**Greeting**

Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen, and welcome to the Hungarian State Opera House. My name is Eszter Iklódi and I will be your guide today. Before we start our tour I would like to ask you please not to take any photos, unless you have the red wristbands.

**History**

First and foremost, I would like to tell you a few words about the history of this building. The Hungarian State Opera House was built between 1875 and 1884 in Italian neo-renaissance style and according to the plans and personal instructions of Miklós Ybl, a famous Hungarian architect of this era. In the 19th century, concretely from 1867 (from the Compromise) until the end of the First World War Hungary was part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and that’s the reason why a permission was needed form Vienna as well. Franz Joseph I., emperor of the Monarchy, gave us this permission and he even supported the construction financially.

It cost almost 3 and a half million contemporary Hungarian (golden) forints (the price of approximately 600.000 horses) to build up this building, which was far more than the estimated 2 million forints. These 2 million forints were actually paid by Franz Joseph, but he tied his subsidy to one condition: the size of the Hungarian Opera House could not be any bigger than that of the already existing Viennese one. The remaining 1.5 million forints were paid by the city of Budapest, but as a reaction to the condition of Franz Joseph, they laid down their own requirements as well, which were, that during the construction only Hungarian companies, workers and artists could be employed, and in addition exclusively Hungarian materials could be used. This way the construction of the Opera House could serve as a public utility as well, although there are a few exceptions where actually foreign materials were used, but I will always show you these exceptions.

Originally the construction was planned to take 3 years, but it took 9 years in the end. There are several excuses for this delay though. Firstly, the royal budget offered by Franz Joseph was not received in one sum, instead he placed an amount at the constructors’ disposal every year depending on what was left from the budget of the royal court. So we had to wait for the money as always. Secondly, in the year of 1881 the famous Ring Theatre burnt down in Vienna, and in the aftermath of the fire more than 400 people died. After this tragedy an international committee was convened to determine strict fire-protection specifications in the theatres of the Monarchy. Let’s not forget that in this year, in 1881, the construction of our Opera House was just in progress, so this way our Opera House became the first one among the theatres where these safety regulations were applied. However, the incorporation of these measures implied changings in the original plans as well, which not only made the costs more expensive, but it made the duration of the construction take longer as well.

Nevertheless, before this opera house was built here, in Budapest, those who wanted to see an opera for themselves had to travel all the way to Vienna to see one, which journey, to be honest, was rather complicated in the 19th century and took quite long as well. So we can say that there was a kind of urge for an opera house here, in Budapest, at that time. No wonder that the opening ceremony was a great success.

**Main Buffet**

Ladies and gentlemen we are in the main buffet now, or in the Foyer as it was called back then in the 19th century. As you can see this is a two-storey high buffet and it reminds us of the interior of the Renaissance palaces in Florence. Ybl made a lot of study trips to Northern Italy and he found the inspiration there. Actually he used this design quite often in the shaping of different halls.

Originally this buffet was only used by the audience of the ground floor and by the audience of the boxes of the first two floors, but today it is basically open for everyone. There’s a separate buffet on the third floor for audience up there, since the capacity of this buffet would not be sufficient for serving all the guests. However, this is not the only reason why this buffet was not used by everyone. Well, at the end of the 19th century it was really important the separate the aristocracy from the so-called commoners, who could only afford themselves tickets for the third floor, which was much cheaper of course. Speaking of the tickets, the most expensive ones cost about 12 golden forints back then. In comparison, the price of a horse was only 6 forints, so to be honest, visiting the opera house in the 19th century was really a posh thing to do. And I must say that the main purpose of these visits were definitely not to enjoy the performance itself, but much rather to be seen, socialize and simply to show off. And for the socializing part at least this buffet was the most appropriate place in the building.

So it is not a coincidence at all that the main figure of the paintings at the ceiling is the god of wines of the Greek mythology. Do you happen to know who this god was? His Roman name is Bacchus, and not only was he the god of wines, drinking, eating and basically all human pleasures on the earth, but the first theatre plays in the ancient Greek theatres were also organized in favor of him. So his name is strongly connected with the theatres and with the opera house as well. On the left you can see his birth, in the middle his triumph and on the other side, on the right, his education.

Looking around the walls you can see nine paintings. These paintings are the work of a famous Hungarian artist, Árpád Feszty. Originally they would have been done by Károly Lotz, another famous Hungarian painter of this era, but in fact he was too busy with the enormous fresco in the auditorium, so he entrusted his young student, Árpád Feszty, with this work. This was a great opportunity for the young artist, as Árpád Feszty was only in his early twenties at that time and he wasn’t famous at all.

These paintings, just like all the other paintings in this opera house, were made by a special technique, the so-called secco technique. Secco means dry in Italian, and the application of this technique means that the paintings are painted on dry surface, as opposed to frescos which are painted on wet surface. Seccos get dry faster, and that was exactly the reason for choosing this technique instead of frescos, because it was really important to finish the opera house as soon as it was possible.

