

Yuri Dimitrin

***LIBRETTO:
Its History, Art, and Craft
(a textbook in the form of an essay)***

The book is written as a lively extended essay eschewing the tone of dry dogma or the impersonality of a textbook. It can, nonetheless, serve as a robust and imaginative guide for college and conservatory students studying to be composers, dramatists, conductors, producers, and music or theater scholars.

This book, intended for a wide readership of music theater aficionados, can serve as a guide for college and conservatory students aiming to become professional composers, conductors, dramatists, producers, musicologists, and theater scholars – and can inform their instructors as well.

Table of Contents

In the Labyrinth of co-creation	5
I. The Next Semester and Pages of History	
1. Opera – drama per music	11
What Is It Made of?	18
Rondo-Capriccioso around Libretto	35
Operatic Reform in 18 th Century: Who and What?	56
2. Operetta – life after life	
II. Librettology in Letters, or the Pains of Co-creation	
Giuseppe Verdi (selected letters)	72
Modest Mussorgsky (selected letters)	93
Pyotr Tchaikovsky (selected letters)	102
Giacomo Puccini's Perspectives on Opera Libretto	121
Arnold Schoenberg (selected letters)	144
By Way of an Epilogue	153
III. Technique - the Final Exam	160
Source	161
Subject	162
Opera before opera	163
Characters	164
Exposition	165
The Golden Mean	167
Finale	170
Text	171
Updating the Plot	174
Authors and Directors	175
More Reflections and Practical Advice	180
Supplement:	
Libretto Dramaturgy: A Course Syllabus	184
Bibliography	188
About the Author	191

IN THE LABYRINTH OF CO-CREATION

(a word about Yuri Dimitrin's book)

During the past several hundred years scarcely one composer can be found who did not dream, openly or in secret, about writing an opera (or a related genre – a *Singspiel*, an operetta, a musical). Most of the time, alas, such attempts are in vain (very few possess the synthetic gift of a Wagner or a Boito). Then the inevitable occurs: the composer must seek and find a co-author in the ranks of a rare and unique profession of opera dramatist. The book in front of you tells about such a co-author, and about the process of such co-authorship.

In my view this is, first all, a richly suggestive work by a talented man, written in a distinctive, captivating style. I, at any rate, devoured it overnight. What is the source of its appeal and what makes it so valuable? My answer is: a variety of things. First of all, the subject itself – libretto and its creators – appears to be a genuinely vital issue. The history of operatic art is such that every period (including our own) can boast but very few librettists among its literary folk. (This especially in comparison with the crowded composer guild – in certain times, after all, a dozen operas would be set to the same libretto!) There are many reasons for this state of affairs, as recounted in this book: they include certain idiosyncrasies in thinking like a musician, which seldom coincide with the logic of literary composition and lead to the «dependent» nature of the librettist's labor; they include personality-driven differences in co-creators' approaches; they include the ultra-modest role reserved for the author of the text in the final stage; they include, too, fairly dismissive attitudes toward the libretto, as some kind of second-rate product, on the part of many high-brow writers, even the greats. We note that the craft of libretto-writing is not taught, and there is precious little scholarly literature on the subject. Therefore, in this business, important figures (some of whom have been quite flamboyant and adventurous) are, as it were, custom-made. In this

light, the testimony and opinions of the author of this book – who is one of the very few highly professional librettists around – undoubtedly are of both theoretical and practical value.

How can we define the genre of this book? Least of all does it resemble a standard textbook, although it can function perfectly well in this role for a great number of art majors (not limited to composers or dramatists). Its style cannot be farther from dry and dogmatic: the technicalities of the craft are very artfully «dissolved» in the harmonies of artistic embodiment, thus the librettist's «kitchen» is presented in an easy-to-comprehend and, as a rule, believable manner.

The narrative in this book hews to the logical schemata of a well-known «trinity»: history, art, and craft. In the historical chapters the author does not attempt to deal with the entire difficult and twisty history of the development of opera dramaturgy (which would have been impossible, anyway, given the scope of the present work). Rather he draws the reader's attention to certain key moments, turning points in this process, highlighting personalities who were central at this or that juncture (the Florentines, Metastasio, Calzabigi; Gluck, Da Ponte's collaboration with Mozart, Wagner; the problems of 20th century libretto-writing in Russia, with Shostakovich's operatic «to-and-fro's» serving as examples). This «pin-point» approach permits the reader to appreciate the essential problems of musician-writer collaboration at different stages, to grasp the main vectors of its historical trajectory, and to evaluate the degree to which musical and poetic thought developed in parallel (including the degree to which one or the other of these components ran ahead or lagged behind in different historical periods). In the end, to define the principles governing this process – see the author's chapter on the problems of survival of classical operetta – is indirectly to raise a most pressing question about the future of the musico-scenic art in the 21st century.

The narrative in the second part of the book – the narrative of art – is presented literally from the first-person point of view, that of the great masters of operatic genre (the book offers us fragments from their epistolary legacy). In summing up these

very valuable testimonies, Yuri Dimitrin notes that they are not so much a part of academic librettology as of «the life of operatic giants – their despair and successes; their creative breakthroughs [and] victories». All the more instructive, then, are these cited documents! In his commentary the author underscores an important idea: «The demands placed by these various composers on their librettists are closely related if not entirely identical: dramatic value of the plot, brevity of vocal dialogues, simplicity of style, staginess, efficacy of the text». What amazes us now is how relevant these *aeternae veritates*, achieved through such toil by the classics, are today – as relevant and contemporary as the problem of authorship and co-authorship in operatic art, also featured in this section.

Much profit can be derived as well from the concluding section of the book, devoted to the «technology» – craft – of libretto composition. Dimitrin's advice on «how to make a libretto» is based in decades of his own experience and delivered with his signature artistry, humor and sharp wit, frequently verging on self-irony. Many of his suggestions are in earnest and undoubtedly a real aid in the creation of the literary text for a musico-scenic composition; others might compel us to stop to ponder our own solutions to a given challenge.

In a word, this work is a quite successful attempt to introduce the reader to the history of the problems at hand, to delineate their unique landscape, and to propose a number of recipes for their resolution. Not a little for one book! Taking into view the extreme paucity of published material on this subject, I dare say Yuri Dimitrin's volume is in many ways unique. In 415 years of musical theater's existence, this is the first attempt to create an instructional aid of its kind.

But is the author sufficiently authoritative to offer us his opinions on a topic so little studied in theater musicology? Unequivocally yes, in my view, and more than enough. The grounds for saying this are many. For one, how easy is it in our times to name at least a few more or less successful professional librettists? Not easy – and yet Yuri Dimitrin is one such librettist. One may like the content of his creative output or not, but

that he has been so consistently and durably in demand is obvious, and in a wide variety of musico-scenic art at that (he is the author of numerous texts for musical dramas, comedies, musicals and rock-operas, as well as translations of foreign-language libretti and modernized adaptations of the classics). Under his belt are collaborations with a variety of well-known composers, resounding creative successes and relative disappointments; his assets include unquestionable unique talent as a librettist and a wealth of experience penetrating the secrets of his craft, which he generously shares with us in these pages. I urge you to entrust yourself to this author (while yet holding on to your own wits and convictions!) and to validate his wisdom through your own creative endeavors.

Lastly – this book is addressed, of course, to a range of creative professions. Primarily, however, it ought to be of equal benefit to the librettist and to the composer. The one and the other will both discover in it much that is instructive and indispensable in practice and will understand their co-authors better, which will lead to greater mutual consideration and in the end a successful product of their co-creative efforts. Besides, it seems to me that Yuri Dimitrin's work (whether or not the author wished it so) might beget a daring thought in the composer's mind: Should he perhaps set about creating his own textual basis for his future musico-scenic composition? For who knows, perhaps we will have this book to thank for what Pushkin's Salieri called a «new *Wagner*», creating «something great – to take delight in.». . .

Let us wish this book a happy future.

Grigory Korchmar,
chair of the St. Petersburg Composers' Union,
Merited Artist of the Russian Federation,
professor.

Instead of an Epigraph

LIBRETTO...

What governs it, and what
 does it itself govern?
 Does it shape the music's style and form?
 Or does it anticipate them?
 Does it affect the artistic quality
 of the completed work?
 Is there room for it in our apperception of the
 aural and visual elements of a production?
 In existence are theories of music and theater.
 In existence are theories of drama.
 Theories of libretto do not exist.
 Without libretto, the long-lived musical theater
 has not yet lived an hour –
 but it has somehow survived without a
 full-fledged «librettology».
 And while historical studies of the libretto
 have by now appeared,
 not so for the theoretical ones.
 It is not even clear who their author might be.
 A musician? A writer?

The theorizing attempts made in this book
 are fragmentary, disjunctive, surrealistic.
 They qualify as «theory» only
 in a qualified sense.
 They sooner represent the fruits of one
 dramatist-chemist's many years
 of painfully coming to understand.



Fragment of Pieter Brueghel the Elder's engraving «The Alchemist»

I

THE PAGES OF HISTORY AND THE NEXT SEMESTER

1. O P E R A - D R A M A P E R M U S I C

WHAT IS IT MADE OF?

«Well, dear students, our semester is almost over. Now for a knotty question: What is IT made of? What do you think? I am all ears».

«It is made of libretto and music».

«Other views?»

«There is nothing but music in it. Nothing that is worth thinking or talking about. Nothing that can't be discarded as infinitesimally small».

«So, the positions have been staked out, and vacation is enough time to reflect on them. I look forward to working with you in the next semester».

... As a matter of fact, all that I am about to reveal to the world is a kind of guide to the Next Semester. The Past One has lasted four centuries. In 1596 the city of Florence «invented» the kind of theater which, in its search to express «drama per music», turned out to be capable of vocalizing drama. The stage, of course, had sung before, including the singing of plays. Yet what we now call «music theater» (let us exclude ballet from this discussion) originated at that time. Four centuries is a considerable stretch, so how

much longer can we postpone resolving this question: What is IT made of?

«Show some humility, Mr. Librettist. You are not the first to hold forth on music theater. Plenty of sensible people before you have spoken their minds on this subject».

Fair enough. Let us define our question more precisely. Looking from the vantage point of the Next Semester and comparing our own conclusions with the reflections of the Past Semester's sensible people, let us try to understand this: What does a dramatic-musical composition consist of?

The correct-and-boring answer -- «of libretto and music» – is a barren formula, which clarifies nothing and leads nowhere and of which the precision is more than doubtful. Admittedly, one might agree with the first half of it («of libretto and...»), although this way of putting it fails to account for literary or mythological sources that serve as many a libretto's foundation. Let us not forget, either, that the function of libretto may be performed by the original source itself, in all of its virginal purity and without a word changed. The libretto of Dargomyzhsky's *Stone Guest*, for example, is simply the unaltered text of Pushkin's eponymous «little tragedy». A case like this, of course, is just as much of a rarity in music theater as is a boundlessly original libretto based on no literary source whatsoever. Let us agree, therefore, that the term «source» is in general already contained in the term «libretto». A libretto, then, is a play created on the basis of a literary source and capable of being expressed through music.

It is important, however, to recognize that the transformation of a literary source into a libretto occurs in a congeneric environment. A distinct but related genre is crystallized in this process, and they both -- the parent and the child -- are, essentially, literature. Yet as soon as the libretto is given over to the composer, a radically different type of transformation ensues. The congeneric context no longer exists, in which one genre might gradually «flow out into» the other. Rather, all the while relying on a literary work that is the libretto, the composer constructs a specifically musical dramaturgy of the future composition. The conceptions of one art, with its distinct means of expression, with its own habits and «maneuvers», must now be expressed through a different art altogether. The difference is in respect to that art's very nature; it is a genetic difference. And much as we would like to receive with open arms, and to celebrate, «the perfect union of two muses», conflicts between them are inevitable. They foreshadow agonized refashioning of form, ideas, and principles; they preordain countless compromises; they spell the need for each art to forego the ultimate in its native expressivity. The surprise? It is that, in braving the road paved with its victims' bones, the union of the two muses -- bosom enemies and implacable friends -- has in fact found a way to produce an artistic alloy of exceptional homogeneity. And, like some infallible device, the audience's perceptions again and again confirm the indivisible nature of this alloy, for it is impossible to separate the libretto out of one's sense of what is happening on the

musical stage. Outside of the stage experience, this is indeed a possibility – and nothing is simpler. There it is the text of the libretto, severed from the music; there they are, two or three dozen lined pages to be read, taken in, and evaluated. Keep in mind, however, that this libretto in front of you has been abstracted from the homogenous alloy and is now functioning as merely the first half of the barren formula, «of libretto and...» To abstract the libretto from the second half of it (the one that is after «and...»), to separate libretto from music, is not something our perceptual faculties can do. And what is even more striking is that neither can the music be separated from libretto. Libretto is part of every individual musical phrase.

It has arrived then – the hour to bring to light our own formula for a dramatic-musical piece. What is IT made of? It is made of two parts: the first is Libretto, the second – MusicPerLibretto.¹ Only for convenience's sake do I use capitalization in this tripartite word-monster. In fact, to underscore the perfect blend of the MusicPerLibretto alloy, I should scramble the letters haphazardly, for example: «tosicbrettomu». And if so, if you are fundamentally in agreement with this formula for a dramatic-musical composition – Libretto plus MusicPerLibretto – then the following conclusion is unavoidable: in music theater, no «pure music» exists at all. Each of our composer's notes contains the labor of the librettist, too.

¹ The Russian original of the term «MusicPerLibretto» is clearer and more evocative as it connotes the confluence, or alloy, of the music with the text to which it is set.

Even when we're dealing with a musical passage without text. Even when the composer and the librettist are unacquainted. Even when one of them is a genius and the other a nobody. Tosicbrettomu!

Let us now return to the start of our investigations and consider the second reply to «What is IT made of?» Some believe, it appears, that IT is made of music alone, that the rest is negligible. Let us not bat away this notion. It is gifted and fearlessly sincere, and every one of us has been ready to believe the same after some terrifically impressive operatic production. But is this a true idea? No, it is not. Yet we must discover why all of us sometimes, when we experience musical drama on stage, stand ready to plead allegiance to it.

The nature of the art form called «music» is such that it displaces from our perceiving consciousness all other art forms – in part if not in their entirety. This in some strange way is right and just, even in cases where the artistic quality of the music is lesser than the quality of its co-participating art form. As for the classical standard, nothing need even be said. When we listen, for instance, to Glinka's romance «I Remember the Wonderful Moment», we do not register Pushkin's lyrics – which fact, of course, does nothing to take away their beauty. Whether we admire this song or are left unfulfilled by it (or its performance), the measure of our perceptual experience lies entirely in its musical aspect. Entirely.

In my Theater Academy lecture course, I convey this to my students through the following anecdote of my own composition. The story is called «Ludwig

and William». «Two hundred years ago», I intone like an epic poet, «there lived two friends. One, named William, was a great playwright; the other, named Ludwig, was a great composer. Together they decided to create an opera about, say, a Danish prince. Conferring with Ludwig, William wrote the libretto (a play). Conferring with William, Ludwig wrote the music. Who, dear students, is the author of this work?» Shrugging their shoulders, the students reply: «Both of them».

Well, my clever ones, and now I shall take you to a performance of this opera created by two geniuses and at the close of it ask you again, «who is the author?» What will be your reply? Your most sincere reply will be, «Ludwig, alone» «How can that be, 'Ludwig alone'? What about 'The Mousetrap'? What about Yorick's skull? What about the prince's flute soliloquy? What about...?» «Yes, theoretically speaking – they are both authors. But speaking emotionally – only one of them is.»

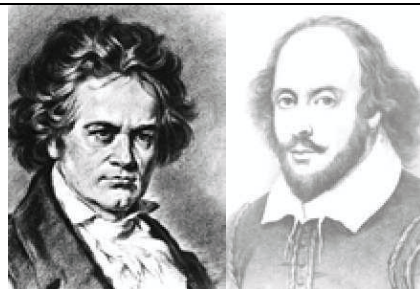
Not too long ago I, a librettist, was awarded a literary prize. This occurred during the celebrations of Pushkin's bicentennial, and here is what occurred to me. Pushkin's prose and poetic works have served as the basis for several hundred musical compositions. Of those, several dozen have been written by geniuses. And yet, if our knowledge of Pushkin were based only on what was adapted for voice and for the stage, it would be no knowledge at all. We would not know Pushkin, we would not even know his name. The literary creator, when the public sees him next to the creator of music, is not seen as an author.

Pushkin himself is known to have reflected on the matter – and drawn very definite conclusions. This from his letter to his friend Pyotr Vyazemsky: «Why would you take up writing libretto, subordinating poetry to music? I for one would not stir, not even for a Rossini.»²

What a gripping intrigue did the Past Semester's music theater deliver! The Florentines have made the first steps in mastering «drama through music.» The union of the two muses, braving the pro-

verbial bone-paved road, has man aged to create an artisticalloy of rare consistency. Ludwig and William have hypothetically been enabled to unite their arts for the greater glory of a new genre. Scores of sensible people have shared with the world their inquiries into the subject. Yet Pushkin refuses to stir, Rossini notwithstanding.

How then does the Next Semester bode for us?



Ludwig and William



«I Remember a Wondrous Moment...»



Rossini & Pushkin

² Prince Pyotr Vyazemsky (1792-1878), Russian poet and literary critic, friend of Pushkin.

RONDO-CAPRICCIOSO AROUND LIRETTO

Let us first get acquainted with a most curious statement:

«To my notion, it was a great misfortune for lyric drama [*lyric drama* is the author's name for the Florentine invention of 1596 – Yu. D.] that the melodramatic reform in Florence did not lend a helping hand to a reform in poetry as well; or at least that the reformers of poetry, the champions of truth and nature, did not, especially in France, make friends with Opera. They disowned it, however; and so nothing remained for the musicians but the poets of the court. This dull collaboration with a nerveless style full of foolish pretentiousness and forced sentiment, and lacking in sincerity and life, had a deplorable influence on musicians. It taught them idle formulas, and weighed heavily on dramatic music until our own day.³

Who could have written in this way? A musician? A litterateur? We will come back to that, but we will begin with a discussion of the «Great Misfortune». We will ask: what milieu, whether musical or literary, ended up serving as recruiting grounds for librettists, whose bones paved the way for music theater during the Past Semester?

The answer is: predominantly a literary milieu.

Who were these authors, and how many of them left behind an important literary legacy? They num-

³ Translation by Mary Blaiklock. *Some Musicians of Former Days*. New York, 1915.

ber in single digits. One is Carlo Goldoni – an Italian dramatic reformer, author of around 300 plays and 100 libretti; another is Eugene Scribe, a Frenchman whose libretti were used by Meyerbeer, Verdi, and Auber, among others; the third is the Austrian dramatist Hugo von Hoffmansthal, author of several libretti for Richard Strauss. On Zola, Stefan Zweig, rare occasions the genre of libretto attracted Victor Hugo, Emile Jean Cocteau, and Paul Claudel. In Russia during the pre-Glinka era the following authors were known as librettists: Sumarokov, Kapnist, Kheraskov, Krylov, Zagoskin, Pisarev. Afterwards, we count Turgenev, Ostrovsky, Sollogub, Polonsky, Bulgakov. This just about completes the list. The others (and they are countless) may be termed what the *Sovietera Encyclopedia of Music* used to politely refer to as «playwrights of secondary importance». Some of these names are deservedly well-known in music theater, yet their renown and significance are circumscribed by the boundaries of that setting. Still, why had



Carlo Goldoni
(1707-1793) –
renowned Italian
playwright and
librettist, author of
numerous libretti,
including the text
for Joseph Haydn's
The Apothecary.



Augustin Eugène
Scribe
(1791-1861) –
French playwright
and successful
librettist; provided
libretti
for Meyerbeer
D. Auber, G. Verdi
D. Rossini, plays
also served as
scenarios for opera
libretti by several
other composers,
including (V. Belli-
ni, G. Donizetti,
F. Cilea and others).



Hugo von Hoffmannsthal (1874-1929) – Austrian novelist, poet, playwright, librettist; collaborated with Richard Strauss on the following operas: *Elektra*, *The Knight of the Rose*, *Ariadne on Naxos*, *The Woman without a Shadow*, *Intermezzo*, *The Egyptian*, *Helen*, and *Arabella*.

those champions of truth and of nature», why had they been «unwilling to make alliance with opera...»? I believe that two causes are involved. First, writing plays for the dramatic stage and writing libretti are professions that call for different sets of skills. To learn the craft of the librettist, a dramatist must reflect on, digest, and learn a great deal, for otherwise even a Shakespeare would produce a text which reveals talent, perhaps, without being competent musically or stage-wise. Second, the psychological environment in which the Librettist actually toils is, to put it mildly, uncomfortable for those who see themselves as authors, as creators. After one attempt our «creators» tend immediately to «slink back» to the drama house. They are not likely to labor on behalf of the music theater nor to

master the librettist's craft.

This professional commonplace of the music theater is, by the way, a great secret for the majority of the public. In perceiving a musical performance dramatically, the public is convinced that the words which are sung are somehow a product of the very music they are sung to. Such are the spectator's barely acknowledged sensations, which, naturally enough, the lay person does not set out to contemplate.

It's a different story with the professional, at least from time to time. Here is testimony of Gluck's younger contemporary André Grétry,⁴ who in speaking of the librettist and the translators of Gluck's innovative operas *Orfeo ed Euridice* and *Alceste*, admits, «...It is correct to consider these poets [authors of translated versions for the Paris stage – Yu.D.] the true restorers of lyrical tragic drama. Yet aware of the uses to which their texts were put by Gluck, you have adorned it».

The deliciousness of this «one wants to believe» contains a profound truth, and a bitter one as far as librettists are concerned. Toiling from dawn till dusk, here you are giving your best to the restoration of lyrical tragic drama – meanwhile, everyone around you «wants to believe» that you, of all involved, is not involved at all.

«...I for one would not stir, not even for a Rossini». Ivan Sollertinsky, Russian music and theater historian, once wrote an article on a rarely treated subject, called «Dramaturgy of the Opera Libretto». The advice he gives therein is as follows: «...Should the librettist be struck by an exceptionally bright idea, he ought first of all to convince the composer that the idea belongs to the composer himself».

⁴ André Ernest Modeste Grétry (1741-1813) was a French composer, author of more than seventy operas, including *Peter the Great*, *The Two Misers*, and *The Talking Picture*. His most famous opera is *Richard the Lionheart* (1784), one of whose arias became a royalist rallying song during the French Revolution. Another aria was used by Tchaikovsky in *The Queen of Spades*.



Ivan Sollertinsky (1902-1944) – an important Russian music and theater critic in the 1920s and 1930s, a prominent figure in Leningrad's cultural life.

An early Soviet scholar and supporter of the music of Mahler and Schoenberg.

Author of a series of monographs on Soviet and foreign composers.

«...Should the idea, the overall conception, strike the librettist alone, it is imperative that the composer be persuaded that the conception is his own». In principle, this is a profound observation. One's enthusiasm for one's own exceptionally bright conception works as a potent stimulus toward embodying that idea, the stimulus being a launching pad for inspiration.

And insofar as Sollertinsky (together with the rest of humanity) believes that the composer's inspiration is paramount in music theater, it follows that should an «exceptionally bright» notion become available, the composer alone must be provided with the means to self-actualization. What remains unclear, however, are the personal qualities in the librettist that Sollertinsky is counting on. He seems to

have in mind a remarkably gifted individual. Not only would this person be visited by an idea central to the success of their common enterprise, he would also need to display enviable tact and cunning in persuading his fairly sane co-author of having thought up something that the co-author had not in fact thought up. Sollertinsky's librettist thus possess-

es extraordinary virtues, both artistic and interpersonal.

Extrapolating his creative destiny as an eternal donor of bright ideas, this talented individual would scarce dedicate his whole life to the librettist's craft. But perhaps it is a rather average craftsman that Solertinsky has in mind? Then indeed there is no reason to extrapolate – only the inconvenient fact intrudes that no exceptional idea could occur to this lesser artist. For those who do happen upon such ideas...

«...would not stir, not even for a Rossini».

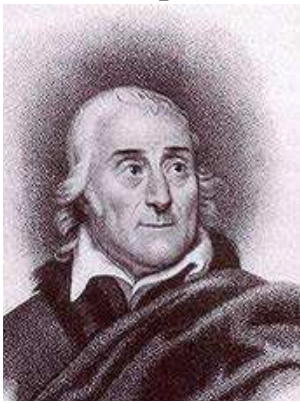
I offer these joyless maxims neither to sneer at the musicians nor to mystify the public. A moment of reflection exposes, however, a veritable labyrinth of psychological threat involved in any creative musico-dramatic collaboration, so that the intriguing adventure we had set out on acquires, for all its high purpose, the undertones of a tragic farce.

But what about the composers? How do *they* bear this «Great Misfortune»? So what if «Florentine operatic reform did not proceed hand in hand with the reform of poetry»? Is it possible that this is no misfortune for the composers? Mozart's conviction is well-known: in an opera the poetry is «the obedient hand-maiden of the music».

He, however, was not himself too spoiled by the obedience of this hand-maiden. In 1783, during a period of fruitless squabbles with yet another librettist



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756-1791) –
prodigious Austrian
composer, author
of 18 operas.



Lorenzo Da Ponte
(1749-1838) –
Italian librettist,
poet, and translator.
Author
of 28 opera
libretti
for eleven compos-
ers, including
Mozart's
*Le Nozze di
Figaro*,
Don Giovanni and
Così fan tutte, and
Salieri's
Il Talismano,
Il ricco d'un giorno
and others.

(which led him to abandon the work on *The Goose of Cairo*), Mozart wrote to his father:

«I have looked through fifty Italian plays and found none to suit me....Meanwhile, we have here a certain abbate Da Ponte, who has promised me a libretto, but first he has to finish one for Salieri. He gave me his word that he would write to me in two months... And while he's keeping his promise to Salieri, I may wait for his libretto my whole life». As we know, Lorenzo Da Ponte did eventually cast his gaze upon Mozart, the product of their collaboration being three opera masterpieces: *Così fan tutte*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and *Don Giovanni* (Vienna boasts an entire Lorenzo Da Ponte Research Center, dedicated largely to studying these three works by Mozart). We might be permitted to conclude that, to everyone's joy, the «Great Misfortune» retreated, though not without fraying Mozart's nerves. Writing libretti was for him a matter of great creative satisfaction.

To judge by his not operas, Wagner did believe in Mozart's «religion» in which «the poetry [was] the obedient hand-maiden of the music».

It was to poetry that he dedicated the leading role in his operatic synthesis (music, poetry, drama). As a rule, he devoted more time to writing libretti than to «musicalizing» them, and never would he begin composing the music until the verbal text was polished to perfection. Already at the libretto stage Wagner would ensure that the incipient opera fulfilled the reformist purpose of its musical content. The sound was to flow out in a steady stream, uninterrupted by set conversation pieces or the *recitativo secco*. Wagner replaced mutually isolated, symmetrical numbers – arias and ensembles – For Richard Wagner – who wrote his own libretti – the problem of the libretto looked nothing like misfortune, rather the opposite. Writing libretti was for him a matter of great creative satisfaction. To judge by his operas, Wagner did not believe in Mozart's «religion» in which «the poetry [was] the obedient hand-maiden of the music». It was to poetry that he dedicated the leading role in his operatic synthesis (music, poetry, leitmotif system and his emphasis on narrative as against action (which sharply distinguishes his drama). As a rule, he devoted more time to writing libretti than to «musicalizing» them, and never would he begin composing the music until the verbal text was polished to perfection. Already at the libretto stage Wagner would ensure that the incipient opera fulfilled the reformist purpose of its musical content. The sound was to



Richard
Wagner
(1813-1883) –
great German
composer,
author of
13 operas.

flow out in a steady stream, uninterrupted by set conversation pieces or the *recitativo secco*. Wagner replaced mutually isolated, symmetrical numbers – arias and ensembles – with unstructured monologues, dialogues, and narration. I would even insist that both his famous work from that of his predecessors and contemporaries), that both these features derive from the particularities of his libretti. It is important to realize, finally, that each of Wagner's libretti is a creative compound achieved through agony and joy, in which the foundation of mythological



Dmitry
Dmitrievich
Shostakovich
(1906-1975) –
Russian
composer, author
of three operas:
The Nose, (1930)
*Lady Macbeth of
Mtsensk*, (1932),
and the unfinished
Gamblers. (1942).

subject matter is wrought into a full-blooded verse drama, imbued with philosophical substance and human passions.

