

The Liszt Academy of Music
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Art History and Cultural Studies: Music

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**“THE SECRET OF PURE NOTES”:
THE ART OF ISTVÁN VÁNTUS
IN THE LIGHT OF HIS MUSIC
THEORETICAL SYSTEM**

Summary of PhD dissertation

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Contextualizing the dissertation

The art of István Vántus (1935–1992) is a relatively little researched topic in the history of Hungarian music of the second half of the 20th century. Reasons for this include the temporal proximity of his life-work as well as Vántus’s autonomous composer’s path, which could be best symbolized, on the one hand, by “infinite pentatonicism”, the “warped musical space” theory built on it, and, on the other hand, the opera titled *Aranykoporsó* [Gold coffin], which he composed following this system and which gained national fame despite being performed in theaters outside Budapest. Vántus was recipient of the Erkel Award, an acknowledged composer, but, as “a composer from Szeged”, he did not participate in the forefront of Hungarian music scene. Nevertheless, the following facts underline the unavoidability of his life-work. About half of his works, 25 compositions – choral works, chamber music works, and string orchestral pieces – have been published. Editio Musica Budapest (EMB) published the first Vántus composition, *Szvit* [Suite], in 1975, and the latest so far, *Valaki hí téged* [Somebody is calling you], in 1991, while the publisher Akkord Kiadó published six of his works starting in 1994. Several of his works were recorded for radio (some of these recordings are available on the homepage of Hungary’s mr3 Bartók Rádió) and are still broadcast every few months, especially as part of the *Ars nova – a XX-XXI. század zenéjéből* [Ars nova: From the music of the 20th and 21st centuries] series (for instance, the entire program was devoted to his works on June 4, 2012). The only author’s record was produced by Hungaroton in 1988, with its material expanded in 1999, when, already after Vántus’s death, the LP was transferred onto a CD. Music historical research, thus, can be motivated also by the successes that Vántus accomplished both among the audience and the critics.

From the point of view of musicological research, the situation is rather unique in that even though Vántus’s life-work has not been thoroughly researched, literature on it is abundant at the time when he would still be only in his 70s if he were still alive. Three books on Vántus have been published in the twenty years since his death: two edited by Ernő Kiss, secretary of the István Vántus Association, and one written by composer Máté Hollós, president of the same association. The variegation of the first volume, published in 1997, is indicated already in its title, *Vántus István (1935–1992) Tanulmányok – Vallomások – Dokumentumok* [István Vántus (1935–1992): Studies, confessions, and documents]. It is comprised of scholarly pieces (in order of inclusion in the volume, by Ernő Kiss, Máté Hollós, and Zoltán Pongrácz), 23 informal memoirs, as well as articles about him and pieces of writing by him. The volume also contains a meticulous listing of articles and papers on Vántus written by 1997.

A 2007 volume, titled *Vántustól Vántusról* [By and about Vántus] expands on the third part of the first book to provide a comprehensive collection of all of Vántus's published writing, and also includes studies by Csilla Gyémánt, Máté Hollós, Lajos Huszár, Mária Illés, and Ernő Kiss. In his book titled *Vántus István*, published as Volume 33 of the series *Magyar zeneszerzők* [Hungarian composers], Máté Hollós organized into a unified volume his ideas about Vántus's work and tone system first expounded on in the 1997 book and appended it with a short biography. In addition to these three volumes, concert previews, reviews, brochures and record sleeves constitute the literature on Vántus.

The chronological listing of Vántus's work from 1990, edited by György Gyuris and published by the Somogyi library of Szeged, can be considered as a starting point to research on his life-work. The errors in the listing clearly attest to the fact that Vántus did not keep a prior account of his works: he most likely provided dates relying on his memory, without checking his original manuscripts. This listing contains 37 items, while seven arrangement-like works as well as works written for special occasions are not included at all. Ernő Kiss used this listing as his starting point in the 1997 book, naturally including the works written after 1990 as well as the ones omitted from the 1990 publication. Complying with the expectations of the series, Máté Hollós compiled a listing divided by genre in his book. A comprehensive overview of the individual compositions, by genre, was presented by Máté Hollós in the 1997 book, then, in a more extended form, in his monograph. Ernő Kiss wrote about the two operas. Lajos Huszár provided an excellent analysis of *Naenia*, a string orchestra piece, published in the 2007 book. My own articles discuss several of Vántus's works, complying with the expectations of the places of publication in content.

