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/// From mass songs to The miracle of God:

Changes in the repertoire of the Hungarian People's Army Male Choir in light of the 1950s political changes

=== Introduction

After the Second World War, the Central and Eastern European region became part of the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union, which purposely sought to distinguish itself from Western culture. Moscow's control was thus not only political, military and economic, but also cultural.¹ Although the Soviet Union did not systematically seek to propagate a socialist worldview in the satellite countries, the centralising elements of the system were applied flexibly by local leaders, who wanted to follow this pattern as closely as possible in all areas as a sign of their loyalty.² The cultural policy leadership therefore gave priority to education and the arts in order to rapidly re-ideologise society. From 1948 onwards, they gradually restructured and centralised the artistic institutions thus promoting the autocracy of socialist realism and seeking to destroy cultural diversity.³ Soviet musical decrees restricted the freedom of creators, and the folkloristic, national classicist style of Kodály and his pupils, which was in line with political expectations, was elevated to the official level.⁴ Although the arts were democratised and concert halls were opened up to all levels of society thanks to low ticket prices, the state-sponsored schematic mass culture led to a decline in quality.⁵ In education, as in other areas, the increase in the number

1 == Melinda Kalmár, *Történelmi galaxisok vonzásában. Magyarország és a szovjet-rendszer 1945–1990* (Budapest: Osiris, 2014), 42.

2 == Kalmár, *Történelmi galaxisok vonzásában*, 44.

3 == Kalmár, *Történelmi galaxisok vonzásában*, 57.

4 == Anna Dalos, "Nem Kodály-iskola, de magyar": Gondolatok a Kodály-iskola eszméjének kialakulásáról," in *Kodály és a történelem. Tizenkét tanulmány* (Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2015), 122.

5 == Ignác Romsics, *A 20. század rövid története* (Budapest: Rubicon-Ház Bt., 2007), 330.

of students was not accompanied by an increase in quality, partly due to secularization and to significant restructuring of the curriculum.⁶ The Sovietisation of the arts took place on several levels. The translation and distribution of Soviet publications, the work of visiting Soviet consultants, and guest appearances of Soviet artists also contributed to the transformation. From the 1940s onwards, the Soviet Union used its guest performance folk ensembles throughout Europe as a mean of representing its own power and asserting its *soft power* in international relations.⁷ These guest performances led to the formation in the region of amateur and then professional ensembles, which enjoyed the full cultural and political support of the Sovietising satellite countries. Based on his archival research, Czech historian Václav Šmidrkal believes that the professional ensembles in the Eastern Bloc were mere imitations of Soviet groups, and that the ensembles that enjoyed their golden age during the Stalin era went into decline after Stalin's death, as they lacked a real artistic identity.⁸ The importance of these guest performances abroad, which had replaced diplomatic contacts that had been reduced after the war, declined from 1955, after the signing of the Warsaw Pact.⁹ The process of de-Stalinisation also led to changes in the way politics was conducted both in social policy and in cultural life, and this entailed the dismantling or rationalisation of propaganda organisations.

This pattern can also be observed in the case of the Hungarian People's Army Performing Arts Ensemble that operated under the aegis of the Hungarian People's Army beginning in 1949. The ensemble aimed to disseminate socialist-realist music and thus reflected both the cultural policy of the Hungarian Workers' Party (MDP) and the expectations placed on musicians under state socialism. This was particularly true of the male choir, whose members were also involved in teaching the soldiers political mass songs. In my paper, I wish to explore the changes in the repertoire and programme policy of the male choir in order to gain a more accurate picture of how political expectations of musicians changed and how Hungarian music life began to transform in the early years of the post-Stalinist period. I examine the changing status of the male choir on the basis of contemporary press materials, the legacy of the conductor Lajos Vass, and the archival materials of the ensemble.

6 = Tibor Tallián, *Magyarországi hangversenyélet 1945–1958* (Budapest: MTA ZTI, 1991), 5.

7 = Tallián, *Magyarországi hangversenyélet*, 32.

8 = Václav Šmidrkal, "Song and Dance Ensembles in Central European Militaries," in *Theatre, Globalization and the Cold War*, edited by Christopher B. Balme and Berenika Szymanski-Düll (Munich: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 96.

