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A Portait of Nicolaus Esterházy, the "Good Prince" (1714-1790), Commemorating His 300th Birthday

by János Malina

Abstract

Prince Nicolaus Esterházy "The Magnificent" is well-known as the creator of the "fairy-world" of Eszterháza, and as a musically competent and theatre-loving aristocrat who ensured nearly ideal circumstances for Haydn's creative work during a period of almost three decades. Other facets of Nicolaus's personality, however, remain mostly unknown. Just to mention a few of them: he was a full-blooded, extremely widely-read intellectual; he also went in for painting in his youth; he showed much empathy to people in his environment who were in trouble, and possessed an astonishing level of social sensitivity; he demanded strict dicipline, especially in financial matters, but his good heart often defeated his harshness; and, as one of his contemporaries put it, he preferred to "live according to the desire of his heart." On the other hand, he suffered from serious seizures of depression, he may have been involved in gambling in his younger years, and his marriage does not seem to have been very harmonious. To commemorate the 300th anniversary of his birth, this article attempts to more fully flesh out his portrait.

I. Introduction

Just before the end of last year we commemorated an important anniversary of the history of European music: 18 December was the tricentenary of the birth, in Vienna, of Nicolaus Esterházy, later known as "The Magnificent," whom Haydn once called his "good Prince."¹ Nicolaus's accomplishments are well known: he established nearly ideal circumstances for the unfolding of Haydn's genius, he created a "Hungarian Versailles" at Eszterháza, he organised sumptuous festivities for his aristocratic guests, often lasting for several days, he played an instrument—the baryton—which was an oddity in its own time, and he had an unquestioned loyalty to the Habsburg family, most notably as a military general. It is also known by many that he was an exceptionally nice and informal person. Among others, Goethe found him a very likeable man when he had the opportunity to meet him directly during the election process of the Holy Roman Emperor held in Frankfurt in 1764.² This list of accomplishments and characteristics would be more than sufficient for regarding our Prince as one of the most remarkable and exciting personalities in Hungarian culture and Hungarian history. Yet Nicolaus to some extent shares the fate of Haydn himself, who has been characterised by László Somfai as a "disadvantaged genius." Posterity stubbornly compares Haydn with Mozart, involuntarily and unavoidably labeling him the "lesser genius." Similarly Nicolaus Esterházy, as a result of half-truths and anachronistic notions, battles with the prejudice that he had treated his genius court composer as a mere servant, and that without Haydn he would not be remembered by anyone today. Reassessing a number of historical factors, however, shows that such a judgment is far from the truth. In this article, I will attempt to make clear that Nicolaus Esterházy is a much more complex individual than he has been given credit for in prior assessments.

¹ In original German: "guten Fürsten" (accusative), used in his letter of 17 September 1791 written to Marianne von Genzinger. See Dénes Bartha, ed., *Joseph Haydn: Gesammelte Briefe und Aufzeichnungen* (Kassel–Budapest, 1965), 260. In English: H. C. Robbins Landon, ed., *The collected Correspondence and London Notebooks by Joseph Haydn* (London, 1959), 118. Landon's translation of the expression is "kind Prince."

² He tells about this in his autobiography; compare Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, in *Werkausgabe in zehn Bänden*, vol. 8 (Cologne, 1998), 224-5.

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Portrait of Nicolaus I. Esterházy, oil on canvas, 2nd half 18th century.

Inv. Nr.: B 46 Esterházy Privatstiftung, Eisenstadt Palace;

Photo: Gerhard Wasserbauer, Vienna. Used with permission.

II. The Prince and his subjects.

The magnanimity shown by Prince Nicolaus towards Haydn went very far beyond those implied in their contracts. Nicolaus's generosity contributed to the composer's accumulation of wealth throughout his lifetime; Haydn died an extremely wealthy man. To give just one example, Prince Nicolaus took over the expenses accrued during the reconstruction of Haydn's house in Eisenstadt both times it burnt down, in sums that far exceeded Haydn's own modest contribution.³ This same house, when it became useless because of the final relocating of the princely court to Eszterháza, was sold by Haydn for his *own* profit. The Prince also proved to be extraordinarily liberal when in Haydn's second contract, in 1779, he removed his entitlement over Haydn's instrumental output.⁴ Admittedly, his interest had almost exclusively turned to opera by then. To be sure, Nicolaus did not question the order and the conventions of his day. But within this framework of social mores, he maintained an exceptional, personal empathy towards Haydn. (Alas, we will never find out in detail, how and to what extent the intimate experience of the many hours of doing chamber music together, rehearsing and performing baryton trios, contributed to this empathy.)

