

**Kaleidoscope of thoughts, ideas and reflections based on
Visions Fugitives, op. 22 by Sergei Prokofiev**

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During the three years between 1915 and 1917 during World War I and leading to the Russian Revolutions of 1917, Prokofiev composed his Visions Fugitives (Mimolyotnosti). There are 20 Visions, arranged in non chronological but particular order by the composer himself.

In this paper, I will argue that Prokofiev's Visions Fugitives were reflections of the tumultuous times in Russia preceding and during the 1917 Revolutions and that each 'Vision' provides a philosophical perspective of existence and sometimes a prophetic premonition of impending changes. The title was taken from a verse by the Russian symbolist poet, Konstantin Balmont:

I do not know wisdom – leave that to others -

I only turn fleeting visions (mimolyotnosti) into verse.

I will argue that Prokofiev turned fleeting visions (mimolyotnosti) into sound, just as Balmont turned 'fleeting visions into verse'.

The paper will explore the meaning architectonically as a set and individually and provide examples of Prokofiev's five lines which he identified within his music: classical, modern, toccata or motor line and lyrical line. His fifth line is that of the various degrees of the Scherzo - whimsicality, laughter, mockery'.¹ Eight of the Visions will be examined in greater detail from a personal perspective, to demonstrate how the meaning of the score can be conveyed in performance. (Nos 1,2,10,11,14,16,19 & 20)

The entire purpose of music and the arts in general is human expression. It is dependent first upon what we have to say and then how we say it. This puts into perspective the importance of understanding the meaning of the score both musically and historically, as we develop an interpretation of it. Following this awareness, is the craft of how to convey what we have to say through the music.

Great artists reflect and interpret their surroundings, highlighting relationships that are not usually connected. They have heightened perceptions of reality. At times they are prophetic. This could be inferred from Visions Nos 1 and 20. In Russia, the years 1915 to 1917 were

¹ Shlifstein, S. (2000). *Sergei Prokofiev Autobiography Articles Reminiscences*: Trans. by Rose Prokofieva, Hawaii, USA, University Press of the Pacific, pp36-7

marked by war and revolution. Social historian, Daniel Orlovsky subsequently wrote that *these years brought massive destruction; not only a dynasty, but vast numbers of people, resources and territories vanished in the conflagration.* ² This quotation summarizes the extent of the social upheavals surrounding Prokofiev, especially in his home city of St Petersburg. Prokofiev's wrote in his autobiography: *I too had been subconsciously affected by the revolutionary events that had shaken Russia to its foundations and now all this clamoured for expression.* ³ This reference supports the concept that the political atmosphere surrounding Prokofiev was influential in his expression through composition. Prokofiev also wrote: *as I left Russia in 1918, ...in vain did one wise friend warn me. "You are running away from history, and history will never forgive you: when you return you will not be understood"* ⁴ Both passages reflect the concept that history was being represented through artistic expression.

The earliest Visions, originally referred to as *doggies*, ⁵ were composed in June 1915, and frequently used as encores in Prokofiev's concerts ⁶. Eventually they were grouped into Op 22 and in August 1917, referred to as *Mimolyotnosti*⁷. The Russian symbolist poet and translator, Konstantin Balmont was invited to write a verse in Prokofiev's *Wooden Box*, an autograph collection from interesting people imaginatively challenged to give their thoughts on the sun. (This reflected Prokofiev's fascination with the image of the sun and the sun-god which were the foundation of his Scythian Suite, 1915.)⁸ Balmont quoted his own verse from 1903, and dedicating it to Prokofiev, provided the title for Prokofiev's Op 22:

*I do not know wisdom – leave that to others -
I only turn fleeting visions (mimolyotnosti) into verse.
In each fleeting vision I see worlds,
Full of the changing play of rainbows.
Don't curse me, you wise ones. What are you to me?
The fact is I'm only a cloudlet, full of fire.
The fact is I'm only a cloudlet. Look: I'm Floating.
And I summon dreamers . . . You I summon not. .⁹*

Balmont's verse connects the fleeting effects of light with moisture as in a rainbow to ephemeral visions and dreamers. Prokofiev's diaries indicate that he considered his *Mimolyotnosti* (fleeting visions),

2 Freeze, G. (2002), *Russia, A History*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press, p231

3 Shlifstein, op.cit., p.47

4 *ibid.*, p.50

5 Prokofiev, S. (2008) *Diaries 1915-1923, Behind the Mask, translated from Russian and annotated by Anthony Phillips*: New York, Cornell University, p65

6 *ibid.*, p.191

7 *ibid.*, p.221

8 *ibid.*, p.95

9 Nice, D. (2003) *Prokofiev A Biography; From Russia to the West 1891 – 1935*. New Haven: Yale University Press. p129

*appropriate to the verse.*¹⁰ This supports the argument that Prokofiev was turning fleeting visions into sound.

