

Sauer's, Godowsky's, and Backhaus's Budapest Recitals in the Reviews of Géza Csáth (1906–1912)

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Abstract: This study analyzes the music critiques of Géza Csáth (1887–1919) on the interpretational achievements of the eminent European pianists Emil von Sauer, Leopold Godowsky, and Wilhelm Backhaus, who gave guest performances in Budapest from 1906 to 1912. By comparing Csáth's opinions about the performances of the above mentioned pianists with those of the critics who wrote for Hungarian, German, Austrian, French and Serbian newspapers, the authors arrive to the conclusion that, at the time, artists were being more and more explicitly profiled exclusively as performers, while the practice of both composing and performing one's own compositions, which had been customary, was slowly disappearing. The importance of the chosen critiques by Csáth lies first and foremost in the author's comments, which indicate the changes happening in the piano practice in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

Keywords: Géza Csáth, Budapest, Emil von Sauer, Leopold Godowsky, Wilhelm Backhaus

Géza Csáth¹ (1887, Szabadka, Austria-Hungary – 1919, Kelebija, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes), a neuropsychiatrist, writer, music critic and composer, is one of the most distinguished Hungarian representatives of modern literature. Known to the wider public mainly for his short stories estimated as masterpieces,² he also wrote over 530 music critiques and articles he published in daily

1. Géza Csáth is the pen name of József Brenner Jr.

2. See Mihály Szajbély, *Csáth Géza* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1989); Imre Bori, "Geza Čat," in *Književnost jugoslovenskih Mađara* [Literature of the Yugoslavian Hungarians], (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1976), 82–84.

and weekly newspapers as well in some specialized journals.³ Most of these texts have a predominantly informative character, and their goal is to report on musical events and performances of foreign artists in Szabadka (today: Subotica, Serbia) and Budapest. However, the critiques gave Csáth also the opportunity to express his support for modernism and his ideas on national style in Hungarian music.

What can immediately be noticed while reading the music critiques of Géza Csáth is his special sensitivity to the performing practice of the pianists who gave concerts in Budapest. Because of that, his critiques, which are the subject of research in this work, can also be read as a unique phenomenology of the changes in the domain of modern piano performance, which became fully evident only after the author's untimely death. Although Csáth did not explicitly deal with the aforementioned issue in his texts, the authors think that – partly because of his acquaintanceship with the young Béla Bartók who, like Wilhelm Backhaus, represented the modern piano interpretation of the twentieth century – Csáth was undoubtedly aware of the changes happening in the contemporary pianists' technique and performance style.

Concert life in Budapest in the second half of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century

The social conditions necessary for the development of artistic music in Hungary, especially in Budapest, improved during the second half of the nineteenth century. An important incentive was the unification of Óbuda, Buda, and Pest in 1873, making the Hungarian capital an economic center which “was very quickly able to compete with the other capital on the Danube, Vienna.”⁴ However, as it has already been observed, even before the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 some consolidating factors could already be found in the Hungarian music life. The most important one among them was the activity of the celebrated musicians Franz Liszt, Ferenc Erkel, Mihály Mosonyi, Robert Volkmann, Ede Reményi, and Kornél Ábrányi.⁵

The development of concert life in Budapest was supported by the establishment of adequate institutions: the Pest-Buda Music Association (1836), the National Conservatory (1867), the Hungarian Theater (1837; later National Theater),

3. The most important ones include: *Bácskai Hírlap*, *Magyar Szemle*, *Budapesti Napló*, *Huszadik Század*, *Nyugat*, *A Polgár*, *Világ*, etc., see Éva Kelemen, *Művészetek vándora – A zeneszerző Csáth Géza* [Wanderer of Arts – Géza Csáth the composer] (Budapest: Magyar Kultúra Kiadó, 2015).

4. Katalin Szerző, “Musical Life in the Age of Dualism,” in *Music in Hungary. An Illustrated History*, ed. János Kárpáti (Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2011), 176.

5. *Ibid.*, 176–195.

the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra (1853),⁶ the Hungarian Royal Academy of Music (1875; today: Franz Liszt Academy of Music) and the Hungarian Royal Opera House (1884).⁷ In 1865, Budapest got a new concert venue, the Vigadó Concert Hall, where concerts of the most important Hungarian musicians and orchestras started to take place. Young composers also presented their works and world renowned guests gave concerts there. "The professionalism of the Hungarian musical public life that received them did not fall short of the achievements of other European capitals; as the millennium approached, Budapest was no longer on the fringe of Europe, what Wagner had dismissed as an "unmusikalische Stadt," but henceforth a favored destination on the concert tours of world-famous artists."⁸ The establishment and the development of the Hungarian music institutions were accompanied with the education of the audience. Music publishing was spreading,⁹ and music critique, an equally important factor in music life, was emerging.¹⁰ Daily newspapers and specialized journals were reporting with an increasing regularity about concerts and music events, which greatly contributed to the profiling of the music audience.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, important premieres of music pieces took place directed by Ferenc Erkel and Hans Richter, while Erkel's son, Sándor Erkel, invited world-famous composers such as Karl Reinecke, Karl Goldmark, Camille Saint-Saëns, Johannes Brahms, Gustav Mahler, Edmund von Mihalovich, Charles-Marie Widor, and Antonín Dvorák¹¹ to conduct the Philharmonic Orchestra's performance of their works. Owing to the well-educated audience, eager to hear good performances, and the artists who were ready for cooperation,¹² the Hungarian capital became a magnet for the famous European artists. The guest artists who performed in Budapest included violinists Jan

6. Ferenc Erkel had an important role in the founding of the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra: "he set the foundations of modern Hungarian concert life. He nurtured the first permanent concert orchestra in Hungary and created the permanent audience, who regularly attended concerts and considered it a part of their life." Ferenc Bónis, *A Budapesti Filharmoniai Társaság százötven esztendeje 1853–2003* [150 years of the Budapest Philharmonic Society] (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2005), 21.

