

OPERETTA AS A GENRE FROM ITS BEGINNINGS TO ITS FAMOUS HUNGARIAN REPRESENTATIVES

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SUMMARY. This work comprises three uneven parts. In the first part we have attempted to offer an abbreviated history of the operetta genre, from the beginning of the 17th century to its Hungarian composers at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Instead of an exhaustive historical presentation, we focused on pursuing a line of argumentation that would explain the emergence of the Hungarian composers from Budapest and Vienna, whose operettas successfully entertain audiences until this day. In the second part, we reviewed the specific topics approached by the Hungarian operetta composers, exemplifying these by briefly presenting the contents of the 14 operettas that we will analyze during our doctoral research. In the third part we compared the genres of opera and operetta, in terms of their elements. We considered this to be necessary in order to be able to demonstrate the specific features of the operetta genre and also emphasize the fact that they are very elaborate works created by talented and well-trained composers, and their staging required just as much talent, work and dedication throughout history, as their great operatic counterparts.

Keywords: operetta, prima donna, grande dame, musical, themes

1. The Operetta - The History of a Supposedly Minor Musical Genre

1.1. The Origins of the Genre

Undoubtedly, the roots of the operetta genre extend back to the middle of the 17th century, when the musical stage work of Antonio Berti entitled “*Pazzo amor*” was defined as an “operetta”.² Prior to the middle of

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² Brockhaus Riemann Zenei Lexikon (Brockhaus Riemann Music Lexicon), Budapest, 1985, vol. III., pp. 29-31.

the 18th century, around 30 stage works under that name were identified; they appeared generally in the German princely courts. After 1730, the term operetta was used to describe German language adaptations of opera buffa works, and of Italian *intermezzos* or for the German translations of *vaudeville* pieces and French *opéra comique* works. The term was also applied during this period to the German works pertaining to the genre of *singspiel*. A skillful composer of such plays was Christian Gottlob Neefe, the distinguished and demanding master of the young Ludwig van Beethoven (*Amors Gukkasten* 1772). His other contemporaries have created a series of parodies of mythological themes (C.D. Dittersdorf, F. Kauer, W. Müller). Other heralds of the early operetta were the parodies written based on the “*opera seria*” composed at that time, one of the main targets being Meyerbeer, whose *Robert le diable* was the basis for many comical interpretations of the work, such as *Robert der Wau Wau* by Scutta (possible pseudonym), or *Robert der Teuxel* by A. Müller. A similar process took place in France, where, from the initial genres of *vaudeville* and *opéra comique*, A. Piron introduced “*les persiflages des dieux*” in the theatre, and Alain René Lesage did the same with operatic parodies. However, the main pioneer of the operetta genre was Hervé (Louis Auguste Florimond Ronger by his own name), with his comical parodies, which he initially called *musiquette* (*Les chevaliers de la Table Rondes* 1886, *Chilpéric* 1868, *Le petit Faust* 1869).³ He was the forerunner of the first great operetta composer, Jacques Offenbach that has entered music history with his three act opera buffas and single-act *buffoneries*. Born in the family of a Jewish cantor from Cologne, he moved to Paris at a young age, having been noticed for his virtuoso cello performances. His first attempts to compose and present comic operas were not received with sympathy by the Comic Opera House in Paris, therefore, he founded his own theatre, *Les Buffes Parisiens*. Here, he managed to successfully present an impressive number of works: opera buffas, and single-act operettas (over 60), comic operas and two, three, four or five act operettas (around 50). His best known works are *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1858) and *La belle Hélène* (1864). He finalized all of his librettos himself, intervening in order to create dramatic situations, thus aiding in the creation of a perfect harmony between text and music. Moreover, the great success of his works is also the result of his masterful couplets, as well as the fact that he included the most popular dances of the time – such as the *cancan* and the *galoppe* – in his operettas.

³ Winkler, Gábor, *Operett – Szubjektív kalauz egy varázslatos világban (The Operetta – A Subjective Guide into a Magical World)*, Tudomány Kiadó, Budapest, 2013, pp. 25-28.

1.2. The Classical Viennese Operetta

1.2.1. Based on Offenbach's example, the first of the great Viennese operetta composers, Franz von Suppé, created the work that will foretell the style reigning in Vienna and Budapest for the next half century. The piece was entitled *Das Pensionat* (1860), which brought from the beginning that sweet and sentimental, unmistakable characteristic of the old Viennese theaters. Born in the Dalmatian city of Split in 1819, he studied flute, musical composition and law at Cremona and Padua. In 1835, after his father's death, he moved to Vienna and studied medicine and music at the Friends of Music Conservatory. At the urging of Franz Pokorny, the head of the Josephstadt theater, he begins his long and prodigious career as a composer, during which he wrote 28 operettas and more than 200 farces, vaudevilles, ballets and other stage works. His most important works (of the 37 written for stage) are: *The Beautiful Galathea* (1865), *Fatinitza* (1876) and *Boccaccio* (1879). Another Viennese composer, a contemporary of Suppé and just as prolific was Carl Millöcker, who created more than 20 operettas, of which the most successful were *Der Bettelstudent* (1882) and *Gasparoni* (1884). After such a preamble, it was time for perhaps the most important operetta composer in history, namely, Johann Strauss II.

