

## OPERA AND NATION



Last year the world commemorated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Joseph Haydn, the famous composer for whom the National Széchényi Library holds the world's greatest collection of manuscripts. Consequently, during the memorial year the Music Collection of the library not only organised its own "7 Times Haydn" exhibition, but in collaboration with the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' Institute for Musicology it also played a central role in presenting an exhibition dealing with Haydn's relationship to Hungary.

This year, another important anniversary is being celebrated by the library and its staff: the bicentenary of the birth of Ferenc Erkel. The core of the National Library's unique Erkel collection was established in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when it purchased the estate of the composer's manuscripts, including the original manuscripts of his most important works such as the *National Anthem* and the operas *László Hunyadi* and *Bánk bán*. In 1954 the collection was significantly

enriched with the acquisition of the former Peoples' Theatre collection of musical scores, and the 1980s saw the archive of the Opera House incorporated into the Music Collection, resulting in it becoming the guardian of the central collection of the almost-complete musical sources of Erkel. This extremely rich archive is complemented by the National Theatre's library and fragmentary archives – which are today housed in the Theatre History Collection – and also by the many written documents from Erkel's estate, which are housed in the Manuscript Collection.

With the aim of introducing this unique and important collection of sources – and as with last year's "Haydn and Hungary" exhibition – the Institute for Musicology asked the National Library to help organise and co-direct the central exhibition of the series of bicentenary commemorations. This year's co-operation is on a larger scale than in 2009 due to the fact that, whilst for the Haydn exhibition the leading role was understandably taken by the Music Collection, Erkel's activities as a composer and conductor also demanded the expertise of the staff of the Theatre History

Part of the exhibition, the enlarged stage-setting in the background.



Collection, and especially that of Olga Somorjai, who was key to designing the exhibition.

The Director of the Institute for Musicology, Tibor Tallián, prepared the script for the exhibition which opened on 1 October at the Museum of Music History (Táncsics Mihály st. 7, Budapest, 1014). The title of the exhibition, *Opera and Nation*, reveals that his ambition was much more than simply describing the career and compositions of Erkel: rather it was to extend from the central oeuvre of Erkel a survey of Hungarian opera culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first of the four exhibition rooms explores the process of Erkel acquainting himself with the most significant traditions of contemporary musical theatre, and how he both sustained and redefined the genre. Erkel became familiar with the remnants of the aristocratic ‘castle-theatre’ during his childhood in Gyula, and also with urban German opera performances during his student years in Pozsony (*Bratislava*). Visiting the first permanent Hungarian theatre in Kolozsvár (*Cluj Napoca*) appears to have awakened him to the importance of composing music in the Hungarian style, which he set out to achieve in the middle of the 1830s as conductor of Buda’s National Theatre. From January 1838 – after a year at the German City Theatre – he conducted at the Hungarian

Whilst the first room – as with the full exhibition – is titled *Opera and Nation*, the second room broadens the horizon and examines the notion of *Opera and World*. This is also strongly connected to the personality of Erkel as the musical leader of the National Theatre between the end of the 1830s and the beginning of the 1870s. His taste and judgement was most influential in the shaping of the theatre’s international repertoire. Here visitors can find one of the exhibition’s most memorable spectacles: a full orchestra pit including all of the relevant instruments. Moreover, the illusion of being in the theatre is completed by the stage-setting that covers the background wall, and by the painting of the boxes on the side walls. (It is even more exciting when the visitor discovers that the scene is a reproduction of a contemporary impression, the tiny original of which can be seen at the other end of the room.) The display cabinets reveal not only the popular opera composers of the age – from Rossini to Verdi, Meyerbeer to Massenet, Weber to Wagner – but also we meet the characters of the National Theatre’s most significant singers, and through a few documents we catch a brief glimpse of the everyday life of Erkel’s “opera factory”.

We approach the next room through a short passage, at the centre of which we find Alajos Stróbl’s bust of



Part of the *Opera and Folk* room.

