

Francisc László's Mozart Legacy - Reflections on the Volume *Studii mozartiene III*

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Abstract

On the tenth anniversary of Francisc László's passing, the Romanian Mozart Society published all his scholarly writings on the Viennese composer in their Mozart Studies series. The volume is significant in several respects. Firstly it fills a gap, as the results of four decades of internationally acclaimed research have become available in one collection for the domestic audience. It is also a written legacy that expresses the author's lifelong commitment to Mozart, his dedicated and sacrificial work in promoting the composer's oeuvre, both theoretical and practical, and in this sense, it serves as an inspiring example for future generations. Just as importantly, it is a worthy tribute to László's memory, to which we can add our modest thoughts.

Keywords: Francisc László, Mozart, legacy, genre, style, form, music history, analysis, reception

Francisc László's rich and wide-ranging oeuvre needs little introduction, at least to the Romanian professionals devoted to Mozart's music. Since his passing in 2010, he has been the subject of numerous writings of tribute and remembrance, with some commemorations even published as a collection.¹ In this context, the

¹ Elena Maria Șorban [ed.], Școala muzicologică Francisc László – lecții perene și mărturii [Francisc László Musicological School – perennial lessons and testimonies], Editura Muzicală, București, 2020.

third volume of the Romanian series of *Studii mozartiene* (*Mozart Studies III*)² is a remarkable homage to the most distinguished, internationally renowned domestic Mozart-scholar, fulfilling his unrealised wish: to provide in collected form all his musicological papers on the oeuvre of “The Incomparable”³, published in Romanian, German and Hungarian over four decades.

The tripartite structure of the volume follows the author’s original conception: the extensive “Analitica” deals mainly with style, genre and form issues, the “Historica” gives a historical overview of Mozart’s reception in Romania from the beginning to (almost) the present day, and the “Addenda”, containing a list of all his related writings, including his journalistic work.

The “Mozartian testament”⁴ syntagm used in the editorial preface appears to be quite appropriate. It not only indicates the importance that László accorded to these writings in his own oeuvre, but also expresses the steadfast alliance that he forged with the Viennese composer at an early stage of his career. And of course, it calls on his successors to continue this outstanding theoretical and practical output in the same spirit, as indeed the Romanian Mozart Society (the co-publisher of this volume, which he founded) has been doing for decades.

László was the kind of musician who was drawn to musicology not by academic necessity, but by the questions that arose in his practical dealing with music, by a sincere interest in its external and internal correlations, and by what one might call a childlike curiosity. His appreciators often mention that he was self-taught in this respect, and he regarded himself as such. As a result, he adopted a balanced approach to scholastic trends, which gave him a sense of autonomy and freshness of perspective. This background prepared László to

² Francisc László, *Studii mozartiene III* [*Mozart Studies III*], Societatea Română Mozart - Gudrun Schröder Verlag, Leipzig, 2020. It is telling that the previous two volumes are dedicated to personalities no less important than Jaap Schröder (2002) and Robert Levin (2006).

³ The epithet comes from the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, which Francisc László considered as an inspired characterisation, and adopted as a subtitle in his study on the reception of Mozart in Romania.

⁴ Cf. editor’s foreword. In Francisc László, *op. cit.* p. VI.

answer an almost unanswerable question: how does one say something internationally relevant about perhaps the most researched composer of all time? And we must also consider the time that László spent working in the isolation of the Eastern Bloc, and that this is a corpus of just over 300 pages.

From the beginning, this “outsider” status instilled in him a professional humbleness which is also evident in his writings dating from the period of his growing scientific recognition. Thus, it is not uncommon for some of the texts in the volume to be referred to as “modest introduction”, “report”, “short study”, or “analytical sketch”. This attitude was coupled with outstanding diligence, perseverance, thoroughness, a desire to communicate, and great language skills; he also had a responsible attitude towards the spoken and written word, paying particular attention to the latter.

A prime example is his clarification of certain concepts. Whether short or long, these indispensable departures are usually intended as introductions, the basis for further reasoning. For this he was willing to dispute some entries in certain musical dictionaries, at times suggesting his own translations of specific terms into Romanian. Since he did not take such precise prior knowledge for granted, these kinds of remarks or interjections may sometimes appear to be didactic, and this isn’t actually too far from the truth.

