A PEDAGOGICAL AND PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED SOLO PIANO WORKS BY ROBERT MUCZYNSKI

A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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FIGURES

Figure 1 Muczynski, Toccata, Op. 15 mm. 1-15 ................................................................. 4

Figure 2 Muczynski, “Vision” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 4-9 ......................... 5

Figure 3 Muczynski, No. 2 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 1-9 ..................................... 6

Figure 4 Muczynski, No. 1 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 47-56 ............................... 7

Figure 5 Muczynski, No. 1 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 1-9 ..................................... 8

Figure 6 Muczynski, No. 1 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 47-56 ............................... 8

Figure 7 Muczynski, No. 3 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 1-12 ................................... 9

Figure 8 Muczynski, Toccata, Op. 15, mm. 24-36 ....................................................... 10

Figure 9 Muczynski, “Festival” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 68-74 ...................... 11

Figure 10 Muczynski, Toccata, Op. 15, mm. 62-69 ...................................................... 12

Figure 11 Muczynski, Toccata, Op. 15, mm. 224-231 ................................................. 13

Figure 12 Muczynski, “Festival” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 46-51 .................... 13

Figure 13 Muczynski, “Scherzo” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 70-81 ............... 14

Figure 14 Muczynski, No. 4 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 5-7 ............................... 14

Figure 15 Muczynski, “Scherzo” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 12-15 .................. 15

Figure 16 Muczynski, Toccata, Op. 15, mm. 24-32 ...................................................... 16

Figure 17 Muczynski, “Scherzo” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 74-81 .................. 17

Figure 18 Muczynski, No. 3 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 26-33 ............................. 17

Figure 19 Muczynski, “Scherzo” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 34-37 .................. 18
Figure 20 Muczynski, “Scherzo” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 42-44................................. 18

Figure 21 Muczynski, No. 3 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 1-8 ............................................. 19

Figure 22 Muczynski, “Scherzo” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 9-11................................. 20

Figure 23 Muczynski, Toccata, Op. 15, m. 232........................................................................ 20

Figure 24 Muczynski, “Phantom” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 6-21 .............................. 21

Figure 25 Muczynski, No. 1 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 1-9 .......................................... 22

Figure 26 Muczynski, No. 3 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 47-50 .......................................... 23

Figure 27 Muczynski, No. 5 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 1-5 ............................................ 23

Figure 28 Muczynski, No. 5 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 11-12 ....................................... 24

Figure 29 Muczynski, No. 1 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 24-34 ........................................ 24

Figure 30 Muczynski, Toccata, Op. 15, mm. 8-15 .................................................................. 26

Figure 31 Muczynski, “Vision” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 15-17 .............................. 27

Figure 32 Muczynski, “Flight” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 1-8 .................................. 29

Figure 33 Muczynski, “Scherzo” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 9-11 ......................... 30

Figure 34 Muczynski, “Vision” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, m. 10 .................................. 32

Figure 35 Muczynski, “Scherzo” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 1-8.............................. 33

Figure 36 Muczynski, No. 3 from Six Preludes, Op. 6, mm. 47-50 ........................................ 34

Figure 37 Muczynski, Toccata, Op. 15, mm. 232-235 ....................................................... 34
**Introduction**

The purpose of this creative project is to provide a pedagogical and performance analysis of a selection of Robert Muczynski’s solo piano pieces, including *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, and *Toccata*, Op. 15. This document is supplementary to my master’s recital, on which these three works were performed. First, I will provide a brief compositional analysis covering Muczynski’s style, influences from American and Russian twentieth-century music, and musical elements found in these pieces. Next, I will discuss pedagogical and performance perspectives on these works.

An American composer, pianist, and teacher, Muczynski was born in Chicago in 1929 and died in 2010. Although he wrote music for orchestra, chorus, and solo instruments, he focused on chamber music and music for piano.¹ As previously mentioned, his musical style was influenced by Russian composers, such as Prokofiev, and his piano teacher, Alexander Tcherepnin.² Muczynski often uses syncopation, accents, and hemiola to create driving rhythms, which are typical characteristics of Russian folk music, such as in Muczynski’s *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, Nos. 3, 4, and 6.³ American composers Barber and Bernstein also influenced Muczynski’s compositional style.

