

History of choir movement in Sfântu Gheorghe from the 19th century onwards

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Abstract: *The choral movement in Sfântu Gheorghe has a long and distinguished history, spanning from its early beginnings in the 19th century to the modern day. This article explores the development of the town's musical traditions, highlighting key ensembles, conductors, and events that shaped the cultural landscape. The article delves into the contributions of groups such as the LAUDATE Choir, the Reformed Choir, and the Vox Humana Chamber Choir, as well as examining the socio-cultural and religious contexts that fostered this rich choral tradition. Concluding with insights into contemporary initiatives, this article offers a comprehensive account of the enduring legacy and ongoing vitality of the choral art form in Sfântu Gheorghe.*

Key-words: *Choral tradition, Sfântu Gheorghe, LAUDATE Choir, Reformed Choir, Vox Humana*

1. Introduction

What was musical life like in Sfântu Gheorghe in the 19th century? Or, can we actually talk about a certain musical culture of Sfântu Gheorghe in that period? The answer is yes. We can and should talk about it, remember it, and thus preserve the memory of musical past of this town.

Certainly, we cannot compare this musical culture with those already existing in larger cities, with older musical traditions, such as Cluj-Napoca, Târgu Mureş, Braşov and Sibiu. However, from the discovered materials, dusty newspaper articles and the archives of the Roman Catholic and Reformed Church, an interesting and well-defined historical musical life of the town of Sfântu Gheorghe emerges.

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Based on the results of the 1890 census, the number of the inhabitants of Sfântu Gheorghe was 5,665. In 1899, this number – according to the most conservative opinions – was at least 6,000.

Under these conditions, the following question arises: who represented the musical life in this town? The answer is simple: different groups of amateur musicians, schools, the church and artists who came from other places.

Another question would be: what were the events that resulted in music? The answer is: different soirees, anniversaries, celebrations and church holidays.

One of the best-known groups of this kind was the *Women's Association*, established in 1878, that regularly organized charity nights. It is also important to mention the Háromszéki Tanító Egyesület (*Teachers' Association of the Three Chairs Region*) and the Sepsiszentgyörgyi Kereskedő Ifjúság (*Young Merchants of Sfântu Gheorghe*).

Also worthy of mention are the soirees organized by the Háromszéki Háziipari Egyesület Államilag Segélyezett Nőiipari Iskola (*Industrial School for Girls State-Funded by the Industrial Association of the Three Seats Region*). The concerts of the Reformed Church and the Roman Catholic Church also played an important role.

Furthermore, Pótsa soirees, who was the ispán at that time (which were also charity events with orphan beneficiaries), Műkedvelők Egyesületének Zeneestélyei (Musical Soirees of the Association of Amateurs), performances of the Reformed School, or as they were later “soirees of the Mikó College with performances” (a Mikó Kollégium műsoros estjei) and last but not least, the events of the Civic School for Girls and the Civic School for Boys (Polgári Leányiskola, Polgári Fiúiskola).

Among the above-mentioned events I would like to highlight the concerts of the Association of Amateurs because based on the data of 27 July 1884, there were four classes within this association, namely: a.) musical class with instrumentalists b.) male choir class or mixed choir class (Figure 1) c.) literature class d.) theatre class.

In organizing these events not only the charity activity was important, but also the intention to propagate musical culture in the public environment. A significant fact is that in Sfântu Gheorghe, as in all small towns, regardless of who organized a certain event, the musical performers were always the same. This tendency generally applied to all small towns.



Fig. 1. *Male choir in Sfântu Gheorghe, 1907*

The exceptions were those school events where the main roles were played by pupils, but it often happened that these pupils sang together with the amateur musicians of the town.

Today, the town of Sfântu Gheorghe has an already developed choral tradition and a rich and colourful musical culture. The foundations of this musical culture originate from the last quarter of the 19th century, when the existing choirs manage to advance to a quite high level. Although these local choir groups didn't perform in other towns – such as those from other towns –, several church and secular choir groups are formed step-by-step, and it leads to today's extraordinary flourishing choir movement.

In the following part, I would like to present – within the limits of possibilities and without exhaustive intentions – the history, musical activity, conductors and results of choir formations that exist in our town today. For this I used documents from archives, newspaper publications, historical descriptions of the town, records from the chronicles of choir formations and stories preserved in the memory of older choir members.

Currently, there are approximately 30 choral ensembles in Sfântu Gheorghe, including 15 adults' choirs and 15 children's or pupils' choirs that operate within schools, churches or other civil organizations. The limited space of this thesis does not allow to present each ensemble separately, but I would like to describe, using

the documentation at my disposal, the activity, the repertoire and the national and international results of the most renowned choir formations in Sfântu Gheorghe.

