

Géza Csáth's Musicographical Work and His Fundamental Aesthetic Viewpoints

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the musicographic significance of the essays on music and the musical criticism of Hungarian novelist Géza Csáth is discussed on the basis of lexicographic entries and the few scholarly papers in which some of his views are present. The picture of this music critic is completed by a brief account of the problems of a stylistic determination of his literary œuvre, as well as of the importance of psychoanalysis for his artistic creativity and activity. There are three main problems in Csáth's writings on music: support of modernism in music, advocacy of national style in artistic music, and emphasis on the importance of artistic individualism; while the first two problems are mentioned in several scholarly works, the third – Csáth's insistence on artistic individualism – has not been the subject of musicological consideration. Likewise, Géza Csáth's aesthetic views on music have not even been identified, though he was a highly educated critic who was among the first to recognize the importance of Béla Bartók and to support impressionism, expressionism and tendencies towards atonal music. Csáth's aesthetic attitudes were clearly influenced by Darwinism and the positivism of the late nineteenth century; yet, in his essays on music, we find much more than an organicistic and psychological interpretation, and that is a deeper understanding of the connection between artistic music, the cultural climate, and the changing needs of audiences at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

KEYWORDS

Géza Csáth, musical criticism, modernism in music, national style, artistic individualism, positivism, new aesthetics

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Common sense supposes – wrongly – that science and art are completely separate. However, these two are one. Their goal is finding the truth. The scientist searches for the absolute truth, and the artist for the relative truth. The scientist achieves relative results, and the artist – the great artist – achieves absolute solutions.¹

The author of the text quoted, Hungarian short story writer and neuropsychiatrist Géza Csáth,² left behind more than 530 texts about music, but his musicographical work has not yet been studied and assessed in an adequate way. A whole century after his death there is still no systematization or analysis of his texts, and what is especially lacking are the works which would take his whole musicographical opus into account.

Although Csáth's texts were published in the most important Budapest daily newspapers³ and in the modernist literary magazine *Nyugat*, only some of his efforts were noticed and only some of his critiques acknowledged. Nevertheless, even that amount was enough for this gifted critic to be included in the first edition of the Hungarian music lexicon edited by Bence Szabolcsi and Aladár Tóth, where he is called "one of the most important and for his personal culture one of the most notable representatives of recent Hungarian music writers."⁴ This short entry from 1930 states that Géza Csáth was "a doctor, writer and music critic" and cites his music critiques about Bartók and Leó Weiner, which were published in 1908 in the journal *Nyugat*, several of his essays ("Puccini," "Über Puccini," "New Hungarian Music"), as well as his collection of portraits of composers, which Csáth published during his lifetime.⁵ The second edition of the same lexicon from 1965 gives us the same information and emphasizes that "critiques he wrote about Bartók are especially worthy of attention."⁶ The entry about Géza Csáth in the Hungarian edition of the *Brockhaus-Riemann Music Lexicon* mainly draws on the partial edition of his music critiques gathered and published by János Demény (1971)⁷ and on the incomplete bibliography of his works published by Zoltán Dér (1977).⁸ The entry says that Géza Csáth was also a composer (he wrote songs, pieces for the piano and violin, as well as the accompanying music for his dramatic pieces), that he was among the first to recognize Bartók's significance,

¹Géza CSÁTH, "Haydn," in *A muzsika mesekertje* [The magic garden of music], ed. by Mihály SZAJBÉLY (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 2000), 124; originally published in *A Kéve könyve* (Budapest: "Kéve" Művészegyesület, 1913), vol. 3, 3–20.

²February 14, 1887, Szabadka, Austria-Hungary – September 11, 1919, Kelebia, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

³Including *Magyar Szemle*, *Budapesti Napló*, *Huszadik Század*, *A Polgár* and *Világ*.

⁴Csáth Géza," in *Zenei lexikon*, ed. by Bence SZABOLCSI and Aladár TÓTH (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1930), vol. 1, 192.

⁵Géza CSÁTH, *Zeneszerző portrék* [Portraits of composers], ed. by Jenő GÖMÖRI (Budapest: Politzer Zsigmond & Fia, 1911) (= *Modern könyvtár*, vol. 74.).

⁶Csáth Géza," in *Zenei lexikon*, ed. by Dénes BARTHA (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1965), vol. 1, 428. Both editions of this notable Hungarian music lexicon wrongly cite 1918 as the year of Csáth's death. (In fact, he committed suicide on September 11, 1919).

⁷Géza CSÁTH, *Éjszakai esztétizálás: 1906–1912 zenei évadjai* [Nocturnal aestheticizing: Musical seasons of 1906–1912], ed. by János DEMÉNY (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1971).

⁸Géza CSÁTH, *Ismeretlen házban II – Kritikák, tanulmányok, cikkek* [In an unfamiliar house II: Critics, essays, articles], ed. by Zoltán DÉR (Újvidék: Forum, 1977).



and that his “strict value system classifies him among the best Hungarian music critics of his time.”⁹ The second edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* from 2001 also draws on these basic sources¹⁰ about Géza Csáth, although more complete studies about him had already been published by then,¹¹ as well as the most comprehensive publication so far of Csáth’s music texts, edited by Mihály Szajbély.¹² Ágnes Gádor’s entry explicitly states only that Csáth was “a Hungarian music critic” and that he was a neurologist by profession; it states that “he was among the first to recognize the importance of Bartók and Kodály, and his study of Puccini (1909) and his article on Wagner (both in *Zeneszerző portrék*, 1911) were highly influential.”¹³ It also cites the main features of his medical career, as well as of his military service during World War I. The entry ends with the basic facts about Csáth’s mental illness and tragic death. Unlike the entries in the previous music lexicons, this is the only one that contains the information that Csáth published his first music critiques in *Bácskai Hírlap*,¹⁴ although it does not specify that it was a journal from Subotica (Szabadka).

