

Brigitta Pályi

**The path of operetta popularity in Budapest in the context  
of social history (1894–1918)**

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## **I. Professional literature of the subject matter and the research question**

In Hungary, operetta represents a theatrical genre which still forms a part of our present, but rather belongs to our past. Although operetta is not a genre of Hungarian origin, it has still become an integral part of Hungarian culture, so much so that in 2013 the Hungarikum Committee classified Hungarian operetta as Hungarikum. Despite the fact that the operetta forms an important part of the Hungarian cultural heritage, the history of the Hungarian theatre is yet to perform its scientific examination. French, English and Austrian (Viennese) operettas received much more attention among scientific researchers (even among Hungarians), and thus their professional literature is much wider than that of the Hungarians.

The major shortcoming in the scientific literature of the Budapest/Hungarian operetta so far is that no scientific work has been written which would depict a summarised and detailed outline of the history of the Budapest/Hungarian operetta, highlight the reasons for the popularity of the operetta genre in Budapest and Hungary, or would consider the significance of the operetta from its social historical aspects at all, especially for the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first decades of the 1900s were left out of the view of the Hungarian scientific professional literature. It is true that we can find some comprehensive works for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which, however, were not written with a scientific demand. Here we could mention, for example, the works of Gál – Somogyi (1959) titled '*Book of Operettas*', or that of Rátonyi (1984) titled *Operetta I-II*. We can also find a summary work which examines the history of the genre of operetta in the field of international professional literature. We could mention the monograph by Richard Traubner (2003) titled *Operetta. A Theatrical History* as an example, which describes the history of the operetta broken down by period and authors within those periods.

This present dissertation tries to fill in the gaps in the scientific literature, and seeks answers to the questions neglected by scientific life, when it examines the historical path of the Budapest/Hungarian operetta, the reasons for its popularity and its connection with the capital's society between 1894 and 1918.

## **II Structure and methodology of the dissertation**

The dissertation examines the path of operetta popularity through several factors. The theatres in Budapest appear as the first relevant factor. With regard to theatres, we pay special attention primarily to institutions which play a more significant role in the history of the operetta. (Népszínház, Magyar Színház, Király Színház, Vígszínház, Népopera). The dissertation deals with the rural performance of the operetta only to the extent of the examination of one rural theatre (the theatre of Pécs), in order to get to know the circumstances of the rural appearance of the operetta and its reception among the rural audience as a narrow perspective. The dissertation also mentions the relationship between music halls and the operetta through the history of 3 institutions (Fővárosi Orfeum, Royal Orfeum, Téli kert).

The next aspect of exploring the popularity of operetta is the word-books/librettos of the period under study (1894–1918) and the era before that, which have not been analysed in scientific depth until now. By studying these in more depth, we intend to shed light not only on the reasons for the popularity of the operetta genre, but also on the identity of its audience and the development of the Budapest/Hungarian operetta. In addition, by means of a more in-depth examination of the history of Budapest/Hungarian operettas we aim at substantiating the claim that the renewal/modernization of the operetta and the Budapest/Hungarian operetta in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was clearly due to the changes in the composition (and needs) of theatrical audiences, and vice versa: with the renewal of the operetta, the range of the theatrical and non-theatrical audiences of the operetta also changed and grew wider. In order to explore the foregoing we analyse the word-books of the Budapest/Hungarian operettas of the time interval under study and the period before it (in the course of our research we intend to examine nearly 40 such textbooks), which can be found primarily in the National Széchenyi Library's Theatre History Collection. When analysing the word-books, we also cover the social and political issues in the librettos (e.g.: the issue of the military forces, the issue of marriage customs, the mockery of certain politicians [e.g.: István Tisza], political parties, and the coverage of current political events [e.g.: during World War I]). We intend to show the specific characteristics of these librettos (open political references – names of persons, names of parties), by which they become unique and clearly distinguishable from the Viennese operetta, by gathering the characteristic features of the word-books of the Budapest/Hungarian operetta.

Reviews published in the daily press also help to define the Budapest audience of the operetta. The following printed press matters are included in the dissertation: *Budapesti Napló*, *Pesti Napló*, *Budapesti Hírlap*, *Pesti Hírlap*, *Színházi Lapok*, *Friss Újság*, *Zenészet*, *Lapok*, *Harmónia*, *Az Újság*, and preferentially, *Színházi Élet*. *Színházi Élet* also means another component of the issue of popularity, as a deeper analysis of its articles reveals the extent to which the press has contributed to increase the popularity of the operetta and its development into a cult in Budapest.

The works on the history of each operetta or the biographies of each operetta author also have valuable information about the history and social aspects of the Budapest/Hungarian operetta at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Memoirs and diaries from the pen of an actor, writer, or composer who can be linked to the operetta can also provide useful data. In addition to these, the correspondence in the NSZL Manuscript Archive also serve as additional contributions.

