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Chess & Music

“Chess, like love,
like music, has the
power to make
men happy.”

—Siegbert Tarrasch

By **DR. ALEXEY ROOT, WIM, AND WILLIAM ROOT**

Grandmaster Levon Aronian has been on the FIDE top 10 list for the past 12 years, reaching the number two spot from 2012-2014 and again in 2017. After winning the 2017 Saint Louis Rapid & Blitz, Aronian commented that he has a “good ear for music.” Moreover, he might have continued in music school if his teacher had not hit him with a ruler every time he made a mistake. Aronian continued in chess school instead. The authors of this article interviewed Aronian via Facebook Messenger 10 days after he won the 2017 World Cup.

Aronian improvises with pieces of music during his chess games. He elaborated, “I like having melodies in my head, and trying to find an alternative development for the theme is something that I have always found to be enjoyable. During the game, it is a way to distract the brain from chess and then to bring it back into the chess game with a fresh perspective.”

Aronian also listens to music when studying chess. He wrote, “I

generally like to be distracted when I train (focusing too much is not too beneficial for my decision-making). Thus, music can have educational and inspirational effects on me during analysis.”

Like the jazz soloists he listens to, such as Eric Dolphy, Aronian balances excitement and structure. He explains, “Often I get excited if I see a way to create a mess, but sometimes I choose the solid option if it does not take away the chance to add spice later in the game. The freedom of choice is something one can always create. Bravery through improvising should not be an issue as long as it is sometimes rewarded.”

MARVIN GAYE OF CHESS

According to Aronian’s Facebook and Twitter pages, the composer and performer Ned Rothenberg once called Aronian the “Marvin Gaye” of chess. Rothenberg messaged, “I actually called him something like





An evening of chess and music with GM Levon Aronian in the Brooklyn, New York apartment of Ned Rothenberg in July 2016. From left to right: Briggan Krauss, Ben Monder, Ellery Eskelin, Ned Rothenberg, Aronian, and Paul Herzman. Out of the picture was Dan Weiss.

the Roger Federer of chess and Aronian said, 'I'd rather be Marvin Gaye' and I replied, 'Sounds good to me!'"

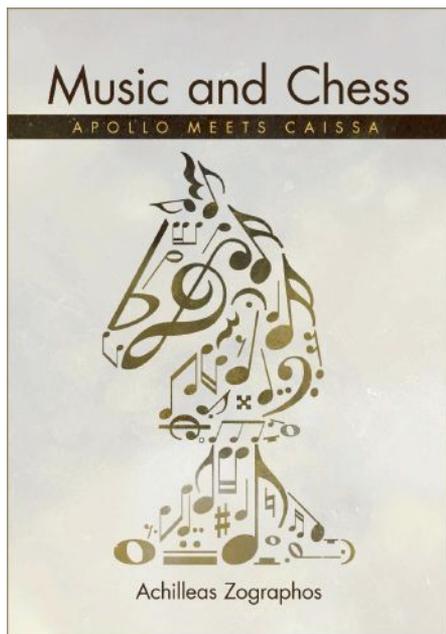
In July of 2016, Rothenberg's Brooklyn, New York, apartment was the setting for a chess night with Aronian and several musicians. Two of those musicians have US Chess ratings: Paul Herzman (1846) and Ellery Eskelin (1682). Since Eskelin is at the forefront of improvising music worldwide, we asked him to email us about improvising in music and in chess. Eskelin responded, "In music, to improvise like a composer means to take in the 'big picture,' not just concentrate on one's own playing. Sometimes we call it 'telling a story.' I think what Levon was encouraging us to do on the chessboard was similar. To take a little more time, to carry out a plan rather than simply responding to events. Levon played blindfolded, three games simultaneously, while having a casual conversation with some of the other guests in attendance. I was expecting surprising moves and positions, yet everything seemed pretty

normal. Yet as the moves progressed, I was seeing fewer and fewer good options in my position. It was as if a boa constrictor was slowly tightening around my neck.

"Afterwards he told me where I went wrong, for example, 'You played d5 too soon.' None of us had a chance against him, of course. But even in these casual games he took things seriously enough that we learned something."

PORTISCH'S SECRETS

Ranked number three in the world on several FIDE lists in the early 1980s, Grandmaster Lajos Portisch was also usually in the top 10 from 1967 to 1987. Gambit Publications Editor FM Graham K. Burgess provided an excerpt from Portisch's latest book, *My Secrets in the Ruy Lopez* (see sidebar page 41), which was one of four books nominated for the English



Zographos, Achilles. *Music and Chess: Apollo Meets Caissa*. Russell Enterprises, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-941270-72-1 (print), ISBN: 978-1-941270-73-8 (eBook). FAN. 224 pages. (Available from www.russell-enterprises.com/upcoming-publications/music-and-chess-apollo-meets-caissa, \$24.95)

Chess Federation (ECF) 2017 Book of the Year award, ultimately won by *Timman's Titans*.

