

PRO & CONTRA

“The world upheaval of today does not mean the beginning of the new world, just the end of the old one.”

[Lajos Kassák, *To the New Artists of the World*, 1920]

In Hungary, the most important transmitters of modern musical trends were the avant-garde artistic circles. Lajos Kassák, who had returned from exile, together with Andor Tiszay and Zsigmond Remenyik, actively promoted the new culture in the journals *Dokumentum* [Document], *Munka* [Work], *100%* and *Uj Föld* [New Land], as well as at musical and literary evenings.

Imre Weiss Haus and István Szelényi were the musical directors of the New Land Society, a partner organization of the New Music Society in California, led by Henry Cowell. In Budapest, New Land Society performances included works by the mass art proponent Iván Hevesy, and Ödön Palasovszky's new Hungarian compositions. Pál Kadosa, József Kozma, Ferenc Szabó, and István Szelényi, active participants at Green Donkey Theater, Zikk-Zakk, and Prizma Theatre events, were influenced by Dadaist and other avant-garde movements.

This cross-cultural approach to music was also supported by the journal *Crescendo*, published between 1926 and 1928, and which supported the group called Modern Hungarian Musicians who held four concerts. The group's members – with the exception of György Kósa – were also all New Land composers. Interest in American musical trends was evident at the large-scale concert organized by the New Hungarian Music Association [reformed in 1932] which, as part of a series of concerts held in Paris, Berlin, and Havana, presented the “ultra-modern” works of American and Mexican composers to great acclaim in the great hall of the Music Academy in Budapest.

From the 1930s, the Fodor Music School, already known for its contemporary educational principles, hosted many of the new musical endeavours. It was here that the country's first department of jazz was established in 1926, where Oszkár Ascher taught speech art and choral speaking, and where anyone could take part in modern music seminars.

Kassák's theory of art accepted the plurality of isms, which also influenced those composers associated with him, including Pál Kadosa and István Szelényi. Initially, they tried to develop their own style, and appreciated the isms in their writings: they viewed the primitivism of Bartók and Stravinsky as “musical Cubism,” a first step towards a renewal of musical language, while rejecting Neo-classicism. However, serious disagreements broke out over the reception of various musical trends, and by the 1930s, the experimental spirit was clearly on the wane. For example, in Kassák's journal *Dokumentum*, a defence of Neo-classicism was offered by George Antheil, who had previously been regarded as an “absolute barbarian” and “ultra-modern.” At the same time, Szelényi wrote a critical review of Antheil's 1927 Budapest concert in *Uj Föld*, and instead promoted the works of Henry Cowell.

“Musical Constructivism” was written about by, among others, György Justus and István Szelényi. The post-Bartók generation used Kassák's Constructivism as a guide to modern compositional methods, which sought the formal realisation of musical elements. Their works feature the abolition of tonal language, as well as the sporadic use of abstracted musical material, rhythm, and sound material, according to freely chosen rules. Szelényi's *Simultanphony*, which bears the traces of Cowell's influence, incorporated an aleatoric compositional method based on chance, leaving room for interpretation by the performer.

In their summary of the development of avant-garde trends, *Book of New Artists*, Lajos Kassák and László Moholy-Nagy paid equal attention to achievements in art, architecture, and technology. They experimented in new mediums and artistic forms, primarily in film, theatre technology, and performing arts. Their prognosis was that the development of science and technology would transform the arts too, whose effect could already be felt in the 1920s.

The advent of new technologies offered new mediums for artists. The cultural integration of technology also meant an examination and working through of the relationship between man and machine. The ‘mechanical’ element appeared in dance and music, which took the form of repeated sequences of movements or rhythmic patterns.

In music, the Futurist movement announced the advent of Bruitism, whose use of sounds produced by noise machines transcended the depiction of big city life. This new soundscape was intended to refine and develop human perception. Artists from across several avant-garde movements occupied themselves with experiments to combine the senses, sound and colour, or spatial and temporal elements.

