

## TEACHING SPIRITUAL MUSIC AND THE ROLE OF CHORAL ACTIVITY IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

ÁRPÁD SZÉKELY<sup>1</sup>

**SUMMARY.** In this article, my main focus is on presenting the role of psalm and hymn teaching as well as the importance of choral activity in religious education. In order to do this, first I argued about the importance of psalm-/hymn-teaching in schools and in congregations, considering that the beautiful singing in a religious service is the most natural participation of the church-attendees. According to my own professional experience as a choir conductor, music teacher and principal, hymn-teaching is an essential part of preserving tradition and deepening Reformed religious identity. Finally, I pointed out that attending a choir has a great role in the development of the individual and of the community. As a conclusion, psalm-/hymn-teaching, as well as choral activity play an undisputable role in the process of individual formation and in maintaining the continuity of Christian morality in a society where an unsettled system of education may hide great dangers, and where the future of our Hungarian minority depends on today's youth and the education we give them.

**Keywords:** psalm- hymn-teaching, choral activity, choir, spiritual music, religious education, ethnic survival, reformed identity.

In the following paper, I would like to present my ideas along three major issues, which is, naturally, an approach of the topic based on my personal experience:

- The importance of teaching spiritual music
- Teaching spiritual music as a method of developing tradition- and identity-consciousness
- The role of the chorus in the development of the individual and the community

1. The reformed theological high schools laid great stress on teaching spiritual music. Professor Dr. András Benkő dedicated an entire lecture to this subject and as far as I recall, He also wrote several articles on the subject in the *Úzenet*<sup>2</sup>, for He has made a special point of teaching spiritual music

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<sup>1</sup> Reformed High School of Cluj, str. Kogălniceanu nr. 16, Cluj-Napoca, 400084 Romania, (www.kollegium.ro), music teacher and principal, E-mail: szekelyarpad@gmail.com.

<sup>2</sup> Reformed Hungarian church periodical published by Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület (<http://uzenet.reformatus.ro/>).

at the theology, first of all, but also in cantor training schools and high schools. Today, teaching spiritual music is an integral part of religious education on every level. Here I would like to mention professor Benkő's book entitled *Mondjatok dicséretet (Praise the Lord)*.<sup>3</sup>

Teaching spiritual music being such a priority for Him and on the special request of Bishop Kálmán Csiha, professor Benkő devoted himself entirely to His work on the new Hungarian reformed hymn-book.

He was the one who called my attention to the new hymn-book<sup>4</sup> and asked for my help in this work. One of the reasons he considered the matter of the new hymn-book so significant was that, according to His opinion, the reformed community from Transylvania had the poorest quality hymn-book, and during the cantor training courses He never ceased to stress the importance of teaching the new hymn-book correctly, for today's level of singing does not even reach that of the interwar period. Unfortunately, even today there are some who have not realized the value of the material they are in possession of.

Since the re-opening of the Reformed Theological High School of Cluj, I myself, as a music teacher have been teaching our chorales, because I believe that the most plausible active participation in the church service of a reformed believer can be through singing beautifully.

2. Teaching spiritual music as a method of developing traditionalism is also a highly significant factor in education: the connection between the religious holidays and the related chorals is deeply imprinted in the soul of the Hungarian people of Transylvania. We can observe these both with the Roman Catholic and Reformed believers, as well.

With the approach of Christmas, we will not miss hearing the well-known carols such as the *Csendes éj (Silent Night)*<sup>5</sup> or *Krisztus Urunknak áldott születésén (On the Birth of our Lord, the Christ)*<sup>6</sup>. These have already become paradigms. Alternatively, no Easter can pass without the sounds of *Győzelmet vettél Ó Feltámadott (O You Resurrected, You Took Glory)*<sup>7</sup>.

These carols contribute to the atmosphere of the holidays, to the spirituality connected to it. It would be a shame not to teach them, not to pass them on to the next generations.

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<sup>3</sup> Benkő, András, *Mondjatok dicséretet (Praise the Lord)*, Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület, Kolozsvár (Cluj), 2000.

<sup>4</sup> *Magyar Református Énekeskönyv (Hungarian Reformed Hymnbook)*, Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület, Kolozsvár (Cluj), 1999.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 621.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 326.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 346.

To take the idea further, when we think of the confirmation of such chorales come to our mind as *Szent hitünkről vallást tettünk (We confessed our holy faith)*<sup>8</sup>, or the celebration of the Reformation automatically associates the *Erős várunk nekünk az Isten (A mighty fortress is our God)*<sup>9</sup>, but this is already more than simple tradition, this is also a matter of religious-national identity. In my opinion, a person's identity does not consist of his nationality, mother tongue, musical mother tongue, history and traditions only, but also of his religion. These altogether make the individual whole and complete. This is how it can become a life style.

