Volumes Three and Four of Jozsef Soproni's "Note Pages": A Stylistic Study.

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VOLUMES THREE AND FOUR OF JÓZSEF SOPRONI'S NOTE PAGES: A STYLISTIC STUDY

A Monograph

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

in

The School of Music

by

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August 1999

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Abstract

József Soproni, born in Hungary in 1930, composed in virtually every genre of musical composition: symphonies, other orchestral pieces, concertos, an opera, masses, cantatas, other choral pieces, songs, string quartets, sonatas, plus other chamber and instrumental pieces. His interest in solo piano music is realized in a number of compositions written before 1979 and his twelve piano sonatas written between 1996 and the first quarter of 1999. There is no comprehensive study of Soproni's music for piano; indeed all that has been published about it are brief analyses of various pieces, biographical sketches in books, and two articles in a Hungarian pedagogical journal of music.

*Note Pages* includes eighty pieces for solo piano in four volumes, composed in 1974, 1975, 1977, and 1978. While volume 1 consists of short pieces and the consecutive volumes contain an increasing number of longer and more challenging compositions, *Note Pages* is a collection of performance pieces for pianists on various levels rather than being a didactic work. This monograph examines the fifteen pieces in volumes 3 and 4.

Chapter 1 includes biographical information and an overview of Soproni's musical heritage and aesthetics, his works, his compositions for solo piano, and the entire collection of *Note Pages*. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the third and fourth volumes of the work, with emphasis on compositional techniques and pianism. The study concludes with a brief summary of stylistic features found in the last two volumes and possible difficulties encountered by the performer, as well as some advice given by the composer regarding the preparation process preceding performance as well as the main objectives of a good performance of these pieces.
Chapter 1

Introduction

A. Short Biography of the Composer

József Soproni was born on October 4, 1930, in the city of Sopron in northwestern Hungary, which was the home of his ancestors for several centuries.¹ He started his piano studies at the age of three² and continued his music education at the State Music School of Sopron³ until the completion of his high school education. His exceptional talent in drawing also showed itself at an early age, and in high school his art teacher had him come to extra drawing sessions after school.⁴ In 1949, Soproni moved to Budapest to study composition at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music, from which he graduated in 1956. His principal teacher was János Viski.⁵ In 1962 Soproni finally had the

¹ Zoltán Farkas, "Az emberiesség időszerű: Új magyar művek a Rádióban [Humanity is Timely: New Hungarian Compositions on the Radio]," Muzsika 35/10 (October 1995): 43. All translations from the Hungarian are my own.

² József Soproni, interview by author, 22 May 1997.


⁴ Foldes, 155.

⁵ János Viski (1906-1961) was born in Kolozsvár (Transylvania, Hungary). From 1927 to 1932 he was a composition student of Zoltán Kodály at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest. In 1940-41 he taught at the National Music School, in 1941-42 he was director of the Conservatory in Kolozsvár, and from 1942 to his death he was professor of composition at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music. His works included orchestral compositions; concertos for violin, cello, and piano; oratorios and other choral compositions; and songs. See Antal Boronkay, ed. of the
opportunity to go abroad to visit Darmstadt, "the festival city of the newest and strangest" and, for the first time, become acquainted in person with the avant-garde musical world.

Soproni has taught in the two most prestigious music schools in Hungary—the Béla Bartók Conservatory (high school level) and the Franz Liszt Academy of Music (university level)—both in Budapest. From 1957 to 1972 he was professor of music theory and composition at the Conservatory, and in 1962 he also started teaching at the Liszt Academy, first as a lecturer until 1968, then as an associate professor until 1974, when he became a full professor of composition. In 1984 he was elected assistant director of the Franz Liszt Academy of Music and became director in 1988, serving in this position until 1994. He retired in 1995, but he continues to teach at the Academy and is a highly productive composer. Soproni has been awarded several honors by the Hungarian government, among them the *Erkel Prize* (1974), *Artist of Merit* (1981), the *Bartók-Ditta Pásztory Prize* (1987), *Outstanding Artist of Hungary* (1990), and the greatest artistic honor awarded in Hungary, the *Kossuth Prize* (1999). He is a founding member of

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*Földes, 152. The *Internationale Ferienkurse für neue Musik* (International Summer Courses for New Music) was founded in 1946 in Darmstadt by the initiation of Wolfgang Steinecke. The courses, that "have encompassed both composition and interpretation and include premières of new works," were held annually until 1970 and in every two years afterward. See Ernst Thomas, "Darmstadt," in Stanley Sadie, ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1980), vol. 5, pp. 247-48. The courses provide "a focal point for a wide range of artistic information and for testing new ideas...[They] reflect a great diversity of contemporary currents and have also frequently proved to be points of departure in theory, composition technique and aesthetics." See Josef Hausler, "Germany, §1, 7: Art music, Federal Republic since 1945," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 7, pp. 280-81.

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the Széchényi Academy of Literature and Arts, which was established in 1994.7

**B. Soproni's Musical Heritage and Aesthetics**

György Kroó, a prominent Hungarian music historian wrote about József Soproni:

[He is] a composer inclined to meditate, a thinker, one who feels his responsibility as a teacher as well. The richness of his cultural background can be compared only to that of Kurtág among his contemporaries. His deep grounding in counterpoint and the meticulous quality of his work as a composer also make him stand by Kurtág. Like all deeply rooted artists, he developed, changed, and expanded his style slowly.8


György Kurtág (b. 1926) studied piano with Pál Kadosa and composition with Sándor Veress and Ferenc Farkas at the Budapest Academy of Music, from which he graduated in 1953. He also worked with Milhaud and Messiaen at the Conservatory in Paris. See Don Michael Randel, ed. *The Harvard Biographical Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), s.v. “Kurtág, György.” “György Kurtág [is] the most outstanding figure—next to György Ligeti who lives abroad—of Hungarian contemporary music. He has succeeded in evolving a wholly individual style out of the heritage of Bartók, Webern, and Stravinsky.” See György Kroó, “New Hungarian Music,” in ed. Bálint András Varga, *Contemporary Hungarian Music in the International Press* (Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest, 1982,) p.13. “It might be unfair to some of his contemporaries to say that Kurtág . . . was the first Hungarian composer of his generation to break convincingly from the Kodály axis and write in a style wholly and distinctively his own. But he was certainly one of the first composers of his generation to achieve official recognition in his home country as well as notice and interest abroad; and it was around him during the 1960s that a new group of composers quickly came to prominence . . . who were the first to carry forward the banner of the New Music in Hungary, no longer content to continue with the same precarious re-working and re-stitching of ‘traditional’ pre-war styles.” See Dominic Gill, “Reviews—A Collage,” in *Contemporary Hungarian Music in the International Press*, p.44.
Like his Hungarian contemporaries, the young Soproni was deeply influenced by Bartók. Soproni matured just after the war, at a time when it was impossible for him to get acquainted with the avant-garde musical trends or even the modern stylistic tendencies of the 1920s and 1930s, due to the transformation of the social and political structure of the country and the anti-western cultural policy introduced in 1948. From 1945, Hungary's musical life was centered around Kodály and his disciples who, from progressive opposition against the German domination in music between the wars, became the executors of the new official musical politics. As Kroó describes it, the musical life of the country became one-sided in an unhealthy manner, which resulted in a conservatism that rendered any original idea suspicious. No works by Schönberg, Berg, Webern or Stravinsky

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As György Kroó describes it, this cultural policy proclaimed the democracy of arts. It declared folk music as the origin of new music and urged the composers to write music that the masses understood, music which was impregnated with faith in the greatness of the era, pride due to the victory of the social revolution, a sense of power, and hope of an even more beautiful future. See Kroó, A magyar zeneszerzés 30 éve [Thirty Years of Hungarian Musical Composition], 40.

György Kroó writes: “Cut off from the postwar avant-garde and even from the stylistic tendencies of the 1920s and 1930s transmitted through Bartók's works, blinded by the illusion of a classical, folk-inspired music appealing to millions, Hungarian art music sank into provincialism. Stuck in the impasse of narrowly interpreted tradition and striving for the realization of a misinterpreted Kodály program (“Let music belong to everyone”), the leading Hungarian composers of that era (all of them essentially Kodály's direct or spiritual disciples) became epigones of their master. They renounced originality, individuality, and the search for the new in favor of schematic folklorism, a narrowing down of genres (a spate of serenades and divertimenti), and the dilution of Kodály's heritage into a lingua franca.” (Kroó, “New Hungarian Music,” in Contemporary Hungarian Music in the International Press, p.8.)
were performed or broadcast between 1949 and 1955; no word was said about the experiments in *musique concrète* and electronic music; and hardly any printed music arrived from the West. Even the more progressive works of Bartók, among them *The Miraculous Mandarin* and the *Cantata profana*, were outcast. A whole generation grew up without having the opportunity to see Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Strauss’s *Salome*, Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Berg’s *Wozzeck*, Hindemith’s *Mathis*; nor did anyone hear *Le sacre du printemps*, *L’histoire du soldat*, the *Symphony of Psalms*, or even Bartók’s String Quartet No. 4 and Piano Concerto No. 2. Hungarian composers of this generation never heard the names Boulez, Dallapiccola, Eimert, Messiaen, Petrassi, or Varèse until later in their careers. The cultural policy of 1948 was in effect until about 1959. However, “the trend was a total failure,” as Kroó states, because “it could not lead to a genuine, intimate, lasting encounter between contemporary Hungarian music and the new public—a fact that finally dawned on the country’s best musicians about 1955.”

