

The pianistic style of Stasys Vainiūnas: recurring features and pianistic gestures

Vincenzo DE MARTINO

Lithuanian Academy of Music
and Theatre

ABSTRACT. The article aims to define the distinctive traits of the pianistic style of Stasys Vainiūnas and how they can be conveyed through various pianistic gestures and techniques. In particular, the author argues that Vainiūnas' piano music is especially suited to both the mechanical possibilities of the instrument and the technical skills of the pianist. This is achieved through a series of recurring features, such as specific textures, hand settings and fingerings, that allow reaching outstanding virtuosity effects, along with an extreme variety of colours and demeanours. Particular attention is given to the idea that Vainiūnas' piano music is ideally tailored to the instrument's features and possibilities, so that even the most complex passages, thanks to a variety of recurring hand settings and suggested fingerings, are generally "comfortable to play": attention to the natural configuration of the hand, the effective combination of different techniques and the near absence of certain others allow the performer to achieve results without ever reaching the limits of practicability.

This article is part of the research project "Interpretations of the Lithuanian Piano Canon" (No. S-MIP-24-136), funded by the Research Council of Lithuania (LMTLT).

KEYWORDS:
Stasys Vainiūnas,
pianistic style,
piano music,
piano technique,
pianism.

Introduction

The history of Lithuanian piano music is relatively young and has been closely intertwined with the course of development of the other major European musical traditions, while also seeking its own unique path at the beginning of the 20th century. Since then, composers of different generations have worked to establish a distinct Lithuanian national character in music, often drawing on folksong patterns while engaging with broader stylistic trends of their time, from Late Romanticism to Expressionism and other avant-garde movements.¹

1 Summary from *The Modern Music of Lithuania: Past & Present* by the Music Information Centre Lithuania (MICL). <https://www.mic.lt/en/database/classical/history> [last accessed 01-08-2025].

In this context, the figure of Stasys Vainiūnas (1909–1982) represents a milestone in the quest for individuality through the lens of a more cosmopolitan and ever-evolving musical language. The composer's life inevitably shaped his artistic expression: born in Riga in 1909, he studied composition with Jāzeps Vītols (1863–1948), a leading exponent of Latvian national Romanticism. After moving to Vienna in 1935, he was mentored by Emil von Sauer (1862–1942), editor of the complete piano works by Johannes Brahms and a fervent advocate of Liszt's transcendental pianism. Later, in Lithuania, alongside Balys Dvarionas (1904–1972) and Antanas Račiūnas (1905–1984), Vainiūnas composed his major works under the shadow of post-war Soviet occupation, which significantly influenced the stylistic features and social function of music.²

The piano holds a central place in Vainiūnas' oeuvre, making him notable mainly as a composer of piano music as well as a concert pianist and an eminent pedagogue of the instrument. His piano compositions range from several collections of miniatures to four piano concerti, as well as a few important chamber works with piano. These opuses display diverse faces and intents, drawing from a variety of compositional techniques and convincingly bringing them to life within the instrument's 88 keys. The composer's pianistic style stands as a landmark in the landscape of Lithuanian piano music, merging a striking virtuoso technique with highly refined pictorial expression.

This article analyses Vainiūnas' pianistic style from a performer's perspective, highlighting recurring characteristics of his piano writing and examining how they can be rendered through different techniques and gestures. A central focus is given to the idea that Vainiūnas' piano music is ideally shaped for the instrument's features and possibilities, so that even the most intricate passages, due to a number of recurring hand settings and suggested fingerings, are generally "comfortable to play".

The pianistic style: definition and application in works for piano by Stasys Vainiūnas

The concept of style in music has been broadly discussed across different branches of musicology over the centuries, resulting in numerous definitions related to the style of a composer, a movement, or a historical period, among others.³ Even though music "is not objectively descriptive or representational" (Dannenberg 2010: 45), such catego-

2 Ambrasas and Juodpūsis (n. d.). URL: <https://www.vle.lt/straipsnis/stasys-vainiunas> [last accessed 01-08-2025].

3 Some of the most significant works in this realm: Croker 1966; Meyer 1989; Morgan 1991.

risations help to orient us in the vast realm of musical expression, pointing out frequent characteristics, for instance, in one composer's work as compared to another's.

As Xiaoning Yang observes, a composer's style arises from the interplay between their aesthetic pursuits and the influences of their environment (Yang 2021: 53). This constant interpenetration, along with multiple other factors, produces a unique signature across their works. Terms such as "early", "mature" and "late style" can also be useful for dividing a composer's output over the course of their lifetime and artistic parabola.

In a similar way, one can refer to a composer's style of writing for a specific instrument as a further subcategory of their creative output, which is the concern of this research. Because instrumental realisation always passes through a performer's hands, pianistic style can be understood as both the style of writing for piano and the pianism necessary to bring it to life. For the purpose of this analysis, pianistic style will be understood as: a set of characteristics within a composer's writing style for piano, in the realm of their own music vocabulary, shaped by different influences, that become manifest during the act of the performance.