However, we should not think here of the inevitable generalisations partly inherent to university lectures, or the compromises made towards digestibility characteristic of a publicist. The author’s basic historical approach can best be seen in a kind of localising manner, his aim is to identify the precise time horizon and context of certain concepts and musical phenomena as a basis for their definition, which can then be dealt with in a unique yet interrelated way on the past-future continuum. The extent of such discourses is always determined by the topic. In the first part of the volume, these form the “backbone” of the studies in the historical discussion of style and/or genre questions of Mozart’s oeuvre, while in the further structural analyses they are mostly limited to providing necessary but sufficient information, with a kind of Aristotelian conciseness.

As we know, László also engaged in considerable journalistic work, which not only facilitated the development of his writing skills,

but also helped to develop a reader-friendly, captivating style of communication, which he was visibly able to maintain in his scientific publications.⁵ Therefore, we can state without exaggeration that this volume is not only a necessary resource for professionals, but that even moderately informed music lovers will be able to find interesting and useful knowledge. The author seems to have considered in his own turn the fatherly advice which Leopold addressed to his son in a letter of 11 December 1780, quoted in the footnote.⁶ He even identified with

⁵ Quote from Németh G. István article, *A László Ferenc hagyaték, és ami mögötte van* [*The Ferenc László legacy and what lies behind*]: “Their source value [referring to his vast publicist output, F.A.] enhanced by the so typical interpenetrability of Ferenc László’s journalistic and scientific writings, as mentioned by László Vikárius in his obituary. ‘Even in his individual volumes, he did not deny that his starting point as a researcher was journalism.’ In this connection, Ferenc László himself put it this way [Oral History]: ‘one should strive to ensure that there is no difference in content between academic and popular writings. Popular writings must be as firmly grounded as scientific studies. On the other hand, scientific writing, however complex the subject may be, should be written in such a way as to be readable and to engage the reader emotionally with the subject.’” In *Certamen VI*. [Egyed Emese, Pakó László, Sófalvi Emese, eds.], Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, Kolozsvár, 2019, p. 94.

⁶ Here is an extract from their correspondence concerning the premiere of *Idomeneo*: “Let me suggest that in your work you think not only of the musical *cognoscenti* but also of those listeners who are unmusical. You know that there are 100 unmusical listeners for every 10 connoisseurs; so don’t forget to bring in the so-called popular style, which tickles the long ears.” (Letter from Leopold Mozart to his son, Salzburg, 11 December 1780). Reply: “*Mon très cher Père!* ...as far as the so-called Popular style is concerned, don’t worry about it; in my Opera you’ll find Musick for every kind of listener – except for those with the long ears.” (Wolfgang’s letter of reply to his father, Munich, 16 December 1780.). In Robert Spaethling [ed. and transl.], *Mozart’s Letters, Mozart’s Life. Selected Letters*, Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 2000, p. 221. Mozart was not concerned with this point only in regards to his operas. The most frequently quoted passage in this sense was written in connection with his early Viennese piano concertos KV. 413-415. Quote: “These concertos are a happy medium between what’s too difficult and too easy – they are Brilliant – pleasing to the ear – Natural without becoming vacuous; – there are passages here and there that only connoisseurs can fully appreciate – yet the common listener will find them

the overall jovial tone that often pervades not only Mozart's music but also his letters. In our case, this sometimes occurs as ironic references or well-timed punchlines. These breaks in character once again evoke László's experience and sense for journalism, but they can also be seen as a form of self-amusement, as well as a wink to the esteemed reader which evokes sympathy.

On a more serious note, the responsibility for communication is not limited to the correct use of terms. The author endeavours to measure every assertion to the best of his ability against the most rigorous standards of current scientific knowledge and to apply them fully (to his own work above all). His observations are always factual and show a substantial background in the relevant literature. There is hardly a paper in this volume that does not reflect on the various statements made by some of the most prominent international Mozart-scholars, and while there are occasional harsh criticisms he balances these with gestures of appreciation, praise or argument-based positions on competing opinions. László does not hesitate to express his gratitude in public when a problem is brought to his attention, or an area for further consideration. This conveys the texts a colloquial, conference-debate-like tone. Some of them were indeed designed for such events, it should be added, but the discourse typical of live speech is evident in the way the entire volume is written. The mentioned criticism even extends, where appropriate, to some of Mozart's experiments and solutions⁷, which rather enhances the reliability of the analyses and the sense of responsibility behind them.

satisfying as well, although without knowing why." (Letter from Wolfgang to his father, Vienna, 28 December 1782). In *idem*, p. 336.

