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

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Chapter Seven

Querela Hungariae

László Hunyadi and Bánk bán – Variations on a National Theme National Opera and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Hungary

“Oh beata Ungheria se non si lascia/Più malmenare!”²⁷⁸

(Dante: Paradiso XIX: 142-3)

**“Her ruin was caused by intrigue and guile!”(FERENC ERKEL
& BÉNI EGRESSY –*Bánk bán*)²⁷⁹**

**“Si vous voulez plaire aux Hongrois, me dit-il, écrivez un
morceau sur un de leurs thèmes nationaux; (...) Je suivis le
conseil et choisis le thème de Rákóczy, sur lequel je fis la
grande marche que vous connaissez.” (Berlioz to A. M.
HUMBERT FERRAND 3rd, February 14, 1861, Pest)²⁸⁰**

I. The voice of nationalism in 1848 and its operatic echo

On March 4, 1848, Sándor Lukács (1822-1854), lawyer and radical politician, read the claims of the Hungarian parliamentary opposition party in Győr's theatre filled with urban intellectuals. Ten days later, on March 14, in the same theatre, the actors could not finish the first act of the drama *Könnyelműek* (The frivolous) by Zsigmond Czákó (1820-1847), because the audience repeatedly interrupted the performance with loud shouts demanding the Rákóczy March from the players. The next day everyone in the audience wore traditional Hungarian garments and sang the *Szózat* composed by Béni Egressy. In Szeged on April 17, 1848 the performance of Ede Szigligeti's *Szökött katona* (The runaway soldier) turned into a political meeting. Three days later enthusiastic political uprising followed the play of an amateur theatre company. In Arad on March 17 the audience demanded a gipsy band instead of the official theatre programme, to play the Rákóczy March and choir passages from the

²⁷⁸ “Oh, happy Hungary! Do not let yourself misguided”.

²⁷⁹ Erkel, Ferenc, *Hunyadi László*, libretto by Béni Egressy, Hungaroton Classic, Recorded in 1984, Libretto book, 61.

²⁸⁰ <http://hector.ucdavis.edu/Berlioz2003/Memoires/Mem000TP.htm> .

Erkel's *Hunyadi László*. On March 26 in Rozsnyó, the theatre company had to change its program because the audience requested from the actors the *Szózat* and the *Himnusz*. On March 26, a play about King Mátyás Hunyadi was followed by “national songs” in the auditorium of the city hall. In Temesvár, a passionate revolutionary public gathered in the theatre to sing the *Szózat* and the *Himnusz*. In Pest, the audience interrupted the performance of Katona's *Bánk bán* and claimed patriotic songs.²⁸¹

All these examples illustrate the overwhelming importance of music at the beginning of the Hungarian revolution of 1848. The enthusiasm did not diminish during the war for independence in 1848-49, although performances became scarce. The actors in the cities occupied by the Austrian army were prevented from playing the revolutionary repertoire. The best-known members of the National Theatre, Schodelné, Róza Laborfalvy, Lendvai and Szigligeti, fled to Debrecen in January 1849, but continued to receive their salary. Just like during the French revolution in 1789, the revolutionary crowd shaped the repertory of the theatre. The Hunyadi story and Katona's *Bánk bán* became the favourites of the public.

In one of the theatre yearbooks published in 1848, we can read the program of a typical theatre: the Rákóczy March, an orchestrated version of the *Himnusz* (which later became Hungary's national anthem), a folk song sang by Kornélia Hollósy, the recital of Petőfi's *Európa csendes* (Europe is silent) by Fánecs, a leading actor of his time, another folk song sang Füredi, and the choir from Erkel's *László Hunyadi* titled *Meghalt a cselszövő* (The complotter died) with orchestra and choir (**Example 3**).²⁸² In the intermissions of plays, *verbunkos* and other national dances were performed. A Russian officer, Mihail Lihutin Dormindontovic, who lodged in a garrison in Nagyvárad, noted in his diary that Hungarian programs were performed in the theatre every evening: either a Hungarian play, or a compilation of Hungarian dances among which the quick *csárdás* was the audience's favourite.²⁸³ Theatre and music animated the people in war and peace alike.

Verbunkos and *csárdás* music, the *Szózat* and the *Himnusz*, as well as some passages from Erkel's opera *Hunyadi László* were the most popular tunes of the Hungarian revolutionary public. They were received and understood as national by a

²⁸¹ *Magyar Színháztörténet 1790-1873*, (ed. Kerényi, Ferenc), Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990, 352-353.

²⁸² *Ibid.* 358.

wide interpretive community, whatever their differences and party preferences. The *verbunkos*, this military recruiting music whose popularity goes back to the eighteenth century (see Chapter Three), was just fit for the purposes of the revolutionary committees that recognised quite early the role of theatre as public space. *Verbunkos* and the *Rákóczy Song* recalled national memories about the former Rákóczy rebellion and war for independence (1703-11). In 1848, the internal political situation of the country and its international relations resembled those of Rákóczy's period.

The Rákóczy March became a national symbol, together with Erkel's *Hunyadi László*, whose explicit historical allegories were just tailored to the present political situation in the country. It is significant to note that these tunes became popular during the revolution by a bottom to top process, by the will of the public. Only later were they performed with propagandistic aims defined by the leaders.

Following his concert in Budapest Berlioz wrote to a friend about the stunning effect that his Rákóczy March exerted on the Hungarian public: when the orchestra played the first bars of the hitherto calm public erupted in an unspeakable explosion of emotions and hail. Nothing could stop the volcano of violent passions triggered by this music.²⁸⁴

Berlioz's letter reveals how significant and alive this tune was in the cultural memory of the Hungarians. It could still rouse national sentiments and create a revolutionary sphere, just as the *Bánk bán*-topic, which had gradually entered into the national consciousness already before 1848, thanks to the theatre companies that favoured it. During the revolution, the *Bánk-Bán* story became canonised and in 1861 it was "consecrated" with Erkel's opera of that title. *Bánk bán* did not replace *Hunyadi László*, but it has been competing with it in popularity ever since. Their status and rapid canonisation could be ascribed to the fact that they were active artistic participants of the contemporaneous debates about nation building. They could also be regarded as aesthetic reflections of that specific cultural-political paradigm, which,

²⁸³ *A magyarországi hadjárat 1849.* (ed. Katona, Tamás), Budapest: 1988, 794.

²⁸⁴ Berlioz: A M. HUMBERT FERRAND 3e LETTRE, 14 février 1861, Pest, Use documentation in English "Le public resta calme et silencieux à cette exposition inattendue; mais quand, sur un long crescendo, des fragments fugués du thème reparurent, entrecoupés de notes sourdes de grosse caisse simulant des coups de canon lointains, la salle commença à fermenter avec un bruit indescriptible; et, au moment où l'orchestre déchaîné dans une mêlée furieuse, lança son fortissimo si longtemps contenu, des cris, des trépignements inouïs ébranlèrent la salle; la fureur concentrée de toutes ces âmes bouillonnantes fit explosion avec des accents qui me donnèrent le frisson de la terreur; il me sembla sentir mes cheveux se hérissier, et à partir de cette fatale mesure je dus dire adieu à la péroration de

in the long run, emerged victoriously from the contest of the various national ideologies and nation-building concepts. These operas are like blueprints for the differentiated and controversial intellectual life of the nineteenth century. They could function as a map in the hands of cultural historians; their “thick description” could find new ways for understanding nineteenth-century nationalism and its cultural practices.

Let us take therefore a closer look at the cultural and historical background of these first Hungarian national operas and examine their involvement in the nation-building of nineteenth-century Hungary. As we have noted before, cultural historians as well as musicologists have neglected the role of operas in nineteenth-century nation building. Even when the relationship of music and nationalism becomes a centre issue of musicological anthologies or a topic in a chapter of a music history the question is usually formulated in terms of influence, “how nationalist ideology was a vital factor in conditioning musical culture with respect to nationalism in Europe.”²⁸⁵ I would like to investigate the question from the opposite direction: how and why music and opera could become a vital factor in constructing national consciousness all over nineteenth-century Europe. Music and especially opera was not simply a reflection of nationalist ideologies; it functioned rather as an active agent in shaping nationalism and national constructing national identity.

I do not intend to give a meticulous technical analysis of the musical scores²⁸⁶, or examine the poetic means in the libretti. Instead, I shall offer an outline of the cultural-historical embedding of *Hunyadi László* and *Bánk bán*, in order to define those patterns and interpretative strategies that contributed to the reception of these works as *national* operas. Why could the public identify the story of the opera as a national narrative? Why could this re-enactment of history evoke an emotional response? What was its relevance in the upheaval of nineteenth-century nationalism? How does the music relate to this narrative, and what was its impact on the nation-building movements? In the following pages I shall seek answers to these questions.

mon morceau, la tempête de l'orchestre étant incapable de lutter avec l'éruption de ce volcan dont rien ne pouvait arrêter les violences.” <http://hector.ucdavis.edu/Berlioz2003/Memoires/Mem53A2VL3.htm>

²⁸⁵ *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, 1.

