

The Liszt Academy of Music – Doctoral Program
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LÁSZLÓ LAJTHA'S WORKS FOR THE STAGE

An unknown set of works in the context of an oeuvre

Theses for a Doctoral Dissertation



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I. Topic selection and background to the research

Works for the stage constitute the least known part in the oeuvre of composer László Lajtha (1892–1963). Performing artists have all but forgotten about these remarkable works. Since the 1937 premiere of the ballet *Lysistrata* (Op. 19, 1933), the only such work that has been performed is the comic opera *Le chapeau bleu* (“*The Blue Hat*,” Op. 51, 1948–50), staged in 1998. Two other ballets by Lajtha, *A négy isten ligete* (“*The Grove of Four Gods*,” Op. 38, 1943) and *Capriccio* (Op. 39, 1944), have not been performed on stage as of the date of this dissertation, even though nearly seventy years have passed since their creation. Of the four compositions mentioned, only *Capriccio* and *Le chapeau bleu* exist in an unabridged recording, and none of them has been published in print score. Before I embarked on my research project for the present dissertation, the unavailability of the orchestral score of *Lysistrata* had made it impossible to know such basic information as the number of movements in the complete version, and even the libretto was missing in action. The first step, therefore, was to track down and unearth the libretto and the orchestral score. (The latter had a turbulent history marked by complete destruction and reconstruction from the known instrumental parts, then this very fact and the whereabouts of the reconstructed score were consigned to oblivion for long decades.) Beyond the absence of performances, audio recordings, and a printed score (in the case of *Lysistrata*, also the absence of the very scoring and the libretto until recently) the study of this set of works has been hindered by problems of a different sort, such as the historical circumstance that *The Grove of Four Gods*, a ballet written secretly in 1943 that satirized the figure of Hitler, understandably left very little if any documentary trace of its genealogy.

These difficulties of access have clearly contributed to the lack of any attempt to date to investigate Lajtha’s complete works for the stage, except for a few pages by the music historian János Breuer in his 1992 book *Fejezetek Lajtha Lászlóról* [“*Chapters of László Lajtha*”]. The comic opera was first assessed by myself in my 2007 volume („...magam titkos szobája”. Lajtha László A kék kalap című vígoperájának keletkezéstörténete, esztétikai vonatkozásai, zenetörténeti kapcsolódásai – “...my own secret room:’ The genealogy, aesthetic aspects, and musical historical connections of László Lajtha’s comic opera *Le chapeau bleu*”), but the work of situating the three ballets in Lajtha’s oeuvre was yet to be performed. My aim here has been to explore this virtually unknown set of works in the context of the composer’s life as well as of history, literature, theater, and art history, in an effort to gain an understanding of their position and significance in Lajtha’s output as an artist. Intending my study of the dramatic works to be comprehensive, I included in my investigation *Bujdosó lány* (“*Girl in Exile*,” 1952), a stage

scene Lajtha conceived in collaboration with the author Áron Tamási that had not received any attention in professional literature, partly because it was banned for political reasons shortly after its creation. As Lajtha considered motion picture to be “the music drama of the future,” I felt that my discussion of the stage works would be incomplete without addressing the music score he composed for four films (*Hortobágy*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, *Shapes and Forms*, all three directed by Georg Höllering, and *Kövek, várak emberek* – “Stones, castles, people,” directed by István Szóts), as well as his soundtrack projects and general aesthetic views on the genre. In settling on my dissertation topic, I was guided by the ambition not only to unearth an obscure set of works but to delve deeper into an oeuvre that political exigencies and a certain stylistic idiosyncrasy have kept from being properly placed in the context of 20th-century music to this day. It is in this broader light, then, that I have chosen to examine Lajtha’s stage works, striving to make a contribution to surveying this hitherto uncharted territory of Hungarian music history.

