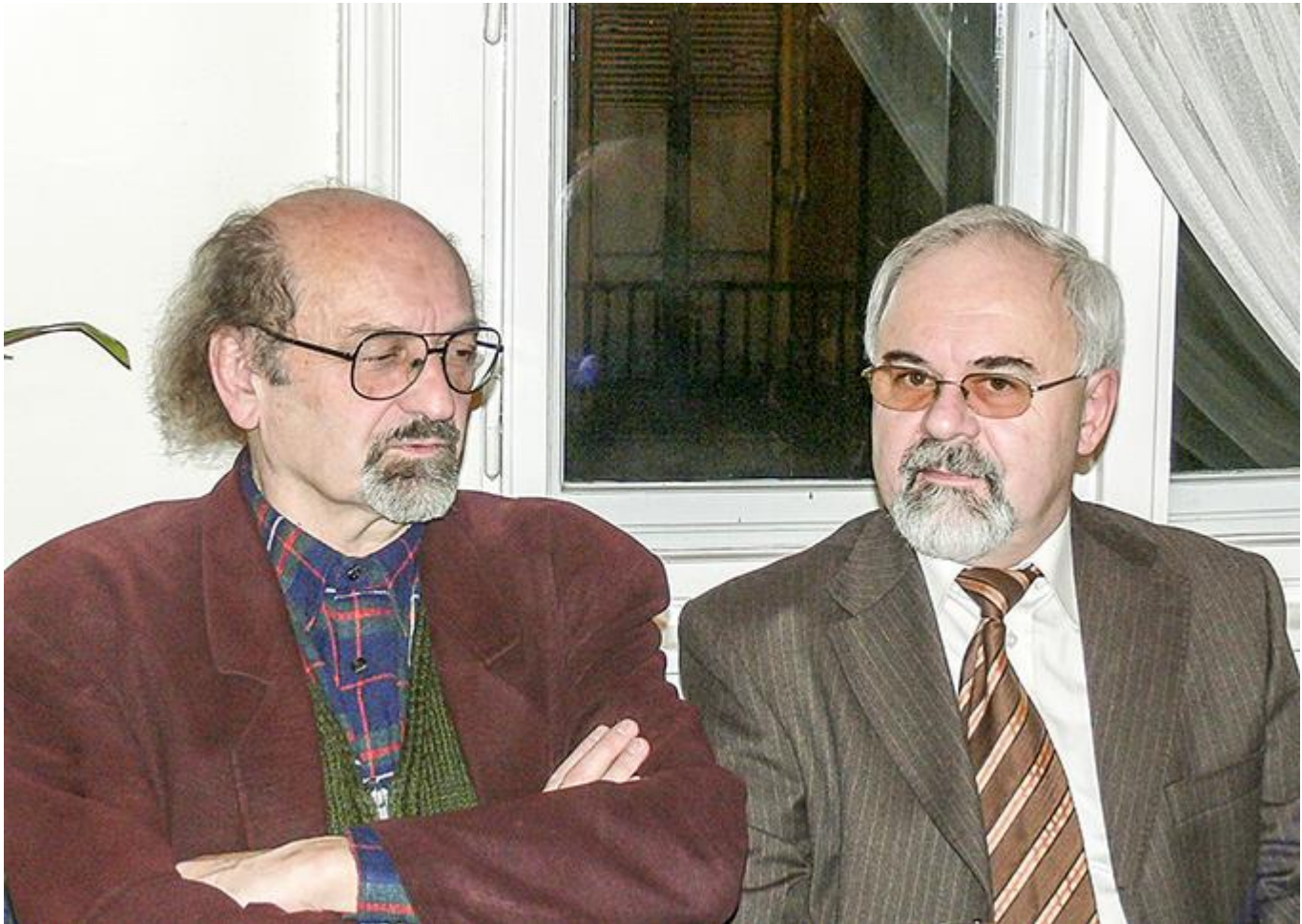


JAZZ – IN HUNGARIAN

(György Szabados)

He was born in Budapest in 1939. Took private music lessons as a child, formed his first band in 1954. In 1962-63 he gave his first free jazz concerts, parallel to the American avant-garde trends. Aiming to create his own musical language, he markedly built on the parlando-rubato practice of Hungarian folk songs and on oriental asymmetric rhythms.

