

Mikrokosmos

A Diary of Experiences

by

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

After a few years in which my doctoral thesis fell into a deep sleep on one of the shelves of my dusty home library, one day arises the idea of bringing it back to life, removing it from its anonymity.

With the desire to give it more voice, I decided to transform it into a small diary of experiences, much more summarized and adapted to any reader, whether professional or amateur.

This is how I converted an extensive doctoral thesis presented in 2010 at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain), into a brief diary that exposes the properties of the piano work Mikrokosmos (1926-1939) by the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók (1881-1945).

The term Mikrokosmos, as its very word describes, is a cosmos, which although small, represents an unlimited space of elements. And although the work has been covered by numerous authors, each one contributed a different perspective, which by joining them all, it helps to complete the mosaic of the unlimited knowledge.

I hope the reader can enjoy this brief presentation of ideas, immersing in the world of this musical work.

Sharon monis

FIRST STEPS

During the years I've been a music student, my teachers used Mikrokosmos for different musical practices: piano teaching, music theory, audition, composition and improvisation. This variety of uses got my attention, and so, I started to research.

At first, I found that Mikrokosmos was a piano work that brought together 153 progressive pieces, distributed in six books, passing through all levels of difficulty: elementary, advanced and superior, coinciding with the different stages of a student who is progressing gradually. The work presents a continuous progressiveness, amplitude, density and enrichment of the musical content presentation.

Then I found that Mikrokosmos belonged to the genre of artistic-educational works, a genre that brings together an educational perspective, presenting the most concrete elements, as well as an artistic perspective, presenting the most abstract elements. This genre was conceived by the Romanian-Israeli composer Sergiu Shapira in a doctoral thesis presented in 2001 which became the first and only written document on this type of a compositional genre.

From other sources, Mikrokosmos was known as a true compositional treatise with the symbiosis of compositional styles and techniques of the past, the contemporary environment of the composer and his personal style. And finally, known also as a conceptual work, loaded by socio-cultural manifestations, responsible for the construction of the musical content.

A GOAL

Every work has, or at least must have, a goal, fulfilling a specific purpose or function.

When the composer writes his work, he combines different musical elements (register, melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, shape, etc.) in order to achieve a specific purpose that can be educational, artistic, therapeutic or for leisure, and that way, produce not only a sound space, but also a reflective, formative, healing, or spiritual space.

The work with educational purposes, for example, wish to offer to the performer the maximum knowledge of the musical elements and their performance. For this reason, the musical content will be generally clear, organized, gradual, stimulating, inducing towards a continuous discovery of knowledge and reflections that goes with the mental-emotional stages of its performer. The educational work is committed to the needs and limitations of its performer in all stages of its training, producing a clear material with a logical and gradual sequence of content.

On the other hand, the work with artistic purposes is a more abstract work that seeks the maximum sublimation of the musical components, their maximum expressiveness, uniformity and transcendence, when the only consideration is music in its highest expression, not the evolutionary process of an performer.

The artistic work manifests itself in such a way that its components and its spirit, combined, can evoke the highest sublime reactions that inspire and transform. An example of this could be Beethoven's ninth symphony whose high musical and humanistic ideals, were capable to transform and transcend. And although human beings have always sought transcendence, first, to cultivate the human condition, and second, to survive its fatality, through the artistic work it was possible to do so in a highly sublime way, beyond time and space.

THE ARTISTIC-EDUCATIONAL GENRE

The artistic-educational genre had its origin in ancient times, when the first musicians in history wanted to teach music, and in the absence of material, they created their own. As a result, his teaching was not only transmitted orally but it was also inscribed on countless scores as a real treasure for present and future generations.

Works by composers such as Bach, Schumann, Heller, Bartók, Kabalevsky, among many others, are the result of this compositional-pedagogical activity, and although the number of existing works, as a result of this activity, is innumerable, null is the number of documental material that could help to understand the characteristics of these works.

