

DLA Thesis

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## Choral Improvisation

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## **1. Antecedents of the research**

Choral improvisation is a methodological experiment developed in the past decades for choirs. The expression was first applied by the Swedish choral conductor Gunnar Eriksson to refer to his latest choral techniques. No Hungarian choral musician or choir is known to have been engaged in such improvisatory activity prior to Eriksson's developments, his impact however has yielded great change: several choirs in Hungary have now begun cultivating the method.

Due to the novelty of these techniques, no literature can be found specifically relating to the topic of choral improvisation. It is possible however to examine several of its aspects: improvisation in other musical fields, its presence during the course of music history, its application by 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers, its use and effects in music pedagogy. There is sufficient literature available in the above topics in both foreign languages and Hungarian. Publications generally deal with the technical aspects of improvisation more extensively – such are training books teaching improvisation and music theory of jazz. A synthetic approach to the topic as a whole – in a similar manner to the theoretical part of current study – can only be found in a 1938 German discourse written

by Ernst Ferand<sup>1</sup> and Derek Bailey's book under the title *Improvisation*<sup>2</sup> published in English. The German book investigates exhaustively the topic of improvisation from the contemporary standpoint of musicology, pedagogy and psychology, while the latter publication offers a modern, yet a more superficial approach to it, which in addition to considerations in music history and ethnomusicology, also touches upon the fields of jazz and avant-garde music. Apart from the aforementioned studies, references to improvisatory activity in the past can only be found sparsely in literature dealing with specific periods of music history – with regards to the fact that extemporization such as the organum form in the Middle Ages or the Baroque ornamenting tradition was rarely referred to as improvisation and also because the topic in itself is a fairly debated subject difficult to judge from a scholarly point of view. The same can be said of ethnographic researches: studies dealing with the analysis of music in different cultures generally consider music theory aspects alone, presenting the melodic and rhythmic systems, but not discussing the notion of improvisation, even though it is an indispensable element in many cultures. As far as the field of

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<sup>1</sup> E. Ferand: *Die Improvisation in der Musik*. (Rhein-Verlag Zürich, 1938).

<sup>2</sup> D. Bailey: *Improvisation*. (Da Capo Press, 1993).

music pedagogy is concerned, literature for alternative teaching methods commonly deal with the advantages of applying improvisation in music education, however the approach is more of the technical kind in this case as well. Last to be mentioned, workbooks of current improvisational methods are also available, among them Gunnar Eriksson's collection<sup>3</sup> and the teaching material for Walter Thompson's *Soundpainting* sign system.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Sources

For the in-depth examination of the different fields of improvisation I have in the first instance turned to the literature mentioned above provided by Ernst Ferand and Derek Bailey, and also the entry of Improvisation in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. I have proceeded from the data and literature found in these sources to reach other musicological papers, books and articles published in music journals.<sup>5</sup> Pedagogical conclusions were drawn from the teaching books of the different alternative methods and papers

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<sup>3</sup> G. Eriksson: *Kör ad lib.* (Göteborg: Bo Ejeby Förlag, 1995, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> W. Thompson: *Soundpainting 1&2.* (Walter Thompson Artwork, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Highly appreciated were the articles published online in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* and *The Musical Quarterly*.

written by music teachers. My ethnographic research – apart from the literature found under this subject – was aided by world music lectures and performances organized in Budapest and also by experts of the different cultures. For the chapter dealing with a psycholinguistic aspect (the metaphor of music as a communicational form) and the analysis of the etymology of improvisation I have turned to the sources of my earlier linguistic studies. Most importantly of all, in presenting the theoretical principles and the technical aspects of choral improvisation, I have tried to find parallel notions in the literature of some other academic fields, such as philosophy, psychology and logic.

