

Júlia Hajdu (1925–1987) – Career of a woman operetta composer

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ABSTRACT

The object of this presentation is Júlia Hajdu (1925–1987), the first and only female Hungarian operetta composer. Although there is no abundance of female composers in either international or Hungarian music literature, most of the few were canonically mistreated, despite their creations being worthy of research. The author of choice, Júlia Hajdu, had a rather rich artistic career during which she excelled in various musical genres, such as the composition of dance songs, operettas, revues, dance suites, and incidental music. Besides composing, she was also an outstanding pianist. At the Zeneakadémia (Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music), her master teachers were Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967) and György Ránki (1907–1992) – the latter, too, being a composer of operettas. Hajdu studied folk music from Kodály and jazz orchestration from Ránki. Hajdu's name was soon mentioned next to the best-known creators of popular genres by both her contemporaries and the critics of the age. Among others, she worked on the popular music shows of Magyar Televízió (Hungarian Television) and was employed as Hanna Honthy's piano accompanist. Hajdu recorded hundreds of dance songs, revues, and dance suites, as well as fourteen operettas, including those for radio and television broadcasts. Her career is to be explored within the cultural, political, and civilizational contexts of state socialism, thus understanding her work as not only another oeuvre of an operetta composer, but also as a representation of the artistic sentiment of a whole era. During her active years, she had to make compromises which she later interpreted as assertions of herself as a female artist in a male-dominated cultural milieu. After recognizing various narrative patterns in her creations, I aim to discuss Hajdu's career along two of the most prevalent and recurring issues: the “female composer as a sensation” narrative, and the “significance of the master teacher” narrative.

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KEYWORDS

Júlia Hajdu, Hungarian composers, female artists, dance songs, operettas

FOREWORD

Although a reconstruction of the life and career of Júlia Hajdu (1925–1987)¹ Hungarian composer and pianist, is still to be completed as part of an operetta history research, her importance is indisputable not only in the field of Hungarian operetta but also concerning the international development of the artistic genre. Júlia Hajdu was born in Budapest in 1925 (*“Hajdu Júlia,”* 1967), and her career as composer began and blossomed during the era of state socialism. Her significance, apart from the quality of her oeuvre, lies undoubtedly in the fact that Júlia Hajdu was the first female operetta composer of Hungary. I first examine her career along the lines of socialist operetta performance and cultural politics, and after, I aim to focus on the then-contemporary press narrative about Júlia Hajdu’s persona and work. According to the aforementioned contemporary press sources, there were two main narratives about her, the “female composer as a sensation” narrative, and the “significance of the master teacher” narrative.²

INTRODUCTION: HOW DID STATE SOCIALISM CREATE NEW CONDITIONS FOR POPULAR MUSIC AND THE OPERETTA GENRE?

During the first four or five years after the Second World War, marking also the beginning of Júlia Hajdu’s career, there is great effort for recovery, for the reconstruction of buildings, artefacts, plants and infrastructure. At the same time, the entire social atmosphere undergoes changes, with the middle classes beginning to rise and individual desires, more liberated emotions, and ambitions also appearing after the period characterized by fear of war, confinement, and (social) seclusion. The fifties can already be seen to be reflecting on the years before 1949, and Hajdu also becomes a “cultural product” of this era. She is inspired by the liberated and less rigid musical feelings, rhythms, and the entire new melodic world. The years of 1950 and 1951 mark the dividing line between two eras, making it tangible and apparent that something is about to end. In the early 1950s, the ever-accelerating channeling (or more precisely, squeezing) of all the energies that derive from the diversity permeating the previous few years is still taking place, while an ideological struggle, even a fight, begins. This struggle affects the arts, music, acting, while evoking silly, schematic expectations for the “entertainment and education of people,” as the government also seems to be working on the reduction of all arts to these “functions,” both supported effectively by the state sphere.

¹In various sources, her family name can be found as Hajdú or Hajdu. The latter is the official, state-registered version; thus, I shall use that form throughout my present paper.

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The dividing line of the history of operetta is first 1945, and later, as for many other genres, 1949, since the origin and history of operetta (Bozó, 2013) were well-explored before these dates – cultural anthropologist Gyöngyi Heltai also addresses the phenomenon (Heltai, 2012, p. 45). In 1949, therefore, the Budapest Operetta Theatre on Nagymező Street is also lost to the public nationalist takeover. With the help of Margit Gáspár, who is also responsible for “recreating” the origin myth of operetta, the framework of the bourgeois genre in the Monarchy is reframed into a working-class artistic genre.³ In accordance with the aesthetics of social realism, the composers of this period in question write many “tsz” (farmers’ cooperative) operettas, miners’ operettas, as well as film and radio operettas.

