

# „NEW CLASSICISM” AND THE MUSIC OF „NEW HUMANITY” – HUNGARIAN MUSIC HISTORIOGRAPHY AND BENCE SZABOLCSI

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Hungarian music historiography traditionally regards the dispute about „new Hungarian music” as a contest between conservative and progressive aesthetic views. However, the artistic problem of the Hungarian intelligentsia in the interwar period were more complex. They had tasks such as synchronizing modernism and nationalism, harmonising 19th century ideals and 20th century compositional ideas and redefining the criteria of the national musical-cultural canon.

The musicologist Bence Szabolcsi created an influential theory on peasant music inspired symphonic style already in the 1920s. He supported Kodály in his articles and he had a conscious intention to establish a new school of Hungarian music. As a young man Szabolcsi created a future oriented golden age theory based on his belief that the classical era was the absolute peak of European music. He made a difference between artistic creation (as a reflection of divine creation) and conscious composition, classicism and romanticism, culture and civilization, and he regarded the latter categories as the signs of perilous European decadence from which there is no other choice but a „new classicism”, that is a „new testament”. Young Szabolcsi thought „new Hungarian music” could be the new and only path leading back to God, to culture, to music.

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„Hungarian music in our century – its influential movement hallmarked by the names of Bartók and Kodály – was born under special conditions. [...] In a country where the institutions of a powerful musical culture were missing almost completely and where there was neither social claim to a musical culture on a high level nor conditions for making it, two musicians appeared, who lifted Hungarian music and musicology up to the international forefront at one stroke”.<sup>1</sup> This is how János Breuer described the decisive change of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian music in his book *30 years’ Hungarian musical culture* published in 1975. He was a Kodály scholar and one of the renowned Hungarian musicologists. The quotation is remarkable for various reasons. On the one hand, Breuer quite naturally equates 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian music in general and the musical style

inspired by peasant music. On the other, he interprets the artistic début of Bartók and Kodály as *deus ex machina* with which the cultural desert turned into an artistically flowering and rich empire.

Naturally, Breuer knew that Hungarian music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was stylistically more complex and varied than just being described as focusing on one single aspect: the revelative effect of peasant music inspiration. And he had no doubt about the fact that the Hungarian musical institutions were not in a rudimentary state when the careers of Bartók and Kodály started. (On the contrary, these two composers were educated in schools and concert halls of this establishment.) The deceptive picture of the sudden perfection is not based on historical data in this text, and the purpose of its permanent evocation in Hungarian music historiography is not publication of facts. This is a ritual act, actually, ceremonial service of the musical manifestation of national identity.

The prophetic exaltation of the compositional technique which was searching modern musical possibilities of the archaic, oral tradition of peasant music was the intellectual legacy of the interwar period. In this time, in the first half of the 1920s there were passionate discussions on the reception of works by Bartók and Kodály, which were interpreted later as a contest between conservative and modern aesthetic views. This definition however is too laconic: it says nothing about the fact these debates on so called „new Hungarian music” how deeply rooted in the frame of mind of the interwar period of Hungary. (The attention concentrating on the conservative-modern opposition conceals even the accented moral foundation of the critical opinion of that time because of the sacred prohibitions of the cultic function of new Hungarian compositions.) Though the political and social problems of Hungary in the post-Habsburg era strongly determined the ideas about the role and forms of culture.

The basis of the conflict was a historical one: industrialization, urbanization and embourgeoisement were new phenomena in Hungary in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and due to the feudal or half-feudal state of the country bourgeoisie mostly had German and Jewish roots. Those members of the bourgeoisie whose mother tongue was not Hungarian were assimilated swiftly in line with the dynamic development of the decades of dualism (it generally happened voluntarily, from a sincere national sentiment), but the social strain increased because of the new dreams of nation-state. By the turn of the century a significant part of Hungarian intelligentsia was made of German and Jewish families. As Ágnes Széchenyi points out, Hungary had circa 18 million citizens before the Treaty of Trianon, but only 51 percent of this number were Hungarians including assimilated German and Jewish families.<sup>2</sup> This situation created problems and resulted increasingly violent confrontations already in the 1910s. For example János Horváth who was a celebrated and important literary historian in his time and teacher of many artists and scholars in the Eötvös College of Budapest University (among

