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Opera and nineteenth-century nation-building : the (re)sounding voice of nationalism

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Chapter Six

The Role of the Theatre in Shaping the National Imagination

**“The play's the thing / Wherein I'll
catch the conscience of the king.”**
(William Shakespeare)²⁴⁰

I. The initial stages

When professional theatre playing was emerging in Hungary, the country was part of the Habsburg Empire, a huge complex territory that incorporated many different ethnic groups. The Habsburgs ruled over the greatest part of Northern Italy, Croatia, Hungary, Transylvania, Czech Republic, and a part of Poland, Galicia. These territories had one factor in common: the Habsburg government. The rest was characterised by different languages, cultures and histories. It was not a harmonious symbiosis: the ethnic groups disliked only each other more than they hated the Habsburgs. Instead of fostering peace among the people of the empire, the Habsburgs followed the policy of “Divide et impera!”, which finally led to their fall.

However, this co-existence of cultures had its advantage, too, even though it was neither recognised, nor appreciated by most of the people at that time. The simple fact that they were bound together contributed to cultural competition between the intellectuals and state officials of different nationalities. They borrowed ideas and modes of implementation from each other, even in the case of nation-building policy. Romanian intellectuals, for example, printed their theories concerning Romanian national consciousness in Hungary.²⁴¹ Jan Kollár, one of the founding fathers of Czech nationalism, was cleric in a Lutheran church in the centre of Pest. Education, cultural taste and institutional system intertwined. The absolute heart of the empire was Vienna. But when Emperor Joseph II moved the council of the governing body from the more peripheral Pozsony (Bratislava) to Buda in 1783, Hungary also became an intellectual centre of the Monarchy.

²⁴⁰ Shakespeare, William: *Hamlet*, Act2, scene2.

²⁴¹ The *Supplex Libellus Valachorum* (1791) was a request for the recognition of the Romanians as a "fourth" nation coequal with the predominately Hungarian nobility, the Saxon patricians, and the once-

All these state officials and clerks needed a form of entertainment, so the emperor himself fostered the idea to build a theatre in Buda.²⁴² The first company played in the *Reischl-house*, a small wooden theatre situated along the bank of the Danube and named after its carpenter builder, Gaspar Reischl. In 1787, an old Karmelite Church in the Buda Castle was transformed into a proper theatre for 1200 visitors. This *Várszínház* (Castle Theatre) originally played in German, but Hungarian actors could also give occasional performances in the building. Between 1833 and 1837 the most popular travelling theatre-company of Pozsony rented it for a symbolic sum of 1 Forint. They became constituted the core of the Hungarian Theatre of Pest, which was placed under state patronage and re-named *National Theatre* in 1840.²⁴³ Since 1774 there was also an active German theatre in Pest, in an old bastion building called Rondella on the banks of the Danube. When in 1812 the German company moved to a new, modern theatre with a capacity for 3500 persons in the heart of Pest, the Rondella started to host temporarily Hungarian players as well. The huge German Theatre completely burned down in 1847 and was never rebuilt.

The repertory and the plays were censored. Though the Austrian “Big-Brother” never ceased to watch the cultural life of Buda and Pest, during the relative freedom accorded to the Hungarian theatres and intellectuals by the enlightened emperor, Joseph II, original Hungarian drama writing, translations and theatre life burgeoned. The most popular playwrights on both German and Hungarian stages of Pest and Buda were Shakespeare, Schiller, Molière and Corneille, and the two favourites of the public, the Austrian dramatists, August Kotzebue (1761-1819) and Franz Grillparzer (1791-1872).²⁴⁴

powerful Székelys in Transylvania. Joseph's successor, Leopold II, rejected it, in part, due to the excesses of the 1784 rebellion of Horea. The pamphlet was published at the university press in Buda.

²⁴² Joseph II is considered to be one of the most culture loving emperors among the Habsburgs. He established the Hof- und Nationaltheater (Burgtheater) in Vienna in 1776. According to the renowned historian of theatre Joseph Gregor, —the most important act in the history of modern Austria was that Joseph II founded the National Theater in Vienna and, after dismissing the French theatre company from the Michaelerplatz, he invited and sponsored German players. He also compiled a set of rules for the country's German language theatre, advocated a German repertory, sent one of his trustees to search for the best actors of the country for the emperor's German theatre, and set an example for the other people of the Monarchy. Hungarians, Czechs and other nationalities also started to think of establishing institutions that could cultivate their mother tongue. In this way theatre, as a national forum, suddenly became important (*Geschichte des österreichischen Theaters. Von seinen Ursprüngen bis zum Ende der ersten Republik*, Wien: Donau Verl., 1948).

²⁴³ *Magyar Színházművészeti Lexikon*, Ed. Székely György, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1994.

²⁴⁴ *Magyar színháztörténet 1790-1873*, Eds. Székely György and Kerényi Ferenc, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990, 35-42.

