

The Use of Béla Bartók's Mikrokosmos in 21st Century Education



Todd Urban - May 1, 2010

The last few decades of piano education have faced difficulties beyond technical ability and stylistic interpretation. Students in the new millennium are surrounded by formulated music driven by big business, music technology that can be held in higher regard than ability, a fast paced society that can spread a student's interest thin among many different areas, and a plethora of piano methods that value profit and cosmetic appeal over content. In order to achieve a complete understanding of both their instrument and its literature, piano students are in need of education that helps to engage the learner on a level that expands their interests beyond the current culture so that they can achieve an appreciation of both past music eras as well as future styles. Béla Bartók's Mikrokosmos was arranged to enhance pedagogical approaches through different folk styles and continues to satisfy many of the needs of modern day education while offering new teaching potential through its varied content and flexible organization.

Mikrokosmos was originally published in 1940 and can offer great pedagogical opportunities to present day students by working through its content. However, it may be valuable for educators to have a conceptualization of the goals that Bartók tried to meet during the time in which the method was written. There were five primary objectives that this method tried to satisfy: Bartók wanted to provide pianists with pieces suitable for concert use, to teach pianists technique and musicianship, to acquaint the student with different styles, to introduce folk music via transcriptions, and to serve as a reference book for students of composition.¹

¹ Suchoff, Benjamin. "Béla Bartók's Mikrokosmos", 185-186. Suchoff identifies these objectives of Mikrokosmos. Suchoff also suggests the idea that in 1926 the pieces in Mikrokosmos were used to fill solo piano concert material prior to being conceived as a piano method since Bartók's concerts would frequently feature excerpts from Mikrokosmos.

Bartók met these objectives during a time when educational standards were not being enforced by the government. Currently, MENC outlines objectives similar to the ones previously mentioned², however most popular piano methods, such as Alfred and Bastien, do not satisfy all these goals that Bartók set out to meet. A quick glance at more recent piano methods will reveal many different supplemental books, such as a theory, ear training, note speller, performance, or composition book. Current methods are set up to milk techniques to sell volumes, as described by Bartók educator Elka Kirkpatrick. Colorful pictures are included to get the child interested in the look of the book, but not necessarily to enhance the music or the idea of learning an instrument.³

The way in which Mikrokosmos is organized is very different from a more commercial method. While the method is organized in order of difficulty, the introduction to the method states that it is not necessary to learn every piece. Furthermore, as described in the introduction to the method, “technical and theoretical instructions have been omitted in the belief that these are better left to the teacher to explain.”⁴ This allows each student to grow individually instead of the method forcing each student into a mold. Popular educational practices such as Differentiated Instruction⁵ would support

² MENC is also known as the National Association for Music Education. For more information on the national standards, visit www.menc.org/resources/view/national-standards-for-music-education

³ In an interview with Elka Kirkpatrick, Frank Pavese and Itay Goren, these three educators discussed their experiences with Mikrokosmos and the difficulties that more recent methods present in current society. Bulgarian pianist Kirkpatrick works as a mentor to Pavese and Goren, who have dedicated a significant portion of their careers to the performance and teaching of Bartók’s work.

⁴ Bartók, Béla. *Mikrokosmos New Definitive Edition*, 4-8. Ideas are taken from the preface by Peter Bartók as well as from the introduction by Béla Bartók.

⁵ Differentiated Instruction is also known as UbD or “Understanding by Design”. The basic concept is that since student learns differently, material must be presented in different ways in order to satisfy the learning needs of each student. Grant Wiggins is one of the most well known educators on this topic. For more information, visit www.grantwiggins.com.

Bartók's decision to leave out these instructions, since each student learns differently and the piano method needs to be able to adapt to the student.

These factors form a different approach to education than a commercial method that has a specific order to the lessons. Furthermore, many methods require the purchase of separate books and therefore may be redundant in their content. Bartók's original idea was "for certain pieces to be published with pictures if they are very good and original."⁶ While these pictures never came into existence, Bartók suggests that the pictures would be included in order to enhance musical study and not just to have a commercial appeal to young students.

