

Before *The Wooden Prince*: Károly Szabados's Ballet *Vióra* (1891) in the Context of the History of Hungarian Ballet

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ABSTRACT

Following the debut of Károly Szabados's ballet *Vióra* on March 14, 1891, the daily newspaper *Pesti Hírlap* called the date a glorious day not only for Hungarian music, but also for Hungarian genius and spirit in general, and treated the debut at the Hungarian Royal Opera House in Budapest as an allegory for spring: "It was as if the refreshing, revitalizing breaths of that traditional March breeze had blown across the hall of muses on Andrásy Road: such was the enthusiasm dominating the spectators' benches and the stage alike."¹ According to the newspaper, it was the long-anticipated victory of "the Hungarian genius, which some had begun to consider as almost alien to the Hungarian royal theater," and it was all thanks to Géza Zichy (1849–1924), one of whose first acts as intendant was bringing this long neglected piece to the stage.² In the context of *Vióra*'s premiere, the "Hungarian genius" and the "Hungarian spirit" manifested on several levels, as it was the decision of a Hungarian intendant to present the evening-long ballet of a Hungarian author revolving around Hungarian themes; but this raises the question, why did a Hungarian ballet carry such significance at the time? What place does Károly Szabados, the author of the ballet, occupy in the history of Hungarian music, and how was the

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¹N. N., "Vióra. Szabados Károly balettje" [*Vióra*. A ballet by Károly Szabados], *Pesti Hírlap* 13/73 (March 15, 1891), 4.

²Ibid.

ballet and its music received by contemporaries in and out of the limelight? This study attempts to answer these questions by examining contemporary Hungarian and German news articles and music critiques published in Budapest.

KEYWORDS

Károly Szabados, ballet, Franz Liszt, Hungarian Royal Opera House, Gustav Mahler

1. THE OBSTACLES HINDERING THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUNGARIAN NATIONAL BALLET

In nineteenth-century Hungary, upward mobility and attempts to regain national independence were characterized by hiccups and compromises, and due to a number of historical anomalies, the nationalist development of certain branches of the arts was slow and often controversial. While Hungarian music developed rapidly due to the contributions of Franz Liszt and Ferenc Erkel, and later on thanks to Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, the same could not be said of Hungarian ballet, which lacked the sort of exceptional talent that could have adapted contemporary Hungarian folk dancing for the ballet stage in a way that would have satisfied the tastes and spirit of the age. Consequently, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Hungarian ballet closely followed the Vienna model, with only a few national or folk elements added to ballets such as *Csárdás* and *Vióra*.³

Regarding the role and significance of Hungarian national ballet, it is worth noting that in the first half of the nineteenth century, there was social demand for the development of a national dance culture and ballet, but the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 and the Bach period curbed these aspirations. Following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, however, there were signs of development as demands for the exhibition of Hungarian national dance culture increased, ballroom and partner dancing became more popular, and the achievements of European ballet began to take root in Hungary.

On account of the fact that the discovery and collection of Hungarian folk artifacts provided a solid foundation for the development of national dance culture, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, ethnographic research began to encompass the entire Carpathian Basin in the fields of poetry, music, and dance. The latter especially produced spectacular results: for instance, at the 1896 millennial exhibition in Budapest, a village open-air museum was erected in Városliget, and dancers were brought in from rural areas to perform at the exhibition. Another example was the Hungarian Royal Opera House's presentation of the ballets *Csárdás* and *Vióra*, which were not only based on folk-themed librettos, but also included original folk dancing elements performed by authentic local dancers.⁴

³Géza KÖRTVÉLYES, "Balett és néptánc" [Ballet and folk dance], *Muzsika* 9/2 (February 2, 1966), 34–35.

⁴László MAÁ CZ, "A Budapesti Operaház 100 éve" [100 years of the Budapest Opera House], *Táncstudományi Tanulmányok 1990–91* [Dance studies], ed. by László MAÁ CZ (Budapest, 1992), 7–25.



The demand for Hungarian national ballet partly stemmed from the strengthening of the Hungarian middle class in the nineteenth century, and due to Hungary's status as part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, these artistic aspirations became closely intertwined with the issue of achieving national independence. In other words, the more this agenda was hindered, the more necessary and important it became to support the national program of representing Hungarian themes to the public in the form of national music and dance, also dramatic and romantic ballet. However, as the Hungarian ballet that used to flourish in the Reform Era had declined, national stage dancing had no foundations to build on, and after 1867 Hungarian national, ballroom, and partner dances (the *palotás*, *körmagyar*, and *csárdás*) gradually lost their significance. This problem was also exacerbated by the "stagnation of folk and national music," the relative inaccessibility of the Opera House in Budapest, power and personal struggles among the authorities on a national musical theater, and last but not least by ballet professionals with Italian musical and artistic roots, who thus favored foreign influences in ballet over the development of an indigenous Hungarian ballet. It was under these circumstances that three national Hungarian ballets were presented at the beginning of the 1890s (*Csárdás*, *Vióra*, and *Dárius kincse* [The Treasure of Darius]), and Hungarian ballets were added to the program as the (often quite limited) opportunity arose.⁵

2. "I WANT HUNGARIAN ARTS ON A EUROPEAN LEVEL, FOR NOW WITH THE HELP OF FOREIGNERS, AND SOMEDAY BY OUR OWN STRENGTH"⁶

With the 1884 opening of the Hungarian Royal Opera House, musical theater could at last operate as an independent institution; nevertheless, the development of Hungarian ballet was hindered by a variety of factors that also negatively impacted its artistic quality. For instance, while Budapest adopted the repertoire of the Vienna Opera House, the training and skills of performers lagged behind the high standards established by Austrian ballet. At the time, ballet in Budapest was overseen by Frigyes Campilli (1820–1889), who had been brought in from Vienna and commissioned by the Hungarian National Theater in 1847 to organize systematic ballet training in Hungary, put together a ballet company, and improve its ballet repertoire. In 1884, Campilli was appointed as the ballet-master of the Opera House, and since he considered Vienna his model, he drew on the international ballet repertoire or Western European romantic ballet as well as on his own choreographies. Consequently, he paid little attention to developing Hungarian national ballet culture or the training of Hungarian performers; Campilli first and foremost promoted classical ballet, and chose to invite famous foreign artists to perform in Hungary. In the first two seasons of the Opera House, they adapted Campilli's works from the Hungarian National Theater (*Coppélia*, *Naila*, *Sylvia*, and *Rococo*), and also put on a new production, *Bécsi keringő* (Viennese Waltz), with choreography set to the music of Josef Bayer.

⁵Ágnes GELENCSÉR, "Balettművészet az Operaházban" [The art of ballet in the Opera House], in *A Budapesti Operaház 100 éve* [100 years of the Budapest Opera House], ed. by Géza STAUD (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1984), 151–164.

⁶N. N., "Az új intendáns" [The new intendant], *Pesti Napló* 42/33 (February 3, 1891), 2.



Under Campilli's management, the ballet company of the Hungarian Royal Opera House counted sixty performers, half of whom were ballet students. The titular roles in Campilli's ballets were performed by Zsófia Coppini from the Teatro La Fenice in Venice and Fanni Maruzzi, who were accompanied by four Hungarian solo artists: Katica Müller, Paula Ferenczy, Hermin Kürthy, and Mariska Sarkadi. As the Opera House had only one male performer, the Italian dancer Enrico Pini (Coppini's partner), male roles such as the army recruiters in *Bánk bán* and *Hunyadi László* were often played by female dancers.

In 1887, after a career of forty years, Campilli retired and was succeeded as ballet-master by Cesare Smeraldi (1845–1924), who also took Vienna for his model in ballet and started his career with Manzotti's *Excelsior*, which had premiered in Vienna only two years prior. Featuring a cast of hundreds of performers, this spectacular and melodramatic piece about the rise of human civilization and the development of technology was destined for success in Europe: Vienna performed it for twenty-nine years in succession, and Budapest for nine years. Another excellent choice was *A babatündér* (The Fairy Doll) composed by Bayer and choreographed by Joseph Haßreiter,⁷ which debuted in December 1888 and remained in the program until 1932.

