

DLA Theses

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Karel Burian and Hungary

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I. Antecedents of the research

Karel Burian was one of the best tenors of the first two decades of the twentieth century. The authors of his biographies always mention his Wagner roles – mainly Tristan – and his long presence in New York, and primarily the world premiere of *Salome* by Richard Strauss, when he played the role of Herod to much acclaim. His reputation and popularity might be measured against those of Enrico Caruso.

Burian was first engaged in Budapest as a young but already well-known Wagner-tenor, he worked there for one year as a member of the Opera House, then later as guest singer regularly until his death. He was likely the most influential operatic world star in Budapest at the beginning of the twentieth century, and was the founder and for many years the only intended representative of the *Heldentenor* role in Hungary. He primarily sang Wagner operas, but there was also a Hungarian opera on his repertoire in Budapest. A study of his activities in Hungary contributes to our knowledge of Hungarian opera life, and Burian's whole career affected the cultural history of the period because of his frequent guest appearances in Budapest. Burian's Budapest activity had a great influence on the young composers of that time, most notably on Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály as well.

There is a relatively large amount of literature about Burian, mostly in Czech, English and German. There are conspicuous differences among the encyclopaedia articles (Grove, MGG, the *Sängerlexicon* by Kutsch and Riemens, Celletti: *Le grandi voci*, Czech, Hungarian and German theatrical and musical encyclopaedias). Other literature about Burian in German and English is to be found in the form of books dealing with singers (Einhard Luther, Jürgen Kesting, Michael Scott). Some data can be found in the memoirs of Burian's contemporaries (for example those of Johannes Reichelt and Leo Slezak) and in books about the opera houses in Prague, Budapest,

Dresden, New York. As he made many recordings, two important studies were published in recording history journals (by Paul Wilhelm and James Dennis).

The foreign literature mostly does not address the Hungarian activity of Karel Burian, or does so only tangentially. Only the Hungarian premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* is mentioned but the other two Hungarian premieres (*Onegin*, *Fedora*), the world premiere of *Otello mesél* [Otello Tells his Tale] by Jenő Sztojanovits and his thirty-year artist's jubilee celebrated in Budapest are not mentioned. His Hungarian citizenship and his regular Hungarian activity are not known at all. No study exists in Hungarian about Karel Burian and his recordings.

II. Sources

In my dissertation I made use of two groups of sources beyond the already available literature. I studied Burian's Hungarian activity primarily through the press reviews in the daily newspapers. The list of his Budapest performances in the first appendix includes the data of the handwritten repositories by Alfréd Jónás in the Theatrical Section of the Széchényi National Library, the Archive of the Hungarian State Opera and the Budapest concert catalogue of the Musicological Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. I collected and studied on the basis of this compilation the reviews in the press collection of the Archive of the Hungarian State Opera. Burian's first Hungarian contract is preserved also in the Archive of the Hungarian State Opera; the whole text of the contract is printed in the fourth appendix of the dissertation.

The documents related to Burian's Hungarian legacy had to be rediscovered; the two groups of documents are preserved in the Budapest City Archives. Some of the still extant documents concerning Burian's

assuming of the Hungarian citizenship can be found also in the Budapest City Archives.

I used the recordings of Burian as primary sources for the analysis of his singing style. I had access to these recordings in Hungarian and Austrian private and public collections: in the Pécsi Hangtár (Marton-Bajnai) Alapítvány (Pécs Sound Archive Foundation, Collection of Gyula Marton and Klára Bajnai), the private collection of István Andrejcsik and the collection of the Society of Historical Recordings (Alfred Seiser Collection) in Vienna.

III. Research Methods

I applied the methods of the study of written sources in the first half of my DLA dissertation. I corrected some mistakes in the biographies of Burian after comparing the literature with historical documents. I did my archive work at the Budapest City Archives, in the Archives of the Hungarian State Opera, in the Theatrical Section of the National Széchényi Library, in the Musicological Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, in the Historical Archives of the Semperoper Dresden, in the Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden and in the Theatermuseum in Vienna. I used the homepage of the Archives of the Prague Opera (<http://archiv.narodni-divadlo.cz>); I also had access to the archive data of further foreign opera houses via publications (Metropolitan Opera House, Deutsches Theater Prag), and through mail requests (Brno, Brussels, Hannover, London, Stuttgart, Tallinn, Zurich). Some of the results of the study of written sources were published in lists in the appendixes of the dissertation.

In the fourth chapter – on Burian’s singing style – I applied the methods of the scholarly recording analysis. I analysed and compared his interpretations with those other singers with the help of the *Sonic Visualiser*

software. For my comparative analysis, I used the recordings of the well-known contemporaries of Burian, including Enrico Caruso, Heinrich Knotte, Hermann Winkelmann, Johannes Sembach, Alfred von Bary, Fritz Vogelstrom and as only Hungarian Béla Környei. I compared the results of the interpretation analysis with the press reviews of the time and statements found in other, non-scholarly literature.

IV. Research Results

My DLA dissertation enriches and brings new insights to the literature about Karel Burian and about the Hungarian opera playing in the twentieth century. In the first chapter I give an overall picture of the period before the Hungarian activity of Burian from three aspects. I treat the Hungarian peculiarities of the tenor roles up to the first Budapest years of Burian to demonstrate the situation wherein he arrived in the summer 1900. Then I deal with the tenor roles, focusing primarily on the development and the characteristic features of the *Heldentenor* and I discuss about the changes in the performance style of the operas by Wagner after the death of the composer. These two latter subchapters are the background of the analysis of the singing style.

