

“MOZART’S TRANSYLVANIAN PUPIL” JOSEPHA PALM: POSSIBLE CONNECTIONS AND NARRATIVES

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Abstract. *The musical culture of Transylvania changed in significant ways at the turn of the nineteenth century; with the government moving to Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár, Klausenburg), the city became a cultural centre of Western standards. Theatre performances, musical academies, and Viennese-style chamber music concerts became popular among the region’s Hungarian nobility, especially among the close circle of the Governor, Count Georg Bánffy. One contemporary source indicates that his Viennese wife Josepha (née Palm, 1754, Vienna–1816, Cluj-Napoca) was a pupil of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Countess Bánffy introduced the cultural practices typical of her native town to Cluj. Josepha Palm supported German-speaking theatre groups and became a Maecenas to the local Kleinmeisters, strongly influencing the reception in Transylvania of the works of Viennese composers in general, and of Mozart in particular.*

Keywords: Josepha Palm, Mozart reception, maecenas, Transylvania

Scholars exploring the musical culture of early nineteenth-century Transylvania frequently refer to an outstanding but rather inexplicit topic of local historiography: the narrative about Countess Josepha Palm (1754, Vienna–1816, Cluj-Napoca) as a pupil of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791). Regional research literature on Mozart’s reception considers the composer’s presumed links to the Transylvanian aristocracy a certainty, and has perpetuated this certainty for decades without ever questioning or probing the reliability of the professional or personal relationship between the acclaimed artist and the wife of the region’s governor.

Using methods of musical historiography, this paper examines the conflicting elements in the conventional “Transylvanian pupil” narrative, while also elucidating the role and place of a truly emblematic figure, Countess Josepha Palm. It aims to correct a few of the unconfirmed references present in Romanian and Hungarian musicological literature by aligning data on premieres and public performances with

other evidence of local artistic assimilation, as well as bringing forth new information regarding the early reception of Mozart and the musical culture of Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár in Hungarian, Klausenburg in German).

RESEARCH HISTORY

At the turn of the nineteenth century, there were important changes in the Transylvanian musical scene. Starting with the winter of 1790, the transfer of the governmental seat from Sibiu (Nagyszeben, Hermannstadt) to Cluj-Napoca meant that the latter became a cultural centre. Theatre performances, musical events, as well as Viennese-style chamber concerts became common practice in the close circles of the governor of Transylvania. Brought up in the capital of the Habsburg Empire, Georg Bánffy married the Viennese countess Josepha Palm, a member of the Austrian aristocracy who was referred to by a contemporary source as having learned to play piano with none other than Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

This plausible hypothesis, of the countess being the only Transylvanian pupil of Mozart, has effortlessly made its way into the works of local researchers interested in the region's history and culture. Thus, István Lakatos discussed the issue in several of his articles,¹ Ede Sebestyén referred to it in his description of Mozart's links to Hungary,² George Breazul included the story in his monograph published at the bicentenary of Mozart's birth,³ and János Fancsali cited it in his paper dedicated to Anton Polz, the Bánffy family's music-teacher.⁴ More recently, Erich Türk also mentioned it in his thorough presentation of the musical life of Kolozsvár at the beginning of the nineteenth century,⁵ and I have also discussed similar topics in my previous papers related to musical life in Transylvania.⁶

1 See István Lakatos, "Pătrunderea muzicii lui Mozart în Ardeal și Banat" [The infiltration of Mozart's works in Transylvania and Banat], *Muzica* 6/9 (1956): 26–30; idem., "Mozart művei Erdélyben és Bán-ságban" [Mozart's works in Transylvania and Banat], in *Zenetudományi tanulmányok V. W. A. Mozart emlékére*, ed. Bence Szabolcsi and Dénes Bartha (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1957), 467–471.

2 Ede Sebestyén, *Mozart és Magyarország* [Mozart and Hungary] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1991, 2. Edition).

3 George Breazul, *La bicentenarul nașterii lui Mozart. 1756–1956* [At the bicentenary of Mozart's birth 1756–1956], București: Uniunea compozitorilor, 1956).

