

The History of Belarusian Opera Art

And the Role of the Chorus in operas by Belarusian Composers

by Yury Karaev

In the eighteenth century the development of music education and professionalism caused the appearance of numerous private music theaters on the territory of present-day Belarus, which invited conductors, composers, teachers and performers to work there. In the first instance, researchers attribute this period of musical and theatrical flourishing to the fact that the aristocracy started to take more interest in musical and theatrical genres which required a considerable amount of financing.

The opera "Agatka" by J. D. Golland (1746-1827) is considered to be the first national Belarusian opera created by a professional composer. It was staged on 17 September 1784 in Nesvizh in honor of the arrival of the king of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Stanislav August. The opera was a great success and was staged several times in Warsaw (1785, 1788, 1791, 1799, 1820), Lvov (1796-1799), Lublin (1786), Krakov (1815) and Poznan (1826). The music of the opera displays the main features of J. D. Golland's style as a follower of the Viennese and Berlin schools. At the same time the melodic patterns of the music performed by the lyric characters and employed for dancing were also influenced by Slavic folklore.

Unfortunately, numerous opera scores by famous composers who worked on the territory of Belarus in the 18th and 19th

centuries disappeared without trace, or only their fragments have been preserved. These include the operas "The changed philosopher" by M. K. Oginsky (staged in 1771), "Ill-gotten gains never prosper" by J. D. Goland (1780-1782), "Voit of the Village in Alba", also by J. D. Goland (staged in 1785-1786) and "The Competition of Musicians" and "Village Girl" by S. Moniuschko. Moreover, it is difficult to study the manuscripts of those works which have come down to us because many of them currently are held in musical archives beyond the borders of the modern Republic of Belarus. In the first instance this refers to the works of S. Moniuschko: "Recruit Conscriptio" (staged on 10 October 1841) and "Miraculous Water" (staged in the 1840s in Vilnius). The fragments of these works are currently kept by the Warsaw Musical Society.

A new phase of the development of the art of national opera is connected with the opening in 1938 of the State Theater for Opera and Ballet of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Numerous stagings of foreign operatic masterpieces as well as of Belarusian national operas took place there from 1938 to 1940: "Mikhas' Padgorny" by E. K. Tsikotsky, "In the Woods of Palesse" by A. V. Bogatyryov and "The Flower of Happiness" by A. E. Turenkov are among these.

During World War II the staff of the theatre were evacuated from Minsk, and the building of the theater was seriously damaged. The opening of the reconstructed theater was marked by the première of one of the best national operas, "Kastus' Kalinouski" by D. A. Lukas. The pre-war repertoire was fully restored only by the year 1949. Operas staged in the late 1940s and 1950s represented the very best of Belarusian opera theatre. Among them were operas by E. K. Tsikotsky and A. E. Turenkov as well as works by A. V. Bogatyryov: "Nadezhda Durova" (1947), Yu. V. Semeniako: "Thorny Rose" (1960), "When the leaves fall" (1968), "Star Venus" (1970) and "Your Spring" (1962) by E. A. Glebov and "Song about Fate" by V. G. Muliavin. The distinguishing features of the national operas

of this period are their use of the people's liberation as subject matter and their tense dramatic plots, closely connected with the events of World War II. It is also worth mentioning that the choral episodes that supply the background for the action have an everyday (genre) nature, which adds a certain national coloring to the operas. Composers often use quotations from popular songs and dances, various types of popular lyric and stylized war songs. The national and historic foundation of operatic works of that period contributed to the establishment of the chorus as one of the main acting characters.

The modern period of the development of operatic art is connected to the flourishing of composers' activity and starts in the 1970s. During the first half of the 20th century the national school of composing was developing under the strong influence of the Russian school (both in stylistic and artistic aspects). Only by the middle of the 1970s did the impact of postmodernism and the active synchronization of the national musical and theatrical process with the European one enable the artistic system of contemporary opera art to renew itself.

The beginning of this most recent phase of the development of Belarusian operatic art is often linked to the staging of the opera "Giordano Bruno" by S. Cortes (1977), which touched upon the burning problems of modern society and its outlook on the world. The author's original interpretation of Giordano Bruno's life shaped to fit the genre of "philosophic and journalistic action with oratorical features and traits of hagiographical drama" raised much interest from audiences as well as from musical specialists. The dominating role of the chorus consists in building plotlines, in vivid structural and compositional orientation, which is expressed in the function of uniting and framing of certain episodes, as well as permeating the opera as a whole. The fact should also be highlighted that the text of the chorus's part is symbolic,

which is displayed through metaphorical perspectives in the text that allow us to perceive the action beyond the boundaries of time and place.

Other operatic works of S. Cortes include “Mother Courage” (1980) and “Visit of a Lady” (1989). In both, the importance of the part of the chorus part in building basic plotlines of the operas, defining the time and place of action, cannot be underestimated. The introduction of the chorus contributes to the vivid representation of the culminating phases of the opera. With the help of choral sonority the composer manages to produce cinematographic effects of “stopframe”, “montage” and “dissolve view”, using choral scenes to highlight such inherent traits of the parable genre as allusiveness, semantic duality, and also the introduction of character-commentators.



S. A. Cortes

Other composers, too, enlist the help of the chorus to supply similar dramaturgic devices, for example Yu. V. Semeniako in “New Land” (1978), D. B. Smolsky in “Ancient Legend” (1978) and “Francisk Skoryna” (1988), V. E. Soltan in “King Stach’s Wild Hunt” (1988) and “Lady Yadviga” (1990) and E. A. Glebov

in "Master and Margarita" (1992). Thus it can be stated that one of the distinguishing features of the style of the Belarusian national musical theatre is the exceptional importance of the opera chorus. The most recent "big" national opera was composed comparatively long ago. In 1992 the Belarusian National Theater of Opera and Ballet decided to stage the opera "The Prince of Novogrudok" by A. V. Bondarenko. The plot tells us about historic events during the formation of the Great Lithuanian Principality in the middle of the 13th century. The historic foundation and vivid spiritual and religious coloring of the plot determined the genre of this opera, in which choral scenes are undoubtedly the dominant part of the musical and dramaturgic action as a whole. This can be proved by the way opera specialists categorize "The Prince of Novogrudok": "opera-oratory", "epic choral opera", "historical drama", "choral opera".



A. V . Bondarenko

In the operas by Belarusian composers choral scenes often play the main role in the development of the musical and dramaturgic action, but in this context "The Prince of Novogrudok" is almost unique. Large-scale choral scenes draw

up the Christian and pagan plotlines of the opera, and it's the epic aspect represented by the chorus that performs the unifying function within the opera. The choral part, as well as dialogues and ensembles, allows the immediate action of the opera to develop, and the chorus is an active participant in this, taking part in the action and commenting on it on behalf of the author; the voice of the chorus has both general and subjective meaning. The chorus sympathizes with the characters and "rises above" the action, generalizing what is going on on-stage from the point of view of modern time and history.

The opera "The Prince of Novogrudok" was not only a landmark in the history of national opera art, but also embraced the tendency of returning to a spiritual and Christian outlook in musical and theatrical genres. Religious music, which was prohibited during the Soviet period (1917–1980s), again began to penetrate into secular genres such as cantata, oratory, symphony with chorus and opera. This is probably connected to the fact that such works embrace numerous topics and ideas which are highly significant to the composers and lie at the core of their spiritual and creative activity.