

Péter Eötvös — *Valuska*

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Opéra grotesque, based on the novel The Melancholy of Resistance by László Krasznahorkai

December 2, 2023 marked the world première of Péter Eötvös' new opera, *Valuska*, in Budapest, under the direction of Bence Varga. It is the composer's thirteenth opera and also the first of its kind written in Hungarian, Eötvös's native language. Kálmán Szennai conducted the Chamber Orchestra of the Hungarian State Opera, and the soloists of the evening were: *János Valuska* – Zsolt Haja, *Hagelmayer/Narrator* – Tünde Szalontay, *Mrs Pflaum* – Adrienn Miksh, *Tünde* – Tünde Szabóki, *A peasant woman* – Mária Farkasréti, *Professor* – András Hábetler, *Senior officer* – Krisztián Cser, *Director* – István Horváth, *The Prince's adjutant* – Balázs Papp, *Nadabán* – Lőrinc Kósa, *Mádai* – András Kiss, *Volent* – János Szerekován, *Ticket inspector* – Zoltán Bátki Fazekas, *An officer* – Attila Erdős, *The men's choir* – Benjámín Beer, Ninh Duc Hoang Long, Gergely Halász, Bence Pataki, Gergely Újvári, Botond Pál, Donát Varga.

This event marked an important moment in European contemporary music and beyond, Eötvös being recognised worldwide as one of today's most relevant opera composers. The opera *Valuska* is an exceptional work that perfectly outlines the genre of musical theatre in the context of contemporary musical art. The libretto, written by the composer's wife, Mari Mezei and the Hungarian playwright Kinga Keszthelyi, is based on László Krasznahorkai's novel *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1989). The subject of the opera is topical and profound: the pure-hearted young Valuska becomes the victim of the manipulative society, which will end up destroying him under the shadow of a huge whale (a metaphorical image of it).

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Fig. 1. The première of the opera *Valuska*, December 2, 2023, Budapest.
Photo by Klára Ocskay.

Originally commissioned by the Hungarian State Opera in Budapest, *Valuska* was composed simultaneously in Hungarian and German, with the latter version in response to another commission, this time from the Regensburg Opera. The world première of December and the three subsequent performances scheduled in Budapest at the *Eiffel Art Studios* were followed by the Regensburg première, in February of this year. It was undoubtedly a challenge for Eötvös to adapt the music to a libretto written in two different languages, given also his well-known way of relating to the linguistic component of his works.

In terms of genre, *Valuska* could be defined as a tragicomedy in music or a grotesque opera. The composer named this work an opera in one act, with a duration of about one hundred minutes, “*commedia tragica* in 12 pictures”¹. In interviews, Eötvös often spoke

¹ https://www.opera.hu/media/kiadvany/fajlok/7395/Valuska_mf_old.pdf.

of his stage works as theatrical plays, hence the major importance he attached to the dramaturgical aspect. The different guises in which the soloists appear, the extremely important role of the men's choir, and the position of the orchestra with the instrumental sections placed in the mirror, all stand as testimony to a clear conception of the composer regarding precisely the area of confluence between opera and theatre.

The première was a resounding success: the audience's ovations, both for the artists and especially for Eötvös, who was attending the première despite his already precarious health condition, were followed by great acclaim from notable critics. The opinions regarding the adaptation of Krasznahorkai's novel to the opera genre were, nevertheless, controversial, with the discussions focusing especially on the dramaturgical aspect. However, Eötvös's musical vision and the motivic construction of the characters were praised.

In Eötvös's earlier works, the audience had the opportunity to learn about the ingenuity and accuracy with which the composer relates to their subjects and the importance he attaches to the communication of ideas through music. This music reaches, beyond the action itself, to the culture, language, folkloric background, and even faith of certain peoples (for example, in the operas *Love and Other Demons* or *Lady Sarashina*). We, therefore, believe that *Valuska* can be regarded as the pinnacle of Eötvös's operatic oeuvre, through the complexity with which it relates not only to extremely topical socio-cultural issues of the 21st century but also to the cultural, social and intellectual life of the Hungarian people. The composer's musical language is ironic and sometimes self-ironic, comic and tragic at the same time – grotesque.

Théâtre musical, théâtre instrumental dans l'oeuvre de Péter Eötvös **(January 12-13, 2024, IRCAM, Paris)**

On January 12-13, 2024, on the occasion of Péter Eötvös's 80th birthday, the international conference entitled *Théâtre musical, théâtre instrumental dans l'oeuvre de Péter Eötvös* was held at the IRCAM Research Centre (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique – Musique) in Paris. The composer played an important role in the history of the French research institute and especially in its musical ensemble, Ensemble Intercontemporain, founded in 1976 and led by Eötvös as artistic director and conductor, between 1979 and 1991.

