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Ideology of the Opera Diva in the Case of the Opera of the National Theatre in Belgrade

Abstract: The theme of this work refers to the study of opera's diva system or the way in which an opera diva can affect (or not) the development of repertory theater. The idea is that through a variety of approaches – musicology, history, sociology – one finds those aspects that are caused to develop the concept of an opera diva. The thesis from my starting point is that the West-European practice of the first half of the 19th century was recognized in the work of the Opera of the National Theatre in Belgrade after its Golden period (1954–1969) when the system of the opera's stars formed in Serbia. The goal of this work is to present a part of the repertoire policies of the National Theatre related to the possible impact of opera divas in the formation of the repertoire and vice versa.

Keywords: ideology, opera diva, repertory theater, the audience, Opera of the National Theatre in Belgrade

In literature one can often find a single portrayal of opera singers, which may create a false image. Along with the potential for glory comes an intensive monitoring of opera singers' physical appearance, their morals, love affairs and career choices. Their conspicuous ambition was attacked, especially in the 20th century, and their reasonable appeals were dismissed as a fad of demanding divas. In many cases, the images that the divas' fans or admirers construe, along with the media and other marketing agencies, are more influential than reality, with the preconceived diva character traits that determine the way in which the diva is presented. In this article I will not be looking at those publications relating to the biographies of opera divas from the perspective of opera lovers.

The paper focuses on the research system of the opera diva or the way an opera diva affects (or not) the development of repertory theatre. The idea is that through a

variety of approaches – musicology, history, sociology – one finds those aspects that caused the development of the concept of an opera diva. By the ideology in this paper I refer to our understanding of the opera diva, which will be illustrated through a brief historical development from castratos (angelic voice), prima donnas (women), to opera divas ('stars'). The starting point for this part of the paper is the book *Ideology of the Opera* by Philip-Joseph Salazar in which the author describes the development of the operatic voice through the ideology and values of the West,¹ and *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera* by Michael Poizat in which the focus is on the expectations and wishes of the opera audience.² This discourse is most representative in the 19th century; in the first half of the century we can see the dominance of opera voice, i.e. repertoire policy determined by the choice of singers; at the end of the century the situation is reversed, singers must adapt their voices to the diversity of roles and to the variety of musical styles in the repertoire. The thesis that I start with is that the practice of the first half of the 19th century, is recognized in the work of the National Theatre after its golden period when the system of opera stars in Belgrade was formed.

The remainder of this paper focuses on the development of the ideology of opera divas, as a perfect voice, and its relationship to the listener.

Ideology of the opera diva

The concept of the opera diva was developed in the 19th century and is still current. In France, the word diva, "known (female) voice", first appeared in the text of Albertus Theophile Gauthier in 1832, as a loan from the Italian tradition in which, under that name and meaning, it appears in the beginning of the 19th century.³

The term diva, in addition to referring to a female vocal artist, recognizes another connotation that Poizat called "the law of insanity", hysteria.⁴ The term diva always has a pejorative idea of capricious behavior, bizarre demands, in short, abuse of position of absolute domination. This idea can be found in the concept of 'stars' from the world of film.

In the relevant musical dictionaries, the term 'diva' is problematic. The only article concerning it in the *Oxford Music Online* does not distinguish between a prima donna and diva, as a novelty for the diva it simply notes that it is the Italian term for 'goddess' and suggests the reader refer to the entry 'prima donna'. In *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* there is a difference between prima donna and diva, the latter referring to "the famous singer of popular music" or "for a woman who is considered

¹ Filip-Žozef Salazar, *Ideologije u operi [Ideologies in Opera]*, Beograd, Nolit, 1984;

² Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 1992.

³ Michel Poizat, op. cit., 9.

⁴ Ibid, 180.

to be temperamental and haughty”⁵. *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* defines a prima donna as “the first lady, the chief woman singer in an opera cast, but term has been generalized to mean a leading woman singer”.⁶ *The Grove Dictionary of Music* expands the meaning: “Today the term is not only linked to the lead role but is also related to any of the lead female singers. Also, it entered the dictionary as a term for anyone (does not have to be a singer) who behaves in an outrageously egotistical way”⁷. These definitions indicate that the categorization is made in relation to how we determine a prima donna.

