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Performing socialist Hungary in China: 'modern, Magyar, European'

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ABSTRACT

This paper reconstructs the ways in which the Hungarian People's Army Performing Arts Ensemble arranged its repertoire to perform socialist Hungary in the autumn of 1956, during the Ensemble's tour in the People's Republic of China. The paper performs a close reading of a single archival document, the program of the Ensemble's début performance before non-European socialist audiences that took place in Shenyang on September 21, 1956. The repertoire featured a simple chronological, quasi-historical overview of musical and dance traditions from Hungary. It offered a vague, highly stylized set of references to Hungary's military traditions. It attempted to realize the triple formula of a new, 'modern, Magyar, European,' art form, and foregrounded a plebian ('peasant-') progressive-patriotic theme with hints of ethnic nationalism. The program provided the absolute minimum of the standard Stalinist fare, resolutely avoided any reference to the USSR or Russia, and, most fascinating, closed with a self-ironical dance piece featuring a powerful allegorical story of socialism with a 'Hungarian face,' something that represented a resolute break with the Stalinist aesthetic canon and reinforced the group's political commitment to a socialism that is 'modern, Magyar and European.'

KEYWORDS

China; close reading; Europe; Hungary; modernity; performing arts; repertoire; Stalinism

Introduction

On 7 September 1956, the Performing Arts Ensemble of the Hungarian People's Army left Budapest for a tour of the People's Republic of China. The tour involved 217 people, on a two-week journey through the Soviet Union. They travelled in a chartered train, tracing the route of the Trans-Siberia Railway. Once in China, they gave 104 performances in two and a half months and, then, took a two-week return trip to Hungary via the USSR, arriving in Budapest on Christmas Day 1956.

The Ensemble consisted of three groups, each with its soloists: a dance troupe of 40 performers with its own band; a 72-member men's choir along with a small group of opera singers; and a symphony orchestra. Accompanying the group were a number of political officers and a handful of Sinology students from Hungary serving as interpreters, along with stage hands, two journalists, a laryngologist, a Swiss-born ballet master (co-founder

of, and widely admired professor at, the Budapest Ballet Institute), a graphic artist, a stage actor, and a two-member film crew, joined by local helpers and handlers organised by the PRC's Ministry of Defence, the People's Liberation Army – the official host of the tour – and the Central Song and Dance Company of the People's Liberation Army.

This paper reconstructs the aesthetic, social-historical, and political meanings and references embedded in the Ensemble's repertoire as it was assembled by its leading artists for the tour in China – a tour that began a mere six weeks before, and ended less than two months after, the suppression of the revolution of 23 October–4 November 1956, a truly consequential political event in Hungary's political history. That task requires, first, a brief look at the Ensemble's original charge as it was imagined eight years earlier.

The concept paper that justified the Ensemble's creation in 1948, entitled 'The question of the central Performing Arts Ensemble/choir, dance and music ensemble/ of the Army' blended two conventional, relatively low-ambition, 'adult education' aims – assistance in public education efforts within the Army and 'educative entertainment' of the members of the armed forces – with two considerably more ambitious goals.¹ The first of these goals was aesthetic – the 'creation of the [sic] new, progressive vocal, dance and music art style' – the other was political – suffusing all that activity with the increasing influence of the Communist Party.² The framers argued in favour of the establishment of the Ensemble by appealing to the revolutionary task of the newly emerging socialist state: transformation of society's consciousness through education and the arts. The framers of the Ensemble took a strong political stance in three interlinked ways:

- (1) First, within the Party's own political universe, they worked to broaden the official view of the revolutionary transformation to include at least some segments, if not the entirety, of the peasantry under the concept of the 'working class' that could, in turn, be regarded as a class endowed with the historical agency to carry forward the task of transforming Hungarian society in a socialist direction;
- (2) Second, they placed a clearly radical-left claim on the 'népi' ('populist') tradition in Hungarian intellectual life, rejecting '(petty) bourgeois' values and traditions.
- (3) Third, they foregrounded the cultural sphere, and specifically the performing arts, as a set of tools effective in the social uplift of the peasantry and an important avenue for the socialist transformation overall.³

In sum, the framers invented the Ensemble as a creative centre that would produce a new, socialist *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the performing arts. In doing so, they linked a populist-plebeian-socialist reinvention of folk culture as a key component of cultural creativity, 'the peasant' as one – and the most powerful – among the (potentially) progressive working-class locations, and the idea of a plebeian-'peasant' take on socialist realism as a form of revolutionary consciousness.

¹A honvédség központi művészegyüttesének /ének-,tánc-és zeneegyüttes:/ kérdése, N.d. Military History Institute, Military History Archive, Budapest, 272–7.

²Emphasis added.

³The 'népi-urbánus' opposition is arguably the most consequential political, social-historical, and aesthetic divide splitting Hungarian cultural and intellectual life at least since the interwar years. See, for example, Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, 'Szellemi élet. A polgári társadalom korának művelődése II. (1920–1948)', chapter 9 (428–59) in László Kósa, *Magyar művelődéstörténet* (Budapest: Osiris, 1998), especially 439–41. On its contemporary reverberations, see Éva Kovács, 'A nemzet einstandolása? Töprengések egy történészvita közben', *CAFÉ BABEL* 20 (2013): 35–44.

Programming for China

The Ensemble's invitation to China came on the occasion of Chinese Defence Minister Zhu De's official state visit to Hungary in January 1956. The tour was a major departure from the past in its sheer magnitude. Cultural flows between the two countries had been marked by sporadic visits by small numbers of individual writers, visual artists or performers, sports teams, and a modest programme of student and academic exchanges.

Programming for the tour involved a set of unique challenges for the Ensemble. To start with, the programme had to be viable in terms of costumes and props, and sustainable in terms of human resources (so that it would not exhaust the Ensemble's members beyond reasonable limits).⁴ This was an unprecedented, and monumental, task, to which should be added the issue of health concerns, the unpredictable effects of long confinement in railroad cars – after all, the trip through the USSR alone would take between 12 and 14 days – and the all-important task of maintaining the Ensemble's spirit through the long and exhausting trip.⁵

The prospect of the tour in China also produced some concerns about artistic quality, within the Ensemble as well as outside. Highly unusual in 'show business' – where rule number one is never to admit to problems, insufficiencies, difficulties, or mistakes – the same interview about the preparation of the dance group opens with an exchange in a rather (self-)critical tone:

Th[e] question [of preparation] is all the more exciting since professional circles regarded with some trepidation the dance group's, by now, several years of uneven development, [concerns that] can be summed up [in stating] that artistic talent and stage execution may not have always been in complete sync.

... Let's start with the question of how the dance group prepared for the tour.

Immediately upon return from [our tour in] Bulgaria, we began developing the final [shape of] our repertoire. We faced a double task: On the one hand, we polished up our best existing pieces, and we learnt the more important works in multiple casts. On the other, we have created three new compositions.

We gave special priority to ballet training in our preparations. As a departure from the somewhat liberal, and easygoing practices of the preceding few years, we set aside an hour and a half daily for [Ballet] Mistress [Marcella] Nádasí's ballet training [sessions]. All members of our dance troupe put in hard work, and that will no doubt benefit our work later.⁶

So, both journalist and interviewee hastened to acknowledge anxieties about both the scale of the tour and the quality of the productions. As part of the way to manage those apprehensions, the dance group's technical training – which was already widely considered superior to all other professional-stage folk ensembles in Hungary – was further enhanced for the Chinese tour.

