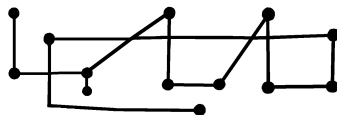


SEARCHING FOR THE COMPOSER'S ROLE IN PETER EÖTVÖS' FIRST CREATIVE PERIOD (1963–1989)*



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“IN DEINER ROLLE LACHT DIE KUNST SICH SELBST AUS.” This quotation is taken from Peter Eötvös’s *Radames* of 1975.¹ It is how the German theater director instructs the singer of the double figure Aida and Radames using long German philosophical and methodological explanations to facilitate interpretation. The sentence has symbolic significance for all who try to understand the first creative period of Eötvös’s life as a composer. One can even say that every word of the quotation can be understood as a key idea of the works written by him before 1990. His compositions aim at interpreting the concept of art —“Kunst” as the Germans would emphatically call it—playing with such means as humor and self-irony, and querying constantly the artist’s role in the creation of works of art.

Eötvös’s chamber opera demonstrates almost didactically the impossibility of the development of artists and arts. Such development is not only hindered by the double gender of the title role (Aida and Radames in one person), but made unviable by the despotism of other

artists involved in the production of a performance. Theatrical functioning kills the chance of the consummation of art. The same parable manifests itself in *Harakiri*. There is always something that disturbs the reception and the performance of the ritual: the translator of the Japanese text deprives the ritual of its artistic character and desecrates it at the same time. Peter Eötvös emphasized in an interview that *Harakiri* represents the artist and the imitating dilettante.² Dilettantism undoubtedly plays a significant role in destroying art; Eötvös's statement is, however, misleading. Eötvös rather questions the possibility of art today.

Adorno's oft cited and misinterpreted statement—after Auschwitz poetry could no longer be written—shouldn't be brought into conjunction with Eötvös's self-related question. It rather refers to his own music and probes into the question whether he is able to create works of art at all, and if so, what does a work of art mean in reality. Eötvös's compositions represent the search for ways and means after the loss of artistic innocence, and are in this sense exceptionally reflective works. As a composer, he followed an absolutely different path from his Hungarian colleagues. In his case the period of searching for the proper way, for finding himself—moreover, for the composer's role in this new artistic era—lasted long. My study aims at pointing out the context and the background of this very personal experience.

Little is known about Eötvös's composition studies at the Budapest Academy of Music. He started studying at the Academy aged fourteen, first as a student of János Viski, later of Ferenc Szabó.³ Though Eötvös is willing to give interviews, he is reticent about his lessons with the two noted professors. The Kodály pupil Szabó, who was a convinced communist and a leading figure of Hungarian musical life between 1947 and 1956,⁴ retired from public life after the uprising in October 1956 and only kept his post of teacher of composition. Unfortunately he was not really successful in his capacity as a teacher, particularly when compared with his fellow professor, Ferenc Farkas. Szabó's music is characterized by the light neo-classicism of the thirties. It seems that Eötvös cannot have learned anything from him. This is the reason why the young composer turned to other sources of inspiration: film music and incidental music for the stage.⁵

His first known composition, *Solitude*, was written in 1956 for children's choir and reflects the young boy's proficiency in the traditional Kodályian way of thinking. Composed five years later, the composition *Kozmosz* shows a change in the direction of his interests. The work of the seventeen-year-old composer is a naive, almost unreflective piece in which he documents Gagarin's space flight and

the wonders of the universe.⁶ In the centre of the piece, Eötvös quotes the fourth movement (“The Night’s Music”) of Bartók’s cycle *Out of Doors* at the moment when the Earth can be seen from the universe. The reference to Bartók in the form of a quotation bears consciously proclaimed national character.

