

They would take Bartók's music to new places and new ears

Interview with Peter Sarik - digitalhungary.hu - Anna Debreczeni - 11.05.2021.



The Bluebeard Jazz Opera promises to be one of the biggest musical sensations of the year.

We have to wait until August for the presentation, but the sound recordings have already been made. I asked pianist Peter Sarik about the driving forces behind the uniquely bold enterprise, the relationship between Bartók and the digital generation.

As a routine speaker, you asked yourself one of the most obvious questions – perhaps more crudely than I would have put it – when you said, “the first question at this point is always, what the hell are we doing this for?”

Isn't a classical, classical work as good as Bluebeard's castle, as it is?

But surely, it is the best as it is, and it cannot be better. In a remake, we always try to add something different to the original, to adapt it a bit to today's ears and of course to our own genre. Anyone who is a fan of Bluebeard will listen to the original anyway, our target audience is not them, but those who are averse to this wonderful work for the time being. It's a difficult and responsible process, thankfully for our Jazz Request Show program, where we've jazzed up all kinds of music, we've had plenty of decades of routine on the subject.

In addition to Mozart, Beethoven and Vivaldi on the classical music line, Bartók's more modern music of the 20th century is not a new field for you either.

How did you come up with the idea to arrange Bartók's only opera, the Bluebeard's castle into jazz?

We also said at our Bartók album, which they are not used to, they do not dare that Béla Bartók's music is too abstract, too modern for many, even in classical music-loving circles.

The Bluebeard is currently one of the most popular operas in the world.

Singing is very important in this genre, the whole world is whistling the most beautiful, most famous opera arias.

The Bluebeard isn't that whistling piece, it's hard for most students to have vocal dissonances in many places, and the work has everything to say to a good couple, but it would certainly not be

nice to the average person. At least not on first hearing.

I love every moment of the piece and all my desire is to be loved by more of our version, which is why we've worked it out.

Aren't you afraid of the dissatisfied people who say we are desecrating this world-famous classic?

It took all of our work so far to dare and be able to do this opera processing.

And we also have to bear the weight that will hit us with the reception. We expect a lot of people to like it very much and not the same ones - and they will make a sound of it.

It took a lot of courage, because the genre of opera is very far from jazz and Bartók's music is terribly difficult and complex anyway.

It was a huge job, I almost gave up several times, but now we release the record in the knowledge that we made it with the utmost humility and attention.

How did the story of the current Bluebeard begin?

The invitation came in 2019, when we played at the Bartók Plus Opera Festival in Miskolc.

After a very successful concert in the backstage, conductor Gergely Kesselyák, opera director, suggested that we can do anything for next year's 2020 festival - for example the Bluebeard.

Thanks again for the invitation! One can easily say yes to such an offer after two glasses of wine.

It later fell off, what we actually undertook. But I was very excited about this work.

Serious preparations began, because this work process was for us immersed in a foreign world, both musically and technically: for example, I don't usually read symphonic scores on a daily basis, so I progressed slowly.

Besides, what else was a big challenge for you?

To transfer all this to a jazz band - knowing that jazz musicians usually start and end a song at the same pace, while in this work there are millions of slowdowns, accelerations, changes in tempo.

These had to be combed together to retain the original message and intent of the work, but in the meantime we also had a meaningful role to play in it and we would be able to play it.

Who helped you the most in this?

Primarily my fantastic musicians: Attila Galfi and Tibor Fonay. Firstly, by taking on this almost impossible mission at all, and then by being perfectly prepared and already playing their voices easily in the studio.

A very important player in the project is Gábor Hollerung, the conductor of the Dohnányi Symphony Orchestra in Budafok, with whom we have had a very good relationship for a long time, and who has entered into a partnership in the work.

He also had the expertise and obviously the courage to reach into the original tempos of the piece, making the processing fresher, more modern and even playable with a jazz band.

I also relied on Gábor to select the singers: Adrienn Miksch and Krisztián Cser sing the main roles, Judit and Bluebeard. I think this adventure was a difficult and risky undertaking for them too, I am grateful to have it found.

I'm following you on Facebook, and I've been seeing Bluebeard studio recordings for a couple of months now - how come you didn't record the opera in the classic way, in a concert hall?

We really didn't record the material the way we do with classical works - when the whole band, singer and conductor march into a room - but like a pop record. Each instrument was recorded separately, including the drum, bass, piano, strings, and singers. This recording mode is an amazing difference to classical musicians compared to the way they work, but they solved this task perfectly, thank you so much!

What was your job during the production?

It is important to emphasize that of course I did not rewrite the piece.

The opera goes from beginning to end following the score, adding two piano cadences.

The vocals are also intact.

As we approach from the jazz point of view, of course, the improvisation over the original musical fabric is almost continuous, but the most significant change has taken place in the orchestration.

The line-up of piano, drums, bass, Fender Rhodes, Hammond organ, string orchestra has fundamentally changed the sound picture, especially the drums and plucked jazz bass make the work modern and hopefully more familiar to young people.

How do you imagine the spectacle for this fundamentally modern-sounding opera, which even got a jazz remake?

In recent months, a lot of thought has been born about what the piece will look like on stage.

I knew right away that on the one hand I wanted a strong spectacle at the performance, I wanted it to be something that was also interesting to the twenty year old eye.

