

Éva Marton 58 years, 52 diaries - conversation

Fidelio 17 June 2021 Judith Canjavec

A husband, Dr. Zoltán Marton, who says of his life partner: "I've been serving her for 58 years". And a wife, whose name is: Éva Marton. And the continuation is already in the minds of every reader.

It couldn't have been easy being the spouse of one of the world's most prominent dramatic sopranos. But at the same time, as I listen to them as a guest in their welcoming home, I think how good it is that their meeting was so clearly destined to be.

I managed to achieve until the age of seventy what very few people have done so – *says Éva Marton* – I never had a bad performance! I opened up on stage, where finally no one interfered with my work. No conductor, no director, nobody. Because it's one thing to prepare, it's another thing to go into that particular tunnel alone.

Tunnel?

That's what I always called the moments before a performance. I need a tunnel! My voice, my being, my personality. I need a bigger space. It is almost impossible to teach this, because each person has to figure out things for him/herself. That's what I tell my students: I can speak about how I did it. But they shall think about how they would do it!

I no longer perform; as professor emerita I work only with master students at the Liszt Academy. I don't have to teach too much, but I still have five or six students. I pay a lot of attention in every class. I take notes, watch their progress. I teach them what a Mozart forte, Beethoven forte, Verdi forte is. As for Wagner, I always take the sheet music in my hand and say, look, the beginning of the line always starts with piano. Think about where you need to get to, where the peak is!

The peak is often not on the high note, but spans it and puts the weight on the next one.

When my students pick up the sheet music, they are mostly just looking for a way to sing the notes. Very few of them are able to interpret the text as well,

to know the emotional state behind it. When I sang, I often saw colours. Blue, yellow – it was fantastic! Emotion can influence even reason, not the other way round! Yes, I can artificially put myself in a situation or emotional world through the power of imagination, which changes the voice!



Éva Marton and Galeano Salas, winner of the Grand Prix of the 2018 Éva Marton International Singing Competition (Photo/Source: László Mudra / Liszt Academy)

A great motto was posted on the website of the Éva Marton International Singing Competition, saying that a teacher usually wants to make his/her student a lesser artist than him/herself. How many people talk about this so openly?

This is jealousy! When I was a music academy student, I vowed that if I ever had my own students, I would teach them independence and self-confidence from the very first moment. I had two teachers at the Academy of Music. The first one, Endre Rösler, was excellent, but unfortunately he died soon, so for a while I had only a repetiteur, Elza Récsei to help me. This was how I took the exam, and then the teachers got together and asked me whom I wanted to study from. I chose Dr. Jenő Sipos.

Was it the right decision?

The best! He was very good at explaining the breathing technique, how to bring the sound forward into the sinus cavity to multiply it. I think back on him with gratitude, even though he couldn't show me how to sing high notes. He taught us to bring the sound forward, but when the high note came, he put it back. I was practicing this at home early in my career,

Zoli was listening and suddenly exclaimed, "Keep this pitch!"

We have discussed how it works anatomically, *the husband, Zoltán Marton, who is, by the way, a surgeon, joins in our conversation.* And you sang the high notes perfectly! I said, "Keep it and that's it!" Éva never had any problems with high notes again!



Éva Marton and Dr. Zoltán Marton (Photo/Source: courtesy of the owner)

I am well aware that Birgit Nilsson, the greatest Turandot of her time, said that you will be the next Turandot.

Éva Marton: Right. I had a lot of respect for her. She was an extremely decent, intelligent and clear-thinking woman in the noble sense of the word! There are few people like her in our profession! We were standing on the stage of the Metropolitan when she asked me if I had ever wondered that I would be the

next Turandot. I had not thought about it, I answered. But you would be, she replied. In parallel with this Zoli was on the phone and contracted for the performance. For the performance of Turandot. This was the work of destiny again! Birgit always had a pint of brown beer in Elektra, placed behind a stone. She told me that when she had to dig the hatchet out of the ground, she had a drink to get nutrients into her body.

When I sang Elektra, I used to put a bottle there, but it was always filled with tea.

We played in Düsseldorf, according to the set there was sand everywhere. But one cannot sing in sand, so they imitated it with couscous. I had a lot of couscous in my trousers afterwards... I walked barefoot on stage, the whole stage scenery was amazing! The room was turned upside down: the bed and the tables were on top and the chandelier at the bottom. I was looking for a place to put my little bottle in the couscous. I remember when I had to dig up the hatchet in the scene, I was scratching and scratching, but I couldn't remember where I left it. Finally, I found the hatchet, but my drink disappeared in the couscous. My mouth was dry, so I bit my tongue. Ever since then, I have always thought of the scene when Birgit drank the brown beer. There are some roles like this, when, by the end of the play, you're using the last of your strength.



