

ROMANIAN PIANO MINIATURE IN THE MODERN PERIOD OF ITS ASSERTION

Roxana PEPELEA¹

Abstract: *The miniature piano creation of the 2nd-5th decades is deeply marked by the European tendency of neofolklorism. However, it is not the unique creative direction to have been approached; being joined by other elements, of a classical nature. That period's representatives dwelled, more or less, upon the popular-music sources, going through the well-known stages: quotation enhancement by harmonization (Drăgoi), creation in a popular style (Constantinescu, Negrea), allusion to the popular intonations (Jora, Lazăr) or even parting from folklore and closeness to other sources (Jora, Negrea, Lazăr).*

Key words: *folklore, piano miniature, interwar period, modal language.*

1. Introduction

In the twentieth century's first twenty years, the composers' preoccupations targeted the enhancement of the autochthonous sources, especially in the choral creations and in the rhapsodic symphonism. The first works announcing the extension of the folkloric movement over the other musical genres, fall under our century's early third decade.

The demonstration of the viability inherent to a national art was sometimes shadowed by universalistic preoccupations, such as Castaldi school. *The folkloric academism* – as called by Zeno Vancea [7] – this stance, asserted ever since Romanticism, within the Romanian national school – had been quartered before 1920 in compromise solutions, which could not solve the conflict between the academic forms and a content unfit to these forms. Instead, as ideological attitude, it had acquired a conscience of its

limits, at which point the edification of the Romanian creation on folkloric bases will be adequately approached.

2. Historical-stylistic premises

The first works announcing the extension of the folkloric movement over all musical genres were related to the activity of the composers who acted in the country's great cultural centres (Bucharest, Cluj, Iaşi, Timișoara) who had studied abroad (the Conservatories in Leipzig, Prague, Milan, Paris etc.). In this way, as claimed by the musicologist Vasile Tomescu, "the genre of the short piano pieces had entered, at the time, the modern stage of assertion, starting from the enhancement of the specific rhythmical-melodic sources.

There had been issued, at Moravetz Publishing House – Timișoara, *Opt miniaturi pentru pian [Eight Piano Miniatures]* (1924) and *21 Cântece populare pentru pian [21 Popular Songs]*

¹ Dept. of Musical Pedagogy, *Transilvania* University of Braşov, Romania.

for Piano] (1923) by Sabin Drăgoi, wherein the composer, following the principles traced by Bartók in *Dansuri populare româneşti pentru pian* [Romanian Popular Dances for Piano] and *Colinde româneşti pentru pian* [Romanian Carols for Piano] (both in 1915), innovated the language of this genre, in relation to the salon style, which was connected to the urban-folklore intonations. In a very close line, there followed [...] *Piese minuscule pentru copii* [Minuscule Pieces for Children] (1929) by Filip Lazăr. The enlargement of this frame, with elements originating in Impressionism and Post-Romanticism, is visible in *Impresii de la ţară, op. 7* [Impressions from the Countryside, op. 7] (1921) by Marţian Negrea and in the suite *Joujoux pour Ma Dame, op. 7*, by Mihail Jora (1925)". [5] They are the starting point towards the *Patru fabule pentru pian* [Four Fables for Piano] (1929-1932) by Paul Constantinescu and, later on, towards the 1st Notebook of *Poze şi pozne* [Attitudes and Pranks], op.25 (1948) by Mihail Jora. The end of this period is marked by the *Trei piese pentru pian* [Three Piano Pieces] (1952) – *Joc, Cântec, Joc dobrogean (Toccata)* [Dance, Song, Dobroudja Dance] – by Paul Constantinescu.

Yet, there are precursors of the piano miniature creation. We particularly refer to the series of composers who arranged, for this instrument, popular dances in the stylized form of *hora* (round dance) [traditional Romanian folk dance, where the dancers hold each other's hands and the circle spins, usually counterclockwise, as each participant follows a sequence of three steps forward and one step back.]. Such arrangements were particularly enhanced in Iacob Mureşianu's creation, being further developed by his students, Tiberiu Brediceanu and Guilelm Şorban. These types of processing are salient

through the popular intonations, specifically imprinting the melody; yet, they do not succeed in creating a new harmonic language, stemmed from the modal specificity of the popular melody – this task will only be solved by the composers of the following generation. A touch of originality in dealing with the popular element is, nevertheless, brought by Ion Scărlătescu, a composer with preoccupations in the modal harmony; his piano round dances originate in folkloric modes – Lydian, mixo-Lydian, Aeolian etc.