Mikrokosmos is commonly associated with teachable concepts that are not as available in other methods. These concepts are deliberate in their placement. During a recommendation he wrote for Varro, Bartók discussed how he was influenced by Margit Varró's ideas on the psychological and theoretical aspects of teaching of beginners. By notating critiques in the initial drafts of the 1913 Bartók-Reschovsky Piano Method, the precursor to Mikrokosmos, Varró also suggested ways of testing musical aptitude.

Of all of Bartók's works, the Piano Method may be the least recognized. However, in the case of discussing what Mikrokosmos has to offer to modern pianists, this method may be the reason that Mikrokosmos was able to stand the test of time. In her notes, Varró suggested the inclusion of positions, canons, free melodic imitation, and compositional techniques for students. Extension of playing range and parallel

⁶ Suchoff, Benjamin. "History of Béla Bartók's Mikrokosmos", 189. Suchoff reveals that Boosey and Hawkes eliminated this idea of pictures prior to publication. Furthermore, in an effort to provide more volumes for sale, the 3 proposed volumes of Mikrokosmos were split into 6 volumes, which could ultimately create more revenue for the publisher. Bartók was not in agreement with the publisher to split the volumes and eliminate the drawings.

motion in 6th and 10th were also recommended. During Bartók's final interview in Hungary during 1940, Bartók mentions that Varró's suggestions helped him write many of the pieces and organize Mikrokosmos in a way that was progressive and student driven.⁷

In "Teaching With Bartók's Mikrokosmos", Silvia Ameringer supports the idea that Mikrokosmos is a superior method since it is what the author describes as a test of students' mental reaction and not just technical ability. This 1951 article on Mikrokosmos helps to show some of the improvements that Bartók may have made based on Varró's suggestions. Ameringer discusses the various techniques that Bartók introduces and states that a pupil learns one step at a time to overcome technical difficulties, while developing an ear that gradually comes to accept dissonance and less common rhythms. While preparing a student for the structure of modern music through these techniques, Ameringer states that the "beauty of music is gradually revealed".⁸ This revealed beauty ensures that the student develops not only technical ability, but an appreciation for music that allows the student to enjoy and accept modern music as part of their own life.

During an interview with Bartók educator Frank Pavese, he also addresses the idea of dissonance in Mikrokosmos. Pavese feels that today's student is in need of accepting dissonance and unfamiliar sounds since much of the music of today's youth is very simple, with I-IV-V chord changes dominating the popular music. When asked what to do when a student finds a Mikrokosmos dissonance displeasing, Pavese

⁷ Lampert, Vera. "On the Origins of Bartók's Mikrokosmos", 123-137. Author Lampert suggests that since Varró used the *Piano Method* in her teaching, she was the most reliable source to comment on strengths and weaknesses of Bartók's method.

⁸ Ameringer, Silvia. "Teaching with Bartók's Mikrokosmos", 35.

suggested using a familiar tune such as “Mary Had a Little Lamb” to show the student that inherent dissonances are not a negative trait. A child can accept sounds as beautiful on their own without the teacher trying to sell it to them. Pavese states that a society, we have simplified our music and hid the beauty of certain sounds from our youth. While this statement sounds like an obscure conspiracy theory, it should be viewed as a statement of Pavese’s concern for the idea that majority of today’s popular music is not dominated by the clashing harmonies and rhythms that appeared in many cultures’ folk music.⁹

Author Ameringer states that dissonance first appears in *Mikrokosmos* as passing notes, but then eventually develops into unresolved discords. The ear gradually comes to accept the dissonances, but more important is the inner necessity of the music which creates them since Bartók always states a strong melodic line when presenting these dissonances. The dissonance is described as “not an exceptional occurrence, but an integral factor.” In the end, these dissonances develop student technique and broaden their musical outlook.¹⁰

The popular piano methods of the last fifty years include very little that is not based on a major or minor scale.¹¹ Bartók felt that his study of folk music freed his compositions “from the tyrannical rule of the major and minor keys”.¹² In Lawrence

⁹ Ibid, 31. Similar to Frank Pavese’s comment, Silvia Ameringer discusses how “virgin soil gives the best results”.

