

## **Imre Madách is Alive and Well and Dying in West Germany: Peter Michael Hamel's Opera "Ein Menschentraum" <sup>1</sup>**

*Dieter P. Lotze*

Much of Hungarian literature—and thus a major aspect of Hungarian culture—is beyond the reach of the majority of foreign observers. The most obvious reason is linguistic: the comparative inaccessibility of the non-Indoeuropean language of a small Central European country impedes the first-hand acquaintance with a rich cultural heritage for all but a few specialists.

Numerous translations of some of the works of major (and even minor) Hungarian writers into other languages are available, to be sure, but many of them, especially attempts to recreate Hungarian poetry, convey little more than approximations or blurred reproductions of the originals. Thus, some well-read non-Hungarians of our times may be familiar with the name of Petőfi, who, mainly through his political involvement and his death for the cause of his nation's freedom, had become a symbol for liberal Europeans of the nineteenth century, such as German poet Heinrich Heine. Even philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was inspired to set some German versions of Petőfi's poems to music. Yet few foreigners can truly appreciate his lyrical genius.

There is, however, also another factor which has contributed to this lack of appreciation. Hungarian literature is the artistic expression of a small and isolated country that has its linguistic and ethnic roots in the East, but that has for centuries—ever since embracing Christianity—considered itself part of the culture of the West. Furthermore, Hungarian writing reflects the experience of a tradition of continuous struggle to maintain national and cultural autonomy in the face of overwhelming pressure from without. It is no wonder, then, that literature and writers in Hungary have been playing a role that has differed

from that in most other, especially larger, countries or cultural entities. Hungarian authors frequently not only echo in their works that specific national experience, but also define both their mission and their audience in a way that differs from that of their counterparts in other nations. Again, Petőfi in his political engagement and in his use of poetry to appeal to the patriotism of his fellow countrymen could serve as an example. This tendency, in turn, may make much of Hungarian literature appear to the outside world as somewhat provincial, or, to state it in more neutral terms, as hard to comprehend for readers who have never shared those experiences.

If we view *The Tragedy of Man* (*Az ember tragédiája*) of 1859-60 by Imre Madách against this background, it is all the more astonishing that what Hungarians consider their greatest philosophical drama has been little noticed beyond their national and cultural borders. Part of the reason for this phenomenon may again be the numerous rather mediocre translations of the play, although there are notable exceptions.<sup>2</sup> But most Madách scholars will readily admit that the drama's significance lies much more in its philosophy than in the beauty of its language. And here Madách clearly differs from the vast majority of nineteenth-century authors in Hungary. His play, while considered by most Hungarians as reflective of their national experience, certainly defies the label of "provinciality." He seems to have deliberately avoided all specific references to matters Hungarian, except for a fleeting mention of János Hunyadi and a few oblique hints at Hungarian customs or Hungarian history. Ancient Egypt, classical Greece and Rome, Constantinople during the Crusades, Renaissance Prague, Revolutionary Paris, nineteenth-century London, and finally the science-fiction world of the future (including an egalitarian utopian society, an excursion into outer space, and a cold and barren area on a dying earth) are depicted as the significant stages of the rise and fall of mankind and society. Given this universality in scope and the fact that many of his dramatic scenes appear much better suited for the technical possibilities of modern film and television than for the theatre of his century, it is surprising that—apart from occasional (and not necessarily always successful) productions on European and American stages and a few doctoral dissertations and monographs<sup>3</sup>—there has been little public notice of *The Tragedy of Man* outside Hungary.

An unusual and noteworthy attempt to acquaint a larger European audience with Madách took place in West Germany recently. On June 27, 1981, Peter Michael Hamel's opera *Ein Menschentraum* (A Dream of Man) premiered at the Kassel *Staatstheater*. Based on a libretto by the composer's father, the late Kurt Peter Hamel, and by Claus H. Henneberg, the work attempts to confront the twentieth-century viewer and listener with Imre Madách's life, achievement, and philosophy. What is classified by Hamel as "Musical Theater in Two Parts for Actors, Singers, Chorus, and Recording Tape,"<sup>4</sup> it presents selected scenes from *The Tragedy of Man* in operatic form. Thus, Imre Madách seems indeed to be alive and well on the West German stage. But Hamel juxtaposes these dream visions from Madách's drama with realistic scenes set at the bedside of the dying playwright who discusses his life—including the failure of his marriage—and his world view with his strong-willed mother, Anna Majthényi, and with his friend Pál Szontágh. In the end, reality and vision can no longer be separated, and Imre Madách expires in the arms of his creation, Adam.

