

“This Musical Peace is Worse than War:” Cultural History, Musical Banality and Political Context in the Ballet *Excelsior*

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Received: July 24, 2023 • Accepted: October 12, 2023

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ABSTRACT

From 1847, the head of the Budapest ballet was Federico Campilli (1820–1889), an individual of Italian origin. He regarded Viennese taste as authoritative in designing the program, thereby building on the international ballet repertoire. This repertoire included romantic pieces from Western Europe, along with Campilli’s own choreographies. Campilli concluded his forty-year tenure in Budapest in 1887, and Cesare Smeraldi (1845–1924) assumed his position. The imperial city served as the model for shaping the ballet program, commencing its operations with the staging of Manzotti’s spectacular *Excelsior*, which had premiered in Vienna two years earlier. This sensational performance, focused on the rise of human civilization and the development of technology, involved hundreds of actors and was destined for success throughout Europe. It ran for 29 years in Vienna and nine years in Budapest. In this study, an exploration of the driving forces behind this ballet success story with unconventional themes is undertaken. Various aspects are examined, such as the discourse of dance and the articulation of otherness in local and global spaces. The study delves into what technophile ballet entails, how cultural history, abstract concepts, discoveries, and inventions can be narrated through ballet. The thesis also highlights the debatable aspects of the ballet’s music, utilizing music reviews from Budapest and Viennese newspapers. Through these reviews, an attempt is made to map the reception history of the ballet in Vienna and Budapest. The significance of *Excelsior* in the political power field within Hungarian conditions is also emphasized.

KEYWORDS

Manzotti, Marengo, Milan Exhibition (1881), cultural transfer, Eduard Hanslick

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“Italy ..., you are great, united, you have your poets and artists, your Scala and your San Carlo, but you lack one thing for perfection, and that is the ballet of the nineteenth century! Building the Mont Cenis Tunnel is no art, a skilled engineer can do that, but making a tunnel dance ballet”
(Schütz, 1887)

1. INTRODUCTION: THE DISCOURSE OF DANCE, THE FORMULATION OF THE OTHER IN LOCAL AND GLOBAL SPACE

In Italy, in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a significant evolution in the forms, genres and levels of theatrical performance, which coexisted and in some cases were intertwined. The grand ballet (*ballo grande*) was a particular spectacle that, after Italian unity had come about, in a way took over the popularity of melodrama, which in the nineteenth century was interpreted as the collective narrative of Italian national identity. The genre that emerged in the last decades of the century represented a new, extremely popular spectacle, which turned out to be much more diverse and certainly more open to a certain type of modern performance. It was characterized by grandiose scenes and very simple narrative patterns, accompanied by an obvious didactic intent. In terms of dance technique, it was a mixed genre, since academic dance forms were combined with other forms of movement. The former went through a strict codification process, based on the Italian dance tradition shaped and recorded by Carlo Blasis¹ and the school of the Teatro alla Scala. There were also acrobatic movements, character dances, pantomime parts, i.e. popular and traditional elements, supplemented by many extras and sometimes animals on stage. The extensive scenography of the *ballo grande* required a large number of performers.² The structure of *Excelsior* was considered the norm of its genre: in the grand ballet, the traditional narrative forms ensured coherence in the direction of dances with many actors and spectacular stage effects. The latter’s inventory included dramatic lighting, impressive costumes, acrobatics, and the inclusion of live animals in the stage production.³

Luigi Manzotti (1835–1905) definitely contributed to the development of the history of the *ballo grande* and therefore of European choreography; as the best-known representative of this school, he brought this special spectacle to almost all of Europe’s major dance stages. The popularity of *Excelsior* at the time was comparable to that of Verdi, and the author was considered the “prince of choreography” and a great innovator.⁴ Impressive costumes, stage transformation sequences, and daring stage scenes marked the performances where storms and

¹Carlo Blasis (1797 or 1803–1878): Italian dancer, choreographer, dance teacher and dance theorist. He summarized the outline of his theses in his most famous work, *Traité élémentaire, théorique, et pratique de l’art de la danse* (Milan: Joseph Beati et Antoine Tenenti, 1820); in English: *The Code of Terpsichore*.

²ADAMO, “Dancing for the World,” 143–172.

³WILLIAMS, “*Excelsior* as Mass Ornament,” 251–268; NIKIFOROVA, NIKIFOROVA and VASILIEVA, “Italian Spectacular Ballet,” 52–66; PAPPACENA, *Excelsior 1881–1967*.

⁴ADAMO, “Dancing for the World,” 143–172.



even earthquakes came to life. This type of extreme spectacle was extremely popular in the 1860s, particularly at the Alhambra Theater in London,⁵ and thanks to *Excelsior* the effect reached the Éden-Théâtre in Paris in the 1880s,⁶ from where it spread to Russia.⁷

The dancers were actually considered spatial points, elements of a spatial disposition, so the dancing figures, the myriad positions, and the arrangement of the masses were more important than the steps. Such a choreographed ballet can be compared to military troop movements and battle formations. The dancers' bodies are used in the piece like (inanimate) abstract objects, while the abstract elements (light, obscurantism, civilization, but also tunnels, canals, steamboats, electricity, etc.) are embedded in such a narrative pattern that animates and makes the performance come alive.⁸

Excelsior was of course a ballet, not a circus, play, nor any folk spectacle. Ballet developed a specific form of allegorical and non-narrative construction in Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is worth thinking about this along with the history of opera, since ballet and opera alternated on Italian stages, and in different eras the dominance of one over the other prevailed. Since ballets were often staged as self-contained in the interlude between acts of an opera or as appendages to the theme of a melodrama, they had to unravel all narrative threads to make way for allegorical representation and other structures. In the work thus constructed, extensive textuality is important as it guides, points in the right direction and verbally instructs the audience. The explanation given in *Excelsior's* libretto is also present in the theatrical performance, since a human voice is heard at the beginning of the ballet and basic information is conveyed to the audience almost as "instructions for use." (For example, the monument visible in Turin was erected to the glory of the Mont Cenis Tunnel, then an imaginary choreographic representation of it followed.) In this manifestation of vision and imagination one can easily discern that kind of perception forced by exhibitions where visitors are meant to see with their own eyes, and then give free rein to the imagination, which is somehow guided by observation of reality or controls the staging of reality, while its discursive constructional character remains hidden.⁹

At the same time, ballet achieved a kind of autonomy in which technical development, which often resulted in virtuosity, became a kind of survival method, abstraction, and the dancing body an end in itself. This is particularly evident in *Excelsior*, where moving human bodies are only abstract allegories, elements of mere movement. Manzotti's work is the archetype of the monster spectacle, a kind of super opera, a cheesy and trivial total work of art. According to Sergia Adamo, the staging of "totality, synchrony and simultaneity" in his phantasmagorical endeavor constitutively evokes the merging with the "discourses, perceptions and temporalities of great exhibitions."¹⁰ Part of the kitsch aesthetic is that the depiction of objects and themes avoids any ambiguity, everything is immediately and unequivocally identifiable, and the audience does not

⁵Opened in 1854, the Alhambra was a popular theater and music venue on the east side of Leicester Square in London's West End. The building was demolished in 1936.

