

## PIANO WORKS BY DORA PEJAČEVIĆ – A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE OF AN INTERPRETER

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### *Abstract*

This article illuminates the significance and impact of Dora Pejačević's piano compositions through the lens of a performing artist. Dora Pejačević (1885–1923), a Croatian noblewoman and composer, emerges as a figure of profound musical depth and innovation. The article begins with an evocative description of Pejačević improvising at the piano, a scene recounted by Countess Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin in a letter to the poet Rainer Maria Rilke dated 5 October 1914. This anecdote serves as a poignant entry point into Pejačević's world.

Central to the article is the exploration of Pejačević's Piano Sonata, Op. 36, composed during the First World War. The interpretative perspective sheds light on the nuanced relationship between Pejačević's compositional process and her personal experiences. The author argues that Pejačević's music is not merely a reflection of her inner world but also a response to the external realities she faced. This dual focus highlights Pejačević's ability to channel her emotional and intellectual energies into a musical language that is both deeply personal and universally resonant.

The discussion extends to the broader context of Pejačević's piano compositions, which are categorized into three distinct phases: early works reflecting her Romantic and Classical influences, middle-period compositions showing a mature late-Romantic style, and late works characterized by far-reaching harmonies and formal freedom, marking a stylistic turning point in her oeuvre. The article highlights Pejačević's precision in musical notation and her ability to clearly communicate her musical ideas. Moreover, the article underscores the significance of Pejačević's piano works within her broader musical oeuvre, noting that these compositions represent the largest body of her work and showcase her evolution as a composer. Through an examination of specific pieces, the author illustrates Pejačević's stylistic development.

**Keywords:** Dora Pejačević; piano works; interpretation

**Ključne riječi:** Dora Pejačević; klavirska djela; interpretacija

*Dora improvises on the piano for hours,  
thus one forgets the war and the beginning of winter.<sup>1</sup>*

Written on 5 October 1914, this single sentence in a private letter captures a valuable impression of a daily scene for us. The writer is Countess Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin. She was one of Dora Pejačević's closest friends and guest at Našice Castle (Croatia), where the composer still lived at the time. The letter quoted here was addressed to no one less than the famous author Rainer Maria Rilke. By writing him about her friend Dora, Sidonie Nádherný pursues her good intention to bring those two artists together somehow (which never really worked out, but that is another story).

»Dora improvises on the piano for hours...« We immediately have a picture in mind: Dora Pejačević at her Blüthner grand piano in her music room at Našice Castle – just as it is caught in this picture (**Figure 1**).



**Figure 1:** Dora Pejačević at the piano. Picture taken by Countess Elizabetha Drašković von Trakošćan (private property), photo by Tim van Beveren (2021).

What an immense privilege Sidonie Nádherný had to hear her play, developing ideas, inventing music on the piano... We can assume that improvisation was a routine for Dora Pejačević. It must have been wonderful to hear that.

<sup>1</sup> »Dora fantasiert stundenlang am Klavier, darüber vergisst man Krieg und den Winter-Anfang.« Rainer Maria RILKE – Sidonie NÁDHERNÝ VON BORUTIN: *Briefwechsel 1906-1926*, ed. by Joachim W. Stork with the assistance of Waltraud and Friedrich Pfäfflin, Göttingen: Wallenstein Verlag, 2006, 220.

»Dora improvises on the piano for hours, thus one forgets the war and the beginning of winter.« Sidonie Nádherný wrote this sentence in the autumn of 1914. The First World War had been going on for two months and it seems that, for her, music was a welcome distraction from the outside world, as it is probably for most people.

But evidently for Dora Pejačević, it was not that simple. Music did not have a clear function to her, it was more like a manifestation of her inner world. She describes this in a letter to her friend Countess Rosa Lumbe Mladota:

»Actually, I am here only physically, everything I feel within me floats beyond what is present and visible [...]. Floating away into this most invisible world of my own inwardness, I am completely myself, and this self, which then feels too full of itself in this heavenly hiddenness, is looking for an expression, for a relief from this psychological high pressure which is actually a kind of enthusiasm – and this enthusiasm becomes when a composition is created!«<sup>2</sup>

Although this description sounds self-centered in a very *romantic* way, Dora Pejačević was not at all an individual who shut herself away from the world (which she could have easily done as a noblewoman in a castle). We can derive that from her charity work as President of the Red Cross in Našice, where she had frequent contact with wounded soldiers and thus saw the effects of the war with her own eyes. From letters to Rosa Lumbe Mladota<sup>3</sup> we know how much she was moved by those impressions. It therefore makes sense to consider her compositions of those years also in the context of the political and social situation.