The European cultural institutions participating in the organization of the event included the "Liszt" Institute in Budapest, the University of Strasbourg, the IRCAM Centre, Ensemble Intercontemporain, the University of Music and Dance and the "Gustave Eiffel" University in Paris. The organizer and hostess of the conference was the Hungarian-born musicologist Prof. dr. Márta Grabócz (University of Strasbourg), who ensured the high quality of the event, both logistically and especially in terms of

substance of the subsequent speeches and discussions. All the participants in the conference, headed by Márta Grabócz, wished to pay tribute to one of the most outstanding contemporary composers and to present fundamental aspects of his stage works. For this conference to become available to a wider audience, the organizers facilitated its live streaming on the YouTube channel of the IRCAM Centre.

The conference brought together musicologists, composers, linguists and semioticians from Budapest, Strasbourg, Basel, Mainz, Bordeaux, Evora, Paris, New York and Toronto, and the sessions focused mainly on the stage works, while some of them also addressed Eötvös's instrumental works.

The event was opened by Hungarian musicologist Zoltán Farkas, with the presentation “Twelve Operas in Search of an Author, ‘Lack of Personal Style’ in Péter Eötvös’s Operatic Oeuvre”, which referred to all 12 works of the Hungarian composer and their specific features. Naturally, these features differ from one work to another due to the theme, the language used (from Russian, German, French, etc. to Chinese), and the existential issues addressed. However, all the works follow the same dramaturgical thread: their endings tend towards the loss of hope, emphasizing the feeling of loneliness and social marginalization. We find the same trajectory in the new opera, *Valuska*. So, this becomes Eötvös’s constant question and anguish, which musicologist Farkas Zoltán places in parallel to the cycle of short stories entitled *The Stories Without a Happy Ending* by Géza Csáth².

The second presentation was given by musicologist Giordano Ferrari: “*Trois soeurs: la recherche d’une écriture vocale et instrumentale dans l’espace théâtral*” emphasized the way in which the orchestration of the opera *Three Sisters* influences the spatiality of the scene: the three sisters (Irina, Masha and Olga), as well as Natasha are played, in Eötvös’s conception, by three countertenors. However, it is only at the world première of the opera (Lyon, 1998) that we find the musical cast in this formula, while in the subsequent performances around the world, the characters are played by female voices. For Eötvös, the orchestration of the opera meant emphasizing certain specificities of Chekhov’s dramaturgy, thus becoming an essential “character” itself.

In the following presentation, entitled “The Sound Dramaturgy of Dreams. On Péter Eötvös’s ‘Sound Theatre’ *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams* (1998-99)”, Swiss musicologist Simon Obert, from the “Paul Sacher” Foundation in Basel, drew attention to certain musical motifs with acoustic-dramaturgical significance that defined the opera as well as the musical experience of the audience. The interplay of the sounds, the spatiality of the music, and the acoustic atmosphere created by a series of speakers surrounding the audience offer a special musical sensation, which takes us to an unreal, unstable world, a dream world. The location of the orchestra is also an interesting one – the string instruments and the clarinet are placed behind the stage, thus creating a

² Csáth Géza (1887-1919) Brenner József (real name) – Hungarian novelist, physician, music critic.

particular effect. In *Parlando Rubato* (2018), Eötvös spoke to musicologist Pedro Amaral about the acoustic and musical aspects of the opera *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams*.

The fourth presentation of the first day of the conference was delivered by Claude Coste, a French philologist, who spoke about the prosody of the opera *Le Balcon* (“Prosodier *Le Balcon*”). The presentation was based on the following question: how does a foreign artist relate to the French language, how does he understand its musicality, to then reproduce it through an opera? Coste brought into discussion the evolution and transformations of the French language throughout history and presented the essence of the prosody of the opera both from the perspective of the historical context in which it was composed (the second half of the 20th century) and from that of the current state of the prosody of the French language.

The second session of the first day consisted of a series of presentations given by Hungarian specialists. The first paper was presented by composer Krisztina Megyeri from Budapest. In her paper entitled “Outils de construction de la grande forme dans l’opéra *Love and Other Demons* de Péter Eötvös”, Megyeri highlighted the structural and dramaturgical aspects of the opera written between 2006 and 2007, based on the novel *Of Love and Other Demons* by Gabriel García Márquez. After evoking Maria Sierva, the action of the opera develops on several levels, thanks to the four languages used by Eötvös: English (the everyday language of nobility), Latin (the language used in church and in the religious culture of Latin America), Spanish (the language used by the characters Delaura and Sierva) and the Yoruba language³ (the secret language of the servants). At the end of this opera, we find again the main character as a victim of society, of the cultural, social and religious domination.

