

THE ROLE OF PIANO PIECES IN KODÁLY'S LIFE

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SUMMARY. This study summarizes the composer's piano works for the occasion of Kodály's 140th anniversary. It introduces the role of the piano in Kodály's life, the works he became acquainted with during his studies, and whether he had the opportunity to perform them in concert during his lifetime. Other questions include which study trips could have influenced the composition of his piano pieces, in which period were the piano pieces written, and who were the performers of the first performances. The research method is documentary analysis. As a result of the research, it can be concluded that Kodály had no formal piano teacher. He acquired his knowledge through lessons from his sister. He was driven by curiosity to become acquainted with all of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier. He later used the instrument in his composing. We also found examples of him accompanying his songs in concerts.² The piano pieces were influenced by his study trip to France. The piano pieces were composed in 3 periods.

Keywords: Kodály, piano study, piano pieces, dawn, performers

Introduction

A composer's oeuvre is influenced by the genres they prefer, the instruments they play, and whether they can predict the performers of their works. Kodály was drawn to music from childhood. He heard his parents play the violin and piano and his sister play the piano, but he loved singing more than anything else. He studied on his own and tried to play several instruments. His favourite instrument was the cello. His earliest works include

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² Eöszé, László. *Kodály életének krónikája (Chronicle of Kodály's Life)*. Editio Musica, Budapest, 2007, p. 16.



a composition for cello, the Lyric Romance. He had no piano teacher. His sister taught him piano and gave him some lessons. After six months of study, he bought both volumes of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier and played them himself.³ He used the piano for his compositional work and made piano scores of his orchestral works. He played the Psalmus Hungaricus for example, several times in score form. There are also examples of him accompanying songs on the piano at concerts.

His study trips influenced his work as a composer. He spent a week as a student in Bayreuth and later longer periods in Berlin and Paris. The Paris trip was the most significant for him. He attended the orchestration lessons of Charles-Marie Widor. He met Romain Roland and the musicologist Jules Echorceville. He studied the piano score of Debussy's *Pelleas and Melisande* and the score of the String Quartet in G minor. On 12 May 1907, he heard Debussy's opera.⁴ His first piano pieces show the influence of the Paris trip.

Methods

The research method is document analysis. Exploring the scores, identifying the periods of composition.

Several studies⁵ have dealt with this topic, and our study presents the works in chronological order, focusing on the first publication and the performers. It covers transcripts and CD recordings.

³ On 6 November 1926 in Nyiregyháza, Kodály accompanied Mária Basilides on the piano, who sang from the Hungarian folk songs' series.

⁴ Eősze, László. *Kodály életének krónikája (Chronicle of Kodály's Life)*. Editio Musica, Budapest, 2007, p. 42.

Pándi, Marianne. *Hangversenykalauz IV. (Music Guide)*. Zeneműkiadó Budapest, 1980, p. 396.

⁵ - Breuer, János. *Kodály-kalauz (Kodály-Guide)*. Zeneműkiadó Budapest, 1982, pp. 332-352. Csüllög, Judit, „Kodály - Hét zongoradarab Op. 11 (Kodály - Seven Piano Pieces)”. In *Kodály jegyében (In the spirit of Kodály)* (edit. Csüllög, Váradi). Az Eszterházi Károly Egyetem Ének-zene Tanszékének tanulmánykötete, *Eger, 2020*, pp. 61-77.

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- <http://parlando.hu/Abraham-Kodaly.htm> (Accessed 12.12.2022)

The piano pieces of Zoltán Kodály can be divided into 3 periods.

The first period lasts until 1918. Several pieces belong to this period: *Meditation*, *Valsette*, *Nine Piano Pieces*, and *Seven Piano Pieces*.

