STUDIA UBB MUSICA, LXXI, 1, 2026 (p. 51 – 62)
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI: 10.24193/subbmusica.2026.1.03

GETTING FAMILIAR WITH OPERA IN EARLY ADULTHOOD. PERSPECTIVES OF A CREATIVE WORKSHOP

CSILLA CSÁKÁNY[1]

SUMMARY. This paper investigates how young adults engage with opera, drawing on the author's two decades of experience in university music education. Opera's unique emotional and dramatic power appeals broadly, offering a rich interplay of music, text, and theatrical presentation. Generational differences in music listening are highlighted: Generation X favors concerts, recordings, and traditional media, while Generation Z relies on digital streaming, social media, curated playlists, and interactive experiences. Across generations, repeated exposure—central to the "familiarity heuristic"—enhances emotional and cognitive engagement, as demonstrated through examples from Handel, Bach, and Alban Berg. The study also presents the GlosszA workshop, which introduces participants to opera through historical context, performer studies, and creative exercises. By leveraging the familiarity heuristic, the workshop cultivates interpretive skills, critical awareness, and deeper aesthetic appreciation, enabling young audiences to connect more fully with operatic works while fostering lifelong engagement with the genre.

Keywords: Classical music mediation, Familiarity heuristic, Opera, GlosszA workshop, Musical aesthetics

The encounter with the genre of opera is never indifferent. The intimacy of the genre can trigger strong emotions and feelings - both positive and negative. Why does the genre of opera appeal to so many people - whether they are musically literate or not? Perhaps it is because opera, of all musical genres, arouses the most excitement and passion. Unlike other genres, such as the symphony, the concerto or the sonata, opera did not emerge gradually, but rather, at a crucial point in cultural history, it appeared

[1] *PhD, University Lecturer Professor, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Department of Reformed Theology and Music, Street Horea nr. 7., csilla.csakany@ubbcluj.ro*

in a kind of explosion, as a genre offering a rich repository for the unfolding of the musical-dramatic archetype. And its uniqueness lies in the way it relates to the world, namely by holding up a mirror to the current era.

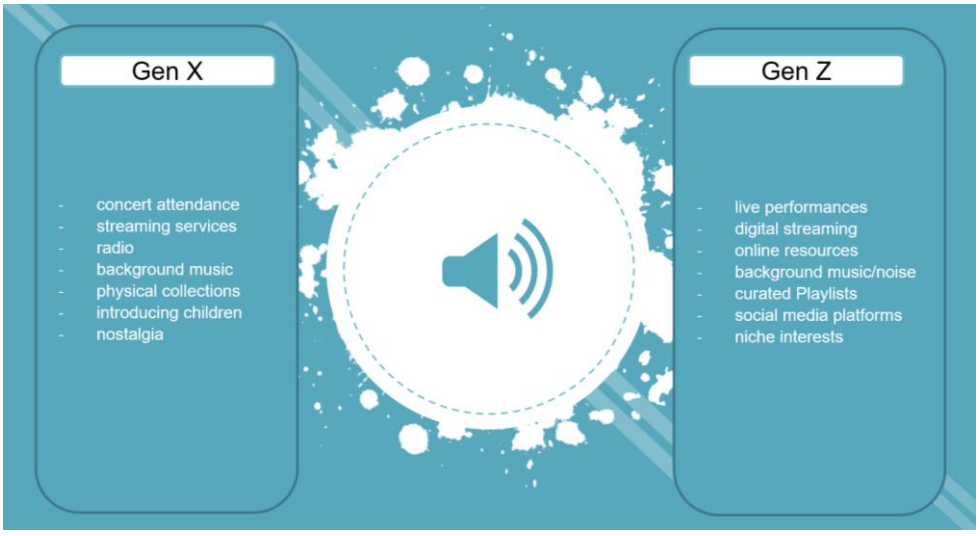
Opera as a genre from the opening of the first public opera house is a mass genre. As with all mass genres, it is more defined by conventions than by those which, by their very nature, appeal to a narrower audience. It is clear that change has repeatedly been forced by the cultural demands of genre lovers, giving rise to so-called reform operas, which have changed the means of expression, a fluid dramaturgy or even a complete change of musical concept. However, these works did not have the expected effect, as the gap between the work and its audience widened. The realization of those activists in the institutionalized system of opera was that, in order to truly move the 'masses', the genre needed a whirling 'circus', with all the frenzy that entailed a complex and varied cavalcade of aural and visual stimuli. Examining the opera-going habits of university students, we found that although the genre is frequented by young adults, there are some aspects that could increase its popularity. In the following we will explore these conceptual problems and assumptions: what is the music listening habits (forms of social and cultural interactions) in early adulthood; what emotional and cultural impact has encountering opera; familiarity gained through multimodal interaction with the genre; what are the goals and methods of the workshop entitled *GlosszA*.

