

When the Teacher Likes His Students and His Subject ...

Gách Marianne

Neither his appearance nor his personality gives away the age of Lajos Bárdos, who is now celebrating his 70th birthday.

"Each year I dig out my birth certificate and realize that again the document has become a year older. But what concern is that of mine? ... Excuse my little joke!"

With his unique and charming sense of humor, not only does he entertain, teach, and heal, but he also helps others get through the most devastating situations of life.

I recall the bloody Christmas of 1944. The Bárdos family provided shelter in their Margit Boulevard apartment to refugees persecuted by the Nazis. Bárdos not only provided these refugees with the security of a home, but he also gave them consolation, round-the-clock encouragement, and hope.

On this insane Christmas of 1944, to distract the refugees, who were horrified by the constant bombings, Bárdos sat at his piano and loudly played gospel music until a series of explosions outside chased us down to the shelter in the basement. Today that raucous jazz and the frightening explosions intertwine in our memory like an absurd drama. Along with his unforgettable and wonderful wife, Irenke, having "only" ten children at the time, Bárdos several times risked his own and his family's life while guarding, supporting, and saving the persecuted that he sheltered.

But let's get back to the present. Books, manuscripts, sheet music, and letters are piled high on his desk. Work has always been a fundamental part of his life, and today Bárdos works more than ever.

Bárdos is proofreading *Thirty Essays*, his new book that sums up a small portion of his studies and experiences. It will be published in the near future.

"This book is a collection of my older as well as newer studies on musical theory and instrumental music. It has seven main topics: rhythm, melody, study of harmony, form, prosody, choir, and 'miscellaneous'."

It might have been this book that made him decide on early retirement, because neither the dean and the other professors nor the students at the Music Academy wanted him to leave.

"I have been teaching at the Academy for forty-one years. Now I would like to do some work at my desk. I never had time to do that before," Bárdos explains.

Despite his retirement, he still does not have enough time to do everything he wants to do since he constantly receives invitations from all over the country. People ask for new musical compositions, studies, proofreading, and support. Due to his weakened health he does not teach or conduct on a regular basis, but still he travels regularly around the country.

"I am glad to travel around Hungary because it makes me happy to talk with the people and to see the emerging ideas and the interests that enrich our musical life."

From early in his career Bárdos was most intrigued by choral music. Why this attraction?

"When we were young musicians, Zoltán Kodály commented that only a few of the elite had the privilege of having an education in instrumental music, and these were not enough to establish a flourishing musical culture in the whole country. On the other hand, "everybody has a voice," Kodály said. And at that time there were hundreds of thousands of chorus members at schools and in adult choirs who were still singing that fake "paper-flower kind" of music. We were motivated to bring this enthusiastic crowd to the level of classical music."

As a result, the movement of The Singing Youth (Éneklő Ifjúság) was created under the musical direction of Bárdos and with the assistance of Jenő Ádám, György Kerényi, and Gyula Kertész.

"In the beginning of the 30's the famous music publishers were not willing to print any music written by our generation for the schools or choruses. Therefore the four of us started to run our own music publishing house. In a couple of years we collected so many pieces of music - ranging from the older to the most modern composers such as Kodály and Bartók - that we decided to organize concerts in Budapest and in the rural areas as well.

A concert was considered part of The Singing Youth only if more than one school choir participated and the audience sang along. Kodály gave The Singing Youth movement a gift - the beautiful canon that he composed from a Berzsenyi ode, "Magyarokhoz." Bárdos Lajos finished his Music Academy studies with Kodály in 1925. He spoke of his work with Kodály as an experience that greatly influenced his life. "First of all, Kodály gave us a wide range of detail from Palestrina to modern music. This was a revolutionary change compared to the boring pattern of the traditional teaching style."

Bárdos smiles: "One day, we were studying the minor waltzes by Schubert. Kodály, on his way out, turned back and said: 'Now I want you to write a number of these waltzes yourselves - or at least try to write several.' And he disappeared."

