

Lajos Szamosi's life

Lajos Szamosi was born in 1894 in Csenger, Northeast Hungary, in the house of his grandfather, who was a tenant farmer. He spent his early years in this orthodox Jewish household. Later, his parents moved to Nagyvárád (now Oradea, Romania) where, besides going to primary school, the young Lajos also went to a Yeshiva. Even as a child, he wanted to learn music, but his parents were against it. Nonetheless, he did learn the basics of music from the local Cantor. Everything else he learned later from private teachers.

During these years, Nagyvárád was a cultural and artistic center often called the 'little Paris'. A number of young writers, poets, and future public figures of great promise were flocking around Endre Ady, the celebrated Hungarian poet of the age. Musical life was thriving, and touring musicians who came to Budapest all visited Nagyvárád as well. So the young and curious Lajos had the good fortune early in life to get a taste of this atmosphere. Later, he started writing music criticism for *Nagyvárad* *Napló* (*The Nagyváradi Journal*). He experimented quite successfully with writing poetry as well but soon realized that his true calling was music.

When Nagyvárád was annexed to Romania as Oradea after World War I, Lajos moved to Budapest where he found accommodations with one of his father's friends, a well-known Cantor. Szamosi learned a lot from him about music and singing. – Now he had the chance to make his long-held dream of studying singing come true. He started to take lessons from a famous voice teacher of the day, Emil Makai, and he also began serious studies in other fields of music to make up for time lost during the previous years. – When, after a while, he felt that his teacher could not solve the vocal problem that blocked his development, he tried taking lessons from other teachers, but again to no effect. Then he decided to search for a teacher abroad. First, he went to Vienna, then he moved on to Berlin, where he spent more than two years. He took lessons for shorter or longer periods from several famous teachers and audited lessons taught by others, but he had the same experience there as in his own lessons: teachers could not solve vocal problems. In his search, he made contact with the famous soprano, Lilly Lehmann (*Meine Gesangskunst*), who was a great artist and an associate of Wagner. He learned a great deal from her about art.

Berlin, which in the 1920's was enjoying a golden age, offered Szamosi a great opportunity for development. He had a chance to listen to concerts and go to opera performances led by the greatest conductors (eg. Bruno Walter, Wilhelm Furtwängler,

Erich Kleiber, Otto Klemperer) and sung by outstanding singers (eg. Sigrid Onegin, Maria Ivogün, Friedrich Schorr, etc.) He regularly visited the rehearsals of the famous oratorio conductor, Siegfried Ochs. His artistic standards and requirements were developed through his exposure to these examples.

He learned much in Berlin and collected valuable experiences, but still he could not solve his vocal problems, so he decided to try his luck in Paris. Here, he managed to take lessons from the famous baritone Jan de Reszke, and then from N. Plamondon who had a great career in the United States. Both of them were elderly by this time and were working as teachers. Unfortunately, he did not find an answer to his problems with either one of them.

Szamosi had a beautiful tenor voice, a good ear for music, and a depth of expression to his singing. Every voice teacher was happy to take him as a student but considered his problem, a slight throatiness, irreparable. They encouraged him, saying his singing was beautiful enough to take a contract, but this kind of singing could not satisfy his own aspirations. Szamosi did not give up on his vision that there must be a way to solve vocal problems such as his. He developed a conviction that a thorough knowledge of neighboring fields was necessary for a true pedagogy of singing. He started studying aesthetics, anatomy, physiology and psychology on his own, paying particular attention to the operation of the vocal organs, without which knowledge he could not have succeeded. In the meantime, he learned that there was an institute in Munich, the Institut für Stimm- und Sprachheilkunde (Institute for Speech and Voice Therapy), led by Prof. Max Nadoleczny. They treated and cured singers, actors, teachers, priests, etc. who suffered from functional vocal disorders (e.g. weak vocal cords due to strain or incorrect function, nodules, etc.). Szamosi managed to get permission to observe the therapy sessions. After a couple of months, they entrusted him with treating simpler cases under the supervision of a physician. The treatment consisted of light vocal exercises.

