

Fact Sheets on Hungary



From the Harmonia to the Endgame

A
HISTORY OF HUNGARIAN
MUSIC



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*When seen on a globe or a world map, Hungary looks merely like a sizeable dot in the middle of Europe, but—similarly to Austria and the Czech Republic—it is a powerhouse in the world of music. Perhaps there is no time of the day, hour or moment, when a Hungarian musical group or soloist is not playing somewhere in the world, or a melody connected to the Hungarians in one way or another is not being played in the media. For example, one of Brahms’s “Hungarian Dances”, Berlioz’s *Marche de Rákóczi*, Tchaikovsky’s *Hungarian Dance (Czardas)* from *Swan Lake*, melodies from the operetta *Der Zigeunerbaron (The Gypsy Baron)* or the quick polka “*Long Live the Magyar!*” by Johann Strauss II; and, of course, the pieces—already in the public domain—by Liszt, Bartók, Kodály, Lehár, Kálmán and all the other actors in this story of hundreds of years.*



Béla Vikár in the village of Felsőszentmárton, Hungary, in the 1890s

It was “in the last hour” when in 1896, the year of millennial festivities of the Hungarian Conquest of the Carpathian Basin, Hungarian ethnographer Béla Vikár—and soon after him, Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály—started to collect Hungarian folk songs by recording them with a phonograph. At that time, none of them could have imagined that thanks to their undertaking, which was in itself ground-breaking in Europe, Hungary would have probably the largest and most significant ethnographic collection of the continent by the second half of the 20th century. As a matter of fact, the centuries-old Hungarian folk music culture, stem-

ming from Inner Asia, preserved the motifs of the pre-Christian “ancient” world, while being further enriched by Turkish, Byzantine and, later on, Slavic elements during the migration of the Hungarian conquerors. Looking into the similarities and matches of these motifs, researchers in the field have found the roots of Hungarian folk music—going back to the undiscernibly distant past—in ancient laments and pentatonic tunes.

Through his State Foundation, King Saint Stephen tied his country to Western Christianity. Therefore, also in church music—the Gregorian chants—the impact of Western Europe was predomi-

nant. Our earliest remains recorded with neumes, i.e. inflective marks that indicate the direction of the melody only, date back to the 11th century. The *Pray Codex*, originated in the 12th century, is one of the earliest Hungarian documents that uses stave lines invented in the Middle Ages.

The Hungarian church liturgy and liturgical singing are undoubtedly among the jewels of our religious and musical culture. Evolved by the 13th century and kept alive until the 17th century, Hungarian liturgical practice had unique, original features but, as a result of intentional transformation, also incorporated elements from



The Pray Codex

the Frankish, Italian, French and Norman traditions. Therefore, Hungarian Gregorian chants represent a one-of-a-kind treasure box in European musical heritage—still being explored today and hiding lots of new surprises.

At this time, secular music was played by well-experienced knight-troubadours and bards. King Matthias established a true Renaissance spirit in his court by inviting and employing the best scientists and artists of the time to Buda in the second half of the 15th century. This period that is characterised by adopting, developing and enriching the Western European culture lasted until the Turkish conquests in the 16th century. At the same time, Bálint Bakfark (1507–1576), a Hungarian



Sebestyén “Lantos” Tinódi, *Cronica*

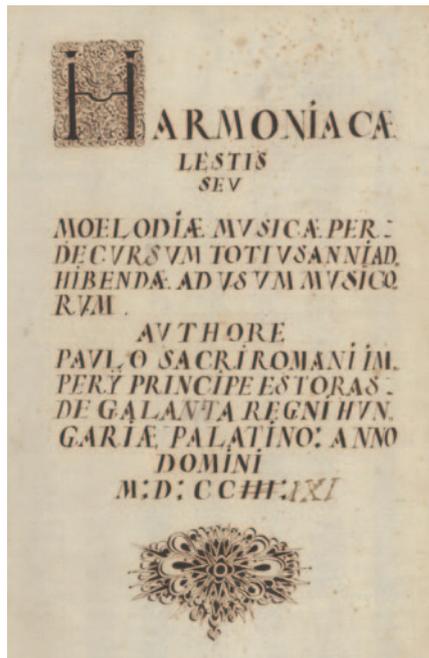
of Transylvanian Saxon origin, could still become a well-known composer and travelling lutenist all around Europe. His contemporary, the lyricist, chronicler and minstrel Sebestyén “Lantos” Tinódi drew inspiration for his heroic poems and historical songs on the battlefields and castle sieges.

The forces of the expanding Ottoman Empire defeated the army of the Hungarian king in 1526 near the town of Mohács. Hungary was divided into three parts and became a buffer zone between Christian Europe and the empire of the Turkish Emperor. Like all other arts, music also fell prey to the clash between different cultures and religions. Although Hungary’s ties with the “West” were loosened, one of the most significant composers of the era, the master of early Italian Baroque music and a pioneer in developing the genre of opera, Claudio Monteverdi had the chance to visit Hungary, although in a quite unusual setting. Still in his youth, Monteverdi was a court musician employed by Vincenzo Gonzanga, the Duke of Mantua, who fought against the Turks, therefore, at the siege of Esztergom and Visegrád it was Monteverdi’s task to enliven war-weary soldiers in tent camps, and in the meantime he could start to compose a mass of thanksgiving.

After the 150-year-long Ottoman occupation and the conclusion of the Treaty of Szatmár that formally ended Rákóczi’s War of Independence



Esterházy Palace, Fertőd



Harmonia Cælestis

in 1711, the musical scene became vibrant again in a relatively short time, especially in religious centres and palaces of the high nobility. Among the noble families who were active as patrons of arts, probably the Esterházy did the most for music. Not only did they stand out as patrons and demand-

ing employers of artists, but many of them were also musicians, albeit rather amateur ones. However, *Harmonia Cælestis*, a collection of about fifty cantatas published in 1711 under the name of Pál Esterházy, who was born in Eisenstadt (Kismarton) and bore the office of the Palatine of the Kingdom of Hungary, represents the finest of early Hungarian Baroque music.

