

Performance strategies in Einar Englund's music for piano

Sabina – Iuliana OPREA¹

Abstract: *Exploring the Finnish piano repertoire of the second half of the XXth century as a musician and as a pianist made me take a closer look at the parameters that define the stylistic approach in performance, and how it may vary depending on the context, personal choice and historical background. Starting from methods and classifications formulated by acclaimed professionals such as Diether de la Motte, Mine Doğantan-Dack, Alfred Brendel, or Andras Schiff, I assembled a list of musical parameters that served as a personal guide in learning and performing modern and contemporary repertoire. The following article depicts Einar Englund's music and offers suggestions regarding structure and objectives in building a performance.*

Keywords: *stylistic approach; performance strategy; historically informed choice; piano music in the XXth century; neoclassical contemporary;*

Introduction

Over the past few decades, Finnish piano music has attracted attention at international level due to the diversity and versatility it evinces. Not being the beneficiary of a century-long musical tradition, like the countries of the Germanic, Slavonic or French space, the Finnish school of composition, starting with Jean Sibelius, was permanently oriented towards novelty². Gradually, after Sibelius, an extensive ramification into styles and sub-styles took place among the Finnish composers, but a great affinity of the audience for the new music also became obvious, so that nowadays Helsinki is considered as one of the most important European centers of modern and contemporary music³.

Being a Sibelius Academy alumnus, I've chose to expand my knowledge and my repertoire in my doctoral research on Finnish piano music written between 1950-1970. That's how I got to know more about Sven Einar Englund (1916-1999), a representative of the Finnish-Swedish population, who is considered as one of the most important Finnish symphonists after Sibelius⁴. He became known due to his Symphony no. 1 (1946), subtitled The War Symphony, in which he already demonstrated a mastery of the art of composition, and late on, in 1949 he was granted a scholarship that offered him a chance to go to the United States of America to study composition with Aaron Copland⁵.

Einar Englund's piano works represent a genuine stylistic laboratory for the composer's entire oeuvre. He nominates symphony as the representative musical genre but acknowledges that the implementation of the new musical language elements took place initially in his piano pieces and were only later developed in the symphonic genre.

¹ National Academy of Music "Gheorghe Dima" Cluj-Napoca, sabina.oprea@amgd.ro.

² Matti Klinge. 2000. *A Brief History of Finland*. Otava: Book Printing Co., p. 56.

³ Paavo Helistö. 1980. *Music in Finland*. Finnish-American Cultural Institute, p. 62.

⁴ Tauno Karila. 1961. *Composers of Finland*. Werner Söderström Oy, p. 171.

⁵ Kimmo Korhonen. 2007. *Inventing Finnish Music*. Finnish Music Information Center, p. 97.

1. Issue & Objectives

Tackling on a subject that's more recently being studied and research is a challenge in itself, because the paradigm varies according to the information available at a certain time. So as a performer, I base my current view on two types of inputs, subjective (influenced by personal experiences on stage) and objective (articles, books and other resources that help me better comprehend the musical works).

Einar Englund is nowadays considered a traditionalist in the Finnish composition school of the 20th century⁶. After World War II, with Sibelius retiring to his residence from Ainola, the Finnish musical scene was searching for a new exponential composer to lead stylistically the postwar era, and Englund became that trendsetter with his first symphony, *Sotasinfonia* (the War Symphony), written in a neoclassical style and premiered in 1946. The overwhelming success of this work remains to this day a pinpoint in modern Finnish music history and has inspired the new generation of composers to write in a neoclassical style. Looking back at Englund's entire oeuvre, his constant resilient approach regarding aspects such as form and style got him viewed as a traditionalist composer of the second half of the 20th century.

From a performer's point of view, one can interpret the term *neoclassical* with a variety of nuances regarding style, sound and even technique. So, going into more detail, what can be considered *neo* (new) and *classical* in Einar Englund's piano works? The composer himself describes his works as being *very precise* in his autobiography⁷, however we usually have a limited number of indications in his scores. Speculative as it may be, I connected the *precision* aspect in Englund's music with the clear structures in terms of form and writing that he uses, thus determining a *classical* parameter. That leaves the *neo* aspect of the music up to personal choice, and my suggestions in this matter concern sound and agogics rather than technical aspects.

Looking more closely, we notice that the majority of Englund's piano works were written between 1950-1980, a period that defined the evolution of his style. Musicologist Mikko Heiniö analyses the importance of Englund's pianistic creation and reflects on the composer's neoclassical language in works I performed multiple times, like *Introduzione e Toccata* (1950, his first piano work), or *Sonatine in d* (1966, dedicated to his daughter)⁸.

Strictly from my own perspective, *Introduzione e Toccata* was one of the works that turned out to be much more difficult than I imagined before I played it. I learned this work in the fall of 2015 while studying in Helsinki. Having experienced the year I spent as an Erasmus student at this institution, I knew that the work pace was fast, considering that the recitals took place once every three weeks or so, and new repertoire would be preferred periodically if possible.

