

University of New Hampshire

University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository

Inquiry Journal 2020

Inquiry Journal

Spring 4-9-2020

The Post-Tonal Pedagogical Piano Music of Dianne Goolkasian Rahbee

Annelise Papinsick
University of New Hampshire

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_2020

Recommended Citation

Papinsick, Annelise, "The Post-Tonal Pedagogical Piano Music of Dianne Goolkasian Rahbee" (2020).
Inquiry Journal. 9.
https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_2020/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Inquiry Journal at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Inquiry Journal 2020 by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.



Research Article

The Post-Tonal Pedagogical Piano Music of Dianne Goolkasian Rahbee

—Annelise Papinsick

I played piano for about ten years before deciding that I wanted to major in music performance and teach private lessons. As a beginning student, I was captivated by the wide variety of musical styles readily available in piano music and always wanted to explore sounds beyond those of the baroque, classical, and romantic eras. My longtime piano teacher throughout all of grade school, Kathryn Southworth, always provided me with these opportunities through exposure to interesting and often lesser-known composers. One of those whose music she selected for me to play was the Massachusetts-based composer Dianne Goolkasian Rahbee (1938–present).

In the summer of 2019, while studying at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), I undertook research through a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship on the subject of pedagogical piano compositions by Rahbee. I am generally excited about academic research and was eager to explore a subject that had practical relevance to my peers and professors in the music department, especially since—I was surprised to find out—so few art students seem interested in following the path of research. There is just as much territory to explore in the arts as there is in the sciences, so perhaps the lack of academic research in the arts stems from a lack of self-assurance in the importance of this research. However, it is important to discover how the arts develop and change through time. For example, jazz music developed from its African slave roots, to the “big band” genre, to its ubiquitous incorporation into almost all modern pop music. We can use this type of information to better understand preexisting art or to create new art. This kind of research can even inspire new social movements in the arts; in the case of Rahbee, it can bring justice to the often-overlooked female composer.



The author playing piano.

My Role

I was attracted to Rahbee’s music in particular because I had been exposed to it by my own teacher when I was a young beginning student, and it had significant effects on the direction of my musical taste over the thirteen-plus years I have studied piano. Rahbee’s music is post-tonal: music that doesn’t follow the tonal conventions set for musical compositions from roughly 1600 to 1900 and often contains unusual dissonances—notes that clash—as well as other unusual melodic and

rhythmic features. Rahbee's music was the catalyst that introduced me to and drove my interest in post-tonal music.

There are few resources available for the purpose of teaching post-tonal music to beginning students, but a bounty of very difficult post-tonal pieces have been published; therefore, intermediate-to-advanced students often come to this genre feeling slightly confused. Through my research, I hoped to widen the usage of Rahbee's work and provide other young students with the opportunity to examine post-tonal music. This objective was particularly meaningful to me given that I have been employed as a piano teacher in UNH's Piano Extension Program since my first semester and also intend to teach private lessons as a career after I graduate. To begin reaching my goal of proper post-tonal education for young students through the dissemination of Rahbee's work, I set out to gather information through both analyzing and teaching Rahbee's pieces as well as speaking to her in person. Dr. Rose Pruiksma advised me during the application process, helped guide the course of my project when it was approved, and continues to help me revise a comprehensive research paper, which I hope to publish in an academic music journal within the next couple of years.

What Is Post-Tonal Music?

Post-tonal music departs from or disregards the conventions of tonal music. Tonal music was developed during what is known as the common practice period, the period stretching from roughly 1600 to 1900 and containing the formation and subsequent decline of the tonal system associated with Western classical music. The tonal system includes rules about the kinds of dissonances allowed and how they resolve, and chord progressions that are appropriate for certain parts of a musical piece. Post-tonal music often contains unresolved dissonances and uses chords that are not harmonically functional, meaning that the chords don't follow common chord progressions that establish a given note as a stable "goal." Other qualities frequently seen in post-tonal music include unusual or varied time signatures and the usage of modes: scales that are not explicitly the standard major or minor scales used in all tonal music.

Part of what makes Rahbee's use of post-tonality unique is her incorporation of flavors of the Armenian folk music she grew up with in a largely Armenian area of Massachusetts. The modes and time signatures she chooses to use give many of her pieces a distinctly Eastern European flair. Rahbee has published a variety of pedagogical and performance pieces in this unique style.

