

Press release

23 April, 2021

The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award goes to Peter Eötvös, “one of the most important musical voices of our time”

- **“His artistic significance, originality and contribution to the advancement of music** since the second half of the 20th century can be recognized in his writing for voice, solo instrument and orchestra, and in his operas,” in the words of the award citation
- **He has achieved a synthesis between tradition and avant-garde**, developing an innovative musical language that finds room for the emotional and resonates with a wide public
- **“I am hopeful** that if I write a good opera it will still be staged a hundred years from now,” said Eötvös after hearing of the award, in token of his desire to transcend the immediate reception accorded to his works

The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award in the Music and Opera category has gone in this thirteenth edition to the Hungarian composer and conductor Peter Eötvös, “undoubtedly one of the most important musical voices of our time” in the words of the citation. “His artistic significance, originality and contribution to the advancement of music since the second half of the 20th century can be recognized in his writing for voice, solo instrument and orchestra in operas such as *Three Sisters*, *Love and Other Demons* and *Senza Sangue*. His instrumental compositions have been played by the most important ensembles and orchestras around the world.”

Among Eötvös’ defining characteristics, in the view of the committee, is that he “excels” in all three areas of his musical endeavor, as composer, conductor and teacher. “His work in each is of unassailable quality, and what truly sets him apart is his generosity. As a writer, a musician and a conductor, he puts all his trust in his players and his public,” says Joana Carneiro, committee chair and Principal Conductor of the Orquestra Sinfónica Portuguesa and Teatro São Carlos. “Like all great composers,” she continues, “he knows how to take from the authors he admires and translate it for the next generation. He has experimented with acoustic music, with technology, with spaces and musicians, using a language that is affective but also new, full of creativity and originality.”

23 April, 2021

Regarding this language, the Hungarian has stated on various occasions that “composition consists of the enchantment of the audience through sound, transforming the unbelievable into sounds.” In a video conference shortly after hearing of the award, he remarked that “as orchestra conductors, we often say that not only is the audience behind it but we can feel it on our backs. Then comes that moment of rapt attention, and the conductor perceives it as a magical unity. When this feeling emerges, the audience becomes as one person listening and watching. As a composer, I know these magical moments are what I am aiming for.” As a conductor, Eötvös spent 13 years at the helm of Ensemble InterContemporain, the world-renowned contemporary music ensemble founded by Pierre Boulez.

“The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award in Music and Opera is a prestigious accolade,” he says. “For me it is important to have received it not just as a composer of operas, but also as a teacher and a conductor. In fact I see these three professions as a unified entity, in that what I achieve in one, serves me for the other two. So what I compose I can conduct, what I learn by conducting I can apply in my writing, and the experience I acquire in these two professions informs my teaching work. This desire to share my knowledge with young people goes back to my own youth and the gratitude I feel towards the teachers who helped me learn everything, to understand it and to perform it.”

For the committee, one of Peter Eötvös’ great talents has been to overlay this emotional dimension on an existing innovative tradition that had left its audience behind. As Víctor García de Gomar, committee secretary and Artistic Director of the Gran Teatro del Liceu, explains: “The way he understands music has to do with the intensity of the communication between a composer, through a performer, and the audience that is out there. This link had become broken in the codification of 20th-century music. With Eötvös it is not just a mental or intellectual exercise, but an attempt to engage the public; what he does, crucially, is bring emotion to the story without forgoing an innovative and disruptive language.”

This is a characteristic that the Hungarian maestro acknowledges in himself: “This emotional attitude possibly goes back to my long experience in theater and opera. There is no way of writing of opera without emotion, it simply can’t be done. So after some ten operas, I realized that it is the music that connects the public to what is happening onstage, and I later applied this to my symphonic works.”

The great themes of today

23 April, 2021

Many of his operas are grounded in today's realities, for which he has turned to texts by contemporary writers like Tony Kushner, Alessandro Baricco or Gabriel García Márquez. He says of them, "I wouldn't wish to single anyone out, all of them are important. What interests me is to work with living authors, as this gives me the unique opportunity to write for the future. I am hopeful that if I can write a good opera it will still be staged a hundred years from now, and that means working with an author from my own time."

