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Opera and nineteenth-century nation-building : the (re)sounding voice of nationalism

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Chapter Two

Music, Opera and Nationalism

“Opera could now not only mirror but actually make the history of nations. In extreme cases it could help make the nation.” (Richard Taruskin)⁵⁵

“So in fact a national quality is an essential feature of national music.”(Arnold Schoenberg)⁵⁶

“The art of music above all the arts is the expression of the soul of a nation.” (Vaughan Williams)⁵⁷

I. Opera Matters

Opera is usually associated with poignant stories of love and death, with the enactment of universal human sensibility and the musical outpourings of overwhelming emotions. The lovers of opera tend to attend performances mostly because of the sake of music or the narrative. It might seem odd, then, to link the art of opera to nationalism. However, the long nineteenth-century offers us a significant number of cases when opera was linked in some way to politics, and especially to nation-building movements. One of the best-known examples – that already gained both folkloric and mythical proportions – is Verdi’s relationship to the Risorgimento. Many of his works have been interpreted already by his contemporaries as the representations of the pursuit of national independence. Both the famous chorus of the Jews, “Va pensiero” from the *Nabucco*, and the chorus “O signore dal tetto natio” from *I Lombardi* became a kind of national anthem in the Risorgimento, and Verdi was regarded an iconic figure of Italian unity. “Viva Verdi!” was the battle cry of the revolutionaries and Verdi’s name grew to be an acronym for “Vittorio Emmanuelle Re d’Italia!” (**Image 1**)

⁵⁵ Taruskin, Richard: *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol.3, *The Nineteenth Century*, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 212.

⁵⁶ Schoenberg, Arnold: “Folk Music and Nationalism”, In. *Style and Idea. Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, (Ed. Leonard Stein; Trans. Leo Black), London: Faber&Faber, 1975, 168.

⁵⁷ Williams, Vaughan: *National Music and Other Essays*, London: Oxford University Press, 1963, 68.

The Belgian revolution of independence in 1830 was instigated by a performance of Auber's opera *La muette de Portici* in Brussels. The revolution turned the following duet into an important piece of national-cultural memory:

Tombe le joug qui nous accable.
Et sous nos coups périsse l'étranger!
Amour sacré de la patrie.
Rends-nous l'audace et la fierté;
A mon pays je dois la vie;
Il me devra sa liberté.⁵⁸

In histories of the outbreak of the French Revolution is connected to the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, but if we go just two days back, we see the same crowd invading a different public institution: the Opéra.

“Because the Parisians of that time regarded opera as elite entertainment, their revenge was to demand that all performances be cancelled. For the next nine days, both Opéra and the Opéra-Comique remained dark. When they reopened, their themes began to change radically. Instead of libretti that celebrated beloved rulers, selfless aristocrats, and benevolent clergy, stories of heroic commoners, rescues from evil officials (e.g. Beethoven: *Fidelio*), and struggles against the severity of Church authorities began to appear. So strong was opera's influence that the French insurgents felt the need to block its conservative message and replace it with performances that advanced their revolutionary program.”⁵⁹

Opera mattered and it played a central role in the upheavals of the nineteenth century. One of the greatest changes that came about through the French Revolution was that opera became public. While previously opera houses were the properties of royal courts or wealthy aristocrats, in the nineteenth century public opera houses were built all over Europe.⁶⁰ They were mostly funded by private donations rather than official state support. While the language of the libretti had earlier been either Italian, French or, rarely, German, in the nineteenth century new vernacular languages appeared on the stage: operas were sung in Czech, Polish, Greek, Hungarian, Romanian and other

⁵⁸ Quote from the duet of Masaniello and Pietro in Act II of Auber's opera *La muette de Portici*. [Internet] Quoted text available at: <http://lespecheursdeperles.blogspot.com/2007/09/la-muette-de-portici-et-lindpendance-de.html> [Accessed on: 13-02-2008]. The opera's performance in 1830 at the La Monnaie opera house in Brussels instigated a riot that finally led to the Belgian revolution of independence.

⁵⁹ Rabb, Theodore K.: Opera, Musicology, and History, In. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36/3, 322.

languages. While folk music had earlier been used only occasionally, beginning with the nineteenth century the exception became a rule.

In the eighteenth century, mainly due to such factors as colonisation, war against the Ottoman Empire and the Napoleonic wars, new and “exotic” musical worlds appeared on the European operatic stages and in concert halls. This is the period when the *à la Turk* and *All’Ongarese* (Turkish and Hungarian style music) became extremely popular in instrumental compositions as well as in operas.⁶¹ On the one hand, the new interest in the exotic and the folk⁶², brought these cultures closer to the European elite public, on the other hand, it triggered an interest in local culture among the learned elite in the peripheries and urged them to (re)define their cultural and national identity.