Just try to write even one such piece – and Wagner has a dozen. That is his operatic genius. To call him an «exception to the rule» is a near-sacrilege. He is no exception; he is Wagner. But let us return to «the rule», and attempt to trace the «dance macabre» whose ragged rhythm marked the libretto hunt of a composer not so distant. In working on my book *We Are not Fated to Divine*,⁵ I had the opportunity to

⁵ Dimitrin, Yu. G. *We Are Not Fated to Divine: Thoughts on the Opera Libretto for Dmitry Shostakovich's Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, on the Original Text, and on the Subsequent Versions*. St. Petersburg, 1997.

detect a certain «rondo-capriccioso around libretto» which Dmitry Shostakovich was compelled to «dance» all his life. How did Shostakovich treat the problem of libretto in music theater? Numerous talks by Shostakovich dating to 1933 speak to the matter in a very plain way, referring to the composer who, without an operas, Wagner did appropriately skilled co-author, was deprived of the opportunity to be a genius. The genius composer, after all, is not required to be a capable writer nor one proficient at text placement. Not required at all... Yet where will those be found who *are* so required, capable and proficient, and willing to serve in the shadow? How many projects by Shostakovich due to their lack? Consider these excerpts from his articles: «The professional culture of our librettists is still very weak... We should think about training musical dramatists, in particular, we should have conservatories teaching musical dramaturgy. Then opera libretto will have masters treat work in the music theater much too casually... They refuse the 'trivial' work of writing an opera libretto...» «Our great masters»... Should one of these greats happen to lose his vigilance and consent to take on the «trivial» job of writing a libretto, his mastery may not suffice for the demands of drama expressed through music. «Our great mas-



Aleksandr Germanovich Preis (1905-1942) – writer and author of two libretti for Shostakovich's operas: *The Nose* (co-authored with Evgeny Zamyatin, Georgy Ionin and Dmitry Shostakovich) and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (co-authored with the composer).

ters» (as great as we wish) – novelists, poets, playwrights – cannot replace librettists, for the librettist's profession calls for different skills different means of literary-dramatic expression. Shostakovich tasted these bitter truths throughout his life.

A variety of note-worthy writers were to provide libretti for him (or intended to provide them): Bagritsky,⁶ Aseev,⁷ Aleksey Tolstoy,⁸ Oleinikov,⁹ Sholokhov,¹⁰ Meyerhold,¹¹ Bulgakov,¹² Shvartz¹³... Yet only one actually did provide them, namely, Aleksandr Preis (1905-1942), who had hardly fulfilled himself as a writer during his life.

⁶ Eduard Bagritsky (1895-1934) was a famous Russian poet, translator, and dramatist in the 1920s and 1930s.

⁷ Nikolai Aseev (1889-1963), Soviet Russian poet and screenwriter who was active in Russian Futurism.

⁸ Aleksey Tolstoy (1882-1963), count, Soviet Russian writer and public figure, classic of Russian literature.

⁹ Nikolai Oleinikov (1898-1937), Soviet Russian writer and poet, member of OBERIU, editor of children's magazines. His poetry, tinged with irony and a tragic *Weltanschauung*, rarely saw print during his lifetime. A series of his books have recently come out: *Poems* (1975), *Ironic Verses* (1982), *The Deep of Passions* (1990), and others.

¹⁰ Mikhail Sholokhov (1905-1984), Soviet Russian writer and public figure, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature (1965), classic of Russian literature.

¹¹ Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), experimental stage director, actor and pedagogue. Theorist and practitioner of the Theater of the Grotesque, inventor of the Biomechanics acting method.

¹² Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940), Soviet Russian novelist, playwright and stage director. Author of novels, tales, stories, plays, adaptations, screenplays, and opera libretti (*Minin and Pozharsky*, *Peter the Great*, *Rachel*, *The Black Sea*), classic of Russian literature.

¹³ Evgeny Shvartz (1896-1958), Soviet writer and playwright, author of more than thirty plays for drama and puppet theater as well feature film screenwriter.

Catalogued below are the projected operatic works Shostakovich contemplated both before and after writing *Lady Macbeth*:

1930 – Following *The Nose* (libretto by Zamyatin,¹⁴ Ionin, Preis), Shostakovich anticipates libretti for *Karas'* (text by Oleinikov) and *Backwater* (Zaton), operas included in the plans of the Maly Opera Theater in Leningrad. The libretti are never written.

1932 – Enthusiastic about Bagritsky's epic poem *Thoughts about Opanas*, the composer meets with the poet evidently in order to discuss operatic collaboration. The libretto, however, never materializes.

Under contract with the Bolshoi Theater, Aleksey Tolstoy (in collaboration with Storchakov) begins writing a libretto for a contemporary-themed opera *Orango* for Shostakovich. The plot is developed in minute detail. The received text is never delivered.¹⁵

1933 – Shostakovich composes nine numbers for an *opera buffa* *The Big Lightning*, based on Aseev's text, but stops when he becomes convinced of the terribly quality of the libretto. 1934 – The composer announces his conception of something like a new *Ring des Nibelungen* – a musical tetralogy about the fate of the Russian woman (*Katerina Ismailova* being the first part). Aleksandr Preis' libretto based on Gorky's novel *Mother* fails to inspire the composer. No libretto means no tetralogy.

¹⁴ Evgeny Zamyatin (1884-1937) – Russian writer, founder of the Serapion Brothers writers' group, author of the novel *We*.

¹⁵ See Olga Digonskaya's dissertation *Shostakovich's Unrealized Opera Projects*.

The same, evidently, can be said of the libretto Shostakovich received from Preis for a tragic farce *The People's Will*.¹⁶ This project, too, remained unrealized.

Next Shostakovich enthusiastically ponders the idea of an opera-farce based on a plot of his own devising. Disappointed with the plot, he ceases work.

1935 – The composer meets with Sholokhov to discuss collaborating on the opera *Virgin Soil Upturned*. Sholokhov fails to write the libretto.

Shostakovich entertains collaboration on operatic works with Vsevolod Ivanov¹⁷ and Mikhail Bulgakov. No libretti are forthcoming.

1937 – A contract is signed with the Kirov¹⁸ to create operas based on two films featuring scores by Shostakovich, *Volochaev Days* and *The Great Citizen*. The contract regarding *Volochaev Days* is cancelled in 1940 on account of an «unsatisfactory libretto». As for *The Great Citizen*, the libretto was never written.

1938 – Vsevolod Meyerhold proposes to Shostakovich his plans to write opera libretti based on Lermontov's *Masquerade* and *The Hero of Our Time*. No such libretti are created.

Drama and theater critic Raisa Benyash completes for Shostakovich her libretto for *The People's Poet*, centered on the Turkmen poet and general Seid. The composer approves of the text but never writes the music.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Vsevolod Ivanov (1895-1963) – notable Soviet Russian writer and playwright.

¹⁸ Now Mariinsky Theater.

1940 – A contract is signed with the Kirov¹⁷ for the creation of *The Snow Queen*, with libretto by Shvartz. The libretto is not written. Shostakovich and the theater directorate approve the libretto in March 1941; in May, however, the theater received a curt telegram from the Chief Repertory Committee²⁰: «*Katyusha Maslova* libretto forbidden».

1942 – Shostakovich writes the opera *Players* based on the eponymous play by Nikolai Gogol; he intends to use the entire text by the author, without abridgement. With fifty minutes written and still stuck in exposition, the libretto-deprived composer ceases work.

1948 – After the Central Committee's decree «On the Opera *Great Friendship*»²⁰ Shostakovich declares his plans to write the opera *Young Guard*, after the novel of Aleksandr Fadeev.²¹ The status of the libretto is unknown.

1957 – Shostakovich is in receipt of libretto for the operetta *Moscow-Cheryomushki*, written by the leading Soviet humorists of the day Vladimir Mass and Mikhail Chervin-sky, and he begins his work. (If you have gone a long time without blushing for shame, read this libretto. Blushing is guaranteed.) The Moscow Operetta Theater staged this piece in 1958.

¹⁹ Anatoly Mariengof (1897-1962) – Russian Imaginist poet, playwright, memoirist.

²⁰ Chief Repertory Committee (Glavrepertkom) was tasked with theater censorship in the USSR.

1964 – Shostakovich announces his work on the opera *Quiet Flows the Don* after Part II of Sholokhov's novel. (The contract is with the Bolshoi Theater.) Libretto is written by the team of literary critic L. Loukin and musicologist A. Medvedev. At least a part of the score (and by some accounts, almost half) is completed. In 1960, however, Shostakovich breaks off work on this opera and, apparently, de-stroys all.

1971 – Shostakovich conceives an opera based on Chekhov's story «The Black Monk». We have no information on the libretto; the opera was never written.²²

How should we comment on this catalogue of unrealized designs? In effect, the problems of operatic creation constituted a drama in Shostakovich's own life, the opera itself becoming the composer's «drama per music». The libretto became the main villain in this drama. The opinion exists that a number of the great composer's potential operas were «axed» preemptively by the 1936 campaign against him (I

²⁰ The Central Committee's decree aimed at Vano Muradeli's opera *Great Friendship* condemned the so-called formalistic trend in Soviet music, characterizing it as «anti-populist and leading to the liquidation of musical art.» Some of the most original Soviet composers of the time were categorized as formalist in this decree: in addition to Dmitry Shostakovich, they were Sergei Prokofiev, Nikolai Myaskovsky, Aram Khachaturian, and others.

²¹ Aleksandr Fadeev (1901-1956), Soviet Russian writer and public figure.

²² For more details on this catalogue of Shostakovich's unrealized projects, see Dmitry Shostakovich, *Letters*; Khentova, S., *Shostakovich: Life and Work*; I. Raikin, «How the Kirov Theater Did Not Become the Theater of Shostakovich»; L. Akopyan, «Shostakovich»; O. Digonskaya, *Shostakovich's Unrealized Opera Projects*.

refer to the article «Muddle instead of Music» in the party newspaper *Pravda*). The catalogue above, however, adds a significant clarification: «axed» indeed but not solely by this newspaper piece. The executioners were many – of both the everyday and the creative sort – but the king of kings were the missing libretti, and the quality of those the composer did receive.

For Shostakovich, then, the «Great Misfortune» I have been tracing did, to all appearances, turn out to be a misfortune, possibly a major one. Some composers had more luck, others less, still others wrote their own libretti. We might even note the case of one eminent composer serving as librettist for his genius peer: the case of Arrigo Boito writing libretti for three of Giuseppe Verdi's operas.

The impression one comes away with is that the opera genre has resigned itself to the Great Misfortune” and learned to live with it. In the Past Semester, at any rate, we could scratch around for enough martyrs to meet the needs of the genre, some of those people being very bright and talented. From time to time, the stage did enjoy a masterpiece with brilliant music and professional-quality libretto, authored by someone both gifted and inventive.

Incidentally, let us note another oddity. The music stage of this long Past Semester featured a number of astonishingly colorful tableaux – as though pleading with the writers and dramatists of the first order not to give up on the librettist's profession. An unheard-of anomaly appeared suddenly in the 1870s in England, an all but singular case in the history of the music theater: It became



W. Gilbert and A. Sullivan



B. Brecht and K. Waill



A. L. Webber and T. Rice

natural to list as authors of a musical-dramatic composition none other than its ... actual authors! celebrating the lyricist as legitimate co-author: think the team Webber-Rice of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Your humble servant has himself acquired a modicum of fame for his role in two genres: the rock-opera, and the Russian-language adaptations of foreign *opera buffa* classics, where the role of comedic text, if it be approached as comedy not filler, is too conspicuous.

Can all this be perceived as a barely audible signal pointing timidly to an imminent need for a new pers-

pective on the librettist's profession? I cannot say. But as we await the Next Semester...

«...I for one would not stir, not even for a Ros-sini».

**OPERATIC REFORM IN THE 18TH CENTURY:
WHAT WAS REFORMED?
WHO WAS THE REFORMER?**

My dramatic piece *Masquerade* is one of my latest works and, possibly, the best. Much of the original chronology in Lermontov's verse play is retained, although my protagonists are situated in a different era – the historic days of summer 1914 – and their masked ball is Russia's last as the country is soon to be engulfed by the start of World War I. Post-August 1914, as we know, such festivities were the last thing on Russia's mind.

I conceived and executed this piece without a collaborating composer. The written agreement between me and my client – the future producer of *Masquerade* – stipulated that the choice of composer would be his. Thus I knew nothing about who would write the music for my play, did not care to know, and held my disinclination to be quite deliberate.

After I finished the play, I wrote an Afterword for it, which I present below.

On Musical Scoring for Stage Play Masquerade

Readers of this play for music theater will perhaps have noticed a strange feature in its design. The author's stage directions do not content themselves with the stage business alone but, for many scenes, include music-oriented «signposting» where the author attempts to define the character and dramatic function of the future score. This «incursion» by the playwright into the composer's territory has several

explanations. As the text of *Masquerade* was written for no particular composer, there is no reason to speak of creative mistrust toward the collaborator. On the other hand, the history of music theater furnishes an eloquent example of success when the libretto is written using this method. For that is how the operatic reform was achieved in the 18th century when Ranieri de' Calzabigi, librettist of the reformist opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*, wrote his text prior to his acquaintance with Christoph Willibald Gluck. Here is the relevant excerpt from Calzabigi's 1784 letter to this effect to the newspaper *Le Mercure de France*:

«I read him my poem *Orpheus*, and by reading and rereading several passages to him, I was able to show him the nuances I put into my expression, the pauses, the slowness, the quickness, the intonation, now stressed, now level and glossed over, which I desired him to incorporate in his setting. [...] M. Gluck went along with my ideas.

I sought for ways to mark at least the most striking features [of the text – Tr.]. I invented some signs to do this with, and placed them between the lines throughout *Orfeo*. It was on the basis of such a manuscript – supplied by notes wherever the signs did not give a full enough picture of the intent – that M. Gluck went about composing his music. I did the same with *Alceste*».¹ Stage directions addressed by

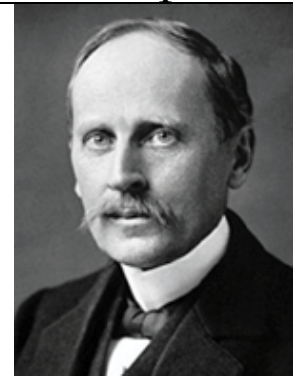
¹ Translator's note: The first passage is taken from Patricia Howard's translation of Calzabigi's letter in her *C.W. von Gluck. Orfeo*. Cambridge, 1981. The second passage is a revision of Ernest Newman's translation in his 1895 study *Gluck and the Opera: A Study in Musical History*. London, 1895.

the author of *Masquerade* to the future composer (or composers) are obviously far less detailed and significant – they set themselves no reformist goals. The author is nonetheless hopeful that his *Masquerade* will prove to be a robust libretto for dramatic pieces scored by different composers in several genres, and that his vision for the musical score will in each case be taken into account. The author is also hopeful that this revived method of composing the libretto may take its rightful place in contemporary music theater practices.

St. Petersburg, March 2000

Setting aside *Masquerade*, however, let us focus on the Case of Ranieri de' Calzabigi. The upshot seems to be that the author of the 18th century operatic reform, in fact the only reform in the history of the genre, is a librettist. Can this be? Musicologists do not believe so. They cannot altogether ignore Calzabigi's unusual role in this revolution and even sometimes refer to it as «the Gluck-Calzabigi reform». But to concede the librettist's leadership in the reformist movement is much too difficult for the musician's mentality.

To make use of a more neutral mindset, we might consider the views of a researcher who was novelist,



Romain Rolland
(1866-1944) – prominent French writer, major historian of music, public figure. Winner of the 1915 Nobel Prize in Literature.

dramatist, and social commentator – but also professor of the history of music at the Sorbonne. The title of his doctoral dissertation reads, *The Origins of Modern Lyric Theater: A History of Opera in Europe before Lully and Scarlatti*. We are dealing, of course, with Romain Rolland, who to my mind is unique in the entire history of music for his views, his angle of vision as regards the history of opera. His singular perspective stems precisely from the «two-fold» character of his professional psyche which, as far as opera is concerned, goes beyond the concern with music alone.

This idea of «going beyond» functions perhaps decisively in relation to music theater, which itself is a two-or even three-fold formation: the word, the music, the stage.



Prologo –
La Tragedia
fragment from
prologue to *Dafne*
(1596), the first
opera in the history
of the genre.
Libretto by Ottavio
Rinuccini, music
by Jacopo Peri.

Our previous chapter («Rondo-Capriccioso») began with an anonymous reference to «the Great Misfortune». The cat is out of the bag now: and musician.

This passage concerning the Florentine Camerata's «invention» of opera in 1596 is by Romain Rolland, writer The heart of this innovation, as we know, was to achieve a declamatory style that would put the music back into ancient tragedy. In this connection it is impossible to avoid referring to the first

opera librettist poet Ottavio Rinuccini (1563-1621), writer of libretti for all end-of-century operas, and Camerata's key theorist and practitioner. Who were these powerful Florentines? «Florentine opera», says Rolland, was created by the patron and lover of music Count de' Bardi; by the scholar- nobleman Jacopo Corsi; by the highly placed civil servant and clever, artistically gifted director of Florence's theater houses Emilio de' Cavalieri; by the educated amateur Vincenzo Galilei [Galileo Galilei's father – *Yu.D.*]; by the poet Ottavio Rinuccini; by the poetess Laura Guidiccioni; and by two singers, Peri and Caccini. This long list includes no true musician, that is to say, no composer, which certifies that opera was invented not by musicians but by poets and writers. And here is Rolland on Ottavio Rinuccini himself: «Born into a noble Florentine family, a poet at the Medici court, Rinuccini achieved something like an insuperable artistic dictatorship over other poets and musicians, who obeyed him completely.... A perfect union of poetry and music in a dramatic composition presupposes a firm unity of purpose and thus almost invariably entails the supremacy of one of the collaborating artists over the other. Almost invariably the composer dominates, but in this case the authority lay with the poet. Rinuccini, who thought himself a genius and whose exalted idealism was sure to draw a reaction from the realist camp,... as possessed of an elegiac rather than a dramatic talent, yet he had a strong sense of what music required...» It was none

other than Rinuccini who wrote the first opera libretti, namely, *Dafne*, *Euridice*, and *Ariadne*. These texts subsequently inspired one celebrated composer after the other, with *Dafne* alone being set to music four times in the space of a decade. In only a few years operatic music would move away from *stile rappresentativo* and thus abandon the poet's dominance over the musician (see Claude Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607), libretto by Alessandro Striggio²). Yet it behooves us to fully comprehend what Romain Rolland proposes about the evolution of opera subsequent to the era of Rinuccini. «To my notion, it was a great misfortune for lyric drama that the melodramatic reform in Florence did not lend a helping hand to a reform in poetry as well [...]; and so nothing remained for the Musicians but the poets of the court. This dull collaboration with a nerveless style full of foolish pretentiousness and forced sentiment, and lacking in sincerity and life, had a deplorable influence on musicians. It taught them idle formulas, and weighed heavily on dramatic music until our own day...»³

The wide-angle vista opened up by Rolland's pronouncement stands in striking contrast with many adoring, not to say ecstatic, opinions by «pure

² Alessandro Striggio (1573-1630), Italian poet and dramatist, author of two libretti for Claudio Monteverdi, *La favola d'Orfeo* (based on the texts by Ottavio Rinuccini and Ovid) and *La finta pazza*.

³ Translation by Mary Blaiklock. *Some Musicians of Former Days*. New York, 1915.

musicians» about great operas. So it is to Rolland's collection of historical pieces, *Some Musicians of Former Times*, and specifically to his chapter on Gluck, that we now turn in search of 18th century opera reformers and the precise object of their reform.

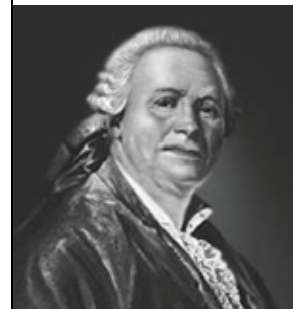
No need to dwell on the famous «Querelle des Bouffons», which broke out in Paris some twenty years before the appearance of Gluck's *Orfeo* when Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's short intermezzo *La serva padrona* was performed by an itinerant Italian troupe of comic actors, shocking the capital of the arts and literally dethroning the French opera king, and king of monumental *opera seria*, Jean-Philippe Rameau. Instead, let us record Rolland's observations on the preparatory role of the French *encyclopédistes* in operatic reform.

Now things are much clearer: The reform in question had to do with the dramatic, theatrical aspect of opera. Music, of course, was also subject to reform, but music was not the progenitor – rather the off spring – of the central reformist demands.

Needless to say, the reform would



Denis Diderot (1713-1784) – French writer and *philosophe* of the Enlightenment era, dramatist, theorist of the arts, editor in chief of the *Encyclopédie*.



Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787) – distinguished German composer. Author of a number of reformist operas and ballets, a chief influence on development of these genres.



Ranieri
de' Calzabigi
(1714-1795) –
Italian poet,
dramatist, and
librettist.

In 1755, Calzabigi formulated his main principles of operatic reform: see his *Dissertation on the Dramatic P. Metastasio*. Collaborated with Christoph Willibald Gluck and choreographer Gasparo Angiolini to effect reform in opera (*Orfeo ed Euridice*, *Alceste*, *Le feste d'Apollo*, *Paride ed Elena*) and ballet (*Don Juan*, *Semiramide*). Operas set to his libretti were written by other composers, too, including G. Paisiello (*Elvira*, *Elfrida*). for the theater.

Have been unrealizable without composers' involvement. Equally as evident, however, is the fact that the most natural instigator of this dual, musical-dramatic reformist ception could not have been a musician, but rather a theater critic, dramatist, or librettist collaborating with a like-minded (and of course indispensable) composer. Such a reformer did appear and did turn out to be a librettist, as affirmed by Roland: «...The chief merit behind the innovations belongs to an Italian, Ranieri de' Calzabigi, the author of the libretti, who had a clearer idea of the incipient dramatic reform than Gluck [did] himself».⁴ This fact is attested to by Gluck as well: «I would lay myself open to just reproach if...I agreed to accept the credit for having invented the new form of Italian opera, which has proved so successful an experiment. It is to M. de Calzabigi that the principal merit belongs, and if my music has met with some approval, I feel bound to confess that it is to him I

⁴ Ibid.

am indebted, for it is he who made possible for me to explore the resources of my art....These works are composed of striking situations, exploiting those elements of terror and pathos which provide the composer with the opportunity to express great passion and to write strong and stirring music». (From a letter to *Le Mercure de France*, 1773) ⁵ Another curious admission on this score appears in S. Rytsarev's 1987 book *Christoph Willibald Gluck*. The author writes, «...As Gluck scholars have noted with reason, it is difficult to know what would have become of Gluck's music had master librettist Calzabigi not been in the right place at the right time».

What a predicament we are in! Scholars «have noted with reason», yet our minds continue to resist what the scholars have had reason to say. For decades now I have been trying to apprise the musical community of this collision in operatic reform, and I am struck to learn, every time, that the majority of my interlocutors are utterly ignorant of it.

Those who have some familiarity with the matter immediately rise up in Gluck's defense (as though he were being attacked) and, full of knowing» condescension, smile ironically at the amateur «non-musician Rolland». (An attitude, I imagine, that will not fail to raise the temperature of the frying pan awaiting them in hell.) Not so long I delivered a lecture to a seminar of Boston University doctoral candidates in music pedagogy, themselves musicians (as was their seminar leader). The subject of my lecture was nearly identical to this chapter's heading: «Op-

⁵ Translation by Patricia Howard in her *C.W. von Gluck. Orfeo*. Cambridge, 1981.

eratic Reform: What [was reformed]? Who [were the reformers]?» The result was similar in that none of those present had heard the «collision» story before nor were they familiar with Calzabigi's name. No wonder one struggles to drive away the thought of some «evil conspiracy» whereby the music community is prevented from acknowledging certain facts of opera history, facts apparently offensive to the musician's professional self-regard. But perhaps no evildoers are to blame; perhaps the professional community is simply suffering from a case of severe professional brainwashing. What are the consequences of such clannish self-regard? It is harmless in «pure» music genres, but the situation is otherwise in synthetic genres where music must act in concert with the other arts. I would like to illustrate with a passage from my book *We Are Not Fated to Divine*, a study of the libretto for Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*.⁶ There I attempt to analyze the music community's reaction to Shostakovich's, and some other composers', operatic art.

«...Now for the narrow judgments that the «music community» all too frequently passes on nontraditional musical-dramatic compositions. It is as if the musician's professional outlook directs his attention to the music alone and gets in the way of an accurate grasp of the whole. Thus, when performed for the first time, *The Nose* received its due not from the music world (with the possible exception of Sollertinsky) but from

⁶ Dimitrin, Yu. G. *We Are Not Fated to Divine: Thoughts on the Opera Libretto for Dmitry Shostakovich's Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk, on the Original Text, and on the Subsequent Versions*. St. Petersburg, 1997.

others: theater director Meyerhold, writer Yuri Tynyanov,⁷ playwright Adrian Piotrovsky,⁸ film directors Sergei Yutkevich,⁹ Leonid Trauberg,¹⁰ and Grigory Kozintsev.¹¹ An analogous scenario developed around Nemirovich-Danchenko's¹² *Carmensita* and the Soldier as well as Meyerhold's *Queen of Spades*. Back in 1875, the Parisian critical community responded to Bizet's *Carmen* with exactly thirteen reviews – negative ones, very negative ones, and ones that were plainly insulting to the author. Only the fourteenth review evinced recognition of the unique significance of this opera, congruent with our current views, and this was the review by poet Théodore de Banville. And whose side gained the support of the French music community – with Jean-Philippe Rameau at its helm – when the *Querelle des Bouffons* broke out which led, eventually, to the Gluck-Calzabigi reform? Was it the party favoring *La serva padrona*? No, for that party was enjoying the support of the public and the encyclopédistes.

⁷ Yuri Tynyanov (1894-1943), notable Russian and Soviet writer and literary critic.

⁸ Adrian Piotrovsky (1894-1943), Russian and Soviet critic, theater critic, playwright, and pedagogue.

⁹ Sergei Yutkevich (1904-1985), well-known Soviet film director and film theorist.

¹⁰ Leonid Trauberg (1902-1990), well-known Soviet film director.

¹¹ Grigory Kozintsev (1904-1984), well-known Soviet film director and pedagogue.

¹² Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858-1943), Soviet theater director, writer, playwright, and pedagogue. A fundamental reformist figure in the history of Russian theater. Co-founder, with Konstantin Stanislavsky, of the Moscow Art Theater in 1898. In 1919 he established a music studio which, in 1924, staged a famous production of Bizet's *Carmen*. The new libretto, called *Carmencita and the Soldier*, was furnished by V. Lipskerov.

Russian musicology had at one time felt the powerful impact of a remarkable figure, whose «musician's mentality», like Rolland's, happily was diluted. We have already spoken of Ivan Ivanovich Sollertinsky in the previous chapter. Was he, by the way, a musician? Of course he was – but look closely at parts of his autobiography: «...In 1921 I returned to Petrograd and entered the university, where I received a degree from the Romano-Germanic department of the Social Sciences division. In 1923 I graduated from the State Institute of Art History, then...completed graduate work in Theater Studies. ...At this time I am artistic director of the Leningrad Philharmonic, professor at the Leningrad Conservatory, as well as professor and Music Theater department chair at the State Institute of Theater and Music.¹³

This bears a dramatic resemblance to Rolland's «dualistic» path. In fact, not only their biographies and predilections but their literary styles as well are surprisingly alike. In music theater, their interests went beyond music and, like Rolland, Sollertinsky wrote musico-historical studies, including an essay about Gluck. This essay for the first time cited a Russian translation of Calzabigi's letter from which I briefly quoted above, and it appears necessary to me to report the entire passage on Calzabigi – our main hero – as it appears in Sollertinsky's study. (The excerpts quoted above will, unavoidably, need to be reintroduced.)

¹³ Sollertinsky, Ivan. *Musico-Historical Studies*. State Music Publishing. Leningrad, 1956.

«Ranieri de' Calzabigi (1715-1795), an Italian born in Livorno, was a gifted man of letters, who wrote poetry, published an edition of Metastasio's works in France and, like Gluck [is that so? – Yu. D.], gave a great deal of thought to the possibility of drastic reform in music theater. Endowed with significant musical ability, he independently arrived at the same conclusions as were dear [is that so? – Yu.D.] to Gluck's own heart. Much later, in 1784, taking umbrage at the unequal distribution of fame following the reform, with Gluck receiving the lion's share, Calzabigi published in *Le Mercure de France* his rather provoking letter. The letter ascribes the operatic reform initiative to him alone. It is an interesting document where several parts are worth quoting:

«Twenty years ago, I thought that the only music suitable for dramatic poetry, especially for dialogue and for the airs we call *d'azione* was that which would most nearly approach natural, animated, and energetic declamation; that declamation itself is really only an imperfect kind of music; that it could be noted, if we could find sufficient signs to mark so many tones, so many inflexions, so many outbursts, so many softenings, and the infinitely varied shades given to the voice in declaiming. Music, then, being in my opinion only a cleverer kind of declamation, more studied, and more enriched by the harmony of the accompaniment, I thought that this was the whole secret of writing excellent musical drama; that the more compact, energetic, passionate, touching, harmonious, the poetry was, the more would the music that should express it thoroughly, in accord-

ance with its true declamation, be the genuine music of that poetry, music *par excellence*...

«I arrived in Vienna in 1761, full of these ideas. A year later, Count Durazzo, the then director of entertainments at the imperial court and today its ambassador at Venice, to whom I had recited my poem *Orpheus*, persuaded me to have it performed in the theater. I agreed on the condition that the music should be written according to my ideas. He sent me M. Gluck who, he said, would suit my taste.

«At that time, M. Gluck was not held to be one of our finest composers -- no doubt this was an erroneous judgment. Hasse, Buranello, Jommelli, Peres and others were at the top of the tree... [moreover] [f]or M. Gluck, who did not pronounce our language very well, it would have been impossible...to declaim even a few lines as they should be spoken.