French and German drama dominated European stages at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. The French drama concept was considered to be more *mechanical* with its classical unity of time, place and action, while German drama followed Shakespeare and was based on the concept of *organicism*. The idea of organicity was borrowed from biology and was transported to the field of culture and worked out by Goethe and Herder. August Wilhelm Schlegel in his *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur* (1809-1811), Ludwig Tieck in *Dramaturgische Blätter* (1826) promoted the idea of organicism in culture. Gradually this German drama concept and the idea of German Romanticism became the strongest aesthetic ideology all over Europe. Through this influence Shakespeare became the absolute favourite playwright. Already Lessing mentioned in his series of essays, *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (1767-69) that organicism is to be traced to the works of Shakespeare. He compared Shakespeare's style to creation by nature. This is why, according to the romantics, creation had to be original, accomplished by a genius, and not mechanical. The concept of organicism exemplifies a dynamic and complex relationship to the world, as opposed to the mechanical world-view of classicism. The reconciliation of French and German conflict was not helped by the ongoing Napoleonic Wars, which led to the occupation of Berlin by Napoleon in 1806. Aesthetic considerations therefore took a more and more patriotic tone. As one of the leading figures of the German theatre of that time, Adam Müller, remarks: the place of the theatre is between the "church and the market".²⁴⁵

Hungarian theorist appropriated this German ideology. However, they gave little attention to the individuals' relation to the universe or the relation of drama to a philosophical world-view. Instead, they stressed the importance of more practical issues such as the moral effect of the theatre, the development of a national-consciousness, the cultivation of the mother tongue and the dissemination of Hungarian culture to all social strata. Gábor Döbrentei (1785-1851), editor of the influential Transylvanian periodical *Erdélyi Múzeum* (1814-1818) and co-director later of the Hungarian theatre company in Buda Castle,²⁴⁶ claimed, "Hungarians should have dramas shaped by and tailored to their own character."²⁴⁷ Besides

²⁴⁵ Müller, Adam Heinrich: "Vorlesungen über die deutsche Wissenschaft und Literatur. Gehalten zu Dresden im Winter 1806", In: *Kritische, ästhetische und philosophische Schriften*, Berlin: Schroeder und Werner Siebert, 1967, 11-137.

²⁴⁶ The other director was the Hungarian prose writer András Fáy (1786-1864).

²⁴⁷ *Magyar színháztörténet 1790-1873*, 241.

historical, philosophical and aesthetic considerations, Hungarian theatre gradually came to focus on morality and national education.

II. Hungarian Theatre Life – School Theatres, Castle Theatres, Public Theatres

The origins of Hungarian drama are to be found in the theatre playing at Jesuit schools²⁴⁸ and in the performances given at the various aristocratic theatres. Literary historians usually date the beginning of the Hungarian Enlightenment with the appearance of *Águs tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Prince Agis) in 1772 by György Bessenyei (1747-1811), poet, personal guard and court librarian of Empress Maria Theresa. Literary journals and newspapers started to appear in Hungary after 1780, and also contributed to the drama translation movement as well as the writing of original Hungarian plays. The absolute favourite dramatist of the school theatres was Metastasio (1698-1782), who from 1730 settled in Vienna and became the most popular playwright and opera librettist of the age in Europe.

II. 1 School theatres

After the completion of the Synod of Trident in 1563, the Catholic Church sought to gain influence all over Europe. Education, mainly in the hands of the Jesuits, was a key field of the anti-Reformation movement. Acting was considered a suitable practice of public speech, therefore a proper exercise for the students. The Jesuit order was involved in Hungarian educational system for about two hundred years, from 1561 till 1773. During this time they founded 44 schools all over the country and performed some 4000 plays.²⁴⁹ The students of the Jesuit schools belonged mainly to the nobility, while other orders, such as the Piarists, the Minorite church and the Franciscans educated pupils mainly from the other, lower, social

²⁴⁸ In 1773 the Jesuit order owned 41 high-schools (gymnasium) and 7 monasteries on the territory of Hungary. In 1782, Joseph II, abolished church orders in the monarchy. The scattered monk-writers and teachers continued to work for the cause of the Hungarian theatre and literature in general. Just to mention some important names: András Dugonics's *Etelka* (1788) became a best seller during the nineteenth century. Dugonics and the poet and music theorist *Ferenc Versegly* (1757-1822) were also among the representatives of the Hungarian theatre- and drama translation movement. (See *Magyar színháztörténet 1790-1873*, 44-45.)

²⁴⁹ *Magyar színháztörténet 1790-1873*, 22.

strata. These other schools were founded in the seventeenth century and were, therefore, able to incorporate the new trends of Hungarian theatre life. Piarist schools started to translate and play in Hungarian language on the stage much earlier than the Jesuit ones, which clung to Latin, a sign of aristocratic education. The social differences among the students were visible not only in the difference between the sophisticated stages of the Jesuit theatres and the modest scenes of the Piarists, but also in the elitist choices of the Jesuit schools, and the mainly folk-like, para-liturgical dramas played by the Piarist students. One of the first theatre stages in Pest was set up in a Piarist school in 1718. School theatres spread all over the country and they became popular also outside schools. The Jesuits popularised Metastasio because his plays easily conformed to the religious spirit of the Catholic schools: they involved many characters and were suitable for both educational and devotional purposes. More and more plays written in Hungarian enriched the Jesuit repertoires and generated a need for professional players.

II. 2 Castle Theatres

Castle theatres also contributed to the development of Hungarian theatre life, even though they had a small private audience and hosted German, French and Italian companies. The example they followed was the theatre culture of the eighteenth-century French aristocracy. The plays were performed occasionally for the entertainment of the castle owners and their guests. The players were mostly family members, but they could also involve the servants' crew. In castles where theatre playing became a stable long-term entertainment, professional acting companies were hired. German theatre players and Italian opera singers came for longer periods to Hungary, and when the aristocratic families temporarily left the castle, the company entertained the burgher public of the nearby cities.

