

# ”Cultural Exchange“ on the Stage of the Slovak National Theatre at the Time of the Slovak Republic (1939 – 1945)

Branko Ladič

*Department of Musicology, Faculty of Arts,  
Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia*

**Abstract:** New social-political conditions related to the creation of the independent Slovak Republic (1939 – 1945) at the time of the Second World War brought remarkable changes in the area of culture. Passing over the changes in the internal musical culture, which involve independence (including the newly formed Slovak Radio and its orchestra, and subsequently the Slovak National Theatre) and the birth of a new cultural institutions (e.g. the birth of the State Conservatory in 1941), the “cultural exchange” between the “allied” states was very important. This “cultural exchange” enriched through the appearance of orchestras, chamber ensembles, choirs, and soloists – the instrumentalists and singers – the cultural life of the capital Bratislava. The visiting artists came from the countries of the Axis states, or their allies. Despite the aggravating circumstances during the war, there were nevertheless very considerable events (the majority of the names of the artists is still well known in the cultural consciousness of Europe). On the stage of Slovak National Theatre, besides the appearance of the guest soloists or conductors, the cultural exchange took its form in the bringing of operatic novelties from „allied“ states to the scene: this included 4 operas during the war – *Peer Gynt* (1941) by the German Werner Egk (1901 – 1983), *Salambo* (1942) by Bulgarian composer Veselin Stoyanov (1902 – 1969), *La farsa amorosa* (1943) by Riccardo Zandonai (1883 – 1944) and *Ero s onoga svijeta* [Ero The Joker, 1943] by Croatian composer Jakov Gotovac (1895 – 1982). In this contribution I want to introduce these operas, their artistic realisations and perception in the cultural life of Bratislava.

**Keywords:** Slovak National Theatre, operatic dramaturgy, cultural exchange, Štefan Hoza, Werner Egk, Veselin Stoyanov, Riccardo Zandonai, Jakov Gotovac

## The Slovak National Theatre in 1939 – 1945

In 1939 – 1945, the Slovak National Theatre (SND) was an institution of cardinal importance – it was the only professional theatre in the whole state,

and its aim was to cultivate musical dramatic works. Although it had been in existence for twenty years when the First Czechoslovak Republic was dissolved, the "Slovakness" of the Slovak National Theatre posed a major problem. The Slovakisation of the institution was one of the greatest achievements of the new regime in cultural politics. Slovakisation was carried out, with various intensity, in the field of economics (the state interfered with the economic matters of the institution, but it figured as an entrepreneur, not as its founder), dramaturgy (all operas were staged in Slovak, so it was necessary to hastily translate the whole repertoire into Slovak) and human resources (but only to a certain extent – the young Slovak culture was not yet prepared to staff the theatre without foreign, especially Czech, help).

The political turmoil in the autumn of 1938 brought to an end the entire period, and the important one, in which the director Antonín Drašar (1880 – 1939), the conductor Karel Nedbal (1888 – 1964), and the stage director Viktor Šulc (1897 – 1945?) developed a new approach to staging operas in the 1930s, based on their inclination toward symbolic theatre, often with a political message, contrary to the conventional illustrativeness that dominated the theatre at that time (the most significant productions were *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* by Dmitri Shostakovitch (1935) and Ludwig van Beethoven's *Fidelio* (1936), in reaction to the actual political situation in Nazi Germany). Shortly after the Declaration of Slovak Autonomy (6 October 1938), the new government began to resolve, very vigorously, the question of the theatre. Director Antonín Drašar was accused of fraud and arrested on 15 October. After a short detention, he was expelled from Slovakia. On 22 October, a new director, lawyer Dušan Úradníček (1899 – 1985), a lawyer and governmental commissary for the Slovak National Theatre, was appointed to the theatre, who executed his duties without remuneration. Officially, the theatre was supervised by the Ministry of Education from 1 November. On 1 December 1938, a new head of the Opera Department, Josef Vincourek (1900 – 1976), and a new dramaturge, Štefan Hoza (1906 – 1982), who remained in office until 1945, were appointed. Practically, the whole theatre was led by Štefan Hoza<sup>1</sup>.

1 For more on the turbulent years of 1938/1939, see LAJCHA, L. *Dokumenty SND 1920 – 1945* [Documents of the SND 1920 – 1945]. Bratislava : Divadelný ústav, 2002; BLAHO, J. *Opera SND v období 1939 – 1945* [The Opera SND in the Period 1939 – 1945]. In HORVÁTHOVÁ, K. (ed.). *100 rokov nového operného divadla v Bratislave* [100 Years of the New Opera Theatre in Bratislava]. Almanac from a Musicological Conference on 2 October 1986, Bratislava : Mestský dom kultúry a osvety, 1986. Many pieces of important

Despite the enormous efforts of the Slovak political leaders, it was not possible to reorganize the artistic staff of the theatre without Czech artists – the head of the Opera Department, Josef Vincourek, and conductors Ladislav Holoubek (1913 – 1994) and Juraj Villiam Schöffer (1897 – 1972) were all born in Prague. The first Slovak conductor, Tibor Frešo, was engaged in the 1941 – 1942 season. Changes occurred also in the ensemble of soloists – although the majority of the staff left Slovakia, some soloists of Czech origin remained, such as Arnold Flögl (bass), Zdeněk Ruth-Markov (bass), František Hájek (tenor), and Milada Formanová (dramatic soprano); in 1939, the baritone singer Emil Schütz was engaged from Prague. There was also a Slovenian alto, Mária Peršlová (from 1927), a Slovenian baritone, Franjo Hvastija (from 1940; similarly to Schütz, he remained in Bratislava until the end of his career), and two Russian singers (the bass Boris Jevtušenko and the mezzosoprano Jelizaveta Evertová) in the staff. The most experienced Slovak singers were Janko Blaho (tenor) and the soprano Helena Bartošová. Later on, many other Slovak soloists (mostly graduates of the professor Josef Egem's vocal class at the Academy of Music and Drama in Bratislava) were contracted, and they became the founders of the tradition of Slovak vocal art (the sopranos Margita Česányiová, Zita Frešová, Mária Kišonová, Janka Gabčová, the mezzosoprano Dita Gabajová, and tenors Štefan Hoza and Rudolf Petrák).<sup>2</sup>

