Liisi Metsvahi

“Ballade”
by Eduard Tubin
An Estonian tale for violin and piano

Written reflection within independent, artistic project

Recording of the independent, artistic project is documented in the printed copy of this text at KMH’s library.
Abstract

The purpose of this study is to ascertain if exercising mental training, analysis and research on a musical piece before beginning the physical practicing process will benefit and simplify the learning process.

The piece chosen is Eduard Tubin’s “Ballade” for violin and piano. Different sections have been analysed and translated into a narrative from my point of view. Historical background information is presented and the piece is also visual as a graph.

From my research I deduct that mental techniques should be much more engaged into the everyday practice routine to avoid frustration and physical injuries, and assist in the learning process.

Keywords: Eduard Tubin, program music, mental training, musical imagery, Estonia, ballade
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1. Introduction

I chose to write about Eduard Tubin because he was an Estonian living in Stockholm, Sweden, just like I am. The main focus of this study however was not something I had initially planned on exploring but came to me from the first time I listened to a recording of the “Ballade.”

I have always been one to get certain images in my head while playing or listening to a piece of music and the same images would reoccur every time I would return to the same parts. Usually they are just random pictures my subconsciousness has fabricated that aren’t really related to one another and often don’t even correlate with the idea of that certain segment (for example I remember playing a Bach fugue on the piano and getting images of cows eating grass on a field etc.) However, with Eduard Tubin’s “Ballade” the images were very clear and actually added up to one great story. The more I listened to it, the more convinced I was that it was not just beautiful music but there was a narrative, and a very specific one. Intrigued by that notion I started to do some research and was amazed to discover that my findings actually verified my version of this story, or at least that there undeniably is one, even though the composer had never spoken of it.

1.1. Aim

What lies beyond the score and in between the sounds? Many composers want to tell a story and create music to express that. My aim is to translate the music back into a story to see if by uncovering the programmatic, I would be more capable as an instrumentalist and more efficient as a musician to present it to the audience.

I also plan to explore and get more accustomed to involve mental training techniques into my daily practice routine throughout the duration of writing this study.
2. Background

2.1 Eduard Tubin and the historical influence

Composer and conductor Eduard Tubin (1905-1982) was one of the most important figures in the development of the Estonian national idiom and the father figure of our symphonic music. He has composed music in many different genres including the first Estonian ballet “Kratt” (1940) but his most important works, like those of Jean Sibelius, are considered to be his ten symphonies.

“Ballade” (1939) for violin and piano (or violin and orchestra) was written at a transitional period in Tubin's life. Both his composing style and the political situation in Estonia was about to change.

It was the eve of World War II and the Soviet Union had started their aggressive plans on taking over the Baltic countries, gathering tens of thousands of soldiers on the boarders, ready to occupy our homeland. The Soviet army crossed the border on June 17, 1940 and Estonia was occupied for 51 years, until August 20, 1991.

According to the Estonian Music Information Centre Eduard Tubin, like many other from the Estonian cultural elite, emigrated to Stockholm with his wife and two children in 1944. The second great period in his composing began. He managed to acquire a good job, working in the archive of the Drottningholm Palace for 27 years. In time he became a member of the Swedish Composers’ Union and The Royal Music Academy.

After Stalin’s death in 1953 the composer was able to re-establish some ties with Estonia but because of his connection with his occupied homeland he fell into disfavour in the émigré circles.

During his lifetime, one of the peak moments was the performance of his Symphony No. 5 in 1952 at New York’s Carnegie Hall, conducted by Endel Kalam as stated by the Estonian Music Information Centre.
Tubin and his music became more widely known posthumously thanks to the performances and recordings of his orchestral works by Estonian conductors Neeme Järvi, Arvo Volmer and Eri Klas. Eduard Tubin is buried in The Woodland Cemetery in Stockholm, Sweden.

The unrelenting qualities of Tubin’s work are the expressive role of rhythm and thematic unity based on persistent interval relations and linear polyphony. His melodies and also variant development are associated with Estonian folk melody. The tonal freedom and economic style in Tubin’s work are modernist, but his form shaping is conservative. Uniting conservative (folk music sources, classical form) and modernist trends in his work, he was more of a developer and unifier than a rule breaker. Though he avoided the programmatic, Tubin’s music carries a vivid dramatic message. The tragic tone in his music intensified with his life in exile and in occupied Estonia his name became a symbol of cultural disruption.¹

2.2 What is a ballade?

Etymologically, the word ‘ballad’ has been taken from Latin word *ballare*, which means ‘dancing song’. It is a poem meant for singing that first appeared in the 14th century.²

