

MUSICAL LIFE IN THE 17-18th CENTURY REFORMED COLLEGE OF SZÉKELYUDVARHELY

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SUMMARY. With the help of this hereby study, I would like to present some of the records concerning musical education within the Reformed College of Székelyudvarhely, followed by a detailed description of Sigmond Orbán's handwritten hymnbook as well as Mihály Nagy's psalm book, the handwritten vocal scores which are a true testament to the level of musical life within 17th as well as 18th century Transylvania.

Keywords: reformed college, musical training, manuscript, mensural notation.

Singing was a major part of education received in reformed colleges, therefore a great emphasize was put on vocal coaching from early on. The students were required to perform songs within the mass, funeral songs at funerals, as well as other occasional performances in the honour of the church's benefactors. At that time, the priests were also those who led the song of the congregation, therefore, it is natural that they have prior training in this respect.

In the 17th century the general regulations handbook - *Canones scholae udvarhelyianae*,² section IX - was the one, which outlined the process of vocal training within the Reformed College of Székelyudvarhely. Therefore, it was the duty of the rector as well as the deacons to decide the number of students required to perform at any given mass and/or funeral. This canon represented the basis of a long held tradition, by which a certain number of students were expected to sing alongside the cantor at daily church masses, and at the funeral procession of the wealthier members of congregation. Later, the heads of the college cancelled this certain practice, by way of the following motivation: "*it is in the detriment of their academic achievement, as well as being the subject of many examples of abuse; therefore – against the vehement objection of the church - we cannot help but dissolve this practice.*"³

It is a well-known fact that before 1670, when the school still had a trivial status, the teacher (ludi magister) was also the cantor of the county. After achieving its rank as a secondary school, the teacher could not function

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² *Canones scholae udvarhelyianae*, approved by the synod from Nagyenyed, on June 15, 1671

³ Kis, Ferenc, *A Székelyudvarhelyi Ev. Ref. Collegium Történelme (The history of the Reformed College of Székelyudvarhely)*, 1873, p. 17

as the cantor anymore, therefore the bishopric officially requested the ruler Apafi Mihály that he grant permission for the college to function in the traditional manner, namely let the teacher to lead the songs at mass as well as funerals along with his students. If the teacher cannot sing, then he should himself employ a cantor at his own expense. Section X. of the rulebook emerged from letters written in February of 1671 and stated that the rector – teacher – is required to employ a praecantor to perform ecclesiastic duties in lieu of him, a praecantor who is pardoned from school functions. They respected this condition, and subsequently the presbyter of college M. Bethlen ensured a separate wage for the cantor, in the amount of 25 forint and grains from 8 buckets of grain. In addition, since that instance, the cantor did not take part in the education of the students anymore.⁴

We can find records stating the level of musical education in the same book by Ferenc Kiss. He writes about the period between 1685 and 1721, a time which not only the number of enrolled students increased significantly, but also the academic level of the school. This academic improvement soon was generated into a trend; the spirit of the college urged both the teachers as well as students to keep aspiring to greater heights. Even though up until a certain point students had to further their education elsewhere if they wanted to begin a profession, from that point on the education provided to them by the college was suitable for students to become well-trained cantors, rectors, teachers etc.⁵

What did the students sing? How did they learn to sing? The basic repertoire of the students consisted out of hymnbooks printed in the 16th and 17th centuries, while the funeral songs were to be found in a different hymnbook. The students learned the songs by ear from a young age. Beginning with the 17th century, psalms were starting to become popular also in Transylvania. Mainly the students themselves ensured the distribution of the psalm book published in 1607. György Maróthi, a teacher from Debrecen, who has come to be familiar with the practice of the polyphonic congregational song during his studies abroad, took this custom back home with him to Debrecen, and began to develop the same method. Following this revolution, many other colleges started to consider reforming musical training and the introduction of polyphonic singing. The harmonic vocal scores from 1753 created based on the melodies of the psalms,⁶ created by Mihály Nagy, who was a music teacher from Udvarhely, as well as Sigmond Orbán's handwritten hymnbook are a true testament to this fact.

