

**DOCTORAL DISSERTATION THESIS**

**THE ROLE OF POLYPHONIC THINKING  
IN FLUTE PLAYING**

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## Premises of the choice of the subject

During my studies and later in the course of my activity as a concert artist and teacher my frustration, caused by the fact that my instrument, the flute, plays only one part, has increased. Gradually I formed a certain resistance to this fact. Not that I would deny that the flute is basically a melodic instrument; however, it is hard to accept that this feature limits our thinking. Fortunately I met flute masters (like István Matuz or Auréle Nicolet) who take aspects of harmony into consideration when dealing with the interpretational problems of flute literature. I am grateful for the theory lessons of Iván Madarász at the Liszt Academy of Music as well as to my chamber music teachers, György Kurtág and Ferenc Rados, who did not support the conventional flautist attitude which takes no interest in harmonies at all. They set me going on this long road which eventually led me to this doctorate dissertation; following their way of thinking I have gained certain experiences and realizations of which I would like to give an account here. Although I cannot pride myself on exceptional aural or pianistic skills, nonetheless harmonic thinking became a guideline for me which determined the process of my understanding of music and forming my conception about its performance both on stage and in my pedagogical work.

## The subject, the goal and the method of the dissertation

I chose **the role of polyphonic thinking in flute playing** as the subject for my treatise hoping that immersion in the topic would help me to clarify some connections and that, by a detailed delineation of my concept, I can enrich interpretation practice. I found it necessary because, though we talk about it sometimes, there is hardly any written trace of the recognition that a flute piece, be it with keyboard accompaniment or even solo, is mostly a product of the polyphonic European compositional tradition; to understand it and play it properly one cannot avoid mapping the harmonic structure. At the same time, it is not enough to extend our horizon with theoretical information; the real practical goal will be musical empathy, the conscious improvement and use of the sense of harmony, since this is what directly serves the art of performance. For this reason I tried to define some subjective feelings as well, which are hard to describe and actually impossible to communicate verbally, other than by making and listening to music.

While collecting the material I was surprised to realise that no direct source exists on the subject. Even in the Baroque period I did not find any treatise explaining how to compose a melody in order to be in line with the harmony supporting it. The theoretical works from the era speak even less about how to represent the multi-part structure in a solo sonata composed for an instrument which has limited or no polyphonic possibilities. The first one to write a study on this was Sigfrid Karg-Elert in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. So I was left to my own devices and was forced to draw general inferences after individually processing the emerging pieces. This inductive method made it more difficult to define attractive, final principles in the script. Nevertheless, I hope to have succeeded in accumulating enough logical and carefully made analyses for an interested reader to be able to approach music in the future in a similar way after studying them. Numerous score examples are attached to assist in this. Although I was willing to formulate exact statements, due to the nature of the topic it was impossible to avoid entering the far more muddy territories of aesthetics, psychology, philosophy or anthropology. I try to confirm or refine my observations made here by quotations from books read earlier or in connection with this treatise.

## The structure and content of the dissertation

The main part of my dissertation consists of analyses, treating significant works mostly composed for solo flute. Supporting it however, I had to lay down some theoretical foundations. The **First Chapter** is about my doubts concerning the actual existence of a single voice. Taking the expression literally one has to see that no case exists when only one pitch is sounding since (1) a musical sound contains its partials in every case; (2) thanks to our inner hearing we always recall an entire sound system which works as a yardstick to which we can adjust our sounds; (3) the sounds which have just passed

are kept in our ears for a while, we can compare the new frequencies to them, thus there are always several pitches present in our mind; (4) being familiar with a style, having a certain sense of music helps us to imagine in advance how the unknown melody continues. Compositional devices such as fulfilling an expectation or surprising the listener are based on this fact.

Researching the melody as such, I reached the consequence that, even in the simplest children's song, there exists no melody without the feelings of harmonic relationships, metric characteristics or the activity of the memory and imagination. The intrinsic order of the melody mirrors the metric and tonal-harmonic relations alongside the hierarchy originating from the pitch of notes. The performer must follow this order. European musical tradition is built on the constant changes of tension. The elements which influence the momentary tension of the sounds can be clearly seen as illustrated by a diagram in my paper. However, the actual shaping and the interpretational devices chosen by the performer are individual and can not be strictly fixed.

After investigating the latent polyphony hidden in one part and surveying the birth and history of polyphony we go on to categorise the melodic steps, then I describe a few simple exercises in order to help to improve polyphonic inner hearing. In this way I also wanted to stress that my work will reach its actual goal in practical use, even if I tried to write it for academic purposes.

