Gebrauchs-Formulas

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ONE AUTUMN DAY IN 1896, ANTON ARENSKY INVITED Rachmaninoff and Glazunov to dinner at his St. Petersburg home to celebrate a visit from Sergey Taneyev. A network of personal and professional ties linked these notable musicians. Rachmaninoff, for example, had studied with Arensky and Taneyev; Arensky and Glazunov had in turn studied with Rimsky-Korsakov. After dinner the four composers played a musical parlor game. Each of them took a sheet of paper and wrote out the initial phrase of a small character piece for piano. When all were ready, each passed his sheet to a colleague who extended the composition, and this round robin continued until the sheets returned to their starting positions. The original composer then completed the final phrases and cadence. Example 1 shows the first of the resulting four compositions, the one begun and completed by Arensky.

Few classical musicians today could play this game at such a high level. Arensky and his guests displayed amazing musical fluency, a score-reading ability that took in all the harmonic and contrapuntal implications on the page, and an aural imagination capable of devising satisfying continuations to complex musical gestures penned by others. How were they able to do this?

The same question could be put to jazz musicians from the 1930s or to actors in the commedia dell’arte from the 1630s. Two giants from that distant world of Italian theater, in explaining their craft, emphasized that the novice had to build up a large memory of stored material and then learn to control it:

Niccolò Barbieri (1576–1641): [Actors must] study and fortify their memory with a wide variety of things such as sayings, phrases, love-speeches, reprimands, cries of despair, and ravings, in order to have them ready for the proper occasion.

Pier Maria Cecchini (1563–ca. 1630): [T]he actor must see to it that his mind controls his memory (which dispenses the treasure “over the vast field of opportunities constantly offered” by the changing bass patterns in a partimento). They learned the “mystery” of their craft through long years of observation, internalization, and reproduction of a whole repertory of patterns.

In 1921, with the experience of having conducted the premières of Histoire du Soldat and Pulcinella under his belt, Ernest Ansermet remarked, “The teaching of composition in Russia, as far as I can gather from what Stravinsky received from Rimsky-Korsakov, is much more in the spirit of Medieval guild apprenticeship than our own generally academic instruction. . . . Stravinsky . . . is an artisan.” Certainly the artisanal system of partimento training was imported to Russia in the eighteenth century through a long series of famous maestros hired for the court in St. Petersburg. The very first print of Neapolitan partimenti, by Giovanni Paisiello, was published there in 1782, and Giuseppe Sarti even established a music school in Russia. Whether compositional instruction in Russia became more “academic” after the lapse of Italian hegemony (ca. 1806) or remained artisanal has been unclear, at least to this author. And so I was greatly intrigued to read Professor Taruskin’s reference to Gebrauchs-formulas—compositional exemplars for emulation

Adapted from the story posted by Amphissa (2007) on the website of The Rachmaninoff Society.

1 Arensky et al. (1949, 174 [No. 1 of the four improvisations]). The four manuscript pages of these improvisations were first published in an appendix to Taneyev (1925).


3 Cecchini (1954, 50).

5 Gjerdingen (2007).

6 Dunlop (1912); Stuart (1933).

7 Ansermet (1921, 16): “L’enseignement qu’on donne de la musique en Russie, autant que j’en puis juger par celui que Stravinsky a reçu de Rimsky-Korsakov, est beaucoup plus près—dans l’esprit—de l’apprentissage corporatif du Moyen-Age que l’enseignement académique que est généralement le notre. . . . Il est un trait particulier par lequel Stravinsky ressemble encore aux hommes du Moyen-Age: il est comme eux un artisan.”
by the artisan apprentice.\(^8\) I thought that perhaps Arensky’s
demonstrated talent for improvisation might be a by-product of
partimento-style instruction, and so I looked for a publication of
his that might show the least traces of “generally academic
instructors.”

Given my limitations with the Russian language and the scar-
city of relevant material in North America, I was fortunate to find
a copy of Arensky’s \textit{Sbornik zadach (1000) dlya prakticheskogo
izuchenija garmonii} (A Collection of 1000 Lessons for the
Practical Study of Harmony) from 1897.\(^9\) This is a \textit{partimento}
collection in all but name. It contains no explanations, no theory
of harmony, no real instructions outside of occasional descriptive
headings (e.g., “Suspensions in two or three voices”). Instead, it is
packed solid (over 1300 lines of single-stave exercises) with musical
patterns to be absorbed and stored in memory. At its beginning
the young apprentice would find short and easy figured-bass
exercises in simple note values. By its end the journeyman
musician would be expected to realize florid unfigured basses of forty
to fifty measures and equal in complexity to published character
pieces. The book contains both basses and melodies, what the
French call "basses et chantes données," many of which, according
to his student Matvey Pressman, Arensky had improvised for
classes at the Moscow Conservatory: “At that time there were still
no books with [extensive] harmony exercises. So he devised any

\(^8\) Taruskin (2011, 175).