### The Dramaturgy of the Slovak National Theatre under Štefan Hoza

Generally speaking, Štefan Hoza's dramaturgy was relatively conventional (Hoza was a man of theatre, indeed), with preference for the Italian romantic repertoire, which dominated every season (this kind of operatic repertoire is, of course, the most favoured one by the audience – regardless of time and place). The most frequently played composers were Giuseppe Verdi (*Un ballo in maschera*, *Rigoletto*, *La traviata*, *Aida*, *Il Trovatore*, *Otello*), Giacomo Puc-

---

information can be found in memoirs like NEDBAL, K. *Půl století s českou operou* [A Half Century with the Czech Opera]. Praha : SNKLHU, 1959; HOZA, Š. *Ja svoje srdce dám...* [I'll Give my Heart...], 1, 2. Based on the notes in Hoza's diary, and his articles, letters and other writings, prepared for publishing by B. Machýnková. Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ, 1989.

2 For more on the soloists of the opera at that time, see BLAHO, J. *Opera SND v období 1939 – 1945* [Opera in the period 1939 – 1945]. In HORVÁTHOVÁ, K. *100 rokov nového operného divadla v Bratislave* [100 Years of the New Opera Theatre in Bratislava].

cini (*La bohème*, *Madame Butterfly*, *Tosca*, *Turandot*, *Il tabarro*, *Gianni Schicchi*) and Gioacchino Rossini with his *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. The veristic couple *I pagliacci* by Ruggero Leoncavallo and *Cavalleria rusticana* by Pietro Mascagni was unthinkable. Beside the works of Italian origin, some popular French pieces were also staged, e.g. *Mignon* by Ambroise Thomas, *Carmen* by Georges Bizet, *Manon* by Jules Massenet. Czech operas (in their Slovak translation) were also in high demand: *The Bartered Bride*, *The Kiss*, *Two Widows*, *The Secret* by Bedřich Smetana, *Rusalka*, *The Devil and Kate* by Antonín Dvořák, and *Jenůfa* by Leoš Janáček. The German operatic repertoire was represented by *The Flying Dutchman* by Richard Wagner, *Elektra* by Richard Strauss, and some popular pieces like *Hänsel and Gretel* by Engelbert Humperdinck, or *The Merry Wives of Windsor* by Otto Nicolai. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was present on the stage of the Slovak National Theatre with his most famous operas: *Don Juan*, and *The Marriage of Figaro*. Two Russian operas were performed in 1939 – Piotr Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegine* and Modest Mussorgsky's *Khovanshchina*<sup>3</sup>. With the outbreak of the war with the Soviet Union in June 1941, for political reasons, it was no longer possible to play Russian operas. It is touching how the new director (officially State intendant), Ľudovít Brezinský (1907 – 1994, in this function from 1 September 1940 to 4 April 1945), tried to promote the most significant works of Russian romantic opera and play them in state-run institutions (Ministry of Education and Propaganda Office)<sup>4</sup>.

Besides world opera repertoire, it was necessary to give scope to domestic operas and operatic novelties from abroad, too. The question of domestic works was especially acute. The management of SND, strongly supported by state institutions (especially by the Propaganda Office), promoted domestic works to give opportunity for a Slovak national opera to be composed, which was something still missing in Slovak culture (unlike in its neighbouring countries). There were only two works composed by Slovak composers, which had previously resonated with the audience of SND – *Wieland the Smith* by Ján Levoslav Bella (1926) and *Detvan* by Vilam Figuš-Bystrý (1928), but neither of these became a truly national opera because of their ideological and qualitative aspects. In 1940, the situation prompted the Ministry of Education to issue a call for a libretto for a national opera. In the end, the jury,

3 For more on the repertoire, see BLAHOVÁ-MARTIŠOVÁ, E. *Súpis repertoáru SND 1920 – 2010* [Register of the Repertoire of the SND 1920 – 2010]. Bratislava : SND, 2010.

4 See LAJCHA, L. *Dokumenty SND 1920 – 1945* [Documents of the SND 1920 – 1945]. Bratislava : Divadelný ústav, 2002.

consisting of musicians (Mikuláš Schneider-Trnavský, Frico Kafenda, Štefan Hoza) and writers (Andrej Mráz, Andrej Žarnov – the poet acting under his official name František Šubík) and headed by state commissary Ľudovít Brezinský, did not award the first prize and did not even recommend libretti to any composers because of their serious imperfections. At that time, the young Eugen Suchoň became interested in composing a national opera. He was probably aware of the call and the subjects, but these did not satisfy him. He wrote the libretto of his opera *Krútňava* [*The Whirlpool*] (1949, based on Milo Urban's novel *Behind the Upper Mill*) himself with the help of Štefan Hoza.

Ultimately, four domestic works were staged in the Slovak National Theatre during the time of the First Slovak Republic, *Čalmak* (1940) by Jozef Rosinský, and three operas by Ladislav Holoubek (rehearsal leader and conductor at SND). The reflection of Holoubek's modernistic opera *Stella* (1939) came to an end with the turbulent events connected with the birth of the new state, but his more traditionally conceived opera *Svitanie* [*Daylight*] (1941, free adaptation of Svetozár Hurban-Vajanský's poem *Herodes*) was, despite of the imperfections of its libretto, closer to the ambitions of a national opera. His fairy tale opera *Túžba* [*Desire*] (1944) is an opera for children. These works have had no resonance in Slovak musical culture since then – neither the traditionalist Jozef Rosinský, nor the young Ladislav Holoubek, who was at that time still searching for the right musical concept of an opera, came up to the expectations of the institutions, the critics and the public for a Slovak national opera.

