

Veronika Vitaitė: Discoveries in Pianism

Summary

The book is devoted to the analysis of the performance skills, pedagogical and organisational activities of Veronika Vitaitė, a prominent current piano pedagogue, pianist, promoter of Lithuanian piano culture. Manifestations of the Professor's personality in different fields of musical activity, the universality of her works influenced the development of Lithuanian piano culture of the past decades: performance skills, a close relationship with Lithuanian composers encouraged the creation of piano duet, inspired the premiers of works of different genres; zealous work, preparation of her students for international competitions yielded several generations of young pianists; intense organisational activities, long-time leadership of the Piano Department of the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre, constant supervision and care of training of young pianists of the Republic laid strong foundations for a further development of piano excellence.

Thus far Veronika Vitaitė's intense and multi-faceted activities have not been thoroughly discussed and properly assessed. Whereby the present monograph it is sought to fill the existing gap. In preparing the book, the following works by Lithuanian researchers were used: collections of articles compiled by Kęstutis Grybauskas (1984), Veronika Vitaitė (1993), studies of the development of the art of piano by Mariam Azizbekova (1991, 1998, 1999), Liucija Drąsutienė (1996, 2004, 2015), Eugenijus Ignatonis (1997, 2003, 2010), Rita Aleknaitė-Bieliauskienė (2003, 2014, 2017), Ramunė Kryžauskienė (2004, 2007), scientific insights of Leonidas Melnikas (2006, 2007), Lina Navickaitė-Martinelli (2013). To discuss Veronika Vitaitė's artistic activities, we drew on the reviews of her concerts, and to analyse general principles of her teaching methods, reminiscences of her former students and a questionnaire survey were used, lessons of the experienced pedagogue, as well as workshops and master classes that she conducted were attended.

Veronika Vitaitė's creative path is similar to that of many artists of the soviet period. She began to learn to play the piano under a music

teacher Bagijev at Vilnius Seven-Year Music School; later, she continued playing the piano at the Ten-Year Music School (currently the National Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis School of Art) and the Lithuanian State Conservatory (currently the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre) in the piano class of the famous piano pedagogue Olga Šteinberg (1920–2005).

Following the principles of life of the soviet period, higher education graduates had to work in the place of their appointment for three years. Having graduated from the Conservatory with a degree with honours (*cum laude*), Veronika Vitaitė went to Šiauliai to work at Šiauliai Music College. Many talented students who became outstanding performers while studying, as though plunged in day-to-day routine after they started work in the periphery. The young pianist, however, with all her energy and devotion to art, sought to energize the then placid cultural life of Šiauliai. Alongside large pedagogical load she performed in concerts solo and with different singers, with the violinist Algirdas Stulgys, accompanied the choirs.

The year 1964 was of great importance to the performer's multi-faceted activities because it was then that, together with the pianist Andrius Povilaitis, she started giving concerts in a piano ensemble. Dissatisfied with the achieved results, seeking to enrich their knowledge of playing music in a piano ensemble, the pianists entered the Gnessin State Musical College in Moscow and studied successfully (1972–1976) in the piano class of brothers Michail and Adolf Gotlib. In the course of thirteen years of creative activities, the performers improved their piano skills, matured as interpreters. Critics often underlined high performing culture of their duet, a sense of ensemble, the timbral diversity of sounds.

After Veronika Vitaitė had returned to Vilnius, a new phase of creative life, the time of further purposeful and intense searches, began for her and her family members. She started work as a senior lecturer at the newly established Department of Pedagogy of the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre where she conducted seminars on pedagogical repertoire, taught piano and pedagogical practice, and at the same time worked at the Piano Department and as a teacher at the National Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis School of Art where she taught spe-

cial piano. These were rather complicated years of intense searches and adaptation to the life in the capital city.

In 1989, new colour was added to Vitaitė's creative path – a year of studies at the Academy of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna (*Akademie für Musik und Darstellende Kunst*), in piano classes under Karl Wollleitner (1919–2004) and Hans Kann (1927–2005). An interesting theme that was not studied in the Soviet Union at that time was chosen: *Piano Creative Work of Austrian Composers of the 20th Century and Peculiarities of the National School of Performers*. Getting closely acquainted with the Austrian piano school was extremely important and valuable professional experience. Consistent studies of Vienna classics, compositions of Franz Schubert performed by the Austrians artists, their concentration on the expressive sound, its intoning, a moderate use of the piano pedal fascinated the pianist. The acquaintance with a legendary personality, the pianist Paul Badura-Skoda (1927–2019), made an indelible impression. This European experience allowed her to become well acquainted with the sources of Austrian music, to follow a further specificity of its development. Veronika Vitaitė adopted some features of musical interpretation of Vienna pedagogues – the precision of performance, the moderation of the chosen means of musical expression, she deepened her knowledge of the analysis of a musical text and the composer's instructions, adopted the emotional attitude and principles of performance of the Austrian school. She started paying ever more attention not only to the editor's instructions but also to the authentic texts of the composer.

