

Thesis of dissertation

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## The Artistic Career of György Sebők

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The Liszt Academy of Music

28th Doctoral School of Arts and Cultural History

Budapest

2023

## I. Background to the research

During my years as a student, the more my teachers became interested in György Sebők, the more striking became the lack of a comprehensive work on his art and pedagogy, and the lack of content attached to his name for people of my age or younger. In addition to the scattered reviews and interviews, there are two major Hungarian-language sources available to the general public: on the one hand, the study by József Dombi,<sup>1</sup> which, however, since the author is from Szeged, only deals with the aspects of Sebők's life that are related to his hometown, and on the other hand, the interview film made with the artist in 1992 by Sándor Érdi,<sup>2</sup> entitled *From Szabófalva to San Francisco*, which, due to its genre, only provides information on the events or topics raised by the interviewer.

It was therefore both obvious and necessary to write a study which, in addition to providing a fuller picture of the pianist's eventful career, would also examine and contextualise his performance and teaching.

## II. Sources

As Sebők spent almost half of his life in Hungary and the rest of his life (after a few years in France) in the USA, the sources relating to him are mostly in Hungarian and English. My research was given a great boost when I came across Cynthia Cortright's DMA dissertation,<sup>3</sup> published at the University of Oklahoma in 1993, which I was able to order from the New York Public Library. The basis of this thesis is based on interviews with the artist, her colleagues and her students, which gave me second-hand access to a wealth of information not available elsewhere.

János Starker, who was the longest-lasting presence in the life of the Sebők, mentions his friend in several places in his book *The World of Music According to Starker*.<sup>4</sup> His work, despite its anecdotal style, contains a number of otherwise missing datas.

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<sup>1</sup> Erzsébet Dombiné Kemény: György Sebők (Szeged: Private edition of the author, 2001.)

<sup>2</sup> Sándor Érdi: *From Szabófalva to San Francisco*. Biographical interview, reportage, 1992. <https://nava.hu/id/3014151/#> last viewed 11.12.2022.

<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Cortright: *Gyorgy Sebok. A Profile as Revealed Through Interviews with the Artist, his Colleagues and his Students*. DMA disszertáció. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma, 1993. (Manuscript).

<sup>4</sup> János Starker: *The World of Music According to Starker*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.)

Barbara Alex's book,<sup>5</sup> a collection of the most important sentences from Sebők's master classes over several decades, has proved a great help in analysing the artist's pedagogical approach.

In addition to the aforementioned study and interview film, a large number of concert and course reports and interviews were available in Hungarian, scattered throughout the book. Finding these would have been almost unthinkable without the arcanum.hu online database.

Although the recollections of Sebők's former students are quite consistent, I found it important to visit his former students in person. I interviewed Júlia Orbán, whom he had taught during the young artist's stay in Hungary in the 1950s, and Gábor Csalog, who in turn had taught in Bloomington in the 1980s.

### **III. Method**

As technological progress makes access to information easier and easier, the focus shifts from acquiring information to organising, collating and sorting it. Contrary to my expectations, the real challenge in writing my dissertation was not to find and obtain the sources, but to integrate and process them, to assess their credibility and to filter out inaccuracies and contradictions.

The first four of the six main chapters of my thesis follow the life of Sebők. As I do not consider the individual's personality to be separable from his art, I have tried to bring together fragmented sources to create a text which, while chronologically covering historical, personal and professional events, also reveals the causal links which draw attention to his playing and pedagogy. However, the actual analysis of these two main activities is dealt with separately in the last two chapters.

I have tried to extract the main features of his teaching as objectively as possible from the many praiseworthy accounts of his former pupils, capturing the root of his approach and presenting it to the reader in key concepts.

Fortunately, I no longer had only textual sources at my disposal to study his style of playing. Although I have researched dozens of concert reviews in various journals, most of his more than 40 recorded albums are available on the Internet. Listening to these recordings provided more information than any text. Again, my aim was to place Sebők's art in a larger

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Alex: *Words from a Master*. György Sebők. (Portland, Oregon: Carpe Diem Books, 2010.)

coordinate system rather than subjective analysis: to articulate its main characteristics and to fit them into the performance trends of the twentieth century and the personality of the pianist.

#### **IV. Results**

Cultural memory cannot be limited to the erection of plaques and statues; the real value lies in the spirit itself, which needs constant reinterpretation and the genuine enthusiasm of new generations to carry it forward. In this sense, the memory of György Sebők is just flickering in Hungary. This has prompted me to write a work that paints a vivid picture of the artist and hopefully encourages the musician reader to discover in his own relationship to music how he can benefit from the pianist's approach.

By exploring, organising and interpreting hitherto unprocessed sources, a comprehensive account of this extraordinary musician-educator has been written for the first time in Hungarian.

In the appendix I have included a discography, which not only makes Sebők's recordings easier to find for the interested reader, but also highlights the richness of his repertoire.