
ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

Article received on October 17th 2021
Article accepted on November 4th 2021
Original scientific paper
UDC 785.7
78.071.1 Mezeи C.
DOI 10.5937/newso2158S

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CHAMBER MUSIC OF SZILÁRD MEZEI AND DIFERENTIATED CONGRUENCE IN ITS COMPOSING LAYERS (I)

Abstract: The composer and violist Szilárd Mezei has made a significant, decades-long contribution to contemporary music in the national and international contexts. Although his artistic approach can be linked to the musical universe of György Szabados, an author who became one of the most influential creative figures in the Central European cultural space during the 1970s and 1980s, Mezei is a special phenomenon on the local music scene. With his ensemble mostly comprising prominent Novi Sad musicians, Mezei has a large number of discographic achievements to his credit in the space between composition and improvisation. Mezei divided his compositional opus into genre corpora of chamber and orchestral music, of which the review of chamber music is the subject of research in this paper.

Keywords: Szilárd Mezei, folklore, aleatorics, texture, compositional structure

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Szilárd Mezei (1974) is not a new name on the Serbian, Hungarian and European contemporary music scene. However, his artistic achievement has not been given adequate attention so far. Apart from the liner notes to sound releases, there are no other professional articles on Mezei's music. Even media reviews are rare in relation to the importance of this author's work for composers and performers in the national and international contexts. To make up for lost time and introduce Szilárd Mezei to the field of musicological research is the task of this paper, not at all easy if we take into account the responsibility with which a topic as such is opened for the first time.

No definitive conclusions ought to be drawn about the life and work of an author who is currently at the zenith of his artistic maturity. However, given the introductory character of this presentation, it is important to offer some biographical data. Szilárd Mezei was born in Senta, where he began his musical education with a violin in his hands. He continues to live in Senta, without changing his residence, despite the advantages of living and working in other places. The devotion to this small town in Vojvodina, mostly inhabited by the Hungarian population, is more than just one thread in the set of biographical data. It is a trace that leads to the core of the composer's ideological and artistic orientations aimed at permeating the native ethos with the spirit of the metropolis. Even before completing Violin studies at the Secondary Music School in Subotica and studying Composition from the Faculty of Music in Belgrade under Professor Zoran Erić, Mezei launched his rich artistic career. As a violinist, violist, double bass player and composer, he has given hundreds of concerts in European cities and in Japan. He generally performs with ensembles of which he is the artistic director. In ensembles such as the Mezei Szilárd Trio, the Mezei Szilárd Septet and the Mezei Szilárd Ensemble, this artist exclusively performs his own compositions or arrangements of folk tunes.

In the identification block of some future encyclopedic unit, Mezei will be presented as a composer and violist. Some brief, relevant biographies from the Internet also include under his 'occupations' determinants such as orchestra leader¹ and improviser². Insofar as the interplay of Mezei's performing-improvisational and compositional work is inseparable, these are the key aspects of his musical being.

Mezei's creative personality, whose prolificacy is demonstrated by more than six hundred scores and fifty-five discographic releases, is a challenge for

¹ <http://www.novisad.rs/lat/kcns-mezei-szilard-trio>

² Liner notes to the album *CET*, Szilárd Mezei Septet, Lawrence, Odradek, 2015.

(self)reflection.³ This composer, who has lived and worked as a freelance artist for more than two decades, refutes the conclusion that the survival of contemporary art music is only possible within academic institutions. The question is, however, to what extent is what we generally mean by contemporary music actually Mezei's field of action. This author performs at jazz festivals as much as at forums for new music, without relying on analogue synthesizers, amplifiers and sound modulators, which have become an almost unavoidable new sound⁴ tool for contemporary composers. If we do not adopt the radical view that contemporary music is impossible in a traditional

³ Both music critics and the composer himself face difficulties in writing about Mezei's work. Although Mezei's opus as a cultural text is not and cannot be a self-referential result, the composer and music writers with whom he collaborates often underline his non-belonging to standard genres and concepts. Regarding Mezei's music, Glenn Astarita asks the question: "Is it jazz? Or perhaps avant-garde, European folk-jazz with elements of Chamber embedded within free-jazz style improvisation? Hence, the challenge of attempting to classify music that generally defies rigid borders. (...) Szilárd Mezei stands mightily as a supreme genre-buster, (...) He's straddled the boundaries of contemporary classical, progressive-jazz and improvisation when performing with International jazz icons and other artists too numerous in scope to mention here." See: Glenn Astarita, liner notes to the album *We Were Watching the Rain*, Szilárd Mezei Wind Quartet, Newton Abbot, Alissa Publishing & Leo Records, 2009.

The limited ability to verbalize on his own creative practice, Mezei articulates as follows: "My very good friend, the dancer Péter Gemza, told me that somebody once asked a famous painter why he did not write about his paintings, and he answered that if he could have explained his paintings, he would not have painted them. It is the same with music. You can circumnavigate it with words, but you cannot describe its essence. I can, however, explain the musical background to this album. In this music, I seek to reconcile the two poles of improvisatory and composed music. I feel I am a jazz musician, but the music we play on this disc is not jazz in the traditional sense of the word. Some of these pieces cannot be called 'contemporary' for the reason that they are not entirely written down. Yet, they are too contemporary for jazz music, and too jazzy to be called folk music. My inspiration stems from a similarly broad spectrum: philosophy, sociology, politics, poetry, nature, humor and literature; Shakespeare, Beckett, Kierkegaard, Hamvas... Of particular significance to me are Hungarian folk music, contemporary classical music and jazz, and the music of Béla Bartók." See: Lawrence (USA), Odradek, 2015.

