

20th CENTURY- THE SOUR SWEET MUSIC

by Winifred Scott Wood

Music in the 20th century as in preceding centuries reflects the events surrounding its composers. The big difference is that this century saw more rapid upheaval and revolution than occurred in former times. Artists in all forms of expression seemed compelled to break the boundaries of their predecessors in every way imaginable. This affects harmony, form, rhythm notation and idioms. The general public always tends to lag behind its artist in vision and is loath to give up what has become fondly familiar. Music teachers therefore have even more difficulty in persuading students raised on the harmonious sounds, familiar rhythms and balance forms of pre 20th century composers to venture to the strange seemingly discordant land of contemporary composers. However, as Alan Fluck, author of "The sour Sweet Music" (used as the title of this article) says, "the discords of one generation become concords to the next, because when people get used to discords they consider them concords".

This is very true and gives us a hint as how to introduce students to "new" music without too much "shock" to their system. Students should be made aware of the important role that discords play in the music of the pre20th century composers. Discords add strength and need to be emphasized and even lingered on before this tension is resolved in concords. The word Appoggiatura (a form of discord) means "to lean on".

There is a wealth of music that introduces pianists early in their musical journey to 20th century idioms that is adventurous yet attractive. Russian composers such as Prokofieff, Shostakovich, Kabalevsky, Khatchaturian and Gretchaninoiff all wrote music especially suited to the young. Look for titles such as Albums for the Young or Children's Pieces. Many European composers wrote excellent music for children.

Bartok's "For children" Volume I and II based as they are on folk tunes are easily assimilated
Casella's 11 Pieces Enfantine (of intermediate difficulty)

Dello Joio's Suite for the Young and Lyric pieces for the Young

Kodaly's "24 little Canon on Black Keys"

Gyermektanckock (Children's Pieces)

Lutoslawski's Popular Melodies of Poland

Menotti's "Poemetti" (Intermediate)

Mompou's "Scenes d'Enfants"

Myezynski's Fables

Pinto's "Festa de Crianças" (Children's Festival)

Soulima Stravinsky's "Piano Music for Children" are some attractive examples. America as can be expected has produced much 20th century music.

Bernstein's "Birds"

Dan Beaty's "Woodsprite and Waterbug"

Katherine Beard's "Echoes of America" are a few examples.

Canada has produced many fine composers of music for young students - the Music of our Time series (Coulthard, Duke and Hansen) is a good example but there are many others, a few of whom are Linda Niamath (many collections)

Coulthard's "Pieces for the Present"

Chatman's "Amusements" Books 2 and 3
Mychael Danna's "Land of Narnia"
Eckhardt-Gramatte's "From my Childhood" Volume I and II (Intermediate)
Wuensch's "Mood of the Modes"
Ernst Schneider's "Five Moods of the Ogopogo"
Fiala's "Australia Suite".

Participation in Canada Music Week has acted as a great stimulus to getting contemporary music into this year's repertoire. Sometimes parents show greater resistance to unfamiliar sounds than do their offspring. My favourite story in this vein is of one of my students whose mother asked her to play to her guests but cautioned "Not your Canadian piece"! Sometimes it is the teacher who is reluctant, such as the one who firmly declared "I don't like this new music and either do my students."!

Some of the skills the student will have to develop are an ability to play polyphonic writing, to be able to read and learn tone clusters and dissonant harmonies, wide leaps, rhythms that involve changing time signatures and unusual accentuations within the bar (in this area counting while tapping with both hand on the fall board is a great help).

The best way of introducing one's students to this music as it is to any music is to learn it yourself and be able to play it well so you can give an interesting and attractive performance of it. This produces better teaching also as you know the difficulties first hand and how to overcome them.

Some good sources of repertoire are to be found in such publications as Contemporary Showcase - 1990-1995r graded syllabus available from the Canadian Music Centre in Vancouver. (The CMC can also loan music for perusal)
Various examination syllabi (look to see if the source book is mentioned)
Catalogues from Music publishers
Intermediate Piano Repertoire by Albergo and Alexander (Frederick Harris).
The latter also has a good list of albums of contemporary music. For a very good overall view "Avant-Garde Music from Debussy to Boulez" by Paul Griffith (Oxford University Press) is very readable.

As both teacher and student widen their knowledge of contemporary works the unfamiliar becomes more and more acceptable and initial resistance is overcome by the genuine beauty and freshness of this music. Try it - you'll like it!

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