

CSABA SZABÓ: *THE BALLAD OF MASON CLEMENT*

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SUMMARY. The ballad of Mason Clement is known since the end of the 16th century. Csaba Szabó composed his work based on the version collected from Vlăhița, Odorhei county. He composed the adaptation of the ballad in 1967 for a mixed choir in four voices, for a children's choir and for a solo instrument. It was published in the booklet entitled *Egyszerű énekek I. (Simple songs I.)* in 1968. The tune is repeated twenty-one times by various parts of the mixed choir or by the instrument. Various tempo signs show the limits of the musical parts of uneven length, which are adapted to the lyrics of the ballad.

Keywords: ballad, recited lyrics, canon of fifths, swirly melodic line, skip in the extended fourth, glissando.

On November 12th, 2016 Csaba Szabó's 80th birthday was commemorated by a choral concert. Csaba Szabó is a Transylvanian composer, musicologist and university professor. The musical piece mentioned in the title was performed by the chamber choir of the Babeş-Bolyai University.

1. The Life and Oeuvre of Csaba Szabó

He was born on April 19th, 1936 in Acățari. He began studying music in the Music School of Târgu Mureş as a pupil of József Tróznér². Then he obtained a composer's degree at the Gheorghe Dima Academy of

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² Csaba Szabó evaluated the activity of his teacher as follows: "In high school we studied counterpoint far more than the usual requirement due to József Tróznér... We also studied orchestration under the name Instrumental music." See Láng Gusztáv, *Arckép történelmi háttérrel (A Portrait with Historical Background)*, In: *Üvegszilánkok között – Szabó Csaba emlékkönyv*, Cellissimo kiadó, Budapest, 2013, 11. During his music studies in Târgu Mureş his piano teacher was József Tróznér's wife, Sarolta Erkel who was the great-granddaughter of composer Ferenc Erkel.

Music of Cluj-Napoca under the guidance of János Jagamas and Gábor Jodál, a disciple of composer Zoltán Kodály³. He began his career as the conductor of the Official Szekler Folk Band of Târgu Mureş. As a composer he participated in the decisions regarding the repertory of the band.

Between 1963 and 1987 he was a teacher at the István Szentgyörgyi Theatrical Institute of Târgu Mureş where he taught the theory and history of music and a subject called the rhythm and tone of the Hungarian speech. He was a member of the Romanian Musical Performing and Mechanical Rights Society and he was the president of the Târgu Mureş branch between 1979 and 1986.

Then he moved to Hungary where worked as a teacher at the Dániel Berzsenyi College of Szombathely from 1988 until he passed away on May 23, 2003.

Csaba Szabó was active in several spheres of the Romanian musical life. He regularly dealt with issues regarding folk music, the history of music, prosody and music teaching. As a public writer he wrote pieces of music criticism, musical reviews and articles for magazines and omnibus volumes aiming to make musical science more intelligible for the public. He also held lectures on these topics in Romania, Hungary, France and the United States. He was a member in the editorial staff of the *Művelődés (Culture)* magazine. He participated in the organizing committees of choir meetings and professional courses. He collaborated also with several theaters. He wrote incidental music for pieces written by József Katona, János Arany, Mihály Vörösmarty, Áron Tamási, András Sütő, Andor Bajor and other playwrights.

In 1978 he won the award of the Romanian Musical Performing and Mechanical Rights Society for his musical piece entitled *Öt Dal Dsida Jenő verseire, szoprán hangra és zenekarra (Five Songs Adapted to Jenő Dsida's Poems for Soprano and Orchestra)*. In 1977 he edited volume I of a book entitled *Zenetudományi írások (Musicological Writings)* containing studies of Hungarian musicologists. In the same year *Hogyan tanítsuk korunk zenéjét (How to Teach Today's Music)* was published by the Kriterion Publishing House and in 1980 a collection of articles entitled *Zene és szolgálat (Serving by Music)*. In 1982 he presented at the Kodály symposium of Budapest his study entitled *A magyar népzene öt-fokú hangsorai (The Pentatone Scales of Hungarian Folk Music)*⁴.

³ The example of these two professors taught him to respect the Transylvanian Hungarian folk tradition and the Hungarian poetry and to be thorough in his research.

⁴ The above mentioned data can be found on the website of the Csaba Szabó International Society.

In 1999 he won the Golden Award at the Millennial Creation Arts Competition of the Hungarian Academy of Arts with his scientific work entitled *Erdélyi Magyar Harmóniás Énekek a XVIII. Századból* (*Hungarian Songs in Several Voices in Transylvania in the 18th Century*). The work in three volumes contains three hundred facsimiles. This is a unique work whose historical value is invaluable: it is an organic part of both the Hungarian and the universal church music culture. In this work Csaba Szabó analyzes the proofs pointing to the practice of Reformed church members to have sung songs in several voices, a practice whose reverberations can be found in the Transylvanian folk tradition up to this day.

