

# ERKEL

*The Erkel Century*

# 102







## Dear Enthusiasts of Opera and Ballet,

The significance and meaning of life, and also its beauty, are revealed by those high points and low points from which we can grow personally and become better and wiser as people.

It is an interesting peculiarity that an institution dedicated to being the musical theatre of the Hungarian people should also suffer a characteristically Hungarian fate: glorious moments in history, times of crisis, a desperate struggle to save it, and performances given by the most renowned musicians and companies have all been played out here. The century in the history of one of the most iconic buildings and institutions in Hungarian cultural life is – just like music itself – a tale dizzy with highs and lows.

This fantastic building was constructed 102 years ago bring high culture, at the time considered the privilege of elite layers of society, to a wider audience. As Zoltán Kodály put it, “music should belong to everyone, and it is not right that anyone should be denied the joyous miracle of music based on their origin, material circumstances, level of education, or even age. The “People’s Theatre” has witnessed many significant moments in musical history – for example, it was here that the world-famous Ballet Russe made its first appearance in Hungary – but it has also undergone difficult times, falling under foreign ownership, and even operating as a cinema for a brief period.

From absolute rock bottom – the decision to dismantle it in 2007 – we have now finally reached the absolute peak of our hopes and dreams: the day of the Erkel Theatre’s rebirth, which fittingly falls on the birthday of its namesake, Ferenc Erkel, the father of Hungarian opera.

The building, having been renovated in accordance with international standards, now offers an environment that is modern, elegant and pleasant also for young people. In addition to acquainting audiences with a wide range of traditional Hungarian music and maintaining its original “popular education” function, one of the renewed Erkel Theatre’s most important tasks will be to introduce and popularise opera culture among the younger generation.

Based on the original concept of a people’s opera, the institution’s 21st century mission is to develop and maintain the ethos of a “community opera”.

It is my wish that in the 102 years an more to come, everyone visiting here will feel that music belongs everyone, just as the Erkel Theatre should belong to us all!

**Viktor Orbán**  
Prime Minister



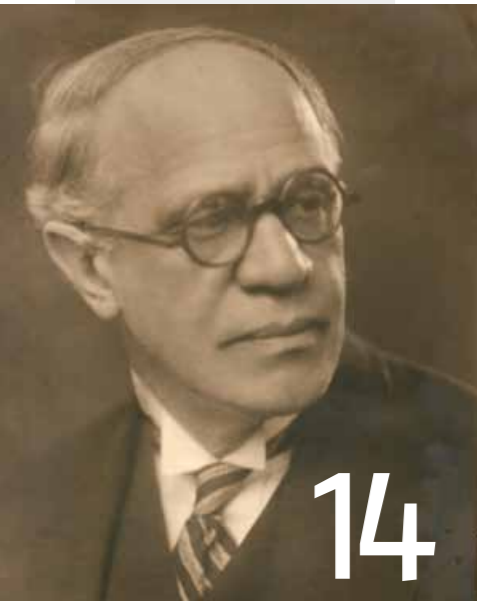
## Dear Reader,

We are in an unusual position in that we are not handing over to the audience an institution that was strictly speaking ever fully inactive. It never disappeared from the consciousness, so the fear of forgetting it was never a threat. Still, for six years, fans of opera and ballet were not allowed inside. As rehearsals were conducted here even after its incomprehensible closure in 2007, the building itself never fell into a dangerous state. Once the government measures required to re-open it had been taken, a temporary spring season was held in the Erkel Theatre in 2013 (which is when the OperaKaland, Hungary’s largest organised cultural program for students, commenced), but we have also held dress rehearsal productions in recent weeks.

It is also unusual that this enormous building regained its beauty on the quiet, in summer, at night and on weekends, in order that it might once again be that for which it was built: a practical, clean and comfortable home for Hungarian total art. The venue we are now handing over has already been attended by more than 150,000 audience members, as neither the company operating the Opera nor the massed ranks of fans were able to or wished to wait for the official opening in November. This insistence is moving and has filled me with confidence that there will once again be an audience for Hungary’s largest theatrical space, which today has finally undergone every planned reconfiguration and development, and for which funds of around Ft 2 billion have been utilised by the management of the mother institution, the Hungarian State Opera House.

Our task is to provide the support structure to sustain all this – and we will be delighted in the future to continue assisting the mutual cause of Hungarian art, Hungarian theatre culture and the Hungarian public through the operation of the Erkel Theatre.

**Zoltán Balog**  
Minister  
Ministry of Human Resources



4 GREETING FROM VIKTOR ORBÁN  
 5 GREETING FROM ZOLTÁN BALOG  
 8 GREAT MOMENTS – 1911  
 The first evening of the People’s Opera  
 10 GREAT MOMENTS – 1912  
 The Russian Ballet  
 12 GREAT MOMENTS – 1914  
 Parsifal  
 14 GREAT MOMENTS – 1918-1946  
 Glimpses of the history of the People’s Opera/City Theatre  
 22 WE NEED THE ERKEL!  
 Joining forces to renovate the 100-year-old Erkel Theatre  
 24 INTERMEZZO  
 Jazz at the Erkel  
 26 HAUNTING THE IMPOSSIBLE  
 Reminiscences – 1953-2004  
 32 PAS DE TROIS  
 The March opening of the Erkel Theatre  
 34 FROM CLOSING TO OPENING  
 From 2005 to the grand reopening  
 40 FROM PEOPLE’S OPERA TO ERKEL THEATRE  
 Notes to an exhibition

44 A THEATRE BUILDING FOR THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY: THE PEOPLE’S OPERA  
 Of architectural interest  
 50 “UNCLE” SCHÄFFER’S ALBUM  
 The new-found treasures of the Opera Archive  
 54 ADVENTURES IN THE ERKEL THEATRE  
 14 October 2013  
 56 ANYONE WHO LOVES THE OPERA CANNOT BE A BAD PERSON...  
 Interview with Péter Laki, István Mozsár, Szilveszter Ókovács and Gábor Zoboki  
 60 BARTÓK’S BLUEBEARD  
 Bluebeard première  
 63 OPERAKALAND  
 66 AFTERWORD BY SZILVESZTER ÓKOVÁCS

**CHIEF EDITOR:** Szilveszter Ókovács, General Director  
**PUBLICATION CONCEPT:** Dr. Monika Turkovics  
 Director of Marketing and Communications  
**EDITOR:** Judit Kádár-Csoboth  
**DESIGN:** Mátai és Végh Kreatív Műhely  
**PRINT PREPATION:** Mátai és Végh Kreatív Műhely  
**PRINTING:** Keskeny és Társai 2001 Kft.  
**AUTHORS:** Anka Józsa | Márton Karczag | Tamás Pallós | Tímea Papp | Zsuzsanna Rákai | Norbert Vass | Nóra Wellmann  
**TRANSLATOR:** Golden Fish Language Services  
**PHOTOGRAPHY:** Szilvia Csibi | Pál Csillag | László Emmer | Vera Éder | Tamás Gács | Péter Herman | Zoltán Máthé | Béla Mezey | Nagy Attila Nagy | Thomas Opitz | Otto Skall  
 | Aladár Székely  
 Opera House Archive | Opera House Commemorative Collection

# Great moments

Author: Tamás Pallós

# 1911

## The first evening of the People's Opera

"The most sensitive, and almost unerring measure of the course of human life and human endeavour is architecture. Those succeeding us will grasp the scale, direction and content of our culture from the buildings left behind, just as they will from the written word. Someone wishing to imagine this still-unfinished process as the democratisation of opera, groaning as it is under the heavy weight of tradition, will glean sufficient information from comparing a modern amphitheatre-type seating area, with few boxes, to, say, the seating area of the Paris Opera. I harked back to older opera houses as I stepped into the auditorium of Dezső Márkus's new theatre, of rich, elegant and heavy decor, of gilded walls, and muses and other figures painted among floating clouds. The contrast is nearly overwhelming. A long and relatively

short barrel-shaped vault encloses the auditorium. The spatial effect is imposing, and particularly imposing was the crowd of people clattering away in the jam-packed auditorium, which warmed and completed the otherwise cold interior architecture emphatically lacking in decoration. This coldness is unfortunately only increased by, among other features, the large painting by Bertalan Pór over the stage.

Nouguès's opera *Quo Vadis* opened Dezső Márkus's new theatre. Of the opera itself, we cannot say much that is positive. The music is full of banality and bombast, and its coloratura is a great mess. The singers performed their work with great ambition. We can now take note of the name Pajor. I believe that a worthier occasion will help bring other names from obscurity



○ FRIGYES "FRITZ" REINER | Photo: Opera House Commemorative Collection

also. Of the orchestra's material, it is not yet possible to know for certain. Much more interesting than Grosskopf was Frigyes (Fritz) Reiner, who is known to be an unusually intelligent conductor and hopefully will bring style to the orchestra. The chorus was good, as was the directing, in contrast to the tasteless scenery. Today, when every theatre worth its salt creates its scenery under the direction of a graphic artist, it is not appropriate to adorn with such dreadful canvas rags a stage from which we expect so much and toward which the Budapest audience has directed unprecedented fondness."

Aladár Bálint  
(Nyugat, 16 December 1911)

## The opening of the People's Opera (excerpt)

"Anyone witnessing the auditorium of the People's Opera this evening will be clear about the extraordinary significance of the new theatre's opening. We must use the word "extraordinary", because the enormous interest, the good-natured waiting and the enthusiasm with which the audience greeted the opening are all founded on our capital city's extraordinary relationship with the theatre. This theatre was urgently lacking in Budapest. The Hungarian Royal Opera House has, for years, been on the side of fumigating the audience. It neglects the most interesting foreign innovations, it does not concern itself at all with talented Hungarian composers, and, in the programme selection, it is not artistic merit, but interests, that are taken into account. (Works by Guerra, Hűvös, Erlanger, Zichy, Franckenstein, Delmar, etc.) Here it is not just the interested parties, the unjustly slighted, but also the larger audience that has awaited with clenched fists a new opera house where it is not necessary to get into a fretful state each day, where one can sit in fresh air and receive all that one's eyes and ears desire. Interesting new material. Concise, monolingual performances. Attentive, robust direction, and not some kind of academic-nonchalance.

I believe the reason all of us were awaiting the People's Opera is because this is what we expected from it. And after today's opening performance at the theatre, we can state with complete certainty that we did not wait in vain. We heard *Quo Vadis* as the first performance. The libretto is the work of Henri Cain. The music

was written by the Spaniard [!] Jean Nouguès. The text presents six parts from the novel by Sienkiewicz. Of the performance, we can only write in general terms. It was splendid. Welcomingly fresh, it was put across with enthusiasm, diligence and understanding. Operatic direction the like of which we had not yet seen in this country. (The work of Adolf Mérey.) All of the performers were outstanding, some surprisingly so. We should mention all of them. Especially noteworthy for us: R. Ábrányi, Várnai, Andrzejka and Pajor. The opera was conducted by Márk Grosskopf. A first-time visitor. A brilliant conductor. The audience was at first somewhat restrained, as if alarmed by the great apparatus constructed to impress them, but after the third act, they applauded with total enthusiasm. *Quo Vadis* was a great success."

Géza Csáth  
Budapest, 7 December 1911



○ QUO VADIS? | Photo: Vasárnapi újság (1911)



○ THE PEOPLE'S OPERA | Photo: Vasárnapi újság (1911)

1912



○ THE PEOPLE'S OPERA (1912)

### The Russian Ballet

“The Russian Imperial Ballet made a guest appearance at the People's Opera this evening. It is no exaggeration to state that we had been waiting for them for a long time. We had read such gushing praise heaped on them in the foreign press that our curiosity and interest were understandable. We were not disappointed. On the contrary! What they produced superseded everything we expected of them. And for our expectations, we took as a basis the productions of Reinhart, the marvellous magician of the theatre. Fokin was the choreographer. A dance genius with a splendid sense of fantasy such as is born only once every 300 years. Anyone who saw his ballet *Cleopatra* will never forget it as long as he lives. Fokin reconstructed from Egyptian wall paintings and drawings depicting dancers – of course, only in a single moment of dance – the entire dance, the movement of the people, their entire culture, with such beauty, intelligence, gorgeous inventiveness

and veracity that our amazement never ceased.

The music to *Cleopatra* was written by Arensky and Taneieff. Singularly stylish and outstanding music. For each performer, we can only write unqualified approbation. Those who had only mime-type roles were just as surprising and astonishingly perfect as the soloists. Only a dance culture underpinned by a century of tradition, driven by tenacious strength and supported by great material sacrifices and public interest could produce such a work. Of *Cleopatra's* performers, we can single out Ms. Nijinska, the personifier of Princess a-Hoor, Ms. Stafiea, who played Cleopatra, and Adolf Bolmot. A man with a phenomenal physique who played the tragic lead male role with jarring theatricality.

In the second ballet, *Armidas Pavilion*, we see a Gobelin tapestry brought to life. The newness of the ideas and inexhaustible richness warped the

viewer's sense of reality. We would have liked to invite Miklós Guerra, the Opera's ballet master whose dubious choreography has tested our patience so many times, as he could have learned a thing or two here. The music to this ballet, the work of Tcherepnin, is slightly tiresome, overly loud, and of inert inventiveness.

The choreographic drama *Scherehazade*, performed as the closing, is reminiscent of *Sumurun*. A harem, unfaithfulness, butchery and mass murder. Music written by Rimsky-Korsakov. Overly scored and artful music in which the insipidity of the melodic inventiveness is not compensated for by the clever dramatic effects. Nevertheless, the drama was astoundingly interesting, and the entire evening left us with a rare and unforgettable memory of new pleasures.”

Géza Csáth

### The People's Opera Wagner cycle

“This evening saw the start of the People's Opera's German-language Wagner cycle. We heard *Lohengrin* as the first performance. The general effect was surprising. The piece left a unified, rounded impression, even if fast tempi were avoided and it thus stretched much longer than, for example, a performance of *Lohengrin* at the opera house. The first mention must go to Ferenc Mikorey, musical director for the evening. His conducting is characterised by great style, strength and independence. In certain sections, he was able to show us new and enchanting aspects. The Budapest public can feel blessed by Mikorey. The chorus and orchestra of the Dessau Opera House took their places illustriously. The chorus's singing was marked by a sure balance

of the phrasing, and the orchestra's playing by absolute discipline, total concentration of strength, and fearfully powerful woodwinds. It is unfortunate that the difference in tone of the slightly lower-tuned organ interfered with the complete success of the stirring end of the second act. Foremost among the principals, we mention Éva Plaschke van der Osten, personifier of Elsa. She has a celestially tender voice, which is also hardy, steady and lasting. Her movements and facial expressions, just as much as her singing, attest to complete understanding and intense empathy. We already know Knoté's *Lohengrin* from the Opera House. He was heroic. He was handsome. And his fresh tenor rang out with rousing passion. However, certain gestures, unfortunately, were made prematurely also today. F. Plaschke, as Telramund,

excelled with his enormously powerful baritone and the extraordinary clarity of his phrasing. Anna Bahr-Mildenburg, as Ortrud, sang in a stilted fashion and acted erratically, although we found her voice voluble, worthy and in places superb. Pál Bender, as Henry the Fowler, and Charles Mott, as the Herald, filled the roles well. The direction was the work of chamber singer Zsigmond Krauss. Lively and solid. Professor Leffler, the scenery designer, was in a difficult position. He had to negotiate with the available, but relatively small space. His efforts succeeded in a manner deserving of recognition. The audience filled the People's Opera auditorium and enthusiastically applauded the principals and conductor Mikorey.”

Géza Csáth



○ THE PEOPLE'S OPERA (1912)

1914

## Parsifal

"The name sounds out from the departing Lohengrin's lips with a great crescendo: Parsifal.

A radiance invisible to human eyes, a mystical grandeur exceeding human comprehension flows out from the pathos of the Grail legend.

"I was sent to you by the Grail: my father Parsifal wears its crown...."

For a moment, the heavy veil of secrets opens up, and a long period of bedazzlement ensues as the flashing lights taper off.

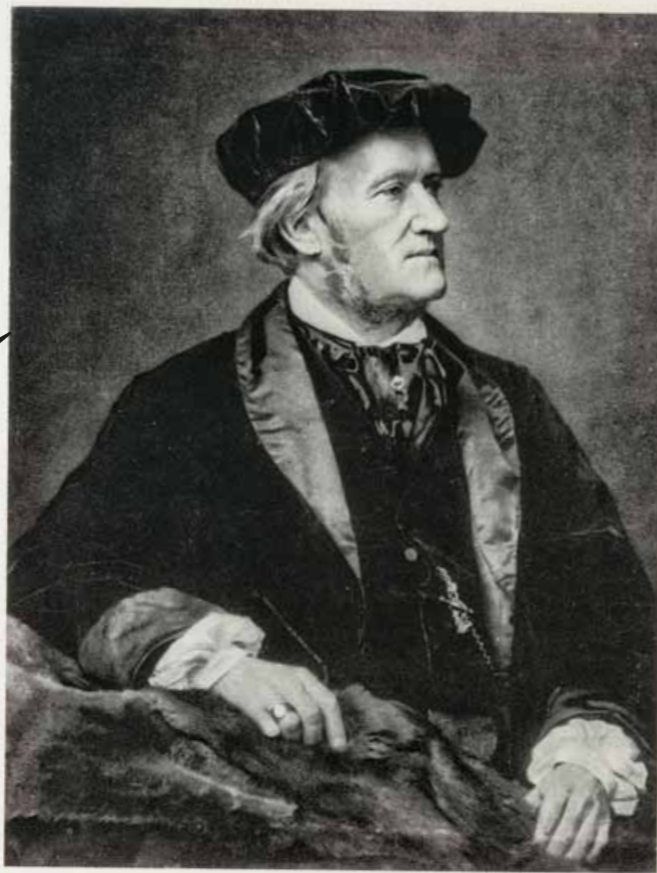
Now everyone can visit the temple of the Grail Knights, and experiencing Wagner's later works does not require a great fortune. In every cultural centre of the world, practically speaking all on the same day and hour as the 30-year ban expired, the reverential notes of holy communion rang out for the first time. From Paris to Saint Petersburg, from Prague to Barcelona (and beyond) impressive human solidarity bridges the restrictions of geographic and ethnic borders. This sweeping momentum does nothing to ruin people's curiosity – understandable and warranted curiosity let it be said.

