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The Objectives of Educating the People
and the Nation in the Life Work
of Zoltán Kodály,
with Special Focus on Mixed Choir Pieces

DLA

Theses

2007

On the 125th anniversary of his birth and the 40th anniversary of his death, Zoltán Kodály has still been in the focus of criticism in some educational and cultural institutions, at ‘higher grounds’ and by several individuals. Among those making the criticism, well-known individuals, politicians and outstanding musicians can also be found. Beyond the seemingly unimportant fact that Kodály is criticised for certain elements of his method (mainly for solmisation), he is also considered ‘one-sided for folk-song-centered thinking’ and a ‘nationalist’, not to mention that he is said to have had *ideas without realities*; and as he was awarded the Kossuth Prize three times and as he seemed to accept the role of ‘*the Educator of the Nation*’, he is claimed to have served or rather have used politics so as to achieve his aims.

Most of these opinions can be explained by the fact that the above criticism takes only certain elements of Kodály’s life work into consideration (sometimes these elements are slightly obscurely understood or misunderstood). Furthermore, the point of view of this criticism is the world of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, instead of considering simultaneously both Kodály’s life time and the continuity of Hungarian history. The main aim of this essay is to provide arguments against the above criticism by using a new, rarely discussed aspect of Kodály’s life work, while motivating the criticising viewholders to refine their opinions.

II. Research Methods

On choosing the best research method for examining the spiritual background of Kodály’s life work I tried to approach the topic through searching Kodály’s inspirations and inner motivations rather than from the point of view of a researcher who tries to keep an objective distance from his/her theme. From this point of view, and we need to emphasise that *only from this point of view*, both my thesis and the Kodály lifework might seem subjective. As it is stated in the title and the subtitle, Kodály’s life work is examined and explored from the point of view of Kodály’s aims to educate the people and the nation. It is Kodály himself, who provides the possibility for this examination, as he recalled his years in the Eötvös College several times as decisive in his life, career and a great influence on his professional aims to become the Educator of his Nation (“*praeceptor Hungariae*”).

The thesis deals with several literary, historical, socio-political and culture policy areas in exploring Kodály's varied people- and nation- development work. There are some fields of discussion (questions of education and instruction) which refers to Kodály so many times that it attracts attention. The reason for this is that Kodály recalls this period of departing the average composer's life (up to 'Psalmus Hungaricus', and also the first steps on the hard journey towards becoming a 'praeceptor Hungarie') a result of realising the importance of music education in public schools.

A subjective point of view and at the same time a transmission of the research method are the choir works, which deserve special attention, especially mixed choral works. The basic hypothesis of the thesis is that the Kodály lifework has to be examined from the point of view of Kodály, more precisely Kodály's motivation. This is the point where the truth can be seen and, knowing Kodály's precise academic attitude, it can be considered reality. If this truth-searching attitude is to be explored an area in which Kodály undoubtedly seems most sincere is to be chosen. This is nothing else but Art. Kodály's artistic personality can be best seen in his composer work. This is the field which tells us the most about Kodály, and also, about any composer. In this field Kodály's and any other composer's inner world is best revealed, especially when composing music to a text. This is the area where we can see a composer's confession of his beliefs and feelings about the world and beyond. These feelings and beliefs are directed by their inner motivation and they can be considered missionary thoughts.

As for the method of exploration and aspects of approach, special ways had to be invented because of the immense and varied nature of Kodály's life work and because of the above mentioned subjective viewpoint (namely exploration from the point of view of pieces composed for mixed choirs and men choirs).

To sum up, while we can go ahead with the help of choir works in the fields discussed in the essay, the pieces (choir works and their extracts) appear again and again, discussed from a different point of view or with a new focus each time.

The manifold topic is, thus, discussed in a screw-threaded spiral structure.