While the symmetry of form and the twelve-tone cluster show the limited nature of Eötvös’s compositional skills, the improvisational character of the piece embeds the possibility of later experiments. Eötvös once mentioned that he reshaped this piece and created a new version of it every time it was performed, reworking it even after 2001 and 2006.⁷ He must have found good basic material in his earlier compositions as he often recomposes them.⁸ The reason for recreating his own pieces lies, however, not only in the availability of good basic material but can also be attributed to the conscious flexibility of his compositions. To borrow the title of Umberto Eco’s famous book: Eötvös’s works are open, every engagement with them creates further works of art.

In his study on the constructive and improvisational traits of Peter Eötvös’s music Ulrich Mosch notices a change in Eötvös’s compositional thinking. He draws attention to the “constructive” pieces of the 1980s, including *Chinese Opera* (1986) and the improvisatory techniques of the 1990s represented by *Shadows* (1995–1997).⁹ Mosch cites an interview with the composer in which Eötvös justifies the change in his compositional thinking.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that construction and improvisation appear simultaneously, side by side in Eötvös’s compositions even in the 1970s. Moreover, it has to be clarified what the term “constructive” compositional thinking implies.

It is a well-known fact that in 1968 Eötvös went to Cologne to study conducting and worked in Karlheinz Stockhausen’s ensemble between 1968 and 1976. Stockhausen represented the ideal type of constructive composer both in his serial and post-serial phases. In an interview after Stockhausen’s death Eötvös described him with the words “consciousness,” “complexity,” “extremely logical thinking.”¹¹ As Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich points out, working in Stockhausen’s **environment** and sharing the lifestyle of Stockhausen’s artistic family must have been paralyzing for the young composer.¹² In the early 1970s Eötvös tried to be a good follower of the master and made experiments with electronic music after Stockhausen’s model, primarily after his *Kontakte*. Eötvös composed his *Elektrochronik* between 1972 and 1974. It is the chronicle of eight days by means of shorter and longer studies; that is, compositional exercises written for electronic media.

It is more than telling that between 1975 and 1981 Eötvös did not compose anything. Only a change in his life, his closeness to Pierre Boulez, must have helped him out of the cul-de-sac of the Stockhausen period. Nevertheless, the works of the Stockhausen period already display the features representing Peter Eötvös as an independent composer. For example, in his *Tale*, written in 1968, canon technique is used, which can be characterized as a model of constructive compositional thinking, where the parts, the text of the tale, are delivered in different tempi. This procedure roots in the different canon techniques of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance.

Eötvös's other electronic compositions written at the same time are full of extramusical noises, including crickets, the roaring of the sea, and the humming of a motorcycle. In an interview he said that such natural noises, "for example the noises of the street, cannot create music in themselves, but if I cut out a certain section, for example a six-second-long unit beginning with a car horn, followed by street clamour, and ending with the ringing of the tramway, it becomes a three-part unit."¹³

Using noises in music must have derived from film music Eötvös had composed in Hungary from 1963 onwards. The Hungarian films of the 1960s make frequent use of street noises, as can be seen in two films: *Golden Age* (directed by Pál Gábor, 1963) and *The Professor of the Underworld* (directed by Mihály Szenes, 1969), for which Eötvös wrote the music. His experiences with film music provided the basis for his later experiments with noises and strengthened his conviction that when working with electronic media he should use extramusical, not electronically constructed sounds.¹⁴ The roaring of the sea in *Golden Age* later appears as an organ point in his *Now, Miss* (1972), based on Samuel Beckett's radio play (*Embers* 1959);¹⁵ the humming of the motorcycle can also be heard in the piece.¹⁶ In *The Professor of the Underworld* the policemen on a secret mission sing as young street musicians a sixteenth-century madrigal close to the style of the *Madrigal Comedies*, written in their first version between 1963 and 1972.¹⁷ Jazz appears in almost all the film music of Eötvös, as jazz represents modernity in modern Hungarian films. These jazzy sections turn up later in *Music for New York* (1972) and in *Intervalles-Interrieurs* (1981).

