

Ferenc Liszt University of Music  
Graduate School (7.6 Music)

KRISZTA KÖNCSE

Summary of Doctoral Dissertation

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF  
FERENC KERSCH  
(1853–1910)  
TO SACRED MUSIC

SUPERVISOR: MELINDA BERLÁSZ

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## I. Research background

Ferenc Kersch (Bácsalmás, 1853 – Esztergom, 1910) was a founding member of the Hungarian sacred music movement (Hungarian National Caecilian Association, “OMCE”).

The association was founded more than a century ago, in 1897, yet the movement and its members are seldom mentioned in present-day scholarly literature. However, it is a key area of sacred music, hence a subject which deserves attention these days. The contemporary press releases normally linked the activities of Kersch and the OMCE to such issues in sacred music which make the study of this area topical nowadays. The primary sources for the present research project included encyclopaedia articles and memoirs, followed by press articles which presented the members of this reform movement and their ideas. Among them, the most noteworthy figure is Ferenc Kersch, whose name emerges in a number of areas. This gave rise to the biography of a church musician with a wide horizon, solid theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

In terms of the overall information currently available about Kersch’s career and compositions, the contribution of this dissertation amounts to approximately 90%. It should be noted that to date the literature has remained silent on both this period, a milestone in the history of sacred music, and the work of Ferenc Kersch.

## II. Research methodology

This research could not rely on what would otherwise be the most readily available source, Kersch’s estate, as the family no longer have any document or score. The only way to obtain information about the composer’s career and works was to study municipal and local history documents. The initial stage of this project was marked by visits to the main locations of Kersch’s life, the cities of Bácsalmás, Kalocsa, Pest, Nagybecskerek, Nagyvárad and Esztergom, in search of relevant documents and scores kept in archives, libraries and church music collections. The systematic plans of this research led the present author to the music library of Saint Stephen’s Basilica, which has preserved the majority of Kersch’s works.

What initially seemed to be a hopeless enterprise soon became a well-grounded project. The principal events of Kersch’s life were found in local newspapers and his articles in sacred music journals (e.g. *Bulletin of Catholic Sacred Music*), of which he was a regular contributor.

## III. Life of Ferenc Kersch

Due to the scanty literature on his life and works, the main events of his career are set out here in detail.

Ferenc Kersch (Bácsalmás, 2 December 1853 – Esztergom, 6 October 1910) was a prominent figure of Hungary’s sacred music reform movement (Hungarian National Caecilian Association). As such, he was mostly inspired by the reforms in Germany (Allgemeiner Caecilienverein), and personally by Karl Proske and Franz Xaver Witt, but primarily by Franz Liszt.

This is a major conclusion of the present research into the main reform ideas regarding Catholic sacred music. My principal goal was to outline the sacred music initiatives in Regensburg, a city which inspired the Hungarian Caecilian movement, with references to certain relevant papal edicts. I also strove to present the attempts of another major school of sacred music, that of Solesmes. This brought me to make some passing remarks on a number of other sacred music reform initiatives. In terms of the principal aims of the Hungarian sacred music reform movement and the contributions of its representatives, I studied the work of Mihály

Bogisich. My research revealed various other figures of the Hungarian Caecilian movement (Ignác Glatt, Jakab Léh, Alajos Hennig), who would deserve a detailed presentation in a future summary paper on sacred music. Their attempts are presented in conjunction with the views of Hungarian high priests. I give various examples to prove that the people involved in Hungary's Catholic sacred music were primarily trained in Regensburg.

After his childhood in Bácsalmás, Kersch went to study at the Jesuit Grammar School in Kalocsa. He graduated as a student of Alajos Hennig in 1872. His career reflects the typical circumstances of a late 19th century middle class person who chose to become an intellectual. After leaving grammar school, he went on to study at the University of Pest, where he earned a degree as a teacher of Mathematics and Science. During his university years he had worked as the organist of the seminary and was a student of Franz Liszt's for a while. This encounter is not mentioned in the literature on Liszt.

As a fresh graduate he was appointed deputy lay teacher in the Piarist Grammar School in Nagybecskerek, an institution which he served until 1880. Due to his pneumonia developed during his military service, he was discharged from his position and went on to work as a pianist. His musical talent, organising skills, hard work and altruism had earned him prestige already in Nagybecskerek, where he was invited to lead the local choir. As transpires from the contemporary press, he introduced a vivid musical life in the city with a number of highly successful concerts.