1.2.2. The “King of the Waltz”, as he was called even during his lifetime, Strauss was part of the family of musicians, composers and conductors, who had a decisive role in shaping the style, a high quality leisurely cultural lifestyle that characterized Vienna at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Born in 1825 in the family of a famous and beloved Viennese composer and conductor, who wanted to guide his son towards a “more serious” profession, young Strauss studied music in secret, and in 1844 founded his first orchestra, thus entering into a conflict with his father. After his father's death in 1849, Strauss joined the two orchestras, thus shortly becoming the most popular composer and conductor in Vienna. His music promoted the spirit of the Austrian popular dance according to a specifically Viennese formula, combining it with a cheerfully light tone, and a natural arrangement, relatively simple, borrowing from the folk music of the time. He was the creator of the so-called dancing operettas, where dance music was the element that generated the entire plot of the piece. His operettas were not as many as Suppé's, or that of Millöcker, however, due to his composing abilities and his extraordinary melodic flare Johann Strauss II. was able to create undisputed masterpieces of the genre: *The Bat* (*Die Fledermaus* 1874), *A Night in Venice* (*Eine Nacht in Venedig* 1883) and *The Gypsy Baron* (*Der Zigeunerbaron* 1885). *The Bat*

is considered to be the most successful operetta of all time, while until the occurrence of the Hungarian operetta, *The Gypsy Baron* (which is a stage adaptation based on one of Mór Jókai's novels) was almost viewed as a work with national importance.⁴ This proves that the proximity and partial merging between the Viennese cultural life and the culture of Budapest was a suitable and fertile ground for the appearance of a long line of composers of Hungarian operettas, who, up until the middle of the 20th century, have created countless works of musical theater drawing on both Hungarian and Viennese culture.

1.3. The Great Triad of Hungarian Operetta Composers

Reviewing the literature on the topic, we found that there was a long line of Hungarian operetta composers, who have created a long list of works for musical theater. Even before the occurrence of the greatest Hungarian composers of the genre, there are no fewer than 11 names of composers who created such works, according to the distinguished historian of the Hungarian operetta, Amadé Németh (1922-2001): József Konti, Károly Huber, Verő György, Károly Czobor, Izsó Barna, Jenő Sztojanovits, Béla Hegyi, Lajos Serly, Béla Szabados, Elek Erkel, Ferenc Puks. They have collectively created over 30 operettas, which were more or less successful with the audiences of the time, but which have created a climate conducive to the emergence of the genre's "heavyweights", who – through their work - have conquered both the Viennese "high society", as well as audiences around the globe.⁵

1.3.1. Next we will focus on the figure of the brilliant composer Ferenc Lehár, who conquered the high quality music connoisseurs of Vienna and Budapest alike. However, since our segment deals with the history of the genre of operetta, we need to mention also another "triad" of the Hungarian operetta composers, who ushered in the indisputable streak of successes of Hungarian composers, but who received their musical education and oriented their work toward Viennese culture. The first one is Jenő Huszka, a composer who, in an exceptional manner, held the world premiere of his first operetta not in Vienna, but in Budapest, in 1902. We are referring to *Prince Bob*, performed no less than 100 times in its first year, while some of the songs included in the score became beloved hits that are cherished to this day. The longevous composer Jenő Huszka wrote a total of 15 operettas (the most renowned of which was *Gül baba*, composed in 1905), the last one having had its world premiere in 1954. Shortly after his first successes,

⁴ Németh, Amadé, *A Magyar operett története*, Anno Kiadó, 2002, pp. 13-14.

⁵ Németh, Amadé, *op.cit.*, pp. 19-28.

Ferenc Lehár, the son of a well-known military orchestra conductor, appears on the stages of Budapest and Vienna. Born in Komárom in 1870, Lehár became familiar with music from an early age, completing his musical studies at the Prague Conservatory, later settling down in Vienna. He has composed an impressive number of 31 operettas, and began to present his works at about the same time as Huszka, however, his first real success came only in 1905, in Vienna, with *The Merry Widow*. His other notable creations in the genre of operetta are: *The Count of Luxembourg* (1909), *Gypsy Love* (1910), *The Land of Smiles* (1929) and *Giuditta* (1934). The third composer of the first wave of composers of Hungarian operettas was Pongrácz Kacsóh, a composer who is little known outside his linguistic territory, but who has marked the history of the genre with his *János vitéz* (*John the Valiant*) that was a huge success at its world premiere in Budapest in 1904, and was performed more than 600 times after its first showing, without interruption.⁶

