

Béla Szilárd JÁVORSZKY:

## György Szabados – Ruttings of the Sacred Phoenix Bird

The composer and pianist György Szabados is considered the Doyen of the Hungarian *Free Jazz*. The physician in Nagymaros created a specifically Hungarian jazz school, combining the traditional jazz rhythm with the asymmetric rhythm of the Hungarian folk music. Since the beginning of the sixties, he was one of the first – even in Europe – to experiment with the concept of the so called “free music”, and he firmly believes in the concept, and it seems, time confirms him. In 1972 he obtained first prize in this category awarded in San Sebastian, and his album, released in 1975 entitled *The Wedding* (*Az esküvő*), is certainly epoch-making in the Hungarian history of the genre. His bearing as a creative artist – as one of his critics précised accurately – is not of an offended person but rather showing a Sisyphus attitude in the sense of Camus, which means that we must see him as a happy person because he belongs to that kind of people for whom “the struggle for the peak is already sufficient to fill the human heart”.

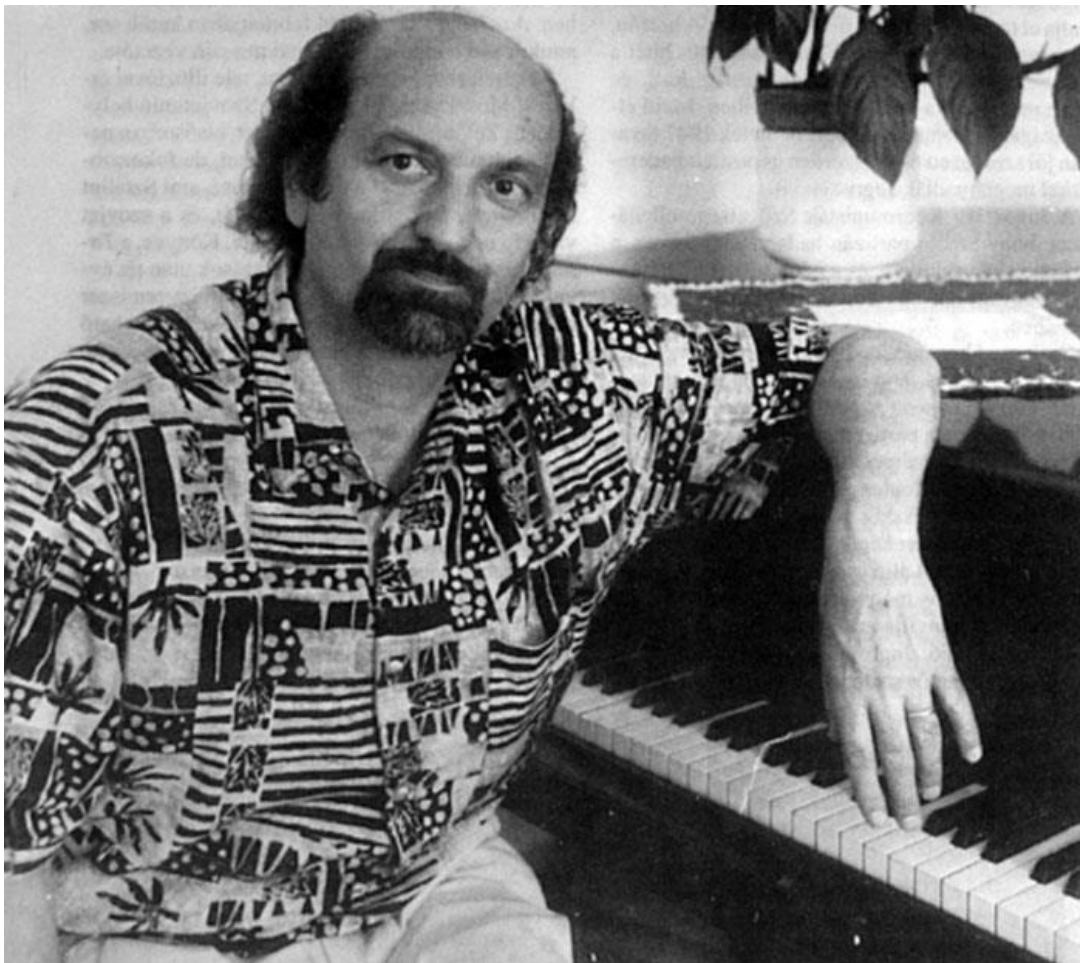


Photo: Frankl Aljona

- You were born at the time when the Second World War broke out. You witnessed as a child the siege (of Budapest) and the following scourges. The process of gaining consciousness in your childhood coincided with this harrowing time.

