

FIVE SKETCHES FOR PIANO. AN AVANT-GARDE WORK OF PÉTER VERMESY

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SUMMARY. Péter Vermesy (1939-1989) was one of the most progressive members of the Cluj School of composition. Although his work, either as a composer or a writer demonstrates a commitment to promote the musical mother tongue, he was also opened to the techniques and messages of the western avant-garde. The *Five Sketches for Piano* (1963) is one of his earliest works that experiments with elements of new music, explored later in many other compositions. We dedicate the paper to his memory on the occasion of his double anniversary.

Keywords: Péter Vermesy, Cluj School of composition, avant-garde, piano music

In the context of the second generation of the Transylvanian composers', Péter Vermesy appears as a distinguished, original personality. As a man and as an artist, as he confessed about himself, he is characterized by the dichotomy of the „homo faber” and “homo ludens”. From this attitude arise a great variety of – frequently contrasting – musical expressions – candidness, naïve joyfulness, harsh directness, irony and sarcasm –, as well as his creative curiosity.

Similar to his colleagues, the outset of his compositional career was profoundly affected by Bartók's oeuvre. Though its influence is often understood as an emphasis on the musical mother tongue both in composition and education, certain aspects of his output may have served as a model for Vermesy and his contemporaries in other respects too. Namely, a synthesis of the folk heritage with the contemporary musical tendencies achieved variously by individual results.

Beyond the bartókian influence, these sources had also a special significance during the communist regime, since besides the tolerated

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folksong, the avant-garde style – considered as a manifestation of the western decadence – became a primary device for protest against dictatorial oppression.

Among his Hungarian contemporaries, Vermesy proved to be in this respect one of the most progressive, similar to his Romanian fellow, Cornel Țăranu. As well as their many other colleagues, both studied composition with the remarkable Transylvanian master, Sigismund Toduță. It is not an accident, that out of the interpreters of the very few surviving recordings of Vermesy's excels Țăranu and his *Ars Nova* ensemble founded just for the interpretation of contemporary music.

It would be an exaggeration to consider Vermesy an outstanding pioneer of the Transylvanian avant-garde. Yet, it is important to notice that – according to his writings – he was surprisingly familiar with western musical tendencies, even living on the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain. His attitude towards new music was a Janus-faced one, characterized at the same time by openness and critique. As he stated in a self-interview entitled *Longing for New Classicism*: “Evidently I am very curious about every new musical tendency, every new musical work – wherever it was composed. Since composition has also a technical side, that needs to be permanently developed. You can and you have to learn from every new composition, consciously assimilating everything that seems to be valuable. However, everything new is just in a philosophical sense a necessary denial of the old.”²

As a composer, Vermesy uses the avant-garde language both for experimentation and as a form of protest. For the latter, one of the best examples is his *Monologo con commenti* (1984) set for trombone, percussion and contrabass just before his immigration to West-Germany. In terms of his solo piano compositions it applies mostly to *Five Piano Sketches* (1963) and *Improvisations* (1968).

Though he didn't consider himself a pianist, the instrument is relatively well represented in his output. Besides the compositions set for solo piano, two pianos and chamber formations, it plays a great role in other significant large scale works, like *Concertino da camera* (1966), *Failed Serenade* (1986) or *the 3rd Symphony* (1984). Vermesy wrote two solo piano pieces for his children: *Sonatina* (1976) for his son András, and *Notturmo* (1977) for his daughter Anna.

² Vermesy Péter *Új klasszicizmusra vágyom* [*Longing for New Classicism*], in: *A Hét évkönyve* [The „Hét” Annual], Bukarest: A Hét, 1979, p. 172.