II. From *Báthori Mária* to *Hunyadi László* – the development of the “Hungarian spirit” on the operatic stage

After the first performance of Erkel’s *Báthori Mária* (1840) even the most ardent anti-opera critic, Imre Vahot²⁸⁷, admitted that “it is worth mentioning Mr. Erkel’s endeavour to establish the Hungarian art of opera”. The music critic of the *Pesther Tageblatt* remarked that *Báthori Mária* was an opera of high value and that he hoped that Erkel was going to write soon another opera in the same spirit. The literary and opera critic of the *Athenaeum*, Ferenc Toldy, asserted that *Báthori Mária* was the first real Hungarian opera.²⁸⁸

To establish original Hungarian operas had been an old wish of the intellectuals in the Reform Movement. The theatre director Gábor Döbrentei wrote in 1817 in the afterword of his Mozart-biography:

“our pure Hungarian cities do not nurture for us a Hungarian composer-musician, neither do they raise Hungarian singers... Shall we ever hear an original Hungarian opera, whose music is composed by a Hungarian and is sung by Hungarian singers? For only this totality could awake in us a special attention towards the art of the opera. Without a Hungarian music academy, this would never become a reality.”²⁸⁹

Gábor Mátray responded in his Hungarian music history, *A muzsikának közönséges története*:

“as long as Mr. Döbrentei expects from a Hungarian opera that both its music and libretto should be written by a Hungarian, and it should also be sung by Hungarians, then we do not have one. Because the libretto of the first Hungarian Singspiel by József Ruzitska (1775-1824) *Béla futása* (Bélas Flucht), was written by Kotzebue, and he was German.”²⁹⁰

²⁸⁶ For a detailed analysis of Erkel’s musical art see the book of Gyula Véber: *Ungarische Elemente in der Opernmusik Ferenc Erkel’s*, Balthoven: A.B. Creighton, 1976.

²⁸⁷ He was involved in the “opera war” and was an ardent opponent of the operatic genre. (See Chapter Six)

²⁸⁸ Barna, István: “Erkel Ferenc első operái az egykorú sajtó tükrében”, In: *Zenatudományi Tanulmányok II., Erkel Ferenc és Bartók Béla emlékére* (eds. Szabolcsi Bence and Bartha Dénes), Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1954, 175-218, 196.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

Hungarian intellectuals had been thinking about the true character of a Hungarian opera well before Erkel wrote some. The writer of the first Hungarian music history, being of German descent, Mátray was on the opinion that, regardless of ethnic origin, everyone was Hungarian whose work was imbued with a Hungarian spirit, and contributed to the advancement of the Hungarian culture.

Mátray's argument reveals that the earlier *Hungarus* identity, which was associated with the homeland²⁹¹, gradually shifted towards a collective identity that was more and more characterised by culture and the cultivation of culture. Everyone could be Hungarian who was sentimentally bound to Hungarian culture or – as Mátray put it –, to the “Hungarian spirit”. However, what this “Hungarian spirit” was, how it should look like and how it could contribute to the making of Hungarian opera had not been explicitly worked out. Although the definitions of Hungarian identity in music were vague, *Hunyadi László* was immediately received and praised by a large public as the first genuine Hungarian opera imbued with Hungarian spirit. Of course, it had its critics, too.

Paradoxically, the German press received *Hunyadi* more enthusiastically than the Hungarian one. In the *Ungarn*, which published the very first review of *Hunyadi* on January 29, 1844, we can read a highly appreciative article that stressed the good qualities of the opera. The critic wondered, however, whether a music based on such closed forms as the *verbunkos* could ever become the basis for more complex musical constructions.²⁹² A certain P. Weil praised the extraordinary talent of Erkel in the *Spiegel*, another leading German newspaper of the time.²⁹³ Contrary to these admiring reviews, many Hungarian newspapers were explicitly critical of *Hunyadi*, due to the extended “opera war” as well as to clashing concepts of the nation. As it could be expected, the anti-opera and pro-drama radicals disliked Erkel's work. According to

²⁹¹ See Chapter Three.

²⁹² “Der heutige Erfolg war mit einem Worte nur ein *succès d'estime*. (...) Die Musikalische Bearbeitung betreffend, wird man wohl noch keine genaue, den musikalischen Gehalt der einzelnen Nummern bis in die kleinsten Details gewissenhaft abwägende und glücklich erschöpfende Beurtheilung fordern, doch müssen wir schon jetzt im Ganzen unsere vollste Anerkennung dem Fleisse, der Tüchtigkeit und der Geschicklichkeit des Compositeurs ausdrücken, in der er die Forderungen, die man an eine sogenannte “Nationaloper“ stellt, grossentheils zu befriedigen wusste.” /.../ “Es bleibt immer noch eine grosse Frage, ob die *musikalische Sprache* die in ihrem jetzigen ausgedehnten Wirkungskreise kaum noch einer Erweiterung hinsichtlich der Modulationen fähig scheint, auf den engeren Kreis eines particulären Dialektes beschränkt, *mannigfaltigerer Accent* fähig sei.“ (In. Barna, 206-207).

²⁹³ “Diese Hauptidee, durch frappante Episoden gehoben, diente dem ausgezeichneten Kompositeur als Folie zu einem originellen, *echt nationalen* Tongemälde, desgleichen die vaterländische Tonmuse

the critic of *Regélő Pesti Divatlap*, everything was wrong with this opera: the composer was not talented enough, the libretto was awful and the singers – except Schodelné – were contemptible. The *Regélő Pesti Divatlap*, edited by János Garay (1812-1853), was most of all critical of the historical figures singing on stage: “May we not condemn the fact that in this opera every serious subject is conveyed by singing? It contradicts the spirit of history that heroes like László Hunyadi sing on the stage.”²⁹⁴

István Széchenyi’s journal, the *Jelenkor*, wrote on February 4, 1844: “In this opera we still cannot perceive any ingenuity or talent that would be able to create a melodious work. (...) A Mozart or a Bellini could have created a beautiful masterpiece out of this libretto!”²⁹⁵ There were, to be sure, more positive reviews in the Hungarian newspapers as well. One of these was to be found in the *Világ* on January 31: “This opera attracted the public. Except the boxes, the auditorium was completely full. (...) The work is permeated from the beginning until the end with original Hungarian spirit.”²⁹⁶ And the article in the other daily, *Nemzeti újság*, remarks: “This is a brilliant opera both regarding its music and its libretto. Erkel excels as a great composer.”²⁹⁷ However, this article does criticise the behaviour of the listeners: “The audience does not have a refined musical taste that is why it was applauding all the time without a proper assessment of the actual professional achievement of the aria singer.”²⁹⁸ The critic of the *Spiegel* also remarked that at the end of the performance the audience had asked Erkel and the singers again and again on the stage with loud applause but “unfortunately with ear-splitting shouts that are just unfit for the sphere of a National Theatre. The impartial listener can wholly agree with cordial vociferous cheers, but not with noisy outcries”.²⁹⁹

Lázár Horváth Petrichevich wrote in the journal *Honderű* the longest Hungarian review of *Hunyadi László* on February 3, 1844. Though Hungarian literary historians consider Petrichevich a conservative writer for his dislike of Petőfi’s poetry, his musical taste was definitely more progressive than that of his contemporary literary

noch keines produzierte – und das die Hoffnung auf einen umfassenderen Aufschwung unverfälschter, nationaler Tonkunst im Herzen eines jeden wahre Patrioten beleben muss“ (Barna, 205).

²⁹⁴ February 4, 1844. Ibid. 203.

²⁹⁵ Ibid. 204.

²⁹⁶ Ibid. 202.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Ibid. 205.

critics. Petrichevich was among those few Hungarian intellectuals who recognised Erkel's talent. He suggested: "Erkel set the first foot-stones on which in the future the Hungarian musical Valhalla could be built." Further he appreciated that the music was fit for the spirit of the libretto and often even surpassed it. As regards the possibilities of an original Hungarian national opera Petrichevich stipulated: "Only when our composers recognise that national music can draw only on the national past and on a national character fostered by this past will they be able to create true national music."³⁰⁰

Hunyadi László could have been perceived as a national and not just as another Hungarian opera because of its multiple layers of complex semiotic systems, both on musical and textual level. It functioned as a cultural palimpsest. This complex semiotic operatic system could represent and construct the emerging national consciousness, which eventually led to the revolution of 1848.

III. *Hunyadi László* – making history public

III.1. László Hunyadi - The historical figure

László Hunyadi was the first-born son of János Hunyadi and the brother of the Renaissance Hungarian king Mátyás Hunyadi. László lived in the period when the ever-stronger Ottoman attacks were threatening Europe. His father became famous for his successes in fighting the Ottoman Empire. When the Papal State, governed by Pope Eugene, sent his troupes against the Turks, the mercenaries suffered defeat, but the small army commanded by János Hunyadi, and later reinforced by the Polish soldiers of King Ulászló I, managed to defeat the Turks in Serbia. Later Hunyadi forced the Turkish army all the way back to the Balkans, as far as Nis in Bulgaria. Only the hard winter could stop Hunyadi's men in 1443. Other victories and defeats followed this military expedition, and Hunyadi's figure became inscribed in the European cultural consciousness.

Meanwhile Hungary's internal political confrontations escalated into a civil war. When the Habsburg King Albert of Hungary (1397-1439) died, the question of succession tore the country apart. Because Albert's son Ladislaus Posthumus of

³⁰⁰ Ibid. 209-210.

