

Political or Aesthetical Subversion? Strategies of Avant-Garde Speaking Choirs in Interwar Hungary

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Abstract: Speaking choirs were underground artistic groups of labor-class youth in Hungary in the period between the two World Wars. The groups, led mostly by Avant-Garde artists, were artistic and political communities also. Dadaism, Expressionism and Constructivism, Soviet Proletkult and revolutionary mass festivals had considerable influence on the speaking choir movement. Politically, a number of the choirs were influenced by the Social Democratic Party, others by the illegal Communist Party, but some of them, such as the choir of Kassák or the company of Palasovszky, were autonomous leftist groups that strove to remain detached from any kind of party influence.

In the paper I will give two examples of works written especially for speaking choirs. One is a poem by probably the best known twentieth century Hungarian poet, Attila József (*Tömeg* [Crowd], 1930). The other is a mass play of multiple choirs written for street performance. It is called *Punalua* (1926), it was written by a lesser known Avant-Gardist poet and stage director, Ödön Palasovszky, and due to its grand scale, it was never performed. The poem of Attila József, though a masterpiece of its genre, remains enclosed in its own sociocultural context whereas *Punalua* is still open to reinterpretations.

The Speaking Choir Movement

Speaking choirs were peculiar artistic groups of the Hungarian labor-class culture in the period between the two World Wars. These underground communities were comprised of young, mostly teenage industrial workers and intellectuals. The groups were led by

Avant-Garde artists of the time such as Lajos Kassák, Jolán Simon, Ödön Palasovszky, Aladár Tamás, and also non-avant-gardists such as the acknowledged actor-director Oszkár Ascher. Speaking choirs were not only artistic communities, but political communities which had a certain informal educational role as well.

The first experiments with Hungarian speaking choirs were made by the Proletkult group of Kassa, otherwise known as Košice in 1922, led by János Mácza.¹ Mácza wrote, directed and organized a mass play called *Choir of Workers* for the May 1st festival, International Labor Day. But Mácza fled to Moscow and the Kassa Proletkult group broke up. The real spread of the Worker's Choirs began only after 1926 with the success of the *Új Föld* [New Land] Theatre project of Ödön Palasovszky, Aladár Tamás and Zsigmond Remenyik. The choir movement was growing very fast at the turn of the twenties and thirties. The speaking choir was seen as a cheap and democratic genre which was accessible to anyone. One did not need to master a musical instrument nor take expensive singing or acting lessons to join a choir. The only thing needed from the participant was that which everybody, even the poorest unemployed worker had: one's own voice and the ability to speak. The choir, as a group performance, was seen as a *par excellence* anti-individualistic art in a bourgeois age of emerging movie stars. The members saw the choirs as representatives of a new democratic or even a new communist age.

¹ BOTKA Ferenc, szerk., *Kassai Munkás 1907–1937* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1969).

The practical advantages and good ideological reputation of the speaking choirs made them popular. The movement in its heyday had approximately ten thousand members in about a hundred different choirs throughout the country. The aggregation of a well-organized leftist, potentially communist, youth quickly reached the level of posing a considerable threat to the nationalistic government that was ideologically based on anti-bolshevism and anti-Semitism. The speaking choirs always functioned under strong political control until 1933 when the whole movement was banned by the Minister of the Interior.

The aesthetic and political debates inside the choir movement, which sometimes involved confrontations and denunciations of other members, reflected the debates of European avant-gardists and party theoreticians of the twenties about the revolutionary or reactionary role of Avant-Garde art. Dadaist cabaret, German Expressionism and Constructivism, Soviet Proletkult and revolutionary mass festivals had considerable influence on the rather heterogeneous Hungarian speaking choir movement. Politically, a number of the choirs were influenced by the Social Democratic Party, others by the illegal Communist Party, but some of them, such as the choir of Kassák or the company of Palasovszky, were autonomous leftist groups that strove to remain detached from any kind of party influence.

