

**„...THE COMPOSITION OF A TEAM IS  
A SCIENCE...”  
– INTERVIEW WITH ISTVÁN MÁRTA,  
THE MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE ZSOLNAY  
HERITAGE MANAGEMENT NONPROFIT LTD.  
AND THE CHAIRMAN OF THE HUNGARIAN  
FESTIVAL ASSOCIATION**



*Fotó: www.pecsma.hu*

**Q:** First, I would like to ask you to tell the readers a few things about your career as a manager.

**A:** I studied composing which is rather different from cultural management. I graduated as a composer from the Budapest Music Academy. Then somehow I got involved with theatres. As a theatre musician I edited music for various productions and I also composed music and I worked in almost every Hungarian theatre. Most of my friends were theatre people. Later I became a founding member of the Mandel Quartet which plays historical music. I played the harpsichord and percussion instruments. Thanks to being a music performer I toured the world with the quartet. We interpreted music from the medieval times, the renaissance and early baroque period. I didn't have much time for contemporary music but I wrote compositions for the Amadinda group playing percussion instruments, the 180 Group or the Kronos Quartet from California. These compositions of mine became world famous and some of them are parts of the curriculum. Eventually, I had many more friends and connections in the world of theatre. I learned a lot about the history of drama and techniques used by stage directors and theatre structures. Later I became music director at the Petöfi Theatre in Veszprém and at the National Theatre lead by Imre Csiszár and I was the director of New Theatre for

thirteen years. In these theatres I made very good use of everything I had previously learned. In the meantime I founded a unique civil organisation called Kapolcs Cultural and Nature Conservation Society. As its name suggests it also aims at protecting nature. Our priority is the monitoring of the streamflow of Eger creek but we also run projects to tidy the village Kapolcs. It was the year 1989 and Kapolcs was a run-down village in the Transdanubian region and I thought that why not organise a festival as the name of the society unequivocally suggests. And then in 1989 the Kapolcs Days was born. It was a one-off idea, a three-day mini art festival created by locals and a few of my artist friends. We manufactured the stage ourselves and created the program which had about a hundred-strong audience mainly friends and family. There were a few artists and journalists from Budapest and spread the news of the festival, so this dream-like story didn't stop there and the locals called for it to be continued. Later in the early 1990s neighbouring villages also wanted to be part of it. Three other villages joined and the festival couldn't be called Kapolcs Days any more. So, I came up with the name Valley of Art. If I consider the story of my role as a manager the Kapolcs Days – Valley of Art festival was a momentous step. By 2007 we had 260,000 visitors and the six villages in the valley were completely full. In 2009 we closed the festival ever since we've been trying to recover. This year we will be celebrating our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It's unbelievable!

As a manager I took other social roles as well. I've been the Chairman of the Hungarian Festival Association for 11 years now. It is a professional civil organisation with over 90 member organisations. We are responsible for the professional representation of 220 festivals of all kinds. I also worked as chairman in various advisory boards. These were *ad hoc* engagements.

**Q:** What are those attitudes that drive you to be a leader?

**A:** It's not me who should answer this question. Obviously, as a composer or an artist I would handle this problem differently from those who are professional managers. I've never studied economics, management or leadership techniques so I've learned everything in real life as I went along. I'm sensitive and I've acquired routine and good communication skills which make up for my lack of management skills. There are so many things I have to do that I simply can't take it easy. To a certain degree I try to hide my unsettlements, I've learned it in the theatre how 'to act a role'. I'm not a traditional manager, a real 'boss'. I'm boisterous and blunt, sometimes childish and often introvert and there are many times when I'm really playful. But there is a really important thing in my life and that is teamwork. I know it sounds like a

cliché but I firmly believe that the composition of a team is a science and I always managed to build great professional teams to work with. I couldn't even move without them. I've been working as the managing director of the Zsolnay Heritage Management Nonprofit Ltd. for three years. This position meant a change of lifestyle as well because my wife and myself moved to Pécs. It was a brave undertaking to accept the managing director position because we formed along with the city a large 'cultural holding' which I think is unique. The truth is that even in the last three years many new responsibilities and tasks have been added to my old ones but it had been impossible to see this beforehand.

It's not a classic, gigantic city company and our 'products' come from all areas of art. Meeting the expected indicators and the values and quality we represent give us a special status and requires a special way of thinking both on behalf of the city and our co-workers. The road we chose to follow isn't built on faceless mass production. In many cases we must improvise mainly because of financial reasons.

