

## FORMAL STRUCTURE AND POLYPHONIC TECHNIQUE IN ZOLTÁN KODÁLY'S *SEVEN EASY CHORAL PIECES FOR CHILDREN*<sup>1</sup>

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**SUMMARY.** The aim of the paper hereby is the analysis of Zoltán Kodály's *Seven Easy Choral Pieces for Children*, an aim set out of mere curiosity. Theoretically I analyzed these choral pieces years ago during my classes of score transcription for choirs. I noticed already then that despite their simplicity and absolute clearness these pieces are very logical and masterly elaborated. Zoltán Kodály composed his *Seven Easy Choral Pieces for Children* in 1936. His thoughtfulness and precision is proven also by the fact that he wrote the year of composition to every piece, although these small pieces belong to the same cycle.<sup>3</sup>

**Keywords:** Kodály, Seven Easy Choral Pieces for Children, choir, analysis, formal structure, polyphonic technique.

Let us then take a look to the choral pieces one by one:

1. *Éva szívem, Éva (Éva, my dear Éva)* is an adaptation of a folk song having 36 measures, written for two voices (**S+A**)<sup>4</sup>, having musical form **A Av A**, with a repetition *Da Capo al Fine* of part **A**. Naturally each part is divided into phrases. All phrases have 3 measures and follow each other in a variation. The formal structure is symmetrical, consisting of measures of 12+12+12.

The folk song or the *Subject* as the case may be appears in the first part in the upper voice:

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<sup>3</sup> Regarding Kodály's thoughtfulness: My master, the composer Ede Terényi related to me years ago on one of my musicology classes that as a young composer he took one of his works to Kodály to find out his opinion. When he received it back he was surprised to see that Kodály put a point after every number by which the measures were numbered, as is the custom in Hungarian grammar. He looked the piece through and all the point were in their places, none was missing.

<sup>4</sup> In choir pieces, especially in those written for two voices Kodály often has the two voices intersecting each other.

Ex. 1



Measures 1 – 6.

The **Alto** voice accompanies the tune of the upper voice with an *ostinato* motif in two measures. This has also variations: reversed in mirror or augmented rhythmically.

Ex. 2



Measures 1 – 3.



Measures 10 – 12.

In part **Av** roles are interchanged: the lower voice brings the main tune (the folk song), while the upper voice bears the *ostinato* motif, this time varied in each of the cases. Variations consist both in reversal in mirror and in variations of the intervals.

Ex. 3



Measures 14 – 15.

The *ostinato* motif is not a musical piece foreign to the main string of the music. It closely relates to the basic phase of the *subject's* tune: in the counterpoint this close relation resembles the type of harmonic accompaniment specific to the 20th century in which the author supports the tune with chords out of the tune itself.

The tempo of this piece: *At pace* ♩ = 112. Meter 2/4. Kodály uses modal keys. Part **A** is composed in *D doric*, while part **Av** in *A doric*. The dynamics of part **A** is a steady *piano*, while that of part **Av** a continuous *crescendo* for both voices.

**2. Falú végén (At the End of the Village)** – the second choral piece of the cycle is also an adaptation of a folk song for two voices (**S+A**). This is the shortest of the seven pieces, it has 22 measures. It consists of a single part: part **A**, divided into measures of 4+3+2 (*addition*) + 2 measures of *Codetta*. The piece becomes a two-stanza piece due to the signs of repetition valid for the entire form (**A+A**).

The piece has a polyphonic technique using imitation. The author conducts a canon through all the 22 measures of the choral piece. The lower voice imitates the upper voice one measure later and one fifth lower until the addition.

**Ex. 4**

Frissen ♩ = 144 (1936)

**Measures 1 – 5.**

The first measure of the addition is imitated a minor seventh lower and returns to the imitation one fifth lower only in the second measure, but with a variation of intervals this time: the major sixth jotting down turns into a perfect fifth. In the *Codetta* imitation ceases.

**Ex. 5**

**Measures 8 – 9.**

**Measures 9 – 10.**

The tempo: *Vividly* ♩ = 144. Meter 2/4. Kodály intermixes keys in this piece, using bitonality on the one hand: *D major / G major* and *G major / G mixolydian* and viewed at the tonal-modal level on the other: tonal-functional key/ modal key.

The author does not give any specification regarding the dynamics.