This is how, in 2001, the Romanian-Israeli composer and musicologist Sergiu Shapira, from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, decided to gather in an extensive and rigorous analysis, hundreds and hundreds of classical works, in order to establish the characteristics that made them belong to this genre, being the product of a compositional-pedagogical activity. Shapira found a series of characteristics, which as a pattern, were constantly repeated in each work he analyzed, and by bringing them together, he established what he would later call: the four criteria that determine the genre of artistic-educational works:

- . Criteria of Degree of difficulty: referring the density and complexity of the musical content
- . Criteria of Degree of simplicity: referring the communicability and assimilation of the content
- . Dimensional Criteria: referring the organization of the content
- . Emotional Criteria: referring the spiritu or emotional aspects of the content

Shapira explains that this genre's works have a multiple purposes: on one hand, correspond to the values of education, taking into account the needs of the young performer, and on the other, correspond to artistic values, taking into account aesthetical and expressive qualities of the music.

As to the educational values, the musical content is made in a way that takes into account the population to which the work is dedicated -if infantile, juvenile or adults- and also, the level that each population has, or could have -initiation, advanced or higher-.

However, in any of these cases, the musical content will always be clear, concrete and eloquent with a progressive appearance of the musical elements, introducing reduced, brief and repetitive content that will make everything more comprehensible and assimilable, inducing towards more immediate and attractive musical experiences. Above all, a content capable to provoke reactions in the emotional ambit, awakening feelings, spirit and imagination, and recreating attitudes and values in the performer.

If we look for these criteria in Mikrokosmos, we will see that the criteria of difficulty and simplicity are present through musical elements first exposed in its most basic form, and then, in its most altered or metamorphic form, such as a linear melody without interruptions that afterwards becomes interrupted with large register jumps. The dimensional criteria is present through the use of small musical forms, such as: Minuet, Fugueta, Dance, among others, to first concentrate the content in a few limited bars to then develop it in large schemes. Finally, the emotional criteria is present through the evocation of different states of mind or imagination by descriptive titles such as: "Slow Dance", "Meditation", "The Dragon Dance", "Children's Song", "Waves", among others.

The criteria that Shapira exposes, generate a symbiosis of objective spaces -through training-, and at the same time, of subjective spaces -through inspiration-. And since the human being is a being that feels and thinks, the artistic-educational work presents this duality that, on one hand, develops thinking and reflection, and on the other, feeling and expression.

MIKROKOSMOS CONCEPTUAL

The Hungarian-Israeli composer and musicologist André Hajdu, a disciple of the known composers Zoltán Kodály, Darius Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen, wrote in a document published in 2008 by the Cambridge University Press, the idea of a *conceptual* Mikrokosmos, as a result of a number socio-cultural manifestations of that time, adapted to music in a pedagogical and artistic ways.

One of those manifestations was the strong presence of elements from the ethnic world or folklore, inside music: melodies, rhythms, textures that shaped the musical content that became an identity value.

In order to understand this aspect, we must first understand the socio-cultural environment of Bartók who was born in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, assimilating its great development, as well as later, its great disintegration, which produced a strong shaking and loss of the identity values in that society.

In order to rebuild these values, Bartók decided to rescue the musical traditions of each region of the empire (Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, etc.), integrating it all in his music, specifically in his Mikrokosmos. That way he achieved to revalue past traditions, preserving a great historical and multi-cultural heritage to never lose it again.

His material and research have practically made him the pioneer of a discipline that didn't exist until 1950, several years after his death: Ethnomusicology, which was first called Comparative Musicology and was a combination of the study of Music and Anthropology.

But there is something else, since while he was introducing folk elements in his music, new proposals and compositional techniques were also developed in the world, something that he also implemented in his Mikrokosmos, reflecting a combination or duality between local and traditionalist elements (folklore) and universal elements (contemporary classical language). It can even be said that there was an elevation of the first towards the second, to achieve a musical revaluation.

As a consequence, there was an innovation of musical schemes and forms of expression, as well as new possibilities developing different musical contents. In *Mikrokosmos*, it was produced through elements of poly-rhythm, bi-modality, phrases of asymmetric structure, tonal structures transformed into different tonal functions and change in the function of the piano, acting as a percussion instrument, rather than a harmonious one.

TEACHING MIKROKOSMOS

The pieces of Mikrokosmos are a compilation written by the composer in the piano classes that he taught to his son Peter and other students. His own teaching experiences have helped him determine the quality of the works and their possible form of transmission. These are not mere theoretical ideas, but experiences that have achieved concrete results.