One of the main components of the dissertation is the collected list of the Budapest/Hungarian operettas. The previous professional literature has discussed diverse segments of the Budapest/Hungarian operettas, but one of its key elements has been forgotten: if we scrutinise the Budapest/Hungarian operettas, then we should be aware of how many and what kind of plays we are talking about at all. Several attempts have been made to map this in scientific life, but unfortunately none of them provided a sufficient basis for our research. Mention could be made here of the work by Amadé Németh (2002) titled *History of Hungarian Operetta*; the project titled “*Operetta in Hungary, 1860–1958*” launched at the Institute of Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and two quite recent works by Dr Gábor Winkler (2015) titled *Operetta I-II*, as well as *The Hungarian Operetta* (2018). Taking into consideration the imperfections and filling in the gaps of these works, in the course of the research we established a list which takes into account the Budapest/Hungarian operettas arranged by composers (according to the author of the dissertation, only those operettas which were written by Hungarian authors in the Hungarian language and whose world premiere took place in Budapest or in other cities of the Kingdom of Hungary fall in the notion of the Budapest/Hungarian operettas). The compiled list of the Budapest/Hungarian operettas covers not only the period examined in the dissertation, since it enumerates the Budapest/Hungarian operettas not only from 1894 to 1918, but also until 1945. The list was compiled primarily based on the already published theatrical repertoires, Hungarian and international encyclopaedias, as well as the information in certain contemporary periodicals (especially *Színházi Élet*). The list of the Budapest operettas attached to the dissertation is

analysed in more detail in a separate chapter, examining its individual elements separately and broken down into figures.

Finally, in connection with the issue of the popularity of operetta, we also address the motivational issues of the authors of the age concerned, by examining the factors influencing and motivating each author (especially composers and librettists) to put pen to paper: financial reward, reputation, self-realization, or possibly driven by some other reason.

### **III Summary of scientific results**

Within the framework of this present dissertation, we examined the history of the popularity of the Budapest/Hungarian operettas, the way of their development and their features from several aspects. All in all, we can state that the Budapest/Hungarian operettas (and the genre of operetta itself) gradually gained more and more space during the period under study (1894–1918), and their popularity peaked during the First World War. However, in order to be able to produce this popularity index, it was essential to undergo a decisive change, that is, development, which was closely related to the transformation of the theatrical audience of the operetta, we could say that the change in the composition of the audience was both the cause and consequence of the genre renewal of the Budapest/Hungarian operetta.

If we summarize the appearance of operettas in theatres, we can see how the genre of operettas gradually gained more and more ground in the Hungarian capital. The operetta was sooner or later added to the repertoire of almost all of the theatres in the capital as a result of the rise of the middle-class culture. First it made its debut only on the stage of the Népszínház, then of the Magyar Színház, then it won a theatre of its own in 1903, when the Király Színház opened its doors. The Király Színház also needs special mention because, although the Király Színház played a significant role in the history of the operetta, the history of its operation has not been presented with a scientific need so far. However, the present dissertation fills this gap making use of the surviving records of the Király Színház. One of the most prominent moments of the popularity of the operetta was that in 1908 the operetta appeared on the stage of the Vígszínház, which was fundamentally based on prosaic plays, what is more, the said operetta was an original Budapest/Hungarian operetta, namely the play by Imre Kálmán, titled *Tatárjárás*, the history of which was also followed in the long term by the author of this present dissertation. Although the genre of operetta has not become a permanent offer in the repertoire of the Vígszínház, this event is an excellent illustration of the growing demand of

the Budapest audience for the genre of operetta. And this tendency kept continuing, as evidenced by the fact that the genre of operetta was present on the stage of each and every newly established theatre in the capital: just think of the Népopera, which opened in 1911 and was originally intended to introduce the genre of opera to the lower social strata and make it available to them, but year in year out, the operetta completely displaced the opera from the repertoire of the Népopera. Not to mention the fact that the Városi Színház, which was established as the successor of the Népopera, also functioned as another operetta theatre in Budapest. In addition, the operetta not only won the stages of theatres for itself, but it also appeared quite often in the programs of nightclubs and music halls (Fővárosi Orfeum, Royal Orfeum, Téli kert), mainly in the form of single-act operettas. By enumerating the theatres, we also sought to shed light on the identity of the operetta audience by studying the ticket prices of each theatre, as well as the salaries, living conditions, and cultural needs of contemporary social groups. What the results of the study reveal is that the primary theatrical core audience of the operetta after the turn of the century was the middle and lower middle-class groups which were gaining strength as a result of modernization and which were almost completely amalgamated by the turn of the century. While other social groups could all have gone to see an operetta in the theatre (at least from the financial aspect) their different cultural needs did not permit them to do so: higher classes simply considered it inferior to them to see an operetta (the aristocracy and upper middle-class primarily attended the Opera House), and the lower social classes (workers, servants) spent their little money on entertainment in the pub or later on in the cinema, rather than on theatre tickets.

