XIV. Nikolai Kapustin

Nikolai Girschevich Kapustin, born 1937 in the Ukraine during the era of the Soviet Union, is in my opinion the very greatest composer of the 1970s and ‘80s to fuse classical music with jazz. His journey was a strange one and certainly did not spin out in a straight line. Among the more curious details is the fact that he studied piano with Avrelian Rubakh, a pupil of Felix Blumenfield who had taught Vladimir Horowitz and Simon Barere. His official biography also says that he studied piano with Alexander Goldenweiser, who had known Tchaikovsky, Scriabin, Medtner and Rachmaninov, but Kapustin is quoted as saying, “He was a very interesting person—he remembered Rachmaninov and Medtner, so it was very interesting to speak with him. But as a teacher he gave me nothing, because he was very old—he was already 81.”1

But this is only the first of several bits of conflicting information about Kapustin and his career. One story has it that, as a jazz-loving pianist, he had to keep his jazz bias secret due to official Soviet doctrine, yet Nikita Khruschev considerably loosened the restrictions on jazz during his tenure as Premier, encouraging jazz musicians like Benny Goodman to tour the Soviet Union. One online source claims that Kapustin developed into a fine a jazz-classical composer because of his exceptional ability to improvise, but Kapustin himself is quoted as saying, “I was never a jazz musician. I never tried to be a real jazz pianist, but I had to do it because of the composing. I’m not interested in improvisation—and what is a jazz musician without improvisation? All my improvisation is written, of course, and they became much better; it improved them.”2 He is supposed to have been influenced by Art Tatum, Earl Hines and Oscar Peterson, but publicly admitted only the latter, who he said was “No. 1 for me.” Most of his time as a performer was spent playing Dixieland and swing, the officially sanctioned forms of jazz in the old USSR. In fact, it was his lack of ability as an improviser and his attraction to relatively mainstream, non-avant-garde pianists that kept him safe from government censure. “I was entirely free; no problems,” he said. “My music wasn’t avant-garde.”3

And there is another connection, often overlooked, between Kapustin and his only real predecessor in the Soviet Union as a composer of jazz-classical pieces, Alexander Tsfasman (recall the discussion of Tsfasman in Chapter VI). Tsfasman, like Rubakh, was a pupil of Blumenfield, and in the 1960s Tsfasman also became a mentor to the young Kapustin. Interestingly, Blumenfield, Tsfasman and Kapustin were all Ukrainian.

Thus we see a young man, classically trained in both piano and composition, who was bitten by the jazz bug but could never improvise with the ease of his idols. Considering this, composition seemed a natural step forward for him. He was far too interested in the jazz style to consider competing with such stellar names as Richter, Gilels and Oborin for a place among the top Soviet classical pianists, he loved composition, and he was adept at creating “jazz solos” which were all written out. After graduating in 1961 he formed a jazz quintet, played with Juri Saulsky’s band in Moscow, and toured extensively in Russia and abroad with Oleg Lundstrom’s Jazz Orchestra. There is a rare video clip of Kapustin playing piano with the Lundstrom band on the Russian TV program Goluboj ogonek in 1964.4

All of this background, along with the knowledge that Kapustin is an exceedingly shy, quiet man who rarely gives interviews, is important to understanding both his development as an

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1 Quoted by Randall J. Creighton in randycreighton.com/music/kapustin/Ch2_Background.pdf.
3 Anderson, ibid, p. 96.
4 Once available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEDI9_oNICA.
artist and his lack of a strong profile in the West. Indeed, it was not until the year 2000, when he was 63 years old, that Kapustin’s music became known outside of Russia, thanks to the efforts of pianist Marc-André Hamelin who began playing his pieces in concert and making recordings of them. To say that his work hit America and Great Britain like a bombshell would be putting it mildly. Those listeners who enjoyed classical music as well as jazz, and understood both, were stunned by the utter brilliance of his construction and the wonderful swing that he injected into his scores.

Kapustin’s shy, retiring demeanor was very much like the Polish-Jewish composer Mieczsław Weinberg (sometimes spelled Moisey Vainberg), who sought refuge in the Soviet Union in 1939 when the Nazis invaded his home country. Both men kept a low profile, tried not to rock the boat, and were not self-promoters. Weinberg’s superb music (strictly classical) only became well known in the West after his death in 1996; we should be happy that Kapustin at least lived long enough to enjoy the fruits of his labors. As of 2015 Kapustin was still actively composing, and in fact some of his later works are even more interesting and complex than his earlier ones.

But why wasn’t his music more popular within the Soviet Union? Undoubtedly because of its close resemblance to jazz. His music does not require the performer to improvise, but it does require a knowledge of how to play jazz, how to swing, how to phrase the breaks and turn-arounds that he writes into his scores, and many Russian pianists simply didn’t want to bother. Why should they, since his music wasn’t well known or popular? It was a Catch-22 situation.

Even the relatively objective description of Kapustin on Wikipedia seems to be in awe of his ability to fuse the structures of older music with the much more modern aesthetics of jazz. “An example of this is his Suite in the Old Style, Op. 28, written in 1977, which inhabits the sound world of jazz improvisation but is modeled on baroque suites such as the keyboard partitas composed by J. S. Bach,” we read there, “each movement being a stylized dance or a pair of dances in strict binary form. Other examples of this fusion are his set of 24 Preludes and Fugues, Op. 82, written in 1997, and the Op. 100 Sonatina.”5 Randall Creighton, who wrote a doctoral thesis on Kapustin, is even more specific in his descriptions. In the 24 Preludes, Op. 53, for instance, Creighton finds that “Kapustin uses several methods of thematic organization, including variations of scoring, thematic transformation, and spinning out the germ of an idea in a more improvisatory way… There are examples of ternary, rondo, and monothematic forms, and the ternary Preludes in particular contain elements similar to sonata-allegro form… From modern jazz, he takes quartal, pentatonic, and diminished harmony, along with highly chromatic two-voiced textures similar to those used by jazz artists from the 1960s onward, particularly Miles Davis.”6 Clearly, a great many listeners are knocked out by Kapustin, and rightly so.