⁴ The category of *new sound* in this context includes all the components of the musical flow that have a modernist and avant-garde 'aura' in relation to the compositional-technical norms of national (neo)classicism. Such elements occur in the use of atonal harmonic language, structural musical thinking (dodecaphony and serialism), cluster sonoristics, controlled aleatorics, micropolyphony, and concrete and electroacoustic music.

sound medium, Mezei's commitment to the standard instruments of the Western European artistic tradition (along with folk instruments) is nothing but a variant of the new music phenomenon, whose paradigmatic position was unquestionable until the rise of electronic music in the second half of the 20th century. However, the poetic strongholds of Mezei's musical language should not be mystified. They are noticed on first listening. In addition to jazz, there is Hungarian folk music material⁵ and its improvisational-aleatoric elaboration in a new sound context. Mezei understands improvisation as a bridge between the archaic and the modern, between musical folklore and its contemporary artistic transposition. In the liner notes to the album *Nád / Reed* Mezei formulated his position as follows:

I don't think that contemporary improvised music and Hungarian folk music are far from each other at all. The essence of Hungarian folk music, like that of just any other folk music, is improvisatory. During improvisation, musicians improvise in their mother tongue; so do I. This is why this musical crosstalk is often captured in my solos. (...) For me, the question is neither theoretical nor analytical; it is elementary.⁶

Speaking of Mezei's release *CET*, music critic Bert Noglik touched on another relation important for understanding Mezei's creative approach – the relationship between composition and improvisation. Noglik points out that in Mezei's music "(...) the borders between composition and improvisation are porous".⁷ In his music "improvisation remains a moving and reviving force", while "even if the process occasionally culminates in calculated chaos, the overall conception is a series of consciously built-up compositional

⁵ One of the best descriptions of Mezei's position towards Hungarian folk music comes from the pen of music critic Andrew Choate, who wrote the liner notes to the 2017 album *Nem Füstöl a Zentaji Gyár Kéménye*, released by Slam Productions in Abington, UK: "Evan Parker said his roots were 'in his record player', and all lovers of music and art know exactly what he meant: we are (...) defined by what we choose to love, not (...) by where we are born or who our immediate family is. Fortunately for Szilárd Mezei, he was born in Vojvodina, a place with musical roots he wanted to connect to. In his music, the accident of where he was born becomes no accident at all: the Hungarian folk music of this region hold an attraction for him that he is pre-conscious and instinctual, but, equally, also rational and learned. Desired and chosen. Loving this music and being born inside it it doubles his passion and understanding for it."

⁶ Szilárd Mezei, liner notes to the album *Nád / Reed*, Szilárd Mezei Ensemble, Montreal, Red Tucan Records, 2006.

⁷ Bert Noglik, liner notes to the album *CET*, op. cit.

ideas”.⁸ As for the stylistic features of Mezei’s music, Noglik singles out swing, ceremonial unisons, sharp riffs, wild improvisational lines and majestic melodies. Listening to Mezei’s music “you are invited to dive into moods of self reflection”, until “odd meters” appear all of a sudden “inspiring (...) to dance (...). Although the ensemble has no vocalists (Noglik means the septet, but this also applies to all the other ensembles of Mezei, author’s comment), it possesses the quality of a choir. Thus Mezei’s music returns to the fundamentals of dancing and singing in a very subtle way”.⁹ It should be said that Mezei received the impetus for the artistic research of these “fundamentals of dancing and singing” from the pianist, composer, improviser and founder of Hungarian ethno-jazz, György Szabados, who was a kind of mentoring figure in Mezei’s artistic development. Bert Noglik points to the relationship between Mezei and Szabados in the following words:

Szilárd Mezei follows the late pianist and composer György Szabados, who created new music in the Béla Bartók tradition assimilating – not imitating – Hungarian folk music. Using this vocabulary as a kind of musical mother tongue, Szabados developed it further in his own works, combining compositions with the revitalizing forces of improvisation. Szilárd Mezei had the good fortune to enjoy working with György Szabados, first as a student and later as a musical partner. He continues this process, but he also stands on his own. Like Szabados, Mezei is first and foremost an individual. Szilárd Mezei’s music does not seek trends and fashions. It is less about stylistic categories than about integrity and authenticity.¹⁰

Szabados – and through him Bartók – are the most important, but not the only intertextual strongholds of Mezei’s creative practice. Other references cannot be determined without pointing out the social circumstances, the aesthetic codes of the musico-historical period and the overall climate of thought in the environment of the composer’s creative endeavours. In this paper, however, the intertwined semantic layers of Mezei’s opus will not be the subject of detailed consideration.¹¹ The lack of empirical support for musico-

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Liner notes by Neven Ušumović to the Mezei’s release *Sivatag* could be the first stop on the way to determining the cultural coordinates of Mezei’s artistic activity: “From the very beginnings of his musical activity Szilárd Mezei appears both as an instrumentalist and composer (and a conductor of ensemble). He has searched for his creative landmarks in the avant-garde tendencies of classical music, as well as, primarily, in free jazz (in the

logical interpretation puts before this research the imperative of analytical focus, so the view on the morphology of Mezei's musical language will be oriented towards the assessment of basing the compositional structure relations on special modalities of equivalence as, on the one hand, the universal foundation of music, and on the other, the expression of Mezei's conscious and unconscious driving forces directed towards the field of the archetypal. These modalities are a set of differentiated congruences of the *identical, ho-*