A central concern was of course that the programme had to be comprehensible for Chinese audiences, not only in terms of communicating without a *lingua franca* between performers and audiences, but also, much more challenging, in terms of making sure that

⁴E.g. the dance troupe had to drop a very ambitious piece, developed specifically for this tour, from its repertoire simply because it would have produced too much of a logistical burden due to its costume design. See Cs. Gy [Cszimadia, György], 'A kínai út előtt. Beszélgetés Böröcz Józseffel', *Táncművészet* VI, no. 9 (September 1956): 390–1 (390).

⁵Ibid., 390.

⁶Ibid., 390.

the programme offered something accessible to the Chinese audiences in spite of the vast, literally continent-scale, physical, cultural, and social-historical distance between the two countries.

It is an indication that the leadership anticipated this problem that the Ensemble had produced and shipped with it, along with the rest of the Ensemble's cargo, no fewer than 'twenty-five thousand copies of a leaflet printed in Russian, to which an appendix, in Mandarin, would be added in China'.⁷ It seems that the Ensemble's leaders instrumentalised the hegemony of the USSR and the role of the Russian language as a *lingua franca* both inside the USSR and in official communication among the socialist-bloc states in making a gesture toward an intra-socialist 'people's diplomacy.'

A review of one of the Ensemble's last pre-tour performances, published in the Budapest paper *Magyar Nemzet*, captures the problem even in its title:

Chinese Eyes and Ears

— that is what the critic would have to have in order to be able to foretell what the Chinese audiences would like most about the People's Army's excellent Performing Arts Ensemble's program in the People's Republic of China. And that is almost impossible.⁸

The reviewer finds the Ensemble's China programme 'rich' and 'colourful,' he lists some of the biggest names among the composers and choreographers, and files a polite complaint about the absence of Franz Liszt from among them. He even volunteers suggestions as to which of Liszt's works he thinks would be appropriate for inclusion in the programme. The review repeats the mildly Orientalist thought that 'it is impossible to guess' what the Chinese audiences will like – and then proceeds to do just that, by criticising the programme, especially the second half, for reflecting too much 'music history' and 'music philology.' Finally, the critic also concedes the artistic material the Ensemble is bringing to China 'belongs in the best of our culture,' – i.e. he reverts, in the end, to an inside-Hungarian conversation.

The Ensemble gave a couple of dress rehearsals, followed by several gala performances, a few days before departure. Perhaps the most exulted of those was the men's choir's concert on the steps of the National Museum.⁹ The location was chosen as a historical reference to the location where, according to apocryphal tradition, Sándor Petőfi, Hungary's leading romantic-nationalist poet, read his incendiary poem, 'National Song' on the day of the outbreak of the national uprising of 1848.¹⁰

Gyula Ortutay, a professor of ethnography, slated to become President of the Patriotic People's Front in the autumn of 1956, was the featured speaker of the concert on the steps

⁷György Csizmadia, 'ÚTRA KÉSZEN ...', *Szabad Nép*, 31 August 1956: 4.

⁸Sándor Asztalos, 'A kínaiak szemével és fülével', *Magyar Nemzet*, 24 August 1956.

⁹<http://honismeret.hu/?modul=oldal&tartalom=1220168> (accessed 9 June 2015). To understand the symbolic power of the museum steps and the poem, it is important to remember that the 'National Song' is a standard, required part of elementary school curricula in Hungary, memorised by all students in their pre-teens. The opening line of the poem's refrain – 'On your feet now, Hungary calls you!' – is widely paraphrased in everyday speech. Arguably, 'National Song' is the single most widely known poem in Magyar. See also Lajos Rácz, 'Adalékok a magyar-kínai katinadiplomáciai kapcsolatok történetéhez', *Hadtudomány* (2010): 1–21.

¹⁰The other venue was Károlyi Kert, a public park in downtown Budapest, a historically less symbolic, but no less central, outdoor location. The two performances attracted at least 15,000 spectators. See, e.g. Éva Bielickyné Buzás, *Nemzeti dal – bemutató*. <http://fonix-sarok.hu/nemzeti-dal-bemutato/> (accessed 28 November 2017).

of the National Museum.¹¹ He went so far as to suggest that the entire ‘motherland, the whole people was saying goodbye to its sons’ [sic].¹² Imre Nagy – who was to become prime minister, an iconic hero, and one of the martyrs of the uprising of October 1956 – was in the audience, as was the old Kodály, along with a veritable who’s who of the Budapest cultural elite.

The men’s choir’s concert on the museum steps featured, along with a number of other standards, a new piece by Kodály, dedicated to the very People’s Army Men’s Choir that gave its premiere. Kodály’s work set to music none other than Petőfi’s iconic poem, ‘National Song.’¹³ Major newspapers, the national radio, and the newsreel film service all covered the event.

The deluge of coverage of the Ensemble’s last days before departure included a review in *Szabad Nép*, the central newspaper of the Communist Party at the time.¹⁴ The reviewer, István Péterfi, was elated. He contended that Kodály’s music was congenial with the poem: ‘Kodály’s music provides the “National Song” a place in musical history that matches its historical and literary significance.’¹⁵ The article is filled with references to fire, light, flame, spark, and so on – metaphors that have been central to the rhetorical repertoire of left-revolutionary writing for centuries. The review takes care to point out that the enthusiastic crowd demanded an encore of the ‘National Song’ at both performances, and bid a passionate farewell to the Ensemble.

Clearly, in addition to the obvious exhilaration over the impending tour of the country’s best performing arts ensemble in China, something else, something much more exciting was also ‘in the air’ in the last days of August and early September 1956. The political and emotional charge of the atmosphere ‘before the storm’ of the revolution was palpable. For his part, Kodály sent a brief, hand-written ‘thank you’ note to the Ensemble on the occasion of the premiere of his ‘National Song’ that echoes some of that excitement. Here it is in its entirety:

The performance of “On your feet now” on the steps of the National Museum, on the sacred stones where it was first delivered 108 years ago, filled me with great pleasure. The Army Ensemble’s exquisite performance and the audience response reinforce my belief that there still exist Hungarians who not only recite “On your feet now” but are ready act to help ‘wash away the shame and dirt from our name. ZOLTÁN KODÁLY.¹⁶

The stakes in the Ensemble’s work were thus elevated to a previously unseen level. At the point of their departure from Budapest, they found themselves at the centre – not only of concentrated media attention but also, more importantly, of a tremendous collective

¹¹Ortutay’s diary commemorates the event this way: ‘By the way, the entire city is abuzz [with the news] that I will be the secretary general, or the executive vice president [of the National People’s Front]. When I gave the speech in front of 5000 people on the steps of the National Museum, before the *Petőfi-Kodály* choir piece, the National People’s Front sent me a car, and the driver already asked me to choose him [as my personal driver].’ Gyula Ortutay, *Napló 2. 1955–1966* (Budapest: Alexandra, 2009), 120.

¹²(rajki), ‘ITT AZ IDŐ, MOST VAGY SOHA!’, *Népszava*, 7 September 1956.

¹³I have not been able to locate an online video recording of the People’s Army Men’s Choir’s performance of Kodály’s ‘National Song.’ To give a sense of the music, the following link connects to a recent performance by another men’s choir: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XL0Yyl-a5g> (accessed 9 June 2015).

