

Elements of modal writing in the *Piano Sonatina* by Peter Vermesy

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Abstract: *This article constitutes a study of the Romanian modern musical language of the 2nd half of the XXth century, as shown in the Piano Sonatina by Péter Vermesy. In the discourse with an obvious modal fragrance, the composer synthesizes the stylistic elements and composition techniques that have revolutionized modern European music, starting with Stravinski and reaching to Bartok with his original harmonic „signature”: the axial system. In our approach we follow precisely those distinct components and structures in the profile of the tone-modal discourse as they unfold in a miniature work belonging to an instrumental genre flourishing in the consciousness of great classics and reevaluated after two centuries. Thus we discover a classical expression vested in the surprising and original light of the new harmonic conceptions, in a tone-modal blend of Romanian soul.*

Key-words: *sonatina, axial system, modalism, bitonalism.*

1. Introduction

The Romanian musical scenery of the XXth century shows a masterly combination of folk substances and substrates, both in the ample forms and in the miniature, bringing a new spirit to classical genres (creative models already at the top of their development in the works of European composers of the previous centuries) through assimilating new tendencies with a strong experimental character, promoted by the „international” contemporaries.

Music changes its gravity centre, the tonal leaving room to the modal:

“In music, the term *mode* means structure. More specifically, that of a sound scale structure. Structures are live elements reach in meanings, varied, inexhaustible as resources. Live, as in them the language of peoples is synthesized; rich, because by using them, people have expressed their ideas and feelings; varied, since all cultures have formed and developed throughout the ages their own particular structures. They proved to be inexhaustible, transmitted through the ages until today, being always retrieved, selected and varied, extended even to the complexity of systems.” (Berger 1979, 8).

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The result is a unique music. The interior “mechanisms” contouring the modal musical language “weave” sound systems both in melodic-horizontally and harmonic-vertically, leaving the symmetry of the tonal-functional system and thus bringing new profiles of the sound discourse and new original and surprising solutions for harmonization and cadence. And this is evident in the Piano Sonatina of the composer Péter Vermesy (1939-1989) from Brasov, a disciple of Sigismund Toduta and Jodal Gabor.

2. The modern musical language in the Piano Sonatina by Péter Vermesy

Composed in 1975, this tripartite sonatina reveals a musical language framed within bimodal and multimodal, a careful and thorough research revealing the composer’s preference to use Bartok’s axial system in creating the unique harmonic support on which the melodic level evolves, an essentially modal one. Mixing the fibonnacian series, the major-minor chord characteristic to Bartok’s work and the axial system theorized by Lendvai (adopted by Bartok, Messiaen, Stravinski, Enescu) we distinguish in Vermesy’s piano sonatina a complex nongravitational/axial/geometric system found in a strong contrast with the gravitational system based on the axis Subdominant-Tonic-Dominant.

Focusing initially on the **harmonic frame** of the work, we notice from the very beginning of the sonatina that obstinate harmonic pedal attributed to the left hand – a method on the border between harmony and polyphony – suggesting a tone-modal centre of Reb (sc. I-V), which generates an obvious bitonalism by superimposing the melodic line built on a pentachord centred on G (according to the axix of dominants DO#-SOL in Bartok’s geometric system, considering the tone-modal centre of Reb enharmonic with C#). (Figure 1)



Fig. 1. Péter Vermesy – Piano Sonatina, p. I, measures 1-7

On this pedal deployed along the 26 measures, other tonal centres are also involved, as for example H-F# (meas. 15-18), or simply the A sound (meas. 19-23), which together delimit a pentatonic IV on the sounds H-D#-E-F#-A with a cadence on the H sound. (Figure 2)

Fig. 2. Péter Vermesy – *Piano Sonatina, p. I, measures 15-27*

Particularly interesting to note are measures 38-39, clearly revealing to us the C-F# tonic in the same geometric system (nongravitational) to which also belongs the C-G# dominant, axis on which lies the melodic discourse of the first 14 measures of this sonatina part, as well as the Amol-D subdominant axis (measure 57). (Figure 3)