2. Key Ensembles and Contributions

2.1. The choir of St. Joseph's Parish, LAUDATE

The first “vocal conductor” (“énekvezér”), mentioned in a local document, was a Roman Catholic cantor, Ferenc Opra, who – according to a note from 1849 – was the chapelmaster of the Romano Catholic Church (Sávai 1999, 567). He was succeeded in the same position by Ferenc Kelemen (SÁL, Fond 1052, Nr. 586, Sepsiszentgyörgyi római Katolikus plébánia anyakönyvei [1764–1857], 65).

At that time, the parish employed cantors who also had the obligation to teach at the school that belonged to the church – however, the school was abolished in 1873. Over time, the duties of a cantor have expanded even more, having the following responsibilities: teaching church music, organizing the choir ensemble, fulfilling office services and teaching about religion (GyFL SGYL. Iktatott iratok. Entry 112/1857. Bpl.). These chapelmasters were succeeded by cantors who were employed for periodic or occasional services.

In 1885, Gyula Kurkó was elected to the position of cantor, who remained at the Romano Catholic Parish for 33 years fulfilling this position.

Gyula Kurkó establishes a male choir by the episcopal decree of 1881. Document no. 1823/23 attests to this approval to organize a male choir and it was signed by Bishop Ferenc Lönhárt (GyFL SGYL, A Sepsiszentgyörgyi római Katolikus Egyháztanács és megyegyűlése tanácskozásairól felvett jegyzőkönyvek 1885–1908, II, 20, 60). During World War I, Kurkó had to take refuge, but in 1917 he returns and on Sundays and holidays we find him serving as a cantor in Saint Joseph’s Church.

After the end of the war, no one served as a chapelmaster for more than a decade, and that is why we do not have any document or data about the activity of the male choir. However, the conviction persisted in the public consciousness that this ensemble was none other than the Men’s Choral Society of the town or at least its predecessor. Due to the lack of documentation, I rely on the older choir members’ memories, that support the assumption that Saint Joseph’s Church has always had a choir ensemble, and although cantors come and go one after the other, the choir has remained active and glorifies God to this day (Pénzes 2010).

In 1929, Jenő Ferenc, the cantor of Armășeni, is invited to the town, who besides teaching about religion, also leads the Saint Cecilia Choir (GyFL SGYL, Spl, Iktatott iratok, 9/1928 v., 705/1939, 264–265). Between 1955-1983 Ibolya Papp becomes the conductor of the choir, who enriches the repertoire of the ensemble;

for example, she teaches the passions of Alajos Werner to the choir. Although the choir did not have regular concerts, they gave 4-5 concerts every year on the occasions of church holidays (Christmas, Easter, etc.) (Here I relied on the words of my father, Lófi Lajos, who sang in the choir between 1963-2016.)

In 1983, István Csedő takes over the conduction of the choir, and they start to perform in the churches of nearby villages, such as Valea Crișului, Bixad, Nicolești.

Starting from 1990, the conductor of the choir is Imre Rózsa, and in 1991 – at the proposal of Reverend Ottó Sebestyén – a children's choir and a youth choir are established. After a while, the two choirs merge and after a tour in Kecskemét/Hungary, the united choir is named LAUDATE. It happened in 1997, the year when I also became a member of the choir (Figure 2).



Fig. 2. LAUDATE choir, 1997

The main goal of the LAUDATE Choir was, and still is, to create an enhanced and attractive spiritual atmosphere during religious liturgies through vocal music. Annually the choir has at least 40-45 concerts in the town and in Saint Joseph's Church alone. A close bond has been formed among the members of the choir, a community of friendship which is also due to the regular rehearsals (3-4 hours a week). Being a choir ensemble that adapts to church holidays, the collection of songs from which the repertoire of different concerts is selected mostly contains religious works (currently about 250 works).

The LAUDATE Choral Ensemble participates regularly every year in numerous church and secular choral festivals organized in Sfântu Gheorghe, Târgu Secuiesc, Odorheiu Secuiesc, Komló, Pécs (Hungary), and also accepts invitations from other cities that organize church music concerts: Sibiu, Șumuleu Ciuc, Reghin, Lăzarea, Pécs (Hungary), Kaposvár, Veszprém, Budapest (Hungary) and attends the Schola Gregoriana reunion in Zsámbék / Hungary. The choir can also take pride in numerous CD recordings created between 1999-2020.

