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*Bardenklänge, op. 13 – Interpreting and the Creative Process of an Early-romantic Cycle for Solo Guitar by J. K. Mertz*

**Foreword**

The artistic research on the romantic cycle *Bardenklänge*, Op. 13, by the Bratislava-born composer Joseph Kaspar Mertz aimed to highlight aspects of the Ossian aesthetics and its renderings in this rare work for solo guitar. The Ossian aesthetics played a significant role in the emergence of the Romantic movement in the late 18th century, but it has unfortunately been overlooked in the context of 19th century music. However, its influence on the artistic expression of Romantic music is significant.

The motivation and subsequent catalyst for this artistic research were ideas expressed by Clive Brown, a musician and musicologist specializing in 19<sup>th</sup> century music, in an interview titled *Early Music, Notation and Performance* (Held, Brown, 2022). These ideas emphasize the need to go beyond a "correct performance" ("richtige Vortrag"), which today has unfortunately often become the final step in the interpretive process.

Brown states:

*“My feeling is that what we do today is essentially richtige Vortrag almost all the time – we have lost the courage to go beyond the notes, in the way that they expected.”*

Of course, these thoughts do not lead to interpretation without an awareness of the musical text, its meaning, or its rules. The mastery of *richtige Vortrag* should indeed be a matter of course. What is not taken for granted today is the continuation on the path toward “beautiful performance” (“schöner Vortrag”), which seems to be the only true essence of the artistic experience. Brown encourages us to search for various meanings behind the notation and especially liberating oneself from the habits acquired during the learning of basic musical skills.

*“We read notation as we were taught to read it when we were children.”*

An important aspect of this way of thinking is the acceptance of the diversity of approach, and especially diversity of results, as an essential part of a higher level of artistic expression.

*“A composer like Beethoven had very clear intentions for the way he wrote down his music, but his only intention for the performance was that it should be beautiful.”*

In this context, the recommendation of Johannes Brahms, who instructed the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld on how to play his new clarinet sonatas sounds interesting:

*“Play it however you like but play it beautifully.”*

While correct performance has a rational character and is more or less given, the essence of beautiful performance is the diversity of outcomes, and its main quality is beauty.

Brown's indication of the need to go beyond the notation can also be understood as a warning about the danger of losing the true essence of art – the authentic artistic experience – today. The reluctance to progress from *richtige* to *schöner* is supported by the current trend of unified public performance and its subsequent “judgement”, which have become the only values in today's musical world. Any divergence from the "norm" is usually questioned and considered a deficiency or perceived as a mistake. For a successful performance, we often adapt the musical text to meet the expectations of the audience. These expectations are highly normalized and equated with the concept of virtuosity—often narrowly defined by correctness, stability, strength, or clarity etc. These qualities are commonly understood to have emerged in the Romantic period, but whether they were the sole and true qualities of this art form is at least questionable.

From my perspective, the character of the *Bardenklänge* cycle opens up new possibilities for perception of musical art and its interpretation from a different angle.

## **Personal Background**

My first contact with the music of Joseph Kaspar Mertz was about 25 years ago. Since 2004, I have been studying his work more deeply and continuously. This has resulted in many concerts, CD recordings, and a PhD thesis. My PhD research inspired me to use historical instruments to perform Mertz's music, which I found to be an important step in improving the interpretation, expands especially its sonorous possibilities.

Mertz's work is quite wide-ranging in terms of genres, and my interest spanned several paired areas: solo and chamber music, early and late works, as well as original works and adaptations. Selections from the *Bardenklänge* cycle, which was and still is one of the composer's most popular works, have consistently appeared in various concert programs I have performed.

My deeper interest in the cycle led to live performances of the complete cycle (Books I - XI) in 2012. Subsequently, I devoted time to individual pieces from the cycle, including their selections in various programs. After a long 12 years, my second complete performance took place in January 2024, when I again performed *Bardenklänge* in its entirety.

The motivation for my ongoing research on this work stemmed from my dissatisfaction with the usual interpretations, including my own ones. During the recent process of re-studying, a fundamental breakthrough in my approach emerged. My change in perspective occurred only when I began to recognize and understand better the non-musical contexts of Mertz's inspiration, as well as the contexts of works for other instruments, especially related piano literature. The contexts were mainly related to the principles and aesthetics of Ossian work by Scottish writer James Macpherson.

Another shift in understanding came after a new experience with the sonorous qualities of the period fortepiano while working on Johann Nepomuk Hummel's pieces for duo with fortepianist Hrvoje Jugović.

