

Nausikaa, Sappho and Other Women in Love: Zoltán Kodály's Reception of Greek Antiquity (1906–1932)

Anna Dalos

Musicological Institute of the Research Centre for the Humanities,
Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest

ABSTRACT: Zoltán Kodály showed a great interest in Greek antiquity throughout his life. Not only did he study the ancient Greek language thoroughly and read up on the different editions of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but he had also been planning an opera about the latter figure since 1906. Only one song survived from this opera plan, 'Nausikaa', written in 1907 to a poem by Kodály's former secret lover, Aranka Bálint. It was published only in 1925, at a time when Kodály, stimulated by the Hungarian writer Zsigmond Móricz and his new drama *Odüsszeusz bolyongásai* (The Wanderings of Odysseus, 1924), turned himself towards the Odysseus theme again. Though he abandoned the new plan of the opera soon, his desire to write music for the stage proved to be lasting. He finished his Singspiel *Háry János* in 1926, and his lyrical play, *Székely fonó* (The Transylvanian Spinning-Room) in 1932. Even contemporary critics recognised the similarity between the figures of the adventurer Háry and Odysseus, and they referred to Kodály's possible identification with the two heroes. A recent study investigated the role of the Young Man in *The Transylvanian Spinning-Room* from the same point of view.

My paper, however, examining Kodály's songs from his first mature period (1906–1923), first of all 'Nausikaa' and 'Sappho szerelmes éneke' (Sappho's Love Song, 1915), as well as the series of *Magyar népzene* (Hungarian Folk Music, 1924–1932), and the two plays for stage from the second period (1923–1945), scrutinises the role of the women in love in Kodály's *œuvre*. Kodály's songs introduce women who are lovelorn and for this reason feel defenceless. These female portraits are connected to one characteristic musical feature, the use of pentatony. Pentatony symbolises here for Kodály not 'Hungarianness', as usual, but the archaism of the ancient music and culture, on the one hand, and women's longing, on the other.

The young Zoltán Kodály was fascinated by the figure of the Phaiakian princess Nausikaa. Nevertheless, he wrote only one composition on this theme, the song 'Nausikaa', completed on 6 July 1907. It was based on a poem written by Kodály's girlfriend of youth, Aranka Bálint.¹ He probably planned to compose an orchestral piece with the title 'Nausikaa' as well, which would have been the counterpart of *Nyári este* (Summer Evening) finished in 1906.² He must have considered composing two other orchestral pictures, *Nausikaa* and *Circe*, sometime between 1916 and 1919, a fact we only know from references in Kodály's

¹ Aranka Bálint refused to have her name printed as the author of the poem in the edition of 'Nausikaa' later. She also wanted to remain anonymous when she handed over to Bence Szabolcsi some Kodály manuscripts from her own property. Bence Szabolcsi, 'Három ismeretlen Kodály-dalról' (On Three Unknown Kodály-Songs), *Muzsika*, 13/8 (August 1970), 1–3.

² Tibor Tallián, 'Kodály Zoltán kalandozásai Ithakától a Székelyföldre' (Zoltán Kodály's Adventures from Ithaka to the Székelys), *Magyar Zene*, 56/3 (August 2008), 241.

notebook.³ In addition, in 1924 the composer was asked by the Hungarian writer, Zsigmond Móricz (1879–1942) to write an opera based on his three-act drama, *Odüsszeusz bolyongásai* (The Wanderings of Odysseus).⁴ The three acts presented three women in Odysseus' life: Nausicaa, Circe, and Penelope. Though the subject gave Kodály an opportunity to realise his dream of composing an opera related to ancient Greece, he did not set the play to music. All we know is that he wanted to insert the old song 'Nausikaa' in the first act.⁵ Researchers of the composer's life emphasised from the beginning the importance of the figures of Odysseus and the three women in love for Kodály. Bence Szabolcsi suggested as early as 1926 that the hero in Kodály's 1926 completed *Singspiel Hóry János* – himself an adventurer, a kind of Hungarian Odysseus – was the composer's spitting image.⁶ Recently, Tibor Tallián pointed out that the Lover, another Hungarian Odysseus in *The Transylvanian Spinning-Room*, Kodály's lyric play completed in 1932, might be Kodály's equivalent as well.⁷

