

In Memoriam Prof. János Kárpáti (1932–2021)

Mária ECKHARDT*

OBITUARY

© 2021 Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest



Once again, we have lost a great scholar and true human being: Prof. János Kárpáti, a founding member of the Liszt Ferenc Society, and from 1987 to 1990 also a Member of the Board, died on March 19th after a long illness.

Obviously, many and worthy commemorations will appear about a man who was a particularly versatile and prolific scholar, a laureate of the Erkel Ferenc Prize and the Széchenyi Prize, the Grand Prize of the Hungarian Artist's Association and the Eötvös József Wreath of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences; a Doctor of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, an honorary full professor of the Music Academy and retired Director of its Library, a former Vice President of the International Association of Music Libraries, a former President of the Hungarian Association of Musicology and Musical Criticism and a participant in many international projects

* Corresponding author. E-mail: eckhardt.maria@lisztakademia.hu

First published in the journal of the Hungarian Liszt Society, *Liszt magyar szemmel/The Hungarian View of Liszt* No. 43 (April 2021), 12–19.

and conferences. Here I would like to share my memories with the readers of our review about the man I always respected and honestly loved.

I met János Kárpáti for the first time as a music academy student: in 1961, just as I was starting my studies at the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music, he was appointed Director of the Library after the retirement of Margit Prahács (1893–1974). Although the preservation and presentation of the Music Academy's Liszt legacy was one of the Library's missions, as a prominent Liszt-researcher Prahács still continued to perform the tasks related to her previous duties for a short time after her retirement. The young Kárpáti was known primarily as a Bartók-researcher, and especially as an explorer of the relationship between Bartók and Arab folk music (he also studied the latter by conducting field research); however, his versatility had already been demonstrated by the fact that he had published small monographs on both Scarlatti and Schoenberg (in 1956 and 1963, respectively), and soon afterwards he edited and wrote the texts for volumes II and IV of the *Muzsikáló zenetörténet* (Music History in Sound) series in 1965 and 1973. When his book *Bartók's String Quartets* (subsequently published in English as well) was published in 1967, I immediately acquired this essential work for my own library. Kárpáti subsequently published a number of important books and studies on Bartók (his 1976 book *Bartók's Chamber Music* was later published in English and Japanese, while the 2003 volume *Bartók-Analitika* [Analytics of Bartók] is a selection of his valuable analytical studies), but he was by no means limited to this field. It was a particularly new phenomenon when his thick book with the title *Kelet zenéje* [Music of the East] was published in 1981 as the first modern Hungarian musicological work on the topic. I had already received a copy of it as a gift from the author, as we had become colleagues meanwhile (I was a staff member of the Music Department of the National Széchényi Library, as a specialist to process the library's significant Liszt manuscript collection, and from 1973, I worked at the Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences as a researcher in 19th-century Hungarian music). Then from the end of the seventies, it happened several times coincidentally that we were working on our separate projects at the same time in the Musician's Rest-House of the Musical Fund of Hungarian Artists in Galyatető. During our walks together in the winter in the snowy mountains of Mátra, we used to have interesting and useful conversations – including about the way to continue the processing, enrichment and presentation of the Music Academy's Liszt estate collection in the best possible way, because at that time, the burden of that task was already primarily on Kárpáti's shoulders. In addition to managing the Library's operations and international connections and his own individual research work, he put great emphasis on research into the history of the institution, in which he was happy to support both internal staff and external researchers. He magnificently rearranged the outdated and dusty exhibition of the Music Academy's Liszt Memorial Room for the centenary of the birth of the Liszt Academy (1975). He took a serious interest in the history of Liszt's original instruments, and supported the restoration – paid for by a Swedish firm – of the large Chickering piano, which Liszt had received from America in 1881 designed especially for him; afterwards a recording was made in 1983 using the restored piano, for which Kárpáti wrote the accompanying leaflet himself.

