

SÁNDOR VERESS: FADING INTO OBLIVION

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Motto:

Sándor Veress: „I love Helvetia so much,
that I cannot forget Cluj.”

SUMMARY. The composers of the 20th century bring several innovations, resulting in a multitude of new musical movements, which will make this period to be the most intense and prolific era in all of music history. The representatives of the Hungarian School of composition is made up of Jenő Hubay, Ernő Dohnányi, Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, and those who follow the footsteps of the new generation of Hungarian composers, later becoming some of the most famous and appreciated creators of their time, namely György Ligeti and György Kurtág. The present study will reflect upon the music of the 20th century and a creator of outstanding importance. Sándor Veress shaped and influenced many generations of composers and has continued the legacy of Bartók and Kodály in his own style. The three sections of the study will approach important biographical data of composer Sándor Veress, noting a few representative works from his oeuvre. The subchapter dedicated to his compositional style will broach upon the topic of the composition techniques used by the Hungarian creator, revealing both his sources of inspiration, as well as his ideas, his conceptual approach.

Keywords: Veress, Bartók, Kodály, Ligeti, Kurtág, threnos, folklore, dodecapronic system

Introduction

Music history has always had important characters, musicians that were in the limelight; however, there is a whole list of creators who have remained unknown for various reasons. The case of Johann Sebastian

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Bach comes to mind, for instance, a composer who was brought to the attention of music lovers by none other than Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy in 1829, when the German creator gave an exceptional performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*. The immense success gave a strong impetus to Bach's reputation, and thus he became one of the most prominent representatives of the Baroque era.

There have always been different reasons behind certain composers' lack of success, whether that might be connected to specific historical backgrounds, cultural aspects, or simply matters that touched upon their innovative style being received with skepticism. It was quite difficult for them to convince their peers that their composition techniques were original and novel. The eternal struggle between the creator who is full of innovative ideas and the reluctance of his contemporaries to acknowledge or accept his ideas remains a topical subject throughout the 20th century, up until our present time.

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century marked an essential transition in music history, making way for new directions in musical composition. The 20th century has been disrupted by several social and political events, such as the two world wars, technological advancements, etc. These changes also impacted the cultural sphere, and brought forth major innovations to the world of arts. Several parallel musical tendencies emerged: expressionism, neoclassicism, pointillism, serialism, aleatoric music, electronic music, experimental music, minimalism, etc. Among the outstanding figures of the 20th century are a number of creators who have contributed greatly to the development of the musical arts, by way of using different and innovative composition techniques. Two of the most prolific creators in this complex landscape of 20th century music are Hungarian composers György Ligeti and György Kurtág, while the one who contributed to the formation of this valuable generation is none other than the Swiss composer of Hungarian origin, Sándor Veress. In the graph below, we can observe important links between these composers: Sándor Veress is the spiritual heir of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, while also being a pedagogue who has influenced a new generation of composers who furthered their valuable legacy.

Figure 1



Professors and disciples of Sándor Veress



Sándor Veress

Sándor Veress was born on February 1, 1907, in Cluj-Napoca. He was a well-rounded person who gained recognition both as a composer and a pianist, but also as a teacher and ethnomusicologist, having been awarded with the Kossuth Prize (1949) and the Bartók-Pásztory Prize (1985) for his work. He belongs to an exceptional generation of composers, including Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975), Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992), Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) in Europe; John Cage (1912-1992) in the United States and Theodor Rogalski (1901-1954), Tudor Ciortea (1903-1982), Miklós Chilf (1905-1985), Max Eisikovits (1908-1983), Sigismund Toduță (1908-1991), Paul Constantinescu (1909-1963), Constantin Silvestri (1913-1969) in Romania, and Pál Kadosa (1903-1983), Ferenc Farkas (1905-2000), Zoltán Gárdonyi (1906-1986), György