\(^9\) Arensky ([1897] 1929). I consulted the 1929 reprint; Arensky’s collection
remained in print until 1960.

Arensksy’s \textit{Sbornik} reveals many layers of style and influence.
The eighteenth-century layers are most obvious in the Earlier
exercises. Almost all the rules of Italian \textit{partimenti} find their ex-
emplars in Arensky’s basses; even very particular and unpredict-
able eighteenth-century patterns find their place. Example 2
shows the beginning of an advanced \textit{partimento} in \textit{E} major by
Paisiello (the bass is his, the upper voices are my interpretation
of his figures) along with the analogous exercise from Arensky,
his No. 513 in \textit{G}\# minor (again the realization is mine). The
topic of these exercises is the simultaneous suspension of at least
two voices in the context of a famous ground bass (the basso
ostinato from Pachelbel’s Canon in \textit{D}, which is likewise the
major-mode, “\textit{B}”-section bass of \textit{La romanesc}, known better to
English speakers as the scheme of “Greensleeves”).\(^11\) This inter-
locking gestalt—Romanesca bass supporting parallel descend-
ing thirds, with or without double suspensions—was apparently
a jewel stored in Arensky’s memory for ready retrieval. It was
the very pattern that he selected to lead off his after-dinner
improvisation (see Example 1, mm. 1–3, in \textit{E} minor).

\(^10\) “Bücher mit Harmonielehre-Aufgaben gab es damals noch nicht. So dachte
er sich irgendwelche Melodien oder Bässe aus, die nach bestimmten Regeln
to harmonisieren waren—Aufgaben, die er im Stegreif erfand.”Translation
from the original Russian to German in Wethmeyer (2001, 42).

\(^11\) For eighteenth-century examples of this schema, see Gjerdingen (2007,
Chapter 2).
The type of circumlocution needed to describe the Paisiello/Arensky variation on the Romanesca schema is already cumbersome, whether one speaks in words or thoroughbass figures. When Arensky progressed to the more complex combinations of his own day, he eventually abandoned any implied metalanguage and resorted to a page of fully realized Gebrauchs-formulas—“exemplars” in my terms.12 That page is reproduced as Example 3.

Arensky titled this page “МОТИВЫ ДЛЯ МОДУ-ЛЯРУЮЩИХ СЕКВЕНЦИЙ” (“Motives for Modulating Sequences”). Thus, these formulas were both integral, in the sense of constituting independent modules, and connectable, in the sense of working well when strung together in larger ascending or descending schemes. As shown in Example 4, the Schumanisches No. 846 fits nicely into a descending sequence that moves diatonically to the relative minor. By contrast, No. 847 suggests a thoroughly chromatic sequence in the manner of Rimsky-Korsakov. And No. 865, with its Tchaikovsky-like intensity and initial upward thrust, suggests an ascending sequence and a triumphant breakthrough to the major mode.

A purple expression like “triumphant breakthrough” may irritate some readers, yet ignoring the affective preoccupations of this music culture would be the greater sin. These Gebrauchs-formulas are, to be sure, describable as mere combinations of tones and intervals. Perhaps more importantly, however, they represent specific locations in a cultural web of emotional, social, and historical associations. When I played No. 848 for a colleague, he smiled and said “Schubert.” These exemplars are the musical equivalents of the “sayings, phrases, love-speeches, reprimands, cries of despair, and ravings” that were learned in the commedia dell’arte. Gebrauchs-formulas were musical utterances that meant something, and in giving them to students, Rimsky-Korsakov and Arensky were providing starting points for the creation of meaningful music.

Stravinsky's early teachers, Fedir Akimenko and Vasily Kalafatî, were both recent students of Rimsky-Korsakov, so one could expect to find echoes of chromatic Gebrauchs-formulas in their music. I was thus surprised to see even standard Italian diatonic formulas still in evidence. The first of Kalafatî’s Op. 9 bagatelles (1907) employs what I term the Indugio (It.: “lingering or tarrying”), an old music-rhetorical strategy of delaying the arrival of an important cadential dominant chord by means of (1) an inner pedal on the tonic, (2) passing motions between different positions of a 6/5/3 chord over the fourth scale degree in the bass, and (3) the frequent raising of the fourth degree as it finally moves to the fifth degree. Below Kalafatî’s phrase, Example 5(a), I have placed the relevant esempio (“example,” but also “exemplar”) by the early nineteenth-century Neapolitan maestro Saverio Valente (Example 5[b]), whose lessons may still have been used at the Naples conservatory when Glinka visited there in the early 1830s. I mention Glinka because in the overture to Ruslan and Ludmila (1837–42; see Example 5[c]), one finds the same strategy employed at a corresponding location, though with the passing 5/4 over the dominant replaced by the more common passing 6/4. Example 5(d) is taken from Akimenko’s Romance for Violin and Piano, Op. 9 (1901), and represents a more remote derivation of the Indugio. Akimenko provides most of the features of this Gebrauchs-formula, but he recomposes and reinterprets them in a way reminiscent of Rachmaninoff’s command of sonority and harmonic implication.