direction given to the latter by Anthony Braxton), that is, in a broader sense, in improvisation. His creative development has been influenced by the fact that these beginnings took place in the environment of the theatre (in the early nineties, Mezei was writing and performing music for the performances of the theatrical ensemble AIOWA, then for the Jel Színház and other formations of the already famous Hungarian-French stage-manager and dancer József Nagy (...), which brought Mezei into a direct relationship with the performance side of music and the possibility of its staging. The substantial and ideological tendencies of Mezei's rich creativity are hardly comprehensible without a certain acquaintance with his extraordinary erudition, the spirit of research based on the spiritual world of the primordial Tradition, but also on modern art and its revolt against the 'measuring of the world' carried out by the rationalistic mind of the West. This spiritual background already reveals itself in the symbolic titles of Mezei's albums and compositions, but, of course, in his texts and interviews as well. The ideological soundness of the work of the Hungarian thinker Béla Hamvas (1892–1968) and Béla Bartók (1888–1946), and among living composers the musical *dignity* (which unites the endeavours of these two Hungarian geniuses) of György Szabados, offer Mezei an interior basis which gives direction and force to his own musical efforts. Orientation towards the Tradition leads Mezei, in his primary role as jazz musician, to a reinterpretation of the jazz tradition, replacing that which in the history of jazz represents the African heritage and the tradition of 'black America' by the – in the European context – extremely lively and peculiar tradition of Hungarian folk music, as well as by the music of the great Oriental sacral traditions. So, no wonder that it is, notwithstanding all this, very difficult to foresee what Mezei will do next (...) One thing is however sure: for now, we won't find in Mezei any trace of the nowadays very popular post-fusion' jazz tunes, no experimentation with electronic pop-music, hip-hop or noise-rock! All that we have said up to now makes us realise the specific programmatic character of this music. This character derives not only from the ideological richness of Mezei's creativity, but often from its (the music's) predestination for the stage as well. Mezei's scenic imagination had the luck to be continually developing due to the stimulating creative cooperation with artists like his sister (...) Kinga Mezei, then with András Urbán, Tibor Várszegi, as well as with József Nagy. As if this continual contact reflected itself on the orchestration and the musical dramaturgy of his compositions, in which we sometimes find a real 'distribution of the parts', and the musical dialogue and monologue (...)." See: Neven Ušumović, liner notes to the album *Sivatag*, Szilárd Mezei Ensemble, Lisabon, Creative Sources Recordings, 2006.

mogeneous, heterogeneous and opposite in which the extremes of ontological-logical perspectives such as existence-accident and identity-difference are dissolved (and overcome) under the motto of the composer's "revolt against the 'measuring of the world' carried out by the rationalistic mind of the West".¹²

Opus Mezei: "chamber music" & "orchestral music"

With all the diversity of Szilárd Mezei's opus, there seems to be no basis for its strict genre division. The division made by the composer himself, probably without the intention of being decisively autopoetic, distinguishes between chamber and orchestral music, while the group of chamber works includes solo compositions for piano and even choral works, while the corpus of orchestral music includes mostly compositions for chamber orchestra or large chamber ensemble. The explanation for the genre homogeneity of that part of Mezei's opus in which this musicologist, at the will of the composer, gained insight, appears when examining the audio releases of compositions in whose recording the composer himself participates with a number of his regular collaborators. The impression is that Szilárd Mezei perceives his music in a 'singer-songwriter' or 'band-like' way. Although he does not consider himself and his collaborators to be the only authentic interpreters of his compositions, it is always the concrete performance approach, rather than the abstract genre type, that is the source of Mezei's artistic imagination.¹³

Respecting the composer's choice of representative musical works, I list them on this occasion as they were originally grouped, with a division into chamber and orchestral music:

Chamber music:

- *Arról hogy víz nap ég föld* (1995): ch
- *Trio* (1996): ob, ca, bn
- *Gudački trio* (1996); vn, vla, vc [String Trio]
- *Trio* (1997): fl, pf, perc
- *Tibeti gyors* (2000): cl, vn, vc, pf
- *Örizgető* (2000): fl, ca, cl, hn, bn
- *Leveg leveg két ének* (2000): sop1, sop2, alt

¹² Ušumović, *ibid.*

¹³ "I am almost always writing music for known, not imagined, musicians." See: Szilárd Mezei, liner notes to the album *CET*, op. cit.

- *Csip csip* (2003): fl, vn1, vn2, vla, vc, pf
- *Hep 7 B* (2008): bcl, cb, pf
- *Bop Bap* (2014): fl solo
- *Hep 13 A. T.* (2014): vn, vc, pf
- *Hep 30 B* (2015) bn, mar
- *Stuffed Hippos* (2015): vn1, vn2
- *Al Folia* (2015): pf
- *A jövő könyve / The Book of the Future* (2016): cl, vib
- *Orlando Application* (2016): vn1, vn2, vla, vc, cb, vib
- *O. J.* (2016) sop1, sop2, alt
- *Hep 21 E / 22 L* (2017) picc, fl, afl, bfl
- *Hippo Hippopotamus* (2017) vla, vc, cb, pf
- *Resistor* (2017) 4picc

Orchestral music:

- *C-major Choral Op. 1 Winter* (2012): fl, bcl, bn, cbn, tpt, tbn, tba, vla, vc, gtr, pf, cb
- *Hep 28* (2014): 2fl, afl, 2ob, 2cl, bcl, 2asax, tsax, bn, hn, tpt, tbn, pf, acc, gtr, perc, vn1, vn2, vla, vc, cb
- *Hep 29* (2014): fl, bcl, bn, cbn, tpt, tbn, tba, vla, vc, grt, pf, cb, dms
- *Mozdulat nem számít* (2014): afl, cl, bn, tpt, tbn, tba, vla, vc, vib, pf, cb, dms
- *Extinction 1* (2015): picc, 2fl, 2ob, ca, cl (es), 3cl (b), bcl, cacl (es), cbcl (b), ssax, 2asax, tsax, bsax, 2bn, 4hn, 3tbn, euph, tba, tpn, xyl, cimb, sdm, bdm, mar, vib, tam-t, sdm, tpl.bl, glsp, tom-t, pf, cb
- *Gyémántrét / Diamond-Meadow* (2015): vn1, vn2, vla, vc, cb (string orchestra)
- *Reports for Soprano/Alto Saxophone and Wind Ensemble* (2015): solo ssax, solo asax, picc, 2fl, cl (Es), 3cl (B), bcl, 2asax, tsax, bsax, bn, 4hn, 3tpt, 2tbn, btbn, euph, tba, timp, perc1 (sdm, tdm, bdm, sn.dm, bon, cimb, tgl), perc2 (t-tom, tpl.bl, a-cimb, bdm, mcs, guiro, sn.dm, clav, bon, t-tam), perc3 (xyl), perc4 (mar), perc5 (vib)
- *Concerto for Flutes* (2016): solo picc, solo fl, solo afl, solo bfl; fl, afl, ob, ca, cl, bcl, bn, cbn, 2hn, 2tpt, tbn, vib
- *Concerto for Clarinet in Bb* (2017): solo cl, 2fl, afl, 2ob, ca, bcl, tsax, 2bn, cbn, 2hn, tba, perc1 (sdm, tdm, bdm, trg), perc2 (cimb, sn.dm, tdm, t-tam, tpl.bl), perc3 (vib), hrp, vn1, vn2, vla1, vla2, vc1, vc2, cb
- *Hep 32* (2017): 6vn, 2vla, 2vc, cb
- *Bartok Amerikaban* (2017): 2fl, afl, 2ob, ca, 2cl, bcl, 2bn, cbn, 3hn, 2tpt, 2tbn, tba, timp, tpl.bl, cimb, glsp, bdm, vib, hrp, pf, vn, vla, vc, cb

- *Tű, tő, tó. / Needle, root, lake.* (2018): fl, afl, ob, ca, cl, bcl, bn, cbn, 2hn, 2tpt, 2tbn, timp, perc1, perc2, vn1, vn2, vla1, vla2, vc1, vc2, cb
- *(a tél evangéliuma)* (2018): 2fl, afl, 2ob, ca, 2cl, bcl, 2bn, 2hn, 2tpt, vib, glsp, hrp, solo sop, vn1, vn2, vla, vc, cb
- *Kukurikú* (2018): solo vla, solo cb, 4vn1, 4vn2, 3vla, 3vc, cb
- *A szabadság órvárosa* (2019): fl, ob, cl, bcl, bn, hn, tbn, dms, vib, hrp, pf, vn2, vla2, cimb, cb2, vn1, vla1, vc, cb1

Further on, my focus will be on the presentation of Mezei's chamber music, leaving the more complex and more recent orchestral music for some future research. Szilárd Mezei's chamber music can be classified chronologically, divided into groups of works from the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. An alternative classification would take into account the relationship between musical material and compositional-technical procedures, so on the one hand there would be (mostly early) works dominated by aleatorico-cluster expressionism that follows the Polish School model, and on the other hand, those compositions based on folklore-expressionist melodies greatly related to new-music and new-sound composing techniques. Starting with the composition *Örizigető* for wind quintet from 2000, all the latter works are based on musical folklore extracts, texture-based (not necessarily aleatoric) new sound and special equivalence relations in compositional structure. The composer himself often mentions the first two poetic strongholds in his comments, but the third has so far remained insufficiently reflected.

The earliest work from the group of those that Mezei submitted for this research is the *Trio* for oboe, English horn and bassoon from 1996. It is an aleatoric composition in which limited uncertainty characterizes the parameters of rhythm and pitch in certain segments of the form. The characteristic of the sound medium – the nasal one-timbre sound – is the centre of Mezei's attention in this composition. (Audio Example No. 1, *Trio* for oboe, English horn and bassoon, 00:00–00:20).¹⁴ Finding creative solutions for the (pre)set range of compositional-technical problems is a sign of the modernist tendency towards self-limitation, whose musico-aesthetic result in *Trio* only indirectly announces the future discourse of modernized poetic archaization. The same is the case with the *Trio* for violin, viola and cello (1996), which brings an expressionistically agitato quasi-improvisational ductus. The pitch and duration in this piece are precisely determined, but the absence of bar

¹⁴ Audio example 1 is available at the official New Sound YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/_bUF9b7i9Ro.

lines and the instruction “All rhythmic values are approximate”¹⁵ speak of the aleatoric way of thinking as a way of nuancing and enrichment of musical relations. Another *Trio*, this time a mixed one, for flute, piano and percussion (1997), completes the corpus of representative Mezei’s chamber music from the 1990s. This early work by Mezei brings an improvisational type of musical presentation, a change of pulsating and ametric segments, aleatoric blocks with approximate rhythmic values and jazz-swing associations in triplets as we find in later works, such as *Hep 7 B* and *Hep 21 E / 22 L*. In the 1997 *Trio* the piano is treated as percussion, and special attention is paid to shaping the melody in the flute part, where the composer is flirting with the musico-stylistic conventions on the pastoral mood.

Example 1: Szilárd Mezei, *Trio* (flute, piano, percussions), bars 1–6.

