



FIRE AND
FAITH:
LITHUANIAN
HISTORY AND
MYTHOLOGY
ON THE OPERA
STAGE

SUMMARY

Opera in Lithuania is closely linked to statehood. The social significance of the genre was particularly evident during periods of national strength or political change, serving as a vehicle for cultural expression and prestige for various social classes. Born in Italy at the end of the 16th century, opera had already reached the courts of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania by the beginning of the 17th century, furthering the political and cultural ambitions of the elite.

During the years of czarist oppression, the romantic myths and folklore incorporated into operas stimulated the national consciousness of the middle class and peasantry. In interwar Lithuania, the opera stage became a kind of modern national sanctuary, while in Soviet-occupied Lithuania it served as a politicised bastion of cultural power. After the 1980s, it became a venue for experimentation, challenging national myths and genre clichés. For more than four centuries, composers of the operatic genre actively contributed to the formation and consolidation of a historical Lithuanian narrative, since historical themes are dominant in opera. Lithuanian themes are prevalent in the national tradition, and Lithuanian history and mythology have attracted the interest of many prominent composers (from Alessandro Scarlatti and Amilcare Ponchielli to Alexander Scriabin, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Karol Rathaus, and others). Consequently, not only operas with historical and mythological themes created in Lithuania and/or by Lithuanian composers, but also operatic works based on Lithuanian history and mythology by foreign composers form an interconnected whole, uniquely revealing the manifestation and reflection of Lithuanian cultural identity worldwide.

Several operatic paradigms can be distinguished in the extensive repertoire of Lithuanian opera whether it be Baroque, Romanticism, or (post)(meta)modernism. The early paradigm is revealed in the Baroque era by the opera-oratorio *San Casimiro, rè di Polonia* (St. Casimir, King of Poland, 1704–1705?), written by Alessandro Scarlatti at the commission of Queen Marie Casimire Louise de La Grange d'Arquien (1641–1716). After the death of her husband, King John III Sobieski, the queen settled in Rome and befriended Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni, a patron of music, whom Scarlatti, who had lived in Rome for several years, also served¹. Seventeenth-century Italian operas and oratorios abound with

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1 The exact date of the first performance of the oratorio is not known. There is evidence of it being performed in Florence in 1706, though the composer had no connections with the Medici court.

Catholic saints, and more than one work is dedicated to St. Casimir, whose veneration spread after his canonization in 1604, especially in Rome, Florence, southern Italy, and Sicily.² The story depicting the life of St. Casimir, king and patron saint of Poland and Lithuania, incorporated Lithuanian themes into the wider history of Christian civilization. Gioachino Rossini's opera *Sigismondo* based on a libretto by Giuseppe Foppawas was intended for the Venice Carnival and premiered in 1814. Its approach to history was not very different from that of the work commissioned by the Queen of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, but Rossini's opera laid the foundations for romantic opera and the stage genres of the 19th-century in many national traditions, thus directly or indirectly influencing Lithuanian opera.³

The presentation of Lithuanian themes began to change fundamentally in the 19th century, when Lithuanian history began emerging in the discourses of modern nations. During this era, opera was influenced more than other musical genres by the emergence of modern nation states and the struggle for national liberation, as well as by the ideas of political romanticism and national historicism. This linked Lithuanian historical events and heroes to the current processes of European political history, which was particularly encouraged by the Lithuanian movement in Polish Romanticism and the works of Adam Mickiewicz. Typical examples include Amilcare Ponchielli's opera *I Lituani* (1874), a work imbued with ideas of national liberation, and the opera *Konrad Wallenrod* (1885) by Polish composer Władysław Żeleński, inspired by a work of the same title by Adam Mickiewicz. There were also operas by Polish composers romanticizing the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: Karol Kurpiński's opera *Jadwiga, królowa polska* (Jadwiga, Queen of Poland, 1814), Józef Antoni Franciszek Elsner's opera *Jagiello w Tenczynie* (Jogaila in Tenczyn, 1819), Franciszek Mirecki's opera *Rymund Xiąże Litewski* (Raymond, Duke of Lithuania, 1860), three operas by Henryk Jarecki: *Mindowe* (1880), *Jadwiga* (1886) and *Barbara Radziwiłłówna* (1893); Wojciech Gawroński's *Pojata, córka Lezdejki, czyli Litwini w XIV wieku* (Pajauta, the daughter of Lizdeika, or Lithuanians in the 14th century, 1900) and others.