⁶The Éden-Théâtre, built in the early 1880s, was a 4,000-seat theater on Rue Boudreau, Paris. It was demolished in 1895.

⁷ADAMO, "Dancing for the World," 143–172.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., 168.



have to make a special effort to understand what the ballet is depicting. *Excelsior* largely succeeded in imagining phantasmagorical kitsch by staging “moving bodies.”¹¹

In all, Manzotti succeeded in exploiting and further developing the peculiarities of the dance language through various “reuse” of different cultural discourses. Modern people felt part of a nation, but they were also part of a much broader dimension of international spaces, mass production and consumption, leisure, and widespread spectacle.¹² As the ballet’s success soon transcended national borders, the work was transferred to other contexts and became an effective vehicle for spreading an ideology that was no longer solely that of the Milan Exposition of 1881 and not solely Italian, but also stood for internationalism and the technical development of the late nineteenth century.

Excelsior is more than a glorification of technological progress, fin-de-siècle internationalism, a representation of non-Western otherness, primarily in the form of various dances that also had local and global dimensions. The ballet was a global success first and foremost, its message being to spread the ideology of “progress and civilization,” first in the newly formed Italian nation and then around the world. The Suez Canal scene, for example, provided an opportunity for several nations to parade, which in turn allowed spectacular national costumes to be displayed. The Mont Cenis Tunnel was the subject of international collaboration, as was the final image depicting the Dances of the Nations, that is, the Apotheosis of Light. Overall, the work, which stands for the presentation of human diversity in the context of the progress and primacy of western civilization, can be interpreted as a national and global display.¹³

2. THE PLOT OF *EXCELSIOR*

At the center of Manzotti’s ballet is the constant struggle between intellectual backwardness and progress, Darkness and Enlightenment, the two ideas being embodied by the figures of a male and a female. In any case, this battle will be decided in favor of Enlightenment and progress, the forces of Darkness will disappear, and world peace will come upon mankind through the blessings of civilization. At the beginning of the ballet, the spirit of Darkness holds the Light, progress, in chains. But the captive being is released, the light is victorious, the embodiment of human genius appears, and only the defeated party retreats.

The scene of the next picture is the Palace of Science, which houses culture, art, inventions, and fame. Surrounded by richness and brilliance, the scene is extremely dynamic and spectacular, and this can hardly be surpassed throughout the play. In the other parts of the ballet appear the new achievements, the discoveries of the new age and the results of science. A new era begins and a bright future lights the way of mankind, including steam power, the invention of the telegraph, and the building of the Suez Canal and Mont Cenis Tunnel.

First, the winner of the boat race that has just ended, young Valentino, is celebrated in a village inn on the Weser, while the victor and his entourage also appear. The Obscurantism warns the participants of the arrival of a steamboat piloted by Papin. “This is the work of the

¹¹Ibid., 143–172.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.



devil,” he tells them. The sailors destroy the watercraft, not sparing Papin, who dies in battle. But the brilliance of Light reaches the crowds, the Brooklyn Suspension Bridge appears, and below it seagoing vessels, improved versions of Papin’s invention, cut the foam.

Below, experiments related to electricity come to life in Alessandro Volta’s laboratory in Como. The spirit of Darkness is afraid of the sparks that fly out and signify victory. With a quick jump in time, an American telegraph building appears with many telegraph attendants carrying urgent messages from around the world. Darkness has once again succumbed to civilization.

The next act takes place in the desert: a caravan appears, caught up in a terrible sandstorm. Unfortunate travelers are afflicted by desert raiders and prepare to die in the dark. The evil spirit rejoices, but the light points to the sky where a new route has opened, the Suez Canal. Instead of the desert, a wide canal appears, as well as the city of Ismaila. The old wilderness is already a thing of the past, while flourishing landscapes along with a booming trade and industry determine the new cityscape, in which the entire European civilization finds its place through science. The institution of slavery and national prejudices are already history, and mutual contact between peoples dominates. As boats, tents, and a huge colorful crowd appear on the stage, all people, no matter what race, dance for joy.

Towards the end of the ballet, the Mont Cenis Tunnel comes to life, marking another stage in the human struggle. Engineers try to make the remaining rock separating Italy from France disappear. The work comes to an end; meanwhile, however, the villain is excited and plots revenge. Miners and engineers await the detonation in a tense atmosphere. Then the barrier finally collapses, and the workers of the two nations embrace jubilantly in a spirit of brotherhood. Obscurantism is truly defeated now, and the Light prevents it from seeing people united in universal happiness. Then the earth opens and the spirit of Darkness disappears below.

The ballet’s final scene offers the apotheosis of human genius, culture and progress. All nations gather and dance joyfully for the glory of the present and the greater glory that is yet to come.

3. THE “TECHNOPHILE” BALLET

The Milan Exposition of 1881 is closely linked to the context of *Excelsior*, which can be seen as the Italian nation’s first step towards opening up to the world.¹⁴ The ballet indicated this ideological position and, perhaps unexpectedly, became a vehicle for this change.¹⁵ Although there were many attractions in the Expo area (equestrian shows, theatrical performances, music and dance productions, etc.), these were actually less successful, but the ballet performed at La Scala was characterized by its “didactic, assertive and ideological” characteristics, and the public appreciated it greatly. The play was a paradigm of spectacle and as such went hand in hand with the exhibition in Milan. Added to this was the coincidence that universality, interdependence and peace defined Manzotti’s version of world conquest, and this corresponded to the message. The ballet as well as the exhibition can be viewed both from close up and from a distance, and a very effective dramatic performance of the ballet can juxtapose the following contrasting themes:

¹⁴BOAGLIO, “Die Entstehung,” 66–81.

