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by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Musical Arts

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May, 2001
ABSTRACT


by

Renato Sergio Fabbro

Like most composers, Charles Griffes’s piano works display certain recurring stylistic traits. These traits transcend the three periods in which his music is categorized. A comparison of two of his best known piano works, Roman Sketches, Op. 7 and the Piano Sonata (1917-18), illustrates the significant compositional techniques that he continued to use as his style matured. Examples from other piano works are included in this document although the focus is primarily on these two. The comparisons also highlight the traits that Griffes added or abandoned in his later years.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Examples</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piano Music</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Roman Sketches, Op. 7 (with supporting examples from other works)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Piano Sonata (1917-18) [with supporting examples from other works]</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix (List of Solo Piano Works)</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# TABLE OF EXAMPLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Griffes, “The White Peacock,” mm. 5-6, from <strong>Roman Sketches</strong>, Op. 7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Griffes, “Notturno,” mm. 8-10, from <strong>Fantasy Pieces</strong>, Op. 6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ravel, <em>Jeux d’eau</em>, mm. 48-50</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Debussy, “Pagodes,” mm. 27-32, from <strong>Estampes</strong></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Ravel, “La Vallee des Cloches,” mm. 50-54, from <strong>Miroirs</strong></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Griffes, <em>De Profundis</em>, mm. 56-59</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Ravel, “Le Gibet,” mm. 1-3, from <strong>Gaspard de la Nuit</strong></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, m. 29</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Griffes, <em>The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan</em>, mm. 54-58</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 18-19</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, m. 16</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Griffes, “Prelude No. 3,” mm. 11-12, from <em>Three Preludes</em></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 84-88</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 416-418</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 227-237</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 160-165</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 131-133</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, m. 25-27</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 250-257</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 54-58</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 321-325</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 379-383</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 401-403</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 407-418</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 131-140</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 318-319</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45. Griffes, <em>Piano Sonata</em>, mm. 36-38</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Charles Tomlinson Griffes was born in 1884 in Elmira, New York, where he studied piano with Mary Selena Broughton. In 1903, at the urging of Miss Broughton, he went to Berlin to study piano and pursue his dreams of becoming a concert artist. After realizing his shortcomings as a pianist, he eventually turned his talents toward composition. While in Berlin, he studied composition with Phillippe Ruther and Engelbert Humperdinck (a Wagner protégé). He returned to the United States in 1907 to accept a teaching position at the Hackley School in Tarrytown, New York, where he remained until he died.

When hearing the name of Griffes, such terms as "exoticism" and "impressionism" are often used. He was fascinated with exotic countries and their music, particularly those of Eastern Asia. This influence is apparent in several works, including the ballet Sho-jo (1917), the song cycle Five Poems of Ancient China and Japan (1916-1917), and the chamber work Sakura-Sakura (1917). Although he is often labeled the "American Impressionist," such a term is a bit simplistic in his case. Griffes was continually evolving as a composer, and "impressionism" just happened to be one of the styles he explored. Like Scriabin, he associated certain colors with specific tonalities. For instance, the key of C Major represented an incandescent white light, and E-flat Major was yellow.¹

Griffes wrote for most musical genres. His compositional output includes works for chamber and full orchestra, several sets of songs, choral music, and solo and two-
piano works. Many of his orchestral compositions were originally conceived for the piano. Several of Griffes’s pieces have won a permanent place in the standard repertoire, including the orchestral work *The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan* (1916-1917), probably his best-known work. The *Poem for Flute and Orchestra* (1918) and *The White Peacock* (1915) are also concert staples. His art songs are among the most important in the genre.

It was within the genres of the solo song and works for solo piano that he was most productive. Griffes had most of his works published by G. Schirmer, Inc. during his lifetime, but had many struggles with the corporation as he tried to convince them to publish his music and as he negotiated royalties. He died in 1920, just after his emergence as one of the most promising American composers of the time and only six months after the Boston Symphony premiere of *The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan* catapulted him into the international spotlight.

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Piano Music

Although Griffes lived just thirty-five years, in that short time he produced a considerable amount of piano music. He composed for the instrument throughout his life. It was the main outlet for his work, and therefore an excellent source for studying the general characteristics of his style.

His music has typically been classified into three style periods. The early period, lasting up until around 1911, is in the German romantic tradition. Its rather conservative style is characterized by dense, chromatic, Wagnerian textures. During the course of his studies in Germany, he had immersed himself in the operas of Strauss and Wagner. The works from this period are tonal and rhythmically straightforward (e.g. Prelude in B Minor [1899-1900]). His middle, or impressionistic, period lasted roughly from 1911 to 1917. In it can be seen an affinity for the music of Claude Debussy (1862-1918) and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937). Some examples of their influence include the use of parallel chords, whole-tone scales, pentatonic scales, seventh chords, ninth chords, eleventh chords, and East Asian sonorities. Also, most of the works from this period deal with nature subjects. Representative titles include “The Vale of Dreams,” “Night Winds,” “Clouds,” and “The Lake at Evening.” Although still tonal, they show an increased use of dissonance and harmonic experimentation. His late period, from 1917-1920, is rather abstract and experimental. In it he explores new scales and textures. The music is dissonant and approaches atonality. It is interesting to note the parallel between his stylistic development and the general evolution of European musical style at the turn of
the century, which moved from German romanticism, to impressionism, and finally to a
more dissonant style.

