

THE POETICS OF SOLER'S SONATA

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Abstract: *Going through Padre Antonio Soler's most relevant sonatas for keyboard instruments made it possible to identify and generalize a few spiritual tracks on which the thematic of Soler's sonata are centered. The stylistic features defining (by enhancing a certain facet), the poetics of Soler's sonata are the scherzando character, suggesting a solemn atmosphere, illustrating the feeling of nature, appealing to old stylistic worlds, resorting to the valences of folklore.*

Keywords: *Padre Antonio Soler, sonatas, stylistic features, thematic of the sonata.*

1. Introduction

In the shape of virtuosity and under the pretext of developing a technique specific to the keyboard instruments, Soler's sonatas enclose the most diverse nuances of inner moods. From the picturesque of certain sonatas to the lively atmosphere, from the festive tone to the comic or playful accents, from dance frenzy to polystylistic hints (baroque, rococo, classical), here are some of the various facets of the *music poetics* of the sonatas of Padre Antonio Soler, "a cheerful and solitary priest".[1]

How right the remarks made by Alexandru Leahu sound here, referring to Scarlatti's sonata: „Acrobatic virtuosity, technical exhibitionism interfere like an ultimate signification [of the sonatas, n.n.]. Few contemporaries were able to see in [...Soler, n.n.] *the poet*, the artist who hides under the veil of exuberance and humour

the most daring innovations, blending the most diverse nuances of inner moods”.[4]

2. Particularities of the thematic in Soler's sonata

Going through the 120 sonatas [5] made it possible to identify and generalize a few spiritual tracks on which the thematic of Soler's sonata is centered, by enhancing a certain facet. These may be submitted to the following systematization:

- the scherzando character, his sonatas expressing the exuberance and verve typical for the Spanish Baroque, even if their author lived secluded inside the Escorial's cold walls, in a rigid and austere atmosphere like that of a „monastic cemetery”[2];
- suggesting a festive, solemn atmosphere as the fruit of the clarity, logic and concision of the composer in organizing the sound material;

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- illustrating the feeling of nature, Soler embraces the tempt of the music descriptivism;
- making appeal to the old stylistic worlds, through the dance character of certain sonatas the Spanish master is sending us back to that “stile antico” of *sonata da chiesa* or *da camera*.
- resorting to the valences of folklore, the Iberian spirit is asserting itself first through the fragmented melody, through the marked and syncopated rhythm of the Spanish dances.

2.1. The *scherzando* character prefigures the *scherzo* genre later introduced by Beethoven in the sonata genre and has some aspects which are common with those of Scarlatti’s *scherzo* of his first creation period. In Soler’s sonata, the multitude of feelings takes a playful, lively expression, sometimes comic, even reaching grace and choreographic plasticity through the specific melodic drawings, based on the ternary meter (fitted into the 6/8 bar).

The brightness of some unison passages, rendered in one breath, of a transparency like Mendelssohn’s or Schumann’s, emerges from the energetic of some themes like the one of *Sonata 83* (vol.V) in F Major.

Often, this energetic is enhanced by the rapid pacing towards the higher register of *rocket-melodies*, like in the debut of *Sonata 78* (vol.V), in f # minor. The same momentum, determined by the upward direction of the melody to which is added the brevity of motif resulting from the fragmentation of the discourse through brakes and repetitions, can be observed in *Sonatas 21 and 31* (vol.II). They mirror the significations acquired by the conscious use of *repetition*, as a fundamental construction procedure for any author’s creation. The technique momentum slips towards the comic or musical joke through

the very fast features – suggesting an alert rhythm – on big leaps over the octave or, on the contrary, through repeated notes doubled by frequent trills, like in *Sonata 86* in D Major. His sonatas are full of various elements of instrumental virtuosity, Soler taking Scarlatti’s taste for the exploration of the keyboard through the crossing of hands and acrobatic leaps, melodic lines in thirds and sextants, and the great mobility of the left hand.

The choreographic plasticity of certain themes transcends from a graceful impetus, rhythmically complementary between the two hands – *Sonata 104* in d minor – to exuberance, dance frenzy in *Sonata 120* in d minor, both in volume VII.

