

CHURCH AND SCHOOL – BIRTALAN JÓZSEF'S CREDO

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SUMMARY. József Birtalan is one of the prominent personalities of the Transylvanian music education and choral culture of the 20th century. The present study proposes to summarize his aesthetic motivations as a composer, conductor and pedagogue through a paradigmatic choir work, based on the well-known poem of the Transylvanian poet Reményik Sándor: Church and school. It is not only one of his most important works, but also one of the Transylvanian choral music, both in aesthetic and musical sense. Its passionate atmosphere and ideological depth reflect his author continuous aspirations as an artistic credo: the promotion of the musical mother tongue through the folk and church music, and so, the affirmation of his cultural identity.

Keywords: József Birtalan, Reményik Sándor, poem setting, ars poetica, church and school, choir music.

The aesthetic motivations of József Birtalan's oeuvre are quite easy to reveal since his work is widely linked to his assumed social tasks, especially that of the conductor and pedagogue. His primary aim as a composer was to serve his community in a broader sense. Instead of promoting hermetic messages and abstract poetics, Birtalan conceived his compositions in order to transmit traditional values and to educate through them. Therefore, the utmost part of his work consists of settings.

However, this particular genre, based on the elaboration of preexistent materials is not necessarily a purely technical task. On the one hand, the subject of the setting is a matter of creative choice, on the other, its nature determines a specific context (personal view, language, style).

Birtalan's works cover a wide range concerning the relationship between the subject and its elaboration due to several factors: the skills of the future interpreters as well as the nature and genre of the initial material. Since he composed mainly for children and amateurs in order to promote

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the choir singing, his oeuvre, consisting almost entirely of choral works is characterized by the simplicity of compositional tools. Meanwhile, during his career, he had several opportunities to create more complex pieces for high-level singing groups.

Regarding their sources, they belong to the following categories: folk settings, sacred pieces, music for youth and compositions inspired by poems. During the communist regime, Birtalan mostly created folk settings for children and women choruses with the intention of creating a repertoire for a mother tongue-based music education, and to encourage the choir singing. After the 1989 regime change he turned to sacred music. The most explicit message of Birtalan's choral works demonstrates the undertaking of a declared social role, whether are based on folk, religious or poetic texts.

As an excellent and experienced conductor, Birtalan is well versed in choir composition. Thus he considers first of all the musical skills of the presumptive interpreters in the sketching of the settings' technical and expressive requirements. However, even his simplest scores denote a remarkable fastidiousness, for example in the careful treatment of the texts, that always shows a profound knowledge of the Hungarian intonation and declamation. Meanwhile, the richness of tone color and character demonstrate his talent in vocal arrangement.

A particular and precious segment of his output is represented by the poem settings, perhaps the most demanding choral genre in the matter of autonomous creative thought. In his case, their topics focus on significant subjects of Hungarian history. In the lack of preexisting musical materials, this genre offers an increased level of freedom in the treatment of the texts, frequently with much complex results.

Subsequently, we turn in our analysis towards such work, entitled *Church and school*. The composition is based on a well-known poem of the Transylvanian poet Reményik Sándor. Beyond the fact, that this is one of the most significant pieces of Birtalan, it expresses – in our view – the core of his artistic credo.

The poem, written in 1925 puts into the center two fundamental symbols of every Christian and national community, that seeks the ways of preserving its language and cultural heritage. These two words return in the refrain as some mighty symbols, like permanently changing comments of the poet's passionate words. Finally, in their metaphoric waving unfolds many symbols of survival – mother tongue, faith, tradition, hope, national belonging – in a sacred dimension.

József Birtalan's work was written – according to the front page dedication – “in honor of the 250th anniversary of the Debrecen Reformed College's Kántus choir, and that of the poet's 100th birth.”

The premiere of the composition commissioned by the Kántus took place in Debrecen in 5th November 1989, conducted by Sándor Berkesi. Though the communist regime was on his last legs, the severe limitations regarding the travelling abroad prevented Birtalan from participating at the first audition. Under such circumstances, it's unsurprising, that he signed the score with the pseudonym Bagosi József.²

According to the historical experience, the setting of a great text, especially a well-known one may be a risky undertaking. However, the choir work genesis preceded the increasing popularity of Reményik's poem, characteristic for the 90' and after. This timing proved to be fortunate in other respects too. The fall of the communist regime brought new opportunities and challenges, enriching with fresh senses the semantic field of the text.

The *Church and School* also mirror the main aspirations of Birtalan's entire life: Reményik's passion his musical mission, the Transylvanian spirituality his aim for the peaceful coexistence of nations. Finally, it summarizes the basic values of the pedagogue, conductor, and composer, as a promoter of the musical mother tongue through the popular and church culture.