his students was Zoltán Kodály) wrote a sarcastic article in 1911 in which he criticized the literary periodical *Nyugat* because it published articles using „the most degenerated Hungarian language”,<sup>3</sup> as he said. This was the journal giving place to the works and parlance of the modern, urban intelligentsia. (*Nyugat* means West. This was a journal of Western or European spirit. Representatives of Hungarian literature published their works here like Endre Ady, Margit Kaffka and Mihály Babits, though the sarcasm of Horváth was not directed against them but first of all György Lukács and Dezső Szomory.) Originality, purity and power of the characteristic features of Hungarian culture were important questions in general, naturally. The Hungarian character of 19<sup>th</sup> century music was criticized by young musicians because of the foreign (German, Italian, Gipsy) elements this music traditionally used. This is clearly understandable from an article written by 30-year-old Béla Bartók in 1911 (title is *On Hungarian Music*). In young Bartók's opinion the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian music could not be successful because of heterogeneous components: the dilettantism of foreign, incomer composers, the influence of Gipsy tradition and Western music. „The result of mixing such heterogeneous elements is not Hungarian style but lacking of style” - he wrote.<sup>4</sup>

The relation between important cultural achievements of the dualist era and the foreign characteristics of this cultural life was ambivalent, and these controversial feelings grew stronger between the two world wars. New and even more intense national pride was born by the shock caused by the Treaty of Trianon, the dismemberment of the country and radical redrawing of its borders, and this strong identity needed new self-definition. During the time when count Kunó Klebelsberg served as the Minister of Culture, „cultural supremacy” became an official political program and the desire elevating Hungary above its environment put up a new measure of „cultural purity”. On the one hand there was a great emphasis on separation and independence from the German mind and spirit. Antal Molnár, one of the founders of the Waldbauer-Kerpely Quartet felt even in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Kodály was the genius who liberated Hungarian music under the pressure of provincial status. „Before Kodály's appearance national independence was missing from our musical life. [...] We were a colony of Austria economically as well as musically”<sup>5</sup> - he wrote. Kodály himself also felt stressed by German culture. On the importance of teaching folk music in primary schools he wrote that the educational system and establishment of the Monarchy was literally harmful to the Hungarian national identity: „The purpose of the primary school is to give homogeneous Hungarian education to every class of society. [...] Those who did not deal with this problem thoroughly, could not imagine what a soul-distorting miseducation was in common here from the time Austrian educational system had been forced to us.”<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, contrast of the rural, thus unspoiled and pure Hungarian culture and the assimilated urban version - regarded as an alienated and rootless

one – was strengthening. The multi-coloured cultural life consisting of different nationalities, religions and languages was not the evidence of the transforming power of Hungarian identity any more. Its positive features were overshadowed by the rethoric of fear. Budapest, for example, with its modern infrastructure and animated social life was repeatedly mentioned as an „unpatriotic” and „rootless” city which could corrupt and deteriorate the representatives of the healthy rural values through its dangerously cheap, multicultural atmosphere. Furthermore, the articles published were more and more shifting in tone suggested by the anxiety that the expanding civilization could ruin the traditional values. The novelist László Németh formulated this feeling of separation: „The rural population, people of the land of Hungary are hovering between two cultures. Who can rescue them from the horrible brush which is washing the colours of nations into muddy, grey fluid? Who can rescue them, the heirs of the Hungarian song, from the Zerkovitz-culture converged from the canals of Europe?” – he asked in his article *People and writer*.<sup>7</sup>

