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PARALLEL LIVES
A FLUTE–PIANO PROGRAM OF TWO HUNGARIAN COMPOSERS' WORKS

Two Pozsony boys: the biographical connections of Dohnányi and Bartók

There had never been such a high school in the history of the Hungarian music as the Pozsony Catholic High School was in the 1890s, where two future world-known composers studied almost in the same time. In 1894, the student organist Ernő (Ernst von) Dohnányi (1877–1960) was graduated, and left Pozsony (now Bratislava, capital city of Slovakia) for the Budapest Academy of Music. His successor was a newly enrolled pupil: Béla Bartók (1881–1945). In those days no one could forebode their phenomenal careers, of course. Who would ever predict, for example, that the son of the strict professor of the Pozsony high school, Frigyes Dohnányi, would become one of the most famous 20th-century pianists, a significant (post)romantic composer, and moreover, the administrative leader of the Hungarian musical life in the 1930s? It seemed to be even more unlikely that the other boy, a much more reticent person, would grow to one of the greatest composers of the Western music history, and would also become an exceedingly significant ethnomusicologist who not only worked with Hungarian and Central-European, but Arabian and Turkish folk music, as well.

Dohnányi's and Bartók's common childhood roots basically determined their relationship till the end of their lives. The similar background strengthened their very understanding and attentive feelings to each other, while some hierarchy always remained between them: the younger Bartók regarded Dohnányi as his superior, or at least as an elder brother in his entire life. Anyway, Dohnányi was five classes upper than Bartók though he was only four years older than him. This was because the young Ernst, a very mature and intelligent little boy, started the school a year before the usual. The age difference of four years was also multiplied by the different curves of the individual developments – Dohnányi found his way easily and early, while Bartók managed to do it relatively late. It is also important that Dohnányi's choice influenced Bartók very much when he decided to continue his musical studies at the Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, and not in Vienna. So they not only had the same music teacher in their hometown, Pozsony, but the same professor of piano (István Thomán) and composition (Hans Koessler) in Budapest.

By the beginning of Bartók's freshman year, 1899, Dohnányi had already graduated the Liszt Academy for two years (here, again, he skipped a grade because of his extreme talent). He was beyond his enormous successes in England, and was preparing for his first American concert tours. During his Budapest visits, however, he was in touch with Bartók, and helped him when needed. It was Dohnányi, for example, who commended the very receding boy to Mrs. Henrik Gruber's salon where he got acquainted with Zoltán Kodály, his future friend and fellow in folk music research. After his graduation at the Academy, Bartók took some private lessons from Dohnányi, though at this point some differences of opinions aroused between them in certain political–ideological questions. [Bartók-levélidézet.] This conflict, however, was quickly cleared up, and their further relationship remained harmonious all the while.

In the next years, Bartók concerned himself with his unrequited love with the violinist Stefi Geyer, with his first experiences in the field of folk music, and with the search for his individual compositional style. Meanwhile, Dohnányi moved to Berlin (1905–1915) as the greatly esteemed professor of the Hochschule für Musik, composed some of his most successful works, and also went through an emotional crisis. Partly in connection with this

crisis, he returned to Hungary, too, in the beginning of World War I. After the war, their leading role of the Hungarian musical life had become clear: Dohnányi and Bartók participated together (and with Kodály) in the musical directory of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, and Dohnányi was also named director of the Liszt Academy in the same year. Though their appointment was motivated by purely professional reasons, they could not avoid the political consequences – Dohnányi, for example, was suspended at the Academy.

In the 1920s, Bartók had become internationally recognized as a modern composer, while Dohnányi toured Europe and the United States where he was extremely popular. He spent most of time on abroad. This is why Bartók wrote about him in 1921: “Budapest sorely misses Dohnányi”. Both of them gained significant successes till the end of the 1920s, but while Dohnányi seized the leading administrative positions of the Hungarian musical life one after the other (he was the chief conductor of the Budapest Philharmonic Society between 1919 and 1944, the musical director of the Hungarian Radio between 1931 and 1944, and the president of the Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest between 1934 and 1943), Bartók started to step aside because of the political outcome of the 1930s. Finally, in 1934, Bartók left his professorship at the Academy of Music, and started to work at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences with his folksong collection.