The first castle theatre performance dates from 1746, and took place on the estate of the royal family in Holics. Lotharingian servants performed Molière's comedy *Les facheux* for the royal family that was enjoying a vacation in the castle. The most famous Hungarian castle theatres were in Kismarton (Eisenstadt) and in Eszterháza at the residence of the Esterházy family. The first record about the theatre in Kismarton dates from 1749: an Italian artist, Giuseppe Quaglio, was hired to contribute to the theatre's design. The castle became mainly famous for its flourishing

musical life,²⁵⁰ which was enhanced by the presence of Joseph Haydn. One of the most exceptional events in the history of entertainment at the Esterházy's castle was the visit of Empress Maria Theresa in 1773. The program was followed by dance and music of more than a thousand Hungarian peasants.

The general European interest in Hungarian culture and the popularity of the “exotic” Hungarian music in the eighteenth and nineteenth century could also be reinforced by this visit of Maria Theresa. She arrived at the Esterházy estate with many courtiers and Austrian state officials who were impressed not only by their truly royal reception, but also by the Hungarian folk culture. Beethoven composed his C Major Mass (1807) for Eszterháza, and Miklós Esterházy II was the first to appreciate the talent of Franz Liszt, whose grandfather was also in the service of Esterházy as an organist.²⁵¹

The Brunswick family also had theatres built in their castles in Alsókorompa, Buda and Martonvásár. In the Martonvásár castle Beethoven spent a few days at the invitation of his friend, count Ferenc, who was a renowned violinist. Beethoven dedicated to him his piano sonata in F Minor, op.57, the *Appassionata*.²⁵² The Pálffy, Grassalkovich, Erdődy, Ráday, Károlyi and Festetich families also owned remarkable castle theatres. We have to mention the Catholic bishop of Nagyvárad, Ádám Patachich (1717-1784), who built in Nagyvárad (Oradea, Grosswardein) an impressive theatre that was mainly used as opera house. He hired such renowned musicians as Michael Haydn (1737-1806), the younger brother of Joseph, and Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf (1739-1799).

²⁵⁰ One of the Esterházy counts, the governor Pál Esterházy (1635-1713), a composer of the highest degree, published in 1711 his musical cycle *Harmonia Coelestis*. The theatre life of the castle started to develop on a high artistic level during his life. Being educated by the Jesuits, count Pál Esterházy considered both drama theatre and opera as important forms of entertainment, so he also encouraged musical theatre life in the castle. Joseph Haydn was hired as the second *kappelmeister* of his castle. Pál Esterházy started to build a new theatre, which was opened in 1762 by his son, Miklós Esterházy the “Glorious”. The new and very modern theatre was celebrated with fireworks and four Haydn operas. The opera section started to function officially in 1769. Many renowned European singers and opera companies followed each other on the stage. The only stable person was the faithful servant of the Esterházy family, Joseph Haydn.

²⁵¹ Dobszay, László: *Magyar Zenetörténet*, Budapest: Planétás, 1998, 218.

²⁵² *Ibid.* 219.

II. 3 From travelling players to the Hungarian National Theatre (1790-1840)

Hungarian theatre players developed their skills under the influence of Austrian travelling players, who started to build theatres in the eighteenth century in Sopron, Pest, Pozsony, Buda, Brassó, Győr, and elsewhere. The most important German theatre initiated by Joseph II was built Pest in 1812, and had a huge capacity of 3500 places. Professional theatre in Hungarian language was born under the rule of Joseph II, even though he promoted German as official language of the Empire. Nevertheless, the ideas of the Enlightenment, the general intellectual sphere within the Habsburg-Empire as well as the favourable and looser censorship contributed to the thriving Hungarian drama literature. The first Hungarian public theatre performance was given in 1784 in Buda, in the small wooden Reischl-theatre. The first regular Hungarian theatre company gave performance between 1790 and 1796. Next to Pest and Buda, a permanent Hungarian theatre company began perform in Kolozsvár. From 1812, with the opening of the new German Theatre of Pest, the old building, called Rondella, became empty. This is the place where later many Hungarian actors started their career. Among them was József Katona, whose drama *Bánk bán* (1819) was the main inspiration for Béni Egressy's libretto for Erkel's opera, *Bánk bán* (1861). By 1814, Hungarian companies could not afford the high rent of the Rondella and their actors scattered all over the country.

III. Translations and transpositions

The major figure of the drama translation movement in Hungary was the writer, linguist and poet, Ferenc Kazinczy (1759-1831). He wanted to renew the Hungarian language and establish a modern literary culture in the country. His ambition of renewing the language went hand in hand with the idea that original literature written in Hungarian should come about by imitating the more developed literatures, such as French or German. Hungarian writers should polish their style through imitation in order to produce later Hungarian works. Hungarian writers understood the terms translation and imitation in a broad sense. They did not merely translate the texts of the foreign dramas, but they also adapted the settings, the characters and the situations to Hungarian conditions, while retaining the basic plot.

They *Magyarised* the foreign plays in order to make them appealing to an average Hungarian theatre-goer.

György Bessenyei's first drama in print was a tragedy entitled *Hunyadi László Tragédiája* (Vienna, 1772). The Hunyadi-topic became so popular that during the Hungarian reform movement in the next century Erkel composed his famous *Hunyadi László* (1844), an opera that was almost immediately recognised as *national*. Bessenyei explored in *Hunyadi László*, as well as in *Ágís*, the theme of power and politics. Both plays oppose absolutism and tyranny to a more democratic rule based on a feudal constitution (*rendiség*), which, according to the language use of the time, was synonymous with the *nation*.²⁵³ Bessenyei's notion of *nationalism* and *nation* did not include the "people", the "demos", of the country, only the nobility. He dedicated his drama, *Ágís* to Maria Theresa, suggesting the necessity of a contract between the empress and the Hungarian nation. Both dramas contain a character who initiates conflict between the people and the ruler. The king is originally not wicked, but the evil figure, the intriguer, disturbs with manoeuvres the peaceful relation between the king or queen and the nation. This became a popular dramatic figure throughout nineteenth-century Hungarian literature as we shall see in Chapter Seven.

