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S. Morrison, ed.: Sergey Prokofiev and His World

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PART I
DOCUMENTS



“Look After Your Son’s Talents”: The Literary Notebook of Mariya Prokofieva

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The same parting words were always addressed to me: “Look after your son’s talents.” I remember them with gratitude to this very day and always followed them, whenever possible. —*Mariya Prokofieva*

The Serge Prokofiev Archive in London houses a copy of an unusual item from the Serge Prokofiev Estate in Paris: a small notebook, completed at the end of 1917, filled with miscellaneous entries from various sources, including poems, philosophical aphorisms, and notes on a wide range of subjects from mysticism to astronomy. It is not known exactly how this notebook ended up among Prokofiev’s papers in France; he may have packed it in his suitcase when he left Russia in May 1918, or his mother may have brought it to him together with his musical papers and diary of 1917 when she joined him in France in June 1920, arriving with just two suitcases after an arduous journey from Kislovodsk via Constantinople.¹ Whichever route was taken, it is clear that the notebook was of considerable importance to Prokofiev, otherwise it would not have been chosen as one of the few items to be taken out of Russia after the Revolution.

For many years it was assumed that the entries in the notebook were all made by Prokofiev. This view was taken for granted because the notebook had been kept with Prokofiev’s personal papers and contains materials closely linked with his creative work and pursuits at the time: poems by Zinaida Gippius and Konstantin Balmont that he set to music in 1915 and 1917; excerpts from Edouard Schuré and Schopenhauer, whose works he was reading in 1916 and 1917; and two of his own humorous poems, composed in 1916 and 1917. In the course of recent research, however, it became apparent that only the very last entry in the notebook is in Prokofiev’s hand; all the other entries are written in the “beautiful and energetic”

handwriting of his mother, Mariya Grigoryevna Prokofieva (1855–1924).² This discovery raises several intriguing questions. Why would Prokofiev’s mother have recorded in her notebook so many items of relevance to her son’s creative work and reading? Was this simply a matter of coincidence, reflecting their shared literary and philosophical interests? Or was she keeping a record of the various poems, aphorisms, and notes on subjects that were of special significance to him? If so, what was the purpose of this record? Was she assisting him, perhaps at his request, by copying out various texts of interest?

Some clarification of these questions can be found in the entries made in the notebook. Before looking at the textual evidence, however, we should first consider the broader context of Mariya Prokofieva’s personality and relationship with her son. A fairly consistent picture of her character can be pieced together from her own memoir of her son’s formative years, his comments about her in his autobiography and diary, contemporary correspondence and recollections. She was clearly a remarkable woman in her own right. Although she came from a family of peasant origins and modest means, she succeeded in building a different life for herself through a combination of natural talent and sheer determination.³ As Prokofiev noted with pride in his autobiography, both his parents were the cleverest children in their respective families, with a marriage founded on shared intellectual pursuits and aspirations.⁴ Mariya Grigoryevna was an accomplished amateur pianist and a lively conversationalist who always enjoyed good company.⁵ When her husband, Sergey Alekseyevich, a trained agronomist, took up his position overseeing their estate at Sontsovka, she became determined (like so many of Chekhov’s heroines) not to succumb to the stagnation of provincial life. Her home was full of books; she subscribed to all the latest journals and followed the musical and theatrical life of Moscow and St. Petersburg with interest.⁶ Every winter she would journey to the capital for one or two months, leaving her son behind in the care of his father and grandmother.⁷ She also made considerable efforts to influence those around her who were less privileged, taking part, for example, in the education of local peasant children.⁸

As the only surviving child of the marriage (two older sisters died in early infancy), Prokofiev naturally became the prime focus of his parents’ ambitions. His father gave him lessons in Russian, arithmetic, geography, and history, and later, when he came to visit his son in St. Petersburg, in algebra, geometry, and drawing.⁹ Prokofiev did not always find these lessons enjoyable because of “Papa’s excessive pedantry.”¹⁰ This was certainly not the case with his mother’s lessons, which evinced her remarkable pedagogical skills. She taught him languages, first French, then German, and studied the Old and New Testaments with him. Most important, she initiated him

into the world of music, shaped his early tastes, and took full responsibility for his initial musical training.¹¹ As an infant, he responded enthusiastically to her piano playing. When he was a young child of seven, she made sure to keep his music lessons short and fun, never boring him with rote learning. She introduced him to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century piano repertoire, encouraged him to develop independent opinions of it, arranged for a grand piano to be brought from St. Petersburg to Sontsovka, and took him on his first visits to the opera in Moscow and St. Petersburg.¹² When he began to compose his own pieces, she either wrote them out for him or enlisted others for the task—his French governess, for example, copied out his first opera *The Giant* (*Velikan*, 1900) in calligraphic style.¹³ On one occasion, when he tried to destroy a piece that he had given to his mother as a present, she insisted on preserving it.¹⁴ Later, she showed him how to record and organize his work, teaching him the principles of musical notation and the importance of making clean copies of his compositions.¹⁵

