

# Demythologizing the Genesis of the Hungarian National Anthem

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## Abstract

Hungary's state anthem is the musical setting of Ferenc Kölcsey's 1823 poem *Hymnus ...*, composed by Ferenc Erkel for a competition announced by the National Theater of Pest in 1844. With Erkel's award-winning melody, the already well-known poem soon became a national prayer, sung throughout the country. Based on recently surfaced sources, the study examines the genesis of the musical setting and surveys the process of its canonization in the nineteenth century as well. The concordance of the melody with one of the pieces from the collection of Catholic hymns of Heinrich Klein, Ferenc Erkel's former teacher in Pressburg, seems to substantiate the anthem's inspiration from the Catholic church music. This inspiration is also supported by a number of hitherto neglected or unknown spots/fragments in Erkel's operas, where the composer quoted both the melody and the lyrics of the *Hymnusz* in the context of *religioso* scenes. The Catholic musical background of the music leads us to reconsider and reinterpret the only contemporary account dealing with the birth of the *Hymnusz*—and at the same time with Erkel's composition method—originating from the famous Hungarian writer Géza Gárdonyi. The Catholic musical inspiration of the *Hymnusz* certainly contributed to the Kölcsey poem, embedded in the Protestant tradition, becoming a commonly acclaimed folk anthem.

  
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# Introduction

[1] Did Ferenc Erkel (1810–93) compose individually or as a member of his compositional workshop? We can answer this question based on the not too rich compositional source material connected to his oeuvre (his drafts, concepts, etc.). In this respect, Erkel himself was rather laconic. There are hardly any diaries, memoirs, or recollections available. One of the very few recollections, written by Géza Gárdonyi (1863–1922), a famous writer and novelist, is, however, a novelistic account based on what the old Erkel told the writer, who was a young man back then. And Gárdonyi only wrote it down decades later, probably embellishing his own old memories.

The recollection itself is *not* of minor importance, given that it concerns the conception of the musical setting for “Hymnusz,”<sup>[1]</sup> which is the current national anthem of Hungary. The story, as it was told by Gárdonyi, really demands to be mythicized and was first published in a representative publication, the *Erkel Memorial Album*, released in 1910 at the occasion of the centenary of Erkel’s birth. The volume contains the writings of distinguished authors and witnesses (including family members) considered the most authentic.<sup>[2]</sup> This volume, which later became very important for Erkel research, canonized the recollections of Gárdonyi and Erkel due to their publication in such a distinguished context, and this was also the reason why these recollections became generally known. Some of its fragments are accepted even today, in spite of the fact that certain episodes of the story were called into question by Erkel scholars. This study deals with the genesis and canonization of “Hymnusz,” the current Hungarian national anthem, composed by Ferenc Erkel in 1844, and also takes into consideration, through a single example, the historical discourse emerging around “Hymnusz.” We will re-examine the memories of Géza Gárdonyi concerning the conversation that the great storyteller had with Ferenc Erkel, presumably in 1886, about the circumstances in which “Hymnusz” was composed. On the basis of this survey of the sources, we need to revise the history of “Hymnusz” on several points.

The question may arise whether details put under the magnifying glass of national historiography can be of interest outside of national boundaries. The history of Erkel’s “Hymnusz,” which has become a national symbol, does share a number of similarities with the Central Eastern European history of national anthems. Nation-building strategies and efforts to create national memories and symbols proceeded on parallel paths, albeit following different chronologies, one of these parallel histories being about the official and non-official national anthems.<sup>[3]</sup>

## “Hymnusz”: Sources and Canonization

Let us begin with a brief account of the facts. In 1844, the director of the National Theater in Pest announced a tender for the musical setting of a poem written by Ferenc Kölcsey (1790–1838) in 1823, entitled “Hymnus, a’ Magyar nép zivataros századaiból” (Anthem, from the stormy centuries of the Hungarian people). The entries, submitted anonymously, copied by foreign hands, and identified only by a motto, were considered by a committee, and the seven best settings were performed at the National Theater. Ferenc Erkel’s entry won the first prize.<sup>[4]</sup>

The performance copies (score and parts) of Erkel’s “Hymnusz” at the National Theater and the Hungarian Royal Opera House have not yet been studied in detail.<sup>[5]</sup> One of the reasons for this is that the early part of the historical collection of the Hungarian State Opera House, mainly dating back to the nineteenth century, was included in the Music Collection of the National Széchényi

Library during the 1980s, and it was only a few years ago that the inventory of this huge sheet music collection was completed. Although these musical sources have still not been fully analyzed, there have been a number of fundamental studies on the “Hymnusz” in recent years. For example, a volume released in 2017 with the title *A magyar Himnusz képes albuma* (An illustrated album of the Hungarian national anthem)<sup>[6]</sup> released the most important sources of “Hymnusz,” accompanied by four major studies signed by Vilmos Voigt, Zoltán G. Szabó, Ferenc Bónis (a partially re-published study, entitled “A Himnusz születése és másfél évszázada” [The birth of the national anthem and its one and a half century]),<sup>[7]</sup> and Kata Riskó (a large-scale new study, entitled “Erkel Himnuszának keletkezése és hagyományozódásának története az első világháborúig” [The genesis of Erkel’s “Hymnusz” and the history of its tradition until the First World War]).<sup>[8]</sup> Historians and literary historians have in recent decades produced a number of further important studies examining the performance and reception history of Hungary’s “national prayer” from the perspective of cult research, political representation, and the whole process during which “Hymnusz” became a national symbol.<sup>[9]</sup> In the illustrated album mentioned above, Ferenc Bónis deals primarily with the creation and inspiration of “Hymnusz.” However, Kata Riskó, as the title of her study indicates, analyzes the *Tradierung* of “Hymnusz” primarily on the basis of its sources as popular music, especially the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century printed editions and early recordings.

In the transmission of “Hymnusz,” the “art music” tradition connected to the National Theater and later to the Opera House is clearly separated from the popular music tradition, which is, by its nature, rich in variations and gave birth to “Hymnusz” material sometimes including bold variants as well. This variability might have been acceptable for the contemporaries, but at the same time it was also quite disturbing for them, especially if compared to the art music tradition. “Hymnusz” did not have a canonized version or a proper score, despite the fact that Erkel’s music was used as the non-official national anthem almost from the moment when the musician was given an award for composing it. There were large numbers of vocal editions and versions for voice and piano, but there were no orchestral scores or vocal-orchestral editions of “Hymnusz” available, not even at the beginning of the twentieth century.

[2] Obviously, manuscript performance copies were available at the theaters and permanent orchestras, and they could be obtained through the internal network of musical institutions, but they could not be reached anywhere else. The situation is best characterized by Emmerich Kálmán’s (1882–1953) open letter (*Az Est*, February 8, 1917, 8), which reports the frustrating difficulties he faced when he was asked to introduce his festive performances abroad (such as that in Vienna on December 20, 1916, proceeding the 400th presentation of *Die Csárdásfürstin*) with Kölcsey’s “Hymnusz.” He had practically no score nor any other music that he could have used to conduct the piece. On this occasion, he even offered 1,000 pengő for the release of the score, including the orchestration, proofreading, and the organization of the publishing. His example was followed by several fellow musicians, according to the periodical *Az Est*, among them Franz Lehár (1870–1948), who also described the difficulties in obtaining the score of “Hymnusz” in a similar open letter,<sup>[10]</sup> and who also offered 1,000 pengő for the publishing.