2.2. The suggestion of a solemn, festive atmosphere runs through the themes of numerous sonatas, being achieved by elements which plasticize the musical discourse such as the rhythmic-melodic elements with the character of a signal. Here belong those themes in a binary meter in which we encounter characteristic rhythms, such as the marked formula placed on the second beat in *Sonatas 1, 4, 18*, vol.I, *Sonata de clarines no.54*, vol.III, or on the first beat of the bar in *Sonata 22*, vol.II.

The dactyl formula, which is doubled by the signal-arpeggio, characterizes the thematic profiles of some of the sonatas and the signal-arpeggio generates ample formulas grafted on extensive arpeggios of over two octaves, in the openings of some of the sonatas, such as in *Sonata 27*, vol.II.

The counterpoint formula associated to the signal-arpeggio makes us think of the brass sonorities, so as in other sonatas, such as *Sonata de clarines no. 53*, vol.III, the trumpet signals carried in parallel intervals to generate the famous „hunting quints”, or thirds which suggest the signals of a post chaise trumpet.

Fig. 1 (measures 1-7)

Fig. 1 *Sonata de clarines no.53*, vol.III (measures 1-7)

At the same time, in *Sonata 10*, vol.I, we can notice the opening with a prologue-theme in which the simultaneous octave signals are combined or brought into rapid scalar successions of thirty-twos, followed

by rhythmic drawings in the type of a toccata and finished with a marked ending signal.

Fig. 2 (measures 1-9)

Fig. 2 *Sonata 10*, vol.I (measures 1-9)

2.3. The illustration of the feeling of nature, belonging to the descriptive programmatic, „is nothing but one of the compromises [... brought, n.n.] for the purpose of catching the contemporaries' benevolence and demonstrating the new possibilities offered by the instruments”, thinks A. Leahu.[4].

In a time when the instrumental music is wished to become as appealing as the vocal one, composers are looking for

rhythmic and timber diversity, making use of a series of sound effects.

The feeling of nature in music through the plasticity of the sonorities used unravels to us the pastoral echoes in *Sonata Pastoril 42*, vol.III, attained by means of the effect gained through the marked Sicilian rhythm, in 6/8.

We note that this sonata, impregnated by the feeling of nature, falls in line with Domenico Scarlatti's well-known pastoral sonatas.

The descriptive tendencies (Soler strengthening the tempt of music descriptivism by attributing suggestive titles to some of his sonatas, such as no.12 The Quail, no.53, and 54, The Trumpeter), drawn mainly from the singing of birds, illustrative through the onomatopoeic references, represent one of the ways to overcome the *abstractionism* of instrumental music.

In *Sonata 108*, vol.VII, subtitled *The Cock*, the naturalistic effects are rendered by purely musical means such as the ternary marked formula of repeated sounds followed by the sextant leap adorned with a grace note. The result becomes a comic one, being boosted by the entry in the canon of the two voices.

Fig. 3 (measures 1-11)



Fig. 3 *Sonata 108*, vol.VII (measures 1-11)

The voices entering the imitation, the adornment based on frequent trills, the thirds, the parallel sextants make of *Sonata 69*, vol.V a true descendant of Scarlatti's, continuing in the line of the specific „hunting sonatas”, and so the brilliant parallel thirds followed by the acoustic signals of the trumpet and the closings on repeated sounds of imaginary castagnets give us the impression of a rounded whole in the construction of the extended main theme of *Sonata no. 89*, vol.V.

2.4. The appeal to the old stylistic worlds or stylistic anticipations reveals another of the composer's intentions, which can unify the themes of Soler's sonata.

The recourse to old ways of writing is materialized in allusions to the Baroque melodic patterns or to the adornment of the Rococo. In the first category, extremely spiritual, appear the themes of certain sonatas in which Soler is trying to bring together more different patterns. Entitled

Sonata-rondó (vol.III/no.58), *Sonata-rondon* (vol.VII/no.109) or simply *Rondó* (vol.III/no.59), we are shown three genuine rondo themes – frequently found in the later classical literature – generating the respective form, in some pieces which retain the term *sonata* merely as an allusion to the manner of *suonare* (*playing an instrument*).

Sometimes the composer tries a combination between the rondo theme and the menuet character, as it appears in the ternary movement of *Sonata 61* (vol.IV), to which the composer gives the title *Rondon* and which becomes the refrain of the rondo form.

