Miklós Rózsa's El Cid (1961)

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ABSTRACT

One of the last great Hollywood epics, *El Cid* hit American theaters in 1961. The film, a romanticized version of the medieval epic poem, *El Cantar de Mio Cid*, tells the story of Spain's national hero. Writing the music for the film was concert and film composer Miklòs Ròzsa, famous for the scores of *Ben-Hur* and *Quo Vadis*. Drawing upon his rich knowledge of and experience with Hungarian folk music, Rózsa incorporated several medieval Spanish melodies into the score, seamlessly blending them with his original material through his unique compositional voice and skills. Although Rózsa created a masterful score for the film, he and it fell victim to the changing styles of Hollywood.

With a number of composers working in film during Hollywood's golden age who had trained with some of the greatest composers of the time before relocating from Europe to the United States, it is easy to see why many of their film scores are of high quality — musically interesting and complex — and perfectly complement their films. Erich Wolfgang Korngold (who studied with Alexander von Zemlinsky for a short time), Max Steiner (who studied piano with Johannes Brahms and composition with Gustav Mahler), and Bernard Herrmann (who studied with Percy Grainger) amongst others brought classical training to the film studios, which had been populated by Broadway composers and arrangers.

Another composer working during Hollywood's golden age was Miklós Rózsa (1907-1995). Hailing from Hungary, Rózsa was born into a wealthy family that owned an estate just outside of Budapest. He names his mother as the person responsible for his love of music. Before meeting Rózsa's father she had studied at the Budapest Academy with Karoly Aggházy and Istvan Thomán, both of whom had been pupils of composer and virtuo pianist Franz Liszt.¹ Béla Bartók himself was just two classes ahead of Rózsa's mother at the Academy and was often asked by Thomán to perform for the younger students. After Rózsa was born, his mother's aspirations to become a professional pianist ended. His father was well versed in Hungarian folk music and loved it; Rózsa says that it may very well have been the first music to which he was exposed.

At the age of five, Rózsa began studying violin; by the time he entered elementary school at six he could read music but not words. As he continued learning the instrument he began to improvise – a passion of his – and to compose short pieces. Rózsa's love of improvisation stemmed from his exposure to gypsy ensembles in the villages on his family's estate. In Rózsa's memoirs, *Double Life*, he recalled how he would improvise with the gypsies when his family would leave the estate. This experience with gypsy music undoubtedly deepened his affection for Hungarian folk music and helped cement folk style into his own musical voice.

As a teenager, he attended the Budapest "Realgymnasium," the equivalent of a secondary school that dealt in practical arts, arithmetic, and modern languages. He became president of the school's Franz Liszt Music Circle and took charge of organizing classical music concerts. He even organized a concert and wrote a speech entitled "The History of Hungarian Music," in which he "unpatriotically" declared that the only outstanding Hungarian-born composers were Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály. The concert consisted of selections from Bartók's For Children and

according to Rózsa the pieces in the suite were quite revolutionary for the time. The next day he was called to the principal's office and reprimanded.

At this time he pursued his interest in the local folk music. The family estate was north of Budapest in a village called Nagylócz at the foot of the Mátra Mountains. The area was inhabited by the Palóc, indigenous Magyar people with their own dialect and customs. Rózsa eagerly put the music on paper to keep and study:

I traveled around the Palóc region. The people there were not Slovaks, and their songs show no Slovakian influences. They were strange songs, very powerful, strong in emotion and fascinating rhythmically, and I took them down. . . . I was never a methodical folk song collector like Kodály or Bartók; I was interested only in the music, not in its ethnographical connotations. I had no Edison phonograph like Bartók; I just went around with a small black notebook and wrote down what I heard as best I could. I never bothered with the text, which interested me not at all. In other words as a *bona fide* folklorist I was an amateur. ²

Rózsa would not realize for many years how powerfully this folk music would influence his compositional style. Indeed, the sound became his musical trademark: "the music of Hungary is stamped indelibly one way or other on virtually every bar I have ever put on paper."³

Rózsa finished school in 1925 and after some disagreements with his father about what he would study next he was allowed to study music at the Leipzig conservatory as well as chemistry at the university. This dual course of study ended after Rózsa's teacher at the conservatory, Hermann Grabner, wrote to Rózsa's father that "if anyone had the right to be a composer, [Rózsa] had."⁴