His first important international success came in 1972, at the San Sebastian Festival, where he was awarded first prize of the “Free Jazz” category. Subsequently he was invited to several important festivals in Germany and Austria. In the seventies and eighties he led an open music workshop at the Kassák Club in Budapest. He is a “school setter” musician; he plays solo, in trio and with his MAKUZ Orchestra (Magyar Királyi Udvari Zenekar – *Hungarian Royal Court Orchestra*). In 1985 he was decorated with the Ferenc Liszt-award.



- *This interview aims at focusing on a specific subject, the issue whether jazz may possess a national character and if yes, to what extent is it essential. Nowadays many*

discussions focus on the terms “nation” and “Hungarian”. Do you recognize these categories?

- Of course I do, but this is not a question of recognition. It was not the term that was born first but the experience and the environment which made the term emerge. The notions of “national” and “Hungarian” equate to the identification of a spiritual environment, of a certain kind of perception. My way of thinking as a musician is, first of all, spiritual. If, to give you an example, someone makes a distinction between jazz and music in general, it would narrow the scope of discussion. For me, this can only be approached from, and related to, a spiritual provenience. The arts enjoy a cult status and can only be national as an institution. That’s why I feel myself corked in a bottle in the jazz community in Hungary if we talk about matters of this quality. Hungarian mentality and taste are not a question of artistic genres.

(“It is still with me”)

- When I approached you with the idea of this interview, you argued that the topic may have no relevance today. I guess you referred to the recent changes in your musical direction, that now it transcends the idiom of jazz so that it should rather be defined by broader categories. We may use the terms “20th century music” or “contemporary composed music”; but perhaps it is better to say, the music of Szabados. Yet, those ideas, which made you move into this direction, are probably present in your mind, even today.

- Oh yes, very much so. In fact, it is not relevant to refer to the past because you can’t simply leave the past behind. Our way of thinking is not linear; the events of life, especially in our mind, are not structured in a linear continuum. Jazz is still with me today and will continue to be so. Like a kind of gesture, a special attitude, relationship, an answer. It has been deeply absorbed in my perception of life, for I have been living in the 20th century and, because it is the most powerful, characteristic music of the 20th century. When I was a high school student, it opened the way to a world that was not identical with the diffuse, expropriating dictatorship and suspicious milieu that we lived in. Which introduced a diabolic method of contrasting Hungarian musicality with the natural openness and elementary desire for capaciousness that was present in me and in many of my contemporaries. That is why we approached and cherished jazz with admiration and tried to adopt it. For us it was the symbol of freedom those days. But there was another mysterious reason which did not clearly take shape in me, revealing itself unconsciously and playfully while performing live music. Now, it is also clear to me. Namely, what is the spiritual and musical impact of jazz in a universal context. It is the impulsivity of jazz, its genuine freedom as opposed to the pre-arranged musical practices that is of defining importance both in terms of the history of music and human mentality in an increasingly cohesive and multicultural world. Mind you, one of the most essential syndromes of the 20th century is the interference and interaction of various cultures. In this process jazz may exercise such an impact on our musicality, the Hungarian musicality which has a wonderfully expressive and strong language, so far buried in its past, that it can be revitalized.