Bohemia and Hungary (1440-1457) (or László V) was in that time a baby, he could not take immediately his father's place. His cousin, Frederick III (1415-1493) was chosen to follow Albert as Holy Roman Emperor. Many Hungarian nobles rejected László's mother, but also Frederick III, who was chosen by the Habsburgs to step on the throne. Therefore they preferred the Polish King Ulászló I (or Wladyslaw III of Poland) (1424-1444) as successor.

When King Ulászló I died in the battle of Varna (10 November 1444) some Hungarian nobles decided to bring László V and the crown back to Hungary. In the meantime János Hunyadi was elected Regent of Hungary. From 1450 onwards Hungarian and Czech nobles exercised pressure on Frederick III to free László, whom he basically held captive. In 1452 he was forcefully liberated by his uncle, Ulrich Czillei (1406-1456), who also gained guardianship over the child. In 1453 the thirteen years old boy was crowned king under the name László V.

Hungary became thus the battleground of fighting noblemen and foreigners who tried to seize the power. Czillei was one of the main protagonists of this civil war. Trying to become Regent after János Hunyadi's death he wanted to get rid of Hunyadi's two sons, who might claim the position of their father.

At the diet of Futak (October 1456), László defended himself against Czillei's accusations that his father owed debts to the state, and he also promised to surrender all the royal castles to King László V. They agreed that the first fortress to be transferred was the one in Belgrade (Nándorfehérvár), of which László was commander.³⁰¹ Czillei joined the king at Nándorfehérvár and he hired German mercenaries to murder Hunyadi. But Hunyadi had been warned of the plan, and his men killed Czillei after a quarrel in the morning of November 9, 1456. King László V, who was terrified by his uncle's murder, pardoned Hunyadi and promised to his mother, Erzsébet Szilágyi, to protect the family and never revenge László's deed. As a sign of his benevolence he appointed Hunyadi captain-general of his kingdom. László accompanied the king to Buda, but arriving there he was arrested and beheaded on March 16, 1457. The King died shortly afterwards.

III. 2 Representations of Hunyadi László in Hungarian Cultural Memory

The major sources of the Hunyadi-myth were the chronicles of Antonio Bonfini, a historian who was close to the Hunyadi family, and Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II, who was in charge of King László V's education.

The tragic history of László Hunyadi was a favourite literary topic at the beginning of the eighteenth century.³⁰² Lőrinc Tóth's drama entitled *Két László* (Two Lászlós), which received a prize from the Academy of Sciences, became the source of Béni Egressy's libretto for Erkel's *Hunyadi László*. *Két László* was performed in 1842 in the National Theatre.³⁰³ The structure of the play is similar to that of Erkel's *Hunyadi*, though it had more characters and more conflicts than the opera version.

Erkel's *Hunyadi László*, first performed on January 27, 1844, had an important role in the national movement, during the Hungarian revolution of 1848, and the following war of independence in 1849. People sang favourite choruses of the opera on the streets and requested the actors to present Erkel's work on the stage during the revolution. In 1844, six months after the opera's first performance, the leading poet of the age, Mihály Vörösmarty, published his drama version of the Hunyadi-story entitled *Czilley és a Hunyadiak*. In 1848, Sándor Petőfi wrote the poem *A király esküje* (The King's Oath), in which the main character is not László Hunyadi but King László, who reneged on his oath. In 1853, in the bleak post-revolutionary years, János Arany wrote a ballad entitled *V. László*, focusing again on the weak and perfidious king.

It is worth noting how the dramatic accent shifted: before the revolution, the dramas focused on László Hunyadi's tragedy, and on the traitor and schemer figure of Czillei. During the revolution, King László V became the central figure of the literary works. After the bloody oppression of revolution, Arany's ballad focused on the remorse and the horror of the traitor king for having killed the national hero. The treacherous king became a symbol of the Austrian repression after 1848.

³⁰¹ The surrender of the fortress in Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade) is the starting situation of the Ferenc Erkel's opera, *Hunyadi László* (1844).

³⁰² *Magyar színháztörténet 1790-1873*, (ed. Kerényi Ferenc), Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1990, 47.

³⁰³ Barna, 201.

The Hunyadi-topic was very popular among nineteenth-century Hungarian painters. Witness *Hunyadi László siratása* (1859) (The mourning of László Hunyadi), by Viktor Madarász (1830-1917), (**Image 18**) *V. László esküje* (The King's oath) by Béla Vízkelety (1825-1864), *Hunyadi László búcsúja* (1866) (László Hunyadi's Farewell) by Gyula Benczur (1844-1920) (**Image 19**), or *V. László* (1870) by Bertalan Székely (1835-1910) (**Image 20**). A bronze statue by László Dunaiszky (1822-1904) *Hunyadi László és Czilley Ulrik* (1846) should be also mentioned as representation of the Hunyadi-theme.

László Hunyadi became a marker of national identity in the nineteenth century, linked to the other popular legend cycle about his brother King Mátyás, called by the people Mátyás the Just³⁰⁴. While in the seventeenth and eighteenth century King St. Stephen and the leader of the nomadic Hungarians, Árpád, were popular topics in the arts, in the nineteenth century the Hunyadi-myths became the cornerstone of the Hungarian national narrative.

Ferenc Kölcsey's (1790-1838) poem, *Hymnus* (1823), to which Erkel composed the music, contained the line "és nyögte Mátyás bús hadát Bécsnek büszke vára" ("and the proud castle of Vienna dreaded [literally "moaned" under] Mátyás's army") referred to King Mátyás's siege of Vienna in 1485. This "glorious" past act was sadly contrasted with the nineteenth-century situation, when Hungary was subordinated to Vienna. Not only glory or humiliation was at stake, but also independence or subservience. The mythic history of the Hunyadi family, which was in every respect a Hungarian success story, presented itself as an excellent example of resistance against the Habsburgs. It was seen as an appropriate thesaurus of national heroes that could express and represent in a more or less unified picture all the existing national paradigms.

Why could many Hungarians recognise themselves as a nation in this opera more than in any other one until then? According to the strongest national paradigm around 1840, represented by the liberals and radicals, the nation could be defined as a group of people sharing common traditions. A community with common traditions also had to involve a common historical narrative that would create coherence within the

³⁰⁴ Mátyás gained independence of and power over the barons by dividing them, – therefore he was liked by the middle-class nobility, who spread the myth of Matthias the Just – and by raising a large royal army (*fekete sereg* or *Black Army*) of mercenaries, whose main force included the remnants of the Hussites in the Czech lands. At this time Hungary reached its greatest territorial extent of the epoch

semantic system called *the nation*. Therefore only those stories could function as elements of nation-building, which could suggest and advance national unity, ones that would be recognised as such by many.

Hunyadi János and his sons were just fit for this role. Unlike the protagonists of the other Hungarian operas, who were either of aristocratic or of peasant origin,³⁰⁵ the Transylvanian Hunyadi family belonged to the middle-class nobility and János had earned his title and recognition with military excellence shown in a series of victories over the Turkish army.

III. 3 László Hunyadi on the operatic stage

The plot of the opera³⁰⁶ follows the well-known story of the Hunyadi family as preserved in the Hungarian cultural memory. The faithful and honest László Hunyadi, the weak and treacherous king László V, the schemer and power thirsty Ulrich Czilley and the proud nationalist Hungarian nobleman, Gara are the main characters of the opera. The two women figures, László Hunyadi's mother, Erzsébet and his fiancé, Mária Gara do not play an active role in the story. Both are depicted as sufferers of the history – in a feministic reading one might say that they are the victims of men – even though both try to influence events: László's mother makes the king swear he would not punish László for Czilley's murder, and Mária Gara prepares to save

(present-day southeastern Germany in the west, Dalmatia in the south, Bulgaria in the east, and Poland in the north).

³⁰⁵ The libretto of József Ruzitska's opera entitled *Béla futása* (Béla's Flucht) (1822) was based on a German drama with the same title written by Kotzebue. *Zrínyi* (1869) composed by Ágós Adelburg (1830-1873) could not succeed because its libretto was a bad adaptation of Körner's drama with the same title and Adelburg was not able to balance this shortcoming with musical excellence. Erkel's *Báthori Mária* (1840) couldn't become a national opera among other things because the protagonist was a woman. Besides the libretto written and published by András Dugonics under the same title, was based on Portuguese and German dramatic adaptations. The music is composed of Hungarian songs (*magyar nóta*) and *verbunkos* texture. Nevertheless, Mária's figure is the archetype for the women characters in the later Erkel operas, such as Erzsébet Szilágyi from *Hunyadi László* or Melinda from *Bánk bán*. Károly Thern's *Tihany ostroma* (The Siege of Tihany) (1845) wished to present the period of Hungarian settling in Pannonia. But he did not even strive to integrate some Hungarian particularity into his Italian musical texture, but only now and then added *verbunkos* rhythm to his orchestral harmonies. The Mátyás operas, József Heinisch's and György Arnold's *Mátyás királynak választása* (The Election of King Mathias) (1832) or *Mátyás király* (King Mathias) composed by Sándor Bertha (1884) were far from being musical masterpieces. Though Erkel composed later musically more elaborate operas as *Dózsa György* (1867), *Brankovics György* (1874) and the Wagnerian *Névtelen hősök* (Anonymous heroes) (1880), these were neither successful nor regarded as *national operas*. This could be explained with their weak libretto, or the chosen topic. Both were the case in *Dózsa György*. The libretto was a very weak dramatic work and an opera about a peasant rebellion was not fit for the atmosphere of the Ausgleich. *Névtelen hősök*, which tried erect a monument to the heroes of the 1848 revolution, had lost its relevance by the end of the century.