When Prokofiev turned eleven, his mother wisely realized that she needed to enlist professional musicians to develop his precocious talent.¹⁶ In January 1902 she took him to see Sergey Taneyev in Moscow; on his recommendation, she invited Reinhold Gliere, a graduate of the Moscow Conservatory and Taneyev’s former pupil, to spend the summers of 1902 and 1903 at Sontsovka teaching her son composition and music theory.¹⁷ In 1904, following a visit to Alexander Glazunov, the director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, she enrolled her son as a first-year student.¹⁸ In order to create the best conditions for his education she rented a modest flat in St. Petersburg and moved in with him, organizing everything to meet his needs.¹⁹ After Sergey Alekseyevich died in the summer of 1910, Prokofiev confessed in his diary that he did not know whether he had loved his father, since they had very little in common.²⁰ The opposite was true of his relationship with his mother, which only strengthened after his father’s death. According to the memoirs of Mariya Morolyova, an old family friend, his mother’s moral authority was so great that her firm and calmly expressed opinions were accepted uncritically; she taught her son through the power of her example how to speak and behave with directness and honesty.²¹

Mariya Prokofieva’s awareness of her vital role in nurturing and developing her son’s musical talent is clearly articulated in the memoir of his early years that she dictated in 1922. Her account of their relationship is borne out by Gliere’s perceptive observations. In his memoirs he describes her as a “rare mother” who believed in her son’s creative potential and did everything possible to develop his talent in optimal conditions. He comments that her love for her only child and pride in his achievements never turned into blind adulation; she remained keenly aware of her responsibility for his upbringing and rose to the challenges it presented.²²

She succeeded in instilling within him a love for work, creative discipline, and order. Glier also notes that Prokofiev recognized the enormous role that his mother played in his creative development and retained a deep sense of gratitude, love, and loyalty to her teachings throughout his life.²³ This view is confirmed by Prokofiev in his autobiography, begun in the late 1930s, which acknowledges and develops many of the points made in his mother's memoirs.

It is clear from all these sources that Prokofiev's musical career would not have developed as it did without the phenomenal energy and resources that his mother invested in his upbringing. One might well gain the impression from her memoir and Prokofiev's autobiographical writings that her close involvement in his musical life, exceptionally strong during his childhood, receded after he joined the Conservatory. From this point on Prokofiev makes relatively few comments about his mother (most of his references to her are of a factual nature, concerning her travel plans, for example, rather than musical or cultural matters). In many ways this is not surprising; it would have been entirely natural for Prokofiev to gravitate toward his teachers and friends during his years at the Conservatory. After his graduation in 1914, when he was in his mid-twenties and already an independent young man, taking on his first musical engagements and establishing his reputation, one would expect even fewer traces of his mother's influence. Her notebook, however, provides compelling evidence of her continuing close involvement in his literary, philosophical, and musical pursuits. In this respect it is an extremely valuable document, countering the general impression that she no longer actively participated in her son's development at this stage. Throughout this later period she continued to play the role that she had adopted in Prokofiev's early life—the role of copying out his works, preserving them, and keeping a record of his interests. This activity evidently provided her with vicarious self-fulfillment. We know from Prokofiev's autobiography that his mother stopped playing the piano when she saw that her son had overtaken her abilities.²⁴ In similar fashion it would appear that she preferred to follow in the tracks of his literary and philosophical interests, rather than pursuing her own.

In this way she remained faithful to Taneyev's parting injunction, "Look after your son's talents." She recorded these words in her 1922 memoir, and they assumed special meaning for her son, who quoted them twice in both versions (long and short) of his autobiography: "The main thing is, look after your son's talents,"—said Sergey Ivanovich, and my mother repeatedly recalled this injunction."²⁵ Her notebook provides unique evidence of the way in which she continued to follow this advice. It is possible that Prokofiev kept the notebook with him after he left Russia not simply because its contents were useful to him, but also because of its sentimental

value as testimony to his mother’s involvement in his creative development. In the “Apologetic Introduction” to his long autobiography, he drew attention to the importance of his mother’s role in this respect. When he was twelve he observed a music professor keeping a diary and was so impressed that he started writing his own diary in secret, often while sitting on the toilet. His mother then gave him a thick bound notebook and said to him: “Sergushechka, write in it whatever comes into your head: let nothing be lost.”²⁶ It was evidently this desire to preserve her son’s work that motivated her to keep a notebook of her own for recording items of interest to him.

