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Reception – Interpretation – Influence. Modern Opera and Modern Operatic Performance Practice in Budapest at the Turn of the Century (1890–1918)

Research Proposal

a. Purpose of proposed research

The purpose of the planned research is to discuss the opera life in Hungary between 1890 and 1918, to outline the singing style of the most important Hungarian female opera singers of that period, and to discuss the connections between the different cultural levels and places of the music-theatrical life of the *fin-de-siècle* Budapest.

From the 1890s on the repertoire of the Royal Hungarian Opera House was enlarged by the production of several modern operas. Initially the novelties were operas of the composers of the Italian *giovane scuola* (see Supplement 1). After 1900 three operas by Puccini and then the first three operas by Richard Strauss were premiered in Budapest. Compared with 19th-century operas the hierarchy of the main roles changed in the modern operas significantly. The composers of the period created female roles considering several aspects, trying repeatedly to find and formulate the female ideals of the *fin-de-siècle*. A new generation of female singers debuted at the Budapest Opera during those premières: Teréz Krammer (1868–1934), Ilonka Szoyer (1880–1956), Elza Szamosi (1884–1924), Erzsébet Sándor (1885–1962), Ilona Dömötör (?–?), Aranka Fodor (1885–1931) and Sára Sebeök (1886–1952) became the most successful female opera singers in Hungary being at the same time the first Hungarians to star in these modern female roles. Many of them were successful operetta singers as well.

The reception, interpretation and influence of the modern operas in Budapest at the turn of the century have not been treated in their entirety yet, especially not from the point of view of some seemingly relevant aspects.¹ The operetta for example – as the most popular music theatrical genre of that time – has a complex role in the reception of the modern operas in Budapest. Not only did performers of operettas sing in operas; some operettas were also premiered at the Opera House as a means of adding freshness and vitality to the repertoire (see Supplement 2). The contemporary Hungarian press took already notice of the connections between dramaturgy, role characters and genres of the modern opera and operetta. Besides, operas, just like operettas, were also interpreted as commentaries on the current events and cultural trends of the *fin-de-siècle*.² The blending of genres renewed the stage of the Opera House because the rather rigid and formal operatic playing got imbued with the acting and performance style of the operetta. Singers took part in training abroad; their experiences improved the Hungarian opera life too. Although the singing style of these Hungarian singers differed from the international standard of the time, it was nevertheless greatly appreciated by Puccini himself: Elza Szamosi was invited to a tour of the USA at Puccini's recommendation.³

Moreover, the Hungarian performance style of the turn of the century has hardly been discussed using sound recordings as primary sources. Despite the quantity of the early (pre-1926) gramophone recordings, the research fields of the discography and computational analysis of sound recordings have been scarcely involved in musicological research of the interpretation in Hungary so far.⁴

b. Proposed research plan with timetable

During the period of the MTA Postdoctoral Fellowship I plan to prepare a monograph about the reception and interpretation of modern operas and their effect on modern Hungarian operas.

In order to better understand the reception of modern operas, the presence of eroticism, nostalgia, exoticism, religion, and the America-phenomenon in the social life and on the music stage in Hungary will be dealt with. The examination of the Hungarian opera singers' singing studies is also included in the research. I plan to conduct research abroad, mainly in Germany but also in France, England and maybe in the USA, to reveal the experiences gained by Hungarian opera singers at theatres in foreign countries. These sources have not been studied before.

My basic assumption while interpreting press reviews was that the reviewers came under the performers' influence when they formed their opinion about a new, so far unknown work. This phenomenon can be observed, for example, in the case of the Hungarian première of *La Bohème* by Giacomo Puccini with a double cast and the role debuts of several important singers or guest performances of significant foreign singers. According to the current view, a different performance or alternative performance style generates another work; in other words, the 'work' is identical with the performance.⁵

The comparison of Hungarian and foreign singers could help describe the modern Hungarian operatic performance style at the turn of the century. The singing style of foreign singers who appeared in guest performances in Budapest, e.g. Gemma Bellincioni, Emma Calvé, Emmy Destinn, and Selma Kurz are going to be analysed on the basis of written documents – mainly contemporary press reviews – and early sound recordings. Further computational analysis of recordings of internationally well-known singers e.g. Eugenia Burzio, Gilda dalla Rizza, Claudia Muzio, Rosina Storchio, Elise Elizza, Minnie Nast, Maria Jeritza, etc. is also sorely needed to identify the differences and similarities between the Hungarian and the international standards of singing modern opera.⁶

Furthermore, the popularity of operetta singers makes possible to analyse the connection between the singing style of the operetta and the opera in Budapest, Vienna or Berlin. These connections and differences will be analysed in the planned research with the help of early sound recordings and contemporary press reviews; the comparison of sound recordings of Hungarian operetta singers – Ilka Pálmay (1859–1945), Ilona T. Harmath (1877–1937), Sári Fedák (1879–1955) etc. – and the opera singers could lead to relevant results.