**Q:** I've looked up one of your previous interviews. You said that *'...at that time I was looking for new venues for the theatre festival when I discovered the Zsolnay Quarter, and I had the same excitement what I had when I found Kapolcs. Both places have the same peculiar history and tradition which became white canvases in my mind for exciting cultural programs.'* What are your recollections on that?

**A:** It's true. Going back to the idea of leadership I was the artistic director of POSZT (National Theatre Festival). And it's really true that in my first year there, someone dropped a word about the Zsolnay Quarter which was still under construction. I walked through the gate at Bajor Street – covered with mud and rubble – and I was shown the only exhibition open, the Gyugyi Collection. It's a unique collection of ceramics representing the golden age of the Zsolnays from around the end of the 19th century, the millennium years and secession. In these utter shambles yet exquisite surroundings there were forks and crockery and I saw steel vases and large amounts of debris and I suddenly felt exactly the same as what I had felt in Kapolcs back then. I thought that it was a place full of potential waiting to be discovered. Fantasy has no limitations. It offers the opportunity for us to show history and tradition in the more generous spaces as well as in every nook and cranny. New qualities, new approaches can be introduced using our heritage. The same happened in Kapolcs. The village has its own personality. It's very important for the place to have its own distinctive characteristic. I'm often asked how to repeat the Valley of Art in Upper Hungary, in Transylvania or in other

places. What I think is that the character of the place or community should be discovered because nothing can be done with a place that has no 'face'. Of course the word 'face' here is allegorical. It includes not only the landscape but also its past and traditions. There should be people, locals or 'blow-ins' who want to do something with the landscape and those living there. Here, in the Zsolnay Quarter I felt instantly that it would be great to do something with the place. What will happen once the revitalisation is finished and the area is rebuilt? Then suddenly by sheer luck I was asked to be the managing director. The day after the assassinated New Theatre project closed down I was in Pécs.

**Q:** To turn to a more general topic. What are your views of today's cultural consumption here in Hungary? What are the trends?

**A:** I'm a pessimist. At the same time, because of my age and my profession and also my temper I always try to look at the bright side of life. What I see is that the virtual 'lifestyle' has fundamental effects on society and it's independent of various generations. It might not be a problem by itself because the world is more spacious now and it's easier to get to know it. Unfortunately, there is a huge loss in values too in this new virtual space. I feel very deeply about all the disappearing of invaluable cultural resources. What do I mean by that? Just to bring one example: classical music. My nightmare is who and how people will listen to Beethoven symphonies? Who and how will understand Mahler's Symphony No. 4 or Wagner's operas? In order to interpret these compositions a thorough historical and cultural understanding is also needed apart from the obvious musical knowledge I think the world is heading somewhere where all of these are not important any more.

**Q:** For that matter, can you or is it possible to draw a line between high culture and popular culture?

**A:** Well, as they say world music and other flashy trickery are on the borderline of classical and popular music and it's possible to find a transition in these cases. But in reality they are artificial 'genres' and cannot provide the same level of experience as classical music. They're simply not authentic. They cannot possibly replace Bach Mass in h-moll or Bartók violin concertos. I'm not sure whether the mission to include folk music somehow in musical adaptations has any kind of effect. Because it doesn't necessarily mean that people will start listening to and enjoying the original works. It's undeniable that the rediscovery of folk music was mainly due to the rediscovery of folk dance, folk architecture and traditions. The main

aim of the Muzsikás and Sebő (and my younger years too) was also something like that. I try to provide space for these pursuits in Kapolcs from time and time again but there is less and less demand and place for this kind of music. Today's generation has very different fields of interests, way of thinking and they also use very different technology. Tablet PCs and smart phones serve as a body parts. They post on Facebook but can only focus for a minute or two then they click to something else. Or they download a more intelligent App. Live music – classical or folk – and the face-to-face characteristics of these music types are uncomfortable for this generation. This is of course my opinion – a grey fox – who probably shouldn't make sweeping statements. My generation also had a stigma a few decades ago.

**Q:** Can this pessimist view be applied in international context as well? Is it true there too or are we different from that?

