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# ZOLTÁN KODÁLY: A CENTENARY TRIBUTE

by

LAJOS VARGYAS

Perhaps no Hungarian artist or thinker has been as obsessed by a superior image of the national spirit as Kodály was. It was an obsession which compelled him, when exploring Hungarian villages from the Pozsony region to the Bukovina, to discover unknown traditions which had almost been allowed to go to waste. That is why he sought out yellowing papers for what they preserved of the atmosphere of by-gone times: he wanted no less than to connect all the colours of the national spirit into a great, universal, synthetic image. In the ancient German myths Wagner had seen the national character's rich world of vital force, Kodály saw it in the living folk tradition, in the richness of the popular mind and in the richness of folk music.

From the beginning the aim of his life was to express the popular mind. For him folk music meant not just musical inspiration, elements he could incorporate in his creation of a new style, but a communal experience to be assimilated so that it could be restated through his art in the unity of a large artistic conception. Thus it was for him no mere subject but the centre, the goal of his composing.

There are several stages to this. When he treats a song individually, or as a choral adaptation, the musical setting goes beyond the usual concept of piano accompaniment. He enlarges its spiritual contents, increases its effect. Consider the *Folk Music of Hungary* series: the poetic imagination, the sheer musical invention of these musical settings. But at the same time they are compositions which identify themselves with congenial sympathy with the songs adapted and with the folklore as a whole.

This applies even more to his choral adaptations. *Anna Molnár*, or the extremely suggestive *Transylvanian Lament* are examples of the feeling for and the intensification of the content and atmosphere of the folk-songs involved.

Yet Kodály was not content with adaptations. The individual song is always a piece torn out of the folklore, distilled from thousands of folk-songs and situations which contain a particular human world in all its emotional complexity. To grasp as much as he could of this world, to give the most complete image of it was his ambition. He never ceased to declare, as an ethnomusicologist, that folksong can only be understood by those who know it in real life, within its numerous contents; this he demanded in art too, namely to paint popular life around the song in its totality.

His cyclical choral works are linked from several folksongs. *Songs from Karád* and *Mátra Pictures* are genuine genre-pictures each song completing the other and rounding off the image they separately give of popular life. In *Songs from Karád* the whole story of an outlaw is narrated: in three or four songs we see the outlaw, first making merry, defying the gendarmes, then begging mercy of the judges, parting from his sweetheart; after this, in contrast, we hear the voice of ordinary people as they make love, joke, express their carefreeness through the song of the swineherd and others of similar atmosphere—in all, the rich diversity of village life. It is not programme music but a poetic representation evoking the reality of peasant life.

The most beautiful example of this form of genre piece is *Mátra Pictures*. The four themes of this chorus contain all of popular life, all of its peculiarities. In the ballad of Vidróczki, the outlaw, heroic and tragic elements, the mysterious atmosphere of the gloomy mountain is joined with the solemn and exultant moments of day-to-day life. From the dark colours we move to another world: after the parting from the sweetheart, the home-sickness, the grief and the tenderness come the outbursts of joy; the composition expands exuberantly. The individual songs evoke a country, a people and the moments characteristic of their life.

This was still not the solution Kodály felt to be definitive. For in these choral pieces, it is still only the power of the imagination which makes the listener feel something of the colour of the life of the people; it is not life itself which explains these songs in their contexts and atmosphere of joy and sorrow, pranks and fear of death, different individuals in different situations. However large the two choral works are, they can only show glimpses of a few chosen elements, a few characteristic features. For someone to show all of popular life, of necessity he has to present it through the theatre.

Kodály's first attempt at this was *Háry János*. The libretto, an imitation of the naive world of the folk-tale, offers an opportunity for the composer

to portray authentically all that is alive in the world and imagination of the people.

His next step accomplished a real solution. Kodály's framework for the *Spinning Room* is a background to the songs in which all life takes place. In this case the story, the drama itself was made to fit the songs. In other words, he achieves a modern form of theatre and, with it, a modern form of musical drama. It is not reality which he wishes to present on stage since it can only be artificial when sung and played, rather he presents us with an abstracted background for the music. The function of this stylized background is simply to explain each song through the context it derives from. Jokes, pranks, merry-making in the spinning room, love, parting and death are colourful or grotesque images, though mainly expressive of sorrow. For sorrow is the dominant mood of the whole piece, or as János Arany has it—A little joy mingled with a lot of sorrow—and at the end exultation is released.

