

AN OVERVIEW OF SIR GEORG SOLTI'S LIFE PATH EMPHASIZING HIS VIEWS ON EARLY 20th CENTURY MUSIC

- A CONDUCTOR'S PERSPECTIVE ON CLASSICAL MODERNISTS -

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SUMMARY. Our thought on early 20th century music is mainly influenced by judgements uttered by contemporary composers. They unwittingly guide our stylistic and aesthetic taste, leaving us with two options: we either agree or disagree with their opinions regarding the milestones of this period. We find it interesting to follow the preferences of interpreters. They seem to present distinct value judgements concerning this much discussed era of modernism. In this essay we will try to present a general overview of this period based on the memoirs of a great conductor, Sir Georg Solti. Although Solti was essentially a representative of the "classical" eras of music history, he also had an important and relevant opinion concerning modern achievements. He participated in a continuous dialogue with notable contemplators of modern music, such as T. W. Adorno, and he repeatedly expressed the importance of presenting contemporary works.

Keywords: Sir Georg Solti, early 20th Century Music, milestones of composition, interpretation.

Introduction

Being a musicologist and a music history teacher, one of my most important missions is to be acquainted and understand the music of the 20th century, furthermore, to pass on this knowledge in an intelligible and insightful way to my students. After analysing numerous modern, avant-garde or postmodern masterpieces, such as Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia* or Pierre Boulez's *Rituel in memoriam Bruno Maderna*, to name a few, I have tried to

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change the perspective of my approach. During my conversations with fellow musicians, interpreters, concerning early 20th century musical works, I have received remarks like: “it feels good to play this”, “it requires more skills than I could perform”, “it is not for me”, “it sounds good”, etc. This is a completely different approach, which cannot be neglected, taking into account musical composition as such.

In our former research endeavours concerning 20th century music, it was clear that we need to be taking into account the thoughts and remarks of contemporary composers, since these are considered to represent our guiding words with respect to the course of musical development. However, we also have to remember that the concepts of composition and interpretation were not always distinct notions. Only a few centuries ago, the two were still belonging to the same idea. This is demonstrated by one of the crucial legacies of music history, the *Buxheimer Orgelbuch*, which is a book that contains instructions both for practicing and performing (actually composing) music. Still, in time the two concepts slowly separated, therefore, it is only natural that we wanted to get first-hand knowledge of the composers' opinions. That is probably the reason why it has become popular nowadays to release interview-volumes like those of Ligeti's, or Boulez's, where leading composers talk about music and the presumptive future of music². The process of getting familiar with the thoughts of contemporary composers is crucially important as it is unavoidable. However, within this essay we chose to change our approach. Our study, therefore, will be conducted through the viewpoint of a great interpreter of music stemming from all periods, who also considered it important to play and exhibit 20th century music for the public. He was one of the most prominent figures of music history, an excellent conductor, who fully understood the place of classical music within the history of mankind. This study is also a humble reverence on the 20th anniversary of his demise.

The insight offered by Solti on the topic of 20th century music is intertwined with the thoughts of the maestro presented within his *Memoirs*³.

The essay's structure will, therefore, follow the chronologic succession of his memoirs. The essay focuses on the opinions and impressions Solti made on the compositional milestones of the 20th century, ideas presented in comparison with the thoughts of other well-known musicians of his time, augmented with my own comments upon the issues.

² We make reference to the following works: Várnai Péter, *Beszélgetések Ligeti Györggyel (Conversations with György Ligeti)*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1979; Eckhard Roelcke, *Találkozások Ligeti Györggyel - Beszélgetőkönyv (Encounters with György Ligeti - Conversation Book)*, Osiris kiadó, Budapest, 2005; Deliège, Celestin, *Beszélgetések Pierre Boulezszel (Conversations with Pierre Boulez)*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1983.

³ The quotations are translated from Hungarian from the volume Sir Georg Solti, *Emlékeim (Memoirs)*, translated by Mesés Péter and Zádor Éva, Seneca Publisher, Budapest, 1998.