From the preface of Mikrokosmos' first book, Bartók proposes: working technique, singing, playing four hands, transposing, transcribing, adding improvised notes; In other words, experimenting with different practices in order to develop each of the capacities of the young performer.

This versatility of practices helps the performer assimilate the work much better, beyond its technical and cultural limitations; technical, since the performer still has many lacks in his knowledge; and cultural, since not every performer can assimilate music with cultural traits different from his own.

Mikrokosmos, allows through this versatility to work different aspects of knowledge which could cultivate, sensitize and transform the performer, offering at the same time, the possibility to transform the musical work through the performer's creativity.

When this transformation happens and more awareness and sensitivity is acquired through music, a humanizing act is manifested, that is, when our humanity develops to its highest expression. It is an act that allows the human soul to reconcile with its prejudices and cultural discrepancies, to then be identified with it and express it.

To conform all this information into experiences, I gathered different teachers in different music schools, and for more than a year, I made them work the first three volumes of Mikrokosmos with piano students in different ages at initiation level. The results were conceived in stages in which in the first one, there was a first contact with the work; in the second, a process of study and assimilation; and finally in the third, its performance.

At first, I noticed that there were teachers who knew how to work Mikrokosmos' versatility and cultivate a multiple practice, but others who didn't know exactly how to approach to it. The first group received better and more immediate results from their students, than the second group who needed more time in order to get these responses.

I also noted that the students preferred some pieces more than others; for example, pieces that sounded more melodic and tonal, with a more symmetrical structure, with more stable beats and rhythms; short pieces, of few measures, visually simple, happy, moderately fast; pieces with homophonic or monodic texture, pieces with static, repetitive or imitative elements that develop points of tension-relaxation or relief-decline; pieces with a more descriptive titles such as: "The dragon dance" due to its attractive "storytell" element.

In order to share the teachers experiences, I gathered them in reunions talking about each one's practice, discussing processes, results and possible proposals. They proposed focusing on four practices: technical, theoretical, creative and expressive, integrating also the constant inventive participation of the student.

As an example of the technical practice, the teacher placed the performer's hand on the keyboard and guided towards different exercises where the performer also could have space to invent them. As to the theoretical practice, by learning concepts of *forte* and *piano*, the performer was asked to create also strong and soft phrases. In the creative practice, calling to the performer's inventiveness, notes were added to linear melodies along with stories that could change the added notes. And finally, in the expressive practice, the goal was to get different responses of emotion by the performer in order to create the greatest possible sublimation of the musical content.

In summary, teaching Mikrokosmos demonstrated that a versatile practice creates and develops a versatile and creative performer, capable of solving all the complexities presented in the musical content, assimilating knowledge that is outside his common cultural context in order to re-create it, transforming his musical reality into a reality that cultivates and sensitizes him.

MIKROKOSMOS IN THREE VOLUMES

The pieces compiled in the first three volumes of Mikrokosmos, are pieces that according to the composer, are appropriate for the young performer in his first years of musical-pianistic study. Bartók explains that each performer has different needs but Mikrokosmos is capable to give everything to satisfy all needs, recommending certain guidelines:

- . The order of the pieces can be altered according to each performer's needs
- . Exercises can be created, based on the chosen pieces before its performing
- . Some pieces can be played faster or slower than indicated
- . One can choose the piece that suits more since several pieces are based in the same idea

Bartók assures that many pieces are a real challenge for the young performer helping its training due to unusual elements such as combined patterns of time and rhythm, combined modality, irregular structure of phrases, intertwining of hands, among other aspects.

MIKROKOSMOS VOL. I

The first volume is a book that offers technical and expressive bases, focusing on proposals for a beginner in the piano study:

- . Introducing exercises prior to the piece
- . Limit the hand posture to five fingers, closed postures
- . Coordinating the hands in legato, in opposite or parallel directions
- . Focusing on basic modalities and counterpoint

In this volume, the favorite pieces of the young performer were: the first nine in parallel movement, piece 13 - Change of Position; piece 14 - Question and Answer; piece 17 - Opposite Movement; piece 27 - Syncopation; piece 29 - Reflected Imitation.