Fig. 3. Péter Vermesy – *Piano Sonatina, p. I, measures 38-39; measure 57*

We also notice the unmistakable presence of chord α , that unique „signature” of Bartok identified by Lendvai, on which his entire chromatic universe is set (Lendvai 1971, 35): the chord of diminished octave resulting by superimposing the diminished 7-th chord formed by the two axis of the tonics C-Emol-F#-A – superior layer – with the diminished chord of the dominant axis C#-E-G-B – inferior layer (the enharmonies being allowed), arranged by Vermesy on the main stroke of measures 52, 54-56 (Figure 4), respectively 69.

Fig. 4. Péter Vermesy – *Piano Sonatina, p. I, chord α – measures 52-56*

Also on the harmonic level, we find the presence of modal chord structures of impure quarts as we encounter in measure 92 (Figure 5), with an added 2-nd (meas. 70, 72-74), of enlarged octave with an added 2-nd (meas. 73-74), or the cluster with enlarged octave in measure 75. (Figure 6)



Fig. 5. Péter Vermesy – *Piano Sonatina, p. I, modal chord structures – meas. 92*



Fig. 6. Péter Vermesy – *Piano Sonatina, p. I, measures 70-75*

On the **melodic level**, the composer resorts to pentachordic and pentatonic scales (Figure 1 and Figure 2), which he prefers in the construction of the melodic line with a specific theme, whose ambitus does not exceed this predetermined span and which the composer presents in the light of different modal ethoses by means of transposition and imitation, means specific to the polyphonic approach.

The only constructions that go beyond the pentatonic frame with which we are familiar in this part of the sonatina are the Messiaen 1 mode (the scale in tones) which goes beyond the heptachordic ambitus in measures 45-47 and the aeolian in measures 50-51. (Figure 7)

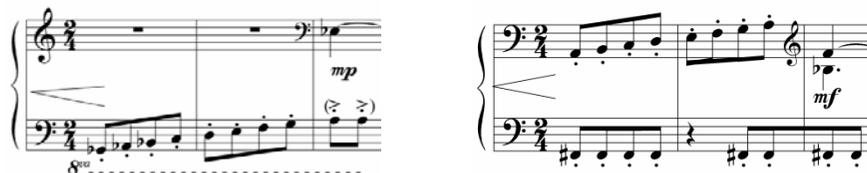


Fig. 7. Péter Vermesy – *Piano Sonatina, p. I, measures 45-47; measures 50-51*

This first part of the sonatina – also constructed monothematically, on the principle of imitation, the theme being taken up mainly in its pure state, without significant processing – reveals a fairly symmetrical construction, if we follow the arrangement

of the obstinate melodic pedal accompanying the theme. Thus, we can delineate three sections:

- A – 28 measures (with two periods of 14 measures each)
- B – 32 measures
- A – 32 measures

Particularly interesting, the second part of the sonatina proves to be multimodal, clearly distinguishing four superimposed levels, Soprano-Alto-Tenor-Bass, each of these being the carrier of a modal centre or a melodic pedal. Even more interesting to observe is the fact that this part of the sonatina reveals a symmetrical arrangement of the musical material. Thus, the first thing we notice is the A-B-A tripartite lied form, where the short B middle section is enclosed by A. On the other hand, studying more closely the return of A, we see in a comparative look, the inverted arrangement of the plans presented in the first section: the plans Soprano-Alto in A become the plans Tenor-Bass in A1, and Tenor-Bass in A become Soprano-Alto in A1. (Table 1)

A		A1
S – pedal on Fmol	↘	➤ S – pedal on Fflat
A – tetratonia A mol-B-C-Emol	↗	➤ A – tetratonia F#- A -H-C#
T – pedal on Fflat	↘	➤ T – pedal on Fmol
B – tetratonia F#- A -H-C#	↗	➤ B – tetratonia A -B-C-Emol