4 János Fancsali, "Polcz Antal, a kolozsvári magyar Zenekonzervatórium első igazgatója" [Anton Polcz, the first director of the Hungarian Conservatorium in Kolozsvár], in *Írások Erdély zenei történelméhez 1* (Budaörs: Magyarörmény Kulturális Egyesület, Pro Artis Alapítvány, Budaörsi Örmény Nemzetiségi Önkormányzat, 2014), 9–17.

5 Erich Türk, "Aufschwung des Klausenburger Musiklebens in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts," *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Theologia*, 64/2 (2019): 113–130.

6 Emese Sófalvi, "Bánffy György, a kolozsvári Muzsikai Egyesület első védnöke" [Georg Bánffy, protector of the first Musical Society in Cluj], in *Ananka György és a tudomány megújuló alakzatai*,

The Transylvanian musicologist and highly esteemed Mozart expert Ferenc László repeatedly underlined the importance of the governor’s wife in the cultural history of Transylvania: “Bánffy’s wife, born Palm, was Viennese. A source dated to 1804 reveals that she might have been Mozart’s pupil,” and in László’s opinion, there are documents showing that Mozart was acquainted with members of the Palm aristocratic family. László emphasized that the frequent musical activities at Bánffy Palace in Kolozsvár might be considered local variants of those common in the Brukenthal Palace in Nagyszeben:⁷

The Bánffy Palace – today, the National Museum of Arts – witnessed the first Mozartian chamber music auditions documented in Cluj. The concerts’ promoter was none other than the Governor’s wife, born Josepha Palm, a Viennese aristocrat whose family knew Mozart well and who was actually a former piano student of the composer. The Viennese guests were fascinated by the city, the palace and the encounter with the living memory of one of Mozart’s students.⁸

Ferenc László related in one of his interviews that the Bánffy Palace, located in the main square of Kolozsvár, was home for numerous events in a Mozartian spirit. According to the late musicologist, Georg Bánffy married a Viennese aristocrat whose family may be mentioned in association with the Austrian musician, and who was “declared by a contemporary source as a former piano student of Mozart ... who brought to Cluj the Viennese custom of chamber music performances.” László states “We have unquestionable evidence of the fact that Bánffy himself knew and supported Mozart, his name appearing on the list of ‘subscribers’ to one of his concerts in Vienna.”⁹

ed. Annamária Biró (Cluj-Napoca: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2018), 235–251; idem, “Josepha Palm és a Mozart-kultusz kezdetei Erdélyben” [Josepha Palm or about the beginnings of the cult of Mozart in Transylvania], in *CERTAMEN VI*, ed. Emese Egyed, László Pakó, Emese Sófalvi (Cluj-Napoca: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2019), 123–130.

- 7 “Bánffys Frau, geb. Josepha Palm, war eine Wienerin. Einer Quelle von 1804 zufolge soll sie Mozart-Schülerin gewesen sein. In der Tat sind Mozarts persönliche Beziehungen zu mehreren adeligen Familiennamens Palm dokumentiert und siebenbürgische Quellen bestätigen sowohl Josepha Bánffys pianistische Fähigkeiten als auch sonst eine rege musikalische Tätigkeit im Bánffy-Palais – ein Klausenburger Pendant zum Hermannstädter Brukenthal-Palais.” Ferenc László, „Zur Geschichteder Mozart-Rezeption in Roumänien,” in *Musikgeschichte in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, vol. 1, eds. eds. Helmut Loos and Eberhard Möller (Leipzig, Gudrun Schröder Verlag, 1997), 135.
- 8 “Palatul Bánffy – azi, Muzeul Național de Artă – fusese scena primelor audiții de muzică de cameră mozartiană la Cluj, atestate documentar. Promotorul acestora fusese însăși soția guvernatorului, născută Jozefa Palm, o aristocrată vieneză a cărei familie îl cunoștea bine pe Mozart și care chiar fusese eleva acestuia, la pian. Oaspeții vienezi au fost încântați de Cluj, de palat și de întâlnirea cu amintirea vie a unei eleve a lui Mozart.” Ferenc László, “Cu Mozart în Europa,” a manuscript text written for the Romanian Broadcast Company in 2000.
- 9 “și pe Jozefa Palm, o sursă de epocă a declarat-o fostă elevă la pian a lui Mozart. Ea a adus la Cluj, cutuma de tip vienez a concertelor camerale. [...] Avem o dovadă irefutabilă [sic!] a faptului că

