



REVIEW ARTICLE

Reappraising Prokofiev's Operas

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Nathan Seinen, *Prokofiev's Soviet Operas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 269pp.

Christina Guillaumier, *The Operas of Sergei Prokofiev*, Boydell & Brewer, 2020. 298pp.

Dassia N. Posner and Kevin Bartig, eds., *Three Loves for Three Oranges: Gozzi, Meyerhold, Prokofiev*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2021. 460pp.

Sergei Prokofiev's operatic career exhibits a multitude of exceptional successes and failures, political and cultural idiosyncrasies and compromises, and bold convictions and uncertainties. Prokofiev considered himself an opera composer and showed his affinity for it from an early age, completing his first opera by age nine and continuing his work in the art form for the remainder of his life and career. Each opera takes on vastly different subjects, topics and time periods, evidence of his diverse selection of libretto sources. For his mature works, Prokofiev adapted literary works from Russia's nineteenth-century greats (Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy), a Russian twentieth-century symbolist author (Bryusov) and two socialist-realist authors (Katayev and Polevoy). He adapted two other operas from the eighteenth century with Richard Brinsley Sheridan's comic opera libretto for *The Duenna* and Carlo Gozzi's fiaba *L'amore delle tre melarance*.

Prokofiev possessed incredible compositional and dramaturgical gifts, which he displayed in his juvenile operas and refined throughout his life. The hallmarks of his style were his attention to dramatic rhythm and pacing and the use of a declamatory style of vocal writing. Both elements contributed to Prokofiev's comprehensive dramaturgical goals of 'scenic flow' or 'scenic flexibility'. While these stylistic and dramaturgical principles made his operas unique and innovative, they also partly impeded the works' success. As Richard Taruskin points out, '[Prokofiev's] operatic career had been one of unremitting failure'.¹ Performances for his first completed opera, *The Gambler* (1917, rev. 1928), fell through for many reasons beyond the composer's control, but it received its premiere in Brussels in 1929, over a decade after Prokofiev finished the original score. *The Love*

¹ Richard Taruskin, *On Russian Music* (Berkeley, 2009), 247. These failures primarily concern the lack of productions given to many of Prokofiev's operas or the fact that some were never staged during the composer's lifetime. The reasons for this can be attributed in part to aspects of Prokofiev's aesthetic rigidity, but many of the problems existed outside the composer's control. Some of the issues that contributed to these failures were the ineptitude of directors, the inabilities of performers or the bureaucratic hoop-jumping one needed to address when producing an opera in the Soviet Union.

for *Three Oranges*, the second of his completed mature operas, premiered in Chicago eight years before *The Gambler*, in 1921. It even had successful premieres in the Soviet Union at the Mariinsky in 1926 and the Bolshoi in 1927. *The Fiery Angel* (1923, rev. 1927) languished as production plans fell through and Prokofiev continued to revise the work; it would be performed in full in Venice in 1955. As for Prokofiev's Soviet operas, similar catastrophes awaited. *Semyon Kotko* (1939) failed to remain in the repertory, being outstripped by Tikhon Khrennikov's 'song opera' *Into the Storm* (1939). *Betrothal in a Monastery* (1941) experienced delays due to war and premiered only in 1946. *War and Peace* (1943, rev. 1952), a massive undertaking and Prokofiev's most significant operatic achievement, received a complete staging two years after his death in 1955 and became firmly established in the repertory.² His last opera, *The Story of a Real Man*, only received a closed-door rehearsal performance for officials in December 1948, an inauspicious year for a Prokofiev opera due to the attacks that befell the composer and many others in February of that same year. Officials roundly criticised the opera after the rehearsal, and it only reached the stage twelve years later in 1960.

