

Abstract of PhD thesis

**Agnes Anna, KUN
2021**



Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem

**KÁROLI GÁSPÁR UNIVERSITY OF THE
REFORMED CHURCH IN HUNGARY**

Faculty of Theology – Doctoral School

Agnes Anna, KUN

**"Translation, explanation and
'Wirkungsgeschichte' of the Song of Songs in
contemporary Hungarian music"**

Overview and Summary

**Supervisor:
Prof. Dr. Jutta Hausmann**

Budapest, 2021.

1. BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

As a student of theology and a young scholar Old Testament study, I first studied mainly Genesis, including the history of the patriarchs, especially Jacob and Joseph, which I also published at the “OTDK” (National Scientific Student Conference) and the Collegium Doctorum. I found it exciting how the material of different writers' circles could be separated from each other by methods of textual and literary criticism; I wondered what secrets lay behind the lines. Then, unexpectedly, a seminar led by Professor Istvan Karasszon aroused my interest in “Song of Songs”. I found the topic so exciting, interesting and far-reaching that I promptly decided to write my master thesis in this special field. In that work, I ended up dealing only with the second Chapter of the “Song of Songs”.

In 2005, I was successfully admitted to the Doctoral School and, of course, among many other things, the “Song of Songs” remained my central subject.

In 2008, I graduated from the Doctoral School and completed my studies at the Academy of Music at the same time.

In subsequent years – as far as my studies of the Old Testament were concerned – I focused mostly on the

“Song of Songs”. I took every opportunity to find and get usable materials.

2. OBJECTIVES

I intended to do a job with two goals. On one hand, as there is no good summarizing commentary on the “Song of Songs” in Hungarian today, I wanted to give an evaluation like this. And on the other hand I wanted to present the connection with the music and the ‘Wirkungsgeschichte’; happily I have the competence and skills necessary in music also.

3. HYPOTHESES OF THE RESEARCH

The strictly theological part was intended to be a summary, and in compiling it I had already guessed that I would reach a lyrical theory in my final understanding; this proved to be true during my research.

In the musical part, I was hoping for new insights through the eyes of the theologian as well, as over the years I have collected music related to the “Song of Songs” and finally I found thousands of compositions. Thus, I was given the opportunity to examine the ‘Wir-

kungsgeschichte of the “Song of Songs” on the art of music with their help.

My premise or theory was that it would be clear from the works how the composers understood and interpreted the “Song of Songs”. I wanted to show the musical traces of current theological interpretations that have changed over the centuries through the given and found compositions.

4. TEST/EXAMINATION METHODES

I first dealt with the theological part. I collected theological materials, commentaries, monographs, articles, and processed those systematically.

Childs, Fohrer, Von Rad, Römer, Schmitt, Soggin, Zenger in general, while at the level of commentary and monograph Pope, Gerleman, Keel, Murphy, Hess, Meek, Fox, Athalya Brenner, Cheryl Exum, Weems, Ariel and Chana Bloch, Marcia Falk, Krinetzki, Longman, Garrett, Ginsburg, Gordis, Gottwald, Knight, Barbiero, Hunt – they were all the main guides.

From a musical point of view, a little more complex research was needed, since no precedent or any example existed for such an exhaustive summary of musical material. I needed a search for all this, for it is clear e.g. in Ruth’s “song” which musical works are based upon it, in the Song of Songs we face the difficulty

of having a million variations of the titles authors may have given to the music. While Latin was the commonly used and known language of church music, we may come across the title “Canticum canticorum”, but any poem or line of the “Song of Songs” could have been chosen by the authors, and then only the given section was marked by them. Thus, we can even search for every line, and we must look and see if there is a work with a title that is about our topic being discussed in reality, not to speak about fantasy titles that the composers have arbitrarily invented. Further complicating the situation is the fact that we know lots of Gregorian melodies, which are only paraphrases of the “Song of Songs”, and troubadour songs from the Middle Ages that picked up one line from the biblical text, but the work itself is not about the “Song of Songs”, but only the love images were used. The researcher must therefore be cautious and aware that he/she does not follow a misleading title. And since the authors began composing in their own native language, the situation has become increasingly complex and difficult.

