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THE NEW MUSIC STUDIO IN BUDAPEST  
EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC IN HUNGARY  
FROM 1970 TO 1990

Abstract of the doctoral thesis

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## I. The subject of the dissertation and the preliminaries to the research

The work of the New Music Studio between 1970-1990 had been unique in the history of Hungarian music: if we do not count the artistic and friendly union of Bartók and Kodály with no institutional background, this was the only group of performers and composers that created based on homogeneous principles for two decades and its founding members kept their intellectual collectivity even after the end of work of the ensemble.

The work of Albert Simon, László Sáry, Zoltán Jeney, Péter Eötvös, László Vidovszky, András Wilhelm, Barnabás Dukay, Zoltán Kocsis, Zsolt Serei, György Kurtág Jr. and Gyula Csapó evolved on three fields. With their compositions they brought unprecedented sound in contemporary Hungarian music. We can understand their works as the Hungarian appearance, echo, and creative acquisition of experimental musical phenomena originating from the United States in the middle of the 20th century. With their concerts and performing activity constructed by a conscious artistic concept Budapest (more rarely rural) audiences got to know not only the works of the members of the ensemble, but also the novelties of the time's music outside Hungary. The Studio's performances mostly contained works that were the musical equivalents of the period's neo-avantgarde style in Hungarian literature and visual arts. Their third field of activity might probably have less significance, but cannot be overlooked: this workshop was the only, albeit not official home for obtaining experience in performing contemporary music in the higher education of music.

Although the Studio did give some concerts during the 90's, during the two decades since 1990 it became obvious that the ensemble's twenty year operation by now is a closed chapter of twentieth century music history of Hungary; its achievements left its mark not only in Hungarian concert life, but also in the oeuvres of composer members of the ensemble. The activity of the ensemble (especially in its first fifteen years) was *tolerated* in musical circles and as a result, it worked on the outskirts of Hungarian music, in both its work conditions and institutional background. Its background was provided by the Central Artists' Ensemble of the Young Communists League, which seemingly demanded assimilation with the cultural trends, but in reality not only it allowed alternative work, but also insured some protection against partly political attacks which quite frequently made efforts to create alternative theatre, literature, and visual arts impossible. However, this relative protection also meant a limitation in operational conditions and a lack of the opportunity of representation and planning ahead on long-term. Daily work was therefore recorded by few documents. Documentation that remained of the time (posters, flyers) are not always creditable, as events that were carried out not always went as it was described in the concert flyers or programmes. Changes were not always unanimously remembered by participants; still, by 2012, a database of the works that were played by New Music Studio and a resumé of the information of its concerts was created. It was established with the help of Zoltán Jeney based on a list assembled by him in 1990.<sup>1</sup>

During the active period of the Studio's operation, composing achievements appeared just in the form of publicism and reviews in the discourse of musicology. Although the reviews did not offer an opportunity to analyse the works, they preserved the descriptions of new elements (surprising for the Hungarian musical profession at the time) and the polemics in connection with the performances. The composers did not present their artistic intentions as

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1 Jeney-Szitha, „Az Új Zenei Stúdió hangverseny-repertoárja 1970-1990 között” [The New Music Studio concert repertoire 1970-1990]. *Magyar Zene*, 50/3 (August 2012.): 869-902.

thoroughly as György Ligeti, Cage, Stockhausen or Boulez. They wrote about their works in leaflets or programme notes, talked about their artistic aims in interviews, but the forums where they could do this during the 70's and 80's were not suitable for analytic communication. András Wilhelm was the first to do more detailed analysis in the notes of Jeney and Sárosi's records, but the depth of analysis was limited by the length and genre. Nevertheless, Wilhelm's writings are of great significance, because (as a member of the Studio) he could present these works through performing experience, and they present the basics of the new musical style. As a sign of how much Hungarian musicology kept a distance, the first study about the work of the New Music Studio - based on analysis by Jeney, Sárosi, and Vidovszky - was written by English musicologist Margaret McLay in 1982. McLay described the works from the point of view of the international experimental phenomena, like Dominic Gill, the music critic of Financial Times, who regularly reviewed the activity of New Music Studio from 1975 to 1982.

