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## INNOVATIONS AND TRADITIONS: EXPLORING TECHNICAL ADVANCES AND MUSICAL INFLUENCES IN ZOLTÁN KODÁLY'S SONATA, OP. 8 FOR SOLO CELLO

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### Abstract

*The topic for this paper is Zoltán Kodály's Sonata, Op. 8 for Solo Cello, with specific reference to its technical advances in cello playing and influences that contributed to Kodály's realization of the sonata as well as its profound influences on other composers of the twentieth century who wrote solo cello repertoire.*

*Having performed Kodály's Solo Sonata for many years and had the benefit of studying it with Janos Starker, the cellist whose name became so identified with championing the work, it was fascinating to me how the Op. 8 Sonata opened a new doorway to the understanding of tonal colors and a fresh way of thinking about how advanced cello technique helps to achieve them. This paper will explore the sonata from historical, stylistic, theoretical and instrumental perspectives, proving that its addition to the repertoire inspired a plethora of solo cello compositions written in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Kodály's compositional style also will be investigated, showing how its manifestation, in a major solo work for the cello, helped to produce significant instrumental, technical and musical traditions for future generations.*

Throughout the course of solo instrumental music, specific works contribute to defining a composer's style while serving, as models, to represent technical and compositional development within a specific genre. The violoncello repertoire is imbued with several noted landmarks, and of those, only a handful is included amongst the unaccompanied catalogue, especially before the twentieth century. According to Dmitry Markevitch's *The Solo Cello*, a bibliography of the unaccompanied violoncello literature, the first unaccompanied pieces for the cello, a *Chiaccona a Basso Solo* and a *Toccata da Violone Solo*, were written by Giuseppe Colombi (c. 1670).<sup>1</sup> The first major works in the solo category of the eighteenth century, the Six Suites for Unaccompanied Violoncello by Johann Sebastian Bach (composed between the years 1717 and 1723), cast a major spotlight on this solo instrument's unique nature, tonal beauty, timbral/textural ranges and technical potential. The cello, once regarded only as a *basso continuo* instrument, by itself would now satisfy all melodic and harmonic features in

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<sup>1</sup> Dmitry Markevitch, *The Solo Cello: A Bibliography of the Unaccompanied Violoncello Literature* (California: Fallen Leaf Press, 1989), 5

the music while exhibiting a wide range of timbres, tonal capabilities, and polyphonic expressions.

The Bach Suites contributed significantly to the evolution of the violoncello as a solo instrument, and considering the scope of difficulty in each suite, the technical demands of negotiating linear melodies within a polyphonic structure helped to develop a higher level of instrumental skill and musical consciousness.<sup>2</sup> As a unique point of interest, Suite No. 5 in C Minor indicates the retuning of the *a* string (*scordatura*) one step lower to *g* consequently altering the overtones of the instrument and producing darker tone colors and sonorities. The obvious challenges that exist with technical aspects of *scordatura* require the understanding of playing passages on the proper string without becoming tonally disoriented.

According to Markevitch, it appears that nothing of significance was written for the solo cello during the nineteenth century. Other than three suites, Op. 131 by Max Reger (dedicated to Julius Klengel, Hugo Becker and Paul Grümmer in 1915) and Julius Klengel's *Kaprize*, Op. 43 (1905), Kodály's Solo Sonata exists as the first major unaccompanied work written for the cello since Bach. Zoltán Kodály's Sonata, Op. 8 (written in 1915) continues in the footsteps of the Bach Cello Suites, considering the extent of polyphonic textures; grand two-, three-, and four-string chords; virtuosic passages; and its monumental design. From its unconventional tuning (the *scordatura* specifies that the *G* and *C* strings are each tuned a half step lower to *F#* and *B*) and exotic harmonic language evoking music of Debussy as well as the modal systems of medieval plainchant, to its dazzling display of virtuosity that requires advanced technical abilities (extensive use of thumb position, rapid string crossings, harmonics, pizzicato and simultaneously playing pizzicato and arco), the Op. 8 Sonata stands as a true milestone of the twentieth century solo cello repertoire.

