

THE SOPRANO VOICE TYPE AND ITS IMPORTANCE WITHIN THE OPERETTA GENRE

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SUMMARY. This hereby study has two main parts, uneven in length. In the first part we have attempted to classify the types of voices within the genre of operetta, while detailing their functional aspects, focusing on the analysis of the use of the soprano voice for the roles of *prima donna* and *grande dame*. In our second part, we have presented the main female roles of the 14 operettas that we will analyze within our doctoral research, classified from the standpoint of their authors. We have also added some interesting facts concerning the great Hungarian operetta composers, as well as mentioned famous performers who portrayed the main roles of these operettas during the time they were performed.

Keywords: prima donna, grande dame, lyrical soprano, spinto soprano

1.1. Operetta and its Voice Types

Even after a relatively superficial glance at the types of voices used most frequently in the genre of operetta, we can clearly observe that this genre has also its favorite voices, which are usually associated with well-defined characters. Thus, the main female roles (i.e. those of the *prima donna* and *grande dame*, around which the entire work is structured) are written exclusively for sopranos. The protagonists of the second line of female singers are also sopranos. This particular type of voice is called a *soubrette*, and it's characterized by a light voice, and has a particularly sprightly stage presence, ensuring the audience has a good time throughout the performance. The mezzo-sopranos and altos appear more rarely in operettas, and they often portray either character roles and antagonists, or older figures. The same

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applies to the use of men's voices in operettas. The lead male roles are written exclusively for tenors, and the love interest of the *soubrette*, who is usually a good dancer and a comical character, belongs to the same voice type of tenor (*buffo*). Baritones usually play older or negative characters, and basses, which are the rarest roles, portray character roles, not unlike their alto counterparts.

1.1.1. The Soprano Voice Type in Prima Donna Roles

Although at first glance it seems to be a lighter, easier genre, singing in an operetta requires the same level of skill and professionalism as the ones expected from operatic artists. And the *prima donna*, the first lady, who is at the heart of the operetta's plot, must be a highly skilled soprano with exceptional training. The most successful soloists cast in *prima donna* roles are lyrical sopranos, belonging to a subcategory of the soprano voices, characterized by a soft and smooth vocal consistency. The representatives of this vocal genre are endowed with short, narrow vocal cords. Their voice is flexible and highly expressive. They can easily and effortlessly approach even the piano passages written in the high register. There are also *prima donna* roles in which *spinto* sopranos are best suited, for instance: Countess Maritza's Maritza, The Circus Princess' Fedora, The Merry Widow's Hanna Glavari or Prince Bob's Victoria. Their vocal range is richer, especially in the lower registers, and their voice is stronger. Casting lyrical sopranos in such roles is not beneficial as it leads to the straining of the vocal apparatus.² Generally, for the *prima donna* roles in operettas, ones needs singers who have a good command of the *bel canto* vocal technique, have the ability to highlight the appealing elements of their arias, and have a proper diction. This latter requirement is necessary for two reasons: 1. often the text of the arias, duets and ensembles is a component part of the dramatic text; 2, most of the arias and songs featured in operettas later became very popular melodies sung by music lovers everywhere, therefore, their text had to be enunciated correctly, and clearly. (In many cases this requirement is disregarded because some female artists have a superficial approach to the lyrics, being exclusively concerned with the sound of their own voices. The end result is a dull interpretation that does not emphasize the characteristic features of the work's dramaturgical layer, and fails to capture the attention of the public.) And in terms of the vocal qualities and technique required, we can safely state that the fragments included in the operettas of the elite composers of the genre often have a musical complexity that rivals

² Kerényi, Miklós György, *Az éneklés művészete és pedagógiája (The Art and Pedagogy of Singing)*. Magyar Világ Kiadó, Budapest, 1998. p. 74.

