

Propositions

My essay is a study of the possibilities of textual representation in the 'a cappella' choral works of the 20th century. I had two reasons for choosing this particular theme. Firstly, in my experience, music of the 20th century does not have its worthy place in our music education and on the repertoire of our choirs. Teachers, conductors are averse to the teaching or taking pieces of music of this era on their repertoire. I would like the analyses in my dissertation to be a kind of stimulus to the approach to this rich and rather fascinating period of music.

The other reason for my choice is based on my belief that approaching a certain piece of music from the viewpoint of the text and drawing attention to the representation of music during the acquisition period can be successful in endearing music of this era to students or members of choirs, in many cases without any previous music education at all, music that is seemingly hard to understand.

For the study of the theme I chose poems written by French poets. I tried to select works by important poets and composers, which give beautiful examples of the textual representation. Moreover, for the chosen choral works to show the more varied pictures from the viewpoint of style and chronological order was an aspect of huge importance. With my essay I would like to prove that music of this period also has plenty of beauty, and that many of the composers of the 20th century laid great emphasis on the expressive representation of the poetical texts, similarly to the Masters of previous eras.

In each case, I introduce the poets and the circumstances of the origins of the opuses in my essay, and, if necessary, the literary and possible historical background, followed by the introduction of the composer and finally the analysis of the selected composition.

In the melancholic and painful poetry of Charles d'Orléans, his sorrowful and rugged life is reflected. He lived in one of the most acute crisis periods of French history and considered writing poems as pure, light amusement. At the dawn of the new era, the Renaissance, his poems resembled more the medieval courtly lyric poetry of which he created the last, extremely refined gems. Also, his themes resemble the traditions of previous centuries. He sings of the beauty of nature and the anguish of love. Nevertheless, the characteristically personal tone of his works developing the traditional forms (i.e. rondeau, chanson, ballad [or lay]) to perfection makes his poetry outstanding. The sad longing and the nostalgia are a recurring motive in his poems.

His poems were set to music by two significant composers, László Lajtha and Claude Debussy. Lajtha is the most prominent figure of the generation of composers immediately following Kodály and Bartók. With his unique, specifically particular style that is as good as of other composers in Europe, Lajtha takes a special place in the history of Hungarian music of the 20th century. For Lajtha, the quintessence of creative art was creating an ideal world and not a representation of the prevailing reality. The classic beauty ideal was always in his mind. He wished to establish an oeuvre that is part of the general European values. He regarded the mission of composing as finding beauty, gentility, musicality and synthesis, as the continuation of the art of old times, as the creation of an art where man is in the centre and as searching for beauty lost in the 20th century.

Among numerous effects, the French influence was of the most crucial importance in Lajtha's music. His study trip to Leipzig in his youth followed by a series of stays in Paris made a great impression on him. Composers and epochs that musical life in Hungary completely lacked those days, drew his attention at that time. In his career as a composer he composed his choral works in two, nearly a decade-long periods. His compositions for mixed

choirs were completed in the 1930s whereas his church music was written in the 1950s. A number of common, general characteristics can be found in them, which are the following:

- Polyphonic composition and fugal sections
- Making the most of the potentials of the tone-colour of the choir. The different kinds of ways of singing without text: using different vowels, singing with closed and semi-closed mouth and all sorts of varying of these methods. Onomatopoeic effects
- Elaborate rhythm, fast notes, dance rhythms
- Alternating and asymmetric metres
- Characteristic melody-making
- Modality, chromaticism, mixturas, unexpected changes in tonality and in harmony
- Diverse use and creation of forms

