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Early Italian Opera Within the Labyrinths of Postmodernity*

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Abstract. The article is focused on certain critical questions of the position of early Italian opera in contemporary culture. For a long time both performers and scholars considered it as an outdated genre meriting only historical interest. This state of affairs began to change in the 1970s, when a series of facsimiles prepared by Garland Publishing revealed a certain number of published opera scores and librettos. Over the past 50 years, three trends have emerged in the scholarly approach to early Italian operas. The first is that of *deconstruction* of the prevailing and largely erroneous stereotypes. The second is that of *reconstruction*, filling in the gaps of knowledge (compilation of encyclopedias, catalogues, works on the history of opera, and monographs about composers). The third is that of *interpretation* of the 17th- and 18th-century European musical and theatrical heritage in the context of culture and style.

In this regard, a special position is held by the issue of performance interpretation. The postmodern era has transformed the early opera from an antique rarity into a topical musical and theatrical phenomenon. The dimension has opened up for directorial experiments aimed at projecting this genre onto the topical problems of today, bringing it closer to the perception of the mass of listeners – each and every one. The plotlines based on ancient myths and historical legends, conventional comedic and farcical situations referring to the earliest literary specimens are easily adapted to the realities of the modern theater: one convention becomes replaced by another, the wigs and camisoles of the 18th-century singers are replaced by army camouflage. Most of these productions provide interpretations not so much of the early opera as such, but particularly of us, bringing our own existential fears and ambitions onto the stage, playing on our political sympathies and antipathies. But there also exists an opposite side. It finds expression in the manner of singing and instrumental playing which comes close to the norms of three and four centuries ago, i.e., historical performing practice, which in our conditions is perceived by everyone as exquisite,

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designed for the refined taste of the elite, and in this sense of the “aristocratic” listener, rather than the general masses. Thus, in many cases there arises a combination, which is paradoxical in its essence – an unreasonable duality. Interpretation of the essence of early Italian opera is becoming acutely relevant as the path for this art to regain its previously lost artistic integrity.

Keywords: 17th and 18th-century Italian opera, musical theatre, the stages of research of early opera, the producer’s interpretation of early opera on the contemporary stage

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Международный отдел

Научная статья

Старинная итальянская опера в лабиринтах Постмодерна

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Аннотация. В статье рассмотрены некоторые острые проблемы существования старинной итальянской оперы в современной культуре. Долгое время она воспринималась и учёными, и исполнителями как жанр, вызывающий только исторический интерес. Положение начало меняться в 1970-е годы, когда серия факсимиле, подготовленных к печати в издательстве «Гарланд», открыла ряд публикаций оперных партитур и либретто. За прошедшие 50 лет в научном освоении старинных итальянских опер обозначились три тенденции. Первая – *деконструкция* сложившихся и во многом ошибочных стереотипов, вторая – *реконструкция*, заполнение лакун в знании (создание энциклопедий, каталогов, трудов по истории оперы, монографий о композиторах), третья – *интерпретация* музыкально-театрального наследия XVII–XVIII веков в стилевом и социально-культурном контекстах.

Особое место занимает в данной связи проблема исполнительской интерпретации. Эпоха постмодерна превратила старинную оперу из антикварного раритета в актуальное музыкально-театральное явление. Одновременно открылся простор для режиссёрских экспериментов, призванных спроецировать этот жанр на актуальные сегодняшние проблемы, приблизив к восприятию массы слушателей – всех и каждого. Сюжеты мифологические и легендарно-исторические, условные комедийно-фарсовые, отсылающие к древнейшим образцам, легко адаптируются к реалиям современного театра: одну условность сменила другая, парики и камзолы на певцах XVIII века – армейский камуфляж. Большинство таких постановок интерпретирует не столько старую оперу как таковую, сколько нас самих, выводит



на сцену наши собственные экзистенциальные страхи и амбиции, играет на политических симпатиях и антипатиях. Существует и противоположный полюс. Он обозначен манерой пения и инструментальной игры, приближенной к нормам трёх-четырёхвековой давности, то есть исторической исполнительской практикой (*historic performance practice*), которая в наших условиях воспринимается как изысканная, рассчитанная на утончённый вкус не массового, но элитарного и в этом смысле «аристократичного» слушателя. Во многих случаях возникает парадоксальное по своей сути сочетание, мало чем оправданная двойственность. Интерпретация художественной сути старинной итальянской оперы становится остро актуальной как путь к обретению этим искусством утраченной художественной цельности.