In 1974 a window opened onto Stravinsky’s compositional apprenticeship when Eric Walter White published the early Scherzo (1902) and the substantial Sonata in F♯ Minor (1903–4). The Scherzo is a modest work playable by any good amateur pianist. In its Trio one finds Stravinsky working out, in Arensky’s phrase, “motives for modulating sequences.” The modules that he chose to sequence invite comparison with the Gebrauchs-formulas notated by Arensky. For instance, Example 6(a) pairs Arensky’s No. 849 (extended to fall a third) with mm. 7–8 from the Trio of Stravinsky’s Scherzo. Similarly, Example 6(b) pairs Arensky’s No. 859 (extended to rise a second) with mm. 11–12 from the same Trio.

Speaking of the Sonata in 1960, and not knowing that a copy of it had survived in Russia, Stravinsky quipped that “It was, I suppose, an inept imitation of late Beethoven.”13 Like so many of Stravinsky’s bons mots, this one is both sardonic and slyly misleading. His sonata is a virtuoso piano work very much of its time, one that challenged Rachmaninoff, Medtner, and other young lions of the keyboard on their own ground, even if not always to Stravinsky’s advantage. Yet Gebrauchs-formulas

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13 Stravinsky and Craft (1960, 28).
from the Rimsky-Korsakov circle remain close to the surface. Example 7, taken from the Andante, shows Stravinsky’s ascending and descending presentations (mm. 7–8 and 19–20 respectively) of a module closely related to the opening gesture of Arensky’s No. 865 (seen previously in Example 4[c]).

What I never expected to find in such a chromatically advanced sonata was a Prinner. What, you might ask, is a Prinner? During the eighteenth century it was the most common riposte to an opening thematic gambit, something like an all-purpose rejoinder to the standard thematic assertions of the galant style.\(^{14}\)

The compositional utility of such a Gebrauchs-formula helped it survive well into the nineteenth century, especially in social circles where connotations of aristocratic poise were still welcome.

Example 8 displays fourプリンners in chronological order. The first comes from the well-known opening Allegro of Mozart's Sonata in C Major, K. 545 (1788). Mozart presents two bars of

\(^{14}\) See Gjerdingen (2007, Chapter 3).
EXAMPLE 4. Three of Arensky's Gebrauchs-formulas and their implied sequential continuations

EXAMPLE 5. Instances of the Indugio schema by (a) Stravinsky's teacher Kalafati, Trois bagatelles pour piano, Op. 9, No. 1, Scherzino, mm. 126–31 (M. P. Belaieff, Leipzig, 1907); (b) the Neapolitan maestro Saverio Valente (ca. 1790, Ms. Q.13.17, fol. 5v, Noseda Collections, Milan Conservatory Library, Milan); (c) Mikhail Glinka, Ruslan and Lyudmila, mm. 48–53 (vol. 14 of Mikhail Glinka, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, Muzyka, Moscow, 1966); and (d) Stravinsky's teacher Akimenko, Deux morceaux pour violon et piano, Op. 9, No. 1, "Romance," mm. 15–19 of the Più mosso section (M. P. Belaieff, Leipzig, 1901)
Example 6. Two of Arensky's 

\[ \text{formulas paired with (a) mm. 7–8 of the Trio from Stravinsky's early Scherzo for Piano; and (b) mm. 11–12 of the same Trio movement. Stravinsky: Scherzo for Piano, Faber, London, 1974} \]

Example 7. From the Andante of Stravinsky's early Sonata in \( F^\# \) Minor, two presentations (descending: mm. 7–8; ascending: mm. 19–20) of sequences based on modules quite close to the opening of Arensky's four-voice exemplar No. 865. Stravinsky: Sonata in \( F^\# \) Minor, Faber, London, 1974