The question of the Austrian imperial anthem (“Gott erhalte”), the Hungarian royal anthem, and the Hungarian national anthem (Erkel’s “Hymnusz”) was often the subject of public discourse and lively debate. This is especially true of the national rhetoric emerging by the time of the millennium. The 1901 speech of the playwright László Rátkay (1853–1933), a member of parliament representing the Independence Party, against the singing of *Gott erhalte* and in favor of solving of the question of the Hungarian national anthem was partly the result of this process.

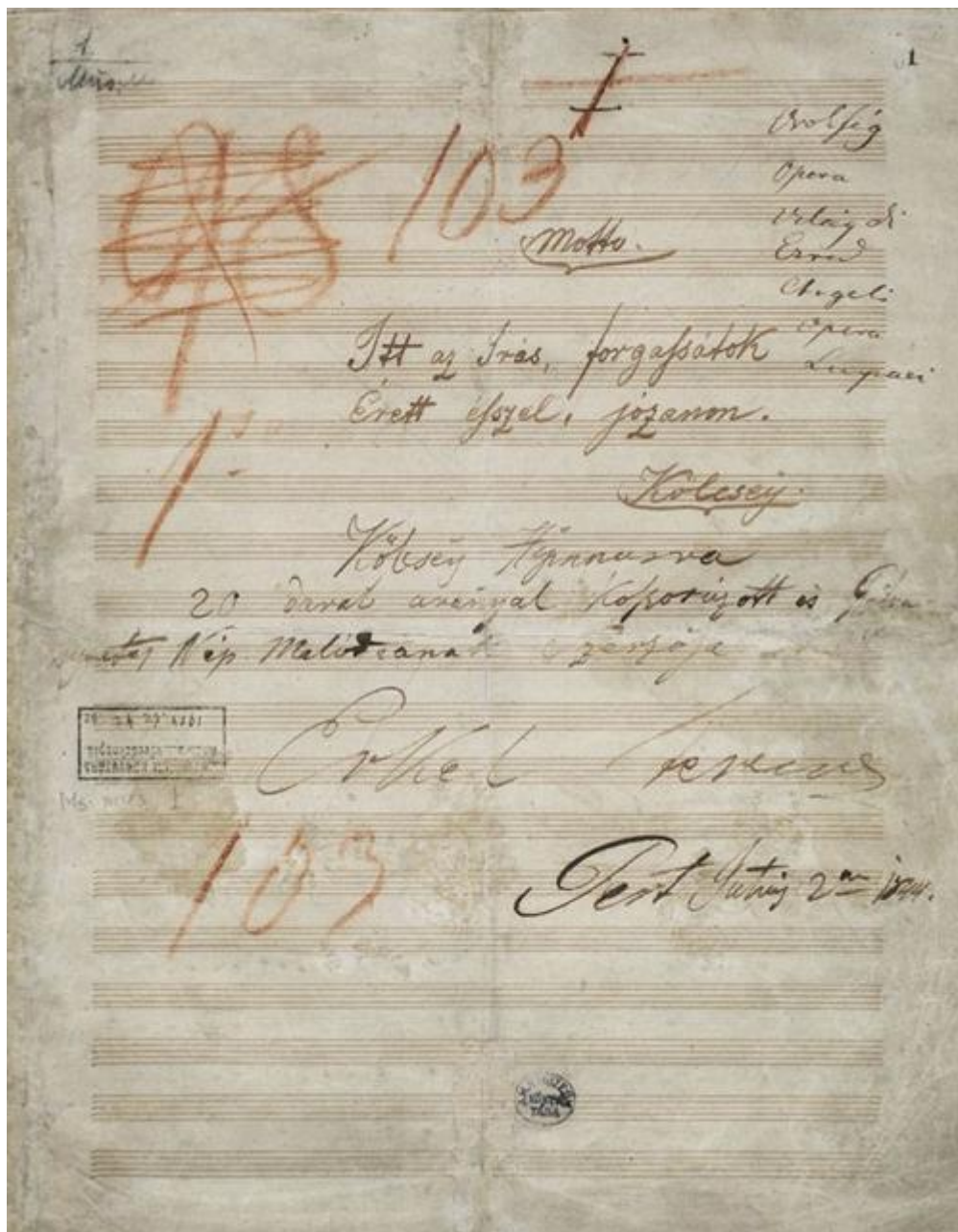
Rátkay was also the author of the bill from April 23, 1903, that declared the work of Kölcsey and Erkel the anthem of the entire Hungarian nation, valid from August 20, 1903. In the same year, there was another fierce debate going on—in periodicals like *Magyar Sion* and *Religio* as well as in the daily newspapers—about the continuation of the practice that allowed the singing of “Hymnusz” in Catholic churches (which was possible, of course, according to the position taken up by the episcopate). The question of “Gott erhalte” still remained a topic of lively discussion even at the end of the Great War. The last scandal involving an emblem of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy was also connected to this issue: on November 23, 1918, as Karl IV and his wife visited Debrecen at the opening ceremony of the new university, “Gott erhalte” was played instead of Erkel’s “Hymnusz,”<sup>[11]</sup> a week after former prime minister Count Tisza publicly announced in his famous October 17 parliamentary statement that the monarchy had lost the war.

## Rethinking the Mythic Birth of “Hymnusz”

Erkel’s statement, released in Géza Gárdonyi’s interpretation in the *Memorial Album*, should be included in the cultural historical context characterized by the efforts to formalize “Hymnusz.” As one of the most respected writers of the turn of the century, who made a lasting impression precisely with his historical novels, Gárdonyi colorfully “wrote” the story of Erkel. But as in his historical novels, he probably did not allow his literary fantasy to soar in this case either. Just as his contemporaries might have believed him too much, the distrust of future generations was perhaps also exaggerated. But no matter how over-mythicized the wonder-like birth of “Hymnusz” seems to be in Gárdonyi’s story (which elevated the process of the creation from everyday life), or even how tendentious it seems to speak of the pronouncedly Catholic inspiration for the setting of a poem of decidedly Protestant inspiration (thus giving an *ex post* explanation for “Hymnusz” becoming a nationwide, community-creating symbol), there are more truthful elements in Gárdonyi’s story than we have assumed so far.

