

Liszt Academy of Music

Doctoral School No. 28 (History of Art and Culture)

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“Far-Living Reality” – László Lajtha’s Late Creative Period  
(1945–1963)

PhD Thesis

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## 1. The Antecedents of the Research

The heritage of László Lajtha has been deposited since 2013 as a collection in the Archives for 20<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> Century Hungarian Music at the RCH Institute for Musicology. However, processing of the collection did not start only in the summer of 2015; researchers had familiarized themselves with some documents from it in earlier years. The first chance to look into this rich and informative collection went to Melinda Berlász, János Breuer and Emőke Solymosi Tari, whose enthusiastic, committed work led to valuable publications on Lajtha's life and works appearing from the 1990s onward. The first landmark was Berlász's monograph in 1984. Another monograph, by János Breuer, coincided with the composer's centennial in 1992. In the same year came a first volume of Lajtha's writings edited by Berlász, who also produced collections from the composer's correspondence (Leduc, Barraud). Beginning in the 2000s, several valuable oral history collections appeared from Solymosi (e. g. *Between Two Worlds* and *The Checked Booklet*, both 2010). Alongside them she dealt also with analysis of Lajtha's stage works (*The Stage Works of László Lajtha*, 2011).

These publications sought mainly to discover the personal issues and political facts and tendencies detectable in Lajtha's biography and familiarize a wider public with them. Lajtha's late creative period developed in the 1950s, when the arts were subject to strong political pressure. That itself is a reason why scholars and researchers have studied closely the political outcomes of Lajtha's activities. The descriptions often concentrated on Lajtha's personality, human character, and clear stance toward the political system. Berlász called this "internal emigration"; Solymosi stressed the composer's declared antipathy to communism. Hence it is less than surprising that the composer's reputation has appeared in a rather uncertain light in the canon of Hungarian musicology. This indeed is the point where the spectrum of earlier researches needed widening. My PhD thesis, in examining Lajtha's late works from a musical viewpoint and identifying his composing models and sources of inspiration, also discusses Lajtha's opinion on music in the context of Hungarian musical discourse.

## 2. Methods and Structure

The starting point of my thesis was an overview of the manifold documents inherent in the László Lajtha collection deposited in the Archives for 20<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> Century Hungarian Music. The collection includes published notes and manuscripts of Lajtha's works, remaining examples of the composer's library, some correspondence, several photographs taken on personal and

formal occasions, and a wide, but far from complete collection of press articles from Hungary and abroad, in which works by Lajtha are mentioned in any form. Also preserved are some concert tickets, programs of recent events, and other documents of the time.

The first step in analyzing the music was to study the printed notes and manuscripts. Those in the Lajtha collection are mainly fair copies that show the piece already in its final form. Sketches from earlier phases of composition are largely lost or undiscovered. Fortunately the hiatus did not weigh against me in completing my thesis, as my aim was to outline Lajtha's points of reference in the history of music and the arts, to present works by others that may have served as a model for his composing style, and to describe how such models built themselves into his means of musical expression. The final forms of the works tell of Lajtha's purposes – at least at the time when the compositions analyzed were being completed.

I have always borne in mind during the analysis a broader, musico-historical context and the cultural background behind each occurrence. In incorporating current musicological discourse into my study, I dwell on the actuality of the issues that occupied Lajtha at the given time. I present the lattice of compositions, paintings and literary works that served to orient him and drawn parallels from these with some technical solutions he used in his works. For instance, a reflection of his discourse on Bartók appears in the score of the 7th Symphony (Op. 63, 1957). Similarly, a citation of Ravel's opera *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (1924), in the third movement of Lajtha's chamber work *Quatre Hommages* (Op. 42, 1947–1955), gains meaning from Lajtha's recollections as a soldier, though the movement itself is followed by a quizzical finale, offered to a fictional hero, Colas Breugnon, the protagonist of Romain Rolland's eponymous novel.

The thesis rests on how Lajtha's œuvre was received in Hungary; concerts abroad are raised only here and there. This is a legitimate curtailment – it was Hungarian cultural and political life that set the scope for Lajtha in his late creative period and affected most deeply the generic and stylistic features of his works. Yet the features of underlying Hungarian musical discourse needed stressing also. Compositional analysis revealed manifold, often equivocal relations between Lajtha's stylistic or aesthetic preferences and the ideological directives under which he worked.

The thesis falls into four parts. The first presents the historical, biographical and cultural-political trends of the time and place Lajtha in terms of several aspects in Hungarian musical life. The second part describes musical solutions in Lajtha's symphonic works and seeks to show and interpret possible sources of inspiration to be glimpsed in them. Having examined the composer's self-reflective writings and letters, I have used them

as a context in which to observe his artistic efforts. I analyze his ways of using musical *topoi*, the various types of *Nachtmusik* and the features of Lajtha's tragic works. In the third part, the main emphasis of the thesis appears where I look at the main ideological issues in 1950s Hungarian musical discourse and in Lajtha's own views on musical or aesthetic problems and trace them in musical solutions to be found in the works he wrote in those years. The fourth part sets Lajtha's rhythmic concepts in the context of his dances and marches. *Dances from Udvarhely* (1952) and the 10th String Quartet (Op. 58, 1953) exemplify expressively how one musical material can be used in a folklore adaptation for an amateur ensemble and – at least according to Lajtha – contribute to a classical genre of “grand art”. I define in the structures of the 7th (op. 49, 1950) and 9th quartets (Op. 57, 1953) distinct denotations tied to folk dances and to the minuet.

