

Revival of Haydn oratorios

The first „historical concerts“ in Hungary from 1872*

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It is perhaps not a generally known fact that after the Vienna premieres the first performance of Haydn's oratorio "The Creation" in an other country was at the Buda Castle on 8th March in 1800. Above the national pride, I think it is important to mention this date because it provides an excellent starting point for examining the frequency and reception of Haydn's oratorio performances in the 19th century Hungary. Within Haydn's oeuvre I chose the genre of the oratorio as the subject of my research because in order to be successful the concert-like performance of these works requires larger ensembles and, correspondingly, considerable financial investment and organisation, which presupposes a well-considered choice of the work to be performed. The latter choice therefore also reflects the taste of the performers and their audiences at the time, and of the changes in these tastes.

As a musician-researcher in the field of early music, I am trying to find out whether these performances could have played a role, and if so, for what reasons, in the development of historical musical thinking in Hungary from the second half of the 19th century. I believe that this question is all the more valid since Viennese classical music, because of its almost constant presence in the concert life, is usually not in the focus of interest by examining the beginnings of the early music movement. In my presentation, I would therefore like to demonstrate the importance of the performances of Haydn oratorios in Hungary in this process by presenting data reflecting the changes in history and in musical taste.

Due to the historical and geographical position of the country being a part of the Habsburg Empire, the Hungarian nobility was closely linked to the Viennese court. Both in their castles at home and in their palaces in Vienna, reflecting the tastes of the court, fashionable music was often played. As a musician, Joseph Haydn was

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himself in the service of the Esterházy Princes, one of wealthiest landowning families in Hungary, from 1761, and as a composer, especially after his travels to England he became increasingly recognised in Vienna too.

The cultural links between Austria and Hungary at the time and the interest in Haydn's new works is illustrated by the fact that all three oratorios composed after 1795 were performed in Hungary very soon after their composition. This is particularly true in the case of the *Seven Words of Christ on the Cross*, which was a revised and rearranged version of his earlier work on the same name for orchestra commissioned for Good Friday in 1786 by Don José Sáenz de Santa María for the Oratorio de la Santa Cueva in Cádiz. From the new version of the piece from 1796 with choir we know of a performance in Eisenstadt before the Vienna premiere and a performance in Győr shortly afterwards (see the Table below). However, I will not go into the performance history of this piece for several reasons. Firstly, compared to the oratorios of the period, neither the form nor the instrumentation of the piece is typical; secondly, the work was performed almost exclusively in church performances and only as part of Good Friday liturgy throughout the country in almost every year of the century. The piece was therefore, in my opinion, more a part of the liturgy than of the concert programmes.

**Joseph Haydn:
The Seven Last Words of Our Saviour on the Cross
(1796)
First performances in Hungary**

Year	Date	Performance	City
1796	26th of March	private performance	Vienna
1797	27th of October	performance for the Palatine	Eisenstadt
1798	1st of April	public performance	Vienna
1798	17th of April	church performance	Győr (Raab)

These diagrams show the distribution of performances of the two works by cities. Unsurprisingly, most of the performances were in Buda and Pest, and it seems that The Creation was much more popular than The Seasons. However, the following reviews of concerts from 1845, the last ones until mid-century, and a report of a later performance of the Creation in Wiesbaden seem to indicate a waning interest in these works.

[T]here were very few listeners, most of the loges of noblemen were empty, although the audience in Cluj might be worthy of praise, they cannot be described as connoisseurs.

7 January 1845 *Múlt és Jelen -Erdélyi Hírlap (Past and Present- Transylvanian News)*

[T]he audience sent only a few representatives instead of themselves, because the winter season has become so boring this year that there is a great prejudice against any such title. And this antipathy became so great that even half of the musicians stayed at home.

30 March 1845 *Budapesti Híradó (Budapest News)*

I know that this work of Haydn is not liked and appreciated everywhere, some people even find it boring and long-winded.

26 October 1858 János Pados in *Delejtű (Compass)*

By the middle of the 19th century the number of Haydn performances in Hungary was visibly decreasing, and then completely disappearing. Despite the enthusiasm of the musical associations, had been formed in the meantime on the Viennese model, which occasionally undertook even to learn oratorios, it was more than thirty years after the last performance of the Creation in Pest in 1840 before the complete work was performed again in the capital. Several reasons can be mentioned for this one-generation hiatus.

