
THE CHAMBER OPERA: AN ATTEMPT AT AN ALTERNATIVE OPERA THEATRE SCENE

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Abstract: This paper describes in detail the artistic, ideological and existential peripety of the Chamber Opera (Komorná opera), which was established in May 1986 and which closed down in June 1999. The paper summarises one chapter in the history of Slovak opera theatre, which besides several positive moments, was marked by unclarified competencies and the unfulfilled and often mutually contradicting artistic ambitions of personalities which formed the Chamber Opera's dramaturgy and production during its 13 years of existence.

The term "chamber opera" is generally understood in two different ways: as a small opera ensemble consisting of a chamber orchestra, a small choir and soloists of the main voice types, and as the genre designating a musical stage work for a small opera ensemble.¹ From Around the 1920s the chamber opera genre started to develop in a different way from being just a miniaturised version of larger classical opera. Chamber opera developed as an independent and innovative type of musical theatre (e.g. in the works of Igor Stravinsky, Paul Hindemith, Dmitri Shostakovich, Benjamin Britten and Carl Orff). The term "chamber opera" in the sense of being a genre was explicitly used by Benjamin Britten for the first time in connection with his work *The Rape of Lucretia* in 1940. The contemporary groupings known as "chamber operas" are usually formed as an alternative to mainstream-oriented permanent theatres. These groupings focus on selected chamber works or they come up with their own projects which they have written themselves. In the last two decades institutions known as "Kammeroper" have arisen mainly in German-language areas. However, their repertoires are not meant for opera connoisseurs so much as audiences who come to see entertaining productions, musicals and shows.

The organisational peripety of the Chamber Opera

The Chamber Opera was established in May 1986. The first artistic head of the ensemble was Jozef Revallo and in 1988 Marián Vach became the chief conductor. The opera was established with the aim of creating room for an alternative opera theatre both in terms of dramaturgy and implementation. The dramaturgy intended to focus on presenting marginal periods of style which were sporadically presented by the existing opera houses in Bratislava, Banská Bystrica and Košice (e.g. pre-romantic opera and productions from the 20th century). At the time of its establishment, the Chamber Opera declared cooperating with Slovak composers and motivating the

¹ Seeger, Horst. *Musiklexikon*. Leipzig : Erster Band, VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1966, p. 454.



The Chamber Opera of the Slovak Philharmonic. Gaetano Donizetti: *Maniere teatrali*. Premiere 10 April 1987. In the middle František Zvarík. A photo from the Theatre Institute's archive.

emergence of new original works (a plan which was not fulfilled during the existence of the theatre) to be significant features of dramaturgy. On the level of implementation, the Chamber Opera had the ambition of presenting unconventional (and in the Slovak context “innovative”) poetics of production and giving an opportunity to young authors and directors who were not from the field of opera to realise their potential.

The Chamber Opera came to life with the will and blessing of the highest political and government bodies (at that time the Minister of Culture was Miroslav Válek). However, in practical terms this did not make the beginnings of the Chamber Opera any easier. The ensemble was incorporated into the Slovak Philharmonic (its director Ladislav Mokrý was a supporter of the idea of the Chamber Opera) and not into the Slovak National Theatre, into which it should have been incorporated. The functioning of the Chamber Opera was strongly complicated by the lack of its own space for performance and rehearsals and the lack of stage technology; it alternately performed in the small halls of the House of the Revolutionary Union Movement (Dom ROH), Studio S (Štúdio S), the Theatre Studio of the Academy of Performing Arts (Divadelné štúdio VŠMU), Moyzes Hall of the Slovak Philharmonic (Moyzesova sieň Slovenskej filharmónie) and the House of Culture in Dúbravka (Dom kultúry v Dúbravke). This “travelling” and the insufficient promotion of the projects had an unfavourable impact upon the size of the audiences and resulted in a low number of repeat performances.