As of the time of this writing, Kapustin has produced 157 numbered works. At least two of them are rewrites of earlier pieces, the Piano Concerto No. 1, Op. 147 being a heavily revised edition of his Op. 2 from 1961 and his Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano being a transcription of his Op. 86 Trio for Flute, Cello and Piano. One of the most interesting things about Kapustin’s published output is its chronology. After his Op. 1, a Concertino for Piano and Orchestra in 1957, we have a gap of four years before the first Piano Concerto, and in the next seven years he wrote only 11 more pieces, following which there was nothing for four more years. His Op. 14, the Piano Concerto No. 2, is dated 1974 but the next three works are dated 1972. A few more works (13) were composed during the rest of the 1970s, then a few pieces in the early ‘80s, but

5 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikolai_Kapustin
from 1984 onward he became more and more prolific with age. Since he was 47 years old in 1984, it’s tempting to wonder if he reached his peak of inspiration in middle age, but my own guess is that by this point he had finally figured out how best to compose classically structured works that retained the swing and spontaneous feeling of real jazz. Sometimes when you are a pioneer, the initial idea—bright though it may be—does not always lead to proliferation. There are times when you need to step back, reflect, and consider where you are going and what it is that you’re really trying to accomplish.

Whatever the case, Kapustin’s proliferation as a composer between 1984 and 2009 was really quite astonishing: 103 works, with only 1989 and 2001 showing only one work for those years. This proliferation includes all 20 of his piano sonatas (with four of them, Nos. 4-7, all published in 1991), his Eight Concert Etudes (1984) and 24 Preludes in Jazz Style (1988)—both major works—in addition to two String Quartets, the Divertissement in four movements for piano trio, two cello concertos, sonatas for violin-piano and cello-piano, the Concerto for 11 Instruments, four more piano concertos (for a total of six) and four “Paraphrases” on others’ tunes, including Kenny Dorham’s Blue Bossa (2004) and Dizzy Gillespie’s 1947 hit Manteca (2006). This amazingly prolific period also included, towards the end, several short piano pieces with humorously self-deprecating titles: Good Intentions for Piano Solo, Sleight of Hand for Piano Solo, Holy Cow for Piano, Freeway for Piano, A Pianist in Jeopardy, Wandering, Curiosity and Nobody’s Perfect! I’m starting to believe that the reason he didn’t give many interviews may not be entirely due to shyness. I don’t think he wants the academic world to catch on to the fact that he has a wacky sense of humor, since composers who don’t take themselves too seriously are often frowned upon.

And indeed, humor is a key component of his music, as was so often the case with the very greatest jazz composers. Just about the only major jazz-classical composers who showed no humor in their music were John Lewis and Gunther Schuller. For everyone else, it was an essential component. There is humor in several of Morton’s works, many of Ellington’s, some of Sauter’s and certainly a great many of those by Herbie Nichols, Don Ellis, George Russell and Mingus. Humor has always been a key component of jazz; it is one of the things, among several, that always distinguished it from classical music; and to eliminate it just because you are pouring the elements of jazz into preset classical structures is missing the point of the music.

For the sake of starting with a piece that has recognizable jazz “signposts” in it for the listener to follow, we will first tackle his Paraphrase on Dizzy Gillespie’s Manteca for Two Pianos, Op. 129 (2006). Here we are immediately plunged into Kapustin’s world, as the opening section opens with the second pianist jumping from a contrabass C, struck initially as an eighth note but held throughout the bar as a whole note with sustain pedal, then flying up to the E below middle C and playing a glissando up to the D above middle C. Both pianists then engage in fortissimo, out-of-tonality fourths played as eighth notes at the furious tempo of $\dot{\text{}} = 120$. This tempo never lets up throughout the piece as the two keyboardists engage in a furious interplay, moving from eighths to triplets by the second line of music that sometimes span two and a half octaves in this furious pace. Even the most astute jazz fan, not knowing the title of this piece, would not have anything to hang on to for some time since the duo-pianists don’t even play anything close to the Manteca theme until a half-minute into it, and don’t touch the tune proper until 39 seconds in. Using two keyboards here, Kapustin is able to maintain an extremely wide tonal range throughout: at no point does the ostinato bass or contrabass line ever disappear, but keeps going in one form or another throughout the music. Even when pianist 2 disengages from the bass line to play a solo, pianist 1 drops into a boogie rhythm before taking over the contrabass ostinato. It is a
simply wonderful display of complex interplay, sort of a cross between the jazz-influenced works of Erwin Schulhoff from the 1920s and the jazz-classical paraphrases of Tsfasman from the 1940s.

Moving to the second Piano Concerto (1974), one is delighted to hear that, unlike so many others, Kapustin scored this for a *jazz* orchestra, specifically the band of his friend and colleague Oleg Lundstrom, who played it with him on his recording. I have so often railed in this volume about the insistence of crossover composers sticking to the tried-and-true orchestration of classical music when there are so many other options open to them that it is refreshing to hear someone actually take advantage of the richer palette that jazz orchestration can provide. In this incarnation of the Lundstrom band, strings are included, but they too play in a jazzy manner like the jazz strings arranged by Satterfield, Sauter and Coleman. The interesting thing in the first movement, however, is the beat, which is almost like a samba or a milonga rhythm. This is more evident in the orchestral part than in the solo piano music, which plays a fairly regular motor rhythm of eighth notes against the orchestra. Indeed, the orchestra seems to be very much the star of the show until the piano comes in to play solo (along with the rhythm section) at about 1:40, and not really staying around long enough to establish its dominance. Most of the time, this sounds almost like an orchestral piece with piano obbligato (albeit very flashy obbligato), with brass fanfares making the music sound suspiciously like pop-show music. At 3:40 the orchestra stops entirely to allow the piano to play a very brief cadenza before returning to the opening motif, but now with variations on the original theme. Finally the piano itself gets involved in the quasi-Latin rhythm before clarinet trills and staccato trumpet interjections move us into the final section.