This present research has found answers to several questions by means of the more in-depth analysis of the librettos of the Budapest/Hungarian operettas. First of all, we could trace the moments of the textual development of the Budapest/Hungarian operetta: how it transformed from simple plays copying only French and Austrian, as well as English patterns to plays representing a unique trend with original features, renewed in all its flavours. The operetta by György Verő (1894) titled *Virágcsata* appeared as the premonitory signs of the change, by providing in its text exactly what the newly forming operetta audience demanded. Instead of the trite French and German vaudevilles, the Budapest/Hungarian operettas staged after 1902 provided original ideas (we consider the operetta by Huszka titled *Bob herceg*, which was staged on 20 December 1902 for the first time, as the first representative of the modern Budapest/Hungarian operetta), bringing a fundamental change in rendering the old, complicated, and exaggerated schemes of the operetta in a simplified manner. In addition, they brought the stories of operettas closer to people and made them more realistic, as the

operettas were no longer played in the fairy-tale world, but in real locations with real types of people. The examination of the word-books also revealed that the renewal of the genre of operetta was largely interdependent on the change in the composition of its audience. The word-books of the 1880s and 1890s were still full of French and Spanish names, as well as French and Latin phrases and terms, from which the conclusion can be drawn that during that period the audience of the operetta rather came from the upper, more well-to-do and more educated middle-class, who represented a kind of conservative, hidebound view to a certain level. In the 1890s, however, there were more and more voices (especially in the columns of the daily press) demanding innovation from operetta authors. These were the ever-strengthening groups of middle and lower-middle-class citizens whose identities we had already shed light on in terms of theatres. The analysis of the content and theme of the word-books also supports this statement of ours, as the modern Budapest/Hungarian operettas also dealt with a political topic in one respect, which presupposes that the audience was interested in politics at all, that is, they had the right to vote and were educated enough to be able to grasp and appreciate the meaning of the topical witticisms (which often criticized the upper classes, as well): these conditions were met precisely by the already mentioned middle-class groups, in which the liberal, more advanced spirit that led to the development of the modern operetta was inherent. It is no coincidence that the innovations in *Virágcsata* (1894) by Verő were also evaluated only by *Pesti Hírlap*, as at that time this newspaper was a popular magazine of the liberal middle-classes. The simplification of the words of modern operettas (especially as far as lyrics are concerned) also resulted in the operetta gaining increasing popularity outside the theatre and gaining ground among more and more groups in society. This, naturally, does not mean that in the first decades of the turn of the century all social groups would have thronged for operetta tickets. The upper social classes (aristocracy, upper-middle-class) as well as intellectuals continued to treat operetta with contempt, at least in public, accordingly, by no means did they go to the theatre to watch operettas. However, as a result of the simplification of the words, operetta songs and operetta hits also became understandable and memorable for the lower social strata. In addition to the social aspects, the word-books also greatly supported our statement that the Budapest/Hungarian operetta represents an independent trend within the genre of operetta, and cannot simply be called one of the branches of the Viennese operetta. One of the main features of the words of the Budapest/Hungarian operettas within the period under study (1894–1918) is the presentation of the multitude of the topical political and social witticisms, and not only in a covert form

(see Viennese operettas), but completely openly (exaggerating) holding a kind of mocking glass towards politicians and social groups of the age.

The career of the operetta had already been on its upgrade by the early 1910s, when the first copy of *Színházi Élet* was published (1912). In the light of the articles examined, *Színházi Élet* clearly strengthened the already established popularity indicators of the operetta and promoted it to become a cult. Its principle that its articles could not contain any negative criticism, but only positive reviews contributed to this to a great extent. If a play was less engaging, it simply disserted little or no mention of it. Accentuating the advantageous side of the operetta undoubtedly assisted in furthering the increase in the popularity index of the genre. In addition, not only the genre of operetta, but also the cult of operetta actors and actresses was greatly supported by the capital's prominent theatrical press: reports, tiny moments of everyday life, and photographs of the current stars of operetta were published. Although the advancement of operetta actors and actresses into a star began in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (think of Blaha Lujza or Ilka Pálmay), the *Színházi Élet* further increased their popularity with rumours and anecdotes, as well as extravagant reviews about the actors and actresses lauding them to the skies.

