

“Operetta and me? ... Never!...” – On the trail of a forgotten operetta composer, Ákos Buttykay (1871–1935)

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ABSTRACT

The research project *Chapters from the History of 20th Century Hungarian Operetta: The Operetta Art of Ákos Buttykay* has as its subject the operetta art of Ákos Buttykay (1871–1935), who was unjustly disqualified from the operetta canon. The subject is highly topical and necessary since the reconstruction of the history of 20th-century Hungarian operetta has been complicated by the fact that, with the exception of a few popular and well-known operetta composers – including Pál Ábrahám (Paul Abraham), Imre Kálmán (Emmerich Kálmán) and Ferenc Lehár (Franz Lehár) – the oeuvre and biography of the composers who were instrumental in the development of the Hungarian operetta style have yet to be reviewed. This shortcoming became evident to me during my research into the history of 20th century Hungarian operetta and the reconstruction of Buttykay’s career and operetta works – using archival sources and contemporary press sources – is the first step towards filling this gap. I chose Buttykay mainly on the basis of my preliminary research and findings, as a composer who had written dozens of operettas and whose name was associated with the most successful operettas of the Hungarian musical stages in the first half of the 20th century.

KEYWORDS

Ákos Buttykay, operetta, Hungarian operetta, press sources, musical theatre

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INTRODUCTION

The research project *Chapters from the History of 20th Century Hungarian Operetta: The Operetta Art of Ákos Buttykay* has as its subject the operetta art of Ákos Buttykay (1871–1935),¹ who was unjustly disqualified from the operetta canon. The subject is highly topical and necessary since the reconstruction of the history of 20th-century Hungarian operetta has been complicated by the fact that, with the exception of a few popular and well-known operetta composers – including Pál Ábrahám (Paul Abraham), Imre Kálmán (Emmerich Kálmán) and Ferenc Lehár (Franz Lehár) – the oeuvre and biography of the composers who were instrumental in the development of the Hungarian operetta style have yet to be reviewed. This shortcoming became evident to me during my research on the history of 20th century Hungarian operetta and the reconstruction of Buttykay's career and operetta works – using archival sources and contemporary press sources – is the first step towards filling this gap. I chose Buttykay mainly on the basis of my preliminary research and findings, as a composer who had written dozens of operettas and whose name was associated with the most successful operettas of the Hungarian musical stages in the first half of the 20th century.

An examination of the position of this composer within the world of Hungarian operetta is also justified by the fact that at the opening of one of the centres for operetta, the Fővárosi Színház [Capital City Theatre] in December 1922, Jenő Heltai's speech was followed by a Buttykay operetta, namely *Olivia hercegnő* [*Princess Olivia*]. (After 1923 this theatre came to be called Fővárosi Operettszínház [Capital City Operetta Theatre]), while today it is known as Budapesti Operettszínház [Budapest Operetta Theatre]. Buttkay was able to maintain his leading position for two decades. After his first operetta – *A bolygó görög* [*The Flying Greek*] (1905) – he went on to become one of the stars not only of the Hungarian, but also of the international popular music scene. His career was on the rise, he was becoming more and more famous and recognised.

We know from recollections and interviews by his colleagues that he had tried his hand at operetta on the advice of László Beöthy, an influential theatre director on the Hungarian private theatre scene: “[...] László Beöthy said to him: Ákos, you must write an operetta for the Király Theatre! The young artist rejected the idea almost startled: Operetta and me?... Never!... I don't understand any of it!...”² His wife, Emmi (or Emma) Kosáry, an operetta prima donna who had been the first to play the role of Szilvia in the *Csárdáskirálynő* [*The Csárdás Princess*], was also decisive in this respect.

In the course of my research, I have selected press articles – interviews, reports and reviews – which help to place Ákos Buttykay on the palette of Hungarian operetta literature, as his career coincides with that of operetta composers who are still part of the operetta canon today and whose works are still performed on operetta stages. These composers include Ferenc Lehár, Imre Kálmán and Jenő Huszka. As an operetta composer, Buttykay began to flourish in the period between 1900 and 1918 which was undoubtedly the golden age of Hungarian operetta.³ Other classifications can also be found; for example Gábor Winkler mentions

¹Székely (1994), 123.

²“Csak néki minden jót és szépet...” [“Wish him all that's good and fair...”] [Jenő Faragó]. *Színházi Élet*. 1935/45, No. 11–13.

³For a summary, see e.g. Bozó (n.d.), On the socio-cultural context of operetta, see e.g. Csáky (1999), 31–41.



