

University of Theatre and Film Arts

Doctoral school

**THE MAJOR HUNGARIAN FILM COMPOSERS OF THE
MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AND THEIR
COMPOSITIONAL METHODOLOGY**

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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I. Dissertation topic

In the discourse of the study on Hungarian film and musicology, it is striking that Hungarian film score is only mentioned, despite that the number of pieces composed in this genre is extensive. These works are of essential importance in the oeuvres of composers who are also active in the field of applied music. Although there are occasional articles on Hungarian film score but the majority of them only examine the subject from the perspective of music dramaturgy. These shall of course not to be overlooked, however they disregard compositional aspects. The main reason for this may be that music is outside the horizon of film studies, while musicology examines the compositional methodology of composers through concert pieces and stage works which are built around music (e.g. opera, ballet). I believe it is essential to stimulate professional discourse on the subject, not only because of the immense quantity of film scores, but also because of their composers and their aesthetic quality.

A further motivation for my research was the unique style of Hungarian film scores produced in the mid-twentieth century, in the 1950s and 1970s, which was the result of a synthesis of the Hungarian school, marked by Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, the approach of the New Music from abroad and the unique artistic language of the composers. Apart from the succinct recollections of composers and directors there is almost nothing written about the film scores of this period. The aim of my dissertation is to fill a part of this gap. The quantity and quality of the music that was composed in this genre makes, in my opinion, the work of Ferenc Farkas, György Ránki, András Szöllősy and Emil Petrovics outstanding. In this thesis I will examine the compositional methodology of film scores, evolved from the individual compositional languages of the four composers and from the tradition of the Hungarian school of composition. Furthermore, I will seek to answer the question of how the creative approach of Bartók and Kodály is realised in the film scores. The research had to be severely restricted due to the richness of the musical corpus in question. I have reduced the large number of applied musical works in the oeuvres to twenty-five film scores, which should provide a sufficiently representative overview.

The two endpoints of the filmography of the dissertation are 1954 and 1978.¹ Thus, the period under discussion is being the era of state socialism, and therefore the impact of politics on arts was an inevitable aspect of the research.

¹ The earliest film examined is *Életjel* ("Sign of Life"), was released in 1954, the latest the *80 Huszár* ("80 Hussars") in 1978. In terms of film scores, this period is the most prolific of the four composers' oeuvre.

II. Resources

The main sources of my research were the manuscripts of the composers' film scores. The legacy of Ferenc Farkas can be found in the Music Collection of the National Széchenyi Library, while the manuscripts of György Ránki are in the Hungarian Music Archive of the 20th-21st Century of the Institute for Musicology. Emil Petrovics' scores were made available to me by the composer's daughter, Eszter Petrovics. Some of András Szöllősy's manuscripts – including most of his film scores - were lost after his death. Of the film scores examined in this dissertation, I found the manuscript of only one, namely the score of the film *Feldobott kő* (“The Upthrown Stone”) in the collection of the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, but I did not have the opportunity to view it. In the case of Szöllősy's film scores, a sonorous analysis based on listening was carried out.

I have examined the aesthetics of Bartók and Kodály through the work of the leading musicologists of the past decades. The works of Anna Dalos on Kodály's oeuvre, as well as a comparison of the studies of László Vikárius, János Kárpáti and Ernő Lendvai on Bartók's compositional techniques, served as primary sources. In addition to the musicologists mentioned above, I also took into account Bartók's own writings and his preserved lectures. There are only a few treatises on the Hungarian classical music scene under state socialism and the cultural policy of the authorities of the time in relation to music. The research and publications of Anna Dalos and Lóránt Péteri, which helped me to write the chapter on cultural policy in this thesis, are a valuable source of information on this topic.

Hungarian film history and film studies have a more extensive coverage on the era of state socialism in this regard. In dealing with this aspect of the topic, I have drawn on Gábor Szilágyi's two-volume monograph the books called *Tűzkeresztység* (“Baptism of Fire”) and *Életjel* (“Sign of life”) as well as resorted to Gábor Gelencsér's volume called *Forgatott könyvek* (“Filmed Books”), and Balázs Varga's thesis called *Filmirányítás, gyártástörténet és politika Magyarországon 1957-1963* (“Film Governance, Production History and Politics in Hungary 1957-1963.”).

The admittedly subjective recollections of the composers and testimonies of the artists have also proved to be significant resources.

III. Method

In the first part of this dissertation, I summarise the political and historical aspects of Hungarian film scores in the period 1954-1978. In the next chapter, I will outline the musical aesthetics of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, discussing the compositional techniques frequently found in their works and the relationship of the younger generation of composers to the Hungarian school. In the Fourth Chapter, which forms the backbone of the thesis, I examine the approaches of composers in film scores through the lens of important compositional techniques of the oeuvres of Bartók and Kodály, at the same time complementing them with aspects of music dramaturgy. However, the analysis of the different and varied musical examples taken from the films did not offer the opportunity in this chapter to present a comprehensive analysis of the film scores, so I felt the need to write a chapter in which I describe in detail the compositional principles of each of the four composers' works. This aspect is realised in the four case studies in Chapter Five.

IV. Results

Through the analyses and the examples taken from the films, it is clear that the four composers knew and used the Hungarian school of composition at a native level. There are plenty of elements of Bartók's and Kodály's creative approach in the film scores, which are sometimes incorporated into the compositions in a very direct, sometimes in a latent way. In addition to this, it is also possible to observe in these works that a conscious distancing from the Hungarian school also appeared in the film scores of the mid-20th century. This was mainly manifested in the use of dodecaphony, jazz music or musical eclecticism. This non-overlapping bipolar compositional attitude, combined with individual taste, has created a particular stylistic framework in the four composers' filmic works.

In my artwork I composed an orchestral suite, in which I used the compositional techniques of Bartók and Kodály, also used in film scores. Along with elements typical of the works of Farkas, Ránki, Szöllősy and Petrovics I incorporated these techniques into the movements, which then was also complemented with solutions according to my own personal taste, at the same time reflecting to the creative attitudes of the four composers. In this way, I aimed to show that the language of the film score can be reconstructed, and that as the four composers shaped the Hungarian school in their own image, so can the style of film score be shaped further.

The experience in music dramaturgy and compositional techniques gained from these analyses can also be used in my teaching career, in studies on applied composition and in courses related to film education.