

Éva Radics:

Takács Jenő and the World Heritage. The Philippine Folk Music Collection

Hungarian and Austrian, the composer, pianist, teacher and ethnomusicologist Jenő Takács was born on 25 September 1902 in the small village of Cinfalva (Siegendorf), which was Hungarian until 1921. He studied at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in Vienna (1921-1926).

He was already composing at this time, initially in a style which blended his Hungarian roots with the colours of French impressionism; adding the respect for contrapuntal and thematic clarity of his Viennese teachers Joseph Marx and Hans Gál, as well as the musicology of Guido Adler. But it was his first meeting with Béla Bartók in 1926 that was decisive, reinforcing Takács' awareness of the Hungarian folk idiom, expanding his use of tonality and the resourcefulness of his rhythms and phrase-construction.

In 1927, Takács took up a professorship of piano at the Conservatory in Cairo, using his five years there to investigate Arabic music. His next appointment took him even further afield, to a professorship in piano and composition at the University of the Philippines in Manila. During this time he gave concerts in Japan, China and Hong Kong. Research in Egyptian, Arab and Philippine folk music also left its mark on his compositions. The audio recordings Takács made on the Philippines were enlisted in UNESCO's "Memory of the World" collection in 1999.

Back in Austria (1938), that was the year of the Anschluss and so, in 1939, to avoid becoming a pawn of Nazi cultural politics, he moved to Hungary, to Sopron, where his parents had taken up residence; Takács renounced what had been Austrian citizenship (it now made him officially a German) and became Hungarian again. In 1942 he was nominated director of the Music School in Pécs in southern Hungary (earning it elevation into a conservatory during his tenure), and in this phase of relative professional stability – although in a world turned upside down. He left Hungary again (due to communist politics) in 1948, staying in Switzerland and Italy. From 1949 onwards, Takács toured Europe and the US as a pianist. In 1952 he was finally appointed a professor in piano and composition at the College Conservatory at the University of Cincinnati (USA), which became his longest-held position. After his retirement in 1970, Takács moved back to his birthplace Siegendorf (by then belonging to Austria), where he stayed for the rest of his life, composing assiduously and receiving a large number of prizes and honours.

Takács' music resembles his personality: noble, sensitive, sure, not always accommodating, but also never hurtful. Starting from the Impressionism movement and the Hungarian folk music, his ethnomusicological research into Arabic, Philippine, Austria and America sources left its mark, until his serial techniques and aleatoric, his work assimilated influences from the whole 20th century, synthesizing them unto his unique personal style and helping him to popularize his piano cycles and other pedagogical instrumental works. In the mid-1960s, Takács turned even further away from traditional tonality and showed a more pronounced interest in experimental methods. But he never lost sight of the fact that music must engage its audience and, even during his most adventurous periods, continued to write music that was tonal to a large extent and maintained a very direct appeal. His compositions of the 1980s and 1990s synthesize elements from earlier periods.

Jenő Takács was a significant composer for present Burgenland in the 20 century, having been compared in importance to Pál Esterházy in the 17th, Joseph Haydn at the 18th, and Franz Liszt in the 19th century.