While his music is usually categorized into these three periods, it is important to
note that this is simply a general classification. The *Rhapsody in B Minor* (1914) was
written during Griffes's "impressionistic" period but displays the earlier romantic texture
and style. Although it does involve some use of the pentatonic scale, it is much closer in
style to Brahms than Debussy. The piece *De Profundis*, of 1915, is mostly in the earlier
German romantic style as well. Griffes referred to it as his "tribute to Wagner."2 It too,
however, contains references to the pentatonic mode. Also present is the use of East
Asian sonorities, which he often incorporated into his later music.

Griffes's piano music requires sensitive pedaling, and a wide palette of colors.
Great control and delicacy of touch are essential. The writing, for the most part, fits the
hands quite well, being that his own were rather small. As a pianist, Griffes's hand size
relegated him to miniaturist works by such composers as Mozart and Chopin.
Occasionally, as in sections of the *Roman Sketches*, he uses large, widely-spread chords,
but they are never in rapid succession. The pianist has ample time to roll them. Melodic
lines are often accompanied by extended arpeggiation. These arpeggiated
accompaniments usually occur in the left hand, although the reverse can also be found.
Such rhapsodic accompanimental figures usually occur in the most agitated sections,
propelling the music toward its climax.

Arguably the two most important of Griffes's piano compositions, the *Roman
Sketches*, Op. 7 and the *Piano Sonata* (1917-18) make for an excellent analytical

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1984), 175.
comparison. They both show the major characteristics of his musical style, as well as new and changing traits. These two works are examined in detail below, but I've also included examples from other piano pieces.
I. Roman Sketches, Op. 7

with supporting examples from other works

Griffes's Roman Sketches, Op. 7 were written between 1915-1916. They comprise a suite of four homophonic pieces, respectively titled "The White Peacock," "Nightfall," "The Fountain of the Acqua Paola," and "Clouds." These pieces represent the pinnacle of his impressionistic piano music. The Musical Leader, in a February 8, 1918 review of the Sketches, said "more than any other American composer has he dared to free himself from tradition without overstepping the bounds of honesty and beauty. The schooled musician stands behind his work, which is interesting melodically and rhythmically as well as harmonically." 3 "The White Peacock" is dedicated to Rudolph Ganz, "Nightfall" to Winifred Christie, and "Clouds" to Paul Rosenfeld (all of whom were pianists). "The Fountain of the Acqua Paola" bears no dedication. Like his other piano works, with the exception of the Piano Sonata, they each contain a ternary structure and are small in scale. The second piece, "Nightfall," is written in an arch structure. Each piece climaxes in the middle section; "Nightfall" contains two equally powerful climaxes.

For the piano he wrote mostly character pieces, and these are no exception. Roman Sketches is a collection of programmatic movements, each with a title bearing a reference to nature. This in itself is an example of impressionist influence. The title of the third piece, "The Fountain of the Acqua Paola," is reminiscent of Ravel's Jeux d'eau (The Fountain), not to mention Liszt's Jeux d'eau a la Villa d'Este. In fact, it was upon

3 Ibid., 228.
hearing Ganz perform *Jeux d’eau* that Griffes found the inspiration to study the
impressionists.\(^4\)

In keeping with Griffes’s lifelong interest in poetry and literature, each of the
*Sketches* contains a prefatory text. He also used poetic prefaces in his other
this case, the text consists of poetry by William Sharp, who also wrote under the
pseudonym Fiona Macleod. With the exception of “Nightfall,” *Roman Sketches* is the
only example of a Griffes work that was actually composed after the poetic text was
selected. With most of his compositions, he tried to insert the proper poetry “after” they
were written, but the majority of the *Sketches* were actually inspired by one of Sharp’s
poems.

Technically speaking, this set covers the entire range of the piano. Griffes’s love
for low, bell-like sonorities can be found throughout, as can his ethereal writing in the
upper registers of the instrument. The writing style contains many lush, full chords.
These include seventh, ninth, and eleventh chords, many of which are widely spread.

The moods range from tranquil to rhapsodic. While each movement has a clear
climax, it is never jarring in intensity, as is the *Piano Sonata*. The melodies still have a
lyrical quality to them; they are smooth and conjunct. Phrases are rather flexible and
asymmetrical, often a result of the frequent meter changes. In the first, and most famous
meter from 7/4 to 8/4 to 3/4. “The Fountain of the Acqua Paola” contains the most
traditional phrase structure of all the movements, with some “four plus four” groupings.

\(^4\) Nicholas E. Tawa, *Mainstream Music of Early Twentieth-Century America: The Composers, Their
The phrases in the work as a whole tend to be short. This contributes to the languid, relaxed character.

"The White Peacock," which Griffes later orchestrated, makes use of the whole-tone scale (Ex. 1).

![Example No. 1: "The White Peacock," Op. 7, No. 1, mm. 5-6]

It was only in this, his impressionistic period, that he used this scale. Another example occurs in the "Notturno," from Fantasy Pieces, Op. 6 of 1912-1915 (Ex. 2).

