



AUS DER ZEITSCHRIFT  
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# A life in music

A move from communist Hungary to West Germany in 1968 opened up new musical horizons for composer, organist and musicologist Zsolt Gárdonyi. Now in his 70th year, he talks to **Henry Fairs**. IMAGES COURTESY OF ZSOLT GÁRDONYI

I grew up in a modest apartment of two rooms shared by our family of four. My mother was a music teacher and my father a professor at the famed Liszt Academy in Budapest. In the evenings at home, my sister and I would often hear music by Chopin, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Liszt being played in the next room by our father, who was an accomplished pianist. For the four of us, living with music was the norm.'

I am sitting in a bustling coffee shop in Hanover, and opposite me is Zsolt Gárdonyi. The German-Hungarian composer, organist and musicologist turns 70 this year, and represents the third of four generations of Gárdonyi musicians. His paternal grandmother was a contemporary of Béla Bartók at the Liszt Academy in Budapest; his father, Zoltán, who died 30 years ago, went on from studies with Kodály and Hindemith to become a distinguished composer; and his son, Daniel, is an accomplished professional organist.

Given his family background, it was inevitable that Zsolt would gravitate towards music, taking his earliest piano lessons with his mother from the age of five, and spending many hours improvising and experimenting at the keyboard during his childhood: 'At home, my father's illuminating answers to every question I had about music fuelled my enthusiasm for the subject. Much of my musical knowledge seems to have been acquired simply by "osmosis". As a teenager, for example, I learned a great deal by playing piano duet arrangements of Beethoven symphonies with my father, who, when I was 12 or 13, gave me a formal and extremely intensive course in classical harmony and counterpoint (two double lessons a week over the course of the summer). His understanding and skill in teaching the relationship between theory and practice helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the vivid and crucial connections between repertoire, improvisation and composition. When I became a professor in Germany 20 years later, I realised that these two months of study in particular had formed the basis of everything I had achieved in my career, whether as an organist, teacher, composer or theorist.'

As in other communist countries such as the GDR, studying the organ in Hungary was not without its difficulties: 'The organ was viewed as an instrument of the church, and organists, to some extent, as "class enemies". However, a desire of the state, for cultural reasons, to hold a series of concerts on the large Walcker organ at the Liszt Academy, and to produce virtuosic concert organists capable of competing successfully on the international stage, secured the future of organ studies in Budapest. At the same time, it was forbidden to perform chorale-

based works in concerts and examinations; and Messiaen's organ works could only be performed with "edited" titles: for example, I remember hearing "Dieu parmi nous" performed under the heading "Toccata" in 1963.'