1.3.2. Talking about Imre Kálmán in superlatives is a relatively easy and natural thing to do. However, looking at our data, we quickly realized that we must mention another pair of composers who complement his work, the two talented Albert Szirmai and Viktor Jacobi. The first of the three composers is Albert Szirmai, who has composed 10 operettas, of which *Mickey the Magnate* brought him true success and recognition, a piece that since its world premiere in 1916, has consistently stayed on the repertoire of musical theatres until today. The second composer, and the most important of the three, is Imre Kálmán, born in 1882 in Siófok, educated at the Academy of Music in Budapest (where he was a colleague of Zoltán Kodály), is the author of 18 operettas, of which four were responsible for his world-wide fame: *Die Csárdásfürstin* (1916), *Die Bajadere* (1921), *Countess Maritza* (1924) and *Die Zirkusprinzessin* (1926). These works are still part of the repertoire of musical theaters around the world. *Die Csárdásfürstin* was the basis of four, while the *Countess Maritza* of three cinematic versions of the operettas. The third of the group was Viktor Jacobi, a composer of 8 operettas, of which *Szibill*, first presented in 1914 in Budapest, ensured him a brilliant American career that was cut short by his untimely death (1921).⁷

1.3.3. The third important Hungarian operetta composer, Pál Ábrahám, was not alone in writing for musical theatre in Budapest and beyond, until the middle of the 20th century, he was joined by: Károly Stephanides, Zsigmond Vincze, Imre Farkas, Béla Zerkovitz, Mihály Nádor, Alfréd Markus, Dénes Buday, Mihály Erdélyi, Károly Komjáti, Mihály Krasznai, Károly De fries, Mihály Eisemann, Gyula Kiszely, Lajos Lajtai, Pál

⁶ Winkler, Gábor, *op.cit.*, pp. 655-660.

⁷ Gál, György Sándor, *Operettek könyve*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1976, pp. 274-302.

Gyöngy, Egon Kemény, Miklós Brodszky, Ferenc Farkas, Ottó Vincze, Rezső Kókai, Tibor Polgár, György Ránki, András Bágya, Endre Székely, Szabolcs Fényes, János Kerekes, Tamás Bródy, Jenő Horváth, György Behár, István Sárközy, Zdenko Tamássy, Amadé Németh and Júlia Hajdú. Therefore, together with Pál Ábrahám, we are talking about 34 composers who have created more than 250 operettas, thus enriching the lives of the ten musical theatres that have existed at the time in Budapest. We have chosen to emphasize the work of Pál Ábrahám, since two of the six operettas he wrote, namely *Victoria and Her Hussar* (1931) and *Ball at the Savoy* (1933) are works that are present within musical theatre repertoires to this day, and their music is a glaring example of the new spirit that he brought into the genre, which eventually led to the creation of the style of contemporary musicals.⁸

1.3.4. In the three previous segments, I sought to place the three great operetta authors in the Hungarian musical context of the time, so we believe it to be superfluous to allocate further paragraphs for the presentation of the continuators of the musical stage tradition they initiated. However, I would like to recall an interesting fact that can strengthen our belief in the uniqueness of Viennese and Budapest musical practices and styles from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. I refer here to the classification made by the distinguished European and Hungarian operetta historian and analyst, Gábor Winkler, who in his monumental work, entitled *The Operetta – A Subjective Guide into a Magical World* (Tudomány Publishing, Budapest, 2013) unambiguously places Ferenc Lehár, Imre Kálmán and Pál Ábrahám in the context of Hungarian-Viennese opera. He does that based on several reasons: their musical education, compositional style, and the fact that most of their operettas had their world premieres in Vienna, and were sung in German. This standpoint is in contradiction with the position adopted by many music historians, who view the three great composers exclusively as the founders of Hungarian stage music. It is true that in their scores they also used elements specific to the Hungarian musical style of the second half of the 19th century (which included also the great Liszt), but by benefiting from a universal culture, they assimilated and synthesized everything that was the best (and the most successful) in French, German and Viennese music. On the other hand, no matter how determined and sustained the patriotic tendencies and efforts aimed at creating a truly Hungarian type of stage music were, no composer could neglect the preferences and expectations of the Budapest audiences, which was mostly formed by a fresh

⁸ Brockhaus Riemann Zenei Lexicon (Brockhaus Riemann Music Lexicon), Budapest, 1985, vol. I., p. 11.

and prosperous bourgeoisie, who felt at home in Budapest, Vienna or Paris alike. This open perspective that characterized the “high society” of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, was the driving force that created the rich and unmistakable style of the Hungarian operetta. And the three composers presented in our analysis are the foremost representatives of this type of music.

