

ERNŐ DOHNÁNYI

JÓZSEF UJFALUSSY

Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest
Hungary

Béla Bartók, Ernő Dohnányi and Zoltán Kodály are inseparable from the history of Hungarian music in the first half of the 20th century. Considering this historic period of Hungarian music and the careers of these three, we encounter the same recurring question why did Bartók and Kodály become the ideals, or, as János Arany put it, "the animating idea" of Hungarian culture, while Ernő Dohnányi is discounted.

What was the reason? Personal qualities? External circumstances? What interactions determined this unusual career? "Where is the stage: inside or outside?" one could ask with the words of a fourth contemporary, Béla Balázs. The answers are to be found in the relation between Dohnányi, Bartók and Kodály. Ernő Dohnányi was born in Pozsony (Pressburg: now Bratislava) in 1877. His father, Frigyes Dohnányi, was a grammar schoolteacher, an influential and honoured citizen of Pozsony. His house was one of the centres of chamber music culture, characteristic of Pozsony musical life. His son's legendary talent for music emerged at an early age, and both his family and community supported his development. He was 17 planning a musical career when, in 1894, a new talent appeared in Pozsony: the 13-year-old Béla Bartók. From this time on their paths were joined. They were equally great musical geniuses with completely different personalities. Those who heard them play the piano could confirm this.

Bálint Vázsonyi, in his excellent biography of Dohnányi, defines the difference between the characters of the two.¹ Dohnányi could do everything with ease. He lived elegantly with almost Apollonian serenity. Bartók struggled hard for everything. Losing his father early and being the son of a poor schoolmistress, he soon got used to a modest lifestyle. The milieu and behaviour of his older colleague inevitably made Bartók's relation to him two-faced: attraction combined with the alienating influence of dissimilar internal and external conditions.

Dohnányi not only followed Bartók's career with attention but also supported him. Dohnányi encouraged him to study in Budapest under the direction of István Thomán, professor at the Academy of Music.

As Bálint Vázsonyi informs us, it was also Dohnányi who first called Bartók's attention to *Also sprach Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss² before the performance of the piece on February 10, 1902. This piece gave an impulse to his development as a composer. This, and the revelation of Liszt's late compositions for the piano were probably the last determining experience these two had in common. From this time on, Bartók was making his way ahead 'by relay horses', so to say. Meanwhile, Zoltán Kodály, five years younger than Dohnányi and one year younger than Bartók, was growing up in Galánta, and later in Nagyszombat, without knowing about the other two. Like many major literary and artistic figures flocking to Budapest they became acquainted in the salon of Emma Gruber (later Mrs Kodály).

"That was a time nurturing Herculeses", wrote Endre Ady, meaning the years around the turn of the century. Born in 1877, Dohnányi was the same age as Ady. Was the age difference between Dohnányi and his two colleagues or the early current of the pianist career drifting him to a phenomenal "outer course" the reason why he did not participate in the domestic struggles of Ady's generation? He was being ripened in a different way while working in Berlin, Leipzig and then again in Berlin "by fate for the sluggish, great, indecent Hungarian revolution". The difference between their artistic character, however, inclines one to think of them as not being of the same generation.

The things being in the making at home were as significant ones as the creating of our national culture in a modern, twentieth-century way and, within and by this the reformulation of our cultural consciousness and identity, and to designate anew our place in our country, among our neighbours and in the world. Scientists, writers, painters, actors and musicians were seeking the way to the 20th century. Zoltán Kodály, a student of arts and composing had already drafted the plan of Hungarian music and musical education as a freshman at Eötvös College.³ Together with Béla Bartók, in folk-music they found that tradition of great artistic value which made their music akin to the contemporary, chiefly French style of composing. It was not Vienna, but the French example that attracted the interest of the new age. Also, the Hungarian artists were beginning to show solidarity with the anti-war movement of other European artists.

Dohnányi could not take part in these movements. He had been living abroad since 1905. He did not experience the excitement over the discovery, gathering and re-creation of folk-music, nor did he participate in the struggles for equal rights for the ethnic minorities. He did not experience Endre Ady's blood-stirring poetry, the Nyugat-generation or the efforts put forth by a group of painters called The Eight. His disposition and education did not draw him to these. This was probably the reason why Bartók, in his famous letter from

Gmunden of September 13th, 1903 made a disapproving remark about Dohnányi's showing little devotion to his own country.⁴

In some respects he distanced himself from the revolution. Though he did not have much share in the domestic struggles, he contributed to the cultural renewal. Maybe unintentionally, his compositional style led to the final refinement and serenity of classical traditions reaching as far as Richard Strauss. At the same time, he wrote classical and romantic compositions for the piano. The beauty of his piano-playing evoking nostalgia embraced all that remained alive of their tradition. He brought back the Liszt tradition from its round-the-world tour to the Music Academy founded by, and named after him.