7. Szerző, "Musical Life in the Age of Dualism," 176–195; see also: András Batta, "Zene," [Music], in *Magyarország a XX században* [Hungary in the twentieth century], ed. István Kollega Tarsoly (Budapest: Babits Kiadó, 1997), vol. 3, 499–500.

8. Szerző, "Musical Life in the Age of Dualism," 186.

9. One of the most important music publishers from 1850 to this day has been the publishing house Rózsavölgyi és Társa. See Ilona Mona, "Rózsavölgyi és Társa," in Grove Music Online (10 August 2017); eadem, *Magyar zeneműkiadók és tevékenységük (1774–1867)* [Hungarian music publishers and their activity (1774–1867)] (Budapest, MTA Zenetudományi Intézet, 1989).

10. "The musical press was the workshop of the organization of musical life." Szerző, "Musical Life in the Age of Dualism," 177. The first Hungarian specialized musical magazine *Zenészeti Lapok*, published between 1860 and 1876. It was founded and edited by Kornél Ábrányi and Mihály Mosonyi, Liszt's followers in Hungary. Ibid.

11. Cf. Bónis, *A Budapesti Filharmoniai Társaság*, 37.

12. Guest musicians often performed with Hungarian musicians in chamber ensembles: Eugène Ysaÿe (violin) and Mór Gönczy (piano); Ferenc Vecsey (violin) and Artur Schnabel (piano); Jenő Hubay (violin), David Popper (cello) and Eugen d'Albert (piano); Jenő Hubay, Rezső Kemény (violin), Gusztáv Szerémi (viola), David Popper and Leopold Godowsky (piano). Ibid.

Kubelik and Eugène Ysaÿe, cellist Pablo Casals, pianists Ignacy Jan Paderewski, Eugen d'Albert and Arthur Schnabel, as well as opera singers Yvonne de Tréville and Valborg Svardström. Budapest also welcomed pianists Emil von Sauer, Leopold Godowsky, and Wilhelm Backhaus, and Géza Csáth was among those who reported about their performances. The authors chose Csáth's articles on the concerts given by Sauer, Godowsky, and Backhaus based on the performance styles of these artists, given that each of them represented a different school of piano performance. Csáth's opinion is compared with other reports published in Hungarian, Austrian, German, and French dailies and periodic newspapers, as well as with the critiques of Serbian music critic Stanislav Vinaver, who had the opportunity to write about the performances of some of these pianists.

It should be said that here a principle-related scholarly problem arises, that of the musicological validity and historical reliability of music critiques in daily newspapers. The main reason for this is the function of the music critiques themselves, which is above all informative and propagandist, even when it comes to art music. The second problem is related to the form of the critiques, whose content had to be fitted into an announcement of a short report about the concert. The third problem is up-to-dateness and daily response, meaning that the validation of music events mostly excluded a time distance; this last problem can be mitigated if there is a continuity in the reports about a certain artist or a certain segment of musical life, which allows tendencies in musical creation and/or performance to be also noticed in critiques published in newspapers. Thorough knowledge of music and aesthetic refinement allows a music critic – and certainly that is the case with Géza Csáth – to give in critiques published in newspapers the evaluation of what can be expected from a composer and a performer at a certain moment.

Csáth on Sauer

In his writings, Géza Csáth commented on four out of the ten concerts Emil von Sauer gave in Budapest between 1906 and 1912.¹³ As a matter of fact, Csáth heard Sauer in concert for the first time in 1905. He was truly impressed, but he noticed that “papers in Pest did not like it”.¹⁴ Csáth started writing his critiques of Sauer's concerts at the time when this artist's popularity was slowly waning:

13. Between 1900 and 1940, Sauer visited the capital of Hungary as many as 70 times. The number of Sauer's Budapest concerts in that period are registered in *Koncertadatbázis. Budapesti hangversenyek 1900-tól napjainkig* [Concert data base. Budapest concerts from 1900 until our days] on the website of the Institute for Musicology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, http://db.zti.hu/koncert/koncert_Kereses.asp (accessed on 10 August 2017).

14. Cs[áth] G[éza], “Budapesti levél” [Letter from Budapest], *Bácskai Hírlap* 9/43 (12 February 1905), 7; quoted in Géza Csáth, *Rejtelmek labirintusában* [In the labyrinth of mysteries], ed. Mihály Szajbély (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1995), 176.

