

Introduction: Alexander Ringer's and Gilbert De Greeve's Vir Justus Tributes to Zoltán Kodály

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Four pillar concepts seem to emerge from the late Professor Alexander Ringer's classic *Vir Justus* memorial tribute to Zoltán Kodály. Written 35 years later, Professor Gilbert De Greeve's timely reflection upon Ringer's *Vir Justus* further highlights those themes: 1) Identity; 2) Journey; 3) Productivity; and 4) Timelessness.

As for *identity*, both authors help us understand that Kodály was, as we say in English, “comfortable in his own skin;” he knew who he was and what he was to do with his life. Ringer invokes an ancient Hebrew psalmist, then Plato and Aristotle, to reinforce how *Vir Justus* describes individuals who are at peace with themselves, possessing a blessed balance of inner- and outer life that equips them to serve humanity. Interestingly, one of Kodály's students, László Dobszay, found in music itself the same ideal of such a well-ordered life, suggesting the essential role of music in the development of such a “whole person”: “*Sine music nulla disciplina potest esse perfecta*’ . . . *Good music reflects and, at the same time, expresses the order of the universe and the harmony of the human body and soul . . . Music reflects order and therefore creates order in man.*¹

Further, Vaclav Havel, late former president of the Czech Republic and Nobel prize-winning playwright, clearly understood what conditions produce *Vir Justus* individuals when he observed their opposites:

“Somewhere here there is a basic tension out of which the present global crisis has grown . . . This condition is characterized by loss: the loss of metaphysical certainties, of an experience of the transcendental, of any super-personal moral authority, and of any kind of higher horizon . . .”²

We cannot read any of Kodály's writings without realizing that such a loss never occurred in his life. He unequivocally was a *Vir Justus in musica*, as both Ringer and De Greeve have emphasized.

The idea of *journey* begins far out of reach of our memory, but it is abundantly visible in each of our lives, just as in Kodály's. Once we become aware of our personal journey, our identity and life-purpose become clear to us. By extension, our individual journey is also part of humankind's collective journey. This is the classic phenomenon of the Hero Journey. Some individual journeys—like Kodály's—are so large that they stand out among the masses simply because they benefit the whole of humanity, which Ringer and De Greeve have highlighted as one of his outstanding attributes.

Clarissa Pinkola Estés explains why Kodály's *Vir Justus* legacy is so vital to the survival of our civilization:

*“It is not too much to say that an abundance of compelling and unpredictable heroic stories can re-inspirit and awaken a drowsing psyche and culture, filling both with much-needed vitality and novel vision. From the ancient storytellers to the present, the idea has always been: As the souls go that lead, so goes the culture.”*³

There is no question that at some point in his own hero journey, Zoltán Kodály had an epiphany during which he discovered, through ancient folksong—that vast treasury of “heroic stories”—how *music itself* had come to a crucial juncture in its own trajectory. Professor De Greeve gives an apt description of this tipping point in his extensive treatment of an impending “temporary defeat” of “serious music.”

Kodály was the right person at the right time to be found standing at this crossroads where three of civilization's greatest hero journeys were colliding: the human musical heritage that had been surging forward since time immemorial; education's arrival at the fortunate realization that humans are predisposed to best learn through experience intuited into knowledge that can be synthesized into meaning-laden symbolic systems; and the availability of technical means for preserving, creating, and transmitting the first two.⁴ His purpose was to recognize that conjunction, then to marshal the brightest minds of his generation on harnessing and balancing those three great powers, as Ringer points out, "*to change the course of musical history*" by which "*he also contributed immeasurably to the cultural liberation of all mankind.*"

Productivity as the third great pillar emerging from the *Vir Justus* portrait of Kodály refers far more to *quality* rather than *quantity*. Kodály clearly understood that professional integrity is rooted in the difference between a "job" and a "vocation;" the former is temporary, the latter is a lifelong inner calling to serve and benefit others. May we musicians, teachers, and administrators who profess to follow in his footsteps take notice of what he meant when he wrote,

*"It is the custom with us to recommend a single physic for the healing of every disease: the state should give money . . . It only needs some singing teacher who, at the chime of the [school] bell, does not throw the trowel back into the mortar trough: for whom, even if it is not their official duty, a little additional work is a spiritual need, which can provide the stimulus and is the soul and significance of the teacher's task."*⁵

Kodály did not work in isolation; his kindred spirit association with and support of Béla Bartók was legendary. It is also well known that both Kodály and Bartók sought after and acknowledged the influence of other great ones such as Kodály's first wife, Emma, then Ansermet, Britten, Casals, Toscanini, and Vaughan Williams and many more. In this we can identify that humility, teachability and unified effort are essential elements of the productivity

that *Vir Justus* individuals generate. The net result of such collegiality was the internationalization of Hungarian musical and educational achievements regardless of that country's decades of isolation. This ability of true greatness to transcend even the most restrictive socio-political boundaries is also a prominent theme in Ringer's and De Greeve's articles.

