

Ferenc János Szabó

International Careers and National Performance Style? Recordings of The First Hungarian Piano School of the Twentieth Century.

Research Proposal for the Edison Fellowship 2019–2020

In his famous book *The Great Pianists: from Mozart to the Present*, Harold C. Schonberg stated that there was not a really Central European pianist school in the early 20th century, claiming that “the major pianists from Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the Balkan countries generally have ended their studies in the West.”¹ However, this statement is only partially relevant, at least, for Hungarian pianists. It is true that most of the internationally known Hungarian pianists of the twentieth century left Hungary and made their careers in Western European countries or in the USA. But before that, most of them completed their studies in Budapest, at the Ferenc Liszt Music Academy, as pupils of Béla Bartók, Ernő Dohnányi or Arnold Székely (1874–1958). According to their recollections, the Liszt Academy remained a central point in their careers. They considered themselves to be part of a tradition which was established by the first teaching staff of the Music Academy: Ferenc Liszt and his pupils like István Thomán (1862–1940) or Árpád Szendy (1863–1922).

There are many common points between the biographies of the Hungarian pianists who started their careers after the First World War (see the table in Appendix 1): most of them studied chamber music with Leó Weiner and some of them also studied composition with Zoltán Kodály. The piano music of Hungarian composers, such as Ferenc Liszt, Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály and Ernő Dohnányi, was in the focus of their repertoires. Their performances met with success at the first major international piano competitions.² Most of them made sound recordings abroad, since, mainly for political reasons, they left Hungary partly in the 1930s and 1940s, and partly around the time of the 1956 revolution. That is why their sound recordings are rarely accessible in Hungarian collections, but most of them are available in the Sound Recording Collection of the British Library.

In the proposed research I intend to examine the sound recordings of Hungarian pianists made in Western Europe or in the USA between 1926 and 1970. The topic has not been a subject of musicological research yet. Some previous generations were already investigated, namely the pupils of Liszt,³ or the interpretation style of Bartók and Dohnányi,⁴ but the first world-known generation of Hungarian pianists was not treated as a group, despite the fact, that

¹ Harold C. Schonberg: *The Great Pianists. From Mozart to the Present*. Revised and updated edition. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987): 458–459.

² Imre Ungár, Lajos Kentner and Ági Jámor: International Chopin Competitions in Warsaw 1932 and 1937; Annie Fischer and Lajos Kentner: International Ferenc Liszt Competition, Budapest, 1933; György Sándor and Gyula Károlyi: International Music Competition in Vienna, 1933; György Faragó: Gabriel Fauré International Competition in Luxemburg 1939, etc.

³ See, for example, Kenneth Hamilton: „Nach persönlichen Erinnerungen’: Liszt’s long-ignored Legacy to his Students,” in: Michael Saffle – James Deaville (eds.): *Liszt’s Legacies* (Stuyvesant – New York: Pendragon Press, 2014): 83–97.

⁴ See the articles of László Somfai, László Stachó and Zoltán Kocsis.

they were the first Hungarian pianists who had the opportunity to make a larger number of sound recordings.⁵

Since some Hungarian pianists wrote not only memoirs,⁶ but also books and manuals on piano playing and the piano repertoire,⁷ it is possible to compare their interpretation with their written statements. The Sound Recording Collection of the British Library also owns unpublished talks and radio interviews of Hungarian pianists,⁸ which can be valuable sources for further research. The analysis of the interviews can prove on the one hand that they had a profound influence on the reception of Hungarian music in Western countries; on the other hand, they can serve as oral history sources for the biographies of the pianists as well.

I intend to focus on Hungarian pianists' interpretation of piano pieces and concertos by Liszt, Bartók and Dohnányi, in addition to their Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Chopin recordings which are to be compared to recordings of Bartók and Dohnányi. As there seems to be some significant differences between the output of the schools of Bartók and Dohnányi,⁹ it is worth examining the differences in their teaching approach through the analysis of recordings by their pupils, added to written sources and recollections. On the basis of the analyses I will try to define the position of the Hungarian piano school among the most important pianistic trends of the early twentieth century, like the romantic tradition of the 19th century,¹⁰ neo-classical piano performance¹¹ or the so-called "Bartók-Prokofieff-Stravinsky Style".¹²

The proposed research is not only a continuation of my former research projects connected to early sound recordings¹³ and performance style,¹⁴ but it will also broaden their spectrum to the interpretation of pianists. Furthermore, it can serve as a pilot project for a planned institutional application for an ERC research grant which intends to deal with the migration of Hungarian musicians in the 20th century.

⁵ See my article about György Faragó's legacy: „Egy sokoldalú muzsikus dokumentumai. Faragó György (1913–1944). [Documents of an all-round musician. György Faragó (1913–1944),” *Parlando* [online] 2014/4 (September 2014): <http://www.parlando.hu/2014/2014-4/SzaboFerencJanos-Farago2.pdf>.

⁶ Andor Földes: *Erinnerungen*. (Frankfurt: Limes, 1993); Georges Cziffra: *Des canons et des fleurs* (Paris: Laffont, 1977); Tamás Vásáry: *Üzenet* [Message]. (Budapest: Libri, 2013–) etc.

⁷ Béla Síki: *Piano Repertoire. A Guide to Interpretation and Performance*. (New York: Schirmer, 1981); György Sándor: *On Piano Playing. Motion, Sound and Expression*. (New York: Schirmer, 1995); Andor Földes: *Gibt es einen zeitgenössischen Beethoven-Stil? und andere Aufsätze*. (Wiesbaden: Limes, 1963) etc.

⁸ For example, Andor Földes's talk titled „Bela Bartok: man and artist,” (1981), John Amis's interview with Andor Földes titled „Beethoven's letters” (BBC Radio 4, 1968), Jonathan Summers's interviews with Tamás Vásáry and Péter Frankl (2018) etc.

⁹ There are more famous pianists among the pupils of Dohnányi, although more famous conductors and composers studied piano with Bartók. Furthermore, many acclaimed propagator of Bartók's piano music were pupils of Dohnányi, but Bartók's students less often performed Dohnányi's works.

¹⁰ Kenneth Hamilton: *After the Golden Age. Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Timothy Day: „Anti-Romantic and formalist trends: neo-classical performing styles between the wars,” in: Day: *A Century of Recorded Music. Listening to Musical History*. (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 2000): 160–162.

¹² Schonberg, op.cit. 394.

¹³ I have conducted research in several fields of the history of early Hungarian sound recordings and discography. For the relevant publications see the list in Appendix 2.

¹⁴ Until now, I have dealt mainly with vocal interpretation. I wrote both of my doctoral dissertations (piano DLA and musicology PhD) on operatic performance practice, in which I discussed several singing styles of the turn of the century, like Wagner, Puccini, operetta, *Le beau idéal* and *verismo*. For the relevant publications see the list in Appendix 2.p