

Stylistic and interpretative particularities of the Chamber Repertory for Viola in the 20th century

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Abstract: *At the beginning of the 20th century, the soloist perspectives for the viola acquired new dimensions after the works composed by Paul Hindemith, Max Reger, Dmitri Shostakovich and Béla Bartók. The viola was increasingly present on the great stages as a soloist instrument. Our study will focus not only on the creation of composers Dmitri Shostakovich and Béla Bartók, but also on the legacy of authentic musical emotions, as well as on the synthesis of language elements, of compositional structures manifest in musical history up to these two famous composers.*

Key-words: *viola, modernity, structures, compositions, performance.*

1. Introduction: elements of modernity in the music of the 20th century

For a long time, in the second half of the second millennium, the viola was an instrument that had gone into decline, but which “returned at the end of nineteenth century” (Cowgill & Holman 2010, XIX).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the soloist perspectives for the viola acquired new dimensions after the works composed by Paul Hindemith, Max Reger, Dmitri Shostakovich and Béla Bartók. Musicians such as Lionel Tertis and William Primrose helped the rise of a new generation of violists, and the viola was increasingly present on the great stages as a soloist instruments. Our study will focus not only on the creation of composers Dmitri Shostakovich and Béla Bartók, but also on the legacy of authentic musical emotions, on national elements, as well as on the synthesis of language elements, of compositional structures manifest in musical history up to these two famous composers.

The post-Wagner composers will make ample use of modulations in order to increase musical dynamism, and the constant exacerbation of harmonic procedures led to the vacillation of tonality (Pascu & Boţocan 2012, 473). The abstract became

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the norm, unseating the traditional foundations, thus in atonalism composers resorted to various systems of sound organization. Stravinsky uses the terminology of *sound polarity* which exceeds the scope of the tonal framework. In his work *Poetica muzicală* [Musical poetics] he states that: “*The pole of music represents the essential axis of music... Any music is only a succession of impulses which converge towards a definite point of calm.*” – our translation (Stravinski 1967, 38).

Stravinsky says that he himself is not atonal, but anti-tonal, this statement underlining the fact that tonality is only a provisional means which shall pass, the fundamental element to survive to all changes (Stravinski 1967, 40-41) will be melody.

The extended tonality, based on the phenomenon of natural resonance, the microtone – the introduction of quarters, sixths, thirds of tone, the chromatic range, dodecaphony, serialism, are important directions in the 20th century, directions which exceed the traditional template of that time.

This paper approaches the two compositions, *Concerto for viola and orchestra* by Béla Bartók and the *Sonata for viola and piano op. 147* by Dmitri Shostakovich from distinct angles relevant in the construction of an interpretative approach, but also in the musical, structural and formal cognitive progress, which contributes to a good understanding of the message of the two compositions. The two compositions represent the summit of the existence of the two composers, both are the last opuses composed, and they gather their musical, compositional, human, creative integral experience. Their common point is the modern language, the symbols of death, but also the idea of transcendence.

Modern composers exploit the most daring means to renew the musical language, the rhythmic and melodic structures from the folklore of peoples represents an extremely precious contribution of the 20th century. Polyrythm becomes a way of expression, and polyrhythmic overlaps are often encountered in the creation of *impressionists*, but also of *neoclassicists*, whereas the hostility of *expressionists* towards order and symmetry is also conveyed through rhythm. The metrical disorganization reaches its summit in *randomness*, where different sequences can be sung randomly by the interpreters (Pascu & Boțocan, 479).

