

Liszt Academy of Music
Doctoral School No. 28 (History of Art and Culture)

Anna Laskai

Ernst von Dohnányi, the conductor (1915–1944)

PhD Thesis

Supervisor: Anna Dalos (PhD, DSc)

**Budapest
2023**

1. The Antecedents of the Research

In the last few decades, scientific research into Ernst von Dohnányi's oeuvre has had significant results. Thanks to the Dohnányi Archive at the Institute for Musicology of the Research Centre for the Humanities from 2002 to 2009, and the return of the composer's American legacy in 2014, the literature on the composer has grown to include numerous publications of both national and international significance. Thanks to the opportunities provided by the institutional framework, the first volumes publishing basic research were the *Dohnányi Yearbooks* appearing between 2002 and 2007, and subsequently in 2017 and 2021 with the title *Dohnányi Studies*, which contained workshop studies and documentary publications on the composer's oeuvre. In recent years, there have also been publications focusing on more specific topics. Veronika Kusz's landmark monograph on Dohnányi's last creative period, his American years (*Dohnányi amerikai évei*, 2015), which was published five years later in English by the University of California Press (*A Wayfaring Stranger: Ernst von Dohnányi's American Years, 1949–60*, 2020), can be considered a milestone. This book, published by this prestigious publisher, is also significant because international research on Dohnányi has started in the United States since the early 2000s. Another remarkable documentary volume was published in 2020 by Veronika Kusz: the volume collects Dohnányi's most important writings and statements and sheds new light on the composer, whose written oeuvre is lesser known (*Ernst von Dohnányi. Selected Writings and Statements*, 2020). It should be mentioned – and from the perspective of scholarly work on the composer's oeuvre it is undoubtedly decisive – that Bálint Vázsonyi first undertook to write a monograph on Dohnányi in 1971 (*Ernő Dohnányi*, 1971, 2002), but the biography, which was republished in 2002 without changes, despite its highly informative and readable style, contains numerous errors and inaccuracies – and therefore it is necessary to take a critical attitude towards the information published in the book.

Despite the fact that Dohnányi's position at the head of the Budapest Philharmonic Society is considered the longest and most influential in the composer's career in Hungary, there is very little literature available on this period. János Breuer was the first to focus on Dohnányi's activities in this area, and he examined a segment of the conductor's activities in a study ("Dohnányi's Philharmonic and Contemporary Music", 2001). Although Breuer chose an unexplored topic from the composer's oeuvre, the then booming research on Dohnányi did not pay much attention to this topic – only a few sources on the conductor's activities can be found in the volumes of the *Dohnányi Yearbooks* (works by Tamás Sávoły, László Gombos and Ilona

Kovács). The institutional background of Dohnányi's most important position as a conductor and the history of the Budapest Philharmonic Society Orchestra are presented in a few summary publications, which were usually published on the occasion of the orchestra's jubilees. The most significant of these, in terms of its content and the publication of the ensemble's repertoire, is the volume compiled by Béla Csuka, which was published during Dohnányi's tenure in 1943 (*Nine Decades in the Service of Hungarian Music*, 1943). Two more representative publications were released afterwards: on the occasion of the 125th anniversary, edited by János Breuer (*125 Years of the Budapest Philharmonic Society Orchestra (1853–1978)*, 1978) and on the occasion of the 150th anniversary, by Ferenc Bónis (*One Hundred and Fifty Years of the Budapest Philharmonic Society, 1853–2003*, 2005). Understandably, however, because of their summarizing nature, these publications could not undertake a detailed elaboration of specific topics, and so they provide only a general overview of Dohnányi's activity as a conductor.

2. Methods and Structure

Due to the limited amount of literature on the conductor Dohnányi, my thesis is mainly based on primary sources and their interpretation. The most important of these are the documents of the Budapest Philharmonic Society's archives, which were deposited with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 2022, and are currently being professionally maintained by the Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music in the Institute for Musicology of the Research Centre for the Humanities. The types of documents in the collection cover a very wide scale: their archives include minutes, constitutions, programs, program sheets, program leaflets, posters, press clippings, correspondence, as well as various lists and documents, and fortunately the documentation of the Dohnányi era is very comprehensive. For my thesis, I reviewed a large number of Hungarian and foreign-language press documents, and in addition to the ensemble's archives, I conducted research in the Internet databases of Arcanum, ÖNB Anno, The New York Times, the Music Collection of the National Széchényi Library, the Library of the Institute for Musicology, and the Dohnányi Collection of the Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music.