Soon Vitaitė's organisational talent was noticed: in 1986, the pianist was elected Head of the Department of Pedagogy, and a year later, she took charge of the Piano Department. During 25 years of her leadership, the creative ambitions of the Piano Department overstepped the borders of narrow professional teaching. The abundance of students' recitals, summer creativity camps, close cooperation with the Lithuanian National Symphony Orchestra led by Juozas Domarkas (*Atžalynas* concerts) and with the Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra directed by Saulius Sondeckis (cycles of concerts of Johann Sebastian Bach and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart compositions) testify to the creative working climate of the Department, excellent possibilities for the young musician to at-

tain perfection. Saulius Sondeckis, who influenced a general tradition of interpreting Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart compositions in Lithuania, taught the young performers a deeper understanding interpretation, a wilder flight of imagination, brighter emotional colours and nuances.

In due course the Piano Department turned into a small philharmonic. Expanding the activities of the Department, Veronika Vitaitė put on student concerts not only in the Great Hall of the Academy but also at the gallery Vartai, Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, Stasys Vainiūnas houses, Chodkevičiai (Chodkiewicz) palace, the Lithuanian Theatre, Cinema and Music Museum in Vilnius, at the Museum of Druskininkai Town and sanatoriums, organised evenings-reminders devoted to discussing the activities of Sofija Juodvalkienė, Balys and Aldona Dvarionas, Stasys Vainiūnas, Vladimiras Ružickis, Jakovas Ginzburgas, Lidija Dauguvietytė and other famous pianists. Concerts given by the pedagogues of the Department became a tradition. These concerts revealed a wide spectrum of disciplines being taught: playing solo, in the piano duet, improvisation. Veronika Vitaitė developed professional and at the same time very warm human relationships with prominent Lithuanian pianists residing in the United States, together with her students she visited their homes, shared pedagogical experience, organised workshops, conferences for the pedagogues in Lithuanian peripheries.

Organising different competitions took a lot of time and creative energy. During those difficult years when Lithuania fought for its independence, Veronika Vitaitė paved the way for the International Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis Piano and Organ Competition. The Professor also takes part in organising competitions for young pianists: Balys Dvarionas Competition for Young Pianists, Stasys Vainiūnas Competition for Pianists, Aldona Dvarionaitė International Festival-Contest for Young Pianists, the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition and others. She takes part in the work assessment commissions. In 2000, she founded the Lithuanian Musicians' Society *Music and Education of the 21st Century* and is the Chairwoman of the Board of this Society. Every year the Society organises an International Piano and Chamber Ensemble Competition-Festival, carries out a broad educational programme. The disabled also take part in this activity: they learn, play

in concerts and often win prizes during the Festival. Many musicians from different countries of the world beginning with China and ending with Denmark participate in the events. There is no specific age limit for taking part in the competition: once the youngest participant was six years old and the oldest one – 85 years old. The aim of the competitions is not only to discover talents but also to help them develop music activities – laureates are provided with the possibility to give concerts in Lithuania, the USA, Denmark, Sweden, Georgia, Poland.

Veronika Vitaitė played an important role in the development of a piano ensemble in Lithuania. When discussing the panorama of the pianist's concert activities, on the basis of the trends in the repertoire of a piano duet, her art of performance can be divided into three stages. They are the years between 1964 and 1977, when Veronika Vitaitė lived in Šiauliai and intensively played music with the pianist Andrius Povilaitis. Gradually trends in the duet repertoire formed, attention to classical and romantic literature became apparent. Good music-related memory of the performers (at that time all pieces of music were played from memory), creative thinking and having sufficient stamina and tenacity while on the stage enabled the pianists to perform music of the most different styles and genres.

Compositions for two pianos that prevailed in Veronika Vitaitė's and Andrius Povilaitis' concert programs revealed a romantic nature of the performers, their authentic energy, artistic solutions that sprang up spontaneously on the stage. The pianists liked works of powerful technique, contrasting tempos and dynamics which are memorable for expressive culminations, strong dramaturgical accents. The duet gave many concerts in Lithuania and different cities of the former Soviet Union.

