

Ketting for piano solo by Jo Sporck – a fascinating moment of recent new music

Cristina BUGA¹

***Abstract:** There are very few performers considering approaching new creation starting with second half of the 20th century. Its new sound and unknown effects on audience after almost a century of new discovered sonorities seem to be still a challenge in the last 20-30 years. New music needs a better approach by the performers and this could be the result of some habits established during the study period. Exploring and promoting new but good creation may bring multiple positive effects. In this respect **Ketting** by the living Dutch composer Jo Sporck represents a valuable moment of recent music deserving a broad acknowledgement.*

Keywords: performing, new music, *Jo Sporck, Ketting*.

1. Few considerations over approaching contemporary music

In the last 20-30 years the approach and the general appetite for listening to new music has decreased exhibiting significant steps backwards. After a century of new sonorities there is still a significant part of performers displaying an exclusive preference for approaching only greatest works of the great musical past. In our contemporary concert halls the most neglected is mostly the more recent music.

There is a fact that a big mass of performers are selecting the greatest composers' works whose value has been already confirmed by time or history. There is also the aspect of approaching *cross-over* music in a desire of pleasing the audience. There are very few performers daring approaching new creation. The new sound with its unknown effects on audience after almost a century of new discovered sonorities by A. Schoenberg - seem to be more challenging than several decades ago. Perhaps the actual situation needs a restauration by a better and more extensive music education in order to be rescued from a rather isolated phenomenon. This position may be the sequence of a reflex formed in the studies period as well. Usually student's target aims achieving greatest historical works. Once they succeed accomplishing- on different levels- their goal, their studies period is, most of time,

¹ Transilvania University of Braşov, c_buga@unitbv.ro

also over. This way would form their further pattern also bringing confidence in their further professional path. It is to be admitted that not all instrumentalists are having a right feeling for performing contemporary music, or other different musical styles, depending on each performer, but studies period is mostly devised towards experiencing, learning and discovering.

A relevant mission of a performer consists in discovering music, mostly good music, of its times, as well. And this experience would be better if it started earlier in the studies period. Below there is a reasonable list of argumentation for approaching contemporary music from the earliest age of study:

- Prevalence of *Rhythm* within the musical expression as rhythm and meter are more explored in 20th Century. A very strong progress has been made, a big step forward in the rhythm, poly-rhythm and poly-meter structures. Getting a strong rhythmical sense is a solid performing tool for an ambitious performer.

- *Polyphony* and consequently the *Melody* line- in different layers as parallelism of different melodic lines. Mostly the first is strongly represented.

- The issue of the larger scale of the *musical form*. Almost every piece has its own form based on the principle of continuous variation and development according to its own message. Old structures may be found now within smaller sections of the big form as well.

- A wide range of technical means. Musical periods look back to the past getting inspired from it. In this respect contemporary creators have got a wider range to get inspired from. Therefore, technical and also musical demands for contemporary music are always notable. In this respect we are direct descendants of *Bartok*, *Prokofiev* or *Ravel* but also other musical styles starting with baroque époque.

Approaching recent music may embody a challenge but spotting new and notably good scores is distinctly a worthy rewarding professional enterprise. In this context I am content to hereby acknowledge and attempt to reveal some of the main aspects of the piano solo piece *Ketting* by, the Dutch composer, *Jo Sporck*.

2. Introducing *Jo Sporck*, some of his concerns and work.

Jo Sporck was born in 1953 and lives in *Tilburg, Nederland*. He was enrolled as a student in chemistry whilst left his current studies in the favour of the music and he graduated as a pianist soloist.

The emblematic 20th Century composer *Witold Lutoslawski* describes *Jo Sporck*'s music as '*an extremely exciting world*' (according to the famous publication *The Strad*; please visit: <http://www.sporck.nl/biografie-eng.html>) while the large inspiration expressed in an sumptuous range of compositions, catalogued on the composer's website: <http://www.sporck.nl/index-eng.html>, recommends him as a highly inspired musician plenary dedicated.

