* is the ninth diversion of the fifth day, or the forty-ninth tale. Carlo Gozzi took this tale of a Prince and his citrus that is only to be opened near water, a single surviving maiden, a magic pin and a happy ending and

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<sup>33</sup> Harlow Robinson, "The Operas of Sergei Prokofiev and Their Russian Literary Sources" (PhD. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1980), 88.

combined it with the *Pentamerone*'s framing story, which features a melancholy princess, a fountain of oil and the curse of an old woman who slips and falls in the overflow.<sup>34</sup>

The 1761 Gozzi version, three undivided acts with a prologue, was such a success that it revitalized *commedia*'s popularity and inspired the author to write eight more *canovacci*, including *Turandot*. Gozzi politicized the tale considerably, using it as a mouthpiece for criticizing the overly serious naturalistic theatre of the day, most notably the work of two rival playwrights, Carlo Goldoni and Pietro Chiari. The magician Tchelio parodies Goldoni, a lawyer, and therefore speaks in pedantic, complicated language. Fata Morgana represents Chiari and thus speaks in Martellian verse, the clumsy, academic twelve-syllable form of which that author made regular use. There was much confusion as to whom exactly Gozzi was ridiculing, and an onslaught of criticism resulted. In response he re-published his play with accompanying "reflexive analysis," which included more descriptive stage directions and more prepared dialogue (particularly for the prologue and supernatural characters), critical glosses on what was being satirized, and the author's own commentary on production and reception.

*Commedia dell'arte* experienced a short revival during the years Gozzi fashioned himself its champion, but again fell out of public favor toward the end of the eighteenth century. It would be another two centuries before the *scenari* of *commedia*, true to their original spirit, would resurface with the advent of Modernism throughout Europe. In 1913, Russian modernist *commedia* found its vehicle in Meyerhold's *Lyubov k tryom apelsinam: Zhurnal Doktora Dapertutto*. The nine-page Russian *Oranges* that opened the

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<sup>34</sup> Giambattista Basile, *The Pentamerone: or, The Story of Stories*, trans. John Edward Taylor (New York: Cassell, 1893).

inaugural issue and became the basis for Prokofiev's libretto was a divertissement made up of twelve scenes, a prologue, an epilogue, three intermezzi, and a parade.

The prologue, if slightly more fantastic than the original, retains much of the spirit and content of the Gozzi version. The parade involves a dispute between Comedians and Tragedians that descends into slapstick fisticuffs. In the second intermezzo, following scene V in which the Prince embarks on his quest for the oranges, each of three characters proselytizes about their preferred style of theater, Clarice defending high tragedy, Leandro speaking on behalf of elegant comedy, and Brighella expounding on the virtues of *commedia*.<sup>35</sup> In the third intermezzo, occurring between the final two scenes, Truffaldino leads the cast in a ballet-pantomime. He also provides the epilogue, stating, "Tomorrow the critics will do their worst, but let the present audience show its pleasure."<sup>36</sup>

The Russian authors remained essentially faithful to Gozzi's conception, their only additions being certain sections of dialogue (particularly the quartet for the King, Pantalone, the Prince, and Truffaldino near the beginning), and, more significantly, the extra characters that comprise the stage audience. Meyerhold adds Three Eccentrics, Jesters in the Towers, Extras in the Towers, Everyday Comedians and Pure Tragedians.<sup>37</sup> These framing characters function as a distancing tool, constantly reminding the audience of the unreality of the proceedings onstage and preventing them from connecting emotionally with any of the characters. The stage audience also helps to exaggerate the

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<sup>35</sup> This scene, if not taken directly from Gozzi, was certainly inspired by the earlier version, which also includes a quarrel over dramatic values in Act 2.

<sup>36</sup> McAllister, 87-90.

<sup>37</sup> Robinson, "The Operas of Sergei Prokofiev," 92.

fantastic and satirical elements. The satire was now aimed at formulaic play-writing and worn-out theatrical clichés.

Meyerhold, experienced in opera production and densely structured direction, created a detailed description of the scenic action with careful consideration of rhythm and pacing, as well as a prevalent musical element. His version of *Oranges* included precise indications for choreography and movement, a myriad of theatrical sound effects (thunderclaps, footsteps, crowd noise, etc.), and suggestions for musical accompaniment. The opening is to be accompanied by tambourines and trumpets, scenes three, ten and twelve, as well as the third intermezzo, are all marches, and the entrances of supernatural characters are set to music. Moreover, the structure and pacing of utterance is given “quasi-musical treatment.”<sup>38</sup> It is reasonable to assume that Meyerhold always intended this project for operatic treatment. He offered it unsuccessfully to Richard Strauss before taking an interest in the young Prokofiev. The copy of the journal Meyerhold gave to Prokofiev contained even further suggestions from the director for possible music and instrumentation. Given the suitability of Gozzi’s particular brand of laconic comedy to operatic adaptation, Meyerhold’s long-standing interest in operatic collaboration, and Prokofiev’s compositional strengths that were so well matched to the subject matter, it seems almost fateful that the *Oranges* tale’s ultimate incarnation was to be his.

Claude Samuel, a Prokofiev biographer, has suggested that the composer was familiar with the Basile fable from childhood, and Harlow Robinson, another prominent Prokofiev scholar, believes it almost certain that he would have had access to the Gozzi *fiabe* growing up. It does not appear, however, that he consulted either during the

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<sup>38</sup> Beatrice Picon-Vallin, “Meyerhold, Prokofiev, et *L’amour des Trois Oranges*,” *L’avant scene opéra*, 133 (1990): 23.

construction of the *Oranges* libretto, but relied entirely on the scenario contained in Meyerhold's journal. The libretto is a compressed, streamlined version of the plot, retaining only the most exaggerated scenic elements, with dialogue kept to a minimum, a valuable lesson learned through the problem of the wordiness of *The Gambler*.

Meyerhold's twelve scenes become ten, spread over four acts. Prokofiev eliminates the character Brighella entirely, and the scene in which he, Leandro and Clarice argue the virtues of the various types of theatre. Absent as well is the scene in the courtyard of Creonta's castle, a kind of magical riddle-solving sequence that, while funny and effective dramatically, would prove awkward in an operatic setting: The sorceress Creonta does not appear in the opera, but the ladle-wielding Cook from whom the Prince and Truffaldino must steal the Oranges fills the same characteristic function. Meyerhold's epilogue and three intermezzi are also omitted, thus removing much of the politico-theatrical posturing introduced by the previous two interpreters.

Aside from removing those elements unsuited to the operatic stage, Prokofiev made several minor changes and additions to enhance the telling of this story through musical means. He expands the role of Smeraldina by incorporating many of Brighella's wily qualities into her character, changes the bumpkins who carry off the dead princesses to soldiers, who better suit the recurring march theme, has Smeraldina turn the princess Ninetta into a rat rather than a dove for added absurdity, and, to great comedic effect, casts the Cook as a cross-dressing, surly basso profundo who becomes enamoured of a magic ribbon. The most significant alteration made by the composer, however, is the expansion of the stage audience, both in number and involvement. He retains Meyerhold's Tragedians and Comedians, replaces the Extras in the Towers with Lyricals,

the Jesters in the Towers with Empty-Heads, and expands the cast of proselytising clowns, now called Eccentrics, from three to ten.<sup>39</sup> The proscenium towers from which the stage audience observes and comments on the action are kept intact, retaining their effectiveness as a distancing tool, continually reminding the real life audience of the falsity and absurdity of what is happening before them. The Eccentrics act as referees between the rival theatrical groups in the towers, and, in two specific instances, prove themselves integral to the plot. In Act III, scene iii, when the Prince opens the final orange in the desert to reveal a parched and fading Princess, it is the Eccentrics who save her by coming down from their towers, entering the scenic action, and placing a bucket of water at the Prince's disposal. Again, in the final scene of the opera (Act IV, scene ii), they disembark from their towers once more to capture Fata Morgana and lock her up, affording Tchelio the opportunity to change Ninetta from a rat back into a princess, thereby restoring order at court and facilitating a "happily-ever-after" ending.<sup>40</sup>

Certain of the choices Prokofiev made in constructing his libretto were motivated by personal preference, his own sense of humour – the ladle-toting, cross dressing Cook is certainly an example of this – or dramatic simplification. The decision to translate the libretto into French, which the composer did himself with the assistance of Vera Janacopolous, was done at the behest of the Chicago Opera Association. The company, who ironically enough had several Russian émigrés in its employ, specialized in French repertory and felt that the Midwestern audience had a better chance of understanding a French text than a Russian one. The composer seems to have been only too happy to

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<sup>39</sup> This was undoubtedly done for purely musical reasons, as the Eccentrics make up the male chorus of five tenors and five basses.

<sup>40</sup> All information concerning the Meyerhold version of *Oranges* is adapted from the dissertations of Harlow Robinson and Margaret Notman McAllister. These sources can be referenced for more information regarding the Russian text.

oblige their request, creating the alternate French libretto, and adding incidentally to the complexity and somewhat random nature of the production process. The French version works as well or better than the Russian one, providing (in my opinions) an air of jauntiness, and the two have been used with equal frequency in subsequent productions.

The majority of Prokofiev's alterations, however, were musically motivated. Characters are introduced more successively so as to create clear musical associations, sometimes melodic, sometimes timbral, as with supernatural characters and the increased choral forces in the stage audience, or rhythmic, as with the soldiers in the desert or the Little Devils who mill about during the Act One card game. The incantation to Fata Morgana by Leandro, Clarice, and Smeraldina is a particularly noteworthy instance of musically motivated dramaturgical alteration. Not present in the Gozzi or Meyerhold versions, this scene establishes the intensely chromatic, thunderous music to be herein associated with supernatural characters and activity. Otherwise Fata Morgana could easily have been introduced fairly easily within the context of the Act II, scene ii, bacchanalia. The scene exists not only to introduce a major character, but also to establish that character's musical identity.

The significance of Prokofiev's stage audience has been emphasised as the composer's 'critical conscience' by many scholars, and played down as a simple musico-comedic device by others, most notably Margaret Notman McAllister. I agree with the former opinion. While it would be presumptuous to assume that Prokofiev was deliberately misleading the press when he denied any overt critical intentions with this opera, the means by which it is made humorous are telling. Farce is a great medium for parodistic criticism, especially criticism of the very genre one chooses to employ.

Prokofiev's stage audience allows him to comment on the increasing far-fetchedness of operatic convention throughout the nineteenth century under the cloaking safety of absurdist comedy. While the composer played down any subversive satire one might glean from this opera, the lengths to which he went to incorporate his stage audience into the action, the changes he made to their dialogue to better suit (and poke fun at) opera, and the music he wrote to accompany their scenes all counter-indicate this statement. This is not merely "an amusing opera," but a wonderful example of a composer's ability to laugh at the inherent irrationality of the operatic form, and indeed at himself for loving it unabashedly nonetheless.

A strong sense of fantasy and absurdity has made Prokofiev's least realistic libretto his most successful. He had always rightly considered himself something of a writer, and had a good grasp of dramatic nuance. His stage directions are numerous and precise, indicating a clear plan for staging and overall design. Jean-Michel Breque credits the libretto with being "perfectly balanced and coherent."<sup>41</sup> This 'coherence' must of course be limited to the internal logic of the play, and is valid but for the bizarrely abrupt ending. The opera seems just to stop, the King instantly forgetting the evil-doers the moment they escape and focusing, along with the rest of the court, on the wedding celebration of the new Royal couple. This is however a minor point of contention with a work that is, overall, dramatically well constructed. As Béatrice Picon-Vallin has stated in the issue of *L'avant scene opéra* dedicated to *A Love for Three Oranges*:

[Prokofiev] created, in a Meyerholdian way, a strong dose of provocation: an operatic subject that is neither myth, nor historical, nor grandly passionate. He presented a story alone in the tradition of Rimsky-Korsakov but more so, an absurd fairy-tale, narrated in

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<sup>41</sup> Jean Michel Breque, "La fiaba de Carlo Gozzi: génie parodique, théâtralité et merveilleux," *L'avant scene opera* 133 (1990):18 (translation mine).

grotesque style, which carries with it a new, action driven theatrical aesthetic.<sup>42</sup>

In many ways *A Love for Three Oranges* counter-indicates many of the things we generally associate with operatic story telling. There are no heroes or heroic acts, many of the characters being villainous, and those who are not are still deeply flawed. Pathos and sentimentality are essentially absent, and the humor of the story is neither subtle nor elevated. It is not a star vehicle by any means, yet it places high demands on its singers, each of the numerous parts requiring considerable vocal skill. Nonetheless, Prokofiev manages to retain a variety of the trappings of traditional operatic convention: intrigue, the struggle between good and evil, supernatural elements, a plot to kill the lead character, love at first sight, and a happy ending. The familiarity of these elements is of course essential to the establishment of irony and satire, around which this story and its musical embodiment are centered.

Using a simple, albeit logic-defying, children's story to restore the "life, efficacy, and force of a theater in crisis"<sup>43</sup> was ingenious. With *A Love for Three Oranges* Prokofiev was ultimately successful in proving his sometime patron, Diaghilev, wrong about opera's relevance in the twentieth century. He gave the form new animation, a new musical aesthetic, and potentially, a new audience. It is a musically and comically sophisticated piece appreciable to connoisseurs, but at the same time very accessible and entertaining to less discerning audiences. *Oranges* is a worthy example of the modernization of a waning art form and a testament to its composer's ability to create new and provocative material within the strictures of a firmly established medium. As

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<sup>42</sup> Picon-Vallin, 24 (translation mine).

<sup>43</sup> Breque, 19.

Richard Taruskin has observed, “never before, and never again, was Serge Prokofiev so clearly ahead of his time.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Richard Taruskin, “From Fairy-Tale to Opera in Four Moves (not so simple),” in *Opera and the Enlightenment*, eds., Thomas Bauman and Marita Petzoldt McClymonds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 499.

## Chapter Two: Melodic Construction and Usage

Just as the classification of a piece of music as 'modernist' requires a concise definition of what precisely is understood by the term, discussion of its melodic content requires an explanation of the idea of melody and those factors that determine its inherent qualities. Music that expands the boundaries of traditional tonality and its characteristic harmonies will naturally present the ear with melodies that may not be immediately recognizable as such. This does not negate, however, the existence of certain basic structural elements common to all melodic figuration, regardless of genre, era, or school of composition.

Excluding intangible and therefore unqualifiable elements such as singability or memorability, a melody, according to Paul Narveson in his book *Theory of Melody* is, at its most simplistic, a musical figure comprised of one or more of the following six elements: the melodic scale element – any three direct pitches moving stepwise in one direction; the melodic appoggiatura element – any two direct stepwise pitches; the melodic chord element – any three direct pitches moving entirely skipwise; the melodic skip element – any two pitches moving skipwise; the melodic neighbour element – stepwise vacillation between two notes; and the melodic pedal element – any pitch appearing twice or more with orderly rhythmic consistency.<sup>45</sup> As these six elements comprise virtually all of the ways in which motion between pitches is generated, Narveson qualifies them as the fundamental components of melody with what he terms

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<sup>45</sup> Paul R. Narveson, *Theory of Melody: A Complete General Presentation of the Practical Materials, Resources, and Phenomena* (New York: University Press of America, 1984), 4-28.

the “direct layout” or “consecutive layout of pitches.”<sup>46</sup> A melody or melodic fragment must have one or more of the above six elements appear, uninterrupted, in its entirety. To Narveson’s requirements, I would add the more elusive elements of contour and balance. A melodic figure must have shape, whether simple or complex, uninterrupted or fragmentary. It must also achieve some measure of equilibrium through periodicity. The length of the comprising motives is unimportant. This flexible, pragmatic definition of melody as determined by its most basic structures allows for the transcendence of typical operatic melodic ideals.

Prokofiev’s music contains, in addition, idiosyncratic melodic characteristics which will be helpful to the understanding of the melodic structure of *A Love for Three Oranges*. He placed high value on the functionality of melodic material, and was a talented melodist, not only in vocal music but in everything he composed. “I love melody,” Israel Nestyev quotes him as saying. “I consider it the most important element in music, and I have been striving to improve its quality in my music for many years.”<sup>47</sup> His melodies are rhythmic and extremely laconic, sometimes lasting only one measure, and they are often presented in fast tempos and shifting meters. Simplicity of line is combined with unusual twists and angularities, such as the use of extreme register, unusual instrumental techniques, or insistent rhythms in conjunction with simple triadic or diatonic pitch motion, creating an exaggerated version of typical melodic features. In fact, triadic melodic development is quite common in Prokofiev’s music, although these triads have a tendency to remain ultimately unresolved, often coming to a close on an unrelated pitch or “wrong note.” Another characteristic of Prokofiev’s triadic usage is the

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<sup>46</sup> Narveson, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Nestyev, 474 (originally quoted from *Sovetskaya muzyka*, No.1, 1948).

reinforcement of tonal centers through neighbouring chords rather than dominant or sub-dominant preparation. The ambiguity of these open-ended tonalities is further accentuated by the frequent and abrupt juxtaposition of contrasting keys. The interspersions of chromaticism, often in the middle of a phrase, further blurs the tonal outline. Of operatic melodies in particular he wrote:

I have avoided recitative as the least interesting element in opera. At the more emotional moments, I have tried to make the recitative melodious, producing a sort of recitative-melody. In the more 'matter of fact' parts, on the other hand, I have used rhythmic speech...<sup>48</sup>

The initial response to the Chicago premiere of *A Love for Three Oranges*, as evidenced in many of the reviews, was that it was unmelodic. Ironically, Prokofiev's intentions were quite similar to Wagner's, yet the Wagner-loving Chicago audience was unable to recognize the correlation. Eminent Chicago music critic Edward Moore's popularly-shared opinion appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* on 31 December 1921:

The music, I fear, is too much for this generation. After intense study and close observation at rehearsal and performance, I detected the beginnings of two tunes...for the rest of it Mr. Prokofieff might well have loaded up a shotgun with several thousand notes of varying lengths and discharged them against the side of a blank wall.<sup>49</sup>

American audiences, as will be further discussed in chapter four, expected easily digestible 'tunes' from operas designed to be star vehicles, and were unprepared for the modernist, melodically disjunct ensemble offering they received. While Prokofiev presented melodies that were more fragmented, episodic, and punctuated than those to which his initial audience was accustomed, they are melodies nonetheless. *A Love for Three Oranges* represents Prokofiev's most successful attempt at writing operatic melodies, striking a fine balance between the uncompromising declamation of *The*

<sup>48</sup> Prokofiev, *Articles and Reminiscences*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> Ronald Davis, *Opera in Chicago* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966), 128.

*Gambler* (1917) and the emotive expressivity of *The Fiery Angel* (1927), the operas that immediately surround it.

Prokofiev uses a variety of melodic styles in the assemblage of a musico-dramatic structure for this opera. The 'wrong-note melodies' for which he had become notorious during his student days, traditional lyricism and character-based melodies all combine in *A Love for Three Oranges* to create the humour and fine theatrical balance that are benchmarks of the work. There is an astonishing amount of melodic variety, but also a strong underlying unity. This unity is admittedly subtle and difficult to piece together, especially on first hearing, but it is nonetheless present and fundamental to the compositional framework. The clever interplay between different types of melody creates irony, comedy, abrupt and forceful juxtaposition of ideas, and a narrative that allows the listener insight into the composer's critical conscience. The first two minutes of *Oranges*, possibly the most contrapuntally frenetic and motivically dense section of the entire piece, serves as a good example of Prokofiev's particular brand of melody and offers clues as to why the work was misinterpreted as "unmelodic."