On the basis of the results of dramaturgical, musical, role and performance analysis I plan to analyse some of the modern Hungarian operas of that period (see Supplement 3) in an effort to show the influence of the modern operas on Hungarian composers and to seek out the possible 'ideal performers' of the leading roles, or at least their vocal profile.

Nevertheless, the research project includes some experiments, i.e. historically informed performance (HIP) workshops with singers.

Timetable for the two years of the scholarship:

2013-2014

- Collecting and interpreting written sources of the operatic life in Budapest at the turn of the century (contemporary press reviews, files of the singer students and yearbooks of the Music Academy)
- Collecting data of the early sound recordings in private and public collections in Hungary and abroad
- Research into modern Hungarian operas
- Research in theatre collections abroad
- Computational analysis of early sound recordings
- Workshops with singers

2014-2015

- Computational analysis of early sound recordings
- Research in theatre collections abroad
- Analysing the chosen modern Hungarian operas
- Workshops with singers

c. Expected results and impacts

The research results in exploring different sources of the Hungarian operatic life: written sources as well as sound recordings. The results of the analysis of these sources will be incorporated into the planned database of Hungarian opera singers of the 'Lendület' Archives of the Institute for Musicology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

My research focuses not only on the 'work' itself, but also on the interpreters and the performance. The current view of the performance studies and methods of interpretation analysis mentioned above will be used for the first time in a topic of Hungarian music history. As the main figures of the research are modern female singers, this point of view opens the research towards the methods and approaches of gender studies as well. The HIP workshops are new initiatives to put the results of the analysis into practice.

The research will fit in with international research through publications in English and German, and papers presented at international conferences. The exchange of research experiences will be discussed with research groups of performance studies abroad, e.g. the Forschungsinstitut für Musiktheater der Universität Bayreuth and the AHRC Research Centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice. The 'Lendület' project would be a good opportunity to perform research under favourable conditions.

Planned publications and papers to be read at conferences beyond the planned monograph:

2013–2014

- 'The Importance of the Király Theatre in the Music Life of Budapest' – Paper at the popular music conference of the Archives and Research Group for 20th-21st Century Hungarian Music, publication on the homepage of the Archives (January 2014, in Hungarian)
- 'Elza Szamosi and Ilonka Szoyer. A New Type of Female Operatic Stars in Budapest' – Paper at the conference of the AHRC Research Centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice, Performance Studies Network, Cambridge (14th-17th July 2014, in English)
- 'Sängerin aus dem 19. Jahrhundert, Pädagogin im 20. Jahrhundert. Laura Hilgermann und Budapest' – German paper to be read at the conference of the Gesellschaft für Historische Tonträger, online publication www.gramophone-anno.eu

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- 'Frühe ungarische Puccini-Aufnahmen (1900–1924).' – German paper to be read at the conference of the Gesellschaft für Historische Tonträger, publication in vol. 6 of *The Lindström Project*.
- 'Hungarian Interpreters on the Operatic Stages of Dresden and Leipzig' – Publication on the homepage of the Archives and Research Group for 20th-21st Century Hungarian Music (in English)
- 'Operas 'for' a modern female singer – Elza Szamosi in the leading roles of modern Hungarian operas. Publication in *Magyar Zene*.

¹ Former literature deals mainly with the operas of Giacomo Puccini and Richard Strauss, most detailed by Tibor Tallián in Géza Staud (ed.), *A budapesti Operaház 100 éve* (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1984).

² For the connection between the operetta and the modernity see: Moritz Csáky, *Ideologie der Operette und Wiener Moderne. Ein kulturhistorischer Essay zur Österreichischen Identität* (Wien: Böhlau, 1996).

³ Aladár Schöpflin (ed.), *Magyar színművészeti lexikon. A magyar színháztörténet* [Hungarian Theatrical Lexikon. The History of the Hungarian Theatre. Vol. 4] ([Budapest:] Országos Színészegyesület és Nyugdíjintézete, [1929]), 169.

⁴ See e.g. the DLA thesis of the applicant: Szabó Ferenc János: *Karel Burian és Magyarország* [Karel Burian and Hungary]. DLA thesis. (LFZE, Budapest, 2012). For further research see e.g. David Mahlon Breckbill: *The Bayreuth singing style around 1900*. PhD thesis. (University of California, Berkeley, 1991), Michael Scott: *The Record of Singing, Vol. 1: to 1914*. (London: Duckworth, c1977), Jürgen Kesting: *Die grossen Sänger*. 4 Bde. (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2008).

⁵ Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, 'Compositions, Scores, Performances, Meanings,' *Music Theory Online* 18/1 (April 2012) <http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.12.18.1/mto.12.18.1.leech-wilkinson.php>; Nicholas Cook, 'Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance,' *Music Theory Online* 7/2 (April 2001) <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.01.7.2/mto.01.7.2.cook.html>

⁶ I use the 'sonic visualiser' software for analysing sound recordings, see: <http://www.sonicvisualiser.org/> For the computational analysis see: Eric Clarke – Nicholas Cook (eds.), *Empirical Musicology: Aims, Methods, Prospects*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).