

On Identity and Belonging in The Radical Catalan Community of Buenos Aires: The *Esbart Infantil* and The Staging of Wagner's *Lohengrin* (1933).

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ABSTRACT

In 1933, fifty years after the premiere of *Lohengrin* in Buenos Aires, the Catalan playwright Ramón Más i Ferratges created a theatrical adaptation for children, performed by the *Esbart Infantil* of the *Casal Català de Buenos Aires* (Children's Ensemble of the House of Catalans in Buenos Aires). The aim of this article is to identify how the staging of Wagner's *Lohengrin* shaped a sense of belonging within the community of radical Catalans, redefining a migrant identity. To do so, I will address the actors, institutions and circumstances that made the staging and the social memory of the event possible, through the study of various press media in Buenos Aires, those related to the Catalan community, as well as chronicles, personal accounts and memoirs. By performing the *Lohengrin* story, the *Esbart Infantil* created a sense of belonging when sharing the migrant experience with the younger generations of Catalans in exile. The staging also provides nuance to the sense of belonging (Lems, 2020), a way of drawing borders with non-radical Catalans and Spaniards.

KEYWORDS

Wagner's *Lohengrin*; children's performance; identity and belonging; Catalan immigration; Buenos Aires

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INTRODUCTION

Critical – and classical – approaches to opera conceive it as a bourgeois entertainment that reproduces social asymmetries by symbolically legitimising the dominance of a class or social group (with nuances from Adorno, 1994; to DiMaggio, 1982 and Bourdieu, 1998, among others). Instead, the emphasis on the organisational aspects of the opera scene, or the emerging middle-class opera and concert audiences (Rosselli, 1990; Weber, 1976), has been driving attention to the ways in which consumers or users build relationships with music and artistic objects (Smith and Stoll, 2021). In this sense, some of the broader approaches consider opera as part of the democratisation process (Snowman, 2013) within the mass culture(s) of the 20th century, as a devotional bond between the object of affection and fans, which produces self-transcendence (Benzecry, 2012), or as an act of protest, through the engagement of South African practices and discourses on staging western classics, resulting in what is often described as ‘black empowerment’ (Van der Hoven and Maasdorp, 2020). These differing interpretations bear particular relevance when examining the 1933 staging of Lohengrin¹ in 1933 by the *Esbart Infantil* of the *Casal Català de Buenos Aires*². The aim is to identify how Wagner’s Lohengrin could have been staged to shape a sense of belonging within the community of radical Catalans, and how it contributed to the process of redefining a migrant identity.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Catalan immigrant community in Buenos Aires has been divided between those who avoided making a clear statement about Spain and the Catalan political status, and those who committed to the Catalan national cause at a political level (pro-independence), also known as radicals (Fernández, 2010). In this sense, until 1940, two societies were competing for the affiliation of Catalans: the *Centre Català* (Catalan Centre), created in 1886, which admitted not only to belonging to Catalonia but also to Spain; and the *Casal Català*³, founded in 1908, which exclusively emphasised the singularity of Catalonia with respect to Spain⁴.

¹ Lohengrin was the first production of a Wagner opera in Buenos Aires. It was performed in 1883, the year of the German composer’s death, in the old Teatro Colón and under the direction of Nicola Bassi. The audience handbook mentions that the Italian version was the only possible translation for the Wagnerian auditions (Sala, 1964). It was not until 1910 that Catalan immigrants circulated translations in their native tongue. The first staging in the original German language took place in 1922.

² The original is kept in Catalan throughout the paper, translations are only provided the first time it has been mentioned in the text. All translations were made by the author.

³ From now on *Casal Català de Buenos Aires* is shortened to *Casal Català*. The word “Casa” refers to a popular association, specific to the “Catalan Countries” (territories where the native language is Catalan). Communities of Catalans residing outside Catalonia, especially in America and Europe, have often met in “casales”.

⁴ Some of the members of the *Casal Català* called themselves as “Catalans of America” (*Ressorgiment*, 1916) identifying as a group that claimed the radical Catalan ideology in America (Lucci, 2009, p. 10). The latter has also been referred to as “radical nationalism” (Fernández, 2010) or “radical separatism” (Lucci, 2009) regarding the option for breaking with the Spanish nation (secessionism). In this sense, we prefer the name “radical Catalans” to identify the group that in Buenos Aires adhered to this ideology, since “Catalans of America” is less specific, and at the same time it indicates a geographical label coming from outside, that is to say, from Catalonia.