In fact, the question which divided the Hungarian labor cultural scene most during that period was the acceptance of what we now more or less call Avant-Gardism. One can easily note that many of Kassák's adversaries were once his disciples. Mácsa, Aladár Tamás and others were easily and subsequently attracted by the call of the party, and turned their back on Kassák because of his stout resistance to accept any party intervention. And party theoreticians considered expressionism, constructivism etc. as anti-revolutionary artistic choices. They, like Georg Lukács among them, considered this

to be the art of the Weimar Republic, that of the bourgeoisie decadence and not that of the labor-class. Based on a study of the five main speaking choirs, we can say that the stronger the party control was, the less subversive the performance of the choir became.

The Performance as a Political Ritual

There were, roughly speaking, two main types of speaking choir performances. The one I am discussing first can more easily be seen as a "political ritual" of a community rather than an artistic performance before an invited audience. As a political ritual it was a celebration of the union of the working class. The synchronized recitation and motion of the choir, which also engaged the audience, was a symbolic re-enacting of the messianic moment, a unity of the class consciousness, when all individual interest dies and transforms into one greater common will. This probably sounds like political populism, and as we know, cultural anthropology could be useful in the interpretation of modern political rituals. The choirs tried to veil the theatrical character of their performance, and the measure of success was if the audience ceased to be an audience and joined the choir in reciting the lines.

Mass festivals of the early Soviet republic were more similar to this kind of political ritual rather than that of theatrical symbolization. The best known among them was the *Storming of the Winter Palace* re-enacted in Saint Petersburg and directed by Nikolai Evreinov in 1920. It took place three years after the original events, partially by some of the same Red soldiers who participated in the battle on those same streets. Other examples can be found in the workers' theatres of Berlin. The actors used the same placards and flags that they used during the street protests against the government. The Hungarian review, called *100%* (Hundred percent), which was closely related to the communist speaking choir of the same name, often reported about contemporary worker's

theatres in Berlin. One review hailed the *Arbeiter-Theaters* for bringing the political placards and flags on stage.² Performances and rehearsals could be seen as a remembrance of former political acts, and also as preparation for the next street protest or revolution to come. Hungarian speaking choir members and leaders were familiar with these foreign examples. They also held that the first speaking choirs were spontaneous actions of street protesters who began to recite together, eventually becoming an independent genre on the workers' stages later on. So not only the placards and flags but the whole genre came directly from the street. It was thought that the performance on stage *preserves* the original political force, or at least a tiny spark of the revolution in a somewhat transcendental way. Just like in religious rituals: a communion of mortals with a transcendental force is possible.

Although the speaking choirs were proliferating in an extensive manner from the end of the twenties, the repertoire wasn't so varied. In most of the cases the new choirs learned the same pieces that they heard performed by others. The repertoire consisted of revolutionary marches, hymns of freedom, hymns of work, as well as political allegories. Not only the pieces performed, but also the mode of the performance was usually fixed. In fact, a speaking choir could be partitioned into male and female parts, also into "dark" and "light" voices (that was the name for low and high voices), often a solo voice was used, and rhythmical or illustrative motion of the choir members accompanied the recitation.

Despite all of the variability of the choirs, the most common vocal structure of a poem on stage was the simple *crescendo*, the rise of the voice and the dynamic from *piano* to

forte or to *fortissimo*. This was the acoustic equivalent of the ritual union of the entire community. The *forte* of the choir could be intensified only if the audience joined the recitation.

This type of choir performance can be named the *crescendo structure*. By 'crescendo structure' I do not mean exclusively the constant and gradual increase in loudness; rather, only two criteria has to be fulfilled: 1. there should not be a decrescendo in the performance, 2. the ultimate line has to be the loudest. Battle marches and wartime verses were the best choices for this kind of interpretation. Poems like *Föltámadott a tenger* [The Sea has Revolted] by Sándor Petőfi, a nineteenth century revolutionary poet. This is a political allegory of the world's nations flowing together like a flood against kings, tyrants and aristocracy. The poem, which allegorizes the *crowd as the sea*, in return could easily be performed by a *group of people acting as if they were the flood*.³

