

**The pianist, band-leader, composer, and music philosopher György Szabados, born in 1939 in Budapest and passed away in 2011 in Nagymaros, is considered one of the greatest personalities of jazz emerging from the European culture tradition. His creative oeuvre spans from playing solo to working with big ensembles, from free improvised music to orchestra works. On the occasion of his 80th birthday the Hungarian Academy of Arts has published a book composed of essays treating his oeuvre. One of the authors is Bert Noglik, who contributed a presentation to the conference dedicated to György Szabados in November 2019. Hereafter excerpts of his lecture:**

My engagement for György Szabados' music started at the beginning of the 1980s. Searching for new developments in the field of jazz, I committed myself to different discovery journeys. I had the opportunity in the GDR to enjoy many free jazz musicians from Western Europe because interested circles created their own network, so that organizers like Jazzwerkstatt Peitz could host these musicians. During those times, I could travel only in the countries of Eastern Europe (Ostblock). I made use of every possibility to track down innovatively oriented musical endeavors. So I regularly visited the jazz festivals in Warsaw, in Prague, and went as far as Archangelsk, and frequently to Hungary, to witness the latest developments. Although Hungary was rooted in the communist system, we experienced there in the 1980s a much greater extent of freedom than in the GDR. It is certainly not due to coincidence that the process of erosion of the power, the decisiveness and courage of the people led to the opening of the iron curtain just in Hungary – an event, which we always remember with great thankfulness, especially in the year of the jubilee.

During my visits to Hungary, I came across a musician, who fascinated me in an extraordinary way – due to the seriousness of his play, his will for renewals, and his being deeply rooted in the Hungarian music culture. To hear György Szabados in a concert was for me an auratic experience of great impressiveness. To know him personally enriched my life, thanks to conversations with a man whose theoretic occupation with music could join music with wisdom; a charismatic personality of great modesty and overflowing heartiness. Additionally, I admired his deeply felt and intellectually reflected connection to folk music. While in Germany after the Second World War such traditions were difficult to find, commercially degenerated, and above all, presented as infected with “völkisch” (national socialist) ideology; the case was different in Hungary. Szabados drew from a primary source, and joined at the same time, directly contemporary forms of expressions. His reference to the Hungarian culture penetrated to the deepest layers, where he found links to current processes of assimilation. Thus, I wanted György Szabados to become known outside Hungary through the media, which I succeeded in doing by the end of the 1980s, even before the collapse of the Berlin wall. I published essays dealing with György Szabados in the GDR, in Switzerland, and in West Germany, and I dedicated a chapter to him in my book »Klangspuren – Wege improvisierter Musik«. Considerable time has passed since then, and still, György Szabados' oeuvre has remained mainly outside of Hungary, something to be discovered as it is - the oeuvre of an extraordinary personality in the cultural life of Europe during the last decades.

Thanks to the efforts of a small group of enthusiastic supporters, knowledge about György Szabados' life and oeuvre has grown considerably. The website launched by Rudolf Kraus offers a huge collection of documents, and is similar to a research centre in the way it is managed, maintained, and continuously updated. This website is highly recommended to all those who wish to contemplate the

music, the music aesthetic, and the personality of this extraordinary artist: The World of György Szabados ([www.gyorgy-szabados.com](http://www.gyorgy-szabados.com)). Besides biographic information, essays, scientific papers, interviews, and photo and video collections, you find there a detailed discography. A lot of the subjects, which I tried to explore in the eighties, with the kind help of often overburdened amateur interpreters, have been in the meantime completed and deepened. I think of, but not only, the works of my friend and colleague, Gábor Turi.

Allow me to pick up a few strands of thought, which I acquired when I was dealing earlier with the work of György Szabados.

György Szabados has fulfilled, since the 1970s, the role of an outsider and at the same time of a central figure, a cult figure in the music and intellectual life in Hungary. Since his childhood, it was a necessity for him to improvise music. In jazz, which he could listen to on the radio, and thanks to records from the USA brought covertly into the "Ostblock" (Eastern Europe), he discovered new liberties, even when the occupation with this music remained at first in the field of imitation. But he soon discovered the intuitive way while playing together with the bassist János Szudy and the drummer Endre Publik; a free way of playing, free from "idioms" – without ever having heard about Ornette Coleman or Cecil Taylor. In synchrony with the international avant-garde of the time, he came into conflict with the jazz scene in his country. The communist authorities slandered jazz earlier, as a poison of imperialism; now it was accepted, but without any effort to express their own identity.