In 1997, after the tragic death of Andrius Povilaitis, feeling nostalgia for playing the piano duet, Veronika Vitaitė chose Ramutė Vaitkevičiūtė as her new concert partner. Playing together for more than three decades, the performers gave a number of performances in Belarus, Russia, Poland, Germany and in different concert halls in Lithuania. The performers played a piano duet and four hands on one piano, cooperated with the pianists Sergejus Okruško and Vytis Buivydasvičius, in 2012, released a double disc. The repertoire of the duet ViVa includes play-

ing popular pieces of music by Johann Sebastian Bach, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Sergei Rachmaninoff, however, opuses of the composers of the 20th–the 21st centuries constituted a larger specific weight. Mention should be made of interpretations of Béla Bartók's sonatas for two pianos and percussion instruments (the conductor was Juozas Domarkas, and the ensemble 'Giunter Percussion' participated), Francis Poulenc's sonatas, Benjamin Britten Introduction and Rondo alla Buresca, op. 23, No. 1 and lots of other little known compositions or compositions that have never been performed in Lithuania of the following composers of the 20th century – Anton Heiller (Austria), Gian Francesco Malipiero (Italy), Gaetano Cappocci (Switzerland), Urmas Si-sask (Estonia) and others. The ensemble devoted much attention to the dissemination of musical compositions by Lithuanian composers, in their recitals or benefit concerts piano opuses by Teisutis Makačinas, Osvaldas Balakauskas, Valentinas Bagdonas, Vytautas Barkauskas, Faustas Latėnas and other composers were performed.

Attention of the piano duet VIVA to the creative work of the composers of the 20th century, to artistic searches of Lithuanian authors encouraged it to create traditions of performing new compositions that have never been performed in variety concerts, to look carefully at the priorities accorded by the modern repertoire. Communication with living composers, acquiring their creative wisdom encouraged the pianist to undertake studies of their creative work, enabled her to put the artistic ideas of their compositions into effect more consistently.

Over the last decade Veronika Vitaitė gives concerts together with her daughter, pianist Aleksandra Žvirblytė. Playing of this duet marked the return to a classical and romantic repertoire. Both performers were able to take a new look at the compositions that have deep performance traditions, to study consistently the diversity of colours and emotions of music and convey them to the listeners. Alongside classical concerts for a piano duet and orchestra their repertoire includes a great number of miniatures for four hands reflecting the artistic taste of the performers, subtle manifestations of their individualities.

After Veronika's grandson Paulius Andersson had joined into the concert activities, the piano trio Dinastija [Dynasty] was created. The pianists play in ensembles of different compositions: two pianos, six

hands on one piano, a piano duet and percussion instruments. Composers create unique opuses specially for these performers. In this way, Vytautas Barkauskas *Trio concertante*, op. 133 for three pianos and an orchestra, Vytautas Laurušas *Concertino* for two pianos and the percussions, and other compositions were created. The piano trio extended spatial, acoustic solutions, often brought interpretations of the compositions nearer to the dynamic possibilities of the orchestra.

The musicians of Dinastija launched many interesting projects with a well-known jazz pianist Olegas Molokojedovas. In preparing the programmes of *Musical Installations*, the performers masterly combine compositions by well-known Lithuanian classics (Balys Dvarionas, Alvidas Remesa and others) with the possibilities provided by jazz improvisation.

The piano trio Dinastija carries out the educational mission, with their artistic educational projects the performers have visited lots of provincial music schools, have introduced many different authors. They sought to create contrast between well-known compositions and modern opuses of the atonal sound. Closely cooperating with the Lithuanian Composers' Union, the trio performers successfully continued the artistic project *Music for M. K. Čiurlionis* for several years, they played compositions by Lithuanian composers and composers of the neighbouring countries in the halls of Lithuania.

Veronika Vitaitė also has extensive experience of performing in other fields of chamber music. The pianist creatively cooperated with the singers Birutė Rainienė, Zinaida Varanavičienė, Regina Tumalevičiūtė, Irena Laurušienė, Akvilė Kisielienė, Regina Maciūtė, Virgilijus Noreika, Danielius Sadauskas and different instrumentalists: the violinists Algirdas Stulgys, Raimundas Katilius, the violoncellist Valentinas Kaplūnas, the *birbynė* player Antanas Smolskus and others. She has always perceived the ensemble of the soloist and the accompanist as an equal artistic partnership. Being able to read sheet music excellently, quickly orient herself in the stylistics of compositions, she managed to sensitively respond to the ideas and conceptions of other performers, to put into practice the spontaneous ideas right on the stage.

