

# History of Opera and Historical Opera

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*The main goal of this paper is to define the genre of historical opera, mainly in its relationship to literary-historical genres. It is clear that historical opera encompasses an essentially narrower field than the historical novel. As a criterion, the “historicity” of a theme does not prove to be sufficient because historical opera should display its characteristics on a formal musical level, as well as in its dramatic construction*

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Although the title of this paper is a play on words, my goal is not to present the vast history of the historical opera genre in all of its forms – that is, from the post-antiquity “rebirth” of opera at the beginning of the 17th century to its contemporary form – but rather to define the genre of historical opera in its relationship to other literary-historical genres.

Literary history places Sir Walter Scott as a leading contributor to the development of the historical novel (Starikova, 25; Hladnik, *Temeljni* 2). Scott’s contribution is also important for the evolution of operas dealing with historical subject matter (Gerhard 1576). A spectrum of historical themes can also be found in operas written before the 19th century, but their presence in Baroque and Classical opera is relatively minimal in comparison to the more predominant range of themes found in these operatic types, ranging from mythological subjects to Biblical themes and love affairs. An extremely significant fact is that there is no discernable difference between operas dealing with historical or non-historical subjects as regards the opera’s structure and characteristics. It is for this reason that one cannot speak about historical opera as an autonomous genre.

It is with this in mind that the nature of historical opera should be carefully considered; the central question of this paper revolves around the designation of an opera as historical due to its libretto being drawn from historical sources. Musicology seldom speaks of a particular historical operatic genre; contemporary terminology prefers the term *grand opera*

in connection to the operatic climate of Paris in the 19th century (Bartlet). Indeed, the findings of literary history concur in that the historical novel displays these same characteristics: the plot unfolds in the historical past, some of the events are indeed motivated by true historical facts and historical distance (or, better, narrative distance) proves to be very significant (see Starikova; Hladnik, *Temeljni*; Matajč; Hladnik, *Slovenskež*). In addition to these main characteristics, scholars have also revived the central dilemma around the relationship between fact and fiction. Nadežda Starikova solves this problem in one decisive sentence: “[w]ithout facts the historical novel stops being historical, without fiction it stops being a novel” (Starikova 28). One possible interpretation of this finding is that historical genres do indeed encompass fiction, but only to the extent that the historical facts presented retain their accuracy.

Nonetheless, historical opera cannot be classified as a literary genre – it only comes into indirect contact with literature via the libretto. It is for this reason that the aforementioned characteristics of the historical novel can only be used to define the “historicity” of the chosen subject; otherwise it is clear that the particulars of historical opera should be sought in the distinct features of musical structure, operatic dramaturgy, and formal solutions. If our aim is to properly designate a genre, the musical criteria above all must be called into account.

Operas based on historical subjects became dominant in the 19th century, an event greatly linked to the admiration and popularity surrounding the novels of Sir Walter Scott. In fact, it becomes difficult to trace all the historical themes that appear in this period and the “fever” for historicity was partly connected to the central Romantic notion of character. A well-chosen historical event provided a specific historical flavour, a *couleur du temps* that distinguished one opera from others and fulfilled the demand for character. This was not, of course, a completely novel idea. Composers had long been making use of the particular local colouring of a site, its *couleur locale*. Composers and librettists often set their operas in remote sites (because particularly exotic “landscapes” were in demand) and displayed this local colour through the vehicles of musical exoticism and folklore. A novel location along with a corresponding national “flavour” thus guaranteed each subsequent opera its own unique character.

Detailed studies of *couleur locale* indicate that such procedures do not generally provide true individuality and distinctness, but instead merely the outer vestments of character. The problem of local colours is connected to their interchangeability; exoticism and folklore are discernable within their operatic contexts because of their musical construction, but it is often difficult to define their precise origins. A typical example of this

can be found in Borodin's unfinished opera *Prince Igor*. Borodin attempted to portray two opposing and belligerent musical parties – the Russians and the Polovtsians – but ultimately, folklore (achieved via Russian melodies) and exoticism (tied to this Turkic tribe) remained indistinguishable. This leads to the finding that composers tend to use a certain set of compositional techniques – that is, melismatic circulation around one tone, use of pentatonic modes, chromaticism, constant shifts from major to minor, pedal points, augmented second and fourth, and diminished sixth and ostinato (Mahling 53) – in an effort to indicate local colour, causing indeterminacy and interchangeability.

The same can also be claimed for various forms of historical colour, which are interchangeable not only among themselves but also with “local colour”. Such is the situation in Gaspare Spontini's opera *Fernand Cortez, ou La Conquête du Mexique*. **Here the composer attempts to picture the historical clash of two cultures by enlisting the help of the typical musical patterns of both nations.** Thus, the historical is presented as local, which only demonstrates the lack of distinction between the archaic and the exotic for 19th-century composers. Both are reduced to their shared characteristic of remoteness, which indeed runs parallel to the idea of character. Therefore, the “Romantic” equation is as follows: archaic equals exotic equals remote equals characteristic.

