

PhD Theses

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The Art of Elza Szamosi (1881–1924)

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Doctoral School No. 28 for the History of Art and Culture

Budapest

2018

I. Antecedents of the research

Elza Szamosi (1881–1924) was one of the most influential Hungarian opera singers of the first half of the twentieth century. With her renditions of leading roles such as Mimi, Cio-Cio-San and Minnie at Hungarian and North American premieres of the Puccini operas, she inscribed her name into the annals of opera performance. Szamosi's unique performance style drew on three interpretational schools: the French musical stage of the turn of the century (*Le beau idéal*), *verismo* and the operetta. Her renditions of the Puccini roles, shaped by the above influences, had a fundamental effect on the reception of Puccini's operas in Hungary, and the three styles combined in her highly successful portrayals of alluring exotic female characters like Carmen, Dalila or The Queen of Sheba as well. Elza Szamosi's significance to twentieth-century Hungarian culture is made evident by the poems (e.g. Gyula Juhász: *Carmen*, 1920) and paintings (Endre Komáromi-Kacz: *Madama Butterfly*, c. 1909) her performances inspired, and also by references to her art in novels by Gyula Krúdy (1910s) and Janka Fábíán (2011).

Despite her significance to music history, the life of Elza Szamosi is mostly the stuff of legend, and a large part of her career remains to be studied. Her career, apart from an article by Vilmos Somogyi in the series "Operatic Pantheon" from the journal *Muzsika* (July 1962), has not yet served as the subject-matter of an independent publication. Her biography was published in brief entries in musical and theatrical lexica (edited by Aladár Schöpflin, Péter Ujvári, Bence Szabolcsi and Aladár Tóth, György Székely, Karl Josef Kutsch und Leo Riemens in chronological order), and further information can be gleaned from remarks scattered throughout books and chapters on the history of the Royal Hungarian Opera and on the reception of Puccini in Hungary (writings by Tibor Tallián, Géza Falk, Giorgio Magri, Beatrice Töttössy and Maurizio Ceccarelli come to mind). These sources laconically demonstrate one of the most exciting singing careers of turn-of-the-century opera culture, focusing only on the most essential elements of her art.

Scholarly study of Elza Szamosi's career from the aspect of musical interpretation is deficient. Her performance style was not discussed before the

present thesis, apart from a few remarks by Tibor Tallián in his chapters on the history of the Opera House and the preliminary research connected to this thesis. For the most part the French, Italian, and Hungarian performance schools mentioned above have not been investigated in detail by scholars of musicology. The sound recordings of Elza Szamosi made between 1905 and 1913 have never formed a part of performance studies. Even the authors of the articles discussing the history – at least in part – of the interpretation of Puccini (Richard Dyer, David Hamilton, Emanuele Senici and Thomas Seedorf) have not dealt with them for reasons of inaccessibility. Szamosi is virtually unknown to international musicological research. Therefore, it is rather surprising that her name is mentioned in the book titled *Le donne di Puccini* by Amelia Bottero (1984), and in Jim McPherson’s article on the history of the Castle Square Opera Company (2003).

II. Sources

Unfortunately, Elza Szamosi did not write memoirs, accordingly, I was only able to use her interviews published by the daily press in Budapest and in the US, and one of her private letters as autobiographical sources. This letter, dated on the basis of its contents as having been written in 1904 (National Széchényi Library, Manuscripts Collection), was not discussed in the previous literature. I verified and fleshed out the brief lexicon articles written about her with the help of archival sources and articles from the daily press. This was possible because daily press underwent rapid proliferation in Budapest at the turn of the century. The newspapers and the newly founded gutter press reported day by day on opera performances, providing the most current information on guest performances, engagements, releases, and also publishing bits of gossip about the popular actors and singers. Therefore, I processed a large number of press articles while performing research for my dissertation.

I used three different types of sources for the interpretation analysis. Since each of Elza Szamosi’s operetta or opera performances was reviewed by ten or more newspapers, critics’ opinions on Szamosi’s singing and acting can readily be compared with one another. Furthermore, because Szamosi

was active during the first two decades of the 20th century and took an interest in technological advancements as well, a number of her sound recordings are available to us today. With their help, a scholar today can form a correct estimate of her voice and its utilization, which can then be compared with reviews by her contemporaries. I also used archival scores as sources of her performance practice. One of the most important among them is a handwritten part book of the title role of *Madama Butterfly* which can be linked to Elza Szamosi (National Széchényi Library, Theatre History Collection). With the help of the entries in this part book, it is almost possible to reconstruct her stage acting. Szamosi's physical appearance on stage can be investigated with the help of her many photographs as well, some of which are listed and published in the appendix.

