



**Péter Eötvös, Judit Rácz**

## Settled in the Present

*Judit Rácz in Conversation with Péter Eötvös*

"In philosophy, literature, the theatre, painting, you name it, the new is seen as a positive, indeed it is expected, whereas in music it constantly has to be justified in the teeth of opposition". Talking in interview, Hungarian composer–conductor Péter Eötvös describes how he aims at wholeheartedly participating in the world of music: as a composer of contemporary music, as a conductor, as a supporter of young musicians and as a mediator of musical education.

**Judit Rácz:** Rather than a run–down of your life, let me just ask into what periods would you divide it?

**Péter Eötvös:** I was born in Székelyudvarhely (Odorheiu, Romania) in 1944. I began a globetrotting life when I was just a few months old, when the Russians were coming from the east, so we were obliged to trek westwards. For quite some time my family wandered around in Austria and Germany, before coming back to Miskolc in eastern Hungary.

**JR:** When a composer comes from Transylvania we tend to look for those roots in their music — in György Ligeti's case, not unprofitably either.

**PE:** My family was not Transylvanian, but personally I feel I am completely Transylvanian despite the fact that, a brief engagement in Kolozsvár (Cluj) apart, I have not managed to get back there since.

**JR:** So what does being Transylvanian mean?

**PE:** The fact that all my personal documents contain the word *Székelyudvarhely* made me a queer fish at primary school. After all I wasn't born in Hungary but in a place that no longer existed — in one of those magical lost territories. I belong to a home that is a bit different from home.

**JR:** That is, you constructed an identity for yourself out of nothing?

**PE:** It was a self–image that made me feel secure without having any consequences. Those Transylvanian roots came out most strongly when we moved to the Netherlands when I was fifty. A sort of homesickness overcame me, which gave rise to a couple of compositions. I got out an old book, the folk–song collection *Szépkenyerüszentmártoni gyűjtés*. What a marvellous name! <sup>1</sup>

In it I found various fine songs and pieces of instrumental dance music. Three of the movements for strings for my *Atlantis* came out of this collection.

*Atlantis* is about cultures that have disappeared, and those three movements are about the sinking of Transylvania specifically. At that time Pál Schiffer was making a documentary film about Transylvania, and it was he who told me that the traditional dance culture had vanished there, because the young were going to discos. That was one piece of information which made me realise that cultures in our own times are sinking. Another inspiration was Sándor Weöres's concrete poem "Néma zene" (Silent Music) in which there is a hidden line that goes "*Atlantis* / foundered / the year / it sank / we don't / know." And a third stimulus was that overnight the Soviet Union had simply ceased to exist.

**JR:** And did you mourn the sinking of that particular culture?

**PE:** No, one could only call it a culture in part, but it is an example of how an empire can sink within seconds. Fortunately, the Russian culture of Chekhov and the rest did not vanish with it. Cultures can cease in various manners, some passing on in a slow, natural process, others vanishing in a flash due to a catastrophe, or being eroded in some insidious manner... Another piece of mine, *Shadows*, a funeral dance that I composed after my son died, is Transylvanian music throughout. That is what my Transylvanian identity signifies for me.

**JR:** Is the inspiration behind *Atlantis* tragic and melancholy?

**PE:** At bottom, I don't approach anything tragically; I try to view everything objectively. There are two sides to that, of course, joy and sorrow are present in the consciousness and in the body, but when I begin to work on something, I have to stay on the outside. I am neither a religious nor a political animal, because I feel that this would lead to a narrowing of my perspective. I am an observer by nature, which is vital when it comes to collecting material.

**JR:** Can we go a little further into your life?

**PE:** In Miskolc I learned to play the piano at an excellent music school, with Bartók's music becoming hardwired in my fingers from the age of five onwards. After primary school I passed straight to the Academy of Music in Budapest, Kodály accepted me in the class for the highly gifted.

**JR:** You were accepted as a composer. Most people would assume highly gifted applies to instrumentalists. Is it possible to spot a talent for composing in a fourteen-year-old boy? What can one show at that age?