### **Cultural Exchange in the Light of the Changing Political Regimes**

This article focuses on the staging of novelties from abroad, which was another part of the dramaturgy of SND under the leadership of Štefan Hoza. Four such works were staged in 1941 – 1943. The first one was *Peer Gynt* (world premiere in Berlin in 1938, staged by SND in 1941) by Werner Egk (1901 – 1983), followed by *Salambo* (1940 in Sofia, 1942 in Bratislava) by the Bulgarian composer Veselin Stoyanov. In the following season, it was *La farsa amorosa* (1933 in Rome, 1943 in Bratislava) by Riccardo Zandonai (1883 – 1944), and the last such opera was *Ero s onoga svijeta* (*Ero the Joker*, 1935 in Zagreb, 1943 in Bratislava) by the Croatian composer Jakov Gotovac (1895 – 1982). As mentioned above, the audience was familiar with the German and Italian operatic repertoire (in the interwar period as well as at the

time of the First Slovak Republic), especially with the Romantic one. From the modern repertoire, only *Il Dibuk* (1934, in Bratislava in 1937) by the verista Lodovico Rocca (1895 – 1986) was performed, and no German opera composed in the interwar period figured in the repertoire of SND from the time of its establishment in 1920. In this respect, the works of Werner Egk and Riccardo Zandonai (despite the age gap between the composers) also documented some trends in actual German and Italian operatic production.

On the other hand, the works of Bulgarian and Croatian provenance represented the much younger, nascent musical culture of smaller nations, similar to that of Slovakia. There were more Croatian (or Yugoslavian) operas in the interwar period – as for cultural exchange, it is important to note that, along with Romania, Yugoslavia (until 1929 officially the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes) was the main ally of Czechoslovakia in the region (they formed the Little Entente). In 1925, the historical opera *Nikola Šubić Zrinski* (from 1876), with a plot about fighting the Turks, composed by Croatian composer Ivan Zajc (1832 – 1914) was staged. In 1929, a one-act opera, *Suton* [The Sunset] by Serbian composer Stevan Hristić (1885 – 1958) was performed, with the composer conducting its Bratislava premiere. In the late 1930s, works by the Croatian composers Božidar Širola (1889 – 1956) – *Dubrovnické fašiangy* [The Carnival in Dubrovnik] (1937 in Bratislava) – and Autun Dobronić (1878 – 1955, a student of Vítězslav Novák at the Prague Conservatory) – *Vdova Rošlinka* [Widow Rošlinka] (1938 in Bratislava) were staged. From the contemporary Bulgarian production, the opera *Tsar Kalyan* (1936, in Bratislava already in 1937) by Pancho Vladigerov (1899 – 1978) was performed.

The late 1930s witnessed an expansion of Nazi Germany, which changed the social and political situation in southeast Europe. Romania, a former ally of Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria adopted monarchical fascist regimes, and Yugoslavia was totally devastated after the German intervention of April 1941. It was the Independent State of Croatia (formally a monarchy ruled by King Tomislav II (Aimone, Duke of Aosta, 1900 – 1948), related to King Vittorio Emanuele III of Italy; he never resided in Zagreb) which dominated the region. The real power, however, was in the hands of "poglavnik" Ante Pavelić (1889 – 1959), who built an extremist fascist regime in the country. These changes were welcomed by the political leaders of the First Slovak Republic (e.g. entire numbers of the journals *Slovák* and *Gardista* were dedicated to the birth of the Independent State of Croatia and its anniversaries). Despite the geographic (and also linguistic) distance from Bulgaria, and besides the

official alliance with the Axis powers, it was the former tsar Ferdinand (of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, 1861 – 1948) who became associated with Slovakia. After his abdication in 1918, he often visited his patrimonial properties in Slovakia (manor houses in Svätý Anton and Predná Hora, for the last time in 1944).

Also, Bulgaria, Croatia and Slovakia were the three Slavic states that retained their formal independence within the dictatorial system of Nazi Germany. No wonder that cultural exchange was the most intense between these three states. It is important to note that many artists from other allies appeared in the concert cycles of the Slovak Radio Orchestra. Besides artists from Germany, these included musicians from Romania and Finland, who achieved success in the cultural life of Slovakia, especially in its capital, Bratislava.<sup>5</sup>

### **Werner Egk: Peer Gynt**

Štefan Hoza described his first encounter with Egk's opera *Peer Gynt* in his memoir.<sup>6</sup> It was in the autumn of 1939, when Hoza was recording some songs for the Odeon Company. He utilized this trip (he travelled with the head of the Opera Department and artistic director Josef Vincourek) to familiarize himself with the operatic repertoire of the German "Reich" because the "Kulturamt" (the German cultural bureau in Slovakia) called on him to stage some new German operas<sup>7</sup>. Hoza attended the performances of Richard Wagner's *Siegfried*, Hans Pfitzner's *Palestrina*, concerts with the works of Richard Strauss, the performance of *Die Bürger von Calais* by Rudolf Wagner-Regény (1903 – 1969), and *Peer Gynt* by Werner Egk in the Berlin Opera. Although neither of these two Slovak artists were interested in the opera of Rudolf Wagner-Regény because of the dreariness and complicatedness of its plot, they were enthusiastic about the music of Werner Egk, which immediately fascinated them with its "outstanding dramatic and lyrical passages".<sup>8</sup>

Werner Egk, a significant exponent of German Neoclassicism and modern opera theatre, was born on 17 May 1901 in Auchsesheim near Donau-

5 See STRAČIAKOVÁ, B. *Hudobný život Bratislavy v rokoch 1939 – 1945, Koncertný život v dobovej tlači* [The Musical Life of Bratislava in 1939 – 1945. Concert Life in the Press]. [Master's thesis]. Bratislava : Filozofická fakulta, Univerzita Komenského, 2018.

6 HOZA, Š. *Ja svoje srdce dám...* [I'll Give My Heart...], p. 180.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 179. But I have not found any official note on this in the documents. (Author's note.)

8 *Ibid.*, p. 180.



