

DLA thesis

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**Ernő Dohnányi's Chamber Works
Under the Spell of the Viola**

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I. Precedents to the Research

Several sources can be consulted on the instrumental chamber music of Ernő Dohnányi. Of them, Tovey's study (Tovey, D. Francis: „Dohnányi, Ernst von”. In: Cobbett, Walter W. [ed.], *Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music I*. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963, 327-331) is of signal importance for musicology. In it the eight chamber works between op. 1 and op. 26 are discussed mainly in terms of form, with a stylistic survey of the composer's consecutive periods.

Schneider's article (Schneider, Herbert: „Zur musikhistorischen Stellung der frühen Kammermusikwerke Ernst von Dohnányis”. In: Fricke – Frobenius – Konrad – Schmitt [hrsg.]: *Zwischen Volks- und Kunstmusik. Aspekte der ungarischen Musik*. Saarbrücken: Pfau, 1999, 110-126) subjects the same Dohnányi works to a more detailed analysis, placing them in a music historical context from Bach's music to contemporary works, comparing them with a view to composing technique, e.g. modulations, the specificities of theme appearances, inner proportions, etc. The author devotes a lengthy section to the string quartets and Sextet op. 37, and also mentions the emphatic role of the viola in his analyses.

A special form of analysis can be found in the Winkler study (Winkler, Heinz-Jürgen: „Ernst von Dohnányis Klavierquintett c-moll op.1: Rezeption und Codagegestaltung”. In: Fricke – Frobenius – Konrad – Schmitt [hrsg.], *Zwischen Volks- und Kunstmusik. Aspekte der ungarischen Musik*. Saarbrücken: Pfau, 1999, 91-109) devoted to the coda representations in the piano quintet in C minor (op. 1).

The university dissertation of Veronika Kusz (Kusz Veronika: *Dohnányi Ernő variációs művei* [Ernő Dohnányi's variation works]. Dissertation. The Liszt Academy of Music, Department of Musicology, 2003) abounds in useful information, providing the scientific grounds to circumscribe one of Dohnányi's most characteristic compositional technique – variation – which can also be frequently encountered in the works discussed in my dissertation. It helped me to illumine the role of the viola in the variation movements from different angles.

The first edition in 1971 of the book on Dohnányi by the former pupil and admirer of the composer Bálint Vázsonyi (Vázsonyi Bálint: *Dohnányi Ernő*. Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1971. [2nd edition: Nap Kiadó, 2002]) is a milestone in the Dohnányi literature in Hungary. Apart from being the first work in Hungarian about the composer forced into emigration during World War II, it laid down firm foundations in the Appendix for prospective scientific elaborations of Dohnányi's oeuvre. His sketchy analyses arranged by categories such as themes, chords, counterpoint, form, instrumentation, effects helped me to buttress my statements from different angles and to describe the role of the viola in more depth.

The historical background played an accented role in the review of the chamber works. It was inevitable to touch on Dohnányi's family inspiration, his personality imbued with chamber music, the circumstances of the genesis of each piece, the subsequent performances and performers so that as complete a picture could be outlined of each composition as possible. I could also get detailed

information on these aspects from the Dohnányi Yearbooks (*Dohnányi Évkönyv 2003, 2004, 2005*. Budapest: MTA Zenetudományi Intézet, 2004, 2005, 2006.) I found the names of viola players in the papers who might have drawn the composer into a more intimate acquaintance with this instrument. In Viktor Papp's and Deborah Kiszely-Papp's books (Papp Viktor: *Dohnányi Ernő. (Arckép [Portrait])*. Budapest: Stádium Sajtóvállalat RT, 1927; Kiszely-Papp Deborah: *Dohnányi Ernő*. Budapest: Mágus, 2002) Dohnányi's attitude to the viola is also discussed.

Although the above listed excellent publications are quarries of valuable information, none provides a comprehensive analysis of the chamber works in such a way that would synthesize the theoretical aspects and the insights and experiences gained in the practice of performance.

II. Sources

In addition to the enumerated books, articles and studies, I relied on the books, scores and CDs in the library of the Music Academy, the library and the Dohnányi Archives at the Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the BMC Hungarian Music Information Centre and the music collection of the Szabó Ervin Library of Budapest. The Doblinger and Simrock scores as well as the clear copy of the Serenade at the National Széchényi Library could be used as authentic sources.

