

Accompaniment or Song:

Two Musical Approaches to János Pilinszky

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1. Introduction

In this presentation I explore aspects of the relationship between song and poetry. In particular, I examine the difference between setting a poem to musical accompaniment and transforming it into a song. To this end, I highlight two poems by János Pilinszky, “Egyenes labirintus” (“Straight Labyrinth”) and “Egy szép napon” (“On a Fine Day”), which I interpreted musically and recorded for my first two EPs in 2014 and 2015.

I am a singer-guitarist-songwriter and keyboard player and one of the founding members of the band Platon Karataev. The band was formed in 2016, in Budapest; in its beginnings, it built mainly on British / American folk music traditions and worked with English-language lyrics. Over the years, we have released three albums, with progressively stronger indie-rock and psychedelic influences. The lyrics on the third album are written in our mother tongue; the melodies have also distanced themselves from our earlier work, so that listeners will sometimes discover Hungarian folk motifs in the songs, rather than American or British folk.

Besides my work in the band, I also compose and perform solo. In my solo projects I am responsible for the lyrics and sometimes set poems to music, sometimes in Hungarian, sometimes in English translation. My first EP concludes with a musical reading of a poem by János Pilinszky, for which I used an English translation (Géza Simon, “The Straight Labyrinth”). In my songs I mainly focus on the passing of time, the beauty that comes from

the insignificance of human life, the experience of sadness, and the focus on presence. My lyrics have both a psychologist's attitude and literary influences. I have worked and am working on Hungarian poetry, from great poets like János Pilinszky, Attila József and Miklós Radnóti to contemporary poetry (Csenger Kertai). In my songs I sometimes quote American authors such as Allen Ginsberg or Bob Dylan.

I am testing my wings as an employed musician in the film industry. Besides previously contributing a piece to the film *Two Stripes* directed by Balázs Dudás (screened at the Fresh Meat International Short Film Festival and the Lagów International Film Festival) and the short film *Home* directed by Laura Strausz (2022), I created the complete soundtrack for Balázs Dudás' short film *Thanks for the Wonderful Pictures*, released this year.

Alongside my music career, I have a degree in psychology and give individual counseling sessions as a self-employed entrepreneur. Currently I am also employed in a method-specific capacity at the Hungarian Association for Relaxation and Symbolic Therapy as an Autogenic Training practitioner.

2. On what grounds do we call a song a song?

The above question, as well as the one posed in Section 3 below, is highly complex and could be discussed at great length; it may be illusory to think we can establish an objective answer or definition. Surely there are those steeped in the subject for whom a word spoken aloud or a sound sustained is a song. By the same token, there are surely those who define the "borders" of the song genre in terms of music theory: a multitude of chordal and tonal features.

In this presentation, I offer a simplified interpretation of song to allow us to focus on the actual subject matter. On this basis, a song is an aesthetic sequence of sounds in which

at least one singing voice or instrument (even a percussive one) appears and forms a meaningful system. I can also imagine a song that consists of a single note, but which, because of its tonality, rhythm or effects, becomes a system in the mind of the composer and the listener. A song is further distinguished by its relative simplicity; in many cases, it can be played and sung with minimal equipment, in almost any environment.

3. Up to what point do we call a poem a poem?

This point differs from the previous one in that I am not looking for the point where a text becomes a poem, but rather the point where it stops being a poem and becomes a song. What separates a song from a poem? Is there an objective boundary? I think we can say here that there is no universal truth, but that there are as many subjective opinions on the topic as there are people.

