

## INTERPRETATIVE ELEMENTS OF GYÖRGY KÓSA'S CHINESE SONG SERIES FROM AN ART PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

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**SUMMARY.** I got to know the art of György Kósa (1897-1984) during my performing career. During the performances of the first *Chinese Songs* series, the songs inspired me to learn more about the composer. Delving into the literature shed light on the composer's artistic concept, elements of which I can identify with also as a performer. It can be said that, even if we focus only on his songwriting, his most important role as a songwriter is to communicate values. His choice of lyrics is based on a profound knowledge of twentieth-century Hungarian and world literature, and his literary themes represent both the cultural and mental-spiritual well-being of the time, and satisfy the musician's need for expression, both on a personal and a communal level. György Kósa's oeuvre as a songwriter is a densely woven structure, consistently and organically formed. The songs are each a microcosm of their own, linked to a particular state of being, time and emotional mood of the individual, and in portraying this, the literary and musical tools employed can all be accurately mapped.

**Keywords:** Chinese songs, György Kósa, Po Chü-i's poetry, Sándor Weöres, performing arts, creative arts, singing voice, Stella Ferch

### Introduction

I got to know the art of György Kósa (1897-1984) during my performing career. During the performances of the first *Chinese Songs* series, the songs inspired me to learn more about the composer. Delving into the literature shed light on the composer's artistic concept, elements of which I can identify with also as a performer.

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In György Kósa's work, music and music-making go beyond the scope of pure art. His personal self-determination and the assessment of critics agree that the sung text fulfills a missionary role, that the mission of music (especially in the case of songs, cantatas, oratorios, and choral works) is to reveal the underlying poems and to communicate meaning that requires a confession of belief. In all cases, the music bears the imprint of the composer's own mark, the imprint of his personality. However, in György Kósa's works, the element of transmission is just as important. Even the most personal work reveals the communal experience of existence that radiates from both contemporary literary texts and intelligently selected texts from earlier eras. In his compositions, the singing voice is a prominent function in bringing the text to life in a more intelligible and dramatic way. Artistic humility in the face of literary and cultural tradition and the musical fulfillment of the human voice's ability to communicate the text are the fundamental aesthetic and ethical values on which this extremely varied oeuvre, balanced in quality and proportion, is based.

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György Kósa's oeuvre as a songwriter is a densely woven structure, consistently and organically formed. The songs are each a microcosm of their own, linked to a particular state of being, time and emotional mood of the individual, and in portraying this, the literary and musical tools employed can all be accurately mapped.

However, it would be one-sided if we were to analyze only individual works. In György Kósa's life, the choice of themes, the frequency, the cultural and, within that, the musical message of his songs changed from one era to the next. Behind these changes there are often personal experiences, such as the growing awareness of faith at the time of his baptism; the tragedy of the Second World War and the Holocaust, experienced in the lives of his loved ones; the momentum of his new beginning after 1945; and the extremely rich literary material ranging from confessional to philosophical pieces. Personal destiny is thus a natural, given framework for interpreting the interrelationships between the works and, to a certain extent, their genesis and impact.

To interpret the songs, it is necessary to point out the dimensions in which the works were created, which determined their relationship to their audience, and in which the works acquire their current meaning during their reception.

## The songs of György Kósa

György Kósa (1897-1984) was a Hungarian composer who worked across a wide range of genres. He has written string quartets, symphonies, and ballets, but his art is essentially focused on vocal genres. In addition to operas, oratorios and cantatas, his song literature is also outstanding: it is the largest genre category he has composed in his career. He has interpreted the boundaries of the genre broadly: miniatures are as much a part of the genre as are series or works requiring solo cantatas. György Kósa formulated his basic idea of the singing voice as follows: "The singing voice is the most vivid and perfect expression of music's essence, if it is indeed artistic".<sup>2</sup> His aim was also to convey the message and feelings of the poem, in his own words, "I do not play music to assert myself, but to become a humble transmitter of either the piano pieces or the composed works".<sup>3</sup> The primary requirement of identification with the text led Kósa to *set the poems to music*, in his own words. "If I set a text to music, I identify completely with the text (structure, form, atmosphere)".<sup>4</sup> This formulation gives us a precise indication of the qualitative difference and also the starting point for the analysis of the songs. In each study, the *lyrics must be analyzed and interpreted first*, and only then can the music written to accompany them be examined.

An important adjunct to Kósa's song analyses from the point of view of composition, as described in the literature,<sup>5</sup> is that he was an inspired improviser, to quote his own words: "I compose as I feel, and I always try to express honestly what I feel".<sup>6</sup> His *style* and *tone* were influenced by Chopin, Debussy, Richard Strauss and Wagner (by his own admission, he was also a Wagner fan) at the *beginning of his career*, but *he broke early* on with the tonal gesture and the dominant-tonic relationship and worked mostly with seventh chords. His music is essentially expressive, saturated in gestures.

