THE BIG BAND AND THE PIANO: NIKOLAI KAPUSTIN’S VARIATIONS OP. 41

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THE BIG BAND AND THE PIANO: NIKOLAI KAPUSTIN’S \textit{VARIATIONS OP. 41}

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written and said on how piano works should almost imitate the sounds of an orchestra to be played well. There is a style and musical language that serious pianists must master in order to play with correct voicing, specific tones, and other techniques that make a piano sound like a full orchestra and thus bring it to life.

While there much written about how the piano should imitate the traditional orchestra in the classical and romantic style, what of the big band? In the last century many works have been written for the piano using jazz rhythms, harmonies, and idioms. Nikolai Kapustin is known among other things for melding complex jazz stylings with classical forms. Does Kapustin have a big band in mind when writing music for the piano the same way that Beethoven had the 19th century orchestra in mind when writing his piano sonatas? In this document I will investigate the possible correlations that exist between Kapustin’s Variations Op. 41 and big band sounds. I will then discuss what my findings should mean to a pianist when he/she is making decisions on how to play this and other pieces by Kapustin.
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INTRODUCTION

Nikolai Kapustin has captured the hearts of classical musicians around the world by giving them compositions full of jazz harmonies, rhythms, and styles in the context of classical music forms. In October of 2012 at the well-known venue for new music in New York Symphony Space, which I attended, the famed composer and writer of musical theatre Stephen Sondheim was asked who he was listening to these days. He quickly responded that he was presently obsessed with the music of Nikolai Kapustin and then told an audience of musicians that he was constantly preaching the gospel of Kapustin everywhere he went.

Putting Kapustin’s name in search engines of online databases of scholarly documents will usually yield similar topics. Most of these documents talk about the fusion of different forms common in the classical tradition with different aspects of jazz. Many of these documents and interests in Kapustin seem to stem from a desire that many of these musicians have had; the desire to play and perform jazz music despite lacking a comprehension of improvisation and the jazz harmonic language. Even if one is very comfortable learning, memorizing, and performing difficult works for the piano, this does not mean that he or she will be comfortable improvising jazz music.

While many of these different dissertations discuss how Kapustin quotes famous jazz tunes and styles, none of them delve significantly into how his music may imitate certain instruments common in the jazz tradition such as instruments found in big bands or smaller jazz combos. The scope of this paper will be to investigate how specifically notated jazz music imitates instruments in a big band the way classical music imitates instruments in an orchestra. If a connection between the two is found in any capacity it will be necessary to discuss how pianists should approach their interpretation with this knowledge. This document will investigate
Kapustin’s *Variations Op. 41* to figure out if and how this music relates to the instruments in a big band or jazz combo in order to give pianists insight as to what type of tone, sound, or style they should use while playing this piece and other works by Kapustin.¹

The idea of mimicking the sound of a large ensemble while playing the piano is not a new one. Many composers and pianists alike in the classical tradition have talked of the power of the piano to sound like a whole ensemble within itself. Different quotes and ideas will be provided by excellent composers and pianists as to the necessity of playing the piano with many different tones if one wants to give an interesting performance. Many composers and pianists have thought that the most powerful piano playing sounds like anything else but a piano and many of them compared the sounds great pianist make to the sounds of a symphony orchestra. A syllabus for a piano performance class at Brigham Young University taught by Scott Holden stated that the ultimate goals of his teaching are, “To teach you how to make the piano sing (and bark, shout, daydream, mumble, articulate and a thousand other expressive devices/colors). To teach you that there are rarely ever two notes played with the same attack.”² Thus, one could argue that creating tones that imitate instruments found in an orchestra is only a small beginning to a proper study of piano tone. However, for the purpose and scope of this paper, examples will be given in the form of quotes by respected composers and pianists relating to the importance of thinking of the piano symphonically, as well as musical examples of how certain musical lines written for the piano can act like instruments found in a symphony orchestra.

The first musical example that will be given in the classical tradition is *Pictures at an Exhibition* originally written for the piano by Modest Mussorgsky. Maurice Ravel transcribed

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this piece for orchestra and he is praised for his masterful orchestration of this great work. A study of the original piano score by Mussorgsky along with the symphonic setting of the same piece by Ravel will be particularly helpful in discovering which instruments will be used to represent different musical lines present in *Pictures at an Exhibition*. This example along with quotes of well-known pianists and composers will show that the relationship between the instruments in an orchestra and the notes of a piano is one that has been discussed and thought of in the classical tradition for many years.

The purpose of this document however is to convince the reader that some music written for piano can also imitate a big band or jazz combo. To achieve the transition of how the piano can imitate music in the classical tradition to how it imitates music in the jazz tradition, *Rhapsody in Blue* will be discussed. While *Pictures at an Exhibition* was written first for piano and then transcribed for orchestra, *Rhapsody in Blue* was first written for a jazz band (later transcribed to a full orchestra by Fred Grofe) and then transcribed to a piano solo version by Gershwin himself. This piece is also well known because of its rhythmic and melodic ideas associated with jazz, and because every note and rhythm is specified in the score and not improvised. It was written using the jazz style but intended to be performed in the concert hall, and was thus one of the first of its kind. Both the version for piano and orchestra and the solo piano version have been recorded many times by great pianists and orchestras. This paper will discuss how great pianists try and imitate different sounds in an orchestra specifically playing in the jazz style. Studying the orchestrated version of this piece is certainly something one would do in preparing to make a recording at the piano. A relationship will be shown between the different performers’ approach as they relate to the instrumentation in the original score. *Rhapsody in Blue* is thought by many to be the original example of composed jazz performed in
the concert hall, and the solo piano version of this piece contains many examples of a piano
imitating different instruments in the symphony orchestra in a jazz style. This will help us
transition to the main focus of the paper; a discussion of how the piano music of Kapustin relates
to different instruments in a big band. In my opinion, Gershwin is Kapustin’s compositional
grandfather; one of the first great composers to bring jazz to the concert hall. The study of how
different melodic lines in the solo piano version captures the effect of a full symphony orchestra
playing jazz will be a good transition to discussing how Kapustin does similar things in his
compositions.

To understand Kapustin’s relationship to jazz it is important to understand a little bit
about his background and where he came from. The Soviet Union and jazz had a very
complicated relationship. There were periods of time when it was allowed and other times when
it was forbidden. It was not until the death of Stalin that jazz finally found a permanent
comfortable home in Russia. Despite these difficulties passionate musicians sought recordings of
American jazz musicians. Kapustin started his professional career as a jazz musician a few years
after Stalin’s death. Despite earlier difficulties that passionate jazz musicians and fans in Russia
endured, Kapustin had opportunities to play and hear the music that would later influence him as
a composer. The years he spent as a pianist for Oleg Lundstrom’s jazz band as well as his
exposure to Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Count Basie and many others were vital to the
development of his unique style.

Finally, after having established a basis on which to base this argument, this paper will
discuss how Kapustin’s Variations Op. 41 relates to instruments in a big band or jazz combo. In
this section many side-by-side musical examples will be given of different measures from this
piece compared to certain big band and jazz combo tunes that may have influenced Kapustin.
The argument will then be given that to play the music of Kapustin effectively, pianists should be very familiar with different types of instruments in a jazz ensemble and what type of purpose these instruments usually fill. Gaining a knowledge of the role of these instruments in jazz and how Kapustin may imitate them will help pianists as they decide what type of tone to give a note, chord, musical line, or entire section. Help will be given to curious pianists based on research, listening, and playing experience as to how one should create an effective performance of Variations Op. 41 specifically. This part of the paper will be more practical in its approach; helping pianists to make the piano come alive and sound like a modern big band the same way that Scriabin was said to have made the piano sound like a full orchestra.\(^3\) The purpose of this paper is not just to help the reader see the relationship between the piano and large ensembles merely in the specific examples given, but to enliven the readers imagination and give life to other possibilities of tone that exist on the piano. If this paper gives the reader more questions than answers, then it has served its purpose.