**PE:** Oh, I had accumulated a whole "repertoire" by then; I took my collected works to show Kodály... There were all sorts of pieces, from a cantata on.

**JR:** Have you disavowed them since then?

**PE:** No, never! There is no need to disavow anything; whatever there was, was. That Academy of Music period was interesting on two counts. First of all, even today I consider the Sixties to be one of the most flourishing ages of all. That was the first time we had the opportunity to discover Western cultures. The group of people I got into were artists and musicians who were interested in what was going on in the rest of the world, so we followed everything up. The Sixties were a period when there was a double culture in Hungary: there was the official culture, which was what it was, and not so bad at that, and there was the avant-garde underground, which fortunately was left to get on

with things, because that made it much easier for the political powers—that-be to keep tabs on it. I did not experience any form of banning; somehow my bread always fell buttered side up. During my Academy days, since I was good at improvising, I found my way into filmmaking and also into the Budapest theatre world. I produced music for a great many films, and I was the house composer for several of the big theatres. It is thanks to what I learnt during rehearsals at the time that I am now writing operas: theatre with music.

**JR:** What kind of music was that?

**PE:** I was a modernist.

**JR:** Very modern?

**PE:** Very. Electronic music, the lot. It was possible then, because new styles had got to Hungary with Polish films, and if the Poles were allowed to do it, then so could the Hungarians. That was when the Balázs Béla Studio was set up; modernity flourished there. If something was allowed to filmmakers, then it was allowed to theatres as well. For instance, Madách's *The Tragedy of Man or Timon of Athens* were turned into avant-garde productions at the National Theatre under Tamás Major's direction. There was quite a lot of resistance to the avant-garde as far as music went, however, and that still remains the case to this day. After I graduated I needed to continue my education to avoid being called up for the army. The funny side of it was that I was looking to get to Moscow to train as a conductor; I put in an application but got no answer. Time was starting to press, so someone suggested that I apply to DAAD, the (West) German Academic Exchange Service, so I did. Within a fortnight I had got an answer and a scholarship. That was how I got to West Germany in 1966. I made a beeline for Cologne, because that was the place for electronic music, which interested me at the time, and that was where Stockhausen, Mauricio Kagel and Bernd Alois Zimmermann were — and Ligeti too for a time. Everything that was big in the avant-garde was there, in Cologne. I qualified as a conductor, though I didn't set any great store on that. The very first day that I was in Cologne, incidentally, I saw a notice on the entrance door that Stockhausen was looking for a copyist. Great! That's me, I thought to myself. I copied an electronic score for him, *Telemusik*, so we were in daily contact. Then it transpired that I was a decent pianist so from that point on I became a regular part of his team. From 1968 on I used to travel to the West from Hungary as a member of the Stockhausen Ensemble.

**JR:** Just like that? In those days travel was not that simple for Hungarians. What's your take on it? Were you one of the privileged few who had proved they could be trusted to come and go freely? After all, back here in Hungary you were friendly with some dicey people.

**PE:** I travelled under contract to what was called the Hungarian Concert Office. I paid them a percentage of my earnings and I got my passport through them. The condition was that "the comrade had better come back," and the comrade always did. That was the scheme of things. Then in 1970 I was invited to go for six months to the World Fair at Osaka, and there the Germans invited me to work in the WDR Electronic Studio in Cologne. I was able to travel there perfectly legally, with a valid passport.

**JR:** I imagine that your name must have given you some measure of protection by then, or was there perhaps something in your nature that made them let you come and go?

**PE:** There's no two ways about it, I avoid getting into conflicts. I'm a Capricorn, so I usually get what I want by sheer persistence.