*Werner Egk: Peer Gynt. The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, 1941. Franjo Hvastija (Peer Gynt). Direction Bohuš Vilím. Photo by Anton Illenberger. The Slovak National Theatre archives.*

wörth, Bavaria, Germany as Werner Joseph Mayer. His pseudonym Egk is an acronym (Ein guter Komponist, or he derived it from his wife's initials: Elisabeth, geborne Karl – Elisabeth, née Karl). He used it from 1923 and he changed his name officially in 1937. He attended the grammar school and conservatory in Augsburg and, later, he studied in Frankfurt am Main and Munich (with Carl Orff). He worked for the Bavarian Radio from 1930. In 1936 – 1941 he was the conductor of the Unter den Linden State Opera in Berlin. After 1941, he worked as a freelancer. In 1950 – 1953, he was the director of Hochschule für Musik in West Berlin, and he was also a member of several organisations and institutions. He died in 1983 in Inning am Ammersee. In his works, Werner Egk preferred orchestral and operatic music.

In 1935, he composed the opera *Die Zaubergeige* [The Magic Violin], which became his first significant success. It was followed by *Peer Gynt* in 1938, but his other operas were performed only after World War II: *Circe* after Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1948, new version in 1966), *Irische Legende* [The Irish Legend] after William Butler Yeats (1955/1975), *Der Revisor* [The Government Inspector] after Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol (1957), and *Die Verlobung in San Domingo* [Betrothal in St Domingo] after Heinrich von Kleist (1963). He wrote also five ballets, the second of which, *Abraxas*, was based on the theme of Faust by Heinrich Heine (1948) and became one of the greatest scandals in the history of musical theatre after World War II (a black mass was performed on the stage). Werner Egk was also engaged in literary works. He wrote the libretto of *Abstrakte Oper Nr. 1* [Abstract Opera No. 1] composed by Boris Blacher (1953), many essays and reflections about music, and a memoir *Die Zeit wartet nicht* [Time Does Not Wait].

After the success of his opera *Die Zaubergeige* [The Magic Violin] in 1935, which was conceived as a modern folk opera, Werner Egk turned to a “big theme” – *Peer Gynt* by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen from 1867 (this otherwise successful play had not been staged in Copenhagen until 1876 because of performing difficulties). From an ideological point of view, this extensive work, centered around nature and the character of the world (“Weltgedicht”), is similar to such works as Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust*, or Richard Wagner’s *Ring*. In the complicated architecture of the play, the hero oscillates between good and evil in many diverse positions – as a Scandinavian hunter, fraudster, philosopher, a kind of Faust who tackles the question of his own existence, and also a predatory Don Juan. There are no fewer than thirty-eight characters in various situations and places (in a Norwegian village, in the mythological world of the trolls, in South America etc.) in the cast of this five-act play, so the plot had to be reduced radically. Werner Egk, who wrote the libretto himself, treated the subject very skilfully, with enormous sense for operatic dramaturgy. At the same time, he stayed away from the concept of Wagner’s *Ring* (1876), where the plot was divided into several evenings, or from the concept of Sergei Prokofiev’s opera *Voyna i mir* [War and Peace], based on Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy’s (1941 – 1952) novel, a kind of a historical fresco opera with seventy-two characters. Werner Egk succeeded in accentuating the difference between good and evil and the eternal oscillation of the hero between these two extremes. Also, the other characters are conceived as archetypes – the most significant one being Solveig, the personification of eternal femininity,

who, unlike Goethe's Gretchen, is not a victim but the only person whom Peer did not wrong and who saves him in the end.

It was no easy task for Werner Egk to compose the music for this opera. In his setting, he competed mainly with Edvard Hagerup Grieg, who wrote original incidental music for Henrik Ibsen's play, performed in Copenhagen in 1876. Grieg composed about ninety minutes of music in the original score (Op. 23, containing twenty-six numbers), out of which he later chose and reworked eight parts for two suites (Op. 46 and 55). Because of their inventiveness and national character, these became the most popular works of the composer and are still among the most famous pieces of Romantic music.

Nevertheless, Werner Egk composed his music for the opera in accordance with his own ideas. He was inspired by Norwegian folk music in the initial scenes of the opera, he composed the scenes taking place in South America with the use of melodic and rhythmic elements of Latin American music (e.g. tango), and there are many elements of dance and popular music used in the troll scenes (can-can, Charleston, galop, polka). In the troll hymn ("Tu nur, was dich erfreut"), the composer used a melodic and harmonic progression that evokes deformed Protestant hymns (naturally, this was condemned at the premiere). In several scenes (troll scenes, scenes with merchants, the scene with a president, or the scene of judgement in Act III), he used Kurt Weill style songs from the 1920s, coming close to the concept of Bertolt Brecht's and Kurt Weill's music theatre.

No wonder that the work, with such a musical concept, was condemned at its premiere on 24 November 1938 under the baton of the composer. It was a time when the Nazi regime was established and the work was attacked in the press, too. The main objection was that its music was very close to Bertolt Brecht's and Kurt Weill's concept of musical theatre and that there were many inspirations from jazz, and "negro" music in it<sup>9</sup>. Although the opera was not banned officially, it was performed only in Düsseldorf (1939) and Frankfurt am Main (1940), despite the fact that its performance in Berlin on 31 January 1939 was attended by Hitler and he was delighted with it. In his memoir, the composer describes his feelings when conducting this performance after having heard that Hitler was in the audience, and his feelings when, after the performance, he entered the office of the intendant

---

9 DAHLHAUS, C. (ed.). *Pipers Enzyklopädie des Musiktheaters, Band 2*. München, Zürich : Piper, p. 121.

Heinz Tietjen<sup>10</sup>, who announced to him that Hitler was satisfied with the opera<sup>11</sup>. Given that this work was ignored by German theatres during the war, its staging in Bratislava in 1941 was an interesting act. After the war, the circumstances changed significantly – the work was performed in Munich (1952), Braunschweig (1953), Berlin (1954), and Lübeck (1955), and there is a live recording compiled from its performances in Munich in 1982 (under the baton of Wolfgang Sawallisch).

For the Slovak National Theatre, it was a real challenge to perform Werner Egk's *Peer Gynt*. Despite its clear structure and communicability (which impressed not only Štefan Hoza and Josef Vincourek at its performance in Berlin but Hitler himself, too), it was a modern piece, which meant enormous problems in terms of staging and performance.

