

Doctoral thesis

Balázs Futó

Composition techniques of Nikolai Andreyevich

Roslavets in the 1910's

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I. Case history to the research

The work of Nikolai Andreyevich Roslavets, just like the Russian avant garde in the early 20th century, do not belong to the most explored and most adapted topics of culture, or even of musical culture. The reasons for that can be explained by the particularity of the epoch around. The oppression had gotten rid of free art and advanced theories, also made the work of Roslavets disappear for a long time from the musical life, and sadly, same happened to the specialized literature.

However, musicologists like Zofja Lissa, as a result of the spread of scale or chord-based composition techniques – which had become known mostly due to the second Viennese school – wrote an essay in 1935 for *Acta Musicologica* about the Scriabin-like structures and atonality, comparing them to the dodecaphony of Schoenberg, regarding their aspects of pitch-class systems and the expression of musical thoughts. As Lissa doesn't mention the name of Roslavets, it is an interesting fact, that she does mention the synthetic method as a term, with which she refers to the methods of Scriabin, while presenting the comparison of the mentioned composition techniques: that is, that in her opinion, the melodic, harmonic and formal aspects

are determined by the *Grundgestalt*. By now, we know, that even Roslavets himself called his method synthetic technique.

In the 1960's, the specific literature related to the composer gained a bit. It was Detlef Gojowy, who decided to explore the music of the 1920's of Soviet-Russian music at that time. As a result of his research, one can see his extensive work in his book *Neue sowjetische Musik der 20er Jahre* (published in 1980), in which Gojowy, taking up a vast number of other composers (besides Roslavets), presents the cultural revolution of the Soviet-Russian musical culture happened after the political landmark of the year 1917, also having very well documented the Russian composition methods of the 1910's.

It is, however, Marina Lobanova, who is the most important key figure of Roslavets-research, who started her work already in the 1980's, made investigations and looked into the work and biography of Roslavets, with the help of the composer's niece and others. After several publications in different specialist journals, she completed her monography *Nikolaj Andreevič Roslavec und die Kultur seiner Zeit* in 1989, which is one of the most important research ever made related to the composer.

Roslavets' name and method have already popping up in some dissertations since 1990; however, he has still remained a

peripheral author, whose compositional technical achievements are not known suitably by the musicology today, same goes for his works, regarding the musical professionals and the public.

II. Sources

One of the objectives of this dissertation was to present existing information about the life of the composer in Hungarian, in virtue of the steadfast and trustworthy work of Lobanova. Every kind of contribution and source was cited from her book mentioned above, the biographical chapter tracks almost exactly the monography (as far as I'm knowledgeable, there is no such a collection, which ever publicised the almost undiscoverable original texts in Russian), so the questions related to the composition-technical problems of Roslavets and his life can be understood by the reader, from more aspects.

I found it important to present Lissa's publication *Geschichtliche Vorform der Zwölftontechnik* as well, which sheds a light on the problem, which might have caused wonderings for the musicologists exploring the composition methods of Scriabin at that time, during the spread of the dodecaphonic technique, particularly due to the lack of any edition of a valid description by the circles of Schoenberg.

Besides all of these, when it comes to the analysis of the compositional techniques, I would mention the music sheets themselves as sources, whose availability can be owed to Lobanova. She has been working unbrokenly on Roslavets' oeuvre since the 1990's for the publisher Schott. The first edition of numerous works is because of Lobanova: many works had been considered unknown or lost due to the chaotic irregularity in the archives of Roslavets, and thanks to her work, many of these creations became complete or sometimes, however, reconstructed.

III. Method

First of all, I found it important to present the contemporary musical theory (regarding the thoughts of the of the tonal-atonal sphere) of that time, which explains the nature of the atonal composition techniques. I cited Lissa's publication for help.

The process of Roslavets' shaping of his pitch organisation is represented in an excellent way by his chamber music and songs, written around the year 1910. Firstly, I present works using almost tonal-functional relations, with the ones using whole-tone scales, and also the carefully applied *Grundgestalts*, so the reader can witness the way how the composer turns away

of conservatism, to find a system among tones and also among pitches, considering all the stylistic conceptions at that time.

I consider the presentation of the synthetic method (used after 1913, said by Roslavets) as a main chapter of this dissertation. Primarily, the propositions of the fundamental theses are introduced, then the different usages of the basic row (transpositions, row variations, formal aspects, motivic characteristics) are demonstrated, using different works picked for each case. With this, one can get into the best of Roslavets' oeuvre.

The dissertation sheds a light on the fact, that in the style of Roslavets, a certain simplification appeared before 1920, which ended up in utter ruin in 1929 (the composer denied his doctrines due to pressure). The next chapter picks typical examples from this simplificational period, regarding different musical aspects.

IV. Results

The dissertation – maybe it isn't inmodesty to say so –, fills a gap in the Hungarian Roslavets-literature; thus (thanks to the helpers and sources of Lobanova) some sort of new information is revealed for the reader. These can be found in the biography chapter, about the Soviet-Russian musical associations (ASM,

RAPM, etc.) in the 1920's, also their disputes in different musical journals of that epoch.

I personally have never met studies examining Roslavets' techniques in a systematic way, but ones, which confined themselves (often shallowly overinterpreted) to one certain work or movement which were to demonstrate the synthetic technique as an unmeritedly forgotten doctrine.

I can also consider as a result of this research, that like any other methods from the 20th century, the synthetic one can be a quite current device for the composers today; in my opinion, it even serves slightly greater freedom and more possibilities than its commonly known corresponding technique, the dodecaphony. The name and the work of Roslavets must be a known part of music history, notwithstanding his real milestones, which are coming only from a few years of his oeuvre; it is not only the technique which is revolutionary, but the music is also phenomenal.

V. Documentation of pursuits pertaining to the doctoral thesis

As a pianist, I have performed Roslavets' and other contemporaries' works on recitals two times by now, together

with my colleague *Ádám Ignác*, with which we intended to demonstrate the world of the Russian avant garde.

As a composer, I have been dealing with the application of the synthetic techniques, leading them by my own musical thinking. As a result of that, some of my latest works have been created with this method: (*Рославет* (2011), *Period* (2013), *In ihm leben, in ihm sterben* (2013), *Salus* (2015), *Two compositions* (2015)), which row I would like to continue and develop in my future work, investigating the new possibilities coming from this very method. Roslavets thought, his method would be valid for two hundred years – I could not argue with that.