

## Fourth International Libero Canto Conference, Vienna, February 2020

by Kinga Cserjési with Zsuzsanna Horváth

special thanks to Mari Székély

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**The Fourth International Libero Canto Conference took place between February 19 and 23, 2020, organized by the Libero Canto School of Singing of New York. The founder, disseminator, and first teacher of *la via al libero canto* (the path to free singing), was the voice teacher Lajos Szamosi (1894-1977), who developed a system of voice and speech pedagogy that frees the entire organism, the voice production and the artistic expression of the singer, from the stiffness of inhibitions, tensions, and spasms.**

Lajos Szamosi trained as a singer in Budapest, Paris, and Berlin. His musical refinement, knowledge of literature, and writing skills became evident quite early. The daily newspaper, *Nagyváradi Napló*, employed him as a music critic from 1917 on. Bence Szabolcsi asked him to write the article on voice training in his *Music Lexicon*. Szamosi's essays were also regularly published in psychological and medical journals between 1935 and 1977. His seminal essay, *The path to free singing*, was republished in 1947 by the Psychoanalytic Society of Rome. In his preface, Dr. Joachim Fleischer, the president of the Society, wrote, "[I think this essay is] possibly the best publication to date in the field of modern applied psychology," and called the author a person "who can connect his excellent psychological intuition with his extraordinary experience in the field of singing."

Lajos Szamosi taught in Budapest until 1944, then in Italy between 1946 and 1949. After he returned to Hungary, he became the voice coach of Erkel Ferenc Nemzeti Zenede (later Bartók Béla Conservatory). In 1957, he emigrated to Vienna. In 1958, he became a voice teacher at the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst in Vienna. In the early 1960s, with some of his advanced students, he founded the vocal ensemble, Collegium Canticorum. The repertoire of the ensemble mostly consisted of Italian Baroque vocal music, which was a novelty on the Austrian concert stages of the day. Szamosi based his singing approach on the Italian vocal traditions of the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, because he was convinced that the song and opera repertoire of later eras was rooted in this musical style. His pedagogical credo can be best described with the following words of Pier Francesco Tosi:

*"Oh! how great a Master is the Heart! [...] the Heart corrects the Defects of Nature, since it softens a Voice that's harsh, betters an indifferent one, and perfects a good one: Own, when the Heart sings you cannot dissemble, nor has Truth a greater Power of persuading:..."*

*(Pier Francesco Tosi: Observations on the Florid Song, 1723. English translation: Johann Ernest Galliard, 1743)*

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian musicologist, György Kroó, summarized the system of Lajos Szamosi in 1990 as follows:

*"[...] Lajos Szamosi, as a voice teacher of exceptionally thorough theoretical background, examined and investigated a wide palette of problems from both theoretical and practical points of view, and, approaching the issues of voice training as a musician, a physiologist, and a psychologist at the same time, he developed his system on an interdisciplinary basis. [...]*

*I do not know of any other work in the related Hungarian literature that is so original or demonstrates such profound thinking or so much talent, and I think our artistic life – which is waiting for, and ready for, a renewal – can no longer afford to do without his fundamental insights."*

Although he did not know Szamosi in person, Péter Popper, the influential Hungarian psychologist and author, made the following statement about him on the basis of his writings:

*“If I had to summarize the essence of this unique life in one sentence, it would be this: An endless effort until his death to help his students return to the cosmic harmony, to the unbreakable unity of body, soul, and mind. That is why one of his Japanese students called him the Zen master of music.”*

Lajos Szamosi’s children, Edvin (1924-2014) and Hedda (1931-), helped their father in his work by acting as his assistants; they were his students and colleagues for decades, so they were able to observe the entire process of his research, the phases of his development, as well as the deepening and refinement of his methods and approaches. After Lajos’ death, they took over his pedagogical work and developed it further on the basis of their own experience.

