ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: DESPERATE MEASURES: RECORDING OF THE COMPLETE PIANO WORKS OF ROBERT MUCZYNSKI

Dmitry Aleksandr Samogray, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2019

Dissertation directed by: Professor Larissa Dedova, School of Music

The aim of this dissertation is to help assimilate the solo piano works of Robert Muczynski into the active 20th century piano repertoire, by providing pianists, musicologists, and listeners with the composer's complete solo piano output on CD, for the first time. Of the fifteen compositions contained therein, only eight can be found on commercial CDs, with another two available on out-of-print LPs, and the last five never recorded on any recording medium. This circumstance diminishes Muczynski's piano music - the largest part of his catalogue - to a footnote in the American chapter of this instrument's history. The ultimate goal is to have these recordings commercially released as a two-disk set. This release will follow an earlier disk of Muczynski's chamber music with piano, recorded for Brilliant Classics and released in the spring of 2017.

# DESPERATE MEASURES: RECORDING OF THE COMPLETE PIANO WORKS OF ROBERT MUCZYNSKI

by

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# Preface

This is a document of supplementary biographical and descriptive material. Presented as program notes, it is intended to help contextualize the recordings within the larger sphere of 20th-century piano music.

These recordings were made on the stage of the Dekelboum Concert Hall at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, College Park, Maryland, across eight recording sessions in an eighteen-month period, with the first session taking place on December 17, 2017, and the last on May 13, 2019. To ensure a consistent, industry-standard sound quality and overall production value, the same Steinway Model D-274 Concert Grand Piano was used in every session of this project, along with an identical Sennheiser microphone setup and configuration.

# Dedication

To Dora and mama.

Your love is my most precious treasure.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Professor Larissa Dedova and Professor Rita Sloan for the years of invaluable help and mentorship I received from them as a graduate student at the University of Maryland. This project would be impossible without them.

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# Chapter 1: Biography and Summary of Style

*Biography*

Robert Muczynski was born in Chicago on March 19, 1929, to immigrants of Polish and Slovak origin. Displaying an early sensitivity to music, he began to study piano at the age of five. In 1947, he began his Bachelor of Music degree in piano, as a student of German pianist and pedagogue, Walter Knupfer. In 1949, he began to study composition with Alexander Tcherepnin. Muczynski earned his Bachelor and Master of Music degrees in piano from DePaul, in 1950 and 1952, respectively. In 1958, Muczynski made his New York recital debut playing a program of his own works. Later that year, he appeared as soloist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, performing his own Piano Concerto, Op.7.

In 1965, Muczynski joined the composition faculty at the University of Arizona, remaining there until his retirement in 1988. A list of honors and achievements includes a Pulitzer Prize nomination for the Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra, Op.41. He died in Tucson on May 25, 2010, at the age of 81.

*Summary of Style*

Muczynski embraced the neoclassical aesthetic, championed by an earlier generation of European masters like Stravinsky and Les Six, in a time when most young composers were being indoctrinated into serialism. In summarizing Muczynski's musical style, musicologist Walter Simmons opined, "One might identify its underlying stylistic currents with reference to the phraseology of Bartók, the harmonic language and overall rhetoric found in the piano works of Barber, a fondness for 5 and 7-beat meters reminiscent of Bernstein, and a piquant sprinkling of 'blue-notes' within its melodic structures."[1]

An important source of influence was the music of Sergei Prokofiev. Muczynski's connection to Prokofiev comes from his composition professor, Alexander Tcherepnin, who identified Prokofiev as his own idol, having been exposed to the composer's music from an early age. Alexander's father, Nikolai Tcherepnin – a pianist, composer, and a well-respected conductor – was one of Prokofiev's teachers at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. As a token of gratitude, Prokofiev dedicated his Piano Concerto No. 1, Op.10 to him. Nikolai often welcomed Prokofiev into his home, whereupon the young composer would play his early piano compositions, with the young Alexander (eight years Prokofiev's junior) hiding behind furniture, listening.