In the case of Vainiūnas, concrete features of his pianistic style (which will be examined later) can be traced to several sources of influence:

- ◆ Lithuanian folksongs, which are a prerogative of his early works, the majority of which survive only in manuscript form. Folksongs also appear in his large-scale works, often recalling the traditional multipart singing of *sutartinė*, and thus implying a polyphonic approach. In 1949, the composer stated: "I found a new source which enriched my creative work: I paid attention to folk songs, I studied them and it seems that I will be able to integrate them within my music".⁴ Vainiūnas later affirmed: "I have my own style, which is shaped on both Classical and [Lithuanian] national music features",⁵ deliberately embedding peasant song elements within more traditional compositional forms.
- ◆ Pictorialism, as in works by Debussy and Ravel (which often featured in Vainiūnas' concert repertoire as a solo pianist). Vainiūnas explored the piano's

4 "Aš radau naują šaltinį, kuris praturtino mano kūrybą. Aš atkreipiau dėmesį į liaudies dainas, jas studijavau ir, atrodo, kad man pavyks jas įauginti į savo muziką" (Narbutienė 1991: 84).

5 "Turiu savo stilių, kuris remiasi klasika ir nacionalinės muzikos ypatumais" (Gaidamavičiūtė 2005: 36–37). It must be noted, however, that Vainiūnas' choice to shape his style on features derived from folk music may have been not only the result of his personal search for artistic individuality, but also a consequence of the historical context in which he worked: the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, where the Communist Party promoted folk-inspired music that was accessible to the masses and capable of instilling patriotic feelings. It is possible to affirm, therefore, that the composer's predilection for folk-based material resulted from both factors.

broad colouristic possibilities through a wide range of figurations, an array of touches and infinite sound combinations. Pictorial intent is already evident in his first major work for piano, the “Mažoji vabzdžių siuita” (*Little Insects Suite*) Op. 7 (1940).

- ◆ A general tendency to virtuoso display, inherited from years of study with Sauer, a disciple of Franz Liszt, which is particularly emphasised in compositions such as the aforementioned *Little Insects Suite*, the “Baladė” (*Ballade*) Op. 30 (1963) and in the “Sonata-fantazija” (*Sonata Fantasy*, 1978), with a predilection for fast notes, arm rotation, hand alternation and *staccato*, all of which are readily apparent in his scores.

These sources together shaped Vainiūnas’ pianistic language, which found expression within a wide range of stylistic features. Their heterogeneity and connection with pianistic technique will be discussed in the following sections.

Recurring features in the pianistic style of Stasys Vainiūnas and their main influences

These paragraphs highlight some of the recurring stylistic features in the piano music of Stasys Vainiūnas as they appear in his major works for the instrument, also in comparison with the works of other composers. The analysis is based on both a comparative score study and practical engagement with the pieces in preparation for public performance.

Patterns. Reiterations of small motivic units are frequent constructive elements in episodes or even entire sections of Vainiūnas’ piano works; this characteristic will be referred to here as “patterns”. Their function can vary significantly. In general, they are largely employed to convey a clear sense of pulsation. For example, in the last of the “Aštuonios nuotaikos” (*Eight Moods*) Op. 43 (1979), characterised by an overall obsessive rhythmicity, the composer uses a pattern of consecutive triplets in the right hand (bb. 14–17) to re-establish ceaseless motion within a squared 4/4 metre after a relatively asymmetrical 6/4 bar (Example 1).⁶ A similar device is used in bb. 22–30, where, after syncopations and dotted rhythms (bb. 18–21), the left hand alternates between an Eb–Ab chord and a D note, while a plain fourth-based melody embellished with a few flickering figurations occurs on top (Example 2).

6 All examples from: *Tarptautinis Stasio Vainiūno pianistų ir kamerinių ansamblių konkursas*. <https://konkursai.wixsite.com/ipmc/vainiunas-natos-pianistams> [last accessed 01-08-2025].



Example 1. Excerpt from the last of Stasys Vainiūnas' *Eight Moods* Op. 43, showing the use of a pattern (boxed, bb. 14–17) as a source of pulse and motion



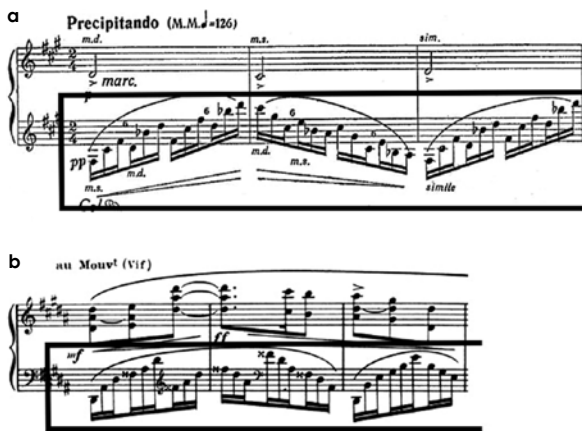
Example 2. Excerpt from the last of the *Eight Moods*, showing the use of a pattern (boxed, bb. 22–28) in a similar way to Example 1

Patterns are also used to serve more virtuosic purposes. For instance, in the *Più mosso* episode from the fourth movement of Piano Concerto Op. 40, alternating ascending and descending *arpeggi*, built from a reiterated motivic unit throughout, display the performer's agility while ornamenting the orchestra's dissonant, sharp-edged texture (Example 3). Similar use of pattern-based *arpeggi* appears in the most virtuosic of Vainiūnas' works for piano solo, such as the Little Insects Suite: for example, the second movement, "Drugelis" (Butterfly), is almost entirely based on such *arpeggi* entrusted

to the left hand from the very beginning (Example 4a). This recalls another illustrious incipit from pianistic literature: Scarbo from Maurice Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908; Example 4b). As noted, Ravel's works also often appeared in Vainiūnas' concert repertoire, thus possibly influencing his compositional style.



