

# “Mozart’s Transylvanian Pupil” Josepha Palm. Possible Connections and Narratives<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new developments took root in the musical culture of Transylvania. With the government moving to Kolozsvár (Klausenburg in German, today known as Cluj-Napoca), the city developed into a cultural centre of Western standards. Theatrical presentations, musical academies and, notably, Viennese-style chamber music concerts became more and more popular among the region’s Hungarian nobility, especially the close circle of the governor, Count György Bánffy. A contemporary source frequently cited by local scholars indicates that his wife Josepha (née Palm, b. Vienna 1754, d. Cluj 1816) was a disciple of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. International literature doesn’t confirm this, however, and other surviving documents diminish the plausibility of the “Transylvanian pupil” legend.*

*Nevertheless, Countess Bánffy is the earliest figure to represent a successful implementation of Western European artistic standards in the region; she introduced cultural elements typical of her native town, the Habsburg Empire’s capital, to Kolozsvár. Josepha Palm supported German-speaking theatre groups and became Maecenas to*

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<sup>1</sup> Present article summarizes the author’s previous research results which were partly published in Hungarian, in Sófalvi, Emese, *Josepha Palm és a Mozart-kultusz kezdetei Erdélyben* [Josepha Palm or about the beginnings of the cult of Mozart in Transylvania], In: Egyed, Emese–Pakó, László–Sófalvi, Emese (eds.), *CERTAMEN VI. Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, Kolozsvár, 2019*, pp. 123–130, and in Romanian in Sófalvi, Emese, “*Credo in Mozart*”. *Lucrările mozartiene ale muzicologului Francisc László* [“*Credo in Mozart*”. *The Mozart-studies by Francisc László*], In: Banciu, Gabriel–Şuteu, Cristina (eds.), *Doctoralia. Lucrările Simpozionului tinerilor cercetători „Romeo Ghircoiaşiu”*, ed. III., Editura MediaMusica, Cluj-Napoca, pp. 149–163.

*the local Kleinmeisters, strongly influencing the reception of Viennese composers' works, particularly Mozart's, in Transylvania.*

**Keywords:** Josepha Palm, Mozart reception, Maecenas, Transylvania

Scholars exploring the musical culture of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Transylvania frequently refer to an outstanding but rather inexplicit topic of local historiography: the narrative of Countess Josepha Palm as a pupil of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Regional research literature on Mozart's local reception considers the composer's presumed links to the Transylvanian aristocracy a certainty, and it has perpetuated that certainty for decades, without ever questioning or probing the reliability of the professional or personal relationship between the acclaimed artist and the wife of the region's governor.

Using musical historiography methods, this paper examines the conflicting elements in the conventional "Transylvanian pupil" narrative, while also elucidating the role and place of a truly emblematic figure, Countess Josepha Palm. The study aims to correct a few of the unconfirmed references present in the Romanian and Hungarian musicological literature by aligning data on premieres and public performances with other evidence of local artistic assimilation, as well as bringing forth new information regarding the early reception of Mozart and musical culture of Kolozsvár (Klausenburg in German, today known as Cluj-Napoca).

## **Research history**

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new events take place on the Transylvanian musical scene. Starting with the winter of 1790, the transfer of the governmental seat from Nagyszeben (Hermannstadt in German, today Sibiu) to Kolozsvár marks the evolution of the Hungarian town into a real artistic centre. Theatre performances, musical events and Viennese-style chamber concerts become common practice in the close circles of the governor of Transylvania.

Brought up in the capital of the Habsburg Empire, Georg Bánffy married the Viennese countess Josepha Palm, a member of the

Austrian aristocracy who was referred to by a contemporary source as having learned to play piano with none other than Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

This plausible hypothesis, of the countess being the only Transylvanian pupil of Mozart, has effortlessly made its way into the works of local musicologists, researchers interested in culture around 1800, and others interested in the history and music of the region. István Lakatos discussed the issue in several of his articles, Ede Sebestyén referred to it in his description of Mozart's links to Hungary, George Breazul included the story in his monograph published at the bicentenary of Mozart's birth, and János Fancsali cited it in his paper dedicated to Anton Polz, the Bánffy family's music-teacher. More recently, Erich Türk also mentioned it in his thorough presentation of the musical life of Kolozsvár at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the author of this article discussed the topic in previous research papers concerning the musical connections of the governor and first lady of Transylvania, the Bánffy couple.

