

Introduction

When I began writing on Zoltán Kodály in 1998 as a PhD student at the Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, I was very fortunate to have access to the Kodály Archives in Budapest, which is funded and run by Kodály's widow, Sarolta Péczely. I first reported on the findings of my research in a doctoral dissertation completed in 2005 and published in 2007, and then in a separate volume of essays published in 2015.¹ The more comprehensive monograph that I now introduce draws on these two works. It does not aim to be a biography in the fullest sense; rather, its primary purpose is to illuminate Kodály's thinking as a composer through a chronological discussion of his oeuvre. This monographic focus reflects a conscious and deliberate decision to omit Kodály's educational method, internationally influential and widely adopted though it is, for his educational legacy has tended, in Hungary and elsewhere, to eclipse his work as a composer and scholar.² Kodály saw himself principally as a composer, not as an educationist, but he was steered toward the methodology of teaching music by a pressing need to educate audiences.³

The publication of such a study has been long overdue. This is the first English-language work on Kodály to be issued by a non-Hungarian publisher since Percy M. Young's monograph on Kodály written during the composer's lifetime, under his supervision and with his introductory letter.⁴ Young's, incidentally, is the only such work by a non-Hungarian author. The German-language book on Kodály's youthful chamber music—published in 2015 in the *Studien zur Wertungsforschung* series by Universal Edition of Vienna—is unique in presenting international conference material on Kodály by Hungarian, Austrian, and German musicologists.⁵ English-language work on Kodály published by Hungarian publishers—among them *A Guide to Kodály* by János Breuer, László Eöszé's illustrated volume, and the

doctoral dissertation by Mihály Ittzés—has failed to enter the mainstream of international musicological scholarship, as Kodály's non-Hungarian correspondence has also failed to do.⁶ Only a fraction of Kodály's writings are available in English.⁷ He indeed remains a composer less accessible than most to international scholarship.

Interest in twentieth-century Hungarian music history, meanwhile, has been increasing in English-language musicology over the last two decades, albeit focused primarily on Béla Bartók's music. Scholarly works by Judit Frigyesi, David E. Schneider, and Lynn M. Hooker sought to reveal his music's inspirations and cultural-musical contexts, while Danielle Fosler-Lussier examined the reception of it during the Cold War period.⁸ Rachel Beckles Willson's work is closely linked to the reception of Bartók, although her main subject is the music of György Ligeti and György Kurtág.⁹ These works clearly relied on study of the Hungarian cultural, social, and political environment in explaining the music of Bartók (and of Ligeti and Kurtág).

This burgeoning scholarly interest makes it all the more surprising that Kodály and his output should be mentioned only in passing, particularly when one considers that the work of Bartók—at least from the beginning of his acquaintance with Kodály in 1905 to the early 1920s—cannot truly be gauged in isolation from the latter's efforts and ideals during the same period. Despite the two composers' differing dispositions, their efforts were closely tied in those fifteen-plus years; moreover, the dominance of Kodály as a composition teacher made his influence indisputable in matters of compositional technique and aesthetics.¹⁰ His impact also profoundly affected the historical development of twentieth-century Hungarian music, from composition, musicology, and performance to Hungarian musical life and the teaching of music. It was specifically felt in various significant ways: the reception of Bartók's works and his changing image; the more general discourse concerning modern Hungarian music and folk music; the development through the choral movement of an institutional system for primary musical education; the curriculum of the composition faculty at the Academy of Music; and the institutionalization of musicology in Hungary. This unique and wide-ranging influence was due in part to his high level of activity and involvement, which was comparatively rare for a composer. Not only had his works achieved recognition in his home country and in the world since the second half of the 1920s, but he was also a writer on music, a researcher on Hungarian folk music and music history, and the creator of an internationally renowned music pedagogical concept that transformed the entire Hungarian system of musical education.

Kodály's presence in the Hungarian music scene remained influential right up until his death in 1967. It had first become noticeable after the successful premiere of *Psalmus Hungaricus* in 1923, which brought him prestige that only grew over the years, partly through his ability to retain his creative and civic autonomy in the

face of rapidly changing political systems and regimes in the twentieth century.¹¹ From the 1930s onward he had pupils and followers in leading posts in Hungarian music and the press, who propagated his views on Hungarian music and musical culture.¹² Their support in turn swayed the reception of his music on the concert stage and among the Hungarian intelligentsia, including its scholarly evaluation.

A basically apologetic interpretation of Kodály's output can be traced to three major critics of Kodály and his pupils in the 1920s: Antal Molnár (1890–1983), Bence Szabolcsi (1899–1973), and Aladár Tóth (1898–1968). I noted in my study on Kodály's composition school that rhetorical devices in these writings and those of other Kodály pupils such as György Kerényi (1902–1986) make reference to the Gospels of the New Testament and the Acts of the Apostles.¹³ Along with this association to Christianity came a number of other basic topoi for interpreting Kodály's oeuvre in the 1930s. Szabolcsi formulated an influential theory that Kodály composed in ways that recalled the past in an effort to compensate for missing links in Hungarian music history.¹⁴ Molnár developed the concept of classicism in Kodály's oeuvre.¹⁵ Kerényi evoked Palestrina in formulating an image of Kodály as a reformer of modern church music that then entered into the musicological discourse.¹⁶