The recollection written by Géza Gárdonyi contains a number of dubious elements (see figure 1). It could not have been true that Erkel, as an already recognized author of national operas, in fact the *only* recognized author of national operas, and as the first conductor of the National Theater’s orchestra, would not want to participate in the tender announced by his own director András Bartay (1799–1854) on February 29, 1844. Gárdonyi’s story is also contradicted by the copy submitted anonymously for the competition, the earliest copy of “Hymnusz,” which was registered, according to a handwritten entry, as “No. 1.” So not only was Erkel not that late with the submission of his manuscript, but actually he must have submitted it quite on time.<sup>[12]</sup>





**Figure 1: Title page of the *Hymnusz* manuscript sent in for the application; by courtesy of the Music Collection of the National Széchényi Library, Budapest**

Consequently, the next fragment of the story cannot be true either, even if it would otherwise perfectly fit into Erkel's reputation, who was famous for his laziness as well as for being indolent and hypersensitive. One day before the deadline (April 30, 1844), director Bartay lured into his own apartment the celebrated author of the recently premiered opera *Hunyadi László*, who was otherwise reluctant to take part in the tender; Bartay locked the composer into a side room, thus obliging him to set the poem by Kölcsey to music right there on the spot, sitting next to a beat-up yellow piano.

According to the current state of Hungarian music historiography (and here I turn to Ferenc Bónis, who probably did the most research on the national anthem), "Gárdonyi's record is an outstanding literary work with a few well-observed features of the musician's character. But in terms of music history it is a mystification."<sup>[13]</sup> Dezső Legáný expresses equally skeptical views in his catalogue of Erkel's works (and rightly so). His starting point is what can be demonstrated. The immediate success of the first performance of "Hymnusz" mentioned by Gárdonyi is partially contradicted by contemporary press reports. Gárdonyi describes "a tornado of cheering shaking

the theater.”<sup>[14]</sup> However, there are reports with a quite positive tone, quoted by Amadé Németh, which document Erkel’s success. According to another press organ, the *Regélő Pesti Divatlap* (Fashion relater of Pest), the audience applauded the works of two other entrants, Benjámín Egressy (1814–51) and János Travnyik (1816–71), more than Erkel’s winning composition.<sup>[15]</sup> Erkel’s hymn, reports the *Regélő Pesti Divatlap*, “is excellent both in its national character, sublime artistic expression and in its powerful harmonies, but because it bears the mark of church music adapted to the spirit of the *Hymn*, it will not find an echo on the people’s lips.”<sup>[16]</sup>

[3] Legány, however, not only emphasizes the contradiction between Gárdonyi’s recollections and the press reports but believes that already “the style of the statement belongs to Gárdonyi and not to Erkel, so presumably the bulk of the content originates mainly from Gárdonyi, too. It is no longer possible to decide,” claims Legány, to what degree the substantial differences between the contemporary records and this statement can be ascribed to the colorful writing of this genuine novelist and to what degree they are accounted for by fading memory. It was more than forty years after the events that Erkel allegedly told the story this way, and Gárdonyi only wrote it down following an additional twenty years. What Zoltán Falvy, one of the first researchers on the national anthem’s material, recalls from the period press and carefully reconstructs from a survey of the manuscripts may be considered authentic and is complemented by László Somfai in his analysis of Erkel’s autograph manuscripts.<sup>[17]</sup>

Hence, Erkel probably entered the National Theater’s anthem contest of his own free will, and contrary to what either the composer or the novelist thought to remember, the authenticity of the next element of the anthem story is doubtful too. Indeed, if Erkel himself decided to compose the setting, and if he was among the first entrants in the competition, there was no need to rush either, the music of the anthem being born automatically, as it were, under the hands of the composer-conductor improvising on the keyboard of the yellow piano. Once it was there, it was as if it had *always* been there. This element is a prerequisite for every cultic ritual.

And now let us turn to that fragment of the recollection which concerns the compositional process.

“It’s silence”—says Erkel in Gárdonyi’s wording—“I’m sitting and thinking: Well, how should I actually do this anthem? I’m putting the text in front of me. I’m reading it. Then I’m thinking again. And as I’m thinking, it comes to my mind the word of my very first master, who taught me in Pressburg [Pozsony, Bratislava]. He said: ‘My son, when you are about to compose some sacred music, it’s always the word of the bells that should come to your mind!’ And there, in the silence of the room the bells of Pressburg are tolling in my ear. I’m possessed by devotion. I put my hands on the piano and the sounds are melting one after another. It doesn’t take an hour and the Hymn is ready, the way everybody knows it today. By then Bartay came back, too. I played it to him. He said it was nice. I go back to my place. I write it down for the orchestra. The next day I submit the entry.”<sup>[18]</sup>

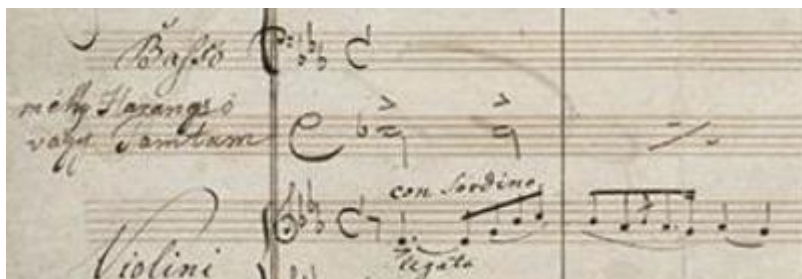
This is the story. And now let us examine our questions again. In fact, if there was no lack of initial interest on Erkel’s part towards the competition for the national anthem, and if there was no subsequent change of heart, there was no rush and no miraculous birth either. And if the three main pillars of the story’s cultic building are compromised, we can probably also put a question mark behind the fourth pillar. That is to say that the mentioning of the inspirational bells of Pressburg is not credible either. It seems to be one more product of the composer’s and/or writer’s fantasy in Gárdonyi’s memoirs.



**Figure 2: First page of the music for *Hymnusz*, sent in for the application; by courtesy of the Music Collection of the National Széchényi Library, Budapest**

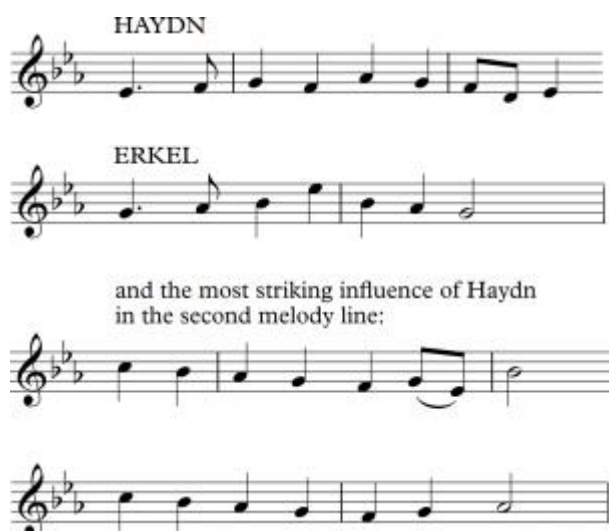
Moreover, in Gárdonyi's text, Erkel speaks of the bells not only in the moment of inspiration but also in relation to the performance. ("I was so overwhelmed by the thought of the bells that I also started the orchestral transcription with the sound of bells. And this was quite effective", says Erkel in Gárdonyi's text.) But the bells are missing from the orchestral score copy submitted for the entry. Erkel introduced the bells subsequently into this score (incidentally in Hungarian, in the otherwise Italian score heading: "Mély harangszó vagy Tam-tam" [low bells or tam-tam]) (see figures 2 and 3). And it is also a subsequent pencil entry that marks the bells in the timpani part of the orchestral material which was used for the first performance of "Hymnusz." Nevertheless, this addition could only have been made *after* the entry was considered for the competition, because the score submitted anonymously to the tender could not include the author's handwriting.<sup>[19]</sup> But it is rather odd, even among the many anecdotal and cultic elements of the tale within the short account of its genesis, to find a reference to the place of Erkel's studies and his first master Heinrich Klein (1756-1832). This reference was obviously needed as part of the origin myth, we might say ironically. But perhaps there is more to it...





