

OPERA AND MODERNIZATION: THE CASE OF BULGARIA¹

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Abstract: *Opera music may be much more central to our understanding of urban modernity than is habitually thought. Since its beginnings in Bulgaria around 1890, opera has had a strong relationship with urban space and the public sphere. Most opera houses were built in urban centers and came to be seen both as secular temples and sites of entertainment, in which the appreciation of high art coexisted with conviviality.*

This paper aims at demonstrating that development of opera art is inextricably linked to the process of modernization of Bulgarian cities. By addressing the impact of this classical art on urbanity, the paper will also attempt to show how opera houses have been among important in towns“ transformations and alteration from the late 19th to the second half of the 20th c. By studying the inception and development of opera theaters in particular Bulgarian cities and through its focus on the liaison between music and localities, this paper should add to the vast body of scholarship in social and cultural history to do with the city, and the meaning of urbanity in Bulgaria.

Keywords: *Opera Houses, Bulgaria, Modernization, Cities, Music*

“**I**f you want to find the level of a city, you ask if they have an opera house”, advised the Chinese composer Xiao Bai, voicing an opinion, popular in musical circles of the previous century. And specified: “If they do, it’s a progressive, developed city”².

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² S. Melvin, J. Cai, *Rhapsody in Red: How Western Classical Music Became Chinese*. New York, Algora Publishing, 2004, p. 306.

Indeed, since its origination in Italy in the 17th c., opera has been closely linked with the city space and the public sphere. Most opera houses stand proudly in the center of some big city, functioning as both secular temples and entertainment facilities, as spaces where high art cohabits with popular celebrations, as well as with frequent manifestations of social, political and economic supremacy³.

The opera is tied inseparably with the progress of modern European cities⁴. Bulgaria is not an exception. The first Bulgarian opera theatre was opened in 1890 in Sofia. Following the example of the capital, in the next decades seven of the larger cities of the country also were privileged with operas. The development of Bulgarian operatic art made the opera a component of public life and culture in Sofia, Stara Zagora, Varna, Rousse, Plovdiv, Bourgas, Pleven and Blagoevgrad. Gradually, these places became models to be imitated. The standards they set were adopted by much smaller townships. That special positioning of larger Bulgarian cities was backed materially by the allocation of rather lavish resources for the erection of monumental buildings, though in other respects they would still be lagging behind European cultural centers⁵. That effort included the building of opera houses. Bearing in mind such specificities of Bulgarian urban development after the Liberation (1878), this text aims at following and analyzing the appearance and development of opera theaters in Bulgaria in connection with the modernization of the Bulgarian town, beginning with the end of the 19th c. and ending in the second half of the 20th c.

Opera was brought to Bulgaria in 19th c. There were varied performances of Bulgarian and foreign companies, singers, choirs and orchestras, with shows comprising fragments and indigenous versions. Gradually, it developed into a Bulgarian opera, into something done by many for a multitude. It started with one state opera group (Sofia, 1890), then there was one amateur group (the regional opera of Stara Zagora for South Bulgaria, 1925), followed by the state operas of Varna (1947), Rousse (1949), Plovdiv (1953) and Bourgas (1954); finally there

³ P. Hohenberg, L. H. Lees, *The making of urban Europe, 1000-1994*. Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 78-81.

⁴ The Opera House Effect: <https://www.citylab.com/design/2011/11/opera-house-effect/586/> - 22.09.2019.

⁵ Велинова, З., И. Начев. *София и балканската модерност. Белград, София, Загреб, Любляна*. София, Рива, 2016, с. 9.

came the state operas of Pleven (1970) and Blagoevgrad (1977). Thus, Bulgarian opera no longer remained limited to the capital, becoming a national affair, substantial and significant in the context of Bulgarian musical practice. Moreover, the major part of opera art started to be produced in the province, penetrating everyday life, forming new notions, preparing generations of opera artists and opera lovers. During the envisaged period it is the provinces that stimulated the creation of original Bulgarian opera works and shaped the basic characteristics of Bulgarian opera singing. Provincial opera companies went on tours abroad, earning international recognition. Of fundamental importance, however, was that they ingrained themselves in the urban *milieu*, becoming irreplaceable and necessary.

In comparison to other cultural institutions, the opera in Bulgaria developed with difficulty, resulting in a significant retardation; that was due to a general lack of understanding, combined with lack of interest and support on the part of the state. We should also keep in mind that opera, being a synthetic art, is especially complex, and that there was constant lack of singers and directors. Despite all that, the Bulgarian opera surpassed in its development composition and musicology, as well as chamber music and singing. That phenomenon had diverse causes. On the one hand, there were the centuries-old traditions of folk singing; on the other hand, there was a well-developed theater, in which acting was often accompanied by music. After the Liberation, opera music was popularized by the military wind orchestras with Czech conductors, who for the first time introduced wide audiences to *pot-pourri*⁶ from classical operas. Also should be noted the tours of opera singers and companies from abroad, which sharpened the interest of the Bulgarian cultural public⁷.

Occasionally, opera music (fragments or entire titles) could be heard in Bulgaria some decades before the Liberation of 1878. However, opera pieces entered the repertoire of city choirs and orchestras only in the 1890s, when the cultural situation permitted the realization of the idea of Bulgarian opera. In the context of modernization of all spheres of public life, in the last decade of the 19th c. came the first attempts to institutionalize opera-type vocal and instrumental practices. In the bigger towns, singing and musical societies were being established, catering to specific cultural needs, i.e. providing church and lay music on occasion, and also giving concerts. For some of them, the creation of Bulgarian opera was

⁶ A sequence of popular tunes from one or several musical opuses.