II. Research methods

I studied a variety of sources relevant to Lajtha’s oeuvre at nearly thirty research venues in Budapest, Paris, London, and Exeter. In addition to locating and exploring primary sources, including manuscript scores and libretto drafts, analyzing them in terms of the relationship between text and music, I familiarized myself with relevant audio recordings and film footage, and attempted to explore as extensively as possible existing correspondence concerning the stage works, most of which remain unpublished. I studied hundreds of letters in the Lajtha estate currently in the custody of the Hungarian Heritage House, and discovered some previously unknown letters on my own – such as the ones to Romain Rolland, in the manuscript archive of the Bibliothèque Nationale – that turned out to supply interesting details to the intellectual background of the stage works. I paid special attention to examining the contemporary press reception of *Lysistrata* (mostly courtesy to the Memorabilia Collection of the Hungarian State Opera) as the only one of his ballet pieces Lajtha had the opportunity to hold up against public feedback in his lifetime. From various research outlets, including the Collection of Theater History of the National Széchényi Library, I culled photographs taken at the 1937 premiere, which provide glimpses of the stage set, the costumes, and the choreography. To go even deeper into the circumstances surrounding the premiere, I even studied the score of *A szerelmes levél* (“The Love Letter”), a comic opera by Count Ferenc Esterházy, with which Lajtha’s ballet shared the bill on the same night. Given that the activities in the 1930’s of the

Friends of the Opera Society, which hosted the dual premiere, remain just as poorly documented as Lajtha's work, I had to have recourse to documents of the day to identify points of intersection between the Society's endeavors and Lajtha's own. Holding the kind permission of the legal successor of László Fábrián, a music reviewer who was a friend and colleague of Lajtha's, I became the first scholar to research Fábrián's music-related estate kept at the Manuscript Archive of the National Széchényi Library, wherein I discovered useful information about Lajtha's stage works that cannot be found anywhere else. Also instrumental in the completion of my dissertation has been my honor to serve as editor for the publication, in 2010, of the diaries of the ethnographer Dr. Zsuzsanna Erdélyi, a member of Lajtha's folk music research group, which had been inaccessible for study for half a century. (*A kockás füzet. Úttalan utakon Lajtha Lászlóval – "The cross-ruled exercise book: On untrodden paths with László Lajtha"*). Were it not for the formerly unknown data gleaned from this invaluable book, I would not have been able to portray Lajtha's love affair with music theater from his tender age.

Beyond the extensive philological investigation merely hinted at here, my research included the collection of oral history relevant to the works being studied. Subjects I interviewed in Budapest, Paris, and Exeter included Lajtha's widow and two sons; Guy Turbet-Delof, one-time director of the French Institute in Budapest, who provided invaluable assistance with solving problems of prosody in Lajtha's comic opera; the ethnographer Dr. Alice Gáborján, who served as Lajtha's secretary at Hungarian Radio; the composer Ferenc Farkas, who completed the orchestration of the comic opera; the widow of Imre Eck, choreographer for several works by Lajtha; Andrew Hoellering, the son of the director Georg Höllering, three of whose films used soundtracks composed by Lajtha; Claude-Alphonse and Jean Leduc, Lajtha's publishers and friends in Paris; the composer Henry Barraud, a close friend of Lajtha's; and the conductor György Selmeczi, who conducted two stage works by Lajtha during the past decade and a half. (The list is far from exhaustive.)

I had the opportunity to attend two Lajtha premieres on stage, one in Kolozsvár (today Cluj in Romania), the other in Budapest, as well as all of the accompanying official events. Given my focus on discussing the stage works in the context of the life of the artist, I researched various archives (Budapest City Archives, Historic Archives of the National Security Services etc.). Never losing sight of the embeddedness of Lajtha's stage works with other compositions in his oeuvre as well as with European music history, I tried to uncover as many connections as possible.

In order to gain a thorough familiarity with the librettos, their various drafts, and the genesis of each music opus, I visited the Petőfi Museum of Literature to research the estate of Lajos Áprily, who wrote the libretto for *Lysistrata*, and I also studied the librettos by József Révay (*The Grove of Four Gods*) and Salvador de Madariaga (*Le chapeau bleu*) to situate these texts in their respective oeuvres and to map the work relations they maintained with Lajtha. I studied a variety of sources before I successfully established the identity of the author of the libretto for *Capriccio*. I found that, beyond the historical and literary associations, certain connections to the history of theater and the fine arts were equally relevant. This certainly proved to be the case with *Capriccio* (the Hungarian title *Bábszínház* translates as “Puppet Theater”), the proper interpretation of which required that I delve into the history of the puppet theater. In this phase of the research, I studied sources kept at the National Museum and Institute of Theater History which had never before been examined from the perspective of music history. Prompted by allusions in *Capriccio* and *Le chapeau bleu* by the authors, I continued my interdisciplinary investigations by mapping the composer’s relation to painting based on documents extant in the estate, such as draft compositions and correspondence, as well as on the personal recollections of Lajtha’s contemporaries and other works not intended for the stage but containing hints at the fine arts. Because of the obvious biographical relevance of certain works, I also felt that a psychological approach was in order.

