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## BÉLA BARTÓK'S MIKROKOSMOS: ART AND CULTURE IN INTERPRETATIVE PRACTICES

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**Abstract:** The present research aims to describe the qualitative value of Béla Bartók's *Mikrokosmos* in the development of the musician-performer, covering musicological, technical, interpretive aspects, as well as the application and relevance as a methodology for musical teaching and important aspects of piano performance. The balance between practical and theoretical issues ratifies the work as a reference in the process of musical formation (culture) and artistic development (art).

**Keywords:** Bela Bartok; Microkosmos; Interpretive Practices; Art; Culture.

## **MIKROKOSMOS (1926-1937): COMPOSER - ORIGIN - CONCEPT AND ORGANIZATION**

Béla Bartók (1881-1945), Hungarian composer, nationalist and one of the most respected specialists in folk song. The guiding thread that runs through his entire production lies in the versatility with which he combined the essence of popular music with the highest forms of Western classical music, bringing together past and present achievements in an expressive synthesis. In 1904 he made his first notation linked to a folk song and for the next 15 years he traveled through Hungary and neighboring countries, digging into the roots of this music and capitalizing on his discoveries. Through this scientific approach the composer reports that

The work I did, recording songs in the villages, was a fundamental influence on my work, as it freed me from the tyranny of major and minor keys. The greater part of the treasures collected, and the most precious part of them, were in the ancient Greek or ecclesiastical modes, or were based on still older (pentatonic) scales, and the melodies were full of the freest and most varied rhythmic phrases, and of changes of tempo, performed both rubato and in

tempo giusto. It became clear to me that the old ways, forgotten in our music, had lost nothing of their vigor (COELHO, 2010, p.9).

The *Mikrokosmos* was composed between 1926/1937 and represents one of his most important works for the piano. Its origin is associated with the composer's need to obtain a pedagogical organization for the formation of his own son, ratifying its didactic character, as well as the interest in creating a method for piano that could represent the new actions of 20th century music.

The terminology *Mikrokosmos* describes a guide to small works (*mikro*) based on a diversity of discoveries of a universal character (*kosmos*), presenting a school of music education for pianists where, in addition to the instrumentalist training the movements and muscular coordination necessary for the development of an accurate technique, will have gradual knowledge of musicological information, aesthetic concepts and listening to sound patterns that are not only related to traditional tonal music, expanding its auditory scope. It reports on composers such as Bach (185-1750), Beethoven (1770-1827), Debussy (1862-1918), among others, as well as a compendium of Bartók's personal style and many aspects of musical achievements in the first half of the 20th century, ratifying the conceptual description (SUCHOFF, 2002, p.9)<sup>1</sup>.

This collection of 153 small pieces is organized into six volumes, offering progressive learning. The first four notebooks have a pedagogical character, bringing an appendix of specific exercises at the end of each volume with the objective of training the main technical-musical requirements. Volumes V and VI are conceived as concert pieces, artistic in nature, where the performer must use the information learned, materializing the transfer of learning.

<sup>1</sup> "...*Mikrokosmos* may be interpreted as a series of pieces in all of different styles that represent a small world. Or, it may be interpreted as a world, a musical world for the little ones, for de children."

The transfer of learning is the possibility of applying, in a new situation, knowledge, habits, methods, etc., acquired in other circumstances. The individual realizes that the same solution, which made it possible to overcome the difficulties of a given problem, serves to overcome those he currently faces (KAPLAN, 1987, p.84).

The reasoning of formation (vol. I to vol. IV) and application (vol. V and VI) offers unity to the work that, due to its undeniable importance, is known as the “well-tempered harpsichord of the 20th century”.

## PEDAGOGICAL THINKING

Four important factors structure the pedagogical thinking of Béla Bartók's Mikrokosmos:

- Literacy: a guide to theoretical elements;
- Motivation: valuing pleasure as an important ingredient in the learning process;
- Diversity: multiplicity of musical, technical and interpretive resources inserted in each work;
- Technique: piano performance skills related to the most diverse possibilities of motor coordination.

Features such as time signatures (simple and compound); rhythmic figures; treble and bass clefs, developing the reading of notes through the associative process (parallelism); tonal thinking (key keys); modal organization (interval relationship); intensities terminology (*p*, *mp*, *mf*, *f*, *ff*, ...); articulations (*stacatissimo*, *staccato*, *non-legato*, *legato*, *legatissimo*, *tenuto*); diversity of accents ( $\wedge$ ,  $<$ ,  $>$ , *sf*, ...); conquest of textures (geographical keyboard knowledge for the locomotion process); fingering; symmetrical and asymmetrical sentences; polyrhythmia; polytonality; interpretation terminologies (*dolce*, *martelatto*, *stretto*, *vigoroso*, ...); tempo terminologies (*acellerando*, *rallentando*,

*ritenutto*, ...) ; are gradually inserted, ratifying the method as a guide of theoretical elements in the literacy process.

