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The theory of *ars musica* and its practice in early medieval education

PhD dissertation – Theses

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„What opposes also unites, and from variants comes complete harmony.”

/Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics* 8, 2, 1155 b 4–6/

1. The dissertation's topic, aim and method

When choosing topic for my dissertation I was highly influenced by the fact that I have been teaching medieval art history since the year 2000 at the Károli Gáspár University. The role of music in the European society and especially in education was strongly emphasised in my syllabus. The dissertation has a historic and art historic rather than a musical approach.

I have aimed at creating a thesis the basis of which are the medieval music theory writings that were the most commonly used and were regarded as standard in the Middle Ages. If we add to these works the most important persons (church fathers, monks, masters) and the places (bishoprics, monasteries, schools) that had been connected to music, a picture can be drawn which clearly shows the role of music in early medieval thinking and education.

The chronology of the dissertation begins in the 4th century with Saint Augustine's *De musica* and ends with the rise of a new generation of musicologists and music teachers at the end of the 10th century. The thesis is concluded with the demonstration of how Cluny, a dominant contemporary monastery, had functioned musically. I intend to display the stages of music education by introducing, analysing and comparing the works of authors who were acting during this time.

It is not a coincidence that these stages are in accordance with the generally recognized educational periods of the Middle Ages. As one of the disciplines of quadrivium, music is discussed in a significant work of every century which is based on the predecessors' writings, but adds the novelties of the age, or actualizes the theory according to the fashion of the time.

The place where the pieces were written complies with the different cultural periods. The place of the important cultural centres changes throughout the centuries: the centre is Italy in the 5th century, Hispania in the 6th century, the English monasteries in the 7th century, later the Carolingian Empire and its successor states, then the Holy Roman Empire. Cassiodorus, Boethius, Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede, Alcuin, and Hrabanus Maurus are the ones who connect the periods and the regions. I aim at creating a clear summary by dividing the period into smaller segments and also by demonstrating cultural phenomena through a related character. This person-based approach gives the opportunity to elaborate and highlight other points of view.

The endpoint of this research is the Millennium which was generally acknowledged as a turning point regarding science and culture. The ecclesiastical and secular interests were more and more conflicting. Politics, which influenced cultural life as well, became bipolar because of the rivalry between the state and the church. In music we can observe the birth of a new generation. Members of this new generation are regarded by posterity both as musicologists and music educators. One of the characteristics of this age is that the *cantor* who followed the *usus* because of a sense of duty or mere routine turns into a musician who holds his position assertively. Parallel to this change a new musical phenomenon is shaping, i.e. early polyphony which in the long run fosters the gradual polarization of cult and culture. The former oral style makes place to notation, in other words to written music.

2. Sources, secondary literature

The topic of the dissertation and also the choice of related sources and literatures has been forming in the course of my work as a lecturer. Collecting the topic-relevant sources had been therefore a long process. As a historian I think that it is important to quote works that are not the possible sources for today's musicologists, but are relevant in a historical, church historical, cultural historical or philological respect.

The compilation of sources is incomplete. At the present stage of my work I only ventured on demonstrating the significant pieces and the most relevant parts from the voluminous ones. My plan is that at a later stage of my research I will process the entirety of the sources that were written from the 4th to the 10th century and also that I extend the boundaries of the analysed period to the 12th century.

The selected sources can be divided into three subcategories.

To the first belong the works that were written as separate musical tracts, like the works of Saint Augustine, Boethius and Cassiodorus.

The second group is made up by sources that became well-known as parts of educational or summarizing (encyclopaedic) works and were written in an instructional, analysing style, similarly to the previous group. Among many others the most important authors are Martianus Capella, Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede, Alcuin, Hrabanus Maurus.

To the third group belong all the sources that do not fit into the first two categories because of their diversity in length or style, or because the way they approach the topic is different,

e.g. intuitive, poetic, liturgical. To this group belong the poems themselves, i.e. psalms and hymns and the attached commentaries. Among the latter the psalm commentaries of Cassiodorus, Saint Basil the Great and Saint Ambrose are extremely important. Because of stylistic traits and personal characteristics Saint Augustine's Confessions or Saint Gregory's letters could also fit this group. Additional expletive sources are the early medieval biographies (Saint Gregory the Great, Odo of Cluny), synod resolutions, statutes (Carolling capitularies).

