

I. Antecedents of the research

I became a second conductor at the Lajos Vass Choir of the Vasas Ensemble Foundation in September 2000. Since I believed that a conductor should be aware of who the choir was named after, I decided to gather some information about the life of Lajos Vass. The chorus members praised him all, however, there was not much about him in the literature of musical history. I had no other option but to collect information myself if I wanted to learn more about his person.

II. Methods of the research

My decision was received with great pleasure among the chorus members who promised to support me in my work. I had lengthy conversations with them about their beloved conductor who was a part of their lives for more than 30 years. One of the members, László Tóth, introduced me to the widow and the son of Lajos Vass, who could provide me with additional information about Vass's other activities and personal characteristics as well. It was the family who later introduced me to his closest, although not musician friends, too. Thanks to the widow of Vass, his legacy in the National Széchenyi Library is in very good condition which facilitated my research a lot. As it can be seen well in the bibliography attached to my thesis paper, articles and interviews published in newspapers of the age were also of great help to me. Thanks to these sources I was able to put together a portrait of Lajos Vass as a versatile musician, a conductor, a pedagogue, a composer and musical educator and as a **nótafa** of the 20th century.

III. Results of the research

1. The life of Lajos Vass mirrors and depicts the great changes in the society of the 20th century.

In the early 40s, a great renewal of interest could be felt towards ethnic traditions in Hungary. This, as well as his family background (his parents were of peasant origin) turned Lajos Vass towards ethnic culture, and more specifically towards folk songs and folk music, already at an early age, as a student of the Lutheran Grammar School of Debrecen.

In college he had close relationship with the “**népi kollégisták**”, whose interest for ethnic culture he shared. After the liberation from fascism, he felt good opportunities to realize his plans, so he worked actively with a folk band called **Muharay** and took part in the intensive research work on folk music and the collecting of folk songs. His career was on the rise: he became an officer in the Hungarian Army as the coach of the men's choir, of which he became the artistic leader and conductor later on.

After he had learned about the Russian occupation in 1956, he agreed with the decision of the Ensemble to refuse participation in a concert in Moscow. The consequences of this step, as it will be described in my paper, were not only bad for the Ensemble, which was dissolved, but to Vass's life and future career as well. He was unemployed for years, and dismissed from his temporary jobs as well time and again – needless to say that not because of the way he worked. It was only in the 1960s that the political consolidation allowed him to get new opportunities, just as it happened to many others who worked for preserving folk tradition. Besides other activities he was the lead conductor of the Choir,

and later on also of the Orchestra of the Vasas Ensemble. And although he was living in favourable circumstances at this time, because of his political side-taking in the 1956 events he could never be worthily acknowledged.

2. Folk music and folk songs played an important part in the life and work of Lajos Vass, one of the most significant elements of his oeuvre being his role in educating people about folk music, mostly through the television programme “Röpülj páva” (Fly, peacock – the title of a Hungarian folk song).

Even at an early age, during his tours around the countryside when he collected folk songs, he was mainly interested in finding a way to get children and young adults to know and like Hungarian folk songs. This paper will show that his main motivations were not only based on music pedagogy – he considered it highly important to maintain a sense of identity among Hungarians and preserve ancient folk traditions and values, the ones he himself grew up with.

Although it was not him who had given the idea for the programme “Röpülj páva” starting off in 1969, its success throughout the whole country was mainly due to him. It seemed at that time that “folk songs had become successful again, people on the streets were humming them in cities and in the countryside alike”. People seemed to have understood the difference in value between a popular song and an original folk song, and the programme could also call the attention to our national treasure and heritage, Hungarian folk music. An important and, due to Lajos Vass’s personal and professional credo, also very new element of the programme was that he regularly made his audience and the TV spectators sing. Thanks to Vass’s inspiring personality, whole movements started up and created “Röpülj páva-circles” all around the country. The ambivalent attitude of the era (and above all, the current political leadership) towards folk traditions was one of the most important factors why the programme, despite all its success, could not be on for long. Similar programmes later were never able to reach up to its popularity.

3. Lajos Vass was among the firsts to recognize the effect of the media on the audience, and was able to exploit its possibilities to teach a whole country to appreciate folk music.

The programme “Röpülj páva” was rather aimed at adults, while the “Nótafaiskola” at children. Lajos Vass had two ways to ‘activate’ his audience. On the one hand, by making his audience sing he showed them the pleasure of singing together, and awakened the need for that. On the other hand, to his encouragement, thousands of TV spectators started to collect folk songs themselves. As László Vikár remarked, these self-made “song collectors” enriched our folk song treasure with thousands of new songs.