Prince Nicolaus's deeds as a statesman and music lover also have been underreported. His tastes and influences effected not only the arts in Hungary, but beyond, as suggested by Haydn's own notariety across Europe. Consider for example the case of the *buffo* tenor Guglielmo Jermoli, who played the protagonist in two Haydn operas, and whose remarkable career took him to various leading opera houses from Venice to St. Petersburg. In 1777–79, between two Eszterháza periods, he also sang in London. In the librettos of all of the London performances in which he participated he is described as "the chamber virtuoso of Prince Esterházy,"

³ For example, the cost of the reparation after the fire of 1768 reached 378 guilders of which Haydn's contribution was only 50 guilders; in 1776 the costs were beyond 460 guilders. See e. g. H. C. Robbins Landon, *Haydn: Chronicle and Works*, vol. II.: *Haydn at Eszterháza 1766–1790* (London, 1978), 150–1, 399. The original documents in Hárach's transcription: *Haydn-Jahrbuch*, iv (1968), 49–50, 54–5.

⁴ Esterházy Privatstiftung Archiv, Burg Forchtenstein [EPA], *Süttör missiles, Fasc. 6 No. 20*. Transcription in Bartha, 83–4, English translation in Landon, *Chronicle and Works*, 42–3.

indicating that Nicolaus's name had cachet throughout Europe's musical community even during his lifetime.

A notable travel report by Gottfried von Rotenstein gives a concise and felicitous characterization of Eszterháza. Art historian Edit Szentesi has recently ascertained that the report's author is identical with Gottfried Stegmüller, the owner of the pharmacy called Red Crab in the medieval city centre of Pressburg (now Bratislava, Slovakia).⁵ Rotenstein/Stegmüller purchased nobility for himself, and was evidently a great snob and a passionate traveller. Many contemporaries mocked him for his infinitely pedantic and detailed descriptions of the objects seen in the famous buildings he visited. His accounts of Eszterháza, summarising the results of his repeated visits, have enriched our knowledge with numerous valuable details. However, Rotenstein/Stegmüller at times went beyond describing mere objects. In the third edition of his extensive travel book⁶ he wrote the following:

Prince Esterházy is a pleasant gentleman, of approximately 74 years old [this part of the text, published in 1793, was written around 1788], from a distance he looks like someone in his forties; his pace is quick, his posture is free and natural. He has a glance filled with spirit, which reduces the number of his years also from a short distance; aside from his military science, he is exactly someone whom you call a *belletrist*; he reads noble books in German, English, Italian and French. The composition and annual increase of his personal library makes us conjecture that he possesses, if not the fire of a spirited young gentleman, certainly his imagination. The wide-ranging travels of his youth developed his custom of not tolerating anything inappropriate. In earlier years he also painted and drew; many of his paintings and watercolours are still on display. He likes

⁵ Edit Szentesi, "Eszterháza 18. századi leírásai" [The 18th-century descriptions of Eszterháza], in *Kőkövön. Dávid Ferenc 73. születésnapjára / Stein auf Stein. Festschrift für Ferenc Dávid*, vol. II. (Budapest, 2013), 165-229, with German abstract (Eszterháza in der zeitgenössischen Öffentlichkeit). Rotenstein's identity is discussed 177-8.

⁶ *Lust-Reisen durch Bayern, Württemberg, Pfalz, Sachsen, Brandenburg, Österreich, Mähren, Böhmen und Ungarn, in den Jahren 1784 bis 1791*, vol. III (Leipzig, 1793).

the arts, music and architecture and, in general, he lives according to the desire of his heart.⁷

These words do not generate the impression of vague politeness; they are imbued with sincere admiration or even love, and they are crowned by an almost lyric summary of his essence. Beside this little account, other compliments are also scattered in the text. "No one can leave Eszterháza without being enchanted by the friendliness of the Prince," he wrote in the first, shorter 1783 version of his text.⁸ And again, in a most concise portrayal: "He does good wherever he can." Another writer, the lexicographer Mathias Korabinsky, also of Pressburg, agrees with Rotenstein/Stegmüller. In his opinion the princely guard, the group of musicians directed by Haydn, the opera troupe, "the actors and many others alike, bear witness that the Prince is an elevated, great philanthropist."⁹

At first glance the quotation from Rotenstein/Stegmüller, along with other concrete data, one might infer that in order for Nicolaus to develop and maintain such a reputation, he would expect a certain level of moral propriety from his subordinates. But he very often proved to be forgiving, remitting punishments and debts, and even rewarding those he had punished before. An example concerns Benedetto Bianchi, a