Research into the history of the subject reveals that plausible references to Mozart's single Transylvanian student can be traced in the local musicological literature back in the 1940s, but not earlier. The original point is the publication of a historiographical source, Richard Weiskircher's description of the musical culture in Transylvania at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The manuscript, under the title *Musikpflege in Siebenbürgen um 1800* (Music in Transylvania Around 1800) was written in 1804 in Sibiu and published by Gottlieb Brandsch, a versatile intellectual interested in the history, popular music culture, and education of the Transylvanian Saxons. The editor omitted to mention the exact provenience of his source material, rendering critical examination of the manuscript impossible. The author of the manuscript lived in Sibiu, relatively far from the inner circles of the countess Bánffy, and in this work he mostly described Saxon musical traditions in Transylvania.

The Weiskirchen–Brandsch text describes the generous and honourable wife of Count Georg Bánffy as an accomplished person fully deserving of high social status, a lady who skilfully plays the fortepiano and used to learn from the “immortal Mozart.”¹⁰ The author places Josepha Palm in the same context as another symbolic figure: the chapel master Peter Schimert (1712–1785), the beloved disciple of Johann Sebastian Bach. Both the cantor and the countess are presented as personalities who enabled Transylvanian art to become aligned with Western musical traditions.

This piece of new information, published in German in a Transylvanian Saxon journal, was instantly processed by István Lakatos, a self-educated but prolific chronicler of the region's musical historical events. Without questioning or revisiting the source, he instantly and repeatedly integrated it into his articles. Thus, the appealing (and quite feasible!) presumption of her being “Mozart's Transylvanian pupil” came to be cited frequently as a fact in the literature on local music history.

HYPOTHESIS OF A POSSIBLE MOZART-PALM CONNECTION

Considered by Brandsch an accomplished pianoforte player, Josepha Palm had no explicit pretension to become a bridge between Western musical conventions and

Bánffy însuși l-a cunoscut și l-a susținut pe Mozart, numele său apărând pe lista ‘subscribenților’ la un concert al acestuia dat la Viena.” Mozart 250 ani și Transilvania. Interview with Ferenc László by Victor Eskenasy, 27 January 2006. <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/25653601.html> (accessed: 10.10. 2022).

10 “Die Gemahlin des Ersten verbindet als eine gebohrne gräfin Palm, mit denen ihren Rang und Seelengröße eigenen erhabenen Tugenden noch die Eigenschaft, eine geschickte Fortepiano Spielerin und Schülerin des unsterblichen Mozarts zu sein.” Gottlieb Brandsch, „Musikpflege in Siebenbürgen um 1800,“ *Siebenbürgischer Vierteljahrschrift* 64/2 (1941): 138–152, 149.



Fig. 1. Unknown painter. *Portrait of Countess Josepha Palm*, before 1822, private collection

the necessities of a peripheral region. Born Countess Josephine Maria Palm on 25 August 1754, she married on 12 April 1771 at the age of 17. After the wedding, the wife of the future governor lived a life typical of Austrian or Hungarian high nobility: she gave birth to eight children, six of whom lived to adulthood. Entirely

dedicated to their instruction, she supported the publication of treatises on education, as well as works of Hungarian literature. Countess Palm was seen by her contemporaries as a role model for promoting culture, and as a respectable person whose compassionate and sensitive heart was observed and mentioned by prominent figures in the Transylvanian community. Her achievements were eventually recognised by her native country in the form of the Sternkreuz, the highest Austrian distinction.

But what of the Mozart episode? A possible early encounter between the Mozart family and the young Countess Palm's inner circles could actually have taken place. During their repeated visits to Vienna (1762, 1767/68, 1774), Leopold Mozart and his son Wolfgang might have met the Palms, but to date no documents confirm an actual connection between the two families. Such an encounter between the artist and his presumed student is more likely to have happened later, in the year 1781. By this time, during Mozart's Viennese period, the student would have been Countess Bánffy, the wife of a high Austrian state official.