Musical score for 'Syncopation (2)'. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The time signature is 3/4. The piece is marked with a '3' and '(27)' on the left. The treble staff begins with a first finger fingering (1) and contains a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes, including repeat signs. The bass staff begins with a second finger fingering (2) and contains a bass line with eighth and quarter notes, including a sharp sign (#) and repeat signs.

Syncopation (2)

Musical score for 'Syncopation (2)'. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The time signature is 4/4. The piece is marked with '27¹⁾' on the left. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 96. The treble staff begins with a first finger fingering (1) and contains a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes, including a forte dynamic marking (f). The bass staff begins with a second finger fingering (2) and contains a bass line with eighth and quarter notes, including a forte dynamic marking (f).

Musical score for 'Syncopation (2)'. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The time signature is 4/4. The piece is marked with '[35 sec.]' at the bottom right. The treble staff contains a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes, including a forte dynamic marking (f). The bass staff contains a bass line with eighth and quarter notes, including a forte dynamic marking (f).

1) cf. No. 9

In this piece called *Syncopation*, one of the favorites, the exercises prior to the piece serve as a warm-up but also as a space for technical, expressive, creative and theoretical work; technical, playing what is presented in different registers, with different fingerings and movements (opposite and simultaneous); expressive, giving it a more elaborate phrasing and with an increasingly different spirit; creative and theoretical, adding all the effects that the performer's creative mind can generate (dynamics, articulations, rhythms, accompaniment, stories, points of tension-relaxation, etc.)

Before working the piece, it is recommended to play it so the young performer could be familiarized with it and can work by ear as well as by sight. Afterwards it is recommended to present the first theoretical concepts that can be visually recognized in the score, such as the direction of the melodic

lines (ascending or descending), their repetitions or changes, their registers, the rhythmic elements used, possible alterations (sharps or flats) and the "syncopation" of the piece.

Once the piece is clearer on the auditory and theoretical level, a variety of activities can be implemented such as: directing the time of the piece while it is played or sung; playing a line with one hand and singing or drumming with the other; the performer can play one of the lines on the piano while the teacher accompanies on the same or in different instruments; playing on different registers, changing articulations and dynamics, discussing the differences and similarities of elements.

It should be emphasized that although the piece is short, its density of notes can scare a bit the young player. In that case, it is recommended to divide the piece into parts and small units and even teach it by memory.

MIKROKOSMOS VOL. II

The second volume develops the technical and expressive bases, presented in the first volume, giving new proposals:

- . Work bi-modality
- . Bring linear melodies (counterpoint)
- . Build structures with peak and decline points
- . Contrast the articulations, dynamics and rhythms
- . Add titles that define the spirit or character of the piece
- . Presents arrangements: pieces for four hands and for voice and piano.

On this volume, the pieces preferred by the young performer were: piece 38 - Staccato and Legato; piece 40 - In Yugoslav Style; piece 52 - Divided Unison; piece 55 - Triplets in Lydian Mode; piece 65 – Dialogue.

In Yugoslav Style

Allegretto, ♩ = 120

40

First system of musical notation, measures 40-41. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#) and the time signature is 2/4. The piece is marked *f* (forte). Measure 40 contains a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, with fingering 5 and 1. Measure 41 contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 5, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. A first ending bracket spans measures 40 and 41, with a repeat sign and a fermata. The second ending is marked *(La seconda volta p)* and contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 5, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3.

Second system of musical notation, measures 42-43. The key signature is two sharps and the time signature is 2/4. Measure 42 contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 7, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. Measure 43 contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 8, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. A first ending bracket spans measures 42 and 43, with a repeat sign and a fermata. The second ending is marked *mf* and contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 8, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3.

Third system of musical notation, measures 44-45. The key signature is two sharps and the time signature is 2/4. Measure 44 contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 7, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. Measure 45 contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 4, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. A first ending bracket spans measures 44 and 45, with a repeat sign and a fermata. The second ending is marked *p* and contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 4, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3.

Fourth system of musical notation, measures 46-47. The key signature is two sharps and the time signature is 2/4. Measure 46 contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 7, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. Measure 47 contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 5, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. A first ending bracket spans measures 46 and 47, with a repeat sign and a fermata. The second ending is marked *p* and contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 5, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3.