Ключевые слова: итальянская опера XVII–XVIII веков, музыкальный театр, этапы изучения старинной оперы, режиссёрская интерпретация ранней оперы на современной сцене

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The history of early Italian opera throughout almost the entire 20th century was previously not presented in Russian musicology as a topic of scholarly research. With a few rare exceptions, it was covered only in music textbooks on merely a few pages. And even then, it consisted for the most part of the usual clichés about “concerts in costumes” in *opera seria* and the willfulness of the singers, sometimes containing annoying factual mistakes. Until the 1970s, scholars from outside of Russia, even when they did resort to writing about the 300-to-400-year-old art of the opera, did that rarely, turning their attention almost exclusively to individual composers: Alessandro Scarlatti,¹ Niccolò Jommelli,² Giovanni Paisiello,³ Giovanni Battista Pergolesi,⁴ Domenico Cimarosa,⁵ Alessandro Stradella.⁶ Performances and recordings of early operas were just as rare – in fact, presenting a sporadic occurrence. The reasons are well-known today: a lack of publications, difficult access to manuscripts,

as well as the lost vocal techniques which made it seem impossible to sing 18th century *bel canto* arias at all.

There was also another, even more important reason: the significance of the early, primarily serious opera in the mass perception of performers, musicologists, and music lovers was of purely historical nature, it was completely relegated to the past. We are not referring to the stylistic shifts on the boundaries of the respective stylistic eras, which resulted in the loss of the relevance of the artistic and aesthetic ideals of the musicians’ predecessors. Another fact is striking: the two-centuries-old genre tradition, which had occupied the leading, “avant-garde” position in European art, lost all of its artistic value even in the eyes of connoisseurs in the 19th century. Until the last third of the 20th century, early Italian opera never acquired its Mendelssohn, who would breathe new life into the old musical scores.

It is difficult to find any analogy to this extremely rare artistic situation in the other

eras or in the other arts. To sense the situation even sharper, one can recall, for example, the construction of the lantern over the middle cross of the Milan Cathedral in 1488–1490. Two geniuses of the Renaissance era, Leonardo da Vinci and Donato Bramante, were responsible for its design; however, in order to preserve the uniform stylistic appearance of the cathedral, it was decided not to interfere with the Gothic proportions, which were alien to the Renaissance. This decision testifies of the aesthetic “tolerance” and flexibility of the artistic tastes, which our predecessors showed even in such turning periods.

As it seems to us, the oblivion that befell early Italian opera is associated with a system of historical and theoretical apprehensions ingrained in people’s minds in the 19th and 20th centuries. According to these apprehensions, the art of music develops in stages, and each subsequent stage raises it to new heights, absorbing all the best from the previous stages and inevitably discarding what are considered to be the “vestiges”. The first part of this thesis is indisputable; in contrast to it, it is difficult to agree with the second one.

The theory of progress in art, criticized by modern scholars continuously, held out in music longer than anywhere else. This can be explained by the fact that the other arts survived the stages recognized as classical at much earlier time. It is very difficult to talk about any progress, for example, in sculpture, having before one’s eyes the heritage of the ancient Greeks or Michelangelo, or in drama, knowing about the ancient tragedians, Shakespeare, as well as the Spanish and French drama of the Golden Age. The classical stage in the evolution of music came much later, only after the middle of the 18th century. That is exactly why, in the apprehension of

music, the ideas about the steady progress of society, its structure, its understanding of the surrounding world, which originated in the minds of the 18th century proponents of the Enlightenment and subsequently flourished in positivism and in the 19th century evolutionist theories, turned out to be so attractive for music theorists and practitioners.

