

Jernej Weiss

Pedagoška fakulteta, Univerza v Mariboru  
Faculty of Pedagogy, University of Maribor

# Wagner on Ljubljana's Concert and Opera Stages

## Wagner na ljubljanskih koncertnih in opernih odrih

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### IZVLEČEK

Članek prikazuje najpomembnejše mejnike v ljubljanski koncertni in operni poustvarjalnosti del Richarda Wagnerja. V povezavi s programskimi usmeritvami vodilnih glasbenih institucij v 19. in 20. stoletju na Slovenskem in sočasnimi kulturno-političnimi spremembami skuša določiti razloge za (ne)uprizorjanje Wagnerjevih del in tako opraviti z nekaterimi pri nas žal še vedno aktualnimi stereotipi, povezanimi z Wagnerjevo glasbo.

### ABSTRACT

The contribution presents the most important milestones in Ljubljana's concert and opera stagings of Richard Wagner's works. In connection with the programme orientations of the leading music institutions in the 19th and 20th centuries in Slovenia and the concurrent cultural-political changes, it attempts to determine the reasons for the (non)staging of Wagner's works and in this way deal with some of the, unfortunately, still existing stereotypes related to Wagner's music in Slovenia.

If anyone, then it is Wagner and his music that always arouse many conflicting emotions. On the one side, his admirers transform into true Wagnerian worshippers who often make pilgrimages to the mecca of Wagner's music, Bayreuth, while his opponents are usually unwilling to perceive Wagner merely as a genial composer, but reproach this in reality often anti-Semitic artist and his music – which was evidently abused by various despots before, during and after Second World War – primarily with having a major ideological impact in the historical transformation of the world.

It is therefore not surprising that Wagner's earlier masterpieces, in which he evidently started to choose new ways of expression, had met with sharp opposition in his native Germany and triggered a strong wave of complaints from both audiences and critics. Nevertheless, his operas *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* were from the mid 19th century onward constantly performed on most of the leading opera stages around the world.<sup>1</sup>

While the sounds of Wagner's revolutionary music were shaking up all major opera theatres in the Habsburg Monarchy, the central German music theatre in Ljubljana, also known as the Ljubljana Provincial Theatre (Deželno gledališče v Ljubljani), was, due to its poor financial situation and temporary visiting ensembles, far away from such artistic intentions.<sup>2</sup> Although the Provincial Theatre did not have the capabilities for performing Wagner's operas in the mentioned period, certain possibilities for Ljubljana's audiences to become acquainted with Wagner's music nevertheless existed already in the mid 19th century. The credit for the fact that Wagner's music first publicly sounded in Ljubljana goes to the Ljubljana Philharmonic Society (Filharmonična družba v Ljubljani), which, in comparison with other cities, relatively early, in 1858, included individual pieces from Wagner's operas in its concert programs.<sup>3</sup>

## Wagner's Works in the Concert Programmes of the Ljubljana Philharmonic Society

The Ljubljana Philharmonic Society was the leading concert institution in Slovenia in the pre-war period. Founded as early as in 1794, the Society began its significant rise in 1856 with the arrival of an exceptional Czech musician, Anton Nedvĕd, who just two years later became Musical Director of the Society.<sup>4</sup> As an excellent bass-baritone who had been performing both at the Prague and Brno opera theatres, Nedvĕd realised the exceptional meaning of Wagner's music even before his arrival in Ljubljana.<sup>5</sup> Under his direction, Wagner's first piece was performed for the Slovenian public on 19th March 1858 – the famous Sailor's Song (Matrosenlied) chorus from *The Flying Dutchman*.<sup>6</sup> So thanks to Nedvĕd, the concert public listened to several concert performances of excerpts from Wagner's operas in subsequent seasons as well. It is therefore not surprising that Ljubljana's main newspaper, *Laibacher Zeitung*, soon recognised Nedvĕd's merits for

<sup>1</sup> The most important region for the production of his works in the second half of the 19th century was, besides his homeland, certainly the Habsburg monarchy, where *Tannhäuser* was premiered in Graz as early as on 20th January 1854. Gernot Gruber, "Art. Nachmärz und Ringstraßenzeit", in *Musikgeschichte Österreichs* (Wien: Böhlau, 1995), 46. See also: Roswitha Karpf, "Die erste Tannhäuser-Aufführung in Graz", in *Historisches Jahrbuch der Stadt Graz* (Graz: Stadt Graz, 1975), 165–184 and Erdmute Tarjan, "Oper und Singspiel in Graz", in *Musik in der Steiermark* (Graz: Styria, 1980), 285–286.

<sup>2</sup> Jože Sivec, "Wagner na slovenski glasbeni sceni", in *Opera na ljubljanskih odrih od klasicizma do 20. stoletja* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2010), 201.

<sup>3</sup> Primož Kuret, *Ljubljanska filharmonična družba 1794–1919* (Ljubljana: Nova revija, 2005), 595.

<sup>4</sup> Jernej Weiss, *Češki glasbeniki v 19. in na začetku 20. stoletja na Slovenskem* (Maribor: Litera & Univerza v Mariboru, 2012), 179.

<sup>5</sup> Weiss, *Češki glasbeniki ...*, 175.

<sup>6</sup> The reviewer in the *Laibacher Zeitung* wrote: "The particularity of this representative of music of the future was to a smaller extent, but not fully, shown with the Matrosenlied choir. If we wished to discover it in its fulness, we would have to listen to the entire composition [...]." *Laibacher Zeitung*, March 20, 1858.

the reproduction of Wagner's music, which "guides us towards the future"<sup>7</sup>. Namely, at that time the still mainly German-speaking bourgeois concert public in Ljubljana was becoming increasingly more enthusiastic about Wagner's music, which resulted in a steadily growing demand for his works.

In the following years, the concert public of that time was able to hear a number of symphonic and also a few chamber concerts of Wagner's music. On 22nd April 1880, the Philharmonic Society achieved an overwhelming success with an evening of Wagner's music in an almost sold-out concert hall. Only two performances were on the repertoire: first the violinist Hans Gerstner and pianist Josef Zöhrer played Wagner's *Albumblatt*, which was followed by the entire first act of the music drama *The Valkyrie*, with piano accompaniment. The *Laibacher Zeitung* devoted a feuilleton to the concert, in which an unsigned critic wrote that "the question for or against Wagner is no longer relevant in Slovenia"<sup>8</sup>. Evidently, after the birth of certain Slovenian music institutions, primarily the central Slovenian music institution *Glasbena matica* in 1872, Wagner's music raised quite a number of questions for or against Wagner among the mixed Slovenian-German speaking citizens.<sup>9</sup>

