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## **CHURCH MUSIC EDUCATION AND PRECENTOR PRACTICE IN THE REFORMED CHURCH DISTRICT OF KIRÁLYHÁGÓMELLÉK**

**Otília Valéria Orosz**

*West University of Timișoara, Romania*

[o.otilia@yahoo.com](mailto:o.otilia@yahoo.com)

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### **Abstract**

*The Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék was founded in 1921. After the first world war, as a result of the Trianon border change, the church leadership of the part detached from the Trans - Tisza Reformed Church District (Partium) led by István Sulyok, the bishop of Oradea, decided to create a separate diocese. The administrative county boundaries in force today do not match the boundaries of a hundred years ago, it can be attributed to the fact that the dioceses of Satu-Mare and Sălaj belonged to the Transylvanian district, so in these dioceses, the Transylvanian hymnbook and choral books edited by Samu Borsay and Gábor Veress were in use. In this period the cantor's training took place only in Partium and Transylvanian teacher-training institutes. During communism, cantors were mostly prepared privately for the periodic cantor examination. The Oradea Cantor – Training Course in the Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék started in 2006. In my dissertation, I discuss the cantor – training and cantor service in the Partium area, from 1921 to the present day.*

### **Keywords**

Hymnbook, Choral Book, Cantor, Training, Teacher

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As the Partium region, today is located in the band between Hungary at the Transylvanian Reformed Diocese from Romania, Reformed church music was also influenced by Transylvania. During the border changes in the Partium region, the congregations of this region were also affected by the Transylvanian influence, which can be traced to this day through the common hymnbook and church music practice. In the educational history of the Hungarian Reformed Church in Romania, cantor – training is intertwined with teacher – training. One can find data on the history of the cantor – training in Transylvania in the writings of Benkő, A. (1997), Péter, É. (2014). Moreover, the periodic cantor – training in Partium is discussed thoroughly in the writing of Balláné Bakó, E. (2018). Because the period between the two world wars and in the communist decades that followed, a lot of church documents was lost, it was a challenge to find data about the preparation and the service of the cantor – teacher. Old journals preserved in the church archives, correspondence closed for decades and recently discovered, data and documents that have not been processed so far, helped me a lot in this. The research base of this thesis is construed of these files, that is, the data in religious publications (*Reformed Journal, Church Journal, 1927-1940*).

There has not been conducted any comprehensive documented study of church music life in the period following the social changes of 1989. This paper, therefore, summarizes the history of the cantor – training of the last hundred years of Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék while it also offers insights into the present-day status of such programs.

In the Reformed Church, institutional cantor – training began with the establishment of teacher – training schools and the cantor – training service. After the establishment of the Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék, in the period between the two world wars, education in the Hungarian language was provided only in denominational schools. The cantor – teachers had a dual-task: education in elementary schools and church service, which imposed several tasks on the teachers. In addition to school and church work the population education activities also fell on the teachers, which consisted of the organization and the management of the town's cultural life.

The principal objectives of the study were as follows:

- Cantor – training between the two World Wars.
- Precentor practice in the time of communism.
- Cantor – training after 1989.

For this reason, the research was to study the church music education in a denominational school, the cantor – teachers practice, and the cantor – training course evolution in the Partium area.

## **2. Cantor Qualification and Cantor Service in the Partium Region between the Two World Wars**

With the establishment of teacher – training schools, the training of cantors gained a modern form of education. Until the end of the First World War, regular and high-quality music education took place not only in denominational but also in state teacher – training schools.

### **2.1. Teacher – Training Schools in Transylvania and Partium**

In Transylvania, the teacher – training schools of Deva, Cluj-Napoca, Aiud, Odorheiu Secuiesc, Sfântu Gheorghe, and Cristuru Secuiesc are notable. However, in the Partium the teacher – training schools of Sighetu Marmăției, Satu Mare, Oradea, Zalău, Arad, and Timișoara have provided cantor – teachers for the church district (Barabási, T. (2006).