⁷ Gottfried von Rotenstein, 180-1. The original German text is as follows: "Der Fürst Esterhazy ist ein angenehmer Herr, von ohngefähr 74 Jahren, von weiten scheint er als ein vierziger; sein Gang ist geschwinde und den Körper trägt er frey und ungezwungen. Er hat einen geistvollen Blick, welcher auch in der Nähe die Zahl seiner Jahre herabsetzt; außer seiner Kriegswissenschaft, ist er das, was man einen Belletristen nennt; Er liest galante Bücher in deutscher, englischer, italienischer und französischer Sprache. Die Wahl seiner Handbibliothek und die jährliche Vermehrung derselben läßt muthmaßen: Er habe wo nicht das Feuer, doch noch die Imagination eines geistvollen jungen Herrn. Seine vielen Reisen in jungen Jahren haben ihn so gestimmt, daß er nichts unschickliches leiden kann. Er mahlte noch und zeichnete vor etlichen Jahren, wie man noch viele Gemählde mit Wasserfarben gemahlt von ihm zu sehen bekommt. Er liebt die Künste, Musik und das Bauen, lebt überhaupt nach dem Wunsch seines Herzens."

⁸ Gottfried von Rotenstein, "Reisen durch einen Theil des Königreichs Ungarn, im 1763sten und folgenden Jahren. Erster Abschnitt," in Johann Bernoulli, ed., *Sammlung kurzer Reisebeschreibungen und anderer zur Erweiterung der Länder- und Menschenkenntniß dienender Nachrichten*, vol. IX (Berlin, 1783), 288. The original German sentence is as follows: "...niemand gehet von Esterhaz weg, der nicht von der Freundlichkeit des Fürsten bezaubert ist."

⁹ Matthias Korabinsky (?), *Almanach von Ungarn auf das Jahr 1778* (Wien and Pressburg, 1778), 327. The original German text is as follows: "...die Schauspieler und viele andere, hinlänglichen Beweis, daß der Fürst ein erhabener großer Menschenfreund ist."

leading baritone of the "opera factory" of the years between 1776 and 1790. In the first year of his service to the Prince he committed a *faux-pas*: at a performance he repeatedly raised the skirt of his female partner. This caused a big scandal which obliged Bianchi to apologize publicly and in writing. The Prince punished him further by imprisoning him for fourteen days, except to fulfill his performing duties (i.e. he could leave his place of detention from time to time). Additionally, Bianchi was threatened with 50 blows to be executed publicly, should a similar *faux-pas* occur in the future. Invoices indicate that the hangman of the city of Ödenburg or Sopron regularly travelled to Eisenstadt in order to execute the capital punishments ordered by the princely court.¹⁰ However, such a punishment would probably have caused him more pain than incarceration. Despite this, Bianchi got a 33% pay raise eighteen months later when his contract was renewed, and a very positive reference three years later when he left the Prince's company. What is more, he was re-contracted in 1784 for another six-year period. There are many other instances where Prince Nicolaus remitted fines, or re-engaged dismissed musicians, often as a result of Haydn's intervention.¹¹

Despite such benevolent actions, no one found the former general to be in any way weak-willed. He could remain hard and say *no*. Rotenstein/Stegmüller unambiguously stated, "The Prince does not tolerate anybody on his soil who is known to be profligate. He attends to morals and order." Austere morals conspicuously prevailed in money matters. The surviving financial summary of the construction of the second opera house, built on the venue of the first after it had burnt down, shows that the overall value of the investment was approximately 59,400 guilders (roughly corresponding to approx. \$2 million US). However, there is a column in the document which tells us that during construction, one expense exceeded the plan approved by the Princely Commission: the ropemaker's bill was ca.

¹⁰ Compare the invoice of the hangman of the city of Ödenburg (Sopron) charging 6 guilders (3 guilders for the service and 3 guilders as per diem) for a two-day torturing at Eisenstadt: EPA, *Rentamt Eisenstadt Rechnungen 1762*, No. 141, Enclosure no. 3.

¹¹ An example for the latter is the case of the violin player Nigst and the tenor singer Diezl in 1768 when Haydn protests against their dismissal in a letter of 22 December; see Bartha, 62-63; in English: Landon, *Correspondence*, 11-13. After all, they were both permitted to remain in the Prince's service for many years.

1‰ or 0.1 % (i.e. 18 kreuzer; approx. \$10) higher than budgeted. As this regrettable fact could not be concealed, the responsible person was certainly punished. On another occasion four or five kreuzers were being subtracted from a craftsman's because of an erroneous overpayment a year and a half earlier. The initial overpayment had probably been discovered by one of the internal auditors employed by the Prince.¹²

