

**THE BEGINNINGS OF THE CREATION OF THE CROATIAN
NATIONAL OPERA REPERTOIRE – THE CROATIAN NATIONAL
HISTORICAL OPERA TRILOGY
(MISLAV, BAN LEGET, NIKOLA ŠUBIĆ ZRINJSKI) BY IVAN von ZAJC²**

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Zajc's Croatian national opera trilogy *Mislav* (1870), *Ban Leget* (1872) and *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski* (1876) was composed in a sequence and by that time Zajc had already had compositional experience in operas, acquired in both his early and intensive operatic periods. After a series of operettas, the composition of a historic opera with national elements was a *conditio sine qua non*, especially after Zajc's arrival in Zagreb from Vienna which was arranged with Croatian intellectuals in 1870. That same year, the premiere of the opera *Mislav* on 2 October, one decade after the establishment of the Croatian Drama (1860), i.e. Croatian National Theatre (1861) and twenty years after the completion of the then still unperformed opera *Porin* (1847 – 1851) by Lisinski, the work of Zagreb's permanent opera as well as Zajc's forty years of musical activity in Zagreb commenced. Moreover, the aforementioned operas, together with Lisinski's *Love and Malice*, were, in the Croatian cultural and historical perspective of that time, declared as the only »real« Croatian national operas yet composed and performed (except *Porin*, which was performed in 1897). Despite their uneven quality and their contemporary and subsequent success (audience reception), our attention was attracted by the questions pertaining to the competence of the author who had to make, upon arrival, all the necessary assumptions for creating the first publicly performed national opera. Firstly, the musical ensemble and education were to be established, the nurturing of the players and the education of the singers. In accordance with inherited predispositions, cultural and family environment (influence of his musician father), music education and specialization (Rijeka, Milan), the author's artistic growth and formation in diverse environments (Rijeka, Milan, Vienna, Zagreb), Zajc managed to establish a creative dialogue in the new environment in the context of the time. One could say that the endeavours of Zagreb's patriots for the formation of national (musical) culture after the period of Bach's absolutism coincided with (private and artistic) circumstances which brought Zajc to Zagreb. Zajc came in the period between neoabsolutism and the rule of Héderváry (from 1883). While the operas *Mislav* and *Ban Leget* were composed during the reigns of banus Levin Rauch (*Mislav*) and Antun Vakanović (*Ban Leget*), both guided by aggressive Hungarian politics, the opera *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski* was created during the reign of

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Ivan Mažuranić, whose reign was a »bright oasis« in the socio-political circumstances in Croatia in the second half of the 19th century. Even though the last period was rather favourable, one could say that the opera trilogy as whole was composed in the intermission between two strong political pressures (Bach's and Khuen's). Therefore, it is important to emphasise the convenience of the historical moment for the expression of the national, that is, for the creation of national operas with more or less allusive messages and metaphors. This can especially relate to *Mislav*, being the first work of its kind, but also to *Ban Leget* and *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*, which were also intended to be national operas, and Zajc followed mutual ideas (for instance, self-sacrifice) in his choice of themes in all three works, thus reflecting the general mood of the society of the time. Their mission was to reinvigorate and confirm Croatian national identity in times of uncertainty, just after the two Settlements, during the unrest in Croatian national aspirations. The choice of themes aimed, with a great deal of certainty, for the confirmation of the national: the existence of the nation since the »ancient times«. Furthermore, the themes reflected the key terms of the founders' myths of identity, unity and continuity (of one's nation).

The librettos, three diverse texts written by three authors (Franjo Marković: *Mislav*; Ivan Dežman: *Ban Leget*; Hugo Badalić: *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*), were inspired by a folk tale (*Good Children* from Erben's collection no. 48 in *Mislav*), a historic book (*De regno Dalmatiae et Croatiae*, written by Ivan Lucius in 1666 in *Ban Leget*) and a dramatic text (written by a German Theodor Körner after the drama *Zriny* from 1812 in the opera *Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*) and present three topics from three different sources: a folk tale (*Mislav*), scenes from Croatian history / legends / myths (*Ban Leget*) and a historic event (*Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*). The subjects are typical for that time and they depict three different periods of Croatian history over the course of of 1000 years; the 6th century in so-called Great Croatia, homeland of the Croatian people before the journey to Pannonia and the Adriatic sea (*Mislav*: battle with Avars); the second half of the 10th century (*Ban Leget*: internal conflicts of a disunited nation – battle for power; an illegitimate ruler) and the 16th century (*Nikola Šubić Zrinjski*: the conflict with the Turks).

