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JUBILEE OF THE LISZT FERENC SOCIETY – ENCOUNTER WITH LISZT AT THE MUSIC ACADEMY

(László Gombos)

On May 20th 2023, the Liszt Ferenc Society celebrated the 50th anniversary of its foundation with a concert in the Grand Hall of the Music Academy. It should be added that the launch in 1973 was in fact a re-establishment, since the predecessor of the Society had already begun its activities 130 years ago, in 1893. Therefore, this is a double anniversary, worthy of the impressive venue, the magnificent programme and, above all, the unparalleled performances of the musicians involved. The *spiritus rector*, main organiser and hostess of the concert was Mária Eckhardt, co-chairperson of the Society and retired director of the Liszt Museum. So first of all it is her who we must thank for the memorable evening. Seated on the edge of the stage, she inspired the audience with a lot of information and interesting facts about the performers and the compositions played, some of which I will also share below with our readers. Thanks are also due to the musicians who kindly contributed *pro bono* and, not least, to the co-organiser of the concert, the Music Academy.

The concert began with the famous ode *To Ferenc Liszt* by Mihály Vörösmarty, set to music by Zoltán Kodály. This was followed by the motet *Salve Regina*, one of Liszt's last choral works, which also features the well-known Polish Marian chant *Gaude Mater Polonia*. The New Liszt Ferenc Chamber Choir was conducted by László Norbert Nemes. The singing of the small ensemble sounded surprisingly concise and bright, as if many of their predecessors had been on the podium alongside the young performers, and as if we had also heard the enthusiastic singers, who used to be members of the former Liszt Ferenc Chamber Choir between 1963 and 1993. However, from the very first chords, we could not help but think of the legendary founding conductor, István Párkai, who had died in March at the age of 94 and who for decades had given his audiences unforgettable experiences. Alongside Liszt it was him, a Head of Department at the Music Academy and a teacher revered by many of us, whom Kodály's brilliant choral work evoked, and the "new" choir, established in 2010, demonstrated once again that it is following in the footsteps of its great predecessor.

Between the two choral works, the Chairman of the Liszt Society, the pianist and organist Csaba Király, welcomed the audience. He gave a brief overview of the Society's history: its dynamic but short-lived beginnings in 1893 following the initiatives in the 1880s; the significant organisational work in the 1930s that the Society undertook in celebrating the Liszt jubilee in 1936; its being banned during the communist takeover of 1948-49; and finally, its relaunch in 1973. The initiator and leading figure of the latter was Miklós Forrai, a professor at the Music Academy and the conductor of the Budapest Choir. He took over the position of Secretary General and later also that of Co-chairman (Klára Hamburger succeeded him in the former position in 1992), while Liszt's great-granddaughter Blandine Ollivier de Prévaux was elected Honorary President and the violinist Dénes Kovács, then President of the Music Academy, became the first Chairman. In addition to two music-loving ministers and co-chairmen (György Csanádi and Rezső Trautmann), the Board also included such notables as Béla Bartók Jr.

After hearing another choral work, Ferenc Liszt's premier instrument, the piano, took over the leading role. József Balog's programme of pieces were a contrast – in terms of genre and style – not only to the preceding vocal works, but also to the concert as a whole, while sharpening contrasts was also a defining element of the musician's playing. Schubert's popular song *Ständchen* was performed in Liszt's transcription, followed by the 13th Hungarian Rhapsody.

As the projector highlighted the figure of József Balog in the magnificent, richly coloured light show in the Grand Hall of the Music Academy, the musician illuminated Schubert's melody in the same way, as it took on an almost tangible, omnipresent form in the hall. The extra fine accompaniment, on the other hand, was sometimes softer than the sound of a breeze or the rustle of leaves, yet – and this speaks volumes about the performer's qualities – every note could be heard.



And the Hungarian Rhapsody was literally rhapsodic: it picked up and then recoiled, it was brooding and pondering, and then flourishing freely, and finally it was galloping like Mazeppa. Is all this exaggeration or artfulness? If Robert Schumann had been invited to the jubilee evening, he would obviously have had many objections to the collaboration between these two Hungarian musicians, Liszt and Balog. However, we know that albeit this is only one face of the thousand-faced Liszt, it is a real face and part of his personality – and audiences have been crazy about it for almost 200 years.

A very different side of Liszt was revealed in his songs of unparalleled beauty, namely *Die Loreley*, composed to a poem by Heine, *Die drei Zigeuner* (The Three Gypsies), *Freudvoll und leidvoll*, and *Isten veled* (Farewell), a setting of a Hungarian poem by Lázár Petrichevich-Horváth. One of the performers, the pianist Daniel Heide, is planning to record all of Liszt's songs, and his latest disc recorded with Konstantin Krimmel won the Franz Liszt International Grand Prix du Disque last year.

