

A MULTILEVEL ANALYSIS OF FAZIL SAY'S SONATA FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO OP.7

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SUMMARY. This article introduces Fazıl Say's Sonata for Violin and Piano op. 7, composed in 1997, shortly after his international success. Despite being an early work, it exhibits the architectural complexity characteristic of Say's style, blending his Turkish cultural heritage with innovative compositional techniques. The authors aim to analyze this sonata thoroughly, exploring its mature style and cultural influences in order to provide a series of guiding principles for interpretation. They discuss the architectural and semantic meanings that reside in the incorporation of Turkish musical elements, such as modal approaches, folk traditions, and dance rhythms, throughout the sonata's three movements. Each movement is examined, highlighting technical challenges, interpretive nuances, and thematic connections to Turkish culture. The sonata's structure, culminating in a palindromic arrangement, is investigated, emphasizing its coherence and narrative thread. The first movement introduces melancholic themes, the second movement evokes Turkish instruments and rhythmic patterns, the third movement emulates the Horon dance, and the second to last movement draws from Turkish folk songs. The conclusion praises Say's fusion of tradition and innovation, highlighting the interpretive freedom left to performers and listeners. Overall, the Sonata op. 7 reflects Say's distinctive musical language and showcases his prowess as both a pianist and composer, blending tradition with modernity in a captivating manner.

Keywords: Fazıl Say, Sonata op. 7, violin, piano, Turkish culture, composition, musical elements, modal approaches, folk traditions, dance rhythms, interpretation, structure, thematic connections, melancholy, Turkish instruments, rhythmic patterns, Horon dance, folk songs, tradition, innovation, interpretive freedom.

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1. Introduction

The Turkish composer Fazıl Say (b. 1970) composed the Sonata for Violin and Piano op. 7 in 1997, at the request of the “Arizona Friends of Chamber Music” association⁴, just three years after winning the international competition “Young Concert Artists” (New York, 1994), which served as a launching pad for the career of the young concert pianist and composer (Fazıl Say, n.d.). Although among his early works, the architectural approach to composition revealed through a comprehensive exploration of musical material unveils the premises of the compositional style that has made Say renowned. The creative vision that lends a distinctive and recognizable identity to his compositions is closely linked to a fusionist approach, simultaneously faithful to the composer’s ethnic and cultural background and oriented towards innovating technical and expressive language. Thus, Say’s creation is simultaneously anchored in the heritage of his native cultural legacy and in the visionary perspective of the ongoing transformation of language, specific to the contemporary direction of creation.

For many reasons, Sonata op. 7 for violin and piano can be perceived not as an early composition, but rather as a hasty anticipation of mature style, as it incorporates all the elements and characteristics necessary. In this article, the authors aim to bring to light, in an exhaustive manner, the relevant clues of this mature style found in the musical material of the sonata. Correlating these with the semantic substrate they contain will ultimately serve as a valuable guide towards an authentic interpretative vision of the score. By probing the cryptic information latent in the musical text of the sonata, we will gain the knowledge and understanding necessary for a more accurate fulfillment of the ultimate objective of any musical piece, namely its manifestation through performance. Thus, the ultimate goal of this analysis, which has engaged theoretical means, is ultimately a practical one. A secondary outcome of the article is the desire to popularize within the Romanian musical cultural space fresh works, which, as we will see, have the potential to engage the affective and musical imagination of artists in a creative process of interpretation, which has not yet been constrained by a multitude of scholarly perspectives within a rigid framework of stylistic vision. It is important to mention that, in the comprehensive endeavor undertaken on the score towards shaping an accurate interpretative vision, the individual factor, represented by the affective and imaginative inclinations of the authors, has contributed to a large extent. Thus, the present study serves as an introductory perspective into the world of Fazıl Say’s compositions, through the Sonata op. 7 for violin and piano, upon which they attempt to provide a starting point in the collective formative process of interpretative vision.

⁴ Say, Fazıl. *Sonata for Violin and Piano*. Mainz: Schott Music. 2007, p. 2.