The land and heroes of Lithuania occasionally appear in the works of Russian composers: Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (1868–1873), Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Mlada* (1890), Alexander Scriabin's unfinished work *Kęstutis and Birutė* (1891–1892). Scriabin's opera may have inspired the opera-ballet *Syrena* (The Mermaid, 1927) by Polish composer Witold Maliszewski, who studied in St. Petersburg and worked in Russia for a long time. The landscape and history, including battles between the Prussians and Teutonic Knights of Lithuania Minor attracted the attention of several German composers. Johann Friedrich Reichardt wrote music for dramas (*Die Hexenszene*, 1795) based on an excerpt from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Ernst T. W. Hoffmann wrote music for Zacharius Werner's drama *Kreuz an der Ostsee*, 1805. Richard Wagner composed *Die letzte Verschwörung der Heiden in Preussen, oder Der Deutsche Ritterorden in Königs-*

2 See Ryszka-Komarnicka Anna, "The Musical Characteristics of Worldly Temptations in Alessandro Scarlatti's *S. Casimiro, re di Polonia: Regio Fasto* (Royal Splendour) as the Main Protagonist, and the Possible Origins of the Oratorio". *Musicology Today*, vol. 6, 2009, p. 113–126.

3 G. Rossini's opera *William Tell* (1829) is considered the first Swiss national opera.

berg, based on Zacharius Werner's literary work, libretto by J. Singer (1837? fragments). The French composer Sylvio Lazzari created an opera based on a play by the German writer E. von Keyserling, born in Latvia. The action of *Le Sauteriot* (1917) takes place in Lithuania, and the opera's protagonist is a Lithuanian girl called Žiogelis (Grasshopper). Interestingly enough, Lithuanian themes inspired the first national Latvian operas – *Baņuta* (1920) by Alfreds Kalniņš and *Vaidelote* (1927) by Jazeps Medins.

Lithuanian themes were popular on the opera stage even before the emergence of a national opera, so Italian, Russian, German, Polish, and French romantic operas and the images of Lithuanian history they created resonated in national operas of the 20th century – both in the interwar period of independent Lithuania and during the Soviet era. As for musical style, a large part of the operas of various countries in the 19th and 20th centuries represent the romantic tradition, which developed in Europe as a way of nation building through opera. The most prominent examples of this tendency on the Lithuanian stage include the first professional national opera, Jurgis Karnavičius' *Gražina* (1932), and the most popular opera of the Soviet era, Vytautas Klova's *Pilėnai* (1956), both of which have been staged many times not only in Lithuania but also in the diaspora. As in other countries, the creators of Lithuanian opera became involved in the (re)creation of history, becoming a factor in shaping the national narrative. It should be noted that, for example, *Pilėnai* depicts one of the most archetypal historical storylines, which Jorge Luis Borges called the oldest of all stories, telling of a mighty city attacked and defended by heroes. The defenders know that the city will be given over to fire and steel, and that their efforts will be in vain. The most famous of attackers, Achilles, knows that fate destined him to die before achieving victory.⁴ Lithuanian operas of the Romantic code mostly chose plots from the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania or mythology, not straying far from the romanticized historical self-image that began to take shape in the works of Adam Mickiewicz. These inspired more than one opera and became widespread in the historical dramas of Lithuanian writers that abounded in the interwar period. Generally, the most popular historical figure in Lithuanian operas was King Mindaugas of Lithuania, portrayed in four operas by Lithuanian composers: Julius Gaidelis' *Karalius Mindaugas* (1982), Darius Lapinskas' *Karalius Mindaugas* (1994), Bronius Kutavičius' *Ignis et fides* (Fire and faith, 2003), Gediminas Rimkus-Rimkevičius' *Karalius Mindaugas* (2009) and 19th century Polish composer Henryk Jarecki's *Mindowe* (1880). The legend of Kęstutis' love for Birutė reigned supreme in the pagan narrative, inspiring Lithuanian (Mikas Petrauskas, *Birutė*, 1906), Russian (Alexander Scriabin, *Kęstutis and Birutė*, 1891–1892) and Polish (Witold Maliszewski, *Syrena*, 1927) composers.⁵ It is helpful to recall Timothy Snyder's observation that modern nationalism pays little attention to the actual traditions of the early modern period, giving preference to an imagined continuity with the Middle Ages.⁶

