

**Liszt Academy of Music Doctoral School  
(7.6. Musical Art)**

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***Dohnányi's American Years, 1949–1960***

**PhD Theses**

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## 1. Antecedents of the Research

Interest in Ernst von Dohnányi and his musical activity has grown considerably in the last decade. During the first forty years after his death, there appeared a monograph by Bálint Vázsonyi (*Ernő Dohnányi*, Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1971; <sup>2</sup>Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2002) and some other, minor studies, but scholarly discourse and an actual research process did not really begin. The renewed interest in the 1990s had its political reasons, but systematic research into Dohnányi was also prompted by a change of approach in musicology. Furthermore, it started simultaneously in Hungary and in the United States, where the composer had lived his last years, with major publications appearing in the same year in each country (James A. Grymes, *Ernst von Dohnányi. A Bio-Bibliography*, Westport, Connecticut/London: Greenwood Press, 2001; Kiszely-Papp Deborah, *Ernst von Dohnányi Ernő*, Budapest: Mágus, 2001 = Melinda Berlász, ed., *Hungarian Composers* 17.). Although neither could supplant Vázsonyi's book completely, both provide important initiatives and guidance for the further research.

The most significant event in the short history of international research into Dohnányi occurred on 1 January, 2002, when the scholarly work finally gained an institutional background: the Dohnányi Archives of Budapest, established by the Ministry of National Cultural Heritage and the Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The Archives, in their first eight years, have obtained a large amount of musical source materials from Hungary and abroad (originals sources and copies). The volumes of the *Dohnányi Évkönyv* (Dohnányi yearbooks, published by the Institute for Musicology in 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006/7), showed how various types of basic research commenced: into the composer's press reception, and his various activities as a performer and musical organizer, and in the listing of the materials in several Dohnányi collections.

Though musicologists' interest was aroused by many other subjects, such as sketch research and interpretation analysis, there has still been no new, complete monograph or any comprehensive survey of the composer's oeuvre. It makes sense, of course, to postpone such a monograph until certain basic researches have been done, but it becomes increasingly urgent to answer some vital questions to do with Dohnányi's reception: how to describe the style of this "conservative," "post-romantic," "epigon" composer, how the reception of the oeuvre was influenced by political factors, and how Dohnányi's role can be gauged in terms of the history of Hungarian and Western music.

Keeping all of these possibilities and problems in mind, I have chosen as the subject of my PhD thesis a comprehensive study of Dohnányi's last, American period. His activity between November 1949 and his death in February 1960, along

with the colorful and diversified compositional output of that period, seems to be an area worth investigating from many points of view. The American years, like Dohnányi's earlier periods, have yet to be studied thoroughly. A history in the form of annals of the decade was presented by Marion Ursula Rueth (*The Tallahassee Years of Ernst von Dohnányi*, MA thesis, Florida State University [FSU], 1961), but her subject covered only a thin slice of the composer's activity: she took almost exclusively into consideration events connected with Dohnányi's employer, the FSU, and presented important data without scholarly interpretation or evaluation. This left the chapter in Vázsonyi's monograph, some twenty pages long, as the most comprehensive study of the period so far. Vázsonyi touched on many aspects: not only biographical matters, but the origin and style of the compositions. But primary sources have shown that his data were often unreliable and his interpretation often assailable. It seems that his colorful, outspoken, argumentative style often disguised slightly tendentious discussion. Prejudiced in favor of his beloved teacher, Vázsonyi may have wanted to draw a parallel between Dohnányi's struggles and those of Bartók's American years, and to raise sympathy or guilt feelings in readers who might be resistant. This stance influenced significantly our picture of the period in question. Furthermore, several personal memoirs are now at the disposal of scholars examining Dohnányi's American years: texts by his students and friends, also the biography by Dohnányi's third wife (Ilona von Dohnányi, *Ernst von Dohnányi. A Song of Life*, James A. Grymes, ed., Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), and even the composer's own memoir, uncertain though their authenticity is (*Message to Posterity*, Jacksonville, FL, 1962).

