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## **Performance style of the operetta embodied in operatic performance practice.**

### **An analysis of Elza Szamosi's 1908 recording of "Mi chiamano Mimi"<sup>1</sup>**

#### **1. Operatic culture of Budapest at the turn of the century**

Though the Hungarian première of *Manon Lescaut* (17 March 1894) took place still in the stormy years of the *verismo*, the first great Puccini-era of the Royal Hungarian Opera was the first decade of the twentieth century. From 1903 on, three operas by Puccini were premièred in three consecutive theatrical seasons in the Royal Hungarian Opera House with great success: *Tosca* (1 December 1903), *La bohème* (27 April 1905)<sup>2</sup> and *Madama Butterfly* (12 May 1906) – the latter was held in the presence and under the direction of the composer. As a continuation, the first revival of *Manon Lescaut* took place in 1907, and this series ended in 1912 with the Hungarian première of *La Fanciulla del West* (29 February 1912), again in the presence of Puccini. These premières were epoch-making not only in the culture but also in the operatic performance practice of Budapest. For some years the popularity of Puccini almost threw into the shade even that of Wagner in Hungary.

#### **2. Operettas in Budapest and in the Royal Hungarian Opera**

This period coincides with the so called "silver era" of the Austro-Hungarian operetta, which was rather a Hungarian era of that genre. Many of the internationally well-known operetta performers and composers of this period were Hungarian, e. g. the composers Imre Kálmán and Ferenc Lehár and the operetta singers Ilka Pálmay (1859–1945) and Juliska Kopácsy-Karczag (1871–1957). Operetta was the most popular music theatrical genre in Budapest at the time; it shows the popularity of the genre that operettas were performed not only in the operetta theatres of Budapest but also in the Royal Hungarian Opera, which premièred some operettas as a means of adding freshness and vitality to the repertoire.

At the turn of the century it was not unusual to perform operettas in operatic theatres, for example, in city theatres in Germany. But the case of the Royal Hungarian Opera was different

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based upon a paper delivered at the Performance Studies Network third international conference of the CMPCP in Cambridge („Singing Puccini Like an Operetta? Elza Szamosi and the Early Hungarian Performance Style of Puccini”). The author is a member of the „Lendület” Archives and Research Group for 20th and 21st Century Hungarian Music (Institute of Musicology, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences) and holds the Postdoctoral Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. I offer my thanks to Ágnes Lux for her help in the English text.

<sup>2</sup> *La Bohème* could not be staged at the Opera in its time because *La Bohème* by Leoncavallo was premièred in 1897.

in several aspects, precisely because of the popularity of the operettas. First of all, in Budapest there were three operetta theatres at the time (Király Theatre, Magyar Theatre, People's Theatre) and operettas were performed in some other theatres as well (Vígyszínház, Városligeti színpark etc.). Therefore, the Royal Hungarian Opera could have had a purely operatic repertoire, but it did not. Another aspect is that only one new Hungarian operetta was played in the Opera – *Fürstenkind* by Franz Lehár –; the operetta repertoire of the Opera consisted of some older French and Viennese operettas by Lecocq, Offenbach and Johann Strauss, as opposed to the German opera houses, where new and older operettas were both performed. The case of Budapest is quite similar to Vienna, where *Die Fledermaus* and *Der Zigeunerbaron* by Johann Strauss were regularly played at the turn of the century in the Court Opera as well, but only these operettas, maybe as “classical” works of the genre;<sup>3</sup> the new operettas were played in the Theater an der Wien, in the Carltheater and in the Johann Strauss Theater.

### **3. Performance style of the operetta in Hungary**

The genre of the operetta required a quite different vocal and acting style than the opera which was at that time the noblest genre, with rigid and old-fashioned performance style. The task of the performer of an operetta is more complex than that of an opera performer. The operetta performance always reacts to the recentness; it is almost rewritten from performance to performance “by” the performers themselves. Despite this fact the performers of the operettas played at the Opera were members of the operatic ensemble, so the singers of *Die Fledermaus*, *Der Zigeunerbaron* or *Fürstenkind* were the same as the singers of the contemporary operas e.g. *Madama Butterfly*, *La Fanciulla del West* or even *Salome*.

The singing style of the operetta is scarcely researched. Kevin Clarke discussed in an article some elements of this performance practice with the help of sound recordings<sup>4</sup> and he pointed out that the opera singers' operetta performances essentially changed the performance style and the meaning of the operetta. Clarke summarized the elements of the performance practice of the operetta in five points: (1) eroticism and sexual innuendos, (2) artificial, often ironical stylization, (3) unrefined but effectual voice material, (4) bravery in dance and (5) glamorous personality.<sup>5</sup> It is remarkable that only two of these elements are musical ones and four at most are real elements of the performance practice, the fifth is rather a personal characteristic.

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<sup>3</sup> See: Dr. Wilhelm Beetz: *Das Wiener Opernhaus 1869 bis 1945*. (Zürich: Panorama, 1949).

