
CENSORSHIP IN SLOVAK OPERA

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Abstract: This study deals with the fate of Slovak opera compositions at the hands of communist censorship in the second half of the 20th century. The most striking case is *Krútnava* (*The Whirlpool*) by Eugen Suchoň (which premiered in Bratislava in 1949); this work was subject to gross ideological distortion with the elimination of its Christian and humanistic character as well as a distortion in its dramaturgical composition (i.e. the rejection of its symbolic framework). *The Whirlpool* was performed on dozens of European stages in its modified form, which did not correspond with Suchoň's own convictions. The process of its rehabilitation was protracted, and its reconstructed original version was first heard in Banská Bystrica only in 2008 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Suchoň's birth. Operas by Ján Cikker also had a complicated fate: *Mister Scrooge*, which premiered in Kassel in 1963, was composed on the theme of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens; *Coriolanus*, which premiered in Prague in 1974, was inspired by Shakespeare's drama of the same name. Like *The Whirlpool*, *Coriolanus* had the Slovak premiere of its original form only on the occasion of the centenary of the author's birth (in Banská Bystrica in 2011). Both composers were respected and supported by the official establishment. This fact takes their fight for the soul of their compositions and the implied compromises into the wider moral and ethical context of the period.

Key words: Eugen Suchoň, Ján Cikker, *Krútnava/The Whirlpool*, *Mister Scrooge*, *Coriolanus*, Slovak opera, censorship

Nomen omen. When Eugon Suchoň named his first opera *Krútnava* (*The Whirlpool*), he probably did not anticipate that the name would predetermine the fate of the work and that shortly after its premiere the opera would be caught in a whirlpool of malign influences due to the ideological nature of the period. The opera is based on the novella *Za vyšným mlynom* (*Beyond the Upper Mill*) by Milo Urban. This story of life in the countryside had a strong motif of resolving issues of guilt, penance and forgiveness, and deeply spoke to Suchoň. However, subjective and objective circumstances caused the birth of Suchoň's work to take eight years. Among other things, Suchoň had high expectations of the opera's literary component. He co-wrote the work's libretto with Štefan Hoza, but the composition was not created as a traditional folk opera. Suchoň approached the novella with the ambition to accentuate the noteworthy psychological dramatic aspects of Urban's narrative in a musical way in the form of an operatic opus while using modern methods of operatic dramaturgy in the creative process. In Urban's novella, Ondrej Zimoň kills his rival Ján over unrequited love and then marries Ján's beloved Katrena. However, under the pressure of a guilty conscience, he eventually confesses his guilt and accepts his punishment. Suchoň gave Ondrej's story a symbolic framework in the dramatic characters of the Poet and the Double. He highlighted the work's ethical message in their texts and widened the

subject to take on a universal meaning in the demonstration of compositional aesthetics.¹ Suchoň integrated the original narrative of Urban's novella into a framework demarcated by the dispute between the Poet and the Mephistophelean Double. The Poet endeavours to reach true art and believes in the good of the human soul, whereas the Double trivialises and questions the noble ideas of his opponent: "Look at life! There the strongest rule, as do artifice and the cruel chain of coincidence. People ask for the right to sin; they never change!" Their dispute is supposed to be resolved in a play of life, which they will write together: "We'll see what is stronger: life's ideals or life's passions."

The premiere on 10 December 1949 was a celebratory event for Slovak culture. The arrival of a national operatic work had been long anticipated. More than a quarter of a century had passed since the formation of the Slovak National Theatre, yet in its repertoire there was still missing a Slovak operatic production which could match Czech operas such as Bedřich Smetana's *Prodaná nevěsta* (*The Bartered Bride*) or Leoš Janáček's *Její pastorkyňa* (*Jenůfa*). *The Whirlpool* was hugely successful with the audience. However, amidst the general public enthusiasm for the emergence of a Slovak opera, there were disharmonious voices which bore tones of the Zhdanov doctrine on conforming to the party line, stratification and folksiness (such expressions hid the aggressively formulated aesthetic principles of socialist realism). Critics rejected the moral message of the work and accused it of Christian pseudo-humanism:

