

FANTASY AND INNOVATION IN *DEUX PIÈCES POUR CLAVECIN*, H. 244 BY BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ

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SUMMARY. This article highlights the divergences between the historical and modern style of playing the harpsichord, through a detailed analysis of the album *2 Pièces pour clavecin*, H. 244 by Bohuslav Martinů, a leading figure of 20th century cultural life. Given the abundance of baroque compositional means, this album of solo works for harpsichord, composed in 1935, represent the perfect combination between old and new, moreover, between tradition and innovation. The predilection for rediscovering Baroque music in its pure forms began in the 1900s and continues to this day, spreading with great speed thanks to the evolution of technology and numerous historical documents. Historical treatises, writings and numerous criticisms of Baroque performances have led performers towards the closest possible performance of early works, with emphasis on proper articulation type, dynamics, freedom in phrasing, construction and fingering. The harpsichord occupies a unique place in the chronicle of the renaissance of Early music, even if it was by no means the only ancient instrument to arouse new interest in the decades preceding the early 20th century. Looking at all these major changes, modern composers such as Arnold Schoenberg, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Igor Stravinsky, Francis Poulenc, Philip Glass, Manuel de Falla and Bohuslav Martinů have revived the effervescent music of the Baroque.

Keywords: Bohuslav Martinů, harpsichord, 20th Century, modern playing, analysis

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Introduction

The rebirth of the harpsichord in the cultural life of the 20th century was significantly influenced by numerous changes, both in the instrument's overall structure and in its technical and stylistic aspects. The first attempts to recreate the harpsichord date back to the 1900s. The Pleyel brand in Paris built the first modern harpsichord in 1905. The difference between the baroque harpsichord and the one built by the Parisian brand was the implementation of a 16-foot register that sounded an octave lower than the normal register and added both color and power to the bass. Thus, the instrument could easily respond to modern compositional demands, curving a wide range of dynamic colors, such as a sweet and placid sound or a powerful and harsh timbre. The instrument was a curious mixture of piano and harpsichord, essentially a piano with a harpsichord mechanism in which the strings were plucked, not struck. Some harpsichordists affectionately referred to this instrument as the "whispering giant"⁴.

The most important figure who contributed to the rediscovery of the harpsichord in the early 20th century was the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska. She made a series of recordings of solo harpsichord works in the first half of the 20th century, which have gone down in music history and contributed to the discovery of the pure truth of harpsichord playing. Harpsichordist Landowska's iconic recording of the Goldberg Variations, BWV 988 dating from 1945 is a landmark for subsequent generations of harpsichordists and pianists.⁵

In his book *The Modern Harpsichord*, harpsichord builder and critic Wolfgang Joachim Zuckermann⁶ examines harpsichord production in the 20th century. He categorizes modern harpsichord manufacturers based on their philosophy and expertise, rather than the geographical place where the instruments were built, as was customary during the Baroque period. Furthermore, he cites notable manufacturers such as Alfred Hipkins and Arnold Dolmetsch, as well as brands such as Neupert, Gaveau, and Steingraber. Numerous makers attempted to modernize the instrument at the beginning of the 20th century, but instead, they simply changed the piano's mechanism, which had already existed in cultural life up to that point. Thus, the "harpsichord" had hefty keyboards and an unsettlingly loud sound.

⁴ Christopher D. Lewis. "20th Century Harpsichord Music. Poulenc, Francaix, Martinu, Durey." In Naxos Recorders, US, 2015, p. 3.

⁵ <https://archive.org/details/J.S.BACHGoldbergVariations-NEWTRANSFER> (12.03.2024)

⁶ Wolfgang Joachim Zuckermann (1922-2018) was a leading figure in 20th century cultural life. He had an honourable influence on harpsichord building in the early 20th century and left behind an admirable collection of works, such as the renowned book *The Modern Harpsichord*. His most famous harpsichord designs were called "The Slantside" and "The Z-Box".

