

UNIVERSITY OF PÉCS FACULTY OF ARTS

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**The development of compositional thinking  
in the songs of Miklós Kocsár**

**DLA dissertation Thesis**

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## **Choice of topic and subject of the thesis**

Miklós Kocsár was a member of the 1930s generation, and his classmates at the Academy of Music were György Kurtág, Emil Petrovics, Sándor Szokolay, Zsolt Durkó and Attila Bozay. The works of the abovementioned can now be seen to have left their mark on 20th century Hungarian music. The list is by no means exhaustive, but it also shows that the work of many composers could be the subject of much research. The oeuvre of Miklós Kocsár has been little researched. Apart from the monographs of Rita Gerencsér and Péter Ordasi, only his choral works have been the subject of comprehensive studies, such as Zsófia Cseri's dissertation on choral works and Péter Ordasi's study entitled *Csodafüű-szarvas*.

Although the songs chosen as the subject of my dissertation represent only a fraction of the composer's vast oeuvre, I assume that by studying and analysing them we can come closer to understanding the coexisting attitudes of composers in Hungary between 1955 and 2015 and to mapping the song culture.

I was also motivated by the fact that I was able to gain insight into Miklós Kocsár's compositional workshop through one of the most exciting genres of musical expression that is closest to me. As a composer, I have written countless songs, so an analysis from a creative point of view gives me the opportunity to explore the deeper layers and contexts of musical thinking. During my years at the Music Secondary School, I had the opportunity to attend many of his lessons, which, as well as being a fond memory, have influenced my musical thinking for life.

## **Aim of the research**

The objective of my research was to find, analyse and organise songs composed to poems by Miklós Kocsár, a poet and writer, to study and compare the stylistic tools of the different periods, and to draw the resulting musical compositional arc. Within this framework, I sought answers to the following two questions:

- which stylistic periods can be outlined, how did the compositional techniques evolve and what might have been their motivations?

- Are there elements and musical manifestations that are carried over from one period to another, or is there a musical phenomenon that is permanent in all styles and can be interpreted as an attitude that is characteristic of the composer?

Among the songs selected for analysis, *Lamenti*, *The Three Songs to Poems by Sándor Petőfi*, and the *Kassák Songs* have been published by various publishers. In my thesis, I deliberately chose songs that were discovered during the research (*Ragged Carpet*) or that can only be known from a single performance (e.g. *Clouds of Fear*, Kányádi songs, Csukás song cycle). My intention was to draw the attention of the profession to these unknown songs, given that many of them were written for men. In my experience, songs written for baritone and bass-baritone would be in demand in college teaching, on concert podiums and in singing competitions alike. Another goal is to get these unknown works published.

## **Research methodology**

### *1. Search for and selection of songs*

To get a comprehensive picture of the songs and to really focus on the composer's thinking, I had to decide which songs to select for my analysis. Ignoring the folk song arrangements, folk songs and sacred songs in the Master's apartment, I sought out and examined only compositions inspired by poems written by poets and writers. The research was greatly assisted by a "Booklet"<sup>1</sup> in which Kocsár arranged all his works in chronological order, indicating the recitations and the performers. I found some of the songs in manuscript form in the apartment, but apart from a few, Kocsár also recorded them in a computer music-writing program (*Encore*), often taking advantage of the possibility of rewriting, rewriting and correcting them. I found some of the song productions in the hands of vocal artists, and the original manuscript of the song cycle "*Rongyszőnyeg*" (*Tattered carpet*), composed to poems by Sándor Weöres and accompanied by flute, violin and cello, was found at an auction. The "typescripts", which had been entered straight into the score-writing program, were still being salvaged from the old computer on which the composer was still working. One of the

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<sup>1</sup> my own name, also referring to the size of the catalogue

saved songs is the last song, composed to the poem by Sándor Kányádi: *Volna még (Would be still)*, which remains unfinished.

