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VLASTIMIR NIKOLOVSKI'S "CONCERTO FOR PIANO AND ORCHESTRA" AS A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL FOR DEVELOPING INTERPRETATIVE COMPETENCIES

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Abstract. Higher music education aims to develop performers who connect technical preparedness with analytical thinking, sound imagination and independent interpretative judgement. In piano teaching, this aim becomes especially important when students work on compositions that combine traditional notation with contemporary sound and performance procedures. This paper examines Vlastimir Nikolovski's "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra" as a pedagogical model for developing interpretative competencies in piano students. The study is based on a qualitative case study, descriptive-analytical observation and methodological-interpretative reflection, supported by content analysis of selected score segments that require conscious performance decisions. The concerto was selected because of its pianistic, formal, folkloric, spiritual and performative complexity. Particular attention is given to the pedagogical value of the concerto's specific performance demands: the vocal part in the second movement, clusters, palm and fist strikes, glissandi with a degree of performative freedom, knocking under the keyboard, vocal exclamations in the strings and orchestral effects requiring coordination between soloist, conductor and ensemble. The paper argues that Nikolovski's concerto can serve as complex pedagogical material in higher music education when approached as a field for performance inquiry, sound imagination, cultural understanding and interpretative maturity. The contribution of the study does not derive from empirical measurement of students' competencies, but from the original methodological interpretation of an artistic work and from the identification of its pedagogical potential within piano teaching.

Key words: interpretative competence; piano teaching; higher music education; Vlastimir Nikolovski; Macedonian professional music; artistic research

1. Introduction

In higher music education, piano teaching increasingly faces the challenge of educating students as independent musical thinkers rather than merely technically prepared performers. Contemporary interpretation requires the ability to read the score, understand its formal and thematic organisation, recognise stylistic and cultural layers, and develop a convincing sound concept. For this reason, instrumental teaching should move beyond technical refinement and reproductive accuracy toward a broader model of interpretative maturity (Cook, 2013; Lehmann, Sloboda & Woody, 2007; Rink, 2002).

Piano students usually acquire knowledge and performance experience through works from the canonical, or so-called standard, repertoire, covering stylistic periods from the Baroque to the twentieth century. This repertoire remains essential for building technical preparedness, stylistic awareness, formal understanding and interpretative discipline. However, higher music education should also gradually introduce students to contemporary

works in which notation, sound gesture, bodily involvement, performer freedom and the treatment of the instrument differ substantially from traditional models of interpretation (Karkoschka, 1972; Stone, 1980; Vaes, 2009).

Works from the domestic professional repertoire have particular pedagogical value in higher music education. They help students develop not only instrumental and analytical capacities, but also a conscious relationship with their own musical culture. Macedonian professional music can therefore become an important field for developing interpretative maturity, especially when it is approached not as a formal curricular obligation, but as an artistically, historically and culturally meaningful area of study (Golabovski, 1999; Kolovski, 1996).

In this respect, Vlastimir Nikolovski's "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra" has particular pedagogical value. In its overall organisation, the work belongs to a classically conceived concerto score, with a clearly defined solo part, orchestral apparatus and three-movement structure. At the same time, Nikolovski introduces contemporary performance techniques and expanded sound procedures that lead students toward a different relationship with the instrument. The pedagogical importance of the work lies precisely in this duality: it stands between the classical concerto model and modern sound-performance practices.

The work places the student before a range of interpretative tasks: technical clarity, rhythmic stability, control of sound, cooperation between piano and orchestra, recognition of the character of each movement, and the formation of a coherent performance concept.

The aim of this paper is to examine the possibility of using Nikolovski's "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra" as a pedagogical model for developing interpretative competencies in piano students within higher music education. The focus is not on a complete musicological analysis of the work or on empirical measurement of student progress, but on its methodological and interpretative value in the teaching process.

2. Vlastimir Nikolovski within Macedonian Professional Music

Academician Vlastimir Nikolovski occupies one of the central positions in Macedonian professional music of the second half of the twentieth century. His artistic and public activity brings together several closely connected roles: composer, pedagogue, essayist and cultural figure. He belonged to the generation that contributed to the formation of Macedonian musical culture after the Second World War, in a period marked by the institutional development of music education, concert life and professional composition in Macedonia.

