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Collapsing Stages and Standing Ovations

Hungarian Choral Societies and Sociability in the Nineteenth Century

Krisztina Lajosi

Almost every Hungarian town and hamlet has its own choral society, and some can boast even two; this is perhaps not a bad thing, since what comes up from the throat does less damage than what goes down. One or two fiery songs can intoxicate the mind more than three bottles of wine. However, to be honest, I prefer listening to a village girl singing her sorrow on the meadow, or a sulky village lad singing his woe in soft or robust tunes, to watching a ridiculous group of elderly men with white mustaches and deformed faces wailing in unison with the flapping arms of a conductor. . . . Singing suits them about as much as ballet suits a cow. . . . Small-town caterwauling societies¹ are notorious for many a *casus bibendi*. . . . At least people are not bored, so they won't start revolutions.²

This satirical appraisal of choral societies was written by Kálmán Mikszáth (1847–1910), a famous nineteenth-century novelist who made fun of the attitudes and rituals associated with the singing culture that defined the social life of Hungary in the late nineteenth century. After criticizing the quality of their voices, Mikszáth mocked the pride and eagerness of choirs to win prizes at singing competitions. He ridiculed the prize-winning ceremony at the national song festival held in Debrecen in 1882, where the jury had to give some sort of certificate to almost every participant in order to avoid a scandalous fight among the choral societies who all claimed to have delivered the best performance. When they returned home with their prizes, each choral society was celebrated with great pomp and circumstance by passionate crowds who took pride in the extraordinary achievements of their melodious townsmen.

Choral societies were a matter of prestige that involved whole communities, and sometimes divided them. They provided for many happy occasions advancing social cohesion, but often they became the breeding grounds for political conflicts and class struggles. According to the writer Ferenc Móra

1 In the original text the word *dalárda* (choral society) is replaced with *dalárma*, combining *dal* (song) with *lárma* (noise).

2 Mikszáth (2005), 588. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

(1879–1934), who published a history of the choral society in Szeged, political oppression forged unity, while liberty created dissent among the people. After the *Ausgleich* of 1867,³ some ‘good Hungarians’ formed a green-tag party and wanted to elect a mayor who supported the Austro-Hungarian compromise, while the ‘even better Hungarians,’ cherishing the memory of the failed anti-Habsburg revolution of 1848, formed a white-tag party and campaigned for a mayor who did not disavow this revolutionary heritage. In order to resolve this excruciating difference, an anonymous cartoonist proposed to have both candidates sit on a hot stove, and the one who remained seated the longest should become the new mayor of Szeged. However simple and effective this solution might have seemed, the elections were not decided by the hot-stove method. Instead, the city of Szeged itself became a hot hell for a while. The Greens and the Whites did not greet each other, did not shop in the same stores, and did not frequent the same pubs. “The Whites were cursing the Germans in the *Zrínyi* Restaurant on the church square, while the Greens were glorifying the homeland in the Grapevine pub. Of course, where patriots are so divided even over drinking matters, singing will also reflect dissonance.”⁴ The director of the first choral society in Szeged, Ede Hánki, was a white-tagged ‘true’ Hungarian, whose relentlessly temperamental and outspoken nature became the source of much irritation among the Greens, who eventually paid him back for all the discomfort by establishing their own ‘élite’ choral society. The differences between the old and the new ‘élite’ society were magnified by the two local newspapers, who were looking for dramatic stories. Finally the ‘élite’ choral society fell apart and Hánki, with all the active members of his choral society, founded a new choir which he called the ‘civic’ choral society, as against the ‘élite’ one that had been disbanded. This ‘civic’ society was active, and there was hardly any charity in the town which the society did not support.⁵

3 The *Ausgleich* or Compromise of 1867 was the result of many exploratory talks and negotiations between the Austrian and the Hungarian governments after the failed Hungarian revolution and war of independence in 1849. The compromise led to the formation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. In the dualist system Hungary and Austria each had complete independence in domestic affairs, but surrendered their sovereignty in matters relating to foreign and military policy. The emperor had more power than a traditional constitutional monarch, since he could interfere in the decisions of the executive and had absolute authority over his dominions. Public opinion in both countries was divided about the success of the Compromise, and many were convinced that the other party had the better deal.

4 Móra (1922), 10.

5 *Ibid.*, 11–13.

The proliferating choral societies, whether loved or hated, provided musical and social entertainment for Hungarians in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Carl Dahlhaus says of the German *Liedertafeln* and *Gesangvereine*, these choral societies “formed an increasingly dense web of musical societies mingling companionship and music in equal measure.”⁶ Most of the choirs were formed between the 1860s and 1880s. Fifty choirs participated at the festival in Pest in 1865.⁷ Many of these choral societies became members of an overarching national association, the *Országos Magyar Daláregyesület* (Hungarian National Association of Choral Societies), founded in Arad in 1867.

The first amateur male choral society was formed in Pest in 1840 under the leadership of Mihály Havi (1810–64), a singer at the National Theatre. They were the first choir to perform Ferenc Kölcsey’s (1790–1838) *Hymn* set to music by Ferenc Erkel (1810–93), which later became the national anthem of Hungary.⁸ By the 1840s, choral works were becoming ever more popular in operas. The chorus plays a prominent role in the works of József Ruzitska (ca. 1775–1824), who composed the first Hungarian opera, *Béla Futása* (Béla’s Flight) in 1822. Choruses also figure importantly in the operatic works of Károly Thern (1817–86), Béni Egressy (1814–51), Kornél Ábrányi (1822–1903), and Ferenc Erkel, who would later be known as the Hungarian national opera composer.

