

Notes on the program

by Paul Flight

This evening's concert is almost entirely dedicated to the work of the great Hungarian composer Zoltán Kodály. As we shall hear, much of Kodály's music is intrinsically bound up with the beautiful folksong melodies of his native country. But before we begin our musical trip to Budapest and to Kecskemét, we must first stop off in Berlin.

This year marks the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Felix Mendelssohn, a composer whose elegant and nimble orchestral music has long been a mainstay of the world's orchestras. Much less well known are his many short choral pieces, written for use within the liturgy of the Christian church. One such piece is the *Ave Maria*, composed in 1830. This lovely work for double chorus is beautifully written and a great pleasure to sing. From the start we hear clearly Mendelssohn's gift for graceful, lyrical melody. Each phrase of the melody is sung first by the tenor soloist, and then taken up by the full choir in a kind of call and response. Mendelssohn fashions a rich contrapuntal texture over a "walking bass" in the middle section, a musical feature more commonly found in the music of the 18th century. Indeed, at this time in his life Mendelssohn was in the midst of an intensive study of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, a composer whom he revered. The music of the opening then returns as before, but this time with an added dimension. Strands of a short phrase, a setting of the words "ora pro nobis", are sung by a small group of solo voices, and are woven artfully around the main melody.

The two most famous composers of twentieth-century Hungary are surely Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók. Throughout their lives these two learned men worked intensively to preserve the folk music of their native country. While still young, they began to collect the many folksongs they had heard sung in the countryside. These folksongs are at the core of the art music of both composers. In addition, Kodály worked tirelessly to improve the musical education and musical literacy of his people. With an extraordinary instinct for pedagogy he set about developing a systematic approach to musical education in which indigenous folk music became the main source material for instruction. That method is known today as the Kodály Method, and variations of it are practiced in many countries. (In fact, an important training center for Kodály teachers is located at Holy Names University in the Oakland hills.)

Kodály composed the *Missa Brevis* in 1943 as an Organ Mass, and dedicated it to his wife. In 1944/45 he re-arranged it for performance by a mixed chorus and orchestra with organ; remarkably, the first performance took place in the cloakroom of the Budapest Opera House as the Red Army advanced on Budapest in its attempt to "liberate" the city from German control. Kodály had been among those taking shelter from the fighting, at first inside a local convent, and then within the Opera House. The true premiere of the work came after the war in 1948, at the Three Choirs Festival in Worcester (UK). As one listens to this work it becomes apparent that Kodály was never interested in the style of the musical avant-garde in the way that Bartók was. His was an aesthetic that is rooted in nineteenth-century tonality and lyricism. The *Missa Brevis* is an intensely Romantic work in which the composer's unique harmonic touches are apparent, noticeably during the haunting trio of high solo voices first heard during the "Christe eleison", and again in the "Dona nobis pacem." While there are no specific folksongs to be found within the work, a melodic style derived from Hungarian folksong can readily be perceived, as for instance at the start of the Credo. An unusual

feature of Kodály's *Missa Brevis* is the elaborate setting of the words "Ite, missa est," normally a simple chant sung by the officiating priest. Instead of priestly plainchant, however, the choir sings an elaborate version of the phrase, along with its congregational answer, "Deo gratias," providing a rousing conclusion to the work.

Kodály had an abiding love for the folksongs he collected, and his preservation and dissemination of them was perhaps his greatest gift to the Hungarian nation. In 1941 he wrote, "To write a folksong is as much beyond the bounds of possibility as to write a proverb. Just as proverbs condense centuries of popular wisdom and observation, so, in traditional songs, the emotions of centuries are immortalized in a form polished to perfection." Kodály arranged many of the folksongs he collected for unaccompanied voices, and their introduction helped to foster a resurgence of choral singing in Hungary at a time when it was at a low ebb. *Köszöntő* is a song that is sung in honor of a person on their birthday, and this evening we have chosen someone with the Hungarian name Erzsébet (Elizabeth) to be the recipient of our blessings and good wishes. The lovely setting of *Esti Dal* is one of Kodály's finest arrangements. In it, a forlorn stranger prays to God to grant him rest and respite from the weariness of his wanderings.

The very exciting set of Folk Dances from Kálló (*Kállai Kettős*) was given its premiere by the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble in 1950. It is one of Kodály's most exuberant scores, and was originally composed for chorus and an orchestra that included two cimbaloms. Like its cousin the hammered dulcimer, the strings are struck by special felted hammers that the player holds in his hands. Since classically trained cimbalom players are scarce in the Bay Area, this evening we will perform a special chamber version for violin, two clarinets, cello, piano, and chorus.