**3. Héja (Hawk).** In this third choral piece Kodály adapts a children's folk song in 57 measures, divided into 56 + 1 closing measure of *General Pausa*. This is a sort of „peace after the storm” due to the content. The author offers an explanation for the children performers (and also to the musicologist...) regarding the text, in a footnote, so that it can be more easily understood: “*The hawk keeps attacking the little yellow goslings grazing on the green meadow. The little shepherds scare him away with stones and sticks, but also with verses and noises.*” Compared to the above mentioned pieces the form of this piece is complex:

#### Ex. 6

Introduction	A	B	addition	Av1	Bv1	Coda
4	+ 8 +	8 +	6	+ 8	+ 12 +	11 (3+4+4)
	(a+a1) (b+bv1)			(av1+av2) (bv2+bv3+bv4)		

Phrases building up the formal structure consist of a steady 4 measures.

As far as the musical content is concerned: **in the introduction** the author represents the exclamations showing the presence of the hawk by descending two-note cells. This onomatopoeic, illustrative and programmed cell structure is present through almost the entire piece. In parts **A** and **B** the tune of the children's folk song is born by the **Alto** voice. In parts **Av1** and **Bv1** the main tune is taken over in a varied manner by the **Soprano** in a transposition of upper fourth. The **addition** and the **Coda** are based on the adaptation of the illustrative cell in the same manner as the **introduction**.

The tempo: *Lively* ♩ = 144. The same meter of 2/4. The key of the piece is a **A major** free of modulations, however – compared to the previous pieces – in this piece there is markedly a great number of dissonances starting with part **B**. See for example measures 48-49. (at the end of the last but one line) where there is a series of interchanging major seconds and major ninths.

**Ex. 7**



**Measures 48 – 49.**

The author gives a colourful distinction also to the closing chord (see the last 4 measures): in the lower voice he creates a *second ajoutée* with a *Divisi*.

**Ex. 8**



**Measures 54 – 57.**

During the entire piece the dynamics is built up of interchanging contrasts, going from one extreme to the other thus: **Introduction** = *fortissimo*, **A** = *piano*, **B** = *piano*, **addition** = *fortissimo*, **Av1** = *piano*, **Bv1** = *piano / forte*, **Coda** = *fortissimo*. The author represents also by this musical means the panic created by the presence of the hawk.

**4. Versengés (Rivalry)** – the fourth choral piece is an adaptation of a folk song written for two voices, a male and a female voice, in the same manner as the previous pieces. It has a simple form in three parts with variations followed by a *Coda*:

**Ex. 9**

**A Av1 Av2 Coda**  
**20 + 20 + 10 + 10**

The form consists of 60 measures. This makes it the longest piece of the cycle.

The entire piece consists of phrases of 2, 3 and 4 measures following each other irregularly, according to how they adapt to the lyrics. The musical representation of this piece: the voices intonate the main tune alternatively, while the other voice follows the former by a free counterpoint during the entire piece. The tempo: *Vividly* ♩ = 126. The meter: irregularly alternating measures of 3/4 +2/4.

**Ex. 10**

(1936)

**Frissen** ♩ = 126

Lányok: Mért? Majd ha lá - tom,

Fiúk: Vagyok oly-lyan le-gény, mint tē! Vá-gok oly-lyan *cimrekter*,  
ak - kor hi - szēm, Majd ak-kor hiszēm, mi-kor lá - tom.  
6 dok-tor, te-re-rek-ter, dok-tor, ren - dēt mint tē.

**Measures 1 – 10.**

Similar to the formerly discussed choral piece here we also find many dissonances, mainly on unstressed measures, but also on some of the stressed ones. The main key is *G major*, but each part of the piece starts in *D major* except for the **Coda**.

**A** = *D major* - *G major*, **Av1** = *D major* - *G major*, **Av2** = *D major*, **Coda** = *G mixolydian* – *G major*.

In part **A** and in the first part of part **Av1** the voices have opposing dynamics (*forte* and *piano*), then both voices converge to a plain *forte* which ends in a *fortissimo*.

**5. Ciróka (Hickory dickory)** – the fifth choral piece has 57 measures, two voices which turn into four voices by a *Divisi*: S1+S2, A1+A2. It is a children's folk song, just as the third choral piece entitled *Hawk*.

It has a form similar to the former piece: a form with variations.

**Ex. 11**

A	Av1	Av2	Coda
16	16	16	10 (1 measure overlap Av2/Coda)
4+4+4+4	4+4+4+4	4+4+4+4	5+2+1 (G.P.) +2

Until the *Coda* the form develops regularly. All three parts of the piece have 16 measures divided into a regular 4+4+4+4 and all phrases consist of 2+2. The voices form a dialogue by responding each other with the *Ciróka*, *Maróka* motifs until the last 3 measures of part **Av2** where all the voices converge.

Tempo: *At pace* ♩ = 120. The meter: 2/4. This is a piece composed by Kodály exclusively in modal keys. Parts **A**, **Av1**, **Av2** are composed in *D doric*, while the **Coda** contains 3 modes: *D doric*, *B lydian* and *D mixolydian*.