Miklós József Esterházy, “the Magnificent”, “the Extravagant”, gained a lasting reputation for the palace in Eszterháza (Fertőd), the Esterházy Palace—also referred to as the Hungarian Versailles—that he had had built. The park of the Palace once accommodated a 400-seat court opera house—completed in 1768 and then, after having burnt down, solemnly reopened in 1781—which later became one of the most significant musical centres of Central Europe. Guests arrived here also from the highest circles of Vienna and Bratislava. Of course, the prestige—and the golden era—of Eszterháza was guaranteed primarily by the presence of Joseph Haydn, who

moved from Eisenstadt to live and work there as a composer, conductor and programme organiser for most of the time between 1766 and 1790. As an employer, Prince Miklós “the Magnificent” put great pressure on his brilliant court musician who, besides his other responsibilities, was composing continuously. As the director of the musical theatre in Eszterháza, Haydn rehearsed and conducted about one hundred operas of other composers. Every week, two-three operas and two concerts were performed in the Palace. However, in terms of music history, what is even more important is Joseph Haydn’s oeuvre. While being in the service of the Esterházy family, he composed countless pieces of chamber music, string quartets and more than fifty symphonies which had an impact on his younger contemporaries, Mozart and Beethoven. The world premieres of a dozen of his Italian-language operas known today—and performed increasingly in all parts of the world—were all in Eszterháza.

In Nagyvárad (now Oradea, Romania), Bishop Ádám Patachich organised a cathedral orchestra, and, for the post of director, he asked Joseph Haydn’s younger brother, Michael, who composed several masses, symphonies and concertos during his service. Michael Haydn was succeeded by the similarly talented Austrian musician, Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf.

With regard to significant ecclesiastical centres, in the city of Győr, the



Joseph Haydn

activities of composer and director of music at the local cathedral Benedek Istvánffy represented European levels in late Baroque and early Classicism in music. In Pécs, the way the Austrian chorister and organist Johann Georg Lickl—also a prolific composer who was at ease with different genres—laid the foundations of local musical life in the city with a Mediterranean atmosphere, and his impact is still being felt today.

In the second half of the 18th century, not many of the most outstanding composers and performers of the era had the courage to visit the large cities of the then Kingdom of Hungary, reunited by the House of Habsburg, as they seemed so distant from Vienna. Even the well-travelled Mozart family were scared off by the bumpy and dusty roads. The farthest Hungarian city from Vienna where Wolfgang Amadeus, his father and sister went was only Pozsony

(today’s Bratislava in Slovakia) in December 1762. It is presumed that during their stay of barely two weeks, the wunderkind gave a house concert in the Pálffy Palace for local nobilities.

At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the main locations of opera performance in Hungary shifted from the theatres in countryside palaces to large cities, Pest-Buda and Kolozsvár (today’s Cluj-Napoca in Romania). Musical and cultural convergence in the mainly German-dominated Pest and Buda was relatively slow. The first Hungarian-language theatrical performance was held in 1790 in the Várszínház (Castle Theatre). The premiere of the very first Hungarian-language “singspiel”, *Prince Pikkó and Jutka Perzsi*, a “tragic opéra comique” by composer József Chudy, was in 1793 in “the Summer Play-house next to the Bridge” in Buda. Unfortunately, the entire score of the opera has been lost; today we have the libretto only. In 1822, Kolozsvár could be the proud host of the premiere of the first Hungarian historical opera, *Béla’s Flight* by József Ruzitska, a pioneer of the genre.

Before the opening of the Municipal German Theatre of Pest in 1812 and of the Hungarian Theatre of Pest in 1837, the Várszínház (Castle Theatre), located in Buda, had been the most important musical centre for decades in the then German-Hungarian bilingual city. The Buda Castle theatre was the place where Mozart’s singspiels were performed for the first time



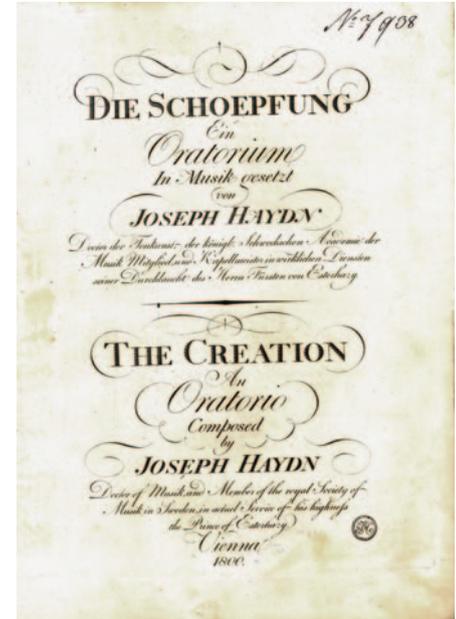
Pest-Buda, 1800

in Hungary. Among others, the works of Dittersdorf, Cherubini, Grétry, Méhul, Boieldieu, and later on Rossini and Meyerbeer, the operas of the above-mentioned Ruzitska—*Béla's Flight* and *Simon Kemény*—were played here.

There are two other noteworthy events in the history of Várszínház. Haydn, who came to Buda on the invitation of Palatine Joseph's young wife, Alexandra Pavlovna, had rehearsals in the Várszínház in preparation for a concert on 8 March 1800 in the throne room of the Buda Castle, where Haydn himself conducted his own oratorio, *The Creation*. And, on 7 May the same year, “a famous musician called Beethoven captured everyone’s

attention by playing masterly on the Forte Piano.”

Although not nearly as close as Haydn, Beethoven also had some emotional and professional ties with Hungary—mainly with the Brunszvik family headquartered in Martonvásár, and especially to Jozefin Brunszvik. It is a less-noted fact in musical history that the Municipal German Theatre of Pest, which was a huge building with an audience capacity of 3,500 people, was opened for the general public on 9 February 1812 with two of August von Kotzebue’s plays, *King Stephen, Hungary’s First Benefactor* and *The Ruins of Athens*, and Beethoven produced the incidental music for both



The score of Joseph Haydn’s oratorio, *The Creation*



Ludwig van Beethoven, *King Stephen*, 1812



One of Beethoven’s sonatas dedicated to Therese Brunszvik



János Lavotta, *The Siege of Szigetvár*

performances—therefore, Beethoven had world premieres in Pest!

During the second half of the 18th century, a new genre emerged out of the marriage of gypsy and folk music, verbunkos, which is instrumental dance music for recruiting purposes. Besides csardas, verbunkos has also become known worldwide as an unmistakable distinguishing characteristic of Hungarian(-ish) style. At the beginning of the Hungarian Reform Era, verbunkos—interpreted simply as folk music in the century of Romanticism—was incorporated into European composed music by János Bihari, János Lavotta and Antal Csermák. They were a virtuoso trio of Hungarian composers and violinists



Ferenc Erkel (lithography by Ágoston Canzi)
The Hungarian Theatre of Pest, 1838



whose work served as an inspiration for many other composers of the era.