Buttykay in his – primarily popular-scientific – book alongside the Hungarian artists of the period between 1900 and 1920, Jenő Huszka and Pongrác Kacsóh,⁴ with whom Buttykay co-created *A harang* [*The Bell*] (1907, libretto by Árpád Pásztor). Until the early 1880s, works by French composers were performed mainly in Pest-Buda and then in Budapest.⁵ The founding of the Király Theatre is an important milestone in the development of operetta in Hungary and in Buttykay's career. The theatre opened its doors on 6 November 1903, but the first season turned out very poorly, due to low audience interest. In November 1904, the musical play *János vitéz* (*John the Valiant*), written by Pongrác Kacsóh, Károly Bakonyi and Jenő Heltai, was performed,⁶ finally bringing the long-awaited success.⁷

THE BEGINNINGS – A GIFTED COMPOSER AND PIANIST OF HUNGARIAN SYMPHONIC LITERATURE

Buttykay was born in Halmi on 22 July 1871. Like many operetta composers, he initially felt slightly averse to the genre. He had begun his music studies in Weimar, where he spent one and a half years in 1893–94.⁸ His teacher during this period was Bernhard Stavenhagen.⁹ He then continued his musical education as a student at the Liszt Academy in Budapest.¹⁰ He was taught music theory by Viktor Herzfeld and the art of orchestration by Ferenc Szabó Xavér.¹¹

At the beginning of his career, he did not feel at home in the genre of operetta – note, however, that the Hungarian operetta style only began to establish itself in those decades – and was mainly composing symphonies – indeed, contemporary newspapers described him as a gifted symphonist. It is also not surprising that these two creative periods are not sharply separated, since even as a well-known operetta composer he still returned regularly to the world of orchestral works. It is worth taking a look at some of the reviews and reports from this period. On the one hand, it is interesting that the sources are punctuated by a certain pathos; on the other hand, they also reveal that Buttykay was already a well-known and respected composer and pianist during his lifetime.

His talent was quickly recognised by his fellow composers. He entered Hungarian musical life as a pupil of István Thomán (1862–1940),¹² gave concerts (according to sources, his first concert

⁴Winkler (2018), 74–75.

⁵On this, see e.g. Bozó (2021).

⁶Koch (1941), 143–172.

⁷Székely (2001), 605–631.

⁸Schöplin (1929–1931).

⁹FALK, Zsigmond, A nyolczadik filharmóniai hangverseny [The Eighth Philharmonic Concert], *Ország-Világ*, Vol. 18, No. 14 (4 April 1897), 221.

¹⁰Székely (2001), 123.

¹¹FALK, *op. cit.*, 221.

¹²Bartók, who was also a pupil of Thomán, wrote about his former master in 1927 as follows, "...studying with Thomán is more than just learning to master the art of playing the piano. The education I receive from Thomán is not only for the piano hand and the musician's ear, but also directly for the human soul." (Domokos, n.d.).



took place in 1892)¹³ and was considered a promising piano student. By the end of the 1890s he was already a star of philharmonic concerts. His *Scherzo* of 1898 represents a kind of breakthrough, “The Philharmonic Orchestra fills the grey evenings with life. The *Scherzo* by Ákos Buttykay seemed like a bright spot amidst the overpowering greyness of today’s programme, with only one flaw: its brevity. Buttykay, who made his debut as a symphonic musician two years ago, is now one of the best. His *Scherzo* is a beautiful, clear work that could fairly be called a classic if it were not so modern. Buttykay has a way of being modern without poisoned harmonies and cutting rhythms. The young composer was called back to the podium twice, amidst thunderous applause [...]”,¹⁴ after the *Scherzo*, which was lovingly conveyed by the conducting Richter.

He also tried to hold his own as a law student, although it is mostly mainly in the light of his work that we get to read about his law studies, “The first carnival ball was held today at the Vigadó. I liked the new *csárdás* and the new waltz; these pieces by the law student Ákos Buttykay had to be repeated several times by the Berkes band and the Dubez military band.”¹⁵

After only a few years, Buttykay was hailed by critics as the outstanding young talent among his coeval contenders. In February 1901 he shone as a pianist in the Minor Hall of the Vigadó. *Budapesti Hírlap* acknowledged his performance as follows, “It’s been a few years since we last heard Buttykay perform. His name did not disappear during this period; he was only inactive as a pianist, but as a composer of various orchestral works he achieved great success at philharmonic concerts. The distinguished audience at today’s concert, however, was delighted to see Buttykay alongside a Bösendorfer. The young artist has come a long way in recent years. [...] Buttykay played a rich and substantial programme worthy of his serious personality, including great works by Schumann, Bach, Chopin, Brahms, Beethoven and Liszt. The young artist was enthusiastically celebrated throughout the concert and his admirers presented him with two laurel wreaths.”¹⁶

In 1902, inspired by Gustave Flaubert’s novel *Salammbó*, he wrote a symphony with the same title: “The composer was inspired by the novel’s vivid imagery, its lush colours, the sensuality of an immensely rich imaginary world. [...] The whole work is very significant and interesting and places Ákos Buttykay among the first ranks of modern symphonic composers. Tonight, the audience listened with growing interest and applauded the composer enthusiastically after each movement.”¹⁷

In 1905 he wrote another major work, the music to János Arany’s ballad *Ünneprontók* [*Spoilers of the Feast*]. His increasingly Hungarian musical style is highlighted by critics, “[...] the air, the colouring, the rhythm and even the concept of *Ünneprontók* is Hungarian. [...]

