

STYLISTIC AND INTERPRETATIVE ASPECTS IN SOLER'S SONATAS FOR KEYBOARD INSTRUMENTS

D. C. IBĂNESCU¹

Abstract: *Having both spiritual and affective affinity with Padre Antonio Soler's music which I have not only interpreted at different contests and recitals but also studied together with the students from the piano class I teach inside the Music Faculty of Braşov I felt the need to both clarify and present in detail the coordinates of the pianistic discourse of his sonatas. The present article identifies these coordinates with the hope that it would be of great help and interest for the ones who will want to study and interpret these compositions.*

Key words: *Soler, keyboard instruments, sonata, interpreter.*

1. Introduction

Since nowadays there is a worldwide interest for rediscovering baroque music I have considered that the Spanish composer Padre Antonio Soler's sonatas for keyboard instruments must be brought again into the public's and interpreters' eye especially because they may be considered one of the most valuable masterpieces of the keyboard literature in the 18th century.

As both an interpreter and a pianist I have been charmed by the value, the beauty and last but not least the great number of his compositions (120 sonatas, the full edition of his sonatas being published in Madrid, between 1957-1972, and coordinated by P.S.Rubio – *Sonatas para instrumentos de tecla* – in 7 volumes)

[4]. The study and the interpretation of his harpsichord sonatas brought me unknown aesthetic satisfactions and the so colourful and various range of the instrumental discourse created by the most valuable Spanish composer of the 18th century made me experience deep artistic feelings.

2. Soler's sonatas in the composition context of the Baroque

Although defined as 'the most ambiguous and controversial term ever created by musical practice' (A. Leahu), the *sonata*, by far the result of a 'reprehensible' or at least 'despicable occupation' (Rousseau) represented a form of instrumentalism emancipation, a way of detaching itself from the syncretism in

¹ Dept. of Musical Interpretation, *Transilvania* University of Brasov, Romania

which it used to exist together with vocal music and dance. For Soler, the *sonata* represents first of all the proper genre for the development of the instrumental technique; this can be deduced from a closer reflection upon the subtitle – 'for keyboard instruments' – a direct hint. Therefore, one of the purposes of these sonatas is its didactic utility just like Scarlatti's contemporary *Essercizi*. This specificity predicts the majority of the later miniaturist cycles which sometimes have conform titles such as *Microcosmos* (Bartók), *Studies* (Chopin, Debussy, Skriabin), *Preludes* (Chopin, Debussy) etc.

The technical innovations (arpeggios, ranges, register hops, hands crossing, octaves, thirds, parallel or broken sixths, trills, mordentes etc.) were used by Soler's students (among which Gabriel, the Bourbon prince) for their technical and interpretative perfectionism. The author does not specify on purpose the instruments for sonatas; "keyboard instruments" means harpsichord, clavichord or pianoforte all together. The stylistic variety of Padre Antonio Soler's sonatas gives the impression that they have been written for the two different keyboard instruments spread and appreciated all over Spain: harpsichord and clavichord. Along these two there is also the pianoforte, built at the beginning of the 18th century by Bartolomeo Cristofori, which seems to had been known by Soler since at Escorial this new instrument could be found too: 'Not long ago it was discovered that Domenico Scarlatti (therefore Soler too n.n.) had at his disposal, in the palaces from Aranjuez and Escorial, some types of pianos and so it is possible for a part of his sonatas to have been written exactly for this instrument, more modern than the harpsichord.' [1]

The naïve, naturalistic picturesque of some onomatopoeic suggestions – reproductions of the birds' song, which made a real career in the epoch, especially

in the French harpsichord school – from Daquin's *Cuckoo* to Rameau's *Call of the birds* – was also used by Soler, the composer emphasizing the musical descriptivism tempt through the suggestive titles given to some of his sonatas: no.108 „Del gallo” (*The Rooster*), no.53 and 54 „De clarines” (*The trumpeter*), no.12 „De la codorniz” (*The quail*). The procedure will be used again, on other stylistic coordinates, in the 20th century, by Respighi (*The birds*) or Messiaen – For Messiaen, this procedure becomes a stylistic determinant - for 'oiseau' style – (*The Birds Awakening*, *The Exotic Birds*, *The Birds Catalogue* etc.).

In Soler's sonatas could be felt the influence of his predecessors and his contemporaries (especially Scarlatti's) but this influence must not be overestimated. The rhythmic configurations, the modulations, the elements specific to harpsichordist solutions are taken over from the literature of those times. There can easily be seen resemblances and they are justified as long as the interpret wants to get into the atmosphere of the epoch and to decode both the gallant gesture and the (sometimes) little precious manner of outlining the discourse.

Still, in each of these works there is a personal touch of the composer, no matter the dimension or the degree of difficulty. I am talking about the natural ongoing, the simplicity of the phrases, the very acute and original sense of modulation, a great precision in what the structure balance is concerned, the avoidance of the rhetoric and of the gratuity by means of the determined simplicity and genuineness of the musical logics. There is a charming clearness and measure in outlining the ideas. The music seems to create itself, one cell generating the other without feeling any trace of tension or lack of inspiration.