Since 1956, schools specializing in the restoration of historical instruments have witnessed rising public interest in restoring instruments. Among these was the Boston School of Instruments, whose instruments differed significantly from those produced at the turn of the century. They had a considerably more appealing tone, with wood being used primarily to generate a warm timbre and lighter keyboards allowing for more delicate playing. The harpsichord kit, introduced in the 1960s, was expressly designed to allow anyone to build a harpsichord from start. Despite all these features, the harpsichord did not generate the same auditory perception as the great harpsichord makers. As a result, many of these kits were discarded or unopened. Today, it is more common to keep a harpsichord from the 1970s or 1980s in good shape than to build one from scratch.

Bohuslav Martinů and his music

Among the many musical tendencies that developed in the 20th century, Bohuslav Martinů remained one of the few composers who is not associated with the concept of the avantgarde. Bohuslav Martinů studied the compositions of Palestrina, Orlando di Lasso, Bach, and Mozart and adhered to traditional musical structures, despite his use of current musical language from the 20th century. Despite the terror and turmoil gathered by the thirteen years of war, Martinů avoided the prevailing currents and created a unique Neo-Classicism. He would be the last to claim any elevated status; he aspires to be nothing more than a modest worker in the cause of modern art. As he himself states, "...I do not accomplish any miracles. I am only exact."⁷ Bohuslav Martinů's compositional style is characterized by three fundamental truths: first, his Czech heritage and affinity for local folklore. Martinů, who grew up in his hometown's church tower, was deeply influenced by the music around him. Martinů's early exposure to symphonic material came from his job as a violinist in the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra after graduating from the Prague Conservatory's violin section. Finally, Martinů's composing career relied on his own knowledge gained over time.

Martinů studied composition at the Prague Conservatory but did not complete his studies. He was unsatisfied with neither his professors' teaching methods nor the modernist movements in twentieth-century art. He has always been an advocate for traditional forms, yet his works have never lacked creativity or modern language.

Martinů has been composing since he was 10 years old. Many of his early works were lost. During his lifetime, he composed nearly a hundred works

⁷ Miloš, Šafránek. "Bohuslav Martinů.", In *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Jul., 1943), pp. 329-354. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/739378> , (12.03.2024)

of various genres, including big orchestral works, concertos for solo instruments and orchestra, eight operas, nine ballads, and more than thirty chamber works.

Martinů's appreciation for early music inspired him to incorporate musical forms as concerto grosso, *invenzione* or *ricercare*, *partita*, and symphony into his compositions. Martinů's *Concerto grosso for chamber orchestra*, H. 263, exemplifies his pursuit of *absolute music*. Although this work represents the high point of Martinů's creative career, the orchestration is somewhat basic, and the structure is typical. *Inventions* for big orchestra do not follow the conventional Bach's "invention" form, but instead take a tripartite structure. Martinu intends to experiment with orchestral sounds and timbral colors of many instruments in this composition, as well as incorporate Czech folklore motifs.

Martinů's skills of stringed instruments permitted him to compose quartets, quintets, and orchestral works, however he additionally succeeded in piano composing. He wrote roughly thirty songs for the piano, primarily for the rhythmic components it could offer. Even in orchestral pieces, he used the piano to carry out the rhythmic sections more accurately. "... When we played together, he always played the piano, and was able to sightread marvelously, and he always added something while playing, as I often noticed with surprise."⁸

As Miloš Šafránek relates in his work, *Bohuslav Martinů*⁹, the Bohuslav Martinů's style is rendered by an absolute constructivism, preceded by a highly developed rhythmic sense. The sonorities are pleasant but surprising, using classical forms and various motifs from Czech folklore.