When defining the rise of the operetta genre and the career of Júlia Hajdu, the general musical environment and the radio itself are two unneglectable components. The first period of her artistic career is characterized and influenced by pre-war (American) jazz from the 1930s and 1940s, a lot of “real” classical music, as well as “hit” classical music (considered by the community as truly “classical” for decades), Hungarian songs, popular opera arias, French chansons, and Italian and international dance songs. All that Júlia Hajdu learns at an academic level (including folk songs and a more modern style of composing) become equally repressed later, only to eventually have a few years’ fashionable “comeback” at the end of the 1940s and the very beginning of the 1950s. In that regard, it is also significant that Júlia Hajdu’s teachers are Pál Kadosa, Zoltán Kodály, and György Ránki, and she studies orchestration from Kadosa, folk music from Kodály, and jazz orchestration from Ránki. She graduates with honors from the Academy of Music.

However, at that time, the aforementioned social reorganization is still taking place, with new systems of relationships between the various social levels and disintegrating classes – classes of officials and leaders with a rural “sentiment” (all coming from more secluded communities), the rich and those aristocrats who are being forced to part with their former way of life, even the middle and upper classes, and the suddenly growing petty bourgeoisie. Young and middle-aged countrymen and urban workers, or even those leaving these social groups behind can now taste the new sentiments, all while still often seeking refuge in formerly preferred, more simplistic cultural pleasures. This includes visiting the amusement park (the less glorious “reminiscent” of the village fair) or the “presszó” (the coffeehouse is a community space, not the pub or the restaurant). These people often listen to “presszó” hits (coffeehouse hits), old and well-known songs on the radio (even their jazzed-up versions are quite tolerated for a long time), Hungarian songs (as these songs take over the role and cultural “place” of folk songs from the beginning of the 20th century, Pál Jávör and Katalin Karády are the great artistic examples of the phenomenon).

Besides classical music, a series of ingratiating, nostalgic, and/or melodic hits, popular music, and dance music on the radio reflect upon the phenomenon, with their popular, easy-to-remember melodies and rhythms, and rather simple lyrics. In addition to operettas, Hajdu was a great master of this “genre,” too. She gave quite simple, sort of “everyday” titles to her pieces, her best-known song, for instance, was titled “Pest megér egy estét”/*Pest Is Worth a Night* etc. (Sometimes already a title could make a song a hit.)

³See also Gáspár (1963).



The operetta genre is especially triumphant and popular in the countryside, while many comedies and musical performances are written and composed in an escapist spirit. This escape is into the world of stage scenery from the everyday life and the evolving complexity of family and economic difficulties. This aesthetic direction in Hungary is strongly supported by Soviet (Russian-dominated) cultural products (books, illustrations, pictures, films, music, dance, staged “folk” dance performances, etc.). Júlia Hajdu is one of the masters of this musical and atmospheric world, this is her own cultural environment, full of hits, music for stage plays, and operettas. While working immensely, she “grows” together with the radio, and later, with the television, gradually becoming an integral part of both cultural milieus and media forms. (These two inventions and platforms are, in a way, responsible for community-building that also represent a network of relationships for artists.)