At the beginning of the seventies, György Szabados heard the authentic, unaltered song of Hungarian peasant women in a village near Lake Balaton. It was a pivotal experience. Szabados became aware of a tradition rooted in the collective subconscious, which was called by Béla Bartók, the "musical mother tongue". It is known that Bartók had described different ways of incorporating elements of the folklore music; the "serving" adaptation, the integration of their own works, and the creation from the spirit of folk music, without referring to concrete specifications. György Szabados engaged in this last form of integration, which most challenged his creativity. From then on, he intertwined recourse and innovation into his works. Szabados recognized that the claim postulated by western composers, that composing must exclude the past, leads to a dead-end. He looked for and found points of intersection between archaic and avant-garde – in the stock of sounds, like in the modes and in the microtonality – as also in the parlando-rubato. With this, he attached himself, first to the Afro-American jazz development, which moved in those years from a traditional-modern Swing in the direction of pulsating rhythms. Szabados understood sound as vibration, following the idea of the Vedas. The driving force for him was not the beaten rhythm but the rhythm of the sigh. "Not graspable" he said in this context, "totally detached but at the same time sensual – that was the solution." In his oeuvre, György Szabados insisted on uniting composition and improvisation. He succeeded in this effort so convincingly because a circle of young musicians gathered around him who was prepared to take risks with him. His Ritual Music and Ceremony Music refer to the Hungarian music history, concerning the mind set, but the playing developed spontaneously into a cult event. Szabados didn't render homage to a secular ruler, but to an imaginary Sun king, and he was near to the intentions, which led John Coltrane to »Ascension« and »A Love Supreme«.

Far away from jazz centers, Szabados developed music with individual imprint, and at the same time soaked with the power sources of the European, of the Hungarian culture. György Szabados came upon a music aesthetic which didn't intend to exclude anything, which can absorb the vast range

between sound and noise, and where the finest sound differences have room as well as ecstatic outbursts. All these could link the process of improvisation in a fluent and organic way; it could become here and now an event and create a community. This way, György Szabados reached a similar concept of playing as the musicians around the AACM in Chicago. However, while Szabados drew from the primary source of the Hungarian mother tongue, the musicians of Chicago leaned towards the Blues and Spirituals, to the widespread heritage of the Afro-American tradition. Revitalizing these traditions, they followed the idea of „Ancient to the Future“. In both processes, musical universals have been discovered and shaped multifariously. Dealing profoundly with the tradition, together with the expression of present well-being, the opportunity for encounters between cultures and transatlantic bridge building became possible. This was only successful, because musicians with strong identity approached each other. It is not about alignment in an all-world-music, but the direction was preserving their own music while opening up at the same time.