Then **Ferenc Erkel** (1810–1893) appeared: a composer, pianist, conductor, musical director and, last but not least, an avid chess player. In certain respects, his significance is comparable

Anne de la Grange in the role of Erzsébet Szilágyi in Erkel's opera, *László Hunyadi*





Ferenc Erkel, *Hymnus*, 1844

to that of Count István Széchenyi, the “Greatest Hungarian.” Basically, laying the foundation for

Hungary to become a musical super-power can be single-handedly attributed to Erkel. Indeed, he had no time for self-

praise, study trips, concert tours abroad to build his reputation, or courtesies visits that would bring benefits to him at some point in the future... The fact that the late process of making him known and acknowledged internationally is still under way is partly because—contrary to most of the path-seeking and pioneering Central and Eastern European tunesmiths—he stayed and worked in his home country throughout his whole life. He did not even leave Hungary at all: he was born in Gyula (more specifically, Németygula, the then German-speaking half of the city), studied

in Nagyvárad (today’s Oradea) and Pozsony (today’s Bratislava), taught in Kolozsvár (today’s Cluj-Napoca), and worked as a conductor in Pest, first in the German Theatre, then in the Hungarian Theatre that opened in 1837. His profession and mission tied him to Pest-Buda; his service for the evolving and more and more vivid cultural life of the two-sided city occupied his whole time. He expanded his activities to almost all sides of culture: he strived to upgrade Hungarian music and musical life to Western European level, presented countless musical pieces, established and directed various institutions. In the meantime, he was an ardent—sometimes struggling—composer of his own music, and shepherded even his talented sons to be servants of music.

It was after the success of his first, own-voice-seeking but sufficiently inventive opera *Mária Bátor* (1840),



Ferenc Erkel, *Bánk bán*, performance of the Hungarian State Opera in New York City, 2018

and *László Hunyadi* (1844) that triggered unparalleled zeal in turbulent Reform-Era Hungary desiring for independence, and the competition-winning *Himnusz*, which is still the official national anthem of Hungary today, when Erkel composed *Bánk Bán*, the emblematic national opera about protesting against foreign, oppressive powers. First and foremost, he was inspired by the works of Italian and French composers. His opera *György Dózsa* (1867), which was quite similar in its structure to Meyerbeer's grand operas, was followed by the even more dramatic *György Brankovics* (1874). *Sarolta* (1862), based on legends about King Matthias, and *Unknown Heroes* (*Névtelen hősök*, 1880), which illustrates the times of the war for independence in a caricatured way, showcase Erkel's moderate sense of humour. Although he went to great lengths not to be influenced by Wagner, finally he gave in, which is proven by his last opera, *King Stephen*, characterised by

a little pathos and an overflow of emotions. The opera was first performed in March 1885, however, it was meant to open the Hungarian Royal Opera House of Budapest on 27 September 1884. The solemn opening was attended by Franz Joseph, Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary, yet the central role of the evening was played by the elderly composer himself—Erkel conducted his own pieces first, Act I of *Bánk Bán*, the overture of *László Hunyadi*, and then Act I of Wagner's *Lohengrin*.

Nowadays Erkel's qualities as a composer, the significance of his operas reworked and dramaturgically adjusted many times, and his international status is disputed by many. However, what is certain is that *László Hunyadi* and, especially, *Bánk Bán* deserve a place among the finest operas of European Romanticism due to their richness in melodies, musical delicacies, crystal clear "Hungarianism", and arrangements that are based on



The Pesti Vigadó

Mediterranean patterns but still unique. Besides the excellent feature film of *Bánk Bán*, shot with world famous Hungarian opera singers, various performances, new recordings, and the Hungarian State Opera's touring companies targeting far-away countries, all presenting the values of the opera by giving convincing performances, help making this historical masterpiece well-known among an ever wider audience all around the world.

Among Ferenc Erkel's "creatures", the Hungarian Philharmonic Society also deserves to be mentioned. The symphonic orchestra, having the longest history in Hungary and still in operation today, was recruited first from musicians of the National Theatre, and then from those of the State Opera House. Their first concert was given in the Ceremony Hall of the National Museum of Hungary on 20 November 1853, of course, under conductor Ferenc Erkel, with pieces by Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer. In 1865, the orchestra inaugurated its new residence, the Pesti Vigadó, by performing Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* at the grand opening of the building.

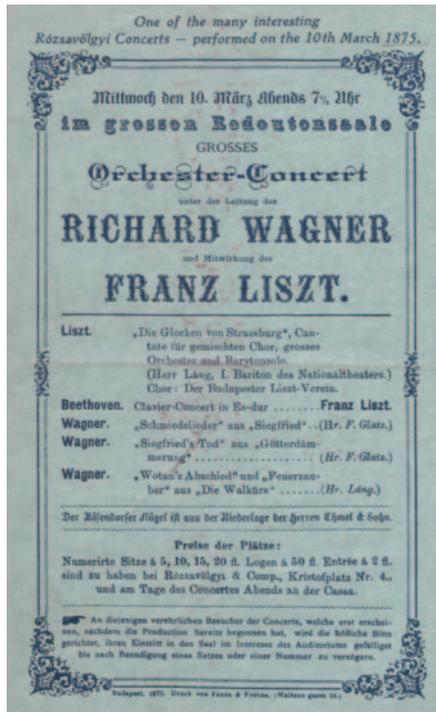
The Vigadó hosted many events that have great significance in musical history. Already in the year of its open-

ing, Franz Liszt's oratorio *The Legend of St. Elizabeth* was performed here, with the composer himself who stepped on stage wearing a Franciscan habit. In 1881, the Vigadó saw Johannes Brahms himself playing the solo on the premiere of his own *Piano Concerto No. 2 (in B major)*. The outstanding conductor Gustav Mahler, who was the director of the Hungarian State Opera at the time, premiered as a composer in 1889 in the Vigadó with his five-movement *Symphony No. 1. "The Titan."*

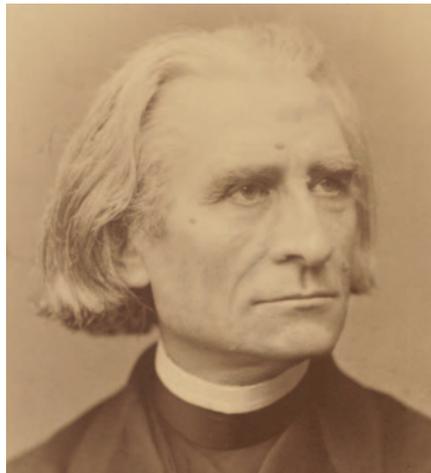
It was the Vigadó where the two geniuses, Wagner and Liszt met and had



The building of the Academy of Music in Budapest



The poster for Wagner and Liszt's mutual concert in the Pesti Vigadó, 1875



Franz Liszt

a concert together on 10 March 1875. Liszt composed *The Bells of Strasbourg Cathedral* for the occasion and performed Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major*, under conductor János Richter. Wagner conducted parts from his tetralogy *Ring of the Nibelung* at the concert

which was a fundraiser for the building of Wagner's future theatre in Bayreuth, the Festspielhaus.

