

Georg Ruzitska: *Introduction et Variations brillantes sur un thème hongrois*, op. 14

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Abstract: *In 2019 we celebrated the 150th anniversary of the death of Transylvanian composer, Georg Ruzitska. Living a long 83 years, he experienced the transition from the Classical to Romantic eras. This period's myriad historic and artistic developments influenced Ruzitska's music, inspiring the migrant composer's composition of the Introduction et variations brillantes sur un thème hongrois op. 14. The work is one of Ruzitska's four unedited, unpublished cello pieces that lay in the form manuscript on the shelves of the Széchenyi Library in Budapest. This interesting musical piece is written for cello and piano in the form of theme and variations and represents many elements of the "verbunkos" style, the contemporary national Hungarian musical idiom. This paper seeks to provide a detailed description of the work, with an emphasis on highlighting the above-mentioned stylistic elements.*

Key-words: *cello music, Georg Ruzitska, Transylvania, verbunkos style*

1. Preambulum

Born in Vienna in 1786, young Georg is hired at the age of 23 by Transylvanian aristocrat, Count János Bánffy, as music teacher to his daughters. After a few years, he became one of the most important musicians in Cluj – then, the capital of Transylvania – working as a piano/music teacher, organist, conductor, but also a composer. His work from this period includes several cello pieces that demonstrate a great variety of salient features, such as distinct style, form, and technique. These distinct attributes could easily be attributed to the awakening of European national identity in music. The following work is a product of these nationalistic movements.

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2. Genesis theory

We do not have much information about the inception of the *Introduction et variations brillantes sur un thème hongrois*, op. 14 – only the few words noted by the composer himself on the cover page of the manuscript stating, “*Composées et dédiés à Mr J. R. Lewy; Maître de Concert de S. A. R. le Prince héréditaire de Suede et Norwegue. 1840*”. J. R. Lewy was a horn player who, along with his brother E.C., inspired numerous composers – including Richard Wagner – to write new, virtuosic playing technique (Ericson 1997, 1). Lewy was born in 1802 in Nancy, studied under Duvernoy in Paris, and played in several European orchestras, including that of the Court Opera in Vienna. In this orchestra, Joseph Rudolf played beside his older brother, Eduard Constantin, and Mr. Breitenwald – Ruzitska’s cello teacher – played too (Lakatos 1940, 39).

Specifically, how Ruzitska and Lewy met, and the nature of their relationship, we do not know. Ericson's article states that Mr. Lewy embarked on a long tour between 1834-1835 to the northern/eastern countries and, for a short period, even served as the music director of the National Navy Orchestra of Sweden. It is very likely that Ruzitska’s dedication on the front cover of the work refers to Lewy in this capacity: *Maître de Concert*. Moreover, His Royal Highness S.A.R. (Son Altesse Royal), references Oscar I., King of Sweden and Norway – a musician himself, and dedicatee of Schumann’s Second Symphony. It might be possible that Lewy, on his way back to Germany, became acquainted with Ruzitska while visiting the city of Cluj. We do not have evidence about this particular visit, though he is mentioned having performed concerts around the region in several newspapers of the time. Likewise, we know that he played in Budapest in November, 1837 (Schöpflin 1930, 128) and Timisoara in January, 1838 (Honművész 1838, 66). It is more than likely that Lewy passed Cluj in the same period – but this scenario casts aspersion on Ruzitska’s “1840” date on the front cover of the score. Equally questionable is the opus number, 14, that does not fit into Ruzitska’s chronology. The issues of dating the *Introduction et Variations brillantes sur un thème Hongrois* require further research to be explored in a forthcoming article.

Beside Lewy’s integral role, other circumstances may have influenced the inception of the work. Take, for example, the composer’s friendship with Ferenc Erkel. Erkel is known as one of the founders of Hungarian musical nationalism, particularly in opera, and through his authorship of the Hungarian National Anthem (music only). His biography references a short, 6-7 year period spent in Cluj, between 1827-1834. During these years, he worked as a piano teacher in the houses of the local aristocrats, led the theater orchestra, and participated in the cultural life of the city. Ruzitska connected to him through a common

acquaintance, polyhistor Sámuel Brassai. Erkel and Ruzitska became good friends and would remain so for the rest of their lives, evidenced by Erkel's gift to Ruzitska: the handwritten, dedicated copy of the overture to his opera, *Báthory Mária* (Lakatos 1971, 127 - 128). Most likely, the two of them extensively discussed the new national ("serious") music, and influenced each other's compositional styles.