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Clarke: „Aspekte der Aufführungspraxis oder: Wie klingt eine historisch informierte Spielweise der Operette?“ *FZMw* Jg. 9 (2006): pp. 21–75.

<sup>5</sup> Clarke, p. 65.

I found an older description about the operetta style as well: the great stage director Constantin Stanislavsky wrote a short paragraph about the performance style of the operetta, in which he considered the operetta to be a stepping stone for the stage for novice actors. He wrote: “The light genre demands strong voice, good diction, the deeper understanding of the motion and the rhythm, liveliness and honest happiness. It needs nobility and charm [...], great external technique, but it does not intrude intense and complex feelings onto the soul. [...]”<sup>6</sup> Although his statements are very important in the acting, they include even less musical features than that of Clarke.

On the basis of my analyses on early Hungarian operetta recordings, I would like to add to these descriptions some pure musical elements.<sup>7</sup> (1) The operetta singers sing usually with free rhythm. The rhythmical pulsation is strict only in the faster dance songs, for example, polkas and modern American dances. The singer is allowed to sing free in the verses of the slower waltzes above the almost free three-quarter pulsation of the orchestra, but the refrain must have a perceptible waltz pulsation again. (2) In the operetta arias – mainly in slow arias – the singers sing many slides, *glissandi* or *portamenti*. At that time the operatic singers also used more *portamenti* than today’s singers, but in the operetta there are much more slides, regardless of intervals, of the direction of the intervals and of the text. (3) The singers use their speech voice as well, not only as a frequent change between the singing and speaking, but also as a singing characteristic. They sing in the middle position with darkened chestvoice, which sounds almost as if they are speaking. Only in the high position do they sing with full resonance, with a normal singing voice. (4) The interpretation of the operetta is always loose, not only free in rhythm and singing, but also free from the rigidity of the operatic stage.

#### 4. Operetta singers in the Opera

It is remarkable that several early Hungarian performers of the operas by Puccini were successful operetta singers before – and in part, after – their operatic careers. They renewed the acting and singing style of the operatic genre, mainly in contemporary works for which they could create a new performance style. All three Hungarian female singers who created the Puccini roles were successful as operetta singers as well. Teréz Krammer (1868–1934), the first Hungarian Tosca, appeared in Vienna at the opening night of the Johann Strauss Theater

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<sup>6</sup> Konstantin Sztanyiszlavszkij [Konstantin Stanislavsky]: *Életem* [My Life]. Translated to Hungarian by Géza Staud. (Budapest: Madách Színház, Új Színház Kft., 1941): pp. 51–52. (= gróf Károlyi István – Pünkössti Andor (eds.): *Madách Könyvtár* 2)

<sup>7</sup> I discussed the elements of the singing style of the operetta in Hungary in a paper delivered at the conference on popular music, organized by the „Lendület” Archives and Research Group for 20th and 21st Century Hungarian Music in January 2014. The written version of that paper is in progress.

(30 October 1908), and she was a member of this theatre for a half year.<sup>8</sup> Ilona Szoyer (1880–1956), the first Hungarian Musetta, and Elza Szamosi (1884–1924), the first Hungarian Mimi, Madama Butterfly and Minnie, were engaged by the Royal Hungarian Opera after some successful years as operetta singers;<sup>9</sup> Szoyer even returned to the genre of the operetta after her years in the Royal Hungarian Opera. The male singers of these premières – József Gábor (1879–1929) as Rodolfo and Béla Környei (1873–1925) as Dick Johnson – were also successful operetta singers.<sup>10</sup> These singers, who came from the operetta, brought a new performing style to the operatic stage; the rather rigid and formal operatic acting got imbued with the acting and performance style of the operetta.

A good example of the success of that new performance style was the Hungarian première of *La Bohème* which was staged in double cast. The young, former operetta singers – Szamosi, Szoyer and József Gábor – were split up between the two casts. A year later, when Puccini came to Budapest for the première of *Madama Butterfly*, *Tosca* and *La Bohème* were performed with the best cast in his honour. The two casts of *La Bohème* were mixed in a way that the former operetta singers played the main roles of the opera. It shows the popularity and success of their performance style.

	First cast 27 April 1905	Second cast 28 April 1905	In the presence of Puccini 8 May 1906
Mimi	<b>Elza Szamosi</b>	Teréz Krammer	<b>Elza Szamosi</b>
Musetta	<b>Ilona Szoyer</b>	Gizella Blätterbauer	<b>Ilona Szoyer</b>
Rodolfo	Dezső Arányi	<b>József Gábor</b>	<b>József Gábor</b>

Their singing style was highly esteemed by the audience and by Puccini himself, even if they sang differently than the foreign opera singers. For example, after the première of *Madama Butterfly* Puccini recommended Elza Szamosi to Henry Savage for a seven-month

<sup>8</sup> On the basis of the playbills stored at the Theatermuseum Wien.

<sup>9</sup> Szoyer was a member of the Carl-Theater in Vienna (1899–1900) and of the Magyar Theatre in Budapest (1900–1901) as an operetta singer, later she was a member of the People’s Opera also in Budapest (1912–1915). Elza Szamosi was a member of the Király Theatre (1903–1904) and the People’s Theatre (1904) in Budapest as an operetta singer.

