

Pedagogical Opportunities in the Eccentric Piano Works of Arthur-Vincent Lourié

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Once a prominent figure in the Russian Silver Age, the composer Arthur-Vincent Lourié (1892-1966) produced an attractive yet peculiar catalogue of works throughout his frequently reinvented career that spanned three continents. Although his orchestral and chamber works are recorded on occasion, his piano works have suffered more undue neglect. Perhaps this can be attributed to his reputation as a composer, which never recovered from Soviet suppression and his subsequent exile to Paris, where he was overshadowed by Stravinsky. However, many of his works for solo piano warrant more pedagogical recognition and performance than they have received. The unique quality and approachability of Arthur Lourié's piano works can serve as a rewarding introduction for early advanced students to new tonalities and even as a bridge to later atonal studies.

Life and Oeuvre

I found a collection of Lourié's music while browsing recordings featuring infrequently-heard and underrepresented composers. The title of one piece in particular struck me: A Phoenix Park Nocturne. Surmising an association with the famous park in Dublin, Ireland, I listened out of curiosity. The piece's haunting quality led me to discover many other works by Lourié, but I was particularly drawn to the creativity and unpredictability of his piano repertoire. The surviving works of Lourié span 1908-1964. While there are a few orchestral works and some chamber music, most of his compositions are either for voice and piano, or for piano solo. My intent in this research is to introduce the repertoire of Lourié that is suitable for teaching needs, performance pieces and analysis opportunities.



Figure 1. Arthur Lourié

Lourié was born on May 14, 1892 in Propoysk, located in what is now Belarus. His birth name was Naum Izrailevich Luria (Наум Израилевич Лурья). By his early twenties, he

had respelled his surname as Lourié, as well as adopted the names Arthur (after Schopenhauer) and Vincent (due to his admiration of van Gogh.) Partly self-taught as a musician, Lourié studied with Alexander Glazunov at St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he became enamored of the music of Scriabin and was a contemporary and rival of Prokofiev. He left the conservatory after a time, preferring to pursue his own path of musical innovation, going on to write a microtonal string quartet as early as 1910. As a young man, Lourié was one of the first composers with Futurist associations, going on to publish his artistic ideals in his 1915 essay on “Music of Higher Chromaticism.”



Figure 2. St. Petersburg Futurists in 1912. Front from left: Nikolai Kulbin, Olga Rozanova, Arthur Lourié, Vladimir Kamensky. (Funeral Games, p. 24)

By the age of 25, Lourié was named first music minister of the new Soviet state, where his guidance led to the creation of the Association of Contemporary Music; he was also a key figure in setting up a “State Institute for Research in Music, whose role was overtly experimental, and involved speculation concerning new organizational systems and scales, as well as new forms of notation.”ⁱ Amy Nelson describes his presence in the St. Petersburg musical scene and his ideals and goals:

... Long vilified by Soviet scholars, and famous in the West for his associations with the futurists and his prewar experiments with microtones and graphic notation, Lourié was friendly with acmeist poets Osip Mandel'shtam and Anna Akhmatova and the symbolist Alexander Blok. ... Although a contemporary described him as “seemingly exhausted by an excess of culture,” Lourié devoted considerable energy to a number of pet projects, including proposals to replace the conservatories with “musical universities” and the aggressive promotion of his own music.ⁱⁱ

In reference to the Bolshevik’s promised platform of “bread, land, and peace,” Lourié wrote about his time in post-revolution Russia: “There was no bread, and art took its place. At no time and in no place have I seen people, not listening to, but devouring music with such trembling eagerness, such feeling, as in Russia during those years...”ⁱⁱⁱ Lourié, becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Bolshevik regime, disengaged himself from his political platform and defected once he moved to Paris around 1922-1923.^{iv}

After moving on from his preoccupation with Scriabin in his early years, Lourié thought of himself as a modal composer, neither a traditionalist or belonging to the avant-garde camp. Lourié's earliest works evoke a late Romantic style, as Mussorgsky was his foremost model. Later, a French element derived from Ravel and Debussy began to appear around 1912. During his years in Paris, Lourié was close with Stravinsky and a champion of his music, although Lourié eventually was disavowed by Stravinsky over a feud.

