

Anything changed?

Many music lovers consider György Szabados as a “lone wolf” among the Hungarian jazz musicians, as a “king living in internal exile” within the progressive avant-garde, the free music. I would deny this statement. During the past 20-22 years, Szabados was seldom lonely; young musicians longing for a true creative experience called upon him frequently and joined him. Furthermore, nothing was further away from his nature as arguing with sharp teeth or fighting for the prey. Internal exile? Public-sociologic surveys have established in the last years that he was one of the three most popular jazz musicians, if not the most popular. The public never exiled Szabados, at most he was pushed outside the official “pen” for a short while due to some ignorant or jealous musician colleagues, small-minded music critics, and culture politicians without interest. But all this didn’t discourage him. The 45 year-old composer, pianist, and leader of different music formations is an extraordinary personality in Hungary’s music life. For jazz lovers, he is sometimes too abstract and extreme, the experts of classical music think that his music belongs to who knows where – to a different category. It is true that this music doesn’t fit into any dusty box because it is a profoundly original synthesis, an inimitably lucky mixture of composed music, of contemporary jazz and folk music; in fact a modern contemporary music. But in the middle of his musical meta-language – above all genres – is not the speculative improvisation but the improvisation based on natural musicality and free, floating rhythmic. Also mentally, he is turning towards the totality and ready to absorb the most unusual cultures. However, it remains typically Hungarian in its character; its rhythmic is based upon the *parlando rubato* of the Hungarian folk singing, of the singsong style, and upon the prosody of the Hungarian language, and of the living speech. Furthermore, it is also emotionally linked to the folk music.

Unusual is the aesthetic diversity and with it, the creative continuity, characteristic of Szabados’ oeuvre. In 1963, he was already one of the first musicians in Europe to experiment with the concept of open music, but not even the grand prix of the San Sebastian jazz festival in 1972 could grant him the support of his Hungarian musician colleagues and of the official professionals. For many years he lived in total exclusion and worked with different partners. Only two LPs were published during those 20 years; in 1975, *Az esküvő*, [The Wedding] and in 1983, *Adyton*. In the meantime, such works like *Csíki verbunk* (Verbunk from Csík) and *Katonazene* (Soldier music) were composed, as well as the most famous production of the Kortárs Zenei Műhely (Contemporary Music Workshop) under his direction, the *Csiga* (Snail), and his concert in Győr in 1983* with the famous American saxophonist, Anthony Braxton, although these performances were not recorded. An exiled “puszta-king” would be bitter after facing so many obstacles, but György Szabados believed and still believes in his own

musical concept, and the time seems to confirm him. His creative stance is not branded by the state of being offended, but by a Sisyphean attitude in the sense of Camus. We must think of him being happy because he is the kind of man, “for whom the struggle to reach the height is sufficient to fill a man’s heart.” Recently, as if the “ice-cover” around him melted, last year he was awarded with the Liszt prize and finally, after a long time, his second LP *Adyton* was published.

Has anything changed since, how is your well-being?

As if we were experiencing some “melting”, a course giving hope; life in Hungary has become somewhat encouraging, even if the worldly tendencies are not the best. For me personally, this means that I can work, compose, give concerts, talk – and most important, I can give pleasure to others – which is already a sign of change. The Liszt prize is a great pleasure because it is the result of the work done. On the other hand, the award does not mean so much for me, but rather it honours the musical trend in which I move, which I represent.

What is so attractive for you in the improvisative-intuitive music, be it jazz or folk music? Finally, playing music from notes is also a kind of improvisation: the fixed, written form must be filled with content every time?

True, playing music from notes is a fantastic task, but improvisation is a creative state, in which the grandiosity of the moment opens always in different dimensions, showing broader and more complete truths which are born only there on the stage, and cannot be repeated again. But I must add: confronting composed and improvisative music is an artificial problem. Both methods complete and overlap each other, they help mutually, they melt into each other in today’s music, at least in excellent works. What is important is how complex and true is the composer’s statement, and whether he expresses this statement with an aesthetic claim, which is worthy of the statement. I don’t believe in the claim that an aesthetic and ethic truth can be accepted only when sustained by sophisticated, artificially blown up composition arguments and methods.

Why did you choose just the parlando rubato as the starting point (basis) of your rhythmic?

When listening to a Hungarian folk singer singing a lamentation, a lullaby, or a love song, we notice how he is bending, sliding downwards the melody, as the emotions of the moment require it. The succession of the sounds has a very intimate, very virtuously kept rhythmic, which is based on this intimacy, rich and deeply human. This is a tempting, and at the same time human leading principle to relate different African, Asiatic, East-European rhythms on the basis of traditional archaic and Hungarian foundations. *Parlando rubato* is a guarantee for an emotionally sincere and true music because it doesn’t tolerate cold, artificial, sophisticated structures.

You have composed a work for the Spring Festival this year: the Ceremony Music (Szertartászene). This is the ritual of an imaginary feast, celebrated in the depth of the soul. In fact, your first LP, The Wedding, and even Adyton, are a kind of higher community ceremony music. Do you believe so much in the power of the rites?

I respect all those who are capable of sharpening their brains in this computerized-digital world, so much that they look down with disdain on feasts and rituals. But I am convinced that with such a mentality nobody can be his own master, or can carry out his will against things and technologies. One has to care for the natural being existing since his birth as an original dowry in himself, only it is not revealed, even more, it is decaying more and more – thus never before has there been such a need for human culture as today. We must decide every day what we consider as right or wrong, intellectual or narrow-minded, egoism or generosity. If ritual exists – and I believe that it exists – then it doesn't apply to the mystification of the computer, but it refers to the ritual of the forms of our behaviour for the well-being of the community. This rite appears sometimes only in our imagination, in an imaginary time or during an imaginary ceremony, but in the depth of our soul we long for it and we offer sacrifice to it.

The Ceremony Music is full with archaic Far-East influences from China, Japan, Tibet. Why did you reach out so far in time and space?

In nature, everything appears in dual form: man-woman, low-high, positive-negative. There is the outside world and me, thus whatever my thinking capacity can digest, I must accept it. One of the most important references – East and West – these are the two reliable rocks in the world view and mentality, with all their manifestations. We are among them, but our older music traditions, our folk songs, come from the East and not in the sense of the barbaric, but in the sense of a higher order. Slowly, the secrets of the oriental culture reveal themselves: their seeming simplicity turns out to be broader and more complex than we imagined, although we have spoken about it in a derogatory tone for a long time. Since we Hungarians have one ear in the East, we can search in these regions with more plausibility than others. Even today I can hear behind the Hungarian lamentation song the old men in Northern Japan, the Mongols duophone singing, the koboz-player from Kazakhstan, and I could continue for a long time.

Singing is again present in your music after a laps of 15 years...

Singing has again become important for me. I mean, we know nothing about sounds, music, and the harmony which holds the world together. When we don't know, we don't experience the vibration of the song – the musical mathematics that exist in our body.

In 1979 you wrote in your article The misery of Jazz on the subject that the Hungarian jazz-life has been discouraging for decades because the world of

jazz in Hungary has been dominated by despotism and a condition of helplessness. Therefore, it seems that nothing has changed; forgotten musicians, unelaborated styles, tolerated but obstructed musical vegetation. Do you still see it like that?

Basically, no change has taken place – merely in the nuances, which seemingly tempers the situation. In any case it is positive that it will be more and more difficult to advise man against doing good.

Tamás Horváth

*The concert took place 19 March 1982

(Translation by Marianne Tharanb, January 2020)