Beyond the score in *Deux Pieces pour clavecin*, H. 244

As mentioned above, Bohuslav Martinů was a follower of Traditionalism and classical baroque forms. Throughout his career as a composer, he has managed to maintain a balance between the old and the new by incorporating modern musical language into classical formal structures. One particular criterion is orchestration, which Martinů has always chosen with great inventiveness, especially in his chamber and symphonic works. The groups of instruments are distributed in a novel way each time, creating a variety of timbres and sonorities. In his solo works, Martinů showed his creativity by creating complex polyphonic themes, thematic inversions, usage of polytonality and extended chromaticism.

⁸ Vaněk, Vladimír. "Bohuslav Martinů". In *Essays on the Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 2, pp. 1350-1361. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9783111562575-034> (12.03.2024)

⁹ Miloš, Šafránek. "Bohuslav Martinů". In *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Jul. 1943), pp. 329-354. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/739378> , (12.03.2024)

Bohuslav Martinů is primarily recognized for his symphonies, operas, and ballets. However, he also composed several works for harpsichord, which were gaining popularity among composers in the first half of the 20th century. These works include *Deux Impromptus pour clavecin*, H. 381, *Concert pour clavecin*, H. 246, *Sonate pour clavecin*, H. 368, and *Deux Pièces pour clavecin*, H. 244. Each work evokes the diaphanous reminiscence of the Baroque and immerses the listener in the grotesque and chaotic atmosphere of the 20th century.

Deux Pièces pour Clavecin, H. 244 were composed in Paris in 1935. They were dedicated to Marcelle de Lacour, a former student of the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska. The two works are in strong dynamic contrast. The first piece is marked *Lento*, while the second is marked *Allegro con brio*. Both pieces showcase the expressive sonorities of the harpsichord and present numerous technical challenges.

Lento

This section is *fantasy*-shaped and consists of seven rhythmically and melodically contrasting parts. The piece begins with a seven-bar introduction that explores the sonic capabilities of the harpsichord through sweeping chords and powerful basses. The entire section is heavily ornamented with appoggiaturas, melodic notes, and harmonical delays. Additionally, the piece is highly expressive, transitioning abruptly from states of stillness to chaos without any preparation. The opening section introduces the key of B flat minor. It begins with a 7-8 anticipation. The first four measures are reminiscent of J. S. Bach's *Sinfonie in d minor*, No. 4, BWV 790.

E.g. 1



J. S. Bach, *Sinfonia* no. 4 in d minor, BWV 790, mm. 1-4

E.g. 2

Lento

Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pieces pour clavecin*, H. 244, 1 mvt., mm. 1-7

After the introductory section, which ends on the dominant, the second section begins. It is rhythmically diverse but more static and concise. The left hand has the thematic role, while the right hand contributes to the harmonic basis with sequential figures in sixteenth-note rhythm. The contrast between light and dark is heightened in this section by the right hand's ascending leaps and the left hand's descending gait.

E.g. 3

Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pieces pour clavecin*, H. 244, 1 mvt., mm. 8-11

The third section is nearly as lengthy as the first. It features sinusoidal lines in the right hand, with smaller jumps than the previous section, following the same ostinato rhythm of sixteenth notes. The left hand receives a rhythmic augmentation, transitioning from eighths to quarter-notes.

E.g. 4

Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pièces pour clavecin*, H. 244, 1 mvt., mm. 12-17

The fourth section has a surprise element, an improvisatory style section, like the *non-mesuré* preludes of the Baroque period. It consists of only three bars but is one of the most dynamic sections of this work. The ostinato rhythm of sixteenths now shifts to the left hand, while the right hand presents a descending sequence of appoggiaturas, which are a symbol of sighing. To heighten the drama, the musical discourse is interrupted with a caesura, anticipating the cadenza pointed in the middle of the work. The improvisation starts with an ascending melodic scale in the right hand, while the left hand lingers on a dominant chord (f-a-c-a). The right hand descends after excessive repetition of the highest point of the improvisation, pausing on a sequence of repeated notes in triplet rhythm. Meanwhile, the left hand arpeggiates on the dominant chord. The section concludes with a C Major chord, another harmonical surprise of this work.