2.1. Coordinates of the pianistic-interpretative discourse

The solerian pianist character is born out of the perfect command of the means of expression of the instrument. Soler, a virtuous and great connoisseur of the keyboard instruments, deepened the expressive resources of these, emphasizing their qualities. In all his sonatas there can be traced the pleasure of searching for new elements by means of which the instrument to get an artistic power; all these are filtered by his exceptional personality hence enriching the sonority range of the instrument.

2.1.1. The tempo

The role of the tempi in creating the sonatas expressivity is extremely important, playing the epoch instruments being generally faster than playing the traditional ones this being greatly owed to the fact that epoch instruments have more delicate sonorities and react faster than their modern equivalents.

Actually one of the greatest baroque harpsichordists and composers, François Couperin, in his treaty 'L'art de toucher le clavecin', advised the interpreters to adopt faster tempi. 'In what the delicate tracks played to the harpsichord is concerned it is advisable not to play as gentle as when playing the other instruments because of the sound duration. The rhythm and expression can be preserved no matter the lower or higher growth of speed.' [2]

In Soler's sonatas there is a predilection for the moderate tempo and this is thought to be owed mainly to the inclination to a very expressive melodic line; this is greatly owed to the processing of beauty and simplicity of singing the songs and dances from Catalonia which have definitely enriched his childhood.

It can also be talked about his predilection to lyricism, the composer confessing in his great theoretical work *Llave dé la modulaci3n...*, the concern for his music expressivity first of all: 'What is a well written work good at if it does not arouse a feeling in its listener?' [5]. Maybe that is why the terms used to define the tempo are mostly connected to the terms of expression: Andantino cantabile, Andantino expresivo, Cantabile con moto, Andante amabile expresivo, Andantino gracioso e con moto, Allegretto expresivo.

The fast movements are most of the times tempered too, customized in Soler's compositions by terms which underline the importance of expression: Allegro soffribile, Allegro airoso, Allegro spiritoso, Allegro non molto – Pastoral, Allegro pastoral, Allegro espressivo non presto, Allegro vivo.

Up to now I have shown the importance of the tempo as an essential element in discerning the expressive senses of the Catalan master's music and in the accomplishment of a most authentic interpretation.

2.1.2. Melodicity, the determinant generating factor in the writing of the sonatas

In his sonatas, Soler accomplishes an expression of great melody and exuberance, music full of light and joy, an instrumental music which fully reflects the epoch of the Spanish baroque.

The fact that his music is bright and full of light is essential and ought to be emphasized because Soler, who spent almost all his life inside the Escorial walls demonstrates to himself his extraordinary inspiration and a huge compositional force. In this way it is very revealing the description made by the French writer Théophile Gautier to the Escorial in the

chapter dedicated to this in his book „*Voyage en Espagne*”: ‘I know well that the Escorial had a religious and austere destination; but gravity does not mean drought, melancholy does not mean depression, recollection does not mean boredom, and the beauty of forms may very well combine with the elevated thinking.’ [3]

Judging from the point of view of what has been written above, Soler’s capacity of abstracting seems unbelievable if you think about how the restrictive and severe atmosphere from the Escorial succeeded to create such a lively and bright music. Therefore, it can’t be remarked how powerful and complex the Spanish composer’s personality was.

2.1.3. The predilection for virtuosity

For the interpreters the great number of sonatas, with their different degree of difficulty, offer the possibility of being interpreted according to the inner universe, the technical qualities and the artistic personality of each person. The solerian sonatas show a bright harpsichord virtuosity tracing the line marked by Scarlatti in this direction. It is a fact that the later was considered to be one of the most important innovators of the pianist technique. He developed the technical vocabulary of the instrument and brought the playing the piano to a much higher level of virtuosity more than other composers like Frescobaldi in Italy, Froberger in Germany or Couperin in France did.

The same interest in virtuosity can be traced in many of Soler’s sonatas these representing a real touchstone for any pianist (taken into account the very high level of technical difficulty).

The dimension of the difficult and very difficult parts is great and the interpreter

needs to have a permanent control both over the technical means and the relaxation in order to assure the agility. The ornaments difficulty which sometimes are aligned into very fast strings involve a great malleability of the pianist in using the rapid attack, the sudden break and the position changes. The repeated notes and the staccatos are made by means of a precise attack of the rapid change of the fingers on the same key and on the edges ease.

The obtaining of the clarity and accuracy in attack will lead to a special musical interpretation. The double notes, the harmonies and the octaves need clarity and robustness in attack, a differentiation of the sound with a melodic or harmonic function and at the same time a certain balance between the components in order to create the effect wanted by the composer.

The rhythmic was of course the most important element inside the technique. The formulas which multiply and diversify and the combination of values which follows the composer’s free inspiration must be played precisely and beautifully.

The ornamental passages are frequent and they impose an impeccable interpretation of the rhythmic equality, as a premise of accuracy. In other words, it is known that the ornamental art was governed by two laws during the baroque epoch: the first law was clarity and the second the ornamental – non-ornamental alternating. In this context the interpreter’s creative liberty ought to find the most suitable way of manifestation in concordance with the ornamentation. The ornaments, as an element which prolongs the sounds, meet very often in cadence as trills or among the melody sounds as grupets, mordents, the grace notes and arpeggios frequently accompanying the sounds.

