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The Saint and the Myth: Saint Gerard of Cenad and “Symphonia Ungarorum” between the Middle Ages and the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

Rezumat. Sfântul și mitul său: Gerard de Cenad și „Symphonia Ungarorum” între Evul Mediu și secolul douăzeci. Pasajul referitor la "Symphonia Ungarorum" și existent atât în *Legenda Minor* cât și în *Legenda Maior* a Sfântului Gerard de Cenad, a stârnit o serie de dezbateri academice care încă nu și-au găsit o finalitate comună. Scopul prezentei lucrări nu e o dezlegare și nici o prezentare a acestor dezbateri și a concluziilor acestora. În schimb, intenția acestei comunicări e prezentarea unei paralele între realitatea "Symphoniei Ungarorum" și percepția acesteia astăzi. În mod special, e vorba despre reinterpretarea simfoniei și "reciclarea" acesteia cu ocazia sărbătoririi unui mileniu de la întemeierea statului maghiar. În 3 ianuarie 2000, Opera din Budapesta prezenta debutul „Symphoniei Ungarorum”, compusă de Szokolay Sándor și bazată pe legenda Sfântului Gerard. Ce ecouri există între simfonia medievală a lui Gerard și cea modernă a lui Szokolay Sándor? Ce relevanță are originala „Symphonia Ungarorum” și cum e aceasta reinterpretată în contemporaneitatea secolului XX? Cum e privit și înțeles Sfântul Gerard astăzi? Acestea sunt câteva dintre întrebările la care această lucrare va încerca să răspundă.

Keywords

Gerard de Cenad, „Symphonia Ungarorum”, secolul XX, reinterpretare, construcție istorică, medievalism.

I. Introduction: A Distorted Image of a Manifold Man

As often time happens with medieval characters, the aftermath of the death of Saint Gerard of Cenad has seen a rather distorting development in the saint's image. The Late Medieval period promoted a literature in which the image of the bishop and his personality were shrunk when compared to the story of his martyrdom at the hands of Hungarians in the year 1046. Consequently, as time passed and historiography developed, his image continued to focus on his martyrdom and his image as the man to Christianize the Hungarians, his legend developed, and the actual historical character of Saint Gerard lost valuable scholarly territory. Efforts are therefore being made today in order to reconstruct the actual Saint Gerard, his work, and his meaning as a monk, pilgrim, hermit, bishop, philosopher, martyr, and saint.

II. Saint Gerard in the Realm of Medievalism

Watching over the Pest side of the Hungarian capital from the Gellert Hill, the seven-meter statue of Saint Gerard is solemnly holding his cross towards Budapest. There are few inhabitants of Budapest who do not know the story of his martyrdom: Gerard was murdered on the banks of the Danube River by a Hungarian pagan tribe in the eleventh century. Likewise, there is no sightseeing tour which goes by the bottom of the Gellert Hill and does not recall the story of the saint. Although many times erroneously remembered and lacking fundamental biographical information, Gerard is still very much present and his name is recalled on numerous occasions.¹ The Middle Ages and their actors are endlessly incarnated in new guises and these pages will show one such instance related to Saint Gerard. On January 3rd, 2000, with the occasion of the millennium celebrations of the Hungarian Christian state, the Budapest Opera was presenting the debut of *Symphonia Ungarorum*, written by Sándor Szokolay and based on the story of the saint of Cenad.

What new meaning did the image and character gain with Sándor Szokolay's work? How does the historical Gerard relate to the Gerard of the millennium celebrations and what impact does this connection have on the perception of the saint? These are two of the questions that will be investigated with the help of an eleventh-century song which astonished Saint Gerard upon his arrival on Hungarian territory.