The ECF judges wrote, “When a player as renowned as Portisch (eight times a world candidates qualifier), who was famed for his meticulous opening preparation, writes his first book in English (as far as the judges are aware) on the Ruy Lopez, it is eagerly anticipated and does not disappoint. ... Portisch also includes perceptive comments on the chess world and players he encountered during his long career, which greatly adds to the book’s value.” Relevant for this article, Portisch’s book includes music references.

In an email interview with the author, Portisch shared his love for music and his stories about two chess and music legends, World Chess Champion Vasily Smyslov (a semi-professional baritone) and World Championship Candidate Mark Taimanov, a concert pianist. Portisch also commented on François-André Danican Philidor (top chess player and composer, France), Ferenc Erkel (composer, Hungary), and Sergei Prokofiev (composer and strong amateur chess player, Russia).

FRENCH DEFENSE OF MUSIC

Portisch wrote, “Usually Smyslov and I spoke more about music than chess. We often performed together at different chess gatherings. Our repertoire featured Russian operas and romances. In Moscow, at the Petrosian Memorial in 1999, we sang together Anton Rubinstein’s

famous piece from the opera *Nero* ‘Paju tebe, Boh Gimenej!’ which is very favored with the Russian public.”

Portisch continued, “At the Ladies-Veterans match (the Klompendans tournament) in Amsterdam at the end of 2001, I gave records of my music to all the participants. The records had a live recording of my recital of Russian romances and songs at the Russian Cultural Centre at Budapest. All the Russian participants appreciated my approach to the Russian music. Also at the 2001 match, Taimanov accompanied me on the piano when I sang German *Lieder*.”

Portisch noted, “Whenever I sing for chess players my ‘obligatory’ song is *The Two Grenadiers* (from Schumann and Heine). And my comments on it: ‘Now, dear chess friends! You may listen to the French Defense of music!’”

STAGE FRIGHT AND INTUITION

Both performing music and playing tournament games can cause stage fright. Portisch emailed, “Obviously there is some kind of anxiety in singers and chess players as well. But in my case it is different. Stage fright disappears after the first tone; in chess, it may last longer. Therefore, I have never been late to the chessboard for a tournament game. Actually, I usually sat at my board a few minutes early, before the game started. Also, I never made my first move at once. When playing with white, I always imitated thinking although obviously I knew what move I was going to play. Being a religious person, I always used to pray a little before the chess game and before a music recital as well.”

Music and chess both use intuition. Portisch explained, “For composers—like Philidor, Erkel, and Prokofiev—intuition probably helped their work. My intuition, my secret feeling for selecting

openings or lines, helped me in my work. I was not a master of calculation—like Karpov for example—so in my tournament games I laid stress on my intuition rather than calculating long variations. On the other hand, relying on intuition was one of my weaknesses, too.”

APOLLO MEETS CAISSA

A piano teacher from Greece, Achilles Zographos, is also a FIDE Instructor. FIDE lists his last name as Zografos and his rating as 2097. In 2017, Russell Enterprises published Zographos’ book, *Music and Chess: Apollo Meets Caissa*. In it, Zographos wrote, “Over the past years, I have been thinking about the connection between chess and music. Mathematics is a main common denominator, a fact that will be highlighted accordingly throughout this book. Being a professional music teacher, my interest in the subject grew when I started teaching chess. While reading a lot, attending seminars for trainers and getting some experience, I noticed many similarities in the teaching process.”

National Master and FIDE Instructor Alex King also sees links among chess, math, and music. King is the director of Mississippi Achievement Through Chess (MATCH), a program within the Center for Mathematics and Science Education at the University of Mississippi. He graduated from the University of Southern California in 2011 with a bachelor of arts in Music and has performed professionally on piano and bass, including at the Montreal Jazz Festival.

King emailed that in both math and chess “lines intersect, sequences are ordered, points are visualized on a coordinate plane.” Moreover, the skills needed to succeed in math and chess are similar. According to King, some of those skills are “focus, patience, visualization, learning

A Camp for Music and Chess

Located in Jemez Springs, New Mexico, Hummingbird Music Camp was founded in 1959 by Kenneth Lloyd and Wanda Higgins. Their oldest son Elliott (1941-2014) was a professional French horn player, orchestra conductor, and a founder of the International Horn Competition of America. He created chess week at Hummingbird. Head instructors included IM Jack Peters (1981-1990), WIM Alexey Root (1990s and early 2000s), and National Master Robert Haines (2000s onward).