In his 153 pieces, Bartók offers the student different musical elements that can feed the interest in the new, creating a reason that awakens the pleasure of searching, learning and consequent change, avoiding the fatigue of a study based on a repertoire without new expectations.

Any type of learning – motor, understanding of concepts, etc. – is only carried out through the activity of the learner, who needs reasons to carry it out. (...) Encouraging learning is putting the student in situations that provoke in his psyche the sources of internal energy – the motives – that will lead him to study with interest and pleasure (KAPLAN, 1987, p62-64).

The dynamism is associated with a diversity of sound planning, seeking continuous auditory education, gradually increasing the sound communication process, as well as important performance resources from a technical/instrumental point of view.

The musicological, technical and interpretive resources inserted in each work give Mikrokosmos a qualitative differential. Such observation can be described through the analysis carried out in the first piece of Volume I, whose extension is eight bars:

- Musicological: presents the pentagram (organization of musical writing); measures (rhythmic division); time signature (understanding of rhythmic figures); treble and bass clefs (associative reading); rhythmic figures (semibreve and minim – proportion); pauses (sound and silence relationship); C pentachord (geographical position).
- Technical: individuality of the fingers (pentaccord); fingering (locomotion and organization); parallel ascending and descending movement (motricity and displacement).

- Interpretive: legato touch (how to say); phrasing line (musical text); time indication (speed and aesthetic character).

In this collection, Bartók provokes performance skills related to the most diverse possibilities of motor coordination and sound construction, always demanding a new system of responses from the performer: “The formation of a new system of responses to a given stimulation imposes a fact that has a considerable relevance in the process of creating a new functional structure: the phenomenon of learning.” (KAPLAN, 1987, p.42).

## STRATEGIES

### READING: PENTACHORD

Exactly in the first two volumes, Bartók creates micro works structured in pentachords. The reading does not occur from middle C, but a pentachord above and below this reference, creating an associative reasoning between the treble and bass clefs.

Pentachord changes occur, however, there is no displacement of the hands. As we have five notes for five fingers, once positioned, the player can fix his attention on the score, developing his sense of location, avoiding looking at the keyboard.

The time spent transporting the gaze, from the music page to the keyboard, and from there again to the piece under study, all the time spent on this double route is time stolen from reading, fatally mutilated by countless interruptions, surprises and hesitations. (...) Using only sight, the student does not develop the “being away”, does not acquire a secure knowledge of the keyboard and, consequently, does not learn to locate himself safely (SÁ PEREIRA, 1964, p. .16).

## MUSCLE DISSOCIATION (VOLUNTARY MOVEMENT RESPONSE): FIVE FINGERS

The immediate insertion of the five fingers is another factor that qualifies Béla Bartók’s Mikrokosmos. In general, we use the hands through the reflex, which is an invariable response related to a defined stimulus. However, the piano performance requires the individuality of finger articulation, stimulating the learning of voluntary movement, the one that demands the conscious intervention of the one who performs it.

Being a type of action in which the neurological, muscular and bone structures of the individual participate, we can say that voluntary movement is the peripheral manifestation of a process that has its origin and control in the brain and central nervous system and that obeys a need of the individual who performs it. (...) it is the type of movement used in the act of instrumental learning (KAPLAN, 1987, p.30).

## AUDITORY EDUCATION: SOUND RELATIONSHIPS

Sound is the main relationship between the player and his instrument. Its planning is associated with the refinement of sensory and auditory perceptions. The first 21 works of the method, present in the first volume, do not present information about dynamics or sonority, provoking balance of the articulation of the five fingers through the maintenance of touch, demanding from the performer body awareness and auditory education.

With the achievement of this tool, the student will be able to explore new horizons. Bartók confirms this reasoning from the twenty-second work with the first reference to dynamics based on extremes: *f* and *p*. Learning the extremes creates a reference for intermediate sounds such as: *mf*, *pp*, *cresc*, *dim.*, proving the pedagogical reasoning in the conquest of sound relationships.

## TEXTS AND TYPES OF WRITING: POLYPHONIC, HOMOPHONIC AND MONODIC

The process of musical creation has, throughout its history, specific types of writing that characterize each period. It is possible to observe that Bartók was strongly influenced by Bach's polyphonic art, as well as by the homophonic and monodic thought present in the classical and romantic periods, employing in his Mikrokosmos resources that portray such characteristics, ratifying the important dialogue with the past in the construction of the continuity of the historical process.

