

## SÁNDOR VERESS'S *THRENOS* IN THE LIGHT OF 'TRADITION' AND 'RENEWAL'

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**SUMMARY.** This paper focuses on the musical analysis of Veress's orchestral composition, *Threnos*. Written in 1945 and dedicated to the memory of Bartók, it is a one-movement work, divided into three independent internal sections, each of them representing an orchestral gradation. Being a threnody, Veress inserts two folk-like funeral laments, which are the composer's melodic inventions, in the style of folk music. Veress, the ethnomusicologist and composer presents the bartókian principle of how to capture the ethos of folk music in its structure, melody, harmony, and rhythm, and how to express it in such a modern and innovative way, that a completely new quality is born from it.

**Keywords:** Sándor Veress, folk music, bartókian principles, style, compositional techniques, analysis, *Threnos*.

The destruction, loss, disappointment, and redrawing of state borders caused by World War II, shattered Hungary. It was the atmosphere, when Bartók's death was announced at the end of September 1945. This news was a shock to Hungarian musical life. As a collective response to this loss, musicians organized a memorial concert, scheduled – not surprisingly – for October 6. The loss of the victims of the war and the loss of Bartók were enfolded in the symbol of the fate of the thirteen martyrs of Arad. Peace and security were lost, and also the freedom of the homeland and culture. The concert included Kodály's composition for orchestra and mixed choir entitled *On the Tomb of the Martyrs* (*Vértanúk sírján*, originally *Arad*), Pál Kadosa's *Funeral Ode* (*Gyászóda*) for orchestra, and Sándor Veress's *Threnos*. Only

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ten days have elapsed between Bartók's death and the memorial concert, so "it is clear that the conception of these works precedes September 26. Nevertheless, Sándor Veress published this *Lament* as a dedication to the memory of Béla Bartók, under the title *Threnos*"<sup>2</sup>

*Threnos* is a one-movement work for a large orchestra (piccolo, 3 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, snare drum, cymbal, harp, violins, violas, cellos, double basses).

The orchestral work draws a huge arch in its dramaturgy and expressivity. Even though the composition consists of one single movement, it is divided into three independent internal sections. Each of the three sections is an orchestral gradation: they start from silence and gradually reach an emotionally ecstatic climax. These gradations are reflected through the intensifying and then – just at the very end – fading of the orchestration, density of voices, exploitation of the extremes of the instrumental and orchestral registers, dynamics, chromaticism, polytonal-polymodal layering of the harmonic structures, etc.

The composition begins with a soft timpani rhythm (funeral march), and due to its presence throughout almost the entire work, determines its entire fundamental character. In the first and second main sections, Veress introduces two separate funeral lament songs – both are the composer's melodic inventions, conceived in the character of folk music (folk funeral laments, wailing songs). These instrumental laments and their characteristic melodic motifs will represent the linear musical materials for the orchestral gradations. As a musical metaphor, the culminations, and climaxes of the first two sections are reached through ever-increasing emotional waves of the 'wailing', after which the orchestral sound suddenly breaks, in the same way, as it can happen during the wailing process in the folk tradition when the wailer wearily sinks in herself. The third major section also starts from the silence of the staggering, but after reaching its culmination, the orchestral musical texture fades gradually to silence. This last section is also a summary of the thematic material of the first two.

The first section (bars 1-40) begins with the timpani's solo, introducing the 'fate motif' and 'funeral march'-rhythm, through the stubborn, rigid pulsations of the continuous quarter-notes. The melody of the first lament or threnody (T1) evokes the characteristics of an archaic tune (style), having a descending melodic profile and a relatively small range. Referring to the relationship between speech and the development of archaic melody, Bence Szabolcsi states the following:

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<sup>2</sup> Tallián Tibor. *Magyar képek. Fejezetek a magyar zeneélet és zeneszerzés történetéből 1940-1956.* (Hungarian Sketches: Chapters from the History of Hungarian Music Culture and Musical Composition, 1940-1956). Balassi Kiadó, Budapest, 2014, p. 122.

