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## Nation Building through Solmization. Nationalism and Music Pedagogy in the Context of Zoltán Kodály's Method\*

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In June 1944, in the music journal *Énekszó* edited by Zoltán Kodály's students, an enthusiastic teacher published a short reader's letter about the recently appeared booklets *Szó-Mi* edited by Zoltán Kodály and his pupil, Jenő Ádám:

What interesting and lovely songs emerge from letters and lines, and later from the crotchet heads! You just have to take a good look at which ones belong to the "So"-family (Mi and Do), who always walk together with So, whether Father So walks on the rails or between the rails, and which belong to the hostile "La"-family (Fa and Re), who are avoiding the "So"-family forever.<sup>1</sup> (Salamon 1944: 94)

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<sup>1</sup> "Milyen érdekes és kedves dalok lesznek betűkből és vonalakból, no meg később a bogárfejekből. Éppen csak jól meg kell nézni, hogy melyek tartoznak a szótfogadó Szó családhoz (mi-do), akik mindig együtt sétálnak a szó-val, akár a síneken, akár a sínek között jár Szó papa, s melyek tartoznak az ellenségeskedő La családhoz (fa-re), akik örökké kikerülnek Szó-ékat."

This quote in itself draws attention to the playful pedagogical method that characterizes the series of booklets rich in drawings, through which the authors want to bring music learning closer to the world of little children. At the same time, however, the author of the letter perceives the contradiction between the content and appearance of the published booklet and the date of publication. The publication of the first volume of the booklet *Szó-Mi* was only a few months ahead of Governor Miklós Horthy's unsuccessful attempt to jump out from World War II on October 15, 1944. An article on the negative effect of air raids on singing lessons in schools appeared in the same issue of the journal ("Légítámadás és zenetanítás" 1944: 92-93). But as if music teachers did not want to take note of everyday reality: the same issue contains Benjamin Rajeczky's review (Rajeczky 1944: 88-89) of Jenő Ádám's basic work, *Systematic Singing Teaching Based on the Tonic Sol-fa* (see Ádám 1944), a book that appeared to be the first, detailed summery on the so called Kodály Concept or Kodály Method, which became known world-wide from the 1960s (Szőnyi: 38).

The publication of the *Szó-Mi* booklets and the methodology book of Jenő Ádám are the first milestones in the renewal of school singing education in Hungary. Kodály's interest in the subject is traditionally linked in the musicological literature to the second performance of the composer's 1923 masterpiece, *Psalmus Hungaricus* (Szőnyi: 13). It was then that Kodály got to know the boys' choir of the Wesselényi Street School, in Budapest, which – as the organ of the Academy of Music was under renovation and thus did not work – strengthened the female voices of the choir (Eősze 1977: 102). The experience gained during the rehearsals of the boys' choir aroused the composer's interest in this special medium. In the following years he composed a lot of children choruses.

Despite the composer's contemporaneous writings – the first essay on this topic appeared in 1929 under the title *Children Choirs* (Kodály 1974a: 119-127) – Kodály scholars don't emphasize enough that Kodály's interest in the music education of children and music pedagogy in general served at least two purposes simultaneously: on the one hand, educating the audience of the future, that is, the audience of new Hungarian music based on Hungarian folk song, and on the other hand, strengthening the idea of solidarity. This solidarity was indeed needed in post-World War I Hungary, which was torn apart and wounded in its identity as a result of the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. "That Hungarians do not like to unite – wrote Kodály – is a fatal national error which we should struggle to correct by every means" (Kodály 1974a: 40). Kodály saw singing in a choir as an ideal field for stimulating collabora-

tion (Kodály 1974a: 40). And similarly to the popularization of the practice of choral singing, the development of his music pedagogical concept based on solmization is also interwoven with politics. Without knowing the political context, Kodály's pedagogical ideas, statements and even his compositions cannot be fully understood.