From the above anecdotes one may conclude that Nicolaus "The Magnificent" balanced many seemingly opposite characteristics: relentlessness met warmheartedness, virtue coexisted with the ability to live well. Moreover, Rotenstein/Stegmüller and the financial documents also indicate that the Prince possessed a highly developed social conscience. This is exemplified by the fact that he maintained a hospital in the neighbouring village of Széplak, paying for the medicines of the needy patients, and by the high number of those who enjoyed a pension, even a widow's pension. Haydn, when he wrote an indignant letter in 1779 to the less-than-respectful Tonkünstler-Societät, cited the Prince as a good example to them: so far "... even the least of persons in the princely Esterházy house has received an adequate pension."¹³ Nicolaus honoured a high number of his musicians and clerks by undertaking the role of godfather or of wedding witness, possibly functioning occasionally as a veiled form of benevolence. He even played the role of rich relative to some of his artists, such as the horn player with many children, Joseph Oliva.¹⁴ Contemporary accounts tell that he gladly guided his visitors around the places of interest of his Eszterháza estate, including his private suite. When he was not able to do so for some reason, he would offer them a horse-drawn rig for a round-trip to the gardens and the forest.

¹² One of them, Jacob Jérôme, was born in Alsace, and, as his name shows, was French-speaking. See the inventory, titled "Personal Stand 1776", in the EPA, *Prot. 4701*, in the section "Hochfürstliche Hoffstadt" [= Hofstaat].

¹³ See Bartha, 86; in English: Landon, *Correspondence*, 23.

¹⁴ For a resolution about a regular supply of wheat and wine for Oliva's two sons, "until they will be able to make their own living", see Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár [Hungarian National Archives, MNL], *P 162, Eisenstädter Prothocollum Commissionis*, No. 1155 from 1777.

Almost every account mentions that all theatre and opera performances were free of charge, and anybody was entitled to visit them. A description from 1781 by the poet Márton Dallos mentions *peasants* in particular. It is little wonder that in a letter written to his powerful land-steward Peter von Rahier, himself an aristocrat and a retired military officer, Nicolaus expressed his good wishes for the Christmas holidays with cordial friendliness. But it is really touching when he uses the same natural and kind tone while writing (in Italian of course) to the Italian tenor, Andrea Totti, who inquired about the possibility of returning to Eszterháza: "... being provided with three tenors, I am sorry to say that for the time being I cannot make use of your offer. Despite this, let me know from time to time where you happen to stay, so I can advise you in the case of any changes that occur. Remaining your affectionate [*ben affezionato*] Prince Nikolaus Esterházy."¹⁵ And in a letter to his architect Nicolas Jacoby from Padua in 1763, he again wrote as if he were a co-creator discussing the actual construction of Eszterháza with a colleague, even as he is instructing him. We appreciate this tone even more if we compare it to some of the letters his grandson, Nicolaus II, wrote to Haydn, where his attitude towards "the Shakespeare of music" is as rude as it can be. Compare this tone, too, to the well-known case from the early 1760s when the Prince instructed Rahier to ask Haydn why some of the musicians had left Eszterháza without permission: when Rahier related Haydn's answer (trying to explain the absence of all he could) to the Prince, he warned his land-steward to remain silent about his enquiry, so that the guilty parties would end up completely surprised about their reduced pay. Such stories contribute to the portrait of the strict and sermonizing Prince Nicolaus. But let us be fair in our assessment of the situation: was he not right to act as he did?

III. Nicolaus's literary tastes, military skills, and hobbies

Most ignored in the stereotypes about Nicolaus "The Magnificent" is his status as a broadly educated *intellectual*, who was an outstanding and creative spirit despite the fact that no original literary or musical works are connected with his name, unlike his grandfather Pál Esterházy, the poet of numerous (Hungarian) love and religious

¹⁵ See Landon, *Chronicle*, 63 where he gives "Prot. Missilium XV.5.883" as the source. I was unable to locate the original document based on this siglum.

verses, and the compiler of the *Harmonia Cælestis* collection of devotional songs. Nicolaus was not only well-read, he also painted, played the baryton, and was a remarkable art collector. While perhaps not of the same stature as Nicolaus II, whose private collection of paintings later served as the nucleus of the Collection of Old Masters of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest (Landon is wrong when he attributes that collection to Nicolaus "The Magificent"),¹⁶ those artefacts which "our" Nicolaus purchased by private means in connection with his participation in the 1764 imperial election in Frankfurt, representing Bohemia, clearly show his superb sense for quality. An exciting study was devoted to this assembly by the German art historian Stefan Körner in 2013.¹⁷

As has always been customary in the world of high aristocracy, Nicolaus travelled widely. He studied in Vienna and in Leiden. As a Prince, when he already embarked on a much steadier life, he continued to take circular tours beyond his regular visits to Vienna and to his estates in Hungary (including some hunting excursions), for several months at a time, until 1782. On these lengthy tours he visited various parts of Austria, Northern Italy, Bavaria, Württemberg, and the French regions of Alsace, Lorraine and Paris. He spent longer periods in Venice (where he arrived by gondola from Mestre), Strasbourg and in the spa of Schlangenbad, near Wiesbaden.

