

Russian Provincial Musical Theatre in the First Quarter of the 20th Century in Saratov: Main Trends and Phenomena

Irina Viktorovna Polozova^{1,*} Arina Sergeyevna Chirila^{2,a}

¹Saratov State L.V. Sobinov Conservatoire, Saratov, Russia

²Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Iași, Romania

^aEmail: arina.chirila.uaic@gmail.com

^{*}Corresponding author. Email: i.v.polozova@mail.ru

ABSTRACT

Based on the archive materials, the article looks more closely at the development of musical theatre in Russian provinces in the first quarter of the 20th century in Saratov. The study is centred around the main trends in the development of the theatrical life of the city, the projects realized, as well as the personality of Saratov's artist F.A. Palchinsky – an entrepreneur, stage director and musical critic. Various spheres of his activity reflect the key aspects of the development of Russian musical theatre of the time period in question, and namely popularizing the art of Russian composers, highlighting the didactic function of musical theatre, relying on local performers, especially the younger ones, and aspiring to make musical art widely accessible (Popular theatre). The above-mentioned artistic aims were fulfilled in Palchinsky's creative projects, as well as in numerous reviews in Saratov's periodicals. The paper arrives at some conclusions concerning the intensity of the development of musical theatre in Russian provinces, the search for new forms of existence of musical theatre and the implementation of innovative directing principles.

Keywords: musical theatre, Russian province, F.A. Palchinsky, the first quarter of the 20th century, Saratov, opera, theatre company

I. INTRODUCTION

In the first quarter of the 20th century Russian musical theatre sees a period of flourishing and dynamic development. Operas and ballets by Russian composers, the creation of private theatre companies and troupes, the rise of performing art in musical theatre – all these aspects contributed to the realization of new innovative and often experimental ideas and the renewal of the cultural space of both the capital and provincial cities. A good example of this is Saratov's musical theatre which reflects the common trends of the development of Russian provincial musical theatre. This presupposes the organisation of numerous exhibitions, educational lectures, disputes, publication of polemic articles on the issues of the development of musical culture – the phenomena that are sure to contribute to the enrichment of artistic practice and the appearance of new creative projects and ideas [1], [2].

In this paper we will turn to the first quarter of the 20th century, when Saratov's musical theatre goes through active development, and the audience has an opportunity to get acquainted with the best examples of

modern opera, especially the Russian ones (for more details, see [3]). The performers of the main roles are both well-known musicians from Saratov and those coming from the capital or foreign operatic troupes. New theatrical companies and interesting creative projects are initiated by enthusiastic musicians. Among the many famous people who devoted their lives to Saratov's musical theatre in the first quarter of the 20th century (M. Medvedev, A.M. Gorin-Goryainov, D. Yuzhin etc.) we will single out F.A. Palchinsky – the man who played a substantial role in the development of Saratov's musical theatre.

II. SARATOV'S MUSICAL LIFE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY AS A REFLECTION OF COMMON TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF RUSSIAN MUSICAL CULTURE

Saratov's musical life of the first quarter of the 20th century was a bright and dynamic one. There was Saratov's branch of the Russian Musical Society with its musical classes; a musical college opened in 1895, followed by the first provincial conservatoire in 1912.

The city hosted concerts of chamber and symphonic music, and among the guest performers were such outstanding musicians as L. Auer, G. Venyavsky, A. Yesipova, K. Davydov, S. Prokofiev, A. Rubinshtein, A. Skryabin, P. Sarasate, V. Safonov, N. Figner etc. As for Saratov's performers, we have to mention the names of A. Vinogradsky, V. Zayts, A. Palitse, E. Tsendler, O. Chaban, S. Eksner etc. The stages of Saratov's theatres constantly presented musical theatrical performances from a vast spectrum of classical and modern works.

Musical theatre was highly popular. Archive documents confirm that at that time 2-3 operatic troupes used to perform simultaneously on Saratov's stages. It should be mentioned in this connection that by the beginning of the 20th century there had already been formed a large group of educated people who understood the issues of musical art really well and could appreciate the quality of performance. Among the constant attendees of musical theatrical performances were professional musicians, university professors, students, as well as a vast number of merchants who not infrequently spent substantial sums of money on the development of the city's musical life. Thus, merchant G.V. Ovechkin invested his money in the construction of a theatre building which hosted performances until 1918.

III. MUSICAL THEATRE IN SARATOV AND THE PERSONALITY OF F.A. PALCHINSKY

Feodor Akhimovich Palchinsky is a personality whose name is occasionally referred to, in the studies on local history centred around Saratov's musical life, as a musical critic and the organiser of several operatic theatrical companies in 1905-1923 [4], [5], [6], [7]. He played an important role in the development of the city's musical life, contributed to the initiation of a vast audience into the academic art, and aspired to modernise musical theatre by all possible means.