Lourié's works began to fall into neglect due to a number of reasons. After he cut ties with his former position, almost all Russian contemporary records of Lourié were removed from memory by Soviet regime. Lourié was labelled as a traitor, half-rate composer, and his music was banned in the Soviet Union in 1922. After his break with Stravinsky, Lourié's existence was seldom acknowledged by his former associate and all Lourié's letters to Stravinsky were destroyed. Near the end of his life, he immigrated to the U.S., trying to get his works performed, but his compositions never met with much success. In 1966, he died at his home in Princeton, New Jersey, a composer in obscurity, with little to no acknowledgement from former colleagues.

Leveling and Teaching Track

In view of this varied repertoire, the first step to make Lourié's music known is to create an initial teaching guide that is accessible to interested teachers and performers. The framework of this research will avoid the few overly-technical and somewhat virtuosic works in Lourié's piano repertoire, in order to appeal to a more general audience. Recommended teaching pieces avoid excessive mixed meter, pictographic scores, overly virtuosic textures, or original handwritten manuscripts.

The following pieces span Lourié's alliances to various musical tastes beginning with his early Futurist career in Russia, then his foray into Neoclassicism during his Paris years, and ending with his shift to Symbolism in his later years. Both teacher and student may find it of interest to discover and discuss the recurring themes throughout Lourié's works for piano. The most frequent encountered are the passing of time, reflections on Russian heritage, and literary or historical interests.

Eight Scenes of Russian Childhood (1917)

This collection was originally published as *Rojal' v detskoj* (*Grand Piano in the Nursery*), published also as *Piano Gosse*. The set, containing eight short character pieces dedicated to Lourié's daughter, follows the same tradition as Schumann's and Tchaikovsky's collections for the young. Although among his simplest and most amusing compositions, they are not meant for the typical young pianist to play. This work demonstrates that Lourié already was experimenting with dodecaphony by this time, although he was not held to rigid twelve-tone expectations. Characteristically, the movements are similar to Satie and Poulenc. Recommended movements are detailed below.

No. 1 The Porcelain Shepherd and His Flock

Frequent scalar movement (often punctuated by sudden jumps and clef changes), sudden dynamic and articulation fluctuations. Could be taught at the same level as Bartók's Romanian Folk Dances (comparable character and similar use of mixed meter). Level 6.



Figure 2. *The Porcelain Shepherd*, mm. 11-15

No. 2 Little Trepak

Like a traditional trepak dance, this piece is in a brisk 2/4 time, with the tempo direction of “dashingly.” One of the most difficult of the whole set. The influence of dodecaphony can be seen alternating clusters of both Major and minor seconds (with unusual notation, shown in excerpt). Similar humorous style and harmonies to the first movement of Satie's *Embryons Desséchés*. Level 7.



Figure 3. *Little Trepak*, mm. 43-44

No. 3 Good as Gold/A Good Boy – Level 5.

No. 4 A Naughty Boy – Level 8.

No. 5 Bogey Man/Werewolf – Level 6.

No. 6 Lullaby – Level 6.

No. 7 Sun and Shower

Also recommended in this set is No. 7 “Sun and Shower,” which is comparable in technical requirement and style to select Debussy preludes. Level 7.



Figure 4. Sun and Shower, mm. 14-17

No. 8 The Kitten Climbed on the Fence: A Children's Song

This piece is sometimes left out of certain publications, such as Piano Gosse. Contains very few chords; mostly note-against-note between hands. This mazurka features a jaunty, folk-like melody, often including stemlets of 16th notes. Lourié instructs pianist to perform the piece *alla mazurka*. Teacher could choose a simpler Chopin Mazurka (F Major Op. 68 No. 3) to prepare student for style. Level 4.



Figure 5. The Kitten Climbed on the Fence, mm. 5-14

Short Suite in F (1926)

This four-movement suite is an indication of Lourié's shift toward neoclassicism, or as one might even specify, "neobaroque." A collection of very short but energetic vignettes, much like some of Schumann's *Kinderszenen*. Lourié provides metronome numbers, though without descriptive tempo annotations. Interestingly, all four movements use the same tempo marking and all are played *attacca*. The texture is deceptively simple because of descending and ascending scale patterns; however, the melody features some sudden jumps (a few over two octaves in the fourth movement) that separate this from most pieces in the late intermediate level. Level 6.

Berceuse de la Chevrette (Lullaby for the Little Doe) (1938)

This piece develops melodic projection over long lines. The brooding, meditative theme is reminiscent of Gregorian chants, a genre in which Lourié found great interest. Larger leap in difficulty between this Berceuse and the Short Suite in F. Level 7.

