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DOI

[10.5117/9789462981188/ngRY5D76eTYJ9CeqKRANdYqb](https://doi.org/10.5117/9789462981188/ngRY5D76eTYJ9CeqKRANdYqb)

Publication date

2018

Document Version

Other version

Published in

Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Lajosi, K. (2018). Erkel, Ferenc. In J. Leerssen (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe* (Vol. 1, pp. 291-292). Amsterdam University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.5117/9789462981188/ngRY5D76eTYJ9CeqKRANdYqb>

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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Erkel, Ferenc

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Ferenc Erkel (1810–1893) played a major role in the creation and dissemination of national consciousness in 19th-century Hungary, as both the composer of the Hungarian national anthem *Himnusz* (1844) and the “father” of Hungarian national opera. Two of his national operas, *Hunyadi László* (1844) and *Bánk Bán* (1861), both inspired by medieval history, became seminal pieces of the Hungarian Romantic-National canon.

Ferenc Erkel was born in Gyula, a small trilingual town in the eastern Hungarian plains. His father, an estate manager, was the descendant of a Catholic, German, and musical family from Bratislava (Pozsony/Pressburg, now Slovakia); his mother was the daughter of a Hungarian estate administrator. He received his first music lessons from his father. After a year in school in Oradea (Nagyvárad/Grosswardein, now Romania), Erkel's next destination was Bratislava, where he became the pupil of the famous composer and well-connected music pedagogue Henrik Klein (1756–1832), author of an essay on Hungarian national dances, and contributor to the Leipzig *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*. This gave Erkel the opportunity, not only a thorough musical training, but also an opportunity to familiarize himself with the operatic repertoire of the time, as Bratislava's German theatre was almost as up-to-date and professionally equipped for complex operatic productions as the ones in Vienna.

From Bratislava, Erkel went to Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár/Klausenburg, now Romania), where he worked as the conductor of the Kolozsvár philharmonic orchestra and distinguished himself as an excellent concert pianist. According to his first biographer, Kornél Ábrányi, Erkel remembered Kolozsvár fondly, and in nationally Hungarian terms: “In that city I was encouraged to work for the neglected cause of Hungarian music; it was there that I heard the most beautiful Hungarian folk-songs, whose memories would not let me rest until I released from my soul the music that was inside me.”

In 1834 Erkel, on his way to different employment, passed through Pest, where, at the invitation of the National Casino, he gave a concert. It received a rave review from the leading music critic of the time, Gábor Rothkrepf (1797–1875; he later Magyarized his name to Mátray) in the journal *Honművész* (“Art of the Homeland”), which prompted Erkel to remain in Pest. There he became one of the most active and sought-after musicians.

He was invited to become the conductor for the Hungarian theatre company which performed in the Castle Theatre in Buda. Despite critical acclaim, the company went bankrupt for lack of a ticket-paying public, and Erkel moved to the German Theatre in Pest, despite his misgivings: “My national feelings, which I had to repress for a while in order to serve a foreign art, were against it. However, I accepted the offer because of my personal professional ambitions and for the sake of Hungarian music, whose interests I could serve much better and more efficiently in the capital of the country.” In 1838 he accepted a post as chief conductor in the newly constructed Hungarian Theatre, with significant

managerial and artistic control.

Erkel's first opera, *Bátori Mária* (1840), coincided with the official renaming of the Hungarian Theatre as the National Theatre. Erkel's opera was chosen for this festive occasion partly because of its national-historical theme, and partly because audiences preferred opera to spoken theatre plays. This preference meant that the cause of "national" art was served better by opera than other performative genres. The thirty-year-old Erkel collaborated for his libretti with Béni Egressy (1814–1851). The main topics of *Bátori Mária*, dynastic struggle, legitimacy of power, and intricate conspiracy, would be explored further in both *Hunyadi László* and *Bánk Bán*.

In the years preceding the revolution of 1848, Erkel's *Hunyadi László* proved to be the most prominent musical expression of the Hungarian national movement. It conveyed strong anti-Habsburg sentiments and deployed mnemonic cultural practices that reinforced the contrast between freedom-loving Hungarians and treacherous Habsburgs. Erkel's music galvanized nationalist passions, and in 1848 the revolutionary crowd sang excerpts from *Hunyadi* along with the *Rákóczy March*, the other musical symbol of Hungarian struggle for sovereignty. In the post-revolutionary 1850s, Erkel wrote mainly choral music and was active in promoting and conducting for the Philharmonic Society in Pest.

In 1861, ten years after the success of *Hunyadi László*, Erkel completed his next opera, *Bánk Bán*, which became his best-known work. Béni Egressy based his libretto on an earlier play of the same title by József Katona (1791–1830). *Bánk Bán* eclipsed the popularity of *Hunyadi* and was soon celebrated as the Hungarian national opera par excellence. Though the opera is a mixture of Italian, French, and German styles, its orchestration and its melodies are based on Hungarian songs and *verbunkos*, a musical style considered typically Hungarian. During his entire career, Erkel wrote only one comic opera, *Sarolta* (1862), which was based almost entirely on Hungarian folk-songs.

After the *Ausgleich*, the compromise with Austria in 1867, Erkel's operas focused on patriotic stories around national heroes. He criticized the compromise both in *Dózsa György* (1867), whose protagonist is the brutally executed leader of a peasant revolt, and in *Brankovics György* (1874). Inspired by Serbian history, *Brankovics* presented the tragic fate of a hesitant leader who during the time of the Ottoman expansion could not decide whether to support Hunyadi's army or accept a peace treaty with the Turks.

In his last operas Erkel experimented with *Sprachgesang* combined with a refined version of Hungarian national style. Despite their musical achievements, *Névtelen hősök* ("Nameless heroes", 1880), which commemorated the martyrs of the revolution of 1848, and *István király* ("King Stephen", 1885), which revolves around the life of the first Christian Hungarian king, never approached the popularity of *Hunyadi László* or *Bánk Bán*.



Part of the "Music and National Styles" project, funded by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences

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