Kodály's identification with Odysseus made Tallián search for the sources of the female figures. He associated Penelope with Kodály's first wife, Emma; moreover, he argued that the chief female characters in Kodály's stage works, Örsze in *Hóry* and the Housewife in *The Transylvanian Spinning-Room* were Emma's counterparts.⁸ It speaks for itself that Kodály dedicated *Hóry János* to his wife with the words: 'To my Örsze'. As no love affairs in Kodály's life are known after their marriage in 1910, the models of Nausicaa and Circe must be sought in an earlier stage of Kodály's life. Tallián is right to refer to the emotionally turbulent times around composing the song 'Nausikaa', 1906–1907, when Kodály had to choose from three women, Emma, Aranka, and the German actress, Eva Martersteig.⁹ The situation proved to be so traumatic for the young composer that seventeen years later he was still inclined to compose an opera from Móricz's erotic drama focusing on men's right to sexual satisfaction and infidelity.¹⁰

During his Berlin journey of 1906–1907 Kodály kept a diary, which helps us reconstruct the events leading to the traumatic experiences and his final decision to choose Emma.¹¹ The other source of information on this period is the diary of Béla Balázs,¹² Kodály's closest friend at the time, who later became the librettist of Bartók's *A Kékszakállú herceg vára* (Bluebeard's Castle, 1911) and *A fából faragott királyfi* (The Wooden Prince, 1914–1916). For that matter, it must have been the idea of the extrovert Balázs to bring the reserved

³ Ibid. 243.

⁴ Zsigmond Móricz, *Drámák II* (Dramas II) (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1980), 593.

⁵ Tallián, 'Kodály...', 242.

⁶ Bence Szabolcsi, 'Hóry János', in *Kodályról és Bartókról* (On Kodály and Bartók) (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1987), 64–70.

⁷ Tallián, 'Kodály...', 240–241.

⁸ Ibid. 244–245.

⁹ Ibid. 242.

¹⁰ Ibid. 242–243.

¹¹ Lajos Vargyas (ed.), *Kodály Zoltán: Közélet, vallomások, zeneélet. Hátrahagyott írások* (Kodály Zoltán: Public Life, Confessions, Music Life. Posthumous Writings) (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1989), 119–135.

¹² Béla Balázs, *Napló I. 1903–1914* (Diaries I. 1903–1914) (Budapest: Magvető, 1982).

Kodály to write a diary. For Balázs the genre of diary was a peculiar form of public – not private – literature in which the young and sensitive artist can formulate his ideas on life, philosophy, friendship and love, particularly his thoughts on friendship with Kodály and his love for Aranka Bálint. In addition to Aranka and Kodály, Balázs's closest circle of friends also included a second woman, Paula Hermann. All of them not only read the diary but expressed their opinion in letters and conversations as well.¹³ Kodály's entries in his own diary and his travel diary written some months after his Berlin and Paris trip with the title *Voyage en Hongrie*¹⁴ reflect unambiguously the influence of Balázs's style and attitude.

The central topic of their diaries was love: man's and, in connection with it, woman's love. Both of them described Berlin as an erotic town where the practice of free love raised no ethical questions as it had nothing to do with feelings.¹⁵ Kodály, who looked for the 'true one', as Balázs put it,¹⁶ must have suffered from this attitude, particularly when oblivious of his unclarified feelings for Emma and Aranka for a while, he fell in love with the Eva, portrayed by Balázs as a Circe.¹⁷ She gave herself to Kodály but refrained from all romantic feelings ('Nur keine Sehnsucht haben, bitte' (Please, don't Yearn) – as she told Kodály).¹⁸ In his diary entry dated 12 March 1907 Kodály tried to describe her personality but felt difficult to find the proper words, as the fragmentary wording reveals:

Hogy járkel, mint egy vízió [...]. 'So kultiviert' a legkisebb mozdulata [...]. Talán a 'zur Natur gewordene Kultur' vonz benne. 'Schreckt dich das?' kérdezte, mikor elmondta, hogy lesbosi hajlandósága van. [...] Ósvonások benne. Mint az ultramodern szimfóniák agyonbogozott szálai közt egy-egy primitív melódia. [...] (A spirális fejlődés: a kultúra tetőpontjainak érintkezése a primitívséggel).¹⁹

She walks around like a vision [...]. Her moving is 'so kultiviert' (so cultivated) [...]. Maybe her 'zur Natur gewordene Kultur' (culture that became her nature) attracts me [...] 'Schreckt dich das?' (Doesn't it frighten you?), she asked me when she told me that she had a lesbian inclination too. [...] There are also some ancient features in her. Like some primitive melodies in the confused lines of ultramodern symphonies. [...] (The spiral evolution: when the peak of a culture communicates with the primitive).