Another highly important event of the same year, 1875, was the establishment of the Academy of Music in Budapest, with great Hungarian musicians elected in managerial positions—Franz Liszt as the President, and Ferenc Erkel as the Director.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886), who was developing strong ties and commitment to musical life in Hungary, was Erkel's friend, supporter and ally. As for his personality and take on life, however, was in many respects the very opposite—the young Liszt was, at least seemingly, a happy-go-lucky cosmopolitan who was extremely popular. His fate and art is a quintessence of the Romantic Era. He was born in the village of Doborján (today's Raiding in Austria) which was part of the Esterházy estate,

started off as a whizz-kid in Sopron and Pozsony (Bratislava), studied in Vienna, and then moved to Paris. The virtuoso pianist and composer travelled all around Europe and generated real hysteria with his divine/diabolical piano performances. It was heaven and hell. Throughout his whole life, the thinking and artistic expression of Liszt—a conqueror of women’s hearts, a humanist, a devout but struggling believer—was determined by the duality of body and soul, and the issues relating to the battle of good and evil.

Therefore, it is understandable that Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the Faust problem and the presentation of “Faustic” existence were among his recurring themes.

Liszt was in contact with almost all important European artists of the era. His wide-ranging interests in literature and visual arts were reflected in his music. He was deeply touched by the 1838 flood catastrophe in Pest; he gave several benefit concerts to help repair the damages as soon as possible. After this tragedy, Liszt—the generous patriot—visited Hungary more often, greatly welcomed by his friends, fans and fellow culture creators. In the meantime, and quite importantly, Liszt became one of the more prolific composers of the 19th century. He divided most of his time between Germany, Italy and Hungary, mainly Weimar, Rome and Pest-Buda. The extremely long list of his compositions—containing several hundreds of items—includes orchestral works, piano pieces,

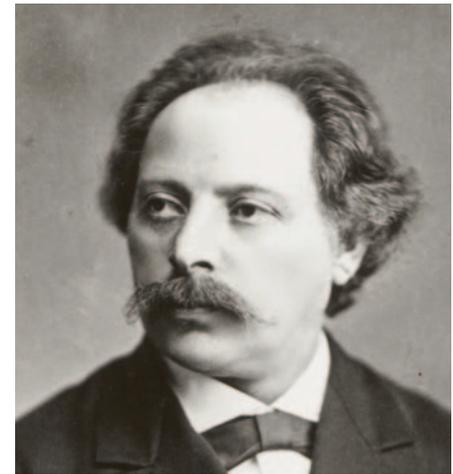
cycles, rhapsodies, oratorios, masses, choral works, concertos, songs, transcriptions. He invented the genre of symphonic poem as program music that was further developed, amongst others, by Liszt’s admirer, Tchaikovsky, and preserved for the late Romanticism of the early 20th century by Richard Strauss. In 1855, Liszt composed *Missa Solemnis (Esztergom Mass)* for the consecration of the basilica in Esztergom. His *Hungarian Coronation Mass (Missa Coronationalis)*, composed for the coronation of Franz Joseph and Elisabeth as King and Queen of Hungary, was performed for the first time in 1867 in the Church of Our Lady of the Buda Castle (the Matthias Church).

Liszt’s unbelievably rich and enigmatic oeuvre is still not fully explored. His artistic spectrum ranges from full-blooded romanticism to minimalist, “sound-economical”, more abstract music exposing the underlying truth and progressively pointing towards our age.

It is a well-known fact that Franz Liszt’s daughter Cosima was Wagner’s wife and after his death, she became the all-powerful director of the Bayreuth Festivals aimed at keeping Wagner’s heritage. Liszt, who already successfully experimented with operas as early as his childhood and made new attempts with them in the early 1840s, eventually surrendered the genre to his genius German son-in-law who reached his full potential in musical dramas. However, the first act of the Italian-language Byron adaptation, *Sardanapalo*,

which was discovered and reconstructed by David Trippett, music history professor at Cambridge University, and premiered in 2018 in Weimar, proves that Liszt was—or rather, could have been—a subversive innovator in the field of opera with his own unique style.

As a matter of fact, it was in the field of opera where the son of the Jewish chazzan (cantor) in Keszthely, **Károly Goldmark** or Karl Goldmark (1830–1915)—a modest musician who settled down in Vienna and built his career there patiently—gained real success. The road was long and bumpy,



Károly Goldmark

and full of privation, until the premiere of his Biblical-themed grand opera, *The Queen of Sheba*, took place at the Royal-Imperial Court Opera Theatre, but the immediate world success and prestige that followed was a substantial compensation. His breakthrough,

however, came earlier, with the overture *Sakuntala*, composed for a drama by the classical Indian writer Kalidasa. Goldmark chose his themes from the world of literature and legends: *Merlin* is based on the legends of King Arthur, *The Prisoner of War* is inspired by Greek mythology, and *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *Götz von Berlichingen* and *The Winter's Tale* are adaptations from Dickens, Goethe and Shakespeare, respectively. Goldmark's attraction towards his motherland was ceaseless, he adapted Hungarian or Hungarian-like themes as well. His most well-known and performed symphonic work the *Rustic Wedding Symphony*, and his *Violin Concerto* also testify to his cultural-emotional ties to Hungary.

Jenő Hubay (1858–1937) gained worldwide reputation mainly as a violinist and a teacher of the master school named after him. As the son of Károly Huber—a virtuoso violinist and a concert master and conductor at the National Theatre—, Hubay was literally born into music. In their home in Pest, and later on at the musical afternoons and evenings held in Jenő Hubay's residence in Buda, prominent figures of all areas of culture, Hungarians and foreigners alike, appeared as guests one after the other, including Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner, Károly Goldmark, Camille Saint-Saëns and Léo Delibes.