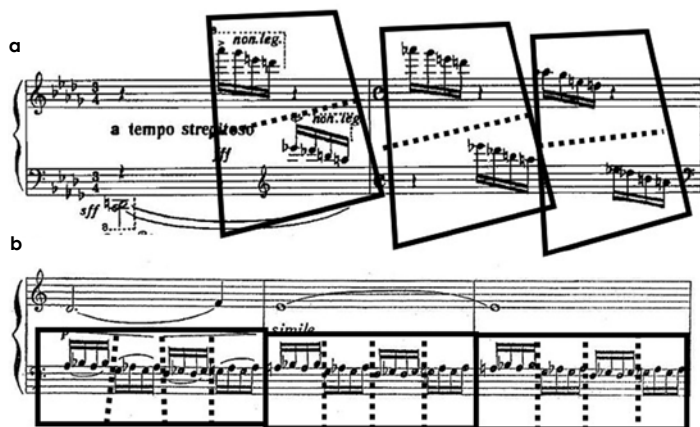
Example 3. Pattern-based arpeggi as a tool of virtuosic display in the *Più mosso* section of the fourth movement of Stasys Vainiūnas's Piano Concerto Op. 40



Example 4. Analogous use of pattern-based composed arpeggi in Stasys Vainiūnas' *Little Insect Suite*, II. *Butterfly* (a) and Maurice Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*, III. *Scarbo* (b)

Another frequent pattern-based configuration is the alternation between the two hands to perform the segments of a reiterated figure in succession. This occurs, for instance, in the third movement, "Liūtis" (*Rainstorm*), of "Gimtinės pievos" (*Meadows*

of *Homeland*) Op. 31 (1964; Example 5a), as well as in the main textural element of “Uodas” (*Mosquito*) from the *Little Insects Suite* (Example 5b). Indisputably, a hallmark of Vainiūnas’ pianistic style relies on what can be called “bridge patterns”, where patterns are used to connect two phrases or episodes, which are often non-symmetric, “non-pattern”. This expedient is used, for instance, in the previously mentioned fourth movement of Piano Concerto Op. 40 (Example 6), among others.



Example 5. Pattern-based alternation between the hands, in *Rainstorm* from *Meadows of Homeland* Op. 31 (a) and *Mosquito* from the *Little Insects Suite* (b)



Example 6. A “bridge pattern” connecting two “non-patterned” sections in the fourth movement of Piano Concerto Op. 40

One of the most accomplished uses of this technique appears in the third of the *Eight Moods*, a miniature based entirely on the juxtaposition of two short rhythmic patterns reiterated throughout (Example 7). These can be considered the two “thematic patterns” of the piece.

a

b

Example 7. The two main rhythmic patterns in the third of the *Eight Moods*, whose alternation throughout (with different notes) constitutes the piece's main constructive element

To summarise: patterns are central to both formal construction and thematic development in piano music by Stasys Vainiūnas. These are a key feature of the composer's semantic world and a peculiarity of his pianistic style, besides being a recurring benchmark for the performer.

Polyphony. As previously noted, Lithuanian folksongs strongly influenced Vainiūnas, particularly in his organisation of polyphony, which draws extensively from *sutartinės*, traditional Lithuanian polyphonic singing characterised by simple melodies, often revolving around limited pitch ranges, simultaneously sung at various, often dissonant intervals (most often major and minor seconds).⁷

Vainiūnas does not merely adapt preexisting tunes from this tradition but creates new solutions that reveal both the stylistic features of the source repertoire and the unique characteristics of his own music vocabulary. This approach resembles that of another great composer of the same century, Béla Bartók (1881–1945), who also drew inspiration from peasant folksongs, adopting melodic, harmonic and rhythmic devices without quoting directly from specific folk tunes. Bartók frequently combined elements of different origins into a kind of “re-invented” folklore, as, for instance, in *Mikrokosmos* (1932–39), *Contrasts* (1938) and *Concerto for Orchestra* (1943) (*Conversations with Bartók* 2000: 205).

For example, the opening of the first of the *Eight Moods* presents a four-voices polyphony distributed between the two hands, often resulting in sharp dissonances (mostly major and minor seconds), a peculiarity of *sutartinės* (Example 8). However, the tune itself is original. In the fourth of the *Eight Moods*, the two right-hand parts mostly proceed by perfect fourths, generating different intervals as they occasionally move closer or further apart (Example 9a). Parallel motion is a common polyphonic device for Vainiūnas, sometimes paired with dissonant counterpoints, as in the fifth

⁷ *Sutartinės, Lithuanian Multipart Songs in UNESCO. Intangible Cultural Heritage*. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/sutartins-lithuanian-multipart-songs-00433> [last accessed 01-08-2025].

piece of the cycle, where the left hand moves in thirds while the right one indulges in harsher intervals (Example 9b). In the seventh piece, the composer again distributes the four parts between the two hands, in a homorhythmic stream alternating consonant and dissonant intervals (Example 9c).

