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# IN THE SHADOW OF THE CHOIR AND THE ORGAN

THE SYSTEMATIZATION AND ANALYZIS OF THE  
COMPLETE WORKS OF GÁBOR LISZNYAY SZABÓ

THESIS

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Gábor Lisznyay Szabó<sup>1</sup> is one of the undeservedly forgotten musicians of the 20th century. His activity as a composer is just as important as his vocation as a teacher and a church musician. He was one of the composers who were thinking in 'sacred and national culture'<sup>2</sup> and according to László Bucsi and 'a lot of church musicians' his music 'spreads life'.<sup>3</sup> The proof of his precious activity among others is that the music school of Veresegyháza, which had been an affiliated department of the Music School of Gödöllő until 1993 is now bears the name of Lisznyay proudly.<sup>4</sup> One of my thesis' main aim is to pique the interest on the achievement of Lisznyay so his works can be transferred from the depths of the libraries into the concert practice.

I met the name of Lisznyay for the first time during my studies in Budapest at the Hungarian Church Music Institution where I studied with his daughter Mária. At the same time I met his organ works at the organ lessons of István Koloss who published two volumes of Lisznyay's organ works, and I got involved in his sacred music during my studies with László Tardy.

As an active church musician, organist, choir conductor and composer I've found Lisznyay's life absolutely interesting because he also had a strong focus on church music and on the organ. Initially I had concentrated my research on his organ works but shortly after I revealed his complete *œuvre* which I wanted to process completely.

Although some of this colourful repertoire has been published and sometimes can be heard during concerts, most of his compositions are unpublished, and because they are available only in the manuscript therefore inaccessible. Although during the life of Lisznyay many of his compositions had been published, these copies have slowly disappeared through the decades and nowadays can be found only between some libraries most cherished treasures,

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<sup>1</sup> His name was in use in different ways. Until high school he was mentioned as 'Szabó Gábor' in his graduation certificate we can find the 'lisznyay [sic!] Szabó Gábor, László, Béla, Iván' name. Under his years at the Music Academy he used most common the 'Lisznyai-Szabó Gábor' format but at his adulthood he used only the 'Lisznyay Szabó Gábor' or 'Lisznyay Gábor' names.

<sup>2</sup> TÓTH SÁNDOR (1988): „In memoriam: Lisznyay Szabó Gábor” In: Lukin László (ed.) *Lisznyay Szabó Gábor*, Viczián János (publisher), Győr, 9.

<sup>3</sup> DR. BUCSILÁSZLÓ (1988): „Tengert átfogni” In: Lukin László (ed.) *Lisznyay Szabó Gábor*, Viczián János (publisher), Győr, 13.

<sup>4</sup> I. Appendix

thus cannot be used for practical purposes. Major editions didn't come to light and only a few thorough research has been done. I would like to mention Levente Márton Horváth on the first place who have written his first thesis from the organ works of Lisznyay<sup>5</sup> then he dealt with the complete masses<sup>6</sup> which he also mentioned in his doctoral thesis later.<sup>7</sup> We have to mention at this point István Koloss as well who planned to publish the complete organ works of Lisznyay. Unfortunately his death in 2010 left this edition unfinished, however he had published two tenuous volumes<sup>8</sup> including a bunch of organ works which became the most often performed compositions of Lisznyay since, thanks to this new edition. The main goal of this thesis is not less than to systematize the complete repertoire of Lisznyay with the collection of each known piece, and also to analyze the most important works of this huge repertoire.

From the above it was predictable that only a limited number of literature is available so basically I had to rely on empirical methods. The primary location for my research was the National Széchenyi Library where most of his manuscripts are present at the rare music collections floor but I have found several manuscripts elsewhere as well.

Initially I overview the life of Gábor Lisznyay Szabó based upon the most relevant and authentic information, then I will analyze and review his complete repertoire according to my detailed catalogue which is the one and only systematization of these compositions, and is the result of a year-long documentation which contains every single piece available from Lisznyay divided into three greater categories.

