

CHAPTER 11

Critical Years: Debates in the Field of Hungarian Music (1988–1992)¹

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On 21 March 1992, an open letter appeared in the columns of *Új Magyarország* [New Hungary], a daily newspaper close to the government (Orbán et al. 1992: 9). The letter was from a group of composers known as the Four – Miklós Csemiczky (b. 1954), György Orbán (b. 1947), György Selmeczi (b. 1952) and János Vajda (b. 1949). It was addressed to four other composers belonging to a special, modernist generation of composers inclined toward Western models, who were all born in the 1930s – Sándor Balassa (b. 1935), Attila Bozay (1939–1999), Zsolt Durkó (1934–1997) and Sándor Szokolay (1931–2013). They had all played decisive roles in the turn toward modernism in the 1960s, so that they were seen in the 1960s and 1970s as essential figures in the Hungarian music field (Földes 1969). The letter from the Four dropped like a bomb on a music scene riven in any case by scandals in the previous four or five years. When it appeared, Szokolay promptly told a live television programme, *A hét* [The Week], he would resign from all his positions in music (N. N. 1992a: 3). Meanwhile the Presidency of the Hungarian Composers' Association rebuked the Four for a letter whose sharp and personal tone seemed (at least to them) unprecedented in the history of Hungarian music (N. N. 1992b: 9.). No one, according to the Presidency, could be condemned for seeking to prevail in professional life – neither in the present, nor in the past. Emil Petrovics (1930–2011), a well-known Presidency member, publicly expressed his personal view in another daily newspaper, *Népszabadság* [Folk Freedom]: the attack on the four older composers was “unprecedented” and the blame it placed on them for all the problems on the Hungarian music scene was wholly unfair (V. Gy. [Gyula Varsanyi] 1992: 4).

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In fact, the Four's open letter posed four different questions and touched not only the circle around Durkó, but the Achilles' heel of the mechanisms of Hungarian music life in its entirety, above all the society of composers who played a leading role in shaping its discourses. This also implies that the four recipients would also be affected by the letter in different ways. The Four saw too much power concentrated in the hands of the iconic generation of the older composers, who were using it to reshape the music scene after their own image. As the Four put it, Durkó and his people were trying to clean up the "whole Hungarian Music Scene, those Augean stables", without "managing to reach consensus even on what should be cleaned up" (Orbán et al. 1992: 9). Furthermore, it was emphasised that composers in Durkó's circle were in an exceptional position with official state commissions. It was also argued that however much the generation might express opposition to the presocialist regimes, its members had all exonerated the previous political system. The Four criticised sharply the strong nationalism shown among the Durkó circle, a common characteristic of this being too frequent, often distorted references to the ideas of Zoltán Kodály.

Certainly *éminence grise* in music was Zsolt Durkó as President of the Hungarian Music Society, which had close relations from the outset with the first independent political party in Hungary, the Magyar Demokrata Fórum (Hungarian Democratic Forum) founded in 1987, which then won the first free general elections in 1990. Meanwhile Durkó as contemporary music director could decide whose work was heard on Hungarian Radio (Gerencsér 1999: 226). Furthermore, the new government chose his friend Attila Bozay in 1990 to direct the National Philharmonic, the national concert organisation (Kovács 1990: 6), while Sándor Szokolay became chairman of the Hungarian Music Chamber, an umbrella body founded in May 1991 (Győri 1991). And as if the leadership insensibly sought to display the truth in the Four's letter, Szokolay's place, when he resigned as Chamber President over the 1992 scandal, went to its former vice president, Attila Bozay (N. N. 1992c: 10).