**Figure 3: First page of the music for Hymnus, sent in for the application, detail; by courtesy of the Music Collection of the National Széchényi Library, Budapest**

For instance, Ferenc Bónis thinks in his essay that it could have been Heinrich Klein, Erkel's teacher in Pressburg and a personal friend of Beethoven, who imbued his pupil Erkel with veneration toward the masters of Viennese classicism. As a result, "it was more than natural that, when Erkel composed the national anthem, he was looking for a model to follow in the vein of the Viennese classical masters, in the vein of Haydn and Mozart. The structure of his melody, but in places also the motifs he used, recalls Joseph Haydn's exquisite 'Gott erhalte,' composed in 1797."<sup>[20]</sup> This parallel, illustrated by Bónis with several music examples, is beyond doubt. The similarity of the second melodic lines in particular is quite convincing as a melodic parallel (see figure 4).



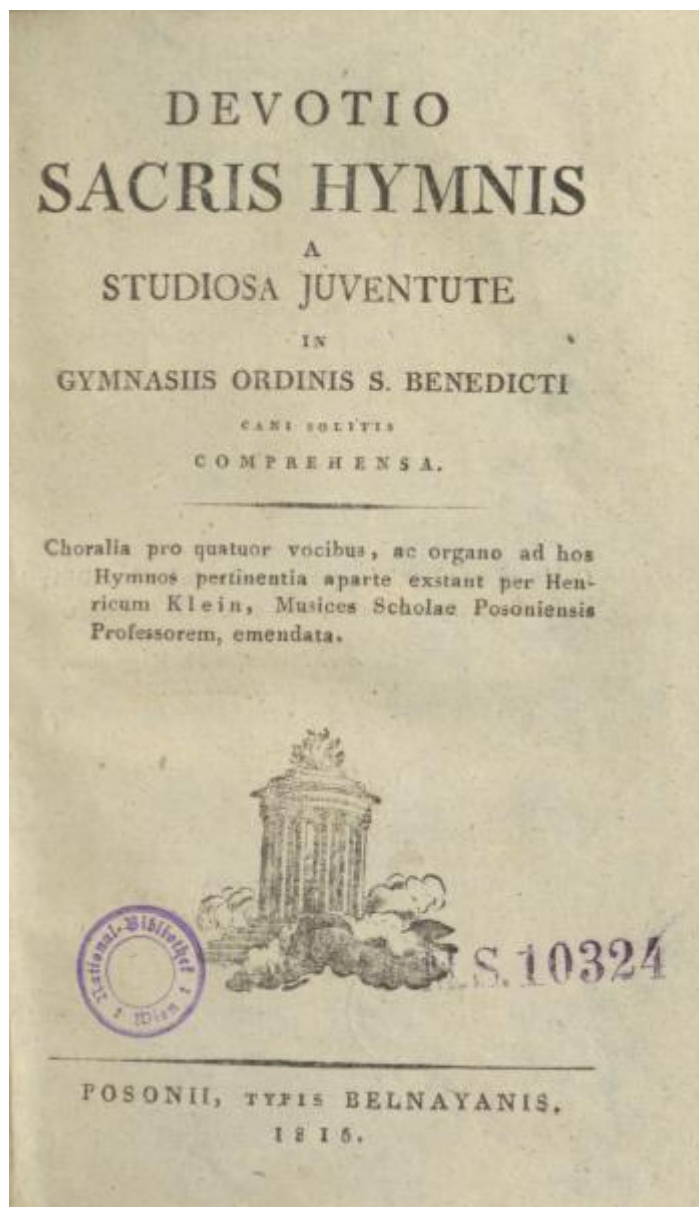
**Figure 4: Melodic relationship between *Gott erhalte* and *Hymnus*, according to Ferenc Bónis, "A himnusz születése," 82**

In terms of the anthem's creation history, the relationship between the Pressburg-based Beethoven friend Heinrich Klein and the Viennese classical model is a less convincing argument. Certainly, Erkel's only known teacher had a key role in the formation of the young composer. And the appearance of Klein's name in this memoir is strange enough, at least to me, to assume that there was a real experience behind the evocation of the bells of Pressburg and of Klein's spirit.

[4] The story is really like a tale, but I still do not exclude the possibility that when Erkel saw the verses of the poem he was actually remembering his school years from Pressburg and that he mentioned this to Gárdonyi at some point. Heinrich Klein taught Erkel composition, but he was also the music teacher of the Benedictine Grammar School in the town where Erkel was a pupil from the age of eleven until fifteen. Under Klein, there was intense musical life at the *Kleingymnasium*, involving choir singing with instrumental accompaniment. Klein took the teaching of his students seriously, who in part also cooperated at the musical event of the Benedictine Academy Church. The Masses of the school were held until 1823 at the *San Salvatore* church of the Jesuits, which was closed down, and from November 1823 on, precisely during the

period of Erkel's studies there, Masses were held at the newly renovated church of the Clarisses. (It was in this church that one of Erkel's first compositions, a litany with instrumental accompaniment, was performed.)<sup>[21]</sup>

