A DISCUSSION OF ALBERTO GINASTERA’S
PIANO SONATA, No.1, Op. 22

A RESEARCH PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF MUSIC
BY DAVID JARAMILLO

DR. RAYMOND KILBURN - ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA
MAY 2014
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My Master of Music in Piano Performance recital took place on Thursday, February 24, 2014, at 5:30 PM in Sursa Hall. The program consisted of Lutoslawski’s *Variations on a Theme by Paganini*, Op. 35 for piano duo; Ravel’s *Jeux d’Eau*; Liszt’s Ballade No. 2 in B minor, S.171; Mozart’s Fantasy in C minor, K.396 and Ginastera’s Piano Sonata No.1, Op. 22. In choosing this program in consultation with my instructor, I aimed to include pieces in a variety of styles that would allow for a careful pacing of emotional contrasts. In particular, I wanted the final piece to serve as an exciting and dynamic capstone to the recital. As an Ecuadorian pianist, I have always been interested in Latin-American music. After researching the most important Latin-American composers and their works, I selected Ginastera’s piano sonata. It is a very dynamic, driven, and challenging work, which would provide an electrically charged ending to my recital.

In this creative paper, I explore the technical and musical challenges faced in learning and performing Ginastera’s Piano Sonata, No.1, Op. 22. This paper first presents Ginastera’s musical career as a background for a better understanding of his music and culture, which is followed by a formal analysis of each movement of the sonata, with precise technical and musical suggestions. The focus of this paper is on the performance aspects of the piano sonata, which could be useful for performers of the piece and also serve as a guide for future reference.

Alberto Ginastera, a nationalist composer, incorporated folk rhythms and melodies with his own harmonic language. Ginastera is considered one of the outstanding composers of the twentieth century from the Americas. ¹ Ginastera was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on April 11, 1916, and died in Geneva, Switzerland, on June 25, 1983. He studied composition and piano

at the National Conservatory of Music of Buenos Aires with Jose Gil, Athos Palma, and Jose
Andre; his piano teacher was Cayetano Argenziani. ² He also studied business at Escuela
Superior de Comercio de la Nacion, “to fulfill his parents’ wishes.”³ He began to compose at an
early age, and in 1934, won the first prize of the musical society El Unisono, with his work
Piezas Infantiles for piano. In the same year, his Impresiones de la Puna, for flute and string
quartet, showed early indications of his attraction to native Argentinian melodies and rhythms.
These melodies are influenced by the milonga, vidala and triste (slow vocal genres), and
malambo, zamba, chacarera and gato, the three most influential dances.⁴

In 1946-47, he traveled to the United States on a Guggenheim fellowship, during which
he investigated North American educational systems, visiting Juilliard, Columbia, Yale, Harvard,
and Eastman. He also attended the Music Educators’ National Conference in Cleveland, where
he made connections that helped him with his own ambitions of founding music schools in
Argentina.⁵ Between 1948-53 and 1956-58, he served as director of the Conservatory of the
Province of Buenos Aires in La Plata. He taught at the Argentine Catholic University and was a
professor at the University of La Plata. He left Argentina in 1968 and lived his last years mostly
in Geneva.

Ginastera developed an interest in Argentinian melodies and rhythms with a harmonic
and contrapuntal setting. Examples of these nationally-styled works are Panambi (1935), a
ballet; Danzas Argentinas (1937) for piano; and the popular Estancia (1941), a ballet inspired by

native scenes of the Pampas Argentinas, composed for the American Ballet.

Later, Ginastera began to explore new methods and sounds for his music with more interesting harmony and asymmetrical rhythms. Of these works, *Cantata para America Magica* (1961) is the most representative. This work is for soprano and percussion with pre-Columbian texts. Ginastera’s later style is clearly represented by his three operas, “which marked a change of direction in which nationalism no longer plays a part.” These are *Don Rodrigo* (1964), *Cantata Bomarzo* (1966), and *Beatrix Cenci* (1971). Here he uses his own innovations in serial techniques, chromatic sounds, serial progressions, and tone rows. Among his instrumental works, the Second Piano Concerto (1972) is the most illustrative of this later style. Ginastera was also passionate about teaching. His two most distinguished students were Astor Piazzolla and Antonio Tauriello.

**Movement I. Allegro Marcato**

Piano Sonata, No.1, Op. 22, was commissioned by the Carnegie Institute and the Pennsylvania College for Women. The first performance of the work was on November 29, 1952, by Johana Harris at the Pittsburgh International Contemporary Music Festival. The first movement, *Allegro marcato*, opens with a dance-driven character. Its dramatic opening

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statement is characterized by rhythmic declaratory chords in the upper register punctuated by large leaps to bass octaves, emphasizing the extremes of the piano's range.

