

UNIVERSITY OF PÉCS – FACULTY OF MUSIC AND VISUAL ARTS
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Martin Gölles

MUSICA POETICA

The relationship between music and text in the light
of choral works written to the poems by Sándor Weöres

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Academic advisor:

Prof. dr. Tamás Lakner
choral conductor, professor

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1. Introduction

“[...] There is only one knowledge; everything else is mere addition: Beneath you is the earth, above you the sky, within you the ladder. Truth does not lie in words, but in untainted existence. Eternity is not hidden within time, but in the state of harmony.”

Sándor Weöres: *Towards Wholeness – Facing Mirrors* (Weöres, 2021, p. 15)

Through this writing, Weöres seeks to highlight the essence of pure harmony, which can only be attained once a person first comes to know themselves. True fulfillment in the “state of untainted harmony” can only commence after self-discovery, with art offering guidance by exploring and contemplating the eternal truths of life. Art delights, expresses, provokes thought, and offers support; sometimes seriously, sometimes humorously, sometimes playfully. To truly understand art, one must learn its language (Apagyi & Lantos, 2011). A choir is an excellent tool for this purpose. It provides a unique environment where participants, even without high-level musical training, can create artistic works. With professional guidance, these choirs could even come to the same level as professional ensembles. Art is wonderful in itself, but it is also a means for shaping the human being and for enhancing and improving the quality of human life (Apagyi & Lantos, 2011).

Wherever human cultures were born, their music also emerged; however, the earliest origins of music are lost to time. The music of primitive people is quite simple and most likely accompanied regular physical activities, such as dancing or various forms of labor (Szabolcsi, 1999, p. 9). From a text-centered perspective, it can be assumed that singing developed from spoken language (Várnai, 1997, p. 20). Wherever music became bound to certain forms, it meant that not all texts could be applied to it anymore. Since the function of text is to convey thoughts clearly, prose had to part ways with melody to fulfill this purpose. In contrast, poetry demonstrates the opposite: because of its melodic and rhythmic structure, it possesses qualities that do not appear among the components of everyday speech (Weöres, 1939). As for the question of why singing emerged, or how songs were born, Tamás Lakner (2020, p. 5) offers one possible answer:

‘People build houses with tightly sealed windows and doors to protect themselves from the storms of nature, the sun, the cold, the rain, and the snow. Against the storms of the soul, they invented the SONG.’

2. Reasons for choosing the topic, personal motivation

As a choral conductor, vocal music is special for me, because in singing – and thus in choral singing as well – we use the most beautiful ‘instrument’ in the world: the human voice. The Hungarian language offers a remarkable term that captures the harmony of music and text: *énekszó* (literally ‘song-word’). This expression did not evolve coincidentally, as it emphasizes attention to both components – music and text – as well as their unity. I consider understanding interpretative singing to be essential. In a choir setting, it is the conductor’s responsibility to master and embody these principles and to nurture and instill them in the singers.

The genre of setting poetry to music has existed for a long time. It represents a fusion of literature and music, creating works in which a particular theme is expressed simultaneously in two ‘languages’: verbal (spoken) communication and music. Given the fusion of these two art forms, neither should be regarded as inferior, because it is their equal partnership that can only make the art of choral singing. Until the mid-twentieth century, Sándor Petőfi’s poems were most frequently set to music among Hungary’s great literary figures. However, during the twentieth century, a new poet emerged, whose rhythmical and playful poems captivated both children and adults. His work inspired composers to such an extent that, from the second half of the century onward, he came to be referred to as the ‘most frequently set-to-music poet’ (Szabó, 2013, pp. 4–8). This poet is Sándor Weöres, who was also a writer and a literary translator, and holder of the Kossuth Prize and Baumgarten Prize. (‘Weöres Sándor’, n.d.).

‘Weöres was a virtuoso of the Hungarian language like no one before him. The content of his poetry ranges from the trivial — even the vulgar — through sarcasm and humor to tragedy and despair, and he also created artificial myths and legends. Some of his works are grand frescoes, even entire separate worlds. At the same time, he composed countless short poems, both serious and playful.’
(Kerékfy, 2010, p. 446)

I chose Sándor Weöres as the guiding character in my dissertation because of his virtuosity. His poems come to a new light through choral compositions. Furthermore, it is also worth mentioning Weöres’s own sources of inspiration. One of his major influences was Zoltán Kodály, whose relationship with the poet profoundly shaped Weöres’s creative work. After their acquaintance, Kodály regularly sent Weöres short melodies to be set to text. Weöres later noted

that he had learned a lot from this collaboration, especially in developing his rhythmic sensibility (Weöres & Károlyi, 1993).

