

## LÁSZLÓ LAJTHA

Born in Budapest (Hungary) June 30, 1892.

His childhood and early youth were chiefly influenced by several long stays in Transylvania, 18th century French music, and the works of Claude Debussy.

He completed his musical studies, composition and piano at the Academy of Music in Budapest, in 1913.

Granted permission by the Academy to spend half his time abroad, Lajtha went to study successively in Leipzig, Geneva and Paris. He stayed in Leipzig for three months (1909), during which he acquired the skill of counterpoint and was particularly attracted by the performance of J. S. Bach's works at the St. Thomas Church. Following his strong leaning towards Latin countries, Lajtha went to Geneva, his first stepping-stone to Paris.

Introduced to Vincent d'Indy, a professor honoris causa of the Budapest Academy of Music, Lajtha was acquainted with this great master who appreciated his compositions and guided his first steps in the musical world of Paris. He absorbed the general atmosphere and attended all the great premières of this brilliant period (Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky).

Since 1910, attracted by musical folklore, Lajtha joined the great movement launched by Béla Bartók. In 1913, Lajtha was appointed civil servant at the Ethnographic Museum in Budapest.

The same year his first work appeared in print: *D'un Cahier d'Esquisses* (From a musician's sketch-book). These pieces for the piano, the success of which widely spread at once in Budapest and Vienna, immediately secured a position for the young composer in the ranks of the best avant-garde musicians. His initial success brought him orders for two further piano pieces, a Sonata and "Tales", published in 1914 and 1915. Six years later, Bartók wrote that these first steps were of a "stupendous boldness", and "apart from Kodály and Lajtha, we have no composers worthy of mentioning". (Bartók's letter to P. Heseltine)

Lajtha's musical career, as well as his connections to France were interrupted by the first World War. At the end of 1919, he was appointed professor of composition and chamber music at the National Conservatory of Music in Budapest.

Lajtha also replaced Bartók at the head of the Musical Department on the Ethnographic Museum in Budapest.

The performance of his Second String Quartet in Paris brought Lajtha an order from Mrs. Elisabeth Sprague-Coolidge for whom in 1929 he wrote his Third Quartet, which is played all over the world. At this time he renewed his artistic and personal relationships in Paris. Florent Schmitt was one of the first critics to "discover" this young Hungarian composer in his critical papers appearing regularly in *Le Temps*. The famous "Boar of the Ardennes" always reserved a special place in his heart for Lajtha, who himself never missed the opportunity to give him the credit of his respect and gratitude.

In 1928, Lajtha became an active member of the International Commission for Popular Arts and Traditions, and in 1930 he was elected President of the Music Department of this

Commission. In this position, he was one of the permanent experts of the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation at the League of Nations. He replaced Bartók as a member of the Commission of Arts and Letters at the League of Nations, and became a member of the Executive Board of the International Folk Music Council in London.

In 1928, he signed his first contract with the publisher Alphonse Leduc in Paris.

The period between 1928 and 1939 is marked by a steady growth of Lajtha's talent and reputation. His chamber music was played, among others, by the "Triton" association. The first performances of his symphonic works were mostly broadcast by the French Broadcasting Corporation. Lajtha's ties to France became increasingly strong, he made several friends among the composers of this country (Ravel, Roussel, Ibert, Rivier, Barraud) musicologists (Cœuroy, Schaeffner), and virtuosi. By the end of this rich period, he was most obviously considered a honored member of the so-called Ecole de Paris.

Again, Lajtha's French connections were broken by the Second World War. Nevertheless, he constantly kept in touch with French diplomatic and cultural representatives in Hungary.

At last, in winter 1947, Lajtha could leave Hungary, and it was of course Paris he went first. It is also Paris from where he went back to Hungary in 1948.

In 1947-48, Lajtha spent a year in London, writing the music score for the movie *Murder in the Cathedral*, adapted from T. S. Eliot's play.

Lajtha never ceased to keep contact with his French and other international friends, as well as with Alphonse Leduc, who became his general editor in 1948.

In 1955, Lajtha was elected corresponding member of the Institut de France (Académie des Beaux-Arts) to replace the recently deceased George Enesco. Lajtha was the only Hungarian composer to have been honored by this very special admission.

László Lajtha died in Budapest, February 16, 1963.

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László Lajtha's vocation to music and humanism originated from Udvarhely County in Transylvania, a few miles away from the crest of the Carpathian Mountains drawing a natural border between Romanic belfries and Byzantine bulbous domes. Chosen as a dwelling place by the ancient "Székely" race ten centuries ago, this country might be one of the richest resources of musical folklore in the world. Lajtha had never forgotten these early impacts. It will have to be Romain Rolland, one of the first people to discover this Hungarian composer from the Border Marshes, to point out two similar aspects in Lajtha's music. On the one hand Rolland mentions an inner, sensitive mood in which tragedy and humor blend into constant emotion, and are sometimes carried away by youthful impulse, and on the other hand, he refers to the landscape with its bare and forested hills and gentle valleys, so often visited by the tireless ethnographer.

It is in Budapest, that young Lajtha started his studies. At the age of twelve, he was already playing Couperin and Debussy. As an adolescent, he made full use of the facilities of higher education available in the capital, and he did not stop his endeavors before he could move a

further six degrees westwards. In only three months, Lajtha mastered what Leipzig could still teach him as regards to fugue and counterpoint. For the Hungarian painters of his generation, Munich was the threshold to Paris, for Lajtha, it was Geneva. In 1910, he reached the “Holy of Holies”. Debussy had still eight years to live.

From that time on, he was faithful to Paris and to his schools. Although he frequently visited London, wasn't this because the Greenwich meridian had officially replaced the Paris one in 1916? In eternal search for the ideal point of balance, and even more a lover of liberty, it seems as if Lajtha were for ever trying to place himself in the center of gravity in the Universe. The ICO, and later the UNESCO opened their doors for him. Still, it was always Paris, its societies and saloons, Lajtha's publishers and the friends he made there, the French Paris to which he always returned. When he left, it was only for trips to his native land. Wherever he was, the coins that this industrious worker forged always bore his trademark: Hungarian metal, French workmanship, universal value.

Lajtha may be described as having been an avant-garde (he was indeed a first-class member of this movement), up to a certain point in time which could be roughly equated with the events leading to the outbreak of the Second World War. In this aspect his evolution was similar to that of Bartók: in spite of assimilating and coordinating the essential results of his extensive experience, he finally acquired and realized an extremely rarified concept in his art, bereft of any Baroque extravagance, expressing with increasing aptitude both the complex and simple problems of his age, his country and his own existence. When in 1946, on his first trip to Paris after World War II, in an interview at the French Broadcasting he was asked what he had spent his time on since 1938, his reply was characteristically: “On the search of lost beauty”. Even more emblematically he could have answered: “... and of truth”.

As regards to Lajtha the ethnographer, one finds the same intention to synthesize the general and the particular. An ardent admirer of folklore, he remained nevertheless constantly careful not to fall into a particularization that would end in breaking the bond represented by music, this ultimate and universal language.

Lajtha aimed for clarity of line (Fouquet being one of his most admired painters), at a pellucid orchestration, an ample melodic line, and a firm structure without destroying spontaneous impulse or dramatic accent. This professionalism is surprisingly self-confident at the service of a rich inspiration turning his oeuvre into one continuous burst of pure music, and placing Lajtha in line with the most outstanding composers of our time.