A ‘ballade’ in literature is a poem by form but a narrative in content. It does not tell the reader what’s happening, but rather shows it, describing each crucial moment in the trail of events to convey that sense of emotional urgency. Ballads mostly rely on simple language but seldom offer a direct message about a certain event, character or situation. It is left to the audience to deduce the moral of the story from the whole narration.³

By definition a ballad is a lyro-epic poem, which means it combines two types of emotional tone: lyrical and epical. That notion is closely connected with that of a “lyrical hero”, which is the structural building notion of the lyro-epic. It means that the events are treated via the prism of a hero’s consciousness. The plot depicts mostly the broodings and thoughts of the lyrical hero – hence the lyricism, and the poem pictures the history of a nation’s struggle for independence or a personality’s struggle for inner or outer independence (the author’s position) – hence the epic.⁴ That concept of portraying heroic legends can be widely seen in nearly all of Tubin’s music.

² [https://letterpile.com/poetry/The-Ballad-Definition-Types-Characteristics](https://letterpile.com/poetry/The-Ballad-Definition-Types-Characteristics)
³ [http://literarydevices.net/ballad/](http://literarydevices.net/ballad/)
⁴ [http://doclecture.net/1-35140.html](http://doclecture.net/1-35140.html)
2.3 The elements

According to ancient Greek philosophers all matter consists of four different elements: water, air, fire and earth. The idea that these elements made up all matter was the cornerstone of philosophy, science, and medicine for two thousand years. The elements were "pure" but could not be found in that state on earth. Every visible thing was made up of some combination of earth, water, air, and fire.

I have deducted that the four elements can also be fitted into this research as the foundation on which the musical material of E. Tubin’s “Ballade” is based on.

Empedocles described these elements not only as physical manifestations or material substances, but also as spiritual essences. The four elements were even used to describe the four temperaments a person could have. Their varying combinations result in different personality types. Hippocrates used the elements to describe the four "humors" found in the body.

These theories stated that the temperaments and humors needed to be in balance with each other in order for a person to be well both mentally and physically. In astrology each of the four elements represent a basic kind of energy and consciousness that operates within everyone.

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5 http://www.webwinds.com/thalassa/elemental.htm

3. Method

I am going to perform E. Tubin’s “Ballade” at my Bachelor exam concert which will take place in May, 2017. There is a lot of repertoire to go through, so I proposed to myself that in addition to regular everyday practice, I would try something different with this one piece as it has a special meaning to me. I am going to try different forms of mental practice before getting into the actual physical part of mastering a piece. My intention is to do everything I can think of except actually touching the violin.

The common term ‘mental practice’ also refers to musical imagery. This is defined as cognitive or imaginary rehearsal of a physical skill without overt muscular movement. According to Clark, Williamson & Aksentjevic imagery as used by musicians involves the melodic and temporal contours of music and also a sense of the physical movements required to perform the music, a “view” of the score, instrument, the space in which they are performing and a “feel” of the emotions and sensations a musician wishes to express in performance as well as those experienced during an actual performance.

Lehmann identified three different forms of mental practice a musician could use, either in isolation or in combination, to create a more complete understanding of the music. The first is visualization, whereby the piece is memorized in terms of its visual structure. That means you visualize the score in your mind’s eye which would allow you to “read the notes”. The second type is internally hearing the music that is not physically present. The final type of practice is what he terms the photographic ear, whereby musicians claim to have access to individual notes within a memorized, or just heard, piece of music.

In my own experience I think of musical imagery as actual images in my mind’s eye. If I can combine all of Lehmann’s forms of mental practice by creating one mental narrative that I can see, hear and feel in my mind, it is surely bound to benefit me as much as any other musical imagery technique. It is interesting that I have yet to come across that angle in other researches.

I started this study with doing research on the composer. I found out about his style of composing and his view of the world in hope that it would open the door to his mind and

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7 Connolly & Williamson (2004: p. 224)
8 Lehmann (1997: p. 146)
intentions with the piece at hand. Other methods include fully analyzing the piece, listening to it repeatedly, playing it in my mind while following the score, creating a graphic plan to visualize different parts and which segments are the most important in each section. All that led my mind to translating all of the information into a story.

It is intriguing to find out if this method helps with mastering a musical piece and if the technical issues that always arise for instrumentalists could really be the result of handling the task in a misguided way in one’s head. In addition to making the learning process easier, it will help me understand the music to be able to interpret it in the most authentic way possible.
4. Analysis

I find that the four elements (earth, air, fire and water) and the hero (/nation) who is struggling amongst or with them are represented in this ballade and the piece is divided into five sections respectively.

These are the different sections of this piece that are presented as my translation of the story in Eduard Tubin’s “Ballade”:

**Earth**

The piece starts quietly with a slow and heavy march, although written in a three fourth time measurement. The piano is playing alone with both hands in unison (see example 1). It can be viewed as almost a funeral march or maybe it marks something ancient and profound, like the earth.