Indeed, the epoch made us even as toddlers extraordinarily vigilant, and my experience is that those who survived the gulag or other camps in Hungary – and we have some of them in the family – are people with an incredible lively spirit. They generally lived to a high age, although with different ailments, but with a clear head. Of course, I don't want to imply that it was good, but they were not spoiled in the welfare society; they always had to struggle for their existence, furthermore, they experienced that a man's essence cannot be found in him but somewhere above himself. That "fate's hand" really exists. We can call it what we like.

- You were educated in classical music, yet still you turned to jazz in the fifties. Did it mean freedom in that very regulated word?

Of course. Jazz was something promising. I felt in it the unconditional ecstatic involvement and those inner forces which make jazz live. Even if we know that nothing in life exists on its own, black lives together with white, or as it is said in the Orient, things are arranged in *yin and yang* relation. This huge ecstasy and unbridled joy was attached to drugs for many American musicians, and most of them died as a consequence.

- According to a legend, the year 1963 was a turning point in your life. You sat down in the famous Dália Club with *Endre Publik* and suggested to him, "what if we would play so that we don't discuss anything before – we only play". With this, actually, the Hungarian free jazz was born, or with another name, the free music.

This remained for a long time a personal matter, since *Publik* migrated to Sweden soon after. Some musicians joined me only at the beginning of the seventies: Mihály Ráduly, Sándor Vajda, Károly Friedrich, László Kimmel - they used to listen to a lot of black music and were encouraged and convinced and picked up the concept too. After came the younger musicians, Mihály Dresch, Attila Lőrinczky, Róbert Benkő and for a while, I even worked together with Magda Tarkó, the classical singer, and also with László Melis, Tibor Szemző, Ferenc Körmendy and others in the *Kassák Kortárs Zenei Műhely*.

- Can we call it jazz at all, what you are playing?

For a long time, I was not calling it so - rather improvisative music. I had to realize when I am looking for a solution in forms while going from one -ism to another -

ism, I arrive nowhere. One has to grasp the essence of the things, which is nothing other than the state of Man, or of man's conscience, since everything issues from there. So often we witness in history that tiny changes in the conscience and mentality could produce unbelievable epochs. The basic laws remain, only the attitude – to use a trendy word – changes. Referring to music, one had to realize man doesn't live the way as we were taught: it is not true that he is born as a little idiot, struggles throughout his life to achieve self-realization and a few hours before his death, he assesses whether he reached his goal or not. Man is living the opposite way; he is a creature, he is born "ready-made", provided with all formidable capacities. In this sense, we all come from the same "something" and we have to keep up this grandiosity till our death, while we unfurl it and make ourselves aware of it.

- Thus, man is born "ready-made" also in the field of music?

Exactly, but these capacities must be developed. And the inherent, tensed forces must "talk" directly - not so that they are first forced into all kinds of styles and -isms. The biggest mistake made by today's music pedagogy is that such things are canonized, which does not comfort anybody. They don't encourage the students to understand their age in depth and to compose music worthy to it.

- Is your opinion so pessimistic regarding the music, resp. jazz education in Hungary?

It is difficult for me to talk about that because we live in times when the reader is looking for political background behind every statement. And this is already a tragedy. At the moment when life - or its more beautiful part issuing from dreams yet to be fulfilled, its part kicking from inside - becomes the battlefield of interests and existences; that is the death of culture, one of the stages on the road to death.

- Yes, but talent is finally a question of madness and stubbornness and is able to rise above every day's squabbles.

This is true, but it matters at what price. For a hundred years, there have been few people ready to die for a holy cause. At the same time, we still have to talk about the – in my opinion – pitiable state of education, since for a long time, everything is largely changing; and these changes have to be followed up. Not that we simply meet them, but so that we are confronted by them, we let them into our senses and consciousness, and we evaluate them for us. One has to be open, open and again open (for the confrontation, for the evaluation – remark by the translator). In the Creation, everything is probably good as it is, and from this follows that processes and changes cannot be excluded, and nobody can judge as a little god about anything, be it anyhow. Wherever abroad, I saw that people with other ways of thinking and other music was listened to with the utmost interest to the music of each other, and it didn't start from the principle that whoever doesn't make our music, must be excluded.

- Yes, but I mean, this doesn't really regard the essence and the quality of the music.