The stage of deciphering and memorizing the musical text was relatively short, but from that point to the first performance in public, the process took much longer than the average time I was used to. From a technical point of view, the first section of the toccata was the most difficult one. I noticed that the reaction speed of the fingers of the left hand was much better than those of the right hand, which caused an uneven sound result, maybe even a little heavy in relation to the agility proposed by the writing.

⁶ Kalevi Aho. 1996. *Finnish Music*. Otava, p. 94.

⁷ Einar Englund. 1996. *I skuggan av Sibelius*. Porvoo: Söderström & Co Förlags AB, p. 47.

⁸ Mikko Heiniö. 1995. *Finnish Composers of Our Time and Their Background*. Finnish Music Information Center, p. 95.

Over time I have found that changing the angle from which I look at a technical problem can have an immediate result, thus avoiding the danger of a stagnant study period. In the present case, I was able to improve my reaction speed by trying to be aware of just the sensation of my fingers coming out of the fingerboard while playing. The positive impact was immediate, but mentally, the introduction of this new approach required some adjustment time.

Another very difficult passage was the *stretto* at the beginning of the *meno mosso* section. Here, however, I am not highlighting a difficulty of a motor nature, but one aimed at auditory control. I studied this *stretto* by assigning different modes of attack and combinations of articulations to each voice, out of a desire to be aware of and control the horizontal movement of the planes. As with the previously mentioned excerpt, changing the parameters to which you channel your attention while singing requires a separate study time. Personally, I find that achieving a balanced interpretation of this work is quite difficult. Compared to other opuses that I have played repeatedly, including Englund's creation, *Introduzione e Toccata* remains a touchstone from a performing point of view.

About *Sonatine in d* on the other hand, we have one of the few testimonies of the composer regarding the interpretation. Englund demands an effortless agility from the performer, likening his own conception of the Sonatina to that of a sonata by Domenico Scarlatti. Starting from this premise, we propose a more unified and consistent approach to the tempos, in accordance with the initial indications in the score, namely *Allegro con brio*, *Andantino* and *Vivacissimo*.

I suggest playing the first part with as much finger independence as possible. Here I'm referring to the reaction speed necessary to obtain a transparent sonority. The highlighting of the accents will have to be done without aggression, to avoid harsh or massive sonorities, and to ensure the consistency of the interpretive scarlattian approach. Differentiating the modes of attack is one of the difficulties of the first part. Moreover, it will be necessary to adapt them according to the register in which they appear. For example, the second theme features staccato sections in the low and high registers. Between the two poses, the left hand makes a jump of about three octaves. Thus, in the acute register we will need more transparency, which we will achieve through an attack as close as possible to the keyboard, while in the low register we will have to adapt the reaction of the fingers, in order not to play the sounds in staccato with a longer duration.

The second part primarily involves a good proportioning of the sounds within the chordal structures. The distance between the voices will increase, creating tension in the build-up to the climax.

It is interesting to note that Englund submitted an early version of *Siciliana* as a stand-alone miniature at a composition competition in 1965⁹, from which we can deduce that the idea for the entire sonatina started from this second part. Starting from this information, I suggest building the interpretation of the whole work with the middle part as a reference point. Thus, we will relate the tempos of part one and part three to the middle part. Moreover, it is necessary to pay more attention to the climax in this movement. If we adopt a performance strategy in which the center of gravity of the whole sonatina is represented by the second part, the climax of this piece will also be the culmination of the whole piece. Thus, we will relate and adapt the construction of the musical discourse and the dynamic palette of parts one and three to that of the middle part.

⁹ Timo Mäkinen & Nummi Mäkinen. 1965. *Musica Fennica*. Ottawa: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Oy, p. 158.

The third part is very dynamic and represents a test of musical and pianistic versatility for the performer. Here we refer to the numerous staccato passages and repeated accents. In order to keep the proportions of a dynamic scarlattian palette, we will need to adapt the speed and weight of the attack from the keyboard surface. Specifically, the speed and reaction of the attack will be higher, while the weight of the arm remains reduced. Moreover, the dynamism of the musical discourse also requires a good capacity of the pianist's apparatus for movement and anticipation. In this sense, we suggest an interpretive approach focused on the rhythmic aspects of this last part, to avoid the trap of massive sonorities, which would distort the lively and very dynamic character of the finale.

2. Material and Methods

Performing neoclassical piano works from the 20th century requires a nuanced understanding of the style and techniques characteristic of the period. Here are the guidelines I used in approaching these pieces effectively:

1. Study the Historical Context. I highly recommend being familiarized with the historical and musical context of the compositions you're performing. Understand the influences of neoclassicism, including reactions against late Romanticism, interest in Classical forms, and incorporation of modern harmonies and rhythms.¹⁰ This step is important in the music written in the late 20th century as well given the great stylistic shifts over short periods of time.