These two parallel musical careers ended quite similarly, too: both composers emigrated to the United States (though Bartók left Hungary 4 years earlier, in 1940, than Dohnányi), and both of them died in New York – Bartók died at the age of 64 in a fatal disease (1945), while Dohnányi at the age of 82 in the complication of a common flu (1960).

“Fire and water” – two different musical styles

Despite the many common elements of their fates, Bartók’s and Dohnányi’s musical worlds could not have been more different. This difference, by the way, partly derives from their absolutely unlike personal character. According to their own written sources (letters, diaries, other writings) and the contemporaries’ reminiscences, Bartók was a very closed, ascetical, struggling personality, while Dohnányi was a “sunshine character”: breezy, joyful and social. As the leading Hungarian musical reviewer of their age, Aladár Tóth wrote about their piano playing: Bartók was the raw truth, while Dohnányi was the Arielian marvel. Regarding their creative world: Bartók’s style was based on folk music, and, generally speaking, his deep, scholarly interest in this kind of ancient music. His tremendously individual, dramatic and modern (in his younger years: even experimental) style was established by this enthusiasm for folk music. On the other hand, Dohnányi remained faithful in his whole life to those 19th-century musical traditions which gave his musical identity.

Surprisingly enough, there were some musical connections between the two different compositional worlds. As László Vikárius pointed out in his analysis, Dohnányi’s music played important role in the young Bartók’s stylistic endeavors – though not as a positive model but something from what he wanted to differ. We can say that the refuse of Dohnányi’s musical language became a basic moment in development of Bartók’s compositional style. The discovery of folk music as an inspirational source, and, as a consequence of that, the finding his unmistakably specific tone, excluded the further Dohnányi-influence in Bartók’s mature works. Recent researches pointed out, however, that Dohnányi, who could not, or did not want to hold off his interpreter (pianist and conductor) personality from his creative side, sometimes “interpreted” Bartók’s music in his own works, too. The variation movement of his *Symphonic Minutes* (op. 36), for example, was embedded into the series only after the premier of the first version of the work, and maybe by the influence of Bartók’s orchestral setting of the folk ballad, *Angoli Borbála*, from the Hungarian Peasant Songs. Moreover, there are several late Dohnányi-works that contain Bartók-references such as the *Burletta* (op. 44/1) which strongly recalls the *Burlesque* “Slightly Topsy”.

Of course, the consciousness and the deepness of such Bartók-references at Dohnányi could only be presumed since we have dramatically few information about the two composers’ most sincere feelings and estimations about each other. In any case, Dohnányi spoke very respectfully about Bartók in his late interviews, and he also mentioned him in his memoirs, the *Message to Posterity*, as one of the few great modern composers. When he discussed the forced originality of the moderns, he wrote, for example: „How different was Bartók’s originality! It just came out of himself. [...] He knew well what he was doing. He

was prepared, he had the knowledge and the talent. He wanted to find a new way.” Despite his basic respect for Dohnányi – or *because of it* –, Bartók did not make a statement on his colleague’s music. As far as we know, the latest known text on Dohnányi’s style is dated from 1921, and it is as follows: “Because of their German character, his [Dohnányi’s] works are not really significant in the aspect of Hungarian nationalism, but the fine forming and the noble musical taste made them well known even outside Budapest”.

The conception and program of the “Parallel Lives”

Standing side-by-side Béla Bartók and Ernst von Dohnányi, these two, closely linked, but very different artists should be a very important topic for musicologists. Until recently, however, only a very few publications dealt with the Bartók–Dohnányi relationship, as Dohnányi had been long neglected in the Hungarian musicology and musical life – because of baseless political postulations of the Communist regime. Moreover, the music performers also indebted with the “elaboration” of this topic, and the audience has a very little chance to listen the works of these two, determining musical personalities next to each other. The program, titled “Parallel Lives”, of the Hungarian performers Szabolcs Szilágyi (flute) and László Borbély (piano) is qualified to remedy this deficiency. The program was originally planned for concert performances, but would also be recorded on CD.