### “Wrong-Note” Melodies

The first 98 measures of the opera (a little more than half of the Prologue) are comprised of a musical argument of sorts between the various groups that make up the stage audience – Tragedians, Comedians, Lyricists, Empty Heads, and Ridiculous People. Each of the first four groups champions their own particular theatrical preferences, while the Ridiculous People serve a dual function, refereeing the other groups and arguing in favour of the play about to be presented. The opera starts as abruptly as it stops – all we are given by way of an “overture” is a ten-measure trumpet fanfare preceding the first vocal entrance. Even this short opening phrase betrays many of the trappings of traditional melody. There is rhythmic regularity, and two balanced, four-measure motives that, combined, constitute an eight-measure phrase, followed by a two-measure tag, or “mini-coda”. Two different but complementary types of melodic motion, coupled with a balanced phrase structure and an arcing contour, combine to create solid melodic construction. There are of course elements that obscure this structure to a certain extent, including significant chromaticism, the *vivo* tempo marking, and Prokofiev’s signature “wrong notes.”

The Tragedians sing the first vocal entrance, eight bars in which they proclaim, “Give us great tragedies! Elevated and philosophical tragedies!” The melody is again balanced, divided evenly into two four-measure phrases with contrasting but complementary rhythmic and pitch content. The melodic chord element of the first four measures suggests C major, and the increased chromaticism of the second motive, along with increasingly smaller subdivision of the beat and the hemiola effect created by the

duplet on beat one of m.18, give this melody a sense of forward motion. The ear may not instinctively recognize the implied C major tonality, but the line sounds melodic nonetheless, due to the triadic pitch motion and the iambic rhythmic organization, which gives this particular melodic figure a singsong quality.

**Example 2.1: Tragedians' and Comedians' Melodies (mm. 10 – 25)**

Vivo  
Tragedians

Don - nez nous, don - nez nous de grandes tra gé - di - est Tra - gé - dies mon - dia - les

Comedians

et phi - lo - so - phiques! Meur - tres, dou - leurs des â - mes tor - tu - rées!

Don - nez nous, don - nez nous de vraies co - mé - di - est Du rire joy - eux du rire so - no - re!

The Comedians are the second group to enter the musical fabric at m.19. The texture at this point is becoming increasingly contrapuntal, but a complete melodic idea is still discernable. The Comedians' melody is very similar to that of the Tragedians, in terms of diatonic and rhythmic elements, implied tonality, and overall shape. The impression of forward motion is increased through the use of duple rhythm in the second motive of the phrase, as well as a shortened phrase structure (this melody is comprised of only seven measures, unlike the previous two eight-measure phrases). The second motive is also differentiated by a shift toward an implied B-flat major tonality, used to differentiate comedy from tragedy. It sounds particularly comedic at the  $B^b - G - B^b$  cadence, which skirts a traditional dominant-tonic phrase ending. The Tragedians re-enter at m.20, only one measure after the Comedians' entrance. These two melodies serve the

dual function of characterizing their respective Stage Audience members and providing a contrapuntal underpinning for the next entrance, that of the Lyricals.

By the time the Lyricals enter in m. 37, the musical texture has already become quite thick, containing two rhythmically aggressive, quasi-recitative-like vocal parts, harmonic support in the strings, and woodwind filigree above. Prokofiev provides this group with melodic material that is not only well suited to their character, but also a refreshing reprieve from the rather agitated quality of the score thus far. Immediately obvious is the increased length, resulting from the slower rhythmic activity. It is a smoother, more 'singable' line than the previous two entrances, the generally longer note values giving it a sustained, vocal quality. The implied tonality shifts again, this time from C major to A major, and the chromaticism so prevalent in the melodies of the Tragedians and Comedians is replaced with an essentially diatonic line comprised of stepwise motion, triadic skips, and the juxtaposition of two bright major but contrasting keys. This section nonetheless retains the same shape and contour that has been established from the beginning: it is divided evenly into two balanced motives of the same melodic character but contrasted slightly by rhythmic elements such as the duplet in the sixth measure of Example 2.2. A sense of forward motion is achieved here through the shift from divided voices in the first phrase to the more climactic unison singing of the second. A fascinating, if convoluted, contrapuntal texture emerges from the three-way musical argument between those in favour of tragedy, comedy, and romance, respectively.

As in the case of the Comedians, the Lyricals are not allowed uninterrupted exposition of their melodic material in full. The Empty-Heads enter at m.44, only eight

measures after the beginning of the Lyricals' 18-measure entry, thus overlapping for 10 measures.

**Example 2.2: Lyricals' and Empty Heads' Thematic Material (mm. 36 – 69)**

The musical score consists of four systems of music. Each system has two staves: the top staff is for 'Lyricals' and the bottom staff is for 'Empty Heads'. The lyrics are written below the staves.

**System 1:**  
 Lyricals: Don - nez de vrais drames ly - riques, ro - man - tiques, é - mo - tion - nants, des  
 Empty Heads: Vi - te, vi - te,

**System 2:**  
 Lyricals: fleurs, la lune! Des mo - ments d'ex - ta -  
 Empty Heads: des far - ces a - mu - santes Des mots d'es - prit gri - vois! Don - nez nous du

**System 3:**  
 Lyricals: - sel L'a - - mour re - veur et ten - - dre!  
 Empty Heads: lu - xe! Au diable vieux cro - que - morts A la por - te, vieuz cré - tins!

**System 4:**  
 Lyricals: Des re - z - ves, des son - ges ly - ri - - ques!  
 Empty Heads: Ne pas pen - ser, ne pas pen - ser, mais ri - re ri - re ri - re re - re! Don - nez des far - ces!

Unlike the entrance of tragic and comic Stage Audience members, the Empty Heads' musical material cannot easily be categorized as melodic. The line is too disjunct and fragmentary to constitute any sort of melodic arc, disrupted as it is by significant periods of rest. While it maintains the same type of chordal, triadic pitch motion as the previous melodies, it fills an ancillary role, dependent on the other voices, but providing rhythmic and tonal support and adding to the increasingly cacophonous aesthetic of the Prologue. This is fitting, as the Empty-Heads are the least sensical of the groups of caricatured representatives of theatre. They have no particular affiliation with any genre, but wish

merely to be entertained, and are accordingly assigned no specific and independent melody.

By the time all four voices have entered the musical fray at m. 44, the individual lines have become essentially unintelligible, a problem Prokofiev solves by overpowering the entire chorus with full orchestral forces playing a unison, disjunct triplet figure reminiscent of the opening trumpet fanfare, all coming to a close on a jarring, altered Cmaj7 chord on the downbeat of m.70.

The Ridiculous People enter at m.70 as the voice of reason, admonishing the other groups for their unruly behaviour and doing their best to facilitate their own agenda, which is not to advocate a particular theatrical preference, but to present the opera's theme. Their initial entrance, in which they attempt to bring order to the chaos onstage, is utilitarian and epigrammatic, comprised of brusque, recitative-like figures designed to facilitate the physical movement of the Stage Audience into their balconies. The Ridiculous People's first identifiable melody comes eight measures later, beginning in m.79.

### Example 2.3: Ridiculous People's Melody (mm. 79 – 88)

Vo - yez notre spec - ta - cle! C'est du bon thé - â - tre C'est in - com - pa - ra - ble

C'est là qu'est le vrai che - min *ff* L'a - mour pour trois O - ran - ges!

*ff* L'a - mour pour trois O - ran - ges!

This melody, like the others, bears the marks of solid construction. It is comprised of ten measures divided into two four-measure phrases, rounded off by a two-measure, fanfare-like tag, much like the opening phrase of the opera. It also conforms to the same skipwise, triadic pitch motion as the melodies of the Tragedians and Comedians. There are several ways, however, in which this melody is differentiated from those that precede it, singling out, by musical means, this particular group of Clowns as more significant to the plot than the others. The 4/4 time signature distinguishes this section from all that precedes it, creating a more formal, march-like impression than the previous lilting, 6/8 melodies. Although it is more tonally ambiguous, never really coming to rest on any one tonality, it does achieve a sense of finality through aggressive rhythmic and timbral means. The single most distinguishing factor of the Ridiculous People's initial melody is, however, its uninterrupted delivery. All ten measures are heard without interjection from any other group, a luxury afforded to no other group of characters up to this point. This signifies to the listener the importance of both the Ridiculous People's lines and their musical material, which will reappear at key points in the opera.

Because Prokofiev's melodies are by nature brief and epigrammatic, and, in the case of the Prologue of *Oranges*, contained within an obscuring texture, they are rarely regarded as complete and independent melodic entities. I have attempted to demonstrate with the above analysis that this is not the case. The melodic material in *Oranges* has a stubborn tendency to remain tonally unresolved, often coming to rest on a 'wrong note' that borders the implied tonic, giving it a somewhat unfinished quality. It is also more punctuated and episodic than was customary of the operas of the previous century but, upon closer inspection, it does constitute melody.

### Traditional Melodies

In contrast to the particularly idiosyncratic melodic material written for *A Love for Three Oranges*, the opera also contains instances of markedly traditional melody, which serve as a useful point of comparison in arguing for the validity and inherent lyricism of Prokofiev's operatic recitative-melody. Two such occurrences are the oft-recurring March theme:

#### Example 2.4: The *Oranges* March (mm. 1080 – 1089)

and the moment when the Prince professes his love for Ninetta in Act 3, scene 3:

#### Example 2.5: Prince's Love Duet Music (mm. 2779 – 2787)

While clearly very different in character and function, these two melodies share many commonalities, both with each other and with the melodic material previously described in this chapter. The march is traditionally melodic. It is one of the only sections of the opera to draw praise from contemporary critics as a 'singable tune'. It is, additionally, structured in the same Prokofievan manner as the melodies of the Clowns. Eight measures in length, divided further into equal four-measure phrases, centered around chordal skips of a third, with an arcing shape that gains momentum and intensity throughout, but not resolving as one would expect, ending with a major sixth leap instead of a traditional perfect fifth, it is constructed according to the same compositional principle Prokofiev has used throughout *Oranges*, yet to a more melodically accessible end.<sup>50</sup> The relatively conventional harmony of this melody is peppered with non-functional chromaticism, thus creating an overall tone of irony and anti-romanticism.

The Prince's lyrical outpouring of affection for his Orange-turned-Princess (Example 2.5) is a rare example of a traditional operatic moment in this work. It conforms to much the same structure as the other melodies described here, but does not adhere to the speech-like, intonational style applied to the utterances of other characters (including the Prince himself up to this point). It is a lyric moment, complete with sustained notes in high tessitura and a complex, undulating shape in place of a smooth melodic arc. The underlying tonality suggests B major, oscillating between tonic and dominant arpeggios, albeit with added notes and chromatic rather than dominant preparation in the penultimate measure. It has a heroic, grandiose quality that separates it

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<sup>50</sup> For more detailed information on the harmonic structure of the *Oranges* March consult Simon Morrison, *The Music of Sergei Prokofiev* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 30-32.

from the general aesthetic of the score, highlighting the Prince's passion for his newfound love.

### Musical Characterization

A number of characters or groups of characters are essential to the action-driven plot of *A Love for There Oranges*. To quote the composer,

The novelty resided in the three different planes on which the action unfolded itself: the first, that of the characters in the story (the Prince, Truffaldino and the others); the second, that of the forces of the underworld (to which belong Fata Morgana and Tchelio); the third, that of the Clowns, who are in a way emissaries, commenting on the action.<sup>51</sup>

While the composer most certainly had a distinct musical language in mind for each of these three groups of characters – diatonic and straightforward in the case of the characters of the story, chromatic and bombastic for those of the underworld, and highly programmatic for the Clowns or Stage Audience – he went even further in terms of melodic specificity and identification. Taking into consideration their function within the plot and the musical material assigned to them, the groups of characters can be again divided into ten sub-categories. For the sake of clarity they will be addressed in reverse order of their significance to the plot, as more important characters tend naturally to have more complex music, occasionally involving references to the music of the lesser roles. The ten sub-categories are these:

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<sup>51</sup> Prokofiev, *Prokofiev by Prokofiev*, 74.

- 1) **Incidental Characters** – the Doctors, Fata Morgana’s Little Devils, the Courtiers of the palace, and the soldiers in the desert
- 2) **Clowns or Stage Audience excepting the Ridiculous People** – Tragedians, Comedians, Lyricals, and Empty-Heads
- 3) **The Cook of Creonta’s castle** (representing grotesquery and adversity)
- 4) **Three Princesses** – Nicoletta, Linetta, and Ninetta
- 5) **Conventional Human Characters** – The King and Pantalone
- 6) **Benevolent Supernatural Characters** – Tchelio and Farfarello
- 7) **Evil Characters** – Fata Morgana, Clarice, Leandro, Smeraldina
- 8) **The Prince** (pseudo-hero)
- 9) **Truffaldino** (catalyst)
- 10) **The Ridiculous People** (narrators; saviours of the day)

I have grouped as ‘incidental’ characters those who have either sung or pantomimed parts, but do not affect the overall outcome of the plot. These include the Doctors, the Little Devils, the Courtiers, and the Soldiers. The Doctors, who appear in Act I, scene i, sing of the Prince’s incurable hypochondria in suitably sombre tones. Their material is comprised of two contrasting sections, one to identify the Prince’s symptoms, the other to give their diagnosis.

**Example 2.6a: Doctors’ First Theme (mm. 212 – 218)**

Moderato

Des dou-leur au foie des dou-leurs aux reins l'asth-me chro-ni-que des maux de tête une a-pepsi-e

la fai-blese des ar-tères a-fétera-mollie

**Example 2.6b: Doctors' Second Theme (mm. 245 – 253)**

poco piu mosso

un é - tat d'hy - po - con - drie que nous ju - geons in - gué - ris - sa - ble.

Example 2.6a reveals rhythmically oriented melodic material, the second grouping in each measure moving in interrupted stepwise motion, giving it a plodding, methodical quality. Example 2.6b moves in block chordal motion, outlining a clear tonal structure based around E minor, but again moving through the juxtapositional foreign chords of E-flat and C in the middle (measures four and five of the example). It is a 'matter-of-fact' section devised to convey information by simple, laconic means.

The Little Devils who attend Fata Morgana sing a slithering, ostinato vocalise reminiscent of a locomotive that typifies the kind of music generally assigned to evil, supernatural characters.

**Example 2.7: Little Devils' Ostinato (mm. 531 – 534)**

legato

Hil... Hil... Hil...

The Courtiers, along with the Stage Audience, fill the role of the chorus, providing added support at climactic and triumphant moments and populating crowd scenes, including the Bacchanalia of Act II, scene ii. The Courtiers are represented by harmonically and orchestrally clear musical language. Their music, in keeping with the diatonic structures Prokofiev had outlined for non-supernatural characters, falls into well-

defined tonal areas. The soldiers, who appear in Act III, scene iii, at m. 2743 do not sing, but pantomime the act of carrying off the dead princesses. Aptly, they are accompanied by a variation of the recurring march theme.

The second group of characters, the Clowns or Stage Audience,<sup>52</sup> whose music from the Prologue has already been discussed at length, appears intermittently throughout the opera, marking some of the defining moments in the plot. Their musical material, which is made up of closely-related rhythmic and melodic patterns, is not developed but appears as in the Prologue, sometimes extended or altered slightly, but maintaining the same essential melodic shape. This allows for easy motivic identification and creates a musically associative recollection for the listener, both of the specific group of Clowns performing at the time and of their collective role as onstage commentators.

Margaret Notman McAllister, in her 1970 dissertation on Prokofiev's operatic oeuvre, observes that:

These extra-fairytale characters evoke no special musical treatment from the composer. The idiom of their utterance merges into the general musical flow, leading one to regard everything that happens on the stage, however unlikely, simply as part of the stylistic and very entertaining *buffa* spectacle.<sup>53</sup>

While I agree that Prokofiev has succeeded in creating a captivating piece of fairytale escapism in which the most implausible absurdities are taken as a matter of course, McAllister's assertion that the music of the Stage Audience is not melodically relevant does not ring true. This group of short but closely related melodies is, as has been outlined earlier in the chapter, inextricably and uniquely connected to their characters. They are employed not only to identify the personae they represent, but also

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<sup>52</sup> With the exception of the Ridiculous People.

<sup>53</sup> McAllister, 98.

as a pacing tool, demarcating points in the score that exemplify a group of characters' particular theatrical ideals.

The monstrous Cook from whom the Prince and Truffaldino must steal the oranges, occupying solely the third sub-category of characters, has music of an incongruously lyrical quality. In contrast to the tender expression reserved for the enchanted ribbon, her music in the earlier part of her one scene is bold and menacing, but nonetheless smooth and melodious, moving in stepwise motion or in skips no larger than a major third. The role of the cook is easily the least subtle bit of humour in the work, and the composer likely sought to make the role as farcical as possible. A smooth melodic line emitted from a deep bass in a dress is Prokofiev at his ironic best. The Cook's status as an important character is further reinforced by her association with recurring tuba solos throughout Act III, scene iii. While the tuba does not always play the same motive, or even music that can be easily related, it always appears in association with the Cook. She is the only character in the opera to be assigned a "leit-timbre."

The three princesses who appear out of the oranges and constitute the fourth subcategory of characters, Linetta, Nicoletta, and Ninetta, have what is commonly considered some of the most lyrical thematic material in the opera. They each sing the same melody before succumbing to thirst. This melody is plaintive, with minor tonality, a descending arc, and an air of desperation, particularly in the second half of the phrase. This, along with the Prince's music from the same scene, is more traditionally "operatic" than much of the rest of the score. The music for Linetta and Nicoletta becomes more and more fragmented as the scene progresses, until their thirst overcomes them. Ninetta,

however, is revived through the efforts of the Ridiculous People, and is thus able to develop her melodic material further:

**Example 2.8: Ninetta's Melody (mm. 2857 – 2871)**

Andantino

Merci mon Prince. Tu m'as sau - vé la vi - e et tu m'as sor - tie de l'es - cla - vage

C'est toi que j'ai at - ten - du de - puis tou - jours.

The two melodies begin similarly, with a leap of a fifth followed by stepwise contrary motion. Ninetta's melody then expands further out of the original "princess" melody, adopting a more lilting rhythm, skipwise motion and a climactic point a whole tone higher. The final four measures in particular betray greater musical sophistication than the original princess melody. Spanning a wider range of pitches in a generally higher tessitura with intensified chromaticism, measures 2868 to 2871 highlight Ninetta's greater relative importance to the plot. The implied tonality is C# minor instead of the D minor of the original princess theme, and the phrase ending is both more climactic and less ambiguous, differentiating Ninetta once again. Having skirted death, she seems, in Example 2.8, to rejoice all the more in her love for the Prince.

The King's music, both in Act I and again when he returns in Act IV, is ponderous, serious, and often gloomy. He is in a perpetual state of worry over the fate of his kingdom, and his music reflects his anxiety. Pantalone, as the King's personal aide and confidante, often shares his musical material, almost always singing in unison, harmony, or counterpoint with the King:

**Example 2.9: The King's thematic material (mm. 275 – 280)**

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is labeled 'Pantalone' and the bottom staff is labeled 'King'. Both staves are in 2/4 time. The King's part includes the following lyrics: 'Pau - vre Prince!', 'Pau - vre Prince!', 'Pau - vre fils!', and 'Mon mal - heu - reux en - fant!'. The music features large intervals and chromatic slides, particularly in the King's part.

Slow meter and large, swooping leaps contrasted with sliding chromaticism give the King's musical material somewhat of a whining or moaning quality. Deeply concerned over the fate of his kingdom and the health of his son, the King feels a heavy burden of worry that is reflected through musical sighs. A persuasive argument can be made for viewing this character as a caricature of King Arkel from *Pelleas and Mélisande*, or *The Golden Cockerel's* King Dodon.

