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Introduction

Opera and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Europe *Practices of “Transemination”*

Introduction

– Central Aims, Background, Methods –

“L’opéra est à proprement parler de l’histoire des idées.” (Philippe-Joseph Salazar)¹

“History today has an opportunity to avail itself of the new perspectives on the world which a dynamic science and an equally dynamic art offer.”

(Hayden White)²

1.1 Opera and Nationalism – the subject of this study

This dissertation focuses on an interdisciplinary and intercultural assessment of the relation between nationalism and musical culture in nineteenth-century Europe. It aims to point out that music and opera played an important role in nation-building processes both because they were reflections of nationalist thought and because they functioned as active agents in shaping the national consciousness of the people. Culture and politics coexisted in an entangled relationship: music served as an ideological tool in nation-building movements, while the national idea became a dominant creative force in the musical practice of the nineteenth century.

The concepts of *national music* and *national opera*, which had an important role in shaping nineteenth-century national identity, should be interpreted as cultural phenomena produced by the interaction of contemporary aesthetic theories and their social, political context. The study of nineteenth-century nationalism would be incomplete without analysing the role of music and musical theatre. Music became a topic of public interest and was regarded as a marker of national identity just like the

¹ Salazar, Philippe-Joseph: *Idéologies de l’Opéra*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980, 12.

² White, Hayden: *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, 50.

national language or the national dress. In order to analyse how music and opera could become such important factors of nineteenth-century European nationalism I shall focus on the dynamic processes of the interaction between culture and politics, music and national movements.

Hence the *portmanteau* word in the title of this introductory chapter, “transemination”. The term combines the concepts of *transmutation*, *insemination* and *dissemination*. *Transmutation* refers to the transmutation of species, the altering of one species into another. *Insemination* denotes the natural or artificial act of fertilisation. *Dissemination* refers to the intertextual, interdisciplinary and intercultural spreading of ideas and trends. They are also metaphors of transfer and mutation characterising the dynamic interplay between the various cultural media as well as between culture and politics. The thesis views the relation of nineteenth-century national opera and nation-building movements as an act of *transemination* taking place between the different cultural genres (music, text, visual representation) and politics. On the one hand, the term *transemination* intends to describe the dynamism of culture and aims to suggest that whenever a cultural subject is transposed into another media (e.g. a poem into music, a drama into opera) it loses its original meaning and function and gains new ones. It is going to assume new ontological and epistemological dimensions.

The case studies concentrate on late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Hungarian and Romanian culture and history. Their relationship has scarcely been studied from a cultural-historical point of view that aims to stress the cultural processes of transfer instead of focusing on the individual distinctive national character. The thesis approaches these two neighbouring cultures by accentuating their entangled nature and dynamic connectedness with the contemporary European political and cultural-historical context. The case studies endeavour to point out that the different peculiarities cannot be understood without the dynamic cultural context in which they had been formed, just as the political events and historical characteristics of the wider context – in our case of the Habsburg Monarchy – also cannot be comprehended without taking under close scrutiny the dynamic relation and cultural character of its component parts.

1.2 Study of nationhood, cultural history and musicology – premises and implications

Though the relation between nationalism and nineteenth-century musical culture seems to be a historical self-evidence, the topic has rarely been explored or scrutinized in an interdisciplinary context either by musicologists or by scholars of nationhood. With the exception of Laura Mason's book *Singing the French Revolution. Popular Culture and Politics, 1787-1799*³ that focuses on the role of music in shaping the revolutionary movement, most scholarly works discuss music only as a simple reflection and representation of the political ideologies of the age. The fact that nationalist ideologies affected the world-view and artistic credo of many nineteenth-century composers is quite obvious. But it is less transparent how music affected the shaping of national consciousness. With a few exceptions⁴ this is an unexplored academic field both in musicology and history.

In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century many musicologists approached the question of *national music* without reflecting on its historicity. Almost all national histories of music assumed the existence of *the nation* as being an a-priori category, a natural context for musical investigation. Later, especially after Benedict Anderson's influential theories about *imagined communities*⁵ have gained more and more appreciation in the academic disciplines of humanities and social sciences, musical scholars also started to question the premises of their predecessors. As a first step they began to discredit the epistemological validity of an a-priori national framework in musical research. By reversing earlier statements about the relation of national consciousness and music according to which musical culture was an organic element of the national character, musicologists pursued to point out that there was no direct, natural and organic bond between the national cultures and music. Instead they argued that the "naturalisation" or "nationalisation" of music was an artificial process,

³ Mason, Laura: *Singing the French Revolution. Popular Culture and Politics, 1787-1799*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996.