According to the written documents, Kersch sought to obtain a musical position which would ensure him a decent living to support his family, while allowing him ample freedom to implement his specific plans and ambitions, as reflected in his works. In 1886 he became the organist and later Choir Master of Nagyvárad's Cathedral with the support of Bishop Lőrinc Schlauch. His work in Nagyvárad, which became his first actual enterprise as a church musician, helped the cathedral's pathetic choir to achieve excellence in the art of music. He was also employed as a music teacher at the local seminary and at the Men's Teacher Training College. His principal contribution to the city's musical life was his work as a pianist. For a while, he was a teacher of young Béla Bartók. His exemplary work in Nagyvárad became an inspiration for the introduction of musical education in the city.

In 1897 he applied for and earned the position of Choir Master in the Cathedral of Esztergom, an occupation which brought him to reach the climax of his musical career. Soon after his arrival, he prepared plans to reform the cathedral's choir and orchestra, reorganised the choir and promoted the renewal of liturgical music. He introduced a service regulation binding to each choir member, participated in the organisation of the first sacred music congress in Hungary, and actively contributed to the establishment of the OMCE. He was the head of the Hungarian delegation at the celebrations in Rome on the 1300th anniversary of the death of Pope Saint Gregory the Great. He took on the job of music teacher at the seminary and the teacher training college, and organised the establishment of a tuition-free vocal school. He launched and implemented his reforms with the support of his brother, Mihály Kersch, and church musician Mihály Bogisich, Chairman of the OMCE. Kersch successfully introduced a number of state-of-the-art changes in the practices of sacred music, which would later be prescribed by the Pope's *motu proprio*. He was a regular contributor to a number of sacred music journals (*Bulletin of Catholic Sacred Music*) and offered supplementary courses for cantors.

The central part of this dissertation is a detailed presentation of Ferenc Kersch's work, creative periods and principal artistic features. This is followed by a thorough analysis and comparison of his works belonging to various genres. A number of contrastive tables demonstrate the individual works of a multifarious musical career.

#### IV. Stages of an artistic career and their features. Classification of works by genres

At the beginning of his career, Ferenc Kersch composed secular works, mostly folk plays and piano pieces. Nearly all of his compositions produced in his positions as a church musician were sacred pieces. Kersch's career is best divided into three creative periods:

1. Compositions in the ten-year period from Nagybecskerek to Nagyvárad (1876–1886),
2. Works related to his activities in Nagyvárad (1887–1896),
3. Pieces composed in his Esztergom years (1897–1910).

The first creative period is mostly inspired by late romanticism, the second by the style of Franz Liszt, and the third by the neo-renaissance Palestrina style as revived by the Caecilian movement.

The majority of his works are available in manuscripts, often without a date. Most scores are kept in the music library of Saint Stephen's Basilica in Budapest. Presumably, it was Artúr Harmat, a student of Kersch's in Esztergom, who carried the scores of his former teacher from Esztergom's Basilica to Saint Stephen's, his own place of service.

This research discovered a number of compositions, which fall into the following generic categories:

Masses (16)

Requiems (4)

Offertorium, Introitus, Graduale (77 polyphonic compositions in the genre of motet)

Divine Offices (4 full polyphonic divine offices)

Te Deums (2)

Litanies (1 polyphonic)

Passion turbas (2)

Polyphonic arrangements of sacred folk songs (19)

Other polyphonic sacred pieces (3)

A cantor book called *Sursum Corda!*

#### V. A detailed analysis of masses

Of the total of 17 masses composed by Ferenc Kersch found in most encyclopaedias, the present author only found 16. In terms of their performers, they are best categorised as follows: 6 masses for grand orchestra and mixed choir, 3 for mixed choir and organ, 3 a cappella masses for mixed choir, 1 male choir a cappella, 1 female choir a cappella (probably composed for an organ and strings). Other known works include 1 two-voice mass for a female or male choir with organ accompaniment, 1 single-voice mass on a melody of his own with organ accompaniment, and several single-voice masses on Gregorian chants with organ accompaniment. Of these latter, three were published in the cantor book *Sursum Corda!* The manuscripts found include a musical draft book (*Fragments from 9 Such Masses*), containing Gregorian masses for which Kersch only composed organ accompaniment. Presumably, 10 manuscripts were made by Kersch himself, and one edition was published by the Regensburg publishing company Coppenrath in 1910 (*Missa in honorem S. Ambrosii*).