Pedagogy, Gender, and the Post-Tonal

There are very few pedagogical resources available to teach post-tonal music to beginning piano students. Perhaps this lack is related to the relative newness of post-tonal music, but the reason is unclear. Pedagogical pieces overall, for both tonal and post-tonal music, do not have a hard-and-fast set of characteristics: they are, generally, pieces that are designed to teach students a particular technique. They can range from simple scales to complex concert etudes. Many pedagogical piano pieces were written during the common practice period—such as J. S. Bach's Inventions—or were written much later but mostly follow the rules of tonal music, as in the case of many of the pieces in the widely used series Alfred's *Basic Piano Library*. Rahbee's pedagogical works, however, are made to immediately present beginner-to-intermediate piano students with the flexible potentials of music without the often-strict musical conventions of the common practice period.

Rahbee's work is also important to study because she is a female composer. Rahbee's closest analogue in terms of post-tonal composition is the male Hungarian composer Béla Bartók (1881–1945), who wrote *Mikrokosmos* (1926–1939). Similar to Rahbee's compositions, *Mikrokosmos* is a series of post-tonal pedagogical pieces that progress in difficulty and have strains of folk song and folk influence in them. However, the *Mikrokosmos* are virtually the only post-tonal teaching pieces in the pool of resources used by piano teachers. That the only post-tonal resource generally used was composed by a man is not a coincidence; it is a continuation of a trend beginning centuries ago. Historically, almost all published musical composers have been male. Since women in the Western world have long been considered inferior in qualities both physical and cerebral, female composers have often either been discouraged from their passions or otherwise felt compelled to publish their works under the names of their husbands (in the case of Clara Schumann) or male relatives (in the case of Fanny Mendelssohn). Now that female composers may openly follow their passion and compose music in Western society, music teachers are accountable for ensuring that these composers receive their due—especially given that full societal equality still needs to be fought for.

The dearth of post-tonal pedagogical pieces and of recognition for female composers made Rahbee a very appealing and important subject for my research. To help repair the missing links in the world of piano music, I chose to research her music using three primary techniques. I carefully read and evaluated some of her pedagogical works, used these works to teach piano students, and interviewed Rahbee herself to explore her perspective and the vision she had for them.

Analyzing Rahbee's Pedagogical Works

To examine Rahbee's pedagogical piano works, I chose and purchased three books: *Pictures and Beyond, Book 1* (2013); *Modern Miniatures for Piano Solo, Volume 1* (2005); and *Modern Miniatures for Piano Solo, Volume 2* (2006). Other works that Rahbee herself considers teaching pieces are three concertinos, which I did not choose to examine, given that they do not represent a progressive collection of piano pieces (Rahbee 2015).

I spent several days per book, playing through each piece at least once—the more difficult pieces taking more time to digest—and making note of unifying factors in each book. For example, Volume 1 of *Modern Miniatures* contains the most intensive use of dynamic markings of the three books—dynamic markings being visual indications of the volume level at which a performer is intended to play. Volume 2, while still well saturated with markings, thins them out slightly in favor of pedal markings, which indicate where and how the pedals on the piano should be used. *Pictures and Beyond*, on the other hand, contains more exploratory instructions to introduce a student to the world of modern music.

For each book, I chose two contrasting selections from the first half and the second half of the collection and analyzed them in depth. During the process of analysis I examined each piece to determine what technique it was meant to impart—examples include certain fingering patterns, dynamic contrasts (the range of volume), and extensive jumps up or down the keyboard—and how well the composition allowed the student to understand the technique. I also looked for musical interest and quality. Although this is a subjective characteristic, choosing pieces that sound vibrant and compelling is important to hold a student's interest and to boost their confidence during performance. In the absence of "good" music, students are more likely to lack inspiration and want to quit playing.

The image shows a musical score for two measures of a piece titled "Wondering" by Rahbee. The tempo is marked "Andante". The score is in 4/4 time. The upper voice (treble clef) has a melodic line with a slur over measures 1 and 2, labeled 'a'. The lower voice (bass clef) has an ostinato pattern of quarter notes, labeled 'e'. Dynamic markings include 'mp' (mezzo-piano) and 'dolce, molto legato'. Crescendos and decrescendos are indicated by hairpins labeled 'c' and 'd' respectively.

Measures 1 and 2 of "Wondering," exhibiting (a) legato (smooth) articulation in the upper voice, (b) a mezzo-piano (medium-soft) beginning dynamic, (c) crescendos (getting louder) and (d) decrescendos (getting softer), and (e) the ostinato pattern that repeats in the left hand throughout the piece.

