

DLA Doctoral Dissertation Thesis

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The Influence of Klára Kokas' Approach on Performers:  
Balance of Precision and Inner Freedom in Musical Interpretation

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## I. Background of the Research

Klára Kokas (1929–2010), as a student of Zoltán Kodály, realized his educational philosophy in previously unknown, innovative ways: she offered her students the possibility of free improvisation in the realm of music, both in vocal expression (vocal improvisation) and bodily expression (free movement to music). For a comprehensive examination of my dissertation topic, a significant amount of literature was available: Klára Kokas' own books and writings, interviews with her, writings by her students, and scholarly studies related to her pedagogical work. At the beginning of my research, a thorough study of her books proved helpful: *I Taught in America*<sup>1</sup>, *Music Raises my Hands*<sup>2</sup>, and *Joy, Bight Spark of Divinity*<sup>3</sup> were published during her lifetime, and the multimedia DVD-ROM<sup>4</sup>, which shares the same title as the latter and compiles Kokas' collected writings and studies, is also an invaluable source. Her final book, *I Combed the Clouds: My Children's Stories Hiding in Music*<sup>5</sup>, as well as the DVD series *Worlds Discovered in Music*<sup>6</sup>, were published posthumously, edited by her colleagues and students. Many of her writings remain, in the question-and-answer format she favored – these are sincere, clearly understandable, yet reflect a high level of professional knowledge about topics she found of utmost importance.

The most rigorous and high-quality scholarly studies were written by Gabriella Deszpot, who has conducted the most authoritative research on Kokas pedagogy and examined it as a complex art education method<sup>7</sup>. The complex impact of the Kokas pedagogy

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<sup>1</sup>Klára Kokas: *I Taught in America [Amerikában tanítottam]*. Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest, 1978.

<sup>2</sup>Klára Kokas: *Music Raises my Hands [A zene felemeli a kezeimet]*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó (Akadémiai Publishing House), 1992.

<sup>3</sup>Klára Kokas: *Joy, Bight Spark of Divinity [Öröm, bűvös égi szikra]*. Budapest: Akkord Music Publishers, 1999.

<sup>4</sup>Józsefné Lájér – Beáta Furka – Melinda Kocsis (Eds.): *Joy, Bight Spark of Divinity: A Multimedia DVD-ROM on my Teachings [Öröm, bűvös égi szikra. Multimédiás DVD-ROM tanításaimról]*. DVD-ROM. Budapest: Klára Kokas's self-published edition, 2007.

<sup>5</sup>Klára Kokas: *I Combed the Clouds: My Children's Stories Hiding in Music [Megfésültem a felhőket. Gyermekeim zenébe bújó történetei]*. Budapest: Klára Kokas Agape Music-Joy Foundation [Kokas Klára Agape Zene-Életöröm Alapítvány], 2012.

<sup>6</sup>Klára Kokas – Katalin Vékony – Attila Rieger – Péter Mihola – Anett Kuszko – Gabriella Deszpot (Eds.): *Worlds Discovered Through Music: A selection from Klára Kokas' Films with Explanatory Texts by the Author [Zenében talált világ. Kokas Klára filmjeiből készült válogatás a szerző magyarázó szövegével]*. DVD-ROM. Budapest: Klára Kokas Agape Music-Joy Foundation [Kokas Klára Agape Zene-Életöröm Alapítvány], 2013.

<sup>7</sup>Gabriella Deszpot: „Musical Transformations: Klára Kokas' Complex Art Program as Pedagogy and Therapy.” *Parlando* 51/6 (June 2009: 5–11; Gabriella Deszpot: „Music and Creativity: The Development of Creativity through the Pedagogy of Klára Kokas.” *Parlando* 61/4 (2019/4), [www.parlando.hu/2019/2019-4/Deszpot\\_Gabriella-Zene\\_es\\_kreativitas.pdf](http://www.parlando.hu/2019/2019-4/Deszpot_Gabriella-Zene_es_kreativitas.pdf)

on personality development has been discussed by Éva Vass and Gabriella Deszpot in their study *Full Attention and the Flow Experience in Children with Kokas Pedagogy*<sup>8</sup>.