The Kodály-epigonism had surprisingly little influence on Soproni; even his First String Quartet of 1958 was influenced by Bartók. Imre Földes reported Soproni’s words:

> From 1957 or 1956, even beginning in 1955, it was possible to turn away from the “Hungarian-pentatonic” style, toward which we felt

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* Kroó, *A magyar zeneszerzés 30 éve* [Thirty Years of Hungarian Musical Composition], 46.


* Kroó, *A magyar zeneszerzés 30 éve* [Thirty Years of Hungarian Musical Composition], 150.
aversion anyway. I have never composed in that style. I simply did not find it suitable to express myself.  

Kroó states that at that time a new direction of composition emerged in Hungary “under the surface” and then became more and more open in the “new cultural political atmosphere,” developing during the “social consolidation” that started in 1957. “The transitional period and the first years of the new era (1957-1968) were characterized by taking stock of the tools of music and of the possibilities of the language of music.”

As the example of Soproni’s above-mentioned string quartet shows, “it was the rediscovery of Bartók’s music and his example that brought the members of the Kodály school out of the impasse of the mid-1950s.” According to Kroó, the musicians of 1957 discovered a new portrait of the “classical” or “folklorist” Bartók known by them: “the portrait of a lonely, tempted, suffering-rebellious Bartók, the poet of the night, and the creator of the Miraculous Mandarin.” In Kroó’s opinion, “Bartók taught the Hungarian musicians that art is not only play and service but the wording, rewording, and declaration of the greatest questions of life. He induced stylistic fermentation and, by his works, directed attention toward Stravinsky and Schönberg as well. He expanded the horizon and offered perspective, backward as well as forward.” His life’s work showed Hungarian composers “how to synthesize Hungary’s native musical language with modern

* Földes, 151.


17 Kárpáti, “Hungary, §1, 5: Art music, 20th century.”

* Kroó, A magyar zeneszerzés 30 éve [Thirty Years of Hungarian Musical Composition], 86.
European techniques into an individual expression.” Following Bartók’s example, young Hungarian composers of the late 1950s sought “not only the expression of what they held in common but also the highly responsible representation of their individualism.”

It was not until the early 1960s that Soproni had the opportunity to become familiar with the musical world outside Hungary. As he stated, “the new trends of music sneaked into [his and his colleagues’] ears and eyes slowly; it did not happen suddenly.” At first, he familiarized himself with the new musical trends and compositions only through scores and recordings, but in 1962 he finally had the opportunity to have personal experience of the avant-garde musical world in Darmstadt.

Like his contemporaries, he first became interested in the music of the New Viennese School. His discovery of their music offered him an example of a new possibility for musical expression apart from the traditional, over-simplified style expected by the government during the preceding decade. The “new” sounds created by the Second Viennese School attracted him. However, he could not accept strict serial technique; rather, he wanted to follow the creative process that took place inside himself instead of rules or preconceptions. He also believed and continues to believe, contrary to the twelve-tone idea, that music must never be atonal, but must be directed toward some point, even if that point becomes clear only toward the end of the piece. The older Webern, Berg, and Stravinsky, as well as Boulez and

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* Kárpáti, “Hungary, §1, 5: Art music, 20th century.”

* Kroó, A magyar zeneszerzés 30 éve [Thirty Years of Hungarian Musical Composition], 86.

* Földes, 152.
Nono, who were among the French and Italian avant-gardists, seemed "artistic and, at the same time, differentiable, expressive, and substantial" to him, but "the Germans did not at all." By "Germans" he meant Hindemith and his circle; he disliked them because of their constructivist thinking.

Soproni stated that Stravinsky's influence has always been present in his art, although it might be difficult to trace it. As a young composer, he admired Stravinsky's Russian period; at other times it was the Russian composer's ingenious and colorful neoclassicism or his free, intelligent, and musical treatment of the twelve-tone technique that appealed to him. Soproni himself, however, has never practiced the twelve-tone technique. Moreover, during his student years at the academy, it was Hindemith and Honegger, rather than Stravinsky, who represented neoclassicism to him. At first he liked them and composed several pieces imitating their style, but soon he felt that their music was formalistic; therefore, he renounced their style and all the pieces he created under their influence. In Darmstadt, he considered only Boulez's *La Marteau sans maître* a significant work. He thought it was "great music not only because its sonority was the exact opposite of what they learned in composition classes, but also because of the expressiveness of its message that was never interrupted by unimportant idling, unlike the other pieces" he heard there. The only other piece he liked in Darmstadt was the

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* Soproni in Varga, "Visszatérés az elveszett paradicsomba [Return to the Lost Paradise]," 12.
* Földes, 152.
* Telephone interview by author, 6 February, 1999.
* Soproni in Varga, "Visszatérés az elveszett paradicsomba [Return to the Lost Paradise]," 12.
* Telephone interview by author, 6 February, 1999.
young Niccolò Castiglioni's *Consonante* for flute and chamber ensemble. He also attended a lecture by Stockhausen at the festival, but he was very disappointed because the master did not even mention music, but talked only about philosophy.\(^2\)

Later, the style of the minimalists directed Soproni's attention to the importance of a comprehensible harmonic structure and beautiful sound. Around 1975, he started making an effort to create euphony in his music, and for him this is still an important goal. The rhythmic pulsation of minimal music also interested him, and the clicking of the wheels of the train on the unwelded rails while traveling between Budapest and Sopron made him realize what a form-creating force rhythm is. During his childhood, noises awakened Soproni's fantasy, and the sound of bells has always enchanted him. The rhythmic polyphony of groups of bells, the surprise of silence, and the harmonies that change pitch according to distance were such important sound experiences for him that they often recur in his compositions. The noisiness of large cities, however, gives him an uneasy feeling. He has remarked, "I like silence and tranquility; noise hurts."\(^3\)

In an opinion that is based on Soproni's works, the course of his life, and his aim for order and beautiful sound, Éva Beliaczkyné Buzás described Soproni as a well-balanced composer, perhaps one of the most well-balanced ones. Soproni replied that the reason might be that he does not have illusions in any regard, neither of the future of humanity nor of his own. He simply does his job, whether it is composing, teaching, or doing anything

\(^2\) Földes, 152-3.

\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^4\) Varga, "Visszatérés az elveszett paradicsomba [Return to the Lost Paradise]," 12-3.
else. He believes that humans will, perhaps, change sometime, and because of this, societies will be better.30

Soproni believes that musical notation need not be more complicated than the actual sound, and that it is the simple kind of notation that will survive.31 In order to make the pieces (specifically ensemble works) easier to conduct, he prefers to keep a constant, simple meter, and show any departure from it by accent marks. In his opinion, the only exception from this should be notation of unusual or asymmetric meters of folk origin, for example, the so-called "Bulgarian rhythms."32 Soproni thinks that quite simple music is often put on paper in a complicated manner (with too many meter changes) only to make it look more contemporary. This "magical" look shocks the amateurs; they think the piece must be written by a great master. However, "great music--I am thinking of, for example, any piece by Lutosławski--is notated quite simply." He believes this is necessary for worldwide understanding of any composition.33

According to Földes's interview with Soproni, composing is like constructing, and a composition is like a building for him. He believes that composition is a spatial art, and its temporal quality is much less important. The timbres of musical instruments--a woodwind color in the higher registers,

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* Földes, 155.

* Telephone interview by author, 6 February, 1999.

* Földes, 155.
a brass color in the lower registers--create a spatial experience; however, the length of compositions does not matter to him. "I consider the musical art work block-like; I grasp it in a moment, just like a French cathedral or a Romanesque church," he said. He is interested mostly in contemporary and medieval architecture. He thinks that the spatial and temporal quality of music is similar to the closed spatial effect of Romanesque architecture. He considers Romanesque architecture--its gravity, its conciseness of expression, its nobleness of material, and its use of matter in perfect agreement with its substance in its structures--a norm for his later compositions. He believes that aiming for virtuoso sound in contemporary French music (for example, in the music of Boulez) is comparable to the way French Gothic architecture "plays with the material" and "lets the outside world into the previously closed space." Soproni thinks that, to help dissolve the boundaries of closed forms influenced by German music, the effect of French avant-garde music is much needed. He also sees a parallel between the modern material of construction, ferroconcrete, and the material used during the Middle Ages. Ferroconcrete makes it possible to allow nature into the architectural space, as in Gothic constructions, while its simplicity and compactness recalls Romanesque architecture. Soproni searches for a way to combine the virtuosity of Gothic architecture with the compactness, gravity, nobleness, and the harmony of material and its use seen in its Romanesque counterpart. Soproni is also interested in primitive culture--the third culture where the harmony of essence and employment of material is a crucial element; the American (Maya, Aztec, Inca) and, most of all, the Oceanic cultures attract him, rather than the Asian ones. His

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* Földes, 157.