Table 1

Year of composition	Title	Notes
unknown	<i>Adagio-Allegro molto</i>	
unknown	<i>Burletta</i>	
unknown	<i>Three Piano Pieces</i> : I. Invention, II. Adagio, III. Burlesque	
1960	<i>Sonata Juvenile</i> (I-III.)	
1963	<i>Five Piano Sketches</i>	
1968	<i>Improvisations</i> : I. Moderato recitativo, II. Agitato, III. Adagio, IV. Capriccioso, V. Molto agitato, VI. Moderato, VII. Presto	I-III., VII. parts orchestrated for chamber orchestra (1972)
1970	<i>Nenia in memoriam B. B.</i> – Lento, rubato assai	Hommage à Bartók, Later developed in the first movement of the 2 nd <i>Symphony</i>
1976	<i>Sonatina</i> : I. Allegretto, II. Larghetto, III. Vivo	For his son, Vermesy András
1977	<i>Notturmo</i> – Andantino	For his daughter, Vermesy Anna. Later developed in the second movement of the <i>Failed Serenade</i> (Andantino)
1978	<i>Postludium in memoriam K. Z.</i> – Adagio, rubato a piacere	Hommage à Kodály
1982	<i>...Super sepulchrum K. Z.</i> – Moderato, un poco rubato	Hommage à Kodály

The list of Péter Vermesy's Piano Works

All of his solo piano works were composed before he left his homeland. Among the first four, the *Sonata Juvenile* certainly, the other three supposedly date from his college years. The other seven succeeds with a relatively great interval. The last Hommage à Kodály is followed only by a few late – though significant – pieces, thus we can state, that the solo piano works cover in time his entire output.

Some works of his youth show certain overlaps. So the second movements of the *Three Piano Pieces* and *Sonata Juvenile* are almost identical, while the third movement of the later is a significantly elaborated

version of the former's first movement. Two other compositions were developed further: the *Nenia* is a basis for the second movement of his significant 2nd *Symphony*, while the *Notturmo* returns in the late *Failed Serenade*.

Vermesy's solo piano compositions are not demanding that much from a technical, but from an expressive point of view. Their other common characteristic is the briefness of setting, however, due to various factors. Some of them are style exercises (*Sonata Juvenile*), others reflect the technical limitations of the future interpreters (*Sonatina*, *Notturmo*). The laconicism of the three homage pieces expresses a meditative state. And finally, the briefness of the *Five Piano Sketches* and *Improvisations* is a consequence of a concentrated avant-garde language and technique.

In spite of Vermesy's compositional significance and popularity, the greatest part of his output is still unpublished, except his piano works, issued by his former colleague and friend, Pál Búzás in four volumes.³ Though the majority of his compositions were presented during his lifetime, only a few unofficial recordings have survived in the Acoustic Studio of the "Gheorge Dima" Music Academy from Cluj-Napoca, including two interpretations of the *Improvisations*.⁴ The only official audio recording was released by Hungaroton Music in 1988, including almost half of his solo piano works owing to his pupil György Selmeczi.⁵

Generally speaking, Vermesy's piano works are varied in duration, complexity, technical difficulty, style, melodic sources, construction, expression. In a wider sense, they demonstrate an overall preference for experimenting,

³ Vermesy Péter, *Művek két zongorára* [*Works for Two Pianos*], ed. Buzás Pál], Arpeggione, Cluj-Napoca, 2005.

Vermesy Péter, *Művek zongorára és zenekarra* [*Works for Piano and Orchestra*], ed. Buzás Pál], Arpeggione, Cluj-Napoca, 2007.

Vermesy Péter, *Zongoraművek* [*Piano Works*], ed. Buzás Pál], Arpeggione, Cluj-Napoca, 2008.

Vermesy Péter, *Zongoratriók* [*Piano Trios*], ed. Buzás Pál], Arpeggione, Cluj-Napoca, 2009.

⁴ 1472/1049 Vermesy Péter: *Improvizációk zongorára* [*Improvisations for Piano*, Sava Gheorghe, 25.05.1968].