E.g. 5

Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pièces pour clavecin*, H. 244, 1 mvt., mm. 18-20

The fifth section represents the coda of the previous section, consisting of only six measures. It has a strong and determined character, characterized by an ostinato rhythm of eights in both hands. At the end of the section (m. 26), an authentic cadenza emerges, which modulates towards the dominant section (F Major). The right hand has a chordal texture, and the left hand has a vocal quality, forming a sinusoidal and expressive cello-like melodic line.

E.g. 6



Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pièces pour clavecin*, H. 244, 1 mvt., mm. 21-28

The sixth section (mm. 27-35) is a reprise of the introductory section. It is more varied in terms of rhythm, melody, and harmony. Excessive chromaticism and polytonality heighten the musical discourse. From m. 30, the chordal texture reappears in both hands, this time much denser. The climax (mm. 33-4) abandons polytonality but adds polyrhythmicity. The right hand plays a quintuplet followed by an eighth note, and the left hand plays a sextuplet followed by an eighth note. The two rhythms overlap identically only in measure 35. Two chords appear in eighth-note rhythm in the same measure: a B flat major sixth chord and a diminished seventh chord. These chords are repeated three times. It is important to maintain the original phrasing, to make an even more surprising sound.

E.g. 7

Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pieces pour clavecin*, H. 244, 1 mvt., mm. 29-35

The final section of the work, coda, is the longest, consisting of ten bars. The right hand plays the harmonic texture while the left hand plays the melody. The piece concludes with a Picardian cadenza, paying tribute to J.S. Bach's legacy.

Allegro con brio

The second piece of this opus is strongly contrasting with the first, due to its lively and youthful character. It has an ABA + Coda form and is built on a pentatonic scale starting on the note F (f-g-a-c-d). This work, with all its surprising elements such as staccato accents, unexpected rests, and calm sections, challenges the performer, who must be skilled enough to transition smoothly from one contrast to another without hesitation. From a technical standpoint, we observe large leaps, opposing movements of the hands, and different phrasing for each hand. Compared to the previous work, here the performer has the chance to showcase their interpretive mastery and virtuosity.

Section A comprises 21 measures with strong contrasts. The first three measures are based on the pentatonic scale in the 1th root, f-g-a-c-d, with changes in articulation and dynamics. For instance, in measure 8, a *marcato* sign is used to indicate the desired emphasis on the note c, creating a syncopated rhythm. These varied dynamics are not possible on the harpsichord. In this case, hold the C longer and let the finger fall on the keyboard with greater weight.

E.g. 8



Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pieces pour clavecin*, H. 244, mvt. 2, mm. 1-3

From the fourth measure onwards, Martinů uses polytonality to create spectacular sonorities. This effect is even more powerful as the harpsichord is coupled to both manuals to produce a fuller and harsher sound.

E.g. 9



Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pieces pour clavecin*, H. 244, mvt. 2, mm. 4, 10

The climax will be reached in mm. 13-16 with a series of dense chords repeated for four measures.

The B section heavily uses chromaticism and is composed of sequences. Small sections are sequenced in numerous, varied, and chromatic ways. The first section begins in the key of B minor at m. 22 and features latent polyphony in both hands from measures 24 to 27. This polyphony forms descending gradual scales. It is crucial to focus on phrasing in this section. As shown in e.g. 10, the phrasing differs in each hand, demonstrating diversification.

E.g. 10



Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pieces pour clavecin*, H. 244, mvt. 2, mm. 23-25

This section contains a surprising element: the parallel walking of the hands on ascending and descending arpeggios (mm. 28-29). This technique is rather atypical for keyboard players.