The anticipation of the world of the Vienna classics Haydn and Mozart becomes a stylistic feature for some of Soler's sonatas. The melodic of *Sonata 56* (vol.III) is almost entirely like Mozart, and its main theme reveals the rhythmic-melodic profile of *Sonata in B Major, K_v 333* by Mozart.

Fig. 4 (measures 1-9)



Fig. 4 W. A. Mozart – *Sonata in B Major*, Kv 333(measures 1-9)

Another thematic trunk which sends to the patterns of the Baroque and, especially, to Scarlatti's sonata is formed by the themes in the 3/8 measure, with allusions to the character of the spiritual *Gigue*. The rhythmic pulsation of the old dances renders a specific uniform writing in *Sonatas 35 and 38* (vol.II).

The identity of the debut in *Gigue in G Major* by Scarlatti and *Sonatas 15 in d minor* (vol.I), *71 in a minor*, *80 in g minor* (vol.V) starts from what could be called a *specific pattern for the opening of the discourse*, namely the formula of three / more sounds which are repeated on the same step moved by leap to the octave. It is also interesting the fact that, for these pieces, the system „en modo dorico” is specified, probably also by virtue of the same *stile antico*. The pulsation of eights in a ternary movement fitted in the $\frac{3}{4}$ measure becomes characteristic for the reevaluation of another pre-classical dance – *Courante* – within the thematic of *Sonatas 41*(vol.III) and *116* (vol.VII). The opening pattern starts from the six equal eights in the first 2-3 measures brought in a formula of arpeggio or stepped running.

The grace of the Rococo *embroidery* is remarked, also as a feature of the *stile antico*, in many of Soler's sonatas, regardless of the period in his creation. Consequently, in the first volume, not less than six pieces – *Sonatas 3, 5, 8, 14, 16, 20*

– send back to this stylistic period. Soler demonstrates that the rich adornment of the writing is suitable both for the slow pieces, *Sonatas 22, 26* (vol.II), and for the fast ones, such as the brilliant theme of *Sonata 33* in G Major, vol.II.

2.5. Resorting to the valences of folklore, to the means of the folk dance, is one of the main premises for all the Spanish composers' creation because, as the Russian composer Glinka said „...Music and dance are inseparable... There is no Spanish who, since childhood, does not know how to dance”[3]. The Iberian folklore has been a temptation for so many composers outside Spain that its influence seems so much more natural on a native musician. The Iberian dances full of temperament emerge from Soler's works either through direct allusions, or even only through the exuberance and vitality characterizing so many of his pages. Although about the true „discovery” of folklore we can speak only at the moment when the national schools appear (the first wave – Liszt, Chopin, Grieg, the Russian school, or the second wave – Bartók, De Falla, Enescu etc.) it is impossible not to make a remark of the influences of the folk art in the precursors' music.

Besides the specific *interlude* in the composer's early sonatas, „the Spanish specifics” of Soler are concentrated in

certain melodic, rhythmic or harmonic elements, such as:

- The tetrachord formula *malagueña*, which is called by A. Leahu a „descending motif /.../ used today until saturation, even by the entertainment music based on Spanish themes”. [4]

The exoticism of the formula blends, in fact, with the traditional *bas de ciaccona*, from where we can draw the conclusion that it is universally valid in time and space. In *Sonata 117* (vol.VII) it can be depicted in the pillars of the bass, placed on the first beat of the measure.



Fig.5 - *Sonata 117*, vol.VII, (measures 1-8)

- The scales specific to the Iberian folklore as a major scale with the second step, the sixth and the seventh lowered in *Sonata 2* vol.I .
- The colourful harmonic language by involving in the cadence the second lowered step, the way it appears in *Sonata 2* vol.I.
- The rhythmic elements affect the large relations among the durations - 4:2 in *Sonata 18* vol.I which characterizes the manly, firm side of the Spanish music, its specific stresses – every 4 out of 4 values in *Sonata 6* vol.I, sounds suggesting the tambourine, the castagnets, the specific beats of the dance steps, in *Sonata 4* vol.I.

3. Conclusions

The various facets of Soler's sonata reveal us the way followed by the composer for his entire life (from the scherzando character to his recourse to the old ways of writing, to anticipating the exploitation of folklore,

before the national schools were formed) to confer to each of his sonatas a personal touch through which the Spanish master externalized artistic experiences.

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