

Two Essays on Contemporary Music

Bálint András Varga



Abstract

Bálint András Varga (1941–2019) was an advocate for and a keen critic of contemporary music, first on radio, and later as an acquisitions editor for both Editio Hungarica and Universal Edition. He interviewed many musical figures and planned to interview visual artists before he died. His interlocutors were impressed with Varga’s insightful questions and frequently answered them much more comprehensively than they would ones from standard journalists. These two essays were intended to be published in Varga’s third book, *From Boulanger to Stockhausen: Interviews and a Memoir*. The first, “What to Listen for in Music,” refers to Aaron Copland’s book of the same name, furnishing some insight into the criteria Varga used when listening and judging a new work. The second, “Dogma,” recounts the twentieth-century smothering of individuality and creative imagination by a damp blanket of conformism and authoritarian dictates.

Keywords: Bálint András Varga, Aaron Copland, Ralph P. Locke, Eastman Studies in Music, music—twentieth century—history and criticism, Communism and music

Introduction

Bálint András Varga (1941–2019) was a prolific, canny interviewer of composers and other musicians. In the course of his work for the Hungarian State Radio and then in the music-publishing business, he interviewed—sometimes briefly, sometimes at great length—leading figures in European and, to a lesser extent, American musical life: Yehudi Menuhin, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, the impresario Sol Hurok, and so on. During his last years of

employment and after retirement, he became even more active in this regard, producing book after book of interchanges with some of the most prominent composers of the age—such as Luigi Nono, Luciano Berio, Yannis Xenakis, Tōru Takemitsu, Libby Larsen, Chaya Czernowin, György Ligeti, and, most remarkably, György Kurtág, who was famous in part for not doing interviews. The last four of his books appeared in the University of Rochester Press’s Eastman Studies in Music series (of which I am Senior Editor).¹ Their cover images are illustrated here.

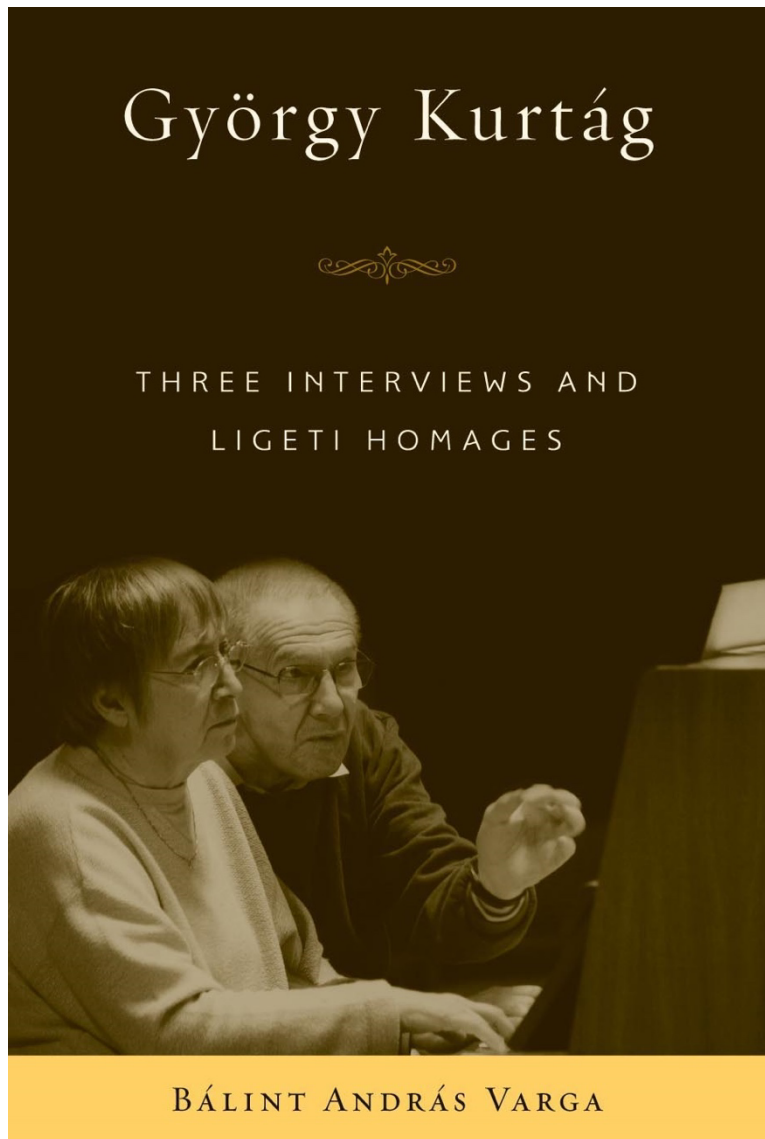
Aware that music is “made” (that is: made possible, known, desirable, affordable, and so on) by many people other than performers and composers, Varga also interviewed a smattering of critics and scholars (Paul Griffiths, Arnold Whittall) and music administrators (Sir William Glock, Nicholas Kenyon). When he died in 2019, at the age of 79, he was developing plans to extend his interviewing to visual artists. (I paid brief tribute to Varga in [*Proofed*](#), the blog of Boydell and Brewer/University of Rochester Press.)