<sup>10</sup> József Gábor appeared in operetta roles as a member of the Vígszínház [Comedy Theatre] (1899 and from 1916 on), of the Népszínház [People’s Theatre] (1900) and of the Király Theatre (1908). Béla Környei started his career at the Choir of the Népszínház [People’s Theatre] (1896) and later he performed operettas as a member of the Krecsányi Ensemble (from 1900 on) and of the Király Theatre (1908). Both of them recorded many operetta excerpts as well.

USA tour for the roles of Mimi and Butterfly, and she sang the title role of *Madama Butterfly* at the first performance in the USA (15 October 1906, Washington).<sup>11</sup>

### 5. Elza Szamosi's performance style.

Elza Szamosi was perhaps the first modern woman – in the sense of the *femme nouvelle* – on the Hungarian operatic stage. She sang in Hungarian premières of several modern operas and created several modern female roles in Budapest. Her most successful roles were Carmen, Mimi, Madama Butterfly, Manon by Jules Massenet, Delilah and the Queen of Shaba. We do not know too much about her singing studies, only that she studied in Budapest with an Italian singing teacher, Quirino Merli. She started her career in Berlin at the age of seventeen (1902, Königliche Hofoper), later she appeared in Leipzig (1902–1903, Vereinigte Stadttheater), then as an operetta singer in Budapest (1903–1904, Király Theatre, 1904, People's Theatre). She was a member of the Royal Hungarian Opera from 1904 to 1914, except for the duration of her USA tour. She sang in the Hungarian première of *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly* and *La Fanciulla del West*. The latter two premières were directed by the composer himself and Puccini was very satisfied with the singing of Elza Szamosi. There are some letters from Puccini to Szamosi, published in the period press, in which he admired Elza Szamosi's Butterfly.<sup>12</sup> – I have to mention here that Szamosi's first husband was a doctor who left his job in order to manage the career of his wife. I can not exclude that some of these letters were written by him, not by Puccini. However, it is true that she sang the role of Cio-Cio-San as a member of the Castle Square Opera Company in the American première of *Madama Butterfly*.

According to the period press, she lost the freshness of her voice during her USA tour.<sup>13</sup> However, it is not certain that the press was objective, since the journalists sharply criticized her because she left hastily, and for financial reasons for the USA.<sup>14</sup> Finally, she left the Royal Hungarian Opera in 1914, and during World War I she appeared in smaller theatres as a guest singer, mainly as Mimi and Carmen. After some years as a singing teacher she died an early death, at 39. She made some recordings before and after her USA tour, and according to these

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<sup>11</sup> Jim McPherson: „The Savage Innocents. Part 2: On the Road with Parsifal, Butterfly, the Widow, and the Girl”, *The Opera Quarterly* 19/1 (Winter 2003), pp. 28–63.

<sup>12</sup> [Anonymous]: „(Puccini elismerése.)” [Puccini's appreciation] *Magyarország* 18 May 1906.; [Anonymous]: „A newyorki út előtt. Beszélgetés Szamosi Elzával.” [Before the tour to New York. Interview with Elza Szamosi] *A Polgár* 20 June 1906.

<sup>13</sup> See for example: D. A. [Artur Dombay]: „M. Kir. Opera.” [Royal Hungarian Opera]. *Alkotmány* 18 October 1907.

<sup>14</sup> [Anonymous]: „(Szamosi Elza Amerikában.)” [Elza Szamosi in America] *Budapesti Hirlap* 29 May 1906.

recordings she still had voice after 1907 as well.<sup>15</sup> She also recorded some arias from operas by Puccini. Despite of the fact that she was a successful operetta singer, she did not record any operetta excerpts. Perhaps her name had become inseparable from the operas of Puccini.

But was it only the singing style of Szamosi that caused such an enthusiasm for Puccini? Looking at the repertoire of Szamosi, it is not easy to determine her voice type. She sang alto parts as Erda and Delilah, mezzosoprano parts, for example, as Carmen and Azucena, and also higher soprano roles as Mimi, Butterfly or Saffi. The ranges of her early operetta roles are also large: from the low *a* sharp to the high *c*. Was she a late *soprano assoluta*? I do not think so. On the basis of the press reviews and her recordings, it is clear that the higher notes above *b* flat were re-composed for her:

The image shows a musical score for a Hungarian recording of 'Madama Butterfly'. It consists of two systems of two staves each. The first system has lyrics: "A nagy se-reg meg-áll, szá-vam a csá-szár ke-gyel-me-sen hall-ja,". The second system has lyrics: "egy-szer, ki tud-ja, be-lő-led majd nagy hí-rü her-ceg lesz és bá-tor dal-ja." The score is in 4/4 time and B-flat major.