The issue of the tone system of "infinite pentatonicism" is addressed in almost all writing about Vántus, although usually superficially, so a complex investigation of it has certainly been called for. In the first Vántus volume (1997), the topic was touched upon by Máté Hollós, Miklós Kocsár, Lajos Huszár and Zoltán Pongrácz. In the 2007 book, it is briefly discussed by Lajos Huszár in the introduction to his analysis of *Naenia* as well as by myself in my article on the forthcoming book *A tiszta hangok titka* [The secret of pure notes]. It is also important to mention that two student theses were also written in the 1990s, under Ernő Kiss's guidance as advisor, on a side issue of research into Vántus's tone system, the topic of "chess music". The clear lack of comprehensive treatment of Vántus's life-work and the acute interest in his concept of "warped musical space" motivated me to choose a tone system centered approach and interpretation of István Vántus's life-work as the topic of my dissertation.

Methodology

I have used the primary materials produced by the composer as the starting point of my dissertation, and my work has been based on an account and systematic categorization of the available primary musical material. Following Vántus's widow's decision, his materials have not been archived in a library but remained in the Vántus home. This special situation also means that the researcher who is given access to the materials can carry out their investigations in exactly the context in which the composer lived and worked. The materials are varied and contain, in addition to the composer's materials connected to his own works, a collection of Vántus's sheet music, his library, musical recordings on audio cassette, video recordings, and, thanks to Mrs. Vántus's meticulousness, concert invitations, concert programs, letters, and most of the documentation on commission. Regarding Vántus's own works, the materials include the composer's notes, outlines, non-final as well as fair copy versions of most of his works. The musical material of the opera *A három vándor* [The three wanderers], for instance, was worked out by the composer in seven small music score notebooks: this version is only a piano-vocal, particella version of the score. Eight large format notebooks contain the composer's notes from his last years. It was Vántus's habit to destroy his notes and drafts to completed works, but, fortunately, he was not completely consistent in his habit, allowing some of his unsystematically kept music sheets containing drafts and ideas to be preserved. Following his sudden death, his drafts to his last works remained on his piano and were kept by his wife.

I considered it to be an important part of my work to systematize the composer's materials and to organize them in such a way as to allow them to be transparent and searchable. I have given identification titles to unmarked notebooks and examined loose notes and drafts, organizing them chronologically into folders based on the relatedness of works, in order to provide transparent archiving. I have numbered loose pages as well as provided page numbering to notebooks and folders. In my interpretation of the tone system, I have been able to rely on two additional sources in addition to my own examination of Vántus's works: first, the few existing pages of Vántus's planned music theoretical work *A tiszta hangok titka* [The secret of pure notes], and, second, Vántus's analytical notes, following his own system, in his copies of the works of European classics of musical history. Such marked up sheet music was not treated separately in the musical material: it was part of my research to identify and categorize it.

An analysis of Vántus's works constitutes the core of my dissertation. In my work, I have followed the method of assigning key works written in a

given period to the relevant phase of the formation and development of the tone system, providing detailed analysis of the works and scrutinizing their theoretical implications. As a first step in my work, I examined the whole of Vántus's life-work and identified those works which are connected to special points in Vántus's search for a tone system. The two works written clearly at turning points are *A három vándor* [The three wanderers], which Vántus began composing in 1964, and the cantata *Harangszó* [Bell chiming], finished in 1985. New developments occurred in Vántus's theory of music in the late 1970s, which makes his chamber orchestra works *Visszaverődések* [Reflections] and *Ecloga* even more significant, as well as around 1990, when he wrote *Hommage à Mozart*, *Két kis zongoradarab* [Two small pieces for piano] and *Hangcsoportok* [Groups of notes], among other works. I have analyzed these works with special care in traditional ways as well as along Vántus's own principles. Among the analyzed works a special place is occupied by Vántus's most important and best known work, the opera *Aranykoporsó* [Golden coffin], which was the first work in which he used the system of infinite pentatonism fully. I considered it vital to examine Vántus's manuscripts and drafts even in the analysis of works that were published.