* Ibid.
fascination with the remains of the large ancestral statues on Easter Island led him to the composition of his cantata *Carmina polinaesiana*.3

Although Soproni was inspired by some aspects of contemporary musical styles, his style has never changed radically as a result of outside influence.7 In his opinion, "changing styles suddenly--without inner conviction and the pressure of circumstances--declaring the 'new' as the only salutory, and casting aside the 'old' is nothing else than following fashion."34 Establishing a personal style has always been more important to him than strictly following any compositional method;9 he never absorbed the newest styles if he found their means superficial. He imagines music in large spans, and he longs for beautiful sounds, undulating melodies, and a natural manner of musical expression akin to human speech.6 His goal has been not to create a specific kind of sound, but to express his own thoughts and ideas about the world and himself.41 György Kroó, writing about him in 1970, concluded that among the "masters of new sounds" there were few artists

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3 Földes, 156-8.

7 Soproni in Varga, "Visszatérés az elveszett paradicsomba [Return to the Lost Paradise]," 12.

9 Földes, 152.

3 Soproni in Varga, "Visszatérés az elveszett paradicsomba [Return to the Lost Paradise]," 12.

6 Mariann Ábrahám, "Köszöntő helyett... 'Jegyzetlapok,' I. Füzet, Soproni József 60. születésnapjára [Instead of Greetings... "Note Pages", Volume 1, for the 60th birthday of József Soproni]," *Parlando* 32/4-5-6 (April-May-June 1990): 2.

4 Földes, 161.
who wished to reveal themselves as deeply and openly as this forty-year-old Hungarian composer.

Soproni believes that, in our time, when many international styles of music exist simultaneously, no style is superior in its ability to express the period. Every piece expresses the world some way, whether it is written in C major or it is cacophonous. In 1984, Soproni, then over fifty, stated that he realized that it was very important to him to continue what he had brought from his childhood. He does not care any more about what others do; he composes what he can in his own way. It is his opinion that, while one must keep an individual “voice,” a spiral-like progress that returns never to the same point but only to a higher point can eliminate the danger of self-repetition. As he put it, “it is absolutely necessary to step forward with new means, but one must never leave behind ‘Music,’ ‘Music’ with a capital ‘M’.”

His faith in the goodness and greatness of humanity is a principle of his ars poetica. “I compose for humans, even if only a few understand it.”

C. Work

Soproni has composed many works for a variety of media: the opera Antigoné; six symphonies; several other orchestral pieces; concertos for viola, violin, cello, and piano; several masses, cantatas, and other choral

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* Kroó, A magyar zeneszerzés 30 éve [Thirty Years of Hungarian Musical Composition], 152.

* Éva Bieliczkyné Buzás, "Számvetés a Magyar Rádió és az új magyar zene évtizedei ről ... [Reckoning decades of the Hungarian Radio and new Hungarian music ...]," 438.


* Földes, 154.

* Földes, 161.
pieces; songs; ten string quartets; sonatas for various instruments; and numerous other chamber and instrumental pieces. His compositions have been performed in Hungary, Austria, Poland, Germany, Bulgaria, Italy, France, Great Britain, the United States, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. A number of his pieces are available on sound recordings (see Appendix 1), and many have been heard on the radio in Hungary as well as abroad.

**D. Piano Pieces**

Soproni started studying piano at the age of three. For him, writing for piano is one of the most natural ways of expressing his musical ideas. Földe reports that he is able to improvise on the piano with exceptional ease in most any Western musical style. Soproni has written numerous compositions for the instrument: 4 bagatell zongorára (4 Bagatelles for Piano, 1957), Hét zongoradarab (Sieben Klavierstücke; Seven Piano Pieces, 1962), Incrustations pour piano (1970), Invenzioni sul B-A-C-H per pianoforte (1971), Quattro intermezzi per pianoforte (1976), and  

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* These included performances at the prestigious annual contemporary music festival called Warsaw Autumn in 1975, and at the annual festival of the International Society of Contemporary Music in Boston in 1976. (Telephone interview by author, 22 September 1998.)


* József Soproni, interview by author, 22 May 1997.

* Földe, 149.
Since 1996, he has composed twelve piano sonatas, and in 1997 he completed a piano concerto.

The 4 bagatell zongorára range from two to six pages in length. Their title, ternary form, and traditional notation on two staves with bar lines and regular meter recall the romantic character piece.

The pieces in the Hét zongoradarab do not exceed two pages in length, and the total performance time of the set is about nine minutes. Each piece has a parenthetical title (cast in lower case letters), recalling Debussy’s preludes. Number six (quasi marcia) is in triple meter instead of the quadruple meter characteristic of marches, which reminds one of the “Marche des ‘Davidsbündler’ contre les Philistins” that concludes Schumann’s Caraval. The notation of the Hét zongoradarab is relatively simple and clearly arranged on two staves. Soproni started writing these pieces before going to Darmstadt, and, after his return to Hungary, he continued to work on them, convinced that new compositional devices were absolutely necessary though one must never leave behind Music. He stated that the Hét zongoradarab show the very first impact of serialism on his music. Kroó believes that this set is “a truly lyric creation” that shows “a great leap

51 Brockhaus Riemann Zenei Lexikon [Brockhaus Riemann Music Dictionary], s.v. “Soproni József.”


* The titles of the twenty-four preludes by Debussy are in parenthesis, as well. However, they do not appear until the end of the pieces, and are introduced by ellipsis points and capitalized.

* Soproni in Földes, 154.

* Varga, “Visszatérés az elveszett parádicsomba [Return to the Lost Paradise],” 12.
In his work. Its stylistic novelties—free exploitation of twelve-tone technique, pointillism, and suggestion of a new conception of "cycle" (the placement of short movements one after the other)—are, however, almost concealed by its "meatiness."

*Incrustations pour piano* is ten pages long; it is the only single-movement piano piece written by Soproni. This composition appears to be more "modern" than Soproni's earlier piano pieces—although conventional bar lines are still employed, two- and three-stave notation alternates, meters shift frequently, and rhythm is quite complex, including elements of indeterminacy. According to Kroó, the piece is written in "free variational form," and its "title refers to the incrustation technique of the applied arts."*6

*Incrustations* has frequent tempo changes, improvisational elements, and cadenza-like passages. Kroó calls attention to the passionate quality of motives, the "expressionistic shaping," and the "calmer form" of the piece. In his opinion, the "calmer form," resulting from a recent process of simplification in Soproni's work, is able to communicate the "sincere lyric character" of his music in a simpler and more direct manner.*7

*Invenzioni sul B-A-C-H per pianoforte* is six "inventions" totaling seventeen pages; the individual pieces range from just over one page to five pages long. They are notated on broken multiple staves. Bar lines are absent; however, an understanding of the score is facilitated by broken lines connecting but not crossing the staves. A time signature is used in the

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* *Kroó, A magyar zeneszerzés 30 éve [Thirty Years of Hungarian Musical Composition], 151.


* *Kroó, A magyar zeneszerzés 30 éve [Thirty Years of Hungarian Musical Composition], 186.

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opening section of the last invention only, but there are frequent changes of meter. The B-A-C-H (Bb-A-C-B) motif with its numerous variations permeates the composition; in fact, in several inventions it is also the opening and the concluding motif. According to Kroó,

The first three [inventions] are more like variations, the others have a more fixed structure (imitation, crab canon, chorale variation). The cycle can be divided into three groups (pair[ed] variations) by mood: the first two pieces are like a fantasy; the second two have the character of a fast movement; and the last two are chorale variations based as much on the B-A-C-H motif as on the chorale “Es ist genug.”

The individual inventions of the three pairs are to be played attacca. Kroó speaks of the last pair, which he calls “chorale movement,” as an especially touching example of sincere lyricism in Soproni’s music.

Of the Quattro intermezzi per pianoforte, the shortest is just over two pages and the two longest are almost five pages. The intermezzi are notated on two or three staves. Traditional bar lines are replaced by solid and broken lines between the staves, broken lines being used to show the subdivisions of “measures.” Time signatures are used only in the concluding half of the second piece, and the meters are irregular. Tempo changes are frequent throughout the intermezzi.

After the Note Pages, it was eighteen years before Soproni wrote for the piano again; however, since 1996 the instrument has become an important medium for him, notably in the twelve piano sonatas. Ten are in three movements with a moderately slow opening, followed by a fast movement, and concluded by a slow finale. Of the remaining two, one has

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* Kroó, A magyar zeneszerzés 30 éve [Thirty Years of Hungarian Musical Composition], 186.

