

BENCE ASZTALOS¹**Audience Education, Concert Pedagogy – Hans Krása’s Children’s Opera:
Brundibár**

The objective of a symphony orchestra’s musical education programme is to establish accurate and long term experience in schoolchildren and young people, which encourages them to appreciate classical music later in life. Such a programme leads students into the world of instruments and music, provides an enjoyable and at the same time useful extension to regular music classes. Brundibár, an extremely touching and tragic children’s opera by Hans Krása, has played a special role in the children’s opera series of the Budapest Festival Orchestra’s (BFO) educational program. This essay is evoking the origins of the opera, the circumstances of the first performances in Theresienstadt, and the recent performances by BFO.

1. Prologue

Attending concerts contributes to making us recipients as well as making us socialize into being an audience. The ambivalent attitude of certain layers of a potential concert audience to concert situations is due to the fact that this process of socialization does not take place at an appropriate age (Retkes and Várkonyi ed., 2010). It is one of the most pressing tasks of concert pedagogy to halt the dramatic shrinking of the audience of classical music concerts; that is to say, to halt their aging and the decrease of their number by changing the tendencies. “[...] *the very conditions of live performance help focus attention on the music and therefore make it more likely that flow will result at a concert than when one is listening to reproduced sound.*” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 110.)

The educational functions of music institutions (orchestras, concert hall centres, educational institutions) are increasingly expanding, which requires new methods and techniques of mediation. The Budapest Festival Orchestra (BFO) acknowledged the importance of this area at the same time as the founding of the ensemble (1983); thus, in the past three decades, the orchestra has established systematic and well-functioning cooperation with public education and higher education institutions. All this is in line with Kodály’s ideas about the quality criteria for children’s experiences with music (Kodály, 1982). Unlike the

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public education programs of the organizations hosting or organizing the concerts, it is the Festival Orchestra itself that creates and defines the structure of these programs; which aim at making the circumstances attractive, finding new and more relaxed venues for encountering music, adapting it to the life cycle of young people. The orchestra's artists quickly recognized the importance of this task and the beauty of its inherent artistic-educational challenge, though it seems to be an almost unsurmountable challenge for most educated musicians. (Trencsényi, 2013) The new elements of the orchestra's educational program are often invented by the musicians themselves; they process their experiences this way by incorporating them into the next encounter with young people.

2. The BFO's educational program

The orchestra offers programs that contribute to the entrancing character of the reception, and to the complexity of the music experience while taking into account the age of young people. One of the oldest of such programs is the Cocoa Concert series, which promises family-friendly, story-telling weekend afternoons for 5–12-year-olds, and of course their parents and grandparents, to get acquainted with music. By way of 3–4-minute solo and chamber productions, the leader of the orchestra, or a musician introduces the world of musical instruments and listening habits to the nursery school audience in a funny and enthusiastic way. Foreign children living in Hungary can participate in Cocoa Concerts in English, and the orchestra has separate Cocoa Concerts for children with autism, who have been shown to many researchers to be influenced by the role of music in their social interactions (Kim, Wigram and Gold, 2009). This is in line with music director Iván Fischer's thoughts: "*A child who finds it hard to use words can be reached by music because his feelings are the same as any other person's feelings.*" (Belinszky, 2015a)

With the "Choose your Instrument!" series, the orchestra visits 6–8-year-old children who have not yet chosen a musical instrument. In a short concert, the musicians present their instruments, which can be tried by the students.

The program entitled "The BFO reaches out!" is for the 8–18-year-olds, in which the artists of the Festival Orchestra visit children living in the countryside. In the frame of mini-courses, musicians encounter students who are already learning how to play an instrument, with the aim to encourage them becoming professional musicians. The visits also makes it possible for musicians to discover new talents.

Not only does the BFO knock on the doors – kids can also knock on its doors. By attending orchestral rehearsals, students from partner schools have a great opportunity to closely observe a symphony orchestra, to get to know symphonic music, and to track the rehearsal process.