It is evident that Eva represented for Kodály a high, sophisticated culture which does not reject its own ancient, primitive characteristics either. In his eyes she was a mixture of nature and refinement, archaism and modernity – a combination that was to become

¹³ Ibid. 286, 308, 336.

¹⁴ Zoltán Kodály, *Voyage en Hongrie* (Budapest: Múzsák, n.d.).

¹⁵ Balázs, *Napló*, 362–363, 403. See also Kodály's letter to Emma (22 December 1906) in Dezső Legány (ed.), *Kodály Zoltán levelei* (Zoltán Kodály's Letters) (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1982), 28–29.

¹⁶ Balázs, *Napló*, 329.

¹⁷ Ibid. 401.

¹⁸ Vargyas, *Kodály*, 132–133.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Kodály's main ideal some years later when it came to creating modern Hungarian music.²⁰ On the other hand, Emma and Aranka represented other ways of life as he had tried to formulate it some months before:

Emma és Aranka közti különbség: mikor Arankát megkérdeztem, hogy tetszett a Camenzind: 'Hesse tanítvány és nem is a legjobb'. Ezt kezdte mondani. Emma pedig? nem is emlékszem, mit mondott. Aranka a reflexió, az utánagondolt gondolatok embere. Emme maga az őstermészet. [...] Nyelvalakító képessége kicsiny, azért öltözteto ezeket megtanult formákba. Csak ha mögé lát az ember ennek a nyelvnek, úgy látja meg. [...] Ő képtelen volna idegen gondolatot úgy 'átsajátítani' és beilleszteni magába, mint Aranka. Mindig emlékszik, kitől tanulta ezt vagy azt. Ezért sokat *idéz*, néha egészen közönséges emberek közönséges mondásait. [...] Igaz: egyik ok: Aranka fiatalabb, nem olyan lezárt.²¹

The difference between Emma and Aranka: When I asked Aranka if she liked Camenzind, she began by saying: 'Hesse is only a follower, and not even the best.' And Emma? I don't even remember what she answered. Aranka is a person of reflections, she weighs carefully all ideas. Emma, however, is ancient nature herself. [...] Her language facility is limited; this is why she dresses [her thoughts] in learned formulas. If you disregard this language, you will understand [her]. [...] She would be unable to adopt foreign opinions like Aranka does. She always remembers whom she learned something from. As a result, she *quotes* much, sometimes absolutely ordinary thoughts from ordinary people. [...] Aranka is, to be true, much younger, she isn't mature yet.

While Aranka's main characteristics include reflexivity, receptivity, and immaturity, Emma figures in his entry as the embodiment of 'ancient nature'. Furthermore, Kodály's description of Emma strikingly resembles the way folk music works: peasant songs – words and melodies alike – are based on learned formulas that vary slightly at each new performance. The twenty-three-year-old Kodály, who wrote his doctoral thesis on the strophic structure of Hungarian folksongs in 1906, points to this feature of folksongs.²² Moreover, peasants remember clearly who they learned the songs from: it is one of the most important information the collector has to ask.²³ Kodály mentioned this practice when he published the series *Magyar népzene* (Hungarian Folk Music) from 1924 on, and indicated who he had learned the given song from. So it is small wonder that Örzse and the Housewife, both Emma's counterparts in Kodály's stage works, sing, that means: they always quote folksongs to express their feelings.

Kodály's diary entries describe three basic types of women. It is, however, much more important to consider how Kodály discusses women in general. He is affected by these

²⁰ Zoltán Kodály, 'Tizenhárom fiatal zeneszerző' (Thirteen Young Composers) in Ferenc Bónis (ed.), *Visszatekintés II. Kodály Zoltán összegyűjtött írásai, beszédei, nyilatkozatai* (In retrospect II. Zoltán Kodály's Collected Writings, Speeches, Declarations) (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1974), 392.

²¹ Vargyas, *Kodály*, 122.

²² Zoltán Kodály, 'A magyar népdal strófa-szerkezete' (The Strophic Structure of Hungarian Folk Song), in Bónis (ed.), *Visszatekintés*, 22–23.

