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## **THE NON-PROFESSIONAL ART OF CHORAL SINGING IN HUNGARY**

### **Abstract**

After World War II, KÓTA (the National Council of Choirs) had the most prominent role in supporting Hungarian amateur choir practices. In the period from 1989 to 1991, the successor organization of KÓTA was established – the Association of Hungarian Choirs and Orchestras, which has had the main role in developing music life to this day. During the Association's work within international organizations such as Europa Cantat and AGECE, Hungary has proven the unflagging energy and innovative abilities of its choral activities.

### **Key words**

Béla Bartók Association, KÓTA, choral activity, amateur choirs, social changes, Hungarian choral societies, Zoltán Kodály, national identity, Europa Cantat, AGECE.

### **A brief historical overview**

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more precisely on 21 September 1868 in Debrecen, the National Choral Society was founded on the occasion of the 4<sup>th</sup> National Singing Competition. This date is a notable one since the newly formed society elected Ferenc Erkel for its life conductor. Following the foundation of the society – at the turn of the century and afterwards – groups performing partly to safeguard their interests and partly to fulfill their artistic duties, were established one after the other. The Workers' Choral Union and the St. Cecilia Society, which brought together church choirs, were the most significant ones among them.

After the end of World War II, there were ideal conditions for the uniting of the two largest singing associations, the Civil and the Workers' Association. In December 1948, the Béla Bartók Association was founded, with Zoltán Kodály at the helm, along with several other prominent figures of the music life of the time.

In 1951, a resolution of the Ministry of Internal Affairs dismissed the Béla Bartók Association as well as all the cultural associations that operated in accordance with their statutes. For the sake of centralization and the expansion of state control, a new institution - the Institute of Folk Art, subsequently called the Institute of Community Cultural Animation – was established.

In spite of all this, the movement did not fall apart, owing to the paramount human and professional authority of Zoltán Kodály.

The year 1969 is considered to be a milestone, when the matter of the Hungarian choral movement was presented to the Community Cultural Council of the day, so as to provide it with a more democratic basis. According to the decision of the Council, the KÓTA (National Council of

Choirs) was to be established as an elective professional social board, which in turn would initiate a constant developing of the movement. The realization of the idea was not so easy, however. Although the authority gave its approval, its fear and concern were noticeable. Due to the determined and, to this day, effective activity of Gyula Maróti, KÓTA was established. Gyula Maróti wrote the following about this: "...a good many of us who have invested every effort since 1951 to promote the success of the several formations of amateur music-making, and moreover, doing this with the meager resources of a state institute, have finally come to the conclusion that it depends on us whether KÓTA will succeed in its purpose".

Ever since its inception, KÓTA has been a democratic organization. In its committees, our colleagues dealing with music, youth, and various other issues have represented the opinions, wishes and views of our members. Our meetings were real forums, agorae, where the fate of certain presentations, ideas, and proposals were settled after heated discussions.

### **Hungarian choral activity after the change of regime**

In the period from 1989 to 1991, the desires of those demanding substantial social and political changes aspired as high above the grounds as geysers. By now openly displaying the intellectuality of the dissolved Béla Bartók Association, the successor organization of KÓTA was established – namely, the Association of Hungarian Choirs and Orchestras.

I would like to mention certain documents that I consider to be the most significant in the period leading up to the transformation.

The board of KÓTA called for a general meeting on 27 January 1990, submitting several proposals. We reviewed the experiences, results, failures and contradictions of our activities during the previous four decades and, taking into account the social change and the progress brought about by the country's democratic shift, we decided that at another general meeting we should bring the appropriate decision about the 'reforming' of KÓTA – as we referred to it then. We again called attention to the fact that in 1970 conductors and educational professionals had initiated the establishment of an alliance of amateur choirs, but that cultural policy-makers at the time had decided to establish an organization that resembled more an association than an alliance of choirs functioning independently. We proudly profess even today that under the given circumstances the organization accomplished its duties, albeit with varying success. On 6 December 1989, at the previous general meeting, a board resolution pronounced that the new democratic alliance would not transpire as if by magic and could not be established within a specified time, for our primary goal should not be to jeopardize the results of Hungarian choral culture, but rather to set out on a new road.