Géza Csáth is first mentioned as a writer – short story writer – in the *Literary Lexicon Hungaria* from 1947. The entry in question is not an in-depth one and presents some basic facts about Csáth’s life in the form of a somewhat banal summary: “He became a morphinist, his scientific career was over; he killed his spouse and committed suicide while escaping a sanatorium.”¹⁵ The entry cites a few details about his short stories as well as that he was “a talented musician, and as a [music] critic he was among the first to discover Bartók.”¹⁶ Géza Csáth the writer is, justifiably, given significantly greater importance in the *New Hungarian Literary*

⁹“Csáth Géza,” in *Brockhaus–Riemann zenei lexikon*, ed. by Carl DAHLHAUS, Hans Heinrich EGGBRECHT, Hungarian edition by Antal BORONKAY (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1983), vol. 1, 381. In this entry, too, we notice wrong biographical data: first, it cites February 13, 1887 as the date of Csáth’s birth, while his birth certificate states that József Brenner Jr was born on February 14 (see the addendum); also, it cites Subotica (Szabadka) as the place of his death, but Csáth passed away in the vicinity of Kelebia; however, an even more serious material error is the statement that in the period “1900–1912 he wrote music critiques for *Budapesti Napló*, *A Polgár*, and *Világ*” (ibid., 381), which would mean that he published his texts in these notable Budapest journals as a 13-year old and grammar school pupil! Csáth published his first music critique in a notable Budapest journal on November 17, 1905, and the text in question is “Muzsikások. Corelli, Tartini [Musicians: Corelli, Tartini],” *Virágfakadás* 2/20 (November 17, 1905), 318–320; see also in CSÁTH, *A muzsika mesekertje*, 48–50.

¹⁰CSÁTH, *Éjszakai esztétizálás: 1906–1912 zenei évadjai*; CSÁTH, *Ismeretlen házban II*.

¹¹Especially Mihály SZAJBÉLY, *Csáth Géza* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1989).

¹²Géza CSÁTH, *A muzsika mesekertje*.

¹³Ágnes GÁDOR, “Csáth, Géza,” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. by Stanley SADIE (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), vol. 6, 759. This entry also wrongly cites February 13 as the date of Csáth’s birth, while it cites “nr Szabadka” as the place of his death (ibid.). The text about Puccini was not published in *Zeneszerző portrék*, and the year of its first publication is not correct either (1909): Csáth first published it in the journal *Nyugat* (November 16, 1908), 342–354, and at the end of the same year it was printed as a separate edition (*Puccini*, Budapest: Jókai könyvnyomda, 1908). This important essay was also translated into German and published in print: *Über Puccini. Eine Studie*. Deutsch von Heinrich Horváth, [Budapest:] Harmonia Kiadó, 1912. It should not be confused with an earlier, significantly shorter text with the same title (“Puccini”), which was first published in *Magyar Szemle* (May 10, 1906), 304, and then again at the end of the same year in *Szeged és Vidéke* (December 25, 1906), 19–20.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵“Csáth Géza,” in *Hungária irodalmi lexikon*, ed. by József RÉVAY and Béla KÖHALMI (Budapest: Hungária, 1947), 117.

¹⁶Ibid.



Lexicon, probably due to the rediscovery of his short stories in the 1960s and 1970s. The three-column entry correctly cites the basic facts about his life,¹⁷ and his short stories and dramas are expertly presented and analyzed. The entry next to Csáth's name says that he was "a writer, music aesthete, doctor", but his music writings are mentioned only in the entry's last sentence (which was, together with the wrong dating of his text about Puccini, obviously also repeated by Gádor in her already analyzed entry about Csáth in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*): "As a music critic, he directed his attention very early towards Bartók and Kodály; his study on Puccini (1909) and his assessment of Wagner (*Zeneszerző portrék*, 1911) stand out."¹⁸

Géza Csáth's literary opus and music critiques also earned him a place in the *New Hungarian Biographical Lexicon* (2001),¹⁹ as well as in the *New Révai Lexicon* (1999),²⁰ an encyclopedia of Hungarian and general culture. Both entries are very precise and correctly cite the most important facts concerning Csáth's professional, artistic and private life, and are completed by an extensive bibliography of Csáth's works and studies and texts about him. However, only in the *New Révai Lexicon* do we find the basic information about some of the issues he discussed in his most important writings on music:

In his text *Modern Music*, we can note a parallel between his views on music and his views on literature. He differentiates between two kinds of composer: absolute musicians (for example, Mozart) and program musicians (for example, Wagner). The former put an accent on repeating the melody, and the latter on repeating the theme. In his opinion, program music, like modern literature, tends to replace thoughts by awakening moods which are based on feelings and associations. His music critiques and monography on Puccini are important. He was among the first to draw attention to the importance of Bartók's and Kodály's works, as well as to the parallels between Ady's and Bartók's art.²¹

When it comes to electronic sources, it should be noted that *Wikipedia* provides a relatively correct entry about Csáth, at least where his career, literary work and private life are concerned.²² It is interesting, however, that his professional qualifications and artistic inclinations are defined differently on two occasions: the very beginning of the entry says that he "was a Hungarian writer, playwright, musician, *music critic*, psychiatrist and a physician," while immediately afterwards it says that he "was a writer, critic, *music theoretician* and medical doctor."²³ Despite

¹⁷The exception here, too, is the date of his birth, February 13 instead of February 14.

¹⁸"Csáth Géza," in *Új magyar irodalmi lexikon*, ed. by László PÉTER (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1994), vol. 1, 350–351 (the second edition contains the same text, 2000, 381–382). As we have already mentioned, Csáth published his text about Puccini in 1908.

