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Dissidence, Neo-avant-garde, Doublespeak. On the Context of the New Music Studio Budapest in the 1970s*

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In my study, I would like to explore the role played by the Budapest New Music Studio, Hungary's first experimental music workshop, in three different layers of public life: in politics, in the neo-avant-garde scene, and in the context of music life. The New Music Studio was founded by three young composers, Zoltán Jeney, László Sáy and László Vidovszky in 1970, primarily with the aim of playing the most important works of the international contemporary music repertoire, especially American experimental music, which has not been present in the official concert life at that time. The workshop character of their work can be grasped on two different levels: on the one hand, with the help of some interested young musicians, they expanded the knowledge about the repertoire and the performance practice, and on the other hand, the workshop provided them with a practicing field for their own experimental compositions. In my paper I try to investigate in the first place how the New Music Studio reacted in the seventies to the democratic opposition and to the "progressive intellectuals", a category which included not only members of the democratic opposition but Hungarian experimental artists,

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that is, representatives of the neo-avant-garde movements as well. Besides, I wish to elucidate the changes of the peripherally defined position of this group of artists, that is, the characteristic features of the presence and embeddedness of the New Music Studio into official musical life.

THE PLACE OF THE NEW MUSIC STUDIO IN THE DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION

In her short monograph on Zoltán Jeney, Tünde Szitha summed up the political views of the members of the New Music Studio in the Kádár era and their relationship to power in no more than a footnote:

It shows the contradictory nature of the intellectual life of the time that the work of the New Music Studio was backed by an artistic ensemble maintained by a political organization, although none of its members preserved their membership in the Communist Youth Organization on completion of their studies. Personally, they all identified themselves with the views of the democratic opposition; consequently, their regular audience consisted for the greater part of progressively thinking intellectuals. It is still stranger that they repeatedly found protection against political and professional attacks owing to the fact that they were active within the framework of an institution established by the Communist Youth Organization. (Szitha 2002: 7)

Documents on the identification of the members of the New Music Studio with the views of the democratic opposition are bewilderingly scarce. It is known that in 1979 Zoltán Jeney signed an open letter to János Kádár condemning – in the aftermath of the Charter 77 – the imprisonment of Václav Havel and his companions (see Csizmadia 1995: 83, 87). The absence of other musicians in the documents of the democratic opposition is conspicuous indeed. This phenomenon may have at least two reasons. It is obvious that professional musicians did not participate in the work of the democratic opposition directed for the greater part by philosophers, economists, and sociologists. What I feel more important is, however, that the historical treatment of the period so far – whether the work of literary, film, or art historians – left music out of consideration. In 2005, a volume dealing with art in the Kádár era omitted serious music altogether (see Tordai 2005; Szőnyi 2005). This was despite the fact that music was a key factor in the international reception of Hungarian culture.

According to Ervin Csizmadia's monograph, Hungarian democratic opposition developed from basically similar communal structures as the New Music Studio. Csizmadia's monograph describes how the opposition youth gathered in literary and debating societies as well as scientific students' associations and formed groups there in the sixties. It implies that they established their circles of friends and intellectual communities under similar institutional frames as the composition circle at the Academy of Music was (Csizmadia 1995: 44), in which the three student composers participated and where Jeney was president for four years.¹ These students' associations became the members' chosen communities after 1968. It went together with establishing a common behavioral culture – an alternative lifestyle (Csizmadia 1995: 16, 44-45) – much similar to the case of the members of the New Music Studio. According to Csizmadia's interpretation, the reason why a certain part of the representatives of this generation could not be integrated into the power structure was that they proved unwilling to be integrated. From 1973 to 1976 they consciously chose marginalization driven by group defiance and an inclination to resistance (Csizmadia 1995: 66).

The three years between 1973 and 1976, that is, the period of marginalization, coincide with the heroic age of the New Music Studio, when the three young composers broke deliberately with traditional musical life. Nevertheless, while members of the democratic opposition decided for united action and open resistance by signing Charter 77 (Csizmadia 1995: 66), the New Music Studio tried to break gradually free of this peripheral position – with considerable success, as we are going to see.

THE NEO-AVANT-GARDE MOVEMENTS AND THE NEW MUSIC STUDIO

Magdolna Jákfalvi's essay on the period's theatre history demonstrates how the dramatic arts of the sixties and their critical reception were based on doublespeak, that is, on the fact that the real message of a work should be transmitted through its stage representation and not by the concrete words. In this way a meaning to be understood by the initiated alone should also come through in addition to the official meaning (Jákfalvi 2005: 95). The alternative theatre of the seventies turned, however, against this practice, based on the principle that all symbolic interpretations must be rejected; art transmitted its message directly (Jákfalvi 2005: 104). The only difference between the representatives of the alternative theatre was whether parallel

¹ Zoltán Jeney's data: e-mail to the author of the study (March 10th, 2013).

with the direct, straightforward manner of speech one should turn his back to politics, or just the contrary, one should produce a political art in every respect (Jákfalvi 2005: 99).

