Nikolai Kapustin: *Piano Quintet, Op. 89*

Nikolai Kapustin once wrote, "In the early '50s jazz was completely prohibited, and there were articles in our magazines that said it was typical capitalistic culture, so we have to throw it away and forget about it." With occasional respites, this situation lasted well beyond the Stalin years into the Krushchev and even Brezhnev regimes.

But forbidden fruit had always managed to survive the censors in two ways. One was "samizdat" (self-published) and the other, "tamizdat" (published abroad and smuggled in). Jazz and popular Western music were particularly difficult to get because there were few machines to play vinyl recordings or tapes. Yet American and Western European records were still sneaked in and shared among the few who had record players.

Samizdat sound recordings were produced on home made record lathes. Some enterprising Russian jazz-lover had discovered that x-ray film is soft enough to be recorded on, but strong enough to hold the groove, and there was a plentiful supply of x-rays discarded by hospitals. These recordings (which "sounded like sand") were known, with the characteristic dark humor of the time, as "ryobra" (ribs). This was the atmosphere in which Nikolai Kapustin became a composer.

In 1953 Josef Stalin died – and Kapustin at age 16 heard jazz for the first time over the radio at a friend's house. He had already begun to study as a pianist. Political attitudes about jazz temporarily became more permissive, but his teachers at the conservatory where he studied the classics were still a problem. He wrote, "Maybe the government looked at jazz with some suspicion, but it seems to me that an attitude to jazz of some professors of conservatories is much worse." By day he was a piano student playing classical music at the conservatory. By night he played jazz with his friends.

But while he was soaking up jazz techniques and attaining notoriety as a jazz pianist, both in State-approved big bands and in clubs, he was not really happy facing a career as a jazz pianist. He wanted to compose music that synthesized classical forms and jazz textures – music that used the language of jazz improvisation but does not improvise. As one writer put it, "a jazz vernacular presented in a contrapuntally dense framework of thematic organization, development, and restatement" – something more integrated even than Gunther Schuller's Third Stream.

The irony resulting from following his natural inclination was that he was able to sneak under the censors in broad daylight. He may have raised some eyebrows, but his jazz-infused forms were within the bounds of what was taught at the conservatory. His music wasn't the sort of freewheeling jazz that challenged authority – it was not judged as "blatnaya pesnya" (roughly, "criminal" or "prison" music). As of today, Kapustin has published over 600 works. Most of them are built on traditional "classical" forms, but all of them swing.

An excellent example of Kapustin's fusion of form and style is found in his 1998 Piano Quintet. The first movement, Allegro, is full of sweeping gestures and marked by cascading jazz roulades in the piano. The second movement, Presto, is a wickedly angular little scherzo; don't blink – it's over before you know it. The beautiful slow movement, Lento, concentrates on the strings in the closest thing in this work to a romantic style. Finally, The Allegro non troppo is a tour de force of fusion that one critic has called a "jazz-rock classic." Perhaps that's an overstatement, but it is guaranteed that audience and performers will be breathless at the end.

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Serge Prokofiev: F*our Pieces from Romeo and Juliet, Op. 64, arr. for viola and piano by Vadim Borisovsky*

When Prokofiev composed the music to *Romeo and Juliet in* 1935-36 he probably had no idea of the storm he was walking into. It didn't really involve his music. There were internal political problems at the Kirov and Bolshoi Theatres that eventually drew in the Soviet Committee on Cultural Affairs to reorganize the staff of the

Bolshoi. All this came in the midst of an increasing fear and trepidation in the arts community following Pr*avda's* 1936 attack on the "formalism" of Shostakovich's music. The scheduled premiere of the ballet was postponed indefinitely, but Prokofiev kept the music alive in two orchestral suites (1936) and a set of ten piano transcriptions (1937). The ballet was finally premiered in Czechoslovakia in 1938 (Prokofiev couldn't attend because he was not allowed to travel outside the Soviet Union). The ballet, with a score altered by the choreographer, was finally premiered in Leningrad at the Kirov Theatre in 1940. The production received the Stalin Prize. For no ostensible reason, fates and favors could switch in the blink of an eye in the former Soviet Union.

Several years after Prokofiev published the original score to R*omeo and Juliet,* his friend Vadim Borisovsky (1900-1972) asked his permission to arrange a suite of viola transcriptions from various scenes. He did so with Prokofiev's full approval. Borisovsky was the founder of the Soviet viola school and the violist of the reknowned Beethoven Quartet. He eventually transcribed thirteen pieces from the ballet. The ones on this program are from four numbers in Act I, Scene 1.

• The tranquil In*troduction po*rtrays a sleeping city, Verona at dawn, just before the public square comes to life.

• Yo*ung Juliet pi*ctures two sides of an innocent young girl, her silly, playful mood taken over by lyrical dreams – but not for long as she scampers off.

• At the Capulet ball plodding chords accompany the boastful, strutting Da*nce of the Knights.*

Lastly, we hear Prokofiev's portrait of Romeo's brash friend, *Mercutio.* It's interesting to compare *Mercutio with Young Juliet.* Both pieces make liberal use of spiccato (the bow comes off the string in a controlled natural rebound – often used in rapid virtuosic passages). The same technique that portrayed scampering in Young Juliet comes off as virile bravado in *Mercutio.* Juliet is dancing carefree. *Mercutio* is spoiling for a fight.

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