While in part **A** there are no dissonances and in parts **Av1** and **Av2** there are barely a few, the first 5 measures of the **Coda** are filled with them.

**Ex. 12**

The dynamics goes from one extreme to the other alternatively in the entire piece:

**A** = *forte*, **Av1** = *piano*, **Av2** = *forte*, **Coda** = *forte, piano, fortissimo*.

Kodály makes this piece more colourful, varied and attractive also by these means, since this is his purpose: to composed songs as colourful, varied and attractive as possible for children.

**6. Jó gazd'asszony (Good Housewife)** is an adaptation of a children's folk song of 28 measures, for two voices, S1 +S2.

It has a form with variations:

**Ex. 13**

<b>A</b>		<b>A1</b>		<b>Av1</b>		<b>Av2</b>
7 +		7 +		7 +		7
3+2+2		3+2+2		3+2+2		3+2+2

The piece divides evenly and regularly into periods consisting of measures of 7+7+7+7, which at their turn divide also evenly into 3+2+2 each.

## Ex. 14

**Tánclépés** ♩ = 126 (1936)  
*Halkan kezdve, végefelé egyre hangosabban és gyorsabban.*

S I. Jó gazd-asz-szony va-gyok én, no de va-gyok én,  
 S II. Jó gazd - asz - szony va - gyok

Két fa - zék - ban li-bi-dá-ri dom-bon lom - bá-ri hē-gyén  
 én, li-bi-dá-ri dom - bon két fa - zék - ban fő - zök

fő - zök én.  
 7 én. Az éggük-ben,

The first two parts are almost identical, therefore these are represented by **A** and **A1**. In fact Kodály varies the music only from the third part.

The tempo: *Dance step* ♩ = 126, increasingly accelerating. The dynamics keeps up with the tempo by becoming ever louder. At the beginning of the piece the author makes a verbal remark: „*Begins softly and becomes increasingly loud and quick until the end*”.

The meter: 4/4 – unique in the cycle.

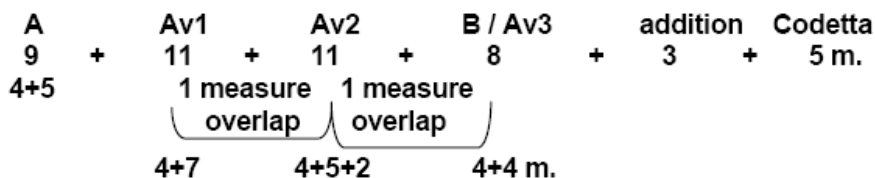
Kodály uses a single key in this piece, *g minor*, but he uses all three variants of the key: in part **A** variant *natural + harmonious*, in part **A1** the same, while in part **Av1** *melodious and natural* and in part **Av2** *natural and melodious*.

**7. Zöld erdőben (In the Green-Leafed Forrest)** – is the seventh and also the last choral piece, closing the cycle (see example 8). It is interesting that Kodály created a cycle of seven pieces as if he would have composed



one for each day of the week. This is the only piece for three voices in the cycle. Its form can be considered also a form with variations which contains repetitions. Its formula:

Ex. 15



In part **A** the main tune is represented by the **Alto** voice.

Ex. 16

A

Zöld er-dő - ben, sík me-ző - ben, zöld er - dő - ben,  
sík me-ző-ben la-kik egy ma - dár.

Measures 1 – 10.

In **Av1** it is taken over by the soprano. In **Av3** all three voices intonate the tune in an imitational structure at a difference of a quarter of a note and transposed by a lower fourth. In the part between measures 30 and 37, in part **B** a new tune is introduced imitated polyphonically and with variations in the lower fifth and then in the lower octave.

Ex. 17

**B / Av3**

zöld a szárnya, Jaj, begyöngyen jár. Várj madár, várj,  
ba, zöld a szár-nya, Jaj, be gyöngyen jár. Várj madár,  
26 lá - ba, Jaj, be gyöngyen jár. Várj madár, várj,

The 2<sup>nd</sup> phrase of the part A

The image shows a musical score for three staves, measures 26 through 37. The lyrics are in Hungarian. The first staff has lyrics: "Të csak ad-dig várj, Még az Is - ten mēg-en-ge-di: {Ti-éd lē-szēk} {E-nyém lē-szēl}". The second staff has lyrics: "várj, Të csak ad-dig várj, {Ti - éd lē-szēk} {E-nyém lē-szēl} már. \_\_\_\_\_". The third staff has lyrics: "32 várj, Të csak ad-dig várj, várj, {Ti - éd lē-szēk} {E-nyém lē-szēl} már. \_\_\_\_\_". The music is written in a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 2/4 time signature. The notation includes various note values, rests, and phrasing slurs.

