

Theses for DLA dissertation

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**HUNGARIAN WOMEN'S CHOIR LITERATURE
FROM 1990 TO 2010**

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I. Before the investigation

In the past 40 years I have been an active participant in Hungarian choir music life, as a choir master, as a contributor to professional meetings and choir master courses, or as a member of the jury. In this way I had a ringside view of the various currents in and the present situation of Hungarian choir music. I had the opportunity to study, from without and within, to what extent traditions and innovations of vocal singing and the characteristic features of the relation between words and music or the features of the music of past ages are present in works composed in the 20th and 21st centuries. In my work so far I have found that in rehearsing a choir piece it is the duty of the choir master to throw some light on the background of the works sung by choirs of varying types and abilities and to 'put into the picture' choir members with different interests and different levels of background knowledge. I think that by calling attention to the descriptive character of the music, the link between the words and the music, we can get closer to the core, i.e., the message of the work. This will make it possible to create a consciously lived-through and experienced performance.

The present dissertation focuses on contemporary women's choir music, and within that on one particular segment, *a cappella* works. Through this I try to show the musical diversity, the wide range of styles and composers' and choirmasters' thinking that exert an influence on the repertoires of amateur and professional choirs and that have made the choral works sung by Hungarian women's choirs in the past quarter of a century very exciting. The dissertation shows the wide range of knowledge that a choirmaster must have, from receiving the music to the opening of the concert. This knowledge, I think, is necessary because the literature so far has more or less ignored the motivations, expectations and intellectual and emotional attitudes of composers, choirmasters and the entities actually creating the performance, i.e. choirs and choir members. In compiling a register of choral works and in presenting some of these works in the dissertation I tried to present as wide a picture as possible for those interested in the topic, so that they can make an informed choice when selecting a work for their own choirs. In view of the great number of compositions I did not undertake a self-contained scientific analysis of the works: that would fall outside the scope of the present dissertation. Rather, my main goal was to present choirmasters and composers with a picture of the situation in this segment of Hungarian choir music.

II. Resources

To provide a background to the present dissertation I survey some materials from professional discussions and conferences over the past twenty five years which focused on composers' and choirmasters' motivations. From among the many roundtable talks I selected four meetings at three different times, which represent the two endpoints (1987 and 2012) the middle (2001-2002) of this period. I found the recordings of the 1987 roundtable in my own archives. The materials of the 2001 conference were recovered from the recordings of the Bárdos Symposium at Debrecen. The forum from 2002 called „Young composers for the choirs of the future” was published by Éva Kollár (editor) with the title *Materials of the First Hungarian Choirmaster Conference*. I lifted the materials of the 2012 conference from the recordings of the Bárdos Symposium.

The dissertation set itself the task of preparing a register of the rich women's choir literature composed in the past twenty five years. Due to the large number of works, this register could only focus on *a cappella* pieces composed after 1990. It is unique in that no similar register had been compiled previously. The database contains information on *a cappella* choir pieces for women's choirs that can be found scattered in various editions by music publishers such as Editio Musica, Ars Nova, Accord, Kontrapunkt, by the Zoltán Kodály Music Pedagogy Institute, or can be found on the websites of international music publishers or were published privately. I contacted as many of the composers as possible, and with their help I was able to include in the register works that have not yet been published. All of them were very helpful in making my list as comprehensive as possible. It has become quite clear that there are still compositions in the „drawers” waiting to be performed by our choirs.

In this connection I must mention the opinions of four choirmasters, Zsuzsánna Mindszenty, Ágnes Török, Sándor Berkesi and László Tardy. I used the materials of the talks I conducted with them and the conclusions reached in these talks to supplement the materials of the conferences.

To study the connection between choir and contemporary music I located choir singers who in the past 15 to 20 years were members of choirs whose repertoires have continuously included contemporary works. The 35-year old Kölcsey Choir of Debrecen was a natural choice. I made the interviews with members of this choir.

III. The method of investigation

I started collecting contemporary *a cappella* literature for women's choirs a long time ago, in 1990, and my collection has been accumulating since that time. The basic line of thought around which my dissertation is built derives from the experiences gained in the process of this collecting work and the lessons that can be learnt from the roundtable discussions. On this basis I present the distinctive features of typical Hungarian choir music. I make efforts to trace the changes of these distinctive features (maintaining traditions and/or abandoning them) up to the present.

The leading methodological principle of the dissertation was to lift some typical works by contemporary composers for women's choirs and to present the external or internal pressures acting on the composers in their choice of theme or text, and to survey the impact of artistic and esthetic trends and thinking on the process of composition, the style and way of thinking of individual composers.

