

A HUNGARIAN COMPOSER IN THE 20TH CENTURY

JOZSEF SOPRONI'S NOTE PAGES FOR PIANO

Introduction

Piano music is an important and significant trend within 20th century Hungarian music. To find the historical roots of this trend, we must go back to the time of Franz Liszt. Béla Bartók, while working on the development of his new sound in music at the beginning of the 20th century, deservedly continued in the tradition of Beethoven in form, magnitude, and richness of thought, but adopted the inclination for experimentation from Liszt. With his large scale and significant piano works, Bartók has a merited place within the universal history of music. Naturally, the generation following Bartók took the direction this composer had set, if not so much as in his stylistic characteristics, but in his desire for experimentation. Through this idiom, Bartók created striking works full of new ideas and rich harmony, attesting to a refined sense of form; and for the most, a lasting piano literature. The new generation of the mid-20th century was looking for new paths to follow.

From among the piano works of contemporary Hungarian composers, József Soproni's (1930-) *Note Pages* deserves an outstanding placement. Soproni composed this work between 1974-78 in response to a commission and the original goal was to create a composition inspired by the new idiom of the second half of the 20th century for both piano students and concert pianists at the beginning of their career. The high quality of the musical content and structural considerations of this work, however, far exceeded its original goal.

József Soproni had received his composition degree in 1956 from the Franz Liszt Academy of Music. The following year he was appointed to teach at the Béla Bartók Conservatory where he remained for 15 years. In 1974 he was appointed University Professor and from 1988 to 1994 he was Rector of the Liszt Ferenc Music Academy where he taught theoretical studies and composition. Thus, he was deeply involved in education.

Note Pages consists of four notebooks, 82 pieces in all, and in the spirit of Bartók's *Microcosmos*. The pieces range from thoughts poured into miniature form to more large scale ones with a depth of content demanding great technical preparation. The four notebooks follow each other in order of difficulty. *Note Pages* was preceded by several other piano works. However, Soproni never published those he wrote at a very young age. His first published work, *Four Bagatelles*, was composed in 1957. Also his works were not characterized by the almost mandatory folk music centricism of the 1950's in Hungary as he never composed works based on folk music. The characteristic role the piano fills in Soproni's overall 'oeuvre', even up to his most recent works, is already present in the *Four Bagatelles*. During the first three decades of his career the piano was not Soproni's instrument of choice for more monumental works. For him the piano was the medium of compositional workshop studies, the place where compositional problems surfaced. The *Seven Piano Pieces* of 1962 is far removed from the world of the *Bagatelles* in style and in the use of expressive techniques. Before he composed this work Soproni gathered a variety of musical experience attending the Darmstadt Center in Germany. Although these seven pieces are independent of each other they follow each other in a definite cyclical plan with slow and fast movements;

and the duration of the movements is epigrammatically terse -the shortest movement lasting for 30 seconds and the longest for 2 minutes. While following a strict formal construction *Seven Piano Pieces* is at the same time a painter's sketchbook displaying a rich variety of ideas, compositional methods, and effects.

Towards the end of the 1960's Soproni experienced the liberating effect of discarding a dependence on the example of other composers and of forging his own musical language and technique. This new phase in his creative life is marked by a freely-interpreted twelve-tone technique, though bound and made stricter by the demands of form inherited from the classical masters, and by his penchant for the contrapuntal treatment of musical material. The post-Webernian way of thinking and the principle of serialism had only a peripheral influence on Soproni, and he never became a follower. He wrote, "I was never able to acquire a taste for serial technique. This compositional process was alien to me and I considered it meaningless to determine such variables as rhythm, dynamics, and sounds before even starting to compose. I listen to the process inside me. On the other hand, the acoustic result of serialism was exciting, because it stimulated my imagination."⁽¹⁾ He also only occasionally uses dodecaphony and only as much as the logics of a particular work demand. The turn of the 1960's and 70's was his 'Sturm und Drang' period during which the emotions expressed in his work intensified, and the music was rich in gesture, dramatic contrasts, and vivid dynamic changes.

Soproni continued to regard the piano as a medium for the exploration of compositional problems. His *Invenzioni sul B-A-C-H* (1971) and *Incrustations* (1973) pay homage to variation form and analyze a single problem. They are built on the numerous possibilities of combination presented by the major and minor variants of a triad. In so doing they illustrate an important poetic tenet of Soproni - that of the defining role of the 'omnia ex uno' principle; namely, musical evolution from small cells. In order to gain a detailed insight into the composer's thought processes with the help of the piano; we will now examine his impressive work of 4 notebooks written during the 1970's entitled Note Pages.