3. Structure of the research

In my dissertation, I explore the fulfillment of Sándor Weöres's poetry through music, focusing more specifically on the diversity of musical and textual interrelations that emerge in choral works based on his poems. After the introduction, I present the relationship between poetry and melody from artistic, historical, and linguistic perspectives, and through Sándor Weöres's doctoral dissertation *The Birth of the Poem*. The following section discusses the rhythmic and verbal playfulness in Weöres's poetry, paired with the musical elements that reflect these traits, as demonstrated in the works of József Karai, István Láng, Péter Nógrádi, Miklós Csemiczky, János Decsényi, and Katalin Szalai.

'Singing style is born of the language itself, yet it also influences instrumental style. Rhythm manifests with particular strength (both in creative and reproductive art) among peoples whose languages are marked by sharp rhythmic differences, such as the Italians, the French, and the Hungarians.' (Kodály, 1984, p. 40)

The subsequent chapters offer full analyses of choral works by Zoltán Kodály, Lajos Bárdos, Ferenc Farkas, György Ligeti, Miklós Kocsár, György Orbán, and Péter Tóth. Given that Weöres is regarded as 'the most frequently set-to-music poet' in Hungary (Szabó, 2013, pp. 4–8), it would be impossible to discuss every choral piece based on his poems. Therefore, without aiming for completeness but moving *'Towards Wholeness'*, I selected composers whose contributions to setting Weöres's poetry to music are significant (many of whom also maintained personal friendships with the poet). The selected choral works were chosen to ensure that their textual foundations faithfully reflect the unique musicality of Weöres's poetry. They also represented the compositional possibilities in his verses and showcased a rich and wide-ranging spectrum of the potential musical expressions of his linguistic artistry.

Throughout the structuring of my dissertation, I followed a chronological framework, describing a form of compositional evolution. In my research methodology — beyond the study of relevant musical, literary, historical, and linguistic scholarship, I conducted independent musical analyses based on the sources listed in the bibliography, guided by the following questions and considerations:

- How does the music represent the text? What kind of sonic characteristics of the musical material can be observed?
- What additional meaning or content does the music contribute to the text?
- How are musical elements that are already independently present in the poems manifested in the choral settings?
- How does the natural rhythm and prosody of the text align with the musical material?
- How does prosody shape the musical material and aid in the musical expression of the text?

In addition to these aspects, I highlighted the universal and formative principles of natural order in the works, such as symmetry, asymmetry, parallelism, contrast, rhythm, repetition, return, variation, and the golden ratio (Apagyi & Lantos, 2011).

I also found it necessary to address the genre of children's choir, in which numerous compositions based on Weöres's poems have been written. One example is *Juli néni, Kati néni* (*Rongyszőnyeg III. 26*), which is among the most frequently set-to-music poems of Weöres, having been adapted by composers such as György Ligeti, Miklós Kocsár, and János Decsényi, among others. The poems *Csipp, csepp...* (*Magyar etűdök 9*) and *Békák* (*Magyar etűdök 40*) are similarly popular among composers. It is an interesting fact that these two poems were written to Kodály's melodies. The most children's choir pieces based on Weöres's poems were composed by József Karai (setting 40 of his poems in 34 works), followed by István Loránd and Miklós Kocsár (Ferencziné Ács, 2010, pp. 40–43).

Although my dissertation includes works for children's choir, a comprehensive study of this genre would require a separate and extensive investigation, which is beyond the scope of the present work. This dissertation is the result of a research project aimed at investigating the textual and musical interrelations manifested within individual compositions, thereby supporting the interpretation, understanding, and performance of these works.