Nikolovski was born on 20 December 1925 in Prilep, in a musical family which enabled him to come into direct contact with music from an early age. As a child he sang in choirs, and during his school years he was already involved in amateur musical activity. His early experience with singing, choral practice, storytelling and dramatic expression later became important elements in the shaping of his musical imagination, especially in relation to melody, vocality, character and dramaturgical organisation.

His professional musical education began after the Second World War. In 1946 he enrolled in the Secondary Music School in Skopje, where he studied piano, cello and harmony with the composer Stefan Gajdov. In 1947 he continued his studies at the Conservatory in Leningrad, where he studied composition and harmony in the class of Dmitri Shostakovich, under the guidance of Orest Alexandrovich Evlahov. Due to the political circumstances he returned to Yugoslavia and continued his studies at the Music Academy in Belgrade in the class of Milenko Živković, later graduating under Enriko Josif in 1955. This biographical fact is particularly significant because Nikolovski is considered the first graduated composer in the People's Republic of Macedonia, which places him among the founding figures of Macedonian professional composition.

After his return to Skopje in 1955, Nikolovski began an extensive pedagogical, artistic and cultural activity. From 1955 until 1973 he worked as a professor at the Secondary Music School "Stefan Mokranjac" in Skopje, where many, later important, Macedonian musicians received their first professional education. Between 1962 and 1966 he taught at the Music Department of the Pedagogical Academy in Skopje, contributing to the preparation of future music teachers for primary and secondary education. In 1966, when the foundations of higher professional music education in Macedonia were being established, Nikolovski became the first dean and professor of the Higher Music School in Skopje. In this role, and later through his teaching at the Faculty of Music Arts, he taught subjects such as harmony, harmonic analysis, composition, orchestration and musical instruments, influencing generations of Macedonian composers, performers and pedagogues.

Nikolovski's compositional output is broad and diverse, including orchestral, chamber, vocal, vocal-instrumental, choral and piano works, as well as children's music and music for drama. His musical language developed from early works influenced by folk material toward a more complex and individual compositional expression, in which folklore, rhythm, counterpoint, humour, satire, grotesque, spiritual elements and dramatic character acquire professional artistic form. His works were performed in more than twenty-five countries on four continents, confirming his importance not only within Macedonian music, but also in a wider international context.

The significance of Nikolovski's work is therefore not limited to composition alone. His role as educator, institution builder, public cultural figure and founder of a strong pedagogical-compositional tradition makes him one of the key personalities in Macedonian music after the Second World War. For this reason, the study of his works in higher music education has a double value: it introduces students to a major artistic oeuvre and, at the same time, places them in contact with one of the formative figures of Macedonian professional musical culture.

3. Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative case study that combines descriptive-analytical procedure, pedagogical-interpretative reflection and content analysis of the score. In this context, content analysis is understood as the systematic selection and interpretation of musical segments that require conscious performance decisions. The unit of analysis is not the entire score in equal detail, but selected parts of the concerto in which technical execution, sound imagination, cultural meaning and pedagogical transfer are most strongly connected.

The following research questions guide the study: 1) How can Nikolovski's "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra" function as a pedagogical model for developing interpretative competencies in piano students? 2) Which performance challenges in the concerto contribute to the development of analytical thinking, sound imagination and independent artistic judgement? 3) How do specific compositional and performative elements contribute to interpretative maturity within higher music education?

The selected musical elements are analysed according to several criteria: their technical-performative complexity; their role in the formal and thematic organisation of the movement; their use of extended or non-traditional pianistic procedures; their relationship to folkloric, spiritual or cultural context; their demand for cooperation between soloist, orchestra and conductor; and their potential to be transformed into concrete teaching tasks. The

analysis draws on the concerto score, relevant musicological literature on Nikolovski, and previous analytical insights into melody, form, thematic material and the reproductive process in this work (Gerasimovska-Dimitrovska, 2019; Kolarovska-Gmirja, 2000; Nikolovski, 1978).