The libretto was translated into Slovak by Mária Rázusová-Martáková, the conductor was Josef Vincourek, and the stage director, whose task was difficult, was Bohuš Vilím. In his memoir, Štefan Hoza recalls an accident which helped him cast the hero. There was no baritone capable of rendering Peer in the ensemble, but a Slovenian baritone, Franjo Hvastija joined in the season of 1940/1941, who handled the problematic role of the title character in an outstanding way<sup>12</sup>. Solveig was performed by Marka Medvecká, Asse by Mária Peršlová, the red haired maid by Helena Bartošová. The premiere on 1 March 1941 was a real success, the critics appreciated the work (especially the treatment of the plot and the inventive music), the staging and the performance (as mentioned above, the most prominent soloists of the ensemble, with interpretational experience, took part in the production). It was also an outstanding success for Franjo Hvastija: "It was a triumph for Franjo Hvastija. He depicted the character of Peer with unique verity, with an inner instability, with constant unrest, with dreaminess etc. It could not have been better. His vocal and acting skills are unusual. He has command over a whole range of possible expressions, which he uses so finely that it is astonishing. With his energy, he led the whole dramatic progression, held it in the right

---

10 Heinz Tietjen (1881 – 1967) was a significant figure of German theatrical life from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the 1960s. Besides being the director of the Prussian theatre, he was the artistic director of the Bayreuth Festival in 1931 – 1944. In Berlin, he supported Egk.

11 EGK. W. *Die Zeit wartet nicht* [Time Does Not Wait]. München : Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, Musikverlag, 1981, pp. 311 – 313.

12 Hoza, Š. *Ja svoje srdce dám...* [I'll Give My Heart...], p. 180.

course and gave it the necessary momentum. Hvastija triumphed."<sup>13</sup> The critics commended the accomplishments of the main female roles in a similar way: "... Medvecká understood her role well, and this made her Solveig (sol = sun) a bright character full of womanly tenderness. Mária Peršlová was unforgettable as Asse..."<sup>14</sup> A critic from the journal entitled *Slovák* appreciated the production but, on the other hand, he had serious objections regarding Slovak articulation: "... If his [Hvastija's] singing had been comprehensible, he would have surely achieved an even bigger success. As an actor and singer, he is good, but he must learn the right Slovak articulation... The same fault can be pointed out for most of our soloists."<sup>15</sup>

In the case of Hvastija, this "defect" is understandable – it was the first season for this Slovenian baritone in Bratislava. The problem is much larger and it concerns the specific problems of the "Slovakisation" of the repertoire – in 1941, it was only two years from the whole repertoire being translated into Slovak; until then, Czech translations had been used and there had been many foreign, especially Czech, artists in the ensemble.

The "moral" success of the performance was heightened by the visit of the composer and his conducting on 9 March 1941. By 29 May 1941, the opera had been performed at the Slovak National Theatre seven times.<sup>16</sup>

### **Veselin Stoyanov: Salambo**

The next modern piece chosen by the dramaturge of SND for staging in Bratislava was *Salambo* by the Bulgarian composer Veselin Stoyanov. Stoyanov, together with Pancho Vladigerov (1899 – 1978), was a significant exponent of the youngest generation of Bulgarian composers who created in the interwar period the form of Bulgarian national music using the modality and the characteristic rhythms of Bulgarian folk music and connecting them with elements of Impressionism and relics of the late Romantic style. This was very similar to the ambitions of the contemporary young generation of Slovak composers. Veselin Stoyanov was born in 1902 in Shumen

13 of. Premiéra Peera Gynta v SND [The Premiere of Peer Gynt in SND]. In *Gardista*, 1941, Vol. 3, Issue 52, p. 6, 4 March 1941.

14 Ibid.

15 J. H. Peer Gynt ako opera [Peer Gynt As an Opera]. In *Slovák*, 1941, Vol. 23, Issue 53, p. 7, 4 March 1941.

16 BLAHOVÁ-MARTIŠOVÁ, E. *Súpis repertoáru SND 1920 – 2010* [Register of Repertoire of SND 1920 – 2010], p. 274.



Veselin Stoyanov: *Salambo*. The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, 1942. Ludvika Svobodová (*Salambo*), Harry Kluska (*Shahabarin*). Direction Bohuř Vilím. Photo by Anton Illenberger. The Slovak National Theatre archives.

in the family of a music teacher. He studied at the Music Academy in Sofia and, from 1926, in Vienna with Joseph Marx and Franz Schmidt, a native of Bratislava. For a short time, he acted as a concert pianist, from 1937, he was a professor and, in 1943 – 1944 and 1952 – 1962, a chancellor at the Music Academy in Sofia. He died in 1969 in Sofia. He wrote three operas: *Žensko carstvo* [The Kingdom of Women, 1935], *Salambo* (1940), and *Chitar Peter* [Sly Peter, 1959], orchestral works, chamber music. Unlike his first opera, which was inspired by such works as *Zhenitba* [The Marriage] – a fragment by Modest Mussorgsky (1868), or *Nos* [The Nose] by Dmitri Shostakovich (1929) and was conceived as a conversational opera, in his other works Stoyanov turned to the Romantic opera (the technique of leitmotifs, monumental choir and ballet scenes, large orchestra, etc.). The truly romantic subject of *Salambo* required such techniques indeed. Gustave Flaubert's famous novel from 1862 inspired many composers – probably Modest Mussorgsky first, who worked on an opera of the same name between the years 1863 – 1866. The French composer Ernest Reyer (1823 – 1909) whose *Salambo* was performed for the first time in Brussels in 1890, was more

successful. In 1929, the subject was set to music by an Austrian modernist, Josef Matthias Hauer (1883 – 1959).