In this situation, the new organizational structure, the fundamental principles, the main directions of its activities and the economic conditions of the new association were to be determined. We wanted paternalism formed into partnerships or cooperation based on the mutual respect of

interests, but we were also well aware that this new organization could not do without the financial support of the Ministry of Culture.

In the material we presented at the general meeting, we also laid down that music and music education, as well as music public education, should have a unique role in the forming of the new Hungarian society, so we requested that the members of the movement share their ideas.

The general meeting in January adopted our resolution, and set up an ad hoc committee that announced the basic principles of the foundation of our national choral and orchestral association. According to this document, the new *national choral and orchestral association* was a voluntary association of choirs, folk choruses and instrumental groups that formed itself democratically, made every decision democratically and elected its management democratically. All this required the establishing of local, regional, district and municipal root associations as well as one in the capital.

Regarding the establishment of the association, we took the 1989 Act II on the Freedom of Association as the governing statute. Our goals have been valid up to the present day.

Our goals include the reverence and care of every notable value of the universal culture of music, including the art of choral music, folk music, composed music, secular and religious music, among which Hungarian music values play a prominent role:

- The moral and financial support for the activities of singing and music-making communities;
- The organization of choral and other music meetings, festivals, and competitions, the establishing of professional workshops, the organizing and support of further education;
- Regular and continuous cooperation with state, religious and social organizations and movements interested in the development of Hungarian non-professional musical activity; and
- Professional organizational consolidation of all the international connections that serve the interests of Hungarian amateur music activities.

At the same time, the organization should reinforce cooperation with other music associations and representatives of non-professional music life. For this, it is necessary for the organization to promote the popularization of the movement and the social publicity of its activities by means of its periodicals and other information vehicles.

After this short survey of the historical background, let us see what it was like to sing in a choir in 2001.

### **What is the significance of choral activity in an artistic, pedagogical, and general cultural and social sense?**

One, and maybe the best way to keep the so-called traditional culture alive is to sing in a choir, seeing as it contributes to the preservation and, due to its innovative force and continuous creativity, to the

improvement of the national cultural heritage. Singing communities also predispose their participants to other aspects of music culture, at the same time providing the opportunity and motivation for the establishing of connections with similar communities, which, after all, may enhance and develop this area of human activity.

Allow me to quote Zoltán Kodály: “Is there any better example of social solidarity than a choir? Many people unite to implement something that cannot be implemented by an individual, regardless of the talent involved. In a choir the work of each individual is very important, and the error of one can destroy all”.

Choral activity also has a tempting force for the artistic self-realization of its participants because it provides extensive possibilities for them to realize their creative ideas. Ensuring its further development and existence, the artistic, stylistic and national message of the cultural heritage of European vocal music thus makes it complete.

It is a proven fact that music and singing as a means of education are important, even crucial elements and means of becoming a fully accomplished human being, since striving to reach a higher quality not only has basic professional and artistic aspects, but is also the prerequisite for raising the confidence of the individuals and groups in singing communities.

### **The decisive role of choral activity in raising national identity awareness**

For how does music play a part in raising the awareness of the identity of peoples, nations, whether of the majority or the minority? It is no accident that singing – and here I mean primarily folk songs, the musical material preserved on the lips of the people – has always reflected the society of a given period, with its specific controversies and relations.

There are two reasons for my special interest in folk songs. The first is the Bartókian idea that folk song is a clear fount from which we may draw confidently, since we also become purified due to its clarity.

The other reason is that this music material was once (though regrettably less and less) the personal property of singing communities and their members, as it was transmitted from one member of the family to the other in a natural way, which is why the necessary presence of this music material in the progress of education or in the daily work of choirs is unquestionable. Singing a folk song is an a priori experience, but only if it is taught, learnt and interpreted naturally and with pleasure.

Another reason for my interest in this subject is the fact that throughout the centuries, composers drew inspiration from the world of folk songs, either factually or from their spiritual value. Thus it is no wonder that with the help of folk songs we can contribute to the acquisition as well as preservation of the awareness of national identity and the mother tongue.