¹⁴István Péterfi, ‘NEMZETI DAL. Kodály Zoltán új művének bemutatása’, *Szabad Nép*, 8 September 1956: 4.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶‘On your feet now’ is the first line of the refrain of the poem – the way in which popular conversation tended to refer to it. Kodály paraphrases another widely known line of the same poem, ‘National Song.’ The brilliance of the use of the 1848 revolutionary poem in the pre-revolutionary moment of September 1956 re-inscribes the references to the national ‘shame and dirt’ in the post-war, post-Holocaust, post-genocide context. Archive of the Army Ensemble.

emotional and political effervescence. As (rajki), a journalist who reviewed one of the Ensemble's last performances for *Népszava*, another national daily newspaper, suggested:

It was almost as if not just the seventy excellent singers, but also the ... thousands of listeners sang together the lines that are so timely for our country and the rousing, beautiful melody, "Now is the moment, nothing stalls you."¹⁹

Major Lajos Vass, choir master and art director of the Ensemble's men's choir, took the issue one step further in a brief interview published a week before the Ensemble's departure for China. For, once the journalist mentioned that the men's choir learned two Chinese songs for the tour – 'one is an unison folk song, the other is an elaboration by a Chinese composer' – Major Vass volunteered the following anecdote about the choir's understandings and expectations of China and their own task as artists who bring Hungarian culture to Chinese audiences:

It is interesting – Lajos Vass says – that it was easier for us to learn [the Chinese songs] than the Russian and Bulgarian texts earlier. For our premiere on August 18, we had planned to sing from sheet music but, by the time of the last rehearsal, it became clear that the choir knows [the songs] flawlessly without notes – so, when it came to the concert, nobody used the sheets.²¹

Major Vass articulates two related points. First, he asserts an imagined, highly valued, deep cultural tie between the Chinese and Hungarian societies and cultures. What the choir master is playing on is of course, the widely known (in Hungary) fact of the 'Asian' character of some aspects of Hungarian culture – the language, Magyar, is a member of the Finno-Ugric group, which is, in turn, part of a bigger central Asian context and, most relevant to men's choir art director Major Vass, the oldest layer of Hungarian folk music uses the pentatonic scale, something that is of course a mainstay in East Asian, including Chinese, classical and folk music.

In the context of the hot, late summer night performances before the Ensemble's departure for China, these words also carried an additional, directly political significance. Simply put, by insisting on the 'deep' cultural affinities between the Chinese and Hungarian 'folk' spirits, artistic or otherwise, Major Vass elegantly 'skipped' the vast entity that lies in between, both geographically and in terms of moral geopolitics, i.e. Soviet/Russian culture and society. Given what we know about the overall political atmosphere, this had to be perceptible in the late summer days of 1956 in Budapest – and especially so because, almost as if to remind everyone who might have missed his moral-geopolitical message, Major Vass not only constructed an imagined, direct link between the peoples of his country and faraway China, he also explicitly used not only the Bulgarian, but also, very significantly, the Russian (read, in the given political context: 'Soviet') example as negative counterpoints. Logically, excitement about the imagined Sino-Hungarian link did not strictly require counterpoints; by posing the putative distance to the two East European fellow-socialist cultures as contrasts to China's presumed moral, almost familial, proximity – 'it was easier for us to learn [the Chinese songs] than the Russian and Bulgarian texts earlier' – he asserts that there is a gap, an empty space, a non-familial territory between China and Hungary. It clearly signals the fatigue of official Soviet-Hungarian relations by late summer 1956 that the Party's central newspaper printed all this.

¹⁹This is how the article is signed. The author could not be identified. Emphasis in the original. (rajki), 'ITT AZ IDŐ ...'

²¹Csizmadia, 'ÚTRA KÉSZEN ...', 4. Emphasis in the original. Csizmadia, 'ÚTRA KÉSZEN ...', 4.

Programming to represent

Having spent two months in preparation for the tour, and several weeks giving dress rehearsals and gala concerts of their material to the enthusiastic audiences in Budapest, the Ensemble gave its début performance in the northeastern city of Shenyang on 21 September 1956, i.e. exactly two weeks after their train rolled out of Nyugati Station in Budapest.

Figure 1 reproduces the programme of the Shenyang performance, as remembered and typed up by Lajos Mészáros, a long-time baritone singer, member, and soloist of the men's choir.²³ Table 1 presents the same programme list in English, annotated for authors and performers wherever it was possible to find out about the choreographers/composers omitted from the original list. In order to convey a sense of the materials, Table 1 also contains a set of endnotes that contain links to video recordings of the performances of 15 of the 20 pieces on the list.²⁴

This programme signals a departure from the Ensemble's initial charge in two important ways: one of those is marked by its presence, the other by its absence.

Starting with a striking presence, the programme is marked by the predominance of a 'Hungarian', i.e. 'national', frame. The opening number, the 'Rákóczi March', was a popular, quasi-folkloric melody that came to be closely associated with the enlightened noblemen's uprising against Habsburg absolutism, led by Ferenc Rákóczi II between 1703 and 1711, a small war of anti-imperial independence that created a minor musical tradition of its own. The March has unclear origins.²⁵ It spread as quasi-folklore, and had served as the unofficial national quasi-anthem of Hungary before the inauguration today's national anthem in 1844.²⁶ Hector Berlioz inserted the Rákóczi March into his 1846 'dramatic legend', *The Damnation of Faust*. The second item opens with the men's choir's rendition of 'Meghalt a cselszövő', a very popular aria from Ferenc Erkel's romantic-nationalist historical opera *Hunyadi László*, and closes with two brief pieces from Kodály's 'song play' *Háry János*, an operatic piece based on a loosely connected set of anecdotal folk tales of a peasant boy recruited into the Habsburg Army, with intense comic effects due to the boy's proclivity to fibbing, through five 'adventures'. The fourth piece is a romantic-nationalist musical item par excellence, from the early nineteenth century. Item 8 includes three musical pieces, two of which – the 'Soldier Song' from Franz Liszt's *Faust* symphony and Kodály's score to the 'National Song' – are clearly items that continue to thematise the vexed history of nationhood. Closing the series of performance pieces clearly in a 'national' frame, the second part of the performance returns to *Háry János* for a brief orchestral *Intermezzo*.

It might legitimately be asked: Why it is even worth mentioning that the Ensemble's programme, as it is prepared for a set of performances abroad, reflects a national frame?

²³Mr Mészáros contributed this sheet to the Ensemble's archives in conjunction with the preparations for the 50-year commemoration of the tour in 2006; I received it from the archive soon thereafter. This is a doubly invaluable document. Not only is it the only programme among the 104 performances I have found; it is the programme of the Ensemble's first performance, ergo it can be seen as the clearest reflection of the ways the Ensemble's artists envisioned, the ways in which they would perform Hungary to Chinese audiences before they had any chance to adjust their programmes based on audience feedback.

²⁴I have not been able to find videos of the remaining five items.

²⁵It is likely that it was written music that soon became popularised for its patriotic meanings. Apocryphal arguments suggest that it may have been 'written music' – but it is clear that it spread folklorically by the early nineteenth century. <http://mek.oszk.hu/02100/02115/html/4-836.html> (accessed 10 June 2015).

²⁶Ferenc Erkel's musical score was submitted to an 1844 competition to set to music to Ferenc Kölcsey's 1823 poem, 'Hymnus.'