His first major opera, in terms of critical and public reception, was *Tri sestry* (1998), in which he adapts Anton Chekhov's celebrated *Three Sisters* to construct a sustained narrative in sequences, each devoted to one of the play's main characters. Proof of his ability to synthesize the most avant-garde European musical tradition while still connecting with an audience is that the work premiered to great success at Opéra National de Lyon, has since been performed over 150 times and continues to be regularly programmed by leading opera theaters.

This awareness of the problems of his time led him to compose the 2016 orchestral piece *Alla vittime senza nome* – a commission from four Italian orchestras (La Scala, Santa Cecilia, Florence and Turin) – in memory of the African refugees who died trying to cross the Mediterranean. "It was something I chose to get involved in," Eötvös recalls, "out of my knowledge of the times we live in. It was a wonderful commission in a year when the plight of refugees was especially acute (as unfortunately it still is) and I wished to write a musical memorial for those who didn't make it, but had started out with hope. It is the hope I wanted to emphasize, the search for a better world that came to nothing for those who lost their lives."

It also inspired him to tackle subjects in his operas like the hardships faced by undocumented immigrants struggling to earn a living (*Der goldene Drache*, 2014) or the problems of couples living with AIDS (*Angels in America*, 2002-2004). In *Oratorium balbulum* (2015) he addresses the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the seeds of conflict sown by man-made borders.

Various facts stand testimony to the universality of Eötvös' work. One is that "he is permanently being performed in the most prestigious opera houses and by the world's leading orchestras," says García de Gomar. Another, that he has written operas for librettos in German, Japanese, Russian, English, Italian, French and Hungarian. "Each language – says Eötvös – leads us to its culture, a distinctive culture with its own temperament. And also to what I like to call its own sound world, which is central to the music. This question of the sonority of a language is an important one in theater and opera, because those lacking hard consonants are more difficult to understand. Soft languages are very beautiful, as is the music, but the text does not come across."

23 April, 2021

This synthesis of different cultural backgrounds is another hallmark of Peter Eötvös' work. "When I moved from Budapest to Cologne as a young man, I spent two years in a students' hall of residence, where each room was, so to speak, inhabited by a different language (Spanish, Japanese...). It was there I realized that each language opened the door to a distinct culture."

His candidature for the Frontiers of Knowledge Award was put forward in five separate nominations by: György Kurtág, composer and Music and Opera laureate in the 7th edition of the awards; László Góz, director and founder of Budapest Music Center; Lydia Connolly, head of international agency Harrison Parrott; Paloma O'Shea, president of the Escuela Superior de Música Reina Sofía; and Fabián Panisello, director of Asociación PluralEnsemble.

Panisello says of his conducting: "What is striking is how he works to create a calm atmosphere and also the conviction he conveys, and how he demands the most exacting standards with great naturalness and serenity. Eötvös eschews any eccentricity of gesture and instead centers on the essence of the piece and the contact with the musicians, helping them to understand and execute the most complex of scores with total clarity."

Asked about Eötvös as a teacher, he describes him as "both kindly and strict, patiently instructing the new generation on the best way to approach a work and the most economical way to convey it through gesture to the players. He is a conductor who cares about the musicians and can get them engaged in the projects he directs. And this he transmits to his pupils, teaching them the importance of forging a strong relationship with the musicians responsible for getting out the sound."

"A legacy for the young"

The laureate reflects on why teaching is so rooted in his psyche: "I think there are two reasons. Both my mother and my grandfather were teachers, so in that sense pedagogy is in my blood. And the other reason is the enormous gratitude I feel for those who helped me in my own youth, both at the Budapest academy and the Cologne conservatoire. Everything you learn when young has a big influence on your later career, and I feel it is my duty to give help in turn to the young people of today."

