



Sándor Berkesi

## Contribution to the Cantatas on the Anniversary of the Galley Slaves' Liberation

### Abstract

New Hungarian choral works were born on another jubilee, i.e., on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant galley slaves' liberation. They are the 'little sisters' of the oratorio *Budavári Te Deum*, these cantatas are in the order of their completion: Sándor Szokolay: *Cantata to the Memory of the Galley Slaves*, Lajos Vass: *Furor Bestiae*, Zoltán Gárdonyi: *Memento*. Composers use the text written by Ferenc Otrokocsi Fóris and other galley slaves who records the story of his deportation, sufferings and liberation. The last two pieces of music were composed in October 1975 and dedicated to the choir 'Kántus' of the Reformed College of Debrecen. Their world premiere took place on 11 February 1976 in the Reformed Great Church in Debrecen, in the framework of festivities dedicated to the anniversary of the liberation of the galley slaves, the conductor was the writer of this article.

**Keywords:** Memory of the Galley Slaves, Cantatas, Jubilee of Galley Slaves in 1976

In 1936, Zoltán Kodály composed his grand oratorio *Budavári Te Deum* in commemoration of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Buda. This jubilee offered the Maestro the possibility to express his peoples' thanksgiving to God in a triumphant voice for His sustaining love, on the one hand, and to summarize 'the overdue melodies' of 250 years through melodizing an ancient Latin text, on the other hand. Forty years later, new Hungarian choral works were born on another jubilee, i.e., on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant galley slaves' liberation. They are the 'little

sisters' of the oratorio *Budavári Te Deum*, these cantatas are in the order of their completion: Sándor Szokolay: *Cantata to the Memory of the Galley Slaves*, Lajos Vass: *Furor Bestiae*, Zoltán Gárdonyi: *Memento*.

Kodály's masterpiece and the galley slaves' cantatas cite the same age, and they sing about victory. The same intention led the composers as regards their theory, content and style: namely, to formulate

what the Hungarian Renaissance was like, would have been like, [...] what the Hungarian baroque was like, how the Hungarian rococo started to flourish, what the spring of the verbunkos (the dance performed at recruiting) might have looked like and the whole together: the Hungarian classicism.<sup>1</sup>

### **Sándor Szokolay: *Cantata***

Sándor Szokolay wrote choral works for the Lutherania Choir several times, to which he had a relationship of more than ten years. Following the *Christmas Pastoral*, *Pentacostal*, *Motet of Locarno* he presented the Lutheran choir and orchestra of Budapest–Deák Square and its conductor Jenő Welter in spring 1975 with a new piece of music. The *A Cantata to Commemorate the Galley Slaves* was written for narrator, baritone solo, mixed choir, organ and orchestra in 8 movements. The text was borrowed from the Codex Szentsey, a poem of an unknown poet from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The composer expresses his conviction about the content, the style, structure and inner world of his work as follows:

[...] besides the language the music can only become stylish if it evokes the past to some extent. To achieve this I had to become imbued with the Bachian world of the baroque cantatas with a Hungarian-Kuruc hue. My notion was enhanced by the fact that the Lutherania Choir under the leadership of Jenő Welter had been the most authentic interpreter of Bach's oratorios for decades! [...] In my new work I made an attempt to make the listener "understand" and "feel" the same at the same time. (It is a well-known fact how difficult it is to understand the text of vocal compositions, especially when hearing them for the first time!) I tried to entrust this double task to the narrator. György Bánffy's wonderful recitation inspired me to do this. [...] In the role of the narrator speech, rhythmic speech and singing alternate built into the musical form. The choir sings six from the eight movements, which is a huge material. The role of the baritone solo is similar to that of the narrator's. They are practically twin-soloists. [...] The

eight movements of my new cantata are inseparable from each other—my aim was to put them together into a big Whole!<sup>2</sup>

In movement 1 (*Antifona*), following the grievous orchestral introduction, the narrator is complaining while the choir is lamenting silently: 'Oh, Zion's daughter, my grievous mother! [...] My loving fortress enveloped in mourning! On hearing your lamentation, I said immediately: Rachel, my mother.' A choral repeats the narrator's words, stressing what is being said. In the movement, the narrator's task is not only to speak prose but also to chant: 'Why is it that the world does not pity your orphans, your lambs? The wind of persecution is blowing your sacred flag, it almost overturns your little boat.'