Hungarian theatres followed the general European trend in staging crowd scenes, creating gigantic historical tableaux, and enhancing the spectacle with ‘national’ costumes and decorations. Like famous opera arias, the operatic chorales took on a life of their own as part of the repertoire of choirs that sang at festive occasions. Next to these opera choruses, composers set to music popular poems by famous Hungarian poets. The “Bordal” (Wine Song) by Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–55) was a particular favorite, and after Erkel included it in his opera *Bánk bán* (1861) it became a standard piece in the programmes of choral societies all over the country, along with Vörösmarty’s other poem, the “Szózat” (Appeal). The poems of the Hungarian national poet Sándor Petőfi (1823–49) were also set to music by Béni Egressy, one of the most prolific choral composers before Erkel. He set to music Petőfi’s “Nemzeti Dal” (National Song), which became one of the most popular poems during the anti-Habsburg revolution of 1848. Patriotic songs were ubiquitous in the revolution and the war of independence. Some tunes, like the “Rákóczy induló” (Rákóczy March) and well-known opera choruses like the “Meghalt a cselszövő” (The Schemer Died) from Erkel’s opera *Hunyadi László* (1844), gained wide circulation already

6 Dahlhaus (1989), 47.

7 Kacz (1889), 16.

8 Mihálka (1986), 19.

before the revolution; they were disseminated outside the theatre by professional and amateur choirs all over the country.⁹ The *Marseillaise* was translated into Hungarian and set to music in 1848 by Mihály Mosonyi (1815–70), a renowned composer of that time.¹⁰ Songs that mocked the Austrians and glorified the Hungarian leaders, especially Lajos Kossuth (1802–94), were sung by soldiers and supporters of the revolution all over the country. The memory of the revolution in folk music has recently been studied by the ethnomusicologist Lujza Tari, who collected these songs in a digital anthology that is now also available online.¹¹ According to Tari, the “Kossuth nóta” (Kossuth Song) has many variants and was probably sung by thousands of peasants and commoners during 1848; it became one of the best-known relics of the revolution.

After the failed war of independence, communal singing became scarce in Hungary. The so-called Bach regime of the 1850s, named after the infamous Minister of Interior Alexander Bach (1813–93), is remembered as one of the darkest ages in Hungarian politics, ruled with a heavy hand by Haynau’s dreaded secret police who retaliated against every suspect political assembly.¹² These circumstances were not conducive to musical and social gatherings. However, the gloomy air had cleared by the 1860s and societal organizations began to flourish among the Hungarians: literary groups, choral societies, reading societies, bourgeois and civic clubs (*polgári kör* and *társas kör*) were founded all over the country. These grass-root civil initiatives of the bourgeoisie were all the more important since under the Bach regime the only way to participate in public life was by showing loyalty to the Austrian political system. “Because of the Germanization of the public administration, the nobility and the bourgeoisie were excluded from the running of the country. Anyone who, nevertheless, assumed office for existence reasons could expect to become a social outcast.”¹³ It is therefore no surprise that the writer Ferenc Móra, in his short history of the choral society of Szeged, claimed that the choral festival of 1866 organized by the city of Szeged was not only an entertainment for the local population but a celebration of the whole country.

9 Ibid.

10 See Lujza Tari’s website *Revolution, War of Independence in 1848/49 and its Remembering in the Traditional Music*.

11 See Tari, *A szabadságharc zenei emlékei*.

12 Julius Jacob von Haynau (1786–1853), also called “the Habsburg Tiger” or the “Hyena of Brescia,” was an Austrian lieutenant who became famous for his ruthless and aggressive military leadership. In Italy and Hungary he was remembered for his brutality and merciless oppression of the anti-Habsburg revolutionary insurrectionists.

13 Toth, ed. (2005), 404.

The devil put the Bach regime in his sack, but did not take it away completely yet. The double-headed eagle turned both its necks towards his fatherland, but its claws were still holding tight to the Hungarian wool. It was still a patriotic duty to show resistance by wearing the Hungarian national costume and a Kossuth-beard and to sing Hungarian songs. National resistance was bursting in every song and every rhythm, and we had to make singing a national cause not only because we liked it, but also because it infuriated the oppressive power. The national song was not only a delight for the heart, but also a political weapon.¹⁴

This “political weapon” proliferated in the 1860s and it was also encouraged by the leading composers of that time: Kornél Ábrányi, Ferenc Erkel, and Mihály Mosonyi. The first Hungarian musical journal, *Zenészeti Lapok* (Musical Papers),¹⁵ published articles regularly about the choral festivals and about newly formed choral societies. From 1868 the *Zenészeti Lapok* became the official journal of the Hungarian National Choral Society. Kornél Ábrányi, who was appointed editor-in-chief by the Society, “made the support of the Hungarian choral movement his new goal.”¹⁶

Given the proliferation of choral societies in Hungary and their prominence in the press and public sphere in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it is remarkable that they have not received more scholarly attention. As far as I am aware, there are no comprehensive studies of Hungarian choral societies, except for one unpublished doctoral dissertation that focuses on children’s and women choirs.¹⁷ Both cultural and music historians either ignore them completely or mention them only in a few dismissive paragraphs.¹⁸ This disparaging attitude towards choral societies could perhaps be explained by the quality of the music they were propagating, the folksy character of their repertoire, and the lack of musical education of most of their members. Music histories traditionally chronicle the production of art music and overlook low-brow music-making. However, choral societies in Hungary formed a bridge between high art and low-brow entertainment: they made certain high-brow pieces accessible to the general public, and popularized musical education

14 Móra (1922), 9.

15 *Zenészeti Lapok* (1860–76), published in Budapest.