The shifting proportions in mood and feeling organize the piece into a whole with two enormous supporting pillars, the lament and the wedding-celebration of the finale. In the lament, a harsh cold scream, the primal fear of death can be felt. The grief, the sorrow, hitherto felt but not expressed, is given an added significance by the shadow of death, the bewilderment of the man having to come to terms with it. This dark shadow broods over the entire play, over the separated couple's almost inconsolable grief in the last scenes until they are released in the happiness of their reunion.

The composer underlines all this with lines such as: "My God, after all my sorrows, I beg you, give a little joy! . . . My God, I beg you, let me live together with the one I love! If you cannot give me my love, My God, take from me my life!" And then the relief and wild joy burst out. And if the lament, the vision of death was so terrible, so horrifying, the finale is so exultant that it nearly breaks down the walls. The *Spinning Room* is rightly ranked along with the *Te Deum* and *Psalmus* as one of his great compositions, the best that Kodály created in the genres based on folklore.

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The same effort to create a national musical language led him to the ancient dances of Hungary. These forgotten tunes lived on only through the instruments of Gypsy musicians and evoked past ages and the art-music particular to old Hungary.

He found the theme of *Galánta Dances* in an old transcription. The



themes of *Dances of Marosszéek* derive from living traditions, from instrumental pieces which preserve the heritage and were played by Transylvanian Gypsies and peasant musicians; in this case tradition had kept alive music from the past centuries which had sunk into oblivion. His *verbunkos* in *Háry János* or in the *Spinning Room* follow in the tradition of Liszt: he, too, wanted to raise the *verbunkos* to the status of art-music. Yet Kodály stood on firmer ground than Liszt in resorting to this form of music: he was lead by his extraordinary knowledge to find what is truly original and typically Hungarian in the *verbunkos* and in the music of the ages preceeding. He gives the work an historical atmosphere: what the investigator discovers, the artist expresses.

In order to judge correctly an œuvre which is so greatly indebted to folk-music, some characteristic features should be discussed. Kodály is not looking for himself through the act of composing, he does not express himself through self-revelation from the inside, as the lyric Bartók did. Kodály is an epic.

His invention prefers to cling to what is exterior. There is no question of an inner world aspiring to manifest itself or to seek opportunities for expression, sometimes through exterior elements, as in the case of Bartók; but exterior things reveal the experience in him—a text, a theme, a tradition of style, a world of peasants. That is why most of his original works are vocal: songs, choruses, and orchestral choral works.

The extent to which the epic-inclined master had a lyrical gift is best shown by his songs. Kodály is one of the very few who found the song a natural medium. His forty odd original songs possess a distinct melodic line. This melodic sense along with all of his language of vocal music, from the song-like choir parts to the declamation of the solo in the *Psalmus*, results from the new vocal style which was formed out of folksongs by Kodály together with Bartók. It is art-music melody—reflection of the folk-song style in art. It is declamation which derives quite simply from the spirit of the language. After a long period of foreign influence, it rehabilitates the language.

A composer as vocal as Kodály had to arrive at a renewal of vocal music. Kodály's activity here is the richest of all; this part of his art became public property in his own country. It seems that he himself felt most at home in it, returned to it again and again, cultivated every feasible genre of it: children's choirs for 2 or 3 voices, singing practice pieces, secular and ecclesiastic choirs, folksongs of original theme or adaptations in inexhaustible variety. He consciously connects with the great vocal culture of the 16th century. These works unite the serene melodic material inspired

by folksongs and the spirit of the Hungarian language with the polyphony and the strict leading of the 16th century.

For him they meant a cultural and social weapon, the means to a great cultural and political end. Kodály wanted to lead the masses of the people to musical culture, help them to understand and love art. He never stopped proclaiming that the singing voice, that choir singing is at everybody's disposal and offers an opportunity of artistic experience even to those who have no talent for playing an instrument. Everybody can participate in the joy of music-making. That is why he dedicated so much time to music-teaching in schools, to make note-reading a common skill; that is why he composed so many school-singing practice pieces from the biciniums to the four-part choral works. This communal ambition inspired several great composers—think of Bach's *Inventions* or Schumann's *Kinderszenen* to mention the most conspicuous. In Kodály it was present to an extraordinary extent. He wanted to lead the whole nation out of musical darkness and pass them to the great experience of high art. That this feeling of a national need resulted in a world-success only proves that it is a general human value.