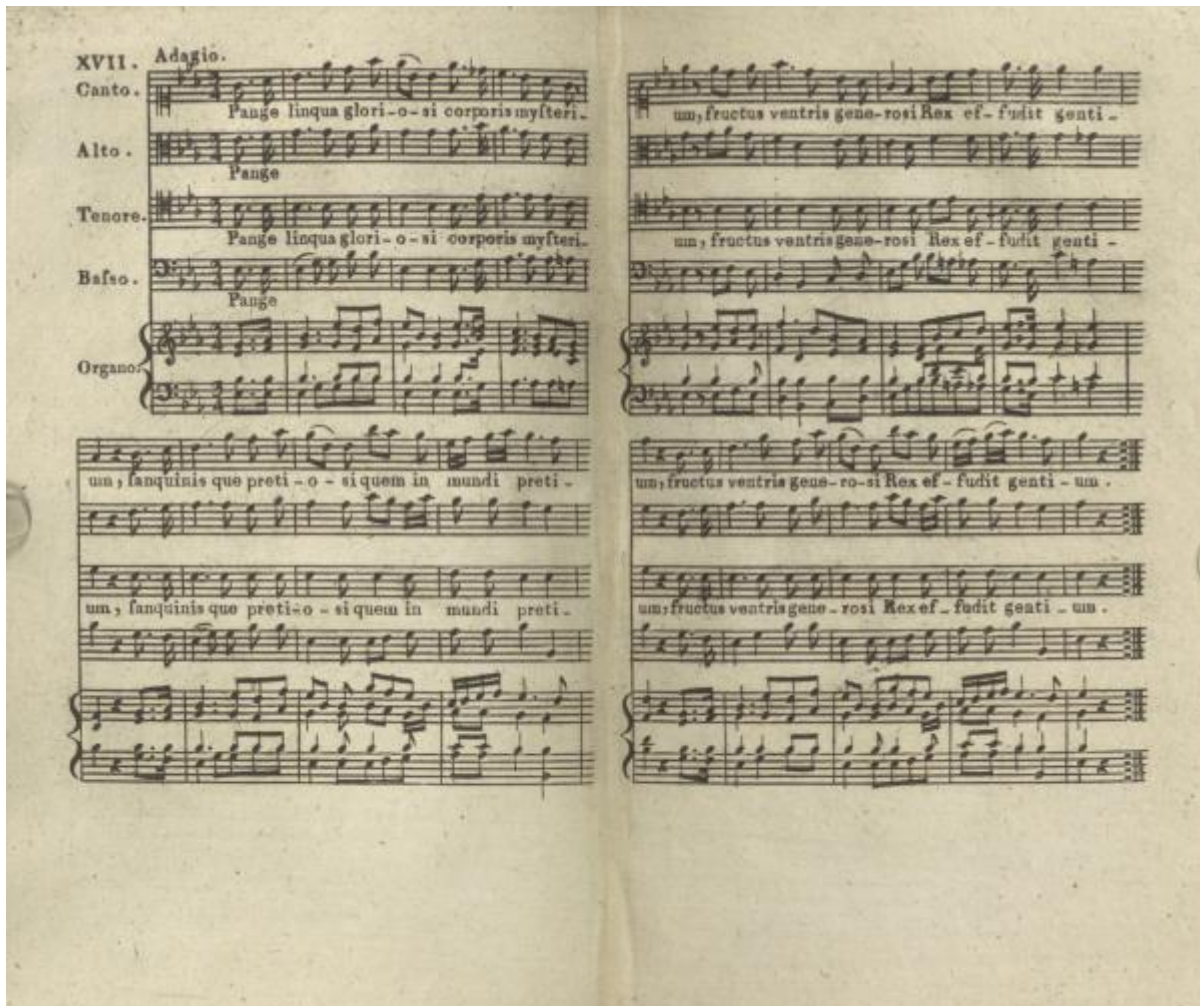
Klein undertook further tasks, independent of his daily duties at the school. A few years earlier, for example, he issued a volume of hymns for purposes of the Benedictine students' church music practice. The publication fits into the early nineteenth-century vogue of hymn collections. It appeared in 1815, only a few years before Erkel's student years in Pressburg. According to the title page, Klein prepared the publication explicitly for the student choirs of Benedictine schools (see figure 5). Erkel must have sung from the hymn material of this volume; and if he really did so, it cannot be ruled out that this was the very experience which was recalled later by the thirty-four-year-old composer, while he read the lines of Kölcsey's poem.



**Figure 5: Heinrich Klein, *Devotio Sacris Hymnis*, title page; by courtesy of Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, MS 10324-8°**

All this became evident to me, to my great surprise, as I saw the beginning of one of the hymns from the volume: the *Pange lingua* anthem for the procession of the Lord's Day. Erkel's biographers did not notice this analogy, perhaps because in the sources of Klein's hymn volume available in Hungary the musical setting for this hymn (and many others) is missing. I found the copy with the musical setting of the *Pange lingua* chorus in the Musical Collection of the Austrian

National Library (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek) without information about its owner<sup>[22]</sup> (see figure 6). Not only is the initial motif identical with the one in Erkel's "Hymnusz," but the key is the same too. The analogy only applies to the first notes, but this is a very strong beginning, virtually dominating the whole musical setting of "Hymnusz." This melodic analogy, together with Gárdonyi's recollection, makes it quite likely that Erkel's school experiences, the *Pange lingua* sung at the procession of the Lord's Day but perhaps on other occasions as well, were present in his mind as he set the national anthem to music. All the more so since the procession of the Lord's Day, accompanied by the performance of the *Pange lingua* and traditionally attended by the students, was a memorable event everywhere. Hence, in Pressburg as well it was probably celebrated all over the city, and students not only sang during the procession but regularly held school drama performances as well.



**Figure 6: The choir *Pange lingua* from Heinrich Klein's volume; by courtesy of Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, MS 10324-8°**

The credibility of Gárdonyi's recollection is somewhat increased also because, despite being a man of letters, he describes quite accurately the creative process characteristic of the composer (or actually, characteristic of *many* composers). He outlines a process exactly like the one we might imagine on the basis of Erkel's sketches and drafts (see figure 7).<sup>[23]</sup> Erkel first reads the text, and then, leaving it, he sits next to the piano to improvise. The music itself comes into being at the piano; then follows the notation, first of the melody and then of the rough accompaniment.<sup>[24]</sup> Hence, the creative process described by Gárdonyi is roughly identical to stages suggested by the compositional sources. The process is not unique, but there is no doubt that it was typical for Erkel, and it confirms to a certain degree the credibility of his memories from Pressburg in relation to "Hymnusz"; not necessarily the bells, but the choral singing at the



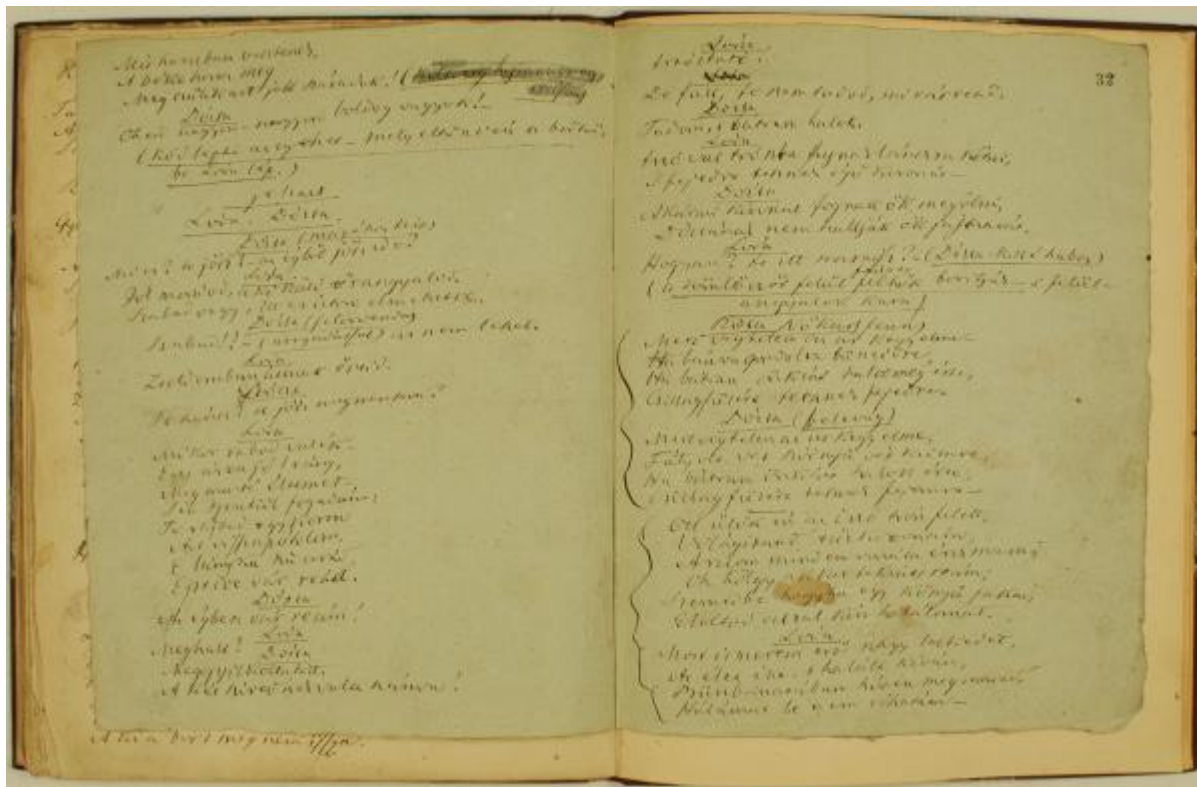
school and Klein's harmonizations of hymns.