The role of Tchelio in the opera is that of the 'good wizard', there to protect the protagonists from evil supernatural forces. He is, however, spectacularly incompetent, in keeping with the farcical nature of the story. A bumbling stage magician, he sets into motion the series of misadventures that comprise the plot by losing the card game of Act I scene ii to Fata Morgana, on which he had gambled the fate of the King and his kingdom. Tchelio, in actual fact, does nothing to assist the characters with whose fate he has been entrusted, but relies on the ingenuity of the wind demon Farfarello and the Ridiculous People. In Act III, scene i, it is Farfarello who guides the Prince and Truffaldino toward Creonta's castle. He also provides the enchanted ribbon with which Truffaldino subdues the Cook. Again, in Act IV, scene i, when Tchelio is once more confronted with the task of preventing Fata Morgana from ruining the Prince's happiness,

the Ridiculous People step in to trap her in their tower, as Tchelio is incapable of containing the more powerful magician. His ineptitude and the farcical nature of his character are reflected musically. The invocation to Farfarello at the beginning of Act III is one of the more obviously parodistic moments in the opera, calling to mind the patter melodies so often incorporated into bass parts in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Italian *opera buffa*. There is a neoclassical bent to Prokofiev's compositional style, made most obvious of course in the *Classical* symphony and the later ballet, *Romeo and Juliet*, which at times bears itself out in this opera as well, as the following example illustrates:

**Example 2.10a: Tchelio's Invocation of Farfarello (mm. 1782 – 1787)**

Accelerando

Far-fa-rel - lo, Far-fa-rel - lo, Far-fa-rel - lo, Far-fa-rel - lo!

Otherwise, Tchelio sings melodies imbued with false bravado, as though he realizes his own shortcomings and is over-compensating for them with pompous, bombastic vocalization.

**Example 2.10b: Tchelio's Thematic Material (mm. 1822 – 1834)**

Allegro moderato

Je suis ter - ri - ble je suis fé - ro - ce Eh, bien prends garde sois do - ci - le

Ré - ponds moi!

The evil, or ill-intentioned characters (sub-category number seven), which include Fata Morgana, Leandro and Clarice, are characterized as much by the orchestra as by

their own vocalisation. The music that accompanies their entrances is programmatic and evocative, involving recurring ostinato figures most representative of the “leit-cues” discussed previously. That being said, however, these characters also have legitimate thematic vocal material that aptly reveals their character and intentions. The melodies of the evil characters are related through the use of chromaticism, dotted rhythms, colourful, onomatopoeic orchestral accompaniment, and a tendency to sound chant-like or invocational. There is a latent menacing quality to the melodies and ‘leit-cues’ of these characters.

Leandro and Clarice, both unscrupulous and self-serving, sing thematic material of a manipulative nature that vacillates between being cloying and demanding. Leandro, seeking both the downfall of the Prince and a union with Clarice (solely to advance his own political agenda), sings first a sombre, self-pitying melody reminiscent of the King’s music, albeit with a menacing undertone:

**Example 2.11: Leandro’s Theme (mm. 628 – 634)**

Andantino, sombre

Tous mesdésirs n'ont rencontré que des obstacles de grands et lourds obstacles. La chose n'est pas facile.

Clarice’s first entrance (example 2.12a) is in conversation with Leandro, and is, naturally, tonally and rhythmically related to his music. She is, however, the more decisive conspirator, a trait that is exemplified in her slightly bolder, more chromatically aggressive theme. As with Ninetta, it is in the final measures of her phrase that Clarice is clearly differentiated from the character with whom she is most closely musically

associated. The ninth and tenth measures of the following example exhibit an abrupt shift from F minor toward the relatively distant key of C-flat, and comprise a rise of a minor ninth within the span of one measure, providing intensified drama and Prokofiev's characteristic skirting of traditional cadential intervals, such as octaves or fifths. Her melody also makes liberal use of dotted rhythms, which, in this opera, come to represent either motion or evil intent:

**Example 2.12a: Clarice's Theme (mm. 637 – 646)**

*Piu animato*

Lé - andre sa - chez ce - ci si le Prince meurt je suis hé - ri - tière du trône de mon on - cle,  
et si nous perdons le Prince je vous é - pou - se, Lé - an - dre.

Unconvinced of the efficacy of Leandro's plot to overwhelm the Prince with bad prose, Clarice pushes for a more pragmatic, if much less subtle, approach, pressuring her co-conspirator to either poison or shoot their adversary, a suggestion that is conveyed by a rhythmically simplified figure, increased orchestral forces, and a climatic octave leap:

**Example 2.12b: Clarice's Theme Cont'd (mm. 733 – 737)**

*Moderato*

Don - nez au Prince de l'o - pium ou une balle.

Fata Morgana, the opera's primary antagonist, is given distinct musical treatment. Often coupled with full, harmonically piquant orchestral accompaniment, it is a virtuosic, soloistic role that remains in keeping with the musical language Prokofiev chose for the supernatural characters, but at the same time transcends it. The curse she places upon the

Prince at the Act II, scene ii Bacchanalia after she is humiliated by his laughter is indicative of the melodic design assigned to her:

**Example 2.13a: Fata Morgana's Melodic Material (mm. 1490 – 1497)**

Andante assai

Il faut que tu su - bi - ses l'a - mour pour trois o - ran - ges l'a - mour pour trois o - ran -

ges!

This relatively straightforward, ostinato type melody is enlivened by tritone leaps at the end of the first two phrase sections, followed by a chromatic descending fourth figure that reinforces Fata Morgana's supernaturality. Forceful, stylized delivery further emphasises the chant-like quality of her music.

The melodies of the evil characters follow much the same rules of melodic construction as those of the other characters, but the more pervasive qualities that connect them, particularly the increased orchestral forces and an invocational method of delivery, also make these melodies more difficult to identify and define.

In the themes characterizing the fantastic characters...the composer employs many complicated harmonic effects, among them, polytonality, fanciful chains of ninth chords, and whole-tone progressions. The melodic element is shackled and shoved into the background by an abundance of sharp harmonies, which at times seems to become an end in itself...The harshest orchestral effects are concentrated in the fantastic episodes, reaching the point of thunderous outbursts in the magic oaths of the evil forces.<sup>54</sup>

There is no character development in *A Love for Three Oranges* to speak of; the characters are stock figures employed to caricature human traits and advance the plot.

<sup>54</sup> Nestyev, 198.

The only character to undergo any semblance of transformation is the Prince, who turns from melancholy hypochondriac to quest-driven pseudo-hero as the result of Fata Morgana's curse. The "pre-curse" Prince is prone to warbling, ostinato figures with onomatopoeic moaning on vowel sounds.

**Example 2.14a: Prince's Melancholia Ostinato (mm. 997 – 1005)**

Moderato

Oh! . . . . . Oh! . . . . . Oh! . . . . . Oh! . . . . . Oh! . . . . . Oh! . . . . .

Oh! . . . . . Oh! . . . . . Oh! . . . . .

Not only is this melody well suited to the Prince's melancholic, melodramatic state of mind in the early part of the opera, but it also serves a supportive function, providing counterpoint to Truffaldino's jocular, prodding efforts to get him out of bed. This is another instance of Prokofiev's instinctive musico-comedic sensibility. It is a scene that requires considerable acting skill on the part of the singers, but when performed well can be very funny.

The post-curse Prince is, as has been discussed in relation to traditional melody, one of the more "operatic" characters. Once he becomes obsessed with the oranges, he adopts heroic/epic tones to the accompaniment of pointed and militaristic strings. The Prince's newfound sense of adventure eventually plays tricks with his sense of reality, however. In Act III, scene iii, when he recounts the rescue of the oranges to Ninetta, he presents an inflated account of his own heroism, complete with full-force vocal bravado:

**Example 2.14b: Prince's 'Heroic' Theme (mm. 2872 – 2911)**

*Allegro*

Non, rienne pou-voir m'arre - ter dans mon é - lan vers toi bien ai - mée! Je n'ai pas crains l'af -  
 freuse Cré - on - te, j'ai do - mi - né l'a - trôce cui - si - nière j'ai bra - vé la lou - che mor - telle,  
 j'ai pas - sé l'en fer - qu'est sa cui - si - ne Non! mon a - mour est fort plus fort que Cré - on - te plus  
 chaud que la cui - si - ne De - vant l'a - mour s'incli - nait la louche et trem - blait Cré - on - te!

This section, one of the longest uninterrupted melodic moments in the entire piece, is comprised of five equal eight-measure phrases. It is characterized by diatonic motion, or leaps of thirds and fourths and square, straightforward rhythms, in contrast to the dotted-note chromaticism of the supernaturals. The suggested tonality is e minor, which is not reinforced through traditional cadential means, but through the neighbouring chords of D, D#7, and f# minor. The melody adopts b minor rather than B major as its dominant, which is arrived at through gradual progression upwards through C, G+, G7 and A-flat chords in the orchestra. This particular melodic section cadences on b minor rather than e minor, but the impression is not one of a change of tonality, merely a pause on the “dominant” before Ninetta’s response, the next melodic section begins. Dramatic intensity and a sense of forward motion are created through gradually rising pitches over the first 32 measures, settling back into a more relaxed tessitura for the final eight. Alternating between melodic declamation and sustained note bravura, the music is very well-suited to the dialogue, which is intended to convey a lot of information in a

grandiose manner. It is representative of the “post-curse” Prince’s histrionic manner of expression.

If the prince is the opera’s protagonist, then Truffaldino is its catalyst. He is responsible, sometimes inadvertently, for many of the pivotal events that make up the plot. From his argument with Fata Morgana during the Bacchanalia, in which he causes her to fall over, to the scene in Creonta’s kitchen where he distracts the Cook, thus enabling the Prince to steal the oranges, to his decision to open two of the oranges, causing the deaths of two princesses, to running away without informing the Prince of the contents of the oranges, Truffaldino, in his own bumbling way, determines the entire course of events.

The traditional *commedia dell’arte* gestures associated with Truffaldino include acrobatics, tumbling, and general clownishness. Prokofiev remains faithful to this characterization, both dramatically and musically. Truffaldino’s music is dance-like as opposed to song-like – a hybrid of operatic and balletic stylization.<sup>55</sup> Each of his entrances is prefaced by cartwheeling orchestral triplet figures, usually with the upper winds and strings ascending or descending in either chromatic or diatonic stepwise motion. His status as an important character is cemented musically from the outset, when he is introduced in a fanfare-like manner by Pantalone:

**Example 2.15a: Pantalone’ Introduction of Truffaldino (mm. 364 – 371)**

The musical notation shows a bass clef, a 6/8 time signature, and the tempo marking 'Allegro'. The music consists of a triplet of eighth notes on a single pitch, repeated three times. The lyrics 'Trou - fal - di - no!' are written below the notes, with the first two phrases having a space between 'fal' and 'di' and the third having a space between 'di' and 'no'.

<sup>55</sup> Nestyev, 198.

In keeping with his rather frantic and impetuous personality – Truffaldino is not a character prone to introspection – his music often leans toward the recitative side of Prokofiev’s recitative-melody formula. Angular, garrulous, rhythmic motives tend to characterize his utterances. He does nonetheless get his fair share of time in the melodic sun. During the Bacchanalia, Truffaldino, revelling in the opportunity to entertain a crowd, sings along with the recurring March theme, arguably the most identifiable “tune” of the entire piece.

The section of desert scene in Act III, scene iii, where the Prince is sleeping and Truffaldino, perishing from thirst, tries to rationalize the opening of one of the oranges, is the longest uninterrupted sequence for any one character in the opera. His personal struggle between having his immediate need for fluid met and heeding Tchéliio’s warning only to open the Oranges near water is an identifying melodic moment:

**Example 2.15b: Truffaldino’s Hesitation Over the Oranges (mm. 2520 – 2531)**

Allegro moderato

Les o - ran - ges? Mais si j'ouv - rais ne fut-ce qu'une seule des trois? Elles sont si belles si ju - teu - ses!

It is a melody comprised of wide leaps in quick tempo, in keeping with the musical language thus far associated with Truffaldino. Each of the three phrases is one measure longer than the one that precedes it, and each is characterized by progressively higher climactic notes, differentiated by a major second between the first and second phrases, and an augmented second between the second and third. This is indicative of Truffaldino’s growing confidence that opening and eating one of the oranges can be rationalized. Love of fun, impulsive behaviour, and fear of remonstrance are all qualities that pervade Truffaldino’s character and thus his music.

The most important group of characters in the opera, according to this system of hierarchization, is the Ridiculous People, as they serve multiple functions and are given distinctive compositional treatment. Like Truffaldino's, their actions are integral to the plot. They also mediate the substantial and unruly stage audience, and they provide narration, sometimes essential to the understanding of an opera that includes significant sections of pantomime. Unlike the other groups of clowns, the Ridiculous People do not lobby for any particular theatrical genre, but for the play before them. They are therefore more prone to objectivity regarding the unfolding of dramatic events. Their music is as a result epigrammatic and declamatory, following traditional tonal structures and memorable, ostinato-like melodic patterns. Example 2.16a, which occurs in at m.773 in Act 1, scene iii, is actually a parody of Leandro's theme from m. 674 of the same scene, but the Ridiculous people soon adopt it as their own, creating motivic cohesion between characters as well as an ironic twist to an otherwise sinister theme:

**Example 2.16a: Ridiculous People's "Leandro" Theme (mm.768 – 775)**

Molto animato

Il va gué - nir quand on pour - ra le fai - re ri - re. On va bien rire quand on sau - ra qu'il va gué - nir.

To quote Margaret Notman McAllister:

The interruptions of the Ridiculous People are much more frequent than those of the other groups, and again their melodies are nearly always built on a third – that which dominates the prologue. At 109 [m.773], when with their optimistic remarks they interrupt the conspiratorial conversation of Leandro and Clarice, these thirds emerge in a full-blown melodic motive, which is recalled in its memorable form later in the score at moments when the actions of the Ridiculous People drastically affect the course of the drama.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> McAllister, 271.

The next example, 2.16b, is an instance of the Ridiculous People corralling the Lyricals. The same melodic material is used each time they must admonish members of the stage audience. It is a brusque, hushed melody intended swiftly and efficiently to prevent the starry-eyed Lyricals from interrupting the very scene for which they have been waiting. Dry, staccato, unison eighth-notes give this motive a speech-like quality, adding to its matter-of-fact nature:

**Example 2.16b: Ridiculous People's "Stage Management" Motive (mm. 2923 – 27)**



Andantino  
p  
si-lence en si-len-ce Si vous aimez l'a-mour Ne trou-b-lez pas les a-mour-eux.

The final two examples represent the Ridiculous People's most important contributions to the drama – the provision of water for Ninetta and the entrapment of Fata Morgana. Example 2.16c is typical of their declamatory, practical style, as they hit on the simple solution of supplying the Prince and Princess with water from the wings of the stage, where it is readily available:

**Example 2.16c: Provision of Water (mm. 2818 – 2823)**



Moderato  
Eh! vous au tres-là, n'au-riez vous pas de l'eau? C'est bien pos-sible. Mais a-lors don-nez  
donc, il faut qu'elle boive! C'est bon!

The final example, 2.16d, recalls their theme from Act I, scene iii (example 2.4b). In both instances they appear to thwart the plans of the evil element, first interrupting the conspiracy of Leandro and Clarice and then, in this case, trapping Fata Morgana, thus

preventing her from ruining the Prince's happiness. Dry, speech-like, and unassuming, this is nonetheless the Ridiculous People's most important moment, both dramatically and musically. Following a relatively straightforward tonal plan that implies E-flat major, in characteristic march-like rhythm, this is some of the more memorable musical material in the score, made more so by its continual repetition:

**Example 2.16d: Entrapment of Fata Morgana (mm. 3259 – 3287)**

Andante scherzando

*p*

Fa-ta Mor-ga-na nous ve-nons par-ler d'a-fai-res Fa-ta-Mor-ga-na il faut que tu le sa-ches Nous al-lons te di-re

une nou-velle cu-rieuse nous la chu-chote-tons à ton o-reille Ap-pro-che en-co-re ap-pro-che

*pp* Ap-pro-che en-co-re ap-pro-che en-

en-co-re é-cou-te c'est gra-ve é-cou-te c'est gra-ve Fa-ta Mor-ga-na! Fa-ta mor-ga-na! Hop!

co-re é-cou-te c'est gra-ve é-cou-te c'est gra-ve *p*

Some of the music previously discussed is of a more obviously lyrical nature than that of the Ridiculous People, but given their importance to the plot and the Prokofiev's skillful musical capturing of their character and function, it is important to consider their thematic material in the discussion of the overall melodic structure of the opera.

### Conclusion

...an opera may have a few tunes, but if each tune is repeated several times the listener will remember them. If there are too many tunes, the listener will not be able to absorb them all at the first hearing and mistake abundance for poverty.<sup>57</sup>

The melodies of *A Love for Three Oranges* at first appear overwhelming in their breadth and quantity, but upon closer reflection reveal themselves to be a closely related web of associative material, identifying and grouping characters into units based on musical language and treatment. It is an extensive scheme of recurring melodic processes, associated either with characters or their attributes, well suited to variation, transformation and repetition.<sup>58</sup> Prokofiev's lyricism is devoid of emotional stress and psychological complexities, an aesthetic he made a point of emphasizing to performers<sup>59</sup> in an effort to prevent them from over-sentimentalizing his lyric intentions. Lyric outpouring disproportionate to the dramatic tone of *Oranges* is banished absolutely, leaving a melodic quality rendered more intense by its overall leanness.

While there is undoubtedly melodic repetition in *Oranges*, it is usually spaced out over considerable spans of time, often relegated to background or inner parts, obfuscated by comedy and clever musical or dramatic play. Certainly an audience accustomed to the closely related, homogeneous melodic plan of Puccini or Donizetti and the intensely self-referential leit-motivic construction of Wagner would be hard-pressed to grasp the incredibly heterogeneous and at times tenuous melodic relationships of *A Love for Three Oranges*, especially on one hearing. The melodies of this opera are rarely afforded uninterrupted completion and are subject to constant variation. In most cases they are

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<sup>57</sup> Prokofiev, *Prokofiev by Prokofiev*, 119.

<sup>58</sup> McAllister, 268.

sixteen measures or less in length, occupying only a few seconds of actual temporal space, and sometimes appear only two or three times over the course of the opera's two-hour length. The considerable volume of melodic variation is well suited to the chaotic, mile-a-minute comedic syntax of the *Oranges* scenario. This is also the very reason why the extraordinarily sophisticated yet subtle melodic construction can easily go unnoticed.

The melodic material of *Oranges* is inextricably bound to the description and personification of its characters. Programmatic to the point of onomatopoeia, Prokofiev's method of declamation, combined with instrumental associative material, endows his characters with a humanity rarely encountered in opera. They sound groggy when roused from sleep, parched and raspy when thirsty, and weak when they are dying. All manner of vocal vanity is sacrificed in the interest of dramatic verisimilitude. Characters are defined by the style of melody in which they sing, and also by the manner in which others sing *about* them. The music reflects not only the characters' personalities, but also the feelings of the singer toward he who is being discussed. The angular, declamatory recitative-melody of Prokofiev's opera also allows for excellent audibility of the text, further reinforcing a sense of dramatic cohesion. *A Love for Three Oranges* is an action-driven opera, to which a compact, economical and evocative style of melody is eminently suited.

Prokofiev was trying, especially in *The Gambler*, and also in *Oranges*, to create very concrete musical portraits that revealed [the characters'] outer essence. Thus the brilliantly illustrative quality of his music – for which Prokofiev has been praised, and thus its superficiality – for which he has been faulted. Traditionally opera composers had struggled to make prose into music...Prokofiev struggles to make music into prose.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Robinson, *The Operas of Sergei Prokofiev*, 49.

Musical characterization is one of the primary functions of melody in this opera, as evidenced by the extensive description of melodically associative material given above. The vast array of characters in this opera are grouped together into categories of increasing specificity largely through their melodic material. Evil characters are personified through chromaticism, dotted rhythms, and interesting timbral effects. These same musical characteristics also come into play in the melodies of Tchelio and Farfarello, drawing a link between all supernatural characters in the opera. The Ridiculous People, responsible for much of the opera's conflict resolution, are represented by clear-cut, diatonic melodies in march-like, duple rhythm, the same melodic qualities associated with non-supernatural or "real" characters. While the Ridiculous People can be grouped in with the supernatural characters in terms of plot function – everything that actually happens in the opera is the result of the actions of these two groups, the "straight" characters being merely pawns in the game – their melodic material places them clearly in camp with the non-supernaturals, or "good guys."

