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Baroque Opera on the Contemporary Ukrainian Theatre Stage: Ideas and Solutions

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What is Baroque Opera?

The Baroque epoch left a rich and voluminous opera heritage. Opera as a music genre emerged at the turn of the 16th-17th centuries in the Italian city of Florence and in the 17th century developed and spread throughout Italy. It later appeared in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The trend towards Italian opera and the colossal popularity of this art form required the development of infrastructures to support performances. The capitals of princedoms and large cities were marked by the construction of opera theatres and the invitation of Italian composers, soloists, instrumentalists, choirs, and ballet performers to these cities. Also, the implementation of special machinery, décor, stage costumes, and make-up contributed to opera's popularity. Opera performance was a spectacular event, preparation for which required significant funding by royalty and aristocrats, and performances demanded a high level of preparation.

Almost all Baroque operas were written in the Italian language, regardless of the country of performance and the composers' nationality. Composers often traveled to Italy to master the local manner of opera composing. *Opera seria*, a sub-genre of Italian opera emerged at the end of the 17th century and became the most widespread opera sub-genre. It aimed at entertaining monarchs, nobles, courtiers, and other representatives of the highest social strata of European society.

Opera seria librettos were based on ancient themes. Among their characters were gods and kings, brave warriors, and beautiful ladies. The music was mostly of a high-style and its rendition was based on the *bel canto* manner, which required special vocal techniques. Male roles were performed by castrati, whose timbrally unique voices soared over orchestras. The virtuosic singing of leading male opera performers is a well-known feature of Baroque opera. Female roles were written in a similar way. Operas consisted of 3 acts, each featuring solo parts and arias that differed in passion, tempo, and technique. Importance was placed on the orchestra, whose functions included

creating the background for arias and other vocal performances as well as performing particular instrumental parts (e. g., 3-part overtures).

Over time, Baroque opera gradually lost its leading position. This was connected with evolving processes in the music of the second half of the 18th century as well as with changes in taste and style, performing manner, and the emergence of new artistic priorities. The turning point in the attitude towards Baroque opera appeared to be the emergence of Classicism at the end of the 18th—beginning of the 19th centuries. This art form suggested alternative aesthetic concepts, which is why the opera genre underwent substantial reformation and stepped aside, making room for instrumental music. In the 19th century opera music once again became more popular and established itself as one of the leading musical genres of the Romantic age. At that time, the connection with Baroque opera was lost, the latter considered to be old-fashioned and as a result remained unperformed.

The renaissance of Baroque opera began in the second half of the 20th century. It returned to theatres, but not in a leading position in terms of repertoire, this being left for 19th and 20th century opera.

Today, Baroque operas are rarely performed, for a number of reasons. The first is that their notes are *limited in availability*. At one time, these operas were in the possession of monarchs who paid for the composers work and maintained staffs of performers. This is why opera scores were not published and were copied by hand, after premiere performances being transferred to private archives and theatre libraries. Today, some of these scores are found in various state archives, which regardless of the form of ownership have the rights to the manuscripts and legally demand fees for permission to utilize them, copy them, perform them on stage, etc. The violation of any of these conditions leads to penalties.

The second reason lies in the *performing conventions* of Baroque opera, which require particular mastery and manner in vocals, instrumentals, sound creation, articulation, etc. The original manner is now lost. However, early opera shouldn't be performed in a modern manner as this would constitute a serious stylistic violation. Such a performance would not correspond to the authentic material, it would become a stylized piece and not a true replication of Baroque musical tradition.

In the musical arts an approach of historically informed performance has recently developed, which aims at the revival of performing traditions and the authenticity of performing manner. However, only a small number of theatres that perform Baroque opera follow such an approach.

The third reason lies in *the perception and contemporary assessment* of early opera performances. The contemporary production of Baroque operas requires considerable funding and the creative efforts of a large number of musicians while audiences are mainly composed of specialists who study old music culture, perceive Baroque opera as a living organism, and have a profound understanding of the significant role it played in the evolution of opera. For the general public these performances are much less appealing, the rationale being that although interesting, Baroque opera is somehow out-of-date and not fully understandable. That is why, for theatres, it is easier to develop the

traditional Romantic opera repertoire than work on the costly and less advantageous production of Baroque operas, which as a result appear mostly at thematic musical festivals.

Baroque Opera in the Work of Ukrainian Composers of the Second Half of the 18th Century

At one time, the fashion of Italian *opera seria* was ubiquitous in royal courts. It spread to the countries of Eastern Europe and particularly to the Russian Empire, where the development of court opera was closely corresponded to the tastes of the monarchy. The fashion intensified in the second third of the 18th century during the reign of Empress Anna (Anna Ioannovna, 1730–1740) and was associated with invited Italian musicians — composers, singers, and instrumental performers. At the same time, a new generation of musicians born in the Russian Empire was being educated. Among them were many Ukrainians brought to the imperial capital at a very young age for the furthering of their musical education. They had the opportunity to be taught by Italians and could substitute for them on stage, in the orchestra, or in the position of the Kapellmeister. The last position was the most taxing as it involved opera composing, a skill that musicians had to master by completing their studies in Italy.