Oral history plays an important role in connection with Vántus's artistic activity and life-work. The two reasons for this are, on the one hand, his temporal proximity, and, on the other hand, the great number of people supplying recollections since he was a public figure who maintained good relations with many. Thus, as a part of my investigations, I carried out interviews with his former colleagues and students. As a result of contact with interview subjects, for instance, I have discovered a formerly unknown recording of the only full premiere of Vántus's organ concerto. A wealth of information was supplied by violinist Gabriella Márffy, who, in contrast with the other interview subjects, knew Vántus only as a student because she has spent a great part of her later life in Switzerland. In connection with the restaging of *Aranykoporsó* [Golden coffin] I contacted conductor Gábor Kardos and theater director Attila Toronykőy, who did not have personal contact with Vántus but had current information and opinions regarding the opera, their work with it, and its effect on the performers and the audience. Fortunately, the city of Szeged continues to have commemorations of Vántus, and occasions of remembrance also produce formerly unknown documents and information. A case in point, for instance, is an A4 sheet of paper from 1979 on which Vántus summarized his tone system, which Mrs. György Papp made available to me after a lecture commemorating the 75th anniversary of Vántus's birth in 2010. These notes from 1979 were illustrations to a few minute long explanation by Vántus, a chance detour

that grew out of a conversation, and which, thus, do not contain any text but still manage to provide an insight into Vántus's thinking regarding his tone system at the time.

Results

My primary goal in carrying out the research was to closely follow and understand Vántus's composer's way of thinking that is manifested in his compositions and theory of tone system: to register the development and changes of the tone system and to trace the effect of this conscious artistic work on his compositions.

(1) Using the sources, I have corrected the chronological listing of Vántus's works and added to it previously unmentioned items, marking also important performance events. I have used as a starting point the listing appended by Ernő Kiss and reworked in my own thesis titled „*Jó hangok.*” *Vántus István művészete* [‘Good notes’: The art of István Vántus] and defended in 2007, but it has turned to contain so many contradictions compared to my other sources that I have given up using the original numbering system of the listing although I still marked it everywhere in order to ensure traceability. The resulting listing of Vántus's works clarifies connections between groups of works more clearly than previous listings.

(2) I have prepared a listing of other composers' works analyzed by Vántus (photocopies of his notes constitute 250 pages). These analyses have provided me with assistance in interpreting Vántus's tone system, since he has never written down a full account of it. I have adopted Vántus's analytical method and system of notation in the dissertation so that I could treat his works in accordance with his artistic intentions.

(3) I have taken great care in examining the descriptions of the various musical scale tables (the eight line chess music tables among them) which are not dated and were clearly created at different times. I have concluded that these scale tables – the five line basic scale and the seven and eight line scales alike – originate in the same basic concept and represent a continuously explorative and solidly based but renewal seeking attitude.

In my dissertation I have been able to uncover more aspects of Vántus's tone system than have been known in the literature so far. I have been able to demonstrate how, following Vántus's experiments and research, the system becomes more varied and some new works – e.g. *Visszaverődések* [Reflections] and *Ecloga* – start to seek possibilities opening to the outside. The fact that Vántus brought his system to a final, comprehensive state of development is supported by the wide range of his analyses of others' works as well as the microcosm of his *Hangcsoportok* [Groups of notes] cycle.

It has become evident that an intimate familiarity with Vántus's basic concept is indispensable for the interpretation of his works written after 1964, since he used it as a starting point for his works. The changes and modifications in the use of the system can also be interpreted only with this concept in mind and in relation to it. Such a unified treatment of the tone system means, primarily, a unified harmony of sound and recognizability (already noted by Vántus's contemporaries), and also a stylistic unity that characterizes his entire life-work, as has been demonstrated in the analytical chapters of this dissertation. A main finding of the present thesis is that the unity of Vántus's works goes beyond that of the harmoniousness in the way they sound and extends to their interrelationship and interconnectedness, which gets all the tighter as Vántus's life-work reaches its completion.