3. Romanian miniature piano creation (1920-1950)

The traditional problem of the conciliation between universal and national, between tonal and modal, between the vertical-harmonic stance and the horizontal-melodic one, finds authentic artistic solutions in the miniature creation of that period (1920-1950). It is the time when – as claimed by the musicologist Clemansa Liliana Firca – “a complex of modernity, with specific features, forges its way [...] in the Romanian music”. [2]

Each outstanding composer of that time had already defined his own scoring system – transpiring in the miniature creation, too – with clear-cut distinctions among their techniques and also with similarities – obvious coincidences, in terms of working method. Thus, although the common starting point in their creative process was the source represented by popular music, the subsequent evolution of their artistic personality led to the individualisation of their distinct expressive means. Preferentially oriented to a modern modal vision, they unveil their belonging to the contemporary folkloric current, in different degrees and modes. In the first place, as stated by Zeno Vancea, there is “no Romanian composer

of the following generation to the founders of our modern national school not to have used folkloric quotation, regardless of the musical form and genre”. [7] “The enhancement /.../ of the popular music as a program, the comprehension of one’s own musical reasons, as transposition of the popular melody, on the level of the classical one, is a specific feature, apart from Sabin Drăgoi, only for /.../ Paul Constantinescu. [7]

If the popular-origin modes or modal formulas imbue each composer’s creation, in Filip Lazăr’s case, all works of Romanian character are written as miniatures: “the symbiosis is set between the modern and folkloric specific features /.../ they are representative for the style of the composer’s miniature creations”. [2] In the other genres, as confessed by the author, he tended “at full strength, towards a less picturesque music, towards a purely musical music”. [6]

Refined, intellectualist spirit, formed at the Western School, tributary to the universal values, Marțian Negrea confers, however, upon the Romanian set of themes, a prevalent role in the suite *Impresii de la țară* [*Impressions from the Countryside*]. The Romanian set of themes is the one that generates the musical-language elements.

Under the auspices of modern European intellectualist aesthetics, falls the tonal-modalism of works where the Romanian folkloric element is generally absent - such pieces are fit therein, as those of the cycle *Joujoux pour Ma Dame*, by Mihail Jora – a composer whose vision stands in contrast to that of Sabin Drăgoi, for instance.

The differences in terms of modal conception, of the aforementioned authors, stem directly from the starting point, whether of harmonic or of melodic nature. In this way, in some composers’ conceptual whole, the role of the melodic is revealed, as main factor, decisive for the modal harmony. In the case of Sabin Drăgoi and Paul Constantinescu, the modal vision takes shape from the monody, especially folkloric *quotation*; or, possibly, invention in the folkloric *spirit*, either of vocal-meditative nature, taken from the carol or of instrumental-dynamic specificity, close in structure to the popular songs for dancing. Yet, while Drăgoi confines himself to observing the formal integrity of the popular melody, applying the limits of the vocal character over the instrumental scoring, Paul Constantinescu displays amplifying-evolving tendencies and proneness to the specifically instrumental virtuosity.



Fig. 1: Paul Constantinescu, *Trei piese pentru pian, Joc* [*Three Pieces for Piano, Dance*], m.17-18

The author of the monograph dedicated to Sabin Drăgoi, Nicolae Rădulescu,

notices the following: “the piano pieces, destined for children and beginners, from

the 2nd-3rd decades, are Sabin Drăgoi's musical manifesto, living proof of his theoretical principles. There are submitted *in nuce*, the bases of Drăgoi's entire system of compositional thinking, which, enlarged and amplified, in the following

years, will basically keep the same features in ampler works" [3] wherefrom the harmonized choral scoring detaches (homophonous isorhythmic).

Fig. 2. Sabin Drăgoi, "Colinde pentru pian" [*Carols for Piano*], II/1, m. 1-8

Zeno Vancea's observation is as pertinent as possible, when he attempts to grasp the elements differentiating Sabin Drăgoi's scoring, from that of his contemporaries: "unlike Sabin Drăgoi, in whose music – especially in the early creation period – the harmony generally adjusts by certain structural particularities of the popular melody, Marţian Negrea

acts reversely, modeling the popular melody by the necessities of his differentiated harmonic language, resembling, in this respect to Dima". [7]

Marţian Negrea gives a particularly important role to harmony, which often becomes the melody-generating element.

Fig. 3. Marţian Negrea, "Impresii de la țară, A fost odată"...[*Impressions from the Countryside, Once upon a Time*], m. 1-4

Marţian Negrea, as Mihail Jora are harmonists, by excellence, of post-Romanticist lineage; in the former case – Impressionist, in the latter case – Expressionist. The two composers' modal vision (in the miniature for piano) is

deeply marked by their harmonic stance, determining the specificity of the melody-harmony relation, substantiated in such aspects:

a) neutrality of some harmonic structures, which allow either highlighting

some melodic-modal particularities, or blurring them;

b) use of harmonic backgrounds, by *ostinato* formulas or harmonies-pedal;

c) existence of the syntactic combination – melody of harmonies, wherein the modal characters are given by the structure of the accords themselves.