**THE PIANO AND THE ORCHESTRA: A LOVE STORY BEGINS**

There are a few things in piano teaching that never change. Certain phrases are repeated so often that one can almost predict that they will be said in any given piano lesson. Things like, “You need to practice slower, you can’t play it fast until you can play it slow,” “Can you make your pinky play louder than the rest of your fingers in this chord, I want to hear that high note voiced better,” “You need to make your louds louder and your softs softer,” and many other such phrases. It seems that many piano professors spend their lives trying to figure out creative ways

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to help students understand and apply these playing techniques. While each of these phrases fit in a neat little sentence it usually takes many years for young pianists to master such techniques.

One such conversation most teachers will have with their students at one time or another is about tone quality. In this sphere of piano teaching you will hear phrases like, “I want you to follow through and play deep into the key beds. Think of this low melodic line as a cello solo and try and get a rich beautiful tone from the piano. Use your wrist and follow through the sound to produce a richer cello like tone.” Another musical teaching moment many have with their students might sound something like this, “Think of each melody as different parts of a full orchestra. Try and give each melody its own separate tone quality. Assign instruments in your head to each melody and try and make one melodic line communicate with the others. Perhaps you can think of this high quick colorful figure as a flute and this mid range melodic figure as a violin. As you play imagine that each line has its own tone, dynamic range, and even personality.” One accolade that many have given to great pianists over the years is that their playing sounds like a full orchestra. Scriabin’s pupil Nemenova-Lunz said of Scriabin’s playing, “At the touch of his fingers, the ugly walls, the poor furnishings, the discordant piano, all disappeared and a mighty orchestra resounded.”

Great Romantic pianists such as Franz Liszt, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Sviatoslov Richter, Vladimir Horowitz, and others were all known for their ability to make the piano sound like an orchestra. Liszt is especially legendary for his mastery of the piano at an early age and even though he composed many pieces for orchestra, the piano always remained one of the most important instruments in his compositions and the vehicle for many beautiful expressive works.

In the piano he saw a whole universe of possibilities that could never be exhausted. He even thought it equal in its capability of artistic power to that of a full orchestra of one hundred people. In a letter to Adolphe Pictet, Liszt described the place that the piano had in his artistic life:

You do not know that to speak of giving up my piano would be to me a day of gloom, robbing me of the light which illuminated all my early life and has grown to be inseparable from it.

My piano is to me what his vessel is to the sailor, his horse to the Arab, nay even more, till now it has been myself, my speech, my life. It is the repository of all that stirred my nature in the passionate dates of my youth. I confided to it all my desires, my dreams, my joys, and my sorrows. Its strings vibrated to my emotions and its keys obeyed my every caprice. Would you have me abandon it and strive for the more brilliant and resounding triumphs of the theatre or orchestra? Oh no! Even were I competent for music of that kind, my resolution would be firm not to abandon the study and development of piano playing, until I had accomplished whatever is practicable, whatever it is possible to attain nowadays.

Perhaps the mysterious influence which binds me to it so strongly prejudices me, but I consider the piano to be of great consequence. In my estimation it holds the first place in the hierarchy of instruments...In the compass of its seven octaves it includes the entire scope of the orchestra, and the ten
fingers suffice for the harmony which is produced by an ensemble of a hundred players…

What exactly did Liszt mean by this last statement? Did he mean that the entire range of notes possible by many different types of instruments could be produced at the piano? Was he merely saying that the 10 fingers working together with hammers and strings could produce the notes necessary to fill out harmonies the same way 10 sections of an orchestra could, or is he implying something more? Perhaps he was also saying what many listeners have discovered for themselves over the years as they sat in concert halls and listened to a great piece of music played at the hands of a master. Perhaps he was not only describing the pianos range and the infinite possibility of rhythms and notes, but maybe he was also describing the perhaps less obvious capability of the piano to play with many different types of tones. It is possible he was saying that a master of the instrument could sit down and make the piano sound like many different instruments by bringing out an infinite number of tones. Perhaps he was describing his experience as he separated different musical lines out and attached different types of musical tones to them as they communicated in endless patterns.

If we accept the argument that different musical lines in a piece can imitate the form of a large ensemble like a symphony orchestra this leads us to another question. Might certain writing for the piano ever suggest a specific instrument? If we look at any given score in the piano sonatas by Beethoven, the Transcendental Etudes by Liszt, or any of the sets of character pieces by Schumann, can we look at the character, articulation, or range of a certain musical line and conjecture that the composer meant for a melody to sound like a flute or a violin? Can we pick up certain clues from how the composer wrote certain musical lines to assign a melody a musical

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instrument from a symphony orchestra, and will this assignment of a musical timbre and personality of a certain instrument affect the way that a performer should approach the piano at that point in the music?

Many great masters of the piano have made such comparisons as they teach and play what has become the standard piano repertoire. In a master class given by Daniel Barenboim on the Beethoven Sonatas, he goes as far as to say “that when playing any piece of music on the piano one should imagine different lines as other instruments because of the neutral nature of the piano.” The question posed by the audience member and Barenboim’s answer offers great insight from a master of piano playing:

Audience member: “You asked him if at some point if he could orchestrally begin to imagine some of the phrases. Do you think that would be helpful in terms of approaching a piece like this to imagine the flutes in one part and the bass in another?”

Barenboim: “I think that this is something that can be helpful in any piece you play on the piano because the piano… is a very primitive neutral instrument. Any weight you place on the keys produces a sound,”… (Barenboim places his elbow on the keyboard). “It is a c-sharp, not particularly interesting, but I do it with the elbow. You can put an ashtray, anything on it. You try and do that with the violin, you get nothing. You have to first find the note, then you have to know how to put the finger, then you have know how to connect the two hands before you can actually make the equivalent of that. Therefore the piano is, from that point of view, a very neutral element. And it is precisely this neutrality, which gives it the possibility of so much expression, because you can put on the neutral wall any
color you want. You cannot put any color you want on the wall that already has a color, blue, red whatever it is. And the neutrality of the piano is what gives it the possibility to be so expressive. But in order to do that you have to accept the fact that in itself, left to its own devices, it is a very neutral, inexpressive instrument. But that it is open to twenty million different ways of seduction of each finger and then you get that, and therefore, if you have in your ear the sound of the oboes or the sound of the violin or the sound of the chorus or the sound of the flute, it doesn’t have to be that Beethoven orchestra of where he would have put the flute. The mere fact that you have it in your ear and you have a sensitivity and an understanding of how the flute sounds in that register will allow you if you have the necessary manual control to produce a sound that is much more interesting and more imaginative than the sound that is produced by simply bringing the keys down.”

In this master class, Barenboim gives great insight to the different sonorous possibilities of the piano and that these differences in tone can be produced by comparing different musical lines to instruments in the symphony orchestra. So, in learning a Beethoven sonata, is it necessary for one to assign each musical line to a different instrument to create an effective and convincing performance? This also begs the question: can one take a melody and make it sound like an actual flute or violin in the minds of the audience? In creating tones at the piano, Barenboim makes it clear that being familiar with the different tones of an orchestra and imagining them while you play will help one to create more beautiful and varied tones at the piano. As is true in most art, imagination is the key. Assigning different musical instruments to

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certain lines may be helpful in helping students understand that each musical line must have its own tone and personality, but it may not be completely necessary to assign a musical instrument in your head to every single line of every piece that you play. Barenboim states that there are 20 million different possibilities of sonorities on the piano, and the traditional orchestra usually has no more than 100 people. Of course this doesn’t need to be taken as a literal number of sonorities, but it is safe to say that he believes the piano to have an endless amount of tone color possibilities. While certain melodic lines written for the piano may at times clearly imply a certain instrument in an orchestra, (such as high trills in the upper register mimicking a flute or low heavy quarter notes imitating an upright bass or a timpani), he makes it clear that there are many more possibilities of tone on the piano than the number of instruments present in a symphony orchestra of any era. However, being familiar with these instruments, their sounds, and how they act in an orchestra will certainly give one a place to start as one explores the different tone possibilities on the piano. It is a great way to start to color the naturally neutral sound of the piano that Barenboim refers to. And while rarely will one hear the sound of a piano and be fooled into thinking that they are actually hearing a flute, bass, or violin, an astute listener will appreciate a pianist who can produce many different tone colors and may even correlate the sounds they hear on the piano to those of an orchestra. Perhaps Barenboim and others tell us that a piano should in a sense sound like an orchestra, not necessarily assuming that the piano should be able to produce the actual sounds of instruments found in a full orchestra, but to enliven the imagination of the pianist and audience member alike when they are producing and hearing different tone colors come from the piano. When one plays a piece of music the possibilities of tone production are perhaps as endless as the different ways to arrange the notes and rhythms.
themselves, and an artist will spend his/her life exploring these tonal possibilities to their fullest extent.

**PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION: A TRANSCRIPTION IN REVERSE**

While Ravel was not the first composer to arrange Mussorgsky’s original piano score for orchestra, his arrangement is certainly the most well known and performed today. Henry Wood, the composer who gave his own attempt at an orchestration of the already famous piece, prohibited his piece from being played in public out of either intimidation or respect for Ravel’s work. Ravel’s imaginative orchestration gives this piece a new life and the listener a new perspective. Barbara Kelly states, “Although not wishing to interfere with the essence of a composer’s style, Ravel left his mark on his orchestrations; his version of Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* is characterized by a dazzling array of instrumental colour…”

Perhaps one of the most famous examples is Ravel’s transcription of Mussorgsky’s scherzino titled “Ballet of the Chicks in their Shells.” The piece is a short scherzino in ternary

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form that effectively paints the picture of chickens popping out of their shells. The quirky chromatic harmony and short thematic material that is constantly interchanging with other short quirky melodies help us feel the cute chaos of the imagined moment. Ravel’s creative orchestration furthers this bubbling energy in the music even more.

The first thing we notice is that the grace notes in these first few measures are played by the flutes. While in Mussorgsky’s music the right hand grace notes and following chords seem to be apart of one figure, Ravel separates the notes out to two different instruments to give us two different colors. The flute is responsible for all of the grace notes on the large beats one and two, while the oboes and clarinets are responsible to fill out the chord both on the down beat and on the off beat. One could say that the flute playing the grace notes on beats one and two gives those beats a more shimmering quality and makes the exchange between the flutes and oboes part of the charm. These different orchestral colors rhythmically popping out help further the image of the confused newborn chicks.

Ravel chooses the viola and bassoon to voice the left hand alto range figure found in measure five. Having this different instrumental color contrasting with the upper register played by the flutes and oboes help us hear the pulse more clearly as the viola and bassoon steadily play eighth notes.

**FIGURE 1. MUSSORGSKY PIANO SOLO**
5. Ballet of the Chicks in their Shells

Scherzino
Vivo, leggiero

FIGURE 2. MUSSORGSKY/RAVEL ORCHESTRATION
While both parts are marked pianissimo in the score for orchestra and for piano, it is clear that the measures 1-4 and measures 5-8 should have two very types of tones and the melodies of
each should have two different types of personalities. Perhaps one can imagine the grace notes in the first four measures as the legs of the chicks as they burst from their shells while the lower rising line of eighth notes could depict other already partially hatched chicks stumbling around and bumping into each other.

The viola and bassoon demand the listener’s focus quickly in measures 5-8 with their lower range and ascending eighth notes. While the mood of the piece certainly hasn’t changed from its spritely whimsical nature, the change in instrumentation and range perhaps implies that we are now hearing a different chick or set of chicks than we heard in measures 1-4. More specifically the viola and bassoon are in a lower range, and while they are still playing figures with the same whimsical energy as the figures played by the flutes and oboes, their lower range and deeper tone may imply a chick that is a little bit farther on in the hatching process, amusingly walking around running into things.

Also of note is the fact that in measures 5-8 the oboes take over the grace note figures that were present on the strong beats in measures 1-4. Ravel seems to want us to think of the grace notes in the beginning as a dominant presence by placing the grace notes in an instrument that really cuts through the texture of the rest of the orchestra. The grace notes in the oboes in measures 5-8 while still heard are not the focus. It is as if, for a second, the chicks that we associate with the flutist’s grace notes in the beginning go from being the focus to becoming part of the background of the picture in our minds. The viola and bassoon may represent another chick that for these four measures demands our focus. Mussorgsky’s original score for the piano is extremely creative by itself and effectively creates a picture; Ravel’s orchestration adds another dimension to this creativity.
Is a thoughtful study of Ravel’s orchestration necessary to play the original version for piano solo convincingly? It may not be necessary but as Barenboim stated, “I think that this is something that can be helpful in any piece you play…” Recognizing each note’s own distinctive role in the composition is essential to a pianist just like it is essential for each member of an orchestra to know their role. Like players in an orchestra, each finger on a pianists’ hand must have it’s own distinct purpose in each musical moment, its own direction of phrasing, and maybe at times even their own personalities. Considering Ravel’s orchestration of this famous piece is a great way to enliven the imagination when preparing for a performance of the piano solo version.

**Rhapsody in Blue: Transcribing an Orchestra for the Piano**

*Rhapsody in Blue* holds an important place in the relationship between jazz music and music in the classical tradition. It was written at a time when these two types of music were not

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viewed with equal respect in the minds of the public and many music critics. Perhaps this is because it was associated with bars and casinos of the time. It may also have to do with the fact that jazz largely stems from an African-American tradition and this was a time of intense racial discrimination.

Some criticisms of the composition itself may affect the way we view the orchestration. Bernstein criticized it for being a string of well-crafted melodies strung together with flimsy transitional material. “The Rhapsody in Blue is not a composition at all. It’s a string of several paragraphs stuck together--with a thin paste of flour and water. It is not a real composition in the sense that whatever happens in it must seem inevitable, or even pretty inevitable. You can cut out parts of it without affecting the whole in any way except to make it shorter. You can remove any of these stuck-together sections and the piece still goes on as bravely as before. You can even interchange these sections with one another and no harm done. You can make cuts within a section, or add new cadenzas, or play it with any combination of instruments or on the piano alone. It can be a five-minute piece or a six-minute piece or a 12-minute piece. And, in fact, all these things are being done to it every day...”

Bernstein had a point. You can certainly take different sections of the piece and play them as compositions that stand alone, something you wouldn’t be able to do with other masterpieces composed by Gershwin’s predecessors. If the definition of a great composition is to create a feeling of unity then one could argue that this piece isn’t great at all. But Gershwin was a man with a foot in both worlds. He was well known for his songs written for the Broadway stage and is a core figure in the Tin Pan Alley genre. Many of these songs like “Someone to Watch

"Over Me," “Our Love is Here to Stay,” and perhaps most famously “I Got Rhythm” became standards used by countless brilliant jazz musicians later in the century. It is almost as if he took these separate types of song forms, added a lot of rubato to the beginning and ending of each section and mashed them all together to create *Rhapsody in Blue*. But the pieces beauty is not in its unity. It is in the themes that are as singable and memorable as his tunes “Someone to Watch Over Me,” or “I Got Rhythm.” Despite its criticisms, *Rhapsody in Blue* is one of the most played works for piano and orchestra in America and the world today.