Especially after the arrival of a new musical director, Viennese musician Joseph Zöhrer, in the year of Wagner's death in 1883, the number of Wagner's works performed at philharmonic concerts increased strongly. Thus, in the storms of enthusiasm sparked among the public by the performances of the above-mentioned compositions, the question whether Ljubljana, too, was becoming a "Wagnerian city"<sup>10</sup> was repeatedly being asked in the music reviews of that time. Very frequent were the so-called memorial concerts held on several of Wagner's anniversaries, which were subjected to various ensemble improvisations due to the inconsistent orchestra membership of the Philharmonic Society. One such concert took place on 5th March 1883 with a performance of the Overture to the opera *Tannhäuser*, at which the Philharmonic Society paid tribute to the memory of "a great master of music, the greatest musician of the present times, Richard Wagner", who died on 13th February<sup>11</sup>. The fifth anniversary of the composer's death was celebrated at a Wagnerian evening where, among others, the first act of the opera *The Valkyrie* was performed once again, with piano accompaniment. This was why, only a few days later, one of the most influential reviewers at the *Laibacher Zeitung* and certainly one of the best connoisseurs of Wagner's music of that time in Slovenia, Julius Ohm Januschowsky<sup>12</sup>, did not keep silent about his reservations regarding the replacement of the orchestral part with piano,<sup>13</sup> which seemed particularly controversial to his perception of Wagner's music. Hence it seems that already in

<sup>7</sup> *Laibacher Zeitung*, April 4, 1859.

<sup>8</sup> *Laibacher Zeitung*, April 24, 1880.

<sup>9</sup> In the 19th century, Ljubljana was the capital of the crown land of Carniola in the Habsburg Monarchy. The capital had a population of approximately 30,000, of which 5000 to 6000 were German speaking citizens. Primož Kuret, "Wagner in den Konzert- und Opernprogrammen vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg in Ljubljana/Laibach", in *Richard Wagner - Persönlichkeit, Werk und Wirkung* (Leipzig: Sax Verlag, 2013), 471.

<sup>10</sup> *Laibacher Zeitung*, December 21, 1880.

<sup>11</sup> *Laibacher Zeitung*, March 5, 1883.

<sup>12</sup> Januschowsky has seen numerous stagings of Wagner's opera in Bayreuth, Vienna and Graz. Weiss, *Češki glasbeniki ...*, 481-484.

<sup>13</sup> *Laibacher Zeitung*, March 5, 1883.

the 1880's, Ljubljana's critics and audiences were not pleased with the less complete performances of Wagner's music on piano,<sup>14</sup> but expected increasingly better results also as regards performance from the then management of the Philharmonic Society headed by Zöhrer.

Criticism towards the performance practice of Wagner's works even increased after the construction of a new philharmonic building named *Tonnhalle* in 1891. In the spring of 1893, a famous star of the Vienna Court opera, Amalie Friedrich-Materna, was among the first artists to perform some of Wagner's most important arias in the new philharmonic hall.<sup>15</sup> She was certainly one of the greatest Wagnerian sopranos of her time. Thus she sang the role of Brünnhilda 151 times between 1877 and 1894 at the Vienna Court opera.<sup>16</sup>



Picture 1: The new "Tonnhalle" building of the Philharmonic Society in Ljubljana built in 1891 (Source: Emil Bock, *Die Philharmonische Gesellschaft in Laibach 1702–1902*, Laibach: Direktion der Philharmonischen Gesellschaft, 24).

<sup>14</sup> This was the most common performance practice until then, since the Philharmonic Society did not have a permanent orchestra ensemble in Ljubljana.

<sup>15</sup> On 26th June 1870 she sang Brünnhilda in a worldwide premiere of *The Valkyrie* in Munich on 26th July 1882, and also shone in the role of Kundry at the world premiere of *Parsifal* in Bayreuth.

<sup>16</sup> "Vorstellungen mit Amalie Friedrich-Materna", *Homepage der Wiener Staatsoper*, accessed July 19, 2013, <http://db-staatsoper.die-antwort.eu/search/person/5959>.

Among the more important concerts of Wagner's music in the new philharmonic hall, the performance of the *Berliner Philharmoniker* under the leadership of the famous conductor, Hans Richter, should be mentioned, which took place on 28th April 1901.<sup>17</sup> Richter was reputed as one of the greatest interpreters of Wagner's music in his time, who had participated as Assistant Conductor in the Munich premiering of Wagner's *The Master-Singers of Nuremberg* as early as in 1868, and more than three decades later presented an overture of this work to the Ljubljana public.

Another first-class event in the exceptionally rich performance history of philharmonic concerts was the guest performance on 8th March 1903 of the *Berliner Tonkünstler Orchestra* under the conduction of Richard Strauss.<sup>18</sup> At this concert, Strauss also performed the previously mentioned overture that had been presented to the Ljubljana public for the first time already in 1896.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of the obvious performance progress, the always extremely critical Januschowsky wrote, after one of the many concerts of Wagner's works at the turn of the century, that "Ljubljana in comparison to other cities was falling behind in the realisation of Wagner's stage works [...]"<sup>20</sup>. His criticism was more or less justified, because at that time a large number of Wagner's stage music compositions had still not been performed in Ljubljana. But Januschowsky's warnings did not remain unheard. Just before the end of the century, Ljubljana's audiences became acquainted with fragments from *Tristan and Isolde* and *Parsifal*.<sup>21</sup> So, at the beginning of the 20th century, fragments from almost all of the Wagner's masterpieces were at least orchestrally performed at philharmonic concerts.

Until the beginning of the first WW, Wagner's music was thus played at different concerts of the Ljubljana Philharmonic Society, which, according to more than 80 concerts with Wagner's music, places the composer in high second place among composers of the second half of the 19th century, immediately after Brahms.<sup>22</sup> By the number of stagings of his orchestra works alone, he even surpasses Brahms. Therefore, at concerts of the Philharmonic Society held before the beginning of the First World War, Wagner was the most frequently performed composer in Slovenia, which from today's perspective is almost inconceivable.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Kuret, *Ljubljanska filharmonična družba ...*, 301–303, 706.

<sup>18</sup> Kuret, *Ljubljanska filharmonična družba ...*, 318–319, 718.

<sup>19</sup> Kuret, *Ljubljanska filharmonična družba ...*, 696.

<sup>20</sup> *Laibacher Zeitung*, January 30, 1901.

<sup>21</sup> On 6th March 1898, the Philharmonic Society in Ljubljana hosted a concert performance of Good Friday Magic from *Parsifal*, and on 27 November 1898 the Overture to and Isolde's Love-Death from *Tristan and Isolde*. Kuret, *Ljubljanska filharmonična družba ...*, 700–701.

<sup>22</sup> Kuret, *Ljubljanska filharmonična družba ...*, 595–770. See also: Sara Železnik, *Koncertni sporedi Filharmonične družbe 1816–1872* (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2013), 390 pp.

<sup>23</sup> Yet in contrast to Brahms (1885), Wagner did not become an honorary member of the Ljubljana Philharmonic Society. Especially Josef Zöhrer was one of the strongest promoters of Brahms's music. Ivan Klemenčič, "Častni člani ljubljanske filharmonične družbe", in *Evropski glasbeni klasicizem in njegov odmev na Slovenskem* (Ljubljana: SAZU, 1988), 123–134.