He also saw the opportunity in indirect ways of advertising on television: companies that provided services for the contestants of the programme, such as travel agencies and clothes companies, were thanked in public, thus given free advertisement in prime time, in exchange for their supporting culture.

4. Following Zoltán Kodály’s conception, Lajos Vass promoted the musical education of children.

As a composer, he did not only write choruses for children, but operas as well. These got their interest for at least two reasons: firstly because of their topics, and secondly because

the actors themselves were children. In these pieces, he used typical patterns and tunes from folk songs, and composed “arias” that suited a child’s vocal capacity. With his children’s operas he not only made children love singing together, but educated the future generation towards more serious genres as well.

He regularly hosted children’s programmes on the radio and on television as well, which also shows that children were just as important an audience for him as adults.

He made speeches on educational conferences in order to improve teacher training circumstances which also aimed at reaching a higher musical educational level within the future generation.

5. Being a chorus leader had a significant part in the life of Lajos Vass.

This paper will provide a brief overview of his career as a chorus leader: he conducted the Ensemble of the Hungarian Army, the “Acélhang” men’s choir of Ganz-Mávag, and the Vasas Choir for more than 30 years. He was a permanent guest conductor of the Central Choir of Hungarian Teachers of the Czech Republic as well. As a result of his work as a conductor in the Vasas Choir, the artistic development of both the choir and the orchestra was obvious. He renewed the system of member recruiting; his personality and fame attracted more and more young people to the choir. He enlarged significantly the repertoire of the choir: the programme, made up of mostly oratorical pieces until then, got completed by masterpieces of the *a cappella* literature, works of baroque composers. The repertoire, this way becoming more and more versatile and colourful, meant new attractive force, with singers of better abilities joining the Ensemble, thus raising standards as well.

A typical example to describe his pedagogical mentality was the fact that when selecting artists for appearance or tours abroad, he did not mainly consider their momentary, current state of voice, but rather looked at how often the artists had attended rehearsals, to what extent they took part in the every day life of the group. This way his methods, musicality and thorough preparation could work wonders with this amateur choir. Musical pieces were mostly acquired through solmization and part rehearsals. Lajos Vass devised numerous methods and exercises as well, using well-known motives from musical history (such as the “B-A-C-H” theme) in one or many parts. At the beginning of rehearsals he often made chorus members practice solmization from Kodály’s *Bicinia Hungarica* for example.

The powerful community, the professional and personal respect of the conductor, as well as his need for perfection in preparation and teaching methods together resulted in long-lasting success of the choir. The performances usually got a good write-up from music critics, praising the beauty, softness and clearness of the acoustic experience the choir provided. His results with amateur choirs clearly show how great a pedagogue Lajos Vass was; while with a professional choir a good artistic education and professional knowledge might be sufficient, complete devotion and good pedagogical methods are indispensable in case of amateurs.

6. Lajos Vass did not regard country borders as the borders of the Hungarian nation.

This paper will present in detail his devotion for Hungarians living beyond the borders of the country. He actively took part in events organized in the former Upper Hungary (now part of Slovakia), in Novi Sad (South of Hungary, now part of Serbia) and in Transylvania. He also kept close contact with the communities living there which were

dealing with music. Lajos Vass had, for example, an important role in organizing a meeting of choirs (now competition) called “Kodály days”, which has, until the present day, been revitalizing and animating the musical life of Galánta (a city in Upper Hungary). From the mid 60s, he was a regular guest conductor in Slovakia; he became the conductor of the Central Choir of Hungarian Teachers of the Czech Republic. This choir also gave many concerts together with Vass’s Hungarian choir, the Vasas and, following his death, just as the Hungarian choir, it also took up his name.

7. *Being a composer meant a special advantage to Lajos Vass as a conductor, and vice versa.*

As the choral piece analyzed in the paper, “Kőrösi Csoma Sándor üzenete” (The Message of Sándor Kőrösi Csoma) shows it convincingly, Vass could use his experiences as a conductor brilliantly in composing music. He was well aware of the possibilities and barriers of an amateur choir, and had a deep knowledge about its acoustic properties. When composing, he always kept in mind the future conductor of the piece; besides meticulously precise definitions of metrum, he always carefully signalled the character as well. He even considered that the alternating rhythms should match musical stresses so that the piece should be easier to conduct and memorize. It turns out from some of the interviews he gave that as a composer, it was his continuous intention to create pieces that are easy to interpret.

8. *Lajos Vass’s various activities create a unity, an organic whole.*

Following in the footsteps of Kodály, Vass, the choir organizer, conductor, composer, pedagogue and TV presenter, had one central objective, that is, to preserve Hungarian traditions by making people like valuable music. According to the demands and possibilities of his age (the latter offered by the media), he sought new ways – and found them.