"He also demanded that we constantly do research. With his amazing almost wordless teaching style, he never advised us on how to correct our musical pieces. We had to find the best solutions on our own. This revolutionary method of teaching provided us with a strong background on which we have relied on in our careers - it made us very independent. We were filled with the urge to revolutionize our musical culture."

Bárdos already had started to teach at the Music Academy in 1928. How many different subjects did he teach throughout his long career? It is well known that he had to create most of his subjects. There were no precedents, no tradition.

"Musical education in the 1920's was like teaching physics without including the latest achievements and discoveries. The study of harmony, for example, would barely mention the basics of Beethoven's

music. I realized the necessity of working out a new system for the study of harmony consisting of five main parts instead only one: Classical, Renaissance, the period of the Romantics of the last century, then around the turn of the century the era of the surprising innovations that started with Debussy, and at last the harmony of the modern music.

"I finished working out this new system of teaching harmony by 1951, the same year the Department of Music Theory was established at the Music Academy. There we had an opportunity to examine and study the various periods of the history of music. Also unprecedented in the past, relying on my own experiences, I built up the method of choir directing, conducting, and also the systematic study of the lyrics of Hungarian folksongs.

"In a similar way, I worked out systems to teach choral conductors, to analyze Hungarian folk songs, and to teach prosody. Prosody had been included in the Academy's curriculum since 1949, thanks to József Újfalussy and András Szöllösy, who supported it from the government offices."

What made you create the theory of teaching prosody?

"Language correlates with vocal music. So teaching prosody can also be thought of as teaching poetry. I was amazed by the prosodic mistakes that occurred in music when the natural accent of a word is misplaced by the accent that the rhythm of the music dictates."

How about folk songs that contain numerous mistakes of prosody?

"Folk songs should not be put on a pedestal. Not all of them can be used as a source for composed music, of course. I am sure that great composers such as Schubert, Wagner, and Debussy did not 'chew on' their lyrics word by word, making sure that every single accent of the words correlates with the accent of the music. These musicians' sense of prosody subconsciously - or rather consciously - functioned perfectly. But our young composers and conductors will benefit from this subject."

Throughout the years of teaching, as a result of independent research and pedagogic work, Bárdos created many new words and idioms. These he collected in a lexicon-like chapter in his new book - his thirtieth.

Sometimes he got so busy with teaching that he had no time left to compose. Didn't he feel as though he had wasted his time?

"No, I never felt time was wasted by teaching at the Music Academy or working with the choruses of the villages. I think I made an impact. The most important result of successful teaching is not so much in the concrete information given as in the seeds planted in the enthusiastic students."

Anyone who was lucky enough to have been Bárdos' student would never forget the magnetism of his fascinating lectures. His colleagues asked him frequently how he managed to make the students like even the most boring subjects, such as the theory of music.

"Initially I did not know how to answer this question. I believe in the love of work and the curiosity and enthusiasm of today's young people, even though others often disparage them. I later found a rule that could almost be a law of physics: namely, the law of the three S's. This is how it goes: when a School professor likes the Students and the Subject then "inductive electricity" is created and the student cannot help learning to like the subject. This is the pedagogic suggestion I give to my colleagues."

What role do you think music plays in people's lives?

"Many say that you can live without music. It is true, you can live without music, 'but why bother?' asks a fifteenth-century Tibetan Philosopher." And one can detect a mischievous smile on Bárdos' face since the Tibetan Philosopher is himself. We all know well his constant jokes and plays on words. He would rather hide behind quotations and give the credit to "strangers" than to himself.

Of his eleven children, only one became a professional musician: Daróci Bárdos Tamás, the talented and well known conductor and composer.

Bárdos occasionally sends a report to his friends about his constantly enlarging family. His twenty-seventh grandchild was just born." I have eleven children, four sons-in-law, three daughters-in-law, twenty-seven grandchildren. That makes forty-five heads and ninety legs."

