

BOOK REVIEW

THE PAST OF A MUSIC SCHOOL IN ORADEA – (EMŐDI JÁNOS: EGY NAGYVÁRADI ZENEISKOLA MÚLTJA. VARADINUM SCRIPT, NAGYVÁRAD, 2015)

The last volume of local historian János Emődi brings a significant contribution to the literature of Oradea's musical past by gathering and interpreting several documents regarding the foundation and functioning of the Szalay-Fischer music school, considered one of the most prominent institutions in the early development of the city's musical life. The author, both as a former student and descendant of the founder family also intends to pay a tribute to three personalities, who played an important role in the musical education of several generations: Stefánia Szalay, her husband Ervin Fischer and her younger brother Elemér Szalay.

The volume consists of an introductory study, a historical overview of their lives and work, and an impressive amount of data, mostly primary sources, meticulously collected and systematized: lists of teachers and students, including the program of their concerts, certificates, letters, posters, yearbooks and other informative materials of music schools, articles and photos.

Stefánia Szalay and her late husband, Ervin Fischer studied both at the Music Academy in Budapest, having such prominent teachers, former pupils of Franz Liszt like István Thomán, Árpád Szendy. More, Stefánia attended to Bartók's class in her last year of study, maintaining further on a good relationship with the composer. After graduation, she opened a music school in Oradea in 1909, inviting Ervin Fischer, who became later her husband to join the teaching staff. Soon after, he took over the leadership, but his military service during the First World War led to the deterioration of his health, and later to his premature death in 1924.

The education system, materials and method of the school was identical with those applied in Budapest, many of its students successfully attended to the music academies of Wien and Budapest. The Szalay-Fischer couple have recognized relatively soon the importance of a city financed institution, and though they took the necessary steps the project was delayed until 1941. It is suggestive that 14 members of the family became professional musicians, many of them being former students of the school.

The prematurely widowed Stefánia Szalay was supported in her work by her younger brother Elemér Szalay. He also started his music studies in her sister's school, and after graduating from law school, he attended to Hans Koessler's composition class in Budapest. From 1922 he joined her sister's school as a teacher. Later, in 1930 he founded his own institution of music education, and in 1941 played an essential role in the establishment of the first publicly financed music school in Oradea, whose director was until his death in 1947.

This public school, as the former ones offered an outstanding level of music education (piano, violin, singing, cello, composition), with a 12-15 teachers and 2-300 students. The institution acquired in 1945 the rank of a conservatory, and unfortunately, soon after, in 1953 it was degraded to a popular school of arts.

The Szalay brothers were multi-faceted musicians, bringing an important contribution to Oradea's cultural development. Elemér was characterized by his master, Koessler a promising composer. He took an active part in the city's musical life as an organist, accompanist and even by writing articles. Stefánia was also known as a fine interpreter, being also member in several societies of charity, art and public life. Her house was opened for the prominent musicians of the time, like Béla Bartók or Ernst von Dohnányi. After the premature death of her husband, she carried on, leading the music school and teaching until her retirement in 1963. She was awarded in 1959 in Budapest with a gold diploma as a recognition of her educational work during a half-century.

This volume of János Emődi is the second, enhanced edition of his book entitled Documents on Oradea's Music History, appeared in 2006 on the occasion of Bartók Year.

ATTILA FODOR