The issues linked to local and historical colour demand a search for the specifics of historical opera, not only in musical material but especially in dramaturgy. The latter is closely linked to the role that the chosen historical subject plays in the opera. Four specific categories can thus be distinguished: (1) the historical milieu merely represents the frame of a story that focuses on scenes from private life with melodramatic premises; (2) the historical subject offers increased external attractiveness through specific historical or local colour; (3) historical events are tightly wound into the opera's core, greatly affecting its dramatic plot; for example, in which a love affair is not only interwoven with political intrigue, but exerts a fundamental influence on political and historical events;<sup>1</sup> and finally (4) national operas, which are most often based on historical subjects, representing special cases.

Most 19th-century operas with historical subjects can be placed in the first and second categories (1, 2). Their chosen historical subject matter actually represents mere external features that enable the interweaving of historic and local colour; otherwise, the private story at the centre of the opera remains unconnected to the historical events surrounding it. Formally and dramatically, such operas continue to be obliged to the predominantly Italian type of melodrama, common to the central Italian op-

eratic composers of the time; Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi.<sup>2</sup> These operas are dominated by scenes from private life, with solo numbers as typical examples of the type of personal confession required.

Nonetheless, the reduced role of history in 19th-century operas was not only the result of a firm obligation to the traditional and very popular dramaturgy of melodrama – historicity also lost its strength due to the powerful censorship and specific demands of the libretto genre. The censors very precisely observed parallels that could potentially be established between isolated historical events and current political realities. It is for this reason that the librettists were very often forced to displace the original historical subject in favour of a more “neutral” milieu. Examples of this include Verdi’s grand operas *Les vêpres siciliennes* and *Un ballo in maschera*. In the first instance, the famous librettist Augustin Eugène Scribe was obliged to shift the original historic plot from the 16th-century Netherlands to 13th-century Sicily, and to change the title for the opera’s Italian performance (to *Giovanna de Guzman*) (Schreiber 621, 22). In the second instance, the creators were forced to change the plot originally based on the true story of the assassination of Swedish King Gustav III in 1792 to the murder of a British governor in Boston because the censors were unwilling to present royal murders on the stage (Schreiber 629). It remains symptomatic that the central aria of the main protagonist, Riccardo, does not resemble either English or Swedish national musical character, but is instead conceived of as a Neapolitan barcarole.

However the genre of the opera libretto should also be carefully considered. This special literary genre differs from usual dramatic text in at least three integral characteristics: simplification (the number of protagonists is reduced, difficult dialogue resumes at a slower pace, and all complicated connections and philosophic threads are cut loose), emphasis on situation (priority is on the visual, with the processional translated into pictures,) and a strong emphasis on emotions (with the protagonists being led by emotions above all; hence the reason for singing becoming increasingly plausible, as argumentation and discussion reduce the emotion) (Koebner 194, 95). It is possible to speak of a simultaneous deliterarization as well as a deviation from reality and, consequently, also from history.

Despite the mass application of historical subjects, only a few 19th-century operas feature a chosen historical subject as their central element (category 3). At the very least, the historical milieu plays precisely just as extensive a role in Meyerbeer’s grand operas *Les Huguenots* and *Le Prophète* and in Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* and his unfinished *Khovanshchina*. The special role of history in these operas affects changes at a dramaturgical level: the centres of these operas include mass scenes, implemented through vast

static pictures (*tableaux*) in which the functions of the visual and pantomimic are increased. Correspondingly, private actions and thus solo numbers become less important. More important than these external characteristics, which can mainly be linked to the most brilliant period of the Paris Opéra, is the fact that the historical subject gains the role of the central idea in such operas and is thus elevated from its former merely decorative function. In his description of French theatre in the 19th century, Heinrich Heine wrote that the Paris Opéra (i.e., historical opera) represented “the sufferings and happiness of all mankind” (Heine 335). Such a shift can be seen in Verdi’s historical opera *Don Carlos*, in which the centre of the idea the opera revolves around is represented by the quest for freedom – not only for Flanders, but for freedom as a universal conception and condition.

It becomes clear that in historical opera, as opposed to literary-historical genres, the relationship between fact and fiction loses importance, while the relations between the private and public (political) spheres, solo numbers, and mass scenes gain precedence, adding to the discrepancy of history as a decorative subject and history as a central idea.

However, another question remains: what happens when the idea of historical opera is applied to ideological goals? Such operas can be found within the genre of national opera (category 4), which was especially common after 1850. Almost all national operas (an interesting exception is Stanisław Moniuszko’s *Halka*) were conceived of as historical operas: librettists and composers chose important historical events crucial to the history of their nation or state as the subjects of their operas (such scenarios can be found in Mikhail Glinka’s *A Life for the Tsar*, in Ferenc Erkel’s *Hunyadi László* and *Bánk Bán*, and in Ivan Zajc’s *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*). In their formal construction, however, the national operas were dependent on foreign examples; the predominant pattern less resembled Meyerbeer’s historical grand opera than Verdi’s melodramatic type, in which the role of history was reduced to serve a mainly exotic or decorative function. This is why national operas in fact contain very few true national characteristics and elements. The national operas were modelled on foreign schemata and national characteristics were only added with the help of the well-known procedure of local colouring. We have already recognized that there is no serious difference between national musical character and exoticism, which is why national operas become freely interchangeable after their linguistic facade is exposed. Exoticism is transformed into national folklore, which becomes the merging of local and historical colour. Thus, at both a formal and dramatic level, Glinka’s opera *A Life for The Tsar* and Erkel’s *Bánk Bán* look very similar, and differ only in externally motivated local colour, both otherwise following the examples of bel canto.