4. Prosody

'In its broadest interpretation, speech is the ability to communicate our feelings and thoughts to others through signs' (Kempelen, 1989). This form of communication involves the use of both segmental (phonological) and suprasegmental (prosodic) features, which constitute the verbal aspect of speech. The most important suprasegmental phenomena arise from the melody of speech (Crystal, 2003, p. 216). The Greek word *προσῳδία* (*prosōidia*) means 'singing accompanying the lyre', and in musical terms, it refers to the correct alignment

of stress and rhythm between text and music (‘Προσῳδία’, 1935; ‘Prozódia’, 1986). Thus, during singing — even though it differs from ordinary speech — we must remember that we are, fundamentally, still speaking. The key to good prosody lies in the appropriate use of stresses, for which a variety of expressive tools are available.

Essentially, both speech and music are independently capable of fulfilling their respective functions. Prosodic features of speech can also be found in music, and their expression does not necessarily require a text. However, in sung music, where text and melody coexist, these features tend to blend: for example, in speech, the segmental unit is the phoneme, while its musical equivalence is the musical note, but this musical note simultaneously belongs to the domain of suprasegmental speech features. Further prosodic elements of speech, such as volume, stress, tempo, rhythm, pauses, and timbre, fulfill similar roles in music. The concept of musical prosody, so the alignment between text and music, can be interpreted as the degree to which the grammatical prosodic features of speech correspond to the musical material, and how the communicative function of speech (encompassing both segmental and suprasegmental elements) aligns with the expressive functions of the music.

The prosody of vocal music is fundamentally determined by the relationship between text and music. According to Tamás Lakner (2015, p. 44), *‘The primary principle of achieving unity between verse and melody — good prosody — is the possible following of the spoken rhythm of the words.’* Thus, the correctness of a vocal work’s prosody depends on how sensitively the musical setting follows the characteristics of the language, including speech-like stresses and rhythms of the words. This approach treats the speech aspect of the text as the basis for the music. It is important to note that the text of a vocal work is not just a collection of segmental features; expressive suprasegmental and paralinguistic elements must also be considered. For instance, depending on the placement of stresses, the same text can convey different meanings; likewise, the same text set to different music can result in varied interpretations. The relationship between text and music in a vocal work must be flexible, at times placing greater emphasis on the text, at other times on the music, with the overarching goal of delivering the message effectively. When examining prosody, a key question arises: how should we view singing? Singing can be considered either an extension of speech characterized by enriched suprasegmental features or an intersection between two independently existing systems: speech and music. There is no sharp dividing line between these perspectives, but speech-like qualities are emphasized in the former aspect. If these two approaches are considered together, singing may be treated as musicalized speech. From this point of view, the two components of speech (segmental and suprasegmental features) may be

applied to singing as well. For example, the phoneme — as the basic segmental unit in speech — corresponds to the musical note in singing, which also connects to suprasegmental features such as intonation, rhythm, and stress. In singing, the prosodic characteristics of speech are paired with musical expression, musical embellishments, and text-painting elements.

5. The choral works in the research

In order of appearance of the dissertation:

- József Karai: *Ugrótánc / Jumping dance*
- József Karai: *Táncnóta / Dance song*
- István Láng: *Hajnali dal és körtánc / Dawn song and round dance*
- Péter Nógrádi: *Rumba*
- Péter Nógrádi: *Blues*
- Miklós Csemiczky: *Három vegyeskar “Béka-dalok” / Three mixed choirs ‘Frog songs’*
- György Ligeti: *Magyar Etüdök (sic!) / Hungarian Etudes – I. Spiegelkanon*
- János Decsényi: *Két kis kórusmű – Altatódal / Two small choral works – Lullaby*
- József Karai: *Altatódal / Lullaby*
- János Decsényi: *Két kis kórusmű – Pletykázó asszonyok / Two small choral works – Gossiping women*
- György Ligeti: *Pletykázó asszonyok / Gossiping women*
- Katalin Szalai: *Pletykázó asszonyok / Gossiping women*
- Zoltán Kodály: *Öregek / The aged*
- Zoltán Kodály: *Norvég leányok / Norwegian girls*
- Lajos Bárdos: *Elmúlt a tél / The winter is gone*
- Lajos Bárdos: *Bérc a rónán / Peak on the plain*
- Ferenc Farkas: *Rózsamadrigál / Rose madrigal*
- Ferenc Farkas: *Hajnal-nóta / Dawn song*
- Ferenc Farkas: *Kánikula / The heatwave*
- György Ligeti: *Magány / Solitude*
- György Ligeti: *Éjszaka – Reggel / Night – Morning*
- Miklós Kocsár: *Csili-csali nóták / Csili-csali ‘cheating’ songs*
- György Orbán: *A Paprikajancsi szerenádja / Serenade of the Paprikajancsi*
- Péter Tóth: *Kis szvit / Little suite*

I illustrate my analyses with musical examples that I have personally re-edited. These examples are placed alongside the relevant sections of the text. For instance, an excerpt from *Rózsamadrigál*, a choral work by Ferenc Farkas based on a poem by Sándor Weöres, is provided in Example 1.