Once, Sauer's concerts in Budapest had a special significance: the audience would attend the concert and applaud in delight; however, after the concert, people would get into serious arguments. Everyone criticized him for something. Some music lovers protested in the name of ancient laws of musicality against Sauer's overly wanton, pathetic manner; sophisticated people did not like his pose, while purists accused him of disrespecting the classics. Thus, the audience was a little ungrateful: they enjoyed the master's art, but afterwards did not spare him their smug comments. Today, things are different. The exceptionality of Sauer's concerts is gone. The competition is so huge that virtuosos literally breathe down each other's necks.¹⁵

Considering Sauer's repertoire, Csáth noticed that Sauer often began his concerts by performing Baroque (Bach, Scarlatti) or Classical pieces (Mozart, Beethoven), but the compositions which dominated his repertoire were Chopin's and Liszt's works of virtuoso character, as well as his own compositions. Although Sauer's name was most often connected to the genre of virtuoso salon music, and rightfully so,¹⁶ his fellow pianists considered him also an excellent performer of compositions pertaining to the Classical-Romantic repertoire.¹⁷ According to Csáth's report about the concert held on 26 November 1906, the Budapest audience shared the opinion of Sauer's colleagues:

The concert hall of the Royal [Hotel] today was full of this great German artist's fans, or, better said, his worshippers. I highly doubt that there was anyone in the audience who heard him play for the first time. Sitting in the semi-lit hall, we were listening to the pianist with a kind of holy respect as he started performing Bach's monumental Organ Concerto in D minor with his well-known noble passion and supreme energy ...¹⁸

Besides Bach's composition, Sauer played Schumann's *Carnaval* op. 9, a series of Chopin's compositions, two of his own works (of which there are no precise data), and Liszt's *Réminiscences de Don Juan*. Csáth observed that it was especially interesting to hear Sauer's rendition of Chopin's Ballade in G minor, because the audience in Budapest had heard the same composition two days earlier, played

15. [Géza Csáth], "Sauer hangversenye" [Sauer's concert], *Pesti Napló* 57/326 (27 November 1906), 15.

16. This was observed very early on, even in the daily press: "Sauer is an artist of wide audiences: his piano performances are brilliant, witty, diverse, popular, and entertaining – the very characteristics that guarantee success with the masses." No author, "Sauer hangversenye" [Sauer's concert], *Budapesti Hírlap* 21/337 (7 December 1901), 9.

17. "Even Jozef Hofmann, not notoriously generous to many pianists, called Sauer "a truly great virtuoso". Harold C. Schonberg, *The Great Pianists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 299.

18. Cs[áth] G[éza], "Sauer Emil zongoraestélye" [Emil Sauer's piano recital], *Budapesti Napló* 11/327 (27 November 1906), 9–10; reproduced in Géza Csáth, *A muzsika mesekertje. Összegyűjtött írások a zenéről* [The magic garden of music. Collected writings on music], ed. Mihály Szajbély (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 2000), 262.

by French pianist Raoul Pugno. According to Csáth, because of a slower tempo, Pugno's interpretation of the composition was "more mystical"¹⁹ than the one by Sauer, who made bigger contrasts and played some parts without using piano pedals.²⁰ However, the culmination of the concert was Sauer's superior interpretation of the last piece, Liszt's virtuoso and technically demanding composition, which "fascinated" the audience.

In the concert that took place four years later, on 5 January 1910, at the Vigadó Concert Hall, Sauer performed Beethoven's piano sonata *Appassionata* and Minuet in G-flat major, Brahms's Scherzo in E-flat minor, Chopin's Piano Sonata in B-flat minor, two of his own compositions – Concert Étude in B minor and Concert Étude in A-flat major –, Petrarch's Sonnet no. 104 by Liszt (from the second volume of the cycle *Années de pèlerinage*), Fauré's Impromptu in A-flat major, Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, and Saint-Saëns's *Toccata*.²¹ This time, however, Csáth criticized Sauer for being unable to understand Beethoven, which was especially noticeable in his rendition of the *Appassionata*:

The first theme was not played in a good tempo, the second theme was overly sentimental and of arbitrary rhythm, and the presentation of the closing theme was theatrical and vulgar. The variation movement got lost in tiny side-effects; the rhythm was disturbed by unpleasant and unjustified small *ritenutos*. Sauer played the finale as if it were a concert étude. His arrogance as a virtuoso as well as the lack of respect towards the composer resulted in this unpleasant and senseless interpretation. ... In vain did Sauer turn the *Presto* at the finale's end into a frenetic *Prestissimo*, in vain did he throw his hands in the air: the audience received this number very coldly.²²

As opposed to Csáth's sharp criticism of Sauer's Beethoven interpretation, the American music critic Harold C. Schonberg observed that Sauer's concert recordings showed

19. Ibid., 263.

20. In the Budapest press, there had been criticizing remarks about Sauer's interpretation of Chopin even earlier: "In Chopin's Ballade in G minor we noticed *blurred phrases and rhythmical fluctuations in some places*, but we completely enjoyed the *Nocturne* and the *Étude* in A minor." m. a., "Sauer Emil búcsúhangversenye" [Emil Sauer's farewell concert], *Magyarország* 7/34 (4 February 1900), 10., italics by the authors. "Sauer's interpretation of Chopin offers a special treat to his devotees, and for this reason they forgive him for his *occasionally appearing predisposition to eccentricity*." No author, "Két hangverseny" [Two concerts], *Magyarország* 10/293 (8 December 1903), 14., italics by the authors. See also: No author, "Hangverseny" [Concert], *Budapesti Hírlap* 25/17 (17 January 1905), 13.