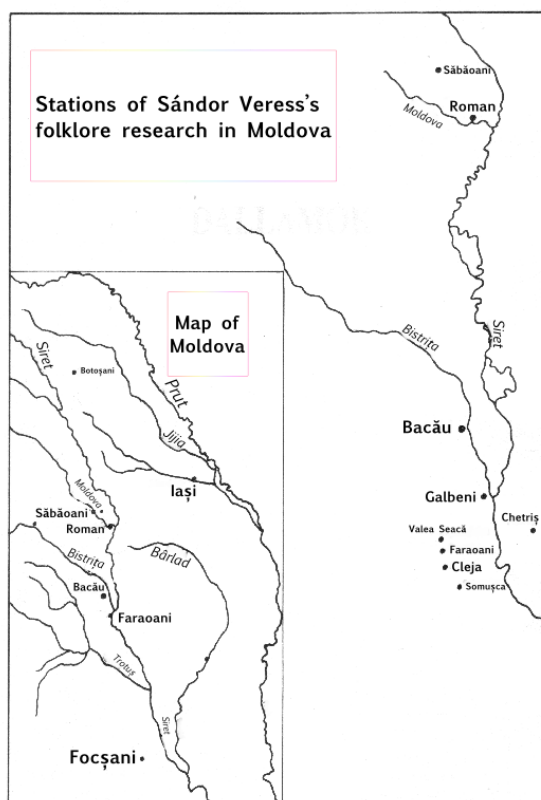
Ránki (1907-1992) in Hungary.

In 1917, Sándor Veress moved from Cluj to Budapest with his parents, where he later studied with the foremost notable representatives of the Hungarian art world. Between 1923 and 1927 he studied composition with Zoltán Kodály, and later, between 1927 and 1933, he learned piano from Emánuel Hegyi and Béla Bartók. The knowledge he acquired from these masters was referred to by Veress by the German notion of *Granitfundament*. This concept illustrates the importance of the teachings received from Kodály and Bartók, as a result of which he became a follower and continuator such a valuable school of music. Veress's talent was described by Bartók as "a composer who aligns himself with the most prominent [of his generation], a good pianist and folk music collector."² He showcased his piano playing abilities by interpreting his own works, not only on the occasion of the world

² Berlász Melinda, *Hazatérőben–Veress Sándor emlékkiállítás az MTA Zenetörténeti Múzeumában (Sándor Veress Memorial Exhibition at the Museum of Music History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences)*, http://www.magyarszemle.hu/cikk/20180827_hazateroben_veress_sandor_emlekkiallitas_az_mta_zenetortenet_i_muzeumaban, (author's translation). The original text, in Hungarian: „aki zeneszerzőként a legjobbak közé tartozik, aki jó zongorista, és népdalgyűjtéssel foglalkozik”

premiere of his Piano Concerto, but also that of his work entitled *Hommage à Paul Klee* or 2 pianos and string orchestra. In line with a well-established tradition in Hungary, during his studies he also worked for the Ethnographic Museum in Budapest, as a folk music collector, alongside the composer and ethnomusicologist László Lajtha. With the support of Magyar Néprajzi Társaság/Hungarian Ethnographic Society, Magyar Néprajzi Múzeum/Hungarian Ethnographic Museum and Uniunea Compozitorilor Români din București/ the Union of Romanian Composers in Bucharest, he started the first folklore collection in Moldova, stating the following:

Figure 2



Stations of Sándor Veress's Folklore Research in Moldova³

³ <https://sites.google.com/site/moldvaaziskolaban/sulyan-andrea-a-magyar-nepzene-es-a-moldvai-dialektus-tanitasi-az-iskolaban/i-a-moldvai-nepzenei-dialektus-felfedezese-gyujtesek-es-gyujtok-moldvaban/i-3-a-moldvai-csango-vokalis-nepzene-es-kutato-i-3-4-veress-sandor-kolozsva-1907-bern-1992>.

After Kodály's departure from the Music Academy in 1943, Sándor Veress had the honor of taking over the position as Chief of the Musical Composition Department, at only 36 years of age. As mentioned above, during this period the composition class included students that later became world famous in their field: György Ligeti and György Kurtág. Moreover, alongside the composition students, there were also other disciples, such as ethnomusicologist Bálint Sárosi, conductors István Párkai and Lajos Vass, and renowned musicologist József Ujfalussy, who later taught musical aesthetics at the Music Academy.