## *2. Aspects of the analysis*

To analyse the 80 or so songs that were retrieved in this way, I have put together a set of criteria that has allowed me to get a comprehensive picture of the focus of my thesis. During the analysis of the songs, this framework was expanded, and three distinct stylistic periods were outlined, based on the genesis of the songs, which provided several possibilities and aspects for a comparative analysis of the songs. The resulting criteria allowed me to trace the development of several areas. The two main aspects of analysis were as follows:

- a) I showed the evolution of the musical expression of the text in the changes in the structure, form, prosody and musical dramaturgy of the songs.
- b) In the study of musical technique, I investigated the changes in melody and accompaniment, the conditions of use of linear (tone lines) and vertical structures (harmony, intervals), tonal centres, and the ways and possible reasons for the use of rhythm formulas and free beats, and the modifications of notation.

## **Results of the research**

The analysis carried out based on the criteria provided answers to the questions posed in the introduction to the thesis. In addition to outlining the three stylistic periods, I have also formulated the compositional techniques and the motivations for their development. In comparing each period, the musical phenomena that were latent or direct in each period were revealed, thus revealing the most striking musical manifestations of the composer's thought present in all three periods.

In terms of the musical expression of the text, in each of the three stylistic periods, the adherence to the structure of the text, the retention of the internal logic of the poem and its powerful expression were decisive. Within the prose, the technique of melismatic singing is more prominent in the avant-garde period. It can be concluded

that in this case it was used by the composer either for the purpose of tone painting or for emphasis in the other two stylistic periods.

In melodic shaping, the concept of the consistent use of intervals, pitch structures and 1:2 model scales in the service of musical expression can be observed in all three stylistic periods.

In terms of musical dramaturgy, the musical illustration of the mood and atmosphere of the poem used, or even the musical illustration of a phenomenon or natural image, certainly brings the listener closer to the reception.

Here I must mention repetition as the primary means of musical reception. In the aesthetics of the early years, not only in Kocsár's work, the use of the repetition mark, and especially the *da Capo* form, was generally accepted. In compositions from the avant-garde period, the use of certain musical gestures, motifs, chords, movement forms, particular timbres or registers, and varied repetition could give a sense of familiarity. Kocsár also made use of the framed structure in this period, but the complexity and intricacy of the musical material did not help to recognise the recurrence. In the late period, the structure of the poem is the most decisive factor in this respect.

In the early years, the instrument or instruments accompanying the melody primarily helped to intone the vocal part with certainty and to create the character and mood of the song. One of the lasting effects of the avant-garde period is that the role of the accompanying instrument as a chamber partner is enhanced, and the singer becomes an equal partner in the subsequent performance.

In the study of musical technique, the use of harmonies is closely related to the use of melodic drawing. With few exceptions, the material of the accompaniment and melody can be said to be coherently built up from a structure and concept.

Kocsár never uses tonalities, but he does use easily identifiable tonalities and tonal centres more in the early years and the 2000s. While in the early years he always arrives at the initial tonality at the end of the songs, in the mature period he only gradually, in the last years, makes this correspondence important again. In the avant-garde period, the presence of points of reference, recurring notes, groups of notes, helps to create a sense of tonality.

### *Mapping influences and stylistic periods*

In my thesis, I have considered it important to articulate the influences that influenced the young composer, the experimental middle-aged composer, and then the wise, elderly Master. The influences of folk music from childhood, the adolescent and youthful contact with popular music and jazz, the years spent at the College of Music, the deep knowledge of the Kodály and Bartók tradition, the lifelong commitment to choral singing, leaving the Academy of Music, theatrical experience and his work as editor of the Radio Folk Music Review, have given his artist a complex compositional language that has been the basis of his success and unanimous acclaim from audiences and professionals. The song output between 1955 and 1965 thus followed a unified, colourful trajectory, following the Kodály and Bartók traditions, but also showing professional development. The song cycle representative of the period is the *Rongyszőnyeg (Tattered carpet)*, composed to the poems of Sándor Weöres and accompanied by several instruments. A comparison of its original, facsimile and later typescript versions has provided new developments for my focus. The other song-cycle of the period, *Kései szelek (Late winds)*, composed to the poems of Lajos Kassák, bore the hallmarks of the compositional attitude typical of the early years. I have defined the years 1955 and 1965 as the stylistic period of the "early years".