¹³See Thomán, István, *Pesti Hírlap*, Vol. 14, No. 123 (03.05.1892), 5.

¹⁴A filmharmonikusok [The Philharmonic Orchestra], *Budapesti Hírlap*, Vol. 18, No. 353 (22 December 1898), 9.

¹⁵Jogászbál [Lawyers’ Ball], *Budapesti Hírlap*, Vol. 10, No. 7 (08.01.1890), 5–6.

¹⁶Buttykay Ákos, *Budapesti Hírlap*, Vol. 21, No. 52 (21 February 1901), 9.

¹⁷Filharmonikus hangverseny [Philharmonic Concert], *Budapesti Hírlap*, Vol. 22, No. 317 (18 November 1902), 9.; Later, too, he performed with great success at concerts, see, among others: Filharmonikus hangverseny [Philharmonic Concert], *Budapesti Hírlap*, Vol. 7, No. 57 (7 March 1907), 12; Hangversenyek [Concerts], *Az Újság*, Vol. 7, No. 39 (16 February 1909), 16.



Buttykay has by and large mastered his task well. His music is lively; without going beyond the framework of the symphonic movement, it follows the flow of the poem smoothly, its rhythms are striking and Hungarian. His orchestration technique represents a high level. Ákos Buttykay's orchestra is inspiring.¹⁸ However, the symphonic poem is not only praised, "There are, however, some weak points in the work: the choice of the central musical ideas was not as successful as it might have been. His themes are fairly small scale or insignificant, so that even a great artist like Ákos Buttykay could not build a perfect, intact symphonic movement from them. The heroes of the ballad come to a terrible, an awful end. Tortured to death, caught in the needles of hell, they suffer dreadful, indescribable agonies; however, the original catastrophe of the ballad is not vividly enough depicted by Buttykay."¹⁹

STAGE PLAYS

Buttykay's stage plays include fairy tales, legends and numerous operettas. His fairy tale is considered a milestone in the history of the Budapest Opera House, and his operettas are also associated with numerous successes and major theatrical events.

Cooperation with Pongrác Kacsóh

On 1 February 1907, the premiere of the three-act legend *A harang* [*The Bell*] took place at the Király Theatre. Pongrác Kacsóh and Ákos Buttykay jointly composed the music to the libretto by Árpád Pásztor. It was praised by critics as catchy, "audience-friendly" music, "Ákos Buttykay and Dr. Pongrác Kacsóh wrote beautiful, catchy Hungarian songs for the piece, which Lujza Blaha sang into the hearts of the audience in one fell swoop."²⁰ In 1919, the play was also received with enthusiasm abroad, being staged in Vienna, Berlin, Hamburg and the theatres of other German-speaking cities. It was performed with new accompaniment, but no longer by the original duo of composers.²¹

¹⁸K. I., Filharmóniai hangverseny [Philharmonic Concert], *Pesti Napló*, Vol. 56, No. 26 (26 January 1905) 14.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 14. More about this spectacular success may be read in the *Budapesti Hírlap*: "On Sunday morning, a large crowd of students gathered in the halls of the Vigadó for the second popular philharmonic concert. In great silence and with due respect, the young people listened to Beethoven's Leonora overture and Mozart's Symphony in E-flat major. They applauded politely after each piece, but there was a sense that their young souls were not captivated by German classical music. The next title on the programme, the orchestral ballad *Ünneprontók* [*Spoilers of the Feast*] by Ákos Buttykay, however, created all the more excitement and enthusiasm. It was a delight to see how differently Hungarian music affected these young people. They understood it, they enjoyed it, their faces lit up when they heard it, and finally applause erupted in the room. The young listeners wanted to see Ákos Buttykay himself. After minutes of applause, Buttykay finally took the podium and was given an ovation the likes of which few Hungarian artists have ever received at a philharmonic concert. Young women waved their scarves and young men jumped up from their seats and cheered this musical poet. Perhaps the audience that Hungarian music has needed for a long time will emerge from this upcoming generation. An audience that helps make Hungarian art great with love, faith and conviction." Buttykay Ákos ünneplése [Celebration of Ákos Buttykay], *Budapesti Hírlap*, Vol. 15, No. 30 (30 January 1905), 8.

²⁰Színház, *Ország-Világ*, Vol. 28, No. 6 (10 February 1907), 117.

²¹Magyar siker külföldön [Hungarian Success Abroad], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 8, No. 39–40 (5 October 1919), 8.



