

# The secret behind the dissonances in Prokofiev: Importance of Interpretation

Hechengzi Li

*The Juilliard School, New York, United States of America*

**Abstract:** When we think of the dissonances inside a piece of music, we think of darkness, sarcasm, and even the word "grotesque." However, who gives the idea of such terms, and why would we believe dissonances represent uncomfortable and uncertain feelings. One might argue that it is the tension created from the so-called "unresolved" or "un-finished" tone. But why must a tone be resolved, and what determined the term "resolved"? When did the word "dissonance" emerge into the music world, and why was this word invented? Throughout the history of music, we can see that dissonances have existed already from medieval times. The chromatic stepwise scales going down and up were amongst the troubadours when they hum the one-lined melismatic tone. Over time, dissonances became a crucial part of composers' compositional languages. In this paper, I will link dissonances to the life events of the composer during specific time, as well as the demands from the audiences at a particular time. To argue that as a performer, it is crucial to understand the reasons for the arrangements of dissonances inside a piece using historical background information. Try our best expressing the story behind the use of dissonances, expressing the demands from both composers and audiences through our instruments.

**Keywords:** Prokofiev; Dissonance; Interpretation

## 1. Introduction

The use of dissonance in a composition exists in almost every work among the music repertoires. The dissonances can represent the emotions such as insecurity and vulnerability. They can also present a portal for audiences to express their emotional needs under exceptional circumstances, such as war times. Thus, many composers (such as Schoenberg and Prokofiev) choose to experience outside of the traditional tonal arrangement of musical languages. Would the development of dissonance be, in a way, chasing the steps of modern idioms that were demanded by the public? After all, the composers wrote down this type of demand on the score, and the performer has an essential role in interpreting these changes in the music to the audience.

The arrangements of dissonances in a piano sonata written by the Russian composer Prokofiev seems as if the piece is built on dissonances. Can the extensive use of dissonances be the tool to channel the composer's life journey and the historical situations to the audiences? This paper will attempt to explain the performer's role in interpreting the dissonances inside the second movement of Prokofiev's Sonata No.7. As a performer, it is essential to interpret the dissonances inside Prokofiev's sonata no. 7 in a way to convey to the audience that music represents the composer's life journey and the historical situations at that time.

## 2. Prokofiev's 7th Sonata – second movement: the needs from the composer and the audience

Prokofiev's life journey plays a crucial role in shifting toward the atonal realm in his compositions. As a disciple from a traditional compositional school, Prokofiev studied composition with Reinhold Gliere from an early age. However, Prokofiev repelled his teacher's standard approach to composition; instead, he was experimenting with dissonances and time signatures<sup>[1]</sup>. From this detail, we can see that the atonal sonority had already existed in Prokofiev's heart since the very beginning of his journey as a composer. However, unlike his friend Schoenberg, who was the star at that time because of his achievement on the 12-tone atonal compositional technique, Prokofiev was not as popular amongst the audience in his late stage.

Prokofiev was influenced not only by pure musical aspects but also by nonmusical elements in life. In the book "Prokofiev: HIS LIFE AND THE EVOLUTION OF HIS MUSICAL LANGUAGE" by the

foremost Prokofiev scholar Boris Berman, the author states that over Prokofiev's compositional career, his musical style evolves significantly. He argues that there are two assumptions reasoning his change of style: political pressure in his late years and the natural process of accumulating modernistic idiom. In this book, the author compares Prokofiev's life to the cultural situation during that time, stating that the specific composition was influenced mainly by the composer's life experience during that time. The author also argues that Prokofiev changes his compositional style to make him more popular among the public due to his need for recognition. The arguments bring an idea to my mind that if writing in an atonal form could make a composer popular at that specific time, could the development of dissonance showcase the most needed escape (or the most wanted form of sonority) from the audiences in unstable times <sup>[2]</sup>.

Compared to the state of society in the middle of the 20th century, it is hard for us to imagine the atrocity of the regime in Prokofiev's time. The unstable aspect of the government, the split of the Soviet Union, the lies from the propagandas. All of these imaginarily add immense pressure to the general public. From personal experience as one of the general publics, whenever I feel emotional and want to have a getaway moment, I always want to listen to music, I would also choose different music types depending on the scenario.

Given said this, I am attempting to present my argument from two sides of the spectrum in dealing with the struggle of living in an unstable time. Music is a way to express one's emotional outbreak, both for the composer and the audience. From the composer's point of view, the need for recognition and the fear of his government, he needed a portal to express invulnerability in his compositions. From the publics' point of view, the need for a getaway portal for emotions, the need of a tool to express their anger, fear, and insecurity, driving them to yearn for unstableness and the sense of unresolved anger in the music. Thus, the development of dissonance could be, in a way, chasing the steps of modern idioms that were needed by the public at a specific time.