On the basis of his studies and experience at the institute, Szamosi started teaching singing. His concept was that the exercises and ways of practicing that were suitable for curing ill voices should also be suitable for repairing the malfunctions of healthy but incorrectly used voices and for restoring the healthy functions of singing. Their effect could only be positive. He had learned at the institute, for example, how to loosen the tension and stiffness of the neck muscles with the soft touch of his fingers in order to achieve an easier, more natural phonation.

After finishing his term at the institute, Szamosi went back to Budapest to his family. He suspended his plans as a singer, but teaching and solving the vocal problems of

different people became more and more interesting and exciting to him. In the beginning, it was mostly serious cases and derailed people who contacted him. He found them very interesting, learned a lot from teaching them, and had good results with them. Thus, he gained a name as a therapist. Many people wanted to see him and even laryngologists sent patients to him. This is how he learned the basics of teaching singing. In the meantime, almost unnoticed, his own vocal problems were solved.

Parallel with teaching, Szamosi keeps doing theoretical work. The Szabolcsi-Tóth *Zenei Lexikon* (Music Encyclopedia) is published in 1930. Commissioned by Bence Szabolcsi, he writes articles about voice training, singers, and singing teachers for the Encyclopedia. In 1932, he starts an artistic and cultural journal, *Zenekultúra*. The authors include among others Miklós Laurisin, Viktor Lányi, Antal Molnár and Aladár Tóth. Unfortunately, due to organizational and financial difficulties, only two issues are published.

In 1934, Szamosi publishes his article, *Functional disorders of the vocal organs of psychological origin*, in the medical journal, *Gyógyászat (Medicine)*.

In 1936, he is invited to give a speech at the 13th scientific session of the Hungarian Phonetics Society. The title of his speech is, *The practice of voice pedagogy*.

In the meantime, he starts studying the works of Sigmund Freud and undergoes psychoanalysis for several years. Thus, he gains a deeper insight into the problems of depth psychology, which proves to be a great help in his work. – Of his cases as a therapist, we should probably mention that of the famous reciter, Oszkár Ascher. In his memoirs, *Minden versek titkai* (The Secrets of All Poems) (published by Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó 1964), Ascher tells the story of how he met Szamosi and what the result of that meeting was. “... I was given a timely warning from the voice pedagogue, Lajos Szamosi, who stood before me and told me flatly and roughly: ‘Your problem is that you cannot speak.’ I readily submitted to Szamosi’s pedagogy and took lessons from him three times a week for one and a half years. – I learned how to give *strength* to my voice without *strain*, how to speak *loudly* instead of *shouting*, how to put *true soul* into my speaking instead of *going into raptures*, *real emotions* instead of *sentimentality*, in addition to *interpretation*. To economize with my bad and dull voice, to warm up during a performance instead of becoming hoarse, to give voice from the same source throughout my range from the lowest to the highest note, and to expand

the tonal range, and together with this expansion to give a wide palette of shades and colors to the voice: all this I owe to Lajos Szamosi.”

In 1939, Szamosi publishes his fundamentally important study, *The path to free singing*.

From as early as the mid 1930's, Szamosi organized house concerts with his more advanced students in front of an invited audience. The interest was so high that he had to accommodate an audience of 100 - 120 people each time. Sándor Jemnitz and Antal Molnár gave introductory talks. Accompanists included István Antal and Miklós Laurisin. – Singers of the first larger concert were, among others, László Csabay, Teri Vajda, and Anna Pauk. László Csabay was hired from Szamosi's studio by a Swiss agent, and during the war he became a member of the Zürich opera. After the war, he had a contract with the Metropolitan Opera in New York. He sang the role of Rodrigo in Toscanini's recording of Verdi's *Othello*. Teri Vajda assisted Szamosi until 1944. After the war, she became a much sought after singing teacher in Prague. Anna Pauk became a renowned teacher in Budapest. György Kerényi Miklós, who began studying with Szamosi in 1939 after studies in Germany and Italy, also participated in some of the concerts. Later, he became a teacher at the Bartók Béla Conservatory and then at the Music Academy of Budapest. – Szamosi's plan was that at the end of the war, with a small ensemble of his students who were all equally accomplished, he would demonstrate his vision for a modern way of singing opera.