The capital of the Habsburg Empire was a cultural centre, often sending theatre troupes and musicians to the peripheries of the empire and welcoming them back for the winter season, together with their aristocratic employers. The Hungarian aristocracy comes across as a tightly knit company in the testimonies of contemporary documents, often under the collective denomination "der Ungarische Adel" (a name we also find later on in a pension request written by Constanze Mozart, the widow of the composer).

In the context of private musical assemblies of the Viennese years, the Apponyi, Bánffy, Esterházy, Pálffy, and Zichy families were the most frequently mentioned from the Hungarian aristocratic circle. From his very first years spent in Vienna, Mozart was invited to play in the salons of Count Károly Zichy (20 July 1782, 20 March 1784) and János Esterházy (nine occasions 1–29 March 1782). A certain Comte de Banffi [*sic*] paid six *gulden*s for his season ticket for the Trattnerhof concerts in March 1784, according to a list which can be found on a letter the composer sent to his father Leopold, but we should perhaps not read too much into this; a gesture of support of this kind would not necessarily have meant actual attendance at events (on the same list of season ticket holders the name of the Duke and Duchess Palm are visible).¹¹

Mozart research literature details a continuation of relations with the Hungarian aristocracy. There were musical visits to Duke Lipót Pálffy (9 April 1784) and

11 The wife of Georg Bánffy, Josepha Palm belonged to a higher branch of the family, the counts of the Palm nobility. See János Kárpáti, *Wolfgang Amadé Mozart: Válogatott levelek és dokumentumok* [Wolfgang Amadé Mozart: Selected letters and documents] (Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, Budapest, 2017).

Count Zichy (21 February 1785), and the composer developed a close relation with the Zichy family, tutoring the Count's wife Anna Mária. It also mentions another female student from the high Hungarian nobility, namely Josepha Gabriella Pálffy.

Sources concerning the involvement of the young Countess Palm in the musical life of the capital of the Habsburg Empire are scarce, as is the precise chronology of the years she spent in Vienna with her newlywed husband. She gave birth to five children in the first decade of her marriage, so her socialising possibilities might have been reduced. It is likely that Georg Bánffy, a high official of the chancellery and treasurer of the Habsburg Empire from 1782 until his nomination to the function of Governor of Transylvania in 1787, would have been more familiar with the Viennese Mozart phenomenon. And in March 1784, he could have easily joined Mozart's public in the salon of his sister Ágnes Bánffy, the wife of Count János Eszterházy.

Despite the frequent allusions to be found in the musicological literature published in Hungary and Romania, we have no documentation pointing toward the existence of a closer, personal Mozart-Bánffy meeting in Vienna, nor any evidence of Countess Palm's particular interest in the musician.

JOSEPHA PALM AND THE MUSICAL CULTURE IN TRANSYLVANIA AT THE BEGINNING OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Countess Josepha Palm was considered by her contemporaries a highly accomplished lady and a great benefactor of the arts. Theatre plays and musical academies honoured her, and compositions or poems were dedicated to her (such as the one entitled *Symphonia*), demonstrating her well-known affinity for music.

Josepha Palm took the presentation of events in the Habsburg capital as a model. Continuing the Saxon artistic tradition of the former chair of the Transylvanian Government, and following the precedent of the Brukenthal Palace in Sibiu, she tried to introduce these types of events from 1787 into cultural life in Kolozsvár, her new home. The Countess became protectress of local *kleinmeisters* and the resident German theatre companies, and she was well known for being supportive of migrating German and Austrian composers.

