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**Hungarian organ designers-experts’
dispositions in the first half
of the 20th century**

DLA doctoral dissertation theses

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I. Background of the research

The beginning of my interest in the organ designers' work dates back before my university studies. It was a defining experience for me when in the summer of 1998 I was researching the history of the organ of my home town's church in the archives of the Central Parish, Baja. Then in addition to the plans I took in my hands the letter written by Lajos Schmidthauer in 1935. 2nd January, in which he persuaded dr. Kálmán Gonczlik abbey-parson to have an organ built, which is suitable for serious artistic purposes as well. This letter gave me the first motivation to turn special attention to those organs that were made with the contribution of experts.

After a while it became obvious to me, that the real identity of the organ designer-expert's activity – although it still exists nowadays – is a hidden concept not only for the cantors or organ-players, but often for the professional organists as well. For the compilation of a detailed organ design – which includes not only a disposition – requires a complex knowledge, as the sound and its technical characteristics are completely determined by: the appropriate dimensioning of the tiers, the selection of the mixture-stops' repetition sequences, a good compilation of criteria for the pipes' intonation, the accurate description of the adequate pipe-materials and wind pressures, the definition of the actions, the comfortable design of the console's equipment as well as the proper selection and location of the playing-techniques' aids. The most important perhaps is that the organ designer would be able to provide these data properly in accordance with his own, real conception.

I have chosen this research field to gain insight into the main processes of the organ desiging and organ building that took place in the first half of the 20th century as well as to draw attention to the importance of this era.

II. Resources

At the end of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century there were a variety of musical and ecclesiastical music magazines in Hungary, in which they wrote about their organ-building conceptions in a series of articles. Time to time responses to these articles appeared, in more occasions attacking hard the colleagues arguing “on the other side”. It became regular that in these periodicals news were given about newly completed organs, especially about those ones, whose building or takeover an expert was also involved in. Since they made a special point of describing the organs designed by themselves, so most of them published longer or shorter essays, that related to the topic in part or in whole. This era lasted until the early 1950s, after that, during the years of socialism only after a long pause, and then only scattered news can we meet, especially in connection with concert hall organs.

The amount of remained, written material related to the topic was limited, as the archives of the Rieger organ plant was destroyed in the 1944 bombing of the factory in Rákosfalva. In Pécs the Archives of Baranya County preserves a part of the files of the Angster organ plant, but the complete materials are far from being available. Here the research became more difficult as the experts’ drafts and letters particularly interesting from the point of the subject were not only very incomplete, but their cataloguing is still pending. Only the contracts can be searched by number, but unfortunately I had to face a number of deficiencies while I was studying them. I came across several undated sketches and documents, referring to these I identify just the archival material.

Also I did not have the opportunity to examine completely the organ designers-experts’ personal legacy because only an infinitesimal part of these got into some archives. My further research focused on those parts of the

legacies which are in the property of my organist colleagues; one part of it originates from the organ designers themselves – Béla Árokháty, József Geyer and Aladár Zalánfy –, on the other hand from such organ-friends, who had a good relationship with them, so I could use some documents from the collections of Sebestyén Hamvas and Rezső Karcsay. In addition I could have face to face, personal interviews with several of those – József Angster, Miklós Csörgey, Mária Rohonczy and Miklós Sággy – who knew these experts personally, they might hear them playing on the organ or worked them together.

An overall publication about the Hungarian organ designers', organ-experts' activity has not appeared yet. During my work I could rely on Ferenc Solymosi's 3 registers, which give the characteristics of the instruments produced by the two most important organ factories of the era, the Pécs-based József Angster and Son Organ and Harmonium Factory as well as the Otto Rieger Royal Organ Properties in Budapest. These three basic registers are the following ones:

- Ferenc Solymosi: The register of Angster-organs.
- Ferenc Solymosi: The Rieger Organ Factory and Opus-register I.
- Ferenc Solymosi: The Rieger Organ Factory and Opus-register II.

Beside that there have been published some commemorations about some experts' path of life, but most of them were prepared for non-academic purposes. This may be the reason why their organ-designer work generally is mentioned only by a few sentences. Beyond the above mentioned ones two important publications appeared on this subject: dr. Károly Fekete's article: "The rethinker of the role of our organs" in which the author relying on his own archival research makes an effort to present Béla Árokháty's organ designing activity; and "The ideas of the Alsatian organ reform in the work of József

Geyer” written by dr. Pál Enyedi in which the author publishes an excellent review about Geyer’s first published book.

III. The Method

The dissertation contains the result of several years’ research work. During my work I have worked up mostly that kind of materials whose considerable part is still an unknown area in the academic literature.

The first chapter begins with a short review about the Hungarian music and “organ conditions” in the late 19th century. This is followed by the presentation of the demonstrated start of the organ experts’ activities, and the development of the organ-receiver activity, then the description of the circumstances of the first major organ-takeovers. At the end of the chapter we can learn about the outstanding organ-experts of the era and about the organ-takeovers’ carrier.