László from her father's terrible plan. But eventually they are unable to rescue their beloved and the men's world has the final say in the course of history.³⁰⁷ Mátyás, László's younger brother appears only twice, and does not have a significant active role in the story. Nevertheless, Mátyás represents the hope of a better future in the dramatic-poetic structure of the opera. Gara's harsh individualistic thirst of power and László's *hubris* of trusting the king are presented as equally fatal mistakes. Only the uncompromisingly strong policy of Mátyás, who could still create a strong bond with "the people", is the only viable solution according to the logic of the story.

Since the story relies on dichotomies of "we" and "the others" as reflected in the divided chorus between the Hungarians and the mercenaries in Act I, one might expect that the division is going to appear in the music as well: *verbunkos* associated with Hungarian characters, while some international musical style with the king and the other foreigners. However, this is not the case. *Hunyadi László* is a blend of Italian, German, French and Hungarian musical styles. The overture (**Example 2**), which was composed in 1845, a year after the first performance, can be considered the first Hungarian symphonic poem, for it is a harmonious web of all the main arias and choirs from the opera. The *verbunkos* numbers create coherence. Reminiscences can be heard of the Rákóczy March in both the slow and fast sections. The opening choir of the Hungarians and the renowned "Meghalt a cselszövő" are both written in *verbunkos* style.

The king's aria, stuck in the "Meghalt a cselszövő" choir, is also a *verbunkos*, and organically fits in the choir's music. This might be interpreted as a symbolic musical representation of the king's hypocrisy. He seems to be in tune with the Hungarians when he promises not to revenge Czilley's death, but he never takes his oath seriously. The text and the music are in dramatic tension. King László V sings on the *verbunkos* notes: "You base rebel,/death calls for death!/Your deed will be met by/the executioner's axe on your throat!/The blood which has been shed/can only be washed away by your blood./Wherever you are: the judge's sentence/shall find you!" This predicts László's fate and death, though the Hungarians seem to trust the king at this point for they cheer him in the final lines of the choir: "The schemer is dead/Long live our dear country and the wise and good King!/Long live László, long live King

³⁰⁶ See Appendix 1.

³⁰⁷ However, the historical figure Erzsébet Szilágyi, after László's death avenged the murder of his son and started a bloody war among the Transylvanian Saxons with the help of her brother.

László!/"Long live the sage and great King!" It is remarkable that the king should appear or leave the stage accompanied by *verbunkos* tunes.

Gara, Mária's father, who turns against Hunyadi and arranges his death, sings a long aria also based on *verbunkos* music. The *verbunkos* functions here as a double symbol: on the one hand, it refers to Gara's Hungarian aristocratic origin, and on the other it expresses his passionate desire to govern the country. Social differences are a major cause of the conflict between Gara and Hunyadi. Gara is a representative of an eighteenth-century aristocratic nation concept in the opera, while Hunyadi, by the right of his father, is chosen by the people to lead the country.

Three contesting nation concepts are in fact the central source of conflict in the opera: the king and his supporters form one group, Gara the second, and László and his supporters the third. Gara is the representative of the view of nation as ancestry. He does not like the king and is also concerned about the country's fate, but he cannot accept Hunyadi as governor. Hunyadi, however, has the support of the people. He is the symbol of a national unity of social classes.

The king is pictured as a weak character who can be easily influenced. He is almost obsessively afraid of the Hungarians, especially Hunyadi. His weakness is shown when he agrees to back Czillei's plan of killing László Hunyadi, when he is afraid to punish Hunyadi's people for Czillei's death, and also when Gara convinces him to send Hunyadi to the gallows. In the 1840s, Hungarians could easily recognise in the weak king László V their Emperor Ferdinand V (1793-1875), who was protected by Metternich just like László V by Czillei. The protection of the feeble king was in both cases only a manoeuvre to exert unperturbed political power.³⁰⁸

The opera had a huge impact not only because of its topic, but also because of the use of *verbunkos* style. Erkel's music was just as effective as the libretto. An inexperienced, weak king, the villain foreigner Czillei, and the Hungarian nobleman Gara, brought about the tragic end of László Hunyadi. According to popular interpretations that are highly contested, a similar treachery, that of count Károlyi, led to the suppression of Rákóczy's war of independence. Internal conflicts and external force led to the tragic end of both independence movements. This was the opera's dénouement, as well as the end of Rákóczy's war of independence, to which the

³⁰⁸ See **Image 22** for a visual representation of the relationship between King László and his guardian and educator, Czillei.

verbunkos music alluded. The memory encoded in the music made it sound as if it would forecast the dénouement of the real-life events in 1849.

The *verbunkos* music is transcended in the oath scene of Act II by organ music and church chorals, suggesting that the oath was not made to Hungarians only but in front of God; the king's breaking of his oath is hence not only a sin against the Hungarians but also against God. Church music has the same function here as the choral in the first scene in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*: it creates and transcends the cultural community. Another crowd-scene in Act III, the Nuptial Choir at the wedding feast of Mária and László, is in a dignified, fast *verbunkos* style and closed with a *csárdás*. The *csárdás* follows the traditional *verbunkos* style established by Bihari, Csermák and Lavotta: three slow sections, two fast sections and a coda section follow each other. In Act III, László Hunyadi's prison-aria and the funeral march are good examples of the slow *verbunkos*, which had always been associated with the expression of melancholy in music.

Folk songs, or rather pseudo-folk songs, constitute the material for two of László's arias, the love aria and the prison aria. The male choir commenting on Czilley's death, and the slow section of the Trio and Andante in the duet between Mária and László were originally folk song material.³⁰⁹

Those arias that imitate Italian style in *Hunyadi László* are masterpieces worth mentioning. The first such aria is Mátyás's Cavatina in Act I after the opening choir. This is followed by duets between the king and Czilley, and then between Czilley and László. Erzsébet Szilágyi's maid choir, the bride's aria, the Cabaletta section in Mária and László's duet, the king's two arias (especially the splendid one in Act III), Mária's Nuptial song, Erzsébet's prayer in the final scene, and the storm music are all written in an international style.

The aria named after the French soprano Anne de la Grange, who sang Erzsébet Szilágyi on July 18, 1850, is one of the most difficult challenges in Erzsébet's role. Erkel composed this part later, especially for la Grange. It is a mixture of nineteenth-century Italian style and reminiscences of Mozart. The aria of the Queen of the Night from *Die Zauberflöte* is clearly recognisable in the coloratura section and also appears in the orchestra as flute music. At the end of the opera, in the orchestral part of Erzsébet Szilágyi's penultimate aria, we can listen to the 3+1 fast-fast-fast-slow motif

from Beethoven's 5th symphony, which Erkel was going to reuse in *Bánk bán*, in the dialogue between Bánk and Queen Gertrude.

French and German elements dominate the recitatives that link the arias and dances. The structural principles of the closed scenes are reminiscences of French grand operas, but the content and the representation of the scenery remain Hungarian to the very end. Despite the remarkable part that international musical styles occupy in this opera, the *verbunkos* still dominates. In spite of his eclectic style, Erkel could create coherence and compose an opera that was recognised as undisputedly Hungarian by the contemporary audience.

The versatile expressive Romanticism of the opera is also worth noticing. The lively modulations and the shifts of key are typical of the Romantic operatic style. The overture itself is a good example of these musical variations and transpositions. Another romantic feature can be ascribed to the choirs in the opera. They represent the “voice of the people”, Hungarian as well as German. The clash between the two parties acquires a remarkable musical expression in the dialogue between the two choirs, the Hungarians and the mercenaries (Act I).

Erkel wrote the opera for a medium size Romantic orchestra in which the wind instruments – especially the flute and clarinet – have a remarkable role. This might be because Erkel had to invite an army orchestra to help him out in the theatre. There was a shortage of professional educated Hungarian musicians, and wind instruments play an important role in military music. Horn and trumpet also have significance in the opera, especially in the marches and the overture. The trumpet music of the “Hunyadi-motif” repeatedly recurs throughout the opera. The delicate string sections require virtuoso players, especially at the constant quick transpositions between G flat major and E flat minor.

Erkel added later instrumental and vocal parts to *Hunyadi László*. The overture he added in 1845 he rewrote in 1878. The Cabaletta with flute cadence was added to the part of Mária Gara in the wedding scene in Act III. In the 1850 staging, at which the “La Grange” aria was sung by the soprano for the first time, the audience could also enjoy for the first time the ballet section in Act III with the *csárdás* music. All these changes can be found in the piano score of the opera edited by Aurél Kern and published in 1896. Ferenc Erkel's two sons, the Wagnerite Sándor and Gyula, both

³⁰⁹ Folk songs have no significant roles in *Hunyadi László*, but Erkel experimented later in *Sarolta*

conductors at that time, assisted Kern during his work. Gusztáv Oláh and Kálmán Nádasdy revised the opera in 1935. Vilmos Komor published the piano version in 1968 with a few minor musical changes. This version was played on the Hungarian opera stages for years.