Meditation (1907) sur on motif de Claude Debussy was composed by Kodály in 1907 but it did not get published until 1925⁶. „This piece was the immediate result of the experience of three months in Paris. It ingeniously develops the opening subject of Debussy’s string quartet. After an elaboration in various registers come string and harp effects that lead up to the virtuoso climax, after which some unusual parallel chords pave the way for an even more singular conclusion in which Kodály combines the diatonic chords with hexatonic chords that he had discovered in Paris.”⁷

The **Valsette**⁸ was composed in 1907. It is a piece with a Mediterranean atmosphere and its melody is characterised by minor thirds.⁹

Nine Piano Pieces¹⁰ Op. 3. (1909)

I. Lento, II. Andante poco rubato, III. Lento- Andante, IV. Allegretto scherzoso, V. Furioso (ques ego...), VI. Moderato triste, VII. Allegro giocoso, VIII. Allegretto grazioso, IX. Allegro commodo, burlesco

Kodály completes the series on 17 March 1909 for the birthday of Madame Emma Sándor¹¹.

The first presentation was performed by Béla Bartók in 1910 under the title *Zongoramuzsika* (10 Piano Pieces) with the addition of the *Valsette*. This presentation was at Kodály's first composer's evening on 17. March 1910. in the Royal Hall in Budapest.

The judgement of the works was not clear-cut, some praised them, and others disliked them. Later Bartók did not play all of them on his programme.

⁶ Kodály, Zoltán. *Méditation sur on motif de Claude Debussy*, Universal Edition, Wien, 1925.

⁷ Eöszé, László. “Piano Music”, In Zoltán Kodály: *The Complete Piano Music*, Hungaroton Classic HCD 31540-41. 1994, p. 5.

⁸ Kodály, Zoltán. *Valsette*. Universal Music Publishing and Editio Musica, Budapest, 1952.

⁹ Pándi, Marianne. *Hangversenykalauz (Concert Guide) IV*. Zeneműkiadó Budapest, 1980.

¹⁰ Kodály, Zoltán, *Kilenc Zongoradarab Op. 3 (Nine Piano Pieces)*. Universal Music Publishing, Editio Musica, Budapest, 1953.

¹¹ Emma Sándor (1863-1958) Hungarian composer and translator from 3. August 1910. wife of Kodály

The Nine Piano Pieces were premiered by pianist Tivadar Szántó¹² in Paris on 20 April 1910 at the Independent Music Festival. It was received with great enthusiasm by the composers who gathered around Ravel and by the members of the Independent Music Association. In 1914, Géza Vilmos Zágón¹³ played a few pieces from Op. 3 at Michel Calvocoressi's¹⁴ music history lecture. On 23 April 1914, Tivadar Szántó played Lento from the series at his recital. On 13 November 1917, Ernő Dohnányi¹⁵ played some pieces from Op. 3 at his recital in Budapest.

In the second half of the 20th century, at the Szeged Conservatoire, Sándor Bán¹⁶ frequently taught the Op. 3. The allegro giocoso in piece VII. was particularly popular.

Kodály was exploring new tonal possibilities, and pieces 4 and 8 show French influences. They each have different characters.

Seven Piano Pieces¹⁷ op. 11. (1910-18)

1. Lento, 2. Székely keserves/Székely lament, 3. „- il pleut dans mon coeur, comme il pleut sur la ville - (Verlain). Allegretto malinconico, 4. Sírfelirat/Epitaph, 5. Tranquillo, 6. Székely nóta/ Székely tune, 7. Rubato

The Seven Piano Pieces was published in 1918 by Universal Publishers in Vienna. The premiere was named after Béla Bartók 12 November 1921 in Budapest.

These pieces show Kodály experimenting on a higher level. Although there are no thematic links, the cycle is better integrated by emotional factors than in his previous pieces.

The 3rd and 4th pieces show French influences.

The epitaph is a tribute to the then recently deceased Debussy.

¹² Tivadar Szántó 1877-1934, pianist trained in Vienna, Budapest, Berlin, János Koessler, Kálmán Chován, Ferruccio Busoni were his teachers, His repertoire included works by Debussy, Ravel, Bartók, Kodály.

¹³ Géza Vilmos Zágón (1889-1918) - Hungarian composer, pianist, writer.

¹⁴ Michel Dimitri Calvocoressi (1877 – 1944) was a French-born music critic and musicologist of Greek descent who was an English citizen ...

