

THE GENEVAN PSALMS (1562) IN THE HUNGARIAN CHORAL LITERATURE

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SUMMARY. At the middle of the 20th century in a time of the upturn of the general musical culture Hungarian composers having experience with ecclesiastical music created adaptations of various levels of difficulty for the tunes of the Genevan psalms. In 1979 a representative volume entitled *Hungarian Psalms* edited by Sándor Arany was created, a volume that contained the adaptations. Selecting from this volume I would mention Jenő Ádám's 8. *Psalm*, Lajos Bárdos's 23. *Psalm*, Zoltán Kodály's 50. *Psalm* and 114. *Psalm*.

Keywords: psalms in prose, paraphrases of psalms, genevan psalms, cantus-firmus-motetta technique, polyphonic imitation technique.

Looking for the meaning of the word "psalm" I found the following definitions²: religious songs making up one of the Old Testament books; a religious hymn; a psalm book. Also the expression "psalm book" has various meanings: for those who regularly read the Bible it means the five books of psalms of the Old Testament containing one hundred and fifty psalms; in the work of István Bencédi Székely published in 1548 in Cracow it means a collection of the one hundred and fifty psalms in prose³. On the cover of the work published by Gáspár Heltai in 1560 in Cluj-Napoca it can be also read the word psalm book: „SOLTAR, AZ AZ, SZENT DAVIDNAC, ES EGYEB Prophetaknac Psalmusinac, auagy Isteni dichiretekne konyue...” [PSALMS, I.E. THE BOOK OF PSALMS OR Book of Worship of Saint David and Other Prophets...]; but in the 16th century the word "psalm" also meant poems written based on the biblical psalms and a collection of such poems. Miklós Bogáti Fazakas's (1548–a.1598) hand written collection created in

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² Fekete Csaba, *Zsoltár szavunk történetéhez [On the History of the Word 'Psalm' in Hungarian]*, In: *Magyar nyelvőr*, volume 126, no. 2002/3, pp. 360-362.

³ Bencédi calls the individual psalms *psalmos*.

1582 is widely known, bearing the title: „*Psalterium Magyar Zsoltár kit az üdőkbeli históriák értelme szerént különb-különb magyar ékes nótákra, az Isten gyülekezetinek javára fordított Bogáti Fazakas Miklós*” [A Collection of Hungarian Psalms Translated for the Benefit of the Congregation of God and to Be Sung on the Tune of Fine Hungarian Songs According to the Interpretation Fit for His Time by Miklós Bogáti Fazakas] where the word “psalm” would already mean a collection of paraphrases of psalms using lyrics in rhymes and stanzas⁴. The *Psalterium Ungaricum* of Albert Szenci Molnár (1574–1634) published in Herborn in 1607 contains already the translation of the one hundred and fifty Genevan psalms. The Hungarian psalms of Szenci are no longer poems written freely, inspired by the meaning of the original psalm, but literary translations. Following the biblical text of the psalms in prose and having in view also the line types and rhyme schemes particular to the Genevan psalms of the Calvinic times he created the Hungarian book of psalms in only 90 days according as notes of the contemporaries testify. In the 17th and 18th century these Genevan psalms were published annexed to the Bible, but they were published also in separate volumes, then they were included in the Protestant hymn books. Therefore the word „psalm” also means the psalms translated by Albert Szenci Molnár on the one hand and a Reformed hymn book on the other.⁵

Studying the creation of the Genevan psalms one has to start by tracing back the history of psalm singing. The psalmodia, the reciting of psalms underwent a continuous change both in the eastern and in the western part of the church following the developments of the church itself and the ever enriched mass-liturgy and playing the most important part within the constant and variable elements of the mass-liturgy. The Reformed psalms having stanzas and non-recitative tunes have a different style. While psalms sung during the mass are recited by the priest performing the mass, in the Protestant churches psalms and paraphrases of psalms are sung together as a common prayer, in the mother tongue of the congregation since the days of the Reform.