The meeting of György Szabados with Anthony Braxton, which I witnessed in 1984 in Debrecen, I will never forget: a music performance filled with great respect and with a common mind set. One of the pieces performed is titled “Keserves” – the label of a Hungarian group of songs, where lamentation is joined with an underlying feeling of hope, and so it seems to be related to a great extent to the blues feeling. When I recall the memory of the meeting between Szabados and Braxton, I see again both of them, bowing in front of each other and then standing up with a boundless joy for the festivity of the moment. Joy was an essential component in György Szabados’ music, in spite of the depth of problems. Many of his compositions are like a hymn about the being, the flow of life. In a conversation with me and also with Gábor Turi, György Szabados made the statement: “Being Hungarian, is a provocation.” It was neither pretentious, nor submissive. It was rather about a challenge. First, a challenge as it is, to integrate different layers of Hungarian culture, to join its spiritual aspects, and to open up to the world. There is something mystic in it, which one can follow or take a distance. However, even an uninitiated listener may penetrate into the secrets of György Szabados’ music, provided he opens up himself to the sounds and their pulsation. Szabados became a challenge for the society due to his kind of self-contemplation. With great seriousness, intellectual pervasion, and emotionality raised to urgent message, he succeeded in creating a sound, poetic world picture, which depicts reality not as it is but as it could be. To safeguard György Szabados’ music must mean to keep her sources, to document them, and to treat them scientifically. Besides the writings and the music notes, Szabados’ heritage needs also live performances and further development. As he made youngsters enthusiastic and gathered them around himself in collectives, today’s task is to carry further the stimulus. His music has to be played by musicians, capable of interpreting it from his spirit, to improvise, and who are daring to produce their own contribution. Musicians do their utmost in this sense; those who used to play in Szabados’ ensembles, like the tenor saxophonist Mihály Dresch, the reed-instrumentalist István Grensó, and the contrabassist Róbert Benkő, together with young musicians like the percussionist Szilveszter Miklós, and the pianist Máté Pozsár. The pianist Károly Binder, professor at the Academy of Music Ferenc Liszt in Budapest promotes the ideas and music of Szabados to the younger generation. The collective around István Grensó is organizing workshops in Nagymaros “In the Spirit of György Szabados”, in order to act in this way.

And one more important name is to be mentioned: the Hungarian viola player, Szilárd Mezei, living in Serbia, has his roots in the thinking tradition of Szabados, and he has developed himself as improviser and composer to a musician personality, whom we can call of European caliber. The fact that he has still to be discovered outside his direct sphere of activity, mirrors the problem also

encountered by Szabados; the difficulty to overcome huge barriers built up by ignorance of language, missing information, clumsy and self-referential institutions, and a slowly functioning transfer of culture. It is due to the tireless endeavors of the visual artist and film director Zoltán Bicskei, that this conference and the concert in the prestigious Pesti Vigadó, dedicated to the oeuvre of György Szabados, could take place.

In the following part of my essay I try for a rather poetic approach to György Szabados' work. In my search for an association space I will immerse into a film by Zoltán Bicskei and György Szabados – a film with the beautiful title "... but this endless Canopy of Heaven". I follow Bicskei and Szabados to the Hungarian Plain, the steppe, the ,puszta'. And I hear the "Sand music" (Homoki zene) recorded by György Szabados and his MAKUZ ensemble. The great silence of this large landscape makes this music possible. John Cage comes into my mind; he defined silence as a condition for music, an element on par with the sound with its endless manifestations. And silence; John Cage recognized it since he locked himself up in the soundproof room of the Harvard University. Silence is not uneventful.

"I could hear", Cage wrote later, "that keeping still, that silence was not the absence of noises, but the unintentional functioning of my nerve system and bloodstream. I discovered that silence is not acoustic. It is a change of consciousness, a transformation."

The idea is very near to the thought which György Szabados reflected upon in his dialogue with Zoltán Bicskei in the desert: "Silence has many forms. There is the silence of non-disclosure, the silence of waiting, and then the silence of preparing". The silence of preparing is the time flowing, until sounds emerge in the mind out of silence. According to his biography, this started in the life of the pianist during his childhood, when he put aside the musical text and started improvising out of an unhappy mood, as he noted.

Improvisation has become for György Szabados a language, in which he could express himself freely – in his youth still in the medium jazz, and later detached from this idiom, the conventional term 'jazz' transcending. I try to imagine why he met such a resistance of the communist potentates with his music. First, they wanted to fight against jazz as an expression of western decadency. At the same time, they supported a simple minded folklorismus propagated by the state. Due to some adaptation to changed times, the regime afforded jazz. When György Szabados music was prohibited and ousted during the seventies and later, the reason was that he tried to find his own language. If someone has found his own language, that posed a threat to the system, because he as an individual was conscious of himself and also of his being a historic subject.

György Szabados reflected on his situation as an artist in the cultural and political context. He asked burning questions concerning identity in a country with a genuine culture having a capacity of integration; in a country with a great history and at the same time, with a history of injuries and humiliations. Since he didn't want to participate in rebellion, he united his questions with a search for spiritual answers.