In Hungarian literature, there are numerous instances of a work conceived and published as a poem but called a song by its author. In other words, the author included the word “song” in the poem’s title. The best-known and most obvious Hungarian example of this is Sándor Petőfi's revolutionary poem, “National Song.” This work, which in literary discussions is interpreted as a *march*, was not originally tied to a melody, but contains recurring elements that can be understood as a refrain. The poem was intended to ignite and fuel the revolutionary fire. I believe that the author, although not thinking in melodic terms, consciously created a form that could be chanted in groups, thus contributing to the revolutionary mood at mass demonstrations and rallies. Chanting is an interesting phenomenon. Does it count as a song, or can it even be called a poem? It's worth thinking about the chants that emerge from the participants’ rhymes and shouts at demonstrations. On the basis of my thoughts in point 2, I think that such things can be called songs, but let us not get bogged down in one particular poem and demonstrators’ rhymes. In Hungarian

poetry, the word “song” is often used in titles; the vast majority of these do not contain choruses, nor do they have the historical inflection of the "National Song" that would imply mass versification. For an example we can refer to the *bordal* (wine-songs), which, although melodic in their ancient Greek origins, became, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, merely poems praising wine and were at most later set to music (as was the above-mentioned "National Song").

The question of setting to music is the most important for my presentation. Does a poem become a song when you set the poem you are reading to music? Does it become a melody if it is read melodically without an accompaniment? My assumption is that it does. However, it does not cease to be a poem. What was born as a poem remains a poem and, in a good case, loses nothing of its meaning, content and spirituality. A poem set to music by either of these methods tries to give the poem’s moods a melodic emphasis and interpretation. Because of the subjective nature of interpreting poetry, setting poetry to music is also a subjective genre, which is very fragile.

4. János Pilinszky and my connection to his work

János Pilinszky (1921- 1981) is one of the most important poets of twentieth-century Hungarian literature, who, in addition to lyric poetry, also created epic poetry and drama. He was awarded the Baumgarten, Attila József and Kossuth Prizes for his excellence. In his oeuvre, he analyses the cruel world of the 20th century, depicting the abandonment of man, the universe of concentration camps, the futility of escape from the suffering of existence, the fear and terror that pervade the stages of life. Christian existentialism and faith are an important element in his art, through his Catholic upbringing, yet he did not call himself a “Christian poet” in the classical sense. He spent his secondary school years at the Piarist

school in Budapest, where I graduated seventy-three years later. In my literature studies, the school placed great emphasis on his oeuvre, and I soon developed a strong attachment to Pilinszky's art, which has remained with me to this day. In the fledgling phase of my musical development, I set his poem "Straight Labyrinth" to musical accompaniment, using an English translation by Géza Simon. On my first officially released EP, I sang the English translation (also by Géza Simon) of his poem "On a Fine Day," this time singing the poem, not just setting it to music. (See the end of this essay for the English text of the two poems.)

Pilinszky's poetry has stood the test of time remarkably well and has remained fully relevant in the 21st century. Today, many artists continue to be influenced and inspired by his writings and his philosophy of art. For me, the most important lesson of the latter is that he believes that true thinking is to concentrate on nothing. His rationale was that as long as the thinking person is simply aware of what he is thinking about, his thought process is filled with things he already knows, so the problem must be narrowed down to the point where he is no longer thinking and, when he gets to the heart of the problem, he concentrates on nothing. This focus on nothingness, in his opinion, gives rise to an answer that one would otherwise be unable to piece together from simple details.

In my opinion, Pilinszky has in many ways gone beyond the thought, or rather the philosophical depth, of most of his contemporaries, and has left behind a timeless and enduring oeuvre, which is worth immersing oneself in at any time, because its astonishing depth allows the reader to discover new layers.