In the second movement, the Latin influence is sustained by use of acoustic guitar rhythms that set up a very unorthodox beat division of 3–2–3. Once again, pop-music-like themes prevail. In later years Kapustin looked back on this work with some puzzlement, wondering how he could have written in such a simplistic way, but when re-listening to his own recording of it from the Soviet Radio Archive (the version used for this study) he is always more tolerant, for what looks simplistic in the thematic structure and “clumsy” (to him) in the piano writing sounds wonderful and fresh. Despite being composed in themed-1970s, the whole work has almost an early-’50s feel to it, and indeed its lack of seriousness is its special charm. Kapustin was very shortly to grow as an artist outside of this mode of expression, but there’s still nothing really “wrong” with the way this music is put together as long as we don’t look for his deeper, more mature self in it. This is still, to some extent, the Kapustin who played with the Lundstrom band back in the early 1960s, and there’s nothing really wrong with that. The third movement sounds the most like the big-band jazz that Lundstrom played when Kapustin was his regular pianist, although the soloist dominates more here than in the previous two movements. The piano part here has a real 1940s bebop feel to it; this could have been played (with even greater swing) by someone like Bud Powell or Al Haig, to great effect. And in this movement, at last, the orchestra falls back to the role of accompaniment, with the soloist dominating the stage.

To jump ahead from this (still) early work (stylistically speaking) to the first sonata, titled “Sonata-Fantasy,” from 1984 is to hear a mature master coming into his own. Though he would ever and anon stay true to the strong influence of Peterson, Kapustin was now confident enough in his own powers to begin working his materials more intricately. Since he was a virtuoso pianist a certain amount of “flash” would always be a part of his music, as it was of Peterson’s, but by the early 1980s he had clearly learnt to create a more interesting form around the flash. The first three movements are played without a break, although there are pauses before the next
movement comes rushing in. In the first movement the flurries of notes which begin it suggest bop but are not rhythmically close to it; rather, if Kapustin were not raised with the sound of jazz around him, and this music not influenced by it, it could be taken for a tonal piano sonata in the late Romantic style. This is not altogether a bad thing, but it shows where his mind was at this period of time. At around the 2:20 mark in the first movement, however, the impulse of jazz swing becomes almost a hurricane force propelling the pianist towards a wildly swinging conclusion. A suspended low D₃ chord leads directly into the second movement, and here Kapustin is more adventurous harmonically and less busy in digital dexterity. One will also note that his theme is original and also noble, leaving behind the suggestion of pop music, and the second half of the movement is very well developed, with the theme put through several variations, some of them quite subtle. After another suspension, the third movement comes along, jauntily progressing along in A minor with a half-Latin, half-boogie beat. Now we are fully engaged in a jazz context, with Kapustin working out his variations in the midst of a full two-handed piano style. One interesting feature of this movement is the wild, two-handed series of runs in the middle section, and towards the end, the sudden increase of tempo as if the pianist were double-parked and had to get out to move his car.

The last movement, as noted by others, is the most virtuosic, but it is also one of the most intricate in terms of the number of variants and their complexity. In Kapustin’s own recording of the work he attempts to give the music a really “unbuttoned” quality, but although as a Russian pianist he did amazingly well in learning to swing under the Soviet system, he is never quite as loose in his rhythm as a Western jazz pianist would be. This is not to be taken, however, as completely negative criticism; after all, he is the composer and this is how the music played out in his mind. Yet jazz lovers will always aware of a very slight reticence in his playing to “let go.”

The Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra from 1987 is an unusually sober work for Kapustin. He uses a more conventional symphony orchestra here, with a full complement of strings and woodwinds, and for the first several minutes there seems to be much more the feel of a purely classical concerto with no sense that this is a jazz-influenced work. Even the alto’s first solo cadenza seems more formal, with no hint of jazz inflection. Even the sound of an electric bass at 3:35 passes almost unnoticed as the placid, formal atmosphere continues, but suddenly at 4:15 the piano starts comping, and alto sax perks up a bit, and you get the feel of jazz creeping in and slowly overtaking the proceedings. Here, too, Kapustin’s orchestration becomes more that of a jazz band, and one detects the undercurrent of a slight rock beat in the following extended solo for the alto sax in and around the orchestra. At 6:27, however, the slight rock beat dissipates and both alto and orchestra are fully engaged in a swinging, full-blooded excursion, though surprisingly an electric guitar comes into the picture to play alongside bongos under the soloist! Now we are in the sound world of late Stan Kenton (one wonders if Kapustin knew any of his recordings; certainly, by the mid-1970s Kenton must have been considered “safe” enough for the Soviets to allow in their country). Indeed, the middle section of this concerto seems to be playing a cat-and-mouse game with the listener in trying to gauge exactly where this music is going in terms of rhythm and phrasing, but by this time Kapustin was so much in control of his resources that he never loses sight of the long line of the music, or its intricate and fascinating development section. Alexey Volkov, the soloist in this performance with the New Russian Orchestra, has a lovely, pure tone and does his best to swing but is clearly not a Paul Desmond or Lee Konitz. All things being equal, however, the performance comes off because Kapustin wrote the solo part in such a way that it vacillates between the two worlds.
We now move on to one of his real masterpieces, the 24 Preludes in Jazz Style, Op. 53. Much has been made of the fact that these pieces use the same major and minor keys as Chopin’s preludes, but this is a rather silly observation. As a composer working within the tonal system, Kapustin would have to use the same major and minor keys as Chopin because they’re the only ones he had to work with. In this instance I bypassed Kapustin’s own recording in favor of those by Catherine Gordeladze, a phenomenal Russian pianist who moved to Germany to further her career. Although Gordeladze plays this set of Preludes nearly six minutes slower than Kapustin did, her sense of swing and her relaxed, commanding way with the rhythm are strongly suggestive of what an outstanding jazz pianist with classical technique (i.e., Chick Corea or Herbie Hancock) could do with such a score.