The next ballet-master, Luigi Mazzantini (1857–1921), continued in Smeraldi's footsteps, as the success of *Excelsior* and *A babatündér* was followed up by another tested and proven ballet: in December 1889, the Budapest Opera House performed *Nap és Föld* (Sun and Earth) with music by Bayer and choreography by Haßreiter. Born in Rome, Mazzantini was a dancer, choreographer, and ballet-master; his first instructor was his own father, but later he also studied under Carlo Blasis.⁸ From 1876 for a decade, he was a solo artist of the Vienna Opera House, from whence he traveled to Budapest for a few months, and between 1889 and 1894, he was once again working as the choreographer and ballet-master of the Opera House together with composer Gustav Mahler. Beyond bringing in the magic of Vienna, Mazzantini also borrowed from the Scala in Milan and from the traditional ballet school of Blasis: for instance, until 1902, Hungarian solo ballet dancers (Müller, Ferenczy, Kürthy, Sarkadi, and later Gizella Schmidek) were sent to Milan to study under Caterina Beretta.⁹

Mazzantini was appointed by Ferenc Beniczky (1833–1905), the Government Commissioner in charge of the National Theater, who was familiar with and approved of Mazzantini's work in Vienna, and hoped he would steer Hungarian ballet in the direction of the national ballet tradition that had been abandoned during the Reform Era. Mahler and Mazzantini took their roles seriously and studied original folk songs and dances, which were adapted to the stage and combined with classical ballet language. During his career in Budapest, Mazzantini was credited for several independent ballet performances (*Csárdás* in 1890, *Vióra* in 1891, and *Nivita* in 1891), and even wrote two ballets himself; however, he also received vehement criticism for bringing Hungarian ballets to the stage.¹⁰

⁷Joseph Haßreiter/Josef Hassreiter (1845–1940): Austrian dancer, ballet-master, choreographer.

⁸Carlo De Blasis (1797–1878): Italian dancer, choreographer and dance theorist.

⁹Caterina Beretta (1828? 1839–1911): Italian ballet dancer and teacher.

¹⁰GELENCSÉR, "Balettművészet az Operaházban," 151–156.



3. BEFORE THE DEBUT OF VIÓRA

Vióra debuted in March 1891, but as early as August 1888, preparations for the ballet were being discussed by the daily press. For instance, reports claimed that the opera workshop supplying painted scenes for *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie), *Les Pêcheurs de perle* (The Pearl Fishers), and *Brankovics György* had been at work for months to produce materials for Szabados's ballet. Based on the concept art of set decorators Ágoston Spannraft and Gyula Hirsch, the visitors of the Opera House were promised an artistic surprise “in terms of splendor and grandeur,” as the new scenes were designed to be of a novel and different quality both in terms of artistic composition and production. Bringing *Vióra* to the stage required several spectacular visual elements: the first act featured a Szekler village and authentic Szekler architectural elements; the second act called for a moonlit scene by the Lake of Saint Anne, and the third act was to take place at an underwater fairy palace.¹¹

In spite of the lengthy preparations reported by the press, the debut of *Vióra* was ultimately much delayed, and as such provided ample fodder for articles bashing the reign of Commissioner Beniczky. According to the daily newspaper *Pesti Napló*, Hungarian authors, Hungarian artists, and Hungarian pieces were “routinely neglected and persecuted,” and this seemed to ring especially true for Szabados's ballet, which otherwise had everything in its favor, including the unanimous support of critics, Beniczky's promises to promote the Hungarian arts, and the budget that had been submitted by Intendant István Keglevich (1840–1905) and approved by Beniczky. Since the replacement of the previous intendant, several pieces had been presented, including *A babatündér*, *Nap és Föld*, and a number of operas, while preparations for *Vióra* were still pending and Szabados's health declined at a rapid pace.¹²

In February 1891, the newspaper *Pesti Hírlap* gave an account of the factors hindering the presentation of *Vióra*, but in the spirit of looking forward with optimism, it also showed faith in the program of Intendant Zichy, who had promised Hungarian arts on a European level, and pointed out that the Opera House in Vienna had approved the ballet, which might have put considerable pressure on the newly appointed Hungarian management.¹³ Meanwhile, the newspaper *Fővárosi Lapok* praised the music of *Vióra* by saying that it was “so delicate and melodic as if it had been composed by a Hungarian Delibes.”¹⁴ These merits were also recognized by Intendant Zichy, who studied the score and found it so valuable that he immediately ordered its presentation.¹⁵ According to the weekly magazine *Ország-Világ*, the Intendant commissioned ballet-master Mazzantini¹⁶ and “sent him on a tour around Szeklerland, so he could learn the required Szekler folk dances on the spot.”¹⁷

¹¹N. N., “Az opera új diszletei” [The new stage sets of the Opera House], *Budapesti Hírlap* 9/236 (August 26, 1888), 3.

¹²N. N., “Operaházunk és a bécsi operaház” [Our Opera House and the Vienna Opera House], *Pesti Napló* 42/7 (January 7, 1891), 2.

¹³N. N., “Magyar királyi opera” [The Hungarian Royal Opera House], *Pesti Hírlap* 13/40 (February 10, 1891), 3–4.

¹⁴N. N., “Vióra, a tó tündéré” [Vióra, the Fairy of the Lake] *Fővárosi Lapok* 28/39 (February 9, 1891), 279.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶N. N., “Új magyar ballet” [A new Hungarian ballet], *Ország-Világ* 12/7 (February 14, 1891), 115.

¹⁷*Fővárosi Lapok* 28/39 (February 9, 1891), 279.



Once Intendant Zichy made the decision to bring *Vióra* to the stage, preparations advanced rapidly, and the Budapest press began to report on the “great enthusiasm” with which rehearsals were being conducted at the Opera House, and how Zichy personally attended these rehearsals, so that he could assist in the musical training of the performers.¹⁸ The budget of the ballet was also significantly increased by the technical innovations required to create the scenery, which was imported straight from Paris. These imported scenes included a nine-meter tall waterfall, jumping jets of water, springs, and fountains, all for the sake of utterly dazzling the spectators.¹⁹

At the Budapest Opera House, scenery rehearsals for *Vióra* began a few days before its intended debut, and received great media attention.²⁰ According to the press, the members of the Opera House orchestra were so busy with rehearsals that the March Gala of the Philharmonic Society had to be postponed until April 3.²¹

The increasing general interest in *Vióra*'s debut is clear from the fact that the daily press reported on the full rehearsal in great detail and praised Szabados's ballet as “a splendid exhibition in every sense of the word; clearly it was in good hands,” and its music as “contain[ing] such lovely details ... several times the audience of the full rehearsal burst into clamorous cheers at what they saw and heard.”²² According to the daily newspaper *Budapesti Hírlap*, the greatest applause was reserved for the traditional *borica* dance performed by two Szekler dancers “with a skill and flexibility beyond ballet-mastery,” and to all this praise,²³ *Fővárosi Lapok* also added that “this might be the first case of extravagance for the sake of a Hungarian piece, but it is well deserved,” as it was “the first great Hungarian ballet.”²⁴ It is worth noting that Antal Váradi (1854–1923) issued a twenty-two-page ballet companion explaining the piece in detail.²⁵

4. THE AUTHOR OF VIÓRA, KÁROLY SZABADOS

Pianist and composer Károly Szabados was born on January 18, 1860, in Budapest to Lukács Szvoboda, a wealthy but later impoverished gravestone merchant. His father enjoyed painting in his free time and also taught his son to paint in the hopes of raising an artist, but as the boy's eyesight began to deteriorate, Szvoboda changed his mind and sent him to music school instead. A friend of the family, sculptor Pál Ferenc Kugler (1836–1875), introduced the boy to Ferenc

¹⁸N. N., “Operai hírek” [News from the Opera House], *Pesti Hírlap* 13/53 (February 23, 1891), 3; N. N., [“Az operaszínházban...”] [“At the Opera House...”], *Pesti Napló* 42/53 (February 23, 1891), 2; N. N., “Operai hírek” [News from the Opera House], *Budapesti Hírlap* 11/53 (February 23, 1891), 2.

