

***Study for the Left Hand* by Béla Bartók**

Corina IBĂNESCU¹

Abstract: *The complexity of the artistic personality of the musician Béla Bartók also includes his works for the piano, he himself being a master of the keyboard, who, in his capacity as a composer, was concerned with enriching the piano art with new technical and aesthetic means. The "Study for the Left Hand" was originally intended as the first movement of a piece entitled "Sonata", but Bartók did not continue to compose the other parts. The initial idea grounds the construction of the work on the three dominant sections of this strict form. The tonality of the secondary theme is F major and the structure is that of a simple tripartite lied, consisting of three periods. Each period consists of two symmetrical phrases. The F sound of the bass, on which rests the cadential chord of the exposition passing into the soprano opens the second large section of the sonata, the development. The first part of it elaborates the expressive theme of the bridge. The secondary theme appears at the end of the development, having a more prominent romantic profile. The concluding theme draws soaring arcs and the Coda brings the main theme descending for the first time, ending the work with a final declamation of the main motif, which travels triumphantly through the registers of the keyboard.*

Key-words: *study, Left Hand, piano, analysis, Béla Bartók*

1. Introduction

A leading representative of the music of the 20th century, Béla Bartók is known for his creation that covers an overwhelming diversity of genres, starting from the instrumental miniature, passing through the genre of chamber and concert music and reaching the amplitude of symphonic vocal sonorities and of opera. However, the memory of the pianist B. Bartók remains remarkable, preserved in the consciousness of those who had the privilege of being his listeners. Today's virtuosos, starting from the analysis of his works for the piano, would be very surprised by the audio testimonies of Bartók's interpretations, which prove the foundation of his piano school on the principles of sound quality which, even within

¹ PhD, Transilvania University of Braşov, i_corina@unitbv.ro

his own creations, he never let it be rough. Far from being a percussionist pianist, Béla Bartók, who “became a piano teacher at the Academy of Music in Budapest (he never taught composition) ...” (Schonberg 2000, 554), appears as a keyboard master.

2. Study for the Left Hand

The study for the left hand published in 1903 at Musica Publishing House in Budapest was performed by B. Bartók in the first audition the same year, on December 14, with his debut in the Bechstein Hall in Berlin, in the presence of valuable pianists such as Leopold Godowsky and Ferruccio Busoni. The composer himself was very proud of his work, writing to his mother that he had successfully performed one of his new compositions, a sonata part for the left hand that actually sounds as if it were played by three hands. It is known that the brilliant composer was also an amazing pianist. Perhaps that is precisely why “all his life, Bartók leaned sometimes to one side, sometimes to another...” (Schonberg 2000, 551), being concerned as a composer-pianist with the enrichment of piano art with new technical and aesthetic means.

3. Analysis of the Study for the Left Hand

The work was originally conceived as the first movement of a piano piece, dedicated to his teacher, István Thomán, “...disciple of Liszt” (Larousse 200, 38) with the title “Sonata”, but Bartók no longer continued the composition the other parties. The initial idea, that the piece constitute the Allegro of a sonata, grounds the construction of the work on the three dominant sections of this strict form: exposition, development and reprise. The clarity of the main theme is noticeable right from the start, exposed by the impetuosity of the arpeggios and ascending melodic lines that start from the tonic of the basic tonality, B flat major, towards the dominant chord (Figure 1).

The image shows the first seven measures of the 'Study for the Left Hand' by Béla Bartók. The music is written for piano in 3/4 time. The right hand features a complex, rhythmic melody with frequent triplets and a descending line. The left hand provides a steady accompaniment of eighth notes. The tempo is marked 'Allegro' and the dynamics range from 'ff' to 'p'. The piece concludes with a 'ritard.' marking.

Fig. 1. B. Bartók – „Study for the Left Hand”, bars 1-7 crown

The first phase of the bridge presents a theme of its own that delicately insinuates itself in a descending line that is attracted by the pedal of the F major key (Figure 2).

The image shows the eighth and ninth measures of the 'Study for the Left Hand' by Béla Bartók. The eighth measure shows the beginning of a new phase with a descending line in the right hand and a steady accompaniment in the left hand. The ninth measure continues this theme with a descending line in the right hand and a steady accompaniment in the left hand. The dynamics are marked 'p'.

Fig. 2. B. Bartók – Study for the Left Hand, bar 8 with auftakt, and 9

Immediately follows the sequencing that brings one by one the chords of D flat major and B flat minor so that then the cadence to B flat major leads to the transition to the second phase of the bridge. This begins in measure 17, recalling

the main theme based on ascending arpeggios. The theme is sequenced passing successively through G major, G minor, C minor, D flat major, C flat major, B double flat major. Measure 30 marks the moment of the third phase of the bridge, the one in which the function of the dominant prepares the appearance of the secondary theme. The simplicity and serene character of the melody emerges from the gradual progress of the intervals, from the sequence of equal durations, from the complementarity of the accompanying rhythm and, last but not least, from the almost perfect symmetry of the phrases (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. B. Bartók – “Study for the Left Hand”, bar 33 with auftakt, and 34-41

The tonality of the secondary theme is F major, and the structure is that of a simple tripartite lied consisting of three periods: two of them, tonally open, and the third, closed, returns to F major. Each period consists of two symmetrical phrases. The first sets forth the theme in a simple language accompanied by an even pulsation in a slightly syncopated rhythm. The A flat major cadence energizes the song, launching it into a spirited climb. The second phase of the second period brings an element of grace through the slightly dancing step of the descending melodic line, at the same time preparing the return of the theme through the third period (Figure 4).