At the beginning of 1990, a time of social, political and economic problems, the legitimacy of several artistic institutions was reassessed. The Chamber Opera was

among those whose existence was endangered. The opera's existence under the auspices of the Slovak Philharmonic seemed to be unsustainable after Ladislav Mokřý, its leading personality, left the position of director of the Slovak Philharmonic. The opera was not incorporated into the Slovak National Theatre because the theatre's management did not want to incorporate it. Miroslav Fischer was the first artistic chief of the Chamber Opera after November 1989, and later on he became a huge proponent of the idea of incorporating the Chamber Opera into the organisational structure of the Slovak National Theatre. However, he stated:

After its incorporation, the Chamber Opera would be in a similar position as it is in union with the Slovak Philharmonic. It would become an unwanted burden. We see the immediate solution to this serious problem in the temporary independence of the Chamber Opera as a theatrical institution.²

The Chamber Opera operated independently from 1 July of the same year and was an autonomous institution until the end of 1996. This stage of its existence was characterised by continuing problems with finding space for performances. Thanks to the political changes which led to the opening of state borders, the ensemble (mainly its orchestra body under the leadership of Marián Vach) focused on performing abroad. Several concerts and some productions were created directly at the request of foreign artistic agencies for Austrian, German, Swiss, Italian and Spanish audiences. Herein there arose a paradox: the theatrical production was subsidised by the state with the argument that the Slovak operatic environment would be enriched with a new poetics of production and a selected repertoire, yet local audiences saw the opera's performances only rarely.

The situation did not change even after the incorporation of the Chamber Opera into the structure of the Slovak National Theatre on 1 January 1997. The Slovak National Theatre was clearly aware of the disunity of the merger and they did not put the Chamber Opera into their programme. The occasional performances of the Chamber Opera did not take place at the Slovak National Theatre (in the discussions in the press, people were expressing their expectations regarding the new Slovak National Theatre building) but on temporary stages (the *Nová scéna* Theatre, the stage of the Slovak Folk Art Collective in Rusovce and the Moyzes Hall of the Slovak Philharmonic). Even though it formally became the fourth ensemble of the Slovak National Theatre, the Chamber Opera continued to focus on external activities and performed only sporadically in the local environment. Opera critic Miloslav Blahynka objected to this in an internal evaluation of the theatre in the 1997/1998 season:

Even though it is often said that the opera orchestra has to be pulled out of the "pit" and be allowed to show its quality on the concert stage, the problem with the Chamber Opera is completely different: the number of concerts given for commercial reasons (in Slovak and Austrian spa towns, churches, etc.) is beyond the boundary where it can be considered as refining the artistic qualities of the orchestra and shows that the Chamber Opera has a purely commercial purpose.

² FISCHER, Miroslav. *Budúcnosť Komornej opery. O stave a perspektívach operného súboru*. In *Literárny týždenník*, Vol. 2, p. 15, 6 July 1990.

The Chamber Opera was disbanded on 30 June 1999. Its union with the Slovak National Theatre lasted two and a half seasons. The possibility of dissolving the Chamber Opera at the beginning of 1990 had been accompanied by a rather widely publicised discussion. However, when the opera finally finished its activities after 13 years of existence, the matter was not discussed much in the daily press or in professional journals.

The organisational and spatial problems of the project cannot be seen as the only obstacles to the successful functioning or longer life of the Chamber Opera. There were problems in the conceptual and dramaturgical formation and the interpretation and production results of the ensemble. A controversial point in the policy statement of the founders of the Chamber Opera was the definition of the target audience. In 1986 an ideologically unquestionable argument was the orientation of the Chamber Opera towards young audiences and its accompanying moral function as well as its intention to enrich cultural life outside Bratislava through touring activity.³ Later on this definition of the target audience became problematic.

In 1990, when the existence of the Chamber Opera was being discussed, Miloslav Blahynka, the editor of *Literárny týždenník* (The Literary Weekly) initiated a debate. Opera critic Pavel Unger contributed to the debate as follows:

From the point of view of understanding, the Chamber Opera is a discerning and super-structural genre demanding a prepared audience and not an inexperienced one. The role of the Chamber Opera cannot be that of substituting education and spontaneous aesthetic education. It has to cultivate and refine the level the audience has already reached.⁴

As has been already mentioned, the Chamber Opera counted on foreign audiences rather than Slovak ones after the fall of the Iron Curtain under the auspices of the argument of representing Slovak culture. This could be the reason why its ultimate downfall in the Slovak opera theatre network did not provoke a voice of opposition in the cultural sphere.

Another obstacle to the artistic progress of the Chamber Opera was its incomplete ensemble, which did not have any distinctive singers. The members of the ensemble were chosen in a preceding audition, which was attended by 54 candidates – fresh graduates from art schools as well as soloists from operas in the cities of Košice and Banská Bystrica. With the argument of not weakening the ensembles active outside Bratislava (“stealing” the artists of already existing institutions was one of the objections voiced by opponents to the establishment of a fourth Slovak opera theatre) the Chamber Opera preferred fresh graduates from the Academy of Performing Arts. Besides other things, the particularity of the dramaturgy (which targeted innovative titles: one of the most important points of the artistic programme set by the Chamber Opera at the time of its establishment) also limited the number of soloists and their vocal capabilities.