The next presentation, given by Hungarian musicologist Zsuzsanna Könyves-Tóth and entitled “«*Erinnerst du dich nicht?*» Myths and Intertextuality in *Die Tragödie des Teufels* and *Paradise Reloaded (Lilith)*”, focused on the mythical figure of Lilith in the two operas. According to a 2010 dialogue between Eötvös and László Krasznahorkai⁴, Lilith represents the female archetype of Lucifer or, on the other hand, Adam’s first wife, that is, Eve’s opposite. The presentation emphasized the composer’s intention to address controversial themes, such as the mythical guise of femininity, represented here by Lilith.

Philologist Jolán Orbán from the University of Pécs spoke of the opera *Sleepless* (2021), paraphrasing the French philosopher Jacques Derrida: *Hospitalité, Hostilité, Hostipitalité*. Orbán finds the dramaturgy underlying the opera *Sleepless* as being similar in terms of ambiguity to the pun mentioned above, suggesting that the Hungarian composer’s opera can be philosophically analysed through the lens of Derrida’s thinking. However, it was not clear to those present what the connection between Derrida’s system and Eötvös’s opera was, where and in what form the possible similarities and

³ The Niger-Congo language spoken in West Africa.

⁴ https://litera.hu/irodalom/konyvajanko/kraszn_nem_kerdez_nem_valaszol.html.

correspondences between the two can be found. Moreover, to what extent does Derrida's philosophy impact the Hungarian composer's manner of thinking? For Orbán, however, the answer lies in the way we reflect on the two authors from the perspective of the same era. The discussions at the end of the presentation did not seem to provide all the expected answers.

The next presentation, "The Intonation of the Grotesque in *Valuska* Péter Eötvös's First Hungarian-Language Opera", was delivered by Hungarian musicologist Szabolcs Molnár. I was looking forward to the speech and the audience also received it with much interest. Molnár emphasized certain elements of the writing style and analysed the choral moments, which emphasize the grotesque in the context of the contemporary opera genre. Eötvös uses the male choir as a very important "character" which has important interventions in seven of the twelve scenes of the opera. This collective, frightening character is in opposition to the naive Valuska, the victim of a society that will destroy him. In the construction of the musical discourse, we find the key interval of the fourth that underlies both the opening motifs of the choir and the orchestral accompaniment of Valuska's retorts. As for the grotesque in the Hungarian context, both Krasznahorkai and Eötvös see it in the very socio-cultural reality, which appears related to Gabriel García Márquez's magical realism, later labelled by Márta Grabócz as grotesque realism. Thus, a distorted reality, from which Valuska's pure soul has no escape, being mesmerized by the giant whale and defeated by malice.

The last presentation of the day was delivered in the form of a video recording by musicologist Jane Forner from Toronto. "Dystopia, Parody and Remaining Myth in Péter Eötvös's Operas" focused on certain archetypes from the composer's works, especially from *Paradise Reloaded. Lilith*. We find again the dominant female figure of Lilith, the strong character who stands in contrast to most female characters in world operatic literature. So Forner presented Eötvös's works as models of this genre in a contemporary context, discussing myths, and existential problems and formulating the rhetorical questions of the present.

The presentations of the second day of the conference focused mainly on the dramaturgy of Eötvös's instrumental music, with each starting from the general scenic conception pervading Eötvös's entire oeuvre.

The first presentation, entitled "*Cricket Music et Insetti galanti, deux / idées / de théâtre*", was delivered by French musicologist Béatrice Ramaut-Chevassus. The two works, with the former composed in 1970 and the latter in 1990, offer a true aural sensation of nature, created by the sound of crickets and insects.

The next presentation, "Une dramaturgie abstraite dans *Chinese opera* de Peter Eötvös: geste invisible et grupement auditif", was authored by Chinese-born PhD student Chen Fan from the University of Strasbourg, who analysed this orchestral work from several perspectives. Although in the presentation of the work the composer claims that it has very little to do with the genre of the opera of Chinese origin, primarily due to the

differences related to the music of each particular region in China (with its own types of traditional melodies, rhythmic motifs, types of musical structures, etc.), the presentation brought to the fore the sounds and rhythms specific to the Far East, with an emphasis on rhythm and percussion instruments. The scenic tension and the musical construction of the work prove the presence of an operatic type of dramaturgy, a ubiquitous feature in the composer's works. The *Chinese Opera* was subsequently revised several times. The first variant, dating from 1986, was divided into seven parts, the second one, dating from 1992, into five parts, and the last one, from 2008, only into four.