The first part of the second chapter describes the two dominant organ-building trends in the first half of the 20th century, the Alsatian organ-reform and organ-movement, and the second half introduces the background of the development of the Hungarian organ designer-expert activity.

The third chapter constitutes the main part of the thesis. In this chapter I describe the activities of six significant organ-experts who lived and worked in the first half of the 20th century: Béla Árokháty, József Geyer, Lajos Schmidthauer, Viktor Sugár, Ernő Szakoczay-Riegler and Aladár Zalánfy. To this part connects the following chapter which discusses separately the joint work of Béla Árokháty And Aladár Zalánfy. The structure of the main part of the thesis by subsections builds up as follows: their lives, their work, descriptions of their main writings which are followed by the tabulated list of their completed, examined organ designs. This is based on the three catalogues of Ferenc Solymosi. Especial

references are used just when there is another source. I tried to divide their work as organ designers into periods where it was possible and to analyse the certain periods' stylistic dominances and their changes. Then I show their work as organ designer and the level of its deepness. I analysed their significant organ designs and the characteristics of their dispositions period by period on the bases of the stops' families' frequency of the appearance, their location and numbers of feet (principals, mixtures, aliquots, flutes, strings, tongues). During or at the end of the analysis I pointed out the specialities found.

I discussed the disposition-designs in three ways: where it was possible I grouped the musical instruments according to eras, such as Zalánfy's dispositions made in periods characterised by different styles, or on the basis of the size or other properties of the organs, such as Ernő Szakolczay-Riegler's smaller or bigger sized new instruments and his rebuilt organs. In the third subgroup where the same, common features I could not clearly discover, I analysed the main characteristics on the instruments one by one, as in Lajos Schmidthauer's case, whose work I got a deeper insight into by studying his correspondence. Each chapter ends with a summary.

In the fourth chapter I make an attempt to compare the experts' work, although applying a detailed comparative method here seems almost an impossible task. Béla Árokháty and Ernő Szakolczay-Riegler followed the principles of the organ-movement through their entire carrier; Aladár Zalánfy in his early period still made "ground-note"¹ dispositions, then collaborating with Béla Árokháty he become a representative of the new trend too. In his early designs Geyer József followed the approach of the Alsatian organ reform, then as a result of the influence of the organ-movement he developed a

¹ „Grundtönigkeit”

special style, which is in fact a combination of the two trends. Lajos Schmidthauer and Viktor Sugár were basically representatives of the Romantic style, however the influence of the organ-movement can be discovered in both of their organs, especially in those instruments which were built after the second half of the 1930s.

As a supplement a collection of dispositions is enclosed to the thesis, in which the presented designers' soundpicture-skethes can be found for the most part.

Of course not only the presented experts processed organ designs and compilations of dispositions in this era, but several other organists as well. When during the research it has become clear to me, that the above-mentioned designers' activity was the most prominent, was the moment when I narrowed down the number of experts to six to present in the thesis. However a significant expert of the younger generation, an excellent organist, Lajos Szalay (1906-1968) is left out. It did not seem appropriate to analyse his almost 30 organ-designs done in his first 15 years of work (until 1950), and omit the remaining 18 years, including his largest completed organ-expansion design, the organ with four manuals and 100 stops in the cathedral of Eger. So the description of Szalay's work may be subject to a further study.

In my thesis I did not intend to debate the contemporary views, furthermore I did not examine the size of the churches, neither the acoustic issues, nor the questions of the sound range of the manuals, since these data were not available in some cases of dispositions. Except one or two cases it did not seem worthwhile to mention the question of actions since at that time in most cases the experts did not have other opportunities just to accept what the organ-builders could make. On the other hand to mark the actions and wind-box types belong to the basic data of the organs therefore I presented them in the tables of organs. I also write about the playing aids only in those

points where I met some extraordinary specialities. Since they also belong to the descriptions of the organs, therefore where I have found data I published them in the collection of dispositions.

In the quotations several tiny inaccuracies and archaisms can be found. As the constant [sic!] interjections would have bothered reading the text, I omitted them.

During my work the numerous contradictory data in the contemporary press caused difficulty: the wrong foot-numbers and sometimes the alterations of a certain organ made in a certain year with a variety of dispositions and stop-numbers.

IV. Results

The novelty of the subject is shown as there is just a small amount of literature available about this really important period. This kind of detailed analysis about certain organ designers' activity has not yet been published in the Hungarian academic literature. Apart from the research and publishing of the contemporary articles and archival materials the importance of the thesis is signified by the collection of the dispositions, in which the contemporary status of the musical instruments has been recorded. Nowadays the majority of these can only be found in rebuilt forms, even if not destroyed in the war or another organ was not built on its place. I consider my work completed in no way. I hope that my thesis will help the Hungarian organist society to understand this era better. My main intention was to raise the interest and to provide a starting point for further possible researches.