"Intonation and melody are tightly linked together since their roots in the distant past are the same. This can be best proved by the life and speech of today's living primitives. The transition between the two is very quick, and the heightened, emphatic accent involuntarily changes into melody"<sup>3</sup>.

This is especially true in the case of mourning lament and wailing song: the expression of a very strong emotional charge is naturally raised in a higher register, to be followed by a lowering of the register as the emotional intensity decreases. This aboriginal, elemental force is present in chants and tunes with a descending melodic profile, and this is to be found also in *Threnos* by Sándor Veress. Although the melody shows the characteristics of folk music, is not a melodic quotation. This is confirmed also by the fact that the melody is born in front of the listener: the composer builds it on a melodic motif, based on the descending melodic step of a perfect fourth (with the attached seconds and thirds), and expands gradually into a melody, step by step:

**E.g. 1**

Andante, poco largo

Timp. *p* *3* rhythm of the "funeral march"

Vln. I *p*

Vla. *p* *3*

Cb. *p* pedal

**Sándor Veress: *Threnos*, 'funeral rhythm' of the timpani and the 'birth' of the melody (bars 1-5)**

<sup>3</sup> Szabolcsi, Bence. *A melódia története (The History of Melody)*. Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1957, p. 10.

The build-up of the melody with the use of small intervals, the descending profile, the frequent fragmentations of the melodic line, the relatively small range, the *rubato* character, and the melismatic ornamentation (mostly circumscriptive figurations) altogether indicate the use of the genre of archaic *doină*. The applied trills may hint even to a more specific variant of the genre, the *doină cu hăulit* (*doină* with quavering/breaking voice), which Bartók discovered in the Maramureş region during his field research, and which was first described and analyzed – from an ethnomusicological perspective – also by him.

The melody is played on the first violins over the soft (*p*) E pedal sound of the timpani and the double basses. Veress expands the orchestral texture gradually: first appears a melodic-rhythmic counterpoint on the violas, then a melodic dialogue develops between the cellos and violins, after which the harmonic texture will be expanded by the chords of the horns. The pillar notes of the descending fourth (E-H) and the E pedal note of the double basses suggest an E Dorian mode, but the later introduced F# note (on the violas), and the gradually expanding harmonic texture outline a B minor (Eolian). It is important to point out, that the harmonic structure of the fragment is in the main a verticalization of the multiple parallel melodic lines. Not only at the beginning, but also throughout the entire section, there will be noticeable a tonal-modal ambiguity, or, later, even a superposition of different, contrasting harmonic layers. The continuously alternating meters (3/4, 4/4, 5/4, 6/4, 7/4) frame the looseness, unpredictability, and improvisational character of the lamentation. The change of beats, associated with the alternating meters (especially in the case of the asymmetrical 5/4, 7/4), are of no significance this time: their role is simply to follow the musical notation of the *parlando*-like melody.

In bars 21-24 there is again a reference to Bartók: Veress exploits in the melodic line (build up dominantly by successive seconds and thirds) the mobile degrees, accentuating even more the tonal-modal ambiguity through the alternation of the minor and major third of the scale:

## E.g. 2



**Sándor Veress: Threnos, mobile degrees (bars 21-24)**

The gradation begins at bar 25 when all the orchestral instruments join in, and Veress prepares the first culmination using the head motif (in this case the descending tetrachord motif) of the song of lament. The elaboration of the diatonic melodic motif is accompanied harmonically by the E and B pedal notes and by a strongly rhythmized, F# based half-diminished seventh chord, which together constitutes a tense context in this huge orchestral gradation. In measure 30, marked *Poco grave*, the harmonic texture – due to a tonal shift – changes to F# minor, the timpani rhythm of the 'funeral march' is interrupted, and the orchestral *fortissimo*, reinforced by the snare drum and cymbals lead altogether to a climax, which suggests the emotional intensification of the lamentation and wailing. This orchestral climax is highlighted through a very effective, repetitive harmonic relation, which is a sequence of dynamic and harmonic '*glissandi*', as the symbolization of emotional discharge and flop-down caused by the very intense, almost delirious and ecstatic spiritual experience. The orchestral sound of this segment is defined by two melodic-harmonic layers: the first is the melodic line and its harmonic pedal support, played on woodwinds and strings, the second is a harmonic '*glissando*' realized through a descending chromatic minor seventh chord progression played on the brass instruments. The effectiveness of the sequence of harmonic *glissandi* is underlined by the joint of two tonally distant minor chords, the D minor and F# minor (five perfect fifths apart from each other). The sequence consists of multiple repetitions, ever closer and closer. As a short episode, the composer inserts in bar 33 a thematic fragment, played on the clarinets, above the syncopated chords of the harp, after which the whole sequence of *glissandi* is repeated.