¹⁹N. N., “Az operaházból” [From the Opera House], *Pesti Napló* 42/66 (March 8, 1891), [3]; N. N., “Az operából” [From the Opera House], *Budapesti Hírlap* 11/66 (March 8, 1891), 3.

²⁰N. N., “Opera” [Opera House], *Budapesti Hírlap* 11/69 (March 11, 1891), 3.

²¹N. N., “Elhalasztott vigalom” [Convivial evening postponed], *Fővárosi Lapok* 28/69 (March 11, 1891), 500.

²²N. N., [“Az operaházban ...”] [At the Opera House], *Pesti Napló* 42/72 (March 14, 1891), 3.

²³N. N., “Az operában” [In the Opera House], *Budapesti Hírlap* 11/72 (March 14, 1891), 4.

²⁴N. N., “Vióra' főpróbája” [The dress rehearsal of *Vióra*], *Fővárosi Lapok* 28/72 (March 14, 1891), 523.

²⁵*Vióra: A tengerszem tündéré, Ballet 3 felvonásban Jókai Mór: A tengerszem tündéré című regénye után, szerző Szabados Károly, szövegmagyarázata Váradi Antaltól* [Vióra, Fairy of the Mountain Lake, ballet in three acts after Mór Jókai's novel *Fairy of the Mountain Lake*, composed by Károly Szabados, text explanation by Antal Váradi] (Budapest: Neumayer Ede Könyvnyomdája, 1891).



Erkel, “who was mesmerized by the talented child.”²⁶ Szabados learned how to orchestrate on his own and composed a “symphonic poem” for Schiller’s *Das Lied von der Glocke* (Song of the Bell), and when Erkel asked him where he had learned to orchestrate, he replied that he had learned “from the catechism by Schubert, and what I didn’t find there I came up with myself.” At the advice of his mentor, he enrolled in the Music Academy,²⁷ where he was immediately placed in second grade and taught by Erkel, Liszt,²⁸ Robert Volkmann, who was “severe and conscientious to the point of pedantism,”²⁹ and Kornél Ábrányi Sr. At his graduation concert, Szabados played his own piano concerto.³⁰

Although Szabados had only spent three years at the recently opened Music Academy and died young (in 1892), Ábrányi Sr. was very fond of the young man, whom he considered one of his “most seriously ambitious” students, and who had many valuable qualities: he was diligent, conscientious, showed interest in all aspects of music as a profession, had an aptitude for musical analysis, and a willingness to educate himself. According to Ábrányi Sr., “he was an excellent virtuoso pianist, but he always preferred composing to playing; that was where all his ideals and ambitions collided.”³¹

Among other things, Ábrányi Sr. recalled Szabados’s conflict with Liszt, which in his opinion had greatly hurt Szabados, and though Erkel, Volkmann, and Ábrányi Sr. himself had pleaded with the maestro on Szabados’s behalf, their once cordial relationship as master and student could not be salvaged.

As a piano teacher, when it came to his word, criticism, orders, or assessments, Liszt demanded not only complete submission, but also impeccability – and he had every right. To contradict him, let alone argue with him, was tantamount to being in a perpetual state of war with him, even if the individual in question had not the slightest intention to do so. Call it what we may, a weakness, vanity, or ambitions of grandeur, the fact remains that such was his nature. But with intellectual giants like he was, all three could be pardoned. Right in the very first academic year, at one of these classes, an incident occurred between Liszt and young Szabados that cost the latter several years of genuine pain, and much disturbed the equilibrium of his gentle temperament. He regarded the maestro’s genius with unending admiration and devotion, and more than once he bitterly poured out his heart to me over the misunderstanding that had come about against his will, and which put an immovable barrier between him and the great maestro.

...

The incident was as follows. One time Liszt made Szabados play a fugue by Bach, and at one point – while walking up and down the classroom – he complained about a note he felt was off. Szabados, with his innocent, naive disposition – and perhaps because of his own conviction – happened to note

²⁶Lajos SZENDRŐI, “Szabados Károly. 1861–1892 [sic],” *Magyar Szemle* 4/12 (March 20, 1892), 133–135. According to Ábrányi’s recollections, he appeared at Ferenc Erkel with the score of the opera *Jean d’Arc* “as the fruit of his hard work.” See Kornél ÁBRÁNYI Sr., “Emlékezés a Vióra szerzőjére,” [Remembering the author of *Vióra*] in *Életemből és emlékeimből a történelem, irodalom és művészet köréből* [From my life and memories from history, literature and art], ed. by Kornél ÁBRÁNYI Sr. (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat, 1897), 299–307.

²⁷Márton ZÖLDI, “Szabados Károly. 1860–1892,” *Vasárnapi Újság* 39/12 (March 20, 1892), 175–176.

²⁸Liszt had several male students during this period: in addition to Szabados, Károly Aggházy, Miklós Almássy and Adalár Juhász among others. See ÁBRÁNYI Sr., “Emlékezés a Vióra szerzőjére,” 301–302.

²⁹Ibid, 301.

³⁰SZENDRŐI, “Szabados Károly,” 134.

³¹ÁBRÁNYI Sr., “Emlékezés a Vióra szerzőjére,” 305.



with all due respect that he had played the note correctly. This caused Liszt to erupt like gunpowder, and he reprimanded [Szabados] for contradicting him in no kind manner. He misinterpreted the youth's thoughtlessness, and believed it to be prepotency rather than innocent naiveté stemming from lack of experience. Suffice to say that from the time of the incident, nothing could restore the once amicable, well-meaning, and complaisant "entente cordiale" between Liszt and Szabados that the former even exhibited towards his slowest students. [Liszt] continued to recall the incident countless times in front of the teachers and also in spite of them, and though I as well as Erkel and Volkmann had attempted to convince him of the talented youth's disposition being most humble and free from all malice, Liszt remained egregiously hostile towards him. Poor Szabados! How often I tried to console him and reassure him over it. It hurt him and he attempted to make up for it by all means possible, but he never succeeded. More than once he told me that it made him feel as if the treasury of his artistic fantasies had lost its most treasured jewel.³²

Szabados started his career as a theater conductor in Cluj Napoca, and in 1880, at the invitation of Sándor Erkel (1846–1900), he joined the National Theater as the director of the opera chorus. During those years, he was composing his own ballet music, and in 1887, he submitted it fully orchestrated and complete with choreographic instructions under the title *Vióra*.³³ According to Ábrányi Sr., "his *Vióra*' was his pride and joy when he finished it, and he considered it the first step he had taken towards the top of Parnassus."³⁴ On behalf of the opera management, Gyula Beliczay, Gyula Káldy, and Sándor Nikolics unanimously recommended the ballet for presentation,³⁵ but on account of a lack of funds, it remained unperformed for years. Szabados's situation was somewhat improved by the fact that in March 1887 he became the third conductor of the Hungarian Royal Opera House, and Intendant Keglevich wanted him to orchestrate *Excelsior*. During rehearsals, however, Szabados began to show symptoms of illness, leaving Gyula Erkel to conduct the first performance, and Szabados's despair was only increased by the fact that his contract was going to expire shortly after. Fortunately, the members of the Opera House came to his aid, and with the support of the new intendant, Ferenc Beniczky, they contacted Minister of the Interior Gábor Baross (1848–1892) with the request to extend Szabados's contract by another eighteen months at a quarter of his original salary, as that would have allowed him to retire with ten years of service. Their request was approved, and Baross actually extended the contract at half of Szabados's original salary.³⁶

³²Ibid., 302–304.