One of the earliest hints of Josepha Bánffy's affinity for music can be found in the text of the recommendation of one of the first printed "Hungarian Arias." József Rájnis's (1741–1812) verses were set to music with particular attention to the Hungarian prosody by János Schreier (1744–1811) for a tenor and an instrumental ensemble (2 violins, 2 violas, bass, 2 flutes, 2 horns in F)¹² and dedicated to

12 The composition's earlier version, preserved in a manuscript form, is written for voice and piano.

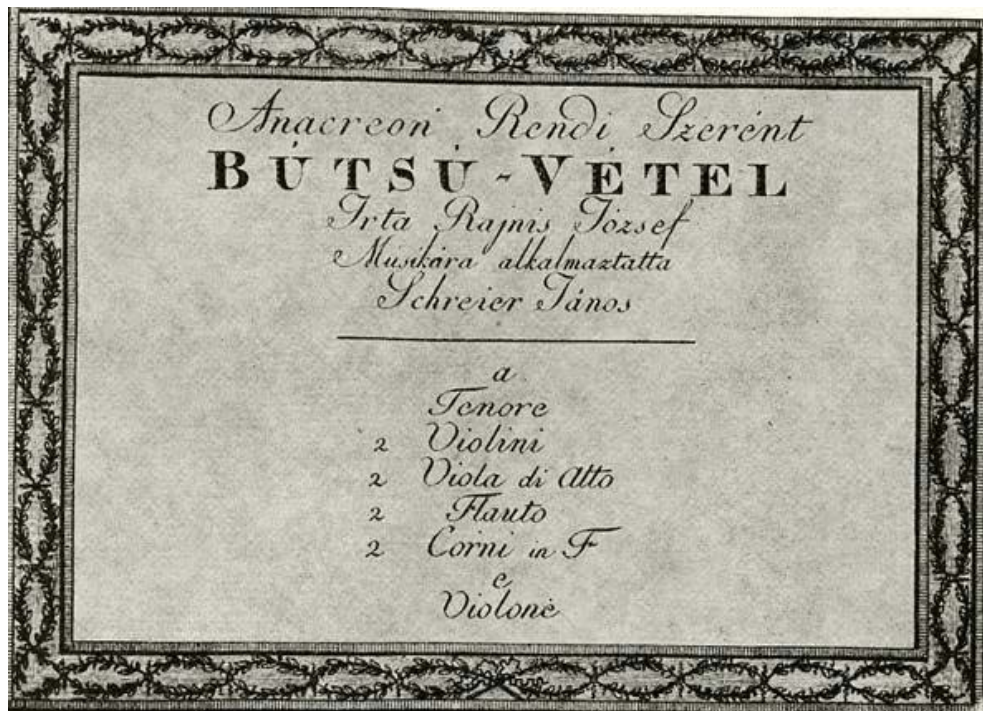


Fig. 2. József Rájnis–János Schreier; *Ankreón rendi szerént bútsú-vétel* (Farewell in Anacreontic Style), front page; National Széchényi Library, Budapest

Josepha Palm. Scherier addresses the Countess in the preface to his 1791 *Anacreon rend szerént Bútsú-vétel* (Farewell in Anacreontic Style) as the person most capable to judge the artistic value of the piece, since she can understand music almost to perfection. Schreier referred to an episode already thirteen years earlier, perhaps in 1778, when Josepha Palm, while playing “the most beautiful works,” allowed him to accompany her, thus developing the Piarist musician’s taste.

At the beginning of the 1810s, the Bánffys had already employed a Viennese musician, Anton Polz, as klaviermeister. Since by this period the Count’s grown-up children were no longer resident in the palace, the music master’s tasks were more likely extended to the organisation of the artistic events of the family. Although Polz was certainly an appreciated member of the governor’s household – he attended the family meals and held a private room on the premises – no exact inscription relating to the Bánffys can be found among Polz’s compositions.