In his songwriting, the choice of themes was usually determined by the *zeitgeist* and personal experiences. He has set to music poems by Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, Sándor Petőfi, Dezső Kosztolányi, Árpád Tóth and Lőrinc Szabó, among others. He also had great success with his setting

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<sup>2</sup> Kósa Anna p. 148, quoted by Katalin Szacsvai, in Melinda Berlász (ed.): *Kósa György*. Akkord Publishing House, Bp. 2003. p. 47

<sup>3</sup> Anna Kósa p. 163; *ibid.* p. 49

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Anna Dalos: "Pályakép" [*Career Path*] in Melinda Berlász (ed.): György Kósa. Akkord Publishing House, Bp. 2003. p. 23

<sup>6</sup> „Amikor pályakezdő voltam...” [“When I was a newcomer...”] – Kósa György: „A zenében nem lehet csalni” [*There Is No Cheating in Music*] in Muzsika [Music], 1984, (XXVII, 5.) pp. 7-10

of children's poems by Zsigmond Móricz. He composed more than 300 songs.<sup>7</sup>

In his early songwriting period, between 1918 and 1924, the Endre Ady experience was at its strongest. In Ady's poetry, the composer confessed, "a single word opens up worlds with rhapsodic concision; it is not enough for the composer to provide an indifferent background to the text, he must compose a form that complements the poem, is coherent, adaptable and yet musically constructed, worthy of the poem".<sup>8</sup> His comment on Ady's compositions could be seen as the *ars poetica* of his entire songwriting career.

A wider range of literary themes and a more consistent development of musical form characterize the period from the mid-1920s to the late 1930s. In addition to texts by Sándor Petőfi, József Erdélyi, Árpád Tóth and Dezső Kosztolányi, he drew mainly on the writings of Mihály Babits. In the period from 1938 to 1943, the role of the singing voice, i.e. the solo voice, became more prominent, and he neglected the choir, and in addition to compositions with piano accompaniment, songs without instrumental accompaniment also emerged.

The period from the mid-1940s to the late 1950s resulted in songs with a strong personal inspiration. The sung poem is also a suitable vehicle for expressing content that cannot be expressed in any other form, because the medium of personal communication is always an already canonized text, present in the literary public consciousness and known to the artist-intellectuals. In addition, the world of literature and music also offered György Kósa a safe haven from the grim reality of the 1950s.

The 1945 piece, composed to Attila József's poem *The Scream*, begins the era of new beginnings with its disturbed drama, while the 1947 *The Curse of Today's Prophet* (Endre Ady) and the 1948 *The Sea Risen* (Sándor Petőfi) also display strong feelings and emotions. The year 1954, if not a sharp turn, certainly represents a series of gentler themes in search of peace, tranquility, and happiness, with the *Four Songs of Csokonai* and the *Chinese Songs based on Po Chü-i's poems*.

The end of the 1950s shows signs of a crisis, but outstanding masterpieces are still being composed, such as *Three Songs to the Poems of János Pilinszky* and 1961 *New Songs to the poems of János Pilinszky*. The song compositions of the 1960s and 1970s are extremely rich in themes, with the author returning to poetic texts from which he had previously

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<sup>7</sup> Bielickyné Buzás, Éva: *Találkozásom Kósa Györggyel (1980. május 07.) [My Encounter with György Kósa (07 May 1980)]*, Bielickyné Buzás, Éva: *Emlékezzünk Kósa György zeneszerzőre [Remembering Composer György Kósa]* 15 June 2020, <https://xn--hajdnc-lwa7t.hu/emlekezzunk-kosa-gyorgy-zeneszerzore/> Last accessed on: 2022. 07. 01.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

chosen lyrics. The higher proportion of world literature present in the works of these years is striking.

The *Chinese Songs* may be a summation of György Kósa's art at the time, but it could also be its culmination. In 1955 he was awarded the Erkel Prize, in 1963 the Meritorious Artist Prize and in 1972 the Distinguished Artist Prize. He also gave several recitals with the participation of regular artists.

In an interview in 1980, he described the process of setting poetry to music: "Poetry often has such a powerful effect on me that I feel it as my own. It happens that I set the whole text to music word for word, but if the music requires it, I shorten it, change it, respecting the poet's intention, of course. Then I add something of my own feelings to complement what the poet has to say".<sup>9</sup>

He got to know the Chinese poets, and especially Po Chü-i, by chance: through his second wife Stella, who bought the collection, and according to György Kósa's account, they chose the poems of the first series of songs together. His songs are characterized by *simplicity*. The melodies are characterized by their *adaptation to the text* (which can be mosaic-like) and *recitative* (declamation, recitative melody). The *accompaniment plays a secondary role*, essentially *commenting* and *connecting* the elements; it allows the vocal solo to prevail; at the same time it helps the form to develop. In this, a conscious composer's self must also be kept in mind, as the composer says: "When I have a compositional plan outlined, I sometimes wait months for it to take a more definite shape, and the inner content that emerges dictates the form".<sup>10</sup> Its scales are in accordance to the period: in addition to diatonic and pentatonic scales, we find modal scales as well.