Allegretto leggierissimo
mf

Szoprán
Ó, ne kér - dezd a ró - zsát, hogy hú ma - rad - e hoz - zád, kér - dezd a kó - sza fel - hőt, ö - rök - re ég - re száll - e?

Alt
Ó, ne kér - dezd a ró - zsát, hogy hú ma - rad - e hoz - zád, kér - dezd a kó - sza fel - hőt, ö - rök - re ég - re száll - e?

Tenor
Ó, ne kér - dezd a ró - zsát, hogy hú ma - rad - e hoz - zád, kér - dezd a kó - sza fel - hőt, ö - rök - re ég - re száll - e?

Basszus
Ó, ne kér - dezd a ró - zsát, hogy hú ma - rad - e hoz - zád, kér - dezd a kó - sza fel - hőt, ö - rök - re ég - re száll - e?

Example 1
Farkas – Weöres: *Rózsamadrigál* (bar 1–4)

6. Results of the research, summary

During the course of my research, as I examined a number of choral works, it became clear that composers set Sándor Weöres's poems to music in highly diverse ways, demonstrating the rich array of tools available within the choral literature. The poet's texts often exerted a significant influence on the musical expression and the shaping of prosody. Composers frequently incorporated the natural rhythm, intonation, and accent patterns of the text into their musical material. At times, the focus shifted more toward imagery, while in other instances, the music added layers of meaning that are not explicitly found in the original poem. Despite Weöres's self-perception as 'antimusical', he was, in fact, exceedingly musical. Through his work, he became a true 'librettist for composers'. It was likely the rhythm that brought him close to music. Furthermore, his relationship with Zoltán Kodály also had a major impact on his artistic development (Ittész, 2003). Weöres's musicality is further supported by Kodály's assertion that '*No Hungarian writer, especially a poet, can reach the peak of their craft without musical knowledge*' (Kodály, 1984, p. 43). As one of Hungary's greatest poets, Weöres certainly achieved this mastery.

Throughout the process of the related literature and the analysis of choral works based on Weöres's poetry, I was able to explore a wide range of possibilities for the musical expression of the poems. This knowledge holds particular importance for choral conductors, from understanding a piece, through the rehearsals, to the interpretive performance. This research profoundly impacted me: the diverse artistic visions, expressive approaches, and compositional techniques of different composers opened up new dimensions of understanding these works. In addition to enriching my work as a performer, the insights gained through this research are invaluable to me as a composer. Since I frequently write vocal music, I emphasize the relationship between text and music and the application of appropriate prosody.

Beyond analyzing specific works, this dissertation aimed to outline methods of text-music analysis that could help performers move closer to a subjectively rich interpretation founded on objective principles — an approach in which understanding interpretative singing plays a central role. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote in his *Hegira*: *'Words weighed then as value's token / Since the word was one that's spoken.'* Similarly, singing must be treated as a living entity: *'Bring life to the song!'* (the title of Lajos Bárdos's collection of essays). Why is this important? To answer, I end my dissertation with the words of Zsigmond László (1961, pp. 7–8):

'The melody [...] of poems escapes the attention even of those with a good ear — simply because intonation is a constant, habitual, unconscious element of our everyday speech, and for this very reason, it is usually overlooked and goes unnoticed. Rhythm, on the other hand, is something everyone at least hears or feels, even if they do not consciously reflect on it; attention can easily be drawn to it, since its phenomena, when intensified and emphasized, can be readily reproduced. The melody of poems not only remains mostly outside the sphere of interest (as evidenced by the state of poem theory literature), but even when interest and attention are sparked, it is not easily grasped as an experience. It is a meticulous, fleeting 'cricket song,' to which attention must be drawn repeatedly, from many directions, in order for it to become a true experience, or even a form of understanding.'

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