**Figure 7: Ferenc Erkel's draft for the opera *Dózsa György*. Gyula Erkel's Estate, Music Collection of the National Széchényi Library, Budapest**

The recollection of Klein's volume of hymns infiltrated not only Erkel's setting of the poem by Kölcsey. It is more than interesting that Erkel chose the same key (E-flat major) and tempo marking (andante) that he used for the national anthem for the hymn movement of the Hungarian Cantata, composed for the gala performance held on June 8, 1867, on the occasion of the coronation of Franz Joseph. Hymns and anthems were among the essential types of closed numbers within the operatic tradition of Erkel's era. It was an expectation he was probably glad to fulfill. An anthem and a prayer, or at least one of the two, occurs in all of his operas. In addition, Erkel also composed many non-operatic anthems. Some of them, however, were written under the pressure of necessity. It is hard to believe, for example, that he wrote out of his own free will a greeting song for Franz Joseph, three years after the defeat of the War of Independence in 1852, based on a poem by Johann Ludwig Deinhardstein (1794–1859).

Examples of transformations and allusions may be found among Erkel's anthems too. One of the most telling examples is offered in the opera *Dózsa György* (1867). The anthem closing the first act of the opera, sung by the peasants preparing to fight under the leadership of Dózsa, was presented six years after the premiere as the brand new royal anthem at the gala performance celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Franz Joseph's reign. The music itself hardly changed, but the text was different: it was written by Ede Szigligeti (1814–78), the librettist of the opera *Dózsa György* and the National Theater's main librettist, who was also the head of the drama ensemble and the administrative director. (Erkel was at the time the chief musical director of the National Theater.)



**Figure 8: Draft of Ede Szigligeti's libretto for Ferenc Erkel's opera *Dózsa György*. The original entry about the inclusion of *Hymnus* is crossed out with a pencil. Collection of Theatre History, National Széchényi Library, Budapest**

[5] For Szigligeti and Erkel, this *contrafactum* must have been a flip.<sup>[25]</sup> Replacing the text of the peasants' prayer addressed to the Virgin Mary, the patroness of Hungary, with the text of the royal anthem was not a political act in itself. However, due to the figure of the insurgent peasant leader György Dózsa, there was a hidden political message in it. Maybe Szigligeti and Erkel felt a little satisfaction, because earlier, before the premiere, they were forced to change the end of the opera. The last pages from Szigligeti's libretto draft are missing, but it is very likely that these pages contained a conclusion similar to that of the drama of same title from 1857 by Mór Jókai (1825–1904), which was the source of the libretto. In the drama, the peasant leader is not assimilated; he remains true to his principles as he fulfills his fate: he is burned to death as he must sit on a throne in fire and wear a crown in flames. However, the pages inserted subsequently into Szigligeti's libretto contain something totally different. Dózsa cannot avoid the death by fire, but before that he repents his deeds. The contemporaries looked away if they wanted to love the opera in spite of this moment. But something else was missing from this finale, something that was planned by Szigligeti and Erkel alike. Both in Szigligeti's draft and in Erkel's sketches, Dózsa's vision was followed by a strophe of the old "Hymnus" based on Kölcsey's poem. It was supposed to appear in the *tableau vivant* at the end of the *scena*.<sup>[26]</sup>

The homeland's altar appears in gloria, Holding  
the Crown and the insignia, And it is  
surrounded by lords and people shaking hands.

Dicsfényben a haza oltára, rajta a Korona és  
jelvények, körülötte urak s nép kezét fogva

Then, the opera's female protagonist, Rózsa, speaks out her last words:

What was lost in battle  
Will be brought by peace,  
The better centuries will give birth to it.

Mit harczban vesztenek  
a béke hozza meg,  
megszülük azt jobb századok.



(Dicsőfényben a harsz oláira, rajta a  
 Korona és a jelvények, körülte urak  
 nek Kerecs fogva.)  
 Mit harszban vesztene  
 A bika hozza meg  
 Megszületett a jobb páradork  
 (Kölcsy himnus egy strófa)  
 Dózsa  
 Oh én nagyon nagyon boldog vagyok  
 (Köd lepett az égért mely elűn-  
 vén, a Döntőbe Lóra lép.)  
 2. Jelenet.  
 Lóra. Dózsa!  
 Dózsa. (magához tért)  
 Mics? te jön? az égöt jön ide?  
 Lóra.  
 Tölmondd a ki kiűl irangyalod  
 Szabad vagy az uton elmehet  
 Dózsa (felőrvendve)  
 Szabad! ? (megadapal) az nem lehet.  
 Lóra.  
 Esőben állnak jöve.

**Figure 9: Libretto of Ferenc Erkel's opera *Dózsa György*; Ede Szigligeti's autograph fair copy. Collection of Theatre History, National Széchényi Library, Budapest**

Erkel's "Hymnus," based on Kölcsey's poem, was present as an allusion in the initial version of the opera. It appeared in Szigligeti's libretto draft (see figure 8) and its fair copy (see figure 10), and one can also find it in the first draft with text that was used by Erkel for his piano improvisations (see figure 10).