that of operatic arias. Interpreting them with the ease and serenity that are specific to the content of these works requires a superior mastery of the score and the vocal technique. There are numerous examples of such high caliber *prima donne* in the history of the Hungarian operetta: at the end of the 19th century the most notable sopranos of the genre in the country's provinces were: Laura Réthi, Lenke Spányi, Janka Dévai, Liszka Melles; followed by their successors at the beginning of the 20th century: Blanka Anday, Irén Balla Csík, Jolán Baranyai, Ilona Ruzsinszky, Irén Székely.³ And in Budapest, the biggest stars of the genre who delighted audiences were: Lujza Blaha, Sári Fedák and Hanna Honthy.⁴

1.1.2. The Voice Types of the Grande Dame Roles

For these roles, *spinto* sopranos are preferred, such as Ilona from *Gypsy Love*, Anna Pavlovna from *Szibill*, Cecilia from *Die Csárdásfürstin*, and La Tangolita from *Ball at the Savoy*. These are female characters that are passed their youth, who, due to their position in society or their life experience, play a decisive role in creating and resolving the conflicts that generate the dramatic situations depicted in the operetta. Given the nature of these roles, portraying a *grande dame* requires a more determined and stout presence as compared to the *prima donna*, hence it needs a fuller sounding voice in the middle and lower registers. Whereas *prima donnas* are naturally guided by their rich score through the plot of the performance, those in *grande dame* roles are often part of contradictory situations, where they alternately appear either in a negative hypostasis, or in one in which they save the day. For this reason, the protagonists of *grande dame* roles must be good performers with a rich stage experience.

³ Festetics, Andor, *A vidéki színészet rendezése (Ogmizing the Provincial Theatre)*. In: Magyar művészeti almanach (Hungarian Art Almanach), edited by Dr. Henrik Incze. Bp., 1904. p. 123.

⁴ Gál, György Sándor, *Operettek könyve (The Book of Operettas)*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1976, p. 241.

1.2. The Lead Female Roles in the Works of Viennese Operetta Composers of Hungarian Origin



Jenő Huszka (1875-1960) - was a longevous composer, who in 1902 set the stage for successful Hungarian operetta composers. He studied music and law at the same time, reaching a high degree of qualification in both fields. Hence, he is employed within the Ministry of Culture, where he meets Ferenc Martos. Alongside Martos, he conceives and finishes his first successful operetta, followed by a four decade long triumphant career.

Prince Bob - in this operetta, we are surprised to find not one, but two *prima donne*: Princess Victoria and young Annie, while the role of *grande dame* (that of the Queen's) is a speaking part. However, the duality of female voices works, as the character of Annie, a young girl, has a score that lends itself to a lyric-leggiero soprano and her rival, Princess Victoria, who is a slightly more negative character, is more suitable for a *spinto* soprano. At the world premiere of Prince Bob, which took place at the Népszínház in Budapest on December 20, 1902, Annie's role was portrayed by Gizella Ledofszky, while that of the leading man – Prince Bob – was entrusted - surprisingly - to another soprano who was an emerging star at that time, Sári Fedák.⁵

Gül baba - in this romantic story there is only one female role, that of Leila, who is the main female protagonist, the *prima donna*. The other five roles of the piece (as the rest are spoken roles) illustrate the use of male voices in operettas: the scribe Gábor is the leading man, hence, a tenor, Gül baba, Leila's father – an elderly man - is a baritone, pasha Kucsuk – the negative character – is a bass, the gypsy Muiko – a character role - is a baritone, and Zulficar, the chief eunuch is a tenor buffo. It is obvious, that all these male characters revolve around the young and beautiful Leila. This role was first performed at the Király Színház in Budapest on December 9, 1905 by Lenke Szentgyörgyi, a virtually unknown singer at the time, but who was brilliant on the stage and had a major contribution to achieving the great success of the world premiere.

⁵ Winkler, Gábor, *Operett – Szubjektív kalauz egy varázslatos világban (The Operetta – A Subjective Guide into a Magical World)*, Tudomány Kiadó, Budapesta, 2013, p. 387.