It goes without saying that any discussion of an operatic work must remain lopsided without an adequate emphasis on its music. Peter Michael Hamel's comments indicate the importance he places on this aspect of his work:

The music in *Ein Menschentraum* is a looking glass in which an ultimately unchanging reality is presented in an always new and seemingly different fashion, in which it is mirrored, refracted, and reflected. Dream conditions become accessible and sound conditions, the repetition compulsion of the world resounds in repetitive movements, tonal centers become the subject matter of dreams, become sounds of dying.<sup>5</sup>

But there is no definitive score readily available, and the only existing tape recording of the Kassel production, made by the *Hessischer Rundfunk* radio network, is not accessible at this time.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the following discussion will focus mainly on the literary and theatrical aspects of *Ein Menschentraum*. This task is made somewhat more difficult by the fact that, according to the composer, "no complete libretto exists since the dramatic texts were reworked by the director."<sup>7</sup> Yet the available information about the opera and its impact appears sufficient to allow certain conclusions.

Hamel's opera owes its existence to his father's preoccupation with Madách's drama, an interest that went back all the way to 1937 when he first attended a German production of *Az ember tragédiája* under the direction of Antal Németh, then in charge of the Budapest National Theatre. Kurt Peter Hamel, a theatrical director himself as well as a writer, later had the opportunity to visit Madách's birthplace at Alsó-Sztregova. This visit triggered in him the desire to use the ancestral home where the Hungarian playwright was born, where he had worked, suffered, and finally died, as the setting for a dramatic work. In 1975, Kurt Peter Hamel sketched out a plan for an opera. The final emotional impetus was the death of his wife in 1976. But the text remained a fragment when the writer died in 1979. Claus Henneberg, artistic advisor to the Cologne Opera, endeavoured to complete the work.

The composer, Peter Michael Hamel, was born in 1947. He combines an outstanding musical talent with interests in psychology, sociology, theatre, film, radio, and television and is the co-founder of the Munich *Freies Musikzentrum* which explores the role of music in social work, education, and therapy. It was his father's death that motivated him to compose *Ein Menschentraum*. He persuaded the Kassel theatre to commission the work whose completion was made possible by a scholarship from the German Academy "Villa Massimo" in Rome. His comments on his choice of topic, as recorded by Hans Joachim Schaefer, are revealing:

My decision to compose a work for the musical theater sprang not so much from theoretical and esthetic considerations, but rather from the fact that I was struck by a subject matter. I selected the subject of *Ein Menschentraum* because it touches on two experiences which I consider decisive in any human life: the experience of dying and death, and the experience of love. Both are very natural – but at the same time supernatural – events that have profound impacts on our lives. Both experiences mean the crossing of frontiers.

The experience "death of my mother" led my father to write the libretto. The experience "death of my father" caused me to compose *Ein Menschentraum*. Thus pervasion and spiritualization of a profoundly moving experience: a work of mourning. Death and love can guide us to a new consciousness, to

a deeper understanding of life, of the world, to a “religio” beyond any denomination. I am searching for this spiritual experience that gives man a new consciousness of meaning.<sup>8</sup>

For Hamel, the depiction of the death of Imre Madách becomes a vehicle to expand personal experiences—his own and those of the dying poet—into more general concerns, into a vision of struggling mankind.

At the centre of the events: a man is dying. In his agony, he experiences visions which take the form of dramatic scenes. Archetypal dream experiences, simultaneity of events that no longer have any logical connection with one another, hallucinations, and visions merge into a “panorama of life” which immediately before one’s death contracts an entire life in its essential experiences into a sequence of freely associated images.

The “death zone” in which this “dream of man” takes place is not only connected with the life and death of Imre Madách, not only with his *Tragedy of Man*. The death zone concerns all of us. It is a general human phenomenon: that frontier region where a soul, under excruciating pains, begins to separate from its body. The intensive care unit, the death room, is an area of frightening experiences. I witnessed that when my father died.