What, then, can this notebook contribute to our understanding of Mariya Prokofieva’s interests and their relation to her son’s creative work in the period from 1914 to 1917? As one turns its pages, one encounters a fascinating, sometimes bewildering medley of different entries. There are poems, some by Prokofiev and some by other writers, aphorisms by Schopenhauer, reflections about the Germans and the English, notes on obscure religious sects, observations on the movements of the planets, and thoughts on art, beauty, and mysticism. What significance can be ascribed to these jottings? Interpreting this type of material is a tricky enterprise. Anyone who has ever kept a notebook knows how many random things of no lasting import can land in it. It would undoubtedly be a mistake to assume that every item in the notebook is of central significance to Prokofieva’s interests or her son’s work at the time. Although some entries bear direct relation to his work, others are of uncertain origin or significance. Nevertheless, as a whole, the document represents a fascinating kaleidoscope attesting to a diverse and eclectic range of study. The remaining part of this introductory essay will therefore provide a general summary of its contents, paying particular attention to the entries that are clearly connected to Prokofiev’s music. For further information on the sources and publication details of the entries, the reader is referred to the detailed notes accompanying the full transcript of the notebook.

The notebook opens rather unpromisingly with the phrase “Tenir un carnet de dépenses” (Keep a notebook of expenses). This resolution was not kept—apart from the prices of a few French books, the notebook contains no record of payments. However, this opening phrase provides a useful clue to the date when the notebook may have been started. The use of French, together with the fact that people tend to keep notes on expenses while traveling, suggests that Prokofieva began the notebook during her trip to France and Switzerland with her son in the summer of 1913. This hypothesis is supported by the next page, which lists various French books with titles such as *Leçons de choses*, *Livre du maître*, *Livre de l’élève*, *Le parfait causeur*, together with a note of prices in francs; Prokofieva may have bought,

or planned to buy, some of these books to improve her command of the language during her trip. But although the notebook may have been started in 1913, most of the entries date from around 1914 to the end of 1917.

Two photographs have been glued onto the opening pages. The first is of Prokofiev's father, Sergey Alekseyevich, and appears to have been taken not long before his death in 1910, possibly at Sontsovka. The second is of his mother, Mariya Grigoryevna, and looks as if it was taken in France. The photographs may have been stuck into the notebook at a later date, perhaps by Prokofiev after the notebook came into his possession.

The first substantial entry is an extract headed "Chuvstvo bitiya" (The sense of being), taken from Sergey Rafalovich's collection *Zhenskiye pis'ma* (Women's letters) published in St. Petersburg in 1906. Rafalovich (1875–1943) was a minor Symbolist poet, prose writer, dramatist, and theater critic who maintained close relations with literary circles in St. Petersburg. *Women's Letters* is one of his earliest works and comprises fifteen fictive prose letters from a variety of women dealing with the problems and moral dilemmas posed by love. Prokofieva has copied out two sections from the first letter, titled "Tyoty Mar'ya" (Aunt Marya). Both passages deal with the "sense of being," extolled as a supreme value and contrasted with the sinful denial of life. Prokofieva's eye may have been caught by the link between her own name and the fictive Aunt Marya; it is also possible that she associated Aunt Marya's description of her nephew's intense love of life and highly developed "sense of being" with her own son's zest for life.

Anyone familiar with literary movements in early twentieth-century Russia can appreciate the extent of the contemporary obsession with the individual's relation to life. For the Symbolists, the *realia* of this world were valued as an echo of the *realiora* of a higher, transcendent reality. The Acmeists reacted against this trend by declaring that they would put the emphasis back on life in this world. Despite their focus on everyday urban life, many of the Futurists' experiments with language and meaning had their origins in the Symbolists' aspirations to transcendence. It is worth noting in this context that Prokofiev was surprisingly eclectic in his literary tastes and had good relations with all three movements—he was on close terms with the Symbolist Balmont, setting several of his poems to music; he cooperated on the ballet *Ala and Lolly* with the Acmeist Sergey Gorodetsky in 1914; he composed a song cycle to Anna Akhmatova's words in 1916; and he had several lively encounters with the Futurist Vladimir Mayakovsky in 1917 and 1918. His mother's attention to the passage from Rafalovich's collection may have been related to her perception of Prokofiev's own strong "sense of being" as a value in itself. As will be seen below, this did not exclude a growing interest on his part in the transcendent dimension of life, explored through philosophy and mysticism.

The extract from Rafalovich is followed by a few brief reflections on the limitations of knowledge and closeness between people, the clash between the rights of the individual and love, and the supremacy of intensity of experience over its duration. The last thought is illustrated by an aphorism, cited in German: “Life is fullness, not time. And even the final moment is far away.” The source of this saying is not identified in the notebook; it is the closing couplet of a historical drama by the Austrian playwright Arthur Schnitzler (1862–1931) titled *The Veil of Beatrice* (*Der Schleier der Beatrice*, 1901). Schnitzler’s work enjoyed considerable popularity in Russia from 1900 onward and came to the attention of Prokofiev in 1913, when he attended a rehearsal at the Moscow Free Theater of a mime production based on Schnitzler’s *The Veil of Pierette* (*Der Schleier der Pierette*, 1910), performed to music by Ernő Dohnányi. Whether this link played a role in Mariya Prokofieva’s interest in Schnitzler’s aphorism is not known.