As an ample example, let us present a quotation from Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s diary. This is what he wrote in March 1904 about the performance of Bach’s *St John Passion* in the St. Petersburg Lutheran Church:

*“Beautiful music, but this music is of a completely different age, and it is impossible to listen to a whole oratorio at the present time... I am convinced that not only me, but everyone was bored, and if they say that they have endured pleasure, then they lie repeatedly. These recitatives, similar to each other, these chorales, arias accompanied by two oboes or two flutes, these unfeasible choruses, this incessant organ, this continuous and perfect counterpoint, alternating with a very imperfect harmony – all of this is truly unbearable... The period of our present music: free music, music with playing and changing moods, music with the use of all various technical means, music which pours into different and interesting forms, expressive music – it began with Haydn and Mozart. Bach, Handel, Palestrina, Lasso, etc. are representatives of a perception of sound already alien to us”.*⁷

This statement by Rimsky-Korsakov clearly outlines the modernist view of the history of music. Along with Bach, Lasso, Palestrina, he also mentioned Handel, who had left a deep mark in the operatic tradition (yet, Korsakov hardly realized this).



However, he did not even mention any of the luminaries of the early opera – neither Claudio Monteverdi, Francesco Cavalli, Alessandro Scarlatti, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (they are textbooks names now), nor the masters who are less famous today, but who were luminaries in those days, such as Leonardo Vinci, Nicola Porpora, Leonardo Leo, Johann Adolph Hasse, Niccolò Jommelli, nor even those who worked in Russia at the imperial court in the second half of the 18th century – Tommaso Traetta, Baldassare Galuppi, Giovanni Paisiello, Domenico Cimarosa, or Giuseppe Sarti. It is absolutely clear that Rimsky-Korsakov did not know and could not know their music, because in the minds of musicians of that time, it had passed away irrevocably.

Changes came only in the 1970s and 1980s. It was at that time that we began to study Italian opera, having received the support of the Russian Foundation for Humanities, the Russian Foundation for Basic Research, the German and Austrian Academic Exchange Services, and the University of Naples.⁸

It may be no accident that the turning point in relation to early opera concurred with the beginning of the postmodern era. Two years ago, the Russian Gnesins' Academy of Music hosted a conference, where one of the authors of the article presented a report that summarized the path taken by musicology over the past half a century in its relation to early opera, and highlighted the three quintessential stages.⁹

The first stage is the *deconstruction* of stereotypes, which have become consolidated in the assessments of early opera and are in many respects erroneous. It was greatly aided by the publication of musical scores and librettos, which revealed an entirely new figurative and sound world. That world appeared to be much brighter, more diverse

and sophisticated than it seemed to musicians brought up on the ideals of the Wagnerian-style psychological musical drama. A string of publications was opened by the famous series of facsimiles prepared by the US publishing house *Garland*.¹⁰ The first ones to settle down in the new world were not opera producers or performers, but scholars. They created opera encyclopedias and catalogues: the four-volume *Grove Dictionary of Opera*, the most comprehensive and valuable commodity at the moment,¹¹ the encyclopedia of musical and theatrical works by the German publishing house *Piper*,¹² the catalogue of printed librettos of Italian operas created before 1800¹³ – without which it is hardly possible to imagine any process of studying or production of operas today.

The second stage, designated as *reconstruction*, involved filling in the blank spots in our knowledge of early Italian opera.¹⁴ This work continues today in the genres of Histories of Opera, monographs about opera composers, opera guides, as well as studies of staging and performing practice.¹⁵ For example, of the utmost interest are collections of articles devoted to single operas, which pose various questions that make it possible for us to see long-known works in a new light. Among the latest editions of this kind, it is worth noting *Mozart's La clemenza di Tito. A Reappraisal* (2018), where, in particular, the documents and materials related to the history of this operatic composition are examined, and an article written by John Rice highlights the context in which it was created – the musical and theatrical culture at the court of Emperor Leopold II.¹⁶ Equally important for the reconstruction of early opera is the knowledge of how the theatrical business was arranged: what were the premises, the theatrical buildings intended for the performance of operas in the 17th and