Movement 2 (*Choral-Hymnus*) is a huge baroque marching. Following a silent, pulsating orchestral introduction, the deep male voices start singing the overarching melody quietly with the narrator speaking simultaneously: 'Although our enemy states that our gracious God does not pity us. That is why they strip us of our clothes, they do not leave with us anything but a farthing.' A three-part male choir, then a six-part mixed chorus sings the same tune monumentally, at the highest dynamics.

Movement 3 (*Fughetta*) has a baroque tone as far as its structure and harmonies are concerned. The narrator recites its text in the previous movement: 'We were dragged in the big heat from street to street, We were dressed in German robe; If we do not die while mixing lime; We will be put in jail in Belincs in the evening!'

Movement 4 (*Arioso capriccioso*) is an austere, hot-tempered baritone solo.

Movement 5 (*Choral-quodlibet*) was modelled on a special movement-type of the 'Bachian passio'. The narrator and then the quart-canon of the tenors and then that of the basses start it: 'Lord, for how long do you not exact revenge for our blood? Why do you tolerate this and why do not you judge them?' After a few beats of the broad gestures of the male choir, the female voices start singing a majestic, consoling and encouraging choral: the first verse of the psalm 'Do not be discouraged little troop.'

Movement 6 (*Conclusio*) relates to the Hungarian tune of Kodály's choral art, it contains richly decorated, melismatic choral material characteristic of Szokolay's pieces of music. As far as the dynamics is concerned, he exploits contrast possibilities provided by the text: 'Although our body has already been sold, we are redeemed by our Lord Jesus Christ! Even if we have to starve to death, we won't yield to mute idols!' The silent ending recalls the overarching melody in movement 2, while the narrator expresses

his hopes for liberation: ‘We can hardly wait now: for the hour to come when we poor [galley slaves] will be freed, or through our death we will go to Heaven where we will have a substantial supper with the lamb-Christ.’

In movement 7 (Baritone-Arietta and Narrator-Epilogue) the baritone soloist sings in a reconciling voice; according to the poets of the age, the narrator takes leave naming the time and place of the birth of the poem: ‘I wrote this in sixteen seventy four, in the first week of Jacob’s month, in the big-deep dungeon of Belics castle [...] You who read this: be faithful into death!’

The monumental, baroque fugue of Movement 8 (Amen-Finale) closes the cantata. At its very end, we will hear the starting motif ‘Oh, Zion’s daughter.’

The cantata, conducted by the composer, was performed in the Deák Square Lutheran church on 1 June 1975. Bishop Zoltán Káldy gave the sermon at the church service. Its last, summarising sentences can refer to Szokolay’s masterpiece, too: ‘I would like this sermon to strengthen, encourage us, move us forward, inspire us to love each other, to do more service, have a more courageous faith and a bigger hope. Because it is true what the writer of Psalm 46 says:<sup>3</sup> “The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”’ (Psalm 46:7)

The Genevan tune of Psalm 46, that is the text of the sermon at the festive church service in the Deák Square Lutheran church, appears in Lajos Vass’ *Furor bestiae*. The huge Luther-song *Eine feste Burg*, based on the Genevan tune of Psalm 46, closes Zoltán Gárdonyi’s *Memento*. Both pieces of music were composed in October 1975 and dedicated to the choir ‘Kántus’ of the Reformed College of Debrecen. Their world premiere took place on 11 February 1976 in the Reformed Great Church in Debrecen, in the framework of festivities dedicated to the anniversary of the liberation of the galley slaves, the conductor was the writer of this article.

