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Transcribing for classical guitar trio

Doctoral Dissertation Summary

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The reasoning behind the topic and the subject of the Dissertation

The greatest composers in music history either did not compose for the classical guitar at all or only sporadically, producing only a few pieces for this instrument. Therefore, the works of guitarist-composers constitute the majority of our repertoire (Solomon, 2007, p. 16). Transcription allows us to partake in a much broader repertoire as classical guitarists, and chamber music expands the reservoir of possibilities (Snyder, 2006).

Among the various chamber music ensembles involving the guitar, this dissertation places the guitar trio in the spotlight. This decision is based on four fundamental pillars of thought. The first pillar is that within homophonic musical passages, three main roles can be distinguished: melody, bass, and harmony. The building blocks of tertian harmonic progressions have played a key role in the evolution of musical language, all the way from the Renaissance to the Romantic era and even in some of the 20th- and 21st-century musical styles. Using these perfect and imperfect consonances and dissonances based on tertian composition principles has been instrumental in shaping the musical language, regardless of the complexity of various counterpoint techniques.

Due to the nature of human perception, the lowest and highest pitches of these sonorities, are the easiest to perceive to the listener irrespective of the number of voices. Consequently, a multitude of musical compositions have emerged following homophonic compositional principles. Therefore, the most significant melodic function of the composition, is often carried by the highest part, which is the most easily audible part due to its high register.

The importance of the lowest pitch arises from the harmonic series. Its overtones are capable of interfering with all higher pitches and their respective overtones. The various tonal experiences resulting from the different chord inversions stem from this physical characteristic.

The parts responsible for filling the rest of the musical register are often perceived even by professional musicians not as individual notes, but as a chord, emerging from the combination of all the notes. Thus, it is natural to allocate these

three distinct musical roles to three instruments, meaning that the guitar trio formation can naturally follow the structure of the music.

The second fundamental pillar is that, even in the case of musical passages using polyphonic and contrapuntal techniques, we obtain a technically manageable musical material for up to six independent voices (divided into pairs for each instrument). This approach to voice handling is necessary in cases where each part can carry essential musical content from the perspective of the musical structure, and no clear hierarchical difference can be observed among them. Due to the complexity of such polyphonic passages or sections, the maximum number of employed independent voices typically revolves around six.

Partly due to the attributes of the classical guitar, polyphonic passages pose the most significant challenge. Articulation of independent voices in these passages, the usage of different dynamics between the parts handled by one instrument, playing melodies without octave breaks, and maintaining the lengths of notes – all of these often become unattainable without certain compromises that violate some of the aforementioned aspects of the music or without pushing the boundaries of technical solutions bordering on impossibility. In the case of two voices handled per instrument, there are many more resources available to avoid such compromises during performance. Thus, the possibilities of the guitar trio encompass the potential to include even six voice polyphonic musical material, maintaining the consistency of transcription quality and without modifying the musical content to be subservient to technical possibilities.

The third fundamental pillar is that, based on my experience with chamber music involving the guitar, the ratio of pieces and transcriptions written for the guitar trio is surprisingly low. The dominance of duet and quartet ensembles was observable to me in terms of original compositions and transcriptions alike during repertoire research, although quantifying this shift precisely is challenging. With an increase in the number of instruments, orchestration possibilities expand; however, synchronizing the participants becomes progressively more difficult. Emerging from the attributes of the instrument and the manner of sound production, the attack of the sound is almost punctual. By comparing this to an ensemble of string instruments – in which the initiation of sounds is much more extended over time,

more indirect, and better controlled – it becomes clear how much more challenging it is to produce sounds "simultaneously" with a guitarist ensemble even according to the threshold of human perception. As a result, an increase in the number of members makes ensemble playing exponentially more difficult. Based on my experience by using the guitar trio one can optimize the artistic freedom of the transcriber and the synchronization of participating musicians.

The Dissertation in the context of modern literature

A comprehensive study on transcribing for the classical guitar trio has not yet been published. Daniel Wolff briefly addresses it in a chapter of his 1998 doctoral thesis written in Manhattan (Wolff, 1998). In addition, some valuable and relevant ideas have been shared by those who have transcribed for other guitar ensembles (most commonly guitar quartets and guitar duos) in relation to specific works.

The topic of transcribing music for guitar chamber ensembles regularly emerges in instrumental journals; however, the guitar trio seems to be outside the focus of these discussions (Adkins, 2015; Roznawski, 2008; Woodruff, 2011; Snyder, 2003). Given that this specific instrumentation is in a central place in the development of my artistic career, the neglect of this area has provided a significant motivation in selecting the topic of this dissertation.