Besides Tcherepnin and Prokofiev, no other composer was as influential on the development of Muczynski's musical language and attitude towards composition

[1] Walter Simmons, "A Muczynski Retrospective," Walter Simmons, September 15, 2019, https://walter-simmons.com/writings/786.

as the Hungarian composer, Bela Bartók. The influence of Bartók comes though in two forms: the conciseness of musical ideas and emphasis on sophisticated rhythmic structures. Muczynski came in contact with Bartók's music both through study as a piano student, and through the mentorship of the renowned conductor, Fritz Reiner, who helmed the Chicago Symphony Orchestra from 1953 through 1962. Reiner – a champion of contemporary music and former student of Bartók – was responsible for pushing several of his teacher's orchestral works, including the Concerto for Orchestra, into the standard orchestral repertoire. In 1953, Muczynski obtained a commission from the Fromm Music Foundation to write his first symphony, and in that process received invaluable feedback from Reiner, who was at the start of his tenure. In 1958, shortly after his Carnegie Hall recital debut, Muczynski was invited to perform his Piano Concerto, Op.7 with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, in part due to his previous association with the music director.

# Chapter 2: CD 1

*Desperate Measures (Paganini Variations) Op.48 (1994)*

Completed in 1994, *Desperate Measures* is a set of twelve variations on the theme from Niccolo Paganini's *Caprice No.24 in A minor*, of 1807. Structurally, Muczynski's work closely resembles that of the original: a statement of the theme followed by twelve variations of varying characters. At slightly under ten minutes in length, *Desperate Measures* is closer in scope to similar efforts of 20th century pianist-composers such as Alexander Rosenblatt, Fazil Say, and Marc-André Hamelin than it is to the established masterpieces by Brahms, and Rachmaninoff. It is important to add that the works of Hamelin and Brahms stand alone in their transcendental technical demands.

Like all the aforementioned composers, Muczynski uses Paganini's theme as a framing device to showcase his own musical language and hint at some of its many influences. In Variation No.8, titled *Tango*, we hear a brief, albeit poignant homage to the great Argentinian master Astor Piazzolla, who passed away exactly two years prior, in the summer of 1992. Variation No.9, *Slow waltz tempo*, with its English title and tart, Cool Jazz-inspired lines, points towards a young Bill Evans – as member of the Miles Davis sextet or duo partner to the ever-dolorous Chet Baker. Aside from the tributes, the work is replete with Muczynski's distinctive stylistic markers: asymmetric meters, snappy accentuations, chords altered by added seconds and fourths and attacked with piston-like exactitude. *Desperate Measures* stands as an

excellent introduction to Muczynski's catalogue due to its concentration of variety in addition to being the last work the composer finished before retiring from creative life; thus representing a quintessence of his style.

*Second Piano Sonata Op.22 (1966)*

In the notes accompanying his own recording of this work (Laurel Record, 1983) Muczynski describes the *Second Piano Sonata* as his "most ambitious," in terms of "dimension, variety of content, and technical demands." Here we see Muczynski: the Expressionist – weaving melodic lines over, under, and through angular, rhythmic constructions, thus yielding a kind of 'cubist dissonance' not uncommon in mid-century piano music.

The first movement, in sonata-allegro form, opens with a bipartite first theme. The first part is a brooding, texturally viscid declamation that makes way for a motoric *Allegro - marcato, non legato*. The second theme is a subdued, meditative polyphony marked *Andante con espressione*. The sudden change in mood, tempo, and articulation points towards Sergei Prokofiev's Sonata No.7, where a similarly mechanical *Allegro inquieto* first theme is followed by a sorrowful *Andantino* second theme.

The second movement comes as a short respite from the brooding and the motoric. Muczynski describes it as a "light, airy kind of music in irregular (4+3) meter." The *Molto andante* chorale brings back the brooding while the fourth movement fugato is once again impetuously motoric, providing a satisfactory finish.

Setting the goal of creating a "large-scaled virtuoso work," Muczynski presents us with his longest and most technically ambitious composition for a solo instrument, demanding a sustained control of sound, rhythm, and tempo unlike anything else in the catalogue. While it is tempting to attribute the work's serious mood to the turbulent decade in which it was conceived, it is important to note that Muczynski, in his usual manner, declined to provide any specific source for its inspiration. As a result, any conjecture with regards to the sonata's meaning would be glib and potentially misleading.

*Maverick Pieces Op.37 (1977)*

In an interview he gave to accompany his own recording of Maverick Pieces, as part of a different release (Laurel Record, 1980), Muczynski explained that the title of the work was derived from the observation that several of the twelve character pieces contained therein shared a kind of 'maverick' quality, in that they didn't "fit in conjunction with the others and because the collection was not necessarily intended as a suite where each movement is linked to its neighbor."