While the musical contents of the Bach Cello Suites are based primarily on characteristics from indigenous European court dances, Bach's compositional style ultimately seeded the traditionalism from which grew a long line of Germanic and other Western European composers. Kodály's music, deeply influenced by Hungarian folklore, contains a synthesis of Western-European traditional art music with roots in the Germanic lineage and Hungarian Nationalism. Kodály's

music can be divided between two stylistic periods. There is nothing to suggest that his stylistic characteristics evolved from one period to the other; however, the genres that he chose in either case provide an interesting comparison.<sup>3</sup> It is clear that his earlier works, which include songs, piano pieces, choruses, one lengthy orchestral poem (*Summer Evening*), and string chamber music (First String Quartet, Op. 2; Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op. 4; Duo for Violin and Cello, Op. 7; Solo Cello Sonata, Op. 8; Second String Quartet, Op. 10; Adagio for Violin and Piano; and Serenade for Two Violins and Viola), were no less mature than works of his later period (which did not include chamber pieces). As an important first step in formulating a mature style, Kodály's first collection of his harmonized Hungarian folksong arrangements, were published jointly with Béla Bartók in 1906. The second step, which quickly solidified his personal style, was his discovery of Debussian harmony applied to melodies derived from Hungarian folksong.<sup>4</sup>

Based on his compositions, writings and speeches, Kodály had the objective to create a national music and culture.<sup>5</sup> Caught in a growing chasm existing between nationalist and atonal composers, Kodály's music was openly rejected by the

<sup>2</sup> Allen Winold, *Bach's Cello Suites: Analyses and Explorations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> C. Mason, *Kodály and Chamber Music*, in *Zoltano Kodály: Octogenario Sacrum*, ed. GyörgyBernát (Budapest: Akadémiai Nyomda, 1962), 251-253

<sup>4</sup> László Eösz, *Zoltán Kodály: His Life and Work* (London: Collet's Holdings LTD, 1962), 101-102

<sup>5</sup> Ferenc Bónis, *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály* (London: Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd., 1974), "Hungarian Folksongs," "Hungarian Folk Music," "What is Hungarian in Music?"

Nationalists because he accepted as authentic folk music only the songs of the lower classes while ignoring the popular art songs of the middle class. Those representing the *avant-garde* movement took issue with Kodály for they regarded his works as second-hand interpretations and not individual compositions.<sup>6</sup> Even though this ideological debate continued to be a controversial issue surrounding him, Kodály, along with Bartók, successfully created a national musical language and a synthesis of underlying styles, which ultimately united music of the common folk with the aristocracy of European masters.

In an article from 1925 entitled “Hungarian Music” in which he explained the importance of Hungarian folksong to a Hungarian composer, Kodály wrote:

In general, many people deny the significance of the folksong in the composition of higher music... Well, he who contends that the average European folksong is as a rule too primitive to have anything in common with higher art or with a more complex inner life, is right to some extent ... Nevertheless, there are Hungarian melodies which for me and many others are an experience like that of a Beethoven theme. Let me add that an acquaintance with Hungarian folk music is far more important and fruitful for a Hungarian composer than their respective folksongs are for say German, French or Italian composers. In countries with old cultural traditions the basic substance of folk music had long before been absorbed in various forms of higher art. Great composers act as a huge collecting and retaining reservoir for the strength and emotions of their people. Bach condensed German folk music in such a way as had never been done by the composers of any other nation. German students of music who had absorbed Bach’s compositions never had to devote so much attention to the study of folk music... The situation is quite different in this country. Our only tradition lies in folk music.<sup>7</sup>

Bartók also wrote in a later article: “If I were to name the composer whose works are the most perfect embodiment of the Hungarian spirit, I would answer, Kodály. His work proves his faith in the Hungarian spirit.”<sup>8</sup>

Between 1905 and 1920, a period that includes his chamber works, Kodály composed over fifty songs in which the poems of contemporary and ancient poets were set to music. In his article “The Artistic Significance of the Hungarian Folksong,” Kodály wrote: “The Hungarian folksong is *par excellence* identical with Hungarian classical music. The evolution of Hungarian polyphonic music in the European sense could not have occurred in any other way.”<sup>9</sup>

Characteristic of many songs, the line, form, dynamics, rhythm, and accompaniment of the melody were determined by the words. Kodály’s acutely detailed study of the rules of pronunciation and accentuation in speech enabled him to set his Hungarian mother tongue to music and make it the perfect instrument of artistic expression. The following Hungarian laments, collected, researched and catalogued from Kodály’s and Bartók’s expeditions, depict the declamatory vocal style with typical idiomatic dotted rhythms.

