

THE MAN OF SPIRIT AND MUSIC

*In Celebration of György Szabados's
Hungarian Heritage Award*

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Some encounters remain with one for a lifetime. I met György Szabados in the late 1970s, as a novice journalist, and as the leader of the local jazz club, I invited him to Debrecen. After that, I followed his career with particular attention, particularly his efforts to create a uniquely Hungarian improvisational music and his pursuit of the uniqueness in diversity, which I had the opportunity to praise in Hungarian and foreign newspapers. I was also able to publish these writings in my books. Our relationship became closer over time, and, lacking phone service those days, we corresponded by letter, as well as meeting here and there to talk, mostly not about music, but about Hungarian culture, history, politics, oppression, his own sense of displacement, and then, around 1990, about the systemic changes taking



Istoán Grencső on saxophone, Róbert Benkő on double bass. © Gábor Turi



György Szabados memorial stone in the background with Visegrád Castle on the Danube bank. © Gábor Turi

place, and Hungary's chances. I was impressed by the breadth and depth of his thought. He was both a musician and a man of spirit.

He was born in Budapest in 1939, but later chose to live on the Danube Bend, in the small, peaceful town of Nagymaros. He learned to play the piano privately, and created the existential conditions for his artistic development while working as a physician. Even at a young age, he played music with an unfettered, free, rebellious spirit, which, with its spontaneous emotional impact and unusual harmonic and rhythmic solutions, paralleled the avant-garde experiments of American jazz. Instinctively, he built his own music on the *parlando-rubato* performance practice of Hungarian folk songs, and on the oriental, asymmetric rhythms also familiar to us from the music of Béla Bartók, dissolving the closed order of the compositions with his free playing. This opened up new possibilities for improvisation. He did not copy Bartók, but approached Hungarian folk music in similar manner: he brought its essence into his music. Not in the form of imitation, but by shaping the cosmic thinking and metaphorical content of folk songs into new musical material with his own tools.

Another pillar of his art was free musical thinking. He believed that natural musicality and creativity are the birthright of every human being. Ever since man has been making music, he has been driven by the desire for freedom of expression; reaching that clean, open state of mind that

allows the inner vibrations of the soul to come to the surface through mutual influence. Szabados was also attracted to jazz by its free spirit and creativity, and he considered it the most valid musical form to emerge from the musical synthesis of the twentieth century. He did not call himself a jazz musician though, but simply a musician, a composer—without adjectives. His life's work, a body of music that is strongly connected to Hungarian musical traditions yet transcends genre categories, is an independent celestial body on the horizon of Hungarian culture.

As a significant stop in the early years, in 1972 he won the grand prize in the free category at the San Sebastian Jazz Festival in Spain. His debut album, *Az esküvő* (The Wedding) (1975), became a milestone in the history of Hungarian improvisational music: it created a pioneering synthesis of Hungarian musicality, jazz improvisation, and contemporary compositional methods raised to a universal level by Bartók and Zoltán Kodály. But all this was not enough to give him a profile. The musical institutions of the party state, including the record factory, were closed to him for many years. He was able to perform only in small clubs and at the rural jazz festivals of the Hungarian Radio. Nevertheless, thanks to his conscious choice of path, his dedication, his attitude, and his highly influential concerts, starting in the 1980s he began to accrue a cult following. His fame spread across the country, and he was invited to prestigious foreign festivals. In Europe, he was considered one of the key representatives of modern improvisational music.

His musical accomplishments are indicated by works with evocative titles that could be translated as *Psalm of the Axe*, *Adyton*, *The Sons Changed into Stags*, *Music of the Sands*, *The Secret History of the Events*, *The Roar of the Holy Phoenix*, *Forgotten Songs*, *The Fabulist*, *The Old Prayer*, *The Apparition*, *The Dust of the World*, *Time Flies*, *Readying for Battle*, and *Land of the Blessed Virgin*. He has also written film music, a piece for string orchestra, a historical song commemorating the Revolution of 1956, and a cantata based on poems by Mihály Babits. He also composed a ballet for Iván Markó and the Győr Ballet, a dance opera based on the poet Gyula Kodolányi's play *The Death of the Governor*, which was performed in several Western cities by the French company of the Vojvodina choreographer József Nagy (Josef Nadj), but they were not invited to Hungary.

