

János Balázs: ImprovisArt (Sheva)

Although it is slowly approaching its finale, the concert series in honour of György Cziffra's (1921-1994) birthday rolls over to 2022.

Still, it is quite justified to ask: why couldn't we enjoy a Cziffra Festival ever after, even weekly or daily, if we like? How do I mean this? In the simplest possible way. Here, in my room. I wouldn't need anything but a suitable music player and CD as a tribute. Based on its title, we could infer that the CD certainly must contain at least a bit of jazz music, and indeed, this presumption is not unfounded.

Géza Simon's undeservedly low-prestige *Hungarian Jazz History* (published by the Hungarian Jazz Research Association in 1999) mentions Cziffra three times as an "early jazzist", owing to his activity as a bar pianist. However, Simon's other work, *Hungarian Jazz Discography 1905-2000* (published by the Jazz Education and Research Foundation in 2005), makes no reference to Cziffra. Is it perhaps a contradiction? No, it isn't. Simon's latter work concentrates exclusively on the jazz publications released as sound recordings. Such recording was not carried out with Cziffra due to the peculiar considerations regarding the period's cultural policies.

Cziffra's memoirs, *Cannons and Flowers*, were, however, published in Hungary twice, in 1983 and 2015. There is, in fact, written documentation of Cziffra's adventurous life, which can be read, if we decide to do so. János Balázs' tribute CD is a must, though, no matter from which direction we approach it: from Cziffra's music or the compositions of classical masters. If I consider Cziffra's attitude to performance (based on his recordings from the mid-1950s), I have come to realise that János Balázs is none other than Cziffra's reincarnated self, as what he gives us is certainly much more than filling the space Cziffra's absence creates in the world. It is as if Cziffra received a second chance from life, yet the album doesn't feature any jazz. What it does feature is the highest-level improvisation skills within the boundaries of classical music. (It will surely remain the exception that proves the rule in a certain sense, namely in the encore recorded on the album). The repertoire itself was compiled so that it focuses on compositions that support or require improvisation. It is a well-known fact that Bach left space for the interpreters of some of his works to communicate their own musical ideas. Therefore, it is no surprise that the programme begins with Busoni's transcription of one of Bach's pieces. In János Balázs' rendering, we can virtually hear a transcription of a transcription. It is also common knowledge that György Cziffra came into the limelight with his interpretation of Liszt's piano compositions, and Liszt himself had already been a keen improviser. The album contains four pieces that can be connected to Ferenc Liszt. This fact speaks for itself again.

György Cziffra was happy to make popular classical music pieces even more widely known. In this spirit, Saint-Saëns's *Swan* floats towards us. We can also enjoy the paraphrase of one of Puccini's well-known arias and two of Brahms' *Hungarian Dances*, also arranged by Cziffra in his time. The emotional charge of János Balázs' performance does not leave much to be desired, but it is just how things usually are to be expected.

But let's take Mendelssohn's masterpiece known as *The Wedding March*. If the serenity reflected in János Balázs' rendering doesn't make you feel like getting married, nothing will! I, therefore, wish to draw – also – young couple's attention to this interpretation. The encore is *Happy Birthday*, addressing the centenary of György Cziffra's birthday. When I first heard it, the presence of this corny melody seemed somewhat odd but not unjustified. When, however, Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt and Gershwin "interfered" with the piece, things fell into place, and my doubts dispersed. By the way, I don't necessarily believe in reincarnation, but I certainly do believe in the freedom of artistic ambitions and the faith and creative power of artists. This marvellous album true – in all respects – to György Cziffra's memory definitely reinforces my convictions mentioned above.

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