¹⁹"Csáth Géza," in *Új magyar életrajzi lexikon*, ed. by László MARKÓ (Budapest: Magyar Könyvklub, 2001), vol. 1, 1100–1101.

²⁰"Csáth Géza," in *Révai új lexikona*, ed. by István KOLLEGA TARSOLY (Szekszárd: Babits Kiadó, 1999), vol. 4, 367–369.

²¹*Révai új lexikona*, vol. 4, 368.

²²"Géza Csáth," in *Wikipedia* (last ed. on August 7, 2018), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C3%A9za_Cs%C3%A1th (accessed on May 5, 2019).

²³*Ibid.* My italics.



that, the only thing mentioned about Csáth's contribution to music criticism and theory is that he "was among the first to laud the work of Bartók and Kodály."²⁴

Lajos Jánossy's text on the site *Hungarian Literature Online*²⁵ is also worthy of attention; Jánossy contextualizes Csáth's literary work very well within general trends in European art of the early twentieth century. Although the text says that he was both a critic and a music theoretician, and that his "versatile creativity is analogous to the complex profile of the age in which he lived,"²⁶ it too only mentions in passing that he recognized the "importance and originality of Bartók," and that he was "among the first to give attention to Puccini."²⁷

Csáth began writing short stories very early, during his grammar school days. In the beginning, he published them in the Subotica journals *Bácskai Hírlap* and *Bácsmegyei Napló*, and from 1906 also in the Budapest daily papers *Magyar Szemle*, *Budapesti Napló*, *A Polgár*, and *Világ*, as well as in the modernist journal *Nyugat* (from 1908).²⁸ During his lifetime, he also published five collections of short stories which he grouped according to his own criteria: *A varázsló kertje* (The Sorcerer's Garden, 1908), *Az albíróék és egyéb elbeszélések* (The Deputy Justice's Family and Other Stories, 1909), *Délutáni álom* (Afternoon Dream, 1911), *Schmith mézeskalácsos* (Schmith the Gingerbread Man, 1912), and *Muzsikások* (Musicians, 1913). The other stories he published in the daily and periodical press would not be collected and published until many years after his death.²⁹

In Hungarian literary theory there is a distinct divergence of opinion in regards to the stylistic determination of Csáth's literary opus. László Bóka, a literary historian and the first theoretician who wrote a PhD thesis on Csáth's short stories, considers them predominantly naturalistic,³⁰ while Mihály Szajbély argues that they are mostly of a symbolist character.³¹

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Lajos JÁNOSY, "The Stray Rider – Géza Csáth and the Age in Which He Lived", *Hungarian Literature Online* (June 20, 2007), <<https://web.archive.org/web/20071115032114/http://www.hlo.hu/object.1cd2a115-c833-41a9-9fa0-bf24a8058fde.ivy>> (accessed on May 5, 2019).

²⁶On Csáth's personality and the time in which he lived see also Mihály SZAJBÉLY, "Géza Csáth (1887–1919). Egy kudarcos értelmiségi karriertörténet körrajza [A failed intellectual career story as an epochal description]," in *A homokvárépítés öröme* [The joy of sandcastle building] (Szeged: JATEPress, 2016), 214–226.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Csáth published his short stories mainly in those journals and papers for which he also wrote music critiques.

²⁹The first complete collection of Csáth's short stories was published by Mihály Szajbély in 1994: Géza CSÁTH, *Mesék amelyek rosszul végződnek* [Tales that end badly], ed. by Mihály SZAJBÉLY (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1/1994; 2/2006; 3/2008). In the spirit of his time, Csáth also wrote several short stories inspired by music, which can be divided into two groups. The first of them consists of writings on the lives and fates of musicians, such as *Fagotista* [Bassoonist], *Zenészek* [Musicians] and *Kilencedik szimfónia* [The Ninth Symphony], while the other group consists of works in which Csáth narrates a certain story through descriptions of music and lets his music imagination shine; for example, *Tavaszkok* [Springs] and *Tavaszi ouverture* [Spring overture]. See also Szilvia PEREMICZKY, "A magyar irodalom és a zene. 1898 Megjelenik Gozdsu Elek Ének a zenéről című novellája [Hungarian literature and music. 1898 Elek Gozdsu's *Song of music* appears in print]," in *A magyar irodalom története 1800-tól 1919-ig* [Histories of Hungarian literature from 1800 to 1919], ed. by Mihály SZEGEDY-MASZÁK (Budapest: Gondolat, 2007), 611–624.

³⁰László BÓKA, *Csáth Géza novellái* (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat nyomdája, 1937).

³¹Mihály SZAJBÉLY, *Csáth Géza* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1989).



According to Szajbély, Csáth was never a naturalistic writer, but only used elements of naturalism to delve into the depths of the human psyche.³² Unlike Szajbély, the art historian and theatre critic László Gerold also interprets Bóka's analysis of Csáth's epic prose as the transcending of naturalism, which points to the possibility of determining their style as secessionist. Although Bóka never mentioned the term Secessionism, Gerold thinks that Bóka's analysis unequivocally opens a possibility for recognizing secessionist elements in Csáth's short stories.³³ Besides that, Gerold points out that all who discussed the stylistic determination of Csáth's literary opus after Bóka – whether they engaged in polemics as Endre Gerelyes³⁴ and András Diószegi did³⁵ or whether they, like Imre Bori, considered the entire Csáth opus secessionist³⁶ – actually only continued along the path that Bóka had already laid in his work.³⁷

Beside the problem of a stylistic determination of Csáth's literary opus, the influence of psychoanalysis on his prose work should also be taken into account. Although there are no reliable sources telling us how and when Csáth discovered the teachings of Freud, one presumes that he was familiar with them to some extent by 1907, during his medical studies.³⁸ Despite that fact, Csáth's literary works already contained some psychological themes in 1905: they featured certain extreme situations (infanticide, matricide) and pathological mental states (anxiety, persecution mania).³⁹ It is thought that Csáth tried to explain the causes of abnormal behavior in his short stories with the help of literary means, and because of that Erzsébet Jankicsity classifies a significant number of Csáth's short stories as literary psychograms.⁴⁰ What is also interesting is the claim by the writer and critic Lajos Grendel who, commenting on the literary-theoretical frame concerning the influence of Darwinism and Freudism on Csáth's work, argues that his works cannot be considered as naturalistic nor as "illustrations of Freud's teachings," but are only means which Csáth used in his literary works to achieve a border between normal and

³²SZAJBÉLY, *Csáth Géza*, 83.