National operas also present certain dilemmas regarding the potential of ideas of the chosen historical subject, which is almost always used to achieve the same goal: the awakening of national feelings. The potential of ideas of national opera is almost always thus reduced to placatory political and nationalist propaganda.

From this it is clear that, in comparison with literary-historical genres, especially the historical novel, the field of historical opera is substantially narrower. This can be confirmed by Hladnik's typology of the historical novel (Hladnik, *Temeljni* 190–191). With regard to the role of history in the novel, Hladnik distinguishes two main groups. The first mainly presents historical fact (I), which can be either picturesque or beautiful (I1) for its own sake; otherwise, it can establish a double relation with the present, yet be more pleasant than reality itself (this is a typical example of escapism, I1a) or it can be painted in “dark colours” (I1b). In the second group are works in which history establishes itself in an instrumental fashion to other periods (II). This relationship can further deal with common human problems (II1) and therefore point to the invariability of human life, or use the past as a metaphor (II2), which can have cognitive (II2a) or propagandistic functions (II2b).

Applying Hladnik's typology to the genre of historical opera, it turns out that only two of his types can be linked to this genre. Many composers of historical operas use historical subjects merely as a literary frame or decorative element. Such operas correspond to Hladnik's first type of historical novel (I), especially fitting with the genre that represents the exotic and picturesque for its own sake (I1). These operas cannot be linked to the independent genre of historical opera because their musical and dramatic structures do not differ from the prevailing melodramatic type. The same also holds true for national operas centred on important historical events. Again, they do not implement any particular innovation or characteristic specific to the genre, and the function of historicity is often reduced to mere propaganda (II2b). In all of these cases, history does not take over and function as an idea or centre of signification, which should be the crucial criterion for the opera wishing to be linked with the historical opera genre. The decisive transformation of the historical subject into the opera's central idea creates changes on a dramatic level (the decisive role of visuals, emphasis on mass scenes, public taking precedence over private) and a formal level (the dominance of choir numbers and vast static tableaux), and this is why the specific characteristic of historical opera can be found in these operas. According to Hladnik's typology, these operas gain this signifying potential when they present general human dilemmas (II1) or when the historical metaphor achieves cognitive dimensions (II2a). It is

only when history acquires a true potential for signification in opera that one can speak of an autonomous genre of historical opera.

On one hand, historical opera displays a great dependence on literature (the chosen subject is often derived from historical novels, and moreover the flood of operas dealing with historic subjects was launched by the popularity of Sir Walter Scott's historical novels). On the other hand, it should only be understood as a specific operatic genre via immanent musical-operatic definitions (e.g., specific dramaturgy, formal specialties). At first sight, such a relationship seems paradoxical but is also largely typical of the history of opera. This is to say that the genre of historical opera continues with a well-known operatic dilemma: *prima le parole, dopo la musica* or *prima la musica, dopo le parole*. The success and persistence of historical opera are attested to by its contemporary examples: Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, *Satyagraha*, and *Echnaton*, Adriana Hölszky's *Bremer Freiheit*, Siegfried Matthus's *Graf Mirabeau*, Gian Carlo Menotti's *Goya*, Krzysztof Penderecky's *Die Teufel von Loudon*, Wolfgang Rihm's *Jakob Lenz*, Alfred Schinttke's *Gesualdo*, Pavel Šivic's *Cortesova vrniten*, and, recently, Tan Dun's *The First Emperor*. The success of all of these operas is primarily connected with their specific positioning between literature and music.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A typical example of such a historical opera is Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, in which the relationship between Marina and Dmitry is crucial for reasons of political intrigue (the breakthrough of the Pretender to the throne) and thus brings more than mere melodramatic character.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of such operas are Bellini's *Beatrice di Tenda* (the plot takes place in the 15th century); Donizetti's operas *Anna Bolena* (the story of the wife of King Henry VIII), *Maria Stuarda* (another story borrowed from the history of the English royals), *Lucia di Lammermoor* (taken after Scott's novel, set in Scotland at the end of the 16th century), and *Roberto Devereux* (set in England at the beginning of the 17th century); and Verdi's operas *I Lombardi alla prima crociata*, *Giovanna d'Arco*, and *Attila*, as well as his works written for the Paris Opéra: *Les Vêpres siciliennes*, *Simone Boccanegra*, and *Un ballo in maschera*.

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