

Preludes and fugues for piano, op. 53

Vladimír Bokes

It would make little sense to talk about the almost 40 minutes long piano cycle without mentioning the complex circumstances in which it was written. It is paradoxical that Preludes and Fugues for the piano belong to my most frequently played works: if a composer in the present time chooses such a form, he declares his relationship with tradition; however, I consider myself a modernist. Let me say a few words about myself in this respect: being 16 years old in 1962, I started to be interested in the serial music; being 19 years old – before commencing my university studies in composition in the traditional class of the professor Alexander Moyzes in Bratislava –, I wrote in 1965 a composition (Sequence for 9 instruments) which the then leader of the Slovak music avant-garde Ladislav Kupkovič wanted to include in a concert of the ensemble "Music of Today" at the Bratislava Music Festival. However, this was not going to happen, as the traditional school would never agree with a performance of a work written under the influence of Webern and the Darmstadt school. "You'll have to choose: the concert or your studies", told me the then head of the department, i.e. my predecessor. The premiere of this piece, 42 years after it was composed, is scheduled for this year's festival Melos-Etos and will be performed by a new generation of young musicians.

I finished my studies at the Music Academy in Bratislava with one of the more tolerant professors, Dezider Kardoš, in 1970, i.e. just at the beginning of the infamous "normalization" period in Czechoslovakia. A short time later, I focused again on the new directions in music, although this was even more precarious than before. In 1975, my chamber compositions, in which I combined the aleatorics with serialism, were scolded by critics as the "extreme avant-garde". The premiere of my Wind Quintet No. 2, performed together with the works of a couple of other unwanted composers of the 1960s in Baranow (Poland), was even monitored by the communist security services. The premiere of the Piano Concerto No 1 in 1978 was brushed down with the phrase "this is not a work of art anymore" and Dr. Zdenko Nováček in his article "For the strength of the Marxist-Leninist aesthetics" wrote: "These opinions and this kind of music endanger the leading role of the working class in the society"; well, at least some truth in these words. Further public performances and any broadcast of my works were forbidden after the first performance of my Symphony No 2 in 1980 from the initiative of the Central Committee of the Slovak communist party.

The works I composed by the end of the 1970s, encouraged by the colleagues and performers who were closest to me, as well as those works I composed already

as a prohibited author (today, you will find some musicians who would not take this very seriously), were declared unplayable and uncommunicative. Among these, I would mention Sonata for Violin and Piano from 1978 (first performed in 2006), Coll'Age for Piano Quintet from 1979 (first Slovak performance in 2005), Piano Sonata No 3 from 1980 (first performed in 2002), Symphony No 3 for orchestra from 1980 (first performance in 1989), Cadence II for flute, oboe and piano from 1982 (premiere in 1995), Wind Quintet No 3 (premiere in 1992) and String Quartet No 3 (premiere in 1994), both from 1982. Today, these works already appear to be playable and they even receive positive response; however, some other works from this period have not been performed yet.

Thus, such were the circumstances in which I started to write the cycle Preludes and fugues for piano. Some of the earliest pieces were composed at the time when I faced the biggest problems: I wrote them in a state of a deep personal depression resulting from the prohibition; it is fair to say that I decided to use such a basic form of music to find out whether I actually could compose or not. I think that a similar motivation, curiously accompanied by a high regard for the work of Johann Sebastian Bach, led Paul Hindemith in 1942 to compose the cycle Ludus Tonalis at the time of his emigration from the Nazi Germany ("Fall Hindemith" from 1934 should perhaps be mentioned); similarly, Dmitri Shostakovich started to work on his 24 Preludes and Fugues at the height of the oppressive Zhdanov Doctrine in 1951. I composed the first piece of the cycle, Fugue in D major, at the beginning of 1985; writing this piece, I realized that the harsh criticism of my music that I had to endure was not justified. I added further pieces from time to time; the idea to create a cycle came later. The defining sign of the cycle is a neoclassic orientation that is being gradually relaxed in the later pieces; it is then enriched by new approaches, e.g. the chromaticism and atonality; paradoxically, tonality and dodecaphony unite, and in the final pieces, even though I kept using the key signatures, the style is hardly distinguishable from my other (deeply dodecaphonical) works. The symbol of the unification of tonality and dodecaphony is the sequence of keys used in the cycle, which coincides with the twelve-tone theme of the last fugue in C major; this somehow reminds me of the popular theory of fractals.

Prelude and Fugue No. 1, D major. The prelude is a reminiscence of my student works, notably of the Piano Sonata which I composed at the conservatory in 1964 and also of La Follia for Violin from 1967. The fugue makes me happy by its calm course and by striking a balance between diatonics and chromaticism.

Prelude and Fugue No. 2, G sharp minor. The prelude should satisfy by its biological form the pianists as well as the mathematicians. The theme of the fugue is based – and follow it now! - on the relation of tones on the 6th and 7th steps of the minor melodic scale, the higher ones (declined to the fifth) chromatically lowered and the lower ones (risen to the tonic) chromatically raised. In the course of the composition, these relations are removed from the tonal context.