Despite his rather unfortunate experiences in his operatic career while he was alive, Prokofiev's sheer determination, his compositional talent and his diversity in subject matter have attracted several scholars to his operas. This research begins with massive undertakings in doctoral theses, from Rita McAllister's 'The Operas of Sergei Prokofiev' (1970) to Harlow Robinson's 'The Operas of Sergei Prokofiev and Their Literary Sources' (1980) and Stella Baty Landis's 'The Soviet Operas of Sergei Prokofiev: In Search of Socialist Realism' (2007). Prokofiev studies have also included a range of biographies throughout the 1980s and into the late 2000s: Natalia Savkina's *Prokofiev* (1984), Harlow Robinson's *Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography* (1987) and Simon Morrison's *The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years* (2009). Scholarly work on the operas has been bolstered by recent dissertation projects such as Katya Ermolaeva's critical edition of the first version of *War and Peace* and Ondrej Gima's critical edition of the first version of *The Fiery Angel*. In the third decade of the twenty-first century, Prokofiev is under reconsideration again (see, for instance, Rita McAllister and Christina Guillaumier's *Rethinking Prokofiev* (2020)), and such reappraisal includes a concentrated focus on his operas.³

The primary focus of this review is the recent publication of three magnificent accomplishments in Prokofiev operatic studies: Christina Guillaumier's *The Operas of Sergei Prokofiev* (2020), Nathan Seinen's *Prokofiev's Soviet Operas* (2019) and a collection of essays edited by Dassia N. Posner and Kevin Bartig with Maria De Simone, entitled *Three Loves for Three Oranges: Gozzi, Meyerhold, Prokofiev* (2021). Although published separately, these three books almost serve as an unplanned series that should be read together. Guillaumier's contribution presents a broad overview of Prokofiev's operas in chronological order,

² *War and Peace* remains in the repertory today, but the opera has acquired new political meanings in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its recent productions by the Mariinsky in 2022 and the Hungarian State Opera in January 2023.

³ See the following biographies and reappraisals: Natalia Savkina, *Prokofiev*, trans. Catherine Young (Neptune City, NJ, 1984); Harlow Robinson, *Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography* (New York, 1987); Simon Morrison, *The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years* (Oxford, 2009); Rita McAllister and Christina Guillaumier, eds., *Rethinking Prokofiev* (Oxford, 2020). See the following dissertations: Rita McAllister, 'The Operas of Sergei Prokofiev' (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1970); Harlow Robinson, 'The Operas of Sergei Prokofiev and Their Literary Sources' (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1980); Stella Baty Landis, 'The Soviet Operas of Sergei Prokofiev: In Search of Socialist Realism' (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2007); Katya Ermolaeva, 'Prokofiev's First Version of *War and Peace*: Lyrico-Dramatic Scenes on the Novel by L.N. Tolstoy, Op. 91 (1942)' (PhD diss., Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and University of St. Andrews, 2018); Ondrej Gima, 'The First Version of Serge Prokofiev's *Fiery Angel* with a Critical Edition of the Composer's Compositional Sketch' (PhD diss., Goldsmiths University of London, 2020).

beginning with the composer's juvenile works up to *Maddalena* (1913) and moving through each of his mature works. Next, Seinen narrows the scope a bit, limiting his period of study to Prokofiev's Soviet operas. Finally, Posner, Bartig and De Simone observe the centenary of the composer's most successful opera with a detailed and multidisciplinary collection that engages with the opera's theatrical origins, its historical and artistic contexts, and its rich legacy as well as those of its collaborators. To compare these publications, I survey them individually and draw further connections where possible.

Guillaumier sets out to provide the 'first comprehensive and critical evaluation of all the composer's operas' (1). As such, she explores Prokofiev's juvenile works – *The Giant* (1900), *On Desert Islands* (1902), *A Feast in Time of Plague* (1903) and *Undina* (1907) – as well as the eight mature works from *Maddalena* to *The Story of a Real Man*. Guillaumier acquaints readers with each opera through plot synopses (including a full set of complete synopses for the mature works in an appendix), archival material (Prokofiev's own words in diary entries and manuscript scores), reception studies and musical analyses. Her analyses construct an image of Prokofiev's 'working methods, his compositional process, and his musical idiom' (4). Starting with the juvenile works, Guillaumier's analysis shows the composer's melodic and harmonic preferences, his youthful approach to orchestration and his early conceptions of motivic gesture for characterisation. The mature works are treated similarly, but here she also presents a more crystallised image of Prokofiev's essential operatic components: 'scenic plasticity, declamation, and characterisation' (3). *The Gambler* represents Prokofiev's first attempt at fully realising these elements, and they serve as a point of comparison throughout the remaining operas. By tracing the composer's approach to these operatic ideals in each opera, Guillaumier shows the development in his compositional approach as well as his ability to reflect on his own processes.