Hamupipőke [Cinderella] (1912)

◆ Buttykay's contact with the Opera House became closer at a time when the development of a Hungarian repertoire was still in progress.²² The first genuine Hungarian-language premiere at the Opera House was associated with his name, "The first Hungarian performance of the fairy tale play by Bakonyi and Buttykay at the Opera House was a great and sincere success right from the dress rehearsal onwards. This extremely warm reception was due to both Buttykay's extremely melodic, gossamer music and to Bakonyi's imaginative, buoyant lyrics with its perfectly pleasing forms. Beautiful, colourful images bring the magnificent characters of the folk tale *Cinderella* to life, and Buttykay's music gently lulls the audience into the fairy-tale world. This great work deserves a long, a very long life."²³ The *Zene* [Music] magazine commented on the operetta as follows, "Rhythmic music introduces the first act, which is rich in beautiful melodies built on closed forms derived from folk songs. The lament in *Cinderella* speaks to us with a direct power, sensitive lyricism and an impressive poetic setting. The trio of elves is cleverly constructed, the portrayal of the loving couple is sublime and the introduction to the third act is very subtle"²⁴ – but that's where the words of praise come to an end. Text and music were discussed together, focusing among other things on Buttykay's French style, "On the other hand, the choruses in Acts 2 and 3 are overly simplistic; a little counterpoint would have done very well to counteract the great homophony. But like the libretto, the music doesn't seem to have set particularly high standards for itself. Although there is little contrast, Buttykay's music is consistently interesting, and does often manage to create a fairy-tale illusion despite the awkward libretto, largely thanks to good use of its technical possibilities. Even the seemingly simplest ideas are clothed in a delicate, yet artfully woven blaze of colour. These are the kind of subtleties we expected from the libretto – and which it completely lacks. This is solid proof that Buttykay is a true musician. However, it is hard to justify why the elaboration and style are almost entirely French, although Buttykay has already indicated his commitment to the Hungarian spirit in invention several times. We admire him for leaving prose in the play, creating a stark difference in mood. The audience's

²²More details about the problem: "In the 1910s – despite the performances of Zichy and Rékai, or even in their dimmed light – the problem of national opera seemed insoluble and operatic life was pushed below the surface. The Hungarian operas that were published at all mostly represented an international subgenre and were composed young composers of varying standard and qualification. Most prolific among them was the young Emil Ábrányi; he chose themes for his operas from short stories and selected his librettists with good intuition, which fitted the style of the time very well. He composed Monna's *Vanna* after Maeterlinck (1907), wrote one opera each about Paolo and Francesca (1912) around the same time as Zandonai, and about Don Quixote shortly after Massenet. His style shows the features and devices of international Art Nouveau: he used colourful sound harmonies and exaggerated, feverish, erotic melodies with little originality. His operas therefore did not appeal to the receptors of the audience and were not a resounding success. Other young Hungarian opera composers shortly after the turn of the century had even less resonance: Sándor Szeghő's version of the vampire theme (Erzsébet Báthory, 1913) became one of the sad fiascos of the Hevesi era. Ákos Buttykay and István Gajár tried their hand at an operatic genre of comic opera in the style of Offenbach's operettas (*Hamupipőke [Cinderella]*, *A makrancos herceg [The Recalcitrant Prince]*). The peasant ballad (*Marika*) by Mihály Krausz was accepted by Bánffy, but he postponed its performance; the fact that time was found for its performance in the troubled months of the Soviet republic was perhaps due to its socially critical theme: Marika was a reworking of the Kádár Kata motif in the style of the operetta genre." SZÉKELY, *op. cit.*, 86.

²³*Hamupipőke [Cinderella]*, *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 3, No. 36 (27 October 1912a), 12.

²⁴*Hamupipőke [Cinderella]*, *A Zene*, Vol. 4, No. 11 (1912b), 236–237.



illusion is often disturbed by the silencing and entry of the orchestra. If he had at least written a melodramatic accompaniment for these scenes... In this respect, how much more artistic is Poldini's *Csavargó és királyleányka* [*The Tramp and the Princess*].²⁵

Accompaniment to the tragedy of man

Buttykay wrote the accompaniment to Imre Madách's *Az ember tragédiája* [*The Tragedy of Man*] in the second half of the 1910s, but the fate of this piece is an adventurous one. Ede Paulay had adapted the play for the stage in the 1880s; on that occasion the accompaniment for the National Theatre was written by Béni Egressy. We also know from the press that Buttykay was commissioned to compose a new accompaniment before the war because the new National Theatre was to open with the new production, but in the event the premiere was thwarted by the turmoil of war. The audience got a foretaste of the music combined into an orchestral suite at a concert by the Philharmonic Society.²⁶ The details became known in early 1918, "Naturally, Monday's performance could only grant Buttykay's music the chance to produce a one-sided effect, lacking the stage and the dramatic action, but the suite was composed as absolute music to enable it to have a purely musical effect on the listener. The theatre audience was in many ways very interested in the new work by Ákos Buttykay, since it allowed them not only to hear the latest opus by this important composer, but also to get a taste of the new production of *The Tragedy of Man*."²⁷

