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Lajosi, K.

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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Choral societies : Hungary

Author: Lajosi, Krisztina

As [elsewhere in 19th-century Europe](#), choral societies, inspired by the German *Liederkrantz* movement, were ubiquitous organizations in Hungary, providing at the same time entertainment, education, sociability, and a political platform, with a membership representing all social classes. Because the population of Hungarian cities was largely German, and the Hungarian bourgeoisie also spoke German, the domestication of German models was unproblematic. The first male choirs sang in German, and the repertoire consisted predominantly of folk-songs and art songs composed by German composers.

The choral society formed in Pest in 1840 under the leadership of Mihály [Havi](#) (1810-1864), a singer at the National Theatre, gave the first performance of Ferenc [Kölcsey](#)'s (1790-1838) *Himnusz*; set to music by Ferenc [Erkel](#) (1810-1893) it would later become Hungary's national anthem. The *Pestofner Liedertafel*, active for two years, was founded in 1844, as was the choral society in Pozsony, the *Pressburger Männergesang-Verein*, which was active until the revolution of 1848. This society also sang mainly in German, but occasionally performed Hungarian folk-songs and the famous *Meghalt a cselszövő* ("The Schemer Died") chorus from Ferenc [Erkel](#)'s national opera *Hunyadi László*. In 1846 a male choir was founded in Pécs. The founder and director of the choral society in Győr was Antal [Richter](#) (1802-1856), an accomplished musician, *Kapellmeister*, and teacher in the Esterházy family. The activities of these choral societies were suspended by the political events of 1848-49.

By the 1840s, choral works were becoming an ever more popular component of operas. The chorus plays a prominent role in the works of József [Ruzitska](#) (c.1775-1824), who in 1822 composed the first Hungarian opera, *Béla Futása* ("Béla's Flight"). Choruses also figure importantly in the operatic works of Károly [Thern](#) (1817-1886), Béni [Egressy](#) (1814-1851), Kornél [Ábrányi](#) (1822-1903), and, notably, Erkel, who would later become known as the national Hungarian opera composer par excellence. Opera choruses also became a part of the repertoire of communal singing, as did the most popular poems of the Hungarian poets of the time. The *Bordal* ("Wine Song") by Mihály [Vörösmarty](#) (1800-1855) 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](#) (1823-1849) were also set to music by 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 played an important role in the revolution and the war of independence. The *Marseillaise* was translated into Hungarian and set to music in 1848 by Mihály [Mosonyi](#) (1815-70), a renowned composer at the time, and became a regular part of the repertoire of the revolutionary crowds.

After the failed War of Independence, communal singing declined. The neo-absolutist regime known by the name of the infamous Interior Minister Alexander Bach (1813-1893), is remembered as one of the darkest ages in Hungarian politics, when, under the repressive surveillance of a dreaded secret police, sociability was etiolated.

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, which ostensibly was primarily devoted to church singing, operated under the close scrutiny of the secret police. Only when state officials realized that high-quality music was needed for the king's visit to Pest were the strict restrictions regarding musical gatherings lifted, and Thill's choir gave a successful concert before the king, who donated a sum of money to commission original choral compositions. Many composers responded to the ensuing competition, with among the winners Thern, Karl [Huber](#) (1828-85), and Franz [Doppler](#) (1821-83).

In the 1860s, when the political and social climate was becoming less oppressive, choral societies again spread

rapidly all over the country. A Hungarian choral society was founded in Szentes in 1861, and also 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.

The choral society in Pécs was the best known and the most successful. It organized the first national choral festival in 1864, to which only Hungarian choirs were invited. Eighteen choral societies with altogether about 200 members competed, and the event prompted an ambition to establish a national overarching association for choral societies; that ambition was only realized after the *Ausgleich*, at the choral festival organized by Arad in 1867.

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, a significant basis for sustaining a regular musical culture in Hungarian towns.

The first Hungarian musical journal, *Zenészet* (*Journal of music*), regularly published articles about the choral festivals and about newly formed choral societies. From 1868 the *Zenészet* became the official journal of the “Hungarian National Choral Society”; with Kornél Ábrányi as editor-in-chief, subscriptions soared. At the same time, more and more Hungarian choral societies joined the national association, which, however, was struggling with petty quarrels and financing.

Though by definition the *raison d'être* of the choral societies was singing, many regarded music as means towards the greater end of cultivating Hungarian culture. This is clear from the mottos of the choral societies and 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 always more concerned with the societal aspects of these events than with the musical aspect. The ritual of the flag was one of the high points of the festivals: the flag was taken to the church and consecrated in the framework of a religious ceremony. Each flag had a “mother”; that role was played by a highly regarded lady in the local community who had also made 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. This 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 recited a slogan in praise of the choral society and of Hungarian culture. When a choral society won a competition, it was given a heroes’ welcome upon the return home, with fireworks, parades and balls.

By the end of the century choral societies were ubiquitous in Hungary and formed a bridge between elite art and communal entertainment: they made certain canonical compositions accessible to the general public, and popularized musical education 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 the dissemination of musical culture and in the population’s national-cultural mobilization.



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Ábrányi, Kornél; 1892. *Az országos magyar daláregyesület negyedszázados története* (Budapest: Országos magyar daláregyesület kiadványa) [“Quarter of a century history of the Hungarian choral societies”]



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