The particular tension of Reményik's poem results from an alternating ternary time structure: the severe, but encouraging sight of the ancestors and the sense of responsibility for the descendants that weigh heavily on the present. The increasing tension of the verses accompanied by the recurrent refrain-like warning culminates in a heavy call:

*„Don't you leave the church,
The church and school!”*

Birtalan's composition enhances in all respects the unfolding of the poetic thought. First – according to the nature of music – it makes possible a more profound emotional experience and transmission of the text, especially in such a case, when the passionate heightening of the recitation seems to be almost impossible. Further, Reményik's call for unity appears in the context of collective singing, increasing not also the power of text, but also its common experiencing.

It is also symbolic, that Birtalan uses the melody of the Geneva Psalm 90 (sometimes with text), both as a quote, both as a nucleus of the musical construction. He thus introduces a second meaning horizon, reinforcing the spiritual foundation of the message. So the psalm paraphrase is more than a quoted musical material. As a paradigmatic melody of the protestant church, it unfolds hundreds of years of history, revealing the power of religion

² The Bagosi pseudonym probably relates to his native village, Szilágybagos.

in the life of a community. According to László Dobszay, the Geneva Psalms have a normative and liturgical function, as well as communal-emotional and national-literary value.³

Moreover, the psalm *Lord, Thou hast been since Thou didst shape creation*⁴ became since the Bocskai uprising a sort of popular church hymn among the reformed, with a great significance during the communist regime.

The composer set only four strophes of the initial five. The omission of the third has a dramaturgic reason, since it expresses the personal reflection of the poet. We quote the entire text, the omitted part in brackets.

Church and School

*You do not intend any bad,
God is your witness to that.
But there isn't anyone
Who couldn't take this combat.
To this, God gives all of you
Undeniable right:
Don't you leave the church.
The church and school!*

*You honour all the order
That is basis for peace.
But not to hear ever again
God's Word in Hungarian?!
And your children at school
Not to hear their parent's word?
Don't you leave the church,
The church and school!*

*(Between this church and school
I used to run sometime
And cooled at the walls of church
This burning stern of mine.
How many times have I relived
The smooth springy age of my soul!
Don't leave the church,
The church and school!)*

³ Dobszay László: *A magyar népének [Hungarian Church Hymn]*, I., Veszprémi Egyetem Kiadó Iroda, 1995.

⁴ Translated into English by Wolter van der Kamp, 1972. <https://www.genevanpsalter.com> accessed: 28 04 2019.

*Even the beggar, the pariah,
The wand'rer has the right
To use the language and methods
His fathers did to worship God.
You the only one to be offered
The wayside and sky as church?
Don't you leave the church,
The church and school!*

*In your small and white church
All kinds of powers gather.
In the small white church-benches
Even the dead sit next to you.
Our grandmothers, our grandfathers
Have encouragement or blame in the eyes:
Don't you leave the church,
The church and school!*

(Translated into English by Vincze Zsófia)

The conceptual-emotional content of Reményik's poem led to a complex, sometimes very strained structure, with powerful contrasts, a polyphonic texture up to 8 divided voices, a speech-like rhythm, frequently changing tempo and character. It is articulated into four parts according to the strophes, with a musically increasing refrain. The psalm melody and its fragments have multiple roles in the economy of the work: cadence, interlude, transition material, or proper (even double) cantus firmus and choral melody. Moreover, Birtalan embeds the psalm text simultaneously with the poem in the first and last part of the work, connecting them metaphorically through music.

This structure is framed (so to speak: embraced) by an introduction and conclusion based on the same musical idea: a progressively widening texture sustained by a pedal point.

The opening material, a gradually evolving polyphony, is a melodic arch of more than 2 octaves, that passes from the lower to the upper voices. It is conceived in *d* Dorian mode, with a *d* Aeolian inflection in the cadence. This moderate introduction emanates a peaceful atmosphere, with several associations:

- the gradually built melody (always connected with a common note!) suggests the communion of generations in time and space, a central motif of the poem;
- the melodic arch that generates a solid, dense structure is a musical metaphor of the church, evoking the sublime value;
- the *a* vowel, as well as the closing descendant melodic curves, corresponds to the musical idea and emotional content of sigh;
- finally, the composer weaves into the soprano melody the psalm's beginning notes:

E.g. 1

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 1-6.

The first verse of the poem is set in the tenor voice („You do not intend any bad”). The quasi parlando melody starts with the first five notes of the psalm, but with a characteristic dotted Hungarian rhythm. Similar to the introduction, Birtalan keeps the modal ambiguity of the discourse: though the mode is still Dorian, the triton melodic turns bring a Lydian flavor:

Poco rubato (A tempo)

Te - ben - ned biz - tunk e -

Az Is - ten a ta-nú - tok re

In rilievo mf
Ti nem a - kar - tok sem - mi rossz - at, Is - ten a ta - nú - tok re - á, De

Az Is - ten a

- le - i - től fog - - va

á A
nin - csen a - ki köz - te - tek ezt a

nincs ki köz - te - tek ezt a har - cot ne vál - lal - ná.

ta - nú - tok har - cot áll. -

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 7-11.