Birgit Nilsson, Franco Zeffirelli, James Levine, Éva Marton, Elizabeth Taylor, Plácido Domingo after Turandot at the MET (Photo/Source: courtesy of the owner)

After the curtain came down, was there a role that you carried on in yourself?

ÉM: Electra cannot simply be put down. Neither can Salome, the last 17 minutes are terrible.

Zoltán Marton: I always got a headache with that.

ÉM: My poor darling!

ZM: After Elektra I was as exhausted as Éva. *By the end, I knew a few roles myself.*

ÉM: Zoli was always there. The only time he sat down on a chair was when he came with our children after me. They were sleeping on his shoulder!

ZM: They asked why I brought them to the performance? I said, we've just come from Europe, Mama is singing, and the children are sleeping here. The family is together!

ÉM: Zoli was always great at relieving my tension! I could have any kind of problem – he helped me in no time! I could also trust him completely as a doctor. In addition, we had to raise the two children and Zoli was very often alone. I once told him that it would be nice to have a third child.

ZM: To which I said, I have no more "milk"!



Éva Marton as Elektra (Covent Garden, London, 1990) (Photo/Source: courtesy of the owner)

It's great to see how much you laugh together!

ÉM: You should also see when we sometimes fight! But we're not hurting each other now, are we? We have a home, we have children, grandchildren, all healthy – and I'm at home.

Not abroad, in some cosmopolitan city where I am one person among many. I am finally home and appreciated!

All my life I've been travelling and always singing in a different theatre. Zoli has built a program for me to do this. I've always asked you not to tell me what's going to happen next year, it's enough for me to have information only about the following six months. I had contracts for five years in advance. But where is it now?

ZM: I also worked out a so-called block system for Éva.

What's that like?

ZM: She sang five, six, seven, eight performances at the same location.

ÉM: In a series. Not every day!

ZM: There was no skipping here and there in between, which could be to the detriment of the performance.

ÉM: Singers need to be contracted for a long period, it's impossible to always cast them, or have an audition for every single role, it's so humiliating!



The team of the performance Attila (László Kónya, Éva Marton, Nicola Martinucci, József Gregor, János B. Nagy - Margaret Island, 1973) (Photo/Source: courtesy of the owner)

You didn't have too many auditions, have you?

ÉM: Maybe once or twice, right?

ZM: Four times, altogether.

ÉM: You're right. There was also an occasion when they showed me the opera house. We were on stage, they said, hey, here's a piano! Éva, do you want to try the acoustics? Oh, there's a pianist, and there's Tosca's Prayer! And I was singing happily in the empty theatre, unwittingly, enjoying how beautiful the acoustics were!

ZM: In fact, that was her audition.

ÉM: Yes, Zoli organised all that behind my back.

ZM: When I was not yet working and Éva was called to smaller theatres with little money, I said, "You're not going". Then she replied, "But we have nothing

to eat!" *We are so nice and skinny, I said, so cute! You mustn't work on tiny little projects!*

ÉM: When we got together, we were so short of money that we slept on an air mattress.

ZM: How flexible it was!

And you were happy!

ÉM: Yes, very much. We have two children and we also have grandchildren now.



Éva Marton and Dr. Zoltán Marton and their children (Photo/Source: courtesy of the owner)

I'm trying to decipher the power that emanates from you. Am I right in thinking that this was a challenge for both of you?

ZM: When I arrived in America, they said the tiger tamer had arrived!

ÉM: This was not quite the case. We were able to live together with each other's possible flaws. We loved each other very much. And this is still the case today.

ZM: We were also asked this on TV: have you never thought about divorce? I said, "Divorce? Never; but we've considered murder!"

ÉM: He likes this sentence terribly!

ZM: I recently tried to reach a famous forensic pathologist by phone. His secretary answered. I said, "I am Dr Marton, an old colleague of the professor". "Unfortunately, the professor is very busy", was the answer. Then she asked,

“Are you by any chance the husband of Éva Marton?” “Yes, that’s my sideline”, I answered. “I’ll put you through to the professor in a moment!” - she replied. I’ve been serving her for 58 years. I am writing a book about her. I have 52 diaries to process. I always put down everything. Exactly as it was!



Dr. Zoltán Marton (Photo/Source: courtesy of the owner)

In 1972 you decided to leave Hungary and venture into the unknown. Why did you make this decision?

ZM: We went abroad so Éva could make a career. Also, to have a Hungarian singer who can do it. And we managed to achieve this!

