

To What Extent Can Opera Be Politicized Totalitarian Countries in Comparison

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The main mission of my research *Classical Opera in the Three Countries with the Totalitarian Systems: USSR under Stalin, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* was to analyze the processes that involved the major opera houses in the USSR, Germany, and Italy in the complicated period of time of totalitarian rule and to study how these processes affected musical culture and opera art itself. The main question was: to what extent opera could be politicized and influenced. The choice of the opera theaters under scrutiny was made due to their artistic importance and excellence and also to their capital location. Although, La Scala is not situated in Rome but in Milan, it remained the operatic capital in the period of Fascism. In Soviet case the main attention is concentrated at Bolshoi Theater, as the “show case” of the regime. In the case of Germany under examination is Berlin Staatsoper.

The most important is the impact of the three regimes on the opera theater. Strange it might seem, but opera managed not to lose its quality during the time of strictest oppressions. The classical opera did not lose its positions after the end of Nazi and fascist regimes, when the new trends in the operatic development attracted global attention. One and the most important of such after-war trends was the appliance of the methods of dramatic directors to the opera productions.¹ By means of this the new attitude towards opera performance was introduced all over the world. Opera started to be considered not only as the singing, but also as theater. The involvement of directors started in the first decade of the XX century in Russia and in Germany was respite during the totalitarianism. After it had gone, it revived. The re-introduction of

drama directors to the opera stage developed in the post-totalitarian period at a very fertile soil of high professional level of the chief opera stages, which remained after totalitarianism had gone. The only defeat that classical opera had undergone was the loss of Wagner obsession. From the god of operatic stages Wagner in the 1950s descended to the elitist composer with quite a narrow circle of admirers. But whether Wagner was shaded by the dark inheritance of Nazi tastes, or simply the time of his stylistic popularity had passed and the genuine skills of singing Wagner had gone remains a problem to be discussed.

At the same time in contrast to the operatic stage, the chief dramatic theaters survived the crisis in the late totalitarian period, and the development of the new tendencies in drama in the post-war times was merely connected with the opening of new theaters (such as “Piccolo Teatro” in Milan, or “Sovremennik”, “Theater on Taganka” in Russia) than with the old dramatic stages that were dishonored and deprecated. These facts prove that the opera as an art managed to maintain itself, while obviously the dramatic theater survived the mess conditions at the end of totalitarian period.²

There were two processes that involved opera during totalitarianism but continue influence it till now. These processes are: termination of operatic composition and creation of classical repertoire. Being a live genre before the advent of totalitarianism opera became a sort of “museum” spectacle after it had gone. The very notion of classical repertoire appeared in opera after the researched epoch. Before, it simply did not exist. Newly composed operas were performed in the opera houses together with the older ones, and the primary interest of the audience was attracted to the composition not to the performance.

It was noticed by most of the researches that during the period under scrutiny opera worldwide experienced the period of termination of the process

¹ Before the Second World War there were cases when the renowned directors (for example Stanislavsky, Reinhardt) were attracted by opera, but this could be considered more like the experiment, then like a general practice.

² I would like to stress that I do not mean the organization of the opera theaters (that actually came through the crisis), but the general state of classical opera as a form of art.

of classical composition writing. The last composers of *verismo* style that could be considered and considered themselves as the last classics³, lived in Italy during the Fascist regime, but the whole lifestyle of opera theaters in the three countries radically changed in the 1920s. While before each season the newly composed operas had to be introduced, now, despite of frequent performance of new compositions, the major role started to play the interpretation. Harvey Sachs, the author of the *Music in Fascist Italy* had written:

“The audiences of the day, for whom opera was high quality popular entertainment, wanted to hear the most recent works by the most successful composers. Although a few thirty- to fifty-year-old classics were generally performed each season, the repertoire was constantly renewed. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the classics had begun to predominate. The linguistic innovations of foreign masters such as Debussy, Richard Strauss, later Schoenberg and his school, left most of the Italian theater-going public far behind – and the theater, during the previous hundred years, had been understood as a place where even the most serious concepts were purveyed to as heterogeneous a public as possible. If an Italian impresario in 1852 – seventy years before the march on Rome – had decided to produce only operas written within the previous fifteen or sixteen years, he would be able to choose between several Donizetti’s works..., Verdi operas..., Meyerbeer’s, and many now-forgotten works, highly popular at the time, by Mercadante, Petrella, Halevy, Auber, the young Gounod and a legion of others. In 1922, an impresario who looked back over the previous decade and a half, searching for operas that had had enormous popular success in Italy, could not find even one... The Italian and foreign operas that today’s music historians consider to have been the most important creations of those years – Busoni’s “Turandot”, “Arlecchino” and “Doktor Faust”; Strauss’s “Der Rosenkavalier”, “Ariadne auf Naxos” and “Die Frau ohne Schatten”; Stravinsky’s “The Nightingale” and “Mavra”; Berg’s “Wozzeck”; and Schoenberg “Die gluekliche Hand” – were then of no interest to the vast majority of Italian audiences. The passion for new works had metamorphosed into a passion for new interpretations of nineteenth-century works, and so it had remained.”⁴

Even if the development of chief opera houses in the three countries during totalitarianism were dissimilar, the general aim of the regimes was the same. It

³ By this I assume the traditional for opera linguistics with the dominance of the vocal line over the orchestral accompaniment and the melodious vocal part.

was the creation of a model operatic repertoire and attempts to create classical, but contemporary operatic masterpiece. Achievements of these aims did not happen at once, but rather evolved into a lengthy process, which had its steps and drawbacks (to be studied in this thesis). It could be explained by the desire of each regime to create a model art. In totalitarian architecture this model art is well researched and more visible than in opera. In opera this modeling first manifested itself in governmental desire to mount the new, but classical opera, which never was composed. The prohibition of certain operatic pieces that did not fit into the form of appropriate style (most obvious – case of Shostakovich), and the promotion of other that were much less talented, led to the termination of operatic composition as such (with the exclusion of Italy, where the regime in general was much softer). But even in Italy, with very little exclusion, composers in the after-war period stopped being interested in writing operas. The amount and the quality of contemporary compositions could not be compared with those written in the first two decades of the XX century, before the advent of totalitarianism.

⁴ Harvey Sachs, *Music in Fascist Italy*, London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1987, p. 56