⁴ Kis 1873,17-18

⁵ Kis 1873,27

⁶ More on the subject: Szabolcsi Bence, *A XVIII. század magyar kollégiumi zenéje (Hungarian College Music in the 18th century)*, in: Szabolcsi, B., *A magyar zene évszázadai (Centuries of Hungarian Music)*, Budapest, 1961, p. 13

According to historical records, as early as November 16, 1768, at the time of the inaugural ceremony, the new professor Gergely Backamadarasi Kis was welcomed by the salutations and harmonic singing of the student at the Reformed College of Székelyudvarhely.⁷ We can therefore conclude that there must have been a long time tradition of polyphonic singing at Székelyudvarhely, even before the arrival of Backamadarasi. In addition, this arrival meant an improvement in musical education and voice training. One of Ferenc Kis' recording refers to this aspect, according to which music and singing was taught in every grade, they even had special teachers for the tenor and discant voices, and students were taught an instrument.⁸ The lesson plans also are indicative of the systematic manner in which music was taught. This subject was a compulsory one, once or twice a week, while also studying voice training. According to the records of the college from 1873, the institution employed a voice coach, eight singing teachers, and a music teacher.⁹ We can also learn from the donation records the amounts that certain people donated toward the musical education of the students as well as the raising the level of church music within the institution.¹⁰ Lajos Gönczi headmaster notes in the College Bugle that each time the college has a memorial celebration, the student orchestra as well as choir performs at these functions. They held this sort of memorial celebrations in 1876 in honor of Ferenc Deák, Count Domokos Teleki, and Count Imre Mikó; followed by one in 1883 honoring János Arany, as well as another celebration held on the 400-year anniversary of Zwingli's birth. A special event was held on October 14, 1888 organized in honor of the consecration of the new school building. Taking into account the stage of musical development of the time, as well as the fact that the college was not a musical institution, we cannot help

⁷ According to the record in the Consistorum Archives 1768/87: "*he was greeted with oration and beautiful harmonic music*"

⁸ Kis 1873/45: "*Gergely Kis payed great attention to voice training. He employed a music teacher for every grade. He also made sure they were taught musica vocalis by a praeses, who also had other praeses teaching certain voice types, for instance for tenorum, and discantistarum. The harmoniae praeses, harmony teacher, also taught church or sacred songs to the students. We also have records of our student playing musical instruments - musica instrumentalis.*"

⁹ see Kis 1873/104

¹⁰ A teacher of the college, József Magyarosi payed 500 forint in 1847 so that the music teacher could be paid from the interest on that amount, or the same money could have been given to the best instrumentalist student. Count Ferencz Haller, jr. from Hallerkő made a promise on February 19, 1858 that he will give 12 ducats of gold as a reward to the students who are the brightest among those who play the violin, flute, and horn. While the mother of he count, Zsuzsánna Kleist gave the school an amount of 100 forint so that from the interest of that amount the best bass could be rewarded. See: Kiss 1873/93

but notice the extended musical program of that particular performance.¹¹ Consequently, we can easily conclude the fact that the students of the Reformed College of Székelyudvarhely received a relatively high level of musical training.

We continue our study with the presentation of two song albums, which according to the records were written by two of the music teachers within the college, namely Mihály Nagy and Sigmond Orbán, noted with the help of the students. The selection of songs, the signs used in musical notation, the harmonies coming from the scores as well as musical theory guides within the books reflect the musical practices of the college at that time.

Sigmond Orbán's Manuscript Hymnbook – 1766

Bence Szabolcsi makes the first reference to Sigmond Orbán's manuscript hymnbook, in his study on music in 18th century Hungarian colleges.¹² Based on this reference, Attila Szabó T. also referred to these practices in his own book *Our handwritten hymnbooks and verses in the 16 – 19th centuries*.¹³ In 1941, Attila Szabó T. once again refers to the handwritten records, however, on this occasion he gives a more detailed analysis.¹⁴

In the fifties, Tibor Klaniczay, who dealt with the written hymnbooks, considered Orbán's book¹⁵ to be lost, however, after three years, András Benkő, a university professor from Cluj, found the volume in the document library of Székelyudvarhely. Géza Papp inserts a few melodies from the hymnbook in his own volume, named *Collection of Old Hungarian Melodies II*.¹⁶ Later, in