Example 1:

No. 160. Gyimeskozeplok

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<sup>6</sup> László Eöszé, *Zoltán Kodály: His Life in Pictures and Documents* (Budapest: Zenemukiado, 1971), 6-7

<sup>7</sup> László Eöszé, *Zoltán Kodály: His Life in Pictures and Documents*, 7

<sup>8</sup> Belá Bartók, “The Folksongs of Hungary,” *Pro Musica*, (October 1928): 28-35

<sup>9</sup> Eöszé, *Zoltán Kodály: His Life*, 7

Parlando  $\text{♩} = \text{cca } 104$

Jaj, lelköm, lelköm, jó társom, négyvennégybe elcsözt, megölte az az át-között háború - ú!

Jaj, András, András, hol van a te sí-ro - od?

Jaj hol van a te gyászos sírod? Sose tudom még a kőröszfűdöt se fel-keres-ni.

Example 2:

Csitár (Nyitra County), 1914

Lyányom, lyányom, kedves ga-lam-bom, I-lon-kám, Már tē csak a-zo-ka-tj

mind vég-höz vit-ted azt a nagy ke-se-rü-si-gēt, a-kit né-kēm o-koz-tál.  
etc.

Throughout the solo cello sonata, Kodály draws on characteristics of the latter mentioned (*parlando*) vocal style by frequently superimposing *rubato* and first-syllable accentuation on many melodic passages.

Example 3:

Zoltán Kodály, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Adagio (con grand' espressione), mm. 12-16

Also apparent is a colorful fusion of melodic material derived not just from folk songs of Kodály's native people, but also, like many other works from this time period, the influences of all periods of musical history: Gregorian chant, Bach, both the Classic and Romantic masters and, most of all, Debussy. The music of Debussy, which he discovered during his 1906 visit to Paris, was an obvious influence on the harmonic, coloristic and textural design of the sonata.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Percy M. Young, *Zoltán Kodály: A Hungarian Musician*, (London: Ernest Benn Ltd., 1964), 37  
222

In a 1918 article issued in *Nyugat* (a significant literary journal of modern Hungarian literature), Kodály wrote upon the death of Debussy:<sup>11</sup>

In harmonies he often renounced the advantage of combining chords in a customary way, thereby increasing the expressive force of the chords he used. His melodies move in the fresh currents avoiding chromatics. At this point his music touches both ancient and folk music. But it is the culture of tone colors which owes most to him. His works are conceived in terms of colors. ... Debussy took a great step forward, creating hitherto unimagined sound patterns.

The parallel between Kodály's and Debussy's fascination with poetry and its impact on their art is striking. Continuing in the same article, Kodály writes: "The course on which he set out leads towards freedom and beauty. And it does not matter how large a part of this new world belongs to him. His realm is not large, not to be compared with that of the few greatest composers. But he is a poet in his own world and nobody can be more than that."<sup>12</sup>

Other stylistic traits, seen as trademarks of Kodály, are found throughout the solo sonata. The importance of modal scales can be seen as a reference to the Medieval Era or Hungarian folk songs. The block chord structure and Baroque idiom are reminiscent of Bach. The spirit of Viennese classicism is very evident in regard to a sense of formal design, proportion and balance. His early musical education involved studies in both violin and cello (the latter because of an interest in playing string quartets). It was his experience with these two instruments, the cello becoming his favorite, which gave Kodály valuable understanding of string playing and insight on its technical potential, providing him with the necessary tools to compose the Op. 8 Sonata. Jenő Kerpely, a noted virtuoso cellist of the Waldbauer Quartet, gave the solo sonata its premiere on May 7, 1918 in Budapest.

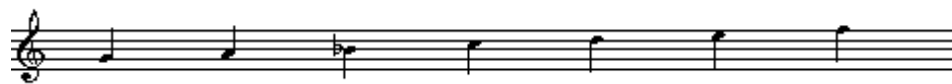
Remarking on this Sonata in a 1921 article, *The New Music of Hungary*, Bartók wrote:

No other composer has written music that is at all similar to this type of work –least of all Reger, with his pale imitations of Bach. Here Kodály is expressing, with the simplest possible technical means, ideas that are entirely original. It is precisely the complexity of the problem that offered him the opportunity of creating an original and unusual style, with its surprising effects of vocal type; though quite apart from these effects the musical value of the work is brilliantly apparent.<sup>13</sup>

Kodály asserts old traditions of both Hungarian folk idiom and Western European in the first movement by establishing for the primary theme a sarabande rhythm and an obvious folk melody reminiscent of plainchant (transposed Dorian mode) in the first statement. Kodály formulated most of the melodic content with one of the following folk scales or modes: G-Dorian, G-Aeolian, pentatonic and gypsy scales.