The foregrounding of his music and the constant reflection on his operatic ideals allows Guillaumier to show Prokofiev as an opera composer with true convictions toward an art form he deeply cared about. She skilfully depicts the human side of composition by documenting the struggles, whether internal or external, that Prokofiev faced in trying to uphold his artistic ideals and hopefully see the operas realised on the stage. The history of revisions for nearly all the works demonstrates how Prokofiev struggled with his own principles, pushing them to a breaking point in *The Fiery Angel*. Guillaumier also explores the external challenges Prokofiev faced in maintaining those same principles in his Soviet operas. At times, Prokofiev would become hampered by his adherence to his idealistic principles and his attention to external pressures from the state, especially in an opera such as *War and Peace*; however, he often found workarounds. Ultimately, Guillaumier's approach allows for the complexities of Prokofiev's operatic experiences to rise to the foreground without getting mired in the political contexts that conceal these compositional challenges.

In her introduction to the book, the author directly states, 'It is not my intention here to re-evaluate the context or political landscape Prokofiev inhabited unless it serves to illuminate aspects of his vision or his compositional and dramaturgical processes' (2), and she adheres to her self-imposed restrictions almost to a fault. It is difficult to discuss the Soviet operas without engaging the bureaucratic politics and the shifting goalposts of socialist realism, but Guillaumier does so successfully by allowing the music and her analyses to speak for themselves. Thus, she at least attempts to move beyond an understanding of these works as exclusively political or cultural products of their circumstances. She insists that simplistically understanding Prokofiev's late operas only in terms of their political or cultural conditions does a 'deep disservice not only to Russian music and the operatic repertoire more broadly but also more importantly to one of the greatest composers of the twentieth century' (5). This is not merely a scholarly concern: it also relates

to a contemporary problem for theatres hoping to stage these Soviet works. Unlike his contemporary Shostakovich, Prokofiev frequently lacks the easily reducible and dramatic backstory that functions as a major selling point to opera-goers.

Whatever Guillaumier avoids in the political context of Prokofiev's late operas, Nathan Seinen faces head-on. By narrowing his book's focus to only the Soviet operas, Seinen wades into the conflicts between Prokofiev's compositional approach and Stalinist aesthetics, without discounting the importance of the music. Each chapter combines a range of methodologies, which include presentations of manuscript score examples, drafts, music notebooks, letters and correspondence together with examinations of issues in aesthetics, ideology, genre, style, reception and adaptation. The variety of approaches contributes to Seinen's overall goal: 'To examine each of the four operas as individual works possessing distinctive stylistic qualities and a particular relationship to contemporary culture' (4). Contemporary culture, in this case, refers to the period of high Stalinism from the mid-to-late 1930s until 1953. Seinen presents each chapter as an individual operatic case study, constructed along the following themes: (i) the context of composing opera in the Stalin era, (ii) the conflicts between the composer's compositional approach to and the state's demands on the genre, and (iii) the major historical events that shaped the composition and reception of the works. Finally, Seinen, like Guillaumier, explores Prokofiev's operatic ideals, but he uses the friction they create with the aesthetics of socialist realism as a connective thread in each chapter.

Although Seinen examines each opera separately and chronologically, he wants readers to understand them as pairs within the broader issues he raises between the composer and the state. He considers the first pair, treated in the first two chapters, as 'reinterpretations of classical genres of the theatre' (227). He argues that Prokofiev made use of classical melodrama and elements of Gogolian comedy in *Semyon Kotko*, and that he capitalised on the rising popularity of classic *opera buffa* in *Betrothal in a Monastery*. Seinen explains, 'The two operas are complementary in many respects, since both are ensemble pieces featuring stock characters and were intended to be suitable for popular audiences' (227). Prokofiev drew these stock characters from disparate sources such as the positive hero in the title character of *Semyon Kotko* and the quintessential characters from *opera buffa* of the eighteenth century in *Betrothal in a Monastery*. Their differences in adaptation sources notwithstanding, Seinen views both operas as 'different solutions to the same problem, namely of how to compose an opera in the Soviet context while pursuing independent artistic goals' (99). In this pairing, he features in-depth analyses of the genre and stylistic resources Prokofiev used in his initial attempts at the art form of Soviet opera.