The 1980 edition of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* includes a definition of national opera in the chapter about “Slavonic and National Opera”, claiming that national operas satisfied the hunger for national heritage with folk music and libretti based on national history, myth, legend, and peasant life. The 2001 edition of *The New Grove* reduces the treatment to half-a-page on “National Traditions” and no longer suggests a strong connection between national operas and Slavonic cultures.⁶³ National opera was a typical and popular genre of the nineteenth century, and it became a sort of virtual *lieu de mémoire* of nations. In spite of its nineteenth-century prevalence and social-political effect national opera as a phenomenon has scarcely been explored by musicologists or scholars of nationhood. That nineteenth-century composers turned to folk music and were experimenting with the creation of national styles is mentioned in every music history, but it is often perceived as an epiphenomenon of the political upheavals. I approach the problem from a different angle, arguing that operas were more than simple reflections of

⁶⁰ Before the nineteenth century there were only a few public opera houses in Europe. One of the best - known was the Teatro San Cassiano in Venice, which opened in 1637, and the one in Hamburg, which opened in 1678. But these were exceptions to the rule.

⁶¹ Mozart included Hungarian passages in his A Major violin concerto (K. 219, 3rd movement), and he also used Hungarian dance music patterns in *The Abduction from Seraglio* in order to create Turkish atmosphere in the opera. We can find examples of Hungarian dance motives in the *Concerto for flute and harp in C Major*, K. 299 in the final passage of the rondo section. Or one should not forget the rondo with Hungarian colour in Haydn’s D Major piano concerto (Hob. XVIII), the *verbunkos* like style in Beethoven’s 3rd Symphony or Diabelli’s Hungarian dances. Later Liszt, Schubert and Brahms, also use Hungarian idioms in their compositions.

⁶² Folk tunes were just as exotic for the audiences sitting in a European opera house or concert hall as the music of an oriental land. Therefore in fact exoticism and folklorism had the same musical function, since they both deviated from the norms and rules of Western art music.

nationalist politics. They were actually active agents in shaping the national consciousness of the people; as the “storehouses” and “factories” of national memories, they were the creators of national imagination, not the sheer representations of it. People did not start a revolution after reading a poem or a novel, but some uprisings did actually begin in theatres and opera houses.⁶⁴ What makes an opera national? How could opera houses become *lieux de mémoires* of nations? If Marshall McLuhan was right that “the medium is the message”⁶⁵, we may ask, what precisely opera’s message was, and why no other art form could deliver it. These are the questions that this chapter ventures to answer.

II. Nationalism and artistic endeavours

It has been argued that the origin of European art music as a literate tradition is directly linked to nationalism from its very beginning, since the Gregorian chants, the earliest musical notations in neumes, were the products of the alliance between the Roman Church and Frankish Kings, whose primary goal was the foundation of the Carolingian Empire. In 754 King Pepin, the father of Charlemagne, accepted the proposal of Pope Stephen II to unite with the Roman Church against the Lombards, he decided to repress the old Gallican liturgy in favour of the Roman one. Charlemagne continued his father’s liturgical reforms to unify his multiethnic and multicultural expanding empire under a single rite.⁶⁶ According to some musicologists,⁶⁷ during Charlemagne ‘s reign an authoritative antiphony⁶⁸ might have had circulated around the Empire around 800-900, until the new musical notation superseded the Gallican chants. The grasp of Politics on culture and music was a gesture that had affected the development of European art music. However, this theory has been criticised because it simplifies the role of the folk songs on the “official” antiphony and does not

⁶³ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, (Ed. Stanley Sadie), London: Macmillan, 2001, vol. 17, 689-707.

⁶⁴ See the examples mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis. (p.12)

⁶⁵ McLuhan, Marshall (2003): *Understanding Media*, London & New York: Routledge, 7.

⁶⁶ Treitler, Leo: “Homer and Gregory: The Transmission of Epic Poetry and Plainchant”, In. *The Musical Quarterly*, 1974/3, 333-372, 338.

⁶⁷ Levy, Kenneth: *Gregorian Chant and the Carolingians*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998 or Busse Berger, Anna Maria: *Medieval Music and the Art of Memory*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005.