In the final scene, the killer Ondrej, who has done much evil and destroyed the lives of many people, is bitterly forgiven and put on a pedestal as if he were some hero. When some reservations were raised against Suchoň's composition at the opera's premiere in Bratislava, it was only for the reasons mentioned here. Therefore, calls to change the closing part of the opera are legitimate.²

Many professional critics expressed their reservations in a similar way, as did the members of the Culture Committee at the Ministry of Education, Sciences and Arts based in Bratislava, which was a more serious matter. At 9 am on 4 February 1950 (a Saturday), Suchoň was invited to a committee meeting chaired by Ladislav Novomeský. The committee members also included Vladimír Mináč, the secretary of the Association of Slovak Writers; Juraj Špitzer, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia; Andrej Bagar, the artistic director of the Slovak National Theatre; the communist ideologue Július Šefránek; and the trade unionist Dezider Benau. Notes from the meeting were kept by Suchoň on the two sheets of paper which formed his invitation. On behalf of the committee, Novomeský congratulated him on the opera's music but expressed deep dissatisfaction with the libretto. He proclaimed the theme to be "the most idiotic in Slovak literature"³ and the play to be

¹ Lubomír Chalupka states that Suchoň was inspired to undertake this symbolic framework by the staging of Ján Poničan's play *Štyria* (*The Four*) (Slovak National Theatre, 1942), in which the young director Ján Jamnický combined the texts of the play with Poničan's verses. See CHALUPKA, Lubomír. *Pohnuté osudy Suchoňovej Krútnavy*. In *Impulz*, 2012, Vol. 8, No. 3.

² BOKESOVÁ, Zdenka. Eugen Suchoň: Krútnava. In *Hudební rozhledy*, 1950, Vol. 3, Nos. 4–5.

³ Behind this resistance, the disrespect of the communist authorities toward Milo Urban can be seen. He had acted as the chief editor of *Gardista* magazine in the period of the wartime Slovak state, and because he was an "undesirable person" his name did not even make it into the premiere's bulletin.

something heathen (not Christian) and therefore inappropriate for showcasing Slovak opera abroad. The other members of the committee saw the presence of the Poet and the Double as “mystic vapours” and considered the fact that Štelina was not compensated for his son’s death to be a tragedy.⁴ At the meeting, the request was made for Katrena to join Štelina’s side and for the child to be made Štelina’s grandson.

Suchoň defended himself against these attacks on his artistic and personal freedom. Even before the opera’s premiere, he had quarrelled with Mikuláš Huba,⁵ stating: “You rebuke me for individualism and the work’s poetical framework. But don’t take this framework from me. You will rob the opera of its most valuable part: its ideological heart!”⁶ Suchoň’s request stayed unheard. The first interventions into the libretto were made just after the premiere without any consultations with those who had produced the work. The prologue, interlude and the texts of the Poet and the Double in the fifth scene were mechanically crossed out, and expressions that were rooted in Suchoň’s Christian worldview were removed from the libretto. In its second (unofficial) version, *The Whirlpool* lasted a little longer and was even performed in Prague in the spring of 1950 before being removed from the repertoire.⁷ Soon afterwards, another wave of official pressure forced Suchoň to rewrite the textual aspect of the work, while its musical component remained unchallenged. In the early 1950s, the socio-political situation and the persecution of people considered undesirable by the regime rapidly escalated. The communist authorities arrested Suchoň’s close co-worker at the National Institute of Music, Jozef Šamko, and terminated the employment of renowned music scholar Ernest Zavorský, who was Suchoň’s friend. Even Novomeský himself was accused and arrested for “bourgeois nationalism”. Not a member of the Communist Party himself, Suchoň had two children and a wife of Austrian origin; his subsequent position of immunity as a prominent cultural figure, which placed him on a pedestal of infallibility, was still some time away. In 1951 Suchoň’s friend Zdeněk Chalabala, the chief conductor of opera at the Slovak National Theatre, managed to persuade him to agree to the requested changes so as to give the opera more of an existence on the stage: the characters of the Poet and the Double were violently removed from the script. In the third (authorised) version, the final scene was remade so that the child came to be the deceased Ján’s son and Štelina’s grandson. So as to add to the moral standing of Katrena, the main female protagonist, Suchoň composed an impressive arioso in which Katrena accuses the people of forcing her to marry the rich Ondrej in order to gain wealth. The premiere of this version took place in the opera of the Slovak National Theatre on 4 December 1952 with a music rendition by Zdeněk Chalabala.