According to Simmons, Muczynski’s music may be classified as neo-classical, but it also has strong neo-romantic elements with various styles, moods and emotions. Moreover, Muczynski uses traditional techniques as well as strong accents, irregular meters, a vigorous rhythmic drive, non-traditional harmonies, and frequent pauses. His compositions have

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influenced other composers in America, Europe, Asia, and Australia.⁴

Muczynski was a prolific composer. Among his piano works are sets of character pieces as well as traditional forms such as sonatas, preludes, a toccata, several sets of variations and three piano concertos. The earlier works, Op. 6, Op. 13, and Op. 15, greatly contrast from Desperate Measures, Op. 48, Muczynski’s last solo piano work, which is based on Liszt’s Paganini Variations. Desperate Measures includes more complex textures and technical challenges such as fast, wide leaps.

The selection of Muczynski’s piano pieces explored in this paper ranges in difficulty level from late-intermediate to advanced levels. Notably, many of these pieces implement short and clear musical ideas, making these works valuable as pedagogical tools.⁵ Their high potential for use in student learning makes these piano works worthy for the subject of pedagogical and performance analysis. Permission to print the musical examples has been granted by the publisher.

The Six Preludes, Op. 6 are among Muczynski’s early works, composed in 1954 after he graduated from DePaul University. According to Cho, the Six Preludes is Muczynski’s first set of piano pieces, and it has an important influence on his later sets of pieces.⁶ Six Preludes demonstrates Muczynski’s use of one unifying idea in his music. For example, in No. 2 from the Six Preludes, the bass line has a descending chromatic pattern, and No. 3 has triplets against octaves in the left-hand.⁷

Muczynski’s Suite for Piano, Op. 13 focuses on more technical issues.⁸ Each movement is based on a different pianistic challenge. For example, “Phantom” consists of consistent

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⁴ Simmons, “Muczynski.”
⁸ Muczynski, Collected Piano Pieces.
chordal playing in a slow tempo. “Flight” and “Labyrinth” are technical etudes, requiring strong active fingers to play passagework in a fast tempo.

After completing the *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, Muczynski composed the *Toccata*, Op. 15 in the next year. Although these two works were composed close in time, they were written in different styles. According to Muczynski, the *Toccata* was his “rage” after getting in a serious automobile accident in Gallup, New Mexico.\(^9\) The *Toccata*, Op. 15 is very different from his other character pieces because it is only one movement. Cho states that the *Toccata* has more technical challenges than the *Six Preludes*, Op. 6.\(^10\) Muczynski uses the interval of a fourth extensively in his toccata rather than focusing on a common repeated-note idea often found in other toccatas.\(^11\)

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9 Muczynski, *Collected Piano Pieces*.
Compositional Elements

Melody

Melodies that cover a wide range of pitches are common in Muczynski’s solo piano pieces. The *Toccata*, Op. 15 begins as a single-line melody that starts from very low on the keyboard and travels up through five octaves, as shown in Figure 1. “Vision” from the *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13 also spans a wide range of pitches, such as in mm. 5-8, Figure 2.

**Figure 1** Muczynski, *Toccata*, Op. 15 mm. 1-15.\(^\text{12}\)

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Muczynski was influenced by Stravinsky, especially in creating angular melodies with a lot of wide leaps and range changes.\textsuperscript{14} No. 2 from the \textit{Six Preludes}, Op. 6 is a perfect example of this, as seen in Figure 3.
In No. 1 from the *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, mm. 51-52 and 55-56, both hands frequently change registers on the keyboard at the same time, as seen in Figure 4.
The use of melodic fragments is common in Muczynski’s compositional technique. In the *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, No. 1, the opening theme recurs again at mm. 49-56, but this time Muczynski breaks the theme by adding several ornamental measures in between thematic fragments, as seen in Figure 5 and Figure 6.
Figure 5 Muczynski, No. 1 from *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, mm. 1-9.17

Figure 6 Muczynski, No. 1 from *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, mm. 47-56.18

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Another good example of the use of melodic fragments can be found in No. 3 from *Six Preludes*, Op. 6. Muczynski composes the entire movement using repetitions and various fragments of the opening four-measure theme, as seen in Figure 7.