First among the list of composers favoured by Solti were Béla Bartók and Igor Stravinsky. In his *Memoirs*, he recalls that when he conducted Bartók and Stravinsky for the first time in Munich and Frankfurt, people had no idea of the harmonic and rhythmic radiance of their music. For them all these pieces were revolutionary musical works, so they reacted in a rather hostile manner: with less applause and more whistling.

The Beginning of a Journey Guided by Béla Bartók

Béla Bartók is and will always be a reference point within the 20th century Hungarian history of music and beyond. Knowing that he is perhaps one of the most significant composers of the 20th century, I wonder if Solti's life would have turned out to be different than it was had he not been personally acquainted with Bartók. Bartók had definitely made a strong impression on him, and vice versa. Solti wrote in his *Memoirs* that during the performance of *Cantata profana* in 1997, he suddenly realized, that within the story of this one work his own life journey to that particular moment, his entire life was written. The song ends with a painful recognition: the father's sons have turned into strangers. They will never be as they were before. He realized that he was a stag too: that's the reason why he was born and educated, to convey music, just as the youngsters were born for hunting. He "hunted" and searched for the music. The circumstances of his life have turned into stag horns, which prevented him from returning home⁴.

Solti here draws a wonderful analogy, identifying himself with the situation presented by the work, but his affinity to Bartók's musical world goes far beyond this aspect, as it will become apparent later in the study. Here we can extrapolate this analogy to refer to both of their personalities. Bartók and Solti both represent the type of individual who does not make compromises in his life. Both of them were great people whose professional competence made them leaders within their profession. They naturally, instinctively have found a path to that which is pure, correct, moral and aesthetic.

The conductor, who was born György Stern in 1912, (father named Móricz Stern, and mother Teréz Rosenbaum) spent his childhood first in Budapest, then in Veszprém, where his family had moved due to the outbreak of World War I. During the war, the family visited his father's relatives several times in Balatonfőkajár, where he formed some of his earliest memories about the way his grandparents looked, the smell of fresh bread, etc. The family returned to Budapest in 1918, after the defeat and collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

⁴ *Emlékeim (Memoirs)*, pp. 13-14.

As for the memories pertaining to his early studies, the first journey to school with his father proved to be memorable, when, according to a family anecdote, Solti told his father: "Papa, this is the day my problems are starting"⁵.

On the topic of his religious upbringing, he remembers that his parents never forced him to exercise the Hebrew religion. "The fact that Mozart existed was at that time enough proof for me to certify the existence of a higher Being."⁶

He first encountered music thanks to his mother.⁷ In his childhood, his first attempt of studying the piano was short-lived. His passion for football was stronger than his desire to study music, and he gave up his piano lessons. But music did not give up on him. In the second grade, during music classes, a boy accompanied his colleagues in class. Solti felt he could do much better than that boy did. Stepping on his pride, he asked his mother to continue studying the piano. "... Since then, I have never stopped learning music. The older I get, the more diligently, even fanatically I work."⁸

After a while he began studying at the Franz Liszt Music Academy in Budapest, where he mastered the piano with Ernő Dohnányi and Béla Bartók, and later, conducting and composition with Zoltán Kodály. He had often asked himself why Bartók does not have composition classes. Solti remembers Bartók was firmly convinced that composition could not be taught. He was perfectly right. Although the central elements of composition – harmony, counterpoint, form – can and must be learned, no one can teach someone how to compose something worth listening to.⁹

The composition classes held by Kodály were based on the counterpoint studies of the Renaissance vocal tradition, and on the intense study of Bach's music. After a while, students were allowed to present works written in their own style.

Becoming a Great Musician

Solti's first major and memorable encounter with symphonic music was at the age of 14 when he listened to Beethoven's 5th symphony, conducted by Erich Kleiber. The music was grandiose and all-encompassing.

⁵ „Papa, ma kezdődnek el a gondjaim.” *Idem*, p. 20.