Interviews (Irurzun, 2021) with the directive boards of the two collectives mentioned above showed that both weren't aware about the strong Wagnerism⁵ that took place in the first half of the twentieth century in Catalonia and Buenos Aires, as well as the work of their grandparents in introducing methods of musical pedagogy. Wagner's art had become a key issue in understanding Catalan culture at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century (Macedo, 1998; Janés i Nadal, 2013; Infiesta y Mota, 2008). The fascination of the Catalan intellectuals of the *Renaixença*⁶ with German Romanticism was largely due to their identification with the idea of *volkgeist*, advocated by Herder, according to whom the "soul of a nation" develops within a history, a culture and, above all, a language (Ferrer i Bech, 2018). Consequently, many of Wagner's fans will converge with the nineteenth-century emergence of Catalan nationalism, particularly in the idea that the affirmation of the Catalan language was necessary for the modernisation of Catalonia (Macedo, 1998).

According to Ferrer i Bech (2018), the proposal was to become familiarised with some Nordic symbols and myths, by redefining them so that they become somehow an integral part of Catalan culture. In addition, this facet of Catalan nationalism also suggested merging them with Mediterranean cultural traditions (Irurzun, 2019). For instance, Jerónimo Zanné, a key Catalan musicologist and journalist – among other immigrants settled in Buenos Aires – claimed that each European nation was a particular synthesis of their migrations, a specific fusion of what he considered the soul of Mediterranean ("Latin") culture and the soul of Nordic ("Gothic") culture. In an effort to reaffirm an ideal of Hispanicism after the latest Spanish imperial losses (Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines, 1898), he argued against what he called the 'modern Latinists', who established a 'mental genealogy' only in the roots of a primitive Rome not 'contaminated' by successive migrations⁷ (Irurzun, 2019).

BACKGROUND

Contemporary approaches have promoted a new epistemology about music (DeNora, 2000; Hennion, 2002), conceiving it as a device that configures social action and not only as the expression of a social framework that gives it shape. Likewise, in Argentina, researchers have addressed the relationship between music and identity by accounting for the constitutive role that music has in the construction of a group's identity (Vila, 1989; Buch, 2013, 2016; Aliano *et al.*,

⁵ By Wagnerism(s), we mean interpretative communities that give a particular meaning to the artistic work of Richard Wagner, mostly conditioned also by a feeling of admiration or affection for the composer or his work (Irurzun, 2021). Nonetheless, according to Ross (2021), even when Wagnerism is defined more narrowly, its meanings multiply. Originally, the word referenced a follower or fan. Later, it denoted an artistic quality, an aesthetic tendency, or a cultural feature. For early 20th-century modernists (not only musicians but also novelists, poets, and painters), Wagner's art was a common topic in discussions. Among Wagnerisms, the Nazi version is by far the best known. Despite the composer's worldview, containing elements linked after with Nazi ideology, "one danger inherent in the incessant linking of Wagner to Hitler is that it hands the Führer a belated cultural victory—exclusive possession of the composer he loved" (Ross, 2020, p. 244).

⁶ A cultural movement that arose from the first third of the 19th century onwards, which sought to recover elements identified with Catalan culture.

⁷ Zanné (1906, p. 1) argues that this Latinists "do not think of Catalonia as an already inhabited land before the Roman conquest (...), they do not remember the post-Roman invasions: the barbarian – in the Roman sense – and the Arabic, and also the Jewish immigration, leaving aside the continuous fusion of races that occurs in the current times. We are the result of the fusion of all these races".

2017; just to mention a few). About the opera worlds of art, Benzecry (2012) has pointed out how the fact of its promotion financed with public funds added to the phenomenon of mass immigration to Argentina (1860-1930)⁸ have shaped diverse relationships between social groups and cultural goods, i.e., a strong circularity of the cultures of the elites with those of the popular sectors.

While these themes have received a degree of attention from scholars in the fields of social music studies and cultural history in more recent years (Frith, 1996; DeNora, 2000; Hennion, 2002), there are still major gaps in our understandings about the links between musical passion, migration and the processes of cultural identity building through generations. Musical taste re-signifies during musical/artistic performances, taking part at the same time in shaping social action (Hennion, 2012) – as well as constituting itself a social action (Turner, 1988) –, challenging the illusion of a time consistency of meaning in collective memory. Therefore, recovering the musical agency of *migrancy* processes – a short-hand for migrant agency in accordance with Pardue, Kenny and Young (2023, p. 3) –could shed light on how immigrant communities address the issue of inclusion: either by choosing to forge cultural identities related to their origins, by deactivating the latter in favour of identifications with the receiving society, or by promoting both strategies of cultural action at the same time.

