

“He Never Said that it Had to be Played a Certain Way.”

Ernst von Dohnányi on Teaching Music and Musical Interpretation

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Abstract: Although, unlike many of his contemporaries, the world-known musician and native of Pressburg Ernő (Ernst von) Dohnányi (1877 – 1960) did not leave an extensive legacy of prose writings, a surprisingly large number of documents surfaced during the preparation of the edited collection of his writings and interviews (published in 2020 by Rózsavölgyi, Budapest). During his long life filled with wide-ranging professional activities, he seems to have authored numerous writings pertinent to the history of music and musical life: memoirs, articles and lectures on pedagogy, proposals for organizations, statements on public affairs, etc. Equally informative are the interviews he gave in his various capacities as composer, performer, teacher, and director of an institution. Based on his various lectures, interviews, prefaces, and recollections, this study aims to present Dohnányi’s views on teaching musical interpretation, including the authenticity of interpretation, the importance of familiarity with the style, the damaging influence of sound recordings, the technical background of a musical production, and the teachable elements of musical performance.

Keywords: Ernő (Ernst von) Dohnányi, Pressburg, music pedagogy, interpretation, piano technique, sight-reading

“One who needs more details should rather not play the piano” – this is what Ernst von Dohnányi¹ (1877 – 1960) wrote in a seemingly unfriendly note in his preface to his edition of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Short Preludes for the Beginners*² and one cannot help thinking how very different this idea is from

1 Outside Hungary, Dohnányi used “Ernst”, the international form of his unusual-looking Hungarian first name (Ernő) from early on in his career. The prefix “von” refers to a rank of nobility in the family and originates from the seventeenth century, but the title was more of a decoration for later generations: Dohnányi’s grandparents and parents were typical bourgeois/middle-class in their standard of living and lifestyle.

2 The complete quotation is: “My goal was to inspire the student to think and work inde-

the concept of his Hungarian composer/music pedagogue contemporaries, especially of Zoltán Kodály whose motto was “music belongs to everyone”. Yet, before accusing Dohnányi of elitism, it is worth taking a closer look at the context, by which I do not only mean the preface to this Bach edition but all of Dohnányi’s writings and statements. I started collecting and preparing them for publication five years ago, funded by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The collection, published in Hungarian in 2020 by Rózsavölgyi és Társa, Budapest, contains autobiographical notes, recollections, articles on pedagogy, reform proposals for the Academy of Music, directorial statements related to the musical life, interviews, and even some political writings – most of them unknown or forgotten before this modern edition.³ The collection is being compiled in English in parallel with the Hungarian publication in co-operation with James A. Grymes, American musicologist. The English-language collection, which will be adapted to foreign readers’ interests, will possibly be published in some years. To make the texts available for non-Hungarian readers till that time, this study not only aims to discuss Dohnányi’s ideas on musical interpretation based on these documents, but also to present longer excerpts of the texts which could possibly bring the usually reluctant Dohnányi’s ideas and beliefs closer to the reader.

Regarding our very first, amusingly straightforward quote (“One who needs more details...”), it is true that similar thoughts do sometimes appear in Dohnányi’s other writings and statements, too. In his article “Freedom in Music Teaching Methods” published in the American journal *Etude*, which might as well be interpreted as a proclamation, Dohnányi praised the concepts of the young music educator Sándor Kovács (1886 – 1918), who had died some years before Dohnányi’s publication.⁴ According to Kovács, music should be taught exclusively by ear in the first few years: children should

pendently if possible, so I kept away from superabundant instructions, and I did not even mark the tempo in those pieces where the natural musical sense would not be mistaken. I still believe that the given instructions and explanations are enough for the student to find his way in these pieces – the one who needs more details should rather not play the piano.” DOHNÁNYI, E. (ed.). Johann Sebastian Bach: *Short Preludes for the Beginners*. Budapest – Berlin – Leipzig – London – New York : Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 1922, p. 3.

3 KUSZ, V. (ed.). *Dohnányi Ernő: válogatott írások és nyilatkozatok* [Ernő Dohnányi: Selected Writings and Interviews] Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2020. Hereafter referred to as Dohnányi’s Xritings.