Szokolay was also mopping up prominent state commissions, such as writing his *Magyar zsoltár* [Hungarian Psalm] op. 241 for the first state celebration of 23 October 1956, Hungarian Uprising, held in 1990 (Gombos 2002: 23). Its title certainly reflected the *chef-d'œuvre* of Zoltán Kodály, *Psalmus hungaricus* (1923). Durkó, Bozay, Szokolay and Balassa had undoubtedly been the most successful figures on the music scene of János Kádár's socialist Hungary, backed by state commissions, composer nights, international management, and sheet-music publications. On 14 December 1989, the organist István Ella (b. 1947), a member of the Hungarian Music Society, noted on television in Durkó's presence that for many years the National Philharmonic had been run by Éva Lakatos (1905–1993) – Director of the institution and a former party official whom he simply dubbed "a radio announcer from Moscow" – without her having any knowledge of music. The composer Kamilló Lendvay (1928–2016) reacted by quitting the Hungarian Music Society and writing at length

to Durkó, reminding him how much his career and those of Bozay and Balassa had owed to Lakatos.²

As for nationalism, the Four focused on an essay by Balassa (*Gondolatok a nemzeti zenéről* [Thoughts on National Music]), published in November 1989 in the right-wing journal *Hitel* [Credit], dubbing modernism “a West European avant-garde ideology in a left-wing robe” and urging his contemporaries to turn in their ideals against modernity in favour of stylistic simplicity and clarity (Balassa 1989: 34). The Four were the first in Hungary to turn to neo styles, around 1985, and proclaim a revolution in the poetics of intelligibility (Dalos 2020: 374–385). They may have been quite irritated by Balassa’s wording, for he sought an aesthetic necessity as an ideology-based definition of the perfect national artwork and a political counter-reaction as well.

Yet references to Kodály’s life work have been made also by Bozay, Durkó and Szokolay, mainly because they planned to stake out new ground for cultural and music education in Hungary. Durkó, in his first major interview after the founding of the Hungarian Music Society, specifically mentioned the renewed relevance of Kodály’s ideas around 1989 (Feuer 1989a: 4). The effects in Kodály’s concepts on shaping a modern and national music life were lively in those times, as the membership of Szokolay’s Hungarian Music Chamber shows. It included the Hungarian Kodály Association, the Békéstarhos Friendship Circle and the National Association of Hungarian Choirs and Orchestras (Győri 1991: 4). So Szokolay referred first to his great model when the Chamber was founded: “We want to catch up with Kodály’s name to become a real nation” (ibid: 5).

However, the most powerful member of the Hungarian Music Chamber was the Hungarian Music Society, founded on 29 November 1987, although it did not begin to function until the end of 1988 (Feuer 1989a: 3). It was the first bottom-up professional music association to be founded independently of the state, although it required state subsidies. It not only carried out duties for protecting musicians, but had the right to organise concerts. It was formed when the National Philharmonic, having hitherto employed instrumental and vocal soloists in official positions, suddenly fired thirteen of them (Jálics 1991: 9). Most of the dismissed musicians on the one hand, and some composers, who belonged to the generation born in the 1930s on the other followed the initiative of Zsolt Durkó. Among the Society’s goals were activation of the country’s music scene, the complete re-examination and renewal of music’s institutional system, and promotion of composers hitherto neglected for political reasons, notably László Lajtha (1892–1963) and Sándor Veress (1907–1992), and of contemporary music, while securing the financial position of soloists and orchestral players and reforming Hungarian music criticism (Feuer 1989a: 4–5). So Durkó and Bozay recommended total redesign of the National Philharmonic and of the international management office Interkoncert, along with the state recording company Hungaroton and state music publisher Editio Musica Budapest.

2 Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music, Institute of Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Research Centre for the Humanities, Zsolt Durkó Collection, MZA-DZs-Script 8.298, Kamilló Lendvay’s letter to Zsolt Durkó, Budapest, 15 December 1989.

All this matched the cultural policy of the new independent Hungarian Democratic Forum. That was clarified also by the writer and politician István Csoóri (1910–1990) in an introductory lecture to the May 1989 joint concert of the new party and the Hungarian Music Society. Csoóri said that members of the Hungarian Democratic Forum and of the Hungarian Music Society “know that dismantling rigid and untruthful institutions is one requirement for our renewal, but not enough in itself. Change also calls for eliminating the core of a corrupt former world” (Csoóri 1989: 20).