Prokofiev's three character groupings – supernatural, characters of the story, and stage audience – which I have further subdivided into ten categories based on dramatic relevance, are associated and also differentiated most clearly through their respective music. The supernatural characters' music is universally chromatic, but Fata Morgana, Clarice, Leandro and Smeraldina are given more interesting timbral and harmonic material, while Tchelio and Farfarello's music tends toward traditional brass bombast that, while still maintaining chromaticism, resolves to tonally stable areas, often in major key centers. The music for characters of the story is all essentially diatonic, but secondary roles such as the King and the Princesses are treated with general operatic convention, the

King being characteristically sombre, and the princesses assigned crystalline, lyrical passages. The Prince and Truffaldino, on the other hand, are given much more varied and distinctive melodic material, befitting their roles as major characters. The Prince is treated with two very distinct melodic styles respectively appropriate to his pre- and post-course disposition, while Truffaldino, the opera's resident acrobat, is represented by some of the most rhythmically distinct melody in the work. The music of the stage audience is very self-referential throughout, and further distinguished by literal repetition at key points in the opera. The Ridiculous People, however, are differentiated from the group through expansion and variation of their initially presented melodic material. Characters' melodic treatment offers as much, if not more, insight into their personalities and relevance to the story as does their dialogue and stage action.

There is much that is familiar in Prokofiev's melodic approach. Diatonic melodies supported by triadic harmonies and expressive of the given dramatic situation are trademarks; yet these characteristics almost never occur simultaneously. Often a straightforward melody, such as the March, will be accompanied by unconventional, ambiguous harmonies, or a lyrical melody like that of the Princess given only the barest, recitative-like accompaniment. The disconnection of musical references from their expected contexts creates musical irony and gives these melodies their modernist bent. This subtle practice of referential isolation and musical objectivity could have easily had an alienating effect on early American audiences, unaccustomed to modernist and neoclassical techniques.

### Chapter Three

#### Music as Dramatic Commentary:

#### Irony, Grotesquerie, and the Orchestra as Character

Opera is of course primarily a vocal medium, but the orchestra in *A Love for Three Oranges* fulfills a role at least as significant as any of those that are sung. The orchestra can be considered a character in and of itself, and one required to wear many hats. It serves as narrator, commentator, composer's critical conscience, and independent *dramatis persona* and directly affects the outcome of the plot in each guise. In the pantomimic scenes especially we rely heavily on the instrumental score for indications of what is happening in the story. The orchestra's commentary regarding the events unfolding onstage provides much of the opera's subtler, tongue-in-cheek comedy, often through wry contradiction of the text, which allows us some measure of insight into the composer's personal views on both opera and life. The parodying of staid operatic convention takes place largely within the orchestral texture. These elements combined provide the orchestra with its 'character'.

The relationship between music and text in this opera is complex and, at times, paradoxical. Often the orchestra is called upon to enhance the mood of a given passage, but is just as frequently employed to contradict what is happening dramatically in the name of grotesquerie. The *Oranges* music can be intensely programmatic, as in the Bacchanalia of II.ii, or, alternately, incongruent with the stage action, like the whimsical solo flute melody that accompanies the King and Pantalone as they commiserate over the Prince's hypochondria. Regardless of its function at any given moment, the orchestra is

inextricably bound to the text it supports. There are few purely vocal *or* orchestral themes. Music and prose work in symbiosis to convey a total storyline comprised of fantasy, humor, irony, and, in glimpses, insight into the human condition.

The definition of musical irony as it applies to *A Love for Three Oranges* is one of the aims of this chapter and one of its greatest challenges. Irony in the most literal of instances can be difficult to define, and in musical terms is determinedly evasive. It is recognizable, however, by its continued reliance on the distortion of a conventionally accepted truth, removing that truth from its common context in order to alter the perspective from which it is considered. This idea is closely tied to what Neil Minturn calls "Prokofiev's perennial aesthetic dilemma: how to innovate without losing touch with tradition."<sup>61</sup> The music of *Oranges* is ironic in places precisely because it is also, in some respects, entirely conventional. The music of the love duet between the Prince and Princess, as tradition would lead us to expect, is lyrical, with a clearly defined major tonality; the *buffo* role of the Cook is assigned to the bass voice. The presence of these operatic conventions provides points of reference from which Prokofiev can create ironic commentary and an arena for grotesquerie. Prokofiev strove for originality while simultaneously exploiting a musical rhetoric deeply indebted to common-practice tonality.<sup>62</sup>

The music of *A Love for Three Oranges*, originally mislabeled by critics as everything from "Russian jazz"<sup>63</sup> to "noise, more or less agreeable,"<sup>64</sup> is in actuality quite straightforwardly tonal, and can be adequately analyzed within the confines of common-

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<sup>61</sup> Minturn, 11.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>63</sup> Karl Hackett, Review, *Chicago Evening Post*, 31 December 1921.

<sup>64</sup> Herman De Vries, Review, *Chicago American*, 31 December 1921.

practice theory. Prokofiev employs a broadened diatonic scale, arrived at through subtle chromatic alteration, in conjunction with periods of octatonicism and essentially triadic chordal structures.<sup>65</sup> The orchestra's level of participation is such that *Oranges* can almost be considered an opera-ballet, especially if the production is faithful to the plot, the composer's stage directions, and the stock gestures of the *commedia dell'arte*. The music is acrobatic in its angularity and range, particularly in the case of the frequent instrumental solos (in the woodwinds especially), and during pantomimic scenes, in which the music carries the action. The highly colorful orchestration, often surprising but never inappropriate or incongruous, shows the influence of Rimsky-Korsakov. Thus the instrumental element of *Oranges* is integral to the intelligibility of the storyline and the overall dramatic tone of the opera.

### **Orchestral Characterization**

The orchestra provides an expressive narrative as well as insight into the psychology of other characters, broadening the depth of other roles through musical commentary. Purely orchestral moments occur frequently throughout the work, assigning the orchestra the substantial task of conveying extended sections of the storyline without the aid of a text. The influence of Prokofiev's Russian operatic predecessors Mussorgsky, Dargomizhky, and particularly Rimsky-Korsakov is especially evident in the opera's orchestral music. The score reveals Prokofiev to be perhaps Rimsky's most talented and faithful orchestration student, following as he does his teacher's penchant for glittering woodwind filigree, expressive brass moments, and ample use of percussive effects. The

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<sup>65</sup> Minturn, 20.

love duet of Act III, scene iii, is possibly the most Rimskyian moment in the opera; sparse but plaintive strings allow for complete intelligibility of the text which then expands out to a fuller texture in the breaks between vocal passages. It is in the opera's comedy that the influence of Mussorgsky and Dargomizhky is revealed. The overall comic tone – what Boris Asafiev so presciently termed “humorously grotesque intonation”<sup>66</sup> – which can range from harmlessly funny to bitingly sarcastic – follows the Mussorgskian/Dargomizhkyian line of Russian comic opera:

The orchestra is transparent and active. It sustains the scenic dialogue very well, and where left to itself, accurately and tersely portrays, with decorative and characteristic strokes, the given situation, without losing the thread of the action, or plunging into self-sufficient symphonic problems. So far *The Love for Three Oranges* and *The Gambler* remain the last points in the evolution of Russian opera outside the specific national coloring – the fantastic opera and the opera of types taken in grotesque perspective.<sup>67</sup>

The orchestra functions as an independent character, but also embellishes other roles, broadening the otherwise one-dimensional *commedia dell'arte* characters, giving them life, personality, and opinion. Prokofiev's efficiently communicative music can skillfully intone the inflections of human speech, the rhythms of vigorous movement, and the gestures of dance.<sup>68</sup> The music can also reflect the inner thoughts and/or ulterior motives of characters, an immensely helpful quality in an opera where deception, trickery, and manipulation are common and accepted behaviors. This pertains especially to the evil characters, who are always scheming behind the scenes while outwardly pandering to the King.

Leandro's first appearance in Act I, scene i, is preceded by the slinking, dotted-eighth/sixteenth ostinato (beginning at m.453) that comes to be associated with him.

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<sup>66</sup> Asafiev, 45.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Nestyev, 471.

Throughout the opera, dotted rhythms are associated with sinister characters and malicious intentions. This, combined with the ostinato's F minor tonality, oscillatory motion and plodding, tenuto quarter notes spaced in fourths, creates an overall impression of Leandro as a character with unsavory intentions. When the King shifts his focus from the well-being of his son to the dubious motives of his niece, there is a marked change in the orchestral accompaniment. The orchestra shifts abruptly from a plaintive, chordal style in minor tonality with soloistic touches in the low strings and double reeds to a restless, triplet-eighth modulating ostinato, indicative of the King's agitation at the thought of being forced to bequeath his kingdom to the manipulative girl. Triplet figuration again creates an atmosphere of agitation and malice at mm. 896-924, when Smeraldina is describing Fata Morgana and her powers to Clarice and Leandro. The chromatic harmony and hemiola rhythm of the orchestra communicate the extent of Fata Morgana's capacity for evil, while concurrently providing counterpoint to Smeraldina's rhythmically static singing (her melody is comprised entirely of half and whole notes). The orchestra consequently provides significant information as to the morality of these characters, not only when they are singing, but also when they are referred to by others.

Orchestral characterization is not limited, however, to evil characters. In Act II, scene ii (m.984), the orchestra whines along with the hypochondriac, agoraphobic Prince, almost as if it is poking fun at the absurdity of the situation. Three simultaneous ostinati, in the celli and english horn, clarinet, and oboe respectively, combine to give the orchestral texture a sighing, moaning quality, but with the crunchiness of close intervals, placing the orchestra's tongue firmly within its cheek.

**Example 3.1: Prince's Melancholia Music (mm. 984 – 992)**

Allegro poco meno  
Prince

Ma vue se brouille j'ai la tete en feu des dou-leurs aux reins et des dou-leurs au foie!

Oboe

Clarinets (in C)

Cello & English Horn

Farfarello, the wind demon and sorcerer behind the scenes, is given duly interesting orchestral treatment. Ultimately on the side of the ‘good guys’, Farfarello is mischievous with a deviant streak, as befits his demon status. A powerful sorcerer, he does not always use his power strictly for good, and takes particular pleasure in taunting Tchelio, a far inferior magician. Act III, scene i (Tchelio’s invocation of Farfarello) begins very somberly with low string tremolos, as if Farfarello were someone to be feared. At m.1794, Farfarello’s first entrance is immediately preceded by a harmonized A<sup>b</sup> variation of Fata Morgana’s motive. It is a very subtle orchestral moment, occurring unobtrusively in the trombones and timpani only, and lasting just two and a half beats, but is nonetheless indicative of many aspects of Farfarello’s character, including his supernaturality, ability to toy with the fates of others, and questionable morality.

The orchestra is used in Oranges to round out personalities and convey crucial aspects of the scenario that are not expressed vocally:

The lamentations of the Prince, the humour of Truffaldino, the tender cantilenas of Ninetta, Linetta and Nicoletta, the somber menacing of Fata Morgana, the hilarious

Cook, "a hoarse bass", all command an extremely supple and efficient orchestral framework...In short, it requires two orchestras for the interior parts alone.<sup>69</sup>

Sparse accompaniment when characters are singing allows for greater dramatic range and flexibility, while interesting and evocative orchestral textures provide a clear narrative when there is no dialogue. Solo instruments are used to great effect, providing musical characterization and a substantial amount of the opera's clever, sardonic wit. Throughout the work, the orchestra develops its own persona by commenting on the (often absurd) thoughts and actions of others.

### Narrative and Commentary

The orchestral narrative that runs throughout *A Love for Three Oranges* is one of the few straightforward elements of the opera, presenting the listener with a reinforcing, largely unironic, musical account of what is happening on the stage. The challenge presented is in the differentiation between orchestral narrative, which supports the unfolding drama, and orchestral commentary, which behaves more independently of the action and offers its own impression of the events that occur. The intimate relationship between dramatic content and musical structure shows itself most clearly when narrative elements are isolated from the abundant orchestral layers that comprise the musical fabric, especially since they can, like the melodic material, occur quickly, subtly, and quite far apart:

He uses themes and motives so unobtrusively that they are likely to go unrecognized, spaced out as they are over great spans of time. The 'curtain-raising' music at the end of the Prologue, for example, recurs at the conclusion of the penultimate scene

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<sup>69</sup> Philippe Olivier, "La Leçon de Rimsky-Korsakov: Sur l'orchestration de *L'amour des Trois Oranges* et de quelques autres grandes oeuvres de Prokofiev," *L'avant scene opera* 133 (July 1990): 78 (translation mine).

(transposed down a major second). Both times the ascending chords serve – if the continuity is not held up by the stage machinery – as the musical counterpart of an unraveling red carpet that leads us to the subsequent scene: the King's throne.<sup>70</sup>

From the opening moments of the opera the orchestra exerts its narrative presence, punctuating the Herald's introduction in the Prologue (mm. 115-150) with interjections after each short utterance. Announcements often follow this formula: the orchestra is afforded almost as much musical relevance as the person singing. When the King announces the sentence of hanging in the final act at m. 3481, he is accompanied by a brash, forceful octave leap in B major for full orchestra. Ostinati, ubiquitous in this opera, are another significant narrative device. Triplets are used to convey a sense of motion, both physical and musical. Repeated-note triplets in the woodwinds imply motion as Truffaldino tries to coax the prince out of bed, and triplet arpeggios are employed to represent the travelers' escape from Creonta's castle with the oranges. Tremolos and similar shimmering, ethereal musical effects are employed regularly in association with supernatural characters and their actions, most often identifying evil characters, but including Tchelio and Farfarello, the characters who are both 'supernatural' and 'good'. Timbre and texture also factor into the narrative equation. 'Real' characters are often sparsely accompanied by chordal figuration in the strings coupled with one or two soloistic lines in the winds. Supernatural characters typically sing over denser textures characterized by a low tessitura, or one that is exceptionally wide – winds in their upper registers paired with basses and tubas, as in the card game scene of Act I scene ii.

Given the laconism of the text of *Oranges*, abrupt harmonic shifts (between major and minor keys or to an altogether remote tonal centre) are employed to indicate changes

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<sup>70</sup> Pisani, 494-5.

in mood. This is especially true for the ill-tempered old King. During the bacchanalia of Act II, scene ii, the straightforward narrative that comes to be associated with him is typified as the lively C major music for this scene expresses its own disappointment. When the King informs Truffaldino, m.1307, that the Prince has yet to laugh, he is accompanied by a jarring C minor chord. The mood abruptly shifts from buoyant revelry to anxiety, expressing the King's displeasure and the Prince's discomfort.

The music for evil characters displays some of Prokofiev's most interesting narrative techniques. In Act I, scene iii (mm. 806-811), just before Smeraldina is discovered by Clarice and Leandro, a repeated E sixteenth-note ostinato in the strings under a foreboding chromatic melody in the winds centered around F<sup>#</sup> and A<sup>b</sup> implies impending mischief in association with a supernatural presence. The same accompaniment occurs again at m. 824, this time with the melody in the trumpet and oboe alone during Smeraldina's first solo. The orchestra takes on a progressively ethereal quality with tremolos and arpeggios in the strings, all centered around E-major with an alternating flattened tonic. By the time the invocation to Fata Morgana is sung, the creepy, mysterious mood has unquestionably been set.

Prokofiev's narrative style is intensely colorful and many-faceted in terms of his ability to communicate ideas clearly and effectively through orchestral means. As biographer Israel Nestyev has pointed out:

A sudden rush or outcry in the melody, spare but clear-cut beats of rhythm, brilliantly pictorial patches of tone color, or an unexpected change of harmony frequently communicate more than a long array of pretty ornaments and embellishments.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Nestyev, 473.

Economy of gesture, rhythmic and timbral distinction of both character and situation, and wrenching harmonies are all benchmarks of his particular narrative musical language. There is little in the way of sentimentality. Another excellent example of his wide-ranging narrative palette is the scene in the desert immediately succeeding the stealing of the oranges. Truffaldino's flight from the scene is accompanied by a biting, minor second ostinato; the deaths of the first two princesses, are dealt with pragmatically and efficiently with the recurring march theme; and the Prince's placidity and later elation is represented with clear cut C-major tonality, which continues throughout the largely conventional love duet. This brand of laconic narrativity, utilizing a minimal amount of repetition and association, is effective precisely because it never becomes embroiled in self-referential musical development. It requires, however, a sharp ear and uninterrupted concentration to be fully appreciated.

The orchestra's commentary is differentiated from the narrative by independent musical ideas and purely orchestral moments, most notably at the ends of scenes. Each section ends with an orchestral moment, but there are also shorter, truncated intermezzi throughout. The music of the prologue exhibits many of the characteristics that will come to embody the orchestral commentary throughout the course of the opera. A busy, colorful orchestral tone is established from the very outset. Triplet ostinati in the trumpets soon expand to include first the strings and then the entire orchestra. Quick rhythmic figuration, chromatic sextuplet runs, and arpeggiated sixteenths in the upper winds and violins, punctuated with short fanfares from the brass and timpani, all occur within the first 100 measures of the piece and invoke the orchestra's dramatic voice. It is from the

orchestra that the first indications of the opera's ironic subtext are heard, with an almost cinematic G-major cadence that closes the turbulent, many-themed Prologue.

While the orchestra in *A Love for Three Oranges* has descriptive ability unusual for the operatic genre, Prokofiev is never indulgent in his use of instrumental devices, utilizing only what is most necessary to convey a musical idea. There is limited direct repetition; rather, he employs a manageable number of musical idioms, themselves continuously altered. Triplets are used ubiquitously to convey a sense of motion, whether literal or dramatic. Other rhythmic devices, including dotted rhythms, and two sixteenths followed by an eighth note, also espouse specific dramatic functions, the former often implying the presence of supernaturalism or malevolence while the latter generally implies the literal, physical motion of characters. The distinctive harmonic idiom includes unusual modulations to distant tonalities via deceptive cadences and an avoidance of strictly vertical structures, exploiting the melodic nature of harmony through the use of moving inner parts and an active bass line.<sup>72</sup> The largely triadic tonal plan is enlivened through the use of added notes - the March being an excellent example - and tritonal root movement.<sup>73</sup> It is the repetition of musical forms and devices rather than the direct iteration of material that unifies the score and establishes the associative connotation between musical motives and dramatic ideas.

The most important moments of the action, those requiring musical generalization, are expressed not in arias or ensembles, but in orchestral music - dances, processions and pantomimes.<sup>74</sup> This transitory material often contains musical information directly relevant to the plot. Act III, scene i (mm. 2052-2123), comes to a

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<sup>72</sup> Nestyev, 478.

<sup>73</sup> Pisani, 493.

<sup>74</sup> Nestyev, 198.

close with an orchestral intermezzo that incorporates many of the musically recognizable events up to this point. It can be thought of as a summary of events to date, which in turn indicates something new and potentially plot altering about to happen.<sup>75</sup> The close of Act III, scene i is the first real climatic point in the opera, highlighting Prokofiev's instinct for pacing. The transition between scenes one and two of the final act, wherein the prologue's cadential material, the March, and the Herald's entrance are all reiterated, provides another excellent example of the sophisticated musical unity that is subtly woven into the musical fabric of the score.

Unlike previous scenes, which only ended orchestrally, Act IV; scene ii (the final scene of the opera) is almost entirely orchestral, especially from the point where the King announces the sentence of hanging for the conspirators Leandro, Clarice, and Smeraldina, and they subsequently escape. The 'chase intermezzo' begins at m. 3488 and continues virtually uninterrupted until the final, "long live the King", phrase of the opera:

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<sup>75</sup> The Prince steals the oranges in Act III, scene ii.