18th centuries, [1] how opera troupes were formed, and what were the singers in their professional and ordinary lives. [2]

Finally, the stage that we are going through today is directly related to the challenges of *interpretation* – in terms of both scholarship and performance. This must include mastering a large array of information accumulated on the history of genres, and analytical work with objects of the musical heritage, theoretical research, and an adequate understanding of historical terminology. For example, the role of the Italian aria in the emergence of sonata form presents one of the issues that allows us to take a fresh look at both the compositional processes in opera and the logic of the development of musical shaping in the music of the Classical Era. [3]

However, the main objective to which the modern cultural situation instigates us is the interpretation of the artistic essence of early opera, the understanding of the reasons why it became so relevant in the Postmodern Era and what meanings it acquires today, when the ideas of Metamodernism have asserted themselves. We would like to point out several ways of such interpretation.

The first way is to abandon the Progressivist attitude in the assessment of early opera and at the same time to develop the ability to perceive within it the impulses for the evolution of the art of opera. There is a profound reason for such a vivid rise witnessed nowadays. First of all, it is in the destruction of the modernist evolutionary scheme, which has long been thought of as uncontested and indisputable in the perception of the art of opera. Somehow, it turned out that the ideal operatic form, which Wagner and Verdi, Puccini and Prokofiev dreamed about in different ways, does not have the parameters and the criteria that could be universal for all times.

The famous video productions of Monteverdi's operas by Nikolaus Harnoncourt have sold almost millions of copies, demonstrating the impressive impact of the dramatic opera concept, perfectly realized long before Dargomyzhsky, Mussorgsky and Wagner created their works. A detailed analysis of one of these productions is given in Gregory Camp's article *Staging Liquid Modern Communities in Monteverdi's Orfeo*. [4] Operas by Handel and Vivaldi have become popular classics and easily compete with such recognized repertoire leaders as Mozart, Verdi and Puccini. Vivaldi, who until recently was considered a master of solely instrumental music, now has 30 recorded surviving operas (out of the 46 mentioned), many of them available in more than one performance. There are more and more commercial recordings and festival productions of operas by Vinci, Hasse, Jommelli, Traetta, and opera *seria* by Pergolesi appearing. Perhaps, the only unlucky composer (in this sense) at present is Nicola Porpora – although, apparently, it is still difficult to find vocalists capable of singing in a tolerable manner the arias he wrote for his famous students, Farinelli and Caffarelli. Most of the modern public has ceased to perceive the norms developed by romantic and late romantic music in the same way as Rimsky-Korsakov did, that is, as a result of “the progress of expressive means.” Exquisite orchestration, rich and colorful harmonic texture, vocal techniques “tooled” for large halls, musical forms subordinated to intense dramatic action – none of these aspects are present in early opera. However, there existed other keys to comprehending its merits, which are perceived today as indisputable.

The second way is to understand the status and role of early opera, primarily, from Italy, in modern culture. For centuries,



opera has retained its significance as a kind of indicator of social stratification. Opera is one of the few musical genres that have been developing continuously over four centuries, notwithstanding the numerous sharp historical turns, such as the French Revolution of 1789, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia, the various wars in Europe, particularly the two World Wars. On the other hand, each such historical turn led to a fundamental change in the musical repertoire. The unenviable fate of 18th century Italian opera during the years of its oblivion provides ample evidence of this. However, this fate primarily affected the serious genre; comic opera has remained on the stage, albeit in rare occurrences. For instance, of Rossini's vast legacy, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *La Cenerentola* and only one grand opera *Guillaume Tell*, his last oeuvre, written for its production Paris, has gained a pass to the future. The tastes of the new century easily accepted the "bourgeois realism" of comic opera, while *opera seria* unmistakably captured the conventional world of aristocratic culture, which seemed to be completely eradicated. Therefore, in relation to the genre of serious opera, artistic and aesthetic modernism was supplemented by socio-historical "modernism," which rejected the class hierarchy.