Indeed, the twelve pieces present unique, self-contained sonic worlds and mustn't be regarded as interdependent. Naturally, some stand out more than others. The first piece, marked *Allegro marcato,* juxtaposes a riotous, nearly cacophonous diatribe with a strained, plea vibrating its way across the high and middle registers. In the fourth piece – *Moderato* – the composer partners a tune that alludes to Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* together with a reposeful melody of American flavor.

The final piece – *Allegro con spirito* – is a scherzo where a playful jaunt of altered triads is interrupted by an episode of dramatic yet ultimately disingenuous solemnity.

As mentioned earlier, these twelve pieces need not appear as a set in order to be effective. Like any sketchbook re-contextualized as a single set for the purposes of publication, Maverick Pieces invites the performer to consider extracting and matching up the pieces to help reveal hitherto unseen features of the music.

*Sonatina Op.1 (1950)*

The first work in Muczynski's catalogue is a Sonatina completed under the supervision of Alexander Tcherepnin, shortly after the Russian pianist-composer arrived at DePaul University from Paris in 1949. A student work, this effort reveals Muczynski at the beginning of his journey into composition and thus, still in search of his own voice.

From the very beginning, the influence of the Russian school in general and of Tcherepnin in particular is apparent. There is a clear respect for form and balance, as well as harmonic function. In the second movement – *Andante con espressione* – Muczynski honors the heritage of his pedagogical and personal family trees (he was a son of Polish and Slovak immigrants) by employing a distinctly Slavic melody, to great effect.

However, rhythm and textural transparency point towards the French neoclassical masters, particularly Poulenc and Milhaud, as well as the Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů. This was not surprising since Tcherepnin himself completed his studies at the Paris Conservatory under Isidor Philipp, after fleeing

Russia following the Revolution of 1917. In Paris, Tcherepnin travelled in the same circles as the abovementioned composers, his own music experiencing a transformation as a result of the creative crosspollination.

His teacher's influence notwithstanding, the Sonatina demonstrates Muczynski's own musical gift in its nascent form, as well as an idiomatic approach to piano composition – i.e. writing for the hands, not the score. Additionally, it holds the peculiar distinction of being the only published piano work by the composer to carry a key signature.

# Chapter 3: CD 2

*Third Piano Sonata Op.35 (1974)*

Conceived during a sabbatical in 1973, Muczynski described his third and final piano sonata as "the most spacious and relaxed" of the three, the first two being "designed as virtuoso vehicles." The description likely arose due to the subdued character of the two themes of the first movement, cast once again in sonata-allegro form. The pastoral lightness of the first theme, marked *Allegro moderato* quickly gives way to a slower, gloomier second, carrying a different tempo marking – *Andante espressivo* – in Prokofian fashion.

Described as "a little Scherzo in rondo form in 5/8 meter," the *Allegro grazioso* second movement evokes the decadence of a ballroom, late into a soirée, where rules of decorum begin to give way to profligacy. The third movement is presented in two distinct parts. The first is a nocturnal *Andante* with more than a hint of the Blues in its treatment of the melody and the apposition of major and minor. The second is a toccata in A/B/A form, marked *Allegro* and galvanized by mixed meters. The B theme reintroduces the main motive of the first movement's first theme – not an uncommon trend in 20$^{th}$ century sonatas – before reawakening the toccata.

As a whole, the *Third Piano Sonata* favors largely unobstructed tonality over the expressionistic dissonances of the second sonata, while saving the contrapuntal textures solely for the development section of the first movement. Consequently, the

slower episodes showcase Muczynski at his most euphonious, saving the rhythmic horsepower for the finale.

*Suite for Piano Op.13 (1960)*

The first of two collections distinguished by their use of programmatic titles - *Suite, Op.13* is influenced greatly by Bartok's early masterpiece and its namesake: The *Suite, Op.14*, of 1916. The first movement – *Festival* – borrows several attributes from the first movement of Bartók's suite, namely the meter (2/4), emphasis on the offbeat, and the whirling, sixteenth-note figures. In turn, the second movement – *Flight* – borrows from the second movement of Bartók's the idea of arpeggiated triads (major/minor in Muczynski, augmented in Bartók) as procreative building blocks. Notably, the two suites end with highly contrasting movements; the Bartók with a ruminative *Sostenuto* chorale that slowly fades into a *pianississimo*, while Muczynski's *Scherzo* gallops away to a *sforzando* finish.