### **Lajos Vass: *Furor bestiae***

Lajos Vass’ cantata *Furor bestiae* is the longest piece of church music of the composer, which he wrote for a mixed choir, narrator and organ. He uses the text written by Ferenc Otrókoci Főris who records the story of his deportation, sufferings and liberation in a writing of the same title.<sup>4</sup> Gábor Herpay translated the original Latin text into Hungarian, from which Lajos Vass takes out certain parts whose recital he entrusts to the narrator, i.e., to

the Preacher in the cantata, in the first place, to guide the listeners through the events. The task of the choir is to perform the psalms the galley slaves sang during their journey,<sup>5</sup> on the one hand; on the other hand, to expedite the plot through working up Otrokocsi's text freely.

The piece of music starts with such a movement. After the introductory tense dissonances of the organ music, a diabolic choral recitativo begins: 'Satan freed from his prison, With what hideous frenzy he dominates the man-inhabited earth [...] With how many tricks and slynesses is he trying to mislead people.' The drama of the piece of music is enhanced by the choir's speaking prose, aleatorically.<sup>6</sup> The Preacher speaks about the court of Pozsony, but he is interrupted by the organ playing and then by the male choir singing Psalm 43 (Judge me my God). Then Psalm 141 (I call to you, my God) implores for help in three voices. According to the Renaissance tradition, the Genevan tune appears in the tenor voice. Following the Preacher, again Psalm 143 (Have regard to the prayer of thy servant, my Lord) is sung with its casual rhythm, grievous complaint, achieving the ecstatic state of folk ballads. After short movements of modern tone Psalm 102 (Have regard to the prayer of thy servant, my Lord) begins, worked up in two versions with its harmonies evoking choral soundings of old times.

The Hungarian folk-music inspiration can be discovered mostly in the movement of the female voices following Psalm 102: 'Alas, they used to express their rage at God's chosen ones under various fallacious pretexts.' As if we heard a folk mourning song. The thirty pastors, who survived and are 'in the most terrible yoke' of the Spanish king, are imploring for audition singing Psalm 88 (Lord, my salvation) unisonant. The nadir of the drama are the third and sixth verses of the psalm<sup>7</sup> that the male voices sing a capella, feebly, fading out completely expressing the dull pain of those in anticipation of death. Here begins the uplifting section of the work that is spreading hope.

The Preacher's promise of liberation is interrupted by Psalm 46 (God is our hope) played on the organ louder and louder, which will be accomplished by the triumphant resonance of the music sung by the mixed choir. The Psalm 126 (When God frees Zion) sung by the male choir unison, then Psalm 125 (Those who trust God) composed for female voices and with 'Kodály-like' intonation are the maturing formulation of the confirmed hope. Is there a more beautiful anthem of the arrival in safety than the closing movement, Psalm 23 (The Lord is my shepherd), whose natural pictures offer complete consolation? Verse 2 recalls 'the shadow of death' through the organ accompaniment, evoking the mourning melodies played earlier, so that verse 3 can proclaim the liberating power of God irrevocably.



*Conductor Sándor Berkesi and composer Sándor Szokolay at a festive occasion (Debrecen, 2020)*

### **Zoltán Gárdonyi: *Memento***

Zoltán Gárdonyi composed his *Memento* for organ and mixed choir, in which he approaches/deals with the anniversary in an individual way. He does not recall the commiserative, suffering witnesses who give an authentic description of the happenings, but he looks for maxims in the Bible and the Protestant song-poetry, which have moral value and consola-

tion for the Christians of all time. I could also say: this cantata is an irregular sermon preached in music, not in spoken word. Even the subhead indicates the topic of the cantata: from suffering to liberation. Involuntarily, the analogous example of *Psalmus Hungaricus* comes to our mind. While listening to the instrumental introduction we can be confirmed about the kinship between the two works as the 6/8 pulsation and or the other melody bear witness to a common root. The Scripture reading is Hebr 10,32–33 that the narrator reads out as a motto. The unison choral recitative of the male voices (Hebr 13,3) develops this idea: it makes us remember the captives in agony. The singing of the entire choir gives a shocking picture of the judging God (Hebr 10,31), then a short phrase of music formulates the voice of being kept by and trust in God (Hebr 10,35). The choral sound of the 'Kodály school' addresses us giving the listeners a wise piece of advice: Because 'You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.' (Hebr 10,36).