We don't find personalities like Bárdos very often anywhere in Hungary.

"Musical miracle!", said one Belgian newspaper about the work of Bárdos Lajos when he visited Belgium. How does he create this human and vocal magic that captures singers and listeners as well? He led four choruses throughout his career: the Cecilia Chorus, the Palestrina Chorus, the Budapest Chorus, and a choir in the Castle Hill in Budapest. Let's listen to one of the chorus members, Sári Vargyas who, during thirty years, didn't miss one of Bárdos' rehearsals or concerts.

"The repeatedly mentioned 'ideal unity' of singing - the entire chorus would sound like one person - was already created during the rehearsals," says Sári. "Often we asked one another: how is it possible that we arrive at the rehearsals exhausted after a long day's work, but we leave freshened?"

"When we were facing Bárdos from the chorus, we saw his expressions reflecting all the pain or joy of the music. We always knew what his feelings were and how to translate those to the audience. Bárdos' expression was not the conscious strategy of a conductor. It was his true inner empathetic experience. There was definitely some kind of 'electricity' between him, the listeners, and us.

"We were very tuned into him. Sometimes he would improvise just to keep us 'alive,' and to avoid the routine singing that leads to dullness. And we could immediately follow the changes in tempo, accent, or dynamics.

"He often cracked jokes rather than engage in a long explanation. He did not like to 'bla-bla-bla,' as he

called using too much verbiage. He would sneak the knowledge into our heads without our noticing it.

"The first step in empathetic singing is to understand the lyrics, regardless of the language in which it was written. Bárdos also emphasized clear enunciation, even in the most difficult pieces such as the Pictures of Matra (Mátraí képek) or the Jesus and the Peddlers (Jézus és a Kufárok), though understandable articulation in these compositions was nearly impossible.

"In the beginning of the rehearsal we would sing the whole piece without stopping. Then we would work on the details. The entire choir stayed in the same hall during practice so different parts of the chorus could hear one another. Learning the music would always start at the very end with the finale. It was his belief that the most difficult and energy consuming part of a piece is always the end. He wanted us to be fresh and energetic while rehearsing the finale. This method always succeeded.

"We never sang the same song over and over again so that rehearsal would become monotonous. Bárdos was very aware of the dangers of over-practicing the music, which would have killed the passion and made our performance flat.

"Bárdos always demonstrated what he wanted to achieve. His singing voice was expressive and full of nuances. We tried to imitate Bárdos, but not always with success. Once, during the first instrumental rehearsal of Missa Solemnis, the F-sharp resonance of the first violin wasn't exactly the way he wanted it to sound, so he asked for the violin and demonstrated. The orchestra applauded with great appreciation.

"The uniform tonality of our singing was achieved for the most part by 'section' singing. Alto and soprano, male and female voices became as one, under the influence of folk songs and Gregorian Chant sung in unison. The only warm-up practice we ever had was the choir singing in unison. Bárdos felt that this was the only way for the chorus to become attuned.

"We were never accompanied by the piano during rehearsals unless preparing for an oratorio. Bárdos' theory was that singers could be trained to stay in tune and to reach a natural clearness of their voices only if they were unaccompanied by instruments. The most difficult task in a capella singing is to keep the pitch constant. Frequently choirs 'slide down' when reaching the finale; that is, they finish the song a half or a whole note lower than they should. Bárdos listed twelve reasons why this happens, e.g. tiredness, sitting position, boredom, stuffy air, etc.

"Sometimes choirs finish at a higher note than what was written. Bárdos' explanation was that great excitement causes the physical tightening of the vocal cords. This phenomenon mainly occurred during monumental, energetic compositions.

"Unfortunately Bárdos Lajos leads our choirs only three or four times a year now. When we know he is to conduct, we notify all the members. About a hundred to hundred and twenty of us gather together. Even though we are reunited under Bárdos' direction only three or four times a year, when he conducts everyone returns with the same enthusiasm, and we begin singing where we left off at the last meeting."