III. The Results of the Research

In my DLA thesis I would like to prove that Kodály was an integral personality, which can be seen not only in his musical activities and work. (What is more, to conduct the general opinion into more specific thoughts, we can say that, despite his unquestionable views on certain ‘spiritual and moral principles’, in some areas Kodály was even *tolerant* in his opinion about men choirs, men choir pieces and songs composed in folk style).

As we can see from his works (articles and music) he was able to merge both in his thinking and in his music ‘European existence’ and ‘the Hungarian world’; past and present; music traditions and new wave western European music trends. By doing so, he created a synthesis of East and West not only in music but in a wider viewpoint that of culture, too. This kind of synthesis set an example to others.

This can be obviously seen from the analyses and provided samples, and can be traced back in his choir music. His music world, based on his integral spiritual personality, is basically a synthesis and appears to be an exceptional new colour, a characteristic ‘Kodály sound’. This ‘sound’, like in making bronze, is an amalgam of past as well as Kodály’s contemporary European traditions, values and Hungarian music traditions.

I aim to prove why (in contrast with the gloomy atmosphere of the 20th century which either turned average people away from society with cynicism or terrified them with hopelessness; which either during the General Crisis or because of the Second World War made many average people as well as world famous scientists and artists leave the country and move to the other side of the Ocean) Kodály, with his personality and decision to stay in Hungary, became the ‘Polaris’. His social sensitivity, his responsibility for people, issues and the nation in general, his inner urge and belief in the future have increased, in contrast with the above mentioned natural reactions.

While analysing the texts of these music pieces, I would like to draw attention to the importance of poems and other texts. This is mostly important because the active decades of Kodály’s life and work coincide with the most hectic and at the same time most tragic periods of the modern history of Hungary as a country and Hungarians as a nation. This 45-year period in history was full of controversies, tensions; and most of

the social, social political and political tensions could be connected to turning towards either extreme right or left. Kodály was very much against both extremes, which can be seen in his works, especially in his choir works pieces.

Thus, the texts of the compositions are obviously in harmony with the quasi daily politics, more precisely with Kodály's views and moral beliefs on these, even if Kodály rejected being involved in daily politics. At the same time, it is important to state that these texts (mostly poems), because of their historical experience, everlasting values (e.g. love for the homeland) and morality, have both general meaning, independent from history, and they are also valid for the present.

With the analyses of the choir pieces I will explore that the inwardness of these can be depicted in the poems and other texts. For example texts from The Bible and from Zrínyi , quoting from the old Hungarian literary giants, and speaking about the bloody periods of our history, reflect at the same time Kodály's opinion as well. This 'textual background' recalling the examples of the past shows a moral mirror to the nation in Kodály's time, which was wandering or sometimes marching towards a catastrophe. In the meantime, the texts trusting in the power of God and the power and humanity of the nation make us enthusiastic, too.

The thesis devotes a remarkable attention and space to the musical expression of making the nation enthusiastic. Kodály did not rely only on the text of the pieces, but he also used musical elements which (by illustrating a word or a feeling) sounded like typical Hungarian and/or generally known and accepted by the public as such.

Among others the 'fighting' fourths, the Rákóczi song circle (including the so-called Rákóczi Song with the Phrygian motive and Rákóczi March with its fourths jumping up and down, and with its typical broken major chord) can be found in this group. Furthermore, the special world of 'Hungarian scale', both the ones with its augmented seconds and melodic minor scales.

I aim to prove that besides certain musical language everyday turns such as the crying flexa, these Hungarian elements also play a decisive role in the illustration of the texts of choral pieces and that of the meaning behind the words. The basis of this aim is Kodály's intention to make his nation enthusiastic.

The thesis illustrating several music solutions justifies that although Kodály had turned away from his previous romantic ideal, Brahms, at the beginning of the century, the music connections with Romanticism and most of his mixed choral pieces can be traced back, especially through some of Liszt's characteristic stylistic features.