**Figure 7** Muczynski, No. 3 from *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, mm. 1-12.\(^{19}\)

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Texture

Muczynski’s compositions include a variety of textures. In the *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, “Flight” and “Labyrinth” are both written in a monophonic texture for the entire movement. The *Six Preludes*, Op.6, *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, and *Toccata*, Op. 15, have many different homophonic textures, including single line melodies with repeated chordal accompaniment and melodies accompanied by ostinatos. Figure 8 demonstrates single line melodies accompanied by ostinatos. Additionally, many different homophonic and polyphonic textures often require much hand independence, as shown in Figure 9.

**Figure 8** Muczynski, *Toccata*, Op. 15, mm. 24-36.\(^{20}\)

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The *Toccata*, Op. 15, is more complex than the other two pieces. Figure 10 shows an example of polyphonic texture in the *Toccata*. It is important to note that there are three separate lines, and pianists must balance these three parts carefully. The main melodic line is in the right hand, while the left hand must define two separate additional voices.
Rhythm

Muczynski’s works often present a strong rhythmic character, with driving, motoric rhythms. An example of this is in the *Toccata*, Op. 15, as seen in Figure 11. This type of writing is also found in the *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, Nos. 1, 3, and 6, and in the *Suite* movements “Festival,” “Flight,” “Labyrinth,” and “Scherzo,” as seen in Figure 12 and Figure 13.
Figure 11 Muczynski, *Toccata*, Op. 15, mm. 224-231.\(^\text{23}\)

Figure 12 Muczynski, “Festival” from *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, mm. 46-51.\(^\text{24}\)
Muczynski frequently uses highly accented and syncopated rhythms. In No. 4 from *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, syncopation occurs in the main melody beginning at m. 5, and appears again in the accompaniment at m. 26 in a very different texture and character (Figure 14). The “Scherzo” from *Suite for Piano* Op. 13 also contains accented and syncopated rhythms in mm. 14-15, as shown in Figure 15.

**Figure 13** Muczynski, “Scherzo” from *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, mm. 70-81.\(^{25}\)

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Figure 15 Muczynski, “Scherzo” from Suite for Piano, Op. 13, mm. 12-15.
Muczynski’s music often has frequent changes of meter. In addition, the composer shifts melodic and rhythmic patterns to different beats, which further gives a sense of metric changes. One example of this can be found in his Toccata at mm. 28-32, as shown in Figure 16. Another example is in the “Scherzo” from Suite for Piano at mm. 74-78, as seen in Figure 17. Figure 18 is from No. 3 of Six Preludes, mm. 27-32.

**Figure 16** Muczynski, *Toccata*, Op. 15, mm. 24-32.²⁸

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Figure 17 Muczynski, “Scherzo” from *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, mm. 74-81.\(^\text{29}\)

Figure 18 Muczynski, No. 3 from *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, mm. 26-33.\(^\text{30}\)
Another way in which Muczynski uses shifting rhythmic patterns is through his use of *hemiola*. *Hemiola* can be found in the “Scherzo” at mm. 36-37 and 43-44, as seen Figure 19 and Figure 20.

**Figure 19** Muczynski, “Scherzo” from *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, mm. 34-37.\(^{31}\)

**Figure 20** Muczynski, “Scherzo” from *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, mm. 42-44.\(^{32}\)
No. 5 from *Six Preludes* shows how Muczynski frequently changes tempos to change character. This movement changes tempo six times within thirty-seven measures, and each time there is also a change in the character.

**Harmony**

The use of bitonality is very common in Muczynski’s compositional technique. *Six Preludes*, No. 3 is an example to show his use of bitonality. In mm. 1-21, the right hand consists of white-key scales against the black-key octaves in the left hand, as seen in Figure 21.

**Figure 21** Muczynski, No. 3 from *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, mm. 1-8.33
Muczynski uses a lot of non-traditional chords in his compositions, which are often very dissonant. “Scherzo” from *Suite for Piano* is a good example of this, as shown in Figure 22. The left hand plays dissonant chords to accompany a winding chromatic melody in the inner voice of the right hand. Both hands playing alternating chords creates a percussive effect. Additionally, Muczynski uses cluster chords, as seen in Figure 23.

**Figure 22** Muczynski, “Scherzo” from *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, mm. 9-11.34

![Figure 22](image)

**Figure 23** Muczynski, *Toccata*, Op. 15, m. 232.35

![Figure 23](image)

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“Phantom” from *Suite for Piano* perfectly presents the feature of harmonic planing. Muczynski writes chords in both hands moving in parallel motion, with the right hand playing root-position chords, and the left hand playing different chords in inversions, as seen in Figure 24. Often the two hands are playing chords in bitonality, which contributes to the unique colors in this section, especially in combination with the wide dynamic changes.