The theme of Parsifal follows Wagner throughout his entire life. The Grail knights are already present in *Lohengrin* (1847), even if invisibly, but with destiny-driving significance. At that time, the legend was gestating inside of him, unformed and raw. He had attempted several times to bring it to life on the stage, but had never got past the planning stage. And he could not, either. What could have been farther from Wagner, in the flower of manhood and exuding his own selfhood and art with every gesture, than the apotheosis of erotic denial. If the figure of Parsifal did in fact appear from time to time, his aggression would not permit him to turn foolishness into a human ideal. The bitter satire of *Die Meistersinger*

(surmounting foolishness with new understanding) and *Tristan's* rapture (love as all-consuming lava), in other words the pugnacious Wagner's two most mature works, are precisely the opposite of what is expressed in *Parsifal*.

It is no coincidence that the story of Parsifal matured as Wagner's powers declined. The more his capacity for eroticism dried up, the more he identified with the figure of the "pure fool".

This is the glorification of old age. One must suffer a great deal, and a great many things may have lost their importance: after climbing up the steps on life, he might have passed



○ RICHARD WAGNER | Photo: Opera House Commemorative Collection

beyond women and passion. At that time, he might have stood clearly and calmly, face to face with Parsifal. With sincerity and inner faith, he might have accepted that human suffering is redeemed by immaculate youthful simplicity, of which, in the character of Parsifal, he realised the ideal example. He deemed the sickness in the complicated machinery to be curable with the magical salve of tabula rasa. Parsifal's music is by necessity built in sweeping forms: distilled music attempting to evoke an emotion of piety. Its instrumentation is such that the conscious toning down of the effects of the act of doing can be felt everywhere, which naturally implies the highest degree of both instrumentation and effect, and the most extreme foray into refinement.

As if Wagner guessed he was writing his final work, he summarised in *Parsifal* all he had learned from life. This music is a distillation of everything in his music he considered permanent and valuable.

\*

The People's Opera has brought to fruition a piece of work that cannot be assessed immediately. Bringing *Parsifal* to the stage involves a horrible amount of work. Wagner in general is a difficult task for the orchestra, singers and director. *Parsifal* brings all these difficulties together to an increased degree. The People's Opera came out on top in this battle, and the results achieved, disregarding a few minor flaws, exceeded all expectations. The fact itself that we were able to experience Wagner's testament for the stage in its entirety is a circumstance of such importance that it is unnecessary to emphasise it separately. We can admit, after the fact, that we deemed

it short-sighted that they dared to set such a task before young singers and a young orchestra, and it is entirely certain that without fanaticism and blind faith, they would have shied away from this work at the first stage of experimentation. The result fully justified the ambitions of the People's Opera's management.

Frigyes ("Fritz") Reiner crafted a marvel from the human resources at his disposal. He had already given much proof of his talent and aptitude, and after his coaching of *Parsifal*, we must immediately class him among the leaders of his profession.

Sándor Bihar's abilities were revealed to an imposing extent in the role of Gurnemanz. His acting talent and mighty voice have predestined him for this role. His declamation is fully Wagnerian, and his enunciation is coherent and clean.

Anthes's Parsifal is classically sculpted. Full of loftiness and towering strength. The inexperienced youth and the seasoned knight are both depicted with plasticity and deliberation. Teréz Krammer was also excellent. In summary of all this, the *Parsifal* performance was an extremely important, outstanding event not only for the People's Opera, but for our collective artistic life. An event in the best sense of the word."

Aladár Bálint  
(*Nyugat*, 1914, No. 2)

## Great moments

### Glimpses of the history of the People's Opera/City Theatre

# 1918

"When, at the start of the last season, the People's Opera took on the name of City Theatre, one of the new christener's resolutions was to compensate in the repertoire for the lack of "opera" in the theatre's name. Last year, the promise became reality only to a very small extent, as *Márta* was the only opera production. (It is better if we forget about the Préger guest appearances). After the packed performance series of the Flotow opera, however, the awakening sense of conscience, the best alarm clocks for which are poor box office figures, compelled the management to make a new promise, this time with a guarantee. The promise was that, come hell or high water, from now on there will be two opera performances each week, and the guarantee is the appointment of **Dezső Márkus** as Principal Music Director. Truly, the "indemnification" – to use a phrase from the language of foreign affairs – for the adventurous past of the theatre at Kálmán Tisza Square can comprise only high-quality, for which, with the current high water, no great sacrifice is required. And let us not forget that if the finest actor cannot easily take on a new type of role, the same is true for theatres as well. The building originally built for 3,500 opera listeners and now "masquerading" as an enormous theatre can only be a true home for operatic music."

(István Péterfi, 16 October 1918)



○ **DEZSŐ MÁRKUS** | Photo: Székely Aladár - Opera House Commemorative Collection

# 1923

"The 'most elegant concert of the year 1923 is again attached to the name of **Jenő Hubay**, whose Petőfi Symphony we premièred on 26 February 1923 in the City Theatre. The evening's festival atmosphere was elevated by the occasion, which kicked off the Petőfi Centenary. The Petőfi Symphony consists of four parts, written for four solo voices, a large orchestra, and a combined and children's chorus. Here, too, the composer found employment for more than 300 people: the Philharmonic Society, the Opera House's combined chorus, the Palestrina Chorus, the Budai Singing Club and children's choirs. Petőfi was personified by Ferenc Székelyhid, with Anna Medek singing Julia Szendrey, Vilma Tihany as Genius, and Béla Venczell as Death. Before the symphony was played, Mari Jászai recited *End of September* in Hungarian and English, followed by Nelly Huszka in French, Lola Grill in German and Erzsi Paulay in Italian. We also had the programme printed in five languages."

(Imre Kun)

# 1924

"Nomen est omen: In the last month, we have read about the simultaneous crises of the Berlin, Vienna and Budapest 'People's Operas'. A favourable early sign of the start of the new regime, however, is that the theatre, witness to a great many tempests, can commence its operation with **Hermann Jadlowker**, the most popular name from its past. Even today, his name translates into a full house. The hero of the hottest people's opera soirées of the happy peacetime was heard by the audience filling the theatre to the last seat, with Jadlowker choosing the part with which he first won over the Hungarian audience: Don José from *Carmen*."

(István Péterfi, Világ, 18 November 1924)



○ **JENŐ HUBAY** | Photo: Opera House Commemorative Collection

○ **FELIX WEINGARTNER**



# 1926

"Today's performance of *Carmen* at the City Theatre was supposed to have been conducted by **Felix Weingartner**, but the world-famous conductor, who had been contracted for 40 appearances at Géza Sebestyén's theatre this year, suddenly tore up his contract this evening. The reason for the break-up was the fact that the theatre's management had given the role of Micaele to Teréz Közszeghy, while the director had wished to send Gizi Kármán to the stage. Since neither party would relax their stance, Weingartner is as of today no longer conducting Bizet's opera and, as matters now stand, will not be making any further appearances at the conductor's podium on Kálmán Tisza Square."

(István Péterfi, Magyar Hírlap, 5 November 1926)

# 1927

"While last year we made the acquaintance of the great Russian artist as part of a concert at the colosseum on Kálmán Tisza Square, the real meeting was nevertheless not until today, when we put Gounod's music together with Goethe's fantasy poem. **Chaliapin's Mephistopheles** was neither such an elegant man of the world as Journet's masterful performance not long ago, nor as demonic as Baklanov was, nor as bat-like as Bohnen's nowadays much copied figure, nor like Titta Ruffo's, but he was in every sense of the word peerless. With the magic of an outsized personality, every element merges inside him, and even the being's joviality is integrated stylishly into the picture. Chaliapin is one of the true princes of the musical performing arts, with a glorious voice, perfection in his singing, stage presence, and theatrical acting."

(István Péterfi, Magyar Hírlap, 15 May 1927)



○ **FEODOR CHALIAPIN** | Photo: Opera House Commemorative Collection

"He enchanted us with his voice, made us giddy with his gestures, and surprised us with his mimicry. **Chaliapin** was profoundly and staggeringly Human, because he cannot be a devil even if he wants to be. His astonishing singing skill, miraculous vocal material, and an endurance sufficient to put famous dramatic actors to shame all served to open the human soul in the most profound and universal way."

(Aladár Tóth, 15 May 1927)

## Great moments



1928

"The City Theatre stages operas at the end of nearly every season. This year, under the baton of the world-famous and hugely talented young conductor from Milan's La Scala, Antonino Votto, our Italian guests will be presenting *Rigoletto*, *La Bohème*, *The Barber of Seville* and *Aida*. As an opening performance, they have selected *Rigoletto*, with its most famous member, Carlo Galeffi, in the title role, Margherita Salvi as Gilda and Alessandro Vesseloni as the Duke of Mantua."

(István Péterfi, *Magyar Hírlap*, 12 June 1928)

praise. While the role of Cavaradossi is not the most suitable for showing off his delicate phrasing, we could nevertheless feel and enjoy Gigli's artistic talent for interpretation even despite this. Already in the aria in the first act, he made a deep impression with the artistic shaping of his song. His passionate outburst in the second act came out with instinctive, masculine force. The high point was *Elucevan le stelle*. Three times he sang this hackneyed aria, but it managed to be new and gripping, without leaving us feeling it was all for the sake of effect."

(István Péterfi, *Magyar Hírlap*, 29 May 1929)

"**Chaliapin** brought to life precisely the Don Quixote we imagine when reading *Cervantes*. It was not for the late Massenet opera, but for Chaliapin that the enormous auditorium of the City Theatre filled up on Friday evening. (...) Massenet wrote it for him, and it is difficult to imagine anyone else in the role. We do not know whether anyone else would have dared take it on after Chaliapin. The great Russian artist emotes the entire tragedy of *Cervantes*'s "sad-faced" knight. An immortal figure from centuries of literature rises to life, and in addition to tragedy, profound human philosophy is also brought into play in his splendid acting and singing. He arrests us from the moment he appears on the stage in his wonderful



mask, and when we watch him, we listen to him and do not even concern ourselves with the slow course of the monotone music."

(István Péterfi, *Magyar Hírlap*, 30 November 1929)

"It is half past seven in the evening. The traffic on Kálmán Tisza Square could easily match that of the Paris Opera on its busiest nights. Private cars and taxis in their hundreds poured out audience members for the great singer's Budapest première. Curious onlookers lined the pavement on both sides. This audience stared at the overcoats and those entering the theatre, and criticised them. Inside, in the City Theatre's auditorium, among the tails and tuxedos, ladies glittered in luxurious dress. Many were there in representation of the artistic world, including Sándor Heves, director of the National Theatre, László Beöthy, director of the Király

Theatre, Jenő Hubay, Erzsé Péchy, Hanna Honthy, Márton Rátkay, Zsolt Harsányi, Dániel Jób and, naturally, the directors of the City Theatre, Géza and Dezső Sebestyén. After the third performance, the celebration of Chaliapin gave way to ecstasy. The audience chattered about pleasure, unforgettable pleasure, a princely gift. What was Chaliapin doing in his dressing room throughout all this? He was sitting calmly, while across from him Jenő Feiks drew "the great Muscovite", and afterwards asked Chaliapin, since it had emerged that he was a gifted caricaturist, whether he would be kind enough to draw himself... A moment later Chaliapin handed over to Feiks his marvellously well executed self-caricature, recording his highly characteristic face with one or two lines. The fifth act truly hypnotised the audience in its depiction of the injured knight's demise, the *Pauvre Chevalier*'s death scene. The audience felt that the "enormous" ticket prices were small compared to the pleasure received. Every viewer had overpaid by several teardrops..."

(Adorján Stella)

1930

"On Wednesday evening, after tense waiting and multiple delays, we have finally reached the season's sensational night: **Amelita Galli-Curci**'s debut. The Metropolitan Opera's world-famous singer's peerless gramophone recordings have everywhere won enormous popularity, just as the tickets have been snapped up despite the dramatically increased prices.

Galli-Curci's Budapest appearance has now for weeks been the subject of disputes between various sides and various opinions, with her 40,000 dollar fee the subject of headlines. Galli-Curci's debut has most definitely caused disappointment. The better part of the soprano's register (perhaps due to some lasting indisposition) was colourless and vulnerable to dynamic shifts. Her instrument is still capable of light and warmth in some places, but fundamentally her scale is broken so that her delicately conceived phrases crack when emitted. Apparently, she may have been suffering from serious stage fright, which would have explained missed notes. (...) When Galli-Curci's slender, sharp-featured figure appeared on the stage, she received polite applause. Even after her first notes, the audience's unease could be sensed, and this only increased when it emerged that Enzo de Muro Lomanto, La Scala's unusually rich-voiced tenor was likewise indisposed, and sang parts of his aria off key in several spots. There was hardly any applause after the first act, and some even hissed. In the second act, János Halmos took over the role of the younger Germont in place of the sick Italian singer."

(István Péterfi, *Magyar Hírlap*, 27 February 1930)

"Ever since **Amelita Galli-Curci**'s appearance on Wednesday, Budapest has been talking about hardly anything other than the American star's debacle. The expensively hired soprano received a surprisingly clamorous response from the audience, and it was feared that the singer's second appearance in *Rigoletto* might occasion a scandal in the City Theatre. (...) Galli-Curci was

today much less indisposed than in *Traviata*. The public today, despite the production's better artistic level, was still less than satisfied. It neither received the wonderful performance it had been awaiting for weeks, nor, however, was it able to witness the sensational scandal it had secretly counted on since Wednesday's news."

(István Péterfi, *Magyar Hírlap*, 1 March 1930)

"We have taken part in many sensational attractions at the vast theatre on Kálmán Tisza Square, but few can compete with Wednesday's concert. The magnificent Italian director, **Arturo Toscanini** and the New York Philharmonic made their debut for the Budapest audience, acquiring musical wonders to be remembered forever. (...) In the overture to Rossini's *Litaliana in Algeri* could be seen the creativity of the composer of *Barber of Seville*, all the scintillation and grace of Italian music; in Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony*, there was the profundity of German classical music; in Zoltán Kodály's work, *Summer Evening*, our own composer's glorious Hungarian music was on display, while Debussy's *La Mer* showed the delicate colours of French impressionism and the *Tristan* excerpt completely validated the force and passion of Wagnerian music. We are especially proud that we were able to see Kodály himself at home here at Toscanini's side, when the master called him to the podium for the booming applause. It is an incalculable honour to the entirety of Hungarian musical art that Toscanini plays works by Kodály at La Scala, in New York, and wherever he goes."

(István Péterfi, *Magyar Hírlap*, 27 May 1930)

1933

"This spring will mark the fourth anniversary of **Arturo Toscanini's** first visit to Budapest, and those who treasured the great director's performance as an unforgettable experience have been waiting for his return ever since, as were those who have now bathed in the world-renowned conductor's art for the first time. It is no wonder, then, that notwithstanding the high ticket prices and the current economic situation, the City's Theatre's enormous auditorium was packed to bursting. (A sincere acknowledgement goes to the radio's management for making listening to the concert, at least indirectly, possible for a broader segment of society.) Of the character of today's concert, we can say no more than that this Toscanini concert even surpassed the previous one, and it is now only out of homage and not with the voice of criticism that one can speak of the master of masters and his magnificent orchestra. For when he was with us that time, he had with him the bravura ensemble of New York's Philharmonic-Symphony Society, and now appeared at the helm of the Vienna Philharmonic. (...) The program was compiled splendidly: Mozart's *Symphony in D major*, Brahms's *Haydn Variations*, Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* and Wagner's overture to *Meistersinger*."

(István Péterfi, *Magyar Hírlap*, 31 October 1933)



○ **ARTURO TOSCANINI** | Photo: Otto Skall - Opera House Commemorative Collection

"The City Theatre auditorium exhibited a shining picture of The People's Opera's former spectacles on Friday night, and judging by their numbers and dress, one would think it was not at the end of the season or in the middle of an economic crisis that the audience gathered to hear **Benjamino Gigli**, heir to the throne of Caruso. The splendid Italian tenor has already been to Budapest once this year, but only to give a performance in the Vigadó Concert Hall, while now, in a single night, the audience was able to enjoy his marvellous instrument and noble vocal art both in an opera, in the role of Turiddu in *Cavalleria Rusticana*, and in a concert afterwards."

(István Péterfi, *Magyar Hírlap*, 19 May 1934)

"This evening was truly a triumph for Italian vocal art and its peerlessly differentiated culture of marvellously crystallised human voice, whose pinnacle is tonight's hero, **Benjamino Gigli**. (...) With him, we do not feel even the most phenomenal vocal effects to be the result of artfulness. He is honest, open and direct, like a big child. He feels what he feels in his heart so strongly that there is nothing for his enormous and rich treasure of a tenor



○ **WILHELM FURTWÄNGLER** | Photo: Opera House Commemorative Collection

to "add", but much more to express. So deeply can he lose himself in his own feelings that no bravura cleverness or virtuoso calculation can surpass this heavenly innocence."

(Aladár Tóth, 19 May 1934)

On the programme: the greatest musical creation of all time, the *Ninth Symphony*, and one of the greatest creations of the Hungarian spirit, the *Psalmus Hungaricus*. On the stage: one of the world's most famous orchestras, the Vienna Philharmonic, together with the Metropolitan Choir of Budapest, of which, after its success in Vienna, we can now speak of as one of the foremost choruses. Soloists: Elisabeth Schumann and Richard Mayr, with Enid Szántó and Endre Rösler, in one word the most select quartet of soloists. Finally, at the conductor's podium: the greatest living conductor, **Toscanini**. After so many superlatives, it is almost pointless to add that on Monday a musical event was held in the City Theatre the like of which today's Hungarian audience has never participated in before.

(Aladár Tóth, 23 October 1934)

1935

**Furtwängler** at the helm of the Vienna Philharmonic! It was a worthy closing chord for the great orchestral evenings with which the bustling concert organisers of Budapest have been outdoing themselves! After the unsurpassable Toscanini, then Mengelberg, Weingartner and Bruno Walter, it is truly only Furtwängler who had been missing from the now nearly complete list of great conductors to visit Budapest. (...) It is with peerless force of genius that he brings to life Beethoven's heroic struggles with life and destiny. Where these heroic struggles are invoked: there perhaps none of today's conductors can touch Furtwängler in terms of genius. Or at least we have never heard the Egmont Overture or the Sixth Symphony in such amazing interpretations, as we did in today's Furtwängler concert. It is true that Furtwängler's visions never disperse the mists that obscure life's deepest happiness, and that the Furtwänglerian tempests bring no catharsis: after they pass, the muggy atmosphere never quite clears, and the sun never comes out in its full glory. Their greatness does not allow what is missing from them to be forgotten, in such a symphonic poem as the *Pastoral Symphony*, the "tempest" is merely an episode, after which one may better rejoice in the clear sky. In Furtwängler's *Pastoral Symphony*, the sky never fully clears, the glorious harmony of nature did not greet us with the boundless happiness with which it once completely filled Beethoven's spirit. This happiness-inducing romance of nature was, however, closer to the spirit of the artists of the Viennese orchestra. What it produced in the symphony was truly the pinnacle of all orchestral art."