9 = Šmidrkal, "Song and Dance Ensembles in Central European Militaries," 96.

= = = 1953: The beginning of change

On September 28, 1953, on the occasion of the Hungarian People's Army Day and on behalf of Presidential Council of the People's Republic of Hungary, István Dobi awarded the Hungarian People's Army Art Ensemble with the Order of the Red Star in Parliament. At the same time, the Minister of Defence, Mihály Farkas, promoted the leaders of the ensemble to a higher military rank.¹⁰ The Order of the Red Star, which was based on the Soviet model, can be seen as a ritual element of state socialist propaganda that was intended to reinforce the primacy of the ensemble's work in spreading socialist ideology as it increasingly expanded its classical music repertoire. The ensemble, which had been founded five years earlier in 1948, had from the outset served to build a common cultural identity in line with the ideology of the regime. Within the People's Army, the cultural policy of the leadership saw the ensemble as a "gentle weapon," and according to its founding document, defined its mission as both the universal education of the armed forces and the setting of an example for amateur ensembles.¹¹

The emphasis on the importance of the army in cultural education may at first glance seem unusual, but the newly reorganised army provided a convenient platform for the rapid ideological education of society. In Hungary, the new constitution of 1949 provided for three years of compulsory military service in the Hungarian People's Army (its official name only from 1951 to 1990). The Army numbered over 200,000 in the 1950s, so it is no wonder that the political leadership gave priority to its cultural work.¹² In particular, the male choir, created a few months after the dance group and comprising talented but largely musically untrained soldiers and civilians, was expected to take a leading role in spreading mass songs among the military and the working classes. Although Zoltán Vásárhelyi, a leader of the male choir and a teacher at the Liszt Academy of Music, sought from the outset to build a systematic musical education system to eliminate musical illiteracy "in the service of Zoltán Kodály's genius for educating the people," he was

10 = = Gábor Mészöly, *Honvéd Együttes – 70 év művészet és történelem* (Budapest: Zrínyi, 2019), 12.

11 = = The first historiography of the Hungarian People's Army Performing Arts Ensemble between 1949 and 1952 was published in 1953 under the title "V.1948–IX.1952." It was published for internal use by the working group of the ensemble – Károly Aszalós, László Bodó, László Boldog, Elemér Gidófalvy, Károly Illés, János Klein, László Kozma, József Maklári, Lajos Mészáros, Pál Monostori, László Sásdi, Iván Szabó, József Szomolányi, Vilmos Tauber, Lajos Vass, and Károly Veres. The 200-page, typewritten documentary volume, produced in duplicate, tells the story of the first four years of the ensemble, with information on the repertoire, annual statistics for the Ministry of Defence, and a summary of foreign reviews of guest performances, sometimes with accurate translations. HEL, "1948 V.–1952 IX.," 9.

12 = = Szabolcs Bodó, "A hadkötelezettség történeti áttekintése Magyarországon," *Hadtudományi Szemle* 15, no. 1 (2022): 15.

a staunch communist and directed the ensemble in accordance with cultural policy guidelines.¹³ In the early years, the choir's programmes were thus characterised by a peculiar dichotomy, comprising both imported Soviet mass songs, choral works and cantatas, and works by Bartók, Kodály, and his students in line with Zhdanov's guidelines.¹⁴ In addition to prescribed performances and "estrada" productions in the barracks, the choir gave solo concerts and as early as 1951 presented new contemporary Hungarian pieces at the First Hungarian Music Week. However, all of these were written within the strict limits of a folk-national style with socialist content composed to avoid accusations of formalism and naturalism.¹⁵

After 1953, the process of de-Stalinisation also began in cultural life, which brought with it a change in the image of the ensemble that gave greater scope to the ideas of artistic leaders. In the immediate aftermath of Stalin's death, both commemorations and awards ceremonies provided an opportunity for public expression in the political and artistic spheres, thus emphasising the 'legacy' of Stalinism. Regarding the music profession, and in accordance with the decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on February 10, 1948 (which was subsequently extended to the member states), the Muscovite composer Ferenc Szabó proclaimed a "meaningful" socialist realist art that would be in integral contact with the people and based on the classical tradition, folk music, vocal genres, and the nationalist tradition of the nineteenth century. As he wrote, "Comrade Stalin taught us that art is a sharp and sensitive weapon, that there is no middle way, no neutrality in art, because it either supports and strengthens the struggles and struggles of our people, or treacherously and insidiously attacks them from behind."¹⁶

