

BAI JUYI'S POETRY IN GYÖRGY KÓSA'S WORKS

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SUMMARY. The development of the art of song can be linked to German regions. The most intimate of musical genres, it was originally intended to be performed in front of a small audience. The songs were mainly written to poems by contemporary poets, which were read before the music was performed to make it easier to understand. Music on oriental themes appeared in European music from the early 20th century. The first major stage work was a love story set in Japan, which was in fact a 19th-century Italian opera (Giacomo Puccini: *Madame Butterfly*). Among many other artists, the Hungarian composer György Kósa (1897–1984) was inspired by the culture of the Far East. The poems of Bai Juyi, who lived in the Middle Tang period, reflect, besides social criticism, the all-encompassing happiness of eternal love and the tormenting loneliness arising from love's painful absence.

Keywords: Chinese songs, György Kósa, Bai Juyi's poetry, Sándor Weöres, performing arts, creative arts, singing voice, Stella Ferch

Introduction

According to relevant scholarly literature, the origins of the genre of the art song go back to the time of Mozart and Beethoven. However, the true development of the genre did not take place until the early 19th century, with the advent of Romanticism. Geographically, it is associated with German regions. The Romantic song genre was not originally intended for concert halls or large audiences, but for home music-making in front of a small audience. It is essentially an intimate genre. The song was also the embodiment of German national identity in German territories, but thanks to the creative work of Schubert and Schumann, its role and perception gradually changed.

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Art songs were basically written to poems by contemporary poets. The composers set to music the works of Schiller, Goethe, Heine and Shakespeare as well as those of mediocre poets. In the reception, understanding and analysis of the songs, the primary concern is to understand and analyze the content, the text. During private recitals in the 19th century, it was common to read out the poem first on which the song was based.

In line with the revolutionary currents of the 19th century, nationalist themes as well as symbolism and naturalism can also be discerned. One of the secrets of the popularity of the art songs, regardless of the subject, was basically the simplicity and direct sincerity of the melodies.² Oriental themes, which are of primary importance for my thesis, appeared in music (i.e., European music literature) from the beginning of the 20th century, first in the highly popular opera *Madame Butterfly*, set in Nagasaki, Japan in 1906, and based on a late 19th-century narrative, but, in musical terms, it was actually 19th-century Italian music.

The scholarly research on the Far East only started in Europe around this time (in fact, historiography and archaeology dealing with ancient times were born at this time), so the verse translations on which the songs are based have only existed since the beginning of the 20th century.³

We first encounter the Chinese theme in Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* ('The Song of the Earth'), a song for orchestra accompaniment. The work was written to poems selected from Hans Bethge's book of poems *Die chinesische Flöte* ('The Chinese Flute'). The original poems are European adaptations of Chinese classics, but they faithfully reflect the concepts of Chinese culture regarding earthly life: the unity of suffering and happiness.⁴

Art songs have been performed with piano accompaniment since the appearance of the genre. Initially, the role of the piano was subordinate. Schubert marked the beginning of a change in which the piano became an equal partner with the singer: it played an independent part, representing the state of mind and the atmosphere of the work in the preludes and postludes as well as during the work. Schumann continued along the same path (although his piano parts were more complex), while Hugo Wolf's songwriting brought a more significant change: in addition to the text, he also intended the piano to have its own message. The piano in his case already comments on the song. (In the Chinese works of György Kósa, this is the typical role of the instrument.) This tendency later led to the appearance of songs with orchestral accompaniment in the second half of the 19th century, which eventually paved the way for the performance of songs in concert halls.

² Dobák Pál. *A romantikus zene története. (The History of Romantic Music.)* Nemzeti Tankönyvkiadó, Budapest, 1999, pp. 7-8.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 157-160.