It is not a very easy thing, though, for a flute and piano duo or a flute soloist to play a Bartók–Dohnányi program, since neither of them was a real flute-composer. Bartók practically did not write any solo or chamber pieces for flute, and Dohnányi composed only two little pieces for this instrument, the *Aria* (op. 48/1) and the *Passacaglia* (op. 48/2) in the very end of his life – both of them were put on the program of the “Parallel Lives”, of course. Only one Bartók-piece could be mentioned with these original flute works: the *Three Folk Songs from Csík County* (BB45b) which was written – if not exactly for flute – but for a similar instrument: for recorder (and piano). Consequently, all the further pieces are transcriptions, two of which were made by the Hungarian flutist, Gergely Ittzés: the Dohnányi-sonata for violin and piano (op. 21) and Bartók’s piano composition, the *Roumanian Folk Dances* (BB 68 [??]). The third such composition is Paul Arma’s *Suite paysanne hongroise*, a piece that was transcribed from Bartók’s *Fifteen Hungarian Peasant Songs* (BB79), and which is a worthily popular piece of the flutist repertoire.

There are some solo piano works on the program, too, which are not only to improve the collection, but to put the flute works into an appropriate context – as we should not forget that the piano was the most natural medium for both composers. Accordingly, four piano compositions are involved: the *Allegro Barbaro* (BB63) and the *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs* (BB 80) by Bartók, then the *Passacaglia for Solo Piano* (op. 6) and the *Cascades* (op. 41/4) by Dohnányi.

Pairs and opposites

The title “Parallel Lives” does not only refer to the close link of these two Hungarian composers, but the relationships of certain pairs of pieces in the program. The first such “pair” consists of the two original flute (recorder) and piano compositions: Dohnányi’s *Aria* and Bartók’s *Three Folk Songs from Csík County*. These two pieces mainly represent the strong stylistic contrast of the two oeuvres which, of course, partly derives from their very different dates of composition, too. The *Three Folk Songs from Csík County* from 1907 is one of the earliest – if not the actual earliest – folksong arrangement by Bartók, so one of the first compositions of the emblematic Bartók-style. On the contrary, the *Aria* was composed more than a half century later (though the listener would not feel it more “modern”, at all), and shares the very last opus number in the oeuvre together with the *Passacaglia for Solo Flute*. And if the *Three Folk Songs from Csík County* was described above as an emblematic composition, the *Aria* is absolutely not typical of his composer: it is a fine example of Dohnányi’s last, experimenting creative period in which he tried – or: was testing – some special forms, harmonic profiles and compositional strategies. The impressionistic harmonies and thematic transformations give some kind of a French, Debussy-like tone for the little piece which is quite rare in Dohnányi’s style.

Comparing the two early piano pieces, the *Allegro Barbaro* from 1911 and the Dohnányi-passacaglia from 1899, we mostly see the differences, too. The former piece is characterized by minimal melodic material, folkish motivic system, and percussion-like piano treatment,

while the latter one has a Brahmsian tone and a Lisztian form (it is similar to Liszt's sonata cycle in one movement). Both pieces were played a lot by their composers – and, interestingly enough, it is mutually true, as the young Bartók played Dohnányi's large composition several times, while the *Allegro Barbaro* was among the few Bartók-compositions which was on Dohnányi's repertoire. The other “parallels” of the piano compositions are the *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs* and the *Cascades*, both of which are of improvisational character (another similarity may be that the Dohnányi-piece was also inspired by some kind of a rural experiment – the rural, wartime Austria where he was hiding in 1945).