![Example No. 2: "Notturno," Op. 6, No. 2, mm. 8-10]

Here the scale can be seen in both the melodic and accompanimental lines.
There are many instances of pentatonic scale use in his middle period. An interesting example occurs in "Nightfall" (Ex. 3). There is an ascending black key glissando, made up of notes from the pentatonic scale (c-sharp, d-sharp, f-sharp, g-sharp, and a-sharp). This is followed by a tremolo and descending sixteenth-note figuration, both of which contain purely pentatonic pitches (this time c-sharp, d-sharp, e-sharp, g-sharp, and a-sharp).


It is strikingly similar to a passage in Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* (1901), which is also based on the pentatonic scale (Ex. 4). In the Ravel example the glissando starts at the top of the keyboard and descends to the bottom. In contrast to "Nightfall," the tremolo occurs before the glissando. Both the tremolo and glissando (as well as the surrounding
material) are based on the same pentatonic set: c-sharp, d-sharp, f-sharp, g-sharp, and a-sharp.

Example No. 4: Maurice Ravel’s Jeux d’eau, mm. 48-50

Shown later in Example 11 (p. 17), “The Fountain of the Acqua Paola” also contains the pentatonic scale. It can be seen in the opening theme, shown in the left hand. It is based on the pitches d-flat, e-flat, f, a-flat, and b-flat. The g-flat in the left hand part of the second bar functions as a passing tone. These are the same pitches that are found in the earlier pentatonic set from “Nightfall,” with a different enharmonic spelling. In Griffes’s romantic Rhapsody in B Minor, a particular passage shows pentatonic usage in both the melody and accompaniment, based on the pitches b, c-sharp, d-sharp, f-sharp, and g-
sharp. Such repetitive use of material is typical of the Germanic style.

Example No. 5: Rhapsody in B Minor, mm. 37-39

Griffes began to explore bitonality in his impressionistic period. The last piece from Roman Sketches. “Clouds” (which he also orchestrated) contains examples in both offset (m. 5) and aligned (m. 7) patterns. Diatonic D-flat Major chords are pitted against B-flat, C, and E-flat Major chords.
Example No. 6: "Clouds," Op. 7, No. 4, mm. 5-7

Another bitonal section in this piece is shown later in Example 12 (p. 17). Bitonal writing also occurs in the "Barcarolle" from the Fantasy Pieces, Op. 6.

Chromaticism figures prominently in most of Griffes's piano works. This is not a surprise in the works in his German romantic style, since they are Wagnerian. The same can be said for his impressionistic pieces, which show much influence of Debussy. In fact, the impressionistic works are his most chromatic. In "The White Peacock," this is reflected in both melodic and harmonic aspects. In the following example, the thirds in the treble clef descend chromatically against the upper melodic line, which moves in the
opposite direction in half-steps.


The third piece in Sketches, "The Fountain of the Acqua Paola," contains chromatically saturated passages, such as that shown in Example No. 8.

Example No. 8: "The Fountain of the Acqua Paola," Op. 7, No. 3, mm. 29-30
Here the upper right hand melody is supported by a line which can perhaps be seen as both a counter-melody and harmony. Both of these lines move chromatically in the same direction. The chordal arpeggiation of the left hand shows a chromatic expansion and contraction from the tetrachord f, a-flat, b-flat, d-flat to the tetrachord f, a, c, e-flat.

Perhaps one of the most distinguishing features of Griffes’s style is the prominent use of the perfect fourth and perfect fifth. It is a further example of the influence of both Debussy and Ravel, as they both frequently used these intervals. This element ties in with other characteristics, such as East Asian sonorities and Griffes’s frequent avoidance of tonality. He had an affinity for octaves filled in with either the fourth or fifth, that is, chords lacking the third. For example, a “c” octave would be filled in with either an “f” or a “g”. In “Nightfall” the quartal and quintal harmony shows the probable influence of Debussy’s Pagodes, from the suite Estampes (1903) [Ex. 9-10].

Example No. 10: Claude Debussy's "Pagodes," mm. 27-32

The Griffes passage, written in the same meter, includes a similar triplet rhythm in the right hand against an octave melody in the left hand (the Debussy example also contains left hand octaves). They both contain fourths and fifths in the triplets. Another common element is that of the key signature, although the Griffes is in G-sharp minor while Pagodes is in the relative B Major. Both pieces make use of a pentatonic set based on the pitches b, c-sharp, d-sharp, f-sharp, and g-sharp. Pagodes is actually based entirely on this set. The opening of "The Fountain of the Acqua Paola" contains alternating fourths and fifths in the right hand accompaniment (Ex. 11). These fourths and fifths, combined with other single sixteenth notes, colorfully depict the continual flow of the fountain water. This is an excellent example of how these intervals tie in with East Asian sonorities; they give this particular movement an exotic sound. These sonorities are further enhanced by the pentatonic melody of the left hand.
Example No. 11: "The Fountain of the Acqua Paola," Op. 7, No. 3, mm. 1-6

An extension of these fourths and fifths is the aforementioned chord which lacks the third. Debussy and Ravel both used this type of sonority\(^5\). It is a doubling of the bottom note of the respective interval. This particular triad was often used by Griffes in order to avoid establishing tonality. With the third missing from the chord, a definitive major or minor sonority is not achieved. The result is an open, ambiguous sound.