The first collection of psalms containing all 150 psalms applied to German and French folk tunes was published in 1540 in Antwerpen. This was followed by English, Scottish, Finnish, Scandinavian psalm books, the Hungarian Psalmus-es and paraphrases of psalms. Calvin (1509–1564) having the most radical views on singing among all the Reformers, as a theologian with a

⁴ Besides Bogáti also András Batizi, Gergely Szegedi, Mihály Sztárai, Gál Huszár, András Szkárosi Horváth, Benedek Thordai were writing paraphrases of psalms using texts in rhymes and stanzas.

⁵ In the 17th and 18th centuries, under the influence of the Puritans psalms in prose were gradually eliminated from the Protestant liturgy and later also the paraphrases of the psalms written in the 16th century. The Genevan psalms became increasingly popular, thus also the meaning of the word „psalm” has changed.

biblical thinking considered that psalms were the most suitable for hymns, to be sung by the congregation. Urging his coworkers he created the Genevan Book of Psalms by 1562. The presentation hereby is a commemoration of the 450th anniversary of this event.

Studying the creation of the Genevan psalms data regarding the lyrics and the tune are to be treated separately.

Calvin noticed quite early the works of the poet Clément Marot (1496–1544) who lived and created in the royal court of King Francis I. Marot made his first translations of psalms for his own use⁶. Then, encouraged by Calvin he translated also other psalms. The collection published in 1539 in Strasbourg contained 13 psalm paraphrases of Marot and 6 of Calvin. The collection entitled *Egyházi énekek és imádságok formája [Form of Ecclesiastical Hymns and Prayers]* published in 1542 in Geneva contained 35 psalms, 30 by Marot and 5 by Calvin. In the edition of 1543 Marot already has 49 psalms. Calvin retracted his own work, for he considered that the translations of Marot were more beautiful and the poet more talented than himself. But one year later Marot died in Turin and thus the work was disrupted. The creation of psalms was continued later by Humanist theologian and Huguenot poet Théodor de Bèze. In 1551 the volume entitled *83 Psalms* was published, which contained besides the 49 psalms by Marot also 34 psalms by Bèze; in 1554 6 more and in 1556 1 more psalm was added and thus was the *90 Psalms* created. The rest of the 60 psalms were created in one cycle of creation by Bèze who also made some alterations to the existing ones. Thus, in 1561 he finished the translation of the psalms.

As far as tunes are concerned the authorship of the Genevan psalms is more ambiguous. The collection of 1539 published in Strasbourg contains mainly the tunes composed by Mathias Greiter and also some tunes by other contemporary musicians. Later these were exchanged with other tunes. The author of the new pieces in the 1542–43 collection is probably Guillaume Franc, a Huguenot from Rouen. But also Eustorg de Beaulieu, Francois Gindron and Thomas Malingre served as musicians to the church in the surroundings of Geneva.

However Loys Bourgeois⁷ (1510–1569) has the greatest merit in creating the tunes for the psalms. He did the work both of a composer, but he also improved and revised the tunes. He applied the so called parody technique as was the custom of the age, which meant the use or revision ad notam of a composition; in some cases the author adopts parts of an already existing

⁶ We know of 6 psalms of Clément Marot from 1533.

⁷ Loys Bourgeois is a composer born in Paris, in Geneva he is the choir-master of the Saint Peter cathedral.

composition. This is how Bourgeois finished the tunes of 84 psalms to the form in which they are sung today. The tunes are of French and German origin, one of the tunes originates from a Flemish tune. Some tunes are of Gregorian origin. Bourgeois's work was continued by a choir-master of Geneva, Maître Pierre⁸, who based his compositions also on the motifs of the existing tunes.

When analysing the tunes it is glaring that there are too many Doric and Eolic tunes (57 of the tunes); tunes in a major key are also frequent (39), but there are also mixolydian (18) and Frigian (11) tunes as well. Large intervals are also frequent and also changes in the direction of the tune. Rhythm is quite varied. Even identical rhyme schemes are combined with various kinds of rhythm. Although these are not parlando tunes they have not been divided into measures. The 150 psalms have 125 different tunes. Due to the great variation in tunes there are only a few psalms that have been used in the every day practice of the church.

