

“YOU HAVE TO GIVE WINGS TO FLY!”

INSTEAD OF THE TRADITIONAL WELCOMING SPEECH, WE UNCONVENTIONALLY ASKED THE WORLD-RENOWNED FOUNDER OF THE COMPETITION TO GIVE US A PERSONAL INTERVIEW. WE ARE THANKFUL TO DR ANDRÁS BATTA FOR ACTING AS INTERVIEWER, AS HE IS PERHAPS THE VERY PERSON – AS THE FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE LISZT ACADEMY AND RETURNING PATRON OF THE INTERNATIONAL ÉVA MARTON SINGING COMPETITION – WHO KNOWS ÉVA MARTON’S THOUGHTS THE BEST. HE ASKED THE GLOBALLY ACCLAIMED SOPRANO ABOUT THE INITIAL IDEA OF THE COMPETITION, ITS CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES, ITS JURY MEMBERS AND OF COURSE, ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF VOCAL COMPETITIONS IN THE CAREERS OF YOUNG SINGERS.

ANDRÁS BATTA: *Do you remember, Éva, it was a good few years ago – at the time of the restoration of the beautiful building of the Budapest Liszt Academy – how we both dreamed that one day there would be an international singing competition under your artistic direction here?*

ÉVA MARTON: In fact, this was realized far faster than I had thought, since we were able to organize the I International Éva Marton Singing Competition barely a year after the opening of the renewed building. Thank you for your help in bringing it to life, and I am delighted that your successor, president Andrea Vigh, has also given her backing to the contest. Therefore, we move forward and I hope that in the future this singing competition will remain one of the finest projects of the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music.

Of course, let's not forget that the competition reflects your personality, being a summation of the experiences of your artistic and teaching career.

Without any hint of pathos I say: I am a Hungarian and even during the decades I spent abroad I always tried to give back to my homeland everything that, in an artistic sense, I acquired in the course of my career. The logical consequence of this desire was that on our return to Hungary I should accept the post of Head of the Singing Department of the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music, and the idea of setting up the singing competition was connected up with this. I am convinced that Hungarian artists, scientists, and athletes who in the course of their careers have served to enhance the reputation of Hungary through their talent and performances have a real opportunity – precisely because of their international renown – of attracting interest through themselves to the Hungary of today, showing young people an example and opening a doorway to the world for them via their contacts.

Through you, it is not only the Liszt Academy as organizing institution which is involved in the singing competition.

Thank you for mentioning this. I must emphasize first and foremost the harmonious work there has been with the president and management of the Liszt Academy in the course of preparations for the singing competition right from the very start, that is, from the first competition in 2014. The Hungarian State Opera (where I am active as senior consultant) also joined the project from the beginning and the Hungarian Academy of Arts has shown considerable interest in the competition: they have enhanced the status of the contest both in the intellectual and material sense with this year's Éva Marton special prize and we have also received a supportive gesture from the Board of the Corvin Chain Award, too. As far as I am aware,

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MTVA's new cultural channel, M5, launching at virtually the same time as the competition, is similarly interested in this event. I'm delighted that ever more people consider the singing competition to be theirs.

Knowing your career as I do (in 2014 we published our book 'The Celestial Voice' revealing your life work), it is worth mentioning that at that time you made yourself a massive international career without ever having attended a single international singing competition...

At that time, competitions did not play the great role they do now in the career of a young artist. The opera houses functioned as more or less closed companies to which it was possible to join only after singing trials. Internationalism was far from mandatory not only in Hungary behind the Iron Curtain but in the 'free' world as well, at least at the beginning of one's career. Today, however, the situation is completely different: the room for manoeuvre for a young singer has grown by a startling extent. Even so, I still consider it very important that having completed their studies young people spend at least a few years with just one company. I think it takes 7-10 years for a person to acquire the necessary experience in the relationship between the stage, orchestra, conductor and partners. That is why we set an upper age limit for our competition of 32 for women and 35 for men, thereby giving the possibility primarily for artists with experience of both success and failure to compete against each other. Naturally, this does not exclude students or recent graduates from also applying. Who knows, it may be that one of the members of the jury will spot that particular spark of brilliance in them.

I suppose that a singing competition forces a young person to face challenges of a different nature than an opera performance, a role.

You are quite right. Competition is a strange genre. There are no singing partners so you have to cope on your own, and what's more, for a single occasion and for a relatively short time. This means that you have to be at your peak right from the very first moment, as there's no time to prepare and acclimatize to the stage. It's no use saying, as one can in a performance, that the singer is indisposed and so on. Here everything is in black and white. The person stands alone, every eye critically appraises him or her, every ear listens to him or her alone. There is an audience that can help lessen this great tension, although the competitors are not singing primarily for the audience but rather for the jury. The audience also tends to follow the competition and concentrate on the performance experience only secondarily. The fact is that the audience are also making their own assessment (comparing, weighing, speculating) and they render judgement not only through their applause but with the audience prize as well. A further obstacle is that a competition comprises several rounds so standards have to be maintained for days at a time, indeed, one has to be better each time, in voice, expression, and even as far as externals go: in appearance and behaviour. A fully planned and strictly implemented strategy is required for competitions; in this, arts contests differ little from the great tournaments.

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Let's now look at the same thing but through the eyes of the jury! There are two parts to the story. The first is getting to know the candidates on the basis of the submitted video and audio recordings, followed by the personal experience based on the selection. Obviously, the decision demands a different assessment and approach in both situations. Is it possible to establish with any certainty from a video recording of a few minutes who should appear in front of the jury, and who should not?