Fatherhood was ascribed to Ján instead of Ondrej, who was righteously punished, and old Štelina gained a little grandson to replace his dead son. Verbal references to Christian morality disappeared from the text as did principles of Christian behaviour in the characters: Katrena’s child was born outside of marriage. Ondrej, whose

⁴ See SUCHOŇ, Eugen. In *Denník z notovej osnovy*. Bratislava : Perfekt, 2012, p. 199.

⁵ At the time of the premiere of *The Whirlpool*, the actor Mikuláš Huba was the chairman of the Theatrical and Dramaturgical Council of the Slovak National Theatre.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁷ The commission authorised Andrej Bagar to remake the work in terms of theatrical direction. Ctibor Štítinický was to amend the texts in the libretto and Viera Markovičová was to edit the texts for the final choir. However, as is written in Suchoň’s own memoirs, none of them touched the work out of respect.

character was torn on the inside but not described as plainly “black”, became a dull killer who confesses only under the pressure of evidence. The Christian colouring of Štelina’s cathartic act, where had received the child whose father was his son’s killer, was darkened by the bile of class hatred. In this way, at least posthumously, poor Ján was shown to have won against rich Ondrej. After the changes mentioned above, *The Whirlpool* became an ideal model of a socialist-realist opus and was performed in this form on many stages, predominately in the Eastern Bloc. Suchoň was a very gentle person at heart, and as a Catholic he had a respect for forgiveness as one of the basic Christian virtues. Such violent interventions into the composition of his work had to be horrific for him, and the international success of this deformed version of his opera must have been a real cross to bear.

During the post-Stalinist political thaw, the situation gradually developed into a redress of the injustice which had been committed on *The Whirlpool*. This partially happened in 1963 at the operatic section of the Jozef Gregor Tajovský Theatre in Banská Bystrica in a production directed by Branislav Kriška which included the involvement of the dramaturge Igor Vajda (later a secretly ordained Catholic priest) and the conductor Ján Valach. The Banská Bystrica production went down in the history of Slovak theatre as being “rehabilitative”. The original closing scene and opening choir returned to the performance, although the political and social climate was not yet ripe for a resurrection of the verses with Christian references which had formed the core of the work. That change only came about after November 1989, when the 1963 Banská Bystrica production was verified, cleansed of the residue of communist censorship and complemented with a return to its ideological message of the apotheosis of forgiveness. However, the road to the rehabilitation of Suchoň’s original aesthetic and dramaturgical intent, namely, the accurate reconstruction of the Poet and the Double, was a much longer and more complicated process.

The first post-communist performance of *The Whirlpool* in Bratislava took place in 1999 at the Slovak National Theatre, with the musical rendition done by Wolfdieter Mauer and the direction by Juraj Jakubisko. It was performed in honour of a year dedicated to Suchoň, which the Ministry of Culture had announced on the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of Suchoň’s birth. However, this production also omitted the framing characters of the Poet and the Double. “I think the message of the Poet and the Double is already contained in the work even without them. Maybe it’s sometimes better just to suggest things than explicitly declare them as these characters do”⁸, the dramaturge Vladimír Zvara argued ten years later in a polemic on *The Whirlpool*. His argument was supported by the dramaturge and director Martin Bendík: “*The Whirlpool* has the classical illusive dramaturgy of the 19th century formed on the basis of the unity of time, space and action. And here an urban dweller suddenly appears, some artificial ‘Brechtian alienator’. I cannot imagine a director who would be able to implant such characters plausibly. In my opinion, these characters and Faustian questions of being or non-being do not fit to such an earthly and simple village story.”⁹

Kriška was a leading Slovak director and respected teacher who had directed four productions of *The Whirlpool* (among them also the rehabilitated one), and he

⁸ ZAGAR, Peter. Krútnava včera a dnes. In *Hudobný život*, 2008, Vol. 40, No. 8, pp. 9–15.