## **2. Sources, Methods, Structure**

In view of the limited literature on Dohnányi's American years, I took the primary source materials as the basis and starting point for my dissertation. I had the opportunity to do research at the most important US Dohnányi collection (The Dohnányi Collection of the Warren D. Allen Music Library of the FSU, Tallahassee) as a Fulbright grantee in the academic year of 2005/2006, when I participated in cataloging work there as well. The material of the collection originated from the composer's Tallahassee home and university office, and it had been growing continually since his death. In 2002 the university gained an exceptionally valuable group of sources, in the bequest of Edward Kilényi, a student of Dohnányi. The US source material now consists of Dohnányi's correspondence, his other official and personal documents, his notebooks and pocket calendars, scrapbooks with newspaper cuttings and concert programs, autograph musical sources, printed scores

of Dohnányi works, the composer's collection of printed scores of other composers' works, and DAT recordings of Dohnányi's concerts.

Although it was not my primary goal in my dissertation, I have endeavored to publish as many of these documents as I can. I list the most important documents and their availability in *Appendix 5.a-c*. I have used the biographical documents directly in the first part of the dissertation ("I. Dohnányi in the United States"), where I have tried to give a detailed and critical summary of the composer's last period on the basis of more than 4,000 items of source material. Having documented and evaluated the most important aspects of his American years (Chapter I. 2), I examine his work as a teacher (Chapter I. 3) and performer (Chapter I. 4), with special regard to appreciation of these activities at the time. In the last, I have also used several archive sound recordings in an attempt to gauge the trustworthiness of contemporary descriptions by comparative analysis of several late solo piano and chamber music recordings (live concerts and studio recordings). In the last chapter of the biographical part (Chapter I. 5), I summarize the compositional output of the American years, dwelling not only on the origin of the works, but also on their reception then and since.

The other part of the dissertation deals with Dohnányi's American works in terms of form (Chapter II), texture (Chapter III), sounding (Chapter IV), and inspiration (Chapter V). In the case of Dohnányi, deep analysis and historical positioning of the compositions become especially important because critical, comprehensive investigation of the *œuvre* is still missing, and no agreed evaluation of them has yet been reached. Since my dissertation is the first comprehensive study of this period, and since the compositions in question are quite diverse, I have not restricted myself to following one, absolute analytical aspect, but sought the best "first approach" to each work, which may serve as a basis for later, more specialized analysis. Accordingly, I have concentrated on the relation of text to musical form in my analysis of *Stabat Mater* (op. 46), on the compositional process suggested by the formal logic and sketches of the *Passacaglia for Solo Flute* (op. 48/2), on the function of quotations (and self-quotations) in *American Rhapsody* (op. 47), and on exploration of the narrative expressed by special forms and cycles in the *Second Violin Concerto* (op. 43) and the *Concertino* (op. 45). I have also sought to compare these with possible compositional models (Pergolesi, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Bartók) and with Dohnányi's earlier pieces.

### 3. Findings

The primary documents have modified the hitherto accepted information in some ways. The composer certainly was unjustly obliged to rebuild his livelihood at the

age of 72, and that was mainly as a consequence of political factors. But it seems in the light of the sources that his situation—along with his finances, university position, reception, and quality of life—was not critical. Vázsonyi's interpretation of the conflict between Dohnányi and the FSU, for example, should be altered: the university management was far less strict or malevolent toward Dohnányi than Vázsonyi suggested, at a time when neither's expectations were being met by his employment there.

There were clearly difficulties in Dohnányi's way as a concert pianist. Vázsonyi and Ilona von Dohnányi tended to interpret the series of events as a direct path leading to the composer's total political and general rehabilitation. But in fact his status did not change during his ten American years. His biggest successes came in smaller cities of minor cultural importance; his stay was almost ignored in metropolises like New York, Chicago and San Francisco, apart from one or two invitations. So his reputation was confined to a relatively small circle of ardent admirers. Vázsonyi and several memoir authors failed to consider that the conservatism of the composer's style was a clear reason for US concert life to reject him. Rather than alluding to so touchy a subject, they pointed to political factors and personal conflicts. Yet the United States could hardly be blamed for failing to welcome a newcomer with a musical style long considered anachronistic. Further work needs doing on how Dohnányi himself saw the matter. For his stance in relation to contemporary music became a pivotal question as he lost a background of support available to him almost continually until the end of the 1930s. That conflict or isolation, borne with greater or lesser resignation, seems to have an essential feature of Dohnányi's American years, hallmarking his musical output.