You also know that we often feel that somebody is going to do something remarkable the moment they come on stage, not even having sung a single note. It's not easy to explain. What is interesting is that on the basis of the overall impression of short productions recorded at different technical levels and submitted from all over the world, it is still possible to formulate some sort of objective selection process. Whatever the case, there was a surprising level of agreement in the separate evaluations of the pre-jury members both at the time of the first competition and again this time around. In making the selection, besides my own impressions I asked the opinions of two colleagues: Balázs Kocsár, acting Principal Musical Director of the Hungarian State Opera and conductor for the gala performance of the competition, and singer Atilla Kiss B., teacher at the vocal department of the Liszt Academy. Over 100 people sent in their videos and we selected around two-thirds of them for the competition. Balázs and Atilla believe that we can expect 'mighty' battles between the competitors. I share their opinion: we have scooped up fantastic voices and hugely talented artists in our 'net'.

The fixed tests are seven arias and a Liszt song. This is certainly a sufficiently broad opportunity to introduce oneself. The freely chosen but compulsory Liszt song could be seen as the 'calling card' of the competition.

That's right. This is one way we show that this competition is being held in this music conservatory with its hugely distinguished past, which (uniquely in the world) was actually founded by Ferenc Liszt himself, in 1875. For me personally, as a Hungarian singer for whom this school is her alma mater, Ferenc Liszt the person is important on many different levels. What he achieved in his century through music in addition to what he did for Hungary through the charm of his beautiful, charismatic personality serves as an example for us all. I am proud that in the course of my career I had the chance to sing, and not only the title rôle in one of his finest works, *The Legend of Saint Elisabeth* but also that last year, on the 150th anniversary of the opening of the Pest Vigadó, the oratorio written originally in German was performed under my artistic direction, in Hungarian, organized by the Hungarian Academy of Arts. However, there are also professional reasons for hearing the compulsory Liszt song in the competition. Liszt wrote songs in several languages and a variety of styles, thus everyone can select the most appropriate piece from the French, German or Italian repertoire.

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Being a member of a jury both as task and role came rather late in your career and is closely associated with your teaching activities. Becoming Beckmesser from Walther von Stolzing is a dramatic turnaround...

Well, given the choice, I'd rather be Hans Sachs. Somebody who recognizes and rewards new talent rather than tallying up the faults as they occur. In fact, the question is interesting. During the long, active part of my career as a singer I listened to others differently to how I do today. True, I generally sang together with the greatest artists but this was not the only reason that the approach of a critical listener of music was missing from me. Since I have been teaching, I find myself listening to everything with an ear to where exactly the problem is and how it can be cured. I have developed a sort of pedagogical temperament with the desire to teach everybody the correct way of singing according to my view. This is not a matter of vanity but some sort of inner compulsion. I'm sure the same goes for other teachers.

I suppose that the invitations to the other members of the jury spring from you, too.

I have a personal, sometimes several-decades-long artistic relationship with all the members of the jury, indeed friendships with several. Of course, in sending out invitations to sit on the jury consideration was also given to draw on as wide a circle as possible – both in the geographical and cultural sense – from Hungarian and international opera life and singing teaching in higher education. I think Hungarians Szilveszter Ókovács, General Director of the Hungarian State Opera, and Andrea Meláth, current Head of the Singing Department at the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music, sitting on the international jury need no introduction. (I, too, am on the jury.) I am delighted to be able to introduce our foreign guests. I have known Christina Scheppelmann for many years, having initially met her in the United States, although she now joins us as Artistic Director of the Teatro Liceu in Barcelona. My association with Miguel Lerín is similarly long; he was my manager and is currently heading the Barcelona Francisco Viñas singing competition. I sang together with Vittorio Terranova in the early 1970s, in Florence at the Maggio Musicale; he is head of the Deutschlandsberg Feruccio Tagliavini singing competition operating under the aegis of the Graz Opera. In the past few years I have made new acquaintances as a jury member for different competitions. On this basis I am pleased to be able to welcome onto the jury Anatoli Goussev, professor at a top school of singing in Milan, who first came to my attention through his superb students. Our other guests are Honghai Ma, professor at the Central Music Academy in Beijing, and Sung Bin Kim, dean of one of the principal universities of arts in South Korea. I consider it vital for young people from the Far East who are receptive to European music culture to get to know the Hungarian traditions, Budapest, the Liszt Academy and the Hungarian State Opera. In my mind the point is for a jury to function harmoniously, for them to like young people and assist them – even with critical comments – in their further development.

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It is worth noting that this singing competition does not conclude with the gala concert.

I decided to offer the opportunity for winners as well as those who did not do so well in the competition, to take part in a master class immediately after the competition. This would be the 'bonus' of the competition. Anybody can take part, for free, they can sing for me and in front of the other competitors, they can ask for opinions and they can do all this accompanied by my most excellent répétiteur colleague Gabriella Gyökér. Let's exploit the marvellous opportunities offered by the Liszt Academy. I don't think there is another music institution of higher education anywhere in the world that provides such a distinguished and at the same time state-of-the-art environment for the staging of a music competition. Making an appearance at the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music is an inspiring experience for all and it is enormously prestigious to have performed here.

And finally, the 'mandatory' question: what does a young singer win by taking part in the Éva Marton International Singing Competition?

There are major prizes on offer but, naturally, it is not the financial element that is most important. I believe the greatest gain is in the spirit of the place and the chance to prove oneself in front of a jury. You have to give young people wings to fly, not clip those wings. After all, rare birds took wing from here at the last singing competition as well...

I sincerely hope, Éva, that you write history in this field as well. I wish much luck to the Liszt Academy, to you, the jury, the organizing committee and last but not least, to the competitors!