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“I was twenty-seven years old and lived in Budapest, completely isolated from all the new musical ideas, trends and techniques that had begun to appear in the West after the war. The decisive turning point in my development as a composer occurred in 1956” - wrote **György Ligeti**, one of the most prominent modern composers of the end of the 20th century. Similar sentiments voiced also thousands and thousands of Hungarians at the time, each according to his or her vocation, among them writers and publicists like the now Canadian **George Jonas**, **Stephen Vizinczey**, violinist **Marta Hidy**, pianist **Bálint Vázsonyi**, the guitarist **Szabó Gábor** and uncountable others for whom the Uprising of 1956 came as cause or opportunity for escaping the confines of a totalitarian system. From then on, the stage of western cultural life became populated with an ever increasing number of Hungarians, particularly musicians. It is perhaps puzzling how a small country could give a so disproportionately high contribution to the international musical life. It is true that the dramatic exodus that followed the savagely crushed Uprising displaced more artists than ever. The fact, however, that so many of them came to prominence can be explained – beside individual talent – with their background. Hungary fostered musical education vigorously and the country could also look back to a rich musical heritage stemming from both folklore and art music.

Not unlike archeologists, ethnomusicologists can even in the absence of written documents “unearth” from older strata of folk music the partly presumed and partly evident musical treasure of early medieval times. Hungary had then its share of the vocal liturgical and sacral music of Europe. Later, the flowering cultural environment of King Matthias’ Renaissance court included also the worldly, secular music, both instrumental and vocal, of his contemporaries in Italy, Aragon and Provence. It is documented that minnesingers frequented Hungary at the time of King Sigismund (1387-1437) offering the best of the German courtly love poetry of the era. The princely and royal courts’ interest continued in music that has been played abroad in similar circles and, in spite of the intervening Turkish invasion, this trend had a revival in the 16th century, in the Principality of Erdély (Transylvania). This is where the widely acclaimed virtuoso lutenist **Bálint** (Valentin) **Bakfark** (1506-1576) was born. The artist was a treasured guest at the courts all over Europe as a lute player, but for his instrument he also composed works of enduring beauty.

In the part of Hungary ruled by the Hapsburgs art music was patronized by the Catholic Church and later also by the Hungarian nobility. The leaders in this sponsorship were the members of the Esterhazy family. The history of music making at the Eisenstadt palace is well known through composer Joseph Haydn’s employment and activity there but even before his engagement, Prince Pál Esterhazy published the first Hungarian anthology of Baroque church cantatas. Outside the residences of the nobility, however, there was little if any place for art music. The lower ranks of nobility and the developing middle class embraced instead the folksy “Magyar songs” and the

music based loosely on *verbunkos*. The *verbunkos* was originally conceived as a mood boosting, manly, strutting dance accompanying the ceremony of recruiting new soldiers. (Pronounced *verboonkosh*, originally from German *Werbung* = enlisting, recruiting). Due to its popularity and its rhythmic and ornamental adaptability the *verbunkos* gained acceptance in all forms of popular and art music. It has become the typically “Hungarian” music and considered as such by many foreign composers, notably Haydn, Beethoven, Weber, and Brahms. The most famous piece, the *Rákóczi March*, went through several arrangements by Franz Liszt, too, and Berlioz used it in his *Faust’s Damnation* in 1846.

In the ensuing part of the 19th century, the Hungarians suffered a failed attempt to gain political independence from Austria but remained motivated to achieve integrity on the cultural level. With new institutions and programmes to match this goal, the musical life in Hungary also rose to a European level. Operas, concerts, music education at the highest degree all came to life along with musical creativity approaching the foreign paragons.