³ The first project already had an educational character. It was called *Cesty operou* (*Journeys through Opera*) and it was a composed series of operatic arias from Gluck to contemporary composers. The performances were accompanied by a running commentary and illustrated by photos of the composers. The Chamber Opera performed the project in small towns in western Slovakia.

⁴ UNGER, Pavel. Kriesiť či vypnúť? In *Literárny týždenník*, Vol. 2, 17 August 1990.



The Chamber Opera of the Slovak Philharmonic. Carl Orff: *The Wise Woman* (*Skrotenie zlého muža*). Premiere 25 and 26 March 1988. From left: Juraj Ďurdiak (Second Vagabond), Juraj Peter (Muleteer), Peter Šubert (King) and Mária Eliášová (Wise Woman). A photo from the Theatre Institute's archive.

It is almost unbelievable how much has been done for the acting preparations and what great results it has brought. [...] However, from the vocal point of view, the ensemble seems less accomplished and impressive. Leaving aside the predominant solid musicality, altogether the voices of the Chamber Opera are featureless; they lack colour, they are neutral in expression, and some of them are insufficiently mature from the point of view of aesthetics and technique.⁵

While this appraisal by theatre scholar Ján Jaborník was made only at the Chamber Opera's beginnings, no superlatives were used in evaluating the vocalic level of the ensemble in the following seasons either. The most significant figures of the Chamber Opera were its core members Ladislav Neshyba and Ivica Neshybová. Other names associated with the Chamber Opera included Eva Šeniglová, Miroslava Marčeková, Mária Eliášová, Juraj Ďurdiak and František Ďuriač. In the later stage of its existence, when the opera's dramaturgy focused on presenting titles of *Bel Canto* literature, which were unknown in Slovakia, the ensemble invited guest artists to sing the difficult parts. Those artists were in most cases soloists from the Slovak National Theatre Opera or the *Nová scéna* Theatre.

⁵ JABORNÍK, Ján. Hľadanie ako devíza. K činnosti Komornej opery Slovenskej filharmónie. In *Pravda*, 22 November 1988.



The Chamber Opera of the Slovak Philharmonic. Christoph Willibald Gluck: *The Chinese Women* (Číňanky). Premiere 5 and 6 October 1987. In the middle: Miroslava Marčeková (Tangia). A photo from the Theatre Institute's archive.

The dramaturgical and production profile of the theatre

The Chamber Opera, in the real sense of the word and in terms of the impression of compositions and demands made upon the orchestra, ensemble and soloists, is represented by classical and baroque opera (the 17th and 18th centuries), avant-garde music of the 20th century and relevant titles of contemporary opera production. Before November 1989, when Jozef Revallo was in charge, the ensemble prepared six premieres and stuck relatively strongly to the specified genre. The inaugural production of the Chamber Opera was Donizetti's buffa *Viva la mamma* – in Slovakia known as *Theatrical Quirks* (*Maniere teatrali*) – and was performed in 1987. This was not a genuine performance of chamber opera so much as a noticeable (and, for some critics, even an insensitive) intervention in a miscellaneous model wherein the a chamber opera structure was created. By means of this new structure, the young ensemble could present its own artistic programme through a parody of operatic life as well as of traditional opera. *Maniere teatrali* made a positively shocking impression by delivering the knowledge that opera theatre could create fully-fledged acting performances which could be measured by the same criteria as in drama.

The hyperbolising satire of afflictions which are typical (not only) for the theatrical backstage can cause bursts of laughter among the audience. Critics unanimously appreciated the thorough work of the actors, the sharp portrayal of character types, the fresh humour, the originality, imaginativeness, communicativeness and up-to-date production, which was freed from the opera cliché. “[Jozef] Bednárík understood Donizetti's work not only as a farcical and humorous story. For Bednárík it was

at the same time an updatable critical statement, which opposes everything that is not peculiar to art and unacceptable in performing art."⁶

However, several critics, who otherwise appreciated this production, which was full of punch lines performed by excellent actors, expressed their objections to the supremacy of the directing part restricting the magic of the music: "Opera, be it in a traditional or experimental spirit, remains a theatre of music and it refuses to play second fiddle as a matter of principle even when updated and when the unconventional requirements of the director are concerned."⁷

