

DLA Dissertation Thesis

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Historical, romantic, and 20<sup>th</sup>-century traits  
in Zoltán Gyöngyössi's interpretation of Bach –  
An analysis of the flautist's legacy and pedagogical  
influence

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## 1. The background of the research

The flautist Zoltán Gyöngyössy's (1958–2011) performances and recordings were often praised by critics, and by composers who worked with him; however, to my knowledge, no scientific paper discussed the whole oeuvre of the musician, who died so suddenly and tragically.

Gyöngyössy was acknowledged primarily as a successful performer of contemporary music, but it is less known that Johann Sebastian Bach's music was highly important to him both as a performer and as a teacher. He often remarked about this in his statements and interviews.<sup>1</sup> Though he himself played a modern instrument; he took interest in the historically informed performance practice. He often combined period performance with contemporary technique and Romantic traits in his concerts, which resulted in completely unique interpretations – countless recordings testify to this. He also made a great impact on his chamber music partners and colleagues with his performance of Bach's works, and on his

<sup>1</sup> Csengery Kristóf: „Bemutatjuk Gyöngyössy Zoltánt.” *Muzsika* 29/1 (1986. január): 26-27. (*Introducing Zoltán Gyöngyössy.*), Gyöngyössy Zoltán: Egy csepp emberség. Gondolatok a Kossuth Rádióban fél hét után 3 perccel. Perjés Klára (főszerk.): *Egy csepp emberség*. 1. (Budapest: Magyar Rádió Rt. Kossuth Rádió, 2004). 235. (*A Drop of Humanity. Some Thoughts in Kossuth Radio 3 Minutes After Half Past Six.*), Gyöngyössy Zoltán: „Önarckép – hangokkal. Bartók Rádió, 1999. május 18.” *Parlando* 43/5 (2001. május): 33-38. (*Self-portrait – With Notes.*), Mikes Éva: „Nem kell stopper és mérőszalag. Gyöngyössy Zoltán fuvolaművész.” *Muzsika* 45/4 (2002. április): 21-22. (*No Need for a Stopwatch or a Measure Tape. The Flutist Zoltán Gyöngyössy.*).

students with his thoughts about the music. The objective of my dissertation is to investigate this utterly important but unduly neglected layer of the flautist's life's work.

## 2. Sources

In order to offer a comprehensive picture of the flautist's approach to Baroque music, several sources were used. From the literature, a central role is given to one of the best-known writings on music from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Johann Joachim Quantz's *On Playing the Flute*,<sup>2</sup> whose examination shows that the approaches of Zoltán Gyöngyössi and Quantz, having been born nearly 250 years apart, largely coincide, despite the centuries having passed between them. The research was also supported by Nikolaus Harnoncourt's *Music as Speech* and Robert Donington's *A Performer's Guide to Baroque Music*.<sup>3</sup>

In this research, interviews with Zoltán Gyöngyössi were examined, as were the critiques praising and analysing the flautist's performance. Two extant notebooks of his have proven to be

<sup>2</sup> Johann Joachim Quantz: *On Playing the Flute*. Hungarian edition: *Fuvolaiskola*. Transl.: András Székely. (Budapest: Argumentum, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Nikolaus Harnoncourt: *Baroque Music Today: Music as Speech*. Hungarian edition: *A beszédszerű zene. Utak egy új zeneértés felé*. Transl.: Judit Péteri. (Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest, 1988)., Robert Donington: *A Performer's Guide to Baroque Music*. Hungarian edition: *A barokk zene előadásmódja*. Transl.: Karasszon Dezső. (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1978).

essential sources, which contain quotes from the literature important to him and excerpts from lectures by other flautists he admired. I also was able to make interviews – twelve to be precise – with former students and chamber music partners of his both from his early and his mature years, which offered a comprehensive image about the change in the flautist-professor's approach.

In the second half of the dissertation, the materials on Bach from his bequeath – cared for and made available to me by the pianist Rita Termes – are analysed: the surviving sheet music, the radio and television recordings of the performances, and the recordings of his concerts made by and for himself. The speciality of the bequeath is that Gyöngyössi himself made a recording of the vast majority of his concerts, thus the extant collection offers a uniquely complete view of his art.

### 3. Methods

In this doctoral dissertation, Zoltán Gyöngyössi's interpretation of Bach is presented from several aspects, in a comprehensive fashion. In the first chapter, the approaches in the above-mentioned literary sources are introduced and compared to the statements made by the flautist in his interviews. The techniques employed in contemporary music that Zoltán Gyöngyössi used with predilection also in his Baroque playing are thoroughly examined. In the second chapter,

Gyöngyössi's personality, perspective, and approach to early music is discussed on the basis of the interviews with his former students and chamber music partners, and so are the relevant sections of the critiques about his concerts. The thus collected attributes are then compared to the related suggestions in Johann Joachim Quantz's *On Playing the Flute*.

