

FERENC LISZT'S RIGHT-HAND MAN – A PORTRAIT OF JÁNOS VÉGH DE VEREB

(László Gombos)



The composer János Végh de Vereb (1845-1918), a former vice-president of the Music Academy and a close associate of Ferenc Liszt, is considered one of the so-called "minor composers" by those who have heard of him at all. They can hardly think otherwise, as they presumably do not even know him. And they cannot know him, since his works have hardly been played for nearly a hundred years, and the situation was not essentially different in his own time either. If, when getting to know him as a composer, he would still be evaluated as minor, his role as a figure in music life can still be significant, representative of a certain field or at least interesting. It is therefore always worthwhile exploring works by these kind of artists as well as other documents of their activities, as mapping all this information is essential for getting to know and understand a particular period.

In the case of János Végh, a significant step forward has finally been made: a short monograph about him by Ferenc János Szabó has been published as the 42nd volume of the *Hungarian Composers* series.¹ The Budapest Music Center is responsible for the publication and the editor and series editor is Melinda Berlász, a grand master of the musical cartography of past decades. Melinda launched her niche series 25 years ago, recording the most essential information on Hungarian composition history of the past two centuries for current and future generations. By marking out the

musical cardinal points, coordinates and major routes, she has given us navigational tools so that we do not have to wander blindly through the impenetrable jungle of data or the desert of missing information. Volume 42 is in itself one of the important signposts, while serving as a compass to the oeuvre of a now little-known composer.

In recent years, Ferenc János Szabó has done all-round work on János Végh, breaking with the usual chronology of the phases of discovery. Together with the research and analysis of the sources and a synthesis of similar results by others, he has also been actively involved in bringing the musical compositions to life. In fact, the music historian has not only become an organiser, but as a pianist he has sat down at the instrument himself on several occasions (this aspect of his knowledge makes his judgements on music more credible: he can play with a light touch what many can only talk about). In 2016, when he was looking for new compositions for a concert programme for his students majoring in singing, he was only interested in a few songs, but later he became an expert on the Végh oeuvre by compiling and recording a complete disc, researching the relevant music history, writing a detailed catalogue of works and performing further compositions.

His book confirms, first of all, that it is not by chance that we are not familiar with Végh's compositions, as most of them have not been published, or included in the concert repertoire, while others are lost or only accessible in fragments. Both the composer's personality and his civic vocation may have played a role in this. He was never attracted to public performance: while Ferenc János Szabó has given us abundant evidence of his excellence as a pianist, his book contains only a few accounts of Végh's performances to a small circle. On these occasions, Végh collaborated with others, mostly performing piano pieces for four or more hands, or, more rarely, accompanying a violinist or a singer. Moreover, he had no ambitions to publish or perform his fairly large number of compositions. He apparently did not invest any energy in promoting them, even though his high social position, financial situation and extensive contacts would have given him ample opportunity to do so. We do not know of any solo concerts or recitals by him – in my opinion, the obstacle to this must have been precisely Végh himself.

Such an attitude is rare from a romantic musician, but all the more fitting for a judge doing his utmost to preserve his independence (and even more so the appearance of it in public). And Véghe worked in that area throughout his whole life, while continuously climbing higher in the hierarchy: from 1873 he was abstractor (entry level official) at the Budapest Royal Court of Appeals, from 1879 junior judge at the Royal District Court of the Budapest 5th District, then from 1882 judge at the Commercial and Exchange Lawcourt of Budapest. Three years later he was appointed deputy judge and in 1887 full judge at the Court of Appeals, and eventually, at the peak of his career, the King Franz Joseph appointed him Senior Justice at the Curia (Supreme Court) in 1897. Obviously, Véghe avoided appearing to be beholden to anyone, and could not accept the favours and patronage that an artist might receive on a daily basis. His independence went hand in hand with a certain degree of solitude, so that he could also have written Joachim Joseph's well-known motto on his flag *frei aber einsam* (free but alone). At the same time, in some social circles, composing might play the role of an intellectual pursuit in which there would arise no question of sharing events or results with anyone other than those in the know.

This in itself makes the figure of János Véghe de Vereb, a landowner from Fejér County, who had to choose between two professions, interesting. His heart was drawn towards music, but he chose the legal profession for the sake of a more secure livelihood and probably because of the *"thorns that grow around the career of an artist"*.² In addition, he went on playing music in his two homes in Vereb and Budapest, and also composed music – and that at an outstanding level, in the opinion of Ferenc János Szabó. The following statement in his book is easy to verify: *"The songs composed after 1870 place János Véghe among the most original Hungarian composers of the period."* The aforementioned disc, released by the pianist and music historian in 2021, contains 27 of Véghe's songs, and the works, which are given excellent performances, speak for themselves.³ As I already exposed in my review about the CD in Nr. 46 of this journal in 2021, Véghe's songs are not the efforts of a half-educated dilettante, but valuable, complex and inspired compositions.