Liberamente I Op. 43

Example 8. Incipit from the first of the *Eight Moods*, showing features analogous to traditional Lithuanian multipart singing, with a predilection for dissonant intervals (mostly major and minor seconds)

a

b

Più mosso, con anima

c

cresc. poco a poco

Example 9. Excerpts from the fourth (a), fifth (b) and seventh (c) of the *Eight Moods*, showing the use of parallel and homorhythmic motion as polyphonic devices

The use of patterns also informs Vainiūnas' polyphonic writing. The first movement, "Auštantis rytas" (*Dawn*), of *Meadows of Homeland* is characterised by a relentless *ostinato* in the lower right-hand part, while the upper voice intonates a sing-song-like, circular melody (this is another characteristic of *sutartinės*; Example 10a). However, in the fourth movement, *Rainstorm*, the combination of polyphony and *ostinato* treats the two as separate entities (Example 10b).

a

b

Example 10. Polyphony with *ostinato*, either encapsulated within the actual multipart construction, as in the first movement of *Meadows of Homeland*, in the right hand (a), or sustaining it separately, as in the fourth movement of the cycle, in the left hand (b)

Multipart constructions characterise even the most virtuosic passages, such as the *Quasi cadenza* section from the first movement of Piano Concerto Op. 15, where the upper voice carries a melody, the middle voice supplies harmony and a low octave completes the chord (Example 11a). Curiously, analogous solutions can be found in works by Latvian composers that were written during or after the period when Vainiūnas studied in Riga. For example, the Prelude in C# minor by Jānis Ivanovs (1906–1983), published in 1935, presents an analogous three-layers texture, though without the same virtuosic flair (Example 11b).⁸

8 This and other scores by Latvian composers were examined by the author during a research visit to the Jāzeps Vitols Latvian Academy of Music in Riga on October 10–15, 2024.

a



I

cresc. e accell. poco a poco

b



Allegro moderato

Example 11. Comparative view of the *Quasi cadenza* from the first movement of Stasys Vainiūnas' Piano Concerto Op. 15 (a) and Jānis Ivanovs' Prelude in C# minor (1935; (b)), characterised by a similar three-layers texture (i.e., melody on top, chord in the middle, octave at the bottom)

Polyphony thus also emerges as a peculiar feature of Vainiūnas' pianistic style, informed by Lithuanian traditional folksong but often extended into more individual solutions, closer to "texturalism".

Chords and sound masses. Texturalism also manifests in Vainiūnas' treatment of harmony. In general, chords serve multiple functions in his music, from shaping specific soundscapes to conferring power and grandeur. The latter is frequently exploited in the piano concerti, as shown in Example 12, an excerpt from Piano Concerto Op. 22, where boisterous parallel chords given to both hands are made to thunder against the orchestra.

The search for intensity is even more pronounced in Piano Concerto Op. 40, where Vainiūnas indulges in several passages of dissonant chords, engaging in a strenuous contest with the orchestra underneath, either competing in strength as they reach a climax simultaneously (Example 13a) or entering a tight call-and-response (Example 13b). The composer also begins the *cadenza* of the second movement with a progression of shrill harmonies to heighten the dramatic charge from the outset (Example 13c).

Example 12 shows a musical score for piano and orchestra. The piano part is written in two staves (treble and bass clef) and features a series of chords, some with a forte (*ff*) dynamic. The orchestra part is also in two staves and consists of sustained chords. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 2/4.

Example 12. Excerpt from Piano Concerto Op. 22, showing a typical use of chords to give the solo instrument more power over the orchestra

Example 13(a) shows a musical score for piano and orchestra. The piano part is in two staves and features a series of chords with a *largamente* marking. The orchestra part is in two staves and consists of sustained chords. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 2/4.

Example 13. Different excerpts from Piano Concerto Op. 40, showing the use of chords either in assimilation into (a) or in opposition to (b) the orchestra, as well as at the beginning of a cadenza (c)

Example 13(b) shows a musical score for piano and orchestra. The piano part is in two staves and features a series of chords with a *cresc. molto* marking. The orchestra part is in two staves and consists of sustained chords. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 2/4.

Example 13(c) shows a musical score for piano and orchestra. The piano part is in two staves and features a series of chords with a *rubato* and *espr.* marking. The orchestra part is in two staves and consists of sustained chords. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 2/4.

This approach also occurs in solo works, for instance in the first movement of *Meadows of Homeland*, where Vainiūnas uses a sequence of sonorous chords to build towards a climax (Example 14a), and in the last of the *Eight Moods*, where the composer marks the end of a steadily intensifying episode with a few heavily dissonant chords in a row (Example 14b).

Example 14. Use of chords to intensify a climax in *Meadows of Homeland* (a) and *Eight Moods* (b)

In other cases, the mere sound amalgamation is employed to variegate the colour of music, a trait indebted to French Impressionism, which frequently featured in Vainiūnas' concert repertoire, as noted previously. For example, in the *Sonata Fantasy*, a series of fluctuating chords, like the one shown in Example 15a, defines the episode's gloomy, mysterious character. In the sixth of the *Eight Moods*, by contrast, a brief interlude of dimmer, slow chords prepare the listener for the reprise of the main theme a few bars later (Example 15b).

Example 15. Excerpts from the *Sonata Fantasy* (a) and from the sixth of the *Eight Moods* (b), showing the use of sound amalgamation to impart different colours to music

Besides chords, Vainiūnas often uses passages of octaves to augment the strength of his music. For example, in the third of the *Eight Moods*, alternating descending octaves between the two hands convey a sense of chaotic collapse to the ground (Example 16a), while in the culmination of the first movement of *Meadows of Homeland* they generate a compulsive spin looming over the screaming chords beneath (Example 16b).

