

ZOLTÁN KODÁLY - VIR JUSTUS IN MUSICA

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“The roots of science and of art are the same. Each, in its own way, reflects the world. The basic conditions: sharp powers of observation, precise expression of the life observed, and raising it to a higher synthesis. And the foundation of scientific and artistic greatness is also the same: just man, *vir justus*¹.” That Zoltán Kodály made this self-revelatory statement in an essay ostensibly devoted to Béla Bartók was anything but accidental. For, Kodály and Bartók, those two inseparable harbingers of the new Hungarian music, complemented each other so beautifully, whatever their unquestioned differences in personality and outlook, precisely because that fundamental Platonic ideal, the genuinely dedicated, just man, *vir justus*, was common to both.

In the poetic vision of the biblical psalmist who inspired Kodály on a number of creative occasions, “the righteous man flourishes like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon.” Somehow, the very appearance of Kodály, tall and erect even in high age, evoked this telling image. But in the end, it was in his actions that he joined the exalted company of the few among modern artists who could be said to represent the Biblical concept of the *tsaddik* rising from temporary defeat invariably with renewed strength of purpose, “whose merit endureth forever”, according to the book of Proverbs, because his cause is just, who has, in fact, achieved the complete inner and outer harmony of which Plato speaks in the Fourth Book of his Republic:

The just man does not permit the several elements within him to interfere with one another, or any of them to do the work of others, — he sets in order his own inner life, and is his own master and his own law, and at peace with himself; and when he has bound together the three principles within him, which may be compared to the higher, lower and middle notes of the scale, and the intermediate intervals — when he has bound all these together and is no longer many, but has become one entirely temperate and perfectly adjusted nature, then he proceeds to act, if he has to act, whether in a matter of property, or in the treatment of the body, or in some affair of politics or private business; always thinking and calling that which preserves and cooperates with this harmonious condition, just and good action, and the knowledge which presides over it, wisdom, and that which at any time impairs this condition, he will call unjust action, and the opinion which presides over it ignorance.²

To which Aristotle, ever the more pragmatic of the two progenitors of Western philosophy, adds: “we call those things ‘just’ which produce and preserve happiness for the social and political community.”³

Composers have had to redefine their social and spiritual stances ever since

secularization began to affect musical composition, its institutional functions and hence its esthetic orientation, nearly half a millennium ago. The first major stage of that long evolutionary process produced the eventual emancipation of the artist as an independent professional; the second caused art itself to reach virtual autonomy in the realm of human experience, on a par with religion, if not actually taking its place. This is neither the moment nor the occasion to explore the changing socio-esthetic scene in recent musical history. Suffice it to suggest merely that, once Carl Maria von Weber had declared early in the nineteenth century that “what love is to man, beauty is to the arts and to mankind,” it took but a small step for Richard Wagner to embrace the notion of artistic priesthood with all its contingent consequences. Beethoven, by contrast, seemed less motivated by the Christian doctrine of love than by prophetic notions of justice and truth, and it was this rather intransigent conception of the artist’s creative task which eventually found such devastating expression in the work of Arnold Schoenberg.⁴

As for *vir justus* in musica, few composers in history have exemplified the platonic ideal quite as perfectly as Robert Schumann whose name Zoltán Kodály tended to invoke on any number of musico-philosophical occasions. Now, if the self-image of the artist as priest is bound to produce a palpable measure of ceremonial pomp and circumstance, just as the prophetic attitude typically leaves heavy dramatic imprints along the creative path, then one who manages to bring Eusebius into perfect balance with Florestan, and thus becomes “his own master and his own law, and at peace with himself” (Plato), is likely to embrace essentially lyrical modes of euphonic expression. Hence, at a time when the theatrical glitter and glamour of a Richard Strauss represented the *nec plus ultra* in the general perception of modern music, Zoltán Kodály confidently forsook “Dionysian inebriation” at the behest of “inner contemplation” in works which, as his friend Bartók was quick to point out, “have nothing of that outwardness described as sensational and can only be appreciated by those who do not look for essentials in the music’s outward appearance, but intrinsically and in its humanity.”⁵ Moreover, never one to limit himself to mere generalities, Bartók challenged “anyone who has not been moved to the very depths of his soul by the setting of Ady’s *Sírni* (weeping)”. Such a person, he maintained, was “either a deaf and insensible puppet or prejudicial and ill-willed.”⁶