In March 1944, the Germans occupied Hungary, and this put a sudden end to Szamosi's work and upset all his plans. Only a few of his students survived these apocalyptic times. Szamosi and his close family were saved, which was little short of a miracle, but they lost everything.

In January 1945, physically and mentally exhausted, the family set out for Bucharest as they had heard that it was quiet and peaceful there. Soon Szamosi was invited to teach the singers of the Philharmonia Choir. Private students also started to appear. His wife, a dressmaker, also found some work. – After a year spent in Bucharest, they decided to go back home. Szamosi travelled to Budapest to get information about opportunities for their return (job, home etc.), but his acquaintances in the Ministry of Education did not encourage him. In fact, they advised him to take any opportunity he could to work abroad.

It had long been Szamosi's dream to make a close study of Italian singing pedagogy on location. Now he had a reason to go to Italy. When he returned to Bucharest, he was given a letter of recommendation by Marietta Guetta, who lived in Bucharest at

the time, to her teacher, Alfredo Casella, the great Italian composer and a researcher of Vivaldi. – Thus, in the spring of 1946 amid the bad travelling conditions of the day, they started off from Bucharest to Budapest and then, through Austria, to Italy. After many difficulties, they arrived in Rome in the fall. As they arrived without money, they spent the first weeks in the Cinecittá (Cinema City), in a refugee camp set up there before the war. Mrs. Szamosi rented a room in the city of Rome, and since the fame of the Budapest dressmakers had long since reached Rome, she soon had much work to do. Soon Szamosi also managed to rent a studio in one of the musicians' quarters of Rome (Prati) where he started to take students. Soon he had a circle of them, mostly Italian singers. He was able to achieve results more quickly with them, because they had more affinity for free singing than the Central Europeans. In a few months, Szamosi started to organize house concerts, and his name became more and more well-known. The press started to pay attention to the Hungarian singing teacher. Articles about him appeared in various newspapers. The June 4, 1948 issue of *Momento Sera* wrote about him: "Maestro Szamosi speaks an approximate Italian but makes his students sing in the truest Italian way." In 1947, the Psychoanalytic Society of Rome published, *The path to free singing*, as a supplement in their Journal, *Psicoanalisi*, under the Italian title, *La via al libero canto*. The president of the society, J. Fleischer, wrote in his foreword among other things: "In my opinion this study is probably the best of the ones that have been published so far in the field of modern applied psychology."

Alfredo Casella also welcomed him. Szamosi asked his permission to dedicate his study, which was to be published in Italian, to him. Casella gladly accepted the offer, but unfortunately the Maestro unexpectedly died, so the study was published "In memoriam Alfredo Casella".

One of Szamosi's students was the wife of the musicologist, Matteo Glinsky, the editor of *Osservatore Romano*, the official journal of the Vatican. Glinsky was very interested in Szamosi's work and often audited his lessons. On the occasion of the publication of *La via al libero canto*, he wrote a long article in the *Osservatore Romano* under the title, *Il segreto del bel canto* (the secret of bel canto). The last sentence of the article was as follows: "Lodovico Szamosi's pedagogic theories — apart from their practical value — have perhaps finally illuminated for us those secrets of the Italian bel canto that many until now believed to be irretrievably lost." Working with the Italian voices enriched Szamosi's work with new and interesting knowledge.

In 1949, world politics took a turn and Szamosi had to decide where he wanted to live. – On the recommendation of Virgilio Mortari, a well known composer, he was

invited to teach in a major musical institution. A condition, however, would have been that he declare his alienation and assume Italian citizenship. He would also have had to make a political declaration. Szamosi did not want to accept either condition. For this reason, and because he had two sons and a grandson living in Hungary, he decided to move back with his wife and daughter. They arrived in Budapest in the fall of 1949.