As some authors have argued (Jensen, 2008; Lucci, 2009; Fernández, 2010), during the first half of the 20th century, activism surrounding the Catalan language in Argentina was a key element in differentiating radical groups from the broader Catalan community⁹. The latter was more tolerant of the recovery of a Hispanic legacy as a sign of Argentine cultural heritage facing the impact of mass immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Fernández, 2010). However, regarding the construction of identity and belonging within the group, it has been barely analysed how the different cultural elements have worked in situated musical contexts as boundary-drawing practices. In this sense, music has equally been employed to create division and in the worst case, encourage warfare (Quignard, 1996; Bergh and Sloboda, 2010; among others). Thus, belonging and inclusion are concepts that require a more nuanced understanding (Lems, 2020; Kyratsou, 2023) since music can be a way of suspending differences (Lenette and Sunderland, 2014) or highlighting power asymmetries and political conflicts (Riiser, 2010).

The links between music, theatre and poetry are both crucial in the associative beginnings of the radical Catalans and in posterity (Irurzun, 2020; 2021). Indeed, as several authors verified (Arbonés, 1976; Foguet i Boreu, 2012; Bover i Font, 2017; Ciurans, 2020), throughout the twentieth century, Buenos Aires became the main city outside Catalonia where the works of the modern Catalan theatre circulated. Thus, drama became one of the most important elements in the promotion of Catalan culture abroad, with repercussions later, during the

⁸ For instance, in 1914, almost one in five inhabitants of Buenos Aires had been born in Spain. The Spanish population of the city fluctuated, at that time, between 200.000 and 300.000 immigrants of which around 25.000 were Catalans natives of Catalonia (Fernández, 2010, p. 164).

⁹ The *Casal Català* did not have legal status, with the purpose of avoiding judicial inspections. This allowed them to carry out their activities in the Catalan language at times when it was not officially allowed by the Spanish government.

Republican Exile.¹⁰ The approaches to anarchism and libertarian socialism amongst Catalan immigrants in Barcelona had a profound impact on their consideration of theatre as a transformative social force, in which Wagner played a crucial role¹¹(Litvak, 1990). Thus, from Catalans' sociability emerged a Wagnerian Society in Buenos Aires, which was linked to the one already founded in Barcelona (Irurzun, 2021).

With regard to studies of Wagner publics and fans¹², we have not found research related to the Wagner adaptations performed by children, particularly at the immigrant communities settled in Argentina in early 20th century (before 1930).

METHODS

In this article I will explore how stagings of *Lohengrin* performed by children could tell us something about the musical construction of a sense of belonging through situated processes of meaning-making. I will address the actors, institutions and circumstances that made the staging and the social memory of the event possible, through the study of various press media in Buenos Aires and the Catalan community, as well as an examination of chronicles, personal accounts and memoirs, some of them arising from qualitative approaches to the current migrant community. Thus, members of the *Obra Cultural Catalana de Buenos Aires* and the *Casal dels Països Catalans de La Plata*, both societies currently connected with the legacy of radical Catalans brought crucial information. Fivaller Seras, son of one of the most prominent figures of the radical community – Pere Seras – joined the *Esbart Infantil*, performed in *Lohengrin*, and within his autobiographical stories one of the most complete portraits of the playwright Ramon Mas can be found.

In particular, the year 1933 found the radical Catalans celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Casal Català* (the Silver Jubilee) and the 50th anniversary of Wagner's death, commemorated worldwide.¹³ These celebrations highlighted a

¹⁰ With the expression 'Republican exile' historians refer to the diaspora of many Spaniards who sought refuge in several European and American countries after the defeat of the Republican side under the Rebel force ('*bando sublevado*' or 'nationalist faction') in the conflict known as the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

¹¹ For more on this concept, see chapter 'The Soviet of Music' (Irurzun, 2021, pp.71-110), where the meanings of social revolution through art and theatre as well-conceived by the Catalans in Buenos Aires in early 20th century have been addressed.

¹² It is possible to point out a before and after in the receptions of Wagner's work, marked by the Nazi appropriation of it (Meyer, 1991, Etlin, 2002 or Spotts 1996; among many others). After these tragic events, other facets and uses that had been popular before the 1930s and that had no relation to the Aryan supremacy upheld by Nazism and some sectors close to Bayreuth were forgotten (see Žižek, 2013, p.137; Badiou 2013 or Ross, 2020, among others). The publication of an informative article on Wagner by the Catalan Josep Lleó in *Juventud. Revista de la Juventud Israelita de Buenos Aires* (1916) is an example of this previous diversity (Irurzun, 2021, p. 22).