*Toccata Op.15 (1961)*

With its relentless *perpetuum mobile* and an exceedingly sophisticated edifice, the *Toccata, Op.15* is perhaps the most unique work for any instrument or ensemble in Muczynski's catalogue. Additionally, while Muczynski favored the genre for his fast movements, this is the only toccata he composed titled thus.

A serious automobile accident in Gallup, New Mexico, instigated the composition of this work. Muczynski was able to walk away from a potentially life-

ending event virtually unscathed, choosing to commemorate it with a work of transcendental technical difficulty, calling it his "rage" piece. Avoiding the repeated-note cliché, the composer initiates a structure of closely linked broken fourths – presented as a kind of irreducible, generative unit – somewhat resembling the links in a long chain. Although the toccata is cast in A/B/A form, the B theme does not offer a respite from the frantic pacing nor an introduction of a conventional melody. Subsequently, the work takes on the form of abstract sculpture, alluding to innumerable different subjects depending on the angle of view.

*Six Preludes Op.6 (1953)*

Influenced by the piano miniatures of Prokofiev, which Muczynski admired for their clarity, *Six Preludes, Op.6* – a "self-imposed exercise," as he put it – became the young composer's first piano works completed following his graduation from DePaul University.

Foreshadowing György Ligeti's *Désordre* from Book I of his exemplary *Études*, the third prelude – *Allegro giocoso* – stands out due to its inventive architecture; with the right hand restricted to white-key triplet runs, buttressed by the left via black-key octaves and single notes. The sixth prelude, marked *Allegro marcato*, is partially modeled after the fourth étude from Prokofiev's *Four Études for Piano, Op.2*, of 1909; a work Alexander Tcherepnin likely heard as a young boy in its gestative phase during one of Prokofiev's visits to Alexander's father, Nikolai.

*Six Preludes* also represent the composer's long preoccupation with small-scale form. One wouldn't be entirely mistaken in labeling Muczynski, like Bartók

before him, as a miniaturist, given that the average length of a movement in his solo piano catalogue is less then a minute and forty five seconds, and since he's never composed a movement for any instrument or ensemble lasting ten minutes or more. Nevertheless, the six sonatas – three for solo piano along with those for piano and flute, cello, as well as alto saxophone – would have to stand as evidence to the contrary.

*Seven Op.30 (1971)*

Intended as a 'sequel' to the *Six Preludes*, *Op.6* Muczynski described *Seven* as a work that puts "greater demands upon the performer in terms of technique, variance of touch, phrasing, and the use of pedals." With regards to scope, the plans seemed to have remained unchanged. Like their predecessors, the preludes are mostly cast in A/B/A form, with a single, unifying idea extended across each piece.

The prelude with the most redolent character would have to be the fourth – marked *Animato*. Hearing it, the first image that comes to mind is that of a carnival pianist, whipping up a waltz intended to serve as a 'screamer' for an eager audience, or a Weimar-era cabaret pianist accompanying a troupe of scantily dressed dancers. In stark contrast, the sixth prelude – *Adagio* – is a glum, crawling processional, too weary to accelerate to the pace of a funeral march.

Played alongside *Six Preludes*, one begins to understand why Muczynski's talents were well suited for miniatures. Reveling in the minute details of inter-sonic relationships, he is able to build small, vibrant sound worlds, illuminating ideas that would otherwise fade away in large-scale narrative forms.

*Fables Op.21 (1965)*

Not much can nor should be said about this set, subtitled *Nine Pieces for the Young*, and dedicated to an eight-year-old. In discussing the challenges of writing for a young student, Muczynski pointed out, "Few people realize how difficult it is to compose a piece that stays within the restrictions of that level. You have to restrain yourself when it comes to key choice, rhythmic complexity, and range. In *Fables*, I tried to use strong patterns with the idea of liberating one hand by assigning it a repeating rhythmic or melodic figure."

# Chapter 4: CD 3

*First Piano Sonata Op.9 (1956)*

Muczynski's *First Piano Sonata, Op.9* was written specifically for his planned Carnegie Hall recital debut, which required a "work of substance," as he put it. An ambitious, technically demanding work of abundant imagination, the first sonata is also Muczynski's most unconventional with regards to form.