Bai Juyi's Poetry

Bai Juyi was the best-known poet of the Middle Tang period (8th–9th centuries). He came from a poor but educated family. Thus, the popularity of his later critical works, which became so typical, was due to his ability to portray the economic, social and political problems of the Chinese people in a credible way. The main *secret of his popularity was his simplicity and deep humanity*. He also introduced *new themes* into Chinese poetry: family poetry and *love*. *His basic concept was that literary works should be in tune with reality*.⁵

In the interpretation of his poems, the title is a fundamental starting point: it often describes the circumstances and aspects of the work, but the possible prefaces to the poems also help to understand these aspects. The majority of the more than 2,800 poems that have survived are well dated, although the author of his English biography, Arthur Waley, notes that there may be a difference of one or two years.⁶

Bai Juyi's *early poems* were not yet dominated by a critical tone, *nor was his early career characterized by happy poems*. One recurring theme (also in later poems) is *separation*. These poems describe a life event (separation from siblings, later from friends) and a typical feature of them is that they were written later than the actual time of separation.⁷ The lyrical demand of the period was for a *new poem*, the *jintishi*. He also mastered this poetic form and cultivated it to a high level. In essence, the rhythm of the poems is determined by the regular alternation of words with a "smooth", level tone (píng) and "deflected" (zè) musical tone. The number of syllables remained between five and seven, in keeping with earlier traditions. Bai Juyi *was a great master of the famous Chinese short poems*, quatrains, the four-line poem, each of which *captured a mood*.⁸ In addition to the critical tone of the period,⁹ he also adopted one of its distinctive *poetic roles and a sense of life*: this was a *retreat* from politics and the imperial court. However, he did not live as a hermit, since *action* remained present in his life (helping with the tasks of the governor or the building of dams). This was greatly influenced by his two exiles (around 814, 820),

⁵ L. Ejdlin. *Po Csü-ji in. Po Csü-ji versei*, fordította: Weöres Sándor (*Poems by Bai Juyi*, translated by Sándor Weöres), Szépirodalmi Kiadó, Budapest. 1952. 12. o.

⁶ Arthur Waley. *The Life and Times of Po Chü-i*, New York: Macmillan Company, 1949., In several editions, based on the Foreword.

⁷ Ibid, Chapter I.

⁸ Tókei Ferenc - Miklós Pál. *A kínai irodalom rövid története (Short History of Chinese Literature)*, Gondolat Kiadó, Bp., 1960. 89-114. o.

⁹ The depiction of the misery of the peasantry and the luxury of the palace. These themes were accepted and supported in Hungary regardless of the friendship between communist Hungary and China during the Rákosi era, so they could be translated and published. And for the translator Sándor Weöres, the work provided a livelihood for him during his period of neglect.

which was the result of his critical writing. Thus, the *themes of wandering and hermit life* surface in his poems. This attitude was also reinforced by the change in his world view: from Confucianism, based on Chinese universalism, he arrived at Taoism and then to Chinese Chan Buddhism. In the preface to his book, the English biographer Arthur Waley states that Bai Juyi's poems cannot be interpreted without the knowledge of Chinese Buddhism (a branch of Buddhism) and that, to understand the poems (including Kósa's works), it is essential to have a knowledge of these.¹⁰

All three basic Chinese religious and philosophical trends have an inherent sense of continuous movement and a bipolar worldview (Yin and Yang and the pairs of opposites based on them). The fundamental distinction lies in human behavior: while Confucianism emphasizes active action, Taoism advocates inaction (*wu-wei*). *Wu-wei* does not mean complete passivity, but natural, non-violent behavior. To achieve this, *one must first become thoroughly acquainted with nature*, which includes *contemplation and living in the moment*. This is the way to finally reach and dissolve into the *dao*, which puts an end to this constant movement. Contemplation, *the love of nature*, the admiration and enjoyment of it, and constant change are also found in Buddhism, which has become strong and dominant in China along with Taoism. There are, however, limitations to getting to know these schools fully: first, the doctrines were largely recorded later (hence, they are not precise), secondly there are overlaps (some concepts appear in other schools of thought with some different nuances) and, finally, because of the secrecy and mysteriousness that is a fundamental feature of Eastern culture.