What then should we offer a person who wishes to sing? What should we sing? Which song, when acquired, would provide the singer with a delightful experience? We do not have a complex and universal formula. There are at least as many answers as age groups.

*I shall begin with the youngest ones, the age group from 8 to 18.* Being the emerging generation, they are the most important for the present and the future of choral life. In this age we can impress their emotions, their spiritual and mental development the most, because listening and receiving music is an immediate experience for them. This age group experiences an awful lot of music. (I apologize; I could not find a better adjective, although these so-called musical effects are far from the music that helps the development of the human soul.) The child steps out of the school gate, places a walkman on his ears, and since he has not yet developed a sense of criticism, quite like an “omnivore”, he listens to and receives everything that is the ghastly product of today’s commercial entertainment industry.

Due to this, we must acquaint the child with worthwhile music within the classroom.

We should not be too snobbish, however; we also have to discuss the pop music of our time. Let us show the child what is valuable in it, let us teach him how to choose, let us provide him with the ability to differentiate between a commercial product and an inspired composition. Lajos Bárdos once said: “There is no light music and heavy music, only good music and bad music.” How right he was! We have to teach the future generations to recognize this, when we give them their music mother tongue back. And outside the compulsory classes, we have to provide them with the delightful experience of singing in choirs.

Yet, for this we need fanatic, charismatic music teachers who are sure of their professionalism and understand the language of children. Unfortunately, we do not have an abundant supply of professionals, since our colleagues are seldom prepared for that kind of work in higher education. It is high time that the educational staff at music colleges and universities understands the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and remodels their training methodology to fit these insights.

Once again I must mention the person whose work, to the best of my knowledge, was the most significant in the field of music pedagogy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yes, it is Zoltán Kodály, since in addition to his epochal activity as a composer, he has marked the course of modern music pedagogy, considering the opportune music education of children to be the most relevant.

*Kodály’s music pedagogy is the pedagogy of becoming an accomplished, benevolent and pure human being and the pedagogy of the human soul itself.*

It is a pity that today in Europe, and consequently in our country as well, ‘of course’, due to the incredible development of natural sciences, their acquisition, to our great sorrow, is increasingly replacing the humanities, including music. According to the curricula, the compulsory number of music classes has been gradually reduced. Soon there will only be a few minutes available for the teacher to introduce students to this point of beauty. And we still have not mentioned when there will be time for choral work in this dramatically pragmatized educational system!

And yet we must not be naive. The parents will not help us in this matter. For our children, for the emerging generation, music will rank as second, third or fourth compared to computer sciences, mathematics, physics or languages, unless the child, being exceptionally talented, prepares for a professional musical career.

The following are quotations from the standpoint of KÓTA's youth section of 31 March 1995:

“The choral singing activity of adults is rapidly diminishing. Among all the reasons for this, the most heartrending is that there is no one to replace them. This is rooted in the choral work of schools. From the relationship between adult singers and children in school choirs an unbreakable bond has developed, a continuity in artistic work. At times, some of our choirs of European ranking were in factual danger because they had no support, while the majority of choirs are growing old and dissolving because there are no new generations to replace them.

There is a great danger in the adults' way of thinking, the parents' backgrounds. Their attitude is centered around practical, express financial benefits. When families spend on culture they do so because they expect financial effects (e.g. language learning).

During the last decades (more or less since the demise of Kodály) the society of singing teachers and conductors has had to fight incessantly for something that is obviously of human, spiritual interest. Why?!”

*The next age group I shall deal with is the one between 18 and 30.* The negative changes mentioned in the previous topics are increasingly influencing their inclination, preparedness and affinity for music.

Many of those who apply for admission into choirs often cannot execute even the elementary requirements for choir singers due to the previously outlined problems in primary and secondary education. In view of the discrepancy in their preparedness, there is a huge risk and responsibility in deciding what to give this age group to sing. They accept classical works of art with the greatest interest, which is also the strongest incentive for them to remain in the choir (Baroque works, grandiose Romantic works and the Vienna classics). The basic duty is to wisely select the repertoire for this age group; to choose from the music of the so-called past ages which can be realized by an average choir of that age group and then incorporate into the repertoire, with a great deal of careful preparation, pieces by composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Adults over 30 face all the positive and negative consequences of what I have already discussed. If there is no proper replacement in elementary and secondary schools, if there are not enough quality singers aged between 18 and 30 joining musical communities, then the sheer existence of this adult age group may be brought into question in the future and, seeing as they lack a proper background, it becomes impossible to find a musical piece that would give them true pleasure.