2. The repertory for viola in the 20th century

In the 20th century there are increasingly numerous papers with viola as the soloist instrument, and remarkable violists emerge, such as Lionel Tertis, William Primrose, Paul Hindemith who encouraged composers like B. Bartók or Cecil Forsyth to write composition for viola and orchestra. **William Walton**, born at the beginning of the 1920s, is part of the elite of English composers who embrace the

conservative tradition of Romanticism, but still allow for the inclusion of some modern elements in the musical language. His concerto for viola, a compositional landmark for Béla Bartók in the treatment of the viola as a soloist instrument, is among the most appreciated concertos written for this instrument. It is a challenging concerto from the point of view of the instrumentalist technique, and it has a different structure than the one imposed by traditionalism at that time. The concerto has three parts, but the novelty stems from the fact that the musical discourse starts and ends with slow movements, the opposite of what happens, parts 1-3 are always fast. Walton has the courage to adopt a different structure for his concertos, the middle part is the fast one, as influenced by the concerto no. 1 for violin by Sergei Prokofiev.

Another famous composer who created and enriched the repertory for viola is Paul Hindemith. French violist, teacher, theoretician, composer, multitalented musician, Paul Hindemith brought an important contribution to these musical domains, his compositions are very popular even today. The concerto for viola and small orchestra "Der Schwanendreher", the second concerto composed for viola and one of his best-known compositions was performed for the first time in 1936, in Amsterdam, by the Concertgebouw orchestra, with Paul Hindemith himself as the soloist.

Another concert representative for the 20th century is the one signed by **Mikhail Pletnev**, renowned Russian pianist, conductor and composer. Winner of the gold medal at the *Tchaikovsky International Contest*, he was famous for his uniqueness and his interpretation and composition talent. He was invited to give concerts around the world, and his compositions are increasingly well known. His concerto for viola was composed for the world-renowned soloist Yury Bashmet, and includes three contrasting parts. It combines harmoniously the musical discourse with Romantic nuances, fragments from Russian folklore music and the dissonant structures which come back each time to the tonal. The three parts are structured in *Moderato*, *Andante* and *Presto*, classical structure, the old pattern for new melodies and extremely pregnant rhythms.

Dmitri Shostakovich's influence is very strong, given that he is a unique personality in the 20th century culture. The neoclassical stylistic orientation is manifest in genres such as symphonies, concertos, suites and quartets, his compositions representing a synthesis of the national character which combines elements of the European creations, both traditional and modern (Chelaru 2020, 88). Alongside the *String Quartet no. 8*, the *Sonata for Viola and Piano op. 147* is considered his second auto-biographical composition. There are numerous symbols and meanings which might be omitted at a first hearing; thus, a more detailed analysis of this sonata will complete the interpretation, adding new focus, new meanings to the musical and interpretative image.



Ex.1. Dmitri Shostakovich – “Sonata for Viola and Piano op. 147”, Part I – m. 1-4
(The first measures for the solo viola)

The third part is composed in memory of L. van Beethoven, including themes from the *Sonata for Piano no. 14* as bass, melodic and rhythmic foundation. This sonata was dedicated by Beethoven to Napoleon Bonaparte, political personality that the composer greatly admired until he proclaimed himself emperor. Shostakovich uses in the sonata for viola the rhythm specific for the sonata for piano, a dominant ternary rhythm.

The sonata for viola is structured in three parts, preserving the established formal pattern. From a stylistic and interpretative point of view, we shall consider the recordings of the soloists Maxim Rysanov and Tabea Zimmermann. Each part of this sonata reflects different ideas: the first part is a mixture of Baroque composition and the musical language of the 20th century, of ideas opposed to lyricism and the linear of the twelve chromatic sounds combined with the melodic line interpreted by the viola.

In Europe, the composers of the national schools of the 20th century carry on the legacy of their forerunners in respect to the use of folklore, both the national one and that of the surrounding countries or even of exotic cultures. This interest materialized in numerous collections and studies, folklore becoming a real source of inspiration for composers. The specific rhythm, the dominant modalism of folklore gave classical music more freshness and melodic diversity. The folklore motifs or the processing of folklore melodies are often encountered by these composers (Bughici 1978, 208-209).