Mazurkas Op. 7 (1911-1912)

These mazurkas clearly have a Debussy influence regarding atmosphere and texture, yet retain a similar chromaticism to Chopin Mazurkas. Level 8.

No. 1 Lent, languidé

No. 2 Essoré

Upmann (1917)

This humorous work is an overt celebration of the famous Upmann cigars from Cuba, originally paired with miniature sequence for two dancers. Upmann also employs the kind of strongly marked rhythms that typify many of Ravel's pieces. Contrasting sections of playful strutting followed by pentatonic cascades, quite similar to humorous elements in Debussy's *Children's Corner*. Level 9.

A Phoenix Park Nocturne (1938)

Dedicated to the memory of the Irish writer James Joyce, this title refers a poem in Finnegan's Wake. A Phoenix Park Nocturne does not bear a resemblance to Chopin Nocturnes in texture, but the atmosphere is clearly nocturnal. Only at the *poco rubato* in measure 18 and similar occurrences of this material does Lourié relax into the expected lyricism and *espressivo* of a nocturne, accompanied by far-spread arpeggios. However, the cantabile episode is interrupted by darting rhythmic effects, possibly representing deer galloping away into the night. Surprisingly, Lourié includes indication for vibrato at the start of the piece – it is likely a combined direction for dynamic control and listening for longer lines, with careful pedaling to engulf large chords like a giant bell. Level 9.

Cinq préludes fragiles, Op. 1 (1908-1910)

Written when Lourié was aged 16-18. All five preludes have similar lyricism to Scriabin, Ravel or Janáček piano pieces. All movements considered Level 10.

- I. *Lento*
- II. *Calme, pas vite*
- III. *Tendre, pensif*
- IV. *Affabile*
- V. *Modéré*

Modelled after Jane Magrath's grading system (in [The Pianist's Guide to Standard Teaching and Performance Literature](#)), this chart of ten recommended pieces, in order of increasing difficulty, is included below.

| Leveling of Arthur Lourié Piano Works | | |
|--|---|--|
| Select Piano Works | Level/Difficulty/Technique | Comparable Repertoire |
| <i>The Kitten Climbed on the Fence</i> | Contains very few chords; mostly note-against-note between hands. Level 4. | Could be taught as a mazurka to prepare student for style of Chopin's F Major Mazurka, Op. 68 No. 3 |
| <i>The Porcelain Shepherd</i> | Frequent scalar movement, sudden dynamic and articulation changes. Level 6. | Could be taught at the same level as Bartók's <i>Romanian Folk Dances</i> (comparable character and similar use of mixed meter). |
| <i>Short Suite in F</i> | Marks shift to neoclassical style. All movements have a cohesiveness so they may be performed together. Level 6. | Could teach to prepare for a simpler Poulenc piece (e.g. <i>Villageoises</i> , with movements from Level 6-8). |
| <i>Berceuse de la Chevrete</i> | Frequent figures containing double-dotted rhythms. First page in bass clef only. Contains a short section with eighth-note continuously beamed across the bar line. Develops melodic projection over long lines. Level 7. | Could be taught at the same level as/to prepare for pieces from Janáček's <i>On an Overgrown Path</i> , especially "They Chattered Like Swallows." |
| <i>Mazurka Op. 7 No. 1</i> | Quadruplets against eighths. Switches to three staves halfway through (requires | Could be taught at the same level as Debussy's easier Preludes: e.g. <i>De pas sur la</i> |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | comfortable span of a 9th). Level 8. | neige (Footsteps in the Snow), <i>Canope</i> , <i>Bruyères</i> (Heather). |
| <i>Upmann</i> | Sense of impulsivity and facility to handle abruptly-changing phrases is necessary for performer. Contains passing instances of mixed meter between 4/4 and 3/4. Level 9. | Could be taught alongside or after pieces from Debussy's Children's Corner. Similar in character to Debussy's <i>Interrupted Serenade</i> or <i>Général Lavine – eccentric</i> . |
| <i>A Phoenix Park Nocturne</i> | Careful pedaling and melodic voicing for changing textures. Quick register changes and fluidity of tone. Level 9. | Could be used to prepare a student for a Rachmaninoff Prelude, especially one that calls for quick register changes and fluidity of tone. |
| <i>Cinq preludes fragiles: II. Calme, pas vite</i> | Character piece combined with prelude. Reflective of Scriabin style. Level 10 | Could teach alongside Rachmaninoff Preludes or easier Chopin Etudes. |

Prelude II from *Cinq preludes fragiles* was chosen for its relatively consistent accompaniment structure and melodic appeal. Any of these five preludes may be considered as the culmination of study for a student (unless the student has a desire and technical ability to continue with the more difficult repertoire such as his Intermezzo [1928], Nocturne [1928], Valse [1926] or Gigue [1927]).