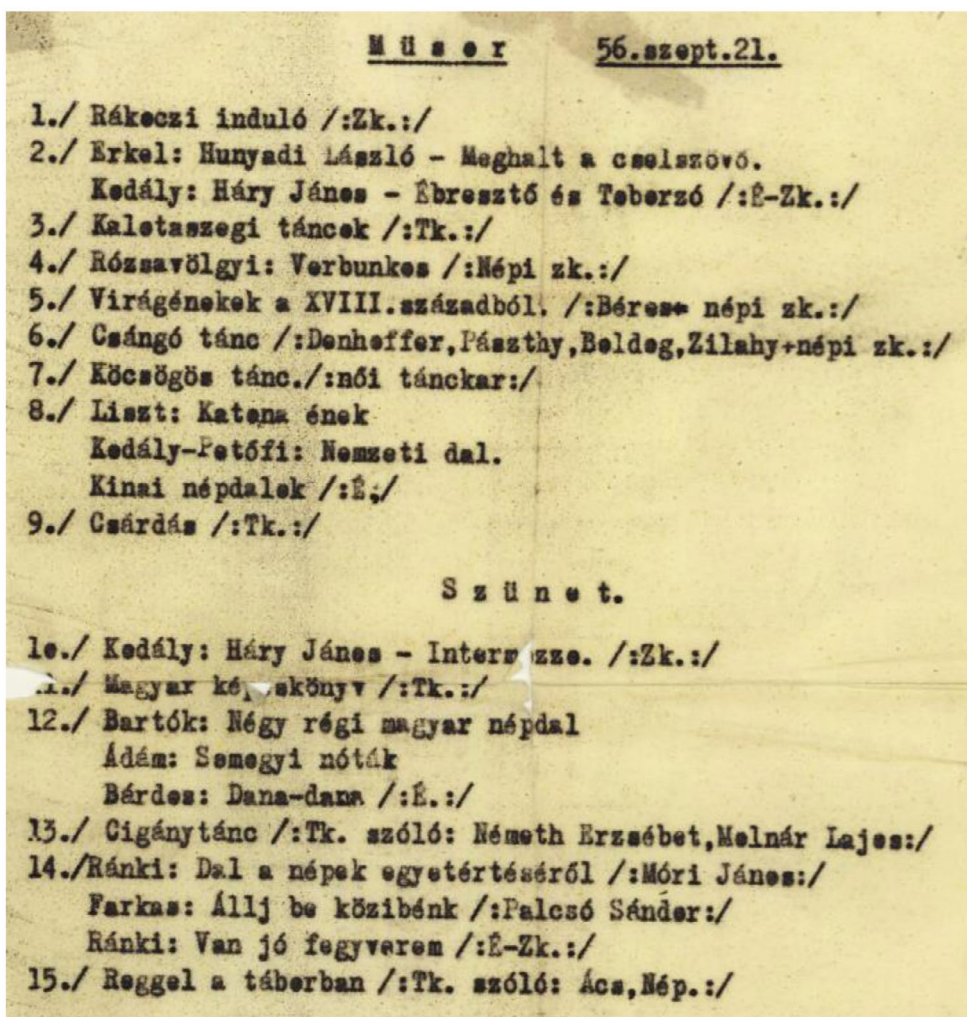


Figure 1. 'M ü s o r' (Programme of the Début Performance in Shenyang), Hungarian original, 21 September 1956.

That frame is noteworthy, first of all, because the national is something that had been 'picked up' somewhere along the way in the Ensemble's – by September 1956, approximately eight-year-long – history. Although, as I mentioned above, there was a discernible 'national' character to the original framing of the ways in which the Ensemble was imagined at its inception, that was a feature of the narrative framework of the document in the sense that it was constructed as an 'inside-Hungary' conversation. Once the document's reader 'entered' that inside, however, there was absolutely nothing about nationhood there, except for the brief, and formulaic, derogatory dismissal of 'petty bourgeois nationalism.' In sharp contrast to that, the performance the Ensemble prepared for China in mid-to-late 1956, especially its first half, exuded a 'national spirit' of sorts. This is very likely to have had to do with the cultural-political positions the composer Zoltán Kodály – a towering figure in the classical-music, art, policy, and education field in Hungary since the interwar period,

Table 1. Programme of the Ensemble's Début Performance in Shenyang, on 21 September 1956.

	Author(s)	Title	Performer(s)
1	(Héctor Berlioz)	Rákóczi March ^a (from the opera <i>The Damnation of Faust</i>)	Symphony Orchestra
2	Ferenc Erkel	Meghalt a cselszövő ^b (Aria from the Opera <i>Hunyadi László</i>)	Men's Choir and Symphony Orchestra
	Zoltán Kodály	Wakeup Call and Recruitment ^c (from the <i>Háry János</i> suite)	Men's Choir and Symphony Orchestra
3	László Seregi – László Sásdi	Dances from Kalotaszeg ^d	Dance Troupe
4	Márk Rózsavölgyi	Recruitment Song ^e	Music Band of the Dance Troupe
5	(folklore adaptation)	'Flower Songs' from the eighteenth Century ^f	Ferenc Béres and Music Band of the Dance Troupe
6	(Sándor Fejes, choreography)	Csángó Dance	Dance and Singer Soloists and Music Band of the Dance Troupe
7	(Sándor Román, choreography)	Clay Pot Dance ^g	Women Dancers and the Music Band
8	Franz Liszt	Soldier Song ^h (from the <i>Faust</i> symphony)	Men's Choir
	Zoltán Kodály – Sándor Petőfi	'National Song' ⁱ	Men's Choir
		Chinese Songs	Men's Choir
9	(Sándor László-Bencsik, choreography)	Csárdás ^j (Hungarian folk-dance medley)	Dance Troupe and its Music Band
Intermission			
10	Zoltán Kodály	Intermezzo ^k (from the <i>Háry János</i> suite)	Symphony Orchestra
11	István Molnár	Hungarian Picture Book ^l	Dance Troupe and its Music Band
12	Béla Bartók	Four Old Hungarian Folk Songs ^m	Men's Choir
	Jenő Ádám	Songs from Somogy County	Men's Choir
	Lajos Bárdos	Dana-Don ⁿ	Men's Choir
13	(Dezső Létai, choreography)	Gypsy Dance	Erzsébet Német and Lajos Molnár, Solo Dancers
14	György Ránki	Song for the Agreement of Peoples	Men's Choir
	Ferenc Farkas	Join Us	Men's Choir
	György Ránki	I Have Good Arms	Men's Choir
15	László Sásdi – László Seregi	Morning in the Camp ^o	Dance Troupe and its Music Band

^a<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qflSpYcnpEY> (accessed 3 June 2015).^b<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUvsk9Hvm70> (accessed 5 June 2015).^c<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b50eVcfXB0c> (accessed 3 June 2015).^dhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IR2ALPaB_Q (accessed 3 June 2015).^e<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XVqpKA4Xwg> (accessed 5 June 2015).^fhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDUgww76kD4&list=PLsNdLc6Y_9UvT3Hsra3cbjg5ys2vEjCj3 (accessed 5 June 2015).^gExcerpt from the short film *We Were China's Guests* (Kína vendégei voltunk), by cinematographers Félix Bodrossy and Miklós Jancsó, released in 1957, which covers the Ensemble's tour in China for Hungarian audiences. The excerpt features the Ensemble's women dancers, on their tour in China. <http://www.folkarchivum.hu/archivum/htsz/media.php?id=M0009&bel=1> (accessed 5 June 2015).^h<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LW-6HMenF74j> (accessed 5 June 2015).ⁱ<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LW-6HMenF74j> (accessed 5 June 2015).^j<http://www.kultura-muveszet.hu/szinhaz/tancszinhaz/honved-tancszinhaz-csardas.html> (accessed 5 June 2015).^khttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5D8t_L_J-70 (accessed 5 June 2015).^lhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qccq_mQmQ0I (accessed 3 June 2015).^m<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6uBN068oVI> (accessed 5 June 2015).ⁿhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwEnLTQ-p_A (accessed 5 June 2015).^oExcerpt, performed by the dance troupe of the Ensemble. <http://www.folkarchivum.hu/archivum/htsz/media.php?id=M0008&bel=1> (accessed 5 June 2015).

and the Ensemble's patron-cum-protector – 'navigated' in the complex relationship between various Soviet practices of nationalism/antinationalism at the turn of the 1950s in a debate with József Révai, the regime's main culture politician.²⁷

²⁷Lóránt Péteri, 'Kodály és az államszocializmus művelődéspolitikája (1948–1967)', *Forrás* (2007): 45–63, especially 50. See also Miklós Hadas, 'A nemzet profétája. Kísérlet Kodály Zoltán pályájának szociológiai értelmezésére', *Szociológia* 4 (1984): 469–90, and József Révai, *Marxizmus, népiesség, magyarság* (Budapest: Szikra, 1949).