The revisions, which aimed mainly at scenic and dramatic “improvement”, affected negatively the musical coherence of the opera. Some parts became incomprehensible without the omitted sections. Right at the opening of the opera, for example, following the male choir of the Hungarians and Mátyás’s Cavatina, the choir asks Mátyás why he invited them to the castle in Nándorfehérvár. Mátyás then explains that his brother returned from the diet of Futak, where it has been decided that he has to return to the king the right over the fortresses in the country. Without these antecedents, the strong resistance of the Hungarians to László’s plan and Mihály Szilágyi’s advice not to let the king and his mercenaries into the castle seems puzzling and unclear. The Hungaroton recording of 1984 restored the opera to its original version, which is more enjoyable and reinstates *Hunyadi László* in its right place. In this version we can listen for the first time to a fairly authentic version that is comparable to the Erkel’s last version of the opera.

Contemporary listeners regarded *Hunyadi László* as a national opera, in spite of its eclecticism. Its *national* character can only be understood within the framework of the Hungarian and European culture that shaped both the Hunyadi-myth and the practice in which the *verbunkos* could emerge as Hungarian national idiom. The Hungarian and the European cultural traditions both contributed to the making of *Hunyadi László* as a Hungarian national opera. The re-enactment of history evoked strong emotional response and had an impact on the formation of a nineteenth-century national consciousness. The interplay between a synchronic and a diachronic level contributed to the reception of this opera as a national work of art. The *diachronic level* involved the revival of certain patterns of the past that were remembered and preserved throughout the centuries as national history by historiographers and artists. The *synchronic level* could be defined as an interrelation of the contemporary aesthetic, social and political discourses and practices that made history public and presented it as a national narrative shared by all the people belonging to a certain cultural community. The diachronic and the synchronic levels reinforced and legitimated their

(1862) with an operatic structure based on Hungarian folk songs.

own systems by cross-referencing each other. One could argue – and modernists do – that nationalism emerged on the synchronic level. However, these *imagined communities* did not and could not emerge from a vacuum: the stories, images and practices that were used to create a national coherence in nineteenth-century society were stored in the cultural memory of the community that was imagining itself as a nation. Once we acknowledge that the nation is an imagined community that did not evolve as a natural organic authentic entity but rather as a complex conceptual construct created in the dynamic network of both internal and external cultural, political and social exchanges, we can start to investigate these interactions and recursive patterns.

We have seen that the combination of the popular *verbunkos* music and the well-known story of László Hunyadi was an expression of the national experience. This national experience was conveyed by the interplay of the different layers of national history and cultural memory: the first level was the libretto's Renaissance story of László Hunyadi, the second, Ferenc Rákóczy's war of independence,³¹⁰ represented by the *verbunkos* music that became popular in that period, and the third was the present level, the political opposition to Vienna, reflected by the previous two levels. The conflict with the house of the Habsburgs, which tried to constrain or oppress the sovereignty of the Hungarian nation, has been a recurring topic in Hungarian cultural memory. The Hunyadi story, popular in the theatre and in published literary works, was recycled and transformed through the centuries. The major types were also well-known from earlier literary works: the treacherous king, László V, who saw his power jeopardised by Hunyadi; the figure of the foreign schemer, Czilley, who misused the king's trust in order to eliminate his rival, László Hunyadi; the Hungarian aristocrat Gara, whose thirst for power was so strong that he could sacrifice his daughter's happiness and László's life to acquire the rule of the country; and the national hero, László Hunyadi, who became a victim of his own *hubris*. The nineteenth-century audience could recognise its aspiration for national independence in the interplay of historical layers, each of them referring to the same idea: freedom versus oppression, the ancient right of the Hungarian nation to sovereignty against the autocratic rule of the Habsburgs. In spite of the many Italian, French and German motives it was regarded as Hungarian because the recurring *verbunkos* theme created a sense of

³¹⁰ See Chapter Three.

cohesion. This structure was not as complex as one constructed with Wagner's leitmotif technique, which mobilised musical memory and asked for a new mode to listen; nevertheless it was also based on the idea of creating cohesion and distinction by repetition. The multi-layered opera represented the historical myth of Hungarian freedom versus Habsburg oppression both on the musical and on the textual level, creating a sense of narrative longevity recognised as national history.

IV. *Bánk bán* – History in *Bánk bán* and *Bánk bán* in history

Ferenc Erkel's third opera, *Bánk bán*, was first performed in 1861, in the year that the Hungarians began talks with the Austrian government, which eventually led to the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1867. The reminiscences of revolution from 1848, the years of the oppression, the atmosphere of the reconciliation period all contributed to the success of Erkel's new work and its acknowledgement as *national opera* by the Hungarian public.

However, the symbolism and the effect of the piece on the contemporary audience are hardly comprehensible without looking back at the history of the topic in the literary cultures of Hungary and Europe. The reception of József Katona's play *Bánk bán* (1819) must be discussed, because it was strongly intertwined with the efforts to establish the Hungarian theatre at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Just as *Hunyadi László's* case, the reception and canonisation of Erkel's *Bánk bán* as national opera should be understood within the cultural dynamism involving the interaction of theatrical reminiscences of history and the opera's actual political, cultural context.

IV. 1 The history behind the myth

Bánk bán – the rhyming title of the opera consists of a name, “Bánk” and the title “bán”. The Bán was the deputy of the king in Hungary or the head of a certain region. Bánk is the old form of the name Benedek (Benedictus). Governor Bánk is a historical figure, who lived and served under King Endre II (1205-1235). When King Endre II went to war in 1213, he assigned the rule of the country to his wife Queen Gertrude and his brother-in-law, Otto, who was elevated to the rank of archbishop. Hungarian noblemen disliked the Queen's policy, plotted against her and wanted to overthrow

her power. Eventually Queen Gertrude was murdered, but we do not know for sure if the historical Bánk killed her or some other rebel. In Hungarian cultural memory Bánk confronted the foreign queen with the deficiencies of her rule. She responded arrogantly, and her insensible behaviour towards the needs of the Hungarians, whose rights were continuously violated with her consent, triggered Bánk's rage. Their quarrel ended in her murder.

The popularity of the Bánk bán theme in Europe can be traced back to the Middle Ages, when the Hungarian Kingdom was one of Europe's strongest political powers. It is thus understandable that such an exceptional event as the murder of a Hungarian queen were recorded in many chronicles all over Europe. Queen Gertrude's³¹¹ murder was noted in many annals, but the circumstances of her murder and death remained obscure. The internal situation was characterised by unrest caused by the queen's behaviour. While King Endre II was away at military campaigns Queen Gertrude placed her relatives in favourable positions and gave them, according to the *Novae Institutiones*, entire counties and estates. This led to the dissatisfaction and uprising among the Hungarian nobility, who felt robbed and exploited by a foreign queen. This unrest ended with the queen's murder and the *Golden Bull* (Aranybulla), a document accepted by the king, which granted more rights to the nobility and reduced the taxes and duties of the landowners. This Hungarian *Magna Charta*, the *Golden Bull*, became the pact that protected the rights of the Hungarian nobility through the ages, and became the basis of the so-called feudal constitution that assured the rights of Hungarian aristocracy under the Habsburg kings.

It is around this period that the small landowners, who were in service of the court, became to be known as *serviens regis*. This status was associated with those, who in exchange and recognition for their military service to the king, were granted personal freedom. The *Golden Bull* clearly stated that *serviens* – as the nobility was called – were not liable to pay taxes. They were withdrawn from the jurisdiction of the county bailiff, leaving legal judgements to the king and the palatine. The document included their military responsibilities and their personal liberty as guaranteed by the king. The *Golden Bull* granted the right to oppose the king's

³¹¹ Gertrude of Merania (1185 – September 24, 1213) was the first wife of Andrew II, king of Hungary. She and Andrew married before 1203, and she was the mother of his successor Béla IV of Hungary and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, wife of Louis, landgrave of Thuringia. Gertrude was killed in 1213, by the Hungarian noblemen, who were jealous over the advancement of her relatives at court. Due to the

arbitrary rule to the old nobility and not to the *serviens*. The later claims of the Hungarian aristocracy to a free choice of its king cited the *Golden Bull*.³¹²

IV. 2 Bánk bán – a recurrent historical myth

Since the chroniclers did not know about the political background, they used their imagination to fill in the details of the murder case. An Austrian verse chronicle from 1268 mentions for the first time the rape of the governor's wife (Melinda in the opera) as the cause of the murder. The historical figure may have been actually Petur bán's wife, who was a young beauty according to the chronicles, and not Bánk bán's fifty years old spouse. These Austrian verses were the source of a fourteenth-century chronicle, the *Képes Krónika*, which was followed by János Thuróczy's *A magyarok krónikája*, written in the fifteenth century. Bonfini, a historian at King Mathias Corvinus's court around 1487, used this chronicle for his narrative in his famous *Rerum ungaricum decade*, which was popular in its time and appeared in 1545 in German translation as well. His story concentrated on three scenes: Bánk's wife was raped with the queen's assistance; the couple's dialogue after the rape; a tableau-like scene, in which Bánk appears with a bloody dagger, that is followed by his dialogue with the king, which ends with the king's pardon. Since Bonfini was a well-known and acknowledged European scholar, his works were disseminated and translated. This is how the Bánk bán story entered into European cultural consciousness.

