

Thesis of a Dissertation

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Zoltán Kodály's Solo Sonata in the Interpretation of János Starker

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I. Introduction of the Research

Kodály's Solo Sonata is undoubtedly an unavoidable part of every cellist's repertoire. Numerous recordings of the piece have been made, performed by cellists of different styles. This 20th-century masterpiece is often played in concert halls in remarkably diverse performances.

The Solo Sonata has accompanied János Starker's (1924-2003) whole career, with several visual and audio recordings of his various performances. Listening to them, it is safe to say that Starker's global perspective on interpretation has changed almost nothing over the decades.

Starker is referred to by many as a "dry" performer who, while playing every little detail of the score perfectly, never shows any emotion. In my dissertation I seek to contradict this image of him. In my opinion – in addition to striving to stay true to the score – Starker also shows his own individuality and feelings, as long as they don't affect the authentic interpretation of the piece.

II. Literature and Sources

Most of the literature about Starker was written in English, despite him being Hungarian. His biographies from various sources contain numerous inaccuracies, so for this section of my thesis I used his autobiography inspired book: *The World of Music According to Starker*¹

¹ Janos Starker: *The World of Music According to Starker* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

The book gives a glimpse into the musical life of Starker's era. We can also become familiar with the cello artist's personality and his humorous, sarcastic side. After contacting Starker's granddaughter, Alexandra Preucil, she sent me a score that was published in 2003.² I wasn't familiar with this edition and as it turned out it's not widely known. I dedicated a chapter in my dissertation to compare it to the original score, published by Universal Edition.³

Studying the score made Starker's conscious way of playing even more understandable to me, since even in his very early recording from 1950, in New York, he often applied the same changes that are indicated in the 2003 version. The differences from the original score in the recordings were thus not random, but conscious decisions on the part of the cellist. In the chapter on the comparison of different scores, I also looked to answer whether these discrepancies were due to musical or technical reasons.

In the chapter, Organised Method of String Playing from the book; *Concept in String Playing*,⁴ published by Indiana University, Starker describes an extremely useful methodical dissertation for cellists.

The elaboration of this methodology was a crucial part of my work. Beside examining it, I also researched its practical use in the chapter, dedicated to the analysis of the recordings.

In my dissertation I not only relied on written sources, but also colleagues who were open to discuss my thesis in person. One of them was Miklós Perényi who in his youth played the Solo Sonata to Kodály himself and has played it often throughout his career.

Tamás Mérei, who passed tragically early just recently, was a student of Starker at the Indiana University. During our discussions I had the possibility to become familiar with Starker as a teacher, his methods and the basics of OMSP.

III. Methodology

The core of my dissertation is the comparative analysis of the two recordings by Starker played two decades apart. The biggest difficulty of my work was being able to stay objective, and to avoid my personal taste and my own idea of the work affecting the analysis.

Essentially I examined Starker's adherence to what is described in the score, focusing on the differences – or in some cases similarities – that consistently persisted.

² Kodály: Szólószonáta gordonkára op.8 (Bloomington: Music Publications Inc., 2003).

³ Kodály: Szólószonáta gordonkára op. 8 (Wien: Universal Edition, 1921).

⁴ Murray Grodner (szerk.): *Concept in string playing: Reflections by Artist-Teachers at the Indiana University School of Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1979)

I did the comparison of the recordings by studying the two different scores -- the original Universal Edition and Starker's performance version. My study also examined how the methods mentioned in the *Organised Method of String Playing* were applied by the cellist. In the case of Starker it's really important to emphasize his roots and the musical influence he was surrounded by at the Music Academy as a student. Hence, I highlighted the importance of the impressions Leó Weiner and Adolf Schiffer made on the cellist.

Dissertations rarely contain biographies but in my case I found it necessary due to the inaccuracy in the available sources.

IV. Conclusions

Kodály stated that János Starker's interpretation is the "Bible" of the Solo Sonata. This was my main motivation for thoroughly examining Starker's recordings of the piece and, through it, getting closer to the original concept of Kodály.

We may declare that Starker's interpretation is one of the most authentic and gives a unique opportunity to recognize Kodály's ideas. The solutions chosen by Starker help with the technical problems in the piece, and even in other compositions.

V. Documentation of the Activity Related to the Topic of the Dissertation

Performing Kodály's Solo Sonata has accompanied my professional life as well. I had the opportunity to play this unique piece on many occasions: at competitions, festivals and concerts, last time in the Chamber Hall of the Academy of Music, as a doctoral student. I also performed the Solo Sonata abroad as the member of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, in the Great Hall of the Lighthouse Concert Center.