Inspired by Bessenyei's tragedy in 1792, János Lakos (1774-1843), a young man from the Lutheran Lyceum in Sopron, who later became member of the Hungarian Academy, wrote another *Hunyadi László* drama. It was first performed in Sopron, two years later in the theatres of Pest and Buda.²⁵⁴ The series of Hunyadi-dramas was continued by the poet László Szentjóni Szabó (1767-1795), who died in Kufstein, the dreaded jail of the Habsurges. Szentjóni Szabó's play *Mátyás király* (1791) also explored the theme of the power, but under the pressure of the censor he had to omit every passage that could offend the Habsburg dynasty. The drama ends, therefore, with a scene of forgiveness: Mátyás Hunyadi (1443-1490), the legendary Hungarian king and younger brother of László, forgives the king for the cruel execution of his brother.

Because of the popularity of the Hunyadi-theme, German actors also played a Hunyadi-drama entitled *Die Hunyadische Familie* (1792), written by Peter Simon Weber, a German typographer born in Transylvania's Nagyszeben and owner of a

²⁵³ See Kosáry, Domokos: *Újjáépítés és Polgárosodás 1711-1867*, Budapest: Háttér, 1990, 218; Szűcs, Jenő: *Nemzet és történelem*, Budapest: Gondolat, 1984, 30-33 and Bíró, Ferenc: *A felvilágosodás korának magyar irodalma*, Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 1995, 136.

press in Pozsony from 1789 till 1795. According to the reviews, the German actors wore “old Hungarian costumes”²⁵⁵ to attract Hungarian audience to the theatre, since the traditional dress was a symbol of the nation. The success was just as impressive as they expected. Later in the nineteenth century, Lőrinc Tóth’s (1814-1903) *A két László* (1839) was also successfully performed several times. It became the source of Béni Egressy’s libretto for Erkel’s *Hunyadi László*. The sustained popularity of Hunyadi dramas, the persistent theme of power-conspiracy, as well as the ever-rising feeling of nationalism formed a steady ground for the emergence of national operas.

IV. Operatic practice in Hungary before Erkel

Hungarian opera grew out of a theatrical practice. It was fostered first by travelling player groups, who were on an amateur level able to perform even grand operas. Opera was so intertwined with prose theatre, that the importance of the Erkel-operas, the role they fulfilled in the national movement and in the semantic system of the national culture is hardly understandable without it. Opera in Hungary did not follow the development of opera in Italy or France. Neither was it so widely popular as in Germany, Austria or England, where Italian and French companies continuously performed a repertoire from Monteverdi to Scarlatti, from Lully to Grétry. Opera was imported into Hungary in the late eighteenth century for a very limited audience in the aristocratic castle theatres. The time lag resulted from the hundred-fifty years of Turkish occupation and the subsequent wars of independence, which prevented an intensive cultivation of the arts. There was however, a significant subversive oral musical and literary culture around the so-called *kuruc* songs, which later became one of the most important sources of national canon-building.

The example for the eighteenth-century Hungarian high art was the Viennese culture. Under the rule of Maria Theresa, French opera and French customs were introduced and made fashionable by her Lotharingian husband, Francis I. The Hungarian aristocracy followed at that time the slogan “our blood and life for the queen”, and remained loyal to the Habsburgs in war, peace, and modes of entertainment.

²⁵⁴ *Magyar színháztörténet 1790-1873*, 47.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 74.

Eighteenth-century aristocratic culture was international. The same opera companies toured in European castles, and the same theatre players entertained the guests of the noblemen. They differed only by their preference for French or Italian style, but usually they were familiar with both. As already mentioned, the Esterházys owned the most famous theatre. The first record of opera performances in Hungary refers to the inauguration of duke Miklós Esterházy II, at which an Italian opera company performed a range of short *opera buffas* by Haydn: *La marchesa*, *Nespolo*, *La vedova*, *Il dottore*, *Il Sganarello*.²⁵⁶

In 1768 a new theatre was opened in Eszterháza – another Esterházy estate, in the village of Süttör – also with a Haydn opera, *Lo speziale*. The so-called “music house” of Eszterháza, from the same year, was built as a home and concert hall for Haydn and his orchestra. The theatre in Eszterháza was one of the most modern theatre buildings of its age, with a “Winkelramenbühne“, which could effect a complete scene change within thirty seconds.²⁵⁷

After Miklós Esterházy’s death in 1790 his successor, duke Antal, dismissed the opera company and the orchestra. His son, Miklós Esterházy II, reopened the old theatre in Kismarton. He had the building renovated with two stages, one of which served for regular opera performances. In 1804, the opera company presented Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, in 1805 *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. By that time Johann Nepomuk Hummel had already replaced Joseph Haydn. The end of opera and theatre playing was brought about by the Napoleonic wars. In 1813 Miklós Esterházy II had to disband his theatre company and the actors tried to play at one of countries public theatres in the country.

In the castle of the Erdődy family the first records of opera playing dates according to their *Theateralmanach auf das Jahr 1787* from 1787²⁵⁸. Mozart’s *Entführung* was performed in 1785, three years after its premiere in the Burgtheater, just as Paisello’s *König Theodor in Venedig* was played nine month after its Vienna premiere.