There was no need for texts with open revolutionary meaning since the crescendo structure suggested the meaning *in itself*. The vocal structure of the crescendo was a tool of interpretation for any kind of text spoken by the choir. Even if one couldn't understand a single line from a poem recited by the choir, she or he would realize the main purpose. The texts performed on stage were not explicit politically; in fact, they couldn't have been because of censorship. We have documents from choir leaders about their work such as that of Oszkár Ascher, leader of the *Nyomdász-kórus* (*Typographer's Choir*), which gives us a detailed description of how he used the voice of the choir. For example, his director's instructions for the interpretation of the poem by Richard Dehmel are full of metaphors. "The grumbling and moaning of dark voices repeat the chorus in a *threatening way*. [...] The solo of the soprano

² NEMES László, „A Th. B. D. [Arbeiter-Theater-Bund Deutschlands] (1927)”, in 100%: *A KMP legális folyóirata, 1927–1930*, szerk. LACKÓ Miklós, 160–163 (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1981), 162.

³ ASCHER Oszkár, *Minden versek titka* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1964), 33.

sounds like *anticipation of victory*”⁴ he writes. Another choir leader, Aladár Tamás from 100%, writes that “The expressive force of the choir gave a figurative sense to everything it performed.”⁵

The Masses by Attila József

Probably the best example for a poem written for speaking choir performance is *Tömeg* (*The Masses*, 1930) by Attila József.⁶ The poem’s first two lines are a labor movement slogan of the time “Work and Bread!” (“Munkát kenyeret!”) which is repeated. At the end of the poem there is also a slogan (“Éljen a munkásság parasztság / Nem fogja polgári ravaszság!”), “Long live worker and peasant / free from bourgeois cunning”. We know that *The Masses* was written on September 1, 1930, which was the day of the biggest street protest during the period between the wars, in which József Attila took part.⁷ Just after his escape from the cavalry policemen, he wrote the poem for his choir. So, the political slogans in the poem – just like the placards or the flags which were brought onto the stage from the street, are not an artistic representation of a political subject, but a part of a political action in the form of a little material piece (or a sound recording of it).

⁴ ASCHER Oszkár, „Dehmel »Aratódal«-a a kórusban”, *Munkáskórus* 1, 1. sz. (1933): 12.

⁵ TAMÁS Aladár, szerk., *A 100% története* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1973), 110.

⁶ JÓZSEF Attila, „Tömeg”, in JÓZSEF Attila, *Minden verse és versfordítása*, 288–290 (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1983); for English translation, see: Attila JÓZSEF, “The Masses”, in Attila JÓZSEF and Anton N. NYERGES, *Poems of Attila József*, 108–109 (Buffalo, N. Y.: Hungarian Cultural Foundation, 1973).

⁷ SZABOLCSI Miklós, *Kész a leltár: József Attila élete és pályája, 1930–1937*, Irodalomtörténeti könyvtár 41 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1998), 70.

In the following I will analyze some parts of the text focusing on the possibilities of the human voice encoded in the lines. Although there’s insufficient data on how it was actually performed, we still can develop a hypothesis about the possibilities of its performance. Let’s start with the above-mentioned first lines. We hear the slogan “Work and bread!” repeated. It was usual that the choir started reciting *before* appearing onstage. The possibility is given in the text that at first the audience only hears the voice getting louder and louder before they actually see the source of the voice. The choir enters onstage resembling protesters who would pop up on any corner at a street demonstration.

During the first appearance the sound of a solo voice acting as a narrator can be heard proclaiming what we experience. “The masses are coming!” (In the translation of Nyerges this line is “The Masses! The Masses!”) The word “masses” is repeated in the text. We can consider it a rule that repetition is always amplification in the crescendo structure. Thus we can suppose that the word “Masses” is repeated by the whole choir or by a section of it.

The breaking of lines in the poem shows us – so to speak – typographically, that the lines with a single word are intended for the choir. In the original poem we can see at first glance that there are only five single word lines (the translation has fewer). See Table 1. As we can see, the word “masses” is repeated from time to time and three times this word makes a whole line. In the last section there are even single vowels making a whole line twice. One is an exclamation “Óh”, the other is the third person personal pronoun standing for the word “masses”. Nothing can be more evident than that these one-word and one-letter lines are not for solo voices, but should be recited by the choir.