A strong intuitive feeling that Mertz's work has a higher artistic value compared to other guitar compositions of the time also played significant and inspiring role. The driving energy of my research was further enhanced by the fact that some musicians from my circle underestimated the qualities of this work.

An important aspect I realized was that when *Bardenklänge* is presented to public (during concert performances or rehearsals with an awareness of future performance), the process of finding the desired form of the pieces slows down, the sound changes, and the subconscious seems to direct the music into completely different and unwanted forms. The music of this cycle appears to be hypersensitive in this aspect.

### **Reflection on Virtuosity as a Phenomenon of Romanticism**

In the context of today's optics, a virtuoso is defined as a musician with brilliant technique and an extroverted emotional expression. We most often associate the emergence of virtuosity with the period of Romanticism. Its synonyms are names like Paganini, Hummel or Liszt known thanks to their brilliance, technical skills, extroverted expression. However, is it appropriate to ask whether this brilliance was the only aesthetics of Romanticism? Or We most often associate the emergence of virtuosity with the period of Romanticism?

On other side the ability to bring a true artistic experience, which comes only with understanding and humility towards the work itself, also can be considered as the virtuosity.

As Wagner mentioned:

*“The real dignity of the virtuoso rests solely on the dignity he is able to preserve for art.”*  
Richard Wagner (Wagner, 1894-99)

Even other quotations also demonstrate an appreciation of the rare qualities of the artists of the Romantic period.

*“None have quite attained to these vague eolian harmonies, these half-formed sighs floating through the air, softly lamenting and dissolved in delicious melancholy. Nobody has even attempted this peculiar style, and especially none of those who heard Field play himself, or rather who heard him dream his music in moments when he entirely abandoned himself to his inspiration.”* Franz Liszt on the piano artistry of nocturne creator John Field (Liszt, 1859)

*“...Schubert had but little technique, Vogl had not much of a voice, but they both had such life and feeling, and were so completely absorbed in their performances, that the wonderful compositions could not have been interpreted with greater clarity and, at the same time, with greater vision.”* Ferdinand Hiller described performance of Schubert and Vogl at a rare meeting of his teacher Hummel and Schubert when Hummel was allegedly so impressed by the performance that he started to cry. (Kroll, 2024, Deutsch, 1958)

*“He played with the lightness of touch that has caused him to be so much talked of in distinguished circles, but without the rhetorical readiness judged indispensable by all the virtuosi.”* Wienese Theater-Zeitung after Chopin’s first concert in Vienna (Landowska, 1908)

*“No..., a large crowd makes me uncomfortable, (but you are well adapted for it, for if the audience is not responsive you can always browbeat it!)”* Chopin replied to Liszt when he once tried to encourage him to perform in the big salons (Landowska, 1908)

I would also draw attention to the music of Johann Nepomuk Hummel. Considered to be a true virtuoso, he is often associated with the emergence of Romantic musical language. His music can be seen as a bridge between the Classicism and Romanticism of European chamber music. A deeper look into his musical language reveals a balance between rhetorical texture, which is mostly based on virtuosic variation principles of traditional compositional school and clear sonoristic surfaces, which evoke a scenic character often creating a specific dreamy atmosphere. Their intensity and glamour directly relate to the innovated period instrument - the fortepiano with its various new sound possibilities. (ME01)

## **Ossianism as the Aesthetics of Emerging Romanticism**

The aesthetics of Romanticism undoubtedly find their roots in the *Sturm und Drang* movement of the 1770s, represented by young writers Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Wolfgang Goethe. The Ossianic literary cycle of Scottish teacher, collector, and writer James Macpherson (1736 - 1796) played a significant role in seeking the origins of this movement. In addition to captivating Herder and Goethe, who became pioneers in the reception of Ossian in Europe (Kristmannsson, 2015), the epic poems *Fingal*, *Temora*, and *Works of Ossian* (1760 – 65) spread remarkably quickly throughout the continent and became an inspirational source for many European artists.

The Ossianic cycle offers themes of heroism, sentimentality, mysticism, and naturalness. It foregrounds the virtues and nobility of characters, with frequent moments of unfulfilled feelings, separation, and sorrow (the Joy in Grief) and setting nature scenes in gloomy, foggy environments. Macpherson creates emotional depth through a dramatic story with sudden plot twists that intersect misty, fantastical images and episodes. Moreover, the epic is linked with a great number of diverse characters and heroes. This created uncertainty (or even confusion) draws the reader into the action, offering space for the creation of their own imaginary worlds, making the text adaptable and easier to assimilate.

Through these means, individual experience and particular feelings of the reader comes to the forefront. More the poetic character of the work enhances its intensity.

