

Choreography in Operetta Performances. Case Study: The Couplets “*How Can One Live Without Love*” From the Operetta *Die Csárdásfürstin (Silvia or the Csárdás Princess)*, Act I, Scene 3, By Emmerich Kálmán

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Abstract: *Die Csárdásfürstin (Silvia or The Csárdás Princess)* is the most famous composition by Emmerich Kálmán. This work remains one of the most frequently staged operettas worldwide due to its charming music and romantic storyline, which combines the exoticism of the Hungarian csárdás with the brilliance of Viennese society. The present study analyzes the choreographic moment constructed on the basis of a French cancan performed by Count Boni Cancianu and the dancers of the Orfeum Cabaret in Budapest, which appears in Act I of the operetta *Silvia*. According to the libretto, this scene represents the count’s farewell moment before departing on a long tour to New York together with the operetta’s main character, Silvia Verescu. The research methods employed consist of analyzing the stage behavior of the performer, the baritone Cătălin Petrescu, through direct observation of video recordings, focusing on his interaction with the cabaret dance ensemble (the ballet ensemble of the Ion Dacian Operetta and Musical Theatre in Bucharest), his relationship with the stage set, and the way Boni Cancianu relates to the audience. Hypothesis: In order to perform a choreographic moment within an operetta performance, the performer requires, in addition to outstanding vocal qualities and interpretative skills, motor abilities related to the learning of dance techniques. The couplet *How Can One Live Without Love* from the operetta *Silvia*, expressed through movement in the form of a French cancan, is not merely a spectacular dance moment but also a key atmospheric element that includes character development and the social conflict present in the libretto. The cancan defines the cabaret world, marks the beginning of the love story between Silvia and Edwin, and contributes significantly to the stylistic charm of the operetta. It can therefore be stated that *Silvia* is an operetta full of vitality, humor, dances, and melodies inspired primarily by Hungarian music (with the csárdás predominating), while also including lyrical moments of great sensitivity. For this reason, it offers performers roles of considerable artistic value. In operetta performance, dance and gesture are not mere additions but integral components of the performers’ expressive language, without which the charm of operetta would be lost.

Keywords: operetta, performer, character dance technique, choreographic structure.

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1. 1. Theoretical foundation

The foundation of this study begins with the definition of operetta. Musical dictionaries define operetta as *a musical-dramatic composition of relatively large proportions, very similar to opera performances*¹, from which it evolved. Like opera, it has a dramatic libretto; however, the libretto of operetta differs in that its content is lighter, characterized by humor and filled with improbable situations.

Another characteristic of operetta is the presence of spoken dialogue and dance numbers. Unlike opera performances, spoken dialogue and choreographic sections play an important role in the show's structure.

The present study refers to the operetta *Die Csárdásfürstin (Silvia or The Csárdás Princess)*, the most famous composition by Emmerich Kálmán. *Silvia* is an operetta in three acts structured around a principal romantic duo (Silvia and Edwin), a comic duo (Stasi and Boni), and a large number of serious characters (Prince Leopold, Anhille, General von Rohnsdorff) or comic ones (Feri, Mișka, Eugen) (Moisescu & Păun, 1969). In total, the operetta contains 23 musical numbers. The libretto was written by Leo Stein and Béla Jenbach and later revised by István Békeffy and Dezső Keller².

Since the first performance on 17 November 1915 at the Johann Strauß Theater in Vienna, which achieved immense success, the operetta has been staged countless times, each production bringing a new directorial vision. Numerous film adaptations have also been produced. After the premiere, a series of classical productions followed, including the staging at the Berlin Operetta Theatre in 1916, which consolidated the work's fame, and the production at the Hungarian Operetta Theatre (Magyar Állami Operettszínház) in Budapest, also in 1916.

Later, in the 1920s, productions were staged in Paris (at the Moulin Rouge) and in London (in the West End), adding a cosmopolitan dimension and consolidating the prestige of Kálmán's operetta.

In Romania, the operetta *Silvia (The Csárdás Princess)* entered the repertoire of operetta theatres in Bucharest and Cluj between the 1920s and 1930s, quickly becoming a popular and widely requested performance. The Ion Dacian Operetta

¹ Dumitru Bughici, *Dicționar de forme și genuri muzicale (Dictionary of Musical Forms and Genres)*, Editura Muzicală (Musical Publisher), Bucharest, 1978, p. 231.