To understand the concept of the opera diva we shall examine the position of the voice by comparing castrato, prima donna, and diva, then the social position of singers and their relationship with the audience.

The development of the operatic voice boasts a long history dating back to the emergence of opera, where through the ideology of arias of the 17th century the singer is represented.⁸ During this period, there was no difference between the vocal registers, the musical nature of the voice i.e. register, but according to the technique and ornaments. In other words, Philippe-Joseph Salazar noted that the practice of the theoreticians of that time was based on the definition of the voice as an instrument in the service of art.⁹ In this regard, there is the beautiful voice discourse where the problem was, according to Salazar, a misconception that singing is a gift of nature and techniques.¹⁰ The idea of naturalness was the ideological reference to justify singing that does not require meaning (aria), and whose power were the ornaments that provoke audience reactions. In creating the ‘natural’, a theory of nobleness of opera gradually developed i.e. opera was accepted into the ranks of nobility. The monopoly of monarchical power over opera arias was hidden and disguised by passing an act that elevated opera and performances of musical works to the heights of the academies in Italy, allowing all lords, ladies and others to sing in the opera without violating the dignity of their noble titles or their privileges, positions, rights and their inviolability.¹¹ Here we see a thesis of the nobility of opera – nobles sing without losing dignity; also, the opera is under the direction of the king, because, as Salazar points out, “the king decides on the choice of works and artists, it is his exclusive right to choose who performs in the first month, he forms a group of musicians and singers from the Chamber or Cabinet (Italian music). Performances are given in one of the royal castles, and then to the audience at the Royal Academy in Paris”.¹² Thus, the singer is just one of his minions.

⁵ Michael Kennedy, *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, second edition, Oxford University Press, 1994, 693.

⁶ *Ibid*, 693.

⁷ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musician*, online edition, 2006.

⁸ “Ideology of arias bares a specific refusal to get interested in the meaning of the text. It becomes a place for the opera stage presentation techniques.” Filip-Žozef Salazar, op. cit., 38.

⁹ *Ibid*, 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 50.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 62.

¹² *Ibid*, 63.

In the 18th century, changes occur in the social position of singers, who becomes the object of worship. The music is adapted to their voices, talents and requirements. The asexual singer is replaced by the semi-nude and adorned singer as one of the consequences of the new ideology of the opera genre linked to the body. The costume and gestures raise the question of expression i.e. in addition to a singer's voice, their appearance becomes equally important. Highlighting the body coincides with the difference of the sexes, male-female, but is still not connected to the dichotomy of male voices and female voices in the 18th century. In this period there is a dichotomy – castrato-woman and castrato-prima donna – as a problem of the musical interpretation of the role supported by the discussions about the differences between French and Italian singing.¹³ Italy cultivated the cult the castratos as an “erotic, sensual interpreter on nature's side”, while in France the prima donna “as an interpreter of the natural sex was on the side of artificial music”.¹⁴ Castratos and prima donnas were the ideal of singing in the 18th century and their vocal abilities evoked different feelings in the audience. While castratos should arouse the sympathy of the audience, prima donnas were related to feelings and the way they could ‘touch’ with their voices.¹⁵

These vocal practices conform to 19th century drama, vocal and sexual systems, and prevents any deviation: “the order of roles according to the volume of the voice, the system of division according to male/female voice and a typology of possible situations”¹⁶. The basic criterion for distinguishing is sex: female or male voices, and according to the range of their voices, dramatic roles were established. Such a closed system did not leave room for deviation. In this way the question of castrato or a prima donna was resolved, but new questions were posed: what is the perfect voice and how does one interpreter exceed another interpreter?