21. [Géza] C[sáth], "Sauer zongoraestélye" [Sauer's piano recital], *Polgár* 6/5 (6 January 1910), 6, reproduced in Csáth, *A muzsika mesekertje*, 429.

22. Ibid. Some critics expressed their reserve towards Sauer's interpretation of Beethoven even before Csáth: "Although Sauer can cope with Beethoven's profound, passionate compositions, but he plays them without style. His interpretation of Beethoven lacks calm, sophistication and, above all, moving sublimity." b.–t., "Sauer Emil hangversenye" [Emil Sauer's concert], *Budapesti Hírlap* 22/16 (17 January 1902), 8.

... a smooth pianist who inclined toward relaxed tempos and exactitude of detail rather than explosive bursts of temperament. He was a sensitive and eminently satisfactory artist, one with style and taste, at once poet and virtuoso.²³

Unlike Schonberg's opinion, that of the Serbian poet Stanislav Vinaver²⁴ is closer to Csáth's estimation of the interpretation by the German pianist. In his review published in the literary-political magazine *Misao* about Sauer's concerts that he had the opportunity to hear, Vinaver reported on Sauer's virtuosity like this:

The conquered difficulty and the almost unshaken calm of the technique that Sauer has attained are marked by some lightness that forgets even to triumph: that creates the impression of the redundant and the accidental, which sometimes offends us instead of amazing us, and sometimes misleads us onto the wrong paths of flowers for sale and paper butterflies. Although I was enchanted by Mr Sauer, I could not shake off the nauseating feeling of protest against his masterful superficiality...²⁵

Having also in mind an early review published in *Budapesti Hírlap*,²⁶ the conclusion can be drawn that there is a longer continuity in the estimation of Emil von Sauer's piano performance skills by music critics who were his contemporaries and who could personally attend his concerts.

Csáth on Godowsky

The Lithuanian virtuoso pianist Leopold Godowsky gave eight concerts during Csáth's stay in Budapest.²⁷ He gave three solo concerts, and the other five times he

23. Schonberg, *The Great Pianists*, 299.

24. Stanislav Vinaver (1891–1955) writer, translator, and publicist, was one of the most important poets of Serbian Avant-garde. He studied mathematics at Sorbonne, but under the influence of the philosopher Henri Bergson he turned to literature. While living in Paris, he was a student of Wanda Landowska as well. Like Géza Csáth, he also wrote music critiques, and his work in this field (over 300 pieces) includes reports and critics about musical events, portraits of musicians, essays, and theoretical treatises.

25. The review quoted was published in the 16 November 1923 issue of the periodical and reproduced in Stanislav Vinaver, *Muzički krasnopis: eseji i kritike o muzici* [Musical handwriting: Essays and reviews about music], ed. Gorko Tešić (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2015), 364.

26. "In any case, his play is very ingenious and original, but it lacks grand style. Instead of getting purer and attaining classical heights, his art is getting more monotonous every year. *Probably no artist has ever so willfully handled the interpreted works like Sauer does.* He elaborates some places with the greatest care, but there are other places where his play is nothing more than the careless succession of laxities, which he accompanies by grotesque movements. At some points, he was playing Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* brilliantly, but the performance of the whole piece lacked unity and completeness. Tempos were at some places slow and at others vertiginously quick, in other words, he adapted the whole piece to his own personality." No author, "Sauer (sic!) Emil," *Budapesti Hírlap* 20/333 (4 December 1900), 10, italics by the authors.

27. Cf. *Koncertadatbázis*, http://db.zti.hu/koncert/koncert_Kereses.asp (accessed 10 August 2017).

performed in chamber ensembles with several renowned Hungarian performers, at the time professors at the Music Academy in Budapest (Jenő Hubay, David Popper, and others). The repertoire of Godowsky's piano recitals most often included Beethoven's, Chopin's, and Liszt's compositions, but the most interesting part of these concerts was certainly his performance of his own transcriptions of works by masters of early music, especially Rameau and Lully. This category also includes his Studies on Chopin's *Études* and the *Symphonic Metamorphoses* which contains the paraphrase of Strauss's *Fledermaus* waltz. Because these works are extremely demanding in terms of piano technique, very few pianists ventured to perform them. Schonberg even thinks that the Godowsky's paraphrases of Chopin's *études* are among "probably the most impossibly difficult things ever written for the piano."²⁸

The audience's opinions on Godowsky's artistic creation were divided: some listeners showed disapproval of and lack of understanding for his "playing" with the parts of the compositions,²⁹ while others enthusiastically praised his talent and "acrobatic" piano skills. Among his supporters was also Csáth, who claimed that "Godowsky had reached the absolute pinnacle in the mastery of the instrument."³⁰ According to this text, "some circles [in Budapest] were convinced that Godowsky was a mere technician and not a real artist".³¹