These piecemeal jottings all reflect a developing awareness of emotional relationships and their limitations, as well as an interest in defining the strength of experience outside time. There are several possible parallels with Prokofiev’s life and creative work, as can be seen from reflections in his diary on his budding romance with Nina Meshcherskaya and, in musical terms, his attempts to capture the fleeting moment in *Visions fugitives* (*Mimolyotnosti*, 1915–17).

Next comes another extract from Rafalovich’s *Women’s Letters*, this time based on a passage from the second letter in his collection, “Odinokaya” (The lonely woman), dealing with the feeling of loneliness (a recurrent theme throughout the notebook). Although in the original letter this passage is narrated in the first person by a female protagonist, Prokofieva rewrites it in the third person in her notebook, thereby turning it into a general statement with broad application. We know from Prokofiev’s diary of the time how frequently he experienced a strong sense of solitude and pondered the significance of this feeling. The loneliness of the individual was also a prominent theme in his musical setting of *The Ugly Duckling* (*Gadkiy utyonok*) in 1914. It is possible that Prokofieva’s interest in recording these comments on loneliness reflected her awareness of her son’s experience with it.

The next entry is a romantic, rather decadent short poem on love by Daniil Ratgauz (1868–1937), incorrectly identified by Prokofieva as Ratrauz. In the course of two quatrains love is characterized as a dream, a fleeting instant, a magic vision, a ray of paradise in the gloom of the grave, and identified as the only source of happiness in this world. Though undistinguished, the poem was well known at the time and set to music by several composers, including Glier, who tutored Prokofiev in 1902 and 1903 and turned the poem into a song in 1905. It is possible that Prokofiev also

considered setting this text to music, as was the case with the two poems by Gippius and Balmont that appear later in the notebook.

The bizarre beliefs and practices of the Johannites, a religious sect who venerated the popular Russian Orthodox priest Father John of Kronstadt, form the subject of the next entry. The fame of the Johannites spread throughout Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a result of their association with Father John (who did not recognize them as his true disciples) and their effective propaganda. In 1912, due to the dangerous spread of their influence, their activities were forbidden by the Holy Synod. In her notebook Prokofieva describes their strange custom of “spiritual marriage” and attitude toward smoking and vodka drinking. This entry is one of the more puzzling in the notebook, since it is not at all clear what aroused Prokofieva’s curiosity in the movement or served as her source of information. She may have been influenced by the recent growth of interest among the Russian intelligentsia in religious sects, including their social behavior and sexual practices. Leo Tolstoy, for instance, published *Resurrection* (*Voskreseniye*, 1899) to raise money for the Dukhobors, and his disciple, Vladimir Chertkov, wrote extensively on religious sectarianism in Russia during his period of exile in England from 1897 to 1905. Similar interests informed the work of several contemporaries of Prokofiev, including Andrey Beliy, Nikolay Klyuyev, and Vasiliy Rozanov. Beliy’s novel *The Silver Dove* (*Serebryaniy golub'*, 1909), for example, tells the story of a young intellectual, disenchanted with urban life, who joins a group of peasant religious sectarians only to be murdered for failing to sire a new messiah with one of the women.

The notebook contains two unusual poems by the Symbolist Gippius. “Naprasno” (In vain) and “Seroye plat’itse” (The gray dress) first appeared in a cycle of fourteen poems titled *Molchaniya* (Silences), published in 1914 in the St. Petersburg literary almanac *Sirin*. Prokofieva transcribed both poems in black ink (rather than in pencil, more common in the notebook) and in neater handwriting than usual, suggesting that clear copies might be required for musical treatment. As we shall see below, the second poem was set by Prokofiev in 1915; he and his mother were clearly intrigued by the musical possibilities of Gippius’s *Silences*, which dwell on the spaces between sounds and unvoiced gaps in communication.

“In Vain,” dated February 1913, is the eleventh poem in the cycle and was evidently copied by Prokofieva from the original publication of 1914, as the text in her notebook reproduces variants found only in this source. The poem is a polemical response to Fyodor Tyutchev’s well-known “Silentium” (1830) and shares several features with its predecessor, including the advocacy of silence, direct address by the poem’s narrator to an unnamed addressee, and iambic meter with exclusively masculine rhymes.

Tyutchev’s poem consists of abstract injunctions for silence, addressed to the general reader or perhaps to the poet’s own inner self; Gippius’s form of address, in contrast, establishes an intimate relationship between the narrator and the addressee. Like Tyutchev, Gippius advocates silence, but for different reasons. Tyutchev counsels silence on the grounds that self-expression and understanding are ineluctably imperfect and unable to convey pristine inner truths:

Молчи, скрывайся и таи
И чувства и мечты свои! [. . .]
Как сердцу высказать себя?
Другому как понять тебя? [. . .]
Взрывая возмутишь ключи:
Питайся ими и молчи!