The second premiere of the Chamber Opera was led by Jozef Bednárík's team as well. Similar to *Maniere teatrali*, Bednárík asserted the poetics of a synthetic theatre in the double production of Gluck's *The Chinese Women* (*Le cinesi*, in Slovak *Číňanky*) and Falla's *Master Peter's Puppet Show* (*El retablo de maese Pedro*, in Slovak *Bábky majstra Pedra*) in 1988. By internally connecting the two, both stylistically and in terms of genre different one-act plays, he achieved a single stage unit recomposed by theatrical means. Both parts of the evening were united by the idea of puppet theatre. While in *The Chinese Women* the director used puppetry as an enlivening illustration without an apparent function, in *Master Peter's Puppet Show* (which Falla intended to be a puppet opera) puppetry became a set part of the story. Another feature which both pieces of art had in common was the very nature of the exposition. While *The Chinese Women* was conceived as the enlivenment of a forgotten score, *Master Peter's Puppet Show* was like leafing through a well-known novel. Interpretation oscillated between different dimensions – theatrical illusion, its disruption (the "dropping out" of characters from their roles), the "theatre within a theatre" principle and triple anti-illusoriness (the usage of puppetry in a "theatre within a theatre" scene). There are several reasons why the use of ballet proved itself so successful in the entire production: it objectifies the content of the story, it expresses the feelings of the characters and it functions as a decorative enlivening moment.

The critique of Bednárík's *The Chinese Women* and *Master Peter's Puppet Show* was similar to that of *Maniere teatrali*. Bednárík was highly praised for his thoughtful and (in terms of acting) well elaborated, live and witty approach but was criticised for suppressing the role of the musical part. The first reproaches are now emerging related to the recycling of the poetics of direction.

With all due respect to theatrical fascination, Bednárík's second production in the Chamber Opera, in comparison to the first one, has shown that the river of such methods and means has more or less dried out; they can only be varied. Both productions are huge inspirations with no doubt. However, it seems that they were hiding the pitfalls of dead ends.⁸

In hindsight, Jozef Bednárík's productions in the Chamber Opera were not only a prelude to his successful career as an opera director; they seem to be the first noticeable step towards a change in Slovak opera makers' viewing of the opera scores,

⁶ BLAHYNKA, Miloslav. Donizettiho *Maniere teatrali* v Komornej opera Slovenskej filharmónie v Bratislave. In *Hudobný život*, Vol. 19, p. 11, 10 June 1987.

⁷ UNGER, Pavel. Donizetti na nepoznanie. In *Film a divadlo*, Vol. 31, No. 20, p. 12, 14 September 1987.

⁸ JABORNÍK, Ján. Hľadanie ako devíza. K činnosti Komornej opery Slovenskej filharmónie. In *Pravda*, 22 November 1988.

which in Bednárík's interpretation was identical with the programme of total synthetic theatre.

It is primarily due to *Maniere teatralei* that the Chamber Opera has remained inseparably linked to the process of theatricalising Slovak opera. Ten years later theatre scholar Ladislav Čavojský expressed his considerable regrets in a review of Weill's *Seven Deadly Sins* (*Die sieben Todsünden*, in Slovak *Sedem smrteľných hriechov*) in 1997:

Actually, only Jozef Bednárík, who was a newcomer to opera, just like [the Chamber Opera] itself, brought with his first production the hope that something would also happen soon in our opera: the hope that we had gained an avant-garde and experimental opera studio. Only Bednárík spoke ironically about theatrical quirks. Other directors legalised all the bad habits of opera production.⁹

The third premiere of the Chamber Opera was Carl Orff's *The Wise Woman* (*Die Kluge*), presented as *The Taming of a Bad Man* (*Skrotenie zlého muža*), which was performed in 1988. The Revallo management invited Peter J. Oravec, the operatic director of the Nová scéna Theatre to undertake the third premiere. Even though his work conception was more moderate and less dynamic than the exploding theatrical shapes of Bednárík, it mostly had a positive effect on critics:

The performance does not have such a significant visual aspect as was presented by Jozef Bednárík in the previous premieres of the ensemble. However, in contrast to [Bednárík's] "directing" productions, [Oravec] confirms the belief that even without the revolutionary interpretation of produced works it is indeed possible to make a synthetic opera in a modern sense. Despite its withdrawal from an avant-garde position, the ensemble preserves the poetics instilled in them by Bednárík. This poetics has features also found in playful student-style theatre, but it differs in its shift from spontaneous improvisation to an elaborated purpose.¹⁰

Oravec conceived the performance as a "stylised monastic dramatised Biblical story,"¹¹ dressing the musicians in monastic habits. Even the conductor, Marián Vach, who was in a historical costume, occasionally participated in the happenings onstage; it was as if the ensemble wanted to confirm the impression of a consciously constructed continuity of performance through this anti-illusory performance element.