The answer to these questions is the shifting of the concept of genius, which belonged to the composers of the 18th century, to the role of the performer i.e. the operatic voice needed to be genius.¹⁷ The genius is linked to the diva who became the centre of an imaginary opera world: “It is a synthesis of two separate bodies of the 18th century, high castrato voice and deep voice dramatic soprano, incorporating both sexes”.¹⁸ Its task was to present the beautiful and true, the genius was reflected

¹³ The beginning of the conflict was the definition of Ramo harmony – *Treatise on Harmony [Traité de l'harmonie, 1726]* as well as the basics of music emanating from melody, and the conclusion that harmony is based on a mathematical calculation. In contrast, Rousseau is considered that the melody is the primary in music – *Musical vocabulary (Dictionnaire de musique, 1755–1761)*. See: Vanja Spasić, “Castor and Pollux, Jean-Philippe Rameau in light of the differences of two operas (1737, 1754)”, in: Vesna Krčmar (ed.), *Musicological Perspectives*, book 2, Belgrade, Faculty of Music, 2012, 224–244.

¹⁴ Filip-Žozef Salazar, op. cit., 120–121.

¹⁵ The theme of an unfortunate castrato was a metaphor that illuminates the audience's association with castration. Ibid, 126–127.

¹⁶ Ibid, 144.

¹⁷ Ibid, 194.

¹⁸ Ibid, 197.

in the “knowledge that crosses boundaries between the registers”.¹⁹ The concept of a completely female voice was first realized by Polina Veljardo, and then confirmed by Maria Callas, whose vocal range covered three registers.²⁰

The relationship to the listener becomes an important issue of the genius of the diva, because the one who expresses, provokes something previously unknown in the other. French theorist Michel Poaza argues that the diva as a tragic heroine in opera should instigate satisfaction in the listener-viewer via the voice, or as Mozart said, “a voice that penetrates the soul”²¹. Creating the opera role strengthened women as performers; this function of the diva as an improviser and auditor led to the second use of ‘voice’ that is participation, control, power and creation.²² In other words, the diva has a say in the production of the opera, in the interpretation of an aria, and in the creation of the character.

The 19th century is characterized by the formation of a permanent operatic repertoire. During the first decades of the 19th century, singers were restricted to a part of the operatic tradition and roles were written specifically for them and adapted to their capacities – the choice of the singing troupe significantly preceded the selection of the repertoire for a given season. By the end of the century, the situation is reversed; the singers must adjust their voices to the diversity of roles and musical styles.²³ Repertory theatres were organized based on a policy of booking a singing ‘star’ of high international reputation.

Further, I will present the concept of the opera divas of the 19th century in the work of the National Theatre in Belgrade. One of the reasons to connect the said phenomenon of a certain period of time is the situation in the theatre, which the authors of *The White Book of the Opera*²⁴ called “psychology opera singers” as a result of the large number of realized visits abroad of our operatic ensembles known as The

¹⁹ Ibid, 196

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Ibid, 180.

²² Rebecca Bennett Fairbank, “Devastating Diva: Pauline Viardot and Rewriting the Image of Women in Nineteenth-Century French Opera Culture”, Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature, BYU, Master of Arts, 2013, 143.

²³ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, online edition, 2006.

²⁴ *The White Book of The Opera House* was published with the aim to familiarize the general public with the motives of the artistic committee for choosing the comprehensive reform of the Opera. As the book states, one of the reasons why the repertoire and performing navigation of the golden period was not confirmed, was ‘insufficient professionalism’, which influenced the artistic achievements and social relations in the collective. Another reason is the material and financial situation. The National Theatre was financed from the state budget, and since 1969 stimulating forms of financing have been applied. For example, from three sold opera tickets one dinar was donated, and for each sold ‘drama’ ticket a dinar was donated. The third reason is the repertoire of the Opera-performing orientation. From the 1960s to the 1970s the most performed operas were of the Italian repertoire, which had standard quality, but the performing practice did not bring anything new. During this period, the ‘iron’ repertoire dominated as the contemporary repertoire was left behind. Cf.: Branko Dragutinović, Rasko V. Jovanović and Gojko Miletić, *The White Book of the Opera House*, Belgrade, National Theatre, 1970, 20–23, 72.

