

Liszt Academy of Music
Doctoral School (6.8 History of Art and Culture)

GERGELY LOCH

PÉTER SZÓKE AND HIS ORNITHOMUSICOLOGY:
SCIENCE, PRODUCTIVE MISUNDERSTANDING
AND REMINISCENCE

Summary of PhD Dissertation

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BACKGROUND

At the end of the 1950s, Péter Szőke (1910–1994) reported about what he thought to be folksong-like elements in the slow-speed playback of certain birdsong recordings and he connected his observations with his theory about the genesis and evolutionary laws of music. My dissertation is the first to discuss Szőke's work and the one-man discipline he called ornithomusicology from a historical perspective.

My choice of subject was motivated by two problems, the first being a personal, the second a collective one. The personal problem stemmed from my interest in the liminal situations of acoustic culture, in how sounds exist in between different cultural discourses. Several of my papers observed the qualities, impacts, meanings and functions that different discourses attribute to a given sound phenomenon, and how these attributions related to each other and to the “objective” reality of sound, if there was any. My farthest-reaching excursion into this direction inside the realm of man-made sound was my research about the jingle of the Hungarian State Railways: discussing the question of semiosis, I needed to touch upon the discourse of classical and popular music, musical folklore and sonic branding, among others. The next step would have taken me outside the realm of man-made sound, where I would have primarily observed the human semiosis of birdsong, both in relation to and independently of the question of aesthetics and musicality. However, I was stopped by an obstacle, the “ornithomusicological” theory of Péter Szőke. I couldn't treat Szőke as my predecessor, as he had tried to answer questions that are fundamentally different from mine. I couldn't build on his results. Yet, because of the seeming similarity between our subjects and because of his theory is widely known in Hungary, I had to account for him, in order to clarify that I don't have anything in common with him.

It seemed readiest to shortly summarize the “essence” of Szőke's theory, but I soon realized that one cannot even come near to understanding this “essence” without seeing the totality of its historical background. Reconstructing and presenting this background claimed, in the end, my whole doctoral research. Fortunately, this modified subject turned out to present just as many opportunities for observing liminal situations as I had hoped for in the case of my original subject.

My choice of subject was reinforced by a collective problem, to which my historical research involuntarily offered a solution. At the time of submitting my dissertation, opinion about Szőke shows a strange polarity: uncritical appreciation on the side of Hungarian laymen and passive rejection on the side of Hungarian musicology. In my dissertation I show the indefensibility of both of these extremes: on the one hand, that Szőke's theory cannot be proved with the methods he used, and on the other hand, that he nevertheless must be considered the pioneer of systematic musicology in Hungary, based on the nature of his questions.

SOURCES AND METHOD

The main primary sources of my research were Szőke's publications and the archival documents of his activity. The latter can be found at two locations. Szőke's correspondence, consisting of approximately seven hundred letters, is kept at the Manuscriptorium of the National Széchényi Library in Budapest. His other manuscripts, autograph birdsong notations, the magnetic tapes of his sound collection, and items of his library (some of them annotated) are at the Musical Collection of the same institution. At the time of my research both parts of the material were undordered and uncatalogued.

Szőke's self-definition advocates his work as a legitimate subject for the history of science. In reality, however, there is an incompatibility between Szőke's scientific goal and most of his methods. Because of this, ornithomusicology as a subject largely falls outside of the field of the history of science and necessitates a framework defined by broader aspects of cultural history. To the viewpoint of history of science I therefore added aspects of history of society, technology, literature and music, and also some of philosophy and aesthetics of music. I grouped these viewpoints into three categories, and it's according to these three conceptual families that I speak about ornithomusicology in the three parts of my dissertation as "science", as "productive misunderstanding" and as "reminiscence", respectively.

In the first part, the framework of interpretation is provided by the "short 20th century" of Hungarian history (1920–1989; with particular emphasis on the role of Zoltán Kodály, a key figure in the cult and research of musical folklore), and also by the "very long 20th century" of the (pre)history of bio- and zoomusicology (from 1859 to the present day; with special emphasis on the heritage of Charles Darwin). In the second part, the theoretical framework is provided by the concept of *productive misunderstanding*, which I use in the spirit of Leó Popper (1886–1911), a Hungarian art critic who at the turn of the 20th century drafted a theory about misunderstanding, stating that it is the definitive driving principle in the history of art. Finally, in the third part I use four different topoi from Hungarian and European culture as a framework of interpretation: the topos of folk music as a natural phenomenon, the topos of the music of the spheres, the topos of the beauty of birdsong and the topos of microscopy. The documents I place in each of these three frameworks are many and varied in nature, yet in each of the three parts there is one source type which is more prominent than others: in the first part it's Szőke's published texts, in the second part his sound recordings and musical notations, and in the third part the documents of the reception of ornithomusicology that dominate.