By repeating the word “Masses” the choir repeatedly refers to itself. One could say that this is a very tautological mode of using language. But one shouldn’t forget about the ritual role of the speaking choir perfor-

mance. The repeated lines of the choir are, just as the repeated parts of the Roman Catholic Mass, an opportunity for the audience to join the actual community by repeating the words out loud along with the performers. Common repetition of the word “masses” is like a profane communion. The analogy can be stated even if we know that illegal communists were supposed to be strict atheists. Joining the performance by repeating the word “the masses” means joining the *imagined community* of the workers of the world on the level of political symbolism. Benedict Anderson uses the concept of *imagined community*⁸ to analyze the period of the birth of national identities during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But in the same period the making of the labor class was also in progress, and the emergence of a social class is comparable to that half sociological, half imagined community of a nation that Anderson analyzed. A political ritual like a performance of a speaking choir symbolically fulfills the order of the *Communist Manifesto* of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels which is probably the most wide-known slogan of the labor movement. “*Proletarians of all countries, unite!*”⁹

The final lines also suggest a simple choreography of a workers’ choir:

All else [is]
useless –
bargain, curse, silence, words.
The masses: building and builder,
foundation and roof,
maker and planner.
Long live worker and peasant

⁸ Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁹ Friedrich ENGELS and Karl MARX, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, in *Marx/Engels Selected Works, Vol. One*, 98–137 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm>.

free of [bourgeoise] cunning.

Millions of legs kick [it] up.
Ho masses, onward, onward.

Here we can see possibilities for making a dialogue between the sections of the choir. Oppositions and parallelisms were usually performed in a responding manner. I have marked in italics and bold the two sections answering each other.

All else [is]
useless –
bargain, curse, silence, words.
The masses: **building and builder,**
foundation and roof,
maker and planner.
Long live **worker and peasant**
free of [bourgeoise] cunning.
Millions of legs kick [it] up.
Ho masses, onward, onward.

The final lines demonstrate a very typical ending of a choral poem. Two things are important here. The first is that the text guides us back to the class struggle, to the street. “Ho masses, onward, onward.” When they repeat, “onward, onward”, they could have started leaving the stage as if they were going back to continue the fight for freedom. The second is that there is a line what can be taken as a director’s instruction for physical movement on the stage: “Millions legs kick it up”. While it is being said, the members of the choir can all kick in the air at one time showing a collective force and frightening the bourgeoisie.

Both of these elements were very common in poems performed by choirs. *Szocialisták* (Socialists) by Attila József ends with this line “You go south, you west and I north, / my Comrade!”¹⁰ We can imagine that by saying this, and pointing to the different directions, the leader of the choir is actually

¹⁰ JÓZSEF, “Szocialisták”, in JÓZSEF, *minden verse...*, 299.

sending the sections of the chorus offstage and eventually leaves himself. The closing is a symbolic act of making propaganda in all parts of the world. (Note that east is missing. Naturally, it is a hint: the only place on Earth where there's no need for more agitators is the Soviet Union.) An other example could be Vladimir Mayakovsky's Poem *The Left March* from 1918 which ends like this:

Chests out! Shoulders straight!
Stick to the sky red flags adrift.
Who's marching there to the right?
LEFT!
LEFT!
LEFT!¹¹

The Punalua by Ödön Palasovszky

Ödön Palasovszky took part in a variety of Avant-Garde theatrical groups of which the Zöld Szamár Színház (Green Donkey Theatre) was the first, founded by Sándor Bortnyik and Iván Hevesy in 1925. Palasovszky used speaking choirs in two different ways: he had two different repertoires as a theatre director, one for the workers' stages and another for a middle-class audience that could afford the ticket at the Academy of Music concert hall. While the first repertoire had a strictly revolutionary character, the latter, even though it had a certain oppositional and leftist touch, was in contrast more sophisticated, more up-to-date and more playful. It was also ironic, contained more foreign authors and was similar to a potential show in Cabaret Voltaire, Zürich. Palasovszky's repertoire for middle class stage involved works by Guillaume Apollinaire, Jean Cocteau, Paul Éluard, Tristan Tzara, Yvan Goll, Franz Kafka, and music by Schönberg and Honegger, while on a workers' stage they recited Endre Ady, Walt Whitman, Alexander