³³László GEROLD, "Egy műfajmonográfia tanulságai. Bóka László: Csáth Géza novellái" [Lessons from the monograph of a genre. László Bóka: The short stories of Géza Csáth] (= *Legendák és konfliktusok. Tanulmányok és esszék a 20. századi magyar irodalomról* [Legends and conflicts: Studies and essays on twentieth-century Hungarian literature]) (Újvidék: Forum, 1997), 48–51.

³⁴Endre GERELYES, "Türelmetlen kritika" [Impatient criticism], *Új Írás* 4/7–12 (December, 1964), 1482–1486.

³⁵András DIÓSZEGI, *Megmozdult világban* [In a moved world] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó 1967).

³⁶Imre BORI, "A 'homo novus' nagysága és tragédiája [The greatness and tragedy of 'homo novus']", in *Varázslók és mákvirágok* [Wizards and poppy flowers] (Újvidék: Forum, 1979), 267–309.

³⁷GEROLD, "Egy műfajmonográfia tanulságai," 51.

³⁸See SZAJBÉLY, *Csáth Géza*, 179 and onwards; Pál HARMAT, *Freud, Ferenczi és a magyarországi pszichoanalízis* [Freud, Ferenczi and Hungarian psychoanalysis] (Budapest: Bethlen Gábor Könyvkiadó, 1994), 74–78.

³⁹Erzsébet JANKICSITY, "Csáth Géza lélektani novellái" [Psychological prose pieces by Géza Csáth], Part 2, *Kaleidoscope* 8/15 (2017), 203. See also: Zoltán KÖVÁRY, "Morfium, matricídium és pszichoanalízis. Témák és variációk Csáth Géza és Kosztolányi Dezső életművében [Morphine, matricide and psychoanalysis. Themes and variations in the oeuvre of Géza Csáth and Dezső Kosztolányi]," in *Csáth-járó át-járó: Csáth Géza, az irodalmi és pszichológiai diskurzusok metszéspontja* [Csáth-járó át-járó: Géza Csáth, The intersection of literary and psychological discourse], ed. by Erzsébet CSÁNYI (Újvidék: Bölcsészettudományi Kar, Vajdasági Magyar Felsőoktatási Kollégium, 2009), 3–38.

⁴⁰JANKICSITY, "Csáth Géza lélektani novellái," 202.



abnormal that is difficult to determine.⁴¹ The aforementioned author Lajos Jánosy gives an even more complex assessment, arguing that Csáth “pitches the passion of exploring the inner world of man, partly propelled by the growing popularity of psychoanalysis, against grand narratives and universalistic representations.”⁴² He thinks that Csáth “represents a typical early twentieth-century writer who, in front of a faded background of lost transcendence, investigates the atavistic layers of human consciousness,” and his short stories *Matricide*, *The Frog*, *The Surgeon* and *Schmidt the Gingerbread Man* “are excellent examples of explorations of the tensions between dreams, the life of instincts and rational reflection.”⁴³

1. GÉZA CSÁTH'S MUSICOGRAPHICAL WORK AND THE MAIN PROBLEMS IN HIS MUSIC WRITINGS

In accordance with the most complete collection⁴⁴ and bibliography⁴⁵ of Csáth's music writings, these can be divided into two groups: the first consists of *essays* – texts with more complex content and deeper aesthetic reflections – and the second – bigger – one contains his music reviews, which were predominantly of an informative character and conceived as reports about music events and guest performances by famous artists in Subotica and Budapest. This classification also represents the base for a more precise determination of the scholarly and purely informative significance of his music writings.

The first collection of Csáth's music writings was published by the author himself in 1911 – it contains portraits of eight composers, as well as an introductory study in which the author explains the difference between composers of absolute and program music, respectively.⁴⁶ Much later – and probably due to the influence of the rediscovery of Csáth the writer – three collections of his music writings were published,⁴⁷ as well as a combined volume consisting of music critiques, essays and other publications.⁴⁸

The collection *Nocturnal Aestheticizing* was published in 1971, and it was edited by the musicologist János Demény. For that occasion, Demény collected and published 246 of Csáth's

⁴¹Lajos GREDEL, “Csáth Géza,” in *A magyar irodalom története* [A history of Hungarian literature] (Pozsony: Kalligram, 2010), 114–115.

⁴²JÁNOSSY, “The Stray Rider – Géza Csáth and the Age in Which He Lived.”

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Csáth, *A muzsika mesekertje*.

⁴⁵Éva KELEMEN, *Művészetek vándora. A zeneszerző Csáth Géza* [A wanderer of the arts: Géza Csáth as a composer] (Budapest–Győr: OSZK–Magyar Kultúra Kiadó, 2015).

⁴⁶CSÁTH, *Zeneszerző portrék*. The volume contains the following writings: “Zeneszerző fejlődése” (pp. 3–9), “Bach” (pp. 10–12), “Beethoven” (pp. 13–15), “Haydn” (pp. 16–18), “Schumann” (pp. 19–22), “Wagner” (pp. 23–25), “Chopin” (pp. 26–28), “Grieg” (pp. 29–31), and “Ferenc Erkel” (pp. 32 onwards).

