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News from CART

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News from CART
(Center for the Advancement of Research and Teaching)

The Center for the Advancement of Research and Teaching (CART) offers grant support for both small and large-scale faculty research projects, as well as for travel to professional conferences. Deborah Nemko, Assistant Professor of Music, was among the recent grant recipients.

MY WORK WITH THE “GRAND DAME OF BELGIAN PIANISM”

In the summer of 2002 I had the pleasure of studying the piano works of Zoltán Kodály with Madame Diane Andersen in Belgium. An internationally known pianist who has lived a most colorful life, Andersen is also an Honorary Professor at the Royal Brussels Conservatory. Among her other accomplishments are numerous awards for her recordings, including a “Grand Prix du Disque” (Belgian Radio). Currently masterful musicians like Boston-area composer Diane Goolkasian Rahbee continue to write music for Andersen to perform and record.

Andersen can also be considered a primary source for information about both composers Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály. For many years she was married to Andre Gertler, the friend and duo-partner of Béla Bartók, and she knew Bartók well. As collector and champion of the folk music of eastern Europe, with Zoltán Kodály, Bartók is seen as one of the most influential musicians of the 20th century.

Diane Andersen and I met in the International Prague Piano Master Classes during the summer of 2000.
I was very impressed with her pianism, style and grace and immediately felt a connection to both the vitality of her work and the pianist behind the music. As a result of my study with Andersen, each summer I now teach and perform in Belgium in the International Piano Class that Andersen directs. The music world, as you may guess, is very small and I am grateful to have had the opportunity through a CART summer grant to soak up some of the musical wisdom from this very gifted lady. My project in the summer of 2002 was the study and analysis of the works of Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók. I spent most of my hours, when I was not teaching, in the International Workshop for Pianists, practicing and studying two works by Zoltán Kodály with Madame Andersen: The Seven Pieces for Piano, Op. 11 (1921) and “The Dances of Marosszek” (1930). While Zoltán Kodály is mostly known for his work as educator and ethnomusicologist, for me it has been a great discovery to learn of his very fine piano pieces.

Kodály’s various compositions, including his piano works, reflect his interest in the folk music of Hungary, his native country. In the early 1900s Hungary was a place of political and cultural upheaval. The upper classes maintained strong ties with Germany, spoke German and had little interest in what they considered “less cultivated music”—the folk music of the peasants. In 1905, inspired by the beauty and rhythmical variety of music he heard, Kodály began collecting Hungarian folk music, thereby beginning a long career devoted to its promotion and preservation. Though the classical music world at first was resistant to this style of music, considering it primitive and simple, Kodály, a classically trained musician, acted as archivist for the music, recording examples in the field of localities in Eastern Europe using early recording equipment, and also transcribing the music for later performance and study.

As a classical composer, the collection of this music provided Kodály with interesting materials for his own work. A natural consequence of his association with folk music, Kodály’s compositions, like Bartók’s, were informed by his contact with these “new” materials. Piano works like “The Dances of Marosszek” and the Seven Pieces for Piano, Op. 11 reflect the composer’s respect and reverence for Hungarian folk music. In “The Dances of Marosszek,” one finds the interweaving of folkdance and folk-tune in a decidedly classical texture. The rhythmical energy and improvisatory style of the work echo the spirit and spontaneity of the original dances upon which the classical work was based.

Mme. Andersen taught me much about the unusual tone colors related to the folk instruments which are referenced in Kodály’s piano pieces. In addition, Andersen’s discussion of the use of the pedal in the music was also very enlightening. By rapidly changing the pedal in moments where the music is very speech-like and at other times holding the pedal down for a lush sonority, one can create a rich variety of sounds similar to the original instruments associated with the folk-music. In addition, an understanding of the Hungarian language, she stressed, helps one to understand the phrasing and articulation of Kodály’s music. Andersen, who speaks Hungarian, explained points in the musical phrase that reflect the natural rhythm and flow of the Hungarian language. Though the works I studied are written for piano, clearly an understanding of language and Hungarian culture assist one in giving a more moving and authentic performance of the work. Ornamentation is prevalent in the music and, as in the performance practice of Baroque music where the oral tradition dictated the understanding and practice of ornamentation, it pays to study ornamentation in Kodály’s works with someone who has heard Kodály himself perform the pieces.

The summer of 2002 gave me a greater understanding of music by Kodály and Bartók and also brought Diane Andersen closer to the United States. After my week in Belgium we arranged to have her visit Bridgewater State College to give a workshop to my students and the Bridgewater community. Most recently, Bridgewater piano students had an opportunity to work with Mme. Andersen in March, 2004, when she conducted a Master Class in the Horace Mann auditorium. The BSC students played beautifully, I am most proud to say, and walked away feeling inspired to be better pianists and develop an even greater knowledge of the wealth of amazing music which belongs to us all.

—Deborah Nemko is Assistant Professor of Music