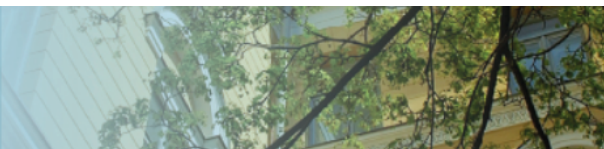


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National Opera and the Creation of Historical Memory

During the long nineteenth century (ca. 1789-ca. 1914), many European nations were attempting to define and assert their national identities. As Benedict Anderson describes in *Imagined Communities*, a common language, defined geographic boundaries, and a shared history were critical factors in this formulation.¹ In music, one genre in which these concepts were especially evident and potent was national opera.

But what exactly is a “national opera”? The concept is extremely nebulous, although it does have some distinguishing features. First, librettos (the words) are in the vernacular language of the country of origin. Second, sometimes folk music elements familiar to audiences appear in the score. And third, plots generally have a national connection stemming from history, literature, or folklore. Living tableaux of pivotal historical moments are often reenacted as lavish musical spectacles, such as the “Coronation Scene” from Boris Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* (1872). Similarly, great moments from national literatures appear on stage, such as the letter-writing scene in Pet’r Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* (1879, based on Alexander Pushkin). Rural villages filled with dancing folk are also typical, as is the case in Bedrich Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride* (1866). But while nation-specific elements are central to national opera, so are many “mainstream” operatic techniques, including aria (stylized singing), recitative (a type of speech singing), spoken dialogue (in some styles), and melodrama (here defined as spoken text above musical accompaniment).

Creators of national operas were faced with the challenge of finding innovative and effective ways of combining national and universal elements in the same work. The nature of this synthesis could also affect the work's reception—would audiences outside the country of origin relate to and appreciate an unequivocally national opera? The more general the theme and broad ideas of the opera, the greater was its chance for international success. Not all creators, however, were concerned about international appeal and deliberately wrote for a domestic audience. When this was the case, librettists most often looked to national history for the opera's plot, and chose stories that had contemporary resonance. These operas helped shape the idea of a shared national historical memory for those who attended productions. This potency was realized in one of two ways: 1) historical events were treated as allegories for present-day situations, or 2) historical persons demonstrated national traits or attributes that remained unchanged from the distant past into the then-present day.

While traditions of operas based on stories from national histories existed throughout Europe, I will focus here on works from Nordic and Habsburg lands. (See table 1 for details on the operas under consideration.)

Table 1. National Operas that Include Evocations of Historical Memory (Selected List)

Gustav Vasa (1786, Sweden)

Music by Johann Gottlieb Naumann (1741-1801)

Libretto by Johan Henrik Kellgren (1751-95), after an outline by Gustav III

Kung Karls jakt (King Charles's Hunt, 1852, Finland)

Music by Fredrik Pacius (1809-91)

Libretto by Zachris Topelius (1818-98)

Bánk Bán (1861, Hungary)

Music by Ferenc (Franz) Erkel (1810-93)

Libretto by Béni Egressy (1814-51), after a tragedy by József Katona

Branibori v Cechách (The Brandenburgers in Bohemia, 1866, Czech)

Music by Bedrich Smetana (1824-84)

Libretto by Karel Sabina (1811-77)

Dalibor (1868, Czech)

Music by Smetana

Libretto by Josef Wenzig (1807-76), translated into Czech by Ervin Spindler

Libuse (1881, Czech)

Music by Smetana

Libretto by Wenzig, translated by Spindler

Nikola Subic Zrinjski (1876, Croatia)

Music by Ivan Zajc (1832-1914)

Libretto by Hugo Badalic (1851-1900), after the German play *Zriny* by Theodor

Körner

The earliest example for this discussion is an opera from Sweden, Johann Gottlieb Naumann's *Gustav Vasa* (1786). The historic Gustav Vasa (1496-1560), often referred to as the "father of modern Sweden," led a rebellion against Christian II of Denmark that resulted in an independent Swedish state and Gustav Vasa's coronation as the first King of Sweden in 1523.

In 1746, the birth of Swedish crown prince Gustav was a joyful celebration. Many hoped that he would follow in the great tradition of his two namesakes, Gustav Vasa and Gustavus Adolphus (r. 1611-32). The young Gustav's mother, Queen Lovisa Ulrika, ensured that her son's education included the memory of Gustav Vasa as the country's liberator.² Hence, the power of memory—the theme of this workshop—was central to the future King Gustav III's own identity. Gustav ascended to the throne in 1771, and the following year, achieved a *coup d'état* that returned power to the throne and ended party rule. Birgitta Schyberg asserts that it was shortly after this that the monarch, who adored theater and was himself a playwright, began thinking about an opera on Gustav Vasa, and that the royal propaganda machine began to draw parallels between the political liberations of Gustav III and those of his predecessor.³

In the early 1780s, Gustav III was contemplating war with Denmark and wanted to influence public opinion in his favor. So when the opera *Gustav Vasa* appeared on January 19, 1786, many viewed it as either propaganda for war or as further defense of the 1772 *coup d'état*.⁴ Gustav himself created an outline for the libretto, which was completed by Johan Henrik Kellgren (1751-95). Music was by the German-born composer Johann Gottlieb Naumann (1741-1801). The story, which takes place during a twenty-four hour period in Stockholm, is told in flashback. It includes re-creations of Christian II's coronation banquet in Stockholm in 1520 and the subsequent Stockholm Bloodbath. The opera continues with depictions of Gustav Vasa's siege of Stockholm in 1521, his election as king, and, finally, his coronation. In the opera, Gustav III uses historical memory to celebrate the story of his ancestor as an allegory for his own actions and desires. Gustav Vasa defeated Denmark, and Gustav III could do the same.