⁷ Quote two examples: "If we dare to place Mozart's achievements on the strict balance of objectivity, we have to say: in fact, only in *Il re pastore* (KV. 208/10), as well as in the two versions of *Non temer amato bene* (KV. 409, KV. 505), did he succeed in integrating this type of Baroque aria into his Classical style, at his own level." In Francisc László, "Postbarocul Mozart în oglinda ariilor sale cu un instrument obligat" ["The post-Baroque Mozart in the mirror of his arias with obbligato instrument"], *op. cit.* p. 40; regarding the Rondo for Piano and Orchestra in D major (KV. 382, 1781), he writes: "For all the genuine beauty of the work, this combination of rondo form with theme and variations must be considered an artistic experiment without a

As for the relevance of his original vocation as a chamber music teacher, this probably determined not only his lifelong commitment to Mozart, but also, in conjunction with his research, drew his attention to a perspective that is not always obvious even to those concerned with studying different styles of performance. This field, which he called the “second idiom”⁸, approaches the act of performance more from the perspective of sonority (the sounding apparatus). Delving deeper into this question is important not only for the pursuit of authentic performance (in this sense, it is reminiscent of the main objectives of the Early Music Revival movement), but also for understanding the role played by a particular musician, orchestra or venue in the creation of a piece, in outlining its interpretative particularities. This idea is a leitmotif that runs through many of his writings mainly on genres or species that involve soloists.⁹

As we have already hinted at, László’s Mozart-volume, including the order of the studies, is guided by a genre-centred historical approach. He develops this starting point in his opening essay along the three major genres that Mozart mastered with equal skill: sacred, dramatic and chamber music (i.e. instrumental music in the broader sense). Although László devotes much more attention to chamber music, there are numerous textual micro-analyses of the vocal music which reveal his interest in the full oeuvre, and a thorough structural knowledge which goes beyond his ordinary practice as a chamber music teacher.

Such a distinct view of these genres and species is justified by the different temporal affiliations of the associated style elements. Thus, we read, Mozart’s church music remained essentially Baroque (as did most of his contemporaries), in dramatic music he was “born” also a Baroque composer but became a Classical one, while in

future.” In „*Rondo, rondò, rondeau, rondeaux și rondeaouix* la Mozart” [“Mozart’s *rondo, rondò, rondeau, rondeaux and rondeaouix*”], *idem*, p. 119.

⁸ „Creația lui Mozart sub semnul idiomaticei” [“Mozart’s oeuvre under the sign of the idiomatic”].

⁹ For example (in addition to the already cited study concerning the post-Baroque arias with obligato accompaniment): „Aria de concert în creația lui Mozart” [“Concert Aria in Mozart’s Work”] or „Cadența la Mozart. Ipostaze, cazuri, crize” [“Mozart Cadenza. Hypostases, cases, crises”].

chamber music he was Classical from the outset. Moreover, as shown in the last study¹⁰ of the *Analytica* chapter, this was the terrain for the “pan-chromatic” experiments¹¹ which, if not in terms of style, in their abstract structural aspects point all the way to 20th century atonality¹².

László’s argument in favour of a genre-oriented and in-depth musical approach is very aptly expressed in his paper on the Mozartian rondo¹³, its title contains five of the misleadingly diverse variations on the musical form, and its last section is comically labelled “Rondieaux”. In other words, it is not the title but the genre, the place and role in the work that is primary, which gives rise to a number of more or less unique formal solutions, whether or not they are called rondo. Because of its importance, his statement expressed in the introductory part of the study is worth quoting at length as a basic premise:

The theory of forms is a relatively convenient science, because it operates with a single grid of criteria, which concerns what might be called the materiality of musical creations. The concept of musical form includes the interactive relationship between the whole of musical structures and their component parts, but not the aesthetic purpose of musical creations. After the advent of form theory, the interest of theorists in musical genres declined fatally. The new discipline became the modern, effective science, while the old one was forgotten before it was perfected, even though a profound knowledge of the classical masterpieces and styles requires [...] a thorough knowledge of the genres.¹⁴

¹⁰ „Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart ca »dodecafonist«”? [“Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart as a *dodecaphonist*”?]

¹¹ The analyses focus on the second movement (*Larghetto*) of the *E-flat major quintet* (KV 452) and a passage from the final movement (*Allegro assai*) of the *Symphony in G minor* (KV 550).

¹² Even with the quotation and question marks, the idea of dodecaphony (instead of the more appropriate concept of atonality) seems to be a kind of journalistic exaggeration, which the author was obviously aware of. The title „Secretul Rondoului *Alla Turca* de Mozart” [“The Secret of Mozart’s Rondo *Alla Turca*”] was conceived in a similar spirit, with the word *secret* now out of quotation marks.