Transylvanian musicologist and highly esteemed Mozart expert Ferenc László also repeatedly underlined the importance of the governor's wife in the cultural history of Transylvania, "Bánffy's wife, born Palm, was Viennese. A source dated to 1804 reveals that she might have been Mozart's pupil," and in László's opinion, there are documents showing that Mozart was acquainted with members of the Palm aristocratic family. László emphasized that the frequent musical activities at Bánffy Palace in Kolozsvár might be considered local variants of those common in the Brukenthal Palace in Hermannstadt.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Bánffys Frau, geb. Josepha Palm, war eine Wienerin. Einer Quelle von 1804 zufolge soll sie Mozart-Schülerin gewesen sein. In der Tat sind Mozarts persönliche Beziehungen zu mehreren adeligen Familien namens Palm dokumentiert und siebenbürgische Quellen bestätigen sowohl Josepha Bánffys pianistische Fähigkeiten als auch sonst eine rege musikalische Tätigkeit im Bánffy-Palais – ein Klausenburger Pendant zum Hermannstädter Brukenthal-Palais." László, Ferenc, *Zur Geschichte der Mozart-Rezeption in Rumänien*, p. 135

The Bánffy Palace – today, the National Museum of Arts – witnessed the first Mozartian chamber music auditions documented in Cluj. The concerts’ promoter was none other than the Governor’s wife, born Josepha Palm, a Viennese aristocrat whose family knew Mozart well and who was actually a former piano student of the composer. The Viennese guests were fascinated by the city, the palace and the encounter with the living memory of one of Mozart’s students.<sup>3</sup>

Ferenc László related in one of his interviews that Bánffy Palace, located in the main square of Kolozsvár, was home for numerous events in a Mozartian spirit. According to the late musicologist, Georg Bánffy married a Viennese aristocrat whose family may be mentioned in association with the Austrian musician, and who was “declared by a contemporary source as a former piano student of Mozart...who brought to Cluj the Viennese custom of chamber music performances.” László states “We have unquestionable evidence of the fact that Bánffy himself knew and supported Mozart, his name appearing on the list of 'subscribers' to one of his concerts in Vienna.”<sup>4</sup>

Research into the history of the subject reveals that plausible references to Mozart’s single Transylvanian student can be traced in the local musicological literature only back as far as the 1940s, not earlier. The origo point is the publication of a historiographical source, Richard Weiskircher’s description of the musical culture in Transylvania at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The manuscript bearing the title *Music in Transylvania Around 1800 (Musikpflege in Siebenbürgen um 1800)*, written 1804 in Hermannstadt/Sibiu) was published by Gottlieb Brandsch, a versatile intellectual interested by the history, popular music culture and education of the Transylvanian Saxons. The editor omitted to mention the exact provenience of his source material, rendering critical examination of the manuscript impossible. The manuscript’s author used to live in Hermannstadt,

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<sup>3</sup> László, Ferenc, *Cu Mozart în Europa* [With Mozart in Europe], manuscript text written for the Romanian Broadcast Company in 2000.

<sup>4</sup> László, Ferenc, *Mozart 250 ani și Transilvania* [Mozart 250 and Transylvania]. Interview with Ferenc László by Victor Eskenasy, 2006. 27. 01.

relatively far from the inner circles of the countess Bánffy, and in his work he mostly detailed Saxon musical traditions.

The Weiskirchen–Brandsch text describes the generous and honourable wife of Count Georg Bánffy as an accomplished person fully deserving of high social status, a lady who skilfully plays the fortepiano and used to learn from the “immortal Mozart”.<sup>5</sup> The author places Josepha Palm in the same context as another symbolic figure: chapel master Schimert, beloved disciple of Johann Sebastian Bach. Both the cantor and the countess are presented as personalities who enabled Transylvanian art and Western musical traditions to become aligned.