² Anca Iorga, "Choreography in Operetta Performances – Case Study: The Cabaret Show in *Die Csárdásfürstin (Silvia or The Csárdás Princess)*, Act I," production by Emmerich Kálmán, published in *Theatrical Colloquia*, vol. 14, Issue 2/2024, December 23, 2024, Iași. Available at: https://artes-teatru.ro/pdf/38/paper_06.pdf

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Theatre in Bucharest has presented numerous successful productions of this work. Particularly notable was the production from the 1960s–1970s, featuring soprano Silvia Voinea in the role of Silvia and tenor Valentin Teodorian as Edwin (Moisescu & Păun, 1969). Since 2000, Silvia has been one of the Ion Dacian Operetta Theatre's emblematic productions, alongside other popular works such as *Die Fledermaus*, *The Merry Widow*, and *The Flower of Hawaii*³. The Braşov Opera also staged the operetta in a production directed by Anda Tăbăcaru-Hogea, with stage design and costumes by Rodica Garştea and choreography by Ioan Dorin Coşeriu. In this production, Silvia was performed by soprano Valentina Mărgăraş, while Edwin was interpreted by Alexandru Aghenie.

Throughout time, the operetta has also enjoyed significant international productions. As early as 1930, fragments and adaptations in English were presented at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, while the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow staged a lavish production in the 1950s–1960s. Throughout the twentieth century, *Silvia* remained a constant presence in operetta festivals organized in Vienna, Budapest, and Baden-Baden (Traubner, 2003).

The film industry has also shown interest in this work. As early as 1927, a silent film inspired by Silvia's story was produced in Germany under the title *Die Csárdásfürstin*, directed by Hanns Schwarz. In 1934, director Georg Jacoby created a sound film based on the same story. The most famous screen adaptation remains the German film from 1954 starring Mártha Eggerth and Johannes Heesters. Another highly appreciated version was produced in 1971 as a television film featuring Anna Moffo and René Kollo.

The plot of the operetta follows the love story between Silvia Vărăscu, a celebrated cabaret singer and star of the Orfeum nightclub in Budapest, nicknamed the “Csárdás Princess”, and Prince Edwin Ronald of Mittenkofer-Löwenstein. Although the two sincerely love each other, social differences and aristocratic prejudices separate them. Edwin's parents refuse to accept a marriage with a variety performer, considering it unsuitable for their social rank. Furthermore, Edwin is already engaged by family arrangement to Countess Stasi. Despite these obstacles, Silvia and Edwin fight for their love, and in the end, as in any fairy tale, love triumphs.

Die Csárdásfürstin remains one of the most frequently staged operettas worldwide due to its enchanting music and romantic story that combines the exoticism of Hungarian csárdás with the brilliance of Viennese society.

2. Research Methodology

In this study, the choreographic moment analyzed is based on a French cancan performed by Count Boni Cancianu and the dancers of the Orfeum Cabaret in Budapest. This moment appears in Act I of the operetta *Silvia* and represents,

³ The website of the Ion Dacian National Operetta and Musical Theatre, Bucharest.

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according to the libretto, the count's farewell before leaving on a long tour to New York together with Silvia.

The French cancan emerged around the 1830s–1840s as entertainment for the population of nineteenth-century Paris. The dance quickly became one of the most famous cabaret dances and continues to appear in productions of this genre to this day. It became a symbol of freedom, exuberance, and Parisian nightlife, filling the famous cabarets of Moulin Rouge (opened in 1889) and Folies Bergère (opened in 1869 under the name Folies Tréville) with an atmosphere of vibrant excitement.

Initially called *chahut* or *quadrille naturaliste*, the dance represented a more energetic and provocative variation of the quadrille, a popular nineteenth-century ballroom dance. Although it was originally danced by both men and women, it gradually became associated mainly with female performers because of the spectacular movements and extravagant costumes. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the dance evolved into what we now call the French cancan, characterized by energetic movements, large leg swings, outward rotations of the lower leg while the thigh is flexed forward with maximum amplitude, *pirouettes suivies*, jumps, and acrobatic elements such as cartwheels, flips, and various turns. A characteristic formation involves the entire ensemble arranged in a line, half facing the audience and half facing away, executing a coordinated 360° turn without altering the line formation.