⁶⁸ Antiphony is a liturgical book in the Roman Catholic Church intended to use *in choro* (i.e. in the liturgical choir). It contained antiphons that were sung at various points of the liturgy.

account for the countless local variants, reducing music to its notation.⁶⁹ These chants circulated mostly orally: they were exposed to mixture with other local variants, and they also contributed to the development of a unified European musical style. In short, though politics tried to transform and unify of musical notation, yet we cannot speak about a total European homogeneity since there were persistent local variants that strongly resisted the endeavours to standardise.

Territorial centralisation usually went hand in hand with cultural standardisation. Administrative languages played a vital role in this process of unification, not only for practical reasons but also in a more refined way, for creating the image of a unity and homogeneity. Benedict Anderson suggests that the appearance of the printed press was a major factor in this process. The printing of literary works written in vernacular greatly influenced their speed and range of dissemination, thus contributing to the formation of national consciousness and to the creation of “imagined communities”.

“These print-languages laid the bases for national consciousness in three distinct ways. First and foremost, they created unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars. (...) These fellow readers to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community. Second, print-capitalism gave a new fixity to language, which on the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of nation.”⁷⁰

We can offer at least one convincing example that supports Anderson’s theory: the first musical genres that were disseminated in print in the sixteenth century were vernacular songs. These songbooks – Petrucci’s book of frottoles in Venice (1504), *Antico* in Rome (Rome, 1510) *Öglin* in Augsburg (1512), *Attaignant* in France (1528) – were intended for local trade and became a lucrative business. Vernacular song genres differed from country to country, just like their languages, in contrast to the international “Franco-Flemish” idiom of sacred music. The vernacular songs circulated in print and were performed as household music, thus they can be

⁶⁹ Brunner, Lance W.: Book Review “Gregorian Chant and the Carolingians by Kenneth Levy”, In. *Notes*, 1999/1, 98-101.

⁷⁰ Anderson, Benedict: *Imagined Communities*, New-York, London: Verso, 1983, 44.

considered a kind of forerunner of later bourgeois entertainment, which, of course, was practised at a much larger scale.

“The most dramatic instance was the new ‘Parisian’ *chanson style*. During the 15th century, the word ‘chanson’ connoted an international courtly style, an aristocratic *lingua franca*. The French song in a fixed form might be written anywhere in Europe, by a composer of any nationality whether at home or abroad. The age of the printing fathered a new style of French *chanson* – the one introduced by Attaignant and associated with Claudin de Sermisy – that was actually and distinctively French in the way the *frottola* was Italian and the *Hofweise* setting (or *Tenorlied*) was German.”⁷¹

While vernacular music was played at households on the continent, England was the first country where public concerts were held in the modern sense of the word; this is where modern concert life was born. The Händelian oratorio was the genre of this public musical self-expression. Ruth Smith argues that political subtext influenced the genre, reflecting the trend of contemporary political debates to disguise the real message in the exegesis of the Old Testament. Händel’s depiction of Biblical characters was read as coded honour to British statesmen.⁷²

Athanasius Kircher, the seventeenth-century thinker, remarks in his *Musurgia universalis* (1650) that the French and Italian styles do not please the Germans and vice versa. Then he tries to trace the causes of this cultural discrepancy:

“I think this happens for a variety of reasons. Firstly, out of patriotism and inordinate affection to both nation and country, each nation always prefers its own above others. Secondly, according to the opposing styles of their innate character and then because of custom maintained by long-standing habit, each nation enjoys only its own music that it has been used to since its earliest age.”⁷³

Already as early as 1650, expressions like “innate character”, “custom maintained”, or “long-standing habit” were used to explain the existence of different national styles. In nineteenth-century this rhetoric became the foundation of nationalist discourses all over Europe. However, even before the nineteenth century there was an ongoing discursive tradition and a series of debates about national styles in music. One of the

⁷¹ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 690.

⁷² Smith, Ruth: *Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

most famous controversies concerning the relationship between music and national consciousness was the *Querelle des Bouffons* (War of the Bouffons), a pamphlet war that took place in France between 1752 and 1754. Instigated by the public performance of Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* at the Académie Royale de Musique in Paris by a group of travelling Italian actors known as *buffoni* (hence the name of the quarrel), the dispute involved the defenders of the French *tragédie lyrique* style of Lully and Rameau, and the proponents of Italian operatic music. With the exception of the German diplomat Friedrich Melchior Grimm (1723-1807), all the participants in the pamphlet writing were French. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, together with other contributors of the *Encyclopédie*, was the supporter of the Italian opera. One aspect of the quarrel was the relation of language and music: melody must originate from speech, Rousseau argued; it should follow the Italian operatic style and should not collapse in an artificial style of singing as in the French *tragédie lyrique*. The relation of music and speech was to form the core of Rousseau's language theories, and thus the quarrel was more than a sheer aesthetic debate. From the beginning it also had a political tint, since the French *lyrique* style was associated with the royal court, while the Italian style with the free public music making. With a slight exaggeration we might say that one represented the stiff, aristocratic world, while the other the more democratic, bourgeois society. One of the paradoxes of this opera war about national styles was that Lully, the father of the French opera, was himself Italian by birth.