⁴ Among the exceptions can be mentioned the works of Hugh LeCaine Agnew or Philip Bohlman. Agnew's remarkable paper entitled *They're Singing Our Song: Music and Politics in the Czech National Movement* presented in 2007 April at the international conference ASN Study of Nationalities at the Columbia University, New York, explores the way how music actively shaped the Czech national thought. The ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman's book, *The Music of European Nationalism* (ABC-CLIO, 2004), which is an anthropological study of music and nationalism in Europe, focuses on music's active role in national movements.

a typical modern phenomenon, which came into being as an epiphenomenon of nineteenth-century nationalism.⁶

In spite of music's overwhelming presence and influence in nineteenth-century Europe, neither historians dealing with this period, nor scholars of nationhood have given any attention to musical culture. Hayden White challenged the reigning orthodoxies of historical studies by admitting that historical investigation is necessarily textual, since the events of the past are not directly accessible to perception, and by stipulating that cultural artefacts can justifiably be the subjects of historical studies⁷, still historians have been avoiding music.⁸ Music seems to be more resistant to immediate interpretation than literary texts or visual artefacts. Besides some obvious genres, such as national anthems or military marches, music seemed to adhere to the realm of pure aesthetics appearing completely independent from politics.

However, the autonomous status granted to music is an assumption rooted in a nineteenth-century ideology.⁹ Music was never practised or written in a cultural and political vacuum. It has always been created and perceived in a dynamic interaction with its intellectual and socio-political environment. The social and political role of music increased especially in the nineteenth century. Music and musical theatre came to be important factors in shaping the *public sphere* in the sense Habermas used this term. Therefore one might conclude that music – in the same way as Hayden White argued about literary texts – could be a relevant and important research topic for historians, too.

This dissertation aims to combine musicology and intellectual history in order to scrutinise some aspects of nineteenth-century European culture. So as to reconsider the importance of music in nineteenth-century cultural history I adopt the methodological premises of New Historicism as practiced by Steven Greenblatt and

⁵ Anderson, Benedict: *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.

⁶ One of the best documents of the critical approach of nationalism and music are Richard Taruskin's volume of historical and hermeneutical essays, *Defining Russia Musically* (Princeton U.P., 1997), and Philip Bohlman's monographic work *The Music of European Nationalism* (ABC-CLIO, 2004).

⁷ See White, Hayden: *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973, and *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, (1978), 1985.

⁸ I assume that a proper perspective could justify a comparative examination without necessarily requiring the same high academic competence in both fields.

⁹ See Goehr, Lydia: *The Quest For Voice. On Music, Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy*, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, (1998) 2002.

the circle of scholars around the journal *Representations*. To grasp the complexity of the relationship between nationalism and music and the larger political, social and historical context the thesis uses as theoretical framework the ideas of System Theory and complexity sciences. It will give special attention to Even-Zohar's *Polysystem Theory*¹⁰ and Niklas Luhmann's ideas about the nature of social systems¹¹.

As a cultural historical work following the tradition set by Peter Burke¹² and Lynn Hunt¹³ I aim to give a *thick description*¹⁴ of the development of the nineteenth-century Hungarian and Romanian national consciousness. I focus on music as a cultural practice with a special emphasis on the institutionalisation of musical culture in order to reveal music's role in nation-building processes and in shaping the nineteenth-century *public sphere*¹⁵. By applying a new perspective on the topics of music and opera as well as the problem of nationalism, this dissertation hopes to contribute with fruitful insights both for the field of musicology and the study of nationalities. On the one hand, the re-contextualisation of the concepts of *national music* and *national opera* and of some Hungarian and Romanian examples, throws light on the ideological nature of music history writing and the formation of musical canon. On the other hand, the "thick description" of Romanian and Hungarian musical and operatic cultures demonstrates that music and opera played a vital role in forming national consciousness.

