

Opening Address to the International Conference of Honour of 100th Birthday of Benjamin Rajeczky

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Abstract: A laudation of Benjamin Rajeczky (1901–89), Hungarian musicologist. Being a Cistercian, up to the 1970s he was not allowed to teach musicology in Budapest; he worked in the Ethnographic Museum, then in 1960–70 in the Folk Music Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Rajeczky was an outstanding scholar of Gregorian chant as well as the folk music. His contribution to the study of the interaction between traditional music and chant strongly influenced the younger generation of scholars

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On behalf of the International Musicological Society, but this time primarily as a happy Hungarian, I cordially welcome you in Budapest on the occasion of the international conference (16–21 August 2001, Pásztó) commemorating the 100th anniversary of the birth of Benjamin Rajeczky – *Béni bácsi* (uncle Béni) for us as well as for many of you –, one of the few great scholars and honored personalities that this small country gave to the international community of musicologists.

The expert evaluation of Benjamin Rajeczky's achievements is naturally reserved for those who worked with him for a long time and who are active in the same branches of musical scholarship that he cultivated; in fact one conference is hardly enough to encompass the wide range of his two major fields of interest. In a few minutes my colleague Lujza Tari, who took the lion's share in the organization of the present conference, and who was a one-time disciple of him, is going to speak on Rajeczky the ethnomusicologist. I wish I could offer you more than a few personal thoughts of an admirer, but not feeling at home in the two chief areas of his creative world, in ethnomusicology and plainchant studies, I focus on the moral my generation in Hungary, or rather I personally, learned from *Béni bácsi*.

To begin with, in contrast to a luckier younger generation, I could not be his pupil, because in the 1950s the Cistercian Rajeczky was officially banned from teaching in Hungary. Nevertheless, through our professors at the musi-

cology department, Dénes Bartha and Bence Szabolcsi, both holding him in great respect, we knew about the man in the Ethnographic Museum who graduated in Innsbruck and now was commuting from a small town, Pásztó, to Budapest. We heard that his work, thank to the virtuoso transcription of recorded folk music, was highly esteemed even by the so demanding László Lajtha; furthermore that he was a trusted man of his former teacher Zoltán Kodály. Several composer professors at the Liszt Academy of Music informally also praised us Rajeczky, their one-time music teacher and boy-scout leader in the Budapest Cistercian high school in the 1930s, who conducted the school orchestra and chiseled their musical taste. In my younger years, from an outsider's point of view, for some time Rajeczky seemed to be a jolly joker who could step in every scholarly undertaking: discussing Joseph Haydn's late masses as well as the technique and the significance of Béla Bartók's folk-music transcriptions – pardon me for giving examples from my own interest. Everything he did fitted into the best traditions of European scholarship; in addition, he had a very special kind of charisma. Non-Hungarian colleagues, beyond the IFMC membership too, were charmed by his personality. In the 1960s Bartha and Rajeczky were on the top of the list of Hungarian musicologists whose membership fee in the International Musicological Society was paid anonymously by foreign friends (like Eva Badura-Skoda), because the benefit of their presence at international meetings was quickly recognized.

We meet some of our best teachers after the end of our official curriculum. In such connections the human aspect is no less important than the professional; furthermore, the influence is often indirect. In my life from 1970 onwards it was essential that I could participate in discussions in the Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences with Rajeczky present (at that time officially already retired but still very much active, leading projects with radiating energy), about the forthcoming first volume of the History of Music in Hungary; publication of folk-music recordings; new research topics and individual achievements; new books and recent approaches. For those of you who knew him, who remember the lovely nasal-deep voice, the warm-hearted turns in his speech, but also the intellectual edge of the thoughts, there is no need to enumerate the characteristics of Rajeczky's performance. He was eager to learn, open to new things – but always critical. His sharpest comments, sometimes demolishing criticism, were presented without heartlessness – as a result, nobody questioned the teacher–disciple relationship. Brilliantly gaining new vistas from new facts, but then immediately returning to collect more data and to a stronger control of the freshly baked theory characterized him and differentiated Rajeczky from his best followers. I personally

loved and admired that he had no *génie* complexes – so rare on the level that he indeed reached.

Much of this perhaps portrays a typical (shall we say, conservative?) wise old man, for many of us outdated in today's competitive new musicology ("new musicology" in quotation mark or without it, if you will). But you know best that Rajeczky himself ignited a small revolution in the mid 1960s with his IFMC study group (lead together with Wolfgang Suppan) in which he urged to scrutinize the influence and interaction between folk-music traditions and certain repertoires of the European history of music, primarily the Gregorian chant. In several of his major essays dealing with different aspects of this question, some already written together with his two outstanding young Hungarian colleagues Janka Szendrei and László Dobszay, Rajeczky broke new path. Recent meetings of the *Cantus planus* study group of the IMS demonstrate how quickly his ideas developed since his death in 1989. Incidentally, Rajeczky surely would be happy to see that the seeds of his work are not only sprouted but some of his ideas had to be revised. I met few scholars who were so much more excited about the next steps than the already done achievements.

The last moral I want to mention is Rajeczky's devotion to Pásztó, his home, the simple folk there, and the country. With his knowledge of languages, and the Cistercian link, in the worst years Rajeczky could have left Hungary easily to garden his gardens devotedly somewhere in seclusion. Not only did he stay in this country, but also he was loyal to the small town Pásztó and his congregation until the end of his life. It is a great idea that this evening the conference will move to *Béni bácsi*'s hometown. There you will also have a chance to see István Gaál's documentary film; Gaál himself is one of his sons in a figurative sense, an artist with crystal-clear ideals, worthy of Benjamin Rajeczky himself.

I wish you a stimulating conference in the next days in those inspiring surroundings!