Listening to classical music in early adulthood

Aspects of young adults' music listening habits are described in relation to generational characteristics. Two categories are taken as a starting point: the author, according to her own values, classifies herself as belonging to Generation X, while the other generation to which she juxtaposes these aspects is the generation of students currently in universities, Generation Z. The classical music listening habits of Gen X – depending on personal experiences and cultural influences – are characterized mainly by: concert attendance as special outing or cultural experience; useage of streaming services to access classical music; some still tune in to classical music radio stations especially while driving or working at home; background music while working, studying or relaxing; having physical collections of classical music including vinyl records or CDs. Gen Xers wish to introduce classical music to their children, emphasizing its educational and cultural value and at the same time some may have fond memories of classical music from their youth and continue to enjoy it for nostalgic reasons.

The Z generation's classical music listening habits are based on the preference of digital streaming platform like Spotify, YouTube; they often enjoy classical music that blends with other genres or film soundtracks; they prefer social media platforms: short classical music videos; they resort to curated playlists and recommendations from platforms or influencers to discover classical music, rather than traditional radio or CDs; they attend often to experience the music in a more interactive and communal setting; they resort to classical music courses available for those who want to learn more about the genre; they are characterized by niche interests in specific composers, eras or instruments. Some may have a particular affinity for Baroque Music, Beethoven or for the piano, for example.

Table 1



Intergenerational comparison
(The image was created by the author)

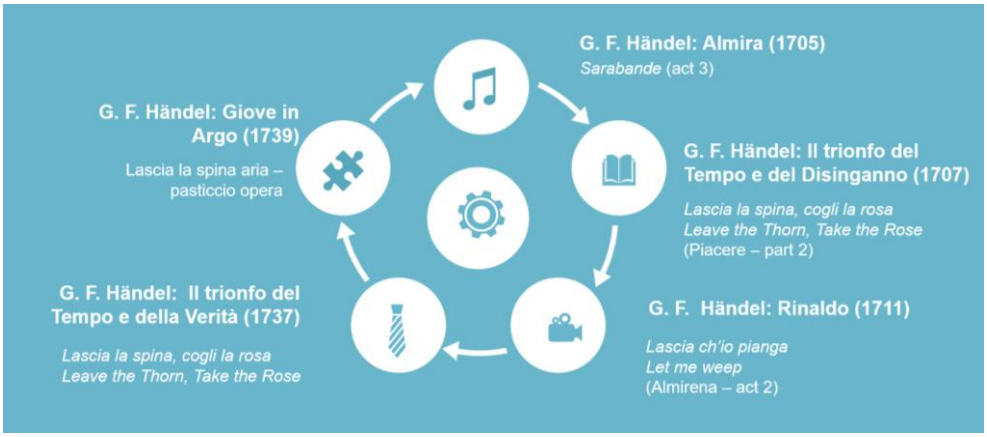
The generationally disaggregated aspects regarding music listening habits certainly converge on one issue: the recognition that repeated exposure to a particular piece of music can enhance the listening experience and the effectiveness of the listening practice[2].

[2] Desblache, Lucile: *Music and Translation New Mediations in the Digital Age*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Familiarity: the effect of repeated exposure to the work of art

Even at an early age, educators noticed that repeated exposition of an audition gave the children a greater pleasure in time. Transposing this idea on listening to classical music, similar results have been formulated by researchers in the field. Operating with familiar melodies was also very effective in pre-recording eras. Many composers from different historical periods beginning from the Baroque era have used this impact-mechanism. Let's just take for example the famous aria from Händel's *Rinaldo*: *Lascia ch'io pianga* (*Let me weep*). The composer completed the score of the opera just a few days after his arrival in England. He could accomplish it only by usage of "ready-made" music for the plot provided by the libretto. He also 'recycled' the aria in question, knowing that its melodic material was perfectly tailored, and perhaps even trusting that there would be people in the audience who had heard it somewhere before. To ensure success, he presented himself in London with a familiar musical score. And success was not lacking.