Two things need to be added here, to help explain the choice of the national framing and, at the same time, to problematise it. First, of course there is something un-avoidable about foregrounding nationhood when it comes to quasi-operatic performances whose stated purpose is representation of one particular society to audiences of another. Arguably, the national frame has served, at least since the onset of modernity, and especially in East-Central and Eastern Europe, to some extent as the ‘external form’ that any society can present to outsiders. In that sense, the ‘national presentation of self through performing arts’ has a specific aesthetic character to it, and that character has its own history, both in Europe and, more specifically, in Hungary. On the other hand, however, insistence on invoking that ‘European’ tradition of national presentation-of-self has two consequences: it drives the representational process toward national purity that translates, all too easily, into a certain sense of ‘national’ exclusiveness.

In addition, the enforcement of the ‘European’ canon in national presentation-of-self in the context of an otherwise intra-socialist cultural contact situation becomes somewhat complicated. That is so partly because of the ‘capitalist-bourgeois’ character of the iconic forms of such self-representation, partly because it also reproduces, perforce, a certain nineteenth-century imagined West European standard of national essences as an implicit default, a powerful idea that had, to say the least, a very troubled history as it was transposed on the societies of Eastern/East-Central Europe, let alone societies outside the ‘European’ frame.

Second, there is something highly enticing about the spectacular character of the aesthetic presentation of ‘the Hungarian nation’ to non-European audiences. After all, the job of the Ensemble was to provide ‘educative entertainment’ – i.e. entertainment. And, as it turns out, what the Hungarian cultural tradition, especially the presentation-of-the-national-self to a foreign context has by way of visibly and audibly enjoyable, stage-worthy material actually happens to be closely linked into the early, ‘progressive,’ anti-Habsburg independence-seeking, romantic nationalist tradition. In this sense, the Ensemble’s hands were somewhat ‘tied.’ If they wished to realise the performing arts imperative to invite, impress, and enchant their audiences, they had to work from the ‘best’ – read: most spectacular, most enjoyable – material they had, and that had to do, to a large extent, with the romantic nationalist period.

Indirect evidence suggests that this reliance on the romantic nationalist tradition might have actually worked. For a report filed by Ervin Havas, one of the journalists on the tour, with *Néphadsereg*, the Hungarian People’s Army newspaper, narrates the following anecdote:

Intermission. A young girl with a pigtail brings a message into the dressing room. Big excitement, running after the interpreters. And the message is read out in the dressing room: “To All Members of the Hungarian People’s Army Performing Arts Ensemble. Thank you, thank you, once again thank you. I love your music very-very much because it reflects the character of the Hungarian people. I would like to request that the comrade pianist play Rhapsody II by Liszt. I wish you much success for your upcoming performances. Liu Zhoushin, worker of the Number 3 Shoe Factory.”²⁸

And yet, it is also hard not to notice, as it has been pointed out in the review of the Ensemble’s China programme by Sándor Asztalos, that the programme does have a certain

²⁸Ervin Havas, ‘Az első napok a Kínai Népköztársaságban,’ *Néphadsereg*, October 1956, n.d., 8.

historicising, ‘music-philological’ character to it.²⁹ That of course is not necessarily ‘a problem’ – after all, the pieces had to be put together in some sequence for there to have a gala performance – nevertheless, it is obvious that there is a certain level of meaning, lodged in the sequencing of the pieces, that is only accessible to the ‘eyes and ears’ of audiences intimately familiar with the musical, dance, not to mention social and political, histories of Europe, let alone specifically Hungary. In this sense, it is almost certain that there was a – perhaps unavoidable, but still palpable – sense in which the Ensemble communicated primarily with that small segment of the Chinese audiences that had training or at least basic familiarity with European histories, ‘over the heads,’ so to speak, of those who attended their performances without such preparation. In sum, the Ensemble’s strong references to nineteenth-century romantic nationalism – while, most likely unavoidable – also carried what appears to be a rather unreflected ‘regression’ to a European artistic canon.

Or – was it fully unreflected? A tiny bit of evidence seems to suggest that it wasn’t. The interview with the dance troupe’s art director in the journal *Táncművészet* (*Dance Art*) makes a truly suggestive point here. In considering the long-term goals of the group, he makes a reference to a concept paper published by another prominent stage folk-dance art choreographer a few months before, as follows: I fully agree with Miklós Rábai’s three-word motto (Modern, Magyar, European). This idea must be victorious at [our Ensemble] as well. I believe we have what it takes to realize this concept.³⁰

Although he argued that the full realisation of this goal will have to wait until after the Ensemble’s return from China, it is fairly clear that the debate is about the specific ‘form language’ the Ensemble would pursue within the overlap among the ‘Modern, Magyar, European’ domains, and simply not the predominance of those features.³¹ In a certain way, pursuance of this particular dictum appears to have been unavoidable for the Ensemble.

Miklós Rábai’s slogan, echoed by the art director of the Ensemble’s dance troupe here, is a fairly sharp clue that helps clarify the character of just which of the many possible meanings of the idea of nationhood the Ensemble ended up aligning itself with. While artistic references to the late-eighteenth-to-late-nineteenth-century struggles for independence from Habsburg rule can of course be seen, perhaps with a large dose of good will, as ethnically somewhat comprehensive, two facts – both of which were of course amply available to the artists who created the Ensemble’s profile – are undeniable. Namely, first, that the Habsburg Empire, including, very prominently, its larger, eastern part that was referred to as ‘the lands of the Hungarian Crown,’ was an intensely poly-ethnic space, i.e. it is hardly satisfactory to make the conventional slip of referring to it as ‘Magyar.’ The period treated in conventional ‘schoolbook’ history in Hungary proper as ‘struggle for independence’ featured, with Rogers Brubaker’s useful formulation, a conceptual struggle between the ‘poly-ethnic’ and ‘multi-national’ readings of that reality – with the eventual political ‘victory’ of the latter scheme. As a result, second, in close conjunction with this, the state entity ‘Hungary’ was formed with the blatant exclusion of all the bewildering varieties of complex non-‘Magyar’ ‘ethnic’ categories from the political process. In other words, referring to the period of the

²⁹It starts with a piece that indexes the 1703–11 uprising via Berlioz’ 1846 elaboration, then we move on to Erkel’s nineteenth-century opera, then it moves on to another nineteenth-century piece, to Liszt’s late nineteenth century, late-romantic nationhood, to Kodály’s mid-twentieth-century interpretation of the mid-nineteenth-century iconic romantic-nationalist poem ‘National Song,’ and so on.

³⁰Gy. Cs., ‘A kínai út előtt ...’, 391.