Despite these declarations and the creation of the musical Copyright Office in 1953, which provided a good living and playing opportunities for a wide range of composers under the socialist regime, the year 1953 can nevertheless be considered a turning point in musical life. As Tibor Tallián's research confirms, from 1953 onwards many composers returned to a neo-classical, divertimento style of composition, rather than programmatic genres.¹⁷ Despite the years of restraint, the requirements of the Zhdanov Doctrine, and the need to meet the aesthetic demands of politics, the works submitted for discussion and the contributions to the Second Hungarian Music Week showed an easing of censorship.

13 == HEL, 42.

14 == The list of the first years' repertoire in HEL.

15 == Tibor Tallián, *Magyar képek. Fejezetek a magyar zeneélet és zeneszerzés történetéből 1940–1956* (Budapest: Balassi, 2014), 290.

16 == Ferenc Szabó, "J. V. Stalin," *Új Zenei Szemle* 4, no. 4 (1953): 1.

17 == Tallián, *Magyar képek*, 378.

The importance of the so-called “folkloristic national classicist” style started to break down in 1955 among contemporary composers, against whom the cultural policy, by the 1960s, no longer wished to take administrative action. However, the period from 1953 to 1956 already saw a transition in the fact that propaganda ensembles could include in their repertoires music proposed by artistic leaders and written outside the Soviet political system.¹⁸ In addition, the restructuring of the army played a major role in transforming the programme policy of the male choir. Although after Stalin’s death Soviet military advisers replaced those dismissed in 1953 and their number doubled in the next three years, the permanent staff of the Hungarian Army was reduced by 25 percent.¹⁹ By this time, it had become clear that the overstretched five-year plan was not in line with the country’s economic capacity, and efforts to economise were also reflected in the cultural elements of the army.²⁰ This is indicated by a letter by the leading conductor, Lajos Vass, who in 1954 reported to his military superior about the impossible working conditions and called for finalising the staff’s pay raises that had been dragging on for a year, “since starving people can neither do serious artistic work nor even inspire others for a long time.”²¹

Partly due to these circumstances, the ensemble’s public appearances increased. From 1953 onwards, music magazines reported on the ensemble’s “high-quality, artistic” performances and noted that the majority of its performances so far had been in Hungarian rural towns and villages.²² In 1955, András Rajki, in an article published in *Népszava*, bluntly stated that the ensemble had quietly, almost to the exclusion of the public, arrived at the ceremonial one-thousandth performance in Inota three years ago. In the meantime, with their concerts in military camps and barracks, they had done much to develop our musical culture with their rural and factory shows. The choir’s leaders and members regularly teach the soldiers, who are now singing noticeably better, to sing.²³

18 = = Lóránt Péteri, “Az utolsó évtized: Kodály Zoltán és a Kádár rendszer művelődéspolitikája,” *Múltunk* 1 (2006): 263.

19 = = Magdolna Baráth, *A szovjet tényező. Szovjet tanácsadók Magyarországon* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 2017), 130.

20 = = Horváth, “Honvédelem és hadügyek,” 413.

21 = = Members’ salaries were well below the average salary in Hungary, which in 1956 was HUF 18,900 per year.

22 = = Edit Lékai, “A Magyar Néphadsereg Központi Művészegyüttesének 1000. előadása,” *Új Zenei Szemle* 4, no. 7–8 (1953): 61.

23 = = András Rajki, “‘Itt az idő, most vagy soha!,” *Népszava* 84, no. 211 (1956): 1. The Inota event was in fact only the 978th concert. The figure in the press was the result of a misunderstanding; in order to celebrate this round number of performances, the Ensemble had put together a new show, which they called among themselves the thousandth show.