With roots within Schoenberg's musical system, Jo Sporck's has created his own well-articulated and self-standing, wholly suited to plastically express his deep musical inspiration and thoughts. His starting approach could be considered as an alternative for the Schönberg-solution as a need for breaking out of completely explored tonality: he share Schoenberg's need to expand the language of tonal music but not his solution

Its composing system's congruity and unity constantly applies throughout all his work resulting in a very personal characteristic language described by the prestigious UK, founded in 1889, musical magazine *The Strad* as '*discordant yet divine*'. In this respect the composer's musical language stands aside from the new accustomed tendencies which lookup only towards an apparent individual and absolute novelty and originality. Jo Sporck asserts that in deeper this phenomenon splashes actually thinks that new music has mostly lost his roots. He notices a lack of a main way in music composition: shortly after A. Schoenberg, about 100 years ago, brought to the world his completely new musical system and theory it has been actually quitted. Unfortunately, no more concerns, continuation or evolvement of it and no other personality has replaced that with anything else of the same distinction further. Jo Sporck considers that *in the absence of a main road some other multiple derived sideways cannot properly occur*. In this respect he stands apart from the general tendency by identifying as well *a lack of necessity of the many of actual trends which do not seem to be the result of a real honest urge of the musical expression*'. The Dutch composer wonders *if the actual rush of leaving a relevant new atonal musical system, which did not reach or achieve its vast limits, may be a real concern and honest artistry need*. In this context he doubts about the meaning and actuality of the vertical line, respectively the harmony dimension, and of the dissonance degrees further. He concerns about ***the lost degrees or expression of the dissonances in the context of an assumed absence of the harmony dimensions***. *J.Sporck points out that tonality provides structure in music and giving up to it implies as well the need of finding new strong structures in music (eventually able to successfully replace it)*.

3. A few aesthetics, formal and performing concerns over *Ketting*

a) Overlook.

In spite of the meaning of the title, *ketting* = *chain*, the piece is out of the category of programme music as its composer grants.

Composed in 2000 the piece got its title after being accomplished. Its creator reveals that *ketting* is projected as a symbol less related to an object. In this respect he suggests one may think to the chained hands of its performer, in the way that in this piece the two hands are moving always together on the surface of the keyboard.

But also to the vivid chains that DNA molecules form within their chemical reactions.

Ketting witnesses that during of an ideal duration of 9'10'' (as one may discover referred to on the composer's website) the interest of experiencing and listening to contemporary music is definitely recoverable. Among other features of the *Ketting* its sound way is one of its main engaging ingredients. Nevertheless rhythmical and melodic lines braided in elaborated polyphony or polyrhythmic structures release an unexpected ultimate fresh improvisational feeling.

Another characteristic feature is a noticeable cohesion supported by a number of generating motifs spread in three meaningful sections: 1. Introduction bars 1- 29; 2. Main (middle) section as a development (represented by five constitutional sub-sections described below), bars 30- 149; 3. Coda, bars.

Each section has a climax usually followed by a descending part, usually leading to the next section.

Each section is defined by long musical phrases. In this respect *Ketting* seems to recalling the large architecture of Brahms musical phrases which constitutes as well one of the considerable provocations of this piece: searching for a good balance of the 'read thread' whilst well defining the small inner structures of the big units.

b) Exploring analyse and performing elements.

b1 - The *Introduction*: is founded on an improvisatory character and on the use of harmonic and polyphonic elements

The harmonic dimension is significant for this section, by being regarded as a main feature. Therefore, a performer is expected to distinctively stress out the fifths in the low register. The first fifth appears in the 3rd bar (ex.1) and they can be noticed all along the piece in significant points of it such as bordering relevant sections. The fifths in the left hand, and later on their reverse – the fourth can be noticed, *are relevant to the character of the piece*- reveals the composer.

ex. 1

Ketting 1
voor piano-solo

Jo Sporek

$\text{♩} = 100$

pp *sfz* *f con forza*

Ped. Ped. Ped.