¹⁵ADAMO, “Dancing for the World,” 143–172.



national identity vs. national rebirth, and universal peace and brotherhood vs. triumphal nationalism and overtly militaristic celebrations.¹⁶

Excelsior can also be interpreted as a “technophile” ballet, drawing on the urbanization of Milan at the end of the nineteenth century and its emerging industrial culture, using an appropriate technological plot and a techno-political sign system. In Italy at the end of the nineteenth century, the dominant conditions of social production were increasingly represented by machines, but this is not to be equated with modernity. At the center of the piece is the allegorical competition between good and evil, with the message that good will prevail in the future and barbarism of all kinds will disappear.¹⁷

Excelsior’s optimistic conclusion is based on a temporal ambiguity: if the final defeat of Obscurantism is the ultimate step in the process of enlightenment, is that moment present or future? The powerful contradictions of “living progress” may seem all too familiar to us today. In Milan in 1881 this ideology had a particular local meaning, as critics also noted in the context of the presentation of the ballet: the piece was in synergy with the city’s transformation and the technological excitement that the national exhibition represented. Over the course of seven months, hundreds of thousands of visitors came to Milan by train to be transported from Central Station to the Exhibition Center on a purpose-built railway. *Excelsior* stayed on stage at La Scala throughout, providing an impressive theatrical continuation of Milan’s industrial celebrations.¹⁸

The ballet continues the tradition of the Italian *ballo grande* of the nineteenth century, celebrating progress and technical development while following the directions of the previous major exhibitions: it uses spectacular elements to juxtapose human transience, frame by frame.¹⁹ It can also be viewed as an experiment in reproduction, “in the microcosm of a mass cultural artifact, of the many tensions and drives that characterized world exhibitions in general: the construction of a national identity founded on a showing off of the dictates of progress, the unavoidable confrontation with otherness (interesting to this regard is the insertion of “exotic dances” and orientalist scenes), the configuration of a “world” or “global” dimension seen as an articulation of single national spaces, the definition of gender identities, the intertwining of different cultural discourses in a space of spectacularization, and, last but not least, the blurring of boundaries between living bodies of human beings and fetishized objects to be put on show.”²⁰

4. ON COURSE FOR SUCCESS: THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN MANZOTTI AND MARENCO

Romualdo Giovanni Battista Marengo (1841–1907), who played violin and bassoon as an orchestral artist and was concertmaster of the Milan Scala, devoted himself after the success

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷WILLIAMS, “*Excelsior* as Mass Ornament,” 251–268.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹UJVÁRI, *Zwischen Bazar und Weltpolitik*.

²⁰ADAMO, “Dancing for the World,” 144.



of his ballet music *Sieba* (1878) exclusively to composing and became known above all for his stage melodies.²¹ The musical collaboration with the choreographer Luigi Manzotti, the master of the *ballo grande*, brought the big breakthrough. As already mentioned, the peculiarity of the genre is that it uses historical and allegorical themes with a deep, serious meaning, and this is accompanied by a huge cast of performers, elaborate staging and overwhelming spectacle. After *Sieba*, composed on a Scandinavian theme, their collaboration was crowned by a series of successes beginning with *Excelsior* (1881) and then continuing with *Amor* (1886) and *Sport* (1897).

The ballets glorified the positive achievements of the time, social progress and humanitarian ideas, and their success extended well beyond Milan. Within the trilogy, *Excelsior* stands out, representing the apotheosis of human civilization and taking up the idea of brotherhood. The show featured 508 actors and was performed 103 times in its first season. In 1889, La Scala brought the ballet to the newly built Éden-Théâtre in Paris, and the play was performed by countless major theaters around the world. The secret of its success lay in the choreographic actions, the well-written, melodic, dynamic music, as well as its “formal invention, and an overwhelming sense of rhythmic dynamism. The music is fast-moving and vivacious, rarely sentimental, and often induces a torrential sense of lyrical exhilaration.”²²

Galileo Galilei (music by Leopoldo Angeli), which premiered in Rome in 1873 and which already dealt with light and science, can be seen as a forerunner of *Excelsior*. Five years later Manzotti’s long and fruitful collaboration with Marengo and the costume designer Alfredo Edel (1856–1912) began. *Sieba* already hinted at later visual elements in the form of colossal ships, temples, Valhalla, and crowd scenes. The ballet was soon performed with great success in Milan, Naples, and Venice, and then it went to France. Showing the influence of Wagner’s operas,²³ *Sieba* not only marks the beginning of a successful collaboration between Manzotti and Marengo, but also the first appearance of Manzotti’s characteristically fantastic stage performance.

5. CULTURAL HISTORY TOLD IN BALLET: *EXCELSIOR*

Even then, Manzotti was interested in the idea of *Excelsior* as a triumph of industry, civilization, and thought. On his return to Milan he prepared the choreography, and then the show, celebrating the nineteenth-century apotheosis, was premiered at La Scala on February 11, 1881. The highly spectacular ballet presents the rise of human civilization and the turbulent development

²¹Biographical information: <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/romualdo-giovanni-battista-marengo_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/> (last accessed: April 26, 2024).

²²MARENCO, *Excelsior and Sport*, ix.

²³The ballet has a plot very different from that of *Excelsior*: Minister Kafur and the pirate Holerut conspire against King Harold, ruler of Thule. Wotan sends the young king a magical sword that reaches him through the Valkyrie Sieba. The evil Surtur, a malevolent and hostile god, manages to make Sieba fall in love with Harold, who has her back despite the Valkyries’ laws. On the battlefield, the pirates capture the king as planned by Kafur, who steals the magic sword and leads the army. Meanwhile, Sieba, driven into the underworld by Surtur, is condemned to terrible things. Eventually, Wotan allows her to return to the light and live among mortals. With the help of Cadmo, a pirate slave, Sieba frees her love Harold. This also requires the intervention of Wotan, who kindles a storm in which the pirates drown, but the boy and the lovers are saved. Harold returns to his people and marries Sieba. The use of a theme from Germanic mythology in a ballet demonstrates the influence of Wagner’s operas on musical theater.



of technology as a bitter struggle between Darkness and the spirit of Light. As a result of the construction of the steamship, the iron bridge, electricity, the telegraph, the Suez Canal and the Mont Cenis Tunnel, the spirit of Darkness faces defeat and the Great Festival of Nations is celebrated with an apotheosis of Light and Peace.²⁴ The production was performed in countless theaters around the world and played in many places for decades. In Vienna, for example, it premiered in 1885, after which it remained in the repertoire for 29 years and was performed a total of 329 times. The Budapest Opera gave 98 performances between 1887 and 1894.²⁵

