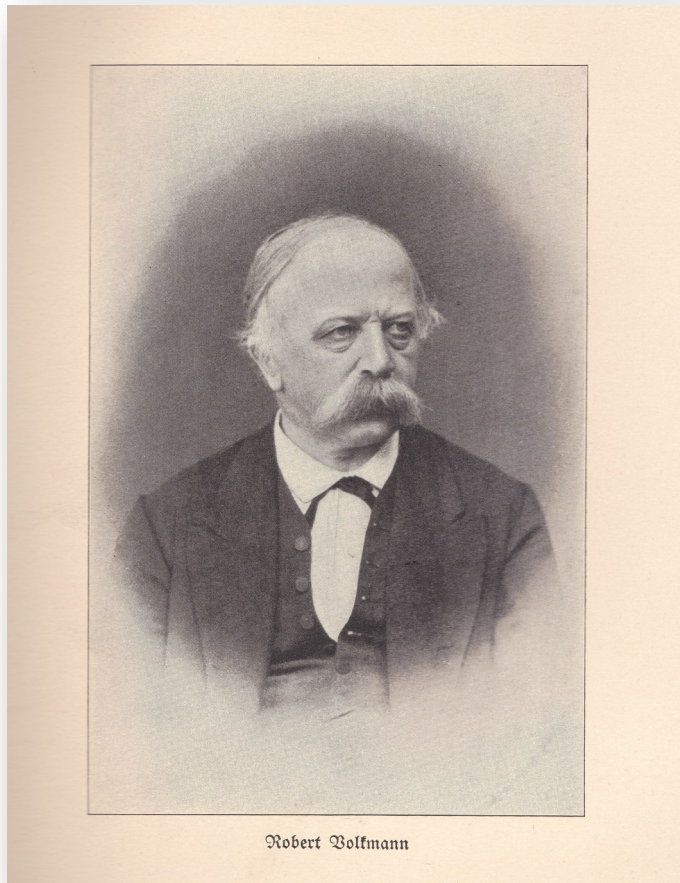


Volkman tehát valójában nem illett egyik zenei táborba sem. Darabjainak hangzása Wagner vagy Liszt helyett inkább Schubertet vagy Mendelssohnt, máskor Chopint idézi, és ugyanolyan távol van Brahms súlyosveretű muzsikájától is. Nevét az újabb generáció sem tűzhetné zászlajára, mivel zenéje nem mutat előre sem Richard Strauss, sem Debussy vagy Bartók irányába. Az az igazság, hogy ő nem is akart mutatni se erre, se arra, és sosem törekedett arra, hogy korszerűnek tartásák. Szerencsére a közönség nem „naptárral a zsebében” jár koncertre (ellentétben néhány zenetudóssal), azaz a mű megítélését nem attól teszi függővé, hogy az néhány évtizeddel előbb vagy később keletkezett, hanem hogy megragadja-e a muzsika. Mikusi felülemelkedett ezeken a kérdéseken, és nem készített se véd-, se vádiratot Volkman érdekében vagy ellenében. Inkább az olvasó rendelkezésére bocsátotta a nagy gondtal kiválasztott és logikusan elrendezett információkat arról a komponistáról, aki idegenből érkezve sokat tett a magyar zenei élet felvirágoztatásáért, és műveiben – kulturális identitását megőrizve – mindvégig saját nyelvén beszélt választott hazájáról.

## VOLKMAN, THE UNKNOWN ACQUAINTANCE – THOUGHTS IN REFERENCE TO A SHORT MONOGRAPH

(László Gombos)

There is hardly one music lover in Hungary who has not encountered the art of Robert Volkman on numerous occasions, heard one of his trios and string quartets, the popular *Serenade for Strings in F major* or the *Richard III Overture* at concerts or on the radio. In Volkman's case, we are talking about a composer about whom numerous writings were published already during his lifetime and then in the decades after his death, whose works are accessible and some of which are still present in today's concert life. Nowadays his name is mainly associated with Ferenc Liszt in the musical literature, because, with Liszt's approval, he was eventually chosen as the first professor of composition at the Academy of Music in Budapest, and despite his German roots, he became an active participant in the musical life of 19<sup>th</sup> century Pest-Buda and Budapest. Whereas Liszt returned to Hungary year after year, Volkman found a hearth here as a leading member of the music world, and together with his fellow musicians he provided the constant environment that made it worth the world's musical greats visiting our country at that time.