The images that the dying man sees before his mind’s eye, his visions, dreams, and hallucinations, are archetypes of human history, transferable in a general sense.<sup>9</sup>

How, then, does this experience translate into a concrete work for the musical theatre? Hamel treats the five scenes at Madách’s bedside as straight drama. In contrast, the six scenes adapted from *Az ember tragédiája* are presented as opera. Yet the two spheres cannot be neatly separated. Madách sees himself as Adam, his former wife, Erzsí Fráter, as Eve, Pál Szontágh as Lucifer, and his mother as the Earth Spirit.

The poet, on his deathbed, demands from his mother, Anna Majthényi, a letter which Erzsí has written, asking him to forgive her unfaithfulness and begging for his understanding. Anna is very reluctant to give the letter to her son. She had always been opposed to his marriage because she did not want to relinquish her control over his life. This control, she claims, was necessary because of Imre’s inability to cope with life’s problems by himself.

Pál, too, comments on his friend's lack of self-confidence.

As the playwright is reading Erzsí's lines, Eve appears in his visions in ever changing forms: projections of Erzsí, and at the same time the ideal woman, embodiment of Goethe's "eternal femininity."

A fevered dream takes him out of the realm of his earthly existence; his bed changes into a space vehicle, and—as Adam—he attempts to rid himself of everything that ties him to his physical and psychological misery while traveling in the metaphorical sphere of pure thought. Even though he denies the attractive powers of his native planet, he is pulled back from death by the Earth Spirit, but is left with a feeling of inner emptiness.

It is this emptiness that the dying poet in the third scene recognizes as characteristic of his entire life. He accuses his mother of having caused his lifelong indecision. What to her was loving sacrifice, her son experienced as paralyzing interference which kept him from making his own choices. Pál announces Erzsí's visit, but Anna tries to prevent the encounter with Imre who is ready to forgive his wife. Doubts about himself and about the destiny of mankind continue to plague him.

In the next scene, he is Adam in the Ice Region, watching the last human beings in their struggle for a meaningless survival. This depressing experience reflects Imre's own situation: the world and his life end, in T.S. Eliot's famous phrase, (not with a bang but a whimper."<sup>10</sup> Mankind does not perish in one last great heroic effort, but, as Rolf Ronzier puts it in his program notes, "it suffocates in its own filth."<sup>11</sup> The last representatives of the human race have sunk to the level of animals, and in this setting, even the dream of Eve is reduced to a disgusting spectacle of grotesque animalistic sexuality. Adam wants to prevent this "tragedy of man," but is keenly aware of his own helplessness.

Meanwhile, at the poet's deathbed, Anna Majthényi blames Erzsí and Pál for Imre's self-doubts and for the deterioration of his health. Madách worries about his children who are growing up without the benefit of a healthy family unit. His son Aladár is likely to become as fainthearted as he has been, living under the same strong influence of Anna. He observes Aladár at play who, dressed as a Roman, rescues his sister Jolán from the clutches of a powerful enemy. To the play-

wright, his son's game is symbolic of Hungary's struggle for liberation. But Pál, the cool uninvolved intellectual, tries to convince him that his dream of human freedom can never be realized, just as the hope manifested in Christianity as the religion of love is ultimately in vain.

The two scenes that follow are patterned closely after Madách's drama. Featuring Adam as Sergiolus in Rome and as Tancred, the idealistic crusader in Constantinople, they seem to confirm Pál's nihilistic world view. Again, Madách sees his own emotional problems connected with the fate of mankind. In Rome, Adam and Eve exist side by side without any inner relationship just as Imre and Erzsi had in their marriage. The Constantinople scene ends with a nightmare: Lucifer has a swarm of witches set upon Adam in order to demonstrate the absurdity of separating love and sexuality. Significantly, Hamel connects the two scenes through an orchestral interlude whose music "has as its theme the perversion of the Christian symbol of the cross."<sup>12</sup>

In the struggle between Anna Majthényi and Pál Szontágh over the dying poet, Anna eventually realizes that she lost her son. Resignedly, she consents to Erzsi's visit. Pál continues his argument with Imre, criticizing him for having always been interested in theory only. He did not contribute in any practical or tangible way to the Hungarian Revolution. Throughout his life, he had been a loner, incapable of contact with the people. In his feverish phantasies, Madách hears a mob screaming for his head as the scene switches to Revolutionary Paris.