4462 Vermesy Péter: *Improvizációk zongorára* [*Improvisations for Piano*, Jánky Ilona, 07.05.1984].

⁵ Vermesy Péter, *Nenia (in memoriam B.B.), Notturmo, Sonatina (Allegro, Larghetto, Vivo), Öt zongoravázlat* [*Five Sketches for Piano*] (*Vivace, Andante, Con moto, Adagio, Presto*), *Postludium (in memoriam K. Z.)* in: Hungaroton, Budapest, 2008, B0013816Y2.

his innate curiosity, openness and playfulness (“homo ludens”). On the other hand, they are well elaborated due to his interest in structures, polyphony, consecrated and new compositional techniques (“homo faber”). As he confessed once: “I work painfully hard, it’s difficult for me to consider a work as definitive...”⁶

There are some particular style elements characteristic to Vermesy’s compositions, mostly derived from his preference for balance, whether static or dynamic.

One of the basic principles widely and variedly used in his works is the arch-structure. As he discussed in his PhD dissertation, the arch is an artistic reflection of a universal principle, that occur in every period and style at the level of every musical parameter (melody, harmony, rhythm, dynamics, tone color). He illustrates this statement with an example taken from Schoenberg’s work *Die glückliche Hand* along with the following comment: „The extreme, fluttering interval-structure (*Eselmelodik*) as a usual consequence of the serial technique even in vocal facture, effectuates the arch structure in smaller units.”⁷

E.g. 1



Arnold Schoenberg: *Die Glückliche Hand*, II. Bild, mm. 45-47.

This melody type, frequently with diminished octave or minor ninth intervals, is very characteristic to Vermesy’s compositions. Another source of his melodic construction is Hungarian folk music. The latter is also present in the rhythm parameter, with a distinguished focus on giusto and rubato.

Regarding the harmony, Vermesy’s musical language – as well as of his colleagues – resembles that of Bartók, especially in his piano works: diatonic, chromatic, mistuned tonal systems, bitonality, bimodality, central harmony, -interval, -note.

⁶ Vermesy Péter *Új klasszicizmusra vágyom [Longing for New Classicism]*, in: *A Hét évkönyve* [The „Hét” Annual], Bukarest: A Hét, 1979, p. 172.

⁷ Vermesy Péter. *Egy szokványos harmóniafűzés – és ami mögötte rejlik (avagy a záróflexa dicsérete)* [An usual chord progression – and what lies behind it (or the laudation of the closing flexa)] in: *Zenetudományi Írások*, Bukarest: Kriterion, 1983, p. 58.

The symmetry is widely used as a formal principle, whether in binary, ternary, whether as an arch-structure.

The *Five Sketches* (1963) (as well as his following piano piece *Improvisations*) is in many regards different to the other piano works. Conceived in his thirties, after his graduation in composition and the beginning of his career both as a composer and a counterpoint teacher, these early works show an increased interest in western avant-garde music. His numerous writings published in several cultural periodicals demonstrate a profound knowledge of the new music. One of his earliest articles was a report about the Amsterdam Music Autumn of 1968 in two parts entitled *Amsterdam and the New Musical Beauty*, where he participated at the invitation of the Gaudeamus Foundation. The text is permeated by his enthusiasm for the popularity of the avant-garde music among the Dutch youth. On the one side Vermesy was reticent to some experiments, like the aleatoric *Piano Concerto* of John Cage, on the other, he summarized an important feature of new music, also characteristic for his compositions: “Despite the variety of works heard at the festival, a – so to speak – general tendency was the *rational construction* of sounds. I think we can regard this as an essential feature of our contemporary music: a new ideal of beauty.”⁸

This statement, though formulated after setting up the *Five Piano Sketches* explains in retrospect his creative purpose. The work is mainly based on the symmetry principle, a general rule for a highly controlled creative process. As a result, it is rather abstract. The title – *sketch* – is also expressive, especially regarding its connection to new music tendencies, suggesting a sort of experimental, unfinished composition, that paradoxically (but necessarily) is very well organized.