Golden period of the National Theatre.²⁵ This psychology was first reflected “in the relation of the singer to the regular activity in the theatre, then to the performative repertoire (interest or disinterest), seeking to specialize in one direction (usually Italian opera) and the pursuit of personal placement abroad”²⁶.

The Opera Diva in the Opera of the National Theatre in Belgrade

The golden period, as the ‘ideal image’ of the National Theatre,²⁷ in the literature is linked to the performances of the opera ensemble abroad, as well as the time in which the director and conductor Oskar Danon achieved a specific repertoire policy, thanks to teamwork and good organization of all the employees of the Opera. Operatic Artists of the National Theatre had the opportunity to learn about the possibilities and evaluation of the opera singers abroad, therefore there was an accumulation of “dissatisfaction regarding salaries and reward system”²⁸. This situation strengthened the ambition of some of the protagonists to seek performances in other opera houses or leave their theatre for better employment opportunities. At that time a ‘star system’ is formed that becomes the other side of the coin of the opera reality.²⁹

Established employment policies of the major opera houses highlight, more and more, a specific type of singing stars. In addition to the vocal priorities and a ‘pretty face’ (!), the singers are required to possess some acting skills, perfect articulation, as well as knowledge of languages.³⁰ During their appearances the Opera Ensemble presented a large number of talented soloists who, in the judgment of critics and audiences, “possessed a brilliant voice quality and an exceptional sense of acting

²⁵ Vladimir Jovanović described the period from 1954 to 1969 as the Golden period of the Opera. This period began in 1954 with a successful tour of Modest Mussorgsky’s opera *Boris Godunov* in Basel, Zurich and Geneva; as a part of the concert cycle *Klubhaus*, a performance of the opera was completed with *Mazeppa* Tchaikovsky in 1969 on the stage of the theatre Theater des Westens in West Berlin. In this fifteen-year period, the Belgrade Opera, its repertoire, performing and musical achievements enriched the European opera scene and to some extent influence its development. Vladimir Jovanovic, *Beogradska opera u Evropi. Gostovanja od 1954. do 1969. godine [Belgrade opera in Europe. Guest appearances from 1954 to 1969]*, Novi Sad, Pometej, 1996, 13–14.

²⁶ Branko Dragutinović, Rasko V. Jovanović and Gojko Miletić, op. cit., 46.

²⁷ For more details see: Vanja Spasić, “The beginning and end of the golden period: The Opera of the National theatre”, *Mokranjac*, December 2013, 106–112. Vanja Spasić, “After the golden period: The Opera of the National Theatre (1971–2011)” in: Dragan Žunić, Miomira Đuranović (eds.), *Book of proceedings from the conference Balkan Art Forum Art and Culture Today*, Niš, Faculty of Art, 2014, 371–378.

²⁸ Branko Dragutinović, Rasko V. Jovanović and Gojko Miletić, op. cit., 81.

²⁹ Some prominent soloists, dissatisfied with the rewards system and general conditions of work, gave nonchalantly their artistic tasks to others. Ibidem. Oskar Danon testifies about this, describing the situation in the following way: “The progress of individuals in their careers has led to the decrease of the solo ensemble, and also the disregard of contractual obligations. The termination of the contract and sudden departures for solo performances in other opera houses, without the approval and consent, for a longer or shorter time in the country or abroad, became a standard, tacit and without any sanctions.” Svetlana Hribar, *Oskar Danon-The Rhythms of Turmoil*, Belgrade, Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra, 2005, 287.

³⁰ Branko Dragutinović, Rasko V. Jovanović and Gojko Miletić, op. cit., 81.

creation, desire and ability to fit into the general performance solutions”³¹. However, these guest appearances had a negative effect on the quality of the current repertoire, created before or after the tour. Preparations for guest appearances delayed the rehearsals for the standard repertoire that was performed, which had negative consequences. Consequently, the press began speculating about the ‘export repertoire’ of the Belgrade Opera.³² In addition, each innovation in the theatre was met with resistance by the performers, because they had become “used to performing on stage on the basis of the established repertoire with established solutions, which have long since become canonized templates”³³.

