Joseph Kaspar Mertz (1806 – 1856)

Portrait of the Composer

When J. K. Mertz was born in Pressburg (present-day Bratislava) in 1806, the city was no longer the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but the Hungarian Diet still convened there, and until 1830, the coronations of Hungarian kings were held in St. Martin's Cathedral. It is in the baptismal register of this parish that we find the entry showing that Mertz was baptized with the name Kaspar Joseph. This is one of the few sources that reveal his full name, as in newspaper reviews, prints, and manuscripts, only the initials J. K. are used. It may seem that our guitarist and composer intentionally preferred not to reveal his full name. Perhaps this is why a misunderstanding occurred in the German guitar magazine *Der Gitarrefreund, Mitteilungen des Internationalen Guitarristen-Verbandes* in 1901, which published an article titled "Johann Kaspar Mertz". Since then, the world has known the composer by this incorrect name.

Joseph Kaspar Mertz studied in his hometown, and it is not yet known if his youth took him beyond the borders of the city. He was a student at the Higher Benedictine Royal Grammar School, whose alumni included many of Europe's artistic elite (after Mertz, for example, were Bartók, Dohnányi, and Schmidt). Already at the age of twelve, proficient in playing the guitar and flute, he had to earn extra income by teaching music. However, young Mertz certainly had contact with European musical culture through the Church Music Society at St. Martin's Cathedral, which was formed in the city in 1828, and he became a member five years later. The society was responsible for ensuring the musical part of the liturgy, the functioning of the orchestra, the music school, and organizing extraordinary concerts—called Academies—where both local artists and distinguished guests from abroad performed. One of these guests was the famous local pianist and composer Johann Nepomuk Hummel, who gave a concert in 1834. Today we know that this was a "farewell" concert, as it was Hummel's last visit to the city. This concert, however, is the first documented performance of the young guitarist Mertz, who successfully presented his Polonaise. The fact that Hummel was a famous European personality and his rare visits to Pressburg undoubtedly had a celebratory character, adds significant value to Mertz's concert debut.

Mertz's later activities (1838–1841) demonstrate his extensive participation in societies, popularity with the Bratislava (Pressburg) audience, and became the foundation for his subsequent successes beyond his native Hungary. Among these, in addition to numerous concert performances (from 1841 to 1842, there are records of more than twenty concerts from Vienna to Pest, Warsaw, Dresden, and Leipzig), were the publications of his first works by the Viennese publisher Tobias Haslinger.

During this period, Mertz met his future wife, the pianist Josephine (then still Plantin), who later played an important role in both his personal and artistic life. Thanks to her written memoirs, we

are today able to know many details of his life. In 1843, the couple settled in Vienna, where Mertz became the court guitarist of Empress Carolina Augusta, and they "only" returned to Bratislava for a concert in 1851.

At the end of the 1840s, Mertz's life was marked by a series of unfortunate events. Serious health complications (inflammation of the trigeminal nerve and subsequent poisoning), the revolutionary year of 1848, as well as the sharply declining popularity of the guitar, negatively affected his personal and artistic life. Ultimately, even his extraordinary success—the victory in the pan-European competition for the best guitar composition in Brussels, organized by the Russian nobleman Nikolai Makarov—no longer brought him joy, as he passed away in Vienna in 1856, just before the results were announced. On the other hand, the negative circumstances that limited his active concert life led to an increase in his creative activities, and Mertz left Europe with a vast and diverse body of guitar works, which represent the pinnacle of the Romantic musical language in this field.

Mertz's work can be divided into published compositions and compositions preserved in manuscripts. The published works, with the highest opus number being 100, were intended for the public, and according to the composer, they had to be adapted to the public's needs, taste, and level of sophistication. In addition to original compositions, there are numerous adaptations of well-known music of the time, in which the composer richly reflects the entire European musical landscape. Through these, he engages in a dialogue with practically the entire world (for example, in the *Kukuk* collection, we find music from 20 nations, including North America, Armenia, and India), as well as with its prominent personalities (Schubert, Paganini, Schulhof, Strauss, dozens of opera composers, and many others).