⁶ „Az a tény, hogy Mozart élt, akkoriban elegendő bizonyíték volt számomra, hogy igazolja egy legfelsőbb Lény létét.” *Idem*, p. 21.

⁷ *Idem*, p. 23.

⁸ „... azóta sem hagytam abba a zenetanulást. Minél idősebb leszek, annál szorgalmasabban, sőt fanatikusabban dolgozom.” *Idem*, p. 24.

⁹ *Idem*, p. 27.

It was not only Kleiber's interpretation, but also the sound of Beethoven's symphony that awakened his desire to dedicate his life to music.¹⁰

Not long after, Solti was hired as an accompanist at the Budapest Opera, where he learned not only how to collaborate with the orchestra, the conductor, and most importantly, with the singers, but also all the necessary steps that went into staging an operatic performance.¹¹

This was a very fertile period in terms of musical taste formation and was also effective regarding the enormous amount of experience gained, however, his activity during these years were already shaded by the political situation of the time. Neither Solti, nor did the world know that that will be the moment when evil will show its ugly head. As a Jew, he had no chance to conduct at the Budapest Opera, regardless of his previous experience¹².

The first chance he got, he signed himself up to be an assistant to Josef Krips in Karlsruhe, Germany. Those few months spent in Germany passed quickly, but due to the political situation, he was forced to return home to Budapest.

In the summer of 1936, he had the opportunity to participate in the Salzburg Festival for the first time, where he returned a year later, and requested permission to assist the rehearsals prior to performances. He was asked if he could play *The Magic Flute*. After his affirmative reply, the organizer asked him to participate as an accompanist, since because of a virus, all accompanists were out sick. By a twist of fate, Solti began to work with Toscanini, the most famous conductor in the world, becoming his assistant. The fact that he worked with Toscanini helped him in other respects as well, so the management of the Budapest Opera House allowed him to debut as a conductor in 1938, with the opera *The Marriage of Figaro*. Solti believed in the success of his debut. He did not even fathom that what would follow would be one of the saddest moments of his life. During the premiere, the news arrived to Budapest that German troops entered Vienna and officially declared Austria's Anschluss. In his exasperation, he accepted to take money from a passionate music enthusiast, András Fellner, in order to go to the International Music Weeks in Lucerne (today the Lucerne Festival), Switzerland, where he would ask Toscanini for help.

He spent the following years in Switzerland in poverty, overcome by loneliness and hopelessness. Toscanini could not help him. Switzerland did not give him a work permit. He could not even study continuously, because where he lived, his neighbours complained about his noise pollution. Faced

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 38.

¹¹ *Idem*, p. 42.

¹² *Idem*, p. 43.

with situation, however, he worked on developing his cultural knowledge, his learning ability, and in 1942, he even managed to win the Geneva Piano Contest, after three years of living in Switzerland. Due to his success within the competition, he received a partial work permit, was able to give piano lessons and hold several concerts. After the end of the war, Solti did his best to work as a conductor. Thus, he did not reject the possibility of taking over the baton at the Munich Opera House even after the horrors of the Nazi regime. "I felt an irresistible desire to conduct – this desire was stronger than any other. Sometimes I had the impression that, just like Faust, I would be willing to make a pact with the devil, I would have even followed him to hell just to be able to conduct."¹³

Munich, the Era of Confrontations, as well as the Blossoming of His Friendship with Richard Strauss

During his stay in Munich, Solti developed a very good relationship with Richard Strauss. He confessed that of all the people he had ever met, Strauss had had the greatest influence on his life¹⁴. Richard Strauss elevated the technical and expressive possibilities of playing music to a new foundation. His magnificent musical imagination found its modes of expression in genres such as opera and symphonic music. His music came to be recognized by rich orchestral texture and the wonderful musical lines that gave the human voice opportunities to showcase its brilliance. Solti met the composer during the staging of the opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, a production attended by the maestro. Shortly after this performance, Solti visited Richard Strauss alongside a violinist, with whom they played one of the Maestro's sonatas, thus celebrating the composer's birthday. After the concert, Strauss congratulated him for his most skilful way of playing the piano, and invited him to have a discussion. Within a few weeks, bringing the scores of *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Elektra* and *Salome*, Solti visited the Master. The conversation that took place concerned some misunderstandings about the tempo in *Der Rosenkavalier*. Strauss explains to Solti: „I have put Hofmannsthal's lyrics to music in precisely the tempo I would recite them,