The true talent is learning of course, about himself, and he knows what he needs, and the true talent is provided with outstanding capacities, not only biologically, but spiritually and mentally too. The famous Russian music psychologist, Tjeplov's book was published in Hungary in the fifties. In the first third of the book he doesn't talk about music but he deals with the subject of what kind of a man is the composer and the musician; how he lives, what habits he has. Today we live in a cooled off world where art is mainly the field of fake virtuosity and tricks. But music education is indispensable from the point that it has to remain at a high level and educate, or at least foster children born with high capacities, in a technical sense, but also in a spiritual sense. And there are catastrophic problems in this field. A foreign language cannot be learned as long as we don't master our mother tongue. The same with the music mother tongue. In my opinion this is not promoted enough and the musician is not forced to learn it.

Not to mention the fact that different levels mix with each other. As the language of the revelations is the most simple in the field of phraseology, so are the music works of the highest rank the most simple, accurate, and transparent, concerning the musical expression. Therefore, the education shouldn't start with Mozart, but it should start in the way that the child wants to express himself. Nature too is working in this way, and we are part of nature, even if some don't like it. We shall never be so abstract that we could stop our hunger, thirst, and everything which links us to nature. It is not by chance that some ancient cultures teach that music preceded the divine creation. Thus, music is before everything. In my opinion, not the sounds, but the motion was the first means of communication used by man. And since music is in everything, because in everything is motion, the two are in a certain way, one. One shouldn't separate them. But this is nothing new, since Kodály's concept and the idea "music belongs to all" include the same thoughts, although until today it has completely petered out.

- Maybe because the ruling powers have always been aware of the huge potential power of music and what a role it plays in the maintenance of the social order. It is not by chance that the Chinese sages professed that the basic sounds must be kept because when changing them, the empire would collapse. And that is why the music had such an important role in the ceremonies and social life of ancient times. It is also not by chance that music had a central place in the education of the ancient Greeks, which should have realized the most perfect harmony of soul and body, according to many opinions. Platon, like other Greek sages, considered music as having the power to sustain the state.

That is true. Today millions of people watch and listen to the mass music which has been produced in the world for several decades, and which rules the world market practically in a hegemonic way. And which doesn't contain anything sublime. A pacifier, at most. Its affect goes towards instincts. According to the teachings of the Veda, the final essence of music – as of everything – is a pulsation, a vibration, and that is why it works on a deep level, and can be manipulated uncontrolled. That is why it is not irrelevant whether a certain music is harmonic and noble, further, of what nature is its melody and pulsation. The firing of a machine gun, typical for the heavy metal music, is basically deadly, thus void of the dimension of life. Life is always flexible, fixed, and at the same time soft. Dead material is inert, stiff, and has edges.

- These types of music mirror our environing world in their aggression and way of thinking – although not at a very high level.

It is possible, but until today not only the people, but even the musicians could be made to be idiots. When someone is born truly as a musician, he knows about it. Gustav Mahler, for example, would never have written different music from what he has composed. His soul, his stance, his thinking, his ideals, his ear, his sense for rhythm wouldn't have allowed him to be drawn away from his compositions in such a forced phenomenon. Such functional things like the metal – or as I call it - dark music – have a very carefully considered role. They aim at the creation of a consumer society, resp.? at keeping the mass behaviour at a low level, needed for the consumer society. The world-governments and the advisors serving them, those who delve themselves in the subject, also in international context, know exactly that this is part of a game – and what kind of game it is.

- Let us come back to the education. What is, in your opinion the next step after having acquired the music mother tongue?

It is indispensable today to learn and understand the many different music cultures of the world. And based on the Hungarian musicality, it is absolutely easy. Unlike the English or German music mother tongue, the Hungarian is oriented in many more directions; it is much more archaic, and even if its origin is lost in the fog of the past, it has a life of its own, just like a tree. It always drops something and always grows new branches, but its essence doesn't change; we can observe at most, some articulation changes. The Hungarian musicality is absolutely open, even if some people claim it to be closed. There are of course laws, which seemingly refer to closeness, but those laws are so hard and unmovable because they give the system a firm foothold so that it can be open towards every direction. It is like a ball-joint, which can be turned in any direction, but it remains the same.

The Hungarian music – like the Hungarian language – is very flexible, yet still exact and nuanced – and the most important - assimilating. The court music of Gábor Bethlen, or the music of Szék, or the psalms of the Reformed Church; they are all born from the contacts of different cultures. The first is the product of Italian

musicians composed in Transylvania. The last one was born from the contact between Gregorian music and the archaic Hungarian singing. And both went through the same spiritual-mental digestion process, and today one cannot separate the two different elements. But the process needs a longer time. When the music of the Buddhists reached Japan, it took 600 years until the Japanese musicality – also a very archaic one – digested this impact, and the Japanese Buddhist music was born. Even in the human bones it takes 1200 years until the genetic material is essentially changed when two different races marry. And if after 1200 years no new affirmation has come, the two elements separate again.