The Italian and French contest is going to gain importance later in the nineteenth-century in the Risorgimento period, when the civically committed Italian opera began to mobilise people against both the French and the Habsburg rule. Stendhal remarks in his *Vie de Rossini* that the Italian musical self-consciousness owed a tribute to Napoleon. By the 1840s, the artistic musical embodiments of Italian nationalism were huge choral unisons that could convey and enhance collective national consciousness. Singing, especially group singing, became a part of the revolutionary movements. Operatic tunes disseminated like wildfire throughout the whole Italy. Singing and raising a crowd's "level of aggression" went hand in hand in the Risorgimento, just like earlier in the French Revolution,⁷⁴ or, as a matter of fact, in revolutions in general.

⁷³ Quote from *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 690.

⁷⁴ See Mason, Laura: *Singing the French Revolution. Popular Culture and Politics 1787-1799*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.

Political endeavours of nation-building and the cultivation of culture initiated by the men of letters merged in nineteenth-century Europe. The interest in aesthetics and culture of the late eighteenth-century thinkers transformed into national self-consciousness during the Napoleonic Wars and developed into national movements of separatism or unification by the mid nineteenth-century. What started as an aesthetic state without nationalistic dimensions, imagined by Schiller, ended in an aggressive cultural nightmare ruled by Bismarck, ultimately refused even by such originally ardent nationalists as Richard Wagner. Even though it is almost impossible to prove that there was a direct link between the literary and cultural trends and nationalism, I take the risk of asserting that culture was just as important in the nineteenth-century revolutionary upheavals as social or economic factors.

Johann Gottfried Herder, philosopher, folk song collector and protestant preacher forged a linkage between the romantic ideology of culture and nationalism. Herder like Rousseau argued that language and music were strongly connected with each and that language, as the world-view of a cultural community, was the most authentic expression of the nation's soul or *ethos*. Herder maintained that no language, hence no nation, can be held superior to another. Small nations contribute to the universal treasury of human civilisation as much as the powerful big nations. As a forerunner of modern semiotics, Herder extended the concept of the language to other aspects of culture and learned behaviour (such as customs, dress, art) and he argued that every cultural component is an authentic expression of the collective spirit and character of the nation. Thus the concept of *authenticity* was born and became a dominant ideology of the arts until the emergence of the twentieth-century avant-garde movement. Expression and representation of authenticity was regarded as both an inherent property and a goal of Art.⁷⁵

The Enlightenment culminated in the Kantian critiques, which gave rise to romantic ideologies and Hegel's historicism, thus transposing the main trend of thought to Germany. Though on different grounds, both Hegel and the romantic followers of Friedrich Schlegel argued that the aim of humanity must be to reach an organic universal totality through an authentic experience of the Spirit. While Plato deprived poetry of *techné* (art) and ranked philosophy higher, the romantics, especially Schlegel, Novalis and Hölderlin thought that the perfection of totality could

be attained by art alone. But this did not mean that philosophy was degraded in romanticism. On the contrary, in Hegel's *Aesthetics* philosophy surpassed poetry and art, hence the idea of the end of art which had an extremely important role in the twentieth century. Thus while romantic art was the revealing of ontology at the same time it was also the very object of ontology. Or to formulate this in another way, romantic art and especially music tried to grasp the essence of life, but in the same time it was itself the essence of life, and ironically this status it was given to art by philosophy, which tried to compete or transcend it. The artistic discourses of longing for unity and authentic life and the struggle for the materialisation of the spirit in history tie in with the contemporary political nationalistic discourses. Benedict Anderson has defined the new nation of imagination as a sovereign but limited community, essentially a mental construct. I claim that the nationalistic aspects of nineteenth-century artistic theories and works of arts were not only derivative of the contemporary political discourses, but that these theories actually provided intellectual material and inducement for politics.

It seems logical that a German thinker elaborated the relationship of language and nation. In Herder's time Germany consisted of small separate kingdoms and states; what held them together was the German language and its related folklore. Next to the great French monolith that became the feared "Other", the Germans tried to search for differences in order to establish their distinct collective identity. The theory that language is the most authentic expression of a nation's soul became a touchstone of the German arts and it rapidly radiated to the neighbouring cultures, too. It became the basic nation-building idea for both Hungarian and Romanian nationalism.

