

Music and Poetry in the Language of Contemporary Hungarian Visual Art

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*How does one artistic medium translate into another? We begin by asking whether the language of music and literature can be translated into visual codes, and if so, what possible interpretive methods and problems arise when we try to form a bridge between two completely different ways of perception and reception. In order to make this rather broad topic comprehensible, we consider specifically Hungary's contemporary graphic environment, and within it, the graphic design work taking place at the Moholy-Nagy University of Arts in Budapest. At MOME, in the past few years, students have focused on the work of two prominent Hungarian artists, Béla Bartók and Lajos Kassák, particularly with regard to Béla Bartók's *Mikrokozmosz* (known in the U.S. as *Mikrokosmos*), which dissects the problems of music education and musical notation, and Lajos Kassák's relationship to the text and to the visible, visual appearance of literature. In this essay and presentation, we would like to give a brief taste of these works and propose tentative answers to our initial question, answers at which the young graphic design students of MOME arrived through their work. In our conclusion, we reflect on how our findings bear on the topic of setting poetry to music.*

The question we attempt to address in the following essay focuses on two fundamental elements of graphic design: form and colour. We are interested in how these two elements can be interpreted in the visual impressions of music and literature: specifically, what commonalities and differences can be found between the recording of lettering and musical sounds on the one hand and the language of visibility on the other, and how two seemingly quite distinct senses, such as hearing and sight, are linked in the relationship between colour and sound.

In its initial period, the graphic notation of music—that is, musical notation—went through the same stages as writing until the emergence of alphabet.¹ Then, after a brief development of formal features, it emerged with its own writing system, equivalent to, but

1 Judit Löblin, A hangjegyzírás a kezdetektől a tipográfiáig, <http://mek.niif.hu/00200/00207/html/index.htm> (accessed: 2022.09.08)

completely independent of, the alphabet. We seek to determine whether traces of this common origin can be found in the graphic signs used today and, if so, whether it is possible to reverse the process and reinterpret the language of poetry and music in visuality.

The relationship between colour and sound has been studied for centuries. The ninth-century Arab philosopher al-Kindi posited a relationship between the four strings of the oud and the four elements, the four humors, the faculties of the soul, the seasons, the planets, and the quarters of the zodiac.² Centuries later, Newton matched the hues of a color wheel to notes of the musical scale. In the twentieth century, the relationship between the senses of the eye and the ear entered a new dimension through the art of Paul Klee and Vassily Kandinsky, who, drawing on their philosophical approach and musical training, related tone to timbre, hue to pitch, saturation to volume.³ We will examine how these are expressed in Lajos Kassák's literary and artistic work and in Béla Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, and what possible interpretations of their graphic signs and translations emerge in contemporary Hungarian graphic design, specifically in the experimental projects at the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design.

To understand the graphic design attitude of the students of the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design (MOME) and the conceptual capital that has led them to reinterpret the traditions of Lajos Kassák and Béla Bartók, one must first understand the MOME's ars poetica, philosophical background, and artistic approach.

Under its earliest name, the National Royal Hungarian School of Applied Arts, the university was originally housed in the Music Academy building, which opened in 1880. Our university identifies with the innovative approach and the educational and artistic principles of its namesake, and cherishes and preserves its heritage at a national and international level. Hungarian-born László Moholy-Nagy is one of the most versatile and influential artists of the twentieth century. His daring experimentation, modern vision, and formal language made him the most important theoretical and practical master of the new vision. The students and faculty of MOME are committed to following Moholy-Nagy's tradition, based on an experimental, playful, yet highly theoretical, conceptual vision, with a strong emphasis on a social approach to design. The website reads, "We believe that design is a powerful tool for shaping the future. The graphic designer is an active participant, a conscious shaper of the processes that are increasingly shaping our environment. This means pushing boundaries and overriding conventions. Permanence means openness to change, an eternal curiosity that defines itself in

2 Gary Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 1993), 82.

3 Szín és zene, szín és szavak, <https://tudasbazis.sulinet.hu/hu/muveszetek/muveszettortenet/muveszettortenet-8-efolyam/szin-es-zene-szin-es-szavak/szin-zene-szavak> (accessed: 2022.09.08)

the search for solutions by focusing on problems.”

Celebrating its 130th anniversary in 2010, the institution now plays a key role in the cultural life of the country by providing university training for visual artists in the broadest sense.