III. *Symphonia Ungarorum* and the *Legenda Maior*

Should one simply mention the terms "symphonia ungarorum," it is probable that most Hungarians would think about "an early, almost mythical, glorification of the Hungarian folksong," most having the impression that the reason for its existence is the folksong.² However, this is certainly a false impression – an impression given by the *symphonia* anecdote, found in both *Legenda Minor* and *Legenda Maior* of Saint Gerard, which was overly interpreted and commented upon by scholars, historians and musicologists alike. In fact, Joseph Balogh thought that the anecdote was so much

¹ In 2002, for example, a knightly order was established in Hungary, Gerard being its patron saint. The name of the order is *Ordo Equestris Sancti Gerardi*. See more in Șerban Turcuș. *Saint Gerard of Cenad. The Destiny of a Venetian around the Year One Thousand* (Cluj Napoca: Romanian Cultural Institute, 2006), 109-110.

² See: Joseph Balogh. "Saint Gerard of Csanad and the 'Symphonia Ungarorum'" *Music & Letters* 29 (1948), 362.

discussed upon that its original meaning was no longer clear.³ The version of the story found in the *Legenda Maior* is the most thorough one and it is also the one which bears the words “*symphonia ungarorum*,” spoken by the saint himself:

He was on his way to the king, for the defence of somebody, and in that region, at a forested part, which served for feeding the pigs, he was hosted at noon time in a mansion. And he heard there around midnight the sound of millstones, something he had not experienced before. He was wondering what that could be. Then the woman who was driving the mill started to sing. The marvelling bishop told Walther: «Do you hear Walther, the symphony of the Hungarians, how it sounds?» And both were prompted to laughter by that song. And since the millstone was driven by a woman with her hands, and the song’s tune reached a higher tone, while the bishop was lying in his bed, and he continued, still smiling: «Explain me Walther, what is the leaning of this melody that constrains me by its tune to stop reading?». And he responded: «This is the tune of a song. The woman who is singing is the servant of the lord of this mansion, who hosted us. She is grinding the wheat of her lord at this time, when there is no other mill in the neighbourhood.» And the bishop asked: «Does it work by mechanics or by manual labour?» –«Both by mechanics and manual labour, answered Walther, it is not pulled by any animal, but the woman rotates it by her own hands.» «It is a marvellous thing, says the bishop, how human beings get around. Had there not been machines, who could bear the tiresome labour? And this is indeed a happy woman, who – although she is under the domination of others – is able to make her obligatory work without any grumbling, in such a sweet and merry manner.» And he gave her a lot of money.⁴

The anecdote therefore tells the story of the saint, who while travelling the country seeks shelter one night at a farm house. During the night, he is disturbed by a peculiar sound – the sound of a mill grinding accompanied by the singing of a woman, getting louder and louder. It is at this point that Gerard asks his famous question: “*Walthere, audis symphoniam Ungarorum, qualiter sonat?*” The two

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ “*Accidit autem quodam tempore, ut pro defensione cuiusdam ad regem properaretet in eiusdem regionis parte silvosa, que usui porcorum erat apta, sita erat quedam villa, in qua meridie hospitatus est. Ubi circa mediam noctem audit strepitum lapidum molarium, quod ipse alias non viderat. Mirabatur, quidnam hoc esset. Continuoque mulier, que molam trahebat, cantare cepit. Admirans autem episcopus, dixit ad Waltherum: “Walthere, audis symphoniam Ungarorum, qualiter sonat?” Riseruntque ambo de carmine isto. Cumque mola solius manu traheretur mulieris et cantus cresceret in altum episcopus autem lecto enterim iaceret, adhuc subridens ait: “Walthere, edisserere michi, quis istius melodie cantus sit, qui meam cantoria sua cessare compellit lectionem.” At ille: “Ista modulatio carminis est, inquit, mulier, que cantat, ancilla est huius hospitis, apud quem hospitatur, que molit triticum domini sui, tempore quo alia molendina in regione ista reperiri omnino non possunt.” Cui episcopus: “Arte, inquit, currit, an labore?” Ait Waltherus: “Arte et labore, non quolibet trahendo iumento, sed manu propria circumferente.” “O miranda res, ait episcopus, qualiter se pascit humana generatio. Nisi enim esset ars, laborem quis posset tollerare? Felix, inquit, mulier, que subalterius potestate posita, sic dulciter debitum servitium absque murmuratione leta impendit.” Cui (sic) etiam non modicum pondus pecunie ei portari precepit.” See translation in: Gábor Klaniczay. “«Popular Culture» in Medieval Hagiography and in Recent Historiography” in *Agiografia e culture popolari. Hagiography and popular cultures*, ed. Paolo Golinelli (Bologna: CLUEB, 2012), 17-18. See Latin original in: *Legenda S. Gerhardi episcopi*, ed. E. Madzsar, in *Scriptores Rerum Hungaricarum tempore ducum regumque stirpis Arpadianae gestarum*, ed. E. Szentpétery, Budapest 1938: De Sancto Gerhardo episcopo Morosenensi (*Legenda maior*), 497-498.*

