

Andrea Koncz: Choirs as communities in Kecskemét



Introduction

The roots of choral singing go back to the Schola Cantorum, the institution of the Catholic Church, which was a singing school founded by Pope Sylvester I in the 4th century. Its members were representatives of artistic church singing, who initially performed musical tasks, later they completed administrative and legal tasks as well. With the spread of Christianity, this form of education became established all over Europe. In the Middle Ages, several similar institutions were established with educational purposes: they were not intended to train musicians, but to educate a new generation of the intelligentsia with a European spirit, that is, to "educate the intellectuals" (Szikszayné 2007).

From the 10th century, Hungary also became a Christian state, and church traditions took hold, in our country as well. For hundreds of years the culture of institutional choirs operated in the same form as in the times of St. Stephen. The different denominations maintained their church choirs and professional bands and singers played a prominent role in the courtyards of the wealthier strata of the society. Knowledge and cultivation of the sciences and arts, including music, belonged to the intellectual circles and the upper social class. The 19th century - as in so many other things - also brought about changes in choral communities. As a result of the urbanization that accompanied the economic transformation, the society was rearranged, new types of communities appeared and spread. Large cities were developed and, as the middle class was formed, leisure activities, self-organised movements and communities became available and also in demand for more and more people. The various societies, associations and circles carried out versatile activities: they represented interests, but they were also engaged in self-education, politics, being active in social life, philanthropy as well as to providing opportunities for leisure activities. In many cases, these organizations ran song clubs and glee clubs at all the levels of social stratification (Dobszay 1998). These choirs and singing groups were the direct predecessors of the choirs that operate today.

Song clubs, glee clubs as the antecedents of the present day choral singing

The glee club or choral society is usually a male choir that originated in England in the 18th century and became known in Hungary through German mediation. It appeared for the first time in England that a lord and his serf sang together, community membership was not based on origin and it was organized throughout the whole settlement, not just in the church. The first Hungarian glee clubs were modeled on the men's choir of the Berlin Liedertafel.

In the 1830s and 40s, a similar movement started in more and more Hungarian villages, polyphonic choirs were formed, the members of which were mainly craftsmen. These actually functioned as informal communities, friends's circles who helped each other and also went to song festivals, where they performed romantic pieces by Hungarian composers, Hungarian sword songs, folk songs and their adaptations. In the age of the awakening to national self-awareness, apart from creating communities, the purpose of singing groups was to sing in Hungarian as often as possible, thus helping to spread the language (Fazekas 2016). The revolution and war of independence of 1848 marked a turning point in the operation of choirs, the number of singing groups decreased, they could not undertake public performances or sing Hungarian songs. But the popularity and necessity of singing together is shown by the fact that the glee clubs were reestablished within a short period of time and in 1867 they were brought together by the National Hungarian Song Society under the leadership of Ferenc Erkel. At the song festival of 1868 - where there were also competitions - already sixty glee clubs were represented, with more than 1,000 choir members (Fazekas 2017).

The beginnings of choir life in Kecskemét

In the above outlined period, in 1864, the Glee club of Kecskemét was also founded, which then became a regular participant in the national song festivals. According to the basic rules of the association defined at its general meeting in 1868, the purpose of the glee club is to: cultivate and distribute art songs, and especially Hungarian national songs, develop fine tastes by their public performances and in this way also to promote cultural education. They serve as a means to achieve the following goals: singing exercises, timely trips, participation in national song festivals (...) contributing to charity and respectable goals" (Basic rules: 1). Members could be any "socially immaculate man or woman", whose task was to maintain the good reputation of the association and their obligation was to obey the basic rules (Uo. 4). Its income came from membership fees, revenues collected at its own concerts and interest paid by the founders. There could be active, supporting, founding and honorary members.

- 1. An active member could be someone who had "a sufficient sense of music and good voice". He was obliged to participate in events (rehearsals, song festivals) determined by the community, if they refused to participate and did not show up for 3 consecutive rehearsals without a reason, he could be excluded. Active members did not pay membership fees.
- 2. Those wanting to support the respectable goals could become supporting members, and therefore paid an annual fee of two forints for at least three years.
- 3. A founding member was a person who paid 25 forints into the budget of the association or 5% annual interest of the capital and made a declaration about it.