The analysis of the 1965 bassoon-piano duet *Dialoghi* serves as a special point of reference in my thesis. The composition was the result of new phenomena that had caught the composers of the 1930s unawares, namely the infiltration and then the spread of Western music and of the experimental composer's way of thinking, which was to explore the fundamental elements of music and to work with more complex musical elements. The encounter with the Polish avant-garde, for example, forced the composer, who had already been writing with an established, predictable and stable compositional technique, to respond. In the new musical language used in *Dialoghi*, Kocsár authentically put the achievements of avant-garde music at the service of musical expression. I consider it an essential element of this that the free, irregular weight system of the avant-garde, without timelines, could meet the world of lamenting folk songs that had always preoccupied and inspired Kocsár, and we can welcome the appearance of this, for example, in *Lamenti*, composed to Lorca poems.

The second stylistic period is sometimes referred to as the 'new era', more often as the 'avant-garde stylistic era'. This period was characterised by an almost song-by-song change in compositional thinking, and I thought it worth analysing them all. In the song cycle *Magányos ének (Lonely Song)*, for example, accompanied by a chamber orchestra to Attila József's poems, Kocsár returns to the use of timelines, in contrast to the Lorca cycle. In the cycle *Three Songs to the Poems of Sándor Petőfi*, accompanied by cimbalom, the 1:2 model scale used in the early years is evident in both the voice and cimbalom parts. In the *Kassák songs*, the use of flute and cimbalom as instruments opens entirely new possibilities in terms of sound painting and provides a new means of musical enhancement in the musical dramaturgy.

The chronologically second major creative period is separated from the first by 16 years. I have selected the songs of the "third stylistic period" in order to illustrate the striking differences that were evident in the songs of the mature artist. Within the period 1992-2015, he did not write any art songs between 2002 and 2013. In 2009, the sacred song production was enriched by the Mary songs, and many choral works were also produced during these 11 years. From this period, I analysed the third song cycle inspired by Lajos Kassák, the song cycle composed to five poems by István Csukás and the last song, *Volna még (Would be still)*, written to a poem by Sándor Kányádi. In the musicality of the Kassák cycle for mezzo-soprano and cimbalom, *A félelem felhői (The Clouds of Fear)*, one can discover both the aesthetics of the early years and the fertilising influence of the avant-garde era. Of the seven movements, only in the first and sixth movements does the composer use timelines or time signatures.

The analysis of the song cycle by István Csukás was the most appropriate for comparing the musical thinking of the early years with that of the third stylistic period. One of the five movements was composed by Kocsár in 1960, and with minor changes, he was able to fit it easily into the four movements composed in 2000 and 2002. The movement *Repce aranylik, (Repce Golden)* for example, illustrates how he used the 1:2 model differently from the early years, composing the instrumental accompaniment from triads of notes extracted from the sound system. As an avant-garde legacy, he also uses free notation without a bar line in this movement.

In summary, the latent manifestations of the practices of the first stylistic period (e.g. framing, madrigalism, tonal structures, 1:2 model) are echoed in the third stylistic

period, but their use is influenced by the aesthetics of the avant-garde period. Distancing himself from the musical thinking of the avant-garde, but retaining its freedom, he uses the techniques of the early years in a freer, more variable form in the service of musical expression.

### **The main novel aspects of the dissertation are**

One of the most important results of the research was the rescue of those pieces of music that I still managed to salvage in pdf format from the composer's old computer or found in manuscript form or at performers. Without that, they would have been lost. I also think it is important to note that although some of the songs exist in manuscript form (e.g. Attila József's *Lonely Song*), the only performance of the work was not enough to make it into the public consciousness.

The criteria developed in my thesis can also be applied to other vocal areas of his oeuvre (folk song arrangements, sacred folk songs, oratorios, masses, stage works for children).

The systematisation and analysis of the songs as a point of reference provides an opportunity to present the various stylistic periods in even greater detail and precision, even by examining other instrumental compositions.

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### **Sheet music**

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