Another appropriate imperative refers to retaining a good balance between freedom of expression and a right flow of the musical discourse to be well pursued. Lastly the succession of fast and slow rhythmical values needs to be treated as a single vast unit.

b2 - Main section: The development, divided in five episodes:

b2.1 - *con motto-legatissimo*, (bars 30-80): the polyphony on two voices takes an important role. The two-voice's activity goes through broken melodic lines combining contrary and corresponding tracks while hands are always following a parallel course. The **fifths** with their reverse, the **fourths**, are now articulated under melodic spread and sequential, therefore, expressivity.

ex.2.(bar 32)

The consequent movement of eights imprint an assertive feeling of restless inner reflection. It starts in *piano*, but after two bars it lowers its dynamic level to *pianissimo* and reaches its climax at bar 59. *Poco a poco diminuendo* (bars 76-79) on a prevalent descending line anticipates the entry of the next episode.

b2.2 – *leggiero (piano)*; (bars 80-93): brings forth new melodic elements which increase the restlessness up, in spite of a character of intrinsic immutability expressed in a low dynamic frame. The new character quite abruptly replaces the previous meditative humankind one. Polyphony is still taking an important role, this time by adding a good deal of tension to the musical discourse.

The rhythmical divisions are now diminished to ternary associations setting up some emotionless innervation.

ex.3

A performer may find here a special predicament while aiming to define the two voices distributed more towards the inferior register of the piano and required in a low dynamic level. In this respect approaching the two voices in two different technical manners may be of a good support: a more *legato espressivo* allocated one to a voice while the other could be approached in a more detached way. Upper voice should decidedly be the leading voice.

A continuous and gradual accumulation occurs towards its highest tensed stage- bar 92. Shortly, an abrupt descent prepares the entrance of a new episode.

b2.3 - the presence of the initial fundamental **fifth** is manifestly marking the third episode (bars 94-112). Without bringing a real novelty this episode increases the tension of the previous section's elements. The conflict between the two voices which seem to follow each other in a permanent argumentation is now increased.

This time the culminant point is reached after a longer and more meandering way at bar 110, marked by a **forte**. This dynamic is shortly prepared by a short *crescendo* and it persists for just one bar! At this point the composer recommends that bar 111 still holds the tension and the *diminuendo* should not occur too soon- on the contrary! Also, it is recommended to opening this section in a lower dynamic level than the previous.

b2.4 - the forth episode of the middle section (bars 112- 133) embodies the main climax of the piece. It is placed in the *golden section*. The debut is clearly marked reiteratively with a percussive anew fifth. The section is build up on a regular and insistent presence of **fifths** labelling the debut of each bar. A percussive touch persists as a main characteristic of the **fifths** helping to build up the escalating tension towards the apogee.

The debut (*mezzo-piano- see ex.3*), brings at its turn a contrast with the previous episode. In opposition to the dynamic plane, the energy and the tension of the inner musical discourse raises at the same time.

Ex. 4

The section exhibits a second further development of the previous two segment's musical material, topping off all accumulated tension at the **fundamental climax** which occurs at the **golden cut** (bar 122). A dense texture of melodic and harmonic intervals of **fifths**, their revers and other related intervals is now present. Stressing them out accordingly helps to bring out an appropriate expression of unleashing musical tension of this relevant stage of the piece.

Its descending anxious restless line leads to the debut of a new and last episode of the development.

b2.5 - the last sector of the **development** (bars 133-149) brings forth once more a new contrasting and final character. It comprises a tensed concluding essence.

It's reviewing commenting character comprises reminiscent elements of the development.

Back to a low dynamic contour (*mezzo piano*- noted at bar 135) anticipated by a sudden *decrescendo* (occurring on the last beat of the previous episode), the characteristic anxiety of the development is thus well guarded and completed by a generic descending line towards the lowest register of the piano. Approaching the debut in **piano** would help to increase the perception of a new section's debut.

ex. 5

A repetitive motif in the left hand (perpetuated at every two beats) seems to have an influential role by upholding on a steadier level the unrestful feeling displayed by the broken rhythm and broken melodic line. The rhetoric of the left hand is at this time descending to a new lower register of the piano.