The primary sources were the main starting points for all three chapters of the thesis. Regarding the circumstances of Dohnányi's career as a conductor and his election as president (I. 1.), it was essential to review the ensemble's minutes and correspondence. At the same time, the entries in the minutes of the Philharmonic Society's sessions provided very useful information for preparing the sub-chapter outlining the tasks of the head of

the institution (I. 2). I had fewer documents available when examining the conductor's technical arrangements, such as the practice of conducting from the piano, rehearsal procedures, seating, orchestration and score accuracy (I. 3.). To explore these, I drew mainly on reports in the national press, as I did when analysing Dohnányi's interpretations of particular periods and composers in music history (I. 4.).

In the second chapter of my dissertation, I examined Dohnányi's performances abroad, from his occasional appearances at the head of European ensembles (II. 1.) to his temporary position as principal conductor of the State Symphony Orchestra in the United States (II. 2.) and the concert tours of the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra abroad under Dohnányi's direction (II. 3.). However, these tours are considered to be both professionally and politically significant events, so in addition to a close examination of the reception, I have also examined the significance of the venues and the personalities who appeared on the tours. In addition to the rich press and program collection of the ensemble, I have also drawn on some international literature dealing with foreign ensembles of the period and the political environment surrounding them.

After the two chapters based mainly on reception analysis, in the third one I undertook to process musical documents related to the conductor Dohnányi – in particular, to study the orchestrations and sound recordings. In the first half of this chapter, I have chosen to focus on two works for symphony orchestra, originally written for piano, which were orchestrated for the Schubert Centenary in 1928: the Fantasy in F minor (op. 103) and the *Moment musicaux* piano cycle (op. 94) (III. 1.). For the orchestration of the Fantasy in F minor, I have used the autograph in the Budapest Philharmonic Society's Music Library, while for the *Moment musicaux* I have used the copy manuscript in the National Széchényi Library's Music Collection, and I have tried to highlight the most specific features of Dohnányi's orchestral use. After the documents related to the composer-conductor, in the next subsection I examined the surviving recordings of the conductor-performer (III. 2.). Among the few surviving sound documents relating to Dohnányi's work, I have examined in more detail those recordings made abroad with philharmonic orchestras that could be compared with recordings made by foreign ensembles during this period. In this chapter of my thesis, I have again turned to the reception in order to draw as accurate a picture as possible of the qualities of the conductor and the Budapest ensemble.

I have also used primary sources for the appendices to the thesis. The first three tables (1.a–1.c) provide information on Dohnányi's guest conducting appearances and concert performances abroad, the second table lists the programs he conducted in Hungary, while the third table lists the

Budapest Philharmonic Society Orchestra's repertoire abroad in a chronological order.

3. Research Results

The aim of my thesis is to examine a further important activity of Ernst von Dohnányi, who achieved world fame as a pianist and composer, which has not yet been discussed in Dohnányi literature, namely his conducting career between 1915 and 1944. There is no doubt that the activities of the most influential personality in Hungarian music life in this direction can be considered a topical subject both from the perspective of Dohnányi's career and from the perspective of learning more about the musical life of the Horthy era.

Until now, we have had very little information, for example, about the beginnings of Dohnányi's career as a conductor, how he was elected president of the Philharmonic Society, and in general, what people thought of the conductor's activities as a musician with no conducting experience. In the first chapter of my thesis, I have primarily set out to examine these questions, and with the help of the sources and literature currently available, I have managed to portray the conductor's career from a variety of approaches. Moreover, the documents I have reviewed show that Dohnányi's name was already being mentioned among potential conductors in the Hungarian music scene before his appointment as president.

Although it is not clear from the existing literature, the earliest performances of the newly elected presidential chief conductor were often sharply criticized by the press. However, the documents I have examined also show that some of his interpretations did have features that earned him the recognition of the wider public. These included Dohnányi's preference for conducting from the piano: on these occasions he had to convey his instructions to the orchestra in a more specific way.