Likewise, *War and Peace* and *The Story of a Real Man* are a complementary pairing, but of a completely different sort due to their uneasy relationship with Stalinist aesthetics throughout the wartime and post-war periods. Both operas faced considerable challenges from the bureaucratic processes that required constant and contradictory revisions amid relentless political and ideological change. The delays in the production of *War and Peace* resulted from these revisions, and Seinen suggests that *The Story of a Real Man* was a response to that experience. He points out that Prokofiev tried to absolve his earlier aesthetic challenges by incorporating more lyrical elements in the opera, including elements of folk song, mass song and 'song opera'. This last element had been a fleetingly successful form of Soviet opera best represented by Ivan Dzerzhinsky's *Quiet Flows the Don* (1935) and Tikhon Khrennikov's *Into the Storm*. Prokofiev's shift away from a declamatory style to a more lyrical one was not unique among the Soviet Union's most accomplished composers. Dmitri Shostakovich similarly declared in 1934 that his second opera, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, featured more 'singable and cantilena-like' vocal writing and served as a response

to the critics of his first opera, *The Nose*.⁴ Moreover, Prokofiev's *The Story of a Real Man* was also a response of sorts to the incredibly damaging period of the 'anti-formalism' campaign in 1948, which labelled Prokofiev and other composers as 'formalists' (Guillaumier, 213).⁵

Beyond the voluntary engagement with or neglect of political context, one thing that connects Guillaumier and Seinen's projects is their comments on Prokofiev's use of humour and comedy in his operas from his pre-Soviet and Soviet compositional periods. Seinen focuses on comedic and humorous elements in Prokofiev's first two Soviet operas. With *Semyon Kotko*, he explores Prokofiev's connection to Russian operatic traditions through his use of Gogolian comedic elements. Seinen similarly connects *Betrothal in a Monastery* to comedic opera genres of the European past, such as *opera buffa* and ballad opera, which gained popularity and official priority in the Soviet Union. Guillaumier finds elements of humour and comedy in *The Gambler* and *War and Peace* through the composer's grotesque caricatures of unsavoury individuals or antagonistic foes. She also notes Prokofiev's use of comedy to bring relief to the otherwise heavy and dark situations that abound in *The Fiery Angel*. In many instances, these comedic elements can be found in Prokofiev's use of stylistic and melodic features such as the comic march that represents the arrogant and pitiful General in *The Gambler*. In *Semyon Kotko*, Prokofiev incorporates different declamatory strategies to reveal the primary antagonist's double-crossing behaviour, ultimately creating a truly revolting buffoon.

These examples of Prokofiev's use of caricature and comedic styles and situations reveal only a small part of his intuitive approach to humour. However, in *The Love for Three Oranges* the composer's comedic gifts are on full display from musical as well as dramaturgical points of view. In the last of this review's trio of texts, *The Love for Three Oranges* serves as a vehicle through which to situate Prokofiev's operatic and comedic talents within a broader creative network. Dassia N. Posner, Kevin Bartig and Maria De Simone's volume brings together an illustrious group of scholars from multiple disciplines to present the histories of three revolutionary theatrical manifestos: Carlo Gozzi's fiaba *The Love for Three Oranges*, Vsevolod Meyerhold's divertissement adaptation of Gozzi's fiaba and Prokofiev's adaptation of the two works for his opera of the same title. The editors separate the book into three parts, centred on Gozzi, Meyerhold and Prokofiev respectively, and take each artist's theatrical approach into account. The volume includes English translations of the fiaba, the divertissement and the libretto at the beginning of each corresponding part. Maria De Simone's translation of Gozzi's fiaba is the first complete English translation since the late nineteenth century and Dassia N. Posner's translation of the Meyerhold divertissement is the first of its kind. Additionally, De Simone, Posner and Bartig help readers recognise the differences between the fiaba, divertissement and libretto by placing in bold font the parts that were completely original to each of the texts.