Composers often commented on the interesting prompts that Varga would give them—concepts or anecdotes that somehow led them to talk at greater length and in richer detail than they were accustomed to doing in more run-of-the-mill interviews.

How Varga developed his astuteness and responsiveness became clear when he finally, at my urging, set down his memoirs, which were published as the second half of his next-to-last book, *From Boulanger to Stockhausen: Interviews and a Memoir* (University of Rochester Press, 2013). The first half of that book included numerous interviews that Varga had published years earlier (in Hungarian) but were now appearing in English for the first time: for example, one with the immensely influential pedagogue Nadia Boulanger, who taught Aaron Copland among countless other composers, and to whom Igor Stravinsky showed his works in progress for constructive criticism.

In the book’s crisply written recollection-chapters, Varga described his family’s life under Nazi and then Communist control. And, in greater detail, he explained his activities—and sometimes battles—on behalf of works by living composers (Hungarian and others): first over the radio waves and then as the person in charge of seeking out repertory for two distinguished publishing houses: Editio Musica Budapest and Universal Edition (Vienna).

1. These publications include *György Kurtág, Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009); *Three Questions for Sixty-Five Composers* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011); *From Boulanger to Stockhausen: Interviews and a Memoir* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013); and *The Courage of Composers and the Tyranny of Taste: Reflections on New Music* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2017). Earlier books, some published in more than one country and language (i.e., Hungarian, German, French, or English), contained important interviews with major composers such as Berio and Xenakis and also some lesser-known Eastern Europeans. (The photo of Varga at the head of the present article is by Andrea Felvégi.)



To a great extent, Varga taught himself what he needed to know in order to carry out his various important assignments. He read widely, in many languages, and he listened systematically to the entire catalogue of music released by Hungaroton (the state-controlled record company) and, increasingly, on other labels. At Editio Musica and Universal he sifted through thousands of new scores, deciding which ones to publish and helping many of them get performed and recorded. In the process, he became a trusted friend to many composers, for they found in him an ally rather than (as is sometimes the case when a music critic interviews a composer) an adversary or—almost as bad—a self-styled representative of jaundiced “public opinion.”

The two essays printed here for the first time were originally written to be included in the memoir that concludes *From Boulanger to Stockhausen*. They were excluded because the

book was becoming a bit long.² Also, the two chapters were not crucial to the course of the tale that Varga was telling. Each was basically an essay summarizing some of Varga's observations from a life lived in music, which was also a life lived (much of it) in a nation oppressed by a Stalinist-inspired system that encouraged favoritism, petty infighting, and intellectual cowardice.

The first essay reproduced here was originally entitled: "Interlude: 'What to Listen for in Music.'" It followed chapter 9 (on Varga's work at Editio Musica), and gives some insight into what criteria Varga used when listening and judging a new work. For the present publication, we have removed the word "Interlude."³

The second essay reproduced here followed what is now chapter 10 in the book ("Interviewing: An Obsession"). Its one-word title—"Dogma"—summarizes, with Varga's characteristic astringency, a quality that he despised in all activities regarding music: the smothering of individuality and creative imagination by a damp blanket of conformism and authoritarian dictates. Not for nothing did he entitle his final book *The Courage of Composers and the Tyranny of Taste*. Good composers, he felt, often needed to gird their loins as they moved out into the battlefield of journalistic categorizing, performers' preferences, and the debates within and outside of academia about what works to admit into "the canon."

The two little-known essays are published here with the kind permission of Varga's wife Kati and daughters Fanni and Flora. The essays needed next to no editing. Varga—a careful, precise, idiomatic, and quietly passionate writer, though working in a language very different from his native Hungarian—had already prepared a finished text before the two chapters were, at a late date, removed from their intended place in the memoir. *Music & Musical Performance* is delighted to make them available to the music-loving public: a widely dispersed yet vital audience and readership of the sort that Varga had in mind whenever he sat down to the typewriter or, later, computer.