There is no doubt, however, that few descriptions of Dohnányi's conducting technique have been written to give a comprehensive picture of the features of his interpretations, but it is clear that, apart from some individual solutions – for example, in the seating or in the faithfulness of the music – Dohnányi mainly followed the practice of his predecessors or contemporary colleagues. There are already several overviews of the reception of the pianist and the composer in the literature on Dohnányi, so I have also studied in a subchapter how critics in Hungary have viewed the interpretations of the chief conductor. In the course of reviewing the abundant source material, it became clear which composers' performances were the subject of more extensive or detailed criticism by Hungarian journalists. It is clear that of the composers, Dohnányi's interpretation of Brahms has won the

most critical acclaim, and perhaps not without reason, since Dohnányi's compositional style is closest to that of the German composer.

The literature has not dedicated much attention to the study of Dohnányi's performances as a conductor abroad. But as a pianist and conductor, Dohnányi appeared on the international concert scene at a very young age. Though the majority of these concerts are primarily attributable to the composer himself, since he most often conducted his own compositions, he has performed in the most important international music centres and with the most prestigious ensembles. My overview shows that as a guest conductor, Dohnányi visited more places – for example, several cities in the United States – than he did on subsequent trips abroad with the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra. It was also a milestone that, for two and a half months after his appointment as Budapest chief conductor, he held the conducting post of the New York State Symphony Orchestra, an overseas orchestra, but Dohnányi still committed himself to his Hungarian ensemble. The building of an international reputation for the Budapest Philharmonic Society also began during the Dohnányi era, but this was not sufficiently emphasized either in the publications on the history of the Philharmonic Society or in Dohnányi literature. There is no doubt, however, that the trips abroad were a major professional step forward for the orchestra. In addition, the foreign policy of the Hungarian government may have been a motivating factor in the realization of concerts outside the country's borders: after Trianon, they gave concerts in Czechoslovakia, and in the 1930s in Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. Besides the longer trips, the Hungarian ensemble has also performed with international ensembles at some events, and these concerts are particularly important for the Philharmonic's positioning and reputation abroad. With the help of the extensive documentation in the orchestra's collection, I have tried to reconstruct as accurately as possible the background and repertoire of the tours, as well as the reception of the orchestra and Dohnányi.

Furthermore, I have included in my research some unique musical documents related to Dohnányi's orchestral activities, which have now been completely forgotten. Although Dohnányi's brilliant orchestration skills have been praised by his contemporaries, the orchestrations he made for orchestra have so far been less widely discussed in the literature on the composer's oeuvre. In my overview, I have tried to illustrate the skills of Dohnányi, who by then had almost a decade of experience as an orchestral conductor, by examining the *Fantasia in F minor*, originally written for piano, and the arrangements of the *Moment musicaux*, which were composed for the Schubert Centenary in 1928. I suggest that Dohnányi's interest in orchestral sound was evident not only in the compositions he wrote, but also in the

transcriptions he made.

So far, little attention has been paid to analyzing the conductor's recordings with Dohnányi – perhaps because of the relatively small number of commercially released and private recordings compared to the pianist. I have chosen the earliest ones for my review: these were recorded in London in 1928, and include some compositions that were also recorded by foreign orchestras during this period. My choice fell on the Hungarian *Rákóczi March*: I compared the sound documents of this work with recordings made by foreign orchestras of the time – the Berlin Philharmonic under Furtwängler and the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam under Mengelberg – because, as far as I know, no other Hungarian orchestras made similar recordings during this period. Although my analysis undoubtedly does not give a complete picture of Dohnányi's conducting style, the comparison does allow us to make some meaningful observations about the characteristics of the interpretations of European orchestras – and of the Budapest ensemble – at the time.

The purpose of my dissertation was to map the beginnings and the most important stages of Dohnányi's conducting career with the help of the currently available, and largely unknown source material. However, due to the limited amount of literature and the current state of research, there is no doubt that I have not been able to fully answer some of the questions raised in my thesis regarding Dohnányi's activities in this field. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the results of my research will provide new insights for future research into the functioning of the Budapest Philharmonic Society Orchestra, the musical life in Hungary between the two world wars, and Dohnányi's oeuvre.