1.4. Themes Specific to the Operetta Genre

This particular aspect of the operetta itself requires a new review of the genre’s history since the specific themes of the genre occur during its development, is gradually changing, therefore, from its beginnings to its developed forms occurring in Vienna and Budapest, the changes seem radical. The first attempts of comedic works of musical theatre at the end of the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century were (mostly) parody replicas of operas written by classicist composers, therefore, they were based on mythological themes, that were approached in a comic manner, intended to ridicule a cultural ideology and viewpoint that were obsolete and had nothing to do with the reality of the time. (A prime example would be *Le Petit Orphée* by Prosper-Didier Deshayes, a parody of Gluck’s opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*, at whose 1792 premiere the term ‘operetta’ appeared on the hand-written posters, alongside other examples, such as Offenbach’s *Orpheus in the Underworld* and *La belle Hélène* (1858). Later on, along with the increasing popularity of the genre, its themes change, as composers begin to draw inspiration from the life of the social strata which make up the audiences of the genre, but without becoming realistic in the literal sense of the term. On the contrary, the stories that represent the bases of operetta librettos are more related to the ones born from the imagination of more or less simple people: love stories, in which protagonists come either from privileged social classes whose lifestyle and well-being are unattainable desires for most audiences, or from lower classes, but whose characters have extraordinary skills, and a life journey worthy of the heroes of such stories. These love stories are complemented by with pleasant, easy-to-remember melodies with a transparent but vibrant accompaniment, but the plot thread is built upon scenes composed of prose, which often contain comic situations, to the delight of operetta audiences. The plot itself is usually full of unexpected twists, as well as everyday intrigue, which usually has a happy ending for the main protagonists. Often these intrigues and comic situations also contain a slight dose of social criticism, approached, however, with indulgence and elegance.

Jenő Huszka: *Prince Bob* - is a good example for what we referred to above. It focuses on the love story between a prince and the daughter of a small merchant, which occurs on the occasion of the prince's incognito escapades. The social difference between the two, the injustices that are about to occur both in the royal palace and in the environment of ordinary people, remind us of the classic-romantic stories of the 19th century. And the happy outcome, in which justice is served, and the lovers get their happiness is reminiscent of the world of folk tales. However, the actual elements of the plot place the story in the historical period when the noble-dynastic sphere interferes with that of the bourgeois-citizenry of a modern world about to be born.⁹

Jenő Huszka: *Gül baba* – represents another theme, drawn from the world of fairy tales from the days of the Ottoman rule, however, it basically contains somewhat similar elements to the previous one: a love story blossoms between two youngsters belonging to radically different social groups, the injustices that await and the resolution of conflict by way of actions and circumstances borrowed from fairy tales. However, since we are referring to a plot that takes place in the 17th century, the elements of the entourage, and momentary situations are characteristic of a more archaic world, having rules that are more cruel, with twists and turns that may endanger the lives of the main protagonists.¹⁰

Ferenc Lehár: *The Merry Widow* - the first successful operetta of the composer has a theme that is strongly anchored in the social and political reality of the transition between the 19th and 20th centuries, containing a high degree of social and moral criticism. However, the imagining a small country in the Balkans, whose bankrupt economy can be saved through an advantageous marriage between a state official and a rich widow, catapults us once again into the world of stories where the great problems of both the individual and society can be resolved through love. The elements of the plot are as real as possible, but the essence of the conflict, the way of solving it, pertains to the realm of imagination. The slight political undertone of the story, namely, the allusion to that small Balkan country, has sparked diplomatic scandals, as some Montenegrin patriots have identified the small bankrupt state with their own homeland. The demonstrations and protests that ensued from their part in the end served to amplify the success of the work.¹¹

⁹ Németh, Amadé, *op.cit.*, pp. 30-32.

¹⁰ Winkler, Gábor, *op.cit.*, pp. 395-398.

¹¹ Gál, György Sándor, *op.cit.*, pp. 413-414.

Ferenc Lehár: *The Count of Luxembourg* - the theme of this operetta is related to that of that of *The Merry Widow*, since it also includes political innuendos, however, these have a lesser degree of immediate impact. The main protagonists are people belonging to different social classes, but are also not ordinary characters: we have a young man, who has inherited an illustrious title with no wealth attached to it, a highly appreciated and celebrated diva, and a high-ranking diplomat, who is in love. These are human connections, with many twists and turns, and the resolution of the conflict takes place on the level of personal feelings and aspirations. Therefore, the theme is a realistic one, but the plot and final outcome bear the candor stories characteristic for operettas: everything takes place in the realm of possibility, which cannot actually be attained in real life.¹²

Ferenc Lehár: *Gypsy Love* – the third highly successful operetta of the composer was originally recommended as a “romantic operetta” and its structural and stylistic features are related with those of the operatic genre. Its theme is an interesting mixture of romanticism, severing almost all ties to reality, and events placed in relatively distant areas from the Vienna-Budapest axis (somewhere in Transylvania), in which very different types of characters appear: Romanian boyars, Hungarian peasants, nomadic Gypsies. The basic conflict is generated by the love between boyar’s daughter and a Roma violinist, who is the star of his time, a character specific to the cultural life of Budapest in the second half of the 19th century. This piece was and is known in two quite different variants. In the original version, both the heroine and the young man with whom she marries come from Romanian boyar families, and the female character who portrays the role of the *grande dame* and plays an essential role in solving the conflict, is a wealthy, divorced lady, belonging to the noble Hungarian class from the region of Transylvania. Given the particular popularity of the work’s music, in the first decade of the third millennium, a more “Hungarianized” version of the original was made, in which the father of the heroine, Zorica, is called Dragojan (i.e. thus giving him an unclear identity), the young nobleman Ionel becomes Gábor Szatmary, i.e. a Hungarian landowner, and the *grande dame* character, Ilona, is an actress, a prima donna of a Budapest theater, and she is also in love with the gypsy violinist Józsi. If in the original version the whole conflict takes place in the middle part of the work, in Zorica’s dream, in the modernized version everything is truly happening then and there, and the happy ending is followed by Ilona’s melodramatic aria.¹³

¹² Brockhaus Riemann Zenei Lexikon (Brockhaus Riemann Music Lexicon), Budapest, 1985, vol. II., p. 403.

