

Benjamin Britten's Piano Concerto in the Context of the Composer's Creative Connections with Russian (Soviet) Culture

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Abstract—In this article the author seeks through the prism of the analysis of Benjamin Britten's Piano concerto to trace the creative connections between the English composer and Russian (Soviet) music and culture in general. Research starts from the earlier period of the composer's creative life. He investigates the influences on the composer during his work. The compositional details of the work are revealed in order to understand the origins of Britten's style. The performance history of the concerto is shown via creative relationships with Sviatoslav Richter.

Keywords—Benjamin Britten; Piano concerto op.13; Sviatoslav Richter; Prokofiev; Aldeburgh festival; Snape Maltings

I. INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Britten's creativity is a complex, multifaceted musical phenomenon of the twentieth century, and, as with any sensitive artist, such as this British composer, it reflects all the ambiguity of existence and the conflicts of contemporary reality.

As an essentially nationalist composer Britten used and embodied the English folk tradition in his music and reflected the national character and tradition in his work. He also absorbed the influences of other national schools and cultures, rethought and used them, which, of course, manifested itself most noticeably at the beginning of the composer's career, but remained an important source and impulse of creativity throughout his life.

Among young Britten's strongest influences, one can recognize the work of the Austrians Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg. In the Sinfonietta op.1, composed by Britten at the age of 18, one can mark, for example its conforming to the pattern of the Chamber Symphony No.1, op.9 by Schoenberg. To study with Berg in Vienna was the unfulfilled dream of a musician who had just graduated from the Royal College of Music.

Russian music and more broadly speaking, Russian culture were strong influences on Britten at an early age. One of the first inspirations was familiarity with Tchaikovsky's

music and subsequent love for his work, studying it and following his models (see, for example, in Britten's ballet "The Prince of the Pagodas").

Other Russian composers with whose music Britten was intimately familiar are his contemporaries: Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich. He heard their works in concerts, often in their own performances, purchased their scores for his personal library and studied them.

The influence of Russian culture on Britten was not limited to composers.

Britten knew and appreciated classical Russian literature. In an interview with the magazine Soviet Music, he said, "My cherished dream is to create an Opera form that would be equivalent to Chekhov's drama" [1]. In 1965, he composed a cycle of six romances on Pushkin's poems The Poet's Echo, Op.76 and dedicated it to the first performers - Galina Vishnevskaya and Mstislav Rostropovich.

It is difficult to name another Western musician of that time who would have been in closer and friendlier communication with the best representatives of the Russian-Soviet musical culture and who came more often to the Soviet Union than Britten.

In general, his contacts with Russian musicians, from the 60s to the composer's death, were on the rise. To mutual joy and satisfaction, they led to creative enrichment and had a positive value for both sides. "Russophilism", of which Britten himself spoke, did not weaken over the years, but rather on the contrary, only grew stronger and acquired new features.

II. THE EARLY PERIOD: BASIC FEATURES, ORIGINS, INFLUENCES AND CONTEXT

The subject of this study is the Piano Concerto op.13, taken in the context of its composer's entire heritage, as one of the works through which Britten's creative interaction with Russian culture, music and musicians, that were of great importance for his artistic development and creative life, can be seen as through a prism.

Written in 1938, the first work of the concerto genre in the composer's output, the concerto was a milestone - the last composition of the first period of Britten's work, which ended with his departure to North America. It is logical, perhaps, to consider in more detail this early period and the works that preceded the writing of the concerto.

The composition incorporates many features and trends that can be found in the music of Britten in previous pieces. By that time the composer had created works of different genres and styles: for string orchestra, choral music, chamber ensembles, solo piano cycle (Holiday Diary op.5), for voice with orchestra, for cinema etc.

In fact, genre diversity and breadth of interests feature prominently in this period. Although each work has its own character, it is still possible and necessary to observe in all of them the general trends and traits that reflect the main features of the composer's style throughout his creative life.

These are, firstly, an interest in dance forms: Bourree, Tarantella, Waltz, Sarabande - an incomplete list of dance models used by Britten. This interest is largely manifested in giving contrasting characterizations to each dance. Dance, so to speak, is psychologized and in each case is understood by the composer as a separate, definite character.

Secondly, an interest in the suite form (and using its features), where the composer gives varying styles to the pieces and their particular mood or emotion. This can also be observed in the use of dance genres in many of Britten's works (not only suites, as the Holiday Diary op.5 and Suite for Violin and Piano op.6). For example, in Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge op.10, each variation has the characteristic name: March, Bourree, Romance, Viennese Waltz etc. Obviously, these traits quite clearly anticipate and prepare for the later, operatic period of the composer's life in which his gift for musical characterization is revealed in its fullness.

