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Different Improvisations. Controversies, Concepts and Ideologies in Hungarian Composition of the 1970s

This paper explores the experimental New Music Studio in Budapest, founded in 1970, which introduced American experimental music to Hungary, especially John Cage's ideals. It discusses the Studio's collective improvisation techniques, which were initially met with scepticism by Hungarian composers like Zsolt Durkó, Rudolf Maros and András Mihály, who preferred structured composition over free improvisation. This paper delves into the differences between composed improvisation and free improvisation, focusing on Hungarian composers born in the 1930s and the role of improvisation in their works. The Studio's collective improvisations, although perceived as experimental, were meticulously planned and later used in compositions by the members of the group, among them Péter Eötvös, Zoltán Jeney, Zoltán Kocsis, László Sáy and László Vidovszky. Despite these innovations, Hungarian composition continued to find a balance between fixed structures and improvisation, thereby reflecting the broader cultural and political dualities of the time.

In 1990, the experimental New Music Studio Budapest – the first workshop in Hungary which followed the ideals of American experimental music and especially those of John Cage – commemorated the twentieth anniversary of its founding. In the afterword for his permutational text composition *I'll Come When You Write It Down* (1990), written for that occasion, Studio member Zoltán Jeney recalls a meeting with his composer fellow, Zsolt Durkó, that had taken place in December 1970. Jeney invited Durkó to listen to the first collective improvisations of the emerging New Music Studio, but Durkó declined the offer with the sentence cited above (“I’ll come when you write it down”).¹ Similarly, the majority of Hungarian contemporary composers in the 1970s felt an aversion to free improvisation. In 1971, for example, the conductor and composer András Mihály declared it a fad, believing that its emergence stemmed from the high degree of organisation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century music, after which it was difficult to find new solutions:

Some gifted composers seek to alleviate this problem by relinquishing control over the process, and composing distinct structures that the performer binds together through improvisation in any optional order. It is possible to discuss this approach as a one-off and unique solution; but I find it insufferable when they turn it into a fashion, distracting composers’ attention from the real problems of finding modern solutions to tackling musical form and process.²

1 “Majd, ha leírájátok, eljövök.” (Quoted by Szitha 2014, p. 89). All translations by Anna Dalos, if not otherwise stated.

2 “Egy-egy tehetséges zeneszerző úgy akar segíteni a bajon, hogy lemond a folyamat irányításáról, különálló struktúrákat komponál, melyeket az előadó tetszés szerinti sorrendben, improvizálva fűz össze. Lehet erről vitatkozni,

Here, Mihály is referencing a type of improvisational practice in which the composer provides more or less fixed components, and the performer makes an independent decision regarding their development and order in performance. This technique – examples of which can be found in the works of Boulez and Stockhausen³ – first appeared in Hungary in the works of Attila Bozay and László Sáy in the 1970s. Bozay clearly wrote his first such composition after Mihály made his statement, as he began experimenting with the technique in his *Pezzo sinfonico No. 2* Op. 25 (1975).⁴ Sáy's first work using this technique dates from 1971 but it is uncertain whether Mihály could have heard it that year. The same is true of László Vidovszky's *405* (1972), which contains 405 chords and 405 phrases playable in any order, and which already testifies to a familiarity with American experimental music and to its influence, especially John Cage's works, these being the most authoritative model for the New Music Studio.⁵ Mihály's remarks, therefore, could not have been aimed at the Studio's experimentation with improvisatory techniques. He may have been commenting on what he knew, or what he mistakenly assumed to be the practices in which the New Music Studio was engaged.

Another composer whose conventional notion of form led him to voice his doubts about the experiments of the New Music Studio was Rudolf Maros:

I am, of course, from the generation that relies on the stability of forms, and that is not a believer in giving free rein, or in the power of improvisation. And while my views may seem outdated, I am convinced of the importance of moulding and shaping the material. [...] Unlike them, we believed – and believe – in the power of forms, the stability of the musical material. And even when we have used aleatory, in other words, employed random elements in our work, we did it in a controlled manner, and most important of all: we never allowed form, the entirety of the composition, to be subordinate to randomness. We also never believed in the decisive role of improvisation because composers compromise their own works by only patchily defining their structure, and by leaving their fate to the abilities or momentary inspiration of the performer.⁶

The premise of Maros, too, is that form is of primary importance. However, his statement, unlike that of Mihály's, offers many more specifics, and attests to a much greater knowledge about experimental music.⁷ The excerpt mentions guided aleatory, the role of 'randomness', which

mint egyszeri és egyéni megoldásról, – de elviselhetetlen számomra, ha divatot csinálak belőle, elterelve a szerzők figyelmét a valódi problémáról, a zene folyamatának, formájának korszerű megoldásáról.” (Mihály 1972, p. 12).