⁷ Р. Бикс, *Български оперен театър до 1944 г. Материали и наблюдения*. София, Музика, 1976, с. 21-24.

set as part of their mission. Opera fragments were being included more frequently in concerts and stage performances of choirs, which by that time had become differentiated, and school choirs separated from the others. Opera pieces would make a concert more attractive to the public, and that was aptly used by some conductors. Moreover, some choirs would perform operatically to mark special occasions, viz., a first public concert, rebirth of a musical group or change in its character (e.g. from church to lay music performance), participation in a regional or municipal competition, on tours, etc.⁸

Simultaneously, in the context of lay education, in school textbooks and readers information started to be included, albeit sporadically and chaotically, as to what is an opera, air, recitative, and duet. Thus pupils had an initial introduction to opera; it found a place in their worldview. However, as theatrical performance, opera was familiar, exceptionally, to some of the richer merchants, and to teachers, doctors, engineers, who during their years of education, or a holiday, or business trip, had gone to an opera – out of curiosity or snobbery. For all others it remained just “a sound and a color” in the picture of “the vast European culture”⁹.

The first who attempted to start a Bulgarian opera theater were the alumni of the Prague Conservatory, singers Dragomir Kazakov and Ivan Slavkov, together with pianist Anguel Boukoureshtliev. On August 8, 1890, they gave a successful concert in the Military Club in Sofia, which encouraged them to try starting an opera theater, with the support of influential officials from the Ministry of education. Among them was Dr. Ivan Shishmanov, who helped Kazakov in getting a small subsidy, in order to organize and lead a “Drama and opera troupe”. The Drama section was staffed from the *Osnova* (*Foundation*) Bulgarian folk theatrical company; and the opera section, by the three musicians mentioned, plus three Czech singers: Olga Dobřova, Anna Kratochvílová, and Jaroslav Hašek¹⁰.

Thus, about a decade after the Liberation and about a decade before the first Bulgarian opera was written – *Siromabkinya* (*Poor woman*, 1899), there was a professional opera troupe in Sofia. However, post-Liberation Bulgaria did not have the financial means to support two stage arts together, viz. drama and opera. The drama, i.e. the *Osnova* “timber house” theater, that had been started just seven years ago, had to step back and give way to the “operas” (as in German), pushed by

⁸ Р. Бикс, *На опера в стара София*. София, АИ „Проф. Марин Дринов”, 2000, с. 29-30.

⁹ Р. Нейков, *Три десетилетия по българските музикални сцени*. София, Сиела, 2007, с. 73.

¹⁰ Бикс, *На опера в стара София*, с. 31.

the influential Dr. Shishmanov¹¹. Thus, the *Opera and Drama Troupe of the Capital* was established. However, the state support was to be shared by both arts, and so were the theatrical stage and the rehearsal rooms. Even the audience was the same, with some exceptions.

As can be seen in the table below, the opera section would go for a most difficult repertoire, and though it performed for two seasons only (1891-1892), there could be no doubt as to what kind of opera was envisaged: the opera of Verdi and Donizetti, Bizet and Tchaikovsky, Mozart and Mascagni.

Operas and fragments of operas staged by the Opera Section of the Opera and Drama Troupe of the Capital (1891-1892)¹²

Fragments		
Title	Author	Season
The Merry Wives of Windsor	Otto Nicolai	January-June 1891
Il trovatore	Giuseppe Verdi	
Faust	Charles Gounod	
Martha	Friedrich von Flotow	
Evgheniy Oneghin	Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky	
Les Huguenots	Giacomo Meyerbeer	
Un ballo in maschera	Giuseppe Verdi	
Don Juan	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	
Lucia di Lammermoor	Gaetano Donizetti	
Operas		
Title	Author	Opening night
Faust	Charles Gounod	January 22, 1891
Il trovatore	Giuseppe Verdi	January 30, 1891
Carmen	Georges Bizet	March 27, 1891
Lucrezia Borgia	Gaetano Donizetti	July 9, 1891
La traviata	Giuseppe Verdi	September 1, 1891

¹¹ Бикс, *Българският оперен театър*, с. 78.

¹² The information is quoted from Ив. Попов, *Минало на българския театър. Спомени и документи*. Т. 2, София, Наука и изкуство, 1939 and Др. Казаков, *Материали по историята на Народния театър и опера*. София, Държавна печатница, 1929, and checked in the *Central State Archive (ЦДА)*, ф. 177К.

Crispino e la comera	Luigi & Federico Ricci	September 19, 1891
Martha	Friedrich von Flotow	October 12, 1891
Aida	Giuseppe Verdi	November 17, 1891
Lucia di Lammermoor	Gaetano Donizetti	February 28, 1892
Hernani	Giuseppe Verdi	March 4, 1892
Das goldene Kreuz	Ignaz Brüll	April 6, 1892
V studni	Vilém Blodek	April 20, 1892
Cavaleria rusticana	Pietro Mascagni	May 15, 1892

Initially, the operas were performed on a piano, without choir or orchestra, in Czech, Russian and Italian, or in the three together. The first performance in Bulgarian was of Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*, translated by Vladislav Shak, in July 1891. Soon, the piano was replaced by the orchestra of the Sixth Infantry Regiment plus amateur musicians, while a group of Italians, who had immigrated seeking work in Bulgaria after the Liberation, together with their families, formed a small operatic choir. Stage sets, stage clothes and musical scores were imported from Prague, where the mentioned Czech soloists also came from. Props were just brought by the performers.