**JR:** What were you concentrating on then?

**PE:** Mainly electronic music during that long Cologne phase. It was quite by chance that I got back into conducting. A few of the Cologne musicians remembered the concert that I conducted to graduate, and they invited me to do a number of radio recordings, saying that I was a safe pair of hands. I travelled the world with Stockhausen, doing everything imaginable, from playing piano, percussion, constructing instruments, acting as a sound engineer — you name it, I learned it. I see it as a huge advantage that I have had the chance to be personally acquainted with every branch of music-making: I can produce professional-looking scores, I'm familiar with the science of acoustics, I have first-hand experience with musical instruments, I was even a répétiteur at the Cologne Opera House. With Stockhausen I played with the New York Philharmonic as well as the Berlin Philharmonic, I visited Lebanon, Persia, Japan... All that was very important, because the globetrotting and the sheer experience give a perspective that provides a huge sense of security. I did very little composing back then; I simply did not have the time.

**JR:** But you knew that you wanted to be a composer.

**PE:** I always was, from the age of four on. During the Seventies there was a large circle of musicians in Cologne, stacks of English and Americans, people from India and even further afield: a superb international crew who were constantly at work building the future century.

**JR:** And was it built?

**PE:** No, it became something entirely different; the world took another direction. In the Seventies, our avantgarde music and pop were still quite close to each other. But the symphony orchestras and their public were terribly stick-in-the-mud. My problem was that in my work as a conductor I was not moving in the same circle to which I belonged as a composer. As my career took off, it brought me to many of the major symphonic orchestras. Since the Nineties, however, there has been a rapprochement of the new and the old and now all the big orchestras in the West regularly play contemporary music, and play it magnificently at that.

**JR:** You mean you are no longer considered a conductor of contemporary music?

**PE:** I am simply a conductor; indeed, a composer-conductor, which is not a very common combination. Since about 2000 I have been a guest conductor at the Berlin Philharmonic. There it was Abbado who brought about a huge opening-up of the repertoire after Karajan's reign. That was when I was invited, primarily to conduct modern works.

**JR:** Which composers did they consider as modern?

**PE:** Ligeti, Kurtág, Harrison Birtwistle and a lot of younger composers, even Bartók, to some extent. I also got to conduct my own *Atlantis* on three evenings. It is largely thanks to Abbado lending his name and reputation that twentieth-century music became socially acceptable, *salonfähig* as they say, in Vienna as well as Berlin, so that audiences of two or three thousand now find it

quite natural to listen regularly to contemporary music. The regularity is very important. When Sir Simon Rattle took over at the Berlin Philharmonic, they became even more receptive, opening up in various directions. It turned out that every kind of music has its audience. After Sergiu Celibidache died [in 1996], the Munich Philharmonic also rejuvenated their repertory, and since then I have regularly conducted them. Last summer I directed Bartók with the Vienna Philharmonic in Salzburg, and it was under me that they played his *Cantata Profana* for the first time.

**JR:** Do you suggest the concert items?

**PE:** Sometimes I do, sometimes they do.

**JR:** Is there any scope for daring?

**PE:** One of the Berlin Philharmonic's programmes in April 2009 will start with one of the two 1921 transcriptions for orchestra that Schoenberg made of Bach chorale preludes. That will be followed by Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*, then B. A. Zimmermann's *Requiem for a Young Poet*. That's a typical programme for Berlin. For a few years now I have had a series with the Munich Philharmonic, and an earlier Hungarian programme, for example, consisted of Ligeti's *Lontano*, Kurtág's *Stele*, my own *zeroPoints*, and Bartók's pantomime *The Miraculous Mandarin*. One of this year's programmes was Bartók's *Four Orchestral Pieces*, my own *Jet Stream*, Debussy's *Jeux* and Varèse's *Arcana*. There are always three performances, the first being part of a subscription season for the young, which I usually preface with a talk.

**JR:** And do the young actually come?

**PE:** The concert hall is invariably packed. Regularity nurtures audiences. What I find depressing in Budapest is the poverty of information that goes into devising programmes. I get the impression that here music is just treated as entertainment; the concerts give no perspective on contemporary music, there is no deliberate striving to educate. If children regularly attend concerts in Munich, that is not because they read the posters, but because for years their teachers have been preparing them to do so. It's the same at the Opéra de Lyon: in Lyon it's not just the music teachers who make it their business, but the teachers of literature as well, by talking about the literary context of a piece. They also invite composers to go to the schools, who explain in person what the process of composition is in the first place and play bits from the piece. That's how you educate an inquisitive audience.