His works as a composer: songs, choral pieces, chamber music pieces, symphonic works, masses and pieces written for plays.

2. The Ballad of *Mason Clement*

The ballad of Mason Clement is known since the end of the 16th century. It resembles the literary ballads, but the author is unknown. As a folk creation it was transmitted by oral tradition and therefore it has several versions. Csaba Szabó composed his work based on the version collected from Vlăhița, Odorhei County⁵.

The background of this ballad is an old belief according to which in order to please the natural forces one needs to sacrifice livestock, crops and sometimes even human lives. When building the fortress of Deva the masons believed that the walls built by them during the day collapsed by night due to a curse. And they wanted to turn away the curse by sacrificing somebody's wife from among themselves.

The action of the ballad is quite compact. It relates a tragic event. It has a discursive tone, lyrical monologues interchange with dramatic dialogues. Its language is obsolete. The Hungarian version contains the earlier form of the past tense, the "vala"-form: „esős idő vala” (it rained). Also elements of the Transylvanian folk dialect can be found in it. These elements are not necessarily taken over by Csaba Szabó. Another specific trait of this ballad is that words specific to folk songs like *csillagom* (*my light*) and the magical numbers specific to folk tales like the twelve masons or the pact repeated three times can be found in it.

The lines referring to the pact contain one of the unique traits of this ballad, the untold in the ballad: no one explains why the tender ashes of a wife's gentle body will prevent the fortress walls from collapsing.

⁵ Csanádi Imre-Vargyas Lajos: Röpülj páva, röpülj. (Magyar népballadák és balladás dalok.) (Fly, Peafowl, Fly! (Hungarian Folk Ballads and Ballad Songs), Budapest, 1954. 67-69.

There are several contrasts in the ballad. For example the tender body and the iron character, the strong will of mason Clement's wife. She gives orders to the coachman, does not dodge when disasters strike and she returns to the twelve masons of her own accord. Another contrast is the idea that the tender body of a woman holds together the walls of the high and strong fortress. When Mason Clement sees his wife approaching he starts to pray. In prayer one usually has positive requests. But Mason Clement asks for the four bay horses to break their legs, the four wheels of the coach two break into pieces so that somebody else's wife would arrive first. These contrasting elements provide the tension of the ballad.

Mason Clement stands between two impacting forces: finishing the fortress by all means which is the common goal of all the twelve masons and his love and care for his family.

And the tragedy is doubled: the mason's wife is sacrificed in order to build the fortress and her son dies due to heartbreak caused by the loss of his mother.

3. Analysis of the choral piece

Choral pieces have a very important role in the oeuvre of Csaba Szabó as a composer. As Mihály Ittész puts it: "he attempted to familiarize the public with new tones, new colours and new forms of expression"⁶ in these works. He composed the adaptation of the ballad in 1967⁷ for a mixed choir in four voices, for a children's choir and for a solo instrument⁸. It was published in the booklet entitled *Egyszerű énekek I. (Simple songs I.)* in 1968⁹. Although he was a supporter of the amateur choral movement this choral piece is so complex that it requires to be performed by a professional

⁶ Ittész Mihály, *A kórusműhelyében (In the Workshop of the Choral Composer)*, In: *Úvegstilánkok között – Szabó Csaba emlékkönyv*, Cellissimo kiadó, Budapest, 2013, 258.

⁷ The first performance of the choral piece was by the Choir of the State Singing and Dancing Band of Târgu Mureş and the conductor was Judit Birtalan. The ballad was sung several times also by the choir of Valea under the lead of Ferenc Nagy. See Csíky Csaba, *Az erdélyi kórusmozgalomban (In the Choral Movement of Transylvania)*, In: *Úvegstilánkok között – Szabó Csaba emlékkönyv*, Cellissimo kiadó, Budapest, 2013, 44.

⁸ The part of the instrument can be played on a flute, on a pipe, on an oboe, on a clarinet, on a zither or on a violin. The lyrics of the ballad are recited as choral speaking or by a narrator.

⁹ Besides the ballad this booklet contains the following choral pieces: *Szerelmi dalok (Love Songs)*, *Katonanóták (Soldier's Songs)*, *Menyasszony-táncoltató (Songs for the Bride's Dance)*, *Házass énekek (Married Men's Songs)*.

choir whose members know how to read the score¹⁰. The directions of the composer are that the 204 measures of the choral pieces should be performed in 8'50".

The basic tune of the choral pieces is a period consisting of 8 measures. Its structure of motifs is: ABCC. The tune is a descending one, the order of the cadences is 5-4-1-1. It was collected by Zoltán Kodály in Lázarea, Transylvania in 1910¹¹. Csaba Szabó made a slight variation to the 2nd-4th notes of the fourth measure of the tune.