## Wagner's Numerous Opera Performances up to the Beginning of the First World War

### *German Opera at the Ljubljana Provincial Theatre*

The situation regarding Wagner's opera performances was by all means less favourable than that of his orchestral performances. Due to changing artistic ensembles and the consequently lower income, the opera at the Ljubljana Provincial Theatre encountered considerable difficulties. It was not until the arrival in the early 1870's of a new music director, Josef Kotzian-Kotzky, previously a longstanding opera director in Salzburg, the complexity of opera performances gradually began to rise. Kotzky extended the previously dominant Italian and French repertoire by adding some German operas, among which he also placed *Tannhäuser*, whose first premiere in Slovenia was on 6th March 1874.<sup>24</sup> The opera audience and critics were enthusiastic.<sup>25</sup> However, the first staging of Wagner's opera didn't bring any major changes in the program policy of the mentioned theatre. Certainly one of the main reasons why this was only the first and for a long time the only entirely performed Wagnerian opera in Slovenia were the limited stage possibilities at the Provincial Theatre. Namely, the operas of the Bayreuth master demanded a much larger theatrical and orchestral infrastructure than what the very small Ljubljana theatre had to offer.

In the year of *Tannhäuser's* premiere in Ljubljana, a number of other events helped to augment Wagner's popularity in Slovenia. Emil Scaria (Škarja), a bass-baritone of Slovenian descent,<sup>26</sup> was on 22nd May 1872 the first Slovenian singer to be accepted as a member of the Vienna Court Opera.<sup>27</sup> Scaria was certainly one of the most important Wagnerian bassists of his time. Among his many successful Wagnerian roles was that of Knight Gurnemanz on 26th July 1882 at the world premiere of *Parsifal* in Bayreuth under the conduction of the master himself. After one of the repetitions of *Parsifal*, Scaria is even said to have turned to Wagner with the words: "by the word King I miss the solemn tympani in the orchestra"<sup>28</sup>. Wagner supposedly accepted his suggestion and subsequently included the timpani in the score.

In spite of its promising beginnings, the financial breakdown of the Provincial Theatre at the end of the 1870's once again stopped the performances of Wagner's operas for a decade and a half. So until the autumn of 1892, when a new theatre building was built in Ljubljana after the old theatre burnt down in 1887, which became the location of

<sup>24</sup> Sivec, *Opera na ljubljanskih odrih ...*, 203. Compared to the other capitals of the former Yugoslavia, this is not too bad. The opera in Zagreb had the first staging of Wagner's opera (*Lohengrin*) in 1895, and the Belgrade opera not before 1923, when *The Flying Dutchman* was staged for the first time. However, it should be mentioned that the Opera of the National Theatre in Belgrade did not begin to work as an independent ensemble until 1919. Melita Milin, "Die Rezeption der Werke Richard Wagners in Serbien", *Richard Wagner: Persönlichkeit, Werk und Wirkung* (Leipzig: Sax Verlag, 2013), 465.

<sup>25</sup> *Laibacher Zeitung*, March 7, 1874.

<sup>26</sup> Scaria was born on 18th September 1838 in Graz, where his father, a doctor from Kranj (Slovenia), was employed at the time. Kuret, "Wagner in den Konzert- und Opernprogrammen vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg in Ljubljana/Laibach ...", 475.

<sup>27</sup> "Vorstellungen mit Emil Scaria", *Homepage der Wiener Staatsoper*, accessed September 13, 2013, <http://db-staatsoper.die-antwort.eu/search/person/5964>.

<sup>28</sup> Werner Otto, *Richard Wagner, Ein Lebens- und Charakterbild in Dokumenten und zeitgenössischen Darstellungen* (Berlin: Buchverlag der Morgen, 1990), 616. See also: Kuret, "Wagner in den Konzert- und Opernprogrammen vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg in Ljubljana/Laibach ...", 476.



*Picture 2: The old German Opera building at the Ljubljana Provincial Theatre, which was destroyed by fire in February 1887 (Source: Emil Bock, *Die Philharmonische Gesellschaft in Laibach 1702–1902*, Laibach: Direktion der Philharmonischen Gesellschaft, 10).*

both the Slovenian and German Provincial Theatres, there were no stagings of Wagner's operas in Ljubljana. However, the new director of the German opera, Rudolf Frinke, managed to put together an ensemble with soloists from Bratislava, Posen, Klagenfurt and Troppau for a short cycle of opera performances, during which the premiere of Wagner's *Lohengrin* was presented on 12th April 1893 as the second Wagnerian opera

staged in Slovenia.<sup>29</sup> Although the theatre was sold out, the opera was staged only once. A reviewer at the *Laibacher Zeitung* wrote that this opera represents one of the most important cultural events in Ljubljana.<sup>30</sup> Yet the first production of *Lohengrin* in Slovenia was unfortunately an isolated example of surpassing the “lighter”, mainly operetta repertoire of the German Theatre.

### ***The Slovenian Opera at the Ljubljana Provincial Theatre***

Given the increasingly more distinct national divisions between the Slovenian and German citizenry in Ljubljana towards the end of the century, an interest in more sophisticated opera reproduction could surprisingly be seen at the end of the 19th century at the Slovenian Provincial Theatre, which opened its doors in the autumn of 1892. The opera's new director, Slovenian composer and tenor Fran Gerbič, together with an excellent Czech conductor, Hilarion Benišek<sup>31</sup>, was obviously well aware of the exceptional meaning of Wagner's works for the gradual development of opera in Slovenia. So if the Slovenian opera theatre wished to be equal to the German theatre at least in terms of quality, it certainly could not overlook Wagner's repertoire. At the turn of the century, the Slovenian theatre supported the performances of Wagner's music even much more systematically than the German theatre. So we can find Wagner's name on the repertoire of the majority of seasons from 1899/1900 to 1912/13, when the theatre was closed shortly before the war.

Largely owing to the Slovenian translations of Wagner's operas,<sup>32</sup> the interest of Slovenian audiences in Wagner's music was growing constantly. An unsigned critic of the magazine *Slovenski narod* (Slovenian Nation) enthusiastically wrote that after the performances of three of Wagner's operas – *Lohengrin*,<sup>33</sup> *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser*<sup>34</sup> – “our musical audiences finally understand even the most complex opera music”<sup>35</sup>. For utmost attractive staging, the theatre administration decided to reach

<sup>29</sup> Sivec, *Opera na ljubljanskih odrih ...*, 207.

<sup>30</sup> J., “Opern – Stagione”, *Laibacher Zeitung*, April 13, 1893.