Among Ukrainian composers of the second half of the 18th century, Andrii Rachynskyi, Dmytro Bortnianskyi, Maksym Berezovskyi, Artemii Vedel, and Stepan Dehtiarevskyi, were primarily renowned for their works in the genre of the choral concerto, while Bortnianskyi and Berezovskyi also mastered the Kapellmeister craft. Both spent prolonged time in Italy (Berezovskyi 4 years, Bortnianskyi 11 years), studying composition with renowned Italian masters (Berezovskyi with Giovanni Battista Martini, Bortnianskyi with Baldassare Galuppi). Both composers also brilliantly mastered the Italian composing manner of secular instrumental music and composed a number of Italian operas in Italy: Berezovskyi — *Demofonte*, Bortnianskyi — *Creonte*, *Alcid*, and *Quinto Fabio*. Berezovskyi's opera *Demofonte* was composed at the request of Count Aleksei Orlov and was staged in Livorno in 1773 at the annual carnival. Bortnianskyi's operas *Creonte* and *Alcid* were staged in Venice in 1776 and 1778 respectively and the opera *Quinto Fabio* was performed in Modena in the 1778–1779 season.

Subsequently, these operas followed the fate of other numerous Italian Baroque operas: following several performances they were no longer on stage and were soon forgotten. There is no evidence to suggest that after the composers' return from Italy the operas were performed in St. Petersburg. The music manuscripts of the completed opera scores and particular fragments (mostly completed arias) and copies of the printed librettos are stored in European (mostly Italian) and American archives. Reviews of their performances were published only in the Italian press. Not all of the operas are fully preserved: entire scores of Berezovskyi's *Demofonte* have been lost and are preserved only in a few remaining fragments, the overture and four arias. Scores of Bortnianskyi's opera *Creonte* have recently been found.

Contemporary Premieres of the Baroque Operas of Ukrainian Composers

It should be stated that Ukrainian opera houses and theatres are reluctant to introduce into their repertoires the Baroque operas of both Ukrainian and other European composers. Productions of them primarily occur at festivals and concerts. This distinguishes opera from another genre present in the works of Bortnianskyi and Berezovskyi that being the choral concerto, whose performance history is much better.

The opera *Demofonte*, composed on an old theme of an Italian libretto by Pietro Metastasio (1773), has never been performed in Ukraine, the main reason being the unavailability of its complete scores. Its preserved arias were found in the library of the Florence Conservatory of Music and subsequently published in Kyiv. They are often performed in concerts as stand-alone pieces. The hand-written scores of the overture, termed a symphony according to the traditions of the time, were found in a Rome archive and remain unpublished. However, the opera is frequently performed in Ukraine as Berezovskyi's C major symphony. The search for the full scores has not yielded any positive results, thus hindering the performance of the opera on stage. There are no such problems with Bortnianskyi's Italian operas, as their hand-written scores are fully preserved.

For a long time (prior to 2008), the score of Bortnianskyi's *Creonte*, composed in 1776 for the San Benedetto theatre in Venice on the theme of Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone* (libretto by Italian playwright Marco Coltellini, who lived in St. Petersburg at the time), remained lost. However, it has recently been revealed that the hand-written scores are found in Portugal.¹ A well-known St. Petersburg musician and director of the "Pratum Integrum" Ensemble of old music, Pavel Serbin, ordered a copy of the score and after a long rehearsal period *Creonte* was performed in the Great Hall of the Catherine Palace in Peterhof on September 1, 2012.

The opera *Quinto Fabio* (1778) was composed for the Theatre Ducale in Modena, where it was performed for the first time. It is based on a theme from ancient Greek history, the libretto written by Italian playwright Antonio Dzeno. The hand-written scores are stored in the Russian National Museum of Music (Moscow). In the late 1980s it was prepared for publication in *Pamiatniki russkogo muzykalnogo iskusstva* (Monuments of Russian Music), but its publication was delayed. A contemporary premiere (concert rendition) took place on May 5, 2007 in the Small Hall of the Tchaikovsky Moscow State Conservatory (performed by the "Madrigal" Ensemble of old music under the guidance of Kostiantyn Naumenko).

The opera *Alcid* (1778), set in Venice, has the most productive publication and performance history. It was composed on the mythological Alcid (Heracles) theme with a libretto by renowned Italian playwright Pietro Metastasio. The hand-written scores of the opera were found in the library of the US Congress and published in Kyiv in 1985

¹ Biblioteca do Palacio Nacional da Ajuda, Colection musica manuscrita, № 385.