I began research in 1998, first by describing the phenomena analytically, then, in connection with the monographies I wrote about Zoltán Jeney and László Vidovszky, by processing the history of the Studio. Since the turn of the millennium the activity of the Studio attracted the attention of other researchers also. Szabolcs Molnár, when finishing his musicology studies, wrote about the settings to music of Tandori poems by Jeney and Sárosi in 1998. In 2005 Alain Williams, as a result of his study trips to Budapest, summed up the most striking phenomena, which connect the works of Jeney, Sárosi and Vidovszky to the peak points of Cage's musical philosophy and American minimalism partly based on the interviews he made with Jeney and Vidovszky and partly on my first articles on this topic. As his purpose was to pinpoint the connecting points between the music of Hungary behind the iron curtain and American experimental music, in his study he presented the political and sociological background, which surrounded the neoavantgarde movements in the 70's, with the eye of a foreigner. Anna Dalos in her 2009 research about the student years of Jeney, Sárosi and Vidovszky made important remarks about the edifications of the work of the three composers before their activity in the New Music Studio, and at the conference on the occasion of Zoltán Jeney's 70th birthday she contributed information about the connection between the Studio and the neo-avantgarde movements in literature, theatre and visual arts. Her research results published since 2007 about the music life of the 60's and the first steps of the 30's generation just before the Studio also provide a more detailed view for the understanding of the decades following that.

## **II. The methods of research**

This doctorate dissertation is the first attempt to summarize the activities and musical achievements of the Studio. Its actuality is highlighted by the fact that the information can still be obtained from formal members of the New Music Studio and the musical circles that formed around them and the composers themselves can talk about the circumstances in which the works were created, the sources of inspiration, the composers' methods, and the intentions behind the compositions. A considerable part of the data in the chapter about the history of the Studio is based on the memory of the participants and the documents that they kept. Although objectivity was important during the writing of this work, I relied on oral tradition that can still be regarded as genuine, just like documents about the New Music studio published at the time. In the monographies that I wrote about Zoltán Jeney and László Vidovszky, the conversations that I had with them played an important role, and I have had

similar conversations with other members of the Studio in the past one and a half decade. Some of the interviews were done in a stricter manner, they were recorded, others were informal. Only a few of them appeared in print, but they are present as references in my previous publications, and I refer to them quite frequently also in this work.

There was no portrait film made about the New Music Studio, and the daily work was also not documented on film. Although during the 70's and 80's broadcastings were actually (still?) not reduced because of financial reasons, the concert premieres were recorded just rarely. Compared to the number of radio recordings of the works written by the officially supported composers of that time there were just a few the works by composers of the New Music Studio archived at the Hungarian Radio. Works published by Editio Musica Budapest and the records that were released by Hungaroton can be looked at as a sources. Their authenticity is strengthened by the fact that the composers took part in the editing works, a part of the scores were published as reproductions of the manuscripts, and a considerable part of the recordings were made with their participation or direction.

There were over hundred compositions created in the Studio's workshop during the discussed twenty years. Unity can only be found in this variegated repertoire if we look at the phenomena that counted as the most important musical innovations of the experimental music of the period. The works of the composers are connected only by this, the greatest inspiring power of the studio was probably that it did not limit the expression of personal taste and communicating ideas in any way. The great number of works and variegation in genre made it impossible to analyse them one by one, therefore it proved to be more simple to look at the patterns that can be seen in the works by the Studio compared to the phenomena of American experimental music in a representative manner. Although my purpose was not to assign musical phenomena to the events of the careers of composers, still, it is certain that the beginning examples are the works of Zoltán Jeney, László Sály, and László Vidovszky. They were those, who played a major role in the artistic community of the Studio (the careers of Péter Eötvös and Zoltán Kocsis went also on a different, international track, independent from the Studio), and those younger them found their paths around the ones that they beat.

### **III. The results of the research**

The activity and workshop of the New Music Studio is inseparable from the patterns that the composers working here adopted from John Cage, and experimental musical stream of thought that followed his work. The music of Cage, Christian Wolff, Morton Feldman, Steve Reich and Philip Glass differed from European and Hungarian musical traditions, meaning the knowledge and principles of composition that the members of the Studio learned during their studies. The part dealing with the history of the Studio therefore follows how the founding members came to be susceptible to this way of thinking during their years of the music academy, and their post gradual studies in Hungary and abroad. It also describes why they did not follow the national trend of avantgarde, which brought great success for the generation of Hungarian composers before them during the 60's and 70's. There is a separate chapter about the work of Albert Simon, who was considered the master of the studio, and not only had an important role in founding the ensemble, but, as the conductor of the symphonic orchestra of KISZ Central Artists' Ensemble (KISZ CAE), he also took part in creating the performing background working around the Studio. The section about the work of the ensemble also describes the motivation and role in the workshop of those who joined

later or stayed out of it. The intensive professional connection between György Kurtág and the members of the Studio during the whole time of its operation is also mentioned. This section also explains the circumstances of the founding, summarizes the technical and professional help provided by KISZ CAE, and analyses the documented professional and political attacks, the concert activity of the Studio, the Hungarian and foreign repertoire played at concerts, the critical reactions in connection with the performances, and finally provides a summary of the changes caused by the change of environment and a shift in professional key points, which led to the end of the active work of the studio.

