

Fantastic Piece for the Piano op. 142 no. 2 by J. B. Foerster

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Abstract: *A part of Foerster's musical creation includes works for the piano, of which we have chosen to present a composition that is balanced in terms of construction, difficult in terms of virtuosity and with an inspired emotional content, although it may be lesser known or approached. Defining for the character, but also for the structure of the work, is the title that sends in the area of free inspiration, not restricted by the rigors of a classical formal scheme. We are dealing with a piece of atmosphere, with an improvisational character combining different elements of sound language, from the postromantic to the expressionist one. The analysed work appears to us as a pianistic miniature dressed in an atmosphere of lasting beauty.*

Key-words: *Foerster, piano, pianistic technique, left hand, piece*

1. Introduction

My long experience as a pianist and piano pedagogue has strengthened my belief that, in order to reach the highest possible level of artistic mastery, the role of the left hand in trying to achieve interpretive perfection is essential, as it often depends on the quality of the whole interpretation. *The problem* of the left hand has preoccupied and continues to preoccupy interpreters, pedagogues and composers. In this sense, Corneliu Gheorghiu, a leading figure in Romanian pianism and pedagogy, emphasized the fact that "the left hand must be insisted on. It will always be the "Cinderella" of the two sister-hands, out of habit, naturally, through daily activity; we are therefore obliged to raise its technical level, that is, to equalize them as a skill. The great pianists were ambidextrous" (Gheorghiu 2015, 55). Fortunately, the special genre of piano creations for the left hand benefits from a large number of works, many of them being creations of great value. The work we have chosen to present further, fantastic piece op. 142 no. 2, by J. B. Foerster, is a lesser known

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and approached composition, but balanced in terms of construction, difficult in terms of virtuosity and with an inspired emotional content.

2. Biographical sketch - Josef Bohuslav Foerster

Josef Bohuslav Foerster (Förster) „30 dec. 1859, Detěnice - May 29, 1851, Novyvestec” (Sava, Vartolomei 1979, 32), also known as J. B. Foerster, Czech composer, music critic, pedagogue and writer, is one of the leading personalities of the Czech artistic life. Coming from a family of musicians, Foerster receives a complex education from his father, demonstrating talent not only for music but also for painting and writing. He studies organ at the Prague Organ School, succeeding Dvořák between 1882 and 1888 as organist of St. Vojtěch Cathedral. Between 1889 and 1894, he is choir conductor, so that from 1884 he also teaches singing at high schools in Prague. He personally met Smetana and Dvořák, participating in the premieres of numerous works of the two. “At the same time, he witnessed the quarrel between the fiercest supporters of Czech nationalism and those who wanted openness to abroad” (Larousse 2000, 177).

After marrying Berta Lautererová, soprano of the Prague National Theater, in 1888, he moves to Hamburg in 1893, where he is a piano teacher at the Conservatory and a music critic. Since 1903, he lives in Vienna, where he will hold the same positions as in Hamburg. With the birth of the Czech Republic in 1918, Foerster “is appointed professor at the Prague Conservatory in 1919, being its director from 1922 to 1931” (Larousse 2000, 177). In 1919 he is awarded the title of Doctor Honoris Causa by the University of Prague, between 1931 and 1939 he holds the position of President of the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts, and in 1945 he receives the title of National Artist. In 1951, at his death, national funerals were organized for him. A part of his musical creation that comprises more than 190 works with opus numbers includes works for the piano, among which we mention: Dreaming op.47; Erotic Masks (Variations) op.98; Pieces op. 142 (for the left hand).

3. Fantastic piece op.142 nr. 2 for the left hand

Along with the *Nocturna* bearing the same opus number, the Fantastic Piece for the Left Hand - composed in 1930 and published in 1945 - is dedicated to Otakar Holmann (1894-1967), the Czech pianist who became (forced by the severe trauma suffered to his right arm in during the First World War) one of the best known and most important performers of piano works composed for the left hand alone.

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We are dealing with a piece of atmosphere, with an improvisational character which combines different elements of sound language, from the post romantic to the expressionist one.

4. Analysis of the Fantastic piece op.142 no. 2, for the left hand

The structure of the work is a tripartite lied consisting of: Introduction (tonal center La) - A (G minor in E flat) - bridge - B (C major) - A (C minor) - Coda C minor).

The introduction reveals to us from the beginning the generating motive of the first section. The chromatic pace revolves around the La (A) sound, which he proposes as the starting point of the construction.

Four measures comprise a succession of 5 submotifs joining the chords built on the A-B-G flat sounds (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. J. B. Foerster – *Fantastic piece, op.142, no. 2, bars 1-4*

The fragment is repeated in the next 4 bars, and then the idea approaches the contour it will have further. Starting at measure 13, the theme becomes more coherent and, accompanied by the motif elements presented earlier, it describes an ascending chromatic which cadences on the chord of E flat with seventh major (Figure 2).



Fig. 2. J. B. Foerster – *Fantastic piece, op.142, no. 2*, bars 13-21

A bridge that takes over the proposed starting point of the cadence leads through the sequences of the same motifs, finally amplified by their doubling to the octave, towards the middle section of the piece. This takes place according to the structure of a double period in C key. The musical idea consists of two phrases, large but symmetrical. The first one repeats a motif that is based on the sounds of the dominant chord (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. J. B. Foerster – *Fantastic piece, op.142, no. 2*, bars 34-41

The dynamics of the second phrase is amplified by leaps of melody and the initial inflection to E minor. The cadence stops on the sound of the dominant (Figure 4).



Fig. 4. J. B. Foerster – *Fantastic piece, op.142, no. 2*, bars 42-49

The whole period is repeated identically, the difference being brought by the moment of its conclusion and of this section on the C sound. The half concisely presents the initial theme in its original form, immediately followed by the coda. Here the arches of the chromatic motif are quickly sequenced, ascending towards the end point of the work strongly marked by the duolets that emphasize the chord of C minor (Figure 5).



Fig. 5. J. B. Foerster – *Fantastic piece, op.142, no. 2*, bars 86-92

5. Conclusions

Although Josef Bohuslav Foerster did not write much for the piano, "his considerable work included especially symphonic and concert music, few chamber works and numerous vocal compositions, especially choral" (Larousse 2000, 177), the analysed work appears to us as a pianistic miniature that stands out through the balance and clarity of the construction, dressed in an atmosphere of lasting beauty. It is known that in the art of the interpreter pianist, a role of overwhelming importance belongs to pedalling" (Răducanu 2006, 7), and in the case of this work even more, the use of the leading right pedal has an essential role in multiplying the number of fingers, assuming the role of leading, of unifying the fragments separated due to the specific writing. The masterful handling of the pedals will allow the performer to focus entirely on the rendering of the improvisational character, the richness of images and feelings that must be grafted on a true demonstration of interpretive piano virtuosity. We consider it a valuable work, which has contributed to the enrichment of the piano art and which deserves to be brought back to the attention of the performers.

References

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