4 Borges, Jorge Luis. (1977). *The Gold of the Tigers – Selected Later Poems*, New York: Dutton.

5 A maiden priestess (vaidilutė) Birutė, who accepts offerings to the sea goddess, is also one of the characters in Vytautas Bacevičius' opera *Vaidilutė* (1929).

6 Snyder, Timothy, (2004). *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999*. Yale University Press. Lithuanian translation by Rimantas Matulis: *Tautų rekonstrukcija: Lietuva, Lenkija, Ukraina, Baltarusija, 1569–1999*, Vilnius: Mintis, 2008.

A new perspective on Lithuanian history in national operas began to take shape only in the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by the musical avant-garde and post-war modernism. In Soviet-era Lithuania, two contrasting trends emerged in relation to official Soviet historiography. One represented the official ideology, as in the operas aimed at belittling Lithuanian emigrants – Vytautas Paltanavičius' opera *Kryžkelėje* (At the Crossroads, 1967) and Vytautas Laurušas' *Paklydę paukščiai* (Lost Birds, 1967). In contrast, criticism of official ideology and distancing from the stereotypes of Soviet historiography was epitomised by Bronius Kutavičius' opera-poem *Strazdas – Žalias paukštis* (The Thrush – A Green Bird, 1981) about a 19th-century Lithuanian clergyman and poet Antanas Strazdas, and Feliksas Bajoras' *Dievo avinėlis* (Lamb of God, 1982) about the post-war in occupied Lithuania. The theatrical fate of both operas was complicated. Kutavičius' opera was only staged at the Kaunas Drama Theatre, while Bajoras' opera never made it to the opera stage during the Soviet era. These works reflect a politically motivated expression of cultural resistance, harmoniously combining modern musical language with de-heroised historical characters—rebels, outsiders and marginalised figures.

The Chicago Lithuanian Opera, founded by the emigrant community, was concerned with the development of national opera and chose traditional romantic repertoire, however there were several Lithuanian operas with contemporary themes created in the US and staged in Chicago – Julius Gaidelis' *Dana* (1969) about Lithuanian refugees in German displacement camps and Jeronimas Kačinskas' *Juodas laivas* (The Black Ship, 1976) about Simas Kudirka, a sailor who attempted to escape from the USSR in the 1970s. After 1990, Lithuanian opera and the search for modernity in musical theatre stood out, breaking through in sporadic cases in the works of Lithuanian (Bronius Kutavičius, Gintaras Sodeika,) and foreign (Frank J. Oteri, Constantine Koukias) composers.

This book examines more than four centuries of Lithuanian opera from different artistic and critical perspectives. In Part One we find the prehistory and early development of opera from the Baroque era to the early Romantic tradition.