4 DOHNÁNYI, E. Freedom in Music Teaching Methods. In *The Etude*, 1921, Vol. 39, Issue 7, 431 – 432. Edition (in Hungarian): Dohnányi’s Writings, pp. 198 – 203.

learn to practise scales, play melodies and chords, and improvise without scores, only by ear.⁵ Dohnányi was amazed by the pupils taught with Kovács's method. "The report that comes to me is that, at that time [two years after the start of the studies], the note reading advances far more rapidly than by other methods. That is, of course, contrary to all our previous practices. We were always taught that to 'play by ear' was one of the first evils against which the musical Decalogue was aimed. When the teacher heard of a pupil playing by ear, he raised his hands in holy horror. Yet, I have personally examined many pupils trained according to the philosophy of Kovács, and I have been amazed with the character of their work."⁶

In Dohnányi's conclusion, the most important advantage of the method of teaching a child to play by ear before he is given the "complicated mathematical problem of studying notation"⁷ is that the teacher can soon discover the musical talent of the pupil. "If he is really musical, he is worthy of studying music seriously. If he is not, let us spare him the punishment,"⁸ he says. This is clearly similar to the quotation in his Bach edition, even though *Short Preludes* is not for complete beginner pianists.⁹ Nevertheless, the principal aim of the editor

5 Sándor Kovács (Kováts) (1886 – 1918), piano teacher and music aesthetician. After his graduation from the Academy of Music, he worked in Fodor Music School (today Aladár Tóth Music School in Budapest, District 6) and he was a music teacher with a unique personality. For more on his methodology, see KOVÁCS, S. *Hogyan kellene a gyerekeket a zenébe bevezetni?* [How to Introduce Children into Music?]. Budapest : Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 1917. Other works: MOLNÁR, A. – GOMBOSI, O. (eds). *Kovács Sándor hátrahagyott zenei írásai* [Writings on Music by Sándor Kovács]. Budapest : Rózsavölgyi és Társa, [1926].

6 DOHNÁNYI, E. Freedom in Music Teaching Methods, p. 432.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Although it is not closely connected to the subject of this paper, it is important to note that, while Dohnányi certainly did not believe that music was meant exclusively for enjoyment for a small minority, he did seem to believe that playing music was not absolutely necessary for enjoying it. As he put it in an interview: "In my opinion, everyone can be taught to enjoy even the most serious classical music. The simplest and most efficient way to do so is to playfully guide them from the world of music they like, say from a Strauss waltz or a Hungarian folk song, to Symphony No. 9. This is an important task for the radio, too." [Translated from Hungarian.] EGYED, Z. Dohnányi Ernő a zene örök hatásáról, a jó és a rossz zenéről, a mester és tanítvány kapcsolatáról és a nő igaz hivatásáról [Ernst von Dohnányi on the Eternal Effects of Music, on Good and Bad Music, on the Relationship between Master and Pupil, and on the True Vocation of Women]. In *Film, Színház, Irodalom*, 1943, Vol. 6, Issue 8, p. 9, 19 – 25 February 1943. Edition: Dohnányi's Writings, pp. 428 – 433. He noted another experience of a similar kind in an encyclopaedia entry: "Here is an interesting incident which brings out the role of the community in radio and music culture and their important task: it happened some time ago that, stepping onto

by providing only minimal explanation was “to encourage the pupils to think and work independently”¹⁰. (I would like to point out, however, that Dohnányi apparently did not expect the pupils to know how to “play ornaments with elegance” by themselves, so he explained these in detail in the preface.)

All these ideas are clearly related to Dohnányi’s own childhood experiences. “What you experience as a child does not only impact your entire life – it governs it,” Dohnányi wrote in his memoirs. Indeed, there are various traits in Dohnányi the child that would manifest themselves in his social and artistic personality for the rest of his life. Growing up in Pressburg (called Pozsony at the time), Dohnányi benefited from a remarkably privileged musical education. His father, Frigyes Dohnányi,¹¹ was a schoolmaster, director of the Catholic Grammar School, and an amateur cellist and composer who inspired his son by domestic music-making. This stable and disciplined yet harmonious family life within the vibrant and colourful musical culture of Pressburg had clear effects on Dohnányi’s personality and musical bearing. In one of his lengthiest writings, a memorial radio speech from 1944, he discussed these childhood experiences – he had a long list, starting from his organ services at school masses through the musical festivities at the Catholic Grammar School to a high-standard concert life. As the crowning of his musical environment, he nostalgically recalled the opera performances in the municipal theatre. As he recalls: “I came to know a major part of the opera literature in Pozsony. A standing-room ticket cost 32 *kreutzers*,¹² and

