

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC IN PIANO PEDAGOGY

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In this brief look at contemporary piano music repertoire I shall try and answer the following questions: a) Is it possible to introduce the language and performance of contemporary music from the very first years of study? b) What educational purpose does this serve? c) What repertoire do we have available?

I will first illustrate some examples of possible repertoire. Subsequently, given some prerequisites of an educational nature, I will examine some elements taken from an analysis of the pieces, highlighting their possible implications in a teaching environment, with the objective of demonstrating the pedagogical value of a repertoire which is still little adopted in the curriculum in the first years of study.

Examples

Example 1. *Jatekok*, G. Kurtág (1979). Editio Musica Budapest

Lendülettel *)

fff

#b sempre

con Ped.

Figure 1: incipit of *Hommage à Tchaikovsky*, in *Jatekok*: Vol. 1

Vivace, ma sempre tranquillo

(c)

m.s.

m.s.

simile

m.d.

simile

legatissimo possibile

sempre con Ped.

Figure 2: incipit of *Perpetuum Mobile*, in *Jatekok*: Vol. 1

Jatekok is a Hungarian word translated as "Games" in English. Kurtág (1979) says that "The idea of composing *Games* was suggested by children playing spontaneously, children for whom the piano is still a toy. [...] It is a possibility for experimenting and not for *learning to play the piano*" (p. 9). Here clusters (Figure 1) and *glissandi* (Figure 2) are used to explore the instrument both physically and acoustically. The primary feature is gesture, as an expression of energy contained within a self-sufficient formal microcosm (Loffredo, 2008).

Example 2. *Five Easy Piano Pieces*, B. Lorentzen (1971). Wilhelm Hansen Edition

♪ = 264 - 352 (♩ = 132 - 176)

Figure 3: incipit of no.1 *Waves*, in *Five Easy Piano Pieces*

The *Five Easy Piano Pieces* by Bent Lorentzen, commissioned by the NMPU (Nordic Music Pedagogical Union) of Aarhus in 1971, "can be considered as minimalist, since they use small and precise repetition modules where the composer indicates the exact duration in seconds for each; rhythmic variants are applied mainly through the addition or removal of notes and pauses" (Loffredo, 2008, p.18).

Example 3. *Ein Kinderspiel*, H. Lachenmann (1980). Breitkopf & Härtel Edition

♩ = ca. 66

2X (zweimal spielen, also einmal wiederholen) sempre sim.

Figure 4: incipit of no. 5 *Filter Swing*, in *Ein Kinderspiel*

♩ = ca. 100

2X

22na (3 Oktaven höher)----->

(stumm)

8va bassa----->

2 X = 2 mal spielen (also einmal wiederholen)

Figure 5: incipit of no. 7 *Shadow Dance*, in *Ein Kinderspiel*

These seven pieces are written so that young pianists can play them, but the typical qualities of Lachenmann’s “concrete instrumental music” (Von der Weid, 2002, 314) are present just as much as in his other works. For example, in *Filter Swing* (Figure 4) a single chord is repeated over and over again. What matters is the different ways in which it can be made to resound, also through a refined use of the pedal. *Shadow Dance* (Figure 5) is totally based on the rhythmic element and just two notes, which eventually fade away to play with rhythm using merely the sound produced by the pedal (Loffredo, 2008).

Example 4. *Mirada*, M. Zavala (1991). Pygmalión Edition

Introducción ad libitum

ff f a niente

Allegro
pp una corda

(1)

tre corde
f (brusco)

(1) El calderón debe ser cada vez más largo

Pygmalión 0101

Figure 6: *6 Minus 431* in *Mirada*

Mirada is a collection of nine short pieces written for teaching purposes. This work was inspired directly by the composer's piano teaching experience, each piece being dedicated to a pupil with whom the composer worked. For example, she dedicates *6 Minus 431* (Figure 6) to a pupil who never respected and understood the value of silence. That is why there are a large number of coronas, each one representing a longer pause.

Example 5. *Alabaster of Lights*, S. Procaccioli (2009)

Marcia delle luci grigie

♩. 64 (ascoltando le risonanze) *

4

8

13

* Vedi l'apposita raccomandazione indicata in legenda.

Alabastro di luci - © 2009 Stefano Procaccioli, all rights reserved, tutti i diritti riservati

Figure 7: no. 1 *Gray Lights March*, in *Alabaster of Lights*

Alabaster of Lights is six panels written for teaching purposes but with the specific aim of avoiding compromises of a linguistic nature. The author's idea is that "in order to overcome the main obstacle of contemporary music, the linguistic aspect, it is important that pupils deal with the real language and not a simplified copy" (Procaccioli, 2003, p.1). So the formal articulation, use of resonance, kind of materials and treatment typical of his main works are introduced in this piece using short forms, simplified technique and titles with synaesthetic suggestions. Heavily involved in writing for children, Procaccioli (2009) has written another version for piano duet, to make this work even easier from a technical point of view.