*“It is one of those rare texts that generates a life beyond its own pages”* (Fionna Stafford’s idea in Moulton, 2005)

And the life is generated in a personal inner world of the reader.

(More in documentation files A01)

## **Ossianism and Art**

The intensity of the experience offered by Ossianic poetry is evidenced by how fast the texts spread throughout Europe through its translations. Within five years, people could already read them in all the major European languages, and by the end of the 18th century, several minority languages were added. Additionally, we can find Ossianic themes in various artistic fields. Except literature it significantly influenced visual arts and music too.

Composers responded to the Ossianic works as early as the 18th century, but the fascination peaks in the music of Romanticism. Research on Ossianism in music (Jahrmärker, 1993; Wessel,

1994; Moulton, 2005) have documented 300 compositions that bear a direct reference to Macpherson's texts and over 40 pieces influenced by the Ossianic aesthetics. The composers include such figures as Joseph Haydn, Robert Schumann, Franz Schubert, Felix Mendelssohn, Johannes Brahms, Moreau Gottschalk, Hector Berlioz and Georges Bizet among many others.

It is characteristic that this body of work is dominated by two areas. Alongside staged works (opera and ballet), it mainly comprises genres intended for home music-making and chamber settings (instrumental miniatures, character pieces, songs). These works offer an unparalleled artistic experience, even without the presence of the listener.

### **Reflections on Ossianic aesthetics**

The Ossianic aesthetics has attracted many artists. But what were the reasons for their interest? There are several and most of them offers Moulton in his work (Moulton, 2005).

The emotional nature of the poems inspired artists to express their own feelings or create imaginative worlds. The hazy essence that permeates the characters and places, accentuated through a confusing array of characters, fragmented narratives, or images, makes the work more adaptable to the diverse perceptions of the artists and gives wide scope for imagery and imagination.

In addition to the general imagination, the work encourages the imagination of sound. The sounds of nature resonate—most often their convex form as the sounds of storms, wind, roaring rivers and oceans, or whistling branches. Human-made sounds also are important, whether or not they are the sounds made during battles ("strike the sounding shield" or "the king's horn"), the various supernatural sounds of spirits, or even in the form of song.

*"...comes with its music to melt and comfort the soul. It is like a fine mist which, rising from the lake, spreads over the silent vale."* (Ossian, The Songs of Selma)

The text thus stimulates the imagination of sounds and music. If we reverse this, the question arises whether feelings arising from the text can be useful for music making? (Isn't it a principle of music poetry in Schubert lieder?)

The qualities and depth of the human inner world are presented with the singing bard. He is synonymous with the bearer of wisdom, virtue, and is the reincarnation of peace, joy, longing, and heroism, which are represented through his stories and feelings. The harp has become an instrument for the perfection of bardic poetry. The singing or narration of bards is accompanied by images of sounding folk harps (called *clársach*). Striking the harp prompts the singing and initiates the story.

Visual art depicts Ossian with the harp in his hands as the patron of 19th-century musicians. The bards, who resemble mediators of the supernatural and the spiritual, thus indirectly become the messengers of mysticism and magic, which, in addition to them, is so much a part of musicians.

In Ossian work we find a manifestation to the value of the supernatural. The natural environment, folk art and traditions are richly described. They are privileged over artificial and constructed environments.

If we transform the given characteristics into musical parameters and compare them with existing sources, we primarily find:

- Preference for lower registers to dramatize scenes and create a dreamy character
- Legato and sonoristic textures utilizing overtones and resonance to express a hazy and unclear atmosphere
- Motivic elements describing specific narrative or conceptual references – sounds of nature, sounds of battles, sounds of fanfares, and references to the harp as the instrument of the Bards, sounds recalling religiosity
- Alternation between lyrical, ambient soundscapes and epic recitative textures
- Sudden changes of expressions and characters
- Depiction of distance through the softer dynamics, even on longer phrases

The formal structure of the compositions reflects the formal concept of the Ossianic poems. The pieces are simple, independent, one-movement pieces or songs, each with a certain mood, and are sometimes collected in cycles. On other side the inner texture may be changed sharply depending on the specific composition, suddenly jumping between contrasting expressive positions. The 'framed form' is very common, with its prologue and conclusion (intro and coda) of the same material usually slow and sonoric.

Music is also a very suitable medium for presenting folk themes and folkloric environments. Characteristic national dances, folk themes, or elements of improvised folkloric language are very effective mediums for realizing this idea.

(More in documentation files A01, D02, D03)

### **Joseph Kaspar Mertz and his *Bardenklänge***

Among the guitar composers whose work peaked during the first half of the 19th century in several European capitals, Joseph Kaspar Mertz (1806 – 1856), a native of Pressburg (today's Bratislava), was the only one to respond to the Ossianic tradition.