The lyrics for the Genevan psalms are extremely varied as far as form and rhyme schemes are concerned. Stanzas are very long. The most frequent types of lines are those of 8 or 9 syllables and the formations of 10-11 syllables and the combination of the two. There are fewer cases of 7 syllable lines, of 3+2 or 2+3 syllable lines and the variation of the lines of 5, 6 or 7 syllables. A great variation of the combination of the above mentioned types of lines can be found in the psalms⁹.

Albert Szenci Molnár was familiarized with the German lyrics of the Genevan psalms in his years of study at the University of Heidelberg; he read the psalms translated by Ambrosius Lobwasser. He was inspired in his translation to Hungarian of these psalms by the work of Lobwasser. He also used the French lyrics of the Huguenot psalms. He finished the job in a very short time. Although the requirement for a harmonious prosody was set only in the last century, the lyrics of the psalms translated by Szenci – as also Zoltán Kodály mentions – apply well to the tune in three quarters of the cases.

⁸ In that time in Geneva there were working several musicians and choir-masters called Peter: choir-master Pierre Dagues; Pierre Valette, who also published a methodology for teaching solmization; Pierre Dubuisson, a choir-master and also a pastor of Bourguignon; Pierre Dagues; Pierre Davantés muzicologist, composer.

⁹ The opinion of Kálmán Csomasz Tóth regarding the psalms: „...we consider that the various, many times complicated and even artificial metrical structures of the Genevan psalms probably had much to do with the fact that despite of all the popularity of the tunes to which they were sung, their power of expression and often monumental beauty they could not inspire the Christian musical literature of the centuries that followed at the extent the Lutheran choral music did.”, In: *Református gyülekezeti éneklés*, Egyetemes Konvent kiadása, Budapest, 1950, p. 208.

The rhythm of the French tunes applies very little to the rhythm of the Hungarian text. The psalms translated by Albert Szenci do not and cannot follow perfectly the rhythm of the tunes of the psalms. Therefore the Hungarian rhythms were compensated in time generally by a manner of presentation composed of equally long elements. In the last decades ecclesiastical musicians started working on restoring the rhythm of the Genevan psalms to their original form.

Many musicians have worked with the tunes of the Genevan psalms such as Lassus, Claude le Jeune, Sweelinck, Janequin, Certon, Jambe de Fer, Thomas Champion, Richard Crassot, Pascal de l'Estocart, Jean Le Grand and John Black. Le Roy and Nicolas Vallet adapted the tune of the Genevan psalms for the lute and Jacob van Eyck for the flute. Claude Goudimel adapted the entire book of psalms in several variations: in homophone edition, in the so called cantus-firmus-motetta technique and also in the polyphonic imitation technique. In the homophonic variants the cantus-firmus is usually found in the tenor and the processing follows the principle of one note against the other. The four voices have an iso-rhythmic dynamic. In those times this method was used quite often to play music at home.

Calvin imagined singing in the congregation in one voice and in one's mother tongue. For him it was important that the congregation should understand what they sung. The Hungarian composers who adapted the tunes with Hungarian lyrics followed the same principle.

At the middle of the 20th century, when the *Reformed Hymn Book* of 1948 was edited and published, in a time of the upturn of the general musical culture Hungarian composers having experience with ecclesiastical music created adaptations of various levels of difficulty for the tunes of the Genevan psalms. The famous composers of the Hungarian choir literature: Jenő Ádám (1896-1982), Béla András (1909-1980), Béla Árokháty (1890-1942), Lajos Bárdos (1899-1986), Kálmán Csomasz Tóth (1902-1988), Ferenc Farkas (1905-2000), Árpád Fasang (1912-2001), Zoltán Gárdonyi (1906-1986), László Halmos (1909-1997), Frigyes Hidas (1928-2007), Károly Horváth, Jenő Kapi-Králik (1906-1978), Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967), György Kósa (1897-1984), Melinda Kistétényi (1926-1999), Gábor Lisznyai (1913-1981), Rudolf Maros (1917-1982), János Máté (1934-1998), Árpád Nagy, Olivér Nagy (1912-2000), Victor Osváth (1921-1985), Ákos Papp, Miklós Pászti (1928-1989), György Ránki (1907-1992), László Rezessy (1912-1997), Károly Sepsy (1930-), Imre Sulyok (1912-2008), Gyula Szigethy (1904-1986), Sándor Szokolai (1931-), Erzsébet Szőnyi (1924), Aurél Tillai (1930), Lajos Vass (1927-1992) aimed to create adaptations of various difficulty for choirs of various composition and musical abilities. This is how the pieces with unisono organ accompaniment, the bicinia, the pieces for choirs of one gender for three voices, the pieces for