of them start to laugh, most likely because of the spontaneous and ironic association made by the saint between a high-class symphony and the awkward music produced by the woman.⁵ The fact that they laughed might, in fact, partially solve the debates surrounding the type of music heard.⁶ It is certain that it was not a symphony, as the well-learned Gerard was surely well aware of.⁷ Hungarian scholars such as Károly Szabó, Gyula Lánczy, József Balogh, Emil Haraszti, or János Horváth Jr., all argued for various types of music and instruments, although without reaching a common opinion.⁸ However, the fact that the exact type of music remains unknown is less important when it is compared to two aspects: the impact it had on Gerard himself and the impact it had on Hungarian culture.

On one side, the impact that the “symphony” had on Gerard is well discernible in the second part of the anecdote. The bishop continues to read, but the sound grows louder so he asks his companion, Walter, to explain to him the “leaning/vocal part of the melody” that does not allow him to concentrate on his reading. Walter then describes that the woman is grinding the mill alone, without any help from animals, and that while doing this, she sings along. Gerard is surprised by the woman who works so merrily and sings in such a cheerful way while doing such tiresome labour. Upon his amazement, he praises the exemplary woman, unveiling his humbleness, mercy, and compassion. The author of the *Legenda Maior* enhances the bishop’s generosity and love for art by adding the information that Gerard gave a sum of money to the woman, in gratitude for her joy for work and music.⁹

The impact on Hungarian culture, on the other side, has a long history, as has been seen before. Starting with 1887 when János Karácsonyi wrote the first scholarly monograph on the saint and referred to the song as the first known Hungarian folk song, and then touching upon personalities such as Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, who considered the “*symphonia ungarorum*” to be the greatest archaic treasure,¹⁰ the song had remarkable consequences on Hungarians -- the most remarkable of all being the fact that it was seen as a type of symbol for Hungarians. With the occasion of the 1000 anniversary of the Hungarian Christian state, in the year 2000, this symbolism was taken to a new level by the work of Sándor Szokolay.

IV. The Modern *Symphonia Ungarorum*

With the occasion of the Hungarian Millennium, Sándor Szokolay wrote a forty-five minute oratorical symphony bearing the title “*Symphonia Ungarorum*” and based on the history of the Hungarian state formation. For the text of his symphony, Sándor Szokolay asked Gáspár Nagy to write the verses. On the website dedicated to Gáspár Nagy, the reason for choosing Nagy for this work is revealed:

⁵ See the explanation of the irony in: Joseph Balogh. “Saint Gerard of Csanad and the ‘*Symphonia Ungarorum*’”, 359-360.

⁶ Gy. Gábry argues in one of his articles that the laughing is particularly the key to the interpretation of the anecdote. See: Gy. Gábry. “*Symphonia Ungarorum*” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 12 (1970), 292.

⁷ Gerard was a learned ecclesiastic who certainly had musical theory knowledge. In fact, he is known to have founded several music schools on the territory of Hungary. See: Zoltan J. Kosztoľnyik. “The Importance of Gerard of Csanád as the First Author in Hungary” *Traditio* 25 (1969), 377.