¹³ The year 1933 also marks the starting of Wagner's appropriation as a Nazi symbol, as well as the starting of the corruption of the Bayreuth festival (Spotts, 1996; Sala Rose, 2003; Müller, 2013). Thereafter, the National Socialists did "the best they could to try to put an ideological gloss on the operas" (Spotts, 1996, p. 174). According to Spotts (2009, pp. 256-258), Hitler's passion for Wagner aroused great anguish inside the party, because Nazi officials saw Bayreuth as a musical playground for an international elite. Despite the fact that "patronage" ensured the Festival's independence from the Party control, Hitler's involvement with Bayreuth had well-known catastrophic consequences: Jews, singers and artist, or world-appraised conductors such as Arturo Toscanini or Bruno Walter, naturally lost their taste for the Festival and declined to perform there. Paradoxically - or not - many of the artists who went into exile in Argentina, and forged close links with anti-fascist groups, were enthusiastic promoters of Wagner's work, such as Erich Kleiber, Fritz Busch and Paul Walter Jacob. The latter, who had arrived in Buenos Aires in 1939, created the following year -with Ernesto Alemann- the "Independent German Theatre" (*Freie Deutsche Bühne*), the only German

community memory that used to pay tributes¹⁴ to the first generations –such as the ‘pioneer-founder’, Josep Lleonart Nart– and the agency of youngest members, as his son Josep Lleonart Giménez, teacher, writer, and part of the board of directors of the Casal.¹⁵ The latter wrote articles in the most important journals of the community: *Ressorgiment*¹⁶ and *Catalunya*¹⁷, key sources for our case study. In addition to being linked to the local social networks, both publications maintained strong links with the Catalan government (*Generalitat*) and its institutions.

The critical comparison of all these testimonies allows us to examine the relationships between belonging and music passion, within this particular process of immigrant identity production, which involves transnational networks.

THE *ESBART INFANTIL* OF THE CASAL CATALÀ

In this section I will explore firstly the network of Catalan entities focusing on the singularity of the director of the children's ensemble and of other main collaborators, in short, those who believed that the staging of a Wagnerian opera by the youngest members could create a sense of belonging among the community, during celebration time. The goal is to identify how their taste, personal background and pedagogy methods worked into the societal dynamics of the radical Catalans. Secondly, to explore the musical teaching method used in the *Esbart Infantil* will allow us to understand how these teachers conceived *Lohengrin* as a possibility for children to perform.

The promoter was Ramón Más i Ferratges, who was born in Barcelona in 1888. Although his date of arrival in Argentina is unknown, he arrived in Buenos Aires in 1913, from Entre Ríos, in circumstances of economic hardship. Unfortunately, we have not yet found any information about his artistic education. His friendship with Pere Seras, one of the most prominent figures of the Catalan community of the *Casal Català*, facilitated his accountancy role at the Argentine branch of the German toy company *Lehman*, where he remained for the rest of his life. This work was highly consistent with his vocation for the education of young people and children. As Fivaller Seras, explain: “He called himself ‘the Mas boy’ and hid his age, despite for us, the children of the *Esbart*, he was Mr. Mas” (Bacardí, 2009, p. 67-68).

theatre in exile in the world (Glocer, S. and Kelz, R., 2015). Shortly afterwards he published an extensive biography of Wagner (1946).

¹⁴ Tributes to its founder Lleonart Nart and other admired Catalans were a constant practice in the community until 1940. Then, the entire Catalan immigrant community (radicals and non-radicals) merged into a new institution, the *Casal de Catalunya* (currently), in order to face the common enemy of the Franco Dictatorship. However, ten years later, most of the radicals abandoned this new *Casal*, due to dissatisfaction with the board of directors. According to De Cristóforis (2014, p. 19), towards the beginning of the 1950s the anti-Francoism of many groups of Spanish institutions located in the city of Buenos Aires began to lose dynamism, in hand with the weakening of the expectation of the fall of the Franco regime.

¹⁵ In the private archive of the Lleonart-San Sebastián family we had access to objects and photographs related to this celebration.

¹⁶ *Ressorgiment* began to be published in 1916. It quickly became the main graphic medium of the radical or pro-independence Catalan community in Buenos Aires and the longest-lived in America, publishing 677 issues between 1916 and 1972.

¹⁷ *Catalunya* emerged in 1930 as a magazine funded by some Catalans of the community (not only radicals), with a literary and cultural editorial direction. Unlike *Ressorgiment*, it was open to other political trends, such as federalism. It was published until 1964.



Figure 1. Tribute from the *Esbart Infantil* to Josep Lleonart Nart, founder of the Casal Català on the 25th anniversary. Buenos Aires, March, 1908-1933. Commemorative medal. Lleonart-San Sebastián Archive. Credits: Photo by author.