Since French had been the preferred language of the aristocracy and intelligentsia for over a century, Prokofiev had been searching for an appropriate translation of *Mimolyotnosti* for his set of imaginative miniatures. In August 1917, he was with Balmont at the home of a young linguist, Kira Nikolayevna. Kira translated *Mimolyotnosti* into the French *Visions Fugitives*. In English, the translation is more exactly “transiencies” or “ephemeralities”. The title conveys their fleeting, momentary nature. They are very quick responses to experiences and feelings, over in a flash, temporary and then vanishing. The references to rainbows, fleeting visions, and dreamers in the poem, give clues to the transient nature of the musical ideas.

Although the title of Op 22 is French, Prokofiev used highly imaginative Italian words to direct the character of the Visions. Indications like *Pittoresco*, *Con eleganza*, *Ridicolosamente*, *Con Vivacità*, *Feroce*, *Inquieto*, *Poetico*, *Presto agitatissimo e molto accentuato* and *Lente irrealmente* are highly unusual in music. They provide clues to Prokofiev's emotions and reactions in each Fleeting Vision.

In February 1917, Prokofiev was caught in gun crossfire, recording that:

*the February Revolution found me in Petrograd. (St Petersburg had been renamed Petrograd in 1914.) I and those I associated with welcomed it with open arms. I was in the streets of Petrograd while the fighting was going on, hiding behind house corners when the shooting came too close. Number 19 of the Fugitive Vision written at this time partly reflected my impressions – the feeling of the crowd rather than the inner essence of the Revolution.*¹¹

In this quotation Prokofiev himself links the Visions to an event. Prokofiev's autobiography also indicates that other pieces in Op 22 were sketched at this time. Although not specified by Prokofiev, it is highly likely that this could be true of Nos 4 and 8 with their military march-like qualities and No 14, with its aggressive musical character and indication *Feroce*.

In the atmosphere of revolution, Prokofiev challenged conservatoire teachers and defied orthodox tastes, often applying his perceptive humour, ranging from light joking to sarcasm. The *Visions Fugitives* are said to reflect *a softening of temper*.¹² The detail of the scores - the articulation, accentuations, dynamic indications and abrupt changes,

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.221

¹¹ Shlifstein, *op. cit.*, p.46

¹² Nice, *op.cit.*, pp.43-4

along with performance space and timing, breathe character and life into his music. The historical perspective, Prokofiev's documented experiences and his own writings provide us with directions and clues as to the underlying meaning.

Prokofiev's compositional trademarks of assertive rhythms, chromatic melodies, penetrating harmonies and huge range of humoristic responses were underpinned by his extensive skills as a pianist. His musical vision opened the way for a new generation of pianists and composers. The Russian Marxist Lunacharsky commented to Prokofiev, *You are a revolutionary in music, we are revolutionaries in life.*¹³ This further suggests that society viewed that the political revolution was being mirrored in a musical revolution.

The Visions are not ordered as they were chronologically composed. Instead Prokofiev arranged them with their own psychological order. In the broad structure of the 20 Visions, the early pieces are sometimes flirtatious and playful, reflecting a sense of hope. Number 15 is the turning point,¹⁴ ominous in character and full of foreboding. The atmospheric tension from the dissonant harmonies, incessant strong quaver pulse and soft dynamics build to a loud, accentuated close suggesting catastrophe. The final Vision is considered to be an epilogue with the closing chord inferring an open, final question mark.¹⁵

Vision No.1 was one of the last to be composed. Although revolution happened in February 1917, Prokofiev's Visions suggest that the signs of tumult were already apparent in 1915 and 1916. In the Fleeting Visions from these earlier years, there is tension through harmonic dissonance (evident in Nos 2, 3 & 16), indecisive conclusions (apparent in Nos. 16 & 20) and reflective and questioning inner voices (evident in Nos. 2, 3, 10 & 10). The Visions psychologically and atmospherically seem to fall into groups where the Visions composed in 1917 are the culmination of Visions from 1915 and 1916. The 1917 Visions tend to punctuate the larger structure, with clear epilogues closing Nos 4 and 8. This could suggest that the warning signs leading to the catastrophic Revolution were there before 1917.

Group 1

No 1, 1917; No 2, 1916; No 3, 1916; No 4, 1917.

Group 2

No 5, 1915; No 6, 1915; No 7, 1916; No 8, 1917; No 9 1917.