This is a "duty" he has assiduously fulfilled. In 1991 he founded the International Eötvös Institute for young conductors, and in 1992 took up a university professorship first at Karlsruhe then Cologne, teaching contemporary and chamber music. He then went on to found the Peter Eötvös Contemporary Music Foundation with a focus on "new music," supporting not only conductors

23 April, 2021

but also composers, musicologists and librettists. “New music – he says – is perhaps the closest to my heart. Everything I have experienced with new music has had something of the exceptional, and I now want to relay this experience to young people, so our generation of musicians leaves behind a legacy. That is the purpose of my Contemporary Music Foundation.”

Teachers and mentors loom large in Peter Eötvös’ work: “I had two mentors in my youth, and stayed in touch with both of them throughout their lives. The first was Karlheinz Stockhausen, whom I met just after moving to Germany in 1966, and the other was Pierre Boulez, who invited me to Paris in the late 1970s.” The French maestro (Frontiers of Knowledge laureate in Music and Opera in the 5th edition of the awards) hired Eötvös to conduct the inaugural concert of IRCAM in 1978 and one year later appointed him principal conductor of Ensemble InterContemporain, a post we would occupy for 13 years. “Boulez I have to say brought huge energy to my life during the time we were in contact.”

The committee also singled out the human qualities of Peter Eötvös, remarking on his complicity with colleagues, pupils and musicians. “It’s not enough for me – he says – just to choose an instrument and score some music that suits it. I also need to know who will perform the piece for the first time. That way I can simultaneously see and hear the music and the person who is playing it. And together with the influence of the instrument and its characteristics, I receive the influence of that person and can feed both impressions into my music. So finally the concerto I am writing is not just specific to the instrument but also to the player in question. You could even say my symphonic concertos are a kind of portrait.”

Joana Carneiro echoes this point: “Anyone who listens to his music, to the way he paints words, recognizes the presence of something extraordinary. And his manner of conducting an orchestra, or occupying a box, whatever, is the same. He pursues the transmission of human feeling and experience, and does so in an affective way that is also original and new. His affection is palpable whether listening to an opera, conducting an orchestra or conversing with musicians or the public.”

Laureate bio notes

Peter Eötvös was born in 1944 in Odorheiu Secuiesc, Transylvania, now Rumania but then part of Hungary, and spent his early childhood in the Hungarian town of Miskolc. Son of a music teacher mother, he soon learned to play the piano, violin, flute and percussion instruments, and by the age of five had already composed his first works. It was in this period that he met György Ligeti, who would prove a lifelong influence.

23 April, 2021

As a fourteen-year-old newly arrived in Budapest, he was admitted to the School of Exceptional Young Talents at the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music by no less a person than Zoltán Kodály. There he studied composition while working on film and theater productions, gaining not only ample experience in improvisation but also the ability to draw characters with a few deft strokes and an understanding of dramatic pace and timing. All these skills would have a profound impact on his later approach to composition and in the ten operas he has written to date.

In 1971 he moved to Cologne, where he worked with Karlheinz Stockhausen, expanded his composition studies under B.A. Zimmermann and graduated in conducting from the Cologne Conservatoire. He began to work with the Stockhausen Ensemble, leading it during the premiere of *Donnerstag aus Licht* at La Scala, Milan in 1981. In 1978, Pierre Boulez had invited him to conduct the opening concert of IRCAM – the famous Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique of which he was founder – and immediately asked him to stay on as artistic director of Ensemble InterContemporain, a position he held until 1991. Paris opened up a new world of experience. Not only did the ensemble provide a stage for hundreds of new works, it also gave Eötvös the chance to work shoulder to shoulder with the most important living composers.

He had his London Proms conducting debut in 1980, and from 1985 to 1988 served as Principal Guest Conductor with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. From then on he would appear regularly with world-leading ensembles in Europe (from the Budapest Festival Orchestra to the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra or the Munich Philharmonic), the United States, Japan and South Korea, as well as taking the helm with contemporary music specialists like Ensemble Modern, Musikfabrik, Klangforum Wien or the London Sinfonietta.