Robert Volkman

In the light of all this, we might believe that there is little point any more in publishing further shorter summaries about him until a modern, comprehensive Volkman monograph is written. I had to revise my view, however, when I came across a small monograph by Balázs Mikusi, published a few years ago. It dawned on me that the 41<sup>st</sup> volume of the *Hungarian Composers* series edited by Melina Berlász fills in an existing gap. We know little more than a few generalities about Volkman, even though he is familiar to everyone, and most of his works are also unknown to us: as if we saw the portrait of our great-grandfather every day on the wall or in the display case, while the actual aspects of his life, his personality traits and his former ambitions had become all but forgotten. Mikusi's work is nothing else than a 36-page condensed version of the missing monograph. It is useful reading not only for interested musicians but also for music historians, and particularly practical for those who, as authors of concert reviews, concert programmes and radio programmes, do not have the opportunity to wade through detailed studies and volumes written in German for the sake of a few reliable data.

The first thing that strikes you when reading this short monograph is the objectivity of the author. Due to the conciseness resulting from the genre, it cannot be a colourful reading: a third of the 36 pages is occupied by the detailed catalogue of works and bibliography; in addition to the prelims, only eight and a half pages are devoted to the biography and nine to the presentation of the works and style. The wealth of important information does not allow for digressions or personal statements, yet Volkmann's figure is brought to life in the pages of the book, together with a slice from the period to which his work was linked. Of particular interest are the quotations from letters which bring the figure of the composer closer to the reader.

However, in addition to the actual quotations, there are a striking number of words or phrases in quotation marks, which Mikusi has used, perhaps unintentionally or subconsciously, to emphasise his impartiality. It is as if, as an objective observer, he were taking a step back to distance himself from the subject under scrutiny and putting his words into the mouths of his characters. Such expressions include "new school" in relation to composers, "intermezzo" in reference to the Vienna years, "progressive" forces, the composer who "returned" to Pest or the adjective "cosmopolitan" associated with Mosonyi, "turning back" after composing the *Trio in B flat minor*, a "modern" composition or a composition of the "light" genre.

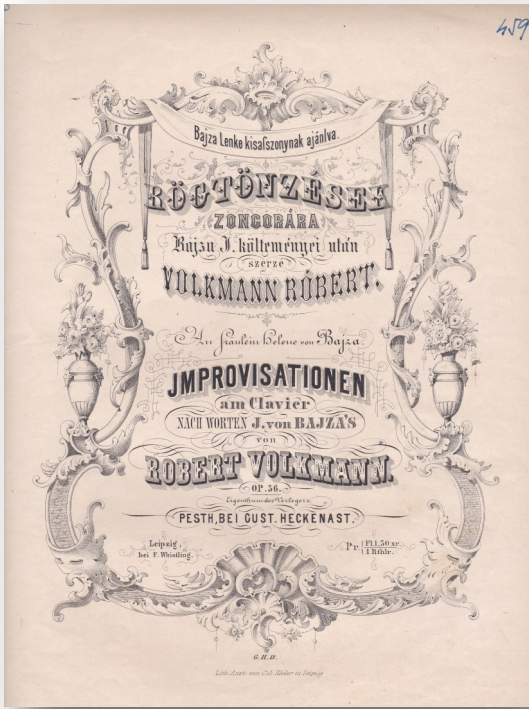
Mikusi's objectivity can also be noticed in his presentation of the two opposing pair of views that defined Volkmann's entire life and work: whether the composer should be considered Hungarian or German, and whether he should be considered conservative or progressive. The book provides a wealth of information on these issues, but the author has not taken a position on the questions that were so important to Volkmann and his contemporaries. Anyone with a profound knowledge of the period will easily understand that Mikusi could not provide answers to what is unanswerable. In today's terms, it is not possible to describe clearly who and what was considered German or Hungarian in contemporary Pest, a city with a German majority population and at the same time one of the focal points of the Hungarian national movement, nor can we understand looking back from another century the once burning problem of musical modernity.