the stage at a dress rehearsal of a philharmonic concert at the Academy of Music, I saw a peasant couple sitting in the first row. A friend of mine approached them during the interval and asked them if they had ended up at the concert by mistake. They answered, as I had presumed, that they had heard several philharmonic concerts on the radio and they wanted to see one, too.” [Translated from Hungarian.] DOHNÁNYI, E. Rádió és zenekultúra [Radio and Music Culture]. In *Rádióhallgatók lexikona* [The Encyclopedia of Radio Listeners]. (Eds. Andor Tiszay, Géza Falk.) Budapest : Vajda-Wichmann Kiadás, 1944. Volume 2, p. 243. Edition : Dohnányi’s Writings, p. 265.

10 DOHNÁNYI, E. (ed.). Johann Sebastian Bach: *Short Preludes*, p. 3.

11 Frigyes Dohnányi (1843 – 1909), secondary-school teacher of mathematics and physics at the Királyi Katolikus Főgimnázium [Royal Catholic Grammar School] in Pressburg (from 1873). He was a versatile man: beside his professional work and musical activities, he invented a method for stenography (“panstenography,” 1887), made a plan for a universal (“Panroman”) language, and established the first X-ray laboratory in Hungary with Károly Polikeit.

12 Its present value is about 3 euros. Magyar pénzürték index [Value Index of Hungarian Currencies]. [online]. [cit. 28 March 2020]. Available at: ><https://artortenet.hu/magyar-penzertekindex-arak-es-devizak-alapjan-1754-tol/><.

if I arrived at the theatre early enough, I could stand in the first row, leaning against an iron bar, which made standing much more comfortable. The company consisted of young singers, some of whom became famous later on. I heard operas by Verdi and Meyerbeer, including *L'africane*, which is rarely performed today, as well as operas by Wagner, although, of course, only *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin* could be given. Gounod's *Faust* was also on the programme, as was Beethoven's *Fidelio*. They did not play any Mozart operas – those are, it seems, the most difficult of all. The Hungarian company, directed by Krecsányi,¹³ played no operas except for *László Hunyadi*, but gave many classical and modern dramas that I also assiduously attended.”¹⁴

It was in Pressburg that Dohnányi had his first music lessons, too. From an early age, he displayed a natural gift for music even if, by his own admission, he lacked discipline at times. Music “was like a game,” he admitted, and, as a result, he often eschewed practicing and relied on his prodigious gifts as a sight-reader. A wonderful teacher encouraged him to do so, as he remembers: “My father realized that he could no longer teach me to play the piano and entrusted Ágost Forstner,¹⁵ organist of the Pozsony Cathedral, with the task. I was very fond of good, calm Uncle Forstner¹⁶ because he did not torture me with hand positions and other things that discourage children from playing. Instead, he let me play and develop as my nature required. Of course, some scales could not be dispensed with. I also had to play some études, but not too many. Beyond determining a progressive course of study, his teaching method was passive in the sense that he pointed out mistakes but never said or indicated that it *had* to be played in a certain way. Even today, I think this is the right approach.”¹⁷

13 Ignác Krecsányi (1844 – 1923), Hungarian actor and theatre director.

14 Translation from Hungarian. DOHNÁNYI, E. *Emlékeimből* [From my Memories]. Radio lecture, Hungarian Radio, 30 January 1944. Edition: Dohnányi's Writings, p. 74.

15 Elsewhere, Dohnányi refers to his first teacher, organist at St. Martin's Cathedral in Pozsony, as Károly Forstner.

16 In Hungarian: “Forstner bácsi,” a rather informal way of addressing him.

17 Translation from Hungarian. DOHNÁNYI, E. *Emlékeimből*, pp. 67 – 68. He followed this method as a teacher, too, as it turns out from the recollections of his pupils. See, for example, SMITH, C. A. Dohnányi as a Teacher. In *Clavier*, 1977, Vol. 16, Issue 2, pp. 16 – 22; DEVICH, M. Pódium és katedra. Beszélgetés Váczi Károllyal [Stage and Lectern: A Talk with Károly Váczi]. In *Muzsika*, 2002, Vol. 45, Issue 4, pp. 10 – 14; FERENCZY, Gy. *Piano-forte*. Budapest: Héttorony Könyvkiadó, 1989, pp. 45 – 47.