⁸ See the interpretation of these scholars in: “A Magyarok Szimfóniája” [The Symphony of the Hungarians] in Zoltán Móser, *Álmodik a Múlt* [The Past is Dreaming]. <http://mek.oszk.hu/02800/02899/html/>, last time accessed May 21, 2013.

⁹ See more details on this interpretation of the anecdote in: Joseph Balogh. “Saint Gerard of Csanad and the ‘*Symphonia Ungarorum*’”, 363.

¹⁰ See a short presentation of the history of the ones who were interested in “*symphonia ungarorum*” in Gábor Klaniczay. “«Popular Culture» in Medieval Hagiography and in Recent Historiography”, 18-20.

Szokolay felt that Nagy's feelings for the past and the future were clear and touchable,¹¹ therefore the message of the symphony would be best transmitted with the help of his words. Szokolay and Nagy's "Symphonia Ungarorum" tells its audience that the Hungarian state survived all its misfortunes because the nation was defended by the faith and morality created at the very beginning by Saint Stephen and Saint Gerard. Moreover, the Hungarians were so strongly under the protection of these two remarkable figures that their beliefs and morality still live on, up until today, assuring the survival of the Hungarian state. In fact, the message of the entire symphony is based on the metaphor of hands held together: Saint Stephen's hands, put together in prayer, represent the connection between the past and the present.¹² This metaphor creates the unity of the oratorical symphony which begins with the words "There is the hand/That single hand/Which bows for prayer/As if on a beautiful golden bridge/A nation would pass/While morning comes"¹³ and ends with the words "Royal hand/The blood of our blood/Has been pulsing inside of us/For a thousand years."¹⁴

Therefore, while the symphony not only describes the period of the state formation as shall be seen shortly, the beginning and the end give a frame to the entire work, a frame which was inevitably linked to Saint Stephen, the first king of the Hungarians, and Saint Gerard, the man to start the process of evangelization on the Hungarian territory. It is therefore, symbolically, the hands of Stephen and Gerard that are holding the Hungarian nation and its prosperity.

The words of the symphony describe, in fact, the history of the one millennium that had passed. It goes through the migration period, the formation of the Christian state, then through the tumultuous Hungarian history emphasising the survival spirit of the nation. However, the work not only recalls the historical past, but also presents a Hungarian literary history, by alluding to certain literary works, such as those of Sandor Petőfi, Attila József, János Arany, or András Görömbei.

The poem of the symphony may be seen as formed of seven different parts which all recall distinctive periods in Hungarian history. The seven parts are comprised of twelve verses which may be broken down in the following way:

- The first verse is an introduction which describes Hungary in words without syntactic connection to each other, but thorough when presenting the personality of the country and its inhabitants: "Plains – rocks – plains – rocks/Rivers – mountains – rivers – mountain/Summers – winters – summers – winters/Cold – hot – cold – hot/Rains – snows – rains – snows/Roads – winds – roads – winds/Curbs – arrows – curbs – arrows/Fires – hands – fires – hands."¹⁵
- Verses two and three, as well as eleven and twelve, present, as shown above, the state formation of Christian Hungary and the vital contribution of Saints Stephen and Gerard. The image of the two saints is strongly imbibed in these parts, and Gerard is a central pillar in Hungarian belief: "...All living/Hungarians/Whose faith/Makes them stronger/Their song is sang/For Saint Gerard."¹⁶
- Verse four is entirely connected to the personality of Gerard and his deeds in Hungary, including the episode of hearing the "symphonia ungarorum." The first section of this part elaborates on how he strengthened Christianity in the Hungarian territories – "[He is] the dough and salt/Of the new Hungarian belief."¹⁷ Then the symphony tells how Gerard a man "With a heart of clean

¹¹ <http://www.nagygaspar.hu/honlap/index.php/irasok/kritikak/16>, last time accessed: May 21, 2013.