The appendices provide charts showing important data for Lajtha's late creative period. The chronology covers biographical events in those years, the concerts where Lajtha's works were played, and a year-by-year list of Lajtha's completed works and publications. His list of works also includes data on first hearings and a bibliographical account of Hungarian press coverage of each event. The last appendix conjoins the data in the 1945–1963 correspondence to be found in the Lajtha heritage and in other letters that have already been published.

### 3. Research Results

The goal in the PhD thesis was to trace a trajectory in the compositions – on how they were shaped, their aesthetic problems, and the technical solutions applied in them. This yields an inner biography to supplement the facts hitherto known, adding aspects to the composer's portrait which give a better understanding of Lajtha's compositional concepts. This musical background in the concurrent historical era helps to place Lajtha within the intricate network of these connections. I make no claim to have described fully Lajtha's position on the trends of 1950s music life, but I have added firm details to the picture found in earlier publications.

It became clear that several milestones need placing within the two decades of the late creative period, rather than treating as one the period from 1948 to the composer's death, as my predecessors did. The earlier approach underestimated the historical turning points on the artistic world, which inevitably periodized Lajtha's late creative period. Only this approach can yield a clearer picture of Lajtha's actual scope, his efforts, and the complex of meaning in reflections on his works made at the time.

The effects of this changing environment appear in the changing ethno-

musicological reception of Lajtha within the Association of Hungarian Musicians, as well. At the beginning, the Association tended to give a role to Lajtha in music life: he took part in sessions on musicology, commented on some of the questions, and he gave lectures in January 1950 and 1951. Then there appeared to be an insoluble difference between his scholarly approach and the irrational ideology of the period, reflected in the reception given to his compositions. After 1948/1949 he found himself on the periphery of music life, but the fall of 1951 brought a positive change. In January 1952, the Association began to show significant appreciation of Lajtha's compositional activity. After 1956, Lajtha became one of the representatives of Hungarian contemporary music. Hungarian performers regularly played Lajtha works alongside those of Bartók or Kodály at their concerts abroad. This applied to the 7th Symphony, which was heard in Paris. Though earlier accounts had seen it as a political scandal, the Hungarian press on this occasion reported on the concert as a great and enjoyable success.

As for the musical solutions, many new observations came to the fore. Earlier writers had not emphasized the motivic similarities between the two compositions applied to the film *Murder in the Cathedral*: the variations (Op. 44, 1948) and the 3rd Symphony (Op. 45, 1948). The link is a substantial one, because it may shed light on the much discussed problem of the chronology of the film music and concert pieces. It was commonly and unsurprisingly supposed that the composer had divided the formative musical extracts only at a later phase in the composing process, so that variant motifs of the same musical material could be found in separate works. Indeed the effects of composing film music can be sensed in the use of “cuttable” points in the works of Lajtha. Some parts of the variations and the 3rd Symphony show up in a different order in the film music and in the concert pieces, so drawing attention to the variation in form. Lajtha characteristically builds the structure in smaller sections, which on the one hand gives a special narrative quality to his works, but on the other impede understanding the form as a musical unit. Furthermore, the film music serves as a starting point for the later use of *topoi* that are indispensable to explaining the symphonies' narratives. Identifying and interpreting such *topoi* clearly lead nearer to understanding Lajtha's music than any formal analysis based on classical conceptions can.

It emerges that for Lajtha the main factors in music are melody and sonority. This preference appears in the lavish number of themes in *In memoriam* (Op. 35, 1941) and in the melodic structure of the Intermezzo for saxophone and piano (Op. 59, 1958) or the Magnificat (Op. 60, 1954), where a hierarchy of melodies can be deduced through the organ prelude.

The strictly shaped structure or use of rhythm as an organizing factor in Lajtha's music is mostly veiled by a touch of irony or recalls mechanical,

tragic connotations. The obvious formal regularity of the 7th Quartet can be perceived as a deceptive joke. The third movement there and the menuet in the 9th Quartet point to a postmodern interpretation of the classical tradition in Lajtha's works – a feature disregarded in earlier literature. The 3rd String Trio (Op. 45, 1945) and *Sonate en Concert* for flute and piano (Op. 64, 1958) pit the ostinato and the freely singing melody against each other – the former symbolizing confinement, the latter the human soul. In the third movement of *Quatre Hommages*, a melody, indeed a *folklore imaginaire*, reveals itself as the conclusion: when it sounds, the earlier disparate instruments merge into unison and the formerly leading ostinato rhythm, ceases for a while, as if losing control over the freely singing melody.