Having composed several works under Grabner, Rózsa was eventually taken under the wing of Karl Straube, who helped him obtain a lifetime publishing contract with Brietkopf and Härtel after the successful premiere of his String Trio Opus 1. After many concert works⁵ and a move from Leipzig to Paris, his first contact with the film industry occurred when his friend, Arthur Honegger, urged him to see a film he had just scored, *Les Misérables*. Soon after, Rózsa was invited by the Markova-Dolin Company to write music for a ballet in London, *Hungaria*, which was attended by director Jacques Feyder. Impressed by the music, he arranged for Rózsa to compose the music for his next film *Knight without Armour*. *The Thief of Bagdad*, scored soon afterward, was Rózsa's first success and also the project that compelled him to relocate to America, when the beginning of WWII forced production to Hollywood, where the composer settled. His groundbreaking contract with MGM Studios allowed him to continue teaching at the University of Southern California, (where he was their first professor of film scoring) prevented other composers from adding to or altering his music (nor would do the same to others'), and guaranteed three months of unpaid summer vacation to compose for the concert hall.

El Cid was pitched to Rózsa in early 1961 by producer Samuel Bronston, with whom he had worked the previous year on King of Kings. Bronston had originally asked Italian composer Mario Nascimbene to score El Cid, but he refused after being asked to adapt the music of Massenet's opera Le Cid. Bronston turned to Rózsa, presumably with no mention of Le Cid. Although King of Kings was a critical disaster, Bronston liked Rózsa's music and he readily accepted the job, thinking it far superior to Mutiny on the Bounty, the film to which MGM was trying to commit him. By now, Rózsa was considered a master of the historical epic, the composer of acclaimed scores for films such as Quo Vadis (1951) and Ben-Hur (1959), so he was a natural choice for the Cid project.

The story of El Cid, Rodrigo de Vivar, is classic. Born in the eleventh century, he is Spain's national hero, immortalized in many works including the twelfth-century poem, *El Cantar de Mio Cid*⁶, Cornielle's play, *Le Cid*, and Massanet's opera, *Le Cid*. Bronston's *El Cid* is most indebted to *El Cantar de Mio Cid*.

The story in Bronston's film begins with Moorish warlord Ben Yussuf's plan to invade Spain and convert its people to Islam. (This Moorish presence deeply informs Rózsa's entire film score.) Soon after, we are introduced to Rodrigo – El Cid – in his burning hometown of Vivar. He and other Spanish soldiers have captured the Moors who attacked the village, including their

leader Moutamin. When faced with what to do with the Moorish general, Rodrigo frees him, since meeting violence with violence will not amend the situation. Moutamin swears allegiance to the Spanish kingdom of Castile and gives Rodrigo the name "El Cid" ("The Lord") meaning someone who is just.

After being tried for treason for releasing Moutamin, Rodrigo wins back the trust of his king by winning a joust for control of the city of Calahorra in the name of the king. Named the king's champion, Rodrigo spends much of the first half of the film fighting to defend him, and, after his death, the king's sons. Central to the film is the love story of Rodrigo and Chimene, the daughter of the king's former champion. After being engaged to marry Chimene, Rodrigo kills her father in a duel of honor. She vows revenge on Rodrigo and does not change her mind until much later in the film.

The finale takes place after Rodrigo, having conquered Valencia, protects it from the army of Ben Yussuf. Rodrigo is wounded by an arrow during the first battle against Yussuf's men and dies after retreating to the city. According to his last wishes and unbeknownst to his army, Rodrigo marshals his men to victory against Ben Yussuf's forces the following day when, propped upon his horse, his dead body leads the charge.

Rózsa approached this score as he had those of previous historical features, including *Ben-Hur, Young Bess, Quo Vadis*, and *King of Kings*, by giving it a sense of historical and cultural authenticity. His success is traceable to his early love of folk music and his interest in musicology.