A catalog of Prince Nicolaus's personal library, mentioned by Rotenstein, is unfortunately not available at present, and so there is little evidence regarding Nicolaus's literary tastes. But we do know that he enjoyed thumbing through lavishly illustrated books about various royal residences. We also know that as soon as he inherited the title of Prince in 1762 (still at Eisenstadt), he started to purchase, via his agents, books explicitly for the Süttör library, which he had carefully bound. The titles of some of these books are known: in 1763 he got a "millitärishes Buch" bound, he bought an eight-volume "economic-physical" lexicon in Vienna, and in the 1764 he ordered a French dictionary of orthography from Paris. It can be assumed that the

¹⁶ Landon, *Chronicle*, 31.

¹⁷ Stefan Körner, "Evviva il nostro prence, che il mondo fa stupir!" in: *Kő kövön. Dávid Ferenc 73. születésnapjára / Stein auf Stein. Festschrift für Ferenc Dávid*, vol. II, (Budapest, 2013), 25-52, with German abstract.

Allgemeines Künstler Lexicon, published in Zurich in 1763, was also purchased by him. Such books, of course, are indicative of a practical individual, but they also reflect the utilitarian outlook of an intellectual with wide interests, who also preserved interest in his own *métier*: military science. However, the books establishing his basic literary background, starting from the 1749 edition of Cicero's letters, through Dante and Shakespeare, to Voltaire (the collected works of Voltaire from 1784 was apparently been purchased by him), stood there on the shelves of the rich family library, having been accumulated in the course of generations. At Eszterháza, the two libraries were detached from each other; the 7500 volumes of the main library (according to a figure from 1784, but a contemporary report emphasizes that this number increased every day) occupied three premises in the western part of the "horseshoe," whereas his personal library was contained in nine bookcases located in two rooms in the vicinity of the Prince's suite.

Nicolaus had a bright career as a soldier. He went into the military in 1740, was made a colonel in 1747, and by 1759 he reached the rank of field marshal. More important than rank, he proved to be a very talented and successful general, participating in several military campaigns in both the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War. His performance in the Kolin battle of 1757 was considered so great that he was promoted to lieutenant general, and the victory has been largely attributed to him. His merits were acknowledged by the awarding of the Maria Theresia Order, and in 1765 the Knight of the Golden Fleece was bestowed on him. From 1764 he was the captain of the Hungarian Noblemen's Life-guards in Vienna, requiring his presence in Vienna every winter.¹⁸ So Prince Nicolaus was not only born into one of the richest families of Hungary, he had a *vocation* as well which required much study, and a distinctly challenging lifestyle at which he excelled due to his own, personal merits. This was by no means a typical lifestyle for an aristocrat.

A few examples of the Prince's *savoir-de-vivre* to which I referred before, based on Rotenstein's remarks, will further illuminate the complexity of Nicolaus's character. Beginning in 1720 the palace at Süttör, later called Eszterháza, was built up by

¹⁸ Gerhard Winkler, "Esterházy von Galánta," in *Das Haydn-Lexikon*, ed. Armin Raab, Christine Siegert and Wolfram Steinbeck (Laaber, 2010), 204-5.

Martinelli. This afforded Nicolaus, well before reaching his age of discretion, a residence worthy of a second-born Esterházy. However his studies, and later his military duties, kept him away from his beloved home for long periods of time. For example, in the first half of the 1750s his regiment was stationed east of Prague, in the vicinity of Kolin. Here he set up a stately tent for himself where he kept not only his arms and full dress uniforms, but also valuable goldsmith's works and ornamental pieces. Wagons full of crates with his favourite objects from Süttör often appeared at this tent.¹⁹ He eventually found these temporary quarters insufficient for a number of reasons, including a desire to receive guests. Therefore in the autumn of 1753, he rented from a counsellor of the Czech chamber a luxuriously furnished five-room suite in the Palace Bullenau in Prague's old town, near Charles Bridge.²⁰

We have no knowledge of his dining habits during this campaign, but we do know that at Eszterháza he employed French cooks and pastry chefs in a period when in the admittedly puritanic Vienna court only local cooks were employed and the upper limit of the size of the dishes was regulated. In the accounts we regularly come across Tokaj, Moselle, Burgundian and Rhine wines and original champagne, not purchased in Vienna but delivered, for a stiff price, directly to Eszterháza from their places of production.²¹ Prince Nicolaus's wife, née Countess Maria von Weissenwolff, who of course had a suite at Eszterháza but who stayed primarily at Eisenstadt with her own household, liked Eger wines as well. We can only guess what exactly the "amerikanisches Liqueur" was, which initially appeared in the accounts sporadically but was later ordered in larger quantities. It must have tasted very good.