The *Five Piano Sketches* is a series of five short movements, with alternating tempos: Vivace, Andante, Con moto, Adagio, Presto. Though Vermesy doesn't use a proper twelve-note technique, he integrates principles of integral serialism, especially by associating several parameters (notes, rhythm, dynamics, articulation) to obtain specific musical motifs (similar to Messiaen's *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*). Its duration is about 3 minutes, which remembers particularly the highly concentrated, brief pieces of Anton Webern.

⁸ Vermesy Péter, *Hollandia – és az új zenei szép 1-2*. [Netherlands – and the New Musical Beauty] in: *Utunk*, 23/46-7 (nov. 15, 22.), Cluj-Napoca, 1968, p. 12.

To this central note, he associates tensed intervals, especially the minor second-major seventh and diminished fifth:

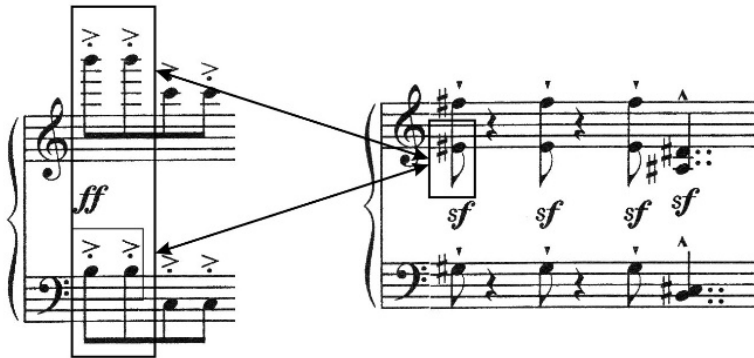
E.g. 4



Péter Vermesy: *Five Piano Sketches*, the beginning of the 4th movement. Minor second relation

The latter (a basis of Bartók's pole-antipole system) is an important structural element, that organizes the axial system of movements:

E.g. 5



Péter Vermesy: *Five Piano Sketches*, 1st movement, Vivace. Pole-antipole relation

The same axial principle leads to the confrontation of diatonic and chromatic materials. The diatonic ones are frequently exposed in a pointillist manner (sudden and big register changes) mostly in the extreme sections, while the chromatic ones presented as chords or clusters of chords (frequently repeated central chords) are placed around the axis point:

E.g. 6

III.

**Péter Vermesy: *Five Piano Sketches*, 3rd movement, *Con moto*.
Acoustic principle, pole-antipole relation, repeated central cluster**

Sometimes Vermesy contrasts the tensed materials with that of derived from the acoustic resonance principle as it is shown in the former example (*c-g-d-a-e*).

The symmetrical organization of the movements is also emphasized by the contrasting use of the rhythm, dynamics and articulation and register (tone color). Each point of symmetry consists of identical rhythm values or formulas, being dynamically accentuated (usually by sforzando) and positioned in a relatively central register:

E.g. 7

I. III.

V.

**Péter Vermesy: *Five Piano Sketches*, 1st, 3rd and 5th movements.
Contrasted materials**

The discourse is characterized by an intense fragmentation (excepting the second movement and partially the fourth). The musical units (“personnages”) are divided either by rests, sudden register changes or different rhythm formulas.

There is no measure and time signature. This apparently leads to the idea of free rhythm that applies however only to the lack of a traditional meter. Let’s quote Messiaen’s *Technique of My Musical Language*: [...] we shall replace the notions of „measure” and „beat” by the feeling of a short value (the sixteenth note, for example) and its free multiplications, which will lead us towards a music more or less „ametical”, necessitating precise rhythmic rules.”⁹

In Vermesy’s case, these rules consist mostly of a sort of rhythm progression from larger values to smaller, or from uniform formulas to heterogeneous ones:

E.g. 8



Péter Vermesy: *Five Piano Sketches*, 1st movement, Vivace.
Rhythm progression

The division into symmetrical binary units by retrograde inversion produces an overall non-retrogradable rhythm theorized and applied by the same Messiaen:

E.g. 9



Péter Vermesy: *Five Piano Sketches*, 1st movement, Vivace.
Overall rhythm scheme

⁹ Messiaen, Olivier: *Technique of My Musical Language* [transl. by John Satterfield], Alphonse Leduc, Paris, 1956, p. 14.