SENSATION! – A FEMALE OPERETTA COMPOSER

According to various sources, Júlia Hajdu composes the music of 14 operettas, while others claim this number to be 26. In fact, the list is not complete, thus it is likely that the latter number, 26, is closer to reality. However, it is certain that she composes hundreds of dance songs and film scores (for instance, that of “A szaxofon”/*The Saxophone* – 1961, “Csudapest”/*Wonder-Pest* – 1962, “Májusi körhinta”/*May Carousel* – 1962, “Éjszaka is kézbesítendő”/*To Be Delivered at Night* – 1963). The author is, by no means, at the beginning of her career when, in 1960, she starts composing operettas. The first operetta is the “Füredi komédiások”/*Buskers of Füred* (1959). Its composer being a woman becomes a sensation in the press instantly: “One shivers a little when one reads such a bold title and is struck by the ‘breath of history.’ It is a great thing to be contemporary. We experienced the moment when we delivered something earthly to the moon. The other day, we also witnessed a woman presenting herself as an operetta composer. Based on our conscientious research, we can claim with confidence that there has never been a woman as an operetta composer anywhere in the world. [...] Well, the woman who composed operetta music for the first time in world history, is Júlia Hajdu. The title of her operetta is “Füredi komédiások” and it was staged in Miskolc during Christmastime”⁴ (Szántó, 1960). While sourcing, I considered it important to include Hajdu’s contemporary and fellow female composer, Júlia Majláth (1921–1976) and her career into my research. During the state socialist era, her songs are performed by, for example, Pál Szécsi, Mária Toldy, and Teri Harangozó. Moreover, Majláth, for instance, also wins the Rádó hit contest in 1948 and 1968, and is, just like Júlia Hajdu, a radio star. During the minute research, however, I noted that Júlia Majláth also records an operetta, or more precisely, a smaller-scale radio operetta which premieres on the Rádó in the early 1950s. She studies to be a pianist, yet, after one point, she is unable to continue the career path due to paralysis, thus Majláth becomes a composer (“Majláth Júlia,” 1969). Apparently, this radio operetta is Júlia Majláth’s only operetta, and it was never performed on stage. Since the work in question does not receive considerable professional response, it is understandable that, when Júlia Hajdu becomes a successful operetta composer in 1959, after having written the music for five radio operettas, professionals and the press refer to her as the first Hungarian female operetta composer – and with that, a sensation! She is an operetta

⁴My translation.



composer who writes a proper “grand” operetta with eighteen numbers, a chorus, dance suites, and a finale – and her work is even presented on stage.

Based on her own recollections, it is also apparent that some of her musical pieces are first staged at the Medgyaszay Theatre. The Medgyaszay Theater operated at 10 Jókai Square, where the establishment opened on April 19, 1945, under the name Medgyaszay Stage, with premieres held until May 1949 (Gajdó, 1994). The place should not be confused with the theater of the same name, i.e., the Medgyaszay Theater at 1 Eskü Road, which was open between 1918 and 1919 (Gajdó, 1994). “They staged comedies with my music in the Medgyaszay Theater, and later, in the Vígszínház⁵ in Nagymező Street, yet those were not operettas, just musical comedies,” (Szántó, 1960) states Hajdu.

Additionally, Hajdu is mentioned as the first female hit writer already in 1948, when she wins a dance song competition (“A rádió slágerpályázatának győztesei”, 1948, p. 4) with the Hungarian fox song “Van annak aki el nem issza”/Those Have It, Who Do Not Spend It on Drinking. She is “[t]he first female hit writer. We first read her name only a few weeks ago on playbills and in radio broadcast programme magazines, yet her catchy songs are being sung everywhere now. Júlia Hajdu is not a ‘whistle’ composer – she graduated from the Academy of Music and received her degree as an artist and teacher with honors. Her giddy success story began at the Radio, where Katalin Karády, Anni Kapitány, and György Gozmány sang her songs. She achieved her first stage success at the Medgyaszay Theatre. The song “Száz édes csók”/One Hundred Sweet Kisses from the musical comedy “Váltott lovaggal”/With a Changed Knight has now become a recording box-office sensation. Her latest hit song is “Mexikói lány”/Mexico Girl, which Karády recorded the other day. Hajdu’s first great stage work is going to be the soundtrack of István Békeffi and Stella Aderji’s comedy, “Végzetes menyasszony”/Fatal Bride. Hajdu’s usual copywriter is Károly Kristóf. The young composer orchestrates her own songs, and her greatest pride is that some of her colleagues are already “stealing” from her (“Hajdu Júlia”, 1948).

Yet, her career started much earlier than 1948, as we know from her own recollection that, at the age of twelve, she appeared on the radio with one of her songs, or as she puts it, one of her “ditties.” She also gives an interview about the competition. She is always happy to talk about her former masters, as well as the progress and current stage of her career, but she does not mention her husband very much (something to be noted when mapping Hajdu’s network of relationships). She claims that her love for operetta begins with “Denevér”/The Bat. She is four years old when her parents take him to the theater, and after that, she can perform the “Kacagóaria”/Giggle-aria by heart (“A melódia megálmodója”, 1963).