Forsaking traditional sonata-allegro form for the first movement, the composer opts for a structure that he described as "sectional, alternating slow music with fast." Bookended by two lengthy *Moderato* episodes, the first movement contains a total of five distinct sections with different tempos and unique, self-contained musical ideas; like an anthology made up of five different short stories taking place in the same literary universe. The overall mood is grim, occasionally even sinister – a result of the young composer having suffered through the deaths of several classmates while a student at DePaul. A short *Andante tranquillo* section in the second half of the movement offers what amounts to a consolation.

The second movement is a rondo, marked *Allegro giocoso*. In contrast to the first movement, the rondo is a jubilant romp, carried forward by unrelenting momentum as it clears hurdles set by mixed meters and metric modulations with rhythmic flair and melodic exuberance.

Each separated by roughly a decade, the three piano sonatas accompany significant milestones in Muczynski's career; the first written for the New York

debut, the second following his acceptance of the post of Professor of Composition at the University of Arizona, and the third during a sabbatical after being granted tenure. Regrettably, a fourth sonata, marking the occasion of his retirement in 1988, never materialized.

*Masks Op.40 (1980)*

Commissioned by the Gina Bachauer International Piano Competition as a required contest piece, *Masks* is one of only two single-movement works for piano in Muczynski's catalogue – the other being the *Toccata, Op.15*. Formed in two distinct parts, the work open with an plaintive *Andante maestoso*, continuing to an restless *Allegro*, and maintaining the hurried pace until the end, save for a short, unwinding coda. A quotation from Jonathan Swift acts as a subtitle, "Harlequin without his mask is known to present a very sober countenance."

*Dream Cycle Op.44 (1983)*

Composed in 1983, *Dream Cycle* was commissioned by the U.S. Information Agency for "overseas presentation" through its Artistic Ambassadors Program. Established in 1953 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the U.S.I.A. – according to author Alvin Snyder, writing in his book, *Warriors of Disinformation* – was the "largest full-service public relations organization in the world, spending over $2 billion per year to highlight the views of the U.S. while diminishing those of the Soviet Union."

To what extent the mission statement of the U.S.I.A. or the "overseas presentation" context of the work's intended use affected the artistic process behind its creation is hard to say, since Muczynski never discussed *Dream Cycle* in any existing interview. Nevertheless, due to these circumstances, this work is part of the forty-five-year history of art being systematically employed to further the perceived ideological superiority and righteousness of opposing superpowers of the Cold War, by their respective governments.

History aside, *Dream Cycle* is a four-movement work of contrasting moods, textures, and tempi, closer in spirit to the *Third Piano Sonata, Op.35* than any other work in Muczynski's catalogue. Indeed, the two-part first movement feels like an exposition in search of its development and recapitulation. The slow, droning coda contains a pedal-point D; much like the coda of the first movement of the Op.35 sonata.

The second movement is an agitated Scherzo made of three distinct episodes, plus coda. The third movement, marked *Andante maestoso*, is an evening scene somewhat reminiscent of *Musiques Nocturnes* from Bartók's *Out of Doors* suite of 1926. The *Allegro* fourth movement is yet another toccata, channeling a sensation of relatively subdued yet sustained tension throughout.

*A Summer Journal Op.19 (1964)*

*A Summer Journal, Op.19* is the second of two sets of character pieces carrying programmatic titles – arriving at the end of Muczynski's early period, shortly before the move to Tucson. With the regard to the titles, the composer

explained that, "Like the *Suite, Op.13,* the respective titles were suggested upon the completion of each piece and chiefly for the purposes of identification. *Night Rain* could be the exception: I planned it as a stunt wherein the right hand provides 'figurational' embroidery against three reiterated notes assigned to the left hand … perhaps a kind of *Raindrop Prelude*, 20th century style."

Aside from the aforementioned *Night Rain*, another standout movement is *Midday*: a lethargic blues in E-flat. A few bars in, one starts to feel the stifling heat of a New Orleans summer afternoon. Overall, the trademark qualities found in Muczynski's music – rhythm, accentuations, altered harmonies – appear understated and relaxed in *A Summer Journal*, as all should be during this season.

*Diversions Op.23 (1967)*

A follow-up to *Fables, Op.21,* this set of pedagogical miniatures serves a similar purpose to that of its predecessor. The material is noticeably less restricted – bearing closer resemblance to the preludes of *Op.6* and *Op.30* – suggesting a target demographic of early-intermediate students.

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