The semantic unity of the first four verses appears in two connected phrases, where the second is a gradation of the first, especially through the divided tenor voice („But there isn't anyone/ Who couldn't take this combat.”).

All these are accompanied by the psalm melody set as *cantus firmus* in the divided voices of the soprano, along with the original text (“Lord, Thou hast been since Thou didst shape creation”). Besides the semantic importance, it also has the function to unify the two phrases.

The essential verse of the strophe („To this, God gives all of you/ Undeniable right.”) is emphasized by a contrasting *unison* material, rhetorically speaking a *noema*. During the cadence, that prepares the first refrain, the voices open to a wide E major chord:

E.g. 3

Eh-hez Is - ten mind-an - nyi - o - tok - nak vi - tat-ha - tat - lan - jo-got ád:
 Eh-hez Is - ten mind-an - nyi - o - tok - nak vi - tat-ha - tat - lan - jo - got:
 Eh-hez Is - ten mind-an - nyi - o - tok - nak vi - tat-ha - tat - lan - jo-got ád:
 Eh-hez Is - ten -mind-an- nyi - o - tok - nak vi - tat-ha -tat - lan -jo - got:

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 12-14.

The passionate refrain (“Don’t you leave the church/ The church and school!”) is the first culmination point of the piece (by the *f* 2 note of the soprano):

E.g. 4

f
 Ne hagy - já - tok a tem - plo-mot, a tem - plo-mot, sa z is - ko -
 Ne hagy - já - tok a tem - plo-mot, a tem - plo-mot, sa z is - ko -
In rilievo mf
 Ne hagy - já - tok a tem - plo - mot, A
 Ne hagy - - já - tok - a tem - plo - mot, sa z is - ko -

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 15-16.

The first interlude continues the psalm melody („Our dwelling place in evry generation.”), but speechless, in a polyphonic setting. The relieved material (*in rilievo*) appears again in the tenor voice:

E.g. 5

Musical score for E.g. 5, showing four staves of music. The lyrics are: lát! A lát! A a Ti. Dynamic markings include *mp* and *mf*.

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 17-20.

Since the second strophe of the poem increases in passion, it demands almost necessarily a basic change in the character and construction. Thus the tempo becomes faster (*Poco piu mosso*), signaling the urge of the warning. Though conceived in imitation, the texture basically remains isorhythmic, and due to the *tenuto* indication the character is quite heavy, almost lazy, according to the poet's disapproval of resignation („You honour all the order/ That is basis for peace.”):

E.g. 6

Musical score for E.g. 6, showing four staves of music. The tempo is marked *Poco piu mosso* with a quarter note equal to 76-80. The lyrics are: Ti meg - be-csül-tök min-den ren-det, meg-be - csül-tök. Dynamic markings include *mf* and *f*.

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 21-24.

The poet's question (“But not to hear ever again/ God's Word in Hungarian?!”) turns to a passionate (*con passione*) musical exclamation, where the soprano culminates on the *f* sharp 2, accompanied by seventh chords:

E.g. 7

f con passione (♩ = 52-54)

ne hall - já - tok so-ha-tób - bé Is - ten i - gé - jét ma-gya - rul? —

ne hall - já - tok tób - bé Is - ten i - gé - jét ma-gya - rul? —

ne hall - jad tób - bé Is - ten i - gé - jét ma-gya - rul? —

ne hall - jad tób - bé Is - ten i - gé - jét ma-gya - rul? —

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 28-30.

The answer is extremely vehement. According to the *Furioso* indication, the refrain increases in tension and also by extent. Its vehemence evokes the *Dies irae* parts of the requiems, as a hyperbolic warning: “Don’t you leave!”. The exclamations appear in an avalanche of descendant stretto imitations, starting from the g2 of the soprano. The divided parallel motions generate a complex polyphonic texture, producing harmonic conglomerates of even 7 superposed thirds:

E.g. 8

ff Furioso (66-69)

Ne hagy - já - tok! Ne hagy - já - tok a

Ne hagy - já - tok! Ne hagy - já - tok a

Ne hagy - já - tok! Ne hagy - já - tok,

Ne hagy - já - tok! Ne hagy -

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 33-34.

The passing of the storm is signaled by the reentry of the *cantus firmus* melody (without text) in the alto and bass (*in rilievo*), accompanied by the calming down warning, like an echo: „Don’t you leave the church/ The church and school!”:

CHURCH AND SCHOOL – BIRTALAN JÓZSEF'S CREDO

E.g. 9

az is - ko-lát, Ne hagy - já - tok a tem - plo - mot, az
 a
 A Ne hagy - já - tok a tem - plo - mot, az
 A

mf *mp* *mp* *mf*

In rilievo *In rilievo*

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 38-40.