In this sense, one of the initial tasks of Mas i Ferratges¹⁸ in the community was to create ca. 1916 the first children's theatre ensemble, *Esbart Infantil*, and the first Catalan dance group in Argentina, with the collaboration of other Catalan immigrants, such as the musician Ernest Sunyer and the pianist Montserrat Bartrès. Beyond initial education, the practice and teaching of performing arts had a structural nature in the immigrant community (Irurzun, 2020, 2021). Each year all the children were gathered and divided into three groups according to an age range: the youngest, the middle-aged and the oldest. For the first part of the performances, popular songs, fables and *corrandas*¹⁹ were taught, performed by the youngest children, and for the second part of the performances, ballets and Catalan folk dances, which were usually reserved for the middle-aged. When the children became teenagers, Mas would appoint them to continue in the dance group, or in the *Ignasi Iglésies Group*, also created by him, in honour of the Catalan playwright, much admired among the immigrants in Buenos Aires. They performed short theatrical adaptations for young people of classical and Catalan theatre. These

¹⁸ From now on, he will be simply referred to as Mas, as the community usually remembers him.

¹⁹ Dance song in couples, very popular in Catalonia, with rather lively movement and cheerful tune, called *corriente* in the Roussillon and in Andorra. Also, short, often improvised folk song, sometimes used as a dance song.

adaptations were prepared and staged by Mas himself. Finally, when the young adults had acquired a command of the stage, they had the chance to join the Performing Art Section, whose direction and advice was also their responsibility. As some members of the group highlighted (Anon, 1948, p. 6186), although some pieces were completely original and others arose from a simple story or popular song, on the programs Mas did not appear as the author or arranger.

The *Esbart Infantil* carried out activities in coordination with other sections of the *Casal Català*, which he was part of mainly with the choir of the *Orfeó Català*²⁰ founded in Buenos Aires by Ernest Sunyer²¹, and with the *Associació Protectora de l'Ensenyança Catalana* in Buenos Aires (Society for the Protection of Catalan Education in Buenos Aires). The choir used to rehearse together with the children's ensemble and the stage group according to the plays, by sections during the week, and on Sundays they used to do a general rehearsal, after which Sunyer encouraged improvised dances with the piano. Furthermore, Mas did not work alone but with the collaboration of the pianists Montserrat Bartès and Carme Sarmiento. The first one played an essential role, in such a way that in the review of the first stage activity of 1936, the task of both teachers is highlighted: "Montserrat and Mr. Mas they do not have the monument of stone they deserve, but they have another, the best of all, the one we have raised in the imagination [...]" (Casanova, 1949, p. 6356).

Regarding the *Associació Protectora de l'Ensenyança Catalana* in Buenos Aires, it was established in 1916, being one of the twelve headquarters all around the world that depended on the parent institution founded in Barcelona in 1899. The one in Buenos Aires was considered the most important delegation in terms of the economic support it provided to Barcelona and the relevance of its activities. After the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), it continued its activities until 1950. The institution had its own library, and it used to teach Catalan language courses by correspondence, organised activities and conferences, etc.

Likewise, the introduction of the musical teaching method created by Jacques Dalcroze²², and driven by one of his disciples Joan Llongueres²³, was paramount to the activities of the *Esbart Infantil*. It is important to note the simultaneity with Catalonia in the deployment of this method, although it was assumed that these pedagogical innovations had been developed in Argentine musical education after the 1950s (Hemsey de Gainza, 2000). In particular, Llongueres' musical teaching method focused on body practice, improvisation, auditive learning, and the practice of playing, with the goal of making musical learning accessible to any person/child.

²⁰ The choral practice played a very important role in the Catalan modernist movement. Aviñoa (2005, p. 118) observes that the promotion of choral activity had the aim of including families and people close to the singers, in many cases belonging to the working classes. The results were choirs of more than six thousand people.

²¹ Ernest Sunyer i Curtiella arrived in 1910 in Buenos Aires, at the age of 21 years old, and immediately created the *Orfeó Català*. Pianist and composer developed the Joan Llongueres method, and animated the whole musical life of the immigrants gathered in the *Casal Català*.

²² Émile Jaques-Dalcroze was a Swiss composer and pedagogue (1865-1950) who designed a music teaching methodology based on movement, rhythm and improvisation, issues that had not been considered before in a comprehensive manner.

²³ Joan Llongueres i Badia was a pianist, composer and pedagogue who completed his studies in Dresden and Geneva, particularly under the teachings of Émile Jaques-Dalcroze. This greatly impacted him and led him to found in 1912 the *Institut Català de Rítmica i Plàstica* (currently Escuela Joan Llongueres), in which he developed his own version of the method. At the same time, he taught at the *Catalan School of Dramatic Art*, directed by the playwright Adrià Gual, also a Wagnerite.

Llongueres implemented Dalcrozism²⁴ not only to the musical training of children but also to actors and artists, as well as to therapies for people with disabilities. The Dalcroze method focuses on movement, connecting body and mind in order to feel the rhythm rather than thinking about it, promoting perception and coordination. In this sense, it is based on learning abstract musical concepts through experience and movement (Llongueres, 2002, p. 87).