III. Research Methods

While writing the biography of Elza Szamosi I compared the lexicon articles with archival sources, information from the daily press and the list of Szamosi's performances. I compiled the chronology of her performances with the help of four sources – the continual performance lists of the Hungarian State Opera, Alfréd Jónás's handwritten catalogue of operatic roles (National Széchényi Library, Theatre History Collection) and the playbills from Hungary and abroad served as a basis for my research, which was extended with the help of the daily press articles. The list of the concert appearances was compiled partly on the basis of the online database of the Archives for 20th–21st Century Hungarian Music (Institute for Musicology, RCH HAS) titled *Concerts in Budapest from 1900 to Our Day*, and partly on the basis of the daily press again. As mentioned before, Szamosi's life events were revealed by careful scrutiny of the archival sources and the daily press.

Musical scores, written sources and sound recordings were used for the interpretation analysis. I discussed the elements of the different performance styles in themselves as well, but focused mainly on Szamosi's interpretation. Finally, I analysed the joint presence and the impact of these styles in a more complex way on the basis of Szamosi's two most important repertoires of roles in Puccini operas and other exotic female roles. While examining the

latter, I made an attempt to hermeneutically interpret Szamosi's unique performative tools in the wider context of exoticism. During my investigation of Szamosi's two important Puccini-roles I attempted to provide an indirect textual analysis.

On the one hand, it is possible to deduce from reviews of other performers' portrayals of the same role how Szamosi's portrayal differed from theirs. This method is especially fruitful in the case of premieres with double casts like the 1905 Budapest premiere of *La Bohème* by Giacomo Puccini. On the other hand, based on current researches in interpretation theory by Nicholas Cook and Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, which have not yet been assimilated by Hungarian musicologists, I try to read the reviews written about world premieres or local premieres – that is, reviews uncoloured by experience of former performances – in a way that enables me to deduce something about the performers' interpretations from the reviewers' general remarks on the music itself.

To provide an appropriate discussion of the interpretation theoretical phenomena, recourse to previously underestimated types of sources – photographs, early sound recordings – was unavoidable. The exploration of these largely unknown sources can itself be qualified as scholarly work, but since the Hungarian performance studies literature makes very limited use of them, I found myself needing a new methodological approach to contextualize, interpret, and evaluate the sources in question. Thanks to the interference of the methods of discology and the musicological investigation of the performance studies, in the past one and a half decades distrust of early sound recordings has decreased, yet a complete scholarly discussion of the sounding oeuvre and performance style of an opera singer from the turn of the century remains rare. The most popular singers of that era who – with the help of early sound recordings – can still be heard today are discussed mostly in chapters of journals and books specializing in recording history, and in excerpts of books about the general history of singing. The mainly discological and biographical investigations, which serve as starting points of the interest for the singers of the turn of the century, have yet to inspire more ambitious musicological research focused on the theory of interpretation.

I therefore applied the newest results and methods not only of musicology but also of discology when creating the interpretation analysis case studies of my thesis. With the help of these methods, I managed to contextualize, date, and evaluate the sound recordings of Szamosi and to compare them with recordings of other contemporary singers. I did the comparative analysis partly in a computational way (with precise measurements), and partly in an empirical way by observing and characterising the aural experience. The catalogue of the recordings of Elza Szamosi, published in the appendix, is compiled in accordance with current discographical standards.

IV. Research Results

My dissertation is the monograph of a performer in which I explored—in as much detail as possible—the significant, yet for the most part unstudied career of an opera singer important both to Hungarian and to international music history starting with her debut in Magdeburg and ending with a discussion of her last concerts in Budapest. In the case of Elza Szamosi, this is a crucial exploration because her career after 1914 was scarcely known until now. Since the singer's first husband, Nándor Somló, and later Elza Szamosi herself occasionally used the contemporary media to manipulate the public, my uncovering of the facts made it possible to clarify or debunk several legends from the time such as Szamosi's year of birth, which can be found in two different versions in the sources, the question of her losing her voice, and the history of the famous photograph representing Elza Szamosi and Giacomo Puccini on the stage of the Royal Hungarian Opera House. By processing the daily press, I gained access to a great deal of novel information relevant to Hungarian music history, not only concerning the Italian private voice teachers (Quirino Merli and Quintina Gianolli-Lorenzini) working in Budapest, the summer festivals in Ostende or the history of Hungarian musical theatre in the United States, but also the genesis and development of some stage works like the opera *Báthory Erzsébet* by Sándor Szeghő, or the operetta *Endlich allein* by Franz Lehár.