Outside of functional tonality, dissonances can express the vulnerability of the public and the composer due to scientific facts. Science proves that dissonances are unpleasant to our ears, therefore grabbing more attention from audiences. In Dalby Bruce's article "Student times," the author states that "the pitch of a musical tone is determined by the sound of vibration of the physical medium producing the tone." <sup>[3]</sup>. Thus, the fundamental facts are what distinguish the sonority of atonal and tonal. The differences of vibrations between tonal and atonal have different ways to resonate with our ears; therefore, it creates contrasting atmosphere. When the sound is tonal, the vibration aligns with our ears. But when the dissonances occur, the speed of the vibration changes through the strings, creating distortion in our hearing process. To sum up, the sound of dissonance is unnatural to our sensibility. This statement was supported by Phil N. Johnson-Laird, Olivia E. Kang, and Yuan Chang Leong in their article "On Musical Dissonance." The authors suggest that we develop dissonances in music because it provides enhancements to the musical atmosphere, due to its nature to combine various sensory <sup>[4]</sup>. Therefore, when tonal music's harmonious nature could no longer fulfill the audiences' demands and the composer's aesthetic, dissonances and chromaticism can help the composers to further decorate their musical language, providing a better sounding experience for the audiences.

The unstable nature of Prokofiev's journey as a composer is the reason I chose him as the main character to discuss in this paper. In my perspective, his music seems to evolve alongside the aesthetics of the public. As we discussed in the beginning of the paper, Prokofiev was already intrigued by the atonal sonority in music since he was a student. Nevertheless, his music during the early to middle stages of his life is highly unstable in terms of tonality. Prokofiev composed his Piano Sonata No.1 in 1901. This work experiences the adaptation of dissonances and the different sides to arrange the rhythm to give an unstable nature. However, this sonata was not popularized among the public; it is rarely performed even in recent days. With the lack of recognition from the audiences, Prokofiev composed his Symphony No.1 between 1916 and 1917. Unlike the unstable nature of his piano sonata no.1, the tonal center lays in D major in this symphony cannot be expressed clearer. All sections from the orchestras elaborate on this tonal polarity. The structure and rhythm of this work is also highly "traditional". The composer lands on all the accents on the strong beats, without any distortion of the rhythm and harmony. Few transpositions in this work also strictly follow the conventional way of using a pivot chord or non-chord tone to transpose to the new key smoothly. The non-functional dissonances inside this work are primarily functional, as they serve the purpose of transposing. These dissonances are always resolved alongside the leading tones inside this work. After acknowledging that the public accepted this work, Prokofiev then composed other works in a similar style, such as Peter the Wolf. However, the acknowledgment from the public lasted only until the rise of the star Schoenberg and Stravinsky.

World War II saddened the world in the middle of the 20th century. It is not hard to imagine that the public is looking for a portal to express their fear, vulnerability, and insecurity during this unstable time.

Music became not only the aesthetic experience for the audiences but also a safe house for the public to stay, either by exporting their emotions, or a way to fight back the atrocities of the regime and the war. During this time, Schoenberg's advanced or evolved way of creating music following the 12-tone composition technique caught the audiences' attention. The non-resolving quality of Schoenberg's music falls into the demand from the public. Prokofiev's career path as a composer has been challenged but threatened. This could very well be the trigger that inspires Prokofiev to embrace his talent again with atonality and dissonant sonority, which could be one of the important motivations for composing his Piano Sonata No.7. This sonata has three-movement; the first and the last movement is highly condensed in adapting the non-functional dissonances, which seems like the movements are built on dissonances. However, I would like to dwell on the second movement because of its uniqueness. The second movement is a perfect combination or contrast of tonal and atonal. The movement consists of many diatonic notes relations and has a grounded tonal center and many non-functional dissonances that intensify the entire movement.

This movement follows the traditional ABA form. It starts with the chromatic stepwise motion that unifies in both hands. The right hand repeats the tonic six-four chords while having a cadential V-I in the left hand (see example 1). With the swing or syncopated rhythmic gestures, the movement begins with a clear sense of diatonic polarity. The dissonances are achieved through chromatic stepwise motion and often get resolved right away.



Figure 1: Beginning of the second movement of Prokofiev sonata no.7

Example 1: The middle section is very interesting regarding its non-functional dissonances' arrangement. We can see from example 2 that a Neapolitan sixth chord is following the tonic chord. After the alternations between these two chords, the music moves to the climactic moments when all the dissonances add together one on top of each other while the tonal polarity shifts to median in E major – G sharp. While still maintaining a particular gravitational pole for tonal music, the music develops to its climax by adding the non-functional dissonance to create this intensified atmosphere.



Figure 2: Excerpt from the second movement of Prokofiev sonata no.7

Example 2.



Figure 3: Excerpt from the second movement of Prokofiev sonata no.7

Example 3: The movement ends with the A section (see example 3), a reoccurring beginning as the ending. I find that the most intriguing aspect is that the entire movement ends on the E major tonic chord. This contrast inside this movement gives me more ideas on how to interpret this work. Could the middle section represent Prokofiev's struggle for identity and trying to imitate what Schoenberg has been creating? Could the conclusion of the movement be the way for Prokofiev to finally find calm and peace at heart?

### 3. Conclusions

As musicians, we spend our entire life trying to understand the meaning behind the notes. Thus, we search in-depth for the historical sources just trying to get closer to the composer. Given this, I believe that the music created by the composer always needs a performer. Hence, as a performer, it is our duty to be honest to the composer, music, and audience. It is imperative to understand the reasons for specific arrangements of the non-functional dissonances with the help of historical background information. And then try our best expressing any emotions: fear, vulnerability, joy, happiness, or anger that drives from both the audiences and the composers through our instrument.

### References

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