¹⁹ Arisztid Valkó, "Esterházy Miklós és Bullenau prágai kastélya" [Miklós Esterházy and the Prague palace of Bullenau], *Művészettörténeti értesítő*, xv (1966), 263.

²⁰ Arisztid Valkó, 'Még egyszer Esterházy "Fényes" Miklós prágai lakosztályáról 1753-ban' [Once again about the Prague suite of Miklós Esterházy "The Magnificent" in 1753], *Művészettörténeti értesítő*, xxxi (1982), 307.

²¹ According to EPA, *Rentamt Eisenstadt Rechnungen 1767, No. 91, Enclosure no. 1*, only the tax ("Mauth") paid for the wine imported in the second half of 1767 added up to 431 guilders and 10 kreuzer or more than 10,000 dollars. There existed a traffic in the opposite direction as well: in 1764 Nicholas brought with him 675 bottles of Tokaj wine to Frankfurt; see EPA, *Rentamt Eisenstadt Rechnungen 1764, No. 50*.

The Prince's lavish festivities, lasting for several days and entertaining as many as several thousand guests, are widely known. They featured a wide spectrum of events, from fireworks and "street" entertainers, to luxurious banquets, to serious theatrical and opera performances. After the big boom of the 1770s, Nicolaus seems to have tired of them. However, "simple" masked balls, several per year, were continuously staged in the '60s, '70s and '80s, and not only in the Carnival period. Their venue was the gorgeous Chinese ballroom or "Redoutensaal" until 1779, when it was destroyed by fire. Later they took place in the (second) opera house, which also served as a spoken theatre, a concert hall, and a ballroom, creating, along with the marionette theatre, a sort of a cultural and entertainment centre, open to the public.

Nicolaus indulged in various passions from music and reading, to travelling, to hunting and collecting various kinds of objects. He was obviously excited by original technical devices. His addiction to clocks was extraordinary; his huge collection is mentioned by several visitors, but it was later dispersed. A bill for the reparation of a "mathematische Secunden-Uhr" has been preserved. He also possessed an armchair which started to play music as soon as you sat in it, and he owned a singing mechanical bird. In addition, wall fountains in the marionette theatre were triggered by the motion of entering guests.

IV. Devotion to the Theatre and Opera

These were most certainly slightly childlike amusements following the fashion of the day. But one should not forget that Nicolaus was not merely a fan of luxury and clocks. The Prince's genuine great passion and addiction was always theatre, particularly opera. What he created in the latter, even if we disregard Eszterháza as a complex creation of traditional and landscape architecture, is more lasting than anything else he produced. At Eszterháza the wings on the stage of the second opera house were higher than either the Burgtheater or the Schönbrunn theatre, and the repertoire was as rich and varied as in all of Vienna. What is more, Eszterháza became a bastion of Italian opera in those years when Joseph II suppressed it in Vienna in favour of German Singspiel. All accounts, including those of visiting musicians, highlighted the excellence of Haydn's orchestra. Due largely to the

increasing amount of rediscovered information about the daily operative life in Europe, we have begun to recognise only recently that the singers at Eszterháza were not merely the less sought-after ones from Vienna, contracted to a "provincial branch" of the opera life there. A few local singers were employed, but for a period of several years the Prince engaged a number of international stars who brought to Eszterháza the cosmopolitan fashions of London, Venice, Dresden and St. Petersburg. This fact, along with Haydn's aiming his compositional output (string quartets, later symphonies etc.) at the outside world (facilitated by the Prince), raised this spot in Hungary from its peripheric position, and transformed it into one of the more influential points in European arts and culture. *This* was the most remarkable achievement of Nicolaus Esterházy "The Magnificent," raising him at least to the level of his outstanding ancestors Miklós, the early seventeenth-century Palatine of Hungary, and the poet Pál, and made him a central and notable figure in Hungarian—and European—cultural history.

His devotion to opera and theatre approached obsession. I recently heard a family anecdote which goes back to Prince Pál Esterházy. It tells the story of a theatrical performance during one of the military expeditions led by Nicolaus in the Low Countries. During a winter warfare break he transformed one of the tents into a theatre and arranged performances in it. He invited some officers of the opposing French troops, wintering in their nearby camp, to one of the shows. The French were bewildered as they recognised their own saddles and other ornate military equipment confiscated from them during the previous summer. And, much later, a handful of theatre subscriptions and ticket invoices testify that the Prince, when he stayed in Vienna, spent at least five, but as many as six or seven days a week in the theatre attending operas, spoken dramas, or concerts.

