

NOTES ON HUFFMAN PIANO SONATA (1984)

General comments about Spencer Huffman's music:

Craftsmanship

Huffman considered composing a craft honed by years of studying and analyzing the great music of great composers and incorporating that learning into his own voice.

Organization

Huffman's music is highly organized, primarily utilizing the classic sonata form, various types of rondos, sonatina form, theme and variations, and occasionally a passacaglia.

Mastery of late Romantic harmonic language

From the 1940's until about 1970, Huffman's use of harmonic language reflected the influence of Stravinsky (earlier works) and Hindemith (later early period.) The term Huffman applied to his earlier period works was Approach Harmony. Following a pause in his composing, Huffman resumed writing in the early 1970's utilizing a much more romantic harmonic language, with many similarities to Brahms and utilizing Brahmsian devices.

Importance of leads

At all times in playing Huffman's music, there is a clear lead which needs to dominate and be brought out. In his chamber music especially, the lead frequently changes between instruments, so scores should be carefully studied to ensure players are aware of lead changes.

Skillful transition from key to key

To avoid extensive accidentals in the score and parts, Huffman often wrote in a change in key signature. These changes are so skillfully written that, while they are evident on paper, the impression to the listener is of effortless flow from key to key.

Tempos

Tempos are always moderate in this music. Even movements marked *Allegro* are to be performed at a controlled tempo – never fast.

Understated beginnings/well-crafted endings

Another hallmark of Huffman's music is the understated beginning. Often, a theme is introduced initially with little embellishment and then developed into a fuller version, still as a part of the exposition. Closes and codas, often difficult for many composers to master, are well-crafted with logical payout and finality.

Rhythmic integrity

Beethoven's music highly influenced Huffman in his younger years and Huffman's music incorporates the same sense of rhythmic energy as Beethoven's. Although certain movements in Huffman's music have *rubato* tempo directions written in, many Scherzo-type movements and Finales should be played at stricter tempos to maintain the rhythmic integrity of the music. Even in *rubato* sections, the sense of rhythm must always be clear.

Notes about individual movements of the Piano Sonata:

1st movement – *Allegro moderato*

Traditional sonata form

Initial tempo and length from composer's recording: quarter note = 96 bpm, length of movement = 13:09

2nd movement - *Vivace misterioso*

Rondo form – A-B-A

Initial tempo and length from composer's recording: dotted quarter note = 110-112 bpm, length of movement = 3:53

Rhythmic integrity is very important in this movement; there is no rubato either implied or written.

3rd movement - *Poco sostenuto*

Sonata Rondo form – sonata form with excluded middle section.

Initial tempo and length from composer's recording: eighth note = 69 bpm, length of movement = 8:30

Some rubato but always maintaining rhythmic integrity

4th movement – *Allegro*

Sonatina form – no development

Initial tempo and length from composer's recording: quarter note = 118 (up to 134) bpm, length of movement = 8:30

Composer's terminology:

In sonata form, the composer employed the following terms to describe various sections of this form:

First key – introduces the tonic key and motif material (Exposition)

Level change – the harmonic move consisting of various phrase groups of material in preparation for a harmonic move to dominant

Second key – new motif material in the dominant key

Close – a section heralding and ending – appears before the development and near end of movement

Development – previous and new material passes through various harmonic changes

Recapitulation – Restatement of first and second key motifs, both in tonic key

Coda – final section following the close

Biographical information - Spencer Huffman (1921 – 2005)

Spencer Huffman showed early signs of remarkable musical gifts. At a young age, he taught himself to read music, and began composing orchestral pieces. In 1939, he received a scholarship

in composition to the Peabody Conservatory, now Peabody Institute of The Johns Hopkins University.

Huffman was awarded the Boise Memorial composition fellowship in 1940 and studied at Tanglewood under Aaron Copland and Bohuslav Martinu. According to an article in the Baltimore Sun, "Copland thought so well of Huffman's talents that he gave him a letter to Nadia Boulanger, teacher of many leading composers. Miss Boulanger promptly gave the young man his third fellowship in less than two years -- a course of study under her own instruction."

After service in WWII, Huffman resumed his studies at Peabody, graduating in 1947 with the coveted Artist's Diploma in Harmony and Composition, then the highest honor awarded by the conservatory. Huffman was invited to join the Peabody composition faculty and taught there from 1950 to 1956. Following his tenure, he continued to write music and teach composition privately until his death in 2005.

Over the more than 60 years that he actively composed, Huffman produced an extraordinary library, including 10 symphonies, an opera, several works for chorus and orchestra, six piano concertos, viola and cello concertos, 31 string quartets, 21 piano sonatas, 70 songs, many other chamber pieces, and completed a life-long goal of writing a sonata for almost every instrument in the concert band. Later works reflect his great admiration for the musical legacy of Brahms.

Huffman received many commissions over the span of his career, and major orchestral works have been premiered by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, the National Symphony Orchestra, and the Army Band at New York's Carnegie Hall. His ninth symphony was commissioned by the National Gallery Orchestra in Washington, DC.

The collection of Huffman's scores and recordings is currently housed in the Arthur Friedheim Library archives at Johns Hopkins Peabody Institute and can be accessed at <https://cdm16613.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16613coll28>

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