In the second half of the dissertation, first, the sheet music in his bequeath is examined, and it is compared to that of his former students. Based on this, it is attempted to answer the questions if there were editions that were significant to him, which he would use while preparing for his concerts and during them, and how much the entries in the students' music correspond to Gyöngyössi's own ideas.

The most significant and longest, last two chapters consist of the analysis of the recordings found in his bequeath. It is a considerable number, since nearly 130 cassettes, CD and DVD recordings, and VHS tapes contain Johann Sebastian Bach's works. In the penultimate chapter of the dissertation, the flautist's general musical solutions are examined, based on his extant interpretations of Johann Sebastian Bach's pieces. Solo performances, chamber music, and orchestral music are separately discussed, the unique traits of his playing are presented, and, as conclusion for the chapter, a comparison is made between him and other musicians.

Performances of specific compositions are analysed in the last

chapter. The concepts for Zoltán Gyöngyössy's concerts can really be ascertained from this chapter and from the list of recordings in the Appendix; it also shows how often he performed the works in question. He generally tried to make up a programme of works from different styles and periods, or create a thematic one. For example, with pianist András Kemenes, they performed Bach's Organ Trio Sonates in their concerts, or he performed Bach's Trio Sonates several times with his well-known chamber music group (Zoltán Gyöngyössy – László Hadady – György Lakatos – Borbála Dobozy).

#### 4. Results

As was mentioned earlier, Johann Sebastian Bach's music was of special significance for Zoltán Gyöngyössy. He tried to seize every opportunity to work with Bach's pieces, he often played Bach's compositions in his concerts, and, in his teaching, he discussed the ingenious composer's works in length and detail.

From the first part of this dissertation, based on his statements, interviews, extant notebooks, and the interviews with his former students and colleagues, an incredibly complex, often controversial personality emerges, who still made a huge impact on every fellow musician with whom he came into contact. He was an inquisitive, open person always keen to learn and improve, who – as a true creative musician of contemporary music – still shows a great deal of

similarity in his thinking and in his approach to music to Johann Joachim Quantz's statements and suggestions made in his *On Playing the Flute*, and to musicians researching early music and preferring historically informed performance practice.

Through the overview of Zoltán Gyöngyössi's collection of sheet music, insight can be gained to his connection to works of music, and into his process of preparation and learning. There are several pieces whose music contains his harmonic analysis. His musical suggestions aiming to help play the works in the right way according to him are mostly preserved in his students' sheet music. With the help of his own ornaments and variations, it is possible to get to know his seemingly improvisatory, but – as the analyses prove –, in truth, very conscious side insisting on proven and time-tested solutions.

The largest chapters of the dissertation consist of analyses of recordings. The vast majority of the sound and video recordings which serve as the basis for these analyses were made by Zoltán Gyöngyössi himself: of his own concerts, and of the radio broadcasts of them. It was expressly important to him – besides the fact that he liked to record his concerts – to listen to himself play, so that he could improve and strive for perfection.

The recordings found in his bequeath truly offer a comprehensive view of Gyöngyössi's performances of Bach. His interpretations combine three, seemingly entirely different and incongruous

elements: the approach which strives to understand the composer's intentions and to analyse the piece's structure and harmony; Romantic performance characteristic of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which uses many legatos and lengthy phrasing; and techniques from contemporary music. In my opinion, these three components resulted in a remarkably unique interpretation in Gyöngyössi's hands.

In the dissertation – besides the repertoire for the flute –, performances of compositions are also discussed which Bach originally composed for another instrument: the violin, the harpsichord, or the lute. Beyond the solo and chamber music pieces, orchestral compositions are also considered and examined which Zoltán Gyöngyössi often played with an orchestra. I believe the analyses may prove fruitful not only for flautists, but other instrumentalists, too, and the performance approaches and musical solutions may be used in orchestral and chamber music performances. The paper may also be of use to musicologists, since it is rare that an approach, which is relevant from several aspects, be so complex, yet impressive and enjoyable at the same time.

Writing this doctoral dissertation about the flautist Gyöngyössi Zoltán's Baroque playing and, specifically, about his interpretation of Bach's works gave me the opportunity to immerse myself in the performance practice of early music, to get to know the different approaches, and to widen my own perspective. It is also significant to me that, at the beginning of my studies at the Liszt Academy of



Music, Budapest, Zoltán Gyöngyössi taught me, too, thus, by writing this paper, I was able to pay my tribute to his life's work and music.

