UR. JERNEJ WEISS

VLOGA NACIONALNIH
OPERNIH GLEDALIŠČ
V 20. IN 21. STOLETJU

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL
OPERA HOUSES IN THE
20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

Izid monografije so podprli

Mestna občina
Ljubljana

LJUBLJANA
Zmagoslavje 2016

Organizacija Združenih
narodov za izobraževanje,
znanost in kulturo

LJUBLJANA:
MESTO/CITY
OF/LITERA-
TURE...

• Unescovo
• kreativno mesto
• od 2015

REPUBLIKA SLOVENIJA
MINISTRSTVO ZA KULTURO

vloga nacionalnih opernih
gledališč v 20. in 21. stoletju

*the role of national opera
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2019

Znanstvena monografija z mednarodno udeležbo
Vloga nacionalnih opernih gledališč v 20. in 21. stoletju
– *The Role of National Opera Houses in the 20th and 21st Centuries*
Uredil Jernej Weiss

Studia musicologica Labacensia, 3 (ISSN 2536-2445)
Glavni urednik • Jernej Weiss (Ljubljana/Maribor)
Odgovorni urednik • Jonatan Vinkler (Koper)
Tehnična urednica • Tjaša Ribizel (Ljubljana)
Uredniški odbor • Matjaž Barbo (Ljubljana), Primož Kuret (Ljubljana), Helmut Loos (Leipzig),
Lubomír Spurný (Brno), John Tyrrell († Cardiff), Michael Walter (Graz), Jernej Weiss (Ljubljana/Maribor)

Recenzenti • Lubomír Spurný, Ivan Florjanc, Igor Grdina

Oblikovanje in prelom • Jonatan Vinkler

Prevod • Amidas d. o. o.
Jezikovni pregled (slovensko besedilo) • Jernej Weiss

Izdali in založili
Založba Univerze na Primorskem (zanjo: prof. dr. Dragan Marušič, rektor)
Titov trg 4, SI-6000 Koper
Glavni urednik • Jonatan Vinkler
Vodja založbe • Alen Ježovnik
Festival Ljubljana (zanj: Darko Brlek, direktor)
Trg francoske revolucije 1, SI-1000 Ljubljana

Koper, Ljubljana 2019

ISBN 978-961-7055-50-4 (spletna izdaja: pdf)
<http://www.hippocampus.si/ISBN/978-961-7055-50-4.pdf>
ISBN 978-961-7055-51-1 (spletna izdaja: html)
<http://www.hippocampus.si/ISBN/978-961-7055-51-1/index.html>
ISBN 978-961-7055-52-8 (tiskana izdaja)
Naklada tiskane izdaje: 200 izvodov (tiskovina ni namenjena prodaji)
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26493/978-961-7055-50-4>

© 2019 Festival Ljubljana

Katalogni zapis o publikaciji (CIP) pripravili v Narodni in univerzitetni knjižnici v Ljubljani
COBISS.SI-ID=298791680
ISBN 978-961-7055-50-4 (pdf)
ISBN 978-961-7055-51-1 (html)

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Opera and national culture in Latvia: the centenary balance

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On the eve of the centenary of Latvia as a national state in 2018 and the centenary of the Latvian National Opera in 2019, it seems important to reflect on the relationship between opera and national culture throughout history. Standing at the crossroads between Russian and German political and cultural influences, since the first Latvian opera troupe founded by Pāvuls Jurjāns in 1912 opera has been one of the cultural cornerstones leading to creation of the national state. The features of the Latvian national identity on an opera stage appear long before the proclamation of a national state. The Latvian National Opera was one of the pillars of Latvian culture both institutionally and artistically during the first Republic (1918—1939), during two world wars and the following Soviet occupation (1940—1991). The first original Latvian operas – “Baniuta” by Alfrēds Kalniņš and “Fire and Night” by Jānis Medīņš in the early twenties of the 20th century marked the endeavour to put Latvian national music and drama on the level of European elite culture. The article outlines the role of the Latvian National Opera as an institution and opera as a genre in the context of Latvian national culture. Through the Latvian example, the article aims to open the discussion on the positioning of the opera genre in the context of national cultures throughout Europe, in particular, in Central and Eastern European countries.