We also send news of this posthumous publication to dear Bálint—wherever he is—"on wings of song."

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2. Two oldish interviews were also removed. Three years later, they were finally made available (for the first time in English) at MusicologyNow.org, the blog of the American Musicological Society. The interview with concert impresario Sol Hurok is at <http://www.musicologynow.org/2016/02/an-interview-with-sol-hurok-1888-1974.html>. The one with pianist Edward Kilenyi, Jr. (son of one of George Gershwin's teachers) appeared in two parts: http://www.musicologynow.org/2016/03/an-interview-with-edward-kilenyi-jr_5.html and <http://www.musicologynow.org/2016/03/an-interview-with-edward-kilenyi-jr.html>.

3. We have also removed the quotation marks around the title proper. Varga wanted to emphasize that he was repurposing the title of a famous book by Aaron Copland, but he makes the point adequately in the opening sentences.



**THREE QUESTIONS FOR
SIXTY-FIVE COMPOSERS**

BÁLINT ANDRÁS VARGA

What to Listen for in Music

I have borrowed the title of this essay from Aaron Copland's book. Written in 1939, it was revised in 1957. In the meantime, it had been steadily on sale and the copy he gave or sent me in 1970 was the tenth printing.

Obviously, there was and I suppose still is a need for a guide to the way one should listen to music. You may remember my difficulties with understanding just what was going on in Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto in B-flat minor after the initial chords; also with making head or tail of two of Attila Bozay's compositions.

I also realize that the one sentence I devoted to this subject (in chapter 9 of my published memoir)—“If a piece proved difficult to digest, I heard it again and again, until I was satisfied that I had a rough idea of what the composer meant to convey”—was rather insipid. It does contain, however, a grain of truth: the best method to gain an understanding of music is to listen to it as much as possible.

That is also what Copland suggests in his “Preliminaries”:

All books on understanding music are agreed about one point: You can't develop a better appreciation of the art merely by reading a book about it. If you want to understand music better, you can do nothing more important than listen to it.⁴

I have been listening to contemporary music for forty years now and I can assure you that Copland is right. The reason for my own difficulties in the beginning was that I could not make sense of the sounds I was hearing. It was in a foreign language. If you want to understand it, you have first of all to be motivated—you have to *want* to learn how to listen. And once again, you have to listen as much as you can.

Of course, you cannot expect the ordinary music lover who goes to a concert in order to hear Beethoven and Brahms to welcome a composition sandwiched in between which speaks an unfamiliar idiom. The ideal music lover, however, will have been intrigued by what he heard at the concert and assuming he has a computer as well as internet access, he will try and listen to the piece on YouTube. The ideal music lover will have learned an instrument in their youth and can read music. Publishers nowadays make scores of new compositions available on their website free of charge, at least for a limited period of time following the world premiere, so that the ideal music lover has no difficulty at all to listen to a piece of new music and read (download) the score as well. This is no utopia—there *are* such music lovers. They will hopefully end up appreciating new music and develop a private dialogue with it.

4. Aaron Copland: *What to Listen For in Music*, rev. edn. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957), 15.

Of course, there is no such thing as New Music. John Adams is different from Harrison Birtwistle who is different from Helmut Lachenmann who is different from Arvo Pärt. You may like one and dislike the other. And you may like one piece by a composer more than another one. And you may discover that the one you did not like on first hearing, you do respond to positively another time. Perhaps you are in a more receptive state of mind. Perhaps the performance is better. Perhaps—while the musicians are identical—the acoustics of the hall are more favorable.

