

## ZSOLT SZILÁGYI AND CHOIR LIFE IN SFÂNTU GHEORGHE (SEPSISZENTGYÖRGY)

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**SUMMARY.** This study examines the work of conductor and voice teacher Zsolt Szilágyi, focusing on the artistic, methodological, and aesthetic dimensions of choir conducting. The aim of the research is to explore how Zsolt Szilágyi's conducting practice fits into the traditions of contemporary Transylvanian choral culture and what specific methodological and interpretative principles he contributes to its renewal. The methodological basis of the study consists of professional interviews, decades of newspaper articles, and personal conversations, the material of which is subjected to qualitative analysis, with particular emphasis on rehearsal techniques, voice production, repertoire selection, and pedagogical approaches. The analysis shows that, in Zsolt Szilágyi's conception of conducting, choir leadership is not merely an interpretative activity, but also a complex educational and community-building practice. The results of the study contribute to the contemporary interpretation of the role of the conductor and to the scholarly analysis of Hungarian choir life in Transylvania.

**Keywords:** Vox Humana, Transylvanian choral culture, conducting interpretation, musical identity, community singing

### Introduction

The region of Háromszék, and within it the choral culture of Sfântu Gheorghe, has an extremely rich history. Written evidence of this can be traced back to the last quarter of the 19th century. Numerous pieces of archival data, records, choir minutes, and newspaper articles mention this. Granted - Sfântu Gheorghe, is a small town; the 1890 census shows the

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population was only 5,665. But even then, it already boasted several church choirs, singing groups, and school choirs. And this is even more so the case today! Sfântu Gheorghe, with a population of 48,794, currently has more than 30 choirs, some of which have won numerous national and international awards and achieved significant successes. Specifically, there are 15 adult choirs (women's choirs, men's choirs, mixed choirs, or vocal ensembles) and 16 children's choirs or youth mixed choirs.<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps unique not only in Europe, but in the whole world. Perhaps one of the main architects and causes of this growth in numbers and in quality is the musical work of conductor and teacher Zsolt Szilágyi, one of the country's most renowned oratorio tenors, in this small town.

### **Professional and historical context and influences**

Zsolt Szilágyi's life began in Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár) on April 8, 1946, as the son of intellectuals. His father was a geography and natural history teacher, and his mother was the organist and choirmaster of the cathedral in the former princely city. He attended elementary school in Alba Iulia and Deva (Déva).

From 1963 to 1965 he studied music at the Pedagogical College in Târgu Mureş (Marosvásárhely), and from 1965 to 1970, he was a student at the Gheorghe Dima Conservatory in Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár), where he studied music education and singing. Already as a university student, he had a one-year singing performance contract with the Hungarian Opera in Cluj-Napoca. After graduating from the conservatory with the best national GPA, his music teaching degree precluded him from accepting performance positions at the Opera, so he joined the Community Arts School in Sfântu Gheorghe as a teacher of singing, music theory, and music history.

As a result of the 1968 county reorganization, many young music teachers were assigned to Sfântu Gheorghe to fill the teaching staff of the newly established Music Elementary School and the Community Arts School. The young teachers who were assigned here, who had studied music education and had been socialized through choir singing during their college years, soon felt the need to sing together, which they initially did only for their own entertainment during informal, occasional gatherings. As a result, in 1972, they founded the choir of music teachers of the educational trade

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<sup>3</sup> See the author's earlier study. Gellért Lőfi – Ignác Filip. *History of choir movement in Sfântu Gheorghe from the 19th century onwards*, Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov. Series VIII: Performing Arts, Braşov, 2024, pp. 115–124.

unions of Sfântu Gheorghe a choir that later took on the name Vox Humana. Initially, three conductors took turns conducting the choir, each bringing their own style. Katalin Szarvas represented the folk style of Birtalan; Olga Czakov was considered a symbol of musical bourgeoisie. But it was Zsolt Szilágyi who had the most experience in the chamber choir genre, having sung in Dorin Pop's select chamber choir, Cappella Transylvanica, as a university student in Cluj Napoca. The official debut performance took place in May 1973, with an evening concert featuring madrigals and Hungarian and Romanian folk song arrangements. Even Tomás Luis de Victoria's "Ave Maria" was not objected to by the political censors. The concert was a huge success. The former choir directors invited to the performance – József Birtalan and Dorin Pop – offered words of praise and appreciation and suggested to the choir members that Zsolt Szilágyi should be the conductor from then on. The proposal was accepted, and Zsolt Szilágyi conducted Vox Humana until his serious illness in 2012. In these almost four decades, they garnered numerous national and international awards, fame, and success.