The movement has a very typical sonata-allegro form. The first theme establishes the marcato character through use of unsupported parallel thirds articulated at a forte dynamic using syncopated rhythm. The time signatures from mm. 1-8 change in the following order: 3/4 – 2/4 – 4/4 – 3/4 – 8/8 and 6/8. Example 1 shows how these changes are produced.


Following the first eight measures, Ginastera develops this first theme twice (mm. 12-19; 23-29), building up to a fortissimo the third time. Even though time signatures do not change here as often as in the opening, these two developed phrases drive the rhythm forward. In this passage, the performer has to transmit this rhythmic momentum and musical tension. It is extremely important that the performer uses arm movement to organically join the leaps. This arm movement allows a declamatory rhythmic intensity and punctuation. If the arm movement is
not fluid, the connections between the leaps and the rhythms will be abruptly displaced.

After a transition (mm. 30-51), the second theme is presented from mm. 52-55. As expected of a secondary theme, it presents a dramatic contrast of character. The composer indicates it to be a *dolce e pastorale*, even though the rhythm keeps moving with interchangeable time signatures of 6/8 and 5/8. Musically speaking, this second theme can be seen as a reflection of the green pastures of Argentina, a typical Latin-American landscape. It should be played technically relaxed, with fluent arm motion and well-balanced voicing the top part. The timbre should be reminiscent of a harp’s sound, not as lyrical and bright as a flute, but smooth and contained. The grace note must be very audible, and ring brilliantly at the beginning of these measures to help transmit the *pastorale* character. The theme is developed three times, with short transitions connecting them.

The development, starting at m. 80, explores the energetic driven rhythms of the first theme and builds up in intensity with the *marcato* character. An important passage in the development is mm. 101-109. This *sempre forte e violento* is charged with intensity and expectation. Exaggerating the right-hand chords and adding staccatos, while also doing a *crescendo*, will build up the intensity and sound. The second theme is clearly developed in mm. 110-117, but it is not *dolce e pastorale*. Rather, it is presented as a more driven dance-like theme that oxygenates the build up for the recapitulation. This large swell (mm. 110-137) should be well thought out and controlled so it can work properly and progressively. Notice the *fortissimo violento* on m. 132. This leads to a *fortissimo* in the recapitulation in m. 138. These two *fortissimos*, however, are not the same. Instead, Ginastera is looking for the intensity of the *crescendo* to continue growing, persistently aiming for a larger and broader sound.
The recapitulation begins at m. 138, but this time with even more intensity and bigger chords. The technical suggestions from the opening also should be applied here. The second theme is presented (mm. 194-201) with a character and sound that is opposite of that which is found in the exposition. Ginastera marks it fortissimo and gaio (cheerful/allegro), an opposite style from the original piano and dolce e pastorale.\(^{11}\) It is also presented with a different texture—chordal, instead of linear. The grace notes become aggressive and driven (mm. 198-201). In this grace-note passage, the performer has to use arm weight combined with very articulated fingers, as if the fingers were grabbing the keys producing a clear sound. This second statement leads to a short coda (mm. 202-214) that ends the movement with a triple forte and triple sforzandos.

**Movement II. Presto Misterioso**

The second movement is marked presto misterioso and is characterized by a relentless rhythmic drive marked pianissimo. This second movement sharply contrasts with the other three, because of its dark, nervous, and mysterious character. It is written in sonata-rondo form, ABACABA.

Section A (mm. 1-33) is built with a twelve-pitch tone row.\(^{12}\) This, however, does not develop anywhere else and is only used in the A sections. In the first 33 measures, the performer has to search for an appropriate fingering, which should be applied to the entire movement as well. The search for an ideal fingering has to be cautious and well thought out so it can achieve

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the goal of playing the passage legato and at a fast tempo, without the help of pedaling. This will require slow practice until the performer gains control over the passages. It is suitable to mention that, while learning fingering and notes, the performer should also play with the correct character of *misterioso*, always searching for the *pianissimo* and *legatissimo* indicated. Example 2 shows a suggested fingering for both hands in mm. 1-9.


Pedaling in this section is not specified. Ginastera wrote a general *col due ped* (with both pedals), which is clear enough to establish the character desired, but leaving it to the performer’s choice. The performer should use the sustain pedal to create different colors throughout the movement. Thinking in a two-bar phrase, the sustain pedal can be used for one-and-a-half measures. This will add “color” to the *misterioso* character of the movement. The brackets in Example 3 show how the sustain pedal should be played from mm.1-4.