But another migrant artist from Austria did dedicate a series of piano variations to Josepha Palm: František Pöschl, the music teacher at Count Sámuel Kemény’s family. Although the score is not dated, we can deduce that it was composed before

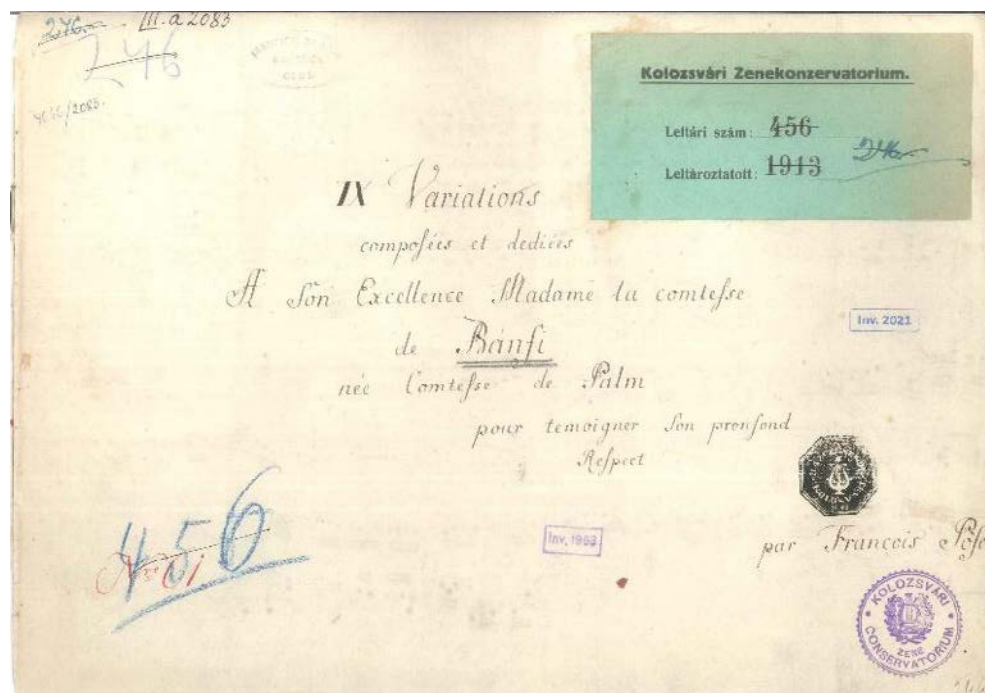


Fig. 3. František Pöschl: *IX Variations*, front page, Library of the Gheorghe Dima National Music Academy, Cluj-Napoca, III.a.

1814, most likely between 1810 and 1814, and that it was not necessarily intended specifically for the Countess to perform it on the fortepiano. The original 3/8 theme and its nine character variations (including the common types of the genre: variations for the left hand, minor variations, and a Polonaise) suggest a skilful pianist and a Vienna-trained composer.

For private gatherings, Josepha Palm used the term *Gesellschaft* (social assembly), which is a hint of her affiliation to German-speaking culture. At the sumptuous events she organised, or which were organised for her, music was always present. In 1803, for example, on the Countess' birthday her children József and Dénes played a piano and clarinet piece in her honour.

Considering that the Countess had been brought up with German culture, there was no impediment for local Hungarian theatre troupes to perform regularly in their mother tongue in honour of the first lady of Transylvania. One of the earliest performances of this kind was the play *A nemes joltevő* (The Noble Benefactress), performed in 1793 by amateur members of the gubernatorial chancellery at Rhédey Hall (a place frequently used for theatrical events in Cluj).

Wandering theatre groups coming to Cluj-Napoca presented annual musical events to mark the name days of the Bánffy couple. Five such artistic events can be linked directly to the governor’s wife, but their actual number must have been greater. On 19 March 1803 *A Kontraktus* (The Contract), the local public’s beloved *singspiel*, with music by Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf was performed to honour the name day of Josepha Palm.

The playbill of a musical academy dated 8 March 1805 shows the first public performance of a Mozart composition in Cluj. The overture to the *Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute), referred to as “the opening music of the *Czauberflöt* [*sic*] opera written by Mozárt [*sic*],” was described as the work of the person “who deserves everlasting remembrance” and placed at the beginning of the theatre orchestra’s programme, directed by the residing conductor Johann Seltzer. After ten days, on 18 March 1805, a new drama performance *Pruth vize mellett kötöttett békesség* (Peace Made on the Side of the River Pruth) was dedicated to the first lady of Transylvania, including musical insertions from an unidentified composer. The author of the drama remains unknown. In 1806, the Hungarian theatre group’s act was a new musical presentation with festive illuminations: the comedy *Viktorina*.