¹³ Winkler, Gábor, *op.cit.*, pp. 690-694.

Ferenc Lehár: *The Land of Smiles* - the theme of this piece is one that is characteristic to the beginning of the 20th century, when - following the development of trade relations with the countries of the Far East - the attention of Europeans turned to the culture, customs and traditions of that part of the world. The story of the operetta presents the encounter between two youths belonging to two extremely different worlds: a young noble girl from Vienna, and a diplomat from the faraway country of China. Their love and happiness seem to have no boundaries as long as they are in Vienna. But when the young diplomat is called home to receive the highest state distinction, the yellow robe, insurmountable obstacles concerning the Chinese culture and customs arise: Sou-Chong is forced to marry four young Chinese women from notable families. Since the situation and the general atmosphere is causing her pain and suffering, Lisa feels the need to return home to Vienna. After her husband's refusal to make that happen, she chooses to go alone, and is helped by a young Austro-Hungarian diplomat. Sou-Chong uncovers their plan, and after lashing out in anger and threatening them, he eventually calms down and accepts Lisa's departure. The ending, thus, is not a happy, but rather a sad one. Moreover, the style of the work and the way it was created closely resembles the creation of an opera. The arias written for the two main protagonists, Lisa and Sou-Chong, have a degree of difficulty that is close to that of the opera segments.¹⁴

Ferenc Lehár: *Giuditta* - is perhaps Lehár's most realistically themed work. All the elements – from the situations presented, to the love connections and the situations arising for the heroes and heroines of the work are as real as possible. Both Giuditta and Octavio, as well as Anita and Pierrino are looking for happiness and their way to live a decent life. But, as is often the case in life, the twists and turns of fate make everything much more complicated than they are in fairytales. The ending of the plot is far from being a happy one. The author wanted on this occasion to actually create an opera. Perhaps this was the reason why he chose such a realistic libretto. Nonetheless, although *Giuditta* is structured in scenes, it includes arias that require the skills of opera singers. Its world premiere took place at the Vienna Staatsoper, but since the critics of the time did not classify it as an opera, over time, it was assimilated into the genre of operetta.¹⁵

Albert Szirmai: *Mickey the Magnate* - is a comedy characteristic for the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Here we can already observe a clear tendency to show a crooked mirror to an *passé* aristocratic world, since almost all of the main characters of the work come from outside of the nobility: the

¹⁴ Winkler, Gábor, *op.cit.*, pp. 745-749.

¹⁵ Németh, Amadé, *op.cit.*, pp. 58-60.

engineer Baracs, who, although comes from a modest family, is a successful inventor, who appreciated throughout Europe; the stableman Miska is the healthy and robust son of the people, who playfully carries out the farce prepared by Baracs for the members of the high society; Marcsa, the modest maid, who, through her healthy sensible character, solves the main conflict of the work; and Rolla, the young countess who, being abhorred by the morals of her own world, chooses the path toward a freer life, in which true human sentiments and qualities prevail. However, in order for the comedic aspect of the operetta to work, there are also a lot of caricatures of the people who populate that world of privilege, which had almost completely declined at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Moreover, the reconciliation at the end of the work illustrates the compromise that existed at the time of the operetta's creation between an outdated social order and a new one, built upon the reality of life at the beginning of a new century.¹⁶

Imre Kálmán: *Die Csárdásfürstin* – the plot of the operetta is based on the conflict between the world of show-business and entertainment and that of the aristocracy from a century ago. The latter is as rigid and traditional as in the previous centuries, but it can be pierced through the power of love, an element that is reminiscent of fairytales. The two main female characters come from the world of show-business, while the men whose attention they seek come from the aristocratic world. The main male protagonist is an Austrian prince, with close ties to the royal court, an aristocrat who, in his youth, has fallen in love with a star of the luxury entertainment establishment, Anhilte, and - opposing the habits and customs of his class – and married her. The actress who became a princess is a typical example of the “grande dame” character, who - through her position and attitude - generates much of the conflicts that make up the plot of the operetta. The other main female protagonist, Sylva, is almost like a replica of a young Anhilte, who is in a relationship with the son of the former diva, who is now a princess. With all the resistance put up by the mother and after a long series of comic and melodramatic twists, history repeats itself a generation later, and the end is a happy and joyous one.¹⁷

Imre Kálmán: *Die Bajadere* - shortly after the success of *Die Csárdásfürstin*, the composer asked his Viennese librettists for a text about the exotic world of the Orient. The main protagonist of the work is Prince Radjani, the heir to the throne of the Lahore kingdom, part of remote Indian. He escapes from his country which is under British protectorate, and leads a luxurious life in Paris. After many love affairs, he falls in love with a beautiful

¹⁶ Gál, György Sándor, *op.cit.*, pp. 309-310.

