

The Way of the Trumpeter

Scherter Judit's interview with Tarkövi Gábor

'Without music life would be a mistake'

– Friedrich Nietzsche –

I have known you since you were very young so I know that you were a lively, active child to put it mildly. How that undisciplined little boy, who cut off girls' braids and jumped out of the window to escape the teacher, has become a disciplined musician, solo trumpeter of the Berlin Philharmonics?

Probably that childhood bravery has something to do with playing the trumpet. Because a trumpeter in a band has to be brave to start playing first at a concert, to play the first notes. Because if a violinist plays a false note only the people sitting in the first two rows will notice, but if a trumpeter plays a false note then the cleaning lady in the next room drops her broom. An American trumpeter once said this and I did not come up with it as an excuse; I really was a village bad boy. Every child was bad in Csolnok, where I grew up, since every one of them wanted to be the leader of the gang and only the most daring one had a chance; he or she had to do the wildest things in a forest where we used to play or at school where we were supposed to learn. Csolnok is a beautiful village in one of the valleys of the Gerecse where Marie-Therese sent Austrian and German miners. This is how my family got here, partly from Alsace-Lorraine and partly from Lower Austria. In the church register you can find the words miner and musician next to the name Quintz – we magyarized this to Tarkövi. My father's father, a self-taught musician was already teaching music. I dare say that this 'Donauschwab' miner village is mainly characterised by music. When I was a child there was a musician in almost every family, I mean there was someone who could play one or more instruments. At primary school there were three brass bands and two choirs. School of music had almost the same function as primary school, it was evident that at the age you started school you started the school of music as well. You could choose flute, clarinet, French horn, trumpet and tuba. It was more difficult for the girls because they could not learn violin or cello in the village, only brass band instruments and the piano. Or they could choose percussion instruments, but percussionists were not considered musicians in our village. But now I return to my legendary bad behaviour. I really behaved very badly at school but at band rehearsals never. That was the conductor standing in front of us, the director of the school of music, and we simply had to concentrate very much. We did what he had said and were happy to play music together. This was the effect playing in a band had on us. Playing music is used as a form of therapy for children with behavioural problems. I remember the first rehearsal very well, I was nine and the boy sitting next to me was sixteen and already this fact scared me a bit. I was second flugelhorn...

Did not you start by playing the trumpet?

No, I did not. When I was six and went to register at the school of music myself they asked me what I wanted to learn and I said I did not mind. This is how I became a pianist. It was a bit embarrassing because my grandfather, father and brother, everyone

was a trumpeter in my family. But I did not even have milk teeth so I could not play a wind instrument, I had to play the piano for two years. In the beginning it is exciting to learn playing the piano because unlike with a wind instrument it is easy to find the notes and feels like playing music even if he is only tickling the ivories. After the piano my father wanted me to learn the clarinet, an instrument I did not really like. Fortunately one day the trumpet teacher appeared at my clarinet lesson and with a brand new trumpet he basically lured me to learn playing the trumpet. It was not very nice of me but I did not even say a word to my clarinet teacher but grabbed the trumpet and walked over to the next room, the trumpet room. The trumpet teacher asked me whether I knew anything about playing the trumpet and I played *// Silenzio* to him that I had learned on my brother's trumpet. Considering how young I was I played quite well. The first week I had to learn half of the trumpet course book, about 100 exercises. This is how I became a trumpeter. I was ten years old.

When did you decide to become a 'real' musician?

It is sure that around the age of twelve I had no doubt about it. At that time I did not know about symphonic orchestras all I wanted to do was playing the trumpet and make a living out of that. This was quite unusual in my family, they always thought one should have proper job and in his free time he can play the trumpet as much as he wants. My grandmother was desperate when she learnt that I was going to be a musician because she thought that I would end up down in the gutter since it was impossible to live on playing music. Later when I was in Győr, in the first year of secondary school, one of my friends lent me a video tape with disco music on it, but by accident it also contained Dvorak's Symphony No.8, performed by the New York Philharmonics and conducted by Zubin Mehta. I listened to it every day because I liked it a lot and I thought that I would like to play this symphony but in a better orchestra than a village brass band.

Did you get to play it later?

Just recently, I was very happy, in Prague while I was working in Munich with Latvian conductor Mariss Jensonss. I went to Munich from Berlin because I wanted to work with the brilliant conductor Lorin Mazel. Not to mention that the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra's reputation was excellent, I knew them from recordings. And the fact that Munich is much closer to Hungary than Berlin probably also played a part in my decision, I thought I would be going home quite often...But it turned out differently...