- Jazz also has digested several impacts during its almost 100 years of history.

Yes, but the „black base“ has actually never disappeared in jazz. In spite of the fact that black musicians dealt with Indian music, two to two-thirds of John Coltrane’s life work can hardly be understood without the knowledge of Vedic teachings; he blows ragas in fact – the roots have remained. There is also a striving in Hungary which wishes that the Hungarian musicality doesn’t dominate in the Hungarian jazz life; it is in my opinion a small-minded thinking. The Hungarian public and musicians will always feel that imported things are strange.

- János Gonda who founded in 1965 the Jazz chair, represents also the point that we have to be open for everything.

Possible. Although I appreciate his earnestness, I cannot agree with him in several matters. Schooling in jazz is just one of the studies, and they don’t sufficiently focus on the spiritual education, or if they do so, it is not from a good approach. Even an entertainment musician – because mainly those are trained – is a good musician only when he makes “holy” music in his field. He is perfect when he entertains in such a way that he lifts the public’s mood and “redeems” the people in the given situation and moment. It is not sufficient for this to learn about composing. The positive view, behaviour, the good state of the soul, needs much more energy than just the way his fingers move. This attitude is missing not only in music education but elsewhere too. Only recently the chair for behavioural psychology was established at the university for medicine, for the same reason. Its leaders know, a nation cannot survive when it has only negative ideas about itself and the world.

When I started to work with this improvisative music, my starting point was MAN. This music recognizes and respects that man is a wonderful being and his similarity with God – never perfect but aiming at perfection – will only manifest itself when he will be a creative contributor and experience in himself the whole Creation. As we go through the phylogenies between the conception and the birth, with all its beauty and responsibility, art is the acting force and means. Error is pardonable but it never should be an end in itself.

- Were you never tempted? Were you never bitter? Did you never think to adjust yourself to the expectations of the outer world?

Of course, sometimes. Sometimes I was exasperated, but it never knocked me down.

- Although, at the beginning, it could seem to be tilting at windmills.

This never disturbed me. Probably because this is my nature; I am born so, with such a dreamy mind. It is a characteristic attitude in our family, to look into the sky. In my teenage years, my grandmother and I, we wore the same shoes for years. She was able to write, talk, and read in several languages. She played piano fantastically, thus she would have deserved a pair of shoes on her own. Still, she was always smiling. Because she knew we have to go through life as it is given; who lives will always hurt, and will suffer a lot because he is an egoist. He doesn't yet know what the world is, and what it is: alpha and omega. One cannot be choosy – otherwise he will be rebel; rebel and not revolutionize. Rebelling is a negative position, a destroying attitude, and if man cannot make of it a positive stance, then his life will be miserable, and if he believes in reincarnation, the following lives too. Because one has to struggle with the same difficulties in every rebirth, provided he defeated the temptation.

- Have you never regretted that during your whole life you had to linger on the periphery of the genre?

The genre has never interested me. The world is not living in genres but in persons, trends, and qualities. The genre is a notion borrowed from commerce. One has to find the way how he can free himself from the captivities. To think in terms of genres is a quite primitive form of captivity.

- You strive thus for totality?

Either it is inherent or not. Although the striving is innate in every being, but later we forget about it – we are forced to forget about. It is very hard work to see clearly what our nature is, our thinking and our fate. Lipót Szondi, the Hungarian psychologist who lived in Switzerland said, the free will in man is maybe one percent. Strangely, this is in accordance with the teaching of the Evangelists, but this one percent is man's real life. Today the majority of humankind is living in the captivity of an atavistic power pulling them downwards. This power is present in everybody to a certain extent, but this one percent gives us the chance to get out of the captivity. This requires a huge spiritual strain but actually, this is the real reason for life. Improvisative music is an amazing method and tool offered for those who work with it to go through this spiritual process - a product of many years - and to obtain a positive view. They will have a different relationship to the different kinds of music because they never left the totality inhabiting them. They

have an approaching attitude – as if everything always would be in them, only they have yet so far to deal with this side of themselves.

- Does it mean that everything we find in the world history, art history, style history etc. is based on this deeply experienced fate of consciousness of soul and mind; that the vigil attention of our striving for totality is behind everything, and that these processes are determined in us, and whatever is visible is just a sign, just a symptom?