After escalating towards a higher point, the musical discourse moves further to another lower level of the piano registers. The composer's suggestion for this juncture indicates to not substantially diminish the dynamic level so as the tension may still last straightforward.

b3. The Coda – (bars 150- 187) embodies two distinctive sections:

b3.1- adagio, desolato is marking an elaborated **transitional** area -- extended over 14 bars towards the legitimate section of **coda** (bars 150 -172). It drops down further towards a more inferior register and dynamic whilst it gets to a twice larger agogic (the beat is indicated on the metronome index of **48** instead of

100, as it was marked in the debut of the piece). The rhythmical values are also augmented accordingly to the different new character.

These elements altogether attempt a welcome but quite sudden feeling of relief and calm undisturbed contemplation. A rather unexpected contrasting and thus effective introspective, pensive frame of mind replaces the precedent nervousness and anxiousness.

ex. 6

148

Bordered, as all relevant previous sections, by a new **fifth** which covers almost the whole length of the bar 150 (ex 6). Next four bars are perpetuating the same circumstance hold by the left hand in the very low register of the piano. Its likely bell sound effect is opportunely attenuated by the use of left pedal. A better moment for placing the left pedal in this debut of the section is the second bar (respectively bar 151) according to **Jelena Bazova** an accomplished contemporary music performer. This way first appearance of a new character of the **fifth** will be highly noticeable and thoroughly announcing the **coda**'s new character.

The long phrasing peculiarity of the musical discourse is now replaced with shorter but fully effective motifs which are distinctively separated by breaks of different length or longer rhythmical durations.

A particular presence of harmonic **thirds** completes the landscape of (harmonic and melodic) **fourths** and **fifths** furrowing the whole section. They are adding up expressiveness to the 'vacuous' resonance of the **bare fifths**. In this context they gain a relatively equivalent revelatory value with the intervals of **fifths**.

This section reveals an absolute quiet frame of mind. There is no more rushing even for the smaller rhythmic subdivisions which permit a moistest performing expressiveness.

b3.2 – Coda - de facto (bars 172- 187) stands as only section opening in a more robust dynamic: (a corresponding) **forte**. But more unpredicted and unconventional elements are granted further: a fermata surprisingly placed on the second beat of the first two bars; an unprecedented presence of **triads** assembled from intervals of **fifths** and **thirds** to which are intervals of **fourth** overlapped – as a quintessence of the peculiar texture of the piece.

ex. 7



It pursues the same familiar sinusoidal trajectory generically accomplished within each significant section revealed above. A particular exception is represented by an early short going up side early compensated by a long gradual descending towards the last two (repetitive) notes placed in the lowest register.

In order to help the upholding of the tension stretched over the long progressive fall a performer should be aware of not lowering the dynamic too early. De facto a first **pp** emerges in the bar 182 anticipated by just one beat **decrescendo** (marked in the score). Starting with bar 185 **una corda pedal** is a desirable support in order to get a most appropriate sound and expression.

A last reference: starting with bar 175 the **ternary** arrangement of the **thirty-second** notes to be strongly stressed out. First of the each three notes groups should not be spared even though the score does not particularly point them

4. A few conclusive remarks.

The discourse in each section moves gradually and meandering according to a characteristic sinusoid trajectory peculiar for the inner architecture of Ketting.

One may notice most of the sections are moving up towards a climax positioned in a higher register followed by a descending curved lined. Consequently, each of the intermediate climaxes builds up towards the main one occurring at bar 122. The earlier a performer gets aware of the sinusoids of each musical period the more rewarding can be an earlier determining of consequent plentiful amount of other relevant aspects. This mapping way of this rather complicated piece may help one to stay away from a certain feeling of (perhaps) getting lost amid the shrubby musical text. A good orientation in the musical score is certainly always welcome.

Of a special importance are the accents and other musical signs. They are supposed to be imprinted with a special stress as in the majority of cases they mark the alternance of binary or ternary metrical groups. Binary and ternary grouping are of a special significance for they bear one of the main representative expressive characters of the piece.

5. Acknowledgment

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6. References

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*A copy of the score and a recording of the **Ketting** are provided to the library of the Faculty of Music of Transylvania University, Brasov.