

The Kodály phenomenon

Three facts make the Kodály phenomenon currently problematic: the stability of the life-work closely tied to the middle ages, the “cathedral building idyll” of the Hungarian conservatism born in Europeanism, and the illusion of quality of the program “music for all”. These three facts share the same roots as their origin: the genial intuition of an existing archaic feeling and aspiration, their conscious practice and firm faith in them, while all three are in the service of the upkeep of life’s spirituality and morality.

The faith has become a well known inner certainty due to the vision, which has been passed on as a way of feeling and of view from man to man, from era to era, from silence to silence, by the Hungarian spirituality, culture, and experience of several millenniums – in spite of the ever actual external conditions. It is a statement about the world, distilled as a specialty, which determines even its own rejection; nothing else than a quality awareness – which is therefore an undeniable archaic secret.

This is exactly the reason why Kodály represents big problems for many today; for those that grew up in a World where their very nature and personality, as well as their customs were unapproved, and who swim on the interferent waves of rough waters in a special emotional floating state. The grandeur and purity of the creation, the nobility of the intention, and the sublimity of the style are perceivable and untouchable in Kodály’s art. And in what mechanical modernity can the high gesture – being so generously self-sacrificing - turn to dust when it is cherished by souls? And still, the leading supremacy of the reasonable arguments promote chaos and vertigo, and so challenges not only the construction, but the foundation too. All this has caused damage to the masses, not the mass-emergence of new Kodálays and Bartóks. We don’t have to be afraid of that. The consequence was that the mental and aesthetic potency of the understanding milieu sank back to the circumstances before Bartók and Kodály.

The notions “all”, “fate”, and “quality” form a set, no doubt; they make the great “trinity” Kodály’s. This carved his role out of the fog of his talents; it couldn’t be otherwise in the distance of the historic time and the space, bridged over and filled in by the Kodály phenomenon. If we can talk about similarities in the lifeworks of Bartók and Kodály with regard to the Hungarian culture, then it is this filling in (the distance). The difference is in the HOW of filling in. Beside the space-architecture of Bartók’s hegemonic wheel rim, releasing and tying pains, Kodály’s grandeur consists in his magic spell, making “home” timeless. He builds the heavenly spheres into his space and performs a dance on the eternal balance’s surface of the oriental “motionlessness” – not leaving the spot - without strangling twists, ignoring the dwindling presence, caring only for the approved, for the value, for the eternal, for the ideal. Let me use a metaphor: while Bartók took over the man’s work in our music culture, Kodály engaged himself for the mother’s work. One conquers, the other guards. One purchases, the other safeguards.

It is therefore pointless to look for novelties of tools and methods, for an arsenal of new solutions in his Lifework – and to condemn it consequently. Kodály’s international importance is in his special ambition for completeness, in the self-assured perseverance, continuity, and shamanic solemnity of his statement, in the deeply safeguarded beauty of an eternal ideal, and in the everyday reference point, that instead of toppling the world, our world, this extraordinary idealism, he rather wanted to save and to continue with it. To experience and to unfold that which is statically perennial in him and in his masses. To continue this spiritual era there where it ceased to exist, where it used to be the most healthy, the most viable, the most convincing - in the Hungarian middle ages. With other words - to build up the cathedral.

Kodály's lifework has become to a huge, instinctive, and heritable undertaking at this point, and has become at the same time traditionally unrealistic too, because it was not able to induce a lasting change in our vital vision - which he shouldn't be blamed for. Also, the strength on which this concept is based and could grow efficiently - being the high musical, spiritual, and consequently harmonized physical comfort condition of persons creating and determining the collectivity - is a wonderful and legitimate find, which however has stiffened to a maximalist idea, and shrank to a stillbirth - in an era when the machine and the industrial "beautiful new world" should oblige man struggling in it, to engage himself for the necessary mental preparedness, like peasant societies had been encouraged by their land in old times. We have seen; the impulse could ripen and fulfill everything except the character, which only could have been able to carry the aura of the call for quality. Kodály - determined and politic - foresaw in vain the stubborn nature of opposing, inhibiting, degrading external, and internal factors unable to understand him; he anticipated in vain the kaleidoscopic multi-coloured range of interests and conflicting interests, in which field the one, one day, the other, the next day, is dominating - depending on the actual hegemonic situation in the cultural life - but where seldom dominate the understanding, the creativeness, the engagement. However huge is Kodály's idea and stimulus in importance and contents - being the Hungarian conservatism with high European demand and closely linked to his program "music for all" - they lost their quality factor finally, as soon as they became mass products. True, music was bestowed upon everybody as business, as influence, but just the MUSIC, the exalted didn't belong to all. A kind of spiritual, cultural conservatism has gained force, while keeping much of little value, but didn't become either European, or Hungarian. The reason is that whatever has been, and is being borrowed even today permanently, is no more than an existential Europeanism, and not at all something sublimely spiritual. That which could be called as Hungarian is no more than an induced neurosis of embarrassment, which when seeing the diadem of performance, cannot appreciate anything else as the size of the gems, and has no idea about, or refuses even to know about, what is hidden in the infinity of his history.

The construction of the cathedral will not happen for the time being because there are neither builders nor masters for the purpose. They might not even know what it is about. The most valuable building is for them that which protects from rain, frost, and wild animals; which is only "mine" or "his", but not "ours", and which wouldn't demean them in the daily race - which is tangible. This micro-structured "spirituality" of time and space however are moving away so fast from the vicinity of Kodály's spirituality, as if catapulted away, and soon Kodály's spirituality will be only a giant, known from tales, and which will seem more and more as a dwarf due to the miniaturization glass of the telescope stuffed reversely into the (spectators) hands.

Everything is relative morally, and labile spiritually. This remains reality against the essence of Kodály's oeuvre. The grandeur - we have learned that it is great, but we don't feel anymore why; the fact - together with its consequences - is no more than what it is and whatever it has become, is considered as natural. Man is realistic. Everything else is an absence with a halo - a deficiency. Therefore we still love the unrealistic Kodály.

György Szabados (1980)

(Last year was the 110th anniversary and 25th death anniversary of Zoltán Kodály)

Translation by Marianne Tharan (January 2017)