(The original score of *Madama Butterfly* is in the lower part, in the other part is the version sung by Elza Szamosi in Hungarian on the recording of the International Talking Machine Company (Jumbola label, No. 15639, matr. Ho 452), recorded in Budapest, about 1910).<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately, she did not record any arias from her virtuoso high soprano operetta roles. The critics always mentioned that she did not have the appropriate voice for the higher parts such as Mimi, Butterfly, Tosca or even Santuzza.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, a critic found the role of Delilah too low for her<sup>18</sup> – however, it is not verifiable on the basis of her Delilah recording.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> A selective list of Szamosi's recordings can be found in my article „Szamosi Elza és a korai magyar Puccini-stílus jellegzetességei” published online on the website of the Ferenc Liszt Music Academy (Budapest): [http://lfze.hu/hu/doktori-iskola/tamop/palyazatok/-/asset\\_publisher/NknC9EJlvYIv/content/posztdoktori-palyazat-eredmenye](http://lfze.hu/hu/doktori-iskola/tamop/palyazatok/-/asset_publisher/NknC9EJlvYIv/content/posztdoktori-palyazat-eredmenye)

<sup>16</sup> The recording is available in the Andor Tiszay Collection of the Győző Csorba Library, Pécs (Hungary) and in the Archives of the Gesellschaft für Historische Tonträger (GHT) in Vienna.

<sup>17</sup> (–rfi.): „Bohémélet.” [La bohème] *Budapest* 28 April 1905; Armand Erdős: „Puccini – Pillangó kisasszony.” [Puccini – *Madama Butterfly*] *Egyetértés* 13 May 1906; (–ty.): „M. kir. Opera.” [Royal Hungarian Opera] *Az Ujság* 18 October 1907.; e. a. [Armand Erdős]: „Opera.” *Egyetértés* 28 October 1908.

<sup>18</sup> [Anonymous]: „(M. kir. operaház.)” [Royal Hungarian Opera] *Pesti Hirlap* 26/305 (4 November 1904): p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> „Mon coeur...”, in Hungarian, The Gramophone Company, HMV AK 111, matr. 5935ab. Recorded on 28 October 1913 in Budapest.

Her most successful roles were the Puccini heroines and Carmen. A remarkable sentence can be found in the press after her debut at the Budapest Opera as Carmen. A critic wrote that “She is in an excellent school on the operetta stage. She is leaving behind the manners of the conventional operatic performing tradition. Her singing gains confidence and a flair for the dramatic.”<sup>20</sup> It is true – one can remember the quotation from Stanislavsky, mentioned above –, but the operetta had bigger impact on Szamosi’s art.

Elza Szamosi’s acting was special in many aspects. She brought from the operetta not only looseness in the acting style, but also the mischievousness of the genre. She was young – only 21 in the year of the *Bohème*-première. The first female singers of the Puccini roles were quite older than her when they worked with Puccini. On the basis of this kind of comparison it is obvious that Puccini liked the younger female singers much more; for example, when he heard Gilda dalla Rizza as Minnie in Florence, he admired her: “At last I’ve seen my fanciulla”.<sup>21</sup> Dalla Rizza was only 21 years old at the time, just like Elza Szamosi when performing Mimi in Budapest.

Singer	born	role and year	age
Cesira Ferrani	*1863	First Manon, 1893	30
Cesira Ferrani	*1863	First Mimi, 1896	33
Elza Szamosi	*1884	First Mimi in Budapest, 1905	21
Rosina Storchio	*1876	First Butterfly, 1904	28
Salomea Kruscelnicka	*1872	First Butterfly, rev. version, 1904	32
Elza Szamosi	*1884	First Butterfly in Budapest, 1906	22
Emmy Destinn	*1878	First Minnie, 1910	32
Elza Szamosi	*1884	First Minnie in Budapest, 1912	28
Maria Jeritza	*1887	First Minnie in Vienna, 1913	26
Gilda dalla Rizza	*1892	Minnie in Florence, 1913	21

<sup>20</sup> „Az operett-színpadon kitűnő iskolában van. Leszokik a sablonról, az operai tradíció avult, kopott eszközeiről. Éneke nyer biztosságban, a színpadi hatás ismeretében.” [Anonymous]: „(Operaház.)” *Budapesti Hírlap* 26 November 1903.

<sup>21</sup> William Weaver: „Puccini’s Manon and His Other Heroines” in: William Weaver – Simonetta Puccini (eds.): *The Puccini Companion*. (New York – London: W. W. Norton & Company, c1994): pp. 111–121. p. 364.

Szamosi was not only young, but also gorgeous, a fine figure of a woman, and she was able to take eroticism to the stage. Many critics mentioned her erotic stage acting after her performances in the roles of Delilah and the Queen of Shaba – that is, mainly in exotic roles. As a critic wrote about her Delilah: “her snake-like motions, her facial expression of passion and sensuality and the fiery glance produced full illusion. This was a real Delilah, longing after sexual pleasure and thirsting for revenge.”<sup>22</sup> Not only Kevin Clarke, but Moritz Csáky also pointed it out in his book *Ideologie der Operette und Wiener Moderne* that eroticism is elemental in the operetta both as a compositional and interpretational feature.<sup>23</sup> Eroticism was also connected by the period press to the music of Puccini at the Hungarian premières of *Tosca* and *La Bohème*.<sup>24</sup> We can not say for certain that Elza Szamosi’s performances evoked the genre of the operetta in the mind of the audience, but it is possible that people associated her sensuality with the eroticism they experienced in operetta performances.