³¹Ibid.

late-eighteenth-to-mid-nineteenth century as ‘national independence,’ and then switching the conversation to a ‘Magyar’ national frame, involves a strongly ethno-nationalist, *ergo* by definition ethnically exclusive, interpretation of history.

That this is not idle speculation but, indeed, a feature of the Ensemble’s work is reflected in two parallel facts regarding its artistic programme brought to China. The first one has to do with a presence – the inclusion of a ‘Csángó Dance’ in the programme, a folk-dance medley featuring ethnic Magyar materials from a micro-region called Bukovina/Bucovina/Bukowina, a borderland area between the Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian Empires, part of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic of the USSR at the time. Throughout its momentous history of imperial control, Bukovina had never ‘technically’ been part of Hungary proper, definitely not as long as we conceive the latter as a state defined by its borders as of the mid-1950s. There is a strong convention in stage folk-art dance in Hungary to use Csángó materials because this small enclave of ethnic Magyar peasants lived so far away, and in such cultural isolation, from the main body of their fellow-Magyar co-ethnics that they preserved layers of their dance and musical heritage (as well as their distinctive language dialect, the only one in Magyar that poses comprehension difficulties for speakers of literary Magyar) that is found nowhere else. In other words, a defining feature of the Csángó – a subgroup of ethnic Magyars whose very name derives from a verb referring to ‘wandering away’ – is the very distance of Bukovina, their ethnic enclave, from Hungary. Inclusion of this material reveals that the Ensemble, just like much of the folk-dance movement in Hungary, thought about ‘peasant’ art along ethno-nationalist lines.

The other clue has to do with the underrepresentation of ethnically non-‘Magyar’ folk music or dance in the programme. If the Ensemble were to have conceived their understanding of ‘Magyar’-ness along some other, ethnically more inclusive, lines, it remains to be explained why there was only one reference – the insertion of a ‘Gypsy Dance’ – to the 20 or so ethnic groups that lived in Hungary at the time, from Germans to Ukrainians, from Romanians to Slovaks, Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, Armenians and Greeks, not to mention the multiple layers of Jewish folkloric heritage in Hungary. This is noteworthy because one crucial aspect of the work of the Ensemble’s un-questioned idol, Béla Bartók, was his avid interest in folklore beyond boundaries of the Magyar ethnic group (quite a blurred and complicated boundary, anyway), both in East-Central Europe and farther away.³² The inclusion of a ‘Gypsy Dance’ is, again, something that works very much along the lines of the folk-dance movement in Hungary at the time (where the power of Roma folklore heritage was very strongly articulated and widely acknowledged), and raises questions about the presence of the Roma as well as the absence of all others. Be that as it may, the ‘people’ that the Hungarian People’s Army Ensemble represented, were ethnic Magyars, with a small concession to the spectacular treasure of ‘Gypsy’ traditions – even as it was exoticised by virtue of being marked as ‘Gypsy.’

It is indicative of the location of the fundamentally ethno-nationalist posture of the stage folk-art dance movement at the time that the question of ethno-national purity was raised

³²For instance, Bartók conducted years of extensive fieldwork in Romanian folk music, he learnt Romanian, was a widely recognised contributor to the scholarly study of Romanian folk music, and composed a number of works based on Romanian folk melodies. See, e.g. Tiberu Alexandru, ‘Bartók Béla és a román népzene,’ *Korunk* 8 (1970): 1164–7; Ágnes Herczku, ‘A folklore ereje. Bartók szemével látni és láttatni,’ *Előadás a Charta XXI Megbékélési Mozgalom által szervezett ‘Egymás szemében – Közép-Európai Identitások’ című konferencián* (Brussels: European Parliament), 27 November 2013. <http://www.hagyományokhaza.hu/page/11403/> (accessed 11 June 2015).

in slightly different terms as well. In the year of Stalin's death, when the first 'new winds started to blow' in the Soviet 'bloc,' choreographer Miklós Rábai, a stalwart of the stage folk-art dance movement in Hungary and director of the State Folk Ensemble for decades (whom I have quoted above for his programmatic three-word axiom for the movement) voiced his – given the nationalist space created by Kodály's manoeuvrings, rather damning – opinion, in a review of the dance troupe's one thousandth performance, that 'the Ensemble does not dance in Magyar,' a shortcoming he explained with their supposedly excessive focus on ballet training.³³

Another subplot of the main story of national independence is the programme's repeated references to military themes. This of course is completely to be expected – after all, this is the performing-arts ensemble of the Hungarian People's Army, on an official visit hosted by the People's Liberation Army in China. And yet, this was a tender area for the Ensemble, a place where they had to tread gingerly. For, first of all, Hungary's military history did not exactly provide these artists with many examples of a glorious military past from which they could derive artistic inspiration. Add to that the recent dark historical cloud looming most heavily over the head of any artist who would look for rousing reminiscences of past glory, the fact that Hungary not only participated in World War II on the wrong side – as an ally of Nazi Germany – it fought actively against the Soviet Union, it also inflicted genocide against the civilian populations in those parts of the USSR which its army occupied, and members of the Hungarian armed forces participated actively in genocide against Hungary's own citizens. It is reasonable to assume that this experience – which the Hungarian military participated in a mere 11 to 17 years before the tour – was to be an elephant in the room for anyone trying to construct a 'positive,' rousing artistic portrayal of military life. Most likely for this reason, the various examples for the appearance of the 'military' theme in the programme – with one glaring exception to be addressed later – are located, again, Hungary's early-modern history, essentially as a subplot of the 'safely' distant romantic-nationalist master narrative.

As for the most glaring absence, it is remarkable how little the programme offers by way of explicitly Party-oriented, Stalinist propaganda art. The only item that qualifies under that heading is the penultimate block (number 14 in the list) comprising three choral works: 'Song for the Agreement of Peoples,' 'Join Us,' and 'I Have Good Arms,' the first and the third composed by György Ránki, the middle one by Ferenc Farkas. All three of these works were conceived to satisfy the official, Stalinist demand for directly political works, and they had been written between 1949 and 1955.

Although the placement of this block close to the finale could perhaps be interpreted as a sign of a somewhat elevated status, it is obvious that the programme as a whole provides the absolute minimum by way of Stalin-era propaganda art. Perhaps even more significant is the complete absence of what is referred to in the concept paper of 1948 as 'the choral art of the Hungarian working class movement which is at the cutting edge world-wide.'³⁴ It is also clear from the oral-history interviews I have conducted with members of the Ensemble – including members of the men's choir – that, during the first seven years of the Ensemble's existence, a very significant part of the choir's repertoire consisted of Stalin-era Soviet and Hungarian propaganda pieces, including highly prominent examples such as Alexander

³³Vitézi Ének Alapítvány, *Honvéd Táncszínház (1948–2007)* [The Army Dance Theatre, 1948–2007] (Budapest: Vitézi Ének, n.d.). Alapítvány. http://www.folkarchivum.hu/archivum/htsz/dok/A_Honved_Tancszinhaz_rovid_tortenete.pdf (accessed 6 June 2015).

³⁴'A honvédség központi ...'

Vasilyevich Alexandrov's (the Red Army Choir's founder's) famous Cantata on Stalin, a 1938 piece frequently cited as a particularly poignant example of Stalinist propaganda music.³⁵ Considering the centrality of Stalinist propaganda art to the Ensemble's repertoire until 1956, the placement of the three relatively brief pieces, grouped in one block to make up a tiny fraction of the Ensemble's programme in China, it is possible to have the impression that it had been inserted in the most minimal way, almost as if to 'cover' the Ensemble from that political angle. Importantly, all three of the Stalinist works chosen were Hungarian. That no Soviet piece was included in the Ensemble's programme is another indication that the programme was put together with a subtle underlying intent not to foreground the USSR as a point of reference. It is hard to imagine that that absence would go unnoticed by the numerous Soviet diplomats, political emissaries, intelligence officers, technical experts, and exchange students who occupied a very exalted position in Beijing expatriate life in 1956.