In the autumn of 1914, she was working on a piece that has and will always have a special place in my repertoire: her Piano Sonata, Op. 36. Whenever I play this piece, I find it difficult not to think of the time in which it was composed. The consistent expressivity and tension of the work at least suggest that the First World War has left musical traces here. Sidonie Nádherný was probably one of the first persons who heard fragments of the Sonata, which is Dora Pejačević's most extensive work for piano.

A few months later, in February 1915, the two women go on a journey to Rome together as we know from another letter by Sidonie Nádherný to Rainer

<sup>2</sup> »Eigentlich bin ich nur körperlich hier, alles was ich am Leben und Erleben in mir fühle schwebt über das Gegenwärtige und Sichtbare hinweg [...]. In diese unsichtbarste Welt eigenster Innerlichkeit entschwebt, bin ich erst ganz mein Selbst, und dieses Selbst, das sich dann in dieser himmelweiten Verborgenheit zu sehr erfüllt von sich selbst fühlt, sucht nach einem Ausdruck, nach einer Entlastung von diesem seelischen Hochdruck, der an und für sich eine Art Begeisterung ist – und diese Begeisterung wird dann, wenn eine Komposition entsteht!«, Croatian Music Institute, Zagreb (Hrvatski glazbeni zavod, Zagreb), Archival Collection, Legacy of Dora Pejačević, II-Pej-IV, 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, II-Pej-IV, 2.

Maria Rilke.<sup>4</sup> During their stay in Rome, Sidonie Nádherný might have witnessed the evolution of the second movement of the Sonata, Op. 36, as we can see in the autograph manuscript where Dora Pejačević noted: *Roma. Febr.* (Figure 2). Or did she compose the piece only in her mind? We do not know.



Figure 2: Autograph manuscript of Piano Sonata, Op. 36 (2nd movement). Hrvatski glazbeni zavod (HGZ), Zagreb, Ostavština Dore Pejačević (muzikalije), II-Pej-V-A.19 (1), photo by Tim van Beveren (2018).

Although there are big gaps, we can at least put together some details to get a vague image of the creation process of Op. 36. It takes another month until the whole Sonata is finished. In the autograph manuscript, Dora Pejačević writes at the end of the third movement: *Fine. Našice, 29. III. 1915.* (Figure 3) The 29-year-old composer succeeds in creating a real masterpiece despite the great external upheavals.

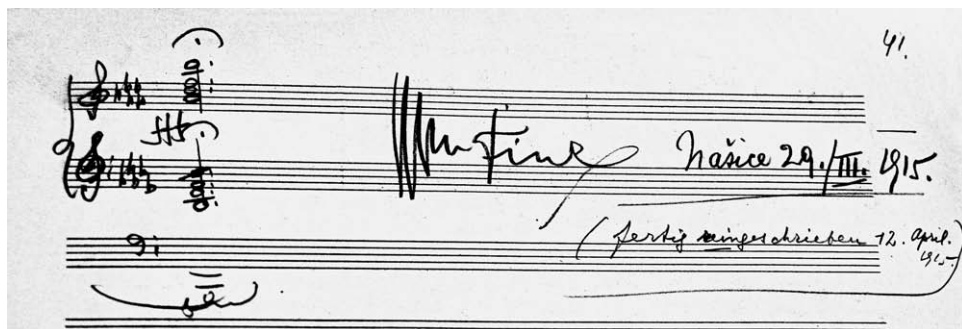


Figure 3: Autograph manuscript of Piano Sonata, Op. 36 (3rd movement). Hrvatski glazbeni zavod (HGZ), Zagreb, Ostavština Dore Pejačević (muzikalije), II-Pej-V-A.19 (1), photo by Tim van Beveren (2018).

For me, as an interpreter, the information »Dora improvises on the piano for hours« was an important affirmation of my own approach to the Sonata, Op. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Rainer Maria RILKE – Sidonie NÁDHERNÝ VON BORUTIN: *Briefwechsel 1906-1926*, 228.

Playing the beginning of the second movement, for example, I had the idea of improvisation immediately in mind: it starts totally open with a single tone, then a melodic movement around it, disguising rhythm and metrics by ties. The harmonic frame stays vague at first, too. Formally, one could call those first bars an *introduction*, but the sound result is far away from that. It seems as if the main theme grows, evolves from the single tone in the first bar; it sounds just like an improvisation. But although this is the effect Dora Pejačević creates here, the music is far from being improvised, of course. The composer is very accurate in a philological sense (actually, she is one of the most accurate composers I know). In all of her autograph manuscripts, we have primary sources that show her strong will to put on paper her precise musical ideas. The path to that might have been improvisation, but the results are thoroughly fixed works.