16 Szerző (1986), 5.

17 Fazekas (2007).

18 One of the best-known histories of Hungarian music, László Dobszay’s *Magyar Zenei Történet* (1998), devotes less than one page (p. 324) to a description of the nineteenth-century Hungarian choral movement.

and musical culture by involving as many people as possible in their ritualized gatherings and festivals. Choral societies may not have improved the quality of musical production, but they certainly played an important role in spreading musical culture. When the *Zenészeti Lapok* became the official newsletter and journal of the National Association of Hungarian Choral Societies, subscriptions to the journal soared, and more people supported the publications of the musical press than ever before.¹⁹

Choral societies organized societal life, shaped and cultivated national consciousness, and increased the demand for original Hungarian choral compositions. The social and political functions of these societies were closely intertwined with their artistic, entertaining, and educative aspects. Though most of them had from ten to twenty-five active members, the number of the supporting members could exceed 600, which was a significant basis for sustaining a regular musical culture in Hungarian towns.

The first records of Hungarian choral music in a modern sense date from the eighteenth century. Choral singing developed in the Protestant colleges—especially in Debrecen, Sárospatak, Kolozsvár, and Miskolc—and the choirs participated not only at school festivities but also at town celebrations. These choirs sang mainly church music and occasionally German songs, usually in Hungarian translation. The poets of the so-called Western School, László Amadé (1703–64) and Ferenc Verseggy (1757–1822), had both received Catholic educations and sought to elevate Hungarian musical culture by imitating and translating German songs. Because the population of Hungarian cities was largely German, and the Hungarian bourgeoisie also spoke German, the domestication of German models was not difficult. Following the examples of the college choirs and the advice of eighteenth-century poets, the first amateur choirs were formed, and they sang German songs in German. The popularity of the German-style *Liedertafeln* was a first phase in the history of choral singing in Hungary, but at the same time it hindered the development of Hungarian choral works.²⁰

The growing reputation of *verbunkos* music²¹ in the so-called Reform Era (1825–48) also had an impact on the development of vocal music. *Verbunkos* originated as recruiting music for the Austrian army, but by the nineteenth

19 Szerző (1986), 5.

20 Mihálka (1986), 15.

21 The word *verbunkos* is derived from the German *Werbungsmusik* (recruiting music). Since the late eighteenth century it came to be seen as the typical Hungarian national music. It was first used mainly in instrumental pieces, but later also became popular in vocal music and operas.

century it came to be associated with the anti-German *kuruc*²² identity, mainly because of its role in the anti-Habsburg Rákóczi war of independence (1703–11). Because of its complicated ornamentations, the verbunkos style was not ideal for vocal music, as it did not follow the natural rhythm of the Hungarian language. However, composers like Ferenc Erkel, Béni Egressy, and Károly Thern shaped the verbunkos to fit Hungarian diction, and most of the choral pieces they composed were written in verbunkos style. In the Reform era the cultivation of Hungarian music and the popularity of verbunkos went hand in hand. Musicologists assume that most of the songs during the revolution of 1848 were sung in verbunkos style recalling the memories of the earlier anti-Habsburg Rákóczi insurrection. Verbunkos thus came to be seen as the music of the Hungarian resistance throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.²³ Nevertheless, the choral societies formed in Hungary in the 1840s sang exclusively in German and had only German works in their repertoires.²⁴ These pioneers were towns in West Hungary with a substantial German population: Győr, Pécs, Pozsony, Sopron, Veszprém, etc.

As mentioned earlier, the first male choir was formed as a private initiative of Mihály Havi in 1840. The *Pestofner Liedertafel*, active for two years, was founded by Antal Dolezsnák in 1844. In the same year the choral society in Pozsony, the *Pressburger Männergesang-Verein*, was established by János Sroffregen and provided musical entertainment until the revolution of 1848. This society also sang mainly in German, but occasionally they performed Hungarian folk songs and the famous “Meghalt a cselszövő” (The Schemer Died) chorus from Erkel’s *Hunyadi László*. In 1846 a male choir was founded in Pécs under the leadership of József Ede Wimmer (1820–59). The founder and director of the choral society in Győr was Antal Richter (1802–56), an accomplished musician, kapellmeister, and teacher in the Esterházy family.²⁵ These choral societies founded in the 1840s did not have a long life, and their activity was put to a halt by the political events of 1848–49.

The crushed war of independence of 1849 was followed by difficult years of reprisal characterized by strict censorship and prohibitions on assembly, which was not favorable for the cultivation of communal singing. Kölcsey’s “Himnusz”

22 The word *kuruc* refers to the armed anti-Habsburg rebels—mainly of Hungarian and Slavic origin—who fought over a period of almost 100 years against Habsburg rule. The most famous anti-Habsburg uprising was led by Francis II Rákóczi (1676–1735) and led to a war of independence (1703–11).