[illegible]

**Figure 11: Ferenc Erkel, *Dózsa György*. Autograph score, finale of the fifth act. Music Collection of the National Széchényi Library, Budapest**



# Conclusion

The finale of the opera *Dózsa György* is a good example of the art music line of tradition, in the course of which the composition became a national symbol. At the end of this musical drama, which evokes the repressed peasant rebellion of 1514 and thus has a theme that was politically delicate in 1867, Erkel entrusts the message of the work to our “national prayer” in what is basically a religious scene. The religious context accompanies the recollections of “Hymnusz” in Erkel’s other operas too. For instance, in *Erzsébet*, composed on the commission of the National Theater on the occasion of the first joint visit to Hungary of Franz Joseph and Elisabeth in 1857,<sup>[27]</sup> which was at the same time also their first joint visit to Pest-Buda, “Hymnusz” appeared in a similarly religious context.<sup>[28]</sup> (At the beginning of act two, Erzsébet/Elisabeth is handing out alms to the poor; “Hymnusz” is played as the closing chorus of this scene and, according to Erkel’s original idea, with organ accompaniment).<sup>[29]</sup> With this instrumentation, alluding to church music, Erkel connects this scene to an operatic tradition. However, during the neoabsolutism of the regime of Alexander von Bach, the religious context and instrumentation somewhat distracted attention from the national character of the folk anthem known and sung throughout the country by that time.<sup>[30]</sup> The religious character of “Hymnusz,” as we saw above, has already been noticed also by the reviews written about the competing pieces. This is the reason why the critic of *Regélő Pesti Divatlap* questioned the later success of Erkel’s setting. He was wrong. However, he was right about the Catholic roots of the music. And it was precisely the religious character of the setting that made it possible for Kölcsey’s poem to become a commonly known *Volkshymne*.



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## References

1. Concerning the orthography of “Hymnusz” as the work’s title, we follow the version used by Ferenc Erkel. This form gained ground in Hungarian musicology on the basis of the catalogue of Erkel’s works. See Dezső Legány, *Erkel Ferenc művei és korabeli történetük* [The works of Ferenc Erkel and their contemporary history] (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1975), 51–54. [↑](#)
2. Géza Gárdonyi, “Apróságok Erkel életéből” [Trivia from Erkel’s life], in *Erkel Ferenc emlékkönyv, Születésének századik évfordulójára írók és tudósok közreműködésével szerkesztette Fabó Bertalan. Másfélszáz képpel és hasonmással* [Ferenc Erkel memorial album for the hundredth anniversary of Erkel’s birth], with 150 images and facsimiles, ed. Bertalan Fabó under the collaboration of writers and scholars (Budapest: Pátria irodalmi vállalat, 1910), 209–14. Also available online: <http://mek.oszk.hu/08600/08689/>, last accessed March 10, 2018. [↑](#)
3. For the parallel events and a typology of the anthems, see, inter alia, Ulrike Aichhorn and Stefan Jeglitsch, *Österreichische Hymnen im Spiegel der Zeit: Geschichte und Geschichten von Bundes-, Landes- und inoffiziellen Hymnen* (Vienna: Jan Schramek, 2010). [↑](#)
4. It is worth noting that the National Theater published a similar call one year earlier for the

musical setting of a text by another Hungarian poet, Mihály Vörösmarty's (1800–1855) "Szózat" (Summons). Erkel composed music for that poem as well but did not take part in the competition as he was a member of the jury. The text of the call for the musical setting of Kölcsey's "Hymnusz" is almost identical to the one the year before. On both occasions, the primary goal of the National Theater was not to have a folk anthem written (although there was a great need for that at that time) but to promote Hungarian poetry and nurture the Hungarian language. This goal was also formulated in the call: the task of the National Theater was "to raise, to spread, and to facilitate the coming to life of the best lyrical poetry of our poets, and this goal becomes more accessible if the poems are set to singing and music; the Theater has the intention of doing this every year and this year it offers 20 guildens to award such folk melodies, suited to the singing and orchestral accompaniment of the 'Hymnusz' by Ferenc Kölcsey, our most poet laureate." In original: "költőink' jelesebb lyrai költeményeinek becsét minél inkább emelni, terjedését és életbe jutását a' nemzetben elősegíteni, 's ezt leginkább elérhetőnek véli, ha az illy költemények ének és zenére tételnek, 's ezt évenként tenni szándékozáván, ez évben ismét 20 arany pálya díjt tűz ki a' legjobb népmelódiáért- Kölcsey Ferenc koszorús költőnk' 'Hymnusára' ének és zenekarra téve." *Regélő Pesti Divatlap* 3, no. 18 (March 3, 1844): 284; *Honderű*, March 9, 1844, 339. The central cultural role of the National Theater is also indicated by the fact that both award-winning musical settings were soon sung nationwide as national songs. To this day, "Hymnusz" and "Szózat" are still paired up as opening and closing numbers of official celebrations. ↑

5. On the sources of "Hymnusz" from the National Theater and the Hungarian Royal Opera House, see Katalin Kim, "A Hymnusz 19. századi átdolgozásairól" [Nineteenth-century arrangements of "Hymnusz"], in *Zenetudományi dolgozatok 2019–2020* [Studies in musicology 2019–2020], ed. Katalin Kim, ass. ed. Lili Békéssy, Pál Horváth, and Péter Merényi (Budapest: BTK Zenetudományi Intézet ELKH, 2021). ↑
6. Magdaléna Tóth, ed., *A magyar Himnusz képes albuma* [An illustrated album of the Hungarian National Anthem] (Budapest: Országos Széchényi Könyvtár – Argumentum, 2017). ↑
7. Ferenc Bónis, "A Himnusz születése és másfél évszázada" [The birth of the national anthem and its one and a half century], in Tóth, *A magyar Himnusz képes albuma*, 75–96. ↑
8. Kata Riskó, "Erkel Hymnuszának keletkezése és hagyományozódásának története az első világháborúig" [The genesis of Erkel's "Hymnusz" and the history of its tradition until the First World War], in Tóth, *A magyar Himnusz képes albuma*, 97–127. ↑
9. See, among others, the study by Zoltán G. Szabó and Vilmos Voigt in Tóth, *A magyar Himnusz képes albuma*, as well as Ildikó Nagy, "Himnusz, Szózat kontra Gotterhalte: Birodalmi és nemzeti szimbólumok az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchia Magyarországon" ["Himnusz," "Szózat" versus Gotterhalte: Symbols of the empire and nation in the Hungarian part of the double monarchy], *Aetas* 32, no. 4 (2017): 21–62, accessed March 12, 2018; Róbert Milbacher, "'A felébredt nemzet ebben az énekben magára lelt': A Hymnus 'nemzetiesítésének' folyamatáról" ["The awakened nation found itself in this song": How the "Hymnus" became a National Symbol], *Holmi* 26, no. 12 (December 2014): 1624–40, accessed March 10, 2018. ↑
10. *Az Est*, February 15, 1917, 9. ↑