The fact, that the choir and the organ were the most important in the life of Lisznyay is also palpable; as we will see, from his over 300 compositions there are only about fifty pieces which ignore the human voice or the sound of the organ. This disproportion of his works gave me the thematic basis of the systematization, where firstly I collected all the vocal compositions, then the

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<sup>5</sup> HORVÁTH MÁRTON LEVENTE (2006): *Lisznyay Szabó Gábor, Az ismeretlen orgonista-zeneszerző, [thesis]*. s.n., Budapest

<sup>6</sup> HORVÁTH MÁRTON LEVENTE (2007): *Lisznyay-Szabó Gábor miséi [thesis]*. s.n., Budapest

<sup>7</sup> HORVÁTH MÁRTON LEVENTE (2013): *Egy műfaj illegalításban, Misekompozíciók Magyarországon 1949 és 1969 között [dissertation]*. s.n., Budapest

<sup>8</sup> LISZNYAY SZABÓ GÁBOR (2003): *Orgonaművek I-II*. Editio Aerophon, Budapest

organ works, and finally every other pieces which would be meaningless to place in different subcategories due to their small number and various instrumentation.

For practical and extensive reasons upon the analysis of these works I focused on the most interesting and most precious parts of the *œuvre*, thus some of the compositions have been detailed more thorough, however particular – basically the most conventional – pieces have been only mentioned. When I felt it indispensable or just to ensure greater understanding I used score excerpts as exemplification from actual work of Lisznyay and associated pieces from other composers. For this illustration I have used *Finale 2011* scoring computer program. Also because of dimensional reasons I publish the whole catalogue at the end of my dissertation.<sup>9</sup>

The formal, thematical and harmonical, music theoretical diversification of Lisznyay's compositions makes it difficult to understand this heterogeneous and compound repertoire. In his works we can often find fashionable Frenchlike impressionistic harmonies blended with the puritanical gregorian melodies or conjugates the 17th century poliphony with the brusque effects of the *avantgarde*. In his sacred music beside the arrangements of well-known gregorian melodies and canonized catholic chants we can also find a dozen of apochrypal chants, protestant chorals and hebrew tunes as well. The pieces of his secular work also contains curiosity especially his folksong arrangements which were absolute novelty during the first decades of the 20th century.

During the analysis of his works we have to take into consideration that these works were not created for recitals, concert purposes or for highly skilled distinguished musicians but for everyday church services, less trained musicians or for pedagogical intentions. On the one hand it is for sure that many times his imagination had to be limited by the rigid compulsion of the everyday practices but on the other hand he had the possibility – just like Kodály or Bartók – to prove his talent, ability, creativity and unique inventions in his most simple and unsophisticated works. Last but not least thanks to these circumstances we received a lot of compositions which are easy to learn and to perform from him, however we can also find extremely difficult pieces in every genre as well.

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<sup>9</sup> VII. Appendix

The life of Lisznyay just like his repertoire is excessively colourful and manifold. As Horváth pointed it out 'we have just a few documents about the life of Gábor Lisznyay Szabó'<sup>10</sup> so I also relied on his sources and publications, primarily on a booklet<sup>11</sup> published by László Lukin, and the information and manuscripts, other documentation given directly from the composer's daughter, Mária Lisznyay. Considering that these sources contains several discrepancy I tried to sort the most relevant and authentic information consulted with the composer's daughter, Mária Lisznyay to compile the most thorough and most precise biography to the best of my knowledge.

As a composer he was deeply affected by the conservatism of his master, Ernő Dohnányi but we can find the impact of his other teachers as well, like Artúr Harmat and Lajos Bárdos. Because Dohnányi 'contemplated every novelty critically, especially if it was from one of his pupils'<sup>12</sup> it is not surprising that Lisznyay was under the influence of the Brahms-like german romantic tradition but at the same time – just like the young Kodály – he was affected by the French impressionism as well. Apart from his last pieces we can find this dualism in his work, he combined the colourful seventh and ninth chords with the precise German counterpoint. He often used mixtures and carillon-motifs just like neomodality and other achievements of the impressionistic era. However, in his late works we can find the Liszt-like introvert simplicity, the brilliant passages turned into sketchy fragments and the colourful harmonies had been transformed to atonality and rude, sharp chords. Even if we cannot find the geniuses epoch-making attributes in the work of Lisznyay, we can declare that Lisznyay's art over cultures and religions is one of the most colourful repertoire of the Hungarian music history so far.