Switzerland – A New Era

After a time of great successes, in 1949 an important period of his life ended. Wanting to completely distance himself from the new communist regime that had taken over Eastern Europe, Sándor Veress left Hungary, choosing to settle in 1949 in his adoptive country of Switzerland. His Hungarian literary contemporaries – writers László Cs. Szabó or Sándor Márai –, found themselves in the same unfortunate situation: they were forced to emigrate because of the dictatorial system at home.⁵ Starting with the year 1950, Veress taught composition and music theory at the Bern Conservatory, while later – between 1968-1977 – teaching at the Faculty of Musicology of the same institution. Among the students he taught



**Dr. Edit Kaposi, Sándor Veress
and Lajos Vass – Lugano, 1980**

in the Swiss capital were a number of youngsters who soon would become famous in their own right: Heinz Holliger, Heinz Marti, Jürg Wittenbach.

Although the composer clearly devoted himself to his teaching career, his main preoccupation was writing music. As a composer, Sándor Veress debuted in Budapest, in 1933. Analyzing his oeuvre, we can safely state that Sándor Veress was a prolific composer, writing no less than 125-130 works of music. From the very beginning, he demonstrated an eclectic and striking style, as well as a distinct artistic personality. Folklore occupied

⁵ http://www.magyaraszemle.hu/cikk/20180827_hazateroben_veress_sandor_emlekkiallitasz_mta_zenetortenet_muzeumaban, accessed on February 20, 2019.

a central place in his works, especially in his early period, however, his music reached beyond this aesthetic framework, using even the dodecaphonic system in a number of his pieces.

We will next selectively enumerate some of the composer's works, highlighting also his openness towards numerous musical genres.

Table 1

BALLET MUSIC	A csodafurulya [The Magic Flute] (1937)
	Térszili Katicza (1943)
ORCHESTRAL MUSIC	Divertimento (1937)
	Musica ungarica (1938)
	Symphony no. 1 (1940)
	Quattro Danze Transilvane (1944–1949)
	Threnos – in memoriam Bartók Béla (1945)
	Respublica Overture (1948)
	Sonata per orchestra (1953)
	Symphony no. 2., „Minneapolisana” (1953)
	Expovare (1964)
CONCERTOS	Concerto for violin and orchestra (1939, 1948)
	Cukaszőke Csárdás for violin and chamber orchestra (1940)
	Hommage à Paul Klee – for two pianos and string orchestra (1951)
	Concerto for piano, strings and percussion (1952)
	Passacaglia concertante for oboe and string orchestra (1961)
	Concerto for string quartet and orchestra (1961)
	Concerto for clarinet and orchestra (1982)
	Concertotilinkó [Concerto for flute] (1991)
CHAMBER MUSIC	Musica concertante (1966)
	Diptych (1968)
	Baryton-Trio (1985)
	Orbis tonorum (1986)
	Geschichten und Märchen (1988)
VOCAL MUSIC	Christmas Cantata (1934)
	Sancti Augustini Psalmus (1944)
	Zwei schweizerische Volkslieder (1953)
	Roedd gan mair un oenig dof (1961)
	Songs of the Seasons – (1967)
	Das Glasklängespiel per coro e orchestra su testi di Hermann Hesse (1978)
FILM MUSIC	Talpalatnyi föld (1948) [The Soil under your Feet]

Selected works by Sándor Veress

Despite the fact that he spent 42 years in Switzerland and never returned to Hungary, Sándor Veress confessed that he preserved the Hungarian language as a principal element in his compositional approach. Throughout his life, he has always been proud of his refugee status and of his Hungarian ethnicity. The Hungarian composer passed away on March 4, 1992. The news of his grave illness reached his former student, György Kurtág, who dedicated the work *Életút (Lebenslauf)*, op. 32) to Veress. Later, this opus became a work dedicated to his memory, illustrating Kurtág's respect for his former musical composition teacher.