ÉM: The world was so different then! I graduated from the academy, but I was not accepted at the Opera. Two months later, I got a scholarship from the ministry and was accepted. What was that? I don’t know.

ZM: It’s interesting, that the office of Aczél (*György Aczél, the cultural director of the Kádár era – editor*) supported us from the beginning, although we never talked to him. Then Éva was invited to Frankfurt by Christoph von Dohnányi. We spoke to Mrs Barna from the Ministry. She asked why we were going to Germany? I said we were going to Ernő Dohnányi's grandson. We would be in good hands. Not a word was said, they supported us all the way.

ÉM: Zoli paid attention to everything. He's not a musician, but he had an insight, a feel for it, and he was always able to help me. He organised everything, *I never went up to any director's office to ask for a role. It was always them who came down to me to the rehearsal stage.*

ZM: In Buenos Aires, at the opening performance of Turandot, Éva was rewarded with a standing ovation from seven floors up. The director told me that the only occasion that had been like that ten years before, with Pavarotti in La Bohème. 400 additional spectators came to watch. We were standing in the back, in the doorway, with the Chilean director and the director, and we couldn't even move.

ÉM: They were lamenting what would happen if they were punished, because people were sitting even on the floor between the rows of chairs. After the performance, they waited outside and were desperate to get me on a carriage to drive me along the main road as it happened to Caruso. I got rid of them by singing Tosca's Prayer to them in the street. Many beautiful memories, beautiful moments.



Éva Marton in the role of Tosca (Photo/Source: courtesy of the owner)

Was it at the Puerto Rican Opera House that your voice caused two light bulbs to burn out during a performance?

ÉM: Yes, during a rehearsal, while singing a long sustained high note, the bulb exploded – with a big bang. I didn't stop and kept on sustaining the note. I said to myself, there's another light bulb, I'll take that down too! And so it was! The musicians loved it, they laughed so much we had to stop for a while.

Do you miss performing on stage?

ÉM: It's not easy! The feeling still comes back in waves, but there is no way I want to return to the stage. Once I close a door, I never open it again. Just being able to sing with my students is a satisfaction in itself. I love teaching and the fact that I am not only shaping the voice, but to some extent the person as well,

is a particularly beautiful job! Now I work more in the background, for another community. Because *I have always considered the audience as a community. They made me what I am.*



Luciano Pavarotti and Éva Marton in *Il Trovatore* (Metropolitan Opera, 1987) (Photo/Source: courtesy of the owner)

You said somewhere that music shapes character.

ÉM: You get better, whether you want it or not. When there are successes, the story is all the more positive. If I had failed, I would be desperate, for sure. Quite early on they wanted to invite me for roles that were not for me. We rejected them.

ZM: I told Director Miklós Lukács that I wanted to see a happy woman even at the end of her life, not a ruined-voiced opera diva! There is nothing worse than a disappointed person.

The 4th Éva Marton International Singing Competition, originally scheduled for September 2020, has been cancelled due to the coronavirus epidemic. It starts

this year on 29 August and runs until 5 September. How are the preparations going?

ÉM: The singing competition has an excellent team at my disposal. Hats off! Programme Director András Csonka, Andrea Vigh, the Rector of the Liszt Academy, Julia Torda, Beáta Schanda, all of them carry me on the palm of their hands! No other singing competition in the world runs as smoothly as this one! Not to mention the location, of which I am extremely proud, because the Liszt Academy is a wonderful place! I have four piano accompanists and out of 350 applicants, I finally selected 116 from all over the world. What's very interesting is that there's an almost equal split between men and women. Those who got in last year have almost all come back so far this year.

ZM: It is also important that, after the success of the third singing competition, the event was accepted into the World Federation of International Music Competitions.



Éva Marton and the 2018 finalists (Photo/Source: László Mudra / Liszt Academy)

When playing music or singing, how optimal is a competitive situation?

ZM: I never let Éva compete. When she was performing, I told her to sing in such a way that one never knows who is sitting in the audience.

ÉM: It's very important that I always invite people to the jury who can give work to the participants!

When the singing competition is over, the participants can stay here for two or three days and get a masterclass from me, free of charge.

What do you think is the most important task of art today?

ÉM: We have to win people back, and young people have to be educated, involved and we need to get their attention. This is the task of art at all times, whether there is a pandemic or not. You have to act, you have to work, you have to serve the community, because ultimately it is a service. And as long as I live, I will give. "Dienen, dienen, dienen!" Like in Parsifal. I can't think of a better thing in life than to stop thinking of ourselves and start thinking of others!