Example 4:

G-Dorian



G-Aeolian

<sup>11</sup> Ferenc Bónis, "Claude Debussy," *The Selected Writings of Zoltán Kodály*, 68-69

<sup>12</sup> Bónis, *The Selected Writings*, 69

<sup>13</sup> Eösze, *Zoltán Kodály: His Life*, 109



Pentatonic Scale



Gypsy scale with augmented intervals



By far the most traditional movement of the sonata, the *Allegro maestoso ma appassionato* follows a sonata form structure with multiple themes and a full-fledged development section. The brooding and ominous opening phrase establishes, as in the traditions of Bach, Haydn and Beethoven, significant germinal motives (mm. 1-4).

Example 5:

Zoltán Kodály, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, *Allegro maestoso ma appassionato*, mm. 1-7



**c**  
Melodic Motives:

Motive a      Motive b      Motive c      Motive d

*Motive a*, highlighted by accents, and *motive d* constitute a deep-seated Hungarian folk cliché found in hundreds of folk melodies. Within this melodic motive are found several sub-motives: the minor/major second (c#-d)/(f#-e) and perfect fourth (a-d)/(b-e), intervals that consistently reappear throughout the movement.

Example 5a:

Hungarian Folk Melody No. 286 (Szolnok) recorded by Bartok in 1918



In Example 5a, the Hungarian folk song recorded and catalogued by Bartók contains the above mentioned Hungarian cliché, a descending perfect fourth interval approached by a step, especially at the end of the phrase.<sup>14</sup> As a significant interval, the perfect fourth (mm. 87-88) and its augmented counterpart (tritone) (mm. 160-161) are intervals most associated with Hungarian folk music and Kodály's melodies.<sup>15</sup>

Example 6:

Zoltán Kodály, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Allegro maestoso ma appassionato, mm. 86-88

**Perfect fourths**

Example 7:

Zoltán Kodály, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Allegro maestoso ma appassionato, mm. 157-164

**Tritones outlining diminished arpeggio**

**Tritones outlining augmented arpeggio**

The tension of the rising melodic line is created by tritones first outlining a diminished arpeggio (m. 160), and then a measure later, outlining an augmented one. The motives permeate the movement, and with the transference of phrases from one movement to another, provide many unifying aspects to the entire sonata.

In measures 5 – 13 Kodály treats the 'B' as a reference point to the following intervallic exchange:  $d^1-b^1$ ,  $c\#^1-b^1$ ,  $f\#^2-b^1$ ,  $e\#^2-b^1$ ,  $b^1-c\#^2$ .

Example 8:

Zoltan Kodaly, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Allegro maestoso ma appassionato, mm. 4-16

<sup>14</sup> Béla Bartók, *The Hungarian Folk Song*, 295

<sup>15</sup> Zoltán Kodály, *Folk Music of Hungary*, 81-84



On a theoretical basis, this intervallic succession highlights the established tonality by expanding away from and returning to the B tonal center. Emotionally, the opening statement's progression of expanding intervals charges the melodic line with harmonic tension while exemplifying the complete range of the instrument. By re-tuning of the *G* and *C* strings (*F# - B*), Kodály actually expands the traditional range of the cello.

The tonal centers move from *F#* (mm.14 – 22), then *C* (mm. 23-27), and finally returning conclusively to its original *B* tonality (mm. 27 – 31). Creating three-measure sequences, the phrase builds to a climactic *sostenuto* statement before resuming the movement's original tempo.

A distinctive feature of Kodály's treatment of chords in the second section (mm. 32-80) is his use of Debussian "coloristic" notes – auxiliary notes, which he attaches to one or more notes of a conventionally constructed chord, in such a way that the notes are not sounded in sequence, but simultaneously. Here, the auxiliary notes, generally left unresolved, are not restricted to intervals of seconds, but are extended to intervals of thirds and even fourths. Kodály establishes in m. 41 two types of seventh chords: first, a major-major seventh (major triad with added major seventh), followed by a German augmented sixth.

