

EAST --

SOLTAN KODALY CENTENARY

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The centenary of the birth of the Hungarian composer Soltan Kodaly is being celebrated this year in many parts of the world. A romantic composer whose works, according to Bela Bartok, were "the most perfect embodiment of the Hungarian spirit," Kodaly is almost equally revered as a folklorist and as an educator of considerable influence internationally.

Kodaly was born in Kecskemet on 16 December 1882 into a musical family. In 1898 the Kodalys moved to Budapest, where Soltan later attended both the Franz Liszt Academy of Music and the Peter Pazmany University, at which he studied languages. At the academy one of his teachers was Hans Kocsaler, who also taught Bela Bartok and Erno von Sebastyi. Kodaly graduated from the academy in 1905 and left the university in 1906, having written a doctoral thesis on The Strategic Structure of the Hungarian Folk Song. He then traveled in Germany, Austria, and France, and in Paris, where he studied for a time, was much influenced by the music of Debussy. In 1907 he was appointed to teach musical theory at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, and in 1911 to a full professorship at the academy.

Kodaly's compositions include orchestral, chamber, and instrumental works, and a large body of choral music, together with three operas, including his widely acclaimed comic opera Mary Jane -- transcribed as an instrumental suite, probably his best known work. An early landmark in his musical career was the first concert devoted entirely to his compositions on 13 March 1910, with Bela Bartok as the pianist. It was not until 1922 that he was commissioned to write a major work, however, the occasion being the 50th anniversary of the union of Hede and Pest. He composed the Psalmes Hungaricus, a work for tenor solo, chorus, and orchestra based on a 16th century Hungarian version of the 57th psalm. As an American critic put it, in this music

Kodaly completely assimilated the styles and idioms of old Hungarian music in constructing a score of surpassing power and eloquence. With a sure hand he combined the old and the new, the characteristics of age-old Hungarian folk song with the techniques and idioms of 20th century music. He managed to express the old culture of his people without becoming archaic, in fact, remaining a voice of his own time. (1)

A creative period of Kodaly's life began. In 1925 Mary Jane was completed and was produced in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the Soviet Union. In 1928 the Baroque of Marosarah and in 1934

(1) Quoted in David Ewen, Composers Since 1900 (New York: E.W. Wilson Company, 1949).

the Dances of Galanta were finished. In 1932 his opera *Bakalykocok* (The Spinning Wheel), whose lyric sources are based on Hungarian folk songs and dances, was produced for the first time, and in 1934 a religious work for orchestra, *The Te Deum*, was composed to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the delivery of Budapest from the Turks. In 1939 came another of his most popular works, the orchestral *Variations on a Hungarian Folk Song, "The Fugue."*

It is the Hungarian folk idiom that is the most characteristic feature of Kodaly's music. He firmly believed that the national element was of vital importance for an artist and that without it he lost his roots and his music became decadent. In an interview with The New York Times he said:

All music comes fundamentally from popular sources. As the culture of the people advances, the product always becomes more interesting and significant, but when the connection with ancestral sources is lost, art enters the stage of decadence. . . . One of the most useless things a composer can do is to quote a few folk melodies in his score and think that in so doing he has created something national and genuine. This is so more the case, under such circumstances, than a bunch of flowers cut and put in vases on a shelf in the garden. The garden is made of seeds that have taken growth from the ground. (2)

Kodaly's close interest in folk music had begun in his student days, and in 1905 he began his collaboration with Zoltan Bartok in the collection, annotation, and publishing of several thousand Hungarian folk songs and dances. The sentimental Gypsy songs exploited by Liszt and Brahms were thought to be authentic Hungarian folk music until that time. Kodaly and Bartok discovered that, unlike the popular Gypsy music, most of the original Magyar peasant tunes were composed using the pentatonic scale. In 1933 the Hungarian Academy of Sciences commissioned Kodaly and Bartok to prepare for publication the entire available body of Hungarian folk music. Under Bartok's editorial control and later -- after 1948 when Bartok emigrated to the US -- that of Kodaly, work on the *Corpus Popularis Hungaricus* was begun. It was not until 1951, however, that the first volume was published, and by 1971, 4-years after Kodaly's death (on 6 March 1967), 8 volumes containing over 100,000 folk songs had appeared.

It is as an educator, however, that Kodaly's influence has perhaps been most far-reaching. He believed that musical education should be started as early in life as possible. Children sing and dance naturally, he thought, and he wrote a musical primer that encourages children to develop the natural musical talents they

(2) As quoted in ibid.