Analysis

A theoretical study of Lourié's work and musical application will provide music theory discussion opportunities for and build awareness of: twelve-tone complexes, the quarter-tone scale, graphic notation, and aleatoric music. This does not necessitate performance for every pianist, in the case of two pieces by Lourié – Forms in the Air and Prelude Op. 12 No. 2.

One of the earliest prototypes of graphic notation combined with aleatoric freedom is Forms in the Air [1915], a piano work dedicated to Pablo Picasso, consisting of three closely-linked pieces. Although this piece concerns the passing of time, no tempo is given, and bar lines and time signature are omitted as well. Lourié uses anywhere from two to five single staves at one time, many including fragmentary motives. He explores atonality, monody, and sound alteration, while suspended moments of silence make this a synesthetic piece, an adaptation of Cubist designs. Literal repetition of some fragments gives structure to the work. Simon Morrison comments on the nature of what Lourié could be conveying in this piece: "It is a dark sentiment,

presupposing, as the Symbolists did, that the phenomenal world is impoverished, pockmarked; a richer, more complete sphere exists that can only be obtained through the experience of art, in its allusions and suggestions.”^v

In reference to the title, the “forms” can be seen as the short motives that permeate the work, grouped into contrasting cells that play consecutively, relatively without a break. Lourié uses several methods for cell variation. Much like Charles Ives’ technique of contrapuntal chaos out of which a recognizable melody gradually arises, the structure of the piece tracks the evolution from ambiguity to clarity: many pitches are presented and explored until D-flat, C, and A prevail by the end (these notes form the recurring motive of the whole work). Other form techniques include the contrast by tritone of certain prominent pitches.

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Figure 6. Final few "systems" of *Forms in the Air*, outlining important pitches D-flat, C, and A.

Octatonic scales are harmonically important in this piece, forming the basis for several cells and the ending of the third movement. When considering how to present this intriguing piece to students, there are many inherent opportunities for analysis. The piece could serve as an inspiration for a much more reduced composing project. A student (perhaps late intermediate/early advanced) could compose a short, simple, coherent piece (only one staff playing at a time), then break it up visually into the style of this piece.

For further score study and listening, analysis can be drawn from Lourié’s cycle of piano pieces known as *Syntheses*. This piece, from 1914, is situated around chromatic complexes that hearken back to Schoenberg’s early twelve-tone experimentations. Here, Lourié would sometimes imply a note by writing both its neighboring tones, either to be played together or in alternation, but always leaving out the resolution. For example, this happens in *Syntheses* no. 5,

where the notes E and C-flat occur several times in the bass, featuring chords above to which they do not relate according to the ear. Another interesting listening example is Lourié's curious twelve-tone foray, Prelude Op. 12 No. 2, composed for a "piano with higher chromatism," as he wrote in the score. This is Lourié's only piece written for a quarter-tone piano. His intended method of performance specified a single piano in the score, but a recording exists which uses two pianos tuned a quarter tone apart from each other, yielding quite a startling sound.

While Lourié's piano works cannot be pinned down by a trademark sound, they are all full of distinct personality, making them pieces worth exploring, teaching, and performing. Benefits of teaching these pieces include the crucial focus on articulation and meter, as well as gained experience with unusual modalities – concepts that will surely expand a student's musical palette.

HANDOUT – PEDAGOGICAL OPPORTUNITIES IN THE ECCENTRIC PIANO WORKS OF ARTHUR-VINCENT
LOURIE

Listening: The following link contains an unlisted YouTube playlist I created, featuring all of the pieces mentioned in this research.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5h_sR-C0P6E&list=PL2nxyXvSIODy5bEZRKFH1roeaO76aXqx6

REFERENCES

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- ⁱⁱ Nelson, Amy. *Music for the Revolution: Musicians and Power in Early Soviet Russia*. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 20.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 13.
- ^{iv} Sitsky, 88.
- ^v Móricz, Klara, Morrison, Simon (eds). *Funeral Games in Honor of Arthur Vincent Lourié*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 278