UR. JERNEJ WEISS

**VLOGA NACIONALNIH
OPERNIH GLEDALIŠČ
V 20. IN 21. STOLETJU**

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

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The Role of National Opera Houses in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Jernej Weiss

Univerza v Ljubljani / Univerza v Mariboru

The focus of research interest in the third monographic publication in the collection *Studia musicologica Labacensia*, entitled *The Role of National Opera Houses in the 20th and 21st Centuries*, is the study of the broader, socially conditioned, institutional and musical frameworks of the activity of national opera houses in this period, with a particular focus on the centenary of the foundation or commencement of activity of the National Theatre Opera in Ljubljana.

Theatrical life in Slovenia, which had run on two separate (nationally or ethnically differentiated) tracks ever since the founding of the Dramatic Society in 1867, was initially equal only on paper. Slovene persistence and changes in government policy gradually began to show results in the theatrical life of Ljubljana. The intention of the Slovenes – effectively announced by the inaugural performance of the Slovene Provincial Theatre in September 1892 – was the complete takeover of the cultural institution. This goal was achieved in 1911, when the German theatrical society built a new, German theatre. Ljubljana thus gained two nationally and organisationally entirely separate theatres, whose activities – conditioned by difficult financial circumstances and, even more so, by political intrigue – were finally interrupted by the First World War.

On 6 April 1918 Ljubljana mayor Ivan Tavčar, writing in the newspaper *Slovenski narod* (The Slovene Nation) under the bombastic headline “Slovenes!”, announced that “a consortium has been established with the

purpose of reviving the Slovene Theatre in Ljubljana and creating a solid financial basis for it.¹ A board of directors was appointed, consisting of representatives of politics and capital. The consortium was led by the wholesale merchant Alojzij Lilleg and a theatrical council, which included some leading representatives of the Slovene cultural community at that time: Anton Funtek, Matej Hubad, Fran Saleški Finžgar, Alojz Kraigher, Oton Župančič and Izidor Cankar. The greatest credit for the renovation of the theatre undoubtedly belongs to Fran Govekar, who brought together the necessary technical staff, singers, orchestra, chorus and conductors. It was thanks to his personal efforts that a Slovene opera and ballet ensemble began its activity with the operetta *Les p'tites Michu* by André Messager on 21 November 1918, followed by a magnificent staging of Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* on 3 December 1918.² The latter performance showed something that had already been demonstrated countless times, namely the connection between the Slovene and Czech nations. At the same time it was an acknowledgement of the fraternal favours that the Slovene theatre had received from the Czechs.

If in the nineteenth century opera continued to serve as the privileged standard-bearer of national symbols, particularly in the case of emerging nations, the Slovenes among them, with the rise of belligerent nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century, it became primarily a political tool of various nationalist and totalitarian upheavals, before national distinctions in opera were ultimately eliminated with the internationalisation that marked the second half of the twentieth century.

For the most part, such modernist transformative perspectives have yet to reach the Slovene reception of opera. As a result, we are still dealing with synthetic discourses that are the result not of analytical stances but, above all, of a mythologisation of the national in opera as an essential distinguishing criterion.

For this reason, too, despite primary historiographical research in the field of opera being largely complete, the results of this research in Slovenia have never really come close to analysing those questions connected to the lack of institutional regulation of operatic art, cultural and repertoire policy, opera house management strategies, personnel and social climate, problems of premises, media representations of opera, and so on, which have

1 Ivan Tavčar, "Slovenke in Slovenci," *Slovenski narod* 51 (1918), 78 (6. 4.): 1.

2 Dušan Moravec, ed., *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč 1867–1967* (Ljubljana: Slovenski gledališki muzej, 1967), 204.

sporadically come to a head at the Ljubljana Opera or the Maribor Opera, the two principal centres of operatic art in Slovenia.

Unfortunately, these issues are all too often dependent on current political interests and have less to do with profound reflection and a long-term strategy as regards personnel and repertoire. The latter often remains merely words on a piece of paper, since it is incapable of surviving more than a single term in office and bringing about the necessary changes within the majority of state cultural institutions. Not even the re-emerging trend for self-management is something upon which the management of principal musical institutions would be based in an advanced cultural milieu, not to mention a disastrous employment policy that equates artists with other professional groups by levelling wages. Both factors lead to uncompetitiveness in a comparable environment, let alone one that is culturally more developed.

A musically impoverished media landscape, uncritically substituted in some of Slovenia's principal media by reporting on popular culture, is becoming our everyday reality. This kind of instant cultural policy is increasingly followed by the general taste of audiences, while not even the artistic concepts of individual cultural institutions are immune to it. Accordingly, the programmes of the majority of national musical institutions are still dominated by the logic of the pleasing and still acceptable classic repertoire. There is probably no need to underline the fact that it is consequently becoming increasingly difficult for artists working in Slovenia to break through with new works. At the same time, and with the exception of festival events, our largely half-empty concert halls and opera houses are calling out to us to make radical changes and, above all, to educate audiences – something that the most successful cultural institutions around Europe realised decades ago.

On the other hand, the extremely rich history of opera in Slovenia clearly shows us that even in considerably less favourable circumstances (in terms of personnel and funding), such as the reconstruction that followed the First World War (with poorer infrastructure, which is all too often an excuse for the absence of more durable concepts) we have been capable – thanks to the vision of a small number of significant individuals – of achieving many enviable artistic superlatives.

Thus the initial question – What is the role of national or state opera houses and other musical institutions in today's culturally increasingly apathetic society? – is undoubtedly an appropriate one. Be that as it may, this

discussion seeks to go beyond the logic of the latest jubilee symposium on opera in Slovenia, and, with the help of contributions from leading national and international opera researchers (the latter as references for current developments in opera around the world), to familiarise itself with the reasons behind some of the currently most relevant issues in opera at home and abroad and, in general, with the intellectual currents and orientations in opera in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

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