At the urging of the management of the Music Academy and Miklós Forrai, the Secretary General of the Liszt Ferenc Society, in the academic year 1981/82 the Ministry of Education repurchased for the institution the building that had once (from 1879 to 1907) housed the Music Academy, but was later used for many other purposes, and had been extensively altered and become dilapidated. Following a bold decision by the Dean Dr. József Ujfalussy and chief



finance officer István Dencső, the reconstruction of the building began in 1984, with the aim to open a permanent Liszt memorial museum in the composer's last residence in Budapest, the place where he used to teach, in time for the great Liszt jubilee in 1986, and also to provide the Liszt Ferenc Society with worthy accommodation and the Music Academy with new classrooms, a concert hall and a research library. As far as the Liszt Museum and the research library were concerned, the lion's share of the preparatory work fell to the library's director, János Kárpáti, and I joined him as an assistant (in addition to my work at the Institute of Musicology at the time) in 1984. I will never forget those exciting two years I spent working on this task under his guidance. In addition to monitoring and providing professional consultation on the reconstruction, revising the existing collection and preparing it for relocation, my task together with Kárpáti was to complete the remaining furnishings of the former Liszt residence in order to make it as authentic a replica of its former state as possible.

As we know, after Liszt's death in 1886, the furnishings of the apartment were removed and given away, with the exception of the collection of books and musical scores and his instruments, which had been bequeathed to the Music Academy. Although Margit Prahács had already managed to recover several pieces of furniture and memorabilia by purchase or donation, it was not yet enough to recreate the original atmosphere of the entire apartment. With Kárpáti, who was known, respected and appreciated everywhere, I visited several museums to borrow materials, especially the Hungarian National Museum, which owns a very important collection of Liszt memorabilia as a bequest from the composer, and still generously lends out a part of it permanently (with occasional changes) to the Liszt Museum of the Music Academy. But we also received paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, furnishings from the Museum of Applied Arts, the Kiscelli Museum and from private individuals. We were thrilled when we were able to buy a bed on the antique market that looked exactly like the one Liszt used to sleep in, based on a picture from Liszt's time – later, we also found a contemporary armchair that had been thrown out during a rubbish clearance and was then restored by a specialist. Some of the period-appropriate chandeliers and carpets were also obtained on the antiques market. In the absence of the samples accompanying the documents that had been lost in a fire in the National Archives in 1956, we had to have the special wallpapers exclusively manufactured based on the descriptions preserved in the archives of the Music Academy. We followed every trail that could have led us to authentic Liszt documents – we went down to a small rural town in search of a supposed Liszt desk (in vain), to the dusty attic of a villa in Buda where a huge Liszt painting without a frame had been found, nailed to the roof beams – it was the wonderful work by Eliza Nemes of the elderly Liszt playing the piano, which today awaits visitors in the museum's lobby, beautifully restored and put in a frame by the restorer of the Museum of Fine Arts. The manuscripts and memorabilia bought at auctions or donated by invitation were piling up, the plans for the permanent exhibition (lobby, study-bedroom and salon) were being drawn up, as well as the first temporary exhibition ("Liszt and the Music Academy") in the dining room. Kárpáti had a great sense of organizing exhibitions as well, and already in 1981 he organised a lovely Liszt exhibition with the title "Album d'un voyageur" in Eisenstadt (formerly Kismarton) in Burgenland, commissioned by the Liszt Ferenc Society, which had been invited by the Provincial Museum of Burgenland to organise a joint exhibition to mark the 170th anniversary of Liszt's birth.

Following the success of the exhibition, he was also commissioned to compile the material for a large-scale travelling exhibition in Hungary in 1986, on the occasion of the Liszt memorial



year, which also featured “Liszt on the road” in tableaux in various dimensions and languages. This substantial and elegant exhibition, Kárpáti’s masterpiece, travelled to many countries with great success, and we could lend one of the returned series of tableaux even many years later, for example, to the Netherlands, the venue of the International Franz Liszt Piano Competition in Utrecht. For the opening of our Liszt Ferenc Memorial Museum on September 20th 1986, it was my task to prepare the catalogue of the permanent exhibition in Hungarian and English, but it was a great relief for me to have my work (the first in this genre) proofread by János Kárpáti, who himself contributed to the introductory part of the catalogue with his essay “Ferenc Liszt’s Pianos in the Liszt Ferenc Memorial Museum in Budapest.” This very thorough study has been included in the ever-changing versions of the permanent exhibition catalogue ever since.