The ideal of thinking and working independently in learning music and, in a broader sense, in musical interpretation was fundamental to Dohnányi's whole pedagogical concept. One might even say he was obsessed with it. The concept included the pupil's independence, the teacher's independence in terms of choosing a method independently for each pupil and, eventually, the adult artist's technical and intellectual independence. "Art and school are fundamentally so different and incompatible concepts that it is impossible to resolve the issue"¹⁸ – this is how Dohnányi formulated his motto in his 1917 reform proposal (concerning the educational system and the curriculum) for the Budapest Academy of Music, which is one of the most important texts Dohnányi ever wrote.¹⁹ When he drew up the proposal, he had gained a decade-long teaching experience at the Berlin Academy of Music (1905 – 1915). Afterwards, in Budapest (1915 – 1943), he also preferred working with pupils who, as he put it, were almost "ripe for concertizing".²⁰ However, when Dohnányi and his prospective employer were discussing in 1949 the conditions of his future job at an American university, including the presumably lower standard of the students in Florida, he did not ask for an assistant teacher "even in the case of a longer absence".²¹ As he wrote to the dean Karl Kuersteiner in Florida: "After all, the aim of any education should be to make the pupil independent. Of course, this is only possible with very much advanced pupils. On the 'Hochschule für Musik' in Berlin, where I taught 10 years, I generally had 6 pupils, who were almost ripe for concertizing, but had besides a few – not too many – also advanced listeners [...] In Budapest I had even less pupils. [...] Now I presume that the student material on the University is inferior to what I had in Berlin and Budapest, and very likely an assistant teacher would be useful. But I should like to wait with the settlement of this until I am there."²²

18 The source of the manuscript with Moravcsik's comments noted down by Dohnányi is: Hungarian National Széchényi Library, Dohnányi Collection (Fond 2/VI.3.).

19 Interestingly, Géza Moravcsik, the Secretary of the Academy, who commented on the points of the proposal either with appalled or sarcastic notes, commented on the above-quoted sentence in the following way: "this is definitely true."

20 Dohnányi's letter to Karl Kuersteiner, 3 August 1949. (Institute for Musicology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Archives for 20th–21st-Century Hungarian Music, MZA-DE-Ta-Script 82.187).

21 Ibid. Dohnányi's quotes originally written in English are presented in their original, unedited form.

22 Ibid. Dohnányi's quotes originally written in English are presented in their original, unedited form.

In Dohnányi's view, independence is an equally important requirement for teachers. The most important reason why he wrote his reform proposal in 1917 was the fact that he felt immensely appalled by having to teach with mandatorily prescribed publications and methodology. This is how he complained about the failure of the proposal afterwards in his above-mentioned article for the journal *Etude*: "Let us take the case of Hungary, for instance, the Academy of Budapest, an institution of the very highest standing: the student, however, in order to pass his government examinations, is required to take certain materials, non-proprietary of course, but of certain prescribed editions with certain fingerings, phrasings, expression marks, etc., and as arbitrary as the police regulations for crossing the streets. However, the law is laid down so that the teacher whose artistic judgment inclines him to use a certain edition cannot do so but must use one prescribed by the state. He cannot use certain pieces or studies which he in his own experience knows to be good, until he has employed others the state has listed. This lack of artistic freedom may have the advantage of compelling inadequate teachers to keep up a certain standard; but it is deadening to the progress of the art, insulting to the judgement of really progressive step in these modern times."²³

Regarding independence, it is worth discussing Dohnányi's views on the connection between sound recordings and musical interpretation, as it is also related to the ideals of independence. As he pointed out in a lecture-recital for American students of music in 1949, "the records have beside the danger, that (...) you get accustomed to the interpretation of *one* artist, who may be not always the best."²⁴ His opinion did not change even after recordings became more widespread. As he said in one of his last radio interviews, "the radio and records made many-many people love music which was not the case before. But what I don't like if students who study music go after a record (...) The student should try to get from by himself there just [by] the interpretation of the piece. It very often it happened that I had to ask a pupil now what record did you listen to (...)

23 DOHNÁNYI, E. *Freedom in Music Teaching Methods*, p. 431. Dohnányi's quotes originally written in English are presented in their original, unedited form.