Thirdly, Britten's love of variations. Variations are part of the Sinfonietta op.1 and of the the Piano Concerto op.13 we are considering. And three opuses of this time are cycles of variations: The Boy was born op.3, Variations on a theme of Frank Bridge op.10 and Twelve Variations for Piano without opus (1931).

Fourthly, interest in the March form, another genre to which Britten gives a bright imaginative character. For example, of the first fourteen opuses, the march is in seven of them, and in the Bridge Variations there are two, one of which is a funeral march. In total, there are three funeral marches in these opuses, which, admittedly, is a lot for this kind of music considering the composer's youth!

The growth and evolution of the composer is always very intriguing and in this regard it would be interesting to trace the factors which influenced his creative development. Here, in addition to analysis of some biographical facts, additional data and sources help. In Britten's case, if we talk about his early period, most researchers rely on the composer's diary entries and his music library, which he began to collect as a child. These sources show the young composer's predilections and preferences and his musical impressions

and thoughts that related to his studies and creative pursuits. They also make it possible to trace all these moments in dynamics, in their changes and transformations.

Since Britten, especially in the early years, kept his library records meticulously, noting the date of purchase of each new score, one can see how the interests and preferences of the composer changed in the period, for example, from 1925 to 1932. In the first years the absolute leader by quantity of the presented works was Beethoven, a favourite composer of young Britten. Later names of more recent and contemporary composers begin to appear in his library, with places of honour going to the scores of the Russian composers Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky.

As for Prokofiev, although Britten in the Thirties, and even later, had in his library only a few editions of his works (at the time of the composition of the Concerto, most likely, it was only the music of the Prelude op.12 No. 7), researchers such as Lyn Henderson [2] and Cameron Pyke [3] note the high probability that Britten was able to attend many of Prokofiev's English premieres. These were performed by the composer himself at concerts in London, which, according to evidence, Britten at that time attended almost daily. Thus, he was able to hear Prokofiev performing his Fifth Piano Concerto in the BBC concert of January 31, 1934.

Also, we can assume with confidence that the composer listened to many of Prokofiev's performances on the radio. And here, probably, Britten heard the Second Piano Sonata, the Second Violin Concerto, the Classical Symphony and the Second Suite from Romeo and Juliet, which were conducted by the composer.

It is known from the Diaries that in the period immediately preceding the composition of his Concerto, Britten knew and heard several compositions for piano and orchestra such as the Third Piano Concerto of Prokofiev, the First Piano Concerto of Shostakovich, Stravinsky's Capriccio (Britten heard it several times at concerts in which the composer performed himself). There was also another Russian composition that Britten loved very much, played himself and made arrangement for piano and organ – this is Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto.

As can be seen from the above, the composer was surrounded by Russian influences at the time of working on his opus. It is safe to assume that all of these factors played a prominent role in Britten's composition of his Piano Concerto and had a marked impact on his approach to the genre.

III. COMPOSITIONAL PRINCIPLES AND LOGIC OF THE WORK

Let us proceed to a more detailed consideration of the work in order to understand the compositional and stylistic thinking of the composer and try, as far as possible, to trace their nature and origins.

Britten's non-standard solution was to give each part of the Concerto a name. This, as well as the four-part structure

of the work, is a combination of the Concerto with the suite form.

The first movement is entitled Toccata. It is unique in the spirit of energy, positive-creative attitude and strength that are inherent in it. In this, it echoes the music of Sergei Prokofiev.

Note that in his response to Prokofiev's death in "Musik der Zeit", Britten wrote: "The death of this composer who possessed such wonderful vitality, such daring, such optimism, is a great loss to the entire world" [4]. Here, apparently, Britten lists not only the characteristics of the personality and creativity of the Russian composer, but precisely those features that were close to him in Prokofiev's music.

Allegro molto con brio – the designation of the tempo and character of the movement - is consonant-identical to the definition of *Brioso*, which Prokofiev liked to use in his piano compositions.

The structure of the concerto and the compositional principles applied by Britten in this work are interesting. On closer examination, it becomes clear that the major seventh is the main, fundamental interval of the whole concerto and underlies almost all the themes, as if performing the role of a kind of seed from which the fabric of the work sprouts.

So, at the very beginning of the concerto, in the main theme of the first movement leaps of quavers to the major seventh, repeated four times in a row, generate rhythmic pulsating and electrified atmosphere of efficiency and enthusiasm. Everything is "twisted" around this intonation: final rising motif of the first and second entries of the main theme, the subsequent bass line in the orchestra part, the bravura figurations in the piano part in a following episode etc.