The next factor in the issue of the popularity of the operetta is the table attached to the dissertation, which represents value in itself. The list of Budapest/Hungarian operettas is also significant because while Dr Gábor Winkler's encyclopaedia publishes descriptions of 242 operettas, out of which some are the works of foreign authors, the list compiled by the author of this present dissertation lists 364 operettas between 1894 and 1945 which were the works of exclusively Hungarian authors and whose world premiere was staged in Budapest or in other cities of the Kingdom of Hungary. One of the most relevant popularity indicators of the Budapest/Hungarian operetta is the remarkable amount of the number of plays performed on stage (1894–1918: 125 operettas), which also only confirms our statement that the Budapest/Hungarian operetta – with this significant number of products – should be considered a distinct trend, separated from the Viennese. The large number of operettas are also a great indication of the continuing interest in operettas, which took on such proportions during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that operettas became practically a fashionable product. Examining the biographies and works of the Hungarian authors of the operettas, we can state that in addition to the outstanding authors – who were primarily motivated by self-realization – authors composing only an operetta or two can be witnessed, who took up writing operettas for no other reason than to meet the fashion demands of the era. It was simply fashionable to write operettas. Among them, we find not only completely anonymous



experimenters, but also defining artists, such as Ferenc Herczeg. He provides an excellent example of the presence of ‘operetta fashion’, since he mentions in his memoirs that he once strayed into the world of operetta writing, but he clearly evaluates this move negatively, and his lines bear witness to remorse. Another example to this can be the case of László Dunai, who may have been a famous classical musician who wrote operettas under a pseudonym. That is to say, in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, operetta writing was considered a fashion item among artists which they were almost obligated to acquire, if they did not want to lag behind. However, they usually regretted this move and were also ashamed to admit that they had ever done so. Of course, we cannot know for certain if it was not just the offended vanity that spoke of them (as it did with Ferenc Herczeg), since just being a talented writer or musician does not mean being able to write a good operetta.

The rise in the popularity of the operetta may also have been due to the historical events of the period. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 undoubtedly ‘played into the hand of the operetta’, since people found themselves in a life situation that meant a stressful, tense everyday life, and the only escape from that was entertainment. And this entertainment was provided for by the operetta, which made it possible for the genre of operetta to enjoy its heyday in Budapest during the years of the First World War (1914–1918), when significant plays, such as e.g. *Mágnás Miska* (1916) was born, which became one of the best-known representatives of the Budapest/Hungarian operettas.

#### **IV Publication activity in respect of the topic**

##### **Publications**

- *The Hungarian operetta in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.* In: the publication titled *Theatre Yearbook for the 2011–2012 season*, National Museum and Institute of Theatre History, Budapest, 2013.
- Participation in the personal and place name indexing works of the study volumes titled *The Eight Hundred Year old Franciscan Order. Studies on the spirituality, historical vocation and cultural artistic role of the order* Volumes I – II.
- *At the dawn of the Hungarian operetta. – Prelude music of the classics = Space, identity, denominations and culture in the Carpathian Basin and Central Europe*, Résumé Volume,

Ed. Rita Szuly, Piliscsaba, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, 2013.

- *At the dawn of the Hungarian operetta. – Prelude music of the classics = Society in space and time.* Studies on the History of Ideas, Culture and Society History in Hungary of the New and Modern Ages, Ed. Rita Szuly - Péter Pál Kránitz, Budapest–Piliscsaba, Hungarian Diary - Written Word Foundation, 2015. (Doctoral school conferences 2) pp. 276–283
- *Tatárjárás. In the Footsteps of a Forgotten Operetta. = Conception history studies. Papers from the presentations of the conference held on 10 November 2012 in Piliscsaba,* Ed. Anita Bojtos - Ádám Novotnik, Budapest–Piliscsaba, PPKE BTK, 2016. (Doctoral school conferences 1)
- *The reception history of the operetta in Budapest (1875–1899) in the light of the reviews of the contemporary press = From the text to the scene. Studies in the history of drama and theatre. Volume I,* Ed. Katalin Czibula - Júlia Demeter - Zsuzsanna Márta Pintér, Eger, Líceum Publishing House, 2016. pps. 169–177.
- *Theatre: the saviour of prisoners of war, (Review) Acting soldiers, prisoner prima donnas. Frontline theatres, prisoner of war theatres in the First World War,* Ed. Mirella Csiszár - Mariann Sipőcz, Agria, volume XIII, Issue No. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 279–284.

### **Conference presentations**

- Lecture delivered at the conference organized by Pázmány Péter Catholic University Doctoral School of History Concept History workshop, titled: *Tatárjárás. In the footsteps of a forgotten operetta* in Piliscsaba on 10 November 2012.
- Lecture delivered at the conference organized by Pázmány Péter Catholic University Doctoral School of History Concept History workshop, titled: *At the dawn of the Hungarian operetta. – Prelude music of the classics.* in Piliscsaba on 28 November 2013.
- Lecture delivered at the conference organized by Károly Eszterházy University, titled *The reception history of the operetta in Budapest (1875–1899) in the light of the reviews of the contemporary press.* in Eger on 13 September 2015.