Exactly. It is interesting from music history's point of view that in certain epochs improvisation is excluded from music. Normally, these are epochs when a culture is in its zenith and its forms are completed, which it wants to canonize. These epochs coincide with a given power system. When its decline starts - suddenly everything is finished – and it clamps down the established rules for a long time in the most drastic way, because it feels its end approaching. Today we live in this epoch of the European culture.

- This process has been going on for a long time, since Spengler wrote already at the beginning of the (20<sup>th</sup>) century the *Decline of the West* in a very comprehensive and sensitive way.

The subject is even older than this in my opinion. As I wrote ten years ago in the essay, “*The dual character of the light of music*” (A zene kettős természetű fénye). Goethe dealt with the decline too. And the composer who showed all this in the language of music was Beethoven. How he constructed his symphonies with an unbelievable power - it was typical of the European way of thinking. He felt that the mentality, which wants to build up the world like God, will never succeed completely and identically. In vain he composed his wonderful polyphonic works. As much as he tried, it never became a “sphere”, he only approached it. The monophony however contains everything simultaneously. And this is already a philosophical category - one of the corner stones of the archaic world. It contains everything simultaneously, it has no opposite since it is the world itself. Within the monophony we can articulate, express things, but this is only an partial correlation. It is an idea of a much higher level compared to the showing-off; I will cobble together the totality from many parts . Beethoven – being a genius as an artist and as a thinker – tried out different musical modalities, by force. His works were all perfectly constructed in every point: horizontally (in the melody) and vertically (in the accords). Concerning the structure, the composition was enclosed in a double rim. He tried to approach the perfection of the divine dimension but – similar to the greatest spirits – he failed heroically. That is why the romantic era represented a different epoch; the artists recognized that they have to search in themselves when they want to come closer to the transcendence.

But I don't want to continue in the direction of music history, however it is linked to jazz, that this scope of inherent problems came into the picture when the culture of the whites realized at the turn of the century (19-20<sup>th</sup>) that it had to step out of



this own circle. A big opening towards the Orient and Africa was the result, which was provisionally closed due to WWII. As a consequence of this opening, the black music burst in and invaded Paris, partly due to Gershwin, partly due to the big bands of New Orleans and the gospel singers.

- In your concerts you often work with a lot of musicians and a quantity of sounds. How is it possible that all these together never sound out of tune, on the other hand, the music never becomes cacophony?

The world of sounds has a non-musical part (noises) and a musical part. In latter case, one experiences and develops such relationship systems, contributes to them personnel feelings, and different known elements of the impact, while flushing them through his personality, that thanks to the mentioned contributions, the thing will be absolutely harmonious, and we have enough practice so that the music is shaped in this musicality through us.

- If I am right, you are the first in Hungary who tried himself with the prepared piano.

I made the prepared piano not because of constructivism but because I had the impression that contrary to the normal piano, this one represses certain things. Because the real sound (the true ideals), the dreams are covered with clamps, which still comes through while playing. This was the sensual base of it. Then I realized that the sounds produced this way are completely linked to the archaic music world, to the sound of gamelan, of koboz, etc. When I made this, I had not yet heard the prepared pieces of Cage, only later, and I saw with pleasure that others also deal with this problem. But I never distorted the sound with the preparation; I always tried to make the whole music aesthetic, harmonic.

- Your compositions' characteristics are mainly the „rubato and parlando“ rhythm. Deliberately?

Yes, those are the doors to cross the threshold. Jazz is the world of the blacks with a very stiff rhythm, and if we want to bring together the glow and the emotional state of the improvisative environment delineated by jazz with the Hungarian musicality, the path leads not through the “giusto” rhythmic, which is a fixed, dance-like rhythm. Rubato means a way of playing with free rhythmic, and parlando is a sense bound to the text. It means that breathing works in accordance with the emotional swells of man. This is a cosmic human dimension, upon which everything can be placed, and it is a foundation where different cultures' ornaments, which are seemingly antagonistically opposed, can meet so that they unify to become a natural one.

- Rites and rituals also play a big role in your works.

The rite is very important being, a force to join community, and a creative power. For me only the “holy” music is interesting; only this should be composed and played. This means in seriousness and with humility. The old rabbi answered the question, why people don’t believe in God nowadays, he replied: “because they are not able to bend down so low as to meet God”. We live in a complacent, haughty world, and we are digging our own grave. When a correction should happen in the world history, then at this point we will be faithful to God who lives in us.

Translation by Marianne Tharan (Dezember 2018)