3 Stockhausen, *Klavierstück XI* (1956); Boulez, *Structure II* (1961).

4 Other works by Bozay using this technique include *Gyermekdalok* [Children's songs] Op. 26 (1976), *Improvisations No. 2* Op. 27 (1976), *Tükör* [Mirror] Op. 28 (1977), *Variations* Op. 29 (1977), *Solo* Op. 30a, VIII zongoradarab [Piano Piece No. 8] Op. 30b/2 (1978).

5 The premiere of *405* took place in 1972 at the Teacher Training College in the town of Baja. See Vidovszky/Weber 1997, p. 134.

6 “Persze én abból a generációból származom, amelyik a formák stabilitására épít, nem hisz a nyitottságban, az improvizáció erejében. S ha álláspontom korszerűtlennek is hat, valloam a megmunkált anyag fontosságát. [...] Mi, velük ellentétben, hittünk – és hiszünk – a formák erejében, a zenei anyag stabilitásában. S ha éltünk is az aleatóriával, vagyis a véletlenszerű elemek alkalmazásával, kontrollálva tettük, és ami lényeg: nem rendeltük alá a format, a kompozíció egészét az esetlegességnek. És nem hittünk az improvizáció döntő szerepében, mert az alkotók saját darabjaikat veszélyeztetik, ha csak helytel-közzel határozzák meg a mű szerkezetét, és sorsát az előadó képességeire bízzák.” (Maros 1978, p. 121).

7 Notably, Maros points out in this interview that, unlike his other colleagues who are critical of the activities of the New Music Studio, he regularly listens to the ensemble's concerts. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

perhaps refers to chance or indeterminacy, and also improvisation, in which the performer's role is at least as important as the composer's.⁸

The wording in the interview conceals the fact that at this time, Hungarian composition was deeply engaged in exploring improvisation as a modern device employed within fixed musical material. Furthermore, this was not merely 'controlled aleatory', as Maros put it, but improvisation elevated to become a genre in and of itself, as many composers – primarily from the generation born in the 1930s, the so-called 'Thirties' – used the term in the titles of their works. Bozay's completion of an entire series with that title (No. 1: 1971/72; No. 2: 1976; No. 3: 1978) was preceded by *Improvisations* by Lajos Papp (1965), Zoltán Pongrácz (1971), István Láng (1973) and Sándor Szokolay (1977). These were intended for various ensembles; Zsolt Durkó's relatively late *Impromptus in F* (1983) also belongs to this group.

Despite containing aleatoric passages, most of the works listed above are composed improvisations.⁹ These titles also allowed the composers to reference Bartók's eponymous composition (Op. 20, 1920) as well as Pierre Boulez's cycle *Improvisations sur Mallarmé*, an uncommonly popular work among Hungarian composers in the second half of the 1960s.¹⁰ These compositions aim to record the freedom inherent in improvisation: the very moment that music is born. One typical characteristic of their lack of constraint is that the composers do not use bar lines. We need to examine their respective practices if we are going to understand the differences between the interpretative scope of how the 'Thirties' thought about improvisation and the New Music Studio's concept of it (the latter composers, all born in the 1940s, belonged to the youngest generation of Hungarian composers at the time).¹¹

The passage from Maros's interview quoted above begins as an artistic creed, and his extensive use of the plural – thereby referencing an entire generation – aims to reinforce the notion that the views he expresses are universally accepted. Maros constructs pairs of opposites, such as the stability and instability of form, the inspiration of the composer and that of the performer, or the old and the current avant-garde.¹² Readers of the interview will have no doubt as to Maros's stance when he sets out to judge the other side. However, problems emerge because he seeks to approach experimental music from the perspective of a different kind of Modernist aesthetic. Unsurprisingly, the statements issued by members of the New Music Studio themselves often noted that their critics were insufficiently informed about American experimental music and so inevitably drew the 'wrong' conclusions when they tried to understand the concerts or compositions of the Studio.¹³

From the mid-1960s onwards, guided aleatory and composed improvisation became accepted techniques in Hungarian composition. Works by Maros, Mihály and most of the members of the 'Thirties' were constructed by alternating fixed and aleatoric sections, while others followed the path of 'consciously composed freedom' in their works. Consciously composed freedom, which is always paired with compositionally fixed surfaces, represents the antithesis of the aesthetic of the New Studio, but was the most important principle in the thinking of the

8 Ibid., p. 122.

9 The three movements by Zoltán Pongrácz (*Improvisationen I–III*) are an exception, as these compositions are based on chance procedures. The unconventional score, which is created from a combination of red and black spots, primarily imparts information about musical operations, not about the sound that can result.