¹³ „Ellenállhatatlan vágyat éreztem a vezénylés iránt - e vágyam minden másnál erősebb volt. Néha azt hiszem, Fausthoz hasonlóan az ördöggel is hajlandó lettem volna lepaktálni, követtem volna a pokolba is, csak hogy vezényelhessek.” *Idem*, p. 83.

¹⁴ „a fost la început bănuie că artist de avangardă, apoi slăvit, iar în anul 1919, socotit de tineretul însetat de modernism ca un «un ultrareacționar imposibil»” Ernst Krause, *Richard Strauss*, Editura Muzicală, București, 1965, p. 22.

with their natural speed and rhythm. Just say the lyrics out loud, and you'll know the right tempo."¹⁵

Strauss steered the discussion to Wagner's music, on the topic of *Tristan und Isolde*. He explained to Solti why the English horn stays quiet in the last chord of the opera, while all the other instruments within the orchestra are playing. Through their conversation we have found out that the English horn is the symbol of the love-elixir within the opera, hence, it is only natural for the horn to stay quiet, since when the last chords are played Tristan and Isolde are already dead, and the elixir's effect had ceased to exist.¹⁶

Alongside the musical insight into his works, Strauss also gave Solti some purely practical conducting advice, which he took to heart and used for the rest of his career.

During his stay in Munich, Solti also met Carl Orff and Karl Amadeus Hartmann, one of Schönberg's disciples. Recalling the concerts organized by Hartmann, Solti contemplates on his relationship with avant-garde music. Solti recounts that it has always been difficult for him to play experimental music or all sorts of music that went beyond the skills he learnt. Therefore, he had never played electronic music. This was a rule for Solti, to do only the kind of music for which he possesses the necessary techniques and knowledge. He did not think he lacked fantasy or initiative - since, in his youth, it was he who was the protagonist of Bartók and Stravinsky's music, a novelty for that period. Still, now, that he's part of the older generation of musicians he chooses to let the avant-garde be approached by his younger colleagues.¹⁷

Frankfurt, the Period of Quiet Development and the Influence of Adorno

During his time in Frankfurt, Solti met Thomas Mann and Herman Hesse; nevertheless, the person with whom he formed a lasting friendship and whose influence proved to be the most defining one of his career, was Theodor W. Adorno. The German philosopher, sociologist, musicologist and composer have exerted a huge influence upon the post-war period with his contemplations on the topic of contemporary art. His writings include studies on classical and contemporary composers, on film music, on the so called

¹⁵ „Hofmannstahl szövegét olyan tempóban zenésítettem meg, amilyenben elmondanám, természetes gyorsasággal, természetes ritmusban. Egyszerűen mondja el hangosan a szöveget, máris ismeri a megfelelő tempót.” *Emlékeim (Memoirs)*, p. 96.

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 97.

¹⁷ *Idem*, pp. 102-103.

“Neue-Musik”, on musical sociology, on problems of musical analysis and many other fields of study. In our region, his theory on aesthetics is generally well-known.¹⁸

Solti notes in his *Memoirs* that Adorno’s most well-known writings on music were about Schönberg and Berg, but that his interest in music was much broader than that. He knew Mozart’s works excellently; he was present at every premiere of Verdi’s, Wagner’s and Strauss’ works at the Frankfurt Opera. Solti writes in his *Memoires*, that once Adorno prompted him to conduct the works of Mahler. «That is the type of music you should conduct». At that time, Solti was not convinced that Mahler would turn out to be an important figure of classical music. Despite his reluctance, Adorno advised Solti: «Start with the 9th Symphony».¹⁹ Solti thought it was foolish to start with Mahler’s most difficult work, but the complexity of the symphony attracted him instantly. After interpreting his first Mahler symphony, he was eager to conduct the other symphonies as well. Discovering Mahler’s last, unfinished creation had intensified Solti’s enthusiasm for the composer. He had conducted Mahler for 30 years. Solti stresses Mahler’s talent for precise indication of dynamics, adding that his instructions must be strictly respected. Solti thinks that it is no coincidence that Mahler is almost idolized today. He thinks that Mahler’s music – which is full of anxiety, longing, fear and chaos – touches the audience, because it reflects those states of mind that are present in today’s world.²⁰