Vox Humana marked a turning point in the history of choral singing in Sfântu Gheorghe. The former amateur choirs were succeeded by professional ensembles, and the long-fashionable mass songs were replaced by more refined, sophisticated, sensitive, and demanding chamber singing. The sometimes ill-fated yearly series of Megéneklünk Románia ("We sing your praises, Romania") national choir competitions, which promoted false patriotism and in which Vox Humana won first prize ten times, was replaced by the crystal-clear intonation of chamber music, radiating refined, noble artistry. And it was this unwavering, demanding, tireless, high-quality work carried out by Zsolt Szilágyi that had an inspiring effect on the choral life of Sfântu Gheorghe and the entire Háromszék region.

### **Conducting methodology and rehearsal technique**

The focus of Zsolt Szilágyi's work is stylistic diversity and disciplined sound. This is based on the rich musical education he received from his parents, his individual performing skills, as well as the ideal sound, precision, and high standards of artistic expression he learned from his teachers and friends, József Birtalan, Dorin Pop, Lajos Bács, and Marin Constantin. His motto as a conductor is Zoltán Kodály's admonition: "A good conductor must have a cultivated ear, a cultivated mind, a cultivated heart, and cultivated hands."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Csinta Samu – Ferencz Csaba. *Az emberi hang fél évszázada (Half a Century of the Human Voice)*, Háromszék Vármegye Publishing House, Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2022, p. 32.

His interpretative practice is characterized by a homogeneous sound based on pure intonation, balanced voice proportions, rhetorical phrasing, and a focus on the intelligibility of the text. It was very important to him that his choir members not only know, but also understand and experience what they are singing about.

Zsolt Szilágyi regarded his role as conductor as a bridge leading from the unity of the choir to the most perfect performance of the work. In the period preceding choir rehearsals, he devoted a great deal of time to the precise analysis and interpretation of the works, paying particular attention to the clarification of diction and text interpretation.

In his artistic concept, tradition appears not as a static heritage, but as a source that can be reinterpreted. For him, the shaping of the deep, sacred nature of church works, or the lightness of folk song arrangements, or even technical bravura—all require equal seriousness, precision, and complete immersion, which he is able to convey to his choir members through continuous and conscious development and rehearsals.

His working methods demonstrate that the continuous expansion of vocal knowledge promotes the development of hearing and musicality; otherwise, choral art might become relegated to the margins of true art. The sound world of *Vox Humana* – the result of the choir members' cultivated vocal technique – is not only a prerequisite for the performance, but also its artistic value, insofar as it serves to express emotional content. And this is very crucial, because the first thing that reaches the listener is the sound.

An examination of the rehearsal process reveals a reflective, dialogue-based working method. Zsolt Szilágyi does not rely solely on direct instructions, but encourages the singers to listen consciously and interpret independently by asking questions and providing musical examples. In the area of voice production, he pays special attention to natural, speech-like singing, which is in harmony with the prosody of the Hungarian language. This approach is in line with the pedagogical approach of several representatives of 20th-century Hungarian choral conducting tradition, such as Lajos Bárdos, but Zsolt Szilágyi's practice shows an adaptation of the method based on personal experience.

### **Repertoire and interpretation**

The repertoire of the *Vox Humana* chamber choir is the result of conscious aesthetic editing. The programs regularly feature Renaissance polyphonic works, 14th-15th century madrigals, motets, villanelles, 17th- and 18th-century chorales, cantatas, Baroque church music compositions, vocal

symphonic works, and 20th- and 21st-century works by Hungarian, Romanian, and foreign composers. To name just a few composers: Lassus, Victoria, Monteverdi, Viadana, Bach, Handel, Mozart, Liszt, Saint-Saens, Dima, Drăgoi, Kodály, Bartók, Orff, Jarda, Bárdos, Bács, Szokolay, Orbán, Terényi, Pop, etc.

Based on a structural analysis of the repertoire, three trends emerge: stylistic diversity, the prominent presence of works by Hungarian composers, and the integration of contemporary pieces.

This concept serves both artistic and pedagogical purposes: the gradual increase in technical challenges supports the development of the choir members.

This conscious balancing act has a dual function: it maintains cultural continuity while also updating the choir's repertoire. The impact of the repertoire selection strategy can also be felt regionally: other city and county choirs are also showing an increasing openness to contemporary and local composers in their programming policies.