⁴⁷CSÁTH, *Éjszakai esztétizálás: 1906–1912 zenei évadjai*; id., *Ismeretlen házban II – Kritikák, tanulmányok, cikkek*; id., *A muzsika mesekertje*.

⁴⁸Géza CSÁTH, *Írások az élet jó és rossz dolgairól: kritikák, cikkek, karcolatok* [Writings on good and bad things in life: Reviews, articles, sketches], ed. by Zoltán DÉR (Szabadka: Munkásegyletem, 1975).



music writings which, according to the newest Csáth bibliography put together by Éva Kelemen,⁴⁹ represents less than half of Csáth's musicographical opus. Based on the collected writings, Demény thinks that Csáth was a pioneer of progressive music criticism and that his importance is first and foremost reflected in the fact that he supported the musical work of Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály and Leó Weiner. Moreover, according to Demény, Csáth was the first Hungarian music aesthete to recognize the "modern" Bartók.⁵⁰ Besides that, Demény points out that in the period of his active work as a critic – from 1906 to 1912 – Csáth gave an excellent intersection of the entire Hungarian musical life of that time.

The theoretician and literary historian Imre Bori also made an important comment on Csáth's musicographical work in his collection of essays *Wizards and Poppy Flowers* (1979). According to him, Csáth's viewpoints on music differ strikingly from traditional ones, because he assesses music from earlier eras from the perspective of the musical taste of his time. He says that Csáth, in accordance with the spirit of his time, gives the most important place to the greats of Baroque music and Viennese Classicism, as well as to his contemporaries Debussy, Richard Strauss, Bartók and Weiner. Bori concludes that Csáth was an art theoretician of Hungarian secessionism, which nurtured expressionism and was open to folk art.⁵¹

Mihály Szajbély also dedicated one chapter of his monography (1989) to Géza Csáth's music critiques, but when assessing them he mainly adopted the opinions of his predecessors, first and foremost those of János Demény. The new element in this monography is that Szajbély recognizes and points out the fact that Csáth also dealt with the aspect of musical performance in his critiques.⁵² This observation of Szajbély's is elaborated by Orsolya Rákai in the epilogue of the book *The Magic Garden of Music* (2000), which is the most complete collection of Csáth's music writings to date (it contains 533 texts written by him). She concludes that Csáth's texts give evidence of significant differences in the performative practices of that time, even when it comes to works by the same composers.⁵³

In her text "The Composer", Marta Kovač Kenjereš makes the first attempt to present Géza Csáth's compositions. Her work is entirely based on retelling the already known facts about his life, and her only significant opinion regarding Csáth's compositions is that they do not have a permanent value in the context of the general history of music. Nevertheless, knowing this aspect of his activity gives us an opportunity to get to know him better and to get close to him as a writer.⁵⁴ The next, and more significant, endeavor to present Csáth's compositions was made by the aforementioned musicologist Éva Kelemen in her study *A Wanderer of the Arts* (2015). After having examined more than a hundred compositions by Csáth, Kelemen comes to an almost identical conclusion as Marta Kovač Kenjereš. Namely, she thinks that the analysis of Csáth's compositions should not be approached in the traditional way, because Csáth did not

⁴⁹KELEMEN, *Művészetek vándora*.

⁵⁰CSÁTH, *Éjszakai esztétizálás*, 13.

⁵¹BORI, "A 'homo novus' nagysága," 271.

⁵²SZAJBÉLY, *Csáth Géza*, 113.

⁵³Orsolya RÁKAI, "Lelki tükrörendszerek" [Mental reflection systems], in *A muzsika mesekertje*, ed. by Mihály SZAJBÉLY, 590. See also: Ana Tamara DEVIĆ and Zsolt LAZAR, "Sauer's, Godowsky's, and Backhaus's Budapest Recitals in the Reviews by Géza Csáth (1906–1912)," *Studia Musicologica* 58/3–4 (December, 2017), 399–414.

⁵⁴Marta KOVAČ KENJEREŠ, "Kompozitor" [The composer], *Rukovet* (Subotica) 7–9 (2008), 57–58.



receive a rounded music education. However, if we see these works as one aspect of Csáth's artistic expression and if we explore his entire opus through internal creative processes that were happening in parallel, we will also be able to better understand Csáth's personality.⁵⁵

As we have already mentioned, Csáth's music critiques did not raise a significant interest in Hungarian and international musicology. There are, however, several relevant scholarly works which take into consideration Csáth's advocacy of the creation of a national style in Hungarian art music, although that problem was discussed indirectly, mainly in the works about Béla Bartók. The text by the musicologist Judit Frigyesi "Béla Bartók and the Concept of Nation and 'Volk' in Modern Hungary" (1994) is especially important, and in it the author tries to determine the ideological background of Bartók's promotion of national art music in the Kingdom of Hungary of that time.⁵⁶ The next step was taken by Mineo Ota in his text "Why Is the 'Spirit' of Folk Music So Important? On the Historical Background of Béla Bartók's Views of Folk Music" (2006). In that work, Ota cites Csáth's key text about the relationship between folk music and art music, which was published in the daily newspaper *Budapesti Napló* (1906).⁵⁷ Another important work is the article by the literary historian György Bodnár "Bartók et le mouvement 'Nyugat'," published before Ota's work; in it, Bodnár points out the importance of Csáth's musicological work and especially of his portrait of Bartók the composer.⁵⁸ In his essay about Hungarian criticism regarding Bartók's work (1995), the musicologist Peter Laki especially emphasizes the importance of Csáth's rational but also devoted assessment of Bartók's music.⁵⁹ He thinks that Csáth was much ahead of his time when he supported Bartók's "treatment of dissonance as an expression of artistic freedom", but that Bartók interested him first and foremost "as a stick with which to beat the conservatives."⁶⁰ Besides Laki's hinting at Csáth's openness towards Bartók's expressionism, only the musicologist Gergely Fazekas unambiguously pointed out Csáth's support for modernism in music (this time impressionism), but again in a different context, through his interpretation of the early reception of Debussy's work in Hungary.⁶¹

The cited musicological works find a connection between some of Csáth's music critiques and two out of three issues that we consider key for an understanding of his contribution to musicography – his *advocacy of the national style in Hungarian art music* and *modernism in*

⁵⁵KELEMEN, *Művészetek vándora*, 41–42.