Jenő Hubay, who proved his talent for the public already at the age of nine, was taught inter alia by the Hungarian-born artist József Joachim, who is considered to be the best violinist of all



Franz Liszt and the 17-year-old Jenő Hubay (drawing by Andor Hubay)

time. On the recommendation of Liszt, Hubay went to Paris, where he established wide-ranging professional and personal contacts in various fields of the city's vibrant cultural life. A Francophile with refined taste, Hubay not only worked as a teacher in Brussels, but also as a concert musician throughout Europe, conquering the whole continent. The Stradivari-owner artist-teacher was the director of the Faculty of Violin at the Academy of Music in Budapest first, and then that of the whole institution. His outstandingly talented students included Stefi Geyer, Ferenc Vecsey, József Szigeti and Sándor Végh. Furthermore, Hubay proved his skills as a prolific composer also—on his list of compositions, there are many pieces for violin, songs, and also symphonies and concertos. Out of his nine musical dramas, the bitter-sweet opera *The Violin Maker from Cremona*, and the one based on Tolstoy's novel, with the same title, *Anna Karenina*, which reflects the influences of Massenet, Puccini and verismo on Hubay, were well-received outside Hungary as well.

In the 19th century, Pozsony (Bratislava) had an aura which provided a perfect incubation for artists and, thus, nurturing musical geniuses. **Ernő Dohnányi** or Ernst von Dohnányi (1877–1960) was born here and made his first appearance as a pianist already in his childhood. He became a full-fledged and world renowned artist—pianist,



Ernő Dohnányi

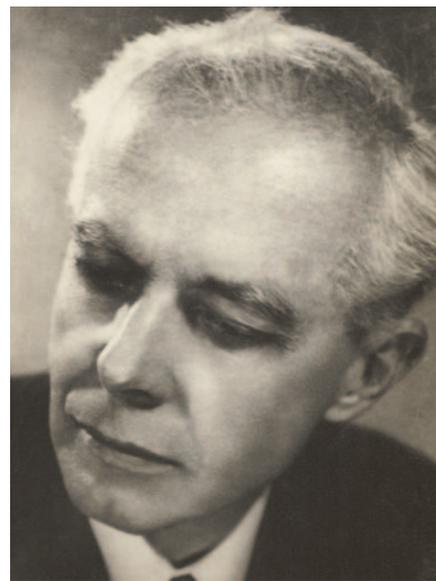
conductor and composer—while studying in the Royal National Hungarian Academy of Music in Budapest. He drew attention to himself with his chamber and piano pieces. His *Piano Quintet in C minor* earned the approval of his teacher, János Koessler, and via him, of Johannes Brahms as well. Dohnányi travelled all around Europe as a performing artist and conductor.

He worked as a teacher for a short while in Vienna and then in Berlin, but when he returned back home in 1915, he became a true all-rounder in the musical life of Budapest. Between 1919 and 1944, he was President and conductor of the Budapest Philharmonic Society. He himself was the guarantee for the uniquely high standard the orchestra represented, which is something really worth mentioning, as it was basically Dohnányi and the high-quality repertoire policy that he developed - including important contemporary works as well - that dominated concert life in Hungary. In the early 1930s, he worked as the Director of the Music Department at the Hungarian National Radio, then he was appointed as Director-General of the Academy of Music. In the dramatic turmoil of World War II, Dohnányi and his family left Hungary. As a result of this decision, he was charged with false accusations in his absence and his name was put on a list of war criminals in spring 1945. After years of wandering in search for a new home, he spent the last decade of his life in the United States of America. Dohnányi, who tried himself in many musical genres, composed a monumental mass for the consecration of the Dome, or the Votive Church, of Szeged. To this day, his most popular, most performed and most recorded piece worldwide is a witty composition requiring great virtuosity, *Variations on a Nursery Tune* (1914). His chamber music, concertos, symphonies and operas nowadays enjoy a growing interest.

Hungarian-speaking cellist and pianist **Ferenc Schmidt** or Franz Schmidt (1874–1939) was also born in Pozsony (Bratislava) but his career, multifunctional membership in various orchestras, and work as a teacher, conductor and composer make him a Viennese musician, similarly to Goldmark and Lehár. Behind the scenes of the professionally successful musician's peaceful personality and seemingly quiet civil private life, there was a tension of human dramas. His first wife was committed to a mental hospital, his daughter Emma passed away at an early age. He dedicated his very last, most performed, requiem-like symphony, *Symphony No. 4*, to her memory. In the past decades, several star conductors have included Schmidt's orchestral works in their programmes or recorded them. His oratorio *The Book of Seven Seals*, which is an adaptation of the *Book of Revelations*, is especially popular in German-speaking countries. His late Romantic opera, *Notre Dame*, based on Victor Hugo's novel, includes a Hungarian-style intermezzo that is considered to be "the most beautiful gypsy music", and the most well-known Schmidt melody.

There is full consensus that one of the composers who had the greatest impact on the 20th century is **Béla Bartók** (1881–1945). Born in Nagyszentmiklós (today's Sânnicolau Mare in Romania), Bartók developed strong affinity towards music at an early age, so he was sent to Pozsony (Bratislava) to learn

music under the guidance of László Erkel. Later on, he attended the Budapest College of Music, where he studied piano from István Thomán, and composition from János Koessler. He was travelling all around Europe as a pianist and praised for his performances in the greatest European concert halls and, in the meantime,



Béla Bartók

he developed his composer self, searching for his own voice. Bartók collected and transcribed Hungarian folk melodies with scientific fastidiousness. Besides doing parallel research into the musical heritage of Transylvania and that of the surrounding peoples, he studied the roots of our folk music and its connections with the Middle East and Asia as well. Thanks to this, he met Zoltán



The Wooden Prince
(Scenography by Gusztáv Oláh)



Bluebeard's Castle, stage scenery



The Wooden Prince
(Drawing by Miklós Bánffy)

Kodály, and the two field-worker folklorist developed a lifelong friendship. Bartók's first major composition, the *Kossuth Symphony* (1903), still reflects the impact of Richard Strauss's symphonic poems. However, his interest in ethnography and the fruits of his field collections have greatly influenced his direction and style as a composer. Similarly to Kodály, he capitalised on his musical mother tongue, but while his brother-in-arms used the authentic folk tunes, wrote instrumentations and, thus, creating a frame for them in a Hungarian national style originating in Romanticism, Bartók—a daring innovator—decomposed these folk melodies into its elements, then synthesised them, made them universal, and that is how he introduced them into the literature of European contemporary music.

Whatever he did, whatever form of expression he chose, Bartók came up with masterpieces—many times

generating debates and anger—, be it a short piano piece, chamber music, a piano and violin concerto, the *Cantata Profana*, which is a personal confession “from pure sources”, or the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, rich in disturbing effects, or the *Concerto*, imbued with irony and homesickness, reflecting the struggles he had in the last years of his life spent in voluntary exile in the United States... Bartók’s two-character ballad-like mystery play, the *Bluebeard’s Castle* (1911) constitutes a separate chapter in the universal history of opera. It is a thrilling (musical) drama inexhaustible in its potentials, both in terms of underlying thoughts and staging. His dance drama *The Wooden Prince*, which also tries to unfold the secrets and controversies of a man-woman relationship, and his provocative and taboo-breaking “pantomime” *The Miraculous Mandarin* have both broadened the horizons of classical ballet.