In the first prelude, for instance, Gordeladze’s syncopation in the middle section comes across with more of a “bounce,” less stiffly than Kapustin’s own version. One is also aware of subtle chromatic shifts in both the top line and the underlying harmony; here, at last, Kapustin is moving away from strict diatonic patterns in order to enrich his musical language. There is even greater relaxation in the second prelude, which translates into a delicious juxtaposition of right-left hand interaction, and at this slightly slower tempo the little pauses in the music are also more telling. And speaking of “telling,” Gordeladze’s approach to the third prelude almost tells a story as she limns the music with her suave touch and wonderful relaxation of pulse. The fourth prelude, with its quasi-ragtime beat (reminiscent of Gershwin), moves along nicely despite some odd out-of-tonality excursions in the musical line, while the fifth comes across almost as a ballad, wistful and a bit sad. This are the glory of the Kapustin preludes, that they can and should be interpreted by the pianists who play them, not always just played “as is,” and the rhythmic variance in them is quite remarkable and thus lends itself to various different approaches.

A fellow-critic and friend of mine suggested that one should not over-analyze Kapustin’s music, not because it does not lend itself to analysis but because it is charming in and of itself and doesn’t need analysis. To a certain extent that is true, yet there is so much of substance in his work that it’s difficult to resist. In these short preludes, analysis is perhaps less necessary than in the longer works, yet it is true that sheer enjoyment is always a factor in listening to Kapustin. In the brief seventh prelude, for instance, he sets up a beat which does not stay constant but, rather, includes pauses and changing tempi within its brief duration, while the eighth, with its uneven meter, keeps the listener on the edge of his or her seat trying to count the beats along with the performer. The 9th prelude is one of the more interesting harmonically; despite centering around C major, it also moves into E major, A♭, D♭ minor etc., often using the flatted third as a pivot-point to another transposition. The rhythmically wild 10th takes the listener on a roller-coaster ride within its 1:50 duration, here mixing the kind of rhythm one hears in American Indian music (or music written in what is considered American Indian rhythm) with jazz syncopation. The 11th prelude is perhaps the bluesiest, riding an asymmetric rhythm over crushed blues chords; the 12th is flavored with rolling triplets which later shift the rhythm in and out of kilter. For Kapustin key and mood seem to be interrelated, and it’s interesting to note that by writing the preludes out of strict key sequence he managed to keep the moods varied. A good example is how the 13th prelude follows the 12th; despite similar moods they are not identical, and the composer’s deft hand at tempo shifts also affects the tonal color to some degree. One could go into similar descriptions of the remaining preludes, such as the wonderful dragged-beat swagger of the 18th and 19th or the insinuating caterpillar-like crawl of No. 21 but, as my critic friend suggested, the listening process is more fun in addition to telling all.

My decision to choose the third Piano Sonata among his 1990-91 works is strictly arbi-
trary, conditioned in part by its varied approach and not an indictment against any of the other sonatas of this period. All three movements of the third sonata are played without pause and the first movement, in my view, is one of the “spaciest” pieces he has written. It is almost Brubeck-like in its relaxed pulse and use of rich, chunky chords, but with a very relaxed, almost tempoless pulse. This gives the movement the feeling of a fantasia; even when the tempo increases and things get busier, you just know in the back of your mind that he’s going to do something different with the pulse, and so he does, pulling back again on the tempo around the three-minute mark and again relaxing into fantasia mode. It’s a very unusual movement for the generally excitable Kapustin, though he does indulge in some of his patented two-handed runs in the latter part of the movement. The second slightly suggests Dizzy Gillespie’s A Night in Tunisia at a slower tempo. Kapustin cleverly disguises and subjugates the brief appearance of this theme into the evolving development section, which includes double-time runs. The third movement seems to channel Thelonious Monk, its quirky humor mixed with the driving beat to produce some real interest including, at one point, a boogie beat in the left hand and, at another, two different beats in the two hands played against one another.

When I first listened to the 1992 Violin Sonata, I was curious to hear how Kapustin handled the logistics of this piece. Did he write jazz-like figures for the violin, perhaps basing those figures on the playing of Venuti, Grappelli or Ray Nance? As it turns out, in the first movement at least, the figures played by the violin have a certain swagger to them but are closer to the kind of writing one heard in Ravel’s Violin Sonata No. 2 (listen to sound clips 0015-0017), an out-of-tonality five-note motive. In this way Kapustin was able to shift the burden (so to speak) of the music’s swing to the pianist. By way of compensation, his writing for the violin is thoroughly idiomatic and even includes a few brief passages (beginning at 1:25 in the first movement, for instance) where the violin gives out a little more like a jazz violinist, at least trying to swing a little, but by and large he only asks the violinist to play in a somewhat rhythmically relaxed manner, putting the burden of the jazz pulse on the accompaniment. In several places, in fact, he also keeps the development in the hands of the pianist, designating the violin to the role of commentator. At the 5:40 mark, the tempo suddenly slows a bit in pace but swings all the harder, and here, at least, Kapustin engages the violinist in some very fancy fiddling. In the second movement the violinist begins playing pizzicato commentary to the pianist’s lines, switching over to bowed playing at the one-minute mark before going back again. There’s a certain unusual quality to this movement, as both the theme and development seem to be shared in fragmented phrases traded between the two instruments.

