

Pécsi Tudományegyetem Művészeti Doktori Iskola

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Aleatorics and Expressivity
*József Karai's Avant-garde Choral Art; Modern Compositional Techniques in
the Service of Musical Expression*

Theses of the DLA Dissertation

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Background of the Research

The choral works of composer József Karai have been present in my life from early childhood up to the present day. The composer was closely bound by friendship to my father, conductor Imre Timár, as well as to our entire family.

Under my father's direction, I sang in several choirs for a long period, which gave me the opportunity to become familiar with many of Karai's children's and women's choruses. I first encountered his male choir works through the performances of the Siófok Male Choral Society. The composer dedicated several choral works to this ensemble, whose premieres, naturally, were connected with the choir's name. Listening to and singing these pieces the profound meanings hidden within them, their diverse musical solutions, and their beautiful melodies all brought me closer to the composer's emotional world and shaped my musical taste. As a choir conductor myself, I have also taught several of Karai's works.

Alongside compositions that are well-sounding and relatively easy to teach for amateur choirs, during my later musical studies I also encountered his innovative, avant-garde pieces. I was captivated by this new yet, in its emotional atmosphere, familiar experience. For this reason, at the Academy of Music I graduated with a performance of his choral work *De profundis*, composed to the text of Psalm 130, written with effects and modern compositional techniques.

In my dissertation, I deal with the composer's lesser-known yet all the more important compositions, written with an individual, innovative intention. The foundation of my dissertation lies in the conversations I had with the composer during my studies in Budapest. These gave me the opportunity to gain insight into the internal connections of his major works, his creative methods, principles, and his compositional creed.

Research Method

The cause or purpose of a musical work or, more generally, of an artistic creation or perhaps both, ought to be explained, or at the very least, investigated and understood. Without venturing into deeper philosophical reflections on art, as a performing artist I must pose

questions in relation to a musical work in order to find answers; that is, it becomes necessary to “wander” on metaphysical ground. This somewhat obscure formulation refers to that mode of contemplation by which we can discover the place and value within European and Hungarian choral music of a segment of artistic output such as József Karai’s avant-garde choral oeuvre.

The task of this research is to make the often seemingly hopelessly feeble or shamelessly loud abstract speculation or sometimes the avant-garde artistic endeavors that appear false—the foundation of scholarly investigation through a formal and stylistic analysis of twentieth-century modern musical developments, without separating them from the intellectual framework of their age. Thus, beyond presenting the chosen composer and his musical milieu, my dissertation also seeks to take a few steps in the direction of showing the artistic achievement of a world cut off from Western developments, yet rooted in the nineteenth-century European musical heritage and the Kodály–Bartók renewal.

I regard the writing of my dissertation as a kind of treasure hunt, where the avant-garde path—leading through a relatively dense, aleatoric forest—ultimately arrives at a new expressivity. In other words, under the influence of these choral works, I trace back the methods, the compositional techniques placed in the service of expressiveness.

I trust that this endeavor will have a reciprocal effect and will affirm the historical, logical, and aesthetic relevance of my chosen composer’s new concepts and application of means.

An important part of my qualitative research method is the mapping of external circumstances and internal motivations. It seeks to present that process of compositional evolution which leads to the period examined in this dissertation and to its significance. Accordingly, in addition to the European developments of the time, I also consider the creative activity of Karai’s Hungarian contemporaries, while attempting to outline the entirety of Karai’s oeuvre in broad strokes.

Results of the Research

From the very beginning of his career, József Karai strove to develop a sovereign, distinctive musical language of his own; for this reason, he made use of improvisational tools that

promised the possibilities of unlimited freedom. He discovered and boldly experimented in order to move further away from the Kodályan vocal traditions, to liberate his music from the constraints of harmonic, formal, or other traditional principles, and to establish a new approach, a new system of criteria. Through the use of aleatoric elements—at times relying on chance—he expanded the inner space of composition with new dimensions, while the internal unity of the work, down to the smallest detail, still determined the perceptible music. Thus, aleatorics and chance were no longer merely technical devices to solve compositional problems but altered his very way of thinking about music, fundamentally questioning the previously dominant perspectives and raising composition onto a philosophical plane. For his new system of principles, he initially employed a more complex poetic-musical language, whose elements he later “carved” and “polished” in subsequent works so that expressivity would not be diminished but remain equal in power to that of his earlier, more intricate compositions.

Looking at his entire oeuvre, Karai’s commitment to choral culture is attested by his abundant body of choral works. His lyrical compositional character appeals to advocates of both domestic and international choral culture, whether among professional or amateur ensembles. Within his oeuvre, every type of choir, every age group, and every level of proficiency can find works suited to them. Choir is his native tongue, whose potential he considers in his technical solutions. His experiences of performance and his desire for understanding shaped his style and mode of expression. Following the Bartók–Kodály path, and in his later quest for new directions, he explored exciting and varied possibilities while taking into account the abilities of singers and the specificities of choirs.

This exceptionally rich vocal output prepared the way for a new, higher-order synthesis in his compositional outlook. Even in his boldly experimental creative period, he remained humanistic, orienting himself toward human nature and the physical world surrounding mankind. His openness to new musical elements and principles, and his desire to create his own individual voice, are evidenced by his use of twelve-tone techniques, atonal experimentation, the incorporation of jazz sonorities into classical works, innovative uses of triads, rhythm built on repetition, and the employment of symbolic systems.

Following this path of diverse interests, Karai arrived at the world of the avant-garde, in which his choral art was built on the conscious, purposeful use of a virtually limitless arsenal of guided improvisation, complemented by a unique tonal system and harmonic solutions. The expressivity captured through aleatoric methods can be found in women’s choruses such

as *Éjszaka* and *Virágsirató*; in mixed choruses such as *De profundis*, *Stabat Mater*, *Ein Frühlingsabend*, and *Tavaszi ujjongás* (for both women's and mixed choir); and in the male chorus *Meeresstrand*. The women's choral works *Ave Maris stella*, *Ave Maria I* and *II*, *Wie fällt der Regen*, *Salve Regina*, *Psalm 23.*, and *Hodie Christus natus est*, along with the mixed-choral *Alleluja*, form a series of more refined works in which effects and improvisational elements are simplified and integrated into compositions written with traditional technique, yet of equal expressive power.

Thus, the application of aleatorics not only modernized Karai's choral works but also supported his pursuit of individualistic expression. It represents one branch of a broader mode of musical thought, which among his contemporaries came to fruition through the foregrounding of different methods. The training received from his masters at the Academy of Music, the incorporation of inherited traditions, the aspiration toward European modernity, the striving for sovereignty, and the demand to intensify expressive power together gave rise to József Karai's avant-garde choral art. These are compositions that, through expressivity shaped by carefully chosen means, occupy a distinctive place in twentieth-century European- and, within it, Hungarian-choral literature.

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