Table 2



The Journey of a Melody
(The image was created by the author)

As is well known, the aria *Lascia ch'io pianga* (*Let me weep*) has a remarkably long and intricate history. The melody originated from the *Sarabande* in Act III of Händel's *Almira* (1705). Two years later the composer revived the tune in his oratorio *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* (*The Triumph of Time and Disillusion*), this time setting it to the text *Lascia la spina cogli la rosa* (*Leave the Thorn, Take the Rose*) in accordance with the moral message of the work. The melody reached its most famous form in the opera *Rinaldo* (1711).

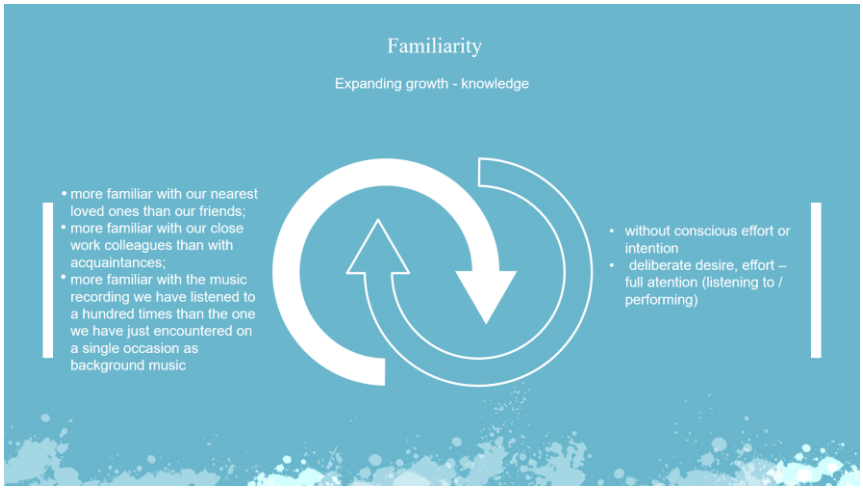
Afterwards, the aria lay dormant for several years during a period of creative rest, until Händel reworked it once again in *Il trionfo del Tempo e della Verità* (*The Triumph of Time and Truth*) in 1737. It resurfaced yet again two years later in the pasticcio opera *Giove in Argo* (*Jupiter in Argos*) in 1739.

Because audiences had already become familiar with the melody, its reappearance consistently elicited delight. Händel clearly understood the evocative power of recognition: by reintroducing a well-loved tune, he created an immediate emotional connection with listeners. This strategic use of musical familiarity functioned almost as a mediating "trick," ensuring that the aria's entrance would have a heightened expressive impact each time it returned.

Familiarity as a key concept in classical music mediation techniques

The familiar resonance of musical passages can awaken countless thoughts and emotions in the listener. It often happens that the very first moments of a film score evoke memories, moods, and even entire stories within us. Musicology scholars Elaine King and Helen M. Prior states that "the notion of *familiarity* is ubiquitous in our lives: it pervades everyday conversations, thoughts and activities. If one is familiar with someone or something, one might be described as being 'well acquainted', 'intimate' or 'close' to it."[3]

Table 3



The development of a sense of familiarity
(The image was created by the author)

[3] *** *Music and Familiarity. Listening, Musicology and Performance* (ed. Elaine King and Helen M. Prior). Ashgate, 2013, 1.