Already two works from 2000 speak of a departure of Mezei’s musical language from academic modernism and a more decisive turn towards Bartókian

¹⁵ The complete instructions for the performance of this piece read: “PLAY FREELY. All rhythmic values are approximate. There is no common pulsation, musicians perform their parts independently of each other, and they need to play together only when indicated with a sign. (Thus, tones that are one above the other do not necessarily have to be played at the same time). In the longer *ad libitum* (improvisational), musicians give each other signs so that the vertical balance would not be disturbed more than necessary. The musician realizes agogics independently of the neighbouring sections. The wavy line after the repeat signs means that the music material within the repeat signs needs to be repeated until an interruption sign is met, but the phrase itself is not interrupted, that is, it does not stop immediately, but it (material inside the repeat signs) needs to be completed. When there is a straight line behind the repeat signs, the phrase is interrupted immediately at the interruption sign. If there is a certain time above the phrase inside the repeat sign, within which it is necessary to repeat the phrase, the musician himself determines when to stop repeating the phrase after the given time expires. When all three musicians start with new musical material at the same time, the sign for the beginning is given by the violinist.”

folklorism and Szabados's anti-Western instrumentation:¹⁶ *Tibeti gyors* for clarinet, violin, cello and piano and *Őrizigető* for flute, English horn, clarinet, French horn and bassoon. Both compositions bring a transfiguration of archaic heterophonic sound. In both compositions, a tone cluster is a basic new sound element, but not in sonoristic use. Although it exists as a vertical harmony of second intervals, the Mezei tone cluster was revoked in the new musical sense by being placed in the function of a heterophonic sound enrichment of the melody, as one of the first to be applied by Igor Stravinsky in *The Rite of Spring*. In *Tibeti gyors* the composition of intervals point to a model of a generic expressionist melody,¹⁷ rather than the close relation of the singing and dancing principle in music. The profiling of the cluster-heterophonic melody is achieved by the isorhythmic structure of the phrase within the block form, the dynamics of which are determined by differently articulated textures, independent melodic lines and improvisational episodes (Audio Example No. 2, *Tibeti gyors*, 00:00–00:56).¹⁸ It is the precise *senza misura* vertical synchronization of isorhythmic melodies, as a kind of reduc-

¹⁶ For György Szabados, great (meta)traditions and (meta)cultures of East and West lay in the foundations of individual national cultures and traditions. Szabados finds a creative dialogue between them in the music of Béla Bartók. The meeting point of East and West, captured by Hungarian culture through Bartók, Szabados considers a source of a sense of uniqueness. According to Szabados, the definitive split between the Western European and Eastern states of consciousness occurred at the end of the Middle Ages. Despite the fact that one music genre from the West – jazz – was his path to personal artistic individuation, Szabados drew his conclusions in the spirit of values-inverted orientalism. His concept of the East does not represent the inferior Other, necessary for the self-identification of the dominant Eurocentric Self, but points to aspects of Western European decadence. Szabados considered himself an anti-materialist according to the Eastern model, defining himself as the opposite of Western consumerism, rationalism and atheism. However, this Hungarian artist did not believe in the division into *this* and *other* world. He thought that God was not somewhere else, far from us. In his texts and interviews, he pointed to the relationship between the One and the Many as fundamental ontological categories. He believed that the One shifts into the Many and returns to itself, as well as that the musical parallel of these processes is inspired in the Gregorian chant. Hence the numerous monophonic, “choral” treated melodies in his music. We find a similar treatment of monophony in the music of Szilárd Mezei. See: Sovtić, Nemanja: “Szabados György gondolatrendszer – jazz, hagyomány, rögtönzés a dacoló számkivettség és lüktető szellemiség világ (lás) ában”: *Szabados*, Budapest: MMA Kiado, 2019.

¹⁷ There is not a carefully constructed twelve-tone melody, but there is an avoidance of repeating the tones that would lead to tonicization.

¹⁸ Audio example 2 is available at the following link: <https://youtu.be/GNJH-7Pin5A>.

tion of texture to a cluster heterophony of a recognizable compositional structure and archaic overtone, that is the most important stylistic feature of the *Tibet gyors* quartet. In the composition *Őrizigető* a homophone melody-accompaniment structure occurs more often than in *Tibet gyors*, with empty harmonies and chords based on the pentatonic scale, which in combination with the nasal timbre of a low-pitched flute, English horn and clarinet (an evocation of the sound of ancient wind instruments) already quite clearly announces the discourse of poetic archaization, somewhat comparable to the creative approaches of Igor Stravinsky or Béla Bartók as a pioneer of folkloristic modernism, although, in fact, it is closest to György Szabados's way of musical thought.

Example 2: Szilárd Mezei, *Őrizigető*, rehearsal number [3]; Audio Example No. 3 (01:50 – 02:12)¹⁹

In the compositions *Csip csip* for flute, two violins, cello and piano from 2003 and *Hep 7 B* for bass clarinet, contrabassoon and piano from 2008, controlled aleatorics remains the compositional-technical principle, and isorhythmic heterophonic polyphony the most impressive segment of the material. Aleatorics is reduced to the approximate rhythm or pitch. It is included in various textures as situations in which the indistinguishability of the melodic, rhythmic and harmonic element forms a specific timbre, depending on the density of the 'flow of information', the register and other parameters of the sound (Audio Example No. 4, *Csip csip*, 00:00–00:48).²⁰ In both compositions the form is block-wise. The shifting of contrasting sections dominates, although there are also chaining, layering and gradual transitions. In the sextet *Csip, csip* heterophony still occasionally turns into a modernist-artificial 'broken' expressionist melody, but even more often it remains within the framework of recognizable folkloristic incantations. Expressionist melody appears somewhat less frequently in later works, retreating before stylized

¹⁹ Audio example 3 is available at the following link: <https://youtu.be/jxzsAePDSQE>

²⁰ Audio example 4 is available at the following link: https://youtu.be/k8_bedzuMfl.

folklore melody and improvisational lines. *Csip csip* is also characterized by a (quasi) jazz section with an up beat ostinato pattern in the piano, just like the solo treatment of the flute, which is entrusted with the most diverse musical material, starting from a virtuoso, rhythmically differentiated solo, through a leading voice in cluster heterophony to a subtle melody in (micro)polyphonic textures.