If we try to chart the formation of the method, it is absolutely necessary to start from the chronology, the more so as the historical literature on Kodály's pedagogy has reflected on it very little so far (see Szőnyi; Szabó; Pethő 2011). This is despite the fact that, as we will see, it is not at all indifferent when Kodály wrote about music education: there are significant differences between his thoughts formulated in the mid-1930s and the 1950s. Thus, it is always fruitful to examine what Kodály considers important, which elements he promotes, and what kind of attacks or criticism he responds to in his writings (Péteri 2017: 277-285).

For instance, he spoke for the first time about the problems of singing teaching in his 1934 paper, *Musical Inner-Mission* (Kodály 1964a: 48-50). The date (1934) is of special significance: from 1931 the Hungarian government began to reform and generalize Hungarian public education, and in the following years, until 1941, the system of primary and secondary school education changed continuously (Ujváry 2009: 392-395). As part of this, the government wanted to place education on a more modern methodological basis, which is spectacularly reflected in the methodological renewal of the teaching of reading and writing, primarily in the introduction of cursive writing (Könyves-Tóth 2001: 168). Of course, the new education system also had a racial-ideological background: the state sought to create schools which were specifically Hungarian, which would educate "more Hungarian Hungarians" to use the definition of the Hungarian Scout movement in the 1930s (see Páva 1994). Due to this, the teaching of singing and music had to be based on the Hungarian folk song (Szabó: 63-66). However, the methodology of teaching folk songs, even more so the easy access to Hungarian folk songs – or "peasant songs", as Béla Bartók used to call them – was not worked out until the end of the 1930s.

Kodály had been aware of the pedagogical significance of folk songs much earlier: his children's choirs composed in the mid-twenties were also based on folk songs, largely using melodies of children's games or folk customs. Kodály had noticed the importance of these melodies for the development of children as early as 1916-1917 when he first collected melodies belonging to children's games (see Szalay and Rudasné-Bajcsay 2001). Moreover, in a 1937 article he also drew attention to the fact that music and motion or gymnastics

played an organically interconnected and essential role in children’s learning (Kodály 1964b: 62). At the same time, he also pointed out that the ancient Hungarian children’s games had become part of the Hungarian consciousness over the centuries, so those who did not play such children’s games were “less Hungarian” (Kodály 1964b: 62).

Kodály’s first pedagogical work, the first volume of *Bicinia Hungarica*, was also published in 1937. Table 1 shows when Kodály’s pedagogical vocal compositions for children and young people were created.

<i>Bicinia Hungarica</i>	1937-1942
15 Two-Part Singing Exercises	1941
<i>Let Us Sing Correctly!</i>	1941
<i>So-Mi</i> (with Jenő Ádám)	1943
333 Reading Exercises	1943
<i>Pentatonic Music</i>	1940-1944
Song Collection for Schools (with György Kerényi)	1943-1944
Song Book (8 volumes) (with Jenő Ádám)	1947-1948
<i>Epigrammes</i>	1954
33 Two-Part Singing Exercises	1954
44 Two-Part Singing Exercises	1954
55 Two-Part Singing Exercises	1954
<i>Tricinia</i>	1954
50 Nursery Songs	1962
66 Two-Part Singing Exercises	1963
22 Two-Part Singing Exercises	1965
77 Two-Part Singing Exercises	1967

**Table 1.** Kodály’s pedagogical vocal compositions.

*Bicinia Hungarica*, which expanded into four volumes, was finished in 1942. In 1941 Kodály completed the 15 Two-part Singing Exercises and the booklet *Let Us Sing Correctly!* The eight booklets of *Szó-Mi*, which he put together with his former student, Jenő Ádám, were published in 1943, and at the same time he completed the 333 Reading Exercises. The series *Pentatonic Music* was composed between 1940 and 1944. The two-volume Song Collection for Schools came out in 1943 and 1944; Kodály worked on it with another former pupil, György Kerényi. His other pedagogical works – for example, the series of his two-part exercises – were published after World War II and after the communist take-over in Hungary in 1948. The only publication that preceded the

communists' rise to power was the set of textbooks for the eighth grades of the primary school, edited together with Jenő Ádám.