Griffes concludes the final piece of Roman Sketches, "Clouds," with such a sonority.

\(^5\) See Claude Debussy's "La Cathedrale Engloutie" from Preludes, Book I. Examples of Ravel's use of these sonorities are included in the following pages.
Both the left and right hand avoid the “f” which is necessary for a D-flat Major cadence.

Example No. 12: “Clouds,” Op. 7, No. 4, mm. 35-42

He even includes the non-harmonic tones c and d-natural in the upper treble clef. This ending is reminiscent of Ravel’s “La Vallee des Cloches” from Miroirs (Ex. 13). Ravel’s
chords, while slightly more quartal, have basically the same configuration. With both composers the chord achieves a low bell-like effect. The Ravel title is actually translated as “The Valley of the Bells.” In both examples the chord occurs in the low register of the piano and is restated several times.

Example No. 13: Maurice Ravel’s “La Vallee des Cloches,” mm. 50-54

In Griffes’s “Clouds” it serves a pedal point function. This is another example of bitonality in his music, which relates to the increased use of dissonance during this period. These open chords are also found in his works of the German romantic style.
Note the use of perfect fourths in the upper two staves of the Ravel. The Griffes example shows his use of four staves (the Ravel has three). "Clouds" is the first instance of this in his piano music. It is yet another example of the influence of both Debussy and Ravel. Also note how the material in the Ravel example is based on the pentatonic set: b, c, e, f-sharp, g-sharp.

The Roman Sketches show the increasing rhythmic complexity of Griffes's middle period. They contain many polyrhythmic groupings, such as three notes against four, and five notes against seven. In his previous works, there are no such groupings. His Germanic works often contain steady streams of eighth-note chords. The texture seen in Example No. 8 (p. 13) includes sixteenth notes against triplet eighth notes and quarter notes. The quarter note triplets in the right hand are subdivided into eighth notes below, almost in a form of diminution. It is a passage with three rhythmic layers occurring simultaneously. An excerpt from "Nightfall" contains five notes against seven, as well as six against seven.

![Musical notation](image)


Another significant characteristic of Griffes's piano music is the frequent use of ostinato figures. This also ties in with the element of the perfect fourth and fifth, since he
often made use of an ostinato figure made up of broken fifths in a triplet rhythm. An example from "Nightfall" shows substantial use of this figure.


These open fifth triplets of the left hand lack the third of the triad, once again showing avoidance of tonality. The Germanic De Profundis shows this same left hand figure being applied to his early style.
Example No. 16: De Profundis, mm. 56-59

Another ostinato figure, from the opening of "Nightfall," shows the likely influence of Ravel's "Le Gibet" (from the suite Gaspard de la Nuit of 1908).

Example No. 18: Maurice Ravel’s “Le Gibet,” mm. 1-3

As in the Ravel, Griffes used a right hand octave figure. “Nightfall” begins with a similar slow tempo. Both of these octave figures emphasize syncopation. Note how both use similar open fifth chords in the left hand (Ravel’s are slightly different). They also occur in the right hand part of the Ravel.

With these comparisons to works of Debussy and Ravel, I’m not suggesting that Griffes merely copied them, but that this particular style was prevalent at the time. Griffes also liked to use a particular ostinato which is basically an arpeggiation of the previously-mentioned chord which lacks the third. The earlier excerpt from “Clouds” (Ex. 12, p. 17) displays this ostinato, which occurs in the lower treble clef. It is yet another example of his predilection towards quartal and quintal harmony and the avoidance of tonality. He obviously liked this sort of open, ambiguous sound. The Rhapsody in B Minor shows his use of this figure in the German romantic style (Ex. 19).
Example No. 19: Rhapsody in B Minor, mm. 34-39

The Roman Sketches are basically tonal, although it is clear that Griffes was loosening the reigns of traditional tonality. Some rather bold dissonances are to be found, particularly in the fourth piece “Clouds.” It is the most forward-looking of the movements, while “The Fountain of the Acqua Paola” is the most traditional. A passage from “The White Peacock” shows major-minor ambiguity (Ex. 20).

The left hand triplets waver between B Major and B Minor while the melody begins on a "d" (suggesting the minor). Griffes liked to include both the major and minor third of the same key simultaneously. This is another type of bitonality. Again we see his use of chromaticism in the descending right hand melody. This melody creates another instance of bitonality at the end of the measure, where the f-natural creates a diminished b chord against the B minor of the left hand.

"Nightfall" is in the key of G-sharp Minor. First moving to the parallel major, it eventually arrives at the "enharmonic" parallel major (A-flat) at the beginning of the middle section. The recapitulation is in G-sharp Minor, but ends on the parallel major.

"The Fountain of the Acqua Paola" is in D-flat Major, with episodes in the related keys of B-flat Minor and D-flat Minor (parallel minor). The beginning of "Clouds" is clearly in D-flat Major, but as seen earlier in Example 12 (p. 17), the ending is rather vague. In addition to the missing third of the chord (f), there is both a d-flat and d-natural, not to mention the added c. The bitonality created by the chords in the upper staves further "clouds" the D-flat harmony. "The White Peacock" has a key signature of E Major. The
key signature, however, seems to be more of a reference point due to the high number of non-harmonic chord tones in the piece. The middle section begins in the dominant of B Major, but quickly moves away from it, traversing through many different harmonies.
II. Piano Sonata (1917-18)

with supporting examples from other works

Griffes composed the Piano Sonata between 1917 and 1918, and revised it in 1919. Lasting approximately fifteen minutes, it is his longest piano work. In fact, it is his only large-scale work for the instrument. Like Debussy and Ravel, he focused mainly on composing shorter piano pieces. It is his only piano work to make real use of counterpoint.