**A:** The international context is exactly the same. We are not different at all. But I wouldn't dare say that this is the end of the world and everything will perish. It's not that dramatic. During the millions of years of human evolution thousands of similar instances took place without disappearing. Even in the European music history. Another example is Baroque music which was followed by Italian operas. But on the bright side – talking strictly about music – oriental music, for example, became available which hadn't been the case before as a result of huge distances. Similar to this is traditional Indian raga music or the Maori music. I only wish Debussy could have lived to see it. And this is a good thing. The question remains: What can mankind do with the moments, hours and days following the clicks on the computer? What can we use the moments after we receive the stream of information? This is when we have to face the issue of live performance. Can live music, theatre, performing arts etc. offer something additional the way we had imagined it? Isn't it maybe too much of a burden to dress up nicely, to remember our good manners when we go to a concert hall? Or is it more of a possibility to open these spaces making them more inviting and 'popularize' them by letting people in wearing jeans and T-shirt.

**Q:** As far as I see it this is how people go to the theatre today.

**A:** Yes, these are formalities. With or without a frock the really hard question is whether the actors the director and the audience can understand each other. My opinion about this is – I'm quite a liberal in that matter – that people should come in even with no tie on. What I think is very important is to understand the language of a theatre play.

As the director at New Theatre we had 98 plays in thirteen years included classical and contemporary pieces as well as plays in small stage version or big stage performances. My most powerful ‘tool’ was the team of actors and actresses. Young artists discovered by me (Pokorny Lia, Huszár Zsolt) several accomplished artists who won the Kossuth Prize (Gáspár Sándor, Bánsági Ildikó, Eperjes Károly) pushed the theatre to new heights in the philosophical sense as well. In the last thirteen years I did have the feeling that the quality and interests of the audience has been changing relentlessly. But there is no scientific research behind this. When I realised this I had a big dilemma. Should I loosen the reins or fight our old ways tooth and nail. Don’t misunderstand me, I wasn’t into acting in an extreme way and I’ve never thought of playing with our pants down. I didn’t have time to deeply think about the ‘what ifs’. You know that is the beauty of theatres. Whatever is said about theatres they are hierarchical structures, institutions which means that in practice – at least traditional theatres – play to the director’s taste, will, world view and value system. At the end of the day a decision must be made about what to play. There are twenty outstanding, very popular artists in front of you, several won the Kossuth Prize and then you



Fotó: [www.nol.hu](http://www.nol.hu)

have to tell them: ‘Listen! We are going to play Dr Faustus by Marlowe.’ They look at you oddly but you have to explain why they have to play that show. You see it’s not you but them, the artists who risk their necks which is yet another cliché. To have this experience throughout the many years as a director, made me more conscious about which direction to take. It’s not good for the artists either if there is no audience or if the audience leaves in the break. And in the midst of all that you can’t help but think about your values...I’ve always worked with great artists not those types who preferred playing with their pants down but real ones who learned from the likes of exceptional directors. They came from leading theatrical schools of Major Tamás or Ádám Ottó. This is something you can’t learn at school. You either learn it as you go or not. As for me I hadn’t been a theatre performer so it was twice as difficult for me to get accepted. Going back to a previous idea and it might give you better understanding of what I meant earlier: I felt the same in Kapolcs namely, that I was in a ‘more difficult position’ there. I was one of the ‘blow-ins’ from Budapest who are by birth all so rich. The life and the whole history of the village was about looking at who is coming from outside the village – especially coming from a large city – as someone who can only bring something bad. That was part of the collective memory... First, I was from a big city. Second, I was an artist. They thought my kind didn’t even exist. They looked at really suspiciously. But eventually I’ve won the battle which took me about five years. I needed that much time to be accepted by the locals. After a while they even started to spread the news that I was born there. I was so proud but in fact it wasn’t true. I was a ‘blow-in’ in the world of theatre as well. As a composer, as a theatre musician I was respected but in the very moment I changed my role in the theatre I was abused right and left. The reason why I went for a change was because I believed that I was well equipped for change with creative ideas. Then of course the profession went quiet and busy workdays kicked in. Whether I like it or not I had enough conflicts in the last few decades.

**Q:** I looked up some currently available definitions regarding the skills of managers in cultural organisations. I would like to ask you, as someone who actually works as a manager in various cultural organisations, to comment on that. One of these definitions is: ‘... *a manager must have effective economic and organisational knowledge and skills.*’

**A:** It will be a short answer. It depends on the type of cultural organisation we are talking about because they are very different and shouldn’t be bracketed. Each and every have their own distinctive set of characteristics. I think that there are leadership strategies but they are more the question of individual choice.