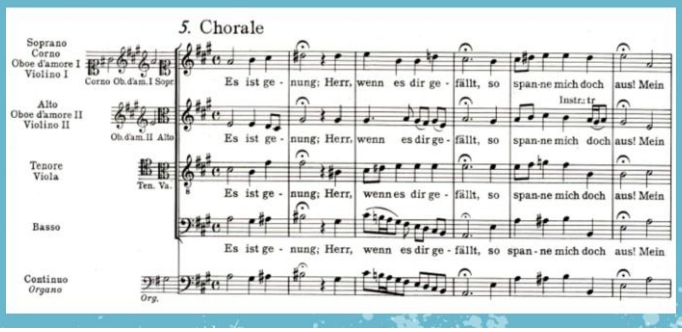
In certain cases, familiarity with a person, object, or phenomenon develops without conscious intention or deliberate effort. In other instances, it can arise a clear desire, intention, or necessity to increase — or conversely, to decrease — the degree of familiarity with a given phenomenon. This dynamic is particularly evident in the context of classical music listening: some works become familiar gradually through repeated encounters, while in other cases we consciously engage in attentive, analytical listening in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the musical material. Naturally, there may be numerous reasons why a listener seeks a greater or lesser degree of familiarity with a musical work; often, however, this pursuit simply stems from the wish to know more — or, at times, less — about the work's musical structure, modes of expression, and aesthetic significance than is afforded by one's prior experience. Our next music example is from the repertoire of violin concertos, but it has an intrinsic textual analogy with a chorale, thus it functions in this context. One of my favorite church cantatas is *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort* (*O eternity, you word of thunder*), BWV 60, a cantata composed by Johann Sebastian Bach. It was composed in 1723, during the first year of his tenure in Leipzig. The work focuses on themes of fear of death, concept of eternity, and the Christian hope of resurrection. The text and musical dramaturgy of the cantata introduce two allegorical figures: Fear (alto voice), representing human existential anxiety and dread of divine judgment, and Hope (tenor voice), embodying consolation, faith, and trust in redemption. The dialogical interplay between these two figures forms the theological and emotional core of the work. The cantata is scored for a relatively rich ensemble, including oboe da caccia, strings, and basso continuo, with the instrumental writing playing a significant role in reinforcing the rhetorical meaning of the text and intensifying its affective content. Formally, the work belongs to Bach's chorale cantata cycle. It opens with a large-scale chorale fantasia, followed by a sequence of recitatives and arias, and concludes with a four-part chorale, thus framing the composition within a clear theological and formal structure that leads the listener from fear toward hope.

The closing part of the cantata is a setting of Franz Joachim Burmeister's chorale *Es ist genug* (*It is enough*). From a musical perspective, the composer resorts to a highly distinctive device — indeed, it is likely that this very procedure drew Johann Sebastian Bach's attention to the chorale melody. The soprano line, set to the words *'Es ist genug'* (*It is enough*), consists of an ascending motion built from successive major seconds, ultimately forming an augmented fourth. This melodic formula was known as *diabolus in musica* and was employed only rarely, typically in rhetorically significant contexts. Within this textual framework, the intervallic gesture most likely symbolizes transformation or passage — specifically, the transition from life to death.

Table 4

Es ist genug!
Herr, wenn es Dir gefällt, so spanne mich doch aus!
Mein Jesus kommt:
Nun gute Nacht, o Welt! Ich fahr ins Himmels Haus,
ich fahre sicher hin im Frieden,
mein großer Jammer bleibt darnieden.
|: Es ist genug! :|

It's enough! Lord, if it pleases you, unchain me!
My Jesus is coming:
Good night, O world! I'm going to heaven's house,
I'm going safely in peace,
my great sorrow remains there.
|: It's enough! :|



Franz Joachim Burmeister's chorale Es ist genug (It is enough)
(The image was created by the author)

I assume that this cantata is well known to music lovers around the world. The same is true regarding Alban Berg's knowledge of music literature. In his *Violin Concerto* of 1935 – perhaps his most frequently performed work – Berg evokes the chorale in a way that creates a profoundly heart-wrenching effect. Thanks to the familiar melody – this subtle "familiarity trick" – the concerto immediately acquires greater emotional depth and a striking new perspective.