An opera libretto based on this extensive novel was written by Boris Borosanov. He reduced the episodes of the plot and the monumental structure of the novel to a love story of the title heroine and a conflict between her love (to the soldier Matho), duty, and religion. The symmetric concept of the libretto – or rather, the order of the dramatic situations – is very interesting. There is a motif of offering a glass of wine in scenes 1 and 6. While in Scene 1, it symbolizes the beginning of the love story of Salambo and Matho, in Scene 6, the wine is poisoned and kills the lovers. Another important dramaturgical motif appears in a similar way: the veil of goddess Tanit is stolen by Matho in Scene 2 (whereby he wants to win the love of Salambo) and, in Scene 5, Salambo brings the veil to the temple, conscious of her duty. The central scenes form the emotional climax of the story (the meeting of Salambo with her father Hamilkar in Scene 4). Stoyanov filled this libretto with inventive music inspired by elements of Bulgarian and Turkish music (Bulgarian modality and Turkish maqams) and their characteristic irregular rhythms. However, the first performance of the opera in Sofia on 22 May 1940 was not a real success. It was condemned by the critics, probably because of its exotic plot, which was not in line with the actual trends in Bulgarian national culture. Apart from its staging at the Slovak National Theatre in 1942, it was going to be staged in Vienna, but this did not happen because of the war. There was another performance of it in Sofia in 1977, and it was recorded under the baton of Ivan Marinov (1928 – 2003).

The first performance of the opera in Bratislava (translated by Arnold Flögl, conducted by Josef Vincourek, stage direction by Bohuš Vilím) took place on 11 April 1942. Its difficult rhythmic structures, colourful instrumentation, and difficult score placed high demands on the soloists and the orchestra. Nevertheless, the performance was well prepared, which was confirmed by the composer himself too, who was present at the performance. The critic Konštantín Hudec noted: "The composer was very satisfied with the achievement. He found Vincourek's dramatic rendering of the score much better than in Sofia."<sup>17</sup> The title heroine was outstandingly performed by Ludvika Svobodová, her father Hamilkar Barkas by Franjo Hvastija, Matho by Štefan Hoza. The other roles were sung by

17 HUDEC, K. Bulharská opera na scéně SND [Bulgarian Opera on the SND Stage]. In *Elán*, 1941 – 1942, Vol. 12, Issue 8, p. 10.

Boris Jevtušenko (Autharrit), Harry Kluska (Shahabarim, the high priest), Arnold Flögl (Narr'Havas). This excellent production had been performed six times until 19 May 1942. Until today, this was the only production of the opera outside Bulgaria.

### **Riccardo Zandonai: La farsa amorosa**

Contrary to both the preceding composers, Riccardo Zandonai (1883 – 1944) was a generation older and belonged to the second generation of Italian veristi. He was born in 1883 in Borgo Sacco in Rovereto, Austria-Hungary at that time. He did not complete his studies at the conservatory in Pesaro, but he met Pietro Mascagni there, who was one of his professors. It was just before World War I when he achieved success with his operas *Il grillo di focolare* (after Dickens *The Cricket on the Heart*, Turin, 1908), *Conchita* (Milan, 1911) and, especially, *Francesca da Rimini* after Gabriele D'Annunzio's adaptation of Dante's *Inferno* (Turin, 1914, libretto by Tito II Ricordi), which is still played sporadically today. His *Giulietta e Romeo*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's play about the Veronese lovers, was premiered in 1922 in Rome. Its libretto was written by Arturo Rossato, who was the author of all the subsequent operas of Riccardo Zandonai. The following operas of his were performed: *I cavalieri di Ekebú* (after Selma Lagerlöf's novel *Gösta Berling*) in La Scala, Milan in 1925, *Giuliano* (after Gustave Flaubert) in Naples in 1928, the one-act opera *Una Partita* in Milan in 1933. Shortly afterwards, they were followed by *La farsa amorosa*, libretto by Arturo Rossato based on the play *El sombrero de tres picos* (1874) by Pedro Antonio de Alarcón (1833 – 1891), first performed in Teatro dell'Opera in Rome on 22 February 1933. This was the last opera completed by Riccardo Zandonai (towards the end of his life, he was working on the opera *Il bacio* [The Kiss], which was performed in Rome in 1954).

This very popular plot was moved by the librettist to Lombardia at the time of Spanish occupation in about 1630, so he could preserve several original Spanish names of the characters. Besides Alarcón's play, both artists were strongly inspired by the local tradition of commedia dell'arte, which played a role in the final concept of the libretto. In this sense, *La farsa amorosa* by Riccardo Zandonai may be assigned to the Neoclassicist trend in Italian opera, which was standardized by Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari (1876 – 1948) at the beginning of the twentieth century in his operas *Le donne curiose* [The Inquisitive Women, 1903], *Quattro rusteghi* [The Four Codgers, 1906], and

*Riccardo Zandonai: La farsa amorosa. The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, 1943. Janko Blaho (Renzo), Margita Česányiová (Lucia). Direction Bohuš Vilím. Photo by Anton Illenberger. The Slovak National Theatre archives.*



*Il segreto di Susanna* [Susanna's Secret, 1909]. These works were a reaction to the expressive veristic style and the operatic symphonism which had spread to Italy from Germany.

*La farsa amorosa* is divided into three acts and five scenes, with two scenic intermezzos. These short choir scenes are inserted between the scenes in the peripheral acts – the first intermezzo is a genre picture of vintage (vintage forms the framework of the whole story), while the second one is a comic scene depicting the return home of an unsuccessful seducer, Don Ferrante. A rare element in the libretto is a couple of donkeys, Ciccio and Checca, who have fallen in love. They help to depict the whole atmosphere of a folk feast and the author of the libretto gives them some allegorical consequences. This simple story was set to music by the experienced composer using a wide range of expressions from drastic fun to lyric passages, full of wide cantilena. The orchestration is brilliant and uses many impressive effects.

In Bratislava, the opera was performed on the sixtieth birth anniversary of the composer,<sup>18</sup> and was chosen by the dramaturgy of SND as the newest opera (although it was about ten years old) of the greatest living Italian composer. The difficult score (the extensive choir and ensemble scenes, difficult parts of the orchestra etc.) was rehearsed by Ladislav Holoubek, the stage director was Bohuš Vilím, and the libretto was translated by Arnold Flögl. The three main characters were performed by Margita Česányiová (Lucia), Janko Blaho (Renzo), and Emil Schütz (Don Ferrante), and the comic characters by Arnold Flögl (Spingarda) and František Hájek (Frulla).

