

# ***THE ESCAPE***

## ***THOUGHTS ON HUNGARIAN AND CENTRAL-EUROPEAN RELIGIOUS MUSIC, ON STYLISTIC TRENDS AND ON SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF CREATION***

**GYÖRGY SELMECZI**

### **ABSTRACT**

The system of ideas pertaining to the Enlightenment and democracy began to adjust the standard of natural selection on an ever lower level, and this process has not yet ended. From the viewpoint of linguistics and the psychology of creation we can determine those somehow tectonic movements that have gradually distanced art music from the world of everyday thinking and tastes. For the composers at the end of the 20th century, it became increasingly obvious that music history and the heritage of musical language are not processes in linear development, but rather the history of a multitude of parallel metamorphoses, along which simpler or more complicated structures interchange periodically or rhapsodically. A particular importance belongs to how sacred genres can synthesize those intonations (and here I understand the term intonation in all its complexity, in order to stress the character and its various modalities) of very different origins, whose source is to be found in the medieval world of the tropes (Gregorian), in the layers of ancient folklore, in the coded forms of the Renaissance and early Baroque, but also in the tradition of the nineteenth century (Schumann, Berlioz, Verdi, Liszt). A new epoch of transformations has been taking shape for the past two decades. Starting from under the protecting umbrella of vocality, more and more composers dare claim the right to existence of the “organic” musical language in the instrumental world of chamber music as well.



**Keywords:** creation, intonation, sacred genres, musical language

### **1. Introduction**

The title of this study evokes an action movie... As a matter of fact, this is exactly what it is: in the following lines we shall speak about escapes and fugitives. With a conclusion appropriate to the rules of the genre.

It is already commonplace to consider the last few decades as representing a period of crisis when looked upon from the perspective of music and musical creation. We can nowadays clearly trace the path that has brought us here, and we have a much more comprehensive overview of the system of historical factors, of spiritual metamorphoses and social premises that determined the specific and almost absurd situation of the present, when the practitioners of this art, respectively its theorists, are more numerous than the public it addresses.

## **2. The estrangement of art music from common taste**

Everything started in the last third of the 19th century, when the dichotomy between the functions of music and those of musical performance was ended once and for all, and the foundations of music's social contract were violently shaken. The system of ideas pertaining to the Enlightenment and democracy began to adjust the standard of natural selection on an ever lower level, and this process has not yet ended. Those historical and social phenomena which placed on opposite levels the functions of music, the propagation of ideas and values, respectively the entertainment, are well known as well: the more profound treatment of these phenomena is the task of philosophy, of art history and of historical sociology. However – if we simplify things a little – from the viewpoint of linguistics and the psychology of creation we can determine those somehow tectonic movements that have gradually distanced art music from the world of everyday thinking and tastes. And, even though the transition from one century to the other still exhibited quite a lot of perceivable signs pointing to possibilities of reversing the direction of this current, a few years later, the wounds of the two World Wars overwhelmed the process of artistic creation with so many ideological and philosophical traumas that it was forced to take refuge into the trenches of intellectualism. This gave birth to an increasing precipice between its own breakdown of expression and the world of functional and entertainment music, which has almost entirely taken over the social function of music. In the second third of the 20th century, the crisis became even deeper due to the well-intentioned but profoundly false belief that all innovations – whether in the tonal field, the field of expression, of form or of genres – rose out of “objective imperatives”, out of a kind of ontological necessity. And on top of that, once the large-scale loss of the social function of the phenomenon of musical performance had been lost, the composers of the last third of the 20th century felt immediately absolved of the responsibility of any contact to the public and, later, to the art of performance itself.

## **3. Revigorating tradition**

The particularly strong ideological support (for instance Adorno, Lukács) enjoyed by the followers of the Second Viennese School marked by Schönberg, Webern – culminating with the dead end of neo-serialism pre-eminence – exerted a petrifying effect on all creating processes of various orientations. And, in spite of the fact that this historical period abounds in extremely varied experiments – folkloric movements, exotic modal systems and form systems, and even “socialist realism” – we consider them nowadays as episodes with poor consequences as compared to the weight of neo-serialism. It goes without saying that the above argumentation is not meant to minimize the importance of dodecaphonic thinking: the crisis is not primarily one of musical or