Rozsa took advantage of his three-month summer break to move his family to Madrid where he researched and scored the music for *El Cid*. He and his family, who were housed at Bronston's expense, enjoyed their stay very much. Rozsa recounted that "The summer went by, and I composed with a kind of exhilaration. I liked the country, I liked the people, and the picture [*El Cid*] made sense."⁷

During his research in Madrid, Rózsa met the film's historical advisor, Ramón Menendez Pidal, the world's leading authority on El Cid and his time, who introduced the composer to several works that would profoundly influence his score: the twelfth-century collection of music and poetry called *La Cantigas de Santa Maria*, compiled by Alfonso the Wise; the *Llibre Vermell*, a compilation of fourteenth-century musical manuscripts from the monastery of Montserrat, and a collection of Spanish folk songs gathered by composer and musicologist Felipe Pedrell. The *Cantigas* had the largest effect on Rózsa's music. Of the four hundred in his source, the composer used six verbatim. The first appears in Rózsa's source music cue (diegetic music), "Palace Music," based on Cantiga 189:8



Scored for two recorders (a medieval flute-like instrument) and two acoustic guitars and performed in a light lilting style, this cue has a flavor that the audience likely would find authentic and perhaps scarcely notice. It would not feel at all out of place within the film. ⁹ Clearly, Rózsa did not vary all that much from the melody of the cantiga, although the B section of his cue is purely his own. The other source cue that directly quotes a cantiga is entitled "Wedding Supper," and is scored for two guitars and two harps. It is based on Cantiga 3, "Mais

No Faz Sancta Maria." Although the original is in a different time signature if translated to modern notation, Rózsa's version is as accurate to the original melody as "Palace Music." Again, the B section of the cue (not shown) is original. This cue is performed at a moderate tempo in the same style as "Palace Music." The melody is performed by the guitar duo with a blocky, straight accompaniment by the harps in contrast to the arpeggiated bass heard in "Palace Music."

Other source music in the film includes two Moorish pieces, "Al Kadir's Delights" and "Moorish Feast," perhaps indebted in style and instrumentation to Rózsa's work on *The Thief of Baghdad*. Also many fanfares were recorded to be used in the context of the narrative itself, mostly based on themes or nondiegetic fanfares from the score proper.

Two cantigas are used in the body of the score as standalone themes for the cue, "Fight for Calahorra," in the Calahorra sequence. The cue itself begins with a bass ostinato (a continuous rhythmic pattern) that firmly plants the tonality of C major with some inflections of the Mixolydian mode. The first theme of the cue, 10 performed by horns and strings after a fanfare introduction by the trumpets, seems based on Cantiga 26611 but is not directly adapted from it.

Cantiga 266 - "De Muitas Guisas Miragres

7

10

"Fight for Calahorra"



The tonal center of the cue shifts to A, a mediant relationship, and the theme is then repeated an octave higher with reversed instrumentation. The relationship of a third between themes in various cues happens so often in the film that it becomes a unifying characteristic. Moreover, Rózsa unusually shifts the key of some cues to a new one a third away, rather than the traditional modulation via fifths. The composer presumably had particular effects in mind by using so many mediant relationships in the score. The tonal center shifts again to D minor and a new theme is introduced in the low strings and brass, directly translating Cantiga 7, "Santa Maria Amar." The theme and the original cantiga are so similar that examples of both are not necessary to illustrate it. The theme itself is very long and takes nearly twenty bars to reach a cadence point.

The next cantiga in the score appears in the cue, "Coronation." Interestingly, Rózsa may have completely misread the aim of the scene. The tone of his cue is very pompous and regal but the scene itself is strained, subdued, and drenched in tension. This cue was cut from the film—perhaps for the better—as the drama of the scene is more obvious than it would be had Rózsa's cue remained. Perhaps his cue was tongue-in-cheek, but that is impossible to know. The scene, curiously, is not a coronation at all, but a feudal oath-taking ceremony. Cantiga 100, "Santa Maria" is quoted verbatim in the cue. The cue itself, a regal march with a large battery of percussion, uses three trumpets and three cornets, an instrumental combination common in the score's fanfares and large brass passages. The cue relies on a simple ternary form (the example below is the a section)¹² and also includes a contrasting b section in the subdominant of the cue's original key. The return of the a section includes a development after the basic four bar phrase:



The final instance of a cantiga in the score (but not the final instance of an adaptation of medieval music) is the theme for Rodrigo and Chimene's twin daughters, to whom we are introduced after the film's intermission. Melodically similar to Cantiga 322, "A Virgin, Que de Deus Madre," it is presented in the key of the original, F major. The two versions of this cue vary in instrumentation although not in the music itself. Rózsa originally scored the cue with the melody to be performed solo on an oboe doubled by guitar; this is evident in his original sketches. However, in the finished film the oboe is absent from the recording; instead, we hear only the melody performed on solo guitar. Without having access to the full orchestral score, something that seems no longer to exist, it is difficult to tell whether this change in orchestration was made prior to the recording sessions or on the scoring stage itself. A change like this would have been easy to make on the scoring stage, since it only involved removing the oboe. Rózsa perhaps had originally recorded the cue with its full instrumentation, then determined that it would be too overbearing for the scene. For the separate soundtrack recording made in Munich the oboe is restored and a recent complete recording of the score includes both versions of the cue.

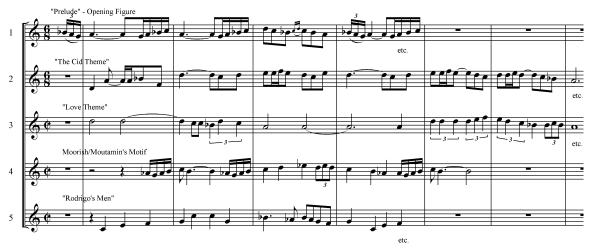
The final medieval melody from which Rózsa borrows in the score, "Los Set Goys," comes, as mentioned earlier, not from *Cantigas* but *Llibre Vermell*. It provides the main theme of the film's overture and is also heard during an ambush on Rodrigo. Rózsa did not lean much on this melody and, in fact, moves in his own direction in its second half by creating a driving, almost "galloping" melody, the first two measures of which are introduced by violins, the next two, by violas and celli. With the fifth measure, Rózsa's own material begins, introduced by a full horn section. ¹³



We are introduced, after an original *b* section for the theme, to the first mediant relationship of the score as it shifts into the *b* section of the overture. This new melody (an original one) is performed by the high strings in the Mixolydian mode centered on C.

One should not assume, however, that the main thematic material of the film was based exclusively on adapted melodies. Of at least 41 identifiable thematic and motivic ideas in the score, nearly 35 are attributable to Rózsa. The use of borrowed, historical material makes sense within the context of the film. The "Palace Music" and "Wedding Supper" cues, for example, are music heard by the characters, so it should be historically appropriate (even though the *Cantigas* were actually collected nearly two centuries afterward). "Wedding Supper" is actually meant to be performed by an onscreen ensemble during dinner following Rodrigo and Chimene's marriage. Although "Palace Music" cannot be attributed to an onscreen ensemble, it is heard by the characters in King Ferdinand's throne room. "Fight for Calahorra," scored for the beginning of a jousting tournament, is suitable for such an event. "The Twins" may have a deeper connection to the characters onscreen than "Calahorra." The text of the cantiga from which the cue is derived celebrates the virgin Mary, and seems to sanctify in some manner Rodrigo and Chimene's twin girls.

Although it would be impractical to address every theme in the score, its major ones should be mentioned. The first to which we are introduced is El Cid's theme (which, incidentally, is different from Rodrigo's), which appears in the film's prelude sequence, directly following the overture. The prelude itself opens with a swirling figure centered on A performed on high strings; it returns once in the score (although this second performance was cut from the finished film). The figure's Spanish flavor comes not only from its ornaments but its Phrygian mode, which is almost a cliché for Spanish music. ¹⁴



The listener is now introduced to the principal theme of the score, the "Cid theme," heard on the strings with the brass performing an echoing accompaniment based on the third through sixth

notes. It does not appear in the score proper until Rodrigo receives his title from Moutamin, in a moment which wonderfully synthesizes film and score. The theme is generally performed throughout the score in 6/8 time, though there are key moments when it is presented in simple duple meter for different emotional effects. Indeed, it is subjected to countless developments as the film progresses. The music for Rodrigo's death scene features a complex variation and interweaving of this and the love theme. It is later accompanied by a full choir in the final cue for the film, the first time that a choir is heard in the score.