23 Mihálka, 16.

24 See Kaskó-Buka (2014).

25 Fazekas (2007), 7.

(Hymn), a popular favorite, was banned, along with other Hungarian music, Hungarian theatre performances, balls, and every form and manner of societal activity that might have presented an occasion for the expression of patriotic feelings.

A Catholic kapellmeister in Pest, Nándor Thill, formed the first post-revolutionary choral society in 1852 under the name *Pest-Budai Dalárda* (*Pest-Ofner Gesangverein*). He and his society operated under the close scrutiny of Haynau's secret police. Only when the state officials noticed that they could not provide music of quality for the king's visit to Pest did they lift the strict restrictions regarding musical gatherings.²⁶ According to the first article in their statutes, which were published in 1857 in both Hungarian and German, the goal of the society was the cultivation of church music. This specification could also be seen as a strategy to avoid censorship, since there could be no objection to singing Catholic church music. However, the second article of their statute, which elaborates on the 'activities' of the society, mentions monthly singing evenings and excursions along with other educational and charitable pursuits. The article about membership distinguishes between two categories of members: active and honorary ones. The active ones were required to have "some experience with singing so that they won't hinder the singing of the choir."²⁷ Thill's concert for the king was a success, and with his payment of twenty guilders he commissioned original choral compositions. This was the first competition organized for Hungarian choral works, and many composers responded with enthusiasm. Among the winners were Károly Thern, Károly Huber (1828–85), and Ferenc Doppler (1821–83).

Control was so strict in the 1850s that the programme of every public concert had first to be approved by the censor. In his memoirs Kornél Ábrányi recalled the way his concert in Nagyvárad in 1851 was policed and almost forbidden by the authorities. He traveled from Szolnok to Nagyvárad without a passport, pretending to be a doctor's apprentice. When he arrived after eight days of exhausting travel, he was received with great hospitality by the governor and his music-loving family. The governor approved the programme which contained the following pieces: 1. "Emlékkönyv (magyar ábránd)" (Book of Memories: A Hungarian Dream), 2. "A hegyek között" (In the Mountains) by Ferenc Liszt, 3. "Polonaise" by Chopin, and 4. "Ne sírj hazám (magyar hallgató nóta)" (Don't Cry, My Homeland: Hungarian Song). The first and the fourth pieces were Ábrányi's own compositions. After the poster was printed and the concert was sold out, the police, who had not received notice that the governor approved

26 Ibid., 9.

27 *A Pest-Budai Dalárda alapszabályai* (1857), 4.

of the pieces, took action against Ábrányi, who was arrested and questioned at the office of the military commander because of the ‘rebellious nature’ of his repertoire. Ábrányi explained that the second and the third pieces are well known, and the first and the fourth have nothing insurrectionary about them, quite to the contrary, as their titles suggest, they are wistful in tone; but the general became very angry and reproached Ábrányi for misleading the governor about his concert, since all the titles contained some rebellious allusions to the past. In the interpretation of the general, the “Book of Memories” was inviting the public to bemoan the deaths of the Hungarian heroes of the revolution of 1848; “Among the Mountains” referred to the apotheosis of Görgei²⁸ above the Carpathian Mountains; the Polonaise celebrates Polish patriotism; and the last piece “Don’t Cry, My Country” is a direct “Anspielung,” a straightforward reference to the return of Lajos Kossuth from emigration. Ábrányi and his concert were saved only thanks to the intervention of the governor.

The news about the scandal regarding the programme spread quickly in the city, so Ábrányi had no need to worry about publicity for his musical evening. The concert room was packed with a very enthusiastic audience, and also a large number of police to keep an eye on the potentially revolutionary crowd. Some people did express their patriotic sentiments during the final piece, which resulted in a number of arrests. The chief of police, unwilling to admit defeat, showed up the next day at the house of the doctor where Ábrányi was lodging and asked to see his passport. Since he did not have a valid passport, the police tried to convince the governor that Ábrányi had political motives and that his artistic activities were just an excuse to create unrest. In the end, Ábrányi was asked to cancel his second concert and leave the city at once.²⁹

In the 1860s, when the political and social climate was becoming less tense and restrictive, choral societies spread rapidly all over the country. The choral society in Szentes was founded in 1861, and that same year Hungarian choral societies were established in Pécs and Arad, followed by Jászberény in 1862, Kecskemét and Szekszárd in 1863, and the following year in Baja, Balassagyarmat, Buda, Debrecen, and Szarvas. By 1864 there were approximately one hundred choral societies.³⁰ The choral society in Lugos was founded in 1852, the same year as Thill’s *Pest-Budai Dalárda*. Its director, Konrád Pál Wusching (1827–1900) was an organ teacher, violinist, and esteemed composer whose choral works were published by several musical journals in Hungary (*Apolló*, *Zenelap*,

28 Artúr Görgey (1818–1916), a Hungarian military leader who was serving in the Austrian army but supported the Hungarian rebels in the 1848 revolution.

29 Ábrányi (1891).