This piece of new information, published in German in a Transylvanian Saxon journal, was instantly processed by István Lakatos, a self-educated but prolific chronicler of the region’s musical historical events. Without questioning or revisiting the source, he instantly and repeatedly integrated it into his articles. Thus, the appealing (and quite feasible!) presumption of her being “Mozart’s Transylvanian pupil” became frequently referred to as fact in local music history literature.

## **Hypothesis of a possible Mozart-Palm connection**

Considered by Brandsch an accomplished pianoforte player, Josepha Palm had no explicit pretension of becoming a bridge between Western musical conventions and the necessities of a peripheral region. Born Countess Josephine Maria Palm on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1754, she married on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1771 at the age of 17. After the wedding, the wife of the future governor lived a life typical of Austrian or Hungarian high nobility. She gave birth to eight children, six of whom lived to adulthood. Entirely dedicated to their instruction, she supported the publication of treatises on education, as well as works of Hungarian literature. Countess Palm was seen by her contemporaries

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<sup>5</sup> “Die Gemahlin des Ersten verbindetels eine gebohrne gräfin Palm, mit dene ihren Rang und Seelengrösse eigenen erhabenen Tugenden noch die Eigenschaft, eine geschickte Fortepiano Spielerin un Schülerin des unsterblichen Mozarts zu sein.” Brandsch, Gottlieb, *Musikpflege in Siebenbürgen um 1800*, Siebenbürgischer Vierteljahrschrift. LXIV(1941), Heft 2, p. 149.

as a role model for promoting culture, and as a respectable person whose compassionate and sensitive heart was observed and mentioned by prominent figures of the Transylvanian community. Her achievements were eventually recognised by her native country in the form of the Sternkreuz, the highest Austrian distinction.



Fig. 1: Unknown painter. *Portrait of countess Josepha Palm*. Before 1822, Private collection.

But what of the Mozart episode? A possible early encounter between the Mozart family and the young Countess Palm's inner circles could actually have taken place. During their repeated visits to Vienna (1762, 1767–68, 1774), Leopold Mozart and the little Wolferl

might have met the Palms, but to date no documents confirm an actual connection between the two families.

Such an encounter between the artist and his presumed student is more likely to have happened later, in the year 1781. By this time, during Mozart's Viennese period, the student would have been Countess Bánffy, wife of a high state Austrian official.

The capital of the Habsburg Empire was a cultural centre, a hub often sending leaders of theatre performances and musical organisations to the peripheries of the country and welcoming them back for the winter season, together with their aristocratic employers. The Hungarian aristocracy comes across as a tightly knit company in the testimonies of contemporary documents, often under the collective denomination *der Ungarische Adel* (a name we also find later on in a pension request written by Constanze Mozart, widow of the composer).

In the context of private musical assemblies of the Viennese years, the Apponyi, Bánffy, Esterházy, Pálffy and Zichy family names are the most frequently mentioned from the Hungarian aristocratic circle. From his very first years spent in Vienna, Mozart was invited to play in the salons of count Károly Zichy (20<sup>th</sup> July 1782, 20<sup>th</sup> March 1784) and János Esterházy (nine occasions 1<sup>st</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> March 1782). A certain Comte de Banffi [sic] paid six *gulden*s for his season ticket for the Trattnerhof concerts in March 1784, according to a list which can be found on a letter the composer sent to his father Leopold, but we should perhaps not read too much into this; a gesture of support of this kind would not have necessarily meant actual attendance of events (on the same list of season ticket holders the name of the duke and duchess Palm are visible).<sup>6</sup>

Mozart research literature details a continuation of relations with the Hungarian aristocracy. There were musical visits to Duke Lipót Pálffy (9<sup>th</sup> April 1784) and Count Zichy (21<sup>st</sup> February 1785), and the composer developed a close relation with the Zichy family, tutoring the count's wife Anna Mária. It also mentions another female

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<sup>6</sup> The wife of Georg Bánffy, Josepha Palm belonged to a higher branch of the family, the counts of the Palm nobility.

student from the high Hungarian nobility, namely Josepha Gabriella Pálffy.