5. DESCRIPTION OF THE PERFORMED STUDY, PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS

In the first half of my thesis I focused on the **theological task**. After a **general introduction**, I took the background of the book, the **canonical place** of when it was adopted, in which Bible it was or can be found, and then tackled the question of **authorship** and **dating**. In terms of **introductory teachings**, I relied primarily on the work of Childs, Fohrer, Von Rad, Römer, Schmitt, Soggin, Zenger.

“The story of the explanation of the “Song of Songs” does not become the glory of biblical exegesis,” - as Fohrer also noted. Indeed, it gives the researcher the enormous task to show who, how he felt about the work, and how he approached it. I demonstrated in a row the **allegorical, cultic or liturgical, dramatic and lyrical modes of explanation**, as well as I deployed the followers of the given theory.

Then I gave a sketch of the **parallels of the ancient Middle Eastern and other love poetry outside the Bible**.

The issue of **genre, language, and style** is a particularly interesting for the “Song of Songs”. Due to the specific theme, there are the most “hapax legomena” in the Bible in this book, and it is true that understanding or not understanding them, correct translations are more or less well done. However, distorting them will greatly determine what the book has to say or interpret correctly.

Here I came to give a little summary of what has been done so far, and then to cope with the difficult task of the **translation**. The end result was a 3-column table. I tried to give a literal (word-to-word) translation, as one would do in a decent Hebrew class, next to which is my own, quasi-interpretive translation, as I have filtered it out over the years, and also produced my own, slightly more artistic translation. It is also interesting that I indicated with different colours, to whom (in my opinion) the given lines may have belonged. I underline, this does not mean that the red line, which assumes a female voice, was necessarily written by a lady in any case. In my point of view, these poems are all fragments from here and from there, and according to the final form before us, I can best imagine placing the poems in the mouth of a “performer” with the colour codes. By the way, this own translation has changed almost day by day over the years; there are already a place or two where I might write something else. Many times it was very difficult to decide on a word, obviously, the more knowledge I gained, the more I saw the impossibility of the task. Since the target language is also constantly changing, in which is being given, it would be necessary to revise the biblical books all over and over again. The “Song of the Songs” requires special attention, as it is full of symbols, such images that were self-evident to the people of that age, but today's people do not know what to do with them.

This is how we get to the **explanation** in the dissertation, where I tried to give an explanation of the translation dilemmas, the symbols. This, if you like, is a **commentary** in which I wanted to dispel as much of the uncertainty that arose earlier as it was possible. For this part I have followed the work of the great ones before me, I am thinking primarily of the work and the research of Pope, Gerleman, Keel, Murphy, Hess, Meek, Fox, Athalya Brenner, Cheryl Exum, Weems, Ariel and Chana Bloch, Marcia Falk, Krinetzki, Longman, Garrett, Ginsburg, Gordis, Gottwald, Knight, Barbiero, Hunt. I have to admit that it wasn't always easy to hear my own voice among such great personalities, even if I could be almost arrogant that at some points, although I basically filtered my results from the above, I still vindicate my own voice. Commentary and translation went hand in hand, one constantly shaping the other and vice versa. In my former work I also dealt with linguistic delicacies at that time, but here the commentary was the main direction, so I omitted them. Unfortunately, the subject is so large; it covers such an area that it was necessary to designate tracking directions so that the material would not be fuzzy. I think connecting with the "Song of Songs" provides mortal researchers with multiple life-long tasks enough.

In my **theological summary**, I declare that these verses are fragments of love poems, folk songs, aphorisms, sayings in the Bible.

As I mentioned, this is not a single, compact poem by a single author, but a collection selected from several sources remained to us.

The collection does not teach any morality per definitionem. Just as it does not encourage free love, it clearly does not plead for monogamy either.

It has nothing theological to say in the classical sense of the word. It does not provide any moral, ethical, protocol, national, religious guidance either.

