

HUNGARY FOR HUNGARY

Australian conductor Carolyn Watson shares her appetite for "the Hungarian experience" - its tourist delights and the country's lofty rank in the world's classical music culture.

Having spent two years in Hungary in the late 1990s I fondly think of Budapest as something of a second home. Invited to return as one of the twelve semi-finalists of the 2012 Emmerich Kálmán International Operetta-Musical Conducting Competition then, was more than an opportunity to compete and conduct. It was a chance to relive those student days, catch up with old friends, dust off the languages skills and see how the city has continued to evolve.

“ Much has changed since the 1990s ”

But first I had to reconcile an evening concert performance in Sydney on 19 September with arrival in Budapest by 20 September. My travel agent insisted it was impossible. I agreed it presented somewhat of a challenge. If I could convince concert presenters to move pre-concert speeches to post-concert, dash from podium to waiting vehicle and rely on a freak electrical fault to ensure all green lights en route to the airport, I might just make it.

Much to the bemusement of a family waiting on the bench outside *Departures*, I changed out of my concert outfit as I pulled into the kerb. [Mental note to self – investigate the telephone booth option next time as gear sticks give nasty bruises and inadvertently sounding the horn can attract unwanted attention.] Employing reverse psychology, I reasoned that arriving at the airport this late would actually be to my advantage. Assuming my fellow passengers were all conscientious enough to be there three hours in advance, I would be granted queue-free check-in and waltz straight through security.

And so it worked! A mere day or so later I found myself on familiar territory in the Hungarian capital after what had been quite the James Bond 24 hours. Without the fast cars or casinos. Although I did play solitaire on the plane and it was a pretty swanky airport minibus.

Much has changed since that first impression of the city during the 1990s when Hungary was in the throes of emerging from behind the Iron Curtain and the spectre of communism.

Enticed by the idea of studying in a country about which I had only the vaguest notion, I accepted a Hungarian Government Scholarship and spent two years at the Zoltán Kodály Pedagogical Institute of Music in Kecskemét.

Kecskemét, a city on the edge of the nation's great *puszta* may be considered an unusual choice for an international music conservatory however the decision is explained by a small plaque on the town's railway station. In what was perhaps an unlikely beginning to an illustrious career as a composer and music educator, Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967) was actually born in Kecskemét's station where his father, an employee of the Hungarian State Railways, just happened to be posted. A frequent visitor to the railway station, I travelled to Budapest, an hour or so away, for weekly violin lessons at the Liszt Academy. Budapest boasted other allures however, and my violin lessons were usually followed by a visit to one of the city's famed thermal baths.

“ The baths are an integral component of the Budapest experience.. ”

While Budapest has undergone many changes in recent years, this was one particular aspect I was relieved to see remained firmly entrenched. The baths are an integral component of the

Budapest experience, part of everyday life for locals and at the top of tourists' to-do lists. Situated on natural geothermal springs, the hot waters of the city have long been popular with those in the know. Those cleanest of ancient conquerors, the Romans, built large thermal baths in the settlement then known as *Aquincum* while the Turks in the sixteenth century imported their own version of the bathhouse to the city.

My favourite baths and probably the city's most iconic are the Széchenyi baths, located in Budapest's expansive City Park, or *Városliget*. Like much of Budapest's city centre, the *Városliget* and Széchenyi are World Heritage Listed - a decision I wonder the UNESCO panel might have reached as they floated in the temperate waters beneath the pink haze of twilight.

Connecting the *Városliget* with the city centre is a magnificent Parisian-style boulevard, *Andrássy út*, around which a number of the city's cultural institutions are housed. Most recognisable among these is the façade of the Hungarian State Opera House. Opened in 1884, the Opera House was built using funds jointly provided by Emperor Franz Joseph and the city itself during a period in which Budapest thrived under a happy power sharing arrangement with Vienna known as the *Dual Monarchy*.



Budapest's Széchenyi Baths. Photo - Vacclav / Shutterstock.com.

“..the history of conducting reads a little like a Hungarian *Who's Who*..”