¹⁵ Ernst von (Ernő) Dohnányi (1877-1960) composer, pianist and conductor was one of the most influential figures of the history of Hungarian music in the first half of the 20th century.

¹⁶ Sándor Bán (1914-2016) Hungarian blind teacher and pianist. In Szeged he took part in the first Bartók Competition in Budapest in 1948.

¹⁷ Kodály, Zoltán. *Hét zongoradarab Op.11 (Seven Piano Pieces)*. Zeneműkiadó Vállalat, Budapest, 1955.

Two tunes reflect the influence of Kodály's Transylvanian collecting trips: Székely lament and Székely tune.

The Székely lament is a folksong that was collected by Kodály in Gyergyószentmiklós in 1910.¹⁸

The latter piece also contains a written-out improvisational element, which Kodály often used in other works, e.g., in his *Sonatina* for cello and piano.

In the Székely tune, the rubato performance is accompanied by a recitative-like monophony and tempo changes.

Hungarian artists often performed the Székely lament and Székely tune. Annie Fischer¹⁹ performed the Székely lament in Moscow in 1951. Nowadays one of the most frequently performed pieces of the series is the Székely lament.

In the second period, Kodály composed the *Dances of Marosszék*²⁰ in 1927.

First performance was at 17.03., 1927. by Louis Kentner in Budapest. The *Dances of Marosszék* marks the virtuoso climax of Kodály's output for the piano. It is an arrangement of five Transylvanian instrumental tunes selected from those collected by himself and Béla Vikár²¹. The slow principal theme is a noble, moving *csárdás* with a rubato character, its varied recapitulations surrounding three episodes²². Formally a combination of the classical rondo and the Hungarian rhapsody developed by Liszt.

The slow part of the rhapsody consists of a chromatic melody and its threefold variation return: the faster first episode; the second episode, reminiscent of a flute solo; and the cantabile third episode (ABACADA), followed by the so-called fresh part, which is an intensification of a single melody.

Several memorable performances of the *Dances of the Marosszék* are associated in Szeged with Tamás Vásáry²³, Ádám Fellegi, and Noémi Maczelka²⁴.

¹⁸ Pándi, Marianne. *Hangversenykalauz IV. (Music Guide)*. Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1980, p. 396.

¹⁹ Annie Fischer (1914-1995), Hungarian pianist. She won the International Franz Liszt Competition in 1933.

²⁰ Kodály, Zoltán. *Marosszéki táncok (Dances of Marosszék)*. Universal Edition, Wien, 1958.

²¹ Béla Vikár (1859 -1945) Hungarian ethnographer.

²² Eősze, László. "Piano Music by Zoltán Kodály". In *Kodály Zoltán. The Complete Piano Music*. Hungaroton, 1992, p. 6.

²³ Tamás Vásáry (1933 -) Hungarian virtuosi concert pianist and conductor. He was an assistant to Zoltán Kodály, who was a mentor to the young pianist.

²⁴ Noémi Maczelka (1954 -) Hungarian concert pianist. From 1999-2017 head of the Department of Music at University of Szeged, Juhász Gyula Teacher Training College.

The third period saw the production of pedagogical works: Children's Dances (1945), 24 Little Canons on the Black Keys (1945), 12 Little Piano Pieces (1965).

Children's Dances²⁵ (1945): Allegretto, Allegretto cantabile, Vivace, Moderato cantabile, Allegro moderato, poco rubato, Vivace, Vivace quasi marcia, Friss/Fast, Allegro marcato, Allegretto leggiero, Vivace, Allegro comodo.

Each dance should be played half a note higher or lower.

The pieces follow in order of difficulty, with a typical even time signature from the 4th piece onwards, using triplets and quavers in the accompanying solo. The theme alternates between the two hands in a similar way to the Bicinium. The pedagogical works were introduced by Peter Frankl²⁶.