Educated in Pressburg, guitarist and composer Mertz soon became a part of the community's cultural life. Through the organization *Kirchenmusikverein zu St. Martin* – the Church Society of

Musicians, he participated in the realization of music culture in the city. The society organized concert life, education, and in general developed music society of the city. It benefited from intensive contacts with great musical personalities such as Hummel, Liszt, Rubinstein, and others. Mertz was active mainly as a performer and gradually oriented more towards composition. His works had been published by leading publishing houses in Vienna, Prague, Milan, and Munich.

Around 1845-47, Mertz composed a cycle of miniatures for solo guitar, opus no. 13, with the charming title *Bardenklänge* (Bardic sounds). With a direct reference to the Ossianic tradition in its title, individual volumes of this cycle gradually appeared on the Viennese music publishing market. A total of 13 volumes were successfully published to great acclaim by the Viennese publisher Tobias Haslinger between 1847 and 1851.

The *Bardenklänge* was published as a series of musical pieces – collected in several books. The pieces are independent, and there are no direct (thematic) musical connections among them. They are unified by the Ossianic idea embodied through specific aesthetic elements that are not difficult to identify in the work.

Mertz successfully captured several of the mentioned elements of Ossianism. Furthermore, the guitar texture and sound properties of the instrument prove to be an exceptionally suitable medium for projecting them.

The mild technical difficulty, the structure of the cycle, and method of continual publication of *Bardenklänge* imply that the target audience was primarily the general public. Its commercial success and popularity, documented by multiple re-editions, demonstrate that the cycle has become part of domestic musical practice.

Publisher Haslinger, thanks to Mertz's work filled a gap in the market for Romantic repertoire for the guitar – an instrument so popular and widespread in the bourgeois environment of the 19th century. The aesthetics that had given birth to Romanticism several decades earlier came back into prominence in the mid-19th century.

In this context, some questions arise.

*Was Bardenklänge intended as the musical equivalent of Macpherson's episodic epic poem?*

*Was the intention to highlight the aesthetics that were slowly disappearing from the music, covered by the development of symphonism and the art of virtuosos?*

(More in documentation files A02, A03)



## Ossianic aesthetics and its renderings in *Bardenklänge*

To identify and follow the ideas of Ossianic aesthetics in *Bardenklänge*, it is helpful to know its musical characteristics according to Moulton (Moulton, 2005). If we are aware of them, during the performance they naturally emerge, and no great effort is required. The use of the period instrument and more period bass 8-string instrument, with its sound properties can be very helpful.

The aim of this research was not to provide a guide or to describe all the possibilities of how to represent Ossianic themes in *Bardenklänge*. Nonetheless, some ideas that emerged while studying the work are noted as annotations in the score in the project documentation. They may contribute to a change in interpretative approach but should be understood just as some of many various possibilities. The aim was simply to open the existing door and point out some of the ideas that are present inside. I believe that offering a few ideas of the possibilities that Mertz's work offers is sufficient.

Please, notice and be aware of:

- Possibilities of legato, linking notes, in melodies and accompaniments...(ME03, ME04)
- Possibilities of so-called pedaling to let the sounds ring and resonate...(ME05, ME09)
- Dynamic marks and their more consistent examination, even on larger sections...(ME09)
- Symbolism in its musical form (battles sounds, harp, spiritualism - religion...), (ME02, ME06, ME08, ME09)
- Possibilities of work with time - reverberation of sounds, sudden changes...(ME07)
- Possibility of re-arranging bass notes to lower octave if use the instrument with extended strings...(ME02-4, ME05)

My ambition was not to provide a precise guide and instructions for interpreting *Bardenklänge*, as the composition inherently offers a wide and diverse space for musical imagination.

Therefore, this text does not provide more detailed information, and the documentation merely highlights the possibilities the work offers to the performer.

((More in documentation files A02, A03, A04, A05, D03))

## Conclusion

My artistic research on the work *Bardenklänge* primarily involved gathering and contextualising the information in order to understand the essence of Ossianic aesthetics as an important model for the artistic movement of Romanticism. Through the parallel practice of the musical material, which was mostly the in form of concentrated playing, listening and discovering new possibilities, many elements of the Ossianic aesthetics naturally emerged in the music.

During the process, the idea arose of how different can an approach be to a work as a matter that is not primarily intended for a public performance. There is a similarity with literature – the difference between just reading the text or performing it in front of an audience (audio book, theatre performance, poetry recitation). The non-performing approach is very liberating. In this case it is not important what we imagine, how we explain or how we interpret the work of art.