⁵⁶JUDIT FRIGYESI, "Béla Bartók and the Concept of Nation and 'Volk' in Modern Hungary," *The Musical Quarterly* 78/2 (Summer, 1994), 255–287.

⁵⁷MINEO OTA, "Why Is the 'Spirit' of Folk Music So Important? On the Historical Background of Béla Bartók's Views of Folk Music," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 37/1 (June, 2006), 33–46.

⁵⁸GYÖRGY BODNÁR, "Bartók et le mouvement 'Nyugat'," *Studia Musicologica* 5/1 (1963), 347–354; see also CSÁTH, "Bartók Béla," in *A muzsika mesekertje*, 89–91.

⁵⁹PÉTER LAKI, "The Gallows and the Altar: Poetic Criticism and Critical Poetry about Bartók in Hungary," in *Bartók and His World*, ed. by Peter LAKI (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 79–100.

⁶⁰Ibid., 84.

⁶¹GERGELY FAZEKAS, "'Unhealthy' and 'Ugly' Music or a 'Compass Pointing towards a Purer Art of Superior Quality'? The Early Reception of Debussy in Hungary (1900–1918)," *Studia Musicologica* 49/3 (September, 2008), 321–339.



music. He supported impressionism (first and foremost Debussy)⁶² and expressionism (especially Richard Strauss),⁶³ but he saw the future of art music in the national style, taking as exemplars Polish (Chopin), Norwegian (Grieg) and Finnish (Sibelius) music. What connects these two advocacies is *artistic individualism*, the third important issue to which Csáth devoted significant attention in his writings.⁶⁴ That is the reason why he gave unconditional support to Weiner and Bartók very early on, because they found *on their own*, relatively simultaneously,

the form of the Hungarian symphony. That, therefore, which Erkel, Mosonyi, Liszt and so many others searched for in vain. This solution had to be sincere, without any experimentation with Hungarian motifs, and to have large-scale international musical forms. The national had to be placed not in rhythm nor in melody, but somewhere else, and it was just not working. It is unnecessary to explain how much *modern art* – whose password is *individualism*: an almost oppressive adoration of the personality – craves for the *national* as its essential attribute.⁶⁵

2. GÉZA CSÁTH'S FUNDAMENTAL AESTHETIC VIEWPOINTS

Although Géza Csáth placed an emphasis on concrete problems in his music writings, certain viewpoints and theoretical orientations he was guided by in his reflections can be discerned. Csáth advocated and to a certain point developed these viewpoints in a smaller number of his texts, first and foremost those we classify as music essays. It should be pointed out that Csáth sporadically made references to the history of Western European art music, but these references

⁶²Csáth considered the French impressionist Claude Debussy a true pioneer of modern music. CSÁTH, “Debussy-est – Beszélgetés Claude Debussyvel,” in *A muzsika mesekertje*, 460; first published in *Világ* (December 6, 1910), 14. The main characteristics of his music are “originality, muted and fine emotional fantasy, free and audacious modern musical construction, accompanied by extremely conscious artistic efficiency. Debussy knows the means, knows his goals, knows what he writes and how that sounds. He is especially knowledgeable about what can be done, what are the psychological conditions for understanding and listening to music. He does not tire the listener. He does not encumber the orchestra. What he can utter in one word he does not utter in three.” CSÁTH, “Az első szimfóniai hangverseny” / “Szimfonikus hangverseny,” in *A muzsika mesekertje*, 133; first published in *A Polgár* (October 19, 1909), 7–8.

⁶³Strauss's music leaves a powerful impression, first and foremost due to the specific characteristics of his orchestration: “The art of orchestration, the magical mixing of tones is what first drew me to Strauss. The orchestra roars, cries, weeps, moans, then at other points pants again, writhes, mocks, threatens. The human and artistic ties that connect music and what music should express multiply and melt together, and every time we are unconditionally surprised and interested.” CSÁTH, “Salome. Strauss Richard zenedrámája,” in *A muzsika mesekertje*, 326; first published in *Budapesti Napló* (May 17, 1907), 3.

⁶⁴Csáth defines the term artistic individualism as “personal viewpoint of artistic valuation” (CSÁTH, “Wagner”, *Zeneszerző portrék*, 23; see also CSÁTH, *A muzsika mesekertje*, 36), and he historically places it in the period between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century. According to Csáth, it was then that an interest in the artist's personality arose: “behind the text, music, painting, sculpture [the audience] started to look for the individual. The individual who has his/her own way of looking at things, feeling and thinking, and expresses his/her views, emotions and thoughts in a unique way, that is, in a way no one has expressed them before.” CSÁTH, “Chopin,” in *Zeneszerző portrék*, 26; first published in *Népszava* (March 15, 1908), 2; also in CSÁTH, *A muzsika mesekertje*, 37–38.

⁶⁵CSÁTH, “Bartók Béla első suite-je,” in *A muzsika mesekertje*, 412; first published in *Nyugat* (March 16, 1909), 338–339. My italics.



were not systematic and were primarily linked to his reflections about the problem of modernism in music.