There are also other rhythm elements characteristic for Messiaen's music, like the use of added value or the addition of the dot:

E.g. 10

The musical score for E.g. 10 is titled "Con moto". It consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The treble staff begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a piano (*p*) dynamic with a crescendo line leading to a forte (*f*) dynamic. The bass staff has a single note with a fermata. There are accents (>) over several notes in the treble staff.

Péter Vermesy: *Five Piano Sketches*, 3rd movement, *Con moto*.
Added value technique

E.g. 11

The musical score for E.g. 11 is titled "Vivace". It consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The treble staff starts with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic and a piano (*mf*) dynamic. The bass staff also starts with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic and a piano (*mf*) dynamic. There are accents (>) over several notes in both staves.

Péter Vermesy: *Five Piano Sketches*, 1st movement, *Vivace*.
Addition of the dot technique

The overall facture of the movements (excepting the second) is a pointillist and isorhythmic one, while the discourse frequently evolves in a single hand by alternation, or in superposed motion. The high-level fragmentation is produced both by the high register changes, fragmented rhythm, contrasting dynamics, and articulation.

By contrast, the slower movements show some particular features, especially the second one. Based on the melodic evolution of two different modes, with a traditional flavor, it is the single real polyphonic moment of the piece (including aspects of free imitation). The principle of symmetry appears in the equilibrium of the arch-like contours, while the rhythm is flowing slowly. Like in the other movements, the pole-antipole relation has a structural role, even being resolved on a harmonic resonance chord in a relatively high register (*f-c-g*):

E.g. 12

II.

Andante

(8th)-

(8th)-

**Péter Vermesy: *Five Piano Sketches*, 2nd movement.
Free imitation, pole-antipole relation, resolution**

Finally, the slowest fourth movement is probably the less abstract (so to say the most human one), suggested by the author with the expressive indications: *cantabile* and *secco*. It uses 11 out of the 12 chromatic notes in a free atonal discourse. Vermesy works here with three different types of materials: a floating discourse over a sustained pedal, an expressive cantabile intonation and a highly contrasting rhythmic motif in the low register exposed by repetition in pole-antipole relation. Here the symmetry principle is more freely applied, altered by the development of materials. The register change of the initial statement in its recurrence suggests a kind of resolution:

IV.

Adagio

The musical score consists of three systems of staves. The first system includes measures 1-2 (pp), 3-4 (poco sf), 5-6 (mf cantabile), and 7-8 (mf cantabile). The second system includes measures 9-10 (ff, secco) and 11-12 (poco sf, mf cantabile). The third system includes measures 13-14 (p) and 15-16 (pp). The score is annotated with various dynamics (pp, poco sf, mf, p, ff) and performance instructions (cantabile, secco). Measure numbers 1 through 16 are indicated throughout the score.

**Péter Vermesy: *Five Piano Sketches*, 4th movement.
Tonal system, motifs, pole-antipole relation, resolution**

The *Five Piano Sketches* is certainly the first mature piano work of Vermesy that experiments with several techniques of 20th-century composition, demonstrating not only his high interest for the new music tendencies but also a particular affinity for construction, seen as a primary feature both of his music, and for the featured style. Though it shows a high degree of abstraction, almost every movement contains flashes of the natural and human, whether as a melodic fragment, cantabile indication, whether by the acoustic principles of sound organization. The arch-principle theorized by Vermesy appears here mostly in the overall balance guided by the symmetry principle, that produces so to say a dynamic equilibrium.

Translated into English by Attila Fodor

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