After becoming the head of the family, he was involved in no less than five theatre construction projects of various types. In 1762 he inherited the project of erecting a theatre in the glasshouse standing in the *Schlosspark* at Eisenstadt. The wedding of his son Anton was celebrated with performances in a well-equipped theatre facility newly built into the ceremonial room of the Eisenstadt palace (today's Haydnsaal). This was followed by Eszterháza's first opera house (1768), and the marionette

theatre inaugurated in the presence of Maria Theresia (1773). But the crowning glory was the construction of the larger, more modern and luxurious second opera house in 1780/81.

That Prince Nicolaus's passions bordered on compulsiveness can be seen from the density of programs at Eszterháza. For weeks and months there would be no day of rest, suggesting a *horror vacui* on the part of the Prince. Some program—theatre, opera, puppet theatre, or concert—took place *every single evening*. On evenings that did not have an event scheduled, evidence suggests that Nicolaus made the short trip to Vienna or Pressburg. The longest period of continuous activity we know of was between April and July 1778, lasting for 89 days, nearly one quarter of the year.²² One really wonders if any other ruler or aristocrat in history was so obsessed; Catherine the Great or Frederick the Great could be possible candidates. And in making judgement over productions, we meet once again the strict, commanding Nicolaus "The Magnificent." There are many cases of titles disappearing from the program following first performances, indicating cancellations. Yet little or no concern was shown for the expenses and energy of the artists invested, including Haydn's meticulous work adapting each piece to the local circumstances. It is also breathtaking to consider that a mere three days after the fire which destroyed, among other things, the entire stock of stage sets, the wedding of Count Antal Forgách and Countess Otília Grassalkovich took place on the scheduled day, as did the première of Alessandro Felici's *L'amore soldato*, without a single cancelled rehearsal. As far as the expenses of the opera seasons are concerned, their full cost, including the wages of the music personnel, must have been between 20,000 and 40,000 guilders according to various sources, equalling roughly one to one and a half million dollars today.²³ This means that every couple of years the Prince spent on productions an

²² See "Verzeichniß der Opern, Academien, Marionetten und Schauspiele welche von 23n. Januarii bis Xbris 1778. auf den Hochfürstliche Bühnen in Esterhatz gegeben worden sind." A listing, compiled by court librarian Philipp Georg Bader, of all programs taking place at Eszterháza in 1778, in MNL, *P* 149 15. cs. 1/a–7. Transcription in Carl Ferdinand Pohl, *Joseph Haydn*, vol II (Leipzig 1882), 367–71. The series of 89 days lasted from 20 April until 17 July.

²³ The set designer Travaglia wrote down on an empty page of a voluminous inventory (EPA, *Prot.* 6339) a cost estimation of the expenses of the staging for 1780 (4180 guilders); if we add to this sum the annual salaries of the musicians and the singers, varying around 17,000 guilders in those years, we arrive at more than 20,000 guilders. Rotenstein, however (181), says that "music and opera" cost 40,000 per annum; this estimation should refer to the final years of the decade.

amount equal to the expenses of the construction of the second opera house. Is it any wonder that right after Nicolaus's death his son, Anton, put an immediate end to the performances?

Also bordering on obsession was the relentlessness with which the Prince began asking for, or called for a cessation of, whole artistic genres (baryton music, symphonies, opera, marionette opera), with seemingly no regard given to expenses. Although in the last two years of his life the aging Nicolaus stopped signing the financial documents himself, obviously becoming weary of this burden, he never reduced the intensity of the opera and theatre factory or, for that matter, that of the ballet and pantomime productions.

A kind of stubborn resolve, then, lies behind the cultural ebullience, the pomp and the glamour which was characterised by the inventive contemporaries as "Esterházy'sches Feenreich," "Hungarian Versailles" or "Deliciæ Hungarorum, oder das ungrische Paradies." This zeal led to nearly 1300 performances during fifteen opera seasons, and to more than 4000 productions of all genres of performing arts during the entire Eszterháza period. Thus, only a small portion of the Eszterháza performances was connected to the fewer than one dozen major celebrations, leaving the vast majority as indications of "The Magnificent" Prince's desire for an artistic and vibrant everyday life.

V. Other characteristics

Nicolaus was an extremely free, "crypto-liberal" spirit in his own way. He did not attribute too much importance to the prescriptions of the Church. For example, after the summer of 1780 opera performances occurred even on the Tuesday before Easter and on Easter day itself, leaving only the days between Wednesday and Holy Saturday exempt from performances. A contemporary traveller remarked, with obvious caution, that "The Prince is not in favour of the tragic and the serious [this was obviously far from the truth] and he likes it if the actor, like Sancho Panza, has a

somewhat indelicate humour.”²⁴ Here we have another contradiction: is it possible that Nicolaus, while expecting and even overseeing adherence to moral standards, forgave the ribaldry of Bianchi because he himself was amused by it? Nicolaus’s free spirit manifests itself in more serious matters, too: Alessio Prati’s opera *La vendetta di Nino*, which broke with an age-long theatrical convention (or even a taboo) of not showing a murder let alone a matricide onstage, was first performed at Eszterháza years before its Vienna première.