Bozay and Durkó had precise ideas on what to do when the Society was formed. Less than two weeks later, the Society proposed at an extraordinary general meeting of the Hungarian Musicians’ Association on 12 December 1987 that the institutions of music be wholly reorganised. They saw the one solution to the serious financial and professional crisis to eliminate state monopolies over concerts (Szále 1988). Indeed, the crisis demanded unparalleled measures: the national Arts Fund [*Művészeti Alap*], which provided the finances for state-controlled arts, was on the verge of ruin. International and domestic management had reached a point of expiry (ibid: 4). It was a clear sign of crisis that the state took 220 million forints from the 400 million forints’ profit of the Hungaroton, the one large and successful corporation in the field. Despite the conditions, Hungaroton’s chief executive officer, Jenő Bors (1931–1999), offered six million forints to the Musicians’ Association in the hope that it could continue to function (ibid: 3).

The Hungarian Musicians’ Association was finally dissolved only on 2 December 1990, or more precisely, transformed into the Hungarian Music Council, which like the Hungarian Music Chamber, acted as an umbrella organisation for musicians. The Council, as successor, also disposed over the Association’s budget (Gábor 1990: 4; Victor 1991). While the Hungarian Music Chamber had fourteen founding bodies, the Hungarian Music Council had twenty (Győri 1991: 4; Victor 1991: 11). The Hungarian Composers’ Association, formed in October 1990 (N. N. 1990c: 5), did not join any umbrella organisation, so demonstrating its political independence and transforming the field of Hungarian music into three parts (Victor 1991: 11). There were clear political reasons for the neglect of the umbrella organisations, as the members of the Composers’ Association were politically more varied than those of the two other organizations. The Hungarian Music Chamber could contact the new government very quickly, mainly through the Hungarian Music Society, which maintained, as has been seen, close relations with the right-wing ruling party, and already played a leading role in the Chamber (Szántó 1989: 31; dal-bor 1989: 39; Varsányi 1990: 10; Győri 1992). The Hungarian Music Council, chaired by the internationally renowned music educationist Katalin Forrai (1926–2004), but whose affairs were actually handled by a young and active vice-president, the composer Máté Victor (b. 1945). This protected the interests of nearly 20,000 Hungarian musicians, some 75% of the professional musicians (Varsányi 1993: 23). Indeed, the Hungarian Music Council opened its doors broadly and embraced not only the associations representing classical

and popular musicians, but even those of the specialists operating on the music scene (Varsányi 1991: 20).

Naturally, the first major conflict between the two umbrella organisations was triggered by a dispute over property and financial resources. In fact the Hungarian Music Council inherited from the Hungarian Musicians' Association the huge music collection of the Music Information Center (today it is the collection of Budapest Music Center), and more valuable still, the state subsidy (*ibid.*). However, a sizable part of the latter was claimed by the Hungarian Music Chamber, and within it the Hungarian Music Society, which argued that the amount the state could use for this purpose was to be spent on the whole range of music, not just on members of the successor organisation (Varsányi 1993: 23). As a result, the government reduced its support to the Hungarian Music Council from year to year: 4.9 million out of 54.2 million forints in 1991, 4.4 million out of 86 million in 1992, and only 900,000 forints out of 105.5 million in 1993. In 1993, the Hungarian Music Society alone was receiving more support than the whole Hungarian Music Council (*ibid.*).

This drastic cut in support was not the only problem for Vice President Máté Victor. In January 1991, the Department of Music and Dance of the Ministry of Culture's, led by Bertalan Andrásfalvy (b. 1931), set up a thirty-three-member advisory board headed by Secretary of State György Fekete (b. 1932) and Department Head Dániel Tőser (b. 1945), but the Hungarian Music Council was not invited to join (Varsányi 1992: 20). The Ministry did not wish to do so because, as Máté Victor put it, the Government sought to specify the NGOs with which it would work. The Hungarian Music Council was excluded even though it was also a member of the UNESCO Music Council (Varsányi 1991: 20; 1993: 23). The list of advisory board members was not published, but Máté Victor learned indirectly there were more board members from the Hungarian Music Chamber and the Hungarian Music Society; the first board meeting discussed redistribution of the 5-million-forint budget of the earlier Hungarian Musicians' Association (Varsányi 1991: 20).

