

Krisztina Lajosi: *Staging the Nation: Opera and Nationalism in 19th-Century Hungary*

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The dawn of the twenty-first century has seen a dramatic increase of interest in nineteenth-century Hungarian opera and its most important composer and conductor Ferenc Erkel (1810–1893). Perhaps the highest profile project has been Csaba Káel's 2003 film of Erkel's opera *Bánk bán* (Bánk the Viceroy; 1861). Less widely circulated are productions and recordings of Erkel's lesser-known operas – some of them first modern performances and recordings – undertaken by the Hungarian State Opera of Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca, Romania.¹ In recent years this innovative small company has also produced József Ruzitska's *Béla futása* (Béla's flight, 1822), the first Hungarian opera the music of which has survived. The Hungarian State Opera in Budapest has had Erkel's best-known operas *Hunyadi László* (1844) and *Bánk bán* in its repertoire almost continuously since their premieres, and has recently mounted new productions of them. In a move highly symbolic of the importance of Erkel's work to Hungarian national identity, the Hungarian State Opera featured *Bánk bán* as the headliner for their first tour to the United States (New York City, fall 2018), which was the first professional performance of an Erkel opera in North America.²

1. These productions and recordings include: *Bátori Mária* (1840) (Musica Hungarica, 2001), *Brankovics György* (1874) (Musica Hungarica, 2003), and *István király* (1885) (Musica Hungarica, 2000). The publisher of the CDs, Musica Hungarica (Budapest 1053, Kossuth Lajos utca 12, Hungary) seems to have ceased to exist in about 2004. The Hungarian State Opera of Kolozsvár also mounted a production of Erkel's *Dózsa György* (1867) in 2004, but did not record it. *István király*, although listed in Erkel's worklist, is largely by his son Gyula.

2. The Hungarian State Opera's performance of *Bánk bán* in New York City in October 2018 is generally considered the first performance of the work in the United States, but Eric A. Gordon mentions an English-language reduced-orchestra performance of *Bánk bán* in New York in 1984, see "'Queen of Sheba' and 'Bánk Bán,' Two Hungarian Operas in NYC," *People's World* (26 November 2018). <<https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/queen-of-sheba-and-bank-ban-two-rare-hungarian-operas-in-new-york/>> (accessed 19 July 2019).

Hungarian musicologists have also played an important role in the Erkel revival with the mounting of an ambitious critical edition of his operas – a joint project of the Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Széchényi National Library, and the music publisher Rózsavölgyi and Co. Under the general editorship of Tibor Tallián, a leading scholar of nineteenth-century opera and concert life, the *Ferenc Erkel Operas Critical Edition* has so far produced full scores of Erkel's first three operas: *Bátori Mária* (2002), *Hunyadi László* (2006), and *Bánk bán* (2009). Krisztina Lajosi's 2018 book *Staging the Nation: Opera and Nationalism in 19th-Century Hungary* is a timely addition to this scholarship – all the more so for being the only book on the subject in English.

Students of music history are likely familiar with the pamphlet war known as the *Querelle des Bouffons* – a debate between the proponents of French and Italian music in mid-eighteenth-century Paris, cited by Lajosi as an early expression of national identity centered on opera (p. 24). The Hungarian “opera war,” a six-year-long battle about the relative merits of spoken drama versus opera in Hungarian nation-building that took place between 1837 and 1843 is much less familiar (p. 70). Lajosi begins her introduction, “Opera and National Consciousness,” with an extensive quotation from one of the leading voices of the “war,” József Bajza, director of the National Theater in Pest, decrying what, in his view, was an almost fanatical desire of Hungarians for opera (p. 1). The heated rhetoric of the “war” serves as an effective justification for Lajosi's project. It provides ample evidence that even in Hungary, a country in which opera was a foreign art form practiced primarily in the form of performances of foreign works in translation, opera was a popular medium that played a major role in creating and disseminating national sentiments. Lajosi also emphasizes that the theaters in which operas were staged provided one of the few spaces in which many layers of society could mix and bond over their common identification with a national cause.³

Chapter 1, “National Opera as a Political Force,” begins by outlining the rise of national opera in France, Italy, and Germany, and proceeds by explaining the important role of German Romantic writers – the Grimm brothers, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Clemens Brentano – in putting language and music at the center of national discourse. Lajosi cites the two best-known examples of opera's role in nation building: the performance of Daniel Auber's *La Muette de Portici* in Brussels that sparked the 1830 Belgium revolution (p. 14), and Italian nationalists' use of Verdi's popularity to call for national unity, expressed by the popular slogan “Viva Verdi,” which was an acronym for Viva Vittorio Emmanuel, Re d'Italia (p. 21). Although recent research has complicated these iconic stories, they remain valuable symbols of opera's central role in the political formation of