I have tried in my analysis to point out that most of Dohnányi's late works—the Second Symphony (op. 40), the Second Violin Concerto, *Stabat Mater* and *American Rhapsody*—do not differ from his earlier style in terms of form, harmony, or texture. On the contrary, another group, mainly the pieces for piano and flute, suggests that he was influenced by this unfamiliar situation and taking steps toward new modes of expression. *Burletta* (op. 44/1) seems exceptional in forming, for example. Its bizarre sound comes with a kind of asymmetric, yet purposefully organized structure that gives it a resemblance to such modern compositions that Dohnányi had harshly criticized for being too rational or non-melodic.

Though none of the American works broke away from tonal thinking, some add quite a new color on the composer's harmonic palette. *Burletta* and the 2nd Violin Concerto, for example, seem to sound especially rough, in the latter case because of the grave, dramatic intonation, and in the former because of its almost grotesque humor. In many ways *Burletta* relates to the Passacaglia for Flute which is an extreme example of harmonic experimentation with a partly twelve-tone theme. The variation strategies are uninfluenced by serial technique, but the work is

exceptionally interesting to analyze because of the large number of musical sketches, which suggest the compositional process was a struggle. Interpretations of *Burletta* and of the *Passacaglia* shed light on each other. The former seems to play with or even joke about Dohnányi's more progressive composer colleagues, but the *Passacaglia* calls for a subtler explanation. Conventional tonality triumphs over the twelve-tone theme, yet there are signs in the large-scale form, serious tone and other features that Dohnányi did not see his own style as absolutely superior to theirs—there was uncertainty about it.

The *Concertino* and the *Aria for Flute and Piano* (op. 48/2) move off from Dohnányi's typical harmonic style in another direction. They seem to bear French, "Impressionistic" influences, mainly in their instrumentation, thematic outlines, variation strategies and faint harmonies. The *Concertino* is especially worthy of attention because after two movements reminiscent of Debussy, the third clearly returns to Dohnányi's typical, largely Brahms-like harmonic profile. I have tried in my analysis to show that the hidden narrative in the work is based on this gesture of a homecoming from a foreign world.

The *Concertino* is the only work that shows new features in its texture, which may be the most basic layer of musical thinking. For the thematic transformation reminds the listener of Debussy. On the other hand, Dohnányi was able to express the conflict of familiar and unfamiliar with a developing variation, a compositional device typical of him. In the *Nocturne* (op. 44/2), for example, he proved that someone with a masterly knowledge of composition—quite rare in modern composers, Dohnányi felt—could even draw up a romantic melodic musical language from the single sound effect of the stylized mewling of a cat.

It seems that Dohnányi, in his late works, felt a strong urge to look beyond the boundaries of his own, conservative style, but he finally had to realize in each case that he had no need to look out for new ways or experiment. Of course, it is hard to decide whether these experiments represent playfulness and irony, or doubt.

He experimented less, however, in the works for larger ensemble, as if he did not aim to imitate modernity in his "representative" compositions intended for a wider public. Musical experimentation was obviously a private matter for him. The "representative" works were composed for commissions (also a feature of the American period since Dohnányi did not like to write for commissions and did not do so often in his earlier years). Consideration for the commissioner (whether a person or an institution) inevitably gave rise to a kind of heterogeneity. The *Violin Concerto*, for example, is a work of exceptional dramatic tone, suited to the personality of its first performer, Frances Magnes, to whom Dohnányi dedicated it.

However, analysis of *Stabat Mater* and *American Rhapsody* belies the presupposition that they derived from specific new influences (such as religiousness or Americanism). One should not exclude that the intimate *Stabat Mater* results

from the old, slandered composer's turn to faith. Many other musical and practical explanations of the choice of text also seem possible, such as the malleable verse structure, the repertory of the commissioner (Denton Civic Boy Choir), and the better chances of having a religious piece performed. Moreover, the harmonic profile, the shaping, the musical texture, and the personal interpretation of the text of *Stabat Mater* connect so closely with Dohnányi's earlier works that it should be viewed in the context of the whole oeuvre, rather than as a unique phenomenon of deep piety. Analysis of *American Rhapsody* has yielded similar results. Based as it is on American folk songs and with its loose structure, it might reasonably be considered a less inspired, occasional, Americanizing work. Yet a different interpretation is also appropriate. The series of colorful musical pictures seem a kind of summary, a cinematic replay of the composer's musical past. Dohnányi recalled his basic musical environment in the manner of Dvořák (whose *Symphony from the New World* is also recalled by the spiritual "The Wayfaring Stranger"), as the message of a lonely, old-fashioned, European composer from the New World. The work has symbolic significance in the oeuvre, stating that for this old, conservative composer, there remained nothing other than nostalgic memories of the past.