¹⁰ Ibid, 32-35.

¹¹ Music distributor, JW Pepper, lists Alfred, Bastien, and Faber as the three top selling methods. When these methods were reviewed, almost every single piece fit into a tonal major or minor scale. In the first three books of the method, Alfred featured only one piece that offered a diminished sound and one that offered an augmented or whole-tone sound.

¹² Suchoff, Benjamin. “Béla Bartók’s Contributions to Music Education”, 37.

Starr's article, "Educating the Ear", he discusses how Mikrokosmos may help students hear outside of basic scales or chord progressions when it is used as a source to look at music analysis. The early pieces in Mikrokosmos are mentioned, since many of the works are monophonic or unison melodies that are described as presenting an unusual kind of texture. Starr states that these pieces also allow for the study of register and not only the structure of the melody. Bartók's independence from a single scale or harmonic system can prevent tonal bias and is described by Starr as a way to help students understand polyphonic textures.

Mikrokosmos' method develops the student's ear through its polyphonic canons. Unlike many methods that use homophonic textures with a chord in the left hand and a melody in the right, Mikrokosmos quickly takes the method into two voice parts. Bartók's method gives students a chance to experience harmony through this simultaneous sounding of two or more melodic pitches. Starr makes a point that there are new music needs in modern education and tells the reader not to categorize music or education into different schools or styles. By categorizing music, students develop an idea of what is right or wrong and may actually close their minds to creative potential.¹³

Regardless of whether or not Starr feels that modern students should categorize styles, Mikrokosmos is replete with a study of all different styles and technical examples. Bartók does not identify any specific styles, compositional techniques, or genres in the method. However, author Suchoff states that Bartók does include examples of

¹³ Starr, Lawrence. "Educating the Ear: Strategies for Teaching Twentieth-Century Music Analysis" 52-56. Many of Starr's ideas are similar to the ideas that were discussed by Frank Pavese in regards to how students need to experience dissonance and modern sounds in music in order to supplement the lack of these sounds in much of today's pop culture.

polyphony similar to Bach, the Rococo period, Classical dance form, Alberti bass, Romantic and Impressionistic examples, and pieces that are similar in sound to Chopin or Scriabin. Also included are examples of more modern techniques such as Schoenberg-like harmonics¹⁴, styles where the music alternates between 5/4 and 4/4 meter, and a piece that emulates Gershwin's tonality, rhythm and color. All of these different styles and compositional techniques are presented in Mikrokosmos, even though they may be based on a folk melody that did not originally use the melody in the same context.¹⁵

Suchoff states that Bartók felt that the inclusion of folk music transcriptions were easier than to write an original composition intended for teaching. There are three ways in which Bartók felt folk music can be “transmuted” into art music: transcriptions, imitations, and composition of original folk music. Transcriptions can be divided into three categories, one where the tune dominates, one where the tune and added parts are equal in importance, and one where the folk tune is treated as a “motto”.¹⁶

These genre examples that are derived from folk tunes are useful models for composition. While composition was a goal of Bartók's for his students, it is an area that many current methods do not develop. Since the pieces were based on folksongs, many were modal or pentatonic. Similar to how dissonance in Mikrokosmos helps to open students to new sounds, these modal and pentatonic folk melodies are examples

¹⁴ This is a technique where the pianist presses down the keys to raise the dampers so that the overtones are triggered as the pianist performs other notes.

¹⁵ Suchoff, Benjamin. “Béla Bartók's Contributions to Music Education”, 41-43.

