

Hunyadi László *Erkel*

HUNGARIAN STATE OPERA
BUDAPEST

Review by Robert Turnbull
Photography by Pal Csillag

Hungarian State Opera opened its new season with an opera by Ferenc Erkel, Hungary's most famous 19th-century opera composer, whose works celebrate the stirrings of Hungarian nationalism.



National perspective:
a scene from *Hunyadi László*

Hunyadi László, first performed in 1844, tells the story of a 15th-century soldier who bravely kept the Turks out of Hungary. But rather than be celebrated as a hero, László is murdered on the orders of a weak new King, fearing a conspiracy. The King falls in love with László's fiancée, who pleads for her lover's life in vain.

Though the language and story are of course Hungarian, Erkel's score is a mélange of the fashionable styles of his day: Meyerbeer, Weber and the waltzes and polkas of Vienna all feature in the score. The Hungarian influence is evident in the gypsy *verbunkos*, but Hungary had to wait for another century for a truly national idiom to emerge in the work of Bartók and Kodály.

However, as Hector Berlioz noted during his trip to Budapest in 1845, Erkel's music has considerable charm and authority. Unfailingly tuneful and rousing, much of the choral writing is in a style more associated with operetta and there is something uplifting in its irrepressible jollity.

The plot of *Hunyadi László* is well paced and the sequence of 'numbers' perfectly balanced. Some sections sound formulaic, but the solo arias have true poignancy, especially those sung by the two women in his life, his powerful mother and his fiancée.

The production somewhat gratuitously mixed modern and old costumes. Since it was the season opener, director Gábor Szücs seemed keen to show off the resources of the whole company, including the corps-de-ballet, even though the opera has no call for dancers.

Vocally, this was a rewarding evening from the all-Hungarian cast – HSO consistently comes up with surprises in its roster of singers. Under the baton of Géza Köteles, soprano Erika Miklósa was especially affecting as the frail Maria, while Erzsébet's aria as sung by Beatrix Fodor was a tour-de-force of stylish coloratura. Another young singer to watch is baritone Krisztián Cser whose rich, dark tone was perfect for the scoundrel Cillei.



Affecting: Erika Miklósa
as Maria