«I read him my poem *Orpheus*, and by reading and rereading several passages to him, I was able to show him the nuances I put into my expression, the pauses, the slowness, the quickness, the intonation, now stressed, now level and glossed over, which I desired him to incorporate in his setting. At the same time, I begged him to banish passage-work, cadenzas, ritornelli and all the gothic and barbaric extravagances that have crept into our music. M. Gluck went along with my ideas.

«I sought for signs with which at least to mark the most striking features. I invented some of these, and placed them under the words throughout *Orfeo*. It was on such a manuscript [the manuscript that was not too long ago published in France – Yu.D], accompanied by notes in those passages where the

signs did not make themselves completely intelligible, that M. Gluck composed his music. I did the same with *Alceste*. So true is this, that, the success of Orfeo having been undecided at the first few performances, M. Gluck threw the blame on me.

«I hope that you will concede, Monsieur, after this explanation, that if M. Gluck is the creator of Dramatic Opera, he has not created it out of nothing. I furnished him with the basic ingredients -- the chaos, if you will. The honours of creation are thus equally shared between us».¹⁴

«What was Calzabigi's true accomplishment?» continues Sollertinsky. «He managed to surpass Metastasio...with regard to emplotting and dramatic structure. No more twisting, complicated, criss-crossing intrigue, overloaded with edgy situations, tragic misunderstandings, and sudden moments of recognition... In Calzabigi's texts, the plot is concerned with the actions of two, at most three, protagonists; sub-plots are gone... The main action is poetic, its musicality organic...»

«To surpass Metastasio», says Sollertinsky. So, if one librettist's style improves upon that of another librettist and this leads to consequences of global proportions, then the art of libretto – however indirectly – has influence over musical style. That's our first observation. Secondly, who was Metastasio? His is another name that will be treated here in detail.

¹⁴ Translator's note: The bulk of the letter, as translated by Patricia Howard, appears in *C.W. von Gluck. Orfeo*. Cambridge, 1981. Exceptions are paragraphs five and six of the letter, which are my revisions of Ernest Newman's translation in his 1895 study *Gluck and the Opera: A Study in Musical History*. London, 1895.

What is worth pointing out now is that Pietro Metastasio (Imperial Court Poet at Vienna, a renowned Italian dramatist and librettist) continued with reformist aspirations of a certain Italian named Apostolo Zeno. Zeno, little-librettists in opera history, furnishing libretti to composers such as Galuppi, Handel, Pergolesi, Paisiello and others.



Apostolo Zeno (1668-1750) – Italian dramatist, court poet, historiographer. Member of a Venetian circle of Enlightenment classicists, author of opera libretti and oratorical texts, a reformist figure and predecessor of Pietro Metastasio. His libretti were published frequently in the 18th century.

His name is associated with the first phase of reform, which secured the genre of «dramma per musica» for the stage. He was the first to go beyond the constraints of mythology in Metastasio extended Zeno's reform. The special musicality of Metastasio's verse, the clarity of his dramatic structures, his subtle characterizations, his ability to render every nuance of a character's emotional experience – all these helped him transport his works into the psychological dimension, in contrast with those earlier tragedies (or situational comedies) which prevailed on the opera stage before his time. Each of his three-act libretti contained six characters, the three principals being sung by a prima donna, a first soprano, and a tenor; the principals were each to sing five types of

aria: an *aria patetica* an *aria di bravura* (a feat of virtuosity), an *aria parlante* (using a sustained style), an



Pietro Metastasio (1698-1782) – world-renowned Italian poet, dramatist and librettist. Continued reformist movement in opera begun by Apostolo Zeno, promulgating the idea of an integral union between music and poetry in an operatic composition. Metastasio's major libretti include *Antigono*, *Artaserse*, *Didona abbandonata*, *Alessandro nell'Indie*, *La clemenza di Tito*, *L'Olimpiade*, *Ipermestra*, *Semiramide riconosciuta*, *Achille in Sciro*, *Adriano in Siria*, *Demetrio*, and *Temistocle*. Editions of Metastasio's complete works came out numerous times.

aria *demi-caractère*, and an *aria brillante*. In the terminology of the 18th century the word «opera» was reserved for «drama to be set to music», not «libretto» as we refer to it now, and this was in large part a measure of Metastasio's achievement.

According to Hermann Abert, author of a classic study of Mozart, «If Metastasio was the poetic idol of virtually the whole of the contemporary civilized world, then there were good reasons for this: few poets captured the whole spirit of that world as comprehensively as he did».¹⁵ The texts of his twenty-seven *opera seria* supplied material to hundreds of operatic works, an example being his libretto *Didone abbandonata* which, after premiering in 1724, went on to be set to music by different composers fifty more times in the course of the 18th century. Every self-proclaimed operatic composer felt it his duty to turn to Metastasio's texts. His coauthors included, among others, such names as Handel, Pergolesi, Galuppi, Pic-

¹⁵ Translation by Stewart Spencer in *W.A. Mozart* by Hermann Abert. Yale University Press, 2007.

cini, Mysliveček, Paisiello, Haydn, Mozart, Berezovsky, Donizetti, Meyerbeer... And let us note that out of 43 dramatic compositions by Gluck, eighteen were set to Metastasio's libretti (among those were his first several operas: *Artaserse* (1741), *Demofonte* (1742), etc.) while only four – *Orfeo* (1762, i.e. Gluck's 33rd opera), *Artaserse* (1741), *Demofonte* (1742), etc.) while only four – *Orfeo* (1762, i.e. Gluck's 33rd opera), *Alceste* (1767), *Le feste d'Apollon* (1769), and *Paride ed Elena* (1770) – were products of his collaboration with Calzabigi. These facts cast doubt on Sollertinsky's claim that Calzabigi's radical reformist thinking was dear to Gluck's own heart». Rather, prior to his first acquaintance with Calzabigi in 1761, when together «with choreographer Gasparo Angiolini the two collaborated on the ballet *Don Juan*, there is no evidence of reformist thoughts being all that «dear» to Gluck. «To surpass Metastasio», the absolute monarch of the music theater of his era... This ambitious undertaking by Calzabigi proceeded during the great librettist's lifetime, since Calzabigi was only seventeen years younger than Metastasio. In the opera world of that period, the words «surpassing akin to what the Russian poetic tradition would understand by «surpassing Pushkin». Nonetheless the «crowned» librettist would witness if



Domenico Maria Gasparo Angiolini (1731-1803) – major ballet theater reformer of the 18th century. Collaborated with Christoph Willibald Gluck and Ranieri de' Calzabigi on *Don Juan* (1761) and *Semiramide* (1765).

not the crash of his empire (operas set to his texts continue to be written even in the first decades of the 19th century), then at least its evident decline.

The hero in this story of transformation, transformation dictated by the needs of the music theater, was Ranieri de' Calzabigi, librettist, «who had a clearer idea of the incipient dramatic reform than Gluck [did] himself». A tremendous figure in the genre's history, this Calzabigi.

Yet Gluck, I admit, is no less striking. What he said of Calzabigi – «It is to [him] that the principal merit belongs» – these words not merely uttered but printed for all to see, hint, for me, at the astonishing generosity of his nature. How did he survive in the atmosphere around him, of merciless criticism by some and endless sycophancy and praise, however well-deserved, by others? I can hardly understand this man – none of my living coauthors (nor, I am afraid, those eternally living, either) could say what he said were they in the same situation. It is not that they are all so very envious or narcissistic. It is that their minds, cast in the psychological mold of a professional musician, are not quite on the same wavelength, their «antennae» unable to hear Gluck's generous impulses. But where did musician Gluck acquire his own powerful sensors, so potent that he was able to receive signals from neighboring worlds? And how did Gluck come to form his views on music theater, views he called «my principles» in his famous prefaces to *Alceste* and *Paride ed Elena*? This is what the most important ones sound like:

«There was no rule which I did not gladly violate for the sake of the intended effect».

«... [T]he union of music and words ought to be so intimate that the poem would seem to be no less patterned after the music than the music after the poem».

«Before sitting down to work, I try to forget that I am a musician».¹⁶

Puzzles... Dreams...

The score for my *Masquerade* was eventually written by Igor Rogalev.¹⁷ His music made a strong impression on me. Did the composer then employ my musical «instructions» in his work? Not directly. But they might have had some influence on his choices, in a lateral, derivative sense.

...After I had furnished the text of my play to the composer, I began to experience a constant mild sense of embarrassment. He received my work with flattering enthusiasm, his first reaction summed up in the following words: «this is not a libretto – it's a play, a work of literature». (These comments themselves do much to lay bare the view prevailing among composers that, as a genre, libretto does not

¹⁶ Translations of the first two statements are cited from «Dedication of *Alceste*» and «Letter to M. de la Harpe,» respectively, published in *The Essence of Opera*, ed. Ulrich Weisstein, W.W. Norton, 1969.

¹⁷ Igor Rogalev (1948 --), St. Petersburg composer, author of several operas (*Salt*, *Exodus* (based on works by Isaac Babel), *The Complaint Book* (based on works by Anton Chekhov), *Masquerade* (2000)) as well as symphonic and chamber pieces, oratorios, music for dramatic plays and short animation.

mix with literariness.) My «revenge» consisted in forcing him for several months to trip over my attempts at signposting. I can imagine how annoyed my musical advice made him as he worked on the score. Nor was I myself pleased with my exertions: my «instructions» had been difficult to arrive at, even more difficult to articulate, and, in the end, seemed less than crucial. It was obvious that they lacked flair, or passion, to excite the composer's imagination and to leave a definitive mark on the score. Thus, my ambitious effort to «catch up with» Calzabigi can be said to have failed. I felt very disappointed by this defeat while the composer did his best to console me. The times, he said, were different now...

But I doubt that was it – at least, not all of it. To compete with Calzabigi, talent alone is not enough. What we need is genius.



Gluck's and Calzabigi's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*.
Aleksandr Golovin's sketch for a 1911
production at the Bolshoi Theater.

2. OPERETTA: LIFE AFTER LIFE

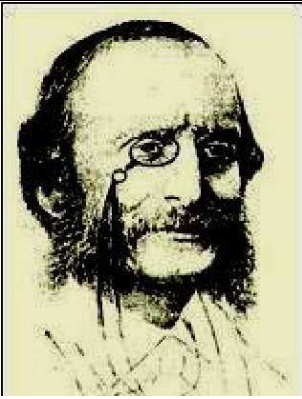
The time for composing operettas had passed – scarcely anybody is prepared to contest this evident fact. Operetta began with the works of Florimond Hervé and Jacques Offenbach (as well as their famous «seconds», Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy) in the middle of the 19th century, and was brought to a close a hundred years later by the neo-Viennese operetta's last Mohican, Imre Kálmán. In spite of some post-Kálmánian composers and playwrights who refer to their works as operettas, none of those compositions in fact represent the genre. Instead, they are to be classified as «musical comedies», and the difference is substantial. It is primarily a matter of scope, or relative weight, of musical dramaturgy vis-à-vis the overall dramaturgy of a staged piece. The leading partner in musical comedy is the play, the leading partner in operetta is the music. Nonetheless, although new operettas are no longer being composed, the old, classic ones (for there are no others) enjoy an active life on the contemporary stage. topics from opera to operetta, a few general observations would not be out of place. It is not easy (perhaps not possible) to discern the unique structural and stylistic features of different types of libretto, whether written for an opera, operetta, musical, or rock-opera. As for the operetta libretto, it is nothing short of flourishing. What this expression means will soon be discussed in some detail.

For now, as we switch I am concerned – but not by the fate of the operetta genre, rather by the conventional view of it. In this context, let us recall an obvious yet rarely remarked upon fact. Where on the contemporary stage has operetta been preserved? In the epoch of Hervé and Offenbach, the number of Parisian theaters performing operetta approached twenty. Today, you will agree, theater venues such as The London Operetta Theater or The Theater of Musical Comedy in Manhattan would sound rather absurd. No such theaters in those cities – and only two in Vienna, one each in Budapest and Warsaw. Germany boasts the quite robust operetta theater in Leipzig, and there are two or three touring operetta companies, as well.



Florimond
Hervé
(1825-1892) –
French
composer and
founder of
operetta
(burlesque *Don
Quichotte et
Sancho Pança*,
1848). Author
of more than
120 operettas,
the best known
of which is
*Mam'zelle
Nitouche*
(1883).

Canada has an operetta venue in Toronto, the United States – in Chicago and Philadelphia. A New York theater which frequently puts on operettas is called The Light Opera of New York. And that is all – or, if I'm undercounting, it is hardly by much. Granted, both major and minor West European opera houses not infrequently include classical operetta in their repertory, but this fact does not change the bigger picture. To put it mildly, although operetta still exists in both Europe and America, it behaves in an uncharacteristically modest fashion.



Jacques
Offenbach
(1819-1880) –
French composer
and founder of
operetta. Author of
more than one
hundred operettas,
with the most fa-
mous ones set to
libretti by Meilhac
and Halévy.

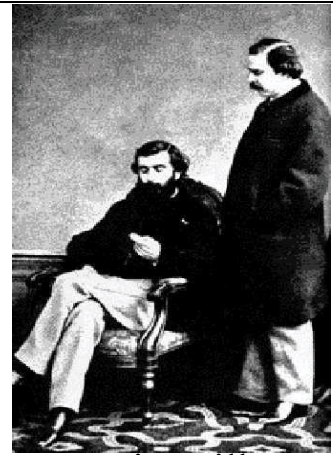
What about Russia, which, speaking in passing, has not given the world a single operetta of classical standing? It looks rich by comparison. The number of Russian theaters that rely primarily on operetta – by Kálmán, Lehár, Strauss, sometimes by Offenbach – is close to a dozen and a half. To this we should add the majority of Russian opera houses and musical theaters, where operetta works as a kind of bonus significantly raising the average annual attendance rates. The audiences, for their part, quite enjoy

even those run-of-the-mill performances that you and I would hardly consider a success. In essence, Russia at the present time is the main if not the sole guardian of operetta – an astonishing fact. It looks as if the outlook of Russia's petty bourgeoisie (a term I endow with no negative connotations) has dovetailed neatly with the genre of operetta, especially that hailing from Vienna. How can operetta be outdated? To be outdated means to serve no purpose – but this sly fox has its uses still. Not by accident do many musical theaters – both in Russia and in the West – commission remakes and adaptations, challenging playwrights-librettists to invent new plot twists in the good old operetta. In this way, evidently, by keeping faith with the genre's musical

heritage, the world's operetta prepares to journey into the Next Semester.

Keeping faith, then – for the music in classical operetta is not subject to reworking. Occasionally, though all too infrequently, it is presented in a stylistically new orchestral arrangement. Individual numbers may be switched or even «travel» from one character to another. Often enough, new versions contain interpolated numbers, i.e. those borrowed from a different operetta by the same author. In my own recent practice I have tried to avoid this method, but it is deemed innocuous in the world of operetta – or rate, on the Russian stage – and it in no way can be said to constitute true «recomposition».

Recall, too, that the entire musical-dramatic classical corpus bears the name «classical» in virtue of the quality of the music rather than the libretto. The component parts in both opera and operetta (that is, the libretto, on the one hand, and the MusicPerLibretto, on the other) enjoy,



Henri Meilhac (1831-1897) and Ludovic Halévy (1833-1908) – French dramatists and librettists. Writers of texts for Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*, *The Beautiful Helen*, *Bluebeard*, *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein*, *La Périhole*, and so on. Their texts were the foundation for libretti of Léhar's *Merry Widow* and Strauss's *The Bat*. Authors of the libretto for Bizet's *Carmen* (1874).



Cartoons of
Offenbach,
Meilhac
and Halévy
in Parisian
newspapers.

as a rule, different «shelf lives». Related to this reality is a principle taken from Romain Rolland about all manner of adaptations and revisions in musical theater: «From a classic we have the right to draw what is eternal». Another relevant circumstance: In the public eye, «operetta» is defined first and foremost in terms of its comic potential. Melancholy and lyrical compositions such as, for example, many works by Lehár, have difficulty securing their place in the repertoire. The main comedic element in operetta is, of course, dialogue; and the degree of a work's comic potential depends on both the time period it dates from (is it dated?) and its provenance (what the German finds hilarious may be death to the Russian). Finally, what would seem to best justify our confidence in the future of operetta is its «numbered» structure. This factor, combined with the system of alternating musical and spoken genres, enables the discovery of artistically fresh dramatic action in an outdated libretto or, if not a whole new drama, at least several new twists or subtleties.

This is much simpler to achieve in the couplet/refrain form of the operetta than in any type of opera. In the case of operetta, the search for dramatic potential (or *eventful-ness*) and ways of intensifying the comic are hampered by neither formal nor musical features. Everything depends entirely on the librettist's own artistry and culture, on his musical sensitivity, on his dramaturgical talent.

Yet another aspect of composing LibrettoPerMusic substantially increases the chances of success for textual «renovators» of operetta: Operetta stage practice does not admit of «the language of the original». In comic opera, as in every other type of opera, the language of the original reigns supreme, which in my view represents thoughtless emasculation of the power of comic

music and a distortion of the authorial intention. Relying on my experience with the libretti of several comic operas (*The Night Bell*, *The Pretend Garden-Girl*, *Rita*, *The Secret Marriage*, and others), I daresay that their foundation is an alloy of words and music intended to reach the audience in a flash, causing immediate comic effect. That is how composers write such music, but the unfamiliar «language of the original» brutally kills their efforts. The surtitles, for their



Imre Kálmán
(1882-1953) –
Hungarian
composer and
a remarkable
representative (and
consummator) of
the New Viennese
tradition. Author
of 19 operettas.

part, cannot save the day because they fail to provide the necessary immediacy of comic effect. Laughter fails to materialize, and even smiling while looking up at the running text is an effort. (In musicals, by the way, authors simply prohibit the use of the original language—only language the audience can understand is permitted, and only the most accurate translation.) In operetta stage practice, there is no need to prohibit the language of the original because the idea of the language of the original is simply unthinkable. True, big opera houses in Europe do sometimes stage foreign-language operettas. Yet, no matter the musical quality, neither their one-legged, extra-textual comedy, stemming entirely from a producer's efforts, nor the «charm» of the dialogue scenes done by masterful singers can save the public from sensing that the genre is but half-abled.

To earn the right to enter into the Next Semester, operetta must meet an important condition, namely, continued modernization of the lyrics. To adapt the lyrics is highly desirable even when the plot remains unchanged. Often enough previous translations of the poetic (vocal) component of operetta come across as just too silly, primitive or tasteless. Today, the level of equi-rhythmic translation is immeasurably higher than, for example, a half a century ago. Of course, the past has also known cases of expressive lyrics, which have become part and parcel of Russia's

operetta theater. I encountered this when endeavoring to modernize Kálmán's *Sylva*. There I touched nothing in the original lyrics, and had more than enough good reasons for that. The entire population of Russia knows dozens of lines from *Sylva* by heart. The first reason is that the authors of one of the first Russian adaptations wrote successful lyrics. Two, the lyrics were composed a long time ago (in the 1930s). Three – the text of the adaptation became the basis for film productions in both 1940s and 1980s. Simply put, those dozen lines are firmly lodged in any audience's «subcortex».

To reinvent, change, or improve them would mean to battle the «subcortex» causing irritation with every rewritten line. It does not take a rocket scientist to reject the idea. Instead, I sought official permission from the authors' estates to include their lyrics in my new (or, rather, semi-new) libretto, and went to work on the dialogue scenes. There are more than enough Russian plays written for *Sylva*, and one of them is



Julius Brammer (1877-1943) – Austrian poet and librettist. Author of more than 20 libretti, including those to Lehár's and Strauss's operettas. With Alfred Grünwald, author of libretto texts for Kálmán's *Bayadere* (1921), *Maritza* (1924), *The Circus Princess* (1926), *The Duchess of Chicago* (1928), and *The Violet of Montmartre* (1930).



Alfred Grünwald (1884-1951) – Austrian dramatist, poet and librettist. Author of libretto texts for operettas by Lehár, Kálmán, Strauss, Ábrahám and Stolz.

a peculiar piece where, according to the director's conception, the operetta is set in the Third Reich and Feri is a Jew escaping from the Nazis.

This version was produced and was received with interest, but it had little noticeable appeal in the long run. The adaptation turned out to be too «one-dimensional», unable to accommodate different staging approaches. My own strong personal preference is to avoid working to too-concrete specifications. A truly worthwhile dramaturgical piece ought to be pregnant with numerous conceptual possibilities.

Or take my experience with *Countess Maritza* (original libretto by Julius Brammer and Alfred Grunwald). This story is testament to the fact that nearly all classical operettas performed on the modern stage can be characterized as reworkings, or adaptations. The story begins in 1981, when the Leningrad Theater of Musical Comedy invited a Hungarian director to produce *Maritza* while at the same time commissioning me to deliver a Russian-language version of the play he had staged in Hungary many times. We should note that his play had turned out to be yet another Hungarian adaptation of the original – evidence that Kálmán's operettas are reworked in his own homeland, too. This reworked text, then, first went to a Hungarian-Russian translator and then came to me. What struck me the most about this particular Hungarian *Maritza* in Russian? Primarily its awkward, undramatic dialogue (a linguist's translation is no match for the art of a comedigraph); also a nearly total lack of jokes. It was beyond my

powers to color this dreary *Maritza* with a Russian-language palette, so I decided to create my own version – all but the plot. After completing the play, I smelled a rat and about ten days before the director's arrival in St. Petersburg I persuaded the theater to translate my play back into Hungarian.

The translator barely had time, and the play was delivered to the unsuspecting Hungarian director right at the airport. The first rehearsal was scheduled for the following afternoon. O horror! The rehearsal is nigh, yet the play is not the familiar one you had directed any number of times in Hungary and were about to transfer peacefully to the Petersburg stage. It's a new version! Not entirely new, but new enough for you to go speechless, then become enraged, then call the Hungarian Ministry of Culture and demand, through the Hungarian minister, an outraged telephone call to the theater from the Russian Ministry of Culture... The rehearsals began on the fourth day. During this time the director came to the conclusion that my version was acceptable. And what other conclusion could he have drawn given that the performers at the St. Petersburg Operetta had already learned their parts, the new vocal score included? The story ended on a peaceful note, the performance having turned out quite good. The saga of the *Maritza* adaptations, however, was not thereby concluded. A quarter of a century later a Hungarian production crew was invited to stage the latest Budapest *Maritza* at the Ekaterinburg Operetta Theater. In twenty-five years, it seems, Kálmán's motherland acquired at least one more version of his operetta. In

a timely communication with the Ekaterinburg Theater, I gently explained what might await them to the theater management. I took comfort in the fact that the theater persuaded the Hungarians to use the lyrics I had composed for the St. Petersburg version (incidentally, not entirely suitable to the new play). The performance was a success, the audience was pleased. Yet the moral of the story is hardly all rosy: When a foreign director is invited to town with a new play, the operetta theater's existence will not be trouble-free.

Another story, this time about Johann Strauss and his *Gypsy Baron*. A certain artistic director of a music theater in southern Russia travels abroad and brings back a foreign edition of the *Gypsy Baron* score...

Here we must pause to make a lyrical – though not too lyrical – aside. In possession of the Straussian score, this director had at his disposal a rarity. The truth is that the use of an actual score has not been standard practice in Russian operetta.

- «Never ever? Not even once?»
- Not once until the last decade is the most likely answer (I hesitate to be more definitive).

During the period in the 1920s and 1930s when the classics of operetta penetrated the Russian theater scene, far from all scores had been published in the West. Copies of scores circulated in manuscript form from theater to theater as authors delivered them for the first performance (the scoring was sometimes done inside one or another individual theater).

As for the scores visible on the conductors' music stands in Russian theaters, those typically are home-spun orchestrations created by adept musicians on the basis of piano scores (which do exist in Russia) or even phonograph recordings. Theaters merely copy such scores from one another. This imposed tradition is perhaps the reason that operettas on the Russian stage all seem to conform to the same standard, exhibiting the same «statistically average» orchestration. (Today, incidentally, authors as a rule continue to hand off their musical dramas and comedies to craftsmasters for scoring, after which it is difficult to judge the specifics of the authors' own musical language.) I do recall, however, that when I worked on *The Ball at the Savoy*, I came across a Polish record with the musical numbers from this operetta. The feast for the ears that I heard was nothing like what I had previously encountered on the Russian national stage. And so, in anticipation of the pleasures of staging *The Gypsy Baron* based on Strauss's authen-

tic score, our artistic director turned to choose from the plays available on the Russian stage. There were two. The first, corresponding more or less closely to the original



Johann Strauss (1825-1899) – Austrian composer, author of world-famous waltzes and 16 operettas, including *The Bat*, *The Merry War*, *A Night in Venice*, *The Gypsy Baron*, and *Viennese Blood*.



Caricature of Strauss and Offenbach in a Viennese newspaper.

libretto, has always struck me (and not me alone) as a veritable madhouse.



Franz Lehár (1870-1948) — Austro-Hungarian composer and conductor. Founder and greatest representative of the New Viennese Operetta. Author of more than 30 operettas/

Notwithstanding, Strauss wrote eternal music for it. (In fact, his extremely carefree attitude toward libretto is a puzzle. Based on the sixteen libretti he received, whether of high quality or worthless, he created sixteen operettas. Only about five of them stand any chance of being in repertoire, including the two masterpieces: *The Bat* and *The Gypsy Baron*.) The second play had been the basis for all Russian performances of *The Baron*. Being introduced to it had a depressing effect on our director — it did not in any way jibe with the score. He then turned to me with the request to produce a new version

of the play which would be scorecompatible.



Franz Lehár (center) and *The Merry Widow* librettists Leo Stein and Viktor Léon.

When I acquainted myself with the text of the libretto rejected by the director, I was flabbergasted. «Updated» for the play by the once-known dramatist Vassily Shkvar-

kin, Straussian music became shuffled like a deck of cards. I began work on the new libretto, this time bringing closer together rather than farther apart the operetta (or its music if not the script) and the au-

thentic Strauss. Without infringing on the boundaries of the score, I had success in creating a fairly dynamic and, in my view, meaningful piece. A curious reaction to the new *Baron* came from one of the actresses at the theater:

«This book was made to conform to the score whereas usually the score is made to conform to the book». She was right. Fitting the score to the book is a common practice in Russian operetta theater. Is it good or bad? I don't have a univocal answer. What I do have is another fact which speaks to the commonly accepted Western tradition of rewriting operetta libretti for new productions. During my work on *The Baron*, I had access both to the Russian underlay of the original libretto and to a recording of a contemporary Stuttgart State Opera

production, which corresponds in full to the Straussian score. I offer my testimony: Stuttgart has replaced the dialogue scenes in the libretto with new ones. So the Germans, it appears, alter the texts of their operetta classics with no less daring, perhaps, than we alter the selfsame texts (we have, alas, no classics of our own and are unlikely now to acquire them). In summary: Reinvented operetta libretti are par for the course, a universal phenomenon, both foreign and domestic. I, at any rate, have not seen



Alfred Maria Willner (1859-1929) – Austrian writer, philosopher, musicologist, composer and librettist. With Robert Bodanzky, author of libretto for Lehár's *Gypsy Love* (1910).

any other kind on the Russian stage. The Next Semester may rest assured.



Nikolay
Robertovich
Erdman
(1900-1970) –
Soviet dramatist,
poet, screenwriter.
With Volpin, author
of the Russian text
for Strauss's *The Bat*
and the interlude for
Hervé's
mam'zelle
Nitouche. Erdman's
best known plays are
The Mandate and
The Suicide.

One last story to conclude these remarks. In my recent experience I have twice drawn closer together (rather than farther apart) the version of the operetta I had been working on and the original text. My work on *The Baron* represented the second such case. The first one involved Franz Lehár's *Gypsy Love* (libretto by The libretto that Lehár set his composition to is practically a modernist play, where the events of Act II occur after those of Act III, the line between good and bad has been blurred, and the main idea is far from obvious to the audience. In the swashbuckling domestic pro

duction all of this has been leveled out, the operetta transformed, in essence, into a meat-and-potatoes detective story. Must we, I ask, throw the baby out with the bathwater (of which plenty in *Gypsy Love*'s original libretto) when we rework old texts?

I decided to try to save this particular baby. Since then, in taking on adaptations of operetta classics, I zealously seek out those "babies" that should not be deprived of life, lest by a vandal.

I am often asked what serves as the greater stimulus to rewrite: my negative perception of the original libretto or my rejection of subsequent adaptations appearing on the Russian stage before mine?

...At the time when I first started (I worked on Offenbach's *Bluebeard*) I would have undoubtedly replied, "both." The original libretto did not impress me one bit, and the available Russian adaptation seemed to me a chatty and mediocre composition. Now...

Now I would reply the same way but with a caveat. Should we not pay more attention to the libretto created during the composer's lifetime? Must we consider all previous Russian-stage libretto adaptations disappointing and rush headlong into revision? I do not, for example, intend to make changes to Nikolay Erdman's version of *The Bat*. I don't advise others to do it, either. There is no reason to ride into the Next Semester stomping on the garden so skillfully cultivated.



* * *

II

EPISTOLARY LIBRETTOLOGY, OR THE PAINS OF CO-CREATION

A unique testament to the realities of authoring a libretto may be the epistolary legacy of the great masters of musical theater. Gathered together, fragments from their letters that touch on the problems of the libretto are, in my view, capable of shedding light on many (if not all) of the «pain points» of the composer's and writer's stage collaboration.

FROM THE LETTERS OF GIUSEPPE VERDI¹



Unfortunately, drama some... times requires that poets and composers use their talent to make neither poetry nor music.