3. Regarding the mixing of layers of society in the opera house, it seems relevant to note that the Budapest Opera House, opened in 1884, is constructed so as to completely cordon off the audience in the balcony by means of a separate staircase that does not permit access to any other part of the theater.

nineteenth-century Europe. As Lajosi mentions in the next chapter, Hungary had its own iconic moment that combined drama and revolution: on 15 March 1848, the eve of the Hungarian uprising of 1848–1849 against Habsburg domination, a revolutionary crowd demanded a performance of József Katona's play *Bánk bán* (1815, rev. 1819) at the National Theater in Pest (pp. 37 and 119).⁴ Little wonder that Erkel sought to capitalize on its appeal as a subject for opera.

Citing Georg Lukács, Lajosi emphasizes that the public character of stage works made historical drama a powerful tool of nationalism (p. 27). Opera was even more suited for stirring the masses than plays because, as she writes, “above all it was the chorus, a mass of people singing together, that represented the most obvious liaison between life and drama, audience and stage” (p. 27). Thus, the opera war was finally won not by the director of the National Theater and other language purists who considered spoken drama to be the proper tool for the elevation of the Hungarian language and with it the nation, but by audiences who enforced their preference for opera by attending spoken drama only sparsely while flocking to performances of opera.

Lajosi is most captivating in her discussion of nationalism and opera when addressing circumstances specific to Hungary or the Habsburg Empire. She recounts that influenced by Herder's ideas about language, Joseph II instituted a Nationaltheater (German-language theater) in Vienna in 1776. As she points out, Joseph II's emphasis on vernacular culture led the Hungarian aristocracy to rebel against the Habsburgs in part out of a desire to assert Hungarian as an official language. Then, in turn, minority populations governed by Hungary – Romanians, Slovaks, Croats, and Serbs – fought for the same linguistic independence. “The Viennese court lost control,” she writes, “cultural nationalism spread like wildfire throughout the Empire and eventually led to its disintegration” (p. 27).

But emphasis on the use of native language in the Habsburg Empire did not result in “national authenticity and purity,” Lajosi points out in her conclusion to Chapter 1 that the national canons in nineteenth-century Europe were hybrids (p. 32). I would add that this cross-fertilization added layers of meaning to the best of these works, which helps raise them above being simple instruments of nationalist propaganda and into the realm of great art. Lajosi does not address current politics, but her observations about the productive hybridity of national art could well be used as a caution against current propagators of national purities. Erkel's particular genius, for instance, lay precisely in his ability to tease out points of intersection between international operatic conventions and Hungarian music.

Chapter 2, “The Struggle for a National Theater,” narrows its focus almost entirely to the Hungarian sphere. Lajosi begins with the claim that “Hungarian na-

4. According to Lajosi, the performance could not be finished because of the crowds' impatience to sing the “Marseillaise” and its Hungarian revolutionary cousin the “Rákóczi March” (p. 119).

tional consciousness was shaped on the stage and on the page just as much as – if not more than – it was in the political arena” (p. 32). Lajosi’s example is the nationally oriented efforts of men of letters such as Ferenc Kazinczy (1759–1831) to turn Hungarian, previously a language of the lower classes, into a language of literature, science, and politics. In Hungary, the educated classes spoke German or French, and government business was conducted in German or Latin, with Hungarian replacing Latin as the official language of the Hungarian parliament only in 1844. Despite this late date, Hungarian intellectuals had long been advocating the vernacular as indispensable for a sense of nationhood. Although Lajosi does not spell out a connection between the late-eighteenth-century movement to elevate and reform Hungarian and Herder’s theories of language, a quote she cites that appeared in the pamphlet *Magyarság* (Hungarianness, 1778), proves that at least some Hungarian intellectuals were *au courant* with Enlightenment thought: “‘Nations become intellectual powers only by using their own mother tongue, and never by using the language of another nation’” (p. 35).