The first public opera performance was given in Pest in 1774 at the Rondella, where the German actors continuously played *Singspiels* and ballet. According to a

²⁵⁶ *A Budapesti Operaház 100 Éve*, (ed. Staud, Géza), Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1984, 8.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 9.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 12.

program book, in 1783 58 of the 274 plays were ballets, and they were performed 134 times.

After Joseph II transferred certain governing bodies of the Empire to Buda, opera performances at the Buda Castle Theatre became more and more frequent. The first opera was Salieri's *Die Schule der Eifersüchtigen* from 1784. The big favourite was Mozart's *Entführung*, which was performed in 1788 for the first time, and remained popular all through the history of the German Theatre. Even though wealthy German burgers formed the majority of the public in Pest and Buda the Hungarian nobility also visited these theatres. The situation did not change when the new German Theatre was built in 1812 in Pest or after 1837, when the Hungarian Theatre of Pest was opened. Franz I, the successor of the enlightened Emperor Joseph II, reinstated censorship. After 1793 only those plays were allowed on the Hungarian stages that had at least twice performances at one of the theatres in Vienna. Of course this order implicated that Hungarian theatres were completely dependent on the Viennese cultural politics.

Among Hungarian travelling theatres, the first opera performance dates from 1793: Philip Hafner's Singspiel *Prinz Schnudi und Evakathel* was played in Hungarian under the title *Pikko hertzeg és Jutka Perzsi* by László Kelemen's theatre company. Its music was composed by József Chudy (1753-1813), the conductor of the Erdödy family. In the early nineteenth-century, the most important centre for public opera was Kolozsvár (Cluj, Klausenburg). The actor and theatre director János Kótsi Patkó (1763-1842) also translated, or better adapted, plays for the theatre and opera. These translations were in most cases adaptations: the settings and the characters were transposed in Hungarian context, they were given Hungarian names, and sometimes they were re-written in a way to raise the interest of the Hungarian public. Another characteristic was that French and Italian plays were not translated from the original but from German, because this was easier and, besides, only a few people spoke other languages. The opera repertoire Kolozsvár was initially the same as elsewhere in the country, but when Hungarian theatre playing became regular opera developed into an independent section of the playhouse, sooner than in Pest. The first opera performed in Kolozsvár was *Lindor and Ismene* (1794); its librettist and composer are unknown.²⁵⁹ Kolozsvár's first Hungarian stone theatre was opened in 1821, and

²⁵⁹ Ibid. 26.

became an important forum for the development of Hungarian public opera culture and concert life. In 1823 Déryné, the leading actress of the age, signed a contract with the theatre in Kolozsvár, and this had an invigorating effect on theatre life in general. Déryné sang opera as well, and she knew an impressive repertoire by heart.²⁶⁰ The directors of the German theatres companies knew of Déryné's talent and wanted to hire her, but she insisted on playing with a Hungarian company in Hungarian.²⁶¹

Ferenc Erkel, who was a music teacher at that time in Kolozsvár, got acquainted with opera there. Later he became the conductor of the opera company, which had to leave the city and move to Pest in 1827 when the theatre in Kolozsvár declared bankruptcy. Every month a new opera was presented on the Kolozsvár stage, which meant that Déryné, though she had a few prose roles, had to specialise in opera singing. In 1822 she played the main role of József Ruzitska's *Béla futása* (Béla's flight), János Kótsi Patkó's adaptation of Kotzebue's *Belas Flucht*. Since the libretto and its language, as well as the music with its *verbunkos* themes were Hungarian, *Béla futása* is considered to be the first national opera. When the Hungarian Theatre of Pest opened in 1837, several musical pieces were also performed to demonstrate that this theatre will welcome operas. However, the opera history of the Hungarian (from 1840: National) Theatre was full of intrigues and disturbances, which eventually led to the long polemics known as *opera war*.

V. Hungarian theatre and its ideological context

When the managers and the artistic directors of the first Hungarian theatre company, Pál Ráday (1768-1827) and László Kelemen (1762-1814), wrote a petition to Leopold II and the governing council, they expressed two different views about the function of the theatre. Ráday supported the idea of a "moral theatre", which could educate the theatre-goer citizens, while Kelemen wanted a "patriotic" theatre, which should stage "plays about the history of our country".²⁶² However, Leopold II would

²⁶⁰ She sang Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, *Tancredi*, *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, *Semiramis*, *The theaving Magpie*, than *Joseph and his Brothers* by Étienne Méhul (1763-1817), *Agnes Sorel* composed by the Czech musician Adalbert Gyrowetz (1763-1850), Grétry's *Raoul*, *Barbe-bleue*, Weber's *Der Freischütz*, Luigi Cherubini's *Water Carrier*, a very popular Singspiel by Joseph Weigl (1766-1846), the composer of Esterházy's family, *Die Schweizer Familie*, Francois Adrien Boieldieu's (1775-1834) *Jean de Paris* and last but not least the favourites by Mozart, *Die Zauberflöte* and *Don Juan*.

²⁶¹ Ibid. 28.

²⁶² *Magyar színháztörténet 1790-1873*, 61.

not allow a patriotic Hungarian theatre. In order to back the cause of a Hungarian theatre, they had to gain the support of the Hungarian nobility. All this happened at a moment, when the nobility became more interested in national ideas. The interest of Hungarian nobility, the progress of the national thought and the slowly developing concept of nation intertwined. To ask the Hungarian nobility to help sustain Hungarian theatre, meant, therefore, a plea to support the development of national consciousness via the theatre.