For the summer of 2017, FM Will Wharton was the chess instructor. As in past summers, chess and art ran concurrently with music and many activities overlapped. For example, all campers sat around the campfire and listened to stories, hiked to the waterfall, shared cabins and the cafeteria, and camped out for one night. Notable Hummingbird alumni include the 1997 World Junior Champion GM Tal Shaked, GM Jesse Kraai, and National Master Lior Lapid.

Excerpt from *My Secrets in the Ruy Lopez* by Lajos Portisch

Now I really have to talk a little—or perhaps even longer—about my relation with Bobby Fischer. Our first encounter took place in Bled 1961. I was very honoured to be present in the company of famous grandmasters of that time like Tal, Fischer, Petrosian, Keres, Najdorf, Geller, Gligorić, etc... However, I could not put up proper resistance yet. Among others Fischer beat me with Black in a fighting game in 47 moves, but it does not fit in with the subject of this book. Even so, right from the beginning there was some kind of sympathy between us. One evening after the games we went to a nightclub where Bobby wanted to sing (he thought that he was a man of genius for anything). I have had a musical background and a knowledge of singing technique ever since my childhood, so I warned him: “Bobby, you’d better not do that!” In my opinion it was ridiculous, but he nevertheless performed with great success. Obviously everybody there knew that he was the great Bobby Fischer.

My Secrets in the Ruy Lopez; Lajos Portisch. Gambit Publications; ISBN: 978-1-911465-11-9; Published in 2017 in three formats: print (recommended retail price: \$21.95), Gambit Chess Studio (\$11.99) and Kindle (\$9.95); gambitchessstudio.com. Available at US Chess Sales with a member’s discount. Product code B0198GB, \$21.95.

LAJOS PORTISCH

My Secrets



in the

Ruy Lopez



*Unpublished ideas and analysis
from decades of elite-level chess*

GAMBIT

from mistakes, pattern recognition, time management, and perseverance.” Experiencing success in chess may carry over into academic areas such as math. At MATCH, chess is a “platform for achievement.” King added, “For students who have not often had the experience of demonstrating high achievement—for example, those struggling with behavioral, development, or concentration issues—chess can be especially valuable.”

To King, “music and chess are outlets for technical mastery and creative expression.”

MUSIC, CHESS, AND MATH

A piano performance senior at The University of North Texas (UNT), Nuno Ventura Sousa has a FIDE rating of 1747. Interviewed in person at the UNT Chess Club, we discovered that Ventura Sousa is from a family steeped in music, chess, and programming (a math-related subject). His mother teaches music. His father is a computer programmer who introduced chess to his children. Ventura Sousa’s sister played piano in high school. She is now a computer programmer. His younger brother is IM Andre Ventura Sousa, who won the

Portuguese Championship in September of 2017. Andre played bassoon in high school.

Although Nuno Ventura Sousa had chess successes—for example, winning the district championship for players 16 years and younger—he quit chess lessons at age 14 and stopped playing in chess tournaments when he was 16. The time previously spent on chess is now for practicing six hours a day before piano competitions. Ventura Sousa has won more than 30 first place prizes at piano competitions, including the International Competition of Fundão (Portugal), the International Competitions of Santa Cecilia (Portugal), and the Antón García Abril Competition (Spain).

The main similarity between his piano recital repertoire and his opening repertoire in chess is that, in both cases, a professor chose for him. His piano professor wanted Ventura Sousa to show a wide range of skills, such as musicality and technique. Thus, a typical repertoire might have a J.S. Bach (baroque) piece, a classical piece, and a contrasting piece. During group lessons, a chess professor told Nuno and his brother Andre to play certain openings and went over variations within those openings.

Ventura Sousa mentioned a “lighthouse”

metaphor by UNT Professor of Piano Vladimir Viardo that applies to piano and that could apply to chess too. When one plays a memorized piano piece, one is like a boat leaving the lighthouse to sail on a dark sea. While at “sea” in the piano piece, one develops lighthouses (measures within that piece) that stand out musically. If one’s memory fails, those lighthouses are the measures that one returns to and restarts from them. In chess, a lighthouse signals to a chess player to “get to a position that you know is won.” When adrift in a chess game, aim for a “lighthouse,” such as a favorable king and pawn ending or a winning tactic.

CHESS, LOVE, AND MUSIC

The Saturday after he won the World Cup, Aronian married WIM Arianne Caoili. Performing for 360 wedding guests at the reception, a tuxedo-clad Aronian sang, “My Yerevan” as a duet with the First Lady of Armenia, Rita Sargsyan. Wearing her wedding dress, Caoili sang the Etta James classic, “At Last!”

And so the long connection between chess and music is set to continue well into the future. ♠