We have the right to experience and realize it differently, uniquely, and personally, without the need to be judged. In this way, the experience and the path to the goal are directed inwards into the work, inwards into the inner personal world, as opposed to presenting “proficiency” or skills outward to the recipient. It is not my intention to favour either approach, but their balance seems to be the ideal.

Many giants such as Haydn, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and others also found pleasure in Ossianism. Many of them realized it primarily in genres intended for home or very intimate settings (songs without words, lieder, character pieces etc.). Possibly through them they were trying to emphasise the value of the inner personal world. Do we pay enough attention to this idea when interpreting Romantic music?

In the context of custom interpretation of Romantic music today, I wonder whether it significantly suppresses the inner introverted world to the expense of extroverted performance. The example of Mertz's *Bardenklänge* and its reflection of Ossianic aesthetics made me realise how important is to incorporate this approach into a musical language of Romanticism.

In Ossian, James Macpherson pointed out the possibility of reconstructing of the past, along with a look inward into the human soul. It stood as an important idea at the birth of Romanticism. The artistic research on *Bardenklänge* was a challenge for me to reconstruct my approach to a specific guitar heritage. In the end, it became clear how important it is to look inwards and how this can be beneficial to the outside world.

## Documentation

The project documentation is an important part of the project. It consists of short articles, data files, music examples – recordings of examples and entire pieces with corresponding scores as video files.

List of documentation:

Short articles:

A01 – The Ossian cycle and inspiration in Art

A02 – J. K. Mertz Portrait of the Composer

A03 – Models and Analogies of the cycle *Bardenklänge*

A04 – *Bardenklänge* - Life and Works contexts and Datas

A05 – Reflection on instrumentation of *Bardenklänge*

Data files:

D01 – Bibliography (PDF)

D02 – Influence of Ossian in Music – works (PDF)

D03 – Features of the Ossianic manner in table (PDF)

## MUSIC EXAMPLES

ME01 – Sonorous character of Hummel ´s music (Johann Nepomuk Hummel: *Pot-Pourri for guitar and pianoforte*, op. 53, *Concertante Duet en Potpourri*, *Grand Potpourri National for guitar and pianoforte*, op. 79, Hrvoje Jugovic – fortepiano /Paul McNulty after Walter und Sohn, Vienna 1805/) Martin Krajčo – guitar /Bernhard Kresse after J. G. Stauffer Legnani model 1821/, *terzina* /Bernhard Kresse after A. Stauffer *terzina*/)

ME02 – Framed form – example of sonorous introduction, re-arranging bass notes, harp imitation (J. K. Mertz: *Bardenklänge*, op. 13, Book I: *An Malvina*, Martin Krajčo – 8 -string romantic guitar /Jan Tuláček after J.G. Ries model Vienna cca 1840)

ME03 – Example of fluent arpeggiated accompaniment, linking the voices, re-arranging bass notes (J. K. Mertz: *Bardenklänge*, op. 13, Book I: *An Malvina*, Martin Krajčo – 8 -string romantic guitar)

ME04 – Example of fluent arpeggiated accompaniment, linking the voices, re-arranging bass notes (J. K. Mertz: *Bardenklänge*, op. 13, Book I: *An Malvina*, Martin Krajčo – 8 -string romantic guitar)

ME05 – Example of re-arranging bass notes (J. K. Mertz: *Bardenklänge*, op. 13, Book III: *An die Entfernte*, Martin Krajčo – 8 - string romantic guitar)

ME06 – Example of re-arranging the fingering to bring Harp-like effect with *campanela* overringing approach (J. K. Mertz: *Bardenklänge*, op. 13, Book V: *Gebeth*, Martin Krajčo – 8 - string romantic guitar)

ME07 – Example of sudden changes of the characters (J. K. Mertz: *Bardenklänge*, op. 13, Book II: *Unruhe*, Martin Krajčo – 8 -string romantic guitar)

ME08 – Example of Features of the Ossianic Manner as military evocations, folk-like melodies, chromaticism (J. K. Mertz: *Bardenklänge*, op. 13, Book VII: *Variations mignonnes* – entire piece Martin Krajčo – 6 -string romantic guitar /Bernhard Kresse after J. G. Stauffer Legnani model 1821/)

ME09 – Example of Features of the Ossianic Manner as imitation of Harp, framed form, sudden changes, chromaticism (J. K. Mertz: *Bardenklänge*, op. 13, Book I: *Romanze* – entire piece Martin Krajčo – 6 -string romantic guitar /Bernhard Kresse after J. G. Stauffer Legnani model 1821/)