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might have. He once said, "nobody is too great that he should refuse to write for children; indeed, he should work hard to be great enough for this job." (3) Some of the basic ideas of his musical concepts are that the human voice is the most important musical instrument (which is why he wrote so many choral works, particularly for children); that people should start their musical education with traditional folk songs; that the pentatonic scale is the easiest one to teach children; and that all children should learn to read and write music so as to enjoy their musical heritage.

Kodaly believed in the importance of musical education in Hungary for another, more political, reason as well. Audiences at concerts and the opera changed radically after the war when the communist government required factories to organize cultural programs for their workers. In an interview Kodaly said:

You see, there is a problem. Formerly we had good bourgeois audiences, a public that was rather well educated. They're gone. Then we got a very bad public, and what I am trying to do -- if one can say it -- is to elevate the general public's taste. And so I started at the only level you can start, in the schools. (4)

The object of the method is to develop the latent musicality that Kodaly believed all children possess by instilling an understanding and appreciation of the basic rhythms and forms of music and encouraging facility in the reading and writing of music. Its material is taken essentially from folk music, and its basic method is corporate singing using solmization (doh, ray, me, fah, soh, etc.) accompanied by hand movements to represent each note. In this way the children are always aware while singing which notes they are producing; the hands represent a bridge between the notes on the paper and the human voice.

By 1960 the Kodaly method had been introduced in more than 70 schools in Hungary with spectacular success. As one account of such a school reported:

During a stay of over a fortnight, reports of this fabulous school, which was Kodaly's idea ("remove the children's city frustrations by letting them sing and dance like the peasants"), continued to reach us: Hungarian families told us of "crazy mixed-up kids" who attended this school and became happy, normal children. Even jaundiced Western correspondents spoke with wonder of this school; Scottish journalists, they reported, had attended the school, and unbelieving, had written a Scottish folk song on the blackboard. The children had read this song at night, had then erased it and sung it from memory.

(3) Quoted in Taina Murray Napusang, 23 October 1982.

(4) The Times, 13 April 1959.

they had then proceeded to transcribe it to any key that the shaken Scottish correspondent had suggested. (5)

Kozaly institutes to train teachers in the method have now been established in Tokyo, Wellesley (US), Ottawa, Sydney, and Sacramento (Kozaly's birthplace).

Kozaly's contribution as a composer, scholar, and educator were recognized both in Hungary and abroad. He received the Kossuth Prize three times, was elected President of the National Arts Council, and appointed a member of the National Assembly. On his 63th birthday he was awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of the Hungarian Republic. He also received awards and honorary appointments from the US , the USSR, Great Britain, the GDR, Austria, and Finland.

Although Kozaly tried to avoid politics, he was elected the Chairman of the Revolutionary Committee of Intellectuals during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. He also sent a telegram to Soviet composers asking them to intercede for the immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary. It was shortly before the revolution that Kozaly's work Illyai's Legend was performed in Budapest. One line of the text is the plea, "Do not hurt the Hungarians." In 1956 this was obviously interpreted as a plea to the Soviets. The work has not been performed in Hungary since. In 1959 a British newspaper claimed that Kozaly was so popular that he "might, had he so wished, have become Hungarian Prime Minister." (6) While probably an exaggeration, this statement reflects the tremendous popularity of the composer among his own people. One of the reasons Kozaly was so well liked by the public is revealed by the following incident:

Mr. Kozaly was recently invited by the Communist officialdom to address an assembly of factory workers. The spare, 78-year-old composer accepted the invitation. He arrived at the factory carrying a battered briefcase. Officials asked Mr. Kozaly what he was going to tell the workers. He replied curtly that this concerned only him.

The composer mounted the rostrum, opened his briefcase and withdrew an old book. It was the Bible. His opening remarks were to the effect that he was not much of a hand at writing speeches and that he proposed to read what someone else had written. Mr. Kozaly then proceeded to read from the New Testament about brotherly love. (7)

(5) Ibid., 31 December 1958.

(6) Ibid., 13 April 1959.

(7) The New York Times, 4 November 1961.

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But it is as a composer, folklorist, and musical educator that the Hungarian Academy of Sciences has chosen to commemorate Bodaly this year, and it is these three aspects of his work that are being widely celebrated throughout the world.

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