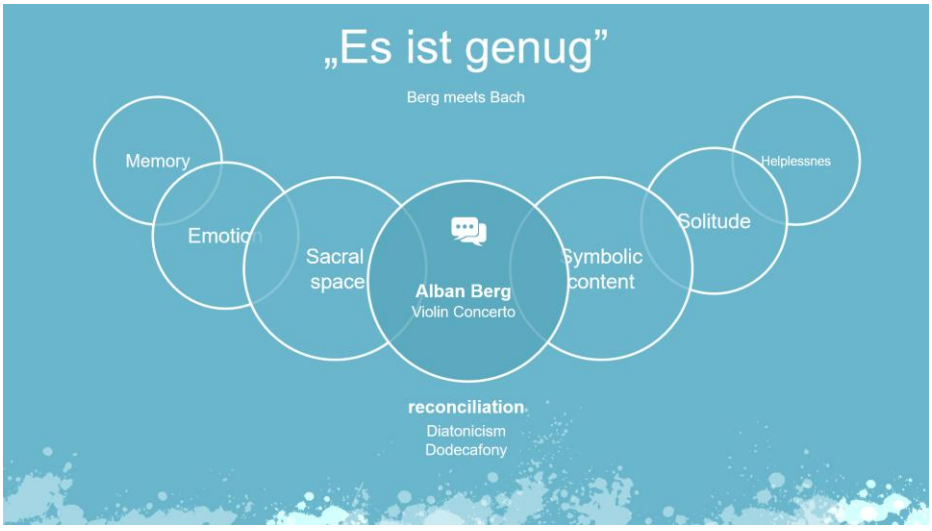
The violin concerto was commissioned by Louis Krasner, and the composer dedicated the work in memory of Manon Gropius, the daughter of Alma Mahler, who had passed away. Manon was the daughter of architect Walter Gropius and Alma Mahler, and a beloved figure in Viennese artistic circles. Exceptionally graceful and gifted, she died tragically at the age of eighteen from polio – a loss that deeply moved Berg and became the emotional impetus for the concerto. Berg was working on the opera *Lulu* when he accepted the commission to compose the *Violin Concerto*. He could not have known at the time that this work would become his last completed composition — a veritable double swan song. In a letter written in mid-August 1935 at the Waldhaus am Wörthersee, he noted that, despite having looked forward to the sense of liberation he expected upon completing the concerto, "some insect" had bitten him in the lower part of his spine[4]. In December of

[4] ***Alban Berg. Írások, levelek, dokumentumok* (*Alban Berg: Writings, Letters, Documents*). Translated by: Péter Várnai. Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1965, p. 111.

that year, this led to septicemia, and on the 24th the composer passed away. The traces of the terrible pain he had endured for months had vanished from his face, and the death mask taken the following morning by Anna Mahler, daughter of Gustav Mahler, presents an image of a “healed” countenance.

The concerto consists of two movements: the first, marked Lento – Allegro moderato, is followed without pause by the second, Adagio, which concludes with a chorale-like ending. Structurally, the lyrical expressiveness of the violin and the richly contrasting orchestral textures engage in a constant dialogue, symbolizing Berg’s personal grief and the themes of life’s transience. In terms of its message, the concerto serves as an expression of remembrance and mourning: the solo violin often appears as an intimate, introspective voice, while the orchestra gradually unfolds dramatic tension and lyrical depth. The work is remarkable in that it combines the traditional form of the classical violin concerto with 20th-century atonal and twelve-tone techniques, creating a profound vehicle for emotional expression.

Table 5



Symbolic and emotional content mediated by heuristic familiarity (The image was created by the author)

When Alban Berg incorporates the Bach chorale into his *Violin Concerto*, he essentially externalizes his own sense of helplessness, transforming it into a cry that soars into a sacred space. The chorale elevates this appeal toward God (*Es ist genug – it is enough*) while simultaneously entrusting his fate into divine hands (*Wenn es dir gefällt – when you wish*). Its symbolic

content is rendered through the timbre of the woodwinds, resonating beneath the violin's solitary lament. We recognize the chorale, yet it emerges as if from a distant memory – familiar, but at the same time imbued with the weight of solitude and profound emotion.

In the study of mediation techniques, experts often draw our attention to a phenomenon known as the "familiarity heuristic". This principle facilitates the pleasure of sudden recognition or the "eureka" moment, a device that composers frequently employ at key moments in their works. The technique appears widely in 20th-century opera as well. For instance, the Transylvanian composer Ede Terényi referred to the evocation of earlier musical styles as "music of affection." Contemporary opera composers such as György Selmeczi, Levente Gyöngyösi, and Dávid Mester similarly enjoy "playing" with stylistic gestures that evoke past eras. By harnessing the power of familiarity, they are able to more readily elicit that moment of recognition and delight in their audiences. This phenomenon allows someone to approach a problem or situation based on their prior experience with a similar context, guiding them to act as they did before. In musical terms, composers exploit this principle to create moments of instant recognition for the listener: when a familiar melodic or stylistic gesture appears, the audience can immediately connect with it, experiencing a flash of insight or delight – a musical "eureka". By skillfully integrating elements of past musical styles or familiar motifs, 20th-century opera composers enhance this effect, turning stylistic familiarity into a tool for emotional and cognitive engagement.