Opera has always been considered an elitist art form, especially in Central and Eastern European countries that cannot boast centuries-long

Picture 1: The façade of the Latvian National Opera and Ballet adorned in the honour of the centenary celebrated in 2018/2019 season. Photographer: Monta Tīgere. Publicity picture credited by LNOB.

and stable opera traditions such as in, for instance, Italy. The 19th century marks the development of national cultures and, subsequently, national operas in terms of composers from Central and Eastern Europe trying to express themselves in this complicated genre. The operatic tradition in Latvia is rooted in the crossroads of the German and Russian cultures in the 19th century, and in Riga as multicultural city. Yet, at the dawn of the national culture, the dramatic theatre and opera were the art forms that articulated the idea of Latvian national identity through different representations on stage, from props and visual effects and linguistic aspects culminating in the ambition to create a Latvian operatic repertoire. The idea of a national opera (based on nationally or regionally specific stories) was accomplished only by the 1920s since the first green shoots of a nascent opera tradition were cut by WWI. None of the Latvian operas have entered the so-called classical opera repertoire like, for instance, the Czech “Rusalka” by A. Dvořák, nor they are a popular object of interest of the Latvian

public. However, many Latvian singers today are starring on prestigious stages around the world, producing in Latvia the strange effect of opera singing as a “national brand”. In the 19th century, opera was the genre where popular and elite culture met and interacted, and so it is today. Through opera, the national, sometimes folk values were transferred from popular culture to so-called high culture. Possibly, opera is one of those bridges in professional art that can contextualise the national ideas in a wider cultural context, since these ideas are expressed in one of the most complicated, most theatrical, yet internationally convertible, recognisable and comparable art forms that works on a similar footing everywhere.

First of all, it has to be said that Latvians are an ethnic community, if we refer to the typology offered by the sociologist Anthony D. Smith, who has widely researched the concept of national identity. Among the attributes mentioned by Smith there is an association with a specific “homeland”, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture and so on.¹ Latvians cherish their “homeland” and often separate this concept from the “state” meaning the actual political processes; there are certain cultural cornerstones grounded in the collective expressions of national identity – i.e. choral singing, that is institutionalized in the Song and Dance Festival included in the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Latvian culture is memory oriented and despite the constant threat of assimilation by larger cultures cultivates the national culture both in Latvia and in diaspora communities worldwide. The representations of national culture in Latvian opera tend to appear in several forms:

- 1) themes, such as mythologised history or national literature-based plots;
- 2) music and text, integrating rhythm, rhyme and melodies of folk songs and dances in opera score, visual signs in set design, props and costumes; and
- 3) in the development of the concept of a “nation that sings” – one of Latvian self-awareness concepts that form the cultural identity of the nation, especially in the context of Latvian opera stars performing on big stages of the world today.

The present article outlines three main aspects related to the interconnections between opera and national culture in Latvia:

1 Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 21.

- 1) opera and national culture in the pre-state period until 1918;
- 2) the first Latvian original operas in the context of national musical culture throughout history and the concept of “My (our) White House” (to be commented further);
- 3) the relationship of opera and national culture today in- and out of house: Latvian operas in the repertoire of the Latvian National Opera and Ballet (LNOB), and world-famous Latvian opera singers as national brand and cultural “ambassadors” of Latvia establishing a perception of opera as a national brand.

The pre-state period (until 1918)

At the beginning of the 20th century the idea of the national state was represented in the symbolic drama “Fire and Night” by Rainis (real name and surname Jānis Pliekšāns), one of the most important Latvian poets and playwrights. He wrote the first two acts of “Fire and night” in 1903/04 as a potential libretto for the national opera competition organised by the Riga Latvian Society Music Commission, but he did not succeed in winning the competition. Instead, the first prize was awarded to the libretto for the opera “Baniuta” by Artūrs Krūmiņš, a 2nd year architecture student at the time and a future academic. After 1905, Rainis was exiled due to his left-oriented political views, but the play was completed and published in four parts in the monthly cultural magazine, then published and in 1911 premiered by the Riga New Theatre – the new democratic and progressive Latvian troupe as a turnover in Latvian theatre history both artistically and technically. The production (included in the Latvian Cultural Canon) included a large chorus and orchestra. During WW1 the opera of the same title was composed by Jānis Medīņš. The structure of the symbolic drama, initially composed as an opera libretto, is classical, and so are the characters – a mythical hero, a traitor, a trickster (personification of evil) and two female characters around the central protagonist. The main character is *Lāčplēsis* (literally: Bear Slayer), borrowed from the Latvian literary epos (1888), a man with bear’s ears. He represents physical strength without much wisdom, therefore he is sent to acquire wisdom; the main female character is *Spīdola* (the Shining One), who represents art, wisdom, metaphysical and magic powers; the second female character *Laimdota* (literally: given by the Latvian pagan goddess of all good/fortune/happiness) represents the national idea, sometimes referred to as Latvia in the text – potentially flour-