It is also characterized using fourths and seconds, compared to which the tenth and sevenths chords already sound as more consonant, and by the use of *mixtures* based on a given series of notes.

When studying György Kósa's music, especially his songs, two important experiences from the composer's musical past must be considered.<sup>11</sup> Even at the beginning of my research, I was struck by the 2-4 beat unity of the introductions of the songs, and the simple sustained chords used in the vocal solo, the parts that emphasize the vocal solo and the essence of the pieces. The introductions of the songs are essentially closely linked to the theme of the song, in its various versions. This kind of introduction and attunement in piano accompaniments is familiar from dances (ballet, improvisational dances), where it is called preparation and formulates the basic character of the piece, thus helping to present it accurately.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Péter Zsoldos, "György Kósa", in *Muzsika [Music]*, 1972 (XV, 4), p. 12

<sup>11</sup> Dalos Anna: „Pályakép” [Career Path], Szacsvai Katalin: „Dalok, dalciklusok” [“Songs, Song Cycles”] and Halász Péter: „Oratóriumok és kantáták” [“Oratorios and Cantatas”], in: Melinda Berlász (ed.): *Kósa György*. Akkord Publishing House, Budapest. 2003. pp. 11-125

György Kósa had the necessary experience to do this, as at the beginning of his career he was the piano accompanist for Valeria Dienes' dance group, with whom he toured Italy for two years. The declaiming phrasing, underpinned by chords, is reminiscent of the recitativo secco known from baroque music. The function of the melody, usually with little movement, in the Baroque period was to narrate the event/story, and the accompanying aria expressed the emotions of the character and the emotional aspect of the text. In Kósa's songs - especially in the first series of *Chinese songs* - the composer switches to one or two voiced melodies when the main message is being told, and the movement of the accompaniment ceases, becoming a stationary chord, reminiscent of the Baroque recitativo secco and continuo. It is also safe to say that György Kósa spent a significant part of his career as a pianist and performer playing Baroque music. He is also known for his concert performances of Bach's keyboard works.

### Conclusions

The aim of my article was to present György Kósa's two-part series of songs entitled *Chinese Songs* from the perspective of an art-psychological approach to interpretation. My work was not driven by an end, but by an attempt to break the neglect surrounding the composer. Not only are they rarely encountered on concert podiums, but also detailed literature on them is scarce.

Kósa's two-part series of songs is in fact a series of miniatures. The basic explanation for this is the scope of the poems: except for three works (*Forever Thinking of Each Other*, *Winter Night*, *Spasm Tree*), the songs are arrangements of the typical Chinese four-line poems. Like the poems, the songs can be understood as epigrams. Their themes are varied, but they are fundamentally imbued with a medieval Chinese world view. The love of nature, the great questions of life (life and death, passing away), but also the image of the genre are expressed through the Chinese Taoism and Chan Buddhism. The poems of Po Chü-i are essentially the imprint of personal poetic experiences, but they also bear the specificity of Chinese poetry and are thus also generally valid. But this is precisely why their understanding and reception is complex: it requires not only knowledge of the poet's life situations, but also of the world view of the Tang period.

The musical material of the songs is based on the content and message of the poems, in accordance with Kósa's artistic concept. The author admits that he instinctively assigned certain formal and musical elements to them, sometimes changing the original text material (omitting or adding to it). The forms thus developed basically follow the traditions of

earlier periods, so we can also find the song form (ABA) and the folk song form (AABA). The form of the works is basically determined by the amount of text material processed. This explains the fundamental difference between the two series: since the second series deals only and exclusively with poems in four lines, no major musical progressions can be expected from the individual pieces. The melodic world of the two series represents György Kósa's entire compositional arsenal: simple pliable melodies are to be found as well as mosaic-like melodic composition, declamatory melody, and melodies with high ambition. The vocal sets and tonal elements of the songs are five-note melodies reminiscent of Chinese music, and an anhemitonic pentatonic melody is also present. In exceptional cases, diatonicism is also used. However, György Kósa formed the tone sequences from modal scales, their intersections, and combinations.

The musical turns are entirely in the composer's own hand: instead of the classical fifth interval, the fourth interval, which is also more in keeping with Chinese music, appears, and instead of the dominant - tonic turn, intervals as the "perceived resolutions" of tenths and sevenths following the fourths and seconds.

The role of the piano is not negligible. Like the melody, it helps to understand the text and the content. It is not a simple accompaniment, nor is it a part with independent parts and solos, as is known from the Romantic period. The piano connects, comments on, articulates the individual arches, emphasizing declaiming with its objectivity; but we also find mood depiction and amplification.

From a performance point of view, the two series are works worth revisiting. The difficulty with these pieces, apart from a full understanding of their content, is the length of the miniatures. Only *Forever Together*, *Winter Night* and *Spasm Tree* are suitable for a single performance as a complete program; the other works can be presented either as a series or as a selection.

*Translated from Hungarian by Juliánna Köpeczi*

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