⁹ Ibid.

contributed significantly to such convictions. Kriška said that in 1963 Suchoň had agreed with the omission of the Poet and the Double.¹⁰ By contrast, Professor Ferdinand Klinda, a leading Slovak organ virtuoso and Suchoň's distant relative and close friend, was alongside the composer Vladimir Bokes one of the most intense and convinced supporters of *The Whirlpool* having the Poet and the Double reinstated. He described Suchoň's agreement with the abridged productions as a myth:

Whoever did not comprehend that time as a 'pact with the devil' in all human, existential and artistic forms will never find the answer to the question of why Suchoň did not resist (thus allowing his music to be brought on stage or to children in schools for decades). He was under constant pressure from all sides: not only from a totalitarian system, but also from theatres and the actors, who all wanted to perform in *The Whirlpool*. Suchoň was a non-confrontational and very gracious man. He could not tell his reservations to the bright faces of the performers, who had tackled with many challenges in this demanding work. He rather suffered alone. *The Whirlpool* was his dearest child, perhaps because, in addition to joy, it caused him so much pain.¹¹

In a deeply personal study, Klinda gives evidence of Suchoň's lifelong inner battle and inability to achieve a sense of satisfaction and identification with *The Whirlpool*. He states that Suchoň's satisfaction was not complete because the message of the triumph of good and cathartic power of art, which he valued above all, remained silenced and was at best present only on the margins and in allegories:

The theme of *The Whirlpool* often resonated in our conversations and even insistently returned as an *ostinato*. This meant that Suchoň did not consider this affair closed. He still suffered from the injustice of the intervention into his artistic freedom, a lack of understanding from others and also his own remorse at his consent to a compromise.¹²

The authors of the production made in Bratislava did not have the ambition to present the work in its "preoriginal" form and close the case of *The Whirlpool*, even though no ideological pressures prevented them from doing so. This only happened ten years later, on the occasion of the centenary of Suchoň's birth in the State Opera in Banská Bystrica. The composer Vladimir Bokes reconstructed the original score with the financial assistance of Wuppertal. It was a complicated job: passages that had become the target of ideological intervention had been crossed out, taped over or torn out, so he had to completely recompose some of them. The dramatically concentrated production, directed by the renowned Roman Polák and with an excellent musical rendition by Marián Vach, was able to answer many questions from the cited polemic about whether or not the original version of the work should be staged. The arguments against staging it had been built upon an empirical foundation based on a number of stage versions of *The Whirlpool*. It was stated that such a realistic and folkloristic work as *The Whirlpool* could not sustain the high stylisation

¹⁰ Compare KRIŠKA, Branislav. Krútnava alebo nevstúpiš štyrikrát do tej istej rieky. In *Slovenská hudba*, 1998, Vol. 24, Nos. 1–2, pp. 82–86.

¹¹ KLINDA, Ferdinand. Neberte nám básnika! In *Hudobný život*, 1997, Vol. 29, No. 9, pp. 4–5.

¹² *Ibid.*

and literary pathos of the framing characters. In the context of the staging traditions of the work up to that time, these doubts were largely justified; insisting on familiar ground (something which not even Jakubisko gave up) represented a more comfortable journey. This was only changed by Polák's production, which was totally bereft of folkloristic features and was instead based on relational, psychological and moral archetypes. In my opinion, this production managed to refute the hypothesis that *The Whirlpool* was less theatrically effective with the inclusion of the characters of the Poet and the Double.

Polák coped with the contradiction between the reality of the story, Suchoň's music and the symbolic provenance of the framing characters in a purely theatrical manner. He put components of anti-illusion into the production, reaching a distance from the plot and a conceptual multi-layering. He did not allow the story to take on detective features. Alienating moments (such as the entrance of "dead" Ján) emphasised the story's universality. The stage was arranged to be devoid of any natural and rustic realities, denying the possibility for the story to be interpreted in a folkloristic way, and allowing the attention of the spectator to focus on the inner meaning of the drama. The scene remained almost unchanged throughout the whole production; only simple alterations were made by the opera choir when the curtain was raised. He thus rigorously built a signal of there being a theatre within the theatre and created the position of a commentator on the plot like in ancient choirs.