The collection of essays represents a broad view of the three versions of *The Love for Three Oranges* as well as their primary creators and various collaborators, highlighting 'the theatre as an act of collective creation' instead of a single figure's creative efforts (3). As such, the essays demonstrate the importance of Antonio Sacchi's performance troupe to the success of Gozzi's fiaba, document Meyerhold's collaborations with Konstantin Vogak and Vladimir Soloviev on the divertissement, and describe Prokofiev's reliance on both Meyerhold and Gozzi's innovations despite writing the libretto and composing the music himself. The fiaba, divertissement and opera all

⁴ Dmitri Shostakovich, 'Tragediya-Satira', *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* 47 (1932), 3. Reproduced and translated in Marina Frolova-Walker and Jonathan Walker, *Music and Soviet Power, 1917-1932* (Woodbridge, 2012), 331.

⁵ Guillaumier notes that Prokofiev did not necessarily consider *The Story of a Real Man* as a 'work of rehabilitation', but he was 'certainly doing his best to conform' following the 1948 denunciation.

represent radical departures from the standard conventions of eighteenth-century Italian theatre, Russian theatrical pedagogy and practice as well as European operatic traditions. The various studies brought together in this collection link the versions through many shared or related influences. They emphasise the connections between all three by offering an alternative to reading the book chronologically from part to part and chapter to chapter. Instead, they suggest that the 'book's essays are designed to be read across themes and sections' (24).

The third part of the book focuses specifically on Prokofiev's opera and begins with Kevin Bartig's introduction to his translation of the libretto. Bartig begins with a bit of contextualisation that illuminates the composer's anxieties around developing a satirical opera that might have seemed out of touch with the prevailing circumstances surrounding the end of the Great War and Russia's ongoing Civil War. The author also addresses the problems of misattribution of the opera's source material, explaining Meyerhold's influence on the opera and Prokofiev's modifications to the Meyerholdian elements.

Inna Naroditskaya, Natalia Savkina and Simon A. Morrison each contribute an essay engaging with intertextual and stylistic cross-references in Prokofiev's opera. Focusing on *commedia dell'arte* specifically, Naroditskaya connects the opera to Russia's theatrical and operatic traditions that extend back to the imperial court theatre of the eighteenth century. Savkina provides a broad range of connections to other stylistic and genre practices from opera to the song cycle. Morrison explores further musical intertexts between the opera and other familiar works such as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in the remarkable laughing episode at the end of Act II. Each author presents fresh insights on Prokofiev's musical jokes through brilliant and vibrant prose, convincing the reader to listen anew to *The Love for Three Oranges*.

The final essays by John E. Bowlt and Kevin Bartig offer distinct takes on two different productions of the opera. Bowlt focuses on Boris Anisfeld, set and costume designer of the world premiere of Prokofiev's opera in Chicago on 30 December 1921. Anisfeld was a well-regarded and successful designer for numerous operas in America, and his designs for *The Love for Three Oranges* premiere were a critical success. Bowlt discusses Anisfeld's artistic philosophy and approach, compares the different sets and costumes used in the Chicago and Leningrad premieres, and comments on the artist's strange disappearance from the theatre after 1926. Bartig follows up with an overview of Sergei Radlov's Leningrad production of the opera in 1926. As the author points out, the opera's success emerged in the complicated space of the new Soviet Union, where new operas from the west found their way to the Leningrad stage alongside 'revolutionised' productions of nineteenth-century operas.⁶ He teases out the ironies of labelling Prokofiev's opera as an example of operatic innovations outside the Soviet Union, and comments on critics' praise for the work's political associations, despite an absence of direct political references in the opera. The successes in Leningrad and subsequent performances cemented *The Love for Three Oranges* as Prokofiev's most successful project, and it paved Prokofiev's path to return to Russia in 1936.