When listening to Veronika Vitaitė's playing, one always feels reflections of her personal features in it: an optimistic, clear conception of life,

a sincere and simple communication pattern. It is difficult to squeeze the art of the performer into a rigid framework of the classification produced by Carl Adolf Martienssen. Features of an interpreter of classical (static) type are typical of the pianist: she is intellectual, modern, each detail, phrase and a stroke are important in her classically artistic solutions. She is faithful to the requirements of the composer's text, she analyses carefully the instructions about the rhythm, articulation, the structure of the form. On the other hand, spiritual experience, a poetical image characteristic of a romantic (ecstatic) performer is also clear in her interpretations. She is looking for an artistic inspiration in art, architecture, poetry and other branches of art, she strives for freedom, improvisation, genuineness in the art of performance. Her performance is always full of life, internal restlessness, spiritual concentration. One-sided admiration for virtuosity, not actualised bravura, as well as unrestricted outbursts of emotions are not characteristic of the pianist. Moderation, taste and self-control prevail. Many interpretations are closer to chamber music performance, to an intimate and subtle treatment of musical images than to an expressive concert-virtuoso style. A large and diverse repertoire of the pianist (old, classical, romantic and modern music of different genres) testify to the pianist erudition, her deep understanding of styles, a rich scale of the means of pianistic expression.

Having reached maturity, Veronika Vitaitė's activities as a performer were somewhat outweighed by her committed pedagogical work, a heavy organisational load. For several decades Vitaitė took part in all the events related to piano pedagogy, her piano class was one of the strongest at the Academy. A list of the former students who became laureates of national and international competitions was becoming longer and longer.

Seeking to systematise and assess Veronika Vitaitė's individual piano teaching methods more objectively, in February-March 2020, an empirical investigation was carried out. Fifteen students in the Professor's piano class were emailed an invitation to fill in a questionnaire containing 16 open questions. The answers of eight students received show their rather subjective opinion, different personal experience and different interpretation of the same pedagogical principles.

Meaningful statement of the graduates of Vitaité's piano class testify to the pedagogue's broad views, the ability to educate versatile personalities who perceive the art of music widely. The artist's romantic nature does not prevent the piano pedagogue from being rational, from working objectively according to the tactics planned in advance. Many of her students are surprised at her patience, tactfulness in seeking to immediately accomplish the artistic goal set. She can take pride in the fact that the majority of her students have an individual performance style, that pianists of her class play the same musical composition differently. This does not mean voluntarism, disregard of the rules of style, even if the interpretation fascinates one by its emotional sincerity. The Professor teaches her students to base the interpretation of each composition on objective data, ways of expression dictated by the composer's epoch.

Methods of training a young performer are determined by many factors: the individuality of a student, the requirements of the teaching stage, the preparation for a responsible competition or concert, and the like. First of all, this is reflected in the choice of a teaching repertoire. Veronika Vitaité devotes especially great attention to the legacy of the classics, on the basis of their creative work she develops a sense of form, logic, classical proportions, culture of the sound and the perception of beauty on the whole. Having comprehended works by Johann Sebastian Bach, Vienna classics, Vitaité's students play opuses by Frédéric Chopin, Franz Liszt, Sergei Rachmaninoff a lot. Seeking to broaden the musical horizon of the young artists, the pedagogue offers them to learn little known compositions of the 20th century, which have no performance traditions yet. She is a supporter of a consistent repertoire. She advises her students to begin their acquaintance with a composer by playing his/her smaller compositions, though sometimes she does not avoid larger leaps of repertoire, which mobilise piano powers, and bring considerable benefit to a young performer.

During her lessons Veronika Vitaité devotes great attention to the actualisation of a musical text, to "the inside singing of the composition", to the consolidation of the fundamental rule "I see – hear – play". To intone the composition on the piano it is necessary to have a well-developed internal ear. At her lessons the Professor activates the pian-

ist's ear, trains his/her concentration, the ability to listen attentively to the sound of the composition being performed. The pedagogue carries out different kinds of activities, she demonstrates longer and shorter pieces of music whereby orienting the students' ear towards looking for necessary sound images, helping them to actualise the image of the musical composition. On the other hand, the pedagogue's playing also shows specific tasks related to the movements of creating the sound, the diversity of strokes, etc.

Full of non-ordinary ideas and professional interest, the Professor opens up unseen artistic horizons to many of her students, by her personal example encourages them to take interest in philosophy, aesthetics, the history of music and issues of the interpretation of compositions. Original ideas, subtle discoveries of the harmonic plan of a composition, counterposing tonality, modulations or unexpected deviations teach the students to get to know and hear the text of music of the composition being performed better, helps them listen attentively to unexpected melodious turns or a play of the rhythmic picture. A pedantic analysis of the composition, picturesquely presented elements of the musical language, the actualised means of a musical expression enable the performer to create meaningful interpretations of the compositions.