Fifth system of musical notation, measures 48-50. The key signature is two sharps and the time signature is 2/4. Measure 48 contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 7, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. Measure 49 contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 7, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. Measure 50 contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 7, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. A first ending bracket spans measures 48 and 49, with a repeat sign and a fermata. The second ending is marked *mf* and contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 7, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. A final ending bracket spans measures 49 and 50, with a repeat sign and a fermata. The final ending is marked *f* and contains a treble line with notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, with fingering 7, and a bass line with notes G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3.

In this piece called *In Yugoslav style*, although without previous exercises, it is recommended to add exercises helping to warm up and to prepare the schemes with which we are going to work: repetitive notes as an active pedal point in the left hand and pentachords in the right hand. Here the creative work is also very latent since the performer can choose the notes of each hand and exchange its functions.

It is recommended, as a first contact with the piece, to listen and be familiarized with it before starting its study. After the audition, teacher and performer can comment what has been heard and address the first theoretical aspects that can be recognized visually, such as the direction of the melodic lines (ascending or descending), their repetitions or changes, their registers, the rhythmic elements used, possible alterations (sharp or flats) and the “Yugoslav” element, which describes a culture and a style.

According to Bartók, this piece is about an imitation of the sound of two bagpipes, which can introduce the performer in a new knowledge: the bagpipe, its timbre, its context and what inspired the composer to write the piece, in order to understand its true spirit.

It should be emphasized that although the piece is short, it can give the impression of being very dense to the eyes of the young performer. In this case, it is recommended to divide the piece into parts and small units and even teach it by memory.

MIKROKOSMOS VOL. III

The third volume expands the technical and expressive bases, presented in the second volume, offering new proposals:

- . Open hand posture, open postures
- . Combined times
- . Homophone textures
- . Structural content with peak and decline points
- . Contrasted styles that define the spirit of the piece

To be more detailed, the third volume is based on melodic movements that change states, suffering different metamorphoses, for example, going from being melodic movements to being rhythmic; from being horizontal (linear) melodic states, to being vertical (with jumps and harmony); from being movements that work technical elements, to being energies that build the spirit of the piece.

On this volume, the pieces preferred by the young performer were: piece 67 – Thirds against one voice; piece 68 - Hungarian Dance; piece 77 - Small Study; piece 82 - Scherzo.

Scherzo

82 Allegretto scherzando, $\text{♩} = 114$

[30 sec.]

This piece called *Schezo*, is presented without previous exercises, however, the strong presence of the rhythmic element, calls for the implementation of technical and creative exercises to evoke its rhythmic spirit and to introduce the complex time changes of 3/8 and then 7/8. Also, exercises to understand the variable interval states exposed.

It is recommended as a first contact of the performer with the piece, to be listened and commented before its study. Afterwards, the first theoretical aspects can be visually recognized: changes in time, articulations, register, alterations (sharp or flats), texture (whether chordic or linear) the title "scherzo", which describes a musical form with a historical background full of transformations and the indication "Allegretto Scherzando", which relates to the festive and energetic character transmitted through strong dynamic contrasts and accentuations.

After the auditory and theoretical work, an expressive practice is recommended, encompassing dynamics, articulations, directionality of lines, spirit of the work. Creative work can be achieved by implementing in the piece different instruments accompaniments and short improvisations.

FINAL WORDS

The Mikrokosmos manifests itself as a Genesis of music and the young performer. It is where everything begins, in the purest, the most original, transforming all as it grows, becoming more and more sophisticated and refined. It is the growth and progressive sophistication of the music and its performer.

This great space of knowledge called Mikrokosmos, is a compendium of elements of contemporary classical music and ethnic music of the first half of the 20th century. It is like a historical and cultural museum that creates new and versatile experiences, transforming the performer and offering all kind of sources and tools in order to understand music and its performance, leading to the maximum expressiveness.

The versatility of Mikrokosmos reinforces the different capacities of the young performer: its technical capacity by developing expressive movements; its mental capacity by helping to build increasingly complex musical concepts; its inventive and expressive capacity by reacting with the purest emotions to an increasingly complex and sublime musical content.

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