**Q:** The other skill is: *'...a manager must operate the organisation without qualitative compromise.'*

**A:** What is meant by quality? I don't want to avoid answering your question but who is to tell what quality means? The concepts and quality criteria of a theatre, a symphonic orchestra or an exhibition space owned by the local government are very difficult to define. There might be the number of audience members or nights, there are marketing expectations but the quality is fundamentally determined by the values of the director and the identity and history of the theatre. The sensitivity and openness of the team are also important.

As for the professionals – if we separate culture professionals – they are all very much aware of their value but if the leaders' ideas are not part of the decisions made then there is a huge problem. So, I often think that professional specialisation must always be evaluated carefully when somebody is running for a director position. What is professional specialisation? I will by no means defend my assignment for theatre director because I did have master level art qualification in music but not in theatrical art and it wasn't a problem. I have a very dear friend who is a cellist and the director of Kolibri Theatre. But a professional specialisation? What is it? It would be absurd to ask for a specialised qualification from the director of the Kolibri Theatre, a cellist who has proved that he is more than capable of leading the theatre through his exceptional skills...while it is true that he is not an actor or a stage director and has never been awarded a degree from the University of Theatre and Film Arts. So, I really think that qualification has not much to do with the whole thing. And again, I'm not trying to defend my directorship. Nowhere in the world would qualification be a determining factor in assigning directors. In some areas – mayors in local governments, the Minister for Culture – can be appointed based on personal ties but it's very risky.

**Q:** Among the skills there is another one which I think is a cliché: *'... a manager must be creative and well-informed.'*

**A:** Yes, I agree totally. In every cultural institution, either it comes to a gallery or a symphonic orchestra, the leader must be well-informed. And the information they have should be broad, including local as well as European perspectives. Moreover, they should be able to think globally and know trends very well. Creativity is of course fundamental because global changes require brand new, individual responds. Communication technology tools must be used as well.



**Q:** I would like to ask you how well can at the levels of local and national governments public orientation endorsed? As we know local and national governments are quite heavily involved in the market of cultural services. It is also a cliché.

**A:** Well, local governments have a well-defined group of responsibilities that they have to meet. Theatrical art is not included in that but many other areas for reasons of local tradition, prestige or image are included. So, local governments have enormous burden on their shoulders because they must finance at least partially these areas of responsibilities.

The local government is required self-control because they might have different philosophies. But that's art which is sacred and must be let alone. Let's say I'm a city leader. Sometimes, even if it makes me desperate, I have to close my eyes to let things happen. Because this is what needs to be done. Real culture and high art in general are not to serve the financiers' will. Undeniably, it means constant fighting in the case of real art. And it sometimes happens that there are individuals who give in and focus on what is expected. They leave at 3 p.m. sharp, get their money and are desperate to meet the indicators that had been set. They don't care about anything else. I find this extremely harmful. I require my colleagues to be on board with our projects and put their shoulders to the wheel. Of course, I'm thoughtful of them and their families but those who are in the top management must work much longer hours than the usual 9 to 5 or 8 to 4. Just to say quietly, we couldn't possibly do festivals here in the Zsolnay Quarter if we only worked in the usual hours. Leaders must have a sense of mission, a will and unfortunately I have to serve as a good example because preaching is sure easy.

**Q:** What is your perception about the cooperation between public, civil and business sectors in Hungary?

**A:** It hardly exists. The whole...the civil sector in itself has no capital. There isn't a strong middle class that could finance civil sector organisations in villages, cities or regions. It means that they can't be self-supportive and they need governmental help. But the government selects among them based on a set of criteria...either tolerate them or ban them. No, there is no ban. There were times when they were banned but it doesn't happen today. Civil organisations are either tolerated or supported. But being tolerated doesn't pay bills. There is a lack of patronage and there are no channels of sponsorship here like in western European countries. There is strong will though, because many civil organisations knock on my door asking for support. And we do provide them with space here in Zsolnay. But there are less and less

of them for some reason. These groups are decreasing in numbers. Maybe it's a generational issue which would really want to support a cause. I don't really know the way the Facebook-generation or as it's called generation Z thinks. A community being organised online is a different issue. I don't know its impacts and what it means and I don't know what it is all about. I'm not familiar with it at all. I'm on Facebook too and I'm also member of a few groups. It might sound silly but I think that against all openness of Facebook I think it is a more closed setup than, for example, when we sat down with the locals in the village grabbed a spade and a rake and we started digging made benches went into the pub and got sodden then had a game of chess and got up the morning after and cleaned the creek bed. It didn't certainly happen in a virtual setup. We became a real community which had tangible results such as a tidy village, the memories we still share which are all crystallized in the 25-year-history of the Valley of Art festival. I don't know how something like that could happen in a virtual community. I don't know.