Excelsior was performed 103 times in the year of its premiere in Italy in 1881, making the piece one of the greatest successes of Italian ballet, an amazing work of mass and color, full of ideas that both delighted and stimulated the general public. It had unlimited faith in scientific progress, and he interpreted the optimism of the new classes of society, which saw industrialization and new discoveries as the way to save mankind from the old world. The ballet also inspired a sense of global brotherhood and internationality, and the juxtaposition of Light and Dark pointed to a new morality fueled by hope.²⁶

Excelsior is not a romantic ballet, but practical and secular: it bears the marks of reform and illusion, and it praises human intelligence that finally understood how to shape the forces of nature according to its own will. In their day, scientific discoveries worked like miracles that changed the course of progress. The ballet authors were aware of these tendencies and, as creators, they gave free rein to their imagination in the grand presentation of stage effects and spectacles. Although *Excelsior* was closely linked to its time and can even be accused of naivety, it should still be considered an important contemporary document of Italian culture at the end of the nineteenth century. There was no lack of fine taste, all decadence was reflected in the choreography, but its effect on the audience was and remained extraordinary. Marenco's music is simply bowed and goes well with the dance, sometimes taking inspiration from folk sources. The genre of ballet offers a great fusion of different types of entertainment. Manzotti choreographically combined the tradition of the nineteenth century with the modern elements of his time. "Perhaps the ballet could best be described as an agile elephant, highly decorated and very cinematographic."²⁷

The choreography may appear difficult and baroque to posterity, but one must see and appreciate the originality with which it blends nineteenth-century traditions and in some ways served as an inspiration for Marius Petipa and George Balanchine. In the twentieth century, Manzotti was often belittled and his culture questioned. At the same time, it cannot be overlooked that he rose to become a successful choreographer at a time when the ballet genre was in decline. Despite the banal features of his ballets, his metier and theatricality cannot be denied, nor his excellent communication, which ultimately brought him ministerial recognition.²⁸

²⁴MARENCO, *Excelsior and Sport*, ix.

²⁵*Spielplan der Wiener Oper 1869 bis 1955*, <<https://www.mdw.ac.at/imi/operapolitics/spielplan-wiener-oper/web/opus/>> (last accessed: April 26, 2024); *DigiTár* [Digital database of the Hungarian State Opera], <<http://digitar.opera.hu/www/c16operadigital.01.01.php?as=53330&bm=1&mt=1>> (last accessed: April 26, 2024).

²⁶MARENCO, *Excelsior and Sport*, ix.

²⁷*Ibid.*, xiii.

²⁸*Ibid.*



6. “IT’S NOT EVEN WORTH MENTIONING”: THE MUSIC OF *EXCELSIOR*

Excelsior’s music critics in Vienna and Budapest unanimously pointed out its shortcomings. “The music is below criticism. It’s all confusing, incoherent noise. This noise often had a very hurtful effect, for example with the image of eternal peace. This peace set to music is worse than war,” wrote the correspondent of the *Pesti Napló* [Pester Diarium].²⁹ The music critic of *Fővárosi Lapok* [Capital Papers] made the same judgment, according to which the music of the ballet was not “gentle,” Marengo was “so pursued by the copper demon that he can only express the mildest feelings with horns and trombones. You can imagine the infernal noise with which the various military bow to peace! I think it’s going to be worse than the war.”³⁰ Likewise: “It’s better not to say anything about his music. It doesn’t even hold up in comparison to mediocre ballet music, let alone the ballets of Delibes, Widor and others, which also appear as musical compositions and have such a high level that dance and spectacle play only a minor role alongside them,” wrote the critic of *Budapesti Hírlap* [Budapester Journal].³¹

A similar judgment was made in Vienna years ago. According to the *Wiener Presse*, the piece offered so many sights that one could completely forget about the music,³² which seemed banal and trivial and could not be compared with the music of other ballets (e.g. *Coppélia*, *Melusine*, *Spielmann*).³³ The music critic of *Die Presse* thought it right not to talk about Marengo’s music in connection with the piece, as it was not worth mentioning.³⁴ Eduard Hanslick also summed it up: Marengo’s music would be described as “unqualifiable” in Parliament. “Should we nevertheless qualify Marengo’s music, we would do it most briefly with the word: circus.”³⁵

The circus character of the music is also the guiding principle in Max Schütz’s critique of *Pester Lloyd*. In Europe, the ballet was performed in all major cities, but apart from the Vienna Court Opera “they were private theaters.” However, it does not deserve a place in any institution: “We even allow ourselves, even after the success of today’s premiere, to express the opinion that *Excelsior* does not belong in an art institute, be it just a court theater or some other larger enterprise; with such circus music no serious art institute should belittle itself and its orchestra. ... Romualdo, Romualdo, what is our fault that you did *this* music to us!”³⁶

Another Viennese organ published a similar criticism: Romualdo’s music was marked by an endearing clumsiness in the orchestration, on the other hand by the loud intrusion of “arena music.” “The Italians are notoriously poor at ballet music,” and *Excelsior* “makes no exception to the rule” that it is simply effective.³⁷ The *Morgenpost*’s music advisor explained his musical

²⁹Gyula SGALITZER, “A bérmálás hete (Bécsi tárca)” [Confirmation Week (Vienna Feuilleton)], *Pesti Napló* 36/152 (June 4, 1885), 1.

³⁰N. N., “Az *Excelsior* ballet főpróbája” [The main rehearsal of the ballet *Excelsior*], *Fővárosi Lapok* 24/19 (January 20, 1887), 131.

³¹Imre HUSZÁR, “*Excelsior*,” *Budapesti Hírlap* 5/138 (May 20, 1885), supplement.

³²MZ., “Hofopertheater,” *Wiener Presse* 4/22 (May 25, 1885), 6.

³³Otto von KAPFF, “Oper,” *Deutsche Kunst- und Musik-Zeitung* 12/19 (May 25, 1885), 240–241.

³⁴Max KALBECK, “Ballet (*Excelsior* von Manzotti und Marengo),” *Die Presse* 38/137 (May 19, 1885), 1–3.

³⁵[Eduard] H[ANSLICK], “Hofopertheater,” *Neue Freie Presse* 7442 (May 18, 1885), 1.