The first automatic musical instrument was a mechanical piano that utilised punched tape, which allowed for the best recordable generation of musical structures with a range of tones, rhythms, and tempos that were otherwise beyond the musician’s abilities. This development of mechanical and electronic instruments preceded the emergence of electronic and concrete music after the Second World War, produced by manipulating sound recordings.

The forerunner of this genre in Hungary was Andor Tiszay who, as a theatre director and radio employee, presented collages of sound experiences [engine noises, animal sounds, street noise]. In 1927, the journal *Crescendo* reported on the sensational highlight of the Frankfurt music exhibition: the electromagnetic instruments invented by the Russian professor Leon Theremin and the German musician Jörg Mager. Among the electronic

instruments there was also a Hungarian invention, the ether piano created by the engineer Tihamér Nemes, for which a patent was registered in 1930.

The encounter between technology and art did not necessarily yield an exclusively rational, functional approach. In his manifesto *Let Us Live in our Times*, Lajos Kassák proclaimed that the new art, while “triumphant over all matter,” was also “compassionate.” The composer Pál Kadosa, who was close to Kassák, stressed that the new art stood out not for its technical ability but for its “humanity.”

LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY

Production – Reproduction

If we want to understand correctly the mode of human expression and shaping in art and in other related domains, and if we want to achieve progress therein, we have to examine the contributing factors: namely, man himself as well as the means he applies in his creative activity.

Man as construct is the synthesis of all his functional apparatuses, i. e. man will be most perfect in his own time if the functional apparatuses of which he is composed – his cells as well as the most sophisticated organs – are conscious and trained to the limit of their capacity.

Art actually performs such a training – and this is one of its most important tasks, since the whole complex of effects depends on the degree of perfection of the receptive organs – by trying to bring about the most far-reaching new contacts between the familiar and the as yet unknown optical, acoustical and other functional phenomena and by forcing the functional apparatuses to receive them. It is a specifically human characteristic that man’s functional apparatuses can never be saturated; they crave ever new impressions following each new reception. This accounts for the permanent necessity for new experiments. From this perspective, creative activities are useful only if they produce new, so far unknown relations. In other words, in specific regard to creation, reproduction [reiteration of already existing relations] can be regarded for the most part as mere virtuosity. [Detail]

In the 1920s, the programme of renewing art also extended indirectly to music. This renewal first appeared in Lajos Kassák's journal *Ma* [Today], which embraced every avant-garde trend: during his exile in Vienna, Kassák had built up a broad network of international contacts. In addition to publishing texts on music since 1916, *Ma* also held soirées in Vienna – where works by Debussy, Stravinsky and Bartók were performed – which also reinforced the Kassák circle's interest in new music.

In 1921, Kassák joined the international programme of Constructivism with his theory of Picture Architecture. It was in this context that he published works by Theo van Doesburg, Piet Mondrian, and El Lissitzky in *Ma*, as well as film stills by Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling, whose visual works were based on musical structures.

In music, as in avant-garde art and literature, a wide range of experimentation signalled the desire to move beyond modernism. Like Arnold Schönberg, the Austrian composer Josef Matthias Hauer also used tonal formations [tropes] based on untraditional twelve-tone scales, aiming to create a new Melos [a departure from melody and established tonal systems]. György Kovács, who helped distribute *Ma* in Budapest, saw possibilities in a new approach to rhythm, such as in his drum sonata for percussion instruments. Kovács also worked on Jolán Simon's performances of 'tribal poems' and Kurt Schwitters's letter poems, in which linguistic elements were deconstructed and rearranged. István Szelényi's use of speech and declamation in song also illustrated the breadth of the material and editorial possibilities offered by reinterpretations of music. Kassák's Constructivism and its slogans, such as absolute or pure art, influenced the ideas of contemporary Hungarian composers who advocated for the autonomy of art and music.

JOSEF MATTHIAS HAUER

Introduction to My 'Dodecaphony'

The emphasis of my work is my repeated performance or singing of all twelve notes of the self-contained circle of fifths and fourths of our tempered semitone scale. I perform this so that it sounds like the overtone series of the tone [the 'sound itself'], that is my own school secret, one that can be clearly discerned from my compositions by anyone who takes the trouble to examine them closely.