The second section contrasts to the primary section in its rhapsodic, improvisational and *dolce* qualities. Typical of Kodály's vocal *parlando* style (lamentation), this thematic material is infused with syllabic accentuations and declamatory statements. The tonality again recalls Debussy in its more "coloristic" rather than functional usage. Kodály establishes here a contrapuntal voice (mm. 43-48, 53-58). The counter-voice, dramatic in its subtlety, is a repeating sigh motive figure derived from the opening phrase recalling in its melodic contour, motive {a}. Observe in mm. 46, 48, 49, 53, 55, 57 and 59 the repetition of the dialectic first syllable enunciations.

Example 9:

Zoltan Kodaly, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Allegro maestoso ma appassionato, mm. 43-58

The image shows a musical score for three systems of music, measures 43-58. The first system (measures 43-48) is in 3/4 time and features a melody with various articulations and dynamics including *pp*, *espr.*, and *poco sostenuto*. The second system (measures 48-53) continues the melody with dynamics like *sfzp* and *ff*. The third system (measures 53-58) includes dynamics such as *mp* and *cresc.* The score is written for a single melodic line, likely for the cello, and includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

The melodic contours here are unmistakably influenced by the folk idiom in the following aspects: the rhythmic starting-point originates from a strong beat since there is no general iambic opening in the Hungarian language; there exists a completeness of each phrase within itself, emphasized by the interjectory character of the accompaniment; the reliance on pentatonic structure; the frequency of falling cadences in the melody; the use of modality; and rhythms are fluid.<sup>16</sup>

In the second movement, *Adagio (con grand' espressione)*, there exists a fantasia-like structure flavored with a vocal improvisational style (*parlando*). In a Debussian way, the movement is visual and associative, filled with an imaginative scheme of mystery, pathos and the exotic colors associated with landscape painting.

<sup>16</sup> Kodály, *Folk Music of Hungary*, 24-35

According to the leaders of the Bohemian school of painters, Antonín Slaviček and Professor Jiří Kotalic, there was a strong parallel to the quality and intention of the unaccompanied cello sonata (as well as other of Kodály's music of that period) and in the works of the Bohemian artists. Kotalic wrote in the September 1962 issue of *Czechoslovak Life*:<sup>17</sup> "To them, this art meant more than pure formalism. They interpreted it as a vehicle for expressing contemporary views and feelings, ideas and sentiments. Yet they did not dissociate modernism from the nation's cultural heritage." He further observed: "[Landscape painting], more than any other genre, was his medium for consciously trying to grasp and express external reality without relinquishing his purely personal reaction to that reality."

The constantly changing time signatures and *tempo rubato* give a sense of unmeasured rhythmic characteristics. Throughout the movement, recurring lamentations, suggestive of a baritone voice singing a soliloquy, are juxtaposed to ferocious passages, resembling battle cries. Here, the technical complexity revolves around the simultaneous arco and pizzicato passages. The declamatory downbeats of the pizzicato appear as a drone (mostly on third and fifth beats of each measure), offering a dance pattern and ultimately, rhythmic counterpoint.

Example 10:

Zoltán Kodály, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Adagio (con grand'espressione), mm. 7-17

The unusual tone colors created here and in the next example suggest the shepherd's pipe (*furulya*) accompanied by the *lyre* or *zither* in this exchange between the ornate improvisational melody and plucked open strings. Even in its timbral color, there exists the ubiquitous vocal characteristic with first syllable accentuations.

<sup>17</sup> Percy M. Young, *Zoltán Kodály: A Hungarian Musician*, 70

## Example 11:

Zoltán Kodály, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Adagio (con grand'espressione), mm 30-51

The musical score for Example 11 consists of five systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. Measure 30 begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a vocal line marked with a fermata. The bass line is marked *sempre pizz.* (pizzicato). Measure 34 shows a *dim.* (diminuendo) marking in the vocal line. Measure 38 includes a *rit.* (ritardando) marking, followed by *a tempo* and a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = 64$ . The bass line is marked *pp pizz.* (pianissimo, pizzicato). Measure 42 features a *p* (piano) dynamic and a *arco* marking in the bass line. Measure 47 starts with a *poco sosten.* (poco sostenuto) marking and a *pizz.* marking in the bass line.