One of the core premises of this dissertation is that nineteenth-century *national music* was in a high degree contingent on political and ideological factors and cannot be understood within an isolated musicological framework.¹⁶ At the same time, the formation of national identity and national consciousness owes much more to culture

¹⁰ See the special edition of the journal *Poetics Today* vol. 11, no.1, (Spring, 1990) on *Polysystem Studies* edited by Itamar Even-Zohar.

¹¹ See Niklas Luhmann's volume *Essays on Self-Reference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

¹² Burke, Peter: *What is Cultural History?*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.

¹³ Hunt, Lynn: *The New Cultural History*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989 and *Beyond the Cultural Turn: new directions in the study of society and culture*, (eds.) Victory E. Bonnell, Lynn Hunt, Richard Biernacki, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

¹⁴ I use the concept of *thick description* in the sense of Clifford Geertz presented in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

¹⁵ I draw on the theories about public sphere as developed by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989).

¹⁶ In this respect the thesis relies on Carl Dahlhaus's ideas about the musical, who denies the existence of "pure musical", discredits the possibility of a sharp distinction between "musical" and "extra-musical", and furthermore emphasises the role of language and discourse in the musical perception. (Dahlhaus, Carl and Eggebrecht, Hans Heinrich: *Was ist Musik?*, Wilhelmshaven, Amsterdam: Heinrichshofen, 1985.)

and cultural practices than is generally realised in the critical studies on nationalism. Therefore I wish to accentuate the role of the *cultivation of culture* – in the sense Joep Leerssen defined this idea¹⁷ – in shaping national thought in nineteenth-century Europe. Cultivating music in the public sphere and cultivating the idea of the nation in the realm of music were two inseparable tendencies in the nineteenth century.

1.3 Theoretical framework

One of the greatest achievements of New Historicism is that it managed to bring under a common denominator cultural practices and socio-political trends of a certain period without relapsing in the ideological act of trying to reconstruct its essence and its spirit, in other words to grasp the *Zeitgeist*. Instead of describing one single coherent force that would have shaped a unified world-view held by a whole population or social class, New Historicism regards society a site where antagonistic forces are active and where the multiplicity of discourses, customs and codes define the intellectual and political map of a historical period. The other advantage of New Historicism is its open character, which instead of strictly separating the different cultural, social or political fields emphasises their interrelation and structural connectedness. Contrary to New Criticism or Structuralism, which ascribe total aesthetic autonomy to artistic products, New Historicism positions works of art in their historical, socio-political and cultural context. However, it does not reduce art to a simple signifier of a referent in reality, but stresses the dynamic relationship between art and its context of creation and reception, in which art does not only *reflect* an age's social and political reality but rather it *shapes* its epistemological orientation. Historical reality is not seen as the cause of the work, but the work and history are set in dialectic relationship with each other: the work of art is regarded both a product and producer of epistemological assumptions.

These working assumptions of New Historicism about the dynamic nature of culture and the plurality of meaning are also the theoretical framework of this thesis. Instead of regarding national operas as reflections of the nationalistic ideologies of their age – as both musicologists and social scientists often claim – the thesis is going to discuss national operas as *mediators* of history and ideology rather than simply

¹⁷ Leerssen, Joep: "Nationalism and the cultivation of culture", In. *Nations and Nationalism* 12 (4),

reflections of something “out there”. Therefore the accent of the research will fall on the *mediation* between the socio-political reality and art, rather than on the influence of “underlying” social practices. Following the tradition set by New Historicist scholars the dissertation is going to apply the Geertzian “thick description” to analyse and highlight the specificity of a particular historical and cultural situation. Pointing out the *historicity of texts* and the *textuality of history* I wish to emphasise the fluctuating interactive dynamism of art and society, culture and politics.

While stressing the importance of social and political processes I do not regard them as prior or determining “base” of cultural products. Instead of the classical Marxist “base-superstructure” model, I approach the “extracultural” dimension of art as being shaped and defined by cultural practices and production. However, the thesis is going to bring under close scrutiny certain political and social phenomena of the nineteenth-century Central Europe, the theoretical framework is primarily oriented towards an anthropological perception of history.