**JR:** What makes children look for something more than enjoyment?

**PE:** Children play while they learn and learn by playing: if the two things are separated the teaching is to blame. I have no objection to enjoyment as such, just enjoyment when it is at the expense of learning, of information.

**JR:** If you had the time and opportunity, what would you do to change that? If, say, the Palace of Arts here in Budapest were to ask you to map out the next five years.

**PE:** That might be on the short side. Six or eight years, a whole generational change in the way concerts are organised and consistent continuity are needed for something like that to have a chance. The sort of thing we did with the Ensemble InterContemporain in Paris. Out of fifteen administrative staff, six

were concerned with education. They would visit schools before every concert, taking a musician with them, and they would speak about what was going to happen. We noticed the first signs of a change after roughly three years: more and more young people started coming to the concerts, and they knew what they were coming to hear. The thing had started to intrigue them. We became a part of Paris's festival life and came into contact with the large and organised public that the festivals attracted. After around 5–6 years we had reached the point that we were playing to sold-out halls, and that's how it has stayed until the present day. The Ensemble InterContemporain is now celebrating its 30th birthday. With the big symphonic orchestras the difference is that they can plan longer-term and think bigger, so if only 300 attend the first concert, they don't just say, "See, it's not worth it! We'll try something else." Quite the reverse, they say, "More! Give us more!" That would be the example to follow.

**JR:** Is it a matter of money, or will?

**PE:** It depends on the money, but it's primarily a question of will. One has to build up a core that is able to stick consistently by the basic principles. Once the Eötvös Institute starts to operate on a permanent basis, I would like to implement an international exchange scheme, bringing the world to Budapest and sending youngsters out from here in order to see and hear more.

**JR:** You worked with Stockhausen during some of his important years. How would you sum him up?

**PE:** Stockhausen was one of those artists who build the future. Anything that type of artist does they do so in the knowledge that what they are creating is directed towards the future. Berlioz, Wagner, Bartók, Picasso, Eiffel, Le Corbusier were like this too. I include other arts here, because there is a poorly conceived concern for tradition that is rife in music. It is a bad habit that arose during the twentieth century — sad to say, as a product of performance practice. In philosophy, literature, the theatre, painting, you name it, the new is seen as a positive, indeed it is expected, whereas in music it constantly has to be justified in the teeth of opposition. To set about deliberately constructing the future, and at the same time constantly having to contend with opposition — that was typical of Stockhausen as well. That is why his relations with people around him were frequently quarrelsome, because he was by nature strong, vigorous, combative, but he only ever attacked in self-defence. That is why it was very important that I got to encounter him in 1966, because the training I had received at the Academy of Music in Budapest was based on an emotional musical tradition, one in which people received no technical information at all.

**JR:** So, nothing of a technical or structural nature?

**PE:** Nothing conscious or premeditated.

**JR:** And did that hinder you?

**PE:** Not while I was still in Hungary because I had no idea things could be any different. But when I got to Cologne it became evident that music is not just a matter of art but also — and I say this very softly — of science. A composer needs to know what a sound is, how it is produced, how it spreads, what gives a particular instrument its particular timbre. All the technical information that I had known nothing about I picked up in Cologne. Interestingly, though, my dealings with Stockhausen were based on an emotional tie, because there were

few around him for whom emotion and meaning were attached to every musical sound (paradoxically, perhaps, that is the very thing prized by the traditional school in Budapest). He was surrounded by technicians.

**JR:** And does that difference still apply? That in Germany the technical skills are perfected, but there is no emotion?

**PE:** Naturally, the best musicians are at home in both. The emotionally-based training in Hungary was not a bad thing, it's just that it is only part of the story.