30 Fazekas (2007), 13.

Dalárzsebkönyv). He was awarded a silver medal by the Pope for his church music, and in 1883 the king distinguished him with a golden cross. For forty-six years he edited the yearbook of the choral society in Lugos, *Lugosi Dal- és Zeneegylet Évkönyve*, setting thus a good example of record-keeping for other choral societies to follow.³¹ The *Zenészet*i Lapok also wrote appreciatively about the choral society in Lugos: "There are not many choral societies in this country that contribute as much to the cultivation of Hungarian culture as the choral society in Lugos."³² This society had twenty-eight singers, 166 supporting members, and nineteen honorary members.³³ The society maintained a music school for twenty-six students and had 512 music scores in their library, a mixture of German and Hungarian choral pieces.³⁴ The same article contains the names of other towns with active choral societies. According to the records from the yearbook edited by Konrád Wusching, the director of the choral society in Lugos, there were choral societies in Arad, Baja, Buda, Csongrád, Debrecen, Eger, Eperjes, Eszék, Fehértemplom, Győr, Hatzfeld, Kőszegh, Kalocsa, Kassa, Karcag, Kisbér, Komárom, Nagykőrös, Lugos, Mohács, Miskolc, Nagykanizsa, Nyíregyháza, Pécs, Pest, Pancsova, Pozsony, Rimaszombat, Szalonta, Szatmár, Szombathely, Orsova, Magyaróvár, Tapolca, Zenta, and Zombor. The journalist of the *Zenészet*i Lapok complained that only a few of these choral societies had contacted their journal, and probably there were more societies around the country, but since they did not officially report their existence, the journal had no information about them.

The choral society in Pécs was arguably the best known and most successful choir in the country. It was founded in 1861 by Károly Wachauer (1829–90), a Catholic kapellmeister. Pécs organized the first national choral festival in 1864, to which only Hungarian choirs were invited. Eighteen choral societies with altogether about 200 members competed for the prize.³⁵ At this event the flag of their choral society was consecrated, and participants expressed their wish to establish a national overarching association for choral societies; but conditions were not yet optimal yet for the implementation of this initiative, which

31 Ábrányi (1892).

32 *Zenészet*i Lapok, (14 Jan. 1864), 123.

33 To get a sense of the scale and the circumstances it is perhaps worth mentioning that in 1880 Lugos (today part of Romania and probably best known as the birthplace of the famous actor Béla Lugosi [1882–1956]) had 11,287 inhabitants of whom 43% were Romanian, 41% German, and 12% Hungarian. In 1910 the total population was 19,818, of whom 35% were Hungarian, 32% Romanian, and 31% German.

34 Ibid.

35 Haksch (1902), 36.

was finally realized in 1867 at the choral festival organized by Arad. It is remarkable that the speech of the main guest, György Majláth (1818–83), who in 1866 had become the Hungarian chancellor, was highly political; he advocated the coronation of Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph I as King of Hungary as a gesture of pacification towards the Hungarian nation. His dream turned into reality in 1867, after the *Ausgleich*, when Emperor Franz Joseph I was indeed crowned the Hungarian king. But already in 1864 Majláth's words were received with applause and cheers, though as the author points out, "these were very bold words"³⁶ at that time.

In Pécs the first mention of a choral society dates from 1819, but this was a German group, which is not surprising given that the population of Pécs was largely German. However, in the Reform Era of the 1830s and 40s, as the cultivation of Hungarian culture gained more and more supporters throughout the country, the choral society of Pécs sang more songs in Hungarian: their repertoire ranged from folk songs to opera choruses translated into Hungarian. The first singers of this society were the members of the Catholic church choir reinforced with a number of amateurs. They took the name *Pécsi Dalárda* in 1847, and this is the forefather of the choral society of Pécs founded in 1861. The freshly organized choral society relied on the old statutes of its predecessor from 1847. The first article of the statutes asserts that music occupies a prominent position in the culture of the modern age, and that "the more civilized a nation is and the more highly developed its bourgeois culture, the more attention it pays to the elevation of the arts" and especially to singing, as the human voice is the most beautiful musical instrument.³⁷

Thanks to the contributions of their members and well-to-do sponsors, the choral society of Pécs could buy a piano and could even invest in the stocks of the local railway company. By the end of the first year, their collection of scores amounted to 896 Hungarian and German choral songs and some music for piano and orchestra.³⁸ In the beginning they sang German songs in Hungarian translations, which were not always of the highest quality, but the aesthetic aspect was overlooked for the sake of the "cultivation of our dear Hungarian mother tongue... which in those times was enough to kindle the hearts of the people."³⁹

The choral society in Pécs invited students with some knowledge of music from the local college to join their members, hoping that when they became

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 3.

38 Ibid., 9.

39 Ibid., 12.

teachers in provincial towns they would spread the love of singing and form similar choral societies. Unfortunately the students were less enthusiastic about this plan, and since they did not attend rehearsals, the board of the choral society decided to relieve them from joining the choir. The director also complained of the lax attitude of the regular members who did not show up for weekly meetings and did not learn the pieces. Those members who did not practice and were not able to be present at the rehearsals were fined a small sum for every missed session.⁴⁰ Thanks to their stricter discipline and higher level of musical training, the choir from Pécs could participate in every national singing competition, which they won three times over the course of forty years: in Debrecen (1868), Kolozsvár (1874), and Debrecen again (1882).