This production also refuted the characterisation of *The Whirlpool* as an earthly and simple village story wherein Suchoň had merely congenially set to music the multi-layered work of Milo Urban, one of the most remarkable writers of Slovak history.¹³ Bokes's reconstruction not only brought *The Whirlpool* closer to its Christian spirit but also to man's animal essence. The power and timelessness of Suchoň's opera lies in the antagonism of the two sides of human existence. Polák generated this conflict as the central idea of his conception:

On the one hand, the opera is full of a biological, even pagan, passion. It reveals the animal instincts that we people have stored somewhere in the subconscious. On the other hand, it is an opera about Christianity, which we have consciously accepted as reasonable creatures, and it gives us a great opportunity through forgiveness to become human beings.¹⁴

Štelina's catharsis took on a strong spiritual and metaphysical dimension in Polák's psychological characterisation, fulfilling the intentions of the composer: "Ondrej, go your own way. Your wife forgave you and I forgive you." The transformation

¹³ In a study summarising the opinions of Slovak literary scholarship on the authorial poetics of Milo Urban, Viera Žemberová writes: "It is not only about the author at the intersection of romanticism and realism, expressionism and impressionism, but about the writer of prose, who through natural motifs, fatality, intuitiveness, the inner world of the complex psyche of the individual, modern social feeling and the sensory imagination of space and being in it, stood on the edge of aesthetics and philosophy (being, its meaning and values) of Slovak naturism. [...] Ján E. Bor states that the principal feature of Urban's method is a perfectly clear crystal materialisation, the materialisation of abstract things [which are] invisible [and] mental: the concretisation, dynamism and imaginism of the still active poetic soul is to him something indispensable." See ŽEMBEROVÁ, Viera. *Slovenská literárna veda o Milovi Urbanovi*. In *Biografické štúdie*. Martin: Matica slovenská, Biografický ústav, 1995.

¹⁴ POLÁK, Roman. *Slovo režiséra*. In SUCHOŇ, Eugen. *Krútnava*. Program bulletin. Banská Bystrica: Štátna opera, 2008, p. 13.

of a father who desires revenge into a man who – aware of higher principles – is able to find the strength to forgive, did not take place easily.

Štelina is not a purely positive figure; the final catharsis is not produced by emotions but by a complexity of reason. Polák's main contribution to the tradition of interpretation lies in the work's dark existential drama, which he shifted from a folk or detective story to a deep and timeless testimony about the battle between good and evil in the human soul. Regardless of whether the makers of any other production of *The Whirlpool* will go for the version with the Poet and the Double, the reconstruction and subsequent performance of the original version of the opera should be considered an important act toward the work, its creator and the ethics of art in general.

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The peripeteia of Suchoň's *The Whirlpool* comprise the most difficult and elongated case of a Slovak opera being subject to censorship. But it is not the only such case; Ján Cikker, another key member of the founding generation of modern Slovak music, had a similar experience of suffering, although not one as long and meandering. Cikker was a composer who the communist regime would officially glorify in the same way as Suchoň. However, Cikker had a difficult career, particularly in the beginning. While he had participated in the Slovak National Uprising, he had done so without the support of any political party. Thus, he experienced an ideological screening in the daunting atmosphere following the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia by coup d'état in February 1948 and lost his place as the opera dramaturge at the Slovak National Theatre. However, in following years he was a very fruitful and successful composer: his operas *Juro Jánošík* (1953) and *Beg Bajazid* (1957) were very popular with the public and critics.