¹¹ As it was written in the College Bugle: Programme: 1. Adagio religioso, by C. Rundnagelt, performed by the young orchestra. 2. Psalm XC. for mixed choir arranged by Kozák Márton, sung by the youth choir. 3. Consecration prayer, recited by Domokos Szász right reverend and honorable Reformed Bishop of Transylvania. 4. Prayer, by Jenő Hubay, sung by the youth choir. 5. Special speech by notary Gerő Szász. 6. Prayer by Károly Huber, sung by the youth choir. 7. Speeches. 8. The hymn, by Erkel sung by the youth choir. 9. The history of the college construction uttered by the headmaster Lajos Gönczi. 10. Prayer, by Cherubini sung by the children's choir of the college. 11. The benediction of the bishop. 12. Adagio religioso, by A. Bott, performed by the college orchestra"

¹² Szabolcsi, Bence, *A magyar zene évszázadai II Centuries of Hungarian Music.*, Budapest, 1961, 13

¹³ Zilah, 1934, 94.1.123. sz

¹⁴ Szabó T., Attila, *Újabb adatok és pótlások kéziratok énekeskönyveink és verses kézirataink könyvészetéhez, (Newly gathered data and information regarding our handwritten hymnbooks and verses.* Erdélyi Tudományos Füzetek.123. sz. Kolozsvár, 1941, 9.1.14.sz..

¹⁵ Klaniczay, Tibor, *Beszámoló a Román Népköztársaság könyvtáraiban végzett kutatásaimról. Adalékok kéziratok énekeskönyveink történetéhez. (Report on the research conducted in the Libraries of Romania. Addendums to the history of handwritten hymnbooks)* Budapest, 1954, 350.

¹⁶ *Régi Magyar Dallamok Tára II.*, Papp Géza, *A XVII. század énekelt magyar dallamai Sung Hungarian melodies of the 17th century*, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1970. four melodies can be found in the collection, and another 10 in the notes.

the sixties, Béla Stoll refers to the hymn books once again, based on the data collected by Attila Szabó T. in his study.¹⁷ In 1986 András Benkő wrote a study about the handwritten hymnbook, a study which was later published in a theological journal.¹⁸ In a volume published in 2001, entitled *Old Hungarian Harmonic Songs from the 18th century*, Csaba Szabó details the hymnbook and analyses the musical material within, transcribing the voices into a modern score written for four voices.¹⁹

We can learn from the title of Orbán work that the volume consists out of odes and funeral songs. The author provides a short explanation regarding the harmonic layout. He created the collection for the library of the college. Four students assisted him in his work.²⁰

The melodies are presented in arrangement meant four voices, with a single exception. On the left hand side (verso) of the handwritten score we come across the tenor voice, the cantus firmus of the melody, while underneath it the discant voice appears (following a German pattern); on the right hand side (recto) we can observe the alto voice, with the bass beneath.²¹

The handwritten score use mensural white notation.²² We can encounter two types of note values: *semmibrevis* as the main value and the *longa* in cadences. The minima only appear a few times as more of an exception.²³ The melodies were written on staves of five lines, occasionally six, which were actually used for the benefit of more than a single note at a time.²⁴ The higher pitches were noted using C-clefs, as in mezzo-soprano, alto and tenor ones, while the bass line used the F-clef. The meter used is usually a C or alla breve, set on the same line as the clef, therefore the location of the meter is relative. They used *b* and *x* letters for alterations; we could not

¹⁷ Stoll, Béla, *A magyar kéziratos énekeskönyvek bibliográfiája (The bibliography of of Hungarian handwritten hymnbooks) (1565-1840)*, Budapest, 1963, 283 sz.

¹⁸ Benkő, András, *Orbán Zsigmond XVIII. századi énekeskönyve (Zsigmond Orbán's 18th century hymnbook)*, in *Református Szemle*, 1992, pp.464–474.

¹⁹ Balassi Kiadó (Balassa Publishing house), Budapest-Szombathely, 2001

²⁰ The title is: *The harmony of the most important praises and some of the funeral songs, elaborated in harmoniae praeses according with the common rules, along with the short explicatio on the soft melody, by 4 respectable members of this Gymnasium, put down in writing for the Theca of the Udvarhely Ref. Gimnasium by ORBAN SIGMOND hereby Balo Samuel, Pap Samuel, Paal Josef, Sofalvi Samuel*. Written in Udvarhely, in the year of 1766.

²¹ From the middle ages until the 18th century the notation of the sung polyphonic works could be done in several ways: parts were written one on top of the other (the modal period); for the individualization of the parts, the two upper parts and the low part were arranged in one then in two pages (*Ars antiqua*); the parts were notated in separate books (separate volume/book for each part, 16-17 centuries). See: *The works of Rajeczky Benjamin*, ed. by Ferenczi Ilona, Budapest, 1976.