These opinions attacking foreign elements of Hungarian cultural life: such as German traditions and the cultural heritage of other nations (Slovaks, Rumanians, Croats) living in Hungary for centuries, from the 1920s onwards aspired more heavily to make a distinction between „pure”, „ancient” and „true” Hungarian culture and the products of foreign influence. (In connection with it in the interwar period it was often denied that the assimilated bourgeoisie could represent the Hungarian culture properly.) This national way of thinking did not necessarily connect extremist and excluding views – despite the fact that Bartók’s reception during the 1910s became ambivalent because of his interest in the folk music of the nations of the Carpathian Basin in general. But the representatives of this national view agreed with each other that there was some kind of a spiritual contest in Europe at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the key to victory was nothing else but pure national culture organically rooted in the native land and history. (Since in case of Hungary this land was tragically polluted and alienated by the Treaty of Trianon, this demand seemed to be more inevitable, noble and legitimate.) One can usually notice the martial rethoric in the publicisms and music reviews of this period, interpreting avantgarde compositions as tools (and almost weapons) of a competition for artistic superiority. And, as the reader is often reminded in these texts, Hungary was regarded a country which gained a unique position in the 1920s: while others were continuously contesting, said Aladár Tóth in his article on *The Mission of Hungarian Music Reviews* published in Nyugat in 1925, Hungary had already won by means of Kodály, Bartók and peasant music inspiration.<sup>8</sup>

This picture, of course, was not only broadcast through the channels of the press. The theory of this aesthetics measuring artistic values with the „creative power of the earth” was born at the beginning of the 1920s, too, especially in

articles and essays written by Bence Szabolcsi. Szabolcsi was born in 1899, he was a descendant of an assimilated Jewish family. From 1917 to 1921 he studied composition with Zoltán Kodály, Albert Siklós and Leó Weiner at the Music Academy in Budapest, then – despite his literary and legal studies – went to Leipzig studying musicology with Hermann Abert and Friedrich Blume among others. Later he worked as an editor, critic and teacher: he founded the Faculty of Musicology at the Liszt Academy in 1951 and the Bartók Archives of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1961. In 1969 he became director of the Institute for Musicology. Though at the beginning of the 1920s he was a young man, he was interested in complex aesthetic theories. His aesthetic ideal was the Classical period as it appears in his essay on Mozart published in 1921.

There is a central statement in this text, namely that Mozartian (and consequently Classical) composition creates and represents a perfect unity of subjective inspiration and objective structure. In this indissoluble union and totality Szabolcsi recognized the transcendental spark of divine creation. In his train of thought Mozart as a composer was led by a „magical creative instinct”. This was the key of the „mysterious metamorphosis” which helped him to find his adequate means of expression without speculation and hesitation. But the explanation of Szabolcsi’s theory was not limited to the intellectual power of a genius. He regarded Mozart (and his oeuvre) as the successor to the Italian mentality, the heir of the spirit of the antiquities and the sacred play. This heritage, said Szabolcsi, belongs to only „great and intuitive” cultures – that’s why 18<sup>th</sup> century Classicism was interpreted by him as the last beautiful and powerful moment of Western culture, a peak from where there was no way up, only downwards. Mozartian composition represented to him the „absolute, only, certain, definitive and implicit creation”.<sup>9</sup> And in this creation, in this mysterious instinctiveness sign and referend, inspiration and expression, content and form referred to each other without reflection. But in this context deviating from classic proportions and sacred lightness meant cultural decadence via the decisive interruption between composition and creation. Therefore Szabolcsi regarded the Romantic era as a period of disruption in which divine creation was replaced by human effort, inspiration by construction and arcadian past by industrial present. This time „the inner form was lost – he wrote –, and only the broken splinters of its external reflection remained.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, decay was continuous and irreversible in Szabolcsi’s theory. He thought struggle for artistic forms and expression had begun with Beethoven in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And several decades later it caused the final disappearance of idyllic past. 19<sup>th</sup> century composers, he said, „were waiting for a new intuitive creation, they cursed their tormenting consciousness and wanted to throw it away; they wanted to grasp the past but it slipped out of their hands; they fought against expanded civilization, for culture, but in vain. [...] When they roused, there was the victorious civilization before them. Western culture was lost.”<sup>11</sup>