Given the vigor and passion of Kazinczy and the playwright György Besse-nyei’s generation to instill a sense of Hungarian nationhood via literature and drama already in the late eighteenth century, it is perhaps surprising that it took until 1837 for Hungarian-language drama to gain a secure foothold in Hungarian cultural life with the opening of the Hungarian Theater of Pest (Pesti Magyar Színház).⁵ Lajosi outlines several reasons for the delay. One relates to the ironic situation already broached in Chapter 1: although the inspiration for a national theater had come from Joseph II’s German national theater in Vienna (1776), a Hungarian national theater was not in the Habsburg’s interest because Hungarian nationalism was anti-Austrian (p. 33). Not only did the supporters of Hungarian theater need to convince Austrian state administrators of the value of their cause, they also had to convince their own nobility, many of whom spoke little Hungarian and had a cosmopolitan rather than national outlook (p. 39).⁶

Another reason for the slow start of Hungarian-language theater was directly related to the need for language reform. Lacking a tradition of Hungarian literature and drama, theatrical life in Hungary was long dominated by German actors. Even when individual productions of Hungarian theater were underwritten by wealthy individuals, the cost of maintaining a theatrical group was too great not to depend on the rental of boxes (the most expensive seats) to the elite. Accustomed to the higher level of performance provided by German actors, upper-class Hungarians generally had little desire to attend Hungarian theater (p. 40). Early attempts at Hungarian-language theater included occasional guest appearances of

5. The Hungarian Theater of Pest changed its name to the National Theater (Nemzeti Színház) in 1840.

6. According to Lajosi, even Count István Széchenyi, a major supporter of the Hungarian Theater of Pest, “could not speak Hungarian at all” (p. 81). While his mother tongue was German the degree of Széchenyi’s fluency in Hungarian is a matter of debate.

Hungarian travelling companies in the Várszínház (Castle Theater), which otherwise functioned as a German theater. The first regular Hungarian theater company performed in a small theater in Buda from 1790 to 1796. Transylvania, a region that had maintained its independence from both the Ottomans and the Habsburgs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (p. 116), saw the construction of the first Hungarian stone theater in 1821 in Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca), which had seen Hungarian productions as early as 1792. Many of the people involved in Hungarian opera in Kolozsvár 1821–1834 would later end up in the music division of the Hungarian Theater of Pest.⁷

Chapter 3, “Taking the Stage: Opera in the Hungarian Theater,” recounts how opera provided a new lifeline for struggling Hungarian theaters in the 1820s, ’30s, and ’40s. As she does for straight theater in Chapter 2, Lajosi reaches back to the second-half of the eighteenth century to trace the history of Hungarian opera. Thus, since much of the history of opera in Hungary overlaps with the development of Hungarian theater writ large, one encounters a fair amount of redundancy between Chapters 2 and 3. Another problem is that the relevance of some of this material to her main argument is not always clear. Opera at the Eszterházy court, for example, does not appear to have contributed to the rise of Hungarian national opera, existing as it did exclusively in the German-Austrian cultural sphere. More relevant is Lajosi’s account of the first Hungarian opera, *Pikkó Hertzeg és Jutka Perzsi* (Prince Pikkó and Jutka Perzsi), a translation of a German *Singspiel* with a new score by the Hungarian József Chudy (1753–1813).⁸ The significance of this work is threefold: the success of its performance in Buda in 1793 showed the preference of Hungarian-speaking audiences for sung drama; it paved the way for the translation of a number of other *Singspiels*; and, most important for Lajosi’s topic, a detail of its creation provides evidence that the Hungarian theater was seen as fertile ground for anti-Habsburg sentiment. In an ironic twist, Antal Szalkay (1753–1804), the translator of *Pikkó Hertzeg* into Hungarian, was a spy who had been planted in the Hungarian theater company to act as a political informant for the Emperor (pp. 62–66).

As had been the case with Hungarian spoken drama, Kolozsvár played an important role in the early history of Hungarian opera. Although initially equipped only with an orchestra of ten to fifteen, a chorus of amateurs, and actors lacking operatic training for the solo roles, the theater’s financial security eventually made it possible to hire singers able to perform technically demanding operas such as Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, *Die Zauberflöte*, *La Clemenza di Tito*, and Weber’s

7. While 1837 marked the opening of the Hungarian Theater of Pest, this was not the beginning of Hungarian drama in the city – it had had a presence on other stages beginning in about 1820.

8. The Kolozsvári Magyar Állami Opera staged *Pikkó Hertzeg* in their 2016/2017 season in a double bill with *Béla futása*. Because József Chudy’s music for *Pikkó Hertzeg* has not survived, the score was recomposed in a contemporary style for the production by György Orbán.