Just because of the scholarly expectations I had constant doubts concerning the validity of any exact statements which can only be proved in personal experiences. This made me write **Chapter Two** in which I investigated how **subjective** or **objective** musical perception and experience are. For this examination I had to use some of the innovations and terms of modern psychology such as categorical or vital affections or synaesthesia, some recognitions of brain research as well as some works in physics, metaphysics or esotery which arrive at certain general consequences helping us to prove musical experience and explain musical creation. This chapter seeks the answer for such difficult questions as what is common in each person, whether the performer and the listener experience the same feeling and how much this feeling depends on harmonic changes, or what the difference is between tradition and convention etc. I was searching for laws which can be the basis for later discussion. I considered music as language, a way of communication, the synonym of the material world or of accomplishing creation. Our image of the musical experience becomes enriched by each approach but, at the same time, we have to see that none of them promises an exact, scientific determination. The subjective will be present even in the most objective-looking musical moment. Nevertheless, we can state that within certain limits one can determine rules in acoustics, psychology or information theory which work as a clue, a measure for musical performance. To ignore these is just as much of a mistake as creating laws from bad taste or bad habits.

**Chapter Three** should be considered the main part of the dissertation. Here are listed the most significant **solo works** of **flute literature** in chronological order. By treating these works sometimes thoroughly, sometimes just touching the surface, the intention is to prove the accuracy of our central thought around which the whole study is built. I was not afraid to draw some conclusions regarding the art of performance based on the result of the theoretical analyses or try to challenge some fossilized conventions. It was not done with a provocative intent, I was always led by the passion of searching for artistic truth. I hope that in the future there will be works which can discuss my axioms on a serious basis, since a stimulating discussion on the theory of interpretation would advance our art.

As I have mentioned I have not found any direct source from the BAROQUE period. However, I thought it worthwhile to mention the conflicting attitudes of Mattheson and Rameau. While the former fights for the priority of melody, the French master explains melody as originating from harmony, which opinion is obviously more congenial to our thinking. For my first example I gave a lengthy though not exhaustive analysis of the Partita in A minor by **Bach** on a harmonic level since it is one of the most prominent examples of applied polyphony in our literature. The 12 Fantasies of **Telemann** are of similar significance; from these I highlighted only a few characteristic movements. I used various methods in the harmonic realisation: figured bass notation, detailed polyphonic realisation in one or two systems, numbers or indicating chords or functions with letters. Sometimes I

even made\* a special preparation of the material in order to make myself clear. The realisations can rarely be used in actual performance since my starting point was always that these flute parts coming from the hands of such great masters represent such accomplished latent polyphony that they don't need, in fact, they can't bear any accompaniment. This is the case in the Solo Sonata in A minor by **C. P. E. Bach** based on homophonic thinking and which I analysed in the last section of the Baroque chapter.

We have much less to do in the case of VIENNESE CLASSICS if staying with applied polyphony since there is no significant solo work originating from this era. Nevertheless, this part gives us an excellent occasion to look carefully at the **cadenzas** which became obligatory parts of concertos at this time. Here we deal with their origins, their musical role and compositional aspects. I could not attempt to lay down the rules of writing or improvising cadenzas. I have only made a few references concerning this issue but mostly I observed the application of polyphonic thinking in cadenzas. We can often find composed cadenza-like sections in Mozart's works which are also worth considering. A nice example is the slow movement of the Flute Concerto in G; its analysis may offer important revelations for the interpreter. Mozart's melodic structuring demands us to discover and follow the polyphony hidden in his flute parts in any case, which often makes us reconsider the phrasing.

ROMANTICS give us new tasks. If looking for solo flute works from this period our main hunting ground will be the field of **etudes**. As I did not want flute playing to stay within the circle of simple melodic beauties, I have to protest against etudes being considered as nothing more than technical exercises. Investigating the etudes of Fürstenau, Köhler and Andersen one can appreciate that these composers wrote their studies with real compositional requirements and especially with a deep knowledge of the harmony of their age; thus they do not only educate our muscles but our skills in comprehending and shaping music. This realization is especially difficult in the case of Andersen, whose etudes at first sight seem to be extremely monotonic. So it is even more important to see behind the incoherent-looking zigzag steps the clear order in harmony and form, the close connections of melody and chords which hold together the material. Here as well several score examples try to reveal the inner structure plus one etude by Köhler, and a half one by Andersen can be found in the appendix transcribed for piano by myself. The musical intention is even more unambiguous in the case of later, non-flautist etude composers like Karg-Elert, JeanJean, Bozza or Reitz.