(Aladár Tóth, 13 April 1935)  
In the City Theatre on Tuesday, we

could again marvel at the peerless musical wonder whose name is **Toscanini**. Once again, we were moved by the greatest personality of musical performance, and through this, the most profound enchantment of the classical Italian spirit. (...) It would be unnecessary to explain to those who heard Toscanini's *Eroica Symphony* today that the highest words of praise for this interpretation are inadequate, even slight deviations seem vulgar. (...) An entire study could be written, but by somebody who is able to comprehend Beethoven in words just as Toscanini comprehended him with the splendid orchestra, the Vienna Philharmonic. We admit that after the Beethoven symphony, we were only able to half pay attention to the subsequent works on the programme. And here, too, there was enough to fully engage the listener's heart and soul. Foremost among them was the Paris version of the overture and bacchanalia from *Tannhäuser*. (...) And, afterwards, Berlioz's *Rákoczi March*. And did Toscanini's orchestral artistry not lend this evening, in Sibelius's *Saga*, such colours that properly showed the Finnish composer's poetic originality to the Budapest audience for the very first time? Finally, the touchingly big-hearted gesture with which Toscanini made a triumph out of his fellow Italian, the cultured and ceaselessly inventive Castelnuovo-Tedesco's overture to Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*."

(Aladár Tóth, 4 December 1935)

1936

"At Edwin Fischer's Thursday concert in the crowded City Theatre, the

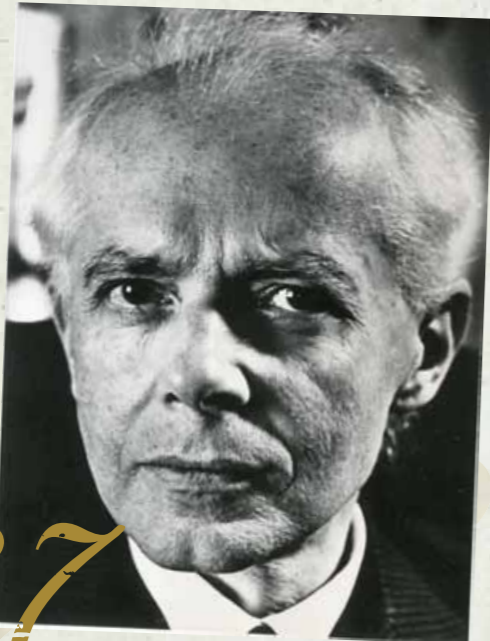
way our excellent philharmonic musicians surrounded the great artist, the way they took from him the fiery inspiration of his enormous artistic spirit: that beautiful musical community, in which the musicians unfolded the wings of their endlessly grasping fantasy, as good as brought to life before us the empathetic atmosphere of the music of Bach. (...) The enjoyable character of the evening, however, was even enhanced when Fischer – in the second piece, the *Concerto for Two Pianos in C minor* – received no lesser an artistic personality than **Béla Bartók** as his partner. The great Hungarian composer – just like Fischer – respects, in the piano as an instrument, the universal interpretation of the music's poetry. What also goes without saying is that Bartók himself is the only modern composer who has enriched the piano literature not with specialties, but with an entire, universal world of musical poetry. This is also reflected in Bartók's piano playing, which is unsurpassable in its expressive force."

(Aladár Tóth, 28 February 1936)

"A remarkably good orchestral evening featuring Béla Bartók and Edwin Fischer unfolded at the City Theatre on 27 February 1936. At this concert, Bartók and Fischer together played Bach's *Concerto for Two Pianos in C minor*. (Béla Bartók sat at the first piano.) A long dispute had taken place early on as both artists modestly insisted that the other take the lead. Finally, Fischer won out, saying that, "where Béla Bartók plays, only he can be the lead player, and therefore Edwin Fischer shall take the second spot." The two-piano concert was so successful that the two artists had

to repeat the entire work, which is something unprecedented in my 30 years of experience as a director."

(Imre Kun)



○ BÉLA BARTÓK | Photo: Opera House Commemorative Collection

"On 4 May 1937, the Budapest audience once again received a sensational delight from the world class when **Béla Bartók, Ernő Dohnányi** and **Edwin Fischer** all appeared in a concert held at the City Theatre, playing together Bach's three Piano Concertos in D minor. Here, too, Béla Bartók sat at the first piano. Even room No. 10 on the 3rd floor of the Music Academy was filled for the great artists' rehearsal sessions."

(Imre Kun)

"The season begins with the greatest of music festivals: **Toscanini** is directing, and this means the very pinnacle of the performing arts. (...) Even the critic can only report on his

emotions, and not his thoughts, at such a time, in the moments after the concert starts. And on the externalities. And on the compelling and varied programme, which included Vivaldi's *Concerto in D minor*, Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, Bizet's *Arlesienne Suite* and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The Vienna Philharmonic, splendid ensemble that it is, is still today worthy of Toscanini, whose inventions it was able to follow with the greatest precision and express in bravura form. The maestro and his colleagues were showered with the most enthusiastic ovations all evening from the grateful listeners."

(István Péterfi, *Magyar Hírlap*, 14 October November 1937)

# 1939

"It is not an infrequent occurrence for the luminaries of the opera stage to visit us only when their glorious names no longer presage a similarly brilliant voice. This is probably the reason why only a surprisingly small audience came out to the City Theatre for **Aureliano Pertile's** first Budapest appearance on Tuesday. Nevertheless, the great Italian singer still stands at the zenith of his career. His voice is unbroken and he is a cleanly resonant clear tenor in both his fortes and pianos, while the suggestiveness and movement of his art, is so compelling that he keeps every listener in his spell throughout. In every respect, Pertile should be ranked among the most outstanding opera singer personalities of all times. (...) an entire study could be written about his wonderful Otello."

(István Péterfi, *Újság*, 14 October 1939)

"Neither the summer heat, nor the end of the season hold back the audience when their favourites are advertised on the playbill. The Hungarian capital hardly has a more favoured singer than **Jan Kiepura**. It was here that he started his world-conquering career, and he has always returned with new accolades. Either personally or through films, the relationship was permanent, and, through his Hungarian wife Márta Eggerth, he now even counts himself as one of our own. On Monday evening, the spacious auditorium of the City Theatre was nearly full, and from the moment he appeared, a spirited ovation greeted the world-famous Polish artist. He started his guest performance series for this year with one of his favourite roles, Cavaradossi from *Tosca*."

(István Péterfi, *Újság*, 13 June 1939)

○ ERNŐ DOHNÁNYI | Photo: Opera House Commemorative Collection



# 1941

"On Monday evening, the world-famous Dutch conductor **Willem Mengelberg** completed his five-concert Beethoven series at the House of Hungarian Culture. The cycle was an outstanding event not only of the musical season, but also for our reconstituted youth orchestra, in which the Metropolitan Orchestra also achieved extremely useful pedagogical results that will certainly have a bearing on its future."

(István Péterfi, *Újság*, 11 February 1941)

# 1946

"The next big sensation of our concert life was the performance organised in the City Theatre by the Hungarian-Soviet Society, in which **Emil Gilel**, a Soviet pianist hitherto unknown to us, took the stage. After his first appearance, so much Gilel-fever broke out in Budapest, it was a match for the interest displayed in Menuhin."

(Imre Kun)



○ AURELIANO PERTILE | Photo: Opera House Commemorative Collection

We need the Erkel!

# Joining forces to renovate the 100 year-old Erkel Theatre



○ SZILVESZTER ÓKOVÁCS, ÉVA MARTON, ANDRÉA RÓST, ERIKA MIKLÓSA, ILDIKÓ KOMLÓSI, KOLOS KOVÁTS | Photo: Tomas Opitz

The management and artists of the Opera House decided to supplement the amount earmarked by the government for the renovation of the Erkel Theatre with a charity gala night and auction, because, as Szilveszter Ókovács said in the winter of 2011, *"The Erkel's traditions as a people's opera, as well as its mission to bring opera, ballet and musicals to audiences from both Budapest and elsewhere in Hungary, at affordable prices and in an easily accessible location, are important to everyone."*

They announced the charity campaign, with its proceeds destined for the renovation, under the name *"Erkel nekünk!"* or *"We need the Erkel!"* The opening event of the initiative was the Erkel night on 18 February 2012, for which valuable relics connected to the worlds of opera and ballet – including costumes worn by famous singers and exclusive paintings and decorative objects – were put up for auction.



○ ERKEL 100 | Photo: Tomas Opitz

We need the Erkel!

More than 60 Hungarian opera singers and ballet dancers of worldwide repute – including numerous representatives of the coming generation of artists – took to the Opera House stage at 7 pm on 18 February 2012. The Opera House donated the artists' fees, the proceeds from benefit tickets, as well as the total revenue from the evening's auction to the Erkel Theatre's renovation and to the construction of a new ballet studio. The special event was even broadcast live by Hungarian Television, Duna Television and Bartók Radio. During the broadcast, the public was invited to join the campaign by making a donation.

Even from its conception, this monumental gala night was the symbol of this artistic and social campaign, the importance of which was also proved by the fact that singer Éva Marton and dancers Imre Dózsa and László Seregi, all Kossuth prize winners, agreed to serve as the event's chief patrons. Every single one of the Hungarian opera and ballet

stars featured that night donated their fees to the noble cause, and many artists even purchased benefit tickets, since they regard the Erkel Theatre's renovation as a matter close to their hearts and their contribution as an investment in the future of Hungarian opera performance. Aside from the revenues from the purchase of tickets for the gala night, anyone – private individuals and companies – was invited to make a contribution. The gala – which was hosted by Erika Miklósa and Szilveszter Ókovács – included performances of popular arias by Erkel, Verdi, Puccini, Mozart, Bizet, Strauss and Leoncavallo, accompanied by the Hungarian State Opera House Orchestra, while the Hungarian National Ballet staged a modern dance fantasy, and the students of the Hungarian Dance Academy performed a *palotás* or palace dance. The hostess of the gala, Erika Miklósa, expressed how important the Erkel Theatre is to her and to all Hungarian artists with the following words: *"I made my debut in the Erkel Theatre as Papagena."*

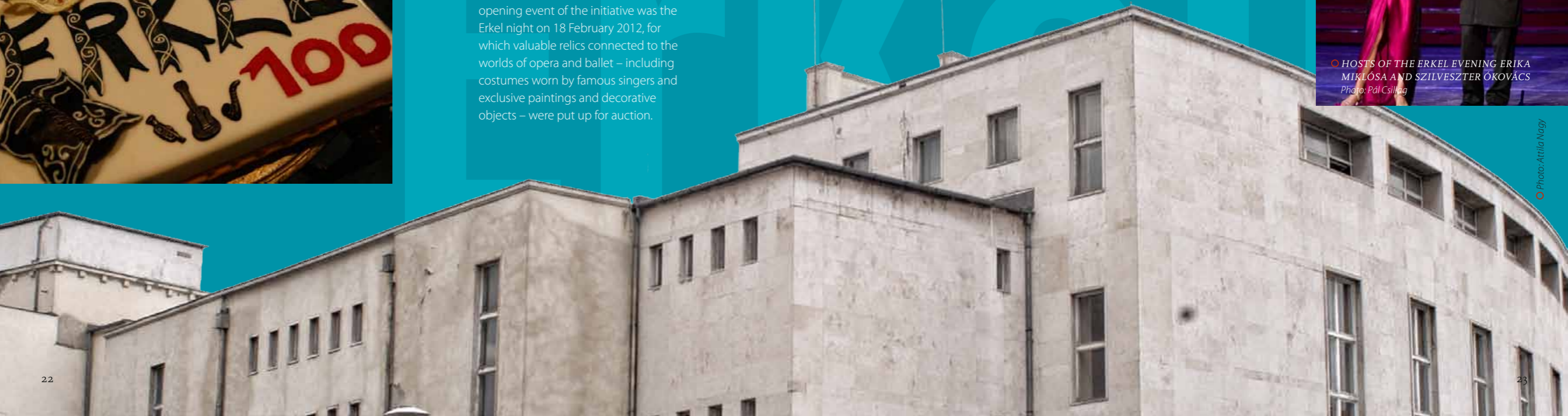
*It was an enormous thrill to sing there: its acoustics are magical. The Erkel had become part of our lives: we miss it, and I am very glad that I too am able to contribute a little to its renovation."*



○ PALOTÁS DANCE BY THE HUNGARIAN DANCE ACADEMY ON THE ERKEL EVENING | Photo: Pál Csillag



○ HOSTS OF THE ERKEL EVENING ERIKA MIKLÓSA AND SZILVESZTER ÓKOVÁCS | Photo: Pál Csillag



# Jazz

at the Erkel

Author: Tamás Pallós



○ ELLA FITZGERALD

# RAY

While it might be said that it was only in the 1960s that jazz really came into its own in Hungary, it was well before then that the genre appeared on the Budapest cultural scene. Jazz concerts had been organised between the wars, and the “white king” of jazz Paul Whiteman himself had appeared with his band in the city. (It was Whiteman who commissioned *Rhapsody in Blue*, and his orchestra that first premiered George Gershwin’s work, with the composer himself featured on the piano.)

The 1928 Hungarian premiere of the jazz opera *Jonny Strikes Up* by the Czech-Austrian-American trailblazer Ernst Krenek took place in the City Theatre. In 1938, the building also hosted a jazz series as the country’s biggest “concert event”. Several concerts were also held in 1948 and 1949, but after that, most likely because they were considered undesirable in the eastern bloc due to the *kulturpolitika* of the time, and as “American music” were not tolerated and therefore omitted from the programme schedule.

After Louis Armstrong’s enormously successful and, in terms of its later impact, breakthrough concert in the

# KENTON

People’s Stadium in 1965, the greats of the golden age of jazz started to pay visits to Hungary at an ever increasing rate, with the most important blues and jazz concerts being held at the Erkel Theatre. This grand tradition started in 1968 with Ella Fitzgerald, and then went on to include Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie and Oscar Peterson, followed by Lionel Hampton, Ray Charles, Charlie Mingus, Art Blakey, Thelonious Monk, Stan Kenton, Stan Getz, Benny Goodman and many others.

András Pernye, critic from Magyar Nemzet (Hungarian Nation) and composer of the first comprehensive Hungarian book on jazz, set down his concert experiences, in the form of a chronicle.

“She knows everything that a performer can and should know. Her personal attraction is irresistible, and may well simply be effortless. She simply sings. (...) What was achieved in the Erkel Theatre, the art’s elevation to this kind of level, could not have been foreseen by anyone. Even if we had somehow switched off the enchantment of her personality, her presence in the full sense of the word, even if we had been listening to her

# GOODMAN

# FLANAGAN

# HAMPTON

live the same way we would a record – even in that case we would have to declare her Budapest concert one of the highlights of her life,” he wrote of Ella Fitzgerald’s Budapest concert.

It was with equal enthusiasm that he wrote of the singer’s 1970 appearance at the Erkel Theatre: “This was the embodiment of performance art: every move she makes is fascinating beyond words. When she stands at the podium, the world is at her command. Of her 52 years of life, she spent 36 at the podium; her career has arced steadily and uninterruptedly upward to this day. (...) Ella Fitzgerald puts her all into creating a lively medium for good music, in order to mould the Erkel Theatre’s more than two thousand listeners into a single audience focused on a single thing. (...) The song *Summertime* – like at every Fitzgerald concert – was sung slightly differently here, slightly differently than ever before, but was nevertheless once again the most beautiful part.”

Anyone can verify his latter statement, since an album was released of the recording made from the outstanding evening. The record, highly prized among devotees of the genre, has given Budapest and the Erkel Theatre a place in international jazz history.

# FITZGERALD

# WHITEMAN



András Pernye’s next report deals with Count Basie, the grand master of swing-style big band music. “It would be fair to say that the audience filling the Erkel Theatre to the rafters a few days ago greeted Count Basie’s big band with unusual anticipation and the affection one has for an old friend. (...) Even today, we can feel in Count Basie’s playing the vestiges of the Harlem School that flourished in the late twenties and early thirties – but essentially surpasses this school with his trademark economical, but, at the same time, endlessly probing improvisation method, which in the wink of an eye conjures up and suggestively relays to us the true world of the blues. (...) Basie speaks on the piano.”

In the annals of the jazz concerts in the theatre’s history, the musical summit meeting of 1 November 1971, anomalous even by world standards, is certainly deserving of mention. “There was a bona fide jazz festival on Monday at the Erkel Theatre. It is

without exaggeration that we consider it a standout concert in the life of Hungarian jazz. In the programme’s first half, Dizzy Gillespie’s sextet played, followed by Duke Ellington’s big band orchestra in the second.” Pernye’s review covers the paragon of trumpet virtuosos and Ellington’s musical delights. It is with similar enthusiasm that he wrote of the returning Oscar Peterson’s evening as well: His trio’s concert in the Erkel Theatre was the apotheosis of jazz music.

The jazz evenings of the seventies made up for lost time by bridging, at the last moment, so to speak, the forced hiatus of several decades by bringing us the great and legendary ambassadors of lighter (?) classical music and improvisation in their twilight years.

# ELLA

# DIZZY

# E



○ BÁNK BÁN (1969) - KAROLA ÁGAI  
Photo: Opera House Archive



○ BÁNK BÁN (1969) - ERZSÉBET KOMLÓSSY  
Photo: Opera House Archive

## Reminiscing on the Erkel, attempting the impossible

Author: Tímea Papp

Let us make one thing clear from the start: briefly summarising the most memorable evenings from the 60 years since the opening in 1953 of the theatre named after Erkel is a practically impossible undertaking. These walls guard the memories of moments related to Hungarian music and dance, significant dates for the artists appearing here, of the professional lives of the building's workers – and, of course, the personal experiences of the audience, which may relate to a significant performance, or to entirely private moments.

Doing so in a telegram style is not an option. Even a list of key performances would fill pages. Because, although 60 years is a short time in the history of a country, it is a long time not only in the life of a person, but also of a theatre, since every season opening *Bánk bán* or *Hunyadi László*, every single première, renovation, coaching, new performer, debut role, understudy

performance, jubilee, guest appearance and dress rehearsal is quite an event in and of itself. Of course, there are also occasions when the reprise is more of a “façade overhaul”, the picking over of the much-worn and trampled path – to quote from a 1988 text, *Film, Theatre and Music* – where the guest artist did not live up to the audience's expectations. This, however, by necessity, is part of what it is to operate a theatre.