We are back in the puszta. Szabados talks about the culture of the plain. "This is a place, he said, where 'small', 'tiny' have a bigger meaning than anywhere else. More essential and more appreciated. Everything has to be loved more in order to keep it alive." What Szabados said, is similar to a pantheistic emotion. At the same time, it is about an opening to the world and to an "ego-less" state, related to oriental thinking, as it seems. Emptiness, as referred to by the term 'sunyata',

doesn't mean in Buddhism what we understand as "nothing". "Sunyata" means a state, a condition, which everything can be born from. Here too, they meet in the desert: György Szabados and John Cage.

Szabados perceives in the puszta the simultaneity of the diverse condensed in wholeness. The liberation process of the New Music steered first to the emancipation of the twelve tones, and later to the emancipation of the noise. But while the New Music deducted the basic principle of the development mainly from the tendencies of the musical material, György Szabados followed sensual experience and philosophic contemplation. In the desert, he finds his way to an all-embracing perception of the diverse. Looking for words, he states: "And there is no dissonance! Only an unbelievably transparent, warm consonance. Everything lives together, has pre-history and consequences. Because music in depth is motion. When tied up, not possible, only in freedom. To make sure that it is working freely and still ordered, we have to move upwards to be identical with the wholeness."

After the imaginary meeting between György Szabados and John Cage in the "puszta", let us go to a different scene; let us enter into another fiction of mental game. We go the red sand landscape of the Kalahari in southern Africa, the place of longing of the South African pianist, Abdullah Ibrahim. There, where country frontiers are meaningless, where desert transforms itself into grassland, Abdullah Ibrahim placed there his "Liberation Opera" in the eighties; an epos of liberation, anticipating something which took place later. The Kalahari Desert is for Abdullah Ibrahim a mystic place, the place of freedom and of peace. The "essence", which György Szabados has found in the Hungarian folk music, Abdullah Ibrahim draws the same from the archaic layers of the African tribal music, further from the township jazz, from style forms as Marabi, Kwela, and Mbanqanga. By transforming all these influences into a totally individual music language, Abdullah Ibrahim has enriched the world culture – in a different way from György Szabados, but both are related in the kind of adoption and spiritual pervasion.

Abdullah Ibrahim's music is inseparably linked with his striving for freedom and emancipation, with the experience of the struggle against apartheid, with such drastic events like the massacre of Sharpeville, and the pupils' protests in Soweto. But opposing the simplifying idea that race conflicts are rooted in the relationship between blacks and whites, Abdullah Ibrahim focused his thinking rather on the humane, universal dimension of liberation.

Similar to Abdullah Ibrahim, György Szabados developed his striving for freedom and wholeness more and more on a spiritual basis with the passing of years. This striving was based on historical experience. Szabados spoke about the process, how he became an adult through the events of the revolution in 1956. "This revolution", said Szabados, "was in every aspect a key event. From this event on, I understood my music as coalescence, where music traditions with jazz influences and with human fate are combined. Since 1956 I consider all music, which I compose or play – independently whether jazz or not – as serious music." He said about the beginnings: "In those days I used to play a rebellious music." He realized only later the parallelism between the Afro-American free jazz and the American civil rights movement.

Already, his first record "The Wedding", published in Hungary in 1974, was related to the events of 1956. It started with the photo selected by György Szabados for the cover of the record, however it was not allowed to be printed on the LP cover. The photo made by László Fejes, and awarded abroad, shows a small group of wedding guests in the corridor of a tenement in Budapest. They walk in front

of a grim wall, full of bullet holes. You know: tristesse pur. But even without this picture – the mood of the soul cries out of the music; you hear the complaint and the cry. With his music composed in 1985 for the ballet by Iván Markó in Győr, “The Sons turned into Stags”, György Szabados referred to the revolution of 1956 with the subject, however allegorical and encoded. And in his composition written in 1983, “The Secret History of the Events”, came to the fore that which was not allowed to be spoken. The truth is hidden in the work; the text is transformed into a meta-language. In accordance to his intention, the piano sounds strange due to “preparation”. Renouncing the usual means of program music, Szabados has created here a work with a strong message. Totally differently, not following the way of sublime contemplation, but employing direct speech, Abdullah Ibrahim achieved something similar with his composition “Mannenbergs”, which became a kind of hymn of the anti-apartheid movement. This was also a piece for instruments, without text. It was a musical gesture meeting the urge and the spirit of time. György Szabados and Abdullah Ibrahim – two musicians in far-away worlds with far-flung synergy.