A semblance of this formative intonation can be found in Prokofiev's First Piano Concerto. The main subject of its first section contains the interval of a rising minor second G - A flat (which, by the way, is inversion of a major seventh), which gives the listener the feeling of tension. The music of the first part of Britten's Concerto is very close to this section of Prokofiev's work in its intensity, elation and energy.

In the Finale of Prokofiev's Second Piano Concerto, the main theme is built on similar leaps to ninths, the piano part's characteristic of alternating octaves with unisons - anticipates such in Britten's work.

By contrast, the second theme (R4)¹ having whimsical rhythm goes legato by intonations of seconds. This theme has a bubbling character and is of considerable breadth, but interestingly, is closely related to the main theme. The musical material is developed by the composer masterfully. The next episode (R7), with the leading role of the piano, is a convergence of the two main themes, almost their synthesis, which is pianistically spectacular.

¹ R – rehearsal mark

A long and virtuosic cadenza is built on the contrast of different elements. In the coda for the first time the second theme appears in the piano, and with its timbre and color it acquires an essentially new sound. At the same time, the now gently and smoothly paced major seventh appears in harp and bass. The sound world created by Britten in this episode is magical. Only probably some pages of Prokofiev's music, for example from the 1st and 2nd movements of his Third Piano Concerto, can compare with it in terms of magic and mystery of sound.

The music gradually fades into the air, but, after the impulse in the French Horns, the musical interest returns to the piano. An ascending motif based on the first four notes of the second theme reaches the minor seventh (D - C natural). Then several attempts to move up another half tone to the major seventh D-C# ... crowned with success on the first note of the final passage, which fills the same interval in the downward movement: C# - D. The circle is closed!

The second movement is a Waltz. French influences are clearly audible here: the composer creates a special sound atmosphere and mood inherent in French music.

It is not by accident, perhaps, that the first five notes of the main theme literally coincide with the theme of "More than a slow waltz" (*La Plus Que Lente*) by Debussy.

The subtle sound created by the composer dominates the movement, and spicy orchestral coloring is created using the masterly distribution of the themes between instruments while the orchestral texture remains thin and transparent. In earlier works such as the *Sinfonietta* op.1, *Fantasy Quartet* op.2, *Our hunting fathers* op.8 Britten is honing his ability to write for a chamber ensemble with individualized instrumental parts and related contrapuntal skill. And here this skill is fully manifested.

In the middle part there is a theme of oriental character. In the mood it sounds a bit similar to the theme of the *Meno mosso* section of the last movement of the Second Concerto by Rachmaninov, also oriental. These melodies are brought together using the interval of an augmented second. There is something Turkish or Middle Eastern in flavor of this section of Britten's concerto with timpani beats, pulsating chords in the strings, a resounding triangle, and rhythmic fragments in the quaver passages in the piano part.

Only in the recapitulation is the sound reminiscent of the grand dynamic sweep of the first movement of the Concerto. The last performance of the elegant theme of the waltz is entrusted to the piano, in which it sounds, though expressive, almost chamber-like. Top-down, crushed by three quavers, the motifs reminiscent of the oriental episode, prepare the way for the theme of the next movement, literally coinciding with the first notes. Finally, the theme rises to a familiar major seventh, which is also hiding in the last flying passage of the piccolo.

The story of the third movement is quite interesting and unusual. Initially Britten wrote a movement called "Recitative and aria" and performed it at the premiere concert in August 1938 at the Henry Wood festival of Promenade concerts in Queens Hall, but after critical reviews,

accusing the composer of light music and a mismatch with the rest of the concerto, Britten decided to rewrite the third movement and in 1945 composed the Impromptu, using contemporary material. The original version bears obvious traces of Tchaikovsky's music influence, especially in the romantic spirit of the expansive theme.

The Impromptu is written in the form of a Passacaglia, a form that the composer had previously used in the Finale of his Violin Concerto (1939). Here again we can detect some resemblance to the work of Prokofiev, since in his First Violin Concerto an unconventional order of movements initially appeared: Slow - Fast - Slow, subsequently used by Britten. Later, in his turn, Shostakovich partially followed Britten's model, composing the third movement of his First Violin Concerto also in Passacaglia form.