In the revolutionary atmosphere of the period, cultural life also underwent significant changes. As part of the country's efforts for independence, the issue of national language and culture is also given an important role. In contrast to the

concerts organised by the aristocratic circles, the ethnically heterogeneous membership of the Hungarian bourgeois associations was not even before the war of independence in 1848 clearly enthusiastic about the arts associated with the imperial court and the Viennese aristocracy. In the multilingual and culturally diverse associations of the Hungarian cities, the question of language was also increasingly challenging because of the different perceptions of different generations. Several sources mention, for example, that in Budapest (then Pest-Buda), the new administrative centre of the country, where 56% of the population was still German-speaking, the Musicians' Society, founded in 1836, had a difficult time choosing repertoire to satisfy the audience. Alongside the oldest, conservative first- or second-generation Germans, the middle-aged, Hungarian-feeling but German-educated class formed the majority of the society, while the youngest generation was of the same mind as the militant Hungarian intellectuals. Although some works sung in Hungarian were performed at the concerts, the latter complained that the predominantly German-language performances did not adequately represent the cause of the development of Hungarian music. Those who did not speak Hungarian well, or whose felt their pronunciation to be inadequate, understandably preferred to sing in their mother tongue.

In the post-revolutionary situation, the most important goal was to create a Hungarian cultural identity as part of the response to the repression. After the suppression of the national movement in the anti-Habsburg public climate that lasted until the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1867, it meant a lot to the Hungarian cultural scene that Franz Liszt, the most famous Hungarian artist, who was surrounded by admirers throughout Europe, also supported the efforts to define a national culture.

This was also the purpose of the first Hungarian music historical research that began at this time. Gábor Mátray, one of our first musicologists, the arranger and curator of the collections of the National Museum and the National Széchényi Library, and also a member of the Academy of Sciences, focused on rediscovering the treasures of the musical heritage of Hungary. As part of his research in folk music, as

early as 1852 he gave a lecture on the collected songs of Sebastyén Tinódi, which he published in his own transcription in 1859 and performed with his students in concert.

This coincided with the growing interest of Romanticism in national music and the musical past across Europe, exemplified by Mendelssohn's early performances of Bach and the Händel Commemorations in England. The monumental oratorio performances in London, Paris and Vienna were regularly reported in the Hungarian press at the time, as were the foundation of the Bach Society in Germany and the related volumes of Bach's complete works. Music-loving readers were certainly not unaware of the reports on Händel performances in Vienna (with works such as *Messiah*, *Athalia*, *Israel in Egypt*), which had become more frequent again since the 1870s.

The second half of the century also saw the reborn music associations throughout the country. Two of the most important of these are the Buda Academy of Music and the Budapest Music Lovers' Association. Both associations were founded in 1867, and from then until the early 20th century they were almost exclusively responsible for organising oratorio performances in the capital. In addition to Mendelssohn's Romantic oratorios, Händel's oratorios, Bach's cantatas and the *St Matthew Passion*, their repertoire also included Haydn's works, so he was already considered one of the great composers of "early music". Although the public interest in the genre does not seem to have diminished, judging by the attendance at concerts, Haydn's works no longer always met the expectations of the public.

This rejection to Haydn's oratorios may also be explained by a change in style and taste over time, and by the transformation of the oratorio style, as confirmed by the review of the Buda Academy's Concert of 10 April 1872.

This work evokes no longer such deep emotions today as it did at the beginning of the century when devotion was surely greater in both performers and audiences. The stilted monotony that pervades the narrative parts of the *Creation*, the long recitatives of the angels as they recount the six days of creation, seems a little tiresome today. Instrumental and picturesque music has also become very rich, and the taste of the

audience has risen considerably since Haydn [...] Today we prefer polyphonic works played from less black paper than the scores of the naive, unspeakably kind, old poet. Liszt recognised the taste of our age and that is why he mingled Romanticism into his masses and oratorios [...]

This is not to say that we do not approve the performance of this oratorio. On the contrary, we are grateful to the music academy for it. We simply wanted to express that the age has evolved, or at least musically changed a great deal, since Haydn. However, just as the works of the old masters, who were surpassed in later years but were the foremost representatives of their time, are of great value in picture galleries, so the works of the same old masters of music composition will always have a prominent place in musical performances too. But the respect for them must not go so far as to neglect the more recent circumstances, and we must confess that yesterday, while listening reverently to Haydn's "Creation", we particularly longed to enjoy more recent works such as Liszt's "Christus" oratorio, for the performance of which - by next autumn - the musical forces of Budapest could really unite.

