

Adam Mestyan

The Cairo Opera House: A case study of political aesthetics in 1869

Outline

Ruth Bereson distinguished three levels or meanings of the concept of opera. The first is “an opera – the performed composite musical work”, the second is “the opera – the social connotations of the venue” and, third, “opera – [...] it is the extended meaning encompassing the first two elements of ‘performance’ and ‘experience’ as well as including its political meaning, where ‘opera’ becomes an arena of civic performance.”¹ This three-fold division manifests itself in the cultural and actual *locus* of the Opera House. In addition, “political aesthetics” often used in studies of autocratic regimes (Nazis, Soviet) designing the public representation of the political. Another concept, cultural policy is connected to the state’s initiatives of cultural institutions.

In my presentation, the case study of the Cairo Opera House will serve to show how political aesthetics and opera serve as means of Westernisation in a colonial context in the 19th century. In a sense, it is also a question if the foundation event serves as a part of the history of Europe or as the part of the history of Egypt. It also illuminates the way the Western concepts of art and public space are transferred into another tradition. This transfer of ideas, however, can be only understood in the wider context of the opening ceremonies of the Suez Canal in 1869. The foundation of the Cairo Opera House preceded the ceremonies with a few weeks but it can be considered as a part of those – especially, because its first visitor was Empress Eugenie who came as the prime guest of the *fêtes*.

First, I will give a small historical introduction, second, I will give the particular details of the foundation, and third I will interpret it as a means of the political representation of the Egyptian state which soon financed a new opera, *Aïda*. Finally, I will suggest that this foundation was not only a transfer of a new idea of art or public space but a manifestation of a new idea of the state – the nation-state.

¹ Bereson, Ruth. *The Operatic State – Cultural Policy and the Opera House*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. 14.

I.

After the French military expedition in 1798, the Ottomans re-established their power in Egypt, but soon a very powerful military commander emerged as the new governor of the country in 1805. After more than forty-years rule, this ruler, Muḥammad ‘Alī completely changed the power-structure of Egypt and the intellectual agenda as well. He re-organized the army, established new schools and the first press in Arabic lands, and sent troops of young Egyptians (Arabs, Turks, Greeks alike) to study in European countries. He had imperial dreams – even menaced the Ottoman Sultan and occupied the Sudan. Only a common intervention of the European powers could stop him.²

After his death in 1849, his successors were all from his family and his household. Under Ibrāhīm (1849), ‘Abbās (1849-1854) and Sa‘īd (1854-1863) the transformation of the country into a “modern”, Westernised state slowed down yet still continued. Muḥammad ‘Alī’s grandson, Ismā‘īl (1864-1879) accelerated the processes and re-vitalised the reforms of his grandfather. However, his rule is regarded ambiguously – some hold that Ismā‘īl was a great moderniser, others, that he caused the bankruptcy of the Egyptian state and thus implicitly contributed to the British occupation of the country in 1882 – in one word, “the dynamic road to disaster”.³

Ismā‘īl was raised in one of the most representationalist country of Europe: in Habsburg Austria between 1844-46, then in Paris for years. Fluent in French, knowing painting and sculpture he might have been a future artist when he was summoned to Egypt to study the arts of governance.⁴ When he visited Paris again in 1867 he observed the progress and difference the city made since the 1840s. He noted closely the new Paris of boulevards, passages and exhibitions and with his minister, ‘Alī Mubārak thought of a similar plan of Cairo, to build a modern city á la Hausmann, in a sense, a capital of a modern Egyptian Empire. However, Ismā‘īl was a ruler in a country which was not only historically or imaginatively an empire. Muḥammad ‘Alī’s successors were also keen on for extending the country, yet, Ismā‘īl

² Fahmy, Khaled. *All the Pasha’s men: Mehmed Ali, his army and the making of modern Egypt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

³ Abu-Lughod, Janet. “Tale of Two Cities: The Origins of Modern Cairo.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 7, no. 4 (1965): 429-457.

⁴ Al-Ayyūbī, Ilyās. *Tā’rikh Miṣr fī ‘ahd al-khadīv Ismā‘īl bāshā min sanat 1863 ilā sanat 1879*. Vol. I. Al-Qāhira: Maktaba Madbūlī, 1990. 9.

was one of the most ambitious. He wanted to occupy the whole East Coast of Africa in the 1870's.⁵ After returning from Paris in 1867, he had two main projects going on: the transformation of Cairo and the end of the Suez Canal works.