Sources concerning the involvement of the young Countess Palm in the musical life of the capital of the Habsburg Empire, as well as the precise chronology of the years she spent in Vienna with her newlywed husband, are scarce. She gave birth to five children in the first decade of her marriage, so her socialising possibilities might have been reduced. It is likely that Georg Bánffy, a high official of the chancellery and treasurer of the Habsburg Empire from 1782 until his nomination to the function of Governor of Transylvania in 1787, would have been more familiar with the Viennese Mozart phenomenon. And in March 1784, he could have easily joined Mozart's public in the salon of his sister Ágnes Bánffy, wife of count János Eszterházy.

Despite the frequent allusions we find in the musicological literature published in Hungary and Romania, we have neither documentation pointing toward the existence of a closer, personal Mozart–Bánffy meeting in Vienna, nor any evidence of Countess Palm's particular interest in the musician.

## **Josepha Palm and the musical culture in Transylvania at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

Countess Josepha Palm was considered by her contemporaries a highly accomplished lady and a great benefactor of the arts. Theatre plays and musical academies honoured her, and compositions or poems dedicated to her (such as the one entitled *Symphonia*) also demonstrate a well-known affinity for music.

Josepha Palm took the presentation of events in the Habsburg capital as a model. Continuing the Saxon artistic tradition of the former chair of the Transylvanian Government, and following the precedent of Hermannstadt's Brukenthal Palace, she tried to introduce these types of events from 1787 into cultural life in Kolozsvár, her new home. The countess became protectress of local *kleinmeisters* and the resident German theatre companies, and she was well known for being supportive of migrating German and Austrian composers.

One of the earliest hints to Josepha Bánffy’s affinity for music can be found in the text of the recommendation of one of the first printed “Hungarian Arias”. József Rájnis’s verses were set to music with particular attention to the Hungarian prosody by János Schreier for a tenore voice and small instrumental ensemble (2 violins, 2 violas, 2 flutes, 2 horns in F and contrabass)<sup>7</sup> and dedicated to Josepha Palm. János Schreier (1744–1811) addresses the countess in the preface of his 1791 *Anacreoni rend szerént Bútsú-vétel* (Farewell in Anacreontic Style) as the person most capable to judge the artistic value of the piece, since she can understand music almost to perfection. Schreier also refers to an episode thirteen years prior, perhaps the year 1778, when Josepha Palm, while playing “the most beautiful works”, allowed him to accompany her, thus developing the Piarist musician’s taste.

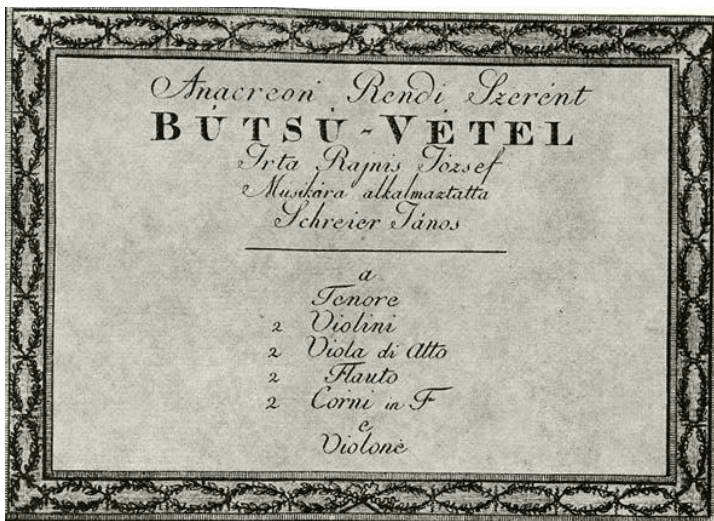


Fig. 2. József Rájnis–János Schreier: *Ankreón rendi szerint bútsú-vétel* (Farewell in Anacreontic Style), front page (National Széchényi Library, Budapest).