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only two movements*¹ and number 8 has four (an additional slow movement being placed between the moderately slow and the fast ones).

The Piano Concerto was composed after the Piano Sonata No.7, as a result of Soproni’s inspiration by the wonderful first performance of his Piano Sonata No. 3 by the young Hungarian pianist Dénes Várjon.*²

**E. Note Pages**

*Note Pages* is a four-volume set of pieces for solo piano composed over five years: volume 1, 1974; volume 2, 1975; volume 3, 1977; volume 4, 1978. The set was soon published in four books, the first two in 1976 and the last two in 1980. According to the composer, the last piece of the first volume could have been the end of the set; however, he liked this work so much that he composed three more volumes.³ Every piece of the set is given a title, but the titles in the second volume were added after the completion of the entire set and are not included in the first edition.⁴ The four volumes can be divided into two major groups, volumes 1-2 and 3-4. In the first two volumes the pieces tend to be short; there are pieces as short as one line and as long as two-and-a-half pages. In the last two volumes the pieces are more extensive, the shortest being one page long and the longest are four pages long, two to

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*¹ The sonatas are unpublished; the composer did not specify which one of the early sonatas has only two movements. (Telephone interview by author, 6 February 1999.)

*² Interview by author, 4 June 1997.

*³ Ábrahám, “Köszöntő helyett... [Instead of Greetings...],” 12.

*⁴ Soproni gave titles to the pieces in the first volume to help children understand the music; however, he did not find it necessary to do that in the second volume, which contained somewhat longer pieces. He gave titles to the pieces in the third and fourth volumes as well. In retrospect, it seemed strange to him that only the second volume was without titles; therefore he added titles by hand to the printed score, hoping that they would be included in later editions. (Telephone interview by author, 16 March 1999.)

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three pages on average. The pieces were not composed with a pedagogical purpose in mind; however, the first ones are purposely simpler than the others.* Soproni wanted to write playable, brief, diverse, and musically expressive performance pieces for piano students.* As he stated, the difficulty of the pieces is not deliberately of a technical character.* "Note Pages is the 'alphabet' of Music, not that of piano playing; it summarizes the compositional techniques born in Europe during the last decades. . . . Through these pieces, we can get acquainted with the models of the musical ideas of the twentieth century."** A chart of the few unusual symbols used in the Note Pages is included in every volume; thus the notation is easily comprehensible. According to the composer, the short pieces are usually based on one or two musical ideas, while the longer ones contain much contrast. Most of the pieces are written in a free, declamatory, occasionally indeterminate style often without bar lines; the remainder are in a rhythmically stricter, metric, giusto style. The pieces represent the "free tonality of the 1960s and 1970s in short, floating sections." Standard forms are of no great concern to the composer, although a few pieces follow strict formal designs; instead, it is reference to previous ideas, not repetition, that creates form.* Soproni stated that the disconnected quality of the set involves continuity as well. The notated ideas could be parts of larger forms;

* Soproni in Ábrahám, "Köszöntő helyett . . . [Instead of Greetings . . . ]." 12.

* Interview by author, 22 May 1997.

* In Ábrahám, "Köszöntő helyett . . . [Instead of Greetings. . . ]," 1.

* Soproni in Ábrahám, "Köszöntő helyett . . . [Instead of Greetings . . . ]." 12.

* Soproni, interview by author, 22 May 1997.
they are sentences without written consequents, but within them they carry implications of evolving processes. Through these pieces we can get acquainted with the models of the twentieth-century musical thinking. An interesting feature of *Note Pages* is that four of the pieces are tributes to other composers (Wagner, Kodály, Bartók, and Händel) and two were composed in memory of other artists (János Viski and László Nagy), of which all but one are found in the last two volumes. Another characteristic feature of the set is the often recurring imitation of the sound of bells—the "bell-motive," as the composer calls it. Mariann Ábrahám believes that

> Ábrahám, "Köszöntő helyett... [Instead of Greetings...]," 12.

Soproni’s teacher; see footnote 5.

László Nagy (1925-1978) was, in Barbara Carlisle Bigelow’s words, “one of Hungary’s most distinguished and beloved literary figures. An acclaimed graphic artist and translator of Bulgarian and Spanish works, Nagy is most famous for his sensual, rhythmic, and metaphoric brand of lyric poetry... His poetry will surely be seen as an achievement of substance in terms of twentieth-century world literature.” See Susan M. Trosky, ed., *Contemporary Authors: a Bio-Bibliographical Guide to Current Writers in Fiction, General Nonfiction, Poetry, Journalism, Drama, Motion Pictures, Television, and Other Fields* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc, 1990), vol. 129, pp. 315-6. In Miklós Szabolcsi’s opinion, Nagy’s poems “have the appeal of great force, an informal mode of expression, a strong talent for condensing and stylizing, and a unique sense of rhythm.” See Tibor Klaniczay, József Szauder, and Miklós Szabolcsi, *History of Hungarian Literature* (London: Collet’s Holdings Ltd., 1964), 311. Soproni was most inspired by the “musical” quality of Nagy’s poetry. Interview by author, 4 June, 1997. One of Nagy’s poems is quoted in Soproni’s *Sinfonia da Requiem* (Symphony No.3, 1979).

See Chapter 2.

Interview by author, 22 May 1997.

Mariann Ábrahám (b. 1933) is a prominent Hungarian teacher/pianist. She has studied and performed *Note Pages* and has written extensively about it. Her writings include two articles, an interview with the composer about the entire set of pieces in 1984 (“Betekintés Soproni József alkotóműhelyébe: Beszélgetés a szerzővel a ‘Jegyzetlapok’ című zongoradarab-sorozatról” [Examination of the creative workshop of József
*Note Pages* summarizes the characteristics of Soproni’s instrumental and compositional techniques, representing the closure of a compositional period that, at the same time, opens a new one.  

*Soproni: Conversation with the composer about the series of piano pieces called “Note Pages”), and a thorough examination of the first volume in 1990 ("Köszöntő helyett... Jegyzetlapok,” I. Füzet, Soproni József 60. születésnapjára [Instead of Greetings... “Note Pages,” Volume 1, for the 60th birthday of József Soproni]).

Chapter 2

Compositional Techniques in the Third and Fourth Volumes of Note Pages

Comprehension of the score of the third and fourth volumes of Note Pages is not particularly difficult for the musician. Notation is mostly conventional and the additional symbols are clearly explained in a chart included in both volumes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Unusual/non-traditional Symbols Used in the Third and Fourth Volumes of Note Pages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>a jelzett csonkoltvonachozogyorsulás: lassítás</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>fokozatos gyorsulás: lassítás</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>nem meghatalmazott átérés, közös hang / hosszúsága hang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>a hangokat a megelőző hosszúság szerűen kisértani to sustain the notes strictly to the length indicated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>cluster a feketé bilinévtőkén</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>cluster a fehér bilinévtőkén</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>ugyanaz a fekete és fehér bilinévtőkén</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>kicsiny: megjelenés szünet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>nagyon hosszú nyújtás, megállás</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*</td>
<td>speedup or slowing down respectively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The accidental refers to the note only which it precedes, except for the continuous repetition of a note or chord without rest. In order to facilitate continuous reading accidentals or naturals have, however, been put above or beside the notes in some places.

* This table and all musical examples from Note Pages are reprinted by permission from the publisher. József Soproni, Jegyzetlapok zongorára [Note Pages for Piano], volumes 3 and 4 (Copyright 1980 by Editio Musica Budapest). See Appendix 4.
All performance indications in the music are written in Italian. (The Latin "motus cancricans" [sic] in In memoriam János Viski refers to compositional technique rather than tempo or expression.) In eight instances, explanatory notes in Hungarian are included by the composer at the bottom of the page, along with English translations.

A. Pitch Selection

Soproni never wanted to write atonal music. He considers his compositions basically diatonic with "coloring" notes. The fourth piece in volume 4, Hommage à Béla Bartók, illustrates this kind of thinking. The piece begins, probably as a reference to Bartók's work, with B-F#-A-E (placed in the octave above middle C), a "tetradic" array (in Hungary, the term is used to denote such an array). In the fourth bar, G# is added to color the tetradic sonority. In measure 7—a brief interlude between the first two phrases—a very different sound is created: the tetradic array is almost completely abandoned; only B, the first note of the piece, is carried over. However, almost immediately (m. 8), the original tetradic array returns soon to be colored by D# (Example 1. a). After the end of the second phrase (m.

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77 While, for example, American, German, and French composers of the twentieth century generally use their native language in their music, the use of Italian (the traditional language of Western music) is preferred by Hungarian composers, since their native language would be difficult to understand for most musicians around the world.

78 Hungarian music publishers customarily include English (and sometimes German) translations in their editions to facilitate their understanding.

