

# The Speeds the Thing: Fast and Furious Choral Music from Hungary

Choral conductors spend a large amount of time searching for the perfect piece to fit their choir. For many, the most challenging part of selecting repertoire is finding up-tempo choral literature. Slow works abound in our profession but fast-moving contrapuntal lines are hard to locate. Many composers seem to prefer delegating the burden of rhythmic drive and momentum to the piano or other accompanying instrument. Outstanding unaccompanied works with a fast tempo are particularly difficult to find.

In the rehearsal room, we find that faster music is harder to master and it requires more repetitions to achieve excellence. Chorus members tend to learn faster music more slowly; they seem to understand harmonic language more quickly than counterpoint. For the conductor, the process of committing to a faster work is a bit of a risk and the payoff must be worth the effort required. We must make sure that the music we select is outstanding in quality and accessible to our choirs in the amount of time we have to learn it.

In an effort to assist the discovery of exceptional music of a faster tempo, this article presents five outstanding works drawn from the choral music of Hungary. The composers represent several generations and all are craftsmen of the highest quality.

## Jozsef Karai

Jozsef Karai was born in 1927 and studied in Budapest and Pécs between 1935 and 1946. In the years between 1947 and 1954 he studied composition with János Viski and Ferenc Farkas and conducting with János Ferencsik, András Kórodi and László

Somogyi at the Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music. A popular choral conductor, he directed several choruses in Budapest and has composed a large body of choral music since 1969.<sup>1</sup>

Karai's *Alleluja* (EMC 198163) is one of the composer's best known choral works. It looks to be a work that the composer struggled with for a time because it bears this note on the music: "On the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, 1981, after the unsuccessful attempt . . . . Revised in 1989." The Karai *Alleluia* is an exciting piece of choral music and an excellent opening work or transition out of a slower piece of music. It begins with a chanted line (Figure 1) from a tenor soloist and then moves into a spirited entrance from each voice part.

**Figure 1. Karai, "Alleluia", m. 1**



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The opening chant is an important part of structure of the work; it is the basis for all of his counterpoint as he weaves the line throughout each voice. (See Figure 2 for a variation of the chant used in the opening part of the piece)

**Figure 2. Karai, "Alleluia", m. 3-5**

Al - le - lu - ja. Al - le - lu - ja, al - lu - ja, al - le - lu - ja.

ja, al - le - lu - ja, al - le - lu - ja. Al - le - lu - ja, al - le - lu - ja.

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Although primarily in C Major, the piece temporarily passes through other key relationships that are easy to understand and sing. He arrives at each cadence logically and easily. The different cadences are similar to each other and they give unity to the work. In Figure 3, note how the composer uses a variation of the chant line in the soprano/alto part to arrive at a significant cadence in m. 49.

**Figure 3. Karai, “Allelua”, m. 47-49**

47 sost.

- le - lu - ja, al - le - lu - ja, al - le - lu - ja. Al - le - lu - ja,  
 - le - lu - ja, al - le - lu - ja, al - le - lu - ja. Al - le - lu - ja,  
 Al - le - lu - ja,  
 - lu - ja, al - le - lu - ja. Al - le - lu - ja,

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Karai's *Alleluia* is a masterpiece of economy and excitement. Other works to explore by the composer include the fast moving *Hodie Christus, natus est* for SSAA (Akkord Music, AKKOR00004) and *De profundis* for mixed choir (EMB 2452).

### **Sándor Szokolay**

Sándor Szokolay is a Hungarian composer born in 1931. A student of Ferenc Szabo and Ferenc Farkas, Szokolay is an award-winning composer of instrumental, vocal, and choral

music.<sup>2</sup> One of his best known choral works is *Duo motetti*, op. 22 (EMB Z 8374). This work premiered in the 1962 International Choral Competition in Arezzo and features two movements drawn from biblical sources: i. *Domine non secundum* and ii. *Cantate Domino*.