We focus here on Lajos Kassák and Béla Bartók, who, although of the same era, differed greatly in their motivations, approach to art, and the way they were affected by the chaotic political climate of the first half of the 20th century. Besides having an experimental attitude, Lajos Kassák would have liked to destroy artistic narratives and philosophies based on old traditions, for the sake of a new art’s ideal and realisation. Béla Bartók’s art, on the other hand, stemmed from Classical and Romantic traditions. In the spirit of national values, with a deep knowledge and use of folk music, it presented something new to contemporary audiences by synthesizing traditions of the present and past. At the same time, he was not far from experimentation, influenced by avant-garde musicians such as Schönberg and Stravinsky. The relationship between Bartók and Kassák was, according to the latter, “respectful and reserved.” Kassák once said of Bartók’s music that “his ‘grating, attractive, blood-curdling’ string quartets inspired courage and rebelled against convention.”⁴ Through their example, we can come closer to grasping the collective intellectual core of the arts associated with the period.

Lajos Kassák

Lajos Kassák (1887-1967) was an ideological mover and shaker, a major figure of the Hungarian avant-garde, a multifaceted artist—primarily a poet, writer and graphic artist—and also a philosopher. In the visual arts, he immersed himself in the science of typography and the technique of collage. We will explore and attempt to understand the musical, literary and visual parallels in his art.

In Kassák’s philosophy of art, one can perceive a radical destructivism, which he follows in both his visual art and literature. Through destruction, this gesture creates and brings forth something new. It abandons the textuality of the text, the didactic expressive power of representation. It returns entirely to geometry as a visual element and seeks to dismantle all the principles of construction dictated by tradition. These principles can be found in even the smallest units: Kassák interprets the letters of words as visual elements, which appear in his picture-poems primarily in this manner and often only secondarily as a text to be read. In all

4 Lajos Kassák, “Barátságunk egymást megbecsülő és tartozkodó volt” (1963 radio address in memory of Bartók on the show titled Hungarian Writers on Béla Bartók), http://ezredveg.vasaros.com/html/2017_07_08/1707082.html.

of Kassák's works, destruction and construction are intertwined: the radical dismantling of the past and the building of the future on entirely new foundations.

Musicality also appears in Kassák's picture poems, in the dynamics of his compositional principles and in the colour theory behind his colours. Kassák believed that the primary link between music and graphic art is movement and gesture: If I pick up a handkerchief or a brush, it is only through movement that it becomes music or a picture. His bold contrasts reinforce this analogy.⁵

In the final semester of the Bachelor of Graphic Design at Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, each graduating student takes part in a more abstract, less applied graphic design-related independent project, each year related to the work of a different artist.

In Csenge Szabó's experimental biography of Kassák, we find parallels and symbols that consciously reflect Kassák's constructivist tradition in a modern wrapping. Csenge inquired into how Kassák's geometric world appears in real spaces, in the streets or in mere wall details and shop windows, and then presented her findings through the medium of photography, in a series of books.

A special feature of each book is that the convex and concave squares can be fitted into each other; thus the series forms a unity that alludes to the oeuvre of Kassák. The books were produced in two series. This is because Kassák's biography initially covered his life only until he emigrated abroad. Thus his full biography became available in his own country only in the 1980s. The grey volumes refer to his time in America, while the red edition refers to the Hungarian era.

Szabó also created an experimental object showing the extreme contrasts favoured by Kassák, the Kassákian formal world, and the playful composition of text and geometry, where the depth of literature and text becomes one with the graphic. Kassák had a strong desire to blur the boundaries between different artistic disciplines, creating a kind of synthesis between graphics and literature. It was as if he wanted literature to be constructive and graphics to be text-centred. One of the greatest boundary-shifts of this kind can be seen in his poem "The horse dies, the birds fly away" (1922), which is like an abstract painting.

5 Lóránd Hegyi, "Adalékok Kassák Képarchitektúrájának értelmezéséhez," in Kassák Lajos. A Magyar Nemzeti Galéria és a Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum Emlékiállítás (Gyomaendrőd. 1987) 51-62.