<sup>31</sup> Hilarion (Hilarij) Benišek (14 Jan. 1863, Veliké Prosenice – 19 Sept. 1919, Belgrade), conductor. After completing secondary school in Píerov, he studied philosophy at Charles University in Prague. From 1889–1990 he was bandmaster of the František Trnky Society. In December 1890 he became a member of the Jan Pišték theatre family (1890–1892), which performed in Plzeň. In 1892 he joined the Ladislav Chmelenský theatre family (1892–1894), with which he went in 1893 on a long tour to Vienna and in 1894 to Dalmatia. He left the theatre family in December 1894 after being engaged as a conductor at the Slovenian Provincial Theatre (1894–1910). In this period he participated as conductor at almost all stage-music productions at this theatre. Particularly noteworthy were his endeavours to perform certain Slovenian stage music works. Among these, the operas that were premiered at the Slovenian Provincial Theatre under his conduction were *Gorenjski slavček* by Anton Foerster (30th October 1896), *Ksenija* by Viktor Parma (5th January 1897), and the operetta *Caričine amazonke* by Viktor Parma (24th March 1903). He also contributed as a composer, particularly music for folk plays with singing (*Around the World in 80 Days* by Adolph Denny and *Miklova Zala* by Jakob Špicar). He was also among those reproducers who put some of Wagner's works on the repertoire of the Slovenian Provincial Theatre. In the 1901/02 season, Benišek was replaced as conductor by Bogomil Tomáš, and in the 1909/10 season the staging of operettas at the theatre was assumed by Václav Talich. In 1910 he went to Belgrade, where he worked as a private teacher and headed various salon orchestras. During World War I (1914–1916) he was interned in Macedonia and then returned to Belgrade in 1917, where he died after the end of the First World War. Weiss, *Češki glasbeniki ...*, 245.

<sup>32</sup> Particularly *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser* in the translation by Anton Štrifof (1859–1917).

<sup>33</sup> On 19th January 1899 *Lohengrin* was staged for the first time in the Slovenian language.

<sup>34</sup> *Tannhäuser* was first staged in Slovenian on 20th December 1900.

<sup>35</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 1899, no. 14.



deep into the treasury and pay more than 1000 florins for new costumes that arrived from Berlin. The reports of critics undeniably reveal enormous national enthusiasm and pride at the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>36</sup> The most resounding of Wagner's operas staged in the period discussed was the premiere of *The Flying Dutchman* on 27th January 1900 under the conduction of the previously mentioned Benišek.<sup>37</sup> The Slovenian theatre thus even surpassed the German theatre, as this was the first staging of this opera in Slovenia.<sup>38</sup> Alongside *Parsifal*, this was Wagner's only opera that was first staged at the Slovenian theatre.

From today's perspective, the 1910/11 season was particularly successful, because two exceptional conductors took their place before the orchestra of the Provincial Theatre: the then twenty-seven-year-old Czech, Václav Talich, and his five years younger Hungarian colleague, Friderik (later Fritz) Reiner. At that time, Talich was principal conductor of the Slovenian Philharmonic,<sup>39</sup> newly established in 1908, and Reiner was the new principal conductor of the Provincial Theatre. And what a coincidence: Reiner, who was later surely one of the most important conductors of Wagnerian music of all time, had to stage *Tannhäuser* as one of his first tasks in Ljubljana's theatre. Alongside *Lohengrin* and *The Flying Dutchman*, this was one of the most popular Wagnerian operas in Slovenia. To make the challenge even more difficult, the young and inexperienced Reiner, accompanied by only 35 permanent orchestra members<sup>40</sup> had to study, conduct and even stage the opera all by himself. So, for the very first time in his life, he struggled with a great Wagnerian opera as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This certainly was a rare opportunity which, until then, had been given to very few conductors, that is, to shape one of Wagner's masterpieces in all its greatness. The successful premiere of *Tannhäuser* on 27th November 1910 was followed by four repetitions until the end of 1910.<sup>41</sup>

Although at the turn of the century one would not expect to find Wagner on the stage of the Slovenian Provincial Theatre due to the growing opposition between Slovenian and Habsburg orientated citizens, exactly the opposite was true. Under Gerbič's leadership, the number of stagings of Wagnerian operas in this theatre was extremely high. And so at the beginning of the 20th century in both opera houses operating in Slovenia – German and Slovenian – Wagner was represented as never before and never afterwards.<sup>42</sup>

## Renaissance of Wagner's Music at the Slovenian National Theatre Opera and Ballet Ljubljana in the Interwar Period

After the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918, the activities of Ljubljana's opera house were renewed. However, the initial circumstances

<sup>36</sup> *Slovenski narod*, 1899, nos. 14–17, 19–20, 23, 26. See also: *Slovenec*, 1899, nos. 14, 16, 18, 24, 28.

<sup>37</sup> Ed. Dušan Moravec, *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč 1867–1967* (Ljubljana: Slovenski gledališki muzej, 1967), 185.

<sup>38</sup> Fran Gerbič, "Večni mornar [*The Flying Dutchman*]", *Glasbena Zora*, 2 (1900): 7, 10, 14.

<sup>39</sup> Weiss, *Češki glasbeniki ...*, 388–414.

<sup>40</sup> Weiss, *Češki glasbeniki ...*, 235.

<sup>41</sup> In this period, the number of season ticket holders in Ljubljana filled four opera theatres. Moravec, *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč ...*, 200.

<sup>42</sup> For example, in the 1906/07 season no less than three Wagnerian operas were staged in Ljubljana: *The Flying Dutchman*, *Lohengrin* and *The Valkyrie*.

were not too favourable for Wagner's music. The reason for this lay in the fact that the theatre's principal, Friderik Rukavina, was not too artistically inclined towards German opera.<sup>43</sup> It seems that in the post-war demonstration of power over everything German, guided by Slovenian composer and jurist, Anton Lajovic, under the influence of his famous article later published in the central Slovenian daily newspaper of that time, *Slovenec* (The Slovenian), "on the eternal beauties and poison of Beethoven's, Bach's and Wagner's works"<sup>44</sup>, Rukavina also accepted the cultural politics that was rejecting everything German. The fact that this was not merely one of Lajovic's caprices, but an increasingly more established ideological doctrine, is also evident from the writings of a post-war cultural ideologist, Josip Vidmar.<sup>45</sup> In an essay dating from 1932, entitled "Kulturni problem slovenstva" (The Cultural Issue of Slovenianness), Vidmar wrote: "I have often wondered why examples of horrific human vampirism so frequently appear in the German nation"<sup>46</sup>. These and similar outbursts were common in the mentioned period. Immediately after the end of the First World War, both the German Opera and the Philharmonic Society in Ljubljana, which was also considered a German institution, were dissolved.

Fortunately, the situation regarding Wagner's operas changed in 1925, soon after the artistic leadership of the central opera house had been taken over by the previous conductor of the Trieste National Theatre, Mirko Polič, who multiplied the number of instrumentalists in the orchestra, and reorganized the soloist ensemble as well. One of the young singers who managed to attract spectators to Ljubljana's opera house for a short time was the famous Slovenian<sup>47</sup> opera singer Anton Dermota, who later appeared at the Vienna State Opera in the role of David in *The Master Singers of Nuremberg*, and is also known for his recording of the Shepherd in the opera *Tristan and Isolde* under the conduction of Carlos Kleiber.