Hans Sachs (1494-1576), the cobbler-poet of Nürnberg wrote in 1561 a drama about Bánk bán, which was followed in the eighteenth century by various dramatic adaptations of the story in England and Germany. Eighteenth-century intellectuals were preoccupied with theories about the right ruler and ideal state models. The English dramatist George Lillo (1690-1739) published in 1730 *Elmerick, or Justice triumphant*, which was presented in the Drury Lane theatre with great success.³¹³ In this play, King Endre II was pictured as the constitutionally reigning ruler. George Stephens also wrote a version of the Bánk-bán story, entitled *Gertrude and Beatrice, or the Queen of Hungary* (1839). In France, the first mention of the Bánk-bán story is

current political situation most of her murderers remained unpunished during the rule of Andrew II. Only Gertrude's son Béla IV took revenge after elevated to the throne.

³¹² For more details on the period see *A Concise History of Hungary*, (ed. István György-Tóth), Budapest: Corvina-Osiris, 2005, 67-70.

³¹³ *Magyar Színháztörténet 1790-1873*, 367.

from 1726. In Italy, two short stories about Bánk bán were claimed to have been written by Boccaccio, but they turned out to be forgeries based on Bonfini's text.³¹⁴ Amadeo di Francesco, an Italian Hungarologist discovered a Croatian version of the Bánk story. In Germany, the Bánk bán story also circulated in several versions. József Katona read one of them, written by a certain first name Müller, whose first name we do not know. Some believe that Goethe may have read Bánk bán's story because he who wrote a poem about Hans Sachs and was familiar with the works of his. What we know for sure is that a Hungarian student, Ede Lakfalvy, wrote a letter to Schiller in 1793, advising him to write dramas about such outstanding figures of Hungarian history as Rákóczy, Nádasdy or Bánk.³¹⁵

Bánk was made popular in Europe by the Austrian playwright, Franz Grillparzer, who wrote a commissioned drama for the coronation of Karolina Augusta, wife of Emperor Franz I in 1825. Grillparzer finished the play only three years later. Grillparzer's title, *Ein treuer Diener seines Herrn* (A true servant of his Lord), suggests already that the play did not encourage regicide, but the Emperor nevertheless offered to buy the rights, just to prevent its spreading. In 1830, at the news of the new revolutionary movements in France, he forbade the drama's performance.³¹⁶

In Hungary the story of Bánk also had a rich tradition and was recycled many times. András Valkay (1540-1587) published a poem about Bánk titled *Krónikás ének az nagyúr Bánk bánról* (Chronicle song about the great Lord Bánk bán) in 1567 in Transylvania, at a time, when he had good reasons to fear that the Habsburgs would occupy Transylvania. Valkay's poem had been published six times within twenty-seven years, making it perhaps the first Hungarian "best seller". Gáspár Heltai (1490-1574), a writer and press owner in Kolozsvár, published in 1575 the first history of the Hungarian people, the *Chronica az Magyaroknac dolgairúl* (Chronicle about the history of the Hungarians), based on Bonfini's chronicle.

In the school theatres, the Bánk-bán topic was also very popular. István Geleji Katona (1589-1649), a protestant preacher, mentioned in one of his sermons in 1645 a performance of the Bánk story. In 1765 the students of the Jesuit school from Kassa (Kosice) played a drama about Bánk. In the nineteenth century, four Hungarian plays

³¹⁴ Kerényi, Ferenc (ed.): Katona József, *Bánk bán*, Budapest: Matúra- Ikon, 1992, 6.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

were based on the story: a drama written around 1820 by the leading poet of the age, Sándor Kisfaludy (1772-1844); a drama from 1810 by Elek József Horváth (1822-1876); a third one from 1827 by the Transylvanian writer Sándor Boér titled *Gróf Bankó vagy a kerítéség bére* (Count Bankó or the price of the matchmaker); and József Katona's *Bánk bán*, which became the most famous.

V. József Katona's *Bánk bán*

József Katona, a playwright, actor and lawyer, was one of the most important figures of Hungarian theatre life at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He played with Déryné's strolling theatre company, and was among the actors who performed both in the Rondella and the Castle theatres of Buda. Katona's wish to act in a permanent Hungarian stone theatre in Pest could not be fulfilled, for the Hungarian Theatre of Pest opened only in 1837, seven years after his death. However, in Kolozsvár (Cluj, Klausenburg) theatre life had flourished within the first Hungarian stone theatre since 1821. Kolozsvár contributed, though indirectly, to the creation and the popularisation of Katona's *Bánk bán*.

The literary journal *Erdélyi Múzeum*, based in Kolozsvár and edited by Gábor Döbrentei, announced in 1814 a drama competition for heroic historical dramas. Katona's *Bánk bán* apparently did not reach the jury because it was not listed in the journal among the submitted ones. However, Katona remarked in a note to *Bánk bán* that he wrote it in response to an appeal "for a new theatre play announced in *Erdélyi Múzeum*". What we do not know is whether he eventually sent his drama or not to the jury. He later thought that the competition was either postponed for financial reasons, or it was simply dismissed, because the committee could not award any of the received works.³¹⁷

It is possible that Katona submitted his drama but jury may have refused even to consider it because it dealt with regicide. According to the law issued by the Viennese censor F.K. Hägelin in 1794, it was forbidden to present the murder of a royal person on stage. Featuring a king or a queen as a morally weak personality was even more strictly prohibited, and one of the German *Bánk bán*s, presumably the work of the

³¹⁷ „Ötödik éve, hogy készítettem e darabot, mikor az *Erdélyi Múzeumban* a kolozsvári leendő játékszíntől felszólítást hirdettetett. Nem volt-e pénz? Vagy – amit szégyen volna hinni – nem

Piarist János Erdődy, was therefore forbidden in 1794. Elek József Horváth, the mentioned author of a nineteenth-century *Bánk bán*, dedicated his work to count József Sigray but advised him to keep it hidden in his library, “because in these days this play cannot be brought into daylight”. It was published only in 1929.³¹⁸

In 1906 a manuscript was discovered in the attic of a cottage near Kecskemét, which turned out to be the first version of Katona’s *Bánk bán*, written in 1815, the date mentioned in the foreword to the play. This may have been the manuscript he intended but never submitted to Kolozsvár. He read it to a strolling theatre company, which performed it in Kecskemét in 1816. One of the most remarkable actors, Miklós Udvarhelyi (1790-1864), immediately felt attracted to the drama, and chose it as a benefit performance in 1833 in Kassa (Kosice). This is the first time Katona’s *Bánk bán* was ever performed by actors. The Kassa performance used a later version of the play, which Katona published in 1819. According to Katona’s foreword to this version, he revised and amended the drama according to the remarks of his friend, Boldizsár Bárány (1793-1860), who sent him a *Rosta* (Criticism) in 1817.

The censor forbade the performance of the 1819 version most probably because of the murder scene of Queen Gertrude. However, the censor permitted the publishing of the drama, so one year later, in 1820, Katona sent his play to the renowned publisher in Pest, János Tamás Trattner (1789-1825). *Bánk bán* was published in the same year.³¹⁹ Trattner complained that he could sell only twenty books in the first year. Katona expressed his disillusionment in 1821 in an article titled *Mi az oka, hogy Magyarországon a Játékszíni Költő-mesterség lábra nem tud kapni?* (What is the cause that in Hungary the dramatic art cannot establish itself?).³²⁰

No reviews of *Bánk bán* appeared, and even his hometown, Kecskemét, which bought a few copies, only appreciated it as a “remarkable undertaking to forward the cause of the Hungarian drama.”³²¹ Hungarian writers and critics discovered it only after it had already become popular with the Hungarian public due to its frequent staging after 1833.

We cannot blame the censor alone only for the long neglect of Katona’s *Bánk bán*. It is most likely that the sarcastic and self-ironic style of Katona’s pamphlet about the

találtatott valamirevaló munka? De valójában a híre is elnémult, vagy legalább én nem tudok róla.” In Katona, 24.

³¹⁸ Orosz, László, *A Bánk bán értelmezésének története*, Budapest: Krónika Nova, 1999, 13.

³¹⁹ Orosz, 19.

³²⁰ In *Tudományos Gyűjtemény*, 1821, IV, 3-22.

state of the Hungarian drama has offended some of his contemporaries, among them Ferenc Kölcsey, a recognised poet, Ferenc Kazinczy, a linguist and organiser of contemporary literary life or Károly Kisfaludy, playwright and poet. Katona referred indirectly to all of them in his pamphlet, though we cannot presume that he actually wanted to criticise or hurt them. None of his letters or remarks would suggest that he wanted to continue the polemics or that he was hostile towards any of his contemporaries. After the difficulties experienced as a playwright, he retreated to Kecskemét and practised law until the end of his life in 1830. He saw no review of his drama or see the successes of the *Bánk bán* performances. However, thanks to enthusiastic theatre players and, later, to Erkel, posterity recognised Katona, and his play became *the* Hungarian national drama.