His choral work titled *Four Madrigals* abounds in beautiful examples of textual representation. The text in the first movement involves the emotional expression of agonizing pangs of love. The music does not represent particular figures of speech but follows the emotional fluctuation in the text. In this case, Lajtha places melismatic singing, which is already one of his characteristic features, in the service of expression. Among the natural scenes in the second movement, outstands the representation of blooming flowers, and dancing and singing birdies. The 6/8 and 9/8-meter bars provide the dance character in this movement. Especially interesting is the use of the *gagliarda* rhythm. The brilliantly composed, massive polyphonic *din, dan, don* parts, which recall the atmosphere of the Renaissance, are remarkable sections of the movement. The third movement is a good example of one of Lajtha's music with a pondering, philosophical atmosphere. In this case what the composer is contemplating on is the acceptance of fate and the inconceivability of the passing moment. Moreover, Lajtha's perhaps most beautiful natural scenes are depicted in the movement. The purl of the brook and the flying of the cranes are conjured up before us by the choir's singing without text. The last, fourth movement is a virtuoso finale, which demands a brilliant performance. The main character, which is a brisk haberdasher apprentice, is pictured by a dynamic tempo, a sequence of short imitation sections, and a voluble delivery of the text, which might remind us of Janequin's chansons.

Debussy's *Three Chansons* is his only opus for mixed choir. The main features of his music such as impressionist atmosphere, the recall of music from previous times, use of the ternary form, namely the ABA form, pentatony, whole-tones, modality, use of mixturas, rich and free rhythm, a liking for triplets and a wide range of the tone-colours can also be found in the *Chansons*. The first movement resembles the early Renaissance chansons from Paris. The poem is about the praise of the beloved woman. Debussy uses every possible musical means to emphasise the poetic message. The second movement is an impressionist image where, on the verge of slumber and wakefulness, the main character is daydreaming about love. Throughout the whole movement the ostinato rhythm, which represents the distant oozing sound of the *tabourin*, can be heard. Primarily, Debussy makes the most of the textual representation in melody-making. The state of light sleep is suggested by the constant varying of the keys and the vindication of the impression of tonal vagueness. The virtuoso finale is a poem about banishing winter. The evil qualities of winter and the good qualities of summer are compared in the text. To demonstrate the contrast, Debussy uses a most simple but quite expressive method when he contrasts minor and major tonality, and loud and soft dynamics.

In his famous poem titled *Ars Poetica (Art poétique)*, Verlaine summarizes the essence and principles of his poetry. He turns to music. 'Of music before everything' thus he starts his *Ars Poetica*. He tries to create a kind of poetry where 'The perfumes, the colours and the sounds respond'. He tries to express the hidden quivers of emotions and passions and to grip

the passing moment, like the impressionist painters tried. His typical images are the moonlit landscape, the lake and trees.

Kamilló Lendvay's art is most diverse as he composed in nearly all genres. Moreover, he saw through the whole life of choir music, and he composed music for choirs from the 1960s to 1990. Among easily performable, mainly a cappella choral works he sometimes tends to set requirements that singers can only meet with great difficulty, like in *Sotto voce no. 2*. He composed three pieces of music under this title, two choral works and a piece of chamber music. In *Sotto voce no. 2*, nearly all the modern composition techniques of the second half of the 20th century are presented: clusters, aleatory, glissandi, sections without bar lines, punctual parts, dissonance, whole tones, chromaticism, mainly dissonant but this time stressed intervals such as minor and major seconds, sevenths, perfect fifths, tritones and minor ninths. The unique and specific use of vowels is significant throughout the whole piece. Lendvay succeeded in serving the music with all of this and, despite the musical language being quite modern, it follows every quiver of the text in a most expressive way.

Lajos Vass was one of the last, illustrious representatives of the second generation who had studied under Kodály. Besides being a performer playing various musical instruments, a prolific composer, a schoolteacher and an educator, he was a versatile musician. His compositions are colourful. In *Nocturn*, which he composed in 1968, he started using the cluster technique, which was considered as one of the most modern schools at that time. The atmosphere of the poem by Verlaine is excellently represented by the buzzing clusters. *Nocturn* is a beautiful example of Vass's efforts to compose opuses which sound modern but at the same time are easily performable even for amateur choirs. On certain occasions the composer looks even further in the field of modern composition techniques by inserting aleatory in his music.