From the press material about the male group between 1953 and 1956, we can conclude that the “Estrada” appearances of the large ensemble diminished and the increasingly professional male choir’s concerts became accessible to the general public, not least the professional public, at representative venues in Budapest. This shift is also confirmed by the ensemble’s internal statistics.²⁴ In the first two years, they performed in military barracks, as stated in their charter, with few public concerts, until in 1951 they became a representative Hungarian group, performing to a mixture of military and civilian audiences. Although it is not possible, in the absence of adequate, reliable statistics, to give an account of the civilian audiences’ composition, Philharmonic booklets and concert posters after 1953 indicate that the number of performances at representative halls increased, especially from 1955 on. Even more strikingly, while the programmes of their first guest appearance in the Soviet Union were reviewed by a three-member “expert” committee – the Minister of Defence, Mihály Farkas, the head of the Propaganda and Press Department of the Political Committee, József Révai, and the head of the Political Group of the Hungarian People’s Army, Sándor Nógrádi – by the mid-1950s the conductor was actively involved in selecting the programmes.

Statistics of the performances of the Hungarian People's Army Art Ensemble (1949–1955)

Year	Number of performances	Audience (military /civil)	Total	Number of foreign appearances	Tour abroad	Foreign audience (military / civilian)
1949	67	120,000 / 40,000	160,000	–	–	–
1950	175	130,000 / 50,000	180,000	–	–	–
1951	301	100,000 / 180,000	280,000	15	SOVIET UNION (04.03–04.21. male choir and orchestra)	25,000 / 10,000
1952	250	140,000 / 80,000	220,000	16	POLAND (01.02–01.18. full ensemble)	10,000 / 5,000
1953	319	140,000 / 120,000	260,000	–	–	–
1954	304	210,000 / 140,000	350,000	–	–	–

24 = = HEL provides statistics for the first three years.

Year	Number of performances	Audience (military /civil)	Total	Number of foreign appearances	Tour abroad	Foreign audience (military / civilian)
1955	340	175,000 / 115,000	276,000	17	GDR (04.02–04.18. dance group)	5,000 / 5,000
1956	202		265,000	113	BULGARIA (04.01–04.16. dance groupe) CHINA (09.07–12.15. full ensemble)	100,000 / 200,000

== The gradual transformation of broadcasting policy

The interest of the profession and the public was mainly related to the change in the male choir's programming policy. Between 1953 and 1956, their prescribed performances on state holidays still mostly reflected Stalinist music policy. At the festive concert for the Hungarian People's Army Day on September 27, 1953, and again about a month later on November 6 at the thirty-sixth anniversary celebrations of the Russian October Socialist Revolution, marches and mass songs about the party and its leaders were performed. However, only one choral work by Kodály and one by Liszt were included in the programmes of Hungarian works not written under the regime. Although the military leadership called for the inclusion of new mass songs in the repertoire – a move that was widely supported and in line with cultural policy guidelines – after the replacement of Zoltán Vásárhelyi as conductor in 1952, it opted to promote the writing of suitable choral works by launching a competition. According to the ensemble's documentary collection, because of the unsuitability of the entries the Ministry of Defence eventually allowed the conductor to select from the abundant older and newer folk song arrangements and "progressive literature" to augment the repertoire.²⁵ This process had already begun in 1952 and was already having an impact in 1953. It was not until 1955–1956, and once the Soviet leadership made official (at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956) the thesis that every country had the right to chart its own path to socialism, that the ensemble's status in Budapest's musical life changed radically with the proliferation of public concerts.

²⁵ == HEL, 177.

The programmes of the representative concert venues now included an equal proportion of classical male choral literature and the predominantly political works of the first repertoire, thus departing considerably from their military performances. The expansion of the repertoire, which began under Miklós Forrai, professor at the Academy of Music, fundamentally defined the period between 1953 and 1956. Popular opera choruses and Franz Liszt's pieces for male voices were performed in the spirit of nineteenth-century revolutionary romanticism, but the *Verbunkos Suite* composed by Tibor Polgár, which reinforced national traditions, was also included in the repertoire. Rich polyphonic Renaissance pieces, mainly works by the church-affiliated composers Palestrina and Lassus that were popularised by Forrai with his own chamber choir beginning in 1948, were not performed until 1954. Why was it necessary for the ensemble, which had originally been established to educate soldiers, now to perform classical works in public for civilian audiences? And how did the Ministry of Defence, which had been responsible for the project, approach the issue? The personality and ambition of its young conductor, a follower of Forrai, played a key role in opening the choir to a new repertoire and new audiences. Lajos Vass, a 26-year-old composer-conductor, returned home from the World Festival of Youth in Bucharest in July 1953 – after barely a year in office – to learn that he had been appointed to replace the recently resigned Forrai as leader of the Male Choir of the People's Army Art Ensemble.²⁶