The periodical *Zenei Szemle* carried an important report on Dohnányi by Aladár Tóth in the autumn 1927 issue.

A document of extraordinary importance is an exchange of letters that has come to light recently and proves conclusively the composer's attraction to the viola. I first heard about it by word of mouth and later received permission to publish the facsimiles.

A detailed list of the primary and secondary sources including my own books, scores and CDs can be found in the Bibliography attached to the dissertation.

III. Method

When one is preparing for a chamber concert, one is faced with a conglomerate of functional, structural questions and questions of musical formulation. It is in the intellectual atmosphere of the rehearsals that the automatism evolves, gradually brought about by the constant questions about the deeper connections and the answers to them. Centering on the viola as the starting point was obvious for me because Dohnányi himself allowed for such an approach: there were several cases in which the important role assigned to the instrument was the key to the analysis of a salient characteristic or phenomenon. As a result, I could also illuminate Dohnányi's well known excellent orchestrating skills from the technical aspects of string instruments, particularly the viola. The novelty of my dissertation lies in the fact that my observations and experiences as a

performer have central importance in the analysis of the compositions.

I subjected the Serenade for a string trio (op. 10) to detailed analysis. I sought to find the connections between harmonic functions, formal, dynamic – often effect-like – solutions largely influenced by the nature of the given instrument as well as rhythmic patterns on the one hand and questions of instrumental technique and articulation, on the other.

I compared the piano quintet in C minor (op. 1), the quartets in A major (op. 7), in D flat major (op. 15), in A minor (op. 33), the piano quintet in E flat minor (op. 26) and the Sextet in C major (op. 37) from four different analytical angles. The determination of the categories of the presentation of the three main themes, the manner of the return of the main theme, countermelody or counterpoint, and humour and Waltz were self-evident on the basis of the observations of the frequented role of the viola.

IV. Results

In the course of rehearsing and performing Dohnányi's chamber works it became more and more imperative to answer the question: What motivated Dohnányi to show such a diverse approach to the viola which is manifest in these works? Was it his musical intellect that stimulated him to explore the so-far unexhausted possibilities? Was it his empathy and boldness that led him to ascribe a salient role

to the instrument? These intriguing thoughts made me conclude that it would be worthwhile to look at this theme more closely.

The approach to the studied issues was new in that I examined the theoretical background of the works in correlation with my experiences as a performer. Though this approach might seem self-evident, there are still hardly any descriptions or references that scrutinize the possibilities of the realization of a composition – interpretation – from different directions and not only in didactic terms. I have arrived at several conclusions in this research that may have immediate practical use for the performance of certain pieces.

It might rightly be judged as a bias that a viola player approaches these compositions from the angle of her own instrument. However, most recent researches support the assumption that Dohnányi had a special penchant for the viola. The correspondence (mentioned under II. Sources) as proof of this hypothesis is presented in the Summary of the dissertation.

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

During and since my academic studies I have mainly been involved in playing chamber music and teaching. As a member of the Danubius, then Camerata Budapest Quartets, I got acquainted not only with the quartet literature but also with works of other instrumental ensembles.

Our repertoire embraced a lot of 20th century chamber music, thus we also contributed to satisfying the increasing demand from the 1990s for the performance of Dohnányi's works. With the members of the quartets and other performers I had the opportunity to play several string-related pieces by Dohnányi.

Another source of inspiration for me was my acquaintance with the violinist Sándor Végh. During the years I spent in his world famous chamber orchestra, Camerata Academica Salzburg, I learnt immensely much about chamber music in general and about quartets – he was the leader of the famous Végh Quartet – in particular. Dohnányi's chamber pieces – then still kept in oblivion – were also among the discussed compositions.

I have also had the luck to get in close contact with some symphonic works of Dohnányi as well. One of the most memorable encounters was with the *Konzerstück* (op.12; Nicolaus Esterhazy Sinfonia – first viola player; conductor: Michael Halász, soloist: Maria Kliegel. Naxos, 1998) in which the combination of the symphonic and chamber sound, as well as the distinguished role of the viola *tuttis* prove convincingly Dohnányi's extraordinary flair for orchestration.

Through the analyses of Dohnányi's works and the experiences gained in concerts I have the possibility to expose the role and place of the viola in a broader context for future viola players. As it is the teacher's task to provide the pupil with the profundity of professional knowledge, I hope to have contributed to the clarification of the structural connections and messages of other composers' works as well.