Getting to the 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY we have to divide our attention between several phenomena. In the solo works by Karg-Elert and Dohnányi it is a specially nice and difficult task to understand the rather complex tonal-harmonic structure of Late Romantic thinking. At the same time Debussy's *Syrinx* practically rejects consequent harmonic thinking. When performing Late Impressionists (Honegger, Ibert, Bozza, Dubois, Lajtha) polyphonic hearing is still a great help but their solo works do not follow obvious inner voicing as for example do the pieces of their colleagues composing in the spirit of German romanticism. They prefer building on the primordial lyricism of the flute and the character of the motions. An interesting border-line case is that of Hindemith, whose solo pieces may be construed both above latent chords and as a result of horizontal interval-structures built after a consequent logic. However, there is no strict system of harmonic rules to be found here any more. In expressionism (Jolivet, Varèse) and avant garde, the flute slowly returns to a more ancient form of music-making where the expressive power of the tone and dramatic declamation become more important than the fluctuation of tension which originates from moving within a pre-ordained hierarchic sound system.

We make good use of the polyphonic thinking henceforward, too, either for better orientation in the interval groups (Messiaen) or scales (Jolivet) arbitrarily created by the composer or for easier pursuit of simultaneous musical processes (Jolivet, Dukay, Stockhausen, Gyöngyössi). In post-modern and the neo styles certain features of the old music have a revival, so we may again make use of our traditional harmonic sensations. In the works of Anthony Newman, baroque thinking is blended in a special way with a compositional method which moves freely in tonality and plays with a non-conventional sense of function.

Although this paper wishes to present the determining role of harmonic thinking through typical examples of hidden polyphony, at this point I could not ignore the fact that in the last few decades

the flute has more and more often been heard to play several pitches at the same time. The attempts of Georg Bayr at the beginning the 19<sup>th</sup> century fell flat since the aesthetics of the romantics was not ready to accept multiphonic possibilities, but from the 1960s more and more people have researched and utilized this technique. Works by composers and even more often flautist-composers are built on real polyphony. The practice of multiphonic playing is also a great help in experiencing latent polyphony.

There is another topic even less pertinent to our subject, which still should be mentioned for other reasons. Since during my career I have gained a little experience in the field of jazz, I wanted to share my conviction with the reader that jazz in its present form retains the unity of **harmony** and **melody** much more faithfully than the practice of classical music both in performance and education. I dedicated **Chapter Four**, the last and shortest one, to this idea. Recognising this may teach us some lessons when comparing jazz practice to that of the Baroque. Chord notation and figured bass, the rhythm section and the pairing of harpsichord and cello, improvisation above given harmonies and spontaneous ornamentation are all close parallels. From the aspect of visceral experience of music it is worth dealing with jazz, too. The most interesting is perhaps the rhythmical stretching similar in French Baroque unequal playing and swinging. Besides that, the history of jazz is like being shaped after the 500-year-long history of European music, speeded up about five times. The inner development of the style, the changes of its role, blending with other influences and the appearance of numerous new tendencies in the last decades remind us of the history of classical music in many senses.

### **The lesson of the dissertation**

Since the treatise is based mostly on my own experiences in interpretation, while writing it I rarely arrived at surprising revelations. As I mention in the dissertation, instinctive feeling and intellectual cognition go hand in hand in music; but while intuition may be enough for a good performance in itself, theoretical knowledge will always remain insufficient if intuition is lacking. Thus, although I find theoretical research, the intellectual processing of music, exciting and important, my heart votes finally for practice and instinctive empathy. I still cannot deny my passion urging me to search for rational possibilities in the realm of subjective, artistic experiences. I am convinced that conscious investigation can effectively help the aspect of intuition, and we need this since only very few are blessed with that exceptional musical instinct through which a piece of music can be captured immediately and directly in its entirety.

I hoped to establish a grasp of the subjective experience of music and using the ideas of several branches of science to succeed in creating an overtly constant system in which musical sensations become structured, musical imagination will be more quantifiable, the volatile experience will be more tangible. I myself can't judge how well I succeeded. An excuse may be that 'scientists realised already at the beginning of the century that every scientific model and theory can only be approximate and in the case of verbal definition we have to reckon with the imprecision of our language' (Fritjof Capra: *The Tao of Physics*, 1975) This is even more valid for scientific statements regarding art. However, since to my knowledge there is no music theoretical writing which tries to bridge such a chasm between theory and praxis, I don't feel my efforts were without purpose. Especially because I treated an approach neglected in flute education with a certain thoroughness which may fill a gap.

From another point of view, I see that every even partially answered question, every piece of scientific evidence mentioned, every bar analysed opens new doors through which we should enter new territories waiting to be explored. In this sense my work did not make order in the puzzle; in fact, it made the clues even more inextricable. To unravel it, if it is possible and at all worthwhile, will be the task of posterity. For that an enormous amount of artistic experiences should be scientifically described or one should write down an exhaustively extended system of music with theoretical correlations so detailed that an artist could transform it to personal experience. Finally, it is possible that everybody will thankfully return to his profession: scientists make science, musicians make music.