In 1959 the Slovak National Theatre had planned a premiere of Cikker's third opera *Tiene* (*Shadows*), composed on the basis of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens (Cikker was also the author of the libretto). He composed this opus under the existential pressure of a life-threatening illness. The work was exceptional for the period because of its unusual theme, which had elements of mysticism, its strong religious features and unconventional musical characteristics, which included elements of the post-war Western avant-garde. The musicians involved in the production did not really sympathise with the opera's spiritual theme (the conversion of the miserly Scrooge) or the major shift from the domestic folk music they were familiar with to the opera's richly expressive musical language. After these negative reactions, Vasil Biľak, the Commissioner for Education and Culture, banned the staging of the production.¹⁵ However, he then changed his mind and both Cikker and his opera – which

¹⁵ In his memoirs Vasil Biľak mentions the circumstances of the banning of the opera: "The national artist Jan Cikker composed the opera *Shadows* on the theme of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. The National Theatre in Bratislava was preparing the work's premiere. Someone did not like it and told the Central Committee of the Communist Party about it. Pavol David, who did not read the story or the libretto of the opera, instructed me to stop the staging of the opera. It was not easy to convince the leadership of the National Theatre, the artist and the author that the opera would not have its premiere. However, I did not want to use the excuse of there being 'instructions from above'. The worst and hardest work one does is that which is not done due to one's convictions. Fortunately, comrade Cikker was not so embittered. He believed me that it was necessary to wait, and a few years later the opera had its premiere under a different name: *Mistr Skruž* [*Mister*

now bore the name *Mister Scrooge* – came under his protection.¹⁶ This change of attitude from the ideological authorities naturally damaged Cikker's reputation in the eyes of music critics. Although Cikker's operas had great success abroad, where Biľak could have not an impact on his work, the tutorial mark of the Communist Party left its mark on Cikker himself.

Two years after Cikker's death, his student Igor Berger described to what extent Cikker had been marked by the struggle for the soul of *Mister Scrooge*:

Just as Cikker concealed his ties to Second Viennese School, he also hid his faith in infernal forces. However, in *Scrooge* he showed them to the fullest. The following attack [on his work] forever marked him with shyness, timidity and distrust. Here I see a spiritual and human reversal in Cikker's work. Never after *Scrooge* did he find the courage to reveal himself so authentically. Cikker preached the path of compromise and concession. I believe that in a free spiritual climate Cikker would have evolved in his compositions in a completely different way. A humanist like him always suffered from the eternal conflict of conscience against violence. This fight tragically broke him.¹⁷

Although Cikker composed about one hundred and forty orchestral, chamber, choral and vocal compositions, his work is dominated by nine operas. Each of them had at least one Slovak staging – for instance, *Juro Jánošík* had six stagings; and *Beg Bajazid*, *Vzkriesenie (Resurrection)* and *Mister Scrooge* had three stagings – and nearly all of these were in the repertoire of the Slovak National Theatre. The only opus not in the repertoire was *Coriolanus* (1972), Cikker's sixth opera, which was based on the tragedy by William Shakespeare bearing the same name. It had its first Slovak premiere in the year of the centenary of Cikker's birth (2011) at the State Opera in Banská Bystrica. After an unsuccessful premiere in Prague at the National Theatre in 1974 and two stagings in Mannheim and Weimar, the stage life of *Coriolanus* was dormant for a long period of time. There were many reasons to this; alongside official reasons there was the difficulty of realising its staging as the dramaturgical work is fragmented into fourteen images alternating in rapid succession and taking place in different locations. The less than accommodating reception of the staging of the work by the Prague Opera when it was hosted in Bratislava did not encourage any further performances. There was, however, also a justifiable suspicion that the essential reason Slovak culture ignored this work was because of its hidden political message and the fear held by state ideological bodies that the work would be interpreted in an "inappropriate" manner.

It is a well-known fact that Cikker had a negative opinion on the entry of Warsaw Pact troops into Czechoslovakia in August 1968. As in Shakespeare's original, politics had a strong presence in Cikker's work as well. The musicologist Jana Lengová has classified Cikker's *Coriolanus* as a case of "music as autobiography"¹⁸, where the

Scrooge]. See BILAK, Vasil. *Paměti Vasila Biľaka* (Vol.1). Editor Jindřich Bílovský. Praha: Agentura CESTY, 1991.

¹⁶ The world premiere of *Mister Scrooge* took place in Kassel, Germany, in 1963. The first Slovak performance (in the Slovak National Theatre) followed a few weeks later.