The theme of the Impromptu, as mentioned above, is anticipated in the Waltz by the last lines of the piano. The boundaries of the theme are again, as in the previous movements, delineated by a major seventh. This cohesion builds and organizes the form and development of the entire work, demonstrating the high skill and ingenuity of the composer. Presented first chordally, the theme runs through a series of six variations. The first variation, preceded by an episode of quasi cadenza, is recalling the undulating ups and virtuosity of cadenza of the first movement. There is something lullaby-like in the series of faintly swaying thirds in the piano part of the second variation, the theme, as in the first variation, being in the orchestra. The third variation of the recitative character is that the declamation of the soloist sounds like the pathos of a speaker trying to convince an invisible opponent. The next, the fourth variation, sounds like a fantastic dance, the rhythm changes to 12/8 and this three-part gives the music a waltz-like character. There is something of a 'puppet-ballet' about it, and at the same time mysterious in this whirling movement, which leads to the next variation, which is essentially a development and logical continuation of the same motif. It is marked with a *Misterioso* character and begins with a canon in which one might imagine the satanic serpent in the Garden of Eden, crawling, mysterious and threatening.

Further development and tension results in a sixth variation which transforms the waltz motif, menacingly riding the orchestral waves, reaching its climax at *fff*, where the piano, in a repeating chord-fanfare motive, echoes the theme of the Impromptu. Incidentally, these chordal fanfares which initially appeared in the first movement of the Concerto (R2, bars 9-10) play a significant role in the development of the entire work, often appearing at important or climactic points along with the interval of the major seventh. For example, the cadenza of the first movement is largely built upon them; they begin in the piano part in the second movement, in the transition to the middle section (in the same movement), and after an orchestral tutti the recapitulation of this motif powerfully features in the soloist's radiating arpeggiated chords.

The concluding part, restates, in reverse order, the themes of all the variations: waltz, recitative, rolling waves of the

thirds and finally the whole movement ends with the initial piano cadenza, now presented in C major in a calm mood.

The final movement, the March, begins *attacca*. As in the previous movements, the interval of the major seventh plays a big role. The music has the character of a procession approaching from afar. The composer makes innovative collaborations of the groups of orchestra and soloist. Gradually, the procession approaches, and finally, the piano enters with the main theme of the pompous elevated, theatrical march (R51). It reminds one of the march from Prokofiev's opera "The Love for Three Oranges" with its caustic humor, sounding almost satirical.

Between the main theme entries, a whimsical new theme in semiquavers and parallel thirds appears (R52), in which one can distinguish the initial motif of the second movement, the Waltz.

The development section brings back all the main themes. Crucial to the drama and the energy is the second theme, in ferocious semiquavers in the piano part.

In the *Quasi cadenza ma in tempo* episode the piano leads in strict tempo, the rhythm of the march contrasting with the classical solo cadenza with its inherent rhythmic freedom. The pulsation is supported by the beats of the tambourine and the big drum. The recapitulation starts with the melody of the March played majestically by the trumpets.

In this episode, perhaps, as in no other, one can also hear the closeness to the music of Shostakovich, to his First Piano Concerto, which Britten at that time knew and admired. The same applies in his symphonic development of musical material, polyphonic texture, and trumpet solo in the recapitulation.

The presence of a cadenza episode in the final part also brings together both concertos. Remember, by the way, the Shostakovich Concerto like Britten's consists of four movements.

The coda is built on the middle fanfare episode. The piano with maniacal persistence, repeats the motif in triplets whilst the orchestra plays all the main themes of the concert: the first and second themes of the first movement, the theme of the Waltz and the Impromptu. A series of ascending scales in unison in a galloping rhythm by orchestra and piano lead to the climax.

The last episode based on the leaps of the second theme from the first movement is written with masterful panache worthy of most remarkable romantic concertos.

IV. PERFORMING HISTORY OF THE CONCERTO SVIATOSLAV RICHTER

Benjamin Britten's Piano concerto was given its USSR premiere in February 1967 in Riga by Mikhail Voskresensky and the Latvian radio orchestra under Edgar Tons.

Sviatoslav Richter's performances of this work began a little later, in the same year and played a significant role in the fortunes of the concerto. Creative contacts and meetings of Benjamin Britten with musicians from the Soviet Union

are well-known and constitute an important feature of his biography. These meetings were held not only in Great Britain, but also in the USSR, which the composer visited five times, initially in March 1963. A little earlier, in January of the same year Britten met Sviatoslav Richter in London. They immediately established a mutually creative sympathy and understanding, which later led to some significant artistic collaboration.