In 1915 Dohnányi returned from Berlin with a demand for a higher artistic standard of musical education and plans for the renewal of the Lisztian school and Hungarian musical education. The great piano teacher, István Thomán, had been living in forced retirement since 1906. This was partly due to another pupil of Liszt, Árpád Szendy, professor at the Music Academy. Prof. Szendy became the chief opponent and hindrance to Dohnányi's reformist endeavours. With Dohnányi's return, piano teaching, which had become mechanic and based on finger work was replaced with the spiritual heritage of Thomán, i.e. with a teaching centred on music. His plans for a reform in teaching methods were aimed at making the Music Academy a real college by a stricter selection of the applicants and by stopping its secondary school-like drabness.⁵ His plans came to fruition in 1919 when the Music Academy was reorganized to be a College of Music with Dohnányi as principal and Kodály as vice-principal.

The project was refused in 1917 because it would have let the students decide which music they used. This interfered with the interest of some teachers, primarily Árpád Szendy and Kálmán Chován, who made a considerable profit by insisting students, use their editions of piano music.⁶

1916 and 1917 were the best years of cooperation for the three musicians. Dohnányi's contribution to the work of this group, besides his pedagogical conception, was his unique art which he generously gave. The principles and practice of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, proclaimed on March, 21th, 1919 seemed to be favourable to the endeavours which aimed at drawing great masses of people into musical education. Dohnányi had already announced his concerts for workers during the bourgeois revolution. At the first one given by Waldbauers in December, 1918 Dohnányi himself participated,⁷ and later on he organized these events and contributed to them as a pianist and a conductor. He performed the greatest musical pieces on several evenings and played chamber music with the Waldbauer-Kerpely String Quartet formed anew after its members' return from the war. He educated people from the stage in the same way as he did in his classes at the Academy: by playing music as it is worthy to be played.

Between October 1918 and April 1919, Zoltán Kodály reported concert life in Budapest for *Pesti Napló*. These accounts suggest that both the repertoire and the performers of these concerts were of the highest standard, and reflect Dohnányi's presence and exceptional enthusiasm. Kodály praised Dohnányi's repertoire and natural style of playing as well. "He who has got used to the high level of these concerts will hardly be happy with lower class music any more. He who got so close to the masters as Dohnányi did through his playing which made everybody forget about the pianist, would exceedingly be irritated by a virtuoso whose so called 'individuality' incessantly stands between the composer and the audience. Only he who is a composer himself can reach such a level of performing art: as if he improvised that which is unalterable and is the only possible thing", wrote Kodály about Dohnányi's Beethoven-evening on October 10th, 1918.⁸ Regarding Frack's quintet for the piano he wrote: "It will be long remembered how Dohnányi's fingers entangled the veiled sound of the piano with the colour-beams of the strings." (December 4th, 1918)⁹ On December 12th he reported on Dohnányi's Liszt-evening: "The most vigorous of Liszt's works are perhaps those of elevated French style opening up new paths and breathing the air of revolution at the same time like his sonata in B minor, one of Dohnányi's most fantastic shows. For, besides and above their other virtues, Liszt's piano compositions are paying to play for their vigour as well. True, they had been intended for the enormous length of the composer's fingers. But only the pianist who, as a necromancer, is able to put, if only for a minute, the composer before the audience in his, so to say, physical reality can manage to make Liszt's legendary art perceptible by performing his works, which have preserved something of the legend".¹⁰ Bartók contributed to the teamwork as a composer. "Dohnányi brought new colours to his usual Saturday concerts having the atmosphere of a classical picture gallery by introducing some freshly painted canvases. He played some pieces by Bartók and two of his own impressive concert-etudes." (Febr. 16th, 1919)¹¹ In the beginning of March the Waldbauer-Kerpely ensemble put Bartók's String Quartet No. 2 on their programme. "With the proper acoustic perspective found, the drawing which had seemed first a confuse mass of lines at first sight becomes more and more discernible with its monumental forms that rise before our eyes, and the bursting energy that lies underneath more and more sensible. Some more such expressive and lively performances like the today's one should follow so that all the hidden beauty of this extraordinary work will come to light." (March 6th, 1919)¹²