E. g. 1

Parlando ♩ = cca 92 SZABÓ Csaba

Hangszer* 

Hsz. 

Measures 1-8

The tune is repeated twenty-one times by various parts of the mixed choir or by the instrument. In most of the cases (17 to be precise) in D Doric, three times in A Doric and once in G Doric.

The structure of the pieces is diverse. Various tempo signs show the limits of the musical parts of uneven length, which are adapted to the lyrics of the ballad.

¹⁰ „it is not meant to be performed by a rural choir. It takes at least half-professionals who can read the score for this scoring to be properly performed.” Ferenc László, *Zenei utazás Somosdon (Musical Journey in Cornești)*, In: *Utunk*, November 9th, 1969.

¹¹ The ballad was sung by Katalin Nagy (50 years old). The recording of this performance can be found in Budapest, at the ethnography section of the National Museum on gramophone cylinder no. 1274a. Its score was published in the volume *Népdalok (Folk Songs)* by Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók and later it had also a reprint edition in 1987 published by Rózsavölgyi és Társa publishing house.

E. g. 2

Parlando	Poco piu mosso	Tempo I	Piu mosso	Tempo I
ABCC/ABCC/CC	ABCC	ABCC	ABCC/CC/CC	ABCC/CC
1–20	21–28	29–36	37–52	53–64
d-dorian	d- dorian	d- dorian	d- dorian	a- dorian
Instrument				
Text				

Con moto	Tempo I	Poco piu mosso	Tempo I
=ABCC/ABCC/ABCC/AB=	CC/ABCC	ABCC/CC	ABCC
65–97	98–109	110–121	122–130
d- dorian	d- dorian	g-dor	d-dor

Piu mosso	Tempo I
ABCC/ABCC/CC	ABCC/ABCC/ABCC/ABCC/ABC□/ABCC –
131–150	151–204
a- dorian	d- dorian

The structure of the choral pieces

In the first part which has a *Parlando* sign the tune is performed by the instrument. And the recited lyrics attend only from the 9th measure on. Then the first, the introductory part of the piece closes with the second part of the tune being performed by the instrument again.

The *Poco piu mosso* in the 21st measure indicates the second part of the ballad. The soprano and tenor parts sing the tune in unisono; the lyrics tell us that the masons work in vain, since the walls constructed during the day collapse at night. In order to picture this conflicting situation the deeper voices (the alto and the bass) create a descending tetra chord melodic curve sung in parallel octaves.

In the *Tempo I.* part starting at measure 29 the combination of the instrument and the recited lyrics partly returns the only difference being the organ like sustained voice of the alto.

In the *Piu mosso* part starting in measure 37 the counsel of the masons is expressed by a canon of fifths sung by the tenor and the bass.

The masons' council decides that the first of their wives who comes to visit will be sacrificed and the ashes of her tender body will be mixed into the lime. The tragic atmosphere is intensified by the discordant second between the soprano and the alto which is repeated in every sequence of the descending melodic curve and which later turns into a lighter third and fourth. This part closes with an elongation performed by the instrument.

E. g. 3

Più mosso

S. *a.*

A. *a.*

T. *f*
Me-lyik fe - le - sé - ge ha - ma-rább jön i - de, Azt gyen - gén fog - juk meg,

B. *f*
Me-lyik fe - le - sé - ge ha - ma-rább jön i - de, Azt gyen - gén fog -

Measures 37-39

In measure 53 at *Tempo I*, the tune is sung by the soprano in *mp* and A Doric key, since the wife of Mason Clement, the tender woman is the one speaking, asking her coachman: "I want to go to my husband./Prepare the coach for the road." The alto voice accompanies the lyrics with a short motif of only a few sounds, then later, when the main melodic line descends to deeper notes it takes on this depth. At this moment the soprano is attending with repetitive, clear, ascending motives having a syncopathic rhythm, which symbolizes the departure. Between $c^1 - c$ the tenor gradually descends using an *f* sharp note, then it repeats the e-d-c trichord several times counterpointing symmetrically the soprano.

Tempo I.
mp

S.
Ko - csi - som, ko - csi - som na - gyob - bik ko - csi - som, Én u - ram - hoz men - ni

A.
Na - gyob - bik ko - csi - som,

T.
len - ne a - ka - ra - tom. haj, haj, haj, Fogd be a lo - va - kat in - dul - junk el út - ra, in - dul - junk el út - ra,

a a

Measures 53-59

In the dialogue like part starting *Con moto* from measure 65 the desperate voice of the coachman can be heard with *f* volume sung by the tenor part in D Doric key. He warns of the danger portended by the tragic dream and he suggests that they turn back. Through the soprano we hear the protest of Mason Clement's wife: „no, no...” in a descending tune emphasized by accentuation and proceeding with long notes. In measure 74 the cross reply of the wife is expressed in volume *f*: „Urge the horses, let us press on”. The alto and bass parts accompany this with seconds and thirds of dotted rhythm moving in opposite directions and using the interjection *alas* to express the state of spirit full of anxiety. In measure 90 the wife's order can be heard, but after the first half of the tune, after the AB part the tune is disrupted. Starting with measure 94 the increasing anxiety is symbolized besides the increase in volume and the acceleration of the tempo also by incomplete seventh chords based on gradually ascending notes.