It will be seen later to what extent, in what kind of manifestations and media of creative utterance the New Music Studio refused doublespeak and also what the presence in the official musical life and hence engagement in politics meant to them. For the moment, it seems more important to clarify that the neo-avant-garde art of the seventies in Hungary developed not only by refusing politics and doublespeak but included a basically new interpretation into the discourse on arts putting experimentation into the centre. As art historian László Beke put it: a work is nothing else but “the documentation of an idea” (Jákfalvi 2005: 99). It is evident that Zoltán Jeney’s and László Vidovszky’s oeuvre show several examples of this creative approach. The pieces which, in addition to certain instructions, present the basic material of the work to be performed, follow “the documentation of an idea” principle. This is why András Wilhelm writes of Jeney’s compositions of the seventies: “the music fixes the scope for action provided by the composer”, that is the “compositional minimum” (Wilhelm 1996: 8).

These conceptualist works in the musical sense of the word are closely connected with Dóra Maurer’s *Creativity Exercises* carried on in the Béla Balázs Studio (from 1975 to 1977). It is all the more justified to mention Dóra Maurer’s name in this context as the spreading of conceptualism went together with the appearance of interdisciplinarity and intermediality. The oeuvre of Jeney and Vidovszky shows several examples of them. Both of them experimented with films in the Béla Balázs Studio: in Jeney’s case it was *Round* in 1975, processing of an earlier chamber composition, as well as *Kalah* produced conjointly with Dóra Maurer in 1981. Vidovszky produced *Aldrin* in black and white with Gábor Bódy as director of photography in 1976. For that matter, audiovisual works make up a separate group in Vidovszky’s catalogue of works (Szitha 2006: 32; Vidovszky and Weber 1997: 146-148). Intermediality left such a deep impression on the composers’ career that on the evidence of data on Artpool portal Jeney even delivered a lecture on film on May 20th, 1976 based perhaps on the experiences gained in making *Round*.² According to the same portal not only the film but also fine arts were associated with musical experimentation: in February 1979 Katalin Keserű organized an exhibition from the scores of the composers of the New Music Studio.

² See <http://artpool.hu/kontextus/kronologia/1976.html>, accessed on April 1st, 2013.

THE INTEGRATION OF THE NEW MUSIC STUDIO INTO MUSICAL LIFE

A survey of the chronology of the seventies on the portal Artpool shows how naturally the work of the New Music Studio fitted into the neo-avant-garde movement at the beginning. Writing about the New Music Studio, the musicologist György Kroó, member of another, older generation, characterized the typical features of this new avant-garde fairly precisely: the acceptance of the non-professional status and the rejection of cultivation and traditional professionalism (see Kroó 1975). Yet the New Music Studio defined itself as a professional ensemble: it had appeared in the Small Hall of the Academy of Music from 1977 onwards and their works were performed within the official program of Music of Our Time on October 8th, 1978.³ These events raised the group clearly from its semi-marginal position. As a matter of fact, the members of the New Music Studio were in all probability reluctant to live an artist's underground way of life but wished to take part in the official musical life. What is more, musical life did not marginalize them at all, despite debates about the New Music Studio in which they were reproached with disregarding the professional compromise reached in the sixties by the composers born in the thirties, with the denial of tradition, self-enforcement, and the relativization of the performer's role.

Moreover, the Communist Youth Organization supported the new progressive generation – and not only the New Music Studio – indeed, which can be documented by issues of its weekly paper *Moving World* printed between 1973 and 1980. In 1979 it published an interview with three members of the New Music Studio entitled *Young Radicals* as a token of propagating the new generation's art. It described the group's work of spreading contemporary music and the rise of a "novel-minded" audience receptive to new music as a success story (Éry-Kovács 1982). This interview – centered on an audience receptive to new music – makes evident that the reason for breaking with the older generation of composers born in the thirties must primarily have been the demand for asserting themselves and occupying territories on the Hungarian new musical market, that is, the desire to create their own public on the one hand, and to stop the exclusive representation of the genuine avant-garde, on the other, and not the fact that the two generations interpreted the concept of avant-garde differently.

³ See <http://artpool.hu/kontextus/kronologia/1978.html>, accessed on April 1st, 2013.

The fact that the New Music Studio became part of the Hungarian music historical canon was due to the Stalinist music sociologist János Maróthy. The canon is namely formed by disputes about the works, not by the works themselves. The Hungarian musical life is by tradition an exceedingly paternalistic one: success is greatly determined by social networks, the activity of well-wishers and ill-wishers influencing from the background the progress of a professional's career. Although Maróthy had lost power over musical policy by then (he had been the most powerful young musical policy maker in the fifties), he was still omnipresent and influential and, what is more, as an extreme leftist he inclined with predilection towards the oppositional, alternative movements. From 1977 onwards he regularly reviewed and passed a positive judgment on the concerts of the New Music Studio. In an interview given to Mária Feuer he even defended norm transgression: "It would be advisable to follow the latest music with a more open heart and to acknowledge that one should not judge it *according to traditional norms*" (Feuer 1978: 72).