### Measures 26 – 37.

But in measures 34 and 35 the author brings back a varied form of the second phrase of part **A**. In parts **A** and **Av1** the voice representing the main tune is followed by scraps of tunes and motifs from the main tune in the other voices.

*Slowly* ♩ = 63 is the tempo. This is the only piece of the cycle having a slower tempo due to the features of the lyrics and the folk song. Meter: 2/4.

As far as the tonal structure is concerned, except for the **Codetta**, all parts begin with a natural *a minor* and modulate into another variant of *a minor*. In the *Codetta* this is inverted: it begins in a melodious *a minor* and later as a reminiscence the basic and beginning motif of the piece it is brought back into a natural *a minor*. This piece is varied with many dissonant chords as well.

**Conclusion: as far as harmony is concerned** Kodály varies his choral pieces with numerous chromatic solutions such as: lower chromatic cambiata, inverse chromatic, ajoutée notes, closing Picardy third, etc. Also a plenitude of **polyphonic** solutions are to be found in the seven choral pieces. Starting with the scraps of tunes and motifs taken from the main tune, from ostinato motif, through variable and non-variable imitation technique in mirror, from the canon to the variable counterpoint there are many musical elements to be found in these „simple” and short choral pieces. Regarding the sequence of keys Kodály pays great attention that all voices intonate the main tune of the pieces. This is like the gesture of a good parent who distributes the sweets at his disposal equally between all his children.

It is known that musical analysis serves in fact musical performance. But not only that. In these choral pieces there are many interesting musical solutions that can be taught to the students in the classes of score transcription for choirs so that they would attempt to create small choral piece adaptations at their turn or as future music teachers they would teach their knowledge to the next generation.

Translated from Hungarian by Borbély-Bartalis Zsuzsa

## REFERENCES

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## ANNEX 1.

# KODÁLY Z.: SEVEN EASY CHORAL PIECES FOR CHILDREN

## Summary Table for the Musical Analysis

TITLE	BASIC COMPOSITIONAL MATERIAL	TOTAL NUMBER OF MEASURES	NUMBER OF VOICES	SEQUENCE OF VOICES	MUSICAL FORMULA	TEMPO	METER	KEY	DYNAMICS
1. Éva szívem, Éva	Folk song	36 (24+12)	2	S + A	A Av A	At pace ♩ = 112	2/4	A = D doric Av = A doric	A = piano, Av = cresc.
2. Falú végén	Folk song	22	2	S + A	:A + Codetta:	Vividly ♩ = 144	2/4	Bitonality: D major/G major G major/G mix.	freely
3. Héja	Children's folk song	57 (56+1 G.P.)	2	S + A	Bev. A B addition Av1 Bv1 Coda	Lively ♩ = 144	2/4	A major, free of modulation s	Contrasting: Intro. = ff, A = p, S = p, Addition = ff, Av1 = p, Bv1 = p/f, Coda = ff
4. Versengés	Folk song	60	2	Female + Male	A Av1 Av2 Coda	Vividly ♩ = 126	irregularly alternating measures of 3/4 + 2/4	A = D major, G major, Av1 = D major, G major, Av2 = D major, Coda = G mixolydian G major	In part A and in the first half of part Av1 voices have a contrasting dynamics (f and p), then both voices are of a plain forte, increasing to ff by the end.
5. Ciroka	Children's folk song	57	2 (4 – by Divisi)	S I - II + A I - II in Divisi	A Av1 Av2 Coda	At pace ♩ = 120	2/4	A, Av1, Av2 = D doric, Coda = D doric, B lydian, D mixolydian	Interchanging alternatively during the entire piece: A = forte, Av1 = piano, Av2 = forte, Coda = forte, piano, fortissimo
6. Jó gazd'asszony	Folk song	28	2	S I + S II	A A1 Av1 Av2	Dance step ♩ = 126 increasingly quick	4/4	variants of g minor: A = g natural, g harmonious, A1 = g natural, g harmonious, Av1 = g melodious, g natural, Av2 = g natural g melodious	A note from the author at the beginning of the piece: „Begins softly and becomes increasingly loud and quick until the end”.
7. Zöld erdőben	Folk song	45	3	S I + S II + A	A Av1 Av2 B/Av3 addition Codetta	Slowly ♩ = 63	2/4	variants of a minor A = a natural, a harmonious, Av1 = a natural, a melodious, Av2 = a natural, a melodious, B/Av3+addition = a natural, a melodious, Codetta = a melodious/ a natural	