From a letter to Antonio Ghislanzoni.

¹ Letters presented in this section were chosen by the author of this book based on *Giuseppe Verdi: Selected Correspondence* edited and translated by A. Bouchain. Moscow: Muzika, 1981. Notes accompanying editions of letters by Verdi, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, and Schoenberg have been revised and in many cases expanded by the author of this book. Unless noted, translations from the original Italian are provided by Basil Considine of Boston University, on the basis of *I Copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, *Carteggio Verdi-Cammarano (1843-1852)*, *Carteggio Verdi-Somma*, and *Carteggio Verdi-Boito (vol.1)*, Gustavo Marchesi's *Giuseppe Verdi, Carteggi Verdiani*, and Franco Abbati's *Giuseppe Verdi* (1959).

TO FRANCESCO MARIA PIAVE

Milan, 12 April 1844

Here is the sketch of Werner's tragedy [*Attila*].²

[...] It seems to me that we can do a good piece of work together, and if you approach this seriously you will craft a very nice libretto. But you need to learn a lot. I will send you Werner's original in a few days, and you will have to produce a translation, because there are glimpses of powerful poetry in it. Therefore, make use of everything that you can, but make me something grand. More than anything, you should read Staël's *Alemagna*,³ which will be of great enlightenment to you. If you come across Werner's original in Venice, you will spare me a lot of trouble.

I recommend that you study this storyline a lot and keep these things well in mind: the period, the characters, etc., etc. Then, make a detailed outline: scene by scene, with all the characters, so that you have much less work to do when you put it into verses. Read Werner, especially the choruses, which are marvelous.

Milan, 22 May 1844

² Friedrich Ludwig Zacharias Werner (1768-1823) – a German poet. Here the reference is to his tragedy *Attila, King of the Huns*.

³ Anne Louise Germaine de Staël (1766-1817) – a famous French writer, whose appeal to Verdi is entirely understandable. Her book *Alemagna* raises boldly and decisively a burning question of the times, which concerned the right of each people to political and spiritual self-determination.

...You can suspend your work for the time being, because I have enough to work with. Reflect well on the libretto⁴ and figure out how to continue in



Francesco Maria Piave (1810-1876) – an Italian librettist and stage director. Worked at the opera house La Fenice in Venice starting in 1844, later (on Verdi's recommendation) gained a position at La Scala in Milan in 1861. Wrote the libretti for 10 operas by Verdi.

the same way as you had commenced. [...] Of course you should take the opportunity to write for Pacini⁵, but try not write an adaptation of *Lorenzino*⁶, because we will do it together another time. But if it's not possible to do work with Pacini except by also working on *Lorenzino*, do what will benefit you, not me.

Paris, 22 July 1848

[...] Ferruccio ⁷ is a truly gigantic character – one of the greatest martyrs of Italian liberty...

If you find this to be a fitting subject, write a scenario and send it to me. Remember that I love a scenario that is bursting with details, because of my need to critique it

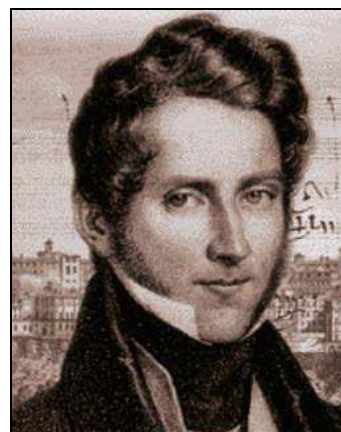
⁴ The reference is to the opera *The Two Foscari*.

⁵ Giovanni Pacini (1796-1867) – an Italian composer. Wrote numerous operas, the majority of which met with success on the stage of major and minor theaters in Italy during the composer's lifetime.

⁶ *Lorenzino de' Medici* – a tragedy by the Italian poet and playwright Giuseppe Revere (1812-1889) and the basis of Piave's libretto that appealed to Verdi.

⁷ Francesco Ferruccio (1489-1530) – a Florentine military captain who led the people against the tyranny of the Medici and died a martyr at Gavinana. A main character in Francesco Guicciardini's novel *The Siege of Florence* (1836).

not because I myself have the capacity to judge such work, but because it's impossible for me to write good music if I don't understand the play well or if it doesn't win me over. Take care to avoid the monotone; when dealing with stories that are naturally somber, if you aren't careful you will end up writing a funeral, you will end up writing a funeral, as was the case for example in *The Two Foscari*, which had a too uniform color from start to finish.



Salvatore Cammarano (1801-1852) – a popular Neapolitan poet, librettist, and artist. He penned the libretti for the best operas by Gaetano Donizetti, Saverio Mercadente, and others. Four of Verdi's opera libretti were authored by Cammarano: *Alzira*, *The Battle of Legnano*, *Luisa Miller*, *Il trovatore*. The Verdi-Cammarano collaboration was interrupted by the latter's death.

TO SALVATORE CAMMARANO

Busseto, 28 February 1850...At first glance, *King Lear* appears to be so vast, so intricate that it seems impossible to draw out from it an opera [libretto]; however, a careful examination reveals that the difficulty – while great, without a doubt – is not insurmountable. You know that we do not need to turn *King Lear* into a drama of the commonplace sort but instead should work out a style that is entirely new and expansive, without regard to convention.

The cast, it seems to me, could be reduced to five principals: Lear, Cordelia, the Fool, Edmond, and

Edgar. There will be two supporting parts: Regan and Goneril (making the latter, perhaps, into another *prima donna*). There will also be two supporting basses (as in *Louise*): Kent and Gloucester. The rest will all be secondary characters.

[...] Of course, certain scenes absolutely need to be removed – such as, for example, the one in which Gloucester is blinded or the one in which the two sisters' bodies are brought on stage, etc., etc. – and many, many others that you nine; know about better than I do. The number of scenes can be reduced to eight or I remind you that there are eleven in *Lombardi*, which has never been an obstacle to producing it.⁸

Busseto, 9 April 1851

I have read your scenario, and seeing as you are a man of talent and of such superior character, you will not be offended if lowly me takes upon myself the liberty of saying this: that if this subject cannot be treated on our stage with all the novelty and oddity

⁸ The composer was so taken by the story of *King Lear* that, instead of waiting for the librettist to begin, he himself composed the original scenario for the future opera. (The scenario is detailed in the same letter.) Because of Cammarano's death in 1852, Verdi began work on this scenario with the dramatist Antonio Somma. Their efforts lasted longer than five years. *Verdi's Selected Letters* contains eighteen letters from the composer to his librettist, in which Verdi enters into all the twists and turns of the libretto's composition with a most creative intent, finally approving the text without reservations. Subsequently, without yet writing the music, the composer attempted to negotiate with a series of Italian theaters concerning *King Lear*. The results of these discussions, however, did not go Verdi's way (conversations centered primarily on the choice of singers), and the opera remained unrealized.

of Spanish drama, it is best that we abandon it. It seems to me, or do I deceive myself, that certain situations in your rendering have lost the force and the originality of the first version, and that Azucena in particular does not retain the peculiarity and novelty of her character – to me it seems that the two great passions ruling this woman, filial love and maternal love, have not been expressed in their full vigor. For example, I would prefer that the Troubadour not be wounded in the Duel. This poor Troubadour has so little going for him that if we deprive him of his courage in that scene, what would remain? How could he then interest Leonora, who is of such high station? Nor do I like having Azucena tell her story to the Gypsies; or saying, in the ensemble piece in the third act, «Your son was burned alive», «but I was not there», etc. etc...And finally, I do not want her to have lost her mind at the end. I would hope that you have left in the big Aria!! Leonora has no singing part in the lament for the dead nor in the *canzona* for the Troubadour, but it seems to me that that is one of the best spots for the Aria. If you are worried about giving too large a part to Leonora, leave out the *cavatina*. To better explain my idea, I will lay out in more detail how I envision the plot:

Part 1 – Prologue

1st number: The choir and the introductory narrative are good. Eliminate Leonora's *cavatina* and make a majestic –

2nd Trio, starting with De Luna's recitative; then the Troubadour's song; Leonora's scene; the trio and challenge [to a duel], etc., etc.

Part 2

Gypsies, Azucena, and the Troubadour
(who has been wounded in battle)

3rd. The Gypsies sing an exotic and fantastic chorus... While they are singing, Azucena starts to sing a doleful song. The Gypsies interrupt her because it is too woeful: «*Woeful like the story that was its inspiration... You don't know it*». («*You will be avenged!*») These words shake the Troubadour, who up until this very moment has been wholly engrossed in thought. Dawn arrives and the Gypsies disperse into the mountains, repeating one of the lines of the song, etc... The Troubadour, left alone with his mother, begs her to recount the story that had so horrified him. Narration, etc... Duet with Alfonso, which you will write in keeping with free and new forms.

4th. Duet with Alfonso. It doesn't seem appropriate to me that Azucena should tell her story in the presence of the Gypsies, letting slip some word that she had kidnapped the son of De Luna and sworn an oath to avenge her mother.

5th. Scene of taking the veil, etc., etc., and the finale.

Part 3

6th. Chorus and De Luna's *romanza*.

7th. Ensemble. The Dialogue – or interrogation in the Spanish play – should show the Gypsy's backbone

very well. After all, if Azucena reveals herself for who she is, she will instantly be in the hands of her enemies and thus deprived of the means of her vengeance. It is good that Fernando makes the Count suspicious, and that the Count (who calls himself De Luna) startles Azucena. In this manner she is recognized by Fernando, but does not otherwise reveal herself, except perhaps by letting slip the words «Be quiet – if he knows who I am, he will kill me!» Azucena's words are very simple and beautiful: «Where are you going?» «I do not know. I lived in the mountains, I had a son who abandoned me, and I am going to look for him».

8th. Leonora's recitative. Recitative and the telling of Manrico's dream, followed by –

9th. Duet between Manrico and Leonora. He reveals to his fiancée that he is the son of a Gypsy. Ruiz announces that Manrico's mother is in prison, and Manrico runs out to try to rescue her...etc...

Part 4

10th. Leonora's big Aria, interwoven with the lament for those about to die and the Troubador's *canzona*.

11th. Duet between Leonora and De Luna.

12th. Do not make Azucena go insane! Exhausted from fatigue, distress, terror, lack of sleep, she can no longer speak clearly... Her senses are beaten down, but she is not insane. It is essential that we preserve until the end this woman's two great passions: the love for Manrico, and the ferocious thirst to avenge

her own mother. When Manrico has died, her feelings of revenge become gigantic, and she cries in exaltation, «Yes – see, see! He was your brother... Fool! ... You are avenged, Mother!»

Please excuse my ardor and daring – I will certainly have got something wrong, but I had to at least tell you everything about what it was that I was feeling. Moreover, perhaps my initial suspicion that this play does not please you is in fact true. If this is the case, we still have time to put things right, rather than work on something that does not please you. I stand prepared with another subject, simple and endearing, and which could be said to be almost finished. If you want it, I will dispatch it to you and we will think no more of *Il Trovatore*.

Send me a word about your intentions, and if you too have an idea for a plot let me know.

TO CESARE DE SANCTIS ⁹

Busseto, 5 August 1852

The sad news of the death of our Cammarano shocked me like a bolt of lightning. It is impossible for me to describe to you my profound grief! I learned of this death not in a friendly letter, but in a stupid theatrical journal!!! You, who loved him just

⁹ Cesare de Sanctis – a merchant from Naples, a theater and music aficionado who moved constantly in artistic circles, was a friend of Cammarano and an ardent lover of Verdi's music.

as much as I, will understand all that I cannot possibly say. Poor Cammarano!!! What loss!!!

[...] You know that *Il trovatore* will be staged in Rome if the Censor will allow it. My mind is so confused that it's impossible to talk in detail about this, but – as you will see in my last letter – this *Trovatore* seems to me somewhat longish; tell me, what if some judicious edits were needed? What if the Censors require some small changes? What if I likewise needed to make some small modifications or revisions? (Note that all these things mustn't tamper with the work of our poor friend, whose memory I want foremost to respect.) Who should I turn to in this instance? Tell me, did this Bardare¹⁰ quite have Cammarano's confidence? Is he capable? Write to me immediately, as there is no time to lose.

It would be beneficial if *Trovatore's* song lyrics were scrupulously guarded and if the heir or heirs of Cammarano, in taking receipt of the promissory note, also cede to me the ownership and rights to *Trovatore*.

Rome, 1 January 1853

[...] I would desire nothing more than to find a good libretto and thereby a good poet (of whom we have such need), but I cannot conceal from you that I

¹⁰ Leone Emanuele Bardare (1820-1874) – an Italian poet and librettist. Known for completing Cammarano's unfinished libretto to *Il trovatore* after Cammarano's death.

only reluctantly read the libretti that are sent to me. It is impossible, or almost impossible, that another person should divine those things that I seek. I seek subjects that are new, important, beautiful, varied, daring... and daring throughout, with new forms, etc., etc., and at the same time settable to music...

When someone says to me, «I did it this way because this is how Romani, Cammarano, etc. did it»,



Antonio Somma (1809-1864) – a Venetian lawyer and writer, author of a number of dramatic plays. He worked on the libretto for Verdi's unrealized *King Lear*.

Also wrote the libretto for Verdi's *Masked Ball*, which suffered such distortions under the censor that Somma felt unable to credit it as his own.

we do not understand one another any more – in-deed, it is because those great men did it that way that I want it done differently now.

TO ANTONIO SOMMA

Busseto, 6 November 1857

Dear Somma, I received your letter from the 1st of November with the rest of Act I.¹¹ The poetry works very, very well, and only some insignificant trifles must be changed, which you will correct effortlessly. The scene with Amelia and the Witch was superb.

The three stanzas of Amelia, Strega, and Gustav, which form the trio, look a little weak (maybe I'm mistaken); perhaps we need more

¹¹ The reference is to *The Masked Ball*, the basis of which was the drama *Gustav III*.

of your strong, expressive voice here.

The entire scene where the chorus enters is just gorgeous, so is Gustav's ballad, and the recitative that comes right after the words «Fate has decided» is especially good.

In the quartet that follows, be aware that we have a scene with a Chorus of Conspirators who should have the opportunity to say something – make a stanza for them as well. By the way, this Quartet with Chorus also perhaps needs to be more expressive.

[...] I would ask that you change *è desso* and *adesso* – these rhymes (being so close) sound bad when set to music. Also get rid of the phrase «Dio non paga il sabato» [«God does not pay up on Saturdays», an Italian saying – *Yu.D.*].

Believe me: all proverbs, all stupid little sayings, etc., are very dangerous on stage.

TO LÉON ESCUDIER¹²

Busseto, 19 June 1865

Dear Léon.

¹² Léon Escudier (1821-1881) – a Parisian music publisher, journal editor and opera impresario. An ardent supporter of Verdi's music, he expended much energy on publishing and promoting Verdi's operas in France.

[...] Are you joking? Write to the Opéra¹³? [...] Nothing would be easier than to come to an agreement for the writing of an opera; we should agree in half a minute if there were a libretto or at least a ready-made subject. *King Lear* is magnificent, sublime, pathetic, but not sufficiently spectacular for an opera. [...] At any rate, to judge of it one would have to see it. In fine, everything depends on a libretto. A libretto, a libretto, and the opera is written!¹⁴

TO CESARE DE SANCTIS

Sant' Agata, 18 April 1869

It's about doing a good deed. Are you willing to help me?!...Yes?!!! Listen: it was decided to make an album of songs for poor Piave.¹⁵ Six songs, but all signed by famous names [...] Or is that too much to ask of you? [...] It'll be enough to absolve you of however many sins you may have on your conscience!

¹³ The Parisian Grand Opéra.

¹⁴ Translation by J.G. Prodhon and L.A. Sheppard in «Verdi's Letters to Léon Escudier (Continued).» *Music & Letters*. 4.2 (Apr., 1923): 186. The names of the operas have been normalized to their normal forms.

¹⁵ While on his way to La Scala on 5 December 1867, Piave fell to the ground, struck down by apoplexy. Paralyzed and bedridden, Piave lived for eight more years, but although partial consciousness returned to him he was deprived of his capacity for speech and unable to read or write. Verdi supported the unfortunate librettist financially right up until the latter's death.

TO ANTONIO GHISLANZONI

Sant' Agata, 14 August 1870

Signor Ghislanzoni, I found your poems on my desk

When I returned home. To speak frankly, I think that the consecration scene has not turned out to be quite as powerful as I was expecting. The characters do not always say what they ought to say, and the priests are not priestly enough. It also seems to me that «the scenic word» is not there – or, if it is, it is weakened by the rhyme and the meter, and as a result does not leap out as clearly and markedly as it should.

Sant' Agata, 17 August 1870

There are wonderful things at the beginning and the end of the duet, although it is too long and drawn out. My opinion is that the recitative could be said in fewer verses. The verses are fine up until «a te in cor destò» («I dedicated my heart to you»).

But when the action warms up after that, I think it lacks «the scenic word». I do not know what it is exactly that I mean when I say «the scenic word»– but I intend something like that the words should carve out the situation, making it clear and plain.

Per Radames d'amore
 Ardo e mi sei rivale.
 – Che? voi l'amate? – Io l'amo
 E figlia son d'un re.
 [For the love of Radames {-}
 Fire and I are rivals.
 – «What? You love him?» – I love him
 And am the daughter of a king.]

These seem to me less theatrical than the words: Tu
 l'ami? ma l'amo anch'io intendi?

La figlia dei Faraoni è tua rivale!
Aida: Mia rivale? E sia: anch'io son figlia.
 [You love him?
 Well, so do I, do you hear me?
 The daughter of the Pharoahs
 is your rival!
Aida: My rival? So be it:
 I am also their daughter

I know very well how you will respond:
 What about the verse, the rhyme, the stanza? I do not
 know what to say, except that when the action de-
 mands it, I myself would immediately forsake
 rhythm, rhyme, and stanza, and would write free
 verse so as to clearly and distinctly say everything
 that the action requires. Unfortunately, drama some-
 times requires that poets and composers use their
 talent to make neither poetry nor music.

Sant' Agata , 28 September 1870

After the terrible scene painted by her father and the insults he hurls at her, Aida, as I have already said, loses all her strength; she is gasping for air as she speaks: hence her disconnected speech, her shallow and despondent voice.

[...] I reread the script and think that it conveys this episode very well. I myself would abandon the strophic and rhythmic structure; I would forget about making it sing and would concentrate on conveying the situation such as it is, perhaps all of it in recitative. At most, I would have Amonasro sing this one phrase: «Pensa alla patria, e tal pensiero ti dia forza e coraggio». [«Think of your native land; this thought will give you strength and courage».] As well, do not forget the words «Oh patria mia, quanto quanto mi costi!» [«Oh, my homeland, what price you exact!»] Essentially, I would be as concise as possible to stay faithful to the script.



Antonio Ghislanzoni (1824-1893) – an Italian writer, journalist and librettist. Published a number of novels and authored eightyfive opera libretti. For Verdi, he created the libretto for *Aida* and *The Force of Destiny*. Also wrote the libretto for Amilcare Ponchielli's *Lithuanians*.

November-December 1870

I received the verses, which are beautiful but do not work well for me in all aspects. As you were very

slow in sending them, I – so as to not lose time – already wrote the section using the monstrous verses that I had sent you earlier.

Come soon – actually, come at once: we will put everything aright.

Genoa, 3 January 1871

Do not be dismayed! We are talking about a trifle. I redid six times the two lines of recitative in the second finale (when Aida recognizes her father among the Ethiopian prisoners). The situation is magnificent, but perhaps it is the characters that do not fit well in the scene – by which I mean to say that they do not behave in the way that they ought to. Therefore have patience and rewrite this little passage. Rewrite it in your own way; do not think of what has been done before. Enter wholly into the situation and write.

Genoa, 7 January 1871

Signor Ghislanzoni,

I fear that we have crossed the ocean only to drown in a glass of water. I redid this little passage again (for the eighth time), and it still does not work for me. It is the King, in my view, who does not fit well in the scene... But now it is time for me to put this aside and finish up the instrumentation.

TO ARRIGO BOITO

Sant' Agata, 5 October 1885

Dear Boito,

I have finished Act IV¹⁶ and can breathe again!... It was difficult to avoid too many recitatives and to find rhythms and phrasing for so many free and fragmented verses. But because of these verses you were able to say everything that had to be said and I am therefore happy and at peace, as if it were Easter. In composing the music for this ultra-terrible scene, I felt the need to remove a strophe that I myself had begged you to add, and to add here and there now a verse now half-a-verse, and especially a beautiful strophe that had been unjustly abandoned. There are, as a result, some disjointed verses that you will easily make connected. You have overcome many far worse obstacles!

Montecatini, 7 July 1889

While wandering in the world of pure ideas, everything smiles at you – but when you plant your foot on the ground and turn to practical actions, doubts and disappointments arise.

While sketching out *Falstaff*, did you never think about how old I was getting? I know that you will reply by exaggerating the state accused of great rashness in taking up such a task! What if I cannot withstand the strain?!

¹⁶ The reference is to the opera *Othello*.



D. Verdi
and A. Boito
Arrigo Boito
(1842-1918) – an
Italian composer
and librettist. His
most famous
music
composition
is the opera
Mefistofele
(1868), set to
Boito's own li-
bretto. Author of
three opera libretti
for Verdi – the
second edition of
*Simon
Boccanegra*,
Othello, and
Falstaff – as well
as *La Gioconda*
for Amilcare
Ponichelli. Also
known in Italy as
a lyricist.

What if I am unable to finish writing the music? If this happens, then you will have wasted time and labor in vain! I would not want that for all the gold in the world. This idea is unbearable to me and even more unbearable when I reflect that, while writing *Falstaff*, you would – perhaps not give up on but be distracted from – your work on *Nero*, thus delaying its appearance. I would be the one accused of causing this delay, and the thunder of the malicious public would crash down on my shoulders! Now, is it possible to overcome these obstacles?... Do you have a good argument to counter mine? I would like you to, but I do not believe that you have it.

Still, let us think this over (but take care that you do nothing to harm your career), and if you find at least one such argument and I find some means of taking ten years off my shoulders...

What joy! To be able to say to the public:

«We're still here!! To us!»

Chronology of Verdi's Operas

- 1839 *Oberto*. Libretto by Antonio Piazza and Temostocle Solera.
- 1840 *King for a Day*. Libretto by Romani after the play *Le faux Stanislas* by Pineu-Duval.
- 1842 *Nabucco*. Libretto by Solera after the play *Nebuchadnezzar* by Anicet-Bourgeois.
- 1843 *The Lombards*. Libretto by Solera after Tommaso Grossi's epic poem.
- 1844 *Ernani*. Libretto by Francesco Piave based on the eponymous play by Victor Hugo.
The Two Foscari. Libretto by Piave based on a historical play by Lord Byron.
- 1845 *Joan of Arc*. Libretto by Solera after Schiller's play *The Maid of Orleans*.
Alzira. Libretto by Salvatore Cammarano after the eponymous play by Voltaire.
- 1846 *Attila*. Libretto by Piave after the play *Attila, King of the Huns* by Zacharias Werner.
- 1847 *Macbeth*. Libretto by Piave and Andrea Maffei based on Shakespeare's play.
The Bandits. Libretto by Piave after the eponymous play by Schiller.
Jerusalem. Libretto by Alphonse Royer and Gustave Vaëz (a French version of *The Lombards*).
- 1848 *The Corsair*. Libretto by Piave after the eponymous epic poem by Lord Byron.
- 1849 *The Battle of Legnano*. Libretto by Cammarano based on Joseph Méry's play *La bataille de Toulouse*.
- 1850 *Luisa Miller*. Libretto by Cammarano based on Schiller's play *Love and Intrigue*.

- 1851 *Stiffelio*. Libretto by Piave after the play *Le pasteur* by Emile Souvestre and Eugene Bourgeois.
- 1853 *Rigoletto*. Libretto by Piave based on Victor Hugo's play *Le roi s'amuse*.
Il trovatore. Libretto by Cammarano and Leone Emanuele Bardare based on the eponymous play by Antonio García Gutiérrez.
- 1855 *La traviata*. Libretto by Piave based on the play by Dumas-fils *La dame aux Camélias*.
- 1857 *The Sicilian Vespers*. Libretto by Eugène Scribe and Charles Duveyrier.
Simon Boccanegra. Libretto by Piave based on the eponymous play by Gutiérrez (the 2nd edition of 1891 is the version by Arrigo Boito).
- 1859 *Aroldo*. Libretto by Piave (a version of *Stiffelio*).
A Masked Ball. Libretto by Antonio Somma after Scribe's drama *Gustave III*.
- 1862 *The Force of Destiny*. Libretto by Piave after a play by Angel de Saavedra.
- 1867 *Don Carlos*. Libretto by Méry and Camille du Locle based on Schiller's dramatic play.
- 1871 *Aida*. Libretto by Ghislanzoni based on a scenario by Auguste Mariette.
- 1887 *Othello*. Libretto by Arrigo Boito based on Shakespeare's play.
- 1893 *Falstaff*. Libretto by Arrigo Boito based on Shakespeare's play.

FROM THE LETTERS OF MODEST MUSSORGSKY*



*... Woe to those who have the folly
of taking Pushkin... as but a text!*

From a letter
to A. Golenischev Kutuzov

* Letters are cited according to *M.P. Musorgsky. Pis'ma*. Moscow: Muzika, 1981.

TO LUDMILLA SHESTAKOVA¹⁷

30 July 1868

[...] This is what I would like. For my characters to speak on the stage as living people speak, but besides this, for the character and power of intonation of the characters, supported by the orchestra, which forms a musical pattern of their speech, to achieve their aim directly, that is, my music must be an artistic reproduction of human speech in all its finest shades, that is, the sounds of human speech, as the external manifestation of thought and feeling must, without exaggeration or violence, become true, accurate music, but artistic, highly artistic.

¹⁷ Ludmilla Ivanovna Shestakova (1816-1906) – sister of Mikhail Glinka, public figure, a friend of Mussorgsky and other composers of The Mighty Five.

[...] So now I work on Gogol's *Marriage*. But the success of Gogol's speech depends on the actor, on his true intonation. Well, I want to fix Gogol to his place and the actor to his place, that is, to say it musically in such a way that one couldn't say it in any other way and would say it as the characters of Gogol wish to speak. That is why in *Marriage* I am crossing the Rubicon. This is living prose in music, this is not a scorning of musician-poets toward common human speech, stripped of all heroic robes – this is reverence toward the language of humanity, this is a reproduction of simple human speech.¹⁸



Lyubov Ivanovna
Karmalina
(1834-1903) –
singer, a pupil of
A. Dargomyzhsky
and M. Glinka,
close to the Bala-
kirev
Circle

TO LYUBOV KARMALINA

St. Petersburg, 20 April 1875

[...] I had to give up the Little Russian opera: the cause of my renouncing it is the impossibility for a Great Russian to act like a Little Russian and hence the impossibility of mastering the Little Russian recitative, that is, all the overtones and peculiarities of the musical contours of Little Russian speech.¹⁹ I preferred to lie as little as possible and

¹⁸ Translation by Jay Leyda and Sergei Bertensson in *The Musorgsky Reader*, W.W. Norton, 1947.

¹⁹ Mussorgsky's abandonment of *The Fair at Sorochintsi* was temporary.

to tell the truth instead. In an opera of the everyday the recitative must be treated even more strictly than in a historical opera, for the former lacks the large historical canvas which, like a screen, can conceal sloppiness and blunders. Therefore those great artists who lack the requisite skill in recitative avoid everyday scenes in historical operas.

TO VLADIMIR STASOV ²⁰

St. Petersburg, 15 June 1876

[...] *Khovanschina* is too large-scale, too unusual a task. You, generalissime, I am sure did not suppose that your observations and proposals would have been received by me other than in a musoryaninish way.²¹ *I have halted work – I have become thoughtful, and now, and yesterday, and for weeks, and tomorrow, all is thought – my one thought is to emerge victor, and to speak to people a new word of friendship and love – direct, and with all the breadth of Russian glades – a true-sounding word of a modest musician, but of a fighter for a true concept of art. And now here's*



Vladimir Vasilievich Stasov (1824-1906) – music and art critic, art historian, public figure, the ideologue of The Mighty Five. To him belongs the idea of composing the opera *Khovanshchina* by Mussorgsky.

²⁰ Translated by David Brown in *Mussorgsky: His Life and Works*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

²¹ This made-up epithet derives from the name «Musoryanin,» which means something like «garbage-dweller» and which the composer sometimes used to sign his letters.

your today's letter; again I have become thoughtful. Your proposal *screams* of something good; the idea must be reflected upon, and already there's a programme regarding Marfa. Incidentally, it's thanks to you that we understood Marfa and are making this Russian woman *pure*... If you're still the same (and for you to change would be a crime) our business will go forward yet more expeditiously...²²

STASOV TO MUSSORGSKY

This, dear sir, is what I must tell you; only remember, for God's sake, that none of this is a *demand* or an *instruction* (which you, of all people, need the least at any rate), but rather these are question marks coming from a member of the audience utterly devoted to you and to your work.

I repeat once again: in its current state, your opera is dominated by too many choruses and has at times too little action on the part of particular personalities or characters. It may happen that later on, when your best admirers (to say nothing of your enemies) are listening to your opera on stage and delighting in your talented and original music, they may ask. «What is *Golitsyn* or *Marfa* or some other personage doing in this opera? Get rid of them and the opera will lose nothing – these characters are simply *place-holders*, lacking in action and integrated neither at the beginning nor in the dénouement». I am ready to pose the same question, although I know exactly why the work became so fragmented and outwardly episodic: it happened because the previous script had to be changed somewhat, Sofia and Petr had to be left out – this means that the remainder suffered a significant defect (I am referring to the libretto); the coherence was lost, and what was left were scenes, details, even entire personalities that seemed sometimes to lack all footing and instead float in the air in some miraculous way, between floor and ceiling.

This is why I had the audacity to scribble for you a few suggestions through which, it seems to me, it may be possible to attain a greater coherence, a greater unity and therefore a greater interest in the action.

I find Act I to be *finished and complete* all around, there is nothing for me to object to.

In Act II I have plenty objections to make.

²² The letter from Stasov to which Mussorgsky replies here is unknown. Much in his reply, however, resonates with another letter by Stasov, from May 18, 1876, in which an outline for the opera is proposed. For the text of this letter, see pages 88-91 of the present book.

Marfa's divination scene is musically splendid but purposeless; her return to Golitsyn, after the attempt on her life, again lacks purpose, is not justified in any way and does not lead anywhere. The argument and the quarrel between Golitsyn and Khovansky are purposeless, without any consequence in the opera, so that, in fact, this entire act (*as libretto*) can easily be thrown out the opera losing nothing in terms of substance. Besides, Dosifei for the second time «stops» someone again: people might say that he is like a *policeman*, an admirer of law and order – and nothing else! No independent personality or image.

To change all of this wrongness, I would like to propose the following: is it possible to make Marfa not only a schismatic and Golitsyn's accomplice – but also a young widow, full of life and a *lover* of Golitsyn? Is it possible to make her come to him in Act II at his request, to prophesy for him, to tease him and the amorous princess Sophia ironically, and then to change from being pensive and ironic to being *resolute* and to begin declaring to Golitsyn that she wants to break off their relations, that she is disgusted by all of it, that sinning is terrible, that their «righteous faith» forbids them this, that she does not wish to take part in any of their political doings, that she is renouncing everything and leaving. Golitsyn does not want to believe her, suspects some other cause, queries her, hounds her with both pleas and threats; now ridicules Sophia to persuade Marfa that she is nothing to him, now tries to reignite in Marfa her old political and religious passions. All is in vain, Marfa is deaf to him, but, when Golitsyn accosts her with the greatest force, Marfa finally gives in and confesses fervently, «Yes, there is a man I love passionately, like a mad woman, a lost woman; but I know that it must ruin me and will ruin others as well – so I wish to end it all, leave everything and disappear somewhere, to live for faith and God alone!»

It seems to me that this would be a correct and rewarding motif for the composer. Golitsyn, who the entire time has either been pretending or actually feeling regret at the loss of this beautiful and passionate wench, suddenly regains his resolve and icily lets her go. «So I am forsaken, I am scorned!» he tells himself when alone. «I, Golitsyn, an all-powerful man, ruler of my country, ruler of Sophia's heart and Russia's destiny. Let it be as you wish! But you will no longer live – for you will betray, you will blab! This is harmful, my plans are going awry». So he calls for his trusted man and orders him to drown Marfa in a bog, meanwhile turning coldly to speak with Khovansky, who has just arrived for a council gathering. Khovansky, however, came not only to attend the council but to settle his own scores: he accuses Golitsyn of Europeanism, of idle and insincere relations with Sophia, of abjuring their cause and instead preferring «separatist intrigues» for personal gain. The quarrel heats up (all the while, in sudden and brief *a parte* Golitsyn continues to return from time to time to Marfa: he is torn up inside). Dosifei, like some potentate, attempts to put out this inconvenient conflagration; however, Marfa runs in just then, wailing and in tears, to complain to the entire believers' «council» of the attempt on her life, and to seek protection from Dosifei, de-

claring that her life will henceforth be dedicated to nothing but her faith and repentance. Everyone – according to his own manner – attempts to *persuade* her to remain his faithful ally, a powerful action-spring that she is for any camp, but she is unwavering; meanwhile, Golitsyn and Khovansky reach all-out enmity and mutual hate and *swear* to one another to kill or be killed. At this point Shaklovityi appears as well as the choir of schismatics from afar.

In other words, I would call this entire act «A Schism within the Schism».

3. Concerning Act III («The Streltsy Quarter») I also have many objections. It has choruses, it has songs (men's and women's), it has splendid music, but it has no action and no interest. It lacks connection with the rest of the opera. Therefore I suggest the following.

Is it possible to leave everything that's been composed as is (it is *splendid* in the highest degree!) but add the following scene. After Marfa's song, when the streltsy wake up and harrass the scribe, Andrei Khovansky enters their quarters and begins to incite the streltsy, the worst brawlers and daredevils, promising them wine, money, and fame better than for abusing the scribe – incites them to go with him to kidnap the German beauty, a noxious heretic. The streltsy, with glee, proceed to get the horses and the carts ready and to arm themselves; but when Andrei, pleased with his luck, is about to join them, he is accosted by Marfa who heard everything and found out everything. Her resolve to retreat from everything worldly is broken, she is beside herself with jealousy, rage and lust for the dashing young 17th century hussar, she is thrashing about like a veritable Potiphar's wife, the voice of the «righteous faith» inside her has died down and all that's left is a raging, jealous woman. But Andrei manages to get free from her and declares that he doesn't love her and can never love another's slave, Golitsyn's lover!.. She is left alone, she is destroyed, in her loneliness she looks around in terror, and it is at this very moment that Susanna approaches her in stealth, who had witnessed the entire scene dumbly from the street (or through a window). Dry and yellow as a piece of parchment, the envious Susan-na finally pours out her hate toward Marfa, triumphs over her as she now knows her *secret* and calls her to account in front of the entire community of believers at their hermitage in the woods. I hope that in this manner Act III will acquire both action and interest and present the richest challenges to the composer.

4. Concerning Act IV («The German Quarters»), again I would like to make the proposal that, according to what we had managed to discuss yesterday, the whole scene be a «Scène d'intérieur», in other words, aunt, niece, chicken-coop ca-refree living, serene conversations, etc. Andrei arrives, puts on his charm, gets the mitten, calls for assistance and takes Emma the canary from her cage by force.

5. You yourself have already made a substantial addition to the scene at Khovansky's «Domostroy home»: the conversation between father and son is terrific; the father's reproaches, leaning on his son to get ambitious, the son's indifference to all that, interjected every minute by his thoughts returning to Emma – all of this is superb. Before the dinner scene, however, before the

harem choruses and the «Persian dance», I would propose adding Golitsyn. In Act II we had Khovansky at Golitsyn's, now we'll have Golitsyn at Khovansky's – a counter-visit and the other side of the coin.

Golitsyn arrives terrified to say that all is lost and to beg to forget all enmity, unite once again, take measures, call up the streltsy and advance on Peter and even Sophia (the *part-Europe* has yielded to the *whole Europe* and is hanging on to *Asia*). But the idiot Khovansky is blinded by this unexpected triumph, he is all swagger and arrogance; he is celebrating, he is prouder than the most ridiculous peacock and, when Shaklovityi and others enter, Khovansky is unaware of his impending demise and puffs himself up even more in front of Golitsyn: «See? What did I tell you! *We are not* worse off, they are! They need me, *they send* to me; they see, they feel their doom coming and my strength rising!» He utters this, conducts the ceremony of putting on the most festive brocaded robe and ...goes to his death! Golitsyn hangs his head; he is arrested immediately.

6. I have nothing to say about the last scene («The Hermitage»). There everything is good: Dosifei settling his life's scores, Andrei arriving full gallop from Moscow, his encounter with Dosifei, then with Emma, his efforts to arm the hermitage dwellers to repel Petrine forces, Dosifei's refusal to do so (he senses that all is lost), the judgment of Marfa, her acquittal and exaltation as the purest among them; their fanaticism and the self-immolation of the ancient, dying Russia – all of this is splendid, vivid, full of action and interest and the most glorious motifs.

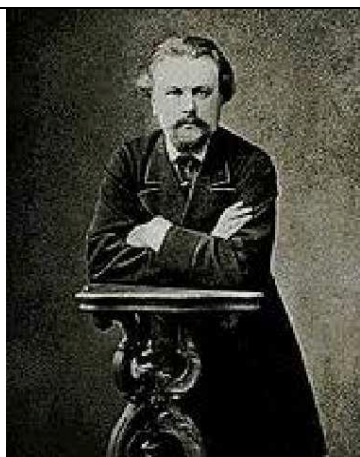
That is what I wanted to propose to you. Here *all characters* become well-defined, they leap out and acquire their distinctness and activity. Reflect on all this, for God's sake, and discuss it with yourself. May it be of use to you.

TO ARSENY GOLENISCHEV-KUTUZOV ²³

15 August 1877

[...] This is not my first encounter Gogol, and therefore his capricious prose frightens me no longer; but *Marriage* is only the humble exercise of a musician, or rather a non-musician, who wishes to study and grasp the twistings of human speech in that spontaneous true exposition which is the means used by that greatest genius Gogol.

²³ The bulk of this passage in English is by Jay Leyda and Sergei Bertenson in *The Musorgsky Reader*, W.W. Norton, 1947.



Arseny
Arkadievich
Golenischev-Kutuzov
(1848-1913) – poet
and philosopher,
a friend of
Mussorgsky.

Verses written by
Golenischev-Kutuzov
were set to music by
the composer in the
song cycles «Sunless»
and «Songs and
Dances of Death», in
the ballad
«The Forgotten», and
in the romance
«The Vision».

Marriage was an etude for a chamber trial. With a [small – MG] stage it is necessary for the speeches of the characters, each according to his nature, habits, and dramatic inevitability to be conveyed to the audience in bold relief – it is necessary to construct so that the audience will easily sense all the artless peripeteia or urgent human affairs, at the same time making these artistically interesting. Imagine, my dear friend, that what you read in the speeches of Gogol's characters must be delivered from the stage to us in musical speech by my characters, without any alterations contrary to Gogol's intentions. [...] The enjoyment of experiencing musical narration of

Pushkin (in *Boris Godunov*) is reborn during the musical narration of Gogol (in *The Fair at Sorochintsi*). Pushkin wrote his *Boris* in dramatic form but not for the stage; Gogol wrote his *Fair at Sorochintsi* as a tale – and most definitely not for the stage. Yet both giants used their creative force to draw the contours of dramatic action in a manner so fine that you can just fill them in. But woe to those who have the folly of taking Pushkin or Gogol as but a text! [...] As only the genuine sensitive nature of an artist can create in

the realm of the word, the musician must maintain a very «polite» attitude toward the creation, in order to penetrate into its very substance, into the very essence of that which the musician intends to embody in musical form.

Chronology of Mussorgsky's Operas

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 1863-1866 | <i>Salammbô</i> . Libretto by the composer after the eponymous novel by Gustave Flaubert. Unfinished. |
| 1868-1869 | <i>The Marriage</i> . An experiment in dramatic music in prose set to the text of the eponymous comedy by Nikolai Gogol. Unfinished. |
| 1874 | <i>Boris Godunov</i> . A national music drama set to the libretto written by the composer after the eponymous tragedy by Aleksandr Pushkin. |
| 1872-1880 | |
| 1874-1880 | <i>Khovanshchina</i> . A national music drama, libretto by the composer.
<i>The Fair at Sorochintsi</i> . A comic opera set to the libretto written by the composer with Golenischev-Kutuzov's participation after the eponymous tale by Nikolai Gogol. Unfinished. |

* * *

FROM THE LETTERS OF PYOTR TCHAIKOVSKY ¹



I fussed precisely over... the meticulous latticework of the themes, and utterly neglected the stage and its requirements. These requirements largely paralyze the pure musical inspiration of the author.

From a letter
to Nadezhda von Meck

TO K. S. SHILOVSKY ²

Dated approximately 1875.

...Allow me to tell you frankly that The Reluctant Queen is marred by the absence of an interesting dramatic plot. In your scenario there are many

Dated good elements for music—dances, choruses, marches. All that is wonderful, but it is also essential to have characters and action—in short, the tying and unravelling of an interesting plot. Your Egyptians resemble too much the kings, princesses, etc., that are in general use in the theatre, especially in ballets. Still, you do have all the makings of an ex-

¹ The Russian text of the letters can be found in *P.I. Tchaikovsky on Opera and Ballet*, State Music Publishing House, Moscow, 1960.

² Konstantin Stepanovich Shilovsky (1849-1893) – amateur musician, poet and painter, in later life actor at the Malyyi Theater. Tchaikovsky's correspondence with Shilovsky, his future coauthor on the libretto for *Eugene Onegin*, reveals the composer's persistent searching for a libretto fulfilling his new outlook on opera.

cellent librettist, and I do not intend to release you from my clutches. Write something else, old chap. Wouldn't you be able to come up with some new and powerful dramatic situations? ...Please, dear friend, have a good look and don't feel you have to hurry – I am prepared to wait even for two months. I am certain that you can devise something splendid.³

TO M. I. TCHAIKOVSKY

May 18, 1877

Dear Modya! ...What I have to say about *Inessa*⁴ is: The idea does not appeal to me at all and I have no desire to start working on it – a sure sign that this libretto has not got the basis of a good opera. Inessa's sufferings are romantic-dramatical, very much in the style of a cheap novel. No proper characters in the plot; Pedrina is an interesting figure but she appears only in the first act. The 'disguise' scene in the second act is unnatural and tedious. The whole thing is unpoetical and has no continuity! No Modya, my friend, you are no good as librettist but thank you all the same for the effort.⁵

³ Translation by Luis Sundkvist (2010), courtesy of www.tchaikovsky-research.net.

⁴ Script based on the novella *Inès de las Sierras* by the French Romantic novelist Charles Nodier.

⁵ All translations here of Tchaikovsky's letters to his brothers Modest and Anatoly are by Galina von Meck, in *Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: Letters to his Family, An Autobiography* (Cooper Square Press, 2000).

Last week I happened to be at Mme Lavrovsky's.⁶ There was talk about suitable subjects for opera. ... Yelizaveta Andreyevna smiled amiably and did not say a word.



Modest Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1850–1916). Dramatist, librettist, translator. Brother of the composer, writing the libretti for his *Queen of Spades* (1890) and *Yolanta* (1891). Author of libretti for E. Napravnik, A. Arensky, and S. Rachmaninoff, as well as of several plays performed at St. Petersburg and Moscow theaters.

Suddenly she said 'What about Eugene Onegin?'¹ It seemed a wild idea to me, and I said nothing. Then when I supped *alone* in a tavern, I remembered *Onegin*, thought about it, and began to find her idea not impossible; then it gripped me, and before I finished my meal I had come to a decision. I hurried off at once to find a Pushkin, found one with some difficulty, went home, re-read it with enthusiasm, and spent an entirely sleepless night, the result of which was the scenario of an enchanting opera on Pushkin's text. Next day I went to see Shilovsky and he is now working furiously on my scenario.

Here is my scenario, in brief:

Act I, scene 1: The curtain rises on old Larina and the nurse; they remember old days and make jam. Duet for the old women. Singing heard from the house. Tatiana and Olga sing a duet accompanied by a harp on a text by Zhukovsky. Peasants appear bearing the last sheaf; they sing and dance. Suddenly the servant boy announces «Guests!» Panic. Enter Eugene and Lensky. Ceremony of their introduction and hospital-

⁶ Elizaveta Andreevna Lavrovskaya (1845-1919) – opera singer, later professor at the Moscow Conservatory.

ity (cranberry juice). Eugene talks about his impressions to Lensky, the women to each other; quintet *à la* Mozart. Old woman goes off to prepare supper. The young stay behind and walk off in pairs; they pair off (as in *Faust*). Tatiana is at first shy, then falls in love.

Scene 2: scene with the nurse, and Tatiana's letter.

Scene 3: Onegin and Tatiana.

Act II, scene i: Tatiana's birthday. Ball. Lensky's jealous scene. He insults Onegin and challenges him to a duel. General horror.

Scene ii: Lensky's aria before his death, duel (pistols). Act III, scene 1: Moscow. Ball at the Assembly. Tatiana meets rows of aunts and cousins. They sing a chorus. Appearance of the General. He falls in love with Tatiana. She tells him her story and agrees to marry him.

Scene 2: Petersburg. Tatiana is waiting for Onegin. He appears. Enormous duet. Tatiana, after an explanation, yields to a feeling of love for Eugene and struggles against it. He implores her. Enter the husband. Duty wins. Onegin flees in despair.⁷

You won't believe how passionate I have become about this subject. How delighted I am to be rid of Ethiopian princesses, Pharaohs, poisonings, all the conventional stuff. What an infinity of poetry

⁷ In the course of composition, several changes were made to the scenario. The first scene opens not with the old women's duet but rather with a poetic duet of Tatiana and Olga set to an early Pushkin poem «The Singer»; the duet is transformed into a quarter as Larina and the nurse enter. The domestic scene is abbreviated (the offering of the cranberry juice is eliminated); Larina leaves the guests immediately after introducing Onegin and the quintet *à la Mozart* is substituted by a quartet. The story of Tatiana's acquaintance with her future husband (scene one of the third act) is omitted and replaced by a dramatic scene of the Petersburg ball where Onegin meets Tatiana and Count Gremin.

there is in *Onegin*. I am not deceived: I know that there will be little movement or stage effects in this opera. The poetry, humanity, simplicity of the theme, combined with a text of *genius*, will more than make up for these shortcomings.

TO S. I. TANEYEV

January 2, 1878

... It may very well be that you are right in saying that my opera [*Eugene Onegin*] is not effective on the stage.⁸ But to this I should like to reply that I don't give a damn about its ineffectiveness on the stage. The fact that I don't have a dramatic vein has



Sergey
Ivanovich
Taneyev
(1856-1915) –
a student of
Tchaikovsky,
Russian com-
poser, pianist,
teacher, scien-
tist, and public
figure.

long since been recognized, and it is something I don't fret much over now. If it's ineffective, well don't stage it then and don't play it. ...I worked on the opera with an indescribable enthusiasm and pleasure, not worrying too much as to whether it had action, effects etc.

I, felt, I spit on effects. Besides, what are effects anyway?! If you can find these, for example, in some old *Aida*, then I must assure you that not for any riches in the world would I now be able to write an opera with such a plot, because I need people, not puppets. I will gladly tackle any opera [subject] in

⁸ In his letter of January 8, 1878, Taneyev replied, «When I wrote to you that *Onegin* is ineffective on the stage, ...I... meant the *first* scene only.»

which, even if it did not have any powerful and unexpected effects, I should find beings like me, experiencing emotions which I too have experienced and can understand. The emotions of an Egyptian princess, of Pharaoh, of some frantic Nubian, I do not know or understand. Some instinct tells me that these people must have moved, spoken and, consequently, expressed their feelings in a very peculiar manner—not as we do. That is why my music, which, in spite of myself, is suffused with Schumannism, Wagnerism, Chopinism, Glinkaism, Berliozism, and all the other 'isms' of our time, would fit the characters of *Aida* about just as well as the graceful, urbane speeches of Racine's heroes, who address one another as 'Vous', correspond to one's notion of the real Orestes, the real Andromache, etc. It would be false, and such falsehood is loathsome to me. ... Unfortunately, ...I haven't come across people who could point me to such a subject as Bizet's *Carmen*, for instance, which is one of the most delightful operas of our times. You may be wondering what I'm looking for. Well, I'll tell you. What I need is something without any kings or queens, without any popular revolts, battles, marches—in short, without all those attributes of *grand opéra*.⁹ I am looking for an intimate but powerful drama, based on a conflict of situations which I have experienced or witnessed myself, and which are able to touch me to the quick. I am not averse even to have some fantastic element, since there is no need to restrain oneself then, and one can give free rein to one's imagination. I suppose, though, I'm not making myself quite clear. Well, in short, *Aida* is so remote from me, I am moved so little by her unhappy love for Radames,

⁹ «Grand opéra» – an opera genre formed in French music in the first half of the 19th century.

whom I likewise cannot picture to myself, that my music would not be heart-felt, as is necessary for all good music. I recently saw *L'Africaine*¹⁰ in Genoa. How wretched this poor African Girl is! She has to endure slavery, imprisonment, death under a poisoned tree, and the triumph of her rival as she is dying – and yet I don't feel sorry for her in the least. But of course there you have plenty of effects: a ship, fighting scenes, you name it! Well, I say to hell with them, to hell with these effects!..

The opera *Onegin* will never enjoy success – this I know in advance. I shall never find the artists who could, even just approximately, meet my requirements. The conventionalism and routine of our big theatres, their nonsensical staging practices, the system they have of keeping on invalids and not giving young [singers] a chance – all this renders my opera almost impossible on the stage. ... I would much rather hand over this opera for the stage of the Conservatory, and in fact this is what I wish. ... That is more suitable for my modest work, which I will not even call an opera if it is ever published. I shall call it lyrical scenes or something like that.¹¹

TO N. PH. VON MECK

January 15, 1879

...I do not know a single person to whom I would gladly commission a libretto. The most gifted poets

¹⁰ *L'Africaine* – the last opera composed by Giacomo Meyerbeer.

¹¹ Translation by Luis Sundkvist (2010), courtesy of www.tchaikovsky-research.net.

disdain such work, but if they do take it up, they charge enormous fees, which scarcely correspond to the quality of the thing, for it is not sufficient to be a poet – one must know the stage, yet these gentlemen have never bothered with the theater. Besides, each considers his verses the holy of holies and bristles when the musician, for his own reasons, changes or adds to or shortens anything, without which it is impossible to compose an opera. There are of course not a few hacks who will undertake this labor for a small fee, but the problem is that I would do no worse, in all likelihood. In fact the creation of a libretto by the author of the music himself has its positive sides, since he is at complete liberty to arrange the scenes as he likes and to choose this or that meter, according to what he needs...



Nadezhda
Filaretovna
von Meck
(1831-1894).
Russian pa-
troness who
provided
substantial
financial
support to
Tchaikov-
sky (from
1877
until 1890)
as well as
Rubinstein
and Débus-
sy
(a sometime
music tutor
for her
daughters).

* * *

November 27, 1879

...*The Voyevoda*, no doubt, is a very bad opera. I take into account not only the musical merits, taken separately, but the totality of conditions which, when satisfied, provide for a greater or lesser merit of an opera. First off, the subject is worthless, lacking in

any dramatic interest and movement. Secondly, the opera was written too hastily and too carelessly, as a result of which the forms that came out were not operatic and not fit for the stage. I simply wrote music to the text that was given, failing to note the infinite difference between symphonic and operatic styles... In *The Voyevoda* I...fussed precisely over...the meticulous latticework of the themes, and utterly neglected the stage and its requirements. These requirements largely paralyze the pure musical inspiration of the author, and that is why both symphonic and chamber music stand above opera. In writing a symphony or a sonata I am *free*, I have no constraints and no limitations; but the opera has this advantage – it permits one to speak in the language of music *to the masses*. That an opera may be staged even forty times during one season is enough to give it advantage over a symphony, which will be performed but once in a decade! But I have digressed from the critique of *The Voyevoda*. Its third shortcoming is the overly massive orchestra and the way it dominates the voices. All of these shortcomings stem from lack of experience. It is necessary to pass through a series of failed experiments in order arrive at a possible degree of perfection, and I am not at all ashamed of my operatic failures. They served me well as lessons and directions. And you see, my dear friend, how stubbornly I persisted in refusing to heed my mistakes and my failure to understand the requirements of opera, for *The Undine* (the burned opera), *The Oprichnik* and *The Vakula* are still far from what is needed. I am remarkably slow at learning this sci-

ence. It seems to me that *The Maid of Orleans*, at last, is composed well, but I may be mistaken.

TO A.I. TCHAIKOVSKY

October 17, 1880

[...] You say that I should change the last scene of *Onegin*.¹² Although I do not really agree – because Pushkin by a hint here and there gives the right to finish the scene more or less as I have done – in response to your request I have tried to change it...

First of all...instead of the note saying that Tatiana throws herself into Onegin's arms I have written: 'Onegin comes ne-arer'... [At] the very end I changed Tatiana's words: she will not weaken and be drawn to him but continues to assert duty... Then instead of the words



Brothers Pyotr and Anatoly Tchaikovsky. The composer's younger brother (1850-1915) was a jurist, vice-governor of Revel and Nizhny Novgorod, in the 90s, subsequently a senator.

¹² In a February, 1878 letter to K.K. Albrecht, Tchaikovsky wrote about the original text of the finale, in which Tatiana's wavering was emphasized: «Due to the requirements of the music and the stage I was compelled to radically dramatize the scene between Tatiana and Onegin. In the finale I have Tatiana's husband appear and order Onegin out with a gesture.» This version of the text, which weakened the integrity of Tatiana's character and caused unanimous opposition, was changed in connection with the staging of the opera at the Bolshoi Theater in January of 1881. For more on the changes to the *Onegin* finale see Yuri Dimitrin's article «Selected Passages from the Correspondence between Librettist and Conductor» (http://www.ceo.spb.ru/libretto/kon_lan/ogl.shtml/).

'I'm dying!', Tatiana will say, 'Farewell for ever,' and disappear. As to Onegin, after a few bewildered moments he will say his last words. The general must not appear.

TO I. V. SHPAZHINSKY

January 30, 1886

...I have become convinced that *The Enchantress* must be in 4 acts rather than 5. ... So far your libretto is exemplary (that is, I use the word *exemplary* not in its general meaning, but in the sense of operatic technique). In the first act there is a skillful exposition of the plot, a splendid genre picture of the common folk in its everyday life, there is lively and interesting action. In the second, the drama for which the 1st act has prepared us begins to take shape; the mutual relations of the dramatis personae and their characters are expressed with the requisite intensity and clarity; the action strives swiftly towards its culmination. The 3rd act is precisely the *culmination* of the drama; in it the composer must be very high-strung; its tension is extreme; this high-strungness, this tension must affect the listener; one can feel the inevitability of a complicated and awful catastrophe. The 4th act then must be dedicated to this very catastrophe, after which the listener/spectator will leave the theatre staggered, yet reconciled and satisfied. After the magnificent, *terrifying* and *passionate* two scenes of Act III I feel that I can *successfully* write only *one* more act. I don't have enough colors on my palette or inspiration to illustrate musically, over *two*

whole further acts, a series of such intensely dramatic scenes as those that occur in the last 2 acts of your play.

If you insist on having *five acts*, then, of course, I shall *give in to you*, but I know *for certain* that this will harm the opera. No listener, no matter how much he may love music in general, no matter how much sympathy he may feel for you as a playwright and for me as a composer—no listener, I say, would be able to leave the theatre after these 5 acts without a feeling of extreme exhaustion and satiety—and that would be fatal for the opera's success. In drama you have the possibility of awakening the audience's flagging interest by some little genre scene, by flashes of ingenious dialogue, by skillfully tacked-on little



Ippolit Vasilievich Shpa-zhinsky (1844-1917) – Russian dramatist. His first drama, *Life's Question*, appeared in 1876. Other plays followed, including a costume drama *Enchantress*. This piece became the foundation for the libretto of Tchaikovsky's opera.

episodes which don't have any direct relation to the main plot. In opera (to which all of the latter devices are applicable only to a certain extent) it is essential to have compressed and swift action—otherwise, the composer wouldn't have the energy to write his work, nor would the listener to take it all in attentively.

My misfortune is that it is *hard* for me to gather together arguments that might convince you. I have arrived at the profound conviction that it is essential

for us to limit ourselves to four acts not by means of reasoning, but on the basis of my *unfailingly reliable* musical instinct. ... The subject of *The Enchantress* is of such a kind that it is impossible to make a *five-act opera* out of it.¹³

TO YU.P. SHPAZHINSKAYA

October 28, 1887

...*The Enchantress* is not well-liked, and the blame for that lies both with me and, chiefly, with Ippolit Vasilievich [Shpazhinsky]. He knows the stage very well, but he is not yet accustomed to the demands of opera. He has too many *words, conversation* overpowers lyricism. Whatever I did to condense his text, whatever *cuts* I was forced to make, in general the scenes are all too drawn out. But I am also to blame. ... [Yet] I do not despair in the least and believe that this is an opera to get used to: once the public starts to listen closely, it will get established in the repertoire.

TO M.I. TCHAIKOVSKY

March 28, 1888

[...] [I] will compose an opera only if the subject attracts me really. *The Queen of Spades* does not im-

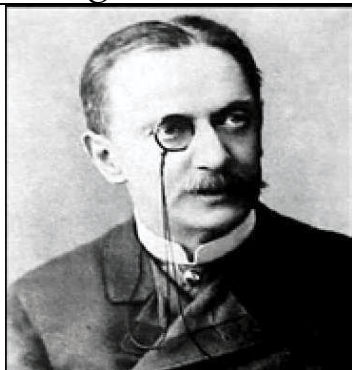
¹³ Translation by Luis Sundkvist (2010), courtesy of www.tchaikovsky-research.net.

press me and I could only write something insignificant on that subject.¹⁴

TO I. A. VSEVOLOZHSKY

August 13, 1888

...I have firmly decided against *The Captain's Daughter*, at least given the shape that Shpazhinsky



Ivan Aleksandrovich Vsevolozhsky (1835-1909) – Russian theater director, designer, chief master of the court. In 1881 he was appointed director of the Imperial theaters. In 1899 Vsevolozhsky became the director of the Hermitage.

gave it. First of all, he refuses to do otherwise and yet his perfectly impossible opera is *six acts* long, with a multitude of *scenes*, with *such a complicated, fragmented plotline*, that even the rest of my life would not suffice to write music for all of this. Secondly, and I myself hardly know why, I have grown cold not toward *The Captain's Daughter* specifically but toward all plots *terre à terre*. I have now for some time been drawn toward *otherworldly* plots, such where no one makes jam or hangs people or dances the mazurka or gets drunk or gives alms, etc., etc.

