

Ervin Nyiregyházi

36 Selected Works for Solo Piano

Edited by Kevin Bazzana



CARL FISCHER®

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Ervin Nyiregyházi in his mid-twenties, around 1929. (Photograph by Albert Witzel, from the *Los Angeles Examiner*. University of Southern California, on behalf of the U.S.C. Specialized Libraries and Archival Collections.)

Front Cover: Nyiregyházi in Norway in 1919, Photograph by Gustav Borgen. See p. 7

Back Cover: Ervin Nyiregyházi around age ten, in the frontispiece of *The Psychology of a Musical Prodigy*, the 1925 English edition of Géza Révész's book about him.

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PL1053

ISBN 978-1-4911-5609-4

Table of Contents

Introduction by Kevin Bazzana	3
Ervin Nyiregyházi.....	3
Nyiregyházi the Pianist.....	5
Nyiregyházi the Composer	8
About the Edition.....	13
Notes on the Pieces.....	14
Source Notes and Acknowledgements.....	19
Valse mélancolique (Melancholy Waltz)	21
Mephisto triumphiert! Fantasie No. 1 (Mephisto Triumphs! Fantasy No. 1).....	25
Chanson passionnée (Passionate song).....	40
Dolcissimo (Very Sweet)	47
Nocturne.....	50
A Száguldó Élet (Petőfi verse nyomán) (The Fast-Paced Life, after Petőfi's Poem)	53
Sweet Memories.....	56
A Soldier of Fortune.....	59
Checkmate No. 2	64
Suhint a Sors (Fate Swishes).....	72
[Untitled No. 1].....	76
[Untitled No. 2].....	78
The Suicide of Géza Kovács (in 1942).....	81
[Untitled No. 3].....	85
Richard Wagner—Venezia (In Memoriam 1883)	88
Wir dachten der Todten (No. 6) (We Thought of the Dead, No. 6)	90
Forty-Four Years ago (In Memoriam August 9, 1940)	92
Arriving at the 125 th Street Railroad Station in New York City March 1927 (Sad Vista)	94
Életem Utolsó Szakasa (Last Stage of My Life).....	103
The Unsolved Riddle.....	106
Sirkő Felirat (Epitaph).....	108
Monuments in Ruins.....	108
In Memoriam November 22, 1963 (The Murder of President John F. Kennedy)	109
The Lost Childhood (No. 2)	110
A Megcsonkitott Élet (The Truncated Life)	112
[Untitled No. 4].....	114
Adored Baby (Doris Nyiregyházi).....	114
The Laughter of the Murderer	116
[Untitled No. 5].....	117
Szálassy to the Gallows	120
Sivár Jövő (Bleak Future).....	123
The Terror of Playing Beethoven's "Appassionata" in Concert	124
Hundred Years ago To-day Franz Liszt Died (July 31, 1886).....	126
Lonely Heart.....	128
In Memoriam Liberace.....	129
[Untitled No. 6].....	130

Nyiregyházi the Pianist

Even when he was supposedly washed up, Nyiregyházi could still overwhelm the most sophisticated listeners. Arnold Schoenberg, after hearing him play privately in 1935, said to him, “You are the person most replete with genius I have ever heard.” The next day, in a letter to Otto Klemperer, he discussed Nyiregyházi at length. “I have never heard such a pianist before,” he wrote, describing him as “something utterly extraordinary,” a pianist of “incredible originality and conviction” with an “astonishing,” “unparalleled” technique, an “unprecedented” sound, and “power of expression I have never heard before.”

Example 9.

SPRING SONG.
Composed at the age of 11. (April 1913.)

Opening of *Spring Song*, as it appears in *The Psychology of a Musical Prodigy*, the 1925 English edition of Géza Révész's book about Nyiregyházi. This piece, which he composed at the age of ten (not, as indicated here, eleven), suggests the influence of Grieg's *Lyric Pieces*. (International Ervin Nyiregyházi Foundation.)

above all Liszt, whose music and personality profoundly influenced him as a pianist, composer, and man. To dub him “a second Liszt” was already a cliché in his teens.