79 Soproni in Ábrahám, "Betekintés Soproni József alkotóműhelyébe . . . [Examination of the creative workshop of József Soproni . . . ]," 23.

80 Due to Bartók's deep interest in folk music, he often employs anhemitonic pentatony or its elements in his music. Tetramony, an incomplete form of pentatony (only four of the five notes of a pentatonic scale or array) appears, for example, in his "Melody with Double Notes" (No. 70) from Mikrokosmos.
more and more "coloring" notes are added to the array. The "clear"
tetradonic sound returns on the last beat of measure 37, but one bar later it is
"colored" again, and the array soon breaks apart into single notes (E from m.
43 to m. 50, A from m. 52 to m. 56, and F# from m. 57 to m. 60). In m. 59, E is
added to F#; however, as they occur simultaneously with several other notes,
these two notes hardly suggest the original tetradonic array. But the addition
of A to E and F# in the second ending does evoke that array, and the
concluding fast, four-note motif beginning on E, which is its lowest note
(Example 1. b), strengthens the feeling of an E tonal center.

Example 1. a  Soproni, *Hommage à Béla Bartók* (volume 4), page 12.

Another example of a clear tonal center is found in *Strophes of
Syncopation* (vol. 3 no. 6). This piece begins with a Gb tonal center set by a
series of Gb-Bb intervals in the right hand. The Gb center is replaced by a
series of other tonal centers beginning at measure 8, but it returns for the last eight bars, giving the feeling of return to the tonic.


Soproni sometimes separates white and black keys into different groups, each assigned to one of the hands, and then uses notes of one group (usually the black-key group) to color the diatony of the other group.81 He likes this technique because it creates an acoustic and physical sensation of stratification.82 The most distinct examples of this technique occur at the end of *Strophes with Clusters* (vol. 4 no. 2; Example 2) and *In Sunshine* (vol. 4 no. 1).

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81 Ibid., 20.
82 Ibid.
Most of In Sunshine derives from two distinct elements: various forms of the opening chord and what Soproni calls a "diatonic, descending melodic sequence in siciliano rhythm"83 (referring to the triplet figures on the second and third pages). As the composer put it, "the diatonic 'white-key' leaps [down by fifths] are colored by the [predominantly] 'black-key' notes of the left hand"84 (Example 3).


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83 Ibid., 23.

84 Ibid.
Polytonality appears in the last two volumes of *Note Pages*. *Alla serenata* (vol. 3 no. 3) begins with an arpeggiated Ab major triad that spans almost four octaves and lasts for almost an entire page. In the third system (m. 5), a new layer is added in the higher register: first a broken A major triad, then other notes from the A major scale (a half step above Ab). Two bars later a third layer appears in the lower register: a G major triad (a half-step below Ab). See Example 4. a. From this point on, *Alla serenata* is notated on four staves simultaneously, with the central Ab major layer written on two staves and the other layers on single staves above and below them. In measure 8, the outer layers continue to move away from the Ab center by half steps in two directions. The changes are clearly shown by key signatures: A major to Bb major, then G major to F# major (m.10); soon after, Bb major to B major (m. 11) and F# major to F major (m. 13). The piece concludes with music on F, Ab, and B major staves simultaneously, with a tritone distance between F and B. Nonetheless, by the end of the piece (mm. 14-15) Ab major has become the most prominent musical element again (Example 4. b), the aural result being Ab major colored by notes of the F and B major scales.


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Although Soproni has never employed strict twelve-tone technique, he has found it important to exploit its acoustical possibilities. The temporally and registerally scattered notes of the first twenty-six measures of *In memoriam János Viski* (vol. 3 no. 2) recall the texture of some serial music, although the piece does not derive from a single tone-row. The "enchanted, unearthly" character created by the "long-drawn-out tones" is to express "reminiscence"—Soproni's recollection of his memories of János Viski, his composition teacher. The technique of retrograde (one kind of

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65 Soproni in Ábrahám, "Köszöntő helyett . . . [Instead of Greetings. . .]." 1-2.
66 Interview by author, 22 May 1997.
"reconstruction of a pitch-collection," as the composer called it) is employed in measures 27-38: the notes in measures 34-38 are the same as those in measures 26-33 read backward in viola clefs, although in different registers. The viola clefs, which are to be ignored for performance purposes, are printed in parenthesis along with the Latin text "motus cancricanus" [crab motion] (Example 5). With this strict construction, Soproni wanted to pay tribute to Viski, the master who taught him to write "Music" even when rigorous restrictions apply (e. g. the style of Palestrina).


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87 Ibid.

88 Telephone interview by author, 16 March 1999.
Piles of Leaves (vol. 3 no. 7) exemplifies another way of reconstructing a pitch collection. According to the composer, the piece is based on a "sentence-model," a series of twelve chords that functions as a pair of six-chord phrases (Example 6. a). The chords of the second phrase of the pair (nos. 7-12) are closely related to those of the first (nos. 1-6): chord 7 is made up of the left-hand notes of chord 1 and the right-hand notes of chord 2; chords 8 and 9 consist of the same notes as chords 3 and 4, but they are switched from one hand to the other; chords 10 and 11 are very similar to chords 5 and 6; and the bass of chord 6 is the same as the highest note of chord 12. After the introduction of the twelve-chord series, its free variations begin. At first, only a change of register and a slight variation of rhythm occur. After the appearance of the first three chords of the series for the third time (chord 1 and 2 switched between the hands and chord 3 partially in a different register), the series is altered more and more: rhythm is varied, chords are transposed, tones are added or omitted, registers are changed. The chords are still easy to recognize for a while, but beginning at the fourth appearance of the second phrase they are altered, and their order is changed so much that they hardly recall the original chord-series. The piece is concluded by the retrograde form of the chord series (Example 6. b). While the second phrase is only suggested, the retrograde of the first appears in a rather strict form. The final chord is, however, extended by several added tones, including a cluster. 

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89 Ábrahám, "Betekintés Soproni József alkotóműhelyébe . . . [Examination of the creative workshop of József Soproni . . . ]." 22.

90 The composer reported that a visual experience inspired him to write this piece: "Enormous cut branches of trees are laid on the ground in a heap; a slow breeze is caressing the leaves. This is the expression of death." He also specified that the harmonies in Piles of Leaves need to ring long. Ibid.
Example 6. a  Soproni, Piles of Leaves (volume 3), page 16.

Example 6. b  Soproni, Piles of Leaves (volume 3), page 18.

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Although all of the examples discussed above exemplify conscious construction, Soproni mostly relies on intuition in his effort to find beautiful sounds, as in In Sunshine (vol. 4 no. 1). The opening chord is consciously selected to be acoustically pleasant, but its variations that produce the acoustic character of the piece are not determined by any system. The composer has said: "The bright block of the first chord is scattered on the keyboard--it appears in the most diverse registers... It was not calculated at all. The imagined acoustic experience inspired me."\textsuperscript{91} See Example 7.

Example 7. Soproni, In Sunshine (volume 4), page 3.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
The acoustic characteristics of different registers are further exploited in various other pieces: *Contrasts* (vol. 3 no. 4), *Hommage à Zoltán Kodály* (vol. 3 no. 5), and *In memoriam László Nagy* (vol. 4 no. 3). Soproni likes to contrast high notes with low ones; he sees them as colorful dots, and he often uses seconds, chords or clusters between them in the middle register, as seen in *In memoriam László Nagy* (Example 8).


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Soproni in Ábrahám, “Köszöntő helyett . . . [Instead of Greetings . . .],” 2.

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Clusters, glissandi, trills, repeated notes, and repeated intervals play important roles in several pieces in these two volumes of *Note Pages*. As the title shows, clusters\(^9\) are of major importance in the middle section of *Strophes with Clusters* (vol. 4 no. 2). The clusters—or harmonies, as the composer calls them—need to sound pleasant but with character, not blurred. "Sevenths and seconds have been accepted for decades as beautiful sounds," he explained.\(^4\) Glissandi can only be found in *Strophes of Syncopation* (vol. 3 no. 6) and *Amuck-runner* (vol. 3 no. 8). They are of interest because of unusual features: some emerge from clusters, one switches from black keys to white keys, and another is a simultaneous glissando on white and black keys (played by two hands) in the same register (Example 9). *Amuck-runner* has a strikingly great number of small intervals: fast repeated notes; glissandi; chains of free trills; and fast, melodic, trill-like seconds (Example 10). *Strophes with Clusters* (vol. 4 no. 2) begins with small intervals, but when the same texture returns after the middle section, the intervals seem to be somewhat expanded. In *Swishing* (vol. 3 no. 1), on the other hand, the chiefly small intervals of the opening section are expanded only to be condensed again toward the end.

![Example 9. Soproni, Strophes of Syncopation (volume 3), page 15.](image)

\(^9\)See Table 1 for an explanation of cluster symbols used by Soproni.
\(^4\)Ibid.

