

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Simon Broughton on the magic of Hungary's best loved singer

MARTA SEBESTYEN

Picture the scene. You're in a late-afternoon, post-coital doze in Ralph Fiennes' oriental bedroom in Cairo. The mosques of the old city are swathed in a sandy haze through the latticed window. Fiennes is a mysterious Hungarian count and you are Kristin Scott Thomas, naked in his bed. Fiennes in his dressing gown plays a record on his 78rpm gramophone. "It's a folk song," he explains which he heard as a child in Budapest. "It's beautiful," says Scott Thomas, and she's right.

The sad, unaccompanied Hungarian love song 'Szerelem, Szerelem' heard in *The English Patient* was sung by Márta Sebestyén, without doubt Hungary's best-known traditional singer. If you can't get seduced by Fiennes, this must be the next best thing. Márta's organic, natural voice has an uncanny power to captivate – not just fictional Hungarian counts, film directors and fans of traditional Hungarian music, but audiences across the globe. She's been given many awards in Hungary, dined with the Blairs at number 10, and counts Prince Charles amongst her admirers. But actually it's in communication with ordinary people, both in learning the songs and transmitting them, that her real skill lies. "People don't imagine that singing is as simple as talking," she says. "I don't need any setting, any piano or microphone. In many people's minds singing is something on stage and distant. For me singing is something much more natural." She learned 'Szerelem, Szerelem' first from a field-recording made by a friend and then from the singer himself – Márton Maneszes, the cantor and fiddler in the Transylvanian village of Magyarszovát. "They sing in a very ornamented way in this region," she says, "The old ladies' voices are like delicate lace."

Márta was born into a musical environment. Her mother was an energetic



Béla Kása



Márta with Muzsikás (Béla Kása)

musical teacher and pupil of Zoltán Kodály, Hungary's celebrated composer, collector of folk music and creator of a music education method using folk songs. According to her mother, Márta could sing before she could talk. At school she won a folk singing competition every year. Most children would know about 12 songs. Márta knew 170. Aged 12 she won an LP of field recordings from the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. It was a revelation. "That was the first time I heard the true voice of the people singing – not arranged pieces or my mother singing in the kitchen. It was an electric shock that turned my attention to this sort of music and made me realise how personal and powerful it can be." A few years later, in the early 70s, she won a nationwide folk music competition on TV and got involved with the *táncház* (dancehouse) movement that was just taking off. With a sort of counter-culture zeal, musicians would go to learn songs, tunes and dances from the villages and teach them in clubs in Budapest. Márta performed with Ferenc Sebő and Béla Halmos two of the *táncház* pioneers, and since 1980 has regularly sung with Muzsikás, Hungary's leading group on the international circuit. Márta's voice cutting through the swirling violins and sawing bass of traditional Transylvanian repertoire is hard to beat. The music is organic, vibrant and full of surprises. Márta and Muzsikás have made

many discs together over the past 25 years, but she's also made fine recordings with Vujcsics, an excellent group playing South Slav music with fizzing *tamburas*.

Márta appears as a vocalist on over 80 CDs. Alongside her traditional recordings, she's performed in the historical rock opera *István a Király* (King Steven), electronic folk projects with Károly Cserepes and was sampled – or should one say exploited? – in Deep Forest's Grammy-winning *Bohème*. Despite the success of *Bohème* she feels short-changed that the recordings used were made as a benefit for Transylvania on which she gets minimal royalties.

The positive side of such projects is that completely new audiences discover Márta Sebestyén, and through her the beauties of Hungarian music. "People think that folk music is for old

situations," she explains. "I think that's rubbish because the basic human and emotional situations are still the same. My duty is to bring this music closer to people in an emotional way. And that's what we're doing with Muzsikás – you can't say you have to respect this music of your ancestors – people shit on that. But if it touches the heart it will be remembered forever."

BEST ALBUMS

Most of Márta Sebestyén's albums with Muzsikás were released outside Hungary by Hannibal – since absorbed and digested by Rykodisc. Several are still available in stores and online, but otherwise the Hungarian versions are available through www.passiondiscs.co.uk

Márta Sebestyén *Dúdoltam Én – Márta Sebestyén Sings* (Hungaroton, 1988)



This dates back 16 years but is still one of the best recordings of traditional Hungarian music with excellent material – notably the 'Morning Song', an amazingly plangent slow style from the Kalotaszeg region of Transylvania. Exquisite. This was released by Hannibal as *Márta Sebestyén* but copies are hard to find.



Muzsikás and Márta Sebestyén *Morning Star* (Hannibal, 1997)



Hard to choose between this and the more recent *Bartók Album* which is also magnificent. But this is an unrecognised masterpiece with powerful playing and sublime performances from Márta. Its Hungarian incarnation *Hazafelé* has several different tracks but the substance remains the same.

BEST COMPILATION

The Best of Márta Sebestyén

(Hannibal, 1997)



A compilation designed to cash in on *The English Patient* effect, but it's an excellent collection of Márta's work, including songs in Hindi, English and Serbo-Croat as well as Hungarian. The ideal place to start.

BEST AVOIDED

Apocrypha (Hannibal, 1992)



There are a few of these dodgy discs with computer and synthesizer whizz Károly Cserepes (*Love Record* is another which I chucked out so I can't check if it's as bad as I remember), but the concept seems to fly in the face of what Márta and her music represents.

Márta Sebestyén & Muzsikás appear at London's Royal Festival Hall on November 20

To mark 30 years on stage, she performs at the Urania Theatre, Budapest on December 27-29

LIKE MÁRTA? THEN TRY...

✦ Kati Szvorák *Énekeim* (Rep, 1995)

Katalin Szvorák has also worked with many of Hungary's best folk musicians exploring the music of the peoples of the Carpathian basin. This CD samples a range of music from 1986-95. |