Taken together, the three books under consideration here illuminate a pair of themes that will continue to require further exploration. The first relates to Prokofiev's uneasy relationship with Soviet opera and socialist realism. Kevin Bartig's final chapter in

⁶ The lack of a new repertory of Soviet operas in the 1920s required new solutions for creating and producing topically relevant operas for the public. One such solution resulted in taking popular nineteenth-century operas by Meyerbeer, Puccini or even Glinka and retrofitting them with more topically relevant, revolutionary librettos. Bartig also discusses how western modernist works – Prokofiev's *The Love for Three Oranges* received this categorisation – arrived on the Leningrad stage due to the relationship between the *Mezhdunarodaia kniga* and Universal Edition located in Vienna (394).

Three Loves for Three Oranges hints at the irony of Prokofiev's great success with his exemplar of operatic innovation from the west, and both Seinen and Guillaumier explore the subsequent debacles and challenges Prokofiev experienced with his four Soviet operas. The issues undergirding these drastically contrasting situations cannot be fully explored here, but there is plenty to glean from each author's approach. Guillaumier tries to stay above the political fray, preferring to explore how Prokofiev remained steadfast toward certain technical elements of his operatic style. Her commitment to showing Prokofiev's faithfulness to his ideals throughout the book, especially throughout the chapters on the Soviet operas, echoes Taruskin's final remarks in his essay on these works: 'In dealing with Prokofiev's Soviet period it is easy to fall into an accusing tone, to speak of coercion and capitulation. But most of the modifications Prokofiev's Soviet style displays are implicit in his earlier work, and ultimately it is possible to recognize the underlying continuity that links all phases of Prokofiev's career.'⁷ Guillaumier's treatment of the Soviet operas follows the spirit of Taruskin's statement and brings some much-needed critical attention to this stage of Prokofiev's music.

Seinen likewise provides brilliant descriptions of the music alongside his in-depth presentations of the shifting political and ideological landscapes in which the composer operated. Ultimately, as the author states, his account highlights 'significant and revealing examples of that central theme of Soviet music, the struggle between creative independence and subservience to state demands' (231). Seinen, of course, discusses how Prokofiev maintained his principles; however, the framework of Prokofiev's struggle against the state fails to capture a complete picture of the composer's musical life in the Soviet Union. Prokofiev did experience pitfalls and struggles in opera, but there is much more to his career as a Soviet composer. Marina Frolova-Walker's 2016 publication on the Stalin Prizes for music develops this comprehensive, though no less complex, image of Prokofiev, Soviet opera and socialist realism.⁸ Throughout *Stalin's Music Prize: Soviet Culture and Politics*, Frolova-Walker presents the inner workings of the prize committees, revealing the many arguments made in support of various composers deserving of official recognition. Her chapter on Prokofiev begins with a quick anecdote from Myaskovsky, a close ally of the composer, who presumed that the struggle between genius and bureaucracy would yield only negative results. However, Prokofiev went on to receive more Stalin Prizes than any other composer, though none for an opera. Opera was an entirely different matter for the prize committee, as the art form served a political function. As Frolova-Walker writes, 'Opera proved to be an effective tool of cultural and ideological expansions into the more distant and reluctant corners of the Soviet empire', a point demonstrated by some of the early Stalin Prizes for opera, which were awarded to composers from those regions.⁹ Operatic success on an 'official' scale had to match the ideological and political functions of the genre itself. Prokofiev's 'official' successes and failures within and outside opera represent what Frolova-Walker describes as 'an entangled web of personal relations and unpredictable circumstances', something much more obscure than the clarity offered in the oft-cited battle between the artist and the state.¹⁰

The second theme that weaves its way through each book is humour and its extension into the phenomenon of laughter. In *Three Loves for Three Oranges*, Naroditskaya, Savkina and Morrison concentrate on the Prince's laughing episode, each with slightly different goals in mind. For Naroditskaya, the transformative powers of laughter reveal an

⁷ Taruskin, *On Russian Music*, 266.

⁸ Marina Frolova-Walker, *Stalin's Music Prize: Soviet Culture and Politics* (New Haven, 2016).

⁹ Frolova-Walker, *Stalin's Music Prize*, 203.