B. Rhythm

Note Pages includes both metric and rhythmically free pieces. However, conventional bar lines are absent in these two volumes, as in much of Soproni's solo piano music. When solid vertical lines are used, they are placed between the staves rather than across them, like the Mensurstriche of some scholarly editions of early music. The lines appear in metric or rhythmically strict, giusto pieces (Example 8), or as formal dividers in rhythmically freer pieces (Example 7). Soproni often omits bar lines in his music written for solo instruments:

This way the entire material becomes more incorporeal and breathes more freely. Hereby the piece is formed by the performer. A free, narrative performance of this set of pieces is essential; therefore, I often use such indications as libero, liberamente, and even declamando (which is to express a speech-like quality).95

Broken "bar lines," similar to the solid lines connecting staves, are also often used in Note Pages. However, according to the composer, they serve only to facilitate orientation:96 they show the end of phrases (Example 6. a), or subdivide phrases (Example 7), or divide rhythmically free music into small, measure-like sections (Example 5).

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95 Ábrahám, "Betekintés Soproni József alkotómúhelyébe . . . [Examination of the creative workshop of József Soproni . . . ]," 19.

96 Soproni in Ábrahám, "Köszöntő helyett . . . [Instead of Greetings . . . ]," 2.
Pieces written in a rhythmically strict, *giusto* style with bar lines between the staves and time signatures include *Swishing* (vol. 3 no. 1), *Strophes of Syncopation* (vol. 3 no. 6), and *In memoriam László Nagy* (vol. 4 no. 3). Only *Swishing* has the same meter throughout (6/16); the 3/8 pulsation of *In memoriam László* is once interrupted by a measure in 7/8, and the meter changes frequently in *Strophes of Syncopation*. *Alla serenata* (vol. 3 no. 3) has no time signature, but it seems that it should have a rather steady beat when performed. However, as the composer stated, notation without meter is employed for the sake of freely breathing performance without rushing; in such cases, time is unmeasurable by a metronome.97 *Hommage à Béla Bartók* (vol. 4 no. 4) is notated with bar lines and frequently changing time signatures, but it is supposed to be played freely ("libero"), as indicated. On the other hand, *Piles of Leaves* (vol. 3 no. 7) has no bar lines; nevertheless, it needs to be played with a constant sense of half-note beat, as suggested by the parenthetical *alla breve* symbol.

Several pieces are to be played in a free, declamatory style, characteristic of many Hungarian folk songs. Among such pieces are *In memoriam János Viski* (vol. 3 no. 2), *Strophes with Clusters* (vol. 4 no. 2), *Hommage à Händel* (vol. 4 no. 5), and *Play with the Silence* (vol. 4 no. 7).

Some other pieces are mixtures of metric (rhythmical) and free sections. In *Contrasts* (vol. 3 no. 4), a "libero" section is succeeded by a "ben ritmico" section, without time signature. In *Hommage à Zoltán Kodály* (vol. 3 no. 5), sections of changing meter and free sections alternate. *Amuck-runner* (vol. 3 no. 8) is mostly free and improvisatory, but it also has a rhythmically strict section.

97 Ábrahám, "Betekintés Soproni József alkotóműhelyébe . . . [Examination of the creative workshop of József Soproni . . . ]," 21.
Certain rhythmic elements play a very important role in some pieces. Syncopation is present on almost every beat in at least one voice in *Strophes of Syncopation* (vol. 3 no. 6); it is often contrasted to nonsyncopated rhythms in another voice (Example 11).


The "bell-motif," a rhythmic-melodic element often recurring in Soproni's music, is of major importance in *Hommage à Zoltán Kodály* (vol. 3 no. 5), *In memoriam László Nagy* (vol. 4 no. 3), and *In memoriam János Viski* (vol. 3 no. 2). As discussed in Chapter 1, the "bell-motif" was inspired by the sound of church bells that has enchanted the composer since his childhood. "The bell-motif" is a repetition of short rhythmic patterns on one or several pitches (Examples 12. a and 12. b). In some cases, certain notes are replaced by silence, as if some of the bells failed to sound (Example 12. c and 12. d). The composer pointed out that the elements of the "bell-motif" are theoretically infinitely repeated; therefore, he felt, the motif has the effect of "turning off time." He also mentioned that at the end of *In memoriam László Nagy* (Example 12. c), a piece inspired by the death of the great Hungarian poet, the "bell-motif" denotes the "thought of burial."98

98 Interview by author, 22 May 1997.

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In his piano music, Soproni likes to employ "chord models" that keep the hands in the same position for a long time. In such cases, his "goal is to stir the material with exciting rhythm,"\textsuperscript{99} to create a "rhythmic play."\textsuperscript{100} Examples of this technique can be found in \textit{Strophes of Syncopation} (vol. 3 no. 6; Example 13), \textit{Hommage a Béla Bartók} (vol. 4 no. 4; Example 1. a), and \textit{Contrasts} (vol. 3 no. 4).

Most of the non-traditional symbols used by Soproni refer to duration or rhythm. The first two symbols in Table 1 express accelerando and/or ritardando of certain groups of notes, as seen, for example, in \textit{Contrasts} (vol. 3 no. 4; Example 14. a) and \textit{Play with the Silence} (vol. 4 no. 7; Examples 14. b and 14. c). The next sign (\textsuperscript{E}) symbolizes a note of relative value—"medium

\textsuperscript{99} Soproni in Ábrahám, "Betekintés Soproni József alkotóműhelyébe . . . [Examination of the creative workshop of József Soproni . . . ]," 21.

\textsuperscript{100} Soproni in Ábrahám, "Köszöntő helyett . . . " [Instead of Greetings . . . ], 3.
length" (Example 5). Another kind of note of indefinite value is the dot-like black note without stem, used especially in *Alla serrata* (vol. 3 no. 3; Examples 4. a, 4. b), and *In Sunshine* (vol. 4 no. 1; Example 3). There are two different symbols in the chart that express different grades of lengthening, and the traditional *fermata* sign is also employed (Examples 7 and 8). Another symbol (•) marks a short, breath-like silence (Examples 6. a and 6. b). This symbol is often used several times in a row (see Examples 2, 10, 14. a, and 14. c).


The composer pointed out that "rests should articulate music like natural breathing; they are to be used as free means of expression, similar to fermatas that divide and organize form." Soproni warns that an exact timing of rests between short, repeated motives is not at all sufficient. Such rests create "agogic play and, in fact, this agogic-rhythmic playfulness must direct the inner, steady pulsation. The life of the length of rests has to come to life inside us and, ultimately, we should not count"; our inner clock, which is never as even as a machine, should measure time instead: "When we know everything here on earth, on a safe ground, we should break away from it"

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101 Ibid., 1.
and learn how to 'fly.' If we approach the pieces [in Note Pages] this way, they will disclose their 'secrets' more easily."102

When rhythms are not strictly notated—in passages of what Soproni calls "aleatoric thinking of free rhythm"—the composer often uses horizontal placement of notes to suggest these rhythms (Examples 3, 4. a, 4. b, 10, and 15); occasionally, broken vertical lines are used to show how notes in one voice coordinate with those in another (Examples 3, 4. a and 4. b). The composer stresses that in such passages one voice must not be adopted to the pulse of the other: "they have to remain completely independent from each other"; the hands have to play "with improvisational looseness," as if they were "two different media."103 Achieving this effect is one of the greatest challenges in playing Note Pages.


C. Form

Only a few pieces of the two volumes recall standard formal designs. *Strophes with Clusters* (vol. 4 no. 2) is written in ternary form. The fast material of section A is followed by contrasting material in section B, which is constructed of a musical phrase (a series of clusters colored by several

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102 Soproni in Ábrahám, "Betekintés Soproni József alkotóműhelyébe ... [Examination of the creative workshop of József Soproni ... ]," 19.

103 Ibid., 22.
chords) and its three repetitions in increasingly fast tempi: *Meno mosso, Più mosso, Ancora più mosso,* and *Molto vivace.* The repetitions are almost exact, except for the ends of the phrases. The last phrase is incomplete, and it flows into section A', which concludes the piece. Vertical lines are used exclusively as formal dividers in *Strophes with Clusters:* to mark the end of section A and to separate statements of the repeated phrase in section B. Section A' contains only the texture and character of section A; notes are not repeated, and the intervals become somewhat more expanded than at the beginning of the piece.104

*In Sunshine* (vol. 4 no. 1) falls into two sections: the improvisational, sometimes *cadenza*-like first page and the more flowing second and third pages, which are based on the diatonic, siciliano-like melody and various forms of the opening chord. Thus, it is like a "piece with prelude."