## E.g. 3

The musical score reduction for the orchestral glissando in Veress's *Threnos*, bars 30-32, is presented in three staves. The top staff, for Flute, Oboe, Violin, and Viola, shows a melodic line in F# minor, marked *ff*. The middle staff, for Horns, Trumpets, and Trombones (transcribed), illustrates the 'orchestral glissando' through a descending chromatic chord progression: D minor 7, C# minor 7, C minor 7, and F# minor. This sequence is repeated multiple times. The bottom staff, for Clarinet, Fagott, Viola, and Contrabass, provides a harmonic pedal of F#-C#-F# and the 'funeral march' rhythm, also marked *ff*. Annotations highlight the 'melodic layer', the 'orchestral glissando', and the 'descending chromatic chord progression'.

Sándor Veress: *Threnos*, reduction: the orchestral glissando (bars 30-32)

Regarding the funeral laments present in *Therenos*, let's jump back fifteen years in Veress's life. At the age of 23, back in 1930, he went to Moldova to collect folksongs, without informing Bartók and Kodály beforehand. He got support for the journey from his father who had contacts in Bucharest and helped him organize it. Being one of the first collectors in that area, he returned to Budapest with a valuable collection of Csángó folk music (almost 150 folksongs recorded to phonograph cylinder). This melody-treasure Veress returned with, opened Bartók's and Kodály's hearts towards him, and the possibilities to begin his research as an ethnomusicologist. Veress also shared many interesting stories about the challenges of his collecting journey, stories which we are familiar with also from the experiences of Bartók and Kodály. In a biography interview given in 1985 to Ferenc Bónis, Veress mentions, how strange people in the rural area were looking at him, coming from the city with a phonograph on his back, which made the collecting of folk music often challenging – such as the huge and fearsome dogs at every house, or the mandatory brandy offered to him at every attempt to collect at a new household. And one more story, linked to the topic of our research, quoted from the narrative of Veress:

“I had also other experiences in Klézse. I knew there was an archaic type of lament and wailing song still alive in that region, and I wanted to record it by all means. But every time I was inquiring about it, I was told that yes, the old women still know these laments, but I should wait, until St. Michael's horse<sup>4</sup> came for someone, because they cannot be sung 'just like that', there needs to be a dead person, so they can be sung. I answered this was hard because I could not wait for half a year until someone died in Klézse to record the song. There was no way to do that. There was a woman, who knew many funeral laments and could wail. Somehow, I managed to convince her to sing me wailing songs in secret. It was a real conspiracy to prepare this, because if they knew that she was singing funeral laments and wailing songs 'just like that', she would have been ostracized. At the end of the village, there was a two-story pub, which had a room upstairs. In complete secrecy, we agreed to meet there on Monday evening, around ten o'clock. Then this woman would come and sing me laments so that no one else could hear. So, I went. It was a windy night, just before a storm. It was dark outside, the wind blew, and we were inside the house, preparing for the seance by the light of a paraffin lamp. Because it was undoubtedly

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<sup>4</sup> It is a specifically Hungarian expression for 'if someone passes away'. The 'St. Michael's horse' is type of wooden handbarrow or stretcher with four legs, on which the coffin was placed during the funeral, and then carried to the grave by four men lifting it on their shoulders.