A musician of German education, who had moved from Saxony to Pest, Volkmann remained German all his life, despite having spent most of his adult years in Hungary. He never learnt Hungarian and by his musical style he can be considered the heir to Schubert, Mendelssohn and Schumann. After his studies in his native Lommatzsch, then in Freiberg and Leipzig, he became a tutor in 1840 in Szemeréd, Hont County, in the castle of the widowed Countess Stainlein-Saalenstein. He continued living on Hungarian soil from the age of 25, from 1841 in Pest, and from the mid-1860's in the Buda Castle until his death in 1883. The only exception was the three and a half years between 1854 and 1858 when he stayed in Vienna for employment reasons.

Volkmann was one of the few people who made a living for decades almost exclusively from composing. Except in his last years, he was engaged only for a few short spells as a teacher or organist, and, unlike most composers of his time, he had no income as a performer. He therefore tried his luck in the mid-1850's in the wealthier Vienna. After a short time, however, he felt a strong sense of homesickness, not for Saxony, as a German, but for Hungary! He wrote to a friend in December 1855: "*Whenever I think of Pest, my heart leaps, I feel that I am actually at home there after all*". In addition to the compelling capital, it was his friends and fellow musicians that meant home for him: Ferenc Brunszvik and his wife, Ferenc and Károly Doppler, Ferenc Erkel, Károly Huber, Károly Thern and many others.

Even during his years in Vienna, he spent several summers in Pilismarót as a guest of the publisher Gusztáv Heckenast. The acquaintance became a friendship that changed his whole life. With Volkmann in mind, Heckenast extended his portfolio by publishing sheet music, and for 21 years from 1857 until the publisher's death, he published each of his works on favourable financial terms. Heckenast's generous support made it possible for Volkmann to settle permanently in the Hungarian capital in 1858 (he even provided him with a free apartment for several years). Volkmann also expressed his attachment to his new homeland with symbolic acts such as his participation in the defence of Pest in 1849 as a national guard. Mikusi describes the event objectively, based on a letter, to which we might add, from the narrative of his former pupil Count Géza Zichy that the composer "*wore the tricoloured cockade and was enthusiastic about the fight for freedom.*"

Volkmann chose Hungarian themes for many of his compositions. Examples include *Souvenir de Maróth* (1862) for piano, the *Visegrád* cycle (1856) of 12 pieces, and the fantasy *At the Tomb of Széchenyi* (1860). Mikusi also found evidence that the composer had planned a Hungarian opera in the mid-1860's. Volkmann's music, however, was fertilised by his impressions in the Hungarian countryside only to the extent of one or other single rhythm or motif. He did not adopt what were then considered typical Hungarian elements like the rather external and formal verbunkos turns and phrases. On the other hand, Mikusi cited numerous examples of how his Hungarian and foreign contemporaries had mentioned Hungarian tones in the case of Volkmann's works in which we can hardly detect a national character today. He explains this by the fact that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century they may have been more sensitive to musical subtleties that have lost their significance by now.



Volkmann: Improvizációk – borító és első oldal (Készült Gustav Heckenast nyomdájában)  
 Volkmann: Improvisations – cover and 1st page (printed by Gustav Heckenast)