¹⁶ Ibid, 38. Transmuted and motto were the original words used in the article and have been retained in order to be as accurate as possible.

that will allow students to hear examples that differ from commercial music with which they may be surrounded.¹⁷

Bartók's teacher, Thomán, passed on Liszt's approach to teaching where a teacher plays a piece with the intent of the pupil to absorb and recreate it.¹⁸ While this technique may help in the area of composition, it also addresses a current need in education, ear training. Currently, there are many educational resources on the market that try to develop ear training with students. Software, books, and CDs all try to supplement ear training in today's student since many students learned from a method that worked as a checklist for technique and therefore may not have taken adequate time to develop the ear.¹⁹ Peter Bartók shares his father's approach to teaching ear training in the introduction to Mikrokosmos by stressing the importance of singing and transposition in instrumental study. A few three staff pieces are included, which not only develop the ear through the singing of different modes, but also help to teach coordination and the ability to read multiple staves.

Educator, David Baker, agrees that by having students use Mikrokosmos as a model to change modes for compositions or sing transposed pieces, one can develop the ear. Furthermore, this study can aid a student in the ability to improvise. This is a teaching tool that is stressed in education journals today, but was not common during

¹⁷ During an interview with Bartók educator, Elka Kirkpatrick, she recognized that there is a recent trend in rap music to use samples that are based on pentatonic, dissonant, and modal sounds. However, she did state that these songs are not enough to culture the ear since the majority of commercial American music still focuses on major scales and simple harmonic progressions.

¹⁸ Chalmers, Kenneth. *Béla Bartók*, 30.

¹⁹ The idea of a checklist of techniques being a negative concept was borrowed from a conversation with Elka Kirkpatrick. Instead, Kirkpatrick suggests allowing the student to grow organically instead of the teacher trying to impose benchmarks for technique that are outlined in modern methods.

the publication of Mikrokosmos since the genre of jazz improvisation was still under development. As an educational exercise, Baker also suggests performing pieces in different modes by altering the key signatures.²⁰

Mikrokosmos is filled with non-traditional key signatures, different key signatures in each staff, and also non-traditionally placed accidentals in the key signature. In both Ameringer's article and Goren's interview,

both agree that these non-traditional key signatures exist in Bartók's method since it makes sense to younger students. For example, if the music hovers at the bottom



of the staff, then an F# should not be located on the top line of a treble staff. Many educators discuss the difficulty in explaining traditional key signatures to young students, and Mikrokosmos may help to eliminate some of the confusion.

Another example that educators encounter is when students are confused when performing with three flats in the key signature (such as Eb major), but an Ab may never actually occur in the music. Of course, most instructors will teach that the major key signature would have that flat even if the music does not actually play it. In the case of Bartók, this explanation is not necessary since the music is not always in a major scale and therefore will only show the sharps or flats that are actually used in the piece. This is not necessarily an argument for Bartók's method, however it definitely helps the student think outside of the traditional notation that is taught by the majority of methods.

²⁰ Baker, David. "Improvisation: A Tool for Music Learning", 43.

Bartók struggled with the inability to be precise with his notation and through his transcription of folk tunes, his practices changed during the 1930s as he developed *Mikrokosmos*. Bartók worked with different types of notational signs and annotated his works in order to make sure pieces were able to be performed in an accurate manner. In describing Bartók's struggle with notation, László states the following:

“The precise meaning of performing signs was differently understood and taught in different conservatories, countries, and cultures. He knew that musical notation was by nature inadequately precise.”²¹

This understanding has helped to make *Mikrokosmos* a precise model to use when instructing children on accuracy. Bartók helps to open the minds of students by exposing them to many different styles of notation while also preparing them for the future encounter of these markings in their performance. As discussed earlier, Varró helped Bartók to thoroughly edit his first piano method. While many of his pedagogical ideas on notation may have been influenced by his fieldwork on folk music, Varró's influence on notation cannot not be ignored since she made specific suggestions to Bartók on the importance of using dynamics, crescendos-decrescendos hairpins, and tempo markings in a way that was clear and did not confuse students.²²

As one example of how students are prepared, three types of tempo indications exist in *Mikrokosmos*: traditional marks in Italian, metronome markings, and time of performance in minutes and seconds. Benjamin Suchoff suggests that Bartók may have been the first composer to formally systematize accents in order of intensity.