Example 1: bar 1-5, piano

An auspicious fanfare-like upwards passage can be heard next in the right hand, played by clarinets in the orchestral version (see ex. 2).

Example 2: bar 8-10, 12-13, piano
The violin enters in bar 15 with the main theme (see ex. 3), calm and dreamy, like beginning to tell a story.

Example 3: bar 14-19, violin

The musical line and dynamics start to grow. The bass is moving more and more chromatically while the right hand is pulsating progressively, like an erratic heartbeat (see ex. 4).

Example 4: bar 20-23, piano

The register gets higher and higher, the dynamics louder and louder and together with the piano they reach a sforzando. From there on they start building towards the next episode, each bar getting less profound and more playful. It culminates in a four-fourth measurement bar that has a fermata quality.
In bar 45 the violin is totally released from the tension of the previous development and really starts to enjoy itself. Victorious octaves and glissandi jumps give this part a feeling of playfulness, thrill and recklessness. But underneath all that the piano is now playing eighth notes in a gradual chromatic movement, suggesting agitation and uncertainty (see ex. 5). In the context of this story, this seems like the actions of a human consciousness. It is almost uncomfortable for the listener because it is so unsettling.

Example 5: bar 45-46, piano

The violin stops in bar 59, while the piano is even more impelled by that, growing with an accelerando and a crescendo into a heavy fff bar, as though out of breath.

Air

Allegro agitato marks the beginning of a glimmering and airy part in the piano (see ex. 6). It is light and quiet but full of doubt.

Example 6: bar 65, piano
However the violin part is heavy, playing one and the same sequent but growing in register every time (see ex. 7). The violin also begins in a doubtful and melancholic manner but together with the harmony they become gradually more decisive and positive.

Example 7: bar 68-72, violin

Fire

By bar 92 the uncertainties have exploded into a swirl of ecstasy. Fast fiery passages in the violin give the sense of incredible excitement and passion (see ex. 8).

Example 8: bar 92-94, violin

The melody and accompaniment move in opposite directions, which makes this place very dynamic. In bar 108 one line in the piano part starts to play a melody of its own — the same motif the violin had in the “Air” (see ex. 9).

Example 9: bar 108-112, piano
Here starts the final chapter of our tale. The piano plays upwards sextuplets in a wide range with both hands, creating a feeling of something flowing and massive, like the sea (see ex. 10). The tempo marking is respectively *Largamente*.

Example 10: bar 126, piano

The violin enters with the same melodic material as in the very beginning but this time it feels decisive, like it has reached its destination and come to terms with its destiny. It sounds like the violin is enjoying itself to the fullest here as well but in a totally different manner than in the “Hero” part. Here it is pure and somehow beyond the petty troubles of humanity. It’s like a breath of fresh air for the hero, it is now one with the nature and in perfect harmony with itself.

In bar 147 the two instruments have the melody together in unison in a strong and powerful manner, as if they are stronger together than apart. The violin plays fourths (see ex. 11) and the piano full common chords.

Example 11: bar 147-148, violin and piano
They finish with four fermata chords that lead to a simple violin cadenza. From there follows the coda. The piano plays a version of the melody again with some comments from the violin. It is a happy ending, created with the simplest of resources, true to the ballade form.

In my idea of this story, Tubin has depicted a hero together with the four elements (earth, fire, air, water) of matter and energy that according to the ancient Greeks, exist in everyone’s consciousness. Together with this, studying the composer’s life and the situation in the world at the time the “Ballade” was written, one can deduct two emotional tones in this piece: a man’s struggle with his inner self and a nation’s battle for independence. As a true national romanticist, he has ended this piece in a hopeful manner, with a happy ending. Even though the composer according to himself didn’t write programmatic music, if done enough research, one can definitely find a hero’s tale in Eduard Tubin’s “Ballade”.

5. Result

On February 5th, three months after I began my research on the “Ballade”, I finally picked up my violin to start the physical process of learning this piece.

I started to play from the first bar with the intention to go as far as I could before any major problems would arise, like I would normally do when first starting work on a new piece. I didn’t expect my groundwork to have any effect on my playing this early in the learning process. I did hope that it would help me later on to solve some technical issues quicker by changing my way of thinking, rather than applying the standard ways of practice again and again. Even though I prepared to begin learning this piece like any other, to my surprise I didn’t act like I normally would. Instead of focusing all my attention to having perfect intonation and good sound, I was making music. This piece had gotten so deep into my consciousness that it had been living a life of its own down there for months. So when I started to play, my main priority was finding the melodic character and I didn’t obsess with intonation or bow hand flexibility, as I normally would in a segment like the beginning of the “Ballade” (see example 3). Instead I was telling the story. I had my story in my head and this time I just tried to tell it with the violin, rather than words.