The third director at the Chamber Opera was Marián Chudovský. He was a young director with the reputation of being an ambitious producer of modern opera theatre. At that time, he had experienced a noticeable four-year season in the opera in Košice and an ambitious debut in the Slovak National Theatre (Verdi's *Rigoletto*, 1987). At the Chamber Opera, Chudovský prepared the Slovak premiere of one of the most remarkable titles of chamber opera literature, Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* (in Slo-

⁹ ČAVOJSKÝ, Ladislav. K siedmym hriechom pridali ôsmy. In *Literárny týždenník*, Vol. 10, No. 45, p. 15, 6 November 1997.

¹⁰ ZUZKIN, E. (BLAHO, Vladimír). Hľadanie vlastnej tváre. In *Lud*, 12 April 1988.

¹¹ VAJDA, Igor. Do tretice všetko dobré. In *Nové slovo*, 14 April 1988.



The Chamber Opera of the Slovak Philharmonic. Benjamin Britten: *The Rape of Lucretia* (*Lukrécia*). Premiere 12 and 13 October 1988. A photo from the Theatre Institute's archive.

vak titled *Lukrécia*).¹² It is an ancient story about a raped Roman woman who commits suicide. Her suicide galvanised all Roman men and the entire nation to free themselves from the ruling Etruscans. Chudovský approached this story as a timeless protest against war, violence and despotism. In this spirit Chudovský designed his universalising stage conception. The production emphasised not only the symbolism of light and colour (the usage of mirror surfaces, the contrast of gloomy black and innocent white and dramatic red lighting) but also the theatrical expressiveness that was already heralded in the Slovak translation by Ján Štrasser. Alongside the stage features, the director also accentuated the dynamism of the originally static commentators designed on the model of the ancient choir. The shift from the epic to dramatism was not evaluated explicitly positively. Despite this, the overall acceptance of *The Rape of Lucretia* was favourable: "Chudovský's interpretation of *The Rape of Lucretia* is unconventional and non-conformist. We do not need to agree with all directing interventions. However, we cannot deprive him of the fact that he, by all means, affects the conscience of his contemporaries."¹³

While *The Rape of Lucretia* can be considered as an ambitious act of dramaturgy and production, Paisiello's 1989 *Imaginary Astrologers* (*Gli astrologi immaginari*, in Slovak *Astrológovia*), one of hundreds of titles that this prolific composer had composed, most of which were covered with the dust of obscurity, was generally rejected by

¹² The original title is *The Rape of Lucretia*. Into Slovak it is usually translated as *Zneuctenie Lukrécie*. However, the Chamber Opera introduced it by the simplified title *Lukrécia*.

¹³ LENGOVÁ, Jana. *Lukrécia*—príbeh o zneuctenej Rimanke. In *Hudobný život*, 1988, Vol. 20, No. 23, p. 5.

critics. This piece of art was accused of being a shallow and random dramaturgical choice. Chudovský tried to fight against the weaknesses of the work by updating it into a farcical form of a failed TV broadcast from the opera; however, this was without success. In relation to *Imaginary Astrologers* and the previous double evening of the one-act Slovak compositions – Igor Dibák's *Candlestick* (*Svietnik*) and Rudolf Geri's *Wardrobe* (*Skriňa*) – directed by Blažena Hončarivová in 1989, the critics expressed serious objections:

It has been proved that despite the contradicting results the higher standard of the first seasons was rather the work of one man (director Bednárík), than the overall quality of the ensemble. The ensemble has to find its own image, again [...] This image is probably the closest to a prankish student opera theatre. However, it cannot serve as a permanent stepping stone.¹⁴