By the summer of 1892, the Opera Section of the capital had started to look like an opera theater, of the kind established in other Balkan countries. Comments and assessments appeared in the press, not all of them favorable or polite, but with the ambition to depict that art form, new for the country. Meanwhile the National Assembly rejected pleas for new subsidies one after the other. The audience started to dwindle: some because they had too high expectations, others because their interest proved to be shallow and temporary. Thus, in September 1892, after staging as many as thirteen operas and nine fragment performances, the troupe disintegrated definitely. Still, it was in the 1890s, in Sofia, that the process "opera in Bulgaria" was initiated. The process was kept alive by tours of foreign singers and troupes, and by the development of the new lay choirs, which had turned into centers of opera culture. Two relevant choirs from the capital were *Rodna Pesen* (*Homeland Song*) and the *Jewish Singers' Society*; both appeared in the first decade of the 20th c.¹³

As to visiting performers, during that period the Italian troupes were the most numerous and toured the country most frequently. The troupes of F. Ugolini,

¹³ *Енциклопедия на българската музикална култура*. София, Изд. на БАН, 1967, с. 35.

Serio and Beloboni deserve to be mentioned, but the most important was the troupe of Egicio Massini. It remained long in Bulgaria, visiting almost all bigger towns, bringing to audiences many operas from the West European repertoire. As to singers from other countries, most of them came from Russia.

All these foreign guests were a basic factor in making the opera part of the cultural consciousness of Bulgarians and kept them *au courant* of opera fashions.

There were no steps taken to create a permanent national opera theater until 1907. In the spring of that year, from Russia came the singers Konstantin Mihaylov-Stoyan, Ivan Vulpe and Bogdana Gyuzeleva-Vulpe. Together with Dragomir Kazakov, they revived the idea of a permanent opera in Sofia. The circumstances were much more favorable, though. The dramatic theater had developed and become established thanks to the talent of its actors and to its repertoire. Besides, the Private Musical School and the Bulgarian Union of Musicians had been active for several years. Into the picture came also the successful solo concerts of Bulgarian instrumentalists, like Neda Filipova and Petko Naumov.

The opera initiative was publicized in a euphoric review by Konstantin Mihaylov-Stoyan of the end of year exam-concert of the Private Musical School, published in the daily *Den* on June 2, 1907. A few days later, the author and the Vulpes gave two highly successful concerts in Sofia. In August of the same year, acting on a decision of the Bulgarian Union of Musicians, Mihaylov-Stoyan sent to the Ministry of education a project for the establishment of a Bulgarian opera. The idea was that it should be in the capital, adding to the modern European look of Sofia. It is said there: "The Bulgarian opera shall acquire the significance of a peoples' national and educational institution."¹⁴ The proposal was that the opera be state subsidized, and perform on certain days of the week, designated by the Minister, in the Sofia Peoples' theater. According to the project author, a staff of at least fifty four was needed: two tenors, two baritones, two sopranos, two mezzo-sopranos, four comprimarios¹⁵, one prompter, a women's choir of twelve, a men's choir of twelve, one chapel master, one concert master, one choir master, one conductor, one junior conductor and a ballet of ten. That meant a staff no less in numbers than that of the Drama section of the Peoples' Theater¹⁶. Mihaylov-Stoyan expected that kind of administration and staff organization to result in an enhanced work *tempo*, more colorful interpretation, equality and independence

¹⁴ К. Михайлов-Стоян, *По въпроса за основаване българска народна опера*. София, 1907, с. 22.

¹⁵ A comprimario is a singer with a limited voice, used in supporting roles.

¹⁶ Михайлов-Стоян, *По въпроса за основаване българска народна опера*, с. 25.

of the music masters. It would also make possible to invite to Sofia and employ talented provincial and foreign musicians.

In a personal meeting with the Minister of peoples' education, Konstantin Mihaylov-Stoyan presented his opera project. Encouraged by the kind and considerate reception of the project, he went on an opera air-singing tour of Bulgaria. But while audiences everywhere met him with interest and impatience to learn whether there will soon be a Bulgarian opera, in the press critical articles and comments regarding the future of that initiative started to appear. Konstantin Mihaylov-Stoyan was targeted personally: he came from Bessarabia, so he was accused of not knowing the specificities of the situation in Bulgaria and Bulgarian cultural life. Misgivings were voiced that should a Bulgarian opera be opened, the public would start to frequent the opera only, and the theater would be left without an audience; thus, dramaturgy would be banished from Bulgarian cultural life. Simultaneously, it was contended that the opera would not be self-sustainable and would have to be subsidized from the state budget for dramatic art. As in the past, to the fore came fears that the creation of an opera, independent from the theater, would stifle Bulgarian playwriting. It was reasoned that to have a peoples' opera, there should first be more Bulgarian operatic opuses, so that the stage was not occupied exclusively by foreign stuff. Doubts were also voiced re the talent of Bulgarian operatic singers, their acting qualities and professionalism¹⁷.