E.H. Carr in his well-known volume entitled *What is History?* stipulated that “the more sociological history becomes, and the more historical sociology becomes, the better for both.”¹⁸ At that time it was a provocative proposition addressed to his fellow historians, who held the conservative view according to which history meant first of all political history. On the other hand sociologists were also segregated in their scholarly institutions founded mostly to research the social problems of the present. However, since 1961 when Carr expressed the need for an interdisciplinary cooperation, both social history and historical sociology evolved into well-established, cross-fertilising, important academic fields.

Analogously, I believe that the more cultural history becomes, and the more historical Cultural Studies become, the better for both. In the last decade culture began to gain more and more ground in historical studies and vice versa, history seeped in the topics of Cultural Studies. However, papers about cultural topics are still uncommon in traditional history journals. Hayden White complains in his essay *The Burden of History* about what he calls the “Fabian tactic” of historians. Historians on the one hand defend their discipline from hard-core sociologists, who reproached them the softness of their methods, calling history a kind of semi-science different from the experimental or mathematical fields of study. On the other hand, they

2006, 559-578.

themselves often accuse the more culturally oriented colleagues of airy, superficial scholarship.¹⁹ However, the comfortable epistemological neutral middle ground claimed by historians does not exist according to White. He concludes: “history can serve to humanise experience only if it remains sensitive to the more general world of thought and action from which it proceeds and to which it returns.”²⁰

Benedict Anderson already devoted much attention to culture and stressed the importance of the written cultural products in the development of nationalism. Joep Leerssen has also expressed a wish for a more cultural orientation of the studies of nationhood. Following the development of national thought from the Enlightenment, through the ideological and social upheavals of Romanticism until the present day, Leerssen stresses both the importance of a comparative perspective of European nationalism, and promotes the idea of a cultural emphasis in the study of nationalities. This thesis assumes the same theoretical perspective formulated by Joep Leerssen and considers nationalism “as something that emanates from the way people view and describe the world – in other words, as a cultural phenomenon, taking shape in the constant back-and-forth between material and political developments on the one hand, and intellectual and poetical reflection and articulation on the other.”²¹

In musicology the social aspect of music has been stressed by such figures as Theodor Adorno and Carl Dahlhaus, nevertheless the cultural-historical interdisciplinary perspective was rarely to be found in musicological journals. Lately more and more musical scholars gave voice to the need of cultural orientation in their discipline. Several conferences proceedings were published on the cultural study of music.²² Joseph Kerman, McClary, Tomlinson, Kramer and Middleton represent this trend of “new musicology”. Culture also occupies an important role in the works of the ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman, and the music historian and connoisseur of Russian music, Richard Taruskin.

The statement that “music is more than notes” would have hardly been surprising for ancient Greek theorists of *mousiké* or for the medieval thinkers for whom music

¹⁸ Carr, E.H.: *What is History?*, London: Macmillan, 1961, 84.

¹⁹ White, Hayden: The Burden of History, In. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, (1978), 1985, 27-50, 27.

²⁰ Ibid. 50.

²¹ Leerssen, Joep: *National Thought in Europe*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006, 14.

²² Two very remarkable of essays are *The Cultural Study of Music* (eds. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, Richard Middleton), New York and London: Routledge, 2003, and *The Musical Constructions of Nationalism. Essays on the History and Ideology of European Musical Culture 1800-1945*, (eds. Harry White and Michael Murphy), Cork, Cork University Press, 2001.

was a kind of theological practice. But neither would it be strange for the Baroque theorists of *Affektenlehre*, not to speak about the Romantic musicians and writers, for whom music was the supreme expression of philosophical thoughts. Nevertheless, by the end of the nineteenth century the idea that music is “absolute” and “purely musical” prevailed in the thinking of the age. John Neubauer in his book *The emancipation of music from language*²³ traces the history of music philosophy in European thinking and shows that music cannot be separated from the other aspects of culture, which shape and define its course. Music has especially been strongly interwoven with discourse and cultural practices. The thesis draws on Neubauer’s observations in situating the study of the creation and perception of music in a dynamic interactive space between words and notes, between cultural phenomena and social practices.