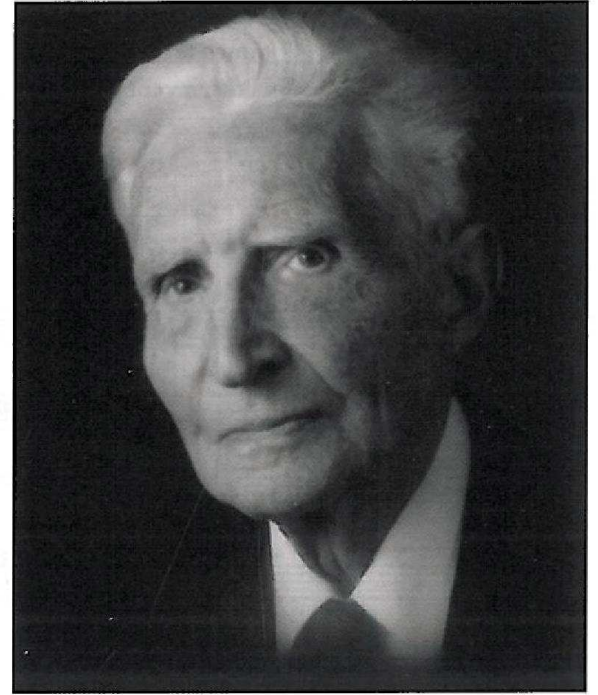
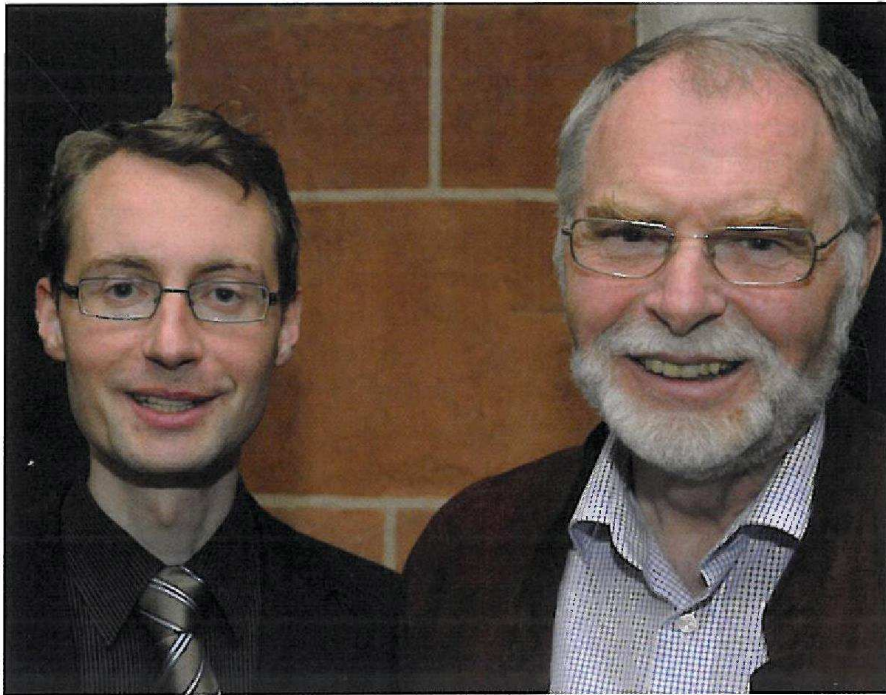
Following studies in Budapest, Gárdonyi received special permission – 'something of a miracle at this time!' – to travel to the Netherlands on a study trip in 1968. From there, he was able to settle in West Germany, a country where his family also has roots. Building on the extremely high standard of teaching and music-making that distinguished the Liszt Academy during the 1960s, he was able to gain three diplomas from Detmold after just two years.

It was during these years that composers such as Frank Martin and Olivier Messiaen were to make a profound and lasting impact on the young Gárdonyi. In October 1969, he visited Frank Martin at his home in Naarden (Netherlands) where, to his astonishment, Martin presented him with signed copies of his *Passacaglia* and *Sonata da chiesa*. Some years later, having recorded *La nativité du Seigneur*, he and Messiaen corresponded about the recording and about Gárdonyi's cantata *Dauids Danklied*, which had just been published by Bärenreiter.

◀ Composer, organist and musicologist Zsolt Gárdonyi: 'Living with music was the norm'

▼ As a young composer, Gárdonyi was to be influenced by Frank Martin and Olivier Messiaen, as well as the jazz of Oscar Peterson





Apart from opportunities to meet contemporary classical musicians in the West, the move to Germany also brought the composer's first exposure to jazz, a musical language that was also to have a profound influence on his future work. Hearing Oscar Peterson in concert was 'a revelation', prompting Gárdonyi to learn this musical language, principally by listening to recordings.

After receiving the Bavarian State Award for Young Composers 1979, Gárdonyi gained international recognition as a composer and concert organist. In 1980 he was appointed professor of music theory at the Musikhochschule in Würzburg, Germany, where he taught for the next 30 years. His research – dealing principally with harmony in 19th- and 20th-century music (Liszt, Debussy, Ravel, Scriabin and Messiaen) – is evidenced in several publications, including his book *Harmonik*, co-written with Hubert Nordhoff. 'More than half of my book deals with harmony of the 19th and 20th centuries. In many music colleges, harmony is often only taught up to Beethoven, with a gap before resuming with twelve-tone music. My aim was to provide new analytical perspectives on romantic, impressionist and 20th-century harmony.'

Not content only to write about music, Gárdonyi has continued to explore his own compositional language to this day: 'I try to search for new "soundworlds" but only write down what I would like to hear in any given moment. This might include, for example, new approaches to the treatment of the chorale in my organ writing that are influenced by impressionist harmonies ... Composition and improvisation feed off each other, so out of spontaneity emerges structure and

logic. For me, composing is a voyage of discovery; a composer doesn't "invent" but rather *discovers* the music – it is already there! I consider every idea and inspiration a gift from our creator, and feel a duty to put pen to paper so that it may be played, heard and shared.'