The performance was cancelled for economic reasons, but the story of the work continued in 1923 when the magazine *Színházi Élet* published an article about Buttykay's play, "Apart from the overture and the passages accompanying the dramatic action or bridging the individual scenes, this interesting work by Buttykay consists of choruses and even solo sections in the Roman scene, and this way music claims to play a far greater role in Madách's dramatic poem than in Erkel's stage rendering. Buttykay did not intend his work as a programme symphony, he was merely expressing his subjective feelings in the accompaniment. His orchestra evokes the primary emotions that reading *The Tragedy of Man* triggered in the composer. There are no leitmotifs in the score; the basic idea of the poem consists merely of a recurring musical phrase expressing the futility of the struggle. [...]"²⁸ In 1929, the work was finally performed in its entirety on the radio.²⁹

Buttykay's operettas (1905–1925)

Buttykay's oeuvre is characterized by operettas such as *A bolygó görög* [*The Flying Greek*] (1905), *A csibészkirály* [*The Villain King*] (1907), *Az ezüst sirály* [*The Silver Gull*] (1920), *Olivia hercegnő* [*Princess Olivia*] (1922), *Itt a macska* [*Here is the Cat*] (1922) and *A császárnő apródja* [*The Empress's Page*] (1925). In 1909 he married Emma (Emmi, Emmy) Kosáry, and in most of the premieres of his operettas his wife slipped into the role of the prima donna.

A bolygó görög [*The Flying Greek*] is an operetta in three acts with a libretto by Árpád Pásztor, which premiered at the Király Theatre on 19 October 1905, directed by László Beöthy.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 236–237.

²⁶*Az ember tragédiája új zenéje* [The New Music of *The Tragedy of Man*], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 5, No. 35 (9 October 1916), 26.

²⁷Buttykay Ákos új műve [New Work by Ákos Buttykay], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 7, No. 5 (27 January 1918), 6.

²⁸*Az ember tragédiája zenéje* [The Music of *The Tragedy of Man*], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (21 January 1923), 11.

²⁹*Az ember tragédiája a rádió műsorán* [*The Tragedy of Man on the Radio*], *Pesti Hírlap*, Vol. 51, No. 137 (20 June 1929), 16.



Critics praised the composer above all for not using the usual operetta style and musical form: "They played with enthusiasm, knowledge and extraordinary verve, as if they knew or felt that they were spokesmen for something new, something fascinating. And they were right about that. Buttykay's music is not operetta in the modern sense of the word, but it is operetta in the sense of the music of the future. It is so original, so beautiful and so heartrending that it will have an effect on everyone, thus ensuring not only a long and perhaps endless life for the operetta *A bolygó görög* [*The Flying Greek*], but also creating a new school, for it is certain that talented composers will take Buttykay's entirely new musical forms as their model."³⁰ Other reviews also highlight Buttykay's talent, "Árpád Pásztor has given Ákos Buttykay a libretto that fits Buttykay's personality as a composer, to perfection. Buttykay is our greatest proponent of decorative music. His orchestral colours are brilliant. Ákos Buttykay's orchestra bathes in sunlight and shines in full illumination. We also find dramatic accents in his earlier symphonic works. *Salammbô*'s symphony is a real opera – without text and stage. In the music of *A bolygó görög* [*The Flying Greek*], Ákos Buttykay has shown the full extent of his talent as a sovereign master of artistic economy. The instruments of the operetta stage and the operetta orchestra, are poorer, simpler and more primitive than the huge apparatus with which the modern symphony works. Buttykay has managed to achieve an enormous, truly artistic and profound effect even with the limited material he had at his disposal. His orchestra shines, his brilliant orchestral virtuosity enhancing the expressiveness of the operetta orchestra with admirable power."³¹

A csibészkirály [*The Villain King*] won the hearts of Hungarian audiences in 1907 with Zsazsa, alias Sári Fedák, in the leading role. The premiere took place on 21 February at the Király Theatre. The libretto is by Lajos Szél. As for the music, a work by Buttykay, I will again let contemporary criticism speak, "The music is as delicate and noble as the lyrics are refined and lively. This is a poetical work. With the emergence of talents like Pongrác Kacsóh and Ákos Buttykay, our operetta music is now entering a splendid period in its development, and Buttykay has contributed the best to this era with some beautiful musical interludes in *A Csibészkirály* [*The Villain King*]. These include, for example, the appearance of the prima donna, who was called back on stage several times, a melodious song of the thieves, a soulfully beautiful song of the policeman in love and the villain's song in the first act. The fact that this music enjoys a wider popularity than his works usually do does not detract from Buttykay's artistic seriousness. A thing that everybody loves can still be beautiful."³² A great future is predicted for the play: "The music is a noble, soaring, poetic work whose melodiousness will certainly enjoy great popularity. In addition to the three songs already mentioned, the police chief's song is also very beautiful, as is the villain's march and many, many other arias that cannot be listed one by one. From beginning to end, the music is a veritable accumulation of glorious melodies that will soon be whistled by all."³³

³⁰ *A bolygó görög* [*The Flying Greek*], *Magyar Szalon*, 1905-1906/XXIII, 12, see also: *A bolygó görög* [*The Flying Greek*], *Ország-Világ*, Vol. 26, No. 43 (22 October 1905), 808–809, "A Király Színházban..." [In the Király Theatre], *Budapesti Hírlap*, Vol. 25, No. 304 (3 November 1905), 13, *A bolygó görög* [*The Flying Greek*], *Budapesti Hírlap*, Vol. 15, No. 290 (20 October 1905a, b), 11–12.