¹⁴ The turning point in the composer's attitude toward the subject occurred in November of 1889. According to the memoirs of N.D. Kashkin, Tchaikovsky would recount how at first he merely laughed at the idea of writing an opera on this subject but then, the composer would say, «it occurred to me that the scene in the Countess's bedroom is magnificent and it all flowed from there» (*Reminiscences of P.I. Tchaikovsky*, Moscow, 1954, page 163).

TO M. I. TCHAIKOVSKY

January 23, 1890

...You did the libretto very well but for one thing – it is too *verbose*. Please be as short and laconic as possible. I have left out a few things.... The words are sometimes quite good, sometimes a bit harsh and sometimes no good at all.¹⁵ But on the whole the libretto is *excellent* and one can see that you appreciate music and its requirements, which is so important for a librettist.

February 2, 1890

...This Scene [the Countess's death] is very well made from the point of view of music and I am very pleased with you as librettist. Only remember to be brief, and beware of *long-windedness*. This little sin is actually worse in the preceding Scene [the first scene of the second act]. I have been thinking a lot about the Scene on *the embankment*. You and Laroche¹⁶ are absolutely against it but – in spite of wishing to have as few of them as possible I feel that without this Scene the whole Third Act will be without women – and this is boring. Besides, the audience must know what happened to *Liza*. One cannot finish her part in the fourth Scene....

¹⁵ In the original Russian, Tchaikovsky gives an example of undue harshness: a modal particle consisting of a hard «b» sound immediately following another harsh sound. – Tr.

¹⁶ Herman Laroche (1845-1904) – music critic, conservatory classmate and close friend of Tchaikovsky.

TO THE GRAND DUKE CONSTANTINE ROMANOV

August 5, 1890

...I wrote it [the opera *Queen of Spades*] with unprecedented fervor and passion, living and feeling through everything happening in it (even to the extent that I was at one time afraid of the ghost). ... Nonetheless, I have no doubt that this opera contains a sea of deficiencies that are peculiar to my personality as a musician.

Your criticisms of my sins as regards declamation are too lenient.¹⁷ In this respect I am past redemption. I do not think I have perpetrated many blunders of this kind in recitative and dialogue, but in the lyrical parts, where my mood has carried me away from all just equivalents, I am simply unconscious of my mistakes and must get someone to point them out to me. Truth be told, however, such details are often attended to much too scrupulously with us. Losing sight of the most important thing in vocal music – the authentic reproduction of feeling and mood –



Konstantin
Konstantinovich
Romanov
(1858-1915) –
Grand Duke, poet,
to whom Tchaikovsky
dedicated two
of his compositions:
the opera
Oprichnik
and the
second string
quartet.

¹⁷ Much of the text that follows is from *The Life and Letters of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky* by Rosa Newmarch (1906).

our music critics make it a priority to seek out incorrect stresses, which fail to correspond to spoken language, and other sundry oversights in declamation; they gloat collecting these mistakes and reproach the author with zeal worthy of nobler aims. ...Of course, I am the child of my generation, and I have no wish to return to the worn-out traditions of opera; at the same time I am to the despotic requirements of realistic theories. ...What Your Highness says about the first scene Garden is entirely correct, and I too am very much afraid that it might resemble something out of an operetta, something farcical.

TO M.I. TCHAIKOVSKY

July 25, 1891

...The libretto is excellent. There is only one fault, but that is not of your doing. I find that between the duet about 'Light' and the end there is not enough *music*, only explanations of the action. I fear that this will be dull.... I did not start from the beginning but from the scene between *Yolanta* and *Vaudemont*. You did [this] scene very well...

TO B. B. KORSOV

November 18, 1891

You will not believe how ...insulting and infuriating is all this nonsense that is being said about The

Queen of Spades. ... A view prevails that The Queen of Spades is boring, that its libretto is bad and uninteresting.

But, my God, has there ever been in Russia a more cleverly constructed libretto, more replete with intrigue and dramatic action?... One must be a complete fool or else a cad to treat this effort so condescendingly, whereas the librettist did so well in extracting from Pushkin's novella all that might constitute a forceful and serious musical drama, into which the musician poured his heart and soul and all of his skill, all of his abilities, multiplied by years of experience! At the present time I am finalizing the instrumentation for my new opera;¹⁸ I dare say that it is very successful. There goes another wonderful subject that will not avoid being called ridiculous.



Bogomir
Bogomirovich
Korsov
(1845-1920) –
a wellknown
Russian
baritone
and opera
artist.

* * *

¹⁸ The reference is to *Yolanta*.

Chronology of Tchaikovsky's Operas

- 1867 *The Voyevoda*. Libretto by Aleskandr Ostrovsky and Tchaikovsky based on Ostrovsky's eponymous comedy.
- 1869 *Undine*. Libretto by Vladimir Sollogub, after the tale by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, translated and set to verse by Vassily Zhukovsky.
- 1872 *The Oprichnik*. Libretto by Tchaikovsky after the eponymous drama by Ivan Lazhechnikov.
- 1878 *Eugene Onegin*. Libretto by Tchaikovsky and Konstantin Shilovsky based on Aleksandr Pushkin's novel in verse.
- 1878 *The Maid of Orleans*. Libretto by Tchaikovsky after the eponymous drama by Friefrich Schiller.
- 1884 *Mazepa*. Libretto by Viktor Burenin after the narrative poem *Poltava* by Aleksandr Pushkin.
- 1885 *Cherevichki*. Libretto by Yakov Polonsky after the tale *Christmas Eve* by Nikolay Gogol.
- 1887 *The Enchantress*. Libretto by Ippolit Shpazhin-sky, after his own drama.
- 1890 *The Queen of Spades*. Libretto by Modest Tchaikov-sky after the eponymous tale by Aleksandr Pushkin.
- 1891 *Yolanta*. Libretto by Modest Tchaikovsky after a drama by Henrik Hertz.

**GIACOMO PUCCINI'S VIEWS
ON OPERA LIBRETTO ¹**
(an essay based on epistolary legacy)



«I am driven to despair by the libretto, which I was forced to redo. Isn't it within possibility to find a poet capable of creating something worthy?»

From the letter to Giulio Ricordi

Giacomo Puccini is famous first of all as an operatic composer. In preferring opera, the composer explained himself thus in one of the letters to his librettist Giuseppe Adami: «My writing desk is a sea of letters. There is no trace in them of music. [...] How can I write music without a libretto? This is my main shortcoming: I can write [music] only when I see how my 'marionettes' of flesh and blood move around the stage.”²

Puccini's work is well researched. More than two dozen books have been published devoted to Puccini's epistolary legacy. Among the many studies dedicated to his work, however, one does not find

¹ This chapter is co-authored with D a r i a M i t r o f a n o v a .

² The Italian language documents referred to in this study can be found in Adami G., *Il romanzo della vita di Giacomo Puccini*, Milano/Roma 1944; Rolandi U., *Il libretto per musica attraverso i tempi*, Roma 1951; *Carteggi pucciniani*, Milano 1958; Puccini: *276 lettere inedite*, Milano 1974.

any special inquiries into his views about opera libretto. Libretto, of course, as a component of the operatic synthesis, still remains a topic without any fundamental theoretical underpinning. It is still lacking in one of the few specialist inquiries into the history of libretto, authored by the famous Italian collector of libretti Ulderico Rolandi.³ As though to explain this omission, the author cites the words of the American scholar O. Sonneck: «It is astonishing that to this day there has been no serious attempt to present an intelligible history of the libretto. Of course, this work would be so difficult that it could be carried out only by that scholar who has expertise in the theory and history of music as well as in the history of drama; moreover, it is necessary that he be well-versed in cultural history as well as in those economic and commercial movements that influence the development of the aforementioned arts...». Rolandi's book presents a synopsis of every libretto followed by several lines of commentary. The most distinguished librettists, in Rolandi's view, were O. Pignuccini, A. Zeno, P. Metastasio, R. de Calzabigi, C. Goldoni, L. da Ponte, F. Romani. He does not include in this list Luigi Illica, Giacomo Giacosa, nor others among Puccini's librettists; in his study they receive only a few lines. Rolandi's main criterion for evaluating a libretto appears to be its theatricality, or dramatism. Interestingly, the most common words in Puccini's correspondence are also *efficacia* -- efficacy,

³ Rolandi is the first to offer an extensive bibliography of articles (around 400) about libretto and librettists. These articles for the most part concern themselves with individual texts or authors.

efficienza -- effectiveness, *teatralità* – the possibility of theatric action, and *essenzialità drammatica* – dramatic substance.

Because, unlike Wagner, Puccini did not leave behind his opera composition agenda, his correspondence is an invaluable source of information. One may say without fear of exaggerating that the majority of Puccini's letters are concerned precisely with the work on libretto. Letters that were written «in haste, without effort, without attributing any importance to them» (the words of Giuseppe Adami in his book about Puccini, published in 1944) permit us to gather together disparate thoughts and reconstruct Puccini's views on libretto. Judging by his correspondence, all doubts that Puccini expresses in his letters concern not the music but «the libretto: the scene, the verse, the word, with all the possible and impossible minutiae associated with the birth of an opera». Even in letters to his relatives, amidst regular domestic concerns, Puccini lets slip his anxieties about libretto. In June 1890 Puccini writes to his sister, «I returned to *Manon Lescaut* but am very upset by the libretto, which I am forced to send to be rewritten.



Giuseppe Adami (1878 – 1946) – Italian playwright, theater and music critic and writer. Together with Simoni, author of libretti for Puccini's *Swallow*, *The Cloak* and *Tourandot*. Adami published the first collected edition of Puccini's letters and authored a series of scholarly works on Puccini's life and art.



L. Illica and
D. Puccini
Luigi Illica
(1857-1919) –
a prominent
Italian librettist.
With Giuseppe
Giacosa, authored a
number of libretti
for Puccini:
Manon Lescaut
(1893),
La Bohème (1896),
Tosca (1900),
Madama Butterfly
(1904).
His other libretti
include
André Chenier
and *Siberia* for U.
Giordano, and *Iris*,
The Masks,
and *Isabeau* for
P. Mascagni,
among others.
Illica's work
did much to
develop the style
of *verismo* in
Italian opera.

... I have a toothache. I canned the strawberries and preserved four kilograms of cherries with alcohol. ... Tomorrow I am going to Switzerland to rent a house, and in the evening I have a meeting concerning the libretto».

Giacomo Puccini's views on the opera libretto were formed gradually. Suffering no radical changes but broadening from opera to opera, their main tenet remained the same – to choose the right plot. It is in this element that Puccini vested the responsibility for an opera's success or failure. The quality of the music could help in but a few cases. In one of the 1899 letters he writes about the reasons that *Iris* flopped. According to Puccini, the cause of failure had to do not with Mascagni's music, which he valued highly, but with the unfortunate choice of storyline for Luigi Illica's libretto. Plot selection is the starting point in Puccini's work on an opera. On average, the search for a storyline, which was always hard, took Puccini at least three years. As a rule, the final decision about the suitability

or non-suitability of this or that storyline would not come to him immediately. It is known, for instance, that after watching Sardou's *Tosca* with Sarah Bernhardt for the first time, Puccini exclaimed, «...this unhappy mess is not for me». When he found out that Illica was writing a libretto for *Tosca*, Puccini again repeated, «This mess is not for me». However, with time he changed his mind, although Illica's libretto was not at all to his liking. As a rule, Puccini worked simultaneously on many subjects. Some he would give up once and for all, others (for example, about Marie-Antoinette) he returned to at different times in his life. In the absence of suitable plots, Puccini does not tire of complaining about idleness. In January 1892 he writes to Illica (*Manon Lescaut* is yet to be finished!): «Dear Illica, you have deserted me!... Catalani says that he has two or three of your libretti in the works... Think about me [now]». In one of his letters to the publisher Giulio Ricordi, in August 1900, Puccini writes, «I am doing well – I am still an unemployed laborer, I am calm for now but cannot guarantee continued calm! No offers from Illica or Buddha [*the reference is to Giacosa for his imperturbable personality – Yu.D., D.M.]!*» In 1916 Puccini informs his librettist G. Adami, «*The Swallow* is finished. I've started on the instrumentation for *The Cloak*. Have you got any new subjects? I can't find anything. This saddens



Giuseppe Giacosa (1847-1906) – Italian poet, playwright and librettist. In partnership with Illica, Giacosa wrote a number of libretti for Puccini's operas.

me very much. I keep searching and searching, for a moment I thought I found a couple of subjects for two one-act operas, but it seems to me they are no good». Now a letter to the librettist Renato Simoni: «I am without work and I feel out-of-work. I am eating myself up and suffering. I put my hands on the piano, and they turn dirty with dust. I feel that years are going by, the best years... When you come back to Milan, why don't you make an arrangement with Adami that you two will find something worthwhile for me?» During the *Tourandot* period, he complains to Giuseppe Adami, «You say that you work for me but instead you are busy with completely different things: some with film, others with plays, poetry, or articles. You do not think, as you should, about the person who every day feels as if the ground is disappearing from under his feet... You write me such endearing and reassuring letters...



G. Puccini
and F. Fontana.
Ferdinando Fontana
(1850-1919) –
Italian journalist,
playwright
and poet;
author of plays
and libretti,
including for
Puccini's
Le Villi
and *Edgar*.

But if instead there came to me one act about the cruel Princess, wouldn't that be better? ... You would once again give me confidence and peace, and the piano would not be collecting dust because I would sit at it and noodle, and on the table there would be a lovely sheet of paper a thousand lines long». Puccini, quite jealous of his librettists' outside activity, was sure that it was not he who harassed his librettists with constantly evolving requirements, rather they tormented him with endless waiting: «On the whole, I have not harassed you

much. It was you who tormented me from time to time, making me wait for 'the bread' of poetry to go with my musical dish... Now I cannot wait ... too many years behind me!» In a letter to Adami he says, «Now that I am already a miserable old little man, I do not at all plan on staying idle for years in search of a subject.

It is better to take care of that right away. While I am finishing up *Touran-dot*, you and Simoni could surely find me a story. You are familiar with my ideas. Our three-way alliance must continue."

Puccini's first two operas – *Le Villi* and *Edgar* – give no opportunity to assess Puccini's views on the opera libretto. The correspondence between Puccini and his librettist Franco Fontana about the libretti of these two operas is limited to a few letters. In these exchanges with Fontana there are no violent discussions such as will occur in the future – Puccini's method was only beginning to take shape. Soon after the triumphant success of *Le Villi*⁴ Puccini received from Ricordi a commission for a new opera and a suggestion: «Arrange with Fontana immediately for him to find you a good story». After the flop of *Edgar*, Ricordi writes to Puccini, «We need to find a good story and a good poet».

A special place in the development of Puccini's views on the opera libretto is held by *Manon Lescaut* – his cornerstone principles emerge in the course of composing this opera. Initially Puccini turned to Le-

⁴ Music critic Marco Sala writes in the newspaper «Italia» on June 1, 1884: «Puccini has attained unprecedented success! *Le Villi* is astounding... A tremendous success, and with us a great composer."

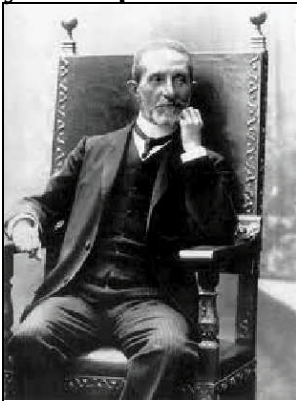
oncavallo who, in addition to composing, also wrote libretti for a living, but their collaboration did not bear fruit. In the spring of 1890 Puccini turned to the dramatist Marco Praga with a request for a libretto based on *Manon*. Praga would refuse for a long time, motivating his refusal by pointing to the existence of Massenet's beautiful opera, written six years prior; besides, he reminded Puccini, he had never written a libretto. In the end they agreed that Praga would write the scenario while Domenico Oliva would set it to verse. Puccini formulated his rationale for turning to Marco Praga as follows: «You have a clear dramatic vision. You know how to construct». Puccini recommended to Praga that he reread Abbé Prévost's novel pretending he had never seen the libretto for Massenet's opera. In his opinion, *Manon* from the French point of view is not the same as *Manon* seen with the eyes of an Italian. In July 1890 Oliva wrote to Ricordi, «I handed [Puccini] the first part of the third act, with which he was quite satisfied» – thus, at the beginning of their collaboration, everything was going well for the librettists. The libretto was finished in a very short time, and in just a few days it was set to verse. An official «reading» happened in Giulio Ricordi's house, meeting with full approval. In spite of this, some time later Puccini went to work on the protagonist who, in his view, did nothing but «burn with passion». He wanted his heroine, while remaining inconstant and self-serving, to empathize with her chevalier's sufferings and to doubt her own actions. He wanted modifications in the libretto because he did not feel the drama, was

not captivated by the image of Manon created by the poet and the playwright. He needed more dramatic urgency, desiring to revise the third act completely, although he himself had only vague notions about it.⁵ After numerous meetings Praga dropped out. Oliva then redid the third act completely, but that did not satisfy Puccini either.

Puccini engaged his publisher Giulio Ricordi to arbitrate in his discussions with librettists – indeed, not only to arbitrate but also to be involved in the writing process itself for Ricordi was «the only person he trust[ed] and [could] entrust everything that was on his mind to». Thus, in a letter to Ricordi, Puccini analyzes the scenes written by Oliva and is indignant that the librettist repeatedly deviates from the original plotline, which was quite clear: «And now, as you will see, the libretto has become undefined and inside-out, and it drags». Specifically, the quartet, which was «so graceful, logical, and interesting», and the whole scene, which was «so swift and juicy», were replaced by a new version, «infinitely long and aiming at rhetorical eloquence, which damages the clarity and pacing of the play's development». In the same letter Puccini asks Ricordi to explain these ideas to Oliva in detail and also to sup-

⁵ In a foreword to an 1875 edition of *Manon* Dumas-fils spoke his mind about the novel. Puccini has fully appreciated Dumas's opinion: «If one doesn't love like de Grioux – prepared for crime and dishonor – one doesn't love at all.» In Adami's view, one may confidently take up a plot that has been used before provided one has something new to say, and Puccini's *Manon* was to represent less a burning passion of the French than a profound and desperate love of the Italians.

port them with «all that you will consider logical on your part».



Giulio Ricordi (1840-1912) – head of a publishing firm; publisher of Puccini's and Mascagni's operas, among others.

As Adami says, «this was unambiguous talk by a person who wanted to receive the final, satisfactory text before sitting down to compose». Puccini would constantly demand ever new modifications. Oliva refused to work. Ricordi first turned to poet Olindo Malagardi, then to Giacosa, who recommended a young librettist and poet, Illica. Illica requested that Oliva and Praga give up all rights to the opera, in writing. In 1891 he began work. Puccini called for specific changes, such as asking

Illica to insert a new second act, thus changing the initial structure of the libretto. He writes to Illica that this act must become a representation of love, spring, and youth, a «picture of freshness and lavish blooming». Manon and de Grieux are happy lovers; showering caresses, they play like children. Puccini concludes the letter by saying that «the finale is difficult. It is necessary to avoid Massenet by any means. There I need you! I need a trouvaille by Illica... I am completely at a loss as to what to think up ... but I know that there has to be a trouvaille there, an efficacious act finale, convincing and, most important, original, because it would be useless to add one more act if it is not much of anything worthy and effec-

tive... Reflect on this and find something, but hurry, I must start soon on the enormous task of the new opera». Illica continued his work, and Puccini was happy with the text. He did say that the second act needed to be shortened and modified, but that these were trifles and that on the whole the collaborators would understand each other well. Illica later wrote to Ricordi, «I have finished the ending of the first part of the third act of *Manon*. But I need the old second act, the one that Giacosa did... I need to see whether I can keep the scene between Lescaut and Manon [...] from the first act, which I consider very good, although the choruses are too long-winded». The matter was that Puccini had already written several scenes that could not be changed; the task was to connect seamlessly the old version and the new.

Reflecting on this «collision» in his monograph, Adami notes, «It proved necessary to reach into the maestro's mind, to trace his inchoate vision, to make it concrete. Long, difficult, and heated talks; doubts; lack of confidence; proposals and counter-proposals, writing and rewriting; seeking counsel from Ricordi, who tried to work out a firm and definitive line. Puccini, although very young at the time, was unyielding in that his will would have to triumph».

The first and the second acts were adjusted quickly. The third act turned out to be a tough nut to crack. Work on the libretto was proceeding so slowly that in a letter to family Puccini confessed, «I am driven to despair by the libretto, which I was forced

to redo». He complained to Ricordi, «Isn't it within possibility to find a poet capable of creating something worthy?»

In the end, when the opera was finished and the libretto had too many authors, it was decided to leave it anonymous.



R. Leoncavallo



M. Praga



D. Oliva



O. Malagodi



G. Giacosa



L. Illica



D. Puccini



G. Ricordi

The «fathers»
of Puccini's libretto for
Manon Lescaut.

This public «fatherlessness» of the work was a consequence of having too many fathers: Marco Praga; Domenico Oliva, who set the bulk of it to verse; Olindo Malagardi, Giuseppe Giacosa; Puccini himself, who, inspired by the others, decided to add a few verses of his own; Luigi Illica, who wrote the text of several scenes and introduced a number of secondary roles, namely, the Dancing Master, the Musician and the Hairdresser in Act II, and the Lamplighter in Act III. Ricordi too took part in the creation of the libretto. He is the author of the captain's farewell words to the weeping lover: «Ah! So you want to populate America, do

you, young man? Well then – so boy, look lively!» If they had all lent their signatures be it! Come on, cabin to the libretto, the names would have taken up the entire cover.

Manon Lescaut was indeed Puccini's first step on the path to fame and financial ease. It alone received the critics' unanimous Puccini judgment. *Manon* engendered the famous triumvirate, which gave the Italian opera the wonderful libretti of *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly* – the three operas by Puccini that are staged the most frequently around the world.⁶

Puccini paid close attention to critics' opinions of a given libretto. This is what he wrote from Madrid during the performance of his *Edgar*: «Yesterday a newspaper ... came out with a negative review of the libretto, which is bad because it is a very popular paper». Puccini's misgivings are quite understandable since contemporary critics paid a lot of attention indeed to libretto in judging a new opera. In particular *La Bohème*, which the majority of the critics rejected, was praised in «Corriere della Sera» specifically based on the merits of its libretto: «The conception of the libretto is successful – one is often laughing at the comedy, yet simultaneously experiencing the deepest emotions that a human drama can evoke... This

⁶ In Illica's words, «the intervention of Giacosa in the famous story with *Manon*... engendered a collaboration that only death would cut short.» Giacosa died in 1906. Illica outlived him by thirteen years but no longer collaborated with Puccini.

libretto possesses unquestionable literary qualities: but, in my opinion, it demands too much from the music».

At first Illica alone toiled on the libretto for *La Bohème*. Puccini was infinitely picky, yet his specific demands appear to have been well-founded. He writes to Ricordi, «I want a storyline giving me greater freedom of imagination”; «the episode in the Latin Quarter in which the characters jump onto the table needs to go”; «we must rid this Act of silliness, such as ‘the horse is the king of beasts’ and ‘rivers are wines made of water,’ that is, all the things that Illica is holding onto as if they were his own children... if he had any...»⁷ Puccini voiced his dissatisfaction without fail whenever his librettists’ and his own vision diverged.

«Illica’s irritation surprises me», the composer wrote to Ricordi, «and I find him strange... The work need only be logical, compact, interesting, and balanced... What is this, must I accept Illica’s Gospel with my eyes closed? ... Yes, I see *a Bohème* in the Latin Quarter but it must be as I described it the last time I spoke with him... With the Musetta episode, as *I made* it... And the death scene must be such as I conceived it because then I can be sure that my work is viable and original. Let Illica calm down and begin working, but I also want to have my say and will not let anyone lord over me. [...] You must always listen

⁷ About this, see Verdi’s letter to Antonia Somma dated November 6, 1857.

to your own heart if you want to create something truly captivating».

But the librettists believed otherwise. During the *La Bohème* period, Giacosa complained to Ricordi, «I don't want to write just whatever. To compose the text with the single goal of getting to the end as quickly as possible seems to me thankless and dishonorable... This is a maddening



G.Puccini. G.Giacosa
and L. Illica. 1895

task – to develop sufficiently an act chock-full of action... I work like a slave, but, on the one hand, the text must be perfectly clear and, on the other, the act must not exceed 300 lines... Will I succeed? The more I work, the more difficulties I encounter». In another letter Giacosa writes to Ricordi, «Will there be an end to this, or will I have to begin from the beginning? I must confess, my dear signor Giulio, that I am dead tired of all this endless redoing, reworking, adding, correcting, trimming, gluing, lengthening on the right in order to shorten on the left. I've already reworked this blessed libretto three times from start to finish, and some scenes as many as four or five times... You tell me that you are willing to wait for a long time where the creation of a work of art is concerned... But the trouble is that my collaboration with Puccini is work without stimuli and without the inner passion...» Within a short period of time relations between Puccini and Illica, too, suffered their first cracks, and it fell to Giulio Ricordi to glue them back together. The writer was exhausted by the

maestro's exacting demands. Forced to rewrite entire acts, Illica writes to Puccini, «To work with you, Giacomo, is like living in hell. Job himself would not have tolerated such agony».

Puccini's method as illustrated in his work on *Manon Lescaut* and *La Bohème* may be outlined as follows:

1. selection of the story by the composer himself (in the future this item proves to be optional, but the subject must be approved by the composer without fail)
2. setting the script to verse
3. public reading and discussion
4. start of composition

All of this is followed by a period of squabbles, quarrels and endless modifications as the instincts of a creative personality can not always be fit into a neat scheme. What does the maestro require in order to do his work? In Adami's opinion, not much: he would «receive the final version of the libretto, rent an inexpensive house in the countryside, lock himself up there in peace and quiet, and work, communicating with no one but the piano».

Nonetheless, libretto work did not always proceed so painfully. The libretto for *The Girl of the Golden West*, for example, was written in a very short time and without prolonged polemics, although in comparison with the source text (a play by D. Belasco) it underwent significant changes. Carlo Zangarini authored the script; Gelfo Civinini wrote the

text. The latter spent many months in Torre del Lago, working together with the maestro.

Another very successful collaboration was that between Puccini and Giovacchino Forzano, who proposed two plots for *The Triptych: Sister Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi*, and then wrote the corresponding libretti. Both won approval at the very first reading. Puccini, who had spent three years working on the music for *The Cloak*, wrote *Sister Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi* in only a few months. There were neither endless revisions during the composition process nor discussions with the librettist. Italian scholars explain this by referring to Giovacchino Forzano as a perfect «man of theater»: a successful baritone, a brilliant librettist, and a thriving director.



Guelfo
Civinini
(1873-1954) –
Italian jour-
nalist, poet
and
librettist.

With age Puccini became less categorical in his opinions; he began to trust the librettists more. His first instinct about *Tourandot* was to present it as a *commedia dell'arte*: «Today, having received your letter and acting on impulse», he writes to his librettists, «I sent you a telegram approving the exclusion of the masks. But I do not wish to influence you and to stop the development of your thought. It may be that by retaining the masks we would introduce into the opera an element of 'our own,' a sincere note. It would not be out of place among all this Chinese

‘mannerism.’ Pantalone and Co’s subtle remarks would bring us back to reality.

In brief, do as Shakespeare does when he introduces three or four outside characters who drink, curse and blaspheme against the king... But this could possibly also spoil the opera. I imagine you might be able to find some other way to enrich and simultaneously simplify the Chinese plot. In conclusion I want to say that so far the dish is turning out pretty bland».



G. Forzano and
D. Puccini
Giovacchini
Forzano
(1884-1970) –
journalist, play-
wright, director,
and singer; au-
thor of libretti
for Puccini’s,
Leoncavallo’s,
Giordano’s and
Mascagni’s
operas.

At the same time, the *Tourandot* librettists⁸ were more accommodating than either Illica or Giacosa. In the words of Adami, «Maestro’s endless suggestions opened new horizons for us. Often just one push, one turn, one conversation or one hint of doubt would be enough to light new flames; to make the plotline take an unexpected, original turn; to endow it with a new level of spirituality; to bring out unique traits, to refine the embellishments. Thus, leaving behind Gozzi and Schiller, transforming masks into ministers, and introducing the poetic Lia – an absolutely Puccinian character, a

touching antagonist – we gradually birthed our *Tourandot*, full of that sense of humanity that Puccini had dreamt of».

⁸ G. Adami and R. Simoni.

Together with *efficacy* and *theatricality*, *atmosphere* also belongs among the key words in Puccini's correspondence. What attracted Puccini in the play *The Cloak*, which he saw in Paris in the small Mari-gny Theater? According to Adami, «he was, of course, interested not in the grim events but in the atmosphere of the Seine, which produced a new and special *pathos*». Puccini spoke without enthusiasm about the sketch of the libretto first made for him by the author of the play, Didier Gold: «Pay no attention to the verses; they seem to me without efficacy. These Frenchmen become loud and long-winded when they take to verse... What I am interested in is Lady Seine; I want her to become the true heroine of my drama».