Bernstein did however acknowledge that perhaps Gershwin’s statement in the classical world might have been left unfinished because of his early death. “[George Gershwin's] tragedy was not that he failed to cross the tracks, but rather that he did, and once there, in his new habitat, was deprived of the chance to plunge his roots firmly into the new soil. He was given only a little more than a decade to develop the roots of this transplantation and died, shockingly and maddeningly, in his thirties--a few years older than [Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart] was when he died. These two names may be felt to be an uncomfortable pairing, but they make a fascinating comparison. Both men were "naturals", each evolving a body of music that sprang like phenomena of nature from their respective soils, fertile and flourishing. But Mozart had no tracks to cross. His was one great continuing harvest from childhood to death. Gershwin, on the contrary, had to plough, sow, thresh and reap afresh over and over again. We can only speculate about what degree of mastery he might have attained if he had lived.”

Gershwin did have to crossover some tracks to be recognized in the world of art music. Originally he was known for writing songs for the everyday man. He wrote songs that you can

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listen to once or twice and walk away humming; something that is more difficult to do if you listen to a symphony by Brahms or Beethoven. Yet Gershwin sought for validation outside of the world of songwriting. He was not content with writing “popular” music and was a student of what was considered more serious and traditional music most of his life. *Concerto in F, Rhapsody in Blue, Cuban Overture*, and the colossal American opera *Porgy and Bess* are all masterpieces still played in concert halls across the world and not uncommonly programmed before or after a piece by Ravel, Brahms, or any other of the recognized masters in the world of art music. However, Gershwin’s works are not without influence from his popular music. They are full of jazz harmonies with as many harmonic extensions as we might find in one of his hit Broadway shows. These pieces are full of swing and long legato lines that one would find in a great jazz solo. Thus, Gershwin was the first to famously take the rhythms and harmonies of jazz music, and put them in a classical context. In this regard he may be considered a compositional grandfather to Nikolai Kapustin. Gershwin was not necessarily trying to cross tracks as Bernstein said. Maybe he was just trying to stand in two places at once.

However disjointed the connecting material in *Rhapsody in Blue* may be, the themes are incredibly memorable and inspiring. As discussed in the introduction, the reason that this piece is such a great gateway into exploring the thesis question is because the composer not only wrote a version for jazz band, but he also took this orchestrated original and wrote a version for piano solo. Thus, using this piano solo score to investigate what kind of markings Gershwin associated with certain instruments or melodic lines will be a great way to truly begin a discussion of how Kapustin imitates certain instruments in his composition for piano.

One such example is the famous opening solo written for the clarinet. The clarinet was a sound found in a large amount of jazz and popular music, and also was blessed with a long-
standing tradition in classical music that went back for centuries. It was a great sound to introduce an audience of classical listeners who went to see jazz played in a concert hall. The orchestrated version begins with a trill followed by a glissando of an octave and a half up to the opening tonic note of b-flat. The glissando was a tool common in jazz music of the time and it’s bluesy implications certainly set the scene for the rest of this “blue,” rhapsody. The sound of the clarinet in this opening passage in many recordings of *Rhapsody in Blue* almost resembles an instrumental moan one might have found in Duke Ellington’s big band.¹¹

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When playing this piece for piano solo how should one approach the opening trill and glissando? We have established that the clarinet is the designated instrument and in many recordings it has an almost groaning quality. While this question has several answers one place to start would be how a great clarinetist approaches this in certain situations. Ross Gorman, the clarinetist on the original recording of this piece, mumbles the opening trill and then proceeds
with a giant glissando to the high b-flat that seems to reach its climax with a lazy difficulty. This is certainly not the only way to play this passage effectively, but the lazy sound of the clarinet gathering speed and volume as it reaches its climax has become a trademark sound to the opening of *Rhapsody in Blue*.\(^\text{12}\)

If one is playing the piano solo version of *Rhapsody in Blue* and wishes to mimic this warm groaning clarinet sound how does approach the piano? As the clarinet is ascending to reach the high b-flat it resembles a giant moan and is not scalar or articulate in its approach. As the line in this famous recording ascends to the b-flat we only hear each note of the scale in the lower range of the passage, as we approach the higher range the clarinet starts to slide, something that is possible with wind instruments or the human voice, but is virtually impossible to do with the piano unless we employ some creative tuning. So how does one use the piano to mimic the sound of the groaning clarinet in this opening passage? A careful listening of many recordings will reveal that there are many ways to effectively approach this. Gershwin’s own recording of this work for piano solo does not slow down toward the end of this scalar run like most of the orchestras that have recorded this piece do, but he does use a fair amount of pedal.\(^\text{13}\)

Approaching this passage with a heavy amount of pedal and a lighter attack at the beginning of the scale, and digging into the piano to achieve a deeper tone toward the end of the scale seems


\(^{13}\) Gershwin, George, Paul Whiteman, Nathaniel Shilkret, George Gershwin, and CA Victor Symphony Orchestra. *Gershwin Plays Gershwin*. Anonymous 76762523 R(UtOrBLW) b14951848. 1976; 1924.
to be what most pianists use if they are trying to mimic the clarinet and its sliding capabilities. To achieve the sliding sound that a wind instrument or voice can perform the piano must blend notes together either with their fingers or the pedal.

As noted previously this is not the only way to approach this passage. The pianist Vestard Shimkus in a live performance ritards and articulates the last few notes rather than blurring them. This and other recordings show that while some transcriptions for the piano to orchestra can call for an imitation of the pieces instrumentation, pianists can also come up with different types of tones, articulations, and other ways of playing the piece as well. As many teachers in the arts and other disciplines say, “once you know the rules, you can break the rules.”

Like the romantic concertos before its time, *Rhapsody in Blue* has many different exchanges with the piano and orchestra as they communicate musical themes to each other and the audience. In the piano solo version, it is interesting to see these exchanges side-by-side as one section may be decidedly orchestral in its writing while another section is clearly more pianistic. In the piano solo and concerto examples below we clearly see the characteristics of a concerto in this solo arrangement as the left hand plays the leading tones to different inversions of the c-major chord in a pianistic flourish. This virtuosic c-major arrpegiation is then followed by a sustained b-flat 9 sharp 11 chord, played with a quick attack and then followed by a decrescendo in the orchestra. (And in the case of the piano solo version the natural decay of the sound in the piano.) In the piano concerto version the clarinet then plays the familiar theme that we first heard in the trumpets in measure 11, and in the piano version the dynamic marking (forte) and articulations make it clear that this part should stand out. If playing the piano solo

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version and trying to conceive it as an orchestra this line handed by the clarinet should be played out, articulated carefully, and possibly be played with some rubato so that it stands out. Playing deeper into the key beds and creating little pockets of space before the accents and staccatos are some ways to imitate the warm sound and tonguing of the clarinet.

FIGURE 5. GERSHWIN SOLO mm. 105-109

FIGURE 6. GERSHWIN PIANO SOLO mm. 110-105
This same pattern is followed again but now in a different tonal center with the clarinet now playing the familiar theme over a G 9 sharp-11 chord shown in the examples above. Thinking of each of these different melodic and harmonic figures as having different types of tones, expressive sound, and musical purpose are the types of things that will make a performance interesting, and relating the piano solo version to the piano concerto version is a great way to start doing that. It would be unmusical to play the pianistic virtuosic arpegiations with the same type of rubato and deep tone that one would play in the melodic and articulated clarinet line, because such lines are meant for the virtuosic and percussive capabilities of the piano. It is of course not possible to produce the exact sound of the full orchestra on the piano.
Yet if the pianist plays artistically we should hear the role of each note played and how it relates to the composition the same way we would hear it in the orchestral setting. As in most cases with music, the imagination of the performer is key.

As Leonard Bernstein said, Gershwin did cross over into the world of classical music. Rhapsody in Blue follows the jazz tradition in terms of harmony and swing and the classical tradition in terms of being composed instead of improvised, and often not adhering to a strict pulse. Perhaps Bernstein is correct that, given more time, Gershwin may have developed into a more mature artist. Yet Gershwin laid the groundwork for other composers like Nikolai Kapustin to close the gap between these two art forms and compose foot tapping jazz music for the concert hall.