- 4. The election of honorary members was the exclusive right of the general assembly. "Publicly respected and socially outstanding individuals can be elected who have distinguished themselves through their keen efforts for the benefit of the association or who have generally recognized merits in the field of music and song." (Uo. 6).

In terms of its organizational structure, the glee club had a general assembly, a committee, various officials and a song judging committee. All the issues that affected the members and the association were discussed in the general assembly according to specific rules. The committee carried out and undertook the tasks that were decided in the general assembly. They supervised the operation and the financials of the association. The officers of the association were: the president, the vice-president, the chorus-master, the notary, the treasurer, the governor and the flag bearer. The president was the representative of the association at all times, he congregated, opened, led and closed the meetings. He guarded the seal and flag of the association. The vice president (active member) replaced him if the president failed to participate. The chorus master held the rehearsals, conducted the concerts, supervised the repertoire and the quality of the singing. The notary kept a record of the members, took the minutes of the general assembly, answered letters with the president's countersignature. The treasurer handled the financial transactions related to the association. The governor was responsible for creating the physical environment: he took care of the heating and lighting, and kept an inventory of the movables. The task of the flag bearer was to keep the association's flag in order and carry it during parades and concerts. The judging committee decided on the songs to be learnt, considered the conductor's suggestions and commented on the choir's achievement after the performances.

The basic rules of the association also states what should be done in the case of conflicts between members: "they are settled by the presidency, they are inefficient, the committee and, in the last case, the general assembly are to make a decision" (Uo. 15).

The glee club of Kecskemét performed successfully between 1874 and 1907, collecting diplomas and prizes at song competitions. Dezső Huszár praised them in his article about the association's 50-year history as follows: "It is recognized all over the country that few glee clubs can perform Hungarian folk songs with such Hungarian flavor as the Kecskemét Municipal Glee Club (...). From 1864 to the present day, the Kecskemét Municipal Glee club is one of the most active public cultural factors of the social life of the town and especially in the first two decades of its existence, it was the sole director of its cultural development. (...) nothing proves it more clearly than the fact that now there is a town music school and two other song groups operating in Kecskemét" (Huszár 1909: 129).

Below I will present two choirs of Kecskemét, which operate as communities with a similar purpose, and whose foundation are 110 years apart.

I wanted to get a picture of the classical music life of Kecskemét, including the operation of the two different choirs and their experience of isolation due to the coronavirus. Therefore, in the summer of 2020 I conducted semi-structured interviews with, among others, the leader of the Aurin Girls' Choir, László Durányik and three members of the choir, as well as the leader of the Kodály Zoltán Mixes Choir, Mónika Korompai Zöldi-Kovácsné.

The Civil Choral Society of Kecskemét, the present-day Kodály Mixed Choir

One of the two choral societies mentioned by Dezső Huszár in 1909 was the Civil Choral Society founded on March 9, 1888. In its fundamentals and organizational structure, it was very similar to the Glee Club of Kecskemét and the Choral Society of Kecskemét. The most significant difference, however, is that only men belonging to industrial guilds could enter the Civil Choral Society. For many years, there could not be a female member of the choir at all. Their first president was Mihály Böszörményi, and their first conductor was István Nemesszeghy, a music teacher, whose expertise made it possible that craftsmen who could not or could barely read sheet music later gained national fame. They also built the Industrial Home to provide a venue for their rehearsals. (Now it is the Youth Home, an institution belonging to the Hírös Agóra)

They operated for decades under the name of Civil Choral Society of Kecskemét, which was later changed to Civil and Workers' Choral Society. In the spring of 1948, in the spirit of the construction of the socialist state, the liquidation of civil associations began, which also hit choral societies. The then president of the Choral Society of Kecskemét, László Tóth, was ordered to resign by the cultural affairs department of the town. Their aim was to eliminate the "civil influence". István Szili, a member of the Socialist Party, was made the new president, who proposed that the choir should take the name of Zoltán Kodály. They were the second in the country to be allowed to bear the master's name by the master himself, thus the choir became the Kodály Zoltán Choir of the Workers of Kecskemét. At the same time of the name change, they were transformed into a mixed choir and operated like this in the following decades. They were regular participants in national and international choir meetings. (Heltai 2008).