Be silent, hide yourself and conceal
Both your feelings and your dreams! [. . .]
How can the heart express itself?
How can another person understand you? [. . .]
By stirring you will cloud the springs:
Drink from them and be silent!

Gippius recommends silence on a different basis—although understanding is possible, the “invisible threshold” (*nevidimiy porog*) between two people should never be crossed as a matter of principle. In reworking the message of “Silentium,” she cleverly transforms Tyutchev’s reference to *klyuchi* (the *springs* of pure water that must not be clouded) using the same word’s alternate meaning (the *keys* of a heart that must not be unlocked):

Я и услышу, и пойму— А все-таки молчи.	I will both hear and understand— But all the same be silent.
Будь верен сердцу своему, Храни его ключи.	Be true to your heart, Guard its keys.

Why did Prokofieva copy this poem? Apart from its intrinsic interest and value as a possible text for her son to set to music, she may have been intrigued by the way it echoed some of the ideas jotted down earlier in her notebook concerning the inability of the individual to know anything other than subjectively, and consequently on the limitations this condition places on mutual human understanding. In this respect it anticipates a poem by Akhmatova written later in 1913: “True tenderness you will never confuse . . .” (*Nastoyashchuyu nezhnost’ ne sputayesh’* . . .), which twice repeats

the same word *naprasno* (in vain) and also emphasizes the futility of uttering “submissive words about love” (*slova pokornīye o lyubvi*). Although Prokofiev did not set Gippius’s poem to music, he chose this poem, written on a similar theme, for one of the five Akhmatova lyrics he composed in 1916 in an intimate style (op. 27).²⁷

The other poem by Gippius, “The Gray Dress,” was written in January 1913, a month before “In Vain,” and occupies the ninth position in the *Silences* cycle. It also takes the form of an address, this time extended into a dialogue. The narrator accosts a little girl in a gray dress with matted plaits and vacant eyes and asks her a series of questions in order to determine her identity. The girl turns out to be an orphan and reveals that her favorite pursuits are destructive (she bites through the thread of a string of beads, cuts pages out of books, and breaks the wings of a bird). When asked her name, she offers several possibilities: division, enmity, doubt, depression, boredom, and torment. Her mother, however, who is referred to as *Mama-Smert'* (Mama-Death) calls her *razluka* (separation).

This strange and disturbing poem evokes the very antithesis of the principle of embracing life in its fullness, the “sense of being” extolled in the passage from Rafalovich quoted at the beginning of the notebook. It shares with “In Vain” the themes of separation and silence, but takes these to a more chilling, sinister extreme, combining a Symbolist taste for abstraction with a flat, pedestrian manner of narration in perfect tune with the “grayness” of its subject. It can be read on two levels: as a poem of social protest about the deprivations of a poor orphaned girl (Harlow Robinson accordingly finds that it “resonates with social awareness”), or as an allegory of the consequences of death and separation.²⁸ From a musical standpoint, “The Gray Dress” may have appealed to Prokofiev more than “In Vain” because of its two-voiced dialogic character and the intriguing shift from the literal to the allegorical plane, qualities that are reflected in his static, declamatory setting of the poem.

The idea of turning Gippius’s poem into a song was suggested to Prokofiev in 1915 by his friend Vladimir Derzhanovsky (1881–1942), a Moscow-based music critic and promoter. On July 25, 1915, Prokofiev jokingly wrote to him: “Imagine, I have already finished the upper half of your little dress.”²⁹ By this stage he had evidently completed about half the song, which he dedicated to Derzhanovsky and incorporated into his cycle of five poems set to music (op. 23), first performed in Petrograd in November 1916 and published in 1917 by Gutheil.³⁰

Given that Derzhanovsky suggested Gippius’s poem to Prokofiev, what significance can we attribute to his mother copying it into her notebook? Was she simply keeping a record of the texts set to music by her son? Or was she perhaps helping him by copying out poems that he was planning to set? This second, more likely hypothesis is buttressed by an important

fact. Prokofieva’s copy of the poem contains one distinctive feature, absent from the published text of 1914: the adjective in the phrase “*devochka v serom plat’itse*” (girl in a *gray* dress), which is repeated five times by Gippius, has been changed to read “*devochka v seren’kom plat’itse*” (girl in a *grayish* dress). The preservation of this unusual difference in the published text of Prokofiev’s song suggests that he used the text copied in his mother’s notebook when composing it. There is also evidence that Prokofiev worked with the version of Balmont’s incantation transcribed in his mother’s notebook when setting this text to music in 1917.