¹⁷ BERGER, Igor. Spomienky – nielen z partitúry. In *Hudobný život*, 1991, Vol. 23, p. 15.

¹⁸ LENGOVÁ, Jana. Cikker a jeho *Coriolanus*. In *Slovenská hudba*, 2012, Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 51–66.

author reflects on events that have touched him deeply, although this is not in the intimate sphere (as in the composition of *Mister Scrooge*) but rather in the reflection of historical development and its impact on human beings. At the time of its creation (1970–1972), *Coriolanus* – which is now experiencing a comeback – was not considered to be one of Shakespeare’s major works. Lengová has deduced that the “sensitivity of social consciousness in the early stages of [political] normalisation led Cikker to present what was happening through parallels in the complex story of *Coriolanus*.”¹⁹ An explanation of the political obstacles concerning the work’s performance was presented in the premiere’s bulletin by the creator of its first Slovak musical performance, conductor Marián Vach, who was coincidentally Cikker’s student when *Coriolanus* was composed. Concerns about the totalitarian regime were also displayed in the 2011 staging of the work by Roman Polák in Banská Bystrica.

In Polák’s version, *Coriolanus* became a visually expressive and ideologically marked political theatre. It pulled the audience mercilessly into the story, brought back memories and initiated connotations with multiple meanings. Already the first scene – the lynching of Menenius in the streets of Rome – where enraged women, provoked by the tribunes Sicinius and Brutus, almost kill the respected patrician with their handbags, evokes memories of pensioners defending the honour and righteousness of Vladimír Mečiar with their umbrellas.²⁰ *Coriolanus*’s consistent opposition to the plebeian masses, present in Cikker’s work as well as in Shakespeare, was escalated by the director to the hatred of a strong solitary individual towards the faceless masses. Sicinius and Brutus, a pair of opportunistic intriguers who in Polák’s rendition are synchronised Brechtian figures in gray suits with red ties on stage, unscrupulously manipulate the human “herd” and epitomise spineless politicians from all periods in history. In *Coriolanus*’s tribunal scene, the dehumanised atmosphere of the court trials of the 1950s is strongly felt: a strong personality is accused of betraying the people, and the masses, not having any opinion, are in the role of witnesses. There was no way the communist authorities could allow this work to see the light of day in the context of “normalised”²¹ theatre.

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On 28 January 1936 Dmitri Shostakovich read some devastating criticism of his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* which was published in *Pravda* magazine under the title *Chaos Instead of Music*. This article condemned him to the position of being an enemy of the people. He knew he would not get an opportunity for a fair hearing and he knew his very life was in the balance. Suchoň and Cikker were obviously not risking their lives: the Czechoslovak communist authorities were not abso-

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ In this context, Polák’s production of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* in Martin’s Theatre of the Slovak National Uprising should also be mentioned. It had its premiere in February 1997 – i.e. in the period when Vladimír Mečiar was Slovak prime minister. Shortly after the premiere, the dissatisfaction among artists with the state of democracy in the country led to actors going on strike. The political and critical dimensions of Polák’s production have been clearly identified by Dagmar Podmaková. See PODMAKOVÁ, Dagmar. Veľký projekt malého súboru. In *Teatro*, 1997, Vol. 3, Nos. 7–8, pp. 4–5.

²¹ „Normalization“ was an official euphemism used for the socio-political process that started after the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

lute rulers like Stalin, who, according to many sources, was the actual author of the article condemning Shostakovich which was published as an editorial. Both composers were given another chance. Like many talented citizens living under socialism in Czechoslovakia, they were confronted with making a “pact with the devil” and had to fight for their own souls and the soul of their work.

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SUMMARY

This study deals with the peripeteia of composition and stage interpretation of Slovak opera at the hands of communist censorship in the second half of the 20th century, focusing on Eugene Suchoň's *The Whirlpool* and Jan Cikker's *Mister Scrooge* and *Coriolanus*. Both composers were respected and supported by the official establishment. This fact takes their fight for the soul of their compositions and the implied compromises into the wider moral and ethical context of the period.