On the occasion of the first solo concert that Leopold Godowsky gave in Budapest on 7 February 1903, the daily press observed his performance closely and concluded that this pianist was "more of a master of technical knowledge than a musician playing from the heart," while his interpretations of Chopin's *études*, which were immensely popular with the audiences, were "skillfully done, but we cannot attribute to them a more significant musical value".³² The following year, the press started to determine his pianistic art more carefully. Thus, *Budapesti Napló* commented that Godowsky's play "does not contain excessive depth, nor magnificence, but he plays what is delightful, melodic, and balanced in music with wondrous elegance and true classical ease".³³ Emphasizing and approving of the great success that Godowsky attained with his technical brilliance again, the music critic of the review *Magyarország* also acknowledges his artistic interpretation:

28. Schonberg, *The Great Pianists*, 322.

29. Godowsky transcribed a few of Chopin's *études* putting the original right-hand part into the left hand, other transcriptions are for the left hand alone. In some cases he interwove two *études*, in other cases the lowest parts were transcribed for the right hand, and the highest parts for the left hand. See Schonberg, *The Great Pianists*, 322.

30. Cs[áth] G[éza], "Godovszky zongoraestélye" [Godowsky's piano recital], *Budapesti Napló* 11/330 (30 November 1906), 9; reproduced in Csáth, *A muzsika mesekertje*, 264.

31. *Ibid.*

32. No author, "Godowsky Lipót hangversenye" [Leopold Godowsky's concert] *Magyarország* 10/34 (8 February 1903), 11.

33. No author, "Godowsky Lipót," *Budapesti Napló* 9/42 (11 February 1904), 9.

It is undeniable that the artist stands out not only because of his phenomenal technique but above else because of the exquisiteness of his performance. Godowsky also knows how to play for the heart. He proved this convincingly by performing a series of Chopin's works. He also played beautifully the works by Rameau, Daquin, and Schumann, while he gave a little less satisfying interpretation of Beethoven's Sonata in A-flat major, where the lack of a deeper spiritual involvement was noticeable.³⁴

Csáth defends Godowsky by saying that the art cultivated by Godowsky stands for a pure and noble esthetic, in which the perfect technical performance serves just as a means to correctly present what is recognized to have an artistic value in the music piece. Beside that argument, Csáth also gives the following ones:

A person who is able to play an ancient composition by Rameau with so many nuances and such beauty, all the while executing all the phrases with a magician's precision – must be an extraordinarily great and serious artist. His *cantilena* has a marvelous unique color, and his fortissimo a titanic strength, which differentiates him from other artists.³⁵

After that, Csáth continues to list Godowsky's artistic qualities: his enormous knowledge shown in his performance of Scriabin's works, as well as "the same beautiful, warm and exciting sound effects, luxuriously colored and clearly differentiated", which were highlighted in his interpretations of Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* and Brahms's *Rhapsody* in E-flat major.³⁶ Besides these compositions, Godowsky also performed Henselt's Étude op. 2, no. 6 ("Si oiseau j'étais") and *Symphonic Metamorphoses*.

Godowsky made Henselt's already virtuoso composition even more difficult. He replaced the double stops for the left hand, which must succeed one after the other at lightning speed, with triple stops (in octave, fourth and sixth). His composition, a paraphrase of Strauss's waltz, certainly represents an artistically rather important piece in its category; of course, Godowsky is the only one who is able to perform it.³⁷

Godowsky received praises for his technical superiority not only in Budapest but also at the concert he gave in Olmütz (today: Olomouc, Czech Republic) on

34. No author, "Godowsky Lipót," *Magyarország* 11/37 (12 February 1904), 15.

35. Csáth, *A muzsika mesekertje*, 264.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

1 April 1907, performing pieces by Mendelssohn, Brahms, Chopin, and Liszt as well as his own transcription of Strauss's waltz:

Yesterday, the artist presented himself to our audience as someone who belongs to the first line of the greatest pianists and has such an astonishing technique that he has nothing to fear from any rival. He performs the most difficult passages with crystal clearness, and he overcomes the biggest technical difficulties with an ease that the audience never ceases to admire.³⁸

A year and a half later, he also received positive reviews in Innsbruck, where the critics praised him as the biggest virtuoso pianist after Franz Liszt. His repertoire included pieces by Beethoven, Rameau, Scarlatti, Chopin, Liszt, and, again, his transcription of Strauss's waltz.

What we had the opportunity to hear was truly bordering the wondrous, the incredible. His phenomenal skill, his astonishing firmness, his innumerable variations and his expression rightfully provoked admiration. ... With his new transcriptions of pieces, Rameau's *Sarabande* in A minor, *Gavotte* in A minor and *Musette en Rondeau* in E major, and Allegro of Scarlatti's *Allegro* in A major, ... professor Godowsky showed what an extremely sensitive musician he is, capable of creating the most wondrous sonic nuances on his instrument.³⁹

Csáth on Backhaus

Unlike Sauer and Godowsky, the German pianist Wilhelm Backhaus belonged to the first generation of the modern pianist school. In the period between 1906 and 1912, he performed in Budapest eleven times.⁴⁰ Csáth reviewed four of those concerts, and immediately in his first critique he noticed that the young artist made a sensation.⁴¹