KAPUSTIN: THE MAN AND HIS MUSIC

In his dissertation on Kapustin’s music, Jonathan Mann stated, “The overall effect can be summarized in a hypothetical scenario: Art Tatum and Herbie Hancock, having studied

counterpoint with Simon Sechter and composition with Sergei Prokofiev, adopted a son, named him Nikolai, and raised him in a musically bilingual household.”

Kapustin was born in Ukraine in 1937. He studied with Avrelian Rubakh, a pupil of Felix Blumefield who also taught Simone Barere and Vladimir Horowitz. He studied at Moscow Conservatory a place certainly known for its tradition of teaching music in a more traditional classical framework. He is known today for welding together the old European forms of composition such as sonata-allegro form, variations, concerto, and many others with the more angular melodies, syncopated rhythms, and harmonic extensions found in Jazz. His style is markedly unique and his works have matured into vastly complex pieces complete with the structural integrity one would find in the music of his classical predecessors. When asked if he was a jazz musician or a classical musician Kapustin said, “I have very few jazz compositions that are really jazz . . . There is no need to improvise with my music, although it is jazz . . . you can make improvisation only by creation; you cannot make an improvisation of a sonata.” Kapustin seems to think that his music being through composed instead of improvised excludes him from the jazz genre. Stephen Osbourne, a great champion of his work, has a hard time putting Kapustin’s music in the traditional classical realm. “I wonder how the recording label, Hyperion, decided to put this in the ‘classical’ category. Probably they did so because Kapustin

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16 Simon Sechter (1788-1867), an Austrian teacher, theorist, organist, and professor of composition at the Vienna Conservatorium, taught counterpoint to Franz Schubert, Anton Bruckner, and Eduard Marxsen, who later taught Johannes Brahms.
18 Anderson, 96.
herself called these pieces ‘Sonata’ or ‘Prelude.’ But, truth to tell, I’m hard pressed to find very much in the way of easily identifiable classical music procedures here.”19

So is Kapustin’s music classical or jazz? The answer is, of course, yes! It is classical in terms of form, and jazz in terms of harmony and style. Today, Kapustin is famous all over the world for this style despite his lack of interest in fame. In an interview, Kapustin said of his rising fame, “To be famous isn’t important, I don’t want to be famous.” 20

Yet even at a young age, the style that would later make him famous was already being written. At the age of thirteen he composed his Op. 1, which is a Concertino for piano and orchestra. His years studying in Moscow didn’t change his interest in jazz but rather seemed to enforce it. The years that followed his studies at the famous conservatory were perhaps the times when Kapustin had most of his exposure to the sound of the big band. He worked and performed many original compositions with the Oleg Lundestrum Big Band with himself at the piano. This was his first long time professional engagement with a big band. The sounds that he played and heard while working with this band would have a large impact on his music as he matured as a composer.


While there is much written about Kapustin, there is little one can find in terms of his own thoughts and commentaries about his music. There are a few interviews in magazines, online articles, simple biographies, and a few dissertations dissecting his music and mostly discovering what makes it jazz and what makes it classical, but we don’t get much personal insight as to his composition techniques or own thoughts about his music in general. Rather than
referring to the piano as it relates to other instruments in a big band he actually seems to focus on his piano works as his main compositional vehicle and process. “All piano music has to be composed at the keyboard otherwise you can write very strange things. If I didn’t play I wouldn’t be able to compose- when you’re the performer you know how to make things easier for the player.” Thus in terms of his own published words there is probably more evidence that his composition is influenced by a desire to compose pianistic passages trying to imitate a big band with the piano.

However, the title of his piece for piano, Big Band Sounds, suggest that these sounds crept into his thoughts while writing. In this piece, we can hear many of the same examples of how his piano music relates to the sound of a big band. In it one can find the loud tutti sections, certain lines playing the roles of the rhythm section, and other sections and musical phrases taking the role of a soloist.  

In order to understand all of these influences in terms of ensemble, rhythm, harmony and all other aspects of jazz it is important to understand its history in Russia. While jazz is an American art form, for many years it carried on a complicated affair with the Russian people. The sound that found its way to Russia in the early 1920s eventually found Kapustin’s ears found. In Moscow on October 1st, 1922 “The First Eccentric Orchestra of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, Valentin Parnakh’s Jazz Band,” performed. This was the first public advertised performance of jazz in Russia. Parnakh’s writings about jazz, “The New Dances,” and “The Jazz Band,” were the first articles of their type to be published in Russian. These articles and Parnakh’s group helped lay the groundwork for a jazz following in Russia.

Later, when the Russian civil war ended, he returned from France and brought with him different instruments found in the jazz bands of America and Europe like the banjo, saxophone, xylophone, and the newest type of drum set available.

All of the buzz behind Parnakh’s writings and performances sparked the interest of film directors Sergei Einstein and Vsevolod Meyerhold, who invited Parnakh’s jazz band to perform as part of their productions. The Russian filmmakers adapted the jazz sound and opened up a wider audience to this new American style of music. Soon, Russian and American jazz musicians had more contact as Leopold Teplitsky traveled to Philadelphia and learned the art by playing with different combos. Teplitsky returned to Russia in 1927 bringing with him multiple scores, including some of Whiteman’s arrangements.

However, after this early success, jazz suffered a devastating loss at the hands of Stalin and the Soviet Union. Although jazz was still popular, it was prohibited because of its association with capitalist America. A compromise was made when the musician Leonid Utesov and his band “Thea-Jazz” were allowed to perform and became stars of the new type of jazz now approved by the Soviet Union. It was a way for the Soviets to show their disapproval of America while still allowing the popular music to be composed, performed, and listened to. Utesov did this in part by mostly arranging popular Russian and Jewish songs with some remnants of the American style still attached.

Alexander Tsfasman was another figure still popular and accepted into the Soviet jazz culture. Instead of improvising, he was known for memorizing and brilliantly performing well-crafted solos, much like Kapustin. As the government became more lax on what kind of music was acceptable, more American songs and elements started to creep back into the repertoire of Russian jazz musicians. Tsfasman was even able to give the USSR premier of Rhapsody in Blue
in 1945. However between 1945 and 1953, jazz in Russia took a huge turn for the worst. Soviet officials arrested many jazz musicians as one of their many tactics to de-Americanize Russia. Everything related to American music, including instruments such as the saxophone, were banned.

After Stalin’s death, Russia’s policies on jazz waned and jazz groups started to reappear again. In 1957, the Oleg Lundstrem Jazz Orchestra, the band that Nikolai Kapustin would later be apart of, arrived in Moscow. Kapustin would join the group in 1961 after his graduation from the Moscow conservatory and play with them for eleven years. After the Soviets’ ban on Jazz lifted, American groups and artists such as Benny Goodman, Earl Hines, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra were able to enter the country to perform. These groups were wildly popular and we can only assume that a young Kapustin would have heard them play as he was finding his own unique voice as a composer. Russia also followed the American trend of bop in Jazz music. In the late fifties and early sixties, hundreds of groups formed that mimicked the American sounds of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, Miles Davis and other popular American musicians. In the piano music of Kapustin, one can see the influences of American jazz pianists like George Shearing, Art Tatum, and even more contemporary pianists like Keith Jarrett.

Often jazz musicians will meet and ask each other the important question, “who do you listen to?” This is because every jazz musician knows that gathering ideas from other musicians is an essential part of the art. Although jazz had a terrible start and was banned for much of Kapustin’s early life, he eventually found opportunity to be influenced by others who shared his love for jazz music. After playing with Oleg Lundstrem’s Jazz Orchestra for many years, listening to the wildly popular sound of bop, and hearing classic arrangements of American
standards by groups like Benny Goodman, there must have been times while sitting down to compose that he had the sounds of a big band and jazz combo music ringing in his ear.