Maróthy's criticism prepared the way for the far more competent critics of the New Music Studio's generation: Katalin Komlós and Tibor Tallián were among the first to change the manner of speaking about the group (Komlós 1977; Tallián 1978: 11-13), and Sándor Kovács was the first who called Jeney's one work a masterpiece in a periodical, that is, before a relatively large public in 1980 (Kovács 1980). Owing to these long reports discussing naturally not only the composers of the group but the works presented at their concerts as well, the leading music journal *Muzsika* became a forum of crucial importance for the New Music Studio. A household statistics shows that the periodical published less appreciations of György Kurtág than of their concerts and that after 1978 even the composers born in the thirties were evidently relegated to the background in the periodical.⁴ The canon-forming discussion on this important forum was no more about the older generation, and that meant the loss of a key position in such a confined and narrow musical culture as the Hungarian one.

⁴ The column "Bemutatók krónikája" [The Chronicle of Premieres] shows it clearly: in 1978, for example, 17 works by the generation of composers born in the thirties (in a broader sense by 14-15 composers) were discussed and 16 premieres of the seven-member New Music Studio. That year only 3 compositions by Kurtág were treated in detail in the newspaper. This proportion is even more remarkable in 1980: that year critiques of 15 works by the composers born in the thirties and 15 works by members of the New Music Studio appeared and only one work by Kurtág was discussed.

In the general professional consciousness, the earlier generation represented unambiguously the “progressive” trend of the new Hungarian music up to 1975. György Kroó concluded his work treating thirty years of Hungarian composition with the question whether the young radicals’ road does not lead to isolation and the dissipation of European values, and took definitely sides with the composers born in the thirties: “[for] the vanguard of Hungarian composition art means a responsible, clear-cut, transmittable, accepted manifestation as it has always been in Europe: individual utterance and reference to the common tradition at the same time, that of yesterday and a new one growing inseparably out of it” (Kroó 1975: 203).

In the interview given to Mária Feuer in 1977 (Feuer 1978: 116), Zoltán Jeney spoke “of the strongholds of indefinable humanism” manifest in Hungarian composition referring beyond all doubt to Kroó’s attitude which was deeply ingrained in general musical consciousness and questioned its justification. The accusation that the art of the New Music Studio lacked humanism in the European sense of the word must have been a basic issue of contemporary common talk. This is why Tibor Tallián, the spokesman of the new generation, welcomed in a critique the Studio’s refusal of “the illusion of solving the situation easily” (Tallián 1978: 13).

It is evident that in his critique Tallián – just like Kroó – made use of the rhetoric means of doublespeak because “the illusion of solving the situation easily” can be understood in much the same way musically as on the level of everyday politics. Strangely enough, this tendency to doublespeak, which appears in the compositions and interviews of the composers born in the thirties and in critical reflections on works alike, can also be observed in Zoltán Jeney’s statements of the time. While he seems to have consciously striven for realizing the principle of plain talk in his music, the disputes of musical life compelled him to have recourse to the practice of doublespeak. Jeney was, of all members of the New Music Studio, namely the most eager to participate in musical disputes and to step up publicly against the stand. He did it consciously: he distanced himself from political music in his interview to Mária Feuer but argued emphatically for the imperative of music-related social action (Feuer 1978: 116). His statement conveyed the image of a responsible artist who distanced himself from music directly engaged in politics, but was committed to the current problems of society.

This image was reinforced by remarks in his statements which tried to shed light on the content of his art. Asked in 1975 what he intended to express with his works, he answered with the axiom of 20th-century modernism: “music is a means of self-fulfillment” (Feuer 1978: 32). He added,

however, that the music of the New Music Studio was “the child of today’s reality” (Feuer 1978: 32) and that in his works he wished “to make the often unbearable everyday sound of the world aesthetically liveable and hence acceptable” (Feuer 1978: 34). Jeney’s self-interpretation uses the concepts of traditional aesthetics: he defines art as the imprint of reality which is, as he understands, not without negative connotations. The composer’s task is to shape this reality adaptable and enjoyable through the creation of the work. This is not typically a neo-avant-garde creed – nor is the figure of the artist who assumes responsibility for his community – but fairly close to the ideal of “European humanism” represented by the composers born in the thirties. At the same time, it documents indisputably the embeddedness of the New Music Studio into the musical life of the seventies, into a confined and narrow musical life the inner balance of forces of which were changed by the end of the decade by the confident and self-fulfilling appearance of the Studio’s generation.

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