This system of thoughts, tastes, and moods prevailed for quite a long time, no less than for an entire century. Even when there were sprouts of interest in "pre-classical" music, and in the early 20th century the public keenly attended Wanda Landowska's harpsichord recitals, early opera remained outside everyone's attention, except for a very narrow group of scholars.

So what happened in the last third of the twentieth century? The Postmodern Era, on the one hand, offered culture the relativistic idea of consumer whateverism. It created

conditions for the revival of early opera, disclosing the space for experimentation: directors project this genre onto the pressing issues and play with the most acute topics of the current agenda, bringing the masses of listeners – each and every one of them – closer to the perception. Indeed, mythological and legendary-historical plots, as well as conventional comedy-farce storylines, referring to the earliest historical patterns, are easily adapted to the realities of modern theater: conventions are replaced one by another, the wigs and camisoles of the 18th century – by army camouflage. It is quite clear that such renditions interpret not so much the old opera as ourselves, bringing our own existential fears and ambitions onto the stage, and playing on our political sympathies and antipathies.

There also exists an opposite pole. It is indicated by singing and playing on instruments in a manner close to the norms of three or four centuries ago, that is, by the historic performance practice; in our conditions, such a manner is still perceived as strangely refined, designed for the exquisite taste of not mass audience, but elitist and, in this sense, "aristocratic" listeners. In many cases, an inherently paradoxical combination arises: the performance involves virtuoso vocalists, the fidelity to every note of the musical score, the replication of the early orchestral instruments, and at the same time – an extremism in the staging and performance, which, however, is increasingly slipping into stereotypes. Here is just one example: the staging of Handel's *Giulio Cesare* at the 2012 Salzburg Festival. On the one hand, there is the aesthetic sound of the *Il Giardino Armonico* ensemble, the flawless singing of Cecilia Bartoli and the countertenors Andreas Scholl, Philippe Jaroussky and Jochen Kowalski; on the other – the stage

presents a shopworn military entourage, conflicts in the Arab Middle East, Cleopatra riding on a cruise missile, Caesar wearing 3D glasses, Ptolemy with a porn magazine in his hands and, finally, a tank barrel directed into the hall. The duality, which is sharply visible in *opera seria*, is also present in comic genres, albeit less distinctly. The

path of early opera through the labyrinth of postmodernity has brought it to the stage, to the pages of monographs and dissertations. This fact can only be welcomed. Now we must just wait and see whether it will overcome the lures of mass art and regain its artistic integrity. And what will be sacrificed for this?

Notes

¹ See more about it: Dent E. J. *Alessandro Scarlatti. His Life and Work*. London: Edward Arnold, 1905.

² Abert H. *Niccolo Jommelli als Opernkomponist*. Halle a.S.: Verlag von Max Niemeyer, 1906.

³ Della Corte A. *Paisiello. Con una tavola tematica*. Torino: Fratelli Bocca, 1922.

⁴ Della Corte A. *Pergolesi*. Torino: Paravia, 1936.

⁵ Tibaldi-Chiesa M. *Cimarosa e il suo tempo*. Milano: Garzanti, 1939.

⁶ Giazotto R. *Vita di Alessandro Stradella*. Milano: Edizioni Curci, 1962.

⁷ Rimsky-Korsakov N. A. *Letopis' moey muzykal'noy zhizni* [My Musical Life]. Moscow: Muzyka, 1980. P. 310. (In Russ.)

⁸ See more about it: Lutsker P. V., Susidko I. P. *Ital'yanskaya opera XVIII veka, ch. I–II* [The Italian Opera of the 18th Century, Parts I–II]. Moscow: Klassika-XXI, 1998. 2004. (In Russ.)