The ideology that language is able to effectively shape national consciousness actually preceded Herder's theories. It materialised first in the concept of *Nationaltheater* and referred to a theatre reserved for plays and operas performed in the vernacular. The model was the French Comédie Française. It first appeared in Hamburg in 1767, and then spread to Vienna in 1776 and to Mannheim in 1778.⁷⁶ In Vienna, Emperor Joseph II initiated the foundation of the national theatre, which became to be called "Court and National Theatre". This directly rejected his mother's,

⁷⁵ Schaeffer, Jean-Marie: "A művészet spekulatív elmélete", (Trans. Tamás Seregi), In. *Változó művészetfogalom* (Eds. Nikoletta Házas – Zoltán Varga S.), Budapest: Kijárat, 107-125.

⁷⁶ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 692.

Maria Theresa's, policy of reserving the Burgtheater exclusively for French and Italian companies. However, Joseph II cannot be regarded a nationalist in the nineteenth-century sense of the word. His objective was rooted in the universalism and humanism of the Enlightenment, emphasising the importance of making education available for all people. Public schooling could expand most easily in vernacular German instead of Latin or French, the privileged languages of the aristocracy. Nevertheless, Joseph II's emphasis on German culture turned into one of the most fundamental ideologies of later nationalists. Furthermore, Joseph II's promotion of German as the official language of the Habsburg Empire triggered the resistance of the Hungarian aristocracy. Later, the Hungarian linguistic and national awareness generated a similar resistance in the neighbouring Romanian, Slovakian, Croatian, and Serbian cultures against Hungarian nationalism. The Viennese court lost control: cultural nationalism spread as a wildfire all over the empire and eventually led to the Empire's disintegration.

II. National Opera

The bond between the theatre and national consciousness became one of the most important *liaisons dangereux* of the nineteenth century. It was the opera where this mutual affection manifested itself in the most astonishing form. The Volkstümlichkeit ("in the manner of the folk") can be found in most of the late eighteenth-century music, especially the *opera buffa*, where folk motives were used to imitate and express *couleur locale* that was associated with idyllic peasant life and pastoral scenery. The various local styles of peasant figures and the musical lingua franca for all the other characters still reflected a "horizontal" view of society, in which class rather than nation was the determining factor of communal identity. However, as soon as folklore and language were considered essential elements of a vertically defined community or nation, their cultural value increased. And so did the stock of national culture soar in general, since it became a core issue of the newly born public sphere and a recurrent topic of political discourse.

Herder himself coined the word *Volkslied* (folksong) and he was among the early collectors of these rustic or peasant songs. He published them in a two-volume anthology entitled *Stimmen der Völker* ("Voice of the Peoples") (1778-79). In Germany Herder was followed by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano who

edited another collection of folkongs, *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (“The Youth’s Magic Horn”) between 1805-1809. The collecting efforts of the brothers Grimm eventually gave a European impetus to an unprecedented passion for folklore, and to a national culture supported mainly by the bourgeois intelligentsia.

Opera, this formerly aristocratic entertainment, became a main expression of cultural nationalism. The romantic exaltation of music was certainly one of the important factors in this. The other factor was a political ideology that had already gained importance in theatrical practice through the works of Friedrich Schiller and later Victor Hugo: the liberal claim that a legitimate state should be built on “the people” rather than on God, a dynasty or imperial domination. Romantic ethnic nationalism and liberal civic nationalism both played an important role in the nation-building movements of the nineteenth century. Opera and musical theatre in general, contributed to the effective public dissemination of a cultural and political self-image. The newly born genre of national opera attained from the very beginning the status of a national virtual *lieu de mémoire*.

What were the institutional and historical causes for developing the theatre and opera into a cultural and psychological “factory” of ethnic and civic cohesion and self-image? According to George Steiner, we cannot understand the Romantic Movement unless we recognise the impulse towards drama and dramatisation in general.⁷⁷ Shelley argues in his *Defence of Poetry* that since drama is the authentic expression of a nation’s soul the decline of the dramatic art marks the decline of the nation:

“And it is indisputable that the highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence; and that the corruption or the extinction of the drama in a nation where it has once flourished is a mark of a corruption of manners, and an extinction of the energies which sustain the soul of social life. But, as Machiavelli says of political institutions, that life may be preserved and renewed, if men should arise capable of bringing back the drama to its principles.”⁷⁸

The idea that the stage and the nation are connected is not new. It can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, where drama, especially tragedy, was regarded as a highest

⁷⁷ Steiner, George: *The Death of Tragedy*, London: Faber and Faber, 1961, 108.