What do these sharp reactions tell us? First of all, that the opponents of the idea of a Bulgarian opera had not been following the evolution of the art of music in the cultural life of the country. But that, of course, does not mean that there had not been a development, enough to be ground for an opera enterprise. On the other hand, the authors of that critical press (part of whom chose to be anonymous), were not of the musical world, nor were they specialists in art and culture. It is they that did not have the necessary qualifications and professionalism to be able to evaluate objectively the condition of professional Bulgarian music and its composers, interpreters and teachers.

As to the adherents of the idea to have an opera, they also published emotional pieces in the press. A *sui generis* war started between the pro-and contra-opera camps, which lasted more than a year on the pages of the newspapers *Grazhdanin*, *Den*, *Vecherna poshta*, *Tribuna*, etc.¹⁸

¹⁷ Казаков, *Материали по историята на Народния театър и опера*, с. 61-68.

¹⁸ Михайлов-Стоян, *По въпроса за основаване Българска народна опера*, с. 25-31.

Thus came the summer of 1908 when a number of well-known opera singers gathered in the capital: Dragomir Kazakov, Dimitar Popivanov, Katya Stoyanova, Mariya Vassileva, Stoyan Nikolov, Zlatka Kourteva and Zhelyo Minchev; the conductors Henrik Vizner, Todor Hadjiev and Dobri Hristov; the choirmaster Konstantin Ramadanov, and other musical persons who formed the Bulgarian Opera Association. On October 18th they gave a “test” performance, with fragments of *Faust* and *Rigoletto*. That was followed by opera shows with the band of the First Cavalry regiment and later with the orchestra of the Sixth Infantry Regiment. In the end of 1908, the amateur choir was replaced by a permanent opera choir. The first entire opera to be performed with a choir and orchestra, full-fledged for those times, was *Pagliacci* by Ruggero Leoncavallo (June 5, 1909)¹⁹.

The season 1910/1911 was special for the development of opera in Bulgaria. Until then all operas were sung in Russian and were picked from the repertoire in Russia and Western Europe. In 1910, on the suggestion of Mihaylov-Stoyan, the Association prepared and performed to great acclaim on the stage of *Slavyanska beseda* the first Bulgarian opera, *Siromahkinya* (*Poor woman*) by Emanuil Manolov. Heartened by that success, Bulgarian composers wrote several new operas, which were shown in subsequent seasons. Among them were *Kamen and Tsena* by Ivan Ivanov and Ventseslav (Vazlav) Kautski, *Tabirbegovitsa* (*Tabir beg's wife*) by Dimitar Hadjigheorghiev, and *Borislav* by Maestro Gheorghii Atanassov²⁰.

It may be seen as strange that during the 1920s it was the government of the Bulgarian Agrarian Peoples' Union that took the long-awaited step to adopt a law to transform the Bulgarian Opera Association into a Peoples' Opera, and the Musical School into a Musical Academy. “Nowhere else in the world the operatic art has been backed by the layers of the population that were represented in the Bulgarian government in 1921-1923, and whose interest they served. Aristocrats – yes. Urban intelligentsia – yes. But a party of land-tillers, not even of land-owners – never, ever!”²¹

The law of July 1921 stated that the Opera Association would be state-funded. From April 1922 it became a state institution under the name of Peoples'

¹⁹ *Енциклопедия на българската музикална култура*, с. 37.

²⁰ А. Христов, *Опера и съвременност*. София, Наука и изкуство, 1969, с. 49.

²¹ Бикс, *На опера в старата София*, с. 59.

Opera, and the opera staff was entitled to salaries and pensions. That ensured a comfortable basis for development, especially of a professional choir.

In this way, in the mid-1920s, the Peoples' Opera occupied its rightful place as cultural center for the inhabitants of the capital, commensurate with the Peoples' Theater and the Military Club. Of course, it was such a center for a chosen group, mostly for the elites of the capital and the country. In just a few years the Bulgarian capital could boast of having the basic artistic high schools of a modern European city: a Musical Academy and an Arts Academy, both state-subsidized. The result was that the Peoples' Opera was to be backed professionally by the first academically home-formed artists and musicians. That gave it the opportunity to stand up to the great opera centers of Europe and America, a topic that occupied the society chronicle of dailies almost daily.

Still, foreign guest performers were important for the indigenous development. From the establishment of the opera until the end of World War II, fourteen of the bigger opera troupes toured the whole country, while four just stopped in the capital. Ten of them came from Italy, three from Germany, two from pre-revolutionary Russia, two from France and one from Serbia.

In the first decades, the new Bulgarian opera was dominated by the Italian and Slavic schools; then, gradually the German and Austrian stage and singing culture took the lead. Among the later were *Die Königin von Saba* by Karl Goldmark (1935), *Oberon* by Karl Maria von Weber (1936), *Fidelio* by Ludwig van Beethoven, and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1942) and *Das Rheingold* (1943) by Richard Wagner. That array displays great variation in the choice of musical directions, but it is obvious that the predominating opuses required a large orchestra, a full-fledged choir, and mighty voices for the solo parties. That bespeaks a developed opera theater, armed with adequate artistic means and qualities that would enable it to do justice to the art²².

With time, the Peoples' Opera started to look like a good place for experiments, where everything and anything could be staged, provided certain aesthetic standards were observed. For example, it appears that of the historically important composers, the only one not represented was Claudio Monteverdi. All other composers, mainly of the Roman and Slavic, and largely the German and German-Austrian 19th c. were represented fully enough. The Bulgarian opera would even produce opuses that would normally be staged exclusively in their country of origin, being unpopular abroad.