Some outstanding chapters of his career included his meetings with saxophonists Anthony Braxton and Roscoe Mitchell, the leading musicians of Chicago's black avant-garde. This was not a momentary guest appearance by famous foreign musicians, but a collaboration brought about by the shared intention of artists living on different continents but with similar views. The most important element was the spontaneity with which these musicians coming from different environments and backgrounds found a common voice.



While playing. Photo by István Grensó

Szabados was a personality capable of attracting a body of disciples and realized his musical ideas together with the young people who gathered around him and worked under the spell of his spirituality, with a similar vision. Just to name a few: Mihály Dresch and István Grensó (reed players), Zsolt Vaskó (flute), Miklós Mákó (trumpet), Ferenc Kovács (trumpet, violin), Tamás Kobzos Kiss (vocals), Róbert Benkő and Attila Lőrinszky (double bass), and István Baló and Tamás Geröly (percussion). Many of these have since become influential figures in the Hungarian jazz scene. The list would be incomplete without also mentioning German trombonist Johannes Bauer, who is entirely identified himself with Szabados's music, and nor can we omit the participants at the Adyton gatherings in Nagymaros, organized later for years in the spirit of the Szabados tradition.

The impact of the master's innovative musical thinking was primarily felt in the musical group he led at the Kassák Club in Budapest from the 1980s, which played a developmental role, then in the Free Music in Public and in the band MAKUZ (Hungarian Royal Court Orchestra), a name with characteristically 'protest' connotations; this latter became the cradle of controlled, free big-band playing in Hungary.

We could assume that initial official neglect resulted from the essence of communist ideology, which advocated dictatorship instead of freedom, and proletarian internationalism instead of a national commitment, but



György Szabados. Private collection

even the strongest walls can crack: in 1983, he was awarded the Ferenc Liszt Performing Arts Award. In 2001, the Hungarian Jazz Association, which had long been ambivalent toward him, awarded him the Gábor Szabó Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2004, as a sign of changing times, he received the Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Hungarian Republic. The highest official art recognition, the Kossuth Prize, came to him late, in 2011, three months before his death.

György Szabados was primarily a musician, but he also manifested himself as a thinker, a man of spirit, looking for opportunities for self-expression outside the sonic world. Several books were published during his life and after his death: his musical writings were published in a joint volume with Tamás Váczi in 1990, followed by his studies in 2008, his poems in 2011, and his interviews in 2015.

In the case of improvisational music linked to the person of the composer or performer, the fate of the works themselves and their continuation is always an open question. Time will tell. There are occasions when his former fellow musicians and young people bring his compositions to life; the Hungarian Academy of Arts contributed to the processing of his work by organizing an international conference and publishing a study volume focused on his work; and Gabriella Medgyesi's poetic portrait film entitled *Just the Song* created a worthy memory for him.

The digital age enabled the creation of the website *The World of György Szabados*, which, on the initiative and thanks to one of his German admirers, Rudolf Kraus, and through the selfless labour of his former co-creators and friends, his entire legacy—including his scores, writings, interviews, publications about him, and all his audio and visual recordings—were processed and made available in the public domain. The collection may also become part of Hungarian cultural heritage in a legal sense if it is transferred from German soil to the maintenance of a Hungarian institution. Time has clarified this as well: the Budapest Music Centre, which operates a concert hall, jazz club, and library, houses the Hungarian Music Information Centre, which includes the legacies of famous contemporary composers, and this institution, which has accepted responsibility for the legacy of György Szabados, is taking over and localizing the website, the incomparably rich repository of his oeuvre.

Translated by Thomas Sneddon