Gippius’s two poems are separated in the notebook by five pages of miscellaneous reflections. After a note on the secret of artistic creation comes a maxim on the inverse relationship between material and spiritual wealth, followed by a generalization about the national character of the English (bent on materializing the spiritual), contrasted with the Russians (dedicating to spiritualizing the material). Next comes an entry on a religious sect—not a contemporary sect like the Johannites but an ancient one. The Cainites were a second-century heretical Gnostic movement that regarded the God of the Old Testament as responsible for evil in the world and exalted those who opposed him: Cain, Esau, and Korah. The Cainites are reputed to have had an apocryphal Gospel of Judas, whom they revered for betraying Jesus. The comment in the notebook that the Cainites were right “to underline in the ‘Gospel of Judas’ that the perfection of an enlightened person cannot express itself in any other way than in the dauntless carrying out of the very highest cruelties” reflects a certain fascination with the connection between enlightenment and cruelty. This observation (of unknown provenance) may have been associated in Prokofieva’s mind with the Germans in the First World War; later in the notebooks, she records a note about the German people’s misconceived belief in their cultural superiority, their racial arrogance, and their inability to understand anything foreign.

The next fourteen entries in the notebook (apart from Gippius’s “The Gray Dress”) cover ten pages and consist entirely of quotations or paraphrases of passages from the Russian translation of Schuré’s history of esoteric religions, *Les Grands Initiés. Esquisse de l’histoire secrète des religions. Rama—Krishna—Hermès—Moïse—Orphée—Pythagore—Platon—Jésus*, published in Paris in 1889. Schuré (1842–1929), a prominent French theosophist, adhered to the conviction that spirit is the only reality. His wide-ranging survey, based on the belief that the essential truth of all world religions lies in their esoteric content, had great appeal for contemporary audiences in search of nontraditional, syncretic forms of spiritual experience; it was frequently reprinted and translated into several languages. The Russian translation by Elena Pisareva first appeared as an appendix to *Vestnik teosofii* (Bulletin of theosophy) in 1908 and 1909; it was followed by two independent editions published

in 1910 and 1914 under the title *Velikiye posvyashchenniye. Ocherk ezoterizma religiy* (*The Great Initiates. A Study of the Secret History of Religions*).

The appearance of several passages from this work in Prokofieva's notebook is not as odd as it may seem. Many members of the cultural elite in early twentieth-century Russia were attracted to theosophy and admired Schuré's work.³¹ His translator was a colleague and friend of the legendary Russian theosophist Anna Mintslova, who exerted a strong influence on Beliy and Vyacheslav Ivanov. Other notable literary figures involved in theosophy were Yekaterina Balmont, Maks Voloshin, and his wife, Margarita Sabashnikova. In the musical world followers of theosophy included Alexander Scriabin (whose unexpected death in April 1915 was widely interpreted as the consummation of his theurgic task in this world), the music critic Leonid Sabaneyev (known to Prokofiev for his scathing reviews of his early work, as well as for his biographies of Scriabin and Taneyev), and the concert pianist Mariya Yudina.

Schuré's friendship with and admiration for Wagner made him popular among Moscow and St. Petersburg music lovers, who read his writings about the composer in translation.³² Schuré's enthusiasm for Wagner as the herald of the mystery of future art reflected Nietzsche's critical approach to the composer and resonated with the Russian fin-de-siècle Wagner cult.³³ During the 1908 celebrations of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Wagner's death, Prokofiev attended every possible performance of his works, finding himself so overwhelmed that he did not want to listen to anything else afterward.³⁴

Finally, note that on the concluding page of his survey of esoteric religions, Schuré singled out Russia and America as devout young nations capable of bringing about the mystical, spiritual revival of the world. This idea would obviously have appealed to Russian readers, as it reinforced their belief in the special mission of their "barbaric" nation, destined to initiate a universal cultural and religious renaissance.

Although Prokofiev is not usually considered to have had much interest in mysticism or philosophy, he was inevitably affected by the atmosphere of his times and keen to expand his intellectual horizons. From 1914 his close friend, the dilettante poet Boris Bashkirov (1891–?, known by his pseudonym Boris Verin), regularly subjected him to long conversations about philosophy and attempted to get him interested in mysticism.³⁵ Prokofiev's diary provides ample evidence of his exposure to these topics in 1916 and 1917, often under Bashkirov's influence. Shortly before Christmas 1915, for example, he went along with his friend to the flat of an acquaintance surnamed Semyonov, where a young girl told his fortune, predicting that he would soon be robbed. Prokofiev was initially skeptical, but subsequently amazed when he returned home with his mother on New Year's Day to find that their flat had indeed been ransacked by burglars.³⁶ Bashkirov liked to

attend talks on religion given by Lotin, a popular preacher and mesmerist, and tried to persuade Prokofiev to accompany him. In January 1916 the composer recorded in his diary with a touch of pride that Bashkirov had recommended him to Lotin as a person with a “crystal soul” despite his lack of passion for mysticism.³⁷ When he finally went along to one of Lotin’s lectures in March, he was not impressed, describing the preacher as a “magnificent talking machine” and blanching at his public attack against modern music and his own compositions.³⁸ Nevertheless, despite these reservations, in October 1916 he began to attend the Monday salons hosted by Bashkirov, where mysticism and philosophy were staple topics of discussion; on his first visit he listened admiringly to the discourses of the music critic Vyacheslav Karatigin.³⁹ Around this time he began studying Kant and Schopenhauer in some depth, and regularly met up with Bashkirov in early 1917 to read Schopenhauer’s *Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life*.