**VARITIONS OP. 41**

*Variations Op. 41* is a wild ride from the beginning to the end, with only a slight moment for rest. This theme is most famously based on the opening solo bassoon figure in *The Rite of Spring*, a meandering mournful opening line that acts like a call for the dancing tribe and almost seems to wake them up from sleep with its lazy musical line. Both of these composers borrowed this theme from a Lithuanian folk song titled, “Tu, manu seserele.” Stravinsky and later Kapustin added grace notes to imitate the dudki, traditional wind instruments from Lithuania.22

**FIGURE 8. LITHUANIAN FOLK SONG “TU, MANU SESERLE.”**

Kapustin uses this theme very liberally, sometimes only imitating the grace notes, playing it in fragments at times, and sometimes abandoning it altogether. The lyrical feeling of the bassoon solo at the beginning of *Rite of Spring* is transformed into the jazz style by use of the space that proceeds accented notes, really making them pop out of the texture, and an instant rhythmic swing. Kapustin also changes the key of the figure often rapidly transforming from f minor, to d-flat minor, to a minor to g-flat minor.

FIGURE 9. KAPUSTIN mm. 1-2

This rapid shift of a tonal center is followed by a large emphasis on dominant. This is almost reticent of the Miles Davis recording “Some Day My Prince Will Come,” which begins with an emphasis on the dominant that lasts several measures. Both Kapustin’s piece and Miles
Davis’s recording stay on the dominant for awhile while emphasizing different altered notes such as flat ninths, sharp ninths, and augmented 5ths. 23

How might listening to a recording of this Miles Davis tune affect the way that a pianist might approach this opening page? In the recording by Miles Davis we can clearly hear the different instrument timbres taking their own space and communicating with each other, specifically the bass and the piano. The role of the bass is to provide an ostinato like underlying statement while the piano is meant to fill up the alto/tenor space.

In the Miles Davis recording, the pianist Wynton Kelly also plays two different roles. At times he is softly playing the chords that give the piece an underlying harmony, and then switches to a more projected sound when the role of his right hand becomes more melodic. The three separate rolls of the ostinato bass, the inner harmonic foundation played by the pianist, and the singing projected melody also played by the pianist can all be found on the first page of Kapustin’s variations.

Approaching the beginning of Kapustin’s variations with the same type of division of instrumental color is extremely effective. When we play the low A-flats at the beginning of the variations it is helpful to think of them as a bass. Playing deeply into the key bed with the flat part of the fingers will help make those notes sounds like the deep toned sounds of a plucked upright bass. The mid range of the piano then gives us the harmonic extension and is like what Wynton Kelly plays in the middle range of the piano on “Someday My Prince Will Come.” Playing this set of mid harmonic extensions with a softer glossy tone gives the listener a clear

picture of the two ideas. The third idea comes in the form of a repeat of the *Rite of Spring* bassoon theme, which the piece is based on. This can emulate the way that Wynton Kelly digs into the keys while giving his melodic figure to introduce Davis’s solo. It is helpful to dig into the keyboard, give pockets of space before the accents, and project in a sharper way than we project in the bass. Doing these things effectively will give the listener a sense that what is being played is important and is acting in and of itself. If this is successfully done we should hear three different tones; the held ostinato bass, the mid range chord extensions, and the projected solo.

**FIGURE 10. KAPUSTIN mm. 4-10**
While the Kapustin score obviously does not specify a drum set to be played in the introduction or at any time in this piece, Kapustin accentuates the different parts of the beat to give us almost a feeling of a drum set being played. Part of the effectiveness of a drum set comes from the interaction of different rhythmic timbres. While playing Kapustin’s *Variations Op. 41* and pieces like it, it’s important to take these different rhythmic ideas and organize our tone qualities around the theme to give the piece a rhythmic life the same way a multi-timbred percussion instrument like the drum set would give to a jazz band.

In measure eighteen the right hand is divided into two parts. The top part is the melody that should be played with a deep tone. In a big band, this could be a horn or wind section. The other part of the right hand, however, takes the role of the drums. The quarter notes are articulated with stacattos while the second part of beat four is articulated with a tenuto marking. The steady beat of this part of the right hand plays the role of the drums and it is interesting that Kapustin changes the articulation when he accents the different part of a different beat in this section the same way that a drum set in a big band would.

**FIGURE 11. KAPUSTIN mm.17-19**

The same section above gives voice to different types of instrument that we haven’t heard before. Generally, in big band music, when things are rhythmically varied, they are played by either a soloist or a section of the band. When things are rhythmically straighter, such as simple
quarter or eighth notes in any given measure, this tends to be played by the rhythm section. For example, in a performance and video of Duke Ellington’s famous tune *Take the A Train* we can physically see that the main job of the rhythm section is to keep a steady beat. The horn section, and later on vocalists, play a variety of rhythms while the job of the bass player and drummer is to serve as an underlying pulse. Thus the left hand in the section shown above could possibly be viewed as a horn section. It is also important to note that in the notes above the middle voice, serving as the rhythm section in this particular figure, should be played softer than the “e” above them, and much softer than the low melodic figure that we have designated as a possible baritone saxophone section. It is, however, important to still give this middle voice a certain energy and varied percussive sound to keep a strong sense of pulse underneath the melody.

Kapustin’s performance of these measures tend to accent the last half of the fourth beat and is very percussive with this drum like inner voice. In her recital at Balai, pianist Cecilia Ratna makes the inner voice a little smoother and less percussive than Kapustin does, really giving us only the bottom voice to listen to. While there are various ways to play it and each performer should bring their ideas to whatever piece they are playing, Kapustin’s performance gives us a more layered, big band-like view in this measure and in general than does Ratna.

In the piano solo version of *Rhapsody in Blue*, we get a sense of when the orchestra plays in tutti as opposed to when there is a solo instrument. A common way to give a sense of a full ensemble is simply to play the melody in octaves and then fill out the middle voices of that

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chord. In the example below, Gershwin writes full chords in the right hand with heavy octaves in the bass and big chords in the middle range of the piano to achieve the impression of many instruments playing at once. To give a successful performance of this piece it is helpful to think orchestrally and create a different type of tone and emotion when the large ensemble is excitedly playing together as opposed to when the flutes give their answer.

**FIGURE 12. GERSHWIN PIANO SOLO mm. 79-85**
FIGURE 13. GERSHWIN ORCHESTRATION mm. 79-84


Kapustin also, at times, gives us a sense that a soloist or section of the big band could be giving call-and-response type figures with the entire ensemble. For example in measure fourteen Kapustin will likewise have the right hand play octaves and fill out the middle voices with the appropriate harmony. He then has two different solo figures communicate with each other in measure fifteen exploding upward into another tutti moment in measure sixteen. In this way, a pianist should communicate, both with dynamics and tone, this change in texture to create a different character in each moment.

**FIGURE 14. KAPUSTIN mm. 14-19**

In measure thirty-four, we get an even bigger sense that he is trying to imitate a larger ensemble playing in a tutti like fashion. In the measures preceding this (30-33) we heard multiple instruments or notes working together to create a large melodic sound. These ideas climax in measure thirty-four, where we see the inner voices filled out more than they have been up to this point. Kapustin also writes a crescendo along with the first forte that we have seen in this piece.
perhaps suggesting an excited and loud ensemble’s communicative efforts, culminating in the climax of this section.
In his pieces for piano, Kapustin will often have a large section imitate a walking bass and his Variations is no different. Measures 94-99 feature a steady stream of eighth notes in the left hand imitating a steady stream of eighth or quarter notes found in countless big band and combo charts. In a live performance of the tune *Perdido*, the Wynton Marsalis big band uses this type of arrangement. After the band plays the head and several solos, the bassist, Carlos Henriquez, solos a steady beat of eighth notes with some variation just like this section of Kapustin’s piece. The right hand takes the same role that the piano in the big band takes in that it is there to provide harmonic color and accent certain beats. These types of inner melodic fills are usually played in the mid-range of the piano and this is just where Kapustin writes them.