¹² For more on the Szokolay's explanation of the symphony's message, see: *ibidem*.

¹³ Gáspár Nagy. *Symphonia Ungarorum* on Kortárs. Irodalmi és Kritikai Folyóirat. <http://home.hu.inter.net/kortars/9905/nagygasp.htm>, last time accessed May 21, 2013.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

resonance,¹⁸ was one of the characters to touch upon the lives of Saint Stephen himself and his son, Emeric. Probably the longest section of part four is the one recalling the story of the woman working at the mill and singing the “*symphonia ungarorum*.” The audience is presented with a surprised Gerard, who admires the song of the woman – a song “in the rhythm of grinding rocks.”¹⁹ The mill motif continues almost until the end of the symphony, with the exception of the fifth verse, which only alludes to the “*symphonia ungarorum*.” Verse five may be seen as an introspective break in the poem: the author seems to stop for a while and contemplate on the Hungarian destiny: “Is there anyone/Singing for us?/A younger or elder sister of ours?/A priest or anyone?”²⁰ The author seems to be referring to a somewhat dark present, while having a strong sense of nostalgia towards the lost times of real saints who indeed knew how to make a difference.

- Verses six and seven return to the now leitmotif of the mill, only this time the mill becomes representative for a tormented, “grinded” nation: “The drums are beating/They are grinding my people/For the mortar of my nation/They are asking for my blood.”²¹ This is the point where the symphony reaches its peak: it describes the tumult, confusion, disorder, and fervour found throughout the one millennium of Hungarian history: a vivid image of violence is portrayed as spears are arrows are shown as cutting the skies, as brothers turn against brothers and fathers against sons. When everything seems to be chaotic, the only truthful and helpful sign is that of the cross, with the help of which the nation will strive.
- The motif of the mill is once again present in verse eight, but this time under the guise of two rocks which are impossible to break, regardless of the fact that they were “Between two cannon balls/Between two pagans/Among a hundred infidelities/After one thousand betrayals”²² they still managed to “stop and remain.”²³
- Verses nine and ten again seem to make reference to Saint Gerard: “It stopped and it remained/Between cliff and foam/The faith of prayer/The prayer of faith/The land became the protector of the weeping water.”²⁴ The symphony starts to march towards its end, where, although Saint Gerard dies, the historical narrative seems to reach equilibrium as the verse ends with a good hope for the future: “The fiery hope/Attacked the future.”²⁵

Although the symphony is a history of the Hungarians, the image of Saint Gerard is ever present within the verses. Whether he is present by nomination, or only symbolically, as in the nostalgic fifth verse, he is a figure wanted to represent the Hungarian nation, its bloom, its struggles, ambitions, and hopes. The much debated story of the woman’s song in the *Legenda Maior* becomes, under the hands of Sándor Szokolay and Gáspár Nagy, a device used to represent two instances of Hungarian history: one instance in which the nation is as strong as rocks and cannot be grinded, and a second instance in which the nation is as weak as soft rocks and is easily taken by water. The historical Gerard becomes a tool for creating a new Gerard with the help of whom Hungarian identity is outlined. The only connection that therefore remains between the two Gerards is ideological: the eleventhcentury Gerard

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Ibidem.

raised the Hungarian nation to a new dimension, just like the twentieth-century Gerard is meant to enhance Hungarian identity.

The title of the symphony, “Symphonia Ungarorum,” attempts to encompass the entire millenary dimension of Saint Gerard of Cenad. On one hand, the title relates directly to Gerard’s eleventh-century “symphonia ungarorum,” while on the other hand, as author Gáspár Nagy argues, it is the common chant of the Hungarians which fully represents them.²⁶ Gerard of Cenad is therefore one of those medieval characters, who although are not fully understood historically, they give new understandings and meanings to contemporary issues. Although with not much connection to each other, the old becomes the new.

²⁶ <http://www.nagygaspar.hu/honlap/index.php/irasok/kritikak/16>, last time accessed: May 21, 2013.