When demonstrating and analysing the sources beside the original Latin source-publications I was also using texts which are either translated to a modern language or bilingual (Latin-Italian, Latin-Spanish, Latin-English). Sources written in Hungarian were very rarely available (e.g. Augustine: *De musica*, John of Salerno: *The life of Saint Odo*) in many cases only in the form of excerpts, e.g. the works of Boethius, Cassiodorus and Isidore.

As far as secondary literature is concerned I selected those works only that are closely related to the topic, since the number of secondary materials sometimes seems to be overabundant. From the rich material that is dealing with Saint Augustine for instance, I confined myself only to a few comprehensive studies.

In other cases the discussed topic was so extensive (e.g. *schola cantorum* in Europe, literature about hymns) that I had to draw a line to the extent of their demonstration. After summarizing the essentials I tried to draw general consequences or on the contrary emphasized a specialized approach.

3. The theses of the dissertation

The place of music in medieval education was based on the theories of antiquity.

According to antique doctrines the 'kosmos', as it is a perfectly organised structure, is the supreme harmony of the world. Within this man, i.e. a microcosm is aspiring to create physical and spiritual balance. The first Christian writings that were dealing with music theory or that had a reference to music's beneficial or pernicious effects were based on the general antique harmony discipline and the Pythagorean numerology.

In the age of Hellenism the theory was enriched with mythological, allegoric, or mystical elements. The symbol system that evolved in this manner was handed over to Christianity as a whole. Therefore the first Christian thinkers faced the challenge of adapting this heritage so

that it would be appropriate for Christian use. Thus in the early centuries of Christianity music theory writing flourished, but at the same time compilations were created on the basis of former authors' works – which was a standard in case of literary products at the time.

The first generation that was concerned with transmitting the antique heritage and also with substantiating Christian education was represented by the Eastern and Western church fathers and those Christian scientists that brought along antique tradition. Based on the knowledge that they thought to be important Christian schooling began, and music's place was emphasised both in theory and practice.

Music's priority was preserved for centuries due to those theoretical works in the first place that reconfirmed the position of *musica* among the seven liberal arts according to the varying requirements of the age.

At the same time music, due to the harmonic, ethical and philosophical features that were assigned to it, was capable of filling an important part in the Christian daily routine (singing psalms and hymns) and also to become an essential tool in the liturgy and the oratorical homilies.

4. Conclusions

My primary goal was to analyse the theory and practice of music in medieval education with the help of various sources. It was revealed that an effort had been made to conserve the music theory writings of antiquity and, like in the case of the other sciences, to transfer them to the cultural domain of the Middle Ages. What also emerged at the same time is that for the consolidating Christianity the science of *musica* has a higher potential than the other branches of the liberal arts. The need for a standard Christian liturgical art already emerged at Augustine's age and it commenced with the training and the education of clergymen. Although preservation and transmission was a crucial task, in the case of music, as a singular occurrence, the purely theoretical and scientific approach was overtaken by practice. Thus *musica* could take the real binary meaning of *ars*.

Until the millennium music had been the only science that had constantly been a part of education. In the case of mathematics for example no novelty could be produced in this era whereas, by installing it to the practice of art, music was not only preserved but also it

evolved into a high-level liturgical art. This was either achieved by following the principles pronounced by the early theoreticians or by holding on to, or even by eternalising tradition. We could see that certain passages about hymns and liturgical tradition or about the meaning, the role and the importance of music are recurrent at the significant deliverers of an era and not because these authors could not offer an opinion, but because these phrases had infiltrated cultural life like toposes. This was rather the speciality of an oral culture than the constant safe-keeping of memory. This era had been ended by the demand for gradually establishing then methodically forming musical literacy, which eventuated music's continuing separation from liturgy and its development into an autonomous art.

In the meantime we could follow up on idiosyncrasies that make a period really unique in this age. In the 4th century the education of clergymen was substantiated. In the 6th century the safeguards of music education, the *schola cantorum*s were founded. With the prevalence of these a chance was given for standardizing the liturgy. This was also facilitated by the papacy, the importance of which grew from the time of Gregory, by the missionary activity and also by the empire-raising tendency of the Carolingian-Age. The latter, among other things, became known because of the renaissance of hymn-poetry. Finally, our closing period, i.e. the 9th and 10th centuries initiated the age of development of musical literacy and methodology. In this period, in line with the former occurrences, the interconnection of the music theoretician's, the music educator's and in many cases the composer's function could be observed.