As we browse through the yearbooks and read through the articles, recommendations, gushing interviews, reports and *post-facto* criticism appearing in the contemporary press, we might feel some excitement after a few lines for what splendid evenings the former Köztársaság (Republic) Square has hosted. To such an extent that one would quite like to sit down in a time machine to see, at the height of their powers, those artists whose voices a generation has only known via digital recordings. Or indeed today's

stars starting their careers as music academy or ballet institute students, or studying direction at the theatrical college.

The Erkel Theatre's photo album is thick, colourful and unusually rich. Open a few pages at random, and we see it would be impossible to count the number of Hungarian opera singers and ballet artists who appeared before an audience here, while it would only be a small exaggeration to say that the guest performers, who often raised the evening's performance to a higher level, were lining up at the door.

They arrived from both inside and outside the country's borders, from neighbouring countries and distant continents. Many came from the opera departments of provincial theatres, while the favourites of prose theatre and television regularly played in operettas and singspiels at the Erkel. There were those who did not know with whom they would be performing or singing, because they only got one or two chances to rehearse, while others were able to spend a longer period with the company, with Budapest artists able to work through the coaching process with a handful of outstanding conductors.

There were later companies that did not collaborate in performances of the Hungarian State Opera. Instead, the audience would see them in the Erkel as part of a one-off evening, a festival or other cultural event. The Budapest Arts Weeks or the Soviet Culture Days, the Great October Socialist Revolution and the Victory Day festival programmes no longer exist, but the pages of yearbooks preserve these as well, just as they do the legendary song nights and concerts.

And then we still have not spoken about the subjective factor, since different memories stay with everyone. There are those who do not even remember the performance, but rather an entirely personal story, a moment, a glittering pair of eyes – whether belonging to a girl or a boy – glimpsed through the crowd, a date, a lost umbrella, the first sunshine of spring or the first snow, something good, something irritating, something entirely unpleasant.

Thus we can really only undertake to illuminate a few frames from this legend-filled past, to mention a few names and titles. Because the past is extraordinarily rich. Not lacking in lessons, but also offering cause for



○ BÁNK BÁN (1983) - BÁLINT HORVÁTH, KATALIN PITTÍ | Photo: Opera House Archive



○ HUNYADI LÁSZLÓ (1972) - JÚLIA FORGÁCS, LÁSZLÓ SZIGETI | Photo: Opera House Archive



○ HUNYADI LÁSZLÓ (1972) - GABRIELLA ZSIGMOND, ISTVÁN RÓKA | Photo: Opera House Archive

pride, as well as the strength needed for future success.

“The Budapest opera audience in our day is much tamer than it was back when it marked down as failures the likes of Caruso and Galli-Curci. The Pest public is a good one, grateful for the excellent guest artists it could see this year, and deserves in the future for the theatre's management to present even more big names, and even better singers and dancers,” wrote Iván Kertész in the 1971/72 season yearbook. A good 40 years later, we can only agree with him.

### OPERA

#### Hungarian guests

Tivadar Bilicsi played the father, Christian Tschöll, in *Das Dreimäderlhaus* (“*Lilac Time*”) for many years, and Kálmán Latabár came over from Nagymező Street to play the jailer Frosch in *Die Fledermaus*, providing an emblematic depiction. János Sárdy could be seen in the title role of *János vitéz* (“*Sir John*”), with Róbert Rátonyi as the King of France and Margit Ladomerszky as the stepmother in Pongrácz Kacsóh's beloved piece. Most certainly among the items of interest is the fact that in Britten's opera, a *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Erzsébet

Kútvölgyi (in the 1972/1973 season, her name was still listed with the note that she was a “college student”) and Teréz Vághegy were Puck in a double cast. Miklós Benedek took the stage as King Bobeche in *Bluebeard*, to no little praise: “In a guest appearance, the artist from the National Theatre gave a scintillating theatrical performance with his portrayal of the degenerate, vain and constantly irate ruler. (...) from beginning to end, he acted as though he were in his home theatre.”

Can a prose actor receive any greater praise from someone in the opera world? Prose directors making excursions into the genre of opera – although it has to be said their number is few – have not managed to avoid preconceptions and prejudices. They have had to meet high expectations, and opera critics demanded a novel approach of them, regardless of whether the piece was well known or infrequently played.

Today, it is difficult to explain – and this is why we should not even try – why our first-rate, globe-trotting Hungarian artists are, purely for administrative purposes, not members of the Opera – Lívia Budai (under the name Lívia Budai-Batky as well), Júlia Hamari, Sándor Kónya, who regularly sings Edgar in *Lucia di Lammermoor*,

## Reminiscences



○ A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM (1972) - KAROLA ÁGAT, ENDRE ÚTÓ, TERÉZ VÁRHEGYI | Photo: Opera House Archive

László Polgár and even Éva Márton – are listed as foreign guest artists. And while we are on the subject of unusual stories, we must also mention the fact that, over the course of several years, the highly rated foreign guest artist Anatolij Fokanov became, by reversing his name in the Hungarian manner, one of the finest Hungarian singers as “Fokanov Anatolij”.

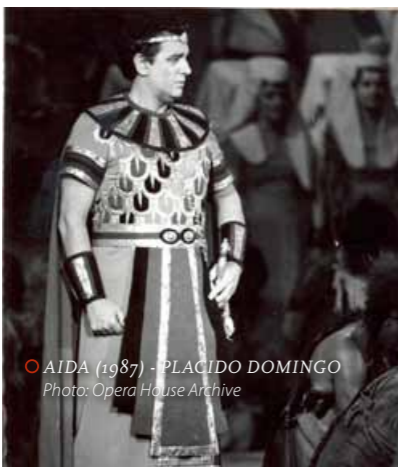
### Foreign guests

“We have indeed entered the world’s oft-mentioned musical circulatory system, namely as a mutual friend. (...) There are those who are new to us, and thus far only their reputation has reached us, but there are also those who have already taken the stage two, three or even four times in Budapest,” acknowledges Marianna Gách in the Hungarian State Opera House’s yearbook for the 1970/71 season.

Guest performances, particularly those by foreign artists, were also accompanied by heightened attention. They received a great deal of hype,

and the criticism on nearly every single occasion began with a paraphrase of the sentence on how the critic had waited for the performance with great anticipation, but also trepidation, since who could not know what kind of singing condition the visiting world star would be, as the powerful voice heard on the record could weaken on the stairs, and without strong directors and partners, they could lose their acting ability, while even the slightest error on the part of a well known performer could easily cause disappointment. A guest appearance is quite important professionally, since guest and host are each measured against the other.

Among the guest conductors directing at the Erkel, one must mention the name of Lamberto Gardelli, who arrived in Budapest at the invitation of the legendary János Ferencsik and who did a great deal for the development of the Italian repertoire and for raising musical standards. The Italian maestro made his debut in Budapest in 1960 with *Le Compte Ory*, and, up until his 1993 *Aida*, conducted between these walls a string of operas, including both works from the core repertoire and lesser known ones, such as *William Tell*, *La Traviata*, *Rigoletto*, *I Lombardi*, *Norma*, *Tosca*, *Ernani*, *La forza del destino*, *La Gioconda*, *La fiamma* and *Manon*



○ AIDA (1987) - PLACIDO DOMINGO | Photo: Opera House Archive

*Lescaut*. Iván Kertész, the noted opera critic and constant fixture at the Opera House and Erkel Theatre, characterised Gardelli, who also received the title of honorary citizen of Budapest, as “the theatre-lover’s guest conductor, the specialist in romantic Italian operas”. We could put it no more succinctly ourselves, at most adding a few immutable epithets: he painstakingly builds up the dramatic arcs, gives the soloists a sure footing, and his temperamental, energetic and magical presence was captivating.

Also serving for many years, exactly two decades from 1985 to 2005, was the opera venue’s first guest conductor, Rico Saccani, the Italian-American conductor who returned often to the Erkel. In 1986, he conducted *La Bohème* with Luciano Pavarotti, which was followed by *Nabucco*, *Rigoletto* and *Manon Lescaut* (and, of course, he also conducted at the Opera House in the same period).

We are now in February of 1973, and the critics write of someone, “a true world star has come to Budapest, the most celebrated tenor of the ’70s. He has come to us neither callow nor aged, but in full flower, and he sang to astonish everyone.” “The greatest singer of recent years, perhaps the finest tenor of the decade, whose Cavaradossi in February restored even the most pessimistic opera-goer’s faith in the meaning and future of the genre.” “The young singing titan’s Budapest première was a true triumph.” Who could this be? As a hint, here is an interview quote: “Even today, I have not given up on becoming a conductor (...) It is my express intention to step aside when I reach the peak of my singing abilities and possibilities. I will not wait for the

years of decline and darken the good memories of the audience. And then I will wield the director’s baton in my hand.” Give up? Plácido Domingo is still yet to step aside – to our great fortune – although he has been conducting for some time.

The then 32-year-old tenor arrived in Budapest not long before his 900th performance, where he donned the costume of Cavaradossi for exactly the 70th time. Asked why he guest performed this role the most frequently, he responded, “because there is little time to rehearse on tour. *Tosca* is performed everywhere, and the stage directions for it are the same nearly everywhere.” One thing, however, was different on the evening of 16 February 1973. Lajos Katona was singing the role of the sacristan for the 150th time, and on this jubilee occasion, he was not only congratulated, but asked what he was doing “*mit csinálsz?*” in Hungarian on stage during the performance, instead of the usual “*Che fai?*”

It is well known that Domingo is not one for encores: in his career up until then he had only encored *E lucevan le stelle* in Belgrade. And he also did it in Budapest for his partners and the viewers: “Henceforth, I will consider the Budapest audience among the very best. It was a wonderful evening. I’m happy that I’ve experienced this, too!” said the artist, who in 1987 returned to the Erkel for a performance of *Aida*, in which Elena Obraztsova was his partner as Amneris.

But let us jump back briefly to the period around 16 February 1973 when guest singers were truly coming in droves to the stages of the Opera House and the Erkel Theatre. Aside

from Domingo, Nikolai Ogrenich, Ticho Parly, Klara Barlow and Leonie Rysanek also all sang, and Lucia Stanescut was also scheduled, but she cancelled immediately before the performance. Something almost unthinkable today is that all of the guest performances were available as part of season subscriptions, with the exception of Rysanek’s *Tosca*. The Austrian soprano’s depiction proved to be the stuff of revelation, winning undivided acclaim, and the critics did not hold back their rapture: “Leonie Rysanek is one of those great artists who restore a person’s – frequently battered – faith in the genre of opera.”

As for the other third of the “three tenors”, it was not only the audience at the Népstadion that had the opportunity to cheer his performance. At the start of his career in 1976, José Carreras came to Budapest for the first time, debuting in the role of Riccardo from *Un ballo in maschera* and Rodolfo in *La Bohème*, and then later as Edgar in *Lucia di Lammermoor* and in the title role of *Don Carlos*. Luciano Pavarotti’s name was as yet unknown in the sixties, but in spring of 1986, it became less so when as Rodolfo in *La Bohème*, perhaps the role closest to his heart, he took the stage at the Erkel. Though reaping a celebrated success – together with his student, Madelyn Renée – Hungarian critics did pick out two more than minor details: one that his aria was transposed a half-note lower, and two, that his physique, to put it mildly, was not conducive to playing the role in a credible manner.

We concede that a tenor’s, especially an Italian tenor’s, position is not easy: we expect from them a wondrous physical appearance and voice worthy of their great predecessors. When Carlo



○ LAMMERMOORI LUCIA (1966) - RENATA SCOTTO, JÓZSEF RÉTI | Photo: Opera House Archive

Bergonzi took the stage here in the seventies, they wrote that his outward appearance did not predestine him to the roles for the voice and was not ideal for romantic lovers, although his acting shone among his peers. Also considered of a very high standard was Mario Del Monaco, who visited the Erkel in 1969, at the age of 54. His voice was at the time the subject of sharp disputes across Europe, but the Hungarian audience got to hear Del Monaco, known to them from his youthful recordings, in the roles of Otello, and in later years as Samson and Caino.



○ LA BOHÈME (1986) - LUCIANO PAVAROTTI, VERONIKA KINCSES, RICO SACCANI, MADELYN RENÉE, LÁSZLÓ POLGÁR | Photo: Béla Mezey

There was, however, no such luck for Montserrat Caballé, who in the early summer of 1971 played Leonora in *Il Trovatore* and Mimi in *La Bohème* while expecting a baby. (The difficulty was probably in spite of this, because her colleagues had set the bar high. In the weeks leading up to the Catalan soprano’s appearance, Grace Bumbry,



○ DON CARLOS (1977) - JOSE CARRERAS, GYÖRGY MELIS, PENKA DÍLOVA  
Photo: Opera House Archive

the “Black Venus” at the height of her career, sang Amneris and Eboli superbly, while Renata Scotto had similarly dazzled the public in two roles, Lucia di Lammermoor and Mimi.) Her figure, in addition to her vocal indisposition, played a part in this: “As opposed to the pretty, well known stars of our times, she is excessively fleshy, and while this was forgiven on the opera stage at the beginning of the century and last century, today’s audience pays attention to the singer’s acting capability and talent, and hungers for visual stimulus. Especially at such expensive, inflated ticket prices.” The audience gave her Hungarian co-singers a much greater ovation, according to contemporary reports. Caballé bore the misfortune: “I know, and I am sorry, that my Leonora did not work well that time, and I am very disappointed with myself.”

Although we have turned up only a few foreign guest directors, two of them, in any case, have succeeded in making everyone form an opinion about their operas. Péter Molnár Gál gave the title *The Battle of the Erkel Theatre* to his critique of *Don Giovanni* in *Élet és Irodalom*, from which we quote: “The battle ensued. Lyubimov was whistled off. One might believe that this is rudeness. It is not. It is a healthy expression of dislike. A timeless right of the viewer. To my ears, the theatrical whistle is more pleasant

than applause at a mechanical tempo. Hungary does not have much say in the opinion of Lyubimov, who is good enough for the wider world. However, Hungary is right: in the matter of liking, it is asinine to invoke the argument of prestige. (...) for as long as passions clash around how *Don Giovanni* is directed, the world is a good place. (...) The change of the theatre’s structure is always witness to the change of society’s structure. It is not arbitrary taste that places the orchestra here or there. In seeking its place, the theatre of today is charging in the wrong direction.”

In the autumn of 1982, heightened anticipation surrounded the new direction of Mozart’s opera. The performance, however, went quite contrary to custom. The excellent performances on the part of the singers and conductor were in vain as, right there on the stage, undecorated and strewn with straw, was the orchestra, which Yuri Lyubimov, from Moscow’s Taganka Theatre, had attempted to actively introduce into the performance. Iván Kertész, already quoted several times above, takes an objective approach to the spectacle: “There is a highly questionable, unfocused core concept, and irritating misunderstandings and errors crop up in it, while certain situations on the stage simply remain unresolvable. At this same time, we saw extremely exciting theatre: the director livens up the piece with brilliant ideas, and almost throughout allows the music to dominate.”

Scarcely a decade ago, considerably greater passion was provoked by Katharina Wagner’s *Lohengrin*, conducted by Yuri Simonov, on which Géza Fodor opined “the new

*Lohengrin* offers a unique experience. The production takes place on two levels simultaneously: on the one hand, in a musical style that dispenses with the narcotic effect of Wagner’s music, yet still provides the empathic intensity of Wagner’s music, and on the other offers a radical criticism on a dramatic level of Wagnerian stylisation/mythologisation conflicting with the problems of life. What is not in doubt: Hungarian opera performance – not developing organically and not “up to date” – has not prepared the audience for such, and thus the problematisation of the unreflectively admired masterwork shocks the conservative majority. But for those who worry about the by no means simple or unbroken relationship between art and history, between art and life, and between art the world, the simultaneous processing of the two contradictory depictions, the interference of the two contradictory experiences could provide complex, exciting and even brilliant enjoyment.” We have to judge for ourselves where the scale points and who we hold to be in the right: those who whistle at every non-historical depiction or the other, more tolerant, side.



○ AIDA (1971) - GRACE BUMBRY | Photo: Opera House Archive



○ A PRÓBA (1982) | Photo: Opera House Archive



## Reminiscences

○ A PRÓBA (2005) | Photo: Béla Mezey - Opera House Archive

### BALLET

While premières of contemporary Hungarian operas were held primarily in the Opera House, new performances of contemporary, modern Hungarian ballet were on more than one occasion given a home by the Erkel Theatre, with its repertoire composed of *Swan Lake* and other Russian (Soviet) dance classics.

Of these compositions, the most influential and the one with the longest afterlife – also internationally, as it was premièreed in several countries, and four television channels made a film of it – was *A próba* (The Rehearsal). The music was picked out and compiled by Gábor Presser from works by Bach, with choreography by Antal Fodor. The production was received with mixed emotions: “The performers: deserving of all praise! They pull out all the stops to bring the best of their skill and the actor’s power of depiction. Mária Metzger’s solos are

bravura pieces, and in addition to her superior technical skill, she also gave a shining display of her character – forming ability. György Szakály – Judas – excelled with eye-popping turns, a great sense of balance and sizzling dramatic power. Jenő Lócsey (sic!) is a Jesus figure worthy of the camera of Zeffirelli or Pasolini.”

After the performance of *The Rehearsal*, several young viewers spoke with unanimous contempt for the snobbishness of the production and its reception. I agree and disagree with them at the same time. Truly, the work is snobbish. But let us not condemn it for this. In the end, probably many thousands of teenagers now have been introduced to the – previously unknown to them – genre of dance as a result of their curiosity about Presser’s “rock ballet” set to synthesiser music.

Fodor has also staged several of his own compositions with the company. *Viva la vita* was created from works

by Vivaldi, Bozay, Penderecki and Rossini, and has translated Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder* into the language of ballet, and *Visions* (according to genre, prelude postlude to *The Miraculous Mandarin*) was composed to music compiled of István Márta classics (Bartók, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky and Albinoni).

György Vukán not only wrote, but also directed *Derby* (choreographer/director: Péter Nagy), the ballet adapted from the novel, *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?*, and was even featured as piano soloist in the production. Some Dutch choreographers came here and attached Kylián compositions to the programme, but we can also find the names of László Seregi, Imre Eck and Sándor Barkóczy on the playbill. Variety could therefore not possibly have been a complaint of the audience of a ballet company boasting such fine artists.