**JR:** Are you referring now to performances or compositions?

**PE:** Both music-making and musical thinking. Let me draw a parallel. Take a plant: underneath are the roots, on top are the leaves and the gorgeous corollas of the flowers. In Hungary teaching is concerned with the top, and it was only abroad that I learnt that a plant also has roots. There may be nothing showing above ground as yet, but down below everything is ready and correct for that to come into being. Training in Hungary takes as its starting-point the idea that a flower just is.

**JR:** To stay with composition, can one say that composers in Germany, for instance, write far better works?

**PE:** I wouldn't say that. A lot of technically fluent works are produced in which there is little or no emotional charge. But composers in the West generally take an active part in the performance process; many orchestras and ensembles commission music, so there is much collaboration, and that counts for a great deal.

**JR:** As a composer, how do you relate to Stockhausen?

**PE:** There is no relation, because his function in the world and mine were different. His was building the future, mine one of continuous participation in the community of music, which to some degree is oriented both to the present and the future, in regard to both composing and conducting. The fact that I conduct contemporary music means that the thinking of my own contemporaries is of interest, while what I produce as a composer is always written with a specific audience and even specific performers in mind. I don't regard myself as belonging to any school of composition and I have no wish to. On the whole, I belong nowhere. That must be something genetic. It's the same with my Transylvanian essence; I may feel Transylvanian, but I do not belong there...

**JR:** When I speak to contemporary composers, I have yet to meet anyone who says, yes, I am a member of such-and-such a school, or I am a leading figure in, or just belong to such-and-such a trend.

**PE:** There are many like that in the West.

**JR:** All the same, if you were to try and view yourself from the outside, would you discern any tendency, anything at all, that might be classifiable?

**PE:** Only Bartók. He is the ground around my roots; he is the one with whom I feel a connection. In music I speak Bartókese.

**JR:** Do you perceive different schools or trends in contemporary music? Or are there as many voices as there are composers?

**PE:** It is more a matter of a grouping by intellectual directions, which tend to be national or regional in character. I am fairly familiar with the Western output over recent decades. I find it interesting to note that French composers write music with a French accent, the English with an English accent, the Viennese with a Viennese accent.

**JR:** Are they trying to be local?

**PE:** A healthy kind of resistance to a global lingua franca is emerging. I see it as important, from the standpoint of cultural policy, that now when political borders have ceased to exist, regional cultures need to be promoted. One ought not to speak about national cultures, but the cultures of small areas, of which we have twenty or thirty in Hungary alone, and deliberately strengthen them. I see intellectual communities: Vienna or Paris have a *genius loci*; Budapest too has a powerful *genius loci*.

**JR:** What is that like?

**PE:** I see it as closed in, uninformed.

**JR:** In what way do you notice that when listening to a piece?

**PE:** I sense a very conscious exclusion of anything considered "alien".

**JR:** Does that mean they are bad?

**PE:** You can't put it that way! It's not that they are bad, rather that they often reiterate things to which solutions have already been found.

**JR:** Whereas they ought to be bringing something new?

**PE:** Every time. Culture is partly a matter of consciously nurturing a tradition, but also partly of pointing up new things, otherwise there is no sense to it. Only things that bring something new at the moment of their emergence can take their place in the tradition. Hungarian works reflect musical thinking that may be new for a local audience but they would find it hard to hold their own on an international platform. There will always be a few exceptions, of course. As we are speaking, there is a musical competition being held in Budapest for composers who are Hungarian by birth or background: one can see from the submitted works that a process of opening up is already under way. The next step would be to make the competition international.

**JR:** Does it make you jittery to hear other people conducting your works? Can you let things go, or do you worry about getting an unpleasant surprise?

**PE:** No, to the contrary! I am tickled pink that it's not me doing it; indeed, the very fact that someone else is conducting one of my works is in itself a mark of recognition. I can hear the pieces much better than when I conduct. I have had some marvellous experiences with full symphony orchestras and their conductors. And that covers a wide range. The premiere of *Three Sisters* was conducted by Kent Nagano, and very capably too. He has an unerringly fine sense of drama; he knows how to keep the stage in motion. He was followed by Nikša Baresa, who is Slovenian by background but studied in Moscow and

brings with him a feel for Russian culture. He took *Three Sisters* at half tempo, and that was glorious: a slow, tedious glory. I have no problem with that! It's best if one can just sit and listen. Knowing, of course, that I am also capable of conducting the music.