Music was thought by Mátyás Zoltai in Arad, Domokos Sándor, János Hoós, Endre Szabó in Deva, Gergely Boér, Ferenc Zsigmond and Ottó Sarudy in Cluj-Napoca. In Aiud the music teacher was Samu Borsay, Gábor Veress (editors of the Choral Books), Géza Szabó, Ferenc Nagy, Endre Tóth, Domokos Sándor, Gyula Horváth in Cristuru Secuiesc. In Odorheiu Secuiesc Gábor Veress for one year, after that Anna Árpádné Seprődy and Ilona Boérné Seprődi have taught music (Benkő, A. (1997).

In the first years of the 19-20<sup>th</sup> turn of the century Sándor Saja, a canto and music teacher was teaching at the Reformed College in Satu-Mare, whose name can be linked to several publications and collections of songs (Balláné Bakó, 2018).



**Figure 2:** *The Teacher Training School of Satu-Mare*  
(Source: <https://hu.pinterest.com/pin/83809243049172161/>)

## 2.2. Precentor Practice between the Two World Wars

We get an insight from the columns of the denominational paper called the *Reformed Journal (Church Journal, 1927 – 1940)* on the qualification of cantor – teachers, the duties of the cantor – teaching service, and the difficulties of filling in job positions. The journal was launched in 1927. On its pages, we often find job advertisements, in most cases job advertisements for cantor – teacher. In the year 1929, a total of 48 cantor – teacher positions were advertised in the journal. The distribution of jobs was as follows:

- Organist cantor – teacher position
- Deputy cantor – teacher position (due to enlistment in the military)
- Intercession (Levitical) cantor – teacher position
- secondary teacher position
- Auxiliary teaching position
- Smaller teaching position (for lower grades)

The intercession (Levitical) teacher had to perform pastoral, cantor, and teaching work as well, except for the holy communion (*Reformed Journal, 1931*).

Remuneration varied greatly from church district to church district. Part of the income from the ecclesiastical lands (crop or money) belonged to the cantor, the lands were worked by the

followers of the church. Part of the allowance was a decent service apartment and its garden and annexe buildings, where animal husbandry was also possible. After each child was taught, the cantor – teacher received a certain amount of crop or money. Monthly cash income was also variable. A separate stole was given for funerals. The chopped winter firewood was brought to the house of the cantor – teacher.

The duties of the cantor – teacher was as follows:

- Teaching the classes of I-VII of the denominational school (mostly combined) according to the curriculum (on average 50-60 children)
- Teaching religion and canto in a public school, 2 hours a week
- Performing cantor duties
- Organizing and leading a choir
- Leading of Sunday school
- Assisting in all church-building work
- Church clergy
- In the event of the impediment of the pastor or a teaching fellow, ensuring their replacement, even by pulpit service
- The substitute male teacher was obliged to substitute the cantor.

Teachers with Romanian language exams were expected for the job, in most cases specifically male teachers.

In 1929, in a single year, in 48 (16%) of the approximately 300 congregations in the church district vacancies occurred due to resignation, enlistment, repatriation, or other reasons. In 1934, the state forced Reformed teachers and didactical personnel to pass the Romanian language exam. As no support material was made available to the teachers before the exam, it was expected that they will take the exam from the Romanian language and literature material of the teacher – training school. The December 10, 1934 issue of the *Reformed Journal* bitterly reports that only a small percentage of teachers and didactical personnel have managed to pass the language exam. As a result, rehired teachers could have taught only in I-II. grades and they were removed from teaching starting from 1<sup>st</sup> of September. This decree deservedly provoked outrage, as the teachers at the Reformed schools were employed and paid by the church, and it was only the church that was able to decide on their employment and dismissal. The decree, which disregarded the autonomy of the church and the school, was already a premonitory sign for the end of the

ecclesiastical schools and the cantor – teaching service. The financial compensation of the cantor – teachers were not always in proportion to the services performed. Due to this, as well as the degree of difficulty of the differential exams required by the state, the cantor – teaching service was in crisis as early as the late 1920s. After 1948, after nationalization, denominational schools and, with it, cantor – training were abolished.