mixed choirs for two, three, four or six voices, the canon for mixed choirs and the pieces for mixed choirs for three and four voices with organ accompaniment were born. In 1979 a representative volume entitled *Hungarian Psalms* edited by Sándor Arany was created, a volume that contained the adaptations of the above mentioned composers.

Selecting from this volume I would mention first Jenő Ádám's 8. *Psalms*. It is a piece written for a mixed choir for three voices, extended to four voices in the closing part. The tune of the Genevan version is continuously present in the musical texture of the choral piece. The tune of the Genevan psalm passes from one voice to another naturally and in a plastic manner according to the range of notes of the tune and the message of the lyrics. Despite its shortness, Jenő Ádám divides the choral piece into four parts specified by the use of various tempos. It begins with *Andante maestoso* then *Piu agitato*, followed by a *Mosso (quasi recitativo)* and then the final part is *Tempo I*. The psalm of praise has a well-defined unisono closing (beginning with the part: *mindeneket lába alá vetél*) from which the mixed choir advances the hope inspiring closing chord of a major third in the Doric-Eolic tune of the psalm with a large crescendo.

Ex. 1

Andante maestoso

S.
A.
T.
B.

Ó, fel - sé - ges Úr, mi kegyes Is - te - nünk, Mely csu - dá - la - tos
 Ó, fel - sé - ges Úr, mi kegyes Is - te - nünk, Mely csu - dá -
 a te ne - ved né - künk. Nagy dicső - sé - ged ez e - gész föld - re ki -
 la - tos a te ne - ved né - künk. Nagy dicső - sé - ged ez egész
 ter - jed és fel - hat az e - gek - re. Nagy vol - tát ha meg - né - zem
 föld - re ki - ter - jed és fel - hat az e - gek - re. Nagy vol - tát ha meg - né - zem dolga -

5 9

In the oeuvre of Lajos Bárdos the compositions with an ecclesiastical topic play a major part. Besides masses, capella pieces adapting religious themes in Latin or Hungarian, the canons and the pieces of music with organ accompaniment or written for other instruments also adaptations of the Genevan psalms can be found. According to the list of work established by Mihály Ittzés the adaptation of the 23. psalm, entitled *Az Úr énnékem őriző pásztorom [The Lord is My Shepherd]* was written in 1975. In his work on the oeuvre of Lajos Bárdos Mihály Ittzés writes the following regarding the pieces of music written in this period: „...it belongs to the years of harvest, they bear the marks of the mature style of the master now already in his sixties in a concentrated form: tunes created in diatony, melodic-harmonic unfolding of parts without lyrics, the application of classical harmonies and of new strings of tunes, the modern mixture of modal and functional thinking, free variation of the tonality, a balance of homophony and polyphony, richness of the lyrics accompanying the tune, precise prosody and varied rhythms as a consequence, perfect union between the musical and lyrical form creation and instructions of interpretation reflecting the experience of a practicing conductor.”¹⁰

Ex. 2

Maestoso, andante

4

poco rit.

8

¹⁰ Ittzés, Mihály, *Bárdos Lajos*, Magyar Zeneszerzők 36., Mágus kiadó, Budapest, 2009, p. 18.