The mixed choir named after Zoltán Kodály, with a history dating back more than 130 years, is currently (in 2019-2020) led by Mrs Mónika Zöldi-Kovácsné Korompai, who feels to keep the long-standing community alive. Due to the state of the epidemic at the time of the data collection, I did not have the opportunity to meet the members of the choir, so Mrs Mónika Zöldi-Kovácsné Korompai, who leads the choir, explained the motivations of the choir and the members. The average age of the members is over 60, those who are still active have usually been singing together in the choir since the age of 40. That is why maintaining the choir has never been as challenging as it is today, when the repertoire has shrunk both in terms of quantity and quality, and this was worsened by the fact that rehearsals were canceled due to the pandemic.

It is typical anyway that new members rarely join the choir, and if they do, they are also over 60. Entry is by invitation, which means that there is typically no way to filter out those who do not have the right voice for choir singing. However, the slow expansion and stagnation will now probably be followed by a decrease in the number of the members. The choir rehearsed once a week before the coronavirus. Years ago, having the proper repertoire, they more often participated in national choir meetings and had a well-established relationship with choirs operating in Galánta. The number of meetings has decreased over the years. They last performed in December 2019 at the Afternoon of Choirs program organized by the József Katona Library. This performance was encouraging, but then came the pandemic, which had (and still has) an impact on the professional activities and life of the choir as a community. Several members go to the choir not only to sing, it happens that for some it is the only community in their lives. After the rehearsals, groups are also formed that entertain together: they go to the opera or the theater. The lack of chorus meetings had a negative effect on several members, as it is common knowledge that amateur artistic activity in itself, as

well as the community experience, has a beneficial effect on the perceived quality of life and mental health (Dudás 2015).

The Mixed Choir has retained the original organizational structure outlined above. Today it operates as a foundation, but the choir still has a president who manages the finances, coordinates the performances, tenders, settles conflicts between members (if there are any) and acts also as a member of the choir. There is a small management team (see Committee) and a treasurer, because members can join the choir by paying a membership fee. The chorus-master is subordinate to the president in most matters, but independent professionally. This community is authentic, because they adhere to the rules that they set together.

Kodály School, the cradle of choirs and the Miraculum-Aurin choir family

The Kodály School in Kecskemét was established in 1950 as the first singing and music school of the country. Its director was Márta Nemesszeghy Lajosné Szentkirályi, whom Zoltán Kodály met for the first time in 1947, at his inauguration as an honorary citizen in Kecskemét. The young teacher performed children's plays with the children of the music kindergarten after the composer had encouraged her to continue her work with school-aged children. Márta Szentkirályi accepted the advice, and the first day of teaching took place on October 27, 1950. During its 70 years, the institution was expanded with a high school and a music secondary technical school. It was awarded the Hungarian Heritage Award, the Zoltán Kodály Award and the institutional professional Award for the Hungarian Art Education. Besides its significant educational activities, it became a determinant of choir life in Kecskemét (the website of the Kodály School).

The Aurin Girls' Choir was founded in 1998 under the leadership of László Durányik, its members were the 9-12 grade female students of the Kodály School. Earlier, these students were members of the Miraculum choir (children's choir consisting of 6th-8th graders) also led by László Durányik. It was probably the master's leadership style and the well-functioning community that led the school leaving 8th graders to found a new choir. (They could have joined the school's mixed choir, but they stuck to the already existing customs and community.) Therefore, there is little difference between the two choirs as far as the rules are concerned, girls who leave the Miraculum due to their age enter the Aurin. The aim of the choir is to "play an important role in the cultural life of the town, to be integrated in the Hungarian music life, to participate and perform successfully in national and foreign concerts, festivals and choir competitions, to make high-quality recordings, to represent the name of Kecskemét, the hometown of Zoltán Kodály in the world" (Miraculum-Aurin choir family website).