Group 3

No 10, 1915; No 11, 1917; No 12, 1916; No 13, 1916; No 14, 1917; No 15,

13 Shlifstein, p.50

14 Nice, op.cit., p.130

15 ibid., p.130

falling chromatic line, running away like water over the dissonant left hand harmonies could be interpreted as a representation of the inner tension of the society. (see Fig.3)

Fig.3



The final resolution on the E minor chord over three bars, conveys indecision. The left hand “E” in the penultimate bar is quite settled as it sounds on the first beat of the bar and establishes the root position of the harmony. However, in the right hand, the initial syncopated tied notes on g'' and e'', the subsequent resolution to the E minor harmony, the change of register and inversion, as well as the very soft dynamic level combine to create an unsettled atmosphere. It could reflect a feeling of premonition, with the sounds fading into the distance. (see Fig.4)

Fig.4



No 2 *Andante* 1916

The decorative right hand is full of 'flashing' legato, where the music moves fast, quick as a flash, the hands moving deftly from position to position, the fleeting notes leading to a longer sound. The character suggests improvisational fantasy. Its interpretation is assisted by particular awareness of atmospheric timing, full hearing of the long sounds and breathing spaces between the phrases. (see Fig.5)



Fig.5

The soft, shorter, even, monotonic, crotchet left hand phrases are as steady as a heart beat or a ticking clock, as if trying to keep peace and bring a semblance of stability. (see Fig.6)

Fig.6





No 3 *Allegretto* 1916

The opening moving voices are underpinned by a firm long sound. There is an inner chromatic voice, creating continual dissonant moments as if warning. This section becomes more poignant when followed by the contrasting, joking, semiquaver melody. The joking quality is an example of Prokofiev's *scherzo* line. Humour was an important element of Russian arts and influenced by the historical role of the *yurodivy*¹⁸, the Russian equivalent to the English court jester. The *yurodivy* had the gift to see and hear, and the right to reflect what some others might have known but because of political fear, were unable to say. The *yurodivy* was significant from the early times of the Tsars, telling society about his insights in a paradoxical way.

No 4 *Animato* 1917

Composed in the year of revolution, the marching energy and animated character imply the promises of revolutionary ideals. The final phrase is an epilogue and clearly marks this piece as the end of the group. The repetition of two chords across three beats in the bar in the RH is unsettled and finishing on the dominant reflects the lack of final peace.

Group 2

No 5 *Molto giocoso* 1915

During 1915 and 1916, Prokofiev records travelling and attending dinners and concerts. This Vision reflects aspects of every day life, innocence and playfulness, which existed despite the war and political unrest. Prokofiev wrote in his diary:

*for Lida (Karneyev) No 5 - with a peal of bells to celebrate her marriage.*¹⁹

No 6 *Con eleganza* 1915

Composed on the same day as No 5 for Lida's sister, Zoya²⁰, this elegant dance is as if mirroring the closed eyes of the society's élite.

No 7 *Pittoresco* 1916

This is a picturesque scene with the tonal qualities of a harp as indicated

18 Volkov, Solomon. *Testimony, the Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich*, Trans. from the Russian by Antonina Bouis, New York, USA: Limelight, 2004, p.xxv

19 Prokofiev, S. (2008) *Diaries 1915-1923, Behind the Mask*, trans from Russian and annotated by Anthony Phillips. New York, Cornell University Press, p53

20 *ibid.*, p.53

by Prokofiev's subtitle: *Arpa*.

No 8 *Commodo* 1917

The military marching character returns. The final *meno mosso* with its repetitious *ostinato* and final seventh chord without confirming the tonic, seem to suggest the loss of orientation.

No 9 *Allegretto tranquillo* 1917

The opening right hand *tenuto* tenths strongly suggest horn sounds, as if revolution has arrived. Despite the *tranquillo* indication, the atmosphere is turbulent and menacing through the soft dynamics, with nothing above *mf*, and the close on the sub-dominant chord. These elements infer that there are no exuberant celebrations marking the 1917 Revolution.

This marks the close of the second group.

