Operetta between the Two World Wars

In memoriam Peter Andraschke

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More than fifteen years ago, at the time of my first active involvement in Slovenian Music Days as the co-author of an exhibition on the composition group *Pro musica viva*, the then head of the symposium Primož Kuret introduced me to Peter Andraschke. As a young doctoral candidate, I followed his appearances at the symposium and read his scholarly publications with considerable interest. He surprised me at our first meeting by addressing me in Slovene (it turned out that he had family connections with our country) and encouraged me to participate actively in the symposium with a paper of my own before too long. Just under a decade would pass before I was able to put his suggestion into practice, but over the years of our encounters at the symposium I realised that he was one of the most important collaborators of the Ljubljana musicological symposium. With the benevolent nature that characterised him, Peter established a genuinely comradely relationship with most of the symposium participants and developed close friendships with some of those from the circle of initiators of the Ljubljana symposium.

Despite the insidious disease he had been battling for the last few years, he also intended to present a paper at the symposium in April 2020 (subsequently postponed because of the coronavirus pandemic). With typical conscientiousness he submitted his summary for translation purposes and prepared a preliminary version of his paper just a few days before his death. The paper was subsequently equipped with scholarly apparatus and read-

ied for publication here by his Viennese colleague Hartmut Krones. As a token of remembrance and gratitude for decades of active cooperation and the lasting legacy of his contribution to the development of the musicological symposium of Slovenian Music Days, we dedicate this publication to Peter Andraschke.

The present monograph in the *Studia musicologica Labacensia* collection, entitled *Operetta between the Two World Wars: Commemorating the Centenary of the Opera of the Slovene National Theatre in Maribor*, places the focus on operetta, which appears to constitute something of a gap in Slovene musicological research to date. Frequently seen as trivial, the genre has long been unfairly relegated to the margins of research interest both in Slovenia and in some other parts of Europe.

By contrast, the staging of musical-dramatic works in the late nineteenth century was strongly dominated by operetta, which effectively dictated the programmes of provincial theatres while at the same time conditioning their numerical strength (in terms of company size and composition) and financial success. Up-to-date in terms of subject matter, visually effective and musically attractive, operetta was not merely in tune with spirit of its time, it embodied that spirit, becoming a phenomenon that conquered theatre stages throughout Europe. As Volker Klotz illustrates in his handy “portrait” of the genre,¹ operetta’s mass appeal and the all-encompassing nature of the phenomenon, which soon outgrew the musical stage, meant that it was often seen as aesthetically suspect – we need only remember Adorno’s definition of the “realistic” framework of operetta.² Despite criticisms of this sort, when its full potential in terms of music and libretto – not to mention acting, costume design and set design – is taken into account, operetta seems to be much more than simply a lighter, standardised form of entertainment. Although the genre rarely appears on the horizons of composers working today, some immortal operettas of the past continue to express surprisingly modern, innovative and critical interpretations of reality in every new guise in which they appear. Or as Moritz Csáky puts it in his sociologically profound and historically accurate essay on the ideology of Viennese operetta: “*the lasting relevance of the questions about hu-*

1 Volker Klotz, *Operette. Porträt und Handbuch einer unerhörten Kunst* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2004).

2 Theodor W. Adorno, “Leichte Musik,” in *Dissonanzen. Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 202.

man destiny and the world that are posed by operettas means that they are anything but trivial."³

Closely connected to Vienna as they were, Ljubljana, with its Estates Theatre, and Maribor, with its permanent professional German city theatre founded in 1852, had always paid close attention to current events in the capital on the beautiful blue Danube. The operetta repertoire, which in the early years accounted for almost all the activity of Maribor's opera house, was rich and diverse. New operettas arrived in Maribor relatively quickly, particularly in comparison to new operas. The First World War and the bloody revolutions that followed it thoroughly altered the geographical and political map of Europe while at the same time bringing about a profound cultural change. Despite the crisis that engulfed operetta performance after the end of the war, several composers established themselves in this period with prominent operettas, as discussed in the papers that make up the first thematic section of the present monograph (*Modernization of the Operetta between the Two World Wars*). New librettists came to the fore and aspired to modernise operetta; younger practitioners began to forge a reputation, despite frequently lacking the characteristics of their celebrated older colleagues.