24 Little Canons on the Black Keys²⁷ (1945)

The Pieces from Nr.1. till Nr.10. are without tempo indication. Nr.11., Nr.13.: Andante, Nr. 14.: Andante cantabile, Nr. 15.: Allegretto grazioso, Nr.16.: Deciso, Nr.17.: Allegretto, Nr. 18.: Vivace, Nr. 19.: Allegretto, Nr.20.: Alla Marcia, Nr. 21.: Allegro, Nr. 22.: Marcato. Nr. 23.: Andantino, Nr. 24.: Allegro.

The first sixteen canons are to be deciphered from solmization signs.

Twelve Little Piece²⁸ (1965) were made for Szávai - Veszprémi Exercises for the piano.

It was also published in a separate volume by Editio Musica Budapest in 1973.

The Twelve Little Pieces is a model for beginners. The pieces were written in the pentatonic scale.

The first three pieces are 8 bars long. The tempo protection of the first and second pieces is allegretto; the performance style is for practicing tenuto strumming.

²⁵ Kodály, Zoltán. *Gyermektáncok zongorára (Children's Dances)*. Zeneműkiadó Vállalat, Budapest, 1953.

²⁶ Peter Frankl (born 2 October 1935) is a Hungarian-born British pianist. Frankl is Professor of Piano at the Yale School of Music in New Haven, Connecticut.

²⁷ Kodály, Zoltán. *24 kis kánon a fekete billentyűkön (24 Little Canons on the Black Keys)* Universal Music Publishing and Editio Musica, Budapest, 1954.

²⁸ Kodály, Zoltán. *12 darab zongorára (Twelve Little Pieces)*. Editio Musica, Budapest, 1973. Z 7029

In the second piece, the pairs of notes and double stops appear once in the left hand. The dynamics is mezzo-forte and forte. The second melody may be familiar to children from the children's songs of the *Kis emberek dala*²⁹ (*Song of Little People* Nr.13) by Kodály.

In the third piece, in addition to staccato, a pair of notes appear in tempo protection vivace, and the volume also rises to forte. The work also contains accentuation marks for the second quarter of the second time.

In the 4th piece, you can learn about primo-, secondo- signs, and the repeat sign. You will also be introduced to new musical techniques through the performer's instructions *allegretto cantabile*, the dynamics mezzo-forte and *espressivo*. The right-hand legato is made more difficult by the repetition of the two left-hand chords.

In 5th piece, a new performance instruction appears: *comodo*. Conveniently the piece consists of 8 bars. The *cantabile* indicates a singing performance. In the left-hand notation, the treble clef alternates with the bass clef.

The 6th piece consist of 2x8 bars, requires legato playing by both hands, and is characterized by canon construction.

The 7th piece consists of 12 bars. Tempo is *andantino*. Both hands are written in treble clef, the reading is made more difficult by the 3 extra lines in the left hand. And for the performance, apart from the forte dynamics, the composer gave no instructions. The finger order refers to the legato.

The 8th pieces in 12 bars. It is curious that in the first half of the period forte and piano are included. The tempo is *allegretto*, and a steady quarter pulsation can be felt in it. Legato playing can be practiced on both hands.

Pieces 9-12th are played again on black keyboards. The ninth piece consists of 16 bars. The tempo is *andantino*. Kodály used the terms mezzo-forte and *espressivo*. The novelty of the piece is that the lower part of the left-hand consists of 4 bars of sustained notes in the two-voice major, an octave range that the student must reach to get to the upper part of the left hand. in the piece, even pulsation and legato playing can be practised.

The 10th piece *vivace* dictates a lively tempo. The dynamics is forte, and repetition is piano, then in the second half-period mf. The left hand moves in large jumps: fourth, fifth, octave. The added finger orders help to hit the notes.

²⁹ Kodály, Zoltán. *Kis emberek dalai* (Songs of the Little People by Zoltán Kodály (1970) 50 children's songs for kindergartners to poems by Hungarian poets Universal Music Publishing and Editio Musica Budapest, 1970.

The eleventh piece consist of 12 bars, the tempo marking is *giocoso*, In the first half period the dynamics are *mezzo-forte*, and the repetition is *piano*, the second half period is *forte*, with *legato* playing alternating with *staccato*.