Regarding my dissertation topic, which focuses on the unique concert type initiated by Klára Kokas in the final phase of her career – the so-called “scarf-waving” concerts – the most relevant Kokas writings were compiled by Gabriella Deszpot under the series title *Ringin in Our Ears* and were published in several parts in the online music education journal *Parlando*. Further, Zsuzsa Pásztor analyzes children’s music-induced movement improvisation in Kokas pedagogy in her book *Studies on Kokas Pedagogy*<sup>9</sup>. Most recently, Imola Csilla Székely has published about Klára Kokas’ religious beliefs and perception of childhood, while Ildikó Reikort is currently conducting doctoral research with an educational science perspective related to the Kokas pedagogy.

Despite the music education-focused research mentioned above, there has not yet been a detailed historical presentation and analysis of either the *scarf-waving* concerts or the impact of Klára Kokas’ concert pedagogy on performing artists. My dissertation aims to fill this gap.

## II. Sources

The primary sources for my topic were the aforementioned papers, books, and multimedia collections of Klára Kokas. At the beginning of my research, I discovered that a significant, uninventoried part of the Kokas estate was difficult to access in the library of the Liszt Academy’s Kodály Institute in Kecskemét, while the remaining, inventoried materials are kept and conserved by the Klára Kokas Agape Music-Joy Foundation. Therefore, I contacted both the Foundation and Gabriella Deszpot, who provided me with a document collection she compiled, titled *Background Materials for Research on Klára Kokas’ Concert Pedagogy*, along with additional written, photographic, and video materials, in an official manner recognized and authorized by the Foundation. This rich research material proved promising for investigating the origins of the *scarf-waving* concerts and expanding upon new research paths.

During my doctoral research, I conducted interviews with Kokas students and performing artists active in the Hungarian music scene who had collaborated with her, as well

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<sup>8</sup>Éva Vass – Gabriella Deszpot: „Full Attention and the Flow Experience in Children with Kokas Pedagogy.” In: Judit Váradi – Tímea Szücs (Eds.): *The Past, Present, and Future of Music Pedagogy [A zenepedagógia múltja, jelene és jövője]*. Debrecen: Debrecen University Press, 2018. 230–246.

<sup>9</sup>Zsuzsa Pásztor: *Studies on Kokas Pedagogy [Tanulmányok a Kokas-pedagógia köréből]*. Budapest: Kovács Method Studio, 2016.

as performers and music educators who carry on Kokas' legacy. In selecting my interviewees, I aimed for an in-depth examination of the impact of the "scarf-waving" concerts organized by Kokas, reflecting her philosophy. Therefore, I interviewed both distinguished musicians and young talents who performed at these concerts, artist-teachers who worked with Kokas, and present-day experts involved in preserving and transmitting Kokas pedagogy. They were happy to share their experiences with me, and the written version of these sound-recorded interviews also served as a crucial source and reference material for my dissertation; this interview collection related to my dissertation is accessible in the Library of the Liszt Academy of Music.

### **III. Method**

My dissertation starts with a biographical summary and a concise overview of Klára Kokas' oeuvre. In the second chapter, I explore the connection between Klára Kokas and the performing arts, particularly Hungarian performing artists. I found it necessary to provide a summary of the key areas of her music pedagogy and then examine their connections to my chosen topic. The focus of the third chapter is the activity most relevant to my research: the *scarf-waving* concerts. I aim to substantiate their significance and uniqueness using historical materials. Despite the available descriptions and video documentation, a significant amount of ambiguous data also emerged. By comparing both published and unpublished Kokas writings, concert reports, original captions found in video materials, recollections from interviewees, and professional correspondences collected by Gabriella Deszpot, I was able to identify the dates, locations, performers of the concerts, as well as the musical pieces performed. Based on this, I systematized the key moments in the evolution of the *scarf-waving* concerts and presented them in several tables, establishing the chronological order of events and creating their detailed descriptions.