³³Márton ZÖLDI, "Szabados Károly. 1860–1892," *Képes Folyóirat. A Vasárnapi Ujság füzetekben*, ed. by Miklós NAGY (Budapest, 1892), vol. 11, 312–314. Even after a decade, the broken relationship was not forgotten. It was well known about Liszt that he did not tolerate contradictions as a teacher. "The case of the genius author of 'Vióra', the deceased Szabados, is generally known, with whom he broke off the confidential relationship for a single – completely professional – comment." See OMEGA, "Remembering Ferenc Liszt," *Zenevilág* 2/8 (October 22, 1901), 59–61.

³⁴ÁBRÁNYI Sr., "Emlékezés a Vióra szerzőjére," 306.

³⁵According to Zöldi, Káldy, Nikolics and Sándor Erkel made up the judging committee, and the board also ordered the costumes. See ZÖLDI, "Szabados Károly. 1860–1892," 312. Gyula Káldy (1838–1901) was the chief director of the Hungarian Royal Opera until 1888 after its opening. Sándor Nikolics (1834–1895) was a flutist, composer, professor and director of the Nemzeti Zenede [National Conservatory].

³⁶SZENDRŐI, "Szabados Károly," 134.



Szabados's treatment was partly funded by Gyula Donáth,³⁷ to whom Szabados dedicated a piece he titled "Impromptu." His most significant work remained the ballet *Vióra*, and the Marseillaise he had composed and orchestrated for *Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man). His legacy also included an opera in three acts titled *A messinai hölgy* [The Lady from Messina], an overture composed for *Romeo and Juliet*,³⁸ a symphony, two string-quartets, several "sonatinas with piano accompaniment," and a number of minor songs.³⁹ In 1886, Szabados married ballet dancer Paula Ferenczy, who later played one of the fairies in *Vióra*.⁴⁰

To honor the author of *Vióra*, Szabados's funeral was attended by many, including the literary and artistic circles of Budapest. Final respects could be paid by his catafalque at 23 Eötvös Street, and on his final journey, he was accompanied by Deputy Intendant József Vécsey, Ministerial Counselor József Stesser, Director Lajos Evva, Director Kálmán Alszeghy, Sándor Nikolics, Sándor Erkel, Josef Řebíček, Béla Hegyi, members of the orchestra and ballet company of the Opera House, and many members of the National Theater. The burial service was performed by Calvinist pastor Zsigmond Papp, and solo singer Lajos Szendrői delivered a memorial speech on behalf of the Opera House. Following the service, a grand carriage and four transported the coffin to its final resting place in an unmarked grave at the cemetery on Kerepesi Road.⁴¹

Even after his death, Szabados was not forgotten; for instance, in 1896, *Pesti Napló* reported that a music house wished to erect a proper gravestone to honor the composer "who was one of the greatest talents of the new literature of music."⁴² In 1901, at a philharmonic concert, Szabados's overture for *Romeo and Juliet* was finally presented to the public, and though he had composed it at the age of sixteen while still attending the Music Academy,⁴³ critics found it quite poetic, "full of melody, interesting contrapuntal details, [and] delicate harmonic turns and instrumental effects"⁴⁴ that showed the influence of Wagner and Berlioz.⁴⁵ "It begins with a melancholy theme accompanied by the harp and muted violins. The main theme is full of melody performed at turns by the violin and the cello; and after a dark, somber secondary theme, it finishes with a long chord. It is not very innovative, but betrays a great deal of knowledge."⁴⁶ Despite his early death, Szabados's talent and works clearly left a deep impression

³⁷Gyula Ezékiel Donáth (1849–1944): neurologist, university professor.

³⁸This work of his was presented long after his death, in 1901. According to the reviewer, his talent was not yet fully revealed in this piece, which incorporated especially the influence of Liszt and Wagner. However, his "strong lyrical talent" as well as his sense of arrangement can be seen in action. See "a. k.," "Filharmonikus hangverseny" [Philharmonic concert], *Hazánk* 8/70 (March 22, 1901), 8.

³⁹SZENDRŐI, "Szabados Károly," 135.

⁴⁰István KERESZTY, "Szabados Károly," in *Magyar színművészeti lexikon* [Hungarian theater lexicon], ed. by Aladár SCHÖPFLIN (Budapest, 1931), vol. 4, 155. See also N. N., "Szabados Károly," *Ország-Világ* 13/5 (January 30, 1892), 79 and N. N., "Szabados Károly (1859–1892)," *Budapesti Hírlap* 12/26 (January 26, 1892), 4.

⁴¹N. N., "Szabados Károly temetése" [The burial of Károly Szabados], *Budapest*, 16/27 (January 27, 1892), 7.

⁴²I. L., "Az utolsó filharmóniai hangverseny" [The last philharmonic concert], *Pesti Napló* 47/78 (March 19, 1896), 7.

⁴³"L.," "Filharmóniai hangverseny" [Philharmonic concert], *Pesti Hírlap* 23/80 (March 21, 1901), 7.

⁴⁴"D. A.," "Filharmóniai hangverseny" [Philharmonic concert], *Alkotmány* 6/69 (March 21, 1901), 8.

⁴⁵*Pesti Hírlap* 23/80 (March 21, 1901), 7.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*



on his contemporaries, “and since we can no longer receive or expect new masterpieces from his genius, we should at least preserve and cultivate what he left behind.”⁴⁷

5. THE PLOT OF VIÓRA

The first scene shows the shore of Lake Saint Anne with its small chapel and hermitage, where each night the small bell of the chapel calls upon the faithful to say their prayers. However, the green-bearded underwater fairy king, his fairy daughters, and the rest of the fairies dislike the magical ring of the bell because it disturbs their games, so they persuade a shepherd with all sorts of promises to steal the bell. The shepherd does as he is told and throws the bell into the lake, but instead of a fabulous reward, the fairies drown him in the lake; now their evening bathing shall be disturbed no more as they dance merrily on the shores of the lake. Several young Szeklers are drawn to the mesmerizing sight of the fairies dancing, but pay a great price for their curiosity when the fairies lure them into the lake and the water swallows them; however, Gergő, a young Szekler hunter, manages to outwit the youngest fairy girl, Vióra. His fervent kiss strips the fairy of her power, and having fallen in love, Vióra leaves the realm of the fairy king so she can marry Gergő. Soon they hold a splendid wedding, where the old hermit of the hermitage is to join them in wedlock and consecrate the new bell of the chapel; however, the holy water bursts into tall flames, and among thunder and lightning the bell is destroyed and a vampire emerges from it, placing a curse upon the village. The hermit has a vision and realizes that until the stolen bell is returned from the palace of the fairy king, there shall be no bells ringing on the shore of Lake Saint Anne, so Gergő and Vióra decide to retrieve the bell. They borrow the old hermit’s cross-staff and descend into the underwater fairy palace, where a great party is being held. The sight of the uninvited guests causes a huge uproar because the fairies are very protective of the stolen bell, but as they are helpless against the magical power of the cross-staff, the young couple manages to find the holy bell and take it from the palace of the fairy king. As Gergő and Vióra ascend, the bell rings three times, the fairy palace collapses, the old king turns into a frog, and the fairies turn into schools of fish.

6. THE PRESS COVERAGE OF VIÓRA’S DEBUT

To ensure a successful debut performance, Intendant Zichy assisted with rehearsals while Mazzantini acted as choreographer, and did an excellent job with the help of his leading dancers: Katica Müller as Vióra, and Ferenczy, Maruzzi, and Emília Zsuzsanits as fairies. The orchestra was conducted by Sándor Erkel, the spectacular scenes were painted by opera scene painters Spannraft and Hirsch, and the costumes were made under the supervision of opera tailor Peter Caffy based on the designs of Árpád Molnár.