The State Archive of Saratov region holds a collection of F.A. Palchinsky's personal documents, the study of which allows us to fill in several blank spaces in the history of the development of Saratov's musical life in particular and that of Russian provinces in general. These documents make it possible to reconstruct some pages of Palchinsky's life, to identify his aesthetic preferences and innovative ideas, and to recreate numerous aspects of concert and theatrical life of the city based on the study of his critical notes in Saratov's periodicals.

Biographical data on Palchinsky are extremely scarce. It is a well-known fact that he was a mechanical engineer and in the period in question worked in Saratov, in the mobilization department of the Ryazan-Ural railway. Judging by Palchinsky's notes in which he presents a list of performances of various troupes on

Saratov's stages, the beginning of his active interest in the city's musical life goes back to 1890s, as his personal notes from 1895 until 1906 contain a detailed description of repertoire lists, mentioning not only the name of the performance and its date, but also the names of the performers (and namely, their initials), beneficiaries etc.

The analysis of Palchinsky's lists shows that performances were given almost daily, by touring theatre companies. A year had two or three operatic seasons: the first one, as a rule, opened in the second half of November, the second one – the spring one – used to start in April or early May. Besides, there were also occasional summer theatrical seasons. Thus, operatic performances could be seen during the most part of the year.

Saratov's operatic repertoire on the verge of the centuries was quite vast. Foreign operas performed in the city included the works by Verdi, Meyerbeer, Rossini, Saint-Saëns, Bizet, Gounod, Wagner, Moniuszko, Donizetti, Mozart, Delibes, Tomas, Massenet, Humperdinck, Mascagni, Leoncavallo and Puccini. As for the Russian composers, theatres staged Borodin, Rubinstein, Tchaikovsky, Napravnik, Verstovsky, Glinka, Serov, Dargomyzhsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Musorgsky and Rebikov. Compositions performed in Saratov were quite popular in Russian musical theatre of that period. In his notes on the season of 1905/1906 Palchinsky provides us with a brief statistical analysis of the operatic repertoire: "Russian: 10 composers – 17 operas – 62 performances... Foreign: 12 composers – 19 operas – 65 performances..." [8]. The doubtless favourite among Russian composers was Tchaikovsky: his 6 operas were performed 35 times during the season; his foreign counterpart was Verdi: his 5 operas were performed 11 times, and the two staged operettas – 2 times.

Together with operatic performances, high popularity was achieved by operetta (or *onepemka* – the way it was called by Saratov's musicians of that period). Palchinsky's list comprises data on the operetta repertoire of 1905/1906, which contains 35 names, including some famous works by Offenbach ("La belle Hélène", "La Périhole", "Orphée aux enfers"), Strauss ("Der Zigeunerbaron"), as well as Planquette's "Les cloches de Corneville", Hervé's "Le petit Faust", Audan's "La mascotte", Zeller's "Der Vogelhändler", and Decker-Schenk's "Khadzhi Murat". Quite surprisingly, Verstovsky's opera "Askold's Grave" is also on the list. This can be accounted for by the fact that *onepemka* was understood as a synthetic performance where an important role was attributed to musical pieces.

The observation of Saratov's theatrical life, acquaintance with its repertoire and its analysis in the

coming years proved to be of crucial significance for the composer's critical and directorial activity.

In 1905 Palchinsky becomes a famous personality in the city's musical life. Between 1905 and 1918 he publishes his reviews and notes on musical events in Saratov, offers a detailed analysis of the tour performances of numerous remarkable musicians. Palchinsky's reviews not infrequently contain shrewd comments that precisely underline the key features and style markers of composers' works. Palchinsky was brave in his assessment and did not accept the prevailing opinion as it is. Thus, he was quite harsh in commenting upon the unsuccessful performance of the soloists of Zimin's opera S.I. Druzyakina and A.I. Khokhlov: "The concert... confirmed once more that opera singers performing in the concert format often lose, not being able to get accustomed to the chamber style... Mr. Khokhlov has a great voice and ability to sing, but his opera singing led to a certain forcing of sound. A gypsy tint could be felt in many aspects. Taneyev's Duet did not appeal to the performers themselves since it had not even been well-practiced. All in all, the concert was not a memorable one!" [9].