The falling curve of the artistic level of the Chamber Opera's production could not be stopped even by the first projects after November 1989. Mozart's early work *Lucio Silla*, performed in 1990, should have been the ideological justification of the existence of the Chamber Opera. With the words of Ivan Hronec, an incoming dramaturge, in addition to presenting distinctive chamber titles, the theatre wanted to present "the search for new ways of adaptation and the production of such works which were in their original form uninteresting for the stage."¹⁵ Although the approach of Karel Brožek, a puppetry director, was successful in *Lucio Silla*, its shortened version of 110 minutes cast doubts upon the chosen path of the Chamber Opera. Brožek had found an original solution to the framing of the story, which took place in historical Rome by adding the character of a genius child. Instead of playing with puppets, this child had to compose an opera and his imaginary world is intertwined with the world of the musicalised composition: "However, besides the witty framing and usage of punch lines in the story, the rest (95% of the performance) is only an attempt to offset the deficiency in musical performance by means of direction."¹⁶

When choosing a title, the dramaturgy did not take into consideration the relation between the vocal demands of the work and the stylistic and technical disposition of the core vocalic ensemble, and this was not only the case of *Lucio Silla*. This obstacle, which stood in the way of the artistic fulfilment of the dramaturgical innovation, was mentioned very often when evaluating the Chamber Opera. Puccini's *Sister Angelica* (*Suor Angelica*, in Slovak *Sestra Angelika*), which had its premiere with Poulenc's *The Human Voice* (*La voix humaine*, in Slovak *Ludský hlas*) in 1990 and the following Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* in 1991 provoked the question of whether the dramaturgy understood the term "chamber" only in the sense of length, the one-act performance of the title or rather in the absence of the choir. Moreover, the chamber opera oriented and artistically immature ensemble was fighting an uneven battle with the demands of Puccini's score.

The brushing up of forgotten pre-romantic repertoire (Pergolesi's *The Servant Mistress* [*La serva padrona*, in Slovak *Slúžka paňou*], 1991; Gazzaniga's *Don Giovanni*, 1992)

¹⁴ TOMAN, Vladimír. Skromné zastúpenie súborov. In *Lud*, 20 October 1989.

¹⁵ HRONEC, Ivan. Komorná opera – ako alternatíva. In *Dialóg*, Vol. 2, No. 4, p. 9, 13 February 1990.

¹⁶ ZUZKIN, E. Komorná opera po starom. In *Lud*, 21 February 1990.



The Chamber Opera of the Slovak Philharmonic. Ruggiero Leoncavallo: *La bohème*. Premiere 13 December 1988. Denisa Hamarová (Eufemia) and Peter Šubert (Schaunard). A photo from the Theatre Institute's archive.

could have been one of the acceptable directions of the Chamber Opera under the condition that the revival would happen in a fresh and unconventional approach to the old model. Here there occurred a new obstacle in the way of the highly discussed programme of the Chamber Opera: while Jozef Revallo had accentuated the diversity of the poetics of production, when Miroslav Fischer was the artistic director the Chamber Opera became the theatre of a single director. While Fischer was in charge (1990–1996) almost the entire production was made by Fischer himself. This monopoly by Fischer contradicted the key purpose of the Chamber Opera, which was to create an alternative theatrical space. Moreover, a realistic poetics of production was characteristic for the 60-year-old Miroslav Fischer: his production was stereotypical and did not promise further development. In comic operas he offered “a presentation of old, well-known and proved manners”¹⁷ (*La serva padrona*) or “farcicality with the repetition of some well-known naive expressive plays”¹⁸ (*Gianni Schicchi*). One of the few of Fischer's successful works in the Chamber Opera was Britten's *Albert Herring* (1993). This consistent and well-expressed piece of work in terms of caricature could be encountered by a slovak audience only sporadically because this production was created at the request of a foreign agency and was rarely performed in Slova-

¹⁷ UNGER, Pavel. Stredy v minidivadielku. In *Hudobný život*, 1991, Vol. 23, No. 23, p. 6.

¹⁸ UNGER, Pavel. V slepej uličke. In *Smena*, 10 April 1991.

kia. Asides from Miroslav Fischer, only opera director Pavol Smolík asserted himself (and only in peripheral projects): in 1992 with the dramaturgy and production in the particularly controversial production of *Rita and the Blind* (*Rita a slepci*), which compiled Donizetti's opera *Rita* and Offenbach's *Two Blind Beggars* (*Les deux aveugles*) into a tawdry farce, and in the not very imaginative production of two Slovak opera fairytales – Hatrík's *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* (*Statočný cínový vojačik*) and Krák's *King Matthias and the Shepherd* (*Kráľ Matiaš a bača*) in 1996. In this production context, the visually powerful, impressionistic and symbolic double production of the one-act opera *Ariadna* by Bohuslav Martinů and the dramatised scene music of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (in Slovak titled *Sen noci, kedy je leto v polovici*) in 1994, directed by the puppetry director Pavel Uher looked like a welcome piece of dramaturgical, production and poetical refreshment, and was performed not only with vocals and motion but also with elements of black and luminescent theatre.

