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Piano Cycle “Improvisation and Toccata” by Nodar Gabunia (In the context of the toccata genre development)

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Abstract:

The previous article discusses Georgian composer Nodar Gabunia’s piano cycle “Improvisation and Toccata” from the standpoint of the toccata genre development. The cycle was created in 1962 and from the very beginning gained great popularity both in and outside Georgia. It should be noted that the cycle was a mandatory Georgian piece selected for participation in the Fourth Tbilisi International Piano Competition in 2009 and is included in the repertoire of many pianists.

In this article, the cycle is dealt with in the context of the historical development of the toccata and its genre features.

Keywords: *Nodar Gabunia, piano cycle, improvisation, genre of the toccata.*

1. Introduction

“The penchant for improvisation has always been an indicator of a musician’s professional skill, the direction of his talent. Here I mean not only the ability of purely musical improvisation but the possibility of emotional and intellectual improvisation as well. This rare phenomenon requires great personal courage and audacity of imagination.”

Nodar Gabunia notes in an interview [Asatiani, 2003:128].

Nodar Gabunia is one of the prominent and versatile figures in Georgian musical culture. He was active as a composer, pianist, and teacher. In 1984-2000, he was a Rector of Tbilisi State Conservatoire. Also, he was a visiting professor at the New Orleans Conservatory of Music; and held masterclasses at the conservatories of Paris, London, and The Hague. He raised generations of talented and successful pianists.¹ It is noteworthy that Nodar Gabunia’s creative work is distinguished by great versatility, with chamber and orchestral music genres occupying a huge place in it. The article discusses Nodar Gabunia’s cycle “Improvisation and Toccata” and highlights the features of the toccata genre in the context of historical development.

The Toccata genre is known to have a long history of development. At the initial stage, toccata dominates as an introduction and gradually gains independence.

In Italian, “toccare” means “to touch” or “beat.” In the 14th century, this term referred to ceremonial fanfare compositions for wind instruments and timpani. This tradition had been reproduced in the 17th-century operas and ballets, where a short fanfare introduction was also called “toccata” (for example, the entry-toccata to Claudio Monteverdi’s opera “Orpheus”).

The earliest examples of toccata (14th -15th centuries) start with chord progressions (often with three or four “beats” of one chord), which are replaced by improvisational sections. In the mentioned toccatas, the chord-passage style dominates, where the brilliant virtuoso movements in the part of one hand are opposed to the chordal accompaniment in the other part of the

¹ It should be noted that on the initiative of Nodar Gabunia’s students, a national competition of pianists named after him - was founded in 2002.

second hand. Imitations are almost not encountered, and the texture is homophonic, the “etude” type.

In the later period, end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th centuries, this genre was characterized by the alternation of passage and imitative sections, thus approaching *Ricercar*.²

The development of the toccata genre is largely conditioned by the contribution of G. Frescobaldi, in whose works there are the toccatas of introductory type, as well as independent, virtuoso prelude and lesser virtuoso toccatas. Into the toccata genre, Frescobaldi introduced an “affective” style, characteristic of the vocal music at that time. Another composer to also make a big contribution to the development of toccata is D. Buxtehude. In his toccatas, like Frescobaldi’s, the compositional principles are combined with the polyphonic techniques of North German school – presented is the alternation of toccata-prelude and fugue sections. These toccatas are notable for oratorical pathos, dramatism, imagination, and virtuosity (i.e., used are complex pedal techniques).

The evolution of the genre reaches its culmination with J.S. Bach, whose eight piano and five organ toccatas are characterized by an unprecedented scope of form, depth of content, improvisational style, multiple changes in tempo, and richness of thematic material.

In the post-Baroque period, this genre is not of great interest to classical composers, in contrast to romanticism, when toccata “loses” its characteristic polyphony and becomes a homophonic, virtuoso, concert-performance genre (for example, the toccatas of F. Schumann, M. Balakirev, S. Prokofiev, A. Khachaturian).

In the 20th century were created many examples of the toccata genre: along with piano and organ toccatas (C. Debussy, M. Ravel, F. Busoni, M. Reger, S. Prokofiev, A. Khachaturian, J. Ahrens, V. Fortner), there also are the toccatas for orchestra (A Casella, O. Gerster, A. Malyavsky); for violin and orchestra (first part of I. Stravinsky’s Violin Concerto – “Toccatà”).

In Georgian professional music, outstanding examples of the toccata were composed by R. Laghidze, O. Taktakishvili, S. Tsintsadze, and others.

2. Analysis of the piano cycle

Nodar Gabunia’s piano cycle “Improvisation and Toccatà” was created in 1962, in the same year it premiered in Tbilisi as performed by the author himself.³

The first movement of the cycle - “Improvisation” - is thought of as an introduction, and toccata is the fundamental part of the work. Improvisation is noted with its slow tempo, lyrical, elegiac, and contemplative nature, and its mood is the opposite of toccata. However, it is transpierced with its improvisation.

Improvisation starts with a fast tempo – *allegro*; from the 11th bar enters a slow tempo – *andante*, which is kept until the end of the piece. At the beginning of the work, there are rapid triplets of thirty-second notes, thus preparing the rhythmic side of the subsequent toccata section.

Example #1. Improvisation from the cycle “Improvisation and Toccatà”:

² Claudio Merulo’s toccatas (included in the collection *Toccatè d’intavolatura d’organo*, 1598 and 1604) consist of homophonic and polyphonic sections, subsequently leading to the formation of a small cycle of “toccatà and fugue”.