In the penultimate strophe, Birtalan turns again – as a device of stressing – to the isorhythmic contrast, in a strongly syllabic discourse with permanent metre change (“Even the beggar, the pariah/ The wand’rer has the right/ To use the language and methods/ His fathers did to worship God.”). The unison melodic development based on a *b* central note is again a tool of gradation, as well as the *organum* structure, that evokes musically the distant past:

E.g. 10

Poco più mosso (♩ = 60-63) *poco a poco cresc.*

A kol - dus - nak, a pá - ri - á - nak, a jött - ment - nek is van jo - ga Is - te - né - hez
 A kol - dus - nak, a pá - ri - á - nak, a jött - ment - nek is van jo - ga Is - te - né - hez
 A kol - dus - nak, a pá - ri - á - nak, a jött - ment - nek is van jo - ga Is - te - né - hez

mp *mp* *mp*

ATTILA FODOR

poco rall.

a - pá - i mód - ján és nyel - vén fo - hász - kod - ni - a

a - pá - i mód - ján és nyel - vén fo - hász - kod - ni, fo - hász -

a - pá - i mód - ján és nyel - vén fo - hász - kod - ni, fo - hász -

a - pá - i mód - ján és nyel - vén fo - hász - kod - ni, a

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 43-47.

At this point, the composer inserts into the soprano and alto voice the psalm melody⁵, as a prayer:

E.g. 11

Poco meno mosso

(In rilievo)

A

kod - ni, A

kod - ni, A

A

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 48-51.

Though structurally resembles the former, the refrain's inverted direction anticipates the hopefulness of the last strophe („Don't you leave...”):

⁵ The corresponding text is: “Before the mountains were brought forth and grounded/ And Thou the earth and world hadst formed and founded.”

E.g. 12

Stringendo (♩ = 66-69)

Ne hagy - já - tok! Ne hagy -
 Ne hagy - já - tok! Ne hagy - já - tok,
 Ne hagy - já - tok! Ne hagy - já - tok a
 Ne hagy - já - tok! Ne hagy - já - tok a

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 57-58.

The litotes that occur in the last strophe („In your small and white church/ All kinds of powers gather./ In the small white church-benches/ Even the dead sit next to you.”) has a double function: on the one hand to signify the intimate atmosphere of timeless encounter with God and the ancestors, on the other, to emphasize the spiritual force that lies in the communion of tradition and faith. Therefore, Birtalan inverts the semantic levels applied during the piece: namely the text of the poem (explicit) with that of the psalm (implicit). In order to evoke the sacred space also by music, he introduces the passage related to the image of the church as recitation. Thus, the Psalm 90 appears first and last time in a full four-part setting, as a hyperbola of tradition and faith (“From everlasting stands Thy holy throne”):

E.g. 13

Religioso (♩ = 58)

Te vol - tál és te vagy e - rős Is - ten.
 A a a A a a
 A a a A a a
 A a a

SAVALATAI Kicsi fehér Most minden erök Kicsi fehér A holtak is
 templomotokba tömörülnek templom-padokba mellettük ülnek.

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 62-66.

The descendant mixture of the last refrain, though warning, brings peace („Don't you leave...”):

E.g. 14

f *Allargando*

Ne hagy - já - tok a tem - plo-mot, a tem - plo-mot az isk - ko - lát!
 Ne hagy - já - tok a tem - plo-mot, a tem - plo-mot az isk - ko - lát, a
 Ne hagy - já - tok a tem - plo-mot, a tem - plo-mot az isk - ko - lát, a
 i - dó - - - ben.

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 70-71.

The closing *d* note of the psalm („To everlasting”) becomes a pedal point for the coda, conceived like an arch, similar to the introduction, that culminates on the *a2* note of the soprano as a final exclamation:

E.g. 15

cresc. *ff*

mf *ff* *ff* *ff*

CHURCH AND SCHOOL – BIRTALAN JÓZSEF'S CREDO

The image shows a musical score for four staves (Treble, Alto, Tenor, and Bass). The tempo markings are 'poco a poco rall . . .' and the dynamic marking is 'ff'. The music consists of long, sustained notes with a gradual deceleration.

József Birtalan: *Church and School*, m. 74-79.

In the context of József Birtalan's oeuvre, consisting of approximately 300 – mostly choral – opuses, the *Church and School* is in our view a remarkable work. It testifies not only a precious artistic creed, but also his – scarcely exploited – outstanding compositional skills and aesthetic sensibility. He also followed in this respect – along with many of his Transylvanian fellows – the way of Zoltán Kodály, that of serving a community instead the promotion of a compositional career.

Translated into English by Attila Fodor

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