Note Pages, 4 Notebooks, 82 Pieces

It seems that this piano work summarizes the characteristics of the composer's applied instrumental and compositional technique. It can also be considered the conclusion of a compositional period which at the same time marks the beginning of a new one. We must first familiarize ourselves with the structural principles to be able to perform this work according to the composer's original idea. The main difficulties within the *Note Pages* are not only technical, but primarily musical in nature; thus, a prerequisite to their proper performance is their preliminary study and an understanding of the relationships within the entire work, sort of grasping a global experience.

The pieces within the first notebook barely exceed the usual classical period, but here the performer has only moments for psychological change because the piece is merely a flash not taking the time and space of development and expression of the musical character as we may experience in classical music. Even in the small forms of the first pieces we find ourselves facing aspirations full of tension which point in the direction of the piece's dramaturgical happenings. Soproni writes:

Speculation was never my intention; I never wanted to write atonal music. My tonal vocabulary is primarily diatonic, interrupted by the 'discoloring notes'. When you start writing something, an idea is working inside you. I listen to the compositional process taking place inside me. There is always a compositional activity in the background directed toward a point of formation. This sometimes happens instinctively, other times it is the result of a conscious effort. The range of tones characteristic of dodecaphony is merely reflection, lacking the severity characteristic of the orthodox style. I imagine music in great curved arches and I desire beautiful sounds, the undulation of a melody, and the natural talkativeness of human beings. Harmony, in the classical sense, is often substituted by clusters. They are present in patches, but within the context of the given music, and can be sounded in a variety of different musical characters. The acoustic exploitation of this sonority is important, the feel for acoustic beauty, and its transmission. That is why the inner hearing and understanding of these pieces is crucial to achieve a good performance. By the time I wrote *Note Pages* composing techniques born during the 20th century had already crystallized within me, and these pieces strove to introduce and summarize these techniques. We could even call it a sort of alphabet, a compendium, of the previous century's music. Through the study and playing of these pieces, we become familiar with the technical models of 20th century music composition, if in a miniature fashion. The most important thing is to prevent oneself from looking for rules one can implement in every instance. One of the most important musical attitudes is that the performer be clear about the directions of musical movement.⁽²⁾

In writing down his musical thoughts, the composer moved between two processes of musical composition: One is metrical in nature and is based on traditions. In this, the more closely bound length of the musical phrases may come from each other, or contrast with one another as in the *Burlesque* (Notebook 1, #25), Ex. 1. The essence of the other compositional form lies in the more relaxed musical material of the piece which is a kind of free narrative, like an improvisation as in the *Epigram* (Notebook 1, #22), Ex. 2. This is reinforced by the score, which has no bar lines. For example, the kind of performance denoted by *liberamente* does not indicate a slow tempo for the piece, which might cause it to fall apart. Rather, a controlled freedom for the performer is conditioned by the composer's expressive intent, during which time the integrity of the musical idea must be maintained. At the same time, wavelike dynamics and broad phrasing are indispensable. The important point is that every motif must be given an expression, which has both musical character and meaning. The

composer's indications of dynamics amount to guidelines, and these must cover the natural movement of the music. The piece begins with an invocation-like introduction, with the denotations 'tranquillo' and 'liberamente'.

Of course, these two compositional concepts do not rigidly separate from each other; in most pieces they effectively follow each other. One of the composer's favorite ways of handling music was the barely noticeable transformation of certain chords or motifs which appear in the various registers of the instrument, within several contexts of the piece. We must embark on an unbelievably exciting journey to explore the often instinctively created identical structures, the interchanging of repetitive, differently applied chords, their undoing and redoing; in other words, their transformation. Experience in discovering these possibilities require a different type of musical analysis, and musicians raised on classical music often lack the self-confidence to do so. In the folioing piece, *Piles of Leaves* (Notebook III, #7), the composer consciously interchanges the position of the chords. As a result of this transformation the harmonies sound in various registers of the instrument and the musical phrases are clearly divided by the fermatas, Ex. 3.

Another example of the same compositional concept is the piece *In Sunshine* (Notebook IV, #1), Ex. 4. Here the composer arranges an acoustically nicely sounding chord model. The choice of the chord is a conscious one, its variations created the tonal vocabulary of the piece quite unconsciously. The shining block of the first chord scatters all over the keyboard - its sounds appear in the most varied of registers and transformations. The composer recalls that, "I was not led by any type of purposeful deliberation, a resonance was living inside me, and experiencing it was what inspired me".⁽³⁾ Certain levels of the piece are completely tonal, but together with the other layers, the piece is not tonal as a whole. It is important that a jingling sound be born from this collective resonance.