Nation and language became crucial during the Hungarian nationalist movement. The language revival initiated by Kazinczy, the gradually emerging translation movement, as well as the aspirations for establishing an original Hungarian literary culture and building a Hungarian theatre all involved cultivating the national language. The idea of Hungarian national music emerged later, and became, next to language, one of the most important symbols of national consciousness. When count István Széchenyi (1791-1860) offered in 1825 an impressive portion of his yearly income for founding the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, his main aim was to “help cultivating the Hungarian language”. In 1827 this goal of cultivating the national language was included in the law that established the Academy. It was officially opened in 1831, after the King and Emperor accepted its statute. More and more literary journals came to embrace the cause of the Hungarian language.

At the diet of 1825 in Pozsony the triad “church-theatre-school” was named as support for cultivating the mother tongue. This way, György Bessenyei’s program from the pamphlet *Magyarság* (1778) became a legal issue as well as an idea that should bind together all the social strata from aristocracy to the serfs, from the burghers to village intellectuals. Language, supported by all cultural institutions, became the national symbol of the age.

However, the *liberals*, *conservatives* and *radicals* did not agree about the theatre and about the function of language and literacy in the nation-building processes.²⁶³ The *liberals* pursued a theatre that educated and furthered the cause of Hungarian language and of an independent, original Hungarian literary culture. The most important representatives of this movement were the Romantic poet, Mihály Vörösmarty (1800-1855), the literary critic and theatre director József Bajza (1804-1858) and Ferenc Toldy. The *conservatives* asked for an entertaining theatre. They did

²⁶³ Ibid. 260.

not want a “Burgtheater” in Pest because the times would not favour such a proposal. Nevertheless, they took every occasion and forum to attack the liberals. One of their most ardent representatives was János Munkácsy (1802-1841), a successful playwright and editor of a literary journal, but as it turned out later also an agent of the Austrian secret service.²⁶⁴ The *radicals* were actors and writers who left the liberal camp and became members of the Young Hungary under the leadership of Gábor Kazinczy (1818-1864). Their views about the role of theatre could be summed up in one word: propaganda. They wanted to use literature and theatre for political purposes in order to appeal to the national feeling of the public. It was this group that canonised József Katona’s play *Bánk bán*.

VI. Opera War (1837-1844)

It is symbolic that the opening day of the National Theatre on August 8, 1840 coincided with the premiere of Erkel’s opera *Báthory Mária*.²⁶⁵ While prose works dominated the old Hungarian Theatre of Pest, opera became the favourite genre in the new National Theatre. The period of the reform movement (1830-1848) and the general disposition of nineteenth-century Europe were unquestionably in favour of the opera, though it was not explicitly considered a national art. However, the verdict of the public was: we must have more music in the theatre.

By the end of the reform movement, everything staged at the National Theatre was either opera or a melodrama with longer or shorter musical interludes.²⁶⁶ Opera did not need official pamphlets and pleadings: it emerged as the most popular genre in a totally democratic way. Most of the audience wanted opera and supported opera. By March 15, 1848, at the eve of the Hungarian revolution and war of independence, all theatres resounded with melodies from Erkel’s opera *Hunyadi László*.

Nevertheless, some Hungarian intellectuals did not favour the opera, and tried to set it against prose theatre; the former was in their view a foreign entertainment, whereas the latter a national art in the service of national consciousness. The defence of opera reached its climax in 1842, when a group of “offended opera-loving citizens” sent a petition to the king, without first discussing it with the local governing body.

²⁶⁴ Ibid. 261.

²⁶⁵ *Magyar színháztörténet 1790-1873*, 286.

²⁶⁶ Ibid. 324.

They accused the radicals, the liberals and members of the Hungarian Academy of an anti-opera policy. However, the petition never reached the king's office, for it went directly to the archives of the governing directorate and became classified as an anonymous letter.²⁶⁷

The term *opera war*²⁶⁸ refers to debates about the role of opera in the Hungarian nation-building movement. The “war” consisted of a series of pamphlets and articles published in the most popular newspapers and literary journals, and encompassed the years 1837-44. It started with the preparations for organising an opera department within the Hungarian Theatre of Pest, and ended with the premiere of Erkel's opera *Hunyadi László* in 1844. More than a series of theoretical debates about the role of the music in theatre, it was a clash between nineteenth-century Hungarian intellectuals with differing cultural world-views.

From the beginning, Hungarian travelling actors had to adjust their repertoire to the demands of urban theatre-goers who were used to German drama traditions and theatrical performances. By the end of the eighteenth century, the taste of the audience in Pest-Buda, Kolozsvár or Pozsony did not differ on ethnic or national grounds, but each was divided along education and literacy levels. There was no state subsidised Hungarian theatre yet. Since the actors could not find permanent sponsors for Hungarian drama, they had to follow the taste and expectations of the public in order to secure an income and to support dramas written in Hungarian.

Opera was highly popular among the theatregoers both within Hungary and abroad. The Hungarian travelling theatre companies included in their repertoire therefore dramas with music, so called *Singspiele*. These were fashionable theatre plays, which contained shorter or longer musical pieces, mostly well-known songs. These plays usually fulfilled another requirement: they were written in a *volkstümlich* (folk-like or popular) style. Hungarian aristocrats, however, who were educated abroad – mainly in Vienna –, expected to see on Hungarian stages a style and standard they were used to in foreign theatres and opera houses. Yet, it was difficult to perform a grand opera in Hungary, on the one hand because of the lack of financial support, on the other hand, because the actors did not have a proper musical education.

²⁶⁷ Ibid. 286.

²⁶⁸ See *Tollharcok. Irodalmi és színházi viták 1830-1847*, (ed. Szalai Anna), Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1981, 349-558.