Overall

In a conversation conducted in 1980, György Kósa highlights his songs based on Bai Juyi's poems: we should not speak of two series of songs, but of a comprehensive cycle of songs written in 1954 and 1955, covering several genres. According to the author, "my second wife, Stella Kósa, discovered the beautiful volume of Bai Juyi, translated by Sándor Weöres, in the Rózsavölgyi shop.¹¹ She brought it home and we both enjoyed reading the wonderful poems. That is how I came into contact with China."¹²

¹⁰ Arthur Waley. *The Life and Times of Po Chü-i*, New York: Macmillan Company, 1949., In several editions, based on the Foreword.

¹¹ *Po Csü-ji versei (Poems by Bai Juyi)*, fordította (translated by): Weöres Sándor, Nyersfordítás és a jegyzeteket írta (Raw translation and notes by): Csongor Barnabás, Szépirodalmi Kiadó, Budapest. 1952.

¹² Bieliczkyné Buzás Éva. *Találkozásom Kósa Györggyel (My Encounter With György Kósa)* (1980. 05. 07.), Bieliczkyné Buzás Éva: *Emlékezzünk Kósa György zeneszerzőre (Remembering Composer György Kósa)*, 2020. 06. 15. <https://xn--hajdnc-lwa7t.hu/emlekezzunk-kosa-gyorgy-zeneszerzore/> Last accessed: 2022. 07. 01.

The first two of Kósa settings to music of Bai Juyi are song cycles. A series of six songs, entitled *Kínai dalok (Chinese Songs)*, was written in 1954, and was dedicated to Stella: "To Stella, the inspirer and unforgettable performer of these songs, with eternal love."¹³ The work was presented by the composer with Stella, but due to Stella's death in January 1955, her friends Judit Sándor and Endre Rösler collaborated on the recording.

György Kósa continued to work on the Bai Juyi's poems in 1954: he wrote a sequel to the songs. This series of nine smaller works was written for baritone. It was recorded in 1958, performed by Rezső Feleki. Kósa wrote and premiered the *Bai Juyi Choral Suite*, which is the setting of five more songs for mixed choir, in 1955. The final piece in the series of poems by the Chinese poet became a full-length ballet. In it, he adapted the poem *Ének az örök bánatról (Song of Everlasting Sorrow)*, with the help of translator Sándor Weöres. The original work, written when the poet was only 15, is one of the most famous works of Chinese poetry. Its theme is the great love, a rarity in Chinese literature. It depicts the tragic relationship between Emperor Xuanzong and his consort, Yang Guifei: Eventually, the consort dies but the emperor can summon her with the help of a Taoist sorcerer.¹⁴ György Kósa turned to this poem in 1955 following a private tragedy. On 26 January 1955, he lost his wife, Stella.¹⁵ Out of the settings of Bai Juyi's poems by Kósa, only two are centered around the theme of love: the first (*We Will Always Think of Each Other*) and the last one (*Song of Everlasting Sorrow*).

György Kósa: Chinese Songs I.

The first series (6 songs) were written in March 1954. Published by Zeneműkiadó in 1955, the songs were performed by György Kósa and Stella Ferch.¹⁶ The second series (9 songs) was completed in October 1954 and was published in 1958. It was premiered by Rezső Feleki and György Kósa.¹⁷

¹³ Kósa György. *Kínai dalok (Chinese Songs)*, Editio Musica Budapest, 1955. Z 1891.

¹⁴ *Po Csü-ji versei (Poems by Bai Juyi)*, fordította (translated by): Weöres Sándor, Nyersfordítás és a jegyzeteket írta (Raw translation and notes by): Csongor Barnabás, Szépirodalmi Kiadó, Budapest. 1952. pp. 122-123.

¹⁵ Dalos Anna: *Pályakép (Career Path)* in: Kósa György (ed. Berlász Melinda), Akkord Kiadó, Bp. 2003. p. 36.

¹⁶ According to the personally provided information of Gábor Kósa, György Kósa's son, the first cycle originally included only four songs (*We Will Always Think of Each Other, I Am Looking for the Spring, Parting by the South Bay, Wandering with the Moon*), and it was only a short time later that the composer added *Winter Night* and *Spasm-tree*.