In his fight for the new ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, Adam, as the professional revolutionary, reflects the ambiguous role played by Imre, the aristocratic revolutionary in the events of 1848-49 in Hungary. As Danton, he relinquishes his principles as he eventually grasps the possibility of a worthwhile life beyond ideology. It is characteristic that Eve appears here only in the single role of the young aristocrat, not in her second incarnation as the coarse, blood-thirsty "woman of the people" of the original scene in *Az ember tragédiája*.

The next dream vision reveals the grotesque world of the London *petite bourgeoisie* of the early nineteenth century, a world that resembles a lunatic asylum. Only money is of value in this society where man has become merchant and merchant-

diser. Eve, too, is now merely an object that can be bought. Everybody is eventually sent to Hell by Lucifer who remains alone with Adam to discuss the downfall of this society.

The final encounter between Madách and his wife shows how strongly they are tied together, how dependent they are on each other. But it is too late for a new beginning. Imre never understood Erzsí and never made her a part of his life. Each spouse had been blind to the other. As death approaches, all the real persons who had been close to Madách assemble around his bed, along with the characters from his drama. Eve, speaking for Erzsí, mourns the lost contact with her children. A last nightmare confronts the playwright with the technological society of the future where life is produced artificially, from where all human emotions have been banned, and where man has become a faceless being with no individuality. In the poet's agony, his relatives and his friend become blurred, shapeless figures, while the creations of his imagination accompany him to the very end. The viewer is left with vexing questions: what did the life, the work, the death of Imre Madách really signify? Was the creator of the "Hungarian *Faust*" blind until the very end, just as Goethe's hero is symbolically stricken with blindness shortly before his death?

Thus Imre Madách is dying once again—this time in an experimental opera on the West German stage. But, to return to (and to call into question) the statement made in the title of this essay, is he truly "alive and well?" Is Hamel's work an appropriate vehicle to acquaint a German audience with Hungary's greatest philosophical dramatist, to foster understanding and appreciation of him and of the culture he represents? The answer can only be cautious and qualified. Reviews of the Kassel premiere have pointed out that *Ein Menschentraum* would be puzzling or downright confusing to anybody not already familiar with Madách's life and work—which would apply to the vast majority of the audience.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, while many of the biographical facts alluded to have a firm foundation in the poet's life, there are distortions and one-sided interpretations, for instance with respect to Pál Szontágh's alleged stifling influence on his friend, or concerning Madách's position in the 1848-49 War of Liberation. And certainly Hamel's fainthearted and indecisive poet is not the fiery and determined political orator, elected to the 1861 Diet in Pest as a representative of Balassagyarmat.<sup>14</sup>



While most Madách scholars would readily concede that much in, *Az ember tragédiája* is autobiographical in nature, we should not forget that this is only one—and not necessarily the most significant—level of his dramatic poem.

In the absence of definitive versions of the score and the libretto of *Ein Menschentraum*, it is, of course, difficult to do Hamel's opera justice. What was presented in Kassel was a complex work, combining not only Hamel's music and the text prepared by his two librettists—in part based on available German translations of *Az ember tragédiája* and on the views expressed in Wolfgang Margendorff's monograph on Madách<sup>15</sup>—but also an interpretation through the direction of Dieter Dorn and the settings and costumes designed by Hans Kleber. It is thus difficult to decide what was incidental to this particular production and its interpretation of Madách, and what is essential to Hamel's opera.

Madách's bed as a spacecraft, complete with blinking lights, obviously amused the audience rather than establishing a readiness to consider philosophical concepts.<sup>16</sup> Some aspects of the production look like gimmicks, designed to emphasize the continued relevance of Madách's ideas, but they seem to have interfered with the unity of the work and with the clarity of its message. Viewers were startled by a disco scene in an Italian beach resort as part of the Rome vision, by a character obviously modelled after the Ayatollah Khomeini, riding in his jeep past Tancred's crusaders in Constantinople (who—in their blue helmets—were made to look like United Nations soldiers), or by Madách's London scene taking place in an asylum.<sup>17</sup> It is to be hoped that future productions will help crystallize Hamel's contemporary concept of Madách and his world, so that the dying poet may continue to be "alive and well."