The responsibility of the conductor is unquestionable, but let us be sympathetic. What would this unfortunate person do with, for example, four tenors, seven basses, fifteen sopranos and twenty-eight altos? In my opinion, the recent sharp rise in the number of small chamber choirs or even smaller

vocal groups is, unfortunately, not only the result of the choirs' desire for more intimacy but it also reflects the actual number of singers. Regarding the age group over 30, I find teaching and performing contemporary music to be extremely important. We may also refer to this age group as parents since their children encounter choral music and hopefully contemporary music for the first time within music teaching and during class activities. What is also extremely important is the help that parents can provide to their children for their better understanding and reception of this music. This help also depends on whether either parent or both parents who sing in a choir had already encountered 20<sup>th</sup> century music and whether that encounter had been pleasant. I would like to stress the responsibility of my honorable choirmaster colleagues. At the same time, I know very well from experience that 20<sup>th</sup> century music is not always easily accessible and that contemporary choirs require such musical pieces in which composers realize the potential of non-professional choirs.

As already mentioned, the years 1989 and 1990 brought about crucial changes in Hungarian social life. The initial euphoria soon subsided in the face of problems such as the participation and role of the state in cultural life, as well as its decline. It became obvious that the model of central control, the so-called 'manual control', had failed and that its duties had to be taken over by the social order. Of course, none of us were prepared for that since what had thus far been implicit according to the ruling ideology – the financial role of the state, for example – became uncertain overnight. New democracies inherited economic and social burdens from previous decades, which is why the issue of culture, including music, became a matter of low priority. After so many years of isolation, the state had to apply methods that were already customary in the West, but which first had to be understood and learnt.

Fortunately, we had and still have among us people with some experience of the period of the previous forty years.

Again I must refer to the Béla Bartók Association that once united amateur choirs in Hungary, directed by choirmasters such as Zoltán Kodály or Lajos Bárdos. They were and still are representatives of the Hungarian mentality.

### **The question of the role of the state**

A short discussion on this subject cannot be avoided. In our region it is still impossible to comprehend that associations, societies, etc., receive resources from fees paid by their members that are sufficient for their safe operation and maintenance. The societies do not yet have a financial background strong enough to ensure the existing of amateur artists.

Fortunately, the leading political elite have realized that society definitely needs these civil organizations, but seldom do they realize that they need to be supported financially as well.

However, after several unstable years following the change of regime, considering that civil organizations came to be valued more in the new democracy, the state found – mostly under the daily

pressure of civil organizations – ways to support these organizations and through them the people who carried out significant, high-standard, valuable and useful work.

A tender system was developed; foundations supporting the activities of civil organizations were established. The latter are very diverse and predominantly funded from the state budget. This support system, however, has an essential deficiency, namely that civil organizations cannot safely and carefully plan their projects, because at the moment of decision-making they are uncertain whether they will receive the amount of support they requested.

Allow me to observe – maybe slightly cynically – that in the course of time applicants formed the philosophy of requesting twice the necessary amount, believing that half the awarded amount would be enough to realize their plans. The only problem with this way of thinking is that not only the applicants, but also the advisory boards of the foundations, are fully aware of it.

The other problem is related to certain important, non-professional artistic events organized regularly at fixed intervals. In these cases the expenses are more or less the same, so they can be easily calculated. In the present system, however, the organizers have to apply for funds all over again each time and they face the danger of being unsuccessful or partly unsuccessful. Being a member of several advisory boards, I have encountered this problem all too often.

There is an irreconcilable difference between the astonishing number of tenders and the amount of money available for the given area. How could the actual funds be fairly awarded? How could, for example, the Béla Bartók International Choir Competition be compared to the application of a small-town choir, which nonetheless plays a major role in the local public education? The only solution is that the budget, the National Cultural Fund and various foundations determine a fixed allocation that could be calculated for a few years in advance and – taking inflation into account – treated separately, that is, not as part of the budget of the complete support system for events of national and international importance such as festivals, competitions and meetings, while organizers of special (one might say ad hoc) projects could apply for resources formerly earmarked for such purposes.