The paths are immensely varied; every occasion is different – it is impossible to summarize.

I do not hear or think in absolute tones, but in tropes [turns], in constellations of the twelve tones, in movements of the intervals in relation to each other – it is purely melic. From the tropes, from the melos, from the monodic line, harmonies and polyphonies arise all by themselves.

My art consists of bringing the metaphysical melos really close to the physiological ear of the musical layman [who obeys the overtone!], so that my music and must say something even to a primitive listener. Fluent playing and listening to my works is, for musical laypersons, the best path to understanding twelve-tone music.

For sensitive listeners, I would like to add that the construction of my musical works also emerges from the trope forms of the twelve tones.

Twelve-tone music [which can also be called purely atonal music] sounds the purest on well-tempered instruments; however, it is also effective [under certain conditions] in chamber music, in the orchestra, and in large choirs.

RÉKA FARKAS-KOVÁCH – ZSOMBOR TÓTH

Hidden Dimensions

supervised by Csaba Hajnóczy
sound installation, 2022

A city is made unique by its characteristic tapestry of various sounds, smells, and textures, as well as its spatial structure and architectural spectacle. Each location has a microclimate, the dimensions of which influence our image of the city. Inspired by Michael Southworth's study of the sonic environment of cities, Farkas-Kovách examines the interconnections between acoustic and visual space. Her installation uses recorded fragments of the sound environment perceived as a unified whole by the city's inhabitants to draw attention to the everyday sounds, speech fragments, and ubiquitous noise we either never notice or which disturb us, and which together produce an incidental music.

Supported by New National
Excellence Programme



PÉTER TORNyai – KRISZTIÁN KERTÉSZ

Bartók's bug collection – 20 Hungarian Folk Tunes

sung by Zsuzsa Dóry Tornyai
interactive sound installation, 2016

As well as collecting folk songs, Béla Bartók also collected and classified bugs with similar enthusiasm. While an insect collection simultaneously reveals both similarities and differences between various species, folk songs can only be studied by listening to them consecutively, or by reading the score. Péter Tornyai and Krisztián Kertész simultaneously play different 'specimens' of 'folk song species' [the new style, 'domed' compositions, in which the two middle lines are sung in higher notes, mostly in modulating fifths], highlighting the common structure of the songs.

The tempos of the folk songs run in parallel, with line-by-line synchronisation. The common tempo of the five verses varies: recordings of the folk songs are in the standard key, meeting in specific harmonies or forming a dense fabric. By carefully unfastening the 'bugs,' elements of the collection can be heard separately.

Supported by the Hungarian National History Museum,
Butterfly collection

CONTEMPORARY

ZSÓFIA NAGY

Hungarian in Colour

interactive sound installation, 2016

Zsófia Nagy's work is a playful presentation of Hungarian folk song structure based on the pentatonic scale and its relationship to universal musical heritage. Her visual presentation of the pentatonic mode follows Alexander Scriabin's colour-sound theory, in which the notes of the musical alphabet do not follow each other in successive order [the practice used by most composers]. Instead, notes are arranged in fifths according to the colours of the rainbow. The five notes, placed within an 'octave' at pure fifth intervals, form an anhemitone [without semitones] pentatonic scale. The nine paper strips produce a colour score of nine folk songs, with each colour representing a note, and the brushstrokes indicating the length.

Anyone can play the colour-scores on the coloured keyboard, producing a visual representation of the pentatonic mode. On the wall you will see, in order, folk songs from Fejér County, Somogy County, Csík County [twice], Bulgaria, Korea, indigenous North American Zuni, Nigeria, and Japan.

BÁLINT BOLCSÓ

Tangential Connections

interactive sound installation, 2017

Bálint Bolcsó explores contemporary improvisation possibilities by designing various acoustic systems and investigating the role of the audience. His sound installation consists of six compressed drink cans that trigger various sound channels when touched. By touching the cans simultaneously, new layers of music, or even transformations, are added to the original music. Exploring all the available possibilities requires the cooperation of several visitors. The more cans are touched at once, the more complex the sound stream becomes.