Ringer relates how Kodály, secure within himself as he was, stepped aside to let Bartók succeed, having recognized the latter's genius. Such loyalty has its own rewards, as when Kodály was twice falsely accused—once at the Liszt Academy and once at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences—for which Bartók powerfully and publicly came to his defense. Over time, their mutual support and defense exponentially magnified the quality and significance of their individual creative productivity and worldwide influence for good. Selflessness is then another essential element of Kodály's *Vir Justus* personality, who Ringer writes “*devoted his life to making us whole.*”

Lastly, Ringer and De Greeve remind us how critical it is for we moderns to embrace *timelessness* rather than its opposite of *trendiness*. Professor De Greeve clearly warns against the danger of inaction in the face of those many voices trying to make Kodály's Concept of Music Education be something other than originally intended, including the dilution of its application within the Hungarian system. The truth remains that *some things are timeless!* Music is one of them. During its own hero journey over millennia, music has transitioned through episodes of innovation ranging from the astonishingly diverse ways the human voice can express all of life through melody, to now lost examples of antiquity's perpetual quest to preserve musical sound in

symbol systems (the ancient Egyptians, Hebrews, and Greeks had them!) on through to Guido's synthesis of them to the floodgates of formal composition, applications of which we now employ and enjoy around the globe.

Consider, too, that Guido's solution never intended to abandon the oral-aural transmission of musical cultures. The two have co-existed now for a thousand years with no sign of letting up. The emotional and artistic powers of music are inextricably bound together with orality, aurality, literacy, and physical movement. Properly applied, Kodály's cradle-to-grave conceptualization of how to create a musical society is a perfect balance of the four.

Kodály's genius was his crystal-clear understanding of this timelessness, and he had the good sense to merge his personal hero journey into the larger river that the musical one had become. As Ringer points out, because Kodály's cause was and still is just, we are called upon to stay the course rather than to allow ourselves to be distracted by today's latest educational trends, only to find out a week or month or year later that the ladder has been leaning against the wrong wall. The moral compass of *Vir Justus* behavior requires that those of us who develop the rising generation of teaching musicians ensure that they enter the profession knowing exactly what to do on the first day of the school year and then every day until the last day. This cannot be accomplished by continually exposing them to the latest trends, which will only paralyze new teachers with confusion and lack of purpose. The late László Eöszé expressed the how the integrity of Kodály's vision countered that danger:

It was this clear-sightedness of Kodály's that was to enable them [Kodály and Bartók] to chart a safe course for themselves through the labyrinth of 'isms,' back to the villages where they could learn the folk songs from the peasants at first hand; while [Kodály's] sound critical sense saved them from the pitfall of a narrow nationalism. Almost simultaneously they were drinking in the songs of the Hungarian peasants and

*the outstanding works of European written music, for as a rule their expeditions in search of folk songs were followed by visits to the principal music centres of Europe.*⁶

The message is clear that Zoltán Kodály, as a quintessential *Vir Justus*, was fundamentally driven by his affection for humanity, and that music was his vehicle for expressing it. Even in the face of the most cynical criticism, he was loyal to the pursuit of the good, the true, and the beautiful, now validated by Frederick Turner's insightful statement:

*"I want to propose that the experience of beauty is a recognition of the deepest tendency or theme of the universe as a whole . . . There is a gathering movement across many of the sciences that indicates that the universe does indeed have a deep theme or tendency, recognizable by the human neurobiological sensitivity to beauty. . ."*⁷

Kodály himself said it best when he wrote: "*Souls cannot be reshaped by administration. But souls reshaped by beauty and knowledge are easy to administer*" (in Bónis, 1964, 147). The path to follow is brightly illuminated; it invites us to step onto it.

¹ Dobszay, László (1992). *After Kodály – Reflections of Music Education*. Kecskemét, Hungary: Zoltán Kodály Pedagogical Institute of Music, p. 83.

² Havel, Vaclav (1990). *Disturbing the Peace – A Conversation with Karel Hvidsala*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 11

³ Campbell, Joseph (2004). *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Commemorative Edition with an Introduction by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Ph.D. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. xlii–xliii.

⁴ See "The Neural Lyre: Poetic Meter, The Brain, and Time" in Turner, Frederick (1992). *Natural Classicism: Essays on Literature and Science*. Charlottesville Virginia and London: University Press of Virginia, pp. 61–110.

⁵ In Bónis, Ferenc (1964). *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*. New York: Boosey & Hawkes, Inc., p. 126.

⁶ Eősze, L. (1962). *Zoltán Kodály—His Life and Work*. Boston: Crescendo Publishing Company, p. 17.

⁷ Turner, Frederick (1995). *The Culture of Hope: A New Birth of the Classical Spirit*. New York: The Free Press, p. 217.