Writing about Backhaus's solo concert that took place on 28 January 1907, Csáth claimed that this pianist played with a lot of contemplation, and that the tranquility sensible during the phrasing of certain parts could be learned only at a German Conservatory.⁴² The repertoire for the evening included, among other

38. No author, "Konzert Godowsky," *Mährisches Tagblatt* 28/75 (2 April 1907), 4.

39. C. S., "Konzertabend Prof. Leopold Godowsky," *Innsbrucker Nachrichten* 55/273 (26 November 1908), 6.

40. Cf. *Koncertadatbázis*, http://db.zti.hu/koncert/koncert_Kereses.asp (accessed 10 August 2017).

41. Cs[áth] G[éza], "Filharmóniai hangverseny" [Concert of the Philharmonic Orchestra], *Budapesti Napló* 12/21 (24 January 1907), 9., reproduced in Csáth, *A muzsika mesekertje*, 287–288.

42. Backhaus studied at Leipzig Conservatory under Alois Reckendorf, and in Frankfurt under the renowned French pianist Eugen d'Albert.

things, a piece by Bach and a piece by Beethoven, but it predominantly consisted of various compositions by Liszt and Chopin. Csáth observed that this 20-year-old artist was already in command of a performance technique that only mature pianists, like Sauer and Godowsky, had. Csáth also wrote:

He played Bach's *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* with such convincing strength and poetic inspiration that he thrilled the audience. What followed after that was a vertiginous bravura: Brahms's *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*, and after that a cycle of Chopin's and one of Liszt's pieces. A special charm of these renditions is the perfect performance, as well as the pure and absolute mastery of the composition.⁴³

From the next report, which was about Backhaus's concert, held a month and a half later, it is obvious that the German pianist "had become fashionable in Budapest." On the occasion of the first concert, the Royal Concert Hall was half empty, but on the occasion of the second one, it was completely full. The extensive repertoire included pieces by Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Mendelssohn, and Liszt, but what struck Csáth the most was Backhaus's performance of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*:

He played the first movement of the sonata with extraordinary finesse and congeniality. Backhaus is not only a sensitive man, but also a musician with great self-control and immersed in his own interior. He did not play the *Allegretto* in a playful *scherzando* style and so fast as pianists usually do, but he succeeded in getting his novel concept across to the audience with no difficulty. In this movement too, he managed to keep certain broadness, and his tones did not lose any of their richness. Thus, the general lapidary style of the sonata remained intact.⁴⁴

43. Cs[áth] G[éza], "Backhaus zongoraestélye" [Backhaus's piano recital], *Budapesti Napló* 12/25 (29 January 1907), 8–9, reproduced in Csáth, *A muzsika mesekertje*, 290.

44. Géza Csáth, "Backhaus második zongoraestélye" [Backhaus's second piano recital], *Budapesti Napló* 12/62 (13 March 1907), 11., reproduced in Csáth, *A muzsika mesekertje*, 310–311. Backhaus's appropriate interpretation of Beethoven's work is confirmed by other sources, too. So, for example, a music critic writing for *Linzer Volksblatt* thought that "... Backhaus excellently gives justice to Bach and Beethoven. He opened the extremely charming concert he gave the day before yesterday with Bach's French Suite no. 5 in G major; it was not a sin that his excellent interpretation modernized a little the somewhat old-fashioned manner of some of the details of this piece in seven movements. And then, a big leap: towards Beethoven's Sonata in C minor, op. 111. Two different worlds! ... With his interpretation of this titanic music piece, Backhaus truly earned the thundering applause he got, and more. Who has not struggled personally with playing the last Beethoven sonata is not truly capable of fully appreciating Backhaus's stunning interpretation. We do not know what deserves greater admiration: his memory, his physical endurance, his technique or his mental flexibility?" Otto Bahr, "Klavierabend Wilhelm Backhaus," *Linzer Volksblatt* 43/56 (9 March 1911), 10.

From Csáth's reviews about Backhaus's recitals it can be seen that this pianist did not want to be exclusively seen as a "technician," which is probably the reason why Csáth himself highlighted Backhaus's emotionality and musicality.⁴⁵ Despite the positive reviews signed by critics like Csáth, the reputation of the technical virtuoso followed him at least for a few more years. In a critique, published in Leipzig's weekly music magazine, reviewing Backhaus's concert given on 17 February 1910 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Chopin's birth, the following can be read:

He has not entirely identified himself spiritually with the Sonata in B minor and other pieces. Those lovely attempts of wider internalization which we heard during his second [previous] recital remained only that – attempts. Although when the technique is in question, there is nothing left for Backhaus to learn, when it comes to deep spiritual emotionality, he has yet to learn almost everything.⁴⁶

The critiques in the Hungarian press about Backhaus's performance at a Budapest concert, held on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Chopin's birth, were contradictory. The music critic of *Pesti Napló* thought that the young virtuoso had played with immaculate technique but without any feelings:

There, however, where we would have expected intimacy and profoundness, virtues that would have brought the poetic Chopin closer to us – in the Sonata in B minor, the *Nocturne* in C-sharp minor, the *Ballade* in F minor and in the *Lullaby* – there all his great efforts were wrecked, because the soul cannot be learned, nor can the feelings be shown if there are not any.⁴⁷