²² Христов, *Опера и съвременност*, с. 91-95.

One of the most important components of the development of Bulgarian opera until the mid-twentieth century was the creation and staging of original Bulgarian operas. Until 1944 (the 9 September coup d'état), the Peoples' Opera had staged all operas by Maestro Gheorghi Atanassov, *Zhensko czarstvo* (*Women's kingdom*) and *Sallambo* by Vesselin Stoyanov, *Czar Kaloyan* (*King Kaloyan*) by Pancho Vladigherov, *Yaninite devet bratya* (*Yana's nine brothers*) by Lyubomir Pipkov, etc. Gradually, the Peoples' Opera became a solid proponent of the opera aesthetics, characteristic for Europe at the time, and introduced Bulgarian opuses. The prerequisites for progress were all there: strong soloists and directors, a choir and orchestra staffed by experienced professionals, and a critique and audience that were already educated and experienced enough to judge the operatic tradition, but also new and untasted art. Finally, in the 1940s Sofia had an opera, worthy of a modern European capital, for which the city had a need, a need of which it could take care.

Until the mid-20th c., the center of opera in Bulgaria was definitely the capital; still, there were some groups in the provinces that popularized it. Audiences in Rousse, for example, were probably the first in the country to experience opera theater, and not just opera music. Down the Danube the great West European operatic tradition would reach their city. In the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th c., most of the traveling opera companies would perform in Rousse.

From 1914 date the first local attempts at opera. The Opera Association of Rousse was founded, and in 1919, it performed the Bulgarian opera *Kamen and Tsena*²³.

Also of interest is the private Art Opera of Plovdiv, which performed the Bulgarian opera *Tahirbegovitsa* in 1920. In December of the same year the Varna Opera Association was formed, with Presiyan Dyukmedzhiev, which staged *Demon* (Anton Rubinshteyn) and *La traviata*. That group was active until 1924.

In May 1923, in Stara Zagora a permanent musical association was founded, under the name of a previous musical group, *Kaval*. Under the direction of Zlatan Stanchev and others, fragments and whole acts of *Faust* and *Carmen* were performed, and in 1925, the whole Bulgarian opera *Gherghana*. In 1928,

²³ Бикс, Р. *Български оперен театър извън столицата*. Дисертация за доктор на науките. ИИ, БАН, 1989, с. 67.

part of the singers in that association founded a separate troupe under the name of Regional Opera, directed by Dimitar Hristov (from the Sofia opera). Several performances later, it was renamed the South Bulgarian Regional Opera (1931). For fifteen years, it was active in Stara Zagora, and toured the country, too²⁴.

In the 1920s, attempts to organize permanent opera formations in the country intensified. In 1928, Presiyan Dyukmedzhiev founded another Varna group, which performed until September 1929 (fragments of *La traviata*). Again in Varna, from the end of 1929 to the end of 1931, the so-called Communal Opera was active, directed by Dyukmedzhiev, Stefan Makedonski and Alexander Krastev. They staged Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *La traviata* and *Tsveta*. In comparison, the Opera Association of Rousse, founded as early as 1914, during the same period staged only one opera, *Gherghana* (1935), conducted by Atanas Strandzhev and with Boris Pintev as choirmaster²⁵.

There were other similar attempts in the provinces too. However, except in Stara Zagora, they were limited to having number of shows by different groupings, not united by a continuing artistic treatment. The core would consist of non-professional singers, who with their enthusiasm and love for the opera helped its popularization among a wider audience.

Production problems were being resolved rather primitively, due to bad material conditions, lack of permanent facilities, and insufficient qualification of the participants. The governing bodies were not interested in opera performance outside the capital. All that stopped amateur groups from becoming durable and significant artistic phenomena. Only in the capital, thanks to state subsidies, the performances of the Peoples' Opera showed a logical line of development.

It is only in the 1940s that the cause of professional opera became a priority for the bigger provincial cities. The Opera of Stara Zagora, the oldest outside the capital, opened its 1944/1945 season on October 28 with Gounod's *Faust*. Its premiere had been earlier, in March 1944; conductor was Romeo Raychev, director – Hristo Popov, and set designer – Petar Rouskov. In the spring of 1946, the Stara Zagora opera became the first provincial state-owned opera. Until then,

²⁴ М. Ценова, *Хорове и хормайстори в българския оперен театър: Градската хорова култура до средата на 40-те години на XX в. като предпоставка за възникване на музикални театри в България*. Докторска дисертация, ИИ, БАН, 2001, с. 87-89.

²⁵ *Енциклопедия на българската музикална култура*, с. 41.

in the 21 years of its existence, it had produced and performed eighteen operas in Stara Zagora and almost all bigger towns of Southern Bulgaria. Before the statification, there had been premieres of the following: *La traviata* (twice), *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Faust*²⁶.

The Varna Peoples' Opera was the first provincial opera to be inaugurated after the 9 September coup d'état (1944). Before it was opened in 1947, there had been several attempts, the first dating from 1920. The initiative was of the Varna chapter of the Fatherland Front organization. A good basis for it was the local State Symphonic Orchestra, established in 1946 and conducted by Rouslan Raychev, the Radio Varna choir and the *Sea sounds* choir. At the beginning, fifteen soloists were engaged through a competition; part of them remained the opera's main movers. After the official proclamation of August 1, 1947, the first opening night was of Bedřich Smetana's *Prodaná nevěsta* (September 10, 1947). Conductor was Rouslan Raychev, director – Petar Raychev, set designer – Assen Popov.