Apart from the songs, only three string quartets by Véghe have been released on the record market: the F major, G minor and D major quartets in 2013.⁴ At a first hearing, these works do not sound as powerful as the songs on the other album (the not always crystal clear intonation may play a role in that feeling), but they are interesting, too, and deserve to be performed more often, at least in Hungary. In addition to these, Ferenc János Szabó has reported on a number of chamber works, including piano trios with a Schumann and sometimes Brahms influence, a piano quartet, cello-piano pieces from the composer's youth and a violin sonata dedicated to Jenő Hubay. The latter was also published and was therefore occasionally performed even after the composer's death. From among the vocal works with a larger format, the cantata *Fent és alant* (Above and beneath) has been performed in public several times, while the cantata *Ostermorgen* (Easter Morning) remains unperformed.



Special mention should be made of the "orchestral works", which can be misunderstood if we set out from the category name alone. In the catalogue of works, the two "symphonies" could have been put in the chamber orchestra category: one of them, *Symphonia*, only survives as a fragment, and the other is *Grosse Symphonie No. 2 für kleine Leute* (Grand Symphony No. 2 for Small People). I am not convinced that these are really works composed for children, but rather jocular compositions for the whole circle of family and friends, which could be performed even by children (unfortunately I haven't been able to track down the manuscript sources, so I can only phrase my suspicions). The term "children's instruments" seems even less appropriate, since the triangle, side-drum, chimes, metallophone, cymbal and clapper are used in "adult" music, too. The second piece is obviously a Beethoven parody: in the fourth movement, the "choir" begins to sing just like in the Ninth. On January 22nd 2020, thanks to Ferenc János Szabó and his father Ferenc Szabó, the composition was performed by students of the Weiner Leó Music School in Szigetvár: the music historian and pianist played the demanding piano solo intended for adult musicians, which even the youngest could join in with great pleasure, however. I hope that their example will be widely followed, as this is a truly splendid and imaginative piece, which I heartily recommend to all music schools and music-loving circles of friends!⁵

Roman Catholic Church, Vereb
– scene of the Véghe Memorial Concert

Chamber music for several pianists was probably at the heart of János Végh's musical world. In addition to the four-hand works, he composed a three-piano piece for 12 hands with the title *Conversation*, as well as eight-hand versions of Liszt's *Dante Symphony*, *Grand galop chromatique* and *Csárdás macabre*, and of Hans von Bülow's *Königsmarsch*. Ferenc János Szabó assumes that the two four-hand waltz suites (*Suite en forme de valse No.1-2*) by Végh may also have inspired Dohnányi's series for two pianos with a similar title (*Suite en valse*), as two Dohnányi pupils, György Faragó and Béla Böszörményi-Nagy performed Végh's compositions on the radio in 1938. The possibility seems plausible, although it should be noted that the two young musicians were no longer in Dohnányi's class at the time, and Dohnányi originally composed the mentioned waltzes for orchestra in 1943, and only transcribed them for two pianos in early 1947 (and not in 1945, as it is often stated in the literature).

As Ferenc János Szabó wrote, Végh preferred to sit down at the piano with his fellow musicians.⁶ At Ferenc Liszt's home, for example, he played four-hand transcriptions of symphonic poems by Ödön Mihalovich with the composer – once *A sellő* (The Mermaid) and on another occasion *Hero and Leander*. Once they even performed the *March of the Three Holy Kings* from Liszt's *Christus* oratorio in a trio with the Master, while at a soiree given by the wife of Baron József Eötvös, the three of them and the host together performed the aforementioned *Königsmarsch* transcription by Bülow-Végh. In one of his letters, Liszt mentioned János Végh among his "usual four-hand companions", which would give him a role in music history in its own right and might justify Végh becoming the subject of research and a small monograph independently of the music he composed. For a decade, Végh belonged to the circle of the elderly master's closest friends. He became a member of the Board of Directors of the Music Academy in 1880, and then worked as Vice Chairman of the institution from 1881 to 1887. As Liszt's deputy and right-hand man, he took a huge burden off the master's shoulders as he helped him to fulfil the tasks of leading and managing the Music Academy.

