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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 Reception of the Ljubljana Opera House Repertoire by Critics in Slovenian Daily Newspapers from the end of the World-War II to the 1960s

Tjaša Ribizel
Univerza v Ljubljani
University of Ljubljana

Following the end of World War II, the music institutions in Ljubljana were in full bloom: the Slovene Composer Society was established, followed by the establishment of Radio Ljubljana and its orchestra, accompanied by the reestablishment of the Slovenian Philharmonic (orchestra), as well as the reinstatement of the SNG Opera Ljubljana in 1945.

Its program within individual seasons was and has been an important segment of its operation. SNG Opera Ljubljana started staging its first productions as early as 1945. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the individual productions of the SNG program as reported by newspaper articles dealing with music criticism in the *Slovenski poročevalec* and *Ljubljanski dnevnik* daily newspapers. These articles do not only report on the reception of particular productions, but also divulge information on the development of the institution in terms of content

Music criticism and SNG Opera Ljubljana

There were as much as 273 newspaper articles pertaining to SNG Opera Ljubljana in the period from 1945 to 1963. In terms of content, these are mostly articles dealing with music criticism, however, there is a number of announcements of the repertoire as well. This paper focuses on music criticism dealing with the repertoire and its features. The number and distribution of the articles is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Counts of newspaper articles per year for the 1945–1963 period in Slovenski poročevalec and Ljubljanski dnevnik.

Year	Nr. of articles	Year	Nr. of articles
1945	7	1951	1
1946	12	1952	2
1947	11	1953	5
1948	5	1954	6
1949	3	1955	7
1950	5	1956	9
1951	3	1957	5
1952	7	1958	2
1953	6	1959	5
1954	8	1960	6
1955	22	1961	6
1956	18	1962	8
1957	18	1963	13
1958	15		
1959	10		
1960	15		
1961	8		
1962	11		
1963	14		

In this period, the repertoire had been subject to change in terms of featured composers, as well as remained unchanged for several seasons. The Slovenian music criticism in daily newspapers did point out and elaborate on these changes (as well as standstills) in the repertoire. In regard to the activity and variety of the SNG repertoire (and the critique thereof), we can divide the post–World-War II repertoire of SNG Opera Ljubljana into the following four time periods: 1945–1948, 1949–1953, 1954–1958, and 1959–1963. This classification is used throughout the following sections of the paper.

The first period (1945–1948)

The onset of works and productions of SNG in 1945 was covered by the Slovenian newspapers, which were very benevolent from the start and pointed out what the newly-established cultural institution should be careful about:

> *Our standards should not be based on Ljubljana, but rather on global examples, lest we should stay on the same level.* [...] *It is only right and in agreement with the nature of development that we aim ever higher, identify flaws, and continually eradicate them.*[1]

SNG Opera Ljubljana was reopened after the war with a remarkably vast repertoire as it included performances of as many as 18 operas in its first seasons, of the following composers: Alexander Borodin, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, Jakov Gotovac, Antonín Dvořák, Marjan Kozina, Jacques Offenbach, Giacomo Puccini, Gioachino Rossini, Danilo Švara, Bedřich Smetana, and Giuseppe Verdi. Thus, in addition to foreign composers, SNG Opera Ljubljana included two Slovenian composers, whose works were met with acclaim by critics:

> *Last year's season was positive in many respects. In accordance with the needs of the time, it aimed to produce as many productions as possible, and it succeeded in producing a number of good performances.* [...] *and also focused on Slovenia's own operatic production,*[2] *[with the only flaw being the lack of modern operatic productions] in terms of substance and ideas as well as musical style.*[3]

The main characteristic of the first period was that the repertoire, in spite of its vastness, did not change significantly throughout the initial seasons of SNG Opera Ljubljana, meaning that the main substantive framework remained more or less the same.

The second period (1948–1953)

The SNG repertoire in the second period following its reopening unfortunately failed to satisfy the critics and did not entail modern operas in its repertoire as suggested. However, 1948 saw an extension of the program: a number of new works by the following composers were included in the re-

1 Dragotin Cvetko, "Premiera 'Sneguročke'," *Slovenski poročevalec*, nr. 106, 3. 11. 1945, 6.

2 Idem, "Ob začetni premieri letošnje ljubljanske operne sezone," *Slovenski poročevalec*, nr. 267, 4. 11. 1946, 2.

3 Ibid.

pertoire: Ludwig van Beethoven, Georges Bizet, Benjamin Britten, Marc-Antoine Charpentiere, Eugene D'Albert, Anton Foerster, Umberto Giordano, Mikhail Glinka, Leoš Janáček, Jules Massenet, Wolfgang A. Mozart, Mirko Polič, Heinrich Sutermeister, and Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari. The works of these composers replaced those from the initial period. According to the SNG director of the time, Mirko Polič, they aimed to "build a general repertoire" [4] and include works that were, in his opinion, "crucial for a truthful development of our work." [5]