But how can one actually interpret and link together the different aspects of music and nationalism studies? How can such an investigation be more than only a juxtaposition of historical, political, sociological and aesthetic concerns of the topic? Which is a suitable framework that makes it possible to describe the actual interconnectedness and interplay of these different aspects of history? One of the models that seem to be suitable for such a complex endeavour is *system theory*.

System Theory studies the interdependence of a system’s components and its organisational structure. It aims to interpret and understand the interacting activity of the interdependent groups and elements and to grasp their relationship as a whole. *System dynamics* is a method for understanding the dynamic behaviour of complex systems. System thinking can successfully be applied to those cases when the behaviour of the system as a whole cannot be explained in terms of the behaviour of its parts. System theory was founded by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Gregory Bateson Margaret Mead and other scholars in the 1950s and was by definition intended as an interdisciplinary theory. In the following years it was used and developed by cybernetics and complexity sciences. Besides its use in the computational and mathematic sciences system theory had also been applied in sociology and recently in humanities, especially literary and translation studies.

Niklas Luhmann is the best-known sociologist who introduced systemic thinking in the social sciences. He regarded social systems as self-creating (self-organising) or

²³ Neubauer, John: *The Emancipation of Music from Language*, New Haven-London: Yale University

*autopoietic*²⁴ systems, which use *communication* as their particular mode of autopoietic reproduction. Luhmann defines communication as a synthesis of information, utterance and understanding. The network of communication reproduces this synthesis. Self-referentiality and self-observation are also important characteristics of social systems, which contribute to its recursive dynamics and to its high degree of complexity. Memory plays a vital role in this autopoietic recursive mode of operation, since it is through memory that the systems maintain their structure-generating power. According to Luhmann we can regard works of art as compact communications or as programs for innumerable communications about the work of art. Style connects different works of art and thereby makes the autopoiesis of art possible. “Style functions as the level of contact between the system of art and its social environment.”²⁵

In the field of literary studies system theory was introduced by Itamar Even-Zohar and other members of the research group at the Tel Aviv University, such as Gideon Toury, Zohar Shavit, and Rakefet Sheffy in the 1960s. This school’s working method became to be known as *Polysystem Theory*. Even-Zohar was attracted to what he calls *Dynamic Functionalism* of both Russian Formalism and the Jakobsonian branch of Structuralism. Therefore Polysystem Theory is a *functionalist* approach to semiotic phenomena as belonging to one or more systems, analyses the phenomena in terms of their functions and mutual relations.

“The idea that semiotic phenomena, i.e., sign-governed human patterns of communication (such as culture, literature, society), could more adequately be understood and studied if regarded as systems rather than conglomerates of disparate elements. (...) The term “polysystem” is more than just a terminological convention. Its purpose is to make explicit the conception of a system as dynamic and heterogeneous in opposition to the synchronistic approach. It thus emphasizes the multiplicity of intersections and hence the greater complexity of structuredness involved.”²⁶

Press, 1986.

²⁴ Luhmann borrowed the term of autopoiesis from Humberto Maturana, who described with the word the dynamism of living organisations like cells, which recursively, through interaction, reproduce their own components. (MATURANA, Humberto: “Autopoiesis”, In. *A Theory of Living Organisation*, ed. M. Zeleny, New York: North Holland, 1981.)

²⁵ Luhmann, Niklas: *Essays on Self-Reference*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, 204.

²⁶ Even-Zohar, Itamar: “Polysystem Theory”, In. *Poetics Today* vol. 11, no.1, (Spring, 1990), 9-26, 9, 12.

1.4 Why opera matters?

Opera enjoyed an immense popularity in nineteenth-century Europe. It became more available for the public than ever before. In earlier centuries opera was the entertainment of the nobility and was founded and financed either by royal courts, or by wealthy aristocrats. Nevertheless, in the nineteenth century public opera houses were built. Besides the nobility we can find in the audience the ever-growing strata of bourgeoisie and cosmopolitan intelligentsia. What earlier had been the symbolic space of aristocracy, in the nineteenth century was also inhabited by the “common people”. No wonder that in Paris before the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789 the revolutionary crowd invaded the Opéra. “Because the Parisians of that time regarded opera as elite entertainment, their revenge was to demand that all performances be cancelled. For the next nine days, both Opéra and the Opéra-Comique remained dark. When they reopened, their themes began to change radically. Instead of libretti that celebrated beloved rulers, selfless aristocrats, and benevolent clergy, stories of heroic commoners, rescues from evil officials (e.g. *Fidelio*), and struggles against the severity of Church authorities began to appear. So strong was opera’s influence that the French insurgents felt the need to block its conservative message and replace it with performances that advanced their revolutionary program.”³⁰