2. Analyze the Score. Carefully analyze the score to identify key elements of neoclassical style, such as clear forms, concise structures, and transparent textures. Pay attention to rhythmic precision, balanced phrasing, and dynamic contrasts. I'm not inclining towards a specific method, but in case of music in the 20th century I prefer what Diether de la Motte describes as *free analysis*.¹¹

3. Articulation and Phrasing. Neoclassical piano works often require precise articulation and nuanced phrasing. Experiment with different articulations (staccato, legato, etc.) to bring out the clarity of melodic lines and contrapuntal textures. Focus on shaping phrases with attention to balance and direction. Afterwards, return to the written stance and work on sound projection strategies that can be applied in various concert hall contexts.¹²

4. Clarity and Precision. Neoclassical compositions typically prioritize clarity and precision in performance.¹³ I would suggest aiming for a clean and transparent sound, avoiding excessive pedal, and focusing on crisp attacks and releases. When applicable, emphasize the rhythmic drive and precision throughout the piece.

5. Comprehension of Form and Structure. Neoclassical works often adhere to Classical forms such as sonata-allegro, theme and variations, lied and rondo. Getting to know these forms and their characteristics is essential, to determine key structural points such as exposition, development, and recapitulation.

6. Find a Balance Between Tradition and Modernity. Neoclassical piano works embody a balance between traditional forms and modern harmonies and techniques. One must strive to capture this balance in the performance by highlighting both the classical elegance and the modernist edge of the music. Personally, I would suggest experimenting in practice with extreme

¹⁰ Alfred Brendel. 2016. *Music, sense, and nonsense: Collected Essays and Lectures*. Sun Lakes: The Robson Press, p. 83.

¹¹ Diether De la Motte. 1968. *Musikalische Analyse*. Kassel: Ed. Bärenreiter, p. 23.

¹² Corneliu Gheorghiu. 2015. *Despre pianistică*. București: Ed. Grafoart, p. 57.

¹³ Andreas Schiff. 2022. *Music comes out in silence*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, p. 74.

differences in sound and agogics. In my experience that is a good starting point to determine further on what can be adjusted.

7. Experiment with Artistic Choices. As with any repertoire, feel free to experiment with artistic choices in your interpretation. Explore different tempos, dynamics, and expressive nuances to find your unique voice within the neoclassical idiom. Most importantly, experiment with different plausible interpretations. Going on stage with only one strategy may not be as rewarding as the possibility to choose in the moment what better suits the context of the performance.

By approaching neoclassical piano works with a blend of historical understanding, technical precision, and expressive sensitivity, one can bring out the richness and complexity of these compositions on stage.

3. Conclusions

In Englund's works we can trace the rigour of the individual practice in the creative process as well. The works' structure is clearly delimited, the differences of language and structure are precisely marked, even in the spectral pieces. Englund is the image of traditionalism in Finnish music. Perhaps more exactly, he represents the musician who possesses an ample playing experience when approaching the creative act¹⁴.

In my opinion, his reticence in treating composition as a stylistic exercise can be a consequence of his career as a concert pianist before World War II, when the reviews mentioned that his repertoire extended from Bach all the way to Sibelius. I believe that Einar Englund was consistent with regard to his sound ideal, which determined his stylistic constancy. His body of work is a current subject both in musical research and in concert halls nowadays.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Finnish Embassy in Bucharest for granting me access to their library. I've found most of the books I listed as reference by they're gracious help.

4. References

● Books

- Aho, Kalevi. 1996. *Finnish Music*. Otava.
- Brendel, Alfred. 2016. *Music, Sense and Nonsense: Collected Essays and Lectures*. Sun Lakes: The Robson Press.
- De la Motte, Diether. 1968. *Musikalische Analyse*. Kassel: Bärenreiter.
- Englund, Einar. 1996. *I skuggan av Sibelius*. Porvoo: Söderström & C:o Förlags AB.
- Gheorghiu, Corneliu. 2015. *Despre pianistică*. București: Editura Grafoart.
- Klinge, Matti. 2000. *A Brief History of Finland*. Otava Book Printing Co.
- Korhonen, Kimmo. 2007. *Inventing Finnish Music*. Finnish Music Information Center.
- Heiniö, Mikko. 1995. *Finnish Composers of Our Time and Their Background*. Finnish Music Information Center.
- Helistö, Paavo. 1980. *Music in Finland*. Finnish-American Cultural Institute.

¹⁴ Tim Howell. 2006. *After Sibelius: Studies in Finnish Music*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, p. 134.

- Howell, Tim. 2006. *After Sibelius: Studies in Finnish Music*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Karila, Tauno. 1961. *Composers of Finland*. Werner Söderström Oy.
- Mäkinen, Timo & Mäkinen, Nummi. 1965. *Musica Fennica*. Ottawa: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Oy.
- Schiff, Andras. 2022. *Music comes out in silence*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.