2. General overview

The sonata is primarily marked by a series of features stemming from the extensive heritage of Turkish culture. As such, within its content, several constituent elements of this heritage are found, either through suggestion or textual encryption, or through paraphrasing or direct quotation. These elements are present on multiple levels. Regarding the treatment of the protagonist instruments, their technical capabilities have been exploited based on thorough knowledge to evoke sound effects characteristic of other instruments recurring in Turkish musical tradition, such as kanun, ud, Kemeñçe, and bağlama. The intentionality of these imitations, as well as the optimal method of achieving the desired sound paradigm, will be correlated with the technical and timbral possibilities specific to the violin and piano, respectively, and with the interpretative vision deduced from the engagement of these technical and expressive means. Additionally, concerning the treatment of the piano, several specific effects have been obtained by employing non-specific means that altered its timbre to achieve the desired effect.

The melodic universe of the work has also been expanded through the incorporation of several constructs derived from the Turkish cultural paradigm. These do not define the sonata as a whole but are successively and simultaneously found within numerous sections throughout. Firstly, there is the modal approach in line with the Turkish-Arabic system of maqam. Extracting and systematizing this melodic material present within the melodic-harmonic structure of the score is important for understanding the semantic and stylistic connotations it implies. Secondly, we find direct representations of specific folk traditions, more precisely, of certain dances. Analyzing the specificities of these insertions will serve not only as a confirmation of the necessity of a certain type of interpretative character with which the respective section is intended to be infused, previously accessible at an intuitive level, but also as an encouragement of emphasis placed on the opportunity for exaggerating the desired affective and sonic effect. Thirdly, melodic lines specific to Turkish folk songs are paraphrased within a formal framework that allows for the development of connections with specific constructs of traditional Turkish instrumental music, the observation and analysis of which will deepen the semantic substrate of the section and serve as an emotionally conducive framework for discussing the interpretative vision.

The architecture of the sonata proposes an almost palindromic unfolding of the musical discourse, as the last movement, the fifth, is nothing but a reiteration of the initial movement. This is revealed both by the identity of the title, "*Melancholy*", accompanied by the complementary indication *da capo* in the case of the last movement, and by the perfect identity of the musical material. This movement frames the musical development at both ends, functioning as an element intended to tie together the coherence of the narrative thread it contains. Each of the three movements that succeed along this thread manifests a distinct

profile, without being connected to each other except by a generative overall vision, whose common denominator is the intention to evoke different instances of the aesthetics and ethos inherent to the Turkish folkloric landscape. These three movements incorporate the most consistent elements specific to the language, which presuppose both a high degree of technical difficulty in execution and a deep understanding of the origin and semantics of these elements, in order to achieve an authentic interpretative product, in line with the compositional intention.

3. First Movement, “*Melancholy...*” Andante Misterioso

The first movement of the Sonata begins with 4 bars of piano introduction then the main theme unfolds in unison with the violin. The accompaniment carries on the leitmotif of the introduction. This theme contains several minor second

E.g. 1

The musical score for the main theme (measures 12-15) is presented in a system of four staves. The top staff is for the Violin, and the bottom three staves are for the Piano. Measure 12 features a piano introduction in the piano part, marked *pp*, *una corda*, and *rit. simile*. Measure 13 is marked *dolce espressivo* and *con sordino* in the violin part, and *mf* in the piano part. Measure 14 continues the theme. Measure 15 is marked *mf* in the piano part. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics, articulation, and performance instructions.

Main theme, mm. 12

intervals and even an augmented one. The second phrase consists of the piano reiterating the theme, while the violin superimposes with a coloratura character. The correct phrasing by both players is very important, as well as the breaths.

From the 3rd phrase onwards both the theme and the accompaniment is more developed. An interesting aspect observed in measure 21 is that the melody unfolds in unison at both instruments, while the phrasing is not the same. Some interesting lines begin to appear in the accompaniment. From bar 24 onwards the descending melody in the violin creates a romantic impact. The next musical phrase, developed from measure 29 onwards, with its chromaticism and many trills and the fact that the violin is playing in the high register conveys an almost unspoken melancholy. From bar 37, where the composer adds the notation "VERY FREE" and the piano is left alone, we can perceive a gradual tension towards the climax of this movement. From measure 45 with auftakt, the piano hands the theme to the violin. The dynamic is also transforming towards the climax at measure 55 through a continuous crescendo reaching *fff* in the violin, then, between measures 56-57, a *sfz* repeated three times.