Example 3: Szilárd Mezei, *Csip csip*, bars 27–30 rehearsal number [3]. Tempo *presto possibile*

A folklore-like connotation is also evoked by a complex, non-distributive rhythm, characteristic of the folklore idiom common to different folk music traditions from the Balkans (aksak rhythm). The characteristic of *Hep 7 B* is the conflict and reconciliation of the archaic principles of song and dance, represented by motoric rhythmic movement and melodies / textures of suspended pulse. The stylistic features of this work should include the homophonic-homorhythmic interpolation based on the second-fourth vertical, which is characterized by ‘divergence’ in the form of an unexpected shortening of the rhythmic base (in this case a crotchet with a dot) by a third of its value (to a crotchet) through a change of 3/4 time to 5/8 (Audio Example No. 5, *Hep 7 B*, 01:17–01:52).²¹

The number of Mezei’s (selected) chamber works grows significantly with the transition from the first to the second decade of the 21st century. If we take into account that the entire orchestral corpus in which the author of these lines gained an insight belongs to the time period between 2010 and 2020, it can be concluded that only the last decade is the most fruitful in the creative work of the considered author. His selected works from the

²¹ Audio example 5 is available at the following link: <https://youtu.be/2NPqq8eHf7w>.

second decade of the 21st century are connected, with the exception of the composition *Orlando Application*, by a partial turning away from aleatoric music. The choice of a traditional musical notation without approximate values does not mean that Mezei has given up on new sound elements in these compositions. Blocks of tone clusters and (micro)polyphonic textures are still strongly represented, but no longer within the models of approximate values marked by the graphic notation. Another feature of Mezei's chamber music corpus from the 2010s is the possibility of pair grouping. The first two pairs are compositions connected by the choice of instrumentation. *Resistor* (2016) and *Hep 21 E / 22 L* (2017) are written for flute quartet, while *Hep 30 B* for bassoon and marimba (2015) and *A jövő könyve* for clarinet and vibraphone (2016) belong to the duet genre in a combination of wind instrument and percussion. The third pair is connected by an unusual non-musical inspiration – a hippopotamus – whose twisted comic appearance, most probably a result of children's imagination, culminated in a humorous scherzo-like touch of whimsy in Mezei's musical opus. These are the compositions *Stuffed Hippos* for two violins (2015) and *Hippo Hippopotamus* for violin, cello, double bass and piano (2017). Although the last group of works from the 2010s is also dominated by string instruments, Mezei does not wander far from the main road of his serious musical thought. These are *Hep 13 A. T.* for violin, cello and piano (2014) and *Orlando Application* for string quartet and vibraphone (2016) as certainly the most complex score for chamber ensemble in the entire opus of Mezei.

In the quartet *Resistor* for four piccolo flutes, Mezei is searching for as much expressive space as possible within the seemingly limited possibilities of the sound medium. The piece consists of four contrasting macro-sections divided by rehearsal numbers. The most important stylistic feature of the composition is the vertically synchronized, motoric semiquaver figuration which makes the individual sections lose their recognizability while they introduce their melodico-rhythmic flow into the system of monochrome micropolyphonic texture that almost borders on noise. The musical flow of most of this composition is mechanized and reminiscent of an out-of-tune music box. Strong dynamic contrasts (ff – pp) are noticeable, as well as a brief thinning of the texture. Although written for four flutes as well, the composition *Hep 21 E / 22 L* represents a somewhat different approach to the timbre aspect of the sound medium. The monohomicity of the sound this time is not emphasized, as in the *Resistor*, but is transcended by the ensemble's quasi-choir setting, ranging from bass to piccolo flute. The rhythmic curve in this composition also leaves the impression of mechanization, but rather reminds one of the uniformity of children's

rhymes with occasional ‘skips’ and ‘mistakes’. Children’s folklore and other archaic strongholds of the composer’s musical imagination in *Hep 21 E / 22 L* are extracted from ‘iconic’ representations. The heterophonic polyphony is realized by an isorhythmic compositional structure whose vertical component is based on empty harmonies (fifths and fourths) or on a tone cluster superposition of melodies. As in previous works, in both cases it achieved the effect of colouristic articulation of the melody, rather than its harmonic contextualization. The musical flow of the composition *Hep 21 E / 22 L* is characterized by stylized (and also extracted from clearly recognizable) jazz interpolations. In section [10], the bass flute in the style of a bass guitar brings a harmonico-rhythmic ostinato, then the accompaniment à la rhythm guitar is included, in order for a swing melody to perform in the treble. Sections [19] and [21] and the final section contain *open for solo* associations, with a quasi-improvisational melody over the *bass walking* movement, thus concluding the musical flow with a final departure from the initial heterophonic isorhythm.

Example 4: Szilárd Mezei, *Resistor*, bars 1–4.

Resistor

Szilárd Mezei (2017)

♩ = 110

Example 5: Szilárd Mezei, *Hep 21 E / 22 L*, bars 1–7.