³⁶Max SCHÜTZ, “*Excelsior*,” *Pester Lloyd* 34/21 (January 22, 1887), [1st suppl.], 2–4.

³⁷W. FR., “Hofopertheater,” *Neues Wiener Tagblatt* 19/136 (May 18, 1885), 4.



arguments in more detail. In his view, Marenco did not put much effort into composing elegant melodies that fit each picture. The first enjoyable part of the score is the Renaissance waltz, which ends with a gallop made expressive by a cello solo. Polkas and mazurkas danced along the Weser are lively. There is an Adagio combined with Volta and electricity that does not really fit the scene, but the electric bells, composed in A^b major, sounding in a three-line octave, and the octave click of the telegraph could have been a good basis for a gallop.³⁸ He could have used Goldmark's *The Queen of Sheba* for the desert scene, but did not. Musically, the Concordia March, written in E^b major, is worth mentioning.³⁹

If not to Goldmark, then Marenco has all the more courageously reached for other sources, according to the art critic from *Budapesti Hírlap*:

His music helps a lot to tire the nerves. Signor Marenco has committed a fair amount of skilled theft to the detriment of music in all parts of the world. From Lohengrin to the English anthem, from dervish chants to the Hebrew Saturday service, from Verdi to Delibes, from Spanish to Russian, this eye-eying maestro has pulled it all together and of his own accord given nothing but a rather clumsy orchestration that spoils the evening for any horn player. ... Apart from the frailty of his music, he is in every respect worthy of the fact that the whole capital and the surrounding area go to the Opera House because of him. So many, many full houses. For without this one would have to fear that *Excelsior* could become *De profundis*.⁴⁰

Lines appeared in the *Vasárnapi Újság* [Sunday Newspaper] that were more revealing but less appreciative of the quality of ballet music: "It is not a famous poetic product, but it is a good tool for large-scale ballet and mass development. *Excelsior* does not want to appeal to the ears but to the eyes. And it had this effect."⁴¹ Delibes would certainly have made the musical part of the work a success:

The only disadvantage of the ballet is that the music is not at the level that such a large-scale work would rightly demand. There are some nice details in it, especially the polka, the mazurka, as well as the dance of the telegraphers in Act II, "Indiana" in Act III, etc. But overall it lacks originality and inventiveness. How beautifully the various national motifs could have been used in this music! Of that there is but no trace anywhere. What could Delibes have done with this ballet, for example, if he had written the music for it!⁴²

The additions by Hellmesberger the Younger, who also conducted the Vienna premiere, proved to be the most pleasant parts of the ballet music.⁴³

Thanks to the *Excelsior* vocal score, the work was played in many French and Italian families and also performed by military bands.⁴⁴

³⁸Positive emotions, happiness, serenity, cheerfulness and strength are associated with A^b major.

³⁹The strong-sounding E^b major offers an opportunity to express more serious, deeper emotions.

⁴⁰N. N., "Excelsior," *Budapesti Hírlap* 7/22 (January 23, 1887), 3.

⁴¹N. N., "Az operaszínházban" [In the Opera Theater], *Vasárnapi Újság* 34/5 (January 30, 1887), 79.

⁴²A[NATALI]K K[áro]ly, "Excelsior," *Pesti Hírlap* 9/22 (January 23, 1887), 5–6.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴O. BN., "Excelsior," *Morgenpost* 35/135 (May 17, 1885), 2–3.



7. THE RECEPTION OF *EXCELSIOR* IN VIENNA (1885)

After the premiere in Milan, the decision to stage the ballet in Vienna came relatively late among the major European cities. The reason for this can be traced back to the conservatism of the Court Opera, i.e. the administration did not want to deviate from the stage traditions. With *Excelsior*, however, one had to tread completely new paths: “instead of the love affairs of the mythological gods, the fairy tales from the Thousand and One Nights or the danced folk songs” an attempt was made to depict “the triumph of enlightenment over spiritual darkness in allegorical images.”⁴⁵ This meant that, alongside the usual historical (*Esmeralda*, *Giselle*, *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *The Assassins*), fantastic (*Coppélia*), mythological (*Pygmalion*, *Brahma*), social (*Carnival Adventures in Paris*) and ethnographic (*Nena Sahib*, *Flick and Flock*) stage plays, the new ballet, a pedagogical dance work the character of which was completely unknown until now, also appeared.⁴⁶

Eduard Hanslick was another who saw that although *Excelsior* began its triumphal procession five years ago and the success surpassed all previous ballet productions, Vienna did not rush the premiere because the work was not a classical ballet. In his opinion, there was no psychological plot or real drama to be expected as it was a series of loose images, but it was still original and entertaining. There was no lack of rich stage effects and spectacular elements, but the underlying allegory, the battle of Darkness with Enlightenment, also seemed like a new idea. This was the starting point for showing the triumph of world-changing inventions and applied scientific knowledge. The basic idea of the ballet was undoubtedly original and interesting compared to the usual serious libretti. The performance was not lacking in effects that bombarded the senses, the eyes were struck by many stimuli. The ballet was justifiably successful, not least because of its breathtaking and effective performance. Solo dancers would have few opportunities to develop.⁴⁷

The *Wiener Presse* wrote similarly after the premiere. The glorification of modern civilization and culture did not reveal itself to the viewer in a single action, but as a series of freely strung together, independent images.⁴⁸ In the multi-part ballet without a plot, the connecting link was the conflict between Light against Darkness, between Civilization against Backwardness. Manzotti skillfully choreographed important moments in human history, the Austrian ballet dancers ensured a high-quality stage production, some of the images from the performance surpassed everything that had previously been seen on the Viennese stages, and the entire production seemed fresh and well-rounded.⁴⁹

The anticipation of the audience was also reflected in the fact that the hall usually only began to fill up after the performance had started, but before the premiere of *Excelsior* in Vienna the Opera House was packed long before the start and one could almost feel the tension. Visually, the performance was truly unmatched, with no shortage of decorative and technical elements. The climax of the ballet culminated in the second scene, in the Enlightenment. The setting was a magnificent palace in which everything that the human mind had created in past centuries appeared symbolically. All of this was presented to the spectators majestically and energetically,

⁴⁵HUSZÁR, “*Excelsior*,” supplement.

⁴⁶W. FR., “Hofopertheater,” 1.

⁴⁷H[ANSLICK], “Hofopertheater,” 1.

⁴⁸KAPFF, “Oper,” 240–241.