Another factor that might have prompted the Ensemble to de-emphasise the Stalinist segment of its repertoire is that, of course, in order for the desired political mobilising effort to take place, the audience had to be able to understand the lyrics of the songs, which would not have been the case with most Stalin-era propaganda songs from Eastern or East-Central Europe. The propaganda songs without the words, whatever the *sui generis* value of their music may have been, definitely do not work as effective propaganda. On the other hand, it is also remarkable that none of the standard pieces of music widely associated with the Communist movement – 'The International,' the various 'labour movement songs' from around the world (including, by the way, those from China) – made it into the Ensemble's programme in China.³⁶

Overall, the rest of the material is aligned quite effortlessly with the plebeian-peasant-progressive-socialist character of the Ensemble's original charge. Practically all of the dance pieces, as well as the various works by Zoltán Kodály, Béla Bartók, and Jenő Ádám, match closely the main concept – with one slight deviation: a popular early-nineteenth-century piece by Márk Rózsavölgyi that qualifies as an example of *imitated* quasi-folk music. In sum, the prominence of the ethno-national 'angle' and the downplaying of Stalinist propaganda art, coupled with the programme's close adherence to the populist-socialist new aesthetic, suggest that the Ensemble's programme is intended as a socialist cultural statement with a distinct, post-Stalinist bent.

'Morning in the Camp' – twist at the end

The programme's finale, a dance choreography entitled 'Morning in the Camp,' fits none of the classification attempts developed thus far. Because of its distance from the staged folk-dance conventions, it is clearly neither 'folkloric,' nor Stalinist. It is very difficult to impute any direct, conventional-ethno-nationalist content to it either. So, what is it, then?

The piece was conceived in 1953 by László Seregi and László Sásdi, two soloists of the dance troupe at the time, set to a distinctly twentieth-century, modern, stylised, post-folk music score by Gábor Barta. 'Morning in the Camp' was a tremendous success in Hungary, so much so that one of its co-choreographers, László Seregi – who would become, by the mid-to-late-1960s, the star creative choreographer and art director of the Ballet Troupe of

³⁵See, for instance, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQCAKgOwGNw> (accessed 10 June 2015).

³⁶Notice also the absence of both the Hungarian and the Chinese national anthems.

the State Opera House in Budapest – considered it one of the most successful choreographies of his life in the oral-history interview he was gracious enough to give me a few years ago. And that was so in spite of the fact that, in Seregi's words, it was just a 'ten-to-eleven-minute little sketch.'³⁷

It's morning, the birds are chirping, the orderly officer enters, we are open-air, in a grove, the trumpeter blows the wake-up signal, guys run onto the stage cheerfully, in tee shirts, to do the morning calisthenics, with a bouncy rhythm, and suddenly a little short character ambles on to the stage, ... his footcloth sticking out of his boots, he ambles in, then falls asleep, and then this nap causes all kinds of delays, he misses his breakfast. This is the basic idea, a little silly thing. At last, he pulls himself together, the commander forgives him, the platoon lines up and the Ensemble walks out lock-step, parade-style.³⁸

It is easy to see why this piece would be popular with audiences, in Hungary as well as abroad. It tells a story, something that none of the Ensemble's other pieces can claim. It is a story that is very easy to relate to, having to do with a microscopic life experience most people had had. It is a story with a small, likeable central character, and all he is trying to do is rectify the initial mistake he had made. And, of course, the story has a happy ending.

Miklós Rábai (according to whom the Ensemble's dance group had too much ballet influence so that it was 'not dancing in Magyar' in 1953), linked what he saw in an early 1956 performance of 'Morning in the Camp' to the aesthetic project of transposing the 'spirit' of folklore to socialist art. He saw this work as a

... heartwarming composition. Soldiers of many a [military] camp, audiences at many garrison stages, as well as scores of 'civilians' have laughed their way through the case of the sleepy little soldier. This is the genre that is needed, this is the genre whose content can be placed next to, or even above, other compositions. Its forms of expression are strong. Even parts that had earlier come across as sapless appear new, strong, and beautiful [now]. This is not a new composition, and it appears to be true that the real value of a piece can only be measured after the thirtieth performance, as things fall into place by then and the momentum of the performance helps the dancers through the weaker parts as well.³⁹

That 'sketch' was not 'only' popular with the audiences and colleagues; it was also noticed by the Hungarian People's Army high command. Hungary's Minister of Defence opined at the time that 'comrade Seregi solved the task of [presenting] the Hungarian soldier through a healthy [and] sympathetic [piece of] dance.'⁴⁰ Apparently not everybody agreed. On a tour in the USSR later, official complaints were lodged with the Ensemble's leadership: 'A socialist soldier is never late, and how can you even place a negative example in the centre of the dance?'⁴¹

'Morning in the Camp' was a strongly (self-)ironical piece of dance art, offering a whole series of allegorical readings. The soldier who is 'late' to 'wake up' for 'service' that is, then, helped by his 'comrades' to 'catch up' – it must have truly been difficult for the Hungarian viewer not to recognise in this piece a certain self-deprecating, comical collective self-representation, the self-image of a society whose historical development is 'belated' but one

³⁷Oral-history interview with László Seregi, conducted by the author.

³⁸*ibid.*

³⁹Miklós Rábai, 'A Magyar Néphadsereg Művészegyüttesének bemutatójához,' *Szabad Hazánkért* (April 1956): 22–3 (23).

⁴⁰Oral-history interview with László Seregi, conducted by the author.

⁴¹Anecdote related by Tibor Vadasi, who would become art director of the Ensemble's dance troupe after 1957. Vitézi Ének, *A Honvéd Táncszínház*.

that eventually ‘catches up.’⁴² In that sense, the piece remains comfortably within the aesthetic-political ambit of official art. It concerns itself, after all, with ‘catching up’ through discipline, effort, and increased readiness: all those virtues extolled in the construction of socialism, especially given the army setting.

However, notions of (self-)irony, self-deprecating humour, self-belittling, the foregrounding of tiny, personal difficulties in performing one’s tasks – these are ideas that were truly alien from the customary pathos, grand, unambiguous gestures and overall heaviness that characterise the official Stalinist variety of propaganda art. In other words – while ‘Morning in the Camp’ is, clearly, ‘programme art,’ and, clearly, socialist – it is socialist in a different, post-pathos, post-grand, post-unambiguous, and post-heavy, i.e. post-Stalinist way. It is a piece that manages to insert some of the attitudes and sensibilities of a collectivity that sees itself as part of a bigger entity, but in a highly complex, polysemic, partly reluctant, partly self-ironical fashion. The greater entity is unmistakably socialist, the individual contribution and the form language in which the narrative is told is unambiguously post-Stalinist.

Finally, it is important to notice that the irony of the piece cuts not only against the Stalinist propaganda tradition; it is also ironical vis-à-vis both of the other key aesthetic elements of the programme: the nineteenth-century, romantic-imagination of the independent nation, and the proclivity of the populist-socialist peasant-to-‘high’-art tradition to romanticising such a complex and problematic class location as that of ‘the peasant.’ Whether or not the Ensemble’s members realised this, placement of ‘Morning in the Camp’ at the very end – almost as if twisting a few drops of lemon juice on vanilla ice cream – opens up a set of possibilities to re-read the entire preceding programme as reaffirmation of a set of socialist commitments – in a different, more acerbic, way.