Following *Vióra*’s debut, the press published enthusiastic praise of the ballet, its “gentle, delicate, and poetic” music, the structure of the piece, its presentation, and the libretto.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Alkotmány* 6/69 (March 21, 1901), 8.

⁴⁸ N. N., “Egy eredeti ballet az operaszínházban” [An original ballet at the Opera House], *Vasárnapi Újság* 38/12 (March 22, 1891), 192.



According to the music magazine *Zenelap*, “its music is full of beauties,” and the orchestration showed the composer’s “noble and elegant” taste, placing special emphasis on the simplicity and charms of the waltz in the second act with “not a single beat out of place.”⁴⁹ The weekly magazine *Vasárnapi Újság* expressed a similar opinion, namely that the music of the ballet is not merely dance music, but music “in which delicate ideas and thoughts follow each other in succession; it can be romantic, and in its folk scenes it can be Hungarian.”⁵⁰ It added that due to the young age of the author, one must not expect great originality, as “the author had no time to reach his prime, but he was guided by elegant taste and skillful composition, and his orchestration is masterful. The entire music is song and momentum.”⁵¹ Beyond the captivating music, the spectacular costumes and scenes, and the performance of the ballet company and the orchestra were also commended.

Budapesti Hírlap dedicated a long article to the debut of *Vióra*, in which Szabados was hailed as the most talented musician of his generation, and his work as “a flow of talent from beginning to end; the work of an extremely prepared master” with amazing orchestration and no lack of creativity and expression.⁵² His music was obviously influenced by Delibes, but it also surpassed him, and between the orchestration and the soft colors the journalist saw a frequent expression of “that pure dramatic force” which the French maestro was not particularly known to possess.⁵³ Szabados also included a variety of dances, such as the mazurka, several waltzes, a wedding march, and two types of *csárdás*. It is worth noting that for the Szekler wedding scene, Mazzantini had traveled to Háromszék to study traditions, clothing, and dances, and also commissioned two Szekler dancers, Mózes Péter and György Tóth, who performed the *borica* dance at the debut.⁵⁴ According to the article, the movements were more characteristic of Vlach than of Szekler dancing, but the audience members enjoyed it so much that they loudly demanded an encore.⁵⁵ (Following the departure of the Szekler dancers, the *borica* dance was performed by Mazzantini and Pini.)⁵⁶

⁴⁹“VERUS,” “A ‘Viora’ ballet” [The ballet *Vióra*], *Zenelap* 6/7 (March 28, 1891), 4–5.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²N. N., “‘Vióra, a tengerszem tündére’” [*Vióra, the Fairy of the Mountain Lake*], *Budapesti Hírlap* 11/73 (March 15, 1891), 3–4.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴For *borica* see Emil HARASZTI, *A tánc története* [The history of dance] (= Kincsestár. A Magyar Szemle Társaság Kis Könyvtára, vol. 54), (Budapest, 1937), 58–59. Pál Péter DOMOKOS, “Magyar moreszka” [Hungarian moresca], *Táncművészet* 5/6 (June 1, 1955), 265–269. *Magyar néprajzi lexikon* [Hungarian ethnographical lexicon], ed. by Gyula ORTUTAY (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977), vol. 1, 328. Krisztina DÓKA, “A székely kalákától a csürdöngölőig. A székely táncagyomány bemutatása a 19. században” [From Székely *kaláka* to *csürdöngölő*: Discussing Székely dance tradition in the nineteenth century], in *Székely népzene és néptánc* (= *Énlaka Konferenciák*, vol. 5), ed. by István PÁVAI and Emese SÓFALVI (Budapest: Hagományok Háza–Pécsi Tudományegyetem–Pro Énlaka Alapítvány, 2018), 148–149.

⁵⁵*Budapesti Hírlap* 11/73 (March 15, 1891), 3–4. The *Fővárosi Lapok* reported as early as February 1891 that Mazzantini had traveled to Székelyudvarhely on a study trip in order to present the *borica* in *Vióra* as authentically as possible. Five Székely couples from Bögöz with a band showed the ballet-master the *borica*. N. N., “A balletmester tanulmányuton” [The ballet-master on study trip], *Fővárosi Lapok* 28/41 (February 11, 1891), 293.

⁵⁶N. N., “Az operaházban” [In the Opera House], *Pesti Napló* 42/108 (April 20, 1891), 2.



According to *Pesti Hírlap*, young Szabados was clearly influenced by the musical genius of Delibes, Bizet, and Massenet, but it is equally clear that “he had a robust, enormous talent of his own that had yet to reach its peak, but was already becoming palpable in the foundations he had chosen, which were those of the modern French school.”⁵⁷ The melodiousness and dramatic force of his music were indisputable, and his orchestration made even the most insignificant details interesting to hear. His music was completely in harmony with the movements and actions of the characters, displayed moderation and taste, and was composed in a way as to “explain the plot.” Of the countless dance numbers in the ballet, the one to bring down the house was the *borica* dance, which was similar to the Hungarian *csárdás*, but its choreography was full of “flourishing figures.” For this dance, the two Szekler dancers were joined by four students of the ballet school in authentic Szekler folk costume.

The success of *Vióra*’s debut was overshadowed by the critical condition of the author, which had deeply shaken the artistic circles of Budapest. Szabados had become so ill that in the end a few incomplete scenes were finished by his younger brother, Béla Szabados.⁵⁸ It was generally acknowledged that “Intendant Géza Zichy could not have done better to inaugurate the era whose motto was ‘Hungarian arts on a European level’ than to begin his artistic activities at the Hungarian Royal Opera House by bringing to the stage a much neglected Hungarian author’s piece, which had been recommended for representation by every competent factor.”⁵⁹

To celebrate the profound success of *Vióra*, the artists of the Hungarian Royal Opera House held a reception for some three hundred guests at the Vigadó Concert Hall in honor of Intendant Zichy,⁶⁰ who proposed a toast and emphasized that it was his pleasure to be here and “celebrate the success of a Hungarian piece.”⁶¹ In his speech, Lehel Odry picked up where Zichy left off and pointed out that the reception was not only organized to celebrate the success of *Vióra*, but also to honor Intendant Zichy, whose appointment marked the beginning of “the patriotic era of opera.”⁶²

7. “THE COMPOSER SAVED THE LIBRETTIST”: AUGUST BEER’S CRITIQUE PUBLISHED IN *PESTER LLOYD*

August Beer, a feuilleton writer for *Pester Lloyd*, examined and interpreted *Vióra* in the context of contemporary literature and music, and argued that Szabados’s ballet was written and presented in an era in which romanticism was in decline, and instead of fairy tales, legends, and

⁵⁷N. N., “Vióra: Szabados Károly balletje” [*Vióra*. Ballet by Károly Szabados], *Pesti Hírlap* 13/73 (March 15, 1891), 4.

⁵⁸*Budapesti Hírlap* 11/73 (March 15, 1891), 3–4.

⁵⁹Károly ANTALIK, “Vióra,” *Pesti Hírlap* 13/72 (March 14, 1891), 1–3.

⁶⁰N. N., “Lakoma” [A banquet], *Budapesti Hírlap* 11/77 (March 19, 1891), 6. See also: N. N., “A m. k. opera bankettja” [The banquet of the Hungarian Royal Opera], *Pesti Hírlap* 13/77 (March 19, 1891), 7.

⁶¹N. N., “Az operaház lakomája” [The banquet of the Opera House], *Pesti Napló* 42/77 (March 19, 1891), 2.