The *Concerto for viola and orchestra* by Béla Bartók was born in the United States of America in 1945. In deciphering the exact context of composing the *Concerto for viola*, our reference point is the correspondence between the two artists: Bartók and Primrose.³ The Concerto for viola has many endings variants, the first was proposed by Tibor Serly in 1950, the next by Peter Bartók (the composer's son), Nelson Dellamaggiore and Paul Neubauer in 1995, and the last variant belongs to Csaba Erdélyi. From a stylistic point of view, this concert on a Romanian folklore theme from Bihor is very similar to the third concerto for piano written in

³ Kovacs, Janos, comments in the record bag of Bartók's *Concerto for viola and orchestra*, soloist Géza Németh, Philharmonia Orchestra, conductor András Kórodi, CD, Hungaroton House.

parallel. The harmony is limited, and the strong elegiac nature specific to Bartók's compositions amplifies in the last years of his life.

Harold in Italy, op. 16, is a symphony in four parts, with viola solo. This work was composed by Hector Berlioz in 1834 and commissioned by the virtuous interpreter and composer Niccolò Paganini. The reason for N. Paganini's request was that he had purchased a Stradivarius viola. H. Berlioz said that his idea was to write a series of scenes for orchestra involving more the solo viola as an active character, but always preserving its individuality: "By placing the viola in the midst of poetic recollections of my wanderings in the [Italian] Abruzzi, I wished to make of it a sort of melancholy dreamer after the manner of Byron's *Childe Harold*"⁴.

The composition has four long parts, the first part is entitled *Harold in the mountains*, with the subtitle "Scenes of Sadness, Happiness, and Joy", and is an introspective introduction of the protagonist, of the subtle theme, performed first by the viola solo, that echoes throughout the composition. The second part, called *The March of the Pilgrims Singing Their Evening Prayer*, contrasts the composer's lush romantic perspective with the pilgrims' gentle religious fervor. The serenade in the third movement describes a person living in the mountains in the Abruzzi region, a person to whom the main character sings. The English horn embodies the singer's voice, Harold is also present in the viola solo which watches the scene closely.

As part of the *Concerto for viola*, the interlude which precedes the second section, *Lento Parlando* is a moment of fourteen measures, gloomy and strong, which is still based on the theme of the first part. The sequence ends brilliantly with a chromatic range, always descending until it reaches the free chord Do in the end. The second part, *Adagio Religioso*, starts with a chord of Mi major. The entire movement is full both for the viola solo and for the orchestra ensemble. At measure 40, a repetition limited in size of the beginning of the motif *Adagio* occurs as an echo of the main theme of the first part (measure 50). From this moment on, the musical discourse gradually accelerates, reaching a short cadence which leads directly to the introduction of the last part noted as *Allegro*. This musical development was fully noted by Bartók. The introduction to the third part is the only place in which Serly was forced to omit eight measures written by the composer (Maurice 2004, 48). The third movement, *Alegro Vivace*, is the part on which Serly worked the most. If the other parts had at least a sketch of the melody, harmony and counterpoint, this last part most often had only one melody noted, or only some chords or only counterpoint structures or even only intervals.

⁴ Schwarm, Betsy. *Harold in Italy, Op. 16 - symphony by Berlioz*, www.britannica.com/topic/Harold-in-Italy-Op-16, 23th of July 2024.

3. Conclusions

The music of the 20th century is a continuous challenge for musicians and for the public who is faced with an ever-changing reality: not only the sonorous aspect of music was changed (especially that focusing on an instrument with a special position such as the viola), but also the mentality concerning the interpretation, the composition, the perception of and the approach to the musical artistic process. A special relation develops with the universe of ideas attached to the musical process, interfering with concepts such as “*language, subjectivity, metaphysics, truth and ethics: music can show how the predominant images of language, communication, and meaning in contemporary philosophy may be lacking in essential ways*” (Bowie 2007, III). Thus, music becomes further integrated in the ampler cultural phenomena of the world, representing (when it comes to value) a pretext for beauty in a world which is building another type of values.

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