A test of the composer's affection for his new homeland was the invitation he received to become professor at the Academy of Music, which opened in 1875. Just the year before, he had turned down a similar offer from the Vienna Conservatoire, knowing that the time-consuming work of preparation would mean he would have to give up his primary vocation of composing. By this time, he was already an established composer whose works were being performed all over Europe, but he (would have) had to develop the curriculum and methodology for his music theory courses upon the invitation. What he did not do for the Emperor's city, he did for the newly established Hungarian institute, with all its uncertain future, after much persuasion from his friends. Indeed, in the last eight years of his life, he composed remarkably little, but he taught several of the most important Hungarian composers of the turn of the century: Károly Aggházy, Henrik Gobbi, Viktor Langer, Gyula J. Major, Béla and Károly Szabados. We can add an unofficial but all the more important pupil to Mikusi's selected list, Jenő Hubay, as he went on to hold a leading position at the Music Academy and in Hungarian musical life for a full 50 years. He recalled his relationship with Volkmann thus: "When I had to prepare a performance of a new Volkmann quartet, Volkmann would invite me to his house, and sometimes I would spend half a day with him; I can say that these were extremely interesting mornings. On such occasions Volkmann even became talkative. He explained the nature of the quartet in question, told me how he imagined it should be performed, and finally we sat down at the piano and played the composition from the score. As he was an extremely poor pianist, [...] he added all sorts of delightful and interesting comments to the missing chords."

As mentioned above, Balázs Mikusi provides a lot of useful information about Volkmann's nationality and the problems raised by the issue. Another important topic is related to the modernity of Volkmann's music. The composer was often caught in the crossfire of controversy, as he was presented alternately as a representative of sometimes the one and sometimes the other of the main German musical trends of the time. What appealed to the conservative camp outraged the adherents of the "New German" school, marked by the names of Wagner and Liszt, and vice versa. When Volkmann sought new ideas, he was already criticised from both sides.

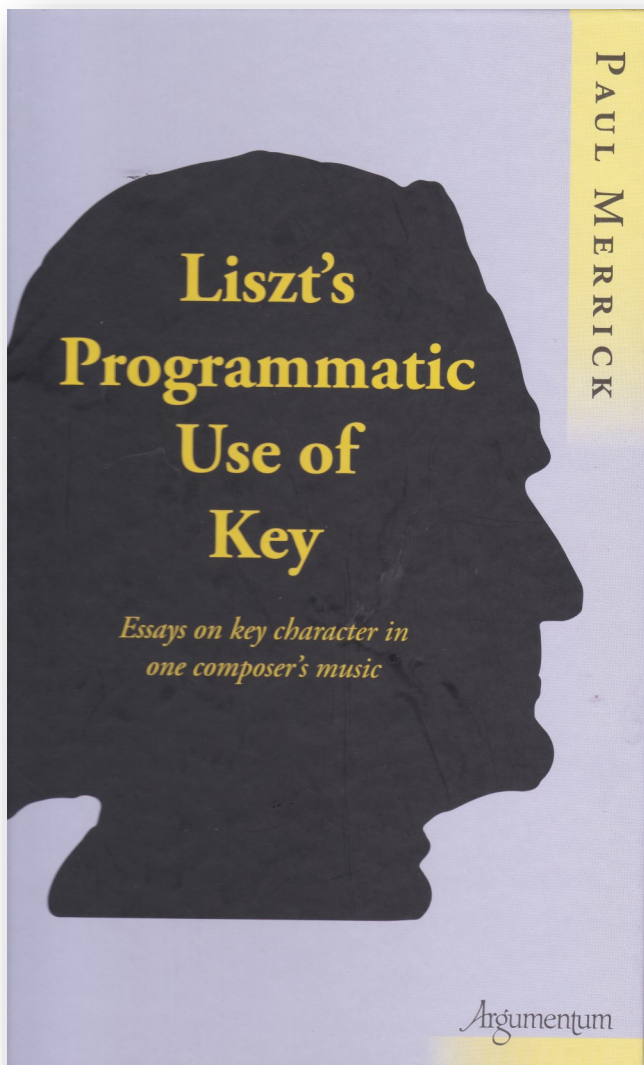
Balázs Mikusi illustrates the contrasting views with the stylistic differences between two piano trios, the F major and B flat minor: "The former, typical of Volkmann's compositions of the early 1840's, is primarily a reinterpretation of the Beethovenian tradition [...] but its being easy to perform had made it extremely popular in non-professional musicians' circles even before its publication in 1852. In contrast to the F major piece, speaking of the hands of the well-groomed Dr Jekyll, the B flat minor Trio, which finally brought international acclaim as well, seems to have come from the workshop of Mr Hyde, wrestling with his demons." (I must confess that after listening to both pieces I felt that the differences, which had been highly appreciated at the time, had almost come to naught by now.) At the same time, Mikusi uses apt and illustrative quotations to present the problems Volkmann faced as a composer. These include a passage from a letter to a friend in 1864: "Some people still think I am a Zukunfts Musiker, while others want to see me in a pigtail [i.e. an old-fashioned wig]; what do You think? All I know is that I want to be neither "the musician of the future" nor a pigtail, but merely Volkmann, and that is my misfortune: people find it hard to forgive such a lack of principle."