The radically different style of the two composers are well demonstrated in the larger transcriptions: the *Romanian Folk Dances*, the extracts of the *Fifteen Hungarian Peasant Songs* in the *Suite paysanne hongroise* by Bartók, and the *Sonata for Violin and Piano* by Dohnányi. All these were composed in the same period: the originals of the Bartók-pieces in 1915 and from 1914 to 1918, and the Dohnányi-opus in about 1913. The Bartók-works give examples for the most direct use of folksong arrangements when – as the composer himself said – “we may, for instance, take over a peasant melody unchanged or only slightly varied, write an accompaniment to it and possibly some opening and concluding phrases. This kind of work would show a certain analogy with Bach's treatment of chorales.” The folksongs of these two series, partly collected by Bartók himself, were chosen with the absolute care of the scholar-composer, and they form a tight, very dramatic arch in the arrangement. Meanwhile, the Dohnányi-sonata demonstrates a basically conservative taste, even if one could discover many individual elements in it: such as its exciting variation strategy or sensitive narrative line.

The enigmatic peak: Dohnányi's Passacaglia for Solo Flute

The only work without “pair” is Dohnányi's *Passacaglia for Solo Flute* which is also the climax of the program – and also the less known composition, especially in comparison to its significance. The genesis of the work has strong biographical connections. The old Dohnányi got acquainted with John Baker, the president of the Ohio University, Athens, in 1948. They immediately made friends, a consequence of which the Ohio University played an essential role in Dohnányi's emigrant years (1949–1960), though he was professor of another university in Florida. One of Baker's daughters, the teenager Elizabeth (Ellie) was a flutist and – as she remembered – one day said to the old maestro: “if only Brahms had written some solo music for the flute”. As a token of friendship, Dohnányi came to Athens a year later (1958) with the score of the *Aria*. He did not mention to Ellie, though, that he was working on another, even bigger piece, the *Passacaglia for Solo Flute*. Later on, however, he discussed the young girl the technical problems of the instrumentation, and finished the composition, as his very last one, in 1959.

The *Passacaglia* is an enigmatic piece in several aspects. First of all, an expanded source-material (sketches, compositional scores) survived of the piece which is absolutely not typical at Dohnányi. The sketches show us that the composer had serious struggles with the material. The other enigmatic feature of the *Passacaglia* was first noticed by the dedicatee, Ellie Baker, who wrote the followings: “the disjunctiveness of the theme struck me on first hearing as surprisingly atonal and angular for a romantic composer, and when I looked more closely, sure enough!, all 12 tones appear in the theme with no repetition until he completes the series and then heads into a traditional cadential conclusion.” The first twelve notes of the theme – a little bit more than the half of the eight measures – form a sort of a row, indeed. (*Music example*) Moreover, two connecting rows could be noticed: the second one starts with the *e flat*, although it only includes ten pitches. Despite the chromatics of the theme, the cadence suggests a strong tonality of A minor. According to an early analyst, Dohnányi composed the variations of the *passacaglia* in regular, dodecaphonic rows – but it is not true. However, it is very interesting to see how the conservative composer experimented with the dissonant material. He sometimes wrote melodic, sometimes etude- or schezolike variations on the theme (usually with much more notes in them). The different variation types create a larger form for the series: it can be regarded, for example as a cyclic sonata in one movement. The source material, however, tells us that Dohnányi struggled a lot with this large form: the order of the variations, their connections, the length of the different sections had been changed and corrected many times. After an “almost dodecaphonic” theme and the many dissonances of

the variations, the piece is concluded by an absolutely tonal coda in A major. What does this quite surprising ending mean: did Dohnányi maybe mock the dodecaphonic theme, or did he exhaustedly give up his experiment with the modernist writing? Was this piece a joke or a bitter failure of him? In any case, the Passacaglia could be an interesting discovery for those who are interested in the problems and possibilities of the 20th-century flute music.

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The parallels of Szilágyi's és Borbély's program spectacularly shows the possible style differences of two 20th-century composers of very similar cultural roots. The present-day music lovers, after the postmodern decades, could marvel this beautiful example of stylistic pluralism, the intimacy of which is given by the brotherly love and mutual respect of two composers, Ernst von Dohnányi and Béla Bartók.