This expansion of the repertoire was also welcomed by critics, who deemed it to be a tangible achievement:

> *By installing The Fair at Sorochinski, this year's exceedingly relevant and vast repertoire was further improved. Beethoven's classical opera Fidelio; the highlights of romantic operatic creativity, Carmen, the operatic type, and Onegin, the lyrical type; the Italian and French sentimental operas from the end of the previous century as well as the patriotist comical plays The Bartered Bride and our own Ero the Joker were all joined by a new type of psychologically imbued folk opera that uses pristine temperaments, down-to-earth expressions, and vigorous music as a much-needed sieve against mush, pathos, and stylization.* [6]

According to Pavel Šivic, the 1949/50 season saw no more "ailing, unfoundedness, unsophistication." [7] The repertoire was not only well-received by critics, but also by the audience:

> *The audience was very much in favor of Massenet's work this time around as well. This, however, does not hold for Ero the Joker.* […] *Today,* […] *Gotovac's simple opera performs pioneering cultural work, in particular due to its priceless folklore gems.* […] *Hence the enthusiasm.* […] *The case of Le donne curiose is very different though. It features the meeting of two congenial artists of different epochs, the two-hundred-year-old Goldoni and the still living Wolf-Ferrari.* […] *The best common trait of all three premieres is*

4 "Razgovor z direktorjem ljubljanske opere Mirkom Poličem," *Slovenski poročevalec*, nr. 229, 28. 9. 1947, 7.

5 Ibid.

6 Pavel Šivic, "Musorgski: 'Soročinski sejem'," *Slovenski poročevalec*, nr. 26, 1. 2. 1949, 3.

7 Idem, "Po zaključku operne sezone," *Slovenski poročevalec*, nr. 174, 24. 7. 1950, 2.

the fact that they were very meticulously prepared and very well performed."[8]

The 1949/50 season was followed by reruns. SNG Opera Ljubljana was still focused on producing the works of world-renowned composers and known Slovenian composers. Subsequently, the names of Heinrich Sutermeister, Sergei Sergejewitsch Prokofjew, and Christoph Willibald Gluck appeared as new entries of the SNG repertoire. However, this practice of repeating performances from one season to another was contributed to by several factors, as stated by the Opera director, Samo Hubad, in the 1951/52 season:

> *In recent years,* [...] *we have been leaning towards* [...] *more chamber-like operatic performances, not towards "grand" operas.* [...] *We have been faced with difficulties when acquiring global operatic novelties due to orchestral material as well as further unsettled international relations regarding copyright. As for domestic operas, unfortunately, no new works are on the horizon, which means that we will have to settle for reruns.* [...] *However, we have been able to recruit a number of young singers.*[9]

In spite of the repetition, the 1951/52 was seen as "diverse, especially when taking into account a number of well-received guest performances abroad" by critics.[10]

The third period (1954–1958)

Following the 1952/53 season, a change in the repertoire came about. It was expanded so as to deliver new names to the stage, or to deliver the authors whose works had not been produced for some time: Richard Strauss, Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky, and Bohuslav Martinů in the 1955/56 season as well Charles Gounod, Antonín Dvořák and Leoš Janáček. This change in the 1952/53 season marks the onset of the third phase of the post-war period. The first season featuring an extended repertoire was well-received by critics as well as the audience.

8 Ibid.

9 Janko Traven, "Opera v novi sezon," *Slovenski poročevalec*, nr. 224, 23. 9. 1951, 6.

10 Pavel Šivic, "Zanimivosti iz letošnjega repertoarja ljubljanske Opere," *Slovenski poročevalec*, nr. 155, 2. 7. 1952, 2.

> *This year's program of the Opera* […], *compared to previous seasons, was extremely fruitful and diverse.* […] *[They] raised the number of premieres and their enactments from the maximum of six to ten from the previous season to the current one, and thus remarkably freshened its repertoire. This fact and this repertoire policy* […] *had a great impact on the theatre attendance.*[11]

In addition to the authors from abroad, this period brought two new Slovenian names into the operatic repertoire: Bravnič in the 1956/57 season and Kogoj in the 1958/59 season. In addition to the overwhelmingly positive reviews, the Opera also faced some negative feedback in the third period. One such, exceedingly specific example dates to the 1958/59 season and pertains to the production of Strauss's *Ariadne*.

> *I do believe that the repertoire policy of our Opera may be disputed as far as choosing to produce Strauss's Ariadne is concerned. I do not believe that it was necessary to follow up the staging of Der Rosenkavalier with another of Strauss's operas after such a short time, all the more because he is a typically Austrian, Viennese composer at heart, foreign to us Slovenes, and more or less unnecessary to us from the cultural and political standpoint.* […] *In spite of the sweetness and succulence of Strauss's music and the overwhelming level of vocal creations, I was actually exceedingly bored by Ariadne and I do not believe that others will have a better time.*[12]

The fourth period (1959–1963)

For the 1959/60 season, the SNG management introduced a new policy regarding the repertoire. It introduced modern works that had not been previously staged in Ljubljana, and this policy was continued throughout the 1960/61 season. Following the 1959/60 season, the operatic repertoire surpassed the third period in terms of the number of productions, as the 1959/60 season saw 21 productions, as well as in terms of the sheer number of composers featured, which was further increased in comparison with the previous seasons. The new additions were thus the following: Werner Egk, Henry Purcell, Gian Carlo Menotti, Richard Wagner, Vincenzo Bellini, Maurice Ravel, Amilcare Ponchielli, Francis Poulenc, Nikolai Rimsky-

11 c, "Med dvema sezonama ljubljanske opere," *Ljubljanski dnevnik*, nr. 3, 8. 8. 1953, 2.