These topoi retain their dominance in writings on Kodály to this day. Although their legitimacy is doubtful in many ways, it must be remembered that each of these early analysts sought to highlight Kodály's relations with the past, in keeping with their view that Kodály's achievements could be best understood retrospectively. This book too will emphasize such connections: how Kodály drew from and reflected upon his unparalleled knowledge of music history; the models that he adopted from past musical epochs; and the means by which he integrated those models into his works. But I also intend to show Kodály as part of a "neoclassical family" of composers in the twentieth century, and to determine carefully how far his oeuvre can be seen as a unique reading of neoclassicism.¹⁷

This approach allows Kodály the composer to be seen within the broad context of twentieth-century music history, whereas Hungarian literature on Kodály has hitherto underlined his uniqueness, i.e., his Hungarianness, without gauging his active participation in international musical developments. Perusing the Kodály literature of recent decades shows that the interpretations of Kodály's work have fallen short of achieving a critical evaluation of existing sources and documents, but have instead expounded myths that arose out of the first period of Kodály research. Excepting only a few studies by János Breuer, the literature offers a schematic, almost inert representation of Kodály as an isolated, exceptional, incompatible hero.¹⁸ So the endeavor here is to render a more viable image, in which he shares in many ways traits common to his contemporaries, and in which he emerges as an active, sentient, receptive creator who, like any other composer, is defined by his own age and environment, the realities of musical life in his time, and his continual interaction with the world around him. It is impossible to grasp

the essence of a composer's oeuvre without such an understanding of the particular environment of creation, which provokes creative thinking and reflection on it. In particular, Richard Taruskin's two-volume monograph on Stravinsky serves as a model for the approach adopted here.¹⁹

This book moves away from critical evaluation of the literature on Kodály in recent decades, which was informed by a methodology based in the first instance on the reception theory that arose from Hans-Robert Jaus's literary research in the 1970s and 1980s²⁰ and gained ground in German musicology in the late 1990s,²¹ and was in turn influenced by Harold Bloom's theories of "anxiety of influence" and "misreading."²² Taruskin rightly warns that Bloom's theory can only be applied to music with reservations.²³ I have found Bloom's remarks on the behavioral patterns of creative artists useful in interpreting Kodály's writings and statements on himself and on his poetics when I was striving to read beyond the documents to identify the specific historical situation and ideological orientation that lay behind the composer's words. Such a critical evaluation is all the more necessary because Kodály's various statements—like those of many creators—are often made with the benefit of hindsight, and can come across as skewed self-assessments in which the composer shifts his emphases to accord with later ideals. It is always important to contrast the constructed later image with documents that may contradict it. This explains why, in seeking to follow Kodály's career in chronological order, I also must go forward or back in time on numerous occasions, so as to provide the broadest context possible.

Because Kodály's ideas are reflected in his music as well as his writings, my analyses follow a dual trajectory: they uphold the works' ontological independence—their detachment from the composer once completed—but they also seek to decipher the works' meaning in the context of Kodály's intentions and creative/philosophical path. Linking Kodály's writings and his compositions is a major objective of this book. I follow Edward T. Cone's concept of the composer as a "persona" in interpreting the works as a projection of the author, a self-portrayal.²⁴ So I seek to present his path by seeking out the biographical/autobiographical instances perceptible in his works. The common purpose behind this deep analysis of the most significant, or rather, paradigmatic works of Kodály is to reveal their poetic context.

The critique of earlier literature on Kodály and the analysis of his works here have been supported by access to hitherto-unresearched primary sources found among Kodály's papers. Relying on notes and lists prepared by the late István Kecskeméti for the planned and (as of this writing) unfinished thematic catalog of Kodály's works, I found—among the source materials in the Kodály Archives in Budapest relating to Kodály's library of books and musical scores—some of his drafts and sketches as a composer, other notated records, and sources used for teaching composition. All of these documents provided insight into Kodály's

composing method, a topic that had received attention in only a few publications,²⁵ unlike the composing workshop of Bartók, which has been explored in great detail thanks to László Somfai's research.²⁶ Kodály's drafts, sketches, and fragments reveal much about his composing practice and aesthetic thinking, and even some probable hidden programs in his works. The sources preserved in the Kodály Archives—not only compositional sketches, whole manuscripts, printed works, documents on the reception of Kodály's works, and his complete library but also his notes on the books he had read, in particular those notes and musical notations he used for teaching—allowed me also to uncover Kodály's method of reading and his way of thinking. In addition to these invaluable sources, I made use of documents in the library of the Liszt Academy of Music.

The hitherto unexamined sources, along with Kodály's published works and writings, the private documents published by Lajos Vargyas, and the reflections of contemporaries, all lead ultimately to a better understanding of Kodály the man.²⁷ His legendary laconicism and reserve, affirmed by a myriad of oral-history documents, are in striking contrast to the abundance and diversity of the extant documents.²⁸ Starting from his earliest youth, these conjure up a creator whose unparalleled intellect, whose familiarity navigating the realms of music and the mind, and whose extraordinary receptivity reveal deep and subtle connections. They show Zoltán Kodály to have been an infinitely inspired and sensitive composer and an exceptional figure in twentieth-century Hungarian music, and it is this Kodály whom this book aspires to illuminate.