In the chapter “Northern Mirages of History in Southern Imagination: (In)visible Lithuania in Italian Operas”, Jūratė Katinaitė examines the connections between Lithuanian sovereigns and nobles and Italian princes, which resulted in the flourishing of opera culture in the courts of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania in the 17th century. The musicologist also discusses the most prominent Italian musical theatre works based on Lithuanian themes by Alessandro Scarlatti, Leonardo Vinci, Gioachino Rossini, and Amilcare Ponchielli. She explains how Lithuanian history was understood from the perspective of the Apennine Peninsula and how the nuances of Polish and Lithuanian noble relations appear in the librettos of Italian authors.

Helmutas Šabasevičius discusses the stylistic development of stagecraft and costumes created for opera productions. In the mid and late 19th century, set design was dominated by a romanticized approach that illustrated the events of the story, seeking to convey the setting, time, and characters in a vivid yet not necessarily historically accurate manner. At the beginning of the 20th century, the visual arts – both in fine arts and theatre – were used to shape Lithuanian national identity. Famous historical and mythological figures seen on stage awakened national consciousness and fostered pride in the

nation's past, encouraging the confidence needed to create an independent Lithuanian state.

The contradictions and confluences of musical nationalism and exoticism are explored by Rūta Stanevičiūtė in the chapter “Lithuanian Opera, Historicizing Imagination, and the Discourse of Musical Nationalism”. Agreeing with opera researchers that national opera is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to define, the musicologist discusses the diversity of concepts and modes of expression in national opera, as well as the historiography of the search for a national style in both Lithuanian and transnational contexts. Lithuanian national opera, which began to take shape in the 20th century, was influenced by international repertoire, as well as by the Lithuanian-themed operas of neighbouring countries. They served both as a prototype and as a phenomenon requiring critical review, decolonizing the imperialist-based images of Lithuanian history and prehistory. This chapter focuses on the dissemination of national historical and mythological storylines in early Lithuanian operas and their reception in the cultural environments of Kaunas and Chicago.

Part Two focuses on the representation of national history and mythology on Lithuanian opera stages during the turbulent 20th century. Helmutas Šabasevičius discusses the stage designs of operas created on Lithuanian themes in the 1930s and 1940s and the approaches to history by artists Adomas Galdikas, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, and Liudas Truikys – all of whom relied on artistic intuition and their view of history, applying the stylistic principles of romanticised realism and *art deco*, characteristic of the art of this period.

Jūratė Katinaitė in the chapter “Hostage of Ideology: Lithuanian History in Soviet-Era Operas at the State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre” reveals the drama behind the initiation, creation, and control of new operas by Lithuanian composers during the Soviet era at the most important opera venue – the State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre. The musicologist draws on documents regulating the content of Soviet-era artworks and the requirements for Soviet ideological interpretation of Lithuanian history. She addresses the political context, explores the relationship between propaganda and artistic expression, aspects of ideological control concerning librettos and scores, and the manipulative mechanisms of the totalitarian state, whereby not only representatives of censorship and nomenclature regulated the creative process, but the creative artists themselves were forced to criticise and interfere in each other's creative spheres. The stage designs of this period reveal a clear change in the aesthetic principles of creating a set for the action – the naturalism that dominated in the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s was replaced by more decorative, abstract, stylized solutions, evident in the stage designs of Juozas Jankus and Regina Songailaitė, as well as the search for visual metaphors and associations in the works of Feliksas Navickas and Henrikas Ciparis.

Part Three is focused on Lithuanian-themed opera beyond the official stage in Lithuania as well as in the Lithuanian diaspora. Based on press reviews and available iconographic material, Helmutas Šabasevičius summarizes the characteristics of the scenography of Lithuanian-themed operas staged in the United States.

