

S. C. Eckhardt-Gramatté

“From My Childhood”

Volume 1

14 Alphabet Pieces

Edited by Lorne Watson

Waterloo

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Editor's Introduction

The distinguished Canadian composer, Sophie-Carmen Eckhardt-Gramatté, best known for large concert works, began writing this book of Alphabet Pieces when, at the age of six, she was living with her mother in Paris. Sonia (her nickname) loved to improvise, and long before she received formal instruction from her mother she made up little piano pieces. The first of the pieces, Letter "A", was dictated to her mother before she could write musical notation. She later wrote: "The pieces were named "Alphabet" because I realized that things we see can be described in sound." They fall into two categories. In four she tries to express musically the character of the letters themselves ("A", "C", "D" and "R"); the other ten contain verbal hints placed by the composer at the end of each piece to suggest what she is describing in the music. Three are named after the initials of "great composers whose works I heard played so well by my mother — works which, under her fingers, made a big impression on me" ("B", "H" and "M").

The Alphabet Pieces comprise a variety of musical styles including that of the Parisian salon ("R" and "V") and the Impressionism of Debussy ("Y"). Young Sophie-Carmen's own phenomenal technique is reflected in the virtuoso passages of "M" and "R"; contrapuntal ingenuity, evidenced in her later works, is found embryonically in most pieces, particularly "F".

The young composer's approach to piano technique was untraditional. In terms of piano performance, her creative individuality culminated in the E-Gré Piano Technique. Several of its basic concepts are found incipiently in these early works: for example, the principle of holding notes of broken chords ("C", mm. 17 - 19); that of holding outer notes in figural passages to add contrapuntal melodic interest ("E", mm. 2, 6, etc.); the typical "out" position of the hand ("A", right-hand fingering, mm. 16 - 17).

The pieces present a variety of technical demands. Even one of the simplest, "A", requires ability in stretching the hand to accommodate R.H. melody octaves and L.H. arpeggios. Bearing in mind that young Sonia had large hands, it is not surprising to find demanding stretches such as those in the broken chords of "E" and "S". The demands of "M" in its original version are almost impossible; rapid L.H. arpeggios *in octaves* have been simplified by the editor, as has an upper-note melody sounded against a trill in the thumb and second finger.

Each Alphabet Piece requires some use of the damper pedal, varying from the simple demands of "C" and "Z" to the artistic complexities of "P", "R" and "Y". Markings indicate exactly when the damper pedal should be depressed or released; all (pedal) markings should be interpreted by the teacher in terms of each student's ability and experience.

The pieces appear in the order used by the composer in her private edition of 1936, with the addition of three: "D", "F" and "V". The editor has used a combination of Italian, French and English tempo and style indications. Those in Italian and French are generally the composer's; those in English are often translations from the composer's Italian and German.

Letter "Y" was published in Paris in 1913 and reprinted with the permission of Edition Max Eschig, Paris.

In the official catalogue of the works of S.C. Eckardt-Gramatté each item has been assigned a chronological "E" number; the Alphabet Pieces account for numbers 1 to 14. These pieces were first heard publicly in their entirety at special concerts presented in Winnipeg and Brandon, Manitoba, during Canada Music Week in 1975. The editor wishes to thank Chester Duncan, Winnipeg composer and pianist, for his part in preparing the manuscripts for these performances.

Lorne Watson
Brandon, Manitoba
July, 1980

Table of Contents

"A"	5
"B"	6
"C"	7
"E": Etude	8
"M"	9
"H"	10
"F": Fugue	11
"R"	12
"P": Poissarde (Fisherwoman)	15
"D"	16
"S": Sonia	17
"V": Valse Chromatique	19
"Y": Etude	24
"Z": Ziganka	26

"A"

S. C. Eckhardt-Gramatté

Peacefully and smoothly

3
dolce

7
animato

13
pedale simile

19
non legato

25
legato
poco rit.
tranquillo

31
poco piu mosso
a tempo e semplice

The young composer probably named this piece after the first letter of the alphabet because it was her very first piece ("mon tout premier morceau"). If octave stretches are awkward (mm. 18-22) play only the bottom-note melody from G (marked*) and alter pedalling accordingly.