The structure consists of three connected movements, giving the effect of a one-movement work. There is a precisely measured rest linking the second and third movements. The first movement is in sonata form, while the other two are formally free. After a brief introduction, the exposition of the first movement begins; there are two themes, as in traditional sonata form. The development resembles classical form in the way the theme is stated at various pitch levels. The material of the recapitulation is almost identical to that found in the exposition.

The Sonata is absolute music, unlike the programmatic Roman Sketches, and there is no impressionism to be found here. No poems or descriptive titles preface the movements. There is no use of the una corda pedal or other coloristic devices as found in the Sketches.

Like his only other piano work from the late period, Three Preludes (1919), the Sonata displays a more dissonant, abstract style. In fact, Rudolph Ganz, to whom this work is dedicated, said "Charles Tomlinson Griffes’s new piano sonata is the finest abstract work in American piano literature. It is free of all foreign influences, he is going
his own way.⁶ One of the most important American sonatas of the early twentieth century, it is a major contribution to the piano repertoire and makes a welcome substitute for the frequently-played Sonata of Samuel Barber.

The writing style of the Sonata is often severe and muscular. It is much more violent and intense than the Roman Sketches, and it lacks any of the languidness or laziness of the latter. Even the softest sections often contain a foreboding intensity. There are also orchestral effects, such as the marking quasi timpani.

The piece is based on a scale of Griffes’ s invention. It consists of the pitches d, e-flat, f, g-sharp, a, b-flat, c-sharp, (d). The first theme introduces this scale (Ex. 21). It covers all of the inclusive pitches in the first measure. The left hand mainly uses the same scale pitches, with the exception of the f-sharp and b-natural.

![Example No. 21: Piano Sonata, mm. 10-11](image)

The Three Preludes, written one year before his death, also make use of an artificial scale. The third prelude is based on the scale: a, b-flat, c-sharp, d-sharp, e, f, g-flat, (a). He replaced the impressionistic whole-tone and pentatonic scales of his earlier music with such new ones as these. It was likely the influence of Scriabin that led to

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these scales. Griffes heard pianist Katherine Ruth Heyman perform Scriabin’s Piano Sonata No. 8 and remarked that she gave him “interesting information about exotic scales.” The pitches of Griffes’s scale, with their intervalllic content, are the reason for the high number of augmented seconds and tritones in the Sonata, and this is also the case with the last of the Three Preludes. This interval content gives each piece an exotic flavor. In fact, he was also perhaps influenced by East Asian music in creating such a scale. It does, after all, have the same large intervals that are often heard in East Asian music. In the following example, the left hand part contains tritones and augmented seconds in alternation.

Example No. 22: Piano Sonata, m. 29

The right hand part contains many augmented seconds. It also shows the pitches of the scale occurring in order, ascending and descending. Example 29 (p. 35), shows the tritone resulting from Griffes’s scale. In the second measure, the right hand melody descends from a to e-flat (both of which are scale pitches). The accompaniment mimics

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this tritone pattern in a fast rhythmic undulation. It consists solely of these same two pitches until the right hand harmony changes on the fourth beat of the bar. The right hand, in the second measure, contains the characteristic chords which lack the third, only here they are altered by the e-flat. This e-flat produces a diminished fifth, or tritone, instead of the usual perfect fifth and fourth, respectively.

The original piano version of The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan (1912, rev. 1915), which is more famous in its orchestrated form, is also replete with tritones and augmented seconds (Ex. 23). Here, however, these intervals are not the result of a synthetic scale; rather, they are the product of an altered minor scale. As in the Sonata, the intervals lend an exotic mood to the piece. The right hand melody is B melodic Minor mode with a raised fourth (e-sharp). The augmented second between d and e-sharp, combined with the twist and turn triplets, gives the melody a strong Middle Eastern flavor. There is a recurring tritone (b and e-sharp) in the ostinato
accompaniment.

Example No. 23: The Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan, mm. 54-58

The theme of Example 21 (p. 27) is just one instance of the disjunct melodic style found throughout the *Sonata*. The leap up to the g-sharp could have been conceived as an octave displacement, but the notes in the following measure abandon the stepwise melodic motion (moving from e-flat to b-flat and from c-sharp down to g-sharp and d). This is another example of the many tritones and augmented seconds in the piece. The melodic writing is much more angular than that of the *Roman Sketches*.

This first theme (Ex. 21, p. 27) utilizes every note of Griffes's scale. In fact, most of the important motives and themes consist solely of the pitches found in this scale. That is why the listener will sense how closely related the themes are, despite their different melodic configurations. Griffes was clearly interested in a more economic style.
Whereas the extravagant Roman Sketches are concerned more with color and atmosphere, the Sonata displays a return to the Germanic ideal of motivically concise writing. This concise style was displayed earlier in the Rhapsody in B Minor (Ex. 5, p. 11).