We also need to keep in mind that people's stimulus thresholds are already in the skies, especially for young people - and we want to please the work with people who wouldn't basically sit in for a Bluebeard performance.

On the other hand, we need simple solutions, by no means do I want a production that is difficult to implement and requires a lot of scenery, because the goal is to present the processing in as many places as possible.

I would like to achieve what we have already managed with our X Bartók album, so that Bartók can play in places where it has not been possible so far, because the main goal, as I have mentioned many times, is to promote Bartók.

That's why it was a great experience to play in a jazz club in Bucharest and then in the art house of a small Finnish town, or to see people dance to Bartók's jazzy music at the Kapolcs festival.

But back to the sight: graphic artist Krisztián Gál - who has already made a CD cover for us - drew a series of Bluebeard's, which came into my ideas with astonishing accuracy.

I really like what he created, and so the cover and booklet of the CD - as a full-fledged graphic publication - and the visual background of the performance were born at the same time.

How are you usually about digitization? I can see that you are up on Facebook and Instagram too, actively posting and responding to emails right away.

Do you manage all the interfaces or do you have a social media manager?

If not, how does this fit into your daily routine?

I post everywhere and I really don't know I have that much time for it. Unfortunately, this cannot be passed on at this level, as I have fresh pictures and videos of ourselves. I'd rather spend the time spent on, say, more practice, but I know it's important, so I do.

Of course, I also have a limit: a media expert friend encouraged me to enter the world of TikTok as well, because the surface is getting more and more pronounced, but I admit that what I see there is more intimidating for the time being, so it is still waiting.

What do you think about the changing music listening habits that you are taking to gain a foothold in music sharing providers?

Is it possible to make money from music at all, even outside of concerts?

Unlike others, I have had positive experiences with CD sales, all of our recent records have been bought, and there is such a demand for them that we are thinking about reprinting. On the other hand, the fact that we can sell our records mostly after our concerts, we were also able to sell very little in the stores.

Classical music and jazz are also listened to to a greater extent by seniors, who are more likely to still have a CD player at home, even vinyl, or just having vinyl again. More recently, vinyl has also come in - the black disc or LP - and has brought back the quality that the CD took.

We recorded the Bluebeard in the best possible quality, in addition to the CD, we plan to print vinyl from it, but it will also be available on a flash drive and in a downloadable way after purchase.

Importantly, for a while, I'm sure I don't want to see this album on Spotify or any other music-sharing interface. Probably students are unaware that these very cheap and convenient music delivery interfaces bring almost no revenue to artists with an average audience.

However, the Bluebeard CD is a publication created with a lot of money and a lot of money, so in this case I do not consider this system to be fair and interpretable.

I want to go back to the old order where there was still a tangible value of a work of art, people went into the store, bought the record and everyone was fine. At this point, I would like to stress the importance of state support for culture and thank Emmi, NKA and MMA for their support, without which we would not have had a chance to create the production.

In light of this, what do you think about the growing number of online gigs over the last year due to restrictions?

It is incomprehensible to me the trend - which has intensified even more with the advent of the pandemic - that artists who were forced to become pizza couriers while still pouring content freely on online surfaces. I think this trend is just as damaging as free concerts: people get used to not having to pay for art, which is what we price ourselves for, and we also lose the chance to take us seriously.

Personally, how did you experience the past period of concerts, without an audience?

It was rippling, with a lot of good stuff and a few lows. I was happy to spend a lot of time with my family - our little boy was 4 years old in February this year, these are wonderful years, we were very much and we are still together. It is also positive that we have had more time to look deep into things - which is pretty much commonplace, of course - but seeing the pace we were living before the epidemic, it certainly would not have been possible.

In addition to these, it was also a kind of spiritual practice. I always preach the word of positive thinking, I confess that one has to pay attention to one's own soul, thoughts, preferably directed, reacting acceptably, positively to the events of life. When all goes well, it's easy, but the last one year has been good for finding out what you can do in practice in case of trouble. I am proud to feel like I passed the exam. Moreover, even in such an incompetent situation, the Bluebeard and others were achieved. We stayed and somehow always came in as much money as we needed to survive. I am confident that this impossible situation will slowly come to an end and that we will be able to take the stage again.

What makes the topic of Bluebeard topical, what do you think it has to say?

If one knows the work superficially, one may have in mind the myth that Bluebeard is a bloodthirsty gentleman who kills women in a row in his castle. Obviously, that's not what the piece is about, but at least as tragic is what happens. I listened to it very many times, I consider the text of Béla Balázs to be brilliant, and I developed a rather definite interpretation of the story.

I think we're witnessing a very nasty game, spiced up with a story next to each other. There is a strong, mighty, rich man who bleeds from many wounds inside, and his soul longs for what a young and fragile-looking woman could give him. But Judit is curious, more and more curious, and without caring about the feelings and warnings of Bluebeard, using all sorts of female practices, she gets to get deeper and deeper into the soul of Bluebeard, wants to see and know everything, and then crosses the border from which there is no going back.

I think the eternal lesson of the piece is that the games only work from time to time and there is no point in manipulation, only honest, straightforward communication, without violence and pressure.

And this applies not only to the relationship, but to all human relationships. Of course, in the play, as in life, it is much, much more complicated than we could describe in an extended sentence.

I am confident that through our Bluebeard processing, many will get closer to Bartók's music, and later they will also be sincere fans of the master's art and the original version of the opera.

(Translated by Google Translator)