Szamosi’s singing was also uncommon, unique; the performance practice of the operetta determined not only her acting, but also her singing style. Already in September 1904, at her guest appearance in Vienna as Carmen, Julius Korngold wrote in the *Neue freie Presse* that Szamosi’s Carmen was rather an operetta figure.<sup>25</sup> Some weeks later, in November 1904, similar sentences can be found in the press after Szamosi’s Delilah in Budapest: the critic of *Budapester Tagblatt* compared Szamosi’s Delilah with Georg Anthes’s Samson and stated that Szamosi’s singing was under the influence of the operetta.<sup>26</sup> The critic of *Budapesti Hirlap* wrote that her acting and singing is not serious and noble enough, and emphasizes that she is performing with a calculated effect and with too elaborated details.<sup>27</sup> Such too elaborated and exaggerated details can be heard on her early recording of the Habanera from *Carmen*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> “[...] kigyószzerű mozdulatai, szenvedélyt és érzéki mámort kifejező arcjátéka és tüzes szemeinek sugárzó tekintete teljes illúziót is keltettek. Ez igazi Delila volt, kék és boszu után szomjuzó.” [Anonymous]: „(M. kir. operaház.)” [Royal Hungarian Opera] *Pesti Hirlap* XXVI/305 (4 November 1904): p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Moritz Csáky: „Modernség és szexuális szabadság” in Csáky: *Az operett ideológiája és a bécsi modernség*. [Ideologie der Operette und Wiener Moderne]. Transl. to Hungarian by Magdolna Orosz, Károly Pál and Péter Zalán. (Budapest: Európa, 1999): pp. 112–114.

<sup>24</sup> August Beer: „»Tosca.«” *Pester Lloyd* 2 December 1903.; Imre Kálmán: „Bohémélet.” [La Bohème] *Pesti Napló* 28 April 1905.

<sup>25</sup> „Man hat Bizets Meisteroper einmal eine »tragische Operette« genannt. Der Gast scheint uns – derzeit wenigstens – nur etwa als Carmen dieser Operette gelten zu können. Die Durchbildung der Stimme, eines Mezzosoprans, der nur in der Mittellage voll in Betracht kommen kann, zeigt nicht recht das Opernmaß, sicherlich nicht das Hofopernmaß.“ J. K.: „(Hofopertheater.)“ *Neue Freie Presse* (Morgenblatt). Nr. 14390. (16 September 1904), p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> „Das wurde so recht augenfällig in dem Duo mit Samson, da man zwei Gestalten sah – jede aus einer anderen Welt: Frau Szamosi, noch einigermaßen unter dem Einfluß der leichtgeschürzten Muse und Herr Anthes, ein Heldensänger von vollendeter künstlerischer Noblesse.” [Anonymous]: „(Opernhaus.)” *Budapester Tagblatt* 4. November 1904.

<sup>27</sup> „Énekes játék nem elég egyszerű, komoly, előkelő. A hatáskeresés látszatát kelti s valami operettszerűség tapad még rajta. Ez nem az a nobilis operai stílus, mely első sorban a művészetet szolgálja és csak azután a



Obviously, there are not any remarks of this operetta-like singing at the reviews of the Puccini premières. The first Hungarian Puccini-sopranos, Teréz Krammer, Elza Szamosi and Ilona Szoyer created the performance style of those operas with their own voice characters. As Mimi, Szamosi had an immediate success through her figure; her stage appearance must have been very impressive. A critic wrote, for example, that “it is superfluous to emphasize that her favourable appearance contributed very much to the increase of the success.”<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, there exists only one picture of Szamosi in the role of Mimi but you can imagine that the 21 years old soprano enchanted the audience.

As Cio-Cio-San, Szamosi had such a great success that it was mentioned not only in the press during her lifetime but also in the later Hungarian operatic literature about *Madama Butterfly*. The critics considered the interpretation of Szamosi perfect. But what was their ground for comparison? It was an operetta singer’s performance: the drama of Belasco was also performed in 1901 and in 1904 with enormous success in Budapest as a play with songs, with Ilka Pálmay, a famous Hungarian operetta singer, in the title role.<sup>30</sup> If Szamosi interpreted the role of Cio-Cio-San perfectly, this interpretation had to be operetta-like, resembling that of Ilka Pálmay.

The operetta-like singing style of Szamosi is discernible on her recording of “Mi chiamano Mimi”.<sup>31</sup> The recording is part of a recording session for Dacapo Record, held in Budapest, in 1908, with piano accompaniment. It was made after Szamosi’s USA tour, when her voice was tired and moreover, the Mimi aria was the last recording of the session, Szamosi sang seven arias before. That is why the limitation of her voice is noticeable. I used sixteen recordings as a comparison: eight from the acoustic period, three from both the interwar and post-war period and two modern audiovisual recordings. The early recordings include the shortened version of the first performer of the role of Mimi, Cesira Ferrani, recordings by Italian, German, Russian and American singers and of course the recording of Elza Szamosi:

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sikert. Nem szabad például egyes frázisok finomítását túlozni a hatás kedvéért, mikor vannak még kidolgozatlan frázisok is.” [Anonymous]: „(Operaház.)” [Opera] *Budapesti Hirlap* 4. November 1904.