³ This musical piece also has been performed abroad: in Bulgaria (1964) and the Czech Republic (1966).

Allegro ♩ = 88

ff marcattissimo

piu mosso ♩ = 160

meno mosso ♩ = 88

ff marcattissimo

Toccata is thematically and stylistically opposed to the first part. The slow tempo of “Improvisation” is replaced by the fast one – *allegro scerzoso*. Along with the continuous movement of eighth notes, toccata is characterized by the frequent changes of meter throughout the entire work, which evokes the sense of ametria and improvisation.

Example #2. Toccata from the cycle “Improvisation and Toccata”:

Allegro scerzoso ♩ = 212

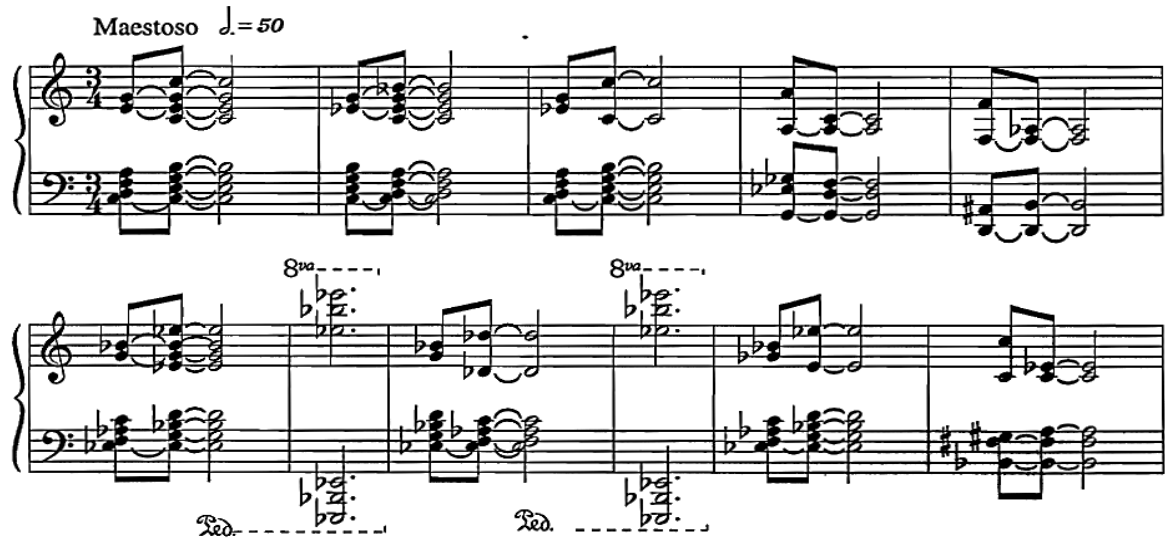
p

cresc.

dim.

It can be said that despite the features typical of the toccata genre (fast tempo, ostinato rhythm, etude-type texture), this part is also full of improvisation, which manifests itself in a free interpretation of the form, frequent changes of the meter. A twelve-bar chordal section (*Maestoso*), which appears in the coda at the end of the piece, unites both beginnings and completes the entire cycle.

Example #3. Coda, bars 243-253:



Toccata is in the chromatic tonality. In the beginning, it sounds in E-flat, which moves to C from the middle of the first part. Throughout the entire work, there is an alternation of the major-minor tonality of the C center). In terms of form, distinguished is a complex ternary form with a reduced reprise.

Example #4. The scheme of the musical form of Toccata:

A					B			A ¹		Coda					
a	-	a ₁	-	b	-	b ₁	-	c	d	c ₁	a ₂	-	a ³	e	a ⁴
10	3	13	9	12	4	7	12	21	7	21	14	4	7	12	12
<u>inEs</u>		<u>inEs</u>	<u>inC</u>	<u>inC</u>	<u>inC</u>			<u>inC</u>		<u>inC</u>			<u>inC</u>		

The composition is based on the principle of continuous movement, where the ostinato and toccata-like movement of eighth notes have been represented as an initial impetus to the development. The technically equal load of both hand parts and fast tempo (*allegro scerzoso*) give the toccata a certain complexity and, in this sense, approximates it to the etude genre.

The cycle is notable for the variety and complexity of performance techniques, which reveals Nodar Gabunia’s profound knowledge in this field as a professional pianist.

3. Conclusions

As a result, it can be mentioned that some genre features, expressed in the Toccata, are combined with contemporary musical language - the latter is manifested in the use of dissonant harmonies, chromatic system, clusters, frequently alternating meter, and inclusion of the jazz elements.

This cycle is N. Gabunia’s work from the early period, which the composer created in the last year of studying with A. Khachaturian at the Moscow Conservatory. The influence of the teacher’s musical style is felt in the cycle. At the same time, some features of the composer’s style are already marked-out in the intonation-metrical rhythm, which finds development in the works of the later period (“Igavi,” symphonies I and II, chamber symphony “Gioconda,” the violin concerto, vocal cycle “Stansebi”).

Comparing Gabunia’s Toccata with those of other Georgian composers, such as S. Tsintsadze, R. Laghidze, and O. Taktakishvili - there can be found a lot in common. In particular, the following: ostinato character, homophony, freedom of the form, fast tempo, continuous rhythmic pulsation, frequent change of meter, the sameness of the thematic material, dissonant sound, concert range, and presentation of the technical complexity of the

performance. These mentioned features are generally characteristic of the genre of the toccata in 20th-century music.

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The article includes three musical examples and one diagram.

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