On the other hand, Palchinsky praises A. Skryabin and S. Prokofiev who gave concerts in Saratov for the first time: "... The direction of the local branch of the Russian Musical Society deserves our gratitude for inviting S. Prokofiev, pianist and composer, to Saratov; despite the shortness of his career, he has already managed to attract the attention of both music lovers and specialists from Saint Petersburg due to his huge gift as a pianist, as well as his original and fresh talent as a composer ... In Saratov the young artist performed a vast number of his own piano compositions, from op. 1 to op. 17, which have been presented to the public eye quite recently... It proves to be rather difficult after a single audition to present a detailed account of complex compositions by Mr. Prokofiev, but the talent and originality of the author's musical thinking are so bright that one cannot help being interested in his works, despite numerous sharp and awkward harmonies and melodies... The originality of Mr. Prokofiev is reflected even in the objectives he sets before him, for instance, to depict "Obsession" by means of sounds. And he manages to do it brilliantly. The listener is quickly captured by his music and at the end of the piece, in its impeccable reproduction by the author himself, loudly expresses his content and demands its repetition. The audience who attended the concert were initially rather prejudiced against Mr. Prokofiev, but the impeccably performed first sonata immediately won them over... The majority of works by the young composer are meant to be performed by a first-class pianist and, naturally, apart from the author, nowadays there are few artists who can meet this requirement. Mr. Prokofiev achieved great success – both as a composer and a brilliant pianist..." [10].

Palchinsky published his reviews on Saratov's musical events not only in the local press, but also in Moscow. Thus, the State Archive of Saratov region holds his correspondence with the former conductor of Saratov-Kharkhiv opera, who later became the editor of the journal "Russian artist", Mikhail Buksha, whom he used to send materials to be published. As can be seen from these documents, Buksha praised the pieces by the correspondent from Saratov, calling Palchinsky "the jewel of our journal" [11].

Among the archive materials there is one more document important for understanding the aesthetical taste of Palchinsky and his contemporaries – "Palchinsky's drafts on the biographies of Russian composers", in which he sets forth the biographical data of Russian composers and, most importantly, expresses his own attitude towards their works. These notes bring to the limelight the critic's balanced attitude towards the activity of the composers of The Five and an infinite esteem for A. Rubinstein – a generator of ideas, remarkable organiser, composer and pianist. It is Rubinstein to whom the warmest words of the "Drafts" are addressed: "The success of this kind ("the success of reverent respect", as Palchinsky writes above – *I.P., A.C.*), often accompanied the performance of Rubinstein's works, which caused the author a lot of distress, since he desired to be remembered as a composer, realising that the fame of a genius virtuoso cannot be passed on to the descendants, who can just listen to the stories about his performances, but do not have an opportunity to experience the impression the virtuoso's performance would leave. However, Rubinstein was mistaken, his name will not die, it is inextricably linked to the history of spreading musical knowledge among vast masses of Russian population. He was the first one who made music accessible for everyone, and a musician became a citizen of equal rights." [12] Rubinstein's educational ideas must have been close to Palchinsky himself, as his activity as a stage director and a critic were always marked by the ideas of the accessibility of musical art and the comprehension of an artist's mission.

IV. F.A. PALCHINSKY'S MUSICAL THEATRE

In what follows we will look more closely at another sphere of Palchinsky's activity directed at the development of musical theatre in Saratov. In 1906, together with the actor V.A. Tassin, he starts a theatre enterprise called "Saratov-Kharkhiv Russian opera". Tassin and Palchinsky recruited an impressive troupe – 102 people including, apart from the performers of the operatic roles, a conductor, 35 orchestra members and just as many choir singers, as well as the ballet conducted by E.I. Giovassi [13] [14]. It follows from the archive documents that there were both local and invited performers. It has to be mentioned in this connection that quite a few young singers of this troupe

would later become soloists of the leading operatic stages of Russia, for example, A.M. Paskhalova, E.L. Gan-Kochurova, M.V. Dubrovin, K.G. Knyaginina, N.I. Speransky and other. Palchinsky's role in Saratov-Kharkhiv opera was manifold: he was responsible for the selection of the troupe's members, inviting the performers he was acquainted with; he was a stage director; he performed the function of the artistic director and administrator, actually conducting the creative activity of the troupe.

Archive documents demonstrate that the partnership of Saratov-Kharkhiv opera was oriented towards vast strata of Saratov's public, and performances were meant to be held 4 times a week. "With a view to offering healthy entertainment to the less wealthy class of Saratov's population and aspiring to familiarise it with the works by Russian composers, the partnership suggested including in its repertoire the following operas: "Rusalka" by Dargomyzhsky, "May Night" and "The Tsar's Bride" by Rimsky-Korsakov, "Boris Godunov" by Musorgsky, "Dream on the Volga" by Arensky, "Halka" by Moniuszko, "Cherevichki" and "Iolanta" by Tchaikovsky, "Aleko" by Rakhmaninoff, "The Demon" by Rubinstein etc" [15]. Especially remarkable is the fact that the repertoire comprised exclusively the operas by Russian composers, which was of great importance for Palchinsky, this principle being also applied in the later projects of the director and administrator.