This pedaling works in most cases, especially in the A sections. In the other sections, the pedal should be used according to harmonic rhythm, swells, and atmosphere changes. After the first 33 measures, the first bridge (mm. 34-47) begins. This increased in volume to fortissimo in the B section. It is important to recognize the two crescendos, the first one only going to a forte on m. 38, and the second one going to a fortissimo on m. 47, coming from a diminuendo after the first forte. This fortissimo (mm. 47) is the only one in the movement, creating its climax. Section B follows (mm. 48-61), and is presented with fortissimo cantando. The character has changed from the misterioso, with Ginastera again using Argentinian folkloric rhythms. This cantando will last 10 measures, and with a diminuendo, the misterioso is back to lead the music to a shorter A section (mm. 70-77).

In section C (mm. 78-116), Ginastera uses a new atmosphere to create a much-needed sense of anticipation. Here, it is important for the performer to be creative and to search for different sounds and colors. Indications in the score determine the character desired by the composer, but there is always something extra that has to be done by the interpreter. It is best to think of this section not as turbulent, but rather, with a nostalgic atmosphere. This atmosphere represents a faraway melancholic memory. The timbre in the right hand is smooth and dark. One can add small variations in dynamics that will help with the shaping of the phrases. The
interpretation of mm. 82-89 of the C section can be seen in Example 4. These instructions should also be applied to the following material in the section.


Section A returns (mm. 117-144) transposed up a perfect fourth. Section B (mm. 145-158) follows in mezzo forte, and the composer omits the cantando indication from the first B section. All this creates a diminuendo to ppp, deconstructing the right-hand figuration toward the end, compounding the nervous quality but unwinding the incessant propulsion of the 16th notes.

Movement III. Adagio Molto Appasionato

The third movement, Adagio molto appasionato, is in extreme contrast to the other three movements of the sonata. It evokes the open strings of the guitar, gives a sense of an improvisation, and does not exhibit any folkloric rhythms. The movement is atmospheric and has one large swell, which is very passionate. It is written in binary form with a linear texture. The
movement starts with half of a twelve-tone row (B, F-sharp, C, B-flat, A, D), and this twelve-tone row is completed at the end of the movement on m. 68 (B, F-sharp, C, B-flat, A, D, G-sharp, E, G, C-sharp, F, A-sharp). Example 5 shows half of the twelve-tone row of mm.1-2, and the complete twelve-tone row of m. 68.

Example 5. Ginastera Piano Sonata No. 1, Op. 22, Movement III, mm 1-3; 68.

It is interesting to observe how Ginastera uses this twelve-tone row technique. It is usually applied to create a certain color or atmosphere, as in the second movement. For the pianist, it helps to breathe and to think in big phrases—it will not work to be metronomic. The performer should have a sense of rubato throughout the movement. One should think of the first 11 measures in layers. Every phrase is different, goes to a different place, and expands or

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resolves. One can also encounter these layers at the end of the A sections (mm.17-22; 57-70).

Pedaling is crucial for the atmosphere. The performer should search for the most adequate pedaling, which is varied, depending on the individual and the instrument. Suggested pedaling is indicated in Example 6, from mm. 1-12. In m. 12, Ginastera wrote one of the few runs found in the Sonata, which needs an appropriate fingering that can allow an even and precise execution. A recommended fingering is given in example 7.

Section B (mm. 23-56) starts with a three-voice texture for 7 measures. The performer should emphasize the soprano and bass parts, and play the middle voice as a background, even though it is always contributing to the general shape of the phrase. This is the only phrase marked *lirico* by the composer, which indicates the importance of voicing. The timbre should be pleasantly smooth or soft, free from harshness, imitating a violin. This three-voice texture will come again on mm. 40-46, but with a *molto agitato* marking, eventually ending with a *diminuendo* and a *rallentando*. Measures 23-33 will lead to the climax of *fortissimo con passione* that goes from mm. 34-39. Here the performer has to expand the larger phrases, building up with musical tension so the sound does not get too loud too soon, and the music can have a greater continuity. Here, again, it will not help to be too metronomic. Rather, one should let the music build by itself. Section A’ (mm. 57-70) comes after all the turbulence disappears. It is the same idea and character as the beginning, but this time the music does not build—it dies. The last note of the movement has to be *pianissimo*, with the performer enjoying the last sound until it completely fades. One should breathe and take time; there is no urgency to finish.