10 See the statement by István Láng in the Hungarian edition of interviews compiled by Bálint (1986, p. 225). For information on the Hungarian reception of Boulez's *Improvisations*, see Dalos 2010.

11 For a broader view on New Music in Hungary 1956–1989, see Dalos 2025.

12 At the end of the interview, Maros contrasts the ideals of his own generation (in the music of Bartók, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Berg and Webern) with the art of John Cage. Maros 1978, p. 122.

13 Vidovszky 1978, p. 94; Jeney 1978, p. 111.

‘Thirties’. Zsolt Durkó was the first to develop these two basic types of music as early as the beginning of the 1960s, and he was clearly a model for the others. He called them “psicogramma” and “organismi” respectively.¹⁴ These two types were intended to symbolise the duality of new music: while “psicogramma” depicts spiritual processes, “organismi” is an organically structured, fixed music. In the light of Durkó’s oeuvre, there is no doubt that this compositional duality of ‘freedom’ and ‘fixedness’ must have been connected with the similar dichotomies that characterised political, cultural and everyday life during the so-called ‘soft dictatorship’ of the regime of János Kádár, and was thus fundamental to the life experience of the generation of the ‘Thirties’ (Kádár being the General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, and thus Hungary’s leader, from after the Uprising of 1956 to his retirement in 1988).

By comparison, for a very brief period in the 1970s, as László Vidovszky has related,¹⁵ members of the New Music Studio including Zoltán Jeney, Péter Eötvös, Zoltán Kocsis, László Sárý and Vidovszky himself were interested in completely free structures or, more precisely, in collective improvisation. However, when these improvisations were performed in big concert halls – such as *Undisturbed* (1974), *Hommage à Kurtág* (1975), *Gaga* (1976), *Hommage à Dohnányi* (1977), *December 27* (1978) and a late offspring, the *Four Victorian Phantom Images* (1983) – they emerged as collaborative works. With one exception – the *Hommage à Kurtág*, which was a real homage – the titles of these works were intentionally rather funny or intended to astonish, and had no connection with the actual content of the works themselves. These improvisations were nevertheless well prepared. The composers themselves determined the ensemble to be used and their musical components, and in many cases they even recorded these in advance,¹⁶ just as they also agreed ahead of their performance on the most important principles on which these improvisations were to be based.¹⁷ In their later works, the composers also utilised parts written for earlier collaborative improvisations: Sárý’s *Koan bel canto* (1979) and *Pentagram* (1982) are based on the material written for *Hommage à Dohnányi*,¹⁸ while the *Windsequenzen* series of Péter Eötvös (1975–1987) was originally written for *Hommage à Kurtág*.¹⁹

These improvisations were therefore not intended by the members of the Studio as autonomous works of art, but as part of a workshop, functioning as raw material for later works that were deemed worthy to be described as a ‘work of art’. This can be seen clearly in Zoltán Jeney’s oeuvre, in which many earlier pieces, many of them written for those collective improvisations, served as a basis for a number of subsequent compositions. Jeney used these materials as ‘objets trouvés’. Already in 1972, the ‘Mutterakkord’ (the ‘mother chord’) of his orchestral work *Alef. Hommage a Schönberg* functioned as a basic musical component in his contemporaneous *Yantra* (1972) and in *Round* (1972–1975), pieces which in fact followed the chance procedures learned from John Cage. But other sources could also serve as ‘objets trouvés’. In *Yantra*’s case, it was not only the Schoenbergian tone-row that fulfilled this purpose, but also visual signs, as the score itself is a Yantra diagram (Fig. 1) that defines the position of each chord.²⁰ The electronic work *Landscape Ad Hoc* (1980), which similarly offers a visual experience as a frame of

14 *Psicogramma* for piano (1964); *Organismi* for solo violin and orchestra (1964).