This methodological position is consistent with the character of research in performance and artistic education. The paper does not claim to provide empirical evidence of measurable student development. Instead, its contribution lies in identifying how an artistic work can be methodologically interpreted and used as pedagogical material. Contemporary discussions in higher music performance education increasingly recognise the value of artistic research, student-centred approaches and reflective work on interpretation as legitimate forms of knowledge production in conservatoire and university contexts (Holmgren, 2022; Minors, Östersjö, Dalagna, & Correia, 2024; Sandberg-Jurström, 2022).

4. Interpretative Competence in Piano Teaching

The term interpretative competence is used in this paper as an operational concept constructed from literature on musical performance, instrumental pedagogy and artistic interpretation. It is not treated as a single standardised category in music pedagogy, but as a complex set of abilities that includes technical control, analytical understanding, aural awareness, stylistic sensitivity, cultural-contextual knowledge and reflective artistic judgement. This understanding is informed by studies of musical performance as an interpretative act, instrumental learning, practice strategies and the relationship between notation, sound and artistic decision-making (Colwell & Hewitt, 2015; Cook, 2013; Lehmann et al., 2007; Rink, 2002; Williamon, 2004).

Technical and performance preparedness refers to the student's ability to perform the musical text with motor security, clear articulation, rhythmic stability, dynamic control and a cultivated sound. Without this foundation, interpretation remains unstable, since the performer does not possess the necessary means to express a musical idea. At the same time, technical mastery alone is insufficient. In higher education, technical solutions need to be connected with questions of musical meaning, sound character and formal direction.

Analytical thinking involves understanding form, thematic material, the development of musical ideas, the relationship between sections and the function of climaxes. When students understand the structural organisation of a work, they are better able to build an interpretative logic: they recognise points of thematic presentation, development, contrast, tension, culmination and resolution, and translate this knowledge into tempo, dynamics, articulation, agogic nuance and phrasing (Caplin, 1998; Rink, 2002).

Aural awareness and sound imagination are essential in piano teaching, especially when the work involves an orchestra or unusual sound procedures. The student must imagine not only the piano sound, but also its relation to the broader sonic environment. In concerto performance, the pianist cannot act solely from the position of the soloist; the orchestral part must be heard as an active partner, not as a passive background (Keefe, 2005).

Stylistic and cultural-contextual understanding connects the musical work with the artistic environment from which it emerges. In Nikolovski's concerto, this includes knowledge of Macedonian professional music, folkloric associations, spiritual tradition and the development of Macedonian piano literature (Gerasimovska-Dimitrovska, 2019; Golabovski, 1999; Kolarovska-Gmirja, 2000). Reflective ability refers to the student's capacity to justify

performance choices and to connect technical solutions with musical meaning. Recent research in higher music education emphasises precisely this movement from imitation and reproduction toward dialogue, reflection, autonomy, and the formation of a personal artistic voice (Holmgren, 2022; Sandberg-Jurström, 2022).

5. The Concerto as a Pedagogical Model and Methodological-Interpretative Framework

Nikolovski's "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra" is a cyclical work in three movements. The first movement, Allegro assai, develops energetic, motoric and toccata-like performance thinking; the second movement, Lento o larghetto, requires slow, broad and meditative sound shaping; and the third movement, Grave – molto ad libitum, introduces seriousness, folkloric symbolism and a greater degree of performative freedom. Taken as a whole, the concerto exposes the student to three distinct interpretative situations rather than to one uniform pianistic problem.

5.1. The First Movement, "Toccata": Energy, Folkloric Layers and Technical-Interpretative Clarity

The first movement develops technical-performance, rhythmic and stylistic preparedness. As a genre reference, the toccata is traditionally associated with keyboard virtuosity, rapid figuration, chordal energy and pronounced motor activity (Apel, 1972). In Nikolovski's concerto, this genre foundation is expanded through a rondo-like form and through the artistic transposition of melodic-rhythmic features from several folkloric traditions.

The thematic material is related to different folk sources: melodic-rhythmic characteristics from the musical traditions of former South Serbia, more precisely the region of Kosovo and Metohija; the hexatonic Istrian scale; the Bulgarian traditional dance "Rachenitsa"; and the idiom of the folk song "Malkite momi delba delile" (Gerasimovska-Dimitrovska, 2019). These sources do not function as simple quotations. Rather, they appear as transformed thematic layers within a professional concerto form.