Kersch elaborated on all six ordinary movements, with abbreviations in the lyrics of the longer movements: *Gloria* and *Credo*. The movement structure remained essentially the same in all three creative periods.

## VI. Other musical and music theory works

Kersch's printed motet collections include two major publications: *Concentus Sacri* and *X Offertoria*. The former was produced in Nagyvárad under the influence of Liszt, and the latter in Esztergom as a return to Palestrina's model. His young-age secular works belong to the instrumental and vocal genres of his age (piano pieces, folk plays, festive overtures, and songs).

In his time Kersch was best known for his cantor book titled *Sursum Corda!* Produced well before Pius X's reforms, it soon fell into disuse with its Gregorian arrangements of the Medicea edition, as opposed to the authentic Gregorian melodies rediscovered by the Solesmes movement. Yet, it provided a wealth of useful information to cantors. His music theory books include *Harmony*, even published in print, which commits an entire chapter to the arrangement of church folk songs with modal chords.

## VII. Other musical activities. His approach as a choir master, educator and church musician

Ferenc Kersch pursued various musical activities, but as transpires from the art reviews, his contemporaries and students (mostly Artúr Harmat) mainly viewed him as an excellent educator and musician. As a choir master he shaped the general musical taste with a number of pieces by masters of Hungarian and universal musical history. As an educator and composer, he laid special emphasis on Gregorian chants. As is demonstrated by his thorough journal articles and reviews, and his excellent programmes, he was an innovating and progressive representative of sacred music in Hungary.

## VIII. Summary evaluation of his artistic career

His musical activities, both creative and performing, were greatly determined by his receptiveness to the new spiritual trends of his age. Throughout his life led as a self-made intellectual, he received ample support from the high clergy. At the same time, Kersch regrettably lacked sufficient support in a key area: the restoration of genuine sacred music.

While his early works were post-romantic in style, his later compositions reflect the influence of Liszt. In this period he surpassed all church composers with his novel approach to harmonic structures. He then went on to reform sacred music with his works inspired by the neo-renaissance style, primarily due to their historic roles and functions in liturgy. In this respect, he returned to Palestrina, while simultaneously using his personal style.

He managed to enforce his initiatives to reform Hungary's sacred music in a synthesis of musical practice and theory (e.g. cantor courses, establishment of a tuition-free vocal school). He supported such activities as an author. His books on music theory were aimed to pave the way for excellence and innovation in sacred music.

The international acclaim of his works is well reflected by the commitment of Regensburg-based Copenrath to publish his compositions. However, this never came to completion owing to Kersch's unexpected death. He regularly exchanged letters with the key figures of the reform movement in Regensburg.

As well as his short life, if full of struggles, his personal and artistic contributions to liturgical music duly earned the recognition of his age and posterity alike.

This dissertation is the first attempt to produce a monographic description of a barely known chapter of Hungarian ecclesiastical history, the work of Ferenc Kersch, based on primary sources. The outcome of this research, Kersch's first musicography, has shown that his contributions to sacred music, both as a composer and as a performing artist, played a key role in the history of sacred music reforms in early 20th Hungary.

## IX. Publications and papers in the subject

Kriszta Köncse: The Effect of Pope Pius X's Motu Proprio on Contemporary Hungarian Church Musicians. In: *Inter Sollicitudines. Conference on the Centenary of Pope Pius X's Sacred Music Motu Proprio, held in Budapest, December 2003*. Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Office of Supported Research Centres – Liszt Ferenc University of Music, Sacred Music Research Group and Hungarian Sacred Music Society, Budapest, 2006. 295–302.

Kriszta Köncse: *Contributions to Ferenc Kersch's Cantor Book "Sursum Corda!"* Paper presented at the Conference "The Lyrics and Melodies of the Sacred Folk Song Books of Saint Stephen Association", held in 2005.