Der Freischütz in Hungarian translation (p. 66). Opened in 1821, the Hungarian Theater in Kolozsvár saw the premiere of the first original Hungarian opera, József Ruzitska's *Béla futása* (Béla's Flight) in 1822.⁹ (Unlike the score to *Pikkó Hertzeg*, that of *Béla futása* has survived, albeit in a revised form.) *Béla futása*, like many operas by Erkel, was an adaptation of a German play inspired by Hungarian history (p. 67). An important ingredient of the Kolozsvár opera's success was their 1823 engagement of Róza Széppataki (born Schenbach; 1793–1872), a Hungarian singing actress of German heritage. Best known by her married name Dérýné (Mrs. Dérý), she was offered lucrative contracts in German theaters, but, as a sign of growing national identification, devoted herself to Hungarian theater. Her diaries and memoirs are a major source of information about Hungarian theatrical life of the day.

Dérýné's presence considerably raised the standard of operatic production in Kolozsvár, not only through her own singing, but also through the instruction of singing she offered other actors. She also helped recruit the musically sophisticated József Heinisch (ca. 1800–1840) as the ensemble's full-time conductor (p. 69). Without more evidence, however, it is difficult to believe Lajosi's assertion that Heinisch "elevated Hungarian opera practice in Kolozsvár to the level of Vienna" (p. 69). Erkel's biography is also tied to Kolozsvár, where he lived 1827–1834 and probably conducted at the Hungarian Theater in 1834. He left the city around the same time as the Hungarian theater and opera troop left seeking better conditions in Nagyvárad (present-day Oradea). Soon, however, the troop left Nagyvárad to join the Hungarian Theater of Buda, where Erkel was the conductor in 1835, and which was a forerunner of the Hungarian Theater of Pest.¹⁰ Following the bankruptcy of the Buda company in 1836, Erkel accepted a position as a conductor in the German Theater of Pest, an immense theater with a capacity for some 3,500 audience members that was better financed and more capable of operatic productions than the Hungarian theaters.¹¹ He moved to the Hungarian Theater of Pest in 1838 under the condition that he would be given autonomy in musical matters. Transylvania may have been the cradle of Hungarian opera and theater, but by the mid-1830s the rapidly increasing population of Buda and Pest assured that these twin cities became the most important sites for the development of Hungarian

9. Lajosi refers to *Béla futása* as a "through-composed opera," which implies that it has only recitative and no spoken dialogue (p. 67), but in a quotation she includes by Gábor Mátray, it is described as a *Singspiel*, which contradicts her claim of it being through-composed (p. 88). It is, in fact, a *Singspiel*. See Pál Horváth, "A *Béla futása* előadásai, forrásai és változatai (*Béla futása*'s performances, sources, and versions)" [to be published in *Magyar Zene*].

10. What Lajosi calls the Hungarian Theater of Buda appears to have been officially a visiting company from Pozsony/Kassa that rented the Castle Theater in Buda from 1832 to 1835. A clearer outlining of the complicated lineages of the Hungarian companies would have been helpful.

11. Lajosi blames the lack of attendance that caused the bankruptcy of the Hungarian theater company in Buda in part to the absence of bridges connecting Buda and Pest (p. 81). While it is true that there was no permanent bridge until 1849, a substantial pontoon bridge did connect the two cities for much of the year.

culture. (Lajosi devotes the last third of Chapter 3 to recounting the details of the “opera war.”)

Lajosi’s account of opera repertoire played in Hungary indicates that the Hungarians were surprisingly up to date with the latest European trends. To cite just one example, Rossini’s *Guillaume Tell*, which premiered in Paris in 1829, was staged in Pest already in 1830 (p. 72).¹² This explains why Erkel’s operas exhibited such a sophisticated knowledge of both the Hungarian style and recent developments in European opera. Erkel himself acknowledged that his experience at the German theater, which was capable of mounting *grand opéra*, was invaluable to his development.

Erkel’s two most successful works, *Hunyadi László* and *Bánk bán*, are the subjects of Lajosi’s fourth and fifth chapters, which together account for almost half of her book. Already with Erkel’s first opera *Bátori Mária*, tellingly chosen to serve as the opening production of the Hungarian National Theater in 1840 while the opera war was still in full swing (p. 71), Erkel’s work was recognized as a major improvement over *Béla futása* (pp. 87–88).¹³ *Hunyadi László* would similarly be seen as a major improvement over *Bátori Mária* (p. 92). *Bánk bán* was recognized as a further improvement, although *Hunyadi* was more frequently performed than *Bánk bán* in the nineteenth century. None of Erkel’s other works achieved comparable success.