The Professor is firmly convinced of the benefit of competitions. According to her, they mobilise powers of a young performer, encourage him/her to work towards achieving higher standards of the art of performance. However, Veronika Vitaitė avoids sportsmanship, ardour and always promotes original interpretation solutions, bolder interpretations. Paying great attention to a deep understanding of the composition, the Professor tries to protect her students from superficial lustre, a lack of individuality. The most important thing is that the artistic contents should not be undermined, that interesting artistic solutions should prevail.

Prof. Veronika Vitaitė works with every student willingly and with great devotion. She allows everyone to reveal himself/herself, to feel and show his/her worth. She is always looking for the best sides in her students, she makes her comments and observations tactfully, avoids hurting or disturbing the personality of a young individual being

formed. Her inborn optimism, a subtle sense of humour turns routine, and often monotonous, work of a pianist into a joyful creative process. Prof. Vitaitė demands that her students should make maximum efforts to achieve the goals set, teaches them never to put a full-stop in the art of interpretation.

In her pedagogical work the Professor stimulates discussions during which the students' preferences reveal themselves and technological moments as systemised. She does not avoid returning to school subjects, filling in the gaps left in the earlier chains of teaching music. A congenial and friendly atmosphere prevails at her lessons, the Professor and the students speak a lot about music, life, the noble mission of a musician. Her students' feelings are always controlled by a performer's will, by the interpretation plan of the composition being performed, which was devised in advance. Under the guidance of the Professor, young pianists create interesting interpretations where their creative freedom and artistic individuality reveal themselves. Her students' participation in different competitions shows that Lithuanian pedagogy is in no way inferior to the methods employed by the world-famous piano pedagogues.

When analysing individual methods of Vitaitė's pedagogical work, we notice her close links with the Russian piano school. This is the need for a melodious colourful sound of the instrument, respect for the author's text, a creative treatment of the editor's instructions, methods of developing technical excellence. This is understandable because Veronika Vitaitė's views of artistic creation, her aesthetic principles, performance skills from many aspects were formed by Professor Olga Šteinberg who enriched the Lithuanian piano school with the traditions of mature Russian performance skills and pedagogy.

Veronika Vitaitė, during her pedagogical activities that lasted for more than five decades, educated several generations of young pianists who work in earnest in different spheres of musical life. The Professor takes a keen interest in the life of her former students, maintains friendly collegial relations with many of them. Her own activities and life are devoted to the art of music; her personal commitment inspires and motivates the young pianists to pursue their career in music. Her former students willingly take part in the Professor's jubilee events,

and when invited arrive from different corners of the world to perform in concerts.

In his *Advice to Young Musicians* Robert Schumann wrote: *'If everybody were to play first violin, we could not have an orchestra. Therefore, respect each musician in his own place.'*

The Professor arranged her orchestra with great skill. Knowing well that not all the performers will play in prestigious concert halls, she worked sincerely and selflessly with each of them individually thus encouraging them to reveal themselves in the most various spheres of music art, to make their even modest contribution to the development of Lithuanian piano culture. Consistent pedagogical work and love develop great professional skills, create a constant need to improve, teach patience in seeking to achieve the goals set. Giving herself up completely to work with her students, she became a teacher of life for many of them, young pianists gain experience, wisdom, love of the chosen profession from her. Attention to each student, his/her individual needs helped her find her place in life. Maybe this explains why the graduates from Veronika Vitaitė's piano class are so different – from hard-working and diligent music teachers, concertmasters at music schools, excellent art managers or scientists to internationally known performers of academic music and jazz, laureates of prestigious international piano and chamber music competitions.

Veronika Vitaitė's wide-ranging artistic activities have been properly assessed. In 2003, she was awarded the Cross of Officer of the Order of Vytautas the Great for her merits to Lithuanian culture, in 2014, she became a laureate of the Lithuanian Government's Prize for Culture and Art, in 2016, she was presented with the St. Casimir Medal of Honour. In 1985, the title of an Associate Professor and in 2000, the pedagogical title of a Professor were conferred on her, she was awarded honorary diplomas of His Excellency President Algirdas Brazauskas, Valdas Adamkus, Dalia Grybauskaitė, the Prime Ministers of the Republic of Lithuania Gediminas Vagnorius, Andrius Kubilius, Artūras Paulauskas, the Ministers of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania, the Medal of Honour of the Senate of the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre.