

THE EVOLUTION AND MULTICULTURALITY OF THE OPERETTA GENRE

RENATA VARI¹, STELA DRĂGULIN²

SUMMARY. This article presents how the musical genre of operetta has evolved from one time period to another, how it has been influenced by the tradition and the folklore of each country, and the kind of imprints it left on the culture that approached it. Starting from the fact that music is the universal language that includes ethnicities, nationalities, and geographical divisions, it is the one that brings together people from all backgrounds and it unites them in appreciation, participation, and education. The advantages derived from the approach of multicultural music education can be illustrated through all these elements - a much wider and interesting openness.

Keywords: operetta, multiculturalism, universal language, interdisciplinarity, art.

Introduction

Multicultural music is not just a study of the features of foreign music, it also involves the study of the cultures of other peoples as a whole and it should be approached from this perspective. When we engage in the study of such music we must take into account not only the musical aspect but also other elements of a particular culture such as art, dance, drama, clothing, food, history, and customs. "Investigation of various non-Western kinds of music is a way to demonstrate relationships between modes of cultural expression."³

Multicultural music provides a clear means of linking interdisciplinary studies including history, social studies, geography, and other subjects. When the world music is studied together with social and historical aspects of a certain culture, the artist acquires a more comprehensive and better education. Skelton's research states that traditional Western music is usually studied in

¹ PhD student, Transilvania University of Braşov, Faculty of Music, orshi7@yahoo.com

² Professor PhD, Transilvania University of Braşov, Faculty of Music, dragulin@unitbv.ro

³ Hao, H. *Educators Journal* Music appreciation class. 84, 2, 1997, pp. 31.

the context of "music and culture", while world music should be studied from the perspective of "music as culture"⁴, i.e. the study of world music represents the cultural study of an entire people.

The history of operetta

Due to its complexity, the history of this genre cannot be studied as an independent and separate entity. The operetta expressed its contemporary taste through the nature of its plots and moral attitudes.

"Its name comes from the Italian operetta, the diminutive of opera, meaning small opera"⁵ and was originally used to describe a shorter work, "perhaps less ambitious than an opera."⁶

The French term *opérette* and the German *operette* highlight the existence of the two schools with very impregnating traditions, which generated the qualities of the genre that were extracted from the French comic opera and the Austro-German *Singspiel*. The comic opera and the operetta emerged following the decline of the lyrical tragedy in the 19th century.

The popularity of the operetta has led to the development of various national styles in other countries. Many terms appeared with each national version, such as light opera, operetta, and comic opera or comedy opera. The term operetta has been applied to all national schools only after the review of past events.

This genre served as an antidote to the increasingly serious and ambitious claims of the *comic opera* and *vaudeville*. Operetta is a musical genre which is rich in melody and based on the nineteenth-century operatic styles, as opposed to *comic opera*, which appeals to feelings, the French operetta is just trying to convey entertainment. The term operetta was initially applied in a more general way to describe works that were short and less ambitious.

The romantic melodies of the operetta, comprised of harmonic textures, are positioned between what the popular music theater proposed and what the opera house brought, to which were added the sparkling dances that made the operetta much more attractive. The operetta addresses all categories of audiences, thus becoming, at the end of the 19th century, one of the most attractive theatrical genres performed by companies and theaters specialized in this genre.

The initiator of this genre was Jacques Offenbach, who "is the most responsible for the development and popularization of operetta - also called

⁴ Skelton, K. *Should we study music and/or culture?*. Music Education Research. (6) 2, 2004, pp.171.

⁵ [https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operetă\(Operetta\)](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operetă(Operetta))

⁶ Lamb, Andrew (2001). *Operetta*, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

buffe opera or opérettes - giving it its enormous vogue during the Second Empire and beyond."⁷

It differs from the *buffa* Italian opera, which, same as the *commedia dell'arte*, was developed in a fun tradition and not for satirical purposes, since the French operetta tried to avoid censorship and did not accept the big bourgeois performances.

It is important to understand the value of the operetta in the history of music because its development took place among many other important musical genres in France in the nineteenth century. In order to appreciate the operetta in its true context, we need to be aware of the fact that it is an accurate portrayal of French society, satirizing the social and political aspects of its time.

Johann Strauss II is the one who lifted the operetta to its highest standards. On the musical side, Strauss's operettas are true carriers of the Viennese waltz, which led to their name as *Walzeroperetten*. Offenbach himself was the one who advised him to approach this style in 1864, who considered that his style and melodic invention, alongside his talent as an orchestrator, had predestined him to create operetta, a style in which he created immortal songs, with waltzes, true models of the genre.

Franz Lehar (1870-1948) is the composer who, at the time of the total decline of the operetta genre, composes *The Merry Widow*, proving to the whole world that the operetta was revived and that there were still enough resources for its creation, being the initiator of the silver period of the genre. During Lehar's time, the Viennese operetta took another turn, with Strauss already bringing a new turn to the romantic sentimentality dominated by the beautiful musical works pertaining to love, "the nonsense made sense again, though it was a special kind of sense: no longer the mere interplay of wit, grace, and good humour. As in the new naturalistic drama and veristic opera, fancy made way for reality... There was psychological depth instead of simplicity, sexual passion instead of innocent amorousness. Discussions whether all this had an effect on the genre for good or bad, whether Lehar went too far are attractive and unprofitable"⁸.

Emmerich Kalman, the most well-known Hungarian representative composer of the genre, divides his compositions into three important stages of development also pertaining to the multicultural influence of his music. In the first stage, we find mainly influences of gypsy music and Hungarian folk music, then, after immigrating to Vienna, he takes over many influences of the Viennese operetta, and the third is phase takes place in America, where

⁷ Lamb, Andrew (2001). *Operetta*. <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

⁸ Grun, Bernard. *Gold and Silver: The Life and Times of Franz Lehar*. New York: David McKay and Company, Inc., 1970, pp. 131.

he develops a great interest for their musical culture, moreover, he introduces jazz elements in his compositions, especially in his mature operettas. As far as the Hungarian composer is concerned, it is certain that no matter what he composed, he could not fail to introduce characteristic elements of his rustic childhood within the music.

The beginning of the 19th century brought new development to the musical culture of our country, in the Principalities, especially from the folkloric and Byzantine strata, with oriental and Turkish influences, and with a hint of secular music from the end of the 18th century, such as worldly, noble court songs, composed by some noblemen. Until the 1820s, we find these features, especially the Greco-Turkish influences, performed by fiddlers and pew singers. In Transylvania, the connections with the European musical style were facilitated by German and Austrian musicians who had been invited for limited periods of time to the princely courts. The assimilation of the European styles in the inter-war Romanian musical culture results from the fact that most local composers synchronized with the aesthetic topicality, alongside certain influences coming from the west, in an obsessive definition of the national relationship with the universal ones.

The evolution of the operetta and its cosmopolitan characteristics

The evolution of the European operetta, and the operetta generally, followed its journey to countless realms, enriching and becoming a developed multicultural genre, even cosmopolitan, being open to international musical influences and forming another view of the art world of operetta. To be cosmopolitan means to recognize the common humanity in the various cultural artifacts of the world. In 1848, Karl Marx announced "the bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country ... The individual creations of individual nations become common property"⁹.

The feature of operetta, from the standpoint of the cosmopolitan genre, became increasingly pronounced in the first decades of the twentieth century, and this raised important questions about its cultural transfer and exchange, indicating that it was established as an art form, which was particularly accessible to people with different cultural backgrounds.

There are also negative views about cosmopolitanism because it tended to erode national traditions and roots. Kálmán is often considered to be Hungarian, but his family spoke both Hungarian, German, and English.

⁹ Marx, Karl, and F. Engels. *The Manifesto of the Communist Party 1848*. Moscow: Foreign Languages, 1952, pp 46–47.

He adopted the Hungarian name "Kálmán" although his family name was of German origin, Koppstein. He was not the only one who proceeded in this way in response to the rise of nationalism in Hungary: Albert Szirmai, for example, was born Albert Schönberg. Many composers involved in operetta acted like Kálmán and Szirmai and sometimes found themselves negatively described as "rootless cosmopolitans"¹⁰.

The European operetta, demonstrated by responding to jazz band music and many types of dance, that it is an artifact that is accessible and open to change if it is a part of a cosmopolitan culture, open to all kinds of international musical influences.

The operetta, during its lifetime, appealed to people from different cultural backgrounds, offering them opportunities to be engaged, both as listeners and as creative artists. Max Schönherr, a conductor who was hired at the Theatre an der Wien and the Wiener Stadttheater in the 1920s, reminded us that while the new operetta productions were "not always met with critical acclaim"¹¹, they were still adored by people from a diverse range of ethnic and social backgrounds.

The enrichment of the features of this genre is also the result of the exploration of people's social conditions, the flourishing of the cultural networks leading to the greater development of the musical style and dramatic content.

Multiculturalism in operetta

The multicultural perspective was shared by the composers born in Vienna such as Oscar Straus, who said "I have never been homesick anywhere, and if there is such a thing as a world citizen, then I am one"¹². He had a strong attachment to a community and an easy interaction with others, demonstrating a great cultural openness.

Before the First World War, the German operettas were represented with the desire of achieving success not only on the biggest European stages but around the whole world. This desire was implemented as soon as the war ended and, to achieve it, the English versions became very important. The main point for seeking international success was the huge profits that resulted, but a wider social and cultural impact was obvious in the transnational affiliations developed between composers, performers, and producers.

¹⁰ Botstein, Leon. *The National, the Cosmopolitan, and the Jewish*. The Musical Quarterly. vol. 97, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp.133.

¹¹ Lamb, Andrew. *Light Music from Austria: Reminiscences and Writings of Max Schönherr*. New York: Peter Lang, 1992, pp. 136–39.

¹² Grun, Bernard. *Prince of Vienna: The Life, the Times and the Melodies of Oscar Straus*. London: W. H. Allen, 1955, pp.167.

The operetta projected an image of glamor, refinement, and a modern influence that reached urban sensibilities. The feeling of the spatial difference between the inhabitants of the cities of one country and those of another had diminished fast. The urban leisure activities could be easily disseminated from one city to another, as the social experience of the cities, especially of the metropolises, became increasingly similar from nation to nation. Theaters contributed to the construction of what was supposed to be urban, fashionable and cosmopolitan, they did not passively deal with the urban style.

A multilateral culture must necessarily have transnational qualities, a flexible ability to adapt to change as it crosses borders.

The research into multiculturalism by all kinds of international cultural organizations, entrepreneurs, agents, and all the media require the adaptation of a methodology that avoids rigid top-down thinking. Martin Stokes recommends that the importance should be placed on a mutual embrace of different musical cultures, rather than on the globalization of music, he "invites us to think about how people in specific places and at specific times have embraced the music of others"¹³, he draws our attention to a lot of known acts of cultural transfer and exchanges between peoples.

Despite all these interferences, the operetta's music was rarely changed to fit a new location, or it was changed insignificantly, although sometimes there were cases of small additions with supplementary numbers, requested later. Different types of musical styles work as entities that develop emotions or emotional states in different processes that are related to the socio-cultural conjunctures in which those styles developed. The Viennese waltz was a certain style that was supposed to signify love and romance, but an erotic mood could also be reached through the very new style of African American syncopation or the Argentine tango. Then there are jazz-style incorporations that can evoke a place, but not necessarily a nation.

Unlike multiculturalism, which has led to the reduction of cultural differences in all the units that were so detached, transculturalism refers to the mixing of all kinds of cultures. The new thinking in operetta, in the twentieth century, was part of an entertainment media industry that led to mixing fertilization of cultures, such as the Hungarian, Austrian, African-American and Argentine musical styles, without any built-in friction suggested by the studies of hybridization of culture. Everything that brought a contribution to the urban theater, from csárdás to foxtrot, was introduced without hesitation, embracing the culture beyond regional or national borders. A mix of musical styles was normal.

¹³ Stokes, Martin. *On Musical Cosmopolitanism*. The Macalester International Roundtable, 2007, pp 6.

The fact is that the cultural conditioning that a real artist develops from being part of a multicultural nation or social environment means that this kind of person will compose, build or perform works of art in a way that a stranger will never be able to do. The ability to play a work by Offenbach runs only in the veins of French orchestral musicians or that Kalman runs only in the veins of Hungarian musicians, this can be an opinion that brings more rigid beliefs. However, this belief does not take into account the number of Chinese and Japanese artists who seem to be sort of experts and sensitive performers of all types of concert music. Bourriaud does not take local traditions or cultures as the inevitable opponents of the efforts to immerse oneself in another culture, they become so only when they act as coercive cultural schemes, and their roots become part of a "rhetoric of identity"¹⁴.

Examples of multiculturalism in the operetta repertoire

We can find a concrete example in the operetta of J. Strauss II, *The Gypsy Baron*, where the composer blurs the lines of the borders between the Hungarians, Gypsies, and Turks even starting from the title he gives to the operetta. In the original libretto, Barinkay's costume, the main character, is described as being half Oriental and half Hungarian. Also, at his entrance, he says in the aria he sings that he worked as a traveling acrobat, a man who swallows swords, a trainer of animals, a magician, and a fortune teller, trades that were considered to be done by gypsies. On the other hand, the chorus of his aria is a waltz, in a major range, along with the choir of gypsies, preparing weapons for the Austrian army, accompanied by the triangle and cymbals, considered of Turkish influence. These instruments also appear in the fast-paced moment of the "gypsy song", with which the main female character, Saffi, introduces herself, letting her Turkish origins be obvious.

We can encounter the influence of the gypsy Hungarian music in several operetta creations, the Austrian composers, and many more. Countless themes, motifs, and dances in the creation of Johann Strauss II are borrowed from this people, starting with Rosalinde from the operetta *The Bat*, who is disguised as a Hungarian countess and who plays the Hungarian Csardas, with those specific rhythms, as well as in the operetta *The Gypsy Baron* in which we find the image of Hungary and its inhabitants outlined in a very positive way.

The Lied, which is a genre of German origin, has left its mark on the musical moments encountered in operettas, and not only, we find the musical

¹⁴ Bourriaud, Nicolas. Translated James Gussen, Lili Porten. *The Radicant*. Lukas and Sternberg, New York, 2009, pp.56.

metaphors of human movement and gesture, rhythms of walking or running, tonic or dominant inflections for the question and response, storm or calm moods. Major-minor contrasts often used for laughter and tears, sun and shadow, and convivial or melancholic songs modeled according to the form and meaning of the verse.

The Viennese Waltz, which is integrated into the repertoire of almost all operetta works, but with the specific and characteristic note of each individual composer related to the country in which it was performed. In the operetta genre of composers such as Lehar, Kalman, Gilbert, Kunenke, Sullivan, Paul Abraham we find elements of this genre that infiltrated their creation and added salt and pepper to it. The Cabaret music that has its origins in France has penetrated several genres such as vaudeville, operettas, musicals due to its honesty, realism, and last but not least its characteristic of conveying the direct message, even if it is sometimes harsh, to the spectator.

Kálmán became one of the first European operetta composers to bring American jazz into his works. Jazz is a significant feature in the operetta genre, as it has always been associated with the social dances of the twentieth century, presenting rhythmic patterns of jazz beat, along with the characteristic American dances - foxtrot and shimmy in *Bajadera*, and Charleston in *The Princess of Chicago*.

The whole variety of influences, elements, and multicultural characteristics that we find in the operettas of the mentioned composers, gives us the possibility to acquire a good knowledge of the local traditions, of their roots, of openness, and a much wider worldview.

Conclusions

Multiculturalism means acknowledgment, a common unity in the various cultural artifacts of the world. It is obvious that operetta is a genre that is easily attuned to this side, but it does not necessarily mean that every operetta has a development of this kind.

The operetta, even to this day, has remained one of the genres that have a multicultural character. It addresses an audience of multi-ethnic categories, with the task of forming an identity. Even if nowadays it is performed differently, because it must be adapted to current tastes, it remains one of the most important forms of entertainment for the public who love the theater and musical performances.

The genre of the operetta is certainly a genre that needs to be discovered and deepened much more because its resistance over time denotes its value. Always supported by an audience eager for humor and entertainment of the highest quality, it demonstrates a much higher depth

and value than it might seem at first glance. This feature is due to the composers who laid out brilliant pages of the operetta genre, gathering all the characteristics of the performing arts in its artistic course: music, singing, dancing, acting, and everything that defines a whole and complex artist.

In the future, artists, teachers, and students can exploit this complex side of musical multiculturalism in order to stimulate musical growth, to expand the sphere of familiarity in music, and thus to develop highly esteemed professionals.

Translated in English by Cornelia Banghea

REFERENCES

- Bălan, George. *Muzica și lumea ideilor (Music and the World of Ideas)*. Ed. Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, Bucharest, 1973.
- Botstein, Leon. *The National Cosmopolitan and the Jewish*. The Musical Quarterly, Volume 97, Oxford university Press, 2014.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. translated James Gussen și Lili Porten. *The Radicant*. Lukas and Sternberg Press, New York, 2009.
- Bughici, Dumitru. *Dicționar de forme și genuri muzicale (Dictionary of musical forms and genres)*. Ed. Muzicală, Bucharest, 1978;
- Crittenden, Camille. *Johann Strauss and Vienna: Operetta and the Politics of Popular Culture*. Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Firca, Gheorghe. *Vodevilul și opereta clasică universală (Voudeville and universal classical operetta)*. Ed. Universitatea Muncitorească de Cultură Muzicală, Bucharest, 1963.
- Gál, György Sandor. *Operettek Könyve (The book of Operettas)*. Zeneműkiadó Vállalat, Budapest, 1960.
- Grun, Bernard. *Princess of Vienna: The life of Oscar Strauss*. W.H. Allen, London, 1955.
- Heltai, György. *Az operett metamorfózisai 1945-1956 (Operetta Metamorphoses)*. Elte Eötvös Kiadó, Budapest, 2012.
- Ignatius Letellier, Robert. *Operetta - A sourcebook, vol 1*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.
- Lamb, Andrew. *Light Music from Austria: Reminiscences and writings of Max Schönher*. Peter Lang, New York, 1992.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing group INC., New York, 1992.
- Moisescu, Titus and Miltiade Păun. *Ghid de operetă (Operetta Guide)*. Ed. Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor din România, București, 1969.

Moritz, Csaky. *Ideologia operetei și modernitatea vieneză (Operetta ideology and venetian modernity)* Ed. Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza", Iași, 2013.

Sterling-Mackinlay, Malcom. *Origin and Development of Light Opera*. Hutchinson and Company Limited, 1927.

Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance*. PAJ Publications, New York, 1988.

ARTICLES:

Hao, H. *Educators Jurnal, Music apreciation class. (84),2, 29-34, 1997.*

Skelton, K. *Should we study music and /or culture?.* Music Education Research, (6)2, 169-177, 2004.

Stokes, Martin. *On musical Cosmopolitanism*. The Macalester International Roundtable, 2007.

WEB SOURCES:

[https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opereta\(Operetta\)](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opereta(Operetta)).

Lamb, Andrew (2001) *Operetta*. <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.