Beyond the connection with the rest of the Catalan entities and the innovative method of musical teaching, the promotion of bonds between generations was another element that made the success of *Esbart Infantil* possible. This remained in the memories of the following generations as an ideal, as noted by Jordi Casanova, a Catalan leader regarding the death of its creator:

Through the classrooms of the *Esbart* we have seen people who are today grandparents and have accompanied then their grandchildren. With the incentive of our songs, our dances, popular *corrandas* and other expressions of Catalan folklore, Ramon Mas educated his students in the love of Catalonia [...] In each family you will find some person, to whom Mas has taught to pronounce their first words in our language (Anon, 1948, p. 6186).

Furthermore, the most important Catalan poetess in the community, Gracia B. de Llorens wrote several poems as a tribute to his labour:

[...] Our children loved him / because he dedicated to them / the primitive music / of *flavioles* and *corrandes* / the primitive music / and the treasure of our dances / they learned from You / of them he made little wise men / of the subtle wisdom / that of the centuries we inherited (Bassa de Llorens, 1948, p. 6187).

The importance of music, theatre, dance and literature to the fostering of what they considered Catalan cultural heritage is clear on the latter excerpts, because arts were seen as tools to build a feeling of belonging in new generations, which otherwise would not ever have had the possibility of knowing Catalonia as their parents or grandparents had done. All the activities were made in Catalan, except in contests that included prizes for Argentine genres, such as *gauchesca* poetry. Hence, the position regarding the host society was ambiguous: on the one hand, “de-Catalanisation” was feared but at the same time, the Argentinean republican system and the historical tradition of the struggles for independence from the Spanish imperial power were praised (Fernández, 2010, p. 170).

WAGNER FOR CHILDREN

During Richard Wagner's lifetime (1813-1883), *Lohengrin* was his most popular opera. Premiered in Weimar in 1850 under the conduction and mentorship of Franz Liszt,²⁵ it arrived in European theatres between 1855 and 1883. While it was known as a ‘romantic opera in three acts’, the plot analysis reveals that the romantic adjective had less to do with romance than power struggles.²⁶ In musical and

²⁴ There is plenty of bibliography about the Jaques-Dalcroze musical method. In short, the method could be summarized in three interconnected dimensions: rhythmic, solfège and improvisation, which, as a whole, do not suggest a defined methodological structure, but a collected resource from which the teacher develops activities based on his own criteria (Juntunen, 2002).

²⁵ Due to Wagner's exile from Dresden after receiving an arrest warrant for his role in the 1848 Revolution.

²⁶ Briefly summarized, Lohengrin, Parsifal's son, is chosen by the "Holy Grail" to be Elsa's protector. The King of Brabant, Elsa's father, had died without leaving an heir to the throne. On his deathbed, everyone had sworn loyalty to his daughter. However, Count Telramund does not recognize Elsa's sovereignty and

dramaturgical terms, it is often said that *Lohengrin* traced the boundary between Wagner's 'romantic' operas and his later musical dramas. Although the technical elements are more adaptable than other works by Wagner, the subject is still complex.

Toward the end of the 19th century, Wagner was a trend in Europe, especially in Great Britain, and in the United States, due to his proximity with the myths of Britain switched on by the Victorian imagination: the stories of King Arthur, of the knights of the Round Table and the Holy Grail. Book publishers created a marketplace for Wagner's explanation books, particularly for young readers. These books emphasised the dimension of heroes and dragons in musical dramas to capture the attention of children, removing complexity from the plot (Ross, 2020).

In Argentina, the first edition of Wagner's works adapted for children was within the imported Collection of the Catalan publishing house *Araluce*, called *Obras maestras al alcance de los niños*, awarded with a Silver Medal at the Leipzig Exhibition of 1914.²⁷ The book, called *Historias de Wagner explicadas a los niños* is a Spanish translation from *Wagner Stories Explained to Children* by C.E. Smith (1914). Although this Spanish translation would have worked as input to the adaptation created by Ramón Mas, the reviews of the staging of the Wagnerian opera, indicate the use of another resource: "One of Wagner's most important works, *Lohengrin*, adapted to the abilities of young performers, went up onto the stage in the Catalan version by Xavier Viura and Joaquim Pena" (Anon, 1933, p. 3360).