After conquering the hearts of the Hungarians with their singing, the choral society in Pécs decided to travel abroad and tour in Germany to let the world “pay homage to Hungarian song.”⁴¹ However, the world was not very interested in listening to Hungarian songs. According to Haksch, in Austria and especially in Germany they were received with “cold indifference” and “suspicious rejection.”⁴² In Graz the police asked them to provide a valid permit certifying that they had the right to sing in the territory of Styria. Before they were allowed to advertise themselves and print posters, the director of the choral society had to guarantee that they were not a ‘*Sängertrupp*’ of wandering minstrels and would not entertain the public with immoral songs. The choral society of Ischl rejected them, saying that “they do not wish to meet the Hungarian choral society, who should refrain from contacting them in the future.” In Salzburg they were told that they “should not accept any honorarium.” In Nürnberg they were bluntly informed that they were “not desirable visitors because they are Hungarians,” while in Switzerland they were expected to sing dressed up in “national costumes.” In Gmunden a lady asked her companion, “Who are these stately people (*stattlichen Leute*)?” and when the man at her side replied that they were Hungarians (*Aha, ich weiß schon, das sind Ungarn!*), the lady remarked with amazement, “*So, die sehen ja aus wie Menschen!*” (So, they actually look like humans!).⁴³

Despite these unfriendly remarks and the unwelcoming attitudes, the choral society decided to pursue their goals and to sing at the choral festival in Zürich, Switzerland. They were determined to show the German public that their image of the Hungarians was false, and to convince them of the artistic quality

40 Ibid., 14.

41 Ibid., 117.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 118–19.

of their singing. Though the authorities in German cities were not always hospitable, some German choral societies did extend a welcoming hand and sent warm notes to the choral society of Pécs when they read about their upcoming visit in the local newspaper. For example, the *Männergesangverein Nürnberg* sent a kind letter inviting them to Nürnberg and expressing their delight in getting to know the Hungarian singers. On the other hand, the city officials were rude in their response and did not want to admit them to any concert venue. The reason they gave was that they doubted whether the German public would be interested in a Hungarian choral society, since the city of Nürnberg had several excellent choral societies who provided enough musical entertainment for their audiences. The director of one of the local choral societies sent an apologetic letter to Pécs about their unfriendly treatment and reassured the Hungarians about the warm-hearted invitation of the German singers: “even though the public opinion created by journalists is against you simply because you are Hungarians, please do come to Nürnberg.” They suggested that given the hostile circumstances, it would perhaps be a better idea to give a joint performance together with the German choral society, and the programme of the two societies would fill the concert hall.⁴⁴ After so many humiliating messages the singers of Pécs decided not to go to Nürnberg, and instead to tour only in those cities that eventually were more welcoming. They sang in Aussee, Ischl, Salzburg, Zürich, and Luzern. Despite the hostile reception, after hearing their concerts, the German public changed their mind about the Hungarians, and the singers received standing ovations accompanied with excellent reviews in the newspapers. The journalist of the *Tagepost* (Daily News) from Graz was pleasantly surprised to find “Das Deutsche Lied” on the programme of the Hungarians, and asserted that the choral society from Pécs was not chauvinistic if they chose to sing this song: “das sind keine Chauvinisten, die singen das ‘Deutsche Lied’ von Kalliwoda.”⁴⁵ The next day the same newspaper published a rave review of the performance, praising the Hungarian conductor, Károly Wachauer, and the singers who could interpret German songs with such passion. “When the Hungarians started singing ‘Das Deutsche Lied’ the audience stood up in standing ovation, and the ardor with which they applauded the choir beggars description.”⁴⁶ In Aussee they were also warmly received, and the reports in the newspapers after the concert were passionately positive. According to the author, “no choir received stronger applause in Aussee than the choral society of Pécs.” The director of the local choral society offered to

44 Ibid., 126.

45 Ibid., 131.

46 Ibid., 132.

keep them company on their way to Ischl. After this kind reception it was quite disappointing to receive a curt telegraph from Ischl informing them that “the queen was honored by the choral society’s offer of a serenade, but she did not wish to receive them.” Nevertheless they held a successful concert in Ischl and offered all the proceeds for the support of the local library. The audience in Ischl was moved to tears by this gesture.

In Salzburg they received if not a royal, at least a princely reception. Prince Rohan greeted them personally and invited them to his own residence, which was unheard of even for local choral societies.⁴⁷ Following the sensational news about the hospitality of the prince, the public in Salzburg was curious to see the Hungarian choral society. After a very successful concert there was a joint dinner with the local *Liedertafel*; they sang together through the night, and the members of the two societies became good friends. Even the journalist of the *Salzburger Volksblatt* who at first did not welcome the Hungarian singers admitted in his article “*Die Sängergäste aus Ungarn*” that the choral society from Pécs sang with impressive mastery (*Männerchor von solcher Meisterschaft*). The twenty-three singers were praised for their musical education, the quality of their voices, and the rich repertoire they presented. Their performance of five Hungarian and four German songs was outstanding; with their German pieces they conquered the hearts of the Salzburgian public. Finally the author concluded that “if all Hungarians were like the singers from Pécs, Austria could not wish for better neighbors than the Hungarians.”⁴⁸ In Zürich they were also praised to the skies for their concert and for their generosity in donating all the money they earned to a local charity helping the victims of an avalanche. The director of the local choral society acknowledged that “*Die Ungarn sind bekannt von ihrem Edelmut!*” (The Hungarians are famous for their magnanimity!). The tour ended in Luzern, where the Swiss public treated the singers from Pécs to standing ovations, especially when they offered the income of their concert partly to a charity helping the poor of Luzern and partly to another charity for poor school children. In the local newspaper they were praised again for the strength of their voices and for their cultivated musical skills. “No amateur choir ever sang so well in Luzern as the choral society from Pécs.”⁴⁹ They returned from their triumphant German tour to face a chaotic situation at home, where the national association for Hungarian choral societies almost fell apart as a result of internal fights, biased juries, and dissatisfied choir directors.