Composers take into account a number of parameters when they select a text for their future work. This is not always a constraint, but it is certainly important to assess what kind of poem they are dealing with, how long the composition should be, will choirs find enjoyment in singing it, will the choirmaster enjoy conducting it, and will the audience like it. From looking for a text to finding the final form for the material they must pay attention to many issues.

For this reason it was best to examine choir pieces from the point of view of text selection, since this is of primary importance for both authors and performers.

The next substantial part of the investigation was to present some of the stylistic features of three selected women's choir *a cappella* madrigals (which have a special significance for me). These works exhibit the elements of composers' thinking mentioned above, and at the same time make it possible for this author to present his own subjective ideas.

Another important collection included in the dissertation represents compositions written on the poems of Ferenc Kölcsey. This was compiled in connection with my research. This summary was time-consuming, yet I do not think it was wasted time. It is my conviction that knowing Kölcsey is my duty, not only because he is the author of our national anthem, but also because the choir that I have been leading for 35 years is named after him.

IV. Results

The whole study focuses on tripartite units that have determined my whole line of reasoning. The first starting point is the connection between composer, choirmaster and choir, and their attitudes to contemporary music. This is based on the recorded and edited materials of selected meetings and conferences and on interviews with choir members. The participants of the four discussions were composers Ferenc Farkas, Erzsébet Szőnyi, Miklós Kocsár, Tamás Daróci Bárdos, Lajos Huszár, János Vajda, Miklós Mohay, Péter Tóth, Levente Gyöngyösi, Márton Levente Horváth and choir masters József Maklári Sr, Ferenc Sapszon Zsolt Szesztay, Zoltán Kövics, Balázs Potyók, Edit Baricsa, Éva Kollár, Zsuzsánna Mindszenty, Dénes Szabó, Ilona Sebestyénne Farkas, Ágnes Török, Adrienn Vinczeffy, Ágnes Tóth and many others. From the list it is clear that these four conferences involved a wide range of composers and choirmasters. Jenő Takács, was born in 1902 and Ferenc Farkas in 1905, while Márton Levente Horváth was born in 1983.

Chapter 2 of the dissertation represents the constructional principles of Hungarian women's *cappella* choral works collection. The collection itself, due to its size, could not be included in the dissertation, so it was attached as Appendix 1. After a sketch of the immediate antecedents, a description follows giving an insight into the wide range of compositional techniques and distinctive stylistic features of the composers concerned.

Chapter 3 offers a summary of aspects of text selection by 58 composers. These are included in a Table summarizing data for 461 works. An important aspect of text selection is whether the text is capable of stimulating the composer's imagination and whether it will meet with the ideas currently entertained by the composer. A good text will incite the composer's imagination, but it may, in certain cases, hinder him/her in composing. Therefore, composers often prefer using Latin texts (in addition to Hungarian ones) because they feel that such texts allow them greater freedom in respect of prosody. They set music to Latin texts with less anxiety, composing polyphonic music and melismas, since understanding the words is not of primary importance. Since it is a dead language, they can let their imaginations roam freely. To illustrate these thoughts, works written in other languages and in mixed languages are also presented.

It does not happen very often that composers give an indication of the genre of the work in its title. Following up on previous chapters, Chapter 4 focuses on a genre that appears in the titles of the works of several composers. I found eleven pieces in the collection that contain the

term *madrigal* in their titles. After presenting how this genre started and describing its stylistic features, I analyze three madrigals, which show very clearly the traditional distinctive features of the genre and/or the emergence of new stylistic features.

My first choice was the first movement of *Due Madrigali* by György Selmeczi, based on a text by Miklós Zrínyi, because it can be seen from the collection that few compositions are done in Italian, and it is this language that is most closely related to the classical period of the madrigal.

Péter Tóth composed a cycle entitled *Magyar Madrigálok* (Hungarian Madrigals) in 2000-2004, consisting of 11 pieces, resembling traditional madrigal cycles. This type of cyclic structure made up of madrigal-type choir works flourished in Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries. In later centuries, however, very little music of this type was composed, and madrigal comedies were completely absent until the 20th century. Peter Tóth used non-musical texts from folk culture. However, his music does not contain even one beat that could be regarded as an allusion to folk songs.

Miklós Kocsár's *Négy madrigál* (Four madrigals) used text by the poet Ferenc Kölcsey. The principle of „triquetra”, which also appears in the title of the dissertation applies not only to the connection between the triality of composer, choir master and choir (discussed in Chapter 1), or the presentation of the three madrigals. The composition presented last is linked to another triality: I write about Ferenc Kölcsey's verse, Miklós Kocsár's musical composition and *Imre Szilágyi's* artwork, taking note of the duties of a choir and its choirmaster towards the person whose name it bears.