<sup>28</sup> Lyrophon 6094, matr. 6094, recorded in 1905 in Budapest, piano accompanist: Emil Lichtenberg. The disc is available in the private collection of Michael Seil (Notzingen) and in the Pécs Sound Archives (Marton-Bajnai Collection) of the National Széchényi Library in Budapest. I have to offer my thanks to Michael Seil and Klára Bajnai for their permission to use the recording for scientific purposes.

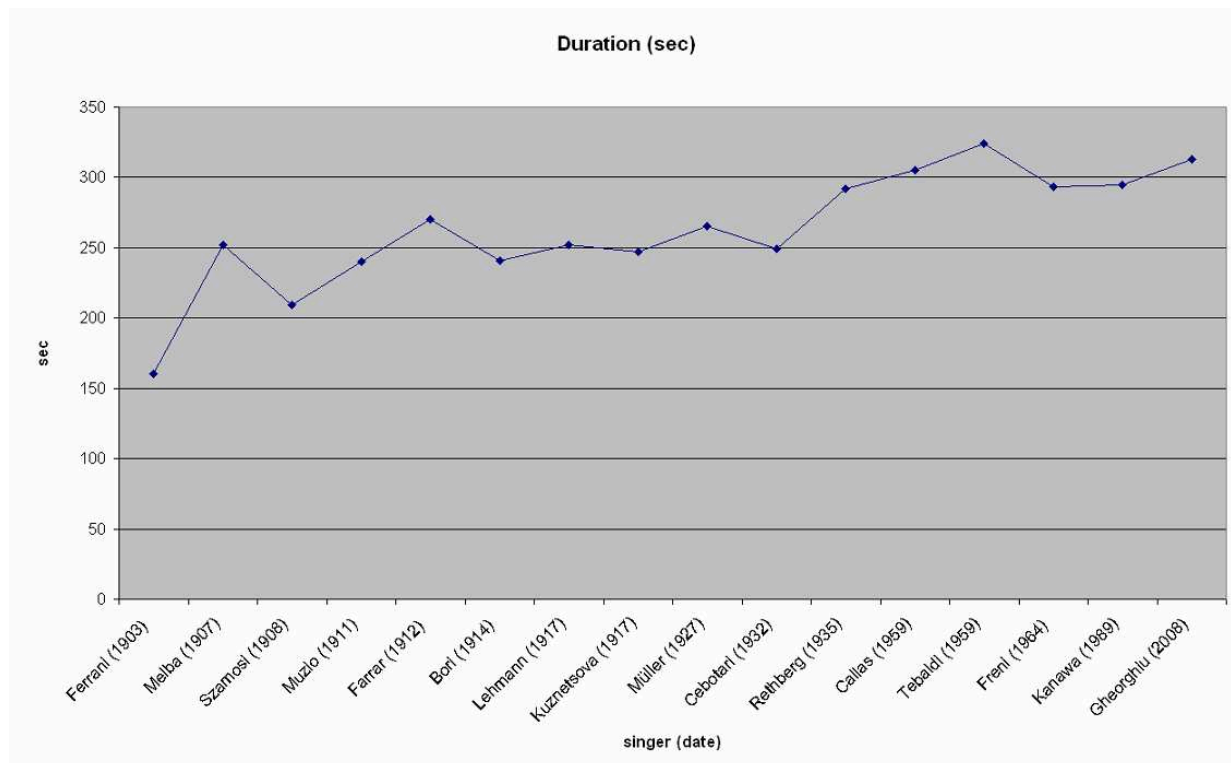
vi „Hogy előnyös megjelenése is nagyban hozzájárult a siker növeléséhez, azt tán fölösleges is hangsúlyoznunk.” (m. a.) [Andor Merkle]: „(Bohém-élet.)” *Magyarország* 1905. április 29.

<sup>30</sup> In 1901 in the Vígszínház [Comedy Theater] (première: 15 October 1901), in 1904 in the Népszínház [People’s Theater] (première: 3 December 1904).

<sup>31</sup> Dacapo Record, O-6057, matr. 6057, recorded in Budapest, September 1908. Piano accompaniment: Alajos Tarnay. The disc is available in the Andor Tiszay Collection of the Győző Csorba Library in Pécs, Hungary. I have to offer my thanks to Csilla Sorossy and Anna Mária Szabó for their permission to use the recording for scientific purposes.