Nyiregyházi's digital technique was strange—his goal, it appears, was not to strike the keys but to *press* them—yet from it emerged a broad, deep, robust tone of unsurpassed intensity and luminosity, with a melancholy beauty and a sometimes overwhelming emotional impact. He commanded a whole orchestra's worth of tone colors. His dynamic range was unparalleled—from an extraordinarily rich and vibrant *pianissimo* to a volcanic *fortissimo* (he sometimes left blood on the keys). He pedaled generously, to mimic the vibrato of an operatic voice, to achieve legato phrasing, to make a sonority seem to swell rather than decay, to blur harmonies for expressive reasons. His playing was “three-dimensional,” rife with contrapuntal tension: He brought out inner voices, staggered intervals, rolled chords, and cultivated rhythmic dislocation of the hands. Rhythmically, his playing was free, flexible, improvisatory. He cared more about mass than drive, and was fond of slow tempos, which were demanded by the huge tone, transparent textures, and rhythmic flexibility he sought. (His timing in Liszt's sonata, he said, usually approached, and sometimes topped, forty minutes.)

Alas, Nyiregyházi's playing in his prime survives only in glimpses: twelve Ampico piano rolls from the 1920s; a few brief appearances on movie soundtracks; a 1936 recording with the Los Angeles Federal Symphony of a short, inconsequential piece by an obscure American composer. And so we are left to reconstruct a portrait of the artist from the concert, studio, and private recordings he made in old age. (Most of these have circulated only privately, though since the 1990s some have appeared on CD from various labels: VAI Audio, Music and Arts, Marston Records, Sonetto Classics.)

The late recordings are problematic, to be sure—flawed, to varying degrees, by wrong notes and other symptoms of age and neglect. But Nyiregyházi never cared much for such things: To him, the accuracy of the overall conception mattered more than the details. And even in old age he could still play with great beauty and expressive power and win over listeners with the force of his musical personality.

His was one of the most authentically Romantic piano styles on record. Even when he was a child his playing was considered old-fashioned, and he was often compared with great pianists of earlier generations—Anton Rubinstein, Busoni, Paderewski, and

Nyiregyházi the Composer

Nyiregyházi was more just than a pianist, however. He composed music prolifically for more than eighty years, from early childhood to the last months of his life. He always considered himself primarily a creator and only secondarily a performer, and certainly he was better suited temperamentally to the private life of a composer than to the public life of a concert virtuoso. As long as he was composing, he felt creatively validated and fulfilled, whatever the state of his pianistic career, and he believed his compositions were his most important legacy.

He was creating melodies at the piano, some with accompaniment, while still a toddler. He learned the principles of notation in a single sitting at age three, and soon after came the first piece he remembered composing: a tune he titled *Madama Butterfly*, inspired by Puccini's opera. Before long, he had compiled an impressive portfolio of original works, and when he was four his parents began parading him before the musical world like a young Mozart. In 1909, Franz Bárd & Bruder, of Budapest, Vienna, and Leipzig, published three pieces under the collective title *Compositions d'Ervin Nyiregyházi: Berceuse, Chatter of Women, and Wedding March*, Opp. 1–3. Ervin had written all three the month he turned six.

As a child, he wrote numerous pieces in generic Romantic forms (ballade, fantasy, nocturne, scherzo, serenade, variation); evocative works with titles like *Spring Song, An Oriental Dream, Plaintive Sounds*, and *Life of a Butterfly*; ambitious orchestral pieces like *The Life of a Hero* and *Proclamation of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai*; an unfinished symphony on Napoleon; an oratorio on the death of Moses; a violin sonata; and a *Dramatic Sonata* for piano in the unusual key of A-flat minor. This music was influenced by respectable nineteenth-century models, though it ranged widely and some of it displayed considerable imagination, individuality, and expressive power. As a nine-year-old, he was already confident enough to compare his Ballade in F Minor favorably with Chopin's ballade in the same key, and he continued to view some of his earliest works as masterpieces even late in life.

During his years in Berlin, Ervin studied theory and composition with several important composer-conductors (Max Fiedler, Siegfried Ochs, Emil Nikolaus von Reznicek), and throughout his teens he continued composing, now influenced by his recent, momentous discovery of Liszt, often winning praise from knowledgeable elders, including some of Europe's greatest composers. In 1920, shortly before relocating to the United States, Nyiregyházi used his concert earnings to subsidize the printing of some recent works he thought highly of, by the venerable firm of C. G. Roder, in Leipzig; Kristiania is credited as the place of publication, himself as the publisher. He printed at least seven pieces, perhaps as many as twelve; there are apparently a few of which no copy survives.