Example 8. Instances of the Prinner schema by (a) Mozart, Sonata in C Major, K. 545 (Klaviersonaten, Ser. 9: Group 25/ Vol. 2 of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke, Bärenreiter, Kassel, 1986); (b) Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 in E Minor, Op. 11, I, mm. 61–68 (Probst-Kistner and M. Schlesinger, Leipzig, 1833); (c) Rubinstein's Piano Concerto No. 4 in D Minor, Op. 70, II, mm. 13–20 (Bartkoff Senff, Leipzig, 1872); and (d) Stravinsky's Sonata in \( F^\# \) Minor, IV, mm. 163–68
opening statement, and then two bars of Prinner riposte (he slightly departs from the norm by placing the standard bass in the implied tenor voice). The second Prinner is from Chopin’s first piano concerto (1830), the major-mode theme of the first movement. Four bars of opening statement lead to a two-bar Prinner riposte and then a harmonic feint, through a Phrygian cadence, toward the relative minor. Chopin matches the 2–3 bass suspension in his Prinner’s first half with a 4–3 soprano suspension in its second half, and makes the first half harmonically more urgent by means of a tenor line that rises C↓–D↓–E↑ (thus creating a 4/4 chord over the bass A↓ in place of the more relaxed and common 5/3). The third Prinner is the opening theme from the slow movement of Anton Rubinstein’s fourth piano concerto (1864). Much like Chopin’s theme, Rubinstein follows a four-bar opening gambit (a “Meyer” in my taxonomy\(^\text{15}\)) with a two-bar Prinner riposte and then a two-bar half cadence. The final Prinner of Example 8 is by Stravinsky, the opening theme of his sonata’s final movement (1904). Two bars of opening gambit lead to two bars of Prinner riposte, though the expected melodic termination on F↓ is delayed so as to elide with what becomes a melodically extended restatement of the theme.

Over the years, in public lectures on the schematism of eighteenth-century music, I have found audiences quite willing to accept the premise that people who wore powdered wigs might have behaved musically in stereotypical ways. Leonard B. Meyer, one of my own teachers, argued that nineteenth-century composers retained many of these same schematisms but went to great lengths to conceal them.\(^\text{16}\) One feature that may distinguish Russian compositional technique in the later nineteenth century from, say, German, is the use of far less concealment (e.g., the example from the Rubinstein concerto). When Stravinsky’s teacher Kalafati chose to employ the Romanesca schema in a large sonata for piano, he did so in a way that calls attention to it (Example 9). And when Tchaikovsky, in the first movement of one of the repertory’s most heart-rending and psychologically intense symphonies (No. 6, 1893), chose to offer a theme of hope and redemption (characteristically marked ten-\text{eramente, molto cantabile, con espansione}), he laid it out in a form barely distinguishable from that of small Italian minuets from the first half of the eighteenth century: statement, restatement, \textit{Fonte} digression, return of statement. Example 10 makes notationally explicit the correspondence between Tchaikovsky’s

\(^{15}\) Ibid. (Chapter 9).

\(^{16}\) Meyer (1989, 222–41).
Regardless of whether these composers absorbed the constituent Gebrauchs-formulas of the repertory from extensive experience or through guided tutelage, having such exemplars in memory made possible fluent composition and improvisation. Stravinsky received training in this tradition, as an “artisan” in Ansermet’s view. Ansermet went on to say that “The fault of academic instruction is to be theoretical and speculative instead of being operational.”¹⁸ It was the shared operational knowledge offered by historically, culturally, and affectively situated Gebrauchs-formulas that facilitated Arensky’s after-dinner parlor game. As a final musical illustration I present, in Example 11, an annotated score of the joint improvisation of Example 1. My annotations mark off the many eighteenth-century schemata still operational that autumn evening in 1896. When Taneiev begins a Prinner but Arensky takes it up in mid-flight and completes it (mm. 13–14), we might ask the same question of Arensky that one of Pushkin’s characters put to a Neapolitan improvisatore: “Astonishing. . . . How can it be that someone else’s idea, which had only just reached your ear, immediately became your own property, as if you had carried, fostered, and nurtured it for a long time?”¹⁹ The answer, of course, is that the idea—in all its improbable specificity—was already there tucked away in the improviser’s memory, a gift to him from his master.

¹⁷ Most minuets modulate before the double bar. One eighteenth-century genre that, like Tchaikovsky’s theme, does not, is the amorosi. For a set of amorosi, see Gaetano Pugnani ([ca. 1771–74] 1991), Op. 8.

¹⁸ Ansermet (1921, 16): “Le tort de l’enseignement académique est d’être théorique et spéculatif au lieu d’être opératif” [paraphrasing M. Maritain].

WORKS CITED


Paisiello, Giovanni. 1782. Regole per bene accompagnare il partimento o sia, il basso fondamentale sopra il cembalo. St. Petersburg.


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