### **2.3. A Recollection of a Former Cantor – Teacher**

Attila Veres-Kovács, a late pastor from Oradea-Olaszi, formerly in Oșorhei, conducted an interview in the spring of 1990 with retired cantor – teacher Károlyné Elekes, who graduated in 1928 from the Gábor Bethlen College in Aiud (*Wold of the Bell. Congregational Journal*), (1990). The teacher emphasized the rigour of Gábor Veress, a folk song collector, musicologist, and author of the ecclesiastical choral book, with which he demanded a high level of canto culture. The most important subjects were pedagogy, psychology, and methodology. At the same time teacher- and cantor – training took place at the institute. To teach religion, they had to study the textbook of Sándor Makkai's confirmations (bishop of Transylvania), and they were very strict about the history of religion and biblical knowledge. In 1928, the female section of the teacher – training school moved to Odorheiu Secuiesc to preserve its building there from the expropriation of the state.

Regarding the teaching service, she mentioned that in a village the teacher was not only a tutor but also an educator for the population. In the absence of a doctor, together with her husband, who was also a teacher, they also took care of sick children. They have studied health books so that they can help if needed. In addition to teaching, cantor duties were also performed on Sundays, holidays, and weeks of penance, when children were also taken to worship. They conducted a four-part choir. A religious ceremony was held every Sunday afternoon, culminating in a dance party. The farmers' circle was organized for the education of adults, and handicrafts were led in the women's association. The fence around the parish in Bályok (Balc) was built from handicrafts sold at school ceremonies and raffles.

In 1948, after nationalization, denominational teachers had to fit into the new system, otherwise, they had to undertake the move. The teacher believed that the church should undertake both religious education and cultural education for the benefit of the people.

### 3. Cantor – Training in the Years of Communism

After the 1948 year's nationalization, the denominational schools were abolished. The cantor – teachers had to choose between ecclesiastical and school service. Teachers could no longer perform cantor service. During the decades of communism, retired cantor – teachers helped in many places to educate young people in music. The church cantor service was henceforth undertaken and performed by persons who had learned to play the organ by private diligence or after hearing. In the Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék, the so-called diocesan cantor qualification was given to applicants who were prepared for the ecclesiastical canto, congregational organ playing, catechism from Heidelberg, biblical knowledge, statute (Canon, ecclesiastical law). This qualification only authorized the cantor for semi-norm employment. Church district cantor examination was held in Cluj-Napoca, District of Transylvania, only in the event if more people were applying for the exam. The material of the cantor examination was the 1923 hymnbook of Cluj-Napoca and Samu Borsay's choral book, as well as the biblical subjects and the statute. In the Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék, most of the congregations used the hymnbook published in 1921, but no church district-level cantor exam was held from this hymnbook.



**Figure 3:** *The Choral Book Edited by Samu Borsay*  
(Source: Own Photo)

During the years of communism, the choral activity also withered. Where there was a trained cantor, there was also a congregational choir, but rather only in large congregations. Due to the lack of youth, the banning of teachers from the church, the choirs were slowly disappearing.



The activities of the choirs were renewed after the turn of the events in 1989 and have been arching upwards ever since. Today the number of church choirs is above one hundred in the church districts where nearly 300 parish churches are functioning.