²³ Béla Bartók, *Miért és hogyan gyűjtsünk népzene-t? A zenei folklóre törvénykönyve* (Why and How to Collect Folk Music?) (Budapest: Somló, 1936), 15. Modern edition: András Szöllösy (ed.), *Bartók Béla összegyűjtött írásai I* (Béla Bartók's Collected Writings I) (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1966), 592.

women but tries to speak about them with a kind of scientific objectivity. Women represent for him Otherness, a strange phenomenon full of mysteries to be solved. Women appear there as objects to be examined. As his *Voyage en Hongrie* reveals, the young Kodály grew attracted to peasant women, and the experiences gathered in the environment of peasants made him realise that women and the relationship between men and women played an equally crucial part in the peasant's world as they did in modern society. He was particularly sensitive to women who remained alone.²⁴

Among his forty-one art songs, written between 1906 and 1926, there are, however, only two expressly women's songs, the above mentioned 'Nausikaa', and 'Sappho szerelmes éneke' (Sappho's Love Song) from 1917. In an additional song entitled 'Haja, haja' (Alas, Alas), the first strophe is written for a man, the second for a woman, while three further songs can be sung by men and women alike. The proportion of men's to women's songs in Kodály's series *Hungarian Folk Music* is much more balanced than among his art songs: the sixty-two folksongs of the collection comprise twenty-three women's and twenty-six men's songs, five songs for two performers (a man and a woman) and eight ones that can be sung by men and women alike. While women's songs focus mostly on women's love and loneliness, men's songs concentrate much more on the realities of everyday life: they are drinking songs, soldiers' songs or satirical songs. Men sing of love only in exceptional cases. The numerous soldiers' songs and women's songs about loneliness and despair suggest that fieldwork during World War I stirred again Kodály's interest in the relationship between men and women.

Kodály's art songs and folksong arrangements do not form traditional song cycles in the sequence they appeared in print (Table 1). The grouping of the songs is often surprising, indeed, particularly if we examine the dates of the pieces. Three early songs written to poems by Balázs, the cycle *Énekszó: dalok népi versekre* (Sixteen Songs on Hungarian Popular Words) Op. 1 (1907–1909), and three of the 1924 published *Négy dal* (Four Songs) were composed between 1906 and 1909. These songs constitute a thematically homogeneous group of works connected to events in the life of the circle around Balázs and Kodály. What is more, the composer's Op. 1, which is based on folk texts, is a kind of musical diary, the musical counterpart to Balázs's diary, in which a young man narrates the story of finding the 'true one'. The format and the make-up of the first edition suggest unambiguously a diary. In the texts there are direct references to Kodály's life. For example, the first song relates a situation in which a young man has to choose from three women. On the other hand, the thirteenth song reminds the listener of an event when a young man introduces his loved one to his best friend, and then the two fall in love with each other. The same incident is described in Balázs's diary: he had to witness how Kodály and his beloved Aranka fell for each other.²⁵

²⁴ Kodály, *Voyage en Hongrie*.

²⁵ Balázs, *Napló*, 319–320.