In 1997, at the initiative of musicologist József Ujfalussy, the Sándor Veress Society was established, to promote the work and music of the late composer. The Society has organized several annual chamber music recitals, and has published numerous volumes in order to preserve the valuable heritage left behind by Sándor Veress. We must also mention one of the great achievements of the Society, namely the establishment of the Veress Award. This prize is awarded to outstanding artists for their excellent interpretations of the Hungarian composer's works. Among the recipients of the award are: conductors Tamás Pál, János Mészáros; musicologists Melinda Berlász, Ferenc Bónis; soprano Adrienne Csengery, clarinetist László Horváth, pianists Klára Körmendi and Dénes Varjas.

The son of the composer, Claudio Veress – a musician and teacher himself –, set up the *veress.net* memorial site dedicated to the Hungarian composer. The website includes the list of his compositions, important biographical data, and, last but not least, a significant bibliographic list containing monographs, interviews and numerous publications. Veress's heritage is preserved and cared for by Claudio Veress: he organizes numerous events dedicated to the composer, so that his works are regularly performed, and his music and memory take their rightful place in universal music history.

Most of his manuscripts are currently in Basel, at the Paul Sacher Foundation; however, there are scores also in Budapest, at the Musicology Institute within the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.⁶

The Style of Sándor Veress' Work

In Ede Terényi's view, Veress' creation can be structured in three distinct periods. His first creative period (1931-1951) is characterized by the influence of the Hungarian folk song (Quartet No. 1, 1931, Erdélyi kantáta,

⁶ Berlász, Melinda: *Veress Sándor Radó Ági zongoraművészhez intézett levelei (Sándor Veress' letter addressed to pianist Ági Radó)*, *Revista Magyar zene/Hungarian Music Magazine*, year LI., no. 2., May 2013.

1936). Alongside his counterpoint technique and the development of sophisticated rhythms, melodiousness will be the foremost feature of this early stage (Violin Concerto, 1939, Symphony No. 1, 1940). His second creative period puts personal touches on his use of the dodecaponic system (String Trio, 1954). Finally, his last period of creation is characterized by the synthesis of Hungarian and European music traditions.

Veress has studied with several outstanding figures, such as Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók, the latter leaving a strong impression upon Sándor Veress's style of creation. The most important elements that demonstrate this fact are the following: the Hungarian composer cites certain motifs from Bartók's creation, a testimony to the devotion, respect and reverence he felt towards Béla Bartók. The work *Threnos - in memoriam Béla Bartók*, written in Hungary, in 1945, is a highly complex work; a symphonic poem containing folk elements and a noteworthy reference to the music of Bartók, by the use of a *minor third* from his *The Miraculous Mandarin Suite*.⁷

E.g. 2

Excerpt from *The Miraculous Mandarin* ballet by Béla Bartók

In the example above, we note the previously mentioned minor third, which appears at the trombone, with the indication *glissando*.⁸ In Bartók's work, the interval illustrates and suggests the intense pain and suffering experienced by the main character.

In the case of Sándor Veress, this interval can have two explanations. First of all, the descending trend of the melodic line, which creates a bleak and funereal atmosphere, highlighted by the use of the *glissando*. Secondly, although the work is entitled *In memoriam Béla Bartók*, the grandiose music of Sándor Veress can be interpreted as sorrow felt towards the European culture that had been destroyed in the war. The above mentioned interval appears both at the horn and the trombone.

⁷ <http://figaro.reblog.hu/mozart-melankolikus-charme-ja>

⁸ <http://www.kennedy-center.org/artist/composition/4766>

E.g. 3

The image shows a musical score for three trumpets. The top staff is labeled 'Trbn. (Do)', the middle 'Trbn.', and the bottom 'Trbn.' with 'B.T.' written below it. The music is in 4/4 time and features complex rhythmic patterns and chromaticism. The score is an excerpt from the Threnos by Béla Bartók.