Kapustin also gives us direction for which of those beats should be brought out in the right hand by marking them with accents, implying a piano comping style. Yet even with it’s jagged accents and thicker chords the right hand is secondary to the steady walking beat of the bass. It is apparent that this is a new section and calls for a new feel because of the change of keys, the change to this walking bass like texture, and the cadence that precedes it. Playing with a deep tone and steady rhythm with the left hand while using the right hand for melodic backdrop and to accent certain beats will make this section stand apart in the listeners’ ears; and if they are familiar with big band music a successful performance should possibly make the listener think of a bass solo in a big band chart such as Wynton Marsalis’ big band playing *Perdido*.29

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Playing both hands in unison, two octaves apart, is very common in the music of jazz pianists and it is written many times in Kapustin’s Variations, as well as many other works. Phineas Newborn Jr., Keith Jarrett, Oscar Peterson, and many others are known for soloing and
playing in this style with both hands.\textsuperscript{30} It is also a common practice in big band music and smaller ensembles to play the head with several instruments or groups of instruments playing the melody one or two octaves apart. A famous example is the very beginning of the tune “Koko,” in which Charlie Parker (saxophone) and Dizzie Gillespie (trumpet) play the quick be-bop melody in parallel octaves.\textsuperscript{31} In Paul Desmond’s “Take Five,” his big band tribute to Brubeck, the saxophones play the familiar melody in five while the flute doubles the saxophones an octave higher.\textsuperscript{32} There are literally thousands of other examples in big band and smaller jazz ensemble arrangements of one instrument or instrument group doubling the melody that the other instrument or instrument group is playing several octaves lower.

There are several instances in the Variations that Kapustin does just that and interestingly enough they are sections where he is outlining the main theme, arguably similar to the “head” played at the beginning of jazz tunes. Kapustin uses this type of spacing to spell out the melody borrowed from the Lithuanian folk song. The very first thing that we hear in fact is the melody spelled out two octaves apart, somewhat reminiscent of the pianists Phineas Newborn Jr. or Keith Jarrett.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{kapustin.png}
\caption{Kapustin mm. 1-2}
\end{figure}


The coda like presto section also begins with the same type of spacing and melodic writing found in the beginning of the piece. The original theme in this section, however, is spelled out in its original key, but is now much faster.

FIGURE 18. KAPUSTIN mm. 198-204

How might thinking in terms of the different tone colors possible in a big band or smaller combo affect the way that a pianist plays this passage? Instruments like the flute cut through texture in an orchestral setting and these instruments are often in a higher register. In these examples above, it is perhaps not so important that you assign a particular instrument to a higher or lower part, but rather that you focus on creating a different type of tone quality in the upper melodic line than you create in the lower. One idea would be to have the upper part voiced a
little louder and shinier than the lower part. If done right, these different types of tones played skillfully together on the piano can sound like two instruments or two different sections of a big band together playing the head of a tune in different octaves.

The Larghetto section, starting at measure 181, is reminiscent of many big band ballads. Kapustin seems to take a more lyrical, bel canto approach in this section and it is perhaps appropriate to compare this section to one of the many recordings and live performances of singers with a big band. It is interesting that, even in this slow section, the soprano part is independent with the middle voices moving with it rarely, almost incidentally. It is also important to note that, in measure 181 and measure 193, the melody is ornamented and dressed up the same way a vocalist or solo instrumentalist might dress up a melody.

**FIGURE 19. KAPUSTIN mm. 180-186**
Dianne Reeves gives a wonderful live performance of *In a Sentimental Mood* in which these types of embellishments are common. When having a soloist play with a large ensemble, balance is always an issue. In this performance the entire band plays a background role to the singer and is there to add color and fill in space when the melody is not moving. Yet even when
the big band (with an added string section in this case) rises, it still gives its melodic input as an
after thought to the the main melody sung by the Dianne Reeves.33

It can be helpful in the Larghetto section of this piece to think of the soprano as your singer with the other voices in the rest of your fingers as background instruments there to support the singer and add different colors and countermelodies. When playing the high “e” in measure 181, it is important to attack it with a deep tone. This single “e” has to last, and the natural decay of the piano and the low octaves played directly after can’t get in the way of that high “e” sound. In this example, we have the same problem in the piano as an orchestra accompanying any type of soloist does. How do we make sure that the most important melodic line is heard above the background material? In this measure, Kapustin marks the low octaves as stacatto suggesting that these attacks should be short. However, this is not the same type of stacatto that we have encountered previously because of its more melodic context. These notes should be played with light pedal to not overshadow the high “e” that we should still hear up until the “and” of beat three. There should, however, still be enough pedal that we can hear the c-sharp minor harmoy implied in the combination of the different tones. The bottom hands continue with this same octave writing, suggesting that the pianist should think of these in terms of the same type of tone that we established in measure 181. When the left hand figuration changes in measure 184 and the right hand starts to be more expansive, we can imagine this section as a widening of the orchestration. The soprano note, in all of these measures, should stay on top of the texture most of the time, as the orchestra rises and falls beneath it. If all of these musical ideas are played with skill and applied to the rest of the lyrical section, the result is beautiful. Studying the way that the

big band assumes its role in accompanying Dianne Reeves singing *In a Sentimental Mood* will help a pianist achieve this type of musical playing. If one studies how the singers Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, Roberta Gambarini, Diana Krall, and countless others fit in the balance with their orchestra and how they sing with beautiful tone and different coloratura, one should be inspired as he/she makes decisions on how to play lyrical sections in Kapustin’s piano music.

It is also important to note that the piano is an important part in most big bands and small groups and that Kapustin may at times let the piano play the role of itself as opposed to mimicking other instruments. The unique role of the piano in most big bands is to provide rhythmic background and an underlying rhythmic variety to the melodic role of the instrumental section and the steady rhythmic backbone of the bass and drums. This is called comping. A common form of comping is for the pianist to play the 3rds, 7ths, and altered noes of the chord (often omitting the root and the fifth) in the middle range of the piano. The transcription of Sonny Clark’s *Cool Struttin’* shown below is a great example of comping. The pianist fills in the extensions of the simple blues harmonies with its rhythmic off-beat jabs on the piano.

**FIGURE 21. KAPUSTIN mm. 1-10**
Kapustin creates something similar with the left hand in measures 120-133. It is important to note the rhythm in these chords. Almost all of them are played on off-beats often with accents. They also are made of up the 3rds, 7ths, and harmonic extensions found in the 

comping of many different jazz arrangements. To play this effectively, a pianist must think of these chords percussively as opposed to melodically. They exist to provide a rhythmic variety opposing the steady stream of eighth notes (perhaps representing a wind instrument section because of its fluidity), found in the right hand.

FIGURE 22. KAPUSTIN mm. 120-134

To make matters more interesting, at measures 121 and 126, the left hand seems to be switching roles from that of an instrument section to that of the piano comping. The smooth eighth note lines in measures 121, 123, and 125 suggest an instrumental section that should be played with a melodic tone; this contrasts with measures 122, 124, and 126 that should be played with more jagged lines and percussive sounds. Having the left or right hand switch roles is a device Kapustin uses throughout this and many other pieces. As pianists play through this
section, they should have these sounds and ideas in their ear to give the listeners the impression that these two alternating ideas are different in intent and purpose. If played well, it should sound like there is a full band of members communicating different musical ideas to each other.

Kapustin not only tries to imitate different instruments found in a big band but is very aware of different jazz styles and often imitates them. An entirely different paper could be written on how Kapustin incorporates harlem stride, the swing era, fusion, and many other styles in just his works for solo piano not to mention all of the other types of compositions he writes. In the presto finale of this piece the reference to bop is heavily implied and studying the way different instruments play this type of jazz should affect the way a pianist approaches these last quick pasages.