ishing, yet weak and in need of protection. The gallery of characters is enriched by the trickster or *Traitor*, who is a “collaborationist” with Evil and shares some magic powers with *Spīdola*, but is materially oriented; and the blind *Black Knight*, the symbolic representation of the “Other”, threat and fear, who literally wants “to destroy all the nation” and at the end of the day challenges the Bear Slayer to fight and cuts off his bear’s ears, thus making the hero lose his mythical strength and fall in the River Daugava. The opera ends with a sentence that opens a wide range of interpretations: “The fight is not over and will continue...” referring to the striving for an independent state and unified nation, but also a universal model of continuous development. Curiously, the person that links the production of the dramatic theatre to opera later on is the Latvian actor and opera singer Ādolfs Kakiņš (1885–1965), who had played the role of *Lāčplēsis* in both productions.

In addition, during the pre-state period, the production of Richard Wagner’s “Flying Dutchman” (premiered 15/10/1918 in the 2nd Riga City Theatre, a month before the proclamation of the independent Republic of Latvia) also plays an important role due to the representation of Latvian national identity and the idea of the emerging national state. Latvian musicologist Lolita Fūrmane writes:

*At that moment of time the proclamation of Latvia as an independent state still was just a dream. At the end of the war on the Eastern front, the German power institute’s political interests were focused on the Baltics, yet the opportunities vanished with the crash of Germany’s military power. The motifs of spell, fatality, ghosts [...] permitted to the public of the second decade of the 20th century perceive the opera as the reflection of blustery reality and the prophecy as well.*² [emphasis mine – L. M. B.]

Namely, the Dutchman’s ship had red sails, and most of the critics saw in that a symbol of the well-known consequences of the revolution in Russia in 1917.

The current building of the Latvian National Opera was built as the Riga City German Theatre in 1863 and it functioned as a German theatre until WW1. The first Latvian opera troupe “Latvju opera” was founded by Pāvuls Jurjāns in 1912 and continued until 1915, when most of the musicians emigrated to Estonia and Russia due to the war. In 1918, after the

2 Lolita Fūrmane, “Four Circles of History in the Latvian National Opera,” *Latvian National Opera* (Riga: Jumava, 2000), 114. (In Latvian)

war, the conductor Teodors Reiters re-established “Latvian opera”, involving the stage director Dmitry Abrenin from Saint Petersburg, set designer Jānis Kuga, and choir conductor Pēteris Jozuus. The orchestra was mainly formed by Tukums Riflemen Regiment orchestra musicians, who performed in 1917 under the baton of Reiters in Novgorod, Russia; the singers mostly were cast from the previous Latvian troupe.

National period

Historically, after the proclamation of the independent state, both German and Russian powers fought for the territory of Latvia, bringing in a serious military conflict and testing the military resources of the new state. Besides, in 1919, from January to May, Latvia was ruled by a pro-Soviet government. The Germans left the theatre, therefore the “Flying Dutchman” performed on the stage of the former German Theatre on January 23, 1919 was the first appearance of a Latvian opera troupe in the house, that later, in December of the same year after the end of Independence War, became the Latvian National Opera.

From that time on, the LNO was one of the most important centres of Latvian culture (not only music). Conceptual measures in LNO policy of that time derived from the ideals of the new, independent state. Opera aimed to maintain classical and national opera repertoire, to create new Latvian operas and to stimulate the cooperation between neighbouring countries. The emphasis was put on stimulation of creation of Latvian original operas.

There are two canonic Latvian original operas –the aforementioned “Baniuta” by Alfrēds Kalniņš (1920) and “Fire and night” by Jānis Medīņš (1921). These are the first Latvian original operas with permanent artistic value – musical dramas in the Wagnerian tradition combined with Russian epic national operas emphasising the importance of choirs and scenes of folk celebration, symphonised music and expressive *leitmotifs* that often refer to Latvian folk song melodies.

“Baniuta”

The opera “Baniuta” focuses on drama of the title character Baniuta and her ability to choose between individual happiness and vengeance claimed by the people. Baniuta is the wife of Daumants, leader of a Baltic tribe, who is killed by a young man of another Baltic tribe shortly after his wedding. His

death is mourned and Baniuta swears to take revenge. Ironically, Baniuta meets Vižutis, her husband's killer, on Midsummer night and they declare their love to each other. The next day they discover each other's origin and Baniuta, according to her oath, has to kill Vižutis despite being in love with him.

