

# Portrait

## László Orbán

According to Sue Isely, artistic director of Kisbetyárok Family Dancers, Laci Orbán is a special local treasure of our community. It seldom happens that a talent of such caliber drops into Seattle as Laci did. The writing of my interview proceeds the Apr 26 Kisbetyárok concert, featuring Laci Orbán as its main attraction. Therefore, I am not able to report here on his concert performance, but I will try to introduce the artist, the husband and father behind the person we see on stage.

Laci Orbán was born in 1960 in Szentkeresztbánya, Transylvania, in the neighborhood of Székelyudvarhely and Csíkszereda. He considers Udvarhely as his home town because that is where he attended the Áron Tamási High School. His parents moved there also when he was in his senior year. He has a younger sister and a younger brother; his father was a factory supervisor; his mother is a retired bookkeeper.

After high school he served in the army for two years, then for the next eleven years he worked in the iron factory. In the meantime, he got introduced to folk dancing, but the musicians often drank too much and there was nobody to play music. So he and his buddy decided that they would try their luck at it. For two years, they practiced fanatically with tapes and CDs. They were also invited to dance parties where they stood behind the musicians and played along without applying resin to their strings so as not to interrupt the music. This is how they learned the techniques of village musicians.

He was 29 years old when the Romanian regime changed. In Sepsiszentgyörgy the Háromszéki Ensemble was formed and Laci and his friend decided to join. Later, he was lured to Hungary where Sándor Timár, artistic director of The Hungarian State Folk Ensemble, hired him as a violinist. This was an important milestone in his musical carrier. He learned to pay attention to what is important to the dancers. "Everything was done very professionally there".

The pay, however, was low and after 10 years several of them lost their job. A choreographer and dancer friend from Ajka, Hungary came to his rescue and hired him as a musician. In the meantime, they also played for several amateur groups.

He and his wife, Kati Gyulai, met at the State Ensemble. Kati went to Germany and Spain in 1994 to work on her Masters Degree. Their friendship continued and when Kati came back to Hungary they got married in 1996.

Kati's parents have been living in California since 1980, so Kati and Laci often came to the US to visit or to travel around, but they did not move here permanently until 2005. Kati got tired of the bureaucracy in Hungary; she did not feel that she was appreciated professionally, and their children's future was also an important factor in their decision. Even though Kati's parents helped with the transition, Laci did not feel at home in Los Angeles; musical opportunities did not materialize; the local Hungarian community was not living up to his expectations, and the huge metropolis seemed unhealthy and foreign to him. In 2005, they moved to Seattle. Here, Laci feels more at home. He grew up in the Harghita Mountains, and when he came to Washington he said, "I could smell the fragrance of evergreens here." He also quoted the writer Áron Tamási: "We were born to this world so we may be at home somewhere in it". Then he added, "We are at home here (Seattle area) and at home there (Hungary and Tran-

sylvania)." The family is fortunate because they can spend summers in Europe among family and friends, at music camps with the children, and at Lake Balaton with relatives and cousins.

Talking about the local musical opportunities, Laci commented that he is never paid according to professional standards. "Instead of paying me as a professional, people only profit from me" he said. However, he is happy about the status quo because he found musician buddies in Vancouver, Canada. He plays music with them; they stick together; they are good friends and enjoy each others' company, but it would be nice if they would be paid as professionals. "It is always difficult to ask for more money because you want to make sure that you will be invited back" he mused.

Kati, who assists Sue Isely with Kisbetyárok, puts in long days from morning 'til night at her job at Microsoft. The running of the household, taking care of their daughters, and driving them to various lessons is Laci's task. In addition to his 8-hour job as a kindergarten teacher, he practices his violin at home with CDs and travels to Vancouver, BC every other week to play music. About once a month something related to dance happens here in Seattle. Occasionally, he gets invited to San Francisco and Victoria, BC or to Calgary.

Regarding the 25th anniversary of Kisbetyárok, he remarked that they are the ones to be celebrated because they represent the future. "Hats off to the local community. It appeals to me that there is enthusiasm here. The dancers take the tradition seriously and it shows that they love to dance. The success of Kisbetyárok on the one hand is due to Sue Isely's influence and talent, on the other hand the community is different here in Seattle. Sue inspires, she is the one who keeps things in good working conditions."

In the family's Sammamish condominium, Laci showed with pride their daughters' drawings, paintings, photos and Panni's poem, all displayed on the walls. From the balcony there is a view to the snowcapped Cascade Mountain range, and all Laci has to do is look at the mountains to decide if the conditions are good for skiing or not. Aside from music and skiing, his childhood love is tennis. He even holds a tennis and volley ball coach's diploma from the Budapest College of Physical Education. "That is the reason why I push sport to the kids" he said. "And Panni will also begin violin lessons in September."

The Orbán family anchored down here. They do not plan to move, even if they have to survive job changes. "We like it here, the children also like it here and my band is here, too. There is a little music, a little dance, tennis, as well as nature and the opportunity for hiking, also."

We, the Seattle area Hungarians, are happy that the talented Orbán family decided to make their home among us and hope that they will stay here. After all, Laci Orbán is our treasure who represents our folk roots.