The librettists of Zajc's national-historical trilogy were three distinguished writers, as well as librettists of Zajc's other operas (Josip Eugen Tomić, August Harambašić, Ivan Trnski, Stjepan Širola, Julije Benešić, S. S. Kranjčević). However, in the period of the conception of those operas, they were all young people; Ivan Dežman (31) had had very little theatrical experience and Franjo Marković (25) and Hugo Badalić (25) had not had any experience in writing a libretto. So, in their conception of the dramatic action they didn't follow the scheme of Italian librettos, such as the different dispositions of numbers and scenes which are conditioned by drama. However, despite the different levels of quality and/or some minor shortcomings of the librettos (*Mislav*, *Ban Leget*) concerning the illogicality of some of

the language and drama, the three librettists strived to »think musically« during the writing of their texts, making parts of diverse character and atmosphere possible, such as solos (romances and arias), vocal duets, quartets, quintets, sextets, choruses, marches (suggested by text) and other structural opera parts.

In this theses diverse aspects of Zajc's national historical trilogy are considered; namely, on the one hand, the issues of the beginning of the creation of a Croatian national operatic repertoire, and on the other hand the musical and textual characteristics of the works, based on musicological and Croatological analysis.

By way of the analytical and comparative methods adopted, various factors are considered including the basic analysis of each individual opera and the relationship between them (by emphasising the differences in diverse aspects as well as connecting similarities). According to hypotheses which result from the consideration of the primary and secondary material, and based on the three national historical operas considered as one segment of the author's opus, the question of the level of participation of a composer in the course of music of that time was pursued. The research aimed to comprehend the level of the composer's contribution and significance in the context of his oeuvre and consider the question of the nature of the author's creative intentions during the time and milieu under consideration. Firstly, the cultural, socio-political and ideological surroundings were observed, especially the idea of the national as well as the thought of *national* in Zajc's works, along with the reception of the national historical trilogy during the time of its creation (chapter II). In particular, some of the (new) perspectives developed led to the conclusion that Zajc – according to his own words – in fact had a rather early appreciation and an individual approach to the problem of the national. However, even though he was unprepared for such a national idiom and isolated from the milieu in which those phenomena would be more natural to him, he had understood them in his own artistic way and had fulfilled the essential national task.

Based on the available and collected material, and using the proper methodological procedures, the score and text analysis was carried out using the original scores of three operas and the extant text sources (literary templates and librettos). The structure of the musical material was observed along with the organization of the parts of each opera (the articulation of numbers / scenes, the course of the action and the compositional methods employed in shaping it). Furthermore, regarding the formal structure of opera numbers / scenes, the dramaturgical side of each opera was analysed, their large-scale structures, and details of the procedures employed regarding rhythm, melody and motives. The methods for the connecting of the scenes and the parts in one logical whole by joining contrasting segments as well as techniques used for the musical differentiation of some parts and the musical characterisation of the characters, etc. were considered. On the

other hand, the relationships between the operas' different facets were also considered, namely the relationships between the dramaturgy of the libretto, the musical dramaturgy, and the dramaturgy of the scenery; the effects of visual or scenic moments in the operas, and the psychological effects of the musical shaping of the storyline. In the central part of this dissertation (chapter III), most of the attention is dedicated to the musical component of the operas, which included Zajc's melodic and vocal thought, harmony and rhythm, and the variety of influences behind the composer's form of musical expression, influences which included not only Italian, but German operatic tradition (as seen in rhythmic elements and operatic gesture) together with Slavic (Croatian) elements (achieved by diverse means and in diverse nuances). Lots of thought was given to the presence of folk motives (tunes and rhythmic patterns) as well as texts with folk characteristics. Namely, according to discovered influences of the motivic content in the operas, significant indicators for the national idea were found in the librettos (such as narration / fairy tale, historical topic / legend and an episode from the history). This pertains especially to the national idioms in choruses, which had a significant role in national operas (conventionally representing the people, the national idea and patriotic rhetoric as well as the heroic element). These are present not only as textual messages but as compositional procedures (by adding motives and musical associations with folk musical tradition), and, last but not least, national ideas in the visual aspects of the piece (costumes, scenery, movement).

Furthermore, the analysis of the score and libretto in the context of national and international issues led to the consideration of what may be considered national in the music, the text (including its theme) and the visual component of the operas, led us to the judgment that it was the composer's intention to pursue the creation of a national repertoire.