The canonisation process of the *Bánk-bán* story reveals the impossibility of writing an organic literary history based solely on works written in a national language or bound to only one cultural community. Culture transgresses the boundaries of genres, media and nations. Consider, for instance, that Katona wanted to write an original drama but fifteen percent of his final work consisted of “quotations”. He chose the topic, but the characters and the plot were already given. Though we would like to think that he read some of the Hungarian *Bánk bán* adaptations, it cannot be proved that any of them served as a primary source of inspiration. Instead, he mentioned as his source Csery’s novel entitled *Otto*, which was translated from German and was originally written by a certain Müller. In the notes added to the 1815 version, Katona mentions Karl von Eckartshausen (1752-1803) and his work entitled *Der Prinz und sein Freund* (The Prince and his friend) (1789) which was published in Pest. The other name that comes up is Leonhard Wächter (1762-1837), who published under the pseudonym Veit Weber a seven volume series entitled *Sagen der Vorzeit*. This was a collection of medieval chivalrous stories and historical sagas that presented the Middle Ages according to the ideologies of the Enlightenment. Knights fighting for majestic public interests appealed to Katona’s fantasy already imbued with patriotism. He borrowed from this book about 250 lines, and 70 verses from Eckartshausen.³²² Nevertheless, Katona’s play was received as an authentic Hungarian national drama. Theatre companies had the greatest role in popularising *Bánk bán*. We do not have any reliable data about the

³²¹ Orosz, 20.

earliest performances, only rumour that the play was performed in Pécs and in 1828 in Kassa. We saw that the actor Miklós Udvarhelyi chose the play as his benefit performance in 1833 in Kassa. In 1834 it was performed in Kolozsvár, again as a benefit performance for the actor, Gábor Egressy, just as in 1839 for Kántorné, starring as Melinda. In between it was performed in 1836 in Buda, too. We have only few records about audience reactions, but know that it was the favourite of the actors.³²³

The ever-stricter censorship forbade performances of *Bánk bán* in 1837-38. Kossuth, the future leader of the revolution, was arrested, a legal action ran against count Wesselényi, and the first issue of *Hírnök*, a Hungarian journal supported by the Viennese court, appeared. This was the periodical that was involved in the opera war via its editor, János Munkácsy, playwright, Viennese informant, and ardent opera lover. Though the representatives of the Hungarian Reform Movement did not know that Munkácsy was a secret agent, they mistrusted and disliked him simply because of his journal was supported by Vienna. The other party, the reformist opposition, did not further *Bánk bán*'s canonisation either. Bajza, the director of the theatre in Pest and Munkácsy's main adversary in the opera war, favoured dramas written in the spirit of French classicism, and appreciated action instead of tableau-like portrayals of sentiments. Nevertheless, because of its shortcomings as a theatre play, this drama with its static images and strong emotional clashes was suitable for the operatic stage.

The radicals – the actor Egressy, the poet Garay and the critic János Erdélyi, who formed with other intellectuals a group similar to *Junges Deutschland* in Germany – regarded Katona's work as one of the most important dramas written in Hungarian. The political oppression of 1837 eased after 1840. In Kolozsvár, *Bánk bán* was performed again in 1842. In 1844-45 censorship became harsher again, and the public enthusiastically greeted performances suggesting revolutionary ideas. In 1844, Erkel's *Hunyadi László* as well as Mihály Vörösmarty's *Czilley és a Hunyadiak* were performed to great public acclaim. There were twenty-two performances of *Bánk bán* in the National Theatre of Pest between 1845 and 1848.

“At public demand”, the National Theatre performed *Bánk bán* on March 15, 1848 the day the revolution broke out in Pest. The actors were interrupted and the audience demanded that they sing the choir passages of Erkel's *Hunyadi*, the *Marseillaise* and

³²² Kerényi, 11.

the Rákóczy March. During the years of oppression after the revolution *Bánk bán*'s reception was two-fold: on the one hand it instigated more hostile feelings against the "foreigners". On the other hand, it triggered literary debates about its dramatic structure, mainly about the last act, in which the king comes on the stage and pardons Bánk. Critics disliked this part most, because they considered it illogical from the point of view of the dramatic composition.

Three leading literary personalities of the age intended to talk about *Bánk bán* in their inauguration speech at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences: János Arany, Pál Gyulai and Károly Szász. Eventually only Gyulai gave a lecture about *Bánk bán* in 1860, but Arany wrote an analysis of the play in 1879. According to Gyulai, *Bánk bán* was the best tragedy written in Hungarian. Significantly, the message of Katona's play was, in his opinion, not hatred against foreigners. On the contrary, Katona wished to illustrate the tragedy of a country in which conspiracy and aggression had gained a foothold. Before the Ausgleich of 1867, *Bánk bán* could only be performed in a strictly censored version, and the 1868 staging in the National Theatre in Pest had to use a censored text. In the twentieth century, Katona's drama was considered difficult to understand, and it was submitted to Gyula Illyés (1902-1983), a leading national poet, for "revision". The new version was presented in 1975. It was not a good adaptation, and was soon forgotten after its first performance.

VI. The opera *Bánk bán*

Erkel's opera *Bánk bán*, based on Béni Egressy's libretto, was first staged in 1861, at the National Theatre in Pest. "Never and nowhere did any opera play such an important role as Erkel's *Bánk bán* in these crucial times in Hungary." – wrote Kornél Ábrányi, editor of the first Hungarian musical journal, *Zenészet* (1860-1876), in his Erkel biography. Of course, "never" and "nowhere" are rhetorical exaggerations, because some of Verdi's operas or Auber's *La Muette de la Portici* played similar roles, and in the second half of the century Wagner's music dramas also stirred up intensive debates about politics and art. However, Ábrányi did not exaggerate the significance of Erkel's *Bánk bán* in Hungary, which came to overshadow Katona's drama. The public esteem of Erkel's work cannot be reduced

³²³ Orosz, 21.

simply to politics. The opera has to be interpreted within the historical and cultural context that produced it, and time and again re-produced it. Until 1884, the opening of the Opera House in Budapest, *Bánk bán* was performed 108 times, while Katona's play only 38 times.³²⁴

One of the reasons why Erkel's *Bánk bán* could become so famous was the popularity of the opera genre itself. As we saw in the previous chapter, the theatre-going public preferred opera to prose theatre. Though the liberal opposition argued that opera was a foreign art that did not further the Hungarian cause, the public embraced the genre; it acclaimed Erkel as a national composer and *Hunyadi* and *Bánk bán* as national operas. Art appreciation trumped politics by inscribing national values into Erkel's operas without explicitly using them as means of propaganda.

Egressy modified substantially Katona's drama. He left out some of Katona's characters, and he inserted into his libretto several popular poems by Mihály Vörösmarty, for instance Petur's drinking song in Act I, or, in Act II, reminiscences of the *Szózat* as composed by Egressy in 1843. However, the libretto's version as we know it today³²⁵ preserved only five percent of Egressy's text.³²⁶ In 1940 Kálmán Nádasdy revised it, just as he did five years earlier in the case of *Hunyadi László*. Nádor Rékai also adjusted the music, and this is the variant we hear on the latest, much debated, recording of the opera-film directed by Csaba Káel in 2001. Fortunately, the facsimile edition of the piano version, published in 1908 by Rózsavölgyi & Co., has recently been re-printed, and this gives us an idea of the original version.

Contrary to Ferenc Liszt, with whom Erkel directed the Hungarian Music Academy in Budapest as of 1875, Erkel left no collections of correspondence or essays behind. He did not join the Romantic trend of writing about his compositions, nor did he analyse problems in music aesthetics. He tried to avoid as much as possible debates and publicity. His letters do not reveal his mind. However, he wrote a seven-page long manuscript about the structure and composition of the *Bánk bán* – an exceptionally rare document, the only thorough analysis that Erkel ever wrote about his operas. It dates from early March 1861, which means that it was written before the opera's first night. Erkel may have written it at the request of János Pompéry (1819-

³²⁴ Ibid. 47.

³²⁵ See Appendix 2 for the synopsis of the *Bánk bán*.

³²⁶ Margócsy, István: "Hogyan rontsuk el a Bánk bán?", In. *Muzsika* 2003, 3, 29.

1884), editor of the journal *Magyarország*.³²⁷ This is the only document to help us reconstruct *Bánk bán*'s originally staging; it also reveals Erkel's intention as composer and his ideas about music in general, which helps us placing him in the epistemic system of nineteenth-century Hungarian national thought and music.