"Incidentally, the repertoire is also determined by the chamber music nature of the choir (34–36 members). Although we are sometimes expected to excel with the qualities of a large choir, we are definitely a small chamber ensemble with limited dynamic and vocal capabilities."<sup>5</sup>

"The human voice is the ideal sound, whose rich expressive possibilities every instrumentalist strives to imitate."<sup>6</sup> The balanced sound of the choir, its clear intonation, the correct pronunciation of the text, and the intensity that radiates emotion, all suggest that the Vox Humana chamber choir has the right conditions: the talented conductor and musical choir members receive adequate support for their artistic activities.

The true test of a choir is its proficiency in European Renaissance choral works. Szilágyi and his choir draw heavily from this source. Their choices have brought to life classics of this era such as Weelkes, Lasso, Gastoldi, Gesualdo, Marenzio, Croce, and Palestrina. Although I found the approach to some of these works unusual, I was won over by their knowledge of the musical text, their confident delivery, and their identification with the material, which was also measurable in their sound. The choir's parts are mature and independent, working together not with the randomness often experienced in ensemble sound, but with the mutuality required by the work. This is the secret of the confidence that emanates from Vox Humana's performances.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Katalin Béres. *Ha mindenki olvas lapról. (When everyone reads from a sheet.)* Művelődés, vol. 31, no. 8, February 1, 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Ilona Verestóy. *Vox Humana*, Red Flag, XXXIV/66, March 21, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Pál Szelényi. *Vox Humana from St. George*, *Napló (Veszprém)*, June 5, 1990.

The sound world of *Vox Humana* is chamber music-like: it is characterized by a transparent texture, finely nuanced dynamics, and articulation. The conductor's gestures are economical but expressive; the conscious construction of formal arcs results in structural coherence.

This sound model can play a normative role in regional choral life, as it offers a followable aesthetic pattern.

### **Pedagogical and community-building dimension**

A conductor learns from his predecessors and tries to draw inspiration from them. But to this must always be added his own individuality, and this must inevitably lead to results in his future work. He must not get stuck in one method, one era, or one genre. When asked about the significant stages of his life and the development of his professional and artistic personality, he says:

Well, if you ask me whether my former environment has been beneficial to me in my profession, my work, and my professional development, then I must answer yes. Above all, I believe that one's start in life, one's childhood environment, influences one's future path in life. But I also believe in the power of learning, diligence, practice, perseverance, and constantly striving for more and better. Perhaps I should start by saying that I received a lot from my parents' home. My mother was an organist, so it is understandable that I heard a lot of music at home. Classical music was always playing on the radio. I learned to play the piano from the age of ten. Although all parents are biased towards their own children, they said I had a good voice even when I was little. As an elementary school student, I sang in the opera *János Vitéz*. As a high school student, I performed in Ciprian Porumbescu's operetta *Crai Nou*. I also have fond memories of my college teachers. From my years in Târgu Mureș, I remember Károly Szász, József Birtalan, and József Tróznér; and from my university years in Cluj Napoca, I remember János Jagamas, András Benkő, Dorin Pop, Emil Mureșan, and Ede Terényi."<sup>8</sup>

In Zsolt Szilágyi's approach to conducting and teaching, choir leadership is not merely an interpretative activity, but also a complex community and audience education practice. At *Vox Humana*, musical work is combined with

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<sup>8</sup> Mátyás Árpád. *Zenei élet – Szilágyi Zsolt nyilatkozik (Musical Life – Zsolt Szilágyi Speaks Out)*, Előre, Volume XXXIV, Issue 10133, June 20, 1980, p. 6.

community building: regular rehearsals (twice a week, or more if necessary), joint performances, foreign tours, and competitions create a cohesive force that goes beyond musical performance.

Everyone knows Zsolt Szilágyi as a true music enthusiast who believes that music is not part of elite culture, but a universal human need. He states this in an article: “I once read somewhere that in a sociological survey, researchers told a folk tale that ended with the wizard taking music away from the village. The respondents’ answer was unanimous and unambiguous: the wizard had robbed the villagers of the beauty of life. Well, music—and of course I don’t just mean classical music—is part of our everyday lives in some form. Music brightens up the dullness of everyday life, makes it more colorful, and beautifies people’s lives. Music is where tired people escape to rest; it is what erases the wrinkles from their foreheads. Human life is unimaginable without music. That is why I believe that we, as professionals, must do our part to ensure that music truly becomes a universal human need, accessible to everyone.”<sup>9</sup>

Thanks to Zsolt Szilágyi’s community organizing efforts, the musical life of Sfântu Gheorghe and, in a broader sense, the entire region has flourished. The regular concert season of the Braşov Philharmonic Orchestra, the Zenélő Képek (Musical Pictures) chamber music series organized by the Fine Arts Gallery, the numerous guest performances invited to the city, and the many choir festivals and song gatherings organized in Sfântu Gheorghe and the surrounding villages and towns—all have contributed to a bustling musical life.