There are four exceptions though. These exceptions you can find on both sidewalls. These paintings are a bit darker than the other ones. The reason for this is that, the year of 1906 was a quite rainy one and due to the heavy rainfalls throughout the year these walls along with the paintings there got damaged. And these renovated pictures weren’t done by the original secco technique, instead the oil technique was used. (They were painted on a canvas.) Now please move on to this u shape corridor around the buffet.

**The Smoking Corridor**

This corridor belonged originally to the outer area. It was added to the interior only back in 1912 during the first reconstruction. That’s the reason for the much thicker walls here. This corridor is called the smoking corridor and to the best of our knowledge this was one of the first designated smoking areas of Europe. These days smoking is forbidden in the entire building, just like in all the other public buildings in Hungary. This corridor was completely separated from the buffet with curtains, you can still see the rings up there. According to the legend the smoke here was so thick that people could literally hide in it. That’s why this corridor was the favorite place of young lovers who came here to meet each other secretly and to exchange some secret messages or even some kisses. However, in all probability everyone could guess where they were because of smell in their clothes, but they didn’t know with whom they were.

It is worth mentioning a few words about this wooden decoration here. This wood here is noble oak and it comes from Slavonia. Slavonia is a historical region basically in today’s Croatia, but back then in the 19th century this area was still part of the Monarchy, so although this material is not Hungarian at all, at least it came from the Monarchy. If you look up, you can see that this wood doesn’t have these knots in it, or just very small ones, and thus this timer is allowing for a very careful carving.

Now, please take a look at the tapestry on the walls. They are not the original ones of course, as they would be really smelly then. There was a big renovation here between 1980 and 1984 for the one hundredth anniversary of the opening of the Opera House. It took 4 years and basically everything was either refurbished or renovated in the entire building. So this decoration here is not the original either but it looks as though it was.

**Balcony**

We are now standing on the balcony. Looking down you can see the Andrássy Avenue. Count Gyula Andrássy was among those who convinced Franz Joseph to provide us with his grant. More importantly he was also the prime minister of Hungary between 1867 and 1871 and subsequently he was the foreign minister of the Monarchy between 1871 and 1879 as well. Rumors say that he had an affair with Sissy, but we don’t know this for sure. The leading architect of this avenue is also Miklós Ybl. Thanks to him this street has a more or less uniform style. You can travel along this avenue with the Line 1 of the Budapest Metro, which is the oldest electrified underground railway system on the European continent and the second oldest in the world after the Metropolitan Line of London. The Andrássy Avenue along with the Metro Line 1 are belonging to UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

On the other side of the road, opposite to the Opera House, you can see another beautiful building, the so-called Drechsler Palace. It was built in French neo-renaissance style and the architect was Ödön Lechner (an Eötvös student). Between 1949 and 2001 the Hungarian Ballet Institute used to operate in that building, which was really convenient as these two institutions are strongly connected to each other. In 2001 the Drechsler Palace was bought by the city of Budapest and since then it was resold several times again. Now it is in the hands of a businessman from Cathar, who has a permission to convert it to a luxury hotel, but the constructions had to be stopped temporarily because Roman ruins were found under the building, and now these ruins have to be removed first.

If you look up at the façade of the Opera House, you can see sculptures of famous foreign composers such as Verdi, Puccini, Wagner, Mozart and so on. These sculptures were originally made of a kind of soft limestone which was not durable enough to stand the rough weather conditions, and one sculpture even fell down in a storm. So these new, renovated ones are already made of a harder kind of limestone from Süttő, a small Hungarian town.

By the way, the building itself is still original. By this I mean that we cannot see any kind of damage on the walls of the building. It is rather special here in Budapest, as basically all the bridges and a great number of buildings were bombed down during the Second World War and later during the revolution in 1956. The Opera House luckily survived, and although one single bomb fell to the building and it hit right the middle of the stage, fortunately it did not go off.

**The Main Staircase**

Ladies and gentlemen we are in the main staircase now. Let me tell you a few words about the two busts down there. The one down there on the left hand side is the bust of Miklós Ybl, the architect of this building. It is commonly held of him that he remained committed to his original ideas all along even when they were struggling with financial difficulties. Obvious proof of his persistency is that not only did he plan the building from the outside, but he designed every single detail in the inside as well, for example he designed each door handle and he decided where to put the chandeliers and other elements as well.

Opposite of him on the left hand side you can see Ferenc Erkel, a famous Hungarian musician. He was the first conductor and musical director of the Opera House, and in addition, he was himself a composer as well. With two of his best-known works, with the Bánk bán and Hunyadi László, he laid down the bases of the Hungarian opera culture, which hadn’t really existed before. These two masterpieces are so-called national operas, as they are telling stories about famous historical events of Hungary. And last but not least, he was the composer of our national anthem.

Back then in the beginning, all the operas were put on in Hungarian, which means that the text had to be translated into Hungarian. As I have already mentioned, in the 19th century Hungary was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and as a consequence the official language besides Hungarian was German. (The Hungarian became official in 1844.) So it’s quite understandable why it was so important to put on all the operas in Hungarian. Nowadays this tradition has been replaced with another one, these days every opera is performed in the original language, and subtitles in Hungarian and in English as well are put on to a display above the stage during the performances, which is actually quite practical, because otherwise it can be really hard to understand the text of the operas, even if they are in Hungarian.