Quite importantly, *Bluebeard’s Castle* is the main ambassador of Hungarian language in all continents. Its beautiful, pompous Art Nouveau-like libretto by Béla Balázs is sung in Hungarian in leading opera houses and concert halls by world-renowned singers of various nationalities. Bartók inspired great film directors as well: for example, the mysterious Adagio in *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* was used as eerie background music by Stanley Kubrick in his adaptation of Stephen King’s novel, *The Shining*.



Zoltán Kodály

Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967), who was a bit younger than Bartók, was born in Kecskemét and studied at the Academy of Music in Budapest, majoring in composition, also under the guidance of János Koessler. He completed his doctoral studies with a thesis entitled *The Strophic Structure of the Hungarian Folk Song*, and then, inspired by the phonograph recordings of Béla Vikár, he started to collect folk music regularly and systematically. He pursued this pioneering activity together with Bartók. As a composer, he found an absolutely original voice of self-expression primarily in using and adapting folk songs and creating unique

instrumentation for them. Similarly, his pedagogical approach of providing music education for everyone, or “democratising music”, is based on the mutual treasure of folk songs and singing them together. He set the objective of launching music education, varied with choir singing, as early as in pre-school, and that the children would learn reading and performing from sheet music—at least at a basic level—, and write down simple melodies after hearing. His teaching method is built on rhythmic clapping and a “sign language.” Solmization, which is a system of substituting the notes in the musical scale with distinct



Zoltán Kodály and the poster of *Székelyfonó* (The Spinning Room) in Milan

syllables and using expressive hand signs, helps to learn and comprehend a given song or musical piece by visualising the line of the melody. The Kodály Method that has spread all around the world was included in the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO in 2016.

Not only did the musical poet Kodály document the “factual materials” of folk culture, but also looked deep into the souls of the Hungarian people. His witty singspiel rich in bravura instrumentation, *János Hány* (1926; the suite extracted from it is the most frequently mentioned Kodály piece to this day), with its grotesque humour, melancholic optimism, touching idealism and bragging, is one of the most honest (pathological) picture of the Hungarian countryside. As a continuation of brilliant adaptations of folk songs “framed” in classical music and put up on the opera stage, Kodály composed *Székelyfonó* (The Spinning Room). Soon after its world premiere in Budapest, the piece was played at La Scala in Milan in January 1933. The performance was conducted by Italian conductor Sergio Failoni, who reached the height of his career in Budapest and the merits he earned in the musical life of Hungary are imperishable.

Kodály’s literary heritage encompassing musical history, pedagogy, folk culture and his collections is almost as rich as his work in the field of music: hundreds of his songs and choral works pose smaller or bigger challenges to soloists or singing groups of various kinds.

Besides orchestral pieces (*Summer Evening*, *Dances of Marosszék*, *Peacock Variations*, *Concerto*, *Symphony*), oratorical works are also of great importance in his Kodály's oeuvre as a composer, especially the one written for the 50th anniversary of the unification of Pest, Buda and Óbuda (Old Buda) back in 1873, *Psalmus Hungaricus* (1923), and *Budavári Te Deum* (Te Deum of Buda Castle, 1936), which is a thanksgiving for the reconquest of Buda from the Turks in 1686.

Kodály, who had extensive international relations with highly acclaimed people, was respected also by the Communist regime after 1946. His prestige, professional and personal integrity



Leó Weiner

was unquestionable. He was close friends, among others, with the greatest conductor genius of the late 19th and early 20th century, Arturo Toscanini, who was open to contemporary music and incorporated several of Kodály's pieces into his repertoire, promoting them in many places.

The legendary educator of the Hungarian Academy of Music teaching composition, music theory and chamber music, **Leó Weiner** (1885–1960) represented a conservative approach as a composer but did not leave a large amount of compositions behind. However, his chamber pieces, wittily instrumented, late-Romantic orchestral works, divertimentos have their renaissance



László Lajtha

today. *Serenade* is especially popular among them—it was recorded by Sir Georg Solti and Neeme Järvi as well.

László Lajtha (1892–1963), who actively participated in and later on continued Bartók and Kodály's folk song collecting activities, was an individualist and progressive representative of the 20th century Hungarian music. He studied at the Academy of Music in Budapest, then in Leipzig and Geneva, and finally, as a student of Vincent d'Indy, in Paris, where he became good friends not only with musicians but, for example, also with writer Romain Rolland. Lajtha was influenced by the Hungarian folklore, the French culture, and the music of the turn of the century and that of the impressionism. After World War II, his Communist culture policy deemed his multi-faceted work ideologically contestable, so it was not possible to get to know more about it until the last couple of decades. Lajtha's compositions started to become more well-known primarily when his nine symphonies, suites, masses, chamber pieces, choral works and his score written for Austrian-British film director George Hoellering's movie *Hortobágy* was recorded and published again. (As a matter of fact, Lajtha composed the score of Hoellering's movie *Murder in the Cathedral*, which is an adaptation of T.S. Eliot's verse drama.)

The half-finished orchestration of Lajtha's neo-classical opera buffa composed for a French libretto written

by the Spanish Salvador de Madariaga, *The Blue Hat* (A kék kalap / Le chapeau bleu), was completed by Ferenc Farkas, a former student of Ottorino Respighi, in the late 1980s. *The Blue Hat* was played for the very first time by the Hungarian Radio, and then performed by the company of the Hungarian Opera of Cluj-Napoca in 1998. Lajtha's ballet based on an Ancient Greek story but parodying Nazism in reality, *The Grove of the Four Gods* remained in the drawer until its late world premiere in 2013 by the National Philharmonic Orchestra in the Palace of Arts in Budapest.

And here comes an intermezzo—a small but rather important one, actually taking us outside of Hungary. Before any overview of the outcome of the cultural and musical revival in post-World War II Hungary, it is definitely worth mentioning the “success product” of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy: the Viennese operetta. The genre was revolutionised at the turn of the century, in the era of Art Nouveau, by Hungarian composers such as Ferenc Lehár and Imre Kálmán. Although the premieres of most of their operettas were held in the capital of Austria, in terms of style, tone and themes, it was indeed the Hungarian, or if you like, the Budapest operetta that they took to its highest level. (In parallel, Pongrác Kacsóh, Jenő Huszka and Viktor Jacobi excelled in the same genre in Hungary.)