The image contains two musical excerpts, labeled 'a' and 'b'. Excerpt 'a' is a piano score for the third of the *Eight Moods*. It shows two staves with a treble and bass clef. The music features a series of descending octaves in both hands, with some notes beamed together and others separated by rests. Excerpt 'b' is a piano score for the first movement of *Meadows of Homeland*. It also shows two staves. The right hand plays a series of octaves, while the left hand plays chords. The music is marked with a forte dynamic (*fff*) and includes a fermata over the final chord.

Example 16. Excerpts from the third of the *Eight Moods* (a) and the first movement of *Meadows of Homeland* (b), showing the use of octaves to heighten the dramatic charge of the music

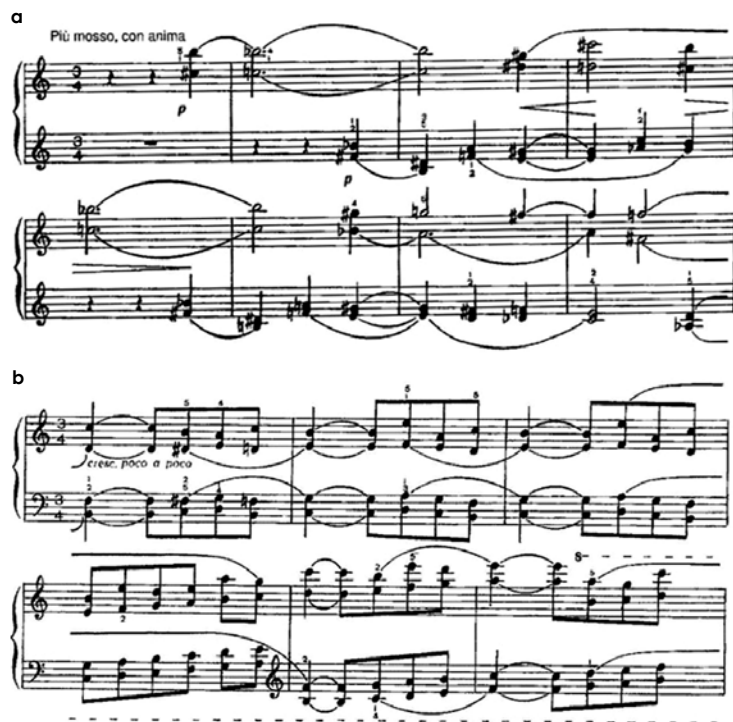
To summarise, sound masses represent a compelling resource for making music more striking as well as a means of generating more differentiated characters and demeanours. This trait also creates specific challenges for a performer, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

Melodic expression. The shape of musical phrasing in Vainiūnas' work also reflects the background of Lithuanian folksongs. Circularity, derived from traditional chanting, constitutes a distinctive feature of his melodic development, as seen in Example 17, an excerpt from the *Ballade*, where similar motives are reiterated with slight variations and progressively intensified by the sustaining texture below.



Example 17. Excerpt from *Ballade*, showing the use of small, reiterated motivic units that create an overall circularity of the melodic construction

Circular melodic constructions appear throughout Vainiūnas' piano works, forming a structural element in miniatures such as the *Eight Moods*. Example 18 shows the main thematic blocks of the fifth and seventh pieces of the cycle, generating a constant non-directional flow rather than traditional "phrasal" progression.




Example 18. Excerpts from the fifth and seventh of the *Eight Moods*, showing the predilection for circular melodies


In some cases, a melody revolving without reaching a climax can sustain an entire piece, producing a languid, tortuous expressiveness. An example is the second of the *Eight Moods*, which also recalls the second movement of Ivanovs' Piano Sonata (1931; Example 19).

||

a



b



Example 19. Excerpts from the second of Stasys Vainiūnas' *Eight Moods* (a) and the second movement of Jānis Ivanovs' Piano Sonata (1931; (b)), showing affinities in melodic construction

In conclusion, melodic expression in Vainiūnas' piano music often creates a sense of continuous outflow, avoiding traditional symmetric phrasing and privileging circularity over directionality.

Other features. A fundamental characteristic relevant to this research is the variety of sound attacks, the so-called “pianistic touches”. A frequently employed one is *staccato*, usually associated with either grotesque or parodic intent. For instance, in the third of the *Eight Moods*, Vainiūnas uses this articulation to build tension from the bizarre, mysterious opening atmosphere to a sonorous climax (Example 20a). In other works, such as the third movement, “Žiogas” (*Cricket*), of the *Little Insects Suite*, *staccato* is used to convey an immediate vivacity and playfulness (Examples 20a and b).

a

b

Example 20. Two different uses of *staccato* in the third of the *Eight Moods* (a) and in the third movement, *Cricket*, of the *Little Insects Suite* (b), to build up a climax and mark a sudden, sharp beginning, respectively

Accents are often associated with bell-like sonorities, such as in the first of the *Eight Moods* or in the *Sonata Fantasy*, where they emphasise the sharpness of certain chords. They can also convey extravagance, as in the sixth and in the final work of the cycle, where they give an obsessive quality to the exchange between the hands (Example 21).

a

b

c

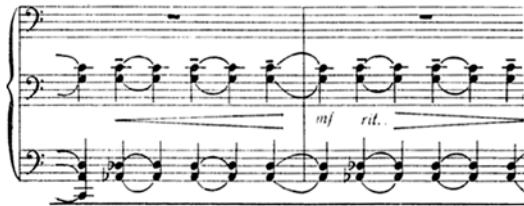
d

Example 21. Different uses of accents, either to induce bell-like sonorities, such as in the first of the *Eight Moods* (a) and in the *Sonata Fantasy* (b), or to emphasise the answer of one hand to the other, as in the sixth (c) and the last (d) works of the same cycle