Furthermore, while Erkel was active in Cluj the local theater performed the first Hungarian opera, *Béla's Flight*, written by *Joseph* Ruzitska, unrelated. The opera already contained elements of the *verbunkos* style, and undoubtedly impacted both composers' writings.

Finally, it is worth noting that compositions bearing nationalistic character was both fashionable *and* politically strategic. Many composers adopted this model during this period.

3. The work

3.1. Layout and orchestration problems

The *Introduction et Variations brillantes sur un thème Hongrois* is a composition written in F minor, in the form of theme and variations. Of its ten movements – *introduzione*, *Tema (Hongrois)*, including six variations of the theme, *Intermezzo/Andante Fantaise* and *Finale* – the two featured instruments alternate. The manuscript – as most of the Georg Ruzitska's compositions – is kept in the OSZK³ under the register number of Ms Mus 237. The digitized copy only includes two voices voices, cello and piano, omitting the full score – a factor that inhibits the analytical process. The manuscript is not perfectly clear to begin with. For instance, the numbering of the variations differs from one voice to the other. The composer's barely legible markings in archaic German further muddles analysis. Accordingly, the digitized version of the piece is referenced below⁴.

Although this version of the work is composed for piano and cello, its original version might have been written for solo horn with orchestral accompaniment. There are several indications in the manuscript that this might be the case. For example, at the beginning of the second variation, there is a note that it should be played by the horn (Figure 1). Beside the cello/piano version, there might have been a cello/orchestra version, too. Further, there is the reference, "*avec accompagnement de l'orchestre ou Quatour ad L*". This remark suggests that the

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⁴ The piece required transcription in "legible" form, so parts were typed into music scoring software and synchronized, according to Ruzitska's indications, by the author of this paper. Hopefully, this new version of the work will serve as the base of a first edition in the near future.

orchestration would have involved a solo cello with a chamber/string orchestra, or even a quartet (ad L = ad libitum). In the coda section of the *Theme*, a “tutti” indication is present, implying the presence of a larger ensemble.

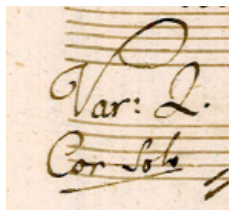


Fig. 1. G. Ruzitska: *Introduction et Variations brillantes sur un thème hongrois, Var. II, piano part, indication of the composer for solo horn*

There are other texts too in the manuscript that refer to the orchestration of the work, such as “*arrangées our piano – forte et violoncelle concertants*”. Later, Ruzitska mentions even a trio version: piano, cello, and violin. Even though the aforementioned clues suggest a broader orchestration, unfortunately only the piano/cello version has survived. This is also the only version mentioned by the musicologist Istvan Lakatos, who researched the life and work of Georg Ruzitska. Presumably, other versions were either lost, or existed only as future orchestration plans by the composer.

3.2. The movements

The composition opens with the **Introduzione** movement, in F minor, 4/4, in an Adagio Sostenuto tempo. The cello’s melodic line is introduced by the rhapsody-like thirty-seconds passage in the piano. The upper voice (cello) is characterized on one hand by chromatic steps, and on the other hand by leaps of sixths, colored by an obscured augmented second interval and syncopated rhythms, concluding with an indicated free improvisation – *ornamento ad libitum* – on the dominant seventh chord.

The above-mentioned form leads to the **Thème hongrois**, composed entirely in *verbunkos* style. The Hungarian word *verbunk* comes from the German *werbung*⁵ referring to the institution of recruiting soldiers in the Habsburg Empire in the 1700s, “inviting” young men to the army by music and dance (Papp 1986, 13). Since the music for dance was frequently played by gypsy bands, the *verbunkos* style gradually adapted elements of gypsy music. Ruzitska’s *Tème hongrois* (Figure 2) features specific features of this style, such as binary meter, use of dotted rhythms and triplets, Major/minor harmonic shifts, arpeggios, and *bokázo*⁶ endings

⁵ Werbung = advertising

⁶ A specific dance figure at the end of the musical phrases whereby a dancer would tap his or her ankles together

(measures 20 and 24 in the musical example below). Research does not confirm if Ruzitska employed a well-known tune of the period, or if it is an original theme. The composition follows all formal and harmonic rules of the style: two musical phrases of eight measures, first (4 +4) in the basic F minor, second (4) starting on the III step and returning (last 4) to the original tonality. The theme in this case is written in a *Lento* tempo, and is divided between the two instruments: the arpeggiating passages are played by the cello, meanwhile the *dolce* indicated second part, featuring descending sixteenth lines, is played by piano solo.