11 April 1872 *A Hon*

We can see that, when it comes to the oratorios, the reviewer is also advocating a performance of the new Liszt piece, alongside which Haydn's works could be given a place on the concert programmes as the appreciated but now "surpassed" works of an "old master"; a role comparable to that of Händel's rediscovered oratorios at the Baron van Swieten's concerts at the end of the 18th century, when the whole of Europe was still admiring Haydn's new works.

Signs of the "canonisation" of Haydn's oeuvre can also be found in the writings protesting against the modern trends that are dominating concert life, where his name is regularly mentioned among the "classical", immortal composers worthy of preservation, whose works are, in the critics' view, performed too rarely. This topos, the lack of performances of major classical works, is regularly quoted in the press up to the turn of the century and even for years afterwards, sometimes as a counter-example, together with references to the programmes of music societies abroad.

The Budapest audience is not a fan of oratorios. Years go by without a performance of the great choral works of Handel, Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, Mendelssohn, and very few people, only the musically most sensitive, feel the absence of it.

11 January 1900 *Budapesti Hírlap* (*Budapest News*)

The musical taste in our country is developing in a very one-sided way and is only following modern trends. In Vienna and Berlin, musical societies have been formed to present oratorios in which simplicity and clarity unite song with music. Here, the Budapest Music Lovers' Association takes this challenge occasionally. This fine association is perhaps the only one in the country which also cultivates classical music, but it has not been able to undertake the performance of classical works of a larger concept, because of the lack of taste of the audience, so indirectly, lack of funds.

9 January 1900 *Budapesti Napló* (*Budapest Diary*)

But from other critical commentaries, it seems that really only few people miss the more frequent performances of Haydn's oratorios: time has indeed passed these works by.

Our joy at the participation of Music Lovers' [Association] in the popular concerts would have been complete if not this oratorio had been performed. Good old Haydn is the eternal master of quietly humorous, pious music, and whatever directions may prevail in the world's thinking, his string quartets and symphonies of classical clarity and classical simplicity will never fade away. The Seasons, too, have a youth that will not pass away; so long as men shall gather flowers in spring, harvest in summer, gather in autumn, and hunt in winter, this music of charming simplicity will endure. But the vast, majestic drama of the Creation cannot be played out before the people of today with naïve recitatives, smoothly rolling arias and a Rococo orchestra. What power, passion and soaring there is down here, in the dust of the earth is all too little to embody the giant idea. For us, Bach's Mass in B minor and Beethoven's nine symphonies taken together are not enough to express the omnipotent power of Genesis. Even less this music, with its lacy, floury hair, tempered with courtly

delicacy! Of all Haydn's works, this oratorio is the most obsolete, because today drama rules the soul, and we will not accept a pastoral instead of it.

15 February 1892 *Budapesti Hírlap* (*Budapest News*)

About Haydn's music similar ideas were expressed by Austrian and German music critics already from the middle of the century. Although its values were acknowledged, its place in the canon was defined by Adolf Bernhard Marx, Eduard Hanslick and Robert Schumann, among others as a more conservative and outdated precursor of the music of Beethoven, which had already lost its relevance.