According to the conductor Oskar Danon, the success of the opera performances was missing because of the “prima donna disease that poisoned the atmosphere in the ensemble, and the rapid increase of the audience’s taste for the ‘beautiful singing from the ramps’, idolatry manners of lingering on the high notes”³⁴.

How going abroad influenced the development of opera divas can perhaps best be seen in his memories related to Radmila Bakočević, who became famous in Serbia and worldwide by mastering the most difficult musical parts. Oskar Danon has a deep appreciation for the beauty of the voice and artistic abilities of Radmila Bakočević and was “impressed with her youthful stage charm, sincere naivety, simplicity and plausibility of the said (sung) text”³⁵. Between Oskar Danon, the director of the Opera, and the opera artist, there was a dispute in choosing roles. The maestro described the situation thus:

“Radmila Bakočević was confident and saw herself as Norma, Tosca, Leonora, Abigaille, Lady Macbeth, Turandont, Salome, etc. When I wanted to make a different Strauss’s *Bat* [12th January 1966, added V. S.] and in the same show I have two of our prima donnas (as the world has never managed in getting Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi to perform together, it did not work for me either) – Radmila Bakočević (Adela) and Milka Stojanović (Rosalinda); Radmila demonstratively travelled to Ankara to sing Norma conducted by Mladen Jugušt to demonstrate that she is the real Norma, what ‘they’ (that was me) at the Belgrade opera did not want to admit.”³⁶

The path that Radmila Bakočević chose was confirmed by successes in major international theatres. However, all the praise that Danon made about her voice and appearance, according to the maestro, started fading in her later roles:

“What has particularly grieved me is that she stopped paying attention to the spoken word. Singing in the original language, her purity of diction and expression was lost; interpretation of the characters became increasingly burdened by some

³¹ Ibid, 43.

³² Ibid, 47.

³³ Ibid, 47.

³⁴ Sijetlana Hribar, op. cit., 267.

³⁵ Ibid, 300.

³⁶ Ibidem.

manner, all the characters of different eras and pieces began to resemble each other, and we saw and listened to the prima donna Radmilu Bakočević herself. Too bad!”³⁷

Oskar Danon used the negative connotation of prima donna for the singer whose performance becomes routine, bland, but her work is positively shown in public, especially during the period in which she celebrated 40 years of her artistic work in the role of Andrijana Lecouvreur of the eponymous opera by composer Francesco Cilea, in 1995:

“Firstly, it is a celebration of the great jubilee of the prima donna assoluta of the Belgrade Opera, Radmila Bakočević, as said by the Opera Director Jovan Šajnović at the end of the play.”³⁸

On the problem of discipline and unnecessary debates, Danon gives the example of when asking the singer to sing *piano*, getting the response, “Let those who have no voice whisper”³⁹. Complaints about the given roles for some operas are just one of the ways opera divas refused to perform. The testament of the influence of ‘the voice’ of soloists is their initiation to replace the director of the Opera and Ballet, Bora Popović in 1983. Perhaps the best explanation for this situation is Bora Popović’s answer: “it is easier to change the director rather than work habits of the ensemble”⁴⁰.

The image of the opera diva is also portrayed in the fact that Jadranka Jovanović, a member of the Board of Directors in 1998, on the issue of the conductor at the theatre said that she is “tired of working with conductors who learn from me and my experience instead of the other way around. I’d actually like to enable the arrival of a real conductor, because our possible trip abroad is not possible with this orchestra”⁴¹.

The status of the opera diva in theatre has another reality, that of the concept of the diva in Serbia is connected more to the opera artist’s commitment abroad. *Politika* correspondent Mirjana Radovanovic, in “Prima donna on rostrum”, describes the status of the prima donna:

“Can an opera prima donna, with a salary of 20,000 dinars, maintain her voice in shape and look glamorous to the standard which is expected of her? Where to sing when there is no engagement? Why do we have seven unions that barely manage to get only the minimum salary increase? Should some attractive prima donna stand on the parliamentary rostrum and sing an aria from Verdi’s *Amelia A Masked Ball* which begins with the words: ‘I’m dying, but show at least a little mercy?’ Will a high C cut just a little into hard ears?”⁴²

³⁷ Ibid, 301.