○ A PRÓBA (2005) | Photo: Béla Mezey - Opera House Archive



○ A PRÓBA (1982) | Photo: Opera House Archive



# The March opening of the Erkel Theatre



**In a joint evening performance, three Hungarian ballet companies opened the approximately 2000-seat Erkel Theatre, which, after having been closed since 2007, welcomed an audience on each of 81 evenings between March 1 and June 9 after the completion of the first phase of reconstruction.**

"The Erkel is all about access. Anyone paying tax money into Hungarian opera culture, that is, everyone in this country, should have access to popular operas, ballet performances, and concerts," General Director Szilveszter Ókovács said in summary of the re-opened venue's mission in spring of 2013, adding, "It is plain that there is a great demand for the Erkel, since advance sales of tickets for the spring performances have been brisk." Ókovács, Secretary of State for Culture László L. Simon, as well as acting managing director and technical director István Mozsár, led representatives of the press around the still-under-renovation building, where, in light of Valentine's Day, all of the participants received *I love Erkel* pins.

István Mozsár and Lajos Béres, the representative from Laki Zrt., the company performing the construction work, showed the attendees the parts of the theatre being renovated first. The stage will receive an overlay that will make it suitable for the 81 spring performances, and major restructuring is going on in relation to the stage's technical equipment, last renovated in 1961. The entire wiring systems and wet areas are also being replaced, and most of the dressing rooms are being rebuilt. István Mozsár said that the aim of the first phase of reconstruction was to put in order the parts of the building that most directly support the artistic work, while preserving the important parts of the Erkel Theatre as a monument, for example, the two

giant frescoes by the grand buffet on the upper floor. At the end of the tour, the visitors were shown the *I love Erkel* photo montage on the stage, in which the artists and employees of the Opera can be seen in different areas of the theatre – most of them appearing as their "private selves", smiling into the camera with their partners beside them.

### The Erkel as online community space

The Erkel Theatre's mission is to address communities, and therefore to also reach opera fans visiting the world's most popular online social network. In honour of the 101 year-old Erkel Theatre's reopening and for the duration of the season, the first

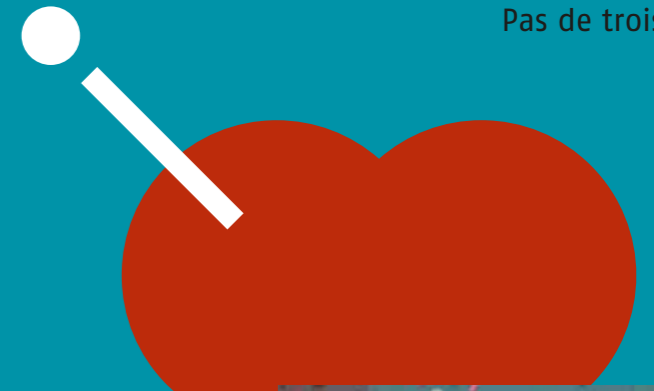


○ LAJOS BÉRES, DEPUTY CEO OF LAKIZRT, AND SZILVESZTER ÓKOVÁCS SIGNING THE RENOVATION CONTRACT | Photo: Tomas Opitz

51 visitors to the site each evening, 101 people (fifty couples and one solo visitor) in total, to "like" the post referring to that evening's production were invited to see the production at a ticket price of 101 forints. The members of the audience winning the "Facebook" tickets took their seats in a separate Balcony named after the portal. The "Facebook Balcony" was introduced on the web interface on February 14, Valentine's Day, which the Facebook *I Love Erkel* campaign supported with these surprises for people in love.



○ FACEBOOK BALCONY | Photo: Péter Herman



○ I LOVE ERKEL CAMPAIGN  
Photo: Pál Csillag



**Opening performance on 1 March**  
*Pas de trois* – a trio on the dance stage. The Erkel Theatre's re-opening was celebrated in a joint performance from the Hungarian dance world: the Hungarian National Ballet, the Győr Ballet and the Pécs Ballet put on in three one-act performances for the first visitors to the re-opened theatre. For this special programme, the Győr Ballet presented its *Hungarian Rhapsody* choreographed by Zoltán Fodor to the music of Liszt, the Pécs Ballet performed Cameron McMillan's choreography *In the Garden of Good and Evil*, while the Hungarian National Ballet performed *Whirling*.

The trial run lasted until June 9, and also included pieces from the Erkel Theatre repertoire, including some promising family fun – *János vitéz* (*Sir John*) and *King Pomade's New Clothes* – as well as several popular operas: *Don Giovanni*, *Aida* and *Don Carlos*. During the short season, in addition to the Opera House's Chamber Singer award-winners Eszter Sümegi, Zita Váradi and Gábor Bretz, internationally renowned opera singers, including Ildikó Komlósi, also performed. In March, the *Primavera* series featured opera companies from theatres outside of Budapest, who performed their most recent works for the Erkel Theatre audience.



○ I LOVE ERKEL BUILDING TOUR  
Photo: Pál Csillag



○ PAS DE TROIS - JÁNOS KISS, TAMÁS SOLYMOSSI, BALÁZS VINCZE | Photo: Péter Herman

# From Closing to Opening

Those living in or passing by the area of the Erkel Theatre will have seen major changes taking place during the spring and summer of 2013. Spring saw the square starting to feel populated as the trial run commenced, during which time ballet and opera were added to the repertoire, with audiences including significant numbers of young people. In summer and early autumn, cordons surrounded the scaffold-covered building draped in protective coverings. These disappeared one by one, and in place of the sad greyness and crumbling plaster, the building had received an immaculate white exterior. Time shifted, and lost time became the present. *Author: Tímea Papp*



## What is being built here?

The Erkel Theatre opened its doors as the People's Opera on 8 December 1911, and as Budapest's second opera house, where an audience of 3,200 could amass to applaud the artists. Over the decades, the building would be used as a cultural centre, a cinema and a variety venue. Even a boxing match was organised inside it in the 1930s. In 1950, it came under the control of the Opera House, and received the name of "Erkel Theatre" in 1953, becoming the Opera's second performance venue. It was here during the Opera House's reconstruction between 1980 and 1984 that the company performed. In the decades that have elapsed, the Erkel Theatre has played host to numerous high-profile premières and guest performances, even though artists and support staff working here had to meet the audience's expectations amidst

deteriorating technical conditions. Now, however, a new chapter can open in the history of the Erkel Theatre. The building had not been significantly renovated since 1961; in 1996, there was a movement to close it, and several governments since 2002 have discussed its fate: renovation or demolition and reconstruction.

In January of 2005, for example, there was a rumour that "this spring a pre-tender for the renovation of the Erkel Theatre is expected to be announced. If all goes well, the contract will be concluded in February 2006," said Miklós Szinetár, Intendant – General Director of the Hungarian State Opera. "The construction is to take place as a PPP (Public Private Partnership), as the intention is to finance it with the introduction of a private investor – a strategy also applied to the Palace of Arts. The establishment would remain the property of the state, which

would rent back the building for the Opera's use for 120 performances a year. On the remaining days, the new investor would be able to make use of the building. In the course of the renovation, they intend to install some of the region's most modern theatre technology: the configuration of the side stage would entail the creation of a single modern theatre hall." Let us hasten to add that the reconstruction was planned simultaneously with the construction of the fourth metro line and redevelopment of – what was then still called – Köztársaság Square. The expectations were that the Opera would run performances 120 days a year, and on the other days the investor would be able to use the building for its own purposes." For the pre-tender, the trio of TriGránit subsidiary Fejlesztési Rt., Duna Sétány Színház Kft., and the architectural firm Zoboki, Demeter and Partners, designers of the Palace of Arts,

submitted a joint bid. Also entering in a joint effort were Mányi Architectural Studio Kft., renovators of the Madách Theatre and the Budapest Operetta Theatre, together with Közép-Európai Építő és Szerelő Kft., while the third bidder, a Belgian investment group imagined a 56-storey building in the shape of an exclamation point. No giant exclamation point building came of all this, but a punctuation mark could have been placed as a warning in numerous locations around the Erkel Theatre – the increasingly unreliable and obsolete stage machinery, the amenities, the artists' dressing rooms. And despite the pre-tender's moment of promise, the story did not end there. Instead, the question marks multiplied. In the summer of 2006, Ministerial Commissioner Lajos Vass ordered a static load test, as a result of which the Erkel's – now non-life-threatening – season could only begin on October 7,

with the ballet *Coppélia*. It was the last season before the closure, for which, in the ministerial commissioner's opinion, there were two reasons: a sagging iron support structure and the theatre's failure to fill more than 50 to 60 per cent of seats.

## From ballet to ballet

Thus, on 30 June 2007, the Erkel Theatre closed: the last performance was *Our Contemporary Stars – Step-by-Step*. The finale of the modern ballet night showcasing the work of several young choreographers was Miklós Dávid Kerényi's composition *So really!* In 2011, the dancer/choreographer revealed what had inspired him: "I thought one could not just quietly walk away when they closed a century-old theatre, where each evening two thousand people had watched us, and where we too had spent half our lives. I was filled with a

## Countdown



HUNYADI LÁSZLÓ (2013) | Photo: Péter Herman



DON CARLOS (2013) | Photo: Péter Herman



ÖT TÁNC (2013) | Photo: Attila Nagy



KING POMÁDÉ'S NEW CLOTHES (2013)  
Photo: Szilvia Csibi



HÁRY JÁNOS (2013) | Photo: Szilvia Csibi

sorrowful pride that the Erkel's curtain had been lowered for the last time on my piece." This was followed by examinations by the opera faculty of the Ferenc Liszt Music Academy from the works of Leoncavallo, Donizetti and Smetana (*Pagliacci*, *Lélixir d'amore* and *The Bartered Bride*), and then the building was locked up. Or rather, it was not, because even though it was closed to the audience, a successful static load test meant it could be used as a rehearsal hall for Opera House productions.

Meanwhile, not one of the many unknowns was resolved. There was news that a multifunctional building would be built by the autumn of 2012, where the opera would perform for 180 days, and the construction tender would be issued shortly (September 2008), or that pursuant to a government resolution, the New Erkel Theatre was also part of the government's long-term developments (October 2009), or that there was a realistic chance that the Erkel would reopen in 2011, with an independent director and chief music director, but sharing an intendant with the Opera (January 2011). At the

opening of the 2011/2012 season, Szilveszter Ókovács, as the government commissioner, hoped that after renovation in December 2012, the Erkel could re-open on the 101<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the building's opening. The government set aside 1.8 billion forints for the work over two years, that is, enough for the building to be renovated to a condition suitable for holding performances.

With the renovation now hailed as the "opportunity of the decade", the focus was on the backstage area, where efforts were made to increase the comfort level of the dressing rooms, install a revolving stage, mechanise the movement of scenery previously accomplished by hand, and make it possible in the future to, on the basis of the development already done, easily implement a technical *upgrade* to meet the needs of the 21st century. This meant there would be a side stage, the roof would be made ready to have a rehearsal hall built on it and new intelligent lighting would be installed (the wish list could have gone on). However, one thing was even more important than all this: After the renovation, the Erkel Theatre should

be convertible into a cultural meeting centre.

February 2012 witnessed the *Erkell nekünk! (We need the Erkel)* gala night, in which both young and seasoned opera singers and ballet dancers took the stage. A charity auction was also held, with items including exclusive costumes, paraphernalia and handcrafted works. These proceeds, together with those from the Opera Ball, were used to supplement the Erkel Theatre's coffers.

The closed Erkel functioned not only as a rehearsal venue, but also as a warehouse holding around 200,000 costumes. The employees of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute picked through them first, filling several trucks with materials to be conserved and displayed in future exhibitions. They were followed by costume designers from those of the country's theatres that have opera departments and others from the Music Academy, then by wardrobe managers from other Hungarian theatres. In this way, the Erkel's glorious past lives on, albeit in a different location.

Part of the renovations took place in a less spectacular fashion. The first viewers were invited to judge how well the facelift had worked out on 1 March 2013, the start of the three-day *Pas de trois 13* ballet festival, in which the ballets of Győr and Pécs and the Hungarian National Ballet performed *Hungarian Rhapsody*, *In the Garden of Good and Evil* and *Whirling*. The end of the month saw *Primavera 13*, the opera festival that showcased the Győr and Szeged National Theatres and the Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) Hungarian Opera. Both spring event series started with the intent of establishing a tradition. The trial run, however, did not result in any loss in tempo: in addition to the popular repertoire productions *Don Carlos*, *Don Giovanni*, *Hunyadi László*, *János vitéz (Sir John)* and the children's opera *King Pomádé's New Clothes*, a ballet première (*Five Dances – Modern Ballet Evening*) and the *Wagner 200 Festival Gala* also both received space on the programme.

Completed with the painting of the building for the full opening on November 7, the new façade proudly proclaims, in silver letters, the name "ERKEL! This is what now catches

the eye, not the wide and draughty entrance where we so often huddled away from the rain. The staircase, however, has not disappeared and has been, in practical fashion, relocated into the interior of the theatre behind the entrance door, while access for the physically impaired has also become easier. An effort to increase personal contact can also be detected in the configuration of the box offices and information desks: audience members and theatre employees are no longer divided by a glass window. After the young ushers have checked their tickets, visitors can enter into the ground-floor foyer with its mini-buffet and exhibition space. Once they have deposited their coats in the cloakroom and adjusted their makeup in the greatly renewed washroom, they can enter into the auditorium. The Erkel can now accommodate "just" 1,900 spectators – to which we quickly add that it still remains the country's largest theatre – but the elegant, grey rows of seats offer the audience enhanced comfort. What perhaps cannot be seen by the naked eye are the kilometres of new cable wiring, the new fire alarms, and the air conditioning, intelligent lighting, the new stage floorboards,

below-stage lifts, the audio booth, scenery-moving equipment – but these also serve to enhance the performance experience. And, since their general destination is also important, the area around II. János Pál pápa tér has also been renewed. One thing, however, has remained unchanged: the Erkel's excellent acoustics.

### OperaKaland "OperaAdventure" on the Facebook balcony

The Erkel Theatre's re-opening is connected to one of the Opera House's greatest challenges: acquainting young people with the genre and instilling in them a fondness for it with a programme aimed at developing an appreciative audience for the future. As part of this, every Hungarian enrolled in a high-school level educational institute is invited to a performance. In spring 2013, this was *Hunyadi László*, followed by *Háry János* in autumn 2013, with two one-act works scheduled for spring 2014: *Der Schauspieldirektor (The Theatre Director)* and *Mario and the Magician*. "The aim of OperaKaland is for every high school student in every corner of the



○ PAS DE TROIS (2013) | Photo: Péter Herman



○ HUNYADI LÁSZLÓ (2013) | Photo: Péter Herman



○ JÁNOS VITÉZ (2013) | Photo: Attila Nagy



○ HUNYADI LÁSZLÓ (2013) | Photo: Péter Herman

country to be able to graduate with an experience of the genre of opera or ballet in a major theatre," stated General Director Szilveszter Ókovács to *Opera* magazine. The performances, however, are not given for the high-school level: they are of the highest quality, that is, they are not abridged or simplified productions, and they are interpreted by the finest singers. Helping to deepen this acquaintance are materials available online – lesson outlines and other background materials – as well as other solutions. At the beginning of the work (during the overture) the players, projected on the screen, are introduced, so that the students can get to know them more easily and learn the names of the artists. In *Hunyadi László*, oral comprehension was aided by electronic supertitles, while in the case of *Háry János*, an exhibit in the foyer illuminated the origins of Kodály's work and its musical and cultural background.

OperaKaland has been an undisputed success: over the course of three months, 27,000 students from 350 educational institutions in 122 communities took part in the programme, including 15,000 from outside of Budapest. The thank-you letters support the need for continuing the programme: "We gratefully thank you for giving our students the opportunity to watch the opera *Hunyadi László* free of charge. It was a true pleasure to see the children's eyes shining; everyone enjoyed the performance very much. We especially thank you for the luxurious seats!" (Zita Köveskúti Schwarczinger, Vásárhelyi András School, Várpalota)

"We thank you very much for the opportunity to watch yesterday's performance of the opera *Hunyadi László* as part of the OperaKaland programme. The cast was absolutely fantastic; we also told the children that

this was not an everyday opportunity to get the chance to watch, in such a format, a performance boasting such stars." (Bence Haidekker, Fazekas Mihály High School, Budapest)

The responses also attest to the fact that, while for many, this was the first encounter with the opera – and there are even those for whom this was the first experience of a theatre – the genre has won not only a battle, but a war, in generating committed opera fans. And it was not just the young people for whom it was the subject of Hungarian, history and music classes for days afterwards, and even discussions in break time, but also for the artists featured in the performances. "It was an amazing experience. Of the 30 performances, I did five, and on each occasion the children went into such frenzied excitement at the end, it was like a pop concert. They really rewarded the

strong portrayals. It was practically a full house, and it was always possible to sense whom they were rooting for, they could empathise with the story so much and they differentiated between the characters: with the performers playing antagonists, for example, they felt that they did not like them so much. I received a great many messages on Facebook from teachers, who reported – not just after *Hunyadi*, after *Bánk bán*, too – what an electrifying effect the opera had," Klára Kolonits, who sang the part of Erzsébet Szilágyi, said recently of the Erkel work included in the OperaKaland programme.

The Erkel Theatre was opened on 7 December 1911 as a people's opera, and continues to operate as such without change in the 21st century with a new and contemporary Opera image. In keeping with this, on a given day, the first 51 people who

"like" it on the most popular social networking site can win two tickets to the Facebook Balcony for that day's performance, while the 51<sup>st</sup> wins one.

"Hey, I'm taking a photo of this!" called out excitedly a teenage boy who had arrived with his class for one of the October performances of *Háry János* and was thrilled by the size of the theatre. "Let's go to the middle, where we can get a good look at both pictures!" said a little girl, who appeared to be around seven, as she dragged her parents to the upstairs grand buffet, to a spot offering a perfect view of the Aurél Bernáth frescoes. The re-opened building is amazing, the performances are an experience. The ever-increasing numbers of participants in OperaKaland, ticket-purchasers and "likes" all prove that there is a demand for the opera, for community, and for their point of intersection, the Erkel.