15 Vidovszky/Weber 1997, p. 10.

16 The solo parts of *Undisturbed* also provide information about the degree to which the music is determined, see Jeney et al. 1974.

17 See Wilhelm 2005, p. 1.

18 Szitha 2014, p. 111.

19 Sárý 2007, p. 149.

20 This diagram is published in Szitha 2014, p. 91.

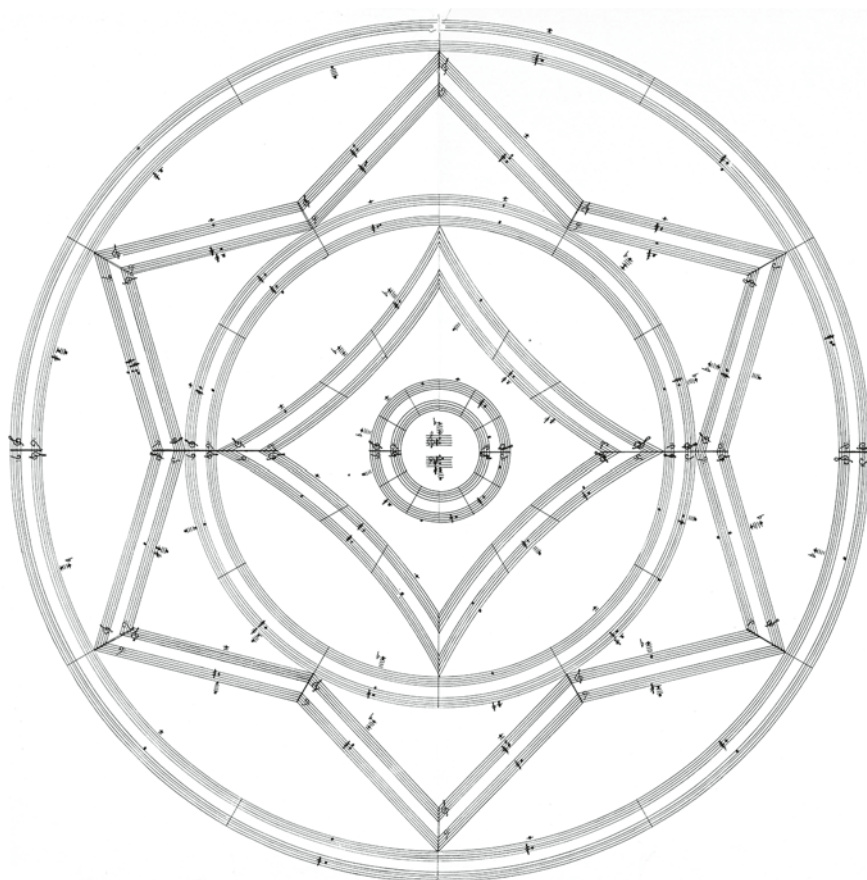


Fig. 1 Zoltan Jeney's score *Yantra* (1972) is based on Yantra symbolism and destined for improvisation (© Z. Jeney, 1972).

reference, follows the visual appearance of the poem entitled *Landscape with Two Figures* by the Hungarian experimental poet Dezső Tandori. Another such example is *Movements of the Eye* (1973), which reflects the typography of *2 Pages 122 Words on Music and Dance*, John Cage's study published in his collection of writings entitled *Silence* (1961). In *Arthur Rimbaud in the Desert*, Jeney translates the typography of Dezső Tandori's *Arthur Rimbaud Rolled the Alphabet Through His Fingers Once More* into the language of music: the melody, continuously encroaching from both ends of the staff, mirrors the printed image of the poem. The title of Jeney's work, however, implies a more comprehensive meaning: both the visual appearance of the notation and the musical experience convey the image of Rimbaud disappearing in the desert.