*Rehearsal of the oratorio by Lajos Vass based on the Furor bestiae by Ferenc Foris Otrókcsi (Debrecen, 1976)*

The protestant preacher of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Sztárai's verse harmonized with expression starts with an introduction reminiscent of old Hungarian instrumental music: 'Release me from misery [...]'<sup>8</sup> The grievous Jeremiah verse: 'All joy has faded from our heart [...]'<sup>9</sup> The gentle recitativo of God's word is ready to console us: 'because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.' (Hebrews 12,6).

The galley slaves are singing 'I am suffering peacefully, I am encouraging myself in every regard [...]' in the prison of Kapuvár strengthening themselves and each other. At first, the tenor sings this poem, and then the mixed choir sings: 'I had better tolerate this because my Lord will rebuke me for His Son [...]' with solistic organ obbligato.<sup>10</sup>

Also part 2 starts with the Scripture reading, where the ring of the thought of liberation can be recognised (Jer 29,14). Just like the 6/8 time of *Psalmus Hungaricus* expressing grievance develops to the triumphant 2/4 time of the hymn 'You are true my Lord', also part 2 in *Memento* develops to 4/4 time that is more and more hopeful. The choir is singing about God's fidelity (1 Cor 10,13), as 'He will grant you escape to undergo it.' A gradually constructed imitation phase describes God trampling on His enemies (1 Cor 15,25). The encouragement that appeared at the beginning of the cantata returns: 'And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved' (Joel 2,32).

Four stanzas of the Genevan psalm 121 [Unto the hills I lift mine eyes] follows sung in unison. The texture of the musical accompaniment getting denser and denser from stanza to stanza unfolds the beauty of the melody, the essence of the text as far as its rhythm and sounding are concerned: true guardian of God's people. An instrumental phase evoking Liszt's world of harmony leads to the closing choral, which is Luther's 'A strong castle is our God.'<sup>11</sup> Also here, the choir sings in unison with the accompaniment that becomes its full partner.

As if the centuries of the European Reformation were singing breaking through the limits of time and space. As far as the text and musical-stylistic inspiration are concerned, Zoltán Gárdonyi's *Memento* is manifold, diversified like verses from the Bible, stanzas from songs of reformers, Genevan psalm, German choral, old Hungarian instrumental and vocal music, Schütz, Liszt, Kodály's tones, however, these form an organic unit, an individual style. Beyond that, this piece of music is biblical and true to the new vocal principles of the reformation in all respects. Beside the organ accompaniment, the author composed its orchestrated version, too.





*The Kántus sings at the grave of Admiral De Ruyter in Amsterdam on the 325th anniversary of the Liberation (2001)*

At the premiere the cantata was performed with symphonic orchestral accompaniment; the magnificent orchestration increased its expressive power to a great extent. On 11 February 1976 Professor László Makkai finished his remembrance service at the thanksgiving church service in the Reformed Great Church of Debrecen as it follows:

When we remember the liberation of the galley slave-preachers in such a way that we thank [God] for the survival of our church, and we ask in the words of the psalm: “What shall I give the Lord for His benefactions?”, we answer again in the words of the Psalmist: “With gratitude do I pay my vow made to the whole folk!” We make our vow to the whole folk, the people of our church, our Hungarian people that we – in the name of Jesus Christ who made the greatest service -, will contribute to the rise of our country and the peace of peoples as the serving members of His body.<sup>12</sup>

The three galley slave cantatas become the worthy continuation of Béla Bartók’s life-work, whose motto is the thought that the peoples will become brothers and sisters ‘despite of all kinds of wars and strife.’<sup>13</sup>

It has been a living, defining, lifelong experience to teach and conduct these three cantatas. I conducted the cantatas by Lajos Vass and Zoltán Gárdonyi at their premiere in 1976, and the cantata by Szokolay when its gramophone concert record was made in 1994. The singers' multiple feedbacks confirmed that they had had the same impressions I had in the course of our mutual services. The performance of *Furor bestiae* by Lajos Vass, of the story that Ferenc Otrókoci Főris witnessed first-hand and described, and that was set to music authentically, burned the story into our souls. I remember the performance in the Pozsonyi street church in Budapest with extreme vividness, where the famous actor, László Mensáros read out the narrator's text with experience.