In this context it is not entirely surprising to discover that Schuré’s history of esoteric religions was one of the books Prokofiev chose to take with him in July 1916 when he set off on a boat trip down the Volga with Bashkirov. While traveling on his own between Samara and Astrakhan and conversing with fellow passengers, he amused himself by adopting different identities, including that of a landowner studying theology; on this new persona he commented in his diary: “I was indeed reading Schuré’s ‘Great Initiates.’”⁴⁰ We may well wonder, therefore, about the status and purpose of the extracts from this work in his mother’s notebook. Was she reading Schuré’s book independently and taking notes from it for her own benefit? Or was she transcribing for her son passages that he had marked or noted down separately during his own reading of the book?

On balance, the evidence points toward the second hypothesis, particularly given the content of the passages chosen for inclusion in the notebook. Two extracts are taken from the introduction, and the remaining twelve come from the sections on Rama (two), Krishna (three), Moses (two), and Plato (five). Among the various topics covered, several are remarkably close to Prokofiev’s own interests at the time, as recorded in his diary, and reflect his growing preoccupation with the moral foundations of life and art. Such topics include the relationship between male passion and monogamy, the primary importance of good deeds as the achievement of a righteous person, the link between spiritual greatness and loneliness, romantic love, the superiority of moral good over aesthetic beauty, and the association between eternal youthfulness, intellectual depth, and purity of heart. Besides these extracts, the reference to Julian Ochorowicz’s book on mental suggestion, lifted from Schuré’s work, reflects the interest in hypnosis that had been inspired by Karatigin’s discussion of this subject at Bashkirov’s salon in October 1916.⁴¹

It is also significant that the next entry in the notebook is a poem composed by Prokofiev (dated July 18, 1916) about a personal incident at the end of the Volga trip. Prokofieva must have transcribed this poem from a copy given to her by her son, since this was not a text that she could otherwise have known. If she was doing this for him, then she might just as well have been copying out passages from Schuré's book on his behalf.

Prokofiev took satisfaction in his poetic prowess and knowledge of versification—in 1922 he commented in his diary that had he not become a composer he would probably have been a writer or poet.⁴² His poem, described by him as “the most foolish tale of a sleeping monster” (*preglupaya skazka o spyashchem urode*), is a lighthearted parody of the tale of the sleeping beauty and a remarkably accomplished piece of humorous verse. In the course of twenty-five beautifully crafted rhyming couplets it tells the tale of two friends, the “chatterbox poet Boryunya” and his friend “the dashing Sergunya,” who are waiting on the Volga for a ship to carry them across the Caspian Sea the next day to a “land ruled by shahs”:⁴³

Урод-поэт и друг урода
Спокойно ждали парохода,
Который их под «охи-ахи»
Свезет в страну, где правят шахи.

The monster-poet and the monster's friend
Were calmly waiting for a ship
Which to the sound of “ohs” and “ahs”
Would take them to a land ruled by shahs.

Boryunya promises his friend to rise early the next morning to board the ship. However, the “poetic creature” suffers all night from strange eruptions in his stomach. In the morning, when Sergunya, punctual to the minute, arrives to wake him, his friend is in a deep sleep, breathing heavily and even dribbling. Sergunya sprinkles him with cold water but fails to wake him; as a result Sergunya sails across the Caspian Sea while Borya continues to sleep, “curled up like a pretzel.”

The background to this amusing poem can be reconstructed from Prokofiev's references to his Volga trip with Bashkirov in his correspondence and diary. By July 16, 1916, the two friends had reached Astrakhan, where they expected to sail the Caspian the following morning. Bashkirov overslept, however, and refused to get up when Prokofiev splashed him with cold water.⁴⁴ As a result, Prokofiev sailed alone on July 17 without his friend. He did not travel to Baku as originally planned; instead, he disembarked at Petrovsk at midday on July 18 and caught a train to Tiflis.⁴⁵

Since his poem is dated July 18, he must have written it either at sea or on the train, evidently to exorcise the memory of this unfortunate incident through humor; certainly, when he met up again with Bashkirov in August in Petrograd, no mention was made of their “Astrakhan argument” and their learned conversations resumed as before.⁴⁶