professional nature, but rather a profoundly ideological one. It was not perceived until extremely late, and only the European changes of the 90s released the everyday professional language from the encumbering systems of taboos which had been threatening it like a range of aesthetic dictates imposed on the participants in the artistic act, who had hardly regained consciousness after the trauma of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. How different is our present perception of the financing system connected to the name of the former French minister of culture, Jack Lang, due to whose initiative “canonized” artistic trends and their representatives benefited and continue to benefit from financial means incorporated in the state budget – that is, from actual political support! Well, in spite of the undoubtedly good intentions of this initiative, it offered the political safety support to some kinds of composition and artistic attitudes which worsened the situation even further and, despite the general interest, delayed the unveiling of the crisis. It is not accidental that all European tendencies aiming to attenuate the burden of the above said aesthetic dictate came from outside Europe (the repetitive school, the jazz experiments, the ceremonial music, etc.), and the extremely highly gifted creators in the countries of the Eastern Bloc, notwithstanding communist constraints (or making concessions to them to a certain degree) considered it their duty – or a sign of Europeanity to follow the neo-serial language. As a consequence, during the final 80s to the early 90s, the elite of the composers or at least a large part of them already attempted, by means of formal experiments, to take the path of innovation, thus inevitably coming up against the undeniable reality that the road to innovation goes backwards, that innovation lies in the past. It became increasingly obvious that the last period of the phylogenetics of music history was a series of inorganic metamorphoses that disregarded the compulsory affective character of the anthropomorphic musical manifestations, considering that the main task of music is to create excessively rationalized, often speculative structures. That is just another reason for them not to be continued. For the composers at the end of the 20th century, it became increasingly obvious that music history and the heritage of musical language are not processes in linear development, but rather the history of a multitude of parallel metamorphoses, along which simpler or more complicated structures interchange periodically or rhapsodically. From the semantic and morphological viewpoint, this evolution is decisively influenced by the elements of everyday musical language, not to mention the scientific conquests of the contemporary period (such as the influence of the bio-neurological mechanisms which gain more and more ground in brain research) or the increasingly accelerating transformations in technique and education. We can see thus that the fate of art music at the end of the 20th century reached an unacceptable denouement but, due to the mixture of aesthetics and cultural politics, as well as to the exacerbated power of the theorists of the time, an opportunistic, cautious pudicity continues to slacken the process through which creators might have a chance of turning back the course of music history, seeking those organic points of junction on which they might rely in the construction of their own

language. The only refuge against the numerous restrictive factors enumerated above is reconsidering the social function of the musical act. Composers have naturally sought those fields where they did not have to cope with the imperative of innovations, and where they could escape the accusations of conservatism, academism, epigonism, populism or banality. The specific political route of Central Europe and Hungary was beneficial for a multitude of such refuges: from the most blamable ones – works written on political-ideological command: choirs, mass oratorios – to the most benefic ones – such as religious, stage and film music. And the latter ones eventually awoke the signs of the long-awaited cohesion, the first gestures of the restoration of the tripartite unity between composer, performer, and public.

The relaxation of the 80s, the mitigation of the paternalistic dictatorship specific to goulash-communism (Kádár: who is not against us is with us) gave composers the possibility to come, at least in the privacy of the universe behind the closed doors of churches, by means of their liturgical works, to the aid of the collective taste formation becoming increasingly free from the constraints of past decades.

The fading away of Central-European ideological systems, the cult of revigorating tradition (previously subject to anathema) and the dissemination of applied musical genres – of stage and film – (in the spirit of media culture conquests and recording techniques) encouraged composers to take up once more the long-forgotten creative language, to revigorate the modal-tonal paradigm, to reconsider traditional formal and dramaturgical laws and, eventually, to take into account the realities of musical language and ways of expression. The rediscovery of everyday religious life came to provide a space that could be re-completed without any danger, on behalf of the common good. The fact that the coercive force of the formal scaffolding of the liturgy had a beneficial effect within the temporal economy and coherence of the new works, and the level of dramatic-performing training determined an “anthropomorphic” nature of all these was a revelation for composers. There is no question of authors going from one style to another overnight – and by this I mean the most talented ones! On the contrary! Some of them lived for years, even tens of years, with duplicate identity, applying melodic-harmonic principles in liturgical or stage and film works, trying (with a continuously atrophying conviction) to correspond, in concert halls, to the mainstream, to the expectations of specialists. Well, this was a truly absurd moment in the history of culture! And, as any manifestation of absurdity, it had an unknown finality. We sense the bizarreness of the situation only when looking upon it from the moral perspective: the composer abided, due to constraint and maybe even in spite of his (less obtuse) convictions, by the old - (what a paradox!) – neo-avant-garde, maybe even post-serial style, while he had been actually experimenting for some time with the “outdated” principle of contrasts or, even more, with the possibilities concealed in the various forms of symmetry. Defending himself against the

