

Vir justus in Musica – 35 years and a century later

In 1982, on occasion of the Centenary of Zoltán Kodály, Professor Dr. Alexander Ringer, prominent musicologist and an excellent musician gave a lecture with the title: *Zoltán Kodály - vir justus in musica*.

That was 35 years and a century ago.

Knowing that my dear friend Alex would have approved it wholeheartedly, I have taken the freedom to use a few points of his remarkable lecture as the basis for this one, to look again at the ‘vir justus’ legacy of Zoltán Kodály and how it appeals to us in the 21st century. I will do my very best, not only to honor Zoltán Kodály, but also, as a personal tribute to the late Alexander Ringer.

In his lecture Ringer wrote that: in a certain way *Kodaly represented the biblical concept of the rising from temporary defeat invariably with renewed strength of purpose, “whose merit endured forever”, because his cause was just. Vir Justus.*

Reading this sentence, I was struck by 3 parts of it: (i) rising from temporary defeat variably with renewed strength..., (ii) whose merit endured forever...and, (iii) because his cause was just.

Even those among us, who are born optimists, cannot deny that “serious” music is suffering severely. (Let me use the word “serious” because it is probably the best description to make a distinction with the other musical genres). In spite of, or should we say, because of, better reproduction and communication tools than ever before, the contact with serious music has become more and more “passive“, if not pushed aside completely by all kinds of purely commercial expressions of sound.

In addition, the musical language of many contemporary “serious music” composers, often seems to focus more on “proving a thesis” than on “moving” the listener. If it is already difficult for me, a professional musician, to understand their music, how much more difficult, if not inaccessible must it be for the not thoroughly trained but great music lover. And yet we should care for our audiences very much. Fortunately there are still the exceptions; composers who continue to express emotions in an understandable musical language, “serving” the community they live in. But, as said, they are “exceptions”.

Also music education is suffering, often considered to be a “luxury” rather than an absolutely necessary part of universal human knowledge, as Kodály formulated it. This unfortunate evolution is even true in Hungary that used to be the ultimate example for the whole world.

These rather sad thoughts brought me to the conclusion that we are suffering a “temporary defeat” and it is the question whether we can “rise” from it with renewed strength of purpose“, so that, as Dr. Ringer mentioned about Zoltán Kodály, “our merit will endure forever, because our cause is just.”

Following Aristotle: we call those things just “which produce and preserve happiness for the social and political community”. Looking back on what Zoltán Kodály has done for his social and political community, even his greatest critics have to admit that he “produced and preserved happiness”. As a composer, as a researcher, as a man with an educational vision and as the great

personality and authority that he was, he has left his country an invaluable treasure. *“His merit will endure forever.”* It is because of that unique heritage that we are commemorating him, a good moment to question ourselves about the present situation and challenges.

Of course in a short lecture we must make choices. Therefore I would like to concentrate on one important question: how can we continue to have the benefit of Zoltán Kodály’s example as a *Vir Justus*, in a time when the political social and educational circumstances are very different?

In 1963 Zoltán Kodály explained that: (quote) *“in order to serve the culture of my country, I had to involve myself in many things beyond the realm of music.”* Above all it proved imperative to reform musical education as a whole”. (unquote)

That is one of the reasons why Alex Ringer called Zoltán Kodály a “Vir Justus in musica” because, following the Platonic injunction, he was in every way his own master and his own law, at peace with himself, pursuing his self-imposed triple task of composition, research and education remarkably and in doing so, contributing immeasurably to the cultural liberation of all mankind. It seems to me that this is probably the most important source of inspiration that we can turn to.

However, many will immediately confront us with the thesis that Kodály’s words were spoken more than 54 years ago, in another time, another society with completely different circumstances and in a completely different context.

It is true. It was another time, another society, another context. But the critics seem to overlook that the words are timeless. Also today, “in order to serve the culture of our countries, we have to involve ourselves in many things beyond the realm of music.” We must be aware of and interested in what is going on around us, a very demanding task with the never ending stream of information overwhelming us daily. We must do as Robert Schumann (for which Kodály had such an admiration) said it: *“I am affected by everything that goes on in the world and think it all over in my own way, politics, literature and people, and then I long to express my feelings and find an outlet for them in music.”*

In doing so we have to admit that this is not a favorable time for the arts. Looking at my own very small country, Belgium, to mention just one striking example, I see with great regrets that there were at least 10 times more professional and semi-professional orchestras 50 years ago. These orchestras not only served a social purpose –bringing people together to enjoy “life” music– but regularly commissioned new compositions, a sound challenge for young composers. Also, not for the least, they provided ample employment for musicians. Their performances, and even I am old enough to remember them well, attracted full houses of enthusiastic audiences. Gradually these orchestras were eliminated, despite great opposition. The same happened with many community- and school choirs.