#### **4. Cantor – Training in the István Sulyok Reformed College (Later Partium Christian University)**

The István Sulyok Reformed College was established in 1990 in Oradea. Back in that decade, two classes began for cantor – teacher and two classes for religion teacher – cantor major. In the absence of accreditation, the teachers had to take a state exam in Nagykőrös (Hungary). Later, the college rose to the university level, and the Partium Christian University was established, which, as an ecclesiastical private university, is the first accredited particular, Hungarian-language higher education institution in the country. In 1996, a church music major was launched, which provided five years of training for future music teachers and cantors. Subjects included congregational canto, church music, conducting, and cantor practice for both Reformed and Catholic students as well. The name of the persons forming the educational team is Sándor Berkesi – Kossuth Prize-winning conductor, László Attila Kovács – Lutheran pastor-teacher, Tünde Molnár – organist, János Zsigmond Kristófi – organist, László Leopold – church musician, Zsolt Lászlóffy – composer, István Angi – esthete. This degree was discontinued because it did not receive accreditation from the Romanian state (there is no Romanian equivalent to the degree). In 2002 was reclassified as a music pedagogy major, which was a four-year degree until 2008, and after that lining up with the Bologna-system became a three-year training (three base years and two-year master course). In the degree of music pedagogy, there is also optional organ teaching and cantor practice subjects. At the university worship held once a week, one of the students majoring in music pedagogy or the organ teacher performs the cantor service.

Since those ecclesiastical music degrees were abolished, the cantor training course in Oradea is currently the only such educational form in the Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék, which ensures the required training and qualification for the cantors to access jobs and issues the certificate.

## 5. The Oradea Cantor – Training Course

The introduction of the *Hungarian Reformed Hymnbook* in 1996 made timely the start of cantor – training in the Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék.

### 5.1. Historical Background

Previously, there was no cantor – training course in this church district. We know of a single periodic course that operated between 1950 and 1952 in Albiş (Balláné Bakó, 2018), belonging to the Diocese of Érmellék, during the pastoral care of Sándor Saja. Then the cantor candidates either took the diocesan cantor examination, which according to the law allowed half-norm employment, or they took an exam in the Transylvanian Church District in Cluj-Napoca – they took a so-called church district exam – which ensured 1/1 meaning full norm employment. The material of the 1921 hymnbook, which was in use in the Partium for nearly 90 years, except for the Albiş course, was requested only at the acceptance exam at Protestant Theological Institute of Cluj-Napoca. The theologians had to give an examination from the materials of the 1923 hymnbook from Cluj-Napoca, and later from the hymnbook from 1996.

**Figure 4:** *The Hungarian Reformed Hymnbook from 1996. Psalm 150.*  
(Source: Own Photo)

The students of the Oradea Cantor – Training Course is mostly employed cantors. There are also high school students among the students who perform cantor service in a village congregation on Sundays for a symbolic remuneration. From 2012, the 12-year-old generation also joined the training. Since about 200 cantors currently serving the church district, just 27 have

Reformed Cantor Diploma (graduates of the courses or church music degree programs in Hungary included), there are still a lot of diocesan qualified (not graduating training course) and unqualified cantor. And there are no cantors in nearly 100 congregations. Therefore, there is a need for continuous training to ensure professional development.

## **5.2. The 1996 Hungarian Reformed Hymnbook, the Initiator of the Ecclesiastical Music Reform in the Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék**

The *Hungarian Reformed Hymnbook (World Meeting Hymnbook)*, published in 1996, was not introduced in the Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék for compulsory use for ten years after its publication. The reason for this is to be found in professional discussions, vindications about the content of the hymnbook. Meanwhile, in Transylvania, in the printing house of Misztótfalusi Kis Miklós appeared the Transylvania edition with the recommendation of late Bishop Kálmán Csiha and István Tonk church district chief caretaker, and printing house manager. The acquisition and use of the hymnbook could no longer be prevented, it was also bought and put into use by the congregations of the Partium, as this was made possible by a synod protocol (Közlöny, 2006). Seeing this, the leadership of the Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék also began to consider the possibility of printing. From 2006, the printing started in the Szenczi Kertész Ábrahám printing house in Oradea, for which as a base it served the small-scale form of the 1996 hymnbook republished in Hungary in 2000.