²¹ Somfai, László. “19th Century Ideas Developed in Bartók's Piano Notation”, 90.

²² Lampert, Vera. “On the Origins of Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*”, 134-135.

Bartók includes tenuto, marcato, marcatissimo, sforzato, and sforzando in his music.

“This teaches a student all different types of technical strokes from a pressure touch, in which the key is never struck, all the way to a key attack, where the key is struck from a height.”²³

Bartók’s method provides all these aspects of music so that the student can have a complete study. However, one must question how many piano students get an opportunity to perform the music that they have studied. The introduction to Mikrokosmos states that it is important for students begin ensemble playing at the earliest possible stage and therefore tries to include examples for students to obtain performance opportunities, even if they are only in the context of a private lesson. In a letter to Benjamin Suchoff, Bartók states the following: “I want to transcribe most of the easier pieces for 4 hands.”²⁴ Bartók’s manuscripts show “a” and “b” variants of certain pieces in Mikrokosmos so that the parts can be performed with the teacher as a duet. Only seven of them were included in the final publication due to editing. It would be difficult to state that the method gives a complete performance experience to the student with these few examples, however Bartók’s insight to a student’s needs at least helps to round out the lack of performance opportunities in today’s student.²⁵

Today’s student is immersed in advertising and pop culture, however, Mikrokosmos offers the opportunity for each student to find a love for modern music and experience a musical culture that may be outside of their own. In an article on Bartók’s piano music, author Weissmann states the following:

²³ Suchoff, Benjamin. “Béla Bartók’s Contributions to Music Education”, 41

²⁴ Suchoff, Benjamin. “Béla Bartók’s Mikrokosmos”, 189.

²⁵ Ibid, 193-194.

“For the teacher Bartók not only transmitted a style and idiom to professional musicians of future generations, but had also indirectly brought up music lovers of a coming age who would ultimately define the musical profile of a nation and directed their attention to an indigenous musical culture.”²⁶

Bartók valued his educational works enough to make them one of the nine topics that he was to address during his Harvard lectures in 1943. He felt that educational works would help to reconnect art to a broader community.²⁷ The inclusion of folk music and the varied techniques in *Mikrokosmos* certainly help to reconnect more than just art to the community. Bartók provides a piano method that can fill a technical, pedagogical, and creative void since other methods, such as Alfred and Bastien, are not as thorough in their content.

Bartók is said to approve of the publisher’s subtitle to *Mikrokosmos*: “progressive pieces for piano”, but he voiced disapproval of the potential use of the word modern. Benjamin Suchoff describes Bartók’s reluctance to have his own name signed by the publisher on his work if the description of his method did not accurately represent the objectives and meaning of the work:

“Think of it: in 20, or lets say in 40 years, this work will cease to be modern. And what does it mean to be modern? This word has no definite sens [sic], can be misinterpreted, misunderstood!”²⁸

²⁶ Weissmann, John. “Bartók’s Piano Music”, 13.

²⁷ Frigyesi, Judit. *Béla Bartók and Turn of the Century Budapest*. pp. 121-122. Frigyesi discusses the Harvard lectures and the topics Bartók planned to include.

²⁸ Suchoff, Benjamin. “History of Béla Bartók’s *Mikrokosmos*”, 191.

Whatever one decides is the meaning of modern is not of importance in the case of Bartók's method. Bartók set out to create a complete piano method that Frank Pavese and Itay Goren describe as being "honest". By using this term, Pavese and Goren mean that Bartók was interested in providing a method that was useful, but always as accurate as possible. Furthermore, Bartók valued the content of the method over the ability to market and profit from the publication of his work. Close to 100 years after Mikrokosmos was written, its pieces still serve pianists as one of the most complete educational methods that are available on the market. Mikrokosmos meets the needs of today's students and takes the students further by giving them the tools to connect to the music of the past, present, and future.

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