The music soon shifts to the other principal theme of the score, the love theme, which is presented in a clear, direct, harmonically pure statement. This is not true, however, of its later harmonic variations, which reflect the changing status of Chimene and Rodrigo's relationship. The love theme is used unabashedly in the film's exit music, scored for full orchestra and choir. Rózsa's early sketches for the film indicate that the choir was originally intended to provide color during the exit music and would only sing on the syllable "ah." This must have changed sometime during the recording for the film because lyrics were added by Paul Francis Webster. Largely unintelligible in the original film track and in rerecordings, the lyrics are offered here for the sake of completeness:

A bell rings in the hush of the morning.

A rose petal falls on the gray castle walls somewhere in Spain.

My heart sings, Oh, my darling, I need you:

A falcon in love can be tamed by a dove only in Spain.

You came to me long, long ago,

And when you came a flame started to grow.

So I knew, love, it will always be you, love.

When magic takes wings and the glory of kings has flown,

You'll still be mine and mine alone.

A bell rings in the hush of the morning.

A rose petal falls on the gray castle walls of Spain."16

Although Rózsa was vocal in disliking the lyrics, they earned him his first and only Oscar nomination for best song. (He lost to Henry Mancini's "Moon River" from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.) Interestingly, Robbins Music Corporation published a version of "The Falcon and the Dove" for piano and solo voice with significantly different lyrics, although Webster is still credited. Because the sheet music was released in 1961 (as, of course, was the film), it is difficult to determine if these lyrics succeed or predate the ones used in the film. The prelude closes with a recapitulation of the "Cid theme," this time performed by trumpets and once again accompanied by low brass.

The next cue, "Ben Yussuf," is sinister, though introduced by a lovely pastoral melody performed by solo English horn with some inflections of the love theme, as a narrator sets the stage for the film. Two main Moorish motives recur in the score, one for Ben Yussuf and the other for Moutamin. The latter, which gets the most play in the score, can even be considered a true leitmotiv. It is used to color passages of music, serve as its own theme, and most importantly, provide shadowing for accompanying cues, suggesting the threat of the Moors (though Moutamin himself is not a threat). This theme is introduced by the woodwinds, particularly the double reeds, its augmented seconds giving it an Arabic flavor.

The score's last major theme is for Rodrigo's men, first appearing right before the film's intermission. Heard over a pedal C bass and including modal coloring (most notably the lowered supertonic) it comes to represent Rodrigo's army in the second half of the film.

Heard as a whole, the score is remarkably cohesive, presenting a story parallel to the film's. In addition, Rózsa's original themes and musical style mesh incredibly well with the material he borrowed from his sources. He obviously immersed himself in the music and worked hard to adapt the historical material to his style and vice versa. Indeed, Rózsa's love for,

and knowledge of, folk music greatly influenced how he approached *El Cid*. This is not to say, however, that there were no problems.

The first occurred when Bronston approached Rózsa with a request. *El Cid* was an Italian co-production; in order to receive financial support from the Italian government, a certain number of Italian technicians and artists had to be employed on the film. Since an Italian composer had been engaged before Rózsa was hired, the Italians were insisting on an Italian composer's name in the credits.¹⁷ Because he did not wish to lose his Italian funding, Bronston asked Rózsa for permission to include an Italian composer's name on all Italian prints of the film alongside Rózsa's. Bronston had been good to him, Rózsa writes, and now he was in a fix. Rózsa eventually agreed, "provided the Italian made no claim for royalties and his credit appeared on the Italian prints only." ¹⁸

Many frustrations followed. In 1961, the studio system of the golden age was dying, and with it, the conventions of traditional film scoring. Over the next decade and a half, the convention of a "wall-to-wall" film score would all but disappear. The traditional style of film scoring would not return until John Williams's *Jaws* and *Star Wars* debuted in the late 1970s. Rózsa's score for *El Cid*, unfortunately, would be one of the first to suffer from this change.

When it came time for the score to be dubbed¹⁹ to the film, Rózsa writes that "again and again the sound effects expert tried to persuade the director [Anthony Mann] to take out the music that interfered with her precious clicks and booms." Rózsa argued that without the music the excitement would be missing from the scenes. But his defense was not strong enough. At the film's premiere, the composer was shocked to discover that scene after scene was musicless. According to Rózsa, the music even stopped mid-bar at one point, presumably so the clanking of a sword could be better heard. As it turned out, more than 23 minutes of his two-hour-and-sixteen-minute score were left on the cutting room floor. A last minute appeal to Bronston proved useless; the best Rózsa could do was cancel the publicity tour for the score, since he now regarded it as unrepresentative of his work: "I could not talk about music which nobody was going to hear." This last experience was the one that drove the nail through Rózsa and Bronston's working relationship. Bronston later asked Rózsa to score his film *Fall of the Roman Empire* but Rózsa respectfully declined; the job went to composer Dmitri Tiomkin instead.