It is important to search for the actual function of each publication to understand what kind of recipients they were aimed at, and – interpreting them from a pedagogical point of view – what kind of role they assigned to pentatonic scale, solmization or the two-part structure. In the afterword to the first booklet of *Bicina Hungarica* Kodály emphasizes that the main purpose of the use of the pentatonic scale which appears emphatically in the volume is to lead Hungarian children to Hungarian folk music by relying on it (Kodály 1964c: 65). Kodály believed that the characteristic leaps and turns of Hungarian folk music that could be derived from pentatonic scale as Hungarians used it, should be built into the children's consciousness and hearing. This is why his booklets, such as the 333 Reading Exercises or the short pieces of *Pentatonic Music*, are based on the repetition of formulae characteristic of Hungarian folk music. In booklets 3 and 4 of *Pentatonic Music* the children practice turns of melodies of linguistically related nations, that is, Mari and Chuvash melodies. Anyway, it is not easy to sing these exercises correctly. Kodály senses exactly which turns and leaps are difficult to intone and therefore require practice. One example is the leap of fifth, both up and down. In Kodály's view, only those are able to sing the Do-So leap (a fifth) correctly in whom the image of the two tones lives both as a simultaneously sounding interval and as a melodic turn (Kodály 1974c: 216).

Learning characteristic interval leaps within pentatonic structures and repeating folk music formulas lead someone to correct singing. As Kodály put it:

Every interval must be memorized separately, and each in its particular characteristic tonal function, not fitted together as steps of scale. Those who try to sing the larger intervals by climbing up the scale will find them but slowly and vaguely. The scale will sound correctly only when its "pillars" are established in advance, and these "pillars" are notes of the pentatonic scale: C-D-E-G-A, or in solmisation: doy-ray-me-soh-lah (d-r-m-s-l). (Kodály 1974c: 216)

Correct singing and sight-reading, according to Kodály's statement, rest on the recording of intervals in inner hearing. The hearing of intervals is provided by the pentatonic "pillars". Following Kodály's reasoning, scale-based learning does not provide the student with sufficient assurance to hear intervals. Therefore, the C major scale cannot be the basis for teaching correct singing and sight-reading. However, as Kodály writes, there is another pedagogical

benefit of pentatony: “Nowadays it is no longer necessary to explain why it is better to start teaching music to small children through pentatonic tunes: . . . it is easier to sing in tune without having to use semitones (half-steps)” (Kodály 1974b: 221). In the preface to the Song Collection for Schools, Kodály draws attention to the fact that children cannot intone semitones correctly before the age of 8-9: according to Kodály, this is also true of Indo-Germanic children growing up naturally in the major-minor system, but even more so of Hungarians who are accustomed to pentatony (Kodály 1964e: 134).

This statement, however, requires interpretation in both musical and political contexts. In his other writings from this period Kodály also contrast the ancient Hungarian pentatony with the Germanic C major scale (Kodály 1974c: 216-217, Kodály and Ádám 1964: 158, Kodály 1964e: 176). He considers education based on the C major scale – which he calls the “scale method” – to be rejected not only because of the difficult-to-learn semitones, but because understanding them requires too much theoretical knowledge from little children (Kodály and Ádám 1964: 140). But it is obvious that there is a political commitment behind this concept also. It becomes especially apparent in the pairs of opposites used by Kodály: pentatony versus C major scale, Indo-Germanic children versus Hungarian children. In the afterword for *Pentatonic Music* published in 1945, but written at the time of the German occupation in 1944, Kodály not only highlights the advantages of pentatony over the “scale method”, but emphasizes that the use of pentatony plays a decisive role in the formation of Hungarian self-awareness in children. Moreover, Kodály speaks of a “Hungarian-centric” education through which Hungarians can distance themselves from the harmful effects of German pedagogy. As he put it: “A Hungarian child must be introduced to music through the gates of pentatony if we want Hungarians to remain Hungarian, and we want to preserve Hungarian music” (Kodály 1964f: 162).