(“The quality of humanity”)

You have to understand that jazz has exerted a fertilizing influence on European civilization, profoundly affecting the prevailing mind-set in the field of art music, which has become structured, composed, and objectified to a large extent. This rigorously composed art music, due to its captive character, has been detached from the human nature, has developed its own rules to be acquired. Since the emergence of jazz, music is performed again by the conveyance of man’s musicality and spirituality, in primary and vigilant concentration on the moment, not being filtered by rational elements like constructions, structures or notes, etc. This new way of playing requires a universal awareness and preparedness, which is a great thing. Why? Because this is the complete, immanent and natural quality of man. Our whole life is based on improvisation. You walk in the street, live your life, and keep on improvising. There are moments when things get together and in such moments we are able to make irrevocable and clear decisions. And these moments are much more complete, explicit and responsible than any planned activity. It has been reinstalled in the arts by improvisation. But, of course, improvisation doesn’t necessarily imply higher musical quality. We don’t seem to improvise our life on a high level these days either. Focusing on improvisation, I entered a free, timeless and uncontrolled world which was an uplifting feeling. This new beginning provided me with fresh and pure connections and the chance that the notion of unity and musicality that defined my childhood would reborn in me, getting stimulated and exercising a stimulating effect on others. The genuine and authentic ambiance of jazz as an impulsive environment and as an ambiance of freedom was a condition of this change. On the other hand, it gave me a chance to turn into a totally natural direction, whereby it became clear that, when addressing the most important questions of life, there is a single source of origin to all the answers. I came to realize the truth in Bartók’s view, analysed by mathematical methods, stating that everything emerged from an ancient ocean of music. This is not a matter of chronology but, first of all, of ontology. In the last decade I engaged myself mainly in free music that is totally improvised because I do believe it comes from that ancient ocean of music. It is lurking in us today but I am sure it can be experienced in its totality and authenticity, and can be revitalized. It is one’s obligation to experience and preserve the quality of those universal principles and reserves that define our life at the core.

(“Creating a world”)

- *While your orientation was aimed at free music, it also implied the denial of some of the parameters of jazz, pushing them into the background.*

- This is the same argument what senior composers used to say about Bartók and Kodály at the turn of the 19th century. Based on earlier German concepts of music, they excluded everything else as if their approach were the alpha and the omega of all things.

- *No, I didn’t mean that. But when talking about the definition of jazz, these elements are often mentioned as main characteristics of this musical practice.*

- No, I don't agree. There is a deep spiritual element at the bottom of every important phenomenon. In jazz, too. Nobody has been able to give a definition of jazz so far. But what for? Everybody feels absolutely sure what it is. Human beings may face millions of chances and when a strong gesture emerges from the deep, it starts to animate and rouse the world and creates embodiments and phenomena. It is the same in jazz. My music alike. Something driven by a gesture; a spirit. This is the main point. The world of music. But then, why don't we form our opinions on the substance of things, i.e. on their importance, plenitude and might? Why are we only scratching the surface? Why are we biased? I am afraid it is motivated by pettiness, spiritual and emotional confinement. I can tell you that although I intend to create music in the broadest sense, I still have my jazz-experiences staying with me.

(“It is a provocation to be Hungarian”)

- *At the beginning of this interview you used the term: “Hungarian musicality”. How could you make a definition of these words?*