Unlike his forerunner, Polič systematically promoted Wagner. Very soon, Wagner once again occupied the place he deserved in the repertoire of the Slovenian theatre, and remained an important part of it until the beginning of the Second World War. In his very first opera season, after not a single Wagnerian opera had been performed on Ljubljana's stage for thirteen years, Polič staged on 17th February 1926 *The Flying Dutchman*, which was performed as many as 23 times.<sup>48</sup> The opera aroused great interest from both the public as well as critics. Writer and critic Fran Govekar wrote that such enthusiasm should be a waymark for the management to devote even more attention to Wagner's creativity in future. He remarked that we had nothing to fear from Wagner, because he would always attract and satisfy our audiences again and again.<sup>49</sup>

An adequate response and the fulfilment of expressed desires were not long in coming. At the beginning of the next season, Polič included *Tannhäuser* in the opera

<sup>43</sup> Sivec, *Opera na ljubljanskih odrih ...*, 215.

<sup>44</sup> Anton Lajovic, "O večnih krasotah in o strupu Beethovnovih, Bachovih in Wagnerjevih del", *Slovenec*, April 6, 1924.

<sup>45</sup> Katarina Bedina, "Slovenska percepcija Richarda Wagnerja – Wagnerjanstva in Wagnerizma do tridesetih let dvajsetega stoletja", in *Zbornik ob jubileju Jožeta Sivca* (Ljubljana: Slovensko muzikološko društvo in ZRC SAZU, 2000), 194–195.

<sup>46</sup> Josip Vidmar, *Kulturni problem slovenstva* (Ljubljana: Tiskovna zadruga, 1932), 43.

<sup>47</sup> Later on he also obtained Austrian citizenship.

<sup>48</sup> Moravec, *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč ...*, 218.

<sup>49</sup> *Jutro*, 1926, nos. 40, 42.

programme, and also significantly contributed to the expansion and enrichment of the repertoire of Ljubljana's opera house with the first Slovenian staging of the opera *The Valkyrie* (on 17th November 1929),<sup>50</sup> which had already been performed at the German Opera on 20th February 1907.<sup>51</sup> On 14th April 1933, *Parsifal* was staged in Slovenia for the first time, in a translation by Marjan Rus.<sup>52</sup> With this performance of Wagner's last masterpiece, the Slovenian theatre wished to pay tribute to Wagner on the fiftieth anniversary of his death. It should be mentioned that both of these operas, as well as all other Wagnerian operas performed until then on Slovenian opera stages, were strictly sung in Slovenian. In particular Anton Štritof's translations of *The Flying Dutchman* and *Tannhäuser* perfectly captured the essence of these operas.

The period between the two wars brought yet another famous protagonist of Wagnerian roles: Julij Betteto, a Slovenian bass who, alongside Ljubljana, sang as many as ten leading Wagnerian bass roles in Vienna and Munich.<sup>53</sup> Already in Ljubljana, he gave a brilliant performance as Daland in *The Flying Dutchman*. Critics in particular praised his acting abilities. "With such a voice and performance as Mr. Betteto has, it is easy to win over the public"<sup>54</sup>, wrote Fran Govekar after one of his performances. Betteto was by all means one of the greatest interpreters of Wagner's operas in Slovenia, and one of the leading Slovenian bass singers of all time. Among other things he masterfully reproduced, on several occasions, one of the most difficult and longest bass roles – that of Gurnemanz in *Parsifal*. Polič's departure from the Opera house in 1939 was again followed by a dry period for Wagner's music in Slovenia.

It is therefore quite obvious that director Marko Polič was the one who, irrespective of the circumstances, pursued his artistic vision and included Wagner in the opera programme. Thanks to him, Wagner's works were among the most popular operas in Slovenia in the period between the two wars.

## Rare Stagings of Wagner's Works at the Slovenian National Theatre Opera and Ballet Ljubljana after Second World War

After 1945, Wagner was entirely overlooked in the repertoire of Ljubljana's opera house for quite some time. Although the strong artistic rise of opera began precisely in this period, the post-war repertoire – despite the return of Mirko Polič as director of the opera house from 1945 to 1948 – was ideologically correctly dedicated more or less to Slovenian and Slav operas of the 19th century. This was a purely logical consequence of the Second World War, which had left a greater mark on the world of music than all previous events. After the end of the Second World War, the opera's management thus attempted to achieve at least one goal: "to stage all new and so far unstaged or

<sup>50</sup> Moravec, *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč* ..., 224.

<sup>51</sup> Sivec, *Opera na ljubljanskih odrih* ..., 212. See also: *Laibacher Zeitung*, February 22, 1907.

<sup>52</sup> Moravec, *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč* ..., 231.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Bedjanič, "Wagner in Slovenci", in *Wagner na kratko* (Celje: Celjska Mohorjeva družba, 2009), 123.

<sup>54</sup> Ciril Cvetko, *Julij Betteto, umetnik, pedagog in organizator glasbenega solstva* (Ljubljana: Slovenski gledališki in filmski muzej, 1990), 67.

less known Slovenian operas and ballets.”<sup>55</sup> And more or less “forgot” about Wagner. So in the initial post-war years, one could observe some disinclination towards Wagner’s works, which can at least partly be attributed to the fact that his music seemed much too German.

The nonstaging of Wagner’s works was a more or less logical consequence of the Second World War, where one had to distinguish between winners and losers in all areas. According to the relatively precise instruction of the Central Department for Agitation and Propaganda (or “agitprop”), all communist members of the Eastern Block had to continue their cultural silence in the first years after the war as well. This meant that all cultural publics had to boycott all artistic events that were reminiscent of Nazi ideology.<sup>56</sup> So it seems more or less logical that, immediately after the end of the Second World War, Wagner could not be found in the repertoires of the main artistic performance institutions in Slovenia of that time.

A similar situation existed in all other former socialist republics of the Eastern Block, where, after the Second World War, Wagner’s operas were not to be found on repertoires until the mid 1950’s. Only a few years after Stalin’s death could the first signs of cultural liberalization be observed in the Eastern Block. Specially after the concert performance of *Lohengrin* at the Bolschoi Theatre on the 28th June 1956, the other countries of the Eastern Block were allowed a little more artistic freedom.<sup>57</sup> Thus, Wagner’s operas saw their first post-war stagings inside the Eastern Block on 7th November 1956 in Riga.<sup>58</sup>

In comparison to the Eastern Block the cultural-political situation in Yugoslavia from the beginning of the 1950’s onward was slightly more liberal. One should be aware that after Tito’s break with Stalin in 1948, the Yugoslav Communist Party was expelled from the Informbiro.<sup>59</sup> Stalin’s main reproach against Tito was precisely Yugoslavia’s departure from Marxist ideology. The real reason for the clash of titans was Tito’s desire for more independent decision-making in Yugoslav politics. Thus, at the Sixth Congress of the Yugoslav Communist Party in November 1952 in Zagreb, the Yugoslav agitprop apparatus was dissolved, which finally ended a period of the most brutal interference of politics in culture.<sup>60</sup>

It is therefore not unusual that Wagner’s first opera could be heard in the second Yugoslavia several years before its first post-war staging in the Eastern Block. Almost immediately after the mentioned liberalisation of cultural politics, it suddenly became necessary for Wagner to be staged again in Yugoslavia. So, less than two years after the “agitprop” was abolished, the central Yugoslav opera house staged *The Flying Dutchman* in Belgrade on the 5th May 1954 with great success.<sup>61</sup> Wagner’s stigma of being a messenger of German art was thus forgotten overnight and he became a true symbol

<sup>55</sup> Jože Sivec, *Dvesto let slovenske opere* (Ljubljana: Opera in Balet SNG, 1981), 43.