“opprobrium”, the author of these lines – once a passionate avant-garde composer himself – often noticed the above-mentioned shyness in his colleagues and, he admits it, in himself. Of course there are several major artists, who, owing to the utmost mastery of their craft have been able, nowadays, to put to good use in a relative short amount of time the right to existence of the ways of expression of the inherited musical universes. As there naturally are numerous authors who have sublimated, with deep and undisguised conviction, the values of serialism or other –isms. It also goes without saying that it would be immoral to claim from a composer to reconsider his work and to confront the communication failure of music. Creators are therefore the tragic heroes of our time – and yet we must acknowledge that postponing confrontation leads to a so-called permanent *Kulturkampf* in a war of attrition, which, as I have said, has no finality. On the other hand, there are lots of neologisms with the help of which the massive bodies of theorists may designate the “organicists”: neo-classicists, neo-romanticists, academists, etc., giving the fight signal to all those who, despite their own experiences and auditory sensations, stubbornly believe in the prestige of eternal innovations, of progress, of competition and in the continuing need to challenge existing values.

But we must give up listing causes of the crisis mentioned above, because the facts described so far have shown that we are dealing with a vast field of research and, despite taboos gradually beginning to fade (and here we should not overlook postmodern currents, which, beside all their negative connotations, had a beneficial psychological effect on the common specialized language), musicology has not yet discovered this area of research.

Before turning to some concrete examples of compositional and expressional specificity of the so-called (for lack of a better term) traditionalist works, we must point out that the aforementioned process was spectacularly accelerated by Kodály’s revigorating the heritage of choral culture, a phenomenon still alive in Hungary, which, having been freed from the obligation of patriotic and revolutionary choirs, spontaneously expressed its requirement for repertoire renewal using both universal literature and contemporary works.

#### **4. Composers and works**

We must specify the grounds we took into account when talking about the “anthropomorphic” and “organic” mode of making music. The author of these lines was a witness of and active participant in the phenomenon that began to unfold in the 70s and 80s of the past century, having as consequence, especially in liturgical music, the adoption of creative attitudes that, over time, became well contoured, as well as the care for intelligibility of the musical language. Lots of personal experiences certify that similar processes took place in the states of Central and Eastern Europe, in spite of numerous noticeable differences from one country to another, depending on local cultural particularities, on ideological “contaminations” and on the

complexity of the European connections of the various artistic communities. The author of these lines will limit himself (strictly on methodological grounds) to the work of several Hungarian composers because: a) these are the works that he knows thoroughly b) these works exhibit the sometimes loose, but nevertheless unitary coherence of the path music has been following along the past three decades. We are talking about major works, of which some have already found their place at international level as well. And from amongst these authors we mention first of all György Orbán, who in the past years has composed in dimensions resembling those of Haydn's and Bach's catalogues, whereas liturgical works stand at the center of his attention. As a matter of fact, liturgical compositions are the lowest common denominator in this creative community and in others like it; it seems that only the liturgical text offers an infinity of ways of expression which might represent a kind of collective challenge, an unconfessed competition in the relationships between creators and their daily work. János Vajda for instance is best known as a composer of opera (*Mario and the Sorcerer, Leonce and Lena, Barraba*), but along the years he nevertheless periodically turns his attention to the world of sacred music. It is a downright miracle that nowadays his *Magnificat* has become a repertoire piece. It would be interesting to know if there are similar examples elsewhere. (We suspect that there have been cases in the Baltic countries when some new pieces entered the daily repertoire.)