Certainly this controversial interpretation contains elements that shed some new light on the Hungarian play. Traditional Madách scholarship has considered his "Earth Spirit" as an echo—if not an imitation—of Goethe's *Erdgeist* in his *Faust* or perhaps as the one positive aspect of Madách's view of materialism (with Lucifer representing its negative, non-creative counterpart).<sup>18</sup> Hamel's bold association of Anna Majthényi with this spirit emphasizes his concept of the overwhelming power of the maternal element as both a necessary tie to nature and a hindrance for man in his attempt to reach ultimate freedom.

Hamel emphasizes the significance of the relationship between the individual and his society, commented on by many students of Madách before, as a problem faced both by the playwright and by Adam, his creation. A society that dehumanizes man by elevating money to be the ultimate value will as its final consequence, turn into an insane world where no relationships among individuals are possible anymore. Thus, Hamel's symbolism in changing the London setting to a virtual madhouse may be heavy and all too obvious, but its logic can hardly be faulted. Madách critics occasionally stressed the importance of the fact that in this scene (as in all the scenes following the one depicting the French Revolution) Adam no longer plays an active role or represents an historical figure. For Hamel, this follows naturally from the de-emphasis of the individual in capitalism. In this respect the composer's views are quite enlightening:

I do not share the almost desperate pessimism of Madách. I am searching for a "positive utopia" which tends to be encouraging. To be more specific: to me that term signifies a "spiritual socialism" which truly recognizes the equality of all human beings. In an archetypal sense, we are all equal and therefore have a right to be treated equally. Each oppression runs counter to this right. The aim of the "positive utopia" is to free us from all pressures which do not allow us to become conscious of our own selves, to reach our own decisions, our own self-determination.<sup>19</sup>

It is quite consistent with this view that in the dying poet's final feverish dream of a technological utopia, human beings no longer have faces or other individualizing characteristics. Man has now become a replaceable cog in the machinery of society, rather than being encapsulated in his own self-centredness, as in the London scene. Under these circumstances both joy and sorrow have lost their meanings.

Perhaps it was Hamel's belief in a "positive utopia" that made him transform Madách's "Phalanstery" into a feverish and therefore distorted dream vision. For the same reason, he probably felt that the depressing Eskimo scene which, in the original play, had resulted in Adam's decision to commit suicide, had to be moved to a different spot in his opera, however tempting it may have been for him to leave it in its

final position as a reminder of man's technological capability in our atomic age to destroy his civilization.

But the most important change springing from Hamel's essentially secular views may be that in his opera there is no room for the metaphysical framework established by Madách. Thus, there is no Lord encouraging the despairing Adam at the end to have faith and to fight on. In this way, Hamel avoids the hotly debated incongruency between Lucifer's view of human history and the Lord's ultimate promise. But at the same time, through his emphasis on death and dying, he makes it harder for his audience to grasp and share his belief in a "positive utopia."

Yet the final scene of the opera makes one point about art and the artist that should not be missed. In the dying poet's last moments, his creations live and stay with him whereas the characters of his "real" surroundings are fading away. Perhaps Madách as a poet lives on through the work he created.

*Az ember tragédiája* has often been called the "Hungarian Faust". What Goethe wrote in a letter about Lord Byron's utilization of motifs from *Faust* for his *Manfred* is frequently quoted with respect to Madách's undeniable borrowings from the German poet. But Goethe's views seem also particularly appropriate—with certain modifications—when applied to Hamel's interpretation of Madách:

This unusual and gifted poet has absorbed my Faust... He has used every theme in his own fashion, so that none remains as it was: and for this in particular I cannot sufficiently admire his genius. This reconstruction is entirely of a piece, one could give most interesting lectures on its similarity to the original and its departure from it: I do not deny, however, that the dull glow of an unrelieved despair will become wearisome in the end. Yet one's irritation will always be mingled with admiration and respect.<sup>20</sup>