The Libero Canto School of Singing of New York was established by Deborah Carmichael and Kinga Cserjési, students of Edvin Szamosi. Deborah Carmichael, artistic director of the school, organized Edvin Szamosi’s master courses in New York between 1990 and 2007. She was also the producer of the documentary, *Libero Canto – Voice is Breath*, directed by Andrea Simon in 2001. Kinga Cserjési, associate artistic director of the school, received her degree from the Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest and became acquainted with the Libero Canto singing pedagogy in the Netherlands in the 1990s as a student of Heent Prins.

Deborah and Kinga have led a number of workshops together, including the *Il Cuore Canta* summer workshop series, organized by Deborah between 2013 and 2015. In 2013 they founded the ensemble *La Compagnia Amarilli*, which regularly performs in Europe and in America. They plan to start a teacher training course at the Libero Canto School of Singing.

The first International Conference of the Libero Canto School of Singing was organized in 2016 in the Netherlands. This was the place where the committed followers of the pedagogy of Lajos Szamosi – this international community of teachers, students, and Szamosi’s family members – met for the first time. Afterwards, they repeated this meeting almost every year, and the event became more and more popular among the members of the community.

At the fourth International Conference in February 2020, there were as many as 25 participants from Europe, Japan, the USA, and Canada. The participants learned about each other’s work through open singing lessons and long discussions held after the lessons. It was the second time that Hedda Szamosi honored the event with her presence. From her wheelchair, she gave lessons daily despite her age (88) and frail health. Characteristic features of her lessons were her keen eyes, sensitivity, laser-sharp attention, humor, childlike enthusiasm, trust, and infinite calm.

Libero Canto is a singing pedagogy that can be useful for any singer of any musical style – be it opera, jazz or pop music – because it can relax and relieve muscle tensions in the voice production with its human-centered exercises. Teachers choose which exercise they want to use to lead their students on *the path to free singing* based on the state of the individual at the given moment. This approach can help anyone who works with their voice, including actors, media presenters, or teachers, because freeing the breath also frees the speaking voice and makes it more powerful and expressive. The Libero Canto singing pedagogy makes it possible to use your vocal organs for a long time without injury. Further information on the Libero Canto School of Singing and the pedagogy are available on the website [www.liberocanto.org](http://www.liberocanto.org).

The conference participants, teachers and students, summarized their experience as follows:

*Libero Canto is not just a singing approach - of course it was developed to support freedom in singing, but it's much more than that. It is something unique and rather philosophical that has an enormous effect on your singing. It transforms your way of looking at music, the world,*

*and the arts in general. It helped me to become independent from singing lessons and teachers, it taught me how to work on myself and to create my own singing language.*

**Johanna Földesi**, concert singer specializing in early music, church musician and choir master

*My previous teachers at conservatory, among The Great and The Good in the world of classical singing, offered mostly mechanical exercises and maneuvers as “technique.” They set high musical goals, but could not guide me to accomplish them in a manner that was satisfactory and fulfilling to me. Working with Edvin was an instant 180 degree turn! .... [What did I learn from him?] One does not “make” voice, one allows it to happen. Technique and artistry in singing are grounded in imagination.*

**Peter Ludwig**, singer and singing teacher

*During the conference, I learned from watching Hedda. I felt even more deeply in my body how at the center of this work is the notion that the body/spirit knows how to sing if we do not get in its way. Hedda embodied this in her teaching. She communicated this in her Being and through her fingers.*

**Marisa Michelson**, composer, singer, singing teacher, founder and artistic director of Constellation Chor

*My lessons made the singing fun and easy again and when Hedda worked with me it felt like I hadn't breathed for a very long time and I wondered how I had survived.... I never feel so grounded, safe and true to myself as I do during and after a Libero Canto lesson... [I also learned from Hedda] that feelings are just feelings and that it's ok to show them - and all your inner craziness.*

**Evelina Szamosi**, singing student

*I love the Libero Canto approach because it is the first approach I have found that considers my entire organism in preparation for my art. I appreciate that it is not a “technique” per se, and that it eschews the mechanical, anti-emotionally-motivated exercises and replaces them with the imagination and musical knowledge.... I believe so much in this work as an essential part of excavating my own artistry through freeing my breath and my mind.*

**Lily Arbisser**, opera singer