The main conclusion of the dissertation is that Vántus is a composer whose musical thinking extends beyond single individual works – somewhat similarly to how composers used to use the concept of groups of works. Vántus's works clearly signal that their creator believed in the existence of intuition, the music of the spheres, and perhaps also in the existence and strength of inspiration and yet stood firmly on the ground of conscious structuring, “being in his own shoes” and accepting the limitations of provincial Hungary for the sake of independent artistic creation.

Publications related to the topic of the dissertation:

- „Inventio poetica – Vántus István három kórusművéről” [Inventio poetica: On three of István Vántus's choir works]. *Szegedtől Szegedig* 7: 277–282. (2004)
- „Hommage a Vántus”. *Szegedtől Szegedig* 8: 270–276. (2005)
- „Visszaverődések – egy zenekari requiem” [Reflections: An orchestral requiem]. *Szegedtől Szegedig* 9: 354–357. (2006)
- „»A tiszta hangok titka« dosszié” [The folder ‘The secret of pure notes’]. In: Kiss, Ernő (ed.) *Vántustól Vántusról* [By and about Vántus]. Szeged: Bába Kiadó, 2007. 322–338.
- „Harangszó Maros Rudolfért – Vántus István gyászzenéje” [Bell chimes for Rudolf Maros: A requiem by István Vántus]. *Szegedtől Szegedig* 10: 325–333. (2007)
- „Ecloga. Vántus István »fehér vára« – a reneszánsz évében” [Ecloga: István Vántus's ‘white castle’ in the year of the Renaissance]. *Szegedtől Szegedig* 11: 344–353. (2008)

- „Fragmenta Bathoriana – Töredékek Vántustól, Vántusról” [Fragmenta Bathoriana: Fragments by and about Vántus]. *Szegedtől Szegedig* 12: 467–478. (2009)
- „Tiszta hangok – Vántus István saját hangrendszerére támaszkodó műelemzéseinek vizsgálata” [Pure notes: An investigation of István Vántus’s analyses of musical works based on his own tone system]. In: Dombi, Józsefné (ed.) *80 év a zenei nevelés szolgálatában. Tanulmánykötet* [80 years in the service of musical education: Studies], Szeged: SZTE JGYPK Ének-zene Tanszék, 2009. 60–68.
- „Vántus István: Aranykoporsó” [*Golden coffin* by István Vántus]. *Szegedtől Szegedig* 13: 450–462. (2010)
- „Álom és játék Vántus István művészetében” [Dream and play in István Vántus’s art]. *Szegedtől Szegedig* 15: 150–155. (2012)
- „Henry Purcell hatása Vántus István művészetére” [Henry Purcell’s influence on István Vántus’s art]. In: Dombi, Józsefné (ed.) *Évfordulós zeneszerzők* [Composers with an anniversary]. Szeged: SZTE JGYPK Ének-zene Tanszék, 2010. 60–68.
- „Harangszó – A pentatónia Vántus István művészetében” [Bell chiming: The pentatonic scale in István Vántus’ art]. *Magyar zene*, 49(2): 219–231. (May 2011)
- „Der goldene Sarg – Die Oper des »Debussys der Theißgegend« im Spiegel ihres Tonsystems“ [*The golden coffin* – The opera of the ‘Debussy of the Tisza region’ in the mirror of his tone system]. *Studia UBB Musica*, 56: 161–187. (December 2011)

Other important publications:

- „A hit zenei szimbólumai Liszt: Christus és Brahms: Német requiem című művében” [Musical symbols of faith in Liszt’s *Christus* and Brahms’s *German Requiem*]. In: Barna, Gábor (ed.) *Érzékek és vallás. Bibliotheca Religionis Popularis Szegediensis* [The senses and religion: *Bibliotheca Religionis Popularis Szegediensis*] 22 (2009): 101–112.
- „A nemzeti identitás zenei jelrendszere a 19. századi magyaros zenében” [The musical system of signs of national identity in 19th century Hungarian style music]. In: Szirmai, Éva, and Edit Újvári (eds.) *Az identitás szemiotikája. Tanulmányok* [The semiotics of identity: Studies]. Szeged: SZTE JGYPK, 2011. 150–162.