# From People's Opera to Erkel Theatre

Notes to an exhibition

Author: Márton Karczag

There can hardly be a theatre building anywhere in Budapest whose previous life has seen more vicissitudes than the Erkel Theatre located on II. János Pál pápa tér (Pope John Paul II Square). The square has been at various times named Lóvásár ("Horse Market") Square, Kálman Tisza Square and Köztársaság "Republic" Square; the theatre has been called the People's Opera, the City Theatre, the Labriola Variety Show, the House of Hungarian Culture and then again the City Theatre, before being attached to the Opera House in 1953, when it received the name that it bears today. However, it was not only the name of the People's Opera that has changed over the years, but, with even greater frequency, if that is possible, its managers, its company (when there happened to be one), as well as its function.

The story of the Erkel Theatre is a gripping and, to this day, unresolved, chapter in the history of Budapest's urban development and culture, which also leaves a sort of imprint from the country's last century. The time of its opening, the start of the 1910s, was the final moment of "happy peacetime". Although the enormous Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was already creaking at the seams, Franz Josef's empire was nevertheless flourishing, and dusty Pest had become a metropolis in time for the 1996 millennium. The growth seemed unstoppable. A single city, where night and day fuse together, where born in the cafés were such intellectual products as the periodical *Nyugat* (*The West*) which shines its light even to this day, where such painters of European standing as "The Eight" would create, and from where Bartók and Kodály, equipped with a phonograph, a

new technical achievement, would head off each summer for Hungarian villages. Only at that time and in this environment could a moment arise when the conductor of an opera house, assembling his family council, conceive the notion of building his own new theatre. The decision of the Márkus clan – Miksa, chief editor of the *Magyar Hírlap* newspaper, and the president of the Hungarian Association of Newspaper Writers, Géza, architect of the Palace of Delights in Kecskemét, together with the conductor Dezső, the conductor, and his spouse, Ilonka Szoyer, the era's coloratura star – was followed, in record time, by deed. The blueprints were submitted in March 1911, the theatre's structure was built by the middle of August, and no later than December 7, the curtain rose.

The People's opera on Kálman Tisza Square, with seating for 3,200 in its

auditorium, targeted a less prosperous audience with inexpensive tickets during a time when even the Royal Opera House could rarely boast a full house. The Márkus family failed in their enterprise within three years. Nor did the directors coming after them find greater success, despite trying everything to entice the audience. In addition to the operas, ballets, operettas and works of folk drama, dramas and concerts were also played in the theatre, which also welcomed appearances from the world's famous classical and popular music ensembles, and even to boxing matches and displays of "Chinese gadgetry". If Géza Márkus and his architectural associates Marcell Komor and Dezső Jakab were to find themselves in II. János Pál pápa tér today, they would hardly recognise the building they had designed: most likely their handiwork could only be identified in the foyer and the railing

of the staircase leading to the buffet. The gigantic auditorium was rebuilt several times: first between 1916 and 1920, when, based on the plans of László Vágó and Pál Klunzinger, there was an attempt made to correct the acoustics, previously described as catastrophic, while the central box and parterre still in place today were also configured. After the war, between 1949 and 1950, the auditorium received another make-over based on the designs of Oszkár Kaufmann, and between 1959 and 1962 the facade and public areas were rebuilt, according to the plans of Iván Kotsis, into the form we know today. Aurél Bernáth's two murals, *The Tragedy of Man* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, were completed in 1973. The meticulous overhaul of the theatre, closed since 2007, was started last year under the direction of the Zoboki-Demeter architectural firm. Most of



Photo: Gyula Nagy - Fortepan



Photo: Vasárnapi Újság (1911)





Photo: Pál Csillag



THE OLD AUDIENCE BAR | Photo: Pál Csillag



the renovations took place behind the wings, but some of the public areas have undergone major work as well.

When we consider the history of a theatre, we usually think of its company. The Operetta Theatre invokes the names of Hanna Honthy, Kálmán Latabár and Kamilla Feleki, and the Comedy Theatre brings to mind Éva Ruttkai, Judit Halász and András Kern. In the case of the Erkel Theatre, however, the building and the company are completely separable. The degree to which the Márkus family and their associates took the People's Opera seriously in 1911 is clearly attested to by the fact that they contracted with two directors, four conductors (one of them, Frigyes "Fritz" Reiner, was to become a world star), 33 soloists (including Adelina Adler, Mária Basilides and Ilona Durigo, as well as Sándor Várnay and Mária Jávör – the parents of Astrid Varnay), and a 60-member orchestra and a chorus of 70. The City Theatre most frequently made the news when it

managed to sign a world star for a few performances. The theatre's managers – many of them, throughout this time – were well aware of this fact, and constantly endeavoured, despite their slender resources, to present the stars of Vienna, Milan, Paris and New York at Kálmán Tisza Square. Over the years, there were innumerable young artists – including Anna Báthy, Orosz Júlia and Oszkár Maleczky – who got their start at the City Theatre and whose careers were later consummated at the Opera House. The theatre's permanent singers, whom the constantly changing directors generally re-signed, have today largely been forgotten. Who nowadays remembers the names of Béla Csóka, Miklós Szedő or Dezső Kovács? However, each of them sang principal roles for years. Hardly any memory at all remains of them, and their artistic careers remain almost totally obscure. The theatre's history is full of grey areas like this. Since nobody thought to keep the poster for the opening performance, we only know the original cast list for *Quo Vadis*

from the Vasárnapi újság newspaper. Almost no-one has attempted to work through the theatre's entire history: so far only partial solutions have come to light. More precise documentation is only available from 1951 onwards, but even since then, no record has been kept about those concerts that were not opera house productions.

By virtue of its stormy history, the Erkel Theatre found itself in the spotlight for reasons other than its performances. It was recognised early on that, owing to its enormous size, it was very suitable for holding large-scale events. Even as early as 1919, during the short-lived Hungarian-Soviet Republic, red soldier nights were held in it, and in the 1940s the popular "Gyöngyösbokréta" folk dance performances, while in 1943, István Balogh filmed his war propaganda film "Hungarian Request Concert". A year later, we see shocking photos of Budapest Jews being led into the theatre building with hands raised. A similar scene features in a photo series from 1956, when

Hungarian secret police are hanged in front of it, as digging goes on beside them in search of underground dungeons. Since the change of regime, the theatre's renovation and/or closure has been a recurring topic of discussion. After so many ups and downs, it has now once again opened its doors and, in its renovated state, reinvigorated the Márkus's idea of a people's opera, offering its audience inexpensive tickets and popular operas.

There can be few more difficult undertakings than to reconstruct a theatre's history from so many scattered sources. From 7 November 2013, in our exhibition entitled *From People's Opera to People's Opera* in the Erkel Theatre's renovated foyer, I will, together with my fellow curator Nóra Wellmann, attempt to show the outstanding moments of this storm-tossed theatre's 102 years through surviving blueprints, photos, and posters.

# A theatre building for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: The People's Opera

Author: Anka Józsa

## Antecedents of European Theatre Architecture

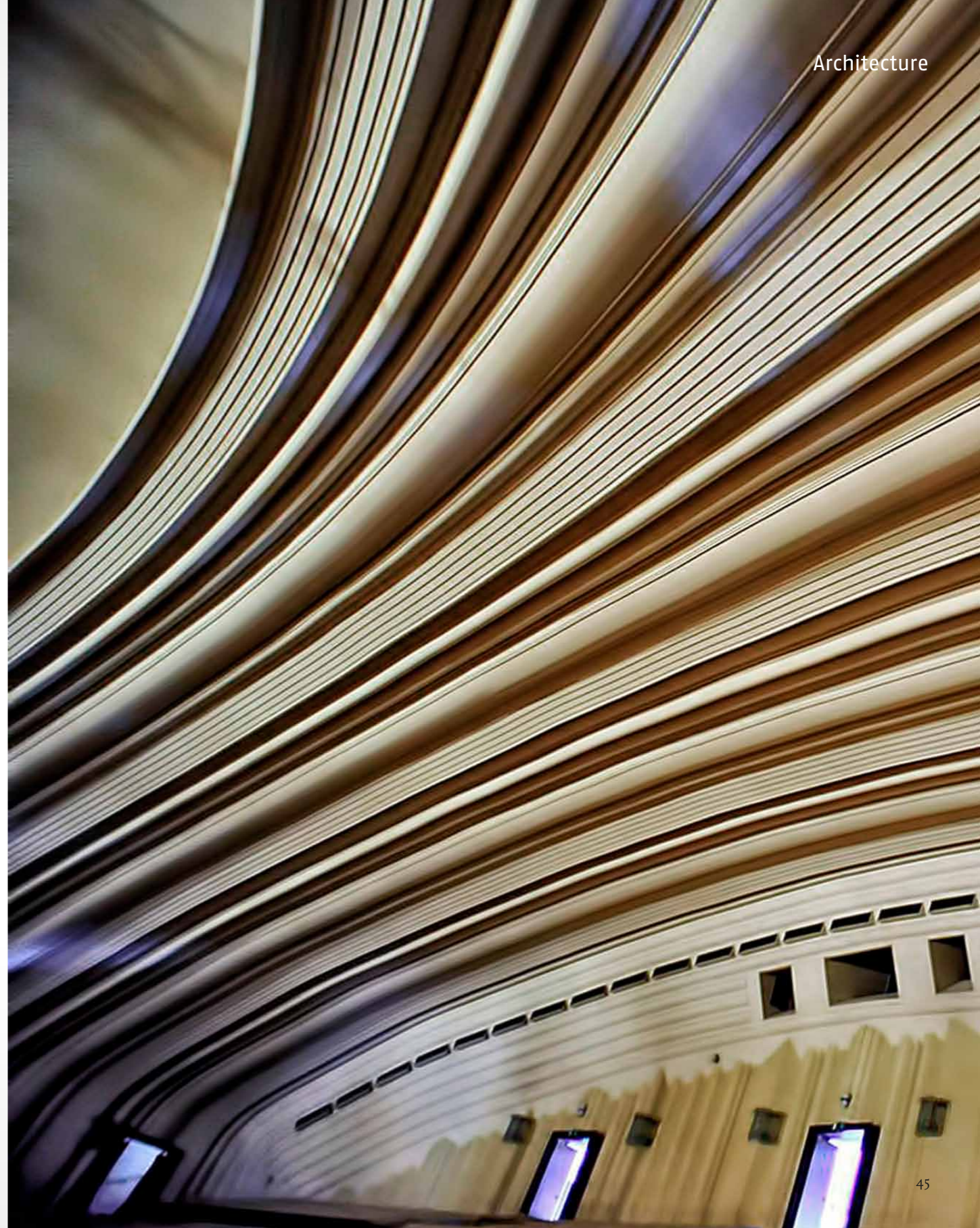
The glory days of big city theatre architecture came in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The theatres of the era of historicism still followed the traditions of the Baroque era in terms of the shape of the seating area and the stage engineering. The hierarchical layout of the viewing area could be felt in the use of multi-level rows of boxes and the ruler's middle box, while, at the same time, the theatres of the era were the meeting places of the burgeoning bourgeois society. In accordance with this, these high-capacity, highly symbolic buildings were built to include spacious areas for the audience and community. Frequently utilised solutions were the central grand staircase, the royal or imperial staircase and a capacious foyer, as well as assembly rooms and salons. These eclectic European theatres, for example the Paris, Vienna and Budapest opera houses, were built almost as complexes of total art.

Following the changes at the turn of the century, the need for people's theatres and people's operas grew in prominence. The historical precursors of this type of theatre stretch back to the core concepts of ancient Greek and Roman theatres, and thereby to the shape of the audience area. It was following this line of thought that Richard Wagner and Dresden architect Gottfried Semper worked out their plan for a Munich theatre. Although it never came to fruition, their intentions can still be seen in the shape of a seating area that gives every viewer equal ability to see and hear. Wagner also applied this template later in the famous Bayreuth Festspielhaus, the venue of the popular Bayreuth Festival. The seating area is different from previous hierarchical layouts in that the rows of boxes have been discarded, and a fan-shaped ground-floor amphitheatre seating area put in its place.

## Contemporary Budapest theatres

In 1837, the Pest Hungarian Theatre – later renamed the National Theatre – was built in Budapest according to plans by Mátyás Zitterbarth, Jr. This building in the classical style, whose façade was designed by Antal Szkalnitzky in 1875, was not able to satisfy growing demand, which is why a new city theatre, named the People's Opera, was built on today's Blaha Lujza Square. The building, constructed based on the plans of Viennese architects Ferdinand Fellner and Herman Helmer, later housed the National Theatre. The Opera House (earlier named the Dalműszínház, or "Opera Theatre") has functioned since 1884 and was designed by the architect Miklós Ybl, who was born nearly 200 years ago. After the National Theatre was demolished in 1908, the idea of building a new theatre was conceived.

Photo: Szilvia Csibi, Artilia Nagy





## Erkel Theatre

At the turn of the century, the building of theatres in Central Europe was dominated by the Viennese architectural firm Fellner and Helmer. Between 1870 and 1904, they also designed numerous theatres in Hungary: the Comedy Theatre of Budapest, the Somossy Orpheum, and the theatres of Szeged, Kecskemét, Temesvár (Timisoara) and Pozsony (Bratislava).

The Hungarian architects of the time would have liked to participate in the building of Hungarian theatres and to play a role in the design of theatre buildings with all their complicated functions. In the journal *Contractors*, the contemporary periodical of the architecture and building sector, the following was written regarding the People's Opera under construction: "The Hungarian Engineers and Architects Association has decided to banish this ghost by announcing a design competition for a modern theatre. The aim was to provide the government with undeniable proof of the talents of Hungarian architects and their theatre-building capability.

(László Ödöfni, *The People's Opera building in progress*, *Contractors Journal*, 23 August 1911)

### The building and architects

The design competition announced for the building was won by Dezső Jakab (1864-1932), who crafted the designs for the People's Opera together with architects Marcell Komor (1868-1947) and Géza Márkus (1872-1912). Marcell Komor and Dezső Jakab had been among the students of the well-known *fin-de-siècle* architect Ödön Lechner and worked together in a joint architectural firm from 1897 until the end of the First World War.

One of the aims of people's operas and people's theatres is to build, from as small a budget as possible, a high-capacity theatre offering low ticket prices. The Budapest people's opera was also built according to these criteria. The building's character is such that the quality of the stage and auditorium is outstanding, but the public areas, operational and service spaces were designed with frugality in mind.

When the theatre was built in 1911, no money remained from the already tight budget after the auditorium was completed for the adequate fitting out of the stage and installation of the missing corridors. The theatre, in the end, was not built according to the Viennese Secession style seen in the plans, but was realised in a form influenced by the German Jugendstil.

The theatre building changed functions several times: it was a variety show, a cinema, and even a circus. It also changed names several times. It operated as the People's Theatre (1911-1917), then several times as the City Theatre (1917-1932, 1933-1940 and 1946-1953), for a while as the Hungarian Cultural Centre (1940-1945), as well as the Labriola Variety Show (1932-1933).

Because of its early deficiencies, many people designed plans to refit the building, most of which can be found in the blueprint section of the Budapest Metropolitan Archives. The stage was reconfigured as early as 1917 according to the plans of László Vágó (1875-1933), one of the most sought-after architects at the turn of

the century. Aside from Vágó, civil engineer Pál Klunzinger worked on the areas outside the theatre hall. Vágó raised the stage four metres into a recess in the auditorium by creating a proscenium and shifting the orchestra pit, also refitting the entire proscenium arch. The following refitting took place in 1950 according to the plans of Loránd Kismarty Lechner.

Among the available plans plans prepared in 1950-1951 by an architect of Hungarian origin named, Oscar Kaufmann (1873-1956). The contemporary professional literature even named Kaufmann as a "modern theatre specialist". Starting in Berlin in 1906, he designed six theatres, and theatres with a single box on the upper floor were called "Kaufmann-type" after him. During the refitting of the Erkel Theatre, he increased the depth of the stage, rebuilding the proscenium as part of this, turning the proscenium box toward the auditorium, moving the front panel of the side boxes forward, and expanding the storage area for scenery.

Under the direction of Dr. Tamás Tarnoczy, quite a lot was also done to

improve the acoustics. By installing a wooden acoustic panel in the auditorium, the proscenium walls were rebuilt, and today's defining plaster articulation of the arch wall and ceiling was configured.

In 1961, the Erkel Theatre was reconstructed according to the plans of architect and Technical University professor Iván Kotsis (1889-1980). Kotsis replaced and modernised the missing public areas, while a spacious entrance hall was added to the ground floor. He designed a portico in front of the main entrance, which still today gives the principal façade its character. Of the theatre's redevelopment, Iván Kotsis wrote, "the Erkel was built in 1912 and boasted a fine auditorium. In accordance with new principals, it was in the shape of a trapezoid with excellent lines of sight and seating for 2,400, of which the great majority were in the stalls and the balcony. Little emphasis was placed on the side boxes, which it would have been better to dispense with altogether, leaving the theatre with only a parterre. In contrast to the fine auditorium, the public and storage areas were extremely primitive, as

were the buffets, washrooms, foyers, staircases and so on, which, in the interests of economy, were of frugal and makeshift construction. Similarly rudimentary design was reflected in the façade as well, whose raw industrial mass it was attempted to enliven with plaster and classically coquettish secession forms [...] In front of the current, somewhat colonnaded façade, I installed a similarly colonnaded front addition, which on the ground floor contains a portico with a wide covered staircase, and above, foyers running the lengths of the second and third floors, with buffets and wide staircases at each end. Above those, I placed another buffet opening out onto the roof terrace. All of these I managed to integrate quite smoothly into the existing designs, so that no one might notice the subsequent addition, as the old and new spaces merge completely." (*Autobiography of Iván Kotsis, editor: Endre Prakfalvia, Budapest, published jointly by HAP Tervezőiroda Kft. and the Hungarian Architectural Museum in 2010*)





# Uncle Schäffer's Album

Author: Nóra Wellmann

Sometimes serendipity unexpectedly drops a treasure into one's lap. Although a rare occurrence, it can and does happen that a museum collection gains an outwardly modest, but incalculably significant item. This is what happened not long ago, when a kind-hearted lady telephoned the Opera House: she was the granddaughter of the City Theatre's former porter, János Schäffer, and she would be pleased to offer the memorabilia in her possession to the archive.