As we can see from his memories he used to play the organ since he had been studying in Belgium, 'moreover, once as a 13-year old boy' he had played a 'festal high mass at the Liège Abbey's great organ'.<sup>13</sup> After, he learned artistic organ playing from Aladár Zalánfy who was his organ teacher at the Music

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<sup>10</sup> HORVÁTH (2007), 2.

<sup>11</sup> LUKIN LÁSZLÓ (1988): *Lisznyay Szabó Gábor*. Viczián János (publisher), Győr

<sup>12</sup> HORVÁTH (2007), 4.

<sup>13</sup> LISZNYAY SZABÓ GÁBOR (1988): „Vallomások” In: Lukin László (ed.) *Lisznyay Szabó Gábor*, Viczián János (publisher), Győr. 6.

Academy, although Horváth remarked that he 'wasn't an organ artist at it's classical meaning. Mainly he had been a church organist, and accompanied choruses.'<sup>14</sup> Apart from the above, according to Forrai he had been a 'brilliant pianist, organist, and composed with improvisation.'<sup>15</sup> His excellent organ playing skills have been corroborated by contemporary concert documents as well, where it is evident that he had played great, major organ works during recitals.

He was also a distinguished teacher, he have had several pupils from elementary music schools to professorship. Nevertheless, from all of his activities and positions he is the most important to us as a composer. The hundreds of pieces shows us his personality, and gives the essence of his whole life.

As we could see in the view of religion and instrumentation Lisznyay has a wide variety of works which are 'unique in sound, and are the delicate and demanding pieces of the hungarian church music history'<sup>16</sup> according to Ferenc Kósa. Most of his manuscripts, over 160 can be found at the National Széchenyi Library, these are primarily multi-movement compositions but we have a knowledge of almost the same amount of manuscripts and first printed editions existing outside the library. For the systematization of this great *œuvre* I have constructed the one and only Lisznyay catalogue so far, to which I have added every known composition of Lisznyay.<sup>17</sup>

On the works of Lisznyay neither *opus* numbers nor other numbering can be found and a great number of the pieces do not have dating at all so the chronological sorting seemed inappropriate. As a solution I decided to use a transparent and an easy-to-understand catalogue system based on instrumentation in an alphabetical order. If we consider the quantity and the significance of the whole repertoire we can create three major categories, the vocal works, the organ works, and the miscellaneous other works.

The greater half of the works uses vocal parts, so as a start I have collected all the vocal works into the first category. Within this category I have separated the masses which have different instrumentation but at the same time they are

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<sup>14</sup> HORVÁTH (2006), 11.

<sup>15</sup> FORRAI MIKLÓS (1988): „Tanúságot teszek...” In: Lukin László (ed.) *Lisznyay Szabó Gábor*, Viczián János (publisher), Győr, 7.

<sup>16</sup> KÓSA FERENC (1977, ED.): *Kórusok könyve*. Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 355.

<sup>17</sup> VII. Appendix

similar multi-movement works. We can find unaccompanied unison choir arrangement, organ accompanied choirs and adaptations based on symphonic orchestra. They are also diverse in the view of movements, we can find examples from the simplest *Kyrie-Gloria-Sanctus-Agnus* sequence to the through-composed ordinariums based on the Italian renaissance model. Most of these ordinariums were composed during his years at the Terézváros church, and only four has a hungarian text, the others uses the latin text.

In the second and third group I've collected every other choral composition which are not part of the category above. Because of the great number of choral pieces, to present transparency I have severed the sacred and the secular pieces. Upon religious deliberation it would have been possible to create additional categories but I would like to avoid fragmentation so I have refrained myself from further diversification. It would have been also complicated to separate them upon instrumentation so instead of multiple subgenres I have enumerated them in alphabetical order including *a cappella*, organ or piano accompanied and orchestrated pieces, also regardless of the choir type. As a church musician he used to compose motets and masses, as the choral conductor of the Budai Dalárda and the MÁVAG 'Acélhang' male choirs and several socialist worker's choir he had written secular choirs but we can find some interesting choral compositions for female and childrens' choir as well. His secular works are based mostly on poems by hungarian poets but we can find numerous folk song arrangements as well.