¹⁰ Frolova-Walker, *Stalin's Music Prize*, 63.

intertextual reference between the opera and Prokofiev's 1920 ballet *The Buffoon*. Savkina describes the episode as an unprecedented musical achievement, an inclusion of *commedia* improvisation in which Prokofiev 'composed a magnificent, broadly developed lazzo of laughter' (363). Morrison highlights melodic parodies and dramatic associations found in the Prince's laughter. These descriptions are by no means the only way to approach laughter. In fact, their descriptions open new lines of enquiry about laughter in the opera score, including questions about its realism, purpose and meaning. In *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, neuroscientist Robert R. Provine studies notated laughter in opera and its potential for replicating real-life laughter. He develops a possible set of compositional parameters capable of eliciting the most realistic version of laughter in notational form, which includes a fast tempo (almost 300 bpm), rests between each note of laughter, staccati to create more space between the notes and a *diminuendo* from start to finish.¹¹ Instead, Prokofiev offers a much more elaborate and convincing display of improvisational laughter, even as it remains confined to the specific demands of the composer's score. Perhaps the illusion of improvisation created by Prokofiev is more appropriate for this particular opera's theatricality.

Studies of laughter have often sought to understand why humans laugh – what triggers a laugh, why it serves as a response to situations, or how it functions as a communicative tool in social encounters.¹² In her preface to Posner and Bartig's *Three Loves for Three Oranges*, Caryl Emerson describes some general theories of laughter, including the superiority theory, incongruity and incongruity-resolution theory and relief theory. A mixture of examples of the first two theories exists in choral laughing episodes from nineteenth-century Russian epic or fairy-tale operas: the peasant men's mocking laughter in Mussorgsky's prologue to *Boris Godunov* (1869) or the derisive laughter aimed at Vakula by Oxana and her peers in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Christmas Eve* (1895). These examples represent social settings of group ridicule, where characters bond through a shared mockery of an individual.

The Prince's laughter at Fata Morgana's calamitous tumble represents a special case, because it begins as laughter from a feeling of superiority and transforms over the course of its protracted development. It shifts from the Prince laughing at Fata Morgana to a moment of release, a reflexive response to the situation and a cure to the Prince's ailments. Laughter theorists often explain the release theory through the concept of Aristotle's tragic catharsis, but the comic scenes in Prokofiev's *The Love for Three Oranges* lack the necessary markers of moral purpose. Ultimately, Emerson finds these traditional theories inadequate for discussing laughter and its functions in *The Love for Three Oranges*, primarily because they rely upon a fixed dichotomy between good and evil in humorous situations. The Prince's laughing episode does not lend itself easily to such a clear and fixed state. Instead, his laughter is a more ambivalent force unbound to any moral purgation. Emerson does locate a more compatible philosophy of laughter from Leonid Karasev, finding his theories helpful in explaining laughter on the *commedia dell'arte* stage (xxvii). The author's consideration of these theories and their application to *The Love for Three Oranges* should encourage further engagement with operatic laughter. Humour on the operatic stage may open new perspectives on musical gesture and dramatic meaning in compositional approaches across styles and contexts.

¹¹ Robert R. Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York, 2000), 69.

¹² See for example: Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London, 1911); Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1960); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN, 1984); Matthew M. Hurley, Daniel C. Dennett and Reginald B. Adams, Jr, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* (Cambridge, 2011).

Taken together, Guillaumier's, Seinen's and Posner, Bartig and De Simone's books deliver a well-rounded overview of Prokofiev's entire operatic corpus. They supply readers with an understanding of Prokofiev's operatic ideals, how the composer navigated cultural politics in the Soviet Union, and his musical and dramaturgical awareness. Posner, Bartig and De Simone's celebration of the centenary of *The Love for Three Oranges* carries the opera into another century in the repertory with a greater understanding of the components that inspired and underpinned Prokofiev's opera. Seinen positions the Soviet operas as a representation of how composers adjusted to the shifting ideological and aesthetic landscapes while maintaining their artistic principles. Guillaumier delivers a comprehensive examination of Prokofiev's operatic oeuvre and establishes the composer's basic dramaturgical and operatic ideals. Of course, there is still much to be discovered about Prokofiev's operas, but this trio offers a strong foundation for future research.