The second movement, *Cantate Domino*, can be effectively used as an opening work for the conductor interested in a fast and dramatic beginning to a concert. It starts with dual-glissando like entrances in the women's and men's voices. (Figure 4)

**Figure 4. Szokolay, "Cantate Domino," m. 1-3**

The image shows a musical score for the first three measures of the piece "Cantate Domino" by Szokolay. The score is written for a mixed choir and piano accompaniment. It begins with the tempo marking "Allegro". The music is in 3/4 time and the key signature has one flat (B-flat). The vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and the piano part all feature a dramatic, dual-glissando-like entrance in the first measure, marked with a fermata and a "5" indicating a quintuplet. The lyrics "Can - ta - te Do - mi - no" are written below the vocal staves. The piano accompaniment consists of chords and moving lines that support the vocal entries.

Szokolay's music is very theatrical and filled with accented entrances, rhythmic drive and glorious dissonance. The composer's skillful use of repetition keeps the musical material organized and cohesive; the opening flourish that captures the listener in the opening moments of the work appears soon after the beginning and both parts are sung again in a Da Capo.

Szokolay uses high range notes and stretto entrances to build the first climax of the work. (Figure 5).

The image shows a musical score for Szokolay's "Cantate Domino" (m. 22-25). The score is in G major and 2/4 time. It features five vocal staves and a bass line. The lyrics are "Can - ta - te Do - mi - no, Do - mi - no! Do - mi - no!". The music is characterized by high notes, accented entrances, and rhythmic drive. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf* and *f*, and articulation marks like accents and slurs. The tempo is marked with a quarter note equal to 120 beats per minute.

**Figure 5. Szokolay, "Cantate Domino," m. 22-25**

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From there, Szokolay continues to employ contrast as a chief part of the composition. Women are set against men and harmonic sections are set against rhythmic flourishes. The rhythmic passages culminate in another dramatic climax that finds relief in a more homophonic section.

After a repeat of the beginning section of music, the piece ends in a dramatic clash between D flat Major and C Major chords (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Szokolay, "Cantate Domino," m. 95-96

Maestoso  
(molto sostenuto) 19

Or - bis ter - ra - rum

Or - bis ter - ra - rum

Or - bis ter - ra - rum

Or - bis ter - ra - rum

Or - bis ter - ra - rum

Or - bis ter - ra - rum

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**György Orbán**





sense fails to perceive this . . . ) (see Figure 8)

Figure 8. Orban, "Pange lingua," m. 77-80

fit-que san-guis Chri-sti me-rum: et si sen-sus de-fi-cit.  
fit-que san-guis Chri-sti me-rum: et si sen-sus... Pan.  
fit-que san-guis Chri-sti me-rum: et si sen-sus... Pan.  
fit-que san-guis Chri-sti me-rum: et si sen-sus de-fi-cit.

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Following a dramatic climax, the composer ends the work by repeating the text 'sola fides sufficit' in each voice for seven measures. His goal seems to be to wind down the dramatic energy of the text and music with a meditation on a message of hope. To end the piece, he inserts a short reappearance of the sixteenth-note figure whispering the words 'pange lingua.'

György Orbán's *Pange lingua* is a rhythmically challenging work and well worth the effort. Hinshaw Publishing is making it available in the United States in January 2013. Other notable works include his *Salve Regina* (HMC1498) and *Orpheus With His Lute* (Lanthur Ha Szol) (HMC1766).