Throughout adult life, Nyiregyházi composed almost every day, sometimes many hours at a stretch. Musical ideas were always running through his head, accompanying his life like a soundtrack. He composed while reading, conversing, walking, taking the bus. Some works came to him almost fully formed; others he labored over. (Some of his sketchbooks survive, along with many loose sketches on odd bits of paper—letters, bills, flyers, pamphlets, concert programs.) His compositions have never been catalogued or even counted, but they number well over a thousand, perhaps as many as two thousand. Sometimes he conceived or completed a work years before writing it down. There were periods in his life when, though composing prolifically in his head, he had little time or energy for writing works down; some were never written down. He made neat copies of finished works, and, beginning in 1947, occasionally microfilmed batches of compositions and stored the films in bank vaults. The pristine state of his manuscripts, and the care with which he sought to preserve them (not always successfully) through an impoverished, peripatetic life, says much about the high value he placed on his compositions.

Indeed, his music meant so much to him that he usually shared it only with his wives and most trusted, sympathetic colleagues and friends, including Lugosi and Swanson, and Schoenberg, who pronounced the music "unique." In 1938, Swanson tried to interest her friend Gustave Schirmer, heir to a major international music-publishing firm, in Nyiregyházi's music, but the firm rejected it—too old-fashioned. He performed his music only rarely as an adult. He gave one recital of his own works in 1934 while visiting Budapest, another in 1937, organized by Swanson, at the Hollywood Conservatory of Music. But the reviews were usually poor. In Budapest, one critic said the music made him want to vomit, and a critic in Los Angeles told him that the review he had wanted to write was too "blasphemous" to be printed. The dean of Hungarian critics, Aladár Tóth, heard a great sensibility and tragic passion that called out "sobbingly" in Nyiregyházi's music, and a reviewer in Los Angeles acknowledged its depth and authenticity, but still the bad reviews rankled—nothing hurt him more than criticism of his compositions. So it was a sign of how accepted he felt in Japan that, in 1982, he

Notes on the Pieces

(p. 21) **Valse mélancolique** (Melancholy Waltz). February 1919. Original printing 1920, 7 pages.

(p. 25) **Mephisto triumphiert!: Fantasie No. 1 für grosses Orchester. Konzert Bearbeitung desselben Werkes für Klavier zu 2 Händen** (Mephisto Triumphs!: Fantasy No. 1 for Large Orchestra. Concert arrangement of the same work for piano two hands). Summer and fall, 1919. Original printing 1920, 18 pp. Dedicated to “my friend Edvard Sylou-Kreutz.”

This and another long, virtuosic work, *Triumpf!*, were printed in 1920 as piano reductions of orchestral music; orchestrated versions do not survive, and probably never existed. In an interview that year, Nyiregyházi said that both works were intended “for piano and orchestra,” but the printed title pages suggest otherwise.

Like Liszt, whose B-minor sonata obviously influenced this work, Nyiregyházi was fascinated by the macabre and diabolical, and by the character of Mephistopheles: *A Mephisto Fantasie* was also among the pieces printed in 1920, and between 1931 and 1986 he wrote, by his own account, almost forty pieces titled *Mephisto*.

(p. 40) **Chanson passionée** (Passionate Song). November 1919. Original printing 1920, 7 pages.

(p. 47) **Dolcissimo** (Very Sweet). January 1920. Original printing 1920, 5 pages.

(p. 50) **Nocturne**. July 1920. Manuscript, 6 pages.

This work is mostly in C# minor, though the bitonal harmony in the last system prompts a sudden, surprising shift to C major, complete with change of key signature, in the last two measures. Such tonal anomalies are not rare in Nyiregyházi's work.

(p. 53) **A Száguldó Élet (Petőfi verse nyomán)** (The Fast-Paced Life, after Petőfi's Poem). August 1932. Manuscript, 4 pages.

Nyiregyházi the composer found much inspiration in literature—from the Jules Verne books and detective stories he read as a child to the works of canonical authors like Dostoevsky, Dreiser, Goethe, Heine, Hugo, Poe, Shakespeare, Strindberg, Wilde, and Zola. He often drew on poetry, plays, and novels by Hungarian authors: Ady, Babits, Jókai, Kisfaludy, Madách, Mikszát, Palasovszky, Pasztor, Vörösmarty. Poems by the revolutionary hero Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849) were particular favorites.

The distinctive augmented-second interval (Bb–C#) in the opening measures seems to allude to the “Gypsy scale” common in Romantic music in the Hungarian style, including Liszt's.