E.g. 2

The musical score for measures 54-58 shows the climax of the movement. The Violin part (top staff) begins at measure 54 with a ritardando (rit.) and sfz dynamic, followed by a crescendo to ffff. The Piano part (bottom staff) also begins at measure 54 with a ritardando (rit.) and sfz dynamic, ending with a meno f. dynamic. Measure 55 shows the Violin continuing with a crescendo to ffff, while the Piano accompaniment continues with sfz. Measure 56 features three sfz dynamics in the Violin. Measure 57 features three sfz dynamics in the Violin. Measure 58 features three sfz dynamics in the Violin. The Piano accompaniment continues with sfz throughout these measures.

The climax of the movement, mm. 54-58

Starting from measure 58, a *stretto* section is developed from all the musical themes encountered so far. From measure 78 onwards the piano remains alone. In this movement, the phrases are very well identified, and mostly symmetrical.

4. Second movement - “*Grotesque...*” *Moderato Scherzando*

The second movement, entitled “*Grotesque*” *Moderato Scherzando*, represents an accumulation of intentional sound effects primarily tailored for the technical-timbral profile of the violin, and to a lesser extent for that of the piano. Throughout most of the unfolding of this movement, the violin imitates a series of Turkish instruments. However, the most striking aspect that emerges with the greatest urgency, right from the beginning, is the rhythmic-metric aspect. This serves to outline the structural coordinates. The section follows a tripartite scheme ABA', where A is defined by the metric framework of 15/8, and B by that of 9/8. The role of this metric framework is to infuse the melodic-harmonic construction with an individualized rhythmic support, evoking one of the two main coordinates of Turkish music, namely the concept of *usul*.

These concepts essentially represent a metric pattern independent of tempo and flexible in terms of rhythm, accompanying a musical piece or a movement thereof. The multitude of possibilities regarding the number of beats in a metric cycle (from 2 to 124), as well as the numerous ways of subdividing them, has generated a complex system. Most of the metric cycles called *usul* are formed by the juxtaposition in different variants of the two basic *usuls*, *Nim Sofyan* (2 beats) and *Semai* (3 beats), but they cannot be reduced to these alone, as a metric cycle is closely related to the melodic phrases it accompanies⁵. We can consider that the understanding of an *usul* can be achieved with the greatest accuracy in relation to the overlaid melodic phrase and the main and internal accents it contains. On the one hand, section A of the second movement, which engages the metric framework of 15/8, evokes this concept, but it does not identify with it, as the subdivision proposed by the composer, 3+2+3+2+3+2, does not belong to any *usul*⁶.

⁵ Farraj, J. & Shumays, S. A., *Inside Arabic Music: Arabic Maqam Performance and Theory in the 20th Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 2019, pp. 88-89.

⁶ Potential *usuller* with which a measure could be identified are *Raksan* (15 beats), a cycle consisting of a *Duyek* (8 beats) and a *Devr-i Turan/Devr-i Hindi* (7 beats) or a cycle consisting of three *Türk Akşağı* (5 beats), but their subdivision always assumes the sequence 2+3 within the simple component *usuller* (Ertek, 2007, p. 65).

E.g. 3

81 (3+2+3+2+3+2) ♩ CCA 138

Viol

Prepared Piano

P-no (Fughetta)

(*) Please see the preparation of the piano for this movement

83

Viol

P-no quasi tremolo

84

Viol

P-no leggiero

Compound metre, mm. 81-83

On the other hand, the middle section B engages a metric cycle of 9/8, subdivided as 2+3+2+2, revealing an exact identity with the succession of accents in the 9-beat *usul*, *Raks Aksak*⁷.

Thus, the main theme is represented in the piano until measure 84, when the violin takes over, reitarating the same theme. From measure 89 onwards we observe a jazz character, thanks to the harmonic interventions on the piano with the right hand. We notice a major change starting with measure 93, where the metric changes to 9/8, bringing a more sttled character. We can asstert that this section best conveys the grotesque character, due to the use of many glissandos, tremolos, accents and highly dissonant harmonies. After a measure of 12/8, where both players intervene in unison, the A section, with both the initial theme (measure 121) and the second theme (from measure 127), returns. The second movement ends with an ascending glissando on violin supported by an ascending folk arpeggio on piano.

⁷ This should not be confused with the well-known 9-beat meter generally known as Aksak, which always has the subdivision 4+5 (Ertek, 2007, p. 85).

