

A somewhat open letter to Jake Boggan

So I've a story to relate, which is interesting, and sad.

I wanted, as I've told you, to do a Fulbright in music theory at the Liszt Academy. I worked on it, wrote a proposal, did stuff. Now, I think I've got a great chance at getting a Fulbright. You know, the whole genius thing. (cough) But it will not happen, because (0) the Liszt Academy does not have the funds to devote time to me in the form of an advisor, and (1) there is no music theory, of the analytical kind I wish to pursue, at the Liszt Academy right now.

Regarding (0) : First of all, where are they getting these funds? That's right: like every other organization in Hungary, they're getting them from the government. They don't seem to think of the alternatives; they're not open to them. They just sit around pleading, begging the government for more money. But they don't realize that if they are dependent on the government for money, then even if this government decides to give them more funds, the next government could just as easily take them all away. The government doesn't care about music and the arts; it cares about advancing its own ideas — maybe those ideas include music, maybe they don't. And it could even be argued that, beneath that, government doesn't have its own ideas, it just supports those of the lobbyists with the most power and money; ie government is only motivated by power, money, and control.

When I told Helena that maybe the Liszt Academy (and other organizations) should depend on private money, she scoffed: “What private money?” . Maybe that private money isn't there right now, but the only way an organization can get it —and the only way it can *ensure* a prosperous future— is to generate interest in itself, to welcome in people and organizations which could attract a lot of prestige —like me and the Fulbright organization— not turn them away.

I know the same thing that happened to me happened to another friend of mine last year. He was going to do a Fulbright in music composition at the Liszt Academy, but he faced the same resistance, and so he went to grad school instead. My friend is no less talented because of the rejection, and SUNY Buffalo has added a great composer to its ranks. The only one who lost is the Liszt Academy, who in fact had so much to gain. What they don't seem to realize is that my friend and I aren't dependent on the Liszt Academy for survival; there are other places for us to go. But we wanted to go to Hungary specifically because it meant something special to us, because we wanted to be part of Hungary's cultural rejuvenation.

Contrast with Budapest Semesters in Mathematics (BSM). BSM's ranks have been growing steadily each year, despite their complaints about money, because they welcome people in. Those people go back home and recommend more and more people to come. My school, for instance, was not affiliated with BSM until I went. Now they're affiliated, and several students have expressed an interest in going. BSM draws attention to itself, and it is slowly becoming bigger and more popular. And this popularity is not in danger of failing any time soon, because it's built on its own reputation, not a government grant. (Of course, I worry about the future of BSM, because I think BSM's growth is stifled by its complaints about money. Rather, their concerns about money decrease the quality of their “prod-

uct” , because they’re very often unwilling to run a class if there isn’t enough interest — “it doesn’t pay” .)

My idea to do a Fulbright came from those of my SUNY friend, Otto, and my roommate from last spring, who did a Fulbright in math. Imagine if my Otto and I had both come here. Two years in a row the Liszt Academy would be affiliated with the Fulbright organization. Everyone doing a Fulbright in Hungary would know about it, and especially me and Otto, who would undoubtedly go back and spread the good word to America. Over time, more and more interest would be generated in the Academy, and it would grow.

And compare with your experience at CEU. Here you came, willing, with energy to spare, all psyched up to be doing math in Hungary — especially in Hungary. And all that happened was that you were dicked around for months. Sure, you got to take a class or two in the end, but on the whole I think your time could have been more fully spent. The result was, I believe, a loss for them and for Hungary, because you left after only half a year — why wouldn’t you, when there were welcoming arms — I don’t mean just Erica’s— back at home?

It sort of reminds me, too, of a letter of recommendation I wrote last year for a NU linguistics professor. What I liked so much about him was his enthusiasm, and his reception to my enthusiasm. From the day I set foot in his office, he was very excited about my decision to try a linguistics major, excited about what I could offer, coming from a mathematical background. He spent time working out a schedule with me, made suggestions for classes to take, and in general exuded a warmth that made me feel like he truly appreciated that someone new was interested in the field he loved. On the other hand, I’ve had plenty of experiences where I’ve been really excited about some subject or another, gone to see someone in the department, and been completely turned off by them. They couldn’t have cared less that I wanted to do work in their field. Who knows what they do care about, but in the end, how do they gain by turning interested people away? Do they think that the only relevant work that will be done in their field can be done by themselves and the people who are already working with them?

Also it’s interesting to compare two critical conversations we both had with our institutions. Not only were we discouraged from proceeding with our studies, but, to add insult, implications were made that we weren’t even *capable* of handling the studies they had to offer; this, despite the fact that we both come as fairly credentialed and bright students.

One professor told you he didn’t think you could handle the algebra class; in fact, you did better than the grad student in the class. And even though I had a great proposal, reflecting a lot of thought and consideration, the woman at the Liszt Academy was constantly joking about how ill-prepared I was, and that I wasn’t even a music major.

I was apparently ill-prepared because I thought the theory department had 20 professors — as they list on their website. There are only two. (My ill-preparedness or their false advertisement?) And one of the professors listed, who I was particularly interested in meeting, died some years ago. Of course there was no mention of this on the website, nor was there anywhere online.

As for the music major: I am a music major —she must have misread—, but so what if I wasn't? Even a glance at the proposal shows that my thoughts and project were well worked-out, and even —dare I say it?— interesting. Additionally, far from being detrimental, my interdisciplinary background would be an asset. What better way to bring in more people than to cull from other fields? I guess it's a money issue once again: If we don't have the money, we don't want bright people to come study with us. In other words, we're not going to do any work unless the government gives us money first.

Issue (1) is kind of related to (0). So what if they don't have a theory department? Surely there are some individuals there who are interested in music! If they were really passionate about music, they'd offer me what they could, and I would learn something, whatever their perspective or approach or field of interest may be. It's true that they may have something to learn from me, as well, but that's a good thing, and is, in fact, one of the goals of the Fulbright program.

By welcoming me in, the papers I would publish would have their name on it. This could bring prestige —or at least attention— to the Academy. And with interested people come money. Somehow they don't get that, though.

Anyways, you can see I'm a little upset. Not because my Fulbright project isn't going to happen, though; just like you, there are plenty of other institutions that would be glad to have me. I'm upset because I see Hungary, in general, as wasting such potential. The country is so vibrant, and there are so many talented minds there, but an over-reliance on government —one wonders if they have forgotten their recent history— and an obsession with money is driving it into the ground.

Frankly, I'm disgusted to be here right now. I'm sitting in the BSM basement, listening to the wind blow by the window, looking at the bright blue sky through the leaves, and I'm remembering how good it was to be doing work here, how utterly inspirational this country was for me. It was the country that inspired my ideas about music theory and cognition, and which led to the creation of my Fulbright project. But I see now that all of that was an illusion. What made last year so great was only the enthusiasm I brought to it. I realize now that the country as a collective whole is, without realizing it, hell-bent on destroying itself.

Hungarians always walk around with their heads towards the ground. We used to joke that it's not because the economy is bad and life is depressing, but because they're always on the lookout for dogshit. I'm thinking maybe it amounts to the same thing, that there's a neck-level buzzsaw just down the road, and they're heading straight for it. Drawn into itself and its own depression, unwilling to restore itself from the inside out, looking only for a handout, Hungary hasn't got a chance.

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Jeremy Weissmann
 11260 Overland Ave. #21A
 Culver City, CA 90230
 USA
 jeremy@mathmeth.com