Feeling of loss was not only young Szabolcsi's experience between the two world wars, of course. So what makes his Mozart-essay really interesting and important is not this loss but the way he referred his experience and opinion to the new social and cultural forms of the interwar period. Namely he did not think Western cultural decay was finished by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He thought several composers of his time were merely representatives of decadence, Stravinsky, for example, whom he called in an article published in 1924 the „Russian demon” and „the fetish of Europe”. He did not believe in freshness and wildness of Stravinsky's works, on the contrary. He thought savage power is only a role, artificial imitation, „cynical and scornful arrogance”, as he said, „intellectual pride, mendacious cynism and contemptuous faithlessness, is what the new human being has to fight against”.<sup>12</sup> Szabolcsi regarded the Russian composer as a swindler, while other composers were categorized by him as experimentists and epigones whose compositions give us nothing more but „speculative eccentricity and morphinist mentality of faded, decadent cultures”.<sup>13</sup>

Although his harsh opinion was refined later as his horizon was getting broader, his classic ideal remained unchanged from a special point of view. There is a repeating belief in his articles written in the 1920s, namely the main problem of European music is estranged urban life: „music of the West became music of the cities and it detached from the earth”<sup>14</sup> – he wrote. It goes without saying that the most important and most valuable feature of Kodály's music was exactly the connection with earth, traditions, in a word, life itself: „The music of the Hungarian people which had been asleep and numb, or when it had tried to follow the rhythm of foreign lands it had clumsily wanted to resemble Europe: in Kodály at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it suddenly discovered itself as a living value innumerable possibilities within. [...] And above all it was recognized that the animating and protecting root of this music: the old peasant music, the greatest musical manifestation of Hungarian spirit was still alive. It is covered up by a new layer but there is the gold in the depth; it must be found.”<sup>15</sup> Young Szabolcsi thought there was only one way to turn again artistic composition into mirror of creation instead of documentation of human efforts: one always had to be in touch with the past in an almost biological, organic way. Therefore he regarded Kodály's peasant music inspired compositions as signs of „new classicism”, literally. He thought these works conquers the disruption of romanticism and, as the old classicism before, seize the perfect unity again. And, because Kodály's „new classicism” is able to grasp organic unity of form and content as the old one could 150 years before, it becomes „music of new humanity, new morality of the world, which accomplishes religious mission”<sup>16</sup> – as Szabolcsi wrote in his article *Instrumental Music of Zoltán Kodály* in 1922. (It was published in *Musikblätter des Anbruchs*.)



So peasant music inspiration and close connection with the cultural-genetic identity of Kodály's music revitalize the creative power that was attributed to Mozart's classicism in Szabolcsi's theory. This is the sacred spark which can reanimate the heritage of European culture in newborn Hungarian music – and Hungarian music is able to become the guard and keeper of the lost European values via its unique nature, namely it is unspoiled and fresh without a trace of the decadent modern civilization.

This theory emphasizing the importance of land, past, language and tradition fits quite naturally and precisely to the cultural demands of the interwar period in Hungary. Hungarian musical institutions of the second half of the 20th century were established in the 1920s and 1930s. Among the fulfilled purposes were the reconstruction of musical education in primary schools (on folk music basis), replacing the old repertoire of *Liedertafels* with folksongs and Kodály-compositions and organization of festivals to celebrate this new repertoire. But besides the technical questions the spiritual basis of the new institutions was also defined in this period. Young Szabolcsi's theory on the moral superiority of Hungarian music based on Kodály's pure „new classicism” played an important role not only in the development of the cult of Kodály's music, personality and heritage but the constructions of the topoi of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian music historiography, too.