The collective improvisations of the New Music Studio, however, were 'happenings' for the audience and critics who knew nothing about the essence and creative role of the workshop. One question evidently emerged in connection with these collective improvisations of the New Music Studio: "How should we listen to it?" was asked by the most prestigious of the local music critics, György Kroó, who also attempted to offer an answer following his experience at the performance of *Hommage à Dohnányi*. He defined collective improvisation as "a musical tunnel" and thought of it as a kind of music that is alien to the European sense of time and that "prompts us to abandon our own pace of life".²¹ Even so, Kroó himself heard a lulling coda in *Hommage à Dohnányi* – in other words, he was ultimately only able to interpret its musical processes with-

21 "Saját életritmusunk feladására késztet" (Kroó 2011, p. 254).

in a traditional framework. The extant recordings of *Undisturbed* and *Hommage à Kurtág*²² offer a distinct sense of this “musical tunnel”, and it is also evident that the later work, the homage to Kurtág, is more clearly formed than *Undisturbed* with its inextricably dense texture and perpetually changing, intense sound. In other words, musical processes in *Hommage à Kurtág*, the well-discernible musical layers of its participating individual performers, and the undulating changes in its musical events, are more distinctly delineated – moreover, it contains well-definable sections. All this allows for better comprehension of the music.²³

Kroó’s review, examining the possible modes of listening, concerns one of the basic concepts in American experimental music, namely the unusual interest that Cage, his students and followers at the New School for Social Research in New York showed in their audiences.²⁴ In essence, one branch of experimental music was conducting sociological research with a musical aspect to it. In Cage’s view, all audience members organise the music they hear into different structures, his aim being to bring into play the audience’s structuring ability.²⁵ The intention of the members of the New Music Studio with their improvisational exercises, however, was not to examine the reactions of their audience, but to expand the capacity of their own workshop.²⁶ Their essentially traditional approach to their improvisational activities clearly confirms John Cage’s observation about Karlheinz Stockhausen: “once a European art composer, always a European art composer”.²⁷

The 1980s brought a significant change in the assessment of the practice of improvisation in Hungary. In 1970 Zsolt Durkó had rejected Jeney’s invitation to the New Music Studio’s collective improvisation session, but in 1984 he completed his *Ludus Stellaris* series in which he transposed the Canis Major constellation into musical notes, thereby treading in the footsteps of Cage’s *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1962).²⁸ Notes selected from the image of Canis Major here provide the basic components for improvisation.²⁹ It is indeed a game: *Ludus Stellaris* was intended for children, at the suggestion of the pianist Erzsébet Tusa.³⁰ Music pedagogy in the 1980s came to the realisation that improvisation can play a defining role in the musical training of children.³¹ Durkó composed this work with this pedagogical function in mind. And although the six to 24 players of *Ludus Stellaris* are required in the majority of movements to manage their 3-to-8-note tone-sets themselves, Durkó thought it was important to emphasise that neither overt restriction nor too much freedom was advisable: “Performers need to find the appropriate measure of components that define the musical and harmonic processes, characters and rhythmic profile on the one hand, but still provide sufficient freedom for the player’s individual ingenu-

22 Dukay et al. 2005.

23 To Kroó (2011, p. 254), it seemed that *Hommage à Dohnányi* was even easier to follow than *Hommage à Kurtág*.

24 See Nyman 1999, pp. 85f.

25 Ibid., p. 85.

26 Characteristically, Vidovszky’s only remark is that listening to the works “requires serious intellectual effort on the part of the audience” (“A közönség részéről komoly szellemi erőfeszítést kíván”; Vidovszky/Weber 1997, p. 14).

27 Nyman 1999, p. 29.

28 Stockhausen also composed his *Sternklang* based on constellations in 1971, and László Sály used a star atlas when writing his *Az ég virágaiban* [*The Flowers of the Sky*] (1973).

29 Durkó projects the drawing of the constellation onto the double staff. As he writes, “I chose this proportion, also found in nature, because the ensuing harmonic framework offered possibilities to develop very simple and very complex formulas; and to explore associations between distant areas – constellations and musical formulas (“Azért választottam ezt, a természetben is létező arányt, mert az így születő harmóniai váz egyaránt lehetőséget adott igen egyszerű és igen összetett képletek kibontakozására és egymástól távoli területek – a csillagképek és a zenei képletek – közötti asszociációk kutatására.”; Durkó 1984, p. [X]).

30 Ibid.

31 See Apagyí 1986.

ity and ideas on the other.”³² This statement makes it clear that the series of collective improvisations carried out by members of the New Music Studio in the early 1970s, and their experimental approach to composition, did not ultimately transform Hungarian compositional thinking, which continued to seek its own path between fixedness and freedom.

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32 “Meg kell találni a mértéket, amely egyrészt meghatározza a zenei, a harmóniai folyamatokat, a karaktereket, a ritmikai profilt, másrészt mindig eléggé nyitott az egyéni lelemény, a játékos ötletei számára.” (Durkó 1984, p. [1]).

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