For the piano student, this means that the first movement should not be interpreted merely as a fast and technically demanding movement. It should be approached as a complex sound structure in which each thematic layer carries its own melodic profile, rhythmic impulse and character. Work on the "Toccata" should therefore connect technical clarity with the recognition of thematic difference. Students must preserve the toccata-like energy while differentiating the timbral character and expressive profile of the various thematic materials. These folkloric layers should not be flattened into a uniform technical flow; their diversity should be expressed through articulation, accentuation, phrasing, agogic nuance and dynamic shaping.

Methodological work should not remain limited to the technical mastery of fast passages. The teacher can guide students to consider how the motoric drive characteristic of the toccata shapes the musical form and how pianistic figuration contributes to the dramatic unfolding of the movement. Because of the rondo-like form and the use of thematically contrasting materials, students should learn to recognise character, not only continuity. Pedagogical work may begin with questions such as: What type of energy does the movement carry? Does the piano, in certain places, suggest a percussive instrument? Which thematic materials have stronger folkloric associations? How can these associations

be conveyed through articulation, accentuation, hand weight, pedal use and changes in sound character? Such work encourages students to **move beyond mechanical playing and develop** a consciously differentiated performance concept.

5.2. The Second Movement, "Tropar": Vocality, Spiritual Atmosphere and the Vocal Part

The second movement develops a different kind of interpretative sensitivity. Unlike the motoric energy of the first movement, "Tropar" is shaped by focused sonority, spiritual atmosphere, phrasing, timbral subtlety and the ability to sustain inner tension within a slower musical flow. For the piano student, this represents an important pedagogical task: to recognise how expression arises not only from dynamic intensity or technical virtuosity, but also from silence, duration of the tone, colour, internal agogic motion and careful melodic shaping. The movement is connected with spiritual and church tradition, and the melody in the first part has a vocal character close to church chant. Therefore, the piano approaches a vocal function and the pianist must think as a singer as well as an instrumentalist. Pedagogical work should focus on vocalising the melodic line, shaping internal agogics and sustaining tone colour. A useful teaching procedure is to have the student first sing the line and only then transfer its direction, breathing, points of tension and release to the piano.
Particularly important is the appearance of a vocal part performed by the pianist-soloist. This is an unusual procedure within the traditional concerto for piano and orchestra: the pianist does not perform only as an instrumentalist, but at a specific moment presents the vocal line written into the score. This vocal line is connected with the spiritual and meditative atmosphere of the movement and with the religious-ethical meaning of the text. Therefore, it should not be treated as an external effect, but as an organic part of the musical and spiritual meaning of "Tropar" (Levy, 1980; Wellesz, 1961).

The pedagogical value of this passage lies in the expansion of the pianist's role. The student needs to coordinate instrumental playing, voice, breath, text and stage presence. The teacher may prepare this section in stages: first, the text is read and interpreted; then the vocal line is sung independently; after that, breathing and phrase direction are shaped; finally, the vocal element is joined with the piano part and imagined or actual orchestral sound. This process develops sound imagination and interpretative responsibility, because the student must understand why the voice appears and how it changes the expressive identity of the movement.

5.3. The Third Movement, "Teshkoto": Folkloric Symbolism, Orchestral Exclamations and Extended Piano Techniques

The third movement creates a close relationship between pianistic interpretation and Macedonian folkloric tradition. Its pedagogical value lies not only in technical demands, but also in the performer's need to grasp the cultural and symbolic character of the traditional dance "Teshkoto." The folkloric association is not based on direct quotation, it emerges through rhythmic impulse, dramaturgical development, dance character, gradual intensification and sound culmination. In this way, the movement teaches students how

national tradition can be transformed into a contemporary concerto form (Bartók, 1997; Kolovski, 1996).

Rather than presenting the dance through recognizable folkloric motifs, Nikolovski transforms its expressive essence into an original tonal and rhythmic language shaped by imagination, intuition and compositional craft. In the concerto, Nikolovski evokes this collective dance energy through vocal exclamations assigned to male members of the string section, using gestures such as "ha-ha" or "u-ha" (Gerasimovska-Dimitrovska, 2019). Their function is not decorative. They contribute to the dramaturgical build-up of the movement and change the pianist's role: the piano is heard as part of a broader sound scene in which dance impulse, collective energy and culmination are intertwined. In pedagogical work, students may compare a traditional performance of "Teshkoto" with selected parts from the concerto, focusing not on literal similarity, but on weight, movement, tension and gradual growth.