(edited by Mykhailo Berdeninnikov).² Its contemporary premiere (concert rendition) took place on January 17, 1984 in Kyiv (National Philharmonic of Ukraine) and has since been performed in various Ukrainian and Russian cities.

The above evidence shows the contributions made to the availability of the opera's scores, outlining new possibilities for its performance, while at the same time pointing to a dearth of the opera's performances in Ukraine.

Bortnianskyi's and Berezovskyi's Operas on the Contemporary Stage

Berezovskyi's opera *Demofonte* remains unperformed as its full scores have yet to be found, although interest in the piece, as well as in the composer's work in general is steadily on the increase. 2020 marks the 275th anniversary of Berezovskyi's birth. It is important to celebrate this anniversary with compelling premieres, one of which could be a performance of *Demofonte*. If by that time the full hand-written scores remain unfound it will be necessary to look for another way for the instauration of a coherent opera performance based on the music composed by Berezovskyi, including the symphony, preserved arias from the *Demofonte* opera, and, if necessary, his choral pieces and sonatas for strings.

Even all this may not suffice, moreover, not all of the pieces are suitable. To our mind, a compromise might be found in the introduction of music material from other *Demofonte* operas written by 18th century composers to Pietro Metastasio's libretto. The theme had widespread popularity among many composers. By the end of the 18th century there were over 70 operas entitled *Demofonte*.

Among those who composed on the theme were such renowned musicians as Antonio Caldara (1733, first opera on the theme, Vienna), Giovanni Battista Ferrandini (1737, Munich), Giovanni Paisiello (1175, Venice), Gaetano Latilla (1738, Venice), Christoph Willibald Gluck (1743, Milan), Carl Heinrich Graun (1746, Berlin), Tommaso Traetta (1758, Mantua), Niccolo Piccinni (1761, Reggio Emilia), Pasquale Anfossi (1773, Rome), Luigi Cherubini (1788, Paris) and others. Some composers completed several editions in order to perform the opera in different theatres: Niccolo Jommelli (4 editions: Padua, 1743; Milan, 1753; Stuttgart, 1764; Naples, 1770), Johann Adolf Hasse (2 editions: Dresden, 1748; Naples, 1758), Baldassare Galuppi (2 editions: Madrid, 1749, with renowned singer-castrato Farinelli performing the main part, Padua, 1758), Josef Mysliveček (2 editions: Venice, 1769, Naples, 1775), and Giuseppe Sarti (3 editions: Copenhagen, 1755, 1771, Rome, 1782).

Berezovskyi was in close contact with some *Demofonte* composers, for example, Galuppi, Paisiello and Traetta, with whom he worked in St. Petersburg, and Mysliveček, with whom he was examined by a special committee of the Bologna Philharmonic

2 Dmytro Bortnianskyi, *Alcid* (3-act opera), libretto by P. Metastasio, total ed. and foreword M. Berdeninnikov, partitions ready for printing V. Matyukhin, arrangement for ph. Y. Vereshchagin, Russian transl. by V. Boldireva (Kyiv: Muzychna Ukraina, 1985).

Academy to obtain the title of academician. The symphonies of Berezovskyi, Niccolò Jommelli, and Pasquale Anfossi are gathered in one hand-written compilation (the latter two composed them in the genre of the overture), which may indicate a creative connection between the composers.

The mentioned operas are preserved in European archives and their productions are becoming more popular. In 1995 Jommelli's *Demofonte* was performed at the 12th Cremona Music Festival in Teatro Ponchielli. In 2009 Cherubini's *Demofonte* was performed at Salzburger Pfingstfestspiele, in the Opera Garnier in Paris, and in Teatro Alighieri in Ravenna. On November 23, 2014 a concert rendition of Gluck's *Demofonte* was performed in the Theater an der Wien. This trend should be continued by a staging of Berezovskyi's *Demofonte*.

Taking into account that the entire scores of Berezovskyi's opera are not available, the missing parts could be substituted with solo and instrumental pieces from other *Demofonte* operas composed by Berezovskyi's contemporaries. First of all, they could include works of the composers that Berezovskyi encountered on his career path (Galuppi, Mysliveček, Jommelli, Anfossi, Traetta, Paisiello).

In order to obtain some of these scores it is not even necessary to access the archives, as the entire hand-written scores of all four editions of Jommelli's *Demofonte* and the second edition of Mysliveček's opera (1775) are available in the International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP) virtual library of public-domain music scores. Moreover, it is evident that in Baroque times there was a tendency to collectively compose music for an operatic libretto. In such a way a composer could substantially shorten the time spent on the creation of a new opera. The result of such collaborations gained the name *opera pasticcio*. Thus, the addition of music written by other composers might not become a stylistic violation, but rather correspond to one of the tendencies that existed at Berezovskyi's time in the European music theatre. After deciding and agreeing on the music of *Demofonte* it would be possible to commence work on issues related to its performance.