<sup>7</sup> The composition’s earlier version, preserved in a manuscript form, is written for voice and piano.

At the beginning of the 1810s, the Bánffys had already employed a Viennese musician, Anton Polz, as *klaviermeister*. Since by this period the count's grown-up children were no longer normally resident in the palace, the music master's tasks were more likely extended to the organisation of the artistic events of the family. Although Polz was certainly an appreciated member of the governor's household, he attended the family meals and held a private room on the premises, no exact inscription relating to the Bánffys can be found among Polz's compositions.

But another migrant artist from Austria did dedicate a series of piano variations to Josepha Palm: František Pöschl, the music teacher at Count Sámuel Kemény's family. Although the score is not dated, we can deduce that it was composed before 1814, most likely between 1810–1814, and that it was not necessarily intended for the specific purpose of the countess to perform it on the fortepiano. The original 3/8 theme and its nine character variations (including the common types of the genre: variations for the left hand, minor variations and a *Polonaise*) suggest a skilful pianist and a Vienna-trained composer.

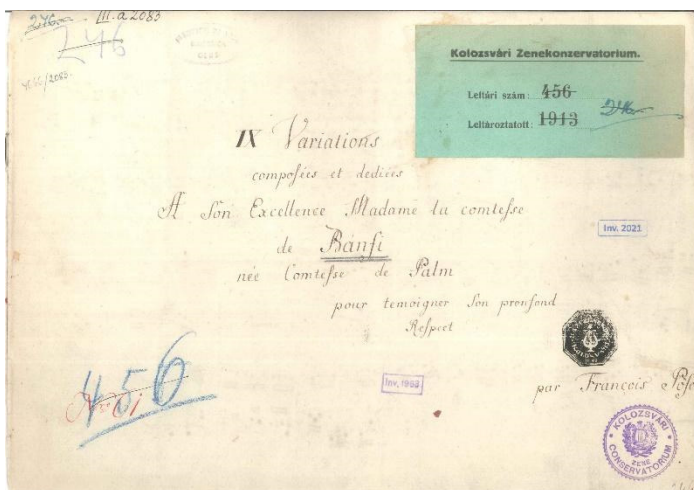


Fig. 3. František Pöschl: *IX Variations*, front page (manuscript, Library of the Gheorghe Dima National Music Academy, Cluj Napoca)

For private gatherings, Josepha Palm used the term *Gesellschaft* (social assembly) emphasizing her affiliation to German-speaking culture. At the sumptuous events she organised or which were organised for her, music was rarely absent. In 1803, for example, on the countess' birthday her children József and Dénes played a piano and clarinet piece in her honour.

Considering that the countess had been brought up with German culture, there was no impediment for local Hungarian theatre troupes to perform regularly in their mother tongue in honour of the first lady of Transylvania. One of the earliest presentations of this kind was the play *A nemes joltevő* (The Noble Benefactress), performed in 1793 by amateur members of the gubernatorial chancellery at Rhédey Hall (a place frequently used for theatrical events in Kolozsvár).

Wandering theatre groups coming to Kolozsvár presented annual musical events to mark the name days of the Bánffy couple. Five such artistic events can be linked directly to the governor's wife, but their actual number must have been greater.

On 19<sup>th</sup> March 1803 *A Kontraktus* (The Contract), the local public's beloved *singspiel*, with music by Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf was performed to honour the name day of Josepha Palm.

The playbill of a musical academy dated 8<sup>th</sup> March 1805 shows the first public performance of a Mozart composition in Kolozsvár. The overture to *The Magic Flute*, referred to as “the opening music of the *Czauberflöt* [sic] opera written by Mozárt [sic]”, was described as the work of the person “who deserves everlasting remembrance” and placed at the beginning of the theatre orchestra's programme, directed by the residing conductor Johann Seltzer. After ten days, on 18<sup>th</sup> March 1805, a new drama's performance *Pruth vize mellett kötötték békesség* (Peace Made on the Side of the River Pruth) was dedicated to the First Lady of Transylvania, including musical insertions from an unidentified composer. The author of the drama remains unknown.