Excitedly, we unpacked the little package. Two scrapbooks containing dedicated photos and autographs from the international singers, dancers and conductors appearing in the City Theatre during the 20s and 30s, along with a handful of newspaper

articles – documents of the era's guest appearances that had until then been completely missing. During this period, nearly every single major foreign artist took the stage in the City Theatre, as its capacity was twice that of the Opera House. The list of names is impressive: from Beniamino Gigli to Maria Jeritzta to Feodor Chaliapin. Genuine curiosities had also been pressed into the albums: a dedicated photo of Teiko Kiwa, the first Japanese Cio-Cio San, or the signed – partly in Cyrillic – group picture of the Don Cossack's Chorus, which had given a guest performance in 1928, and lots of autographs on little cards. The relics of an autograph hunter, a once flourishing "art form". Today it has been almost entirely forgotten what an enormous crowd once awaited the singers at the artist's entrance. For example, Polish tenor

and film star Jan Kiepura, whose popularity once matched that of today's pop stars, after fleeing to the roof of his car, found himself obliged to distribute autographs in front of the City Theatre in order to avoid being crushed to death by the crowd. It was probably not only for himself that Uncle Schäffer was collecting the handwriting: his collection yielded eight signatures from George Baklanoff and fourteen from Titta Ruffo. It appears that the avuncular porter was unable to find a market for these among fans.

But who was this János Schäffer, the addressee of the better part of the photos and autographs? We know that a good porter is even today one of the most important people in the theatre – and this was particularly true



○ JÁNOS SCHÄFFER AT THE ARTISTS' ENTRANCE TO THE CITY THEATRE

○ ANNA GYENGE (ANNE ROSELLE)



○ A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE YOUNG JÁNOS SCHÄFFER

in the more familial atmosphere of the pre-war theatre world. Uncle Schäffer, of German extraction and with a humorous Swabian accent, was the all-powerful custodian of the City Theatre and, by all accounts, a colourful individual. His granddaughter related how the entire family lived in the theatre, and in one photo showed the narrow window from which her father, as a child, used to leap down to the street. The porter's position was one of solemn responsibility: he had to know everyone from the director to the stage hands, carry out assignments, and deliver messages and letters.

Throughout all this – as a somewhat absent-minded person – now and then an error would creep in. Hanna Honthy, who started her career at what was then the People's Opera, wrote a

memory of the figure of the popular porter in her *Theatrical Life* columns: "In and in front of his booth unfolds the social life of the theatre's lesser minions and foot soldiers: the girls, the boys, the understudies and stagehands would treat him as they would one of their key patrons, and around the end of the month, as they would their bankers. Should the bon vivant in question have "accidentally" found himself without spare change, or the girl already exhausted every "account", they would ask him for a loan for supper. In any case, it was a smart idea to be on his good side, because he knew what kind of face the director was wearing when he arrived at the theatre: was he in a pleasant mood or a rage, and would it be approaching him with a certain slip of paper, the denial of which would mean a fateful financial blow? He accepts and

forwards all kinds of messages, both those given in person and by telephone. Throughout all this, the porter is one of the most important creative elements of the theatre's complicated organisation. [...] Uncle Schäffer has since taken on the prefix "the late", but those of us who for decades revelled in the unique and spontaneous humour of his being still think of him fondly. His person was a symbol of the great assimilative magic of the culture of the Hungarian stage: despite his native language being German, he was an enthusiastic servant of the Hungarian theatre."

The most interesting photos from János Schäffer's album can be viewed among the materials of the Erkel Theatre's exhibit, from *People's Opera to People's Opera*, opening on 7 November 2013.

MEMBERS OF THE DON COSSACK'S CHORUS



HANNA HONTHY



FERENC LEHÁR



JAPANESE SINGER TEIKO KIWA



TITTA RUFFO



BENIAMINO GIGLI

# Adventures in the Erkel Theatre

Première of *Háry János* as part of the OperaKaland series

Erkel Theatre, 14 October 2013

Following the successful trial run at the Erkel Theatre in the spring, the building's renovation continued apace. The second and third phases of the work were timed around one of the institution's most important missions, the start of the OperaKaland autumn series one month before the official opening on October 6. During this time, more than 20,000 high school students visited the opera house once again.

The Erkel Theatre, opened in 1910, is Hungary's largest theatre building. Its history is closely intertwined with the golden age of opera performance in Hungary. In 2007, the Hungarian Government made the

necessary funds available pursuant to Government resolution 1393/2011 (XI. 18.) for the reopening of the theatre following closure of more than five years, during which time its future was in doubt. This enabled the Hungarian State Opera House to restore the Erkel Theatre to a condition suitable for holding performances. Following a public procurement procedure, the theatre's renovation and architectural programme was completed, together with architectural, building diagnostic and structural evaluations of the building.

The Government resolution decreed the renovation would take place in accordance with the 1.7 billion forint programme package and the provision of the funds. The public procurement procedure announced for the renovation was won by a joint bid from Laki Épületszobrász Zrt. and the architectural firm Zoboki-Demeter and Partners, who were awarded the contract on 1 January 2013. Following this, Government Order 27/2012 (III.06.) decreed that the matters of public administration related to the restoration of the Erkel Theatre to a condition suitable for holding performances were of great interest to the public.

## The principal behind the renovation

The Erkel Theatre's public areas and auditorium had over the decades retained a functional capability that had been modern in its day, while the backstage area behind the proscenium provided spartan conditions to the artists and technical staff alike, even at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is why the architectural firm of Zoboki-Demeter (Managing Designers: Csaba Silvester, Zoltán Turi and Gábor Zoboki) developed an architectural programme concentrating on improving the technical conditions for performing opera. The volume of funds issued by the Government expressly for improving operations with the most economical technical solutions available was what guided the builders: there could be no discussion of a total reconstruction of the theatre.

The lion's share of the refurbishment has taken place behind the wings, with the soloist and group dressing rooms, renewed and expanded along with the common areas. The stage's technical equipment underwent major modernisation, while the better part of the building's mechanical systems (water, plumbing, heating and ventilation) were renewed.

Photo: Szilvia Csibi, Péter Herman



Audiences will now step into an auditorium with a completely new image, during the construction of which the architects made every effort to ensure that its fantastic acoustic properties remained unchanged. A factor that will greatly increase comfort is the improved seating area with its modern ventilation system. Although the number of seats has been reduced from 1935 to 1819 by refitting the rows of seats for more comfort, the theatre nevertheless still retains its rank as the highest capacity theatre in Hungary.

## Construction and unique features of the design process

It is one of the Erkel Theatre's core missions for new generations to be exposed to opera and ballet culture through performances of high artistic quality. The OperaKaland (OperaAdventure) programme, a subject of special focus, launched in the spring of 2013, during the first phase of design and construction.

The theatre's technical management and architects, in parallel and in coordination with the artistic management, began the initial planning processes and the construction tasks, which later substantially aided the further design process, to allow the artistic work to commence on 1 March. The comments

and experience of technical staff and artists resulted in the implementation of numerous action points, and the artistic management, with continuous resource management, synchronised the additional tasks to take into consideration the requirements of the entire company, so that it was also possible to start those construction tasks not requiring a permit without interfering with the rehearsal and performance schedule. Overall preparations for construction took place simultaneously with this, such as scheduling and acquiring permits for the use of public areas.

As a result of the above, nearly 30,000 students were able to attend performances of *László Hunyadi* given during the Erkel Theatre's trial run from 1 March to 9 June 2013.

The comprehensive reconstruction, lasting less than 100 days, entered its final phase in accordance with the permit schedules in late September 2013. Up until the official handover and opening on November 7, numerous minor tasks and a handful of spectacular surprises are still being prepared. On October 6, however, the youth series was re-launched with 24 performances.



# Anyone who loves the opera cannot be a bad person...

**Cost-effectiveness, harmony and dynamically phased work. The reconstruction of the Erkel Theatre in a nutshell. We discussed the redevelopment of the Erkel Theatre to be opened on 7 November, the 203rd birthday of Ferenc Erkel, with Szilveszter Ókovács, General Director of the Hungarian State Opera, Gábor Zoboki, managing director of architects Zoboki-Demeter, and Péter Laki, chairman and managing director of Laki Épületszobrász Zrt. We also asked Acting Managing Director and Musical Director István Mozsár about technical developments.**

*Norbert Vass*

**The re-opening of the Erkel Theatre in November 2013 after its closure in 2007 for an unspecified time was brought about by a Government Directive two years ago, which made funds available to commence restoration work. What condition was the building in prior to the renovation, and what was the nature of the reconstruction project?**

**Szilveszter Ókovács:** The building was not only considered a risk to mortal health by the public. The audience in excess of 100,000 people – among them almost 30,000 students – who attended the trial season from March to June 2013 will have known the situation well. Since the closure in 2007, the entire gutter system had disappeared, resulting in innumerable leaks and, as is often the case with houses left to their own devices without an owner or use, even those parts that could have stood firm sagged. But this situation could be rectified in just over eight weeks, while

the work carried out in the second, four-month phase is something for people to make their own minds up about. But before you pass judgement, please take into account the fact that more than half of the Ft 1.8 billion of government support and the Ft 400 million of the opera's own funds required for the "restoration of the building to a state fit for performance" was spent on items of hidden value – walls, plumbing, cabling and equipment.

**Gábor Zoboki:** The building had become increasingly run-down since 2006, and, as the General Director said, the elements are remarkably quick to set about a poorly heated and cooled building. So it is not easy to describe the technical state the Erkel Theatre was in in the years running up to 2007. Suffice it to say that the artists of the company often went home from performances and rehearsals with pieces of plaster from the ceiling in their bags. This was the sad reality, so this is what we had to cook with.

As soon as it was decided that the government would choose the most cost-effective option available, we had to keep to a relatively narrow path and make only the most necessary of changes. The job of the architect in this scenario is like that of a conductor. We had to be able to play a little on every instrument but never forget the main aim, which was to find the most cost-effective and functional solutions.

**Péter Laki:** This is precisely why our task was so difficult. Personally speaking, it was a greater surprise to encounter the neglect that had eaten away at the Erkel Theatre over the past five or six years than to be confronted with the structural, mechanical and electrical condition of the building. Of course, we had an idea of the equipment we were likely to find in a

building more than 100 years old and last renovated almost 50 years ago, so our expectations had to be kept realistic based on the funds available. We knew that there would not be enough money to replace much of the existing equipment, only to repair and renovate it. So the building itself did not cause major surprises. We were surprised, however, by the solidarity we experienced during the work. It is rare to experience collaboration between a client, planner and contractor of the kind that developed in the course of renovation of the Erkel Theatre. It is a testament to the work that it was completed in harmony, cost-effectively and according to an agreed deadline.

**You talk of value built into walls and pipes, limited scope for planning and harmonious collaboration. I would be interested to hear which parts of the building were renovated as a result of this.**

**GZ:** During planning, we focused primarily on the artists and the technical side. We renovated the entire dressing room complex, while the other areas that serve the performances also received new furniture and fittings. It was a major improvement to the stage technology to replace the vast majority of the manual pulleys with powered ones, so I can safely say that very many Central European opera houses would be delighted to have the technical apparatus that the Erkel currently has at its disposal. But – and I'll whisper it quietly – we could have asked for much more. The most striking change took place in the auditorium. The audience area was darkened while keeping all the acoustic surfaces as before. The chairs were reupholstered, legroom was increased by 10

centimetres, and a new ventilation system was also installed. The colour scheme was shifted towards the neutral to allow the audience to focus their attention fully on the stage. The reception area received fresher hues, the glass walls of the lobby extended right up to the front of the building, and the building also received attractive exterior lighting. But I would stress that what the public sees is just the tip of the iceberg as the reconstruction of the mechanical and technological systems – a major proportion of the work – took place behind the scenes.

**SÓ:** Despite these limitations, I feel that we have achieved our goals – ensuring safe operation for many years through everything from electrical insulation and fire safety to air conditioning, as well as making the audience areas clean and attractive, and increasing the comfort of operational areas.

**You did not have much time to complete the work. Also, rehearsals began in the building on 1 March. Did you have a chance to consult with the artists? After all, the reconstruction was also carried out to make their workplace feel more welcoming.**

**PL:** Artists operate on a higher level. Otherwise they would not be able to enchant and entertain us. Although we were not in direct contact with them, the project office set up by the Opera in its capacity as moderator allowed us to remain in contact. In general, I can say that we were not confronted with enormous demands on their part. And it is important to add that the collaboration of those working here was also necessary to ensure the handover took place on time.



Photo: László Emmert



○ PÉTER LAKI

**GZ:** Following very many interviews with staff, as architects we had to make some sad decisions laden with responsibility and to brutally cut back on the flourishes that went beyond the budget. We were helped in this task by architect Katalin Reményi, who was responsible for the project at the Opera. It took five years for the mistakes and advantages of the Palace of Arts to be fully felt, and I think the Erkel Theatre company and audience will need a similar period to get to know and inhabit the building.

**It is important for Budapest that one of its key venues has reopened, and that the city will have two opera houses again from November. What role do you as General Director envisage for the Erkel Theatre?**

**SÓ:** Both of the Hungarian State Opera's venues are important to us, our operation would be restricted without both these legs to stand on. Opera employees work in the Erkel, singers, dancers and musicians

perform there, and it is primarily Opera productions that are staged. A total of 200 performances will be held annually, which will be dedicated to reaching as wide an audience as possible. I think this is one of the Erkel Theatre's most important missions. This is also the venue for OperaKaland, Hungary's largest cultural programme for students, but we also need to reach out to those sections of society – pensioners, large families, public servants, and those living outside Budapest and beyond our borders – who cannot afford the prices at the Opera House, but who are devoted to opera and ballet or can be made to feel that way. I firmly believe in the Hungarian saying that anyone who loves opera cannot be a bad person. If you open yourself up to beauty and total art, you become a better individual. And that is something that everyone benefits from.

**Do you dare to have bigger dreams?**

**GZ:** I am convinced that the ideal scenario is for there to be two opera houses in Budapest. As an architect, however, I need to think in decades, and with an eye on the future, I think the city needs a building with a far more professional technological background to allow it to entertain those interested in musical theatre. There is no theatre in the capital where performances can be held before a large audience at affordable prices. This applies not only to opera, but to everything that is music, from "light" to total musical theatre and jazz concerts. I am dreaming therefore that one day the Erkel will be Budapest's Chatelet.

**SÓ:** Well, the biggest dreamer always has to be the designer. My vision is more down-to-earth than Gábor's.

Over the next five years, I can only envisage limited improvements. The square around the theatre will be renovated by March, while a larger air conditioning system, more furniture and stage technology may arrive in the summer. But the goal now is to maintain the current state and to undertake developments to the institution's property portfolio that will ensure the operation of the Opera for the coming quarter century.

**We spoke of dreams and desires. To close, I am curious to know what you dream of seeing on the stage of the Erkel Theatre.**

**SÓ:** I have a long wish list. For example, I would like to see a young, up-to-date *La bohème* that does not replace that of the old-fashioned opera house, but instead offers an alternative. It as it is wrong to keep a masterpiece in a gilded box for 80 years. And it would be a very special feeling to see my favourite Mozart opera in a few years, one I have wanted to show the world for more than two decades.

**PL:** I wouldn't name a single performance, and although it might seem strange, but the thought of desires and wishes brought to mind the idea of donations. As I was browsing the history of the Erkel Theatre, I chanced upon the name of Szentendrei citizen Emil Ábrányi. Ábrányi – having conducted in Cologne and Hanover – led the people's opera, then known as the City Theatre, for three years in the twenties. His dedication and example gave me the idea to follow in his footsteps and support a production or two in the near future.

**GZ:** The stars I have seen on the Erkel stage have included Jorge Donn, but



○ GÁBOR ZÓBORI

performers have also included Jelena Obrazcova, Plácido Domingo and Fiorenza Cossotto. The walls of the theatre have heard an unbelievable quantity and quality of music over the years. My greatest desire is to welcome the Ella Fitzgeralds and Yves Mondands of our day to the Erkel!

**Gradually, even CDs are becoming obsolete as data carriers, and so it is difficult to imagine what kind of equipment the Erkel Theatre building was using before reconstruction. What developments were made in the area of audio, lighting and stage technology?**

**István Mozsár:** The government resolution for reconstruction prescribed a state suitable for theatrical stages, and these resources were ordered accordingly. In the area of staging, we spent around Ft 390 million with different suppliers in order to expand the range of technical possibilities. The budget included major lighting development, with the integration of around 100 new lights,



○ ISTVÁN MOZSÁR  
Photo: BMW Group Hungary/Péter Sorok

but probably even more important than this is that we were able to bring the lighting mounts further out into the auditorium, and thus the entire perspective has changed. Another important development is the fact that we have put in 16 mechanical hoists in place of the old hand-driven ones, and that the archive has been significantly modernised. We also renovated the stage itself, although we had no way to install any new lifts, since that would have required rebuilding the entire understage. In addition to all this, we also had to significantly alter the building's overall mechanical infrastructure in compliance with the latest standards and to meet the need for more efficient energy use, as well as in order to maintain operational capability.

**The General Director emphasised that the Erkel Theatre's primary mission is to widen access to the opera. How much do developments made in the construction contribute to this aim?**

**IM:** This need was addressed in multiple areas. The house has been opened to the physically disabled. Using a new lift, we assist them from street level to the space of the entrance hall, and we have created areas in the rear orchestra balconies that are easily accessible to wheelchairs. The number of washrooms has been expanded, taking into account asymmetric usage by men and women. In reconfiguring the seats, we strived not only for maximum comfort, but also to fulfill today's stricter fire safety regulations.

**Where do we stand now compared to concert halls elsewhere in Europe or in the United States?**

**IM:** There's always room for improvement. Everything in the world can be improved and perfected. Thus, to say that we do not need more of anything or better anything is almost unthinkable. If I think of the previously mentioned specification of the task, that is, "bringing it into a state suitable for theatrical productions", then the American level is not the standard. If we take into account the House's mission, then, however, I can say that we have succeeded in implementing development that will allow the Erkel Theatre to comfortably put on, with this equipment, all of its existing repertoire pieces, all of the pieces that can be "transplanted" from the Opera, and all of the wider hospitality functions of a theatre.

# Bartók's Bluebeard

In the spring of 1911, Béla Bartók was immersed in an unfamiliar task: he was writing an opera. Although the composer, as yet untested in the area of theatrical music, attached great hopes to his work in progress, the creative process, as he reported to Frederick Delius with some undeniable pride and excitement on 27 March 1911, was not by any measure free of problems. *Zsuzsanna Rákai*

**E** “Now I’ve taken on some hard work – a single-act work,” – Bartók wrote in a letter describing his attempts to compose after his bitter review of the orchestral standards in Hungary. “Unfortunately, I have never written anything like this, and you can imagine how much at times – in the beginning – the text troubled me. But now it is going better. And I think that this music is the sort of thing you will like. This summer, I am going to Paris (around June 20). Will you be at home then? How I would love to show you my work!” The text that “troubled” the creator, relatively inexperienced in the area of dramaturgy built from words, was the work of Béla Balázs, *Duke Bluebeard’s Castle*. Although Balázs had originally intended the mystery play for Kodály, it was Bartók who immediately found himself drawn to the theme and its essentially simply expressed yet enigmatic psychological layers. To such an extent that the opera’s music

was composed in under six months and was submitted to a competition run by the Lipótváros Casino. The piece was nevertheless rejected as unperformable and unsuitable for the stage.