The fourth and the fifth subcategories of the vocal works contains the songs and arias. Here we can also severe the organ accompanied sacred arias and the piano accompanied songs but I also avoided further sorting.

The main instrument of Lisznyay had been the pipe organ in his whole life from his childhood until his paralysis and he had been an organist in different places for over forty years so it was reasonable to differenciate the solo organ works into a separate category. I have listed here his nearly twenty work for solo organ but also his minor liturgical or pedagogical opuses which can be interpreted as an individual artwork and have been published in different collections.

Lisznyay was famous from his improvisations which were not written down, so most of his organ compositions have lost forever.

There are only a few compositions for orchestra, chamber ensemble or other solo instrument so I collected all of them into the third major category in these minor subgenres. All the 40 pieces indicated here are from his juvenile, the earliest ones are from his years at the Music Academy and the latest is from 1956. I have collected here his few orchestral work, the four pieces for the piano which are mostly pedagogical compositions, the pieces for the dulcimer or 'cimbalom' which were inspired by his juvenile love, Ida Tarjáni Tóth cimbalom player. He also have three string quartets from which the last one is unfinished, only the second movement had been completed. The most significant pieces of this category are the chamber works which were written for violin, violoncello, flute, double bass with piano accompaniment.

In the first column of the catalogue I put the numbering of the pieces based on the categories above and in alphabetical order. In the second gap I put the title of the actual piece or series. Where the initial words does not match the title I also indicated the beginning of the piece. I also marked the movements in case of a multi-movement cycle. Where title could not be found I marked my titling in a square bracket. In the third column I have written in the dating of the piece if applicable in the order of year, month, day. In the fourth column I put the instrumentation of the work.

In the last column I have written every additional information given by the composer including dedications and text writers. I also published here the library's record number<sup>18</sup> and the publishing details if available just like my remarks which I found important in connection with the actual composition. I have found some works mentioned in the Lukin-register which have no evidence of existence or listed here erroneously which I also notice here. There are some separate sheet music where neither the publisher nor the date can be identified, in this case I do not mark any details. To clear the source of the lyrics I also

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<sup>18</sup> National Széchenyi Library – Rare collections – Music collections



indicated the writer of the text. Because of extensive reasons I have published the complete catalogue as an appendix.<sup>19</sup>

Although I have tried to summarize this enormous work as precise and thorough as I could it seems impossible to systematize this far-reaching and undisposed *œuvre*. There are also several sketches which I did not place in this catalogue and some juvenile ditties, comic rhymes which often do not have even an independent melody so I also omitted them from this list. It is also very likely that further pieces will emerge which cannot be found on this register and calls for the extension of this catalogue but I hope that this list will give an important support to the forthcoming Lisznyay researches. It could be also determinative with the access points for choir conductors, instrument players who are looking for new repertoire and are curious about a thin slice of this complex, never completely investigated work.

We could see how extensive work was done by Gábor Lisznyay Szabó with which he deserved his numerous honors and awards. During his life many of his compositions had been performed, published and broadcasted nevertheless since his death his work has been overshadowed. Beside his professional merits his colleagues pointed out his human virtues as well. They mention especially his open-mindedness, ecumenical view and calm nature but we have to mention his charity activities and empathy as well. He had been in an excellent relation with all of his contemporaries from Miklós Forrai through Ferenc Gergely to Géza Wehner and he had been also commended by his teachers.

Thirtyfive years after the death of Gábor Lisznyay Szabó we can still find new and interesting pieces in his extensive repertoire, it worth it to perform them during services, recitals to prove the excellence of their composer who served mankind and God lifelong in silence, in the shadow of the choir and the organ.

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<sup>19</sup> VII. Appendix

## Literature

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