Solti credits Adorno also for realizing the greatness of Schönberg’s composition, *Moses and Aaron*, as well as familiarizing him with Berg’s opera *Lulu*. He remembers a story about a performance of the latter. Solti was absolutely aware that modern opera is difficult to be received by the public, so he invited Adorno to outline some ideas about the composer and about the work itself to the audience. Unfortunately, the exposition had proven to be a failure, due to the simple fact that Adorno spoke too much.²¹

In the following years, Solti became acquainted with the musical institutions of the United States of America, including the San Francisco Opera House, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Carnegie Hall in New York, and the Philharmonic Orchestra in Los Angeles. His collaboration with the Los Angeles orchestra was very successful. He remembers: „We have developed a very wide repertoire, with a special emphasis on 20th century music: Bartók, Stravinski, Webern, Berg, William Schuman, and the

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Teoria estetică (Theory of Aesthetics)*, Paralela 45, București, 2005.

¹⁹ „Az az igazán Önnek való zene. (...) Kezdje a Kilencedik szimfóniával». *Emlékeim (Memoirs)*, p. 121.

²⁰ *Idem*, p. 233.

²¹ *Idem*, p. 122.

Three Hungarian Sketches written by a friend of mine, Miklós Rózsa, who was also born and educated in Hungary. Among Rózsa's compositions, his film scores became very popular, especially those of *Ben Hur* and *El Cid*.²²

After conducting the works *Oedipus Rex* and *The Rite of Spring* in Los Angeles, composer Miklós Rózsa helped Solti meet Stravinsky personally. Solti was completely aware of the fact that Stravinsky played a decisive role in the development of modern music. When he visited Stravinsky, Solti was very shy, managing to muster up some courage to ask only one question. The conductor was curious about why the orchestration had been changed, and why had the rhythm of *The Rite's* first version been simplified. Stravinsky's answer concerned the degree of difficulty in conducting the work, since it was the composer who wanted to conduct it, however, the real reason behind the changes were of a more practical nature: Stravinsky lost the copyrights to three of his dearest works – *The Firebird*, *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring*. He could receive the fees for these works only if he re-issued them.

Solti stated the following about conducting the works of Stravinsky: "I have been conducting very much Stravinsky (...). I would be happy to perform *The Rake's Progress*, as well as other late-dodecaphonic works even today. Each of his works requires a high degree of technical skills and extraordinary rhythmic precision from the standpoint of the interpreter (...) Their stylistic variety, their endless creativity even at their advanced age, the wonderful and singular force of their artistic personality and the epoch-making effect on the history of art in the 20th century, raise them among the most prominent works ever written."²³

Stravinsky was undoubtedly the composer who renewed the concept of rhythm within music²⁴. It completely penetrates his musical

²² „Nagyon átfogó repertoárt dolgoztunk ki, erősen hangsúlyozva a XX. század zenéjét: Bartók, Sztravinszkij, Webern, Berg, William Schuman művei és barátom, a Magyarországon született és ott is tanult Rózsa Miklós *Three Hungarian Sketches*-e szerepelt a műsoron. Rózsának egyébként főleg a filmzenéi váltak híressé, elsősorban a *Ben Hur* és az *El Cid*.” *Idem*, p. 136.