³¹ *A bolygó görög* [*The Flying Greek*], *Uj Idők*, Vol. 11, No. 44 (29 October 1905), 433.

³² Sz., *A csibészkirály* [*The Villain King*], *Budapesti Hírlap*, Vol. 27, No. 46 (22 February 1907), 14. cf. (-Idi), *Csibészkirály* [*The Villain King*], *Pesti Hírlap*, Vol. 29, No. 46 (22 February 1907), 12.

³³ FALK Zsigmond, *A csibészkirály* [*The Villain King*], *Ország-Világ*, Vol. 28, No. 8 (24 February 1907), 152–153.



These assessments proved correct – the play was staged again in 1919, at a time when most theatres were restaging well-worn hits, “Last week there was a repeat performance at the Király Theatre – one that might as well have been a first performance, since only a very small proportion of today’s theatre audiences remember when *A csibészkirály* [*The Villain King*] was first performed on this stage. This operetta had its premiere twelve years ago at the Király Theatre; since then the people of Budapest have somewhat forgotten little Daisy, nice Grolmus, jolly Gámez and the many other cheerful characters of the play who are now freshly revived, as if they had not lain for many years in the dusty silence of the theatre library.”³⁴ *A csibészkirály* [*The Villain King*] continued its journey abroad: in 1916 the Szél-Buttykay operetta was staged in New York.³⁵

After this performance there was a break for a few years, at least as far as operettas were concerned. But Buttykay was not idle during these years either, for he composed numerous other stage works and was a valued teacher at the Academy of Music between 1907 and 1922.³⁶ Because of the foreign performances of his operettas, he was forced to give up his work there; in 1923, his work as an educator was recognised with an award, “It is reported in Sunday’s edition of the Official Gazette that the Governor, on the recommendation of the Minister of Religion and National Education, has awarded Ákos Buttykay, a teacher at the Academy of Music, a Grade 5 salary on the occasion of his retirement. Ákos Buttykay had been a piano teacher at the Academy of Music for a decade and a half, but when he had to stop teaching two years ago because of foreign performances of his operettas, he took a leave of absence and retired in October last year. Buttykay now wants to devote himself exclusively to composing.”³⁷

In 1920, the operetta *Ezüst sirály* [*The Silver Gull*] caused a sensation³⁸ and rehearsals began at the end of January 1920 at the Városi Színház [City Theatre]; Buttykay’s wife Emma B. Kosáry played the leading role. Even before the performance, the press wrote favourably about the piece,

³⁴*A csibészkirály* [*The Villain King*], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 8, No. 24 (15 June 1919), 4–7.

³⁵Február 17-e... [“17 February...”], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 5, No. 7 (13 February 1916), 20.

³⁶Among many others, Buttykay was the teacher of István Pártos. See: István Pártos, *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 5, No. 13 (26 March 1916), 11–12.

³⁷Buttykay Ákos kitüntetése [Ákos Buttykay Receives Award], *Az Est*, Vol. 14, No. 58 (13 March 1923), 6.

³⁸The genesis of this piece is also interesting: “Interesting pieces usually have an interesting genesis. Now that Budapest is resounding with the success of *Az ezüst sirály*, the question arises as to how its two authors had come together. Two years ago, Ákos Buttykay and Imre Földes didn’t even know each other, let alone think of writing an operetta together. Their first meeting took place on a spring day in Vienna – but Földes was not present. The Buttykay couple visited the former imperial city and spent an evening there with the head of one of Vienna’s major stage agencies, Sándor Marton. In the course of the conversation, Ákos Buttykay’s old operetta hits, *A bolygó görög* [*The Flying Greek*] and *A csibészkirály* [*The Villain King*], came up: ‘You should write an operetta again’, said the Viennese theatre man, ‘it’s a pity you haven’t write a good part for your wife!’ – ‘Yes’, said Buttykay, ‘but where do I get the text? I can’t work on just any lyrics, I want something new, something extraordinary.’ – ‘I have a libretto’, Marton said, ‘that would suit you very well. Its peculiarity is that it is by a Hungarian author: His name is Imre Földes’. – ‘But Imre Földes is a playwright, he writes plays, comedies.’ – ‘And, exceptionally, operettas. I have a beautiful libretto by him, but I begrudge it to the composers here, even though he gave it to me so that I could have it translated into German and give it to a Viennese composer. You see, Professor, that would be something for you. You don’t need to translate it, and I am convinced that Imre Földes will be pleased when he hears that you have taken on his music.’ Buttykay liked the idea so much that he asked Földes for the libretto so that he could read it. Indeed, he read it and never returned it. He took it with him to Budapest, where the two authors finally met. Földes was very happy that Buttykay agreed to set the play to music, and now, after the premiere, he is probably even happier.” *Az ezüst sirály* [*The Silver Gull*], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 9, No. 7 (15 February 1920), 2–11.