On the other hand, the composer protected his works, preserved only in manuscripts, from adaptations, simplifications, and commercial distribution. His intention was to preserve their originality and keep them fresh for his own concert performances or individual sales. It is in the manuscripts that the true musical language of the composer is reflected. This language is characterized by a sophisticated instrumental technique that utilizes the rich sound possibilities of the eight-string or multi-string instrument, on which Mertz played for most of his life. Mertz's sense of Romantic aesthetics in terms of genre and form is also apparent, which appears in both his solo and chamber music; in fantasies, characteristic pieces, dances, and instrumental versions of songs. His musical language finds its model in piano music, particularly in its miniature forms. Influential composers of Romantic music, such as Field, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Chopin, and Liszt, were undoubtedly Mertz's role models. For this reason, the miniatures from *Bardenklänge*, guitar adaptations of Schubert's songs, and the all-encompassing virtuosic fantasies form the ideal portrait of this composer.

Mertz's cycle *Bardenklänge*, Op. 13 (Bardic Sounds), is truly a revelation in the context of European guitar literature. Originally comprising 13 volumes, it was gradually published

between 1847 and 1852, following the example of McPherson's literary saga about the bard Ossian. The public closely identified Mertz with this cycle, as evidenced by the death notices in the press, which referred to him across Europe as the well-known composer of *Bardenklänge*. The cycle was published by Haslinger for the six-string guitar; however, it is important to note that by then, Mertz was already using an innovative eight-string instrument with added bass strings, and the printed version of the pieces was likely adjusted to suit the needs of the general public.

Mertz's poetics in *Bardenklänge* are rooted in all the attractive attributes of the Ossianic tradition that captivated Europe at the end of the 18th century and became the foundation of the Romantic movement in the arts. Goethe, Schiller, Schubert, Mendelssohn, and many other artists, thinkers, and politicians responded to Macpherson's *Ossian*. Mertz was able to extraordinarily express the rhetorical essence, heroic and poetic mood, as well as the meticulousness and symbolism of Ossianic aesthetics. The cycle was clearly influenced by Romantic song composition and piano miniatures, and it is evident that not only the titles of the pieces but also their formal concepts find models in the music of Schubert, Schumann, and Mendelssohn.

It was precisely the Ossianic theme that captivated the last of them nearly two decades before the creation of *Bardenklänge*. In 1829, Mendelssohn personally visited the Scottish island of Staffa, where he was impressed by the beauty of the natural surroundings, particularly the so-called Fingal's Cave (*Fingals Höhle*). He named his orchestral overture after it, which is also known as *The Hebrides* (1832). In this context, an interesting record mentions Mendelssohn's visit to Pressburg (Bratislava). At the time, when he was still struggling to finish his Ossianic overture, he visited the city during the coronation of Ferdinand V (1830). It remains uncertain whether he met Mertz personally, but his influence—both intellectual and artistic—on Mertz's guitar miniatures, which were written seventeen years later, is evident.

Mertz's cycle *Bardenklänge* mainly consists of "songs without words"—*An Malvina*, *Abendlied*, *An die Entfernte*, *Liebeslied*, *Romance*, *Gondoliera*, *Lieder ohne Worte*; characteristic pieces like *Unruhe*, *Elfenreigen*, *Fingals Höhle*, *Gebeth*, *Kindermärchen*; or national dances such as *Mazurka* and *Tarantella*; and we also find traditional forms like variations and rondo. It is as if Mertz embraced the entire Romantic world and presented it to the public as very attractive material for home music-making. Although today *Bardenklänge* is one of Mertz's most beloved works, paradoxically, we have no evidence that these pieces were intended for concert performances.

At the time of their creation, Mertz was also working on arrangements of Franz Schubert's music, as documented by the same opus number 13, which belongs to his series *Beliebte Gesänge mit Begleitung der Guitare* (Popular Songs with Guitar Accompaniment) for voice and guitar. The first six volumes consist solely of Schubert's songs and were published in the same year as the first ten volumes of *Bardenklänge* (1847). However, earlier versions of these were

adaptations for solo guitar, published in 1845 under the title *Sechs Schubert'sche Lieder* (Six Schubert Songs). Among these, we find the same songs: *Liebesbotschaft*, *Aufent-halt*, *Ständchen*, *Das Fischermädchen* (all from the *Schwanengesang* cycle), *Die Post* (from *Winterreise*), but the solo version of *Lob der Thränen* is replaced in the later vocal form by the song *Die Taubenpost* (also from *Schwanengesang*).