As his vocal partner was unable to attend, he performed with Dorottya Láng at the jubilee evening. It is not easy to describe what we heard compared to an average performance. I must admit that I am usually very critical of singing; I am often infuriated by the constant tremolos, the lack of clarity and the incomprehensibility of the lyrics. However, for me Dorottya Láng's performance did not seem like this sort of singing, and Daniel Heide's performance did not seem like this kind of piano playing. I didn't follow individually what they were doing because after the welcoming applause had stopped, there was not a pianist or singer in the room, there were not sounds, rhythms or harmonies, there was not music and poetry. When I sought words to describe the moment when Loreley, the siren of the Rhineland who lured men to death, was heard, my brain stopped working. I could only think in banal terms like magic, miracle, transcendental or unearthly moment. I could feel the astonishment of the audience, too, holding their breath as one, while an immeasurable power had got a grip on everyone. I would venture to say that the statue of Liszt on the stage was no longer a statue either, for the living presence of the Master was almost palpable in the room. We witnessed a rare moment, which of course was made possible by a combination of the special occasion, the magic of the venue, the singing of the choir conducted by László Norbert Nemes and the piano playing of József Balog, topped off by the highest level of interpretation by Dorottya Láng and Daniel Heide.



The musical atmosphere and the escalated mood of the first half persisted also after the interval. Everyone could be certain of this when Ditta Rohmann's cello was heard in Liszt's *First Elegy*, and its wonderful sounds drew back the audience, having bustled about in the lobby just a few minutes earlier, to the world of the most sophisticated chamber music. The music was composed in several versions, and this time we heard the version that Liszt intended for the funeral service of his dear friend Countess Maria Muhanova in Weimar on June 17th 1875. Liszt gave the melodies, meant to sound in a sighing manner, primarily to the cello and less often to the piano in the ensemble, in which the four instruments, together with the harp and harmonium, created a peculiar and ethereal sound. In addition to the cellist, the performance was also unique in the respect that it featured three exceptional musicians, the current and two former presidents of the Music Academy – Andrea Vigh on harp, Sándor Falvai on piano and István Lantos on harmonium. I wonder if there have been similar examples of such a conjunction of musical celestial bodies anywhere around the world.



After the honourable performance of the three presidents, further long-time, decisive supporters of the Liszt Society took over the stage. As Mária Eckhardt related, Dezső Ránki had been a founding member of the Society in 1973 and he played the *Dante sonata* at the founding ceremony half a century ago. Since then, together with his wife Edit Klukon, they have appeared at countless events of our Society, and this time they performed the four-hand version of the symphonic poem *Tasso*. In Liszt's time, for practical reasons, piano transcriptions of most orchestral works were composed, since a larger ensemble was not available everywhere, and the lack of sound recordings also reduced the available selection of music to a minimum. Middle class homes, on the other hand, typically had a piano, and with two, four, sometimes six hands (or even eight on two pianos) they could more or less play even rarely heard compositions, originally requiring a large ensemble, in their piano versions.



Listening to how Dezső Ránki and Edit Klukon played it, however, we could not have any "more or less" feelings, in fact, at that moment the question did not even arise as to whether the orchestral or the piano version is the primary or "authentic" form of the composition. Pure, perfect, genuine music was played in an interpretation so typical of the Ránki couple, in a declarative manner, encouraging full experience and acceptance instead of arguments. I listened to this piece from the professors' lounge, where István Lantos was also enjoying every note with the zeal of spirituality on his face, tapping lightly with his fingers. If Beckmesser from the *Meistersinger* had been with us, he could not have done otherwise either but throw aside his critic's broken chalk.

At the end of the concert, we could also hear the Music Academy's organ, renovated a few years ago, which, in addition to its use as a teaching instrument, is also excellent for performing the organ parts of orchestral works, accompanying choirs and elevating the mood of various celebrations. It entirely fulfilled its latter function, as Csaba Király performed two Liszt compositions, the *Hosannah* taken from *St. Francis' Canticle of the Sun*, and the chorale arrangement of *Nun danket alle Gott*. The latter was composed by Liszt for the inauguration of the Walcker organ at the Cathedral in Riga on January 31st 1884, and he also left the opportunity open for the organ to be joined by a brass ensemble, timpani, and men's or mixed choir. This time, the chamber choir that had sung in the first number of the concert returned to the stage, and when they joined in singing under the direction of László Norbert Nemes in the closing section of the organ work, we witnessed a similar rare musical-acoustic phenomenon as previously in Loreley's singing or the cello solo of the *Elegy*. It was as if the whole celebration, the series of exceptional performances of art, had served this moment, the entrance of the chorale melody, as if the compiler of the programme, Mária Eckhardt, had built her entire construction on this message.



I quote her words, with which she introduced the last piece on the programme: "The chorale *Nun danket alle Gott* (words by Martin Rickart, melody by Johann Crüger) has been arranged by many composers, it is still sung in Lutheran churches and ecumenical services in Hungary with the words beginning "Jöjj, mondjunk hálaszót" (Come, let's say words of thanks). We could not conclude today's jubilee concert in a more dignified manner than by saying Hosanna and Words of Thanks for the last fifty years of the Liszt Ferenc Society to our heavenly Sustainer and earthly supporters, to our active leaders and fellow members, to the musicians participating in today's concert and to Ferenc Liszt himself, who has bequeathed to us such a great oeuvre."

Photos: Andrea Felvégi