In *Pentatonic Music* and in the 333 Reading Exercises solmization is the starting point for teaching sight-reading. Kodály emphasizes the advantages of solmization in the afterword of the first booklet of *Bicinia Hungarica* as well:

The textless pieces in the collection want to pave the way for solmization. Our official syllabus recommends it, but not many make use of it. Yet those who have tried it out, will never leave it: it makes fluent sight-reading so much faster. Of course, only the relative solmization, as it defines the role of the tone in the tonality even when the tone got a name. In England it is considered essential at elementary level. (Kodály 1964c: 65)

As early as in the 1930s Kodály was fascinated by English choirs and how music culture was cultivated (Kodály 1964g: 36-37). He referred to John Curwen's method of solmization in his writings (Kodály 1964c: 66).<sup>2</sup> But it is undeniable that – despite his strong anti-German commitment – he mentioned the names of Agnes Hundoegger and Fritz Jöde, and the Tonika-Do method as well in the afterword to the first booklet of *Bicinia Hungarica* (Kodály 1964d: 66). Kodály's students, Jenő Ádám and György Kerényi, who later helped him to elaborate the pedagogical method, had attended Jöde's singing lessons in Berlin as early as in 1930 and 1931 (Székely 2000: 16; Funkhauser 2015: 4-5). Jöde himself gave lectures and public singing lessons in Budapest between January 9 and 15, 1938. The February issue of *Énekszó* provided a detailed account of the event and an explanation of the solmization signs used in the lessons ("Beszámoló Fritz Jöde..." 1938: 510). The graphic elements of these solmizations signs (the drawn hands) used in this issue appeared some years later in the same form in the booklets of *Szó-Mi*, and in Jenő Ádám's earlier mentioned methodological book.

Kodály considered the practice of relative solmization, that is the practice of "movable do" as something that must be followed.<sup>3</sup> According to Kodály's principles, the advantage of the "movable do" practice is manifested on several levels. It helps to learn how to read and write down musical notes, as it can be used as a kind of preparatory writing initially, which can be placed in the five-line staff later. So, the sight-reading of classical music won't cause any problems for the student (Kodály 1964d: 68). But in addition, solmization is also ideal as an analytical aid, as it helps to interpret the role of each tone in a given tonality, and at the same time it helps to visualize the process of modulation as well by showing where someone reaches the new tonality (Dobszay 1967). It also makes it easier to transpose music or to use various keys (Kodály 1964d: 68).

<sup>2</sup> It is important to mention that in the dissemination of solmization not only John Curwen (1816-1880), but his son, John Spencer Curwen (1847-1916) also played an important role. Erzsébet Szőnyi combined the two Curwens in his book (Szőnyi: 12, 27).

<sup>3</sup> Kodály's former student, Antal Molnár, who worked at Budapest's Music Academy as a music theory professor, following French models, used the so-called absolute solmization when teaching in the 1920s. When Jenő Ádám started to teach at the music theory faculty, Kodály advised him to use the relative solmization. In a recollection, Ádám told that his pupils even in 1941 were shocked when he asked them to work with relative solmization (Székely 2000: 105).



Kodály was interested in the questions of sight-reading. Apparently, his starting point was that general literacy should be extended to musical literacy as well – this is why he used the expression “musical illiterate” so often (Kodály 1964h: 117). His interest in kindergarten music education was aroused by his realization that learning to read and write down music cannot be started early enough (Kodály 1974d). To this must be added that the great advantage of abstract solmization hand signals is that they allow to learn sight-reading before the child gets acquainted with the technique of reading letters. Kodály’s interest was, however, caught by the fact that the use of hand signals could develop another skill: inner hearing. As Jenő Ádám writes in his methodological book, when the teacher sings, so to speak, with his or her hand, the children have to recognize the melody and chant it back in their heads (Ádám 1944: 47). The most forward-looking feature of Kodály’s and Ádám’s methodology is, however, that singing teaching based on solmization allows a complex development of different skills. Rhythm is decisive in the development of the moving of a child, the knowledge of a large number of melodies improves memory, studying melodies after hearing increases concentration abilities, and spelling skills as well, and sight-reading and the knowledge of notation helps the development of reading and writing competences. The ability to transpose melodies from one tonality to the other develops the skills in mathematics.