Among these, we can find the formal solution of *Lamento e Trionfo* based on theoretical founds, the application of polar distance and third-related turns, neo-modal style, the scales recalling the Gypsy scale as well as augmented triad used for emphasising the dramatic effect and the Liszt-heritage of the β-chord.

Another focus of the thesis is the exploration of how poems and other texts, which are based on artistic pictures and dramatic metaphors, are turned into sounds and rhythms in different composing solutions, with special focus on how they can be accumulated (melody, chords, rhythm, imitative techniques, etc.) and the discussion of the expressive power of the musical devices which are used to achieve the education of the nation.

The thesis would like to prove that although Kodály's ideals altogether seem mostly to be Utopian mostly in the eyes of the people of the 21st century, due to the multifront fight, which Kodály fought in different fields and at different levels simultaneously. However, life has proved that his creative intentions and power, as well as his attention to parallel issues – with suitable outsider help and followers – even if temporarily, were realistic and were possible to put into practice. This has been discussed in the chapter titled 'Educating the Nation and the People Locally – in Kecskemét'.

In connection with this, the thesis would like to prove primarily that in the background of Kodály's growing and widening activities from the mid-1920's there is one major, common intention: the education of the people and the nation above all. This can be seen in his choir pieces as well. This part of his life is often compared to those of the Utopian Socialists', as it is also considered to be built on illusions.

It might be true in the face of the fact that Kodály complementing Hungarian art music, which lacked some European periods or it was at least poorer, had to create the missing Hungarian art music periods, and together with it our national self-image from the language of our ancient music culture – which is considered a real illusion. But for Kodály it was

not a ‘Vain Beam’ it is an important part of building up the self-image of the nation.

In an indirect way the thesis aims to justify how much a remarkable part of Kodály’s ideas are still topical. A decisive part of these might not strictly be connected to music, but they refer to a wider social context. For example his ideas on school education, general taste, saving national values, furthermore, the intention to do something for the nation such as saving Hungarian language culture from decline belong to these.

Similar programme-creating and often reappearing ideas of Kodály’s are the discussion on how we can get rid of our ‘Hungarian illnesses’ such as laziness, envy, disagreement, hostility; the determined refuse of any kind of extreme politics; the problems of morality and solidarity as well as the necessity to show our European and Hungarian features altogether.

These ideals, which come up again and again in the texts – and certainly in the music – of the mixed and male choir pieces are basically determine the spiritual value of the compositions, revealing at the same time Kodály’s thinking and feelings in the everyday life of the 20th century Hungary, which was full of conflicts and trials.

These questions as we can experience nowadays have not lost their topicality, on the contrary, in some respects they have been widened with new aspects which can be thought about for the future.

IV. The Author's Publications on the Theme of the DLA Thesis

- „In unruhigen Gewässern”(„Nyugtalan vizeken”). in K.u.K. Krems, Kecskemét:
Pädagogische Akademie Krems, Pädagogische Hochschule Kecskemét, 1995.
- „Wirbelwind”. in: Pädagogische Horizonte in Europa. Krems, Kecskemét:
Pädagogische Akademie Krems, Pädagogische Hochschule Kecskemét, 1999.
- „Forgószél”. in Módszertani Lapok Ének-zene 3. szám. Budapest: 1999.
- „Az ember alkotásra született – Válogatás dr. Kálmán Lajos munkáiból”. Az írásokat és kézirásos kottákat sajtó alá rendezte és szerkesztette: Smuta Attila, 287 oldal + CD melléklet, Lakitelek: Antológia Kiadó, 2004.
- „Praeceptores – Gondolatok Tanítókról egy teremavató kapcsán”. in Magyar Tudomány ünnepe, Bács-Kiskun Megyei Tudományos Fórum. Kecskemét: Kecskeméti Főiskola Nyomda, 2006.
- „Die Kodály-Methode in Ungarn – Entwicklungen, Erfahrungen und neue Herausforderungen”. in Welchen Unterricht braucht die Grundschule? 103-117. p. Essen: Verlag Die Blaue Eule, 2006.