

# The First Jazz Scholar to Become Doctor Honoris Causa of G. Dima Music Academy in Cluj

VIRGIL MIHAIU



JOHN EDWARD HASSE & VIRGIL MIHAIU  
(photo by NICU CHERCIU)

## Virgil Mihaiu

Romanian writer, jazz critic, diplomat, jazz aesthetics professor at G. Dima Music Academy in Cluj, polyglot, and performer.

**J**OHAN EDWARD HASSE (b. November 20, 1948 in Aberdeen, South Dakota, USA), the Smithsonian Institution’s “Ambassador of Jazz” and founder of worldwide Jazz Appreciation Month—nowadays celebrated in all 50 States and in over 40 countries—is the first jazz scholar to receive the Doctor Honoris Causa title from a Romanian academic establishment. The Senate of G. Dima Music Academy in Cluj (rector: Vasile Jucan) had the initiative, with support from the American Embassy in Bucharest and the Transylvania Cultural Community Association led by young promoter Tudor Vesa. Previous DHC-laureates of this institution included violinists Yehudi Menuhin and Sherban Lupu, composers Iannis Xenakis, Krzysztof Penderecki, Pascal Bentoiu, Ștefan Niculescu, György Ligeti, Costin Miereanu, Tudor Jarda, Dieter Acker, György Kurtág, Ghenadie Ciobanu, organist Kurt Mild, opera singers José Carreras, Virginia Zeani, Lya Hubic, Lucia Stănescu, Viorica Cortez, David Ohanesian, Alexandru

Fărcaș, Angela Gheorghiu, Mariana Nicolesco, conductors Erich Bergel, Lawrence Foster, Cristian Mandeal, Petre Sbârcea, Marin Constantin, Nicola Debelic, Emil Simon, musicologists and promoters Roman Vlad, Ioan Holender, Raoul Șorban, Ileana Szenik.

Hasse is long-time Curator of American Music at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, DC, author of books on Duke Ellington and jazz, and founder of the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra. For more than 30 years he has served as Curator of American Music at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of History, where he took care of a number of memorable exhibitions on Duke Ellington, Ray Charles, Ella Fitzgerald, a history of the piano, as seen through the Smithsonian collections, etc. In 2001 he was awarded the honorary title Doctor of Humane Letters by Walsh University, North Canton, OH. Among his publications there are some reference books like *Ragtime: Its History, Composers, and Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985; London: Macmillan, 1985 and 1986) and *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington*, with a Foreword by Wynton Marsalis (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993; New York: Da Capo Press, 1995; London: Omnibus Press, 1996). No wonder that John Edward Hasse was entrusted with the mission to coordinate the album anthology *Jazz: The First Century* (New York: William Morrow/Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), edited on the first centennial anniversary of this musical genre. In his Introduction to this volume, Hasse displays some of his generous ideas and principles that have guided his activity as a jazz scholar and promoter:

*A new form of musical expression emerged at the outset of the twentieth century. One hundred years later it was still vital. And somehow, in the intervening years, it had become the most expansive and influential approach to music-making introduced during that time. That music was jazz. And the idea behind it was powerful: Employ improvisation, hot rhythm, and other enlivening devices in the performance of music from an array of sources—in effect making something new and exciting from something old and familiar. The concept proved fruitful, its creative possibilities inexhaustible. The music grew accordingly, and it accrued the history and the qualities that make for enduring art. . . . Jazz is as much about the personal as it is about the collective. The jazz musician, through inflections and stylings, puts his or her distinctive stamp on the material, making something personal out of something shared. Like democracy at its best, a jazz band maintains an optimum balance between the individual and the group and upholds the value of both. In a century rife with the predictable, the dehumanizing, and the dispiriting, jazz affirmed the fresh, the human, the hopeful. It came to represent humanity at its best: striving for*

*beauty, personal achievement, and perfection, and communicating a message that brings pleasure to the world.*

In his acceptance speech, John Edward Hasse mentioned Duke Ellington's quotation "If jazz means anything, it is freedom of expression," elaborating further as follows:

*The jazz musician improvises, and the immediacy of that approach to invention ensures that the message comes from the heart. At the same time, the depth and scope of the jazz language—on a par with the most complex "classical" music—make that communication as deep and articulate as musical expression can be. The reflection of life in all its complexity has one of its truest images in jazz. . . . For early New Orleans players, jazz could also mean freedom from anonymity, poverty, and powerlessness. For 1920 "Jazz Age" adherents, it could mean freedom from old, tired social mores. . . . For citizens of communist nations, jazz could powerfully symbolize freedom and individualism.*

The recent Doctor Honoris Causa expressed his consideration for Romania's lively cultural (jazz included) scene, for Cluj's current status as European Youth Capital, and his support for the city's application to become Europe's Cultural Capital in 2021. Actually, the 2000-year old Transylvanian metropolis was the first in Romania to host the International Jazz Day, in 2013. The *Laudatio* was delivered by Virgil Mihaiu, Romania's correspondent for the world-famous *Down Beat* magazine and founder of the Jazz Aesthetics Course at the Cluj Music Academy. As a trustworthy disciple of his renowned masters back in the 1960s—jazz pianists Sir Roland Hanna and Jacky Byard—John Edward Hasse gave a brief piano-jazz recital, and the ceremony ended with the audience's prolonged applause.



## **Abstract**

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The text is a summary of the *Laudatio* delivered by the jazz aesthetics professor Virgil Mihaiu at the ceremony during which the curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History John Edward Hasse was awarded the title of Doctor Honoris Causa.

## **Keywords**

John Edward Hasse, International Jazz Day, G. Dima Music Academy in Cluj