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A Courtier, a Musician: Count Matvey Vielgorsky and Music Theatre

Taking Matvey Vielgorsky¹ as an example, the article makes an attempt to draw attention to the issue of ‘musical aristocracy of the first part of the XIX century and their contacts with music theatre’. It looks into preferences of composers, analyzes opera both as a genre and a form of pastime, opera in a musical salon and in the sphere of records and information management.

Between the two brothers we chose the younger one, because it was he who became a professionally accomplished *violoncellist*², famous in Europe. Opera didn’t seem to interest him much. The overarching message of the article is the *universal* artistic genius of Matvey. Ivan Panaev said that “Odoevsky’s efforts to kindle the interest of high society circles in Russian literature didn’t succeed” and accused the society of being ignorant. “There were few exceptions”, he wrote, “and one of the most brilliant of them was count Matvey Yurjevich Vielgorsky, a very widely read man of a fine aristocratic nature” [3, 143]. Matvey was also a connoisseur and a big admirer of fine arts. Even the emperor Nicholas I trusted his opinion and would put him in charge of choosing and purchasing paintings in Italy.

The names of Matvey and Mikhail Vielgorsky are associated with one of the most famous (and unstudied) musical salons in Russia and Europe. First, a few words about his life. The foundations for his ‘purely German’, ‘strictly classical’ music education were laid abroad from 1804 until 1809 (?)³ [7,751], which explains many of his further music initiatives.

According to researchers, “thanks to the appearance of Matvey Yurievich in Luisino, an unusual music festival was held there” in the winter of 1822 – 1823 [1,282]. Vielgorsky’s gift for music was also universal. The part and parcel of musical evenings in the mansion of the Birons⁴ was not only instrumental music, but also singing: both brothers were keen on singing (Matvey was a baritone), there were popular opera pieces performed [6, 433]. They had the latest operas

¹ Matvey Vielgorsky (April 5, 1794, St Petersburg – March 5, 1866, Nice; buried in the St. Lazarus cemetery of the Alexander Nevsky Abbey in St Petersburg), a count, a violoncellist, a famous musical and social figure, one of the founders of the Russian musical society, oberhofmeister at the Highest Court.

² Matvey studied with B. Romberg. According to the data found in Sankt-Petersburgische Zeitung, Romberg gave concerts in St. Petersburg from 6 April 1810 until May 1813. Therefore, Matvey had the opportunity to study with Romberg from spring 1810 (when he came back from abroad) until June 1812 (when he began military service). They maintained professional and friendly relations in after years.

³ This date seems incorrect, because the Vielgorsky brothers did not return to Russia before 1810.

⁴ The estate belonged to the second wife of Michail Vielgorsky, Louise Biron.

delivered from abroad. Those evening gatherings in Luisino were a prototype of *soirées musicales*⁵ in St. Petersburg. By placing emphasis on singing instead of just instrumental music, we are trying to give a fresh perspective on the perception of the musician.⁶

The salon of the Vielgorskys in St. Petersburg was arranged differently and had a different repertoire. As M. Glinka mentioned, “the little ministry of fine arts” (H. Berlioz) was fairly considered a propaganda of classical instrumental music: symphonies, Beethoven’s quartets. However, Adan recalled listening to Francois Servais playing quartets of Mendelson that were popular in France [9,731]. It was Matvey who invited the Belgian virtuoso to St. Petersburg among many other musicians⁷.

Let us focus on the issue of opera. Although certain vocalists and prima donnas were invited to St. Petersburg, opera was not dominant in salons, which makes each particular *opera* case so important for us. The memoirs of Wilhelm Lenz “The adventures of a Lifyandian in Petersburg” are very illustrative. For example, “In the Summer of 1834 the Vielgorsky counts rented Kochuba’s summer mansion <...> Bludov brought there a piano arrangement of an extract from the yet unknown opera ‘Les Huguenots’. The counts convened a committee of their musical friends to introduce them to the opera. Among them there was Nesselrode⁸, who was so young and exhilarated, that even took part in the choir. This small gathering was pervaded with the spirit of cheerfulness and simplicity” [2, 454]. It might seem to have been just a *precedent*, a single occasion mentioned in the memoirs. However, there is every likelihood that it was a common practice of introducing the latest opera pieces. It is also necessary to underline that it was a form of home concert. It was *private* (‘small gathering’), and there were no usual attributes of a salon (or an academy) such as professional guest musicians, audience, society, orchestra⁹.