The reaction of the critics in Bratislava was relatively reserved – the main reason was the subject, the simple, conventional opera plot underlined by relatively traditional staging (“... it would have been better if the staging had parodied this naivety.”)<sup>19</sup>. Although Konštantín Hudec in his critique wrote about a creative crisis in contemporary operatic production (“So we reached this current situation, this cluelessness in operatic production.”). On the other hand, he tried to point out the qualities of Riccardo Zandonai’s composition style: “Zandonai, who transformed his “La farsa amorosa” to the most comic sphere, tried to follow a new path by using melodiousness in the ensembles and choruses, although, in the recitatives, his music is explosive and makes use of instrumental effects.”<sup>20</sup>

By 29 May 1943, Riccardo Zandonai’s *La farsa amorosa* had been performed on the stage of the Slovak National Theatre five times.

### **Jakov Gotovac: *Ero z onoga svijeta***

The last of the four above-mentioned operas was a folk opera based on a story from the Dalmatian milieu, *Ero z onoga svijeta* [Ero the Joker] by Jakov Gotovac (1895 – 1982). The composer was born in Split, where he graduated from a grammar school (1913) and began to study music (with Josip Hatze and Autun Dobronić). Later, he studied law at the Academy in Zagreb and music at the Music Academy in Vienna (with Joseph Marx). After returning home, he worked shortly in Šibenik, but, in 1923, he left for Zagreb, where

18 K. Premiéra opery v Národnom divadle [The Premiere of the Opera in the National Theatre]. In *Slovák*, Vol. 25, Issue 87, 14 April 1943, p. 6.

19 Ibid.

20 HUDEC, K. K premiére Zandonaiho opery *Lúboštná komédia* [On the Premiere of Zandonai’s opera *La farsa amorosa*]. In *Elán*, 1942 – 1943, Vol. 13, Issue 8, p. 9.



Jakov Gotovac: *Ero z onoga svijeta*. The Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, 1943. Helena Bartošová (Julka), Boris Jevtušenko (Marko). Direction Bohuš Vilím. Photo by Anton Illenberger. The Slovak National Theatre archives.

he worked as a conductor (and, for a short time, director) of the Opera House until 1958. Gotovac, strongly inspired by Croatian and, especially, Dalmatian folklore, wrote many vocal pieces, orchestral works and, especially, operatic works. He achieved significant success in Yugoslavia with his opera *Morana* (1930). His next opera, *Ero z onoga svijeta*, first performed in 1935, was an international success and soon became the most frequently played Croatian opera. His other works, performed after World War II, included historical drama *Mila Gojsalica*, Op. 28 (1951), the operatic legend *Dalmaro* (1958), the one-act opera *Stanac* (1959), and the opera-oratorio *Petar Svačić* (1969). Jakov Gotovac died on 16 October 1985 in Zagreb.

The subject of the opera *Ero z onoga svijeta* comes from a Croatian folk legend from the times of Turkish occupation, and some scenic elements are based on the carnival play *Der fahrend Schüler im Paradeis* [The Wandering Student in Paradise] by Hans Sachs from 1560.<sup>21</sup> Ero is an archetypal char-

21 DAHLHAUS, C. (ed.). *Pipers Enzyklopädie des Musiktheaters, Band 2*, p. 514.

acter, a folk hero, a kind of a Croatian Eulenspiegel. The librettist, Milan Begović, moved the plot to the nineteenth century and to his native village Vrlika, eliminating the Turkish elements and giving more scope to Croatian national elements – Croatian songs and dances, and folk humour, which were the reason for its enormous success abroad and its persistence on the Croatian stage. Gotovac appeared with his opera at the right time – its spontaneity based on folk elements was a much-desired contrast to many contemporary trends in European opera. The opera was performed in Karlsruhe in 1938, in Berlin in 1940, and, shortly afterwards, on nearly eighty other European stages. From the aspect of form, it is a work with a traditional concept – the musical progression through musical pieces and scenes is separated by recitatives.

The production in Bratislava was prepared by the conductor Ladislav Holoubek, and the stage director was Arnold Flögl, who translated libretto, too. *Ero* was performed by Janko Blaho, Julka (Djula in original) by Helena Bartošová, Doma (Julka's stepmother) by Janka Gabčová, the peasant Marko and the miller Sima were outstandingly performed by Boris Jevtušenko and Franjo Hvastija, respectively. The audience and the critics were greatly satisfied with the performance. First of all, they pointed out the inventiveness and the national character of the work: "For a long time, the theatre had not surprised us in such a way as it did at the premiere of the opera *Ero the Joker*, the pride of the Croatian nation. Our joy is increased by the fact that it is an opera of our brother, the Croatian nation, and not only because the libretto and the music were written by the members of this nation, but we greatly admire what this opera brings to the stage, visually as well as musically: the life that this Croatian nation lives."<sup>22</sup> Zdenka Bokesová in the journal *Elán* was more critical: "In a word, Gotovac got caught up in combining folk songs, or tunes that imitate folk songs, through recitatives. And maybe only to highlight the folkiness, he presented a folk tune, quoted in a musically primitive way, everywhere where a wider cantilena and a richer elaboration of the ensemble and the choir would have been required, and that may be the reason why he remained so unsophisticated harmonically and instrumentally."<sup>23</sup> Bokesová also noted the problem of casting – she found

22 en. *Ero z onoho sveta na scéne ND* [*Ero the Joker* staged in the National Theatre]. In *Slovák*, 1943, Vol. 25, Issue 229, p. 6, 6 October 1943.

23 BOKESOVÁ, Z. *Jakov Gotovac: Ero z onoho sveta* [*Ero the Joker*]. In *Elán*, 1943 – 1944, Vol. 14, Issue 8, p. 9.

the main character of *Ero* too demanding and too prominent for a lyric tenor, to whose character it is assigned. The lyric soprano of Julka was not performed in an ideal way by Helena Bartošová, who used to sing more dramatic roles. On the other hand, the "overly soft rendering" of the character of Doma, Julka's stepmother, by Janka Gabčová, lacked the roughness which Gotovac relied on to illustrate it<sup>24</sup>.