In terms of technique/sound, baroque polyphony unifies the development between right and left hands through imitative ideas. There is no hierarchy plan, but the active participation of both hands in the construction of the dialogue based on the thematic structure. The homophonic organization, on the other hand, requires the preparation of two specific planes, melodic line and harmonic line, causing hierarchies of sonority. Finally, the monodic art requires continuity and balance in the maintenance of the melodic design. The identity of the hands disappears, and the sound result of the central idea prevails. In addition to auditory development, the three procedures require an analytical look, aesthetic understanding and refined technique to achieve the freedom that transforms interpretation into an artistic object.

... imagination is not only the mother of whim but also the servant of the creative will. The creator's function is to select the elements he receives from them, for human activity must impose limits on itself. The more art is controlled, limited, worked on, the more it is free (STRAVINSKY, 1996, p.63).

## TECHNICAL PROCEDURES

According to Hans Von Bülow (1830/1894) "there are three things a pianist needs: the first is technique, the second is Technique and the third is TECHNIQUE" (KAPLAN, 1966, p.3).

The above quote does not exclude the huge range of musical procedures that imply the act of instrumental performance, it only reinforces the importance of "how" to do it, allowing pianists to overcome the arduous problems of performance present in musical literature.

In its diversity of creation, Béla Bartók's Mikrokosmos brings a considerable list of technical resources that help in the coordination of muscular movements necessary for this practice:

- Specific types of ringtones: legato, legatissimo, non legato, tenuto, portamento, staccato, staccatissimo, among others.
- Independence of the hands: dissociation of movements
  1. Counterpoint: imitation technique;
  2. Coordination: legato in one hand and staccato in the other;
  3. Dynamics contrasts: right hand *p* and left hand *f*, vice-versa;
  4. Accompanying figures: one hand with the melodic line and the other developing an ostinato line; breaks; chords; broken chords, etc.
- Finger independence:
  1. Several locomotion resources: parallel, opposite, ascending and descending;
  2. Homophony: melody x accompaniment;
  3. Polyphony: construction by imitation;
  4. Parallelism of harmonic resources;
  5. Monday: transfer between right and left.

- Exploration of harmonic resources:
  1. 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th intervals. 6th 7th and 8th;
  2. Triadic chords and their inversions;
  3. Tetrads and their inversions;
  4. Ascending and Descending Arpeggios.
- Pedalization:
  1. Resonance technique
  2. Jumps (reflex): sound continuity
- Displacement - passages and positions:
  1. Five fingers technique;
  2. Change of Texture;
  3. Thumb pass;
  4. Enlargement of the Registry: reflex;
  5. Scales;
  6. Arpeggios;
  7. Interval Relations and Chords;
  8. Notes stuck.
- Ornamentation:
  1. Approvals;
  2. Trills (slow and fast) – interval proximity;
  3. Jitters (slow and fast) – interval distance.
- Black Keys:
 

Passing through the black keys, specifically when they are performed by the thumb (discontinuity process) – hand rotation.
- The piano in the community:
  1. Among the instrumentalist himself: piano and voice (coordination and vocal education);
  2. Piano in Chamber Music (four hands

piano; two pianos and piano and voice) requiring the learning of the collective pulse, sound research for the equalization of the ensemble and artistic flexibility, breaking of individual expectations due to the differences in musical formation under the interpretive point of view, requiring partnership and working together.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Bartók, in his research on folk music, demonstrates the importance of the scientific gaze in the discovery and dissemination of information.

Those who engage in practices without science are like navigators without a compass or rudder, who never know for sure where they are heading. (...) Practice must always be built on good theory (DA VINCI apud KAPLAN, 1966, p.7).

The gradual presentation of musicological procedures, in addition to assisting in literacy, ratifying its pedagogical character, represents the practical application of theoretical resources, valuing experience and the transfer of learning. Dynamism, based on the multiplicity of information, helps to maintain pleasure, an essential item in the motivation process.

Associative reading, important motor skills, auditory education and writing techniques are strategies that confirm the composer's conscience, transforming Mikrokosmos into an efficient musical education guide.

Specific types of touches, independence of movements, exploration of harmonic resources, pedaling, locomotion procedures, ornamentation, among others, underlie the importance of this literature in the exercise of instrumental performance.

The use of the piano in chamber music practice reveals the importance of flexibility in interpretive reasoning in conjunction with

continuous sound research: “The search for sound balance in a four-handed duo can bring benefits in terms of timbre quality for each of the pianists” (BARANCOSKI, 2009).

His Mikrokosmos encompasses a synthesis of the achievements of the historical periods, see the influence of previous composers, as well as numerous procedures of twentieth century music, offering an auditory, technical and

interpretive arsenal of indisputable diversity. It is an artistic and cultural landmark of piano literature. However, it must be noted that there is no method that is functional without methodology. The analysis of the teacher/pianist in the search for understanding the mechanisms offered by Bartók in his Mikrokosmos will be a fundamental task, realizing the necessary pedagogical awareness.

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