RESULTS

Péter Szőke spent the first half of his life (1910–1947) in Nitra and Galanta, in historical Northern Hungary, that was attached to Czechoslovakia in 1920, attached partly back to Hungary in 1938 (including Szőke's then residential town Galanta, but not his hometown Nitra), and was finally reattached to

Czechoslovakia in 1945. As to the second half of his life (1947–1994), he lived in Budapest, after having been forced to leave Czechoslovakia with his family during the Czechoslovak-Hungarian population exchange.

Szőke achieved his highest educational attainment in a secondary school of trade. Between 1933 and 1945, he worked as a journalist at the Hanza Centre for Cooperatives in Galanta, for more than four years as the editor-in-chief of *Hanza Szövetkezeti Újság* [Journal of the Hanza Cooperatives]. After 1938, as a natural consequence of its social function, the journal joined the movement of *népi írók* [populist writers], one of the defining intellectual-political currents of interwar Hungary. That is how Szőke got acquainted with the members of this movement, some of whom achieved leading political positions after 1945. It's partly presumable and partly proven that it was thanks to the support of these old acquaintances that Szőke became head of department in bureaus of cooperatives after his move to Hungary, and that he could work as a whole-time “bird music researcher” from 1957 until his retirement in 1978, first at the Institute of Ornithology, and from 1965 on at different departments of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Each half of Szőke's life is characterized by a conflict: the first half by the “Mihola affair”, the second half by the “Kodály affair”. In each of these cases Szőke collided with a member of the elite while fighting for his reformative ideas, and the size of the potential positive outcome was in both cases far below the size of the clash. I suggest that in the background of these disproportionate conflicts there was a psychological mechanism that can be traced back to the social conditions of Szőke's childhood and youth. He came from a family of landless peasants. He succeeded in breaking out of the bottom layer of society, but he didn't have the chance to attend the kinds of schools that his talent would have deserved. His abilities would have enabled him to become an “insider”, yet he was condemned to be an “outsider”, a situation that made him prone to exaggeration, one-sidedness, and obstinacy.

As a journalist, an amateur choir leader and an amateur ethnomusicologist, Szőke became the unasked-for spiritual ambassador of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály in Galanta. Kodály believed in what may be described as an individual reinterpretation of the *Volksgeist*-concept of Wilhelm Wundt: he thought of the Hungarian people as a cultural community and he saw the essence of their “Hungarianness” in old-style Hungarian folksongs. Bartók showed that certain styles of Hungarian folk music impacted the musical folklore of other ethnicities in the Carpathian Basin. As their informal ambassador, Szőke did both of them serious disservice: he conflated the cultural essentialism of Kodály with the idea of genetically defined ethnic essentialism, and he conflated Bartók's scientific results with the idea of Hungarian cultural supremacy, a part of the political agenda in revisionist Hungary. This dubious mixture of thoughts was articulated by him both on the pages of *Hanza Szövetkezeti Újság* and in his private correspondence, also it was partly used to justify his relatively “soft” and more or less concealed antisemitism.

Motivated by his own exaggerated and distorted version of Bartók's and Kodály's ideas, in 1939 Szőke clashed with the lawyer Gyula Mihola, a composer of *magyarnótas* [songs in the Hungarian urban popular style]. In a

journal article propagating the archaic rural folk music idealized by Bartók and Kodály, he doomed the dominant forms of popular music, including *magyarból*, calling them “un-Hungarian”, mentioning the songs of Mihola as an example. The lawyer threatened him with a lawsuit, but the “Mihola affair” was in the end settled outside court after two weeks.

In contrast, the “Kodály affair” that started in 1959 deeply impacted the rest of Szőke’s life. According to his own statements, he had been nursing a theory about the origin and evolutionary laws of music since the late 1920s, a theory that he connected with his amateur ethnomusicological activity in the 1940s. In the Sovietized Hungary of the 1950s, he inserted this theory into a Marxist framework in a paper of more than eight hundred typewritten pages entitled *A melódia belső fejlődésének dialektikája: a népzene sokféleségének egysége* [The dialectics of the inner evolution of melody: the unity in the diversity of musical folklores]. He was able to write this paper by getting paid time off for more than two years at his early 1950s workplace, the Ministry of Agriculture, due to the overdriven egalitarianism of the communist dictatorship and the support of some of his interwar acquaintances from the *népi írók* movement who at this time became leading politicians, of whom Ferenc Erdei played the most important role in Szőke’s new carrier.