5. The basis for decisions on setting poetry to music

a. Choosing a poem for a song

As I wrote above, because of the subjective nature of interpreting poetry, the arrangement of a poem is also a subjective genre, which makes it extremely fragile. A poem may appeal to a completely different layer in one reader than in another; their perceptions of mood can also vary widely. The songwriter who wants to adapt a poem is no different; he has no objective insight into the poem, even in the special case where he knows the author and has the opportunity to talk to him about the poem, its origins, and the poet's interpretation of it. We will never look at any work of art in exactly the same way as its author. But sometimes the reader is moved and has a deeper encounter with a poem. The thought "as if I had written it" comes up when we feel that the poem resonates with us in our whole being. For me, this phenomenon is characterised by a kind of transcendence, a plunge into a deeper state of consciousness, as if a door had been opened to the world and not least to the poet's soul. Of course, I do not claim that in this state I myself really understood the author and came closer to him than anyone else. However, a state of shock, a dense spirituality that can feed creative energies, is already present. The musician who puts the poem into song must seek out this state of shock, the kind of encounter that triggers a stream of emotions that can no longer be expressed in words, and must give himself over to it. I do not consider it optimal to commission poetry arrangements or to put out competitions for this purpose. Such songs cannot be produced, they just have to happen in someone, in my opinion. So the selection of a poem is, in my view, ideally not a cognitive process, but rather a spiritual one. Also, it is difficult to create a song rendition of a poem that one has sought out through a rational and conscious process.

b. Choosing a songwriting approach

In this section I would like to talk about how the songwriter decides on the type of arrangement. There are two basic approaches: to create a musical background against which

someone will read the poem aloud, or to carve the lines into a melody and sing it, or have someone sing it.

Musical accompaniment is, in my opinion, the simpler approach. There is no need to deal with rhymes, no need to create a song structure, and even less need for the songwriter to impose his or her soul on the poem. The musician tries to capture the mood and atmosphere of the poem. The point is not to tell a story or to create emotional waves, but just to paint a shade under the poem, which can bring out its deeper content and put it in a palpable context for the reader or listener. This genre also has its own difficulty: the quality of the reading. Unfortunately, an insensitive or even overly pathos-ridden verse delivery can really spoil the work. So I think this approach is easier in terms of musical composition, but it can easily fail with a mediocre reading.

6. Is it possible to bring people closer to poetry through music?

One of the sad phenomena of our time is the movement away from books and reading. The majority of our society hardly picks up poetry books after finishing school, or at best occasionally comes across a famous poem through social media. Music, on the other hand, has become an everyday consumer product, thanks to the spread of radio, the rise of digitalisation and streaming services, and the production of films. However, listening to music is often a sideline activity, almost a background noise in supermarkets, cars and TV series. Mainstream music lovers are—to put it very simply—enthusiastic about feel-good and party culture, not looking for deeper layers of musicality, either lyrically or spiritually. Consequently, in my opinion, musically arranged poems cannot open a bigger door to the mainstream than their book counterparts.

The larger situation, however, is not so simple or worrisome. For an audience that is open to deeper content and is more drawn to music and literature, musical arrangements can reveal new nuances and, in many cases, can point out and spotlight lesser-known works from a poet's oeuvre. In my view, the vast majority of these arrangements are not able to appeal to the masses, but they do provide interesting and enticing content for the culture-loving audience. Those lovers of culture need not be from the upper echelons of society or hold advanced degrees—for there are many without wealth or formal education who immerse themselves in music and literature, just as there are many from elite backgrounds who treat the same as passing entertainment, or who pay attention only to what is approved and lauded by the critics.

7. A question of subjective experience: is my musical mood-interpretation “valid”?

I have refrained from analyzing or justifying my musical renditions of the two Pilinszky poems, because I think an analysis would distort the truth. The process was largely intuitive; moreover, it is difficult to talk about Pilinszky, precisely because the poems go beyond words as we commonly use them. The question remains: did my efforts, do such efforts in general, succeed?

I think I have said enough about how poems are experienced differently from one individual to another. We will probably never know exactly what emotions a particular poem evoked in the poet, exactly what cognitive path he or she took to arrive at the words he or she wrote. The question arises: how does anyone dare “touch” by artistic means a work that its author considers finished or has rejected? This question is inherently fraught, given that we presumably have a different interpretation of the mood and idea than the author of

those lines, simply because we exist in a different time and space, at a different stage of our lives—that is, we are simply different people.