**Q:** What about the cooperation between the business sector and the other two sectors?

**A:** It's frantic. Frantic indeed! The losing side is certainly the civil sector. And not only those civil sector organisations are losing out on support who would cooperate with the business sector but also those who are supported by the local governments because they depend on the ever changing budget. In Pécs there is a fine example of cooperation between the local government and a civil organisation. For example Lake Balokány, which is located within the city of Pécs, is revived which has a positive effect on the city architecture, conservation and the lives of city dwellers.

**Q:** For just a quick question I would like to switch to the Hungarian Festival Association. I've read it in one of your interviews: *'...the unique quality assurance program of a twelve-year-old association serves as an example.'*

**A:** The festival organising 'guild' was the very reason why we started the quality assurance program. Several associations got together based on consensus and in about one and a half hours we created a program which has two modules. There is a registration part which is important because there is hardly any statistics or survey about these companies.

By creating a quality assurance system we try to put things right with festivals regarding the various categories and rankings. We know that there are about 4,000 festivals in Hungary

without any organisations behind them. Let me give you an example from music composition. In a musical score there must be order otherwise it cannot be interpreted. No one can be denied of calling their garbage events a festival. But public money or partial funding should be based on quality ranking. Today a small amount is divided among many but quality is not taken into consideration.

Serious quantitative and qualitative research must be carried out in order to be able to qualify a festival. There are four festival types: art, community, gastro-cultural and folk art festival. There are three ratings: qualified, well-qualified and excellent. Our quality assurance system is used by the European Festival Association this year and it forms the basis of an international festival award.

**Q:** You've also said: *'...quality assurance and registration clash with some interests.'*

**A:** Yes, they do. There are conflicting interests as soon as the story is about government money and a festival receiving poor ratings. Let me emphasise that we don't want to segregate parties but it's important to separate village festivals or first time festivals from the Szeged Open-Air Festival. It's impossible to compare them and in this question we need to establish a clear and unequivocal system of how to allocate government finances. What I think is that if there is a certain amount of money for festivals in the government budget – whether it be village festivals or other high quality events – at least a portion of this budget should be spent based on some kind of selection process. This is what we are fighting and lobbying for.

**Q:** Finally, the usual question: If you could start it all over again as a manager of cultural resources what would you do differently? Also, what would be your words of encouragement for the managers of cultural resources of the future?

**A:** Let me start with the second question. The coming generation should be open. Apart from learning the trade they should also go and see those places which they are interested in or where they imagine themselves in the future. If someone wants to work in the music industry or visual arts they should know these places and trends very well. A very pleasant way of doing that is to go for concerts or exhibitions. They also must know the historic and psychological relationships as well as the financial background. Of course, it's not enough to be passionate about music to become a cultural manager. Sorry, what was the first question?

**Q:** If you could start it all over again as a manager of cultural resources what would you do differently?

**A:** If I could start it all over again I wouldn't do anything else but write music.

**Q:** But as a cultural manager, if you could start it all over again...The question of learning curve...

**A:** I have no idea what I would do.

**Q:** Well, if you think that you've always been successful then this...

**A:** Oh no! Far from! But people tend to keep quiet about their failures and low moments. There were so many...excuse, back to the question. We must endure our lows and get over them. I had many lows but I've never prepared a 'brag file' to show to the media or anyone else. I've had files with: 'Running away is a shame, but it is useful!' written all over them. It might also be a lesson to learn. But if I were a teacher – unfortunately I'm not a teacher type – I would surely teach about my failures. I would share these examples of failure behind closed doors of course. I can't teach and this is a big problem for me. I'm doing so many different things that I'm quite envy of those...my father is a teacher and he has a lot to be envy about. I did teach music history and analysis of 20<sup>th</sup> century music at the Jazz Department for two years but I had to realise that I'm not capable of teaching.

**Q:** You could surely teach in higher education.

**A:** No, I couldn't. I simply can't focus only on one thing because I'm absorbed by so many things although I'm a composer and I also have a teacher's degree.

**Q:** Thank you very much for the interview.