This is how conductor Marin Constantin described it after one of the Madrigal Choir’s concerts in Sfântu Gheorghe:

I think fondly of this extraordinary audience, which seeks the sublime and the divine in music, and all I can say in farewell is that those of us like my friend Zsolt and myself were created for this, this destiny, or misfortune, has been bestowed upon us by God, so that we may carry out our task for the sake of other people, for the sake of the community, to the very end, and complete it there, before them, on the podium.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mátyás Árpád. *Zenei élet – Szilágyi Zsolt nyilatkozik (Musical Life – Zsolt Szilágyi Speaks Out)*, Előre, Volume XXXIV, Issue 10133, June 20, 1980, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> János Matekovics. *Interview with conductor Marin Constantin*. Samu Csinta – Csaba Ferencz. *Az emberi hang fél évszázada (Half a century of the human voice)*, Háromszék Vármegye Publishing House, Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2022, pp. 73–74.

Zsolt Szilágyi's work with the Vox Humana chamber choir makes it clear that choirs play a particularly important role in shaping identity in minority cultural environments. The Hungarian-language repertoire, the balance between sacred and secular works, and the cultivation of regional cultural ties contribute to the maintenance and renewal of community identity.

### **Quality impact on Transylvanian choir culture**

The activities of the Vox Humana chamber choir can be considered exemplary in several respects:

- Artistic quality and professional consistency – The high standard of interpretation sets a benchmark for other ensembles.
- Pedagogical awareness – The rehearsal method and voice training principles can be adapted for use by other choirs.
- Repertoire innovation – The integration of contemporary and regional works enriches the living tradition of Transylvanian choral literature.
- Community building – The choir, as a cultural community, is of particular importance in a minority context.

Based on the research, it can be concluded that the activities of Zsolt Szilágyi and the Vox Humana chamber choir are not an isolated phenomenon, but one of the determining factors in the dynamic renewal of Hungarian choral culture in Transylvania.

A brief chronicle of the Vox Humana chamber choir:

- 1974-1997 • Television, radio, and CD recordings are made for domestic and foreign broadcasters
- 1977-1989 • First prizes at national choir competitions
- 1979 • Gorizia Second prize
- 1982 • Arezzo Second prize,
- 1982 • Papal reception in Rome, where Pope John Paul II greets the choir in Hungarian: "Teach God's people to sing beautifully and devoutly. My apostolic blessing is upon you." The political "result" of the choir's visit and high-profile, widely mediated meeting with the Pope, as a choir coming from a Communist country, is a ban on foreign travel for many years.
- 1992 • International choir festival in Nuoro (Italy), Vox Humana receives the first EMKE music award (issues by the Association for Transylvanian Cultural Development)
- 1994 • International choir competition: Llangollen (Great Britain)

- 1996 • Athens bronze prize
- 1999 • Barcelona – gold medal; Zsolt Szilágyi receives recognition as master conductor
- 2001 • International choir competition in Rhodes, Greece – bronze medal
- 2003 • International choir festival – Alta Pusteria (South Tyrol)
- 2005 • I. Edvard Grieg Competition and Festival, Bergen (Norway)
- 2007 • I Castelli Incantati festival (Italy)
- 2008 • Internazionale di Cori, festival in Salerno (Italy)
- 2010 • Ohrid – third place
- 2011 • Choir competition in Vilnius (Lithuania)
- 2013 • Zsolt Szilágyi receives the Order of Merit of the Hungarian Republic, Civil Division
- 2016 • Zsolt Szilágyi receives the Pro Urbe Award
- 2022 • Zsolt Szilágyi receives the Háromszék Culture Award

## Conclusions

In summary, it can be said that Zsolt Szilágyi's work is based on a dynamic balance between tradition and innovation. His conducting activity preserves the historical continuity of Hungarian choral culture in Transylvania while also reflecting on the community and educational challenges of the 21st century. The results of this study contribute not only to the interpretation of an individual oeuvre, but also, from a broader perspective, to a rethinking of the role of the conductor, with particular regard to the significance of artistic and educational work in a minority cultural environment.

Zsolt Szilágyi's work in Transylvanian Hungarian choral culture goes beyond the artistic leadership of an ensemble. His activities have an impact on repertoire formation, create aesthetic norms, have an identity-forming function, and contribute to the professional strengthening of the regional choral movement.

The artistic program of Vox Humana can be interpreted as a model of conscious dialogue between tradition and contemporary aspirations, which may have a long-term impact on the Hungarian music scene in Transylvania.

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