

György Sebök Commemoration  
Indiana University  
Bloomington, Indiana  
November 19, 2009

In 1962, before leaving Bloomington to spend the summer at home in Europe, I asked Prof. János Starker if by chance he was going to be there as well, as I would have liked to play for him the program of the third doctoral recital I was then preparing. He replied: "Why don't you play for my pianist? He lives in Paris..." And so, I found myself one afternoon in Maisons-Laffitte, in one of those elegant, spacious French rooms, with white sculpted doors and a grand piano. After a cordial, introductory conversation, György Sebök, sensing my apprehension, motioned to the piano bench and said smiling: "*C'est inévitable...*"

During several lessons in the next couple of weeks, the insights and concepts I had been introduced to by János Starker - anticipation, timing, circularity, muscular intelligence - received a pianist's formulation, demonstration, reinforcement, that had what today is referred to as a "transformative" effect on my playing.

After the end of one of my lessons the phone rang: it was Mr. Starker from Bloomington, as well as, I believe, Dean Wilfreid Bain. Within a few minutes some decisions were made, and I realized that a great pedagogical presence would soon appear and be available at Indiana University itself.

It was not an easy initiation at that time for any of the European artists who came to the School of Music, regardless of their level and reputation, and - whether by the administration's design, or incompetence - György Sebök underwent the same treatment. He was assigned a list of mostly inadequately prepared students for whom his vocabulary (his English was still limited) and manner were rather bewildering. Yet he imparted to the more advanced students a great example, in that he treated them all with the same respect, as representing future educators, and possibly future teachers of artists. He addressed his wisdom and his patience to that middle layer of indispensable, informed, interlocutors, who stand in between the audience and the artist, and which János Starker had written about and advocated in his article "That Room at the Top."

With whatever credibility I had earned by then among fellow students, I managed to persuade some Master's and Doctoral candidates to enter Mr. Sebök's class, and soon his authority and personality created a veritable spell, attracting also a large number of instrumental students to his Chamber Music classes. Of his first revelatory piano recital at the School of Music, I remember the delight of Prof. Walter Bricht, from Vienna, who commented on the Mozart, the Liszt, the Bartók, all sounding as if played by a specialist in each, and yet manifesting the vastness of his range and his rare persuasiveness as an interpreter.

The concert engagements that followed in the U.S. and Europe required the teaching support of an assistant, and Mr. Sebök had then two possible candidates in mind to whom he referred jokingly as his "St. John" and (myself) as his "St. Peter." Mostly because of my having studied with him "in Paris," the piano class selected St. Peter...

It is to Mr. Sebök as advisor for my doctoral document on Bartók that I owe the entire subsequent development of my insight's into Bartók's 'territory' and my international activity - in seminars, courses, and live presentations - as a Bartók 'specialist.' I especially recall Mr. Sebök's words on Bartók's Night's Music, on the instrumental and

choreographic gestures to be deciphered in his piano scores, on the *parlando rubato* style of playing.

Mrs. Sebök (Vica) had generously arranged to combine her own instruction in the English language with the editing of my thesis (on the folk music element in Bartók's piano works), by a very competent graduate student. An episode comes to mind when I had used Kodály's reference to the folk songs as to 'these wild flowers' and the American young lady retorting icily: "What '*flowers*'?"

When Kodály visited the Indiana campus in 1964, Mr. Sebök, who was going to the airport to meet him, asked me to collect a bunch of flowers from the garden of the house I was sharing with other music students, and happily reported afterwards on Kodály's pleasure at receiving such a simple, 'real' bouquet. He also reported on the car trip from the airport to Bloomington, during which Kodály kept asking questions about the crops in the surrounding fields, and about the names of the plants and the trees, and on Mr. Sebök's own embarrassment for been unable to provide any answers.

I recall the echoes of the Sebök/Starker performances in Europe in the 1960s when a headline in Berlin said "Zwei Musiker, Eine Seele" (and recalled it every time I played for my students the LP with their interpretation of Mendelssohn's Sonata in D); in later years, I recall Mr. Sebök's delight in seeing that in Helsinki the press reported daily on his master classes at the Sibelius Academy; and when in Paris Yvonne Loriod declared: "*Nous sommes tous vos élèves*"....

A bizarre opportunity arose in the mid-1960s when Mr. Starker and Mr. Sebök contemplated accepting an offer by a German music institution (I believe it was in Düsseldorf) and intended to take along their teaching assistants (Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi and myself). Mr. Sebök described it as a special pedagogical ivory tower that would be created there - but the project did not materialize (for the great good fortune of I. U.) An even more bizarre possibility occurred in the mid-1970s when Mr. Sebök thought about moving to Canada! Over the phone he spoke to me about his Bloomington class as being already among the best in the world, comparable or superior to those in Moscow, Paris, and Tokyo, and it seemed a strange decision on his part to think of starting anew in a small university in Canada. However, ecstatic about such a prospect, I recall attempting to persuade him by saying that if he was 'first' in the American milieu, in Canada he would have been 'a king.' Regrettably, the obtuse administrators at our Faculty of Music did not grab at this opportunity quickly enough and, again, nothing materialized. Both episodes, however, have remained in my mind to think about as "what if...."

In her reminiscences on Mr. Sebök's teaching, Susan Tomes (of famed Florestan Trio) includes a list of his memorable sayings. I still have an old Indiana U. notebook from 1962-65 where I used to jot down the most significant comments and suggestions Mr. Sebök offered during his classes; he noticed, approvingly, that I grasped right away which were the most significant ones and often expressed his wish that we write together a book on the piano. Alas, it was to be another unfulfilled project.

One of György Sebök's doctoral students from the early years at I.U. spoke to him once about those years calling them the Golden Age. Mr. Sebök replied that there hadn't been yet a 'Golden Age'; and if one suggested that the reply was rather cruel, he would have

simply said: "*Mais c'est vrai...*" And indeed later on his reputation expanded around the musical world. But for his earlier students and *interlocutors* at Indiana University, his generosity and the enlightenment he brought into their musical lives, were golden.

Thank you.

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