The Belgian revolution of independence in 1830 was instigated by a performance of Auber’s opera *La muette de Portici* in Brussels. The name of the Italian opera composer, Giuseppe Verdi, became the acronym of *Vittorio Emannuelle Re d’Italia*, and his operas had a significant role in the Risorgimento. In 1843, after the first hugely successful performance of Verdi’s *I Lombardi* in Milan, the chorus “O Signore, dal tetto natio” was immediately adopted as a patriotic anthem, just like a year earlier the chorus “Va pensiero” from the *Nabucco*. However, the success of these choruses are in great part indebted to the enthusiastic verses written by the librettist Temistocle Solera, who was known as an ardent patriotic writer in Verdi’s time.

Verdi had to change the settings of his *Un ballo in maschera* (1859), because the censors did not allow him to present on the stage a scene of regicide. Originally the

²⁹ In the Jakobsonian model the context is a kind of referent.

³⁰ Rabb, Theodore K.: Opera, Musicology, and History, In. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36/3, 322.

opera was based on the true story of the murder of Gustavus III of Sweden, who was shot at a masked ball in Stockholm on March 16, 1792. Because on January 14, 1858 Felice Orsini made an attempt on the life of Napoléon III, the authorities of Bourbon-ruled Naples disapproved of an opera about a regicide. First Verdi refused to make any changes in his opera, and the performance of *Un ballo* was cancelled, which caused upheavals among the people and thousand protesters went to the streets of Naples crying out “Viva Verdi!”. Verdi’s decision of not compromising with the authorities was seen as a symbolic act of resistance against the oppressing power. However, later Verdi altered the settings of the opera for a performance in Rome. He relocated it from Stockholm to the distant Boston, and the social position of the protagonist to be killed at the end, was also changed from king to a colonial governor.

Carl Maria von Weber’s opera *Der Freischütz* became associated with the performance of the German spirit of the stage, partly due to the fact that it was the opening performance of the Neue Schauspielhaus in Berlin conceived by Karl Friedrich Schinkel. In that design the royal box had disappeared, suggesting the new ideals of a democratic society, and by widening the traditional horse shoe-shape stage into a broader scene the actors came closer to the audience. In this way the audience could “inter-act” with the players and experience the feeling that they themselves are also “in the play”. The success of the opening performance in Schinkel’s new theatre had almost been granted from the beginning by its architectural design. The convivial atmosphere (*Gemütlichkeit*) and folk-like character of *Der Freischütz* were literally brought closer to the people simply by the innovative architecture. Later in the nineteenth century there was the uniquely controversial figure of Richard Wagner. His musical dramas were received as operatic representations of German nationalism and they can still provoke strong emotions from the public because of their history of reception especially in the Third Reich.

In Hungary a public debate known as the “opera war” broke out in the 1840s between the patriots preferring traditional prose theatre and the opera-loving public. The patriots considered opera a cosmopolitan art-form and were afraid that would lead both to the bankruptcy of the prose theatre (set up in the service of nationalistic goals), and to the decay of national consciousness. However, the opera-loving patriotic public had its say and by the revolution of 1848 every performance given at the national theatre was an opera or melodrama. During the revolution and war of independence in 1848-1849 the choruses from Ferenc Erkel’s operas were adopted as

patriotic anthems of the national movements sung by thousands of anti-Habsburg protesters. The audience had often interrupted the prose theatre performances during the days of the revolution demanding patriotic songs from the actors.