⁴⁹Ibid; F., “Hof-Opertheater,” *Wiener Theater-Zeitung* 8/6 (June 1, 1885), 1.



in such a blaze of color, fantastic division and grouping that it was almost impossible for the eye to comprehend in one evening. The tableau then dissolved into various dances. Perhaps it can be seen as a small tactical error that this grandiose scene was placed right at the beginning of the piece, because as the evening went on the effect could hardly be increased, so that the other images in the ballet suffered somewhat. The second outstanding scene was the eighth picture Suez, Ismaila. The multi-ethnic city presented itself in the imaginative “Pas Cosmopolite,” including Chinese, Turkish, English, and Spanish dance. The ninth picture with the tunnel drilling and the subsequent Great Festival of Nations once again made for an impressive crowd scene. At the end *O, Du mein Österreich* resounded; this merged with the melody of the Austrian national anthem and received great applause.⁵⁰

According to the *Morgenpost* reviewer, the ballet’s author Luigi Manzotti was allegedly inspired by a public monument commemorating the achievement of Mont Cenis in Turin in 1879. The work depicts a pyramid formed from granite blocks of the mountain on which the genius of science stands proudly proclaiming his victory. The raw, violent monsters in the form of titans try in vain to attack the genius, but they roll off the rocks into the depths. For the choreographer, this was the advance of human culture against all obstacles and disruptive forces. The title of the ballet is reminiscent of an ode by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882), in which the American poet praised the progress of modernism. For Manzotti this was the starting point for the symbiosis of the effective and specific unity of story, allegory and dance. There is no doubt that Manzotti pushed the boundaries of dance and stage spectacle compared to traditional poetic ballet. In several places he treats historical places and time frames in fiction; for example, the first steamship, whose inventor was not Papin but Fulton, did not set out from the port of Bremen but from New York to Albany. The music of the seventh desert picture is strongly influenced by Goldmark’s *The Queen of Sheba*, which had been played in Italy for years.⁵¹

Since the individual images are only loosely connected due to the lack of an actual plot, the dances had to be artificially coordinated, and the choreographer proved to be very inventive. In the second scene, eight ladies are on stage, and while the soloist is given a chance to display her virtuosity in bold variations, the Renaissance-esque group dance is also very appropriate. In the regatta scene, the winner is celebrated with a polka and a mazurka. In Washington, the gallop plays the main role, and later children also appear in an Indian dance. The abolition of slavery is expressed in a pas de deux and a pas d’ensemble.⁵²

Negative opinions are rare, but now and then disparaging judgments have appeared in the specialist and daily press. The counter-argument was that although the premiere was preceded by increased expectations due to the big publicity, the evening could not live up to them, perhaps precisely because of the huge uproar. Countless previous productions (including *Flick and Flock*, *The Minstrel*, *The Assassins*, and *Melusine*) were in no way inferior to the new ballet; on the contrary, they ranked even higher due to their own uniform line of thought and the use of poetic

⁵⁰W. FR., “Hofopertheater,” 4.

⁵¹O. BN., “*Excelsior*,” 2–3.

⁵²*Ibid.*



and scenic possibilities.⁵³ The genre of ballet was not really suitable for presenting inventions and technical concepts in a natural way, as well as for showing special buildings and structures.⁵⁴

The previous presentation of the ballet in Paris also offered an opportunity for comparison. When looking at these performances in parallel, the reviewer states that, in his opinion, the French production was more effective and technically superior in execution, but some parts in Vienna were performed at a higher level. Compared to Paris, the auto-da-fé scene and the Lesseps ovation were omitted. Also troubling was that the second image was the most effective and could not be surpassed by subsequent images.⁵⁵ According to *Die Presse*, the Paris production could not be compared with the Vienna performance, since a real “circus ballet” was given there, while in the imperial city the dance piece was staged in the noblest and most tasteful way. Of course, the works presented so far were in no way inferior (*Sardanapal*, *Fantasia*, *Ellinor*, *Brahma*, *Stock im Eisen*, etc.), only *Excelsior* stood out with its fast image changes, beautiful backdrops and original costumes. Some dances would be unreasonably long. The final scene, in which many of the world’s armies showed up and thus turned into a huge crowd scene, also proved to be extremely spectacular. In Vienna, instead of the Mont Cenis Tunnel, in the spirit of local color, the drilling of the Arlberg tunnel stood in the libretto. These modifications were possible: in each country only the final apotheosis had to be adapted to local needs, which could also have openly political connotations.⁵⁶

Ludwig Hevesi commented on the expense of this “hopping philosophy.” Although various sums were circulating, the minimum amount for the Vienna performance should be 30,000 guilders, and around 900 costumes were required. Everything is relative, because Schumann’s opera *Genoveva* is said to have cost around 50,000 guilders, and the ballet *Fantasia* around 110,000 guilders.⁵⁷

8. THE RECEPTION OF *EXCELSIOR* IN BUDAPEST (1887)

Several Hungarian daily newspapers in connection with the premiere referred to Longfellow’s poem *Excelsior*, whose protagonist is a young man who, flag in hand, wanted to conquer Mount St. Bernat, but was buried on the way by an avalanche. Nothing shows his determination better than the fact that he died still clutching the flag that said “Excelsior.” This scene symbolizes the aspiring nature of humanity, always striving for higher goals and even after tragedy not losing hope to rise and reach the desired highest point. That’s what Manzotti’s ballet is about.

The performance of the novelty was a “lucky idea” from the director István Keglevich (1840–1905), since the four finales of the four-act play were masterpieces of staging “that we have never seen before.” Also amazing was Cesare Smeraldi’s performance,⁵⁸ i.e. the rehearsal of the ballet, the movement of the masses effective on the stage, because “not a single evolution is repeated,

⁵³KAPFF, “Oper,” 240–241.

⁵⁴KALBECK, “Ballet,” 1–3.

⁵⁵BN., “Hofoperntheater,” *Morgenpost* 35/136 (May 18, 1885), 4.

⁵⁶ADAMO, “Dancing for the World,” 144; KALBECK, “Ballet,” 1–3.

⁵⁷L[udwig] H[EVESI], “Wiener Brief,” *Pester Lloyd* 32/142 [2nd supplement] (May 24, 1885), 2.