<sup>56</sup> Aleš Gabrič, “Slovenska agitpropovska kulturna politika”, *Borec* (Ljubljana: Založba Mladika, 1991), 481.

<sup>57</sup> Lolita Fürmane, “Über die Aufführungen einiger Werke Wagners in Riga: Inszenierungspraxis und Kulturkontexte”, *Richard Wagner: Persönlichkeit, Werk und Wirkung* (Leipzig: Sax Verlag, 2013), 388.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> “The period of the most serious interference of politics in culture ended after the Informbureau dispute between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union”. Aleš Gabrič, “Slovenska kultura v drugi Jugoslaviji”, in *Slovenska kultura in politika v Jugoslaviji*, (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 1999), 117.

<sup>60</sup> Gabrič, “Slovenska agitpropovska kulturna politika ...”, 650.

<sup>61</sup> Milin, “Die Rezeption der Werke Richard Wagners in Serbien ...”, 468.

of the Yugoslav national socialist cultural policy in its new, pragmatic struggle against the Soviet enemy.

Even the principal ideologist of Yugoslav “people’s democracy”, Edvard Kardelj, the top political leader of post-war Slovenia, from then on loved “titanic Beethoven and suggestive Wagner”<sup>62</sup>. It seems that between the communist leaders in Slovenia, Kardelj had the most practical views in culture. This is, among others, evident in his involvement in the polemic that appeared in Slovenia in the early 1950’s in connection with jazz music. At the fifth plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Slovenia held in mid February 1951 in Ljubljana, he stressed that “we would do a great deal more if we showed the people that our socialism is not so very boring as it appears at first glance, and that people are not forbidden [...] to laugh, dance, make fun, and do foolish things. We simply have to let people loosen up a little [...]”<sup>63</sup>. In short, the gloomy atmosphere from the first phase of Soviet “building of socialism” had to be driven away at all costs. Kardelj was therefore openly enthusiastic about “taking” life from the humorous side. Like Tito, he, too, enjoyed light music.<sup>64</sup> In contrast to numerous Slovenian apparatchiks who attempted to wipe the operetta from the face of the Earth, Kardelj did not find it harmful at all.

However, it is a fact that Kardelj’s refined aesthetic view of music was quite an isolated case in the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Slovenia. Unfortunately, even after the Yugoslav liberalisation of culture in the early 1950’s, Slovenia was still mainly dominated by a social-realist lack of taste.<sup>65</sup> Despite the fact that Yugoslav political leaders, including the last head of the Agitprop of the Central Committee of the Yugoslav League of Communists, Milovan Đilas<sup>66</sup> had made a 360-degree pragmatic turn in their views of culture already in the beginning of the 1950’s, the situation in Slovenia was more or less the opposite. The rejection of elements that were considered to be harmful to socialism, such as operetta, jazz, modern and church music,<sup>67</sup> as well as Wagner, more or less remained a common practice.

In particular Boris Zihlerl, the leading cultural ideologist of the Slovenian Communist Party and the last head of the Agitprop of the Central Committee of the Slovenian League of Communists, was also in the 1950’s quite extreme in his demands.<sup>68</sup> That is evident in his request that the art review “must be based on Marxist foundations”<sup>69</sup>. Particularly relentless was his attitude towards German art. After the staging of Strauss’s *The bat* in

<sup>62</sup> Josip Vidmar, *Obrazi* (Ljubljana: DZS in Založba Borec, 1985), 269.

<sup>63</sup> Aleš Gabrič, “Al prav se piše Županova Micka ali Predsednikova hči. Amaterski odri na Slovenskem 1945–1955”, *Zgodovina za vse: vse za zgodovino*, II, No. 2, (Celje: Zgodovinsko društvo, 1995), 50.

<sup>64</sup> In particular the Viennese operetta did not leave him indifferent. Vladimir Dedijer, *Josip Broz Tito: Prispevki za življenjepis* (Ljubljana: CZ, 1953), 736.

<sup>65</sup> Igor Grdina, “Opereta ali peklenski nesmisel”, in *Ideologija operete in dumajska moderna*, by Moritz Csáky (Ljubljana: Böhlau Verlag, 2001), 269. In the first half of the fifties, the leaders of the Slovenian League of Communists supported only the cultural-political concept of Boris Zihlerl. Aleš Gabrič, *Socialistična kulturna revolucija: Slovenska kulturna politika 1953–1962* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1995), 37.

<sup>66</sup> Already in the early fifties, Đilas’s views were much more liberal than the concurrent Slovenian standpoints. *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>67</sup> Jernej Weiss, “Vprašanje avtonomnosti glasbene kritike v slovenskem dnevnem časopisju ob praznovanju kantate Stara pravda Matije Tomca: med estetsko sodbo in političnim konstruktom”, *De musica disserenda* 3, no. 1 (Ljubljana: Muzikološki inštitut ZRC SAZU, 2005), 101–115.

<sup>68</sup> Aleš Gabrič, *Socialistična kulturna revolucija: Slovenska kulturna politika 1953–1962* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1995), 25–37.

<sup>69</sup> Boris Zihlerl, in *Naša sodobnost*, 1953, nos. 7–8, 577–585.

1954 in Ljubljana, Zihlerl stated in the Central Committee of the League of Communists that the reviews should in particular emphasize the renewed threat of German nationalist tendencies.<sup>70</sup>

With such statements it is, of course, not surprising that Wagner could only be heard in post-war Ljubljana two decades after the last performance of his opera in Slovenia. Not earlier than on the 6th March 1958 *The Flying Dutchman* was staged once again.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, also other German operas, except for Beethoven's *Fidelio* and Strauss's *The Knight of the Rose*, were not to be found on the repertoires of Ljubljana's opera house.<sup>72</sup> It thus seems that a more liberal cultural policy did not emerge in Slovenia until after the transition to the "casual sixties"<sup>73</sup> when it became evident that also the central Slovenian opera house could no longer avoid Wagner. The fact that Wagner was one of the first symptoms of the liberalisation of Slovenian cultural policy is ultimately evident also in the cycle of eight 60-minute programmes, with commentaries, broadcast by Radio Slovenia in 1960, entitled *Sketches from the Life of Richard Wagner*.<sup>74</sup> On 13th May 1961 the opera *Lohengrin* was staged as the second Wagnerian opera to be performed in Slovenia after the war, with an outstanding performance by Josip Gostič in the leading role.<sup>75</sup>

Alongside Gostič, some other soloists also deserve mention. One of these is Marjan Rus, a bass of the Vienna State Opera, who reproduced Klingsor and Titurel in *Parsifal*.<sup>76</sup> The prematurely deceased bass-baritone, Anton Orel, who appeared in the role of Landgrave Hermann in *Tannhäuser* at the Ljubljana opera house in the interwar period, also possessed all the dispositions of an exceptional interpreter of Wagnerian roles. Worth mentioning from the recent period is above all mezzo soprano Marjana Lipovšek. It is very regretful that Lipovšek, perhaps the greatest among Slovenia's Wagnerian singers, did not have the opportunity to perform any Wagnerian roles on Slovenian opera stages.