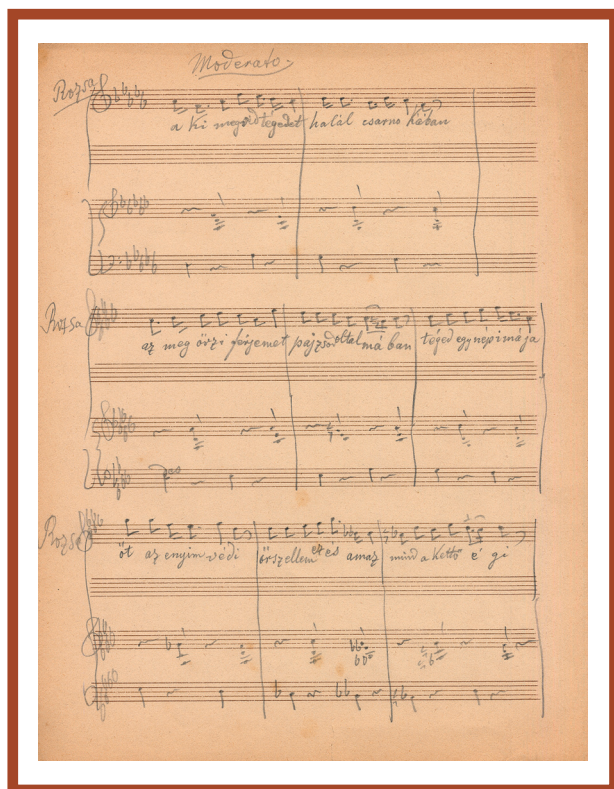
(later National) Theatre in Pest, where he established an orchestra who could perform the most demanding operas of that era, together with his own compositions. The exhibition’s great variety of pictures present not only the locations and their related repertoire, but also introduce the heroic characters of the ‘Opera War’, who fought for the emancipation of national opera, long treated as being second rate to drama.

Erkel, while the walls are covered with copies of programs from the many performances of Erkel’s operas. This third thematic station is called *Opera and History*, and as such examines the main stream of Erkel’s works, from the pioneering *Mária Bátor* (1840), through the incomparably successful *László Hunyadi* (1844) and *Bánk bán* (1861), all the way to *György Dózsa* (1867) and *György Brankovics* (1874), which his contemporaries found increasingly difficult to comprehend, and even on to *King István* (1885), which was to a great extent composed by Erkel’s son Gyula. As the brief introduction at the entrance recalls, the Hungarian artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “regarded the birth of the nation as the programme for the revival of the ‘old glory’”, thus the political message behind the actions of the Middle Ages was immediately understood by the contemporary audience. The original manuscripts of Erkel’s operas, borrowed from the Music Collection, are on display alongside the Theatre History



Collection's abundant range of documents: posters, stage-sets, design plans and portraits. The exhibition's most famous paintings – one called *The Genius of Ferenc Erkel* by Sándor Ipoly and generously lent to the exhibition by the Hungarian National Gallery, and the other, the portrait of Erkel by Alajos Györgyi (Giergl), supplied by the Hungarian National Museum (the third organiser of this exhibition) – can also be viewed here. Finally, also worthy of a mention is the important group of sources which at the opening ceremony needed to be introduced as the “estate deposit of Gyula Erkel”, but which now – thanks to the support of the Balassi Institute, one of the sponsors of the exhibition – has been purchased for the Széchényi Library. This part of the collection provides ample novelties amongst the exhibited manuscripts from *Simon Kemény* – Erkel's last, unfinished opera – to an opera plan that was until now completely unheard of. We are hopeful that with the detailed processing of the estate, yet more similarly important discoveries will be made.

Sketch for the *Simon Kemény* opera, from the estate of Gyula Erkel.



Alternative suggestion for the enlarged stage-setting and the orchestra.

Two of Erkel's theatrical pieces not discussed within the topic of *Opera and History* are acknowledged in the fourth and final room, inscribed with the title *Opera and Folk*. It is striking that the plot of both opera buffas *Sarolta* (1862) and *Nameless Heroes* (1880) are set amongst the people, and both include a sub-plot involving the army – as such these comedies can also be connected to the previous room's historical theme. At the same time the background of these two operas makes them comparable to earlier examples – András Bartay's or Ferenc Doppler's works with similar settings – and warrants comparison with typical examples of the lighter genre, primarily folk theatre plays based on adapting popular tunes of that age.

This spectacular exhibition is open until 28 August 2011, and is undoubtedly one of the most important contributions of the Széchényi Library to Erkel's commemorative year. Just as significant is that on 4 November, a few days before the birthday of the composer, and as a result of the co-operation between the Content Provision Department, the Music Collection, and the Theatre History Collection, the Erkel webpage ([erkel.oszk.hu](http://erkel.oszk.hu)) was launched. Thanks to the continuous uploading it is expected that by the end of next year it will almost completely mirror the abundance of the Erkel collection as found in the National Library. The tasks of the Music Collection staff in relation to the anniversaries will not, however, be over, as 2011 brings the bicentenary of Ferenc Liszt's birthday – and, according to the already advanced negotiations – amongst other celebrations there will be a new exhibition, prepared in collaboration with the Institute for Musicology.

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