(p. 56) **Sweet Memories**. Undated; the manuscript, in the Library of Congress, is stamped July 27, 1934. Manuscript, 4 pages. At the top of the first page: “Composed by ERVIN NYIREGYHAZI/Pen name: THOMAS GORDON.”

This is a pastiche of popular songs from the early twentieth century, of the sort that Nyiregyházi liked to play as encores in his early American recitals. (In 1978, he recorded a twenty-minute medley of improvisations on old songs.) The way he signed this piece raises a tantalizing question: Did he once consider a side career as a Tin Pan Alley tunesmith?

(p. 59) **A Soldier of Fortune**. May 1939, New York. Original printing 1950, 7 pages. Dedicated to Mary Ann Barratt Fike.

The title is self-referential: Marveling once at his own caddish behavior, which he seemed unable to control, Nyiregyházi declared, “I am a total son of a bitch—a soldier of fortune.”

In the early fifties, in Los Angeles, he took one last stab at finding a public for his music by bringing out four piano pieces: *A Soldier of Fortune*, *Tonal Drama No. 1*, *Tragic Victory No. 1*, and *Checkmate No. 2*. The first two appeared in 1950 from “Bysshe and Barratt Publications,” i.e. the two wealthy friends who subsidized the printing; the others appeared in 1951 from “Nyiregyházi Publications,” at his own expense. Priced between 75 cents and \$1.50, the pieces sold mostly among his friends.

These four scores are littered with fanatically precise directions to the performer, not only conventional symbols for accents, phrasing, dynamics, and such but constantly fluctuating tempo and metronome markings, directions for all three pedals, and supplementary verbal instructions and footnotes. Nyiregyházi gives finicky directions for expressive effects like *tempo rubato*, rhythmic accents,

Valse mélancolique

(Melancholy Waltz)

ERVIN NYIREGYHÁZI
(1903–1987)

Andantino

Musical notation for measures 1-9. The piece is in 3/4 time. The right hand plays chords with a piano (*p*) dynamic, which softens to *pp* in the final measure. The left hand has whole rests.

Sempre con Ped.

10

Musical notation for measures 10-18. The right hand plays chords with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic, marked *espr. quasi Cello*. The left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment.

19

Musical notation for measures 19-26. The right hand continues with chords, and the left hand accompaniment continues.

27

Musical notation for measures 27-35. The right hand has an *8va* (octave) marking. The left hand has a *mp con anima* marking.

36

Musical notation for measures 36-42. The right hand has an *8va* marking. The left hand continues with eighth-note accompaniment.

43

Musical notation for measures 43-50. The right hand has an *8va* marking. The left hand continues with eighth-note accompaniment.

Mephisto triumphiert!¹⁾

Fantasie No. 1

(Mephisto Triumphs! Fantasy No. 1)

ERVIN NYIREGYHÁZI

(1903–1987)

Any cuts, even the smallest, are *absolutely inadmissible*.

Sostenuto

Allegro frenetico

The musical score is written for piano in 12/8 time. It is divided into two main sections: **Sostenuto** and **Allegro frenetico**. The **Sostenuto** section (measures 1-4) features a slow, steady bass line with a **ff** dynamic. The **Allegro frenetico** section (measures 5-14) is characterized by a rapid, driving bass line with a **ff** dynamic. The right hand plays chords and melodic lines, with a **fff triumphierend** dynamic in measures 5-7. The score includes various performance markings such as **8ba-1** (octave below), **rit.** (ritardando), and **f glissando** (forte glissando). The piece concludes with a **rit.** marking and a final chord.

All repeats must *absolutely* be observed.

1) The work may also be performed with the title *Mephisto Fantasy No. 1*.

2) Optional: In these eight measures (+ to +), the right hand may be played an octave higher.

Chanson passionnée

(Passionate Song)

ERVIN NYIREGYHÁZI

(1903–1987)

1) *Moderato molto appassionato* *cantando*

6

2) *ma un poco*

11

16

21

sempre cresc.

26

8ba-1

8ba-1

8ba-1

8ba-1

8ba-1

1) The entire piece should be played rubato.

2) Optional: without arpeggio.

[Untitled No. 5]

ERVIN NYIREGYHÁZI
(1903–1987)

Presto

9 *ff* *8ba*

17 *8ba*

23 *8ba*

30 *8ba*

38 *8ba-1* *8ba*

Szálassy to the Gallows

ERVIN NYIREGYHÁZI
(1903–1987)

Lento

ff

6

12

fff

8ba-----

18

fff

8ba-----

23

fff

8ba-----

8ba-----