As the second movement's connection to Hungarian folk song is manifested through a vocal improvisational style, the last movement brings equal considerations of instrumental dance forms of the Hungarian folk idiom. Kodály wrote:

The Hungarians are not especially instrumental music-lovers. Even poor people rather listen to music, than play with their own hands. Therefore compared to the richness of folk singing our instrumental music is moderate. However it is extremely significant because of the ancient traits preserved by instrumental music.<sup>18</sup>

The *Allegro molto vivace* is the *tour-de-force* of this sonata. Kodály structures this movement with a simple folk-dance theme in a 2/4 meter followed by a series of unobvious variations. In his latest book, *The World of Music According to Starker*, Janos Starker gives this account of Kodály's comments after his performance of the work in 1939: "After the concert, while I was still responding to the ovation, Kodály was the first to speak to me. 'First movement, too fast. Second, O.K. Third, don't separate too much the variations. Good night.' I hadn't noticed as yet that they *were* variations."<sup>19</sup>

Each variation becomes a test of endurance and facility to negotiate extensive passages of unusual harmonic excursions, coloristic and timbral explorations, and daredevil pyrotechnics. Maintaining a similar unifying idea from the first movement, Kodály constructs each variation from a specific motive. The following example reveals motivic components of the theme from which the variations are derived.

<sup>18</sup> Emese Kerkay, *Hungarian Folk Instruments* (Passaic, New Jersey: American Hungarian Museum, 2002) [http://www.passiondiscs.co.uk/articles/hungarian\\_folk\\_instruments1.htm](http://www.passiondiscs.co.uk/articles/hungarian_folk_instruments1.htm) (accessed June 1, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Janos Starker, *The World of Music according to Starker*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 92

## Example 12a:

Zoltán Kodály, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Allegro molto vivace, mm. 1-20

It appears ironic that such a movement containing near-impossible technical passages would be constructed from this child-like folk tune as its melodic source of material.

Kodály balances the movement's simplicity of form, rhythm and melodic design with dynamic extremes and complexities of harmony, timbral colors, and articulations. This movement displays, without question, some of the fiercest technical passages in the violoncello repertoire. Note in example 13 and 14 *motive a* imbedded within the passage.

## Example 12b:

Zoltán Kodály, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Allegro molto vivace, mm. 308-325

Exploring all possibilities, many passages in the final movement show the cello treated as a folk instrument or, because of the full textures, almost as an entire orchestra. Frequently, the cello's usual sonorities are intermingled with tone colors most associated with indigenous folk instruments popular to Hungarian dance traditions and used usually in association with accompanying the violin. In the third movement we find possible allusions to: the *cymbalom* or hammered-dulcimer (cimbalom), whose metal strings are played with long carved sticks, sometimes covered for different tone color) or bagpipes or even the *hurdy-gurdy*, a revolving lute (*tekerő*) with a resonance box that has a string for melody and two strings for accompaniment. The strings are sounded by rotating a resonating wooden disc.

## Example 13:

Zoltán Kodály, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Allegro molto vivace, mm. 119-142

Musical score for Example 13, showing measures 119-142 of Zoltán Kodály's Solo Sonata, Op. 8. The score is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a series of sixteenth-note patterns. An arrow labeled "Motive a" points to a specific rhythmic motif in measure 119. Dynamics include piano (*p*) and forte (*f*).

Note the rhythmic and textural similarities with a bagpipe melody used in Erkel's national opera *László Hunyadi* (1844).<sup>20</sup>

## Example 14:

Zoltán Kodály, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Allegro molto vivace, mm. 56-67

Musical score for Example 14, showing measures 56-67 of Zoltán Kodály's Solo Sonata, Op. 8. The score is in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of one flat (Bb). It features a series of sixteenth-note patterns. An arrow labeled "Inverted motive a" points to a specific rhythmic motif in measure 62. Dynamics include piano (*p*), mezzo-forte (*mf*), and fortissimo (*ff*).

## Example 15:

Erkel, national opera, *László Hunyadi*

Musical score for Example 15, showing measures of Erkel's national opera, *László Hunyadi*. The score is in treble and bass clefs with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a series of sixteenth-note patterns.

