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THE CIMBALOM

Reference Guide for Performers and Composers

LUIGI GAGGERO

AD VERITATEM

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Intonazioni

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PREFACE

I am deeply honored and pleased by Luigi Gaggero's request to write the preface to his *The Cimbalom*, a book that is far more than just a *Reference Guide for Performers and Composers*. Just as Gaggero is not merely an *extraordinary* cimbalom player (nor a percussionist, although his musical journey began there), he is a well-rounded musician of great depth who has increasingly found his musical expression in conducting ensembles and orchestras. He approaches this with an attitude I would not hesitate to call "compositional", as the way he delves into scores is not so different from that of those who have written and continue to write them. This brings everything full circle, as Luigi's musical path has always been nourished by his relationship with composers.

But the nourishment is mutual: my friendship and collaboration with Gaggero began in 1998, and despite the twenty-year age difference between us – alas, not in my favor – I can confidently say that we have grown together through deeply shared musical projects (including, among others, a monographic CD of my music that he conducted, which is particularly dear to me, titled, fittingly enough, *Insieme* [*Together*]).

Why do I say this book is more than just a book about the cimbalom?

Let's start with the *Introduction*: combining the image of György Kurtág humbly seated at his beloved upright piano (and with a proportion that could be expressed as: a grand piano is to an upright piano what an upright piano is to the cimbalom…) with the opposite vast richness of range, dynamics, and articulation possibilities of the modern cimbalom, one arrives at the brilliant definition of "romantic Franciscan", perfectly suited to the instrument we are about to discuss!

Among the historical notes about the instrument, one point stands out: the cimbalom does not have Hungarian origins but rather Turkish, thus inheriting Eastern traditions. The fact that it later became the very heart of Hungarian musical tradition (which, in this case, becomes a perfect meeting point between East and West) could have been its limitation, confining it to folklore. However, thanks to Bartók, Stravinsky, and Kurtág, it was projected into the 20th and 21st centuries in a Western Europe that freed it from the risk of cultural and aesthetic isolation, revealing its infinite potential. This is why the book is equally dedicated to performers and composers: because the cimbalom needs both!

And indeed, what could have been the most predictable chapter – the one on the instrument's organology, its complex and highly original morphology – turns out to be of great interest because Luigi Gaggero never once separates the description of the "already known" from his reflections (see Luca Francesconi's brilliant statement on the arrangement of the notes) and more recent possibilities. For instance, alongside the mallets referred to (perhaps with a hint of irony) as "so-called

traditional", he promptly presents all those used in the past 25 years, which have opened up entirely new sound worlds, sometimes provoking fierce resistance from Hungarian traditionalists.

At this point, the Author goes far beyond being merely an "illustrator of an instrument" by offering his own ethical and aesthetic perspective (which, incidentally, I fully share) on certain paths in contemporary musical thought. With sharp clarity – almost provocatively – he draws a distinct boundary between "new techniques" that are inherent and coherent with the potential of this instrument (or any instrument) and can open up still-unknown expressive territories, and those techniques that are instead superficial, disregarding the instrument's natural physiology, and merely designed to "make headlines" for a fleeting moment, often popular among the younger generation of composers.

The perfect fusion of the roles of cimbalom player, conductor, all-around musician, and thinker is fully realized in the part aptly titled *Philosophy and Methodology*. Here, the text emphasizes the necessity for musical gestures, figures, and dynamics to find a perfect interface, a complete analogy, in the performer's physical gestures – almost a sublimation of dance. This is not for aestheticism's sake, but in absolute service to the music itself. The connection with the art of conducting becomes evident in this context.

I conclude by thanking Luigi for so often citing my compositions for cimbalom in his examples. I cannot help but recall that each of the particular sounds or techniques that Luigi attributes to me originated during an afternoon in his studio in Genoa, in 1998, I believe, when he allowed me to dream up the sounds I wanted, to play with his instrument either together with him or alone, and asked him never to be surprised by my requests. This is how we grow together, and how music grows as well.

Alessandro Solbiati, September 2024

INTRODUCTION

A Romantic Franciscan

A musical instrument becomes 'traditional' when its sound is progressively shaped by the *ethos* of a people. This is certainly the case with the cimbalom, whose sound encompasses the memory of its medieval predecessors and the fusion of various East European musical cultures.

The music of György Kurtág, influenced both by that of Béla Bartók (whom he considers his mother tongue) and by the forms and sounds of ancient music[1] (Gregorian chant, the music of Machaut, Schütz, and Frescobaldi…), exemplifies, in our opinion, this *dual soul* of the cimbalom. In fact, while for every Hungarian composer the cimbalom represents primarily a bridge to their own tradition, in Kurtág's works it seems to resonate also as a 'poor relative' of the piano: a less rhetorical piano, more humble and 'laid bare' – almost *Franciscan*.

Yet, while retaining its memory, the Hungarian cimbalom distinctly differs from a medieval psaltery in other aspects of its sound that are distinctly *romantic*: its large range, its dynamic possibilities, the potential for extravagant virtuosity, and its 'density' of timbre[2]. It is precisely these characteristics that have made the cimbalom one of the protagonists of the exuberant traditional music of Eastern Europe, its unmistakable *rhythmic engine*.

However, this *clarity* of rhythmic articulation is, so to speak, counterbalanced, by the *approximation* of tuning (the 'good tuning' of a cimbalom is essentially a beautiful *homogeneous detuning*!): if the articulation *clearly speaks*, the pitch of the sounds merely *alludes*. And it is perhaps this allusive aspect that has fascinated many French composers, from Debussy and Ravel to Dutilleux and Boulez.

The coexistence of such diverse aspects indeed seems to be a unique characteristic of the cimbalom, and it is perhaps thanks to this *timbral polysemy* that the Hungarian instrument, unlike any other in the large family of percussion chordophones[3], has increasingly found a place in the works of composers worldwide[4]. Inspired by the

1 This influence does not lead Kurtág to use ancient instruments, but rather to employ modern instruments with 'essential' sounds: the guitar, the mandolin, the harp, and even the upright piano – often used *con sordino* [with mute] – which Kurtág defines as his preferred instrument.

2 This greater complexity of the harmonic spectrum of the cimbalom sound compared to that of other percussion chordophones stems, among other things, from the following elements: 1) the larger number of strings for each note; 2) the fact that, when one note is played, other strings resonate as well; 3) the substantial impossibility of perfectly tuning the instrument due to the presence of multiple notes on the same string: inevitably, tuning one note also affects (i.e., detunes) the note(s) on the other side of the bridge. These last two points apply to other chordophones as well, but in the case of the cimbalom, they are amplified by its larger range and the higher number of strings (four) for each course.

3 With the obvious exception of the piano!

4 At times, it even happens that the *same* composer assigns the cimbalom a completely different 'role' depending on the context, as we will see later when discussing Stravinsky.

evocative timbre of the cimbalom, these composers respond to the *mystery* evoked by its sound, recontextualizing it within their own poetics, thus revealing its new musical and technical possibilities.

It is therefore thanks to these *composers* that the tradition of the cimbalom continues and renews itself, constantly calling future generations of *performers* to greater responsibility and awareness.

To both, this book is dedicated.

Luigi Gaggero

PART I - HISTORY