When *Gustav Vasa* appeared, Finland was part of Sweden. In 1809, Finland was ceded to Russia and became a Grand Duchy of that empire. One of the leaders of musical life in Helsinki during the nineteenth century was the German-born Fredrik Pacius (1809-91). He was a violinist with the Royal Court Orchestra in Sweden for six years before moving to Helsinki in 1835, where he taught at the university and also organized concerts.

Pacius's opera *Kung Karls jakt* (King Charles's Hunt) had its first performance on March 24, 1852, by an amateur company in Helsinki. The libretto was by Zachris Topelius (1818-1898), an important writer who wrote in Swedish and who extolled Swedish-Finnish history. (The opera is in Swedish.) Based on the actual 1671 visit of the under-

age Swedish King Charles XI to the Aland Islands, Leonora, daughter of a local fisherman, saves the future monarch from conspirators. The story is a mix of fact and fiction. Leonora is an invented character, and it is probably no coincidence that she shares a name with the heroine of Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*.⁵ The creators may have hoped that audience members would remember Beethoven's heroine (evoking the power of memory) and transfer her attributes to their opera. *King Charles's Hunt* is in many ways a celebration of the honesty and loyalty of the Finnish people, something that would have pleased the Russians who were governing Finland at the time.⁶

This is an opera that recalls the past. But it also includes specific notions of memory within itself. The act 3 market scene is the one with the most overt Finnish elements, and two musical depictions endorse the idea of aural tradition, a cultural manifestation of memory. In the scene, a blind fiddler plays the well-known "Björneborgarnus Marsch" while a woman sings in Finnish, accompanying herself on the kantele, the Finnish national instrument. These musical references were intended for the opera's audience, who would recall their pre-existing knowledge of the violin tune and the kantele as parts of the Finnish cultural heritage.

The remaining operas to be discussed here come from non-Austrian parts of the Habsburg Empire: Hungary, Bohemia, and Croatia. First, Hungary. The plot of Franz Erkel's *Bánk Bán*, the Hungarian national opera first produced in 1861, is set in the thirteenth century. Bánk Bán is troubled by the sad condition of his country under the oppressive German Queen Gertrude, who is ruling in the absence of her husband, King Endré. Conflict exists

between the Hungarian nobles and the German crown. In the opera, Bánk ends up killing the Queen. Historically, his part in her murder is unclear. The opera's plot about foreign domination by German speakers resonated with its audience, for it paralleled their political reality as Hungarians being ruled from Vienna. Conflict between Hungary and Austria led to a crisis in 1848, before the opera appeared, and eventually to the creation of the Dual Monarchy in 1867. (Work on the opera began in 1846, prior to the events of 1848.)

One of the most famous numbers in the opera is Bank Ban's "Homeland," which is in the traditional verbunkos form, with a slow rhapsodic section followed by a more deliberate one. Just as Finnish audiences would remember the violinist's march and the kantele as their own, Hungarian audiences would recall the style of the verbunkos, a dance that in earlier times was used in military recruiting efforts. They would also recognize Erkel's distinctive musical language for the number, one that is based on the so-called "gypsy" scale. The aria begins with Bánk asserting that "Just as a homeless wanderer who journeys through the night is lost when raging tempests hide the guiding star's pale light." He remembers his homeland, his "guiding star."

This theme of foreign rule by German speakers is also central to Bedrich Smetana's *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*, of 1866. The opera, set in thirteenth-century Bohemia, takes place after the death of Premysl II, as a group of knights and the mayor of Prague resist the advance of the Brandenburgers. The opening lines could have been stated as truth in either 1279 or 1866. The knight Oldrich speaks to his on-stage colleagues but

also breaks down the theater's "fourth wall" and addresses his audience: "But I say this: we can no longer tolerate foreign armies here. We must now take up arms and drive the Brandenburgers from our homeland. They are destroying our country and our language, and under their sword the nation suffers."

Both *Bánk Bán* and *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia* invoke the memories of historical events concerning German-speaking oppressors. They were conceived as allegories for present-day situations. Two other operas by Smetana, however, celebrate moral attributes of the Czech people. *Dalibor*, which Smetana intended to be the great Czech national opera, is set in fifteenth-century Prague. It relates the tale of the knight Dalibor, who kills a nobleman in revenge for the death of his friend Zdenek and is subsequently imprisoned in Prague Castle. This is an opera that extols justice and the importance of justice for the Czech people. The opera was first performed on May 16, 1868, at the New Town Theatre. The performance intentionally took place on a significant date in the history of Prague: the day of the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone for the new National Theatre.