In the solo versions of Mertz's songs, he reflects not only Schubert's music but also the personality of the Hungarian piano virtuoso and great friend of Pressburg (Bratislava), Franz Liszt. Liszt regularly visited the city and, in 1839, before becoming a member and donor of the local Church Music Society, he performed three concerts there. It was at one of these concerts in the Redoutensaal that a piano version of Schubert's *Ständchen* was to be heard, which was an obvious source for Mertz's guitar version. In fact, the selection of songs that Mertz arranged had already been the subject of Liszt's "piano" interest (such as *Lob der Thränen* (1838), the cycle *Schwanengesang* (1838/1839), and the cycle *Winterreise* (1840). Both Liszt and, later, Mertz paid tribute to the exceptional art of the poet-composer, who, with hundreds of songs, once again highlighted the immense beauty and deep value of uniting the meaning of words and music. Interestingly, Liszt "showed loyalty" to the poetic foundation of the songs by including the text of the poems directly in his piano transcriptions.

It is symbolic that these transcriptions were written and presented at a time when the virtuoso was hurrying from Venice to Vienna to support the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was suffering from the consequences of catastrophic floods. In the spring of 1838, an ice flood on the Danube caused enormous damage and affected the entire lower river valley, including Pest. The proceeds from the benefit concerts, which were substantial, were donated by Liszt to the Austro-Hungarian Empire to help repair the damage and support the people.

One of the important attributes of Romantic thinking was the building and support of national identity. Since the beginning of the 19th century, national themes represented not only belonging to a specific territory but often also defined political stance or even resistance to state oppression. The Hungarian style was very specific in this regard, embodied in the so-called *ungaresques*, representing, for many, a reaction to the social oppression that followed the Napoleonic wars in Europe.

Hungarian music had already been reflected in the works of Haydn, Weber, Schubert, and especially Liszt, who had a deep affection for his homeland. He transposed this into many compositions that he eagerly performed at his countless concerts throughout Europe. It is highly probable that Liszt was a model for Mertz in this respect as well. After all, at the aforementioned concert of the piano virtuoso in Pressburg in December 1839, as an encore, music from Liszt's *Magyar Dalok*, S. 242, was performed.

It is therefore no coincidence that Mertz's very first published opus Flowers of My Country – *Vaterlands Blüthen*, op. 1, was printed in Vienna as early as 1840. Later, he seemingly reduced his focus on Hungarian style. His *Erinnerungs an Ungarn I and II* for two guitars, preserved only in manuscript, are less known. However, he ultimately concluded his Hungarian reminiscences with the magnificent *Hungarian Fantasy – Fantaisie Hongroise*, which opens his peak trilogy *Trois Morceaux*, op. 65. Along with advanced virtuosity in the form of verbunkos figures (scale runs, chromatics, tremolo, dotted rhythms), here he skillfully manipulates Hungarian elements (lassu, friss, bokázó, alla zoppa) and themes, demonstrating a sense of a balanced concert fantasy form, drawing on the art of Hungarian violin virtuosos that captivated not only romantic composers – including Haydn, Hummel, Schubert, Liszt, and Brahms. Mertz also found thematic sources in music attributed to Biháry, Lavott, and Erkel, among others. After Mertz, other guitar composers, including Legnani, Dubez, and Padovec, also responded to Hungarian music.

Universal musicality, a sense of formal unity, and a distinctive individualism are key features of Mertz's later fantasies, including his unique *Elegy*. It can be perceived as the culmination of the effort for self-determination among guitar composers and the acceptance of their work in the musical community of 19th-century Romantics, although from a societal perspective, some of these goals were not entirely realized. Mertz's *Elegy* is a convergence of Ossianic mysterious aesthetics (pensive introduction, harp imitation), Schubertian poetic rhetoric (harmonic relationships familiar from his *Ständchen* as an opening entrée, cantabile themes in the central part of the piece), Hungarian national elements (improvised cadences, chromatic transitions, syncopations, dotted rhythms), and its rhapsodic formal proportions and ideally placed pitch range (from contra A to f^2) predestined it to hold a prominent position among Mertz's compositions.

It is clear that J. K. Mertz was a composer with a truly romantic individual spirit and at the same time a universal European dimension. As one of the few guitar composers, he incorporated all the values of Romanticism into his music and, through his work, communicated with the broad expanse of European music. This is evidence of his sincere love for art, as well as for humanity as its direct source.

Martin Krajčo (November, 2024)

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