24 DOHNÁNYI, E. Sight-reading [lecture-recital]. In DOHNÁNYI, I. von. *Ernst von Dohnányi. A Song of Life*. (Ed. GRAYMES, James A.) Bloomington & Indianapolis : Indiana University Press, 2002, p. 215. The quoted version is based on a manuscript source (British Library, Add. Ms 50807A). Dohnányi's quotes originally written in English are presented in their original, unedited form.

I think if they study just a piece they shouldn't listen to anybody and to any record of it."²⁵

There is a funny story he told to prove his views, namely that recordings were harmful for adult artists' freedom of interpretation just as much as they were harmful for the students: "I had a funny experience once in a city here, I won't name the city, and I won't name the conductor. It was 10 years ago, I played, I think, my Nursery Variations [op. 25], and the conductor made my F sharp-minor Suite [op. 19] with orchestra, and up to the rehearsal I told him some little things, and I told him he should take this a little slower, a little faster, or something like that. The answer was: 'I can't do that.' I was like 'why can't you do that?' 'Because people will think I don't know the music.' 'How is that?' 'Yeah, because it's in the records so.' [Interviewer is laughing.] Now then I asked him what record he has heard, and he told me, and then I listened to that recording – of course all wrong tempi. Now, you see that to regard a record like to Bible, you know, it's certainly a mistake. And that what's the students do, and as this example shows also [does] a conductor. Of course, he was not one of the famous conductors."²⁶

This episode also reveals the circumstances under which Dohnányi worked after his emigration: such a thing was less likely to occur in Vienna or Berlin or even Pressburg in the 1880s and 1890s – with or without recordings – than in an American small town with a much less burgeoning musical life, to say the least.²⁷ Dohnányi made a truly interesting remark during an earlier interview in Hungary which also concerned the relationship between sound recordings and the independence of interpretation: "Radio music is not mechanical because, today, the circumstances of playing in the radio are absolutely identical with those of playing at home or in a concert hall. (...) Playing for recording, on the other hand, is completely different. It must be simplified. It must be made artificially uninteresting so that it will not turn

25 Radio interview on Dohnányi's 82nd birthday, 24 July 1959 (Roy Flynn, WFSU Radio, Tallahassee, USA) (Institute for Musicology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Archives for 20th–21st-Century Hungarian Music, MZA-DE-Ta-AV 2.041:1). Edition [in Hungarian]: Dohnányi's Writings, pp. 451 – 459. Dohnányi's quotes originally written in English are presented in their original, unedited form.

26 Radio interview on Dohnányi's 82nd birthday, 24 July 1959. Dohnányi's quotes originally written in English are presented in their original, unedited form.

27 Our sources indicate that this may have been a concert of the Tri-City Symphony Orchestra on 23 January 1949 in Davenport, Iowa, conducted by Oscar Anderson. About Dohnányi's years in emigration, see KUSZ, V. *A Wayfaring Stranger. Ernst von Dohnányi's American Years, 1949–1960*. Oakland, CA : University of California Press, 2020.

boring. This paradox means that the more *rubato* and arbitrary fantasizing there is on the record, the earlier the owner of the record will get bored with it after playing it several times. In other words, what you need is serene objectivity to protect the performers from the listeners becoming bored with them too early.”²⁸

Dohnányi thus regards radio performances, i.e. those broadcast from a radio studio, as spontaneous, unique, and inimitable ones, similar to concerts. (His regular radio performances were broadcast live.) Consequently, his first monographer, Bálint Vázsonyi, concluded that recordings were not to the credit of Dohnányi’s spontaneous piano playing, which Vázsonyi believed could have also contributed to the unfortunate events in his posthumous reception, and could have resulted from a conscious strategy on his part.²⁹ All this may also be illustrated by the following extract from an interview-like text published in Kálmán Konkoly’s collection in 1944, in which Dohnányi talks about two types of performers: those who are “completely absorbed in the piece and record this feeling in themselves. All their interpretations are more or less equivalent to their previous ones (...). The opposite of these are the artists who play the work differently every single time they perform it.”³⁰ There is no doubt which category Dohnányi believed himself to belong to: his words indicate it, too, but, more importantly, if we compare his concert recordings of the same work played at different times, we will clearly experience “many different lights”. The available recordings of his American concerts – even if fragmentary – illustrate the plasticity of Dohnányi’s concert performances.³¹ His contemporaries said that “his audience felt as if his masterpieces were *born there* on the stage.”³²

28 Translated from Hungarian. SZÁNTHÓ, D. Beszélgetés Dohnányi Ernővel [A Discussion with Ernst von Dohnányi]. In *Magyar Nemzet*, 1942, Vol. 5, Issue 55, p. 10, 8 March 1942. Edition: Dohnányi’s Writings, p. 424.