Rūta Stanevičiūtė's chapter "Lithuanian Emigrants on Musical Theater Stages: Two Waves of Emigration and Four Operas" delves into the portrayal of Lithuanian emigration in operas by Lithuanian and foreign composers. Karol Rathaus' opera *Fremde Erde* (Alien Soil) (1929), Julius Gaidelis' *Dana* (1969), Constantine Koukias' *Olegas* (2007), and Frank J. Oteri's stage oratorio *Machunas* (1994–2003) were selected for more detailed analysis. Karol Rathaus, a Polish-American composer of Jewish origin, was attracted to the stories of Lithuanian emigrants by the drama of their inner experiences, reflecting the painful impoverishment of the rural class and the bitter fruits of industrialisation in the urban jungles during the first wave of mass emigration (before World War I). The work of this prominent representative of the interwar generation represents the genre of contemporary opera (*Zeitoper*), popular in the Weimar Republic, with its characteristic mix of styles and glorification of technological innovations. The experience of the second wave of migration, triggered by World War II and the political upheavals of the mid-20th century, is reflected in Julius Gaidelis' opera *Dana*. It is the first opera written in exile on a contemporary theme, reflecting the experiences of Lithuanian refugees in displaced persons (DP) camps. Gaidelis' work, staged by the Chicago Lithuanian Opera in 1969 was a momentous event that received an enthusiastic and widespread response from the émigré community. As mass migration intensified at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the fates of two Lithuanian émigré artists – photographer Olegas Truchanas and *Fluxus* movement founder Jurgis Mačiūnas – inspired musical theatre works by Koukias and Oteri, written on two distant continents. Conceived and realized in very different circumstances, Oteri and Koukias' stage works are linked by their focus on artists with exceptional biographies and the intertwining of three plot lines that determined the libretto and musical style: the artist's life story, socially engaged work, and the fate of the homeland. Four musical stage works dealing with Lithuanian emigration reveal in their own distinctive way how migrants' experiences and their artistic significance changed in the context of the political and social processes of the 20th and 21st centuries.

The stage designs of Lithuanian-themed operas in the first decades of the 21st century reveal stylistic diversity, and the integration of innovative image reproduction technology into set design. Helmutas Šabasevičius describes the work of contemporary visual artists Mindaugas Navakas, Gintaras Makarevičius, and Dainius Liškevičius, who have influenced the revitalization of opera set design.

Daiva Šabasevičienė assesses the significance of stage direction in opera productions, focusing primarily on the work of Lithuanian theatre directors from the late 20th and early 21st centuries, including Jonas Vaitkus, Gintaras Varnas, and Oskaras Koršunovas.

The appendices of this collectively authored monograph contain summaries of the most important operas. The main sources for the monograph were primary materials: institutional operational records, periodicals, musical works (printed scores, unpublished manuscripts, music recordings), works of art, photographs of performances, radio and television broadcasts, documentary films and feature films, personal texts (letters, diaries, memoirs, manuscripts of various genres), etc. The scope and subject matter of the study

made the works of scholars and the existing body of interpretations an equally important starting point. The monograph does not seek to provide a comprehensive examination of the very broad range of artistic phenomena and events – rather, the book is based on the need to develop an integral scientific narrative, revising and supplementing the images and assertions that have accumulated in culture and scholarship.

The book draws on archives and collections held by Lithuanian and foreign institutions: the Lithuanian Theatre, Music, and Cinema Museum, the Mikas and Kipras Petrauskas House, the Lithuanian Literature and Art Archive, the Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theatre Archive, the Ricordi Historical Archive (Archivio Storico Ricordi, Milan), the Stanisław Moniuszko Grand Theatre Archive in Poznań (Archiwum Teatralne Teatru Wielkiego im. Stanisława Moniuszki), the Center for Lithuanian Studies (Chicago, USA), the Special Collections and Archives Department of Queens College Library (New York, USA), and the Music Collections Department of the University of Warsaw. The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the staff of these institutional memory centres for the information and assistance they provided.

Composers Constantine Koukias (Tasmania) and Frank J. Oteri (USA) provided invaluable assistance by allowing access to the librettos, scores, and recordings of their stage works and publishing excerpts from them.

Translation by Emilija Sakadolskis