Encountering Opera. Difficulties, benefits of the genre

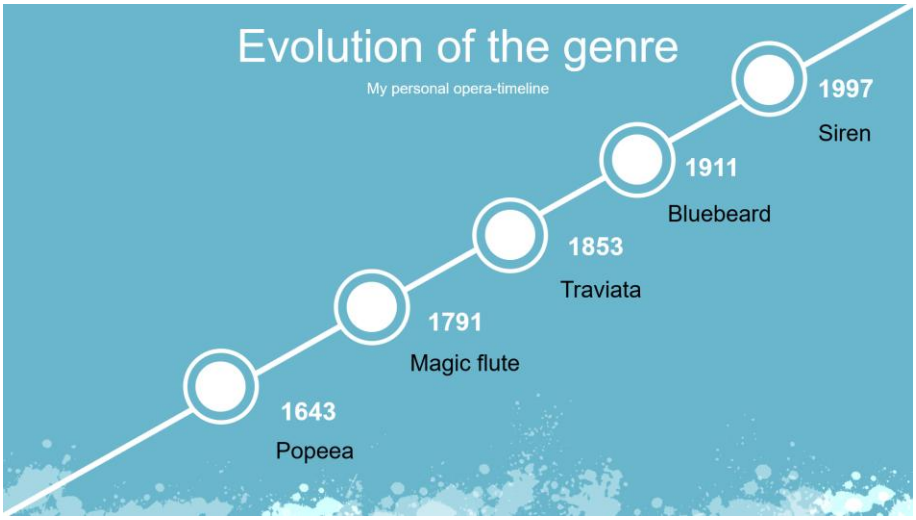
Many questions arise when we engage in the genre of opera. Should it be considered elitist or popular? Is it primarily a social or a cultural interaction? Does its reception depend on the audience's education and familiarity with musical taste? Are well-loved masterpieces more important, or should rarities also be valued? What matters most: the score, the libretto, or the visual dimension of the production?

I share Hegel's perspective: *the truth is the whole*. In other words, the meaning of an opera emerges not from any single element in isolation, but from the dynamic interplay of music, text, and theatrical presentation. This holistic approach reminds us that understanding and appreciating opera requires attention to the complex synthesis of all its components — a synthesis that can evoke profound emotional and intellectual responses in the audience.

Once someone has been captivated by the world of opera, they gradually develop a personal list of favorites. They return again and again to the arias, duets, and trios of these works, as well as their orchestral and

choral passages, intermezzos, preludes, and finales. Mine, organized roughly in chronological order from a music-historical perspective, includes the following.

Table 6



A personal timeline of operatic experiences
(The image was created by the author)

In 1643, Monteverdi's *Poppea* marked a turning point in early opera, blending expressive recitative with rich orchestration to dramatize the passions and intrigues of its historical characters. In 1791, Mozart's *The Magic Flute* combined enchanting melodies with symbolic storytelling, creating a work that is at once accessible, profoundly moral, and visually imaginative, reflecting both popular and Enlightenment ideals. Verdi's *La Traviata* of 1853 captures the intensity of Romantic opera, focusing on human emotion and societal constraints, while elevating the intimate drama of its tragic heroine through unforgettable melodic writing. In 1911, Bartók pushed the boundaries of operatic language, incorporating folk influences, modal harmonies, and rhythmic complexity to create a sound world that was both modern and deeply rooted in cultural identity. Finally, in 1997, Selmeczi's *Szirén* demonstrates the continued evolution of the genre, blending contemporary musical language with historical references, and exploring both personal and collective narratives in a way that speaks to today's audiences.