## Example 3.2a: The Chase Intermezzo (mm. 3488 – 3515)

This musical score is for the 'The Chase Intermezzo' from the 'The Nutcracker' ballet, spanning measures 3488 to 3515. It is written for a piano and consists of seven systems of three staves each. The music is in 3/4 time and features a complex, rhythmic melody in the right hand, often with sixteenth-note patterns. The left hand provides a steady accompaniment with chords and rhythmic patterns. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings like *ff* (fortissimo) and *f* (forte). The piece concludes with a final chord in the last system.

This music evokes the scurrying about of all the characters, including the Clowns and the Courtiers, as they chase after Clarice, Leandro, and Smeraldina, recalling the Princess-turned-rat music of the previous act. The first six measures of the intermezzo are ambiguously chromatic, abruptly shifting to a definitive, second inversion F major rendering of the oranges' motive in the horns at m.3494, amidst continuing ostinati in the rest of the orchestra. From here Prokofiev's penchant for bi-tonality and added notes comes to the fore, with the addition of E and B to the pervading F major tonality. At m.3498, we are given a glimpse of the more melodic, tonally stable motive that will soon be developed, giving this section internal motivic unity. The four repeated Fs at m.3504 give the listener a moment's respite from the perpetual motion of running sixteenth notes and provide a mini-climax, as if the escapees were within arm's reach and just slipped away.

At m. 3541 the 'scurrying' abruptly stops once Fata Morgana rescues her charges:

**Example 3.2b: Fata Morgana's Rescue Music (mm. 3541 – 3548)**



This phrase, beginning with Fata Morgana's motive played in a slower tempo by full brass, marks the point at which she rescues Clarice, Leandro, and Smeraldina and takes them off to the underworld. The aggressiveness of her motive in this instance demonstrates her supernatural power and dramatic importance. This motive is further accentuated by the abrupt dynamic shift to *piano* for the ensuing 'slithering', dovetailing motive that signifies the realization on the part of the 'good' characters that the criminals

have escaped. This motive, repeated over five measures, oscillating between E and A minor, provides effective contrast to the rest of the intermezzo, clearly demarcating the evil characters as such and differentiating the moment of their escape from the confusion of the chase.

Orchestral transitions and intermezzi comprise a significant amount of the opera's content, and are important not only as musically connective devices, but dramatically as well. The score is a mosaic of compounding musical ideas that develops shape through repetition of forms and sudden shifts in mood and atmosphere. This becomes more and more apparent as the piece progresses and orchestral motives recur in different guises and settings. Boris Asafiev characterized the music of *A Love for Three Oranges* as possessed of "the dynamics of the cinema, combined with well-defined forms."<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Prokofiev's later career as a successful composer of film scores is foreshadowed here. The combination of clear musical structures with surprising orchestration and harmonic progression provides a carnival-ride of musical narrative and commentary that imbues this opera with multi-layered compositional sophistication that belies the facile comedy of the *scenario*.

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<sup>76</sup> Asafiev, 45.

### Instrumental Motives

Soloistic motives in the instrumental parts are a benchmark of the compositional schema for *A Love for Three Oranges*. Onomatopoeic orchestral accents pepper the score, adding a dimension of humorous vitality. Prokofiev "...was able to match literary sentiments aurally. His music stylizes, mimics, and animates its characters."<sup>77</sup> Accompanimental lines idiosyncratic to the text expand and personify otherwise pragmatically delivered dialogue, such as the Doctors' listing of the Prince's ailments in the first scene. Mischievous, light staccato octave leaps in the bassoon accompany the diagnosis, indicating (despite the seriousness of the Doctors' tone) that all might not yet be lost. Winds and percussion are the main purveyors of these instrumental embellishments, most specifically flutes, double-reeds, and brass. Prokofiev relies heavily on these three groups of instruments to fill various narrative functions throughout the opera, and develops a specific, distinguishing musical language for each.

Flute filigree, typical of that instrument's traditional orchestral function, provides both lovely, melodious accompaniment and a subversive bit of satire throughout. The first flute motive occurs in the prologue at m.79 and recurs twice more, first at m.438 to underscore the commiseration of the King and Pantalone, and again at m.781 while Clarice and Leandro plot to murder the Prince:

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<sup>77</sup> Jean-Pierre Armengaud, "La morale esthétique de Prokofiev," *L'avant scene opera* 133 (July 1990): 75 (translation mine).

**Example 3.3: Flute Motive (mm. 79 – 86)**



The first instance of this whimsical, flittering motive befits the buoyant, anticipatory nature of the Prologue. The following occurrences of this solo, however, seem to satirize the sobriety of the dramatic moments they accompany. The flute further parodies the King and Pantalone's proselytizing over the Prince's hypochondria at mm:282-284, with a chromatic scale in 32<sup>nd</sup> notes that is completed with an irreverent, grace-noted octave leap, quite incongruous with the pervading somber atmosphere.

The flute has several other identifiable moments throughout the opera, including the representation of oil and wine during the bacchanalia, accompaniment to the Lyricals' enchantment with the love duet in Act III and the lyrical melody representative of the enchanted ribbon with which Truffaldino enamors the Cook. Bright, scherzando writing, often in conjunction with harp and percussion, and smooth, lyrical melodic lines typify the flute's musical signature and provide a breadth of narrative color and expressivity.

Bassoon, oboe and english horn are instruments of mischief, often heard when a character is doing something he knows he shouldn't, for example, when Truffaldino opens the oranges in Act III, scene iii. Often characterized by lilting or disjunct rhythms, and short interjections, sometimes lasting just a couple of beats, music for the double-reeds is imbued with an impish quality that makes us grin more than laugh. A puckish bassoon solo accompanies Truffaldino's obvious anxiety and the Prince's curse-inspired bravado as they walk through the desert toward Creonta's castle. Made up entirely of

alternating sixteenth- and eighth-note rising chromatic patterns followed by wide leaps (perfect fifths and wider), this melody is jaunty and playful at a dramatic moment full of tension and uncertainty. Immediately after Fata Morgana curses the Prince to become infatuated with the oranges in Act II, scene ii, there is a typically mischievous duet for English horn and bassoon. Its lilting, roguish rhythm arouses curiosity and immediately lightens the mood:

**Example 3.4: Double-Reed Motive (mm. 1516 – 1519)**

English Horn

Bassoon

*p*

The double-reeds appear often at moments of terror, confusion, or conflict, providing subtle reminders that *A Love for Three Oranges* is first and foremost a comedy. They take on a distinctive personality that, with few exceptions, remains constant throughout the opera, reminding us to take nothing in this show too seriously.<sup>78</sup>

The brass section is designated considerable, functional musical material. Trumpets are treated largely conventionally, providing fanfares and rhythmic, march-like intermezzi, usually signifying the physical motion of characters. They also serve a comic function during processions and transitions from one scene to another, parodying traditional operatic locomotion in a manner that is highly referential, yet not obviously farcical.

<sup>78</sup> The two notable exceptions to this rule are Clarice's oboe accompaniment at m.635 as she plots to have the Prince killed, and the plaintive bassoon solo that signals the prince's awakening in the desert – the only non-ironic bassoon moment in the entire opera.

The trombones fill a traditional “heralding” role as well, but with a caricatured twist. This timbre is used almost exclusively to announce the presence of important characters, particularly Truffaldino and Farfarello. Extremely low trombone range, coupled with the tuba, is often used in conjunction with the King, exemplifying his somber, cantankerous disposition. The trombone is even afforded an appearance onstage with the monophonic “herald” motive in the prologue:

**Example 3.5: Trombone’s Heralding Motive (mm. 1789 – 96)**



Heard rarely, if ever, at any dynamic other than *fortissimo*, the signature *Oranges* timbre for the trombones is a bleating that can at times become more of a sound-effect than a musicalization. This of course only heightens the farcical quality and maintains the dramatic continuity (in this case, of humorous *commedia* conventions), even at the expense of musicality. The bellowing glissandi that personify Farfarello are no exception to this rule, appearing always in loud, almost obnoxious gusts to signify his presence or handiwork. Immediately following Tchelio’s exclamation, “*Je suis terrible!*” at m.1823, the upper winds and strings chime in with rising glissandi culminating in a  $C^7$  half-diminished chord, the ‘scariness’ of which is immediately undercut by minor seventh bleats in the trombones.

**Example 3.6: (mm. 1823 – 1825)**

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is labeled 'flutes' and the bottom staff is labeled 'trombones'. Both staves are in 2/4 time. The flute staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). It features a melodic line starting in measure 1823, marked with a slur and a fermata that extends through measure 1825. The trombone staff begins with a bass clef and contains a few notes in measure 1825, including a low note with an accent (>) and a whole note in the following measure.

The tuba, as has already been discussed, is used in an uncharacteristically solistic manner associated with the Cook of Creonta's castle. In addition, it combines with the rest of the brass section to provide full fanfare-like effects, often in very low tessitura.

These instrumental tags help, as do the narrative line and orchestral commentary, to round out the one-dimensional characters and skeletal plotline of *A Love for Three Oranges*, adding yet another layer to the musical texture. Prokofiev takes the most commonplace human exclamations – coughs, sneezes, laughs, moans, and yawns – and musicalizes them. These instrumental emissions inevitably come across as absurd, highlighting what was, in Prokofiev's opinion, the over-seriousness of the operatic genre. The use of a farcical, simplistic fairy-story and instrumentally idiosyncratic sarcasm proves ingenious in the exposure of tired operatic conventions and clichés, and attests to Prokofiev's comedic talents.

### Associative Material

While I hesitate to use “leitmotive” in any non-Wagnerian context, it is difficult to think of a better word for the short, recurring phrases that represent either people or ideas in *A Love for Three Oranges*. ‘Associative material’ best describes the function of this music without all the connotations of the more pervasive term. Prokofiev develops for *Oranges* “...a very subtle and highly sophisticated adaptation of the concepts of musical motive and compositional cycles.”<sup>79</sup> Several motives are used as unifying or identifying devices – the bellowing glissandi of Farfarello; the slinking, dotted-note chromaticism that accompanies Leandro and is later ironically adopted by the Ridiculous People; the Cook’s lyrical tuba; the Little Devil’s slithering ostinato; and of course the ubiquitous March, which comes to accompany any type of procession. There are, as well, three major associative motives that appear throughout the score, and demand more careful consideration. They are the motive of mischief:

#### Example 3.7: Motive of Mischief



the oranges’ motive:

#### Example 3.8: Oranges’ Motive



<sup>79</sup> Pisani, 494.

and Fata Morgana's motive:

**Example 3.9: Fata Morgana's Motive**



The first two motives occur only rarely and without variation, excepting augmentation and diminution. The sparseness of their use can cause them to go unrecognized, but they are in fact clever and well-timed unifying devices. The final motive, representing Fata Morgana and supernaturalism in general, is the most pervasive musical event in the opera, occurring more than 25 times.

The oranges' motive, a brief, three-measure orchestral ostinato signifying either a reference to them or their physical presence, is heard only four times in two hours, but always at dramatically charged moments. It first occurs in a sung version at the start of the prologue, as the Ridiculous People announce the story. This establishes the repeated-note theme as the oranges' exclusively, and re-enforces musically their position at the centre of the story. The following appearances of the oranges' motive are much subtler and dramatically prophetic. It comes next during the pantomimic theft of the oranges at Creonta's castle. A *piano* rendering of the motive on muted trumpets is the only indication that the Prince has 'rescued' his beloved oranges and that he and Truffaldino can now flee the scene. During the second desert scene, while the prince is sleeping, the theme sounds once again as Truffaldino considers the oranges as the solution to his all-consuming thirst. The motive actually occurs twice here in the space of seven measures, first in augmented rhythm, as though Truffaldino is hesitant, and then again, this time

cadencing in B minor, reconfirming the inappropriateness of the idea. The oranges' motive occurs one final time amidst the chaotic orchestral chase scene at the end of the opera at m. 3494, providing yet another instance of musical unity through epigrammatic motivic material, and reminding us of the source of all the confusion.

The motive of mischief (Example 3.8), descending down chromatically a major seventh in characteristic Prokofievan evasion of the octave interval, is an aural marker of ill-advised actions, actual and potential. It is used most evocatively in the motive-heavy desert scenes. Prokofiev employs full orchestral forces for this motive in the first desert scene (Act III, scene i), as Tchelio warns the travelers to open the oranges only in the presence of water. A sense of apprehension is thus established. The mischief motive is heard again at mm. 2534-2539, just as Truffaldino opens the first orange, and then again at mm.2634-2639, as he opens the second. The deaths of the two emergent princesses and Truffaldino's subsequent flight are the plot-altering results, reaffirming the foreboding mood established by the motive's initial appearance.

Fata Morgana's motive not only signifies the sorceress's presence and influence, but is also an effective pacing tool, appearing throughout the opera at virtually all points of tension and conflict. It is heard first in variation (recognizable only in retrospect) in Act I, scene iii, at the Tragedians' hopeful assertion that the play has the potential to become melodramatic. At m.856, it is given full-blown expression in suitably menacing timbre of trombones in extremely low range (E and C below the bass staff) just before Clarice, Leandro, and Smeraldina sing the invocation to their protectress. It is then heard several times over during the bacchanalia, most notably at mm. 1492-1494 in the trumpets, trombones, and tuba to underscore the curse, firmly establishing its association

with Fata Morgana and asserting her powerful supernatural talents. At m.1820 the motive expands its range of associative power to include supernaturalism in general, appearing now in reference to Farfarello, the most magically powerful character aside from the witch.

In Act III Fata Morgana's motive (Example 3.9) takes on a more referential role, appearing at points where her handiwork, if not her actual presence, is driving the action. At m.2969, Ninetta, alone in the desert awaiting the return of her Prince, sings a variation of the motive. It is heard again twice at mm.3012-3015 as Smeraldina appears to transform Ninetta into a rat. This time it is unobtrusively woven into the orchestral fabric, played only by muted, low-range trombones – the perfect musical equivalent to Prokofiev's stage direction, which states that Fata Morgana's shadow should loom in the background as Smeraldina sticks Ninetta with the magic pin, one of Prokofiev's most clever pairings of musical and dramatic syntax. The Fata Morgana/supernatural motive is heard in sequence one last time in the final scene of the opera as the Ridiculous People trap her in their tower and thus ensure the happy ending. This time, however, the motive, instead of retaining its minor harmonic underpinning, cadences in the joyful key of D major, a portent of the triumph of good over evil.

## Pantomime

The story of *A Love for Three Oranges* provides various opportunities for pantomime, in the most literal sense - the visual, physical interpretation of music - giving the opera its balletic quality. The mimetic score provides many opportunities for physical interpretation, most especially in the scenes of diverting or comic entertainments, adventure, and sorcery. The fateful card game of Act I, scene ii, the Bacchanalia, the sequences of procession accompanied by the *Oranges March*, the stealing of the Oranges, the machinations of Truffaldino and the chase scene that closes the opera comprise the substantial pantomimic element. The amount of temporal space in this opera that contains little or no singing is indeed remarkable. "Motion in *Oranges* is conveyed as much through the visual as through the music. The sharply-defined musical gestures practically demand physical realization."<sup>80</sup>

Truffaldino is the most pantomimic character in the opera, and the one that remains most faithful to his *commedia dell'arte* roots. An acrobat and slapstick comedian, Truffaldino is introduced with falling triplet figuration at each of his entrances. His music is sprightly and angular, inviting dance and broad physical gesture in virtually every instance. In Act II, scene i, Truffaldino's entrance into the Prince's sickroom and subsequent attempts to amuse highlight the vast pantomimic opportunities afforded him. Beginning at m. 954, the stage directions describe only the Prince's surroundings and appearance. There is no verbal evidence of Truffaldino's clowning until m. 973 when he asks the Prince, "*Est-ce drôle?*" The music, however, clearly evokes his pantomime, from the opening staccato leaps that ascend through the orchestra into a bouncy E<sup>b</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Pisani, 502.

Clarinet solo, to the idiosyncratic trombone and timpani jabs that begin in m. 959, all culminating in a brilliant, tumbling woodwind flourish at mm. 968-972:

**Example 3.10: Truffaldino's Pantomimic Music (mm. 968 – 972)**

The musical score for Example 3.10 consists of three systems of staves. The top system includes a clarinet part (e-flat clarinet) and a timpani part. The middle system includes a trombone part and a bass line. The bottom system includes a woodwind part and a bass line. The music is marked 'Allegro' and features a variety of dynamics including 'f' (forte) and 'mf' (mezzo-forte). The score is characterized by rapid sixteenth-note passages and complex rhythmic patterns.

The Card Game (Act I, scene ii) is also a significant pantomimic sequence, in which Fata Morgana (representing Leandro) and Tchelio (representing the King) gamble the fates of their respective factions. The mood is set immediately at m. 502, with descending chromaticism counterpointed against undulating quarter notes, an apt musical complement to the stage directions, which call for a darkened, shrouded stage. The tense atmosphere is increased with chromatic triplets, beginning at m.514. The Little Devil's sinister, slithering vocalise begins at m. 531, further emphasizing the intended spooky atmosphere.<sup>81</sup> At mm.551-558 *furioso* sixteenth-note tremolos, and scale figuration are employed to represent the laying down of cards, a highly stylized, dramatically weighted gesture.

<sup>81</sup> The Little Devils' music has already been discussed at length in Chapter 2.

The Ridiculous People give a skeletal dialogic outline of what is happening, but otherwise there is no specific verbal indication of the progress of the card game. Fata Morgana and Tchelio express their respective pleasure and disappointment only through a series of swooping exclamations on the syllables “Ah!” and “Oh!” The difference between the two opposing emotions is very understated, as they are both musicalized by the same sliding descending octave. It is through pantomimic gesture that the result of the game is related. At m. 579 the pace of play becomes much faster, indicated by the Little Devils’ vocalise (Example 2.7) in diminution. The scene is concluded at mm. 620-626 with the ‘cabbalistic’ music from the opening, rounded off by a two-measure snippet of Leandro’s ostinato, representing Fata Morgana’s win. The scene lasts 125 measures (approximately four minutes), only 24 of which include sung dialogue.<sup>82</sup> The course of the entire drama is set into motion by Tchelio’s loss at cards, an event that must be seen to be fully understood, but which is nevertheless vividly described by the music.

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<sup>82</sup> This excludes the Little Devils’ vocalise, which is non-verbal.

### Musical Irony

Prokofiev's great success was in integrating his music into an already existing compound of verbal text and miming. His comedy subsists in the interaction between sight, sound, and word. The punch lines of his jokes come in any one of these three elements...[the opera] scarcely makes even lunatic sense if not both heard and seen. That is already enough to justify opera as a genre, which is more than many a fine composer has managed to do.<sup>83</sup>

Epigrammatic and mosaic-like in its construction, *A Love for three Oranges* avoids the use of a single style, making its internal musical unity difficult to decipher. It is also a very conversational score, with virtually all of the text appearing as dialogue between characters. This is particularly evident in the writing for the Stage Audience. There is virtually nothing in the way of soliloquizing or introspection. Prokofiev eschewed pseudo-romantic posing and was uninterested in pandering to perceived public taste.<sup>84</sup> He had no patience with cloying diminuendos, sensuous harmonies, or vulgar imitations of romanticism and impressionism.<sup>85</sup> Romantic musical devices are employed only for the purposes of parody, as in the close of Act I, or the orchestra's suddenly rich, dominant seventh arpeggios as the parched Truffaldino ecstatically embraces the orange.<sup>86</sup>

Parody in *Oranges*, and the resultant irony, relies more upon allusion than direct quotation. This is likely the reason that much of the humor was lost on the original audience. The quest motive, combined with an irrational hero and his earthy companion recalls Don Quixote and Sancho Panza as well as *Die Zauberflöte's* Tamino and Papageno, though neither pair is ever alluded to directly. Irony and humor are persistent

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<sup>83</sup> Taruskin, 299.

<sup>84</sup> For more information regarding the cultural climate in Chicago at the time of the *Oranges* premiere, consult Dizikes, *Opera in America*; Ronald L. Davis, *Opera in Chicago* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966); and Moore, *Forty Years of Opera in Chicago*.

