



Interview: András Schiff

The pianist is reviled by government supporters in his homeland - all because he spoke out against the rising tide of racism.

By Jessica Duchon, October 6, 2011

Any pianist could be forgiven for avoiding a country where someone has threatened to chop off his hands. It is, though, especially alarming when the country is his birthplace. Back in January, when Hungary took up its six-month presidency of the EU, András Schiff, one of today's most prominent Hungarian-born musicians, wrote a letter to the Washington Post, expressing disquiet about rising tides of racism and authoritarianism in his native land.

Schiff wrote: "The latest news is indeed alarming. Tolerance levels are extremely low. Racism, discrimination against the Roma, antisemitism, xenophobia, chauvinism and reactionary nationalism - these symptoms are deeply worrying. They evoke memories that we have hoped were long forgotten."

His was one voice among a number of high-profile Hungarian artists and writers who have protested about recent political developments in their homeland. The backlash seemed to justify their fears. In the state-approved newspaper, Magyar Hírlap, the journalist Zsolt Bayer lashed out at Schiff and two foreign journalists - Nick Cohen from the UK and Daniel Cohn-Bendit of France - lamenting that such people had not met their deaths "in the Forest of Orgovány" (a reference to a 1919 mass murder by a right-wing militia). But it was a threat to Schiff's hands in an anonymous online comment that proved the last straw.

"It's not that I'm afraid," says the pianist, "but I don't want to take the risk." He doubts he will return to Hungary while the situation persists. "My mother died last year - she was 95," he says. "She was the last link."

Now that Hungary's EU presidency is over, Schiff is concerned that the country is no longer under the international spotlight. He says that changes in the law and the

constitution made by the prime minister, Viktor Orbán, and the Fidesz party are exerting an increasing stranglehold over institutions of many types, including the arts.

"The supreme court, the judges, the electoral system - they change everything," he says, "plus they have done a cleansing procedure in all fields in politics, in the media, in culture shockingly, so anybody who is not one of them, they just kick them out. They don't need to give a reason. People are being fired from one day to the next and consequently they are scared about what is going to happen. There's a new media law - if you write something you can get a horrendous fine, and the committee who judges that consists of five people, all from the governing party. So they are the judges, they are the executioners, they are everything.

It's quite shocking - a mixture of Goebbels and Stalin

"Culture, theatres, they fire the directors of the opera house... Iván Fischer [the Hungarian Jewish conductor] said something critical of the government and a week or two later they cut the budget of his Budapest Festival Orchestra. It's quite shocking - a mixture of Goebbels and Stalin, but all very well disguised."

Recent newspaper reports in the UK have highlighted the problem of gangs which attack and burn down impoverished Roma villages. "I've heard of nothing like this since the pogroms of the 19th and early 20th centuries," says Schiff.

These developments are especially painful in the light of Schiff's parents' traumatic history. Both of them were born in Debrecen, and both were previously married before the Second World War. They were among the first Hungarian Jews to be deported by the Nazis in 1944. Schiff's father was sent to a labour camp: "He was a doctor, so he had to do medical work, but his wife and four-year-old son were taken away to Auschwitz and never came back. My mother was married to a young man who was in a forced labour camp on the Ukrainian front. He fell ill in a typhoid epidemic - and they set fire to the barracks where the typhoid sufferers were and burned them alive.

"The big miracle was the survival of my mother. She was put on a train bound for Auschwitz. This was 1944, so the Allies were bombing railways and they bombed the Auschwitz line. The train was diverted and ended up at Magdalenenhof, near Vienna. Although it was a forced labour camp, everybody in that transport survived."

After the war, Schiff's parents met and married; Schiff was born in 1953 in Budapest. "Although my paternal grandparents were Orthodox Jews, I had no Jewish upbringing," he says. "Under communism all religions were suppressed, but my parents also did not want to burden me with a heritage that had brought them so much suffering. As I grow older, my awareness of my Jewish identity is becoming much stronger, and I am eager to learn more about it."

During his teens, Schiff enjoyed a relatively peaceful existence under "goulash communism", plus a fine musical education in the Franz Liszt Academy, where his teachers included the distinguished musicians Ferenc Rados, Pál Kadosa and György Kurtág. In the summer holidays he would come to London to stay with relatives; here he got to know the conductor and pianist/harpsichordist George Malcolm, whom he cites as a major influence.

Schiff rose to prominence initially for his playing of Bach – if he has a signature work it has to be the Goldberg Variations. Still, his achievements range from performing and recording the complete Beethoven Sonatas to conducting the Bach St Matthew Passion, from co-founding the Musiktage Mondsee festival in Austria to in-depth exploration of composers as diverse as Haydn, Janáček and, most recently, Schumann.

His new double CD set of Schumann piano music is just out and includes a startling gem: the long-hidden original ending of the composer's great C major Fantasy, Op 17. This ending furthermore represents a surprise link with Hungary.

"When I was in the Leeds Piano Competition in 1975, the American pianist Charles Rosen was on the jury," Schiff recounts, "and afterwards we became good friends. I was still living in Hungary and one day he got in touch with the amazing information that this manuscript of the Schumann Fantasy in C was in the National Library of Budapest with this different ending. He asked if I could get him a copy of it." Schiff suspects the manuscript was brought to Budapest by Liszt, the work's dedicatee.

Schumann's first version of the work's conclusion turned out to be very different from the published text: it included a quotation from Beethoven's song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*, which Schumann also uses in the opening movement. "I consider the Budapest ending far superior to the published one," says Schiff, who has recorded both versions on the same CD.

Schiff now lives in Italy, but one more powerful link to Hungary is still with him - his passion for the music of Bartók. He performed the composer's Piano Concerto No 3 at this year's Proms and will be playing it again with the Hallé Orchestra conducted by Sir Mark Elder in Manchester next week. Given events in his native land, for Schiff to play it now is certainly a statement of strength and hope.

András Schiff's new recording of Schumann piano music is out on ECM. He performs Bartók's Piano Concerto No 3, in a concert also featuring by Beethoven, Debussy and Stravinsky, with the Hallé Orchestra at the Bridgewater Hall, Manchester, on October 13. Box office: 0161 907 9000 or visit www.halle.co.uk