a seance. It took a while until the woman got attuned to the situation: she recalled the death of her mother so that she could mourn her. Finally, she falls into a trance and wails at her mother with astonishing passion. As if her dead body were in front of her. But in the meantime, she was moving, going back and forth. What could I have done? I could not record it, as I couldn't follow her with the phonograph. Nor could I convince her to sing the wailing song into the phonograph's horn. It was impossible to talk to her at all: she was wailing in a deep trance. Thus, sitting in the corner, I could only take some incomplete notes, resigning to the fact that making a phonograph recording was impossible. After the seance, the woman was totally exhausted. She sat down and I had to wait until she came to herself. That was the end of the lamentation, without me having recorded any sound of it. Unfortunately, it just happened like this."<sup>5</sup>

The second major section (bars 41-88) starts again with the rhythm of the 'funeral march' on the timpani, and regarding the dramaturgy of the whole section, Veress constructs another orchestral *crescendo*. The solo oboe presents a new instrumental mourn lament or threnody (T2), in the style of the folk melodies. Its melodic motion is sinusoidal, meander-like, and it is a prolonged melody (bars 43-56). In folk music, this kind of genre is called *doina* or *cântec lung* ('long melody'). This new melody also indicates that Veress was not only a collector of folk music, but as an ethnomusicologist and composer, he was able to capture their character, style, and ethos, and to integrate them into his melodies or compositions. Just like Bartók did.

The melody of the lament is first played in the middle and upper registers of the oboe, therefore flutes and violins are absent during its whole presentation. The steadily pulsating Bb notes of the timpani serve as rhythmic and harmonic support to the melody, and in the accompaniment the composer uses, on the one hand, the clarinets, through sustained whole notes (in *Andante*) organized in ascending and descending B-minor scale, on the other hand through a short, rhythmized series of intervals and chords, played on the violas and cellos. The strings, using the rhythm of the 'fate motif', form a harmonic and rhythmic counterpoint to the melody and the clarinet 'scale' (bars 43-56). Due to the fact, that the chords of the strings follow the stepwise ascending and descending notes of the clarinets, they stay in the harmonic frame of the tonality-modality, but with loose functional

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<sup>5</sup> Bónis, Ferenc. *Üzenetek a XX. századból. Negyvenkét beszélgetés a magyar zenéről (Messages from the 20th century. Forty-two conversations on Hungarian music)*. Püski kiadó, Budapest, 2002, p. 116.

relations between them – we find chord progressions like e.g. C# diminished → D major → B minor seventh → C major seventh [with M7] → D major → C major seventh → B minor → C major seventh.

**E.g. 4**

**Sándor Veress: Threnos, funeral lament – cântec lung (bars 43-56)**

In the final bars (see bars 53-54) Veress shifts the melody of the mourning lament from diatonic to chromatic mode, which technique is characteristic of the music of Bartók. The conclusion of the melody (see bars 55-56) is a descending motif of range of a seventh, which motif becomes an important thematic material during the further elaboration process. In bars 55-56 the composer uses a surprising tonal leap: the ending of the melody heads towards a G minor/Dorian, but the cadence outlines ‘a sort of’ B minor. This tonal shift launches an elaboration process, in which the composer combines the presented thematic motifs (i.a. the transformed opening melodic motif, the descending-profiled ending motif, the rhythmic ‘fate motif’, and a thematic motif from the first funeral lament) and realizes a slow but intense gradation, culminating in an ecstatic climax in bars 87-88.