As odd as the second movement is, the third is even quirkiest. The pianist sets the tone, initially, with a mysterious (and somewhat ominous) thumping bass line in the left hand, with the violinist playing a few pizzicato notes while the pianist’s right hand plays a strange, atonal theme. Then the volume increases, the pianist begins playing a series of rolling eighth-note figures that slightly resemble Gillespie’s Manteca, and the violin engages a choppy, unusual theme that eventually becomes part of the pianist’s motor rhythm. There are moments where the pressing tempo eases up, shifting in rhythm while the violinist plays bowed, but by and large this is a meaty and more modern-sounding Kapustin. He was clearly evolving. Beginning at 2:24, the pianist starts his variation on the theme, now in the major, with the violinist joining him here and there. At about 3:30 the music really soars, flying up and out of its ground bass with the violin leading the way, then returns to the eighth-note rhythm from earlier in the movement.

The Cello Sonata No. 2, dating from five years later, follows a similar pattern to the Violin Sonata but seems to push the cellist much more in producing a jazz rhythm from the very out-
set. Did Kapustin have a Russian cellist to write for who understood jazz? I don’t know, but here the figures being played are clearly intended to swing, or at least given a good try at swinging, and it’s interesting to hear the cellist (at 1:33) playing portamento figures with a definite jazz feel to them. Harmonically, it is less challenging to the ear than the Violin Sonata, but far more jazz-like. At around the three-minute mark the cello switches from bowed playing to pizzicato, slapping his cello in accepted jazz fashion. By 4:20, both pianist and cellist are swinging quite well, but after a double-time passage for the cellist the tempo temporarily relaxes before ramping up again. Another moment of relaxation, then the fast tempo returns for the finale.

The second movement is somewhat more classical in tone and artistic in design; heard by itself, one might not immediately attribute it to Kapustin from the outset, at least not until the cello pizzicatos followed by a sinuous jazzy swagger in 5/4 time (at least it sounds like 5/4 to me), though the tempo shifts once again during the development section. The somewhat theatrical-sounding final movement, with its typically Kapustin-like motor rhythms, propels both instruments through some nifty changes and tempo shifts, the thematic development being divided again between the cello and piano. By this point in his composing career, Kapustin was seldom at a loss for an interesting solution to the musical mazes he created for his musicians, and this movement is no exception. There’s just a hint of Turtle Island-type writing to some of the cello passages, but by this time the Soviet Union was history and it’s quite possible that Kapustin was digging some of David Balakrishnan’s music as well as his idol Peterson. Certainly the slightly funky beat he sets up for the final section (starting at 5:12) is somewhat different from some of his earlier music, but here it’s wonderfully effective.

The composer’s first string quartet, dating from 1998, marked another advance for him; and here, at least at the outset, the influence of the Turtle Island Quartet seems clear. At least, he has them playing with a bluesy swagger that no string quartet before Turtle Island ever had, and although he develops the music quite differently from Balakrishnan’s methods (more tempo shifts, for one thing, and a more cogent development section), there are indications of similarity. Indeed, it is Kapustin’s complete mastery of classical form, so much greater than some of his jazz counterparts—no matter how much they may love classical music—that almost always marks his music as superior in structure. By this point in his composing career, he had also reached a point where not a single note, phrase or gesture sounded superfluous; every note in every phrase contributed to the whole, and did so in an intelligent way. Perhaps his music did lose a little bit of its “fun” aspect, but the trade-off was an even greater command of musical development, which in the first movement comes and goes with surprising tempo shifts (by this point, another Kapustin trademark) and his unique way of juxtaposing different tempos while still maintaining a coherent musical thread.

The Turtle Island similarity is immediately evident in the first movement, with its loose, almost bluesy swagger and innate command of how to write for strings. Considering his lifelong focus on the piano, it is somewhat amazing that he was able to write so well and so idiomatically for a string quartet. There is also the slight suggestion here of Robert Russell Bennett’s Hexapoda (sound clips 0315-0319) in its use of dance rhythms, yet once again Kapustin’s musical mind is always working through structure, building his structures via blocks of motifs, always thinking ahead. Thus when one reaches the second movement, for instance, the music here is somewhat reminiscent of parts of the first, but laid out differently and emerging in different shapes. Knowing full well that the majority of string quartets can’t swing, he maintains a somewhat relaxed pace in both movements. It’s always easier to play with an insinuous sense of phrasing, a sort of serpentine movement, at slower tempos. And indeed, when the tempo in-
creases in the third movement, there is a more formal “feel” to the music since the string quartet performing it (in this case, an ad hoc group of string players, some of whom have had experience with Kapustin’s music) cannot always maintain the right “swing.” Surprisingly, however, they do well enough in most of this movement to acquit themselves well, particularly in the syncopated eighth-note phrases and the pizzicato and spiccato effects they are called upon to play. Where they have some trouble are those passages, like the final chorus, where the viola and cello are required to play a “walking bass” to the violins. Here, their lack of experience in jazz rhythm becomes apparent; it’s just a bit too formal sounding, and at times there are moments when the pitch of the quartet sounds suspiciously “off” just a bit.

In the last movement, the violinists are instructed to hit their instruments with their bows to create a percussive effect during the opening cello solo, which then leads into some wonderful counterpoint between the violins and the viola with the cello assuming the role of bassist. Again, parts of this come off well despite the constant suggestion that this quartet just doesn’t have rhythm in their soul. This is almost always the real handicap to great performances of Kapustin’s music: not the lack of technique—all classical musicians nowadays can play at 90 miles an hour in their sleep—so much as the lack of looseness. If you view the world premiere performance of Kapustin’s Piano Concerto No. 6 on YouTube, for instance, you will note that pianist Masahiro Kawakami is simply dazzling in terms of digital dexterity, but the music sounds as stiff as a board. With Kapustin’s music, as with Duke Ellington’s, it don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing. What this concerto needs is a performance by Chick Corea with an orchestra conducted by Sir Simon Rattle, just as the string quartet really cries out for a looser ensemble.

