

Gyermekjáték

(Child's Play)
for Toy Piano



after the poem by Ernő Szép

by will T. Laughlin

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PERFORMANCE NOTES

Gyermekjáték is written for a standard Jaymar or Schoenhut toy piano with a two-and-a-half octave range, from C to F two octaves higher. The piece is scored with the lowest note on the instrument represented by middle-C. The exact tuning of the instrument doesn't matter.

The only other requirement is that the toy piano be constructed so that tilting the instrument results in the hammers falling against the resonators and cutting off the sound. Upright toy pianos work particularly well for this, since they may be tilted forward with a simple gesture to produce the appropriate effect. "Grand" toy pianos are slightly more difficult to maneuver.

In the original version of this piece, I specified no dynamics. I have added a few in parentheses for this version, as general suggestions. The toy piano may not cooperate.

For help in pronouncing the title, look carefully at the word and say to yourself, "Chair MacYacht Ache". That should give you a good start.

NOTES ON THE MUSIC

The Hungarian poet Ernő Szép (1884 – 1953) had a very difficult life: he was born in a town which is now part of Ukraine, one of nine children in a poor Jewish family. The struggles of his childhood seem to have influenced the course of his career: his work strikes a tenuous balance between childlike unworldliness and resignation in the face of the harsh realities of life. Szép survived the Holocaust, but died alone and neglected in the early days of the Hungarian Communist regime.

His poem *Gyermekjáték* (which I've chosen to render in English as "Child's Play") is an enigmatic little verse that is practically impossible to translate. The first stanza states, "When I was a boy, I never had a pony..." In modern American English, saying someone "never had a pony" suggests the person who's complaining has never had to worry about anything really significant. The situation was undoubtedly much different for a young Jewish boy, growing up in rural Eastern Europe at the end of the 19th century.

The narrator of *Gyermekjáték* goes on to describe the other privations of his childhood: he never had any toys, nor any books but school books; he never had time for games; he never got to see the Circus -- not even through a hole in the tent.

Eventually he passes into adulthood. But although he is accustomed outwardly to the world of grown-ups, the narrator takes comfort in one thing only: the thought that he will someday die. When he dies, he will kneel before the throne of the Almighty and ask if now, please, he could be allowed to play. Then, in language both beautiful and heartbreaking, this broken man describes his vision of the afterlife. *Then* he will get his toy sword and his number blocks. *Then* he will get his picture books and his toy train. *Then* he will get his pony, or even a little bicycle. The verse ends by trailing off, as though in a vision or a dream, with the stars turning to butterflies and gold dust between the narrator's fingers.

In lesser hands, this poem might be overly sentimental, or even grotesque. But for all the childlike simplicity of Szép's language, and the seemingly straightforward tale the verse tells, *Gyermekjáték* is anything but simple. There is something both touching and terrifying in the prayer of a man whose only hope is almost worse than hopelessness.

When Wendy Chambers (described by the New York Times as "possibly the world's foremost virtuoso of the toy piano") approached me about writing a piece for one of the world's least-expressive instruments, I hesitated - until I remembered Szép's poem. *Gyermekjáték* is about a man broken by his childhood; how better to illustrate the poem musically than with this terrible, broken instrument from childhood?

The challenge was to write a piece of grown-up music for such a limited toy. The main melody, first heard in the left hand at the third full measure, retains something of the rhythm and structure of Szép's verse. In the middle of the piece, I've tried to do something next-to-impossible: write three independent lines for an instrument that can barely handle one. Then the music, like the poem, gradually disintegrates as the end approaches. The final gesture, however, returns us to the point of view of the reader rather than the subject of the poem: the performer should gently, calmly tilt the piano until the hammers fall forward onto the metal resonators, cutting off the sound with a quiet thud. Where the poet has gone, we cannot follow.

Gyermekjáték

for Toy Piano

Liberamente; con alcuna tristezza ♩ = 85

Will T. Laughlin

riten. ... a tempo

(principal theme)

riten. ... a little slower

Tempo I

pochissimo riten. a tempo

ritenuto e perdendosi poco a poco

The first system of music consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, some beamed together. The lower staff is in bass clef and provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The music is marked with a fermata over the final note of the first staff.

comodo (slowly enough that the staggered beats are relaxed)

The second system of music consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line with a fermata over the first note. The lower staff is in bass clef and provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes. The key signature has two flats. The music is marked with a fermata over the first note of the upper staff.

The third system of music consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line with eighth notes and a fermata. The lower staff is in bass clef and provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes. The key signature has two flats. The music is marked with a fermata over the first note of the upper staff.

The fourth system of music consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line with eighth notes and a fermata. The lower staff is in bass clef and provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes. The key signature has two flats. The music is marked with a fermata over the first note of the upper staff.

rall.

The fifth system of music consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line with eighth notes and a fermata. The lower staff is in bass clef and provides a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes. The key signature has two flats. The music is marked with a fermata over the first note of the upper staff.

Più Lento

(p)

(ff) L.V.

(p)

Tilt piano until hammers strike resonators, and cut off the sound with a dull thud.