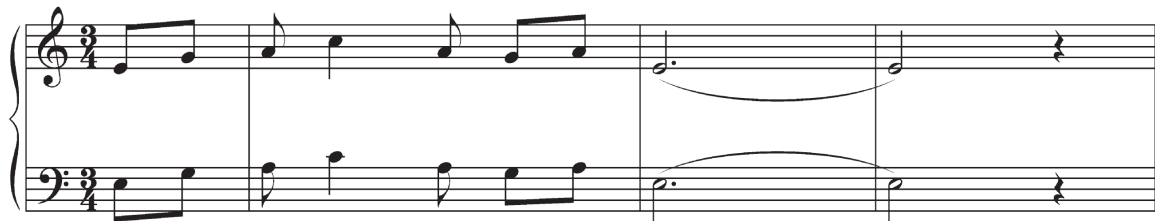
<i>Három dal</i> Balázs Béla verseire (Three Songs on poems by Béla Balázs), Op. posth., 1906–1907	For a man
<i>Négy dal</i> (Four Songs) (published in 1924), 1–3: 1907, 4: 1917 1. ‘Haja, haja’ (Alas, Alas) (János Arany) 2. ‘Nausikaa’ (Aranka Bálint) 3. ‘Mezei dal’ (Meadow Song) (Aranka Bálint) 4. ‘Fáj a szívem’ (My Heart Aches) (Zsigmond Móricz)	For a man and a woman For a woman For a man or a woman For a man or a woman
<i>Énekszó: dalok népi versekre</i> (Sixteen Songs on Hungarian Popular Words) Op. 1, 1907–1909	For a man
<i>Két ének</i> (Two Songs), Op. 5, poems by Dániel Berzsenyi, Endre Ady, 1913–1916	For a man
<i>Megkésett melódiák</i> (Belated Melodies), Op. 6, poems by Dániel Berzsenyi (1–4), Ferenc Kölcsey (5–6), Mihály Csokonai Vitéz (7), 1912–1916	For a man
<i>Öt dal</i> (Five Songs), Op. 9, 1915–1918 1. ‘Ádám, hol vagy’ (Adam, Where are You?) (Endre Ady) 2. ‘Sappho szerelmes éneke’ (Sappho’s Love Song) (Endre Ady) 3. ‘Éjjel’ (Night) (Béla Balázs) 4. ‘Kicsi virágom’ (My Little Flower) (Béla Balázs) 5. ‘Az erdő’ (The Forest) (Béla Balázs)	For a man For a woman For a man For a man or a woman For a man
<i>Három ének</i> (Three Songs), Op. 14, poems by Bálint Balassi (1), anonymous seventeenth-century poet (2–3), 1918–1926 ²⁶	For a man

Table 1. Kodály’s song cycles written between 1906 and 1926

While most songs composed at the time belong thematically to Kodály’s musical diary, ‘Nausikaa’ does not fit into this group, even though it was written by Aranka. All other song texts of these years are either reflections of the style of Hungarian folksongs or actually authentic folk texts. By contrast, the poem *Nausikaa* has nothing to do with Hungarian folk style. The source of the simplicity of Kodály’s setting lies in the simplicity of the poem. The

²⁶ The dates 1924–1929 mentioned in: László Eöszse, Mícheál Houlahan, and Philip Tacka, ‘Kodály, Zoltán’, in Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (eds.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, xiii (2nd edn., London: MacMillan, 2001), 724 are incorrect. Kodály wrote Op. 14 between 1918 and 1924, and he orchestrated these songs in 1926. See Anna Dalos, ‘Zoltán Kodály’, in Ludwig Finscher (ed.), *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Personenteil*, x (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2004), 396.

second and third strophes repeat the melody of the first one, whereas the accompaniment is varied. As characteristic of Kodály, the piano transmits the feelings of Nausicaa. The music is almost without chromaticism; Nausicaa sings a diatonic melody coloured by slight references to pentatony (Example 1a). The song begins, however, with a pentatonic motto in the piano. A chromatic line only appears in the piano at the moment when Nausicaa loses her self-discipline on the mentioning of Odysseus's Ithaca in the third strophe. The chromaticism of Odysseus's memory upsets Nausicaa's diatonic-pentatonic balance (Example 1b).



Example 1a. Pentatonic motto in Kodály's 'Nausikaa'

Musical score for Example 1b, showing chromaticism in Kodály's 'Nausikaa', the beginning of the third strophe, bb. 1-5. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of two staves: a vocal line in the treble clef and a piano accompaniment in the bass clef. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "Hi-deg szél fúj Ith-a - ká-ból, Nem te küld-ted bor-zo-gat Ál - lok". The piano accompaniment shows a chromatic line in the bass clef.

Example 1b. Chromaticism in Kodály's 'Nausikaa', the beginning of the third strophe, bb. 1-5