O p e r a was the most telling expression of the spirit of Hungary at this time. **Ferenc Erkel** (1810-1893) brought to stage operas that possessed both artistic merit and political timeliness. With a few exceptions, his works are based on historical events, with titles clearly indicating the subject. (*László Hunyadi; Mária Batori; Bán Bánk; György Dózsa; King Stephen.*)

If we follow the development of Hungarian music along this particular line, the public interest for opera kept the composers busy up to this day. From Erkel’s operas using historical themes so appropriate for the ideology of an awakening national identity, to modernist stage works as Ligeti’s grotesque and darkly humorous *Le Grand Macabre*, all operatic styles found followers in Hungary. Many of these operas won international acclaim as the *Violinist from Cremona* by **Jenő Hubay** (1858-1937- incidentally a brilliant and celebrated violinist himself); *Pierette’s Veil, Tante Simona* and *The Tenor* by **Ernö Dohnányi** (1877-1970), *Queen of Sheba* by **Károly Goldmark** (1830-1915), *Blood Wedding* by **Sándor Szokolay** (b. 1931) among others.

The Hungarian musical idiom, originally so typical for the operas, did not lose its appeal, but Goldmark, for instance, already felt closer to Wagner and the French composers, and in the operas of subsequent times there is an echo of *verismo* or (by some) expressionism (*Blood Wedding* by **Szokolay**), romanticism and Post-Romanticism (**Sándor Balassa’s** *Out of the Door*, premiered in 1978), while the music of another reaches intensities of pucciniesque drama (*C’est la guerre* by **Emil Petrovics**, born in 1930).

It is interesting that the much discussed national colour of the Hungarian art music had changed at the beginning of the 20th century. Following the activity of researchers and collectors of native, folk music – among them composers Bartók and Kodály – the inspiration turned from the *verbunkos* - type tunes to authentic folklore material. This is why the true and complete transformation of the Singspiel or the French-Italian influenced opera into *Hungarian* opera became accomplished only with the stage works of **Zoltán Kodály** (1882-1967). His *János Hány* and the *Székely Spinning Room* (premiered in 1926 and 1932

respectively) represent a genuinely Hungarian entity in form, subject matter and musical inspiration.

Starting from medieval times – whose instruments are sporadically still in use in the folklore of rural areas of Hungary – **instrumental music** was lagging here behind the prevailing European trends. Its evolution took, however, a dramatic turn in the second half of the 19th century.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) came as a timely catalyst to fulfill the inherent desires of the nation, until then dominated by Austria, to establish its own culture. Liszt is a monumental figure of the universal music history, with Chopin and Schumann co-founder of the Romantic movement in music, a prolific innovator in composition and in the art of performance. He lent his reputation and devoted much of his work to Hungary's developing musical life. Composer of an immense catalogue of works, symphonic poems, choral and instrumental works as well as church music, Liszt occupies a living presence in our contemporary cultural life too. From his Academy of Music in Budapest came almost all the significant musicians and composers of Hungary. So did the earliest outstanding representatives of the new, 20th century composers, **Leo Weiner** (1885-1960) and **Ernö Dohnányi** (1877-1960) too, followed by **Béla Bartók** (1884-1945) and **Zoltán Kodály** (1882-1967).

Bartók's music for its novelty and uncompromising originality came to be recognized much later than the works of his peers, and his full importance and contribution to the history of music has been acknowledged abroad much sooner than at home. Now he is considered one of the classics of modern music but the deciding exponents at the time of his stay at home were unsympathetic toward his *oeuvre*, and his works were banned or spurned by the Hungarian Communist regime after his death in America. Bartók's chamber music, concerti, piano pieces, orchestral works are, however, standard concert repertoire now all over the world.

Kodály's work was centered on music pedagogy, on the enhancement of music appreciation at an all inclusive, national level. Beside his exceptional educational achievements, Kodály was an outstanding composer whose symphonic and chamber works as well as his opera *János Háry* are widely performed.