By 7 January 1944, *Ero z onoga svijeta* had been performed ten times.

The above four operas of German, Bulgarian, Italian and Croatian origin, performed in 1941 – 1943 on the stage of the Slovak National Theatre, document the ambitions of the dramaturgy of the theatre to introduce to the Bratislava audience the latest, or rather, the dominating trends in operatic production in the major part of Europe. Although the ideological conditions were still present, the choice of the repertoire was noteworthy for its diversity. *Peer Gynt* by Werner Egk represented the German productions of the late 1930s, Riccardo Zandonai's *La farsa amorosa* was the legacy of a traditional operatic "superpower", Stoyanov's *Salambo* embodies the ambition to create a national musical style, while Gotovac's *Ero z onoga svijeta* is a traditional folk opera. At the same time, all the scores are really difficult to perform and this, on one hand, testifies the potential and the abilities of the ensemble of the Slovak National Theatre and, on the other hand, it helped to raise its niveau.

## Conclusion

The above four operatic novelties from abroad performed on the stage of the Slovak National Theatre document the ambitions of the dramaturgy of the theatre to introduce the latest trends in the operatic repertoire of its allies: Germany (*Peer Gynt* by Werner Egk, performed in Bratislava in 1941), Bulgaria (*Salambo* by Stoyanov, 1942), Italy (*La farsa amorosa* by Riccardo Zandonai, 1943), and Croatia (*Ero z onoga svijeta* by Gotovac, 1943). At the same time, each work represented a different approach to operatic production in these countries, motivated mostly by the different cultural conditions in these countries and, partly, also by the generation gap between the composers. While Werner Egk drew near to the concept of Brecht and Weill in his opera, Stoyanov, on the other hand, used mostly the elements of Romantic opera, filled with contemporary trends in European music. Riccardo Zando-

---

24 Ibid.

nai's *La farsa amorosa* follows the traditional concept of a music comedy of Italian provenance, while Gotovac was heading towards spontaneous folk opera and a simple formal and musical concept. Despite all these differences between the musical and dramaturgical concept of these works, they represented a challenge for the artistic ensemble of the Slovak National Theatre. The staff mastered them to their honour, as documented by the reflections of the audience and the critics.

*The study is an output of the grant project VEGA2/0040/18 Musical Theatre in Bratislava from the Second Half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Personalities, Institutions, Repertoire, Reflections), carried out at the Department of Musicology of Comenius University.*

## LITERATURE

- BLAHO, Jaroslav. Opera SND v období 1939 – 1945 [Opera SND in the period 1939 – 1945]. In HORVÁTHOVÁ, Katarína. *100 rokov nového operného divadla v Bratislave* [100 Years of the New Opera Theatre in Bratislava]. Almanac from a Musicological Conference on 2 October 1986. Bratislava : Mestský dom kultúry a osvetu, 1986.
- BLAHOVÁ-MARTIŠOVÁ, Elena. *Súpis repertoáru SND 1920 – 2010* [Register of the Repertoire of the SND 1920-2010]. Bratislava : SND, 2010.
- BOKESOVÁ, Zdenka. Jakov Gotovac: Ero z onoho sveta [Ero the Joker], In *Elán*, 1943 – 1944, Vol. 14, Issue 8, p. 9.
- DAHLHAUS, Carl (ed.). *Pipers Enzyklopädie des Musiktheaters*, Band 2. München, Zürich : Piper. ISBN 9783492024129.
- EGK, Werner. *Die Zeit wartet nicht* [Time Does Not Wait]. München : Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, Musikverlag, 1981. 535 p. ISBN 978-3796200014.
- en. *Ero z onoho sveta na scéne ND* [Ero the Joker staged in the National Theatre]. In *Slovák*, 1943, Vol. 25, Issue 229, 6 October 1943, p. 6.
- HOZA, Štefan. *Ja svoje srdce dám...* [I'll Give My Heart...], 1, 2. Based on the notes in Hoza's diary, and his articles, letters and other writings, prepared for publishing by Bohumila Machýnková. Bratislava : Slovenský spisovateľ, 1989.
- HUDEC, Konštantín. Bulharská opera na scéne SND [Bulgarian Opera on the SND Stage]. In *Elán*, 1941 – 1942, Vol. 12, Issue 8, p. 10.
- HUDEC, Konštantín. K premiére Zandonaiho opery *Lúboštná komédia* [On the Premiere of Zandonai's opera *La farsa amorosa*]. In *Elán*, 1942 – 1943, Vol. 13, Issue 8, p. 9.
- J. H. Peer Gynt ako opera [Peer Gynt As an Opera]. In *Slovák*, 1941, Vol. 23, Issue 53, p. 7, 4 March 1941.
- K. Premiéra opery v Národnom divadle [The Premiere of the Opera in the National Theatre]. In *Slovák*, 1943, Vol. 25, Issue 87, p. 6, 14 April 1943.

- LAJCHA, Ladislav. *Dokumenty SND 1920 – 1945* [Documents of the SND 1920 – 1945]. Bratislava : Divadelný ústav, 2002. 1588 p. ISBN 9788088987178.
- NEDBAL, Karel. *Půl století s českou operou* [A Half Century with the Czech Opera. Praha : SNKLHU, 1959. 414 p.
- of. *Premiéra Peera Gynta v SND* [The Premiere of Peer Gynt in SND]. In *Gardista*, 1941, Vol. 3, Issue 52, p. 6, 4 March 1941.
- STRAČIAKOVÁ, Barbora. *Hudobný život Bratislavy v rokoch 1939 – 1945, Koncertný život v dobovej tlači* [The Musical Life of Bratislava in 1939 – 1945. Concert Life in the Press]. [Master's thesis]. Bratislava : Filozofická fakulta, Komenského univerzita, 2018.

Branko Ladič  
Department of Musicology  
Faculty of Arts, Comenius University  
Gondova 2  
811 02 Bratislava 1  
Slovakia  
e-mail: branko.ladic@gmail.com