The dancers' costumes were spectacular: long dresses with multiple ruffles, lace, petticoats, and striped stockings that added a provocative yet comic element to the dance. The dancers, known as *cancanières*, became famous stars of the era. Among the earliest cancan celebrities were La Goulue and Jane Avril, immortalized in posters by the French painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. During the twentieth century, the French cancan became a tourist symbol of Paris while preserving its spectacular acrobatic elements and extravagant costumes.

2.1 Research Methods

The research methods employed in this study aim at a detailed analysis of the performer's stage behavior through the direct observation of video recordings. The analysis focuses on his interaction with the cabaret dance ensemble (which represents the count's stage partners), his relationship with the stage set, and the way Boni Cancianu interacts with the audience.

The research methods used include bibliographic study, direct observation of the performance recording, an interview with the performer, namely the baritone Cătălin Petrescu, and a case study analyzing the choreography he performed.

For the baritone Cătălin Petrescu, the role of Boni Cancianu has a special significance, as it represented his artistic debut. It was also the role he performed in his graduation examination at the National University of Music in Bucharest in 2004, in Silvia Voinea's class. The audience warmly received the first performance of the

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role, while critics praised the performer's expressiveness, comedic ability, and stage presence.

The 2009 production at the **Ion Dacian Operetta and Musical Theatre** represented a significantly improved version of the role, as the performer's accumulated theatrical experience was fully reflected in his interpretation.

2.2 Research Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that, to perform a choreographic moment in an operetta performance, the performer requires not only outstanding vocal qualities and interpretive ability but also motor skills that involve learning dance techniques.

In the present case, the analyzed dance belongs to the category of choreographies specific to musicals and cabaret performances, which began to be incorporated into productions of this type around 1840. The acquisition of these motor skills is based on organized and systematic training, repeated to achieve a high level of movement execution, particularly in precision, amplitude, and speed, as well as in synchronization with dance partners.

2.3 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Determining the level of cabaret dance technique required by performers in order to stage the character;
- Identifying the most appropriate reactions and gestures for conveying the message of the script;
- Establishing the necessary and appropriate dance steps for staging the French cancan moment;
- Identifying the types of coordination required for a character in an operetta performance: music-movement coordination, music-vocal emission coordination, movement-vocal emission coordination, and coordination between the performer and the stage partners.

2.4 Description of the Photographic Set

The set of photographs consists of images from the couplet *How Can One Live Without Love*, in which Count Boni Cancianu (performed by baritone Cătălin Petrescu) bids farewell to his former conquests, the dancers of the Orfeum Cabaret in Budapest (performed by the ballet ensemble of the Ion Dacian Operetta and Musical Theatre in Bucharest), before leaving together with Silvia on a tour to New York. This sequence is taken from the operetta *Die Csárdásfürstin (Silvia)* by Emmerich Kálmán, Act I, Scene 3.

The sequence belongs to the production staged at the Ion Dacian Operetta Theatre in Bucharest, which premiered in April 2009. The performance was directed

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by Kero⁴, with Tamás Bori as assistant director, and choreography by György Gesler, who succeeded in instilling explosive energy into the soloists while simultaneously achieving precision in execution. At nearly 78 years old at the time of the production, György Gesler managed to create a choreography of remarkable value, collaborating in this production with the choreographer Raluca Popa.

The presented moment highlights the lively and bohemian atmosphere of the Hungarian cabaret and the vibrant lifestyle characteristic of the Hungarian nobility at the end of the nineteenth century. Within this scene, the superficiality of the character's feelings and Count Boni Cancianu's desire to conquer every woman he encounters become evident.

The photographic set illustrates the following aspects:

Photograph a - Boni's line: "*Girls, I must leave you...*" - He begins his false confession in a remorseful manner. The facial expression and slightly lowered head, as well as the restrained gesture of the arm bent at approximately 45° at the elbow and brought close to the body, with the hand grasping the edge of his jacket, indicate insincerity and pretence. He begins his speech by mimicking crying through spasmodic body movements and simulating the wiping of tears.

Photograph b - Boni's line: "*It's closing time...*" - He appears determined to put an end to the situation. The muscular tension and the gesture made with his left hand signify distancing, suggesting that he intends to deliver a final verdict. The sudden transition from simulated crying to confident decisiveness is a striking change, expressed through variations in muscular tension and movement energy, capturing the audience's attention.