III. Dissertation structure and research results

Chapter I of the four-chapter dissertation deals with Lajtha’s thinking and pronouncements about music theater as a genre, as well as with his draft composition projects, both staged and unrealized. As the corroborated results of my research show, the music theater genre continued to serve as a prominent vehicle of artistic expression for Lajtha from his youth to his death. His admitted attraction to the comedies of Aristophanes and commedia dell’arte is evidenced by the fact that he based his first two ballet scores on plays by the Greek playwright, while his third ballet and his comic opera resonate with the genre of commedia dell’arte on a thousand strings.

Entitled “Teach and make aware,” Chapter II discusses Lajtha’s two ballets after Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* (1933) and *The Grove of Four Gods* (1943), as reflecting on and calling attention to the gradual gaining ground and eventual predominance of Nazism. Here I make an argument about Lajtha’s motivation behind his choice of themes and present his relations

with his librettists, Lajos Áprily and József Révay. This is also where I present previously unavailable information concerning Count Ferenc Esterházy, whose comic opera shared the bill with Lajtha, and the cultural mission of the Friends of the Opera Society, which hosted the dual premiere. These two topics serve to pave the way for the detailed discussion of the highly acclaimed premiere of *Lysistrata*, Lajtha's only ballet staged in his lifetime, and of the rather vivid and positive reception in the press that ensued.

Chapter III, entitled "Secret Chambers," treats of Lajtha's ballet *Capriccio*, composed during the air raids on Budapest in 1944, and the comic opera *Le chapeau bleu*, composed between 1948 and 1950, when Lajtha's life took a tragic turn, and orchestrated for more than a decade. Here I follow up on the process whereby these two pieces of commedia dell'arte became an inner refuge for Lajtha, a "secret chamber" where to retreat from the cruel external world. In this extensive chapter, I start by describing the genesis and structure of the two works along with the musical allusions and playful stylistic twists so dear to the composer, then go on to demonstrate the importance of 17th-18th century music – and, more broadly, any period style prior to the French Revolution – for Lajtha as a source of inspiration. This inspiration was the only true point of reference for him, the foundation upon which he identified a "new humanism" as the only movement he could follow, the only means of evoking a bygone "golden era." Next I muster important support for the contention that Lajtha's esthetic vision was strongly influenced by painting, particularly by the visual imagination of the French rococo painter Jean-Antoine Watteau. In this chapter, I report on Lajtha's project entitled *Divertissement français*, a composition inspired by paintings that the professional literature has passed over in silence. I undertake a detailed analysis of the powerful influence that the art of puppet theater exerted on *Capriccio* and *Le chapeau bleu* (and a few more related compositions). I devote a separate subchapter to scrutinize the meaning of the menuet or minuetto, a form of dance and dance movement that reoccurs in Lajtha's oeuvre, including the two commedia dell'artes, with striking frequency. Each subchapter in Chapters II and III begins with a heading specifying the essential data of the work to be discussed and of the suites based upon those works (in the case of *Lysistrata*, for the first time ever in this dissertation). Each long chapter is interspersed by shorter, intermezzo-style chapters discussing other, closely related works and events in the period intervening between the two major works. In part, these intermezzi contain my presentation of research findings relevant to a deeper understanding of the composer's biography,

for instance in connection with his dedicated efforts to rescue Jews and his armed involvement in the national resistance movement.

