

Hallelujahs and Fragments

Last year, Sydney cellist Zoltán Szabó visited Péter Eötvös in Budapest to talk about his new oratorio

Péter Eötvös's home is in one of the leafy suburbs of Budapest, far away from the bustle and noise of the city. Situated behind a well-kept garden, the house is unimposing from the outside, but spacious and light once we are inside. The matching colours of the walls and furniture are warm and pleasing to the eye, and there is plenty of room downstairs for a comfortable work space next to the open-plan kitchen and living area. This is where we sit with strong smoky tea and an assortment of equally smoky nuts to talk about Eötvös's recent work, *Halleluja – Oratorium balbulum*.

'I was guest-conducting a Bartók program with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra at the Salzburg Festival back in 2008,' he begins. 'We were only in the interval of the first rehearsal, when one of the principal players, who was also a member of the programming committee, came to me and asked if I would consider writing an oratorio for their orchestra. The exact reasons why they wanted an oratorio were never revealed to me; but it may have helped that they liked my rubato style of conducting Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and thus, my interest in interpreting sung words.'

The text for *Halleluja* is by one of the foremost writers in contemporary Hungarian literature, Péter Eszterházy. The two Péters knew each other for a long time; apart from their friendship, they met regularly at the meetings of the Berlin Academy of the Arts, of which they were both members. Working on the score of *Halleluja* was truly a joint artistic venture, symbolically expressed on the score's first page which says: *Music and text written by E. P. & E. P.* In fact Eötvös's only condition to the Vienna Philharmonic's request was that the libretto be written by Eszterházy. 'He is a highly regarded writer in Austria, as most of his novels are translated into German,' says Eötvös. 'He and I share a similar sense of humour, something

I value very much. Also, his way of thinking about music is similar to how I think about literature. We worked intensely and extremely well. As it turned out, it was not only our first, but also our last project together, as he died a few days before the first performance in Salzburg.

'In an oratorio, there is always a narrator,' Eötvös explains. 'As I was fascinated by Eszterházy's way of putting words together, I knew immediately that my Narrator would speak in prose to make those erudite sentences clear.'

Z.S. *The work is called Halleluja – Oratorium balbulum. This title needs some explanation...*

P.E. After quite some research, we came across the figure of an amazing ninth-century monk, musician, poet, called Notker Balbulus from Sankt Gallen in Switzerland. He was a stutterer which appealed to Eszterházy, who said that 'words are important to those for whom they are difficult'. Needless to say, the stuttering had motivating implications regarding both the text and the music. The Prophet is not the historical Notker, though, although he definitely inspired us.

So, with a Prophet as the protagonist, is this a sacred oratorio?

Next to the Prophet, there is also a solo part for mezzo-soprano, that of the Angel. But no, this is not a sacred work. After all, these days, there are profane oratorios, rock oratorios, you name it. I would say our work treats a sacred theme in a profane way. Also, the real protagonist of this composition is not so much the Prophet or the Angel, but the chorus, the voice of the people. They are doomed to respond with a commentary of a hallelujah whatever turns their life will take. In various ways, the hallelujahs hold up a mirror to our society. Their inclusion throughout the work was Eszterházy's idea.

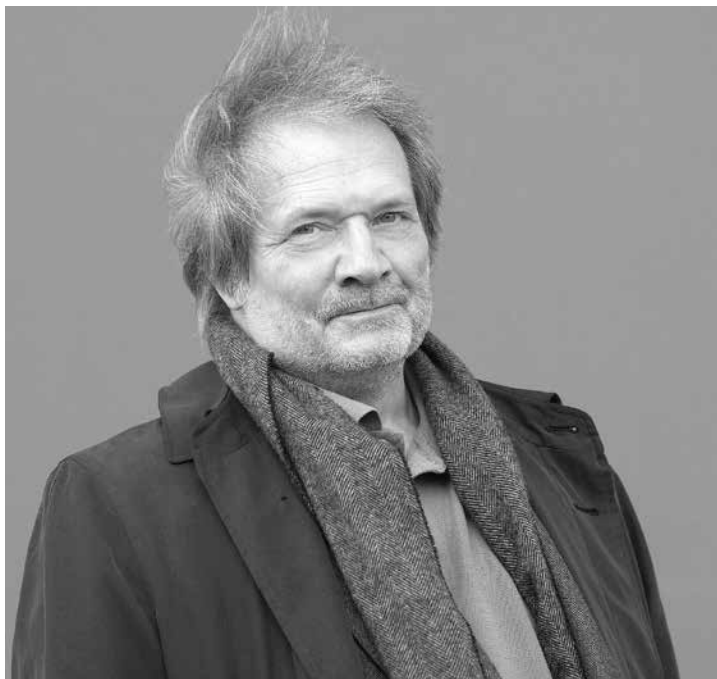


PHOTO: PRISKA KETTERER

These hallelujahs are fundamental pillars to the oratorio then. How did you choose them and make them such organic part of this work?

As is often the case in his works, Eszterházy's text is full of references, quotations, and paraphrases. Thus, the concept of borrowed material was already there. I took that one step further when I started to search for pre-existing hallelujah settings. Naturally, I found hundreds of them; in some cases, I did not even know their composer before. After an extended selection process, I decided to use hallelujahs originally composed by Monteverdi, Schein, Handel, Bach, and perhaps my favourite: Mussorgsky's chorus from *Boris Godunov*. I added only one hallelujah setting on my own and I composed that in Bartók's style. I have also included a hallelujah that Mozart composed, which is a canon for female voices, and another by Bruckner for male voices. Towards the end of the work, I juxtaposed them, as, when performed simultaneously, they sound incredibly good together. I am rather proud of that.

The title also says 'Four fragments'..

And that is very important. On a superficial level, of course, all the hallelujahs are fragments themselves. But that is not what the title suggests. When Eszterházy first wrote the text, he came up with a substantial work in its own right, a kind of a short drama, which was, however, much longer than what we feasibly could work with. In the end, only the most concentrated fragments of it remained. The nature of these fragments means that musical, historical or even political references notwithstanding, Eszterházy's potent text and my composition bring up momentous topics and ask questions, but cannot offer answers.

ZOLTÁN SZABÓ © 2017