**Movement IV. Ruvido ed Ostinato**

The last movement, *Ruvido ed ostinato*, forges its way to a powerful conclusion. The ostinato drives and builds tension throughout the whole movement, capturing the listeners’
attention, and forcing them to anticipate how it is all going to end. This is an especially challenging movement for pianists, because of the care needed to maintain the ostinato powerfully and evenly throughout. It is important to notice that the tempo should be chosen in reference to the most difficult passages of the movement. It is a common mistake for students to take a faster tempo at the beginning, only to be forced to slow down at the hardest passages. The movement is written in a modified rondo form (ABCABAB) and is based on the malambo dance, derived from the gauchos, the cowboys from Argentina and Uruguay. Malambo, typically a dance for men, is accompanied by the guitar and is danced alone. The malambo is characterized by a fast tempo in compound meter of 6/8 and a persistent eighth-note motion. Gerard Behague makes an observation regarding the malambo and its use in Ginastera’s work: “The malambo may be regarded as the rural, primitivistic antipode of the pastoral, cantabile vein that is also present in much of Ginastera’s music of this period.”

The performer should start learning the movement with rhythmic accents so he can play accurately and be able to internalize the rhythm. This movement uses pedal sparingly, only in places that will help build up in intensity and clarify the rhythm itself. Pedal should not be used until m. 21, where the rhythm changes, leading into the B section. See example 8, in which pedal groupings are marked with brackets.

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Section B begins in m. 27. Here, the performer has to be careful and work to balance between the two hands. Overplaying the passage can be produced by the fortissimo ostinato in the left hand. The right-hand tone has to be direct and dry. Section C (mm. 36-81) develops the malambo dance, always maintaining the ostinato. From mm. 40-47 and 52-59, the ostinato and the dance tune are played both by the two hands. Here, the interpreter has to voice the dance tune, guiding the hand weight to the fingers that are playing the moving part, always with flexible arm support. The ostinato part is played by relaxing the fingers. In m. 60, Ginastera wrote the most tricky leaps of the entire sonata—leaps by two octaves played by the two hands going in opposite directions. The performer should practice the movement of the leap itself so the hands memorize the position. When it is played in a faster tempo, there is no time to search for the chords. Instead, each hand should go into position on its own. This is acquired by repetition, leap by leap. Example 9 shows how the division should be made while practicing m. 60.
From mm. 62-69 the composer uses a variation of rhythm, in octaves, for the left hand, while the right hand has the ostinato. This is important to note that, because the ostinato is not specifically written, and can be hidden under the rest of the notes. I suggest playing the right hand with accents on the ostinato rhythm while emphasizing the top voice of these same chords. This will help the listener to follow the two rhythms. Example 10 shows clearly where the accents should be played with the right hand.

Section B’ (mm. 94-147) develops its original theme from section B. The theme is written in octaves for each hand, while the ostinato is in between, also written for both hands. The same concept from mm. 62-69 should be applied here, as seen in example 10. The ostinato has the same rhythm, so accents should be added in the same way. Here it is important to note that the fortissimo mark is still a preparation for B” section, where it is marked fff possibile, and ends the movement. This tension should be pushed, yet controlled, so the performer does not get physically tired and the music can continue to grow in intensity. After a diminuendo at the end of section B”, section A” returns with a development of its theme. Here the theme is divided for both hands, playing chords interchangeably. The technical suggestion for this passage (mm. 148-165) is to reverse the hands from what the score indicates. The left hand would play the material that is written for the right hand, and vice versa. This will allow an adequate crossing of hands, and a supportive hand position, helping with the flow and firm tone of the chords. Example 11 shows the beginning of the passage, with a specific indication of hands.

Section A’’ (mm. 148-171) is marked *sempre fortissimo marcatissimo*, allowing a dramatic crescendo for the last section, B’’, where the music finally arrives with the greatest magnitude. The performer should be careful in this last section to not overplay the left hand. Ginastera writes an indication of *fff possibile*, but arm weight should be still controlled and balanced.

It was a challenging and fruitful experience to learn and work on this program for my recital. Instruction from my piano teacher, Dr. Kilburn, focused daily practice, and performance opportunities in studio classes gave me the knowledge and confidence to successfully perform this program. From a technical standpoint, I have garnered a new understanding of how slow-motion practice of arm movements can resolve even the most complex passages. Without doubt, this new understanding will impact both my approach and resultant mastery of future literature. My interest for Latin-American music and culture has substantially increased after confronting the demanding challenges within the Ginastera piano sonata. My engagement with this creative project, and more specifically the Ginastera piano sonata, has opened up a new area of interest for my future studies. I would like to continue my study of Latin-American composers and their literature, and to help others discover more of these deserving works.
Bibliography