Extended piano techniques represent a further methodological challenge. The concerto includes clusters with relative pitch height, performed with the whole palm, with the part of the arm between the palm and the elbow, with a clenched fist, and with an open palm striking under the keyboard in low and high register areas. Such techniques require careful preparation because students must master the physical action without losing its musical and dramaturgical meaning. In the literature on extended piano techniques, these procedures are understood as part of the modern expansion of the piano's sonic possibilities, in which the instrument is treated not only as a melodic-harmonic medium, but also as a source of percussive, noise-based and bodily-performative sounds (Bunger, 1973; Ishii, 2005; Vaes, 2009).

The teacher should approach these effects in stages. First, the student identifies their function: whether they create percussive energy, culmination, sound mass, dramatic interruption or psychological intensification. Then attention turns to physical execution: hand position, weight, relaxation, control of the strike and safety of movement. Finally, the effect is integrated into the musical whole so that it does not sound like an accidental experiment, but as a logical part of the dramaturgy. A similar approach is needed for glissandi without fully precise notation. They should be treated as controlled performative freedom: the student decides, within the openness given by the composer, how the gesture begins, how quickly it moves, what colour it produces and how it connects with the surrounding material. This type of task develops independence, aural alertness and responsible interpretative decision-making.

Fist strikes, clusters and knocking under the keyboard, also have a psychological function. They move the student away from the traditional idea of a beautiful pianistic tone and introduce the performer to sound gesture, theatrical impulse and bodily energy. Pedagogically, this is highly valuable because students learn that contemporary pianistic interpretation is not limited to legato, singing tone and virtuosic passagework. It may also include strike, noise, physical gesture and sonic harshness, provided that these elements have a clear artistic function (Karkoschka, 1972; Stone, 1980; Vaes, 2009).

5.4. Collaboration between Soloist, Orchestra and Conductor

The concerto as a whole develops the performer's ability to collaborate with orchestra and conductor. The pianist should understand concerto form as a space of dialogue between piano and orchestra, not as isolated solo display. The orchestral part must be heard as an active partner; moments of support, contrast, dialogue and culmination must be identified; and the piano part must be placed within a shared sound space (Keefe, 2005). Nikolovski leaves space for the conductor and performers to shape a joint artistic realisation, with the conductor's rhythmic control playing an important role in the final performance of the work (Gerasimovska-Dimitrovska, 2019).

The analysis therefore indicates several interconnected areas of interpretative development. Technical-performance preparedness is developed through motoric activity, clusters, strikes and glissandi. Analytical thinking grows through the understanding of form, thematic material and dramaturgy. Aural maturity is built through collaboration with orchestra and conductor. Cultural-contextual understanding emerges through all three movements: in "Toccata," through the interweaving of different folkloric traditions; in "Tropar," through the spiritual and vocal dimension; and in "Teshkoto," through folkloric symbolism and collective dance energy. Reflective ability develops when students can explain why a particular sound effect, phrase, vocal moment, tempo or gesture has a specific musical function.

6. Conclusion

The development of interpretative competencies in piano students is a complex pedagogical process in which technical mastery of the musical text must be connected with analysis, listening, stylistic understanding, cultural contextualisation and independent artistic thought. In higher music education, such an approach is necessary for educating performers, who not only realise the musical text accurately, but also understand its meaning and can justify their interpretative decisions.

Viewed as a whole, Nikolovski's "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra" represents an appropriate pedagogical model for connecting technical mastery with interpretative maturity. Its value lies in the diversity of performance tasks it presents: traditional pianistic technique, vocal treatment of melody, stage use of the voice, extended pianistic techniques, folkloric and spiritual associations, and coordination with conductor and orchestra. Each task requires students to connect physical execution with musical meaning. Through such work, Macedonian professional music appears not merely as a historical fact or national repertoire, but as living interpretative material that can strengthen sound imagination, analytical thinking, cultural understanding and interpretative independence.

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