From the outset, the government's cultural policy, in music particularly, bore marks of its determination to decide who should be considered partners and who not, and who would be the right people, who, as Csoóri put it, would help "to dismantle rigid and untruthful institutions" (Csoóri 1989: 20). The state-owned National Philharmonic and Hungaroton appeared clearly to be such "rigid and untruthful institutions" to the leaders of the Hungarian Music Society. In July 1990, Secretary of State György Fekete unexpectedly dismissed Jenő Bors as head of the Hungaroton and András Rátki as Director of the National Philharmonic, in favor of István Ella and Attila Bozay respectively (Győri and Gellért 1990). The situation of the two institutions and of the two new directors were judged differently in the public domain. A letter from Emil Petrovics to Attila Bozay dated 27 August 1990, shows clearly the difference between the two appointments.³ While Petrovics did not doubt that

3 Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music, Institute of Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Research Centre for the Humanities, Attila Bozay Collection, MZA-BA-Script 8.054, Emil Petrovics's letter to Attila Bozay, Budapest, 27 August, 1990.

the Philharmonic was ripe for change, he saw Hungaroton working as an internationally successful and prosperous firm. Deeper down, Petrovics felt that while Bozay's ambition to head the Philharmonic had been well known in the past, the choice of István Ella was incomprehensible: he knew nothing of phonographic record production and had never had contact with the firm before. The manner of his appointment reminded Petrovics of the political practices of the 1950s.

In an interview after his appointment, Ella sharply criticised the work of Jenő Bors as his predecessor, and more generally the way the record label had functioned. He believed the Hungaroton had deserted the cultural values that originally marked its publishing strategy: national values had given way to marketing. His own appointment would ensure that hitherto relegated musicians would finally have a chance to record (Győri and Gellért 1990: 21). Ella also complained that only a dozen of the 700 employees at the Hungaroton had a music education and there was no one in management who understood music (*ibid.*). Ella's views echoed Zolt Durkó's interview right after the foundation of the Hungarian Music Society. Durkó bewailed the musical incompetence and failure to promote cultural values in the management of large music institutions. So it is highly probable that Ella, in seeking to renew Hungaroton, wished to execute Durkó's 1987 plan (Feuer 1989a: 4). Yet Durkó's concepts had been disputed as early as 1989 by Kálmán Strém, who came to head the first private concert-organising firm after the political change. Strém stressed that music management was a profession – those managing an arts institution had to do so professionally (Gerő and Várkonyi 2009). Nor could any music institution be run solely by a professional uncommitted to music. This had also applied under the previous political system (Strém 1989a: 4).

The Hungaroton affair probably caused public outrage because the label under Bors had been a success in the last decade of János Kádár's Hungary. Shortly before his dismissal, Bors was working on a very favorable international deal with EMI in London, whereby the Hungaroton would gain internationally prestigious sound recordings at a good price and easy release of its own records internationally. EMI, of course, withdrew from the talks after the unexpected change in Hungaroton's management (V. Gy. [Gyula Varsanyi] 1990; Szőnyi 1991: 25). Interest in the events surrounding Hungaroton, however, shows not only in the high number of newspaper articles published on the story, but by the signatures of 65 famous musicians who opposed publicly the dismissal of Bors and the reorganisation of Hungaroton (N. N. 1990b: 7). Soon after, its employees also wrote an open letter to the Minister (N. N. 1990a). The world-renowned pianist Zoltán Kocsis (1952–2016) himself expressed his disapproval of the government's cultural policy in several sharp declarations. He did not hide his view that Secretary of State György Fekete was open to the opinions of only one professional group, although "this group is marked," as Kocsis put it, "by some clever, broad-minded people being joined by those of mediocrity in the worst sense. I see no other reason for their motivation than an unbridled desire for power" (Kenessei 1990: 11; Sándor 1990: 7).