### Notes

- 1 Breuer, János: *Harminc év magyar zenekultúrája – 30 Years' Hungarian Musical Culture* (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1975), 15.
- 2 Széchenyi, Ágnes: *Az asszimiláció kérdései az irodalom tükrében a dualizmus (1867-1918) korában – Questions of Assimilation in Hungarian Literature in the Dualist Era (1867-1918)*. In: rec.iti, Budapest, 29-52.
- 3 Széchenyi, Ágnes: *Az asszimiláció kérdései az irodalom tükrében a dualizmus (1867-1918) korában – Questions of Assimilation in Hungarian Literature in the Dualist Era (1867-1918)*. In: rec.iti, Budapest, 29-52.
- 4 Bartók, Béla: *A magyar zenéről – On Hungarian Music*. – In: Tallián, Tibor (Hg.): *Béla Bartók's Writings I*. (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1989), 99.
- 5 Molnár, Antal: *Eszmények, értékek, emlékek – Ideals, Values, Memories* (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1981), 140.
- 6 Kodály, Zoltán: *A magyar iskola mai feladatairól – On Challenges of Present-day School in Hungary*. – In: Bónis, Ferenc (Hg.): *Retrospection, I*. (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1982), 201.
- 7 Németh, László: *Nép és író – People and Writer*. – In: Monostori, Imre (Hg.): *Művelődéspolitikai írások – Essays on Cultural Policy*, (Műzsák Közművelődési Könyvkiadó), 15. Béla Zerkovitz was born in 1882, the same year as Kodály. He was a popular composer of chansons and operettas and inventor of Hungarian music-hall songs.
- 8 Tóth, Aladár: *A magyar zenekritika feladatai – The Mission of Hungarian Music Reviews*. – In: Breuer, János: *Zenei írások a Nyugatban – Essays on Music in Nyugat* (Budapest: Zeneműki-

adó 1978), 11-21. Aladár Tóth was musicologist, critic and editor, he later became the director of the Opera House in Budapest.

- 9 Szabolcsi, Bence: *Mozart. Kísérlet – Mozart. Experiment.* – In: Wilhelm, András: *Szabolcsi Bence válogatott írásai – Selected Writings of Bence Szabolcsi* (Budapest: Typotex., 2003), 12.
- 10 Szabolcsi, Bence: *Mozart. Kísérlet – Mozart. Experiment.* – In: Wilhelm, András: *Szabolcsi Bence válogatott írásai – Selected Writings of Bence Szabolcsi* (Budapest: Typotex., 2003), 12.
- 11 Szabolcs, Bencei: *Mozart. Kísérlet – Mozart. Experiment.* – In: Wilhelm, András: *Szabolcsi Bence válogatott írásai – Selected Writings of Bence Szabolcsi* (Budapest: Typotex., 2003), 16
- 12 Szabolcsi, Bence: *Sztravinszkij, Európa bálványa – Stravinsky, Idol of Europe.* – In: Wilhelm, András: *Szabolcsi Bence válogatott írásai – Selected Writings of Bence Szabolcsi* (Budapest: Typotex., 2003), 38.
- 13 Szabolcsi, Bence: *Kodály és Európa – Kodály and Europe.* – In: Wilhelm, András: *Szabolcsi Bence válogatott írásai – Selected Writings of Bence Szabolcsi* (Budapest: Typotex., 2003), 51.
- 14 Szabolcsi, Bence: *Kodály és Európa – Kodály and Europe.* – In: Wilhelm, András: *Szabolcsi Bence válogatott írásai – Selected Writings of Bence Szabolcsi* (Budapest: Typotex., 2003), 51.
- 15 Szabolcsi, Bence: *Kodály és Európa – Kodály and Europe.* – In: Wilhelm, András: *Szabolcsi Bence válogatott írásai – Selected Writings of Bence Szabolcsi* (Budapest: Typotex., 2003), 51.
- 16 Szabolcsi, Bence: *Kodály Zoltán hangszeres zenéje – Instrumental Music of Zoltán Kodály Kodály.* – In: Wilhelm, András: *Szabolcsi Bence válogatott írásai – Selected Writings of Bence Szabolcsi* (Budapest: Typotex., 2003), 34.