Finally, Nicolaus’s life had some darker and curious sides as well. The following sentence by Rotenstein sounds quite obscure: “The Prince used to like to play [liebte das Spiel] in the past, today he does not play any more, he hates players and all plays.” Might this statement be about gambling? card games? If the answer is yes, this might have contributed—beyond his generally extravagant way of life and the permanent constructions at Süttör, starting years before he became the ruling Prince—to the colossal debt of several hundreds of thousands of guilders (equalling to one to two million dollars) accumulated in the 1740s. His elder brother Paul Anton paid out his urgent debts in 1751 from the wealth of his trust, but he asked for and received Nicolaus’s word as an officer that he would stop his spending spree, and building construction, and that he would even “avoid the expensive Vienna.”²⁵ As is borne out by a surviving draft of a letter, Nicolaus sincerely thanked his brother for his help. Nevertheless, as the renting of the Prague living quarters and the continuing works at Süttör show, he interpreted his promise somewhat loosely.

Various sources inform us about Prince Nicolaus’s recurring serious depressions. Nicolas-Étienne Framery, a French friend of Haydn’s former pupil Ignaz Pleyel, tells a story in his booklet about Haydn based on second-hand information from Pleyel known for its unreliability concerning the details.²⁶ According to this story, once

²⁴ Johann Kaspar Riesbeck, *Briefe eines reisenden Franzosen über Deutschland an seinen Bruder zu Paris*, vol. I (n.p., 1784), 360. In original German: "Der Fürst ist nicht für das Tragische und Ernsthafte, und er hat es gerne, wenn die Schauspieler, wie Sancho Pansa, ihren Witz etwas dick fallen lassen."

²⁵ Compare: Arisztid Valkó: 'Újabb adatok a fertődi (eszterházi) kastély építéstörténetéhez' [Recent details concerning the history of the construction of the palace at Fertőd (Eszterháza)], *Ars Hungarica* (1982), 75-84. Relevant documents quoted 82-84.

²⁶ Nicolas-Étienne Framery, *Notice sur Joseph Haydn* (Paris, 1810).

when the Prince's depression was especially serious, not even a new symphony by Haydn could pull him out of his melancholy, and he nearly broke the violins into pieces on the heads of the musicians. Another, more credible account derives from Haydn himself: in a letter written in March 1790 he writes that "The death of his wife so crushed the Prince that we had to use every means in our power to pull His Highness out of this depression ... but the poor Prince ... became so depressed when he heard my Favourite Adagio in D that we had quite a time to brighten his mood with the other pieces."²⁷

VI. Conclusion

We know more about Nicolaus's life, including its darker sides, than of any other notable Prince Esterházy. But considering his characteristics as a whole, he deserves to be regarded an overwhelmingly appealing, rich and exciting personality. At the end of the 1793 edition of his travel book, Rotenstein risks the following conclusion: "It is agreed that there exists nothing better on Earth than to be Prince Esterházy." Did Prince Nicolaus "The Magnificent" share this view? He certainly did so many times. Yet he still ordered in 1762 or 1763 the French brochures *Essai Sur le Bonheur* and *Essai Sur la Necessité du plaisir*. We might wonder why.

²⁷ Translation by Landon, *Correspondence*, 98. In original German: Bartha, 231. The German text is the following: "...der todtsfall Seiner verstorbenen gemahlin drückte dem Fürsten dergestalt darnieder, daß wür alle unsere Kräften anspanen musten, Hochdenselben aus dieser schwermuth herauszureissen ... Der arme Fürst verfiel aber bey Anhörung der Ersten Music über mein Favorit Adagio in D in eine so tiefe Melancoley, daß ich zu thun hatte, Ihm dieselbe durch andere stücke wider zu benehmen." The marriage of the Prince was not an idyllic one. Several witnesses who inform us that he was overtly keeping a mistress at Eszterháza. One of them is a Venezuelan traveller, Francisco de Miranda, who saw the Prince, his niece and his sweetheart, "a very simple woman," during an opera performance. In fact, we know of Haydn's stormy marriage as well: his relationship with the soprano Luigia Polzelli, the wife of one of the violin players of the orchestra, has become music history by now. There are other sources saying that at the same Haydn's wife consoled herself with Ludwig Guttenbrunn, the painter of Haydn's well-known portrait which shows him with a goose-quill in his hand. And if we add that several instances of elopement of women happened at Eszterháza during the decades, we may conclude that the atmosphere must have been quite loose there.

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