

At the Bow of the Danubia

BY THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF ITS FOUNDATION, DANUBIA ORCHESTRA ÓBUDA HAS MATURED INTO A CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED MUSICAL ENSEMBLE AND ACHIEVED NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION. THE BAND IS SAILING FULL SPEED AHEAD TOWARDS NEW PROJECTS AND EXCITING PERFORMANCES CAPTAINED BY CONDUCTOR MÁTÉ HÁMORI, ART DIRECTOR OF THE DANUBIA SINCE SEPTEMBER 2013.

THE BAND'S CALENDAR FOR THIS SEASON INCLUDES A SERIES OF CONCERTS AT HIGHLY PRESTIGIOUS LOCATIONS SUCH AS LISZT FERENC MUSIC ACADEMY AND BUDAPEST MUSIC CLUB. HOWEVER, YOU'VE ALSO STARTED A NEW PROJECT OUTSIDE OF CONCERT HALLS THAT IS ESPECIALLY CLOSE TO YOUR HEART: CHILDREN'S CONCERTS IN ÓBUDA ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS. WHAT DO THESE CONCERTS MEAN TO YOU?

Our job as musicians is to establish some kind of cultural continuity – to pass down several hundred years of music to future generations. The challenge lies in the fact that the next generation, children and young adults are completely out of touch with classical music. This is especially true for teenagers, who obstinately shut themselves off from the genres we represent. I believe that if children start having encounters with live music at a young age, there is a good chance that a seed will be planted in them.

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HOW DO YOU GET THROUGH TO YOUNGSTERS?

Children are the most demanding and most honest of all audiences. If something isn't interesting, enjoyable or clear to them, they'll let you know. You can't sell a poor performance to kids. However, if they like what they're hearing and seeing, they can be very appreciative and much more open to new things than adults. They have no prejudices about genres, they'd welcome a death metal band the same way they would a baroque chamber band. The younger they are, the more so. You have to take advantage of this openness, but you mustn't abuse it. To quote Kodály, „For children, the best is merely good enough.” You have to design special programmes for them. A children's concert cannot simply be a rehearsal for your evening concert. You have to approach the experience that you want to share with them from as many different angles as possible, so that they can identify with what you're trying to convey to them. Identification is key. That is why dramatized performances are always the most successful. I've done a play where the band was playing musical pieces to accompany modernized versions of classic tales, and we used sand animation in the background as well. It is these types of performances that can get the children involved most effectively.





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WHAT EFFECT CAN SUCH AN EXPERIENCE HAVE ON THE CHILDREN?

Even small children can achieve a state of catharsis, and a music concert is very much capable of triggering that effect as long as the experience it offers is truly complex. As musicians, we have to be able to get the kids to understand – and believe – what music means to us: that it’s not just a form of entertainment, but life itself. There are no limits to what they can understand: children are deeply emotional, they respond to negative emotions as well as to humour – as long as they are presented in the right way.

DID YOU YOURSELF HAVE SUCH AN EXPERIENCE BEFORE YOU STARTED STUDYING MUSIC?

My first encounter with music happened when I was about six and my parents took me to a concert at Liszt Academy. The band was playing Mozart’s Requiem. Even though it’s hardly a child-friendly piece, the performance really gripped me. It was that very concert that got me interested in music in the first place. A few similar experiences followed,

and then I started playing the piano and studying music. It was crucial to my future that my parents were music enthusiasts and shared their devotion with me. It’s the only way to spark interest in a child that is strong enough to light a fire. School concerts are a great help, but they are not enough.

WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON THE WAY MUSIC IS TAUGHT IN PUBLIC EDUCATION?

It does more harm than good. Actively making music and singing are practices that shape the personality, and so they are much more useful than learning how to write sheet music or memorizing the biographies of composers. Music classes have got nothing to do with reality: the musical environment that children are living in is being ignored completely. It might be an unusual approach, but I think that popular music should make up most of the curriculum. Classes should come alive and become experiences, since they are the most adequate place and time for children to get involved in music. Public school teachers, music schools, amateur and professional bands should start a conversation and form partnerships – performances like ours could become part of the classes. If they did, kids would have a better shot at recognizing their musical interests and talents.

WERE YOU A PRODIGY?

I definitely wasn’t, or I would have had to be giving concerts at the age of six. I was touched by that one performance at the Academy, and then I would just sit down and play the piano my father had at home. It was Tamás Vásáry who suggested that I be a conductor. I hope he didn’t just give me that advice because I wasn’t good enough to become a pianist... But I guess we’ll never find out. I was always a creative soul, and literature always had a special place in our family. I still love to read. And it’s important to be multi-faceted, because working in music? It can be very one-sided. Studying, rehearsing, playing a concert... From time to time, you need something else, something different to occupy your mind with.

WHO DO YOU CONSIDER YOUR IDOLS?

I’m just realizing that I probably don’t say this enough, but frankly, my dad was my very first role model. He’s a man of immense wisdom, and he’s a great music lover. I was always very impressed by the vast knowledge that he possessed, and he was always very humble about it. Other than him, there were others that I looked up to: I have a very good relationship with Tamás Vásáry, we often work together and he conducts the band as well. He is a huge master and an even bigger person who has taught me a lot. We used to have talks that lasted all night at Summer Academies. And his working capacity is unbelievable. It’s enviable, even for musicians in my generation. I felt a natural connection to him – sensitive musicians tend to find each other, and these meetings are always very special. I consider Tamás Vásáry my master, but there were others whom I learned a lot from, for example József Sári. I am drawn to people who can look past music and see the bigger picture. What you can learn from them is of unspeakable value, like humility towards your profession and putting your spirit into your work.

WHICH UPCOMING DANUBIA CONCERT ARE YOU MOST EXCITED ABOUT?

There will be two very special concerts at BMC in the spring. We’re still in the middle of planning them, that’s why we haven’t put them in the programme booklet. We are going to try our hand at something new: both concerts will be theatre-concerts, dramatized musical performances. We are going to attempt to visualize the dramatic content of the music using theatrical tools. But it’s important that the music will remain in the focus of the performance, it won’t be reduced to background music. One of the concert-plays will be directed by Kornél Mundruczó, the other by Róbert Alföldi. I am really looking forward to working with them. These performances will be challenging for me as well as the band, and I can’t wait to see it all come together at BMC.

WHAT OTHER GENRES INTEREST YOU BESIDES CLASSICAL MUSIC?

I find electronic music much more creative and innovative than any other contemporary popular genre. I’m not convinced that heavy metal or rock in general has gone through a lot of change since the seventies. We’ve actually worked together with DJ Bootsie on a project at the Spring Festival. He did a remix of *Dance of the Seven Veils* from Richard Strauss’ opera *Salome*. But it’s not only re-workings of classical pieces that interest me. I’d love to learn more about modern electronic dance music too. ❁

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