E.g. 4

The image shows a musical score for Violin and Piano. The Violin part (top staff) starts at measure 134 with the instruction 'trem. e gliss.' and ends with a fermata and 'ppp'. The Piano part (bottom staff) consists of two staves (RH and LH) with a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth and quarter notes, ending with a fermata and 'ppp'. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

Ending of the second movement, m. 134.

In this movement, both instruments were tasked with imitating two traditional Turkish-Arabic instruments, the *kanun* and the *ud*. The *kanun* is a string instrument from the zither family, of Arab origin, with a trapezoidal resonating box and 26 rows of strings. It is found both as a solo instrument and as part of an ensemble.⁸ The *ud* is also a string instrument, from the lute family, with a rich history in the Middle East, having a pear-shaped resonating box, most often with six rows of strings⁹. Thus, both instruments are played by plucking the strings, and sustaining long note values is achieved using a common technique, emphasized tremolo. Accents are necessary for the clear delineation of pitches in a melodic line and for phrasing. Other advanced techniques also include producing harmonics. It becomes evident why the composer chose to transpose these techniques to the violin. The theme of the movement, which is exposed in the A sections, is realized through *pizzicato*. Its execution involves eighth and quarter note values, as the violin cannot produce longer values by engaging in tremolo plucking. Moreover, although the score does not provide such an indication, quarter note values (where possible) can be realized through harmonics instead of an *ordinario* effect to increase the degree of similarity with the imitated instrument. Section B proposes the execution of tremolo technique on the violin in its traditional form, with the bow. The execution of this section should be approached carefully, as the desired sound effect should still seem to result from plucking. Thus, each repetition of the sound within the value realized by tremolo should be

⁸ Poché, C., Qānūn. In: L. Libin, ed. *The Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*. 2nd Edition, Ed. Oxford University Press, New York, 2014, p. 188.

⁹ Poché, C. "Ūd". In: L. Libin, ed. *The Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*. 2nd Edition ed. Oxford University Press, New York, 2014, p. 128.

distinct, slightly accentuated by striking the string to imitate the timbre resulting from plucking. For the most accurate realization of the sound effect, we have identified a combination of true tremolo and the *jeté* technique as an optimal method of execution. This involves allowing the bow to fall onto the string with an initial impulse, followed by its free pull in one direction (up or down); the natural recoil of the bow allows for rapid repetition of the sound.

5. Third movement - "Perpetuum Mobile..." Presto

The third movement, "*Perpetuum mobile*" *Presto*, intends to recreate the exalted aesthetic of the *Horon* dance. This is a mixed group dance, found in over 50 variations throughout the Pontic region of Turkey. *Horon* is notably characterized by its very brisk tempo, which requires an extraordinary agility of the dancer's body movements, often resulting in a shaking of either the shoulders or the entire body.¹⁰ This dance can be considered one of endurance, ritualistic¹¹, aiming for a cathartic fulfillment, a spiritual release attained through the exertion, facilitated by the frenetic, almost delirious character that characterizes its entire unfolding. Additionally, the metric framework of this dance involves the use of asymmetric compound meters, such as 7 or 9 beats, but there are also other variations. The composer opted for the metric framework of 6/4, however, the accents noted throughout the violin line, reinforced by the singular, *secco* chords of the piano, propose an asymmetric phrasing, composed of a succession of cells of 5, 3, 9, 6 beats, with possible variations - thus, a complex, asymmetric rhythm. The violin line is almost exclusively realized through doubling the values of eighth notes, and the extremely brisk tempo suggests a *quasi*-tremolo performance. This technical resource arises for the purpose of imitating the *kemençe*, a popular instrument specific to the eastern Mediterranean region, with strings and a bow, of small dimensions, which accompanies this dance within the instrumental ensemble.¹² Since the third movement of the sonata portrays this dance in the absence of dancers who physically and visually manifest the delirious character of the entire performance, it is understood that the two performers must exaggerate the manner of interpretation by any means available. Regarding the violin, its melodic line has been most evidently infused with the peculiarities inherent in manifesting this frenzy, as sustaining this *quasi*-tremolo over such an extended segment is particularly

¹⁰ Saygun, A. A., Des Danses D'anatolie et de Leur Caractère Rituel. *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, Volume 2, 1950, p. 12.

¹¹ Idem, p. 10.