The substantial interventions, transformations and rethinking of the musical works are another commonly encountered technique in Eötvös's works, for several reasons. For example, the themes approached take on a different meaning and are presented in a new context, so the composer feels the need for re-expression. Then, there is the desire for artistic and intellectual improvement, if we think, for example, that before starting to write a new work, Eötvös would sometimes spend several years building the story from the ground up, through thorough documentation.

The Hungarian-born musicologist Péter Laki, currently based in New York, presented the paper "Von Paris aus geht der Ruhm: Théâtre imaginaire et encodage dans *Korrespondenz* de Péter Eötvös". The composer's chamber work, written in 1992, brings to the fore the correspondence between Leopold Mozart and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The dialogue between father and son brings the feeling of family and love, but also tension, discord, frustration, etc. The dramatic side of this work becomes reality primarily in the imagination of the audience. While the instrumentalists can see the text in the score, i. e. the actual dialogue between Leopold and Wolfgang, the audience can only listen to the musical retorts encoding this dialogue through sounds, rhythms, motifs and phrases.

In the presentation entitled "*Electrochronik* (1974): un moment-clef dans l'histoire de la musique électroacoustique *live*. Création à partir d'un microscope à intervalles", György Kurtág Jr. brought into discussion the electronic music of the 70s, the experiments with the stereo tape, modulators, synthesizers, etc. performed in Cologne. The techniques used in *Electrochronik* are the different transformations (through modulators) of the musical timbre and the intensity and pitch of the sound. In the electroacoustic work, we also find various instruments (or timbres specific to authentic Hungarian traditional music, such as the traditional whistle, the barrel organ or the traditional vocal timbre). Kurtág also provided a broad technical picture of the electronic resources and devices of the time.

Márta Grabócz drew an arc over time, seeking to synthesize the evolution of Eötvös's compositional style, starting from *Now, Miss!* up to *Octet Plus*: "La renaissance d'une dramaturgie musicale dans l'atelier de Péter Eötvös entre 1972 et 2017 (cinq pièces)". The compositions are based on Samuel Beckett's radio play *Embers* (1959), which spawned five chamber works. The first work dating from 1972 is entitled *Now, Miss!* and is written for violin, synthesizer and stereo tape. Between 2008 and 2017 Eötvös rewrote,

reorchestrated and restructured the work in such a way that, starting from the same basic idea, he published four other chamber works (*Now, Miss! Klagspiel; Octet; Octet Plus, Now, Miss! – 2017*). Márta Grabócz's purpose was to analyse the dynamics of the "rebirth" of the musical discourse springing from the same essence.

The French musicologist Geneviève Mathon delivered the presentation "*The Sirens Cycle* (2016): un mythe des origines", starting from the same idea of composition and recomposition, while placing emphasis on the text and the linguistic side.

Andreas Krause, the artistic director of the German publishing house Contemporary Music Schott Music Group (Mainz), spoke about *Hallelujah – Oratorium balbumum* (2015).

The last presentation was that of Portuguese composer and conductor Pedro Amaral, who brought the complex writing-rewriting process back into discussion, this time in the context of the new opera, *Valuska*. With the presentation entitled "Écriture – réécriture – à la recherche d'un drame", Amaral brought examples of the manuscript of the opera, both with the Hungarian text and with the German adaptation. Amaral presented the composer's way of thinking in constructing certain melodic lines and acoustic-musical structures, as well as their synchronization with the narrative thread and the opera's dramaturgy.



Fig. 2. International conference *Théâtre musical, théâtre instrumental dans l'oeuvre de Péter Eötvös* January 12-13, 2024, IRCAM, Paris (round-table discussions)
Photo by Klára Ocskay.

The international conference *Péter Eötvös 80* offered an excellent opportunity to understand the Hungarian composer's music. If the presentations of the two days were up to the mark from a scientific point of view, the end of the conference, namely the round-table discussions, offered a personal, even emotional perspective. Moderated by Márta Grabócz, the round-table discussions offered the opportunity to know Péter Eötvös *the man* – the teacher, the colleague, the passionate musician. The participants were Stefano Gervasoni, Andreas Krause, Simon Obert, Philippe Manoury, Benoît Sizia and Pedro Amaral.

The “final chord” of the conference was the composer's message, delivered by his wife, Mari Mezei. Although he could not be physically present at the event, Eötvös followed it online and expressed his gratitude for the organization, the quality of the presentations and the common memories and experiences his fellow musicians recalled during this last stage of the event.

At the beginning of March of this year, he received the Kossuth Grand Prize for lifetime achievement. On March 24, 2024, composer Péter Eötvös died after a hard battle with the disease, leaving behind him a significant and valuable contribution to contemporary musical life, in his triple capacity as a composer, conductor and teacher.