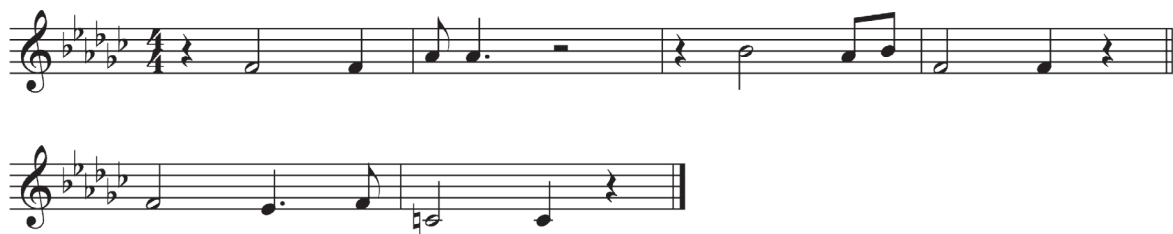
The appearance of the pentatonic scale in the piano part, which can be the symbol of the innocence and instinctively radiating sensuality of Nausicaa (and perhaps Aranka) is, in fact, rare among Kodály's art songs in spite of the fact that the discovery of the pentatonic scale in Hungarian folk music around 1907 was a revelation for both Bartók and Kodály, as it powered the connection between ancient music cultures and Hungarian folk music.²⁷ The same pentatonic motto appears surprisingly in Kodály's 1917 setting of Endre Ady's free formulation of 'Sappho's Love Song' (surviving originally in Catullus' Latin translation) as if it were a quotation from 'Nausikaa'. There are also other points linking 'Sappho's Love Song'

²⁷ Zoltán Kodály, 'Ötfokú hangsor a magyar népzeneben' (Five-tone Scale in Hungarian Folk Music), in Bónis (ed.), *Visszatekintés*, 75.

with 'Nausikaa'. Kodály included the former in the cycle *Five Songs*, which contains – in addition to another Ady-setting 'Ádám, hol vagy?' (Adam, Where are You?) – the musical setting of Balázs's three poems as well: their partially folk style reminds us of the songs of 1906–1907. Moreover, the unique choice of the extremely passionate and erotic poem of the ancient Greek poetess – who is said to have had a 'lesbian inclination', as Kodály put it when describing Eva Martersteig, the Circe of his life – is an eloquent proof of Kodály's renewed interest in his artistic phase of ten years earlier and its central subject: love.

This is why 'Sappho's Love Song' can be interpreted as Eva's musical portrait. The pentatonic motto is hidden among the strophes. The first strophe begins and ends with the pentatonic formula (Example 2a), that returns at the beginning of the second strophe – although this strophe ends with its mistuned version – as well as in the third strophe. There the pentatonic formula may be the symbol of the 'ancient', the 'primitive' that appears at the peak of a highly-sophisticated culture, as Kodály wrote about Eva's personality. Nevertheless, 'Sappho's Love Song' is full of dissonances; pentatony is only one layer of the complex musical texture characterising the setting. By recalling the effect of plucking and arpeggios, the piano refers to the tone of the ancient *kithara*. But the instrument is subordinated to Sappho's emotions as if Sappho accompanied herself. The accompaniment changes right at the moment when Sappho – just like Nausicaa – loses the balance of her earlier state of mind by realising that she is lost. At this point Sappho, whose *kithara* normally plays in a key with six flats, even though it is full of chromaticism, sinks into an unorganised world without signatures (Example 2b). The regular tone of Sappho's *kithara* only returns at the end of the song.

Sappho's ancient Greece must have acted for Kodály as the paradigm of a sophisticated culture.²⁸ Ancient Greece appears in this context as an unattainable ideal, the Other, the object of one's desire. The Otherness of ancient Greece is for Kodály undoubtedly a parallel to women's mysterious Otherness. Kodály's musical description of Sappho's erotic and Nausicaa's innocent, yet definitely sensual love shows clearly that women rarely had the opportunity to express their feelings in the composer's *œuvre* outside Emma-Penelope's world, graced so emphatically with Hungarian tones. If they wanted to express themselves, they had to manifest themselves in Greek.



Example 2a. Pentatonic formula in Kodály's 'Sappho's Love Song'

²⁸ See Ferenc Bónis's study: 'Székely fonó: avagy Kodály Homérosz útján' (The Transylvanian Spinning-Room: or Kodály on Homer's Way) *Hírel*, 15/12 (December 2002), 56.

The image shows a musical score for Kodály's 'Sappho's Love Song'. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in 4/4 time and features two triplet markings over the first and second measures. The lyrics are 've-rej - ték ve - ri tes - tem'. The piano accompaniment is in 4/4 time and includes a 'cresc.' marking and two '5' markings over the piano parts in the second measure. The score is written in a key signature of three flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor) and a 4/4 time signature.

Example 2b. Unorganised world without a key signature in Kodály's 'Sappho's Love Song', bb. 25–26
(© With kind permission by UNIVERSAL EDITION A.G., Wien/UE 7509)