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Evolution of the accordion repertoire,  
possibilities for its expansion

The role of transcriptions in the accordion repertoire

**DOCTORAL THESIS**

Supervisor:

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# THESIS

*Development of the accordion repertoire, possibilities for its expansion*

*The role of transcriptions in the accordion repertoire*

for the doctoral dissertation

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## **1. The rationale for choosing the topic of the accordion transcript, the significance of the research**

There comes a time in the history of every instrument when the composers and performers who compose for music instrument have to answer certain questions, on which the historical development of the music instrument depends. This also applies to the evolution of today's Hungarian accordion art.

At first glance, the situation is quite positive, as accordion education is being successfully conducted at all three levels: in elementary music schools, secondary music schools and at the Liszt Academy of Music. Accordion festivals and competitions are organized throughout the country, master classes are held to which famous teachers and speakers from different countries are invited. Students and performers alike have the opportunity to play high-quality, professional and modern music instruments.

Despite this, there are still problems within the art of the accordion, which may not be so obvious at first glance, and which do not have a very good effect on the future development of the music instrument.

Let's approach the statement from the point of view of the name of the instrument. Among both listeners and performers, we often hear the word "tango accordion", which sounds quite dissonant for a classical musician. This in itself limits the artistic function of the instrument to light music and entertainment. No matter how strange it may seem, educating the listener is also the task of the lecturer.

Educational work must be carried out in such a way that, as a result, the student receives a certain amount of new knowledge, on the basis of which he later shapes her or his attitude towards the events taking place in the world of the accordion, and towards accordion music as a whole. To some extent, this dissertation also serves this purpose to maintain sustainable development of the accordion music future.

The beginning of the dissertation gives a brief overview of the historical development of the music instrument and its role in different periods. At the beginning of its development, the accordion was only considered a fun and entertaining music instrument, later its paths diverged: some of the performers continued to use the accordion for entertainment, while the other he chose the path of development in classical music.

In addition, the so-called light music also reached a relatively high artistic level. For example we shall consider the tango having two faces that, thanks to the talent of Astor Piazzolla, has reached the classical music stage today. In other words, both "faces" of the music instrument can exist perfectly side by side even today. Therefore, it would be wrong to limit the activities of performers, it should be varied and multifaceted. The task of lecturers and theoreticians is to convey all this information to the student.

The next important question that needs to be solved or studied more thoroughly is the accordion repertoire, including the problem of accordion transcriptions. To compose or not to compose, to perform or not to perform? As it turned out, to this day there is still no consensus on this issue. There are still musicians who question the usefulness of transcriptions in the accordion repertoire. Take into consideration for example the secondary music school requirement, where the accordion course states that it is more appropriate giving students original music and refraining from transcriptions whenever possible. This is probably not a blanket rejection of accordion transcripts but simply to protect students from potentially poor quality transcripts. For this reason, I believe that this kind of division of the repertoire is inappropriate here.

Therefore, the greatest emphasis in the dissertation is on the examination of accordion transcriptions. I deal with the issue of transcriptions as a whole, as well as separately with accordion transcriptions, the reasons for the formation of the genre, its place in the repertoire and its effects on the performer's professional development.

And the third thing that prompted me to write the dissertation: the almost complete lack of literature on accordion methodology in Hungarian language. At the same time, nowadays there is quite a rich range of methodological literature of a similar nature in other languages. Particularly rich and valuable literature on accordion methodology can be found in Russian language. The text of the original Russian quotations is my own I translated it into Hungarian language.

From the beginning of the 20th century, accordion art received strong financial and intellectual support from the Russian/Soviet state. Thanks to this, accordion art developed quickly and successfully, slightly ahead of other countries. Of course, as time has been passing by the position of the accordion in different countries more or less has equalized, but by that time in Russia, the traditions of accordion pedagogy and performing arts had already developed. I also consider the development and writing of the topic of methodological literature in Hungarian language which can help the accordion art to have an important and significant step forward based on sustainable development.

## **2. Subject, goals, hypotheses, structure of the doctoral research**

The subject of the research – accordion transcriptions as a way of expanding the accordion repertoire.

The aim of the research is to:

- prove that accordion transcriptions are an integral part of the accordion repertoire,
- explore the effects of the transcriptions on the quality of the accordion repertoire and the professional level of the performers,
- to present the process of creation of the accordion transcriptions.

When defining the objectives of the dissertation, specific research goals were formulated which awaited a solution. Among the first of the rules for creating transcriptions is the requirement that the work be comfortably playable on the music instrument for which it is transcribed. Since it is an accordion the transcribed work must be accordion-like and accordion-wise.

What does this mean? The transcriptionist must make full use of the technical and artistic means of expression of the accordion. Studying the possibilities is therefore among the primary tasks. It is useful to trace how composers, performers and transcribers have used these possibilities.