47 Ibid., 138.

48 Ibid., 142.

49 Ibid., 148.

In response to the encouragement and the passionate appeals of Kornél Ábrányi in the *Zenészet*i Lapok, more and more Hungarian choral societies started to join the national association that was formed in 1867 at the choral festival in Arad. However, from its birth, this joint umbrella organization was characterized by conflict and disagreement among its members. The most common complaints were that at the national singing competitions the decisions of the jury were subjective and biased, and that member choirs were not paying their dues, with the result that the national association had to cope with deficits almost on a regular basis. In his history of the Hungarian choral societies Kornél Ábrányi paints a detailed picture of the unruly festival organizations and the rows among the choirs that accompanied almost every national competition. Even the simplest decisions about the location of the next choral competition, or the compulsory song for all the choirs, could lead to polemics. Under these circumstances Ábrányi, who became the president of the national association, found it difficult to keep the peace and prevent the association from falling apart.

As already mentioned, the first national choral festival was held in Pécs in 1864, and was memorable not only for the ceremonious consecration of the flag and the subsequent pompous banquet, but also because the stage proved too flimsy and collapsed under the weight of the choirs who were preparing for a joint performance.⁵⁰ The next national festival took place in Pest in 1865, where Liszt premiered his oratorio *The Legend of St. Elizabeth*. Liszt's presence immediately enhanced the zest for participation, and forty-three choirs enrolled for the festival. Five hundred singers performed his oratorio, about which Ábrányi published a detailed review in the *Zenészet*i Lapok.⁵¹ The choral competition took place two days later in the Városliget, a central park in Pest, and according to Ábrányi the singers were all wearing various ornate Hungarian national costumes; Pest never hosted a more colorful crowd. The march of the choirs on the streets of Pest was welcomed by cheering local crowds who then joined them at the festival venue in the Városliget. The stage did not collapse this time, but perhaps to avoid the collapses of the two previous years, the stage was built too low for the audience to see the singers, and because of the open air venue the acoustics were also not the best. Nevertheless, the public was satisfied and the director of the festival, Ferenc Erkel, was lavishly praised.

The next choral festival was held in Arad in 1867, but because of the parallel festivities in Pest around the coronation of Franz Joseph I following the Ausgleich, this festival was almost cancelled. Eventually forty-three choirs

50 Ibid., 32.

51 *Zenészet*i Lapok, 17 Aug. 1865 (online version: ZL 1864/65: 361).

participated and the festival was well received, but not as glamorously as the one in Pest two years earlier. In Arad it was decided that the choirs would unite in a national association and would hold choral competitions every second year. In 1868 Debrecen organized the next choral festival, which followed a familiar routine: the choirs arrived by train (usually 1,000–1,200 singers); they were welcomed by the members of the local choral society at the train station; they marched through the city with their banners flying, and were admired and celebrated by the local population. The next day they participated at a church ceremony, rehearsed their songs, and had a joint banquet, and the national committees held their meetings. The third day was devoted to the competition, and at the end of the day the jury announced the results. The last stage of this ritual was the expression of discontent with the decision of the jury and the usual fights of the choir directors who all felt wronged by the final judgment. In the beginning the winners were given a silver cup that was usually awarded by the local women supporters. Later the choirs received only a diploma. In the following years the national choral competitions and festivals were held in Pest (1870), Nagyvárad (1872), Kolozsvár (1874), Szeged (1876), Kolozsvár (1880), Debrecen (1882), Miskolc (1884), Pécs (1886), Szeged (1889), Budapest (1892), Fiume (1894), and Budapest (1896).

Some choral festivals were also disturbed by ethnical conflicts, since the national association admitted only Hungarian choirs and the choral festivals regarded themselves as the guardians of Hungarian songs, which meant that the choirs of the ethnic minorities living on the territory of Hungary were excluded from the choral festivals since they would not—and in many cases could not—sing in Hungarian. The strongly nationalistic atmosphere of the choral festivals and competitions led to serious frictions and conflicts with the choirs of the minorities. The *Zenészeti Lapok* tried to encourage the choirs of the ethnic minorities to take part in the festivals, but “none of the Romanian or Saxon choirs wanted to accept the invitation.”⁵²

Although contacts with the choirs of the ethnic minorities were far from optimal, there were a few exceptions. When the choral society of Pécs visited Eszék (Osijek, now Croatia) in 1863, the locals greeted the singers and their companions with banners written in three languages: Croatian, German, and Hungarian. The river port was decorated with Hungarian and Croatian flags, the welcoming speeches were also given in three languages, and the choirs of the different ethnicities were very friendly towards each other.⁵³ Another example

52 Ábrányi (1892), 178.