Apart from educating committed young people who love and know how to sing, it is its duty to get to know the world through the culture of music. One might say that the girls become cosmopolitan during their year in the choir due to the tours as they have been to several countries of Europe. During its 22 years of existence, the choir won 20 first, 6 second and 4 third prizes in 28 international choir competitions. In 2006, for instance, they won the Choir Olympics in China, beating 42 choirs in their category. The research interviews with three members of the Girls' Choir (aged 18-21) revealed that the primary task during these performances was to create quality sounding, but they could learn other things in the meantime. The members have the opportunity to

learn the norms of behavior in an official environment as well as the cultural customs of other countries during the tours, they can practice their language skills and develop the social competences that are necessary during the trips with the group. Practically they can broaden their horizons in all respects.

The Aurin and Miraculum Foundations support the choir. László Durányik expressed in the interview that the organization is made up of the president (himself) and the members of the board of trustees. During their two meetings a year, they decide on tenders, tours, financial matters, thus the conditions necessary for the operation. The budget of the choir is made up of tender funds, sums received from performances, 1% of the tax and the annual membership fees. The payment of the membership fee is neither an old tradition nor a formal activity, the amount of which is used to buy new sheet music. However, the payment of the membership fee is not a requirement for membership, the foundation takes it over for those who cannot afford it.

Thus belonging to the community cannot depend on financial things, but rather on the right singing voice, but even this can be developed if necessary, however, participation in rehearsals is a must. For the members who do not appear for a certain percentage of the rehearsals, the choir master orders an exam where they have to give an account of their knowledge. They do all this because the quality work of the choir lies in the two-hour joint rehearsals on Fridays and Saturdays. Those who do not participate can hardly catch up at home, they may sing the wrong notes and, in the wrong rhythm, and this way they hindering the community and the representation of quality.

The interviewees all confirmed: without a doubt the choir is a community, within which the members are united by regular meetings, personal contacts and a common goal. However, this does not mean that it is completely homogeneous. Based on the years spent in the choir, a kind of hierarchy was formed within the choir, longer-term membership comes with certain advantages and privileges. The elder members have priority to take part in the tours if there are limitations, to choose a seat on the bus or to jump the queue for shared meals, etc. These rules apply in the community, it is not typical for the elder members to misuse their privileges. The leader of the choir is always the choir master, only the information from him/her is official, and he/she is the one who chooses the pieces of the repertoire. The source of conflicts between the choir master and the choir can be the list of works if they do not like to sing some of them. There are no or very little conflict between the members, they discuss and talk them over with each other.

Within the choir, which has approximately 50 members, apart from the hierarchy of age and choir master/choir members, there are also smaller groupings, which are typically based on going to the same class. Apart from the fact that the choir has common programs, these smaller groups function as friends' circles, communities within the community, who go out to entertain together, like to spend their free time together, which is typical of the Kodály Mixed Choir.

The community of the choir is also kept together by its own traditions and common programs, apart from work and established friendships. On the occasion of the choir Christmas, for instance, it was customary to gifts each other, followed by dancing and singing together. The Miraculum pass was typical: for a token sum, tickets for a series of concerts featuring different famous performers could be bought. (Within the framework of this, the audience could hear for the first time the Quimby song "It passes exactly now" performed by the Csík Orchestra.) These traditions have been somewhat left behind, more recently the choir community receives tickets to the concerts organized by the Hírös Agóra and they pay a visit together.

Above all this, the interviews with the members of the choir revealed that they consider representing a value and create something together the greatest unifying force.

The choir of this age group survived the spring pandemic more successfully than the Kodály Mixed Choir, as they felt more comfortable in the virtual space and the contact remained more intense, they were able to experience joint creation and value creation during the online events.

Do the choir members form communities?