One of the central elements of the research is the examination of the nature of the transcriptions, and specifically of their specific manifestations characteristic of accordion art. I will also present the transcription process of individual works. I have selected the works in such a way that it can be seen that a special approach is required in each individual case, which requires decisions adapted to the given situation. To demonstrate this, I used the accordion transcriptions of organ, harpsichord, and piano works that I made.

The basis of the dissertation is also the idea that transcriptions - for objective reasons - are an integral part of the accordion repertoire.

## Structure

The majority of the dissertation is based on research, together with the related sheet music appendices. Main sections: introduction, four main research chapters, sheet music examples, summary, bibliography. The order of the chapters is determined by the logic of the main aspects of the work. The whole paper its structural principle moves from more general knowledge material to questions discussing more specific problems.

The introductory part briefly outlines the position of the accordion in the modern world and reveals the topicality of the topic of the thesis. More precisely, the lack of literature on accordion methodology in Hungarian, the unsettled situation related to accordion transcriptions, and the lack of educational activities in the field of accordion transcriptions.

The **first chapter** discusses the main stages in the development of the accordion, the evolution and development of the repertoire. The creation of the accordion was preceded by a general expectation that people needed a smaller instrument that was easy to learn to play and that could also accompany larger groups of people, for example during dances and parties. People's musical tastes and expectations were constantly changing, which was also reflected in the development of the instrument.

During its development, the accordion went through several changes until it reached the shape we know today. Change means continuous innovations, thanks to which many types of accordion were born. However, these instruments had something in common that held them together within a family of accordions - the reed whistle.

Paolo Soprani created the accordion with the chromatic bass chord system. This type of accordion is recommended for people with more serious musical education, as it is possible to play works from piano scores on this instrument.

During the further development of the instrument, baritone and later converter accordions also appeared. With the appearance of accordions with a converter system, the accordion gained the form it is known today.

The ever-higher level of accordion education and the spread of high-quality converter and tone-changing accordions have changed the thinking of accordionists as performers. The possibilities expanded, the instrument's sound range made it possible to perform more and more

classical works. As a result, the performers turned more and more in the direction of more demanding performance pieces. For the transcriptions, works were now not only chosen from the point of view of their tonal range, but in the case of the piano pieces, practical questions also arose, such as the use of pedals or the representation of the overtones of the piano on the accordion.

The development of accordion education and the acquisition of the repertoire of older ages on the accordion led to the fact that now the accordionists themselves began to write works for their own instrument. This can be considered an important stage in the history of the accordion, as the instrument begins to find its "own sound" at this point, when a significant number of original accordion works are created.

When studying accordion literature, it is easy to see what kind of music was played in different eras, what genres accordionists liked, and what pioneering role composers played in shaping the repertoire. In this process, the importance of transcriptions is clearly visible, and that with the development of musical instruments and musical literacy the quality of the transcriptions and their artistic value in accordion literature changed together.

**Second chapter:** In order to successfully interact with the instrument, the performer, composer, transcriptionist needs the fullest possible knowledge of the given instrument, its technical possibilities and means of expression. In his book *On the Art of Accordion Transcriptions* (p. 17), F. Lips writes: "[...] the musician who makes accordion transcriptions must not only know the artistic and musical nuances of the instrument, but must also be aware of the instrument's technical properties". And the same idea seems to continue in another book - *It feels like it was only yesterday* - (p. 123): "Only someone who fully knows the specific possibilities of their own instrument can make a quality transcription"

The playing technique basis of the performance process it is based on the interpretation of the specific sound of the accordion. Today, thanks to wide technical possibilities, registers and diverse means of expression the accordion can be classified as a classical musical instrument.

Therefore, this chapter is used to explore the main features and characteristics of the accordion. It highlights features such as pitch, range, registers, dynamics, accordion expressive tools, and principles of airbox playing technique.

The **third chapter** of the dissertation revolves around the topic of transcripts. Here, ideas related to the existence of transcriptions and their place in art in general and in accordion art in particular are revealed. I deal with the centuries-old history of musical transcriptions, during which the transcriptions not only served to expand the repertoire, but also functioned as a kind of connecting link between different arts. The question of the classification of transcriptions, the main purpose of making accordion transcriptions, their role in musical life, and the problematic of selecting works for transcription are raised.

In this chapter, it becomes obvious how much the accordion transcription is essentially a part of transcription of his musical art, which is embodied on many instruments, in this case the art of the accordion. Similar to the art of other musical instruments, the genre of transcription plays a major role in the development history of the accordion. This therefore primarily means expanding the repertoire, connecting the accordion with other art forms, and expanding the accordionists' musical vision.

The last, **fourth chapter** of the dissertation deals with the writing, analysis and presentation of accordion transcriptions. Using the example of specific musical works, I will present the changes that occur when writing the transcription, and explain the background and reasons for each decision.