Spirituality and seriousness of the oeuvre of György Szabados make us recognize – even if in a totally different coordinate system, but at least in some aspects - closeness to the Afro-American avant-garde. In fact, Szabados collected information about the efforts of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler or Cecil Taylor first little by little, and then reflected upon them in music and also discussed them in lectures.

Next, I evoke another meeting, which took place hastily: the meeting of György Szabados with Cecil Taylor. In 1986 Taylor performed in Nagykanizsa. Tamás Váczi, a friend and member in an earlier ensemble of Szabados, said that Szabados was present in Nagykanizsa. Zoltán Bicskei related that he and Szabados dropped off for a short while during Taylor’s concert, and Szabados commented that it had to do with Taylor’s magic, with a power, which takes possession of the mind. There was probably no deep conversation between the Afro-American pioneer and the Hungarian exceptional artist, due to the language barrier. However, a great deal connected them, which would have given them enough stuff to talk about. At the beginning, both suffered because their visionary music was not appreciated by the contemporary people. Both remained unflappable. For both, forbearance was stronger than bitterness. Taylor said that for him the year 1961 was a turning point. That year he decided to keep his music free of compromises. “I could have had perhaps a prospect to become a fellow with similar economic means as let me say, Oscar Peterson, he said, so I found myself suddenly again as a dishwasher. It is the irony of fate that just at this moment Down Beat had published an article about our music, and shortly after the publishing, I started to wash dishes: but in the meantime, I realized why I was working as a dishwasher. “

György Szabados experienced something very similar following his return from the jazz festival in San Sebastian in 1972, where he was awarded the first prize for his composition “Axe Psalm”; during a concert in Budapest he experienced the humiliating rejection of an uncomprehending audience stirred up by communist ideology. Both Cecil Taylor and György Szabados were cut off from the dominating jazz establishment. Both had created an opulent oeuvre with huge long-lasting energy. Cecil Taylor drew his innovations from the continuum of Afro-American music. Even though he came from the black middle class, studied in a conservatory and didn’t originate from a black ghetto, blues had for him the same importance as the folk music had for György Szabados. For him, what was important was mainly the mind-set, and it was not about the question of music material. At the same time, Taylor delved into the subject of European modern music and the avant-garde, and treated the music of Igor Stravinsky and of Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Of special importance for Cecil Taylor was the oeuvre of Béla Bartók, concerning rhythmic and tonal aspects. We can quote the words of Cecil Taylor saying that Bartók taught him how one can use folkloristic material. By doing so, he, Taylor, is not concerned about his own identity because he is absorbing all these influences while not forgetting his Afro-American perspective. The same applies to György Szabados, when he assimilated elements of jazz or the New Music in his compositions. Szabados asserted that Hungarian music is so strong that it can open up in every direction without being damaged. Her force, where she is growing from, is the language, her archaic, her spiritual foundation.

When Cecil Taylor claimed that in the Universe everything was enlivened by energy and that the creator is part of these processes, we find in György Szabados' notes very similar sentences. If Cecil Taylor and György Szabados had not met in Nagykanizsa, we can imagine them both on musical paths of a ramified underground network. They could have met somewhere in the middle. They are spiritually related; both were engaged in a music of existential priority and in the elevation into a state of trance.

Bert Noglik

Selection from the discography:

The Wedding / Az esküvő (1974) – Hungaroton – SLPX 17475

Szabraxtondos (1984) – Krem SLPX 17909

Sand Music / Homoki Zene (1991) – Adyton 005

Revelation / Jelenés – György Szabados / Roscoe Mitchell (1996) – Fonó Records FA-038-2

Time Flies (1998) – A November Music Production – NVR 2002-2

Bells / The land of Boldogasszony – Boldogasszony földje / Harangok (2007) – BMC CD 130

Translation by Marianne Tharan (April 2020)