Finally, on March 27th Kodály gave a summary of Dohnányi's second series of piano concerts. He concluded by saying what has been referred to above:

"Considering the musical value of his fifteen concerts, not only the hours of delight come back to one's mind but also Dohnányi the educator appears before our eyes in full significance."¹³

Bartók, Dohnányi and Kodály made up the so-called musical directorate of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. György Lukács the philosopher was deputy commissar. Béla Balázs was in charge of the theatre. He was Kodály's friend and fellow student at Eötvös College. Béla Reinitz, who set Ady's poems to music, was responsible for musical issues. His tact and helpfulness are often noted in Bartók's letters and writings.¹⁴

The rule of the Hungarian Soviet Republic collapsed in August, 1919. Dohnányi was summoned home from his concert tour in Norway and sent on leave until the end of term. The management of the institution was entrusted to Géza Moravcsik, Szendy's man, an old opponent to Dohnányi. And then, as Bartók informed his mother in a letter (November 28th, 1919) "Mr Hubay has made a triumphal entry into the halls of the Music Academy (the 'Einzugs-marsch' needed was probably brought by himself) and is giving interviews to all kinds of papers".¹⁵ The teachers of the Academy walked out in protest against Dohnányi's being sent on leave, but their solidarity was broken by Moravcsik's diplomacy and threats, and Dohnányi was left unaided. Antal Molnár gives a colourful description of these events in his memoirs.¹⁶

Once Dohnányi tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Hubay to cooperate with him at the time of his appointment as director. Hubay left, offended. Dohnányi did not let himself be convinced by Hubay's argument. He stood behind the other two members of the board. He was the first to protest with the ministerial counsellor, Gyula Wlassics that only Kodály of the three of them had been brought under disciplinary investigation.¹⁷ Bartók soon followed his example.¹⁸ Dohnányi managed to convince the committee to hear him first. He hoped to make Kodály's situation easier with his testimony.

Few documents tell as much about the musical life of the time as the minutes of this shameful investigation. Jenő Hubay said he would cooperate with Bartók and Dohnányi, but not with Kodály. On June 8th, 1920 he wrote a letter to the Minister claiming Kodály forced him to leave by treating him badly. "The destruction caused in the sensitive young minds by his compositions can not be compensated with his pedagogical activity the failure of which is also proven by the fact that last year, during their reign, the committee headed by Dohnányi failed almost all of Kodály's students of composition in the final examination."¹⁹ This was Hubay's way of understanding the results of the examinations in composition, of which Dohnányi expressed his opinion to the committee as: "As for the effectiveness of teaching, I observe that several students failed the examination in composition last year because it was taken more seriously than before."²⁰

It is not worth recounting the disappointing events of this period. The happier side of it convinces us about Dohnányi's exceptional activity and tireless work in organizing and making music. The concord among these three men seemed

to increase during these years. Dohnányi gave piano concerts, conducted and from the spring of 1919 on, performed Bartók's compositions as the chief conductor of the Philharmonic Society. It was probably from Berlin that Bartók sent his enthusiastic account of Dohnányi to the *Musical Courier* in New York. The account of March 20th, 1920 was published on April 29.²¹ Bálint Vázsonyi begins his monograph about Dohnányi with this article. Bartók praised Dohnányi again in the Italian paper *'Il Pianoforte'* in May 1921.²²

Meanwhile Kodály continued giving musical reports, and taught even during his suspension so that later, returning to his department he could bring up superb generations of teachers and composers as a revival of Hungarian music.

These are the years when Bartók attracted the attention of the musical circles in Europe with his new compositions.