Describing the “satellites” of the four major works for the stage, Chapter IV opens with a subchapter in which I offer a detailed discussion, based on further new findings, of the stage scene *Bujdosó lány*, on which Lajtha collaborated with the Transylvanian author Áron Tamási. Having outlined the genesis and performance of this work, I continue by accurately identifying the sources of the folk song settings that Lajtha contributed to the scene. (A few works of literary history do mention the stage scene but misidentify the sources of the folk songs, so the correction was badly needed.) This subchapter is also important because it shores up hitherto unavailable biographical minutiae about the relationship between the composer and Áron Tamási. In the second subchapter, I provide a summary of Lajtha’s views on film as the “musical play of the future,” highlighting his insistence on the autonomy of the soundtrack composer and his equal status on a par with the director and the script writer – on what he termed the “polyphony” of the three art forms. I offer a detailed analysis of the four soundtracks Lajtha completed, and describe two additional, uncompleted film score projects – one of them for a screen version of *Lysistrata* – which has been ignored in the literature on Lajtha. Once again, the last subchapter brings fresh data to a treatment of three ballets (*Jeunesses*, *Kötélékek* – “Bonds,” and *Symphony No. IX*) the music for which was selected by Hungarian and foreign choreographers from the oeuvre of Lajtha. The Appendix to the dissertation presents, in chronological order, numerous illustrations and sources relevant to the works contemplated in the dissertation, none of which have been used in the literature before. I made an effort to render the core text of the dissertation an easier read by scattering in it illustrations unpublished in the past (or just once, in the press reports of the day), including period photographs, sheet music pages, facsimile editions, program notes, press clippings, and charts. The chapter-itemized Bibliography contains a table listing 85, mostly unpublished letters quoted in the dissertation, along with the location of each source.

IV. The doctoral candidate's major scholarly publications relevant to the dissertation topic

Books

„...magam titkos szobája”. Lajtha László A kék kalap című vígoperájának keletkezéstörténete, esztétikai vonatkozásai, zenetörténeti kapcsolódásai. [“...my own secret room:’ The geneology, aesthetic aspects, and musical historical connections of László Lajtha’s comic opera *Le chapeau bleu*”] Budapest: Hagyományok Háza, 2007. (149 pages)

Két világ közt. Beszélgetések Lajtha Lászlóról. [“Between two worlds: Conversations about László Lajtha”] Budapest: Hagyományok Háza, 2010. (341 pages)

List of works

László Lajtha 1892–1963. Budapest: Editio Musica, 2008. (63 pages)

Editorial work

Zsuzsanna Erdélyi. A kockás füzet. Úttalan utakon Lajtha Lászlóval. [“The cross-ruled exercise book: On untrodden paths with László Lajtha”] Editing, notes, and afterword by Emőke Tari Solymosi. Budapest: Hagyományok Háza, 2010. (191 pages)

Articles

„A kék kalap. Az ötlettől az ősbemutatóig”. [“Le chapeau bleu: From inception to premiere”] *Magyar Zene* 34/1 (March 1993): 43–47.

„»A Szeretet és a Szépség szigete«. Adalékok Lajtha László művészetének XVII–XVIII. századi inspirációjához”. [“The Island of Love and Beauty’: Notes on the 17th–18th century sources of inspiration for the art of László Lajtha”] *Magyar Zene* 41/3 (August 2003): 327–336.

„»Bartók [...] mindig latinnak nevezett.« Bartók Béla hatása Lajtha László életútjára és esztétikájára”. [“Bartók always called me Latin’: The Influence of Béla Bartók on László Lajtha’s Life and Art”.] *Parlando* 48/6 (2006): 5–13.

„»Bartók always called me Latin«: The Influence of Béla Bartók on László Lajtha’s Life and Art”. *Studia Musicologica* 48 (2007): 215–223.

„Commedia dell’arte és bábjáték. Az »irrealitás-élmény« Lajtha Capriccio című balettjében”. [“Commedia dell’arte and puppet play: The experience of the unreal in Lajtha’s ballet *Capriccio*”] *Magyar Zene* 46/1 (February 2008): 97–108.

„Lajtha és a menüett.” [“Lajtha and the minuetto”] *Magyar Zene* 47/2 (May 2009): 181–192.

„Filmzeneírás – szabadon: Höllering és Lajtha”. [“Soundtrack scoring in freedom: Hoellering and Lajtha”] *Magyar Zene* 48/1 (February 2010): 69–73.

First public release

„Lajtha László előadása Mozarttól”. [“László Lajtha’s lecture on Mozart”] *Magyar Zene* 42/1 (February 2004): 79–86.

On the cover of the *Theses* is a photo of Bella Bordy in the role of Myrrhene in László Lajtha’s ballet *Lysistrata*, as performed by the Hungarian Royal Opera in 1937 (Photograph by Pál M. Vajda, from the Lajtha estate)