The translation chosen by Mas was the Catalan rhythmic version (text applied to the music) written to its further vocal performance rather than literary versions. A rhythmic translation pursues a practical purpose: it must be used to be sung. When carrying out this type of transfer, the original literary meaning might be lost, but other objectives can be achieved to contribute to the familiarisation and popularisation of the work. The reader-performer memorises the text more easily and sings it in his/her native language. Catalan rhythmic translations contributed to the popular dissemination of Wagner's work in Catalonia (Ortiz de Urbina Sobrino, 2005) and were one of the first objectives of the Wagnerian Society of Barcelona (founded in 1901), so that "the understanding of Wagnerian dramas would be within the reach of any Catalan and not just a few" (Janés i Nadal, 2013, p. 176). In this spirit, *Lohengrin* was the first work translated with this method and edited by the German publishing house Breitkopf and Härtel in 1906. Possibly, Mas's selection of this drama, could have been also related to the goal of connecting this foundational achievement of their compatriots with the celebration of the Silver Jubilee of the Argentine community of radical Catalans in Buenos Aires, and not only with the fact of being Wagner's most famous opera or a more adjustable option. In this sense, the performance also aimed to generate a sense of belonging with a transnational radical Catalan community, since one of the translators,

claims instead to have promised the king that he would marry Elsa to become king himself. Suddenly, Lohengrin appears on a boat pulled by a swan, and duels Telramund defeating him to defend Elsa's right. As a reward, Lohengrin marries Elsa. But he warns her that according to the precept of his chivalry, she cannot ask him who he is or where he comes from, otherwise he will have to return to his life as a knight. Instigated by Ortrud and Telramud, she cannot help asking him the forbidden question. Finally, the swan on which Lohengrin had come reappears and takes him back to the Grail castle, consequently Elsa dies of grief.

²⁷ Curiously, Josep Lleonart Nart, the founder of the *Casal Catalá*, had been an employee of this publishing house, just before emigrating to Buenos Aires.

Jerónimo Zanné, was among the audience. Yet, the originality of this local staging derived from the fact of being conceived to be performed by the children of the community only once. Still, the reviews of the event pointed out the good attendance and the high impact on the Catalan community, a fact that led to the unusual need for its repetition: “it had to be repeated eight days later to satisfy those families who had been left without seats” (Anon, 1933, pp. 3360-3361).

The personal memories of Fivaller Seras, a performer who at that time was 3 years old, confirm this decision: “We must bear in mind that all these efforts were used for a single performance, as used to be in the theatre of the *Casal*. In this case, they repeated it, due to its exceptional nature” (Bacardí, 2009, pp.68-69).

Despite – or because of – the fact of having few material resources for the staging (costume, scenography, effects, etc.), nor an appropriate space, the interpretive faculties ‘of some willing and enthusiastic children’ in a reduced stage setting is highlighted. Another excerpt adds an observation on the dynamics of the adaptation of the work, as a result of the use of the Dalcroze-Llongueres method, applied to musical theatre. According to this method the movement of the actors should be as natural as possible in relation to the music. The primacy of rhythm and the enjoyment of the vivid experience by the children is a central idea of this pedagogical method, giving agency to the youngest members of the community and generating, in this case, a sense of brotherhood with adults:

It does not really matter that the characters were not dressed as they should; that the development was largely modified by the reduced scenario; that some musical passages were conducted with a different rhythm to coordinate it with the movement of the figures. All that matters little, if the poet's verb reached the soul of the viewer to saturate it with sublime beauty (Lleonart Giménez, 1933, p.31)

Additionally, it is observed that there has been a significant decrease in the number of instruments and performers, compensated by an appropriate selection of passages and arrangements: “The musical adaptation, very appropriate for the orchestra (ten musicians), was played worthily. Also, the corals compressed by Miss Montserrat Bartrés were performed by the children’s choir with much justice” (Anon, 1933, pp. 3360-3361), or:

A small orchestra illustrated faithfully the work, interpreting the most prominent pages of the score. The preludes were interpreted; the final bars of each act; the arrival of the knight of the Holy Grail, as well as his farewell; the declaration, the well-known Wedding March; and some choral (Lleonart Giménez, 1933, p.31).

As for the selection of scenes, the arrival and departure of the Grail knight to help Elsa occupied a central place in the staging, as had already been written in the summarised plot of the rhythmic Catalan version (Pena, 1926). Similarly, Seras explained that – as he was a very young age performer – he could only retain in his memories the swan behind the scenes:

The version of *Lohengrin* for boys and girls based on the Catalan translation by Joaquim Pena and Jeroni Zanné [...] was one of his most memorable works. One image stayed with me: swans passing by the back of the stage (Bacardí, 2009, pp. 68-69).

The love's theme and Elsa's main role in whether or not to ask the forbidden question was maybe not highlighted to the extent of more recent productions of this opera.