Csáth developed his characteristic and most general aesthetic viewpoints in the following essays: “Modern Music” (*Modern muzsika*, 1906), “Notes on the Development of Musical Art” (*Jegyzetek a zeneművészet fejlődéstanához*, 1907), “On Music” (*A zenéről*, 1907), “Haydn” (913) and “Music and Modern Life” (*A muzsika és a modern élet*, 1907).

In his music critiques, and even more pronouncedly in his essays, Csáth consistently expresses the opinion that modern art music is a phenomenon which directly satisfies the needs of modern audiences. These needs are both of an aesthetic and organic nature:

Modern music does not content itself with the sense of hearing and the brain structure closely connected to it; it takes possession of the whole body along with the heart, spleen, stomach, muscles, and sex organs. The new orchestral technique already reflects this tendency.⁶⁶

This can be seen particularly in his insisting on *the need for music*, which, according to him, is essentially physiologically conditioned:

The evolution of art is occurring in parallel with the evolution of social life. . . . Today, all arts are searching for something surprising, intimate and mystical, something that today’s man’s sensitive nervous system feels as a real depth of life and senses as true. The proof of this law of artistic development is, perhaps, the most pronounced and visible in music. Musical notes are the best proof of the physiological order, direction, goal and cause of these processes.⁶⁷

When analyzing Wagner’s work and its influence on modern music, Csáth concludes that “music – more than the other arts – is organically linked to the development of the human psyche.”⁶⁸ Moreover, he thinks that the human nervous system is the base for the structuring of music itself:

Its origin is within us, the reason of its existence is also within us. In the development of music there are and there can be no atrophied art movements. The foundation and the indicator of a movement – the human nervous system – directly and deliberately guides and influences the arrangement of tones in a multitude of music sheets, which composers, with feverish minds and hearts beating strongly, wrote in the service of human moods and their intrinsic beauty over many centuries.⁶⁹

When stating that “the physiology of the human sensory nervous system, the characteristics of the human brain, i.e. the developmental processes of the human psyche itself”⁷⁰ can extensively explain the development of art, Csáth also explicitly expresses his aesthetic viewpoint:

Considering the nature of art, a possibility arises here for a firmly linked aesthetic viewpoint which would, in short, be the following: art is not a luxury, nor a game, nor a realization of some more

⁶⁶CSÁTH, “Puccini,” in *A muzsika mesekertje*, 17; first published in *Nyugat* (November 16, 1908), 342–354.

⁶⁷CSÁTH, “Modern muzsika,” in *A muzsika mesekertje*, 54; first published in *Magyar Szemle* (September 27, 1906), 610–611.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 58.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 58–59.

⁷⁰CSÁTH, “Jegyzetek a zeneművészet fejlődéstanához,” in *A muzsika mesekertje*, 60; originally published in *Huszadik Század* 8/2 (August, 1907), 689–701; 8/2 (September, 1907), 777–791.



noble and ideal world; *it is simply life itself*. Like nutrition, movement and other life functions, it is a physiological need and function of the animal psyche, group and species developed to a certain degree.⁷¹

In accordance with his psycho-physiological viewpoint, Csáth gives a general overview of the history of music in his longest music essay “Notes on the Development of Music Art,” in which he focuses on its main elements (melody, rhythm, harmony), and systematically shows their development and treatment through the works of the most important composers of art music. However, what is also important for understanding Csáth’s aesthetic viewpoints is his opinion that there was an excessive domination of epigones in music art, which he explains in the aforementioned essay with the functioning of simple physiological processes:

An interesting tonal sequence or a beautiful melody we hear lingers in our hearing. We croon it countless times, it is present in our consciousness for days; we often catch ourselves whistling the melody of this intense, durable auditory stimulus out loud in the street, and it persistently hovers in our ears when we go to bed. This – long-lasting – intensity of auditory senses explains the slow development of music in certain eras, as well as the conservatism of composers and audiences. Indeed: nowhere can we find so many epigones and so much imitation as in music, and so few distinctly new ideas and thoughts. The composer is prone to avoiding the impressions of his own psyche – the *only* source of art – and their interpretation, and instead takes the existing ones as art objects and imitates them.⁷²

Csáth thinks that the human sense of hearing is predisposed to recognizing musical forms and separating them from other impressions. Because of that, composers are more inclined to follow the already existing patterns (i.e. musical styles and movements) than to express their own impressions:

This unawareness, for which we could more precisely say that it allows our “self” to excessively highlight the impressions originating from art among other external stimuli, is widespread among composers. It is the difficulty that makes the struggle against impressions obtained via the sense of hearing so hard (because these impressions are intense and durable), the difficulty that gives birth to art schools, movements and their blind followers. It makes the ears of lay people so insensitive to all kinds of music they do not hear every day. This explains the vast number of clichés in music, which like mushrooms peak through all the notes in the world. . .⁷³

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, great changes occurred in the way of life, and with them changes in the way of satisfying the needs arising from the state of the human nervous system. Composers had to find suitable musical means to bring music closer to the nervous system of the modern man, and according to Csáth the composers who had achieved it were Wagner, Berlioz, Liszt, Bruckner, Svendsen, Tchaikovsky and Glazunov.⁷⁴ They first and foremost composed for the orchestra, unlike their predecessors, who predominantly wrote pieces for the piano. In order to keep the audience’s attention, the

⁷¹Ibid. My italics.

⁷²Ibid., 65.

⁷³Ibid., 65–66.