There are entire passages which are based almost completely on this scale, such as the following.

Example No. 24: Piano Sonata, mm. 18-19

It is remarkably economical considering the fact that there are double notes in the right hand against the left hand octave melody. There are only two non-scale instances, and they are both the same note (f-sharp). There are five non-scale pitches Griffes could have used: e, f-sharp, g, b, and c.

He is economical with the accompanimental writing as well. In addition to Example 25, many other accompanimental figures use pitches exclusively from the scale. In Example 25, the left hand part depicts this. The two a-flats at the end of the fourth bar are the only non-scale pitches, and even these are enharmonic equivalents of the g-sharp found in the scale. The concise pitch organization he employed lends unity to the work.
Example No. 25: *Piano Sonata*, mm. 131-132 and 141-145

With writing such as that shown in Example 25, we see the sparse textural style towards which Griffes was moving. Here there are no more than two notes occurring at the same time. Although there are moments of dense passage work, they are not of the same luxuriant thickness found in the *Roman Sketches*. Dense writing occurs throughout
the Sketches. Chords in the Sonata tend to contain a maximum of six notes for the hands combined. The widely spread chords of the Roman Sketches often contain as many as eight notes. His movement towards this sparse style in the later works is evidenced in the Three Preludes, which are thinner in overall texture than the Sonata. There are never more than three notes occurring simultaneously in the following prelude.

Example No. 26: “Prelude No. 2” from Three Preludes, mm. 1-3

Griffes continued to explore bitonality in his late period. The Sonata contains an example in the opening (Ex. 27). An E Major harmony, enharmonically respelled as F-flat Major, is pitted against an E-flat Major harmony in the right hand.

Example No. 27: Piano Sonata, m. 16
An hypnotic example of bitonality occurs in the *Three Preludes*. He combines the harmonies E-flat Minor and A Major, as well as an augmented F chord with E-flat Minor.

Example No. 28: "Prelude No. 3" from *Three Preludes*, mm. 11-12

Whereas the *Roman Sketches* are both melodically and harmonically chromatic, the *Piano Sonata* is more harmonically chromatic. A great deal of this has to do with the artificial scale upon which he based the piece. The intervallic content of the scale accounts for the high number of augmented seconds and tritones. Melodically speaking, there are usually no more than two, sometimes three, adjacent chromatic pitches. Most of these adjacent chromatic pitches are followed by intervals such as the augmented second (see Example 21, p. 27). The following chromatic passage shows Griffes's typical flowing, arpeggiated accompaniment, which unfolds harmonically in a series of ascending half steps.
Example No. 29: Piano Sonata, mm. 84-88

In the Sonata, we again see the prominent role of the perfect fourth and fifth. The end of the first movement is based almost entirely on these two intervals (Ex. 30).

Example No. 30: Piano Sonata, mm. 122-124
Notice how he fills in the b-flat octave with the fourth (e-flat) and the fifth (f), but not the third (d). The second movement also ends on open fourths and fifths, in the form of chords lacking the third (the pitch g in this case).

Example No. 31: Piano Sonata, mm. 194-195

The piece itself concludes with parallel open fifths, again demonstrating the avoidance of tonal establishment.

Example No. 32: Piano Sonata, mm. 416-418
In addition to Griffes’s new scale, the *Sonata* centers around what I’ve already described as chords without the third. These respective open fifth and open fourth chords, or what Nicholas E. Tawa calls “non-triadic harmonies”\(^8\), could very well be a product of East Asian influence on Griffes’s writing. Occurring throughout the piece, such harmonies lend an exotic quality to the music. With regard to the melodic writing, it is as if he filled in the melodies by adding a lower octave and a fourth or fifth in between. This gives an open, ambiguous sound to the piece. An excellent example of these chords occurs in the last movement (Ex. 33). This passage leans toward the key of B-flat Major, but instead of cadencing on such a tonality he again opted for these open chords. They lack the requisite third (d) of B-flat Major. The listener, already accustomed to the complete B-flat Major chords of a few bars earlier, expects a consistent harmonic climax on this B-flat sonority, but is denied. In a traditionally tonal piece the outcome would likely have been different.

\(^8\) *Ibid.*, 144.
Example No. 33: *Piano Sonata*, mm. 227-237

The ostinato figure is an important part of the *Sonata*’s texture. Griffes again makes use of the broken fifths in triplet rhythm. As in Example 34, this ostinato always occurs in the left hand. Throughout his different stylistic periods he used this accompanimental figure.
Example No. 34: Piano Sonata, mm. 160-165

Griffes again arpeggiates the chords which lack the third. As in "Clouds", from Roman Sketches (Ex. 12, p. 17), the Sonata contains these figures as ostinato accompaniments (Ex. 35).

Example No. 35: Piano Sonata, mm. 131-133
With the Piano Sonata, the polyrhythms become even more complex. They are more abundant than in the Roman Sketches. In Example 36 alone, there are six different polyrhythmic groupings. The first three beats of the first bar display a five-against-six note grouping. The last beat of the measure has a five-against-seven grouping. In the next bar, there is two-against-four and four-against-five. The final measure shows three-against-five and three-against-four.