¹⁷ Gänzl, Kurt, *The Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre*, Schirmer Books, 1994.

and talented actress, who plays the main character of an exotic operetta called “Die Bajadere”. The young woman successfully withstands Radjani's efforts to seduce her, while he, accustomed to easy conquests, resorts to his powers of hypnosis. After realizing that she was determined to sign a marriage commitment under hypnosis, Odette rejects the prince, and seemingly, their paths part ways. Still, after a lot of plot twists and help from their friends, they both realize that they are meant for each other and they join lives. This story illustrates once more the attraction that the audience of the early 20th century had to the characters and situations generated by the interference of the world and the European culture to that of the Far East. Conflicts and their resolution have, however, quite a “native” feel to them, they have nothing out of the ordinary. The plot is therefore a mixture of a story, a fairytale, and elements pertaining to realism. Due to the wonderful music, *Die Bajadere* was successful in both Vienna and Budapest, but after a few years its disappeared inexplicably from the repertoire of Hungarian musical theaters and was “rediscovered” only after eight decades, in 2009 when he was presented again, in a version adapted for the audiences of the 21st century.¹⁸

Imre Kálmán: *Countess Maritza* - the theme of this operetta represents an interesting mixture of romanticism and realism: the main protagonist is a financially bankrupt Hungarian count, who, in order to provide his sister with an acceptable dowry, gets a job working incognito for a rich and still single countess named Maritza. In order to escape those only seeking her fortune, She, in turn, launches a fake rumor saying that she is engaged to a person, the name of whom she borrowed from the operetta *The Gypsy Baron*. At first, the Countess is cold and act with an air of superiority toward her employee, but his fairness and fine character determines her get closer, and she eventually falls in love with him. Count Tassilo has similar feelings toward the Countess. Meanwhile, the plot thickens as some unexpected twists complicate matters further: all of a sudden a young man appears, whose name is coincidentally the same as that of the person she claimed to be engaged to, and he want to meet his “fiancé”, about whom he read numerous articles in the tabloids of the time. However, instead of the countess, he ends up falling in love with the main protagonist’s sister. After an unfortunate incident, Countess Maritza loses the trust she had in Count Tassilo, considering that he is also only after her money. Liza, the count's sister, tries in vain to clarify the situation, for the two seem to have fallen out for good. Eventually, the Count’s aunt, Princess Bozena, intervenes to redeem all the properties of Tassilo, reinstating him in his rights,

¹⁸ Brockhaus Riemann Zenei Lexikon (Brockhaus Riemann Music Lexicon), Budapest, 1985, vol. II., p. 260.

and redressing his material and social situation. The ending is a happy one, since Maritza is finally convinced that her love is a man of integrity, while Tassilo's sister, Liza also finds happiness in the arms of the false "fiancé", Jupan.¹⁹

Imre Kálmán: *The Circus Princess* - the story of this operetta takes us to the world of Russian aristocracy (it is worth noting, that the libretto and music were created in 1925-1926, when the Tsarist regime had already been eradicated), and concerns two young people, who due to the feelings they have for each other are subject to great trials and suffering. Fedja, the young aristocrat, whom a brilliant military career awaits, falls in love with Fedora, the fiancé of his wealthy and influential uncle, who in turn removes him from the army. Now poor and excluded from the world of privilege, he makes a living as a circus acrobat, and quickly becomes the idol of the public under the name of Mister X. Fedora marries his uncle, Prince Palinsky, but after a while she is widowed. Moreover, she also becomes an admirer of the courageous Mister X, who appears each evening in the arena of the circus, wearing a mask. She feels attracted by the force that emanates from this mysterious character. Meanwhile, the young widow, the heiress of an immense wealth, is intensely courted by another elder prince, Sergius Wladimir. Initially, Fedora rejects both Mister X's compliments and Prince Wladimir's attempts to conquer her. The latter wants to get revenge, and convinces Fedja-Mister X to conquer the widow and ask her for marriage under the pseudonym of Prince Korosov. Fedja accepts, is successful with his attempt, and after Fedora accepts him, Prince Wladimir reveals his farce. Fedora, after being assigned the nickname "The Circus Princess", she reacts violently, and refuses Fedja, leaves with a friend to Budapest, while still planning to get engaged to Prince Wladimir. Fedja finds her here, and finally convinces her that she is not in love with Wladimir, but with him, who is actually a young man from a first-class aristocratic family. The story of this operetta is, therefore, a completely romantic one, full of twists and turns, deception, scheming, passions, and wishes to introduce the viewer into the world of aristocracy, which has always been inaccessible to mere mortals, and is even more inaccessible through the simple fact that it no longer exists.²⁰

Pál Ábrahám: *Victoria and Her Hussar* - this operetta has been played for a long time in an abridged form, because in 1930, when it was first presented, the content of the first scene was disturbing to certain political interests. This first scene takes place in Siberia, in a prisoners of war camp, where captive militants are held in inhumane conditions, and are

¹⁹ Németh, Amadé, *op.cit.*, pp. 74-75.