Béla Bartók

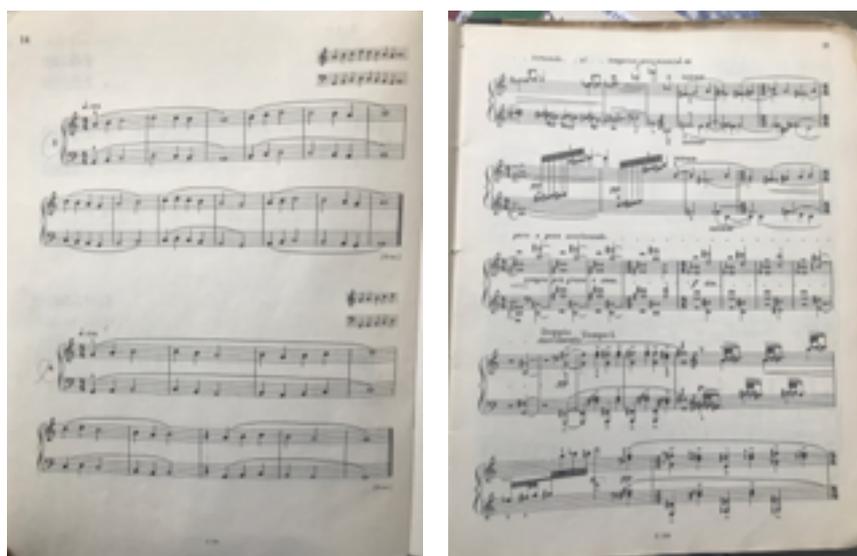
Béla Bartók was born in 1881 in Nagyszentmiklós, Hungary. He made his mark as a composer, piano artist, teacher and folk music scholar, and his name is internationally known. Music theory and music education played an important role in his life's work; one of the outstanding examples of this is his *Mikrokosmos*. In 1940, fleeing the Second World War, he defected to the USA, where he lectured at Harvard and Columbia Universities. He gave his last concert in New York in 1943 and died of leukaemia two years later.

In collaboration with Zoltán Kodály, he steeped himself in Hungarian folk music and also researched the folk music of neighbouring peoples for comparative studies. His acquaintance with peasant music changed his compositional style; he began to draw on the stylistic features of folk music. Music theory and music education played a major role in his life's work, as *Mikrokosmos* demonstrates.

According to Bartók, his *Mikrokosmos*, a six-volume work of 153 pieces written between

1926 and 1939, “attempts to offer a solution to musical and technical problems that have not been solved in the piano works of the past.”⁶ It can be seen as a practical handbook that gives insight into the language of music. It introduces and summarizes the musical language of an era; at the same time, each piece is closely linked to Bartók’s oeuvre and can serve as a key to understanding his style.

The music of the first four volumes builds gradually from the simplest musical motifs to the more complex, while the last two volumes contain complex concert pieces. It is an interesting twist of fate that when the composer’s son reached the age when he could begin his musical education, *Mikrokosmos* proved perfectly suited to this task. “A child who has received only *Mikrokosmos* music, apart from vocal and technical exercises during his years of study, is prepared not only to handle the manual and musical demands of piano playing, but also to adapt with native-like confidence to new music in general and Bartók’s works in particular,” writes Marianne Pándi in her analytical work *Mikrokosmos: Piano Music from the Very Beginning*.⁷ Bartók’s work, which still plays a key role in piano teaching today, shows that the language of music, like spoken language, can be learned reflexively, through a progression from simple phrases or motifs to more complex ones. The pieces of *Mikrokosmos* are not études. They teach not manual dexterity, but musical interpretation; they teach us to hear and understand the important phenomena of music in an analytical way, while at the same time promoting the gradualness of learning and the inseparable unity of technique and musicality. This last point links them to the language of poetry and visuality, among other things.



Images of sheet music from the first and sixth volumes.

6 Wikipedia, “Mikrokozmosz,” <https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikrokozmosz> (accessed 2022.09.11).

7 Marianne Pándi, *Mikrokozmosz – Zongoramuzsika a kezdet legkezdetétől*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060627111111/http://fidelio.hu/hvkcikk.asp?id=451&k=4> (accessed: 2022.09.08)

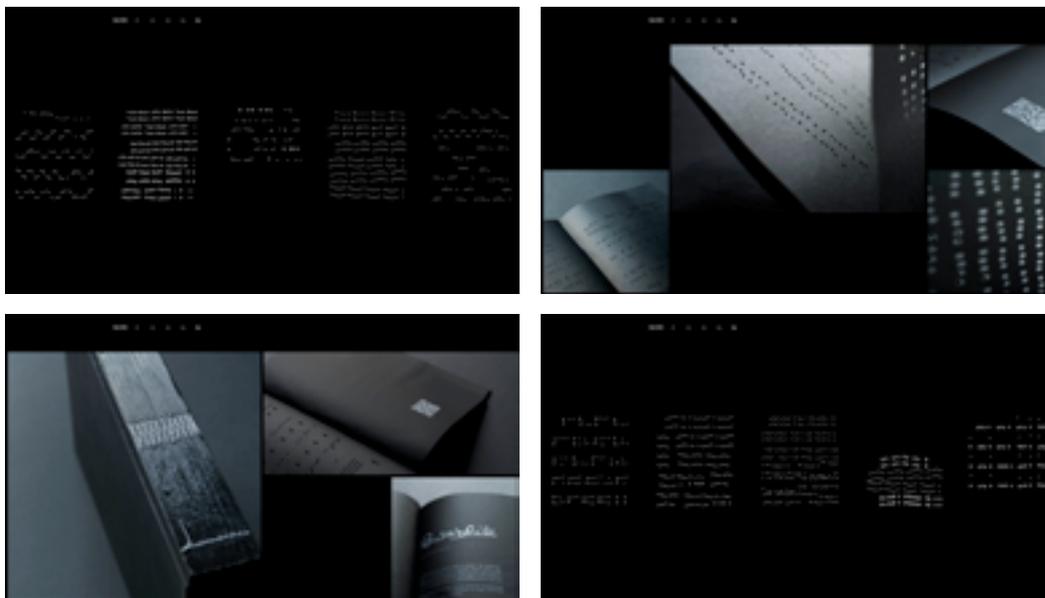
A few years ago at MOME, in addition to the work regarding Lajos Kassák, a six-month-long creative project was launched around Béla Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, in which students, having learned about the structure of the work, its musical historical significance, and its cultural message, created works that attempted to translate Bartók's musical language into visual codes.