Ferenc Lehár (1870-1948) - was the son of a military conductor, who studied music at the Prague Conservatory and served for 12 years (same as his father) in the Austro-Hungarian army. During this time he gained extensive experience concerning the music of the peoples living in the monarchy. Beginning with *The Merry Widow*, he has achieved many great successes with his works, and has become one of the most appreciated operetta composers in Europe. He became acquainted with Giacomo Puccini, the genius of the 20th century Italian opera, who in one of his letters, expressed his appreciation for him: If Lehár had dedicated his life to the operatic genre, he would have been a serious contender of his.

The Merry Widow - the operetta that was one of Lehár's greatest successes, features a large number of singing roles, of which five are female: four sopranos and a mezzo-soprano. Among them, the *prima donna*, Hanna Glavary - the young, rich and very beautiful widow -, stands out. At the world premiere of the piece that took place at the Theater an der Wien on December 30, 1905 this glamorous character was successfully portrayed Mizzi Günther, who, together with her partner, Louis Treumann as the leading man, managed to convince an initially skeptical audience that Lehár's operetta is a work that deserves to be seen and heard. Later, the work was successful produces on several European stages, and numerous recordings of the operetta were made, featuring famous *prima donne*, such as: Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (1953 and 1963), Cheryl Studer (1994), Pamela Coburn (1997) and Margarita de Arellano (2004).

The Count of Luxembourg - is another successful work of the composer, which has been labeled by the critics of the time as an "erotic operetta". Not by accident, for the female protagonist, Angèle, a Parisian *prima donna* is a particularly beautiful woman, with the entire plot revolving around her character. From a vocal point of view, the role has no other competition, it is joined only a supporting role sung by a *leggiero* soprano (*soubrette*), and a mezzo-soprano (in some casts sung by an alto) in a character role. At the world premiere of the work, which took place on November 12, 1909 at Theater an der Wien, the role of the *prima donna* was played by Annie von Ligety. This operetta has also endured the test of time and still feature today in the repertoire of musical theaters, and has been recorded by leading performers, such as: Zsuzsa Petress (1964), Lucia Popp (1968), Gesa Hoppe (2005) and Juliane Banse (2005).

Gypsy Love – the vagueness of the plot of the operetta mirrors the clarity of the relationship between two main female protagonists. The young Zorica is the *prima donna* of the work, and she is endowed with a much

more serious musical score than one can find in most operettas. The portrayal of the role, which includes several dramatic moments, calls for a stronger, more powerful voice than that of a lyrical soprano, hence, it is a *prima donna* role that requires a *spinto* soprano. At the same time, for the role of *grande dame* a much lighter type of music had been written, one that can also be sung by a lyrical soprano. Consequently, we can observe, that in the works of the great operetta composers, the use of vocal types designed for the main female roles can be reversed. At the world premiere of the work, which took place on January 8, 1910 at the Carltheater in Vienna, the *prima donna* role (Zorica) was performed by Grete Holm, the star of Theater an der Wien, while Mizzie Zwerenz, the audience favorite portrayed the role of the *grande dame* (Ilona). Since this work is a most beloved piece within the operetta repertoire, it has endured over time, as it still present today in its different forms. Famous recordings of the work feature distinguished performers, such as: Esther Rethy (1950), Erzsébet Házy (1965), and Johanna Stojkovic - Dagmar Schellenberger) (2003).⁶

The Land of Smiles - in this exotic themed operetta, the character of Lisa, the *prima donna*, is a classic lyrical soprano role, and its luster being dimmed by Mi, the *soubrette* role, who acts as the protector of the main heroine. Lisa's role, as well as that of the leading man, Sou-Chong, need vocal and musical skills close to those required for serious operatic roles. Although we have no data concerning the cast of the work's world premiere that took place on 10 October, 1929 at the Metropol-Theater in Berlin, we know who the protagonists of the first cinematic version of the operetta were: for the 1930 adaptation, the main roles were portrayed by Mary Loseff and Richard Tauber, while for the 1952 version Martha Eggert and Jan Kiepura – a star singing couple - took on the roles. In the first Hungarian recordings of the piece, Lisa's role was sung by Júlia Osváth and Erzsébet Házy. Other notable recordings were made by artists, such as: Anneliese Rothenberger (1967), Valerie Goodall (1967) and Birgit Pitsch-Sarata (1973).⁷