How and why could opera gain such importance in the nineteenth century? To begin with, the general political and social trends of the day were represented in the operas. Instead of gods (e.g. *Orpheo*), kings (e.g. *L'incoronazione di Poppea*) or aristocrats (e.g. *Don Giovanni*) nineteenth-century operas presented the life of common people often suffering from aristocratic or royal oppression (e.g. *Fidelio*) or entire nations suffering from a tyranny (e.g. *Guillaume Tell*, *Don Carlo*, *Nabucco*). The libretti, the musical texture and the settings also played a vital role in popularising opera all over Europe. While earlier the language of the libretti was either Italian or French and rarely German, from the early nineteenth century the textual component of the operas are written in new vernacular languages: Hungarian, Czech, Romanian, Croatian, Serb, Greek, Danish or Swedish. The music was intentionally drawing on local folk songs or dances that also enhanced the spirit of the public who recognised their everyday rites and entertainment presented on the stage as “high art”. The setting of the plots was deliberately folk-like (*couleur locale*), imitating village life, reflecting the local culture and rustic nostalgia of the public. All these factors contributed to diminishing the gap between the stage and the audience, between high culture and low culture, the people’s life and the representation of their everyday reality. However, opera was more than only a representation of socio-political reality. It actually functioned as an active agent influencing the social and political atmosphere of the time.

In this study I shall analyse the relation between opera as a cultural practice and the development of national consciousness in Hungary and Romania during the nineteenth century as embedded in this European intellectual background. What was the significance of the opera in the nation-building processes? Which operas were regarded as *national operas* and why? What kind of nation-building strategies and national representations can a cultural and poetical analysis of these national operas reveal?

Four operas are going to be scrutinised: two Hungarian operas dealing with foreign (Habsburg) oppression, *László Hunyadi* (1844) and *Bánk bán* (1861) composed by Ferenc Erkel, and two Romanian operas, both representing the figure of the Romanian national hero Michael the Brave (1558-1601). Mihai Viteazul –

Romanian Michael the Brave – was a symbol of national liberation from the Ottoman Empire and the embodiment of Romanian unity (because he managed for the first time to rule over Wallachia, Moldova and Transylvania). The first opera, *Mihai Bravul în ajunul bătăliei de la Călugăreni* was composed by Ion Andrei Wachmann (1807-1863) in 1848. The other dates from 1858 and was composed by Julius Schulzer (?-1891). Erkel's *Hunyadi László* relates the story of László Hunyadi (1433-1457), the older brother of King Matthias Hunyadi (1443-1490), who was betrayed and decapitated by the Habsburg King Ladislaus V (1440-1457). *Bánk bán* is the opera adaptation of a Hungarian drama with the same title written by József Katona (1791-1830), which had already been very popular and regarded as national drama before Erkel's work. It tells the story of the conflict between the Hungarian aristocrats and Queen Gertrude of Merania (Istria) (1185-1213), who ruled the country while her husband King Andrew II (1175-1235) went to war in Galicia. The Hungarian nobility's discontent with Queen Gertrude's reign ended with her murder by rebels in 1213.

One axis of comparison is chronological: the first Romanian opera about *Mihai Bravul* by Wachmann and Erkel's *Hunyadi László* were written in the upheaval of the revolution of 1848, *Bánk bán* and Sulzer's *Mihai Bravul* were composed later. I am to demonstrate the similarities and differences between the representations of the pre-revolutionary Hungarian and Romanian national images as compared to post-revolutionary national rhetoric. The other axis of comparison is the development of the protagonists' image in the national imagination. How and by what means could they get the shape of national heroes? Scrutinising these operas we might gain insight not only into the specific national cultures, but also into the larger cultural and political picture of the Habsburg Monarchy and in the relationship of its component nations.

1.5 The structure of this dissertation

After this introduction presenting the aims, methods and theoretical premises the thesis contains nine more chapters. These are organised thematically around nodal issues concerning the relation of cultural and political practices in general, and opera and nation-building processes in particular in nineteenth-century Europe.

Chapter One, *Nations as Imagined and Imagining Communities*, focuses on the different theories of nationhood, and it aims to point out on the one hand, the longevity of nationalism mainly based on the arguments of Anthony D. Smith and his theory about the ethnic roots of the national identity, on the other hand, it wishes to account for the dynamism of the nation concept in the different ethnic communities. By examining the notions of *ethnos*, *gentes*, and *polis* in the antiquity and early Middle Ages, the chapter attempts to emphasise and trace their endurance and to point out that some of these old forms of identity can actually be revealed later in some parts of Europe. It also wishes to emphasise that since the antiquity the nation appears as a cultural political construction. The roots of the earliest forms of national identity are not based on some kind of natural or organic knowledge of racial commonality, but on the contrary, they are the result of a political and cultural cohesion based on social and cultural practice, shared values and common narrative.