II. The foundation event

The foundation of the Cairo Opera House can be regarded as a part of both processes: the building became a symbol of modern Cairo (or a dividing marker between the ancient and modern city) and it served as a perfect place for entertainment of the visitors of the inauguration ceremonies of the canal. Already in the eighteen-forties, new style-palaces and canal-works were started in the city but after Ismā'īl's visit to Paris in 1867, the changes were not only accelerated but even new districts (and a new city - Ismā'īliyya) was built. One of the new places was the Ezbekiyah quarter on the border of which the Opera House was built. Already in January 1868, a *Théâtre de Comédie* was inaugurated there while the idea of a national Opera House came later.⁶

However, it is clear that although it was built in the new quarter of the ruler among with other buildings of European entertainment, the new Opera was ordered also with the purpose for creating an environment for the visitors of the Suez Canal ceremonies. These ceremonies were scheduled to the 17th of November 1869. Khedive Ismā'īl during the summer made tour in Europe when he invited all the rulers, princes, kings and imperators of the time for the celebrations.⁷ The biggest star in the show was Empress Eugenie, the wife of Napoleon III – and secondly, Franz-Joseph, the Austro-Hungarian monarch. The real creator of the Canal, Ferdinand de Lesseps was also there – making the blessing ceremony a French-dominated event.

However, the construction of the Opera House must have been ordered around June 1869. It is likely so, because usually five or six months are given as the time of the work. An Italian architect, Pietro Avoscani was commissioned with the construction. Avoscani stayed in Egypt since the rule of Muḥammad 'Alī, and he served as a kind of ceremonial artist – decorating palaces, commanding operas for the personal

⁵ Stanton, E. A. "Secret Letters from the Khedive Ismail in Connection with an Occupation of the East Coast of Africa." *Journal of the Royal African Society* 34, no. 136 (1935): 269-282.

⁶ Abu-Lughod, 444.

⁷ Al-Ayyūbī, 408-410.

entertainment of the rulers.⁸ The Opera House was finished for the 1st of November: its first visitor was Empress Eugenie and the first work shown was Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Later, in 1870, Verdi accepted the invitation and plot of the Khedive to write an opera for the Opera House and this was *Aida*, staged for the world-premiere in 24th of December, 1871.⁹

III. Political aesthetics – “the imperial set”

The public representation of power was always connected to the Opera House (since its inception) in Europe in the third sense of Bereson's division. Therefore, the being of an Opera House in Cairo or in Istanbul (or in Hanoi) also involves concepts of the political. As the Cairo Opera House was in use by the Europeans and (in smaller numbers at the beginning) the Egyptians continuously until Ismā'īl's financial problems (until 1877),¹⁰ it is justified to assume that it was not only a Potemkin-*set* for the Suez Canal celebrations. It was a set for the whole idea of the modern nation state – at least, as Khedive Ismā'īl and his advisors understood it. It was the part of a concept of political aesthetics which I call ‘the imperial set’.

The European form of entertainment was understood by the Khedive perfectly as not only a place for artistic pleasures but as a place of *education* and as a place of *representation*. This representation was composed for various purposes: an image was created for the European powers and this served also for the Egyptians. A rather interesting issue is that this image at the same time also “helped” to create the Egyptian national identity as well. However, the indigenous appropriation of the new ideas went through a digestion which somehow re-interpreted the ideas and concepts and tried to make them familiar. Otherness thus became the means of the creation of a new identity and the Opera House became the *locus* of this process: the symbol and cross-road of the cultural and political identity building.

⁸ Tagher, Jacques. “Pietro Avosciani, artiste-décorateur et home d'affaires.” *Cahiers d'histoire égyptienne* no. 4. (1949): 306-314.

⁹ Busch, Hans (ed.). *Verdi's Aida*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978.

¹⁰ ‘Abdūn, Šāliḥ. *Khamsūn ‘āmān min al-mūsīqā wa-l-ūbirā*. Al-Qāhira: Dār al-Shurūq, 2000.