- What is it to be a Hungarian? To me, it is a perfectionist attitude. The poets Mihály Babits and Endre Ady spoke eloquently about it. No doubt, Hungarian spirit is a very archaic phenomenon, especially in its language. And as such, it is a holy substance. But on an everyday and superficial level, first of all, it is a provocation to be a Hungarian. I see it as a provocation wherever I go and whenever this question is raised. But you have to have answers. Because those who can only enlist negative connotations, are ridiculous, narrow-minded which speaks for itself. Because, apart from the caretakers* in a block of flats, there is nothing in the world that could only be qualified by negative terms. The teachings of ancient philosophers tell us that it is almost impossible to make a distinction between good and bad. They are related to each other. It is a pleasure if my music is appreciated as positive provocation, trying to evoke and represent Hungarian spirituality. You always have to listen to the positive, the good and the beautiful. This is a universal form of existence and a command, too. To listen to the good and the universal. With free spirits. Hungarian spirituality, for me, is the embodiment of this unified, homogenous miracle, probably not the only miracle, but this is mine. A miracle which is a claim and a requirement. I have been living my life for forty years labelled as the worst, most sinful and most negative person. Mostly as an outsider, an outlaw because this burden was imposed upon me and because I accepted it. And this is not a complaint, it is not a virtue to complain. A famous Hungarian psychologist, whom I don't appreciate any more, told me recently, how beautiful it was when the characteristics of the Hungarians unfolded in 1956. Escaping to the West, they violated Austrian women on the trains. I asked, “You have excellent information, my old friend, but don't you think that we both are Hungarians? How come you talk about the characteristics of a nation? What is it all about?” Now, in an age of insanity when those who are supposed to be the most intelligent people, speak like idiots, you are bound to make standpoint absolutely clear. I mean whether you are willing to listen to the positive things, developing a holistic view, a benevolent and responsible mentality and verbal communication. To act as a person of spiritual quality. To be able to understand, for example, those who are seemingly doing

wrong, though not necessarily intentionally. Of course, if someone is doing wrong, he or she should be despised, no question why. Such people can be relieved if we interpret the confusion as St. Paul described it in one of his famous letters: "God be blamed!", uttered a poor devil while praying at a small shrine on the island where he lived because he couldn't find the word "blessed". And Paul acquitted him by encouraging him to use the word "blamed", because it is not the words but the feelings which are important when you turn to God. It is in this mind-set to say that, for me, it is a provocation to be a Hungarian. Assertion and spiritual attitude. The elevated objectivity, pomp, taste and the reign of goodwill and understanding.

("Everything belongs in it")

- I am a bit shy citing another musical term but, though you may protest against it, your music can also be defined. For example, by your compositional methods linked to pentatony.

- This means you have tried to tackle the exact elements in what I am doing. You tried to make it visible for yourself. As far as I know, Tamás Váczi, my student and friend whom I fondly remember, was the only person who put an effort to analyse it. You said earlier that the jazz-thinking is losing its characteristics in my music, for example what we call swing. Well, I doubt whether it is really disappearing. But I only use it when I think it is necessary in terms of content and when, in a given moment, it is authentic as a symbol and a musical device, just like parlando. It absolutely belongs in the field of sensual qualities. And this is the way I think about Hungarian musicality. I don't expel pentatony either. Why should I dispense with something that is a fantastic, timeless, crystal clear underlying framework? This is a sort of extension if I want to mark my place in the world of music; and as a Hungarian, this is the way I hear and listen to music. And everything belongs in it, the modal scales, the reminiscences of major and minor keys, the homophony, the atonality, Bartók's way of thinking, the music of nature, and pentatony as well. In a genuine unity, in its entirety. And we did not yet make mention of the fact that we are about to leave a well-tempered age, i.e. two centuries of music history defined shaped by the piano.

- Does it happen again with the notion of freedom in mind?

- Yes, but this is an external and superior approach. There is more to it. Activities including myself coupled with similar trends in Europe are creating a universal musicality like a seedling. Dispensed with preconceived ornaments linked to various ages, worlds, mentalities, styles, philosophies, courts. The history of music shows us that all music and substantive music styles are the offspring of prominent significance. There is a universal, cosmic and eternal musical consonance, a total formula, as Bartók tells us and, during the course of time, certain gestures, revelations, aspirations, accents create structures and prominent significances, such as the court music in China, the Greek music or church music, Gregorian music, or the polyphonic diabolism of European classical and romantic periods. Even the strictly defined dodecaphony of Schönberg and many other things. And all this is in organic relationship with our existence. Which means, if we take

this position, that I, by my political power, give signals that the world where this music is played, belongs to my court. This was the case with the ancient Chinese, Greek or Turkish music. We can even see today the boundaries of the Turkish Empire. It is fantastically marked by the presentation of the music, the ornaments and forms. But let's get back to our music. The more I focused on these questions, the more I came to realize that the Hungarian way of thinking is really wonderful. Completely open, while its openness is controlled in a way that it remains transparent and eloquent. It is well exemplified by the Hungarian language. And language is thinking, isn't it.