Ferenc Lehár (1870–1948) was born in Komárom, Hungary, and his career



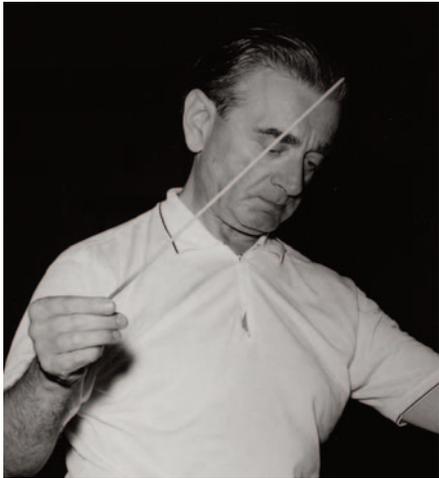
Ferenc Lehár

started before WWI, the “happy times of peace.” His life is something like a Central European dream story that took him to several cities within the Monarchy. First, he made attempts to compose operas, but had to admit it was better for him to sail on less troubled waters. His world famous operettas even won the approval and, what is more, the friendly sympathy of the great musical poet, Lehár's role model, Puccini. Lehár is among the very few operetta composers whose inventive pieces coupled with high quality orchestrations are performed in opera houses and sung by the greatest stars of opera. Let us just think about *The Land of Smiles* (in Hungarian: *A mosoly ország*) or, primarily, *The Merry Widow* (in Hungarian: *A víg özvegy*; 1905)—the latter is played as a recurring production at the Metropolitan Opera of New York since 2000.



Imre Kálmán

Imre Kálmán (1882–1953) was born in the city of Siófok, at Lake Balaton. His evergreen operettas are timeless and fresh: with Hungarian temperament, unique national colours, blood-stirring rhythms of the era's fashionable dances, emotional melodies... Kálmán drew attention to himself already with his first attempts at the genre. His first operettas, *The Mongol Invasion* (in Hungarian: *Tatárjárás*, later titled in English as *The Gay Hussars*) and *The Soldier on Leave* (in Hungarian: *Az obsitos*), were performed in the Vígszínház, Budapest, and then—besides new premieres in Pest—came Vienna, the city of loud successes, and then overseas. To the question: which is the Hungarian theatrical work that nowadays astonishes audiences who like light entertainment all over the world, from the United States through Australia to the Far East,

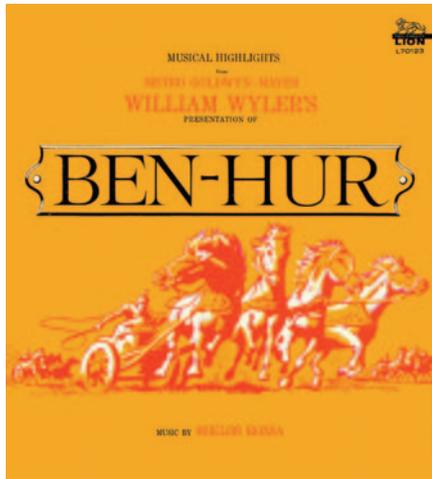


Miklós Rózsa

the answer is clear: *The Csárdás Princess* (*Die Csárdásfürstin*, in Hungarian: *A csárdáskirálynő*; 1915).

This operetta seems to have a never-ending renaissance.

Now, let us get back to a more rational reality! The most outstanding figures among post-World War II generations of Hungarian composers include the already mentioned Ferenc Farkas, who was educated in Rome; György Ránki, who had the virtuosity to travel between and merge different genres; and Sándor Szokolay, who drew inspiration mainly from classical and contemporary literature and achieved his biggest success with his opera *Blood Wedding*, which is based on García Lorca's tragedy. János Vajda gained international reputation primarily with his one-act opera *Mario and the Magician* (1988), which is an adaptation of Thomas Mann's novella.



Miklós Rózsa, *Ben-Hur*

From the perspective of classical music, **Miklós Rózsa** (1907–1995), who was born in Budapest but lived outside Hungary most of his life, had a rather irregular but, thanks to the love of the audience and the professional recognition, very rich career as a composer. Naturally, his greatest reward is that he received three Academy Awards for the scores of *Spellbound* by Hitchcock, *A Double Life* by George Cukor, and *Ben-Hur* by William Wyler. Rózsa, who spent a short time in Paris searching for his path and then went to London to work with the Korda brothers, and finally to Hollywood for the rest of his life, composed music—among others—for *The Thief of Bagdad*, *Jungle Book*, *Quo Vadis?*, *Julius Caesar*, and *El Cid*. However, his life work is even more colourful than that. Rózsa adored his fellow Hungarian composers, Bartók and Kodály—he himself also collected folk



János Richter



Frigyes Reiner

melodies of peoples (palóc, tót and gypsy) living in Nógrád county in North-Eastern Hungary. His violin, cello, piano and viola concertos are slowly but surely becoming an integral part of the basic repertoire of instrumental soloists.



György Széll



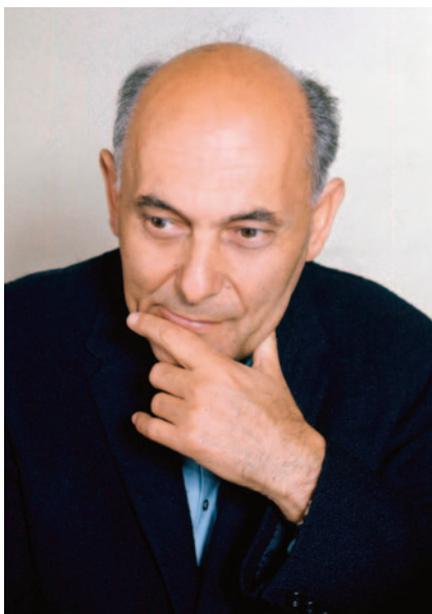
Jenő Ormándy



Antal Doráti



János Ferencsik



György Solti



Ferenc Fricsay



Zoltán Peskó

Pest-Buda/Budapest—“Paris of the East”, “The Pearl of the Danube”, “the city of thermal baths”—could also be named “the metropolis of conductors.” From the second half of the 19th century onwards, the Hungarian capital gave the rest of the world a series of (star) conductors who had an enormous impact on the world of music. János Richter (Hans Richter), who was born in Győr, Hungary, and was a decisive figure in the musical life of Vienna, Bayreuth and London, would deserve a separate chapter for his activities pursued in Budapest alone. Antal Seidl (Anton Seidl) was born in Budapest, and later became Wagner’s assistant in Bayreuth, and a heavily engaged conductor at the Metropolitan Opera and the New York



Zoltán Kocsis

Philharmonic; he conducted the world premiere of Dvořák’s *Symphony No. 9 “From the New World.”* Budapest is the place of birth of conductors Frigyes Reiner (Fritz Reiner), György Széll (George Szell), Hans Swarowsky, Jenő Ormándy (Eugene Ormandy), György Sebestyén (Georges Sébastian), Antal Doráti, János Ferencsik, György Solti György (Sir Georg Solti), Ferenc Fricsay, István Kertész, Zoltán Peskó, Árpád Joó, Ádám and Iván Fischer...