Bendegúz Batke graduated from MOME in 2021. In his work responding to *Mikrokosmos*, he sought ways to make music present in a metropolitan environment. By analysing the rhythms of Bartók's pieces throughout the six volumes, he developed a visual language that translates the musical structure into images, from the simple to the complex. In order to display this large amount of musical material, he designed long, horizontally oriented posters that, like the language of music, affect the recipient's perception elementally. The posters were conceived to appear on the city streets, guerrilla-style, offering passers-by an experience of music and art without the need for loudspeakers or instruments.

The language of visibility differs from the language of sound, in its relation to time and space, for instance: while the reception of a musical experience requires that the creator or sound-emitting instrument and listener be in the same place at the same time, a graphic artwork can bridge these barriers. The other exciting change that results from translating sound into image is that while music does not allow the passerby to choose whether they want to receive what they hear, the visual offers the possibility of opting out of the experience, making it more suitable for a public space. The work of Bendegúz Batke points to these two important differences.



Fanni Demecs graduated from MOME in 2016 and founded the Dare Studio, which she still runs with great success. In her *Mikrokosmos* project, she worked on visualising a composition consisting of six parts that grow progressively more complex, teaching you to play the piano from beginner to advanced level. Fanni “unpacked the whole score, edited it side by side in Illustrator, cut it out and then pasted it in” to create a representative model of a design object that is technically unusable as sheet music, but which accurately represents the music being rendered. Fanni’s reflection therefore does not work backwards; it can only be read from one direction, which makes it exciting, as she aims not to create a rote translation, but rather to show, in a language tangible to the eye, how the pieces of the six volumes become more and more complex. The resulting diagrams are assembled into a single volume, with a list of all the tracks on the back and a QR code to the Soundcloud page containing the individual excerpts from *Mikrokosmos*.⁸



The pieces in *Mikrokosmos* do not contain text in most cases, yet they connect with spoken language and poetry from a different angle. The student who plays through these pieces goes through a process similar to that of learning a mother tongue. Analysing the students’ works, we were fascinated by the way music’s ‘translation’ into visual language can bridge the gap between the verbal nature of poetry and the experience of music, which is difficult to express in words. Through the students’ graphic representations of *Mikrokosmos*, we can easily identify characteristics of the piece, such as the density of the music, its rhythm, or the relationship between pauses and fills, and we can express more simply what we feel when listening to the music.

8 “Mustra: Demecs Fanni tervezőgrafikus,” *Grafika*, July 15, 2016, <https://designisso.com/2016/07/15/mustra-demecs-fanni-tervezografikus/> (accessed: 2022.09.08).

Considering that the seminar is about the questions that arise when poetry is set to music, we would like to end with a few words about why we consider the visual arts—and their relation to music and text—relevant to this topic. First of all, as graphic artists, we found this approach natural. Moreover, we believe that it sheds light on the topic itself. In our essay, we attempted to present and interpret some of the issues raised in the triad of poetry, music and visuality, stretching the seminar's framework somewhat. Thus we move away from the concept of setting to that of artistic translation. For example: what questions and problems do visual artists face when trying to express in their own language a work of art that primarily affects another sense, such as music or poetry? Where are the limits of this genre, and what changes occur in music or poetry when it encounters visuality? What are the pervasive, sensuous ways in which rhythms, sounds and words can be visibly marked in space, with minimal loss of their original meaning—if that is the aim, of course, and if not, what added meaning can the new creation have?