Since it included neither scenic theatrical tableaux nor daring drama, this – similarly to Richard Strauss’s *Salomé* and *Elektra* – concentrated, dense, and progressive work nearly disappeared forever into a drawer of Bartók’s desk. In truth, it was another composition that brought it back out again: the dance piece from a year later, *The Wooden Prince*, whose 1917 première again raised the possibility of bringing the opera to the stage. The première even then underwent several delays, but nevertheless finally took place in the Opera House on 24 May 1918. Although the piece by and large received laudatory criticism (after the relative isolation of the 1910s, his

critical reception was starting to more intensely concern the composer, who had been stubbornly experimenting with new forms of self-expression for more than a decade), it did not receive a great ovation, and was removed from the programme after only a few performances. In Hungary, the production was not even revamped until 1936, but in opera houses abroad, starting in the 1920s, it began to enjoy increasing success. While Bartók himself was still highly sceptical with regard to the reception of the composition – as he expressed to Ernst Latzko, the conductor of the 1925 Weimar production, he thought that, despite the interest of the theatre-goers, *Bluebeard* “could not count on lasting success with audiences” – the creative work has slowly but surely taken the place it deserves among the most significant operas of the 20th century.

The single-act ballet traditionally performed together on the same evening, often based on the way they have been received, is the loosely related work *The Wooden Prince*. However, on the Erkel Theatre’s November programme, *Bluebeard* will instead be followed by *Mario and the Magician*, a work dating from the late 1980s. While revealing the similarities between the two works no doubt belongs in the realm of free association games, their plots, wrapped up in the fallibility, dependence and cruelty of the human psyche, can without undue mental effort and intellectual *legerdemain* be projected onto one another, at least insofar as Béla Balázs’s famous question regarding the role of the dramatic work is concerned. While both works are performed on a double stage, if the dominant element of both is reflexivity, the only difference is that *Bluebeard*, if you like, is about the impassibility of the

boundaries of the personality, while *Mario and the Magician* is about just the opposite – the permeability and capability of being dismantled, and the manner of being compelled to voluntarily resign from individual autonomy. Although *Bluebeard* is the story of two people's personal drama, it nevertheless questions the integrity of the individuality of audience members sitting in their seats at quarters at least as close as in Thomas Mann's 1929 classic, where the strangely dressed, humpbacked and unpleasant "charlatan", the hypnotist Cipolla, prefigures certain aspects of Mann's later Satan figure and alludes in his behaviour to the arrival in inter-war political life of "illusionists" acquiring greater and greater power.

As far as Thomas Mann's stance is concerned, there was no question for the writer living in the time of the Weimar Republic, which would still remain in existence for years despite grappling with numerous problems, that the extremist manifestations of the desire for power were founded on the subservience of the individual and the spiritual need for submission, which is not only stronger than the will and the defiant struggle for resistance, but goes hand in hand with it. As his repellently victorious hero, Cipolla, expresses, "the capability [...] that we exceed ourselves, that we become a tool, that we obey in the most unconditional and full manner, is just the reverse of the other, that we will and command. Both are one and the same capability. Command and submission are consubstantial and create an inseparable unity; he who can submit can also command, and vice versa: the idea of the one is contained in the other, just as the masses and leader are each contained

in the other; but the achievement, the extraordinarily difficult and nerve-shattering achievement is his, the leader and organiser's, in whom will becomes submission and submission becomes will, whose person is the birthplace of both [...]."

In *Bluebeard*, the idea of submission, the defeat of love expected unconditionally from Judit, leads to the conclusion that emotional surrender is impossible. Meanwhile, *Mario and the Magician* poses cruelly unsettling questions in relation to individual responsibility, consciousness and ethical conduct. It is true of both plots, however, that the tragedy is not inherent in the construction upon one another of the various events in the story, but in the depths of the psyche's functioning. As Béla Balázs writes, "The world outside is full of armies, but that is not what kills us, gentlemen and ladies."



# Opera for every school student!

"The OperaKaland's aim is for every high school student in every corner of the country to be able to graduate with exposure to opera or ballet in a major theatre," General Director Szilveszter Ókovács told *Opera* magazine. Every Hungarian enrolled in a high-school level educational institute can take part in the programme, regardless of their family's financial situation or where they live. The theatre offers the highest quality productions with performers of the first rank. The performances are not abridged or simplified productions – that is, the students can enjoy them in full.

The Opera House has notified every high school-level institution of the OperaKaland programme, including students and teachers at high schools, technical high schools and trade schools regardless of the entity running the institution, so schools administrated by the state, religious organisations and foundations are all welcome. The guiding principal is that no student is excluded because of their family's financial circumstances.

For each school year and theatrical season, the programme runs in two phases: autumn (in October) and spring (in May). Each performance series comprises 19-24 performances.

All of the performances start between 11 am and 5 pm in order for groups from both inside and outside Budapest to be accommodated. As part of the programme series, one opera or ballet is staged in each phase – making two works per school year/season. In the autumn of the 2013/2014 season, Kodály's singspiel *Háry János* was performed, to be followed in the spring by two one-act operas: Mozart's *Der Schauspieldirektor* and János Vajda's *Mario and the Magician*.

In order to prepare for the opera visit, a complete set of teaching materials is prepared with the aid of experts in music pedagogy and made available on the Opera House's website. For *Hunyadi László*, a timeline, a director's message, audio material, an introduction to the historical figures and András Batta's work *The Birth of Hungarian Musical Drama* was available from the website in advance.

As a guiding principles, the performed works are performed without abbreviation or simplification. In addition, the performances are supplemented with additional aspects, which – without harming the unity of the work – aid in its understanding. In the case of Erkel's opera *Hunyadi László*, performed in the spring of 2013, images of the characters were



Photo: Péter Herman





Photo: Szilvia Csibi



Photo: Szilvia Csibi, Péter Herman

projected at the beginning of the work (during the overture), to help students easily recognise and learn the names of the artists. For easier comprehension, electronic surtitles were used.

#### Accompanying specials

The spring of 2013 saw the launch of the “Hunyadi travelling trunk”. The item, with central significance and symbolism in the most recent production of *Hunyadi László*, served as both a communication link between schools and a notification of the programme’s existence. The theatrical prop, together with a copy of the Holy Crown of Hungary, visited 20 schools, where it was received as part of a small ceremony, and then sent on its way to the next institution on the list.

In addition to this, participants can receive various awards, for example, the “group arriving from farthest away”, the “largest group”, the “largest group arriving from farthest away”, the “toughest adventurers (wheelchair division)” and the “most elegant

group (dignified, attractive, uniform appearance)”. The gift for the Opera House prepared by the integrated institutions raising mentally disabled youths was acknowledged with the “nicest thank you” award.

#### Observations

The figures from OperaKaland’s experimental phase in May/June 2013: 27,000 students from 350 educational institutions in 122 communities took part in the programme, of which 15,000 were from outside of Budapest. The behaviour of the participating students and the reception of the performance exceeded the organiser’s most audacious dreams, and it may well have been that, for most of them, this was their first theatrical/cultural experience. From a teaching point of view, the target audience is a “difficult” age group: youths between 15 and 18. The production was around three hours long, and heavy and serious in terms of its history, music and libretto. Comprehending the *Hunyadi* production required preparation and attentiveness. Despite

all this, the students – 1,900 a full house – watched and listened to the performance to the end, quietly and with discipline, clapping only at the appropriate times, and applauding the performers with enormous enthusiasm. Feedback received about the programme, both orally and in writing, has been exclusively positive. Here are a few excerpts:

Dear Organisers,

On June 5, I saw the opera *Hunyadi László* with my students as part of the wonderful special offer. I state sincerely that this was a tremendous pleasure, as many of our students were visiting a theatre for the first time. I would like to extend my thanks to you for doing such an excellent job of organising and preparing every single detail of this programme. Truly professional work. Congratulations!

Thankfully yours,

**Henrietta Lékó Nagy**

*Count István Széchenyi Catholic High School, Technical High School and College, Jászapáti.*

Dear Organisers,

First of all, I would like to extend my thanks on behalf of the Áron Tamási Elementary and High School for your bravura performance (June 5, 5 pm) of *Hunyadi László*, which proved a true pleasure for the school’s pupils and their escorts. I ask you to please express our congratulations to the performers and directors! It truly grabbed us how you melded “old and new” in your performance, and special thanks are due for the many gestures with which you strived to make the events more understandable and easier to follow, just like a depiction of emotions (here I am thinking of the subtitles and the portrayal of László’s dreams with dance, which truly enchanted us, the viewers, as did the projections to no lesser extent, using the latest technology – it was amazing!)

Thank you for the opportunity.  
Sincerely yours,

**Krisztina Szamos**

*French-Italian High School Teacher  
Áron Tamási Elementary and Bi-Lingual  
German High School, Budapest*

Dear Dr Noémi Kiszely and Judit Molnár,

I would like to send our thanks through you to every member and employee of your theatre for the fantastic experience you provided today. The performance was for many of the students (trade school students) their first experience of real theatre, and what we heard on the way home was unforgettable. If the school supports our initiative, you can depend on us to come in the autumn. For us, the teachers, the day was also a cause for much happiness. The happiness of our children with this great performance was unforgettable. Thank you!

Yours sincerely:

**Ildikó Gósi Ferá**

*Mátyás Hunyadi Trade School  
and Technical High School,  
Mosonmagyaróvár*

“When we send our new recording to the crib of every little Hungarian citizen, when we host soldiers, when we play before tens of thousands

of high school students, when large families and pensioners visit us with the help of specially discounted season ticket series, when we organise themed events free and for the public, print a complimentary magazine, offer ten percent of our tickets to students for a euro’s worth of forints, or invite Hungarians living outside Hungary for the first performance: all of these make the costly ripened fruit of total art available to everyone whose tax money – or whose parents’ or children’s tax money – has contributed to the creation of these treasures. All of us are sensitive to beauty, but for many the opportunity to enjoy it simply never arises. We sincerely believe that it is beneficial to the nation, to society, if more people know and love the opera. Or in other words, anyone who loves the opera cannot be a bad person.”

*(Szilveszter Ókovács, Opera Magazine,  
Interview with András Oláh – excerpt)*

# Dear Reader,

Let me wax lyrical for a moment: the Erkel is a dream.

It is a dream of *opening* a new phase of life for a written-off building abandoned at just under 100 years of age. A dream of maintaining the legacy of Sándor Svéd, Mária Gyurkovics and József Simándy, along with Viktor Fülöp, Zsuzsa Kun and János Ferencsik – or perhaps the Three Tenors individually, and Scotto, Toscanini, Furtwängler and Gardelli. Of a space for the Hungarian arts, where, whatever talent artists have brought with them and developed diligently, they can show it off.

A dream which allows us, in the midst of a global financial crisis, to believe in the elevation of the spirit. Culture is a great relief, or at least a comfort and a source of relaxation, which this is why it deserves, in an extraordinarily difficult position, extraordinary support.

The Erkel dream is that the opera and ballet can find a place in a practical, comfortable building, together with the finest grand operettas, folk dance, jazz, symphonic music and high-quality pop culture, just as Yehudi Menuhin fitted in here with Ella Fitzgerald, and Yves Montand with Oscar Peterson and the Festival of Dance Music.

But the Erkel is most of all the audience's dream.

It is a dream that there can still be an enjoyment of art even without a fur coat or tails, and without a limousine or taxi. Even without great wealth or a well paid job, ordinary people can have a substantive and respectable desire for opera and ballet. Clean shirt or worn-out suit, bus or – coming soon – metro, thanks to tickets issued at cinema prices and season tickets, it is now more than possible to take a peek at the most complex theatrical world, at the same level of quality as in the opera house, and with the same artists.

And we also dream that, while our less active parents can still find their most favourite works here and we can come out here to see or hear ground-breaking and supremely talented artists – if we are left with a drop of strength after work – our children will also have the opportunity to decipher the cultural codes and receive the gift of understanding, or at least the *feeling* of, total art.

The Erkel is an investment in minds and hearts – and at the same time a profit-oriented institution: in service of society's aesthetic sensibility and emotional well-being.

Anyone who loves the Erkel cannot be a bad person – the Erkel is a dream come true.

Szilveszter Ókovács  
General Director



Photo: László Emmer



# NÉPOPERA

VIII., Tisza Kálmán-tér

I. év, I. előadás.

Igazgató: MÁRKUS DEZSÓ.

I. év, I. előadás.

Kezdetre 7 órakor

Csütörtökön, 1911 december 7-én  
első bemutató előadás.

Kezdetre 7 órakor

## I. HUNYADY LÁSZLÓ NYITÁNY

Irtá: Erkel Ferenc; vezényli: Márkus Dezsó.

## II. QUO VADIS?

Opera 6 képben. Sienkiewicz regénye után irtá: Henry Cain. Fordította: Mérei Adolf. Zenéjét szerzte: Jean Nougues.

I. kép: Eunike megcsókolja Petronius szobrát. II. kép: Róma ég. III. kép: Quo Vadis? IV. kép: A keresztény vértanúk. V. kép: Nero cirksza. VI. kép: Az utolsó rózsza.

<b>Rendező: Mérei Adolf.</b>		<b>SZEMÉLYEK:</b>		<b>Vezényli: Grosskopf Márk.</b>	
Nero császár	Várnai Sándor	Tigellinus	Hajagos Károly	Aggastyán	Széki Ernő
Poppaea	Bazilidesz Mária	Vatinius	Valda Frigyes	Sporus, kormárós	Mátrai Ernő
Petronius	Németh Gyula	Nerva	Nero kegyencei	Pyllia, a felesége	Széky Anna
Eunike	Iávor Mária	Vitellius	Loránd Lajos	Centurio	Fehér Artur
Iras	Petronius rabnói	Péter apostol	Bihar Sándor	Keresztény anyja	Kalocsay Ferencné
Vinicius	Hikisch Kató	Myriam	Gilevicsky Irén	Kis fia	Huszthy Ibolyka
Lyigia	Szántó Gáspár	Nazarius, a fia	Landier Aranka	Matróz	Sogár Frigyes
Khilon	Gervai Erzsé	Ifju keresztény	Széky Emil	Ursus	Graffi József
Lilith, Poppaea cseléje	Gábor Arnold	Demas	Kötösi Jenő	Croton	Ódry Átila
	Legard Adél				

Az I. kép Petronius házában, a II. kép a császári kertekben, a III. kép a Tiberis partján a keresztények rejtélyében, a IV. kép a börtönben, az V. kép a cirksza porondján, a VI. kép Petronius kertjében történik.

Az első bemutató előadásra az összes jegyek elkeltek.

Kezdetre 7 órakor, vége 11 óra után.

Az előadás és a fölvonások kezdete után a nézőtér aítól zárva maradnak.

Az I., III. és V. kép után nagyobb szünet.

A nézőtérben a hölgyek és urak csakis felöltő, ernyő és bot nélkül jelenhetnek meg. Kalapokat a hölgyek nem vihetnek be.

A t. közönség csak a belépőjegyben betűvel jelzett ruháját használhatja.

Szombaton, 1911 december hó 9-én este 7 órakor  
harmadik bemutató előadás:

## QUO VADIS?

**Műsor:** Vasárnap, december 10-én: Quo vadis? Szerdán, december 13-án: Quo vadis?  
Hétfőn, december 11-én: Quo vadis? Csütörtökön, december 14-én: Quo vadis?  
Kedden, december 12-én: Quo vadis? Pénteken, december 15-én: Mignon. (I. bemutató előadás.)

<b>HELYÁRAK:</b>	<b>FÖLDSZINT: 1-39 sor . . . 3.- korona</b>	
	ERKÉLY: 1-3 sor . . . 3.- kor.	ERKÉLY: 11-15 sor . . . 1.50 kor.
	" 4-6 " . . . 2.50 "	" 16-20 " . . . 1.- "
	" 7-10 " . . . 2.- "	" 21 " . . . .50 "
Földszinti páholy . . . 24.- korona		Erkély páholy . . . 20.- korona
Elővételi díj a földszinti 18 első sornál 1.- korona. – A páholyoknál 2.- korona.		

**JEGYEK VÁLTHATÓK:** A Népopera napi pénztáránál, telefon: 122-92, elővételi pénztár telefon: 122-93 d. e. 9-2 és d. u. 4 órától kezdve; azonkívül a következő elárúsító helyeken: Bárd Ferenc és Testvére, IV. Kossuth Lajos-utca 4, (telefon 6-56.) és VI. Andrassy-ut 1, (telefon 25-13.), Rózsavölgyi és Társa IV., Kristóf-tér 3 (telefon 10-08.), és VI. Andrassy-ut 45. (telefon 148-82.) Méry Béla IV., József-tér 11. (telefon 19-61.), Dr. Pataki tőzsdéjében, VI. Andrassy-ut 38, (telefon 139-39.) Szántó Mór dohánytőzsdéjében, IV., Kecskeméti-utca 14. (telefon 6-60.), Breuer nővérek dohánytőzsdéjében, VI., Teréz-körút 54. sz. Podmaniczky-utca sark (telefon 22-88), Németh József I., Fehérvári-ut 15, (telefon 146-59) és Blankenberg Lipót, X., Martinovics-tér 1, (telefon 53-61.)

ERKEL

SZÍNHÁZ  
THEATRE

ERKEL-FEST  
Grand  
Opening  
07-10 11 2013

DAY OF HUNGARIAN OPERA – GRAND OPENING GALA

ÁKOS – "SKETCHES 20" CONCERT

JÁNOS VAJDA: MARIO AND THE MAGICIAN

BÉLA BARTÓK: DUKE BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE

"GENRES AND SHADOWS" – DANCE EXTRAVAGANZA

OPERA  
MAGYAR ÁLLAMI OPERAHÁZ  
HUNGARIAN STATE OPERA

[www.facebook.com/operahaz](http://www.facebook.com/operahaz)  
[www.opera.hu/erkel](http://www.opera.hu/erkel)