In a short time, the opera became an integral part of the cultural life of Varna, enjoying attention and care, and growing understanding on the part of the local audience. The specificity of the Varna opera resulted from the coastal position of the city, and the idea that as a “sea capital” and resort, the city had to exhibit the progress of national opera art, especially during the months of the traditional *Varna summer* international festival. That made the Varna opera different from other non-Sofia based operas, and could explain its characteristic traits and stages of development.

The fourth opera outside Sofia is the Plovdiv Peoples' Opera. It was founded by a state decision and opened with Smetana's *Prodaná nevěsta* on November 15, 1953. Conductor was Rouslan Raychev, director – Petar Raychev, set designer – Assen Popov. That happened ten years after the creation of the local symphonic orchestra and thirty-four years after the first attempt at organizing an opera theater²⁷.

Of special interest is the development of that opera's repertoire. It is not only a question of showing a “Bulgarian premiere”, or “seldom performed elsewhere” operas, for these criteria do not always guarantee a real artistic advance. In Plovdiv, thanks to a management that combined unity of purpose and continuity rarely found in practice, the opera was able to provide interesting and sensible work for

²⁶ Нейков, *Три десетилетия по българските музикални сцени*, с. 85.

²⁷ In the beginning of 1944, Alexander Kraev and Uli Poryazov organized a Plovdiv District Opera, which until the middle of 1945 gave several performances of *Gherghana* by Maestro Gheorghis Atanassov.

all the staff, revealing their potential as artists and performers. The local trademark was to introduce audiences to opuses that had not been domestically performed. Until the end of 1980, nineteen “unknown” operas, ballets and operettas had been staged, which made Plovdiv different from the capital and most provincial cities with their frequently repeated repertoire²⁸.

The opera of Bourgas had the longest history as an amateur undertaking. Several opera shows and fragments, performed before 1944, plus sporadic guest group appearances, interested the local public and around the middle of the 1950s a permanent troupe was formed, under the name of Bourgas Amateur Opera. Its members came from the then extant local State Symphonic Orchestra, the Peoples’ Choir and the *Rodna Pessen* (*Native Song*) choir; soloists were selected through a competition. The first opera to be produced was *La traviata*, with a premiere on June 25, 1955. It was conducted by Vassil Lolov, directed by Stefan Gadoulov, and Konstantin Dzhidrov was set designer. Until it became state-owned in 1972, a total of twenty-two operas, one ballet, eight operettas and one musical comedy were staged²⁹.

In 1970, an opera was started in Pleven as an “amateur state institution”. The performers were gathered from the state-owned local Symphonic orchestra, and the choir and dancers – from the state-owned Northern Ensemble for Folk Songs and Dances. Soloists were picked through a state-run competition. The first opera shown was *Lud ghidiya* (*The crazy village musician*) by Parashkev Hadjiev; the opening night was on October 8, 1970.

In the first years of the Pleven opera, the well-known, Pleven-born opera singer Hristo Brambarov closely followed its development, giving hands-on help in dealing with artistic and administrative challenges. He personally led the vocal practice during the rehearsal periods. In the five years before the Pleven opera became an entirely state institution, eight operas were produced, one of which twice.

On January 1, 1975, it was declared that the Pleven Opera would become a state institution under Chief Directorate “Bulgarian Music” of the Committee for Art and Culture (Decision № 286 of the Council of Ministers). Its reorganization was to take place in two stages: stage one in 1975, stage two in 1976. After the death of Hristo Brambarov on April 12, 1975, the Pleven state opera assumed his name.

²⁸ Бикс, *Българският оперен театър*, с. 117.

²⁹ С. Михалева, *Първостроителите на Бургаската опера. Документална хроника 1920-1972*. София, НИБА-Консулт, 2017, с. 73.

The first production after the opera was taken over by the state was *Maystori* (*Master woodcarvers*) by Parashkev Hadjiev. From 1975 until the end of the season 1979/1980, another twenty-three works were staged: fourteen operas, eight ballets, and one operetta. Some of them were performed during the traditional Katya Popova Laureate Days, with the participation of singers who had received prizes in international competitions. In that five-year period, the opera was using the facility of the dramatic theater, built for a reading house in the late 19th c., and refurbished in 1962.

In Blagoevgrad, a troupe for chamber opera was started comparatively late, as there were no particular traditions in the city: in 1972, by director Plamen Kartalov and the composer Trifon Silyanovski, who acted as musical director. Originally it performed under the name *Opera for the Young*, and the singers were predominantly students; later it became, consecutively, *Chamber Opera for the Young* and *Young Opera for All*. Finally, it became officially established in Blagoevgrad as a state-owned chamber opera, which on December 26, 1977 started with Giovanni Pergolesi's opera buffa *La serva padrona*. Until June 1980, thirteen opuses were staged, most of them for the first time in Bulgaria.

The performers, as mentioned, were initially amateurs and students; later, alumni of the Vocalist's Faculty and the Master Classes of the State Conservatoire. Later, part of the initial troupe members passed on to state operas and operettas in other cities.