Group 3

No 10 *Ridicolosamente* 1915

As indicated in the title, this is a caricature of the ridiculous. It is completely sardonic humour and is the Vision which most clearly displays what Prokofiev describes as his *Scherzo* line - *whimsicality; laughter; mockery*. This Fleeting Vision is clown-like, laughter without understanding the underlying tragedy. There is a Russian saying: What are you laughing about yourself? In his autobiography, Prokofiev recounts this sentiment in the program of one of his *Sarcasms*, Op.17 composed between 1912 and 1914, just prior to *Visions Fugitives*:

*We often indulge in malicious laughter at someone or something, but when we pause to look we see how pitiful and sad is the object of our ridicule; and then we grow ashamed, the mocking laughter rings in our ears, but it is we who are its object now.*²¹

This reference clearly shows Prokofiev's depth of understanding of humour and his conscious representation of humour within his compositions. Even the tonality of Vision No.10 is treated with humour. The underlying key is B flat minor. The opening third suggests B flat minor, but the umbrella chord of the first bar is G flat major in first inversion. The soft, *sostenuto*, left hand *staccato* thirds are like sinister laughter, possibly as if, 'Ha, ha, ha, ha' (see Fig.9) and continue in various harmonies throughout.

Fig.9



21 Shliftsten, op.cit., p.43

The opening right hand intervals with the accented, loud, long sound, prefixed by an *acciaccatura*, dissolve to a soft, short note. These musical elements result in taunting playfulness. The emphatic intervals form an insistent introduction and are an example of Prokofiev's mocking humour. (see Fig.10)

Fig.10



Following this introduction, there are short, flashing phrases, enhancing the ridiculous character in a whimsical manner. (see Fig.11)

Fig.11



Short inner voice phrases below long sounds are like another point of view. (see Fig.12)

Fig.12



There is a final, clear cadence. (see Fig.13)



Fig.13

No 11 *Con vivacità* 1917

This is a flirtatious, whimsical miniature, with the ambience of enjoyment of life today. The opening theme is *burlesque* in character - another variant of Prokofiev's *Scherzo* line. (see Fig.14). The repetitive,

staccato left hand accompaniment provides rhythmic stability. Superimposed are the short, playful right hand figures, with marked accentuation and *staccato* endings, softly syncopating the rhythmic evenness of the left hand. The character of whimsy pervades through the playfulness of this right hand. While the predominant dynamic is soft, a few loud points supplement the humour.

Fig.14



The middle section is poignant and expressive, and reflective of Prokofiev's *lyrical* line. (see Fig.15) Renowned Russian violin master, David Oistrakh observed that: *the tempestuous, defiant Prokofiev could be as touching as a child when he heard the composer play the simple theme that interrupts the lopsided playfulness of No 11.* (Nice 2003 p. 130) This quotation highlights that Prokofiev's music was becoming highly expressive. This contrasting melody is played by both hands at the octave. The longer notes in the lyrical line are underscored by clock-like, dropping *staccato* intervals as if warning.



Fig.15

Vision No 11 displays an abundance of pianistic expectations - the subtle right hand syncopation, the soft *vivacità* character, the *leggiero* phrases and the *espressivo* contrast.

No 12 *Assai moderato* 1916

The insistent chromatic fall in the right hand from g sharp to g natural suggests uncertainty within this waltz-like dance. The opening melody is quite ominous due to the soft dynamic and rather low register.

No 13 *Allegretto* 1916

The narrow range of dynamics from *p* to *pp*, the lyrical melody and the extensive trills seem to be reflective of the beauty of life. Vision 13 is an example of Prokofiev's *lyrical* line and with the strong emphasis on the

repeated melodic phrase, seems to sound very personal.

No 14 *Feroce* 1917

Ferocious, the opening, rhythmic chords seem barbaric. (see Fig.16) They are loud, strongly accented, wild, insistent and demanding. They strongly reflect Prokofiev's *toccata or motor* line. It is as if revolution has arrived with a fanfare and like an earthquake.



Fig.16

The first section finishes with a wild flourish. (see Fig.17)

The middle section is suddenly soft with a seductively reassuring right hand melody, the rhythmic nerve continuing softly beneath. (see Fig.17)

Fig.17



In ternary form, the final return to the ferocious theme culminates in strong, dissonant, rhythmic chords with specific accentuation and ultimate *sforzando*, suggesting the triumph of barbaric power. (see Fig.18)

Fig.18



No 15 *Incite* 1917

Troubled and fretful from the *inquieta* indication, the mesmerizing rhythm, repetitive intervals and *una corda* direction for most of the piece, seem to project the tragedy of extensive death. The atmosphere is philosophically questioning and foreboding, identifying Vision No 15 as the turning point of the work.²²

The loud epilogue marks this Vision as the end of the third group.