11. At the reception in Debrecen of Karl IV and his wife, despite the explicit request of the mayor (főispán), it was not the 3rd Guard of Honor of the Debrecen Hussards who marched, but the 75th Infantry Regiment, serving the garrison with its Czech troops. That's why instead of Erkel's "Hymnusz," they played "Gott erhalte." Later, "Hymnusz" was also heard, but nevertheless, or perhaps even under this pretext, the incident was accompanied by a massive media outcry and was also discussed in Parliament. See Gergely Romsics, "A Monarchia utolsó jelképbotránnya: A debreceni Gotterhalte-affér" [The last symbol scandal of the monarchy: The Gotterhalte affair in Debrecen], *Rubicon* 9 (2005): 20–26. [↑](#)
12. But it is also possible that the applications were numbered only before being handed over to the jury. [↑](#)
13. Bónis, "A Himnusz születése," 80. [↑](#)
14. Legány, *Erkel Ferenc művei*, 52. [↑](#)
15. Amadé Németh, *Erkel Ferenc életének krónikája* [Chronicle of Ferenc Erkel's life], Napról napra ... Nagy muzsikások életének krónikája 10 (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1973), 76. [↑](#)
16. *Regélő Pesti Divatlap* 3, no. 2 (July 14, 1844): 59. Erkel's "Hymnusz" was praised by *Der Spiegel*, July 6, 1844: "Den 2. d. wurden die besseren zur Preisbewerbung eingesandten Kompositionen auf Kölcsey's Hymne abgesungen, von welchen nur eine, die den Preis von 20 Dukaten gewinnende (von Hrn. Kapellmeister Erkel) allen in der Preisausschreibung gemachten Anforderungen entsprach, die übrigen wurden wahrscheinlich [sic] nur darum gesungen, um die Unpartheilichkeit der Preisrichter zu zeigen, denn im Werthe standen sie unter Null." [On the 2 instant, the better compositions on Kölcsey's hymn submitted for the competition were sung, of which only one, the one winning the prize of 20 ducats (by Mr. Kapellmeister Erkel) met all the requirements of the competition, the others were probably sung only to show the impartiality of the judges, since their value was below zero.] [↑](#)
17. Legány, *Erkel Ferenc művei*, 52. See also Zoltán Falvy, "A Himnusz kézírata" [The manuscript of "Hymnusz"], *Muzsika* 3, no. 3 (March 1960): 14–19; László Somfai, "Az Erkel-kéziratok problémái" [The problems of Erkel's manuscripts], in *Az opera történetéből* [From the history of opera], ed. Bence Szabolcsi and Dénes Bartha, Zenetudományi Tanulmányok 9 (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1961), 81–158; Somfai, "A Himnusz ősbemutatójának szólamanyaga" [The part material of "Hymnusz's" premiere], in *Írások Erkel Ferencről és a magyar zene korábbi századairól* [Writings about Ferenc Erkel and the earlier centuries of Hungarian music], ed. Ferenc Bónis, Magyar Zenetörténeti Tanulmányok (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1968), 57–62. [↑](#)
18. Gárdonyi, "Apróságok Erkel életéből," 213–14. [↑](#)
19. The copy of Erkel's entry and the orchestral and vocal parts were written down by János Kocsi, the clarinetist of the National Theater, who at the time was also the copyist of Erkel's works. It was Kocsi who also duplicated the orchestral materials and the orchestral score for the premiere of the opera *Hunyadi László* (January 27, 1844). We were able to identify his handwriting on the basis of a copyist's bill for *Hunyadi László*. [↑](#)
20. Bónis, "A Himnusz születése," 81. [↑](#)
21. Dezső Legány, "Erkel Ferenc Pozsonyban" [Ferenc Erkel in Pressburg], *Magyar Zene* 36, no. 1 (1995): 51–55. [↑](#)

22. See *Devotio Sacris Hymnis a studiosa juventute in Gymnasiis Ordinis S. Benedicti cani solitis comprehensa: Choralia pro quatuor vocibus, ac organo ad hos Hymnos pertinentia aparte exstant per Klein, Musices Scholae Poseniensis Professorem, emendata* ([Pressburg: Belnay], 1815), shelfmark: MS10324-8°. ↑
23. About Erkel's composition methods, see Somfai, "Az Erkel-kéziratok problémái," as well as the doctoral thesis written by the author of the present study: [Katalin Kim Szacsvai, "Az Erkel-műhely: Közös munka Erkel Ferenc színpadi műveiben \(1840-1857\)"](#) [The Erkel workshop: Collaboration in the stage plays of Ferenc Erkel (1840-1857)] (PhD diss., Liszt Ferenc Zeneművészeti Egyetem, 2012), with an [abstract in English](#), as well as Kim-Szacsvai, "Die Erkel-Werkstatt: Die Anfänge einer Arbeitsteilung in der Komposition," *Studia Musicologica* 52, no. 1-4 (December 2011): 27-46. ↑
24. For further facsimiles of compositional sources available online, see Kim Szacsvai, "Erkel-műhely," and "Die Erkel-Werkstatt." ↑
25. They did not have to fear that anyone would recognize the *Dózsa* anthem, given that the opera was unfortunately performed only ten times after its 1867 première, and due to its political message it was removed from the program as of 1869. ↑
26. Translation by Csaba Varjasi Farkas for the fifth volume of the complete edition of *Ferenc Erkel Operas: Dózsa György* (Budapest: Rózsavölgyi és Társa, in preparation). ↑
27. On the musical representation of Franz Joseph's 1857 visit to Hungary, see Lili Békéssy, "Az 1857-es magyarországi császárlátogatás zenei reprezentációja" [The musical representation of Franz Joseph's visit to Hungary in 1857], in Kim and others, *Zenatudományi dolgozatok 2017-2018*. ↑
28. Erkel wrote the second act of the opera. The overture and act one were composed by Franz Doppler, whereas act three was written by Karl Doppler. Both Doppler brothers worked at the time in the National Theater (as solo flutist and second conductor, respectively, and as resident composers). Franz Doppler helped Erkel to prepare the orchestration of act two. See Kim-Szacsvai, "Die Erkel-Werkstatt," 27-46. ↑
29. In the autograph score only the author's remark signals that "Hymnusz" should be played here with organ accompaniment. However, in the early score copy of the National Theater the orchestral version was copied (probably from the copy of "Hymnusz" submitted for the competition), and space was left for the organ part. But only the first bars were entered from the elaborated organ accompaniment, probably because it was not necessary, as there was already a piano reduction available. In spite of this, according to the entries of the part materials of the National Theater, there were early performances at which "Hymnusz" was played with organ accompaniment. See. Szacsvai Kim, "Erkel-műhely," 177-78. ↑
30. We do not know for sure whether "Hymnusz" was performed at the private performance given in the presence of Franz Joseph and Elisabeth. But it was certainly included in the performances of *Erzsébet*, and as such it was most likely played in the presence of Franz Joseph. In any case, "Hymnusz" became part of the later productions of the opera. There were new productions staged in honor of Franz Joseph as well. The first revival was on August 18, 1865, a festive performance on the eve of the emperor's birthday and on January 30, 1866, a festive performance on the occasion of the arrival of the ruling couple.

The second revival was on April 24, 1879, in the presence of the ruling couple on the occasion of their silver wedding, for the benefit of the flood victims in Szeged. [↑](#)

Cover picture: Portrait of Ferenc Erkel, lithography; by courtesy of Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, [Bildarchiv Austria](#). This text was translated by István Csaba Németh.