However, the reader may occasionally feel a kind of kinship, which can be experienced as a kind of catharsis. We may feel that the poem is close to us, that something resonates profoundly, that instead of just “liking” it, we feel an elemental connection with it. Something seems to cross time and physical distance to us, as if straight from the poet. I do not wish to speak of mystical connections or to veer in a very spiritual direction, but rather to describe a state of emotional shock. A state from which it is perhaps worthwhile to try to create something to accompany the poem, to 'carry it on'. My personal hunch is that the poet would be satisfied if he knew that someone had responded so deeply as to be moved and inspired to create. Even if your interpretation is different from the author's, that deepest state of shock, if you can get there, can't be too far from the poet's intuition.

I'd like to talk about a particular case in which I had the opportunity to take part. I was already a close acquaintance of the contemporary poet Csenger Kertai when he invited me to set to music a poem of my own choosing. The invitation came welcome, and I gladly accepted the invitation on these terms: that I would choose the poem myself. As it turned out, I was able to find a piece that truly resonated with me. If I had not found one, I would have been forced to decline the invitation. As I wrote above, I do not believe that poems can be set to music well under assignment or compulsion. I chose his poem "Lake Balaton" and set it to piano accompaniment, supplemented it with various electronic effects and little things, and then asked Csenger to read the poem to the music himself. The creative process was privileged because I was able to consult with the poet at each step. I received feedback on whether my experience was similar to his--whether he felt the musical mood I had painted was close to his own poem. At first I assumed that either I or an actor would read

the poem aloud, but as I progressed with the work, I felt a great opportunity and a chance for the writer of the lines to read it. Here an important influence for me was a lyrical interview with Pilinszky himself, which can be found on the internet. During the interview, the poet reads several of his poems aloud, which for me is moving. I think the "Balaton" arrangement is also complete in that we hear the poem in Csenger's voice.

In the end, perhaps what matters is some kind of meeting, at a wordless level, between poet and musician—a meeting that the listener will also experience with surprise, because it was neither forced nor planned. It does not matter that they (poet, musician, listener) hear or read the poem differently from each other. The meeting does not need such ornaments of opinion.

8. Attachments*

On A Fine Day – János Pilinszky (*translated by Géza Simon*)

(Egy szép napon)

It's the misplaced tin spoon,
the bric-a-brac of misery
I always looked for,
hoping that on a fine day
I will be overcome by crying,
and the old house, the rustle of ivy
will welcome me back.

Always, as always
I wished to be back.

Musical rendition by Sebestyén Czakó-Kuraly: <https://cksebo.bandcamp.com/track/on-a-fine-day>

The Straight Labyrinth – János Pilinszky (*translated by Géza Simon*)

(Egyenes labirintus)

What will it be like, this return flight
that only similes can describe,
like sanctuary, altar,
homecoming, handshake, hug,
under the trees, garden feast,
where there is no first and last guest,
what will it be like in the end,
this free-fall on open wings,
this flight into the fiery
focus, the communal nest? - I don't know,
and yet, if there is something I know,
I know this blazing corridor,
this labyrinth straight as an arrow,
the heavier and heavier,
exhilarating fact of our fall.

Musical rendition by Sebestyén Czakó-Kurály: <https://cksebo.bandcamp.com/track/straight-labyrinth-pilinszkys-poem>

* Géza Simon's translations of these poems are published in *Hungarian Literature Online* (June 7, 2006), <https://hlo.hu/new-work/the-straight-labyrinth-poems.html>. "Egy szép napon" ("On a Fine Day") was first published in Pilinszky's 1972 collection *Szálkák*. "Egyenes labirintus" ("Straight Labyrinth") first appeared in the November 1971 issue of *Nők lapja*, and later in *Szálkák*. Sebestyén Czakó-Kurály released the musical reditons in 2015 and 2014, respectively, on his first two EPs.