<sup>20</sup> Kodály, *Folk Music*, 141

Other sections alluding to strummed instruments (either lyre or zither) are depicted with extended pizzicato passages,

Example 16:

Zoltán Kodály, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Allegro molto vivace, mm. 74-96

and glissando pizzicato;

Example 17:

Zoltán Kodály, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Allegro molto vivace, mm. 573-604

or in the “storm variation,”<sup>21</sup> a measured tremolo with pizzicato passage suggesting the *hit gardon* or percussive cello (*ütögardon*), which has three strings tuned to one tone and hammered with a stick, while a thinner string is plucked simultaneously so that it recoils on the fingerboard. Imitating the hammering of the stick, four pizzicato quarter notes are played in a *forte* dynamic with *pesante* character.

<sup>21</sup> Janos Starker’s description from personal interview, June 2007.

## Example 18:

Zoltán Kodály, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Allegro molto vivace, mm. 379-410

This is an infamous section of the movement, technically requiring unconventional hand positions to facilitate playing beyond the end of the fingerboard while providing forceful left-hand pizzicato.

It is evident that Kodály's Solo Sonata brought the cello to an apex of technical, musical and tonal/timbral possibilities. Other than Mendelssohn's Sonata no. 2 in D Major, Op. 58 (*Scherzo*) or in the last movement of Brahms Sonata no. 2 in F Major, Op. 99, pizzicato was usually used more for reinforcing a piece's harmonic structure rather than as a timbral expression of a melody. It is rare to find a solo cello piece written prior to Kodály's Solo Sonata that contained such extensive or imaginative usage of pizzicato. Alluding to folk instruments, as in the second movement pizzicato accompaniments to the legato folk melody passages or imitating the timbre of a guitar or another strummed instrument, the idea of glissando-pizzicato, used also by Debussy in his Sonata for Cello and Piano (also written in 1915), became a twentieth century feature. Later in the century, extensive use of pizzicato or the use of glissandi-pizzicato became common place, and can be found in solo cello works of Cassadó, Ligeti and Crumb.

For years, the four-minute mile was considered not merely unreachable but, according to physiologists of the time, dangerous to the health of any athlete who attempted to reach it. By the end of 1957, 16 runners had logged sub-four-minute miles. When considering Kodály's Solo Sonata, very few cellists attempted to play it initially because of its technical challenges. The athletic endurance required to play just the last movement is considerable. Though *scordatura* itself is not an innovative technique, it does present technical and tonal challenges in this work that require the soloist to modify customary fingerings.

For the trill passage in the first movement or other physically uncomfortable places throughout the second and third movements, a revolutionary technical solution espoused by Starker to negotiate these passages proposes placing the thumb under the fingerboard and moving it there while playing in the upper register of the instrument. Starker notes that this idea allows the use of all four fingers (as if playing the violin), and "seems to answer the question of security, the matter of the functioning overtones, and the need for an identical angle between the fingers and the strings in all positions."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Starker, *The World of Music*, 287

## Example 19:

Zoltan Kodaly, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Allegro maestoso ma appassionato, mm. 134-140

As the Greek philosopher, Plato stated, “necessity is the mother of invention.” From my own conversations with Starker, I concluded that this innovative development arose out of a cellist’s need to negotiate the register extremes and unusual intervals, some created by octave displacement, in the Kodály’s Op. 8 Sonata. Other technical issues occur from devices used to provide accompaniment to melodies. These technical challenges are realized with the voicing of double stops and secondary melodic lines, especially in the second and third movements, where arco passages are accompanied simultaneously by pizzicato, and varied textures, timbres and rhythmic counterpoint are created. Lastly, many passages throughout the sonata require playing in the highest positions of all four strings. The unusual nature of the latter point and extensive use of the thumb as a true playing finger, as opposed to anchoring a high playing position, was considered unknown territory.