Pascal Benteoiu notes that, for instance, in Mihail Jora's case "the harmony basically prevails and /.../ tends to surpass, in importance, the melodic line". [1]

If the aforementioned may constitute common results, attained by the two composers in different ways, there is worth mentioning that side of the harmony, which is their specific difference: extreme tension of the harmonic language, which particularity draws Jora closer to another creator, Filip Lazăr. Clemansa Liliana Firca detaches from these two composers' creation, the following constant: "creators as Mihail Jora, Filip Lazăr will be defined by /.../ that abrupt harmonism – effect of the polytonal conglomerates and even of the incorporation of the chromatic total, to wit by the feature of border between the post-Romanticist world, intensely chromatic, and the Expressionist world, technically doubled by atonalism". [2]

Polytonality becomes, in this way, a

feature of modern tonal-harmonic order; as well as a result, derived from the existence of a folkloric-urban inspiration source. The importance of urban folklore (and suburban) for the autochthonous, landscape is "its being the only to have offered the creators, an artistic raw material (at a given point) and to have constituted, by excellence, the argument for a grotesque-caricatural vision ...". [2] Along with the grotesque comic and with the parody, the violence and the exacerbation of the harmonic language are the "forms taken by Expressionism in the Romanian music". [2]

The preferential cultivation of this expressive field (especially bent to caricature and irony, than to grotesque) in the miniature piano genre, belongs to Mihail Jora, being obtained by special techniques of musical scoring; the caricature is the effect of contradiction, of the mismatches generated by the false relations (false bass), the unexpected scordaturas, accord strata etc. The modal vision serves, here, a clearly expressed programatism (more acutely than in the case of other creators, descriptive - Negrea, picturesque - Drăgoi, anecdotic - Constantinescu etc.).



Fig. 4. Mihail Jora, "Joux pour Ma Dame, Furtună într-un pahar cu apă" [Storm in a Glass of Water]

By polyrhythmics and polymetrics, the right hand will increase the tempo in the second measure; eventually, both hands will finish the material of the two

measures, in the same temporal interval. The procedure of accelerating the musical-discourse rhythm had been already illustrated in Jora's creation, in the

Expressionist cycle *Joujoux pour Ma Dame* (1925). Two of the constituent pieces of the cycle, suggestively entitled *Furtună într-un pahar cu apă* [*Storm in a Glass of Water*] and *Ma Dame desire entendre du Stravinski* accomplish, in a stratified melodic-harmonic conception (of the type rhythmic-melodic character), by added rhythmic-melodic values or, inversely, by fragmentations, accelerations towards climaxes – false and comic apotheoses. The characteristic feature of the polymodal scoring of these works (including those of Paul Constantinescu) is the stratified structure, where, “as in the overwhelming majority of the cases” – as noted by Terényi Ede – “the inferior layer consists of identical-duration notes - static sonorous layer), whereas the notes of the superior(s) appear either in the arpeggio, or dispersed in the melody”. [4]

4. Conclusions

The generalized solutions in the twentieth century’s Romanian piano miniature revealed the two dimensions underlying the musical-matter structuring: the horizontal dimension and the vertical dimension. The determining factor of the former is the primary melodic impulse, the musical solution being achieved from the melody towards the harmony; and the determining factor of the latter is the harmonic imagination, the musical solution being achieved from the harmony towards the melody. Certain affinities come into light, for these dimensions; for instance, the predilection for harmonic expression draws Jora closer to Lazăr, and off from Drăgoi or Constantinescu, who give primacy, yet not absolute, to the melody.

Hence, each composer’s creation is not unilateral and cannot be strictly fit into a category; yet, it oscillates towards facets, either highlighted, or blurred, in one

direction or another. The highest faithfulness to the folkloric-inspiration source is showed by Sabin Drăgoi, followed by Paul Constantinescu, who, to an almost equally extent, enhances the Byzantine music-resources, too. The other composers experimented, more or less, in different genres or creation periods, also the Universalist musical searches. Yet, what is beneficial for the Romanian music of later times is that this epoch’s representatives succeeded in raising the folklore-based musical creation, to the level of the universal, along with other modern national creations. The aesthetic ideals and the mastery in their substantiation traced the guiding lines of the next stage, easily followed by their after-comers.

References

1. Bentoiu, P.: *Profiluri de compozitori – Mihail Jora (Profiles of composers – Mihail Jora)*. In: *Muzica*, no.7/1964, p. 2.
2. Firca, Cl. L.: *Direcții în muzica românească, 1900 - 1930 (Directions in the Romanian Music)*. Bucharest. Academy Press, 1974.
3. Rădulescu, N.: *Sabin V. Drăgoi*. Bucharest. Musical Publishing House, 1971.
4. Terényi, E.: *Armonia muzicii moderne (The Harmony of the Modern Music)*. Cluj-Napoca. Gh. Dima Conservatory Press, 1983.
5. Tomescu, V.: *Paul Constantinescu*. Bucharest. Musical Publishing House, 1967.
6. Tomescu, V.: *Filip Lazăr*. Bucharest. Musical Publishing House, 1963.
7. Vancea, Z.: *Creația muzicală românească, sec. XIX-XX (The Romanian Musical Creation) vol. I*. Bucharest. Musical Publishing House, 1968.