⁶²Ibid. In the columns of the *Neue Freie Presse* in Vienna, we search in vain for any article about the play’s premiere; it does not even report on it in the form of a small news item, but in the theater and art section it publishes a long news story about the dismissal of Gustav Mahler. See: N. N., “Man telegraphirt uns aus Budapest ...,” *Neue Freie Presse* no. 9537 (March 15, 1891), 6.



myths, the realism of everyday life dominated, even on the stage.⁶³ Daydreaming and immersing oneself in the magical world of fairy tales were confined between the walls of one's home, to the level of the individual seeking a temporary escape from the harshness of the world. However, he also acknowledged that the stage called for flesh and blood characters, and not even music, the most romantic of the arts, could be exempted from that rule. In that respect, music did follow the literary tendencies of the age, where opera librettos were being based less and less on fairy tales and myths.

Despite the declining interest in fairytales, ballet still offered a refuge to fairies, mermaids, gnomes, and goblins, as demonstrated by the fantastical elements of *Vióra*; however, Beer criticized the way the story had been adapted from the novel of Hungarian writer Mór Jókai. While the original was a pleasant and leisurely telling of an epic myth, its adaptation for the ballet stage resulted in significant changes and drastic reductions, leaving only a skeleton of a plot barely covered up by the costumes and scenery. The critic found the ballet boring and its plot poorly paced and often fragmented, with hardly anything happening on the stage despite the myriad of dance numbers performed. Beer attributed these structural problems to an amateur author who messed up even the scenes he had placed the most emphasis on, as these did not serve to move the plot forward, but padded it out with divertissements. The librettist made a blunder when he chose spectacle over the two most important elements: the relatively fast-paced and exciting plot, and in the case of an evening-long ballet, a big dose of humor on the side.

In Beer's opinion, the weak points of Szabados's script-writing were well-balanced by his talent as a composer who had been heavily influenced by the French school, especially Delibes; from him, Szabados borrowed the "often surprising but always captivating" twists in his orchestration, with the influence of *Coppélia*, *Naila*, and especially *Sylvia* clearly felt in the music of *Vióra*. Szabados's music "is not ordinary, his melodies are charming and dynamic, but first and foremost elegant; they exude the scent of a fine Parisian salon, one that we gladly inhale without thinking too hard about what ingredients make for such a lovely scent." According to Beer, Szabados was "a born colorist" and had a natural talent for harmonies; he liked to experiment with tone, and could place the simplest and most natural themes into newer and newer musical perspectives. Like Delibes, Szabados was also a natural with the right side of the orchestra and a sovereign ruler of the strings, the wood-winds, the horns, and the harp, managing to bring out the best in each. The myriad of often similarly choreographed dances required a multitude of melodies, and all of them were dynamic, full of varied, lively rhythm and brilliant orchestration; in short, the reviewer considered the musical pieces to be of much greater artistic value than the dances they accompanied.

Beyond his praise of the composer, Beer pointed out the merits of the orchestra as well, which made the scenes more expressive by reflecting the feelings of the characters through the musical language and aptly capturing emotions such as surprise, curiosity, and fear. The giant storm and lightning shower were as poignantly expressed by the violin and the flute as Gergő's and Vióra's love scene was elevated by the dialogue between the cello and the clarinet. The critic

⁶³ August BEER, "Viora, die Fee des Meeragues," *Pester Lloyd* 38/73 (March 15, 1891), 1. annex. On Beer as a person see Hedvig UJVÁRI, "A gondolatai is ferencjózsefben jártak". Adalékok Beer Ágost zenei szakíró életrajzához" [His thoughts were also in Ferencjózsef. Addendums to the biography of music writer Ágost Beer], *Magyar Könyvszemle* 138/1 (2022), 126–131.



called this pairing “the crème of the sheet music crop,” in which the warm song of the violoncello was answered by the rapturous melodies of the clarinet until the two united in a crescendo. This theme constituted the leitmotif of the piece and delicately permeated the entire ballet. Beer also saw the same excellence in the musical representation of the old hermit, whose figure called for devotion, chorales, and psalms that were accentuated by the bassoon, the oboe, and the violin.

Beer argued that all the dance numbers deserved praise on account of their elegant melodic arrangement and excellent orchestration; however, he found that even the most gracefully performed fairy dances were repeated to the point of becoming uneventful and boring, the dance of the gnomes stretched on for too long, and the melodic, dynamic waltz in the opening of the third act seemed “half Viennese blood, half French elegance.” Beer highlighted the spiccato-polka performed in the same act for its unique rhythm, and mentioned Karl Goldmark’s musical style as a possible influence, especially in the dance of the oriental amazons and the celebratory march, which reminded him of the march in *The Queen of Sheba*.

Beer judged the reception of *Vióra* to be fine and even warm in places, but felt it had little promise considering the weak script, the staggering plot, and the insignificant subject matter technically revolving around a church bell. However, he argued that “the composer had saved the librettist,” as the orchestra, certain solos, and the divertissements were all of a thigh quality, and the performance of the ballet company truly captivated the audience. Beer praised the scenery of the production, which owed much to the combined efforts of Intendant Zichy, Mazzantini, and Alszegehy: the fairy palace, the waterfall, and the fountains looked truly spectacular. Sándor Erkel excelled as a conductor for the orchestra, as did the solo dancers of the ballet, with Katica Müller as *Vióra*, and Ferenczy-Szabados, Zsuzsanits, and Pini as her co-stars. Beer argued that Mazzantini’s performance was not very convincing as the hermit, and his body language and mimicry during the consecration ceremony could have been more expressive. The critic of *Pester Lloyd* did not dispute the success of the *borica* dance that had been so unanimously praised by the Hungarian press, but he thought its appearance in the ballet rather tasteless.⁶⁴

In conclusion, according to the critic of *Pester Lloyd*, the ballet’s strong suit was its orchestration, and he called the composer “a brilliant technician and refined musician.”

8. PREMIERE IN VIENNA?

On the last day of 1890, despite the fact that the Opera House in Budapest had yet to present Szabados’s *Vióra*, several Hungarian newspapers reported on its upcoming premiere at the Opera House in Vienna as if it were a fact.⁶⁵ A few days later, *Fővárosi Lapok* repeated the news and added that the ballet penned by the severely ill Károly Szabados based on Jókai’s novel had already been approved by the Budapest Opera House, but preparations were still pending.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵N. N., “Ballet Jókai egy novellájából” [A ballet based on a short story by Jókai], *Fővárosi Lapok* 27/358 (December 31, 1890), 2673. According to the newspaper, with the title *Dióra*, the ballet queen (!). On the preceding day, *Pesti Hírlap* also published the news: N. N., “Magyarok balettje Bécsben” [A ballet by Hungarian authors in Vienna], *Pesti Hírlap* 12/357 (December 30, 1890), 4.



The significance of the news was increased by the idea that “*Vióra* would be the first Hungarian ballet to be performed abroad as well.”⁶⁶ It is probable that these news articles influenced Intendant Zichy’s decision to present *Vióra* right away lest it be performed sooner in Vienna than in Hungary.⁶⁷

A month after *Vióra*’s debut in Budapest, rumors about its performance in Vienna were still circulating in the press, as Ferenc Gaul,⁶⁸ the wardrobe supervisor of the Vienna Opera House, was intrigued by how quickly tickets had sold out after the premiere and went to see the ballet,⁶⁹ and “talked of it with great admiration.”⁷⁰

Vióra was also seen by Prince Louis-Victor, who was visiting Budapest at the time: at his request,⁷¹ the management of the Opera House replaced *Othello* with *Vióra* in the hopes that, should the Prince enjoy the ballet that had been so successful in Hungary, “he would certainly help pave the way for the ballet’s eventual premiere in Vienna.”⁷² Upon arrival, the Prince was greeted by Intendant Zichy, and he watched the first act from the royal box in the company of Prince Rudolf Ferdinand of Lobkowitz,⁷³ and the rest from the adjutants’ box. According to the press, “he beheld the spectacular decorations of the ballet and listened to its captivating music with interest.”⁷⁴

In May 1891, Joseph Haßreiter visited Budapest on behalf of the Vienna Opera House, and while he enjoyed *Vióra*, he considered it necessary to make alterations to the choreography of the ballet for its presentation in Vienna.⁷⁵ In the end, however, there was no premiere in Vienna,⁷⁶ which caused considerable tension between the two opera houses. Afterwards, Intendant Zichy was reluctant to visit Vienna, and refrained from presenting any of the newer

⁶⁶N. N., “Viora, a tengerszem tündére” [*Vióra, the Fairy of the Mountain Lake*], *Fővárosi Lapok* 28/5 (January 5, 1891), 31. Almost the same elements of content – supplemented by the shaken financial situation of the family – were reported by another newspaper that day. See: N. N., “Szabados Károlytól,” *Budapesti Hírlap* 11/5 (January 5, 1891), 2. and *Pesti Napló* 42/7 (January 7, 1891), 2. The journal *A Hét* adds with some malice that “in the couple of years since it was accepted, they have not been able to present it. As far as we know, they were very busy with other pieces.” See: N. N., “Viora,” *A Hét* 2/2 (January 11, 1891), 31.