Erkel calls the music of *Bánk bán*'s prelude, "antique style". First it shows the way *verbunkos* was perceived by the nineteenth-century public: as antique, as something very old and typically Hungarian. Though it dates only from the eighteenth century, its rhythm can already be found in earlier Hungarian dance music. The second conclusion we might draw from Erkel's remark is that he imagined this prelude in the style of Gluck's operatic preludes. Looking back at thirteenth-century Hungary, Erkel mixed in the prelude with great mastery the baroque style with the *verbunkos*.³²⁸

The choir of the queen's courtiers originally sang a drinking song in A major at the beginning of Act I. In the version we can hear today, this "Örömkönnyek ragyogása" (Tears of joy) choir is positioned after the drinking song of Petur. The shift resulted in a logical dramatic contrast; the two choruses constitute an impressive tableau-like dialogue between the foreigners and the Hungarians. The choir of the Hungarians follows Petur's declamation about the unfortunate state of the country. This begins in A minor and modulates towards the end with the refrain to A major. The ensemble of Queen Gertrude, Melinda, Otto and Biberach starts in E minor in "contrapuntal style" and modulates into E major, which Erkel calls a "brilliant style". This is followed by the duet sang by Melinda and Otto, which starts in A major in "French style" and later imitates a "grovelling Italian style" ending in *furioso* in D minor. In the next scene we see Bánk singing in a "grave" C minor; the later Cavatina, in which he remembers his happy days with Melinda, is in A sharp major, but the concluding "furióssimo" is in C minor. Biberach, "the other Iago", starts in an *Andante Sostenuto*, in the "dolorous style" in G minor, which modulates to the even "more sorrowful style" of B minor, and then into the "duetto furioso" or "Garibaldi style" of D flat major. This is followed by a Cabaletta in "real Hungarian style" in G major and in a quick, passionate tempo. This is where Erkel originally inserted a ballet scene in "foreign style" and a Hungarian *csárdás* dance, which he calls "my own characteristic". This structural position of the dance, which we can also find in

³²⁷ Bónis, Ferenc: "Erkel Ferenc a Bánk bánról", In. *Mozarttól Bartókig*, Budapest: Püski, 2000, 92.

the piano version, was criticised by many contemporaries because justly they felt that the dance arrests the rhythm of the action and should be replaced somewhere else. Erkel finally found the best solution: the dance in E major is positioned after Bánk's conversation with Petur, who convinces Bánk that the cause of the rebels is righteous. Since this "conversion" gives reason for celebration for the Hungarians, the *csárdás* section seems a logical choice. But this *csárdás* is not a dance of joy, but rather a *dance macabre*. Just as Petur's drinking song is in his own words not a happy cheering but a "bitter song" ("de keserű legyen!"), the *csárdás* is a *dance of death*: "három tánc a halálig!" (three dances before death).

Erkel called the finale of Act I, an ensemble of Melinda, Otto, Petur and Gertrude, one of the best pieces in the opera. The foreigners' and Hungarians' choruses join this ensemble, which makes it particularly dramatic: the choir of the courtiers reassures the queen, "Oh, our Lady, mercy is with you only!", while the choir of the rebels sings "Fair Melinda, don't be sad!". The ensemble starts in F minor and modulates into F major, which key is associated with the rebels. Erkel right thought that this was a masterpiece; it could have been presented with great dramatic effect on any *grand opéra* stage. It can be also perceived as one of the most beautiful operatic representations of the nineteenth-century Hungary. We can witness the clashing polyphonic voices of the nation. The second act begins with an aria sang by Bánk in a "grievous style" in C minor, one of the most famous arias of Hungarian opera: "Hazám, hazám te mindenem" (My homeland, my homeland, my everything!) (**Example 4**). The rest is dominated by impressive duets.

Tiborc appears on the stage; his long recitative relates to Bánk the miserable fate of the Hungarian peasants. In the end they join in a duet in *verbunkos* style. Erkel considered this also as "one of the best numbers in the opera". It is certainly one of the most remarkable duets in Hungarian style, comparable to Mária's and László's duet in Act III of *Hunyadi*, or the duet of Bánk and Melinda towards the end of Act II in *Bánk bán*. Before the latter duet we hear a lyrical passage and witness her mental breakdown: "Bánk fogd föl a nyilat" (Bánk, ward off the arrow). This is followed by Bánk's famous curse.

Before the scene in the Queen's chamber, slow *verbukos* music dominates the score, both in an instrumental section and in Melinda's and Bánk's final duet in A

³²⁸ Ibid. 90.

major, composed in a “pure Hungarian style till the end of the duet”. The composer draws our attention to the many “exotic instruments: Viola d’amour, the Hungarian cimbalom, and the English horn. As Melinda begins to sing, “Ölj meg engem Bánk” (Kill me Bánk), the music modulates to C major, which, together with C minor, becomes associated with the grievous scenes, especially those of Bánk and Melinda, throughout the opera. C minor dominates the duet of Bánk and Queen Gertrude, “the gravest and most tragic scene of all” (Erkel). The music of this part contains a reminiscence from Beethoven’s *Fifth*, the famous short-short-short-long, 3+1 motif, but Erkel does not mention it in his manuscript. The scene ends with a “pregante” in Bánk’s Hungarian style aria, which was originally followed by the king’s arrival but cut from the later version. Act II ends with Bánk’s aria.

Act III starts with a lyrical prelude, in which the cimbalom plays a central role. Erkel’s contemporaries regarded this instrument as typical Hungarian, and articles of in the *Zenészet* also popularised it. Erkel does not discuss this act too carefully. He only mentioned the storm scene, during which Melinda jumps in Tisza river with her child. Compared to *Hunyadi László* we can note that *Bánk Bán* contains more lyrical passages as well as longer recitatives and instrumental interludes. In the orchestration the greatest innovation is the introduction of the cimbalom, which gives an additional Hungarian tint to the music. String instruments have the most important role in Melinda’s arias. Although Erkel’s analysis of the opera makes no reference to it, the music occasionally makes use of folk songs. One of the most obvious examples is Bánk’s aria in Act II, “Hol van homlokod liliom virága?” (Where is the lily flower of thy forehead?/Where is the shining chastity...?), about which Erkel only writes that it is characterised by “pure Hungarian style”. The other folk-like melody appears in the mentioned dance macabre *csárdás* of Act I.

Erkel complained that he would have needed three times as many singers in the choir of the last scene, but he was very content with Bánk’s performance. The king’s aria “Vérlázító e bűnös pártütés” (This sinful treason is revolting) in Act III is written in Italian style, and concludes with one of the most popular scenes, the “tetemrehívás” (ordeal of the catafalque or ordeal of the bier).

Many contemporaries linked *Bánk bán* to the ballad *Zách Klára*, which had already been canonised in Hungarian literature before Erkel’s time and also involved the motif of bier ordeal. According to a belief, if the murderer approaches the victim’s body, the corpse begins to bleed. *Bánk bán* also uses this ancient practice that had

become a popular Hungarian literary topic. However, before Bánk was confronted with Gertrude's corpse, Tiborc appears to confront him with the dead bodies of Melinda and her child. While Katona ends his *Bánk bán* with the king's pardon ("rather than our Hungarian homeland, the queen was destroyed."), the opera forgoes it and leaves matters open. The opera's ending may support Gyulai's inaugural interpretation to Katona's work: *Bánk bán* shows what happens with a country torn by internal conspiracies and violence.

The opera does not suggest optimism: Melinda, whose fate is associated with the country's destiny, is a victim, like Queen Gertrude (a theme for as yet unwritten feminist interpretations). Bánk was unable to save his wife and country. He becomes a tragic hero in the sense of the antique Greek tragedies: he falls because of an involuntary fault. But against whom did he commit the tragic fault? The country? Gertrude? Melinda? It seems that everyone is hurt: the country, the king as well as Bánk. Before the final unmotivated praise of God there is no forgiveness, only Bánk's bitter and ironic remark: "King...your vengeance is completed...". Erkel justly calls the style of Act III "requiem like". It is foreshadowed in the *csárdás* macabre dance of the Act I ending with the verse "Three dances before death".

Mosonyi wrote the most careful review of *Bánk bán*, in the *Zenészet* *lapok*. He praised Erkel's opera because of its national style and because of its overall artistic craftsmanship. Mosonyi criticised only the recitatives, which were, in his view, not chiselled enough. This was to be expected from the Wagnerite Mosonyi: he preferred a declamatory style to Erkel's, Italian-style. Mosonyi admired the singers and the orchestra, as well as the lavish stage scenery of the first staging, but he wanted to hear more Hungarian songs (*magyar nóta*), for these represent, according to him, real national music.³²⁹

Erkel's article and our analysis suggest that Erkel actually did not intend to write an opera in a Hungarian style. However, the intonation of most of the passages and the topic itself definitely endorsed the interpretation of *Bánk bán* as a Hungarian national opera next to *Hunyadi László*. Erkel fashioned the different historical layers and their representations, transmitted by several media and the various cultures, what cultures into the meaning system of the present and shaped to be able to function in the epistemological system called Hungarian nation in 1861.

Unlike theatre, opera was first not used for political propaganda or for a specific aesthetic program. There was no theory of opera in Hungary at that time. Though some Hungarian musicians and intellectuals were concerned with the idea of national music and the theoretical aspects of a national opera, Erkel's operas became popular and was regarded as national because of the way they were received by a wide public. The importance of these operas in nineteenth-century cannot be explained solely by referring to their dominant or exclusive characteristics: they were a blend of different international operatic styles. Nevertheless, this hybridity could make it more accessible to an international public. We cannot ascribe these operas' popularity solely to the appearance of Hungarian music on stage only. Their prominence must be explained within the changing cultural system that stimulated their creation and reception. In this process of reception and creation active theatre life had a crucial role. So did the literary and cultural memories of Hungarian history that began to be cultivated, transformed and forged by nineteenth-century intellectuals.

³²⁹ Mosonyi, Mihály: "Erkel Ferenc Bánk bán-ja". In. *Zenatudományi Tanulmányok II. Erkel Ferenc és Bartók Béla*, 17-24.