Having finished his String Quartet, Kapustin then went one step further and wrote a Piano Quintet. The same group of strings recorded it, but at least in this performance the composer was present on piano to move things along a little better. Yet interestingly, this work—despite its moments of relaxed swing—is even more formal and more thoughtfully conceived and constructed than the string quartet, using more interesting themes and more involved development. Within the ensemble, Kapustin sometimes feeds ideas to the strings, sometimes picks them up from the strings, and sometimes just comps. The piano part, then, is a multi-varied and very important part of the ongoing dialogue. And here, too, he uses the strings much more in terms of feeding each other musical ideas and then working them out. Did he come to the conclusion that a piano quintet must be a more formally organized piece, less dependent on “fun” components? It’s quite possible. Whatever the case, this is a work that for all its jazz elements—and in the piano part, especially, they are many and varied—is more highly developed, and in fact the fact that it is occasionally pleasurable to listen to sometimes occludes the seriousness of the development sections. The first movement in particular highlights Kapustin’s claim that writing out his improvisations made them better and stronger musically.

This seriousness is even to be heard in the second movement, which is a sort of Scherzo, which seems to alternate between 6/8 and 9/8 rhythmically. Kapustin’s own dynamic, driving rhythm on the keyboard helps hold the string quartet in close reins to his beat, and here again—despite this movement being less than three minutes long—the development section is densely packed and very tightly constructed. The slow musical mind that tries to follow this movement will get quickly lost before it is over!

Only in the third movement, taken at a Lento tempo, does Kapustin allow the mind a bit of respite in following his thematic development. Here, too, he creates a likable tune for his theme that is not difficult to follow at first. It is, however, a very long theme that does not completely play itself out until the break or bridge passage shortly after the two-minute mark, at
which point Kapustin himself begins the development on piano, followed by the strings playing a variant of the initial tune. In the final Allegro non troppo, however, Kapustin ramps up both the velocity and the complexity, once again playing what sounds to me like a variant on Manteca (a piece, I’ve come to believe, that he dearly loved). In terms of theme and development, however, the music moves far beyond the simplistic world of Manteca, and both he and the strings alternate between thematic development and sheer exuberance in rhythmic propulsion. With such intricate music to play and the composer at the piano, then, the Piano Quintet emerges as one of his real masterpieces.

But what of the Concerto for 11 Instruments? This was a much trickier form for Kapustin to tackle, probably knowing full well that the combination of a wind quintet (flute, clarinet, oboe, bassoon and horn) and string quintet (two violins, viola and cello) with piano—especially when he wasn’t there to direct or play the keyboard part—would be a problem for so many classically trained musicians. (It always rather surprises and frustrates me to hear so many younger classical musicians being able to play rock music, because that is what they grew up on, than jazz music which is so much more interesting and substantial, but that’s the way the modern world works.) His solution, to judge by the one performance of the work I discovered on YouTube, was to write in a quasi-cool-school style that didn’t require a high degree of swinging from the players. In the first movement, I heard (particularly at 0:53) an allusion to Gershwin’s Cuban Overture in addition to elements of Poulenc. The Japanese chamber orchestra and conductor playing it do, I am sure, their level best to inject some swing into the music—the Japanese, after all, have long been jazz fans—and there are indeed some passages that come off quite well. But to my ears, this music sounds much less like a concerto grosso, despite some moments when isolated passages are played by different winds or strings, and more like a jazz chamber symphony. Most of the time, to my ears anyway, the piano part was inaudible in the first movement.

And yet it sounds to me like a fairly successful work if you take it as a chamber symphony. The music is attractive, combining the “fun” elements of the string quartet with the more serious aspects of the piano quintet. The second movement owes a bit to Ravel and perhaps even Gershwin, and I don’t consider it accidental that the piano is more prominent here. Moving at a slower tempo, the Japanese strings sound more at ease with the relaxed, almost bluesy tone of the music, but the French horn interjections sound a bit stiff. This movement is much more formal and far less jazz-oriented than the first; the development is almost exclusively along classical lines. This is another of those movements that, heard out of context, would probably not be immediately recognized as being written by Kapustin.

The third and last movement bears a striking resemblance, rhythmically, to Leonard Salzedo’s music for the Johnny Dankworth band, which is not a bad thing. Here, Kapustin sets up a motor rhythm in irregular meter and allows his imagination free rein in playing with the varied elements of the music. Once again the piano part of prominent, in fact so much so here that it even takes an extended solo over a walking bass (cello) at the two-minute mark, and after a wind interlude the viola plays a variant over the cello before the piano returns once again and in fact dominates the development. A lively but quirky ride-out figure ends the concerto.

By the time Kapustin reached the 21st century, he was already a well-experienced hand at writing his jazz-based classical music for a variety of instruments and instrumental mixtures. Indeed, the only form he had not worked in, and would not touch, was the symphony (which, incidentally, Clare Fischer also felt was a worn-out form in which everything that needed to be said had already been done). When returning to piano sonatas, then, he had a much richer musical vocabulary and dialect to draw upon. Thus his Twelfth Sonata (2001), though still a jazz-based
composition and fairly enjoyable to hear, is more complex in form and less “entertaining” than many of his earlier works. Kapustin also evolved in terms of thematic development, using even more subtle devices and now able to break up the music into smaller cells and still tie them together into a unit. The first movement is a perfect example, the music seemingly wandering all over the place but actually building on itself block by block like an expanding Lego structure. He is still tonal but has learned how to say new things within the tonal framework. Because of this greater command of his materials, Kapustin also became terser in his musical statements. He needed less time (and space) to make his case, thus the entire sonata takes only 12 minutes. Some will feel that the second movement seems to have the same sort of form (it certainly has the same sort of drive) as the last movements of previous sonatas, but here too Kapustin’s use of thematic material—contrasting, mixing and developing themes—has become tighter and, upon closer listening, more complex. Of course, in strictly solo keyboard works he lets his mind play with the kind of jazz he has heard Oscar Peterson play, yet this does not stop him from being able to say more in a shorter period of time. Even the so-called “ride-out” chorus, beginning at 5:15 in the second movement, has more to say as he dashes towards the finish line than similar closing statements in earlier sonatas.