To return to *Now, Miss*: the form of the composition follows the screenplay of a film (in this case a radio play). Even the designation of the parts (Aktion—Monolog—Dialog) refers to a screenplay. Scales play an important role in the whole composition; they are, however, as infinite as the form is. Eötvös puts different layers above each other, like the roaring of the sea, the monologues and dialogues of the two solo instruments, and the organ background.

The layering of different musical elements is the most characteristic compositional (i.e. constructive) device used by Eötvös in his first creative period. The parts in the canon of *Tale* are strictly taken layers and the chirring of the crickets in *Cricketmusic* (1970) produces a layering effect, too. The question is justified whether Eötvös turned to the compositional potential of electronic music because the layering technique proved congenial for this medium, or because his experiences with film music led him to electronic music. At any rate, his compositions written for films—like *Enchantment* (István Bácskai-Lauro, 1963),¹⁸ *Arena* (János Tóth, 1969),¹⁹ and *Amerigo Tot* (Zoltán Huszárík, 1969)²⁰—include numerous layerings. The layers either follow each other as patchwork, as a quodlibet, and their coincidence creates the layering effect—this technique reappears, for example, in Eötvös's *Intervalls-Interrieurs*—or they appear in fact simultaneously. In the latter case the layers contain quotations or pseudo-quotations referring to well-known musical styles and genres, sometimes—as in the documentary about Amerigo Tot—to Hungarian folk music (music for cimbalom and a Hungarian folk song).²¹ This concept was present in the early piece *Kozmosz* and reappeared in later compositions such as *Atlantis* (1995) and *IMA* (2002).

The structure of the layers evokes memories of fine arts in the first place; that is, not primarily of a music-compositional nature. Eötvös himself refers to it in an interview as follows:

I see music before me in the form of objects, in spatial expansion. I perceive it as a block, a big stone, or, let's say, a fly. . . . When I compose it is the mass of the piece that first takes shape in me. Like sculptors, I have to decide which material to use: wood, clay or stone.²²

The playing score of *Tale* that provides information on the schedule of the musical process helps one to understand the importance of blocks and spatial expansion. With its colors and layers it looks like a work of fine art (Example 1).

The piece *Wind-Sequences* produces the impression of a work of fine art, too. The slackened sequences, made perceptible by means of computers, bring about the effect of a picture-like process. Otherwise the composition, written in its original form for a joint improvisation entitled *Hommage a Kurtág*²³ with the New Music Studio Budapest, resembles the favorite technique of the members of the New Music Studio who wrote works based on chance. *Wind-Sequences* is built on recurring musical formulas. An important feature of the composition is

EXAMPLE I. PETER EÖTVÖS: *MESE*, EXCERPT FROM THE FACSIMILE
(BY KIND PERMISSION OF PETER EÖTVÖS)

the presence of off-tuned voices sounding higher or lower than the tempered tones in general. Both the recurring formulas and the off-tuned sounds underline the physical nature of the wind-sequences.

The piece *Wind-Sequences* represents an atypical kind of composition in Eötvös's early work: it lacks simultaneously used different musical layers. Its constructiveness derives from the model followed by the composer: the wind-sequences. Other pieces, such as *Harakiri* and *Radames*, consciously continue the layering technique. Counterpoint appears as an essential component of the technique in them; it represents the basic constructiveness of Eötvös's music.

In *Harakiri* two Japanese flutes play contrapuntally in slow motion; it is as if they followed the rules of Palestrina counterpoint. There is another counterpoint between the flutes and the woodcutter's felling of tree. On the whole, Eötvös uses few musical elements, and the score is extremely simple. By contrast, the score of *Radames* is much more complex: Eötvös superimposes in it the sometimes independent,

sometimes interfering layers. The trilingual text of the three theatre directors is a contrapuntal composition of this kind. Another layer is the part of Aida-Radames, who mostly sings quotations slowly from Verdi's Aida and is accompanied by instruments: a soprano saxophone, a horn, a tuba, and an E-piano with homorhythmic chords. Aida-Radames's part produces a cantus firmus effect circumscribed by the instruments' accompaniment. Furthermore, there appear characteristic formulas known from Knud Jeppesen as "Ritorna vincitor!," or "La vita abborro," or "Guerra, guerra, tremenda" (Examples 2a-c).