Chapter Two, *Music, Opera and Nationalism*, concentrates on the historical development of the concepts of national music and national opera and their relation to the nineteenth-century national movements. First it presents the different theories about the development of the idea of the nation in music. Then it endeavours to cast new light on the topic and discuss national opera and music as *sound sites* of nineteenth-century European nationalism while illustrating the theoretical approach with a well-known piece of the Hungarian national musical repertoire popularised in Europe mainly by Berlioz's *Faust Symphony*: the Rákóczy March.

Chapter Three, *National Opera and the Recycling of Cultural Memory*, presents the role of historical consciousness in national narratives with a special focus on the recycling of history in nineteenth-century national operas. Nineteenth-century theatre and opera became *lieux de mémoire* and thus important arenas for the re-enactment of cultural memories.

Chapter Four, *Conceptualising National Music in Hungary and Romania. Music in Discourse and Practice*, investigates the role of the discourse and practice in creating national operas and national music and analyses the impact of their interplay on the modern national consciousness. Through several examples it wishes to demonstrate that national music was not simply a matter of discourse – thus not only something created by the rhetoric of the nineteenth century press and national ideologies – but a product of the interaction between the already existing musical

practices and their reception and reflection in the discourses and the public sphere of the nineteenth century.

Chapter Five, *Tu Felix Austria? – The Habsburg Monarchy and the development of the Romanian and Hungarian National Consciousness* gives an overview of the development of the Hungarian and Romanian national consciousness since their earliest forms of manifestation and representation until the mid nineteenth century. The chapter focuses on the role of the language and historical awareness in the progress of national consciousness. It argues on the ground of several examples that the national identity should be understood as an entangled process of *histoire croisée* that is being shaped through a series of transfers and intra- and intercultural re-mediations. It sets the analysis in the greater contexts of the Habsburg Empire in order to point out that instead of the traditional centre-periphery opposition more attention should be given to the peripheries and to the transition between the peripheries towards the centre in order to account for change and cultural dynamism.

Chapter Six, *The Role of the Theatre in Shaping National Imagination* analyses the role of the theatre in disseminating cultural memory during the eighteenth and nineteenth century and its function in creating a public sphere dominated by the patterns of the national collective identity. Theatre was paving the way for the reception of the later national operas. The chapter focuses on the theatrical practices in Hungary and on the so-called *opera war*, through which it wishes to illustrate the existence of parallel national discourses and conflicting nation-building paradigms in the nineteenth-century Hungary.

Chapter Seven, *Querela Hungariae: László Hunyadi, Bánk bán Variations on a National Theme* claims that these operas were able to exert a serious impact on the nineteenth-century Hungarian public because they re-enacted, recycled and re-contextualised already existing patterns of the cultural memory and historical consciousness. These operas could successfully symbolise and influence the Hungarian national thought, because of the interaction between the represented historical layers conveyed both on the textual and on the musical level.

Chapter Eight, *Mihai Viteazul as Nation-Builder in Romanian National Imagination*, analyses the relation between the first Romanian national opera, *Mihai Bravul în ajunul bătăliei de la Călugăreni* and the existing Romanian cultural practices. It aims to give a “thick-description” of the development of the Romanian

national thought by examining the changes in the historical representation of the figure of Mihai Viteazul, the title protagonist of the opera.

Chapter Nine, *The Voice of the People: The Role of the Chorus in Nineteenth-Century Operas* argues that the use of singing choruses and crowd scenes marked a fundamental change in the structure of the nineteenth-century operas. It contributed both to the transformations of the opera houses into a national venue, and to the dissemination of these operas and their nationalistic message in the public sphere.

While using a larger scope and a broader context, interdisciplinary enquiries usually have to face the danger of being academically uneven, missing in-depth vision because of the lack of equally high-level expertise in all the involved disciplines. I have to admit that my dissertation is also characterised by these shortcomings. Nevertheless, I still hope to compensate the deficit of disciplinary precision with the novelty of the perspective and the convincing presentation and analysis of historical facts that would support my research questions.