In 1921, to be sure, when this was written, Kodály was still *persona non grata* with the live puppets who were then pulling the nation’s cultural strings, men so “prejudicial and ill-willed” for the most part, they would not or could not understand the full depth of his commitment to “those things... which produce and preserve happiness for the social and political community” (Aristotle). During the brief, turbulent period of the Hungarian Soviet Republic that very commitment had caused him to work for much needed changes far more openly and actively than had some of his seemingly like-minded acquaintances. By the same token, only one as deeply imbued with the spirit of *vir justus* was apt to counter the ludicrous charge of “anti-patriotic disposition” with such undisguised pride, yet utterly devoid of the slightest tinge of arrogance, by lifting his finger contemptuously at those who had contented themselves with “mere phrase-mongering” at the expense of “a policy of actual deeds:”

Let him, who has done more for Hungary than I... come forward to lecture me... I have never metted in everyday politics. But figuratively speak-

ing, every bar of music, every folk tune I have recorded, has been a political act. In my opinion, that is true patriotic policy.⁷

Considering what happened to and around him during that confusing and confused period of the early twenties, when a mindless establishment attacked him so viciously and relentlessly, one suspects that Kodály had, like Socrates and many an other decisive mover in and of history, incurred the wrath of reactionaries who perceived in him everything they *should* have been but were not. Yet it was precisely the disconcerting other-directedness of the just man, which in the end left them powerless to destroy him.

Needless to say, the just man acts as such not only on the socio-political plane but also, if not primarily, in inter-personal relations. As far as that goes, the creative partnership of Zoltán Kodály and Bartók is, for all intents and purposes, without precedent in the history of music. For even Schumann's brotherly concern for Mendelssohn stopped short of the rare devotion of a Kodály who dropped instantly all plans for a dance composition of his own, substituting for it, as good fortune would have it, his masterwork *Psalmus Hungaricus*, upon learning that Bartók was thinking of a Dance Suite in fulfilment of his commission for the fiftieth anniversary of the reunification of Buda, Pest and Óbuda. As Kodály recalled many years later: "From the moment I became aware of his genius, I considered it my task to do whatever I could to pave his way and to remove all obstacles. Thus, I always avoided finding myself in competition with him; I always tried to do something else than what he happened to be doing."⁸ And this self-effacing attitude governed their joint scholarly effort as much as it pertained to musical composition.

"I am affected by everything that goes on in the world", Robert Schumann told Clara Wieck in the spring of 1838, "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."⁹ Quite similarly, Zoltán Kodály explained in 1963 that: "In order to serve the culture of my country, I had to involve myself with many things beyond the realm of music. Above all, it proved imperative to reform musical education as a whole."¹⁰ Kodály's incomparable choral output offers ample testimony to the brilliant creative consequences of such involvements "beyond the realm of music," motivated, as were Schumann's solely by the deep sense of responsibility toward "everything that goes on in the world" that is the hallmark of *vir justus*. The Schumann-Kodály analogy proves thus particularly cogent with respect to what both perceived to be undue foreign domination of their respective musical environments, centered in Schumann's case on Italian opera, in Kodály's on German instrumental music. Reminiscing about those youthful preoccupations in 1854, Schumann noted that "one fine day" he and a few other "young musical hotheads" resolved to do something about this intolerable state of affairs and proceeded without delay to found the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, possibly the most decisive element in the esthetic reorientation not only of a fast growing new public but countless professional musicians as well. Almost exactly a hundred years later, Kodály reflected on how, in his youth, Hungary displayed "no homogeneous musical awareness or public spirit in music... We had just reached the peak of a half century's import of foreign music... educated people turned a deaf ear to Hungarian music, while the others excommunicated all higher forms of music, under the pretext that it was foreign."¹¹ Like Schumann, who enjoyed Mendelssohn's enthusiastic support, Kodály and

Bartók deliberately set out to change the course of musical history, managing both to lay the foundations for complete transvaluation of all musical values at home and to change in the process the musical physiognomy of the twentieth century.