My overall assessment of Rahbee's pieces is that they are characterful and are written with precise dynamic and articulative markings. Like dynamic markings, articulative markings impart information about how to perform a piece, but rather than volume, articulations are based on playing with different physical touches such as smooth or detached. Unusual scales are rather common, as is the usage of an ostinato or drone—a repeating short melodic figure or a single note—that unifies the parts of a piece of music and can evoke imagery of rustic droning instruments like bagpipes or the hurdy-gurdy.

Teaching Rahbee's Work

The teaching portion of my research was enlightening, but flawed. My sample of students was rather small and lacked diversity that otherwise might have made my study more comprehensive. I searched for local, beginner-to-intermediate students by way of an advertisement posted on my town's Facebook page, offering free lessons for experimental purposes. Because I needed local students with whom I could easily meet for lessons, the students likely shared not only musical backgrounds from the local school (in Bow, New Hampshire) but also financial and cultural backgrounds. From there, I had to narrow it down to those who were able to practice thirty minutes every day and who owned a keyboard on which to practice. This resulted in only four students being available: two preteens, a teenager, and an adult. Nonetheless, I taught each student weekly for thirty minutes, for four to seven weeks, out of my basement piano studio using only Rahbee's work. This differed from my normal teaching pattern, where I generally assign my students multiple pieces from different sources as well as scales or arpeggios to practice.

During the lessons I took notes on reactions and issues encountered with the pieces. One of my concerns before I began teaching my students was that, because the music was so unfamiliar-sounding, the students might not be able to distinguish their own mistakes from the intended sound. I was pleasantly surprised to find that I had underestimated their musical ears, and even when my students remarked on the “weirdness” of a piece, they were reliably able to detect their own mistakes. Despite our successes, some students never quite grew accustomed to post-tonal music in the allotted time. One student even commented that a particularly dissonant piece “sounded bad.” (But at least he seemed to enjoy playing it!) I found that I had the most success when incorporating learning-by-ear tactics into my teaching: my students played much better when I assigned them the tasks of memorizing and singing melodies, or clapping rhythms back to me.



The author teaching. *Photo credit: Jeremy Gasowski.*

Interview with the Composer

My interview with Rahbee was also not quite what I had planned—I had intended to visit her in person, but we were both feeling ill, and consequently settled for a phone interview—but it was very informative. I primarily wanted to learn about her teaching style, her own intentions for her compositions, and the origins of her musical style.

I quickly discovered that I needed to learn her musical philosophy if I wanted to really understand her compositions; she stressed to me that for a student to be able to read the collective musical language, they must first be able to “speak” it. Therefore, she encourages her own students to compose and improvise pieces for themselves and to develop their own musical language. Rahbee maintains that she has never provided rules or even guidelines for her students’ compositions. Her words to me, “Freedom is the most important element,” impart the essence of her values with regard to composing and capture the feeling of much of her music. This undertone of freedom and personal expression echoed throughout the conversation and has encouraged me to incorporate more activities of improvisation and personalization into the lessons I teach. My students have had a positive reaction so far to my efforts to allow them personalization of the pieces they are learning, and I plan to encourage student composition as Rahbee does in the future.

When I asked Rahbee about her intentions for her own pedagogical compositions, she replied that she had composed many of them for certain students to practice techniques particular to that student. When publishers reached out to her, she bundled together her compositions with relative nonchalance to be published. Therefore, the pieces were not actually meant to be presented together as a collection at their conception—but I maintain that they are sensibly organized and progressive nonetheless. Each book advances in an appropriate manner, and pieces that were composed with each other are positioned near or next to each other. No particular musical

theme unites any of the books, other than *Pictures and Beyond* containing slightly more variety in technique.

Lastly, I gained some insight from Rahbee about the folk-influenced style in which she composes. I was surprised to learn that she had not been influenced by Bartok, nor had she expressed an interest in collecting folk tunes; rather, her musical language was entirely based on her having absorbed the sounds of Armenian folk music while growing up in an Armenian American community.

