

Thesis of a DLA Dissertation

Tamás Beischer-Matyó

**Acoustic dramaturgical devices
in Ferenc Erkel's *Bánk bán***

Supervisor: Miklós Dolinszky Dr., PhD.

The Liszt Academy of Music

28. Doctoral School of Arts and Cultural History

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1. Background information of the research

Ferenc Erkel's opera entitled *Bánk bán* was premiered in March 1861. For the world première the material of a manuscript score that is today known as the *autograph*, and is preserved in the National Széchenyi Library, was used. However, the autograph does not only contain Ferenc Erkel's handwriting, but also the handwriting of his sons (Gyula Erkel, Sándor Erkel), as well as that of two copyists (or orchestrators?) yet to be identified. There are some signs referring to the fact that Erkel's sons keenly participated in the composition of the work: a large part of the opera was orchestrated by them, and they composed orchestral parts etc. In 1865, the idea arose that the opera should be presented in Kolozsvár, but the score Erkel sent to Transylvania in 1866 was different from the autograph, showing traces of revision. The identity of the person who carried out this revision and its exact date remain unknown. It might have been done by Erkel himself, but there is no concrete evidence to confirm this supposition. Despite the fact that the revision mostly relates to instrumentation (and some cuts), it decisively alters the sound at several places. Consequently, this version shall be considered of full value, if not the composer's final version.

Out of this version, five, essentially similar handwritten copies have been preserved: the first one can be found in the Sheet Music Archive of the Hungarian State Opera House (C1), the second one in the Arad Art Museum (C2), the third one in the sheet music archive of the Hungarian State Opera of Kolozsvár (C3), the fourth one in the Music Archive of the National Széchenyi Library (C4, not to be confused with the autograph), and the last one in the sheet music archive of Jubiläumsstadttheater Baden bei Wien (Austria) (C5). As a result of the thorough comparison of these copies a critical edition was born, based on C1 as its main source. (*Bánk bán. Erkel Ferenc Operák 3. Vol. 1-3.* published by Miklós Dolinszky. Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2009. in the press). These sources have only recently been discovered and identified, and thus a modern critical edition could not have been possible to date.

This version was performed at the production in Kolozsvár in 1866, but in Budapest it did not see frequent use: in the National Theater and in the Opera House, Erkel probably conducted the material of the world première. The situation became especially chronic when in the late 1930s the management of the Opera House had the opera revised due to the alleged weakness of the libretto and prosody (the revision was done by Kálmán Nádasdy, Nándor Rékai and Gusztáv Oláh). The final result, however severely mangled and distorted the piece. The 1940 presentation stirred up much debate, but the version presented there became well established and has been the basis of performances since then, both in the capital and elsewhere in the country.

The revision was extended not only to the libretto and the prosody but to the entire opera: the original system of separate numbers was cut to pieces, and some roles were abbreviated or lengthened. That could be the reason why Petur's part became Biberach's. Another important action of the revisers (having grave consequences) was that, since according to their judgment there was no suitable heroic tenor to play the title role, they transposed the ban's role to baritone, while Tiborc became bass.

It can be maintained that for almost a hundred years no appreciable study had been published on the work (except for Mosonyi's two articles that were published still in the year of the première). Although there came out some writings in the Erkel Memorial

Volume by Bertalan Fabó in 1910, those rather were historical accounts and only few of them dealt specifically with Erkel's works. And even if they did so, they did not approach Erkel's works in an expert, professional manner.

After 1950, the number of writings began to increase. Out of them János Maróthy's study of almost monographic scope should be noted (*The dramaturgy of Ferenc Erkel's operas and some questions concerning the development of opera, 1955*). Although this work is full of deficient and irrelevant recognitions (mixed with a fair amount of ideological didactics), it uses the autograph (instead of the 1940 revision) as the object of analysis, and the conclusions are drawn from that version. The breakthrough came in 1961 with László Somfai's study (*Problems of Erkel's manuscripts*), in which he identifies the different handwritings occurring in the autograph and dispels the myth surrounding the 'Erkel workshop'.

In 1993 (in the year of the centenary of Erkel's death), a recording based on the autograph was issued, and in the same year Tibor Tallián's important study appeared in the musical journal *Muzsika*. This study emphasized the virtues of the original version, emphasized Erkel's far-reaching, large-scale plan and urged the opera's restoration both in performance practice and publishing.

The publishing of the critical collection of Erkel's operas started in 1998. The first piece, *Mária Bátor*, came out in 2002, *László Hunyadi* was issued in 2006, while the publication of *Bánk bán* is due in 2009.