The image shows a handwritten musical score for an excerpt from Peter Eötvös's work. The score is organized into four main staves:

- S.-SAX. u. B.**: Soprano Saxophone and Bassoon part, with a treble clef and various time signatures (2/4, 4/4, 2/4, 3/4).
- SCHALL-SPIELER u. Hu.**: Voice part for Aida, with a treble clef and lyrics: "Ri - tor - na vin - ci - tor!".
- TUBA**: Tuba part, with a bass clef.
- E-pno. (STR + CLAV)**: E-piano and Clavichord part, with a treble clef.

Additional markings and instructions include:

- A box labeled **8.1** at the top left.
- A box labeled **8.2 FILM-REG.** with an arrow pointing to the end of the first system.
- A box labeled **8.3 THEA OPER.** with an arrow pointing to the end of the second system.
- Tempo marking: **♩ = 104**.
- Performance instruction: **(E-pno nur bei 3. x 1. und 2. x tacet)**.
- Dynamic markings: **f**, **p**, and **PPP**.
- Other markings: **(AIDA)**, **Ped.**, and **8.** with a sharp sign.

EXAMPLE 2A: EXCERPT FOR RADAMES, "RITORNA VINCITOR!"
(1975 SCHOTT MUSIC, MAINZ, GERMANY)

Handwritten musical score for Example 2B. The score is for S-Sax in B, Schauspieler u. Hr. (No.), Tuba, and Piano. It features measures 16.1, 16.2, and 16.3. The time signatures are 6/4 (RADAMES), 7/4, 6/4, 4/4, and 5/4. Dynamic markings include f, p, mf, and app. The lyrics are: "No. La vi-ta a-bbor-ro; d'og-ni gaudis La fon-te". There is a tempo marking of J=72. The piano part includes a section labeled "Fpno. (STR. + CLAV)".

EXAMPLE 2B: EXCERPT FOR RADAMES, "LA VITA ABBORRO"
(1975 SCHOTT MUSIC, MAINZ, GERMANY)

Handwritten musical score for Example 2C. The score is for S-Sax in B, Schauspieler u. Hr., Tuba, and Piano. It features measures 21.1, 21.2, 21.3, 21.4, and 21.5. The time signatures are 6/4 (RADAMES in Heldenpose), 5/4, 3/4, and 6/4. Dynamic markings include f, p, and sf. The lyrics are: "Quer-ra, quer-ra, te-men-da, i-ne-so-ra-ta!". There is a tempo marking of J=144. The piano part includes a section labeled "Fpno. (CLAV)" with a pedal marking "Ped." and a circled section.

EXAMPLE 2C: EXCERPT FOR RADAMES, "GUERRA, GUERRA, TREMENDA"
(1975 SCHOTT MUSIC, MAINZ, GERMANY)

For that matter, Eötvös frequently uses two-part counterpoint, most spectacularly in *Now, Miss* and in *Madrigal-Comedies*, but even the different layers form, as mentioned before, a contrapuntal structure. The use of counterpoint constitutes the most traditional part of Eötvös's music, at the same time it is the most constructive device he is working with. Being a conscious composer, Eötvös hides references to counterpoint in his scores. For example, the German theatre director in *Radames* refers to the counterpoint of times (Example 3).

Example 3 shows a musical score for a scene in *Radames*. The top staff is for the German Theatre Director (TH. REG.) with a tempo marking of quarter note = 76. The lyrics are: "DURCH DEN KONTRA-PUNKT DER ZEI-TEN WIRD ALLES ZI-TAT,". The piano accompaniment (EPUD) is marked "halten". There are dynamic markings like *f*, *p*, and *f* throughout. A "FILM REG." marking is present at the end of the vocal line.