⁹ Susidko I. P. Starinnaya opera: vyzovy sovremennomu muzykoznaniiyu [Early Opera: Challenges to Contemporary Musicology]. In: E. S. Derunets, T. I. Naumenko, Yu. N. Panteleeva, I. A. Presnyakova (Eds.). *Musicology in the Cultural Context: Proceedings of the International Conference, 2018, October 30–November 2*. Moscow: Probel, 2018, pp. 131–139. (In Russ.)

¹⁰ Brown H. M. and Weimer E. Weimer eds. *Italian Opera 1640–1770*. Garland Publishing, Inc., New-York, 1977–1984.

¹¹ *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. 4 Vol. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

¹² *Pipers Enzyklopädie des Musiktheaters: Oper, Operette, Musical, Ballett*, hrsg. von Carl Dahlhaus und dem Forschungsinstitut für Musiktheater der Universität Bayreuth unter Leitung von Sieghart Döhring. München, Zürich: Piper, 1984–1997.

¹³ Sartori C. *I libretti italiani a stampa dalle origini al 1800*. Catalogo analitico con 16 indici. Cuneo: Bertola & Locatelli, 1990–1994.

¹⁴ A massive outcry was sparked by the monographs about prominent masters of Italian opera of the 18th century, meeting all modern standards of academic research: Leonardo Vinci (Markstrom K. S. *The Operas of Leonardo Vinci*. Hillsdale, New York: Pendragon Press, 2007), Tommaso Traetta (Riedlbauer J. *Die Opern von Tommaso Traetta*. Hildesheim [u.a.]: Olms, 1994), and Antonio Vivaldi (Strohm R. *The Operas of Antonio Vivaldi*, v. 1–2. Firenze: L. S. Olschki, 2008) as well as the impressive Histories of Opera, in which the first two centuries of its development are not only endowed a noticeable position, but also receive their due in the general European musical and theatrical process: *The History of Italian Opera* published under the edition of Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli (*Storia dell'opera italiana*, v. 4–6, a cura di Lorenzo Bianconi e Giorgio Pestelli. Torino: EDT, 1987–1988), a four-volume book dedicated to European opera (*Geschichte der Oper*. Hrsg. von Silke Leopold, Bd. 1–4. Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 2006),



a compact but very pithy book by Gloria Staffieri (Staffieri G. *L'opera italiana. Dalle origine alle riforme del secolo dei Lumi (1590–1790)*. Frecce: Carocce, 2014).

¹⁵ The topics covered in the recent works are very diverse, which indicates the expansion of the research field. We shall name some of the fundamental works devoted to the operatic tradition of Parma, one of the Italian opera centers (Butler M. R. *Musical Theater in Eighteenth-Century Parma. Entertainment, Sovereignty, Reform*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2019), books and articles analyzing opera in a socio-cultural context (DelDonna A. *Opera, Theatrical Culture and Society in Late Eighteenth-Century Naples*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016; Opera as Institution Networks and Professions (1730–1917), ed. by C. Scuderi and I. Zechner. Wien: LIT Verlag, 2019), in relation to the practice of the *commedia dell'arte* (Wilbourne E. *Seventeenth-Century Opera and the Sound of the Comedia dell'Arte*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), from the perspective of the theory of narrative (poetic and musical) (Knaus K. Narrative über Dichtung und Musik: Produktionsprozess und Aufführung der frühen Opera buffa. In: *TheMA: Open Access Research Journal for Theatre, Music, Arts*. 2016, V. 1–2. Available at: URL: <https://www.thema-journal.eu/index.php/thema/article/view/27/26>).

¹⁶ Rice J. A. Operatic Culture at the Court of Leopold II and Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito*. *Mozart's La clemenza di Tito. A Reappraisal*. Stockholm Studies in Culture and Aesthetics, 2018, pp. 33–55. DOI: 10.16993/ban

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3. Lutsker P. V., Susidko I. P. Strophic and Sonata Form in the Italian Opera Aria of the 1720s and the 1730s. *Problemy muzykal'noj nauki / Music Scholarship*. 2021. No. 4, pp. 63–75. DOI: 10.33779/2782-3598.2021.4.063-075
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