Perhaps best known in the organ world for *Mozart Changes* (in which Mozart meets jazz), what does Gárdonyi feel most authentically represents his 'voice' as a composer? 'First, my Variations for cello and organ, the first piece I composed after the death of my father and which is dedicated to his memory; second, *Meditation über Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem* ▷

▲ Keeping it in the family: (from left) Zsolt Gárdonyi with son Daniel, an accomplished organist; and father Zoltán, a distinguished composer whose teaching skills provided Zsolt with a firm musical foundation

▼ Letter from Olivier Messiaen thanking Gárdonyi for sending a score of his *Te Deum royal* and complimenting him on its excellent structure and strong harmonic colour

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à monsieur ZSOLT GÁRDONYI  
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Paris, le 17 octobre 1976

cher Monsieur Gárdonyi,

Merci beaucoup pour votre aimable lettre. Merci surtout de jouer si souvent mes oeuvres d'orgue!  
J'ai été très intéressé par votre bande magnétique et vous remercie tout spécialement de votre "Te Deum royal" si bien écrit pour les cuivres, le baryton, le chœur, et l'orgue; fort bien construit, et d'une couleur harmonique puissante.

Si un jour, vous venez à Paris, vous pouvez me faire une visite au Conservatoire, à la fin d'une de mes classes de composition.  
Je serai très heureux de vous connaître.

Croyez, je vous prie, cher Monsieur Gárdonyi, à mes sentiments profondément dévoués.

Olivier Messiaen

▼ *Hommage à M. Reger.* (top) the opening motif gives way to an improvisatory style; (below) an allusion to Reger's *Choralfantasie* 'Wachet auf'.

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◁ *Wort* for organ solo (after Martin Luther's well-known text and melody); and, third, three organ works: my four-minute Homages to Bach, Liszt and Reger respectively. My organ piece *Preludio con fuga* – in which the B-A-C-H motif meets a theme by Oscar Peterson – is also an important

"autobiographical" documentation of my musical preferences.'

In this Reger centenary year, it seems fitting to look briefly at Gárdonyi's *Hommage à M. Reger* in a little more detail. Premiered at the International Reger Festival in Buenos Aires in 2002, the three sections of this 'journey from darkness to light' (with increasing Reger-like intensity) achieve a coherence and cohesiveness through skilful motivic development as well as an extensive use of the octatonic collection (cf. Messiaen's second mode of limited transposition). In bar 5, the inversion of the work's opening motif gives way to free, improvisatory writing that leads into a second section.

The second part develops the opening theme while moving through a second and third octatonic transposition before a new *anapest* figure emerges in bar 18 that prepares the way for the entry of the chorale 'Wachet auf' in bar 27 – an allusion, along with the movement profile of the work, to the *Choralfantasie* 'Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme' by Max Reger. Daniel Gárdonyi's analysis of the *Trois Hommages* draws attention to a number of interesting dynamic and rhythmic links between the two works, including the observation that his father's pedal figures under the *cantus firmus* (bar 31) correspond to the fugue subject in Reger's *Fantasie*.

Although some may perceive that the organ is becoming increasingly marginalised, even in today's classical music world, Gárdonyi is optimistic about the future both of the instrument and of church music: 'This is a question with which we are all confronted. Organ and church music are, of course, strongly linked and one tries to give the younger generation the best education possible. A tension between "artistic" and "popular" music can be encountered, both in the Church and the wider world. This can pose a problem for well-qualified, accomplished music graduates, who sometimes find themselves confronted by a society and church with different musical values and priorities from those encountered in the world of academia. When I compare my student days under communism in the 1960s to the situation today – with incomparable employment prospects and new organs being commissioned in Hungary once again – there seems to be every reason that the organ and organ music should continue to be studied in the relatively prosperous West.' ■

*Henry Fairs is head of organ studies at Birmingham Conservatoire and honorary professor of organ at the University of St Andrews. In 2007 he won the Odense International Organ Competition, and travels worldwide as performer, teacher and competition jury member.*

The image shows a handwritten musical score for organ. It consists of five systems of staves. The first system is marked 'Adagio' and 'pp'. The second system is marked 'Cantus firmo' and 'mf'. The third system is marked 'poco accelerando sin al' and features the word 'WACHET' written in large, bold letters. The fourth system is marked 'poco rit.' and features the word 'AUF' written in large, bold letters. The fifth system is marked 'a tempo e accelerando sin al'. At the bottom of the page, the name 'Walhall Magdeburg' is written in a stylized, handwritten font.