### **Levente Gyöngyösi**

Levente Gyöngyösi was born in 1975 in Cluj Napoka, Romania and moved to Hungary in 1989 where he was a student in the Béla Bartók Secondary Music School. Gyöngyösi calls himself a Romania-born Hungarian composer. A student of György Orbán, Gyöngyösi is quickly gaining a reputation as an outstanding

choral composer. He has served as served on the theory music faculty of the Academy of Music since 2002

Gyöngyösi's *Domine Deus meus* is dedicated to André van der Merwe and the Stellenbosch University Choir. It is marked *vivace furioso* and it is a brilliant assault on the listener in terms of tempo, rhythmic energy, and dissonance. It begins with a fanfare-like b-minor chord of open fifths in the upper range and then repeats the fanfare and extends it into an exploration of dissonant chords. (see Figure 9)

Figure 9. Gyöngyösi, "Domine Deus meus," m. 1-4

Vivace furioso  $\text{♩} = 108$

Do - mi - ne! Do - mi - ne De - us me - us!

Do - mi - ne! Do - mi - ne De - us me - us!

Do - mi - ne! Do - mi - ne De - us me - us!

Do - mi - ne! Do - mi - ne De - us me - us!

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Similar to Orban, Gyöngyösi employs the technique of driving rhythmic patterns as accompaniment to longer melodic lines. He repeats the first syllable of the word 'domine' to add to the rhythmic drive of the piece. The melodic lines build with harmonic interest and dissonance. (see Figure 10)

Figure 10. Gyöngyösi, "Domine Deus meus," m. 29-31

ta - tem; et la - cum a - pe - ru-it et ef-  
 - ta - tem; et la - cum a - pe - ru-it et ef-  
 Do-do-do - do-mi- ne, Do-do-do - do-mi- ne, Do-do-do-  
 Do-do-do-do-mi- ne, Do-do-do-do-mi- ne, Do-do-do-do-mi- ne,

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Gyöngyösi brings relief to the dramatic tension in two ways. First, he occasionally drops rhythmic and harmonic motion to sustain on a single note (Figure 11):

Figure 11. Gyöngyösi, “Domine Deus meus,” m. 40-44

do-mi- ne, Do-do-do - do-mi- ne, Do-do-do - do-mi- ne!  
 Do-do-do-do-mi- ne, Do-do-do-do - mi- ne, Do-mi- ne! Do -  
 do-mi- ne, Do-do-do - do-mi- ne, do-do-do - do-mi- ne! Do -  
 Do-do-do-do-mi- ne, Do-do-do-do-do-do-do - do-mi- ne!

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Gyöngyösi also supplies a short homophonic section in the middle of the work (see Figure 11)

Figure 11. Gyöngyösi, “Domine Deus meus,” m. 100-108

Sostenuto  $\text{♩} = 92$  quasi a tempo, qui

100 *ppp intimo* *mf* *p aperto*  
 to - rium me - um a - pud De - um, qui  
*ppp intimo* *mf* *p aperto*  
 Ad - iu - to - rium a - pud De - um, con - fi -  
*ppp intimo* *mf* *p aperto*  
 Ad - iu - to - rium a - pud De - um, con - fi - te - bor  
*ppp intimo* *mf* *p*  
 Ad - iu - to - rium a - pud De - um,

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Gyöngyösi is certainly a composer to watch as his works increase. His *Gloria Kajoniensis* was recently awarded 1<sup>st</sup> Prize by the Jury of the European Award for Choral Composers. Other notable works include his *Puer natus in Bethlehem*, also dedicated to André van der Merwe and the Stellenbosch University Choir.

## **Peter Tóth**

Like Gyöngyösi, Peter Tóth is one of the newest generation of composers from Hungary. Born in 1965, he currently serves as Associate Professor and department head of the music department at the University of Szeged. He founded Café Momuszk in 1998, an online magazine dedicated to the classical music of Hungary. In 2009, he founded Kontrapunkt Music Publishing, a company with the stated goal of fostering the publishing and performing of Hungarian choral works.

Tóth's *Magnus, maior, maximus* for women's choir (SSAA) is a brilliant piece of fast-moving choral music. The work opens with a short two measure introductory portion and then introduces a rhythmic figure that becomes a fundamental part of the whole (see Figure 12).