In the history of ecclesiastical music, canto related reform has always taken place when there has been a change of hymnbook. And the material of the new hymnbook needs to be taught, otherwise, we are just exchanging a book, but the songs are still used by the congregations in the old, usual way.

Printing the hymnbook of Partium was preceded by the organization and the launch of the Cantor – Training Course, which is due to the initiative of Mihály Oláh, a pastor from Zaláu, who back in the days was a church district music referent. A one-week training course took place in 2005, which was also a survey to see if there was a need for this form of training. The first Cantor – Training Course was launched in 2006, organized in Oradea by the Hungarian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church Musicians Working Group (ReZeM), at the same time with the III<sup>rd</sup> Ecclesiastical Music Conference. The initially planned two-week course upon the students' request, from 2012, has been extended to a three-week course.

The Oradea Cantor – Training Course takes place at the Music Department of the Partium Christian University and in the reformed church and congregational halls of Nagyvárad-Újváros (Oradea-New Town), where in recent years more than one hundred and twenty cantors have visited once or more times. As of 2010, a total of 13 students have graduated and received church district cantor qualification.



**Figure 5: The Cantor – Training Students in 2019**  
(Source: Own Photo)

### **5.3 Curriculum, Syllabus, Educators**

The Oradea Cantor – Training Course, after the model of the Hungarian Reformed cantor – training courses: Sárospatak, 1951; Fót, 1958; Debrecen, 1965 (Dávid, 2013), operates in eight stages (A1 to D2), the syllabus is also based on these, according to course note entitled *Church Music Guideline, Course Notes I-II*, (1969). On the course, the materials of the *Hungarian Reformed Hymnbook*, (1996) and the accompanying *Hungarian Reformed Choral Book*, (2000) are taught. From 2016, this curriculum was expanded with the material of a text choral book entitled the *Hungarian Reformed Choral Book with Intonations and Song-poems of 1996 Hungarian Reformed Hymnbook*, (2016).



**Figure 6:** The *Hungarian Reformed Choral Book with Intonations and Song-poems of 1996*  
*Hungarian Reformed Hymnbook*  
(Source: Own Photo)

The main subject of the cantor – training program is the congregational hymn, and besides this, there is solfeggio and music theory, choir conducting, congregational harmonium and organ play, music history, while in groups of seniors also organ knowledge, hymnology, liturgy, and voice training subjects are taught. At the end of the course, students take a group exam of the material studied, for each subject. In the closing concert, the choir of the cantor – training course will present from the works learned over the three weeks under the direction of students and teachers.



**Figure 7:** *The Main Subjects of the Cantor – Training Course*  
(Source: Own Diagram)

The course teachers are Domokos Józsa – music teacher, the organist of the Roman Catholic church in Oradea-Szöllős (organ and organ knowledge), Gyula Kozma – cantor, choir conductor, currently organist in Reformed Church of Oradea-Csillagváros (organ, music theory), Ernő Marczy – music teacher, organist cantor at the Mezőtúr Reformed Middle School (Hungary), (solfeggio, organ), Zoltán Márkus – music teacher, organist and choir conductor at the Oradea-Rét Reformed Church (choir and conducting, organ). Judit Noémi Nagy – music teacher, organist cantor of the Oradea-Őssi Reformed Church (congregational hymn, music history), Otlia Valéria Orosz – music teacher, organist cantor of the Oradea-Újváros Reformed Church (congregational hymn, hymnology), Lóránd Márton Rácz – music teacher, choir conductor, organist at the Reformed Church of Zilah-Center (organ). The courses also were taught by Anikó Brugós – lecturer at Partium Christian University (voice training), Márta Kozma – music teacher, artistic secretary of the Oradea State Philharmonic (harmonium, solfeggio, congregational hymn), János Zsigmond Kristófi – organist, conductor in the Roman Catholic Basilica in Oradea (organ), Apor Miklós Pünkösti – cantor, conductor, organist of the Reformed Church in Zaláu-Liget (organ, organ knowledge) and in the senior groups' Bishop István Csúry (liturgy).