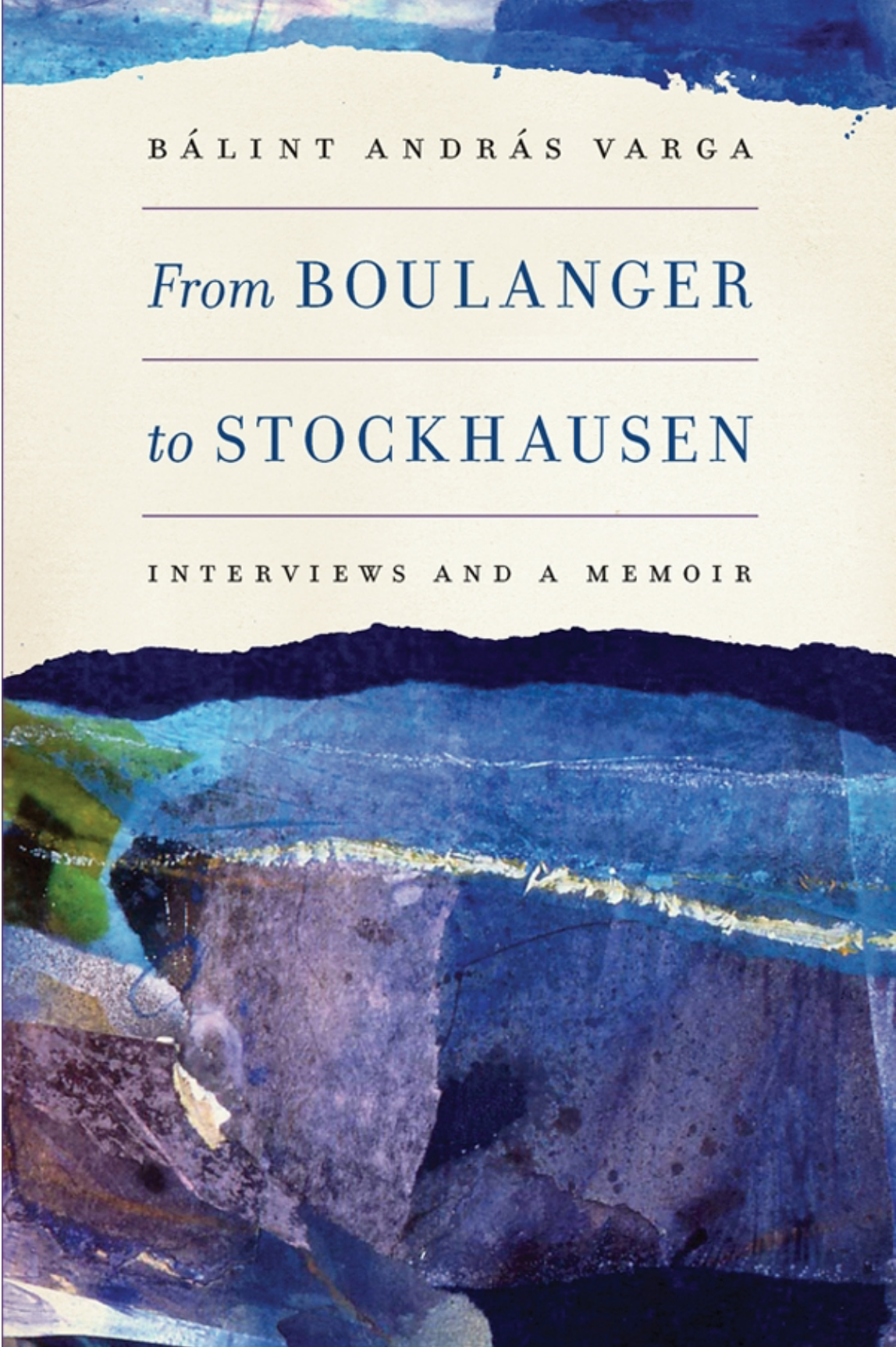
It is also true that there are many—too many—poor or mediocre compositions. If you do not like them, it is not necessarily because you cannot understand them—it is because they are not good music.

Here is another problem. Who decides what is good and what is bad? Your neighbor at the concert may be applauding enthusiastically, shouting “bravo” while you are pressing your lips together in disgust and leave your hands resting in your lap. Who is right?

Is there such a thing as being “right” or “wrong” in art, not just in music? Why do I like Jackson Pollock and turn away, disappointed, from Cy Twombly? Why did the artistic director of the Berlin Konzerthaus derive what she called “sensuous pleasure” from a work by Helmut Lachenmann (born 1935) which left me completely cold?

I have now left the question of “What to listen for in music” and entered the terrain of taste. A logical digression, perhaps, but I shall want to return to the issue of taste at a later point in [his last] book.