⁷⁸ Shelley, Percy Byssche: *A Defence of Poetry*, In. *English Essays: Sydney to Macaulay*, Harvard Classics, vol. 27, New York: Bartleby, 2001.

form of cultural practice. Nineteenth-century thinkers revive this view on the drama and wish to transform the theatre into such a public forum as in antique Greece. Architects like Gottfried Semper (1803-1879) and Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841) designed theatre buildings in ancient Greek style – Neues Schauspielhaus in Berlin, or the theatre in Dresden – and published influential theories⁷⁹ on the relation and importance of Greek architecture and nation-building. Later Wagner based his whole concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* on the same Greek revival movement that defined every aspect of the nineteenth century.

Georg Lukács argued that from the point of view of nation-building the public character of drama and its direct impact on the spectators was the great advantage of the historical drama over the historical novel.⁸⁰ Performance could mobilise the historical awareness of the nineteenth century, especially the staging of opera, which, more than traditional theatre, had music and singing in its favour. Above all, it was the chorus, a mass of people singing together, that represented the most obvious liaison between life and drama, audience and stage.

In the eighteenth century, the theatre fulfilled the function of nineteenth-century opera. However, it was a special theatrical genre, the *melodrama*, which attracted the public and defined dramatic poetry for the next century. Peter Brooks argues that in order to understand the passion of the nineteenth-century for the theatre and for the theatrical in general, we should analyse the “melodramatic imagination” of the age, which began to dominate the public sphere in the time of Napoleon. Melodrama, the French version of the Singspiel, was written for a large public that extended from the *petit bourgeois* to Empress Josephine.⁸¹ While French melodrama was democratic in style, aiming to reach a popular audience, it was also searching for more aesthetic coherence and self-consciousness. Brook traces the origins of the melodrama back to the *pantomime theatre* of the late eighteenth century, when only the so-called *patented theatres*, like Théâtre-Français, the Opéra, and the Italiens were given monopoly by state officials to perform both the classical repertory and full-scale new productions. The secondary theatres had to be content with ballets, pantomimes

⁷⁹ Gottfried Semper: *Die vier Elemente der Baukunst* (1851), *Vorläufige Bemerkungen über bemalte Architektur und Plastik bei den Alten* (1834) and Karl Friedrich Schinkel: *Sammlung architektonischer Entwürfe* (1820-1837), *Werke der höheren Baukunst* (1840-1842; 1845-1846).

⁸⁰ Lukács, Georg: *The Historical Novel* (Trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell), London: Merlin Press, 1989, 130.

⁸¹ Brooks, Peter: *The Melodramatic Imagination*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976, xii.

and puppet shows. Since speech – thus performing the pieces of the classical repertory – was forbidden, these secondary theatres used music and gesture as their major means of expression. These musical pantomimes became more and more elaborate and incorporated pieces of dialogue, coming close to the genre of the nineteenth-century *mélodrame*. The French Revolution abolished the monopoly of the patent theatres, liberated the secondary theatres, which had already been equipped with a well-developed theatrical style of combining music, movement and stage design in order to convey the message of the play that attracted a mostly uneducated audience.

Napoleon re-established for a while the patent and a strict censorship of the theatres, radically reducing them in number. In his opinion, classical French tragedy was the most suitable expression of imperial glory. Yet theatre in general, and melodrama in particular, was flourishing in Paris. The Restoration in 1814 brought again freedom to all the theatres, possibly due to the conscious policy of an insecure monarch to give bread and circus:

“People absorbed their theatre-going in massive doses: an evening’s entertainment would consist of various curtain raisers and afterpieces, as well as one and sometimes two full-length plays, and would last five hours or more. [...] Stage theatricality was excessive, and life seemed to aspire to its status, as if in fictional representation of the historical epic of Revolution, bloodshed, battle, and Empire that the nation had been playing out.”⁸²

During and after the Restoration, the prestige of classical French tragedy and the popularity of melodrama joined forces in another genre that came to dominate the Parisian stages and later all of Europe: the *grand opéra*. This monumental operatic genre enjoyed the financial support of the traditional public of the Opéra so that it could afford lavish spectacles with more developed and complex stage machinery than the Baroque theatre. However, the previous popularity and aesthetic norm of the melodrama undeniably influenced grand opéra’s theatricality and its broadening range of the topics. The huge musical *stage tableaux* and the excessive sentimentality of the performances were all residues of the melodrama, which became a guiding poetic principle of grand opéras.