Like Roger Bannister showing the world that breaking the four minute mile could be done, it was just a matter of time before the Op. 8 Sonata would be an included work in the standard repertoire. According to Janos Starker, Kodály had commented in 1921: “In 25 years, no cellist would be recognized without the Op. 8 Sonata being part of their repertoire.”<sup>23</sup> Starker adds that Kodály was about ten years off, because of the war, and in 1956, the Op. 8 Sonata was included for the first time as an obligatory work in the Casals International Cello Competition (Mexico). Starker first performed the sonata in 1939, which received rave reviews and publicity in *Musical America*, one of the most established musical journals for decades. Starker also mentions that, in 1947, he introduced the work to Pierre Fournier and Paul Tortelier, both noted cellists of the twentieth century. Conclusively, it was his recording of the work in 1948, which won the Grand Prix du Disque and consequently brought the sonata from relative obscurity into new light, becoming the standard on which other cellists measured their abilities.

In Markevitch’s bibliographical resource, it is noted that only 150 solo cello works were written from 1900 to 1950. Can it be a coincidence that 1000 more pieces were composed and published from 1950 to present day? The following are to cite just a few major solo works written after Kodály’s solo sonata: Hindemith, Sonata, Op. 25 (1923); Ysaÿe, Sonata, Op. 28 (1924); Cassadó, Suite (1925); Tcherepnine, Suite (1946); Ligeti, Sonata (1949); Schuller, Fantasy, Op. 19 (1951); Prokofiev, Sonata, Op. 133 (1952) (movement from unfinished posthumous sonata, concluded by Vladimir Blok); Crumb, Sonata (1955); Bloch, Suites I-III (1956-58); and Britten, Suites, Op. 72 (1964), Op. 80 (1967), Op. 87 (1971). In the final analysis, I believe that

<sup>23</sup> Janos Starker, direct quote from a personal conversation, 2007



the Kodály Solo Sonata either influenced or inspired many of these works as well as the concertos of Prokofiev and Shostakovich. The following are some compelling examples.

Compared to the Op. 8 sonata, we can find some striking likenesses in György Ligeti Solo Sonata.

Example 20:

György Ligeti, Sonata for Violoncello solo, I. Dialogo, mm. 1-5

Note the glissandi-pizzicato and expressive C-string melody recalling Kodály's declamatory second movement. As another example, Crumb offers a similar recitative style and typical Hungarian rhythms in the opening movement of his Sonata for Solo Cello. Note the declamatory downbeats (mm. 3, 4, 7 and 8) similar to those found in the Kodály excerpt.

Example 21:

George Crumb, Sonata for Solo Violoncello, I. Fantasia, mm. 1-12

Example 22:

Zoltan Kodaly, Solo Sonata, Op. 8, Allegro maestoso ma appassionato, mm. 55-57

Exploring the different ranges of the cello with expressive intervallic leaps, Paul Hindemith offered in his solo sonata a comparable idea as Kodály.

Example 23:

Paul Hindemith, Sonata for Violoncello solo, Lebhaft, sehr markiert,  
Mi festen Bogenstrichen, 19-24



Note the large intervals in this example. Just as the Op. 8 Sonata begins with an intervallic expansion, Hindemith creates harmonic tension by including intervallic contrasts of minor-seconds as well as major-ninths and elevenths.

In a conversation I had with composer/horn player, Gunther Schuller, it was revealed that Janos Starker, who was then principal cellist with the New York Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, had approached Schuller, a New York Met colleague, to write a solo cello work that would be premiered in his upcoming debut. Starker asked if Schuller was familiar with the Kodály Solo Sonata. Schuller exclaimed that not only was he familiar with it, he knew the work intimately since he sat in the recording booth during one of Starker's recording sessions of it. Starker proceeded to request that Schuller write a piece "as difficult as the Kodály."<sup>24</sup> Schuller presented Starker the composition the following week. Ironically, Starker refused the work, according to Schuller, and it was later premiered by László Varga, a noted performer and then principal cellist with the New York Philharmonic.

Since the Kodály Solo Sonata, the cello's instrumental potential and capabilities of being played on a higher level have become more realized, paving the way and inspiring composers, like Gunther Schuller, to write more demanding works. To the performer as well, the Op. 8 Sonata is a revolutionary work, offering transformational opportunities for developing and refining high level modern cello technique.

It is now evident that the violoncello has truly emerged as a valuable ambassador of unaccompanied literature. From the standpoint of technical advances and musical depth, Kodály's Op. 8 Sonata stands as one of the most influential twentieth century works written for the solo cello and its place in the repertoire will continue to be an inspiration for future cellists and composers.

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<sup>24</sup> Gunther Schuller, personal interview, Boulder, Colorado, 1996

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