Since its inauguration the Opera House has been a platform for leading musicians of the day and counts among its previous music directors Gustav Mahler (1887-1891) and Otto Klemperer (1947-1950). While Mahler and Klemperer were imports, local talent was plentiful and the history of conducting reads a little like a Hungarian *Who's Who*: Antal Dorati, Ferenc Fricsay, Arthur Nikisch, Eugene Ormandy, Hans Richter, Fritz Reiner, Anton Seidl and Georg Solti.

The Hungarian School of Conducting owes much to its founding father, possibly the nation's greatest musical export, Liszt Ferenc (1811-1886). Better known to the world by his Germanised name Franz Liszt, the pianist and conductor was also the founder of the National Academy of Music which today bears his name. In spite of a life lived mainly abroad, and purportedly unable to speak his mother tongue, Liszt remained true to his Magyar origins using his compositions, most notably the Hungarian Rhapsodies, to showcase the music of his homeland, returning to Budapest to teach and give master classes late in his life.

Hungary's other great musical son, Béla Bartók (1881-1945) is today best remembered for his compositions though like Liszt, Bartók was probably most recognised during his lifetime as a pianist. Bartók's most enduring legacy however, is arguably the collection and categorisation of over six thousand folk melodies from throughout modern day Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Ukraine (the then Austro-Hungarian empire) and including places as far afield as Turkey and Algeria. As well as providing inspiration for their compositions, Bartók and fellow composer and friend Zoltán Kodály, who often joined him on these trips, effectively pioneered the study of ethnomusicology.

A composer of a very different sort of music, Emmerich Kálmán (1882-1953), was a contemporary of Bartók and Kodály at the Liszt Academy. Drawn initially to cabaret, Kálmán soon carved out a career as a composer of operettas and is largely credited with popularising the genre in Hungary. Scheduled to coincide with Kálmán's 130th anniversary, the 2012 Emmerich Kálmán International Operetta-Musical Conducting Competition was the second occasion on which the competition has been held.

The Budapest Operetta Theatre, the venue for the competition, is just off Andrassy on a side street between the Opera House and Liszt Ferenc tér. Home of the Liszt Academy, Liszt



The Budapest Operetta Theatre during the finals of the 2012 Kálmán Conducting Competition.

Ferenc tér, or Liszt Square, has become one of the city's most popular destinations for a night out, with restaurants and bars flanking both sides of the large pedestrian precinct. Nestled amongst the newcomers, I was delighted to see my favourite pizzeria from my student days remained, even if the prices had not.

Stress of the competition aside and nervously awaiting the adjudicators' announcement, my mind was consumed by one principle preoccupation.

Selection as a finalist means a return to Budapest. And a return to Budapest means a return to Széchenyi. - **Carolyn Watson**

“Budapest Operetta Theatre - one of Europe's most successful..”

Like the Hungarian State Opera, the Operetta Theatre boasts an opulent late nineteenth century interior in which it was a joy to perform. In a parallel Andrew Lloyd-Weber would enjoy, the auditorium is lit by a hundred year old chandelier although fortunately it remains securely attached to the ceiling. The Budapest Operetta Theatre is one of Europe's most successful, operating seven days a week to capacity audiences who enjoy a varied program of operettas, musicals, concerts and competition events such as this one.

We, the twelve conductors were divided into four groups, each having to conduct three rounds comprising solo, duet and ensemble repertoire. In what felt as nerve wracking as a television talent show, the jury offered feedback following each of the competition rounds before selecting the one competitor from each group to progress to the final round. In order to accommodate a scheduling arrangement with Duna Television, the national broadcaster, the finals of the competition were scheduled for a month or so after the semi-finals.



More to come..

Carolyn Watson returns to Hungary for concert engagements next year when she plans to visit the Széchenyi baths. Again!

In the finals of the 2012 Kálmán Conducting Competition she placed third, also winning the Special Prize of the Kodály Philharmonic and the Herend Porcelain Manufacturer's Special Prize.