EXAMPLE 3: EÖTVÖS, *RADAMES*, TEXT OF THE GERMAN THEATER DIRECTOR (1975 SCHOTT MUSIC, MAINZ, GERMANY)

Example 4 shows a woodwind section score for *Steine*, starting at measure 9. The instruments listed are Kl. (Clarinet), Br. (Bassoon), Cel. (Cello), Hf. (Horn), Fg. (Flute), 2 Pos. (2nd Flute), and T4/T3 (Trumpet). The Flute part has extensive performance instructions in German, such as "Fg. spielt langsame, tenuto-Melodien aus den drei Tönen vor, die zwei Pos. spielen, immer gerade die Töne nicht, die das Fg. gespielt hat." and "Fg. in 'kontrapunktischem' Kontakt zur Klarinette spielen. Dynamik natürlich variieren, auch längere Melodien aus 7-15 Töne gestalten, dazwischen Pausen: Falls die zwei Posaunen, zufällig unisono spielen, bleiben sie mit einer (r) auf dem Ton stehen, dann folgen sie dem Fg. weiter." There are also dynamic markings like *pp*, *f*, and *secco*.

EXAMPLE 4: EÖTVÖS, *STEINE*, INSTRUCTION IN THE SCORE AT NUMBER 9 (COPYRIGHT 1993 BY EDITIO MUSICA BUDAPEST)

In this respect it is worth scrutinizing Eötvös's scores as they abound in instructions revealing substantial details about the pieces. In the score of *Steine* (1985–1990, rev. 1992) the following instruction can be found: “Fg. in kontrapunktischer Kontakt zur Klarinette” (Example 4). The counterpoint of the two instrumental parts is extremely important.

The issues raised by the compositions are, however, undeniable. Is it perhaps superfluous to fix something so scrupulously? Are Eötvös's compositions open works? The composer's most decisive experience is that rules—that is constructions—don't supply safety. The Hungarian films Eötvös wrote music for stunningly bring up this topic too. One can conclude from *Steine* that counterpoint appears in this context as the only possible form of communication, the only possible mode of taking note of one another.

Nevertheless, flexibility in the form of improvisation, aleatory or free decision is central to Eötvös's compositional thinking. Aleatory appears in the seventh movement of *Windsequenzen*, in *Now, Miss*, and in *Intervalles-Interrieurs*; improvisation and free decision rule the forms of *Kozmosz* and *Steine*. But Eötvös uses this freedom as a dramatic device that can be traced primarily in the big cadences of his works. There is a coffee break in *Radames* serving as a cadenza where the three theater directors improvise a three-part madrigal about the death of opera. Cadenzas normally allow performers to exhibit themselves; the cadenza in *Radames*, however, documents the death of art.

There is another big cadenza in *Steine*, that of the conductor.²⁴ Though conductors don't usually have cadenzas, Eötvös wants to show the conductors' virtuosity and spontaneity in this piece, which is dedicated to Pierre Boulez, one of the greatest conductors of the twentieth century and is written by another conductor with evidently conscious self-reference. *Steine* uses five different layers of music: 1) the reiteration of melodic and motivic figures with ad libitum passages, 2) the responses of different instruments, 3) the combination of the first two, 4) the knocking of pebbles by the conductor, which marks the boundaries of music, 5) and the free, improvisational knocking of pebbles by the instrumentalist. The music moves on the verges of flexibility and inflexibility. The conductor's primary role is to determine the musical parts in time.²⁵ The instrumentalists and the conductor cooperate, however, in the interest of a common goal: the creation of a genuine work of art, “die wahre Art,” as the Germans used to say. Does it mean that there can still exist a way of finding one another in music? *Steine* as a self-portrait is definitely a great leap forward in Eötvös's oeuvre in this direction.