²³ „Nagyon sokat vezényeltem Sztravinszkijtől (...). Még mindig szívesen előadnám a *The Rake's Progress* (A kéjenc útja) és még néhány kései dodekafon műveit. Minden egyes alkotása nagy technikai tudást és még nagyobb ritmikai pontosságot követel meg az előadótól. (...) Stilisztikai sokszínűségük, magas korban is töretlen kreativitásuk, művészi személyiségük csodálatos ereje és egyedülállósága, valamint a XX. század művészetének történetére gyakorolt korszakalkotó hatásuk a legnagyobbak közé emeli őket.” *Idem*, pp. 140-141.

²⁴ „...has brought hidden dynamic reserves to the surface, which emphasized rhythm both as a rhetorical and a constructive element” [„...olyan rejtett dinamikus tartalékokat hozott a felszínre, amelyek a ritmust kifejező és konstruktív elemként egyaránt előtérbe állították.”] In: V. Holopova, *A 20. századi zene ritmusproblémái (Rhythm-Problems in 20th Century Music)*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1975, p. 197.

thought. We can safely say that his works showcase a propulsive type of dynamism organized around the parameter of rhythm. Solti did not lack either the inspiration, or spirituality, nor the technique needed to faithfully interpret his masterpieces.

London, His Mature Period

After being asked to conduct Stravinsky's *Der Rosenkavalier* in Covent Garden in 1961, he became also the musical director of the same institution. Here, among other exceptional works, he had the opportunity to direct the work of the English composer Benjamin Britten, entitled *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Solti remembers that the work had been composed in the style of Purcell, with a serene type of orchestration reflecting the language of the drama²⁵. Britten shared Solti's view regarding musical values. In a radio program for high school students, Britten stated the following: "in truly great works, technical skills and inspiration are inseparably linked to one another".²⁶

Solti recalled fondly the success of three performances series staged in 1962, also during his London years. The three works: *Erwartung* by Schönberg, *Gianni Schicchi* by Puccini and *L'heure espagnole* by Ravel, were all directed by Peter Ustinov.

Chicago, the Period of Symphonic Music

The Chicago orchestra was an accomplished ensemble that allowed Solti to work at the highest level of musical command. Concerning the interpretation of contemporary music, Solti considered it a mission to conduct the works of American composers. Within the first season they interpreted the *Three Places in New England* by Charles Ives, *Variations for Orchestra* by Elliott Carter and *Seven Studies on Themes by Paul Klee* by Gunther Schuller. At the same time, he did not neglect the illustrious compositions created in Europe either. Solti and his orchestra supported the premieres of works written by the following composers: Marvin David Levy, Alan Stout, Hans Werner Henze, Bohuslav Martinu, David Del Tredici, Sir Michael Tippett, Easley Blackwood, Witold Lutoslawski, Morton Gould, George Rochberg, Karel Husa, Gunther Schuller, Ellen Taaffe Zwillich and Andrzej Panufnik. Solti regretfully confessed that he had conducted too little of the works of Prokofiev, and almost none of those written by Shostakovich.²⁷

²⁵ *Emlékeim (Memoirs)*, p. 149.

²⁶ „az igazán nagy művekben a technika és az inspiráció elválaszthatatlan egymástól”, Benjamin Britten, *Pályámról (About my Path)*, In: Fábrián Imre, *A huszadik század zenéje (20th Century Music)*, Gondolat, Budapest, 1966, p. 276.

²⁷ *Emlékeim (Memoirs)*, p. 265.

Ending his Journey with Béla Bartók's Embrace

In his volume, *Bartók's Dramaturgy*,²⁸ musicologist Ernő Lendvai presents a beautiful tonal mirror symmetry within the work of *Cantata profana*. The scale of the beginning and that of the end of the work – which starts with the note d, which is the tonal center - is perfectly mirrored.

E.g. 1



In the work, the sons of the father must go from one point to another, from one world to another. The music from the beginning of the work is based on the scale that reflects an organic thought of *sectio aurea*, while the tonal frame at the end illustrates an acoustic, harmonic system. The first tonal system is full of turmoil, while the second represents the miracle of liberation. The analogy of this journey mirrored in Solti's life belongs to the conductor himself.