For many years the only way to hear Rózsa's music for *El Cid* was either as part of the film or on the 45-minute soundtrack album he recorded in Munich. In 1995, Koch Records released a rerecording conducted by James Sedares with the New Zealand Symphony that clocked in at slightly over an hour and included material that Rózsa had not used in his original soundtrack. However, it is unlikely that Rózsa would have approved of this recording, if only for its disregard on many tracks of his given tempi. When Cloud 9 Records intended to release the original film recordings of *El Cid*, it was discovered that they had been completely lost; the surviving elements were permanently attached to the film's audio track and therefore unusable. All that could be released were the portions that had no dialogue or sound effects, the film's overture, prelude, entr'acte, and exit music.

In 2007-2008, a rerecording of the complete score was commissioned and overseen by James Fitzpatrick for his label, Tadlow Music. Recording the complete score of the film required more than half of the music to be reconstructed based on Rózsa's original sketch score because the full score no longer existed. Recording occurred in two parts – the first in September 2007 with the City of Prague Philharmonic, a session orchestra, conducted by Nic Raine, who relied on the only full score materials that were available, used for the Sedares rerecording a decade before. After this, Raine and Fitzpatrick re-orchestrated the remainder of the score based on Rózsa's original concert pitch three staff sketches. This second half was recorded in March 2008. The complete recording debuted in September 2008 to much acclaim. For the first time in nearly fifty years, Rózsa's cut music could be heard.

Although plagued by postproduction trouble and not fully debuting until 2008, *El Cid* is undoubtedly among Rózsa's best works, perhaps matched only by *Ben-Hur* in scope and research. Rózsa himself reminisced in his memoirs, *Double Life* (the title alludes both to a film he

scored and to his life as a concert and film composer), that *El Cid* was his last major film score and his last important film with the exception of *Providence*.²³ A complete analysis would be a massive undertaking, a true testament to Rózsa's dedication to *El Cid*.

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¹ Miklos Rózsa, Double Life (New York: Wynwood Press, 1989), 20.

² Rózsa, Double Life, 27.

³ Rózsa, Double Life, 28.

⁴ Rózsa, Double Life, 35.

⁵ His *Theme, Variations and Finale* op. 13 was premiered in Budapest by Dohnányi in 1931 and acclaimed by Richard Strauss. It made the rounds of Europe and was on the program of the historic concert when a young Leonard Bernstein substituted for Bruno Walter, thereby making his conducting debut.

⁶ Published as both *The Poem of the Cid* and *The Lay of the Cid* in English.

⁷ Rózsa, Double Life, 194.

⁸ All musical examples in the following sections can be heard in recorded form on the complete rerecording of *El Cid* on the Tadlow Music label.

⁹ Alfonso, Cantigas, edited by Jesús Montoya Martínez. (Madrid: Cátedra, 1988). And Ed Cid sketch score, Miklós Rózsa Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.

¹⁰ El Cid sketch score.

¹¹ Alfonso, Cantigas.

¹² Alfonso, Cantigas. El Cid sketch score.

¹³ "Los Set Goyts": Public Domain. *El Cid* sketch score.

¹⁴ El Cid sketch score.

¹⁵ El Cid sketch score.

¹⁶ Frank Dewald. "The Song of El Cid Part 2," pp. 3-11 Pro Musica Sana 51 (1993): 11.

¹⁷ Rózsa, Double Life, 194.

¹⁸ Rózsa, Double Life, 194.

¹⁹ The process of putting together all of the music, dialogue, and sound effects to the film track.

²⁰ Rózsa, Double Life, 194.

²¹ Frank Dewald. "The Song of El Cid Part 1," pp. 3-22 Pro Musica Sana 50 (1992): 3.

²² Rózsa, Double Life, 195.

²³ Rózsa, Double Life, 195.