Although according to 1955 data, there were 291 conductors and choral conductors in the country with a classical music licence, it is not surprising that the composer-conductor, who had been working as a music teacher and singer in the ensemble since 1949, took over artistic direction of the country's only professional male choir.²⁷ Vass had a musical background and four years' experience as a conductor and composer; he had also been active in the meetings of the Musicians' Association and had been unanimously elected to chair the debate on the issue of youth orchestras, mass singing, and marching bands.²⁸ His peasant origins, his young age, and the fact that his mass songs and folksong arrangements were recognised in professional plenums all made him a suitable candidate in the eyes of the political leaders of the association. From the very beginning, however, as artistic director he emphasised the importance of the choir's solo performances and the educational influence of classical music on the people. His letter to Major-General István Otta in 1955 could even be considered his *ars poetica* as a conductor:

26 = = Katalin Flitter. "A karnagy (Pályakép 1953–1992)," in *Vass Lajos emlékezete. Tanulmányok és dokumentumok*, ed. Melinda Berlász (Budapest: Püski, 1998), 26.

27 = = Tallián, *Hangversenyélet*, 94.

28 = = Tallián, *Magyar képek*, 302.

[...] we are also lovers of the art of the choir and we feel that the best of our knowledge and our educational skills can only be truly expressed [not in our estrada programmes, but] separately. [...] I suggest that the General Staff should write in capital letters among our tasks: one of the most important tasks of the Art Ensemble's choir is to promote choral literature within the army, and especially the Hungarian choral literature – especially the choral music of Kodály, Bartók and Liszt – which is outstanding worldwide. [...] I am convinced that in this way we will be able to provide more effective help both to the work of the choirs in the army and to the improvement of marching singing.²⁹

Vass's desire to renew the repertoire reflected the ambitions of his master, Vásárhelyi. Although the young conductor, as a member of the second generation of the choral movement, could no longer learn directly from Kodály, he was indirectly linked to him by a thousand ties. Many of these ties were represented by his teachers at the Liszt Academy of Music, who, as active participants in the choral movement from the 1930s onwards, represented Kodály's concept of music education and "worked to fulfil Kodály's teachings through their compositions, music criticism and writings on music history, music education, the organisation of the choral movement and the running of a music publishing house."³⁰ However, the efforts of the military male choir to renew the repertoire were often rejected by the military leadership. In an undated letter, probably from 1954, Pál Ilku expressed the military leadership's strong opposition to Vass's requests: "[t]his booklet will – most certainly – be of great help in preparing for the Soviet Army Day and at the same time – hopefully – will also eliminate the incorrect view that there is supposedly no Soviet military song to learn."³¹ Ilku's assertion is nuanced by the fact that the 1954 publication of sheet music for the choirs of the Hungarian People's Army contained only a few Soviet songs. The collection was already dominated by Hungarian pieces and the number of classical opera choruses had increased.³² Ilku's letter nevertheless gives a vivid picture of the subordination of the artistic and military leaders of the ensemble during the 1950s.

Yet reviews of Lajos Vass's first concerts at the Liszt Academy in 1954, after six months as director, testify to his classical repertoire-building activities. Iván Vitányi and Tibor Gyarmati of the Institute of Popular Culture, in addition to highlighting in their reviews the clear intonation of the male choir and the rich dynamic skill

29 == OSzK SZT VL. Letter of Lajos Vass to Major General István Otta, May 10, 1955.

30 == Lóránt Péteri, "Zene, oktatás, tudomány, politika (Kodály és az államszocializmus művelődéspolitikája [1948–1967])." *Forrás* 39, no. 12 (2007): 45.

31 == OSzK SZT VL. Letter from Pál Ilku to Lajos Vass, undated.