In return, he was honoured with the love and appreciation of one of the century's greatest musicians. Compared to all this, it is almost irrelevant to what extent the words of Liszt's letter, also quoted by Ferenc János Szabó, can be considered an objective assessment of Végh's achievements as a composer, or how much they served to encourage a loyal colleague and friend. *"Your Suite en forme de valse is one of the most excellent and most charming works, full of fortunate and tasteful ideas, with nothing too much or too little of anything in it. I have played it here myself several times, and had it played by eminent pianists: its distribution will, it goes without saying, continue – even in America, because your Suite deserves to be performed and applauded everywhere."*⁷ Prior to this, Liszt had composed a two-handed concert version of the piece, with the title *Valse de concert*, in which, similarly to his paraphrases, he dressed up the original piano work in new clothes.

There is a wealth of useful information collected by Ferenc János Szabó on the musicological role of this judge and composer, which is eventually all part of János Végh's evaluation. Over the decades, Végh was a member or leader of a wide variety of associations and committees, and many people benefited from his legal knowledge in connection with his efforts for the common good. It is obviously just a typographical error that 1899 is named in the book as the beginning of his membership of the board of the Budapest Chamber Music Association, instead of 1897, in a volume in which the author has reliably and precisely processed the sources at his disposal, has arranged his statements logically and has expressed authoritative opinions throughout his writing.

It should be noted, however, that there are numerous small signs of carelessness in the volume, inconsistencies, errors of wording, logic and spelling that do not affect the substance, and automatically disappear from the text in a translation. It is not by chance that works by highly qualified but elderly and more forgetful professors have long been corrected by young proofreaders with keen eyes, whom Ferenc János Szabó will not need for a long time to go, but is only due rests in the midst of a workload that is enough for several people. Then there would not be so many word repetitions in the text, of which pages 21-23 stand out, where the word "dal" (song) appears at least 42 times. It is also worth being careful with the beautiful old music score title pages, since in French the titles of works have only the first word, except for proper names, written with a capital initial letter (*Grand galop chromatique; La valse; Suite en valse* etc., or likewise: *Magyar cantate*). The official names of institutions, on the other hand, should be written with all capital initial letters (e.g. Royal District Court of the Budapest 5th District, Uránia Hungarian Scientific Theatre). Among the minor inconsistencies is the fact that *Fent és alant* is sometimes referred to as an oratorio and sometimes as a cantata, and also that the instruments of the "children's symphonies" are named partly in German in the Hungarian context (Glockenlyra, Triangel, Klappen-Trompete).



Véghe János sírja Vereben
János Véghe's tomb in Vereb

In the bibliographical data and in the references, some commas and a lot of full stops could certainly be dispensed with (for example, we traditionally do not put full stops after years and page numbers, and moreover commas and semicolons adhering to full stops do not look good, nor do commas before parentheses in a sentence). In the abbreviations of a bibliography, it is also more refreshing to the eye to omit full stops (heg, br, gka instead of heg., br., gka.), but consistency would be even more important. For the word “hárfa” (harp), the familiar abbreviation “hrf” is better than “hr”, and for the word “zenekar” (orchestra) the commonly used “zkr” instead of “zk”. In the case of four-handed works, it is unnecessary to write that they are played on one piano, since if two people play two different instruments, we already talk about pieces for two pianos. I dare not go on with the list of such examples, for fear that someone would think of imposing a rigid standardisation of all similar publications (or of enforcing all the “set in stone” spelling rules, which are often meaninglessly changed from one to another). The freedom of authors is worth much more than that, because, although it leads to minor inconsistencies, it offers wider possibilities for the creation of writings such as this monograph by Ferenc János Szabó, writings which successfully explore our musical past.

NOTES:

1. Ferenc János Szabó: *Verebi Véghe János* (János Véghe de Vereb). *Magyar Zeneszerzők* (Hungarian Composers) series, Volume 42, edited by Melinda Berlász (Budapest: Budapest Music Center, 2022).
2. Szabó quotes a writing by Véghe about Count Albert Amadei in 1896, p. 14.
3. János Véghe: *Songs*. Zsófia Staszny, Nóra Tatai and Lóránt Najbauer – singing, Ferenc János Szabó – piano. Private edition, SZFCD 001 (2021). The accompanying study to the CD was written by Ferenc János Szabó.
4. János Véghe: *String Quartets*. Authentic Quartet (Zsolt Kalló, Balázs Bozzai, Gábor Rác, Csilla Vályi). Hungaroton, HCD 32726 (2013). The accompanying study was written by Enikő Gyenge.
5. One of the movements is available on the Internet from the performance in Szigetvár given the following year (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPS1iPPovAg>).
6. Szabó, p. 25.
7. Liszt's letter to Véghe from Weimar, on November 2nd 1883. Quoted by Szabó (p. 27). We have corrected the typographical errors based upon the publication in the journal *Muzsika* in 1929.