Excuse me, but we left the story off in Győr, you are fifteen years old and attend the conservatoire, and you would like to play in an orchestra one day.

Yes, yes...After the conservatoire where I got to learn and play lots of excellent pieces an important step followed: I moved to Budapest, a strange but very interesting world of music. At college I had the opportunity to play in orchestras, for example in the

orchestra of the Hungarian Radio where I played together with my professor, Geiger György. His knowledge, discipline and musical devotion really impressed me. I also consider Kurtág György my master, whose wise words or characteristic gestures still surface sometimes when I am rehearsing. His humble approach to music influenced me greatly. After graduating from the Academy I played more and more but there were no jobs available in Hungary so I wrote, if I remember it well, about sixty letters to different orchestras in Germany. I received only one invitation, from Reutlingen, where I was offered the job of first trumpet. Shall I skip certain parts? Is not it boring?

You mean Reutlingen was boring?

It really was a rich and boring small town but the real problem was that I hated travelling all the time and very often I only had time to practice at night, let's say from midnight until three a.m. It was worth doing it though because I managed to get to Berlin, to the Berlin Symphony Orchestra that was a real city orchestra. They used to be the major orchestra in East Berlin. I spent the first six years here as first trumpeter and it really was a difficult task. I worked with such conductors Michael Schönwandt, Michael Gielen and Elisha Inbal and thanks to my great colleagues I got to know and learn the German style of playing music to a certain extent. In the meantime I was not only playing music but also enjoying life in Berlin, going to work by bicycle, having nice meals in excellent restaurants, going to groovy jazz clubs with my friends and visiting interesting arts exhibitions – especially the paintings of Schiele had a major influence on me. Berlin is a great city to live in! I and my wife loved living there and our two sons were born there.

After Munich it is now Berlin again...

Yes, at the Berlin Philharmonics there has been a vacancy for the post of first trumpet and this only happens in every 20th-30th year...

How come? If someone is member of an orchestra he plays there until he drops his bow? I mean the trumpet.

Well, if someone is admitted at the age of thirty he can play there at least until he gets sixty-five because that is the official age of retirement.

But what if he plays worse and worse and falls asleep during rehearsal, can he still stay? Will you stay there for ever?

As a matter of fact I could...If I am able to meet the musical requirements of the job continuously. It is obvious that if one gets a to a level of playing for the Berlin Philharmonics he is not only a good musician, but at the same time is diligent enough to keep up his level of playing. It is true though that one has to be able to renew, if he played Mahler's Symphony No.5 ten years ago it

does not necessarily mean that he is able to play it now. One has to be able to renew! One of the reasons why this orchestra is so good is that none of the old colleagues think, well, I have already played this piece with Karajan, I know it very well, but they are open to the ideas of our present chief conductor, Simon Rattle. They still practice two-three hours a day just like when they were young. It is very important to preserve our musical openness. It is a good sign if one has stage fever even before his 100th concert, he is tenser than on an ordinary day, because it means he wants to perform well. I think it is the sine qua non of performing because if one does not have stage fever it means that he does not care about the concert.

What do you think at the age of 36 are you at the zenith of your career?

Career is a strange thing in the case of musicians. It has many aspects. I could think that I am at the top of my career because I am the solo trumpeter in one of the best orchestras in the world. To a certain extent I do think so, yes. But on the other hand I reckon that it was also the top of my career when at a concert in another good orchestra I did something exactly like I had always wanted. For instance in Mahler's Symphony No.5 with Lorin Mazel once. It was a great test for me because I have listened to this piece as recorded by Mazel and the Vienna Symphony Orchestra and have always wanted to play it. Another 'great moment' was when Mahler's Symphony No.3 with Bernard Haitink that I played in Berlin in my test year. It is an exciting thing, the test year, the period that follows the test performance. Fifteen-twenty people come to the test play from all over the world that are considered good enough to play – in this case – the trumpet for the orchestra. After three rounds and a long deliberation the orchestra decided that I would be given the chance of a test year. This is a demanding period both physically and mentally because one cannot feel safe in the job and has to play at difficult concerts. At the end of the year each member of the orchestra casts his or her vote to decide whether the tested musician is offered the contract...

Let's say that in a few years the Chicago Symphony Orchestra offers you a test year. Would you go for it?

It would be tempting but I think I would not, for I am very happy in Berlin and the United States is far not only from Hungary, but Berlin as well.