I consider that the most important result of my dissertation is that it summarizes the unaccompanied choral works for women's choirs over the past twenty five years. This summarization may help, first of all, choir masters in expanding the repertoires of their choirs, and it may also stimulate composers, showing that it is worth composing music of this type. Hopefully the database, the analyses and the ideas put forward in the roundtable talks will clearly show that, although the repertoire referred to bears the distinctive marks of contemporary music, it offers, in a different language, the same musical-spiritual experiences as traditional, centuries-old choir culture. We have an immensely rich repertoire of choral works available, and it is up to our choirs to make these works come alive, providing spiritual food for those who are starved for it.

V.

Documentation of activities related to the topic of the dissertation

First performances of Kölcsey Choir after 1990

Sándor Balassa:

Spring Song – Autumn Song Op.60 – 07.12.1997 – Debrecen

Greeting Op.23.– 07.1999 – Debrecen

Two people in love are one couple Op.73/a – 18.04.2002 – Debrecen, DEK

The Gates of Light Op.73/b – 18.04.2002 – Debrecen, DEK

Christmas Op.68 – 02.05.2004 – Debrecen, DEK

1. The bell rings
2. It would be nice
3. A Christmas Tale

Songs about Birds Op.37/a,b,c – 03.2006 – Debrecen

3. Golden Oriole

Waiting Op.73/c – 04.04.2009 – Debrecen

Péter Durkó:

Nature Music – 05.08.1999 – International Kodály Symposium, Kecskemét

Máté Hollós:

Two Women's Choirs to Árpád Tóth's Poems – 09. 2006 – Debrecen

1. Golden Clouds
2. My soul Today...

Miklós Kocsár:

Four Madrigals – 22.01.2003 – Szatmárcseke

1. Song at Sunset
2. Suppression
3. Woe rises with me
4. To Love

Gábor Kósa:

Credo – 13.12.2006 – Fészek Club, Budapest

Old Newspapers – 13.12.2006 – Fészek Club, Budapest

Zoltán Kovács:

Chinese Poems – 13.12.2006 – Óbudai Társaskör, Budapest

1. Am ong Bamboo Reeds
2. Alone at Night
3. On an Autumn Night

Miklós Mohay:

Three Women's Choirs – 23.03.2001 – Debrecen,

1. What Are You Blooming For?

2. Man, Tree

3. Song on Resurrection

Three madrigals – 14.03.2008 – Debrecen, DEZK

Péter Sebők:

Ave Maria – 06.11.2010 – Contemporary Music Festival „Valley of Dawns”, Csáb

Miklós Sugár:

Ave maris stella – 13.12.2006 – Fészek Club, Budapest

Dextera Domini – 13.12.2006 – Fészek Club, Budapest

Ferenc János Szabó:

Wanderer – 15.05.2009 – Debrecen

Ede Terényi:

Veni, veni Jesu – 12.2001 – Debrecen

„...cum dulci jubilo” (Psallite...) – 12.2001 – Debrecen

Flower of worlds – 23.03.2001 – Debrecen

Resonemus – 04.05.2005 – Debrecen

Péter Tóth:

Moon Song – 06.07.1994 – Bartók Béla International Choir Competition, Debrecen

Stabat Mater – 06.12.1997 – Debrecen

Clouds – 13.12.1998 – Debrecen

Gloria in excelsis – 12.12.1999 – Debrecen

God bless you (Hungarian Madrigals) – 25.11.2000 – Debrecen

I live on a high hill (Hungarian Madrigals) – 2000.11.25 – Debrecen

Baker mocking-song (Hungarian Madrigals) – 25.11.2000 – Debrecen

Water runs down from the high mountains (Hungarian Madrigals) – 25.11.2000

I love you (Hungarian Madrigals) – 25.11.2000 – Debrecen

You may go (Hungarian Madrigals) – 25.11.2000 – Debrecen

Wanderer song (Hungarian Madrigals) – 25.11.2000 – Debrecen

Drinking song (women macking-song) (Hungarian Madrigals) 25.11.2000 – Debrecen

Song of malediction (Hungarian Madrigals) – 12.2001 – Debrecen

My star is no more (chorale) (Hungarian Madrigals) – 02.04.2005 – Budapest

Flames – 23.10.2006 – Matthias Church, Budapest

Amor profanus – 04.04.2009 – Debrecen

Song about Death – Winter Madrigal – 14.03.2008 – Debrecen

O magnum mysterium – 27.03.2009 – Franz Liszt University of Music, Budapest

Stiamo Amor – 16.04.2010 – Debrecen

Péter Zombola:

Cantate Domino – 05.11.2011 Contemporary Music Festival „Valley of Dawns”, Csáb