A recurring theme in Lajosi’s book is the role of German-Austrian models in the development of Hungarian nationalism, theater, and opera. Even the historical Hungarian subjects of Erkel’s operas owe something to a project initiated by the Austrian statesman and historian Josef von Hormayr (1781–1848) who headed a project “to promote an imperial identity among all the different nations of the Habsburg Empire” (p. 89). Among the fruits of this project was the dissemination of heroic stories of Hungarian history such as that of János Hunyadi, known for his successful defense of Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade) against the Ottomans in 1456. With the rise of the anti-Habsburg Hungarian independence movement, Hungarians sought out aspects of these stories that could be read as allegories for the injustice of Habsburg domination. The story of János Hunyadi’s son László fit that bill.

To understand the national significance of Erkel’s *Hunyadi László*, one has to understand the historical resonances of its plot with rising Hungarian nationalism in the nineteenth century. The actor, translator, playwright, and composer Benjámín (Béni) Egressy (1814–1851), the opera’s librettist, based the plot on Tóth

12. Lajosi correctly identifies *Guillaume Tell* as a *grand opéra*, but her use of the term to describe Bellini’s *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* and other works (p. 72) suggests a more general use of the term than is customary in musicological discourse. A comment about “Liszt’s symphonies” popularizing Hungarian music in European concert halls (p. 79) – Lajosi surely means Hungarian Rhapsodies – also serves to warn readers against trusting her treatment of musical technicalities.

13. On p. 87, Lajosi reports that *Bátori Mária* was a huge success, but on p. 77, she writes that it was “not particularly successful.”

Lőrinc's play *Két László* (Two Lászlós). The historical background of the drama stems from the unstable political situation in Hungary caused by the death of King Albert II (1397–1439). On his deathbed, Albert II bequeathed his realms to his as yet unborn son Ladislaus, who became King László V of Hungary (1440–1457). Like his father, Ladislaus was from the House of Habsburg and had little political support in Hungary. Nominally ruling until he died in age seventeen, he was a weak king highly dependent on political advisors. It was unavoidable that such a king would enter into conflict with the Hungarian nobility, in this case with the Hunyadis, whose nobility had been granted for military heroism. The contrast between a weak, foreign ruler with scheming advisors and strong national characters made these historical events well suited to a nineteenth-century Hungarian national drama. Egressy made the topic even more suitable for opera by adding the subplot of a love triangle. The opera's tragic climax is the beheading of László Hunyadi, son of the famous János Hunyadi, who defeated the Turks at the battle of Belgrade in 1456.

The story of the real national historical hero, János Hunyadi, was less suited for opera than the tragic fate of his son László, whose death at the hands of a foreign ruler could be used as a symbol of social injustice. With its tragic tone, *Hunyadi László* is typical of Hungarian national art, which tends to revel in defeat and tragedy. Hungarian operas typically end with death, a tradition that still resonates in the tragic ending of Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*. Nineteenth-century Hungarian opera appears to have been unable to capture the national mood with a celebratory exhibition of national pomp à la Wagner's *Meistersinger* or by following the model of nineteenth-century Russian operas ending with choruses celebrating the nation and its ruler.

Erkel and Egressy's next opera, *Bánk bán*, repeats many of the themes of *Hunyadi László*, but intensifies the plot lines of injustice. József Katona (1791–1830) wrote *Bánk bán* in 1815 in response to a call by the Hungarian Theater in Kolozsvár for an original play in Hungarian on a historical subject.¹⁴ Katona did not win the competition, but revised the play in 1819 for publication in 1820. Unstaged in Katona's lifetime, *Bánk bán* gradually gained popularity when Hungarian actors choose it repeatedly as a vehicle for benefit performances in the 1830s and '40s. Although Lajosi does not specify it, the reason for the play not being produced during Katona's lifetime appears to be that it was banned by the censor. Although she does mention that the first performance of *Bánk bán* was a benefit performance in 1833, Lajosi leaves her reader to speculate why it was finally allowed to be staged (p. 126).¹⁵ (One assumes that censorship was relaxed during

14. Lajosi lists only the name of the publication in which the call for submissions appeared, not the theater company (p. 37).