²² I took the photos used for illustration at the Archive in Udvarhely, with the permission of director Róth András.

²³ Song 51.

²⁴ and they named this technique “zabolás”

find any naturals.²⁵ The interesting thing is that the notation uses *x* to cancel a lowered note and *b* to cancel a raised note. The notation of accidentals is most unusual as well, as it can appear precisely in front of the altered note, or with couple of notes in advance. Consequently, we can safely say that the manuscript has unique traits from the standpoint of meter, key signature, as well as accidentals. There are no particular indications regarding tempo within the score. We encountered only two instances of rhythmic modes. We find a *custos* (direct) at the end of the line, while the sign for repetition is an unusual one. The musical notation is quite precise when it comes to pitch, clefs and accidentals. It is far better than that of the printed hymnbook in 1744 from Cluj.

The musical material of the manuscript consists of 53 songs written for four voices and one, un-harmonized song. The title of the latter is *Így kell-e mégis maradnom*.²⁶ The back jacket of the volume holds within its interior another melody, without text, which was perhaps written down by somebody later.

These songs of praise follow the order of religious celebrations, while the funeral and other types of songs were added to the back of the volume. This particular book contains 2 Advent songs, 9 Christmas songs, 3 New Year songs, one for Palm Sunday and one for Good Friday, 6 Easter ones, 1 for the penance, 2 songs for the beginning of Sunday mass, one for morning mass, one for evening mass, one confession and finally 17 funeral songs.

Orbán himself harmonized the songs. He refers to this practice on pages 44b-48a, with the title *Short lecture on the harmony of soft melodies*. He uses simple harmonic techniques – chords in root position, repeated notes usually feature repeated chords also. The direction of the leaps within the extreme voices is usually the same, while the *cantus firmus* is in the tenor voice.

Csaba Szabó states the following concerning Sigmond Orbán's hymnbook: "the melodies of the volume recorded the songs born on the lips of the people... intended for the college, with the purpose of preserving and passing on the songs. They noted the harmony that they themselves developed guided by the rules of the time, singing together for themselves until the notation of the melodies. They hence immortalized common creations, as a response to daily needs, as for instance the liturgy, special days, and life's milestones, outlines of group-improvisations, with signs specific for that certain theme and purpose. Orbán's book does not strive toward perfection, to the arrangement of the material present in the hymnbook published in Cluj in 1744. He merely wrote down the local versions of the most well-known folk songs, those used in Christmas chanting, augmenting the collection with funeral songs."²⁷ These versions had a surprising number of sharps used.

²⁵ As accidentals came in use at the end of the 18th century.

²⁶ The melody is supposedly the bass of the aforementioned song, written in alto clef.

²⁷ Szabó 2001, 1-55

A question might emerge – why does the book only contain these certain songs? Was this the curriculum, were these songs best known by the congregation, were these the ones considered the most valuable ones by Orbán or fit most in the congregation?

No psalms are present in Orbán's volume. We can safely assume that at that time the college choirs sang the arrangements written by Maróthi, or that the Reformed College of Székelyudvarhely used Mihály Nagy's scores from 1753, which contained psalm arrangements for four voices. In any case the volume filled a great void in the musical life of the 18th century colleges, for it provided valuable material for choir training, church masses and funeral ceremonies. The influence of this book can also be recognized in today's polyphonic folk practices in the Szászcsávás region.²⁸ The book itself is a true historical document that depicts the musical level as well as repertoire of the Reformed College of Székelyudvarhely.

The Psalm Book of Mihály Nagy – 1753

The manuscripts first are mentioned within a study written by Bence Szabolcsi about the musical life of the reformed colleges.²⁹ Attila Szabó T. refers to Szabolcsi's data and notes them in his own *Our handwritten hymnbooks and verses in the 16 – 19th centuries*.³⁰ We come to learn based on his description that Mihály Nagy was at that time the choirmaster of the Reformed College of Székelyudvarhely. Béla Stoll also documents this in his 1963 bibliography, no. 247, based on Attila Szabó T.'s work.