29 VÁZSONYI, B. *Dohnányi Ernő*. Budapest: Nap Kiadó, 2002, p. 89. On Dohnányi’s recordings, see e.g. VÁZSONYI, B. *Dohnányi a zongoránál / Dohnányi at the Piano 1955, 1956, 1959* (CD-booklet). Budapest : Hungaroton Classic, 1993. HCD 12085.

30 KONKOLY, K. *Magyar alkotók* [Hungarian Creators]. Budapest : Singer és Wolfner, 1944, p. 165. Edition: Dohnányi’s Writings, pp. 467 – 477.

31 The private (and non-professional) recordings of Dohnányi’s American concerts are available at the Archives for 20th–21st-Century Hungarian Music of the Institute for Musicology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungary. Publication of a selection: *The Last Romantic. Dohnányi’s American Concert Recordings / Az utolsó romantikus. Dohnányi amerikai koncertfelvételei*. CD. (Ed. Kusz, Veronika.) Budapest: Rózsavölgyi, 2017. RÉTCD 089.

32 Translated from Hungarian. VÁZSONYI, B. *Dohnányi Ernő*, p. 83. Dohnányi’s quotes originally written in English are presented in their original, unedited form.

One thing was stable and permanent though, as Dohnányi always put it: style. He was truly obsessed with the sense of style and its prerequisite, a knowledge of the broadest possible repertoire. As he explained in one of his lecture-recitals in America: "To play *one* Beethoven sonata *well* you have to be familiar with the style of Beethoven; this is impossible by knowing only that *one* sonata. You benefit to know the others too. This refers naturally to other composers too. The style is a thing which can hardly be taught because it is a matter of feeling, obtainable only by the knowledge of a great part of the works of a composer. This alone makes the necessity of sight-reading obvious."³³

He had formulated the above idea at least three decades before, in his reform proposal for the Academy of Music: "The biggest mistake of the teaching material is that there is too large emphasis on the mechanical part, which results in the fact that pupils, apart from doing a lot of unnecessary work, focus on less important things and regard etudes as autotelic pieces. This is why most students at the Piano Teacher Training Department know only ten percent of the major piano works. (...) So, we need fewer etudes and more, much more pieces for performance! There is no need to break down the pieces into the tiniest details when teaching them; pupils should become familiar with the composer's style instead, and this is possible only by playing a large number of pieces. Then, when they need to refine a piece for performance in more detail, it will be easier for them to do so."³⁴

"It will be harder for them," commented Géza Moravcsik, whose sarcastic and, at certain instances, even hostile remarks on the reform proposal were recorded by Dohnányi, "because they will get used to sloppiness." Dohnányi, naturally, did not agree with this and not only because, as he said, he himself had learnt to play the piano by sight-reading and, in his case, this resulted in a technique that not even Moravcsik could question. Nevertheless, Dohnányi's words in his above-mentioned lecture-recital sound as if he had written them as a late message from Ohio in 1948 to Moravcsik back in 1917: "But here many of you, L[adies] & G[entlemen] will reply that this might lead to a "sloppy" playing. Yes, it *might*. But it *need not*. Just as well as the occasional rhythmical unevennesses need not lead to sloppiness. The some-

33 DOHNÁNYI, E. Sight-reading [based on his manuscript].

34 Translated from Hungarian. Dohnányi's reform proposal. Edition: Dohnányi's Writings, pp. 171 – 185. Dohnányi's quotes originally written in English are presented in their original, unedited form.

times unavoidable ‘sloppiness’ can be thoroughly balanced by the demand of absolut[e] correctness in practicing the pieces and executing of the pieces which are the objects of our regular studies. And besides if our the practise of sight-reading is done *reasonably* this danger is almost null.”³⁵