Prelude and Fugue No. 3, B flat major. The prelude, the melodic line of which

evolves according to the Fibonacci sequence, reminds of my friend Josef Sixta and his symmetric construction with the centre in the middle of the keyboard (i.e. "symetastics", using the term coined by Rudolf Macudzinski). The theme of the fugue connects the concepts of the play (the chord figuration in quavers) and the cry (the half-tone "sigh" in dotted crotchets) and resembles the music of Shostakovich; it also includes a quotation of the Große Fuge by Beethoven.

Prelude and Fugue No.4, E minor. A strict prelude, the subject of which connects an atonal figure to the chord of tonic, its transposition with the dominant, has a jazz character. It is followed by the fugue, in which there appears a 5-voice imitative counterpoint with augmentations.

Prelude and Fugue No.5, E flat major. The prelude perhaps reminds of my favourite B. Martinu; nevertheless, there is a strict dodecaphony, the use of pedal tones T-D and the golden ratio. The fugue is another of my "revenge" taken against the pianists. Its style is somewhere between the neobaroque and the music of Xenakis.

Prelude and Fugue No.6, A minor. Both parts combine tonality with dodecaphony. The theme of the prelude is a twelve-tone sequence which begins with a few steps of the descending A minor scale. The focal point of the almost 12-tone theme of the fugue begins with the dominant tone E and continues with diatonic descend.

Prelude and Fugue No.7, F major. I am very satisfied with this prelude: it is a kind of a stochastic Brahms. The fugue with its 5/8 bar perhaps reminds of Bartok and it can also become a treat for the pianist.

Prelude and Fugue No.8, B minor. Here begins the uncompromising part of the cycle. The prelude is in both versions a pure construction in the style of J. M. Hauer; it is important that the pianist be able to express it. I would be glad if all who claim that my music is without expression could try and play this fugue; they should start with its first version and then go on to try the second one with the mini-clusters. The second version of Fugue B minor may sound "scary" in comparison with the previous pieces which are fairly traditional. The listener should wake up from his dozing to realize that he is listening to contemporary music.

Prelude and Fugue No.9, D flat major. I composed this pair in January 1989 as an expression of the outrage I felt watching the scenes of the police crackdown against the protests in Prague on the Austrian TV. A remembrance on Agon can be found in the prelude, in which the intermittent minimalistic sequences follow an appellative introduction. In the fugue we can hear M. Kopelent, whom I met in Dolná Krupá during the summer holiday in 1988. At that time we agreed that he would give a talk at a seminar which I chaired at the Music Academy in Bratislava; this was going to be the second Kopelent workshop after the first at the Paris Conservatory. It is curious that it took years until I became aware of the structural similarities between this fugue and fugue No.3 alluding to Shostakovich.

Prelude and Fugue No.10, G minor. The prelude is similar in sound to No.8. The difference is in the whole line of descending and in the application of the golden ratio sequence to the repetition of crotchets. The fugue is punctualistic and contains fragments of waltz – the construction works well and creates automatically the required absurd associations. The theme of the fugue, which strictly follows the Fibonacci sequence, is a reminiscence on Scherzo from the diploma 1. symphony (1969) and at the same time it resembles the intermezzo from Sequence (1965). That is what I wanted – to bridge the former differences.

Prelude and Fugue No.11, F sharp minor. The Prelude is built on a simple harmonic cadence. The melodic part passes regularly from one hand to the other one; it is based on the chromatic sequences using mostly the sevenths and ninths. The rhythmical structure of the melody consistently applies the permutations of the values derived from Fibonacci sequence. These values can also be found in the fugue which is based on an imitation counterpoint of a twelve-tone sequence which is being continuously shortened; paradoxically, this sequence begins with the tones of the triad.

Prelude and Fugue No.12, C major. I could explain this prelude as a modulation from minimalism (the tones of C major chord) to stochastics (the reverse of this chord, a "serial polyphony"). The fugue – is this still a fugue? - summarizes the cycle: the tones of its dodecaphonic theme coincide with the sequence of the keys of the whole cycle.

The first prelude is a passacaglia, the last fugue is a toccata.

The selection from Preludes and Fugues had its first performance in November 1990 at the festival New Slovak Music organized already in the new political conditions. Stanislav Zamborský interpreted Nos 9, 10 and 12. The response was quite typical, nothing special; it is getting quite boring to write about my first performances: the same reaction as ever before. The whole cycle was performed for the second time at the festival Melos-Ethos in 1995, once again by Stanislav Zamborský. This time the response was great: Zamborský received the prestigious Frico Kafenda Price; the musicologist Egon Krák wrote at that time a surprisingly positive article about the cycle in the journal Music Life; however, this review had to wait to be published, this time thanks to the chief editor Marián Jurík, until the end of the year 1998. In 2001, my first CD containing the cycle and two piano sonatas was recorded.

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