15. Lajosi mentions only that *Bánk bán* was banned by the Hungarian National Theater for an unspecified amount of time before and for a decade after the revolution of 1848.

the reform period beginning in 1830 – or perhaps one-time benefit performances chosen by the actors made it easier to bypass the censor.) As the revolutionary crowd's demand for *Bánk bán* at the National Theater on the eve of the Hungarian Revolution on 15 March 1848 demonstrates, the fear that the play would stir up anti-Habsburg sentiment was well-founded, and the play was banned again from 1849 to 1859. The ban appears to explain why Erkel does not seem to have begun work on the opera until 1859, although the press had already announced that Katona's play would be the subject of Erkel's next opera shortly following the premiere of *Hunyadi László* in 1844 (p. 111). After the premiere of Erkel's *Bánk bán* at the National Theater in 1861, what had been canonized as *the* national play was reborn as *the* national opera.

In the play, and even more clearly in the opera, the story of *Bánk bán* is shaped into an anti-Habsburg parable. A German queen rules over a dissolute court while the king and his palatine or viceroy Bánk are both absent – the king fighting in a crusade, Bánk taking stock of the country. The Hungarian nobles are appalled by the Queen's wanton debauchery of the court, which leaves the peasants starving. The most gruesome symbol of the immorality of the queen's court is the rape of Bánk's wife, Melinda, by the queen's brother Ottó. Upon his return to court, Bánk kills the queen both out of generalized rage at the queen's sins against the country and for her part in abetting Melinda's rape – a powerful if crude metaphor for what many Hungarians considered the Habsburg's treatment of Hungary. Melinda, a symbol of Hungarian innocence and vulnerability, is sent to take refuge in Bánk's castle. In the opera, before she reaches Bánk's castle Melinda breaks down and throws herself and her young son, symbol of Hungary's future, into the Tisza River. The final scene depicts a confrontation between the king, returned from battle on the news of the queen's murder, and Bánk, who readily admits to the deed. In the opera, Bánk drops his sword when men enter carrying the bodies of his wife and son. A final chorus prays for the dead as Bánk himself dies of grief.

Lajosi does an excellent job of laying out the background to Katona's play, beginning with what is known from historical chronicles, and tracing the extensive literary treatment of the tale in Hungarian and European history (pp. 116–142). Lajosi's account situates *Bánk bán* in the context of both Katona's oeuvre and the reign of the Habsburg Emperor Francis I (1768–1835), King of Hungary at the time Katona wrote the play.¹⁶ In particular, Lajosi draws comparisons between Francis I, who ruled by decree and did not consult the Hungarian diet, and the German Queen Gertrude in *Bánk bán*, who presided over the Hungarian court without regard for the rights of the Hungarian nobles.

The historical veracity of much of the plot of *Bánk bán*, which concerns events in the Hungarian court in 1213, is shrouded in mystery, although enough is known

16. Known as the Holy Roman Emperor Francis II until his dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806.

to determine that a great deal in the story is fabrication. There is, however, truth to the general setting: King Andrew II (1177–1235) did leave his Meranian (German) wife Queen Gertrude (1185–1213) in charge of the court in his absence; a controversial figure among the nobles during an unstable time, Gertrude was assassinated on a hunting expedition on 28 September 1213; and Bánk was indeed a “bán,” a title akin to viceroy or palatine (an official with power to act in the king’s stead) at the time of the Queen’s murder.

Lajosi’s account of the history of one significant plot point is potentially misleading. Although she recognizes that “even the earliest medieval accounts [of the story] are largely fabrications” (p. 115), she goes on to state that “as varied as these early chronicles are, they all include the episode of the rape of the Palatine’s wife” (p. 116). This is not incorrect, but it leaves the impression that the rape in the opera has a strong historical foundation and could thus act as a justification for the queen’s murder (p. 116). Miklós Dolinszky, in his introduction to the critical edition of the score, warns against such an interpretation:

This historically utterly suspect interpretation of the crime [rape] became a *sine qua non* of the story’s later literary treatment. The course of this tale likely arose from threads of a legend associated with events that took place at least a century later ... All signs point to the fact that the motive for Gertrude’s assassination was exclusively political.¹⁷

Dolinszky’s view deserves at least a footnote in Lajosi’s account. Curiously, elsewhere Lajosi does cite “*Szikrát dobott a nemzet szívébe*”: *Erkel Ferenc három operája* (“A spark ignited the heart of the nation”: Three operas by Ferenc Erkel), a book that includes the scholarly essays (including Dolinszky’s) from the prefaces to the scores of the *Ferenc Erkel Operas Critical Edition*.¹⁸ Unfortunately, she appears to be unaware of the critical edition itself and the English translations of the introductory essays therein.