⁵⁸Cesare Smeraldi (1845–1924): ballet dancer and ballet master of Italian origin. He first worked in the Hungarian Opera House between 1886 and 1889, and then between 1895 and 1924. During his career in Hungary, he performed the male lead roles in numerous ballets and dance plays. He also composed three ballet choreographies (*Excelsior*, *Maria of Nevers*, and *Zulejka*).



not a single one is superfluous.”⁵⁹ The dance work, staged with good taste and excellent direction, was nothing more than cultural history danced through and dealt with social and scientific issues. It was a unique production, because “the audience in the capital has never seen such a glamorous spectacle.” In addition, the ballet was not only “the brightest stage performance to date, but also the most expensive.” Prime Minister Kálmán Tisza was also present at the premiere,⁶⁰ which was “a rare stroke of luck for a Hungarian theater.”⁶¹ Gyula Erkel stood at the conductor’s desk.⁶² The ballet was presented in Budapest after three months of preparation and the fact that Smeraldi was called onto the stage 12 times during the premiere shows the audience’s reaction.⁶³

The critic of *Pesti Napló* is more differentiated, emphasizing that the new production “continues to overcome itself despite many points of criticism.”⁶⁴ He approaches the piece in terms of genre theory, so the basic criterion of the ballet is that, like the text of an opera, it has a dramatic basis, containing exposition, conflict and resolution. The music should be rich and “express poetic ideas with dramatic tone painting” as well as emotions.” It “must be intrinsically related to the facial expressions that explain the emotions and passions, as well as to the movements and gestures and dances, to the overall plasticity of external signs.” However, *Excelsior* strives more for charms and externals, and this does not correspond to high-quality musical content; “his music does not stand up to even the mildest criticism.” Nevertheless, it has characteristics that “raise it above all previous ballets,” not least its choice of subject.⁶⁵

In the columns of *Nemzet* [Nation], József Keszler puts the new ballet on an even more detailed theoretical basis. In his reading *Excelsior* is “that work with which ballet art for the first time leaves the path imposed by tradition”, the path trod by Jean Georges Noverre (1727–1810) and before that by Louis de Cahusac (1706–1759) and Louis Fuselier (1672/1674–1752).⁶⁶ According to the principle formulated by the French reformers, dance in ballet does not form an independent part, but serves the dramatic action. Even Fuselier took the dramatic event as the basis of the ballet, Cahusac added “the splendor of the exhibition,” and Noverre synthesized all of this, adding characterization as an element. Noverre treated ballet as drama on the genre basis of *ballet d’action*, so he asked about the rules of the drama genre. “His action is simple, his course clear; so that the audience can easily understand it. Therefore, the ballet composer should choose easy-to-understand passions and feelings as themes, so that mime and dance can explain and interpret them in a way that eliminates all doubt.”⁶⁷ This direction determined the genre of ballet up to Delibes, who mainly cultivated poetic and pastoral ballets (*Sylvia*, *Coppélia*)

⁵⁹N. N., “Az *Excelsior* első előadása” [The first performance of *Excelsior*], *Fővárosi Lapok* 24/22 (January 23, 1887), 155–156.

⁶⁰Kálmán Tisza (1830–1902): Prime Minister of Hungary from 1875 to 1890. During his reign, the Hungarian parliamentary system was consolidated, reforms were introduced and economic growth began.

⁶¹N. N., “Az *Excelsior* első előadása,” 155–156.

⁶²A[NATALI]K, “*Excelsior*,” 5–6.

⁶³N. N., “Smeraldi Cézár,” *Pesti Hírlap* 9/27 (January 28, 1887), 6.

⁶⁴József HARRACH, “Zene (Sembrich – Manfréd – *Excelsior*),” *Pesti Napló* 38/22 (January 23, 1887), 1.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶József KESZLER, “*Excelsior*,” *Nemzet* 6/1580 (January 23, 1887), 2–3.

⁶⁷Ibid.



accompanied by fine music in the sense of Boieldieu and Spontini, while others chose subjects that were more allegorical, historical etc.⁶⁸

Excelsior is the first ballet to challenge the canon defined by Noverre. According to Keszler, the basic principles of the eighteenth century lost their validity at the end of the nineteenth century and required innovations. However, they did not turn to ancient art as a source, “but proceeded from the existing and developed the usual in a certain direction.” Inspiration and innovation are not linked to France, but to Italy. In the system emanating from Milan, Manzotti considered Fuselier’s element, the dramatic action, as secondary, but gave priority to the spectacle Cahusac preferred, the exhibition of the play. As a result, Noverre’s system collapsed, but in the absence of dramatic elements, something had to be tied to the mere spectacle. In Manzotti’s ballet the audience should fill this gap, i.e. he saw the solution in the fact that the actors and extras involved in the ballet swelled to an unprecedented size. According to Keszler, ballet without a dramatic plot is nothing unknown in the world of the stage. However, he does not call them divertissements, but “purely descriptive” ballets. “Description; that is the linchpin of the matter.”⁶⁹ He sees this striving not only on the stage, but also in literature: “And the exhibition on the stage is the same as the description, the object painting, which is today one of the main components of modern epic and fiction. From this it can be seen that all the arts are always closely connected.”⁷⁰ As a result of these narratives, *Excelsior*, with its spectacular, sumptuous exhibition, monumental sets, and hundreds of actors, is already the harbinger of new aesthetic aspirations. Manzotti traces the primacy of the visual to “the naturalistic principle” of the arts, according to which the work of art “must touch not only the mind but also the nerves.” He himself called the subject of his ballet half-allegorical, half-historical, “because these two types are best suited to the expression of outward splendor.” The author overcame the dual nature of the object in naming the work by calling it an “ideal ballet.”⁷¹

Among the actors he singles out Smeraldi, among the ladies he praises the leading actresses Miss Zsuzsanits, Coppini and Maruzzi in the role of Bayaders. Smeraldi was the soul of the play:

Among the performers, the main credit goes to Mr. Caesar Smeraldi, who brought the ballet to our stage and rehearsed it with unimaginable diligence and effort. You had to see this little man in the dress rehearsal, in whose veins maybe not even blood flows, but a kind of mercury. He did not waste a minute; he never rested for a moment; he really was like a ghost; but not the “spirit of darkness” that he portrays in the play; he is the spirit of power, excitement, and movement that gets caught up in much shouting but never tires of working.⁷²

The ballet was performed in Budapest between 1887 and 1894 and performed almost a hundred times. But in addition to the glorification of modernity, progress, the grandiose scale of the piece and, last but not least, the novel depiction of the female body, other factors for its reception history must be taken into account.

⁶⁸KESZLER, “*Excelsior*,” 2–3.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.