Example No. 36: Piano Sonata, mm. 25-27

A previous example (Ex. 21, p. 27. 2nd bar) shows the use of hemiola. It is created by the tenuto quarter notes, which then occur in the bass register in counterpoint. This hemiola creates a temporary feel of 6/4 instead of the prescribed 12/8.

While the Sonata approaches atonality, there are still some tonal implications. The piece is not in any particular tonality, in the traditional sense. At first, one might
venture that it is in the key of D minor or F Major, because of the b-flat in the key
signature. However, such a notion is quickly dispelled upon closer examination.
Griffes's fabricated scale precludes the piece from being rooted in any traditional key.
There are no important arrivals in D minor or F Major: the piece does conclude, after all,
on open fifths (d and a only). We do find, however, short sections in D Major. It is
important to note that these sections only have a "feel" of D Major: they lack most of the
other diatonic harmonies common to such a key.

The piece also lacks any standard cadences. While there are no traditional V-I
progressions, there are those which are implied (Ex. 37).

Example No. 37: Piano Sonata, mm. 250-257

In Example 37, the left hand's bass a's give a dominant feel leading to the D Major
chords of the fifth measure, even though the treble material is not of the A Major
harmony. The right hand chords in the first two measures actually center around a D
Major harmony, but in the following two bars become completely non-diatonic.

Nonetheless, the repeated a's in the accompaniment still give the impression of a dominant pulling toward the tonic (D Major in this case). Together with the bass D Major harmony of the second line, they create a strong enough foundation in themselves to make such an impression. The five subsequent bars center around D Major chords, although they include no other harmonies diatonic to that key. Interestingly enough, the exposition of the first movement ends on the fifth scale degree (a) [Ex. 38].

Example No. 38: Piano Sonata, mm. 54-58

Although there is no dominant harmony to introduce the development section, and Griffes's scale degrees are unusual, the ending on the a's shows a faint reminder of sonata form. The ostinato accompaniment at the beginning of the development centers
around this a. The climax of the third movement begins with D Major harmony, but quickly escapes it (Ex. 39). The first phrase drives toward D Major, which is the initial harmony of the next phrase. The second phrase then leads into a non-harmonic chord. In the second and fourth bars of the left hand, the second beat contains a b-sharp leading into a c-sharp. All of this occurs against the other non-diatonic chords of the right hand.

Example No. 39: Piano Sonata, mm. 321-325

We again see the ambiguity between major and minor. The second measure contains a D Minor chord in the right hand. It is situated in between two D Major chords. The Presto coda has a strong pull toward D Major, even though, as seen earlier in Example 32 (p. 36), it concludes on the open fifths of d and a.

At the onset of the coda (Ex. 40), the left hand introduces a second-inversion D Major harmony, spread out over three chords. In the first bar, the second beat of the right hand shows the D Major harmony framed by chords with a passing tone function. The
third bar also contains the D Major harmony unfolding in the left hand. Here, the major third \( (f \text{ and } a) \) in the right hand creates another instance of bitonality, this time in cross relation to the half-measure (see left hand). The last bar of this example shows a root-position D Major harmony in the accompaniment; the right hand contains the same passing tone chords as in the first measure.

Example No. 40: *Piano Sonata*, mm. 379-383

While the coda builds all the way to the end, there is another important arrival point just before that. In Example 41 the crescendo builds to the bar marked *fortissimo*. The preceding progression arrives on a strong D Major harmony. The right hand contains an appoggiatura chord on the first beat of the third bar.
Example No. 41: **Piano Sonata**, mm. 401–403

The final drive to the end shows the same D Major pull (Ex. 42).

Example No. 42: **Piano Sonata**, mm. 407–418
Many of the D Major chords are surrounded by upper and lower neighbors, as well as appoggiaturas.

While it is not in the traditional sonata form, this piece as a whole has a strong emphasis on d, b-flat, and e-flat as important pitch centers. Since these pitch centers don't recur systematically, the form remains somewhat elusive. The most striking theme of the second movement, as seen earlier in Example 34 (p. 39), has a clear feel of B-flat Major. The first bar of the example shows how it is introduced by a repeated B-flat Major chord. The theme's first phrase, in the right hand (3rd bar), outlines such a harmony. This theme returns in the last movement, showing the cyclical nature of the piece.

The first theme of the second movement begins and ends on B-flat (Ex. 43). The second phrase concludes solidly on an open-fifth B-flat chord, and the last phrase closes with B-flat in both hands. Again, we see the arpeggiated open-chord accompaniment, which lacks the third of the key. The melody does have the d in it, but it is used in a more modal way.
Example No. 43: *Piano Sonata*, mm. 131-140

The second part of Example 25 (p. 32) showed this theme ending on the same open B-flat sonority. Example 33, as mentioned earlier on page 38, begins with full B-flat Major chords, but arrives on the open-fifth chords which lack the third. Example 44 shows the end of the section which builds up to the third movement's climax. In the last measure here, the left hand outlines the familiar open B-flat chord. The right hand has the d, f, and b-flat, respectively, of the B-flat Major harmony, but also has a c-sharp added. This
c-sharp, superimposed in an enharmonic way, confuses the tonality by creating a B-flat Major/Minor feel.