<sup>85</sup> Nestyev, 466.

<sup>86</sup> Pisani, 494.

themes throughout Prokofiev's oeuvre. The Classical Symphony, the Violin Concerto, the early piano pieces, and *The Ugly Duckling* all provide glimpses of the comedic brilliance that pervades *Oranges*, while *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cinderella* and the symphonic scherzos are the products of the more experimental techniques that were first tested in the opera.

Prokofiev did not intend merely to amuse his audience; he set out to provoke uninhibited laughter. The irony rests in *how* he went about doing that – the things he considered funny and the manner in which he chose to convey them to others. Sarcasm and parody of the absurdity of certain operatic conventions – rhymed texts and breaks in the action for virtuosic display – were things that the composer found amusing. In *Oranges* he pokes fun not only at opera's absurdities, but at the production process as well. From the opening scene, which in many productions starts abruptly in the middle of a 'rehearsal', seemingly catching the cast off-guard, the composer finds ironic comedy in the seriousness with which opera regards itself. Grotesquerie, sarcasm, and parody were his chosen vehicles for the conveyance of ironic humor. His brand of comedy is subtle and sophisticated, and requires considerable musical intelligence. Prokofiev held his audience in high regard, refusing to underestimate their ability to "get it." Musical irony here is operatic convention dramatically streamlined and economically presented, but all the while gone slightly askew. In *A Love for Three Oranges* it is integral, not just superimposed.

The effect of grotesque depends upon one's knowledge of a model against which one can play grotesque distortion. Pieces such as the March play expertly on our knowledge of the traditional march type...[The March] epitomizes the interaction of tradition and innovation, the same dynamic which produces the wrong note...The march's programmatic associations irrevocably color our reception of it, but its humor also derives from the tweaking and teasing of the composed military aspects

of the type... Prokofiev regularly thwarts our expectation about how a march ought to behave, but retains enough characteristic to preserve the identity of the piece as a march.<sup>87</sup>

In addition to the March, there are several other prominent examples of musical irony in the opera. Trombones and trumpets are used in a traditional way as heralding instruments throughout, but always in slightly skewed, grotesque ways, with bitonality or exaggerated timbres. In Act III, scene i Tchelio adopts menacing tones in order to assert his magical prowess, all the while admitting that he is actually just a stage wizard.<sup>88</sup> These attempts to appear imposing render him all the more ridiculous in light of his ineffectuality. At m. 2283, a seventh leap in the flute and piccolo represents Tchelio's latent fear of Farfarello, but sounds awkward and almost accidental. The flute's association with irony in the opera is pervasive, in fact. Musical irony is created through the combination of several compositional techniques, many of which would come to be integrated into Prokofiev's later, mature style. He uses a "...technique of chromatic displacement in which a non-diatonic pitch in a given tonality is neither prepared nor resolved, but becomes a diatonic pitch in a second 'shadow tonality'. Thus the displaced pitch behaves as though nothing were 'wrong' with it in the first place."<sup>89</sup> Expressive chromatic inner voices, knocking, rumbling ostinati, and sharply defined, often startling cadences are also irony-inducing structural elements.

Almost every little epigrammatic event in *A Love for Three Oranges* is a signifier of something, whether a specific person or a purely musical idea. The orchestra also expresses unsung plot elements, imbues individual instruments with their own

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<sup>87</sup> Minturn, 27, 30, 34.

<sup>88</sup> This particular passage is doubly ironic considering that if one really is terrifyingly powerful, it would go without saying.

<sup>89</sup> Morrison, 271.

personality, and characterizes people and ideas through timbral means. Though their numbers are many and their recurrences often few, it is these events that unify and bind the opera together. The irony and humor – sometimes gentle, sometimes biting – often reside in the subtle alteration of past events and future expectations. The orchestral elements contain some of the most important dramatic material in the piece, further integrating and in some ways revolutionizing the relationship between music and text. It is in the instrumental parts that many of the modernistic, grotesque elements that so alienated the initial audience reside.

## Chapter Four:

### Early Performance History and Contemporary Reception

*A Love for Three Oranges* has inspired colorful, emphatic and highly disparate reactions throughout its performance history. Reviews for individual productions – the 1921 Chicago première being a case in point – are often remarkably polarized, as critics either embrace its spectacle atmosphere or reject it as unoperatic. Critics and directors disagreed about how much physical comedy, buffoonery, and escapist fairy-tale fantasy was appropriate in opera, particularly in the first decade of *Oranges*' existence. Opera itself was being called into question as a viable medium for 20<sup>th</sup>-century music. Ballet was the form *du jour*, thanks in large part to the achievements of Stravinsky, Diaghilev, and the *Ballets Russes*. The 1920's were a time of general musical metamorphosis, the impressionism of Debussy and Ravel giving way to neoclassicism and dodecaphony. Operas, concert music, and other 'serious' forms were losing audiences to jazz and musical theater. Prokofiev presented his audience with an entirely new approach to a form already largely considered museum-bound. Many saw it as an affront to their artistic sensibilities and were unable to adequately interpret it, but for some it was opera's rebirth.

The initial reactions to *A Love for Three Oranges* were varied, a disparity that had much to do with geography and cultural climate. Knowledge of the early performance and reception history of the opera is important to a full understanding of the work and its position within the emergent modernist aesthetic. It also serves to contextualize the reception of the opera in Chicago, highlighting that city's conception of the operatic

genre. The following table represents the early productions to be discussed in this chapter.

**Table 4.1: Early Productions of *A Love for Three Oranges***

City	Date of Premiere
Chicago	30 December 1921
New York	14 February 1922
Cologne	14 March 1925
Leningrad	18 February 1926
Berlin	9 October 1926
Moscow	19 May 1927
London (BBC Radio Broadcast)	4 July 1935

Prokofiev's second opera was premiered on 30 December 1921 by the Chicago Opera Association, but lasted for only two performances. Scathing reviews from a number of prominent Chicago music critics and its very brief run have led to the popular belief that the initial production was a complete failure. Closer examination of a more comprehensive range of reviews, however, in addition to contemporary accounts of the first audiences' reactions, reveal a much more complex and paradoxical response to the modernist fairy-tale extravaganza on the part of Chicagoans than has generally been assumed. From Chicago, the production traveled to New York in early 1922, where it met with even more caustic reaction, due in no small part to the longstanding operatic rivalry that existed between the two American cities. The 1925 Cologne production marked the beginning of a series of significant European versions of *Oranges*, which were by and

large better received and understood than those in the United States. In 1926 *A Love for Three Oranges* finally made it to the Mariinsky (or the Leningrad Academy for Opera and Ballet, as it was then known) and to the Bolshoi in Moscow approximately one year later. Originally conceived by Prokofiev and Meyerhold with a Russian audience in mind, *Oranges* was well-received in the composer's home country, but was once again unable to escape controversy. The schizophrenic nature of the Soviet government's policy on arts and culture caused the opera to be alternately lauded as brilliant, sparkling entertainment and derided for its lack of ideological depth. A perennial favorite in the years following the première among audiences familiar with the *commedia dell'arte* and its Russian cousin, the *kapustniki*, *Oranges* was to fall in and out of favor over the coming decades as the attitude of the Russian Association of Proletariat Musicians<sup>90</sup> toward the propagandizing value of music fluctuated.

As will be seen, the question of Prokofiev's intentions in *A Love for Three Oranges* was a source of much consternation for contemporary reviewers. They saw in *Oranges* only biting satire and wondered at whom the composer was poking fun – the audience? them? opera? himself? Later critics surmised that the opera was a subversive critique of Soviet politics. Prokofiev maintained that he had merely wanted to write an amusing opera. The commentary that arises from the music of *Oranges* is more about finding a new and uncomplicated means of expressing musico-dramatic ideas than any extra-musical observations. *A Love for Three Oranges* is a well-integrated dramatic entity in which all elements – music, text, acting, set design, and costuming – are co-dependent and must be well executed in order for the production to be successful. It is an opera requiring substantial forces in every facet of production – large orchestra, large cast,

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<sup>90</sup> The RAPM was the officially sanctioned governing body of musicians and composers.

many scene changes, but in early productions one or more elements were often under-rehearsed or overlooked completely. Given the fully-integrated nature of the work, poor execution in any one aspect is enough to foster audience misinterpretation and displeasure.

### Chicago

Prokofiev arrived in Chicago at the perfect time to have a new, large-scale work produced and staged, the subsequent reception notwithstanding. The operatic circumstances in the city in 1919 were ideal, combined as they were of the infrastructural groundwork laid by Oscar Hammerstein, the talent and ambition of conductor Cleofonte Campanini, and the seemingly limitless patronage of Harold McCormick. To quote Joh Dizikes, "Chicago opera was the most interesting in America in the 1920s."<sup>91</sup> The composer had met McCormick's brother Cyrus some years earlier at an Evening for Contemporary Music in St. Petersburg, and Cyrus had assured Prokofiev of backing and support for his music from the McCormick family should he ever go to America. Prokofiev arrived in Chicago in late 1918 and was introduced through Harold McCormick to Campanini, a forward-thinking and internationally recognized opera conductor with the means and inclination to produce new works. He expressed interest in staging *The Gambler*, but the full score was inaccessible, stored in Serge Koussevitsky's St. Petersburg publishing house. Prokofiev then suggested *A Love for Three Oranges*, the schematic for which he had sketched during the journey from Russia. Campanini was

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<sup>91</sup> Dizikes, 413.

delighted at the prospect of staging an opera based on his compatriot Gozzi's *scenario*. Prokofiev, fatigued from an ambitious performing schedule and anxious for the opportunity to devote his full attention to composing, set to work immediately, completing the opera in just ten months, from January to October 1919. It was the first opera to be commissioned from a foreign composer by an American opera house. Although it would be more than two years before the opera made was staged in Chicago, primarily because of Campanini's untimely death just weeks before the originally scheduled première, it was to become one of the most significant commissions in the history of opera in the United States, if not the most successful.

Opera had been imported into Chicago beginning in the 1850s via touring companies who specialized in popular 19<sup>th</sup>-century Italian repertoire, *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *La Sonnambula* being among the most often performed. As Ronald Davis explains, around the turn of the century Chicago experienced an economic boom, which saw the immigration of liberal-minded intelligentsia seeking to escape the traditionalism of the East and the beginning of the Mid-West's cultural independence from New York.<sup>92</sup> In 1910 the Chicago Grand Opera Company was formed and the city began producing its own opera, using largely European singers, musicians, and production staff. In 1915 the Chicago Grand Opera Company dissolved and was restructured as the Chicago Opera Association, now with Harold McCormick and his wife Edith Rockefeller McCormick providing the bulk of the financial support, which gave them a controlling interest in all aspects of production, including repertoire selection. For the next six years, the opera produced was adventurous, sumptuous, and

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<sup>92</sup>Davis, 82.

well-rehearsed, for money was scarcely an object. Mary Garden, one of the most famous sopranos of her day, premièred *Daphnis and Chloe*, *Pelléas and Mélisande*, and the notorious *Salome*, which was banned after two performances for indecency. “The McCormicks probably gave Chicago the best opera the city had ever seen, supporting it in a manner reminiscent of the royal courts of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe.”<sup>93</sup> Chicago opera at this time, because of its inability to rely on reputation, coupled with the decision made by Campanini and Garden after him to perform new and unproven material, was often better prepared, staged, and sung than that at the Metropolitan in New York. By 1922, however, the Chicago Opera Association would no longer enjoy the McCormick patronage or his progressive attitude toward programming. Mary Garden, who had succeeded Campanini as director of the company, ran up a million-dollar deficit and, after having settled it, McCormick turned his philanthropic attentions elsewhere. Had *A Love for Three Oranges* not been performed in that year, it may well have not reached the American stage for many years.

The *Oranges* production had all the makings of success. The cast was made up of great singers, including Nina Koshetz as Fata Morgana and Hector Dufranne as Tchelio. Boris Anisfeld’s sets, on which a reported \$80,000 was spent, were vivid, innovative, and much to the composer’s liking. Mary Garden, like Campanini before her, had the means and inclination to allow ample rehearsal time. Prokofiev was allowed as many rehearsals as he liked, a circumstance of which he took full advantage. Prokofiev’s English by 1921 was quite proficient, but even had it not been, many in the chorus and orchestra were Russian émigrés, so communication was not a problem. The single most glaring problem with this production, which we can infer from Prokofiev’s correspondence, interviews,

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<sup>93</sup> Davis, 100.

and memoirs, was the caliber of acting, which was much lower than he had anticipated. In the early part of the twentieth century, the most popular operas in America were star vehicles, designed to highlight the vocal talents of the one or two singers playing major roles. Prokofiev, coming from a much more balanced tradition of operatic construction and performance, was unprepared for the vocally oriented cast with whom he had to work in Chicago. The composer locked horns repeatedly with the stage director, Jacques Cointi, whom he considered unimaginative and overly conservative. "The singers were good, the settings superb, but the director, Cointi, was a colorless personality."<sup>94</sup> The quality of the acting was the one element that neither time nor money could guarantee.

Ben Hecht, a Chicago author and journalist who enjoyed great popularity in the years straddling Chicago's introduction to *A Love for Three Oranges*, was present at the dress rehearsal. The following is excerpted from his article "Fantastic Lollipops," a valuable, if not particularly scholarly, first-person account of the general atmosphere surrounding the première:

But Mr. Prokofiev is a modernist; so nobody pays much attention. Musicians are all mad. And a Modernist musician, *du lieber Gott!* A Russian Modernist Musician!...Last rehearsal for the world premiere of a modernist opera! One winter morning years ago the music critics of Paris sat and laughed themselves green in the face over the incomprehensible banalities of an impossible modernist opera called "Tannhäuser." And who will say that the critics have lost their sense of humour. There will unquestionably be laughter before this morning is over...It sounds like the picture of a crazy Christmas tree drawn by a happy child...A phantasmagoria of sounds, color, and action crowds the startled proscenium. For there is no question that the proscenium, with names of Verdi, Bach, Haydn, and Beethoven chiseled on it, is considerably startled...

Through this business of skyrocketing and crescendos and hobgoblins M. Cointi stands out like a lighthouse in a cubist storm. However bewildering the plot, however humpty dumpty the music. M. Cointi is intelligible drama. His brisk little figure in its pressed pants, spats and fedora, bounces around amid the apoplectic disturbances like some busybody Alice in an operatic Wonderland.

The opus mounts. The music mounts. Singers attired as singers were never attired before crawl on, bounce on, tumble on. And M. Cointi, as undisturbed as a

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<sup>94</sup> Sergei Prokofiev, *Soviet Diary 1927 and Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 271.

traffic cop or a loop pigeon, commands his stage. He tells the singers where to stand while they sing, and when they don't sing to suit him, he sings himself. He leads the chorus on and tells it where to dance, and when they don't dance to suit him he dances himself. He moves the scenery himself. He fights with Mr. Prokofieff while the music splashes and roars around him. He fights with Boris. He fights with electricians and wigmakers.

The first act of "The Oranges" is over. Two critics exchanging opinions glower at Mr. Prokofieff. One says "What a shame! What a Shame! Nobody will understand it." The other agrees. But perhaps they only mean that music critics will fail to understand it and that untutored ones like ourselves will find in the hurdy-gurdy rhythms and contortions of Mr. Prokofiev and Mr. Anisfeld a strange delight.

Mr. Prokofiev has said, 'I am a classicist. I derive from the classical composers...' This may be true, but the critics will question it...I would rather see and listen to his opera than to the entire repertoire of the company put together.<sup>95</sup>

Hecht's comments shed light on several of the issues regarding Chicago's problematic reception of *Oranges*. From a Russian composer Chicagoans anticipated the nationalist exoticism so successfully displayed earlier in the year by the touring *Ballets Russes*. Prokofiev's Modernist take on an Italian fairy tale was unexpected. Modernism in music was generally regarded with suspicion, especially in the opera house, where it was considered grossly inappropriate. Hecht's mention of the Paris *Tannhäuser* premiere supports the possibility that, had *Oranges* been allowed a longer run of performances, a greater level of understanding may have resulted. Hecht, not a musician himself, was enchanted by the opera, and suspected that other non-specialists would be of the same opinion. His description of the music as 'splashing and roaring,' while intended as positive endorsement, offers important insight into the startling impression this music had on contemporary listeners. Finally, the acrimonious relationship between the composer and the opera's director, Jacques Coini, is shrewdly characterized in Hecht's account. The two men clearly disagreed about the staging, rehearsal and production of opera, the composer being adventurous and imaginative while the director was more conservative

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<sup>95</sup> Ben Hecht, "Fantastic Lollipops," *A Thousand and one Afternoons in Chicago* (Chicago: Chicago Daily News, 1921-22): 97-100.

and exacting. Mr. Hecht's cheeky account of the *Oranges* dress rehearsal is an invaluable primary document, not only for the description of the music and setting, but also of the artistic and critical climate into which the opera was about to be introduced.

"Friday, December 30, 8 pm: \$100, 000 production of Prokofiev's fairy tale opera. Three years in production," read the advertisement in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* of 26 December 1921.<sup>96</sup> The city was both proud and somewhat bewildered that they had managed to produce such an expensive and avant-garde cultural artifact. Chicago's conflicted impression of *A Love for Three Oranges* can be best illustrated through the numerous and highly polemical contemporary reviews published in the wake of the première. Many critics objected to the perceived level of discord in the music, even though, upon closer listening, it proves to lie quite clearly within the realm of tonality.

Herman DeVries of the *Chicago American* had this to say of it:

Eighty thousand dollars thrown out of the window, as it were...It is operetta on a grand scale, the operatic 'Auditorium Follies' of 1921. We recommend it to Flo Ziegfeld before he retires. It is noise more or less agreeable, and more often disagreeable, accompanying one of the most marvelously staged pantomime extravaganzas that one can expect to witness.<sup>97</sup>

His comments reflect the entrepreneurial spirit of Chicago, a city where business and commerce encompassed everything, including art and culture. The success or failure of any form of entertainment in Chicago depended on its ability to turn a profit. DeVries' review also offers insight into what Chicago art patrons expected from an evening at the opera. Clearly, the clowning and, in places, slightly vulgar humor of *Oranges* was meant for vaudeville and Revues, not the operatic stage of the hallowed Auditorium. From the premiere of a new Russian opera they expected exoticism and fantasy, but received

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<sup>96</sup> Pisani, 488.

<sup>97</sup> Herman DeVries, *Chicago American*, 31 December 1921.

comedy and foolish, chaotic revelry. Other reviews of the *Oranges* première also betray a sense of unpreparedness on the part of the critics. Many in the audience were caught off guard by this opera, and responded with defensive disapproval. Karl Hackett's review in the *Chicago Evening Post* offers an excellent example of both the general condemnation of *Oranges*' avant-gardism and its harmonic language, which was widely misunderstood in both Chicago and New York:

Fifteen minutes of Russian jazz with Bolshevik trimmings is very amusing. But two hours and a half! One's mind staggers at the labour of the preparation for this work. According to what I have been told more hours have been spent in rehearsing this music than on anything else the company has ever given – and all just to be sure of singing one discord instead of another which would have done quite as well.<sup>98</sup>

The opera had a substantial number of detractors, but there were those who applauded its innovation, its new, better-integrated approach to operatic construction, and, above all, its high artistic quality and broad appeal. The critic for *The New Republic* was especially understanding of the composer's intentions:

For once in a way Truth walks unashamed upon the boards where for generations passion has halted for arias, and death has been obligingly arrested for sextettes. At last Grand Opera, so called, has become a dramatic production.<sup>99</sup>

While it seems that the Chicago patrons were more impressed with Boris Anisfeld's sets than anything else, there is no doubt that there were many in that first night audience who *liked* the opera and were entertained by it. The opera enjoyed considerably more popular than critical success, if contemporary accounts of the audience clapping, shouting, and praising the composer are to be believed. Eugene Cropsey, in his 2000 *Opera Quarterly* article about the Chicago premiere, cites spontaneous standing ovations between the acts

<sup>98</sup> Karl Hackett, *Chicago Evening Post*, 31 December 1921.