Even before their first meeting, Richter was familiar with many of Britten's works and became a staunch admirer of his music. In his diary entry of November 22, 1973 (Britten's 60th birthday), Richter writes on the opera *Peter Grimes*: "This opera was the first I knew, and also the first Britten's music I heard... And it immediately caught me in its "fishing" network. It seemed to me then that I would have written the same if I had been a composer. Since then, I have become an ardent supporter of Britten's music and have remained so". [5]

It is fair to say that Sviatoslav Richter did not have such a close creative collaboration with any contemporary composers, except perhaps Prokofiev, as he did with Benjamin Britten.

Richter's diary entries and interviews reflected the respect with which he treated his British counterpart, his appreciation of Britten's music and personality.

So, soon after the first meeting, Richter said: "One experiences a surprisingly pleasant feeling when an attractive creative image of the artist is complemented by his extremely charming external and internal human appearance"[6].

In this collaboration (unlike Prokofiev) Britten was involved not only as composer, but also in other creative incarnations, as a conductor and pianist.

One of the most striking results of the fruitful creative communication between these two musicians was the recording of the Piano Concerto by Decca performed by Sviatoslav Richter and the English Chamber Orchestra under the direction of the composer in December 1970 (The first joint performance of the concert took place earlier, on June 18 1967 at Snape Maltings as part of the annual music festival organized by Britten and Pears). This record is still, after almost 50 years, considered a landmark.

In addition to his Piano Concerto, Britten also conducted the orchestra during performances of Mozart's 27th and 22nd concertos, played by Richter in 1965 and 1967 respectively. On this occasion, especially for him, the composer wrote a cadenza to the first part of the E flat major Concerto (K. 482), which the pianist loved and later performed in concerts and with other conductors (Muti, Ormandy). The manuscript of the cadenza with a dedication to Richter is now in the archives of the pianist.

At the Aldeburgh festival, the musicians performed several times as a piano duet playing works by Schubert, Mozart, Schumann and Britten's Rondo Alla Burlesque for two pianos op.23 No.1.

Richter praised Britten's performing and conducting talent and their creative union. "Despite some blunders, it's very authentic and the two artists connect perfectly together... Britten leads the orchestra wonderfully" [7] (on the joint recording of Mozart's piano Concerto No. 22 K. 482). "When it's Ben, it's always the highest level." [8]

Richter's brief but precise thoughts are interesting: "Which contemporary composers have something in common with Rimsky? Perhaps Britten. Both have watercolor or gouache, not oil paints". [9] "In Britten some experimentation always combines with human feeling – he is a representative of a very "humane" (if I may say so) music. This is felt in the choice of subjects for his operas, and also in other works". [10]

Apparently, exactly these features of Britten's music - theatricality and brilliance of musical characteristics - are especially close to Richter. Also in the Piano Concerto he particularly liked the *Intermezzo* with the sparkling character of each variation and the *March* with its almost 'buffo' theatricality.

Perhaps it is Richter's fascination with the composer's operatic work that is one of the main points of contact between the two masters. Recall that Richter, in his own words, in his youth dreamed of becoming an opera conductor. His love for Wagner's music began at a young age and his deep knowledge of his operas is well-documented.

Richter had a similar interest in Britten's operas. It is worth noting that in the twentieth century there was no other composer like Britten who created such a number of operas so diverse in content and style, many of which became the pinnacle examples of the genre.

Richter's genuine interest was exemplified in productions of Britten's operas "*Albert Herring*" and "*Turn of the Screw*" at the "December Nights" festival in 1983 and 1984. It is through the productions of Britten's operas that Richter's love of musical theatre that he carried through a lifetime was fulfilled. Together with Boris Pokrovsky, invited to help with the directing of the performances, he actively participated in the staging and rehearsal process, generating bright and innovative ideas, and then realized on the stage of the Pushkin Museum. Boris Pokrovsky wrote about Richter: "He had the gift of seeing music and hearing action. The nature of opera was his property; I can assure you - and his great gift" [11]. So even after the death of Britten in 1976, dialogue between the two musicians, two iconic figures of twentieth century music, continued through opera directing in a new light and at a new level.

V. CONCLUSION

Britten's artistic life and nature exemplified the consolidation and enrichment of cultures and showed that true human values have no boundaries. A detailed analysis of the Piano Concerto op.13 and an attempt to find the origins of Britten's work, to find the artistic impressions, connections and influences that had the greatest importance for him, in no way detract from the originality of his artistic thinking and the power of his artistic talent. On the contrary,

appreciating the sources of certain features of the composer's style, with even greater force and brightness, one can realize and perceive all that is new, original, and national that this artist brought to people with his humanistic art, the high note of the skills and human values, which he specified with his creativity.

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