The reason for this lies in the fact that from the 1960's to the present, there were only three new stagings of Wagner's operas in Slovenia. On 24th May 1984 *The Flying Dutchman* was repeatedly staged with resounding success<sup>77</sup>. This opera was, besides *Lohengrin*, certainly the most popular and the most easily performable Wagnerian opera in Slovenia. Alongside the slightly changed repetition of *The Flying Dutchman* in 1987<sup>78</sup> and the staging of *The Flying Dutchman* on 18th January 2013 by the Slovenian National Theatre Opera and Ballet Ljubljana at the Cankarjev Dom cultural centre, this was the last Slovenian staging of a Wagnerian opera. An exception is the Ljubljana Festival, which in

<sup>70</sup> Gabrič, *Socialistična kulturna revolucija ...*, 36.

<sup>71</sup> Danilo Merlak gave an outstanding performance as the Dutchman. Moravec, *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč ...*, 268.

<sup>72</sup> Tjaša Ribizel, "Glasbena praksa v Ljubljani 1945–1963" (PhD diss., University of Ljubljana, 2012), 56, 68.

<sup>73</sup> Aleš Gabrič, *Slovenska kulturna politika v času »Socialistične demokracije« 1953–1962* (Ljubljana: Inštitut za novejšo zgodovino Ljubljana, 1993), 245.

<sup>74</sup> Ribizel, "Glasbena praksa v Ljubljani 1945–1963 ...", 108.

<sup>75</sup> After a long time, the Opera once again had a heroic tenor whose interpretations of Wagner's characters, especially Lohengrin, gained recognition on some of Germany's leading opera stages. Moravec, *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč ...*, 271.

<sup>76</sup> "Vorstellungen mit Marjan Rus", *Homepage der Wiener Staatsoper*, accessed September 13, 2013, <http://db-staatsoper.die-antwort.eu/search/person/2467>.

<sup>77</sup> Ed. Stefan Vevar, *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč 1982–1987* (Ljubljana: Slovenski gledališki in filmski muzej, 1987), 14.

<sup>78</sup> Jože Sivec, "Wagnerjev Večni mornar", *Gledališki list* (Ljubljana: Opera in balet SNG Ljubljana, 1987), 1–6.

the past two decades has included in its programme two stagings of *The Valkyrie* and, for the first time in Slovenia, staged the first two music dramas of Wagner's tetralogy, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, performed by the Mariinsky Theatre from Saint Petersburg under the direction of Valery Gergiev (*The Rhine Gold* on 2nd September 2013 and *The Valkyrie* on 3rd September 2013, both at Cankarjev Dom, Ljubljana).

There were also very few concert performances of excerpts from Wagner's operas after the Second World War. Other than the concert performance of *Tristan and Isolde* (5th February 1975) with the visiting Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra, two ballets accompanied by Wagner's music<sup>79</sup>, and a staging of the third act of *Parsifal* within the scope of the Slovenian Philharmonic's orange subscription concerts series (22nd April 2010), there were no other major concert performances of Wagner's music. At Slovenia's second opera theatre, the Opera of the Slovenian National Theatre Maribor, Wagner's music has after the Second World War never been on the repertoire to this day, with the exception of isolated concert performances.<sup>80</sup>

It would, of course, be unfair to attribute the nonstaging of Wagner's works at the Ljubljana opera after the Second World War entirely to the cultural policy of the post Second World War policy in Slovenia, since the staging of Wagner's operas always depended on the demands of the public, the greater or lesser absence of Wagnerian soloists, as well as various space and other financial capacities of individual opera theatres. However, in comparison with the pre-war period, the mentioned factors did not essentially change in the Ljubljana opera house after the war. Namely the strong artistic rise of opera began in this period, opera had amazing singers such as tenor Josip Gostič and even impresario Polič remained. Also the aesthetic taste of Ljubljana public didn't changed so rapidly after the War. For example, the staging of *Lohengrin* in 1961 attracted 4320 spectators, which was one of the highest number of the season.<sup>81</sup>

On the other hand the change with respect to the staging of Wagner's works at the Ljubljana opera house, which, I should mention, was the only opera house in Slovenia that staged Wagner's operas, was so obvious that it points to a relevant change in the cultural policy. These policies depended primarily on the presidents of various committees and their subordinated mostly anonymous apparatchiks who, through various levers, were able to preserve a surprisingly high degree of political supervision over the organisation and programmes of cultural institutions in Slovenia at least up to the end of the 1950's.

A historical overview of Wagner's performing practice shows that after the first performance of a Wagnerian opera in Slovenia in 1874, approximately half of Wagner's works were staged in Slovenia. Prevalent among these were the more accessible operas, such as *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, and in particular *The Flying Dutchman*, while the later ones, such as *The Valkyrie* and *Parsifal*, were more or less isolated staging attempts. By the end of the Second World War, *Lohengrin* was the most frequently performed Wag-

79 *Matilda* and *Siegfried Idyll* on 29th April 1986 at Cankarjev Dom in Ljubljana. Vevar, *Repertoar slovenskih gledališč...*, 16.

80 Pianist Margareta Gregorinčič on 27th October 2011 reproduced Liszt's arrangement of the Overture to Wagner's *Tannhäuser* at the Kazina Hall within the scope of the Plus SNG Maribor subscription series. Some of Wagner's Overtures were on 18th February 2013 at the Large Hall also performed within the scope of the SNG Maribor Symphony Orchestra subscription series.

81 Ribizel, "Glasbena praksa v Ljubljani 1945-1963 ...", 75.

nerian opera in Slovenia: seven times. It was followed by *The Flying Dutchman* with six and *Tannhäuser* with four performances.<sup>82</sup>

In the history of Ljubljana's opera, we can therefore observe two short periods in which the central Slovenian opera house was more devoted to the reproduction of Wagner's operas. These were the periods from 1899 to 1913 and from 1926 to 1933, during which it may be said that Wagner's operas were regularly on the opera repertoire. The most surprising is the first period, when the newly-established Slovenian opera, under the direction of Fran Gerbič, surpassed the German musical theatre in Ljubljana by its number and quality of Wagnerian performances. In spite of the increasingly stronger national struggles in the mentioned period, it appears that artistic ideas were still more important than ideological ones. This was last but not least proven also in Mirko Polič's period, which was marked by a new renaissance of Wagner's works. It seems that, up to the Second World War, the decisions whether to put Wagner on the repertoire or not depended more on the competences of individual artistic leaders than on cultural politics, which would dictate one or another repertory framework to opera institutions.