The evangelical text chosen by the confessional composer, and the authentic music dramaturgical solutions of the versatile composer, a student of Kodály, made the *Memento* by Zoltán Gárdonyi a mature work. At the premiere the Kántus was accompanied by a symphonic orchestra. Later, the author composed its version with organ accompaniment, too, which has been performed several times, like in 2017, in the year of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation.

Finally, let the most authentic person, the author, Sándor Szokolay speak about his cantata:

The Galley slave cantata refers also to the new persecutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the power of an atheist world system turns against the believers. It is impossible not to think about those who were dragged away because of their faith. My faith is looking for the resolution of denominational tensions in ecumenism. I am afraid to ask: can there be a time again in the world when people are persecuted for their faith and the freedom of religion and conscience are grossly insulted? I would say that this premiere under Sándor Berkesi's direction is inevitable. He is directing the work of a Lutheran composer at the head of the Reformed choir Kántus and the Choir of the Medical University of Debrecen and the Philharmonic Orchestra of Debrecen in a concert-like performance in the Saint Anna Cathedral. I feel as a participant that this is a sacred lesson, and perhaps we can be one in this fatherland, and just now in Christ, in this way.

Summarizing, I am citing the last sentences of the Szokolay-cantata, that are the words of the unknown galley-slave poet, as a testament to the posterity:

Then we will sing in Heaven at the top of our lungs  
together with Other martyrs.

Together with the saint angels we would adore only those  
Who will crown us in eternal felicity!  
I wrote this in sixteen seventy-four,  
In the first week of Saint Jacob's month,  
In the big deep dungeon of  
The castle Berencs  
You who are reading this, be faithful to death!  
Amen!

(Transl. Izabella Gaál)

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Szabolcsi, *Úton Kodályhoz*, 38.
- <sup>2</sup> Trajtler, *Kantáta a gályarabok emlékére*, 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Káldy, *Hanem hogy ő szolgáljon*, 366.
- <sup>4</sup> Otrókosi Főris, *Furor bestiae*.
- <sup>5</sup> The composer used the chapter 'Mit énekeltek a gályarabok?' [What did the Galley Slaves Sing?] of Csomasz Tóth, *A református gyülekezeti éneklés*.
- <sup>6</sup> Modern method of composition, characterized by chance or indeterminate elements.
- <sup>7</sup> Our Psalter does not contain this verse. Lajos Vass uses the original translation of the psalm in his work. Nagyné, *Szenci Molnár Albert költői művei*, 209.
- <sup>8</sup> The line from the 'bonds of the inferno' is changed for the original version 'From the hands of these strangers' in the verse 7 of the hymn 384 in the *Reformed Hymnbook*.
- <sup>9</sup> Verse 12 of the hymn 385 in the *Reformed Hymnbook*.
- <sup>10</sup> The verses/stanzas mentioned above are verses 6 and 5 in sequence of hymn 262, their rhythm is 3+2+1 and they have a compound triple (9/8), which are characteristic of old lays. More about these in: Szabolcsi, *A Magyar Zene Évszázadai*, I, 108–109.
- <sup>11</sup> Zoltán Gárdonyi uses the original version of the melody and the Hungarian translation from 1676.
- <sup>12</sup> Makkai, 'Ünnepi.', 55.
- <sup>13</sup> From Béla Bartók's letter to Octavian Beu. Újfalussy & Várnai, *Bartók-breviárium*, 2521.

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