Their joint presence at the concert on November 19th, 1923 was to represent their togetherness and the undiminished energy of Hungarian music. This concert was organized for the 50th anniversary of the uniting of Buda and Pest. Pongrác Kacsóh, the supervisor of Budapest's music schools and composer of the musical comedy *'János vitéz'*, asked the three composers to write compositions for the anniversary celebration. This request was also intended as a conciliatory gesture to the music directorate of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. As is well-known, Ernő Dohnányi participated in the concert with his *'Festive Overture'*, Béla Bartók with his *'Dance Suite'*, and Zoltán Kodály with the *'Psalmus Hungaricus'*, called Psalm 55 at the time. This was a memorable day in the history of Hungarian music.²³

Dohnányi had already conducted the Philharmonic Orchestra several times before he was appointed their chief conductor, and remained so until May, 1944, when the Society had to stop working because of the anti-Jewish law. According to the statistics of a jubilee volume published in 1943, Dohnányi conducted the orchestra 333 times,²⁴ and played 86 times at their concerts.²⁵ He conducted several new Hungarian compositions. Under his baton the orchestra played Bartók's 15 compositions 52 times, Kodály's 8 compositions 30 times. They also performed works by Hubay, Kósa and other contemporary composers.²⁶ The music of foreign contemporaries, such as Debussy, Ravel, de Falla, Honegger, Hindemith and Stravinsky were also played occasionally. During his conductorship, the orchestra made several guest appearances abroad, and played more and more often in the country. It became the organic part of Hungarian culture.

In 1928 Dohnányi was called back to the Music Academy to head the piano department and the department of composition. After Hubay's retirement he took over the direction of the Music Academy in July, 1934. He had been the musical director of the Hungarian Radio for several years. As a pianist and a conductor, he had successes all over the world, while Hungarians enjoyed his excellent performances of sonatas by Beethoven, or all the piano concertos by

Mozart on the radio. Several great talents had become famous musicians under his guidance at the Music Academy.

During the 1930s the political atmosphere grew tenser especially after Hitler had come to power. The danger of a new war and the threat of German influence was increasing. The leaders of Hungarian cultural life were struggling with the problems of Hungarian national existence and future. Bartók and Kodály were getting involved in political conflicts; they objected to the conservative efforts in an increasingly self-confident manner, using their works and Kodály organizing a movement out of his conception concerning choral singing and pedagogy based on folk-music. The situation and the atmosphere was beginning to resemble Hungary in the 1910s. Bartók gradually retired, Dohnányi became conspicuous in the political orientation of the intellectuals. His liberal largesse and his probity worthy of a gentleman was not looked at as an attitude clear enough by those seeking the solutions for the problems of our national existence more actively. Bartók and Kodály's appreciation of his musical activity and quality remained unchanged, and he made a gesture in return by trying to involve Hungarian folk-music in his compositions. With his brilliant sense of assimilation he found the best way and manner of enriching his style of composition.

Emil Szabó, who studied composition under the guidance of Kodály and took piano-lessons from Bartók, tells: "Once Bartók entered his class with a handwritten score in his hand. He sat by the piano, played it to the very end and then shut it. «At long last we have got a well scored Hungarian piece,» he remarked." That work was 'Ruralia Hungarica'. Dohnányi's relation to Hungarian folk-music, was not the same as Bartók's identifying himself with it, or Kodály's message about the vital questions of our national existence in his 'Peacock' Variations and choral works. There is no point in denying that the distance between Dohnányi and them was increasing.

Dohnányi was criticized more and more often, with or without reason. Because he played a significant role by his personal prestige in deciding important questions of Hungarian musical life, public opinion made him responsible for certain steps this or that group disliked. He did nothing against it. He did not even pay attention to it. Many were upset because his works were often on the radio. He also regularly conducted his own works on the concerts of the Philharmonic Orchestra. Many remarks were made on the mistakes he made when playing the piano, and he became famous for his splendid improvisations, which were sometimes praised and at other times mentioned disapprovingly. All this was conspicuous in the changing musical environment, in which the technical precision suitable for recording had become the measure of the musical interpretations' quality. The comparisons with Bartók's perfect playing did not fail to be made, either.

All those social mechanisms began functioning which make differences degenerate into conflicts in a tense atmosphere and which use that is different from the expected for indictment.

Dohnányi did his duty as well as he could, and as he should. He resigned from the presidency of the Music Academy because of György Faragó's dismissal, and protested against the conservative political currents in other ways as well. But finally the Hungarian Nazi regime came in November 1944. Against his will and convictions, with the same solidarity rooted in his gentlemen's probity that he had shown when standing behind Bartók and Kodály, he agreed to join Ede Zathureczky at a reception given by Szálasi for the artist-intellectuals. It is said he was left all alone in the second of the unfortunate handshake, in the press photographer's flash, keeping his promise by all means. His alleged fault was made worse by his leaving the country for the reason that he was worried about his family.