Figure 12. Tóth, “Magnus, maior, maximus,” m. 3-7

Mag-nus, ma - ior, ma - xi - mus, par - vus, mi - nor, mi - ni - mus, gra - dus is - tos rep - pe - ri, per quos gra - dus com - pe - ri au - ge - ri et con - te - ri, Mag-nus, ma - ior, ma - xi - mus, par - vus, mi - nor, mi - ni - mus, gra - dus is - tos rep - pe - ri, per quos gra - dus com - pe - ri au - ge - ri et con - te - ri, Mag-nus, ma - ior, ma - xi - mus, par - vus, mi - nor, mi - ni - mus, gra - dus is - tos rep - pe - ri, per quos gra - dus com - pe - ri ri et con - te - ri, Mag-nus, ma - ior, ma - xi - mus, par - vus, mi - nor, mi - ni - mus, gra - dus is - tos rep - pe - ri, per quos gra - dus com - pe - ri con - te - ri.

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Tóth’s composition resembles aspects of Orban’s *Pange lingua* and Gyöngyösi’s *Domine Deus meus* with the repeated eighth-note rhythmic pattern that is eventually contrasted with a soaring lyrical line. Tóth takes it a bit further, however, by contrasting the pulsing 7/8 rhythm with the more lyrical line appearing in a different meter (4/4). (see Figure 13)

Figure 13. Tóth, “Magnus, maior, maximus,” m. 22-25

Mag-nus, ma - ior, ma - xi - mus, par - vus mi nor mi - ni - mus: gra - dus is - tos rep - pe - ri, per quos gra - dus com - pe - ri, Mag-nus, ma - ior, ma - xi - mus, par - vus mi nor mi - ni - mus: gra - dus is - tos rep - pe - ri, per quos gra - dus com - pe - ri, Mag-nus, ma - ior, ma - xi - mus, par - vus mi nor mi - ni - mus: gra - dus is - tos rep - pe - ri, per quos gra - dus com - pe - ri, sempre *f* Mag - nus, ma - ior, ma - xi - mus, par - vus mi - nor mi - ni -

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The contrast of rhythmic and melodic elements in the work is fascinating. First, the composer takes care to firmly

establish the 7/8 rhythmic element in the first twenty-one measures of the piece with repetition and some exploration of the music in related keys. The lyrical melody makes it's first appearance in m. 22 in the lowest voice. When the lyrical element first appears, it is in the meter of 4/4 but is set against the 7/8 pattern; the resulting rhythmic dissonance is reminiscent of a person holding two different thoughts in their mind at the same time, (see Figure 13).

The composer continues to exploit this contrast for the rest of the piece, breaking up each occurrence of the lyrical-rhythmic juxtaposition by a few measures of other musical material. The lyrical line is appears again in the lowest voice (m. 29-33) and is joined by the soprano a moment later (m. 36-40) voice. The more lyrical idea is taken up by the other voices in an imitative setting in m. 43-45 and then vanishes for a moment as the more rhythmical music makes a full appearance. (see Figure 14)

**Figure 14. Tóth, "Magnus, maior, maximus," m. 44-47**

44 *mf*

Par - ve-que sunt gra - ti - e di - vi - ti cont - ra - ri - e,

gra - ti - e, di - vi - ti cont - ra - ri - e, cont - ra - ri - e,

di - vi - ti cont - ra - ri - e, par - ve - que sunt gra - ti - e, di - vi - ti cont - ra - ri - e, di - vi - ti cont ra - ri - e,

*mf*

Par - ve - que sunt gra - ti - e di - vi - ti cont - ra - ri -

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The juxtaposition occurs one more time in m. 57-64 and then the lyrical element makes a full statement of its idea (m. 69-74). There is a little ending action as the rhythmic idea makes a brief appearance and then the piece ends softly on a unison note.

*Edited by Graham Lack, Germany*

1 <http://www.dolmetsch.com/index.htm>

2 <http://info.bmc.hu/index.php?node=artists&table=SZERZO&id=94>