### **3. Method**

The first part of the dissertation attempts to confirm and assist the practice of choral improvisation through theoretically based research. These chapters deal with musical improvisation in the general sense, exploring the difficulties of the interpretation of the word, its background in music history – from antiquity through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and Baroque traditions to modern times –, its occurrences in different cultures of the world – namely in the Indian tradition and the music of West-Africa, the cradle from which jazz has evolved,

the two cultures applying improvisation in very distinct ways –, and finally its rejuvenation and role in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with due respect to trends in modern composition and aspects of music pedagogy. Recent compositional techniques and principles that involve improvisatory elements to a certain extent are dealt with in a separate chapter – together with the short analysis of a few specific pieces provided as illustration.

The second part of the study presents choral improvisation itself – its theoretical principles and practices developed so far –, it also gives a summary of exercises recently attained and developed by the author of the present dissertation and by colleagues in their field study with choirs and ensembles, and finally offers a list of positive effects of improvisational activity experienced thus far. During the research it was considered essential to constantly search for correlations between the two sections, that is the theoretical background on the one hand and the technical, empirical side on the other, thus taking the works of Ernst Ferand and Derek Bailey one step further, the reason being that such coherence not only justifies the existence of choral improvisation, but offers further inspiration for its methodological development.

#### **4. Results**

The results of my research show that choral improvisation both in our home country and internationally speaking is still in its infancy, since the repository of possibilities – taking inspiration from techniques of the past, living traditions in different cultures of the world and the mentality of modern composers – is endless. The positive effects experienced thus far in developing musical skills and personality, all supported by pedagogical standpoints of previous and current generations, strengthen the view that further development of choral improvisation, its circulation amongst amateur music societies and its involvement in music teaching methodology is a must. The presence of extempore music making throughout music history and its essential role in world music expresses the innovative power of improvisation and justifies its establishment on an artistic performance level as well – including its use in the world of choral music. This statement is further supported by Ernst Ferand in his book written more than 70 years ago: "Thus we can observe the crystallization of vivid and flowing forms everywhere throughout the history of music development [...] during the course of creating music, improvisation freezes into composition".

## 5. Concerts and recordings related to the topic of the dissertation

### Choral improvisational concerts of the Soharóza experimental ensemble

*Surface Tension*: 24 January; 21, 29 March; 22 May, 2009 – MU Theatre; 16 April, 2010 – Collegium Hungaricum, Berlin

*Ördögkatlan*: 5 August, 2009 – Ördögkatlan Festival, Kisharsány; 4 September, 2009 – CultBath Festival, Malomtó Turkish Bath (director: Pál Göttinger, guest artist: Rubik Ernő Zoltán)

*Mindenütt jó*: 5-10 October, 2009, 5-13 February, 2010 – Placc Festival, Szemlőhegy Cave (director: Pál Göttinger)

*Letter to Tamás Cseh*: 22 January, 2010 – Memorial Concert for Tamás Cseh, Bárka Theatre

*Presenting Pécs2010*: 15 April, 2010 – Hungarian Embassy, Berlin

*Dolce Voce*: 19, 25 June, 2010 – Palatinus House; 20, 21 June, 2010 – Pesti Lámpás Restaurant; 7 September, 2010 – CultBath Festival, Malomtó Turkish Bath (co-artist: Zsófia Mautner)

*Franz Liszt Jubilee Flashmob*: 8, 14, 22 October, 2011 – Palace of Arts (guest choirs: Trèš Fort, Tócsa Children's Camp, primary school choirs)

*Presenting Choral Improvisation*: 1 April, 2012 – IMPRÓ7 Festival, Impró

*Album Release Concert*: 12-13 May; 7-8 July, 2012 – Kelenföld power-station

*Oversight for Youngsters (workshop for children)*: 15 September, 2012 – CultBath Festival, Foundry Museum

### Choral improvisational concerts of the Halastó choir (with Árpád Tóth)

24 March, 2006 – Fringe Festival, Erzsébet Square

9 June, 2006 – National Theatre Festival of Pécs, Dante Café

25 October, 2006 – Keltenbad, Bad Salzungen

### Albums containing choral improvisational pieces

2007 Halastó: *K.É.K.* (Halastó Cultural Association)

2008 Halastó: *Renaissance & Baroque* (Halastó Cultural Association)

2012 Soharóza (Halastó Cultural Association and S10 Records)