Smetana's opera written specifically for the opening of this new National Theater was *Libuse*. It has its first performance there on June 11, 1881. A few weeks after the theater's opening, however, the house burned down. It was rebuilt and reopened in 1883, and *Libuse* was again the inaugural production. Due to the opera's special association with the National Theater, Smetana conceived it as a work meant to inspire national pride in its audience. The plot retells the story of Libuse, legendary ancestor of all Czechs. It

concludes with her extensive prophecy during which, in six magnificent scenes, she foretells great events in the history of the Czech nation—events which to the 1881 audience would have been historical moments, parts of their collective national memory. The fifteen-minute dramatic monologue begins in the eleventh century, and moves forward to include important heroes such as Jaroslav of Sternberk, who defeated the Tatars in the thirteenth century, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV, who built Prague into a capital city in the latter half of the fourteenth century, and the fifteenth-century Hussite leader George of Podebrady. The final prophecy reveals the majestic Royal Castle in Prague as the chorus sings, “Czech people shall never perish, all hell’s horrors will they ever resist! Glory! Glory!” This is an endorsement of the perseverance and heroism of the Czech people through any adversity, including, for the Czech nationalists, foreign rule in the 1880s.

Foreign rule is also a theme in the Croatian national opera, Ivan Zajc’s *Nikola Subic Zrinjski* (1876). The plot concerns Zrinski’s defense of Szigetvar Fortress in 1566 against the invading armies of Sultan Suleiman II, an event in which Zrinski and his followers became martyrs.⁷ The opera was intended to promote the strength of the Croatian spirit, as evident in this historical event, in the midst of Habsburg domination. Memory, in the guise of aural tradition, plays a role in the opera itself, just as it did in *King Charles’s Hunt*. In this instance, Jelena, the heroine, dreams of a better world and sings herself to sleep to a lullaby she *remembers* from her mother. Zajc inserted an actual Croatian folk song, “Cuk sedi,” at this point in the score.⁸

So what does this small sampling of national operas tell us about the importance of memory in the genre? From these examples, historical-based operas can be used in two fundamental ways. The first is to create a sense of “us” against “them” and to use historical events as allegories for present-day situations. This could come from a monarch, as in *Gustav Vasa*, where the idea of Sweden against Denmark is revived, or from creators in lands under foreign domination, as is in *Bánk Bán*, *The Brandenburgers in Bohemia*, and *Nikola Subic Zrinjski*. The second is to create links to the past that depict the unchanging inherent character of a nation’s people, whether it be loyalty and honesty in *King Charles’s Hunt*, a love of justice in *Dalibor*, or heroism in *Libuse*. (Of course there are numerous crossovers between these themes. *Dalibor*, for example, can also be read as an opera about foreign rule.) These works were especially significant for their original audiences, for they provided conduits whereby observers could experience events from long ago in their nation’s history through the imaginative medium of opera. They could then contextualize these refashioned historical moments within their own lives and recent memories. Audience members could also remember traditional musical numbers alongside the characters on stage, as in the fiddle tune and kantele sequence in *King Charles’s Hunt* or during Jelena’s lullaby in *Nikola Subic Zrinjski*.

Finally, these operas remain part of their respective nation’s cultural heritages in the twenty-first century. All have been recorded, and those from former Habsburg lands can still be seen on stage. In Finland, *King Charles’s Hunt* had two different productions in 2000, and a Hungarian-produced film version of *Bánk Bán* starring Attila Kiss B. and Eva Marton appeared in 2001. Now, however, the role of memory has changed. These

operas themselves have become conduits for contemporary collective memories. They are monikers of a time when nation building, vernacular languages, and a love of the national past were important components of the romantic musical imagination. Listeners nowadays can experience these works as a means to connect with the power of National Romanticism in the long nineteenth century and likewise its inherent re-creations of historical memories.

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¹ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991) and Ernst Gelner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), among other works on the topic of ethnic nationalism.

² Birgitta Schyberg, "'Gustaf Vasa' as Theatre Propaganda," in *Gustavian Opera: Swedish Opera, Dance and Theatre 1771-1809* (Stockholm: Royal Swedish Academy of Music, 1991), 294-95.

³ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 301-02.

⁵ Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera*, 4th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 548.

⁶ For more on the opera, see Tomi Mäkelä, “Between Classicism and Eclecticism: Pacius' *The Hunt of King Charles* - A Piece of Loyalist Anti-nationalism,” *Finnish Music Quarterly* 2:2002, 52-59.

⁷ The historical character's surname is “Zrinski.” Zajc misspelled it for the opera, adding a “j” to create “Zrinjski.”

⁸ Gorana Doliner, “Glazbeni folklor u djelima Ivana Zajca” (Folk Music in the Works of Ivan Zajc), *Zbornik radova sa Znanstvenog skupa održanog u povodu 150. Obljetnice rođenja Ivana Zajca (1832-1914)*, ed. Lovro Zupanovic (Zagreb: Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1982), 162.