Although the main character of the dissertation is only one performer, I was able to examine through her personality a particular phenomenon of the interpretation history of the turn of the century: the combination of different operatic performance styles appearing in the work of one specific performer. To put this complexity in context, I traced themes concerning interpretation history and theory which were unexplored so far, for example, the characteristics of *Le beau idéal* and its reception in Hungary, the definition and reception history of the performance style related to *verismo*, and the possible performative aspects of exoticism. In order to match the theoretical approaches with the aural vocal experience, the interpretation analysis comparing the arias from *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Carmen* was made using a much broader selection of sound recordings than what is common to other studies.

The repertoire and genre diversity of Elza Szamosi, compared with that of her contemporaries like Emmy Destinn, Geraldine Farrar or Lina Cavalieri who were successful in similar repertoires, can be termed unique not only today, but also in her era. She was almost the only female opera singer at the turn of the century who became an epoch-making performer of both operas and operettas. On the basis of the comparative interpretation analyses it became detectable how this unique performance style influenced the next generation of Hungarian opera singers, for example, Hedvig Bendiner (1885–1970), Ilona Dömötör (1885–1966), or later, Piroska [Rosette] Anday (1903–1977).

Szamosi's renditions of Puccini roles may be compared with the work of Italian opera singers of her day, for example with the performance of Cesira Ferrani, who sang in the world premieres of *Manon Lescaut* and *La Bohème*. Although this performance style was approved by Puccini himself, it later disappeared from the increasingly uniform international Puccini-interpretation. However, in Hungary, it continued to influence the reception history of the operas of the Italian composer. Szamosi's interpretations of Puccini, which assimilated the elements of the performance style of the operetta as well, had a marked and long-lived influence on the reception of *La Bohème* and *Madama Butterfly* in Hungary.

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

Publications

“Performance style of the operetta embodied in operatic performance practice: An analysis of Elza Szamosi’s 1908 recording of ‘Mi chiamano Mimi’.” Online publication on the webpage of AHRC Research Centre for Musical Performance as Creative Practice (CMPCP): <http://www.cmpep.ac.uk/events/psn-conferences/psn-conference-3-july-2014/thursday-17-july-2014/> and http://www.cmpep.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/PSN2014_Szabo.pdf (12 August, 2014)

“Valójában milyen is a »könyved operett-stílus«?” [What, in fact, is the “graceful operetta-style” like?] In: Ádám Ignác (ed.): *Műfajok, stílusok, szubkultúrák. Tanulmányok a magyar populáris zenéről* [Genres, Styles, Subcultures. Studies in Hungarian Popular Music]. Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2015. 41–56.

“Interpretáció – recepció – hatástörténet. Modern opera és modern operai előadóművészet Budapesten a századfordulón (1890–1918)” [Interpretation – Reception – Reception History. Modern Opera and Modern Operatic Performance Practice in Budapest at the Turn of the Century (1890–1918)] In: *A Magyar Tudományos Akadémia posztdoktori ösztöndíjasainak beszámolói. 2013–2015* [Reports of the Postdoctoral Scholarship Holders of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. 2013–2015]. Budapest: MTA, 2015. 44.

Lecture Recital:

“Szamosi Elza és a korai magyar Puccini-stílus jellegzetességei” [Elza Szamosi and the Characteristics of the Early Hungarian Puccini Style], with Ildikó Szakács. (21 September, 2013, Budapest, Doctoral School of the Liszt Academy).

Unpublished Conference Papers:

“Eroticism and Exoticism in Performance Style. Elza Szamosi, an Exotic *femme fatale*.” (12 December, 2015, Budapest, Exoticism, orientalism and national identity in musical theatre. International Musicological Conference on the Centenary of the Death of Karl Goldmark)

“The Recordings of Elza Szamosi (Samek).” (14 May, 2017, Hannover, 15. Diskografentag of the Gesellschaft für Historische Tonträger)

“Szamosi Elza Amerikában (1906–1907)” [Elza Szamosi in America (1906–1907)] (21 February, 2018, Budapest, Conference of the 2017 Kodály Zoltán Scholarship holders)