Group 4

No 16 *Dolente* 1915

In ternary form, and employing Prokofiev's *lyrical* line, the opening is loud yet meditative through the steady left hand rhythm and unusual pedal on the mediant, e'. Both the right hand melody and inner voice in the left hand are chromatic, creating their own dissonance and tension creating an atmosphere of pain. (see Fig.19")

Fig.19

22 Nice, op.cit., p.130



Suddenly there is a more playful, accentuated and very soft contrasting section as if depicting a different side of the same personality. The humouristic quality is suggestive of the *yurodiviy* and escape from reality. (see Fig.20)

Fig.20



The return to the original theme uses the previous bass now as a thoughtful inner voice. The new bass line, with consecutive perfect fifths and octaves continually descending and fading, is sinister and suggests doubt. (see Fig.21)

Fig.21



The third statement of the melody is very soft and now *meno mosso*, with the close very soft, sound dissolving away on “E”. The focus on “E”, the mediant, rather than the tonic, “C” gestures uncertainty. (see Fig.22)

Fig.22



No 17 *Poetico* 1915

The repetitive intervals seem to create an aura of isolation and escape through the fantasy of poetry.

No 18 *Con una dolce lentezza* 1917

With sweet slowness, this very soft Fleeting Vision seems to generate a nostalgic spirit. Since it precedes the agitated Vision No 19, it could be considered to be the calm before the storm albeit, any peace is only temporary.

No 19 *Presto agitatissimo e molto accentuato* 1917

This is the Vision of which Prokofiev wrote:

*I was in the streets of Petrograd while the fighting was going on, hiding behind house corners when the shooting came too close. Number 19 of the Fugitive Vision written at this time partly reflected my impressions – the feeling of the crowd rather than the inner essence of the Revolution.*²³

From the first sounds, chaos resonates. There are elements of Prokofiev's motor as well as the grotesque (*Scherzo*) lines. Chromaticism, syncopation between the hands, and unusual accentuation establish a frenetic atmosphere. (see Fig.23)



Fig.23

Vision 19 seems to end with final, decisive, sinister joking through the cascade of descending chords, culminating in the final, low register, accentuated C chords in first inversion, contributing to the sense of

²³ Shliftsten, op.cit., p.46

disorder. (see Fig.24) The very loud, sharply accented beats of the last bar suggest a decisive full stop. It is as if humanity has been destroyed.

Fig.24



Epilogue

No 20 *Lento irrealmente* 1916

Lyrical and motor-like, meditative and intellectual, this epilogue suggests that the destruction was foreseen in 1916. Society's rules and established norms have changed. There is no final celebration to the set of "Fleeting Visions" but instead, the choice of final chord, other than the tonic, suggests a question mark.

The opening time signature is an early sign of unrest. It is the most unusual time signature of the Visions, with 9/8 in the right hand underpinned by a slow beat in 3/4 in the left hand. The dynamic range of the Vision is *ppp* to *p*. The left hand becomes 9/8 in the middle section and is maintained to the end. This section, *ppp* to *pp* in dynamic level, has mesmerizing, repetitive, ascending and descending figures in the right hand. (see Fig.25)

Fig.25



In ternary form, the final section restates the opening melody, underpinned by the mechanical repetition of triplet chords, initially comprising dissonant perfect fourths and terminating softly with complete tonal ambiguity. The right hand voices conclude indecisively with a melodic *c'* and a repeated, tonally ambiguous chord of *b*, *f'* and *a'* (see Fig.26)

Fig.26



In conclusion: in the atmosphere of revolution, the language of anonymous arts was extremely expressive, reflecting the mood of the time. Music and ballet thrived, with sound and movement expressing the feeling of reality without words. The intelligentsia were largely in agreement of the Revolution of February 1917. There was a rejection of the Tsarist regime, its indulgences and repression²⁴ and the desire for a new order. However, the turmoil and groundswell became so great that many artists feared the final outcome of the coming catastrophe.

As I believe I have demonstrated in this paper, Prokofiev translated the mood and atmosphere of tumultuous times in his *Fleeting Visions*. This kaleidoscope of emotions and pictures ranged from carefree playfulness (Nos 4, 5 10 & 11) to mysterious and sinister omens (1, 2 15 & 20) and then to scenes of wild ferocity (Nos 14 & 19).

Prokofiev's *Visions Fugitives* are an insightful set of miniatures. His vast spectrum of pianistic skills paint colourful musical stories within a modern idiom. They are reflective, visionary portraits depicting the extremities of life in an era of unpredictability and turmoil. Throughout

²⁴ Rappaport, H. (2008) *Ekaterinburg, The Last Days of the Romanovs*. London, Random House. Pp 5-7

the Visions, Prokofiev's demonstration of the warning signs of destruction before the 1917 Revolution were as if a premonition. Yet even with the enormous social and political difficulties, life proceeded with its joy, laughter, pleasure and hope.

About the Author

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