For a better understanding of the foregoing, I shall outline in short the operating terms of the Association of Hungarian Choirs and Orchestras.

The association consists of some 125,000 singers, from children to older people, which means 2,300 choirs. The secretariat of KÓTA is located in the new wing of the old Vígadó. The rent for the premises is ideally HUF 900,000 with additional expenses of operation. Four people work full-time at the secretariat. Personal costs including contributions amount to HUF 6 million annually. (The president, as well as the committee presidents and members, does public work.) Our income from membership fees is less than 1.5 million HUF.

The above mentioned expenses, the so-called expenses of operation, do not include the costs of large national choir meetings, festivals, competitions and classifications organized by the association. They alone amounted to HUF 15 million last year. The discrepancy between these two sums can be seen all too clearly. We made up the difference from the following sources:



- the Ministry of National Cultural Heritage contributed to the association's operation with 10.8 million HUF this year (2001);
- and we received 800,000 HUF from the Parliament's civil support allocation this year.

In addition to supporting our operation, the Ministry also helps to realize our events by providing several tenders, the largest being the National Cultural Fund.

To sum up: in addition to membership fees, the association receives approximately HUF 20 million from the aforementioned sources. We are also concerned about the problem noted at the beginning of the section, which is that we have to apply for said funds every year, while the success of our applications is completely uncertain each time.

Securing funds for our operation is a serious problem and task; we often quote the famous Italian commander Montecuccoli: "We need no more than three things to win the war: money, money and money."

In this daily war of ours there is one more possibility – the support of sponsors. To our greatest joy, in the last few years multinational companies have slowly begun to realize the possibilities in culture as well as support culture and, by extension, music. Let us note that these funds are earmarked only for music events whose activities, high standards or successes have won the sponsors' admiration over the past years.

### **The international system of connections of Hungarian choral activity**

The first real success in this area was the Europa Cantat (the European Federation of Young Choirs) festival organized in Pécs in 1988.

Almost 3000 singers, professionals and representatives of choral life from the country and abroad gathered in Pécs and expressed their congratulations, as they still do today. We must not forget that the year was 1988! And we must not forget either that since 1966, our choirs have brought home prizes from all international competitions (this issue is yet to be elaborated). These results enabled Hungary, of all the socialist countries at the time, to organize eight successive festivals of Europa Cantat, an organization which is considered to be of the highest rank in Europe.

In that regard, Hungary was the first country that was not afraid to establish a closer connection with the Europa Cantat organization (e.g. the Veszprém Singing Weeks). Our colleague, József Maklári, who has since passed away, participated in the work of the board for many years. All these predecessors, as well as many other things that have not been mentioned in the narrow scope of this paper, laid the foundations for the development of our network of international relations following the change of regime.

In 1991, I was elected a new member of the board in place of the resigning József Maklári at the EC general meeting in Verona and have been re-elected four times since.

In 1992, AGECE (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Europäischer Chorverbände), the other great European choral association, admitted our country, then elected me vice-president in 1995 and has re-elected me three times since.

In the course of our association's operation within these international organizations, we chose an aggressive strategy and Hungary has demonstrated unflagging energy and the innovative abilities of its choral activities with its continuously successful projects.

I shall mention only a few of the most significant ones:

In 1944, on our initiative, the European Youth Music Parliament was founded in Visegrád. Hereby I quote from the memorandum which the board accepted and forwarded to 27 choral organizations in Europe as well as to the Cultural Committee of the Council of Europe:

“...Those present unanimously believe that it is important to considerably improve the situation of singing and music in schools. Although teaching structures differ from country to country, the attendees believe, in accordance with the spirit of the 1989 UN Convention on Children's Rights, that the committee should consider pupils' rights to the opportunity of familiarizing themselves with music at school, seeing as music is part of the national and world culture. (...) Those present deem it regrettable that the worsening problems of education in European countries are being solved to the detriment of esthetic subjects, leaving aside (...) the irreplaceable significance of music.