I just want to add that for all the odds against there evolving a public appreciative of avant-garde music, thankfully it does exist and fills huge concert halls at festivals like Donaueschingen, Witten, Strasbourg, Vienna, Stuttgart, and Paris. Those are of course events for new music specialists. Apart from festivals, there are also concert series devoted in the season to contemporary music exclusively. Their public tends to be rather small, in Vienna anyway. Around 150 to 200 people turn up regularly; eventually you will know their faces. Most of them are not professional musicians. I know one who never fails to be present: he is in the computer business. Another regular visitor happens to be my wife. When we met thirty-five years ago, she was an operetta fan. For the first couple of years of our marriage she attended concerts for my sake. Soon enough, however, she found her bearings in what was on offer and is now completely at home in contemporary music, often liking or disliking the same compositions as I. There is no question about her motivation, neither is there regarding the frequency with which she has listened to music over the past decades. Hers is the most convincing proof that Copland is right. And I think so am I.

The book cover features a central white rectangular area with text, framed by abstract, layered artwork. The artwork consists of various shades of blue, purple, and green, with some areas appearing like torn paper or layered paint. The top and bottom edges of the white area are irregular, following the shape of the artwork.

BÁLINT ANDRÁS VARGA

From BOULANGER

to STOCKHAUSEN

INTERVIEWS AND A MEMOIR

Dogma

“I have a dark past”—the composer Endre Székely (1912–1988) told me. It was his very first sentence, after offering me a seat in his study.

I visited him and other composers in the first months after taking up my job with Editio Musica Budapest. Endre Székely lived in the Buda hills, that is, in one of the capital’s elegant districts, far from the noise and polluted air of the city center. The flat, however, was decidedly drab, with Bauhaus-like furniture showing the signs of use. There was no warmth, no homeliness, no individuality. I found much the same soulless sobriety in the apartments or houses of other composers as well.⁵

It was as if those homes were expressions of an ideology. Not just the homes—also the way the composers dressed. No formality, no jackets and ties—open shirts and pullovers, baggy trousers made up their uniforms. Anything that smacked of bourgeois taste was eschewed.

I do not know what Endre Székely may have meant in describing his past as dark but clearly he was referring to the late 1940s and early 1950s when left-wing Hungarian intellectuals, many of them Jewish, were determined to build a just society based on equality—the ideals of communism. Székely’s erstwhile friend, the composer and conductor András Mihály (1917–1993)—whose name will be preserved for posterity thanks to the compositions Kurtág has dedicated to him—published articles in which he attacked Bartók’s “formalist” compositions. The term is linked to the name of Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1948), who in February 1948 initiated a campaign of persecution against what he called formalism in music. His attacks were directed primarily against Shostakovich and Prokofiev. Zhdanov’s theses were adopted by cultural politicians in Hungary. Bartók’s abstract compositions, including *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* and the string quartets, were to be removed from concert programs. In Mihály’s view, only those pieces deserved performance which were easy to understand for the “masses”—that is, folk music arrangements.

In later years, especially after establishing the Budapest New Music Ensemble (in 1968, I think), Mihály conducted the very works he had wanted to see banned. Had he changed his mind? Did the musician in him win the upper hand over the politician? According to a friend of his whom I have consulted for this essay, he was very consciously atoning for his extreme stance of the 1950s by espousing the cause of pioneering music. For years, he would devote hundreds of rehearsals at the Budapest Academy of Music to prepare a worthy performance of Schoenberg’s *Pierrot lunaire*. With the Budapest New Music Ensemble, he introduced novelties to Hungary, such as Ligeti’s Chamber Concerto.⁶

5. At the other end of the political spectrum and a generation younger, Zsolt Durkó (1934–1997) had a sumptuous apartment, with exquisite period furniture. His Persian carpets on the floor and hanging on the walls made me green with envy.

6. Ironically enough, after his “epiphany,” András Mihály impressed on his younger colleagues the need for them to write in an avant-garde idiom. Sándor Balassa (born 1935) told me that he had adopted his style in the

In the course of my interview with Kurtág, we also touched on his unfinished *Rákosi Oratorio*. I suggested that he had composed it under duress. No, he replied impatiently, he had *wanted* to write it, out of conviction. In setting the words “I am singing of a Man,” however, he reached an impasse. Perhaps the attempt to set that line revealed doubts that had lurked in his unconscious.

This subject came up a few more times during our telephone conversations, and each time I sensed impatience in Kurtág’s voice, a hardness, a timbre that was unfamiliar. He said he had yet to come to terms with that period in Hungarian history, he could not yet see clearly. Apparently, he had given an interview on his political views and conduct in the Rákosi years to the pianist Zoltán Kocsis, only to ask him later to erase it.

I had encountered a similar relentlessness, an alarmingly blind adherence to dogma in the Foreign Broadcasts Department of Hungarian Radio. I was surrounded mostly by Jews, my relatives if you like, but I had nothing in common with them, they made me feel uneasy, not belonging.