In his non-didactic choral works an extreme richness of style is revealed. From the modern point of view an unknown direction, he tried diverse paths, started on diverse roads, and arrived at successful solutions along almost all the ways. Leaving aside the adaptations, there is great variety among the works of original theme: there are poetic compositions with a lyrical atmosphere, rich in colourful tunes such as *The Aged*, there is the ethereal and pictorial *Norwegian Girls*, there are nature-portraits such as *The Evening*, the reverent *Tantum Ergo* and *Ave Maria*; nature in her mysteriousness in the *Mountain Nights* alternates with such pieces as the *Ode to Ferenc Liszt* and the *Hymn to King Stephen* and the soul-stirring motet the summit of his choral-art, *Jesus and the Traders*. In an image chosen by himself out of the Bible, the composer must have entered into the spirit of Christ driving the merchants from the temple.

Every composition required a different technique, a different approach. The homophonic-harmonic *The Aged*, and, partly, *The Evening* affect by their rich colour scale, by the atmosphere-creating tones of the chord. In *Jesus and the Traders* a whirling polyphony alternates with the serene, soft solo and chord parts which snap with anger and then with the repressed piano-undertones. But whatever the character of the composition, they are all, even the homophonic pieces, as one in that their vocal leads are easily singable and easily distinguishable.

He established a special polyphony in the folksong choruses. The folk

tune dominates the other voices for which he uses totally different yet in themselves solo-like accompanying tunes, often without words, sung only on one syllable. To the folk-tune all the others are merely accompaniment—segregate like in homophony—yet in the independent melodic line of the accompanying voices, the polyphony is perfect. Think of the scene with the begging outlaw in the *Songs from Karád* or of the roaring sea and its moaning accompaniment in the *Transylvanian Lament*. He first found this technique with the wailing female choir in *Psalmus* which accompanies the solo. Here the advantages of the two styles unite: polyphony's song-like leading voice, in itself enjoyable, and the homophony's transparent clarity.

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All this is realized to the highest degree in his orchestral choral pieces: in the *Psalmus* (1923) and in the *Te Deum* (1936). The latter is maybe his most mature composition. The melodic line of the voices, the tessitura is so song-like that its singing provokes an almost physical satisfaction. Moving scenes follow one another: the mob throwing themselves to the ground and pleading in fear, the cherubim and seraphim chanting the praises of God, cool halls with doors flung open, and the stiff white group of martyrs shining forth; widening fortes with colossal heightening out of the mystical pianissimos, as if the gates of Heavens were in fact open. The largeness of invention, the high degree of technical knowledge and the rich poetic imagination raise it among the masterpieces.

The other, the early masterpiece, the *Psalmus* is constructed more around the colours and the means of expression of the orchestra. It seizes the listener with its decisive opening from the very first moment. Wild passion rages in the orchestra, incredible tension is concentrated in a few measures, only for the waves to suddenly collapse: an atmosphere of heated expectation leads to the real opening of the composition. The choir is heard. All of a sudden we are in a strange, mysterious country. This choir sings piano from the other world, this heightened atmosphere remains, even when the psalmist steps forward from out of the choir and begins. The orchestra accompanies him with heated tones, subdued murmuring, nervously quivering tirades, splashing outbursts; the singer begs, accuses, shows fear and curses. In whose name? In Kodály's or in the name of the whole Hungarian people? Both. Just as the poet of the sixteenth century identified with the words of the psalm, Kodály felt the words of the prophet as his own, castigating the nation for those dark years of the twenties.

The words of complaint, the waves of passion are profoundly human,

yet they remain at a dream-like distance. The passions rise higher and higher, the opposition of more and more subdued pianos strain within these outbursts. The mysterious choir-theme articulates with increasing energy approaching ever closer to the zenith in these heightenings. Ultimately it billows out into an enormous polyphonic theme, which finally calms down, until the choir moans with the singer: "God, unto you I cry because I am frightened by my enemies." Then before the last, the greatest increase, there is one more stunning large piano supplication rising out of the harps of celestial light, allowing the song to rise higher among drums and trumpets: "You are true, my Lord!" All this is crowned by the polyphonic orchestra besieging Heaven until there suddenly appears the well-known voice of the opening and, as if by magic, the waves collapse and the opening song is heard again from a distance. It is fading, it slowly fades completely away. The celestial gates are shut, the vision disappears.

There are very few compositions which wholly represent their composer, even fewer which represent the art of a whole nation. The *Psalmus* is one of these unique, condensed moments of Hungarian music.