12 Uroš Prevoršek, "Richard Strauss v ljubljanski Operi," *Slovenski poročevalec*, nr. 15, 19. 1. 1958, 6.

-Korsakov, Ján Cikker, Carl Orff, and Benjamin Britten. In line with the new policy, the repertoire became more distinct and diversified, but above all, the Opera management showed the inclination to the inclusion of modern opera in the repertoire.

Critics were generally very positive about the entire 1959/60 season, however, the lack of the so called classical operatic literature in the repertoire was listed as a possible shortcoming:

> *There can be no doubt: the selection of new operas is bold and frivolous, and the productions were very well done, performance wise. The question is, however, how will this repertoire satisfy the theatre regulars* [...] *Namely, the final look at this year's opera premiers shows that the selection might have been a bit too one-sided, as if the Opera management, while vigorously searching for and discovering new and unknown modern works, completely forgot about Mozart and so many other great names of classical operatic literature.*[13]

The responses to the later seasons of the fourth period were better received. In the 1961/62 season, the staging of Verdi's *Don Carlos* was met with special acclaim, as it "meant a new grand success of our opera theatre",[14] and the staging of *Fidelio* in the 1962/63 season "represents a high affirmation of our opera singers in musical terms. In this respect, this must be one of the most beautiful and harmonious shows of our Opera."[15]

The fourth period was a breaking point of sorts with the first three as it featured great strides forward in the production of the repertoire and the introduction of many more modern operatic works as the previous post-war periods.

Conclusion

Newspaper articles, more specifically music critiques pertaining solely to the operatic repertoire, were scarce in the two post-war decades in Slovenia. However, those that were published show that the Opera did exhibit progress in each of the four periods, repertoire-wise. This progress is discernible in the chronological distribution of the featured composers, as the repertoire at first consisted of productions derived from the vast heirloom of

13 Uroš Prevoršek, "Purcell in Menotti," *Delo*, nr. 169, 21. 6. 1960, 6.

14 Uroš Prevoršek, "Verdi: Don Carlos," *Delo*, nr. 37, 7. 2. 1962, 6.

15 Uroš Prevoršek, "Ludwig van Beethoven: Fidelio," *Delo*, nr. 362, 15. 12. 1963, 5.

great opera works, which allowed no room for newer works. Until the final, fourth period, which was deemed very successful by Slovenian critics, the repertoire was becoming ever more varied, and the presence of younger composers gradually became a regular feature. This growth and change could also be linked to the Opera performers and its management. The former, with which we refer to the Opera orchestra, was met with unfortunate difficulties in its roster. Following the post-war reestablishment of the orchestra of the Slovenian Philharmonics, the orchestra had difficulties in 1948 with engaging new performers.[1] In 1956, this issue was still unresolved; one of the minutes of a meeting of the SNG management board clearly states that the aims of the Opera was to have as many members of the ensemble as before the war.[2] The difficulties did not cease, but the studied material does not reveal when these were finally resolved. The difficulties in terms of the orchestra roster were not taken into account if we consider the repertoire, which was developing rapidly and thus called for varying orchestra sizes.

The second factor for the change and development pertains to the Opera directors. Immediately following the war, Mirko Polič (1945–1948) became Director of the Opera, followed by Samo Hubad (1948–1951), Valens Vodušek (1951–1955), Smiljan Samec (1955–1956, Danilo Švara (1956–1958), and Demetrij Žebre (1958–1968). Some of the directors, such as Polič and Hubad, also provided commentaries of the repertoire and explained the guidelines to which they adhered. Thus, Polič said in 1948 that the Opera wished to lay general foundations, and this was also followed by his successor, Hubad. Each of the directors did, if we consider the repertoire, contribute to its development, in particular Žebre, who was Opera Director during the final, fourth phase of the post-war period. Although there was a number of directors, it is worth mentioning that the repertoire itself and its critiques are the pieces of the puzzle that provide the clearest picture of the repertoire demarcation into four distinct periods.

In the first two decades following World War II, the repertoire of the Opera included works by composers from very different periods and nationalities. The Opera performed its function well and strived for development and progress, and this did not go unnoticed (as the favorable newspaper reviews demonstrate). The Opera managed to do well in spite of the many factors that made its work harder, for instance lack of funding, as Hubad pointed out.

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