The context of *Excelsior* in Budapest in 1887, during the period following the Compromise, can also be interpreted within the given political power dynamics, with opinions about the ballet also reflecting party sympathies. Supporting the performance also meant supporting the ruling power, the liberal Tisza era, the Austro-Hungarian interest group, and acceptance of Habsburg rule, while opposition to the ballet hid acceptance of the radical nationalist position promoted by the criticism of the management and the audience of the Opera House and the need for democratic change was formulated.⁷³ The message of the ballet has already been pointed out: the praise of progress overcoming the forces of gloom is revealed in the work in the duality of Light and Darkness. Part of the ballet's political undertones is that although it was created ten years after Italian unity came about (1871), it could still be adapted to the local political conditions of the time. In Italy, the production staged at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan was linked to the Milan Exposition and its cultural programs, functioning as a link between political loyalty to the Italian dynasty, the revival of urban identity and industrial and cultural progress; not least through its success it became the flagship of the Milan fair.

In the Hungarian capital, the nationalist-leaning organ *Budapesti Hírlap* called for the Rákóczi anthem instead of the Austrian national anthem ("Gott erhalte") sung in Vienna, signifying a clear political position. The demand was not accepted, although "God preserve" was not forthcoming either.⁷⁴ However, it is significant that Count Kálmán Tisza, who rarely visited the Opera House, appeared at the premiere. It is entirely possible that this was due to purely personal reasons, including the ballet's erotic reputation, but the local aspect was probably more influential.

The critics pointed out that the aesthetic value of the ballet was not outstanding, but that it had proven to be a good idea to stage a ballet in Budapest that had already proven its worth throughout Europe. Furthermore, the erotic spectacle of the female body served as an argument for both the prima ballerina (The Light, portrayed by Zsuzsanits) and the entire female dance corps. The beauty of the ballet dancers in Budapest surprised even the Italian performers.⁷⁵

The link between the Budapest ballet and eroticism was particularly well known during István Keglevich's artistic directorship, as he had a soft spot for spectacular performances.⁷⁶ However, the associated high costs, the preference for lighter genres, and not least his authoritarian style, meant that his good reputation was quickly undermined, especially by the press. But he also got into conflict with leading actresses, among others Teréz Csillag and Mari Jászai left the National Theater because of him.⁷⁷ In addition, Keglevich also thought about the function of the Opera House in a special way: he wanted the national singing theater to serve as an exclusive club for aristocrats, upper-class circles and other selected men, and not least with their financial help he considered the enormous costs associated with the upkeep of the house. The director took a rather anti-democratic line on cultural policy, and the performance of *Excelsior* in Budapest provided an excellent opportunity to legitimize this. At the same time, he also believed he could ensure the continuity begun by his predecessor, the popular and not

⁷³PROKOPOVYCH, "The Production of *Excelsior*," 39–53.

⁷⁴E., "Excelsior," *Budapesti Hírlap* 7/22 (January 23, 1887), 3.

⁷⁵PROKOPOVYCH, "The Production of *Excelsior*," 39–53.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.



nearly as vocal Baron Podmaniczky.⁷⁸ The premiere of the ballet was intended to promote and underpin the modernity and sophisticated character of the Budapest Opera.

Tisza's presence at the premiere cannot be traced back to his friendship with the director, but his presence was intended to legitimize his government and give transparency to Hungary's development. This required reports that, alongside the battle of Light and Dark, Papin's invention, the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, electricity, etc., also included István Széchenyi and the Buda Castle in the series of great achievements and historical references. The last two images of the ballet offered the opportunity to show off local color and indigenous features, and these of course had the greatest impact, not least because of the possibility of conveying hidden current-political content. However, the scenes presented were less well thought out. The inclusion of István Széchenyi is understandable given his contributions to the country (e.g. foundation of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, his steamship efforts, construction of the Chain Bridge); however, Buda Castle, designed by Nikolaus Ybl, had a stronger connotation as a symbol of loyalty to the ruling house than the reforms that showed the progress of the country. The scene thus stood for the legitimacy of the current political order and served to glorify the Tisza government. Of course, the ballet was in the crossfire of the capital's oppositional press organs: its music, the high budget, the way in which the artistic director worked and, last but not least, the work's system of political symbols, as well as the Hungarian conditions after the reconciliation, were all heavily criticized.⁷⁹

The presentation of *Excelsior* was well-timed in the given political situation in Hungary, as politicians considered it important to move on cultural terrain, to be present in the interest of their legitimacy, while actors in cultural life were looking for ways to interact with politics and politicians. It was Keglevich's decision that only selected journalists were invited to the closed dress rehearsals, in the case of *Excelsior* more than a week before the premiere. His plan was successful, and he achieved his objective that the majority of reports were positive. The great interest and the pre-sold of tickets already foreshadowed the financial success, but this did not benefit the critical situation of the Opera House, because despite the *Excelsior* ballet the institution was financially worse off than before. Keglevich's vision of an elite, closed, not necessarily profitable club failed, and the new ballet became a symbol of the failings of the old institutional system, from which a new, national opera had to distance itself.⁸⁰

9. CONCLUSION

Due to its groundbreaking theme and stage visuals, the ballet *Excelsior* reached countless European theaters after its presentation in Milan, and was performed everywhere with great success. Its genre, the *ballo grande*, provided a specific, popular form of spectacle in itself, and it showed the way to modern, more diverse performances, which were accompanied by monumental meanings, extremely simple narrative techniques and an overt didactic intention. The success

⁷⁸Frigyes Baron Podmaniczky (1824–1907) was a Hungarian politician and writer. From 1875 to 1886 he held the office of artistic director of the Hungarian National Theater and, for a short time after its completion, also that of the State Opera.

⁷⁹PROKOPOVYCH, "The Production of *Excelsior*," 39–53.

⁸⁰Ibid.



lay in no small measure in the fact that the popular and traditional elements were supplemented with hundreds of actors, acrobatic forms of movement, and not infrequently with animals as well. The result of the fruitful collaboration between Marenco and Manzotti soon appeared in the Vienna Court Opera (Wiener Hofoper), and from there, thanks to the cultural transfer present in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, also in the Budapest Opera House. Although the work's music received unanimous, negative criticism in both places, due to its novelty great and lasting interest was shown in both cities. The reception of the work in Budapest is also of particular importance because the play also had a marked political connotation amid the power relations of the time, so it can also be interpreted in the field of symbolic politics.

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