A concert in 1807 marks the premiere of a Mozart chamber music composition, most likely the Quintet in E-flat major for piano and winds, K. 452. If one looks at the programme and the participants of the concert, it is clear that the protectress of artistic presentations is being celebrated. The name Anton Polz must be mentioned here again, as he was the Bánffy family’s music teacher at the time. Polz was a “Musicus ex Austria” who started as an “anti-Beethovenian” but later became a fervent adept of the works of Ludwig van Beethoven. This Austrian *kleinmeister* knew well his patroness’ association with the Viennese style and its prominent composers. During the festivities held in the Bánffy palace, Polz himself performed the piano part, and was joined by woodwind players from the local theatre (namely: Johann Klein, Johann Seltzer, Johann Trzka and Leopold Irch).

Although known for her artistic inclinations, the countess’ personal correspondence rarely included musical subjects, one exception to this being a description of a disgraceful performance of *The Magic Flute* in Lugoj (Lugos, Lugosch) which did reach her through one of her nephews in 1811.¹³

Additional information concerning the means of artistic patronage can also be drawn from the family archives. In the Bánffy family’s Transylvanian homes – the palaces of Kolozsvár, Gyalu (today Gilău), and Bonchida castle (today Bonțida) – a collection of musical instruments indicate they were used effectively in private musical assemblies. The governor’s possessions included two basses, a dulcimer, music

13 See Ferenc László, *Mozart: Lugos 1811* (Budapest: Helikon, 1991), 11.

stands, benches for the players, a cherry plywood fortepiano, and a great number of musical clocks.

Josepha Palm died in Cluj-Napoca on 2 February 1814, aged 60. The annual musical plays organised in her honour by the residing German and Hungarian theatre groups were mostly transferred to the widowed governor himself, the remainder going to her female relatives. Thus, the public musical academies and opera performances, originally developed to honour the late Countess, were sustained.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the integration of Viennese musical culture continued in the artistic activities conducted and promoted by the governor, who initiated the founding of the first Musical Society in Transylvania in the summer of 1819. Protector of the local Musik-Gesellschaft, Count Bánffy strongly supported the activities of the first musical educational institution of the region, appointing his employee Anton Polz as director. Secondary sources mention Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Requiem* in the same context as the governor, and the funeral mass was very likely performed by the local Musical Society's members in remembrance of Count Bánffy after his passing in 1822.¹⁵

In his testament, Georg Bánffy donated a generous sum so that musical masses in remembrance of his wife would be performed annually on the day of her death (2 February) in the church of Saint Michael in Cluj. We have no data concerning how long these musical gestures were held honouring the memory of the late Josepha Bánffy (née Palm), but the recollection of the beloved wife and mother, Maecenas of the local theatre groups and musicians, had long faded when her figure involuntarily reappeared in the middle of the twentieth century posing as Mozart's single Transylvanian pupil, and became once again an important emblematic character in local music history.

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Josepha Palm's story can be perceived as an illustrative example of the reception of art and music on the peripheries of Europe around 1800. Whether she was Mozart's pupil or not remains a question for further research, but she can certainly be seen as a symbol of thriving relations between Kolozsvár and the great artistic centres of the continent, and also of ever-increasing Western influence, during and after the Enlightenment, in the cultural life of Transylvania. To conclude, the reception of

14 Completing the representations honouring the Countess, we can only hint at the annual "Bánffy-concerts" performed by the local Musical Society between 1819-1822.

15 See Ágnes Sas, "Főúri zenei intézmények, arisztokrata mecénások a 18. századi Magyarországon" [Musical institutions of the high nobility, aristocratic protectors in 18th-century Hungary], *Zenetudományi Dolgozatok 2001–2002* (Budapest: MTA Zenetudományi Intézet), 171–233.

JOZEFA PALM, "MOZART'S TRANSYLVANIAN PUPIL"

the Austrian Countess and the Viennese composer represents a solid building block in the subsequent development of local musical culture: the emerging national school in Transylvania and Hungary.