The composer described *Piles of Leaves* (vol. 3 no. 7) as a series of "free variations" on a "sentence-model." Although he consciously switched the order of chords and the registers of tones in the five variations, elements of the original twelve-chord series can be recognized throughout the piece.105

104 Describing the form of *Strophes with Clusters* as ABA', based on texture and character, is comparable to Charles Rosen's description of form in Schumann's "Eusebius" from *Carnaval.* Although "Eusebius" is a piece "made up of only two four-bar phrases repeated" over and over, Rosen believes that the overall design of the piece is ABA, based on "contrast of sonorities." In his words, "for the listener's experience of the form of 'Eusebius,' pitch and rhythm are secondary and tone color is preeminent." See Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 12-13.

105 Interview by author, 4 June 1997.

106 Soproni in Ábrahám, "Betekintés Soproni József alkotóműhelyébe . . . [Examination of the creative workshop of József Soproni . . .]." 23.

107 Ibid.
The only piece in the two volumes that contains repeat signs is *Hommage à Béla Bartók* (vol. 4 no. 4). The entire second half of the piece is to be repeated; only the last measure is varied, then extended in a second ending. The overall form of the piece can be schematized as ABB'.

Most pieces, among them *In memoriam János Viski* (vol. 3 no. 2), *In memoriam László Nagy* (vol. 4 no. 3), *Hommage à Händel* (vol. 4 no. 5), and *Play with the Silence* (vol. 4 no. 7), do not follow standard designs. In Soproni's words, "it is reference to previous ideas, not repetition, that creates their form."¹⁰⁸ Such pieces are based on different materials, some of which return, usually greatly varied. The only pieces (other than *Hommage à Béla Bartók*) in which the return of an idea is very similar to its original form are *Strophes of Syncopation* (vol. 3 no. 6; compare Examples 11 and 16), *In memoriam László Nagy* (vol. 4 no. 3; compare Examples 12. c and 17), and *Contrasts* (vol. 4 no. 4). The repeats in the first two pieces are more extensive than in the last one. Coincidentally, in both of these the opening idea returns to conclude the piece.


¹⁰⁸ Interview by author, 4 June, 1997.

Soproni has referred to the ideas on which the pieces are built as "lines." He has explained that after every stop, a new "line" begins, as in folk music. The "lines" are to be understood as temporal rather than melodic. In metrical pieces or sections, the "lines" are rather regular; otherwise they may be quite irregular.

**D. Other**

The highest degree of indeterminacy in the last two volumes of *Note Pages* is found in *Amuck-runner* (vol. 3 no. 7). The piece includes a section in which the length of notes and the selection of pitches are put in the performer's charge: after a long, written-out chain of trills, the composer requests that the chain be continued (in a similar fashion to its beginning).

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109 Ibid.
and led to its specified conclusion as the performer sees fit (*improvisando approssimativamente in questo modo*). The performer has a considerable amount of freedom to fill in the notated range of approximately four octaves (Example 18).

![Example 18](image)


In *Hommage à Händel* (vol. 4 no. 5), the technique of quotation is utilized: reference to the great composer's *Concerto Grosso in B Minor*, Op. 6 No. 12, appears (Example 19). Soproni also used this thematic material in *Kommentárok egy Händel témára* [Commentaries on a Theme of Händel] for orchestra (1988). In *Hommage à Händel*, the opening harmonies of the third movement (*Larghetto, e piano*) of the concerto appear twice. On the first page of *Hommage à Händel* (in the *Andante moderato* section), the first five harmonies of the concerto grosso movement are quoted; they are prolonged and "colored" by other tones (Example 20. a). On the second page, Händel's second chord is omitted, but the quotation is extended to the sixth chord (Example 20. b). In Soproni's music, the first chord appears in first inversion rather than root position.

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110 Interview by author, 22 May 1997.

Chapter 3

Pianism
in the Third and Fourth Volumes of Note Pages

Dynamics are notated in great detail in Note Pages; however, Soproni remarked that he intended them as guidance only. They do not need to be taken literally, but they must follow the undulation, the motion of the music; thus, they are of relative value.\textsuperscript{111} He has commented that he "can barely stand harsh piano sound"; he always imagines a "soft and colorful" sonority, even when \textit{fortissimo} is indicated.\textsuperscript{112} Instead of crescendo and diminuendo signs, some sections include a number of dynamic marks (sometimes a different one on almost every note or harmony) to show the precise proportions of the rise or fall in dynamic levels, especially in \textit{In memoriam László Nagy} (vol. 4 no. 3; Example 12. b) and \textit{Piles of Leaves} (vol. 3 no. 7; Example 6. a--first system, Example 6. b--\textit{Andante moderato}, section). The dynamic level diminishes in the course of almost every six-chord phrase in \textit{Piles of Leaves}, perhaps to express the thought of dying. (See his exact words quoted on page 30, footnote 90.)

All but two pieces end softly (\textit{piano} or \textit{pianissimo}); the only exceptions are \textit{Amuck-runner} (vol. 3 no. 8), which ends $\textit{fff}$, and \textit{Allegro with Soundlessly Depressed Keys} (vol. 4 no. 6), which ends $\textit{ff}$. The greatest dynamic ranges are marked in \textit{Amuck-runner} (vol. 3 no. 8)--\textit{ppp} to \textit{fff}, and \textit{Strophes of Syncopation} (vol. 3 no. 6)--\textit{ppp} to \textit{fff}.

\textsuperscript{111}Ábrahám, "Betekintés Soproni József alkotóműhelyébe . . . [Examination of the creative workshop of József Soproni . . . ]," 21.

\textsuperscript{112}Ábrahám, "Köszöntő helyett . . . [Instead of Greetings . . . ]," 2.

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Articulation is rarely marked in *Note Pages*. Soproni, however, explicitly calls for "differentiated touch" and "soft and colorful" piano sound. He stated that temporally and registerally scattered notes need to sound rhythmically correct but, at the same time, they need to create melodies. The acoustical effects of the scattered notes also need to be exploited. Such notes appear most frequently in *In Sunshine* (vol. 4 no. 1; Examples 7 and 21).

![Example 21. Soproni, *In Sunshine* (volume 4), page 5.](image)

Simultaneities of a stationary chord and a moving voice appear in several pieces in *Note Pages*. According to Soproni, such togetherness of tranquillity and motion embody a kind of contrapuntal thinking.

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113 Ábrahám, "Betekintés Soproni József alkotóműhelyébe ... [Examination of the creative workshop of József Soproni ...]," 20.

114 Ábrahám, "Köszöntő helyett ... [Instead of Greetings ...]," 1-2.

115 Ábrahám, "Betekintés Soproni József alkotóműhelyébe ... [Examination of the creative workshop of József Soproni ...]," 23.
composer believes that sustaining the stationary chord actually helps in playing the moving voice *leggiero,*\(^\text{116}\) as seen in *Strophes of Syncopation* (vol. 3 no. 6; Example 13) and *Contrasts* (vol. 3 no. 4; Example 22). Part of the excerpt from *Contrasts* is written on four staves; the only other piece in the last two volumes of *Note Pages* in which the composer employs four-staff notation is *Alla serenata* (vol. 3 no. 3).


Soproni often indicates exactly where he wants the damper pedal to be pressed down and released. As he explains in a note on the first music page of each volume, the traditional pedal "signs extending under larger sections indicate" that the decay of sounds "forms an essential compositional element" in the given section (Examples 5, 8, 20. a, and 20. b). He also

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 22.
states that the sign "(Ped.!)," which he frequently uses, means that the use of the pedal is necessary in the given section or piece, but the fashion of pedaling should be chosen by the performer (Example 1. a, 6. a, and 12. b). In addition, he notes that pedal can be used with care where no pedal marks are given; he uses the senza pedale indication when pedaling is not permissible (Example 14. c). In Allegro with Soundlessly Depressed Keys (vol. 4 no. 6) he alternates senza pedale indications with (Ped.!) signs, while in Play with the Silence (vol. 4 no. 7) he uses all three kinds of the pedal indications used in Note Pages, that is, traditional pedal markings, as well as (Ped.!) and senza pedale indications. Rarely used are the pedal sign in conjunction with "etc.," as seen in Example 2, and "(Ped. ad lib.)," as seen in Example 3.

The composer explains that the traditional pedal indications in Alla serenata (vol. 3 no. 3; see Examples 4. a and 4. b) may be treated quite freely. They are "merely suggestions"; they show one possible way of mixing the sonorities of "various keys and harmonies," while in "other versions . . . minor or greater deviations from this may occur." He warns that the use of pedal is of crucial importance in Contrasts (vol. 4 no. 4), where the purpose of pedaling is to gradually unite tones into harmonies.

Silently depressed keys producing harmonics appear in three pieces in the third and fourth volumes: in Hommage à Händel (vol. 4 no. 5), Play with the Silence (vol. 4 no. 7), and Contrasts (vol. 3 no. 4). In the last piece, in which soft and loud, high and low, and "whirling undulation (horizontal

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117 Explanatory notes on p. 3 of volumes 3 and 4 in József Soproni, Note Pages (Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest, 1980), vol. 3 and 4, p. 3.