However, it is also important to note that, even though she is discovered already at the age of twelve, her career as a young professional has a difficult start. Before the public nationalist takeover, publishing companies and the theater sector both operated on a market basis, and most of these were in private hands in 1948, rejecting Júlia Hajdu’s compositions after one another (K.K., 1959). At that time, and in a world dominated by men, she must get by almost

⁵“The building [of Vígszínház], with the exception of a few minor changes, has remained in its original form until the end of WW2. On 6 January 1945, eight ballistic missiles destroyed the cupola and the audience ring. The main walls still stood, and, when looking at the façade from the street, nobody could tell what happened to the interior of the building. The company moved to Radius Movie Theatre at Nagymező Street 22–24., while, with the 1949 public nationalist takeover, the Vígszínház was eliminated” (My translation). *Vígszínház*, n. d.



without professional relationships. Publishing houses do not see potential business in a female composer, thus Júlia Hajdu records her first composition at her own expense. Her career does not have an easy start, although Júlia Hajdu soon realizes the need for “career-management” and a solid network of relationships, as we are going to see. As she gives her reasoning, claiming that “it is not easy for a female composer [...] You must compete with a lot of excellent male musicians. Unfortunately, it is more difficult for female composers to get a script to write music for. Anyway, there is already a ‘libretto misery,’ and I have been waiting in vain for years to be able to use my many numerous pieces (all in a manuscript form now) in a musical production. Composing incidental music is still a dream for the female composer. The movie world: a dead duck. They do not invite female composers there, so there is nothing left but to compose “smaller” pieces, so-called hits. Of course, the existence of the radio is a great help, they sometimes commission a piece for the symphony orchestra or the dance orchestra, and they oftentimes even need a new radio operetta. However, there is an artistic-media field recently that gives female composers more opportunities to assert themselves, especially if they are also performing artists. It is the television. I would like to compose a nice ballad-opera with lots of music, equally nice songs, and choirs. Until that happens, I am to continue the writing of “light” songs, entertaining orchestral pieces, and the accompanying of the artists on the piano” (K.K., 1959).

She does not really reflect on the beginning of her career, when not many articles were about her, while she wrote many of others: “Before she eventually turned to composing, Júlia Hajdu was our colleague, a newspaper reporter with a refined voice, who published a sharp little article about one of the representatives of the artistic life in almost every issue of the daily newspaper “Világ”/World” (“Hajdu Júlia”, 1987, p. 23). “Világ,” a political newspaper was published continuously between 1945 and 1949. Hajdu’s journalistic activity was interrupted in 1949 with the start of her musical career and the discontinuation of the publication of the newspaper.

Nevertheless, her career is enviable: she writes great dancing-singing revues and musical jokes for the television, the music of the film “Csudapest,” the operetta “Doktor kisasszony”/Miss Doctor, the revue “Nem vicc a twiszt”/Twist is No Joke and “Pest megér egy estét”. Her grand operetta, “Füredi komédiások,” was played three hundred and fifty times in the theater – which is an amazing number. After that, she works on the music for the operetta “Majális”/Mayfair, which is about the life of Hungarian painter and fine artist Pál Szinyei Merse. As her first grand operetta has been mentioned again, it is also worth turning to her reception as an artist for a few thoughts, employing the ideas of Julia Hajdu’s co-authors, Elek Kaszó and Miklós Tóth. “The adaptation that was inspired by the heyday of Hungarian theater, telling the life of the “Dunántúli Színjátszó Társaság”/Transdanubian Theater Company, needed its adept author. From the perspective that one occupies after more than a century and a quarter, it is no small task and responsibility to capture and show the essence of the every-days of the despised comedians in feudal Hungary, in a fitting style and manner. In terms of music, libretto, and lyrics, the three authors more or less managed to write an operetta of the otherwise quite rewarding material. Yet, they merely wrote an operetta following the usual path without creating new ones, without somehow breaking away from the framework used by the great operetta composers. The freshness of the theme would definitely have been worth a bolder experimentation. Even if it had been less successful than the usual style of adaptation, which, with its cheerful tone, aimed to memorialize the pioneers of Hungarian acting. However, the intention remained an only intention, and the tale is lost amongst the numerous trimmings and in the situational comedy that is



apparent throughout the play, reflecting the somewhat corny resolution of the romantic subplot” (“A Füredi komédiások”, 1960, p. 6). Similar critical pieces can be found about the play and its performances –as the first Hajdu grand operetta is performed in several theaters and even on open-air stages. At that time, however, dozens of “tsz” and miners’ operettas are also premiering in Hungarian theatres.