These stage works could exert a huge influence on the public. Lukács pointed out that dramatic portrayal makes man much more the centre of the story than the

⁸² Ibid. 86.

epic. He quoted Schiller, according to whom the direct effect is more crucial to drama than to epic: “The action of drama moves before me, I myself move round the epic which seems as it were to stand still.”⁸³ While the reader of the epic has greater freedom of interpretation, the spectator of the drama is totally dependent on theatrical effects. Opera as a multimedia art form could enhance this dramatic effect.

Richard Taruskin emphasises the significance of singing culture, especially the cultivation of the *German lied*, in the development of national operas and national music in general.⁸⁴ The *lied*, a typical German product, was characterised by Empfindsamkeit (“sensibility”) and Volkstümlichkeit (“in the manner of the folk”), binding together the romantic “I” with the “We”. A Berlin lawyer, Christian Gottfried Krause (1719-1770) described for the first time the *lied* in a book *Von der musikalischen poesie* (On Musical Poetry; 1752) that actually anticipated the genre itself. Krause’s friend C.P.E. Bach, who read the book, began to furnish the theory with more than two hundred *liedern*. As Taruskin points out, the popularity of the German romantic *lied* was “decidedly a cultivation, a ‘hothouse growth’”⁸⁵. These *lieder* were, meant for home entertainment, and thus simple and relatively easy to disseminate.

However, the revival of choral music meant the greatest step towards romantic nationalism, since it could unite people both physically and mentally.⁸⁶ Choral music was not sung in the church, like in the medieval times, but rather in public spaces. It was symbolic that Wagner’s *Mastersingers* displaced the song contest from the church to the Festival Meadow and that the final legitimisation did not come from the church or town officials, neither from the tradition of the *tabulatur*, but from the *Volk*. After the French Revolution, the nation and the nation-state replaced God and the King in popular imagination. The former rituals and state ceremonies were filled with a different kind of secular and national content. Folk and Art became sacralised concepts in a romantic redefinition:

“Romantic choral music was associated not only with *Gemütlichkeit*, the conviviality of social singing, celebrated in the Männerchor texts for which Schubert had supplied such a mountain

⁸³ Lukács, George: *The Historical Novel*, 132.

⁸⁴ Taruskin, Richard: *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol.3, *The Nineteenth Century*, 119-120.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Klenke, Dietmar: *Der singende ‘Deutsche Mann’: Gesangvereine und deutsches Nationalbewusstsein von Napoleon bis Hitler*, Münster: Waxmann, 1998.

of music, but also with mass choral festivals – social singing on a cosmic scale that provided European nationalism with its very hotbed.”⁸⁷

Philip Bohlman also points out that the cult of singing helped spreading of the idea of nineteenth-century national music and opera. He argues that epic songs and ballads were proto-national genres. The epic, “is the story of the proto-nation,” represented through the deeds of “the individual whose heroism mobilises the nation, and whose leadership provides a metaphor for the nation’s own coming to age.”⁸⁸ The epics chronicle the *long durée* history of the nation. The ballads are the stories of the individuals and events that form together a national mosaic. National operas combine both of these two forms.

Before the advent of nineteenth-century nationalism, peasants and common people on the stage represented only their class, not their country. In Lortzing’s comic opera *Zar und Zimmermann* (1837), a work that raises many social issues, the Russian fugitive soldier Peter Iwanow becomes in the end the official representative of his country, but only because of the Tsar’s benevolence. Iwanow is not yet the representative of *the people*. His acts are only motivated by the personal intent to marry the girl he loves. In contrast, Ivan Susanin in Glinka’s opera *A Life for the Tsar* (1836) already acts in the name of his people and is ready to sacrifice his life to help the tsar.

In Germany and Austria the *Singspiel*, the vernacular comic opera, represented primarily the romantic Volkstümlichkeit and the Gemütlichkeit. In France Rousseau’s *Le devin du village*, in Italy, the *opera buffa*, this sung-through musical genre that conquered all the European stages by the 1750s, epitomised comic opera, easily accessible for the common audience. In France, England and Germany, countries with a flourishing theatrical tradition, simple musical numbers, tunes well known to the folk, were inserted into the spoken dialogues, adding to the entertaining value of the plays and making them popular. As Taruskin points out, only a character “simple” enough could sing these simple songs, which resulted in an unprecedented increase in rural settings.⁸⁹

Contrary to the “simplicity” of the German comic *Singspiels*, the operatic stage became in France the place for re-enacting the nation’s history. Tragedy was the

⁸⁷ Ibid. 162.