4. List of Publications

a) Publications relating to the subject of the thesis:

Béla Csuka–Anna Laskai–Nóra Wellmann. „A Budapesti Filharmóniai Társaság magyarországi repertoárja Dohnányi Ernő elnökkarnagyi működése időszakában (1919–1944)” [The Budapest Philharmonic Society's Repertoire in Hungary during Ernst von Dohnányi's Conducting Period (1919–1944)]. Online publication on MZA homepage (2023). DOI: 10.23714/mza.10029_NKFIH_142100.

„A Budapesti Filharmóniai Társaság Zenekarának gyűjteménye” [The collection of the Budapest Philharmonic Society]. In Anna Dalos (ed.). *A 20–21. Századi Magyar Zenei Archívum tíz éve* [Ten Years of the Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music], 72–79. Budapest: Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Zenetudományi Intézet, ELKH, 2022.

- „A Filharmóniai Társaság Zenekarának és az intézmény választmányának tagjai Dohnányi Ernő elnökkarnagyi működése időszakában (1919–1944).” [Members of the Philharmonic Society Orchestra and of the Board of the Institution during Ernst von Dohnányi’s Conducting Period]. Online publication on MZA homepage (2022). DOI: 10.23714/mza.10027_NKFIH_142100.
- „Dohnányi’s Orchestrations of Schubert’s Fantasy in F minor and the *Moments musicaux* Piano Circle”. *Studia Musicologica* LXI/3–4 (2021): 293–321.
- „Dohnányi és a Filharmóniai Társaság: Az elnökkarnagy első éveinek sajtórepciójáról” [Dohnányi and the Budapest Philharmonic Society Orchestra. On the Press Reception of the First Years of the Chief Conductor]. In Katalin Kim (ed.). *Zenetudományi Dolgozatok 2019–2020*, 259–290. Budapest: BTK Zenetudományi Intézet–ELKH, 2021.
- Dohnányi-tanulmányok 2021* [Dohnányi Studies 2021]. Budapest: Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Zenetudományi Intézet, 2021. (Edited with Viktória Ozsvárt)
- „A Filharmóniai Társaság külföldi turnéi a zenekar Dohnányi-korszakának első évtizedében” [The Foreign Concert Tours of the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra in the First Decade of the Orchestra’s Dohnányi Era]. *Magyar Zene* LVIII/1 (February 2020): 33–53.
- „A karmester Dohnányi fogadtatása az 1920-as és 1930-as években Jemnitz Sándor és Tóth Aladár kritikáinak tükrében” [The Reception of the Conductor Dohnányi in the 1920s and 1930s in the Light of the Reviews of Sándor Jemnitz and Aladár Tóth]. In Anna Dalos–Viktória Ozsvárt (eds.). *Járdányi Pál és kora. Tanulmányok a 20. századi magyar zene történetéből (1920–1966)* [Pál Járdányi and His Time. Studies in the History of 20th Century Hungarian Music (1920–1966)], 137–161. Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2020.
- „»Nekem nem kellene kritikusok«. A karmester Dohnányi és az 1924-es sajtóbotrány eseményei” [“I don’t Need Critics”. The Conductor Dohnányi and the Events of the 1924 Press Scandal]. MZA homepage (2019). DOI: 10.23714/mza.10011_NKFIH_123819.
- „Eltörött a hegedű?”. Hangszerrombolás a Filharmóniai Társaság 1929-es Dohnányi vezette pozsonyi hangversenyén” [“The Violin is Broken”. Instrument Destruction at the Philharmonic Society’s 1929 Concert in Bratislava Under Dohnányi]. MZA homepage (2019). DOI: 10.23714/mza.10014_NKFIH_123819.
- „Filharmóniai Társaság 165. Dokumentumok a nagy múltú zenekar Emlékgyűjteményéből” [Philharmonic Society 165. Documents from the Orchestra’s Memorial Collection]. *Muzsika* LXI/9 (November 2018): 10–16.

b) Other publications:

- Hungarian Composers*. Budapest: Magyar Zeneszerzők Egyesülete, 2022. (Editor Gyula Dávid [=Hungarian Composers 39.] Budapest: Budapest Music Center, 2018.
- „Ernö Dohnányi’s Library and Music Collection”. *Studia Musicologica* LIX/1–2 (2018): 97–206.