The opera has two finales: the tragic finale where Baniuta and Vižutis commit double suicide, and the "optimistic" finale ordered by the Soviet Artistic Commission upon preparation of the opera as the representative of Latvian national culture for the Art Decade in Moscow, 1941. In the "optimistic" finale, the people liberate Baniuta from the oath of vengeance, and the couple head into a happy future, favourable to all the community. Ironically, although the composer Alfreds Kalnins disliked the commissioned "optimistic" finale, the final chorus song, which is the arrangement of a Latvian Midsummer folk song, was very popular during Soviet times, when the Midsummer celebration was not officially allowed – nobody could blame anyone for singing a chorus from an opera.

Despite different ideologically modified interpretations of "Baniuta" and "Fire and Night" during the Soviet time, both operas are included in the Latvian Cultural Canon and are considered to be the cornerstones of Latvian national professional music culture in the opera genre. When Latvia regained independence in 1991, the opera house was closed for renovation. It was re-opened in 1995 with a postmodern production of "Fire and Night" staged by Alvis Hermanis, where most of the traditional national representations were portrayed ironically. The modernity of the end of the 20th century brought changes in relationship between opera and national culture.

The Concept "My (Our) White House"

The concept of the "White House" in relation to the Latvian National Opera emerged during the 1920s as a colloquialism used by opera singers, which soon conquered the press and became a widely used metaphor for the opera house in Riga during the First Republic (1918–1940). The concept reached the unofficial status of national symbol after WW2 mainly in Latvian diaspora society and the press in Canada, the USA, UK, Germany, etc., and in the memoirs of emigré Latvian singers, the tenor Mariss Vētra and baritone Ādolfs Kaktiņš. Actually, Mariss Vētra was the one who invented this concept using it in his newspaper articles and even writing a book or memoirs "My White House" (1954, published in Latvia in 1991). Ādolfs

Kaktiņš, in turn, also refers to “White House” in his memoirs “Opera of my Life” (1965, published in Latvia in 1992). The concept of the “White House” is the symbol of belonging, “house” standing for home both in the meaning of native theatre and in the wider meaning of motherland and “white” referring to the actual colour of the building and to the symbolic meanings of good, beautiful, noble. and close to the heart:

To quote Mariss Vētra:

*I loved my White House. It was my White House and I belonged to it as a Latvian peasant belongs to his piece of land and home. However, this sense of belonging was not exclusively mine. Everyone crossing the threshold of the White House became contaminated with that particular feeling that some part of his or her heart stayed therein forever.*³ [emphasis mine – L. M. B.].

Mariss Vētra uses the term “White House” as a synonym of the Latvian National Opera as the building and as the institution:

*We had many set designers at the White House. [...] The inspector of the White House wanted to save some resources [...] Plenty of the productions in the White House can be proud that Pēteris Rožlāpa has contributed his work, taste and knowledge.*⁴

Baritone Ādolfs Kaktiņš, in turn, writes: “Although there were several similar opera houses in Europe, in our hearts our White House was the most beautiful and the best.”⁵ The semantics of the concept include the idea of *locus* (a particular place) and a definite space in the collective cultural memory of the Latvian nation.

Both books of memoirs of the singers were published in Latvia only at the beginning of 1990s after the collapse of the USSR and the restoration of independence of the Republic of Latvia, restoring at the same time the link between the previous and restored independent Latvia among others through the concept of the “White House”. The symbolic status of the term was enhanced by the fact that between 1990 and 1995 the opera house was under reconstruction, which had a serious impact on the artistic activities of the institution – many leading and young soloists worked and studied abroad, some of them retired, some worked in a “project mode”, but others

3 Mariss Vētra, *My White House* (Riga: Teatra Anekdotu Apgads, 1991), 1. (In Latvian).

4 Ibid., 162–163.

5 Ādolfs Kaktiņš, *Opera of My Life* (Stockholm: Daugava, 1965), 126. (In Latvian).

Picture 2: The building of Latvian National Opera and Ballet. Photographer: Daiga Viksna. Publicity picture credited by LNOB.

changed occupation. In 1995 another book – a group portrait about the life of opera singers is published with the title “Without the White House” (by Silvija Līce) – it recalled the memoirs of Mariss Vētra, who wrote his memories about the Latvian National Opera while living in the USA, telling the story of Latvian opera singers left without their stage for five years. Silvija Līce writes: “It was a hard time for everyone who cherished our White House; however, the White House always stayed in our hearts.”⁶ One of the protagonists of this book is the Latvian opera singer Inese Galante, who worked in Germany at the time, who said:

*Western singers feel good travelling from one place to another like gypsies, singing here and there. We are not used to such a situation. I feel homesick; I have never been away for such a long time. Our White House used to be more than a theatre; it was our home, our family.*⁷

6 Silvija Līce, *Without White House* (Riga: Liktenstasti, 1995), 28. (In Latvian)

7 Ibid., 129.

In 2009, Latvian National Opera celebrated its 90th anniversary under the credo “My White House”. The leitmotif for all information and communication material was “personal stories, memories and events about the “White House”. Besides, today the concept of the “White House” is used as a metaphor in communication, press and social media, while also currently approaching the centenary of Latvian National Opera and Ballet.