Though I would be delighted but, based on my present knowledge, I still dare not to say that a woman edited the poems together. I suggest a late date in terms of the age of editing, the final form, but the individual details vary by hundreds of years. The female tone can also come from the sensitivity and fineness of the subject. Sexuality, love, desire, eroticism could be fulfilled by the woman.

This anthology celebrates the sacredness of sexuality and tries to pass on all the teaching by which the love of man and woman gets the purity it deserves (back). Unfortunately, just as we don't understand the parables of the "Song of Songs" today, just as we "lost" the translation, so sexuality has moved out of its sacred and dignified place, and inevitably forced into the vulgar; which no longer has anything to do with the "Song of Songs", or what that has to say.

If I wanted to give a new, short theological summary at any rate, it would require a radical change, and I would say we would really understand the "Song of

the Songs” if we give back to God-given sexuality its dignity, its right place, its holiness. In order to achieve this, however, we first have to purge our souls so that with all our perversions we do not inflict damage on ourselves, rather we get a glimpse into the lost Eden.

After the theological part, I move on to the **musical content**.

As I mentioned, I collected the works, and found thousands of compositions over the years.

How can all this be processed?

First, I had to classify the works. In the second **Appendix (II.)** – a table of about 60 pages shows the composers, their lives, the titles of the given pieces, the years of the composition, their genre and their apparatus. This systematization alone took several years.

I wanted to show the musical traces of current theological interpretations that have changed over the centuries through the given compositions. This was also perfectly noticeable in the Renaissance and early Baroque period, where mainly allegorical interpretation can be observed, and then almost nothing can be found in the Classics. Romanticism makes rarely use of the Song of Songs, if yes, rather dramatic interpretation is preferred. All this until the Twentieth Century, which brought about explosive interest in the “Song of Songs”.

Until the Twentieth Century, by the way, the most accepted theological interpretation is currently the most widely accepted theological interpretation in composers'

works as well. I also demonstrated these in separate tables. I have shown the **distribution of composers by century** and **by era**, when and exactly which explanations were created by the followers, and in which era and which were the most popular poems.

However from the Twentieth Century onwards, differences show a many-faced picture just like theological explanations. That is why I decided to focus on **contemporary composers** only. Out of 411 Twentieth Century composers 247 are contemporary classical authors. (By the way, half of the Twentieth Century composers turned to the Song of Songs also!) I approached almost all of them, and nearly half answered, but even that would have been an overly huge material within the framework of this dissertation. That's when I voted for **Hungarian contemporary classical composers**.

I personally made a long interview with each of them about his/her piece or pieces and his/her relationship with the “Song of Songs”. Composers did not necessarily approach the “Song of Songs” from a theological point of view when they chose the theme of their pieces.

I put the following questions to each composer:
 - Why did you choose the “Song of Songs” as the theme of your piece?

- What does the “Song of Songs” mean to him/her?

- How do you interpret the “Song of Songs”? I mean, as a religious document, a love poem, an allegorical pattern to express some other relationship, a remnant of a cult, a pastoral play, a dramatic oratorio, a fragment of folk songs, an erotic collection, or an echo of any love, or otherwise?

- When did you first meet the lyrics of the “Song of Songs”?

- In what language did you know the work?

- Do you know the original Hebrew text or one of the earliest Latin, Greek translations?

- Which translation did you use for your music?

- Why did you choose that section?

- What did you want to express with your own (master)piece?

- Why did you choose the given musical form and apparatus?

In addition, I asked them if any information they would share with me about their piece. In my doctoral thesis, I also analyse these works in detail, both musically and theologically. We are talking about **16 compositions by 11 authors**, through which I was able to go through the musical ‘Wirkungsgeschichte’ of the “Song of Songs”. I started the line with Erzsébet Szőnyi, who unfortunately passed away since then, and furthermore

Orbán, Csemiczky, Barnabás Horváth, Beischer-Matyó, Gyöngyösi, Szabó Barna, Zombola, Sztojanev Georgi, Andorka and Czinege all helped my work enthusiastically. After **analysing each work**, I also gave a **summary** of the proportions, how the composers approach the “Song of Songs”, and which poems they prefer, and I summarized them all in tables. I can say that the Hungarian results roughly reflect the pattern found in the world.