**JR:** You have often said that a live performance is part of a piece. Does that mean recording robs a piece of some of its essence?

**PE:** The only problem with recordings is that one loses the spatial ambience, though even that can be overcome: four-track technology was already available in the Fifties.

**JR:** You have pilloried concert halls for preserving nineteenth-century listening habits, and enthused that in the round at the Berlin Philharmonic concerts one can sit anywhere. What is so good about the audience being able to sit behind the orchestra and having to listen to one section of the orchestra in particular? I only have two ears, I can't listen from every angle. What implications does this "democratic" seating arrangement hold for the sound?

**PE:** Music is a pluralistic genre: it is polyphonic, and listeners are able to process several channels of information simultaneously. That is not possible in the theatre, because it interferes with picking up the words if different things are being uttered at the same time. My own ideal is to have the audience sitting around the orchestra, or else for the orchestra members to be seated around the audience on several sides. Anyone who has heard Stockhausen's *Gruppen* with the three orchestras set around them, or Nono's *Prometeo* with four orchestras and islets of soloists set in front, behind, above and below the audience, or Kurtág's *Quasi una fantasia*, will have a sense of the large significance space plays in music.

**JR:** You are delighted if someone else is conducting, but does that go for directors of your operas? Do you take part in the work for the first production?

**PE:** In theory, yes. There are some directors who are able to work in collaboration, but there are others with whom it is difficult to come to an understanding. I wrote stage directions into the score of *Three Sisters*, but not after that. The direction is always of huge importance for a first performance, but my experience has been that the initial reactions and critical reception, whether good or bad, only have a short-term effect on a work's fate, on how often it is played; after a while it will find its own level — provided it is fitted for the stage in the first place.

**JR:** It is hardly a matter of indifference how long that takes, it is much more gratifying if that takes place while the composer is still alive. In your case this has happened quite swiftly.

**PE:** *Three Sisters* has now clocked up nearly one hundred performances in various productions. On the other hand, the early reception of *Le Balcon* was poor, but since then five marvellous new productions have been mounted. The first responses to *Angels in America* were middling, but it has been performed constantly since, and I have seen two productions in the States. The critical reception can help or hinder how often a work is played, but for me what is important is that the singers and audiences should like it, and that it is taken into the repertory.

**JR:** If I may put you on the spot, how would you briefly characterise your operas?

**PE:** *Harakiri*, *Radames* and *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams* are chamber operas, all three of them. The first two came to fruition in the Seventies, and they contain many elements that I consider to be characteristic of me. Multiplicity of languages, for instance, with *Harakiri* being in Japanese and also the local language of wherever it is performed, whereas *Radames* is sung in a variety of languages simultaneously. *Three Sisters* was my first full-length opera, and the libretto uses Chekhov's original Russian text. An important innovation is its use of a double orchestra: an 18-piece ensemble in the pit and a 50-piece orchestra behind the stage. I decided that all the figures should be male, including the female characters, which are also sung by males, but in the female range — by countertenors, in other words.