¹³ See footnote 7.

¹⁴ Francisc László, op. cit. p. 107

And indeed, even if the so-called *Formenlehre* reasonably seek regularity, as do some other systematic fields of musicology, they are constrained to some extent to renounce particularity, which is considered exceptionally, at best. It is in this spirit that stylistic stereotypes are used to summarise the different periods of music history, but even with reasonably coherent oeuvres such as Mozart's this is not always appropriate.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that Francisc László's focus is mostly on topics that tend to defy generalisations, perhaps because they are less researched or known, but in return they offer historical and analytical delights. These include, for example, the melologue¹⁵, the aforementioned concert aria, the historical evaluation of the Mozartian cadenza, the critique of superficial statements made about some of the rondos, the lack of sonata form in the "Alla Turca", or the more or less unconventional solutions Mozart applies to sonata form. In our view, the aim here was not to exploit scientific niches, but rather to demonstrate that the historical-genre approach is a valid and meaningful position, moreover, it is well suited to the composer's extraordinary adaptability. This is not to dispute the overall stylistic unity of this output – even when diving deeper into unusual instances, László constantly contextualises, convincingly reminding us of the principle "the exception proves the rule". Therefore, the reader may feel that, despite or through the specific threads of thought, they are getting an almost complete overview of Mozart's oeuvre, at least of its essential points of reference. (In terms of genre and significance, perhaps only his symphonic work is somewhat eclipsed.)

For connoisseurs, particularly fascinating genesis aspects are discussed in the development of the Mozartian piano trio¹⁶, the specific formal design of the KV. 301 (293a) violin-piano sonata¹⁷, as

¹⁵ „Melologul, o specie a muzicii dramatice la Mozart” [“Melologue, a species of dramatic music in Mozart”].

¹⁶ „Geneza trioului cu pian la Mozart” [“The genesis of Piano Trio in Mozart”].

¹⁷ „Cercetări cu privire la cel de al doilea Opus 1, nr. 1 de Mozart” [„Research on Mozart's Second Opus 1, No. 1”] and „Contribuții la studiul formei de sonată la Mozart. Un model de temă principală în partea I a Sonatei op. 1, nr. 1, KV 301 (293a), în sol major, pentru vioară și pian de Mozart”

well as the problem of the sonata-type articulated in two movements¹⁸ or the question of subdominant main themes¹⁹. Here, the convincing morphological and syntactical analyses, along with correlated observations on harmony, tonal design, facture, tempo, dynamics, articulation and so on demonstrate retroactively the solid foundations behind the ideas expressed in the first part of the volume.

The shorter, but equally important “Historica” section sketches the domestic history of Mozart’s reception in the light of concert life, literary and artistic reflections, and current pan-European attitudes. This descriptive musicological area, based on data processing and summarising, played an equally important role in Ferenc László’s interests. Despite the relative rawness of the sources, he did his best to give the reader a comprehensive picture of the subject, and even promised to continue the work, a promise he would have surely kept were it not for his unfortunate passing. One point is worth highlighting: after Enescu, Mozart’s music is the most popular and appreciated in Romania. The festivals honouring the two composers are the largest of their kind in the country, and it is a credit to the achievements of the Romanian Mozart Society that this remains the case considering that they differ considerably in terms of financial support.

The final text, a conference report, somewhat echoes the earlier studies’ colloquial spirit. It points to the unsurprising sociological reality that Mozart’s music has the power to cross political boundaries and to create a far more rapid cultural catch-up that can be achieved by economic or political means. While two of his most esteemed contemporaries, Haydn and Beethoven, provided the anthems of the future Germany and the European Union respectively, as symbols of

[“Contributions to the study of sonata form in Mozart. A model for the main theme in Part I of Mozart’s Violin Sonata in G Major Op. 1, No. 1, KV. 301 (293a)”].

¹⁸ „Contribuții la studiul formei de sonată. Forma de sonată »în două mișcări« la Mozart” [“Contributions to the study of sonata form. The *two-movement* sonata form in Mozart”].

¹⁹ „Teme principale de subdominantă în reprizele lui Mozart. Trei schițe de analiză” [“Subdominant main themes in Mozart’s recapitulations. Three analytical sketches”].

unity, Mozart has had the equal honour of making – with no less consistency – not only the Classical style, but Classical music in general, truly attractive, widely popular and appealing for large audiences. Francisc László, in his own turn, followed this example with his entire career, as demonstrated by this excellent volume and the many other publications listed in the modestly titled *Addenda*.

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