This is the reason for which the piano interpreter should possess a real *leggiero* attack in order to interpret the ornaments in an agile and beautiful way.

Both the rapid passages with the range and arpeggios divided between the two hands and the chopped style are very frequent too. The passages with virtuosity in ranges, thirds and sixths with a very large ambitus, with frequent hands crossing and hops on the entire keyboard represent a real technical and expressive obstacle but once overcome will lead to the most adequate interpretative attitude of the interpretation of the sonata. In the end, the musical expressiveness, the expression of the emotional background of each sonata is what matters most.

In Soler's Sonata no. 17, vol 1, there is a real 'waste' of highly difficult technical procedures.

Starting with the ranges in thirds, launched up and down to the right hand, continuing with the broken octaves combined with the sounds repeated in groups of four sixteenths and ending with the extremely difficult rhythmic-melodic formulas made of three sixteenths, the last one with point, doubled by trill and followed by thirty seconds rhythmical formulas interpreted alternatively by the two hands, they all need great pianist methods.

Two technical procedures seem to attract very much the virtuous and extraordinary composer – the hand crossings and the big, almost acrobatic hops. Soler uses the hand crossing in approximately 20% of his sonatas. This procedure can be met in sonatas number 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 27, 35, 57, 59, 61, 62, 70, 73, 76, 90, 97, 98, 108, all in all in 20 sonatas.

An example of instrumental complexity and beauty of hand crossing is Sonata no. 10, vol 1. The great difficulty is given by the really great hops of the left hand

doubled by the hands crossing and of the arpeggio accompaniment from the median line interpreted by the right hand. The hops in hand crossing sometimes go above eight octaves, sometimes reaching four octaves. No matter how much the interpreter studies these passages s/he has no guarantee of their full accuracy especially because the melody tempo is *Allegro*. For a higher degree of security the interpreter may choose a more moderate tempo but this would be contrary to the spirit and thinking of the composer's melody which obviously ranks it among the maximum virtuosity tracks prefacing (by its left hand acrobatic hops) Liszt's 'Campanella'. The great ambitus between the Fa# from the counter-octave and Fa #from the third octave rises an extremely interesting question: has this sonata been written for harpsichord or for piano?

2.1.4. Soler's sonatas: between the harpsichord and the piano

At the beginning of this article I stated that if it were to take into account the growing importance of the pianoforte in the last decades of the century and that it is a fact that this type of instruments existed and were used in Madrid, and so in Escorial, probably Soler knew the newly created instrument - the pianoforte – his sonatas been composed for it.

Related to this topic the opinions are divided because although the new keyboard instrument (the pianoforte) was of great interest for the builders in several European countries it imposed itself quite difficult in Spain. It is known that several instrument built by Cristofori and enthusiastically bought for the Spanish royal house were lately transformed into harpsichords. Still, it seems that among his favourite keyboard instruments (the harpsichord, the clavichord, the organ)

Soler also had in Escorial at his disposal this new instrument whose influence can be detected in his compositions.

Keeping in mind Soler's so complex personality always interested in various domains of knowledge it is thought that the new instrument was of great interest both for the composer and for the Catalan 'inventor'. That Soler knew the instrument is also proved by the fact that most of his sonatas are composed for an instrument with a 5 octaves keyboard (61 keys) his late sonatas being written for a rich register between Fa1 and La3 which Mozart himself could not find on his 5 octaves piano (Fa1 – Fa3).

From point of view of writing Soler uses *glissando*, rarely *acciaccatura*, but uses quite often the technical procedure called *Alberti's bass* which will largely be used during the classical period by Haydn, Mozart and even Beethoven. This fact leads to the conclusion that, living in a period of musical transition, the composer wrote for pianoforte, too.

3. Conclusions

All in all, in his sonatas for keyboard instruments Padre Antonio Soler uses all the expressive methods in order to accurately emphasise the technical and the sound quality of the keyboard and to express his creative spirit and artistic sensitivity.

The Catalan master's music appears in this sonatas perfectly adapted to the keyboard as a kind of music created especially for the key instruments, allowing the interpreters both to discover and to evoke the image beauty of these interesting sonatas from so many points of view.

As the author of this musicology study having as a starting point the attraction and

the curiosity upon both the composer and its compositions and also the wish to bring back to light a great personality of the 18th century whose piano creations have been, unjustly maybe, less known and interpreted, I would like to emphasise the pleasure I felt while trying to rediscover and deepen into the originality, plasticity and at the same time specificity of Soler's sonatas.

Clarifying and getting deep into the details of the coordinates of the solerian keyboard instruments pianist discourse (which has real competitive elements as compared to the similar ones of the same epoch, the composer succeeding in expressing his personality) I am sure that the Catalan master's sonatas, although more rarely played, when they are interpreted they closely reveal the artistic character and personality of the composer of these masterpieces.

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