Another articulation mark, *tenuto*, is frequently employed to highlight the importance of certain notes without necessarily making them sharper in sound. For example, in the incipit of the first movement of *Meadows of Homeland*, Vainiūnas consistently marks the G note with a *tenuto* sign, giving it semantic weight after the initial G♯ and ensuring its value is not cut short, so that the following crochet pause maintains the correct duration (Example 22). A similar approach can be seen in the previous Example 21d. In other cases, the *tenuto* mark clarifies the character of figures that might otherwise be misinterpreted, for instance, in the *Sonata Fantasy*, where a series of chords on a long pedal could be mistaken as bell-like, whereas the use of *tenuto* ensures these chords are held longer with the fingers (Example 23).



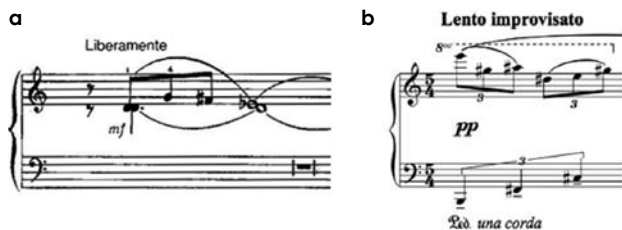
Example 22. Incipit from the first movement of *Meadows of Homeland*, showing the use of the *tenuto* sign to emphasise one specific note, namely, G



Example 23. Excerpt from the *Sonata Fantasy*, showing the use of the *tenuto* sign to define the specific character of some material, namely, a series of chords to be held with fingers despite the long pedalling, which may erroneously suggest the need for a bell-like sound

What gives even further dynamism to Vainiūnas' music is the role of improvisation. A certain degree of freedom is explicitly demanded from the performer through captions such as the ones of *Liberamente* (Freely) or *Lento improvisato* (Slowly, improvising) in the first of the *Eight Moods* and at the beginning of the *Lament* (1972), respectively (Example 24), as well as through figurations such those in the *Sonata Fantasy*, which call for *ad libitum* repetition (Example 25). In other cases, no explicit indications are given,

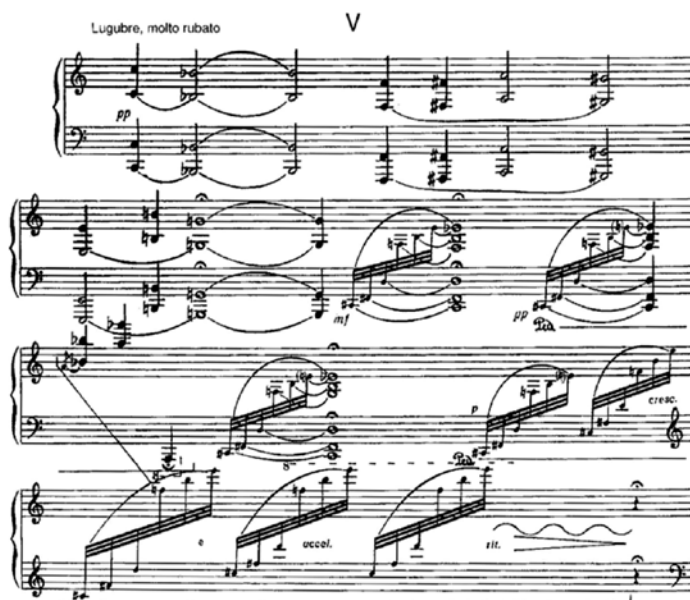
although the general writing itself suggests a degree of extemporaneity, as in the fifth of the *Eight Moods*, with long fermatas, *volatine* and generic indications of *accelerando* and *ritardando* (Example 26).



Example 24. Captions from the first of the *Eight Moods* (a) and the *Lament* (b), granting the performer a degree of improvisatory freedom



Example 25. Excerpt from the *Sonata Fantasy*, where a wave-like figuration indicates the possibility of repeating the preceding material *ad libitum*



Example 26. Beginning of the fifth of the *Eight Moods*, where fermatas, *volatine* and generic indications of *accelerando* and *ritardando* suggests how the author contemplated a certain level of extemporaneity from the performer

Last but not least, another as a distinctive peculiarity of Vainiūnas' music worth noting is the use of very specific character indications. Some of the most striking examples appear in the *Eight Moods*: these are *Narrante* (Narrating, I.), *Lusingando* (Flattering, IV.), and *Lesto* (Swift, VI.). This further reinforces the richness and versatility of the composer's expressive world, which often relies on original solutions in order to convey specific characters and moods.

A practical approach: from pianistic writing to a congenial pianistic gesture

The acknowledged characteristics of the pianistic style of Stasys Vainiūnas, needless to say, can be translated into a series of recurring techniques, observable in the previous and other examples. These reveal the composer's profound understanding of the instrument as a tool for performers to both showcase their pianistic skills and express musical ideas. They also place him in line with other great composers of the same century, such as Debussy, Ravel, Bartók and Prokofiev, who likewise exploited the technical and sonic possibilities of the modern piano.

A frequently employed technique is, indisputably, the one of velocity: fast passages requiring complete finger independence are widely used, not only with purely virtuosic intent. For instance, in the opening of the fourth of the *Eight Moods*, the composer entrusts the right hand with a series of alternating ascending and descending scales to introduce the piece's aerial, dreamlike character. Here, a coloristic approach is demanded: the performer may opt for a succession of small, precise fingertip movements on a sustained pedal in order to render the individuality of the single, crystal-clear notes within the dim overall atmosphere (Example 27a).