The competition for public attention was harsh: by 1820 there were two big theatres in Pest: the German Theatre and the Hungarian Theatre of Pest. The huge German one opened with two plays by the German dramatist Kotzebue, *Ungarns erste Wohlthäter*, *Die Ruinen von Athen* (to which Beethoven composed music). Its musical repertoire included mostly operas by Mozart and Rossini. The Hungarian Theatre of Pest, as of 1840 the National Theatre, had little choice, but to compete with the German theatre and to assemble a repertoire that would attract audience. They had to stage operas.

The German Theatre of Pest could afford to perform *grand opéras* since they had both budget, and suitable actors for it. In 1830, it premiered Rossini's *William Tell*, and later in the same year Bellini dominated the scene with *La Straniera*, *La sonnambula*, *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* and *Norma*. Among Hungarian travelling theatre companies, the one from Kassa (Kosice) staged for the first time in 1836 grand operas, namely Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* and later *Norma*. An army band played the instrumental part, and the German Theatre of Pest contributed the chorus. The situation did not become better with the opening of the Hungarian Theatre of Pest either. Since there were no specially educated opera singers, prose actors performed with more or less success the often very demanding vocal parts. Even so, the public enjoyed it and wanted more.

Gábor Mátray, whose first Hungarian Music history we have already discussed, was elected as director of the opera section of the newly opened Hungarian Theatre of Pest in 1837. As a musician, music critic and ardent Hungarian nationalist, Mátray made efforts to organise the Hungarian operatic and musical life. First he had to lure the high-class audience to rent expensive first floor theatre boxes for a longer term, so that the theatre could count on a stable income. This could be completed with prices paid by the less wealthy burghers and intellectuals for the second floor and ground floor boxes, to which the ground floor auditorium tickets could be added, bought occasionally by the lower middle-class audience, mainly students and soldiers. However, the aristocracy continued to visit the German theatre because of its higher artistic level, even if they bought boxes in the Hungarian one. Mátray wanted to change this by raising the prestige of the Hungarian opera. But he constantly had to struggle with financial shortages, unprofessional musicians, and, later, with the ideological debates about the function of theatre as opposed to the opera.

Opera-lovers were in a less favourable position than the supporters of prose theatre. One of the main reasons for this was that while Hungarian drama had a solid justification as an important means to educate people morally and was seen as a major forum for the cultivation of language and national consciousness in general, the opera had neither its theoretical defenders nor a consistent Hungarian audience. This was the main reason why Erkel first accepted an appointment as second musical conductor for the opera section at the German theatre and not in the Hungarian theatre. Mátray tried to set the foundations of Hungarian opera and music in his history and in his articles concerning Hungarian musical culture. But his voice did not reach the Hungarian Academy or the nationalist intellectuals. One of the reasons for their disinterest could have been that they deemed other issues, such as language use, the establishment of the universities with an up-to-date modern curriculum for engineers and doctors, and the political struggles within the Monarchy, more important.

By many, music was seen as pure entertainment, a privilege and amusement of the aristocracy that had nothing to contribute to the nation-building. Although many opera performances at the Hungarian castle theatres were admired and well known all over Europe, this did not really help much to establish a permanent opera culture in early nineteenth-century Hungary. After the revolution of 1848 the situation changed, mostly because of the important role music played in it. This can also explain why Erkel's operas, which had little effect on the public before the revolution, swept over all the theatres during the revolutionary years and became exceedingly important later in the century, especially during the period after the 1867 *Ausgleich*.

There were, to be sure, some feeble efforts to establish a national opera in Hungary during the reform period. The liberals tried to extend the arguments for the original Hungarian drama to the field of the opera. József Bajza, theatre director and literary critic, formulated an "advice" in an article published in 1839. According to him, Hungarian opera should be based on national music, and its text should help cultivating of the national language.²⁶⁹

Bajza also made efforts to secure theoretical foundation for the opera. To illustrate the difference between prose theatre and opera, he used in one of his articles written in *Athenaeum*, the liberal journal of that time, the metaphor of painting: prose theatre is like a very thoroughly drawn picture, because the actor has to present, in a

²⁶⁹ Bajza, József: "Szózat a pesti magyar színház ügyében", In. *Tollharcok*, 405-442.

sequence of well-conceived scenes, transformations of the human soul during the action of the story, while the opera singer has to present one single but intensive impression on the stage, which is like a not so accurately drawn but very vividly painted picture, in which the artist uses harsher brush strokes to express emotion. This tableau-like idea of opera was inspired by the French grand opera style. Theatre is like a drawing that should be analysed from close-up, while opera, because it combines various media, is like a tableau, and should be watched from a greater distance.²⁷⁰ Yet, in spite of Bajza's attempt to define and theoretically place opera in the cultural framework, the theoretical conceptualisation of the opera in Hungary remained neglected. Two years later, the journal *Athenaeum* published an article translated from German, *About the opera today*, which blamed grand opera for spreading the harmful spirit "delectation".

Even though Bajza publishes in his journal such criticism of opera, he does not entirely refuse it or deny its ability to contribute to the development of national thought. In his pamphlet entitled *Szózat a pesti magyar színház ügyében* (Oration concerning the case of the Hungarian Theatre of Pest) published in 1839 in Buda, Bajza asserts:

"for us, Hungarians, who hope to use theatre for national purposes, its case is much more important than for the German, French or English nation. It is the cornerstone of our national identity. (...) Every attack against Hungarian theatre (...) is also directed against the Hungarian nation. (...) There are a few among us, who want to hide their unpatriotic feelings under the disguise of loving art. (...) If we are always going to visit German theatre for its higher artistic standards, who is going to raise the standards of the Hungarian theatre? (...) Our theatre was originally intended for prose works. Nevertheless, we responded to the demands of the public and also introduced opera on the stage. Not gradually, as it should have had happened, but immediately *in medias res*, we bought lavish scenery and hired the most expensive singers.²⁷¹ (...) Opera is too expensive an amusement and is unable to maintain the theatre. Opera is not a lucrative business in the German theatre either, in spite of its popularity among the audience."²⁷²

²⁷⁰ *Athenaeum* 1838 December 13.