**Figure 24** Muczynski, “Phantom” from *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, mm. 6-21.\(^\text{36}\)

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Muczynski creates a lot of dissonance by using major-seventh chords or augmented-seventh chords. In mm. 1-9 of the *Six Preludes*, Muczynski uses primarily repeated major-seventh chords in the accompaniment, as seen in Figure 25. *Six Preludes*, No. 3 uses an A-flat-augmented-seventh chord at m. 49, as seen in Figure 26.

**Figure 25** Muczynski, No. 1 from *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, mm. 1-9.\(^3^7\)

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Muczynski’s non-traditional harmonies also include extended chords. These chords often have no specific harmonic function; they are used to add color to the music. In No. 5 from *Six Preludes*, Muczynski includes eleventh chords in mm. 5 and 12, as seen in Figure 27 and Figure 28.

**Figure 26** Muczynski, No. 3 from *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, mm. 47-50.\(^{38}\)

**Figure 27** Muczynski, No. 5 from *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, mm. 1-5.\(^{39}\)
Another example of Muczynski’s use of non-traditional chords is his use of quartal harmonies. Quartal harmonies are chords built in perfect fourths. An example of quartal harmony can be found in No. 1 from *Six Preludes*, mm. 27 and 29, as seen in Figure 29.
Dynamics

The use of wide dynamic contrasts is a distinct feature in Muczynski’s works. Among the three pieces in this project, the Toccata has the widest range, from pp to fff. Although No. 2 from Six Preludes and “Phantom” from Suite for Piano are both short movements, each of them features a wide dynamic range, from pp to f. Muczynski’s pieces also have both sudden and frequent changes of dynamics. In mm. 8-9 of “Festival” from the Suite for Piano, Muczynski writes a crescendo for two beats immediately followed by a subito piano, which continues for three measures before another sudden change to forte in m. 12.

Articulation

Muczynski uses a variety of articulations that are indispensable for performing his music. “Flight” from Suite for Piano is in a monophonic texture in AA’B form. The composer marks sempre legato for the A section, and sempre staccato for the A’ and B sections. In addition, the sempre staccato sections are played faster than the A section. Hence, the different articulations contribute to changes of mood.
Pedagogical Challenges

Notation

Learning the correct notes in Muczynski’s pieces is challenging for pianists. Often the tonality is unclear, with many accidentals. For example, in *Toccata*, Op. 15 in mm. 8-15 is a single-line melody that consists of perfect-fourth intervals, and it also includes hand-crossing. When pianists learn the notes, they can practice them by blocking these intervals, as seen in Figure 30.

Figure 30 Muczynski, *Toccata*, Op. 15, mm. 8-15.\(^\text{41}\)

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Another challenge from the notation is the lack of fingering, although a few pieces include some finger numbers. *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, and *Toccata*, Op. 15 do not have any finger numbers provided by the composer. Using good fingering directly affects the sound, the ability to play passagework, fluid technique, consistency, and the performer’s confidence. In the cadenza section of “Vision” from the *Suite for Piano*, mm. 16-17, as seen in Figure 31, identifying fingering groups is helpful for selecting good fingering patterns.