This unfortunate picture also counts for music education. If not abolished completely it has often twisted into “music entertainment” rather than “education”.

Why could this happen? The answer is that many, who should have had influence in countering the negative tendency, were not aware or not interested. Reactions were too little and too late. The most devastating argument of a number of people (even musicians), was that the role of the orchestras and of the well trained music teacher could easily be replaced by the excellent

recordings on disc and later on CD. It is the most damaging argument of all, since it suits a number of decision-makers to comfort their conscience...

Although I am talking about Belgium, these facts count for many other countries as well.

Following Kodály's words, we should be firm and decisive in our opposition against the negative trends. I do not mean to say that we must lean towards a stubborn black and white attitude; that would certainly not work. However we should not stop using our influence and imagination. As, Albert Einstein said it already: "no dream is impossible". Although I cannot re-establish all the orchestra's that disappeared in Belgium, I can convince a number of people to organize small private concerts in their home (which means at least that there is "live" music going on); I can, as a performer, program new compositions of young composers, giving them a chance to gain reputation and to learn from hearing their piece in a concert (after which some of them revise it distinctly...); even so I can continuously call on decision makers to draw their attention to the importance of "good" music education, only possible with "well-trained" teachers, and, perhaps the most important, in an educational structure that ensures "frequency."

On purpose I have structured this sentence in the "I" mode. But many among you and in the world will be able to do the same, perhaps much more and better than I can do it. And, although we may never reach what Ringer has written about Zoltán Kodály, we should try to be a little bit of a *Vir Justus*. Then, afterwards, we can at least say that our cause was just and that we have risen from temporary defeat with renewed strength...

A sentence ago I mentioned the crucial importance of "frequency", which, inevitably forces me to express my great concern for certain evolutions in Hungary.

For many decades now the whole world has witnessed the Hungarian model of good music education. I am absolutely convinced that, besides of the excellent teacher training and the carefully planned sequential methodology, the "frequency" of the lessons and the fact that music has been a "normal" and "equivalent" subject in the school curriculum, is the most important factor. There is no alternative for the frequency as there is no alternative for the quality material or the well-trained teacher. It is not a question of "this" or "that" but of "good" or "bad". With other words: the choice is a mere 'quality' issue. It is simply impossible to reach the same level of musical ability with 1 lesson instead of 2 lessons or, as it should be, with 5 lessons a week. And if a burden is laid on the primary school music education it will consequently affect all further musical instruction. It will be much more difficult, if not impossible, to reach the same results.

Alex Ringer wrote in his lecture that (I quote) "*Kodály, more than any other musician of his generation, exemplified the platonic ideal of Vir Justus, unfettered by extraneous considerations, answering only to the firm commands of his unswerving conscience and creative impulse and thus a lasting blessing to all who believe in music as the crucial cornerstone of the entire humanistic enterprise. As he once put it in response to a query about his historical antecedents in the educational realm: "you may as well invoke the ancient Greek example. Those one hundred schools are not music schools but human schools."* (unquote)

Can we just give up that ideal? Can we allow ourselves to let it happen? A number of years ago, on occasion of the *World Conference on Poverty* in Johannesburg, South African President Thabo Mbeki said: "why do people allow something to happen if they have the capacity to stop it?" These

are wise words and a real challenge for mankind. And perhaps also a hint to all of us that we should never give up, never surrender but follow the example of Zoltán Kodály. This is a time *to rise with renewed strength of purpose*, to pull the same string, to speak the same universal language and to unite strongly in convincing the Hungarian Government that the Hungarian Model of good music education must go on. Not only for the sake of Hungary and the Hungarians, but also for the many, world-wide, considering Hungary as a unique source of human inspiration.

During my mandates as President of the International Kodály Society the organization was engaged strongly in that process and I can ensure you that many, all over the globe, including current IKS President James Cuskelly, are ready to support Hungary in continuing efforts to preserve the unique realizations of the past.

Keeping the exemplary musical status of Hungary alive, now and in the future, would be the most beautiful tribute to a man who, as Ringer formulated it, “*devoted his life to making us whole, those of us, at any rate, who would listen to his insistent voice, the voice of personal and social as well as personal integrity*”: Zoltán Kodály

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