Based on my research I think that the significance of the period between the late antiquity and the new musical approach has to be understood. The transmission, preservation and constant deliverance that lasted for a couple hundred years had not been motivating the successive generations of scholars in vain: with the help of their efforts music teaching became a part of Christian culture. It also could be declared that until this age all the significant personalities of certain periods were led by the determination to teach. And while they were teaching they also defined the culture of the age. The words of Bede – „I have been teaching and writing throughout my life” – could have been said by Augustine, Isidore, or Hrabanus Maurus. The church played an important part in this process by connecting mission to spreading culture. Bede's Church History sheds light on the fact that the establishment of schools was always attached to the missionary activity of the church. First step of the evangelization was to set up the bishoprics, but right besides these the monasteries and their joint schools were created. And music education went hand in hand with teaching.

In the schools music education was interconnected with liturgical service of high quality. The unique bodies that completed this task were the *schola cantorum* the early existence and also the huge importance of which is confirmed by the inscriptions found in Hispania, certain biographies, and also the dispositions of the Carolingian capitularies.

The other major agent of liturgical service was the monastery. The communities that followed a strict order and timetable proved to be the most appropriate premises for singing psalms. Here, aside from keeping to the order's relevant passages, the training of a musically educated and liturgically employable rising generation was also secured. The monasteries, which enshrined the relics of saints as memorial places, initiated the creation of the first hagiographic works. Apart from drafting the lives and miracles of saints, the musical body of the saint's adoration, i.e. the hymn, later the trope or the sequence, was also prepared. This provided music's development with new prospects.

The church, as an ideal microcosm in itself, could represent the triple unity in accordance with Boethius' division. As a sacred building it meant to symbolize the harmonic unity of the universe – *musica mundana* in other words. The ones who sing in it, with their voice, i.e. their natural instrument, fit into the categories of *musica humana* and *musica instrumentalis*.

On from the 10th century began the study of nature and natural sciences which broke away from theology and moved in the direction of cognition and empiricism. This approach of observation that appeared in intellectual thinking as well is in interaction with factors which foreshadowed the general upsurge and which are characterized by contact-making, travelling and the exchange of thoughts and goods. From the closed world of monasteries the development tended towards the openness of city schools.

The innovative verve of the age presented itself in the musical field as well. As complements for Gregorian chant “new genres” were born: the *sequence* and the *trope*. All this was in accordance with the general creative and artistic characteristics of the age. The task of the artist was to make *principia mundi*, i.e. the harmonic order of the world as framed by the Creator, visible, watchable and audible. In my dissertation this aspect is represented by the demonstration of the shrine-capitals in the Cluny monastery's church which illustrate and integrate the eight musical tones and the natural and moral symbols. Although the building was raised in the 11th century, it clearly represents the ideals of the preceding age.

As a summary it can be established that the antique notion of *musica* that derives from the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition and the meaning of which implies a world that is structured harmonically, i.e. on the basis of numerical proportions, along with emphasising music's ethical function in Christian morals proved to be able to support the Christian doctrine about the order of creation and to maintain symbolic thinking in the Middle Ages.

Christian antiquity by consolidating the tradition of early hymn-poetry and the singing of psalms and by the institutionalized and universal music education was able to contribute to the development of Gregorian repertoire which secured the conception of European music's foundations afterwards. By Christianizing the classical music theory a theoretical background was formed which was necessary for the development of practical music. The practice of centuries that was accompanied by theory marked the way of how music became a science by necessarily exchanging the oral culture with writing.

5. Publications on the subject

Harmony as a directing principle in the early medieval musical thinking. In: „*Testis temporum, vita memoriae*”. Ünnepi tanulmányok Pálóczi Horváth András 65. Születésnapjára. *Studia Caroliensia*, 2006. 3-4. szám. 71-80.

Isidore of Seville about music. Theory and practice. In: Az identitás régi és új koordinátái. Tanulmányok Anderle Ádám 65. születésnapjára. Palatinus. Szeged-Bp, 2008. 11-19.

Conference:

Breaking points in church history-writing. Műhelybeszélgetés, Miskolci Egyetem, Történettudományi Intézet, 2008. április 29.

Isidore of Seville about spectacles, music, theatre and games. Euro-mediterrán tanulmányok: romanisztika. Tudományos tanácskozás, KRE BTK 2008. november 13.