Fig. 4. B. Bartók – „Study for the Left Hand”, bars 45-50

The reprise of the small tripartite lied appears to us in the form of a structure in three beats: beat 1 - presentation of the motif, beat 2 - repetition of the motif, beat 3 - expansion of the motif. The thematic material is divided and sequenced during the thematic expansion, and the accompaniment is dynamized by the use of rhythmic triplets, by the octave doubling of the bass sounds, by the ample arpeggiation of the harmonic covering of the long sounds, by amplifying the sonority of the melodic line with the help of chords (Figure 5).

Fig. 5. B. Bartók – „Study for the Left Hand”, bars 51-58

The exposition ends with a conclusion that recalls the main theme with its upward and forward profile. The F sound of the bass, on which rests the cadential chord of the exposition passing into the soprano opens the second large section of the sonata, the development. Its first part, starting in the key of A minor, elaborates the expressive theme of the bridge. After sequences that use meaningful sub-motives, passing through G major and F major, an ample passage of octaves leads to the second part of the development, the one in which the thematic elements of the main theme are heard in dialogue. On the tonal level, F sharp major and E major are imposed until the moment of the appearance of a small episode that outlines for a short time a nostalgic theme (Figure 6).

The image displays a musical score for Figure 6, consisting of three systems of music. The top system shows a violin part with a melodic line and a piano accompaniment. The middle system shows a piano part with a complex harmonic texture, including a 'dim.' (diminuendo) marking and a 'ppp' (pianissimo) marking. The bottom system continues the piano part with similar harmonic complexity. The score is numbered 65 at the end of the second system.

Fig. 6. B. Bartók – „Study for the Left Hand”, bars 92-96

The secondary theme appears at the end of the development but has a more prominent romantic profile. The last phase of the section achieves modulation through bold harmonic shifts. The half begins impetuously with the *Maestoso* indication in bar 121 (Figure 7).

The image displays a musical score for Figure 7, consisting of two systems of music. The top system shows a violin part with a melodic line and a piano accompaniment. The bottom system shows a piano part with a complex harmonic texture, including a 'Maestoso' marking and a 'ff' (fortissimo) marking. The score is numbered 121 at the beginning of the first system and 123 at the end of the second system.

Fig. 7. B. Bartók – Study for the Left Hand, bars 121-123

The main theme now appears in better relief with the octave doubling of the bass. The bridge theme is missing, the modulatory function being fulfilled by the thematic expansion of the main theme. The secondary theme appears in bar 137 after a small *ritenuto*. The accompaniment of the melodic line belongs to the bridge; now it puts on and emphasizes more particularly the “*espressivo e legato*” character of the theme, as appears in the indication that the composer cares to note in that place. The simple tripartite structure is strictly adhered to as the reprise draws to a close. The theme of the conclusion draws sweeping arcs, the sequences agglomerate towards the trill that suspends the arc of the dominant. The coda brings the main theme in descending motion for the first time, ending the work with a final declamation of the main motif, which traverses triumphantly the registers of the keyboard (Figure 8).



Fig. 8. B. Bartók – „Study for the Left Hand“, bars 182-185

4. Conclusions

The style of the study is impregnated with the late romanticism of the music of Franz Liszt, Richard Strauss and Sergei Rachmaninoff, combining very interesting and difficult technical problems with the need for tonal accuracy that places the work very far from what we are used to associate with Bartók's name. The composer who confessed that ...“I cannot compose music that expresses absolutely nothing” (Bălan 1975, 408), conquers the performers and the audience through the intensity and depth of the artistic images expressed in this work. The clear structure of the piece allows Bartók “a virtuoso pianist himself...” (Machlis 1991, 290), to give rise to a demonstration of pianistic bravura full of force and brilliance that has certainly enriched the modern piano concert repertoire.

References

- Bălan, George. 1975. *O istorie a Muzicii Europene* [A History of European Music]
București: Editura Albatros [UNTB Publ.]
- Larousse. 2000. *Dicționar de mari muzicieni* [Dictionary of Great Musicians].
București: Ed. Univers Enciclopedic [UNTB Publ.]
- Machlis, Joseph. 1991. *The Enjoyment of Music*, Sixth Edition Shorter. New York:
W.W.Norton & Company
- Schonberg, Harold C. 2000. *Viețile marilor compozitori* [Lives of Great Composers].
București: Editura Lider, [UNTB Publ.]

(English version by Gilda Cristina Ilieș)