Before the war, Szőke, as Kodály’s follower, proudly professed the Eastern origin of Hungarian folk music. In his paper published in 1959, however, he claimed just the opposite: the theory of Eastern origin, which Kodály based on parallels between some Hungarian folksongs and the songs of certain Finno-Ugric and Turkic people of the Volga river, was deemed completely wrong by Szőke who now thought that the parallels could be explained with the universal laws of physics and neurobiology. Szőke seemingly did a 180 degree turn, but in reality all that happened was an ethnicist variant of genetic essentialism being replaced with a biological variant of genetic essentialism in his thought.

There was a public disputation about Szőke’s paper in 1960, organized by the Musicological Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The chairman of the disputation was Zoltán Kodály, who openly discredited Szőke after admitting that he hadn’t even read his paper. This categorical rejection could have had several motivations at the same time: the sharp anti-Kodály rhetorics of the paper and the one-sided downplay of the role of historical connections, the emphatic use of the politically prescribed Marxist ideology just at a time when the institutional and intellectual autonomy of Kodály’s Group of Ethnomusicological Research was threatened the most by the dictatorship, and finally, Szőke’s outsider status and irrationally fast admission to the highest professional forums.

Szőke replied to Kodály’s harsh rejection by writing three articles in the musicological journal *Magyar Zene* [Hungarian Music], but he didn’t get any more tactful in his choice of rhetorical devices, thus aggravating the conflict even more and making it definitively stuck on the level of political and ad hominem arguments.

In 1962, after an intervention from Bence Szabolcsi, one of Kodály’s loyal former disciples, Szőke was successfully persuaded by the secretary

general of the Academy of Sciences to abandon the question of the Eastern relations of Hungarian folk music as the subject of his planned *Candidate of Sciences* dissertation and to write instead about his discovery made in 1956/57 about “bird music”. Later Szőke deemed this as a positive turn: he believed that he achieved world-class results in ornithomusicology, his new one-man discipline, in which he could at last work without being disturbed. What this however really meant was that he got isolated from the Hungarian musicological discourse. As he lacked the control of professional cooperation in the last three decades of his life, there was no development in his basic ideas, which, despite their excesses, were praised for their novelty by all four reviewers of the 1960 disputation, and which could have led to the birth of biomusicology or cognitive musicology in Hungary.

Szőke’s “bird music” theory is in reality not a “bird specific” construction: he placed his findings about birdsong in his already existing universal theory of music, first after his 1956 observations without a tape recorder, then following his 1957 results achieved by what he called “sound microscopy”, the slow-speed playback of birdsong tapes. In his basic theoretical assumption, Szőke applied the conclusions of Darwin’s theory of evolution to musicology in a pioneering manner: one must presume that the different modes and practices of sound production may be conditioned by (evolutionary) biology, and that therefore there may be analogies between species. However, when trying to prove the assumed analogies, Szőke unwittingly left the territory of science: in order to show the wished-for “musical” results, he interpreted his birdsong recordings with extreme arbitrariness and naivety. I demonstrate this by comparing Szőke’s notations and evaluations of woodlark song with the tape recordings they represent, some of which were even manipulated by Szőke.

In the second part of my dissertation I show that Szőke left the arena of science through the door of productive misunderstanding: by stepping through this door, he inadvertently arrived at the realm of artistic productivity. Although Szőke considered himself a scientist, his historical evaluation cannot ignore the artistic aspects of his work. I compare Szőke’s artistic figure to both Parsifal and Klingsor. As Parsifal, through his involuntary creative act he redeemed Amfortas, that is, John Cage, who dreamed of an art free of intentions but couldn’t escape the intentional nature of actually creating that art. As Klingsor, he turned slowed-down birdsongs into magic castles, in which each listener can hear the music of their own unconscious.

That Szőke’s work was accepted as a scientific activity despite the abovementioned factors can be explained with its seeming or actual conformity with certain accepted concepts of European and Hungarian culture, with some of its elements acting as “reminiscences” in the eye of the public. This is apparent from the documents of the reception of ornithomusicology, which I discuss in part three.

Szőke’s theory places human and bird music into the same system, which reflects the influence of Bartók who considered folk music to be a natural phenomenon. When Szőke deemed the “pentatonic” and “strophic” song of the North American hermit thrush (*Catharus guttatus*, old name *Hylocichla guttata*) the peak of the musical evolution of birds, despite several other birds having the

right to claim that title, he was again under the influence of Bartók, now emulating his aesthetic preferences. It is not surprising that Hungarian musical culture, a great deal influenced by the spirit of Bartók, showed affinity towards Szőke's theory. I present this relationship with the example of five Hungarian composers, who used Szőke's bird melodies in their works, more or less in line with Bartók's artistic thought.