In the autumn of 2007, after conductor Imre Rózsa's leaving, I was honoured to take over the conduction of the choir. Since I was a cantor at Saint Benedict Church in Sfântu Gheorghe, the LAUDATE Choir performed its activities in that church for a year. From the autumn of 2008 to the present the choir has belonged to the Krisztus Király („King Christ”) Romano Catholic Church in Sfântu Gheorghe.

Since 2007 the repertoire of the choir has been significantly enriched with sophisticated works, including both a cappella and vocal-symphonic works. The choir has also gone through a qualitative renewal of its members, in the sense that several pupils, students and teachers with musical training joined. In the meantime, the Laudate Chamber Orchestra was founded, with the purpose of accompanying the vocal-symphonic works.

Since then, the choir has performed many well-known and lesser-known works. Here are some examples: Antonio Vivaldi: Gloria; Charles Gounod: *Messa în Do major*; Cézár Franck: *Dextera Domini*; Gottfried August Homilius: *Kantata: Warum toben die Heiden*; Krebs Jr.: *Kantata für Festo Purificationis Mariae*; W. A. Mozart: *Requiem*, *Große Credo Messe*; Gabriel Fauré: *Requiem*; Carl Orff: *Carmina Burana*, Verdi: *Requiem* (joint projects with the Vox Humana and Pro Musica chamber choirs), etc.

The productive activity of more than two decades of the LAUDATE Choir are preserved through several CD recordings, newspaper publications, brotherhood and friendship bonds with different choirs in the country and abroad, exchanges of professional experience and mutual respect.

The LAUDATE Choir plays a very important role in my professional life. As a young conductor, I got the opportunity to put my personal musical ideas into practice, use my knowledge of vocal technique, highlight my organizational skills and experience as a conductor the magic of the word of choral and instrumental music.

2.2. Reformed Choir

In the last quarter of the 19th century, the musical life of Sfântu Gheorghe was represented mainly by school, civic and church choirs that were established one after the other. First in 1870, at the Reformed Gymnasium, a priest from Bodoc,

Farkas Zajzon, founds a choir ensemble, named *Harmónia*. Chronologically, the next established ensemble is the choir of the Reformed Church, after which the Town's Choral Society (Berde 1971, 127-128) was established.

The *Reformed Choral Society* was founded in 1873 by "Vocal conductor" ("énekevezér") János Benkő (Farkas, 1984). The basic rules of the choir were established at the end of the year, according to which the main purpose of the ensemble was „on the one hand the cultivation and propagation of the vocal art, and on the other hand, the professional training and the actual development of the art of singing" (Sz.n. Dalárda jzk. 1874–1913, 1–5). Anyone who wanted could become a member of the choir if the conductor examined and found them musically and vocally talented. The conductor was also responsible for selecting the works to be performed and organizing rehearsals. The *Reformed Choral Society* was led by a president, a secretary and four members elected by secret ballot. The rules of the society were adopted at the meeting of the church council on 14 February 1874, where it was added that the conductor would always be the permanent president of the choir (Csáki 2001, 59–60).

The council limited the number of choristers to two dozen, and at the same time, undertook to cover part of the expenses of the ensemble, such as purchasing sheet music. They also fixed the amount of casual fees, and last but not least, assigned the consistory the right to change the rules (Sz.n. Dalárda jzk. 1874–1913, 8). The choir had 30-35 musical performances annually, first at church events, later at different celebrations, commemorations organized by the town, and after a time they started to perform in nearby villages, where charity balls and other festive events were organized. For example, in 1890, the choir participated in 13 worship services, 32 funerals, and had 80 hours of rehearsals. In addition to their annual income of 271 forints, they also had 300 forints in their charity fund and 271 forints in the flag fund (Sz.n. Dalárda jzk. 1874–1913, 139–140).

At the end of 19th century, with the death of conductor János Benkő (1897), a long period of more than two decades in the life of the choir comes to an end. Afterwards, the choir was conducted by Ferenc Zsigmond and János Bathó (invited from Târgu Mureş). In 1904, he took over the work of his predecessors for several decades and in the years before World War I, he improved the artistic capacity of the choir. At this time, the ensemble has 40 choralists (Csáki 1998, 60).

The flag of the choir was finished in 1891, and the inscription preserved to this day has the statement of the community: *Égi tűz a lekles dal, gyújt és lángja ki nem hal* ("A soulful song is a heavenly fire, that lights up but never goes out.").

Between 1933-1959, Cantor-teacher József Nagy took over the conduction of the four-voice mixed choir of 40 members. The rehearsals were held every Tuesday at the Reformed School (later the House of Pioneers), the repertoire contained

exclusively church works, they sang at funerals, church holidays and at the patron saints' graves on the Day of the Dead.