¹⁷ Kósa György *zeneműveinek jegyzéke (A List of Compositions by György Kósa)*, compiled by: Dalos Anna. in: Kósa György (ed. Berlász Melinda), Akkord Kiadó, Bp. 2003. p. 186.

The following analyses are primarily derived from the performer's approach, rather than from a musicological perspective or in any detail.

The first series contains six songs:

1. *We Will Always Think of Each Other (Song of a Young Girl)*
2. *Winter Night*
3. *I Am Looking for the Spring*
4. *Parting by the South Bay*
5. *Spasm-tree*
6. *Wandering with the Moon*

1. *We Will Always Think of Each Other (Song of a Young Girl)*

Origins, literary references:

The poem is based on the Yin-Yang binarity of Universalism and Taoism and on the idea of continuous movement in the world. The negative side, the cold, is assigned to the West, personifying the frost as a symbol of cold weather. The East is the positive side, the warm one: full of life. The two sides are also characterized by the constant movement of the protagonist, which is sacred in nature: "ten times to thee/I swing/to thee I turn". This is expressed here in the celestial meeting of man and woman, which Sándor Weöres translates as the number ten (the eternal duality and source of movement in Chinese culture and religious symbolism).¹⁸ In the interpretation of the third quatrain (especially considering István Szerdahelyi's translation),¹⁹ the separation of the two characters by the bridge or river can be both physically real and a spiritual image. This is again reinforced by Sándor Weöres with a cosmological symbol: the number seven,²⁰ which was present in China in the time of Bai Juyi, as a result of an Indian influence (together with Buddhism): the seven-year period marks a stage of spiritual development in this conception. The bridge can also be symbolic: it is located at the boundary between the earth and the sky, separating them. From the point of view of the poem, the girl must grow up inwardly to her love, then they can be together and happy.

In Weöres's translation, this process is described in the fourth quatrain, where the girl is represented by the climbing plant (*Convolvulus*), that reaches the sky by climbing the tree and their relationship can become fulfilled and perfect. The latter is reinforced by two symbols of happiness and perfection: the deer and the pine tree. From the point of view of Taoist philosophy, it can

¹⁸ <https://regi.tankonyvtar.hu/hu/tartalom/tkt/szimbolumtar/ch02.html#%C3%ADz>
Last accessed: 2022. 07. 01.

¹⁹ <https://terebess.hu/keletkultinfo/pocsuji.html> Last accessed: 2022. 07. 01.

²⁰ <https://regi.tankonyvtar.hu/hu/tartalom/tkt/szimbolumtar/ch02.html#%C3%ADz> Last
accessed: 2022. 07. 01.

be taken as a general formulation (bearing in mind the multiple interpretations of such texts) representing the fundamental goal of life: to achieve *Dao*, where the two parts (Yin/female and Yang/male) become one again.

2. *Winter Night*

Origins, literary references:

More biographical data are available here, compared to the previous poem on the creation of this work, written in 813. In Bai Juyi's life, the early 810s marked a series of unfortunate events: his mother died in 811, and the usual three years of mourning were now accompanied by deep depression, according to his biographer. This was coupled by the disruption of his career: he was critical of the court and was forced into exile. The poem gives an insight into the feeling of this period. It is essentially about loneliness and solitude. The author senses and describes in detail how the outside world disappears for him (friends and family disappear). His own world exists now only for him (made even darker by the frozen winter). He is so confined that he can hear the "noise" of snow falling ("tsek, tsek"). In this microcosm, not only the sense of loneliness and ageing are revealed; among them are the great questions of existence. It is the transience known from Buddhist teachings that the poem highlights. From the point of view of religious history, the subject of transience is fundamentally linked to Buddhism.²¹ The formulation of transience is confirmed by the fact that Bai Juyi was already familiar with the Indian religious trend at this time. Similarly, the wandering and hermitage of this period can be linked to Buddhism and the Buddhist way of life/tradition. The poem describes these emotional moments. The work ends with a double affirmation: Bai Juyi gives a sense of this time by marking the exact year and the day.