Shortly after their return, Zoltán Vásárhelyi, whom he had not known before, visited him and invited him to become the voice teacher of the choir of the Honvéd Ensemble. After about 9 months of intensive voice training work, the November 24, 1950 issue of *Szabad Nép* wrote this about their first concert at the Music Academy: “We can clearly say: We have never had a male choir as excellent as the Honvéd Ensemble, neither in terms of volume nor in terms of homogeneity of tone.” The critic of *Kis Újság* (Little Newspaper) reported on November 24, “resonant basses and baritones, and soaring tenors”. None of the articles mentioned the name of the voice teacher. Shortly afterwards, Szamosi was dismissed on the grounds of ‘professional inadequacy’. He lived for almost two years without an adequate job until he was hired as a voice teacher in 1952 at the Ferenc Erkel Conservatory, later named Béla Bartók Conservatory.

In response to his having been attacked by others in the profession, he wrote his study, *The physiological basis of the methodology of voice training for artistic purposes*, and submitted it for review to the Medical Section of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. According to the opinion of the readers, “Szamosi’s findings are adequate to serve as a new, physiological basis for the methods of teaching singing.” This rather significant statement, however, was ignored by both professional circles and the press alike.

In March 1952, Szamosi gave a presentation on the same topic for the Pedagogy Section of the Musicians’ Federation.

In March 1956, he was invited to the physicians’ club of the Science and Art Department of the Hungarian-Soviet Society to give a presentation along with other invited speakers. The talks were followed by a debate. Participants in the debate included members of the Academy Dr. Géza Bárczy, Dr. Kálmán Lissák, Dr. Pál Gegesi Kiss, as well as Oszkár Ascher, Lajos Hernádi and György Sebök, pianist. Due to the general interest, and at the request of the audience, the debate continued on May 11 after some of the participating physicians had visited Szamosi’s lessons to have a look at the practical work.

On September 15, Oszkár Ascher wrote an article with regard to the debate in *Irodalmi Újság* (Literary Newspaper) under the title, *On the edge of an inquiry*. In this article, he wrote: “What am I complaining about? That Lajos Szamosi, after all his achievements and recognition abroad, *came home upon invitation*, to continue his work in Hungary. When he arrived, he was not given the job he had been promised, and in the end it was the High School of Music that offered a modest home for his activities. *The press that was invited did not turn up at the scientific sessions mentioned above; not a word has ever been published anywhere* about the work and aspirations of Lajos Szamosi *in his own homeland!* And thus, for the time being, he must make do with the columns of praise and appreciation with which the press welcomed his work and aspirations in the ‘*home of singing and music*’, Italy.”

Then came October 23, 1956, the outbreak of the Hungarian revolution against the Communists and the Soviet rule. These days seemed even less suitable to carrying on with his work. The disregard and the attacks on his work that he had experienced since his return from Italy had deeply embittered him. He started thinking about moving to a country where his work would be acknowledged and appreciated.

His choice was Austria. He left Hungary with an immigration passport, accompanied by his wife and daughter (his sons had left Hungary earlier). They arrived in Vienna in September 1957. Szamosi was then over 63 years old.

Soon after their arrival, Szamosi met Dr. Imre Vincze who was the head of the Institut for Sprach- und Stimmheilkunde of the Vienna Clinic at that time. Dr. Vincze entrusted Szamosi with treating the voices of two actors from the Vienna Burgtheater. Having seen Szamosi’s achievements with the two actors, Dr. Vincze introduced him to Dr. Hans Sittner, the president of the Vienna Music Academy. Dr. Sittner wanted to hire Szamosi immediately. The rule was, however, that candidates had to teach a demonstration lesson before being hired. Szamosi suggested – since he taught in an unusual way and a single demonstration lesson would hardly have been enough to judge his work – that they give him a couple of students to work with at no charge, and after a while they listen to them and decide about his employment. Three months later, he became a teacher of the singing faculty at the Vienna Music Academy. After reaching retirement age, he was allowed to teach two more years at the Music Academy with special permission from the Minister of Education. Before granting his permission, the Minister wanted to meet Szamosi in person and invited him to a private audience.