Of course, we raised the question concerning the extent of the influences behind Zajc's compositional style. Summing them up, we come to the thesis emphasized in the introduction of this paper. From the observances it is clear that Zajc, especially in this isolated segment of his opus and in accordance with then contemporary circumstances and his own capacities, was inextricably tied to the socio-political events in his (Croatian) milieu, was defined by those events, and the artistic realization of his operas was necessarily conditioned by existing literature and librettos. Meanwhile, in their valorisation one should consider the whole context of their designation, including the composer's artistic habitus and many other factors. One could consider Zajc as »being torn between« different layers and levels: first, his artistic profile understood as his musical inclinations and affinities, together with the needs and affordances of his milieu and their broader definition through existing level of musical education and competence; the second, between the three cultural influences of the Italian, German and Croatian traditions, and the third, following from the second, the fact of the composer's trilingualism

which, besides Croatian, German, and Italian and Croatian in Dalmatia, included Hungarian was present. Of course, in those patterns of threes one could, as a metaphor, observe even the territorial designation of the Triune Kingdom and her division between the Croatian, Hungarian and Austrian politic.

Even though Zajc kept the basic language of international / cosmopolitan (Italian) music in his national historical trilogy, wanting to create the *national opera canon*, he incorporated some formal innovations as well as inventive melodic and rhythmic patterns. Zajc came to some of the solutions by himself, intuitively, which can be already seen in *Mislav*, as an attempt to incorporate Slavic musical elements. That was achieved by:

- a) outer (descriptive, imitative) associations with folk melodies (by using folklore, oriental and local elements – the cadences in fifths, simple motives, repetitive patterns, dance rhythms and rhythmic patterns of Slavic and Czech origin);
- b) inspiration of folk (old town) tunes and shaping the arias or segment of arias in a similar way (*Zrinjski*: »Gdje na tvrdu Stancu-brdu«; melodic and rhythmic themes in *Mislav* and melodies in *Ban Leget*);
- c) using preexisting folk tunes in a slightly modified way and with exquisite stylization, he inserted them in the operas (the archaic »Cvate ruža rume-na« from *Zrinjski*);
- d) citing the tunes (also using suitable harmony and orchestration); styling them using refined artistic interpretation (the chorus of fairies »Ljubio je goluban«).

While striving to define the features of the trilogy's operas (notably their perception and reception, especially in the times of their creation), this work aimed to evaluate Zajc's means and the extent to which he created the Croatian national operatic repertory, based on the fact that he was the most competent musician educated under the influence of the Verdi school and possessing a practical experience of an operetta master. Having said that, this dissertation attempts to discuss the correlation between international and national idioms. The aforementioned idiom reflected on the context of the creation of national operas and/or those which played a similar part in the consciousness of the cultural public of the time. Regarding the context of the time, the intention of such creation in a practical sense could only be achieved by the following compositional tools: associative use of the harmonic models (the choice of keys), selection from a motivic palette in order to underline the national feelings, and, lastly, the composer's skill together with a touch of mannerism, all in the service of accomplishing results. The conclusion presents the understanding of the means and level of Zajc's realization of a national operatic opus, in which the following is reflected: the composer's compositional craft, his past international experience and his newer influences, contained in the demands,

expectations and possibilities of the Croatian environment, which speaks to the meaning of Zajc's trilogy as such.

Moreover, certain features have been noted, such as the formal and melodic-rhythmic innovation of these works against the background of the composer's experience up to that point. The thesis that Zajc, against numerous odds, managed to play a key role in producing the first real Croatian national operatic canon in the second part of the 19th century (in the formative years of Croatian opera), thus inventing the features of a national idiom, was confirmed. These examples emphasize the importance of the social context and the role of a musical work (and the »musical life« of the environment that produced it and the environment to which it belongs). This role is most importantly a social one, which, from a contemporary point of view on the history of music, is especially evident. The appearance of these works included a political connotation. Zajc's role in the inception and creation of the national operatic repertoire also included the overcoming of all possible obstacles. Despite the fact that Zajc's operas had much in common with other heroic (national) operas, they did not seek to depict a random place, period or people; moreover, they were explicitly connected with Croatia, whether on the level of toponymy and personal names or the historical foundation of the plot. As such, the operas are a reflection of a centuries-long tradition of musical creation, because they were conceived by the hand of a composer who was a paradigmatic example of an emissary bearing rich experience and knowledge of European musical thought. The trilogy, based on the conjunction of Italian, Croatian and Austrian-German cultural influences, can be considered culturally complex, as it resonates with the influences issuing from the composer's threefold being. The conclusion of this work is an attempt to summarize Zajc's importance as a composer of the national operatic opus, but at the same time also a call for further scholarly consideration of Zajc's body of work.