

Notes on Sándor Veress' Second Symphony (*Minneapolisiana*)

by Claudio Veress

The *Sinfonia Minneapolisiana*, composed between 15 December 1952 and 25 March 1953, was commissioned by the Frederick Mann Foundation on the initiative of Sándor Veress's former Liszt Academy fellow student Antal Doráti, meanwhile principal conductor of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, and premiered on 12 March 1954 at the Northrop Auditorium in Minneapolis. Together with the *Piano Concerto* (1952) and the *String Trio* (1954), the work is one of the earliest explorations of dodecaphony by the composer, who emigrated from Hungary to Switzerland in 1949. In them, Veress experimented with the possibilities of linking the principles of twelve-tone composition with working methods that he had already used in his Hungarian creative period as a composer trained in ethnomusicology in his exploration of characteristic features of Hungarian "peasant music". The present symphony documents the resulting synthesis in a particularly striking way.

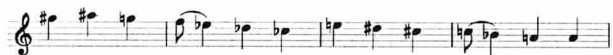
According to a text found in his estate, which Veress very probably wrote for the programme booklet of the premiere, the work follows the formal idea of a three tempi concept: *fast – slow – fast*. Apparently, a variant of the title originally considered was to be *Tripartita*, but this was given up on Doráti's advice because it was too abstract. According to Veress's own explanations, the three-part form articulates a kind of sonata form concept projected onto the large-scale with "exposition", "development" and "reprise", as is, by the way, characteristic of many large-scale single-movement forms of the Romantic period (for example in Liszt). This idea is also present here, since the three tempi merge seamlessly or *attacca*. And indeed, Veress also works with a thematic dualism that is somewhat reminiscent of classical sonata form movements. The two themes (designated by the composer as B and C) are exposed as follows when they first appear in the *Allegro* of the first part:

B



C

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As can be seen, the themes are not differentiated by scale – both begin on G sharp – but they differ considerably in terms of their linear structure, rhythm, and periodisation: While the B theme already exposes a complete twelve-tone row in its first three bars, this does not apply to the C theme. Instead, the latter hides its – likewise dodecaphonic – structure in an immediately "Hungarian" sounding disguise, the phenomenology of which is modelled on the type of four-line, six-syllable folk song verses with a stretched fourth syllable. Irrespective of this contrast, the composer subjects both themes to a technique of developing variation in the further course of the music, in which elaborate contrapuntal procedures come into play.

In addition to the two main themes just described, Veress's formal overview mentions another important figure:

A



This motive makes its first appearance already at the dramatic climax of the *Pesante* introduction to the first section. However, it only reveals its true nature towards the end of the slow middle section (see example), where it articulates the central catastrophic moment of the entire work in three fully orchestrated bars of a *Grave*, which leads into a 7-bar solo of timpani beats initially notated in triple *forte*, then gradually becoming quieter and more dense, leaving behind a fragmented music of tremolo fields and debris of the B theme.

Until recently, the semantics of the A motif was one of the composer's best-kept workshop secrets (even his own text reveals nothing about it). However, since the rediscovery of his incidental music to Madách's *Az ember tragédiája* from 1947 in the music collection of the Széchényi Library, we know that this theme is nothing other than the central leitmotif of the *Tragedy* music, the motif of Ádám, representing humanity, who in Madách's stationary drama is dragged through paradigmatic situations in world history in an ever-changing guise by his cynical-mephistophelean mentor Lucifer, fails everywhere and in the end is released into the uncertainty of his future by the Lord himself with the maxim: "Mondottam, ember: küzdj és bízva bízzál!" If Veress had written his symphony in 1953 for a Hungarian rather than an American audience, the self-quotation would hardly have gone unnoticed. As it was, however, it remained a private mythological element, which the composer obviously deliberately refrained from explaining to his transatlantically distant audience.

Now that we have illuminated some of the most important musical figures of the work, we can reproduce the formal sequence as outlined by the composer in his text:

A	B	C, c _α , c _β , ...	//	B	A	//	B, b _α , b _β , ...	C	B
[quasi: <i>exposition</i>				<i>development</i>			<i>reprise</i>]		

It is immediately apparent that the large-scale form of the work can be interpreted not only in the sense of the reference to the sonata form idea that Veress explicitly mentions, but also in the sense of an (almost ideal) "arch form". In this, the "development" episode A would take on the function of the central axis – at which, at the same time, the most fundamental change of mood in the piece takes place: The catastrophe of this passage does not have the last word, but clears the field for an astonishing reinterpretation of the B theme – one that elicits unexpected nuances of cheerfulness and humour from it. This is due in no small part to the instrumentation: The B episodes of the "reprise", for example, develop in a highly lively interplay between full *tutti* and quasi-*concertino* (in the latter case often in boldly unusual combinations of woodwind and brass, even bass tuba), irrespective of the basically dodecaphonic character of the material.

In the two final episodes C and B of the "recapitulation", something astonishing happens once again: at first, the long unheard contour of the C theme becomes more and more perceptible in the tangle of contrapuntal textures of the last B episode, from which, after repeated transposition, instrumental condensation and dynamic intensification, an apotheosis of the *singing of all* is released: And it is at this single point in the work that the actually dodecaphonic model of the C theme mutates into a *purely modal* variant of itself – a mixolydian melody on D! If the symphony were intended as a flat *per-aspera-ad-astra* conception, it could end

triumphantly here – and all would (perhaps) be well. Instead, however, the jubilation is drawn into the maelstrom of a wild *stretta* and stopped in the sudden silence of a general pause, which is answered by a severe six-part chorale made from the building blocks of the B theme. In this, the composer once again pulls out all the stops of his contrapuntal art by underlaying the chorale line with its inversion, its retrograde form and the inversion of its retrograde form: after all the preceding exoteric activity, a strangely esoteric gesture of a “poeta doctus” (József Ujfalussy 1986 on Sándor Veress), who, it seems, places a sceptical question mark behind too much trust in the real possibility of the previously outlined picture of reconciliation – if we want to understand it that way. Only after this reflective objection is the music released into a final *stretta* and returned to public time in a way similar to the way it entered musical time 20 minutes earlier: with a percussion blast.

Literature

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