Example No. 44: Piano Sonata. mm. 318-319

The same c-sharp is seen in the “B” theme of the first movement (Ex. 45). It creates the same kind of “enharmonic” B-flat Minor in the first bar. In the last bar of the example, the d in the right hand briefly creates a B-flat Major harmony. Note the familiar ostinato accompaniment with its open fourths and fifths.

Example No. 45: Piano Sonata. mm. 36-38
The non-systematic recurrence of B-flat would argue against the piece being in that key, rather, it is "on" B-flat at times.

E-flat, the lowered second degree of Griffes's scale, plays an important role in the Sonata. As seen earlier in Examples 30 (p. 35) and 31 (p. 36), the first and second movements both conclude on an open E-flat chord. Being just a half step above the first scale degree (d), it seems to have a certain pull toward it. In the seventh and eighth measures of Example 42 (p. 45), the left hand demonstrates this. It has a sort of appoggiatura effect, as does the left hand b-flat in the following measure.
Summary

We can only speculate as to what Griffes would have accomplished had he lived beyond the age of thirty-five. His Piano Sonata and the Three Preludes, give us important information upon which to base such speculations. From observing these works, we can see that he was heading from tonality to atonality. From his early romantic works, to the impressionistic middle period, and then to his final period, dissonance played an increasingly important role. This parallel can be seen in the development of several other important composers, including Alexander Scriabin and Arnold Schoenberg.

The bitonality Griffes explored in his middle period also emerged in the late works. Whole tone and pentatonic scales were later replaced with exotic scales of his own invention. In his piano music, he first used these new scales in his late period (as seen in the Sonata and Three Preludes). He did, however, begin incorporating them into works of other mediums in 1916, near the end of his impressionistic period (e.g. the song “Tears”, Op. 10, No. 4, and The Kaim of Koridwen, both from that same year). As seen in the Sonata and the Three Preludes, sparse textures became more prominent in the late music, as they did in Ravel’s.

His style was becoming more and more abstract: the final Three Preludes were devoid of any dynamic markings, key signatures, pedal markings, or tempo indications. Griffes’s late period saw the return of a motivically concise style seen in his earlier Germanic writing. Chromaticism remained an important part of Griffes’s musical language throughout his life, although it was not as noticeable in the late music. The
Piano Sonata lacked the chromatic saturation found in certain passages of his impressionistic works. It contained more of a linear unfolding of chromaticism. In fact, his later works emphasize linear over vertical writing. One aspect that contributes to this is the longer length of the phrases. The ostinato figure remained an important structural element in most of his piano music. He seemed to use it when he wanted an hypnotic or suspended quality in specific passages.

Lavishly arpeggiated accompaniments are seen in most of his works. These are often in a repetitive ostinato fashion themselves. A penchant for exotic sonorities pervaded much of his writing, from the introductory pentatonic melody in “The Fountain of the Acqua Paola” to the new scale of the Piano Sonata, with its augmented seconds and tritones. The exoticism of his music reflects his lifelong interest in oriental subjects. The perfect fourth and fifth played a central role in his music, no matter what the period.

Whether in the form of broken fifths in an accompanying ostinato, or an octave filled in with either the fourth or fifth, these were the sonorities of choice for Griffes. They are perhaps the result of an indelible stamp left by the influence of Debussy and Ravel. He was not the only composer to absorb these sonorities from them; Federico Mompou also made extensive use of them throughout his piano works. Despite the many external influences upon his music, Griffes always retained an unmistakeable sound that was all his own.

Griffes’s influence can be seen in the music of later composers. His exploration of East Asian music preceded similar efforts by Colin McPhee and Lou Harrison. Samuel Barber was possibly influenced by Griffes: his Sonata, Op. 26 and Piano Concerto, Op. 38 both contain quartal and quintal harmonies as well as similar chromatic
writing. Such techniques, however, were prevalent at the time. Aaron Copland said that Griffes was one of a handful of composers who "stood out" for him. He said that what Griffes gave to those who came after him was a sense of the adventurous in composition, of being thoroughly alive to the newest trends in world music and to the stimulus that might be derived from such contact. 9

Appendix

List of Solo Piano Works

Six Variations in B-flat Major, Op. 2 (1898)

Four Preludes (1899-1900)

Mazurka (1899-1900)

Sonata in F Minor, two mvts. (ca. 1904)

Sonata in D-flat Major, one mvt. (ca. 1909-10)

"Barcarolle" (arr.) from Les Contes d'Hoffmann, by Jacques Offenbach (ca. 1910)

Sonata in D-flat Major, two mvts. (ca. 1911)

A Winter Landscape (ca. 1912)

Sonata in F-sharp Minor, one mvt. (ca. 1912-13)

Rhapsody in B Minor (1914)

Three Tone Pictures, Op. 5 (1910-15)

Fantasy Pieces, Op. 6 (1912-15)

The Pleasure Dome of Kubla-Khan (1912; rev. 1915)

De Profundis (1915)

Legend (1915)

Piano Piece in B-flat Major (ca. 1915)

Piano Piece in D Minor (1915)

Roman Sketches, Op. 7 (1915-16)

Piano Piece in E Major (1916)

Piano Sonata (1917-18; rev. 1919)

Three Preludes (1919)
Bibliography