True to the Platonic injunction according to which the just man “does not permit the several elements within him to interfere with one another”, Kodály was singularly immune to the very real danger of musical parochialism, let alone chauvinism. Thus, he warned in the very midst of the struggle for a genuinely Hungarian musical ethos that “without the effect of foreign culture a national culture will waste away.”¹² And nothing was prone to annoy him quite as much as “those patriots” who judged music by the single criterion: “it either reminds me of the *101 Magyar Népdal* (101 Hungarian Folksongs), or it isn’t Hungarian at all.”¹³ The most visible proof of this unique symbiosis of national and universal factors comes no doubt from Kodály’s reshaping of Hungarian musical education that has inspired similar musical literacy movements in many parts. Again characteristically, Kodály never tired of citing Schumannian precepts especially in connection with musical education, even though he vigorously and explicitly opposed any and all actual teaching patterned after purely German models. As he told the 1953 graduating class at the Liszt Academy of Music: “I’ll let you in on something, for practising musicians who do not intend to become musical scholars very few books on music are worth reading but Schumann’s writings are among them.”¹⁴

Precisely because he was in every way “his own master and his own law, at peace with himself”, Kodály pursued his self-imposed triple task of composition, research and education with remarkably little regard for institutional and/or ideological concerns. Constitutionally incapable of ideological compliance for its own sake, he was rather given to direct action, philosophically motivated, working with his every artistic and intellectual fiber for the esthetic liberation of his hard-tried people. That in so doing he also contributed immeasurably to the cultural liberation of all mankind, to “humanity’s leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom”, of which Friedrich Engels spoke so hopefully in the very year of Kodály’s birth¹⁵, is no doubt the principal reason why we are gathered here from the four corners of the earth to pay homage to him who, like his favorite model Schumann, was not so much a shaker as a maker of his time. Oblivious to, nay, resentful of passing fads of whatever stripe, Kodály, more than any other musician of his generation, exemplified the platonic ideal of *vir justus*, a true *Sozial-Musiker* 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. Without music man is incomplete, a mere fragment.”¹⁶

Indeed, Zoltán Kodály devoted his entire long, difficult yet blessed 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. Surely, the least we can promise in return on this, his one-hundredth birthday is to work to the fullest of our creative abilities for a future when mankind at large will finally be whole in a world at last at peace with itself.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Kodály, Zoltán*: Bartók the Folklorist, in: *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, London 1914, p. 106.
- ² *The Republic and Other Works by Plato*, translated by B. Jowett, Garden City 1960, pp. 134-135.
- ³ *Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics*, translated by Martin Oswald, New York 1962, p. 113.
- ⁴ Cf. *Ringer, Alexander L.*: Arnold Schoenberg and the Prophetic Image in Music, *Journal of the Arnold Schoenberg Institute*, Vol. I, 1 (October 1976), pp. 32-33.
- ⁵ *Bartók, Béla*: *Essays*, New York 1976, p. 478.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 469.
- ⁷ Cf. *Young, Percy M.*: *Zoltán Kodály*, London 1964, p. 64.
- ⁸ Cf. *Dille, D.*: *Souvenirs par Z. Kodály*, *Studia Musicologica*, Vol. IX, 3-4 (1967), p. 263.
- ⁹ Cf. *Letters of Composers*, ed. Gertrude Norman and Miriam Lubell Schrifte, New York 1946, p. 157.
- ¹⁰ *Dille, D.* op. cit., p. 26.
- ¹¹ *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, London 1974, p. 31.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- ¹⁵ *Selected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*, Vol. I, London 1942, p. 186.
- ¹⁶ *Kodály, Zoltán*: *Mein Weg zur Musik*, Zürich 1960, p. 75.

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