In his article on bop Scott Devaux says “The word ‘bop’ derives from the syllables ‘re-bop’ or ‘be-bop,’ an onomatopoeic reference to a two-note rhythm created by the alternation of snare drum and bass drum accents.” This type of rhythm inspired soloists to follow the two-note beep of the drums and improvise with a steady stream of eighth notes, only pausing to breathe. He later said, “Younger, more progressive soloists tested their skills improvising alongside the polyrhythmic drummers, as one can hear on a recording from Minton’s in 1941 that pairs Clarke with the electric guitarist Charlie Christian. By the time bebop emerged publically in the mid-1940s, timekeeping was pared down to the drummer’s steady ride-cymbal pattern and the four-beat walking bass line of the string bass. Pianists learned to add their own rhythmic layer by playing their accompanying chords in a rhythmically unpredictable manner, or comping.” As we
have seen in the previous musical examples, comping is something that Kapustin is acutely aware of and, thus, it is often included in his be-bop like passages.35

The presto section at the end of Kapustin’s variations is heavily influenced by bop. The top line is incredibly virtuosic and is composed of mostly eighth notes. Devraux goes on to say that, “For soloists, bop demanded a startling leap in technical virtuosity. Throughout the swing era, gifted young musicians competing for positions in the top big bands set higher and higher standards for range, speed, and the ability to improvise over complex chord progressions.” 36 Early in Coltrane’s career, he was known for his ability to create exciting and complex solos played over rapidly changing chord progressions. In the tune *Giant Steps*, shown below, Coltrane plays a stream of eighth notes, only giving the listener space when he needs to take a breath.

![FIGURE 23. COLTRANE SOLO](image)


In the final presto section of Kapustin’s Variations he likewise shifts keys rapidly like Coltrane and many other bop musicians did. Not only does he have a steady stream of eighth notes, but after he has presented one of these bop like lines, he writes rests in at the end of the phrases. Perhaps this is to give the mind time to process what was played, or perhaps he is mimicking a horn or sax player giving space simply because the player needs breath, (even though a pianist doesn’t need to breathe to start a new line.) Space is as important a part of bop as the usual stream of continuous eighth notes that it is associated with. While the fingers are able to play musical lines like this for hours without giving any space, a horn or saxophone player must pause to take a breath. Kapustin tips his hat to bop soloists by including rests at the end of his musical thoughts. Recognizing this, pianists should use these spaces as natural places to place the beginning and end of musical thoughts and ideas. Pianists should often treat these figures as they would in a musical phrase from a classical sonata; making a diminuendo at the end of the phrase.

FIGURE 24. KAPUSTIN mm. 205-209

To imitate the sound of the instruments that are normally found in bop, Kapustin writes in accents where a saxophonist or a trumpet player would possibly tongue a certain note. He often does this at the end of a short musical line or at the beginning of one just as Coltrane would do. Listening to the recording of “Giant Steps,” it is apparent that it is like the presto section in Kapustin’s Variations. There are long drawn out legato lines followed with the inserted tonguing that Kapustin imitates with accents in his bop like lines.³⁸

To play this effectively, the right hand should play extremely legato while the accented notes divide these separate musical thoughts. In general the wrist should remain fairly parallel to the keys while playing legato and follow through when playing accents. The great pianist, Art Tatum, does this often in his playing and is a great example of technique for any pianists attempting to play Kapustin or any music associated with the jazz style. If we study the few live video recordings we have of possibly the best jazz pianist of all time, Art Tatum, we see that he

achieves a smooth legato sound with very little movement in his wrist. In fact, it seems that when there is movement, it is to express something that he wishes to stand out musically while everything that is technically difficult has very little extra motion. Tatum’s playing, although not part of the bop era, is a great reference on how to play virtuosic lines found in all types of music. If a pianist is trying to figure out the best ways to play this quick bop section, studying the technique of Art Tatum would be a great place to start.39

There are parts in the Presto section where the left hand imitates the drumming style in a bop rhythm section. As stated previously, DeVeaux describes this drumming style as a two-note pattern that gave this type of music the name be-bop in the first place. “The word “bop” derives from the syllables “re-bop or “be-bop” an onomatopoeic reference to a two-note rhythm created by the alternation of snare drum and bass drum accents found in the drumming of Kenny Clarke.”40 This alternation of timbre in a two beat rhythmic pattern is found in measures 237-242 in which Kapustin alternates 5ths with a single note. A listening to the drumming of Kenny Clarke will reveal a strong focus in the bass drum, top hat, and snare drum, always working together to create an intense two beat emphasis that is constantly driving forward.41

FIGURE 25. KAPUSTIN mm. 237-240


To emphasize this two-note rhythm and imitate the bop style in these measures the pianist must conceive and imagine two different types of percussive tones. It would appear that Kapustin intends the pianist to play beats one and three a little heavier than beats two and four simply because those beats contain more notes. The pianist may think of the fifths as the bass drum with the single notes found on beats two and four complementing them as a snare drum would on the offbeat. Most importantly, this rhythm and thicker texture should build momentum as the piece rushes toward its climactic end. Kapustin composed the Variations in 1984, well after the rise and fall of bop, but the bop influences are evident in his fast presto-finale.

CONCLUSION

Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.”42 This is certainly true in piano playing. It is much easier to walk someone through the steps of learning notes and rhythms

than it is to teach them to be imaginative. However, there do exist some theories that piano pedagogues can use to teach their students to be imaginative.

When Barenboim states, “have in your ear the sound of the oboes, or the sound of the violin, or the sound of the chorus or the sound of the flute,” when speaking about Beethoven’s sonatas, what does he mean? He means that in order to ignite the imagination of the different tonal possibilities of the piano, it may be helpful to be aware of the sonic possibilities of other types of instrumentation that Beethoven may have written for, such as the instruments in the symphony orchestra. We are all the total sum of our experiences and we can only assume that Beethoven’s experiences with the orchestra, both in composing and in hearing it played, affected the way that he wrote for the piano. And if the orchestra was, at times, on Beethoven’s mind when composing his piano sonatas, shouldn’t we use the sounds found in a symphony to ignite our imagination when performing the pieces he wrote for the piano?

Kapustin was undoubtedly exposed to and played in many types of jazz ensembles all of his professional life. We can only assume, as he sat at the piano for hours on end listening to Oleg Lundstrom’s Jazz Band rehearse, that these sounds crept into his ear and affected the way he composed. While it is also important to understand the sonata-allegro form to effectively play his sonatas, the way to unwind a chosen theme to dazzle an audience with his variations, and the needed balance an orchestra must have when playing his symphonies; it is equally essential to understand the role of different instruments in a big band or jazz combo and the different jazz styles that his compositions imply. Grigoryeva states, “In his sonatas, symphonies and concertos, he supplements these genres with the ideas and the specifics of jazz performance. The large-scale

works are lent the rhythmic drive and inner energy of big band writing, with all the
accompanying garishness and vitality.”

The piano is then merely a tool. It is an instrument used to express something and be
something other than itself. Liszt said that the piano can encompass an entire orchestra in it’s
seven octaves and perhaps, because of this, he thought of it as first in the hierarchy of
instruments. He is not alone. Kapustin, Chopin, Beethoven, and countless others have used the
piano as their chief means of musical expression precisely because of its limitless possibilities.
But it is not enough that these composers simply wrote masterpieces for the piano. It is the job of
pianists to use their imagination to bring these compositions for the piano to life. Imagination is
more important than knowledge. Knowledge of the content of this paper and listening to
recordings of great pianists are only tools that a pianist should use to spark their imagination.
Good imagination is often based on knowledge, but knowledge is only a means to an end. An
intense study of big band music, small jazz ensembles, and all of the different styles of jazz
should serve to ignite the imaginations of pianists and listeners alike as they approach the piano
compositions of Kapustin. And like anything worthwhile in any type of art or discipline, the
possibilities of the imagination are endless.

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