The part dealing with the workshop of New Music Studio describes the musical elements acquired from American experimental music, which were new contributions to the Hungarian contemporary music but also were fundamental in creating individual style by each composer at the group. An important turning point is the careers of Jeney, Sárosi and Vidovszky was the *tabula rasa*, which was carried out in the early 70's by American inspiration and which resulted, mostly during joint improvisations, in researching only the fundamental elements. A significant stage of the stylistic renewal was the use of open forms, with which they followed not the controlled aleatory seen at Darmstadtian composers, but the principal of "indeterminacy" represented by Cage, Wolff and Feldman. Their open form works, which were practically joint improvisations based on combinatorial sound models, also inspired them to create new notating methods and graphical scores.

Through joint improvisations and their work with open form works made it obvious to Jeney, Sárosi and Vidovszky that the liberty gained by breaking with traditions needs a completely new way of thinking both in musical material and the tools of creating form. As it did not seem a realistic alternative to keep on using earlier sound systems or composing mechanisms based on musical traditions, they started replacing harmony relations, form concept, and the rules of traditional musical rhetoric (and figures and idioms connected to instruments) with logical systems seen in the works of Cage, Wolff and others. Members of the New Music Studio inserted these systems of foreign origin, which could come from musical recordings, graphical shapes, proportions, or even the sound connections from another musical composition, into their own works as found objects (*objets trouvés*). By using the borrowed systems they obtained such composing methods, that they could use with their own imagination and sometimes they still do, with many modifications and additions.

Composing with chance methods and the indeterminacy with respect to its performance brought other important novelties in the works of the composers of the Studio in the 70's: the conscious reduction of the structure's basic layers and, in connection, the need for proportioning time in many forms. Thanks to these two new phenomena their music got in the sphere of action of musical minimalism, but all composers used the patterns, that they got to know from the works of American the most significant composers, differently. Signs of minimalism in the works by composers of the studio connected with the cageian concept of sound, noise and silence. Their works composed in the 70's and 80's showed many original solutions, above all in those works whose structure was based on gradual effacement of sound process, or where unpredictably appearing silence resulted in a dramatic effect. At the same time, broken from tradition, as a material – or more like a found object – folk music appeared in the works composed in the circles of the Studio.

Although the composers of the New Music Studio turned away from classical-romantic genres and composing methods, the consequences originating from this could only be

considered as radical as it could be from the American experimental sources until the end of the decade. The phenomena listed earlier were more like the tools of renewal and served more as a way of creative facing of musicology than a real breaking with it. The most important creative achievements in the period between 1972 and 1975 (above all musical fundamentals, and the handling of form and time without limits) brought with them the possibility of reviving traditions as well. When materials from earlier periods of music history started to appear in their works written in the second half of the decade, even if they were hidden as coincidental systems concealed by layers of minimalist forms and process music, they were signs of ambitions of finding greater form conceptions apart from monolithic musical structures. This cannot only be seen in the works of the Studio's founding members, but in the ones of the younger members also. Barnabás Dukay, György Kurtág Jr., Zsolt Serei, and Gyula Csapó saw the experimental ideas of the older members as a way of development, and in the meantime handled them as a definition of a new relationship to tradition. Style imitations, quote and collage techniques and polyphonic editing methods appearing after 1975 and the presence of counterpoint all prove the intensive occupation with musical tradition by all members of the Studio. In the end, from the beginning of the 80's the aims of the composers started taking new directions, which were mostly influenced by taking the thread of tradition back.

#### IV. List of publications in connection with the theme

„Az ismeretlenhez ismeretlen út vezet” [One is lead to the unknown by unknown roads]. *Muzsika*, 41/9 (September 1998): 41-44.

„Paródiák és metamorfózisok Sály László műveiben” [Parody and metamorphosis in the works of László Sály]. *Muzsika*, 42/1 (January 1999): 36-41.

„Ars és Techné. Enciklopédikus tudás és korszellem. Beszélgetés Dukay Barnabás zeneszerzővel” [Ars and Techné. Encyclopaedic knowledge and Zeitgeist. A conversation with Barnabás Dukay]. *Muzsika*, 42/8 (August 1999.): 34-39.

„Ars és Techné. Enciklopédikus tudás és korszellem. Beszélgetés Dukay Barnabás zeneszerzővel” [Ars and Techné. Encyclopaedic knowledge and Zeitgeist. A conversation with Barnabás Dukay] . *Új Forrás*, 3/5 (May 2014): 6-21. [full version of the interview]

„Az amerikai minimálzene hatása az Új Zenei Stúdió zeneszerzőire az 1970-es és 80-as években” [The influence of American minimalist music on composers at the New Music Studio in the 1970s and 80s]. *Magyar Zene*, 38/2 (May 2000): 127-140.

*Jeney Zoltán*. (Magyar zeneszerzők, 19). Budapest: Mágus Kiadó, 2002.