Photograph c - Boni's line: "*If necessary, I will work...*" - Boni is aware that this is a commitment he will not fulfill. This is conveyed through a slight lifting of the shoulders and a closing of the scapulo-humeral girdle through shoulder contraction. His arms rotate with the elbows oriented toward the body axis and flexed at approximately 15–20°, the palms in supination and the fingers extended. His head tilts slightly to one side at an angle of about 15–20°, while the eyebrows are raised and the mouth is open. The entire posture and gestural expression suggest simulated surprise at his own statement. The cumulative gestures attempt to convey a set of conventional signs that symbolize the deliberate distortion of truth. The expression includes a series of active signs that suggest Boni's passivity in the future actions meant to demonstrate the supposed diligence he promises.

Photograph d - Boni's line: "*What, you don't believe me? I swear I can...*" - He attempts to convince the dancers of the sincerity of his declarations, eloquently presenting the idea that he will begin working. He feigns indignation at the dancers' reaction, who mock him, displaying an attitude of false anger. This attitude is expressed through the threatening inclination of the head; the left arm is raised in the

⁴ Kero is a stage name, registered as a trademark.

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sagittal plane parallel to the trunk at 90°, with the elbow pointing downward and flexed at 20–30°, the fist clenched and the index finger extended threateningly toward the audience. The right arm is bent at the elbow at 45°, with the hand resting on the hip. The falseness of the reaction can be read in the positioning of the lower limbs and the excessive muscular tension. The support of the body is predominantly on the rear leg, which can be interpreted as a defensive position.

Photograph e - Boni's line: "*I've decided. Now I say stop! I can no longer love...*" - He attempts to persuade himself by simulating joy, but he does not succeed. He moves with ease and charm, performing a lively dance that includes spectacular *tours en l'air* and pirouettes executed on both feet (successions of *tombés* and *soutenus en tournant* in *plié*).

Photograph f - Boni's line: "*How could one live without girls...*" - He realizes how difficult it will be to keep his promise. He performs dance steps that move across the entire stage, turning in all directions while gesturing admiringly toward the dancers.

Photographs g, h - Boni's line: "*You are the ones who make me addicted to a kiss...*" - Boni acknowledges his weakness while dancing in the middle of a circle formed by the cabaret dancers, blowing kisses from his fingertips and caressing them.

Photographs i, j - Boni's line: "*Without women, one could become a monk...*" - A state of despair regarding his decision sets in. This is manifested through an introspective attitude accompanied by the urge to collapse onto his knees and then onto the floor, eventually reaching a quadruped position (support on knees and hands). Crawling, he attempts to move away and escape from the dancers, who tease him by pushing him and even sitting on his back, preventing his escape.

Photograph k - Boni's line: "*When she acts crazy, how on earth could you not love her?*" - In the end, he becomes certain that he will yield to temptation. This is expressed through an attitude of uncertainty: he turns his head toward a direction where no one is present, looking down toward the floor as a sign of resignation. His body remains under strong tension, standing upright with his legs slightly apart while grasping his hands extended downward in front of the body, with the elbows slightly flexed at an angle of approximately 20–25°.

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a.



b.



c.



d.



e.



f.



g.



h.



i.



j.



k.

Photographs – The couplet “*How Can One Live Without Love*”, in which Count Boni Cancianu bids farewell to the dancers of the Orfeum Cabaret in Budapest before departing on tour with Silvia, from *Die Csárdásfürstin (Silvia)* by Emmerich Kálmán. Performer: Cătălin Petrescu.

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2. Discussions

The main themes addressed in the operetta *Die Csárdásfürstin (Silvia)* include the conflict between true love and social conventions, the contrast between the bohemian life of artists and the rigidity of aristocracy, and the power of love to overcome prejudice.

Dance and stage movement are essential in the activity of an operetta performer, as this musical genre lies at the intersection of music, theatre, and dance, incorporating and transforming elements from all three domains. Unlike opera, where the emphasis falls almost exclusively on vocal performance and dramatic expression, in operetta expressivity, considered in all its aspects, is enhanced through a more varied, dynamic, and at the same time more spectacular stage language.