His compositional oeuvre is as wide as it is varied, comprising, among others, 34 pieces for film and theater, 4 for tape, electronics or multimedia, 31 chamber or soloist works, 12 for ensemble, 26 for orchestra or chamber orchestra, 6 for vocal ensemble or chorus, and 14 opera or musical theater scores. Eötvös has received writing commissions from such institutions as Opéra National Lyon, the Bavarian State Opera and the Glyndebourne Festival. *Secret Kiss*, which had its Spanish premiere under Eötvös' direction in the Auditorio Nacional de Música on 17 April 2019, was commissioned jointly by the BBVA Foundation and other institutions. This was Eötvös' second Spanish premiere as part of the BBVA Foundation Contemporary Music Concert Seasons. The first was in the fifth, 2013-2014 season, when he conducted his own work *Steine* in its world debut.

In 1992 he began teaching conducting and contemporary chamber music at the universities of Karlsruhe and Cologne. One year before he had set up the International Eötvös Institute and in

23 April, 2021

2004 would establish the Peter Eötvös Contemporary Music Foundation for conductors and composers, where he has since 2018 led a mentoring program of international reach.

Music and Opera committee and evaluation support panel

The committee was chaired by **Joana Carneiro**, Principal Conductor with the Orquestra Sinfónica Portuguesa (Portugal), with **Víctor García de Gomar**, Artistic Director of the Gran Teatre del Liceu (Spain) acting as secretary. Remaining members were **Mauro Bucarelli**, Artistic Administrator of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome (Italy); **Raquel García-Tomás**, composer (Spain); **Pedro Halffter Caro**, conductor and composer (Spain); **Kathryn McDowell**, Managing Director of the London Symphony Orchestra (United Kingdom); and **Annilese Miskimmon**, Artistic Director of English National Opera and the London Coliseum (United Kingdom).

The **evaluation support panel** of the **Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)** was coordinated by **M. Victoria Moreno**, the Council's Deputy Vice President for Scientific and Technical Areas, and formed by: **Luis Antonio González Marín**, tenured researcher at the Mila i Fontanals Institution (IMF); **Ignacio Montero Ruíz**, Deputy Coordinator of the Global Society Area and scientific researcher at the Institute of History (IH); **Emilio Ros Fábregas**, scientific researcher at the Mila i Fontanals Institution (IMF); and **Juan Manuel Vicent García**, scientific researcher at the Institute of History (IH).

About the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards

The BBVA Foundation centers its activity on the promotion of world-class scientific research and cultural creation, and the encouragement of talent.

The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards recognize and reward contributions of singular impact in science, art and the humanities, privileging those that significantly expand the frontiers of the known world, open up new fields, or emerge from the interaction of various disciplinary areas. The goal of the awards, established in 2008, is to celebrate and promote the value of knowledge as a public good without frontiers, the best instrument at our command to take on the great challenges and opportunities of our time. Their eight categories are congruent with the knowledge map of the 21st century, according a differential weight to areas of particular relevance and dynamism in recent decades such as the environment, information and communication technologies and biomedicine, alongside other areas like basic science, economics, social sciences, the humanities and the the supremely creative realms of music and

23 April, 2021

the opera.

The BBVA Foundation is aided in candidate evaluation in the eight award categories by the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), the country's premier public research organization. CSIC appoints evaluation support panels made up of leading experts in the corresponding disciplinary domain, who are charged with undertaking an initial assessment of the candidates proposed by numerous institutions across the world, and drawing up a reasoned shortlist for the consideration of the award committees. CSIC is also responsible for designating each committee's chair and participates with the BBVA Foundation in the selection of its members, thus helping to ensure the objectivity and merit of the selection process.

Forthcoming announcement events

Humanities and Social Sciences	Friday, 30 April, 2021
---------------------------------------	------------------------

CONTACT:

Department of Communications and Institutional Relations

Tel. +34 91 374 5210 / 91 374 8173 / 91 537 3769

comunicacion@fbbva.es

For more information on the BBVA Foundation, visit www.fbbva.es