The examined musical works:

- Gyula Bánkövi: Lebegés
- J. S. Bach: Chorale in F minor BWV 639
- D. Scarlatti: Sonata in A major K.24, L. 495
- F. Liszt: Etude in D major op. 1 No. 11 (12 etudes for piano from series c.)
- S. Prokofiev: Toccata op. 11

During the analysis of the presented transcripts, it can be seen that the initial stage of the work is very similar each time, which is mostly can be considered a phase. At this stage of the work, as much information as possible must be collected about the author, style, genre, and main characteristics and properties of the instrument for which the work was originally written. In such cases, a kind of separation of the musical message, the composer's idea, takes place from the original musical realization, with the aim of rewriting it according to the sound world of another instrument, i.e. embodying it. This chapter contains original sheet music excerpts of works written for organ, harpsichord and piano, as well as their transcriptions.

### 3. Research methodology and sources

Derivation of research results Nowadays, (in the 21st century) accordion art is of a fairly high standard, and interest in the accordion is constantly growing. This is proven by the research activities of accordion teachers, composers, and performers. Despite the fact that there is already a wide selection of literature in the world (although most of them do not fully exhaust the body of knowledge related to accordion transcriptions), since there are still questions that require a new approach, information gathering and rethinking.

The theoretical basis of the first part of the dissertation was M. Imhanitsky's book: *A history of button and keyboard accordion art*. The author of the book writes about the development of the instrument, the characteristics of the various models of the accordion, which pointed in the direction of the appearance of the modern, converter, register-changing accordion. It also presents the process of the formation of the accordion repertoire, with due emphasis on the composers to his works.

If - thanks to other sources - the other side of the accordion repertoire, i.e. the transcriptions, is also taken into account, a more complete picture of the accordion literature can be obtained. After all, the accordion repertoire is not only the original works, but also the transcriptions. For me, the books of N. Rechmenskyi, N. Davidov and F. Lips were an important source of knowledge when studying the topic of accordion transcriptions.

It is important that in this dissertation I consider accordion transcriptions first of all as a part of the art of general transcription, and starting from here we move on to a specific manifestation, accordion transcriptions. According to such an approach, the question of the need for transcriptions in the accordion repertoire also disappears. After all, studying the development of the accordion repertoire, it becomes obvious that in the initial stages of the instrument's development, the transcription was practically the basis of the repertoire. Later, the performers themselves started to write music for their own instruments, and composers who had not previously written for this instrument also began to compose for the accordion.

In such cases, a legitimate question may arise: the larger the majority of the repertoire is made up of original accordion music, the less transcriptions will be needed? This is not entirely the case. By carefully examining the genre of music transcription, we see that this genre has a centuries-old tradition, which has its reasons.

The methodology of the dissertation is largely based on an interdisciplinary approach that combines different ideas and theories related to the issue of transcripts. The works of M. S. Druskin, I. A. Forkel, where it is about the creative journey and work of J. S. Bach, which was essential for me to gain a deeper understanding of the essence of musical transcriptions.

J. S. Bach is the undisputed authority of musicians of all time. Therefore, learning how actively he was involved in the transcribing of various works from one instrument to another in his creative practice, it may arise involuntarily the question is: he was a brilliant composer, he could write everything he wanted (or what his superiors ordered him to do), so why did he transcribe the works of other composers (e.g. Vivaldi)? At the time, the approach to transcripts was quite flexible, and the need for this was often dictated by purely practical issues, necessity. Depending on what instruments were available in a given situation, works were chosen and transcribed accordingly.

Books by F. Busoni and J. Milstejn also played a key role in the study of knowledge about musical transcriptions. These transcriptions are discussed in general, as well as specifically written about views and thoughts related to piano transcriptions. The dissertations of András Batta and Kálmán Dráfi, in which special attention is paid to the piano transcriptions from the point of view of Ferenc Liszt's work, were of great help in clarifying the topic.

After getting to know the material of the literature presented so far, the subject of accordion transcriptions comes up again to the fore. It can be realized that this is the same art, which is fed by the same ideas and is created according to the same rules. Furthermore, the reason for writing and existence of all transcriptions is the same, regardless of the instrument. This could be expanding the repertoire, expanding the performer's musical horizons, or even professional curiosity.

Writings devoted to the problems of the modern accordion form a specific group of literary sources. This group primarily includes two monographic studies. The first is about the performing, teaching, composing activities of Viacheslav Semionov, Honored Artist of Russia - professor of the Gnessin Russian Academy of Music, as well as his work related to the preparation of transcriptions. The second study is about the composer of the Academy of Music, A. Kusyakov, who opened a new path in accordion music with his works after V. Zolotaryev and S. Gubaidulina.