One year before his dismissal, Bors published an open letter (Bors 1989) and followed it with an interview with the most popular music journal, *Muzsika* (Feuer 1989b). At the time Hungaroton's publishing policy was often being criticised, mainly by present-day composers and performers without a recording contract. The press zealously picked up the story. Bors explained in detail in his interview how the company worked and what aspects underlay its decisions (ibid: 3). Thus it provided an accurate insight into the difficulties faced by a giant socialist company operating on a capitalist basis in international markets. Bors touched on the promotion of contemporary music and performing artists as well, drawing attention to the way this structure made classical and popular musicians dependent on each other.

According to Bors, the company had released ten contemporary albums a year in the 1980s. In line with the period's practice, the Composers' Section of the Musicians' Association voted on the works and composers to be selected. The cost of producing a contemporary album was between one and two million forints. In the first year the company could sell 800 discs a single publication, in the second year 300, in the third twenty down to ten, and sometimes none (ibid.). So the firm did not reissue such discs, however much composers lamented that their work had become inaccessible in the music stores after a while. There were market factors in the selection of performing artists as well: albums were issued exclusively with artists who sold both in Hungary and on the international market – such as Zoltán Kocsis or Dezső Ránki (ibid: 4). The selection process relied on an advisory committee, the needs of commercial partners, and market analyses of the publisher's experts. Even so, classical music revenues made an annual thirty million dollars loss for the company, which was offset by the sales of popular musicians. Still, the recordings of classical music earned the publisher foreign currency, whereas most popular-music recordings sold mainly on the Hungarian market. Since classical music could be sold abroad, the foreign currency allowed Hungaroton to obtain from the West, for example, the equipment required for making records. So classical and popular musicians were indeed very dependent on each other (ibid: 5–6).

The business operations listed by Bors lost their function soon after the change of political regime: not only through liberalisation of the market, but because access to foreign currency was no longer a problem. Furthermore, private labels emerged – one of them (Quint) established by Bors himself (Szóneyi 1991: 25). The ways to promote and sell music underwent marked changes as well, as did the shift from discs to tapes and later to CDs (Szóneyi 1990: 35). As the economic and technical environments changed, so did the place and role of high culture in postsocialist society. Durkó's ideas of raising Hungarian music culture through Kodály's ideas, embodied primarily in plans for music education and development of music life in the country (Feuer 1989a: 4–5; Gönczy 1990a), became quite anachronistic within a few years. This is shown most plainly in the loss of demand for Bozay-led National Philharmonic, in the provinces and in Budapest (Gönczy 1990b), especially after the emergence of several independent concert managers which could compete with the na-

tional concert agency (Bányai 1990). The most dramatic moment in these debates on music life is clear to posterity precisely in the fact that the participants in them, irrespective of their political slants, were less perceptive to the new situation, in which earlier cultural values, so important to both groups on the music scene, became marginalised.

There is one other aspect of the debates of Hungarian music life in the period of political change that deserves a mention. A new, unimagined issue arose as to what kind of professionalism was needed in heading the various music institutions. Unlike other learned journals, *Muzsika* addressed the issue strongly, perhaps because music expertise and music-management skills do not necessarily coincide (Strém 1989b) – though Zsolt Durkó and members of the Hungarian Music Society might have thought otherwise. The problem was also reflected in an interview with Bors two months after his dismissal. As he put it, “Our country is a country of amateurs. Everybody here is an amateur, from the prime minister to the cleaning woman” (Győri 1990: 13). Implementation of the plans of the Hungarian Music Society to renew the whole music life was hindered as much by the incompetence of its leaders as by the cultural, economic and political transformation of Hungary after the system change. The Four, not expecting anger from all music society, presumably had an accurate awareness of the situation, when they said in the open letter of 1992 that Hungarian composers should override their self-interest when transforming institutions and operating mechanisms. Based on the Hungarian classical heritage and the example of Bartók and Kodály, Hungarian musicians should work together to create the new and politically free Hungary’s modern and successful music life (Orbán et al 1992: 9).

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