The 12th piece consists of 12 bars. The tempo is *allegretto*, new performance instruction: *scherzando*.

Prescribes the alternation of dynamics *forte* and *piano*.

In playing technique, the even notes alternate with *staccato* and *tenuto*, with a quarter pulsation in the first half period and an eighth pulsation in the second half period.

Out of the pedagogical pieces, this is the only series that does not have a CD recording.

Kodály pieces in piano transcription

Andor Földes³⁰ has transcribed for piano 3 items of the Hány János Suite by Kodály: Song, Intermezzo, and Viennese Chimes.

Kodály's work Galántai Táncok (Dances of Galánta) is known in a transcription by Jenő Kenessey.

Barnabás Horváth³¹ has written a piano transcription for four hands of Kodály's orchestral piece Variation on a Hungarian Folksong (The Peacock)

Transcriptions of Kodály Piano Pieces

The Seven Piano Pieces were arranged for orchestra by György Ránki³² It was a present for 80th Birstday of Kodály.

Zoltán Kodály attended³³ in the performance in the Academy of Music in Budapest.

Aurél Millos³⁴ created dance choreography for the Valsette.

³⁰ *Andor, Földes* (later *Andor Földes*; 1913-1992) was an internationally renowned Hungarian *pianist*.

³¹ Barnabás, Horváth (1965_) Hungarian composer

³² György, Ránki (1907-1992) was a Hungarian composer. He studied composition with Kodály at the Academy of Music in Budapest.

³³ Bónis, Ferenc, (szerk.) *Igy láttuk Kodályt*. Balassi Kiadó, Kodály Zoltán Emlékmúzeum és Archívum Budapest, negyedik javított kiadás 2017, p. 166.

³⁴ Aurel von Millos, Hungarian-Italian dancer (1906-1988), who was also choreographer and ballet director.

8 Pieces from the Children's Dances were arrangement for flute and piano³⁵ by Bántai Vilmos, B Sipos Éva.

Kornél Zempléni³⁶ and Ádám Fellegi³⁷ recorded all piano pieces by Kodály.

The transcriptions can only be heard on the CD of Ádám Fellegi.

Andrienne Krausz³⁸ recorded a new CD. with Kodály's piano pieces.

On 16 Dec 2022, Fülöp Ránki³⁹ performed all Kodály's piano works at the Kodály Memorial House.

Results of the research

We have explored Kodály's relationship with the piano and the influence of his study trips on his pieces. We have classified the piano pieces into the three periods of the composer's oeuvre. We can conclude that Kodály wrote mature piano pieces already in his first period. The Dances of Marosszék, written in the middle period, is a large concert piece that reproduces elements of instrumental folk music. Its performance requires great technical skill.

In the third period, pieces were created for pedagogical purposes to develop musical taste. We have described in detail the Twelve Little Pieces. We presented the transcriptions and new CD recordings.

Conclusion

Kodály's instrumental works are performed less, but the piano works are still valuable. The most frequently performed virtuoso concert piece is the Dances of Marosszék. The complete edition makes it possible to get to know all the works. Through the recordings of Ádám Fellegi we can also get to know the transcriptions.

³⁵ Kodály, Zoltán, *Children's Dances for flute and piano* (Bántai-Sipos). Editio Musica Budapest, 2020.

³⁶ Kornél Zempléni (1922-2013) Hungarian concert pianist and university teacher. Kornél Zempléni gave concerts in Europe and overseas. His performances feature Bach, Mozart, Debussy, Kodaly Bartók compositions.

³⁷ Ádám Fellegi (1941-) concert pianist. His repertory has a large scale of piano music including the standard pieces of the classical literature, many contemporary works and he is credited with several first performances.

³⁸ Adrienne, Krausz (1967-) Hungarian pianist She was the winner of the 1989 Cincinnati Wordl Competition.

³⁹ Fülöp Ránki (1995-) is one of the leading artists of the youngest generation of Hungarian pianists.

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