Here *In Sunshine* the models and scope of ideas are extremely rich. The formation of the piece as a musical gesture and its sensitive performance are often made more difficult by the topographically scattered sounds which seem to be independent of each other. According to the composer's musical concept this type of scoring covers an aleatoral way of thinking, but the scattered sounds must come together in correct rhythmic proportions to create a melody which Soproni requires to be followed. The scattered points, or the small parts they create, are little cog wheels. The relationship between the multitudes of these cog wheels is what is able to create the experience of the piece. These relationships must be found in order to be able to summarize larger slices of the piece.

The Bird and the Butterfly (Notebook II, #14) is a thought taking flight, followed by the rhythmic bringing to life of very fine constricted and fast movement, EX.5. In this piece choreographic depiction is prevented by the connected but asymmetrically dispersed melodic material which requires the frequent changing of bands. Soproni writes, "I am aware that the scoring of modern music puts the inexperienced player in a difficult position, even though the material itself is instrumental-like and playable in a relative way. Romantic composers wrote playable works but it was an instrumental mannerism, a set of decorations which satisfied the taste of the composer's time, the demand for virtuosity. Debussy's works are "instrument-like", but in a different sense. Debussy had found the most playable possibilities for interpreting the harmonic fantasy of French music from the beginning of the 20th century on the piano. The message of modern composers is also represented by instrumental practice, within which every composer has the private technique which imprints the works. The

pianists raised on a Romantic repertoire, for example Liszt, finds it more difficult to read this piece until they find the intellectual key to reading the scores of 20th century music”.⁽⁴⁾

Mixing up the automatic diatonicity and pentatonicity of the black and white keys (one hand is below while the other is above) is a frequent acoustic and manual experience, and appears conspicuously frequently in the pieces. This, however, was not a new compositional method. It was applied often during the beginning of the 20th century by Debussy, Bartók, Stravinsky and many others. In Soproni's works it often serves to color the diatonicity. Let's use a very simple “white model”, a C-D-E patch for example. If we expose this onto the similarly sounding “black model”, F#-G#-A# patch and they are sounded simultaneously, they will provide an unusual color. Soproni writes, “I expressly require a sensitive touch. I find hard piano playing difficult to listen to. I desire soft colors, rather than the grating hammering of dissonance”.⁽⁵⁾ Two pieces illustrate this method of composing. *In Fog and Cloud*, (Notebook II, #11), Ex. 6, presents a figure of a chord in forte dynamic which shines through the dense murmur at the end of the piece.

In *Whites and Blacks* (Notebook I, #34), Ex. 7, the performer must be able to activate the imagination on two completely independent horizontal tracks. The parts do not rely upon each other and the two hands are not in synch. It is as if two separate mediums were playing with the freedom of improvisation. An important thing to keep in mind is that neither hand should adapt the throbbing of the other. The dynamics in the notation merely indicate the direction, but it is important for them to always follow the undulation of the music. The fact that the pitches are not written underneath each other could pose some difficulty in reading the music, but the essence of this is that they do not sound at the same time, seemingly speaking a different musical language. Conscious counting and the exact playing of the pitches are valuable at the time of reaching. The performance of a piece like this is only good if the performer dares to break away from a sure counting and is able to gain an overview of the musical material. To the average pianist it seems as though this musical composition has appeared out of nowhere, whereas its conception can be found in numerous improvisation scores of Romantic music. In this piece diatonic sounds are heard together with the black pentatonic keys.

The piece *Alla Serenata* (Notebook III, #3), Ex. 8, is a rare polytonal piece in the four notebooks. Here we experience a ringing spatial effect where all 12 pitches operate completely equally. The broad opening up of the common chord of Ab-C-Eb interweaves the musical process in which the extended positional flow in Ab major serves as a constant background providing the piece's basic tonality. The colors created by the opening of the common chord followed by again another expansion of overlaying must be played according to the register and the character of the given tones with an independent sound, with different coloration; and it is precisely by mixing the colors of these distinct layers that create the unusually ringing spatial effect.

Concluding Remarks

This brief introduction to József Soproni's Note Pages shows some of his characteristic compositional traits. Shining the spotlight onto the principles which form these pieces can result in their deeper understanding. Polyphonic musical thinking, the tradition of which so permeates Soproni's art, has also found its place within these pieces. The authentic playing of the black and white keys sounded together wishes to indirectly transpose the musical language of the 20th century, the knowledge of the polyphonic “seeing-hearing-moving” concept. However, the titles indicate pictures richly interwoven with emotion and

feeling alive in the composer's imagination. Soproni has included dynamically bursting climaxes in even the shortest of pieces. Dramatic tension as well as the opposite, internal peace and the stillness of silence, can be found within the pieces, frequently even within the same piece, within the same framework. *Note Pages* occupies a special place on the list of Soproni's piano works.