Hep 21 E / 22 L

Szilárd Mezei (2017)

♩ = 100

Unlike most of Mezei’s other compositions, the melody in *Hep 21 E / 22 L* figures as a theme. There is no thematic work in the traditional sense, but a rehearsal number [2] brings multi-layered interactions of the melody with

the musical material of less expressiveness, where each of these interactions brings the melody to light in a different way, making it the thematic structural focus of the form. It should be noted that in Mezei's music, the role of structural centres of form, as a rule, have tegral sections such as blocks, textures and independent linearity. Mezei's melody-theme is also found in two somewhat earlier compositions, *Hep 30 B* for bassoon and marimba and *A jövő könyve* for clarinet and vibraphone. As for the form, these two compositions are closer to the composition *Resistor* than *Hep 21 E / 22 L*, because instead of the development-evolutionary flow, they have a reprise-architectural form made according to the model of incomplete equivalence. *Hep 30 B* initially brings an isorhythmic *staccato* 'hoketus', while the rhythm then becomes more complex and differentiated. Instead of an aleatoric textural abundance, the neoclassical ideal of the economical use of musical material prevails in this work, revoked only by the occasional destructive release of energy in quasi-improvisational spontaneity. In the rehearsal number [6], we find an unambiguous signifier of academic musical discourse – canonic imitation. The polyphony of the structure, however, has no neo-baroque meaning, because the distinct rhythmic disunity of the canonically led voices achieves an almost textural sound-aesthetic effect (Audio Example No. 6, *Hep 30 B*, 05:50–06:25).²² Contrary to this 'meaningful counterpoint' of the written score and sound, the folkloristic episode in number [8] in which the bassoon exposes the melody of the archaic overtone in the marimba is less distant from the 'iconic' connections with the folklore reference source.

Example 6: Szilárd Mezei, *Hep 30 B*, bars 1–5.

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Bassoon and Marimba. The score is for bars 1-5 of Example 6. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 140. The Bassoon part is written in the lower register, and the Marimba part is written in the upper register. Both parts feature a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents and slurs, and a melodic line that is a canonically led voice.

The folkloristic dimension of the material in the composition *A jövő könyve* is given through the initial melodic particle in the ambitus of the diminished tetrachord as a constitutive element of the octatonic scale. Along with the expansion of the ambitus, the melody-theme in this piece is characterized by *acciaccaturas* that evoke archaic ornaments during the performance. The

²² Audio example 6 is available at the following link: <https://youtu.be/PJQerqrwk68>

rhythm in this composition is typical of Mezei: at the level of the entire musical flow, it consists of a combination of mechanized movement with occasional ‘slips’ and richly differentiated rhythms in sections without bar lines.

Example 7: Szilárd Mezei, *A jövő könyve*, rehearsal numbers [1]–[2]

cca ♩ = 100

1 Rubato

Clarinet in B♭ *mf*

Cl.

Cl.

cca ♩ = 100 **2 Poco Parlando Rubato**

Cl.

Vib.

3

Mezei’s two compositions whose titles indicate the image and behaviour of hippos as a source of programme inspiration, have more contained compositional-technical plans. *Stuffed Hippos* for two violins (2015) begins *Ad libitum* with long dissonant harmonies; first, it shifts into a two-voice heterophony, and then into a texture based on an oscillatory figure of second-third structure, exposed through all rhythmic divisions of the time-signature from triplet to septuplet. In bar 46, a melody that evokes a folk sound was introduced, first based on a diminished tetrachord, and then according to an *ad hoc* interval model without modal associations. In section [7], a recognizable Hungarian folk melody was entrusted to the first violin, while the second violin has an ostinato-based accompaniment. The affirmation of the melody is established in the final section by an even distribution in both parts. Seen from the perspective of the musical material, the form of this composition is evolutionary, but the incomplete equivalence is still established through non-pulsating, *senza misura* encompassing sections, which are contrasted by the distinctly pulsating inner space of the form. Instead of the contrasting musical dramaturgy of “stuffed hippos”, the ordinary ones, in *Hippo Hippopotamus* (2017), are presented with a metrorhythmically homogeneous musical flow in which there is no aleatorics or archaic homorhythm, but rather an ostinato repetition of accompaniment over which melodic particles occasionally appear.

Example 8: Szilárd Mezei, *Stuffed Hippos*, rehearsal number [1]

Ad libitum
♩ = cca 80

Violin 1
Violin 2
Vln.

Aleatoric musical thought has a significant musico-dramaturgical and formal-constitutive role in Mezei's works from the last decade only in *Hep 13 A. T.* for violin, violoncello and piano and *Orlando Application* for string quartet and vibraphone (2016). The instructions for performing the above-mentioned piano trio from 2014 indicate aleatoric musical thinking incorporated into the traditional musical notation.

In **ad libitum** (**Improvvisando** with dashed bar lines) parts of the piece must be played freely. In those parts all the rhythmical values are approximate. There is no common pulse. All the three musicians perform their parts independently of the others, with *rubato*, and must be together only where it is defined so. The wavy line after the repeat signs means that the phrase within the repeat signs needs to be played until the sign that indicates the end of it (or one must wait for everyone else to finish the previous section), and immediately after, the phrase must be finished. The **a battuta** sections of the piece must be played accurately.

It is important to point out that individual sections are meticulously composed in all parameters, and that *improvvisando* refers exclusively to the absence of their metric synchronization. Here, too, it is not a question of linear thinking that results in the polyphony of the compositional structure, but of a nuanced texture derived from the inconsistency of lines based on the semi-quaver movement interrupted with rests (Audio Example No. 7, *Hep 13 A. T.*, 00:00–01:20).²³ The revocation of motoric motion in the name of melodic

²³ Audio example 7 is available at the following link: <https://youtu.be/KIZXirV36kY>.

profiling of the musical flow is one dramaturgical plane of the piece, while the other is aimed at challenging the effect of aleatoric freedom in confronting the metric and ametric variants of similar musical material. From the rehearsal number [10], full bar lines appear, which stabilize the vertical ratio of horizontal lines. It is particularly striking the isorhythmic unison in the section [12], whose structure approaches the model of expressionist melody in terms of interval structure and register range, but whose length and steady marching motion oppose the ideas of expressionist ‘scattered’ musical discourse.