Until the end of the Second World War, one can speak of an outstanding reproduction practice as regards the staging of Wagner's operas in Slovenia. Subsequently, however, there appear to have been some significant shifts in post-war program policies in Slovenia, when Wagner almost completely disappeared from the opera repertoire. A long series of opera seasons passed without a single Wagnerian opera being performed.

The question is, therefore, why did Wagner disappear from the iron repertoire of operas in Slovenia after the Second World War? Although up to the end of the 1950's one of the reasons certainly lies also in cultural politics, it is a fact that cultural politics at least from the transition in the "casual sixties" never did lead any further than to the self-censorship of individual actors of opera production. Even the too small stages and the even smaller shells of both Slovenian opera houses, which today would probably still render difficult any more frequent Wagnerian reproductions in both Slovenian opera theatres, should not prove too great an obstacle from the 1984 when the country's largest concert hall – Gallus hall of the Cankarjev Dom – has been built in Ljubljana. Slightly more problematic could be the lack of adequate Wagnerian soloists, especially a heroic tenor, but do we not live in a time of temporary artistic ensembles with numerous guest soloists? Perhaps the reason for not staging Wagner's works lies more in the lack of continuity on the part of the artistic management, and even more in the lack of quality artistic concepts of such management, whose efforts are mostly directed towards filling the theatre's treasury.

It should, however, not be forgotten that the new sound media, together with the professionalization of some leading orchestra ensembles in the second half of the 20th century in Slovenia, stimulated a growing awareness and consequently the higher expectations of audiences. So the performance practice of Wagner's works also evolved gradually, from piano performances of the orchestra part to performances

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<sup>82</sup> Sivec, *Opera na ljubljanskih odrih* ..., 218.



of some of the leading orchestra ensembles. Due to the ever-growing expectations of audiences, the staging of Wagner's operas in Slovenia became an increasingly more risky activity in which conductors, stage managers and stenographers had to reach a compromise in advance. So it is not at all surprising that especially in the golden period of Ljubljana's opera house in the 1960's, critics in Slovenia began to deal with the question whether it was more proper to offer Wagner's art to audiences in a form that cannot achieve artistic perfection, or perhaps, due to the unfavourable conditions, simply avoid staging his music. Although any pure objective judgement would probably convince us to forget Wagner in Slovenia, the performance practice in some smaller opera theatres with technical and personal capabilities similar to those of Ljubljana's opera house shows that Wagner's works certainly belong on the repertoire of these opera houses.

One could probably find countless other reasons why Wagner's works were not staged, none of which, as the history of Wagner's reproduction in Slovenia clearly reveals, should be decisive. Namely, both Gerbič and Polič managed to achieve, in terms of finance, space and ensemble, what their numerous successors in the position of artistic director at both Slovenian opera houses were unable to achieve, and they did so in much less favourable circumstances. Above all, the two of them never underestimated their audiences, but as well-educated musicians constantly strove to provide an artistically most demanding repertoire, irrespective of potential cultural-political pressures. That is why one can observe, in the period of their leadership, not only numerous stagings of Wagner's works, but in general an exceptional stylistic relevance of the opera repertoire.

Wagner was therefore always a kind of touchstone in Slovenian opera reproduction, which separated the successful from the less successful, almost forgotten conductors, reproducers and, last but not least, directors or artistic directors. In observing the reception and performance practice of Wagner's music in Slovenia, it certainly isn't difficult to realise that the performances of his works always positively stimulated opera ensembles, which, in spite of the limited possibilities, were later capable of reproducing some of the most demanding works in opera literature. For this reason we can only hope that the 200th anniversary of Wagner's birth will not only be an act justifying the historical debt of Wagner's post-war absence from concert and opera stages in Slovenia, but also the beginning of a new renaissance of Wagnerian music that had already been so popular in Slovenia's past. It is therefore a strong necessity that both Slovenian opera houses soon welcome some new "Polič's" who are capable of giving Wagner's operas the place they deserve on Slovenia's opera stages.

## POVZETEK

Zgodovinski pregled Wagnerjeve poustvarjanosti pokaže, da je bilo vse od leta 1874, ko beležimo prvo uprizoritev Wagnerjeve opere (*Tannhäuser*) na Slovenskem, iz skladateljeve zrele ustvarjalnosti uprizorjena približno polovica njegovih del. Med njimi prevladujejo izvedbeno dostopnejše opere kot so *Večni mornar*, *Tannhäuser* in *Lohengrin*, pri poznejših kot sta *Walküre* in *Parsifal* pa gre za osamljene poizkuse njune postavitve na oder.

Tako sta po nadvse bogati Wagnerjevi koncertni poustvarjalnosti druge polovice 19. in začetka 20. stoletja v okviru delovanja Filharmonične družbe v Ljubljani, v zgodovini ljubljanske opere opazni dve krajši obdobji, v katerih se je osrednja slovenska operna hiša v večji meri posvečala reprodukciji Wagnerjevih oper. To sta bili obdobji med 1899 in 1913 ter 1926 in 1933, za kateri lahko trdimo, da so bile Wagnerjeve opere stalnica na opernem repertoarju. Preseneča predvsem prvo obdobje, ko je novoustanovljena slovenska opera s tedanjim ravnateljem Franom Gerbičem na čelu po številu in kvaliteti Wagnerjevih uprizoritev celo prehitela nemško glasbeno gledališče v Ljubljani. Tako se

zdi, da je bilo navkljub vedno močnejšim narodnostnim bojem v omenjenem obdobju umetniško še vedno pred ideološkim, kar je v obdobju med obema vojnama nenazadnje dokazal tudi Mirko Polič z novo renesanso Wagnerjevih del.

Po drugi svetovni vojni pa je v programski politiki opaziti večji ideološki preobrat, saj je Wagner čez noč skoraj povsem izginil s koncertnega in opernega repertoarja. Zdi se torej, da je bil vsaj do prehoda v »sproščena šestdeseta« vpliv kulturne politike na Wagnerjevo poustvarjalnost pri nas izrazitejši kot kadarkoli poprej. Kljub temu da si je denimo Verdi v obeh naših opernih gledališčih že sorazmerno kmalu pridobil domovinsko pravico, ki jo je brez prekinitve obdržal vse do današnjih dni, pa tega za Wagnerja ne bi mogli trditi. Seveda bi lahko našli še vrsto drugih razlogov za neuprizarjanje Wagnerja, med katerimi pa, kot nam jasno kaže zgodovina Wagnerjeve poustvarjalnosti na Slovenskem – in to je bistveno –, nobeden ne bi smel biti ključen. Tako Gerbič kot Polič sta namreč v finančno, prostorsko in zasedbeno veliko manj ugodnih razmerah uspela tisto, česar številni njuni nasledniki na mestu umetniških vodij obeh slovenskih opernih hiš niso bili sposobni.