²⁰ Winkler, Gábor, *op.cit.*, pp. 542-547.

gradually all exterminated, having been shot one by one. The main protagonist, the Hussar lieutenant Koltay had left his fiancée Countess Victoria at home, in Dorozsma. Following a happy event, he and his loyal friend, Jancsi, manage to escape, and arrive in Peking, where they take refuge at the United States embassy. For eight decades, the staging of most renditions began with the colourful and quasi-happy image of Peking. This approach made the bittersweet atmosphere that the composer actually wanted to express by way of his music disappear, and the overly sentimental and romantic story survived only thanks to the excellent songs, which quickly became hits, known by everyone. The two refugees benefit from the protection of the generous Ambassador Webster, also due to the fact that they are from the same country as his wife. To his shock and sadness, Koltay finds out that the ambassador's wife is none other than her former fiancé, Victoria, who had vowed that she would wait for him to return from the war. Webster is relocated as a diplomat to Petersburg (notice how the city is no longer called St. Petersburg), and is followed by Victoria and the two refugees. Here, Koltay tries to win back his former fiancée, but Victoria - feeling indebted to Webster - decides to stay with her husband. In a moment of despair, Koltay surrenders to the Soviet officer, who already suspected him for having escaped from the Siberian camp. In the last scene, we return to the quiet little town of Dorozsma in Hungary, where life begins to return to normal after the war. This is where the main protagonists meet up again: Jancsi, Victoria, Webster, and by a miracle, hussar lieutenant Koltay, who had escaped execution through a fortunate trade of prisoner exchange. This scene is exactly the opposite of the first one of the Siberian hell, but is almost as bitter. The happy ending springs again from John Webster's generosity, for he releases his wife, Victoria, from their marriage. The two lovers are happy to be finally in each other's arms. The bittersweet atmosphere, however, is still hovering in the air, because the horrors of the First World War have made their mark on everyone's lives.²¹

Pál Abrahám: *Ball at the Savoy* - Launched in Berlin in 1932, this operetta is written based on a story exclusively built on love, deceit, jealousy, romantic entanglements and happy reconciliations. The bliss felt by a young wealthy couple who just returned from their honey-moon by the man's commitment to his former mistress, the Argentinean dancer Tangolita. She forces him to meet her at the famous ball at the Paris Savoy. The young husband, under a fairly transparent pretext, goes to Paris with a friend, but his wife, Madeleine, gets suspicious, and follows him in secret. Arrived at the Savoy, she recognizes her husband in the company of Tangolita,

²¹ <https://onlinemerker.com/giessen-viktoria-und-ihr-husar-von-paul-abraham-premiere>

and decides to get revenge. She accepts the timid advances of a young man named Célestin, as they sit in the neighbouring booth to that in which her husband, Aristide, is sitting with the Argentinean dancer. At the end of the party, Madeleine surprises her husband, and the divorce of the two seems imminent. After getting home, Aristide learns from Célestin that his wife has not deceived him and that she still loves him, therefore, the newlyweds can soon reconcile.²²

In conclusion, we can state that operetta-specific themes can be extremely varied, from the world of fairytales, completely out of the realm of reality, to those anchored in the specific social environment of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but whose characters are always out of the ordinary, either through their personal qualities and characteristics, or by their social rank. The situations and conflicts that arise through the course of the plot are meant to develop and nuance profoundly human traits, and to deliver to them (and the viewers) a life lesson, in a smiling and indulgent manner. The locations and venues where the scenes unfold, are chosen in such a way as to enable the director and the set and costume designer to create a stunning, attractive set, beautiful, elegant costumes, because the tales and music created by the librettist and composer can be more easily “sold” in such a “package” By reviewing the string of successful operettas created by Hungarian composers, we are witnessing the birth of a whole industry of quality entertainment, a precursor of contemporary *show business*.

1.5. Similarities and Differences between the Structure of Operas and Operettas. A Morphological Analysis.

“**Opera** is a term referring to a form of the theater, often referred to as lyrical theater, in which the entire story takes place completely, or predominantly using music and singing. Opera uses many of the elements of the spoken or dramatic theater, such as script, costumes, sets, stage movement and interpretation. In spite of these similarities, the performers of operas must possess, first and foremost, distinct vocal qualities that give the musical genre its defining identity. Since the message of the work is transmitted mainly through music, to the necessary vocal qualities of the performers, other elements are added, such as an musical instrument ensemble for accompaniment, whose complexity can vary between a minimal ensemble, such as a trio, quartet or quintet, to a complete symphonic orchestra. At times, and especially for French opera, for most of its history, the operatic piece