Conclusion

Overall, through my research, I feel I have made a compelling case for the value of using Rahbee's work to teach students. Her compositions have excellent musical quality and are also educational for students. The richness of dynamic and articulative markings not only exposes students to these markings, but repeats them in an artful way to demonstrate to students how to perform these markings in other contexts. Although I did not put this theory into practice during my research period, I believe Rahbee's work would be well supplemented with the concurrent use of the *Dozen a Day* series by Edna-Mae Burnam. Burnam's work provides practice of techniques that are featured en masse in Rahbee's work, including crossing the fingers over the thumb, leaping from octave to octave, and crossing hand over hand.

I have also enriched my own capabilities and knowledge in terms of teaching, musical research, and conducting research overall. I am a young piano teacher, and the more students I teach, the more I can learn from overcoming unique difficulties generated by unique individuals. The project has also advanced my abilities in sight-reading (that is, the process of playing a piece the first time one sees it, ideally with a high degree of accuracy) and my alertness to the purposes behind individual pedagogical pieces.

Lastly, I learned about the difficulties of conducting research not entirely based upon books and reading. My trouble with having a small sample size likely could have been solved with some more premeditated and efficient planning. Partway through my project, I had distant thoughts that a more comprehensive approach to the teaching portion of my project would have been to "employ" some of my fellow piano teachers to also collect students and teach them with Rahbee's work, maximizing the number of students—and, potentially, the range of backgrounds—that could be examined. Given that I enjoy conducting research and intend to continue doing so after graduation, it is good experience for me to figure out what works and doesn't work while I still have the resources and guidance available to me at UNH.

With the eventual publication of the research paper I am in the process of editing for an academic music journal, I aim to bring more light to Rahbee's work and why it is important. It is my hope that further exposure of her name and her work will inspire young students not only to pursue the study of post-tonal music but also to compose regardless of (or even because of) individual musical language, background, or sex.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Kathryn Southworth for introducing me to Dianne Goolkasian Rahbee's work and building the foundation upon which most of my musical experiences have since been based; my mentor, Dr. Rose Pruiksmá, for her constant support of my interest in research and for her assistance in revision; and my piano teachers during my time at UNH, Dr. Hsiang Tu and Dr. Chris

Kies, for encouraging my pursuit of piano pedagogy. I would also like to thank Mr. Peter Akerman, Mr. Dana Hamel, and the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research for making this project possible.

Works Cited

- Rahbee, Dianne Goolkasian. 2005. *Modern Miniatures for Piano Solo: Volume 1*. Davie, Florida: FJH Music Co.
- . 2006. *Modern Miniatures for Piano Solo: Volume 2*. Davie, Florida: FJH Music Co.
- . 2013. *Pictures and Beyond: Book 1*. Davie, Florida: FJH Music Co.
- . 2015. "Dianne's Compositions by Category." dgoolkasianrahbee.com/.

Author and Mentor Bios

Annelise Papinsick, from Bow, New Hampshire, came to the University of New Hampshire to major in music performance and humanities. She is enrolled in the University Honors Program. When asked what brought her to her Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) project, Annelise said, "A lifetime of piano studies and teachers who enjoyed bringing interesting repertoire and unique opportunities to me." That lifetime of piano studies and the SURF project have given her a deep appreciation of Dianne Rahbee's work and a desire to make Rahbee more widely known to piano teachers. Because of Annelise's love of research in general and of writing and teaching in particular, she found the project to be fun and "almost like practicing for my goals in life." She saw writing for *Inquiry* as a way to get her research out into the world, especially since the arts are sometimes so underrepresented. Annelise is also preparing a paper to be published in an academic musicology journal. She is well on her way to a career as a researcher of musicology and teacher of music, starting first with graduate studies after she earns two bachelor's degrees in 2021: a B.M. in music performance and B.A. in humanities.

Rose Pruiksma is a lecturer in music history at the University of New Hampshire, where she has been teaching since 2010. She focuses primarily on music history courses and music in world cultures, as well as film music and general introduction to music. Her research has centered on music, dance, and identity in seventeenth-century court ballet and opera. After seeing Annelise's high-quality work on a project about Quebecois music, Dr. Pruiksma encouraged her to pursue a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF). She enthusiastically supported Annelise's research idea, specifically valuing how it would expose students to post-tonal modes of musicking and to the work of a female composer at a time when female composers are still largely underrepresented in the classical music world. Both Dr. Pruiksma and Annelise learned a lot during the research process, and Dr. Pruiksma especially enjoyed serving as a sounding board and mentor for Annelise's ideas. She proudly views Annelise's research as a step toward breaking the barriers for young women who wish to pursue a composition career.