Certain volumes of the manuscripts contain the alto, bass and discant scores of the 150 Genevan Psalms, as well as *The Song of Simon* and *Of Heavenly Prayer* songs. The titled at the beginning of the alto and bass voices lets us know about the fact that these songs were written by Mihály Nagy for the college library.³¹ While on the discant score we can read the fact, the he developed the voice for his own person. In front of the alto and bass voices,

²⁸ The harmonization technique of the locals/local people is particularly shown in the study of Szabó, Csaba, *The traditional harmony of Szászcsávás*. In: *Studies in Musicology*, Kriterion, Bucharest, 1977, pp. 109-123. The author asserts that this type of four-part singing corresponds to the harmonization of Orbán Sigmond and that the schoolteacher Balla József, who studied in Székelyudvarhely between 1790-1801, introduced it himself to the villagers.

²⁹ *A XVIII. század magyar kollégiumi zenéje (Hungarian College Music in the 18th century)* in: Szabolcsi 1961, pp. 5-119

³⁰ He notes the psalm book with no. 114 in the first chapter of the volume, entitled: *Vallásos kéziratok énekeskönyveink és verses kézirataink (Our Religious hymnbooks and handwritten verses)*, Zilah, 1934

³¹ The ALTO/BASS of the Psalms adjusted to the nature of songs by ordinary Rules, elaborated in the Contrascriba office for the Techa of the same Noble Ud. Ref. Gym. Put down in writing with the aid of some of its distinguished members by NAGY MIHÁLY M.P. Udvarhely, the year of 1753.

the names of those students who helped in the making of the manuscript are listed.³² The alto and bass voice scores are kept within the Reformed College of Székelyudvarhely's library, while the discant and bass voices are kept in the Cluj library. In fact, there are four voice score manuscripts. According to the note on the end of the bass voice score, the harmonies were matched to the tenor voice of the psalm book published in 1742 in Debrecen. We learn from Csaba Szabó's volume that the separation of musical lines with the help of a brevis rest, as well as the correlation of the cantus firmus pitch (with the exception of psalm XVIII.) with that of the volume published in 1740, prove the fact that the year 1742 must have been a typo.³³ Mihály Nagy constructed the harmonies according to the customs of the time, based on the natural movement of the voices. He writes a music theory guide in the bass voice score on pages 50a-51b.³⁴

From the standpoint of musical notation, he uses white mensural notation, on staves of five lines. If the range of the melody required it, he temporarily switched to six lines. Mihály Nagy does not use time signatures. We encounter three forms of meter: brevis, ligatura – as a sign as well as in cadences; semibreves, and minima. The discant and bass voice score from Cluj notes the rhythmical melody of the voices, however the alto and bass from Székelyudvarhely is mostly without this technique.³⁵ A careful, experienced hand made the musical notation. In some songs within the voice scores of Udvarhely, we notice certain vertical lines marking the additional voice over or underneath the main one. He uses C and F clefs, as well as a baritone clef within the voice scores. The key signatures are not always consistent: they appear in the first line of the melody, but are omitted later, in certain cases the key signatures may also refer to another octave.³⁶ As far as the modal scales are concerned, the most frequent one is the Dorian G, Ionian F or Ionian plagal C; but we could also talk about Dorian Plagal-D, Mixolydian, Phrygian and Aeolian G and C. These were the ones usually depicted in the tenor voice score. Concerning the correlation between text and music, we notice that there is not a syllabic setting, and the writers themselves are not particular to one syllable being sung on a certain note.

The two manuscript volumes presented represent the earliest collection of songs in Transylvania, and are also the most reliable ones. The message of the psalm books: Hungarian polyphonic singing a matter of public interest.

³² Forró Ádám, Krizbai Mihály, Silveszter József, Uzoni György, Simón György, Veres István, Boér Elek, Foris István, Ajtai Mihály, Molnár István

³³ Szabó 2001, I-27

³⁴ The title of the musical guide: *A Harmóniában való hangok kikeresésének és elkezdésének MÓDJA (The method of searching for and emitting harmonic notes)*

³⁵ Exception in the alto: I. and XCVI. Psalm, in the bass voice score I.-VI

³⁶ For instance, the bass voice score psalm XI.

In contrast with the songs presented by Maróthi, who wrote down foreign songs, the students who sang these Hungarian songs placed the culture of their own community in the forefront. The manuscripts are valuable by their mere existence, as well as being proof to the polyphonic musical notation made by the groups of student, they are a testament to the harmonic fiber of group-improvisation and paint a picture regarding choir performances in our native language in the 1600s, and finally by way of their authenticity are more valuable than the gradual and other printed hymnbooks.

(Translated by Köpeczi Juliánna Erika)

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