**JR:** But that is not an absolute requirement, because women have also taken those roles.

**PE:** I allowed that, because I was curious to hear how it sounds. The countertenor version is better, but it is difficult to insist on four countertenors everywhere, after all we are talking about guest artists who do not have a permanent contract with any opera house. That requires money. *Le Balcon* is a "frivolous" opera taken from Genet's comedy — a musical cabaret that I based on the cabaret musical idiom in the France of the Fifties. *Angels in America* was written in an American style, using Tony Kushner's two-part, multi-layered, seven-hour fantasia, one that the playwright himself treats as a stand-alone, mixed-genre work: a dramatic comedy which incorporates all sorts of theatrical elements. There is a distinctive American lightness of touch about the drama, and the American public have taken it to their heart as one of their own operas, which pleases me no end. *Lady Sarashina*, my fourth opera, is a sequence of nine scenes. She was a Japanese poet who was born exactly a thousand years ago, in 1008, but her stories are so modern that they might easily have been written today. I composed this to an English libretto, because that was the language of the translation in which I encountered the Japanese work. She has a marvellous way of talking — about the seasons, about her cat being the reincarnation of the daughter of a governor, about a rendezvous that fails to take place, about fate... In short, anyone between four and ninety years of age will find an appropriate scene in it. It is a playful mix which contains fairy-tale, fantastic and dream elements — I don't know what name to give to the genre.

**JR:** Audiences will find a name for it.

**PE:** And I shall give a prize for the best one, and even get it included in the posters! My fifth opera, *Love and Other Demons*, is based on a Gabriel García Márquez short story. I would be more than happy to call it a *bel canto* opera as it was an explicit goal of mine to accomplish an *espresivo*, "aria-style", music for the poignant dramatic content.

**JR:** You have repeatedly claimed that there is no such thing as an Eötvös style, because in all of the operas the style arises, begets itself, as it is being written. Does this go for your instrumental works as well?

**PE:** Yes indeed, it applies just as much to them. In an opera I build on how the roles of the singers develop, while in a piano concerto the style comes precisely from the technical and acoustic opportunities offered by the piano. Of

course, that is exactly what everyone has always done.

**JR:** So you're saying there is no such thing as a Mozart style?

**PE:** No, there isn't really. Anyone who listens carefully can tell how far removed the style of, say, *Così* is from *The Magic Flute*: it's the works that have the style, not the composer. Mozart has a uniform musical language, but his works all have different styles.

**JR:** Is it really possible to know contemporary music? Isn't music a lot more complex than it was a century ago?

**PE:** Not at all! The musical idiom of whatever is the prevailing contemporary trend is shaped by the individual composers of the age, as writers shape the idiom of literature, and that is what the language of an "age" consists of. The complexity does not reside in the age so much as it is manifested in the works. Every age has its complexity and its simplicity as well; music schools, academies and the public merely have the duty of keeping up with the age.

**JR:** Sofia Gubaidulina once referred to the Chinese custom for a painter to change his name when he became very famous so that he could again become an unknown. Anonymity bestows great freedom; fame can circumscribe and cramp. What does success mean to you?

**PE:** Just that it is easier for me to plan ahead. I am one of those who keep musical life in Europe alive. Renown is also useful when helping a lot of young composers and conductors at the start of their careers.

**JR:** Your path to success was fairly smooth and natural.

**PE:** Indeed, first as a conductor, then as a composer too.

**JR:** Do you attribute that to talent?

**PE:** No doubt talent comes into it, and also a wideranging knowledge.

**JR:** You use the words "knowledge" and "information" a lot.

**PE:** Those are the most important things.

**JR:** As far as contemporary music goes, you seem to be an optimist, or perhaps satisfied is the not just. Many others complain that the audiences are not there or that the music can simply not be listened to.

**PE:** Here too it is just a matter of ignorance. Where you have an informed public there is no problem. In Hungary there is little information about music, and little passing on or acquisition of musical knowledge.

**JR:** You are dissatisfied with many things in Hungary, yet you still came back.

**PE:** I grew up in Budapest; it suits me to compose here, and I like the way the sun shines.

**JR:** It also shines elsewhere.

**PE:** Not the same way.

**JR:** Physically, you are very much present here.

**PE:** Intellectually too. The theatres in Pest are very important to me, because at last I understand exactly what is being said on stage. Even what is not said.

**JR:** For a long time it seemed that you would stay abroad permanently. Did you ever try to settle anywhere else?

**PE:** Me settle down? Nowhere. I am settled here --- in myself.

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<sup>1</sup> The placename Szépkényereszentmárton (Sanmartin) translates as "Saint Martin, Giver of Fine Bread".

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