Opera and National Culture Nowadays

The Heiress of “Vilkači” by Bruno Skulte
 – diaspora discourse of Latvianness and opera in the 21st century

In 1947, while in a refugee camp in Germany, Latvian composer Bruno Skulte composed an opera “The Heiress of “Vilkači”” based on a novel by Ilona Leimane (full piano score, orchestra instrumentation was completed only for the first scene). The opera was fully instrumented many years later by the Latvian choir conductor Andrejs Jansons from New York, USA. The world premiere took place in Riga in 2011, funded by the diaspora Latvian community and conducted by Andrejs Jansons.

“The Heiress of Vilkači” tells about hate and love between two neighbouring families; one of them is Christian and relatively poor, while the other is richer, therefore accused of cultivating pagan rituals or even being werewolves (the name of the farmstead literally means “Werewolves”). Conflict rises when the new heiress of “Vilkači” arrives and the heir of “Dievlodziņi” (the name of the farmstead literally means “God’s windows”) falls in love with her while engaged to another girl. After their intercourse during Midsummer night (a universal symbol of Latvian national culture) a son is born without being acknowledged by his father and the community. At the end, there is a fire provoked by the old *Dievlodziņi* host intending to burn down the “Vilkači” farmstead. However, both houses burn, but the baby is saved and the parents reunite to end up with the superstitions and hatred of both families. The music includes plenty of Latvian folk song melodies in the orchestral score and vocal parts. The production was visually impressive, including authentic national costumes, etc. Yet the production revealed several problems regarding the representations of national culture in opera in the context of the 21st century, i.e. the stylistically outdated interpretation of a folk song performed by an opera singer instead of an aria, the national-romanticist style sentimental interpretation of folk melodies

that used to symbolise Latvia-ness in diaspora society in the mid-20th century. The production led to the conclusion that in the 21st century, Latvian opera does not work as the bearer of national identity despite the representations of national culture included in the score, text and visual signs, showing the crisis in the relationship between national culture and opera. Although regularly commissioned and staged at least once in two years, contemporary Latvian operas do not attract much attention from the audience after the premieres and first season.

The Concept of the “Nation that Sings”

In Latvia, the interconnection between opera and national culture has been transformed along with changes to the socio-historical conditions, but there are some concepts that are permanent in the collective consciousness of Latvians. One of the most widespread self-perceptions of Latvians as a singing nation, caused by the strong choir movement since the end of the 19th century and high musical culture in general. In addition, it comes here to Latvian opera singers and their boundedness to “homeland” if we refer back to Anthony D. Smith. Latvianness in opera today in the consciousness of Latvian people means striving for greatness in performance. There are quite a number of Latvian or Latvian-born opera singers starring on world opera stages: mezzo-soprano Elina Garanca, sopranos Marina Rebecka, Maija Kovalevska, Kristine Opolais, tenor Aleksandrs Antonenko, and Wagnerian bass-baritone Egils Silins to mention just few of them. Curiously, their success on the world’s operatic stages, including the MET, Vienna State Opera, Bavarian State Opera, Opera Bastille in Paris and other works as a source of national pride.

Another aspect is the marketed identity of the city of Riga as the city of origin, the cradle of renowned musicians, as for instance in the case of the “Born in Riga” concert in the framework of the year of Riga as European Capital of Culture in 2014. It comes back to common roots and origins that create new myths. In 2018, the title “Born in Riga” was extended to “Born in Latvia” for the centenary season concerts. The programme involved not only opera singers, but also, for instance, the current conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and *Leipzig Gewandhaus* orchestra chief conductor Andris Nelsons, the artistic director of the *Berlin Komische Oper* Ainars Rubikis, violinists Gidon Kremer, Baiba Skride, Vineta Sareika, accordionist Ksenija Sidorova and others in the anniversary celebration schedules. As for opera, a competition for new Latvian original opera librettos took

place in 2017/2018; 16 new librettos were submitted for evaluation. Probably, these librettos will show new ways how the relationship between opera and national culture could develop today. Meanwhile, Wagner's "Flying Dutchman" is once again on the schedule of the Latvian National Opera as the opening production of the 100th season, coming back to the "roots" or, namely, the first opera produced by a Latvian opera troupe shortly before the proclamation of the independent state in 1918.

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ISBN 978-961-7055-50-4