32 == *Kórusművek a Magyar Néphadseregben működő énekkarok számára* (Budapest: Magyar Néphadsereg Politikai Főcsoportfőnökség, 1954).

of its elite members, also drew attention to the positive changes in the programme composition.³³ Although the composers included in the programme – Borodin, Mussorgsky, Mendelssohn, Schubert, Weber, and Liszt – cannot be considered unusual, as they were the most frequently performed composers in Budapest concert programmes, their works did require more technical preparation and thus testify to the rising quality of the male choir. The cultural policy expectations placed on the ensemble were, however, also clearly expressed here; Vitányi felt that the repertoire lacked new Hungarian works and military songs, which had been heavily promoted by the state.³⁴

Presumably inspired by this criticism, the November concert held a few months later was based specifically on Hungarian choral works, and the professional reaction only criticised the artistic directors for the difference between performances for soldiers and those for the public, saying that “the programmes of everyday concerts should also give a taste of what and how the ensemble gives to the soldiers.”³⁵ It is already clear from the programmes of these concerts that the chief conductor’s aim was to perform pieces of higher artistic value that went beyond ideological education – a goal that provoked controversy both in the armed forces and in the press. It was no coincidence that a critic of the newspaper *Szabad Hazánkért* (“For our Free Country”) felt the need to defend the male choir in writing, as its abilities “not only allow but also require it to perform before a large audience.” As the journalist wrote:

the question is not whether our choir should sing popular works or more demanding but less known works, but whether an ensemble of internationally first-class quality can give up the opportunity to represent and promote our army before the masses of workers and even in the most prestigious forum of the musical arts, the concert podium of the Liszt Academy? The answer is clear: everything that represents the spirit and content of our popular and revolutionary army – which is true culture! Our enemies could only blush at the sight of the soldiers of popular democracy singing Beethoven, Brahms, Verdi and Kodály. We will applaud them all the more enthusiastically.³⁶

33 = = Vitányi, “A Magyar Néphadsereg Művészegyüttese Énekkarának a cappella estje,” 22.

34 = = Iván Vitányi and Tibor Gyarmati, “A Magyar Néphadsereg Művészegyüttese Énekkarának a cappella estje,” *Új Zenei Szemle* 5, no. 5 (May 1954): 22.

35 = = Vitányi, Gyarmati, “A Magyar Néphadsereg Művészegyüttese Énekkarának a cappella estje,” 22.

36 = = “Népszerű énekkarunk,” 31.

In fact, this idea fitted well with the Stalinist idea of fighting the West on the cultural front – against the enemy’s decadent artistic currents – and it also reflected the practice of concert life between 1948 and 1954. Namely, while acceptable classical works were forcefully marketed, political discrimination almost completely excluded the classics of modern music, objectionable works, and contemporary modern, Western composers from the flow of information.³⁷

In November 1954, however, the programme of the choir’s Hungarian Evening was an indisputable sign that censorship was easing. The first half of the concert was largely based on pieces from the 1949–1952 repertoire, and even the newly learned choral works in the second half of the concert were mostly military in theme and national-romantic in tone, which seemed to reflect earlier cultural policy expectations. The work of Lajos Bárdos, who was reprimanded in 1952 at a youth plenum moderated by Vass for his folk song arrangements, which he described as self-serving and technical, can be included here. Although music ideologists had already praised Bárdos’s work immediately after Stalin’s death in 1953 in the pages of the *Új Zenei Szemle* (“New Music Review”), and although the Soldier’s Drinking Song, performed by the male choir in 1954, revived the traditions of the national style of the nineteenth century, the appearance of the church musician-conductor Bárdos’s piece on the concert suggests a freer programme structure.³⁸ This easing of censorship is further substantiated by Vass’s statements, in which he spoke of his ensemble as a dedicated performer of the choral music of Kodály, Bartók, Liszt and Bárdos. Likewise, the works of Béla Bartók were not clearly among those supported. The modernist pieces by this composer – who died in America as an emigrant in 1945 – only became accepted in venues after the 1955 commemorations of the ten-year anniversary of Bartók’s death.³⁹ Although choral works were among accepted in Bartók’s two-part oeuvre, and his more complex vocal works were for a long time technically difficult for the choir, it was nevertheless a step forward that the *Four Old Hungarian Folk Songs* were learned and presented at this time instead of the single-sex choruses sung earlier.