I have the impression that from a very early age Dora Pejačević had the performance of her works in mind. Performing music was something she grew up with. Her mother, Countess Lilla Pejačević (née Vay de Vaya), often organized musical salons at Našice Castle, where she performed as a singer. Young Dora also had the opportunity to play her earliest works to this audience.<sup>5</sup> In that environment, she must have developed her strong sense for musical dramaturgy, for the outside perspective of a work and also for practical aspects. I can derive that from many details in her scores like special fingerings, expression marks, phrasings, etc. As an interpreter, I am able to benefit from that very much, of course. It is not difficult to *read* her works, to get an idea of what she wanted to hear.

Her piano works are the largest group in her musical oeuvre (57 works in total, 24 for piano). The earliest surviving work is the *Berceuse*, Op. 2, which she composed at the age of 12. Her last piano work is the Piano Sonata, Op. 57, written one year before her death. Looking at her piano works, we can follow Dora Pejačević's growth as a composer and her different stylistic phases. I would suggest to divide those works into three subgroups.

The early works for piano are short single pieces that always show a clear ABA form. They stick to Romantic and even Classical traditions (*Menuet*).

- *Berceuse*, Op. 2 (1897)
- *Gondellied*, Op. 4 (1898)
- *Chanson sans paroles*, Op. 5 (1898)
- *Papillon*, Op. 6 (1898)
- *Menuet*, Op. 7 (1898)
- *Impromptu*, Op. 9a (1899)
- *Chanson sans paroles*, Op. 10 (1900)
- *Trauermarsch*, Op. 14 (1902)

<sup>5</sup> Koraljka KOS: *Dora Pejačević. Leben und Werk*, Zagreb: Muzički informativni centar Koncertne direkcije Zagreb, 1987, 28-29.

At the age of 18, she composes her first cycle for piano, *Sechs Fantasiestücke*, Op. 17.

In the following years, this cycle is followed by two others: *Blumenleben*, Op. 19 and *Walzer-Capricen*, Op. 28. In the Sonata, Op. 36 she reaches her mature and unmistakably late romantic style.

- *Sechs Fantasiestücke*, Op. 17 (1903)
- *Blumenleben*, Op. 19 (1904-1905)
- *Berceuse*, Op. 20 (1906)
- *Valse de concert*, Op. 21 (1906)
- *Erinnerung*, Op. 24 (1908)
- *Walzer-Capricen*, Op. 28 (1910)
- *Vier Klavierstücke*, Op. 32a (1912)
- *Impromptu*, Op. 32b (1912)
- *Sonate in b-moll*, Op. 36 (1915)
- *Zwei Intermezzi*, Op. 38 (1915)

The third group starts for me with *Zwei Klavierskizzen*, Op. 44. These two pieces seem to mark a turning point in Dora Pejačević's oeuvre. New elements can be found here: far reaching harmonies, freedom in form and melody. The composer seems to allude to that in the title *Klavierskizzen* (*Piano Sketches*), as if she wants to prepare the listener and the performer for an experiment. I would say that these little piano pieces are the opening of her *late works* / *Spätwerk* (if there is such a thing for a person who died at the age of 37).

- *Zwei Klavierskizzen*, Op. 44 (1918)
- *Blütenwirbel*, Op. 45 (1918)
- *Capriccio*, Op. 47 (1919)
- *Zwei Nocturnes*, Op. 50 (1918 / 1920)
- *Humoreske und Caprice*, Op. 54 (1920)
- *Sonate As-Dur*, Op. 57 (in einem Satz) (1921)

The two pieces of *Zwei Klavierskizzen*, Op. 44 have programmatic titles: *I. An Dich* [To You] and *II. Vor Deinem Bild* [In front of your picture]. Working on these pieces, I asked myself several questions: What inspired these titles? Is it a real person, a real *picture* she refers to? Where does this totally new style come from? Are there influences I can trace? What sources are left behind?

The pieces are dedicated to her close friend Anny von Lange (just like the Sonata, Op. 36, by the way). Is she the person in the *picture*? I did lots of research on her: she was also a composer, living in Dresden, coming from a family of (military) nobility in Saxony. She became a follower of Rudolf Steiner's philosophy in 1920 and stopped composing music in 1931.<sup>6</sup> Sadly, her whole estate and all of her

<sup>6</sup> Rita JACOBS: von Lange, Anny, *Forschungsstelle Kulturimpuls Biographien Dokumentation* <<https://biographien.kulturimpuls.org/detail.php?&id=1410>> (Accessed 24 February 2024).