*Zoltán Jeney*. (Hungarian Composers, 19). Budapest: Mágus Kiadó, 2002.

„Phaedra, Pseudo-Phaedrák, Phaedra-rongybabák. Csapó Gyula operájának hangversenytermi bemutatójáról” [Phaedra, Pseudo- Phaedras, Phaedra- rag dolls. About the premiere of Gyula Csapó's opera as a concert performance]. *Muzsika*, 45/7 (July 2002): 25-27.

„A mélység színén. Dukay Barnabás szerzői lemezéről” [Over the Face of the Deep. Barnabás Dukay's CD record] *Muzsika*, 45/8 (August 2002.): 36-37.

"Talán az »a« elhelyezése dönti el az eldöntetlen maradót ... - Szöveg, dallam és hangrendszer összefüggései Jeney Zoltán műveiben " [Perhaps the position of »a« decides

- the undecided remainder. Coherence of text, melody and sound system in Zoltán Jeney's music]. *Muzsika*, 46/8 (August 2003): 36-39.
- „Vidovszky László: Schroeder halála” [Schroeder's Death]. *Muzsika*, 47/9 (September 2004): 27-30.
- „Két régi-új hanglemez. Közös kompozíciók az Új Zenei Stúdió hőskorából – Simon Albert Schubertje” [Two new-old CD recordings. Joint compositions from the heroic age of the New Music Studio – Albert Simon's interpretation of Schubert's music]. *Muzsika*, 42/1 (July 2006): 37-40.
- Vidovszky László. (Magyar zeneszerzők, 34). Budapest: Mágus Kiadó, 2006.
- László Vidovszky (Hungarian Composers, 34). Budapest: Mágus Kiadó, 2006.
- „Újragondolt műfaj – Pavane. Beszélgetés Jeney Zoltánnal a mű szombathelyi ősbemutatója után.” [Re-invented genre – Pavane. A conversation with Zoltán Jeney after the premiere of his Pavane]. *Muzsika*, 43/9 (September 2007): 22-25.
- „...talán a kérdés folyamatos újrafelvetése: mi lehet még zene? Gondolatok Michael Nyman: Experimentális zene – Cage és utókora című könyvéről” [...Perhaps it was the continual re-asking of the question »what also could music be?« Thoughts on Michael Nyman's book entitled Experimental Music. Cage and Beyond]. *Muzsika*, 51/4 (April 2008): 35-37.
- „Láttató erővel tudott beszélni a zenéről. Kocsis Zoltán Simon Albertről” [He could talk about music with poetical power. An interview with Zoltán Kocsis about Albert Simon]. *Muzsika*, 53/2 (February 2010): 3-5.
- „Operaüzem görbe tükörben. Eötvös Péter: Radames.” [Opera factory in caricature. Péter Eötvös's Radames] *Muzsika*, 53/3 (March 2010): 19-20.
- „A teljes életre tanít Beszélgetés Kocsis Zoltánnal Arnold Schönberg Mózes és Áron operájáról és az általa komponált harmadik felvonásról” [It teaches us to live our life as a whole. Zoltán Kocsis talks about Schönberg's Moses and Aron and the third act composed by him]. *Magyar Zene*, 48/3. (August 2010): 253-276.
- „Experimentum és népzene az Új Zenei Stúdió műhelyében 1970-90 között – és utána” [Experimental music and folk music in the workshop of the New Music Studio in Budapest from 1970 to 1990 – and afterwards]. *Magyar Zene*, 48/4 (November 2010): 439-451.
- „Radikális fiatalok – negyven év múltán. Az Új Zenei Stúdió megalakulásának évfordulójára” [Radical young composers - forty years later. For the fortieth anniversary of the foundation of the New Music Studio] *Muzsika*, 54/1 (January 2011): 5-8.
- „A »rejtett« alaphangokat ugyanott hallom, ahol ő. Eötvös Péter Kurtág Györgyről”. [I hear the »hidden« fundamental notes in the same way he hears them. A conversation with Péter Eötvös about György Kurtág]. *Muzsika*, 54/11 (November 2011): 36-37.
- „I hear the »hidden« fundamental notes in the same way he hears them. A conversation with Péter Eötvös about György Kurtág”. in *On the Page. Universal Music Publishing Classical Yearbook 2012*. Silke Hilger (ed.), 5-7. Paris: Universal Music Publishing Classical, 2011.
- Jeney, Zoltán-Szitha, Tünde. „Az Új Zenei Stúdió hangverseny-repertoárja 1970-1990 között” [The New Music Studio concert repertoire 1970-1990]. *Magyar Zene*, 50/3 (August 2012): 869-902.

„Interview with Péter Eötvös about his new work *da capo* before the world premiere on 6 May in Porto”. <http://www.umpgclassical.com/#/en-GB/News/2014/05/Interview-Peter-Eotvos.aspx>