²⁷¹ Bajza refers to the celebrated soprano of the age, the prima Donna Schodelné Klein Róza (1811-1854), who was hired with a wage that she could get in every other European leading theatre. Her monthly salary was more than the salary of the whole drama section together.

²⁷² *Tollharcok*, 407-410.

Bajza also uses the famous triad of “school-church-theatre”²⁷³ for the cultivation of culture, while he rejects the idea of an entertaining theatre. He asserts: “For me the theatre is a Hungarian institution *par excellence*, which should be given only a Hungarian spirit.”

Bajza wrote about the opera, trying to reject the repeated accusation that he is hostile to opera. His main argument could be summarised with the following sentence from his *Oration*:

“If opera is more important for us than prose theatre, the whole institution is not worth a penny of the money paid by the nation for its maintenance. All these operas are foreign products, foreign subjects, foreign language, foreign colour and character, foreign – German, Italian or French – feelings, but in no case Hungarian. These are feelings, colours and characters that did not acclimatize in our country, or if they did, the more we gain from them for the sake of art, the more we lose from our national consciousness, because they are going to transform our feelings and way of listening into German, French or Italian. (...) I do not want art at the expense of our national consciousness. Let us become a nation first, only then can we think about art. This art should grow out organically from our national feelings; only then can it be compared to the original art of the French, German or English. (...) We often hear that opera is able to attract also foreign public to our theatre. This is exactly why I say that opera is a foreign art. It is a universal language, and as such it is unable to help the development of our mother tongue.”²⁷⁴

Bajza’s remark, “Let us become a nation first, and only then can we think about art.” shows how consciously the leading figures of the national movement thought about nation-building, how aware they were that a nation should be *created*.

As already mentioned, Bajza was not completely against opera. He also wrote further on:

“I do not say that music or opera cannot express national feelings; on the contrary, I believe that operas are going to play a remarkably important role in the development of our national consciousness. Even though they are unable to cultivate our language, they are a great potential for the cultivation of national feelings. But these operas have to be national, written with a penetrating Hungarian spirit, not like those we can see on the stage nowadays.”²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Ibid. 414.

²⁷⁴ Ibid. 418.

²⁷⁵ *Tollharcok*, 420.

This is one of the first thoughts about the nature and role of opera in nation-building, which shows that the liberals were not against the art of opera; they only wished to connect it to national thought.

János Munkácsy, who accused Bajza of being hostile to opera, was of the opinion that the most educated and most intellectual people would turn away from the national thought if futile art was accepted by the theatre just because it conveyed national ideas.

The radicals, under the ideological leadership of Gábor Kazinczy and Gábor Egressy were decidedly negative about opera. Egressy's criticism was also directed against the celebrated soprano Schodelné Klein Róza, who was hired with an exceptionally high salary by the Hungarian Theatre of Pest and enjoyed special treatment from the directorate. She could leave for three month with pay, could choose the time of the repetitions and decide with whom she wanted to be on stage. All these made her very unpopular among the actor colleagues,²⁷⁶ but the public adored her, for her beauty but also for her sophisticated voice.

Lajos Kossuth, the leader of the revolution of 1848-49, also contributed a pamphlet to the opera war in the newspaper *Pesti Hírlap*. Though he supported the radicals in the debate, he tried to unite the two groups under a common goal: the success of the national movement. To achieve national independence, Hungarians had to unite and stop fighting each other in such questions such as opera.

The opera war went on for four years, and influenced also the reception of Erkel's first opera, *Báthory Mária* (1840). It was not particularly successful, and only one longer review of it appeared, by Mátray in the journal *Honművész*. The radical Imre Vahot, editor of the *Pesti Divatlap*, wrote another *Oration concerning the case opera in our country*, in which he declared that letting national heroes sing was to desecrate them. Meyerbeer for example, remarked Vahot, did not let any of his national figures sing on stage. When Meyerbeer was asked in 1842 to compose a work for the reopening of the opera house in Berlin, he could not choose as a hero an ancestor of king Frederick the Great, because it was forbidden to depict members of the royal family on stage. And Vahot cried out:

²⁷⁶ Déryné Széppataki Róza, the other diva of the age, also complained about Schodelné. She told Erkel that she was asked to go abroad and to play in the German theatre, but turned down all the invitations because she was patriotic. She would be ashamed to ask for as much money from the nation, as Schodelné does, even though her own talents could be measured up to those of Schodelné (*Magyar Zene Krónikája*, Budapest: Zeneműkiadó Vállalat, 1962, 247).

“My God! I hope they would never make our great national leaders and heroes as King Lajos Nagy, Máté Csák or János Hunyadi sing on stage! If something like this should happen, the theatre would deserve to collapse immediately.”²⁷⁷

János Hunyadi did not sing, but his son László sang in Erkel’s *Hunyadi László* (1844).

The opera war was more than a malign and jealous attack on Shodelné, or an intrigue against the policy of the theatre director József Bajza. It could have not gained so much attention had opera not been popular in the nineteenth-century Hungary, and opera would not become *national* without these intense debates about its role in the nation-building processes.

²⁷⁷ *Tollharcok*, 621.