⁶⁷SZENDRŐI, “Szabados Károly,” 135.

⁶⁸Franz Gaul (1837–1906): Austrian painter and costume designer, who worked from 1868 for both the Vienna Court Theater and the Court Opera.

⁶⁹N. N., “Operaházi hírek” [News from the Opera House], *Pesti Hírlap* 13/99 (April 11, 1891), 4.

⁷⁰N. N., “Apróbb hírek” [Shorter news], *Fővárosi Lapok* 28/102 (April 14, 1891), 748.

⁷¹N. N., “A m. kir. operaszínházban” [At the Royal Hungarian Opera House], *Pesti Hírlap* 13/113, (April 25, 1891), 4. Prince Louis-Victor (1842–1919) was the youngest brother of Franz Joseph I, Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary.

⁷²N. N., “Opera,” *Budapesti Hírlap* 11/113 (April 25, 1891), 3. See also: N. N., “Az operaházat ...” [The Opera House...], *Pesti Napló* 42/113 (April 25, 1891), 3.

⁷³Rudolf Ferdinand von Lobkowitz (1840–1908): Austrian general, who was transferred to Budapest in 1890.

⁷⁴N. N., “Lajos Viktor főherceg” [Archduke Ludwig Viktor], *Pesti Hírlap* 13/114 (April 26, 1891), 6.

⁷⁵N. N., “Viora Bécsben” [*Vióra* in Vienna], *Pesti Hírlap*, 13/131 (May 13, 1891), 3.

⁷⁶Szendrői also notes in his commemoration of Szabados: “It has been a year since *Vióra* was staged in the opera. Since then, they have been completely silent about his staging in Vienna. But why? Maybe it offends them that it was presented to us first?” See: SZENDRŐI, “Szabados Károly,” 135. Kornél Ábrányi Sr. also nurtured the illusion of the Viennese presentation: “Right from the start, the new intendant asserted the work of an excellent Hungarian talent who had been unjustly ignored, and with his original ballet *Vióra* he achieved such success that the Vienna Opera House also decided to stage it.” See: K[ornél] ÁBRÁNYI Sr., “A magyar kir. operáról” [About the Royal Hungarian Opera], *Pesti Napló* 42/137 (May 20, 1891), 1.



ballets recommended by the Vienna Opera House: “he was determined to rigidly refuse all manner of artistic productions from Vienna until Director Jahn⁷⁷ made good on his promise of bringing *Vióra* to the stage.”⁷⁸

In January 1894, Franz Joseph himself visited the Budapest Opera House, prompting the intendant to make a change in the program and replace the originally advertised *Excelsior* with the third act of *Vióra*, the overture of *Tannhäuser*, and *Pagliacci*.⁷⁹

9. LEGAL TROUBLES

Following *Vióra*'s debut, the music house Rózsavölgyi and Company published the entire piano score in Hungarian and German, with an illustrated cover page by Lajos Linek.⁸⁰ The ballet's popularity is clear from the fact that the first edition of the score sold out within days and was soon followed by a second edition, something that was “practically unheard of when it comes to Hungarian music.”⁸¹

Unfortunately, following Szabados's death, a legal dispute broke out between his widow and Rózsavölgyi and Company. In June 1893, *Pesti Napló* reported that despite the success of the ballet, the author's widow received no financial compensation and was even not entitled to an honorarium. Although there had been uncertainties around copyright, Szabados's widow sold the right to perform *Vióra* in the German language to a theater agent in Berlin, with the rights acquired by the Berlin Opera House. As Rózsavölgyi and Company considered itself the exclusive owners of the ballet, they immediately initiated a lawsuit for copyright infringement against Szabados's widow, who asked Károly Eötvös to be her defense attorney. According to the newspaper, Eötvös prepared an address and submitted it to the court, and planned to build his defense on the idea that Rózsavölgyi and Company had made its offer to Szabados when the author was so severely ill that his judgment could be called into question and his family was struggling with significant financial difficulties. Rózsavölgyi and Company decided to approach Szabados at that time and offered 200 forints for exclusive rights to the ballet, and the defense attorney argued that Szabados likely did not know what he was doing when he accepted the offer; therefore, the contract should be considered null and void.⁸²

Rózsavölgyi and Company promptly responded to the article published by *Pesti Napló* and refuted Eötvös's claims on the pages of *Fővárosi Lapok*. They claimed that it did not initiate the lawsuit against Szabados's widow, and therefore Eötvös had no right to submit anything to the court as a legal representative in the case. The article also claimed that they had approached Szabados at the suggestion and in the presence of Gyula Káldy at a time when Szabados was still

⁷⁷Wilhelm Jahn (1835–1900): singer and conductor, who was at the head of the Vienna Opera for 17 years.

⁷⁸N. N., “Az ‘Ember tragédiája’ Bécsben” [*The Tragedy of Man* in Vienna], *Budapesti Hírlap* 12/217 (August 6, 1892), 4.

⁷⁹N. N., “A király az operaházban” [The King in the Opera House], *Pesti Hírlap* 16/29 (January 29, 1894), 3. See also: N. N., “A király az operában” [The King in the Opera House], *Budapesti Hírlap* 14/29 (January 29, 1894), 4.

⁸⁰Lajos Linek (Gyöng, 1859 – Cleveland, 1941): Hungarian painter and graphic artist.

⁸¹N. N., “Új zeneművek” [New music works], *Pesti Hírlap* 13/119 (May 1, 1891), 5.

⁸²N. N., “A tengersizem tündére” [*The Fairy of the Mountain Lake*], *Pesti Napló* 44/168 (June 15, 1893), 9.



performing his duties at the Opera House, and the performance of *Vióra* had yet to be taken into consideration.⁸³

Despite the refutation by Rózsavölgyi and Company and in reference to the newspaper *Berliner B. Courier*,⁸⁴ *Pesti Hírlap* basically repeated the claims *Pesti Napló* had published five days prior, with the addendum⁸⁵ that they also named the agency in question as the Selar Agency⁸⁶ in Berlin.