The teaching of music, with the help of solmization, appears in this context as a device for educating perfect Hungarians. This can be seen in the eight booklets of the *Szó-Mi* series which leads someone on the path that children take along in the eight school years. The Hungarianness of the booklets is manifest even in the title. The first volume, written for six-year-old children, has even a subtitle referring to a melody of a children game: “Szólj, síp” (in English: “sound up, pipe”). The two vowels of the two words, “ó” and “í” are the same as in the two solmization signs: “szó” and “mi”, and the melody must be sung on these two tones. Kodály immediately puts in historical and methodological context the symbolic meaning of the two tones:

Szó-Mi transforms the word solmization in a way in which Hungarian ears used to simplify foreign words. Thus, the two sound names are not entirely without logic: they refer to a very common children’s song motif at first. On the other hand, the fact that they do not name two sounds next to each other, refers to the lack of the tone “Fa”. So, the title of the booklet is very suitable in all respects. (Kodály 1964i: 152-153)

According to Kodály's idea the children should depart from this simple monophony to arrive at more complex musical phenomena. In this process two-part singing plays a prominent role. As Kodály put it: "musical work in two parts offers possibilities that unison cannot provide" (Kodály 1974c: 217). In Kodály's concept the monophony of Hungarian folk music is not sufficient enough to develop the ear. Correct singing cannot be provided by the piano accompaniment either: "if the concord is felt to be correct by each of the two groups who sing it – and that is only felt when the tempered pianoforte remains silent – then the interval will also be correct" (Kodály 1974c: 217). Only two-part singing leads to correct singing. As Kodály put it: "Correct unison singing can, paradoxically, be learned only by singing in two parts: the voices adjust and balance each other" (Kodály 1974c: 217).

This explains why Kodály's pedagogical oeuvre includes such a large number of two-part singing exercises: the four volumes of *Bicinia Hungarica*, the booklets of Two-Part Singing Exercises and the volume *Let Us Sing Correctly*, the subtitle of which is Two-Part Choir Exercises. These latter exercises, all without texts, introduce choirs, however, into the singing of Renaissance polyphony. This introduction into music history character appears even more clearly in *Bicinia Hungarica*, the four volumes of which use folk music, historical songs from the Middle Ages, compositions modelled on Renaissance and Baroque styles, and Kodály even refers to the Finno-Ugric tradition in them. The texts are selected from the old and the latest Hungarian poetry. Today we would say that Kodály, when using different styles from the whole music history and Hungarian poetry, takes on a "cultural mediating role" (see Ittész 1999).

The 15 Two-Part Singing Exercises, which was modelled on Bertalotti's Solfeggios, obviously aim to teach older ones, such young musicians who are virtuosos of sight-reading. This volume is the first station in a line of Kodály's music pedagogic works published after 1945. Kodály's writings from the 1950s and 1960s make it clear that it is not enough to provide primary schools with textbooks and exercises booklets, but, in fact, the entire professional teacher training needs to be transformed in order to achieve the idea of "singing Hungary" that he dreamed of in the 1930s. The levels of difficulty of the two-part singing exercises appearing in the series indicate what knowledge Kodály expects from those who plan to be musicians or music teachers according to different levels of musicians training. The 44, 55 and 77 two-part singing exercises are written for high school students, while the 22 two-part exercises with their extraordinary chromatics, and the 33 exercises with the different keys used in the scores provide the curriculum for the student of the Academy of Music. It is noteworthy that Kodály published the two parts of 44

and 55 singing exercises separately, reviving the practice of the 15th and 16th century choir singing. He certainly saw this as a symbol of ideal sight-reading, as his greatest desire was to see an army of children before him, whose members “marched like Donatello’s angels with sheet music in their hands” (Kodály 1964j: 159).

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#### **Kodály, Zoltán and Jenő Ádám**

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