Paul Éluard and Francis Poulenc are the most significant author and composer couple of choir music in the 20th century. Éluard's poetic development is closely connected to the poetic movements of the first half of the 20th century. At the beginning of the century the two, perhaps most important literary trends were dadaism and surrealism, both of which reacted to those great changes in society of the era which finally led to World War I. Although both proclaim the failure of intelligence and the necessary renewal of society, dadaism denies and destroys everything whereas surrealism puts its faith in poetry which brings reforms. Surrealists find the way that leads out of the social dead end in the sincerity of the subconscious, the land of dreams and the spontaneity of thoughts. Surrealism is considered to be a literary trend and is hoped to possibly renew human society. Apart from writing love-poems regarded by many as the most beautiful ones of all times, Éluard started his career under the influence of these two trends. There is a transformation period in his oeuvre in the 1930s when his social consciousness and sense of responsibility grows in him, which leads to becoming one of the leaders of the French liberation movement and writing his war poems during World War II.

Francis Poulenc is one of the most unique choral composers in the 20th century. During his life, he witnessed practically all the important musical events and was in connection with all the significant composers of his time. Apart from composing, he had a bright career as a concert pianist. His music was influenced by music of the old times and countless trends of his time, including light musical trends. He was not a great reformer. He uses a quite unique lyrical voice in his choral works, which occasionally feature a deep dramatic tone. He composed both sacred and secular music.

His chamber cantata in four movements titled *Un soir de neige* was composed in 1944, during the war. It was based on Éluard's poems, which represent spiritual processes, moods and emotions. The chased animal, shattered tree, branches desiring to escape from their prison all symbolise the defenceless, lonely, terrified, searching for way out, harrowed, unbalanced

man who still hopes for the triumph of life. Using various musical means to reinforce expression in his music, Poulenc follows the emotional changes of the poems or the flight of surrealistic images with shocking power. The musical representation of the text is executed in two layers in the work. One is an overall application of tempos, the choice of keys or the melody-making, all of which express the general atmosphere of the poems, while the other is a use of certain means that represent the momentary essence of the text in many places in the music.

The encounter and artistic relationship of Sándor Szokolay and Francis Poulenc is a unique phenomenon in Hungarian music of the 20th century. The relationship between the elderly Master and the young composer just starting out his career could basically have influenced Szokolay's later career. Despite his death soon after their acquaintance, Poulenc made quite an impression on the young, Hungarian composer. Szokolay's *Déploration*, in which he made a peculiar attempt to mix two genres, the requiem and the piano concerto, was composed to the memory of Poulenc.

Humour has a major role in Ravel's oeuvre. He tends to give startling, even shocking titles to his compositions at the beginning of his career, or on other occasions the chosen text itself is humorous which is even more highlighted by the music. His opera *The Spanish Hour* is a 20th-century revival of the tradition of the opera buffa. He himself wrote the text to his only choral work, the *Three chansons*. The funny stories in the first and third movements are great examples of his good sense of humour. In both cases, Ravel chooses the form of a dialogue. In the first movement, great effect is achieved mainly by the distribution of the characters among the voices where the basses voice the rich old man whereas the tenors voice the young page. The rest of the voices accompany the events with expressive indications of the current atmosphere. In the three verses of the third movement Ravel utilizes brilliant methods of heightening the music, of which the most important is a gabbling way of singing, which sets a difficult task before the performers.

The influence of the German romanticism is an exceptional characteristic of Florent Schmitt's music, which can primarily be observed in the fields of orchestral techniques and the colours. His main compositions are monumental stage and symphonic opuses. Making several kinds of variations from many of his musical works is one of his main features. His style is eclectic which is evident in his choral works too. *Contrasts* is a varied sequence of movements depicting different characters. *Noah's Ark*, which tells the story of the Flood, is a movement that takes a central place in it. The movement can be divided into two major units. The first portrays the hasty arrival of the animals thronging towards the ark, whereas the second is a depiction of the Flood, and the returning to home. Here, just like in Ravel's case, the text contains a lot of humorous elements, which is even more heightened by Schmitt's music. Schmitt represents the portraits of the different animals and the events of the Flood with the help of differences in harmony, rhythm and register. Among the numerous minor details outstands the representation of the tortoise and the fishes.