In the post-war period, up to the end of the last millennium, Hungarian composers – at home and scattered all over America and Europe – kept either abreast with the ultra-modern musical experimentations or developed their own styles by employing more traditional methods. Opera and stage music, including ballet, remain in the foreground of their interest, sometimes coloured with lyrical elements of legends or folk- and fairytales. (**Szokolay**: *Savitri* [1999], **György Ránki**: *The Emperor's New Clothes* [1953], and *The Moon's Oarsman* [1979], **Attila Bozay**: *Csongor and Tünde* [1981], **János Vajda**: *Leonca and Lena* [1999]). This is also the environment of Bartók's ballet *The Wooden Prince* (1917) and **Imre Czomba's** *Revans* (2003). **Ferenc Farkas**, in turn, gave expression to a modern version of comic opera in his *Magic*

Cupboard (1942) and *A Gentleman from Venice* (1991).

The performing media have evolved so much that “instrumental music” does not cover any more all the means of generating sounds for music. Nevertheless, the Hungarian composers seem to find their way through the maze of contemporary acoustic or electronic and tonal-atonal-serial-aleatoric techniques, some even to international success and critical acclaim. **György Kurtág** (b. 1926) and **Zsolt Durkó** (1934-1997) are in this category. Kurtág had already in the 60-ies proved his mastery in writing chamber works. (Noteworthy is that he elevated there a traditional Hungarian instrument, the cimbalom, into the sphere of modern art music.) From then on, his works bring to a personal synthesis everything from Gregorian chant to punctualism. Durkó’s compositions (among them the oratorio based on the ancient Hungarian funerary prayer, the *Halotti beszéd*, first performed in 1972) follow a structurally strict polyphonic technique, rare in contemporary music.

It is a case of *nomen est omen* that from the esoteric heights of some of the modern music in Hungary the bridge to the living concert stage has been created in good part by **Frigyes Hidas** (*hidas* = having a bridge). “I am the last Hungarian Romantic composer !”- was he quoted in his obituary in 2007. (Born 1926.) A prolific composer of concertos, chamber works and ballet music, he is now a favourite of renowned classical virtuosi as well as of student orchestras and ensembles. As it is noted, his *Requiem* – a choral and symphonic work written to commemorate the fallen Hungarian soldiers at the river Don – beside its artistic value was also an act of political courage in the 1970-ies.

The list of internationally celebrated performing artists of Hungary changes with new additions as time goes. Even the attempt to make it will do injustice to too many since the question is from which date to start the list ? Mentioning only a few of those that are right now at the peak of their career will bring us to singers **Eva Márton, Szilvia Sass, László Polgár, Andrea Rost, Erika Miklósa**; instrumental virtuosi **Miklós Perényi, András Schiff, Dezső Ránki, Zoltán Kocsis, Vásáry Tamás**.

Should popularity and public acceptance mean something, and if so much energy and vitality is invested in a sphere outside strict “serious” music, one should not neglect to point out the innumerable composers and performers of Hungarian pop music. Some of its exponents – as **Zsuzsa Koncz, Tamás Cseh, Zoltán Pásztor, Zorán Szevénovity** – received the country’s Kossuth Prize, designated for highest achievements in professional and artistic field. Another of the country’s musical assets, the art of jazz music, has achieved international recognition thanks to exceptional performers like basist **Aladár Pege**, guitarist **Gábor Szabó**, flautist **Eszter Horgas**, pianists **György Vukán, Balázs Berkes, Béla Szakcsi Lakatos** and trumpet player Rudolf Tomsits, to name only a few.

And the **o p e r e t t a** ? This offspring of the French *opera comique* had world famous Hungarian representatives, too. While England found advisable to modify the originally cheeky and risqué genre as to become more

“family friendly”, in Hungary it has often received local colours in its music. No wonder then that some operetta arias of **Jenő Huszka** (1875-1960) – as Kodály reported tongue in cheek from his field trips later – became “folk songs”. With their widely and continually performed works **Imre Kálmán** (1882-1953) and **Ferenc Lehár** (1870-1948) stand alongside the most famous composers of operetta. Even if the age of this musical genre is long over by now, the light opera endures under different disguises. Rock-opera, musical are respectively the subtitles of newer Hungarian stage productions, notably *Stephen, the King* (1983) by **Levente Szörényi**, *Masked Ball* (1004) by **János Szemenyei**, and *Abigél* (2008) by **Tibor Kocsák**.