COLLECTIVITY

“Everything depends one hundred percent on the economical use of life energies.”

[György Justus, *The Future of Song Composition*, 1928]

Belonging to a community was a central concern of early twentieth-century art movements, which sought to solve civilisational and social problems, as well as to create the ‘new man’ capable of shaping himself and his own destiny. The social role of art was also re-evaluated, with discussions of aesthetics coming to focus on the concept of collectivism, which was contrasted with individualism and interpreted at various levels of meaning.

In working-class culture, the community practice of choral speaking and folk choirs emphasised the collective character of music and speech, and sought to break down the barriers between performer and audience. The involvement of amateurs encouraged the development of new compositional techniques, which focused on a vocal range adapted to performers’ abilities, and an educational function. However, in contrast to the Russian revolution-inspired notion of an orchestra minus conductor, Jolán Simon – who led the Printmaker and later the *Work Circle* choirs – emphasised the responsibility of the conductor for removing individual initiative and creating harmony.

István Szelényi, arguing for a collective musical content, saw the future of music in its psychoacoustic effect, which would trigger direct and shared reception.

Avant-garde artists’ interest in non-European cultures was primarily aesthetic and formal, yet the extension of artistic identity to a broader human community also played a role. The presence of ‘primitive’ workers’ songs in working-class culture and humanist reception theories drew attention to the cultural function of tribal art, while also raising the question of originality. Furthermore, the inclusion of world music in new music also led to a rethinking of musical forms and compositional methods.

SAMU GRYLLUS – ESZTER NÁDAS

Everyday Statements [on two Kassák Poems]

collective sound play installation, 2022

Gryllus’s work features reinterpretation of vocal genres and opening up of the creative process. His spoken word composition incorporates poems by Lajos Kassák, the contemplative *Hétköznapi csoda* [Everyday wonder] and the self-conscious statements of *Vallomáspár* [Pair of confessions], and is performed by members of the Hermina artists’ group. The composition builds on the community tradition of the choral speaking choir, in which poems are recited by individual voices. The video footage and community painting were inspired by the central staircase at the Kecskemét Creative House, documented by Eszter Nádas.

DÁNIEL VÁCZI

Fabula

1. Pentalog [00:50]
2. Heptalog [00:46]
3. Dodekalog [00:21]

graphic score and work written for mechanical piano, 2015

“There lives an angel, Sonifer, who weaves beads from the twelve colours of the rainbow. At twilight, she makes the row of colours using pearls collected during the day, and then repeats this through the night, stitching her chains together. When they are done, she touches a few of the pearls with her fingers: as she runs her gaze over the finished chain at dawn, they gleam, one by one.

The twelve colours are the notes of the chromatic scale. The row of colours is the reticulum. The gaze along the chain is time. The gleaming pearls are the voices singing. This is reticular music.”

Over the past few years, Dániel Váczi has developed a new, meticulously structured compositional technique based on dodecaphony [a predetermined sequence of twelve semitones], which he calls reticular music. The notes of the ‘reticular series’ are contemporaneous with the beat, so that the pitch and tempo are interlinked. A given voice can only sing at a certain place in the beat, and vice versa. Space [sound] and time [rhythm] are not independent, but mutually determined.

KRISZTINA ERDEI

Riset, Victory of the Sun

13 framed photos, 2 gif loops, video [13:00], 2020

Krisztina Erdei performed the 1913 opera *Victory over the Sun* for a flock of sheep while working as a shepherd in Turkey in 2009. The performance and installation set up a collision between two types of social experiment: the Russian avant-garde utopia of a future without a past, and a contemporary eco-village project. Through her own personal experience, Erdei explores various notions of work, utility, and purpose.