After chamber opera was established in Blagoevgrad, it retained its preference for smaller opuses, but added to its mission the task to familiarize people from the Pirin region with the opera and make it a cultural necessity. A permanent staff of soloists and an orchestra were formed, while the small choir comprised mainly local amateurs. Another goal was that Blagoevgrad should become an example to be followed by other larger Bulgarian cities in getting their own chamber operas.

The idea of having state operas came simultaneously with the idea of creating state symphony orchestras. In Bulgaria after the Liberation, there were active processes of democratization and decentralization of culture. Thus, the initiatives for local operas and symphony orchestras were a clear manifestation of

the modernization of urban societies³⁰. The idea to have opera theaters outside the capital was received with enthusiasm by the local population and realized with vigor and knowledge by the central state and public institutions. Regional pro-opera initiatives were started and enjoyed popularity. To have an opera in your hometown was seen as a sign of status and self-respect, of entering the circle of European cultural centers. Even if in places outside the capital musical events were relatively numerous, the creation of an opera theater was perceived as a new Revival, and a barometer of modernization in Bulgaria from the end of the 19th to the middle of the 20th c. But it was also more than that: a realized craving to catch up, to overcome provinciality, to have a full contact experience of the masterpieces of music, to have them whole and unabridged, on a scene, with a choir and orchestra, sets and costumes... And that after having for years heard only separate airs and ensembles, episodic choir and orchestra pieces and disparate acts, shown by local or guest talent.

The establishment of operas outside the capital was addressed with a clear vision of what is central for a beginning and what could jeopardize the prestige of the whole undertaking. Experienced artists of repute were directed towards prospective opera seats, artists with a nationally famous name or at least with good professional formation. That was a prerequisite for gaining the trust of the locals, as well as of the persons that would eventually become part of the opera staff. Work went on diligently and conscientiously, and directed so as to evade artistic compromises. The result was that the operas of Varna, Rousse and Plovdiv turned out to be so well conceptualized and constructed, that with the help of some additions in due course, their founders managed to maintain them in a state of continuous progress. Certain productions kept their high quality decades after their premiere, and others, throughout the whole period in question.

Moreover, the organizational structure would be chosen bearing in mind the specific conditions in each city; also the ways in which each opera functioned. At that time in Bulgaria there were not enough directors and set designers who would have received a special opera-based training. That was resolved by inviting specialists from Sofia Opera, who would get out to the province for certain periods or just to stage particular opuses. Conductors were engaged on a permanent basis and they were the ones who bore the main burden, with some help from younger colleagues without special training. Also permanently engaged were the soloists,

³⁰ Р. Даскалов, *Българското общество 1879-1939*, Т. 2. София, ИК Гутенберг, 2005, с. 158.

the choir masters, the choir or just its core group, the administration and the technical staff. The orchestra was usually the local symphonic orchestra. As a rule, in that initial period interdependence with the local dramatic theater was avoided, possibly due to memories of the difficult coexistence of the Drama and Opera in the capital.

As to repertoire, the opera theaters out of Sofia as a rule followed the politics of the capital. Opuses were selected according to their potential to be liked by a wider audience, simultaneously giving a chance to all performers to gain experience and qualification. In the first decade of their existence, none of the opera theaters would use the repertoire as a vehicle for reckless independence, for inimitability and differentiation from others. What was staged should help troupes in their growth; not repulse the public, and help the growth of its fledgling abilities; so that hopefully, one day modern operatic ideas could be offered and received well.

Thus, repertoire in those years would have operas of the second half of the 19th c., and would be organized around simple and clear directives: do only what is traditionally approved; have one (if possible, more) opera for each cast or type of voices; for lyrical and character voices, have at least one comical or chamber-type production per season (e.g. *Don Pasquale*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*; a bit later, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and *Les pêcheurs de perles* – all these were staged practically everywhere); a “high society” operetta here and there; and, ubiquitously, the compulsory Verdi: *Tosca*, *Rigoletto*, *La traviata*, *Madama Butterfly*, often with a heightened accent on social aspects. Indeed, a no-risk approach, for both interpreters and audience. Essentially, that was an accumulation of “stock” abilities, a basis for future development. Repetitions of the same chain of operas can be registered throughout the country, even occasionally the same opera would be produced twice in a single season. Small wonder, as it would be staged by the same director and set designer, and just adapted to local specificities. Everywhere, the touch of the same few Bulgarian directors and set designers was to be felt, in places all having rather an equal share (like in Rouse), in others in changing proportions, to a large extent dependent on the abilities of the soloists available.

Generally, until the mid-1950s (and in places even later), the tendency was centripetal: out-of-capital “opera workers” wanted whatever was produced in the capital, the approved, i.e. and already staged by the Peoples’ Opera of Sofia. The difference was mainly quantitative: the country had more stages and more performances. The sameness was in almost everything else. The four opera theaters, created in the country one after the other (Varna, Rouse, Plovdiv and Bourgas) replicated repertoires, playing similar or the same pieces treated in the same way by the same directors and set designers. The selection criteria were the same too:

locals would form the choir and the orchestra, soloists would be chosen after a competitive hearing by an expert commission.

For the first time, clear emancipatory gestures were to be registered towards the end of the 1950s. Repertoires would start to vary, aiming at distinction from the opera in Sofia. A tendency towards originality could be detected in the treatment of certain non-capital based productions³¹. There was then a general upswing in provincial opera, which brought it on a par with the opera of the capital, and occasionally to clear leadership. Due to various considerations and circumstances, Sofia did not present the Bulgarian and Soviet repertoire, actual at that time (opting for traditional West European stuff), which created a window of opportunity for provincial operas. That was aptly used by Rousse and Varna, plus, albeit to a lesser extent, by Plovdiv and Stara Zagora, to enrich their repertoire with never-played in Bulgaria or forgotten European opuses.

