

DLA doctoral thesis

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Béla Bartók: Five Songs – „twice”:
Opus 15 and Opus 16

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I. Antecedents of my research

My first extensive encounter with Béla Bartók's songs – as a song cycle – took place during preparing to my diploma concert. It was an extraordinary experience, both song-cycles arouse my enthusiasm immediately. Bartók's special harmony structures incorporating folk music features, the combination of parlando – rubato style, which leads to the birth of the genre of Hungarian song together with Zoltán Kodály and Béla Reinitz. It is a crucial event in the history of Hungarian music. In the early period of Béla Bartók's oeuvre, in 1916, the op 15 and op 16 song cycles - both consist of 5 songs - were composed during only 8 months, and they are unique in a way since Bartók never again uses the genre of piano accompanied songs.

12 years ago when I started to deal with these songs as a singer I was looking for theoretical works and I found only few essays dealing with only these 10 songs – in most scientific articles about Bartók the songs are only mentioned.

When I applied for the PhD School of the Academy of Music my exam contained songs by Bartók and Kodály. As a singer I was lucky enough to sing these rarely performed songs several times both in Hungary and abroad and I had the intention even then to deal with their theoretical background, the history of their origin and their analyzation from the point of view of a performing artist. As a student of the PhD school my professors supported my research and I started it with the unparalleled professional help of László Vikárius. There were three points which motivated me mostly during my research: in Bartók's oeuvre – especially in its early period – it is the single piece written for voice and piano not much later than 'The Bluebeard's Castle' opera was finished, the short period of time during which these

songs were composed, and the secret around especially the songs of the op 15 cycle.

It was also my intention to compile a comprehensive study about these two academically neglected cycles of Bartók, which are rarely performed due to their difficulty. In my thesis I aimed to present a comprehensive, detailed view on these 10 songs, summarizing earlier essays and articles and measuring them according to several theoretical and performing factors from my point of view as a singer and form a partly subjective opinion on them.

II. Sources

In my thesis I tried to summarize the relevant data of the scientific articles focusing on especially on their history of origin, and textual and musical analysis, furthermore in connection with the cycle op 15 – regarding mainly the writers of the songs – I tried to list the arguable relations in chronological order and give possible explanations based on special literature. I conducted my research in the special literature with the help of László Vikárius but I independently collected the material.

The most important special literature I used during my work is an essay published in 1968 by Júlia Szegő called '*Három Bartók dal megtalált ihletője*' which revealed the secret and found the real writer of the texts and the relatives of Bartók whose remembrance contributed in reconstructing the missing data in connection with the year 1916. This research was continued by Denijs Dille – the most important researcher of the life and works of Béla Bartók and who was personally familiar and corresponded with the composer's friends and relatives – who in his work '*L'opus 15 de Béla Bartók*' gives answers

to crucial questions with the help of authentic sources of information inspired by Zoltán Kodály and his wife to embark on this exploring and revealing research. Furthermore I must mention László Vikárius: *'Intimation through Words and Music. Unique Sources to Béla Bartók's Life and Thought in the Fonds Denijs Dille'* and his lecture in 2014 at the Institute of Musicology published in 2015 *Bartók levelei Gombossy Klárához (1916): egy életszakasz megkerülhetetlen forrásai*" – the most important source regarding these songs. These are sometimes rather personal letters between Béla Bartók and Klára Gombossy from which the nature of their relationship and significant quantity of first-hand information is revealed concerning his opinion on these songs and his intentions, which are very rare in Bartók's life. Access to these studies was made possible by the leader of the Bartók Archive and my tutor László Vikárius. A doctoral thesis by Micheal Braun *Béla Bartók's Vokalmusik. Stil, Hintergründe und Zusammenhänge der originalen Vokalkompositionen* at the University of Regensburg from 2014 also contains several information of great value regarding both the history of origin and analysis.