As a conductor and as the musical director of the Hungarian National Philharmonic for almost 20 years, from 1997 until his premature death in 2016, Zoltán Kocsis, who is considered among the greatest piano artists of all times, and who also engaged himself

in composition, worked to extend the list of classical musical pieces ever performed in Hungary. A brilliant interpreter of the compositions by Liszt, Debussy and Bartók, Kocsis instructed and performed many grandiose, especially difficult and highly demanding pieces (for example, works by Richard Strauss and Schönberg that are considered to be rarities, including one by Schönberg but finished by Kocsis himself, *Moses and Aaron*) that has never been performed in Hungary.

The end of the 20th century and the turn of the 21st century brought about a new golden age in Hungarian music with the composer trio György Ligeti, György Kurtág and Péter Eötvös.



György Ligeti

György Ligeti was born in Transylvania, studied in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) and Budapest, and emigrated after the fall of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution—he lived and taught first in Western Europe, then in the United States. After his death in 2006, the interest towards his works did not decrease. In Hungary, he was inspired mainly by Bartók, Stravinsky and Hungarian poetry, especially the one of Hungarian poet Sándor Weöres. Ligeti, an avid experimenter as a composer, created quite a sensation in Western Europe with his electroacoustic music *Artikulation*, his orchestral piece *Atmosphères*, the canons of the choral work *Lux aeterna* and its pair for symphonic orchestra, *Lontano*. One of the highlights of Ligeti's works—covering a wide

spectrum of genres and engaging soloists and a large variety of musical groups—is undoubtedly *Requiem* (1965). What makes it exceptional is its power of expression, the fact that it makes the genre of requiem masses “boundless”, and the impact it has made on contemporary art. Even Stanley Kubrick has contributed to popularising Ligeti's musical universe by using many of his compositions as score music for his cult movie *2001: Space Odyssey*. His epoch-making opera, performed for the first time in 1978 in Stockholm and then revised a couple of times, *Le Grand Macabre* was inspired by Michel de Ghelderode's absurd drama and the grotesque fantasy world of Brueghel's and Bosch's paintings. This ironic paraphrase of a death dance appears every now and then on the menu of the greatest opera houses and concert halls of the world.

Péter Eötvös, born in Székelyudvarhely (today's Odorheiu Secuiesc in Romania), was admitted at the Academy of Music in Budapest at the age of 14 as a special talent on Kodály's recommendation. He started his career as the musical director of Vígszínház. From 1961, he composed several works for theatre and film. The closeness of theatre and his love for literature and drama set the course for him to become an opera composer from early on. He became one of the leading figures in contemporary music as a member of the Stockhausen Ensemble first, and then, at the invitation of Pierre Boulez,



Péter Eötvös

as the musical director of Ensemble InterContemporain in Paris. Armed with lessons learnt from composing two short chamber operas, he responded to Kent Nagano's request, and composed music for the opera *Three Sisters*, a Chekhov adaptation that premiered in 1998 in Lyon, and brought Eötvös a breakthrough on the big stage.

Péter Eötvös, who has been living in Hungary again since 2004, working as a conductor, educator and a patron of young artists, is one of the most requested and most versatile composers of our age in the whole world. He works in every genre—being a universal composer, he uses various musical languages and creates new ways of musical expression. He is also well-known for his openness towards and up-to-date

knowledge about world literature; he draws inspiration from Far Eastern classic writers and present-day contemporary authors as well. His style cannot be categorised, which is not a coincidence, as he firmly believes that every subject matter needs to be put into a different world of sounds. He often says: “It is not me who has a style but the piece that I compose.” Besides his well-tested and widely performed works, new Eötvös pieces are played year by year in some of the most significant musical centres of the world. His brilliantly developed concept makes his opera *Senza Sangue*, which is based on Alessandro Baricco’s novel of the same title, worthy to be paired with Bartók’s *Bluebeard*. The literary basis for his next opera is a novel by the Norwegian Jon Fosse, *Trilogy...*

Fin de partie, that is *End of the Game* or *Endgame*. 15 November 2018—the day when the world premiere of 92-year-old **György Kurtág**’s opera composed for a French libretto took place in La Scala in Milan. It was the first time that the grand old Italian musical theatre hosted a premiere of a Hungarian composer. And actually it was the very first theatrical work of Kurtág, the composer doyen respected worldwide, who was born in Lugos, Transylvania (today’s Lugoj in Romania). His career as a composer and his artistic methods bear no resemblance at all to those of Péter Eötvös, who was well-versed in the genre of opera. One might assume that this over-2-hour-long piece

of “minimalist” Kurtág, who usually thinks in short compositions and small musical forms, goes against all of his previous works. However, not at all. Kurtág just waited for the right time when the elemental experience that he had when he read Samuel Beckett’s 1957 drama matures in him into compositions. (Back then in Paris, it was György Ligeti, who drew Kurtág’s attention to the drama.) And the result of a plan having been matured for decades and the long and thorough working

process is a masterpiece that condenses an entire oeuvre. It is not just an encounter but a symbiosis of two artistic genres: the contemporary (absurd) drama and the contemporary music that conveys and strengthens the former—way beyond words. Four characters, one protagonist, avantgarde monologues, intimate strangeness, shreds of memories, sparing musical transference of thoughts, periods of silence, disturbing unspokenness... Is it possible to say something new,

György Kurtág





The premiere of György Kurtág's *Fin de Partie* (*Endgame*) in La Scala, Milan, 2018

something different with music? Kurtág can. Professionals consider it is a revolutionary and decisive work of art. The elderly composer could not be present at the premiere in Milan in person, but according to the news

he is enthusiastic. Allegedly, he even said that he would continue the work and extend the opera by composing music for one of the scenes in the drama that he omitted from his adaptation. In the meantime, more and more

theatres are planning to perform the resigned apocalyptic vision of the Hungarian artist who has retreated from the public eye. A modern oxymoron—it seems that this *Endgame* will be a timeless treasure.



Fact Sheets on Hungary



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