In the last few pages of the *Memoirs*, Solti includes the days in which he went to Budapest to record several works as a sign of respect for his former teachers: Bartók, Kodály and Leó Weiner. Being persuaded by a friend, after the rehearsals he visits his father's birthplace, Balatonfőkajár. Solti confessed that during this visit, for the first time in 60 years, he finally felt that he belonged somewhere. (...) The stag had returned home, the horns have passed through the door, since, during the time when he was far away, the door had become larger, wider²⁹.

Conclusions

Sir Georg Solti contributed to the consolidation of composers belonging to the “classical modernism” trend of the 20th century. In his choice of repertoire, he sought to reveal the valuable works of some of the most notable composers of the 20th century. The scores interpreted by him

²⁸ Lendvai Ernő, *Bartók dramaturgiája (Bartók's Dramaturgy)*, Akkord, Budapest, 1993, p. 225.

²⁹ *Emlékeim (Memoirs)*, p. 267.

– works of Strauss, Bartók, Stravinsky, Schönberg, Berg, Britten, Ives, Carter, Henze, Tippett, and so on – require the highest level of technical skills of the interpreter, skills that reveal the conscious evolution of the musical process itself. Solti was a very rigorous and demanding musician. His podium personality was “exuberant and forceful”.³⁰ He pushed his musicians until the point where he thought the work had been properly played. Although he had been considered a conductor representative for the “classical” eras in music history – having achieved huge critical acclaim in that respect and recording almost the entire standard European repertoire of orchestral and operatic works³¹ - he was an passionate promoter of contemporary music as well.

Finally, we wonder: if a musician, an interpreter does not have all the skills needed for playing the demanding works mentioned above (and many others), what will happen then? Will the audience accept “less”, or eventually, the work will cease to be played? Do we have schools that prepare us to perform, and ultimately understand such complex works of art? In Solti’s case the answer is clear. He worked with elite musicians, thus his interpretations are priceless. But this is a narrow stratum, just like in the case of audiences. To receive and understand these works, certain qualifications within this artistic genre are needed. This gives way to another question: to whom are these works written? Solti’s high ideals concerning interpretation always aimed toward a simple thought: to promote the idea that it is a positive thing to play the music of the 20th century, and that it is also useful for audiences to hear such music being played.

Solti also encouraged other interpreters to embrace the musical masterpieces of the 20th century. Solti also met musicians through these works written in this period. As the pianist András Schiff recalled, in 1985 they played *Variations on a Child Song* [*Változatok egy gyermekdalra*] by Ernő Dohnányi³² with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, a work that also represents the “classical modernist” school of the early 20th century.

³⁰ Arthur Jacobs – José Bowen, In: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Second Edition, Edited by S. Sadie, Macmillan Publishers, London, 2001, vol. 23), p. 659.

³¹ „His legacy includes over 250 recordings for Decca (with 45 complete operas) and 32 Grammy Awards, more than any other classical or popular performer. Recording *Salome* and then the first complete studio *Ring* (1958–64), with John Culshaw as producer, he became a pioneer in the use of stereo techniques to simulate the theatrical dimensions of opera. Outstanding among his other recordings is a fine Mahler cycle (made with the Chicago SO), including a truly colossal *Symphony no.8*.” In: *Idem*

³² Schiff András, *A zenéről, zeneszerzőkről, önmagáról* (*About music, composers, himself*), Vince, Budapest, 2003, p. 194.

Solti's perspective on musical values in this complex and troublesome period of music history shows us a worthy path to follow. He always managed to point out what he considered to be important to present and to listen to. If it was important to him, it probably would be important for us as well.

Lastly, further inquiries can be made into the topic. In what way did it influence the path taken by other conductors, like Leonard Bernstein, who was also enthusiastic about making classical music education – including contemporary music – accessible to large audiences. Furthermore, it would be more than instructive to analyse the perspective of Sir Simon Rattle, who was also highly engaged in educational musical presentations. These could very well be our next research endeavours.

Translate revised by: Julianna Köpeczi

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