The aspects that make dance and stage movement essential in operetta productions include: the specific nature of this type of performance, the need to achieve a credible portrayal of the character, the necessity of creating a rhythmic flow that provides vitality and energy to the scenes, the accurate expression of emotions through nonverbal language (including both posture and facial expression), and the need to harmonize and integrate the interpreted character within the stage ensemble.

The specific character of operetta performances stems from their energy, dance rhythms, and cabaret-style musical numbers. Dance, as previously discussed, is organically integrated into the performance's construction. Consequently, characters convey messages and build the narrative not only through voice but also through gesture, attitude, grace, and elegance of movement. The interaction of the character in this dance with both the dancers and the audience, as well as the tension between truth and falsehood, between dissimulation and despair, transforms the character into a driving force of the action in the operetta *Silvia*.

Achieving a high level of character credibility is particularly challenging when the performer must simultaneously fulfill the roles of actor, singer, and dancer. When stage movement is well mastered, the performer can create a vivid character capable of transmitting energy to the audience. Dance contributes to interpretation by providing rhythm, dynamism, and spectacularity. Therefore, it can be argued that a well-constructed choreography, together with appropriate gesture and facial expressions, complements the music, adding a distinctive charm to any production.

The refined nonverbal language through which the character's emotions are clearly expressed suggests, in this moment, passion, humor, and irony/self-irony. This leads to the conclusion that, in many cases, dance and stage movement within a production are just as important as the music and libretto of the operetta.

The performer's dance and stage movement are also crucial for achieving harmony with the ensemble, as bodily synchronization with the other performers on stage is vital for the coherence of the narrative and the overall unity of the performance. The French cancan is not merely a decorative element of the operetta, but a means of advancing the action. It marks the audience's entry into Silvia's world

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and establishes the initial tone of the story, connecting the beginning of the narrative to the motivations of the characters, thereby allowing the audience to understand the magnetism of this universe.

3. Conclusions

Die Csárdásfürstin (*Silvia* or *The Csárdás Princess*) is an operetta full of vitality, humor, dances, and melodies inspired by Hungarian music (especially the csárdás), while also containing lyrical moments of great sensitivity. For this reason, it offers performers the opportunity for artistic expression at a high level, providing them with complex and highly valuable roles.

The French cancan scene, located at the beginning of the operetta, plays an important role in the performance. On the one hand, it is a spectacular dance that contributes to establishing a dynamic atmosphere within the show; on the other hand, it has a symbolic function, as it creates the characteristic atmosphere of the operetta genre. Viewed as an element of entertainment, the French cancan appears in the Orfeum cabaret scene in Budapest, where the protagonist Boni Cancianu becomes the star of the evening through his involvement in the narrative of departure, for which he ostensibly sacrifices himself. This sequence, through its vivacity, provides an explosion of energy, color, and rhythm to the performance, ensuring the spectacular effect expected by the audience.

The French cancan defines the cabaret environment from which the main character, Silvia, originates, an environment that can be described as cosmopolitan and bohemian, yet perceived by the aristocracy as inappropriate for public acknowledgment. This type of performance was regarded by the nobility of the time as a hidden desire. In this way, the dance accentuates the central conflict of the operetta: the love between Silvia (the cabaret artist) and Prince Edwin (the nobleman), as well as the social opposition between the two worlds.

This dance may also be interpreted as a moment of musical contrast, as the lively, rhythmic, and exuberant style of the cancan contrasts with the lyrical and romantic arias found in the operetta. Thus, the duality between passion and convention, between artistic freedom and social constraints, becomes evident.

The French cancan in *Silvia* is not merely a spectacular dance moment, but a key atmospheric element that includes character development and the social conflict present in the libretto. It defines the cabaret world, marks the beginning of the love story between Silvia and Edwin, and contributes significantly to the stylistic charm of Emmerich Kálmán's operetta.

In conclusion, it can be stated that an operetta performer must master, to the highest possible level, a triple expressive language: voice, acting, and stage movement or dance. In operetta performances, dance and gesture are not simple additions but integral components of expressivity, without which the charm of operetta would be diminished.

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Although the operetta *Silvia* has Viennese origins, Emmerich Kálmán combines international dance styles (csárdás, waltz, cancan), reflecting the cosmopolitanism of the Belle Époque period. The introduction of the cancan adds vivacity and modernity to the performance, making it appealing to Western audiences of its time and beyond.

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