Blok, Sergei Yesenin, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and others.¹²

From a historical point of view we can say that Palasovszky's choice was a wise consideration of the different cultural needs of the two audiences. Circles of the rich and perhaps snobbish middle-class youth found the scandalous and Dadaist provocation on stage trendy and spicy. Works and shows of Palasovszky were in fashion for a time, but it also seemed to be a betrayal of the working class from a political point of view. Even Kassák published a fervent critique of the Green Donkey Theatre in the Vienna-based *MA*.¹³ (Kassák, 1925). As he suggests, one cannot represent the workers and be a pet of the ruling class at the same time. Kassák held that modernist art is a legitimate property of the working class. Palasovszky considered the middle-class stage to be a better place for the artistic experiment, and only a limited amount of the experimental art could be brought into the workers' stages.

The choral poems which Palasovszky wrote and directed for the workers' choir were similar to the *The Masses* of Attila József. For example his *Üvegfúvók* (Glassblowers, 1927)¹⁴ and *A nyűgtelenek* (Without a Hobble, 1929)¹⁵ were both performed by the "100 %" choir. They are based on the crescendo-structure, ending with a mobilizing slogan. ("Let's go glassblowers!" "Let's go, come on!"). They celebrate collectivity ("Look! We are all from the same flesh and blood!" "Nini! Mindnyájan vérrokonok vagyunk") and offer easily understandable hints of the revolution to come. ("Go and plant an island, / Where will be no more fear and con-

¹¹ Herbert MARSHALL, *Mayakovsky* (London: Dobson Books, 1965), 130.

¹² JÁKFALVI Magdolna, *Avantgárd, színház, politika* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2006), 57.

¹³ KASSÁK Lajos, „Horizont”, *MA* 10, 3–4. sz. (1925): 205.

¹⁴ PALASOVSZKY Ödön, „Üvegfúvók”, in PALASOVSZKY Ödön, *Csillagsebek: Válogatott versek*, 77 (Budapest: Magvető, 1987), 77.

¹⁵ PALASOVSZKY Ödön, „A nyűgtelenek”, in *ibid.* 102.

straint!" "Egy szigetet ültessetek, / Ahol megszűnik a félelem és a kényszer")

But these are not the works Palasovszky is famous for. In his more significant performances he either left behind the simple and didactic tool of the crescendo structure or uses it in an ironic way. As we have seen, the crescendo in a speaking choir performance reinforces or even guarantees meaning. See the tautological structure of *The Masses*: the choir acts as "the masses" on the street and in the meantime the text repeats again and again the word 'Masses'. Palasovszky used several kinds of acoustic patterns, which are also shown in the musical notes of the published version of his texts.

In works like the famous *Punalua*, it is very hard to localize the central meaning. In the cited fragment from the beginning of the *Punalua* there is the solo voice of the priest, and there is a choir divided into male and female groups. Here we can see how the word *Punalua* was born from a repetition of meaningless voices. This scene is again an enactment of a ritual, with a priest and with the community of men and women.

PRIEST: I make Punalua visible.
 (Starting the songs of u-punalua:)
 U –
 U – u u – u u!
 MEN, dancing the "breathing Punalua":
 Ú –
 U – u u – u u!
 A! u – a u – a u! u – a u – a a! a – a a – a a!
 WOMEN, with songs of the iiya- aaya:
 II -ya – aa – ya! ii – ya – aa – ya!
 MEN, with a double u-aa:
 UU! u – a u – a ó!
 U –
 PRIEST: Punalua!
 MEN: Punalua! Punalua! Punalua!
 Punalua! Punalua! Punalua!
 ALL: (crying after Punalua)¹⁶