The special literature background of the song cycle op. 16 is based on Pintér Csilla: *Versforma és zenei forma Bartók Ady-dalaiban* regarding the text, Starobinski: *Le Métronome passionné. Tempo et agogique dans le Cinq mélodiés op. 16 de Béla Bartók* regarding changes in tempi, the text on the cover of the Hungaroton LP by László Somfai, *Bartók Béla: Öt dal Ady Endre szövegeire* an essay by Sándor Kovács from 1981 and *Les mélodies op. 15. et op. 16. de Bartók* an essay by Péter Laki from 2008 regarding the history of origin and biography. In connection with biographical data and Bartók's works I used Tibor Tallián's book *Bartók Béla*, and Kroó György's *Bartók kalauz*.

III. Method

After defining the genre of song – especially of romantic song as a direct antecedent of the genre – I tried to define the place and importance of the two cycles in the oeuvre of Bartók.

Besides summarizing the data found in special literature I analyzed each song regarding their form and harmony from a performer's point of view considering Bartók's life and focussing the personal aspects of the 1910's especially the composer's professional and psychological crisis. Regarding the performer's point of view my most important aspects were to analyze the connection of singing and the piano, to map the peculiarities of the text, the prosody and the declamation, to describe as objectively as possible the relation of Bartók to the writers of the texts of the ten songs, to describe the nature of the types of melodies and melody structures, to analyze in details the possible means of performance, to describe the unusual tempi and the rather frequent – sometimes changing in every bar – changes in tempi and to find possible explanations to them. After writing about the detailed history of origin of the songs and descriptively analyzing the form and the harmony of the text and the music and defining the possible features from a performer's point of view I comparatively analyzed the two song cycles, and using the methods of a music critic I tried to describe two significant performances of Five songs op. 15 as a practical way of analysis besides its general analyzing features.

Furthermore in order to be objective regarding emotions, which are indispensable in performing arts I used interdisciplinary special

literature – i.e. psychological works - to support scientifically my viewpoints. It was a book by Keith Oatley and Jennifer M. Jenkins titled 'Emotions'. I followed the same way and used the above mentioned book when I wrote about the personality of Béla Bartók and its reflections in the songs besides providing the factual data of special literature.

IV. Findings

In my thesis I summarize a great number of analyzing data considering the history of origin, biography, music and text according to several aspects based on findings of earlier and newer research and I add several perceptions – based on earlier mentioned factors - which might be useful in both performing and pedagogical practice. Performers, music teachers, repetiteurs, pianists and piano teachers dealing with these songs will not have to spend long weeks collecting source data and summarize the information regarding each song since the present essay tries to do it without the aim of being complete. Facts of the present essay are reliable but a critical eye is necessary regarding the subjective opinions, which are permissible in a DLA thesis. The ambiguous data, and sometimes contradictory hypothesis of different essays are listed in this paper and analyzes them. It means it does not try to accept one version of a given phenomenon if it is not supported by facts unambiguously. More exactly the personal relationship between Bartók and the writer of the text of one of the songs of op. 15 cycle, Klára Gombossy is discussed in detail and in chronological order citing arguments both for and against trying to establish objectivity.

V. Documentation of activities in connection with the topic of the paper
2005., 2006. August Palacio de Festivales de Cantabria, Santander, Spain

Béla Bartók: Five Songs, op. 15. and Five Songs, op. 16 - excerpts

Piano: Balázs Fülei and László Borbély

2006. October 5. Liszt Academy Grand Hall

Diploma concert

Béla Bartók: Five Songs, op. 15.

Piano: Orsolya Fajger

2007. September Calvinist Church, Leányfalu

Béla Bartók: Five Songs, op. 15. and Five Songs, op. 16 - excerpts

Piano: József Balog and Bea Ács

2009. May Konzertsaal von Marjana Lipovsek, Vienna

Béla Bartók: Five Songs, op. 15. and Five Songs, op. 16 - excerpts

Piano: Eva Mark-Mülher

2012. July Calvinist Church, Leányfalu

Five Songs, op. 15

Piano: János Ferenc Szabó

2017. March 25. Old Music Academy Chamber Hall

Béla Bartók: Five Songs, op. 15.

Piano: Gábor Alszászy

2018. February 22. Liszt Academy Solti Hall

Béla Bartók: Five Songs, op. 15.

Piano: Gábor Alszászy

2018. April 13. Liszt Academy Solti Hall

DLA concert

Béla Bartók: Five songs, op. 15.

Piano: Gábor Alszászy