As is to be expected, Egressy’s libretto simplifies Katona’s plot, and Lajosi identifies the opera’s ending as the most important change between the play and the libretto and the different points of view they embody. In Katona’s version, Bánk does not die, and the play ends on a note of optimism with the king triumphantly proclaiming: “Hungarians! The Queen died justly / Before Hungary was

17. *Bánk bán: Opera három felvonásban* (*Bánk bán: Opera in three acts*), ed. Miklós Dolinszky, *Erkel Ferenc Operák* (Ferenc Erkel’s Operas), general editor Tibor Tallián (Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2009), vol. 1, XXIX–XXX. Lajosi mentions various versions of the score of *Bánk bán* (p. 148), but does not mention the critical edition.

18. Ágnes Gupcsó, ed. “*Szikrát dobott a nemzet szívébe*”: *Erkel Ferenc három operája: Bátori Mária–Hunyadi László–Bánk bán* (Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2011). The quotation in the volume’s title, “*Szikrát dobott a nemzet szívébe*,” is quoted in Tibor Tallián’s essay in the book (p. 242) and is from the *Pesti Napló* (Pest Journal), 25 February 1874. It refers to the effect that the premiere of *Hunyadi László* had on the Hungarian public, see Lajosi p. 92, footnote 28.

destroyed” (p. 141). As Lajosi observes, the king, acknowledging that God has punished Bánk enough with the death of Melinda, “navigates the emotions in the closing scene towards reconciliation and peace... The final and most important message is that the country’s future is secure after the divine and social order has been restored.” This, Lajosi informs us, was a common theme of Katona’s plays written in the years 1813–1814 (p. 142). In a rare moment of droll understatement, Lajosi acknowledges that “the opera does not encourage optimism” (p. 151), but she does not mention two obvious reasons for the play’s and the opera’s different conclusions: written after the defeat of the revolution of 1848, Egressy’s libretto reflects the extreme disillusionment of Hungarian liberals at the time, a disillusionment that was in perfect harmony with the hyper-melodramatic conventions of mid-nineteenth-century Italian and French operas. *Hunyadi László*, written before the revolution, was created in a similarly, if less intensely, tragic vein. Although that opera also ends with the death of the title character, hope remains because László’s younger brother, Mátyás Hunyadi, is left alive. Hungarian audiences know that he will soon assume the throne as Matthias Corvinus, the most successful Hungarian ruler of the Renaissance. In contrast, *Bánk bán* ends in total devastation, leaving no room for hope.

Much of the book’s discussion of the music of *Bánk bán* comes from Lajosi’s account of the work based on Erkel’s own description of the structure and composition of the opera (pp. 148–150). Lajosi also points out similarities between *Bánk* and Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (pp. 151–152): both operas open with party scenes depicting courtly debauchery, and the Hungarian nobleman Petur’s drinking song near the beginning of act 1 bears a resemblance the Duke of Mantua’s arias “Questa o quella” and “La donna è mobile.” In her discussion of Petur’s drinking song, a setting of the first and last stanzas of Vörösmarty’s poem “Keserű pohár” (Bitter glass) that Erkel set prior to his work on *Bánk bán*, Lajosi has an impressive footnote outlining works of Hungarian and world literature that include drinking songs (pp. 152–153). She fails, however, to note that the drinking song was also a standard trope in nineteenth-century opera. Verdi’s *La Traviata*, like *Bánk bán*, opens with a party scene and features a drinking song as its second musical number.

More significant, in her brief description of the scene of act 3 that ends with Melinda’s suicide, Lajosi does not mention that this scene is a typical operatic mad scene, another common component of nineteenth-century Italian and French operas. Erkel’s specific models appear to be the mad scenes in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* and Meyerbeer’s *Dinorah*.¹⁹ Such omissions are unfortunate because they miss what is a crucial ingredient of Erkel’s operatic genius: his ability to combine elements of the Hungarian style with international operatic conven-