This repertoire, having Masses at its center, is characterized by a surprising polychromy. The tradition of Masses best represents piety, revealing a complex and spiritual nature and launching a multidimensional challenge of **compact forms** as opposed to doctrinal intellectualism. Let us take them in turn: the acoustic and prosodic equilibrium of Latin texts offers a multitude of rhythmic and structural possibilities. The formal liturgical structure may be adapted to dramaturgy. The five or six part construction offers the formal scaffolding possibilities of variation which may lead as far as the problem of cosmic thinking. Even the tradition of the genre contains associations in the space of culture history which offer composers the possibility of integration into the grand cultural currents, thus setting themselves free from the psychosis of "timeliness". We will now mention only a few of the possibilities offered by the Mass form, but, after all, it is all about the unity between the skill related to artistry and the European ideal of beauty. Moreover, from the various hypostases of the *a capella* expression to the large-scale oratorio forms, the genre can mobilize almost the entire performing spectrum of music. The other sacred music genres are deeply rooted in tradition as well. Besides the *Magnificat* we have mentioned, within this circle of composers alone we find two Requiems (Orbán, Selmeczi), a lot of thematic cantatas (Gyöngyösi, Vajda), motets (Csemicky, Orbán) passions and Christmas oratorios (Orbán). This series is complemented by innumerable miniatures (psalms, Ave Maria, Pater Noster, especially to texts by medieval authors, possibly to verses with religious themes by contemporary poets), not to mention

choral works composed to sacred folk texts or church songs (*cantici da chiesa*). It is quite clear that we are dealing with a consistent repertoire with a live and intense public presence that can no longer be overlooked. And we must not forget that we have listed only five composers. Not long ago I listened in a series on the Hungarian Radio to a whole evening of North-Balkan authors, then to another one of the Baltic countries. It would be interesting to research the situation of the Polish musical contemporaneity, where these genres have re-appeared not only in the musical, but in the religious life as well. However, Hungarian churches for instance are only sporadically interested in this kind of works, maybe for lack of an adequate professional infrastructure. (A peculiar paradox however is that the presentation of Orbán's *Passion* in the Basilica in Budapest was attended by 2500 spectators, but on this occasion the church played only the role of a concert hall, without any religious service being celebrated).

### **5. Sacred genres – a synthesis of the past**

A particular importance belongs to how sacred genres can synthesize those intonations (and here I understand the term intonation in all its complexity, in order to stress the character and its various modalities) of very different origins, whose source is to be found in the medieval world of the tropes (Gregorian), in the layers of ancient folklore, in the coded forms of the Renaissance and early Baroque, but also in the tradition of the nineteenth century (Schumann, Berlioz, Verdi, Liszt). There is a great temptation that these contemporary works be studied precisely in order to find all sorts of models for them, to which reference can be made – in a negative way! But the revelation is the sheer fact that, as shown by the scores, they are absolutely sovereign works, the listening of which may evoke one age or another, nevertheless bearing the unmistakable seal of contemporary music. As regards vocal characteristics and choral writing, one may notice connections between the mentioned composers and their predecessors not only in relation to the grand creative ages of music history, but also to other particularly interesting aspects. Beyond Bartók's and Stravinsky's (sometimes Shostakovich's and Poulenc's) models of intonation, it is enough to browse through Ligeti's, Sándor Veress' or Tiberiu Olah's early choral pieces in order to notice, at the first glance, the musical language kinship. The author of these lines notices, with a discrete smile, that most of the composers taken as examples are of Transylvanian origin, thus being closely connected not only to Romanian folklore, but also to that Romanian choral repertoire that displays a multitude of features resembling the art of the mentioned composers. We can however reveal relatedness to Northern composers and even to some of the masters of the English vocal tradition as well. A new epoch of transformations has been taking shape for the past two decades. Starting from under the protecting umbrella of vocality, more and more composers dare claim the right to existence of the "organic" musical language in the instrumental world of chamber music as well, causing a wave of

joy among the numerous instrumental performers, who are becoming more willing to approach the composers again. And it is precisely the justified appreciative attitude of the performers that can lift a piece to the spheres of eternity.

It is therefore a conclusive intonation, whose primary purpose is to re-create an expressible, suggestive and sensitive musical language that may be extended to the level of both performers and listeners. Creating a new dimension of the creative consciousness, restoring the value of the professional qualities of composers and compositions and human engagement – these should be new tendencies aiming at the rehabilitation of the increasingly withdrawn and marginalized humanist thinking.

## **6. Conclusions**

There is no doubt that only a narrow line separates the awkward epigonism, sentimental banalities and anachronisms from the true values. But it is precisely this narrow line that might constitute that safeguard of the natural selection that was so much missed in the past decades and whose absence opened the way for the lack of sincerity and of non-value rise.

The escape took place about ten or twenty – maybe thirty years before. The fugitives are safe and sound, even though the new European changes do not herald anything good. The bastions of art music are subject to erosion more than ever, and these erosions can only be ended by the true lovers of art music, who are still there to reach. Let us act!