118 Explanatory note in Note Pages, volume 3, p. 8.

119 Ábrahám, "Betekintés Soproni József alkotóműhelyébe . . . [Examination of the creative workshop of József Soproni . . . ]," 23.
element)" and "wide acoustic space--harmony, high and low note together--
(verticalelement)"\textsuperscript{120} are so intensely contrasted, the use of harmonics is
another way of creating contrasting sonorities. As seen in Example 23,
Soproni uses diamond-shaped notes to indicate silently depressed keys, as
have many other composers.


The most unusual sound effect in \textit{Note Pages} is found in \textit{Allegro with
Soundlessly Depressed Keys} (vol. 4 no. 6). While the left hand holds down
keys to sustain chords, the right hand plays short sixteenth-note motives that
are interrupted by brief rests. However, some of the notes of the right hand
are the same as the ones in the sustained left-hand chord; therefore, some
right-hand notes actually cannot be heard. A silent note is notated with "x" in
place of the note head. Soproni explains that the "mute tones of the right
hand assume [a] rhythmic role. Their keys are to be touched decisively and
accurately."\textsuperscript{121} The composer stated that this effect serves to "color" rhythm by
varying the distance between notes through the insertion of silent notes
between them.\textsuperscript{122} Since the right hand plays a set of notes that at first are

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{121} Explanatory note in \textit{Note Pages}, volume 4, p. 16.

\textsuperscript{122} Interview by author, 22 May 1997.
limited, then gradually increasing in range when this technique first appears, the effect is similar to the music of some Minimalist composers (Example 24).

Chapter 4

Summary and Conclusions

Note Pages, encompassing eighty-two compositions for piano by József Soproni, is divided into four volumes. At first, the composer intended Note Pages as a one-volume set of short pieces for young pianists, but he liked the work so much that he continued it and completed another three volumes. Volume two includes several more extensive and more challenging compositions, and the pieces in volumes three and four can only be successfully approached by more advanced pianists. However, Note Pages was not written with a pedagogical purpose: Soproni’s goal was to offer a number of contemporary performance pieces for pianists on all levels.

The fifteen pieces in volumes three and four represent various musical styles and compositional techniques of the twentieth century. The harmonic language of the pieces—many dissonances: seconds, sevenths, and clusters—is characteristic to the century. Soproni commented, however, that his music is basically diatonic with "coloring" notes. In fact, tonal centers can at times be clearly identified. Polytonality and tetratony (a form of pentatony) also appear in Note Pages, and the influence of serialist music can also be seen, along with various elements of indeterminacy.

Meter, when not absent in these pieces, usually changes frequently. The performance of many pieces requires great freedom, but some pieces have to be performed in a rhythmically strict, giusto style. "Polyphony" of completely independent voices—or in the composer’s words, "aleatoric thinking of free rhythm"—is frequently called for; its realization can be quite a challenge.
Soproni relies mostly on intuition in his compositional process; therefore, his pieces rarely follow standard designs. They are based on a number of "lines" or short motives, some of which return—usually varied. Among the few examples of (freely treated) standard designs are ternary form and variations.

There are many tempo changes in Note Pages. Dynamics are carefully indicated, but they do not have to be taken literally. Pedaling is also frequently marked, but there is a lot of room left for the performer's own ideas. Articulation is relatively infrequently indicated.

Silently depressed keys are used in two different ways in Note Pages: as harmonics, and as a technique (described on p. 53) that helps to continue the rhythmic momentum when a number of short rests have to be played between notes in a fast tempo.

A number of non-traditional symbols are used in Note Pages; some are Soproni's own, others are used by other twentieth-century composers as well. The symbols include diamond- and cross-shaped note-heads, various kinds of notes of indeterminate length, different clusters, short rests, signs for accelerating or slowing groups of notes, and various types of fermatas.

According to the composer, the characteristic performance of every element of the pieces—not only an instrumental, but even more a musical problem—must be the most important goal of the performer. He has said that, since notation can only roughly express music, there is much room for interpretative freedom; clean, exact, and perfect playing is not sufficient.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{123}}\text{Ábrahám, "Betekintés Soproni József alkotóműhelyébe ... [Examination of the creative workshop of József Soproni ...]." 21.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{124}}\text{Ábrahám, "Köszöntő helyett ... [Instead of Greetings ...]." 12.}\]

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He emphasized that it is crucial to start the work in an instinctive fashion and move toward conscious examination from there. "The performer has to reach the point where the notation can 'speak' to him or her." Soproni also stated that preliminary intellectual work, such as structural survey is very important; otherwise, it is impossible for the music to have a well-shaped performance.\textsuperscript{125}

Although the primary difficulty of the pieces is conveying their expressive quality, performers may encounter technical difficulties as well. Notes that belong together are frequently divided between hands, and many required physical movements are unusual for pianists accustomed to patterns learned from more traditional music. Moreover, such movements are varied quite often.

The fifteen pieces in the third and fourth volumes of \textit{Note Pages} represent a number of different moods, characteristics, and musical styles. They are interesting, inspiring, and challenging compositions permeated by Soproni's profound musicianship, and their purpose is to create beautiful sonorities; they represent a valuable contribution to the twentieth-century piano repertoire.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 1.

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________, interview by author, 4 June 1997, Budapest.

________, telephone interview by author, 22 September 1998.

________, telephone interview by author, 6 February 1999.

________, telephone interview by author, 16 March 1999.
Appendix 1: LP Recordings of József Soproni's Works

- Ovidii metamorphoses
  - Hungaroton LPX 1298

- Invenzioni sul B-A-C-H
  - Hungaroton SLPX 11692

- Three Songs to Poems by M. Radnóti
  - Hungaroton SLPX 11713

- Eklypsis for Orchestra
- Cello Concerto No. 1
- String Quartet No. 4
- Sonata for Flute and Piano
  - Hungaroton SLPX 11743

- Musica da Camera No.2
- 3 Pieces for Flute and Cimbalom
- 4 Intermezzi for Piano
- Sonata for French Horn and Piano
- Concerto da camera
  - Hungaroton SLPX 12061

- Symphony No. 1
- Symphony No. 2
  - Hungaroton SLPX 12453

- Symphony no. 3
- Cello Concerto No. 2
  - Hungaroton (information incomplete)
## Appendix 2: Works for Piano Solo
by József Soproni

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<td>1959</td>
<td>Zeneműkiadó Vállalat, Budapest, Z.3138</td>
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# Appendix 3: Individual Pieces

## in Note Pages

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<td>Közélő léptek (Approaching Steps)</td>
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<td>Közelgő léptek (Approaching Steps)</td>
<td>Távolodó Léptek (Retreating Steps)</td>
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128 The English title is published as "Invitatory," but it is corrected as "Invitation" in Soproni's hand in my copy.

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127 Published without titles; Hungarian titles added in Soproni's hand to a copy in the possession of Edit Hambalkó.

128 Published title

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Volume 3

1 Suhogás (Swishing)
2 In memoriam János Viski
3 Alla serenata
4 Kontrasztok (Contrasts)
5 Hommage à Zoltán Kodály
6 Strófák a szinkópéákról (Strophes of Syncopation)
7 Lomb-halmok (Piles of Leaves)
8 Ámokfutó (Amuck-runner)

Volume 4

1 Napfényben (In Sunshine)
2 Strófák hanghalmazokkal (Strophes with Clusters)
3 In memoriam László Nagy
4 Hommage à Béla Bartók
5 Hommage à Händel
6 Allegro néma billentyúkkél (Allegro with Soundlessly Depressed Keys)
7 Játék a csenddel (Play with the Silence)
Re: Your fax of April 6

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Sincerely yours,

Dr. Isrén Hamolya
Vita

Mária Horváth was born in Győr, Hungary, in 1967. She began her music studies at the age of six at the Béla Bartók Elementary and Middle School for Music, where she began piano lessons at the age of eight with Éva Törökné Marosi. From 1982 to 1986, she studied at the Conservatory of Music of Győr, majoring in piano as well as in solfège/music theory. Her piano teachers were Judit Újházy and József Gábor. After her graduation, she moved to Budapest to study at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music. In her first year at the Academy, she majored in high-school teaching/choral conducting, continuing her piano training with Gyöngyi Keveházi. In 1987, she was accepted as a piano major at the Academy and studied piano with Edit Hambalkó (major professor) and Márta Gulyás (chamber music teacher) until completing her művésztanár [artist-teacher] degree in 1992. That year she was given the opportunity to work on a Master of Music degree with Gellért Módos at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois. She graduated in 1994 and moved to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to begin doctoral studies at Louisiana State University with Alumni Professor Dr. Jack Guerry. She was awarded the degree Doctor of Musical Arts in August, 1999.
DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: Mária Horváth

Major Field: Music

Title of Dissertation: Volumes Three and Four of József Soproni's Note Pages: A Stylistic Study

Approved:

[Signature]
Major Professor and Chairman

[Signature]
Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signature]

[Signature]

[Signature]

[Signature]

Date of Examination:

April 30, 1999