The opera was written in the spirit of passion for technology, and combined the ideas of its creators [Aleksai Kruchonykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, Mikhail Matyushin, and Kazimir Malevich] on the interconnection of space and time, the fourth dimension, and radical transformation of the political system. At the heart of the plot was the victory over the sun, which symbolised nature and the old world, paving the way for the rise of the 'new man.' Every element of the opera sought to express a cosmic vision of the future. Only fragments of Matyushin's score have remained, while a large part of the libretto was written by Kruchonykh and Khlebnikov in their own 'Zaum' language. The composers combined language 'beyond meaning' with a futurist vision of the future. By using suggestive sounds, word and sentence fragments, neologisms, and nouns with changed genders, they sought to liberate the mind from traditional thought patterns. While translating the work into Hungarian, Erdei replaced the original novel linguistic phenomena with phrases popularly used online, referred to as a digilect.

ZSÓFIA ÁDÁM

Choreographies for Bolcsó 2.

video [10:44], 2022

In 1857, Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville patented the world's first sound recording device, the phonograph, which transcribed sound waves onto a sheet of smoke-blackened paper using a needle attached to a membrane. This early process produced a graphic depiction of sound, but it was only with the development of 3D scanning techniques that allowed for playback. The idea of unidirectional sound reproduction was the starting point for Zsófia Ádám's videos. Her eight-act video work is based on the operating principle of the phonograph, whereby polystyrene beads placed upon the membrane are set in motion by the sound waves, so that the music visually represents itself. Each new sound rearranges the previously rendered scene, creating a real-time choreography of its own.

The video includes performances of Bálint Bolcsó's works *Kirchen | Bogen | Fragen | Feld* and *Words* written for magnetic tape, *Ér [Spring]* written for symphony orchestra, and his electronic work *Reality Check*.

ESZTER NÁDAS – CSANÁD KEDVES

Min [or]art

video [4:09], 2019

The idea of transitions across media first emerged in early attempts to combine visual and acoustic sensations, or to convert sound directly into images [and vice versa]. Raoul Hausmann's invention, the Optophone, records light frequencies and renders them audible through a telephone receiver, while László Moholy-Nagy created seminal sound effects by scratching images onto film negative played back over an audio projector. The artist Eszter Nádas and composer Csanád Kedves meld their children's voices and visual experiences into one by modulating the words and juxtaposing them with light phenomena. In this way, they recreate the early phases of cognition, when we relate to our environment via acoustics and visuals, in which associations flow freely.

KRISZTIÁN KERTÉSZ – ÁRON LAKATOS – JÁNOS BALI

Barrel Organ

interactive sound installation, 2022

The majority of mechanical instruments reproduce music without human intervention, as the sound-producing devices are guided by an information carrier. In the case of the barrel organ, the rotating cylinder with small metal pins or punched tape function as the 'score,' and operates the various whistles and bellows in the correct sequence. This joint work by the artist Áron Lakatos, the composer János Bali, and the physicist Krisztián Kertész, uses light sensors to rotate the graphic discs made out of paper collages. By interrupting and manipulating the movement, a constantly changing, interactive musical production is created.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ELKH BTK MI:
Eötvös Loránd Research
Network, Research
Centre for the Humanities,
Institute of Art History

ELKH BTK ZI:
Eötvös Loránd Research
Network, Research Centre
for the Humanities, Insti-
tutefor Musicology

KM: Kassák Museum

MRA MTVA: Archives,
Archives of the
Hungarian Radio

NYPL: New York
Public Library

OSZK: National
Széchényi Library

PIM: Petőfi Literary
Museum

SZM – MNG:
Museum of Fine Arts
Budapest – Hungarian
National Gallery

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– Kassák Múzeum, 2022

CONCEPTUAL MAP OF THE ARTISTIC AND MUSICAL MANIFESTOS

The manifesto is one form of public communication adapted by avant-garde artists from the political space. These texts are usually composed of two parts: a description of the cultural situation is followed by the formulation of an action and aesthetic programme. The manifestos in this exhibition have been superimposed to produce a conceptual map depicting keywords and the relationships between them, and arranged according to category. Highlights indicate terms used more than once, while the grid lines follow the conceptual structure.

CONCEPT
Judit Csatlós

DESIGN Studio-U
Orsolya Nagy – Adrienn Umlauf

TONES

NEW MUSIC IN THE HISTORICAL AVANT-GARDE

**KASSÁK
MUSEUM**

30. 09. 2022

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26. 02. 2023