During the 1980's the composer felt he had drained the well of sounds he had been applying. However, his musical raw material continued to be the twelve independently handled pitches. The difference lies in the arrangement of these pitches as he strives to create a more pleasant sound, in the traditional sense. His mode of expression is simplified and his style settles. From the middle of the 1990's the piano ceases to fill the role of a workshop study instrument, and kaleidoscope-like smaller pieces are replaced by more monumental piano works. His first piano sonata was composed in 1996, which was followed by 17 more until December 2003.⁽⁷⁾

Soproni completes the four-movement Piano Sonata #18 in November 2003. He says that, "Only now am I really beginning to compose for the piano, to draw out the essence; now my value system is stronger than ever".⁽⁸⁾ In these sonatas Soproni holds together several passages differing in character and theme, in a single movement, and preferring larger and more complex movements. By the end of the 1990's Soproni had become a prolific composer and his achievements recognized by awards and honors bestowed by the Hungarian government. He received the highest award of the Hungarian Republic, the Kossuth Prize, in March 1999.

Mariann Abraham

NOTES

1. Kristóf Csengery: József Soproni - Hungarian Composers, Magus publishing Ltd. 2002, trans. by Peter Woodward.
2. Ibid.
3. Mariann Abraham: "Betekintés József Soproni Alkotóműhelyébe", *Beszélgetes a Szerzővel*, Parlando 1984, XXVI, issue 8-9, p. 19-24.
4. Mariann Abraham, "In the Place of Greetings", *Notebooks VI. I*, on Soproni's 60th birthday, Parlando 1990 XXXII, issue 4-5-6, p. 1-12.
5. József Soproni, Commentary text for the CD 'Soproni, *Note Pages* for Piano and Sonata #14', Hungaroton Records Ltd., 2004, performed by Mariann Abraham.
6. See note 4.
7. See note 1.
8. Máté Hollós: "József Soproni's Piano Period-Works in Progress", *Muzsika* 1999, January issue p. 42, quoted by Kristóf Csengery.

We are grateful to Editio Musica Budapest for permission granted to publish the examples of *Note Pages* by composer József Soproni.

25 Burleszk – Burlesque

Vivace

The image displays a musical score for the piece 'Burleszk – Burlesque' (Op. 10, No. 25) by Franz Liszt. The score is written for piano and is marked 'Vivace'. It consists of three systems of music. The first system begins with a treble and bass staff. The second system continues the melody and accompaniment. The third system concludes the piece with a final cadence. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'f' and 'pp'.

22 Epigramma – Epigram

Tranquilla, Moderante

rall.

a tempo

p

mf

f

pp

[illegible]

Jegyzetlapok — Note Pages

IV

(1978)

Napfényben — In Sunshine

Poco vivo

SOPRONI József

(Ped.:) *

(Ped.:)

* A szövegben tett pedáljelölések a pedál használatára figyelmeztetnek.
A pedál óvatos használatát természetesen ott is előírhatjuk, ahol nincs jelölés. A nagyobb területek alatt végighúzott jelek arra utalnak, hogy a megjelölt hangok kicsengése fontos kompozíciós elem a darabban.

The pedal markings in brackets are warning signs for the use of the pedal. Pedal can, of course, be cautiously used even where no marking is given. The signs extending under larger sections indicate that the dying away of the sounds struck form an essential compositional element of the pieces.

14
The Bird and the Butterfly

Vivo

This musical score is for a piece titled "The Bird and the Butterfly" (No. 14). It is marked "Vivo" and is written for piano. The score consists of five systems of music. The first system begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written in the treble clef, and the accompaniment is in the bass clef. The second system continues the melody and accompaniment. The third system features a section marked "ad lib. mod. 15." in the treble clef. The fourth system continues the piece. The fifth system ends with the lyrics "nu - en do" and a piano (pp) dynamic marking.

11
In Fog and in Cloud

Allegro assai

This musical score is for a piece titled "In Fog and in Cloud" (No. 11). It is marked "Allegro assai" and is written for piano. The score consists of five systems of music. The first system begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written in the treble clef, and the accompaniment is in the bass clef. The second system continues the melody and accompaniment. The third system features a section marked "poco" in the treble clef. The fourth system continues the piece. The fifth system ends with the lyrics "nu - en do" and a piano (pp) dynamic marking.

34 Fehérek és feketék – Whites and Blacks

Presto

p poco a poco cresc. *L. vibrare*

mf *rit.* *p* *marcato* *sf*

Alla serenata

Andante

mf *rit.* *f*

quasi f

*1) A helyi pedáljelölések csupán javaslatok: egyik lehetősége a külön-
ként hangnemi harmóniai hangsfelrakások összerakásának. Más
változatokban enné kisebb-magyobb mértékben a mutatók/hamok.

*1) The pedal markings given in the text are merely suggestions (and
provide a possibility for the accord of the quality of various lines
and harmonies). In some other versions minor or greater deviations
from this may occur.