Example 9: Szilárd Mezei, *Hep 13 A. T.*, rehearsal number [1]

The complexity and extensiveness of the musical flow in *Orlando Application* surpasses all other compositions of chamber music by Mezei. The title indicates the treatment of a theme from music history both through modernist stylistic leveling and through the postmodernist collage-eclectic shaping of the musical material. Assuming that the “application of Orlando” refers to Orlando di Lasso, one of the most important Renaissance composers, the motet quasi-choral approach at the beginning is a very clear reference. Changes in vertical harmonies without the harmonic rhythm – tonal, modal or atonal (through the so-called “complementary harmony”²⁴) – result in the establishment of a static block with elements of the third, second-fourth or fourth-fifth chords. The textural design of the material persists. In sections [4], [5] and [6], the development is introduced by the elements of contrast. The aleatoric texture goes through a phase of approximate homorhythm based on quasi-determined note values, written in stemless crotchet note heads. The bar lines synchronize this smooth flow in the strings before the vibraphone brings a pulsating figure in quavers and thus further dynamizes this complex sound situation. Various textural formations further alternate

²⁴ See: Hermann Danuser, “Ekspresionizam i rani atonalitet”, *Glazba 20. stoljeća*, Zagreb, Croatian Musicological Society, 2009, 40–54 [Expressionism and Early Atonality; Music of the Twentieth Century].

in blocks, until the appearance of an ‘intimistic’ interpolation in sections [16] – [18] (Audio Example No. 8, *Orlando Application*, 11:05–14:09).²⁵ Since this episode individualizes the musical flow of the composition more than any new sound texture, it is better to put into focus the theme, particularly the first theme, because the second one of a similar stylistic approach will appear later.

Example 10: Szilárd Mezei, *Orlando Application*, bars 205–223.

♩ = 180

205

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Vib.

210

24 cca 1' - 2'

attacca

24

213

25

26 dolce

25

26

²⁵ https://youtu.be/ckinxw_T73w

The suspense effect is in an unexpected transition to an independent archaico-dance rhythm in sections [21] – [24], which was used very successfully by Bartók and Stravinsky. As in the previous situations, Mezei's formal procedure in this piece implies exposition and varied repetition of the material as a whole, so that subtle transitions and developmental processes often occur within clear sections. The polystylistic nature of the work is confirmed by another intimistic episode/theme [25] – [32], with a melody based on complementary two-bar phrases (syntactically linked by the neoclassical phraseological logic of 'questions' and 'answers', but without cadence), and a texture in which the violoncello imitates *cantus firmus*, and two violins syn-copated florid counterpoint. The isorhythmical unison, as found in the section [12] of *Hep 13 A. T.* and which is a recognizable feature of Mezei's musical style, this time appears in section [33]. Its line is already changed in the next section into a melody-accompaniment form and thus introduced into a form of developmental variation, the starting point of which would be a real polyphonization of the compositional structure, with equal lines in counterpoint, if *pizzicato* articulation had not instead formed a chaotic punctualist texture that at some points associated – especially in the independent sections of violoncello and vibraphone – with the improvisational jazz solo rhythm section. The return of the now altered second intimistic theme, new textural blocks and, finally, the reactivation of the static motet-form block, complete this musical flow filled with dialogue of the most distant stylistic spheres of the musical universe in the melancholic emotional register.

The analyzed compositions of Szilárd Mezei are characterized by the consistent and thoughtful implementation of folklore elements in contemporary musical expression. Caring for one's own heritage, materialized in a sweeping discography, with Mezei goes 'hand in hand' with nurturing the cultural heritage of the community to which he belongs and with which he strongly identifies. Finding inspiration in Hungarian folk tunes, free improvisation and aleatorico-expressionist contemporary art music, as well as other, more personal and more mysterious strongholds of the creative process, Mezei remains recognizable in the domains of composition and performance on the local and regional music scene.

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Summary

Szilárd Mezei is a prominent author on the Serbian, Hungarian and European contemporary music scene, but his oeuvre has not been the subject of musicological research so far. Born in Senta, where he acquired his first musical education, Mezei remains permanently committed to life in this Vojvodina town, as well as to the musical folklore of the Vojvodina Hungarians as the basis of his artistic expression. He performs as a violist, composer, improviser and leader of several ensembles that bear his name. He has hundreds of concerts behind him, over 600 compositions and 55 sound releases. The poetic strongholds of Mezei's musical language are Hungarian folk music, improvisation and new sound practices of contemporary music. Contrary to the usual “distribution of the parts” in music into compositional and performing creativity, Mezei, with a number of his constant collaborators, is the most active performer of his own music. Its genre classification is conditional and implies the grouping of compositions into chamber and orchestral music. Given that the chamber music opus is chronologically more extensive and follows the development of the

composer's creative personality over the past three decades, a selection of fifteen compositions for mixed chamber ensembles was made for this occasion in order to provide an analytical view of the stylistic and compositional features of Mezei's musical language. The last decade of the last century is represented by the *Trio* for violin, viola and violoncello, the *Trio* for oboe, English horn and bassoon and the *Trio* for flute, piano and percussion. Since 2000, he has composed *Tibet gyros*, *Örizigető*, *Csip csip* and *Hep 7 B*, and since 2010, *Hep 13 A.T.*, *Stuffed Hippos*, *A jövő könyve*, *Orlando Application*, *Hep 21 E / 22 L* and *Resistor*. An alternative classification of Mezei's chamber music would consider the relationship between the musical material and compositional-technical procedures. If so, one would find that the early works were dominated by aleatoric expressionism according to the model of the Polish School, and that the later works are based on folk melodies in relation to new music and new sound composing techniques. Based on the insights into Mezei's compositional-technical treatment of musical material, it can be concluded that almost all of his works are based on musical folklore, new sound textures and special congruence modalities in the composing style.