“Those who have already heard excerpts from the music of *Ezüst sirály* say that the audience will discover a whole new masterpiece by Buttykay when they hear this music.”³⁹ Városi Színház had apparently managed to find a recipe for success: “By the time these lines appear, forty thousand people will have already seen the performance of *Az ezüst sirály* [*The Silver Gull*] at the Városi Színház, and eighty thousand hands will have joined in enthusiastic applause to celebrate the play, the authors and the performers. This arithmetical result may be calculated from the incredible number of tickets sold and the capacity of the auditorium by simple multiplication, and one can even conclude that the statistics will double in another two weeks, i.e.: eighty thousand spectators, one hundred and sixty thousand hands... What is certain is that it has been a long time since Budapest last had such a unanimous, great operetta success as it did at the premiere of *Az ezüst sirály* [*The Silver Gull*].”⁴⁰ It must be mentioned, however, that in this context we are talking about private theatre organisations, i.e. theatres specialising in operettas functioning as businesses, i.e. with the pursuit of profit. The piece quickly spread beyond the country’s borders, which is no wonder, since the rate at which a hit made it to the musical offer of Budapest cafés was another important measure of success in the period – i.e. the willingness with which it was adopted by the Gypsy bands playing at these venues.

Buttykay himself commented on his operetta career abroad as follows,

“Liebesrausch is performed in a great production” says Buttykay, the stage design is sensational. The third act was completely revised by Imre Földes, and I composed two new pieces of music for it. One of them is sung by Ernő Király in Hungarian. The protagonists have unparalleled success. The play, which will be performed for the hundredth time on 28 September, is played to a full house every day. For this festive performance, the Wiener Werkstätte made a new dress for Emmy Kosáry which cost 250,000 Kronen. The best proof of success is that the management of the Carl Theatre extended the contract with Kosáry and Király until 6 January 1921. Then *Ezüst sirály* will be performed for the two hundredth time. After that we want to return to Budapest to continue performances there unless Bodánszky, the director of the Metropolitan Theatre in Berlin, insists on a guest performance in Berlin. Bodánszky has in fact booked *Ezüst sirály*, along with Kosáry and Király. Last week I started negotiations with Mayer, the head of London’s most famous theatre agency. He has already booked the operetta for England and America, and now wants Kosáry and Király to play the main roles in English at the New York premiere next autumn. Negotiations will be concluded shortly, and the contract will be for ten months. The fee, converted into Kronen, will be more than twelve million. The theatre director Son Sognini from Milan has bought the performance rights for Italy and Spain for 18,000 Lire. The performance is planned for December. Sognini has also acquired the rights to publish the score of *Ezüst sirály*, which will soon be published with German and Italian text.”⁴¹

Here the production was performed almost a hundred times and was soon followed by the New York premiere in October 1923: The following excerpts are from the report published in *Amerikai Népszava*: “Three thousand people! After all that pap.” The review then describes the content of the piece in detail and goes on to say, “Buttykay’s music belongs to the most beautiful

³⁹Próbálják az *Ezüst sirályt* [*Ezüst sirály* is Being Rehearsed], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (25 January 1920), 19–20.

⁴⁰Negyvenezer néző, nyolcvanezer tenyér [Forty Thousand Spectators, Eighty Thousand Hands], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 9, No. 8 (22 February 1920), 22–23.

⁴¹Buttykay Ákos az *Ezüst sirály* világkörüli útjáról [Ákos Buttykay on the Journey of the *Ezüst Sirály* Around the World], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 9, No. 37 (12 September 1920), 18.



examples of Hungarian music. This music deserves that one should dedicate a separate essay to it, and a long one at that. With the instinctive caution of a good artist, Buttykay evades all clichés, is not vulgar for a moment and does not describe a single Gassenhauer. Kosáry's performance is surprisingly novel and interesting, a real musical treat; the dance duet in the first act is full of musical humour and orchestration ideas. Buttykay's music was a joy, a true refreshment for the spirit, a masterpiece after all the pap we've heard in the past, where one felt each new show was a form of torture."⁴²

Itt a macska [*Here is the Cat*] is a one-act play premiered at the Budapest Orfeum in February 1922, starring Emma Kosáry and Ernő Király.⁴³ This piece, too, quickly became a success: "The music of Ákos Buttykay is on a par with any of the hits of great operetta", says *Színházi Élet*.⁴⁴