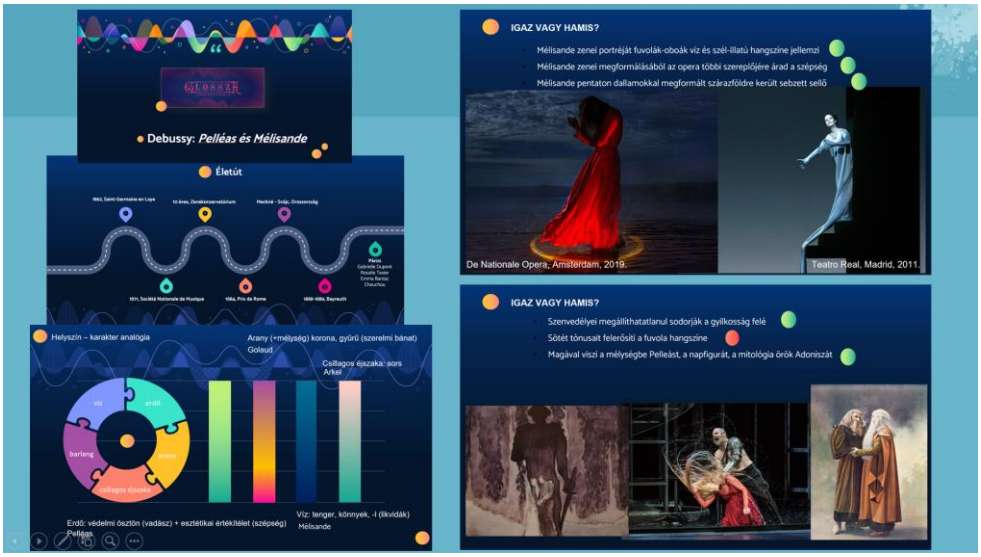
In recent years, I have sought to share my love of opera through mediation sessions in the form of interactive presentations. I hoped that by

offering audiences an insight into individual performances, they would find it much easier to engage with the work and communicate with the performers. Following the idea of initiating participants into the experience of the work itself, the *Glossza* workshop was conceived, hosted by the Hungarian Opera of Cluj.

The Framework of GlosszA[5] in the Practice of 'Familiarity'

The workshop takes its name from the word *glossa*, which means a *marginal note*, a *brief comment (annotation)*, or an *explanation*. Gloss(a) in latin is a brief explanatory note or comment added to a text, often in the margins, intended to clarify, interpret, or provide additional information about the main text.

Table 7



Examples from the workshop's instructional component
(The image was created by the author)

During the workshop, participants become acquainted with the work itself and learn about the era and the spirit of the time (*zeitgeist*). They get to know outstanding performers, including singers and prototypes of emblematic roles, and confront contemporary press coverage of the pieces. Participants

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBjW-5PPEMI

experiment with creative auditory and visual associations and engage in the analysis of finding the right words to interpret an opera and form their own opinions about the works they hear.

The main goal of the workshop is awareness-raising through various topics. These include exploring the methods used in opera, the genealogy of a single work (such as the symbolic features in Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*), the deliberate infringement of operatic rules (as in Debussy's *Pelléas and Mélisande*), uncovering facts and mysteries surrounding the creation of a work (for example, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*), and examining heroes and antiheroes as archetypes on the opera stage.

Overall, the workshop fosters critical awareness and interpretative competence by combining historical context, analytical listening, and creative reflection, while employing the mediation technique of familiarity in order to enhance future listening experiences and enable opera performances to generate deeper aesthetic pleasure for participants.

REFERENCES

***_Alban Berg. Írások, levelek, dokumentumok_ (Alban Berg: Writings, Letters, Documents). Translated by: Péter Várnai. Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1965.

*** *Music and familiarity. Listening, musicology and performance* (ed. Elaine King and Helen M. Prior), Ashgate, 2013.

*** *Musicians and their Audiences. Performance, Speech and Mediation* (ed. Ioannis Tsioulakis & Elina Hytönen-Ng), Routledge, 2016.

*** Várnai Péter (ed.): *Miért szép századunk operája? (*Why Is Our Century's Opera Beautiful?) Gondolat, Budapest, 1979.

Batta András. *Opera*. Vince Press, Budapest, 2006.

Cairns, David. *Mozart és operái* (*Mozart and His Operas*). Park Press, Budapest, 2008.

Csákány Csilla. *Az opera ma. Séte az opera stílus- és műfajtörténeti dialektikájában* (*Opera Today: The Dialectics of Style and Genre in Opera History*). Korunk, 2020/1. 36-47.

Desblache, Lucile. *Music and Translation New Mediations in the Digital Age*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Hennion, Antoine. *The Passion for Music. A Sociology of Mediation*. Routledge, 2020.

Pettitt, Stephen: *Opera*. Képzőművészeti Press, 2007.