Conclusion: performing socialist Hungary

The reception of ‘Morning in the Camp,’ as that of the entire tour of the Ensemble, was astonishingly positive. József Maklári – one of the men’s choir’s conductors – who managed to send a report to the Budapest daily *Népszava* about the Ensemble’s performance in Mukden describes the reception of ‘Morning in the Camp’:

Never before have audiences laughed so much at this composition, built on situation comedy and a fresh sense of humor, as these always smiling people who are receptive of the smallest occasion of humor. The last parade March is accompanied by rhythmic applause ...⁴³

In the materials prepared for the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the China tour in 2006, the Ensemble’s archive inserted the Hungarian translation (reproduced here in Figure 2) of the concluding section of one of the Chinese reviews of the Shenyang performances at the bottom of the sheet containing the programme list.⁴⁴ It reads:

In addition, there were two lively, humorous folk dances. As the soldier dance entitled ‘Morning in the Camp’ began, I couldn’t help but start smiling. I remembered the ‘Soldier Dance’ I saw in Bulgaria, the ‘Defender’s Dance’ I saw in Poland, the ‘Setting Off For Exercise’ I saw in

⁴²That one-to-one, allegorical reading is of course reinforced by the title of the piece where the ‘camp’ can be read as both the army camp depicted in the piece, and as a pun on the ‘socialist/peace camp,’ a centrepiece of geopolitical rhetoric in Eastern and East-Central Europe at the time.

⁴³József Maklári, ‘ÁTÜTŐ MAGYAR SIKER – MUKDENBEN,’ *Népszava*, 9 October 1956. (Mukden is an older name of the town called, since the end of World War II, Shenyang. It is unclear why Maklári refers to it by its colonial name.)

⁴⁴Unfortunately this source contains no bibliographic reference.

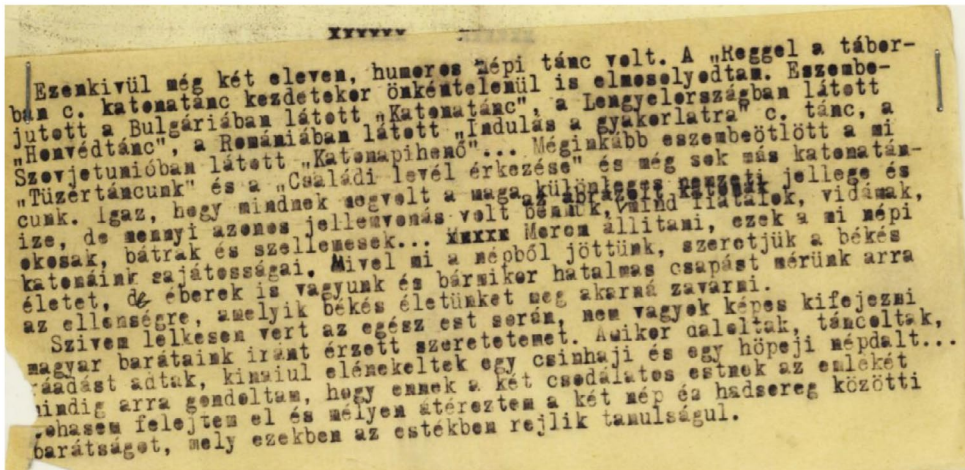


Figure 2. Review of the Shenyang Performances (Excerpt).

Romania, the 'Soldier's Rest' I saw in the Soviet Union ... And even more I recalled our 'Artillery Dance' and the 'Arrival of A Letter from the Family,' and our many other soldier's dances. It is true that each of them had their own quality and taste, but how many features they shared, they were youthful, cheerful, smart, brave and witty ... I daresay these are traits of our people's soldiers. Because we came from the people, we love peaceful life, but we are also vigilant and we are ready to deal a powerful blow on the enemy that would wish to disturb our peaceful life.

My heart beat with enthusiasm during the entire evening. I am unable to express the affection I feel toward our Hungarian friends. When they sang their songs, danced, when they gave their encore, when they sang a folk song from Jinhai and another from Hebei ... I kept thinking, I shall never forget the memory of these two wonderful evenings, and I felt deeply the friendship between the two peoples and armies that is lodged in these evenings.⁴⁵

According to all accounts, the tour was a resounding success. Adding the anecdote of the fan mail delivered to the dressing room and the review quoted above, we have before us a possible summary of what we have learnt about the Ensemble's project of representation in China.⁴⁶ The Ensemble did the 'job' assigned to it—(1) representing (2) socialist (3) Hungary— with great efficiency, as the above review suggests. That is a particularly remarkable achievement since they accomplished that without resorting to any of the standard 'political propaganda' works that marked official international communications at the time. They also did so without even mentioning the USSR – but they also avoided, with surgical precision, the political and aesthetic traps of explicit anti-Soviet propaganda. The references to foreign rule/independence remained below several layers of symbolic and historical materials, as well as (self-)irony. As the story of the effusive 'thank you – thank you – thank you' note / request slip shows, the Ensemble managed to provide 'educative entertainment' along the lines of a national framing in such a way that it remained 'safe' for

⁴⁵Review of the Ensemble's performances in Shenyang. For the Hungarian translation, see Figure 2.

⁴⁶See, e.g. Rác, 'Adalékok a magyar-kínai katinadiplomáciai kapcsolatok történetéhez,' quoting Gábor Mészöly, *50 év* (Budapest: Zrínyi, 1999), 24; *A Honvéd Táncszínház (1948–2007)*, 4, <http://www.folkarchivum.hu/archivum/htsz/tortenet.php> (accessed 22 November 2017); Kányó Andrea, 'Mikor felléptünk, szinte a csillárról is lógtak az emberek,' *Honvédelem*, 12 October 2009, <http://www.honvedelem.hu/cikk/16792> (accessed 22 November 2017), as well as about a dozen oral-history interviews conducted with members of the Ensemble who were on the tour between 2006 and 2015, as part of this research.

both guest artists and host audiences, and ‘went across’ to significant parts of the audience. This was possible because the Ensemble’s fundamental political, artistic, and social-historical ‘project’ of a plebeian-‘peasant’-progressive – i.e. in that specific way ‘socialist’ – transformation remained intact.

The material of this tour is of course vastly richer than what a short paper can do justice to. But even this brief analysis shows that, in contrast to accounts of the Stalinist era of state socialism, widely portrayed as monolithic, the aesthetic practices considered here suggest a remarkable sense of *complexity*. First, we see a number of elisions and omissions (of both the Soviet and international revolutionary aesthetic and propaganda works). Second, we see oblique references (e.g. to the national ‘shame and dirt’ in Kodály’s choice of the ‘National Song’ and his rhyming ‘thank you’ note) that rethink pressing national moral questions in a new, creatively juxtaposed way. Third, there are the open, albeit extremely partial, references to at least some of the ethnic complexities of Hungary’s folklore traditions and the obvious reinstatement of a national aesthetic. Fourth is of course the allegorical critique-and-re-affirmation of socialism in the dance piece ‘Morning in the Camp.’ And, finally, fifth, there is the pervasive (self-)irony and playfulness of the same dance piece, an obvious contrast to Stalinist pathos. All five of those techniques helped move the Ensemble away from the Stalinist aesthetic dogma in ways that explain perhaps part of its success.

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