T.
B.

Az Úr én-né - kem ó - ri-ző pász - to - rom, A - zért sem-mi - ben

mf

12

Zoltán Kodály published ten Genevan psalms in his *Iskolai Énekgyűjtemény [A Collection of Songs for Musical Education in School]*¹¹. In this way the most relevant pieces of the tradition of the Reformed ecclesiastical music could become part of the Hungarian musical education besides Gregorian tunes and the Catholic folk songs. Kodály adapted seven of the Genevan psalms: we find adaptations of three psalms, 33, 124 and 126 in the *Bicinia Hungarica* series; the choral piece for women's choir, *Genevan psalm no. 150* was finished in 1936; form among the pieces for mixed choir in 1943 *Genevan psalm no. 121* was finished, while in 1948 *Genevan psalm no. 50* and finally in 1951, written for the consecration of the organ in the church of Pozsony street was finished *Genevan psalm no. 114*. Analyzing the lyrics of the choral pieces it can be observed that Kodály corrects the translation and word sequence used by Szenci according to the rules of prosody.

Kodály's *Genevan psalm no. 50* is an a capella choral piece. Earlier the psalm itself was considered to be a psalm for Advent, more precisely for the second Advent when Christ will come back to judge heaven and earth. The piece can be divided into two major parts: the first part contains the adaptation of three verses of the psalm and the second that of four verses, these are followed by a closing verse. The presentation of the Doric tune of the psalm is in unisono following the practice of congregational singing, in the two high pitched voices: soprano and tenor, in G doric. The adaptation of the second verse is in fact on two voices. The cantus firmus is present in the low pitched voices (alt and bass) in unisono, while the high pitched voices follow it with a simple counterpoint in C Doric. The third verse starts with a polyphonic tune, but it gradually becomes homophonic, while the closing part has a tune in G Doric, but the closing chord is a major third. The second part introduces a bold tonality shift: it starts half a note

¹¹ Created together with György Kerényi, published in 1944.

lower and then suddenly shifts to H Doric. Each verse takes us a fifth lower. This is how the tune is taken to e, to a, to d, while the closing part takes us back to G Doric. The number of voices is extended to eight and the conclusion of the monumental closing part is: „Those who sacrifice thank offerings honour me, and to the blameless I will show my salvation.”

Ex. 3

Élénken ♩ = 88

S.
T.

Az e-rős Is - ten urak - nak U - ra Szó - lal se föl - det
 7 mind e - lő - hív - ja, Tá - ma - dat - ról és nap - e - nyé - szet - ről,
 13 Nagy szépség - gel a Si - on hegyé - ről el - jő az Is - ten ő fé - nyéssé -
 19 gé - ben, Sém - mit el nem hágy ő í - té - le - té -

S.
A.
T.
B.

ben. Mé - gyen e - lőt - te
 cf. Mé - gyen e - lőt - te még - e - mé - sztó tűz Nagy for - gó szél - vész
 8 ben. Mé - gyen e - lőt - te
 25 cf. Mé - gyen e - lőt - te még - e - mé - sztó tűz, Nagy for - gó szél - vész

cresc.

Psalm 114 relates the wonderful events of the Lord's people being taken out of Egypt. The liberation of the people of God from physical bonds projects to the believer his own true and complete salvation perfected in Christ.

ván, hát - ra ál - la. A Jordán vi - ze visz - sza-for-du - la,

ván hát - ra ál - la. A Jordán vi - ze visz - sza-for-du - la

21

Mind hát-ra si - e - té - nek. A he - gyek szök - dös -

Mind hát-ra si - e - té - nek. A he - gyek

24

tek, mint a ko-sok, És a halmok, mint a juh bá-rá-nyok,

szök-dös - tek, mint a ko - sok, És a hal-mok, mint juh-bá-rá-nyok,

szök-dös - tek, mint a ko - sok, És a hal - mok, mint a juh bá-rá -

27

The poetic images of the psalm reflect God's power and force. Frightened by his voice the sea "stepped back", the Jordan river started flowing backwards, mountains jumped like lambs. His mighty strength ejected water, created life out of the rock.

I dear to hope that these masterpieces of the Hungarian choral literature will also create life!

Translated by Borbély Bartalis Zsuzsa – authorized translator

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