⁷⁴Ibid., 80.



melodies in their works became short and conspicuous, presented by an ever-renewed harmonic understructure:

A few composers write for our modern hearing and brain. For our modern brain!? Yes, for us, who can listen to music only after the whole day of running around, for our tired ears, which are hard to excite, for our sick imagination. For us, who often want from music the same thing we want from an opium pipe or a hashish cigarette: to put us in a trance and excite us. That is why we need a whole legion of new musical instruments. That is why we want incessant modulations of melodies (short and easily engraved in the brain) and their incessant new – surprising – harmonic arrangements. The entire *Lohengrin* overture is nothing but an incessantly renewed harmonic elaboration of such a short melodic idea; a surprising but logical weaving of a motif on all instruments. I do not know of anything that can better excite our modern mood than this music, in which rhythm and melody are subordinated to this composer's – even actor's – goal.⁷⁵

Csáth's general attitude towards music is, therefore, a unique blend of *organicistic and psychologistic theoretical orientation*, and as such it characterizes not only his approach to music but also his approach to art in general. Those theoretical orientations derive from Darwinism and the developed positivism of the late nineteenth century, which consider the human organism as a complex whole capable of behaviors that transcend the mere maintenance of biological functions, and whose results are, among others, intellectual processes and artistic creation. Referring – we think justifiably – to a part of Csáth's unfinished novel *First Chapter* (*Első fejezet*), which was obviously autobiographical in nature, Mihály Szajbély argued that the basis of Csáth's world view consisted of the results of the developments in the natural sciences of the late nineteenth century and their influence on, first and foremost, psychology.⁷⁶ Moreover, Csáth openly supported Darwinism,⁷⁷ but his insistence on physiology and neurology in interpreting musical art should not be seen as a simplified explanation of the origin and reception of art, but as consistent rejection of the previous – metaphysical – aesthetics. He expected new aesthetics – taking psychology as a model – to be built on the foundations of the natural sciences, to “operate with completely pure, simple notions and to take into consideration first and foremost the human psyche and its cardinal characteristic, its tendency towards expression and movement.”⁷⁸ Not only should aesthetics become exact, but also art criticism, taking the methodology of the natural sciences as a model:

Since the last decades of the last century [nineteenth century], there have been many – among whom there have also been renowned people like Oscar Wilde – who implied that criticism is an art, that good criticism can only be subjective, intuitive etc. – only to arrive now at the point where criticism will become an exact science. That is, it should be.⁷⁹

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶SZAJBÉLY, Csáth Géza, 73 and following.

⁷⁷“The fundamental principle of psychoanalysis is in its entirety a Darwinistic thought, in the same way as all the modern natural sciences are built on it. Darwin realized the secret of life: that life has no secrets. The goal of life is living – and nothing more.” Géza CSÁTH, “A symphonia [Symphony],” in *Művészetek vándora*, 71. See also Péter CSUNDERLIK, *Radikálisok, szabadgondolkodók, ateisták* [Radicals, free thinkers, atheists] (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2017).

⁷⁸Géza CSÁTH, “A művészi alkotások élvezése [Enjoying artworks],” in DÉR (ed.), *Írások az élet jó és rossz dolgairól*, 174; see also SZAJBÉLY, Csáth Géza, 79.

⁷⁹CSÁTH, “A symphonia,” 71.



Csáth intended but never got round to writing a *grammar for understanding music*, an extensive theoretical work in which he would systematically present his aesthetic viewpoints on music. It can be clearly seen from the planned content and the first few pages that remain in the manuscript⁸⁰ that he saw art as a function of the life process, and that he gave every primacy to the natural sciences and their developed methodologies. However, although a work of art is a stimulus which produces – i.e. *should* produce – artistic enjoyment, its effect is significantly more complex:

Moving away from simple and homogenous artistic pleasures agrees with the incessant development of the brain and the central nervous system – therefore, it agrees with the soul and its continual differentiation. . . . The cultured person's enjoyments are always complex. We love to busy ourselves, which transcends the narrow confines of our consciousness, or, as it is often said: ourselves, existing below the threshold of our consciousness. We do that with the help of complicated, combined enjoyments, thus also expanding the capacity of our consciousness. A cheap trick of old playwrights was to accompany emotional scenes with soft music, in order to influence the mood of the audience. Despite the fact that their cunning trick was tasteless, it was psychologically based. Musical impressions expand, change and intensify the influence of words and the strength of thoughts and feelings. However, people who are focused on the dramatic action cannot simultaneously pay attention to music (when they do not know the musical piece in question), while music nonetheless reaches the nervous system and influences the mood through the brain, spine, bodily state and lower centers. In that sense, each complicated influence on the emotions is justified: play music to me, talk to me, show me dazzling clothes, ornaments and poses, burn precious essential oils, tempt me with tasty dishes and beverages, give me fine silk and velvet to touch, and all of it at once – capture all my senses – I just want the final result to be artistic enjoyment, artistic satisfaction of the soul.⁸¹

Csáth points out that at the beginning of the twentieth century music was becoming increasingly important in the life of the cultured man. The reason for that becomes more understandable when we take into account the changes and pressure his nervous system goes through every day, while music should provide him with a certain refuge:

Today's man's spiritual life is getting more and more complicated. We are looking for the theories which will make the world happy, we want to give rest to the lonely ship that is our damaged soul in the harbor of enjoyment in which there are no turbulences. We need a certain harmony, a certain supplement. And that is voluntarily offered in music. In good art music.⁸²

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⁸⁰See CSÁTH, "A zeneértés nyelvtana" (A tervezett könyv tartalomjegyzéke és első fejezete) [The grammar of musical understanding: Contents and Chapter 1 of the proposed book], in *A muzsika mesekertje*, 565–568.

⁸¹CSÁTH, "Puccini," in *A muzsika mesekertje*, 10.

⁸²CSÁTH, "A muzsika és a modern élet," in *A muzsika mesekertje*, 170; first published in *Bácskai Hírlap* (April 7, 1907), 5–6.