In the fourth chapter, I continue the presentation of the *scarf-waving* concerts with reference to the available video materials created by Klára Kokas and her colleagues, analyzing the structure and characteristics of the performances. From my analysis of the developmental history of this concert type, I extracted unconventional concert features, which I also arranged in a table and examined in relation to the available concert recordings. To complement these analyses, I discussed the impact of the concerts based on my above-mentioned interviews with performers and artist-teachers participating in the concerts. Due to the unique nature of the stories collected from my interviewees, a unified methodology could

not be established for conducting the interviews, despite my consistent use of an interview protocol. While I did employ a standard set of questions aimed at analyzing experiences from the *scarf-waving* concerts, deviating from this standard questionnaire was necessary at times. The interview process was greatly facilitated by my prior research into the available sources (images, video recordings, concert descriptions), the structure of the concerts, and their presumed locations and dates. These pieces of information helped the artists recall events that had taken place decades earlier. This approach proved successful, bringing forth additional valuable details of personal experience from the interviewees' memories.

#### **IV. Results**

In my dissertation, I examined the work of the music educator from a new perspective, distinct from the pedagogical approach previously applied in Kokas research. I examined the unconventional aspects of the *scarf-waving* concerts, initiated by her, from two aspects that can be interpreted from historical and pedagogical perspectives. In the second half of the 20th century, professional performance practice and music education increasingly prioritized musical and technical precision, often at the expense of experiencing inner freedom. I analyzed the balance between these two aspects – precision and inner freedom – in Klára Kokas' approach to musicality and her concert activities, which also inspired professional musicians. These two factors also guided my examination of the impact of Kokas' unique concerts on the participating artists.

My research was inspired by personal experiences: I had the opportunity to know Klára Kokas personally and observe her activities closely as her student during the final years of her life. I continue to perceive the significant influence of her work in my creative processes as a performing artist. This is why I consider it important that the first dissertation on the impact of her complex musical activities be written from a performing arts perspective. Based on my own experiences, I hypothesized that Klára Kokas' approach, rooted in Kodály's pedagogical principles, and the creative musical experiences she offered significantly shaped the artistic expression of performers who knew and collaborated with her. Through the interviews conducted, I could confirm that both during and after the *scarf-waving* concerts, the unconventional elements of these events had a formative impact on the participating musicians' performing attitudes. The experiences gained there influenced them by allowing for a more intense state of attention while making music, and this experience later implicitly enriched the performers' artistic practice. Additionally, the overall impact achieved by Kokas influenced their playing style and eventually became an integral part of their instrumental or

vocal practice methodology in a creative way. Upon completing my research, I found that with all the tools presented in my dissertation, Kokas directed the full attention of both performers and listeners toward the emotions conveyed in the music, ultimately offering a pathway for personal development.

## **V. Documentation of Activities Related to the Topic of the Dissertation**

### **Final Concert of the Common Sense Society Britannia Fellowship – Song and Aria Recital by Zsófia Bódi and László Stachó**

Date: September 16, 2021

Location: Sir Roger Scruton Library – Sundry Hill Farm, Brinkwirth, Wiltshire, United Kingdom

### **Closing Concert of László Stachó’s Masterclass – Song and Aria Recital by Zsófia Bódi and László Stachó**

Date: October 14, 2022

Location: Jenő Ádám Music School, Szolnok

### **Kokas Training – Certificate Award Ceremony and Scarf-Waving concert organized by Tamara Farnadi (participation as performer)**

Date: November 25, 2022

Location: Rómer Flóris Museum of Art and History, Győr

### **Scarf-Waving concert organized by Judit Szkubán, Zsuzsanna Blaschke, and the Music Collection of the Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library (active participation)**

Date: February 24, 2023

Location: Ötpacsirta Street Salon, Music Collection of the Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library, Budapest

### **“Unpolished Diamonds” – Kokas Professional Day (active participation)**

Date: April 22, 2023

Location: Józsefváros Music School, Budapest

***An Evening in Hungary: A Musical Travel through Two Centuries – Song and Aria***  
**Recital by Zsófia Bódi and László Stachó**

Date: June 27, 2023

Location: Österreichisches Hospiz, Via Dolorosa, Jerusalem

***Love – Song and Aria Recital by Zsófia Bódi and László Stachó***

Date: May 15, 2024

Location: Ceremonial Hall of the University of Szeged

***Music Therapy Club – Practice Methodology: The Complete Training of Musical***  
**Attention – Lecture by László Stachó with the participation of Zsófia Bódi**

Date: November 18, 2024

Location: Budapest Music Center, Library