In other instances, a more overtly virtuosic approach is required instead. For example, in the opening of "Vapsva" (*Wasp*) from the *Little Insects Suite*, the performer must tackle several impetuous scales whose task, from the very beginning, is to transmit the insect's irritation and harassment to the listener. In this case, a more *martellato*-like type of pianistic attack is recommended, ensuring the necessary strength even without pedal, as indicated by the composer (Example 27b).

Another frequently implied technique is rotation of the arm, to varying degrees, depending on how the music material is organised. This approach is particularly evident in the third of the *Eight Moods* (Example 28), where short sixteenth-notes figures given to both hands form a clear *tremolo*-like texture, requiring coordinated effort of elbow, hand and fingers to convey its sharp, obsessive character.



Example 27. Comparative view of the two incipits of the fourth of the *Eight Moods* (a) and *Wasp* from the *Little Insects Suite* (b), showing the use of fast passages with colouristic and virtuosic intent, respectively, as explained in the main text



Example 28. Excerpt from the third of the *Eight Moods*, implying the use of arm rotation

In longer passages, arm rotation, using the elbow to guide a musical line, is equally important. In the opening of *Butterfly* from the *Little Insects Suite*, for instance, the performer must break the *arpeggi* into smaller units, guiding the direction of the music with the full arm through elbow rotation movements and twisting motions of the forearm according to the ascending or descending direction of the passage (Example 29a), thus facilitating the work of the fingers. The same approach is required for both hands simultaneously in Piano Concerto Op. 15 (Example 29b).



Example 29. Comparative view of excerpts from *Butterfly* in the *Little Insects Suite* (a) and Piano Concerto Op. 15 (b), both implying the use of the elbow-rotation technique in correspondence with small motivic units, as can be seen in the boxes, to support fingerwork and musical direction

Octaves are among the most recurrent textural elements in Vainiūnas' piano writing, though rarely intended as displays of virtuosity per se, as in the great Romantic tradition. Indisputably, agility is sometimes required, as in the third of the *Eight Moods*, where alternating, asymmetric octave passages demand perfect coordination of both hands (see the previous Example 16a). Yet in Vainiūnas' piano music the main function of octaves is to enhance dramatic power rather than virtuosic display.

This is particularly evident in the climax of *Dawn* from *Meadows of Homeland*, where the right hand's octave *ostinato* drives the music towards climax, ensuring relentless motion (Example 30a). More boisterous octave passages appear in the piano concerti, emphasising the soloist role of the piano, as in Piano Concerto Op. 15 (Example 30b). Here, the pianist must rely on the full weight of their body and flexible arm movement in the direction of the music to project the magniloquence of such episodes.

a

b


Example 30. Comparative view of excerpts from *Dawn* from *Meadows of Homeland* (a) and Piano Concerto Op. 15 (b), showing the use of octaves to enhance the dramatic power rather than mere virtuosity, as explained in the main text

Generally speaking, piano works by Stasys Vainiūnas convey virtuosity within the natural physical possibilities of the pianist, respecting hand configuration and rarely pushing the performer's stamina to the limit.


First and foremost, the composer often opts for compact hand settings, generally avoiding a span wider than an octave in fast passages. Vainiūnas tends to favour maintaining consistent hand position throughout, so that even very long passages can be reduced to a series of analogous pianistic gestures with uniform fingering. A telling example is found in Piano Concerto Op. 15, where seemingly complex passages can be resolved by repeating the same fingering pattern progressively transposed until the end, analogously to a passage in Piano Concerto Op. 11 by Frédéric Chopin (Example 31).

a

Animato (M.M. $\text{♩} = 72$)



b



Example 31. Comparative view of excerpts from Vainiūnas' Piano Concerto Op. 15 (a) and Chopin's Piano Concerto Op. 11 (b), both showing an analogous use of repeated hand-setting patterns (and consequent equal fingerings) throughout

Another very frequent characteristic is the alternation between the two hands in long passages. This stratagem is often employed in the piano concerti, as shown in Example 32, allowing the two hands never to be constantly engaged to the same extent and, at the same time, enhancing the effect of spectacle as the arms glide freely over the keyboard along the *arpeggi*. Alternation also often entails different techniques, giving the hands the chance to “rest” by switching from one type of pianistic gesture to another (Example 33).

Example 32 consists of two musical excerpts, (a) and (b), presented in grand staff notation. Excerpt (a) is from Piano Concerto Op. 33 and features a piano (*p*) dynamic. It shows a melodic line in the right hand with a trill marked '14' and a triplet marked '3', and a corresponding bass line with a triplet. Excerpt (b) is from Piano Concerto Op. 40 and features a crescendo (*cresc.*) dynamic. It shows a more complex melodic line in the right hand with a trill marked '8' and a triplet marked '3', and a bass line with a triplet.

Example 32. Comparative view of excerpts from Piano Concerto Op. 33 (a) and Op. 40 (b), showing alternation between the two hands

Example 33 consists of two musical excerpts, (a) and (b), presented in grand staff notation. Excerpt (a) is from "Žibuoklių šokis" (Dance of Violets) and features a forte (*f*) dynamic. It shows a melodic line in the right hand with a trill marked '8' and a triplet marked '3', and a bass line with a triplet. Excerpt (b) is from "Rainstorm" (Rainstorm from Meadows of Homeland) and features a forte (*f*) dynamic. It shows a melodic line in the right hand with a trill marked '8' and a triplet marked '3', and a bass line with a triplet.