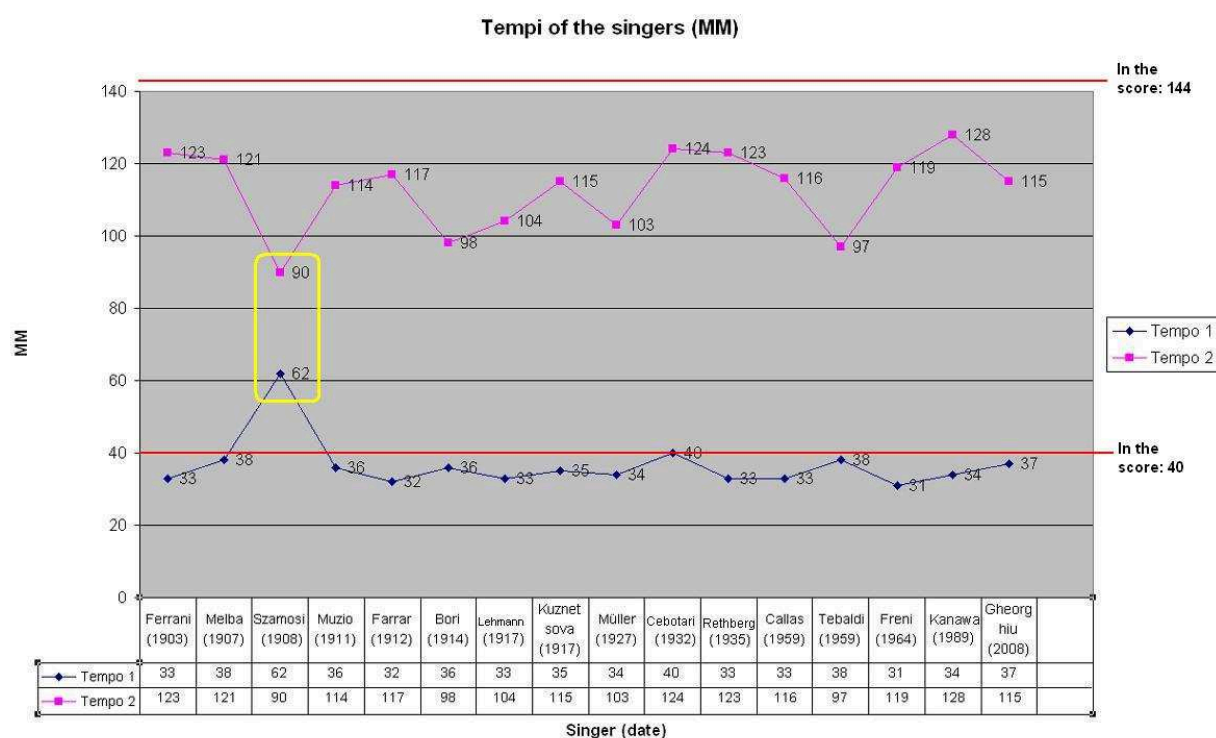
Singer	Acc.	Date	Language	Duration	Final recitativo
Cesira Ferrani	Piano	1903	Italian	2' 40"	+
Nellie Melba	Orchestra	1907	Italian	4' 12"	o
Elza Szamosi	Piano	1908	Italian	3' 29"	+
Claudia Muzio	Orchestra	1911	Italian	4' 00"	o
Geraldine Farrar	Orchestra	1912	Italian	4' 30"	o
Lucrezia Bori	Orchestra	1914	Italian	4' 01"	o
Lotte Lehmann	Orchestra	1917	German	4' 12"	o
Maria Kuzn'etsova	Orchestra	1917	Italian	4' 07"	+
Maria Müller	Orchestra	1927	German	4' 25"	o
Maria Cebotari	Orchestra	1932	German	4' 09"	+
Elisabeth Rethberg	Orchestra	1935	Italian	4' 52"	+
Maria Callas	Orchestra	1959	Italian	5' 05"	+
Renata Tebaldi	Orchestra	1959	Italian	5' 24"	+
Mirella Freni	Orchestra	1964	Italian	4' 53"	+
Kiri Te Kanawa	Orchestra	1989	Italian	4' 55"	+
Angela Gheorghiu	Orchestra	2008	Italian	5' 13"	+

I could say as a general overview that during the twentieth century the aria became more and more serious and more and more uniform. The durations show that it slowed down significantly, from about four minutes to about five and a half minutes, which is about a 30% difference. As the singing skills of the singers improved, the aria of a rank-and-file sewing-girl became a show-piece, a milestone of the great lyric sopranos.



During the analysis, I focused on the elements which discern Szamosi's interpretation from that of the other sopranos, and some of these elements are rooted in the performance practice of the operetta.

Apart from the shortened version of Ferrani, the shortest and fastest recording is that of Szamosi, even though she sang the final recitativo at the end of the aria. Most of the early recordings do not include this short phrase, maybe because of the limitations of the 78rpm disc. Szamosi's recording with this recitativo is a half minute shorter than the other recordings which do not include that. Szamosi's tempi are quite different than those of her contemporaries. She sang the slow sections much faster and the fast section much slower. She did not mind the metronome numbers at all – why did Puccini prefer her interpretation?