I believe it would be necessary to thoroughly investigate and analyse other parts of Gyöngyössi's life's work, perhaps even in further academic papers, since his professional activities offer a well-researchable area due to the rich source material; on the other hand, whoever studies his work may gain truly useful insight and information. This could come from his duly famous activity as a contemporary music performer, but I believe the arrangements he made are also important. In the present paper, these works are also discussed, since he arranged several of Johann Sebastian Bach's original concerti for the violin or the harpsichord and orchestra for the flute.<sup>4</sup> The world of early Romanticism may be a similarly significant area: the flautist's most important arrangements he played most often in concerts are of Franz Schubert's and Robert Schumann's works. Gyöngyössi's arrangements of the song cycles, songs, romances, and fantasy pieces which are significant in the history of music have become an integral part of the repertoire for the flute. The special continuous breathing technique developed by

<sup>4</sup> J. S. Bach: *Flute Concerto in A Minor. Arrangement of the Violin Concerto in A Minor (BWV 1041) and the Harpsichord Concerto in G Minor (BWV 1058)* by Zoltán Gyöngyössi. (Budapest: Akkord Zenei Kiadó, 2005)., J. S. Bach: *Flute Concerto in A Minor. Arrangement of the Violin Concerto in G Minor (BWV 1041) and the Harpsichord Concerto in F Minor (BWV 1058)* by Zoltán Gyöngyössi. (Budapest: Akkord Zenei Kiadó, 2005).

Zoltán Gyöngyössi may be a separate research topic – discussing it in detail has proven to be beyond the scope of this paper.

The above-mentioned topics are all noteworthy aspects of the flautist's life, and it is my hope that my studies at the Doctoral School, my work in the past seven years, and my dissertation may launch a wave of interest about his activity. It is also my objective to inspire musicians of an academic persuasion to do research about topics similar to the complex approach and interpretation discussed in my dissertation, and to point out that understanding the historical background and the composers' intentions behind works of music, as well as reading music in the right way are of utmost importance for performing musicians, too.

Thus, I dedicate my doctoral dissertation, the results of my research, and the aspects discussed here to every musician, musicologist, and inquisitive lay person who likes music, since, through Zoltán Gyöngyössi's life's work, it is possible to get deeply acquainted with the possibilities in performing Johann Sebastian Bach's works – which may lead to a colourful result not completely aligning with prior expectations.

## 5. Documentation of activities related to the topic of the dissertation

During her studies, Mária Fajd-Kerner regularly performed in the Doctoral Concerts organised by the Academy in the Solti Hall. She

has been regularly playing solo, chamber, and orchestral works in Budapest and in other Hungarian cities since before attending the Doctoral School. She played two concerts with her mentor, János Bálint, in Pécs, in 2017 and on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2019, and they played together several times in Budapest during the season of 2021–2022, celebrating Doppler’s anniversary. On 9<sup>th</sup> November 2018, she performed with pianist Anita Ancil in the Liszt Ferenc Concert Hall at the University of Pécs, Institute of Music.

As the subject of her complex exam, she chose „*Pan’s Flute*”, and, related to this, she played a concert by the title „*Pan’s Flute*” on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2022, in the Nádor Hall, as a part of her own concert series. On the programme, works were featured by C. Debussy, J. Mouquet, A. Derecskei, and L. De Lorenzo; her partners were flutists Rebeka Drahos, Enikő Hotzi, and Máté Bán, as well as pianist Ferenc János Szabó.

In the season of 2021–2022, she played a series of concerts in the Nádor Hall, Budapest, and in 2022–2023, she played chamber music concerts several times in Budapest and at the Széchenyi István University, Faculty of Arts & Design, Győr. Related to her doctoral topic of analysing the flautist Zoltán Gyöngyössi’s interpretation of Bach’s works, she has continuously studied playing Baroque music, and she has always included a work by Johann Sebastian Bach in the programmes of the above-mentioned concerts.

In January 2021 (postponed from November 2020 due to the

Covid pandemic), she played the solo part at the concert of the Anima Musicae Chamber Orchestra. The recording of the concert can be listened to at the following link (B.A.C.H. – *Concert “H”, Works in B*,<sup>5</sup> concert by the Anima Musicae Chamber Orchestra, J. S. Bach: Suite in b minor BWV 1067, J. S. Bach: Concerto grosso: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tdRU4VruOk>). On 13th April, she played J. S. Bach’s Sonata in g minor (BWV 1020) with pianist Marcell Kocsis in the Synagogue of Győr, alongside W. A. Mozart’s Rondeau in D major (K. anh. 184), R. Schumann’s 3 Romances Op. 94, J. Feld’s *Erinnerung an Mozart*, and P. Taffanel’s Fantaisie on the themes of „*Der Freischütz*”.

Further recordings of Mária Fajd-Kerner playing J. S. Bach’s works may be accessed at the following links:

J. S. Bach: Partita in A Minor BWV 1013, Allemande:  
<https://youtu.be/2tabXsr3ZY0>.

J. S. Bach: Partita in A Minor BWV 1013, Courante:  
<https://youtu.be/B9Fj9ATDJ4g>.

<sup>5</sup> [Translator’s note.] In Hungary, according to the German tradition, the letter H is used for B natural; the letter B always indicates B flat. Cf. the B-A-C-H motif used here in the title of the concert series.