From as early as the 1930’s, Szamosi built his curriculum in such a way that the initial stage focused on Italian baroque and pre-classical works. He believed that this kind

of music – apart from and in addition to its intrinsic values – was the most appropriate for developing and maintaining the voice and for learning how to sing. Naturally, he taught German works of the period as well. Then followed Mozart, the romantic operas of the 19th century and finally, for advanced students, in accordance with the historical development of music, the German Lied. Obviously, this was only a guideline, not a rigid rule set in stone.

After his retirement, he had private students. Some of his students from the Academy continued to see him and new students were also coming to him. He formed a vocal ensemble called Collegium Canticorum with his advanced students and organized concerts in several smaller concert halls in Vienna (e.g. Konzerthaus Schubert Saal, Palais Palfy, Italian Cultural Institute, The Club of the International Atomic Energy Commission). These concerts – some of which were introduced by Prof. Josef Mertin – received very favorable responses in the Vienna press.

Szamosi was one of the first few people who brought Baroque sacred and secular music back to the stage again, and he was almost the only one who worked with the vocal music of the period. Their programs included the works of G. Frescobaldi, C. Monteverdi, M. da Gagliano, G. Caccini, H. Schütz, D. Buxtehude and G. F. Händel, among others.

In addition to the concerts, with the support of the Austrian Ministry of Education Szamosi also organized summer courses on the vocal chamber music of the Baroque period. (Chamber music in the sense that, even if it is church music, the vocal and instrumental parts play together as equal partners.)

Topics of the courses included among others:

- Phonation and singing style in the 16th to 18th centuries – on the basis of artistic traditions.
- The importance of ornamentation as a means of expression.
- Notation (Baroque notation developed from tablatures), phrasing.

They also discussed the consequences of this musical practice for singing songs and operas, as the roots of these genres go back to early music.

Besides Lajos Szamosi, teachers of the courses were Prof. Josef Mertin, the founder and leader of the Collegium Musicum of the Vienna Music Academy, and Edwin Szamosi who was the assistant of Prof. Mertin for years.

One of these courses was held in a castle in Carinthia and the Collegium Canticorum gave several concerts in Carinthian towns. The Klagenfurt radio made several recordings of these concerts, and the recordings were regularly broadcast on the Vienna radio for years.

The Dutch press also took notice of Szamosi. Several articles were published about him, and the Hilversum radio did an interview with him. An article was published about him even in Sweden.

Famous singers such as Hilde Güden, James King, Werner Krenn, Helga Dernesch, etc. started to come to him with their vocal problems, and he managed to help them overcome some of their difficulties.

Two of his students won prizes in different years in the international opera competitions jointly organized by Deutsche Gramophon Gesellschaft and the Vienna daily *Express*. One of the two, the Bulgarian soprano Stefka Todorova, won first prize one year, and the other, the Spanish soprano Trinidad Paniagua, won second prize in another year. Stefka Todorova became a member of the Graz opera house, and Trinidad Paniagua went back to Spain to sing, for example, *Oscar* with Placido Domingo and *Musette* with Luciano Pavarotti. – Szamosi brought these students out of a rather bad vocal condition to achieve these high standards.

In all this work, Szamosi's son and daughter were helping as his assistants. They were his students and colleagues for decades, and they followed his phases of research and development as well as the process of improving, deepening, and refining his methods and tools. They are both teaching singing to date in Vienna. [In 2016, they are no longer teaching.]

In spite of the fact that Szamosi had to struggle a great deal, had to put up with criticism and attacks in addition to appreciation, had much disappointment, and had to rebuild his life many times over the years, his optimism and faith in people remained unbroken. His health, however, did suffer. In his last years, he was often ill, but whenever his health allowed, he was back at the piano, working again. The 40 years of loving care and unconditional support for his work that his second wife provided played a vital role in his achievements. He was always open for new things. He kept reading all the time, and he looked for large-scale connections up to the last moment. In the midst of all this work and his health problems, he did not have time for writing. Therefore, he was able to finish only the first chapter of his long-planned, comprehensive book on singing. He died in the fall of 1977, at the age of 83. He taught to the last day of his life.