Simultaneously, the critique in *Budapesti Hírlap* unconditionally praised Backhaus's interpretation of Chopin's works:

A bright audience gathered today in the Royal Hall to attend Wilhelm Backhaus's celebration of Chopin. They witnessed true artistic beauty, because there are not many musicians with a vocation to interpret the Polish poet like Backhaus, who understands and feels his painful melancholic sentiments. His warm heart, the softness of his touch, and his iron strength make him predes-

45. Csáth, *A muzsika mesekertje*, 310–311.

46. Ludwig Frankenstein, "Konzerte. Leipzig," *Musikalisches Wochenblatt* 40/46 (17 February 1910), 663.

47. No author, "Hangverseny" [Concerts], *Pesti Napló* 61/70 (24 March 1910), 16.

tined for Chopin's works. *He does not add anything to Chopin from his own personality, but he does not take anything away from him either.*⁴⁸

While Csáth's and Frankenstein's opinions refer to Backhaus's technique and his way of performing, the French journalist Alexis Dorville reproaches the German pianist for his overly "classical" repertoire, which mostly consists of pieces by German composers. Dorville thinks that the program should also have included pieces by French composers, which is understandable, considering the fact that the beginning of the twentieth century is above all characterized by the promotion of the national music cultures:

I believe that, in the extensive pianist domain, there are only few who are as praised as Mr. Wilhelm Backhaus and the recital he gave at the salle Gaveau; the audience was won by the firmness, the precision of his touch, and the subtle and skillful art of the nuances in this famous artist's performance; since the richness of his repertoire is well-known, I would like to hear him play some piano pieces by our French modernists, Fauré, d'Indy, Dukas, and Debussy (to only cite the first-rate achievements).⁴⁹

Conclusion

The concert life in Budapest at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries developed on the cusp between two music eras. The period of late Romanticism and emerging Modernism in art music saw a change in piano performance practice, as well as in performance practice in general. Musicians – especially pianists – were being more and more profiled exclusively as performers, while the practice of both composing and performing one's own compositions, which had been customary, was slowly but surely being abandoned. Musicians specialized either for interpretation or for composing, as can be seen from the example of Béla Bartók, a young virtuoso pianist who exchanged his internationally guaranteed carrier of a pianist for the carrier of a composer.⁵⁰ While the first-rate pianists of late Roman-

48. No author, "Hangverseny" [Concerts], *Budapesti Hírlap* 30/70 (24 March 1910), 13., italics by the authors.

49. Alexis Dorville, "Les Grands Concerts," *La Lanterne: journal politique quotidien* 37/13540 (18 May 1914), 2. On the reception of Debussy during Csáth's activity in Budapest, see Gergely Fazekas, "'Unhealthy' and 'Ugly' Music or a 'Compass Pointing towards a Purer Art of Superior Quality'? The Early Reception of Debussy in Hungary (1900–1918)," *Studia Musicologica* 49/3–4 (September 2008), 321–339.

50. Bartók participated in the famous Rubinstein Competition in Paris (1905) and took second place, after Backhaus. For the full report see J. Jemain, "Le Concours Rubinstein," *Le Ménestrel* 71/33 (13 August, 1905), 259–261. "He accepted rejection as a pianist (Wilhelm Backhaus won), but it was difficult to bear the fact that his compositions, including the four Hungarian Folk Song for piano and voice, were passed over." Leon Botstein, "Out of Hungary: Bartók, Modernism, and the Cultural Politics of Twentieth-Century Music," in *Bartók and His World*, ed. Peter Laki (Princeton University Press, 1995), 39.

ticism still felt the need to prove their virtuosity in both their own compositions and the compositions of other authors, the first modern pianists abandoned that practice and focused on the most precise and authentic possible interpretation of other composers' pieces, especially of the first-rate ones. In terms of performance, it was no longer the performer who was in the foreground, but the composer.

The change in the way of interpreting music pieces is the most completely reflected in Backhaus's performances. Harold C. Schonberg includes him, together with Artur Schnabel, among the main representatives of the modern piano school of the twentieth century. Their repertoire no longer included their own compositions, but, instead, it mainly consisted of pieces by German and Austrian composers, from Bach to Brahms – Backhaus more often than others also performed compositions by other authors, notably Liszt and Chopin. According to Schonberg, their interpretation is characterized by severity, strength, intellect and sobriety, and that of Backhaus also by "monumental solidity and even impassivity."⁵¹

As already mentioned, Schonberg and Csáth had different views about Sauer's and Backhaus's concert performances. Schonberg's opinion is based on musicology and it is certainly more extensive, while Csáth mostly relies on his musical sensibility and the advantage of direct experience, based on which he negates Backhaus's "absence of emotions." According to Csáth's critique of the concert that Backhaus gave on 26 March 1911 and at which he played Beethoven's *Waldstein Sonata*,⁵² as well as Chopin's, Smetana's, and Debussy's compositions, this pianist proved that he was also capable of interpreting such "musical treats," and that he was "no stranger to deep, tender emotions."⁵³