10. VIÓRA, “A TRUE BOX-OFFICE HIT OF THE OPERA HOUSE”

As early as 1888, *Vióra*'s debut was included in the annual budget of the Opera House;⁸⁷ however, certain changes in management put the project on hold and consequently drew the ire of the press. According to *Pesti Hírlap*, “at this time, the Hungarian Royal Opera House experienced a crisis. New people came, and they talked about the need for a change of system. Their motto was ‘frugality’, and in that spirit they set aside the ballet of a young Hungarian musician on the grounds that it would be very expensive to bring it to the stage (while two foreign ballets, *A babatündér* and *Nap és Föld* were well within the budget). They did this despite the fact that, for Szabados, the expected success of *Vióra* was no longer simply a matter of glory but also a matter of life and death.” The contemporary press organs certainly had strong opinions about the acting intendants of the Opera House; for example, the newspaper *Kolozsvár* referred to them as “the kind Baron Frigyes Podmaniczky, the proud Count István Keglevich, the frugal Ferencz Beniczky, the hungry for leadership laurels Count Géza Zichy, the excellent tarot player József Stesser, and the imperious and stubborn Baron Elek Nopcsa.”⁸⁸

To put budget concerns into perspective, during the era of Beniczky and Mahler, staging *Új Rómeó* (New Romeo) cost 4,681 forints, *Nap és Föld* cost 11,273 forints, and *Vióra* cost 13,985 forints, with the latter comparable to the opera *Lohengrin* at 13,166 forints;⁸⁹ unlike operas, however, a well-chosen ballet always turned a profit, as shown by the expectations for the premiere of *Csárdás*: “once again it will fall to the lot of ballet to earn some money for the coffers, which Stojanovits’s original ballet *Csárdás* shall certainly do.”⁹⁰ According to an article published by *Fővárosi Lapok*, “*Csárdás* continues to impress, animate, and fire you up with its music, so it is unfortunate that on principles of frugality, reductions had been made to its presentation. Instead of holding lavish memorials for the *Azraels*, they should spare no money

⁸³N. N., “A Viora ballet pöre” [The trial of the ballet *Vióra*], *Fővárosi Lapok* 30/166 (June 18, 1893), 1325.

⁸⁴In the *Berliner Börsen-Courier/Berliner Börsen-Zeitung* there is no reference between June 16 and 19, 1893.

⁸⁵N. N., “A Szabados-Rózsavölgyi ügy” [The Szabados-Rózsavölgyi affair], *Pesti Hírlap* 15/168 (June 20, 1893), 5.

⁸⁶Louis Selar von Sztankovits was the owner of the Deutsch-Oesterr. Theater-Agentur and the *Deutsch-Österr. Theater-Zeitung*. See Albert ENTSCH (ed.), *Deutscher Bühnen-Almanach* (Berlin: Bloch, 1864), vol. 28, 437; furthermore Thomas DIETZEL and Hans Otto HÜGEL, *Deutsche literarische Zeitschriften 1880–1945: Ein Repertorium* (Munich: K. G. Saur Verlag, 1988), vol. 1, 342.

⁸⁷ANTALIK, “*Vióra*,” *Pesti Hírlap* 13/72, 1–3.

⁸⁸Jenő SZTOJANOVITS, “Budapest zenei élete” [The musical life of Budapest], *Kolozsvár* 10/160 (July 16, 1896), 1–2.

⁸⁹Zoltan ROMAN, *Gustav Mahler* (Budapest: Geopen, 2010), 196.

⁹⁰N. N. “Az operaház...” [The Opera House...], *Fővárosi Lapok* 27/216 (August 7, 1890), 1592.



from what will definitely attract spectators and fill the coffers.”⁹¹ The financial success of *A babatündér* also confirmed these opinions: “it proved to be a real fairy godmother for the coffers of the Opera House,”⁹² and the same was true for the performance staged by the Vienna Opera House.⁹³ A month after the debut of *Vióra*, upon the financial review of the first quarter under Zichy, the intendant himself claimed that “these favorable results were a great deal influenced by the extraordinary success of the ballet *Vióra*, which was a true box-office hit of the Opera House.”⁹⁴

11. CONCLUSION

On account of its successful debut, *Vióra* remained on the program of the Budapest Opera House until 1901, and was performed a total of forty-six times in that ten-year period.⁹⁵ The music of the ballet, the increasing anticipation of the audience,⁹⁶ and last but not least the scenic presentation of *Vióra*, the visual-centric direction of the choreography, and the spectacular stage effects greatly impressed the spectators. The general popularity of *Vióra* is also shown by the fact that when prima ballerina Katica Müller retired from the Budapest Opera House, her last performance was reprising her role in *Vióra* at the audience’s request.⁹⁷

In the spirit of Jókai’s novel, the ballet adaptation was rife with romantic and fantastical elements (such as water fairies, the idyllic underwater world of the fairy king, the love between fairy princess *Vióra* and Gergő the Szekler hunter, their wedding, and the stealing of the church bell), but it also paid attention to ethnographic authenticity. Mazzantini took significant steps in order to create a national ballet, because for each scene requiring folklore elements, he used his own research and authentic Hungarian folk dances, thereby reviving the trend of bringing Hungarian dances to the stage after it had been discontinued in 1848.

Szabados’s works remained on the program of the Budapest Opera House at the turn of the century and after,⁹⁸ and on the twentieth anniversary of *Vióra*’s debut, *Zenevilág* continued to praise the score and its orchestration in particular.⁹⁹ Years later, on the fortieth anniversary of

⁹¹N. N., “Az operaház...” [The Opera House...], *Fővárosi Lapok* 27/356 (December 29, 1890), 2657. Earlier, however, he wrote the exact opposite: “The main rehearsal of ‘Csárdás’ was yesterday in the opera house, with full scenery. The management does not spare any costs for the issue of the novelty.” See: N. N., “A ‘Csárdás’ főpróbája” [The dress rehearsal of *Csárdás*], *Fővárosi Lapok* 27/336 (December 7, 1890), 2493–2494.

⁹²Detailed data for the 1888/89 season: N. N., “A magyar kir. operáról” [About the Hungarian Royal Opera], *Pesti Hírlap* 11/138 (May 20, 1889), 1–2.

⁹³There were 300 performances in Vienna in the 1889/90 season. See: N. N., “A bécsi cs. kir. operában” [At the Vienna Imperial and Royal Opera], *Pesti Hírlap* 12/153 (June 5, 1890), 6.

⁹⁴N. N., “A magyar kir. opera” [The Hungarian Royal Opera], *Pesti Hírlap* 13/106 (April 18, 1891), 3.

⁹⁵See: Opera DigiTár <<http://digitar.opera.hu/>> (accessed December 17, 2021).

⁹⁶ROMAN, *Gustav Mahler*, 99.

⁹⁷N. N., “Müller Katicza bucsuja” [The farewell of Katica Müller], *Magyar Génius* 6/19 (May 9, 1897), 305. Katica Müller was born in Pest in 1860, and her ballet-master was Frigyes Campilli.

⁹⁸See: Opera DigiTár. Furthermore N. N., “Viora felújítása” [The revival of *Vióra*], *Pesti Napló* 52/253 (September 14, 1901), 8.

⁹⁹N. N., “Operai szemle” [Opera review], *Zenevilág* 2/4 (September 25, 1901), 27.



Szabados's death, the newspaper *Nemzeti Újság* published a commemorative article and spoke highly of Szabados's significance in music history, calling him the precursor of Bartók and Kodály. The article drew parallels between his life and works with those of Hungarian composer Pongrác Kacsóh, and compared *Vióra* to Bartók's ballet *A fából faragott királyfi* (The Wooden Prince). Like Bartók, Szabados had placed great emphasis on incorporating authentic ethnographic elements into his ballet, and included Transylvanian peasant songs collected by his younger brother Béla into the second act of *Vióra* to heighten its local character.¹⁰⁰

In conclusion, Szabados's ballet *Vióra* was a success in the eyes of spectators and critics alike, and due to the heavy French influence that characterizes its music, Szabados was often referred to as a Hungarian Delibes: "His fresh invention, his portrayal of mood and scene, his formal design, and his skill as a composer are all praiseworthy. He was an educated musician, one of those who paid attention not only to Hungary but also to Europe."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰Dénes TÓTH dr., "Szabados Károly halálának negyvenéves évfordulója" [For the 40th anniversary of Károly Szabados's death], *Nemzeti Újság* 14/19 (January 24, 1932), 17.

¹⁰¹István SZENTHEGYI, "Vázlatok a magyar baletzenéről" [Sketches on Hungarian ballet music], *Táncstudományi Tanulmányok*, ed. by Péter MORVAI (Budapest, 1958), 22–23.

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