("Longing for universality")

- Jazz, improvisation, free music, openness. Terms, derivative of, and interpreted by, each other. Would you explain more precisely what do you mean by the openness of Hungarian thinking?

- It is a mentality which does not exclude other influences, views or ideas. This is the way of its thinking and conduct. But this aptitude is coupled with a substantive intention for simplification. This doesn't affect the ornamentation; rather, it tries to embrace and use the experience in its entirety as a supplement. It is not rejected. For example, when listening to an unfamiliar music, it tries to absorb it both rationally and emotionally. It doesn't want to frame it to his own image. It will adjust itself accordingly. It is not true that this culture is intolerant. On the contrary, it is absolutely tolerant because its spiritual stability, archaic way of thinking and passive presence are so powerful that it can take liberties with being generous, curious, open. These are the greatest virtues of Hungarian culture and thinking. That uplifting, integrative and unfolding power. I feel that, contrary to some rigorous cultures, Hungarian culture is of universal appeal, especially in its way of thinking. It wants to embrace and absorb everything. I sometimes refer to a book by Ferenc Karinthy, titled *Leányfalu and its surroundings*. This, for me, a resident of Nagymaros, located on the opposite side of the river Danube, represents a free and centripetal way of thinking. It means that New-Zeeland, the Antarctic, the Andromeda nebula or our Lord all are components of our world; and the boundaries of things and my vision may even be beyond all this. A culture should not be small-minded and if it is so, then it is not worth immersing ourselves at it seriously.

- Addressing your affection towards jazz, you said it was a symbol of freedom for you, i.e. it had political implications. Now, after the change of the regime there is no more political control and the circumstances that made jazz the music of freedom and protest, ceased to exist, too. How will you relate to a music that may exist without any political and social references as a viable art form?

- My relationship to jazz has ever been interesting for me. More important is the motivation of artistic activity. This pertains to the art of jazz, too. Jazz sometimes took an almost sensual stand against the regime, but not all the musicians presented it with this notion on their mind. Not at all. There were serious cases of political prostitution and collaboration.

- *Among the jazz musicians as well?*

- Of course. The problem is that no up-to-date jazz criticism has developed in Hungary. Our music life in general and especially music criticism (apart from a few honourable exceptions) is, to a large extent, driven by spiritless snobbism, second rate aspirations, flippant management, unscrupulous ambitions and despotic rivalries between musical genres, an unspeakable attitude. The ancient respect for the artists does not exist anymore. Our music life is rootless, covered by a gloomy sky. Self-conceited opinions and suspicious approaches. A kind of downhill. But music, after all, has to be taken seriously. Had music criticism developed a continuity, a positive attitude represented by really prominent personalities (again, apart from a few honourable exceptions), we could enlist a series of great productions, performances, great initiatives in the last thirty years. And a series of unimportant acts, too. We could register what did happen and what did not happen. And, also, what is happening now. But, it is our existence that determines our consciousness, doesn't it. And we can see no signs of grandiosity.

- *We may remember your fights for presence, for authority, for creativity. How can you realize your ideas in a world where there is no reason to fight and protect yourself from? How can you present yourself in public? If there is anything that can be composed for the future, it is free music, because it is born on stage.*

- Not theoretically, but in practice, there still are persons who would like to ban me. My only concern is to keep the spirit of my musicians high. To make them believe that what we are doing is a kind of planting. I have been doing and praying it for a long time. In my view, the mission of the arts is not the presentation of the ego. No. I set out to perform music to be able to speak in this magic language in an appropriate and motivated way, since the music is an esoteric world requiring a kind of sensibility to speak about things not yet obviously present but about to come forward. It is a troubled and transitional period today, but I am convinced that it is transitional in a positive sense. There is a new world in preparation, waiting to be recognized and assisted, so that you should free yourself from all your preconceptions to avoid bad judgements. The world is moving on with huge steps and we have to recognise it. This needs an open mind, efforts and meditation by everyone. We need an elevated spirit to avoid narrow-minded confusion and new aggressions.