Giuditta - if in the case of *The Land of Smiles* the main roles require voices that are close or similar to those used in operas, in this case, the roles of Giuditta and Octavio can be portrayed only by artists that have solid opera singing skills. Even the secondary pair of the roles, Pierrino and Anita, may be too difficult for most operetta singers. Concerning the cast of the world premiere of the work, we know that it took place on January 20, 1934 at the Staatsoper in Vienna, and that Octavio's role was played by Lehár's

⁶ Németh, Amadé, *A Magyar operett története (The History of the Hungarian Operetta)*, Anno Kiadó, 2002, p. 47-48.

⁷ Gál, György Sándor, *Operettek könyve (The Book of Operettas)*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1976, p. 424-425.

favorite tenor, Richard Tauber. At the Budapest premiere that occurred in April of the same year, the composer was the one who also conducted the work, while the cast was made up of Rózsi Walter and László Szűcs. Subsequently, several recordings featuring famous artists were made: Jarmia Ksirova (1944), Edda Moser (1990) and Natalia Ushakova (2002).⁸



Albert Szirmai (1880-1967) – He has been preparing for a career as a musician since his early childhood; at the Budapest Academy of Music he has had as colleagues Zoltán Kodály and Leó Weiner. After the success brought on by his first works, he became friends with the writer Andor Gábor, with whom he conceived the most famous operetta of his oeuvre, Mickey Magnate. Ten years later, Szirmai emigrates to New York, where he becomes one of the most prominent figures of American music.

Magnate Miska - is a hilarious musical comedy, in which the title character is part of the comedy duo Miska and Marcsa. The real protagonists are Countess Rolla and her love interest of modest origin, Baracs. Rolla is a *prima donna*, with a score composed for a lyric-leggiero soprano, while Baracs is also a leggiero tenor. Other roles are: a *soubrette* (Marcsa), three buffo tenors (Miska, Pixi and Mixi) and a buffo bass-bariton (count Korláth). At the world premiere of the piece, which took place on February 12, 1916, at Királyszínház in Budapest, the role of the *prima donna* was portrayed by the highly esteemed Juci Lábass. Nonetheless, according to the music critics of the time, what mad the production a resounding success was the comical couple Miska and Marcsa, portrayed by two stars of the stage in that period, namely Márton Rátkai and Sári Fedák.⁹



Imre Kálmán (1882-1953) is one of the greatest operetta composers of the early 20th century. His life journey started in the house of a merchant from the small Hungarian town of Siófok, and continued through Budapest, Wien, Bad Ischl, New York and Hollywood, from where, towards the end of his life, he triumphantly and gloriously returned to Europe. He was a good friend of Béla Bartók, Viktor Jacobi, Albert Szirmai, Jenő Ormándy and the writer Ferenc Molnár. He died in Paris in 1953, and he was buried in Vienna, in the vicinity of Beethoven, Brahms and Mozart.

⁸ Winkler, Gábor, *Operett – Szubjektív kalauz egy varázslatos világban (The Operetta – A Subjective Guide into a Magical World)*, Tudomány Kiadó, Budapest, 2013, p. 759.

⁹ Gál, György Sándor, *op.cit.*, pp. 309-310.

Die Csárdásfürstin - as one of the greatest successes of the composer, the work features a classic dichotomy between the *prima donna* and *grande dame*. Sylva is a leading role, whose score is not particularly difficult for a lyrical soprano, while the *grande dame* role, Anhilte, is rather a speaking part, having only two songs to sing for the spinto soprano – one at the end of act one, while the other, near the end of the operetta. The *grande dame* facet of the role is given by Anhilte's dominant personality. What we know of the world premiere of the work – which took place on November 17, 1915, at the Johann Strauss-Theater in Vienna – is that the role of the leading man was played by the darling of operetta audiences of the time, Josef König. At the Budapest premiere that took place the following year, however, the role of the *prima donna* was entrusted to Emmi B. Kosáry, while Paula Bors sang the role of the *grande dame*. Seeing that it was one of the most successful operettas of the composer, there were many recordings made subsequently, featuring illustrious representatives of the musical theatre: Marika Németh - Hanna Honthy (1963), Erzsébet Házy (1968), Anneliese Rothenberg (1971) and Mónika Fischl - Zsuzsa Kovács (2005).¹⁰