E. g. 5

The musical score shows four staves: Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), and Bass (B.). The Soprano part begins with a rest, followed by a note with the dynamic marking *fp* and an accent, with the lyric "Nem,". The Alto part has a melodic line with eighth notes. The Tenor part has lyrics "for-dul-junk meg visz-sza, asz - szo - nyom, asz-szo-nyom for-dul-junk meg visz-sza." The Bass part has a rhythmic accompaniment with eighth notes. The Soprano part ends with a note and the dynamic marking *fp* and an accent, with the lyric "nem,".

Measures 67-69

In measure 98 returning to *Tempo I*, the instrument plays the second part of the interrupted tune, then the tune of the instrument continues coupled with the recited lyrics, similar to the introductory part.

The *Poco piu mosso* part starting in measure 110 is the most contradictory part of the ballad. Mason Clement sees his wife approaching and starts to pray to God. Yet this prayer sung by the bass part in G Doric key is a prayer containing destructive pleas: „My God, my God, take her away somewhere! May all my four bay horses break their legs, May all the four wheels of my coach break into pieces, May the burning arrow of God [thunderbolt] fall on the road, May my horses snort and turn home!”

The tragic atmosphere is accentuated by the sustained chords starting with the interjection *alas*, an accent and a clear rhythm formula of the accompanying parts. This part is closed by a recited lyrical elongation in 4 measures turning already into A Doric.

In measure 122 returning to *Tempo I*, the wife's greeting is heard sung by the soprano in piano volume and A Doric key to which the husband's reply comes from the bass.

In the *Piu mosso* part (measure 131) starting with the interjection *alas*, an upbeat and a discordant second, shortly before the tragic end of the ballad the canon of fifths of the bass and tenor parts lets the victim know her terrible faith. The swirly melodic line, the sudden skip in the extended fourth and the glissando in the part of the soprano are all meant to express the tense state of spirit. The musical texture becomes more

profuse in measure 139: the grim voice of the masons in the tenor and bass parts and the woman's plea to let her take leave of her woman friends in the soprano resound together. This part is also closed by an elongation in which the solo part of the instrument is accompanied by the perfect fifth interval between the parts of the tenor and the bass.

E. g. 6

f
p **Più mosso**

S. *f*
jaj, ———— jaj,

A. *f*
jaj, ———— jaj,

T. Most szé-pen meg- fo-gunk be - do-bunk a tűz-be, Né - ked gyen-ge

B. Most szé-pen meg-fo-gunk be - do-bunk a tűz - be, Né - ked gyen-ge ham-vad

Measures 131-133

In the closing part of the musical piece with the *Tempo I*, the introductory elements of the chorale return: only the instrument and the recited lyrics of the ballad can be heard. This is the introduction for a children's choir for two voices where the soprano sings the question asked by the child seeking his mother. The alto reverberates the question with sustained elongated notes. The father comforts his child in the bass, but cannot bring himself to tell him the truth. The dialogue continues between the two characters, the two parts: finally the father tells the child the truth. From measure 175 the tune played by the instrument couples with the recited lyrics of the ballad. The heartache of the crying child who calls his mother in vain is expressed by the sudden skip of the fourth in the bass and alto parts and by the dotted rhythm of the seconds in the tune of the soprano part.

Hsz. *mf*

S. *p*

A. *p*

T. *p* Elindula sírva az ő kicsiny fia, (=) Elindula sírva magas Déva várta. (=)

B. *p*

Measures 175-178

The lack of reply from the mother is symbolized by the B-D-G sharp chords sung by the mixed choir and sustained for seven measures in a row. Then, in measure 193 the vocal band is extended into six voices. The solo of the soprano renders the response of the woman, while the accompaniment emphasizes it intonating sustained seventh and ninth chords starting with an interval skip with dotted rhythm. In the closing measures the instrument is heard again; while the mixed choir sings a sustained ninth chord in eight voices.

Csaba Szabó's oeuvre is many-sided: he was a composer, a musicologist, a folk music researcher and a teacher. The cause, service, teaching and authentic preservation from generation to generation and research of Hungarian folk music constitutes an important part of his spiritual heritage. He composed fifty choral pieces. He was able to create novelty using the traditional.

Translated by Borbély Bartalis Zsuzsa

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