The next couple of entries are drier and more serious in tone; they consist of detailed information about the planet Venus and its relationship to the sun, followed by a note on Galileo’s development of Archimedes’ teachings on the movements of bodies. We know that Prokofiev developed a passion for astronomy and observation of the stars in 1916 and 1917. In the absence of any evidence of his mother sharing this enthusiasm, these two entries offer further indication that she used her notebook to record materials of primary interest to her son. In October 1916 Prokofiev noted in his diary: “I have become very interested in the stars. Astronomy has always attracted me. I have now got hold of Ignatev’s book and have enthusiastically started to study the stars in the sky, learning their names and drawing constellations on paper. Alas, last week the sky was cloudy every evening.”⁴⁷ Ignatev’s book was a popular illustrated guide to astronomy and observation of the stars published that year in Petrograd.⁴⁸ In February 1917 Prokofiev recorded once more in his diary that he was reading a book on astronomy and had always been attracted to this subject.⁴⁹ In May he remarked on the rapid growth of his enthusiasm; after buying an excellent portable telescope for two hundred rubles, he repeatedly attempted to map the night sky in Petrograd and his country retreat near Sablino.⁵⁰ In the same month he wrote to his close friend and colleague Nikolay Myaskovsky: “Having finished twenty *Visions fugitives* and having dashed off a Violin Concerto, I have now lost heart and, having bought a telescope, watch the stars. I’m very engrossed with this pastime.”⁵¹ The comments in the notebook on the planet Venus evidently relate to this period; its relative proximity to Earth allowed it to be observed by telescope.

Although Prokofieva’s notebook was compiled at the time of the First World War and two Russian revolutions, it is surprisingly free of references to contemporary events. The only two entries alluding to the unsettled historical backdrop occur at this point in the notebook. The details of a second lieutenant in the Life-Guards 1st Rifles Regiment serve as an indirect reminder of Prokofieva’s constant worries that her son might be called up to the army.⁵² The negative comment on the Germans’ false faith in their culture and racial arrogance was no doubt linked to the German advance on Petrograd, and perhaps also to the discussion of national pride in Schopenhauer’s *Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life*, since this work is the source of the next thirteen entries in the notebook.

The next section provides valuable insight into Schopenhauer's place in the development of Prokofiev's worldview. Schopenhauer, both on his own and as filtered through Nietzsche and Wagner, exerted a strong influence on the Russian intelligentsia. His followers included Turgenev, Fet, Tolstoy, and several other turn-of-the-century writers; numerous editions of his works appeared in Russian translation from the 1880s onward.⁵³ Prokofiev first heard about the philosopher from his close friend Maximilian Schmidthof. He spent the evening of his twenty-second birthday in April 1913 with Max, who captivated him with his account of Schopenhauer's life and thought.⁵⁴ As Prokofiev later commented, he was initially wary of following his friend's advice to read the philosopher because of the latter's reputation as "hopelessly pessimistic."⁵⁵ The news of Schmidthof's suicide, which reached him on April 27, just over a fortnight after their conversation about Schopenhauer, can only have reinforced this association.⁵⁶

Prokofiev returned to Schopenhauer three years later, this time under the influence of Bashkirov. In September 1916 he noted in his diary that they had embarked on a joint reading of the *Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life*, which he liked very much and wanted to return to once more, since a cursory reading was insufficient to do it justice.⁵⁷ The joint reading carried on throughout the winter during his visits to Bashkirov's home.⁵⁸ As his diary entry of February 1917 indicates, reading Schopenhauer provided him with a welcome escape and refuge from the increasingly unsettled political atmosphere: "So, everything passed peacefully and quietly, Boris Verin and I regularly read Schopenhauer, enjoying him, and only vague rumors circulated about strikes and a movement among the workers of Petrograd factories."⁵⁹ Two months later, in April 1917, he visited Bashkirov once more "for a traditional reading of Schopenhauer with him. That is to say, strictly speaking, he reads (and very well), while I either sit in a deep armchair by the fireplace or lie on the sofa." On this occasion the presence of other members of the family and guests caused the two friends to retire to the study, preferring the company of Schopenhauer to empty social chatter.⁶⁰ In May Prokofiev moved out of Petrograd to the countryside, taking Schopenhauer with him: "On the fourteenth I arrived at the dacha and once more plunged into my musical work, green walks, and reading Schopenhauer. I am reading his 'Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life,' 'Parerga,' and 'Paralipomena' for the second time; I mark them up in pencil and cannot tear myself away from them."⁶¹ A week later he set off on a two-week trip along the Volga and Kama rivers. En route from Kazan to Perm his main reading was Schopenhauer's *Parerga et Paralipomena*; he particularly enjoyed the "brilliant chapter on fame" and the "subtle one on physiognomy," but found the chapter about women less convincing and insufficiently broad in its aims.⁶² As in the case of Schuré's book, studied during the previous sum-