In the mid-1990s, the Chamber Opera was marked by a radical dramaturgical turn ideologically bound to the figure of Jaroslav Blaho. In that time the dramaturgy reoriented itself to the 19th century, which had little to do with the chamber opera genre. Jaroslav Blaho explained the change in the orientation of the dramaturgy as follows:

The market conditions after 1989 stopped the dramaturgical search in the 17th, 18th and partially in the 20th century. On the other hand, they opened a wide space for the "commercial" dramaturgy of the 19th century: less-known opera titles of the world romanticism and verism.¹⁹

In coproduction with the Zvolen Castle Plays (*Zámocké hry zvolenské*) and Jaroslav Blaho as their artistic director, the Chamber Opera presented the Slovak premiere of three of Donizetti's tragedies: *Lucrezia Borgia* (1994), *Anna Bolena* (1995) and *Caterina Cornaro* (1997). It is self-evident that the Chamber Opera's main contribution to this repertoire was its orchestra. The soloist cast consisted mainly of visiting artists (Iveta Matyášová, Alojz Harant, Anna Starostová and Ida Kirilová). The director of all three of Donizetti's Slovak premieres was Miroslav Fischer, who proved his talent for modelling the tight dramatic form and the punch line situations and characters in opera dramas on the stage of the "big" opera (the Slovak National Theatre). However, in the case of *Bel Canto* trilogy this can be seen only in the first part – in Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*. In *Anna Bolena* an uninventive static character predominated, and above all the work with the ensemble was undervalued as theatrical indiscipline ruined the dramatic atmosphere. There were several reasons why the theatrical effect of *Caterina Cornaro* was spoiled. For the great romantic drama, the stage of the Moyzes Hall of the Slovak Philharmonic was inappropriate. Ladislav Čavojský ironically said that on this stage "the performance looked like a fairly amateurish piece of art."²⁰

The last production of the Chamber Opera was the Slovak premiere in 1998 of Leoncavallo's *La bohème*, which is a less-known version of a story made famous by Giacomo Puccini's opera of the same name. Its stage adaptation was prepared again by the "recycling" Miroslav Fischer. However, he was also limited by the space of

¹⁹ BÁBIKOVÁ, Mária. Snímame hriechy minulosti dramaturgie. In *Javisko*, 1998, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 6-8.

²⁰ ČAVOJSKÝ, Ladislav. Opera bez javiska. In *Literárny týždenník*, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 15, 2 January 1998.

the Moyzes Hall, which was suitable for an experimental type of production but not for a traditional realistic type of work. Despite this, the combination of the inventive choice of dramaturgy and the vocally well-featured foursome of protagonists (Denisa Šlepkovská, Alojz Harant, Eva Šeniglová and Peter Šubert) was positively received by the audience as well as by critics. Pavel Unger stated:

Even though Leoncavallo's *La bohème* did not offer a definite answer to the direction of the Chamber Opera in the Slovak National Theatre (it was an alternative in dramaturgy but not so much in the poetics of production – although this would be more useful), silencing the potential of this ensemble would be a sin.²¹

This sin was committed on 30 June 1999 when the Chamber Opera ended its activity as a theatrical institution. The need for an alternative chamber opera as a theatrical form did not vanish because of the closing down of this institutionalised platform. The establishment of the Association for Contemporary Opera (Združenie pre súčasnú operu) in the SKRAT theatre can serve as an example. In 2000 and 2001 this theatre presented four premieres by contemporary Slovak authors and various projects of alternative theatrical ensembles. The most striking was Solovic's and Klimáček's *Cirrostratus – Opera in a Boeing* (*Cirrostratus – opera v Boeingu*) in the GUnaGU Theatre (Divadlo GUnaGU) in 2003.

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²¹ UNGER, Pavel. Bohéma – známy titul, neznáme dielo. In *SME*, Vol. 6, No. 293, p. 8, 18 December 1998.

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