The professional director of the course is Sándor Berkesi, Kossuth-, Liszt-, Hungarian Heritage- and Károli Prize-winning conductor, retired music director of the Reformed Theological University in Debrecen (Hungary).

**Table 1:** *The Quantifiable Results of the Oradea Cantor – Training Course so far:*

	<b>The Quantifiable Results of the Oradea Cantor – Training Course</b>		
	<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of students</i>	<i>Number of students taken the cantor exam</i>
<b>1.</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>30</b>	-
<b>2.</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>33</b>	-
<b>3.</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>17</b>	-
<b>4.</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>22</b>	-
<b>5.</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>22</b>	-
<b>7.</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>8.</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>9.</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>10.</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>11.</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>17</b>	-
<b>12.</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>19</b>	-
<b>13.</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>14.</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>23</b>	-

The financial background of the Oradea Cantor – Training Course is provided by the Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék. One part of the amount required to hold the course consists of the participation fee paid by the students, the other part comes from project applications and the funds provided by the church district. From 2019, the course is also being supported by the organizing committee of the European Conference of Protestant Church Music (ECPCM) in Germany.

About work, events and the closing concerts taking place in the cantor – training courses can be found in the following source projects: Orosz, O. V. (2015), *Reformed Music Calendar*, (2014, 2015, 2018), Veres-Kovács, A. (2011), Orosz, O. V. (2020, October 3).

## **6. Conclusion**

In the Reformed Church, the cantor – training in institutional form started with the launch of pedagogical schools and the institution of cantor – teacher. In Romania, interwar Hungarian teaching was provided only in denominations schools. Teachers, cantors had a double task: that of teaching in primary schools, and to perform religious duties. Besides the work in school and church have had other duties deposited on cultural activities in the community service where they worked and lived. It would be useful to trace cantor – training rules between the two World Wars, and a music education which was in the teacher – training institutes. We are aware that the music education took place in the teacher – training institutes from the Jenő Stojanovits Harmony School, Dezső Antalffy-Zsíross Organ School, and choral book of Samu Borsay and Gábor Veress.

The institutional resumption of cantor – training was only possible after 1989. The experience of the course so far shows that this training is needed. In-service cantors rarely have the opportunity to supplement their musical knowledge with full-time training. The cantor – training school guides the students in a professionally correct direction, helps them to learn the Reformed musical mother tongue, to develop a musical taste suitable for the congregational cantor service. At the same time, the professional and friendly relationships formed at the training course, the experience of the community, and participation in the choir of the cantor – training are decisive experiences. The organizers are looking for the opportunity to gather the cantors several times a year to exchange experiences, participate on professional days, and mid-year cantor – training. It is from this idea that the church district has been organizing autumn cantor conferences since 2009 and professional days for each diocese of the Church District Music Committee. Several of the students enrolled in the Music Department of the Partium Christian University following their undergraduate education and experience at the Cantor – Training Course. All those who want to prepare for the future cantor service or to improve their knowledge can apply for the course.

The church district was not able to organize the Cantor – Training Course in 2020 due to the pandemic of Covid 19. Looking at the future, it seems necessary to expand the available instrumentation, and a Church Music Documentation Center is being set up to help educate the next generation in ecclesiastical music with a library and sheet music repository and archival documentation material accessible to researchers.



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**Figure 1:** *The map of the Reformed Church District of Királyhágómellék*

(Source: [http://www.kiralyhagomellek.ro/cikk\\_nagyban.php?oldal=371](http://www.kiralyhagomellek.ro/cikk_nagyban.php?oldal=371))

**Figure 2:** *The Teacher Training School of Satu-Mare*

(Source: <https://hu.pinterest.com/pin/83809243049172161/>)