How important the scholarly processing of the institution’s own historical values and presenting them to the wider professional public was for the internationally renowned Kárpáti, in addition to raising the library of the Music Academy to a world class level, is also demonstrated by the fact that he launched, in full agreement with Dean József Ujfalussy, the series of academic publications of the Music Academy (*Acta Academiae Artis Musicae de Francisco Liszt Nominatae / Scientific Publications of the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music*, ed. János Kárpáti). The first volume on the book bequest of Ferenc Liszt’s library in Budapest was completed just in time for the opening of the Liszt Ferenc Memorial Museum and Research Centre in 1986. I had been entrusted with the revision and completion of the work once begun by Margit Prahács, and of course he followed this work of mine as well: I learned a lot from him. Later, I was already able to edit independently and with due professional confidence the 4th volume of the same series, a similar bilingual edition of the much more extensive musical score material of the Liszt estate (1993), in which the then staff of the museum (Zsuzsanna Domokos, Györgyi Éger, Zsófia Koffán and Katalin Neumayer) also participated. Kárpáti, the music historian, was always an inspiration to his colleagues in the Liszt Academy Library: it is no coincidence that several of them, such as Ágnes Gábor, Gábor Szirányi and Klára Somogyi, published important works, books and studies on the history of the institution during the years spent with him and even afterwards. Two of them (Gábor and Somogyi) later also succeeded him as the Library’s directors.

As this is a personal recollection, I must admit that I was very much moved when, only a few weeks after the opening of the Liszt Ferenc Memorial Museum and Research Centre, Kárpáti decided that I had become capable of heading this new small department of the Music Academy on my own after the two years I had spent with him. At his recommendation, I was entrusted with the management of the modest new museum (officially a “museum-like memorial place”), but I could always turn to Kárpáti for advice and help. I asked him several times to open one or other of our temporary exhibitions, and he was always there at the openings even when it was not his duty. He also helped us with his advice when the museum, with the contribution of Jenő Jandó, published its first own recording made with the Liszt instruments, and all the instruments had had to be restored beforehand. (The recording, published by Hungaroton in 1989, was later released on CD as well.)

He kept an eye on auctions and spoke to the Board on our behalf whenever we wished to buy a valuable Liszt relic. He made sure that the modest purchase budget would always be sufficient for the acquisition of important new Liszt books for the research library. I have already mentioned that he was a member of the board of the Liszt Ferenc Society from 1987 to 1990, and although everyone knew that Liszt research was not his first and most important field (he was



very much involved, in addition to Eastern music and Bartók, in contemporary Hungarian music for example, especially the œuvre of András Szöllősy – and of course he also assumed an important role in international cooperation among music librarians), but he gained such a reputation for his Liszt-related activities as well that he was invited to give lectures at international Liszt conferences on numerous occasions, and in 1996 he even received the American Liszt Society's "Award of Excellence."

In 1998, Kárpáti was elected President of the Hungarian Association of Musicology and Musical Criticism (a position he would hold until 2006, enjoying public respect and popularity, as was vividly demonstrated by the conference organised by the Society on his 75th birthday in 2007). At the very beginning of his presidency, he took the initiative in organising a large-scale exhibition by the Society for the millennium, with the participation of the most important museums and musical institutions, on the millennial history of Hungarian music, and also developed the basic concept for the exhibition. He invited different experts to develop each topic in detail, and I felt very honoured that he chose me for the Liszt topic. Kárpáti also edited the catalogue of the truly representative exhibition in the Budapest Historical Museum (*Symphonia Hungarorum – Magyarország zenekultúrájának ezer éve* [A Thousand Years of Hungarian Music Culture], 2001.)

This valuable work was published in 2004 by Rózsavölgyi & Co. in the form of a book as well, with the title *Képes Magyar Zenetörténet* [Hungarian Music History in Pictures]. We often had conversations with him about how important it would be to publish this great book in English, so that the world could get an authentic picture of the history of our Hungarian musical culture, in accordance with the current state of musicology, in an interesting and spectacular publication also containing audio material. This plan was realised in 2011 under the title *Music in Hungary – An Illustrated History*, in parallel with the 2nd revised and expanded edition of the Hungarian original: a nice gift also for another great Liszt anniversary, the bicentenary year of the composer's birth.

I could go on and on listing the musicological works that Kárpáti has bequeathed to us, his last book being, for example, a collection of Mozart documents, also published by Rózsavölgyi & Co., *Wolfgang Amadé Mozart – Válogatott levelek és dokumentumok* [Selected Letters and Documents], 2017), and I have not even mentioned his several decades of teaching, which helped many people to find their way around in the fields of the musical repertoire, musical sources and musical analysis. However, this article has been intended to be a subjective memorial from the beginning, a tribute and a farewell, highlighting the moments that were the most important to me personally in his rich and unique œuvre. I know that not only I, but many other people as well, including the readers of our journal, who knew János Kárpáti, encountered his works, exhibitions, conference lectures, or heard him speak in the media or at an event of the Liszt Museum or the Liszt Society, will cherish his memory with love.