To sum up, through the reviews and testimonies analysed, we can conclude that there was an intergenerational joint work where the cooperation of teachers is placed on a similar level of commitment as the youngest performers, musicians, and singers. This staging generated communion by giving to the youngest members of the community the responsibility of providing enjoyment:

With the performance of the beautiful myth of the Swan Knight, what the leaders of the community had proposed were achieved, that is; to provide enjoy to the community and, in particular, to the members of the *Casal Català*, with a Wagnerian spiritual staging (Lleonart Giménez, 1933, p. 31)

Nonetheless, the practices of 'producing Wagnerian culture' (Irurzun, 2021) was also a process of musical construction of difference, by emphasising a singularity that draws internal borders with the Catalan immigrant community more willing to dialogue with Hispanicism; in addition to confronting a Spanish immigrant identity as a whole. In this sense a review of the performance concludes: "our warmest commitment with all those children who made us enjoy a laudable emotion of patriotism and beauty" (Lleonart Giménez, 1933, p.31), while another points out:

This beautiful action of the Casal Català, joining the global commemoration of the death of a person who with his genius knew how to reform traditional musical conceptions, is proof of the spiritual sense that reigns in the heart of the institution and honours the motto of Culture Centre that it holds (Anon. 1933, p. 3360.)



Figure 2. The *Esbart Infantil* pays tribute to the founder of the Casal, Josep Lleonart Nart. Behind the children, it can be see the Esbart teachers, Ramón Mas and Montserrat Bartrès, sitting in the background on the right. Credits: anonymous, Archive of the Obra Cultural Catalana de Buenos Aires.

Finally, *Lohengrin* could also work as a metaphor of dealing with the migrant status.²⁸ In this sense, the career of the director of the *Esbart Infantil*, Ramón Más i Ferratges, appears as extremely ‘Lohengrinian’, since in the biographies that remember him, the silence regarding his own origins stands out: “No one knew the reasons that had led him to leave Catalonia and he never revealed the mystery” (Bacardí, 2009, p. 67), as well as his refusal to sign his theatrical and journalistic contributions. Therefore, in the plot of *Lohengrin*, the winged knight could be replaced by the modern migratory experience, offering a narrative about the silence or the suspension of identity as a contradictory way to obliterate differences.²⁹

CONCLUSIONS

Among the numerous societies and sections founded by the radical Catalans in Buenos Aires, the *Esbart Infantil* worked into the intergenerational memory as a reminder of cohesion that lasted in the societies that were founded later.³⁰ In this study, I report that the *Esbart* was intended as a way to create a sense of belonging and to share the experience of being migrant – the experience of being an unknown person – with the youngest generations of Catalans by performing the *Lohengrin* story. Furthermore, the use of the Dalcroze-Llongueres method and the rhythmic translation connected indeed both radical communities of Buenos Aires and Barcelona. Due to the lack of data related to current descendants of the children and teachers of the *Esbart*, we explored the staging mostly through the testimonies of the audience and the memories of one of the youngest performers. Studies to further clarify the meanings that performers gave to *Lohengrin's* staging in relation to the Catalan community and the matter of inclusion in the Argentine society are needed.

Conversely, the staging also brings a nuance about the sense of belonging, a way of drawing boundaries by identifying the singularity of enjoying Wagner from the earliest stages of life, as a Catalan conquest. The staging of *Lohengrin* by the *Esbart Infantil* adds evidence to the process of differentiation of the radical Catalans, as presenting themselves not only as promoters of Catalan culture but also of a new idea of it, an emerging “us” also based on the recognition of north European cultural traditions as part of Catalan history. In the nation building process, this recognition allowed them to recover a language that did not have the legitimacy of an imperial or religious community, for instance, a sacred language like Latin (Anderson, 1993, p.33), but rather of medieval Vulgar Latin, as the result of the fusion with other populations like the Germanic form.

²⁸ Lauer and Müller indicate that the opera also reflects on the possibility of anonymity: “The human longing for salvation is always also the subject's longing to be saved from himself. For a subject – literally, something subjugated – becomes a human being only if he/she can provide information about his name and origin” (2020, pp. 85-86).

²⁹ According to Daniel Jütte (2017) *Lohengrin* was attractive to Jewish listeners of the late nineteenth century by providing an identification with the knight as an itinerant outsider that had always been separated from society, seeking for the integration of their different social worlds.

³⁰ Concerning these processes of social memory musical construction through generations, further research is needed to analyse how Wagnerism and innovative musical teaching methods had turned from a ‘strong memory’ into a ‘weak memory’ into the current Catalan community. As we see before, the divisions within the community reappeared in 1950 after a brief union to counteract the consequences of the Franco dictatorship. Additionally, it was not until the end of the Second World War that Wagner's art began to be seen as part of Nazism legacy and not as a “victim” of it (Ross, 2021, pp. 633-666). It will therefore be interesting to find out whether a “weak memory” of this characteristic Wagnerism of the first half of the twentieth century would have had any relation to these events.

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