Research Objectives and Methodology

The central objective of the dissertation is to establish a criterion system that, when applied to composition, allows us to determine whether a given piece of music can potentially be transcribed for the classical guitar trio. Simultaneously, I aim to showcase the possibilities inherent in the classical guitar trio. This criterion system was developed partly based on my own transcriptions, partly on conclusions drawn from other transcriptions, and partly from studies in the literature. Throughout the presentation of these criteria, I always try to illustrate potential difficulties that may

arise during transcription and provide possible solutions through practical examples.

However, there are musical and technical problems that the instrument can only address with certain compromises—or sometimes not at all. In such cases, preserving the original character of the piece and respecting the composer's original intention may not always be feasible. This in itself does not negate the opportunity of transcription, but I find it important to highlight these aspects of the process so that the reader can get a better understanding of the possibilities and limitations of transcribing a piece of music.

Given that the list of transcriptions and relevant examples is vast, but the scope of the doctoral dissertation is defined, I will present only one or two examples of guitar trio transcriptions per chapter. The core of the example collection consists of my own transcriptions, which also reflect the results of my doctoral research. Furthermore, I would like to present the transcription of Modest Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" by Sándor SzilvÁgyi, as it provides a fitting example for almost all the criteria discussed in the dissertation. The following criteria will be examined: range; number and distribution of voices and parts; guitar idioms; volume, dynamics and note length; timbres and instrumentation; extended techniques.

Conclusion of the Dissertation

The process of transcribing for the classical guitar trio is similar to any artistic endeavor, where the judgment of the outcome can vary from listener to listener. Even the performer can influence the success of a transcription due to the nature of musical performance. The reception of a poorly thought-out or lower quality transcription can be positively distorted by an exceptional performance.

The criteria I have synthesized are certainly suitable for guiding transcribers towards a more thoughtful, analytical approach. However, the interpretation of what's described can differ from performer to performer. Our performing ambitions, technical preparedness, and love for a particular piece can all influence these non-exact factors. I would like to encourage every guitarist who is open to transcribing

to view the guidelines presented next as a map with marked paths, but still offering countless unexplored territories.

It's advisable to initially examine the composition selected for potential transcription from a distant perspective. The criteria discussed throughout this dissertation are helpful to get a superficial overview of the piece, shedding light on the most critical questions. Are there extreme range requirements in the piece? Can the number of parts in the composition be managed with a trio? Are there characteristic musical idioms in the piece that could have been played by a guitar? How much value does the piece lose if we cannot achieve the original volume? Does the composition contain a specific instrument whose absence would create an irreplaceable void? Are there orchestration solutions in the original piece that can be substituted with the extended techniques of the guitar? The answers to the questions can already give a clear outline of the type of transcription we are dealing with.

After that, it's worth digging deeper in a spiral fashion along the initial problem areas, formulating more specific questions about the piece and the potential transcription: Does the piece have periodically observable changes in its ambitus? Do we have the opportunity to use octave shifts that won't disrupt the original musical structure? What is the relationship between the voices in the piece? Is it justified to apply a voice distribution based on hierarchy, or should we distribute them democratically among each other? Are there musical solutions in the piece that can be transformed into instrument-like elements with minor changes? Are there places that are sensitive to playing together with an ensemble? Does the piece have sustained notes that would require gradually increasing the volume of a note? How complex are the articulations of individual parts? Is it justified to introduce a guest instrument into the ensemble for a stronger musical effect? Does the composition include percussive instruments that can be replaced by the percussive elements available on the guitar? Is it necessary to employ other tools to create specific effects?

Answering these questions and many others like them can lead to a successful transcription. However, I emphasize that if we get a negative result in terms of the transcription's success for any of these questions, it doesn't necessarily mean that

the transcription of the piece is determined to be bad. Experimentation is crucial at the intersection of performance and creative art, as every transcription and transcriber is unique. Personal preferences, habits, practices, and ideas will make the process smooth. Furthermore, don't be afraid to make mistakes or to create an imperfect transcription. Think of our ideas that test the boundaries like crash tests for cars before they hit the market. It's possible that the composition might be completely damaged during the testing phase, but it's also possible that we might uncover a treasure we didn't expect to work so well.

The analogy of crash tests can also be applied in terms of the critical moments in a composition. Before attempting a full transcription of the entire piece, it's worth creating a preliminary, partial transcription of the critical sections. An authentic decision about the fate of these sections can only be made after hearing them. Over time, we will develop a sharper eye for selecting pieces that work well for the guitar trio, but firsthand experience is essential for this development.

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