Among his later works, the *Divertissement for Violin, Cello and Piano*, Op. 126 (2005) and the second Piano Trio, Op. 142 (2010) stand out for their richness of vocabulary and maturity of form and substance. Indeed, the driving rhythm of the first movement of the *Divertissement* is such that it momentarily obscures the much more complex writing. His experience in creating the string quartet, piano quintet and *Concerto for 11 Instruments* all contributed to his ability to bounce ideas around from instrument to instrument within the ensemble while the theme and its development are in motion. This is the musical equivalent of juggling three bowling balls; Kapustin is thus able to move parts of the music around from violin to cello to piano in such a way that it all sounds like continuous evolution. It also doesn’t hurt that Trio Arbós, the performing group, has (like Catherine Gordeladze) an innate feel for this music that even goes beyond the good but not quite swinging string players that Kapustin used for his quartet and quintet. Perhaps because all three members of the group are Spanish, and the Spanish have always had a good affinity for jazz rhythm over the decades, they are able to “feel” the pulse with a much better sense of balance, but whatever the reason one can tell in their performance of the café-music-like second movement that they are comfortable and familiar with this kind of pulse. In the third movement, Trio Arbós also brings to the music a kind of rock-music-like pulse—remember what I said about young classical musicians being more comfortable with rock music than with jazz?—but the angularity of their playing has a certain drive and lift that many more “studious” groups completely lack. Here, too, Kapustin’s “idea exchange” moves around the members of the trio, sometimes with the piano playing a development and the strings filling in and sometimes with the strings themselves playing variations. Pianist Juan Carlos Garvayo has a bit more of a “clipped” sound than Kapustin himself does, but the acuity of his rhythmic accents gives the music the proper bounce within the framework of the development.

The last movement, with its (again) *Manteca*-like rhythm, is particularly congenial to the trio, who attack it with gusto. Another thing that one likes about their playing is the lean, tight-vibrato sound of the violin and cello. Unlike the Russian players, who occasionally played with a fuller tone, their bright sound brings out the lines of the music as it evolves with exceptional clarity. This is especially helpful in the development section that begins at 1:55 and continues for

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7 At the time of recording, Miguel Borrega was the trio’s violinist. He has since been replaced by Cecilia Bercovich.
some time. They play as three solo voices who have learned to balance one another rather than as a solid-sound trio, playing with an ensemble feel.

The late Piano Trio is an even more highly developed and less purely entertaining work than the Divertissement. Here, in 2010, Kapustin has evolved once again, reducing his statements to even briefer themes, almost short mottos, and moving into the development section sooner than one expects. Here, too, Kapustin switches tempo quicker and more often than in many of his earlier works, which also adds to the interest. Possibly due to these various factors, even the jazz feeling is somewhat subjugated into the evolving discourse between the three instruments. Kapustin, surprisingly, even stays in 3 for some time during the development, accenting the music in a syncopated fashion that suggests jazz but does not really encroach upon it. Of course, there is always the possibility that Trio Arbós is purposely “holding back” on the jazz elements because the music is just so complex, but I get more of the feeling that it just plays out that way. The sudden switch, for instance, to a slow 4 at 5:35 for the last section of the movement gives greater emphasis to the content of the coda than to the motor rhythm, which suddenly relaxes at 7:18 to end the movement, enigmatically, on a quiet note.

The second movement has what I can best describe as a “leaning” tonality, leaning from B♭ major to E minor, to F major and to A major, as it slithers its quirky way across one’s mind. Due to the trio’s particular rhythmic feel, the only suggestion of jazz rhythm comes in the piano solo beginning at 2:16 and the ensuing dialogue with the cello. Kapustin plays cat-and-mouse with the listener in terms of rhythm, shifting the syncopations from one beat to the next, sometimes even within a single bar. By the four-minute mark, we seem to be engaged in a “floating” pulse, or at least a less definable one, and this continues to the end of the movement.

In the third movement, Kapustin almost but not quite reverts to his old self. The rhythm is quite convoluted here (without being able to see the score, it sounds to me like 3+3+4), with rhythmic accents placed oddly within that beat, played under a long-lined melody. By the two-minute mark we seem to be in a quite involved three-voiced development section which only becomes more complex as it goes along. This is surely one of Kapustin’s great masterpieces, so good, in fact, that it only seems prudent to close the chapter on him with it.

We are extremely fortunate to have this remarkable composer living, and active, in our lifetimes. A less judicious writer would, I am sure, declare Kapustin the clear winner in the field of jazz-classical fusion, and to a certain extent that is true, but one must always make allowances for further developments that may arise from others. Certainly, Kapustin’s generally conservative tonal language places him in the center of a jazz world now long since vanished, whereas some others are working in a more contemporary form.

And there has been another very positive affect that Kapustin has had, and that is in forcing the classical music industry, and audience, into taking not only his music but all jazz-influenced classical music, and in turn jazz itself, seriously. In the liner notes for Trio Arbós’ CD, Juan Carlos Garvayo states quite baldly that “The Trio Arbós has been obliged more than once to have to justify its wish to play the works of Nikolai Kapustin, with programmers who are misinformed or are unfamiliar with this composer’s output. The task is never easy: a purely technical description appears to overlook the immediacy, the freshness, the originality of these surprising scores, while an over-simplified account, such as the typical ‘fusion of jazz and classical music,’ seems to ignore the complexity and depth of a language which escapes the preconceived molds we are accustomed to take as reference.”