Thus, Volkmann did not really fit into any of the musical camps. The sound of his compositions is more reminiscent of Schubert or Mendelssohn – in other cases Chopin – than Wagner or Liszt, and it is just as far away from the heavy and serious music of Brahms. The new generation could not have put his name on the banner either, because his music does not point in the direction of Richard Strauss, Debussy or Bartók. The truth is that he did not want to point in either direction, and he never aspired to be considered as modern. Fortunately for him, audiences do not go to concerts with a “calendar in their pockets” (unlike some musicologists), which means that their appreciation of a work does not depend on whether it was written a few decades earlier or later, but on whether the music captivates them. Mikusi has risen above these questions and made neither an indictment of nor a plea against or for Volkmann. Rather, he has provided the reader with carefully selected and logically arranged information about a composer who, coming from abroad, did much to vitalise Hungarian music and who, while preserving his cultural identity, spoke of his adopted country in his own language throughout his works.

## LEVÉL PAUL MERRICKNEK, ÚJ KÖNYVÉRŐL

(David Butler Cannata)



### ELŐSZÓ

Egy tegnap érkezett e-mailben Eckhardt Mária elmagyarázta, milyen problémák merültek fel Paul Merrick legutóbbi könyve, a *Liszt's Programmatic Use of Key (A hangnem mint program Liszt zenéjében, Budapest, 2021)* [megígért] recenziójával kapcsolatban. Mivel hallotta, hogy én közvetlenül a szerzőnek megírtam, mennyire csodálom a művét, megkérdezte, hozzájárulnék-e, hogy véleményemet a recenzió helyett közöljék. Azonnal beleegyeztem, abban a tudatban, hogy Mr. Merrick tudományos tevékenységét mindig is tiszteltem, Mme Eckhardt és valamennyi magyar Liszt-kutató részéről (túl sokan vannak, hogy név szerint említsem őket) pedig sok kedvességet tapasztaltam. Míg az alábbi levél Mr. Merrick tulajdona marad, a szavak az enyémek. Kihagytam az eredeti levélből néhány személyes megjegyzést (ezeket [...] jelzi), de szívesen megosztom mindenkivel a szakmai véleményemet, és kiegészítettem néhány hivatkozással, hogy kezdeti kósza megjegyzéseimet némileg meggyőzőbbé tegyem. Hálás köszönet a fordítónak.

2023. április 22-én

Kedves Paul,

[...]

Végül GRATULÁLNI szeretnék az új könyvedhez és legutóbbi, *The Hungarian Review*-beli cikkedhez.<sup>1</sup> Jól láttad, és helyénvaló is, hogy cikked reklám a könyvnek, csodálatos bevezetés egy új segédkönyvhöz, amelynek valamennyi Liszt-kutató kézikönyvtárában (*Handbibliothek*) meg kellene lennie. A cikk igen élvezetes ízelítő a nagyobb műből, és igen örvendek, hogy mindkettőt megkaptam. Köszönöm.

Csak nemrég tudtam megemészteni a *Liszt's Programmatic Use of Key*-t. Ebben az elmúlt két hétben a műved gyönyörűséget szerzett nekem, kihívást jelentett, elbűvölt, mély benyomást keltett bennem, és olyan hálás vagyok, hogy ezt most hozta ki belőlem. Azon tűnődöm, hogy az *Intimatio Christi: Liszt's Musical Contemplations* (előkészületben) még csak bennem van, de a te munkád, amelyről már sok éve tudtam, határozottan meg fogja könnyíteni és remélhetőleg lehetővé teszi az ényemet.