The most obvious change, however, came in regard to Kodály’s pieces. Kodály remained an inescapable figure in musical life even under state socialism, even though he was considered a “bourgeois” at all levels. His widespread recognition and prestige did not allow him to be openly marginalised, and from 1951 on, the cultural policy leadership regarded him as a fellow traveller. As Lóránt Péteri’s research shows, after 1953 Kodály became an increasingly important symbolic figure, and one who was generally accepted among the vocal left-wing intelligentsia that openly

37 == Tallián, *Hangversenyélet*, 42.

38 == Tallián, *Magyar Képek*, 306.

39 == Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music Divided: Bartók’s Legacy in Cold War Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 149.

advocated a break with Stalinist political practices. However, the performance of certain of his works still met with opposition within the army.⁴⁰ In response to a long letter written by Lajos Vass to Major General Pál Ilku on the topic of programme policy, Ilku emphatically stated the following: “This would mean a complete abandonment of our principles, the introduction of a principle which we will of course never help, on the contrary, we will always prevent. I call for more principled firmness – alongside the development of artistic standards in leadership.”⁴¹ Despite this unambiguous response, Kodály’s choral work *The Miracle of God* was performed at the Hungarian Evening a year later, and just two weeks after that it was sung again, accompanied by thirteen other Kodály choral works, in the concert hall of the Liszt Academy in honour of the master’s birthday. Kodály’s choral work on Petőfi’s political poem was composed in 1944, and its political parallels with the poem are obvious. Although Kodály omitted the third stanza on foreign occupation, this work – like *Nemzeti dal*, composed in 1955 – could have been interpreted as a forerunner of the revolution against the old regime and against oppression. Ilku’s objections were presumably only related to the title and to the increasingly emphatic statement in the chorus: “It is a miracle of God that our nation is still standing.” In addition to the content of the text, this recurring line is the key to the piece in terms of harmony. The uncertain tonality, given by the frequent chromatic passages and third-relations, serves as a kind of bridge between the individual stanzas. The tonal plan of the chorus and stanzas is quite unusual, partly due to the word painting used to express the music. Its constant increase in tempo and dynamics, almost madrigalistic setting, and unusual harmonic movements make this one of the most complex choral works of its kind. In this context, the fact that this work could be performed at the end of 1954 is a sign of a change in the practice of the Stalinist cultural policy, even if its performance is seen as a gesture by cultural politicians towards Kodály.

After 1953, Kodály’s importance in the eyes of the intelligentsia increased as a result of this change. Because his conception of the nation and his people distinguished him from nationalist conservatives, while his humanism clearly distinguished him from the frequently xenophobic thinking of the representatives of the popular movement, the intelligentsia could easily identify with him.⁴² In his report on the Kodály evening, the composer Pál Járdányi had already strongly criticised the male choir’s previous performances, stressing that the ensemble had rarely been given tasks worthy of its abilities and expressing the hope that the group, which was of unparalleled ability, would henceforth only hone its skills with the noblest works.

40 == Péteri, “Az utolsó évtized: Kodály Zoltán,” 263.

41 == OSzK SZT VL. Letter of reply from Major General Pál Ilku to Lajos Vass, December 1953.

42 == Péteri, “Az utolsó évtized: Kodály Zoltán,” 263.

“The male choir should be used to showcase the unique gems of Hungarian male choir literature throughout the country and the world: the Kodály choirs.”⁴³ *Járdányi* clearly attributed the performance of Kodály works to Vass, who had made a great leap forward in his conducting career as a young but already renowned composer. In the previous concert, his otherwise convincing conducting had been marred by a teacher’s lack of maturity, a tendency to moderate his temper, while on this occasion he had “almost completely thrown off the brakes.”⁴⁴ In 1956, the famous critic of the *Népszava*, Sándor Jemnitz, praised the male choir’s perfect singing as a testimony to the highest vocal culture.⁴⁵

In 1955, Pál Gergely, the leader of the Ensemble’s orchestra, attempted to Sovietise the male choir, which was playing an increasingly active role in Hungarian concert life. Gergely encouraged composers to write new marching songs and Soviet-style military songs:

In recent years, it has been proven on several occasions that our composers are also inspired and attracted by the possibilities of this great performing apparatus. But they have been deceived on more than one occasion [...]: a whole series of works have been written for the Ensemble – and not for the army! The means often became an end, even an end in itself! [...] They will only be able to fulfil their true vocation if they can find a close connection with the soldiers of the People’s Army, with their everyday life. It is only by knowing – and loving – this that army artists can become soldier-artists.⁴⁶

His appeal also demonstrates that in 1955, contemporary composers were no longer compelled to compose vocal works in accordance with cultural policy guidelines. Rather, they were composing new works for them because of the quality of the male choir.