**Figure 31** Muczynski, “Vision” from *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, mm. 15-17.\(^\text{42}\)

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Rhythm

Muczynski’s music has a strong rhythmic character, but playing accurate rhythms is very challenging. The use of the metronome is necessary during practicing, although the pianist might have to begin by using the eighth-note beat in places where the meter changes frequently. Next, the pianist needs to think about playing macro beats or larger pulse groupings rather than individual notes. This is especially important in sections where the meter changes. As the tempo increases, pianists can play larger pulse groupings. For example, “Flight” from the *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, requires alternating hands to play one melodic line with consistent eighth notes in 6/8 meter, as seen in Figure 32. The pianist may follow the following practice steps: 1) accent each dotted-quarter note beat; 2) play a larger one-measure pulse by emphasizing only the first beat in every measure; 3) play a larger two-measure pulse by emphasizing the first beat of every two measures. Once the pianist can play this larger pulse grouping, the accentual treatment should recede to the background so that the line may be shaped in a continuous fluid manner. One purpose of this practice is kinesthetic learning that would help the pianist play with a steady tempo.
Muczynski’s use of a wide range of pitches with wide leaps and range changes is a challenge for pianists. Pianists may find it necessary to memorize places where the register changes frequently, especially at fast tempos. In order to make smooth changes of range, pianists can practice playing from one note to the next note with one continuous motion and repeat the motion multiple times. It is important that every time pianists practice the leaps, they should make sure to play these leaps accurately. They may need to start practicing the leaps at a slow tempo then gradually speed up until they reach the performance tempo. Additional technical challenges include playing complex chords in awkward positions, and developing a variety of tonal colors with skillful use of the pedal and different approaches to the keyboard. Moreover, developing a solid hand position with firm joints but flexible wrists is important.

No. 5 from *Six Preludes*, Op. 6 shows how Muczynski frequently changes tempos to change character. This movement changes tempo six times within thirty-seven measures, and
each time there is also a change in the character. The pianist needs to consider playing accurate rhythms while frequently changing tempos, and also switching moods to perform various characters. Pianists should practice each section separately with the appropriate tempo and character, then practice the transitions from one section to another. These are good examples for late-intermediate level students to practice, since it is challenging to have to make these character changes so frequently.

In Figure 33, the pianist must alternate playing chords in a fast tempo that seems to imitate percussive instruments. The pianist should keep the fingertips firm and use relaxed wrists and fluid arm motions. The left hand, which plays the downbeats, should lead the right hand. Because of the fast tempo, pianists also should keep the fingertips close to the keyboard.

**Figure 33** Muczynski, “Scherzo” from *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, mm. 9-11.\(^{44}\)
Dynamics

Since dynamic changes are such an important feature in Muczynski’s piano music, pianists must be able to play good contrasts in dynamic levels. Playing different dynamics is related to the speed of attack into the key. Playing *forte* dynamics requires playing with a very fast speed into the key. The slower the fingers play into the key, the softer the sound. Slow practice is a significant approach to improve the pianist’s ability to play rapid dynamic changes because it helps to practice the muscle memory required for control of the dynamics. Pianists should practice different dynamic levels individually very slowly, and then practice the transitions between dynamic level changes. Finally, pianists should play with good technique at strong dynamic levels, avoiding unnecessary tension.

Articulation

Regarding Muczynski’s use of articulation, it is important to note the differences between various markings, such as *tenuto* and accent. In “Vision” from *Suite for Piano*, m. 10, the melodic line has both an accent on the first down beat and *tenuto* markings on the last two notes. Even though all three notes should be emphasized, these two markings present different characteristics. The *tenuto* notes should be played fuller than the accented downbeat while the accented B-flat should be played louder, as seen in Figure 34.
“Scherzo” from *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13 shows many different combinations of articulations, including accents with *staccato* markings and accents with *tenuto* markings. These different articulation markings require different touches. In mm. 3-5, the accented notes with *staccato* markings should be played louder while the accented notes with *tenuto* markings should be played fuller, as shown in Figure 35.
Artistry

There are many musical challenges in these pieces. These include interpreting abstract thematic material and developing a variety of musical characters and sounds. The pianist should take a careful technical approach when crafting the desired sound quality from any passage of music, using different approaches into the key. For instance, in mm. 49, playing the second chord with an up motion rather than two down motions creates a ringing sound on the second chord like a bell tone, as shown in Figure 36. The same technique can be used in Toccata, where the accented note at the end of m. 234 should be played as a ringing bell tone, as seen in Figure 37.
Figure 36 Muczynski, No. 3 from *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, mm. 47-50.\(^{47}\)

Figure 37 Muczynski, Toccata, Op. 15, mm. 232-235.\(^{48}\)
Conclusion

This creative project analyses *Six Preludes*, Op. 6, *Suite for Piano*, Op. 13, and *Toccata* Op. 15 by Muczynski from both compositional and performance perspectives. These piano pieces range in difficulty level from late-intermediate to advanced levels. Learning these pieces will help pianists better understand Muczynski’s style and prepare them to learn other piano works of this composer. Playing these pieces also helps pianists with an understanding of characteristics of twentieth-century piano music in general for future study. Twentieth-century piano music has unique techniques that are different from other period styles.
Bibliography