The process going on is a kind of transubstantiation, as the Priest makes something visible that was invisible before. We can notice that the crescendo structure is at work again in this fragment. The choir repeats and amplifies the lines of the solo voice. The whole fragment starts with a solo, goes on with male and female choirs dialoguing and ends with a *tutti* of everyone shouting the word finally found, "Punalua". It is an expression of a triumph that after singing and shouting of the vocals "u-a u-a" there's a word finally, probably a name, the random voices found a stable form finally which seems to be very significant. As a result, everybody seems to be happy with that because of the univocality of the whole choir. There is a very similar tautologism here that we have seen in the case of the Attila József poem. A cultic repetition of a sacred word. There was also a central word in the performance repeated from time to time. The community was born exactly at that moment, when everybody was shouting "the Masses, the Masses".

There is another meaningless vocal sequence in the poem, this is the 'ii – ya – aa – ya' sung by women. Later on it is repeated and transformed to "i – o – a – a" and evolves into the word "izzólámpa", that is "incandescent lamp". This word – in contrast to *Punalua* – has a clear meaning but it is still hard to understand what its role is here. One can probably argue that the glowing of the lamp symbolizes the spark of the revolution, but the meaning here is far more ambiguous and uncertain than it was in Attila József's poem. One cannot be sure how to take it. Is it a symbolic ritual of a community or is it a joke? When the audience suddenly understands that the meaningless vocal sequence has developed into a meaningful word, then again they still don't understand what to do with 'incandescent lamp'.

In fact, the word "Punalua" is not meaningless either, although its usage in the choral poem is very surprising. Originally, "Punaluan family" was a term of a nineteenth century American cultural anthropol-

¹⁶ *Punalua!* (Palasovszky, 1926, 6. My translation – D.Sz.)

ogist, Lewis H. Morgan (1877). The term describes a basic prehistoric form of human community that existed before family and monogamy. Morgan based his theory on the study of ancient precolonial Hawaiian family relations, that is where the name came from, and there is still a beach called Punalu'u in Hawaii. Morgan supposed that Punalua was a certain marriage-like arrangement between tribes. Daughters of one tribe became wives of the sons of another tribe. It was a kind of limited polygamy. The wives were sisters, the husbands were brethren to each other and they were parents of all of the children born inside the community, no matter who the mother and father were in the modern Western sense of the word. The concept of free love and the concept of group marriage had a certain popularity in the labor movement subculture. In fact, in most of the cases it wasn't an ongoing, real practice between girls and boys in the movement, it was rather a non-official way to imagine communism. At least two of the most famous authors of Marxism, Friedrich Engels (1884) and August Bebel (1879) wrote about the Punalua family and on the work of Lewis Morgan. Instead of the role it took in the turn of the century Marxist literature, we still do not know what is the exact role of the word "Punalua" in the work of Palasovszky. Is it an erotic vision of communism or is it propaganda for free love? Perhaps we can say that Palasovszky was dreaming about a bond between people that is stronger than the ties of present bourgeoisie society. A utopic community tied both by love and by brotherhood and sisterhood. Or perhaps it is only a frivolous joke, nothing more.

Punalua of Palasovszky was a product of the same little artistic subcultural scene in Budapest at the end of the twenties, but does not share the semantic structure and political function of the other choral poems. Mostly because in this case one cannot know for sure the meaning of the central word: Punalua. The audience can see that there's a ritual going on during the virtual perfor-

mance, and something very important is happening that unites the community. But it is really hard to join to a community in the name of something you absolutely don't understand. What one can do is merely join for the fun of it, in a mocking manner, such as in a carnival or in a festival.

Punalua and other works of Palasovszky had some impact in their times in Budapest society. As we noted earlier, they were in fashion but they also succeeded in making a scandal, and that is what a proper Avant-Garde performance should do. Because of their evident hints about sexuality, they were outrageous not only in the bourgeoisie but also in the labor-class subculture. The speaking choir movement was probably the most powerful and effective leftist cultural movement in the interwar period in Hungary; but considering both the artistic and political subversivity of Palasovszky's pieces, most of the choral poems and choir performances of the time seem to be rather conservative and old fashioned.

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