3. When the Reformed Theological High School of Cluj was re-opened and we didn't have a school building or classrooms, it was difficult to teach music in the given circumstances, but I knew that a good chorus could make a name for the school, it could make this school renowned in the country and abroad, it could play an important role in forming a community and last but not least it could provide the students with unforgettable memories.

The role of the reformed chorus should be to promote music, to serve during church services, to testify about faith and love, to serve during our religious and national holidays and many other elevating roles, which could be enumerated here.<sup>10</sup>

I founded the chorus in the first week: I selected the students and we started working.

The achievements of the chorus are well-known by most people, so it is almost unnecessary to list them. However, I would like to mention some, which were accomplished as a result of hard work and striving:

- tours abroad (The United States of America, Canada, Germany, The Netherlands, Hungary, Slovakia)
- yearly Christmas concerts
- joint concerts with the Orthodox Seminary
- ecumenical Christmas concerts
- participation at ceremonies at our religious and national holidays
- tours in the country all around the congregations of Transylvania, the Diaspora, services at congregation in Cluj, participation at significant events in our city
- Awards and distinctions (Concert chorus, Golden grade, E.M.K.E. award, special awards etc.)

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 408.

<sup>9</sup> *Magyar Református Énekeskönyv (Hungarian Reformed Hymnbook)*, Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület, Kolozsvár (Cluj), 1999, 391.

<sup>10</sup> Székely, Árpád-Kovács, Attila, L., *A református énekvezér kézikönyve (The Handbook of the Reformed Song-Conductor)*, Erdélyi Református Egyházkerület, Kolozsvár (Cluj), 1995.

These all prove that the work of the chorus is successful.

Looking back on the successes of the 19 years and more than 350 concerts, I feel that the chorus has fulfilled its duty and although its members are constantly changing, I believe that it will always fulfil this task. As we can read in Psalm 147: "Praise ye the LORD: for it is good to sing praises unto our God;"<sup>11</sup> (Psalm 147:1)

In the following words, I would like to present a few thoughts about what makes it worth carrying on with this hard work, thinking it further and integrating it increasingly in the educational system of the school.

Besides service and ideological responsibility, numerous positive aspects of choral education can be highlighted.

The most important and most obvious aspect is probably the minimal musical education, which should not be missing from the general culture of any young person.

Within the frameworks of choral activity, students can practice their musical knowledge, they can get an insight in the amazing world of music, and moreover, they can take part in the creation of musical values, as well. Thus, they can become more open to the reception and production of new general human values. Brain researchers keep stressing the importance of musical education and within this choral education, since this can lead to a better understanding of mathematics, and a healthy proportion is not one music class and six mathematics classes, but perhaps two music classes and four mathematics classes, which also provides the student with more free time.

*Self-discipline and community discipline*, without which a chorus is inconceivable, bring along *respect for work, perseverance, expediency, respect for other people's work*, while *success* brings along *self-appreciation, self-respect and self-confidence*.

A significant benefit of choral activity is aesthetic education. Here I would like to mention that this is the field which has always interested me and to which my doctorate dissertation relates.

Topic: **The Aesthetics of Choral Sonority**

Title of dissertation: **Ideal and Semantics of Choral Sonority**

*I. Historical Retrospective on Aesthetic-Artistic Musical Education.  
II. Relation Systems between Poetic Declamation, Musical Intonation and Choreographic Relatum in the Aesthetic Structure of the Choral Music.  
III. Correlation between the Declamation of the Poetic Text and Melodic Intonation in Choral art. IV. Choral Sonority in the Mirror of Intonation Theory.  
V. Formation of the Ideal of Adequate Tone by the Conductor of the Chorus and Extrapolation over Ensemble Practice.*

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<sup>11</sup> *The King James Version*, Cambridge, 1769.

Music is, perhaps, the field, which is most tightly connected to other branches of art, thus pronouncedly contributing to the formation of artistic taste indispensable for the deliverance of a cultivated person.

Phonation belongs to this chapter, as well. Human voice is generally considered to be the most beautiful musical instrument, and if it is so, the quality of our voice makes a great difference: if we want it to be pleasant we have to work on it, we have to train it.

Chorus membership also contributes to the *religious – moral education* of the youth.

The majority of our concerts and services take place in churches, tabernacles and parish assembly rooms. In these cases we speak about testifying – each and every student individually and the chorus as the representative of the Reformed Theological High School of Cluj testify about their reformed faith, faith which is worth living by as Hungarian reformed people of Transylvania, and the moral values of which determine the present and the future of all of us. If we take this work seriously and put our faith in Christ, if our faith is solid, we can hope that our students will become the representatives of such Christian moral values which will protect them from the negative effects and influences of the world, and they will be able to distinguish between right and wrong in their own benefit.

Our increasingly liberal educational system holds numerous dangers. The assurance of our ethnic survival depends on today's youth; therefore, the education of this youth makes a great difference.

(Translated by: Galaczy Júlia)

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