So, it is definitely not about understating technical skills, and this is clear from some of his writings. What is more, he thinks that high-quality musical interpretation requires technical skills which may be acquired by playing scales (because, as he put it, “there is nothing to take the place of scales to gain a certain kind of liquid ability at the keyboard”)³⁶, finger exercises and etudes (he liked to separate these two and regarded etudes as musical compositions, often saying that one can turn more complex technical problems into finger exercises himself)³⁷, free Bach studies, as well as classical education by which he means a large number of pieces by Mozart, Haydn, Clementi and other masters. According to Dohnányi, many pupils tend to avoid the latter step and start learning Liszt’s, Chopin’s, and Schumann’s works too early. While he admits that it is also possible to gain marvellous technique in this way, a true musician and, after a while, even the audience will be able to judge whether the artist has truly gained a real “qualification.” “How will the real musician know whether he has done this or not? By a certain finish, a certain subtlety, a certain flavor that is indescribable,” says Dohnányi.³⁸

We have come to a point where it is difficult to put anything into words. Being reluctant to give interviews in general, Dohnányi said very little about this “certain finish, certain subtlety, certain flavour.” Although some remarks appear in his interviews from time to time, it remains unclear whether these are really Dohnányi’s words or the journalist’s ones. A conclusion may be drawn from a seemingly different aspect in an interview made with Dohnányi in 1943: “Neither the conductor nor the performer can completely disguise their own personalities when they serve the composer. However of-

35 DOHNÁNYI, E. Sight-reading [based on his manuscript]. Dohnányi’s quotes originally written in English are presented in their original, unedited form.

36 DOHNÁNYI, E. Freedom in Music Teaching Methods, p. 431.

37 See, for example: “One of the best ways to keep up one’s technique as well as one’s repertoire is, I have found, to select the difficult portions of compositions, and make technical studies of them. The literature of the piano provides such rich material of all kinds that the student or artist need never be at a loss.” BROWER, H. Technical Material Discussed [By Dohnányi]. In *Modern Masters of the Keyboard*. Freeport, NY : Books for Libraries Press, 1926, pp. 104 – 112. Dohnányi’s quotes originally written in English are presented in their original, unedited form.

38 DOHNÁNYI, E. Freedom in Music Teaching Methods, p. 431.

ten the expression 'playing music objectively' is used, there is no such thing in reality. However, on the other hand, the closer the performer's personality is to that of the composer's, the more perfect the reproduction will be. If the performer does not understand the composer, they cannot present the composition, either."³⁹

And when a journalist asked him to clarify the meaning of the word "understand", Dohnányi's answer revealed his reservations: "Understanding something is mainly a matter of instinct. It is the instincts that play the largest role in art, but also in life. Education improves people but it does not create anything in them. You cannot instil talent or character in anyone, just discipline and a certain level of culturedness."⁴⁰

With this remark, we have arrived back from where we started. All things considered, it is clear that Dohnányi's interviews and statements related to the pedagogical aspect of interpretation are more concrete. His remarks quoted in the second part of the article, which will hopefully give us some insight into his ideas on the deeper layers of performing arts, are mostly commonplaces. This is true of Dohnányi in general: he seems to have avoided talking about his musical memories, the models of his compositional style, the consciousness or unconsciousness in his breaking away from the late nineteenth-century musical mainstream, or, like here, the authenticity of interpretation. Truly important questions and answers seldom arise, and the most intriguing topics are cut short. Yet, the random remarks made by him from time to time are really exciting puzzle pieces for us to solve. Notwithstanding, we will never be able to find out the "secret" by analysing Dohnányi's non-musical statements; most probably, he himself was unable and unwilling to put it into words. Because, as he always said, "music is only music"⁴¹. One can hardly deny the correlation between this life-long attitude and the early experiences of this gifted music pupil whose Pressburg teacher gave him so much independence in interpretation and "never said or indicated that it *had* to be played in a certain way."

39 Translated from Hungarian. EGYED, Z. Dohnányi Ernő a zene örök hatásáról, p. 428.

40 Ibid.

41 TAKSONYI, P. A mai népi magyar zene nem hozott újat a magyar zeneszerzés szempon-tjából [Folk Music Did Not Bring Anything New for Today's Hungarian Composition]. In *Összetartás* [Solidarity], 1943, Vol. 1, No. 45, 12 November 1943, p. 5.

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