53 Reberics (1886), 15.

of a positive attitude towards minorities was the festival held in Brassó in 1888 where the Hungarian organizers also invited Romanian and German choirs.⁵⁴

The more numerous the choral societies became, the more influence they demanded in the musical press, *Zenészet* *Lapok*. After they agreed with Kornél Ábrányi that the *Zenészet* *Lapok* would be the official journal of the choral societies, they treated the journal as theirs and insisted that Ábrányi should publish more news about choral events. However, Ábrányi did not want to alter his editorial policies drastically and fill the journal only with news about the choral societies, so he repurchased the proprietary rights in 1873 and reclaimed the journal from the dominating policies of the choral movement. After this year, the choral coverage was relegated to a subsidiary position.⁵⁵

The popularity of the choral societies were often linked to other social gatherings and caused many *casus bibendi*, as Kálmán Mikszáth noted in his satirical essay quoted at the beginning of this essay. One such drinking bout led to a good deal: the choral society of Komárom was offered a venue for ten years by a local squire for a token price. The members of the society were very pleased with the offer and wanted to thank the generous man in person for his kind proposal. They visited him and gave him a serenade, after which they were all invited for a drink, after which the generous host revoked his first offer and gave the choral society the use of the venue for twelve years free of charge.⁵⁶ Often the choral evenings were followed by ballroom dancing, or sometimes by bowling and other societal entertainments which were seen by some purist critics as a sign of degeneracy.

Almost all the conductors complained of the lack of discipline among the regular members who did not attend the weekly rehearsals.⁵⁷ Choral societies had to cope with clashes among their regular and supporting members over the right to vote and decide on important matters regarding the rules of the society. The societies competed among themselves to invite famous composers as honorary members. Erkel and Ábrányi were the honorary members of more than one choral society.

Social conflicts among the members also presented the conductors with a challenge. For example, the life of the Hungarian choral society from Brassó (1863) was marked by interdenominational tensions and problems related to the different social backgrounds of the members. Though the choir split along the social lines, after a few years they reunited again, since their willingness

54 Józsa (1886), 74.

55 Szerző (1986), 5.

56 Kacz (1889), 25–26.

57 Zoltsák (1889), 13.

to have a local Hungarian choral society and their love of singing together helped them through the problems; in the end they managed to stay together despite the conflicts.⁵⁸ “The choral movement,” Philip Bohlman argues, “was the embodiment of the nation-state as an amalgam of different classes and types of people. This is not to say that many nineteenth-century choruses were openly democratic.”⁵⁹ The Hungarian choral societies were exclusively male. The first women’s choir was formed in 1870 in Vác, but it was not until the first decades of the twentieth century that women became actively involved in a national network of choirs.⁶⁰ Socially mixed choirs also led to many polemics. The priests speaking at the flag consecration festivity in Baróth also warned the choral society against letting social tensions stand between their members.⁶¹ Towards the end of the nineteenth century choral societies were mushrooming, and almost every village had its own choir, but the critics complained more frequently about the lack of musical education of the singers and the remarkably poor quality of their performances at the national festivals, where many choirs arrived totally unprepared and did not even learn the compulsory piece. “There are 1,200 people on the stage of whom only 200 can sing.”⁶²

Though by definition the *raison d’être* of the choral societies was singing, many regarded music as a secondary goal compared to the cultivation of Hungarian culture. This is clear from the mottos of the choral societies or from their statutes: the most often used words were ‘dear fatherland’ and singing for ‘the glorification of the Hungarian nation.’ Newspaper articles, reports and histories of the choral societies and festivals are all more concerned with the societal aspects of these events than with the singing proper. The ritual of the flag consecration was one of the main elements of the festivals: the flag was taken to the church and consecrated in the framework of a religious ceremony. Each flag had a ‘mother.’ This role was played by a highly regarded lady in the local community who had also given a large financial contribution for the manufacturing of the flag. At the ceremony, the flag mother, accompanied by ‘flower girls,’ crowned the flag with a laurel.⁶³ The coronation of the flag was followed by the hammering of so-called nails into the staff of the flag by the local sponsors of the choral society. These ‘nails’ were in fact tiny metal shields with the names of the sponsors, and each person or society who had a nail also

58 Józsa (1886), 12.

59 Bohlman (2004), 50.

60 Fazekas (2007), 51.

61 Török (1894), 15.

62 *Zeneközlöny* (1905), 277.

63 Török (1894), 12.

recited a slogan in praise of the choral society and of Hungarian culture. After a choral society emerged victorious from a competition and arrived back home, they were celebrated like heroes by the people of their city, who organized fireworks, street marches, and balls in their honor. The crowds that gathered to glorify the singers could be compared to present-day football supporters who celebrate when their club wins a match.

By the end of the nineteenth century choral societies were ubiquitous in Hungary and provided access to social participation and musical entertainment for a large section of society. While celebrating the local, they raised awareness of the national. They were intermedial cultural elements uniting literary, musical, and political discourses in performative acts. They did not change the structure of the public sphere, but through their performative acts they accentuated group solidarity and became vehicles for the solidification of national identity. As Christopher Small argues, music should not be seen as an aesthetic category, as a thing, but rather an activity, which he calls “musicking.” He warns us against the “trap of reification” when it comes to appreciating and studying music: “Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do.”⁶⁴ Examining the history of choral societies in their local, national, and international networks can contribute to the renegotiation of the musical canon and to a better understanding of the cultural and social function of music. Choral societies can be regarded as catalysts which transformed their listeners into a socially engaged public and the public into political crowds. Studying rituals of performance and their ensuing “riotously interactive relations”⁶⁵ could lead to a creative reinterpretations of social and national movements.

64 Small (1998), 2.

65 Gramit (2002), 127.