#### NOTES

1. This article is the expanded version of a paper presented at the Seventh Annual Meeting of the American Hungarian Educators' Association at Montclair State College in 1982.
2. While the German translation by Julius Lechner von der Lech, *Die Tragödie des Menschen* (Leipzig, 1937) enjoyed wide distribution in German-speaking countries in the popular and inexpensive Reclam edition, the quality of its language is clearly inferior to that of Jenő Mohácsi's 1933 rendition, republished by Corvina in Budapest in 1957 and, in a revision by Géza Engl, in 1970. Jean Rousselot's French version, *La Tragédie de l'Homme* (Budapest: Corvina, 1966) is fairly faithful but not very poetic. None of the

English translations published to date gives a true impression of Madách's work, but the upcoming rendition by C. Thomas R. Mark, to be issued by Corvina Press in the near future, promises to fill a sorely felt need in this respect.

3. Enikő Molnár Basa's unpublished dissertation, "*The Tragedy of Man as an Example of the Poème d'Humanité: An Examination of the Poem by Imre Madách with Reference to the Relevant Works of Shelley, Byron, Lamartine and Hugo*" (University of North Carolina, 1972) contains much valuable information. My own Innsbruck dissertation of 1961, "Madáchs 'Tragödie des Menschen' in der Begegnung mit der deutschen Geisteswelt," similarly attempts to place Madách's drama in a wider philosophical framework. Some of the insights contained in it are elaborated on in the only book on Madách in English to date, my monograph *Imre Madách* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981). Wolfgang Margendorff's 1941 Jena dissertation, "Imre Madách 'Die Tragödie des Menschen'" was published in book form (Würzburg: Konrad Triltsch, 2nd ed. 1943). An adapted version of Géza Voinovich's classic study of 1914, *Madách Imre és Az ember tragédiája* was also published in Germany in a translation of Jenő Mohácsi.

4. See the program notes, "Ein Menschentraum," *Staatstheater Kassel*, June 27, 1981 (no pagination). This translation (and all others, except where notes) is my own.

5. Ibid.

6. Letter by Peter Michael Hamel to the author, October 15, 1981.

7. Ibid. Wolfgang Sandner's review, "Mit musikalischen Vorsätzen in die Hölle," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (July 1, 1981) lists some of those changes through which, he claims, Director Dieter Dorn turned real persons into stereotypes.

8. "Peter Michael Hamel im Gespräch zu 'Ein Menschentraum'," *Staatstheater Kassel* program notes.

9. Ibid.

10. T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1971), p. 59.

11. *Staatstheater Kassel* program notes.

12. Ibid.

13. See Manfred Sack, "Musiktheater in Kassel: 'Ein Menschentraum' : Philosophie mit Musik," *Die Zeit* (Overseas Edition, July 28, 1981). (The brief article by "doromby," "Madách, az operahős," *Élet és Irodalom*, August 9, 1981, the only Hungarian reaction to Hamel's opera of which I am aware, is based on this review.) A similar point is made by Sandner (loc. cit.). Vera Lumpé's discussion in "Geträumte Tragödie - tragischer Tod" (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, July 3, 1981) is more circumspect, promising "interesting experiences" to an audience which brings "composure and patience" to the performance.

14. It should be remembered that it was Madách's growing reputation as an outstanding parliamentary speaker that drew the attention of János Arany to the unknown dramatist.

15. See Kurt Peter Hamel, "Auf dem Weg zum Libretto 'Ein Menschentraum'," *Staatstheater Kassel* program notes.

16. See Bernd Müllmann, "Die Ideale sind verkommen," (*Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine*, June 29, 1981). Otherwise, Müllmann has high praise for Dorn's direction.

17. Jens Wendland ("Neue Naivität für die alte Oper," *Süd-deutsche Zeitung*, June 30, 1981) deals critically with some of these aspects of the Kassel production.

18. See István Sötér's study, *Alom és történelemről: Madách Imre és Az ember tragédiája* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1965) and my monograph, *Imre Madách*.

19. Conversation with Hans Joachim Schaefer, *Staatstheater Kassel* program notes.

20. Quoted in Fritz Strich, *Goethe and World Literature*, trans. C.A.M. Sym (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1949), p. 256.