During that first period of the Bulgarian provincial opera, a remarkable generation of singers appeared. The Bulgarian public singled them out with its preference, based on a taste that had not changed much since Revivalist times. Bulgarians would not go for a colorless voice, no matter the virtuosity with which it may have been used. "A singer's got to have a voice!" That is, have a voice according to the age-old Bulgarian tradition: everybody sings, but the *singers* of the village or the church choir are known, for they are the ones that *have the voice*. Another circumstance is probably also at play here: Bulgarian opera singers had been formed predominantly by Italian singing, be it in schools in Italy or elsewhere in the world. In the course of time that produced a convergence of folk and professional criteria for judging an interpretation, and made the rich and beautiful voice a *conditio sine qua non*.

The development of Bulgarian opera in the 20th c. was significantly helped by the periodical National Reviews of the Opera, Operetta and Ballet. The first such was organized in 1951, the second in 1958, the third in 1962. In the discussion, following the performance of each troupe, and the judgments of the press of the capital, an overall evaluation of achievements and shortcomings would be given, to help in future work.

³¹ Христов, *Опера и съвременност*, с. 105.

In practice, until the second National Review (1958), and to an extent even the third (1962), provincial operas were seen as having just local significance. Their activities were seen as a valuable part of the cultural life of a particular city, along with the work of the local dramatic theater and symphonic orchestra, chamber performances and guest performances from the country or abroad. The art of provincial operas would become more visible during tours, which did not happen often, but were decisive for evaluation and movement of cadres. It was after guest appearances that the best were offered places in the Sofia Opera, while the provincial troupe in question would replenish its stock with new and young singers and musicians.

At the second National review of 1958, the first signs of differentiation surfaced. In some provincial performances, a drive for self-assertion both in the repertoire and the approach to direction could be detected. Still, in the provinces predominated the unresolved problems with the orchestra (since it would be the local symphonic orchestra, and not the opera's own); with set designers (a problem, ubiquitous for almost all provincial operas, all the time) and even with choirs (albeit, together with their choir masters, they formed the core of the local opera and were valued accordingly). An innovation were the guest groups, invited for a particular staging; overtime, that would result in fruitful artistic cooperation.

That was the situation preceding the third National Review (1962), the results of which demonstrated the emancipation of out-of-capital opera: certain provincial productions were heralded as a national (and not only regional) achievement. Then, until the mid-1970s, a prolonged "balance of powers" period ensued. During that time, the search for new discoveries gradually grew, especially in contemporary repertoire, and in that the capital started to lag behind. For the first time in Bulgaria were produced certain operas by Dmitriy Shostakovich, Richard Wagner, Leoš Janáček, Gian Carlo Menotti, etc.

The third National Review showed that provincial opera in Bulgaria had lost its provinciality, had passed its age of education and reached professionalism. There were ongoing improvements regarding its both artistry and material basis, leading to unquestionable progress.

The role that of extra-capital operas played was to solidify the fledgling Bulgarian opera and to position the best domestic opuses in the cultural heritage. During the whole period in question the new Bulgarian operas were being staged (with small exceptions) first outside Sofia. Examples here would be *Antigona 43* by Lyubomir Pipkov (first staged in Rousse and Plovdiv) and *Yuda (Judas)* by Krassimir Kyurkchiyski; also opuses by Marin Goleminov, Ivan Dimov, Dimitar Hristov, Bozhidar Spassov, etc. The quality of provincial productions in its turn

stimulated the creation of new operas, and helped their success on the stage of the Peoples' Opera and the Musical Theater of Sofia.

It could be said in conclusion that the establishment of opera theaters was significant for the modernization of Bulgarian cities after the Liberation. For Bulgaria, opera houses were not just buildings on the architectural map: they had specific cultural functions. Firstly, they were important nationally, insofar as they were part of the creation of a national culture, and of the education of the people by the intelligentsia in becoming a nation. Secondly, they were places of prestige, evidence that the country was inhabited by a "people of culture", belonging to a nation capable of high culture creation.

That is why after the Liberation, the question was how to raise Bulgarian musical culture to European level; to master the specificity of the opera art form; to achieve a high synthesis of modern approach, modern musical language, modern judgment of the phenomena from the past and present, of which an opera would narrate, and all that via contemporary technique and media. Truly, in the fields of symphonic and chamber music, in vocal and choir art, Bulgarian music went relatively faster in closing the gap with European countries, with their age old traditions. Opera writing went more slowly, due mainly to modest creative experience in the endeavor to establish a contemporary national style.

In any case, in the context of overall modernization, Bulgarians opted for an opera (at least insofar as we are talking about the art of the musical scene) that would focus not on the attractive, the entertaining and the spectacular, but on what was near to their idea of good behavior in the context of patriarchy. People asked of the opera a "sentimental education", a nobility of feeling, and also a heightened social prestige. The opera was seen as something that should soften behavior, and not just fill one's leisure time. In supplying that demand, opera, with its sweet music and high morality, with its highly understandable happenings, heroines and heroes, historically played the role of a *sui generis* Trojan horse in the penetration of the modern European musical tradition in Bulgaria.

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