I was put in mind of Béla Kun (1886–1939), the leader of the Hungarian Republic Councils of 1919, who had after the defeat of his communist state fled to the Soviet Union where he was executed in the course of the Stalinist purges of the 1930s. I was also thinking of all the Western intellectuals who had adopted communism as their religion and either refused to believe news of Stalin’s atrocities or were prepared to shut their eyes (just as their counterparts in Hungary and elsewhere) to the crimes committed in the supposed interests of a “higher goal,” convinced that they were a necessary evil.

If I think of my childhood, tunes emerge in my mind that I heard on May Day, blaring from loudspeakers fixed to houses in our street. They were rousing melodies, they made me feel good, I liked them.

That was precisely the effect they were meant to achieve. The best Hungarian composers were called upon to write what were termed “mass songs” and some of them became really popular. To once again cite the handy example of my brother: he left in 1956, fifty-five years ago now, but he can still sing those melodies, complete with the words, at the drop of a hat. They seeped into our minds, they became part of our world.

Mihály need not have called for the banning of the *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*; there was no danger of it corrupting our minds. Neither was there any need for the Association of Hungarian Composers to ban one of Ligeti’s *Six Bagatelles* (1953) for wind quintet for a dissonance which the committee deemed to be damaging the interests of “the people.” Composers’ careers could be made or broken by a sentence passed at the sessions of the Association. János Viski (1906–1961) is rumored to have died of a heart attack

late 1960s and early 1970s under duress, for he had thought that was the thing to do. He was among many who wrote so called “new music” against their inner convictions. At one point, some of them (including Balassa, Bozay, Kalmár, Orbán, et al.) rebelled and gradually developed a style they regarded as authentic. Oddly enough, their rebellion produced music that was far less convincing than that composed in what they had regarded as a straitjacket.

following criticism leveled at one of his works: he may have been alarmed that he would be deprived of his professorship at the Academy and that his music would be removed from concert programs.

I know there is nothing original in what I am going to say, but I find it amazing how much significance totalitarian states have attributed to art in all its manifestations, as well as to literature. Also, the kinship of the end product, regardless of its color—red or brown.

Could Ligeti's unorthodox interval have overturned Rákosi's rule? I wonder how many talents were stultified by the vital need to conform. Ligeti's mind refused the yoke and during his nightly walks in Buda Castle he hatched the novel ideas that he could realize only after his defection—ideas underlying *Apparitions* (1959) and *Atmosphères* (1960–61), two compositions to become milestones in post-war music history.

Until the collapse of the socialist system, new Hungarian literature was divided into three categories which became known as the three Ts: *tiltott* (forbidden), *tűrt* (tolerated) and *támogatott* (supported). Indeed, the introduction of the three Ts after 1956 was an improvement on practice in the Rákosi era when anything that was deemed alien to socialist realist fiction was banned.

1989 saw the disappearance of the Ts and ushered in total freedom, but also total official indifference as far as literature and the arts went. Some writers are now actually hankering after the years of the three Ts, for under socialism they had at least been taken seriously.

I am saddened to think of the senseless suffering and frustration of generations of composers, artists, and writers caused in the name of ideals which have since been exposed to have been false. I need not have qualified that sentence and ought to have put a full stop after “generations.” It is tragic that a satisfactory solution to the lives of ten million or so Hungarians is nowhere in sight. The history of the twenty years since the country's independence is disillusioning. All the parties have had a go and failed: the socialists, the liberals, and the right wing. There is no alternative left.

No wonder that the stalemate is reflected in the situation of contemporary composers. As one of the middle generation tells me, composers have lost their prestige. They are embroiled in hopeless trench warfare and the opinions they voice of one another are tantamount to defamation.

POSTSCRIPT TO THE “DOGMA” ESSAY

I more or less completed this chapter in 2011. Re-reading it a year later as I am about to submit the manuscript to the publisher, I feel the need to add a postscript.

Writers of the extreme right wing who came to prominence between the two world wars are being promoted by the cultural authorities; they have even been included in the school curriculum. The protest of the left is being ignored amid a wholesale drive to reinstate discredited pre-war figures whose antisemitism is passed off as being of no significance. I feel I must record my despair and incredulity in a memoir that is by definition a reflection not just of my life but also of my concerns.

**THE
COURAGE
OF COMPOSERS
AND THE
TYRANNY
OF TASTE
REFLECTIONS ON NEW MUSIC**



BALINT ANDRAS VARGA