This change in programme policy also meant a decline in the political importance of the ensemble, especially the male choir, which meant fewer trips abroad and a reduction in their income. In 1954, Vass wrote in a letter to his Comrade Lieutenant General (without mentioning the military commander’s name): “[...] the news that the State Folk Ensemble was again going on a foreign tour lasting several months had a depressing effect on our ensemble. Not because they are going, but because we are not going anywhere. We know that the Bulgarian army ensemble

43 = = Pál Járdányi, “Két Kodály-kórus hangverseny,” *Új Zenei Szemle* 6, no. 1 (1955): 16.

44 = = Járdányi, “Két Kodály-kórus hangverseny,” 16.

45 = = Sándor Jemnitz, “A magyar muzsika ünnepi hangversenye,” *Népszava* 84, no. 210 (1956): 4.

46 = = Pál Gergely, “Zene a Néphadseregben,” *Szabad Hazánkért* 3, no. 5 (1955): 24.

is in China right now.”⁴⁷ At this time he also stressed that military ensembles in other annexed countries performed abroad to build diplomatic relations:

Czechoslovak and Romanian military ensembles have been there. These countries are also constantly exchanging ensembles with each other. This summer, for example, the military ensemble from Bratislava was in Bulgaria. The Czechoslovak ensemble has already been to the Soviet Union three times. In general, our members always know who is where, and every new piece of news causes a new and bigger wound.

In his letter, Lajos Vass openly expressed the need to revive international relations. However, the Political Committee of the Hungarian Workers' Party did not allow the male choir to travel abroad for another two years; according to a note dated July 4, 1955, the Political Committee rejected the request of the People's Army Artists' Ensemble to perform in Bulgaria. When the tour eventually took place a year later, it featured only the dance group.⁴⁸

The male choir's appearances abroad were approved by the Party only two years after the date of the letter quoted above. During a visit to Budapest in January 1956, Marshal Zhu De, the Chinese Minister of National Defence, invited the People's Army Art Ensemble to perform in China. Despite the long wrangling that had preceded the trip abroad, the male choir now represented their country with the works of Kodály, Bartók and Liszt in addition to two Chinese folk songs. They also performed Palestrina, Lassus, György Ránki, Ferenc Farkas, Lajos Bárdos, and Jenő Ádám at their concerts, along with folk songs, folk song arrangements, and both old and new military songs, all of which were mixed in their programme. The compilation, which had to be accepted by the major general in charge of programme policy, reflects the ideas of Lajos Vass, who stated in an interview before the tour that “we will perform the best songs of the past years at our concerts in China.”⁴⁹ This first period of success for the large ensemble, which had been touring China for three months at the time of the Hungarian Revolution, ended with a refusal to perform in Moscow, which had not been included in the preliminary schedule. However, the change in their programme policy and the increase in professional reviews also marked the expansion in a classical direction of the male repertoire between 1953 and 1956.

47 = = Károly Gáti, “Kodály 'Nemzeti dal'-ával búcsúzik a Néphadsereg Kínába induló művészei-üttese,” *Népszava* 84, no. 200 (1956): 4.

48 = = OSzK SZT VL. Letter from Lajos Vass addressed to an anonymous “Lieutenant General Comrade,” November 11, 1954.; Varga, *Az MDP Központi vezetősége Politikai Bizottsága és titkársága üléseinek napirendi jegyzései*, II. kötet (Budapest: Magyar Országos Levéltár, 2007), 217.

49 = = Gáti, “Kodály Nemzeti dalával búcsúzik a Néphadsereg,” 4.

Ultimately, this evidence shows that after Stalin's death, although Soviet influence and pattern following continued to be evident in the ensembles of the satellite countries, it was the leaders who determined the artistic direction of their ensembles – even in professional ensembles created mainly for the dissemination of propaganda.

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