

DLA Doctoral thesis

ZSUZSA SZESZTAY

E. CHABRIER: PIÈCES PITTORESQUES
ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Supervisor: KATALIN KOMLÓS, DSc

The Liszt Academy of Music

Studies in History of Art and Culture

Doctoral Program No. 28

Budapest

2014

I. Background of the study

The first time I heard of Emmanuel Chabrier was ten years ago in France. I was immediately admired by the ingenious piano pieces of the composer that I had not known before. As I got better acquainted with the compositions, the unusual way of handling the instrument and the virtuous technical solutions that originated in the improvisative ideas made it clear that Chabrier plays an especially important role in the French piano literature. That was exactly the reason why I felt the necessity that I should know these pieces better, so that I can grasp the methods of the composition and the interpretation that provide the characteristic features.

As I got back home and I tried to learn more about Chabrier, I had to realize that – with the possible exception of the popular *Espana* and the *Bourrée fantasque* – these pearls of the piano oeuvre are practically not performed at all in Hungary. Similarly, the research that preceded my dissertation was seriously restricted by the fact that there is very little known about the work of Chabrier in my country. Literature and sheet music are not available at all in Hungarian.

The only previous source that devotes a full chapter to the piano compositions of Chabrier is the book *La Musique française du piano (1948)* by Alfred Cortot. The works *Emmanuel Chabrier and his circle (1969)* by Rollo Myers and *Emmanuel Chabrier (1961)* by Francis Poulenc have a mostly biographical point of view augmented with a general description of the piano pieces. Additionally, there are

several articles by Roger Delage which discuss the various directions of Chabrier's activity as a musician.

My original plan was to provide a comprehensive study of the complete Chabrier piano oeuvre. However, as my intention was to investigate the compositions by music theoretical methods, such a plan turned to be too extensive. Hence I decided to narrow my topic to the study of *Pièces pittoresques* which is arguably the most characteristic piano composition of Chabrier.

II. Sources

In addition to the works mentioned above, the main source of my dissertation is the book *The Art of French Piano Music* (Yale University Press, 2009) by Roy Howat. This is a unique piece of literature as it approaches the French piano music of the 19th century from a novel aspect. In particular a detailed description and analysis of the piano compositions by Chabrier is included. Howat's work provided great help when aiming at a thematic investigation of the pieces. Based on its sheet music examples I was able to initiate comparative studies, enlighten the historical context of the compositions and their effect on other composers.

As far as the analytic study and the questions of interpretation are concerned, my work was based to a large extent on the collection of sheet music Emmanuel Chabrier: *Works for Piano* (1995) edited by

Roy Howat, the author of the above mentioned book. The collection is preceded with a description of the latest results of research, along with some directions for the pianist concerning the main issues of interpretation. Questions of notation and choice of pace are discussed; a table comparing the paces of Chabrier with those suggested by the editor turned out to be especially useful. Furthermore, at each individual piece the notes of the original sources are indicated, and later variants are pointed out as well.

An important source for the analytical studies was the book *Összhangzattan és tonalitás* (Rózsavölgyi és Társa, Budapest, 2012) by Zsolt Gárdonyi and Hubert Nordhoff. Concerning the development of the instrument I mostly used *A zongora története* (Zeneműkiadó Vállalat, Budapest, 1964) by József Gát. In music theoretical aspects the books *Maurice Ravel* (Gondolat Kiadó, Budapest, 1959) by Emil Petrovics and *Berlioz élete* (Osiris kiadó, 2004) by Peter Bloom provided great help.

III. Methods

I approached the topic from three different directions: from a historical, an analytic and an interpretation point of view. To evaluate the proper **historical** context of *Pièces pittoresques*, it seemed essential to investigate the role played by Chabrier's piano oeuvre in the development of French keyboard music. For this reason the first and the second chapters of the dissertation discuss the roots of

Chabrier's characteristic piano style in the French keyboard tradition and in the romanticism, respectively. A key element of the methodology was the investigation of music historical events along with the development of the instrument from the 17th to the 20th century, which was supplemented by the analysis of some extracts from piano pieces that are closely related to the work of Chabrier.

The **analysis** of *Pièces pittoresques* in the dissertation consists of a study of musical form and a harmonic investigation. My starting point was the classical terminology of harmonic analysis and music form theory, which, nonetheless, has turned out to be too restrictive at several occasions. Hence, for the sake of proper definitions, a wider interpretation of the traditional concepts and the introduction of novel terminology seemed appropriate.

In course of the study of the musical form new concepts were introduced, such as complex ternary composite form, free variation on two themes, monorhythmic development within a ternary form, tripartite variational form, five-part form with a reprise character and sonata-type tripartite form with a binary articulation.

The main lines of approach of the harmonic analysis were: tonal uncertainty at the start of the composition, flattened sixth degree and sixth degree in the minor mode, the usage of the tritonus, connections of modal and third-related chords, chromaticism and sequences.

A special emphasis was put on the issues of **interpretation** as I often had surprising experience when listening to various recordings. The improper choice of pace, the individual interpretations of the

articulation and the variable usage of the dynamics strongly effected the enjoyability of the compositions. The intentions of the composer are indicated with remarkable precision in Chabrier's pieces, hence the fidelity to the notation and the authentic interpretation are of particular significance for me as a performer.

IV. Results

As I was amazed already at the first listening by the piano compositions of Chabrier, the main aim of my dissertation was to reveal the techniques of the composer that are behind this special effect. Consequently, my study focused on the characteristic features of *Pièces pittoresques* that are, on the one hand, closely related to traditional stylistic elements and precede, on the other hand, the music of the 20th century. The study of the musical form concluded that the piano cycle strongly relies on one of the most popular forms of the character pieces of 19th century piano music, on the ternary – A B A^v – trio form, which, however, obtains an individual character by the different variants used by Chabrier. In course of the harmonic analysis the most remarkable feature is the usage of chromatics. Chromatics is often called the trademark of Chabrier as it is so well suited for the individual melodic and harmonic invention of the composer. The description of the typically asymmetric motivic units of the pieces - illustrated by tables in the appendices - can be considered, in my opinion, as an additional significant result. The rhythmical and

variational creativity is the key that helps the listener to capture the improvisative attitude that makes Chabrier's music so special.

I hope that with my analysis I manage to call some attention to Chabrier's piano oeuvre. Perhaps my dissertation supplies, in a sense, a deficiency of the Hungarian musical community; and possibly my study can be continued in further directions in the future. Personally I am convinced that these pearls of the piano literature deserve more attention, and in particular have the merit to be played in the concert halls of our country.

V. Documentation of the activity related to the dissertation

During my DLA studies on November 26, 2010 I reported on the first chapter of my dissertation at the Doctoral Seminar of the School. On 29 April, 2011 I presented a more extended lecture on Chabrier's oeuvre which was augmented by the listening of recordings. The comments and observations I obtained at these occasions provided significant help for a comprehensive investigation of the topic.

At the DLA concert held on 23 March, 2013 I performed two movements from Chabrier's *Pièces pittoresques*, in particular, *Sous bois* and *Mauresques*.