Example 6. *Etchings IV. Nine Easy Landscapes*, P. Longo (2006)

Brillante (♩ = 69)

Figure 8: no. 634/100, in *Etchings IV*

At the basis of the construction there is the same kind of process adopted in all the author's works: a minimal cell, here consisting of five notes taken from the title and a basic rhythmic cell, both subjected to a cycle of permutation. This procedure is simply made more approachable from a technical point of view.

Introductory pedagogical and analytical comments

In order to consider the examples used it is now necessary to make some introductory comments of a pedagogical nature:

- a) Traditional music notation is a symbolic system based on segmentation. This segmentation exists neither on a perceptual level nor in terms of motor skills. Musical performance is indeed always the result of gestural units (Bartolini, 2002).
- b) One of the main expressive aspects of music consists in the affinity between rhythmic-melodic patterns and behavioural gesture patterns. Indeed, basic emotional states are generally connected with specific rhythms, movements and directions (Renard, 1982).
- c) The new trend in pedagogy does not promote a *linear* approach to knowledge (linear: from simple to complex through a hierarchical logical classification of elements) but rather a holistic approach, in which complex does not mean *difficult*. In this context, intelligibility must be sought not in the fragmentation of elements, but in their reciprocal interaction within a system (Bartolini, 2002).

I add one of my own analytical considerations, in order to explain what I will later cite as *synthetic thinking*. An analysis of these pieces would seem to show a tendency by composers to place the attention on resonant objects, on brief rhythmic and melodic patterns and on the possibilities for varying these or relating them to one another, rather than on developing or expanding them.

From the motoric point of view, the result is a single gesture with its possible variations or the possible interaction of *conversing* gestural units. This is made even clearer, for example, by the macro-gesture or the type of notation used in the first two examples given. Avoiding the use of fine motility here allows the pupil to concentrate on other aspects regarding playing an instrument, or rather on making music. This takes us back to the introductory comments: fragmentation prevents the natural expressive tension provided by the unitary nature of the gesture (Bartolini, 2002).

Furthermore, in the pieces given (which are clearly only examples of the repertoire, sufficiently representative although not exhaustive), the attention is often focused on timbre, intensity and rhythm. All these aspects are very physical elements and closely linked to behavioural gesture patterns, to recall Renard's (1982) previously cited comments.

Implications for teaching

So at the root of this repertoire there would appear to be *synthetic thinking*, which is expressed through essential rhetoric, close linked to gestural aspects. I believe that this link may be useful in many ways, if applied within the context of teaching/learning:

- ⊕ in helping pupils to understand musical, logical and analytical aspects in an easy way;
- ⊕ in encouraging creative experience: pupils can recognise and use these elements to compose a new piece or to realise possible variations on it;
- ⊕ in promoting an *expressive experience*, as teachers can work on the similarities between musical gesture and gesture patterns related to emotions and behaviour.

Drawing inspiration from the titles of the pieces, I would like to offer one further consideration. When we teach we often look for images that can help pupils to interpret the piece they are learning. This is one possible method, undoubtedly useful, which belongs to the tradition of music for children. We need only recall Robert Schumann's *Album for the Young*. On the other hand, references to extra-musical elements of a descriptive and/or narrative nature are one of the simplest ways that a pupil has of giving a meaning to his experience of interpretation.

There are very simple ways of expressing a message, made natural by the nature of listening, such as for examples, onomatopoeia (primitive but effective), analogy or structural homology (e.g. structural analogy between music and extra-musical elements), the mediation of a code according to which a particular culture attributes certain meanings to certain rhythmic and melodic structures or timbres etc. (Porena, 1972).

Succeeding in attributing sense in the absence of points of reference (namely understanding music through its structures), is a more complex way of signification and which therefore needs to be incentivised by our teaching. Pieces with titles such as that of Stefano Procaccioli's composition can help to move away from the need for explicit references, in this specific case (Figure 7) thanks to the synaesthetic suggestions (grey lights) that immediately take us away from the denotative context (the march).

Conclusions

In the light of these reflections, I think that the main elements that may help pupils to simultaneously deal with all aspects of making music with an instrument in an easy but meaningful manner can be found in this repertoire. This is what I mean by a “holistic approach” (Bartolini, 2002) to teaching/learning, in which gestural, expressive, logical, analytical and symbolic aspects give a sense to the musical experience thanks to their reciprocal interaction.

The examples also show how a contemporary repertoire also exists for the first years of study for those teachers who think it is important to promote the knowledge of very different languages and aesthetic contexts in the formative period. Personally, I believe that this is important, otherwise there is the risk of denial or simply of inhibiting pupils' interest and curiosity.

It is not a question of introducing this music because it is 'appreciated', but of offering significant means and programmes in a broader context. Music can be understood and experienced in very different ways and as teachers we have the role of encouraging this.

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