This fast tempo causes a quite different interpretation which implies a different meaning of the piece. Szamosi sang the aria with an easier attitude than her contemporaries (*Music examples 1 [Elza Szamosi] and 2 [Nellie Melba]*). This easier attitude can derive from Szamosi's operetta experience. In September 2013 I conducted an experiment with a young female operatic singer, Ildikó Szakács on a lecture recital in Hungary. After listening to early operetta recordings I asked her to sing the opening bars of this aria as she preferred, then more and more in an increasingly lighter manner, quasi as an operetta aria. She could not reach the manner of Szamosi...<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> The results of that research project, supported by the TÁMOP Postdoctoral Scholarship of the Doctoral School of the Ferenc Liszt Music Academy (Budapest), were published online on the website of the Liszt Academy:

Szamosi's Italian is good, understandable. It shows that she might have sung the aria many times in Italian during her USA tour.<sup>33</sup> Her pronunciation in the final recitativo is free, and she sang the whole aria speech-like; that is, she sang the aria in accordance with the rhythm of the text instead of the notated rhythm. Obviously, she does not use spoken words but her enunciation is good.

Szamosi sang with many slides, portamenti. It is again a difference between her and the other sopranos' recordings. Generally, the Italian singers, mainly Lucrezia Bori and Claudia Muzio also sang with many portamenti, but Nellie Melba and the singers of the twenties, thirties and fifties slid much less. In the short phrase "i fior ch'io faccio, ahimè" Szamosi sang two glissandi. Her fermata is similar to the fermata heard before in the Habanera excerpt, and – despite the comma in the text – she slides from the fermata to the next note. Lucrezia Bori sang this phrase quite similarly but while Szamosi went on faster, Bori softened the end of the sentence (*Music examples 3 [Elza Szamosi] and 4 [Lucrezia Bori]*).

<b>Singer</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Slides (1-10 scale)<sup>34</sup></b>
Cesira Ferrani	1903	4
Nellie Melba	1907	3
Elza Szamosi	1908	8
Claudia Muzio	1911	5
Geraldine Farrar	1912	5
Lucrezia Bori	1914	6
Lotte Lehmann	1917	6
Maria Kuzn'etsova	1917	7
Maria Müller	1927	3
Maria Cebotari	1932	2
Elisabeth Rethberg	1935	4
Maria Callas	1959	3
Renata Tebaldi	1959	3
Mirella Freni	1964	6
Kiri Te Kanawa	1989	5
Angela Gheorghiu	2008	6

The character of the interpretation of Bori and Muzio is relatively similar to that of Szamosi, light-minded; they represent the young girl who is a little embarrassed. Nellie Melba and Geraldine Farrar – and the sopranos after the thirties – sang with fewer slides, much slower and in a more serious character; their Mimi is more introverted and serious (*Music example 5*

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[http://fze.hu/hu/doktori-iskola/tamop/palyazatok/-/asset\\_publisher/NknC9EJlvYIv/content/posztdoktori-palyazat-eredmenye](http://fze.hu/hu/doktori-iskola/tamop/palyazatok/-/asset_publisher/NknC9EJlvYIv/content/posztdoktori-palyazat-eredmenye)

<sup>33</sup> She sang the role in Hungarian on the stage of the Royal Hungarian Opera.

<sup>34</sup> I marked with these numbers only the prevalence of the portamenti. I am very grateful to Diana Gilchrist (University of Edinburgh) for her remark that I should make a distinction upon the quality of the slides as well.

[*Geraldine Farrar*]). Maybe the American sopranos, Melba and Farrar interpreted Mimi rather as a *femme fragile*; the Italian sopranos' Mimi was between the *femme fragile* and the soubrette, whereas the Hungarian Mimi was rather soubrette-like. After the death of the composer and, moreover, after Maria Callas the more serious way became the common Puccini-style.

It is superfluous to outline the links between the music of Puccini and the musical style of the operetta. In Budapest, where the operetta was the most popular music theatrical genre of that time, the performance style – both singing and acting style – of the singers who came from the operetta determined the reception and the performance practice of Puccini. On the one hand, even in the 1950s the Hungarian musicologist András Pernye tried to convince the readers in the preface of his Puccini monograph that Puccini is more than a composer of very popular operas, a crowd favourite.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, in 1961, when the Hungarian State Opera revived *Manon Lescaut*, the main roles were sung by Erzsébet Házy and Róbert Ilosfalvy.<sup>36</sup> Both singers were successful as operetta singers as well, so the operetta-like Hungarian singing style of the operas of Puccini became almost a tradition in Hungary.

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<sup>35</sup> András Pernye: *Giacomo Puccini*. (Budapest: Gondolat, 1959). (= *Kis zenei könyvtár* 9)

<sup>36</sup> In the original cast of that revival the role of Des Grieux was sung by József Simándy, but this casting (Házy and Ilosfalvy) became much more successful. It was published on LP (*Magyar előadóművészek – Puccini: Manon Lescaut*. Hungaroton LPX 12648-49. 1984) and CD (*Great Hungarian Voices. Puccini: Manon Lescaut*. Hungaroton Classic HCD 12648-49) as well.