Example 33. Comparative view of excerpts from "Žibuoklių šokis" (*Dance of Violets*, (a)) and *Rainstorm* (b) from *Meadows of Homeland*, showing the alternation of different pianistic techniques

Last but not least, in surveying the scores of all the aforementioned works, one notices a scarcity of some of the most demanding techniques for pianists, such as leaps, repeated notes and double intervals (in the virtuosic sense). In this respect, piano music by Stasys Vainiūnas pursues virtuosity while remaining within the realm of congenial pianistic gestures overall, so that even the most challenging passages ultimately prove "comfortable to play".

Conclusions

In summary, the pianistic style of Stasys Vainiūnas blends an array of recurring traits, as analysed in the preceding paragraphs, uniting virtuosity with the emotional resonance and a deep connection to Lithuanian cultural roots. These characteristics manifest in recurring techniques and gestures that allow a pianist to demonstrate both mastery of the instrument and artistic expression. As observed, the composer's profound relationship with the piano is evident in the way his music seems ideally tailored to both the instrument's properties and the pianist's physical capabilities, without ever pushing them to their limits.

This differentiates Vainiūnas, for instance, from his compatriot Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875–1911), whose piano output is both larger in number and more heterogeneous, often presenting extreme challenges even for experienced performers. Čiurlionis' pianistic style involves complex voicing and dense textures that demand awkward hand settings, coupled with frequent references to other realms such as the visual arts and a highly complex spiritual dimension, factors that often make his music remain elusive even today.

By contrast, Vainiūnas' contemporary Balys Dvarionas (1904–1972), another prolific composer for piano, cultivated a style that emphasised vivacity, brilliance and a dose of candour, along with extraordinarily vivid pictorialism. Yet the darkest and most dramatic moods were never explored in Dvarionas' music to the extent that they were in Vainiūnas', nor did he foreground striking virtuosity in the same way.

Ultimately, Stasys Vainiūnas' piano music stands as a unique case among Lithuanian composers, convincingly exploiting the possibilities of the instrument while being perfectly suited to modern pianism. This strong bond between the composer and the piano places him in the lineage of great predecessors who are also mainly associated with this instrument: for example, Beethoven and his piano sonatas, Liszt and his *Transcendental Etudes*, Chopin and Debussy and their numerous works. For these reasons, it is hoped that his music will gain greater resonance in concert repertoires in Lithuania and worldwide.

Submitted on 2025 08 14

Accepted on 2025 09 12

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Stasio Vainiūno pianistinis stilius: ypatingi bruožai ir pianistiniai gestai

SANTRAUKA. Straipsnio tikslas – apibūdinti savitus Stasio Vainiūno pianistinio stiliaus bruožus ir jų perteikimą skirtingais pianistiniais gestais bei technikomis. Daroma prielaida, kad Vainiūno fortepijoninė muzika idealiai pritaikyta muzikos instrumento savybėms ir galimybėms, todėl net sudėtingiausi fortepijoninės muzikos puslapiai dėl daugybės faktūrų, kartojamų rankų padėčių ir siūlomos pirštuotės yra patogūs groti: atsižvelgimas į natūralią rankų konfigūraciją, išmintingas įvairių technikų derinimas ir beveik visiškas kai kurių jų atsisakymas leidžia atlikėjui siekti efektyvių rezultatų, niekada neperžengiant praktiškumo ribų.

Apibendrinant galima teigti, kad Vainiūno pianistinis stilius apima daugybę bruožų, kurie jungia virtuoziskumą su emociniu rezonansu ir kuria gilų ryšį su Lietuvos kultūros šaknimis. Šios savybės pasireiškia pasikartojančiomis technikomis ir gestais, leidžiančiais pianistui pademonstruoti tiek muzikos instrumento galimybes, tiek pianisto meistriškumą, meninį išraiškingumą, tačiau niekada neperžengiant jo galimybių ribų. Manytina, kad fortepijoninė Vainiūno muzika – gana reikšmingas pavyzdys tarp lietuvių kompozitorių kūrybos, nes joje bene įtikinamiausiai išnaudojamos muzikos instrumento galimybės, kartu puikiai prisitaikant prie šiuolaikinės fortepijoninės technikos ypatumų, kas patvirtina glaudų ir kompozitoriaus, ir pianisto, ir fortepijono tarpusavio ryšį. Pastarasis aspektas primena ir apie kitus didžiuosius su fortepijonu labiausiai susijusius kompozitorius, pavyzdžiui, Ludwigą van Beethoveną ir jo sonatas fortepijonui, Franzą Lisztą ir jo opusą „Transcendentiniai etudai“ ar daugybę Fryderyko Chopino ir Claude'o Debussy kūrinių. Dėl šių priežasčių tikimasi, kad Vainiūno muzika sulauks didesnio atgarsio koncertų repertuaruose Lietuvoje ir visame pasaulyje.

Šis straipsnis – Lietuvos mokslo tarybos (LMTTL) finansuojamo projekto Nr. S-MIP-24-136 „Lietuvių fortepijoninio kanono interpretacijos“ dalis.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI:

Stasys Vainiūnas, pianistinis stilius, fortepijoninė muzika, fortepijono technika, pianizmas.