Table 1. *Péter Vermesy – Piano Sonatina, p. II scheme*

In the middle section (B) we notice a pedal on the bichord D-G accompanying, along measures 13-20 of this part of the sonatina, a melody set on a tone-modal centre of D# within an aeolian with phrygian highlights conferred by the second mobile step (measures 13-27). Moreover, we find the presence of the G-C# dominant axis arranged by the composer between the Soprano-Alto levels with which the middle section of this part begins.

Continuing to refer to the axial system, we are shown in measures 21-22 the composer’s „play” with elements of the tonic and dominant axis. (Figure 8)



Fig. 8. *Péter Vermesy – Piano Sonatina, p. II, measures 21-22*

Thus, considering the sound D# the enharmonic of Emol, we get three elements of the tonic axis – A-C-Emol – superimposed over G in the dominant axis, a method also repeated by the composer at the end of this part, where this time it overlaps the elements C-F#-A in the tonic axis, with F in the subdominant axis. Here, then, two strong oppositions represented by the tonic axis A-Emol and the axis C-F#. (Figure 9)



Fig. 9 . Péter Vermesy – *Piano Sonata, p. II, measures 43-47*

In terms of structuring the four plans, we find the canon type imitative arrangement of the musical material, being able to materialize schematically both the first 5 measures of the second part, as well as measures 30-34 marking the return of section A as follows (Figure 10):

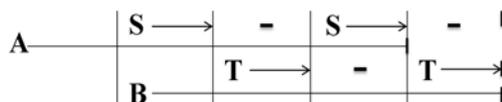


Fig. 10. Péter Vermesy – *Piano Sonata, p. II, scheme of measures 1-5, 30-34*

In the same manner, the third part is constructed also in the form of a tripartite lied, the pianist being greeted by a melodic pedal outlining the tetratonia A-H-C#-E with the centre on A, overlapped by another modal centre prefigured by the melodic line deployed within a pentachord with a cadence on C# (meas. 1-15), which the composer sets in the return of section A in the grave register, at a distance of two octaves to the first section. Here again the composer's preference for bimodalism.

But what draws our attention again specifically is the author's attraction for the axial system, integrating in the melodic discourse the dominant axis G-C# (meas. 27-28) as well as the tonic axis C-F# (measures 32-36). (Figure 11)



Fig. 11. Péter Vermesy – *Piano Sonata, p. III, measures 27-28; measures 32-36*

A strong modal character is also conferred to this part by the symmetrical disjoint scales that go beyond the octave frame, as we encounter in measures 47-50, a closer analysis of the sequence of tones and semitones revealing the following layout: T-T-T-St-T-T-T-St (Figure 12)

isorhythmias sustained by constructions of quints, quarters, chords with added sounds, placing these surprising sonorities in the shocking palette with multiple degrees of *forte*. Thus, Vermesy's Sonatina meets explorations in the timbral field of an intense concern for Iancu Dumitrescu who considered it the „essential parameter” of music and „the ideal environment for Orphic sounds”. (Sandu-Dediu 2002, 201)

The composer's inventiveness and ability to „juggle” with the pianist' and listeners' imagination make of this small-sized a „hardwood” of sonorities with an intense modern fragrance reminiscent of Prokofiev and his *Sarcasms* op. 17.

And we may not be wrong in expanding the meaning of the famous characterization of the Sonatina in f# minor by Maurice Ravel (although having reverberations in another temporal and stylistic sphere), which Alfred Cortot „voiced” with such naturalness, onto the work signed by Vermesy, admitting that it also “offers, in its deliberately abridged form, the example of a perfect construction, having all the details on the scale of the title, both the themes and the developments, the nature of the feeling and the character of the writing” (Cortot 1966, 181).

4. References

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