It would be helpful to consider the particulars of such issues on the example of a recent production of Bortnianskyi's *Alcid*, which took place at the second LvivMozArt International Festival of classical music in July 2018. The opera was shown not in concert rendition, as usually happens at festivals, but in a production with costumes and set design, the latter not following historical Baroque tradition (which can be seen from contemporary engravings depicting scenes of the opera's Baroque performance). As for the modern production, we should mention that the performance was not set on a stage, but in the inner yard of Svirzh Castle, a fortified residence built by the noble Świrski family in the 15th century to protect the eastern boundaries of Galicia. The ascetic look of the castle with its stone façade and inner yard architecture perfectly corresponded to the setting in which the mythological events of the opera were supposed to take place. The audience was left with the impression that *Alcid* really has come to a crossroads and has to choose the right path. The centre of the yard featured a circle with medium-height panels opposite an improvised auditorium containing rows of chairs, with a stone staircase in close vicinity to a wall. The circle,

which resembled a circus arena, symbolized infinity and the impossibility of escaping fate while the staircase symbolized of a path to either the righteous world or to hell (depending on the direction of movement). Together, they became the most significant elements of the natural scenery. The main events of the performance took place within the circle, the centre of which was covered with sand and edging panels upholstered in cloth. The main characters and the choir mostly performed in this place. The latter were not only singing statically but also moving, actively participating in the action while performing not only its own functions, but also those of the ballet and extras. The natural scenery did not suffice on its own and was augmented by fancy costumes and special lighting.³ A vital component of the performance was its choreography, consisting of the plasticity and stage movements of the characters. But most important was the music, its first-class vocals and a first-rate orchestra. The part of *Alcid* was written for a singer-castrato. In the 2018 production it was performed by a countertenor. Both female roles were sung by sopranos. The orchestra and choir were located stage right, where the main events of the opera took place. The orchestra was smaller than in contemporary opera, but quite sufficient for the performance. The opera was sung in the original language, fitting in with the conception of the production. The opera resume was related in a foreword announced to spectators enjoying coffee before they were welcomed into the improvised auditorium. Audience members showed great interest in the performance, discovering for themselves a new aspect of Bortnianskyi's accomplishments, including his mastery of the Italian manner of secular music composition in accord with the practices of the most renowned European composers of the 18th century. The public's high level of interest in the production serves as evidence that the production of Baroque opera in Ukraine is a promising endeavor.

Acknowledging the viability of these operatic works in contemporary Ukraine, what follows are some recommendations on how to proceed. Initially, the first issue that should be addressed concerns the completeness and availability of the note scores. The sheet music should be restored to correlate with other opera works written to the same libretto. It is also necessary to create *opera pasticcio* (for Berezovskyi's *Demofonte*) or to obtain the temporal rights to exploit hand-written material (Bortnianskyi's unpublished operas).

Second, it is necessary to define the setting and manner of performance. For concert renditions any theatre hall would suffice, but it would be much more interesting to conduct full-fledged performances with set design and other production attributes. This would require theatrical scenery, and as the production of Bortnianskyi's opera *Alcid* has shown, the choice of natural scenery in an old castle setting might be a good choice. Such a setting would suggest antiquity, in line with the stories unveiling in Ancient epochs. The only drawback of a production in a natural setting might be the dependence on seasonal weather conditions, as performances would have to take place in warm weather, mostly in summer. A performance intended to be set in a theatre

3 See photographs of the performance on the website of the LvivMozArt Festival: <https://lvivmozart.com/gallery/prem-yera-postanovki-operi-alkid-dmitra-bortnjanskogo>.

would necessitate the construction of historic scenery, with available engravings and other contemporary depictions of baroque performances of the operas as guides

The third issue involves the performing collective. Italian Baroque opera main character parts were written for castrati. Today it would be best to invite countertenors for these roles, especially for festival opera productions. For a theatre performance castrato parts would have to be sung by tenors, as only few theatres have countertenor soloists on staff.

The fourth issue involves the necessity of a historically informed performance remaining as faithful as possible to the conventions of the Baroque style. In order to master the Baroque manner musicians would ideally have to complete additional studies and attend master-classes in Western Europe, a combination that is both laborious and expensive.

The main emphasis of contemporary productions should be placed on the naturalistic dynamics of the performance and on balanced and steady song performance and orchestral rendition. Excessive emotions, drama, and other extraneous components should be excluded as they serve to distract the audience from the action and bring it into the world of contemporary theatre.



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