2. Methods of Analysis

In the last 25-30 years, I have seen and listened to *Bánk bán* on countless occasions, so I know it very well. Getting acquainted with the original piano extract, then later with the recording based on the autograph was extremely revealing for me. After some investigation, I discovered that not only the large-scale dramaturgy mentioned by Tibor Tallián, but also the whole acoustic dramaturgical system of the opera is remarkable.

Tracing back the entire philological background of the opera did not seem to be to the purpose. On the one hand, it has already been done by a lot of people, and on the other hand it would have immensely increased the extension of my dissertation, and the substantial part would have been difficult to follow.

I also had to identify those areas that – although they could be more or less related to the acoustic dramaturgical research – were not essential to it. That is the reason why the several problems in connection with the Erkel workshop, the 20th-century revision and the libretto (and also with prosody) were omitted. The first, introductory chapter deals with this question.

The following, second chapter contains an extensive list of the particular acoustic dramaturgical devices occurring in *Bánk bán*:

1. the tonality order
2. the role of motives, melodies and rhythms
3. the *interactions* between characters that affect the use of devices mentioned under points 1. and 2.
4. the small and large forms of the opera
5. and the instrumentation of the opera.

In the following, third chapter, the numbers of the opera are surveyed, and the applications of the above mentioned acoustic dramaturgical devices are studied through excerpts.

3. Results

The results of the investigation can be summarized under the following points:

1. The keys are arranged into circles according to the axis principle.

The modes of the **tonal** axis make up the *motherland – fate – love* triangle. Their meanings can combine or transform. Around this axis, containing the modes **C major – A minor – A major – E flat major – C minor**, typically Bánk, Melinda, Petúr and the Discontented sing. (The missing keys are not present in the opera).

Around the **dominant** axis, the trinity of *reign – oppression – lie* appears. The modes related to the voices of Gertrud, Endre, Ottó and occasionally of the people of the Court can be found here: **E minor – G major - E major - B major – G minor – D flat major – B flat minor**. This is to some extent richer and more diverse than the system of modes of the tonal axis. Besides the above mentioned characters Bánk and Tiborc also very frequently use modes around the dominant axis.

Around the **subdominant** axis appear the keys of emotions and passion: **F major – D minor – A flat major – F minor – A flat minor**. Sharp keys are practically absent here. This kind of gazing down into the darkness and the A flat minor passage located at the dramatic peak of the opera give a strange, dark mood to these parts of the opera.

2. The use of motives, melodies, rhythms: melodies and motives related to the Hungarians and to the Strangers (the Meranians, i.e. the Germans) can be differentiated. The most striking rhythms are characteristic, heel-clicking closing cadences associated with the Hungarians, and the melodies with remarkably plain rhythm connected with the Meranians (i.e. the Germans). As far as the special use of chords is concerned, the consistent use of the tonic *sixte ajoutée* can be mentioned.
3. The key dramaturgy and the network of motives and rhythms can not only be linked with persons, but also with thoughts and situations. Thus the use of key of the *interacting* characters, as different from that of the normal key, is of special

significance. This may have several forms, the most characteristic one being when two characters – mainly with adverse interests – confront and influence each other, or attempt to do so.

4. Small and large forms: the 8 and 16 bar passages without extension are typical. They frequently make up *Bar- Gegenbarforms* or forms organised according to the strophic principle, becoming multiple, compound larger forms, constituting finally the large form of the opera, where a large *Barform* consists of three acts (Act I – *Stollen*, Act II – *Stollen*, Act III – *Abgesang*).
5. Although the instrumentation does not exceed the characteristics of the contemporary Italian and French opera, Erkel at certain places uses special instruments.

The rarity of these instruments is relative: the octave flute and the harp were not considered to be rare even at the time, whereas the English horn was used in the reinstrumentation of one of the arias of *László Hunyadi*. The cimbalom has become an instrument with significant repertoire since then. Only the viola d'amore has been considered as rarity ever since.

These instruments not only make the palette of sound more colourful: their use is also part of the acoustic dramaturgical concept.

The quartet consisting of viola d'amore – cimbalom – English horn – harp (completed by three solo violins) serves as the accompaniment of the opera's central aria. In other numbers, the English horn, the cimbalom and the octave flutes can be associated to Melinda and the heroic ideals that may be linked to her.

Erkel is very sparing as far as the use of these instruments is concerned, thereby strengthening their acoustic dramaturgical value.

4. Bibliography

The sources and books I drew on while writing my dissertation are listed below. Those of primary importance are in boldface type.

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