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In 1806, the Hungarian theatre group’s act was a new musical presentation with festive illuminations: the comedy *Viktorina*.

Organised on a date close to 17<sup>th</sup> March, the name day of the countess, a concert in 1807 marks the premiere of a Mozart chamber music composition, most likely the Quintet in E-flat major for Piano and Winds, K. 452. If one looks at the programme and the participants of the concert, it is clear that the protectress of artistic presentations is being celebrated. The name Anton Polz must be mentioned here again, as he was the Bánffy family’s music teacher at the time. Polz was a “Musicus ex Austria” who started as an “anti-Beethovenian” but later became a fervent adept of the works of Ludwig van Beethoven; the Austrian *kleinmeister* knew well his patroness’ association with the Viennese style and its prominent composers. During the festivities in the Bánffy palace, Polz himself performed the piano part, and was joined by woodwind players from the local theatre (Johann Klein, Johann Seltzer, Johann Trzka and Leopold Irch).

Although known for her artistic inclinations, the countess’ personal correspondence rarely included musical subjects, an exception to this being a description of a disgraceful performance of *The Magic Flute* in Lugos (Lugosch in German, today Lugoj) which did reach her through one of her nephews in 1811.

Additional information concerning the means of artistic patronage can also be drawn from the family archives. In the Bánffy family’s Transylvanian homes: the palaces of Kolozsvár, Gyalu (today Gilău), and Bonchida castle (today Bontida), a collection of musical

instruments indicate they were used effectively in private musical assemblies. The governor's possessions included two basses, a dulcimer, music stands, benches for the players, a cherry plywood fortepiano, and a great number of musical clocks.

Josepha Palm died in Kolozsvár on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1814, aged 60. The annual musical plays organised in her honour by the residing German and Hungarian theatre groups were mostly transferred to the widowed governor himself, the remainder going to her female relatives. Thus, the public musical academies and opera performances, originally developed to honour the late countess, were sustained.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the integration of Viennese musical culture continued in the artistic activities conducted and promoted by the governor, who initiated the founding of the first Musical Society in Transylvania in the summer of 1819. Protector of the local *Musik-Gesellschaft*, Count Bánffy strongly supported the activities of the first musical educational institution of the region, appointing his employee Anton Polz as director. Secondary sources mention Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Requiem* in the same context as the governor, and the funeral mass was very likely performed by the local Musical Society's members in remembrance of Count Bánffy after his passing in 1822.

In his testament, Georg Bánffy donated a generous sum so that musical masses in remembrance of his wife would be performed annually on the day of her death (2<sup>nd</sup> February), in the church of Saint Michael, Kolozsvár. We don't know how long these musical gestures were held honouring the memory of the late Josepha Bánffy (née Palm), but the recollection of the beloved wife and mother, maecenas of the local theatre groups and musicians, had long faded out when her figure involuntarily reappeared in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century posturing as Mozart's single Transylvanian pupil, and became once again an important, emblematic character of local music history.

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<sup>8</sup> Completing the representations honouring the countess, we can only hint to the annual "Bánffy-concerts" performed by the local Musical Society between 1819-1822.

## Conclusions

Josepha Palm's story can be perceived as an illustrative example of the reception of art and music on the peripheries of Europe around 1900. Whether she was Mozart's pupil or not remains a question for further research, but she can certainly be seen as a symbol of thriving relations between Kolozsvár and the great artistic centres of the continent, and also of ever-increasing Western influence, during and after the Enlightenment, in the cultural life of Transylvania. To conclude, the reception of the Austrian countess and the Viennese composer represents a solid building block in the subsequent development of local musical culture: the emerging national school in Transylvania and Hungary.

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