19. Dolinszky points out the relationship to *Dinorah* in “Introduction,” xxxix–xl.

tions on many levels, not simply by the addition of a Hungarian dance or musical set piece in the Hungarian style. Melinda's mad scene is perhaps the best example of Erkel's ability to synthesize, for it combines the three-part structure of a typical Hungarian *verbunkos*, consisting of an introductory section, a slow dance, and a fast dance (often a *csárdás*), with that of the standard nineteenth-century *scena*, consisting of recitative, *cantabile*, *tempo di mezzo*, and *cabaletta*. Not only does Erkel map a standard sequence of Hungarian dances onto the extended *scena* form typical of a mad scene, but he sets the tone of Melinda's isolation at night on the banks of the Tisza with reference to another long-standing Hungarian musical tradition, that of the Hungarian pastoral, replete with fishermen playing eerie Hungarian scales on the shepherd's pipe (played in the orchestra by the flute and piccolo in imitation of a Hungarian *furulya*) over the tremolo of a cimbalom. This level of synthesis of international operatic conventions and the Hungarian style goes beyond similar, less ambitious, attempts in *Hunyadi László*, and requires considerable compositional sophistication. The result is a scene of chilling intensity, both in its depiction of Melinda losing her grip on reality in an astounding display of *csárdás*-inflected *bel-canto* coloratura, and in its ability to use the suffering of Melinda to fuel feelings of national identification and indignation. The scene is especially telling because it is entirely Egressy and Erkel's invention, having no precedent in Katona's play,²⁰ which is to say that Egressy and Erkel were at their best when seamlessly weaving Hungarian national elements into an international style.

Lajosi brings her study to an end with a brief essay, "The Opera Chorus and the Voice of the People," (pp. 155–163), primarily a recapitulation of ideas already presented earlier in the book. As she states in her concluding sentence, "Music could spread ideas more effectively than pamphlets or political orations, and songs [especially choruses] could give common voice to the people" (p. 163). The ideas here are solid and undoubtedly important to the historians and students of European culture whom I assume are the target audience of the series *National Cultivation of Culture* in which Lajosi's book appears. For musicologists, however, the importance of music, especially opera, in the rise of nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe has long been recognized and requires no special proof.

For scholars of music, the value of Lajosi's work will likely lie primarily in the specific information she provides about the development of Hungarian opera and the rich historical and literary background she offers for *Hunyadi László* and *Bánk bán*. It must be noted, however, that much of the information Lajosi presents about the history of Hungarian opera and the specific works has already been published, often with greater clarity and specificity, in the essays included in the

20. In Katona's play, Melinda arrives to Bánk's castle, but dies there when the castle is burned down by arsonists sent by Ottó.

scores of the critical edition of Erkel's operas. Trained in comparative literature and history, Lajosi brings a great deal more sophistication to her treatment of literary and political history than she does to her treatment of music.

Lajosi points out that "*Bánk bán* has become a sacred icon of the Hungarian literary canon" and stage (p. 147). I would add that Erkel's status as a composer has had its ups and downs. Bartók, whose music and outlook holds a great deal of moral weight for Hungarians, rejected Erkel's music both because he felt that the musical style he used to represent the nation was inauthentic (*verbunkos* as opposed to what Bartók considered true folk music) and because the brand of nationalism he had come to represent was antithetical to Bartók's own more liberal stance. (One should not forget that nationalism, now generally seen as conservative, was a liberal movement in the mid-nineteenth century.) Following in Bartók's footsteps, many Hungarians have had trouble seeing *Bánk bán* as anything more than an out-of-date symbol of old-fashioned nationalism. The recent increase in interest in Erkel has resulted in a welcome and long-overdue raising of his profile. It cannot be denied, however, that it also rides a rising tide of nationalism in Hungary. (For those unfamiliar with the strong political overtones attendant on Erkel in modern times, I suggest watching the 2014 video of a flash mob performance of "Hazám, hazám, te mindenem [My homeland, my homeland, you are my everything] from *Bánk bán*, in Budapest's Mátyás Square, sponsored by the government party).²¹ For a broader understanding of its universally human themes and what Lajosi aptly describes as Shakespearean characteristics of its title character, it would be important to produce it in the great opera houses of the world. To write a first-class historical play in Hungarian was Katona's original goal in creating *Bánk bán*, but the difficulty of the Hungarian language has had the limiting effect of making the opera the sole property of Hungarian companies. The time has come for the universality of its musical language to bring it to a wider group of performers and audiences, whose instincts will be to evaluate it for its dramatic power rather than its nationalist message.

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21. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTXmaD08-Zs>> (accessed 17 July 2019).