¹² Durning, J. et al. Kamāncheh. In: L. Libin, ed. *The Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*. 2nd Edition ed. Oxford University Press, New York, 2014, p. 106.

demanding, thus having cathartic potential. Dosing energy and effort, so that the exposition of the melodic-harmonic line is never deprived of the characteristic exaltation of the dance, is extremely important and, at the same time, difficult to achieve. Exaggerating the accents, for a proper realization of the compositional intention, is a mandatory condition.

E.g. 5

135 (MICROTONE)*
Viol *f*
P-no *ff* *mf*
136
Viol
P-no *mf* *sfz* *mf* *simile*

Beginning of the „Horon”, mm. 135-137.

6. Fourth Movement - “Anonym...” Andante

The second to last movement is titled “Anonym” *Andante*. The source of the melodic material is accurately indicated by the composer, who notes at the beginning of the section the Turkish lyrics of the folk song “*Odam Kireçtir Benim*” (“My room is white-washed”), from an anonymous source, which has been sung and recorded by various Turkish singers in different versions.

187 *con sordino* *dolce cantabile*
Viol *p*

P-no *arpeggio simile*

191

196 ② 15th - To be played with harmonics (flageolet)
Viol *pp*

P-no

Melody of “Odam Kireçtir Benim”, mm. 189-200.

Below is an approximate translation of the lyrics:

*My chamber's whitewashed walls,
My visage, full of smiles,
Strip down, nestle into my arms,
My touch, a healing balm.
Lime doesn't cling to my room's confines,
When sand remains unblended,
Love's flame doesn't ignite,
When not envisioned as intended.
Did my father ever call, “Hey”?
I loved, yet fate had its way,
Father, am I but a memory's sway?*

We observe from the content of these lyrics the intentional semantic aspect of the movement, which, broadly speaking, speaks of a lost or extinguished love. The movement proposes as a guiding thread a melancholic, mournful aesthetic, but at the same time subtle and subdued. Achieving this requires exceptional delicacy and gentleness in execution, engaging the *sul tasto* bowing technique when the phrase is written *ordinario*. When the score indicates its realization with harmonics, through flageolet, the doloroso aesthetic is achieved through a kind of vibrato on the “tired” spectrum of finger movement. The movement also includes a section of improvisational nature on the piano. Here, the intention is to obtain a distinctive timbral effect on the piano, which is achieved by covering the low register strings with the left hand. The piano imitates here the baglama, also a string instrument from the lute family, engaged by plucking.

This part conveys a Post-Impressionist feel to it, through to the broken harmonies on the piano. The violin joins the piano, after 4 introductive measures, with the melodic line of “*Odam Kireçtir Benim*”. An interesting aspect of the movement lays in the approach of the piano, whose timbral qualities are altered through the pressing of the mallets with the left hand. This technique has been used in several of Fazıl Say’s compositions, such as “Black Earth”.

E.g. 7

The image shows a musical score for Violin (Viol) and Piano (P-no) from measures 225 to 228. The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 225 and 226, and the second system covers measures 227 and 228. In the first system, the Violin part has measures 5 and 6 marked with boxes. The Piano part has a dynamic marking of *mf* and a performance instruction: "Dampen the strings with the left hand". The second system has measures 7 and 8 marked with boxes. The Piano part has a performance instruction: "Both damper and sustain pedals depressed". The score uses standard musical notation with treble and bass clefs, and includes various musical symbols such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Notation of the damping technique, mm. 225-228

The Sonata op. 7 ends in a palindromic manner with the reiteration of the first movement, “*Melancholy...*” *Andante Misterioso*. Thus, the originality of the work portrays specific aspects of the Turkish musical language and, also, innovative compositional techniques, without exceeding the possible perception level of a general audience. The “...” in the titles of the movements have a subjective meaning, open to the creativity and imagination of the listeners as well as the performers.

7. Conclusions

Fazil Say is not only a world-class pianist but also an exceptional composer. What we notice in the Sonata op. 7 is that he approaches an original language, which reflects elements of traditional Turkish music along with jazz sequences. We could categorize this work as programmatic music, but the composer still leaves room for free thinking and understanding of the musical and semantic meaning on the part of both the listener and the performers, owing to the mention of “...” after each movement title. Researching this work encompassed a unique experience for the authors of this article. An original aspect is the approach of the prepared piano, a technique we encounter in various works by the composer. It is to be appreciated the extent in which the composer merges, between the confines of the Sonata, both tradition and innovation.

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