Excerpt from the *Threnos – in memoriam Béla Bartók* orchestral work

Sándor Veress's works have a specific coloring through his frequent use of the dodecaphonic system, which does not however, eliminate melody. The composer brings a singable quality to the forefront, which is also intensified by the various composition techniques used. Due to his emigration in 1949, into an entirely new cultural sphere, he had to lay the foundations of a new beginning. He has gotten accustomed to the new surroundings very easily and quickly, in this way the "transition" process had been carried out without a hitch: *"Switzerland has helped me a great deal in distancing myself from the inner circle of the Hungarian school. Here, I was greatly preoccupied by the use of the dodecaphonic system in my own style and not in the [usual] Orthodox manner or as a simple composition technique."*⁹

Having studied under two giants of musical folklore, it is not surprising that we would find folk songs (folk elements) in several pieces of the Hungarian composer's oeuvre.

Reviewing his life's work, we can safely state that Veress felt a particular affinity towards the instrumental genre. He preferred to compose chamber music and concerts, nevertheless, he has also written vocal works (*Elegia per baritono, arpa e archi su testo di Walther von der Vogelweide*), as well as music for choral ensembles.¹⁰

⁹ Berlász Melinda, *Hazatérőben – Veress Sándor emlékkiállítás az MTA Zenetörténeti Múzeumában*, http://www.magyar szemle.hu/cikk/20180827_hazateroben_veress_sandor_emlekkiallitas, (author's translation). The original text, in Hungarian: „Svájc sokat segített abban, hogy leváljak a magyar iskola belső körétől. Behatóan foglalkoztam itt azzal, hogy a dodekafon technikát nem ortodox módon és tisztán technikaként a saját stílusom számára használhatóvá tegyem.”

¹⁰ An Interview by Éva Mikes: *Kétféldős élet - Száz éve született Veress Sándor (The 100 Year Anniversary of Sándor Veress' Birth)*, *Revista Muzsika Magazine*, April 2007, year 50., no. 4., p. 3.

Among the works of the composer, we will also find two pieces that reflect his dedication and admiration for his birthplace, Transylvania. These two works are *Erdélyi Kantáta (Una cantata transilvana)*, composed in 1935 and *Quattro Danze transilvane*, written between 1944 and 1949. As previously mentioned, for Veress, his cultural and ethnic identity was particularly important for him, as also evidenced by an essential quote:

*„I love Helvetia so much, that I cannot forget Cluj.”
(„Úgy szeretem Helvetiát, hogy nem feledhetem Kolozsvárt.”)*

The quote may be an interesting reference to a fragment of *Törökországi levelek* (“Letters from Turkey”) by Kelemen Mikes (1660-1761), the most famous work of the Hungarian writer:

*„...I so love Rodosto, that I cannot forget Zagon.”
(Letter no. 37, Rodosto, 28 May 1720)*

*(„...úgy szeretem már Rodostót, hogy el nem felejthetem Zágont.”)
(37. levél, Rodostó, 1720. május 28.)*

Veress’s music is not without humor either, given the fact that behind the most dramatic melodic lines, there is often a playful, carefree, sometimes grotesque tone, as is the case of the *Hommage à Paul Klee*, the *Unten und oben* and *Kleiner Blauteufel* parts, *Mary had a little lamb* for female choir or *Songs of the Seasons*.

The composer’s genius was appreciated quite early, by the time he was 30. In 1937, the Hungarian musicologist Aladár Tóth wrote words of praise regarding his work, demonstrating that through his work, the music of the 20th century was enriched with great musical pieces and music history was given a creator of utmost importance by way of his prodigious and irreplaceable figure, embodied by a man who lived his life in “two parts”, one that played out in Hungary and the other in Switzerland, while never forgetting his native land.

“A true artist speaks... an artist who has higher ideals, who expects and demands something serious from music to benefit his own soul and his fellow men..., who – using the sound of music - wants to and is able to clarify something of the chaos of life unfolding.”¹¹

Translated from Romanian by Juliánna Köpeczi

¹¹ Aladár Tóth (1937), (author’s translation). The original text, in Hungarian: *„Igaz művész szólal meg..., akinek magasabb ideáljai vannak, aki a muzsikától komolyan vár és követel valamit saját lelke és embertársai számára..., aki a zene hangjaival tisztázni akar és tisztázni is tud valamit... a kavargó élet káoszából”.*

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