Midnight Music is a series for an older generation – young adults – at the Millenáris Theatre in Budapest and in the Várkert Bazaar: *“It’s at night. It’s about midnight. Cyclists and pedestrians arrive at Millenáris Park. Many people are already asleep. [...] however, the crowd of young people did not gather accidentally in the Millenáris Theatre. We know, we feel that something exciting is going to happen, and we all want to be parts of it. Of course, we know, since we all came to listen to serious music in the middle of the night, clutching onto a comfortable beanbag.”* (Belinszky, 2015b). BFO here is addressing young people, the nightlife community of young adults, by re-packing a full orchestra concert, leaving the cool elegance of concert halls behind.

In addition to numerous foreign guest performances, the most important aspect for BFO’s musicians is to make their music available to their home audience – for all age groups and social strata, under all circumstances. That is why, in addition to the audience, they also think of those who do not go to concert halls: children who are limited in their movement, or otherwise seriously hindered to come to a concert, old people, families who cannot afford to buy a ticket, the disadvantaged young people to whom classical music is completely unknown, church communities, residents of small towns and villages. Everyone who might find it important to encounter music. For this purpose, the Festival Orchestra organizes three Community Weeks per season, when chamber formations give performances in old-age homes, child care homes, schools, churches, synagogues or prisons.

In 2015 BFO decided to go not only to underprivileged regions, but also to give people the chance to come to Budapest and become the creators of an important and large-scale event with the ensemble. The experience of joint creation has brought together thousands of young people who have danced for the fourth time to the Festival Orchestra’s music as part of the Dancing on the Square project in Heroes Square, Budapest. Partnership with schools is aimed at attracting disadvantaged and less disadvantaged, Roma and non-Roma children through joint dancing and shared experiences. In addition to dancing and music, the initiative is about accepting each other, showing tolerance and respect, sharing values and experiences. In addition to the weekly dance rehearsals that began months earlier, the series also provides an opportunity for the participating communities to meet BFO artists; thus bringing them closer

to classical music. Organizers are convinced that the music of the Dancing on the Square can build a special relationship between people regardless of gender, social status, ethnicity or language differences. Moreover, it teaches co-operation and openness, as well as attention to one another. All this is in line with the concept of educational policy, which sets the goal of music education in the creation of decisive, shared, collective experiences which contribute to nurturing the harmony of inclusion and self-expression, as well as attention to each other.²

This is the sixth year of the “See what you hear!” film contest where primary and high school students can submit short films they created with any kind of technique to go with a piece of music, or any of the movements of a piece of music, chosen by BFO. The task of the participants is to write the scenario following the music process, and then to play it, and to perform the tasks of photography and cutting. The objective is to display the thoughts, feelings and inspirations that the music has awakened in the students. The winning works will be presented in the Bartók Béla National Concert Hall at the Palace of Arts in Budapest.

For years now, BFO’s repertoire has featured youth opera performances, which the orchestra offers free of charge, to schools in the country and Budapest schools after the presentation in a concert hall; making it possible for thousands of young people to enjoy the performance. These productions are not only for children, but quite often children can act in the operas, so young people in the audience can much easier identify themselves with the pieces. One of the works performed most often in the largest variety of venues, was Hans Krása’s children’s opera entitled *Brundibár* composed in 1938, which was performed by the orchestra in two seasons with different castings.

3. Brundibár

In September 1944 a propaganda film was released by order of the Nazis with the aim of misinformation, intended to show the world how well-treated the deported Jews were under the protection of the Third Reich. The film is often called *The Führer Gives the Jews a City*³ (Gerron 1944), and it showed the whole world that these people were on holiday there, while waiting to be transported to their future country, to be established either in Israel or in Madagascar. They were doing sports activities, went to the theatre and to concerts. This film

² 110/2012. (VI. 4.) Kormányrendelet, p. 10785

³ The correct name of the propaganda film is *Theresienstadt: A Documentary Film of the Jewish Resettlement* directed by Jewish prisoner [Kurt Gerron](#) (1897–1944).

was recorded in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, which was maintained as a show camp with the aim to misinform the diplomats.