In 1996 we organized the first Europa Cantat Junior in Kaposvár and in spite of the fact that our Southern neighboring countries were at war, some 1200 young people aged 8 to 18 gathered, performing first-class concerts and spending a few unforgettable days together. The success of the professional and choral community is clear from the fact that this event is held every three years in different European countries, where Hungarian conductors regularly hold workshops.

In 1997, the second European Youth Music Parliament was held in Pilisszentkereszt.

In 2001, for the first time in Europe, Budapest organized the International Competition of Young Conductors. Its success was reflected in the fact that owing to a great number of applicants, the organizers had to arrange an eliminatory competition headed by Professor Éva Kollár. This event was also a huge success for our country, which is why this competition is held every year.

Meanwhile we twice hosted the so-called Eurochoir; the first time in Esztergom, where Aurél Tillay held a workshop, and then in Budapest, where this international choir was conducted by Éva Kollár and István Párkai.

In addition to the success of these events, our greatest accomplishment was and still is the fact that the Hungarian choral movement managed to bring together Europa Cantat and AGECE, which have since had common projects on a regular basis.

The isolation – sometimes even opposition - is now over, and only the most important remains: MUSIC!

This may be the greatest accomplishment of the Hungarian choral diplomacy in the past years.

Declarations such as the so-called Warsaw Declaration, elaborated in Hungary by the board of AGECE and adopted by its leadership in 2000, were written and forwarded to important forums. I shall quote from it: "With the following proclamation we address -

- European governments: the time assigned for music teaching and choral singing in schools and music schools should not be shortened any further, but should instead be increased in the interest of the development of children's personalities and the possibilities of teachers to educate them...;

- political and economic institutions: they should provide additional financial and moral support for the art of choral singing in order to maintain and develop it because humanitarily orientated Europe needs people who sing."

The decision about choral music accepted at the First Choral Olympics (July 2000) and forwarded to the European Music Council and UNESCO among others, is no less significant. I shall quote from it:

"...We are convinced that art – and, therefore, music and choral education – is exceptionally suitable for imbuing modern communication with the human sound of honor and understanding, and no less with the soul...

...choral music, as well as sport, is one of the most important and wonderful elements of global society.

Choral singing creates an excellent relationship between children and adults and is a firm foundation for understanding and tolerance.

Singing in a choir demands mutual understanding and cooperation..."

I would like to note that Hungarian choral art achieved great success in Linz because it ranked first at the international competition, transcending all the other nations.

I realize that this paper lacks a detailed list of the international successes of our choral activity, but as I have mentioned before, its scope does not allow it.

## Summary

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, numerous singing societies were founded in Hungary. The most significant were The Workers' Singing Union and the St. Cecilia Society. In 1948, the *Béla Bartók* Association was founded and directed by the great authorities in Hungarian music – Zoltán Kodály and Lajos Bárdos. This Association, which was of great importance for amateur choirs in Hungary, was dismissed in 1951 by a resolution of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The foundation of KÓTA in 1969 marked a new era in the Hungarian history of choral singing. As a democratically orientated organization, KÓTA had the most prominent role in supporting amateur choir practice.

After the change of regime in Hungary, in the period from 1989 to 1991, there was a crucial change in social and cultural life. Following the intellectual spirit of the destroyed *Béla Bartók* Association, the successor of KÓTA was established - the Association of Hungarian Choirs and Orchestras, which has had the main role in the development of music life.

And yet democratic changes were soon undermined by the state's indifference to cultural politics. The new democracy has inherited economic and social burdens of the past and does not attach great importance to music.

Despite many unfavorable circumstances, Hungarian choirs have won many prizes at numerous international competitions since 1966. These results allowed Hungary to organize music events for the most significant European choral associations – Europa Cantat (European Federation of Young Choirs) and AGEK (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Europäischer Chorverbände). One of the greatest accomplishments of the Hungarian Choral Union was and still is the bringing together of Europa Cantat and AGEK, which have had joint projects on a regular basis for years. During the Association's work within these international organizations, the Hungarian Choral Union has proven the unflagging energy and innovative abilities of its choral activities.

Edited by Jelena Nikezić and Dušan Zabrdac