Die Bajadere - the main female character of this operetta is Odette, a renowned Parisian actress who plays the role of the *prima donna* in the play "Die Bajadere" (play within a play). This role is mainly portrayed by lyrical coloratura sopranos, because in the first part of the work, she sings an aria written for a high register, with small coloratura ornaments, its range reaching C6, followed by Kálmán's hallmark of difficult duet and ensemble finales. This work also features the two soprano *soubrettes*, Marietta and Simone, who enrich the plot with humorous scenes and highly expressive dance numbers. At the Budapest premiere of the operetta, which took place on December 10, 1922 at Király Színház, a great rivalry emerged between star Sári Fedák, the lead female protagonist and a younger Hanna Honthy, portraying Marietta. In the second half of the century, as well as after 2000, several recordings of the operetta were made, featuring great artists: Maria König (1964) and Erika Miklósa (2009).¹¹

Countess Maritza – Maritza herself is the *prima donna* in this operetta, having a rich score, requiring a high level of vocal prowess. It is a complex role filled with dramatic moments, the melodic lines of the arias and the duets are highly sensitive and expressive. The role is usually sung by *spinto* or dramatic sopranos with a vast stage experience. Since there are a great variety of emotional states within the role, the artist must also possess an appropriate amount of life experience. At the Budapest premiere of the work,

¹⁰ Gänzl, Kurt, *The Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre*, Schirmer Books, 1994.

¹¹ Brockhaus Riemann Zenei Lexikon (Brockhaus Riemann Music Lexicon), Budapest, 1985, vol. II., p. 260.

on October 18, 1924, Maritza's role was played by Juci Lábass. After more than four decades following its Budapest premiere, recordings of the work began to appear by valuable performers: Marika Németh (1965), Anneliese Rothenberger (1971) and Katalin Pitti (1994).¹²

Die Zirkusprinzessin - in this case we have a *prima donna*, who would seem to comprise all the features of the two leading female roles: she is a lyrical-spinto soprano, which has a very melodic, pleasant score, spliced with more dramatic sequences as well. Her way of being stems from the very condition of the character: she is a widowed princess, a member of high society, but is still young and in love with a man of similarly noble origin, and who - as a punishment for his love - becomes a circus artist. The drama of the two is expressed in Kálmán's music with a high level of plasticity, Fedja (aka Mister X), also having dramatic moments himself. Considering that Fedora is a heroine who secretly experiences the greatest love of her life in secret, her role must be portrayed in a more reserved manner, playing her in a less open way than other *prima donne*, such as Sylva or Maritza. The world premiere of the operetta at Theater an der Wien on 26 March 1926 was a resounding success, followed by more than 300 performances of its kind. In less than six months, the Budapest premiere of the piece followed, starring Juci Lábass as Fedora and Tibor Halmay in the role of Mister X. Over half a century later, a recording of the operetta was made with Erzsébet Házy, and another one with Zsuzsa Kalocsai, in 1996.¹³



Pál Ábrahám (1892-1960) - was one of the most famous and appreciated Hungarian operetta composers in the interwar period. He was a prodigy, composing a mass at only 8 years of age. At age 17, he already was a student at the Academy of Music in Budapest, but, due to his insistent father, he also enrolled at the Academy of Commerce, attending his music classes in secret. After earning both of his degrees, he worked as a stock broker until 1927. That year he switched to the world of music, becoming a conductor and operetta composer. His first success came in 1930, when he has already been living in Berlin. The librettos and lyrics written for his operettas entitled *Victoria* and *Her Hussar*, *The Flower of Hawaii* and *Ball at the Savoy* were written by Alfred Grünwald and Fritz Löhner-Breda. Due to the unfavorable political climate, he emigrates to America, where he no longer receives the appreciation he deserved.