8 From the notes to Non Profit Music 1405.
But I can vouch for the fact that it is much more than Kapustin and his “surprising scores.” In my years as a music critic I was wont to judge every piece of music I listened to, regardless of the composer’s or the work’s fame (or lack of it), by the structure and use of musical materials—in other words, the same criteria by which I have judged the pieces discussed in this book. And in many cases I came to the conclusion that many composers, even some great ones, were using a trite musical formula of their time, not creating anything fresh, original, or inventive, and said so in my reviews. This led to angry readers writing in complaining that I was “ignorant of music” because of these judgments. I always found this complaint rather shocking because, in my e-mail exchanges with practicing musicians and composers, both classical and jazz, they almost all commented on my sound knowledge of music. So I began to analyze the underlying nature of the complaints more carefully, and I learned that what they objected to was any criticism on my part of any classical work because, in their view, this music was not constructed by human beings struggling at a piano or some other instrument to find inspiration that they could use to build a structure based on their learned tricks of melody and harmony, but rather somehow inspired directly by some deity and therefore not to be questioned. And this same set of aesthetic values projected itself downward to jazz musicians, automatically assuming that even though nearly all of their solo work was inspired on the spur of the moment at the time of performance it was inferior to classical music because the classical composers put much more thought into their work and were therefore able to strike out inferior or unacceptable variations. These classical music snobs (for that is what they are) thus want to have it both ways. To them, classical music is superior to jazz—even written and arranged jazz—not just because the classical composer is divinely inspired and the jazz musician (perhaps due to class or ethnic origin) is not, but also because the classical composer has more time to formulate his musical ideas. He (and remember, the world of classical composers is dominated by men) is therefore a genius not to be questioned, and to apply the higher standards of jazz performance to classical works—even the creation of first-movement cadenzas for concertos (more often written by the performers, who are even less good composers than the guys who wrote the concerto)—is an insult.

What makes this position even more ironic is that most classical composers active from the late 1930s through the 1970s, and even most of the performing musicians themselves, admired jazz and were often fans even if they couldn’t play it. Bela Bartók and Kaikhosru Sorabji were two of the very few who weren’t jazz fans. Among those who were—even if not all of them could write in a jazz vein—were Stravinsky, Milhaud, Ravel, Poulenc, Satie, Shostakovich, Lambert, Martinů, Tansman, Gershwin (of course!), Carpenter, Copland, Bernstein, Thomson, Liebermann and Prokofiev. So were all of them wrong and all of you classical snobs right? I don’t think so. But think of the awful battles that Friedrich Gulda fought with German critics and audiences his whole life to be accepted for his jazz side, how Leonard Bernstein was laughed at for including jazz musicians in his concerts and Young People’s lectures on music, or how the classical snobs shrugged their shoulders at Yehudi Menuhin’s jazz recordings with Stéphane Grappelli and turned their backs on them.

One of the most interesting articles ever written was that by Don Sinta, an established classical alto saxophone player who tried in middle age to learn jazz improvisation, in 1994. This article, originally published in *B D Guide* (short for Band Directors’ Guide), a division of Village Press of Traverse City, Michigan, has been reprinted with permission by Jamey Aebersold, one of the best-known independent jazz educators and jazz study guide publishers who lives and operates out of Indiana. Aebersold became a well known and respected alto sax player during the 1960s and could easily have become famous in that field, but instead dedicated his life to ex-
panding the number of jazz musicians and jazz lovers in America through his outreach programs, Play-A-Long books and other study guides—one of which, the Jazz Handbook, he passes out for free. Sinta’s report on the sabbatical he took to learn how to improvise is detailed, informative, and humbling. I think that Sinta was one of those musicians who had not denigrated jazz prior to his own experiences, but rather had never thought it was something he could do. What he learned from his experience, however, humbled him much more than he had thought it would. Here are a few of the more pertinent of his discoveries:

I had accumulated plenty of skills during 49 years of playing; but when I tried to use them in spontaneous music-making, I was getting shut down, and just could not understand why...I got out the jazz books and started to practice the patterns, and then recognized my first major problem: most of the information I had was totally eye-driven. If you wrote it down, I could play it; but I wasn’t able to see things inside my brain without the use of the eye. I just didn’t think that way.

Then I tried to create stylistic melodies over this harmonic information, and discovered that I could usually play a 2-bar idea but didn’t know what I was going to do in bars 3 and 4. I began to realize that I did not think as a composer. I could play things, but I couldn’t get thing #1 to be related to thing #2.

Composition wasn’t part of my training...[my] emphasis was not enough on “What is Creston doing in bar 2? What’s happening in the development section” How does that section relate to the recap?” Had I been looking at that process, I probably would be a better improviser...two people were especially supportive – my wife and my son, who is a jazz major at the University of North Texas.

He would ask, “Dad, what are you doing?” I’d tell him, and he would respond, “No-no-no; don’t do that.” It was usually the same pattern:

  • “Are you playing your scales starting on the tonic?” (Yes) “Don’t play on the tonic.”
  • “Are you playing from the bottom up?” (Yes) “Start them at the top, with the 9th.”
  • “Are you playing your majors and minors?” (Yes) “No, you’ve got to get into Dorians and Phrygians.”

This is just the tip of the iceberg of his trip into the world of jazz improvisation. And if the improvisation portion is so hard, just imagine what it’s like to compose jazz and have to make it sound as lively and interesting as the solos that inform it. Perhaps now you know why I’m so adamant that the work of Morton, Challis, Parham, Foresythe, Ellington, Mundy, Sauter, Russell, Monk, Lewis, Katz, Mingus, Fischer, Levy, Akiyoshi etc. should be taken seriously. The fact that the basic structure of much jazz is more “tuneful” than strictly classical works doesn’t matter. Remember what Byron Olson said: Arranging is composing, to which I would add that jazz composition in the sense that it borrows techniques from classical music is difficult despite the fact that the forms are shorter and perhaps more simplistic. The jazz arranger-composer’s job is harder, not easier, than the classical composer because he or she has to take so many more variables into account.

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