THE ATTRACTION OF THE MASTER – TEACHERS, PATRONS, AND THE HUSBAND

Pál Kadosa, Zoltán Kodály, György Ránki as masters, Béla Zerkovitz as patron, István Pajor as husband, all support Júlia Hajdu during her decades-long career. Due to her network of relationships, the development of her career was somewhat determined, and not only in a professional sense. It is worth beginning the examination of this network with Béla Zerkovitz (1881–1948) (*Magyar Színművészeti Lexikon*, 1931, pp. 463–464), since he is considered to be one of the most famous composers of couplets, chansons, and operettas in Hungarian music and theater history. Although he is often called a “whistle” composer during his career, his influence in the days of private theater organizations is indisputable, as “supported” by the mere existence numerous copyright lawsuits. “Béla Zerkovitz, who acted as a propagandist, put me onto my path as a composer of songs...” (Szántó, 1960), as Júlia Hajdu recalls. Thus, she considers the acquaintance a good entry into the world of operetta. Pál Kadosa, Zoltán Kodály, and György Ránki (the latter also a composer of operettas) are important aids of her career as teachers, and later, as colleagues. Sometimes, at state socialist popular music events, Hajdu is in the same program as Ránki, and/or their names appear together in a newspaper article. This is also suggested in an interview announcing the first Hungarian Music Week, organized by the Association of Hungarian Musicians between November 17 and 25, 1951. By the way, during the Music Week, all works were composed and written in the spirit of socialist realism. In the article that was published in “Szabad Szó”/*Free Word*, Júlia Hajdu (among others) expresses her opinion on the current understanding of popular music. As a “beginner,” Júlia Hajdu speaks according to the goals of a socialist cultural-political propagandist. Popular music is a prioritized artistic field in state socialism, since it is a great platform for the youth to be addressed on.

“The direction that we are to follow in dance music today has not yet developed fully. There are various attempts and searches for direction. In our endeavors, the rich dance culture of the Soviet Union, drawing from its folk roots, is of great help to us, thus one of our directions has to be that of the dance song with a folk tone. In the course of these attempts, we may have already made some minor progress. The audience will be able to hear songs in the plenary program that signify some of the stages of this progress. I aimed to use Hungarian-sounding melodies in my dance song. We are focusing on refreshing the genre of the dance song with the joyful, ‘bantering,’ and optimistic tones of folk music to express the *joie de vivre* of our contemporaries” (“Örökké ragyogj ránk, csillagunk szabadságl!”, 1951) – remarks Hajdu.

Perhaps one of the most important “elements” of Hajdu’s network of relationships is the husband, none other than István Pajor, who “on February 20, 1945, is the announcer at the first theater performance after the liberation of Budapest at Magyar Színház” (“Pajor István”, n.d.). This piece of information on Pajor (1902–1973), a professional actor and announcer, can be



found among his biographical data. He marries Júlia Hajdu, who is his third wife, in 1946. Although the couple is favored by the system, Hajdu is still unable to break into the artistic spheres dominated by men (her comments on the closedness of the film industry also reveal this). During the course of her career, however, this network of relationships and the fact that she is presented as sensation in newspaper columns also containing socialist propaganda are perhaps equally important. While fellow professionals appreciate her, the audience knows not only her songs but also her name. She celebrates her 35th anniversary as a composer at Vigadó in Pest, in 1983 (“*Csak a szépre emlékszem.*”, 1983, p. 2). She also works with Hanna Honthy, an influential prima donna, operetta star, and, even as an older actress, an ever-popular diva in the state socialist era. (It is well-known that Miklós Szinetár’s “*Csárdáskirálynő*”/*The Csárdás Princess/The Gypsy Princess* was rewritten because of Honthy, as she plays the leading role of Cecília, Prince Edvin’s mother.) Gaining Honthy’s trust was not facile, though Hajdu eventually managed to do so, and accompanied the prima donna not only at the allies’ countries and on domestic stages but also in the cities of the United States and Canada with large Hungarian population (“*Ez történt még a...*”, 1969, p. 18).

Yet, as a composer of dance and operetta music, apart from articles focusing on her as a sensation, various stages of her career can only be reconstructed partially. The canon of popular music and operetta history also treat the artist with harsh criticism not only in Hungary, but throughout the world, even though she is in accordance with socialist-realist aesthetics (and she also writes a grand operetta as the first female composer).

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