In the new cultural and political reality of the state of the Southern Slavs that emerged after the First World War, the opportunity arose to establish a second Slovene professional theatre, in Maribor. The Slovene National Theatre was founded in 1919 at the initiative of the city's Dramatic Society, with the help of the actor and director Hinko Nučič, who became its first manager. The following year, on 1 May 1920, the Opera of the Slovene National Theatre made its debut with a performance of Hervé's popular operetta *Mam'zelle Nitouche*. This was followed in subsequent seasons by numerous operettas by Franz von Suppé, Jacques Offenbach, Johann Strauss II, Oscar Straus, Franz Lehár, Leo Fall, Robert Stolz, Emmerich Kálmán and Ralph Benatzky, among others. Slovene composers also began to devote themselves more intensively to operetta after the First World War. As well as three operettas by Viktor Parma, the Maribor Opera performed operettas by Josip Jiranek, Pavel Rasberger, Danilo Bučar, Marjan Kozina and Radovan Gobec in the period Between the Two World Wars. Operetta predominated in Maribor right up until the start of the Second World War, when the theatre was forced to close its doors. A review of the activity of the Maribor Opera Between the Two World Wars, which is the subject of the

3 Moritz Csáky, *Ideologie der Operette und Wiener Moderne. Ein kulturhistorischer Essay zur österreichischen Identität* (Wien: Böhlau, 1996).

second thematic section of the present monograph (*Operetta at the Opera of the Slovene National Theatre in Maribor between the Two World Wars*), reveals that it was almost entirely characterised by operetta, with operetta productions accounting for more than two thirds of the company's repertoire. In a similar manner, the third thematic section of the present monograph (*Operetta at the Opera of the Slovene National Theatre in Ljubljana and other surrounding theatres between the Two World Wars*) traces the staging of operettas (somewhat fewer in number) by both domestic and foreign composers on the stage of the Ljubljana Opera.

Notwithstanding a certain amount of primary research in the field in recent years, the mark left by operetta on the wider social and cultural life of the capitals of both Lower Styria and Carniola was so significant that the genre surely deserves to occupy a more important place in contemporary Slovene musicological research. Without operetta, it is impossible to imagine a comprehensive view of the Slovene music theatre of the past, let alone understand its position in the broader historical and social context.

Of particular note is the story of the "expulsion" of operetta from Slovenia after the Second World War. As noted by Borut Smrekar, one of the leading connoisseurs of operetta in Slovenia, this is a "*unique cultural oddity in the European context*".⁴ The story tells us much about the intellectual atmosphere of the time and is therefore an important contribution to our understanding of cultural and social events in our relatively recent past.

With the help of papers from leading Slovene and foreign researchers, the present monograph sheds light on the broader social role of operetta as an artistic genre in the past and present. It considers the policies of various opera houses regarding repertoire, company size and other questions related to operetta in the period between the two world wars, while at the same time it aims to make a comparative study of the position of operetta before and after the period in question. It also devotes attention to a structural analysis of some of the central works in the operetta genre and touches indirectly on some interdisciplinary studies of musical-dramatic culture. In this connection, it is worth mentioning the review of librettos and various staging practices and directorial approaches. Through a variety of interdisciplinary studies, the present monograph thus illuminates several aspects of this once extremely popular musical genre and opens up possibilities for the further study of the measureless riches of operetta.

4 Borut Smrekar, "Foreword," in: Henrik Neubauer, *Opereta v Sloveniji: zgodovinski pregled* (Ljubljana: Kulturno Društvo Glasbena Matica, 2008), jacket.