⁸⁸ Bohlman, Philip: *The Music of European Nationalism*, Santa Barbara CA etc.: ABC CLIO, 2004, 37.

most suitable genre for this purpose. In the period of the July Monarchy (1830-48) the Académie Royale became the site of the monster opera spectacles. In these *grand operas* art and politics were strongly intertwined, and national destiny became a recurrent issue on the operatic stage. (Like in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (1829).) With the theatricality and sentimentality of the melodrama, and the economic and social support of the "official" theatre industry, grand operas became mega-productions, a thriving business for their producers and a favourite of the public.

The Italian *opera buffa*, the German *Singspiel*, and the French *grand opéra*, represent in fact three different national styles, as well as three different approaches to the concept of the nation and its operatic representation. A mixture of all these genres can be found in the so-called *national operas* that became popular in East-Central Europe. The *opera buffa* was the first to bring onto the operatic stage common people and to represent their social problems. The *Singspiel* brought to the foreground the folksiness and conviviality of common social singing. The *grand opera* raised the awareness for history in general and national history in particular.

The idea of history in opera appeared first and foremost on the textual level of libretti. They were based on widely known literary works. Walter Scott (*Lucia di Lammermoor*), Victor Hugo (*Hernani*, *Le Roi s'amuse*, *Lucrezia Borgia*), Schiller (*Don Carlos*, *Mary Stuart*, *Turandot*), Shakespeare (*Macbeth*, *Otello*, *Falstaff*), inspired opera composers and librettists. Of course, these dramas romanticised, fictionalised and distorted the past however, they significantly influenced the historical consciousness of the people. On the musical level, history appeared only later on the operatic stage. Exotic and folk tunes had already been used for the musical representation of *couleur locale* to depict an alien milieu of a remote land, as is the case with Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio* and Borodin's *Prince Igor* (Polovtsian Dances). Nevertheless, the conscious use of archaisms by embodying historical music in the operatic score was quite rare, and it became practiced mostly in the second half of the nineteenth century, as with references to Bach and allusions to Lortzing in Wagner's *Meistersinger*. The rediscovery of earlier music by nineteenth-century composers meant an exploration of the sense of history and historicity of music itself. It came to be used in contemporary works as a conscious poetic principle. While the eighteenth-century public distinguished between music that was

⁸⁹ Taruskin, 187.

up-to-date or out of fashion, the historicity of music became an important criterion for the nineteenth-century audience.

In the multinational Habsburg Empire (**Map 1**, **Map 2**, **Map 3**), the nineteenth-century nation-building was not only a question of a political and social transformation like in France or Germany, but actually threatened the very existence of the whole state, because many ethnic groups wanted to establish their own separate state. Topics of folklore and history became a potential menace for the Viennese authorities, since they reminded the public of a separate cultural consciousness that was seen as different and sovereign from the imperial identity. In spite of harsh censorship, the intelligentsia and some enlightened aristocrats were ardent supporters of national theatres and national cultural practices in general. Since a large portion of the Empire's population lived in rural conditions, the *Singspiel* with its folksiness could easily reach a wide public. On the other hand, the increasing interest in history and historical drama in the spoken theatre paved the way for the *grand opera*. This operatic form also contained passages of folk music and dances. National operas were ideologically the descendants of historical dramas that had already canonised and popularised certain topics and historical figures, and musically a mixture of *Singspiel* and *grand opera*.

It is impossible to approach the phenomenon of national opera solely from a musicological point of view. These operas were actually discursive formations, artistic products of the cultural and social practices of the age. They shaped the historical consciousness of the public more effectively than scholarly historiographies. Most of the works that were regarded national operas, were crossbreeds of accumulated national mythology and nineteenth-century political ideology. As John Neubauer points out, national operas relied on foreign ideas and aesthetic currents.⁹⁰ In spite of the explicit claim of national authenticity and purity by artists and critics, in reality the European nineteenth-century national canons were hybrid. Nonetheless, they were able to shape the national consciousness of the people, since the appropriated foreign elements mingled with the already familiar recurrent topics of the historical, literary and musical memory. Plots drawing on history and being perceived as an allegory of the contemporary local or rural settings, the language of the libretto written in vernacular, and the reminiscences of the folk tunes or well-

⁹⁰ Neubauer, John: "Zrinyi, Zriny, Zrinski", In. *Neohelicon*, Volume 29, Number 1, 2002.

known local melodies incorporated in music, as well as the historical evolution of the theatre and opera house into a site of public sphere both contributed to the perception of certain works as national operas.