NOTES

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1. Peter Eötvös, *Radames* (Mainz: Schott, 2002), section 7.1.
2. See Eötvös' interpretation in his interview presented in the TV series *Kis esti zene* [Little Night's Music] No. 24, Loco-Music, MTV, 1992–1996.
3. Stefan Fricke, "Eötvös, Peter," in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. Personenteil 6, ed. Ludwig Finscher (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2001), 384. The Eötvös entry of the *New Grove Dictionary* mentions only János Viski's name: Martina Homma, "Peter Eötvös," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Second Edition, vol. 8., ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 2001), 261.
4. András Pernye, *Szabó Ferenc* (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1965), 31–32.
5. Bálint András Varga, *3 kérdés 82 zeneszerző* [3 Questions 82 Composers] (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1986), 101. See the German translation: "Das Beste ist, wenn man sich selber beeinflusst. Peter Eötvös im Gespräch mit Bálint András Varga," in *Kosmoi. Peter Eötvös an der Hochschule für Musik der Musik-Akademie der Stadt Basel. Schriften, Gespräche, Dokumente*, ed. Michael Kunkel (Saarbrücken: Pfau 2007), 29–34.
6. *Ibid.*, 102–103.
7. See Eötvös' reminiscences in the interview presented in the TV series *Kis esti zene* [Little Night's Music] No. 11, Loco-Music, MTV, 1992–1996.
8. "‘Mich interessiert gerade das Gegenteil von mir.' Schlussdiskussion mit Peter Eötvös zum Motto 'Ungar und Weltbürger,'" in *Identitäten. Der Komponist und Dirigent Peter Eötvös*, ed. Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich (Mainz: Schott, 2005), 72.
9. Ulrich Mosch, "Konstruktives versus 'improvisierendes' Komponieren. Zu Peter Eötvös' Schaffen der achtziger und neunziger Jahre am

- Beispiel von *Chinese Opera* (1986) und *Shadows* (1995–96/1997),” Kunkel, *op. cit.*, 245–267.
10. *Ibid.*, 245. See: “Balance von Konstruktion und Improvisation. Peter Eötvös im Gespräch mit Wolfgang Stryi,” in *MusikTexte* 86/87 (November 2000), 78.
 11. J. Győri László, “Eötvös Péter Szöllősy Andrásról és Karlheinz Stockhausenról” [Peter Eötvös about András Szöllősy and Karlheinz Stockhausen], in *Muzsika* (February 2008), 12–13.
 12. Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich, “Eötvös und Stockhausen,” in Jungheinrich, *op. cit.*, 50.
 13. Varga, 106.
 14. “Zeiten der Gärung. Peter Eötvös im Gespräch mit Tamás Váczi über elektronische Musik,” in Kunkel, *op. cit.*, 37.
 15. Number 1. The film begins with the roaring: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgZkHzl9wfo> (accessed May 5, 2015).
 16. Number 9. The scene begins at. 2’05”.
 17. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6jvKsf_ur4. The scene begins at 22’05” (accessed May 5, 2015. Not available at the time of this publication, but accessed as recently as December 31, 2016).
 18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHLKouSdgOA> (accessed May 5, 2015. Not available at the time of this publication, but accessed as recently as December 31, 2016).
 19. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEPiLTrA0TM> (accessed May 5, 2015).
 20. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGqbbfm8hLk> (accessed May 5, 2015).
 21. At 13’00”.
 22. Varga, 104.
 23. See László Sárý’s recollection: “Eine Brutstätte der Neuen Musik in Ungarn. Erinnerungen an Peter Eötvös und das Budapester Új Zeni Stúdió,” in Kunkel, *op. cit.*, 148–149.
 24. Number 17.
 25. “‘Meine Musik ist Theatermusik.’ Peter Eötvös im Gespräch mit Martin Lorber,” Kunkel, *op. cit.*, 52–53. And see Eötvös’ reminiscences in the interview presented in the TV series *Kis esti zene* [Little Night’s Music] No. 11, *Loco-Music*, MTV, 1992–1996.

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