**E.g. 5**

**Sándor Veress: Threnos, contrapuntal use of two motifs of the second threnody (bars 56-58)**

The rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic texture gradually expands and thickens. Here also, Veress’s writing technique is fundamentally rooted in linear thinking: he introduces, leads, and combines the different melodic layers parallel, in a contrapuntal way (strings, woodwinds), and despite the inserted chordal harmonic support (mainly brass and woodwinds), the

defining harmonic layer will be that one, which develops from verticalization of the parallel melodic lines. There is a constant tonal contrast between the two simultaneous harmonic layers, and the tension is caused by the fact, that the parallel harmonic structures (intervals, chords), in most of the cases, cannot be reconciled within the framework of the tonal-functional system. As an example, we quote a segment from bar 66 onwards. As a musical symbol of emotional tension, we find here a powerful harmonic tension, which at first seems to be a chromatic cluster, but which is a combination of the two contrasting parallel harmonic layers. The cellos, double basses, bassoons, horns, and trombones represent a first harmonic level, while the flutes, oboes, English horns, clarinets, trumpets, violins, and violas a second level. To exemplify the contrast and tension between the two, let us analyze the harmonic texture of bars 71-74. The first layer is formed by an E minor chord and represents a rhythmized harmonic pedal, while the second layer is built up from a progression of the minor chords Ab-Gb-Eb-Db-Cb, configured as a verticalization of three parallel running melodic lines. The tonal antagonism between the layers is evident, and as a general impression, we hear a block of dissonances, as superpositions of major seventh, minor ninth, augmented fourth, etc. As a 'counterpoint' to this highly dissonant harmonic texture, the melodic lines are entirely diatonic, moving first in a tetratonic and then in a pentatonic modal range, as if it would echo the pentatonic 'peacock' melody, that Kodály also used in his set of variations.

## E.g. 6

**Sándor Veress: Threnos, reduction:  
polytonal parallel harmonic layers (bars 71-74)**

The harmonic tension, created by such superimposed layers and blocks of dissonances, increases until bar 86. Veress creates tension not only between the opposing parallel tonal layers (polytonality and polymodality) but also within the same layer: between bars 70-80, in the mentioned first pedal

layer, we depict the juxtaposition of the chords E minor – Bb minor – Db minor – G major – D minor, which series of chord progressions overrides functional thinking, emphasizing the coloring effect of the harmonization. The melodic-harmonic tension is complemented by dynamic, orchestral, and rhythmic intensification. As a further example, we quote the three trumpet parts of the bars 80-86, where the composer creates a complex rhythmic texture of triplets, full sudden interruptions (short breaks), and complementary rhythm structures – generating a distinctive and modern variant of the Renaissance *hoquetus* writing technique.

E.g. 7

The image shows a musical score for two trumpet parts, labeled 'Tr. (in C)'. The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of two staves. The first staff begins with a forte (f) dynamic and features a series of eighth-note triplets, some with accents. The second staff also begins with a forte (f) dynamic and features a series of eighth-note triplets, some with accents. The score is marked with 'f' and '3' to indicate triplets and accents.

**Sándor Veress: Threnos, rhythmic enhancement:  
hoquetus of the trumpets (bars 85-86)**

The climax (bars 87-88) is realized through a harmonic shift ('chromatic modulation'), starting from the harmonic context of a D minor and shifting to a context based on the notes of the minor third Ab-Cb. The orchestra, exploiting its full range (from the upper register of the piccolo to the lower register of the bass trombones), plays the notes of the minor third in *ffff*, which – after the tense harmonic gradation and the blocks of dissonances – is shocking, and misses the sense of any consonance. It gives the sense of a huge, intense emptiness.

The third major section is preceded by a general pause (P.G.). The orchestral *ffff* suddenly changes into silence, which gives the sense of muteness, of being unable to speak. The violas' short and soft pizzicato notes in the low register, repeatedly interrupted by short rests, symbolize the clumsy attempts to speak. Veress – again as a musical metaphor – introduces in bar 93 a derivate of the ending motif of the second mourning lament. This motif starts with a *glissando*, is played in *forte*, includes the interval of the augmented second in its descending melodic profile, and its range stretches from Ab to A (diminished octave). The composer marks with the suggestive *Rubato appassionato* indication.

## E.g. 8

**Rubato appassionato**

Vln., Vla.,  
Vic., Cb.,  
Cl., Fg.