The materials used in the last chapter, which are the accordion, formed a separate literature group are used to demonstrate the transcription process. These are books that provide information about a specific era, style, works of specific composers and pieces of music. Examples include books by R. Donington, I. Forkel, K. Kuznetsov, J. Milstejn, I. Vishnivetsky and F. Lips.

If we take a summary look at all the literature used in the dissertation, it can be seen that the literature related to the topic, if it exists, is fragmented, since each author studies only one subject of his choice. Thanks to the interdisciplinary approach, I was given the opportunity to create a much more systemic view of the subject. Namely, I had the opportunity to prove the unfoundedness of the doubts about the performance of the transcriptions, and to demonstrate that the transcriptions are an essential and integral part of the accordion repertoire. I will describe the possible paths leading to transcription, this is illustrated in the last chapter, where I present my own transcripts.

#### **4. Scientific results. Conclusions, applicability**

The scientific significance and purpose of the given dissertation is that Hungarian accordionists, teachers and performers can familiarize themselves with a significant amount of literature dealing with accordion methodology and musical transcriptions in Hungarian. In this work, I approached the accordion repertoire from a slightly unusual angle, from the perspective of transcriptions. It is possible to observe how the transcriptions and the original accordion works could exist simultaneously, and what their role was. I studied the main points of the historical development of accordion art, the complex interaction of composer, performer and transcription practice.

With the help of the dissertation, I developed a new understanding, a new approach and attitude regarding accordion transcriptions. Accordion transcriptions can be considered part of the general art of transcription. This association is confirmed by the fact that accordion transcriptions, like any other transcription, have the same parameters, its creation moments, general composition rules and methods, which are based on the successful methodology of authors such as Busoni or Liszt.

In addition to expanding the repertoire, the accordion transcription also fulfills several other important roles. Given that the accordion was not fully developed until the beginning of the 20th century, without transcriptions, accordionists would be completely deprived of an invaluable part of music literature – the classical works.

In the dissertation, when examining the pedagogical and performance aspects of accordion-related knowledge, I thought it important to emphasize their theoretical and practical significance. This work can serve as a starting point and a scientific basis for further research in this direction. The information in the chapter on transcriptions can be used in musical form analysis classes or as a starting point for other accordion players to create their own transcriptions. The different topics of the study, for example, about tilting the different game modes, on the correct use of tremolo and ricochet, they can be used in the main subject, professional methodology and pedagogical practice classes.

## **5. Future research directions**

The question of the "formation" of the accordion repertoire and the role of accordion transcriptions is quite broad and complex, and it is hardly possible to write about it exhaustively within the framework of a single study. Let's take a look at some possible topics that could be explored further.

When we talk about transcriptions, we often see that the performer - before starting to learn the chosen work - must first transcribe it to his own instrument (if it was originally written for another instrument), so it is necessary to adjust the sound to new tonal conditions. There are many types of work of this kind, from slight changes in the texture and form of the work to significant interventions.

Several other similar or identical definitions are used to define "transcript", such as adaptation, adaptation, transposition, processing, transcription. I use the word "transcript" throughout the dissertation.

If we interpret the concept of transcription in the broader sense of the word, for example folk songs and dance arrangements, paraphrases, fantasies, improvisations on given topics, then all of these are somehow related to the transcript. Thus, for the purpose of further research, it

may be possible to create and develop a classification system for all types and subtypes of the transcript. This would make it much clearer and make it easier to navigate the subject both theoretically and practically.

It can be seen that, despite its centuries-old history, the genre of music transcription is still not fully understood by many, including the case of accordion transcriptions, many questions remain open. In addition to organizing the transcriptions, it is equally important – perhaps even more important – to study the creation process of the accordion transcription. Perhaps it would be worthwhile to develop and introduce knowledge of accordion transcription as a new subject for high school and music academy students. In this way, the students could study by interpreting and handling the musical text already in their school years related opportunities.

If there are solfeggio, music theory, musical form analysis and composition subjects, why not music transcription? It is well known that painters look at and see the world around us differently than others. In the same way, when students get to know the art of transcription more closely, they understand that the musical theme is a changeable substance that is plastic enough to remain a full-fledged and viable whole through some changes.

I note here that the problem of musical transcription and transformation should not be confused with the fact that the original music has become fashionable nowadays and is worthless, so-called. with a "crossover"-type transformation, with the help of which they try to make the original music more rhythmic with the wild, disco-like, mechanical drum beats of light music, without caring about its large degree of distortion, which transformation, in my opinion, destroys the eternal musical values of the original work.

So, regarding the transcriptions, the student will not only see an untouchable musical text in front of him, which, as a plaster figure, it can only break and is not capable of other changes. On the contrary, you will be able to understand that a musical score is a way of putting a musical thought and a composer's idea on paper, which can be written down in a different form and with other means depending on the circumstances, but at the same time it does not cease to be itself, and the essence of its musical content lives on.

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