The second chapter of the dissertation is the first fully justified biography of Burian in Hungarian language. The mistakes and discrepancies among the sources were mostly corrected and clarified in this chapter on the basis of my archive research. I was able to correct two important data hitherto incorrectly published in the literature. These concern the only Bayreuth appearance of Burian and the circumstances of his – former connected with the departing of Georg Anthes from Dresden – engagement there.

In the third chapter about Burian's Hungarian activity I treat previously unknown documents that fundamentally determine our former image of

Burian. I made plentiful selections from the press reviews of the period; the details of the Hungarian activity of Burian can be followed almost up to date. The still extant documents of the Budapest City Archives are first published in this dissertation; they can confirm the astonishing news published in the press in January 1914 that Burian assumed the Hungarian citizenship. The probate records and the notary records – in absence of further more accurate documents – suggest that Burian applied for and also assumed Hungarian citizenship in the autumn of 1913. According to the press Burian wished to divorce his wife, and this was possible only in Hungary. These data shed further light on modern research of the so called ‘Hungarian divorce’ which was a common divorce procedure for the citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy before 1918 as the divorce was allowed only in the case of Hungarian citizens.

In this chapter I also treat two specialities of the Royal Hungarian Opera House. Until 1915 it was forbidden to sing in German at the Royal Hungarian Opera House. This unwritten law is variously treated in the literature and can be traced to the period before 1884 when the Opera House was a part of the Hungarian National Theatre. The background of this practice can be proved from the press and other written sources. This practice yielded to multilingual performances as in the case of the Hungarian premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* as well, when Burian sang in Italian and the other singers, including the Italian-born soprano Italia Vasquez in Hungarian. The status of the ‘standing guest’ is an unexplained question in the theatrical literature. I was able to demonstrate from individual guest contracts this special type of contract, which was used when the opera houses wished to engage great singers for several guest appearances. Burian was engaged by the Royal Hungarian Opera House from 1913 till his death almost every year as ‘standing guest’. This was his only contract after his departure from Vienna and New York.

The three best-known tenors of the Royal Hungarian Opera House were simultaneously active as singers at the beginning of the twentieth century and they also died almost at the same time. Therefore in the third chapter I treated tangentially the events of the career of Georg Anthes and Béla Környei that somehow intersected with those of Burian.

In the fourth chapter of my dissertation I discuss the singing style of Burian on the basis of his recordings, the literature and the period press reviews. The result of the style analysis demonstrates a Central-European singer, who was primarily a *Heldentenor*, but who also achieved great success in lyric tenor roles. His interpretation of French lyrical roles was for example more heroic than usual while in German *Heldentenor* roles his voice was not without lyrical, *bel canto* effects. This interpretational attitude is not in accordance with the Bayreuth principles of Cosima Wagner which were treated in the first chapter. I took these aspects of his singing style into consideration when attempting to determine why he was only invited once to sing in Bayreuth.

In the final subchapter I demonstrated the succession of Burian's roles in Budapest. From the role history it is clear that after Burian's death it is only in the forties that the *Heldentenor* roles were concentrated in the hands of one tenor. This was the period of Zoltán Závodszy and later that of József Joviczky.

I compiled Burian's most complete discography on the basis of former published discographies and the forthcoming Burian discographies by Rainer Lotz and Christian Zwarg. It had to be rediscovered that Burian was the first musician who recorded a work by Mahler (the song *Revelge*). The data of this recording may only be found in the Gramophone Co. discography by Alan Kelly.

V. Publications and papers related to the topic of the dissertation

Papers on conferences

8. May 2010, Hildesheim, 11. Diskografentag of the Society of Historical Recordings: “(Gibt es eine) Heldentenor-Tradition in Ungarn(?). Von Carl Burrian bis Béla Környei”
28. May 2011, Hildesheim, a 12. Diskografentag of the Society of Historical Recordings: “At the very beginning: The first Hungarian operatic recordings on the Gramophon label between 1902 and 1905”
8. October 2011, Budapest, “Analízis – ma” [Analysis – Today] conference of the Hungarian Musicological Society: “Hol a színpad? És hol a mű? Az előadói stílus elemzésének problémái az 1926 előtti operai hangfelvételeken” [Where is the stage? And where is the work? The problems of the interpretation analysis on pre-1926 operatic recordings]

Publications

- “(Gibt es eine) Heldentenor-Tradition in Ungarn(?). Von Carl Burrian bis Béla Környei“. <http://www.gramophone-anno.eu/article.php?id=20>
- „(Gibt es eine) Heldentenor-Tradition in Ungarn(?). Die Tenöre des Budapester Opernhauses. Teil 1“, *Gesellschaft für Historische Tonträger – Rundschrift* 16. (Sommer 2011), 3.
- “(Gibt es eine) Heldentenor-Tradition in Ungarn(?). Die Tenöre des Budapester Opernhauses. Teil 2“, *Gesellschaft für Historische Tonträger – Rundschrift* 17. (Herbst 2011), 2–3.
- “At the very beginning: The first Hungarian operatic recordings on the Gramophon label between 1902 and 1905”. In: Gronow, Pekka, Hofer, Christiane (ed.): *The Lindström Project Vol. 4*. (Wien: GHT, 2012). (forthcoming).