Another reminiscence of Lenz describes an evening at count A. Golitsynsky’s: “It was a small gathering <...> I shared a table with Vielgorsky, the Bulgakovs and Golitsyn. Suddenly the count said: ‘This hall is perfect for performing the last scene of Don Juan!’ And indeed thanks to the dark plafond painting the hall looked dim and made a tragic impression <...> Vielgorsky showed considerable knowledge, talking about Mozart, about this ‘bible musicale’, as his friend

5 Soirée Musicale is an authentic definition used by Matvey Vielgorsky while drawing up programmes or posters. See: Manuscript Department of Russian State Library (MD RSL) Col. 48. Venevitinovs – Vielgorskys. Folder 51. SU 11. (ОР РГБ. Ф.48. Вeneвигиновы-Виельгорские. Папка 51.Ед. хр.11).

6 On June 2, 1829, Anna Olenina in her diary points out the singing of Matvey Vielgorsky and of Ivanov, a student of the Chapel [1, 299].

⁷ On the role of musical aristocracy as a “moderator” between the royal court and Western Europe see: [11, 227].

8 Karl Robert Reichsgraf von Nesselrode-Ehreshoven (1780-1862) was Russian minister of foreign affairs.

9 On systematization of the concept ‘salon’ see the book by M. Gerber, dedicated to ‘women’s’ salons [10, 17–23].

Rossini would call Don Juan” [2,451]. Given that the center of public attention were Beethoven and Rossini, the reminiscence of Lenz seems to be a revelation that allows to presume that, as regards opera, Mozart, namely his Don Juan, was an idol of the time among Russian musical noblemen¹⁰.

On January 21, 1827 by the highest decree of the emperor Nicholas I Matvey was appointed a member of the committee of the newly formed Theatre Directorate¹¹ and sent to Italy in order to hire a new troupe¹². We are obliged to mention a very valuable manuscript stored in the manuscript department of the Institute of Russian literature of the Russian Academy of Science (The Pushkin House). The matter in hand is Vielgorsky’s Italian Dairy¹³. It is an important part of the biography of the musician, the civil servant and the courtier. The notes include descriptions of towns, theatres, social gatherings, and impressions of theatre performances. Following are some of them: «Les décorations assez bien, et l’irruption d’Etna n’est pas mal. Le talent de la Vestale da Vigano est beau, dans le goût italien. La Pallerini et Malinaci sont très beaux, un peu (courtois?), pour nous autres »¹⁴. («The staging set is fine, the eruption of Etna was done very well. Vigano performed in The vestal virgin very vividly in an Italian manner. Pallerini and Malinaci are very good, although for us (non-Italians) they might seem too mannered»). Judging by his few sketchy comments, it is clear that the count critically evaluated opera singing voices, sometimes using harsh epithets: «Yachinadi¹⁵ est détestable (‘Yachinadi is detestable’)». He was more kind to K. Bassi: «La Bassi¹⁶ a dû d’être bonne, elle a encore, qui que rarement, de beaux moments »¹⁷. (‘She managed to deliver her part’... ‘there are, although very rare, some good bits’). The Italian Diary of

10 On March 5, 1838 Matvey together with countess Rossi, count Grigory Volkonsky and others performed the final part of the opera “Don Juan” at a concert to benefit the Women’s Patriotic society. See: MD RSL. Col. 48 Venevitinovs-Vielgorskys. Folder 49. SU 1 (ОР РГБ. Ф.48. ВЕНЕВИТИНОВЫ-ВИЕЛЬГОРСКИЕ. Папка 49. Ед. хр.1).

11 Russian State Historical Archive (RSHA). Col. 497. Inv. 14. SU 452. Folio 25. (РГИА. Ф.497 оп.14. Ед. 452. Л.25).

12 Ibid. For more detail see: [4, 10–11].

13 Manuscript Department of the Institute of Russian Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences (MD IRL). Col. 50. SU 146. (ОР ИРЛИ РАН. Ф.50. Ед. хр. 146). The document has no cover, title or case and is divided randomly into two volumes. Pagination and title were added by the archivist. It is written in French.