Earlier literature did not underline enough the connection between Lajtha's artistic conception and the problems of Hungarian musical discourse at the time. My thesis reveals some telling details on this. The 5th Symphony (Op. 55, 1952) and *In memoriam* are said to match the directive views in their emotionally determined structural method and repel the equality between notion and music. My analysis of Lajtha's 7th Symphony dwells on the composer's reception of Bartók, identifying and interpreting the Bartók allusions implied in his work. This draws attention to the interesting fact that the divided reception of Bartók, characteristic of the present era, can be found also in Lajtha's concept, though based on radically different ideas. Lajtha's concepts of "people" and "mass" can be seen in the context of the genres he chose in those years. Furthermore, generic thinking is among the most interesting features in Lajtha's religious works, written in a highly anticlerical environment between 1950 and 1958. The folkloric inspiration and different types of it became the central question in the analysis of the 7th Quartet and the Sinfonietta (Op. 43, 1946). Folklore material as a source of inspiration is always tied to some kind of personal meaning. This proved that folklore collecting and ethno-musicology were more than a simple occupation for Lajtha in these years: the musical realm of folklore appears in the most intimate moments in his works, the very moments of confession.

My goal in the thesis has been to place the music and artistic concepts of a remarkable person in a context of influences that affected his activity. The emerging picture is of one of the most tragic periods in twentieth-century Hungarian history, and of a personal life full of tragedy: two world wars, a fatal car accident, peripheralization, and personal solitude. Yet the artistic results that Lajtha obtained profess the eternal validity of an art that can still thrive amidst the greatest tragedies.

#### 4. List of Publications

##### a) Publications relating to the subject of the thesis:

- “Mindig egy kicsit úgy, mint katona a harc előtt”. Indulótételek Lajtha László műveiben” [‘Always a bit like a soldier before battle’. Marches in László Lajtha’s works], *Magyar Zene* 57/4 (November 2019): 436–456.
- “Lajtha és a programzene” [Lajtha and program music], *Gramofon* (Autumn 2019): 10–15.
- “A szimfónia és a tömegek. Műfaj történeti esettanulmány az 1950-es évek művészetpolitikájának tükrében” [The symphony and the masses. A generic case-study in the light of 1950s’ musico-political tendencies], in György Gyarmati and Lóránt Péteri, (eds): *1956 és a zene. Előzmények, történések, következmények* [1956 and music. Antecedents, events, results] (Budapest/Pécs: Liszt Ferenc Zeneművészeti Egyetem, Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára Kronosz Kiadó, 2019), 199–218.
- “Folklorism and Classical Tradition in László Lajtha’s Late String Quartets”, *Studia Musicologica* 59/3-4 (2018): 323–344.
- “Népzenei inspiráció és klasszikus hagyomány Lajtha László kései vonósnyegyeseiben” [Folklorism and classical tradition in László Lajtha’s late string quartets], *Magyar Zene* 56/3 (August 2018): 303–322.
- “Kósa György és Lajtha László vallásos témájú művei” [György Kósa’s and László Lajtha’s religious works], MZA homepage (2018). DOI: 10.23714/mza.10002\_NKFIH\_123819
- “Lajtha László egyházzenei művei I–II” [László Lajtha’s religious works I–II.], *Muzsika* 61/4-5 (April-May 2018): 7–12. and 9–14.
- “Lajtha László Magyarországon. Sajtókörkép (1949–1958)” [László Lajtha in Hungary. Press account (1949–1958)], online publication on MZA homepage (2018)
- “Die Flötenwerke von László Lajtha” [The flute works of László Lajtha], *Flöte Aktuell* (December 2017): 23–27.
- “Tragédiák kora’. A tragikum kifejezőeszközeinek szerepe és jelentősége Lajtha László kései szimfóniáiban” [‘The Era of Tragedies’. The role and importance of the tragic and means of expressing it in the late symphonies of László Lajtha’], *Magyar Zene* 55/2 (May 2017): 197–220
- “Interactions between Symphonies and Film Music in the Œuvre of László Lajtha”, *Studia Musicologica* 58/2 (March 2017): 239–253.

b) Other publications:

- “»A ‘korszak’ kérdésére az egyes ember így vagy amúgy válaszol« – Szabolcsi Bence és Vargyas Lajos zenetudományi vitái az 1950-es évek első éveiben” [“People answer the ‘era’ question one way or another” – Musicological debates between Bence Szabolcsi and Lajos Vargyas in the 1950s], in Anna Dalos and Viktória Ozsvárt (eds), *Járdányi és kora* (Járdányi and his time, Budapest: Rózsavölgyi, 2020) [in preparation]
- “Mohács és más történelmi szimbólumok megjelenési formái a 20. századi magyar zenében” [The appearance of Mohács and other historical symbols in 20th c. Hungarian music], in Pál Fodor and Szabolcs Varga, (eds), *Több mint egy csata: Mohács. Az 1526. évi ütközet a magyar tudományos és kulturális emlékezetben* [Mohács: more than a battle. The 1526 clash in Hungarian scholarly and cultural memory] (Budapest: MTA Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, 2019), 507–537.