¹² Németh, Amadé, *op.cit.*, pp. 74-75.

¹³ Winkler, Gábor, *op.cit.*, pp. 542-547.

Victoria and Her Hussar - here we have a *prima donna* written for a lyrical soprano voice, with expressive melodies, well-known arias and duets. She is a highly sensitive character, who struggles with the love of two men, as she has to conceal her feelings. The leading man of the operetta is a diametrically opposed character, who expresses his feelings with the utmost sincerity. Also featured in the work, are two *soubrette*-tenor buffo pairs, characters that provide the comedic moments of the operetta, and without whom we would be surely watching a true melodrama. Nevertheless, the character of Victoria remains the play's focus point, with her the role she plays in moving along the narrative, and by way of her contradictory feelings, like sadness, honest episodes revealing her inner struggles, or that of her happiness for the final outcome. The world premiere of the operetta took place in Budapest on February 21, 1930 at Király Színház, to great public success. The role of the *prima donna* was portrayed by Juci Lábass. After two decades, the first recordings emerge, with Gitta Lind (1951), Margit Schramm (1965) and later on with Zsuzsa Kalocsai (1992).¹⁴

Ball at the Savoy – this is the story that showcases, perhaps in the most telling way, the parallel between the *prima donna* Madeleine and her counterpart, La Tangolita, who is a true *grande dame*. Actually, we are talking about two parallel worlds: on the one hand, we have Countess Madeleine, a young woman devoted to her family, caught in the whirl of a game of apparent infidelity and jealousy, and on the other hand, her counterpoint, La Tangolita, a feminine Argentine dancer, a mature woman, who is adored by men. Their vocal qualities are distinguished by their characters and by what they express: Madeleine's score is written for a standard lyrical soprano and that of Tangolita for a lyrical soprano with coloratura variations. Madeleine's melodic lines are characterized by cursive legatos and are constructed according to the patterns of hit songs from the 1920s and 1930s. The appearance of La Tangolita brings a new and effervescent musical style, by introducing a rhythm inspired by the Argentine tango, with pulsating melodies and an atmosphere much different from that which was before. She shocks with her way of being, and defines her role as a *grande dame* through the conflict she creates. The operetta was first presented at the Metropol Theater in Berlin on 23 December 1932, the role Madeleine being portrayed by Gitta Alpár, while La Tangolita was played by Trude Berliner. Later, one of the best versions of Madeleine was portrayed by Rózsi Bársony.¹⁵

¹⁴ <http://www.operetten-lexikon.info/?menu=229&lang=1>,
<https://onlinemerker.com/giessen-viktoria-und-ihr-husar-von-paul-abraham-premiere>

¹⁵ Winkler, Gábor, *op.cit.*, p. 65-70.

In conclusion, we can say that the soprano voice type plays a particularly important role in the operettas of Hungarian composers, since all the main female roles - whether a *prima donna* or a *grande dame* - are written for this voice type; with small variations from the lyrical soprano (the most commonly used type) through the *spinto* soprano, and ending with the dramatic *spinto*. After reviewing the roles of *prima donna* and *grande dame* in the works of the most important operetta composers of Hungarian origin, it becomes clear that the performance of these scores requires a highly skilled vocal training and vocal technique, as well as a very clear diction and an astute capacity from the part of the singers to inhabit their characters and portray them genuinely through their often dramatic arc. Reviewing these operettas' history of world premieres, as well as the subsequent recordings made, we can say that - apart from some esteemed exceptions (Sári Fedák, Hanna Honthy, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Erika Miklósa) - the main roles of these operettas were portrayed by the artists who have molded their technique and their skills to the genre, which may be out of reach for other artists who have made a name for themselves in the rather more "serious" operatic genre. Considering these aspects, we can say that for the high-level interpretation of operetta roles and for capturing the attention of the public, a thorough and special training of young talents should be required, alongside a relatively long and masterfully guided practical training within the genre, which for a long time was considered to be lesser as compared to others.

Translated from Romanian by Juliánna Köpeczi

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