This was enough for some to accuse him groundlessly of being a war criminal. In spite of the disclaimer of the Hungarian government, false accusation embittered his later years. There is no protection, as Socrates put it, against whispering malevolence.

Domokos Kosáry, president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, talked about how Kossuth and Görgey occasionally were played off against each other in political skirmishes, and how Görgey was now a traitor, then an excellent, wise commander according to the change of political regimes. Listening to his presentation I could not help drawing a parallel between Görgey and Dohnányi. It also occurred to me that about 1906 the musical circles in Paris and their press tried to turn Debussy and Ravel against each other by proclaiming now one, then the other the real composer. Romain Rolland would probably have said that although neither was really close to him — we know that he was an adherent of the Schola Cantorum — he did not understand why a nation having two such outstanding composers had to choose between them.

Well we have at least three, and perhaps enough time has passed in our history that we should not feel compelled to make a choice.

Notes

1. Bálint Vázsonyi, *Dohnányi Ernő*. Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1971 (= Vázsonyi 71) p. 43.
2. *Ibid.* p. 44.
3. József Ujfalussy, *Kodály Zoltán, a tudós* (Zoltán Kodály the scholar). In: A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Nyelv- és Irodalomtudományok Osztályának közleményei, XXXIII. 1–4. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1982, pp. 47–48.
4. *Bartók Béla levelei* (Béla Bartók's letters) edited by János Demény. Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1976, p. 66. (= Bartók lev. 76)

5. Vázsonyi 71, pp. 86–88. Cf. Sándor Kovács: *Dohnányi Ernő. Művészete és pedagógiai nézetei* (Ernő Dohnányi: His art and his pedagogical views). In: *A Liszt Ferenc Zeneművészeti Főiskola 100 éve. Dokumentumok, tanulmányok, emlékezések* (100 years of the Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music. Edited by József Ujfalussy). Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1977, pp. 80–91.
6. Vázsonyi 71, pp. 80–91.
7. Melinda Berlász: *Hangversenyélet a fővárosban és környékén* (Musical life in the capital and its environs). In: *Dokumentumok a Magyar Tanácsköztársaság zenei életéből* (Documents about the musical life during the Hungarian Soviet Republic). Edited by József Ujfalussy. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1973, pp. 164–165 and pp. 458–459. (= Dokumentumok 19)
8. Zoltán Kodály, *Visszatekintés* (Reminiscence). Összegyűjtött írások, beszédek, nyilatkozatok (Collected writings, speeches and statements). Edited by Ferenc Bónis. Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1964, Vol. 2, pp. 340–341.
9. *Ibid.* p. 345.
10. *Ibid.* p. 346.
11. *Ibid.* p. 351.
12. *Ibid.* p. 353.
13. *Ibid.* p. 354.
14. Bartók lev. 76. p. 253. *Bartók breviárium (levelek, írások, dokumentumok)* (A Bartók anthology; letters, writings and documents). Compiled and the foreword written by József Ujfalussy. Edited by Vera Lampert. Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 2/1974, p. 280.
15. Bartók lev. 76. p. 255.
16. Antal Molnár, *Tanári sztrájk a Zeneművészeti Főiskolán* (Professors' strike at the Music Academy). In: *Magamról, másokról* (About myself and other people). Gondolat, Budapest, 1974, pp. 124–128.
17. Vázsonyi 71., pp. 100–101; Dokumentumok 19., p. 532–533.
18. Bartók lev. 76. p. 257.; Dokumentumok 19., p. 544.
19. Dokumentumok 19., pp. 591–592
20. *Ibid.* p. 524.
21. József Ujfalussy, *Bartók Béla*. Gondolat, Budapest, 1976, pp. 217–218. (= Ujfalussy 3/76)
22. Béla Bartók, *Budapesti levél* (Letter of Budapest), I. (translated by Éva Keményfy) A Filharmóniai Társaság emlékkönyve 90 éves jubileuma alkalmából (Memorial book in honour of the 90th anniversary of the Philharmonic Society). Written and the historical part prepared for publication by Béla Csuka. Budapest, 1943.
23. Ujfalussy 3/76., pp. 256–257.
24. *Kilenc évtized a magyar zeneművészet szolgálatában* (Nine decades at the service of Hungarian music). A Filharmóniai Társaság emlékkönyve 90 éves jubileuma alkalmából (Memorial book in honour of the 90th anniversary of the Philharmonic Society). p. 51.
25. *Ibid.* p. 145.
26. *Ibid.* p. 51.