<sup>99</sup> Janet Fairbank, *The New Republic*, 2 January, 1922 (reprinted in Davis, 139).

and a generally vociferous initial response from the audience.<sup>100</sup> The number of people who actually *understood* what was presented to them was considerably smaller. They did exist, however, and made their presence felt in the media immediately succeeding the premiere. Maurice Rosenfeld wrote in the *Chicago Daily Times* that,

The wait was worthwhile...both young Russians, composer and painter, achieved a masterpiece...there are some striking musical passages, as that of the March, which recurs frequently, and the quiet music of the desert in the third act – well conceived and tuneful.<sup>101</sup>

*A Love for Three Oranges* was Chicago's first experience with a truly new opera. The city's critics were accustomed to reviewing operatic standards, where the quality of the performance, not the work itself, was the only matter up for discussion. It is true that Mary Garden had premièred *Pelléas and Mélisande* to a largely bewildered audience in 1910, but that opera had gained popularity in Europe first, and was given the benefit of several performances, after which critics were better able to approach it. That *A Love for Three Oranges* "appeal[ed] more because of cleverness than because of its emotional qualities"<sup>102</sup> is indicative of the way Chicago's music critics expected an opera to behave.

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<sup>100</sup> Eugene Cropsey, "Prokofiev's 'Three Oranges': A Chicago Word Premiere," *The Opera Quarterly*, 16/1 (Winter 2000): 6.

<sup>101</sup> Maurice Rosenfeld, *Chicago Daily Times*, 31 December 1921.

<sup>102</sup> Richard Morris, *The Telegram*, 31 December 1921.

## New York

As it is presented on the stage, [*A Love for Three Oranges*] is capable of making *Alice in Wonderland* look like a treatise on inductive logic.<sup>103</sup>

The Chicago Civic Opera Association, now under the patronage of Samuel Insull,<sup>104</sup> took its production of *Oranges* to New York in February 1922. It was rare for the Company to tour, given the exorbitant expense involved, and ever rarer to travel to New York, Chicago's chief operatic rival. While the opera again achieved a respectable amount of popular success, the New York critics, in many ways even more conservative than those in Chicago, were ruthlessly critical of both the work and its composer.

Herbert Peyser, in the *Musical Observer*, commented:

The work is intended, one learns, to poke fun at something. So far as I am able to discern, it pokes fun chiefly at those who paid money for it.<sup>105</sup>

Fiercely loyal to the Metropolitan and instinctively suspicious of modernist novelty, the New York critics seemed determined to disapprove of *Oranges*. The fact that the Chicago Opera Company, in their eyes a *nouveau riche* country cousin, was responsible for the production only added fuel to the fire. Prokofiev wrote of the experience in his autobiography:

The opera was again warmly received by the public, but heavens, what a press it had the next day. It was as if a pack of dogs had been suddenly unleashed on me and were tearing my trousers to bits. If the opera had not been too well understood in Chicago, at least the production, being their own, has been spared. But New York did not need to spare anything; on the contrary the rivalry of the two cities made

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<sup>103</sup> Richard Aldrich, *The New York Times*, 15 February 1922.

<sup>104</sup> Dizikes, 418.

<sup>105</sup> Herbert Peyser, *Musical Observer*, 19 March 1922.

itself felt. 'You wanted to show us something we hadn't thought of producing ourselves – well, here's what we think of it!'<sup>106</sup>

Richard Aldrich, the widely respected music critic from the *New York Times*, who was known for his sympathy to and understanding of modern trends, was violently opposed to *Oranges*. Like many other New York critics, he seemed almost personally offended by it. His review, which includes the *Alice in Wonderland* reference quoted above, continues:

For most of the listeners, [the music] could do little more than belabor the ear until insensibility set in, if it did set in, and further suffering was spared. There are... but only a very few passages that bear recognizable kinship with what has hitherto been recognized as music. [The orchestra] seldom produces any effect but that of a disagreeable noise.<sup>107</sup>

Aldrich was possessed of a considerable breadth of musical knowledge and an urbane prose style that made him immensely popular and influential critically. While generally receptive to modernist musical offerings, he, like most other reviewers in both New York and Chicago, still believed in the sanctity of the opera house. There was a place for experimentation and the *avant garde* in music, but that place was not the operatic stage. In the United States during the early part of the twentieth century, opera was the last holdout of traditionalism, implying “memorable tunes” and easily detachable set pieces. Wagnerian opera had been successfully introduced both at the Metropolitan and in Chicago around the turn of the century, but was seen more as a continuation of the German art music tradition that extended down through Beethoven, Mozart and Bach than as a revolution in integrated music drama, and in 1922 was still banned from most repertory lists, a lingering effect of the war.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Sergei Prokofiev, *Prokofiev by Prokofiev: A Composer's Memoir* (New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1979), 272.

<sup>107</sup> Richard Aldrich, *The New York Times* (15 February 1922).

<sup>108</sup> Moore, 226.

As in Chicago, there were those in New York who praised the opera for its ingenuity and were genuinely impressed with it, but their numbers were woefully few. Emil Raymond, in *Musical America*, hailed it as “a triumphant success... What opera lovers hope for but seldom experience came to pass.”<sup>109</sup> “The Muse has turned farceur and donned a grinning mask... a return to extravaganza,” said Oscar Thompson.<sup>110</sup> On the whole, however, New York in 1922, mired in the operatic ultra-conservatism propagated largely by the Met, was not ready for *A Love for Three Oranges*.<sup>111</sup>

### Early European Productions

*A Love for Three Oranges* made it to the European stage in 1925 with the première of the Cologne production, which it was better received and understood than either the Chicago or New York performances. The combined efforts in Cologne of conductor Eugene Szenkar and stage director Hans Strobach resulted in an excellent, well-integrated production that was lauded by audience, press, and composer alike. The success in Cologne aroused the interest of the Berlin Städtische Oper, which mounted its own *Oranges* production the following year. This production ran for eight performances, and was warmly received by both press and public. The composer, however, was displeased with it, commenting on the rigidity of the orchestra and poor direction in his autobiography:

<sup>109</sup> Pisani, 492 (quoted in Moore, *40 Years of Opera in Chicago*).

<sup>110</sup> Oscar Thompson, *Musical America* 35 (25 February 1922): 89.

<sup>111</sup> Incidentally, the opera did eventually find niche success in New York. It was the première offering from the New York City Opera Company, a progressive alternative to the Metropolitan that began in 1949. Sung in English with some cuts, it was one of the Company's most successful productions, receiving several sold-out performances each year from 1949 to 1954.

In October I went to Berlin for the opening of the *Three Oranges*. I did not like the sets...the opera was not a success and after eight performances was taken off. The direction was so obviously poor that when the head of the company proceeded to praise the elderly producer in my presence I could not force myself to make a single flattering comment. Blech, who conducted the orchestra, was perfect, so perfect indeed that he took all the life out of the score...In the Cologne production the general conception was more harmoniously integrated and the opera was consequently much more successful.<sup>112</sup>

Although Prokofiev enjoyed a great deal of success in Paris throughout his career, particularly as a composer of ballets and piano music, *A Love for Three Oranges* never achieved any real popularity there during his lifetime. Ironically enough, the Parisians felt it was insufficiently modern compared with Prokofiev's ballet *Le Pas D'Acier*, made popular by the *Ballets Russes* in the latter half of the 1920s.<sup>113</sup> Albert Coates, a long-time supporter and advocate of Prokofiev's music, attempted to mount the opera at Covent Garden in 1920, at which time it seemed unlikely that the Chicago production would ever reach the stage. Unfortunately, sufficient funding could not be procured.<sup>114</sup> First broadcast in England in a radio version on the BBC in 1935, it was also performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1962 and then at Glyndebourne in 1982, a production designed by children's author Maurice Sendak and set in revolutionary France.

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<sup>112</sup> Prokofiev, *Prokofiev on Prokofiev*, 280.

<sup>113</sup> Nestyev, 218.

<sup>114</sup> Noelle Mann, "The UK Premiere of *A Love for Three Oranges*" *Three Oranges Journal* 9 (May 2005): 4. Incidentally, Covent Garden is one of the few major opera houses in the world that has yet to perform *A Love for Three Oranges*.

## Russia

Prokofiev's relationship with his home country and its government, while never as contentious as that of other artists such as Shostakovich or Meyerhold, was certainly not devoid of controversy. His long absence at the outset of the Soviet era held him in a suspicious light, while his return at the height of Stalin's reign of terror caused him to be branded a prodigal hero. The Soviet reception of *A Love for Three Oranges* embodies Russia's schizophrenic attitude toward Prokofiev and his music. The opera appears to have been warmly received by the public, however, regardless of the government's official position. The Russian public, raised on Blok's *The Fairground Booth*, *Pulcinella* and other *commedia*-inspired popular theater pieces, understood the *scenario* of *Oranges* better than Western audiences. As Harlow Robinson summarizes *Oranges*' shifting official fortunes, it was sometimes viewed as a light, brilliant bit of farcical entertainment – a product of his early career in St. Petersburg. Other times it was seen as a meaningless artifact of Prokofiev's contaminating years in the decadent West, lacking in ideological depth and significance. On the whole, "...while respecting its effervescence and theatrical sense, [the Soviet press] felt it too insubstantial and apolitical."<sup>115</sup>

Contemporary reviews reflect the unpredictability of Soviet criticism, and make it difficult to discern exactly the general Russian impression of *Oranges*.

*A Love for Three Oranges* received its Soviet premiere at the Leningrad Academy for Opera and Ballet (known colloquially as the Akopera; formerly the Mariinsky) on 25 February 1925, directed and produced by two of Prokofiev's friends from his conservatory years, Vladimir Dranishnikov and Sergei Radlov. Boris Asafiev, a respected

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<sup>115</sup> Robinson, *The Operas of Sergei Prokofiev*, 110.

musicologist and critic and long-time supporter and friend of Prokofiev's, was also involved. David Nice points out in his biography of the composer that Prokofiev's friends faithfully and skillfully carried out the wishes of the composer, which had been communicated by letter. Radlov, a protégé of Meyerhold, made the scenic action dynamic through the avoidance of complicated sets and stage machinery. Dranishnikov's musical direction, which included daringly fast tempi and antiphonal choruses, was a fitting musical complement and in keeping with the composer's own conception of the score.<sup>116</sup> The opera at this time received glowing praise from Soviet critics, whose only criticism was that the heavy splendor of the production was somewhat incongruous with the light irony of the music.<sup>117</sup> Prokofiev, busy with European concert engagements at the time, was regrettably unable to attend. The production was revived in 1926 and then again in 1927 in honour of the composer's first visit in nine years to the city that had been his home for so long. Due in part to the general excitement within the Leningrad musical establishment over Prokofiev's homecoming, the 1927 production was again successful, and the composer was very happy with it. "[It]...was brilliant from the point of view both of smooth performance and respect for the composer's wishes. It was undoubtedly the best of all the productions I had seen."<sup>118</sup>

Prokofiev arrived in Moscow in January 1927 to begin a three-month tour that would centre largely in the capital and Leningrad. The *Oranges March* and other excerpts were played in his honour at several concerts, but a full production would not be mounted at the Bolshoi until 27 May. Conducted by Nikolai Golovanov, with set design by Isaac Rabinovich, Muscovite critics were conflicted in their overall impressions. The music

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<sup>116</sup> Nice, 237.

<sup>117</sup> Nestyev, 217.

<sup>118</sup> Prokofiev, *Prokofiev on Prokofiev*, 283-4.

received high praise, but the theatre was charged with “excessive interest in surface effects and an inability to interpret correctly the elegance and liveliness of Prokofiev’s declamatory style.”<sup>119</sup> Prokofiev, in Paris preparing for the premiere of *Le Pas D’Acier*, relied on written accounts from friends in order to gauge the opera’s Moscow success. He received a detailed report from longtime friend Nikolai Miaskovsky, with whom he shared a very similar musical ideology, in a letter dated the same day as the premiere:

The verdict: ingenious but somewhat overloaded production and designs, generally poor singing and, worst of all, the music: a more or less continual din, with the words drowned out, tastelessly accentuated, frequently exaggerated tempi, so that the chorus can’t articulate a word, frightful pressure from the percussion...<sup>120</sup>

Miaskovsky would of course have had great musical understanding of the piece and of his friend’s intentions, and have been less interested in the non-musical aspects of the production. His impression, combined with those of other reviewers, reveals a complex reaction to an ambitious but flawed effort on the part of the Bolshoi to produce an opera that could potentially create controversy and arouse the ire of the Soviet government. Given the uncertainty of the times, the lavish production was a testament to Prokofiev’s popularity in Russia in the 1920s, success or lack thereof notwithstanding.

Following Prokofiev’s 1927 tour and the initial flush of excitement over the Russian *Oranges* premières, the opera was given several more performances in both Leningrad and Moscow over the next decade, but never really enjoyed the same success. There were still those who advocated for the opera, recognizing its musical significance. Asafiev was a particularly staunch supporter. Under his pseudonym, Igor Glebov, he wrote about *Oranges*, describing it as:

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<sup>119</sup> Nestyev, 218.

<sup>120</sup> Letter from Miaskovsky, 27 May, 1927. In *Selected Letters of Sergei Prokofiev*, ed. Harlow Robinson (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 141.

...the first Russian opera which, in spite of its purely literary subject and emphasis on parody, has no non-theatrical moments. Here two factors that command a spectator's attention are unified: a spectacle that has been 'musicalized' and music that has been 'spectaculized'... *Oranges* has arisen as a decisive rejection of spiritual ennui... It represents the overcoming of the nightmares of pre-revolutionary Russian reality.<sup>121</sup>

Again, Asafiev displays an innate understanding of the music of his friend and of the fast-evolving musical environment in which they lived and worked. In saying that the work has 'no non-theatrical moments,' he clearly considered it a perfect integration of music and drama. Yet even this glowing endorsement bears traces of the Soviet influence that was being felt throughout the Russian artistic community in the late 1920s. Much of the later writing about *Oranges* shows a noticeable adjustment of opinion as the official party stance on the work shifted. Israel Nestyev, whose original and insightful biography of Prokofiev initially concentrated on the success of the 1925 and 1927 performances, later amended his account to include a more "Soviet" account of the opera:

Much was said regarding the social purport of the work, and critics doubted the ideological depth of the work. A. Drozdov in *Muzyka i Revoliutsiya* wrote, '...the subject, while charming, is meaningless, and necessarily dooms the opera to remain only a brilliant humoresque. True, it sparkles with subtle artistry and inspiration, but the qualities, after all, are only tangential to the art of music and not its core.' ... While the opera enchanted a limited number of sophisticated connoisseurs, it did not appeal to the general Soviet audience... after a few dozen performances, it was dropped from the repertoire in both Leningrad and Moscow.<sup>122</sup>

While the tone of the above quote is obviously intended to show both authors' displeasure with the 'under-seriousness' of the opera, the content betrays tacit approval. Nestyev himself does not doubt the 'ideological depth of the work', but merely points out that there are those who do. The Drozdov quote he chooses carefully notes the composer's 'subtle artistry and inspiration', which would, I think, in only a very few minds be 'tangential' to the art of music. 'A few dozen' performances of any large

<sup>121</sup> Robinson, *The Operas of Sergei Prokofiev*, 111 (from Glebov, 311).

<sup>122</sup> Nestyev, 218.

operatic work could be considered a success, and especially in the particular case of *A Love for Three Oranges*, whose longest run up to the time of the Leningrad production had been the eight performances in Berlin. Incidentally, Harlow Robinson notes in his Prokofiev biography that Prokofiev was treated to a performance of the Akopera production upon his arrival in Leningrad in 1927, a production that had “already been attracting large and enthusiastic audiences for a year.”<sup>123</sup> It would seem that such a volume of attendance would require more bodies than those of ‘sophisticated connoisseurs’ alone. The quotation also betrays a lack of understanding on the part of Soviet critics to some degree. That the opera was accused of being ‘meaningless’ is ironic, Prokofiev was no doubt attracted to its subject from a modernist standpoint for that very reason.

Though the literature regarding the events is confusing and at times conflicting, there remains little doubt that first performances of *A Love for Three Oranges* in Russia were unqualified successes. Contemporary accounts, particularly those of the composer in his 1927 Diary, indicate a level of enthusiasm previously unattained for both the work and its composer. “These were people who understood him and appreciated him – never mind those crude Americans and faddish Parisians.”<sup>124</sup> Though the opera and its light subject matter fell out of favour with the Soviet government, both were well-loved and valued by the Russian public from the start.

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<sup>123</sup> Robinson, *Prokofiev*, 204.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

### Conclusion

At the time of its premiere, *A Love for Three Oranges* was simultaneously ahead of and behind its time. American audiences did not yet understand the *commedia dell'arte* tradition from which the story came, nor the musical language with which Prokofiev chose to convey it. Chicago, while more progressive in its operatic tastes than New York, was still not quite prepared for the extravaganza of sound and sight that Prokofiev and Anisfeld offered them: It was, at the same time, however, opera on a grandiose scale that dazzled the senses and required enormous production forces. Like the grand operas of the previous century, both a large cast and a sizeable orchestra were absolute necessities. In the 1920s in the United States, opera attendance was dwindling as people sought entertainment in the speakeasies, movie houses, and jazz clubs of the major cities. The cult of the performer gave way, not to the appreciation and study of new artistic trends, but to the cult of cool.

While it was undoubtedly better received in Europe than it had been in America, *Oranges* still did not enter the public consciousness as a standard of the operatic repertoire, even in Russia. European audiences and critics seemed to have a better understanding of both the opera's *commedia dell'arte* source and of its musical language, but Prokofiev's musically pragmatic approach to his subject may have, upon reflection, been too effective. The distancing tools he used in this opera – orchestral accompaniment that is emotionally unattached to the plight of the characters, a great number of oft-repeated but largely undeveloped themes, motives and ostinati, and a declamatory

vocalization of the text that offers much in the way of intelligibility but little in terms of emotion and pathos – may inspire the listener’s respect for innovation and craftsmanship but rarely the love and devotion reserved for many of the operas in the Romantic canon. *A Love for Three Oranges* engenders appreciation more than passion in its admirers.

While respect, appreciation and acknowledgement of superior compositional ability are all admirable reactions, they are not the responses with which early 20<sup>th</sup>-century operatic audiences hoped to come away from the theatre. Prokofiev had muddled people’s expectations of how ‘Art’ ought to behave. Modernism was becoming commonplace in many other media, but was met with general unpreparedness in the opera houses, particularly in the United States. Even in the composer’s home country, the success of the opera likely had as much to do with the Prokofiev’s pseudo-heroic, prodigal return at the height of the Soviet upheaval as with any real appreciation of the work.

*A Love for Three Oranges* is a brilliantly funny, thematically dense opera that requires many hearings to be fully appreciated. Its humour exists on several levels, from base slapstick bordering on vulgarity to the subtlest of ironies, all of which are realized musically. Unfortunately the realities of production are antithetical to the practical manifestation of the requirement of repeated exposure. An opera requiring huge orchestral forces, a large cast made up of several demanding solo roles, three choruses<sup>125</sup> and many pantomimed parts, several scene changes and complicated sets is not one that is likely to be mounted often. Prokofiev was entirely successful in his endeavor to turn the operatic medium on its head by streamlining and making more theatrically logical the relationship between music, text and drama. However, his audiences were not prepared to

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<sup>125</sup> The three choruses being the Ridiculous People, the rest of the Clowns, and the Royal Court.

fully accept the "improvement" of a medium to which, however illogical, they were devotedly attached.