3. *I Am Looking for the Spring*

Origins, literary references:

The content analysis of this undated poem is also helped by the knowledge of Bai Juyi's life, besides Taoism and Zen Buddhism. In China, Buddhism gained ground alongside Taoism. The practical reason for this was that their tenets coincide on many points. These include wandering, meditation and contemplation. In Zen Buddhism, the love of nature is more important than in Taoism. Zen Buddhist does not only consider contemplation of nature important

²¹ Hamar Imre: *A kínai buddhizmus története (The History of Chinese Buddhism)*, ELTE Kelet-ázsiai Tanszék – Balassi Kiadó, 2004. p. 117.

but also getting immersed and becoming one with nature.²² Bai Juyi was introduced to this movement in the early 800s, and as an eminent disciple of Master Chan, he became part of the life of nature, and with it, vignettes such as the poem “*I Am Looking for the Spring*” appeared in his poetry. The poem has no “plot”, and it is only a momentary impression.

In the volume published by Barnabás Csongor and Sándor Weöres, the work is divided into two parts. The first part is the first two stanzas, set to music by György Kósa (and, incidentally, completed again), which describe the experience of the moment. Then, separated by a caesura, we find a third stanza, which describes the thoughts that arise in the probably ageing poet: he would like to stay young as long as possible.

I seem to be getting old. Desires have forsaken me.
 But even so Spring fills me with ample delight.
 I am hanging around anyone whom I suspect has a flower,
 I do not care if he is a relative or a stranger, poor or rich.”²³

Omitting the verse in the song does not change the layers of meaning in the poem. Bai Juyi was described as having gone grey quite fast, so he was preoccupied by aging quite early. Ageing was considered a natural part of life by the Chinese and Indians alike and was not thought of negatively.

4. Parting at the South Bay

Origins, literary references:

The poem, written around 825, does not deal with a Taoist or Zen Buddhist theme, but with another popular topic of medieval Chinese poetry: farewell. A characteristic feature of poems on this theme is that they were not written when the actual farewell took place, but later. This was particularly popular during the civil war period, but it persisted in Chinese poetry later.

The poetic form is also the characteristic form of Bai Juyi’s poems: his four-line poems reflecting a mood are unique in Chinese poetry and were later imitated by other artists.²⁴ Bai Juyi’s term as governor of Hangzhou ended in 824, when he was given control of the city of Suzhou. The city was located on

²² Hamar Imre: *A kínai buddhizmus története (The History of Chinese Buddhism)*, ELTE Kelet-ázsiai Tanszék – Balassi Kiadó, 2004. pp. 61., 107., and 125.

²³ *Po Csü-ji versei (Poems by Bai Juyi)*, fordította (translated by): Weöres Sándor, Nyersfordítás és a jegyzeteket írta (Raw translation and notes by): Csongor Barnabás, Szépirodalmi Kiadó, Budapest. 1952., p. 74.

²⁴ Tőkei Ferenc - Miklós Pál: *A kínai irodalom rövid története (The Brief History of Chinese Literature)*, Gondolat Kiadó, Bp., 1960. p. 114.

the lower part of the River Yangtze and Lake Taihu. It is in this context that the work and its expressive message, the pain of separation, must be placed.

5. *Spasm-tree*

Origins, literary references:

The title of the undated poem is a symbol of Taoist thought. A spasm tree is a gnarled tree that is completely useless, a symbol of individual freedom. This work is an expression of Bai Juyi's attitude: he serves neither the emperor nor lesser lords. It is a lyrical formulation of *wu-wei* ("inaction"), a social engagement.

6. *Wandering with the Moon*

Origins, literary references:

The poem on which the final work of the first series of songs is based can be placed precisely in the life of Bai Juyi: it was written in 818. This was the end of his exile at the time of the *Winter Night*, after which he was recalled to the capital (819). Thus, the work is partly biographical, but the wanderings were also an important part of his then well-established Buddhist knowledge.

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