(“In a more difficult situation”)

- *Are there new disciples and if yes, what can you teach them?*

- Sure. It is a nice and delicate venture. There is a new generation which signed up to this musicality and acts voluntarily, so that they had and have to tolerate a lot even today. I dare to say they are in a more difficult situation than my generation was those days. Because this is an internal burden to come into terms with. Here is the list: Róbert Benkő, Mihály Dresch, Tamás Geröly, István Grensó, Ferenc Kovács, Attila Lőrinszky, Miklós Mákó, Zsolt Vaskó. And actually, István Baló, István Kovács Tickmayer and Tamás Kobzos Kiss also belong to them. An adult yet young generation that was born in

a degenerated world. They may not have memories of that spiritual quality once penetrating everyday life, of the original naturalness of good-naturedness, of the richness, the nuances, the refinement, the kindness, the cheerfulness of relationships among people, of really great, not fake men, memories I remember well. They were born in a world without ideals and their biggest problem is incredulity they came across. The no-mans-land psyche, where the soul has to be kept warm long to develop good faith. The exasperate understanding of the lack of prospects for the humans descended on Earth. They joined me and now they are constructing their own identity in a self-confident way. They know that the clue is a consistent and persistent intellectual and spiritual activity.

- In the past decades many people collapsed spiritually, escaped, turned their back to the idea what they could have become, including music, jazz. You have stayed on and seemed to have grown under the burden. Where did you get this strength that others were disposed of?

- Now, you made a gentle allusion to the fact that there were people who, either openly or menacingly or hiding their hostility in mysterious phrases, could accept neither my music nor my personality. I was an outcast by the cultural policy, by the world of artists and even by the jazz community in Hungary. This is a sterile and painful world. I think this is a question of authority. Actually, it is a manifestation of a hidden aspiration for power. I have nothing to do with it. Based on this, I am proud to admit that I am neither a “modern” man, nor a jazz musician, I mean, not only that. First of all, I am an intellectual trying to absorb everything and even accepting the label “outsider”. Secondly, I am a musician and sometimes a jazz musician in this sense. This is not a hierarchy but an internal view and standpoint. You have to give answers to the ultimate questions of life yourself. I don’t want to lose my good spirit and don’t want to convey the often incomprehensible fretfulness or the momentary wickedness that I now take almost as a compliment, so I have never addressed this attitude and even forgot about them. I understand that everyone had to face serious difficulties which was certainly not easy to cope with. This was responsible for all the anger. It has a much deeper cause, this is not only a world of mirrors. Time sweeps it away, makes it forgotten, we shouldn’t bother with it anymore. After all, everyone is bound to rely on his own resources. During my progress, it became clear that you can save your strength and secure your presence that may, in a secret way, help you survive, if you preserve the genuine unity and calmness of your spirit and energies and don’t bother with the disintegration and the weaknesses that characterize our modern, materialistic, self-indulgent age much more than previous worlds. We need this strength and energy to forget about the past. We have to leave the past behind. I mean, this is the time for a new beginning. And this is a great gift, a historic and spiritual souvenir, because the beginning is a manifestation of genuine strength. You can get rid of your evil demons and those of the past if you recognize, consider and happily participate in it. This is a chance for the culmination of energies. And then, something can spring up.

Turi Gábor (Translation by Marianne Tharan/Turi Gábor - March/May 2016)
(Magyar Napló, 1992/15) und (in: Szabados György: Írások III. B.K.L. Kiadó, Szombathely, 2015)

** The caretaker had in the communist era, a very negative image, as these acted most as Stasi agents*