Everything suggests that Dohnányi's attitude and aesthetic scale of values were unchanged despite the obvious verdict of the critics—he seemed like a living fossil in the second half of the twentieth century. But his works show that the difficulties of his American career, his isolation, and even his age, had made him reconsider the rightness of his path. The answers to his doubts appear in different manners in different works, but in essence they are similar. Though he could try to draw new harmonic elements, composing strategies, and inspirations into his style, there was no other way he could write than in the eclectic, retrospective style he had cultivated all through his life. The duality between his doubts and his ultimate definite viewpoint means that the American period must be seen one of the most interesting chapters in the Dohnányi oeuvre and a remarkable phenomena in twentieth-century music history.

#### 4. List of Publications

##### a) Publications in the subject of the thesis

- “Dohnányi variációs stílusa a *Szimfonikus percek* (op. 36) című zenekari művének IV. tételében” [Dohnányi’s Variation Style in The 4th Movement of His *Symphonic Minutes*, op. 36]. In *Dohnányi Évkönyv 2003*, ed. Sz. Farkas Márta, Kiszely-Papp Deborah (Budapest: MTA Zenetudományi Intézet, 2004), 99–121.
- “»Pure music?« Dohnányi’s Passacaglia for Solo Flute”. *Studia Musicologica* 48/1–2 (March 2007), 79–99.
- “Dohnányi fogadtatása Amerikában. Sajtórepció 1949–1960” [Dohnányi’s Reception in The United States. Press Reviews, 1949–1960]. *Magyar Zene* 45/3 (August 2007), 265–288.
- “Szabad és »szabad« variációk Dohnányi Ernő műveiben” [Free and »Free« Variations in Ernst von Dohnányi’s Works]. *Magyar Zene* 46/4 (November 2008), 397–412.
- “»Florida’s Youthful Oldster«: Ernő Dohnányi in Tallahassee”. In *My Fulbright Experience. Reports of Hungarian Grantees*, eds. Scott Campbell, Máté Csanád (Budapest: Hungarian–American Commission for Educational Exchange, 2008), 69–78.
- “»Fac ut ardeat cor meum« – Dohnányi *Stabat Mater*-olvasata” [»Fac ut ardeat cor meum« – Dohnányi’s Interpretation of The *Stabat Mater* Text]. In *Zenetudományi dolgozatok 2008*, ed. Gábor Kiss (Budapest: MTA Zenetudományi Intézet, 2008), 179–201.
- “A wayfaring stranger – Dohnányi *Amerikai rapszódíája*” [A Wayfaring Stranger – Dohnányi’s *American Rhapsody*]. *Magyar Zene* 48/2 (May 2010), 161–186.
- “A tématranszformáció szerepe Dohnányi Concertinójában” [The Function of Thematic Transformation in Dohnányi’s Concertino]. In *Zenetudományi dolgozatok 2010*, ed. Gábor Kiss (Budapest: MTA Zenetudományi Intézet, 2010). [in preparation]

##### b) Other publications

- “Johann Georg Lickl (1769–1843) vonósnégyesei” [Johann Georg Lickl’s String Quartets]. *Magyar Zene* 40/2 (May 2002), 147–162.
- *Pál Járdányi* (Budapest: Mágus, 2005) = *Hungarian Composers* 32, ed. Melinda Berlász.
- “Kodály Zoltán hatása Járdányi Pál szellemiségére és zenei stílusára” [Zoltán Kodály’s Influence on Pál Járdányi’s Intellectuality and Musical Style]. In *Kodály Zoltán és tanítványai. Hagyomány és hagyományozódás vizsgálata két nemzedék életművében* [Zoltán Kodály and His Students. Tradition and Legacy in The Work of Two Generations], ed. Melinda Berlász (Budapest: Rózsavölgyi, 2007), 223–274.
- “Kodály hatása a zeneszerző Járdányira” [Kodály’s Influence on Járdányi, the Componist]. *A Magyar Kodály Társaság Hírei*, 30/4 (December 2008), 48–53.