Wherever possible, I tried to connect the musical material with the theological part, and to refer back to the recognitions and knowledge already known there.

At the end of my thesis, I present by way of **tables** which composer preferred which poems in his/her work, and I also give two **appendices**, on the one hand about the exact poem choices, and on the other hand, as I mentioned above, about almost 2200 pieces by 938 composers.

6. NEW SCHOLARLY RESULTS AND THEIR PRACTICAL APPLICABILITY

1. From a theological point of view, a summary, well-used, readable commentary presenting the material of previous research has been

produced, which can be rotated with pleasure in both professional and lay circles.

2. From a musical point of view, nearly 2200 pieces by 938 composers were collected.
3. The focus has been laid on the often unfairly neglected contemporary composers, with a special emphasis on the Hungarian ones.
4. It has become an important material from a theological and musical point of view, from which it could be learned, how current theological interpretations that have changed over the centuries have left their mark on musical works. In the Renaissance and Baroque eras, the “Song of Songs” was interpreted primarily as an allegory, which can be excellently presented through musical works. There could have been an allegory between man and God, a monk (woman) and God, the church and God, Mary and Christ, Mary Magdalene and Christ, the church vocation and leadership, the church and the Holy Trinity, but the point was that it was never applied to a love affair between two people. The dramatic interpretation appeared later in an oratorio, and in operas made from the “Song of Songs”, but it only started in the age of Romanticism. The cultic, liturgical explanation is not typical at all, and only in

the Twentieth Century lyrical explanation appeared as a mode of interpretation, which, in turn, did not become monopolistic, but since then all kinds of interpretations have coexisted.

7. PROPOSAL FOR CONTINUING FURTHER RESEARCH

1. From a theological point of view, I would like to present in a publication, in addition to the original text, a Hexapla of Origen, the famous six-column, that is, comparing six text versions, similar to the Old Testament. How the Greek and Latin translations differ and then what variations the renowned Bible translations bring in Hungarian, in English, in German, in French, and in Italian. Beyond these, of course, I would also show what the most important commentators (e.g. Pope, Keel, Gerleman, Brenner, Bloch, Falk, Exum, Meek, Murphy, Weems, etc.) were committed to them.

Finally, in addition to my literal translation, I would like to provide a so-called interpretive translation also.

I find it important to know the “Song of Songs” not only as an “abstract, sacred document”, but to understand that this is the basis of love, and more erotic poetry, and to show up the dangers of an inaccurate understanding of the text.

2. Another theological goal is to publish another picture (illustrated) album that is understandable to the general public and explains the “Song of Songs”.
3. On the musical side, a more distant intention is the complete elaboration process of the “Songs of Songs” by the found contemporary composers.

8. LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

- A Brief Review of the History of Music in the Song of Songs, THEOLOGICAL REVIEW (0133-7599): LXIII 1 pp 24-30 (2020)
- Jacob-Israel - Name, Person, Event and Theology, REFORMED CHURCH (0324-475X): LX 4 pp 55-61 (2008)
- Review: Istvan Karasszon, Old Testament knowledge for religion teachers (Komárom: SJE, 2006), CONFESSIO-A OBSERVER OF THE

HUNGARIAN REFORMED CHURCH (0133-8889): 30 pp 116-118 (2006)

- The God of the Bible and Human Religions: Book Review: George A. F. Knight: I am - that is my name; God of the Bible and Human Religions, Calvin Publishing, 2004., REFORMÁTUS EGYHÁZ (0324-475X): LVII 6 pp 135-136 (2005)
- I have been a permanent co-author of the Bible Reader's Guide since 2015.
- My writings appear in various journals of the Reformed Church regularly.

9. EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY

- 2010-19 University of Lutheran Theology - Cantor
- 2009-11 University of Miskolc - Faculty of Music