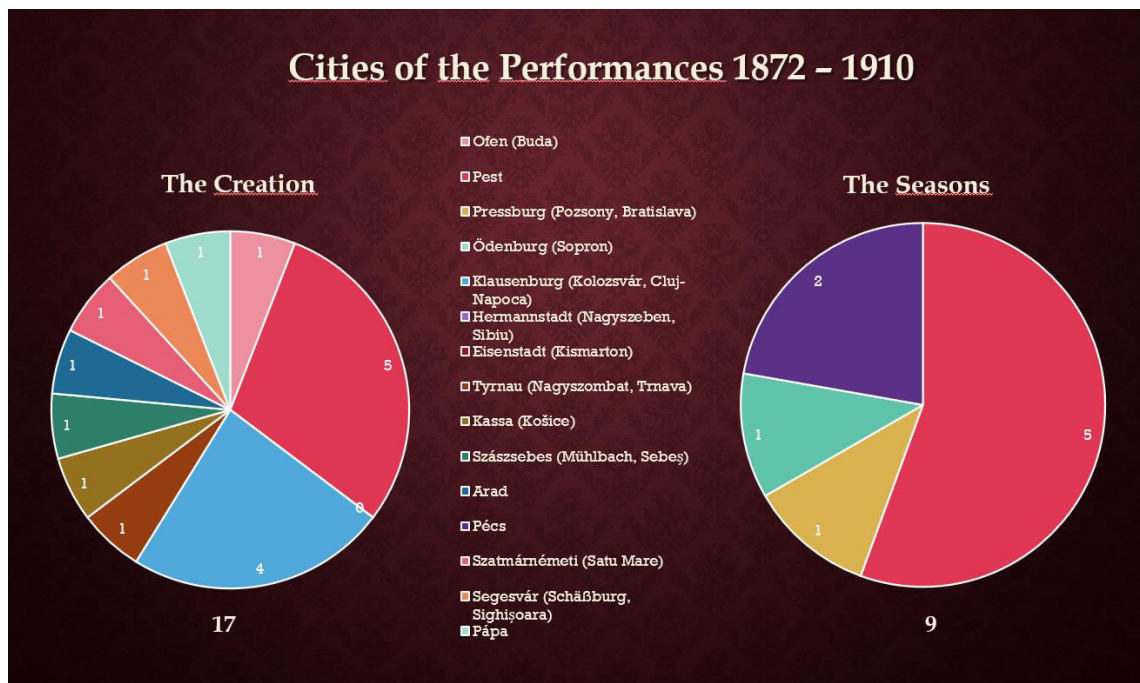
In today's terminology, early music means that we try to perform pieces from earlier times with "period" instruments. From another point of view, however, it is also part of historicism to attempt to revive forgotten music from an earlier era. This was the case with the 1872 performance of the Creation in Pest and, as we have seen, the critics positioned the attempt accordingly: they appreciated the efforts to preserve the works of the outstanding composers of the past, but at the same time warned against giving them too much importance at the expense of more recent art. Don't forget, all this was written after the first performance of the piece in thirty-two years!

Subsequently, The Creation is performed in Pest approximately every ten years until the turn of the century, and the interest in The Seasons, as we can see below, does not show a significantly different picture. What is new, however, is that Creation has been performed in smaller towns too for a single performance.

NUMBER OF PERFORMANCES

1872 - 1911

THE CREATION																																											
1			2									2	4							1				1						1	1			1	1			1			1		
1872	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	1880	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	1890	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	1900	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	1911				
THE SEASONS																																											



We can also see that the number of performances is significantly lower in Pest and Buda, than it was in the first half of the century. However, despite the persistent efforts of the amateur associations, even these rare concerts have met with a fairly strong critical response.

Despite this, interest in the great oratorio compositions of earlier periods has not completely disappeared, and in addition to the performances of Romantic oratorios, performances of Handel's large-scale works have also been given in Hungary, following the fashion in Western Europe. An "early music" repertoire was thus emerging, which from the very beginning included the oratorios of Haydn. The true establishment and development of the genre, however, would only take place within the framework of the Budapest Choir and Orchestra Association, which operated under the leadership of Emil Lichtenberg between 1908 and 1944.

We can therefore say that, in addition to the research of the heritage of Hungarian national music, the reappearance of Haydn oratorios, which had been forgotten in Hungarian musical life for thirty years, thanks to the aforementioned 19th century associations and their enthusiastic leaders, from the 1870s onwards contributed to the awakening and maintenance of interest in the musical past, which later served as the basis for the emergence and positive reception of early music movement in Hungary.

Abstract

The amateur musical associations, slowly formed on the Viennese model, played a very important role in the spread of the Hungarian oratorio cult, including the works of Haydn, already in the first half of the 19th century. The turbulent period of the War of Independence and the Reconciliation in 1867 brought changes in the structure of the associations, which were slowly re-establishing themselves after a period of forced inactivity in cultural life, both in national and social terms. At the same time, interest in the national past and its cultural heritage was also heightened by the Romanticism sweeping across Europe. All this had a significant impact on the reception of Haydn's oratorios, which reappeared in the repertoire of amateur ensembles after thirty years, from 1872 onwards: although critics praised these performances, the works themselves were clearly described as "outdated", "old music" that should be preserved as part of the heritage of the past, but not performed too often in order to maintain the primacy of the contemporary compositions. Haydn's oratorios, later with the rediscovered works of Handel and Bach, thus from the beginning became part of the emerging early music repertoire, and a defining element of the oratorio cult reinforced by the work of Emil Lichtenberg and his ensembles in the early 20th century. The article by Szabolcs Illés with the help of contemporary concert reviews describes this transformation, which is also important for the history of the early music performance in Hungary.