Usually I would search for a meaning in the music while I was playing a certain phrase, trying out different possibilities and deciding which option I liked best. Sadly in the first week (or two) I often didn’t get to the point where I was adding musical expression to the equation. All my focus was directed to practical exercises for overcoming the technical difficulties that I believed were in my way to making music. In reality it is often the other way around, as I also found out with this practice.

“Ballade” is definitely not an easy piece. There are a few places that are especially tricky and need a lot of plain practice like the sixteenth notes in the “Fire” and double stops in the “Water” segment (see example 8 and 11).

Sometimes you have the same problem with a segment for weeks and your brain translates that behavior as the way it is supposed to be, since the same reflex is repeated over and over again. Normally I would try to get the segment technically as close to perfection as I could and then start to think about how to make it into music. But I would often encounter that I would not be able to enjoy that particular place anymore or give it any sort of musical meaning because I have practiced myself into a rut.
When using the method of previous research and mental training I noticed that the phrasing was clear right away and not only in my mind but actually came out the way I heard it in my head, regardless of technical imperfections. I think the main reason for this is that now I am so certain about how it has to sound that there simply is no other option for me. After playing the “Ballade” for about an hour, I felt like I could learn this in days, not weeks or months, as I usually estimate.

I feel like I know the piece and I can already play it, all that needs to be done now is to teach it to my body.
6. Discussion

Research shows that musical imagery helps with developing and enhancing expressivity during practice and performance, assisting with learning and memorizing music, pre-experiencing performance situations and assisting in the prevention and treatment of playing-related injuries.9

The biggest discovery for me in using this method was that I automatically put music first. Music students very often forget the reason why they practice. Ours is a profession that could be very straining to mental and physical health if we fall into a pattern of the wrong state of mind. Sometimes it could feel like you are a slave to your instrument because of the tasks ahead every day that seem never-ending. The key to overcome the difficulties is to remember that practice is necessary to provide yourself with the tools to express yourself, to make music. This is a common conclusion but it is one thing to hear it and another thing to believe it. Preparing a musical piece mentally before actually starting physical work on it helps keep one's priorities and intentions on track throughout the learning process.

There is a number of previous studies made on the importance of visual imagery in the learning process of an instrument.

Lehmann made clear the importance of imagery to musical practice and performance by stating: ”the most important goal of performance is to match a highly vivid representation of the desired performance with the current execution”.10 This is something I had not really thought about before. Playing an instrument is about self expression. Without expression music is just a sequence of notes. The vital idea to extract is that you always have to have the result in your head, clear and vivid before you put the instrument under your chin. The act of practice is to teach your body to express what your mind wants to say.

That is exactly what Holmes found when interviewing elite musicians. He concluded that when practicing they form vivid representations of their music in their minds and then search for ways of translating those schemas/representations into reality.11

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9 Clark, Williamon & Aksentijevic (2012: p. 351)
10 Lehmann (1997: p. 143)
11 Holmes (2003)
Beyond its efficacy as a practice method, Connolly and Williamon\textsuperscript{12} provided a list of functions for which imagery was deemed most beneficial. These included:

- Improving learning and memory.
- Making practice more efficient.
- Overcoming technical difficulties and developing skills.
- Heightening sensory awareness.
- Gaining more interest in the music itself.
- Refocusing attention during performance.
- Enhancing general confidence and resilience on stage.
- Achieving greater control over negative emotions.
- Achieving a greater connection and presence with the audience.
- Achieving peak experience.

Further research on mental training as the first phase of the learning process of a musical piece could indicate that the majority of the work that needs to be put in takes place in the brain. It is yet unclear which is the best combination between mental and physical practice. From my research I deduct that mental techniques should be much more engaged into the everyday practice routine to avoid frustration and physical injuries. This is a big issue that should be addressed already from the early years of learning a musical instrument and should be in focus in all higher musical institutions.

There is no miracle short-cut to mastering a musical instrument or learning a piece but one should always explore the options that make the process easier. The most important thing a young instrumentalist should keep in mind is to remember why they are doing what they do every day.

\textsuperscript{12} Connolly and Williamon (2004: p. 225)
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http://www.webwinds.com/thalassa/elemental.htm
Ballade by Edward Tubin (1939)

(Tempo: Andante sostenuto → Allegro agitato → Poco allegretto)

Tonality: E minor, E major, A minor, A major, E major, E minor

Form:

- A: EARTH
- B: HERO
- C: AIR
- D: FIRE
- E: WATER
- F: Cadenza

Attachment