

Sándor Veress's *Respublika Nyitány* was composed in June / July 1948 and performed exactly *once*, namely in October 1948 by the Magyar Rádió Zenekar, conducted by László Somogyi. – On February 6th 1949, the composer left Hungary for Stockholm to attend the first performance of his ballet *Térszili Katicza*. It would turn out only subsequently that this departure was in fact the first step into an emigration *for ever*. – Nevertheless, by mid-March 1949, Veress was awarded the Kossuth Prize, which he however wouldn't receive personally, since the second production of his ballet took place at Rome at the same time. The laudatio connected to the prize mentioned explicitly two pieces – the *Threnos (in memoriam Béla Bartók)*, composed in 1945, and the just recently premiered *Respublika Nyitány*.

The fact of these justifying references cannot have been sheer coincidence, since the prize itself had significant political implications and the *Ouverture* – at least due to its title – would transport as well, and quite obviously, a political message. But in what exactly consisted this political message and how should it be contextualized? To get an answer to these questions we can at first consult the draft for a letter Veress wrote nearly ten years later to a hitherto not identified recipient – possibly the composer and musicologist John Weissmann in London – in which the circumstances of the composition and performance of the *Ouverture* are being revealed quite clearly. According to this narrative, Veress received the commission – together with Kodály “and others” – by the Ministry of Religion and Education in connection with the centenary commemoration of the Hungarian uprising of 1848/49 against Habsburg. The leading political force in 1948 Hungary, the MDP, seems to have had great interest to “occupy” the historical interpretation of 1848 as far as possible – nevertheless, the composers involved in the musical festivities were free in their choice on which aspect of the historical complex they wanted to focus. Veress, who was himself a member of the Party since May 1945, decided to base his piece on ideas he had long ago found in Sándor Petőfi's political poetry – in particular in the latter's ode *Respublika* from August 1848, whose first lines read as follows: “Respublika, szabadság gyermeke / Szabadság anyja, világ jótevője, / Ki bujdosol, mint a Rákócziak, / Köszöntelek a távoból előre!” [etc.].

As we see, the basic situation of this opening verse (the poem consists of nine in total) may be described as speech act of a lyrical I, typically ode-like addressing the allegorical personification of the Republic, child and mother of liberty in one, from a locally and temporally distant point of view. The text sort, in other words, is *utopic*. And there are good reasons for this perspective, since the author of the poem, Petőfi, stands for political convictions, which may be described in the full sense of the term as *liberal and republican*, but which had obviously no established factual equivalent in the lands of the Habsburg Monarchy of 1848/49.

What did motivate Veress one century later to the decision of taking just *this* author and *this* poem as a textual background for an *Ouverture*, conceived in quasi-romantic (Berlioz-Liszt-) tradition as *symphonic poem* (in the broader sense) on a certain – in this very case political – idea or *programme*? – There are at least two aspects which may be considered here – a more private and a more public one: Firstly, I should mention the fact, that my father was emotionally strongly anchored in what one could call a “family tradition of 1848/49” through the paternal line of his ancestry: His grandfather, Sándor Veress the elder, had been a personal friend to Lajos Kossuth and, after the failure of the independence war, went together with him into Turkish exile, later to England, where he studied engineering.

The second, more public – or actually political – aspect should be seen in the fact, that 1948 was exactly the year, in which important, still remaining institutional elements of the so called Hungarian “coalition period” disappeared definitely from the concrete political landscape: The most important of these changes was probably the unifying party convention of June 1948, in the course of which the Hungarian Communist Party (KMP) “swallowed” the Social Democrats

and fixed the new entity's name as *Hungarian Workers' Party* (MDP). Looking back, this moment has to be seen as one of the most alarming turning points in direction of what would follow in the coming year: the transformation of the Hungarian Republic into a *Peoples' Republic* (by August 1949) and the beginning of severe purges within the new unity party in form of Stalinistic show trials such as the one against László Rajk in September / October 1949.

At this point it may be mentioned, that it was the shocking news of this trial against one of the leading figures of the inner circle of the Party that marked the point of no return (literally understood) within the dilemmas, which might have dominated the personal and political reflections of the potential émigré Sándor Veress, still sitting in Rome in autumn 1949: At this point, he definitely knew – as he often reported in hindsight –, that he would under no circumstances return to his homeland.

In the second half of the year 1948, this personal decision was yet quite far away: By reflecting the title and the poetic quasi-programme of *Respublika Nyitány*, however, we may conjecture, that at least one major element of the political message of Veress's recourse to Petőfi consisted in reminding his audience on the political principles which are classically linked with the modern notion of *republic*. To support this view, we could consult nearly *any* European author in the run-up of the French Revolution from 1789 between John Locke and Immanuel Kant, in whose texts the term *republic* is consequently used as antonym of *despotism* – in the sense namely, that *despotism* is the exact contrary of divided and (parliamentary) controlled power. And from here, we can come back to the Petőfian formula exposing *Respublika* as “child and mother of *liberty*”. Liberty, in other words, cannot be the arbitrary acting of a despotic will, but only the mutually acknowledged freedom of action among equal persons under a constitutional rule of law, that can guarantee diversity. It is quite evident, that this political concept stands crosswise to what was practically on the way in the Hungarian summer and autumn of the year 1948.

Coming to a tentative conclusion, I would answer my introductory questions regarding the political message of the *Respublika Nyitány* as follows: Veress's musical tribute to the centenary commemoration of the 1848/49 events of Hungarian history can be read as a coded message for those who had ears to hear – specifically: a plea for more “republican” diversity in times, where this principle was in acute danger. In the letter draft I referred to in the beginning, Veress states, that he not only *couldn't* accept the Kossuth Prize, since he was already abroad at that time, but that he *explicitly didn't* accept it, arguing: he would only accept it, when it *really* expressed “Kossuth's spirit” – and we may add: Petőfi's spirit.

The interesting punchline in this conclusion is the fact, that this sort of a coded protest – which Veress's *Respublika* might share with pieces like Shostakovitch's *Ninth Symphony*, composed three years before, was articulated by a member of the Party itself – and that meant in Veress's case: an *engaged* member, who was active in various contexts – first of all the Party's *Music Committee*, which he presided a time long and in which he represented the Liszt Academy. In other words: The objection the *Overture* presents is a form of criticism from *inside*, not – or at least not yet – *outside*; it could have reminded those who had ears to hear, that the Hungarian Marxists were on the way to betray a substantial part of their own historical heritage. Veress's recalled reply to a former colleague, confronting him after the concert with the Zhdanow-inspired statement, the great fugue which plays a substantial role in the development section of the piece would be a “formalistic thing and nowadays no more up to date”, supports this reading even on the level of musical aesthetics: “On the contrary”, Veress quotes himself, “the fugue is the most democratic musical form, since in this form, all voices are completely of the same value!”