

# —muzsika

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## COMPOSERS ARRIVING ON THE SCENE

*by Máté Hollós*

### Interview with Alessio Elia

*Máté Hollós: How did it happen that you got in touch with Hungary?*

Alessio Elia: Many years ago I was waiting for a bus in Rome. It started to rain so I entered a bookshop and started to look around. There I found a book of novelettes by Géza Csáth. I didn't know him, but I read about his life on the back cover, which was quite interesting, so I bought the book. A few years later I wrote an opera about him and his writing. That is how I started to be interested in Hungary. Until that period among the Hungarian contemporary composers I knew only Ligeti, but at that time I was not able to understand the important role he had in the history of music and when I realize it he was already sick and at the end of his life, therefore I could not have the chance to meet him personally. Not much later I was looking for a teacher with whom to continue my studies in composition and I found Zoltán Jeney.

*You speak English very well, but with him it was not necessary.*

Exactly, we talked in Italian.

*Was the fact that Jeney was a student of Petrassi somehow related to your choice of studying with him?*

No. I found Jeney's logical way of thinking interesting and that was the main reason I decided to study with him. I also have a logical way to approach composition and it was curious to see how he could improve my compositional thinking.

*Your music is often related to physics and chemistry. Do you look for scientific inspiration to create the logic of your music?*

Science is merely a source of inspiration for me, I don't want to make a transliteration of science into music. I think we need to keep in contact with the world around us and science, particularly

physics, can give an explanation of it. Science can offer a way of being related to the world much deeper than cultivating shared musical languages, which are far more subject to fashions. Naturally there are also fashions in the field of science: for example at present the string theory has acquired a relevant and shared interest, but generally speaking science can provide acceptable answers to the many questions the world raises. In any case to me the most important thing in music is to create something for the ears.

*If you listen to the works of some contemporary colleagues who don't use this source of inspiration, but rather rhythmical, lyrical or epic elements, don't you find their compositions contemporary enough?*

Naturally I have taste preferences, but I don't reject a work because it doesn't employ the same source of inspiration or background I use. In making music the most important features are the quality and the excellence of the technique.

*Let me ask you a provocative question. Don't you think that you and other composers who work on the basis of scientific systems need a kind of assurance that the musical construction made by you should be justified by some measureable order of the real world?*

Science is only one element of my compositional tools. Two recent works of mine, a *Credo* employing a Latin text and another piece for choir and ensemble which is based on a 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript have nothing to do with science. The text of this last work is still indecipherable, but we could know somehow the content because of the many drawings it shows: it is an essay of pharmacology, astronomy and botany.

*How can you shape the chorus' song if we don't know, not only the content of the text, but even more the pronunciation?*

This is really a challenge. An English professor and scholar, Stephen Bax, who is an expert of languages and manuscripts, claimed to have deciphered 14 scripts, providing also the plausible sounds of them. I have employed in my piece a text that makes use of those sounds.

*Who discovered this manuscript and where was it discovered?*

Voynich, who also discovered other rare books from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He found this manuscript in an Italian monastery [Villa Mondragone] and now it is preserved at Yale University.

*I read an interview with you published in Dal+Szerző, the Magazine of the Hungarian Bureau for the Protection of Authors' Rights, where you declare you are not bound to any nation. Did you never feel any belonging? Not even at the beginning of your career? Your Italian roots didn't play any role? You spent many years in different parts of Europe: were you not influenced by the German or Scandinavian music for example?*

I have been influenced by composers, but this does not stand in any relation to their nationality. I found them instinctively. I do not think that music has a feature which can be labeled German, Hungarian, Italian or any other. In France for example, there are several trends, like the spectral

music, which is a tendency shared by a number of composers only, but it is no more French than any of the other trends there.

*I am not asking from the point of view of a musical nationalism, but it is evident and demonstrable that in the opus of many Hungarian composers there is a kind of Hungarian declamation, or the Baltic countries have a type of “Nordic” voice and so on.*

I never asked myself what is Italian or even Hungarian in my music. I left Italy when I was 25 and my first musical education developed in Italian schools where the studies put an emphasis on classical music. For example at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> class there is an exam of 36 hours, during which the student is “enclosed” in the school building and there he should write a fugue in the style of Bach. This is a very good practice for writing in the style of historical composers but it could slow down the process of developing of an original style. I was very lucky because my teacher there, Giovanni Piazza was very open-minded and encouraged me to find my own voice.

*The classical music training influences also the Hungarian system of teaching. I remember when I was a student of the Liszt Academy and when we met the Polish colleagues of the same age who didn't have the same way of teaching, they told us that putting a stress on the tradition would have hindered them to find their own voices. But even with so, let me provoke you. In the last 50–100 years we can find a lot of works of composers who based their music on ideas that have created works well constructed but that didn't find a way to touch the audience. It is important to you to touch the public?*

When I compose, I do not think of a potential public. I don't try to write something in which people could recognize themselves or a type of music they can be pleased by. Music, as I already mentioned, is made for the ears. In my compositional experience the subject of psychoacoustics is quite important. In this sense the period I spent in Norway had a significant importance as I could get in touch with the composer Lasse Thoresen from whom I learnt the aural analysis. He developed a method of aural analysis, which could be used also for the compositional work.

*How can you describe the effect on you of Thoresen or other professors?*

My music is very different from Thoresen's music. He works on the integration of different types of musical traditions, trying to create in that way his own language and in this he has surely succeeded. One of the first things he said to me was: “the pitch is the last aspect”. If music is based on melody and harmony then the pitches are important. In my music the form is based not only on pitches, but even more on the development of acoustical phenomena, the change of the beat rate or the internal resonance of the sounds for example. This led me to what I call *polysystemism*, the integration of different tuning systems. The *polysystemism* is able to provide complex acoustic phenomena. This is not a mere theory: although the theory requires calculations [in order to ensure the exactness of the frequencies of the different tuning systems employed], the listener is able to perceive the results.

*It is really possible for the audience to follow it?*

Following is not important. If we face a painting we don't make an analysis of a blue saying that it is darker than another one. When I apply different tuning systems, what is important is the global sounding result.

If we use Equal Temperament we can employ all the acoustical phenomena of it, but if we use more types of tuning systems we give to listeners a variety of musical phenomena they can perceive in the piece.

Strangely this abandonment to the listening is more difficult for a professional musician who continually raises questions about what he listens than for a “normal” audience, more attracted by the music experience in itself.

*You left Italy ten years ago. How strong are your professional relationships there?*

I was lucky to have left the country at a young age. In 2006 I was travelling continuously between Budapest and Rome where I still had to complete my studies. I tried to absorb as much as I could from Europe, but now my professional relationships with the Italian scene is a bit stronger.

*And what about the Hungarian colleagues?*

I have a Hungarian wife, but I work all day long at home. I don't have a real social life. By winning the first prize in the New Hungarian Music Forum I got in contact with some Hungarian composers. The most profound acquaintance with them I get by listening their works.

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*[Translated from the original text in Hungarian]*