Figure 4: Pavillon at Našice Castle. Picture taken by Countess Elizabetha Drašković von Trakošćan (private property), photo by Tim van Beveren (2021).

works were destroyed during the bombardment of Dresden in 1945.<sup>7</sup> There are no other traces left in Dora Pejačević's estate either, except for one picture that (probably) shows Anny von Lange at the small lake near Našice Castle. (Figure 4)

When I rehearsed *Zwei Klavierskizzen*, Op. 44 I had to learn a new musical language that Dora Pejačević seemed to have invented out of the blue (I did not really benefit from having played already the Sonata, Op. 36 and *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 17). To get closer to that new style, I searched for possible influences. Koraljka Kos points out that Wagner's *Tristan* might have been an inspiration for the free tonal layout of *Vor Deinem Bild*.<sup>8</sup> I share this assumption. Even the notes are the same, if you compare the first bars. I also had in mind Alban Berg's Sonata, Op. 1. Just like in Wagner's *Tristan*, the chords evolve from linear, chromatic movements in different voices. But although it is possible to find musical works that might have influenced Dora Pejačević, we can only speculate here. There are no sources

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> K. KOS: *Dora Pejačević. Leben und Werk*, 63.

that give insight into the creation process. In the estate of Dora Pejačević there are four manuscripts<sup>9</sup> of *Vor Deinem Bild*, of which only one is an autograph manuscript. The other manuscripts are copies by unknown writers. It is also unknown why that piece has been copied three times (an extraordinary case compared to her other works). For my interpretation of *Vor Deinem Bild*, I decided to follow only the autograph manuscript.<sup>1011</sup>

In the last few years, I have played numerous concerts with piano works only by Dora Pejačević. The great variety of her piano music made this easily possible without the risk of resulting in a too one-sided program. For me (and for the audience as well) it is highly interesting to follow her path as a composer from her very early piano works to the free tonal style of her late works, just from the perspective of the piano.

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<sup>9</sup> Croatian Music Institute, Zagreb, Legacy of Dora Pejačević, II-Pej-V-A.13b (1), II-Pej-V-A.13b (2), II-Pej-V-A.13b (1) [3?], II-Pej-V-A.13.

<sup>10</sup> Croatian Music Institute, Zagreb, Legacy of Dora Pejačević, II-Pej-V-A.13.

<sup>11</sup> It shows some distinctive differences which made this decision quite easy. For example, on the last quarter note of bar 5 the upper voice in the autograph manuscript shows an added (although unnecessary) natural on e<sup>2</sup>. The other manuscripts write *b* as an additional here. The sound result then is an e-flat<sup>2</sup> followed by a d-sharp<sup>2</sup> on the first quarter note of bar 6, which is melodically much less interesting since it is a repetition of the same tone. Unfortunately, I had no insight into the sources before my recording of *Zwei Klavierskizzen*, Op. 44, which is why I play an e-flat<sup>2</sup> there, according to the only printed edition. This edition provides no information about the sources and questionable aspects in connection with them.



*Sažetak*KLAVIRSKA DJELA DORE PEJAČEVIĆ – IZ OSOBNE PERSPEKTIVE  
INTERPRETA

Članak osvjetljava značaj i utjecaj klavirskih skladbi Dore Pejačević kroz prizmu izvođača/ice. Dora Pejačević (1885-1923), hrvatska plemkinja i skladateljica, izranja kao lik velike glazbene dubine i inovativnosti. Članak počinje evokativnim opisom improvizacije za klavir Dore Pejačević, scenom koju je opisala grofica Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin u pismu pjesniku Raineru Mariji Rilkeu od 5. listopada 1914. Ova anegdota služi kao dirljiva ulazna točka u svijet Dore Pejačević.

Središnji dio članka istražuje Klavirsku sonatu, op. 36 Dore Pejačević, skladanu tijekom Prvoga svjetskog rata. Interpretativna perspektiva rasvjetljava nijansirani odnos između Pejačevićina skladateljskog postupka i njezinih osobnih iskustava. Autorica tvrdi da glazba nije samo odraz njezina unutarnjeg svijeta nego i odgovor na vanjske okolnosti s kojima se suočavala. Ovaj dvostruki fokus naglašava sposobnost Dore Pejačević da kanalizira svoju emocionalnu i intelektualnu energiju u glazbeni jezik koji je duboko osoban i univerzalno rezonantan. Rasprava se proširuje na širi kontekst Pejačevićinih klavirskih skladbi, koje su kategorizirane u tri različite faze: rana djela koja odražavaju njezine romantičarske i klasične utjecaje, skladbe srednjeg razdoblja koje pokazuju zreli kasnoromantični stil i kasna djela koja karakteriziraju bogate harmonije i sloboda forme označavajući stilsku prekretnicu u njezinu opusu. U članku se ističe preciznost notnog zapisa Dore Pejačević i njezina sposobnost jasnog prenošenja glazbenih ideja. Konačno, u članku se naglašava značaj klavirskih djela Dore Pejačević u njezinu širem glazbenom opusu, uz napomenu da te skladbe predstavljaju najveći korpus njezina stvaralaštva i prikazuju njezin razvoj kao skladateljice. Taj se stilski razvoj ilustrira karakterističnim primjerima.