**Sándor Veress: Threnos, derivate of the ending motif of T2 (bar 93)**

After the pizzicatos of the cellos appears another *doina*-like melodic fragment on the English Horn (bars 97-100), in *piano espressivo*, with the indication of *Rubato*, and with a descending profiled ending in *ritardando*. It could be the end of the composition. But the third major section is also a summary of the first two. Both threnodies appear in their entirety (with minor changes, and in another modal harmonic context): the first funeral lament (T1) from bar 101 onwards, and the second (T2) from bar 139 onwards. The melody of the first lament and its further developed version prepares the intensification and culmination, while the second melody the return to calm and silence. Veress realizes this third wave of intensification and gradation first through the development and intense chromaticism of both the melodic (linear) and harmonic (vertical) texture. From the bartókian compositional techniques and procedures Veress adopts the use of linearly 'creeping' and vertically polymodal chromatism, the use of mobile degrees (which creates the ambiguity of the melodic and harmonic texture), and the tonal shifting of the linear and vertical structures.

## E.g. 9

**Sándor Veress: Threnos, polymodal chromaticism and use of the mobile scale degrees (bars 117-122)**

In its dramaturgic structure, the third main section – in contrast to the previous two – is not a gradual build-up and then an abrupt fall back of tension, but an arched structure built upon the matrix of tension and release. After the peaks and culminations of the ever-increasing emotional waves of mourning and wailing in the first two main sections, *Threnos* concludes in this final section with an orchestral (and emotional) *decrescendo*, fading into calm, and – probably – into resignation. For this closing, Veress reuses the ending motif of the second lament, with its characteristic descending melodic profile, and features it first as the melodic material of an instrumental dialogue (even in an overlapping, *stretto*-like manner), then as a ‘farewell’ motif (by slowing the tempo and lengthening the note values of the motif). The endlessly slowed-down melodic motif dies away, leaving only the rhythmic ‘fate motif’ of the timpani, as a memento of the inevitable fate.

“Sándor Veress’s threnody, dedicated to the memory of Béla Bartók sublimates the inner dynamics of the mourning lament into a large-scale arch structure. Following ancient spiritual and esthetic paths, he gets from the soundless depth of the pain through the stage of fragmented melody-signals to the passionate, rich-sounded mourning lament, just to subsequently fall back almost unwittingly into the silence of passing away.”<sup>6</sup>

In this orchestral work, Veress enriches his musical language, for the purpose of expressivity, with new compositional techniques and characteristic stylistic features. He uses: continuously alternating meters for highlighting the *parlando* character; rhythmic and metric asymmetry; rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic *ostinato* elements; polyrhythmic and polymetric structures; refined polyphonic textures; large-arched intensifications, gradations, and orchestral *crescendos*; free construction of the form; melodic improvisatory elements; folk music character; predominantly linear thinking; contrapuntal development; continuous linear and vertical chromaticism (many times modal and polymodal chromaticism); harmonic ambiguity; modal, neomodal, neoclassical and expressionistic use of harmony (sometimes polymodal and polytonal); dissonant juxtaposition and superposition of contrasting harmonic layers; melodic and harmonic shifts (‘chromatic modulations’).

*Threnos* is an example of how ‘tradition’, the classical and folk music heritage can be creatively translated and transformed into contemporary music, and how this ‘renewal’ integrates the newly developed compositional

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<sup>6</sup> Tallián Tibor. *Op. cit.*, p. 429.

techniques and procedures, highlighting at the same time the urge and also the implementation of the compositional 'innovations'. This principle was declared by the author himself in 1960, namely "the bringing together of old and new techniques and expressions, the tradition and the 'present' in a great synthesis. I consider this the only possible solution in this shameful age of intellectual and anti-intellectual barbarism"<sup>7</sup>.

The music of Veress reflects once again the main bartókian compositional principle: to capture the ethos of folk music in its acoustic-harmonic system, structure, melody, and rhythm, and to express it in contemporary modern classical music in such a way, that a completely new quality to be born from it. 'Tradition', 'renewal', and 'innovation' in symbiosis, at the end of the first compositional period of Sándor Veress.

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<sup>7</sup> Demény János. *Op. cit.*, p. 45.

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