

Theses of DLA doctoral dissertation

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The oboe and its means of expression in the works
of J. S. Bach

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I. Research background

After having chosen the topic of my dissertation, I faced the fact that the relevant literature has either not been translated into Hungarian or is incomplete. The books and studies published earlier, about 1970, are either novelistic biographies (Emil Lichtenberg, Dénes Bartha, Bence Szabolcsi, Marianne Pándy) or have some kind of a romantic approach, analyzing works based on an idealistic preconception. In this tendency, Nicolaus Harnoncourt's book of studies, *Baroque Music Today: Music As Speech*, published in 1989 in Hungarian made a breakthrough, but this was more of an indication for a paradigm shift. It did not offer - since it was not its intention - systematic, comprehensive information on Bach's oboe repertoire. Prior to this and ever since, Alfred Dürr's *The cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach* (1982) can be considered as a comprehensive work of high philological standard written on the topic. In addition to the above, there are great articles by Hungarian musicians - such as Gergely Fazekas, Judit Péteri, Salamon Kamp and others - which are difficult to access. Unfortunately, I did not find any writings that would examine the works of Bach from the oboe's point of view.

The situation of books, studies and articles in foreign languages, however, is different. The critical notes in the *Bach-Gesellschaft Ausgabe* and the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* (the old and new Bach-editions), the program notes belonging to Nicolaus Harnoncourt's Bach recordings written by Harnoncourt himself, major books and articles

by Christoph Wolff, Robert L Marshall have not yet been translated into Hungarian. These already contain more specific information on Bach's use of the oboe.

Working on my dissertation, Bruce Haynes' significant work *The Eloquent Oboe* has been of great help to me along with *The Oboe* written by Geoffrey Burgess and Bruce Haynes. These do not only discuss the history of the oboe in Baroque and pre-Baroque periods in an extremely meticulous way, but they also deal with Bach's use of the instrument. In addition, they quote from contemporary writings some of which were previously unknown to me, and drew my attention to further important sources.

II. Sources

I have read a good part of relevant quotations in the books of Haynes and Haynes & Burgess in original and checked thoroughly some of the major sources mentioned in the bibliographies of these two works. Affected by them, I had an even closer look at Quantz's *Versuch*, paying special attention to those sections where the oboe is mentioned. In the course of my online research I found a doctoral dissertation that is even closer to my subject, John William Denton's paper on the church cantatas of Johann Sebastian

Bach. Here, too, I have found data, examples and approaches that I could use in my writing.

The DLA-dissertation of Csaba Nagy which presents a rhetorical approach towards Telemann's solo cantatas directed my attention to the importance of the relationship between rhetorics and music in the Baroque. As a result I studied further works such as Bartel's *Musica Poetica* and all relevant articles in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*.

The already mentioned books by Haynes, together with his *History of Performing Pitch: The Story of 'A'* drew the attention to the changes of 'A' and the importance of local and historical differences in Bach's oboe music, since these can have a direct effect on the sound and use of instrument, possible transpositions and through these on the expression. Thus I devoted a whole chapter to this subject in my paper.

I was in a fortunate position with regard to the musical examples: the volumes of *Bach-Gesellschaft Ausgabe* and quite a few manuscripts have recently become available online, which I could use without having to worry about copyright barriers.

III. Research methodology

My method after I have reviewed the literature was the following: having processed the relevant chapters in Haynes' and Haynes & Burgess' books, I used their data, different ways and aspects to rediscover contemporary documents, works that deal with the use of the oboe and all literature related to Bach in general. When it was possible, I compared these to each other, defined the quotations to be used, then I collected more information the slowly developing structure of my paper needed. During the research, new aspects have become more important compared to my original plan, their discussion at first glance might be disproportionately large – chapters dealing with the early history of the oboe, the instruments characteristics and possibilities and Bach's use of it – while analysis was carried out in a relatively small part of the thesis. The reason of this is that analysing a single cantata can be a relatively representative example of the approach I consider important; less detailed, superficial discussion of history and context, however, would not provide a sufficient basis for a convincing demonstration of these aspects.

IV. Outcome of the research

The important aspects and requirements mentioned above were the following: a factual summary of the instrument's development, discovering its characteristics in Bach's time, Bach's view on the oboe and its means of expression compared to his contemporaries, putting oboe parts of his works into contemporary context, examining the uniqueness in Bach's oboe music, emphasizing the rhetorical approach and comparing the oboe parts to the texts used in vocal compositions.

These aspects are even more important if we have a closer look at traditional approaches and opinions on the tone of the oboe according to which it should be 'beautiful', 'flexible', 'expressive', 'melting' and should fit easily into the instrumental and vocal parts. This is a rather general approach and does not take into consideration the aesthetics of the Baroque and Bach's music. The same applies to the analysis and evaluation of works involving oboe: most of them mention the qualities 'beautiful', 'melting' and 'flexible' when talking about the tone of the oboe, but do not discuss the specific means of expression defined by contemporary aesthetics. They ignore the relationship with the text in vocal movements, its effect on articulation, the consequences of possible variations and transpositions, and rhetorical references, as well.

Most works discussing oboe parts forget to address the acoustic conditions of Bach's performances, the sound

ratios, contemporary characteristics and proportions of the oboe's and other contributing instruments' possibilities. I hope that my attempt to elaborate on the mentioned aspects in a detailed and convincing way was successful, and that I was able to show their inseparable unity and relation to each other, based on the latest research, documents and experiences. My aim was to do this in the spirit of current Western attitudes, by examining the sources in their historical context and not from a later, romantic, generalizing point of view.

V. Documentation of the activity related to the subject of the dissertation

A major part of my professional activities related to the subject of the dissertation - besides recording some of J. S. Bach's works - was performing his oratorical repertoire over many decades, and having concerts either as a soloist or with chamber music ensembles.

Participation in Bach's oratorical works, including arias with solo oboe, as a member of the following orchestras:

1977-1992	Hungarian State Symphony Orchestra
1992-1996	Budapest Festival Orchestra
1995 -	Franz Liszt Chamber Orchestra
1996 -	Concerto Budapest Symphonic Orchestra

Recordings of J. S. Bach's works:

Brandenburg Concertos No. 1 and 2 (Franz Liszt Chamber Orchestra, SLPD 12618-19)

Orchestral Suites No. 1, 3 and 4 (Franz Liszt Chamber Orchestra, HCD 31018)

Double Concerto in D Minor for Oboe and Violin (Franz Liszt Chamber Orchestra)

Concerto in A Major for Oboe d'amore (Franz Liszt Chamber Orchestra)