²² Moisescu, Titus – Păun, Miltiade, *Opereta – ghid*, Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor din RSR, București, 1969, pp. 22-24.

includes ample ballet scenes. [...] *The composing elements of opera: overture, aria, ensembles (duets, trios, quartets, quintets, sextets), coral ensemble, ballet ensemble.*"²³

"**Operetta** is a musical-dramatic composition of large proportion, similar to opera, and derived from it, written based on a dramatic libretto with a delightful, often humorous tone, featuring artificial and often implausible situations, in which the couplets sung by the soloists and the choir alternate with spoken dialogue and dance numbers, all accompanied by the music played by an orchestra. [...] *The composing elements of the operetta: the overture, the aria, ensembles (duets, trios, quartets, quintets, sextets), the coral ensemble, the ballet ensemble, plus spoken dialogues, often extending to the size of an entire scene.*"²⁴

Based on the above quoted dictionary definitions, we can see how similar the two genres of musical theatre, opera and operetta, truly are. The similarities are especially evident in the composing elements of the two genres, where we can see an almost 100% similarity rate. The differences, however, appear in the "essential parts", that is in the themes, the modes of expression, and, above all, in the creator's intent. Hence the differences, both on the scale of the work's entire structure, as well as within its musical material.

In classical operas, everything is sung, even epic text fragments or dramatic dialogue, these moments being called *recitatives*, which do not require too much acting talent because it is music that determines its mode of expression. In operettas these texts are simply uttered as in a theatrical play, in a manner that requires also acting talent.

Operatic overtures are longer, and contain a well-structured compression of the musical ideas that will be presented in the work. In the case of operettas, overtures are much shorter, and are a sort of "preview" of the hit songs that will delight audiences.

Operatic arias are the most important fragments of the work, they define the character of the main protagonists, express their torments and the dramatic aspects of their experiences. On the other hand, the arias of operettas may have a similar function, but most of the times have a content that is almost exclusively focused on love, and have a much lighter, more relaxed character, and marked by a less intense dramatic tone. However, from the point of view of vocal technique, operetta arias may be as difficult

²³ Dimofte, Georgiana, *Opera și opereta, asemănări și deosebiri (Opera and Operetta – Similarities and Differences)*, <https://www.scribd.com/doc/285927143/Opereta-Si-Opereta-asemanari-si-deosebiri>, 2015

²⁴ Dimofte, Georgiana, *op.cit.*

as operatic ones, and soloists have the obligation to sing in a way that makes the text easily understood by the public. The latter requirement is important, as operettas - besides the fact that they are meant to become hits sung by fans - often contain in the direct and important references to the conflicting situations from which the plot derives.

The solo ensembles of operas (duets, trios, quartets, quintets, sextets) are usually moments that express the dramatic interaction between characters. Apart from the love duets (some of which are profoundly dramatic), the ensembles express conflicting situations, and the musical writing strongly mirrors this aspect (contrasting melodic lines, often in a polyphonic approach, different lyrics for each character, which often are contrasting in terms of content). In the case of the soloist ensembles in operettas, however, the situation is very different. We also find love duets, which most of the times express unequivocally the attraction between the two. Trios and larger ensembles often have a humorous, relaxed content, focused on the intention of creating an entertaining atmosphere, with characters often also dancing.

The choral ensemble of operas often plays a role that is reminiscent of the ancient tradition of dramaturgy, namely to tell that which cannot be viewed on stage or narrated by the characters in an objective manner, but also in accordance with the dramatic tension of action. Starting with the romantic period, the choral ensemble in operas highlights the presence and attitudes of the people, the community, towards the heroes' actions, and the situations that arise. These traits become even more obvious with the composers of verism, and in the era of modernism, the classical functions of the choral ensemble are revisited. In the case of operettas, the choral parts have another role and function. The only resemblance to the choral parts of the opera is that in the operetta the choral ensemble represents the social entourage in which the action takes place. However, the role played by this ensemble is more of accompanying, creating or accentuating the atmosphere of different scenes, and the members of the choir often dance to the music played by the orchestra and to their own singing.

The ballet ensemble featured in operas appears either with a thematic purpose in order to characterize different cultural or social environments, or as a "necessary evil" in the case of works created during periods in which - according to the cultural conventions of the time - the ballet scenes served as a kind of rest between crucial plot turns of the musical drama, which allowed the members of the public to cultivate their social relationships. However, these choreographic moments allowed authors to exhibit their composing skills, creating valuable and attractive intermezzos. In operettas, ballet sequences have similar functions, but it has primarily the role of enhancing the pageantry of the performance, thus giving viewers great fun moments.

As a conclusion, we can say that there are many similarities between operas and operettas, and their differences have more to do with the intent behind their creation and less with the seriousness or the importance of the genre. Moreover, the performance of operettas requires as much hard work, talent and professional discipline from the instrumental performers, soloists, the choir, dancers, scriptwriters, costume designers, conductors and directors, as put into staging an opera.

Translated from Romanian by Juliánna Köpeczi

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