**Chapter Five:**  
**Modernism Meets the Midwest:**  
***Oranges* and the American Operatic Ideal**

I had expected my musical career to be as smooth sailing in America as it had been in recent years in Russia, but I was mistaken. I found myself in a musical world where everything was excellently organized, but utterly different from what I had been accustomed to. In my own country for a whole century composers had been continually creating something new, offering the public new problems to solve, giving rise to heated controversies... America, on the contrary, had not original composers, apart from those who came from Europe with ready-made reputations and the whole accent of musical life was concentrated on execution. In this field the standard was rather high: a carelessness of performance which Moscow would have overlooked was not forgiven here... I had come too soon; the child (America) was not old enough to appreciate new music.<sup>126</sup>

The critical failure of *A Love for Three Oranges* in America had less to do with the opera itself than with the expectations of American audiences. Their musical frame of reference, tenaciously narrow definition of what exactly opera should be and what was permissible within its parameters, were the contributing factors in *Oranges*' initially short-lived American existence. Why was the opera so much more popular among Russian critics and audiences than the American ones for whom it was intended? Unlike the United States, Russia had a long tradition of grotesque comedy. Particularly popular were the *kapustniki*, a Slavic style of improvised comedy which focused on local and often low-brow themes.<sup>127</sup> In addition to being accustomed to the challenges of new music, they were also familiar with the style and content of the opera's subject. In the 1920s the American vogue in opera was for verismo or exoticism, of which *Oranges* was neither.

Prokofiev presented Chicago and New York with a modernist ensemble piece at the height of the cult of the performer in the Golden Age of Radio, where operatic heroes

<sup>126</sup> Prokofiev, *Prokofiev on Prokofiev*, 264, 267.

<sup>127</sup> Pisani, 488.

reigned supreme and 'singability' was the key to operatic posterity. The audiences he encountered there were the antithesis of the aristocratic and petty bourgeois Russian ones to which he was accustomed. Americans were largely uninterested in operatic trends and went to the opera to see, be seen, and listen to their favorite stars. "The idea of a company of performers as opposed to an opera with three or four starring roles had little precedent and may certainly have been considered a mark of insubstantiality."<sup>128</sup> There was a hero-worship mentality in America at the time of the *Oranges* premiere, signifying that country's obsession with celebrity. An ensemble opera designed to highlight the form and not the performers went against the general conception of entertainment.

As an artistic creation, *Oranges* was unrelated to anything in contemporary American art – both the story and its musical embodiment originated in the Russian pre-revolutionary modernist theater.<sup>129</sup> American audiences seemed to have an attachment to operatic melodrama, and the modernist techniques Prokofiev employed – detachment, parody, and the rejection of realism – were antithetical to it. Modernism aggressively amplified and distorted reality and denied the therapeutic function of music. American critics did not simply dismiss or ignore modernism; they allowed themselves to be antagonized by it. The opera was derogatorily accused of 'meaninglessness', but this was exactly the point. It is an opera that is meant to be self-reflective and highlight the absurdities of the form – there is nothing in the way of an extra-theatrical agenda. *Oranges* is theatre for theatre's sake, but American audiences were expecting a grand theme, and were disappointed when they did not get one.

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<sup>128</sup> Pisani, 493.

<sup>129</sup> Nestyev, 195-6.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the arts in America were still emerging from European colonialism, and music, maintaining a long-standing paradigm, was the last to follow. Artistic patronage was controlled in large part by the women of America's fledgling bourgeoisie, the wives of wealthy businessmen who chose to use their philanthropic allowances to promote and foster 'culture'. Many of these women were well-educated, often at European finishing schools, and were more aware than the average American of current artistic trends but were quite prudish and conservative in their personal tastes; Edith Rockefeller McCormick was a prime example. In an effort to bring a measure of respectability to their 'new money', they advocated a repressive, puritanical lifestyle which was manifest in their artistic endorsements. "Opera was 'art', the burlesque and grotesque elements found [in *Oranges*] were 'entertainment', which was relegated to revues and follies. The average subscribing opera goer was not prepared for that line to be blurred to the extent that Prokofiev had done. Histrionic orchestral effects only intensified the incongruities."<sup>130</sup>

Prokofiev was one of the first composers to introduce America to *commedia* techniques, which were to become a central feature of theatre of the 1920s and '30s.<sup>131</sup> While the *Punch & Judy* reviews were immensely popular from the '20s on, and *I Pagliacci* was a staple of many opera houses' repertoires, Americans knew little or nothing about the *commedia* tradition and types from whence these favourites came. Because *A Love for Three Oranges* contains no Pierrot or Columbine figure – the most famous of its *commedia* characters would have been Truffaldino (aka Harlequin) – the association went largely unrecognized.

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<sup>130</sup> Pisani, 492.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

Many critics were overwhelmed by the fast pace and lavish production of the Chicago and New York premières. Because they had very little time to digest the formidable attack on all of the senses that is *A Love for Three Oranges* and were not given the benefit of repeated hearings, there was little in the way of serious analysis of the music. The musical language, while proving quite accessibly tonal upon close inspection, contains enough of a 'wrong-note' element that it could easily provoke a sense of alienation in those accustomed to the easy tunefulness of 19<sup>th</sup>-century opera. The volume of musical ideas would also have been quite a lot to process in one hearing. "He [Prokofiev] aimed at expressing his ideas in a way that could be not only simple but original. And it is for this reason that we find the unusual combination of extremely simple and complex elements in his music."<sup>132</sup> This, coupled with the fact that the score, unlike any other in America at the time, remains aloof from the predicaments of its characters, caused it to be dismissed by most reviewers. Thus one of the most important American commissions in the first half of the twentieth century left the American stage after three performances for the next twenty-eight years.

There is a myriad of musical ideas, witticisms, and comic effects in *Oranges*, and it is these elements that comprise the bulk of the score. Prokofiev sought to mirror the light, fantastical nature of the story with his score, an endeavor with which he was completely successful. The relative lack of development was perceived as a lack of musical generalization, however, which led to the opinion that the score was a mosaic of fleeting, unrelated musical events. The arguments presented in chapters two and three disprove this idea and show the subtle but highly sophisticated musical interconnectivity present in *A Love for Three Oranges*. By putting the singers and the orchestra on equal footing,

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<sup>132</sup> Nestyev, 12.

Prokofiev expanded the range of operatic expressivity but maintained a laconic, efficient framework. Unfortunately, the tightly interwoven nature of the score's construction went largely unrecognized at the opera's early performances. Many of the opera's musical goals are achieved through orchestral rather than vocal means, and this was an adjustment many American opera fans, enamored with their favorite singers, were unprepared to make. *Oranges* is an opera that highlights not the voice but the form itself, showing its potential as a dramatically logical theatrical entity that uses the orchestra as a highly effective narrative voice.

*Oranges* was accused of being operetta or pantomime masquerading as opera, an assertion that speaks more to the narrow definition of opera that predominated in the United States at the beginning of the last century than to any compositional shortcomings. "Some of the opera's Chicago and New York critics felt duped by an apparent black comedy appearing to masquerade as a simple children's fairy-tale. Some also felt it went beyond where an opera should go in its exploitation of the fantastic and grotesque."<sup>133</sup> Many sensed that there was something deeper and more sophisticated beneath the soufflé-like surface, but they did not have the grounding in modernism, grotesquerie, or the traditions of the *commedia dell'arte* necessary to decipher it. This both terrified and offended many, who assumed that the composer laughing at them and inadvertently accusing them of provincialism.

While falling short of total failure, the initial American performances of *Oranges* in the early 1920s were far from completely successful. The audience may have been dazzled by the spectacle presented to them, but the typical subscribing American opera-goer had specific and definite expectations of what opera should be. Prokofiev presented

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<sup>133</sup> Pisani, 488.

them with an aria-free ensemble piece devoid of “singable tunes” and rooted in an antiquated Italian comedic acting style with which they had little or no experience. It was less a matter of the Chicago and New York audiences not liking the opera than it was of them not really understanding it. People were, more than anything else, collectively overwhelmed by the experience of Prokofiev’s modernist opera. Prokofiev was looking to revolutionize the medium with *A Love for Three Oranges*. American patrons and critics, still relatively new to opera and very much rooted in the classics of the previous century, were simply not ready for it.

Edward Moore, one of Chicago’s most prominent and prolific music critics and the author of *40 Years of Opera in Chicago*, had the good fortune to watch the Chicago operatic culture emerge and grow from its infancy. A polemical but not musically unintelligent man, he had this to say of *Oranges*:

This was without a doubt an opera ahead of its time...He [Prokofiev] had announced that it would be a satire in a reasonably savage manner, but it turned out to be a fantastic burlesque, and while satire is sometimes hard enough to project across the footlights, burlesque is much worse. At any rate, it left many of our best people dazed and wondering.

The scenery and costumes had been built at Campanini’s orders by Boris Anisfeld, and their presence was one reason why the opera was given. It was in no end brilliant as a spectacle, and no end technically difficult to stage and sing. The chorus in the corners, grouped as tragedians, comedians, lyricals, empty-heads and absurdities, made running comments on the action. The action, inspired imbecility, sublimated clowning, beknighted awkwardness, was quite amusing as Prokofieff meant it to be. But the music was enigmatic for the public that day, a public that felt that without tunes, what was the use of opera?<sup>134</sup>

Prokofiev’s theory that opera should behave according to the same narrative rules as spoken theater was rejected by American critics as absurd and antithetical to the very nature of the operatic form. New York in particular was generally uninterested in operatic reform and misinterpreted the composer’s intentions as failure. “...The music [is]

<sup>134</sup> Moore, 235-237.

seemingly provided more to underscore the action and the humour than for its own sake."<sup>135</sup> This, of course, was exactly the point, but Prokofiev's ideas were rejected outright as unmusical. The general consensus was that, in opera, music should be master and text its servant. Prokofiev believed them to be equal partners with the same objective – to convey a story in a manner that was fluent, entertaining and, above all, logical. It is one of the great ironies of the work that he had chosen this fantastic, frenzied *scenario* with which to manifest such a pragmatic compositional hypothesis. This subtle paradox was unfortunately lost on many American critics, who seem to have been overwhelmed by *Oranges*, their lack of understanding leading to a certain level of defensiveness.

The opera finally found American success in 1949 when it was used as the gala opening premiere of the New York City Opera and stayed in the repertoire until the sets wore out. It has since become a favorite among regional companies and university opera programs, but never truly made it into the standard American repertory. While the music to modern ears sounds quite accessible and the story carries little of its original notoriety but retains much in the way of entertainment value, the opera requires both human and financial resources that are outside the scope of most American companies, and neither it nor its composer qualify for "big name" status. A new production of *Oranges* would be a risk that many can ill afford to take. "The Arts have always been, and will likely always be, a commercial endeavor in America."<sup>136</sup>

Boris Asafiev said of Prokofiev's music that "it ought to be judged by its own rules."<sup>137</sup> This holds especially true for *A Love for Three Oranges*, and is something many critics, especially in America, failed to consider. *Oranges* was deemed a failure

<sup>135</sup> Nice, 194 (from *Musical Courier*, 23 February, 1922).

<sup>136</sup> Davis, 7.

<sup>137</sup> Asafiev, 4.

largely due to its failure to fit the generally accepted operatic mould, especially in terms of melody and dramatic characterization. Few in attendance at the première recognized the composer's genuine and inspired attempt to bring to the operatic stage a true sense of dramatic pacing and logic. The neo-classic symmetry, cleanliness of line, and emotional restraint that would come to be trademarks of his compositional style were misinterpreted in *Oranges* as frigidity and aloofness. The farcical burlesque with which Prokofiev chose to unify and equalize the dramatic and musical elements of opera created a duality between subject matter and compositional ideal that the initial audience had difficulty reconciling. Prokofiev had strong opinions and bold ideas about the ideal construction of opera, all of which were densely packed into the two-hour whirlwind spectacle of *Oranges*.

It is tempting to attach a political agenda to *A Love for Three Oranges*, given its parodistic nature and story-book theme, which, when directed at an adult audience, is often an indication of some level of subversion. The politically tumultuous times during which the composer lived inspired in many an artistic reaction, but not in the young Prokofiev. He repeatedly denied any subtext in his second mature operatic offering, and his youth, comfortable position within the Russian petty bourgeoisie, and sheltered childhood within a staunchly apolitical household, combined with a healthy measure of narcissism, leave little cause to suspect otherwise. While it is difficult to believe that any Russian person could have underestimated the significance of the 1917 Revolution, it must be remembered that Prokofiev spent very little of that particular year in the cities and major centers and was composing heavily at the time. Upon his arrival in America, Prokofiev is quoted as saying:

Me, I care nothing for politics – art has nothing to do with that. I shut myself away from the thought of politics when I work.<sup>138</sup>

The composer wrote in his short autobiography in 1941:

I had not the slightest idea of the scope and significance of the October revolution. It had never occurred to me that, like any other citizen, I might be of use to it. And hence the idea of going to America took root in my mind. I believed that Russia had no use for music at the moment, whereas in America I might learn a great deal and interest people in my music at the same time.<sup>139</sup>

Prokofiev, as always, was reluctant to attach any political significance to his fairy-tale opera, especially in Russia.

In Leningrad the opera was a success and the press gave it a good deal of attention. The comments of some reviewers were very sensible; others wanted to know whom I was laughing at: the audience, Gozzi, the operatic form, or those who had no sense of humour. They found in *Oranges* mockery, defiance, the grotesque, and what not; all I had been trying to do was write an amusing opera.<sup>140</sup>

As has been discussed in earlier chapters, there is an ironic subtext present in *Oranges*, but it is more of an operatic than a political nature. Prokofiev was, at least publicly, an apolitical person, particularly in his youth, and did not have much interest in Soviet politics. His was a sort of conscious naiveté, wherein he simply chose not to become embroiled in the political turmoil of the day. He was able, through a combination of luck, favour, and fortuitous timing, to avoid many of the unpleasantnesses of Soviet citizenship for much of his life, a circumstance of which he took full advantage. He saw music as independent from affairs of state, and wished to remain as neutral as possible while still maintaining good relations with the ruling party.

There was political and social irony present in the story of the *Oranges*, but it came from Gozzi and later Meyerhold, not the composer, who had not even chosen the subject

<sup>138</sup> Quoted in *Musical Leader*, 19 December, 1918.

<sup>139</sup> Prokofiev, *Autobiography*, 261.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

himself, but had it suggested to him. I believe that Prokofiev saw in it a lively, exciting operatic subject and the perfect vehicle with which to refine the operatic reforms he had first implemented in *The Gambler*. The seemingly endless opportunities to poke fun at the operatic conventions to which he was so violently opposed were added incentive. The above quotes could be interpreted as the composer simply saying what he thought was expected of him, the former coming at a time when Americans were first becoming suspicious of Russia and its politics, and the latter at a time when the Soviets were suspicious of everything. However, there is little evidence to suggest that the young Prokofiev had any reason to conceal his personal views, as at that time (pre-1930), he does in fact seem to have been devoid of any political leanings. Whatever Prokofiev's political ideology later in life, there is little trace of an extra-musical agenda in *Oranges*.

Prokofiev confirmed in his diary that the manner in which *A Love for Three Oranges* succeeds or fails has everything to do with how the director, designer, and actors realized the humor and satire, without resorting to the bitter edge of sarcasm. If the reviews are to be believed, in the United States the opera was played broadly for laughs,<sup>141</sup> an interpretation that destroys much of the opera's subtle irony and instead reduces it to caricature-like parody. The satire hinges upon accurate characterization and confident personification, and a keen awareness on the part of the singer-actors to distinguish between it and farce. The infusion of personality into the largely one-dimensional *commedia* characters is the responsibility of the actor and one of the great challenges of the opera. The sophisticated music demands sophisticated, subtle, and well thought-out comedic acting. Boris Asafiev dubbed *Oranges* "music made visual. Any

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<sup>141</sup> Pisani, 493.

decent production...should be a visual and musical delight.”<sup>142</sup> The laconic expression of operatic conception and sheer volume of musical and dramatic ideas create a density of texture that must be clearly communicated across the footlights, by no means an easy task. More happens in the less than two hours it takes to perform this opera than in many others twice its length. There is much musical allusion that requires practical manifestation, dictating the tight integration of word, action, and music. Prokofiev was at his musico-dramatic best with *Oranges*, the fantastical subject appealing to his most basic musical instincts and innate sense of fun and play.

In a letter regarding the impending 1930 revival of *A Love for Three Oranges*, a production which the composer had had the benefit of attending in 1928, Prokofiev outlined in detail his vision of the production:

Prologue: the different groups should actively fall on each other and not sing looking at the conductor... Act I, scene ii: The whole stage must *swarm* with little devils, who creep on their stomachs and run around on all fours. Act II, scene ii: the battle of monsters must be a battle, not a ballet scene. Make sure the quarrel between Truffaldino and Fata Morgana in front of the laughing Prince goes spiritedly. The Prince must laugh sincerely, merrily and contagiously. Last year the singer playing him laughed artificially and unspontaneously, so it came across boringly and did not match the intention of the composer. Act III, scene iii: The scene with the Princesses must flow along in the spirit of a light, supple lyricism, with Truffaldino contributing a great deal of humor. The latter does not have to play about or act the fool, just as the Princesses do not have to incline either tragedy or caricature. The Prince can fool about only at the end of this scene, like a capricious child, when he has to marry Smeraldina. A few exaggerations here and there are even good. Act IV, scene ii: Pay careful attention to the staging of the traitor's pursuit... I consider that this chase must be staged very entertainingly and, most important, in a lively fashion. Because rehearsal on it is usually left too late, the crowd crams into the wings and then what happens is a stupid obstruction, and then they run from the wings in confused motion. This chase must be staged seriously, like a contemporary police raid, very lively. If the way of thinking beginning it is one of clowning, then it will come out quite the opposite: absurd and not amusing.<sup>143</sup>

<sup>142</sup> Asafiev, 42.

<sup>143</sup> Letter to Weber, 12 July 1927 (from Nice, 272).

From early childhood, Prokofiev had been fascinated with the theatre and showed an innate aptitude for the problems of staging and production. His idea that operatic action should be exciting and surprising, with several things happening simultaneously, germinated with his first visit to the Mariinsky to see *Faust* in 1900 and changed little throughout his life. Through his friendship with Vsevolod Meyerhold, Prokofiev was introduced to the ideals and techniques of the modernist theatre, which appealed strongly to his pragmatic character. The disassociation from the plights of the characters onstage and purely theatrical nature of modernism fit nicely with Prokofiev's attempt to bring a measure of logic to operatic construction. He felt his opera should be playful, mischievous, and spectacular, but never wanted the audience to lose sight of the fact that the people onstage were actors performing in a play. Opera is an entirely artificial medium and the composer sought in no way to disguise this fact; rather, he intended his audience to embrace it, and give themselves over, not to the emotion of the story, but to the theatrical experience. This was manifest not only in the production, but in the emotionally detached music as well.

*The Love for Three Oranges* became a peculiar artistic manifesto, through which the composer was able to bring together, within the parameters of the operatic setting, traditional theatrical pacing and a new musical language, thereby violently and dramatically throwing off the shackles of the Romantic musical past. The chief parody of the opera, the Prince's hypochondria being exacerbated to the point of death by exposure to 'Martellian tragedy,' pokes fun at the over-seriousness and pervasive introspection of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic opera. "Prokofiev's work was truly modern in this sense – as a parody of 19<sup>th</sup>-century operatic conventions using emotionally abstract material, it

became one of the first operas to distance itself from them."<sup>144</sup> The ironically detached, frenetic and constantly changing onstage antics are perfectly complemented by the discontinuous structure of the music. The multifarious themes, melodies, and ostinati, while requiring concentrated attention from the audience, combine to generate a unified musical entity whose focus is the support and exemplification of the drama rather than self-sufficient musical development. This, to quote Richard Taruskin, "remains the most authentic of the opera's virtues."<sup>145</sup> Indeed, the operatic reforms Prokofiev achieved with *A Love for Three Oranges* can be favorably compared with those of the major operatic reformers of the past, including Gluck and Wagner.

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<sup>144</sup> Pisani, 504.

<sup>145</sup> Taruskin, "Prokofiev: A Love for Three Oranges," *New Grove Opera*, 62.

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