Which plots did Puccini contemplate but ultimately hesitated to realize? At various times Puccini seriously considered the works of G. Verga. In June 1894 he even travelled to Catania, in Sicily, in order to meet with Verga and steep himself in the atmosphere of the island. At that time negotiations were proceeding between Puccini and Verga concerning the composition of an opera based on «The She-Wolf» (the composer later abandoned this idea).⁹ He

⁹ Giuseppe Adami has proposed an account of why Puccini turned away from the idea to write an opera based on «The She-Wolf.» On his way back from Sicily by boat, Puccini was advised by the mar-quis Gravina, Wagner's step-daughter, against «The She-Wolf.» She argued that an all-too-naturalistic Sicilian story cannot have success at the opera house. Besides, she added jokingly, all manner of religious processions on stage are going to be boring. It seems that Puccini him-self had certain doubts about this matter. He wrote to Ricordi that «as

explained his rationale in an 1894 letter to Ricordi: «My reasons have to do with the absurdly 'dialogic' libretto, disagreeable characters, and the absence of at least one winsome figure with whom one might empathize».

At several points during his lifetime Puccini wanted to engage with the works of Maksim Gorky. Especially lively correspondence in this regard ensued between 1904 and 1907. His attention was drawn to Gorky's early stories: «The Khan and his Son», «Makar Chudra», «Twenty Six Men and One Girl», and «On the Rafts». No opera, however, came out of this. Puccini ultimately turned down his librettists' various proposals, saying, «this Russia scares me and, to be honest, is little convincing». Instead, Puccini asked Giacosa to find him «something more poetic, more appealing, less grim, with a loftier plot».

All of Puccini's operas are concerned with, are dedicated to, love. His protagonists include no historical figures, and the events taking place in his operas are neither historical nor political in nature. In one of his 1897 letters to Ricordi he writes about the theme of Marie-Antoinette, preoccupying him at the time. Puccini abandoned this idea «after a painful preparatory period» during which he became convinced that he «had no feeling» for the subject. Why does the figure of Marie-Antoinette not suit him? The prospective libretto introduced new layers of meaning, associated with the high status of the heroine, while he «continued to see only her spiritual essence

regards 'The She-Wolf,' it is better to wait to see how the public receives the play. I found nothing musical in Sicily...»

– only what was related to the sufferings of a woman and mother rather than to the behavior and mentality of a queen». Ten years later Puccini returned to this project, calling on Illica not to «send me that long and beautiful, historically accurate drama which you had composed but I found impossible to embody in musical form, rather a cruel, audacious conception, free of every kind of ordinary, conventional device».

It was not that the feelings of historical figures were unsuitable for the operatic medium, but that Puccini's interests lay elsewhere. Here is know what I need – Here is know



G. Puccini (center) with librettists Simonini and Adami

what I need – I need love that hurts. Great sufferings for small ills». «Late in life he begged Adami in one of his letters to «find a plot *for me*, a achingly passionate one»; «I have more heart for small ills». Late in life he begged than mind. It sometimes happened that Puccini wrote music before the text was ready. In one of his letters of the *Manon* period, Puccini praises Illica's poetry in the final trio of the second act, but then adds, «Since I cannot change my rhythmical theme – it is very efficacious – versification with the stress on the third syllable from the end does not suit me at all. This is an order, is that clear? ... [The revisions] must be as efficacious as the first version... because this is probably the sole charming and ardent beginning». Often he would send his li-

brettists meaningless verses in the envisioned meter. For example, Musetta's waltz looked like this in Puccini's original rendition: «cocoricò, cocoricò, bistecca, mamma mia».

Let us recap the specific qualities that Puccini calls for in an opera libretto:

His chief requirement is manifest theatricality, defined as efficacy, effectiveness, and authenticity. Situations and events must not be artificial, implausible but rather «pointed» and dramatic.

Next, the libretto must be coherent, full of passion, and free of convention. It must have clarity, sensuality, simplicity.

Libretto dialogues, by contrast with those of a play, must be compact, since the part of the interlocutor in an opera belongs to the music itself.

The plot should not be grim. A libretto is not possible if its protagonists evoke no sympathy or compassion.

And, lastly, the libretto must be succinct.

Libretto, as Frederick Forsyth so aptly put it, is but «one half of the opera scissors». Puccini's correspondence, which reflects the difficulties of choosing a subject and the frequently agonizing collaboration with librettists, attests to the unqualified truth in this remark.

Chronology of Puccini's Operas

- 1884 *Le Villi*. Libretto by Ferdinando Fontana based on the eponymous short story by Alphonse Karr.
- 1889 *Edgar*. Libretto by Ferdinando Fontana based on the play in verse *La Coupe et les lèvres* (The Cup and the Lips) by Alfred de Musset.
- 1893 *Manon*. Libretto anonymous (Ruggiero Leoncavallo, Marco Praga, Domenico Oliva, Olindo, Malagodi, Giacosa, Illica, Puccini, Ricordi) based on the eponymous novel by the Abbé Prévost. (Librettists' names are listed in the order of their joining the writing process.)
- 1896 *La Bohème*. Libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa based on the book by Henri Murger *La vie de Bohème*.
- 1900 *Tosca*. Libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa based on Victorien Sardou's eponymous play.
- 1904 *Madama Butterfly*. Libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa based on the eponymous dramatization by David Belasco.
- 1910 *The Girl of the Golden West*. Libretto by Gelfo Civinini and Carlo Zangarini based on the eponymous play by David Belasco.
- 1917 *The Swallow*. Libretto by Alfred Maria Vinner, Henrich Raihert, and Giuseppe Adami.
The tryptich: *The Cloak*. Libretto by Giuseppe Adami. *Sister Angelica*. Libretto by Giovacchini Forzano.
- 1918 *Gianni Schicchi*. Libretto by Giovacchini Forzano.
- 1924 *Tourandot*. Libretto by Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni based on the tale by Carlo Gozzi (completed by Alfano after the composer's death).

FROM THE LETTERS OF ARNOLD SCHOENBERG ¹



*[Prose] can renounce the
primitive makeshift to the
memory of the unified
rhythm and the rhyme.*

From a letter to Andrew J. Twa

TO RICHARD DEHMEL

Berlin-Zehlendorf, 13 December 1912

Dear Herr Dehmel,

I cannot tell you how glad I am to be directly in touch with you at last. For your poems have had a decisive influence on my development as a composer. ... People who know my music can bear witness to the fact that my first attempts to compose settings for your poems contain more of what has subsequently developed in my work than there is in many a much later composition. ... And here now is your very kind letter, which at last gives me courage to ask you a question that has long been in my mind.

¹ Translations by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, in *Arnold Schoenberg: Letters*, selected and edited by Erwin Stein (University of California Press, 1964).

...For a long time I have been wanting to write an oratorio on the following subject: modern man, having passed through materialism, socialism, and anarchy and, despite having been an atheist, still having in him some residue of ancient faith (in the form of superstition), wrestles with God (see also Strindberg's *Jacob Wrestling*) and finally succeeds in finding God and becoming religious. Learning to pray! It is *not* through any action, any blows of fate, least of all through any love of woman, that this change of heart is to come about. Or at least these should be no more than hints in the background, giving the initial impulse. And above all: the mode of speech, the mode of thought, the mode of expression, should be that of modern man; the problems treated should be those that harass us. For those who wrestle with God in the Bible also express themselves as men of their own time, speaking of their own affairs, remaining within their own social and intellectual limits. That is why, though they are artistically impressive, they do not offer a subject for a modern composer who fulfills his obligations. Originally I intended to write the words myself. But I no longer think myself equal to it. Then I thought of adapting Strindberg's *Jacob Wrestling*. Finally I came to the idea of beginning with positive religious belief and intended adapting the final chapter, *The Ascent into Heaven*, from Balzac's *Seraphita*. But I could never shake off the thought of *Modern Man's Prayer*, and I



Richard Dehmel (1863-1920) – German poet and writer. His poems were set to music by composers such as Richard Strauss, Max Reger, Anton Webern, and Kurt Weill. Schoenberg's string sextet *Transfigured Night* was inspired by Dehmel's poem. Schoenberg's early songs were also set to Dehmel's texts.

often thought: If only Dehmel...!

Is there any chance of your taking an interest in something of this kind? Let me say at once: if you should think it possible, it would be not merely superfluous but actually a mistake to write the text with any thought of the music in mind. It should be as free as if there had never been any question of its being set to music. ... There would have to be only one limitation: considering the average speed of my music I do not think that the words for a full-length work should much exceed the equivalent of 50 or, at the most, 60 pages. On the contrary, that would be almost too much.

...I should be very grateful if you would write and tell me what you think.²

TO ALBAN BERG

Baden-Baden, 10 April 1930

² Dehmel's reply was amiable but negative. A warm correspondence between the two ensued. Schoenberg himself subsequently wrote a text for the oratorio he had planned, called *Jacob's Ladder*, but he was forced to interrupt his work in 1917 when he was called for military service.

Now before finishing this letter I just want to congratulate you with all my heart on your opera.³ ... [W]hat I'm going to write now I still don't know. What I'd like best is an opera. Actually I have some plans, even for my own libretto, and have also thought of Werfel, whose novel (...) I liked very much. Do you think he would do something *together* with me? For with my last opera I did collaborate a lot. But perhaps I shall do *Moses and Aaron*.

Lugano, 5 August 1930

My dear fellow,

...[Y]ou are still anxious about my *Moses and Aaron*. I suppose, because you have seen some similarity to some other work treating the same subject; something to which, as you write, «it might have a certain external similarity.» You are obviously thinking of Strindberg.⁴ A whole year ago I looked into that play for this reason. There is in fact a certain similarity in so far as we both go in for somewhat Biblical language and even use many outright quotations. As a matter of fact I am now, among other revisions, removing these Biblical echoes.

Not because of the likeness to Strindberg; that wouldn't matter: But because I am of the opinion that the language of the Bible is medieval German,

³ The reference is to *Wozzeck*.

⁴ The reference is to *Moses*, the first part of Strindberg's posthumous «world-historical trilogy.»

which, being obscure to us, should be used at most to give color; and that is something I don't need...



Alban Berg
(1885-1935) –
Austrian com-
poser who
studied under
Schoenberg
between 1904
and 1910.
Author of
the opera
Wozzek.

I don't at the moment remember what idea Strindberg was presenting. But mine, both my main idea and the many, many subsidiary ideas literally and symbolically presented, is all so much tied up with my own personality that it is impossible for Strindberg to have presented anything that could have even an external similarity.... Today I can really scarcely remember what belongs to me: but one thing must be granted me (I won't let myself be deprived of it): Everything I have written has a certain inner likeness to myself.

Territet, 8 August 1931

My very dear fellow,

...So you have one act of an opera finished too, have you?⁵ So have I.⁶ Almost 1000 bars it runs to. ... Oddly enough I'm working in just the same way: the libretto being definitely finished only during the composing, some of it even afterwards. This proves an extremely good method. Of course...this is possible only if one starts with a very exact notion of the whole thing, and what takes some doing is not only

⁵ *Lulu*.

⁶ The reference is to *Moses and Aaron*.

keeping this vision vivid all the time but intensifying it, enriching it, enlarging it, in the working out of details! All composers of opera should be advised to do this....It isn't going as fast as I hoped at the beginning, when I reckoned with a daily *average* of twenty bars.... Main reason: the libretto and the choruses.

TO ANTON WEBERN

Territet, 12 September 1931

As I said, getting a libretto into shape takes a lot of time. It was a very great deal of work, for instance, getting the scene «Dance round the Golden Calf» worked out properly.

I wanted to leave as little as possible to those new despots of the theatrical art, the producers, and even to envisage the choreography as far as I'm able to. For all this sort of thing is in a very bad way nowadays, and the high-handedness of these mere minions, and their total lack of conscience, is exceeded only by their barbarity and feebleness.... I'd like to be able to send you [the libretto – Tr.]; only the fact is it isn't by any means finished yet, since I often



Anton Webern
(1883-1945) –
Austrian composer. Studied
under Schoenberg between
1904 and 1908.
Friend of
Alban Berg.

write the definitive words only just before composing.⁷

TO ALBAN BERG

Barcelona, 20 January 1932

I received the libretto and was very pleased by what you wrote about it.⁸ ...It would interest me



A. Berg and
A. Webern

to hear your impressions of the Golden-Calf scene, which I put a lot of «meaning» into. It will probably have a playing-time of about 25 minutes. But I think enough goes on to keep the audience satisfied even if it doesn't understand a thing of all I meant by it. But: does one understand anything at all?

TO WALTHER EIDLITZ

Berlin, 15 March 1933

Dear Herr Eidtliz,

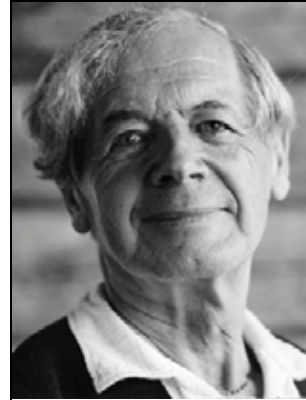
Thank you very much indeed for both your books, which I liked very much.... I was able to appreciate [their] beauty and significance.⁹

⁷ The reference is to *Moses and Aaron*.

⁸ Schoenberg had sent the libretto of his opera *Moses and Aaron* to Berg.

⁹ The reference is to Eidtlitz's book about Moses (*Der Berg in der Wüste*).

The elements in this tremendous subject that I myself have placed in the foreground are: the idea of the inconceivable God, of the Chosen People, and of the leader of the people. My Aaron rather more resembles your Moses, although I have not portrayed him in so many aspects or shown him in terms of his human limitations, as you have. My Moses more resembles—of course only in outward aspect—Michelangelo's. He is not human at all. But what is interesting is that we come fairly close to each other



Walther
Eidlitz
(1892-1976) –
Austrian writer,
poet, Indologist
and historian of
religion; author
of several plays
for the dramatic
stage.

in the, and introduction, formal presentation even in the evaluation of the scene with the golden calf. For me too this signifies a sacrifice made by the masses, trying to break loose from a 'soulless' belief. In the treatment of this scene, which actually represents the very core of my thought, I went pretty much to the limit, and this too is probably where my piece is most *operatic*; as indeed it must be.

My third act, which I am working over again, not to say re-writing, for at least the fourth time, is for the present still called: Aaron's Death. Here I have so far encountered great difficulties because of some almost incomprehensible contradictions in the Bible.¹⁰

¹⁰ The passages referred to are in *Exodus* 17: 6 and *Numbers* 20: 8.

TO ANDREW J. TWA

Los Angeles, 29 July 1944

[...] «Bizarre rhythms» are more frequently used in primitive music than in art music. In art music it might rather be a higher and more compound phrasing, which makes intelligibility more difficult. I would explain this as an approach towards what I used to call «musical prose,» which seems to be a higher form than versification: it can renounce the primitive makeshift to the memory of the unified rhythm and the rhyme.

**Chronology of Operatic Works
by Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)**

- 1909 *Expectation* («Erwartung»). Monodrama for soprano and orchestra on libretto by Marie Pappenheim.
- 1910-1913 *The Lucky Hand* («Die Glückliche Hand»). Drama with music for voices and Orchestra on libretto by the composer, opus 18.
- 1929 *From Today to Tomorrow* («Von heute auf morgen»). One-act opera for five voices and orchestra on libretto by 'Max Blond,' opus 32.
- 1930-1950 *Moses and Aaron* («Moses und Aron»). Three-act opera on libretto by the composer.

By Way of an Epilogue

Let us now try to interpret these selections representing a number of composers' epistolary remarks about the search for literary sources and their transformation into libretto. These remarks leave us in no doubt that creating libretto is an art and as such yields inevitable artistic pains for both librettist and composer. These pains, alas, are not always of the agonizingly sweet variety which accompanies an artist's process of self-expression. The work is sometimes excruciating. «Will there be an end to this, or must I again begin all over? ... [A]ll this endless re-making, adjusting, adding, correcting, cutting, piecing, extending here so as to trim there – I am tired to death». This is Giacosa on his collaboration with Puccini. And let's recall this passage from Verdi's letter to Ghislanzoni, written during the work on *Aida*: «Once again – for the eight time – I have re-worked this small section, and it's a failure». I am afraid that the corresponding text of the libretto did not go that well for Ghislanzoni, either, for he rewrote it numerous times. This kind of spade work enters into any craft, and all the more so into the craft of the librettist, who in the current of his thoughts (and talent) must discern the talent (and the current of thought) of his co-author -- and must merge with them, as it were.

The demands placed by these various composers on their librettists are closely related if not entirely identical: dramatic value of the plot, brevity of vocal

dialogues, simplicity of style, staginess, efficacy of the text. We should, however, pay special heed to one mysterious demand by Verdi: «theater requires of librettists and composers that they possess the talent to write neither poetry nor music». Let us try to interpret this mystery. «Neither poetry...», writes Verdi, but he is not asserting that a libretto's text must lack poetic qualities. Rather, he believes that the acknowledged elements of poetic composition – the work on sound, rhyme, tropes, metaphoricity – must not encumber the stylistic simplicity, efficacy, and aphoristic quality of libretto verse. I recall the lines of my chapter «Next Semester» which concern the union of literature and music and the need for each art form «to forego the ultimate in its native expressivity». Agreeing with Verdi, I claim that the lyricist's prideful self-consciousness – «my Poetry», «I am a Poet» – prevents him from becoming a full-fledged librettist. «Nor music...», continues Verdi, but haven't we already seen words to this effect? «Before I begin my work, I try as hard as I can to forget that I am a musician». Both Verdi and Gluck refer to «pure music» and remind us that, in the case of opera, it is necessary for composers to «possess the talent» not to write it. On the music stage only dramatic music is possible, only «MusicPerLibretto».

Now another crucial topic: Great masters are sometimes capable of mistakes that are completely inconceivable given the immensity of their talent. Verdi's remark about the atmosphere of *I Due Foscari* (see his 1848 letter to Francesco Piave) – «[you] in-

duce in everyone a dreadful boredom, as, for example, in *I Due Foscari*, whose coloration and mood are too monotone from beginning to end» – explains the failure of this opera nearly as well as do any number of academic treatises. Neither should we overlook Musorgsky's reaction to Stasov's critique of *Khovanschina*. (The composer took the actions of a Musoryanin indeed: «I have halted work – and I got to thinking.») Recall, too, Pyotr Tchaikovsky's words to his brother Modest (the future librettist of *The Queen of Spades* and *Yolanta*): «No, no, dear Modya, you are no librettist». Recall his ruthless self-criticism in a letter to Nadejda von Meck concerning *The Voyevoda*. (This in spite of the fact that the young Tchaikovsky enjoyed the benefit of having the great Russian playwright Alexander Ostrovsky as his librettist and that the composer was in raptures over this libretto.) Then also, how are we to explain Puccini's reaction to the performance of Sardou's *La Tosca* with Sarah Bernhardt in the main role (in his words, «this sorry mess is not for me»)? And weren't you readers stunned by the mature Tchaikovsky's mocking attitude toward Pushkin's *Queen of Spades* (see his 1888 letter to Modest Tchaikovsky)? For a full year and a half (from March 1888 until October 1889) the composer «laughed at the idea of creating an opera on this subject». If a flame of enthusiasm did not suddenly replace his sneering mood, we would all be the poorer for losing one of the world's greatest operas. All such and similar cases are vastly instructive. In their light, the cautionary proverb that

advises us to measure only seven times before cutting once is, in my view, not cautionary enough.

Another observation. Judging by the letters cited above, the system for commissioning music and libretti functioned differently in the times of Verdi, Tchaikovsky, and Puccini than in our time. Present-day patrons (in Russia and elsewhere) – music theaters, for example, or publishing houses – sign separate contracts with composers and librettists (this is called «separate copyright ownership»), contracts which stipulate each individual co-author's royalties. During Verdi's, Tchaikovsky's and Puccini's times, a composer would buy a libretto directly from its author. The librettist retained the right to be named as such and to receive royalties, but the libretto itself became property of the composer. Thus, the situation prevailing under Metastasio – where each of his libretti would be set to music by numerous composers – had become impossible in the 19th century.

Broadening our discussion, let us now turn to the actual problem of co-authorship in the creation of libretto, taking Verdi's letters as our point of departure. The composer at times shared significantly in the work on his operas' libretti. Yet it never occurred to Verdi to flaunt his name as this or that libretto's coauthor. Neither can I recall any examples of such claims to co-authorship in the period of Rinuccini, Metastasio, or Calzabigi. Never once did Mozart claim co-authorship in the libretti of his operas. This pattern was sometimes (not often) broken in the 19th and especially the 20th century (*Eugene Onegin*, *Lady*

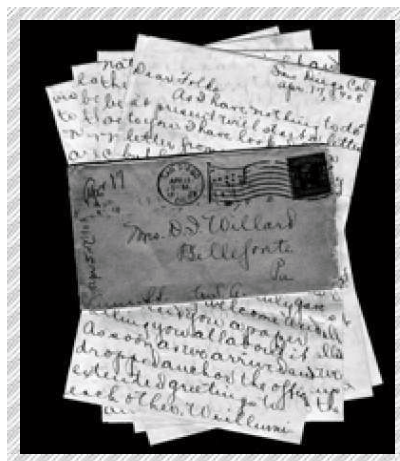
Macbeth of Mtsensk). There is of course nothing criminal in all this, provided that the collaborating composer and librettist have arrived at a mutually agreed-upon distribution of roles. Nevertheless, the problem of co-authorship as it pertains to libretto (or music) is not an idle one. I remember two cases in the mid-1970s, in St. Petersburg [then Leningrad – Tr.], when two different composers filed lawsuits claiming to have coauthored libretti for musical pieces that were by then finished. One of the pieces, a musical, was already in repertory; the case, however, went to court, where the composer's lawsuit against the librettist failed. The second quarrel was settled out of court, and in this case I myself was involved. A certain composer, having finished an opera whose first part has already been performed in concert, informed his two librettists – I was one of them – that he wished to list his name as the libretto's third coauthor. This suit lasted seventeen years, with the composer eventually raising the white flag. Not that the poor wretch had been losing sleep and appetite over a guilty conscience, no. Simply an opportunity presented itself to publish the opera's vocal score, which required that all collaborators sign off on the publishing contract. The shrewd composer did some thinking and, realizing that my signature would not be forthcoming if he were to figure as the libretto's coauthor, backed down. Admittedly, any composer may fall under the illusion of such co-authorship, and whether or not it is an illusion is not too important. What a creator of theatrical music must,

however, remember is a certain non-trivial acknowledgement by a great colleague (an acknowledgement cited in full in the chapter «Operatic Reform in 18th Century»): «It is necessary for me to recognize that I am in his [librettist's – Yu. D.] debt, for he has enabled me to make use of the resources of my art». These eloquent and authoritative words belong to Gluck. It goes without saying that his librettist, Calzabigi, never dreamed of becoming a musical coauthor of *Orfeo*, though in our day he might well have become one by citing these words in court. The lesson to be derived from these true stories could be articulated like this: Dear creative collaborators, it is simpler and more ethical to not beat each other up with wild lawsuits, rather to take one's place in the art world with dignity and respect for one's fellow artists.

Finally, one other important subject – the search for a literary source. How much time and energy expended on this search by the great masters of the opera! How many thousands of literary pages read not for their novelty or trendiness, but solely in the mercenary interest of discovering an inspiring plot. And what a curious thing: it is almost impossible to recall a *littérateur* being tasked with creating an entirely original, source-less libretto. There are reasons for this. As a rule, the thirty or forty pages of a script based in no primary material cannot satiate the composer's hungry imagination, cannot serve as a rich creative stimulus. To make up for this lack, the script requires the addition of those virtual pages from

genres – a novel, a play. Hence the dearth of fully original (i.e. source-less) libretti among the operas which make it into the standard repertoire. Hence a reminder to composers of dramatic music: the risk of failure in those cases is multiplied tenfold.

The epistolary excerpts cited here hardly constitute a science or a theory. Their relationship to academic librettology is only tangential. What they relate to directly is life itself, the life of operatic giants – their despair and successes; their creative breakthroughs, victories, and failures; their spiritual anguish and the overcoming of daily obstacles; their steady striving toward perfection. Is this less or more than librettology? Be that as it may, the tremendous potential of their artistic and applied precepts can help us elucidate the psychology and praxis of co-creation, and avoid making mistakes which threaten every creative soul.



III

TECHNOLOGY OF LIBRETTO –
THE FINAL EXAM

These notes are meant for madmen who are sitting down to write a libretto. They may also interest the no-less-mad composers who desire to create a work of dramatic-musical nature and who, on hearing the word «libretto», lunge for the dictionary.

The reader of these lines, as well as their author, must clearly recognize that to teach libretto-writing (or any other creative genre) is difficult if not impossible. Nonetheless, a systematic compilation of caveats and advice may prove beneficial for those aiming to master music theater dramaturgy.

To pass our final exam in libretto technology is of course not that easy. But the strong-spirited and the brave will manage it. A single request: do not be afraid! A coffee and a disconnected phone will help you relax, and if you possess talent, all this alchemy is not so scary. If you do not, the evidence of that will emerge only much later, and not for you – for others, indeed for all of them. You yourself will never know.

One more thing. Collaboration between composer and librettist is a delicate matter, even a

dangerous one. My personal experience has brought me to a firm conviction that it is harder to maintain good relations with your co-creator than, for example, with your family. And once the term «co-creator» includes not only composers but also directors, the topic of «co-creator psychology» acquires truly nuclear dimensions and, joined with the topic of «co-creator technology», is not always sweet-smelling.

Let's have your bluebooks then... and let's sit down a moment.



Source

Have you decided on the literary source you wish to rework into a libretto? Congratulations. To find an inspiring source is difficult. When (and if) you become a professional librettist, you will discover that such a find constitutes rare luck. The rest is, in essence, a «technical matter» – and a matter of talent.

If you have solved all of the (occasionally diabolical) problems related to copyright law (which, by the way, has nothing to do with your talent), you may get down to work. But you must guard that the source not

deceive you. Does it exhibit a sufficient degree of plot tension? How packed with events is it? Are there vivid scenes that lend themselves to musical expression? What about vibrant characters? Is it replete with dialogues adaptable to recitative? Having taken on *The Queen of Spades*, Modest Tchaikovsky took a risk, for Pushkin's novella contains almost no dialogue. The risk paid off.

Subject

Have you determined the core idea of your literary source? Articulated it? Keep in mind that even a poor articulation is better than none. Are you certain that this idea lends itself to dramatic representation? That it is capable of expression by musical means? Well.

What then is the subject of your libretto? Is it the same as the subject of the literary source you are using? This is not at all necessary. The degree of your creative enthusiasm is likely to be directly proportional to the number of original, rather than borrowed, ideas. A question may arise as to whether or not you have the right to «take liberties» with the author's intentions. The answer is yes – always the moral right and, if you are dealing with classics, a legal one too. What if the original author is a great genius while you are still far from being seen as such? Calm down. The great Shakespeare (whatever his last name really was) took liberties with his predecessors' dramas in nearly every play he wrote, and he hardly suspected at the time that he would go on to become Shakespeare. Neither can you

predict your future, but if you have talent, you have the right to do everything that fosters and develops it.

Opera before opera

Time to solve a few problems, one by one. Solving them together with the composer will be more effective.

How many acts will your dramatic-musical opus consist of? Remember that the audience may not be let out for intermission until it has received a substantial «fill» of dramatic events. To serve up the drama is to nourish with music, since, on stage, the true impact of music on the audience occurs only under the pressure of dramatic events. Will the action provided for by your literary source sustain at least a two-act production? I once ruined my own work – and the work of others – in just this way. I wanted to please both director and patron, and agreed to drag the production out to one and a half hours, in spite of the fact that its dramatic potential reached fifty minutes maximum. They still like me, but the piece was staged twice and then died. Having come to, the directory of the company that had commissioned the piece cut it down to forty-seven minutes and thus saved it for the repertoire – with success, if rumor is to be believed. A three-act production requires the same level of caution because the public nowadays is liable to leave after act two, and possibly with good reason. Better to divide one of the acts into two scenes instead.

A few more challenges.

Are the settings – the main ones, at least – clear? Have you settled on the principles of plot construction: dramatic, cinematographic, mixed? What type of text do you intend for songs or arias – poetic, prosaic, prosaic-poetic? Will your opus include dialogue scenes?

I trust you have estimated the number of monologic passages for each character, their content, the outlines of their musical form... Libretto, dear beginners, must prefigure the form of as-yet-unwritten music. However dim, this prefigured form must exist for every scene and for the work as a whole. The composer may disappoint or, on the contrary, astonish you, in every scene or on the whole. His vision of form may not coincide with yours, in which case you will be reworking much of the text, putting up with cuts, and redoing the phrasing. (After all, you cannot consign the text to that inadequate literary form in which it will inevitably find itself once the composer fits it into his musical framework, occasionally at sharp variance with your own expectations.) You will need to re-write. Yet the more experienced and professional you are, the less often this rewriting will be necessary, since your original libretto, presented to the composer, will be more and more representative of the opera itself.

An opera libretto is a prior-to opera.

Prior-to.

Yet already opera.