Szőke defined the notion of musicality through the vibrational laws of matter, and therefore considered music a universal phenomenon. As the title of his comprehensive monograph (*The origin and three realms of music*) expresses, he thought that music existed on three levels: physics, biology and human society. The idea of universality and the tripartite division can also be found in the concept of *musica universalis*, a concept of medieval natural philosophy rooted in Greek antiquity. Because of this superficial similarity, many believed Szőke's theory to be a rebirth or a confirmation of the old concept, despite the two being completely incompatible. Although the conflation of the essentially metaphysical concept of *musica universalis* with Szőke's materialistic theory was an error, it could nevertheless have helped Szőke's work to become accepted.

Another instance of seeming cultural conformity stemmed from the concept of "bird music", which had been filled with an aesthetic content by European culture for centuries. Many read Szőke as if he had extended and verified that old concept, despite his repeated declaration that musicality in his own definition is devoid of any aesthetic quality. I present this kind of misunderstanding (which irritated Szőke but which was nevertheless favourable for his public approval) with the example of the dialogue between Szőke and the US theist philosopher Charles Hartshorne.

Szőke compared his own "sound microscopy" to the method of the 17th-century pioneer of optical microscopy, Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, but he was not aware of how utterly fitting this parallel was: Szőke's work was a reenactment of Leeuwenhoek's not only in the magnification but also in the tendentious representation of the microscopic world. They both thematised their magnifying instrument as the device of truth and with this rhetorical trick they succeeded in convincing their public even about findings solely based on their fantasy. The magic of microscopy held the audience spellbound not only in Leeuwenhoek's, but also in Szőke's laboratory, as it is testified by the ornithomusicologically inspired works of three Hungarian writers.

From the four kinds of "reminiscences" I mentioned above, three can be found simultaneously in the 1975 film *Barátom, Bonca* ([*Bonca, my Friend*]; written by Katalin Varga, directed by Ilona Katkics), which contains a "bird music" scene inspired by Szőke. I conclude my dissertation by presenting this scene.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

„Nyomd meg a gombot«. Egy száz éves magyar mém” [“Press the Button”. A hundred years old Hungarian meme], *Magyar Zene* LVIII/1 (2020. február): 67–88.

„Madarak és emberek. Rózmán Ákos, Szőke Péter és Bengt Emil Johnson hármas portréja” [Birds and humans. The triple portrait of Ákos Rózmán, Péter Szőke and Bengt Emil Johnson]. In Gyarmati György, Péteri Lóránt (szerk.): *1956 és a zenei élet. Előzmények, történetek, következmények*. Budapest: Liszt Ferenc Zeneművészeti Egyetem, Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára; Pécs: Kronosz, 2019. 287–303.

„A MÁV-szignál zenetörténete” [The jingle of the Hungarian State Railways. A musicological approach], *Magyar Zene* LVI/3 (2018. augusztus): 324–342.

“Two Faces of the Cathedral. Ákos Rózmán’s *Black Illusions* and *Organ Piece No. III/a*”, *Leonardo Music Journal* XXVIII (2018): 25–29.

“Between Szőke’s Sound Microscope and Messiaen’s Organ: The Cultural Realities of Blackcap Song”, *Organised Sound* XXIII/2 (2018. augusztus): 144–155.

„Istennek énekelnek?» Charles Hartshorne és Szőke Péter párbeszéde a madárhangok zeneiségéről” [“Do they sing to God?” The dialogue of Charles Hartshorne and Péter Szőke about the musical quality of birdsong]. In Szirmai Éva – Tóth Szergej – Újvári Edit (szerk.): *Állati jelek, képek és terek*. Szeged: Szegedi Egyetemi Kiadó, Juhász Gyula Felsőoktatási Kiadó, 2018. 47–62.

„A barátposzáta éneke. Szőke Péter »zeneietlen« madarának hangesztétikuma” [The song of the blackcap. The sound aesthetics of Péter Szőke’s “unmusical” bird], *Magyar Zene* LV/1 (2017. február): 88–116.

„Eduárd és Kunigunda. Pillanatok a közzene életéből” [Eduard and Kunigunda. Moments from the life of musical culture, high and low], *Muzsika* LIX/11 (2016. november): 6–11.

„A vérző orgona. Rózmán Ákosról, halála tizedik évfordulóján” [The Bleeding Organ. About Ákos Rózmán, on the tenth anniversary of his death], *Gramofon* XX/3 (2015. ősz): 12–15.

„A szeretőm egy szerecsen». Adatok egy kuplé történetéhez” [“My lover is a darkie”. Contributions to the history of a music hall song]. In Ignác Ádám (szerk.): *Műfajok, stílusok, szubkultúrák. Tanulmányok a magyar populáris zenéről*. Budapest: Rózsavölgyi, 2015. 9–27.