In the 1960s, István Pásztor, a simple worker in textile factory becomes the conductor of the choir. Later other conductors also come, such as Béla Tompa (cantor in Simeria Sfântu Gheorghe), Péter Lukács, cantor in Aita Mare. This male choir disbanded in the 1980s.

Today, this community has a mixed choir led by a retired music teacher, Emőke Toth, and a youth choir led by Reverend Előd Dénes.

2.3. Vox Humana Chamber Choir

The *Vox Humana* Chamber Choir has been operating for 52 years, and has played an important role in the musical life of Three Chairs Region. It is a semi-amateur choral ensemble, but due to the professional quality of its interpretative style, it defined the direction of choir movement in Szeklerland for a long time.

It was founded in 1972, and at the beginning the members of the choir were music teachers, later – due to its impact on the entire local choir movement – the composition of the members changes, but the choir formation remains a benchmark for the other nearby choirs.

It owes the continuity of its activity and the achieved artistic level to Conductor Zsolt Szilágyi, succeeded by his son, Zsolt-Herbert Szilágyi, who refreshed the repertoire with many new oratorios and choral works and collaborated with many choir ensembles on various musical projects.

A series of national and international awards and honours prove the artistic level the ensemble has achieved over the years. Here are some important results:

1974-97: Radio, TV and CD recordings and broadcasts for the Romanian and German radio and TV

1977-89: First prize at the National contests

1979-96: Laureate of the International Choral Competitions in Gorizia (1979), Arezzo (1982) and Athens (1996)

1982: Papal audience in Rome. John Paul II addresses the choir with the following words: *“Teach the people of God to sing beautifully and devotedly. My apostolic blessing!”* As a result, the choir is deprived the right to honour invitations from abroad.

1987-97: The choir collaborates with Philharmonics from the country in the interpretation of vocal-symphonic works: Schütz's cantatas, Mozart's Missa and Requiem, Schubert's Missa, Hander's Messiah, J.S.Bach's Magnificat, St Matthew Passion and St John Passion

- 1990: In January, commemorative concert dedicated to the heroes of the events of December 1989 (Mozart's Requiem). First visit abroad after 8 years of interdictions (Veszprém).
- 1992: International Choral Festival in Nuoro – Italy, Erkel Days – Budapest, the only music prize established in the same year is awarded to the choir by the Transylvanian Hungarian Cultural Association (EMKE). International Kodály Days in Galanta, Slovakia.
- 1993: International Lajos Bárdos Days, Debrecen, Hungary. International concert tour in Hungary, Austria, Germany and Switzerland.
- 1994: International Choral Competition in Llangollen, Great Britain and concerts in the Netherlands, Belgium, England, Germany and Hungary.

Vocal-symphonic concert with Handel's Messiah Oratorio in collaboration with the ASTRA Choir and the Braşov Philharmonic Orchestra as part of the VOICI PENTRU HOSPICE (Voices for Hospice) Worldwide Concert.

- 1995: International Choral Festival in Miskolc, Hungary. International Béla Bartók Days in Sfântu Gheorghe.
- 1999: Gold Medal at the International Competition “*Europe and its songs*”
- 2013: Officer's Cross of the Hungarian Order of Merit for Conductor Zsolt Szilágyi

Today, the choir has nearly 40 members and almost every year contributes to the reputation of the county. In 2009 they participated in an international festival organized in Lithuania, and in 2010 they attended the international competition in Ohrid, Macedonia. Today's members of the choir are not exclusively professionals, due to a split in 1995, when a part of them left the choir and established the *Pro Musica* Chamber Choir. However, this change contributed to the deepening of the popularity of *Vox Humana* in Sfântu Gheorghe dispelling the myth of intangibility around it and offering new challenges to its conductor.

The *Vox Humana Choir*, at the age of 52, has an equally bright future in front of it. The formation which only has two founding members now, continues its repertoire of vocal-symphonic works together with the *Pro Musica Chamber Choir*, *Laudate Chamber Choir*, *Eufonia Youth Choir* and *Campanella Children's Choir*, and are present at national and international choral festivals and competitions.

3. Conclusion

The choral movement in Sfântu Gheorghe exemplifies the enduring power of music to connect people and celebrate shared heritage. From its humble beginnings in the 19th century to its dynamic present, this tradition reflects the resilience and creativity of the town's community. By preserving its rich legacy and embracing contemporary innovations, Sfântu Gheorghe's choral movement continues to inspire and uplift.

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