Characters

How many characters in your two-act libretto call for musical characterization? Four? Good. Five? Ac-

ceptable. Six? Well. Even more? Open the original source and reread everything with a single aim: to reshape the plot so as to reduce the number of *dramatis personae*. With respect to unnecessary or almost unnecessary characters, this reduction maneuver is often a salutary one for the musical stage. The breathing is easier, for you and for the characters you choose to leave «alive». Each one of them now receives a greater dose of your attention.

How many female roles do you provide for? One? You are chancing it. So says the source? That is not an excuse. Use your imagination and add more. Is your imagination stalling? Reduce the number of male roles by substitution, and keep the following in mind as food for thought. A certain opera about WWII, written in the early 1980s, boasted five full-scale female roles (and one male). It conquered the stage of two dozen Russian opera houses in a matter of one or two seasons. No opera by Shostakovich or Prokofiev (the majority of whose works have been around for at least eighty years) has yet had the occasion to enjoy the same tremendous success...

So how many female roles do you provide for? Three? Five? Eight?! You will go far.

Exposition

Whom do you think the spectator sees when the protagonist first enters on stage? Let me answer for you: the spectator sees a stranger. And what about the heroine? A stranger, again. The goal of your ex-

position, then, is to quickly transform these strangers into people one knows intimately.

Exposition is an opera's most challenging territory because the exposition time is worth its weight in gold. Every phrase in the exposition must solve three problems at once: It must define a character's image, it must delineate the relationships among characters, and it must inform the audience of the story's background, without which your play is unintelligible. Simultaneously – for there is simply no stage time to meet these tasks sequentially, in three separate sentences. Ivan Sollertinsky wrote too mildly when he cautioned that «a well-constructed exposition usually decides the fate of the whole libretto in embryo». In truth, the fate of the libretto is the fate of the opera in its entirety. Some of the most experienced librettists found exposition to be their stumbling block. Verdi's librettists for *Il Trovatore* (Salvadore Cammarono, then Leone Emanuele Bardare) began with a rather unsuccessful exposition design. The entire first scene was dedicated to a historical tale told by a secondary character, the Old Warrior, to help the audience understand the background. In principle, such an action-less narrative is barely tolerable on stage; here, even the narrator himself is a gratuitous addition. The error was rectified, but in a somewhat peculiar way: part of the exposition text is now given in scene two, and in the third scene, the same events as told by the Old Warrior are now recounted again, this time by their central character, Gypsy Azucena.

The audience begins to understand: it not only hears but also sees the main players in that bloody ancient drama. The spectators are now able to empathize with the protagonists. Meanwhile, the first exposition (that is, the entire first scene) remains just where it was, and this three-step exposition characterizes *Il Trovatore* to this day. Please note that where the action on stage lacks dynamism and clarity, there the music, too – even Verdi's music – struggles to move us emotionally. The «horror» of the Old Warrior's expositional tale is not particularly horrifying. In love with Verdi's art, we piously wait out the first scene in anticipation of more dramatic events that the music will soon unfold for us. This particularity of *Il Trovatore's* exposition is a consequence of under-articulated relations between the authors' libretto and the literary source, which they would endlessly reduce or restore. As a rule, it is precisely the source (with its own genetic makeup) that complicates the librettist's work on exposition and induces it to take up an inordinate amount of space.

Let us, however, imagine a victory. You have completed, written out the exposition. The plot is guaranteed to develop with utter clarity. Now reread your exposition material once more and cross out a few phrases – including the very first one, if you want an especially salutary effect. Or, at the very least, put some of them into the later scenes. Every word taken out of the exposition is a big artistic triumph.

The Golden Mean

What does a singer live for? He lives to stand in the footlights and sing; these are the finest moments of his life. What will he sing? Whatever you write for him, and we are not talking about minor scenes, recitatives, nor even ensembles. He is expecting monologues, arias. So take care to sit down with a calculator and reckon when and how much your central protagonist sings. Let us say two arias (that's the footlights) and, besides, three scene appearance and two ensembles. For a two-act opera, this is acceptable. What about this supporting female role? Two scene appearances and two ensembles, but no aria. Why is that? It cannot be difficult to come up with an aria. Feeling crowded for time? Yet your first act lasts one and a half hours.

Sic transit gloria mundi... For composer and librettist who set out to apprehend the intricacies of creating a dramatic-musical composition, it passes in calculations of the Golden Mean. There is neither teaching nor counseling about it. At stake is the right balance between the future production's compactness, dynamism, and emotional depth, on the one hand, and the lead singers' «time in the footlights», on the other. Besides talent, to achieve perfect balance requires exceptional ingenuity, diabolical cunning and – alas – some experience. Not too long ago I was at work on the Russian text for a wonderful English operetta, William Gilbert's and Arthur Sullivan's

Trial by Jury. I believe that *Trial by Jury* should be studied in music composition departments as a frighteningly virtuoso solution to the problem of the Golden Mean. The operetta contains no spoken dialogue, but (!) every one of the five characters sings one if not two songs and appears in two or three scenes. How long, you will ask, is this capacious operetta (which, by the way, includes a heavily-used chorus as well)? A little under forty minutes in all.

What further exacerbates the difficulties of arriving at the Golden Mean is that an aria will not fit simply anywhere. It has the right to shine only at certain critical junctures, when the character's situation is marked by significant (if not maximal) tension. Every aria, after all, is an extended, event-less vocal monologue. Every aria addresses itself to the past. It is a moment, frozen in time, of the character's emotional reaction to what has gone before. One might also imagine a «narrative» aria, which would challenge the operatic tradition. In the course of performing such a monologue, the idea goes, a given character would realize something fateful, which would lead to a radical change in his emotional state (and therefore a change in musical temper). This type of aria is especially prized, since it not only highlights the singer's vocal powers but also moves the storyline forward. On the music stage, these two challenges are rarely solved simultaneously. There is, however, another type of aria, which submits to a somewhat different law. Its positioning may not coincide with the extremes of a protagonist's emotion. It is called an «entrance» aria, and it might seem a

simple matter. The protagonist enters on stage, walks up to the coveted footlights, and begins to astound the public with his voice. But wait: in reality, the singer is no protagonist but a strange man or woman, and this impression will last at least a third, if not the whole first half, of the aria. How was this challenge met by the renowned masters of the stage Meilhac and Halévy, Bizet's coauthors on *Carmen*? The solution is to postpone Carmen's singing of the Habanera. Before her aria she appears briefly with a quartet of tenor-admirers, so that after this scene Carmen is no stranger but a great Gypsy temptress instead. Thus readied, not a single note in Habanera is wasted on merely acquainting us with the protagonist.

Once you have decided that your libretto is structurally complete (even though the text itself may be in draft form or unfinished), it is useful to go over everything mentally, to «X-ray» your work. How dynamic is the libretto's plotline? How judicious is the distribution of the most emotionally charged scenes? How much time does each character get «in the footlights»? In short, how well did you estimate the Golden Mean of your «opera before opera»?

Finale

«When I began writing, I did not know how my story would end. It was up to the protagonists to determine their own fate...» This is a familiar writers' dictum. When writing a novel, short story, or novel-

la, this method may lead to success, but this method will not work in the case of a dramatic composition such as a play or a libretto. When you begin a dramatic piece, you must know how your story will end, you must see the last scene in your mind's eye, you must hear the very last phrase. As you continue work your initial designs may change. Vivid characters and newly elaborated developments of the plot may compel a different ending. When I worked on the opera *Masquerade*, the final scene and the fates of several protagonists changed radically in relation to the original plan. I even stopped recognizing some of them and had to get used to their new destinies. (In my own work this is a unique case.) Yet in order to have this experience, the final intention must be kept in mind during the writing of every scene. Figuratively speaking, in professional dramaturgy the writing of the finale is entailed in the writing of every scene.

Text

Brevity and laconic language are doubly important in the case of a sung text. First, brevity is the sister of talent, and second, to sing takes longer than to say. Three or four times as long.

Simplicity of style is the second non-negotiable textual requirement where a dramatic-musical composition is concerned. If we speak of poetic form, for example, the great Pushkin's figurative intricacy is accessible while the great Pasternak's is not – or not yet. In general, the librettist should take care with

words, images, or metaphors that are too «hot» emotionally. The language of a sung text must be rich, vivid, and distinctive, but more neutral than the music that animates it.

I will call the third textual requirement «elasticity». Elasticity means, first of all, organic expression. Secondly, it is concentration of content in the fewest possible number of words. Thirdly, it means striving for aphoristic imagery. Fourth, it means textual efficacy. The text must compel a character toward gesture, active stance, activity. Some believe that in music theater the singer performs only music, not text. That is true for an ordinary singer, but not for a dramatic singer, who performs both music and text. This is particularly clear in the case of comic opera, where an efficacious text makes the singer literally come to life. A beautiful maxim on this subject belongs to French composer André Grétry, cited above: «... the interest will then arise from the drama itself, and the singer will turn actor in spite of himself».

Now let us turn to the phonetics of this text of yours which, invested with music, is offered by the composer to the singer. As the «inner music» of words, phonetics is certainly important to both composer and singer. Yet in the musical milieu its role tends to be exaggerated to an absurd degree. Advocates of performing operatic works in the original language (i.e. one not only incomprehensible to the audience but also foreign to the singer, which hardly helps him «turn actor») – such advocates will typically adopt a look of polite condescension when discussing phonetics with mere mortals. The theory is

that the word's phonetic formula miraculously begets a great composer's music, whose art is destroyed if the formula is altered. Put more simply, vowel-consonant harmony begets music, and any substitution in these interactions infringes on the composer's authorial intention. Dear musicians, please calm down. Polite condescension is wearisome. The composers you so eagerly seek to defend approach this problem with much more pragmatism. In writing the vocal score for any opera, the composer will encounter a dozen cases where he must ask his librettist to redo text underlay. Given the musical form the composer has imagined, the early version may be inappropriate rhythmically or structurally. To disappoint the Phonetics Greenpeace activists, then: your colleague the composer is much less bothered than you are by the «phonetic ecology». Does text underlay sound organic? Is the music's artistic quality preserved? Thank you, dear coauthor, for your work. To convince the unbelievers, let me adduce a tell-tale example from operatic practice. The first performances of *Eugene Onegin* included a different, unfamiliar denouement: Tatiana is unable to resist Onegin's amorous advances while her husband the general imperiously gestures Onegin out of the room. The latter takes his leave and in farewell sings *not* «O shame! O misery! O pitiable my lot!» but rather «O death, o death, in search of you I set out!» Those who disliked this ending (I would have been one of them) apparently got to Tchaikovsky; at the composer's request, the text of the last twelve lines

was altered. The music stayed exactly the same. And there's phonetics for you.

As for us, the key conclusion is this: mastery of text underlay is an important facet of the librettist's profession.

Updating the Plot

The opera is completed; the libretto has been «cemented» in music. The portrait of any one character in it is a musical portrait, not amenable to change by either literary-dramatic or directorial means. Such is the nature of musical art, the emotional force of its representations.

Yet it is within the realm of possibility to reimagine the content or the plot, and to update the text of a musical-dramatic composition (including the classics). The prerequisite is to ensure emotional equivalency between the new, substitute episodes and the original ones expressed through MusicPerLibretto.

A dramatist may not include anything he likes in the updated libretto, but only that material which blends in emotionally with the existing score. After a thorough study of the imagery contained in the classical score, the librettist sets up the updated episodes so that their «emotional timing» coincides exactly with the music – in every stanza, every line, every bar. Sadness, melancholy, pining, grief, despair – those are distinct emotions, with many gradations each, and every new word must firmly subordinate itself to these distinctions. If a given musical phrase conveys, for example, «sadness №4» while the emo-

tion expressed in your text is «grief №3», then your text is flawed. If a climactic event in the original score falls between this and that bar, then the same bars must be involved in the updated plotline, where a different event must now fulfill the same emotional function in terms of both force and hue. If these provisos are accepted unconditionally, then even the most drastic adaptation can result in a perfect alloy of the new libretto and the classical score.

Authors and Directors

Congratulations, colleague! Your work has made it to the stage.

The composer can now anticipate close and, not infrequently, painless communication with the conductor. For the librettist, conducting is a fairly remote profession, although sometimes the two do have something to say to one another. One might endure the conductor's nit-picking about the prosody of this or that section of the libretto, or suffer through his disdainful rejection of a cut you have proposed while working on a foreign-language opera. Make peace with it. He is probably right, and the musical demands he makes should be treated with utter care. But being open to the problems of MusicPerLibretto and accepting you as a creative artist – those things, just at the threshold of the Next Semester, are too unusual for the professional conductor's psychology.

The director is a different story. He no doubt knows our profession just as well as we do. His ad-

vice may prove substantial, even decisive, in ensuring the success of a production.¹¹

Yet not all is that simple. The fruits of even a very talented director's efforts may lead to bitterness and sometimes despair on the authors' part. Recall one more than ample testimony nearly a century-old: «I wanted to leave as little as possible to those new despots of the theatrical art, the [directors – Tr.], for... the high-handedness of these mere minions, and their total lack of conscience, is exceeded only by their barbarity and feebleness...» These words are from Arnold Schoenberg's 1931 letter to Anton Webern. They are harsh; they are not, in my view, entirely fair. They do, however, show that already in the 1930s the theater directing practices had succeeded in scaring off the musicians, and this before the advent of the «auteur director», which represents the most shameless and self-interested type of directing that is currently in vogue (and that we will have occasion to return to later). What we now refer to as a «worldwide tendency» in directing did not, however, take root in a vacuum. The director-initiated process of genre erosion had already begun.

What is this erosion? Strange as it may sound, it arises less out of the director's «ignorance and lack of talent» (though this happens, too) than out of his creative zeal and sense of total control over the entire production process in music theater. In drama thea-

¹¹ For more about the author-director relationship, see Yuri Dimitrin's articles «The Right to Infamy» and «Selected Correspondence between a Librettist and a Conductor» (www.ceo.spb.ru/libretto/kon_lan/ogl.shtml).

ters only the words, only the text exist. They do not dictate the mood of the play, which results from the director's and the actors' combined efforts. But the mood of the piece *is* dictated in music theater by the blend we call MusicPerLibretto. This is not always without appeal, but largely it is. Thus the director's role as interpreter is made significantly narrower and more difficult in music theater. Some directors, possessed of requisite talent and ingenuity, are able to accomplish spectacular results even on this limited patch left to them by MusicPerLibretto. The majority, however, seem to be suffering from a lack of artistic space in music theater, so they colonize what they can at the expense of the music.

In the end, the director's idea often creates entire chunks of the production where the emotional charge of MusicPerLibretto, written by the authors outside of his (the director's) idea, fails to blend in with what transpires on stage. The music does not correspond to the action; it approximates. It is transformed into something like a sloppy soundtrack, serving the director's idea in a more or less roundabout way. Having become a handmaiden, the music in music theater ceases to be the main means of expression. Having obscured the music with his idea, the director pushes it out to the periphery of our perceptions. This constitutes the erosion of genre. Instead of a «dramma per musica», we are offered a timid «musica per dramma», peeking out sheepishly from behind the director's mighty torso. But that is a different genre, and hardly a new one (think film soundtrack, music during a dramatic performance,

music shows, etc.). Sadly, that the director is so skilled at demoting music – no other profession in music theater knows how to do that – is a frequent misfortune on today's stage.

These reflections of ours go against contemporary worldwide directing practices. Their advocates declare that «music theater is, above all, theater». The other side timidly objects, «yes, it's theater, but it's music theater». What one group considers a disaster the other deems an artistic breakthrough.

A curious set of conclusions can be drawn from observing practices related to a certain type of musical. Let's call this type a «super-musical», where a long-running unchanging production is staged, day to day, in many different theaters. No such super-musical is going to suffer from directorial «kinks». These are impossible, and here is why. An agency (headed, as a rule, by the composer, the musical's author) prepares the super-musical for its world premiere. This complicated, frequently agonizing work – involving impresarios, directors, conductors, stage designers, choreographers, casting directors, actors – is based on significant financial outlays providing for the entire armada. The economic risks are tremendous. Creative ones – those that stem from any author-director conflict – are zero. Everything presented at the super-musical's world premiere has been discussed, deliberated and authorized multiple times. After that, any changes, any directorial attempts to «improve» the composition and the production represent a legal breach of contract, in both

the artistic and economic senses, an infraction against the agency that had signed the agreement with your theater. The rules are clear: the language of the original is irrelevant; the translation must be accurate and will be checked; the music, the arrangement, and the sets are untouchable. A director hired by the agency will make sure that the success of the world premiere is repeated on your theater's stage.

Strictly speaking, this entire approach is not very healthy for the development of the theater. It means that the most striking and profound super-musicals fail to grow artistically because directors shy away from experimenting with the dramatic art. Yet no one is to blame but the directors themselves, for the approach we have described appears to be the only way of saving a production (both artistically and financially) from the metastatic process inherent in contemporary directorial practices, which invade ever new theaters and productions.

These reflections give rise to two nontrivial conclusions. First: Of all music genres currently present on stage, the super-musical is the only one protected from the auteur director's tyranny. Second: The experience of the super-musical is a major slap in the face of today's seemingly undefeatable world tendency in directing.

The problem, nonetheless, remains. The surest thing that can be said is that the Next Semester must puzzle out how to steer its vessel between the Scylla of «unmusical music theater» and the Charybdis of

the «musical non-theater», all the while preserving the genre.

As for us, dear colleagues, we can only hope that our talented directors can avoid making soundtracks out of music, the chirping of cicadas out of the lion's roar – and hope dies last.

More Reflections and Practical Advice for the Librettist

A librettist combines two professions. He is a dramatist and a lyricist (I am avoiding «poet»). The lyricist in this alliance is a general, the dramatist a field marshal.

Setting out to work with a literary source, both marshal and general should proceed from the premise that any source is infinitely alien to the nature of music theater. This will not always be true, but it is always helpful to think so.

Do not rely on the paper in the audience's hands that provides a synopsis of your dramatic-musical composition. Fear the running subtitles, where there is often more nonsense and tastelessness than in what might issue from the singers' mouths. Intelligibility of the plot and organicity of the text are your responsibility. The composer, immersed as he is in meeting the musical aims, should not be permitted to cripple the text and cut passages that ensure the lucidity of plot.

Exposition of a one-act opera (operetta, musical) must take up no more than a fourth of its entire duration, and no more than a third of Act One in the case of a multi-act composition. «If it's not there, it can't be jeered». This is a fail-safe rule.

The optimal size of a one-act opera libretto is 25000-30000 characters, with 45000-60000 characters for a two-act one. A longer libretto, as a rule, is the work of an amateur. In the case of a musical or operetta with dialogue scenes, a fourth of an increase may be permissible.

It makes sense to edit a libretto for concision before the composer begins work on vocal score. However, if the composer is shrewd and clever, you should present him with both the longer and the shorter versions.

Rigidly formulaic verse structure in a scene, ensemble, or aria may constrain the composer's creative imagination. This applies to opera. As for the other genres -- rock-opera, musical, and operetta -- there the formulaic, verse-chorus structure is standard.

In translating the text of a foreign composition (in any dramatic genre), remember that the accuracy of the translation is not equivalent to how literal it is. In comic compositions, every phrase and every line of the original must be checked for any intended comic effect and translated accordingly. Your main target is not literalness but rather the organic blending in of the lexicon and the character on stage.

Short, everyday expressions («Dinner is served», for example) should be spoken, not sung. Check the last phrase of each conversational scene. Music begins immediately after, so this phrase should not be ordinary or emotionally neutral.

Write out clear, detailed stage directions. Singers are coached on the musical text before working with the director. They do not always have a firm grasp on the plot of the opera they are rehearsing. At this point your detailed and frequent directions may be of much use.

Completed vocal score calls for a new round of substantive editing of both the text and the stage directions. This is an indispensable process of «adjusting» some if not many passages in the libretto to music. You should not trust your coauthor's literary taste. You are right even if you are wrong. But be merciful, diplomatic. You are in the twilight zone of coauthor conflict.

In every note written by the composer the effort of the librettist is present. If the libretto is bad, this effort deserves a minus.

Warning! Remember, colleagues, that as work on vocal score nears completion, the composer typically grows more and more arrogant. Your relevance is less self-evident to him than when the work first began.

Attention! Beware *auteur* directors. Instead of interpreting what you wrote, directors will sometimes

squeeze in their own ideas, or even subplots, of which you do not approve. And since no director is officially listed on the playbill as coauthor, audience and critics will blame you for things you are not guilty of. «Everything is permitted» is a scoundrel philosophy. Stand up against all directorial distortions of your agenda and use all means at your disposal. Feel free to put up a physical fight.

Careful! Musician is the enemy of the theater (the idea belongs to Wagner). You will encounter this a thousand times -- even when said musician loves the theater, even when he is talented, intelligent, and well-educated, even when he is a genius. On musical stage, the ambassador of the stage is you.

Creating libretto is an artistic endeavor. Its creator is an artist. Therefore everything that I insist on in this chapter may be refuted (or reaffirmed) by any actual librettist's talent.



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Supplement

SYLLABUS FOR YEAR-LONG COURSE

Dramaturgy of Opera Libretto

for students majoring in theater studies

St. Petersburg State Academy of Theater Arts

Theater Studies Department

Russian Theater Section

Written by Yuri Dimitrin

FIRST SEMESTER

No.	Topic	Class Hours
1.	Libretto and Contemporary Music Theater Introduction to the course. Development of stage culture, increasing complexity of stage elements in contemporary music theater practices. Growing role of libretto.	2
2	Visual-Auditory Perception of an Operatic Production Perception of music in and outside of the theater. Effect of various artistic means of expression on the theater audience in an integrated (i.e. operatic) production. Parts of an operatic work: libretto and music to libretto. Operatic production as a scenic embodiment of «MusicPer-Libretto».	4
3	Development of Libretto in the Establishment of Operatic Genres Literary-scenic precursors of the Florentine opera. Poet Ottavio Rinuccini and the role of the play and poetry in the early genres. Types of operatic subjects and the establishment of genre types in opera. Growing role of music in the opera. (Monteverdi and Purcell.)	2

4	<p>Development of Libretto in the Establishment of Operatic Genres</p> <p>Loss of alliance between the opera genre and creative writers; a turn toward the court poets. The era of Metastasio. Flourishing and crisis of <i>opera seria</i>. Subject-related, generic, and scenic causes of the Italian <i>opera buffa</i>'s triumph over Jean-Philippe Rameau's <i>grand opera</i>.</p>	2
5	<p>Operatic Reform of the 18th Century</p> <p>The Encyclopedists on imminent reform in opera. Raniero de Calzabigi. The operatic reform of Calzabigi and Gluck. Who was the reformer? What was the object of reform?</p>	4
6	<p>Italian Opera of the 19th Century</p> <p>Libretto requirements in the operas of Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini, Verdi. The librettists of Puccini. <i>Verismo</i> in opera.</p>	2
7	<p>German and French 19th Century Opera</p> <p>Libretti of Mozart's operas. Meyerbeer's grand opera. Wagner as librettist and composer of «the music of the future».</p>	2
8	<p>The History of the Failure and Triumph of <i>Carmen</i></p> <p>Bizet and his opera premieres. The literary source and the libretto of <i>Carmen</i>. Its librettists. The plot of the opera as a cause of the premiere's failure at Opéra-Comique (1875). Its triumph outside of France and the return of <i>Carmen</i> to the French stage. The transformation of the image of Carmen from novella to opera.</p>	4
9	<p>Russian Opera of the 19th Century</p> <p>Libretto of <i>Life for the Tsar</i> as underlay for the music written prior to the libretto. Operas set to unchanged source texts (Dargomyzhsky, Shostakovich). Pushkin's drama and Mussorgsky's libretto (<i>Boris Godunov</i>).</p>	4

	Belsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. Pushkin and the Tchaikovsky brothers in the opera <i>The Queen of Spades</i> .	
10	The Opera Stage in the 20th Century Increased influence of the dramatic theater. Literary sources and the exploration of new types of operatic subjects (Berg, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Stravinsky, Britten). Operas set to Gogol's plots (Shostakovich, Schedrin, Banshikov, Egk).	2
11	Shostakovich's <i>Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk</i> Turning to Nikolay Leskov's sketch as the composer's way out of an idea crisis. The librettist Aleksandr Preis. Generic contradictions between the opera music and Leskov's sketch. Political and artistic reasons for revisions to the text of the libretto. The «contaminated» libretto of Shostakovich's opera.	4

SECOND SEMESTER

12.	The Literary Source The choice of the literary source and the composer's creative individuality. Narrative atmosphere and means of recreating it in music and on stage. The degree of the libretto's independence. The problems of original (source-less) dramatic play.	4
13	Scenario Dramaturgy Dramatic playwright vs. librettist – related professions calling for different skills. The scenario and the musical outline. Structural elements of a libretto. <i>Fabula</i> , storyline, exposition, intrigue, development, climax, dénouement. Act, scene, situation, number. Dramaturgy of the text of an aria; duets, ensembles, chorus and mass scenes, recitative. «The Golden Mean» of the libretto.	4
14	The Vocal Text Textual economy and «elasticity» in the vocal line.	4

	Efficacy and aphoristic qualities of the libretto. Increasing the amount of information within a scenic unit while minimizing the amount of text. Literary quality of the libretto as it affects the perception of the production.	
15	Librettist and Composer The psychology of co-creation. Librettist's role during the composition of the score. Librettist's role during the process of production of an opera.	2
16	Translated (Equirhythmic) Libretto Text Confluence of musical and poetic imagery of the line, strophe, and number. The «letter» vs. the «spirit» of the text to be translated. Prioritizing natural and organic lexis of a character over and above literal translation. Performance of an opera in the original language.	2
17	Updating the Opera Text Creating plot variants of classic libretti. Search for increased relevance in meaning and dramatic effects of an opera while scrupulously guarding the inviolability of the music. Detailed analysis of a modernized adaptation based on Leoncavallo's <i>Pagliacci</i> .	2
18	Comedy in Music Theater Comic opera and contemporary stage. Requirements and possibilities. Operetta. Libretti of classical operettas in contemporary theater practices. The musical and the rock-opera.	2
19	Methodologies of Evaluating the Opera Libretto Depth and robustness of the libretto in comparison with the literary source. Musicality and theatrical effectiveness of the libretto. Libretto as «opera before opera». Analysis of «the Golden Mean».	2
20	Libretto and Theater Criticism Music theater critics as the voice of public opinion. Trend toward disappearance in opera reviews of libretto analysis in terms of the text's influence on the success or failure of the production (or parts of it). Scathing	2

	journalistic style – a merit or a vice in criticism? Examples of ignorance or even shamelessness on the part of music theater critics. Acute need for sociological research into music theater genres.	
21	Libretto and Its Scholarly Study Origins and development of librettology. Librettologist G. Ganzburg. The Da Ponte Research Center in Vienna.	2
22	Writing Libretto for a One-Act Opera (workshop format)	2
23	Consultations (workshop format)	6
24	Analysis and Evaluation of Student Work (workshop format)	4

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Yuri Dimitrin

Yuri Dimitrin was born in 1934. After graduating from the Leningrad Institute of Chemical Technologies, he worked in a chemical plant and subsequently at a design research center.

In 1963 Dimitrin changed his professional orientation, becoming a journalist, writer and dramatist. He held the position of the Head of the Literature Department at the Krasnoyarsk Drama Theater and was editor of the «Horizont» television station.

Since 1966, Dimitrin has worked in the genre of musical theater drama. He is the author of more than 70 plays for the musical theater (original libretti, translations, scenarios, new versions of classic opera libretti). Around 60 operas, operettas and musicals with texts authored by Dimitrin have been staged in theaters, published by music publishing houses, recorded in a variety of media, and shown on television as musical TV adaptations.

In 1975, taking the Orpheus myth as his source, Dimitrin wrote the libretto of Russia's first rock-opera, *Orpheus and Euridice* (music by A. Zhurbin). He is also co-author, with Yuli Kim, of the text for the rock-opera *A Flemish Legend* (music by R. Greenblatt, 1978), and author of the play for the opera-musical *Masquerade* (music by I. Rogalev, 2000).

Yuri Dimitrin is also known as a music theater critic, author of articles concerning the problems of libretto and of musical theater, and author of a memoir about Dmitri Shostakovich.

Recipient of the Northern Palmyra literary prize in dramaturgy (1999), Dimitrin also teaches a lecture course on the dramaturgy of opera libretto at the St. Petersburg Academy of Theater Arts.

Books written by Dimitrin include: *We Are Not Fated to Divine* (concerning the libretto for Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*) (1997), *Adventures of a Librettist* (2009), *Libretto: History, Art, and Craft. A textbook in the form of an essay* (2012), *«Carmen» for the First Time. A Documentary Novel* (2013).

In 2000, Dimitrin created a website dedicated to the libretto genre and the profession of librettist: «Libretto in Dreams and in Reality» (<http://www.ceo.spb.ru/libretto/>).

A recent theater piece by Yuri Dimitrin is the libretto for an opera-mystery *The Brothers Karamazov* after Dostoevsky's novel (music by A. Smelkov), directed by V. Gergiev at the Mariinsky Theater (2008).

Yuri Dimitrin is also author of libretti for the operas *The Gospel from Judas* (music by P. Gekker), Haydn's *The World on the Moon*, and *The Idiot*, after the novel by Dostoevsky (music by A. Smelkov). They are expected to appear in 2014-2015.