Yes, without a doubt. Scientists in different fields have defined the nature of communities based on different aspects. A German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies, for example, in his work "Community and Society", which was published in 1887, formulated the foundations of the concept of community that is still in use. *He defined the two formations in relation to each other: traditional communities and their positive effects, as well as the social conditions that changed as a result of industrialization in the XIX. century. He puts it this way: "in the society, just like in the community, people live together in peace.* However, they are not basically related to each other, but rather separated from each other, and while in the case of the community the relationship exists despite all the separation, here the situation is reversed: people live separately from each other despite all the relationships" (Tönnies, quoted in Vercseg 2018: 59). .

Ilona Vercseg summarizes the three most common principles of the organization of modern communities in her article on The Theory of Communities:

1. Location: the community appears as a synonym of a locality, it brings together those living in the neighborhood geographically.
2. Interest-based/chosen communities: the individuals can belong to several communities of their choice based on their own decision. Let it be a group of their identity, leisure activities, religious life, etc.
3. Intellectual and spiritual community: the role of religious communities and scenes (Vercseg 2018: 75).

Ágnes Heller a philosopher believes that joining a group is random, while choosing a community is a conscious process. She categorizes the two depending on the degree of integration: she considers the group primitive, with low level of integration, while the community an organization with higher order, thus setting up a kind of qualitative ranking (Heller 1970).

And Vilmos Csányi, the human ethologist, created the concept of community in 2011, taking into account the analysis of human behavior and habits: *"Defining the human community from the perspective of human ethology, it is a group whose members are ready to recognize the interests of the group during their life activities and they are willing to put their own individual interests behind the interests of the group (...)* The major difference between the group and the community is that groups are held together by chance, common good, interest, and pressure, while the community has its own culture and can be characterized by the above-mentioned traits" (Csányi 2011: 42).

Based on the above outlined aspects and the empirical research, it can be stated that in the case of choirs - regardless of their age group - we can talk about communities, since:

1. the members maintain the community even if they cannot meet regularly for a certain period of time (e.g. only in the virtual space): "while in the case of the community, the relationship persists despite any separation" (Tönnies).
2. they are communities organized according to the interests of the individuals, in which the characteristics of spiritual communities also appear (Ilona Vercseg).
3. the choice of membership is deliberate (Heller).
4. they have their own culture, an established system of rules, and a "we-consciousness", that is why the individual is ready to recognize the interests of the group (Csányi).

The studied choirs are communities, because their goal is to form their members into a community. Only those who respect the internal norms of the group and subject themselves to the rules can become members. The basic rules are not a package of measures and regulations imposed from above, but a system of norms resting on the mutual agreement of the members. They create them together and expect everyone to obey them. Apart from singing together, they set out tasks, nurture traditions, spread culture, this way they also serve the culture of the wider community and the population.

They have revived the beginning of choral culture in the church, where the goal was not to educate professional singers, but to educate European intellectuals, "educated humans". It is therefore important that they continue to exist and function despite situation caused by the epidemic.

Summary

In connection with choral singing, which dates back several centuries, it is important to note that music has always played an important role in people's lives, and singing together was and remains a prominent part of community events. After the initial religious tradition, singing together became more and more a leisure activity, the communities were given a permanent framework and became institutionalized, and although they were sometimes limited, choral communities were usually re-established, they were brought to life by people's need for community. Nowadays, the epidemic poses a serious challenge to communities, especially those whose operation is difficult in the online space. The experience of my research is that the work of the choirs and the relationships within them are continuous even though the in person sessions have been suspended. Members of different ages aim to maintain communication between each other in some way in order to preserve the strength of the community. However, we must not forget that choral music (and all the other cultural experiences) can be truly enjoyed with personal presence, the online operation of choirs can only be temporary.

Offline communities and singing together in the same place at the same time can permanently improve the perceived quality of life of the members, and common programs really forge choirs regardless of the age group. In this way, they will be able to provide programs for the public, nurture traditions at the community level and contribute to the education of "the educated people" at the society level.

Further extended research can also shed light on the future of classical music communities, what tools and steps are needed to stop the aging of the audience of classical music events and the decrease in the number of those interested.

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