This individually and socially lyrical masterpiece is the end and at the same time the beginning of a new path. The first period of Kodály's career contains most of his lyrical and instrumental music, particularly in the most lyrical of all genres, chamber-music. Two string quartets, the *Trio Serenata*, the wonderful, unique violoncello and piano pieces precede the *Psalmus*. But how conscious the switch was is proved by a statement in 1932, at the age of 50: "It is time to abandon the lyre." In other words he was completely aware that what he created in the *Psalmus Hungaricus* and afterwards is the œuvre of an epic giving himself up to his community and feeding on it. In the next period, until the *Spinning Room* (1932) he composed only works using folksong tunes or dedicated to the folksong. And when he felt this task was accomplished, he again composed works out of his own inventiveness, but along with others, folksongs, the Concerto, the Symphony and orchestral variations. Until 1923 the lyric characterizes his œuvre, between 1923 and 1932 the epic; from then until his death the two together.

Out of this œuvre appears a highly individual figure. He had a particularly isolated career among his contemporaries. Even with Bartók, who was closest to him, only the base is the same. Hungarian folk-music ties them together as does formal discipline in the classical sense. To a collapsing age they oppose discipline of form and humanity but while Bartók sought the elemental, the modern to liberate his individuality, Kodály aspired to the monumental, and searched for depth, homogeneity. Despite



his willingness to explore new ways, he is not a revolutionary. His personality required clarity and accomplishment. His art is essentially vocal and that explains why it is not so daring in harmonic innovations.

Monumental form, clarity, content, sureness of technique taken together mean: classical. For us, Hungarians, to whom he dedicated it, his work is the national genius.

## KODÁLY AND DEBUSSY

### 1.

Those conversant with the life and œuvre of Zoltán Kodály agree that his discovery of Debussy was of great importance for Kodály's development. László Eöszé, the author of a Kodály biography, considers the experience "decisive."<sup>1</sup>

The twenty-four years old Zoltán Kodály spent most of the 1906/07 season studying abroad. From December until March he lived and studied in Berlin, and from April to July in Paris. His companions were his colleagues of his own age, not long after graduation. One of them was Herbert Bauer, better known as Béla Balázs who collaborated with Bartók on *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* and the *Wooden Prince*.

There are many indications to show that Kodály himself considered his encounter with Debussy's music very important, not only for himself but also for the new Hungarian music as a whole. The strength of the personal experience can be seen in his piano piece *Méditation sur un motif de Claude Debussy*, a result of that spring in Paris, in some later references to Debussy, and in his writings and statements on Debussy and on the importance of Debussy.

The *Méditation* is an open homage

<sup>1</sup> László Eöszé: *Kodály Zoltán élete és munkássága* (Zoltán Kodály's Life and Œuvre). Budapest, 1956, Editio Musica 294 pp. p. 29. In English: "Zoltán Kodály. His Life and Work." London, 1962. Collet. p. 183.

even in its title and motto. Nor may we be entirely wrong if we suspect the influence of Debussy behind the third of the *Seven Piano Pieces*. The work was composed in 1910. Its epigraph, in the Universal edition of 1921, is *il pleut dans la ville* in brackets as in Debussy's *Préludes*. László Eöszé in his book completes the original Verlaine quotation: — *il pleut dans mon cœur comme il pleut sur la ville* —.<sup>2</sup> It is striking that the second song of Debussy's cycle *Ariettes oubliées* was composed for this very poem of Verlaine's. A quote from Rimbaud above the song serves as a motto: *Il pleut doucement sur la ville*. The chain of quotations is thus complete. No comment is needed on the reference to Rimbaud in Verlaine.

It is also quite probable that the fourth of the *Seven Piano Pieces*—the epitaph—is actually a homage to Debussy: it was composed in 1918, the year of Debussy's death.<sup>3</sup> Kodály gave it the final position in the series directly after the third piece we have already referred to. Similarly, Béla Bartók's piano piece, the *Tombeau de Claude Debussy*, subsequently the seventh of the *Eight Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs* was com-

<sup>2</sup> *ib.* p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> For the drafts and origin of the piece in more detail, István Kecskeméti: *Kodály zeneszerzői műhelymunkája a "Sírfelirat" kimunkálásában* (Kodály's draft for the "Epitaph"). Hungarian Musicological Studies in the Memory of Kodály. Edited by Ferenc Bónis, Budapest, 1977, Editio Musica pp. 43–50.