³⁸ Branka Radovic “Admiration, respect and love for the prima donna”, *Politika*, October 9, 1995. Four years later a monograph *Radmila Bakočević – prima donna assoluta* was published, edited by Slobodan Joković, which testifies to her success and recognition as the top artist in our country. Slobodan Joković, *Radmila Bakočević – prima donna assoluta*, Beograd, Verzalpress, 1999.

³⁹ Svjetlana Hribar, op. cit., 302.

⁴⁰ The Archive of the National Theatre of Belgrade (ANTB): *The Resignation of the director of Opera and Ballet* (submitted to the council of workers of the National Theatre), 30th March 1983, no reg. no.

⁴¹ ANTB: *The proceedings of the III session of the board of directors of the National Theatre of Belgrade, held on the 29th October 1998*. 4. 11. 1998, reg. no. 4045.

⁴² Mirjana Radošević, “Prima donna on rostrum”, *Politika*, December 24, 2004, 16.

In the early 20th century the National Theatre decided on the basis of knowledge and experience, for the first time, to put an opera singer as a director of the Opera – Katarina Jovanović. From the perspective of both a singer and a director, Jovanović explained her policy of the division of roles and opera selections in the repertoire. For example, as the reason for setting the opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* by Gaetano Donizetti, in 2008-09, she stated that the opera “lacked the repertoire in which singers who sing coloratura-drama received their artistic space in the theatre, which would at the same time make it possible for them to make progress in their careers”⁴³.

About how the singer-director chooses artists for specific roles; Jovanović said that she selects them based on vocal abilities:

“They are the first qualities of a singer who qualifies for a role, and it is important for me to choose an artist whom I consider to be easy to deal precisely with the role. [...] When we talk about Lucius, it is important for me to choose a singer that will have a relationship with the character, who will already have some ideas in designing the character which he interprets, to know how dramatic and emotionally complex this role is, which is, among other things, the issue of talent and abilities of the singers.”⁴⁴

Thus, the practice of the 19th century – codification of voices according to roles – is represented here, as well as the expectation that opera singers interpret and analyze the character.

Conclusion

The appearance of the opera diva in the history of opera is associated with the concept of a perfect voice (which includes three registers), the relationship with the audience (popularity is a precondition for the recognition of a diva) and repertory theatre (as a confirmation of the status of a diva). The paradox of the opera divas is that: in order to appear they required the formal framework of the 19th century (codification, closed system, illusionist world of opera), but once having appeared they then attempt to undermine it (seeking a new expression, a specialty). The development of repertory theatre was closely associated with the former opera stars because, as I pointed out earlier, success of the show depends on the artist and their ability to ‘touch the hearts’ of the audience. Such a framework in the interpretation of the opera diva was the starting point for exploring the National Theatre in Belgrade after the Golden Period, when the system recognizes opera singers in the theatre. So, in addition to the superior vocal-technical and theatrical-expressive possibilities for affirmation of our operatic diva, the key role was guest appearances in eminent opera houses. However, guest appearances were a ‘double-edged sword’ for the Opera of the National Theatre.

⁴³ Aleksandra Paladin, “I am sometimes irrationally passionate” (the interview with Katarina Jovanović), *Classical Music*, year I, no. 1, October–December 2010, 44.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

On the one hand the opera ensemble has achieved great success over the border, but afterwards it evolved into a psychology of disgruntled singers with their, primarily, material position within the theatre. Such discontent reflected in the repertoire politics, the refusal to set a modern opera piece, and one-specialization within the Italian tradition, are only some of the reasons for the absence of some operas. I conclude that in the public discourse in our country we use the term *prima donna*, with a positive connotation if it is associated to the success and career of an opera singer, and with a negative connotation, if it relates to behavior.