E.g. 11



Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pieces pour clavecin*, H. 244, mvt. 2, mm. 28-29

At mm. 39, the sequencing intensifies, forming latent polyphony. The right hand describes an ascending chromatic line, while the left hand describes a descending chromatic line, both moving in opposite directions. This section creates tension with its deeply chromatic sonority, which will not be resolved until m. 40. The section's rhythm features a sixteenth-note ostinato. This can be almost disturbing on a harpsichord due to the shrill and harsh sound produced by coupling the two manuals.

E.g. 12



Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pieces pour clavecin*, H. 244, mvt. 2, mm. 32-38

Section B reaches its climax in mm. 44-6 with a rhythmic intensification through sextuplets and septuplets of sixteenth notes. The parallel hand gait also reappears here. The musical discourse quiets down in measure 55, leaving only the right hand to repeat the same pattern of notes, sequenced in different registers. Starting at measure 59, there are two types of sequences: ascending gradual scales and descending arpeggios.

E.g. 13

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The first system features a complex, rhythmic melody in the treble staff with many sixteenth notes, while the bass staff provides a steady accompaniment. The second system continues this texture, with some chords in the treble staff circled to highlight specific harmonic elements.

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Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pieces pour clavecin*, H. 244, mvt. 2, mm. 59-66

The A returns at m. 70, identical to the beginning, with the only change occurring in m. 82. Here, the repeated chords are grouped differently to create a binary pulse instead of a ternary one. Four sixteenths are grouped together, unlike the beginning section where six sixteenths are grouped together.

E.g. 14

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system has a treble staff with a complex, polyphonic texture of chords and a bass staff with a rhythmic accompaniment. The second system begins with a 'Poco meno' marking and shows a change in the texture, with the treble staff now featuring a more melodic line and the bass staff continuing the accompaniment.

Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pieces pour clavecin*, H. 244, mvt. 2, mm. 82-87

Coda, titled *Poco meno*, interrupts the chaos and dramatic exuberance of the piece, introducing a calm character and setting up the bright finale. Martinů uses a polyphonic texture by adding an alto voice to the right hand. The soprano voice consists of ascending eighth-note arpeggios, the alto voice

of ascending small seconds formed by groups of two sixteenth notes, and the left hand presents chords in the same rhythm as the soprano. After all the dissonant chord progressions, this work concludes with a F Major bright.

E.g. 15

Paris, Juin 1935

Bohuslav Martinů, *Deux Pieces pour clavecin*, H. 244, mvt. 2, mm. 88-91

Conclusions

Although there is much talk about the ‘resurrection’ of the harpsichord, I don’t think it died, but simply slept for a few hundred years. The harpsichord will never disappear from the lives of musicians, it is a special instrument with many possibilities, offering a wide palette of sound colors. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century that the harpsichord came to the fore again, and since then it has remained a mystery, a source of curiosity and unanswered questions. From the works composed on the Pleyel harpsichord by the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska to Ligeti’s famous *Continuum*, the harpsichord has undergone numerous transformations that have inevitably influenced current interpretations of early music.

The harpsichord has fascinated modern composers, leading them to create electrifying music that revitalizes this ancient instrument. Composers such as Igor Stravinsky, Francis Poulenc, Iannis Xenakis, Jean Francaix, Manuel de Falla, and Bohuslav Martinů have brought the mysterious sounds of the harpsichord to the forefront. While some composers returned to the old habits of baroque or classical writing, few were undaunted by the new avant-garde trends of the 20th century. Among them was Bohuslav Martinů, one of the most significant Czech composers of all time. Although his popularity did not grow over time to the same extent as Frédéric Chopin or Sergei Rachmaninov, for example, he will forever remain in musical history as the composer who brought a serene and nostalgic sound to his works despite the times in which he lived.

Deux Pièces pour Clavecin, H. 244 showcases Bohuslav Martinů's stylistic ingenuity and intense drama through a broad narrative. Each section features its own personality, with each hand representing a character in the story. The dense chromaticism illuminates the musical discourse, while the accents bring out the vivid color of the rhythmic discourse.

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