The once very successful Fővárosi Orfeum [Capital City Orfeum], one of the most popular operetta houses and known today as Budapest Operetta Theatre, began operations on 23 December 1922 under the name Fővárosi Színház [Capital City Theatre]. A new theatre requires a new operetta, which was composed under the title *Olivia hercegnő* [*Princess Olivia*] by Buttykay, Miksa Bródy and Imre Földes.⁴⁵ In November 1922 *Színházi Élet* wrote the following about the music of the spectacular new operetta with its 95 characters: "We would like to say a few words about the music. In *Olivia hercegnő* (*Princess Olivia*), the most beautiful melodies of Ákos Buttykay were brought to life. The waltz in the second act even surpasses the famous hits from *Ezüst sirály* [*The Silver Gull*]. The score includes a whole line of great dance numbers, set to rhythmically lively lyrics by Miksa Bródy. But that's enough about *Princess Olivia* for now. Two or three more weeks and we will be able to see His Majesty face to face, and after the enthusiastic reception he will receive, he will be bound to stay with us for a very long time. And this is what everyone who loves beautiful music wishes for him with all their heart."⁴⁶

The operetta *A császárnő apródja* [*The Empress's Page*], whose libretto became the subject of an authorship scandal (with Jenő Faragó's name appearing in most reports), also received a lively response in theatrical circles.⁴⁷ The play, in which Kosáry again plays the leading role, was performed at the Király Theatre on 21 March 1925.⁴⁸

After this, no new operetta by Buttykay was ever performed, and the composer died in 1935. The following is known about his funeral: "He was buried amidst great condolences in a grave of honour at the Farkasréti Cemetery. The funeral was attended by numerous Hungarian public figures, including the retired Minister of Finance Frigyes Korányi, retired Ministerial Council

⁴²Apponyi Albert és leánya az *Ezüst sirály* New York-i premierjén [Albert Apponyi and his Daughter at the New York Premiere of *Ezüst Sirály*], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 13, No. 44 (28 October 1923), 8.

⁴³*Itt a macska* [*Here is the Cat*], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 11, No. 6 (5 February 1922), 21., *Itt a macska* [*Here is the Cat*], *Pesti Hírlap*, Vol. 44, No. 27 (2 February 1922), 8.

⁴⁴*Itt a macska* [*Here is the Cat*], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 11, No. 7 (12 February 1922), 23–25.

⁴⁵*Olivia hercegnő* [*Princess Olivia*], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (1 January 1923), 3–13.

⁴⁶95 szereplő az *Olivia hercegnőben* [Cast of 95 in *Princess Olivia*], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 11, No. 48 (26 November 1922), 8–9, see also *Olivia hercegnő titkai* [The Secrets of *Princess Olivia*], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 11, No. 46 (12 November 1922), 47.

⁴⁷Ki írta a *Császárnő apródja* librettóját? [Who Wrote the Libretto of *The Empress's Page*?], *Az Est*, Vol. 16, No. 53 (6 March 1925), 11.

⁴⁸Új Buttykay-operett [New Buttykay operetta], *Pesti Hírlap*, Vol. 47, No. 58 (12 March 1925), 15., *A császárnő apródja* [*The Empress's Page*], *Színházi Élet*, Vol. 15, No. 10 (8 March 1925), 20.



member Jenő Huszka, university professor Sándor Korányi, Margit Makay and many representatives of the theatrical world. After the service, which was celebrated by the brother of the deceased, Albert Siklós approached the hearse and said farewell to his colleague on behalf of the Academy of Music and the Society of Composers. Afterwards, Miklós Radnai gave a eulogy on behalf of the Opera House, Imre Földes on behalf of the Playwrights' Association and Lajos Dömötör on behalf of the Philharmonic Society.⁴⁹

His memory, however, turned out to be short-lived on the operetta stages, and the resounding success of his works was dampened by the great operetta hits of the 1920s and 1930s, especially the jazz operetta, which ran a great career in Hungary, as elsewhere.⁵⁰ Committed to satisfying the musical needs of the public, Buttykay had begun composing operettas in the middle of his career: "His first operetta, *A bolygó görög* [*The Flying Greek*], was still convincing because of the great qualities of the symphonic composer Buttykay. The delicate melody lines conceived in excellent taste, the noble tone and the colourful orchestral accompaniment were a real success in the eyes of experienced musicians. But the people, the audience in the operetta theatres, rejected this music. After his first failure, Buttykay eagerly followed the advice of the theatre director, the stage director, the conductor and the theatre experts: he tried to adapt to the more popular sound of operetta. With *A csibészkirály* [*The Villain King*] and *Ezüst sirály* [*The Silver Gull*] he managed to get closer to the audience, but he still never came close to writing what we might call a true "hit". Even in his later works (*Olivia hercegnő* [*Princess Olivia*], *A császárné apródja* [*The Empress's Page*]) he failed to stumble upon a truly popular tone. And that was his tragedy. For by the time he conceived a wish to return to his old style, two decades had passed and the time of artistic revolutions had arrived. His old works faded in the light of the newer styles, and he himself, full of bitterness and disappointment, sick and tired, could no longer adapt to the new winds."⁵¹

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⁴⁹Ákos Buttykay, *A Zene*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2 November 1935), p. 36–37.

⁵⁰Lengyel (2022), Lengyel (in press).

⁵¹Buttykay..., *op. cit.*, 37.



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