The musical score is titled "Teme hongrois" and is marked "Lento". It is in F minor and 2/4 time. The score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 17-21) features a cello part with arpeggiated figures and a piano part with descending sixteenth-note lines. The second system (measures 22-26) continues the cello part and the piano part, which is marked "dolce". The third system (measures 27-31) shows the cello part resting while the piano part continues with arpeggiated figures. The score includes tempo markings "Lento" and "sul D.", and dynamic markings "dolce" and "Ped.".

Fig. 2. G. Ruzitska: *Introduction et Variantes brillantes sur un thème hongrois*, Teme, M. 12 – 31

Ornaments, highlighting the appoggiaturas in measure 24, in the bokázó figure, are placed on the leading notes of the tonic and dominant. This use of appoggiaturas are frequently used in this style for a coloratura effect. The composer's indication at the beginning of the movement – sul D – to be played on the D string of the cello, suggests that Ruzitska was familiar with gypsy bands, where the *prímás*, the lead violinist would often shift into higher positions on the D or G strings to change timbre. In the J. R. Lewy example, it is possible that Ruzitska wanted to replicate the mellow timbre of the horn. Add the characteristics of the *verbunk*: the freer, fluctuating tempo that appears in forms of *ritenuto* at the end of the phrases.

On the accompaniment, the beat – off beat and the syncopated rhythm of the piano below the melodic line – reinforces the folk music idiom. Later, in the Finale, this accompaniment occurs in the cello line in form of *dúvő*, a special bow technique used in Transylvania even today among folk musicians (Figure 3).

The movement ends with a small, four measure coda, entitled *tutti*, that serves as transition between the following parts of the work.



Fig. 3. G. Ruzitska: *Introduction et "Variantes brillantes sur un thème hongrois," Finale, M 200*

Variation I. and **II.** are complementary to each other: the thirty-seconds passages of the piano solo from the first variation continues to the latter in the cello voice. The tempo markings are similar too: *mosso e brillante* and *poco agitato*. The passages are based on the harmonic (f) minor, a scale sometimes called "gypsy scale" because of the augmented second interval on the 6th and 7th step.

Variation III. is again a piano solo movement in slow motion that evokes Ruzitska's organ playing. The sustained chords and delayed harmonic resolutions both are most likely inspired by his church music experience.

Fast piano triplets supplemented by cello pizzicato herald the **Variation IV.** The *sciolte e leggere*⁷ indication of the composer is accurate: the piano voice of the virtuosic movement cannot be played any other way. The triplets originate in the aforementioned leading note appoggiaturas that transition to the middle of the triplets, transforming into shifting notes.

⁷ Loosely and easily

Like a new breeze arrives **Variaton V.** with its F Major and 6/8 meter. The *andante piacerole* movement highlights the cello's singing voice. The leaps of sixths introduced by the *Introduzione* part are energized by offset beats, followed by eighth and sixteenth groups. As a result, the part has a Viennese dancelike feel.

The nostalgia concludes as **Variation VI.** moves the listener back to Transylvania: binary measure, accented dactyl rhythms, but still in major key. Ruzitska's indication, *di bravum*, clearly refers not only to the interpretation, but also tempo. The two instruments almost compete for agility by tandem, fast sixteenth-note passages.

The **Variation VII.** has multiple titles, depending on the voice: **Andante Fantaise** or **Intermezzo**. This is a short, transitional movement back to F minor that leads to the end of the composition, quoting the first notes of the original theme – this time in sixteenth values. The two instruments essentially perform the same musical material in a canon, like an invention form.

The *Introduction et Variations brillantes sur un thème Hongrois* ends with a spectacular **Finale** movement, wherein both instruments have the opportunity to shine. As a conclusion to the work, the composer neatly references and closes the important musical characters of the variations.

4. Conclusion

By creating the *Introduction et Variations brillantes sur un thème Hongrois*, op. 14 Georg Ruzitska sought to follow his contemporary composers. He employs traits of the verbunkos style as he understood them, combined with his "traditional" compositional style in the work. The instruments are treated as equal partners, both provided with opportunity to highlight the instruments' distinct abilities, leading to a particularly technically demanding piece. As one of the few 19th century, cello-specific works from Transylvania, the composition's value should merit its place in the international cello repertory. The work deserves its place on national and international stages.

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