14 MD IRL. Col. 50. SU 146. [1828]. Folio 15. Verso. (Р О ИРЛИ. Ф. 50. Ед. хр. 146. [1828]. Л.15. Об). Vielgorsky managed to watch ‘The Vestal Virgin’ created by Salvatore Vigano to the music by Gaspare Spontini with Antonia Pallerini as Emilia.

15 According to the reference literature, the identity of a singer is still unknown.

16 Carolina Bassi (1781-1862) was an Italian singer, contralto.

17 MD IRL Col. 50. SU 146. [1828]. Folio 15. Verso. (Р О ИРЛИ. Ф. 50. Ед. хр. 146. [1828]. Л.15. Об). What opera part he is referring to is unclear. There is no doubt, though, that from Vielgorsky’s point of view, K. Bassi could still sing well. In 1828 she was in the twilight of her singing career. From what he writes, it is obvious that he listened to Bassi many times.

Matvey Vielgorsky is obviously connected with his official mission to hire Italian singers¹⁸.

After the dissolution of the Theatre Committee on April 24, 1829, Vielgorsky who was in charge of the Italian troupe¹⁹ continued working with them. Further is an excerpt from his unpublished letter to his brother in Paris: «<...>Зачем, они²⁰ так напустили по новые права [на] Seria? Надобно было обрезать Семирамиду, в Париже она не продолжится до 12 часов, хотя спектакль начинается в 8 <...>»²¹ (“Why have they granted such privileges to Seria. They should have shortened Semiramide, it never lasts until 12 o’clock in Paris, although it starts at 8 <...>”). Thus, the ‘theatre’ letters reveal personal tastes of the musician and even his ‘moral code’. Being a professional violoncellist and a high official (since 1831 he occupied the post of a stallmaster at the court of Grand Duchess Maria Nicholaevna and many times accompanied her and later together with her husband Herzog of Leichtenberg on their foreign journeys), Matvey had an ample experience of communicating with Rossini, Spontini, Meyerbeer. He was especially close with Rossini and Meyerbeer. In the 1850s Matvey called Meyerbeer ‘a Beethoven of opera’²².

An essential reason for Matvey’s engagement with European opera were letters of Pauline Viardot. Her letters to Matvey, whom she never called anything other than ‘Providence of an artist’ (5, 7), embraced the period from the end of 1844 until November 1854. In her letters she discussed different roles, performances, opera parts (the sheets are full of music score examples), social gossips, plans, Petersburg. Viardot drew for Vielgorsky the ‘portrait’ of her voice as a zigzag, she told him the ‘secrets’ of cadenzas that she wrote for particular opera parts [5, 47–48]²³.

It can be seen that both new and rediscovered documents allow us to expand the notion about Matvey Vielgorsky, a bearer of European tradition of musical performance. His interest for singing was amateur and could be compared neither with his violoncello mastery²⁴ nor with his other professional achievements. He had a sophisticated professional background of a musician with a profound knowledge of theatre gained from studying opera both by clavier and music score, communicating with singers, investigating Russian and European versions of performances, and from his phenomenal auditory experience. On the whole, ‘Matvey Vielgorsky’s case’ brings us to the issue of studying the phenomenon of

18 According to my estimations, the dairy dates back to 1828. – G. P.

19 It was made disbanded in 1831. See: [4, 11]

20 Directorate of Imperial Theatres headed by the oberhofmeister, count S. Gagarin.

21 MD IRL Col. 50. SU 79. № 10. Folio 9. (ИРЛИ. Ф.50. Ед.79. №10. Л.9). This part of the letter is written in Russian.

22 MD IRL Col. 50. SU 79. № 8. (ИРЛИ. Ф.50. Ед. хр. 79. №8).

23 In the recent studies on Viardot (see, for example, [8]) no reference of correspondence with Vielgorsky was discovered.

24 According to Ginsburg, the “expressive melodiousness of his bow” could be explained by his gift for singing (1,310).

Russian aristocracy in sociocultural perspective. The aristocracy that created musical societies and academies and chased after the latest opera pieces (the ‘Huguenots’ by Meyerbeer, mentioned by Lenz, were written in 1835), that was fascinated by opera and was keen on fostering such a European opera organism as an Italian opera troupe. Not surprisingly on November 14, 1847 Viardot asked Matvey: “Tell me what is happening in your Imperial Italian theatre? Is Mme Frezzolini a success? In Paris the Italians who considered themselves well-informed told me about her fiasco. However, I do not trust such kind of news...” [5, 62].

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