The International Red Cross held an inspection visit in June 1944, as they wanted to know what was happening to the Jewish people who had been transported from their homes to the concentration camps. When the delegation of the Red Cross arrived on 23 June 1944, the camp had been cleaned up and polished. The less healthy prisoners were transported from Theresienstadt to other extermination camps. The Nazis managed to convince the representatives of the Red Cross, that everything was all right with the inhabitants there, and there was no need to worry. This was the only place where they wanted to show this. Due to soft regulations a kind of cultural freedom was allowed inside the camp. Culture was the only way for prisoners to express their resistance and their desire to freedom. Many prominent artists were imprisoned here, so several stage performances were produced and attended by camp inmates. Concert orchestras, chamber ensembles were organised, there were theatre and cabaret performances, and even such forbidden genres like jazz could have been heard in Theresienstadt. There were plenty of difficulties; for example prisoners had only few music instruments. In an attic there was a piano with no legs. One could play on it only in a lying position. Somebody brought a cello into the camp covered as if it were a human corpse.

Probably the most popular performance during these years in Theresienstadt was the children's opera *Brundibár* composed by prisoner Hans Krása (1899–1944). It was performed fifty-five times there and all the performances were sold out. The story line of the opera is very simple: Aninka and Pepiček, brother and sister want to get milk – following the doctor's suggestion – for their sick mother. They have no money, but an organ-grinder (named *Brundibár*) suddenly appears in the street and earns money with his music. The children want to follow his example by singing, but the organ-grinder does not let them earn money in the same way, because he does not want competition to threaten his trade. However, the children get help: animals and some other children hurry to Aninka's and Pepiček's aid, so they can get rid of *Brundibár*. This was the point that meant a lot for the Theresienstadt audience. They could get rid of a dictator. On the stage *Brundibár* had a big moustache, and everybody knew what this meant: they clearly saw *Brundibár* as a portrayal of Hitler. The child who played the role of *Brundibár* had such bravura that he always drew the loudest applause.

Unfortunately, he did not survive the war. He was one of the thousands of children kept in Theresienstadt, who were sent to gas chambers. Very few of these children survived. Only a few children's drawings, a few minutes of the Nazi propaganda film and the survivors'

memory tell us their story. After World War II these survivors often visited Brundibár performances. There were really touching moments when they were called from the audience to the stage by a child singer, to sing with them together the closing song of the opera.

The history of these performances of Brundibár is a very romantic and at the same time a very sad story. The plot of the opera is the opposite of drama, it is full of humour. One has ambiguous impressions after watching this opera, but these contradictory impressions are tightly interconnected. Why is this opera so popular after seventy years? Why is it played all over the world with such huge success? The answer is very simple: the quality of the music, the moral of the story and its particularly moving history.

4. The last BFO staging of Brundibár

The Festival Theatre of the Palace of Arts in Budapest hosted a performance of Brundibár by the musicians of the Budapest Singing School (Budapesti Énekes Iskola) and the Festival Orchestra on 9 September 2009. The Hungarian performance was translated by Judit Rajk, directed by Eszter Novák and conducted by Iván Fischer. Before the performance, a short introductory film was viewed by the audience, including cuts from the 1944 propaganda film; and then Simon Szegeli, one of the actors in the film (once an inmate in Theresienstadt), responded to Iván Fischer's questions about his experiences regarding Brundibár. On 11 September 2013, the orchestra performed the children's opera again, this time in the framework of the "Bridging Europe" festival focusing in 2013 on the Czech Republic, conducted by Kálmán Szennai. The schools and venues where the children's opera was later performed after the concert performance in autumn 2013 are:

- Palace of Arts Festival Theatre, Budapest
- ELTE Radnóti Miklós Secondary Grammar School
- ELTE Trefort Ágoston Secondary Grammar School
- British School Budapest
- Pécs, Hotel Palatinus, Bartók Hall
- Kecskemét, Kodály Zoltán School
- Budapest, Bolyai János Primary School
- Budapest, Deák Diák Primary School
- Budapest Ferencváros Cultural Centre

- Győr, Kodály Zoltán Primary School of Gyárváros and Szabadhegy Chief Administration

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