A comparison between these two great pianists based on the existing audio recordings suggests that Csáth's judgments are more reliable. The overall impression of Sauer's performance of the first movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* op. 27 no. 2⁵⁴ is somewhat ruined by the unnecessary slowing down and accelerating of the tempo, which is present during the whole movement. Sauer

51. Schonberg, *The Great Pianists*, 419.

52. There were other critics as well who agreed with Csáth. To advertise Backhaus's concert in Pilsen (today: Plzeň, Czech Republic) planned for 22 March, the local newspaper quoted a review of the *Dresdner Nachrichten*, claiming "[Backhaus] showed the sings of deep internalization and concentrated disposition in his interpretation of the *Waldstein Sonata* (Beethoven). It seems that its lively content full of warmth is particularly suited to his personality." *Pilsner Tagblatt* 12/25 (25 January 1911), 5.

53. Géza Csáth, "Hangversenyek" [Concerts], *Világ* 2/73 (28 March 1911) 16., reproduced in Csáth, *A muzsika mesekertje*, 482–483. Noticing that the opinions about Backhaus's artistic value are still contradictory, a critic writing for *Zenelap* gave the following explanation on the occasion of Backhaus's first concert in March that same year: "Some people say that he plays coldly and without feelings, while others consider him to be one of the greatest artists. This can be explained by the fact that in all the details of his performance Backhaus strives for the greatest simplicity and conspicuously avoids everything that could be called sentimental. The parts that the pianists of the older style so gladly emphasized he demonstratively neglects and that is why the first impression one gets is that his playing is cold. This simplified playing, however, only gives proof of his stylishness. If it is necessary, he can also produce soft and warm tones." "Dj", "Backhaus Vilmos," *Zenelap* 25/8–9 (25 March 1911), 18.

54. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJfnBY00JuM> (accessed 17 February 2017).

is extremely impatient during the performance, he is being limited by his own virtuosity, which is threatening to burst out at any moment and is thus introducing disquiet into the composition. It can also be noticed that his accentuation – that is, highlighting of certain tones in the melodic line and the accompanying line – is not adequate. Backhaus's performance of the same sonata, however, leaves us with an entirely different impression: he is precise, thoughtful and measured, and his performance is characterized both by strength and by expressivity.⁵⁵ On the basis of listening to the recordings of Backhaus's performances, the conclusion can be drawn that the claim about his "insensitivity" is simply not true.⁵⁶ The recordings which Sauer made in his later years reflect a much more measured pianist, but he still had some of the traits that had characterized his earlier performances: arbitrary change of rhythm and tempo, and unmindfulness of the character of a piece, the way the composer had imagined it.⁵⁷ After listening to the available recordings of Sauer's performances, the conclusion can be drawn that also in this case Csáth's criticism was justified and that when it came to this pianist's interpretation, he characterized it much better than Schonberg.

Between Sauer's and Backhaus's performing art, there is that of Godowsky's. He was born in the 1870s and was raised on older aesthetic norms – on emphasizing virtuosity that had its most important representative in Emil von Sauer – but the way he performed makes him much closer to Wilhelm Backhaus.⁵⁸ Godowsky can be considered as a representative of the transitional generation between Sauer and Backhaus. He set new, more precise performance standards, with the technical perfection in the foreground. Starting from this premise, Backhaus considered technical readiness as self-evident, and for him it represented the base for a more accurate and more profound approach to a musical piece and its performance:

The day when the show of startling technical skill was sufficient to make a reputation for a pianist is, fortunately, past. ... This does not mean, however, that the necessity for a comprehensive technic is depreciated. Quite the contrary is true. The need for an all-comprehensive technic is greater than ever before. But the public demand for the purely musical, the purely artistic, is being continually manifested.⁵⁹

55. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGYUJDFSvfo> (accessed 17 February 2017).

56. Backhaus was the first pianist whose concert performance was recorded (1909) and the first one who recorded all of Chopin's Études (1928). A short time before his death, he also completed the recording of the second edition of all Beethoven's sonatas, a project he started in 1964, when he was 80 years old.

57. Listen, for example, to Sauer's performance of the second movement of Beethoven's Sonata op. 13: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbG-t66EL08&list=PLk5UMJ3SosbiBpioF4qC_eQlcloyroZ92&index=2 (accessed 17 February 2017).

58. Listen to their performances of Beethoven's Sonata op. 81a: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3WYRf9I3w8> (Godowsky) (accessed 17 February 2017); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-JdTsY2Gzwk> (Backhaus) (accessed 17 February 2017).

59. Wilhelm Backhaus, "The Pianist of Tomorrow," in James Francis Cooke, *Great Pianists on Piano Playing* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999), 56.

The difference between Sauer's and Backhaus's concert performances illustrates in entirety the transition from one musical era to the next one. In his critiques, Csáth hinted at that shift, and what he did not express completely would be expressed by Vinaver a few years after Csáth's death:

Mr. Emil Sauer possesses the secret of the exhaustively learned, completely studied and dreamt Viennese manner of easy grace and innocent tameness. Maybe he is the final blossoming of an entire series of similar tendencies, whose cradle was Vienna.⁶⁰

60. Vinaver, *Muzički krasnopis: eseji i kritike o muzici*, 364.