The organization of Saratov-Kharkhiv troupe bears the traits typical of its time. First, it is in this period when theatres start including Russian opera into their repertoire, with the growing number of the productions of the works by Russian composers, especially operas of the late 19th – early 20th centuries. Second, the orientation towards wide accessibility and popular masses characterize numerous educational events. These are the years when Saratov, as well as other Russian cities, see the organisation of Popular universities, educational readings, concerts and travelling exhibitions. Low entrance fees in Palchinsky and Tassin's enterprise also confirm the principle of the accessibility of performances.

The existence of Saratov-Kharkhiv opera can hardly be called a long one: after a few months after its appearance, differences started to emerge between Tassin and the troupe, which, along with material problems, lead to the dissolution of the enterprise in late November 1906. "From September 22 until November 29 the troupe performed 20 operas 56 times. The number of Russian operas accounts to 6 (20 performances)" [16]. However, Palchinsky's ideas on the development of musical theatre in Saratov were not abandoned. The director continues to cherish thoughts about new projects and tries to form new operatic troupes.

The next important theatrical project was realized by Palchinsky in 1915, when he launched the "Partnership of widely accessible opera". The soloists invited were both famous performers and beginner singers: K. Aleksashi, E. Gan-Kochurova, A. Kabanov, K. Knyaginina, L. Milova, A. Paskhalova, Polish tenor I. Dygas, conductor G. Kompaneyets etc., whereas the orchestra and the choir comprised exclusively musicians and amateurs from Saratov. The performances took place in summer, from June 6 until August 1, and were warmly welcomed by the audience, notwithstanding the summer period. The local press wrote the following about the Partnership's performances: "The performance in general rendered inspiration, and some separate musical pieces in particular – clarity and distinctness of dashes. However, the choirs, especially the female one, were not so confident on the stage, behaving in a slightly pupil-like manner. The orchestra, relatively small, but achieving a good interplay and extremely obedient to the conductor's will, produced a favourable impression... The theatre was almost full. The second performance of "Boris Godunov" on Sunday, July 7, not only confirmed the first impression, but also made it possible to affirm that given the conditions, the opera has all it needs to win over the audience." [17]

It can hardly be doubted that a huge contribution to the qualitative performance of the operas was made by a talented conduction, G.I. Kompaneyets. The press wrote about his performances as follows: "Kompaneyets is a great find for the partnership. He is talented, a great worker and can subdue the orchestra to his will; he has always excelled in doing his job" [18]. The role of a bass singer in this enterprise was also performed by Palchinsky himself. B. Manzhora mentions his benefit performance where he sang Konchak's part in the opera "Prince Igor", which closed the theatrical season of the troupe [19].

As the organiser of the Partnership, Palchinsky consciously involved young performers who did not necessarily have professional training. According to the director, this approach contributed to delivering musical education and familiarising the youth with the academic art. On the other hand, this approach presupposed additional effort on part of the organisers of the enterprise and required some serious preparatory work by the conductor and the stage director. The second important distinctive feature of the Partnership was the orientation towards local performers; thus, Saratov was gradually approaching the creation of a constant stationary opera theatre. Finally, the third principle applied by Palchinsky was the accessibility of the theatre, connected not only with the choice of the repertoire, but also with the ticket price. Low entrance fees, even with a considerable number of attendees, did not allow to raise large funds, which again led Palchinsky to a financial fiasco. Unfortunately, this

situation was quite widespread in Russian theatres of the 19th and the early 20th century. Thus, a famous entrepreneur Sobolschikov-Samarin, who organised the tour of an operatic troupe in the Volga region, described the difficulties he faced in the economic part of theatrical practice: "I was out of breath and fell exhausted, but I managed to bear this heavy burden for four seasons. All income of the drama was spent on the opera, yet this bottomless abyss could not be filled. I was at the end of my rope, I slipped into serious debt, I mortgaged both my benefit gifts and those of my wife, I rearranged performances, came up to the surface, sank, spluttered and came up to the surface again." [20]

In the first quarter of the 20th century the ideas of the accessibility of academic art and its approach towards the vast democratic social strata became quite popular and were realised in real life. Notably, this trend embraced not only small touring troupes (for example, in other cities of the Volga region, such as Kazan or Tsaritsyn, where the performing enterprises hardly ever changed), but also the performing activity of outstanding musicians (concerts by Sobinov, Chaliapin etc.) and even the representatives of the Direction of Imperial Theatres. Hence, the last Director of Imperial Theatres V.A. Telyakovsky wrote in his diary in 1917: "I believe that for now we have to lock the old theatre in order to attend to the popular one, so important today for further development of the culture widely accessible for popular masses. Now is not the time to be preoccupied with the subtleties of taste and extravagance. These issues will have to be addressed in several years, when the dust settles and the peace of constructive work comes." [21]

Analogous trends can be observed in Saratov's cultural life, too: Saratov society of popular universities started to organise concerts in 1908, and the interest towards musical performances and concerts with various performers was constantly high. In many ways, the educational ideas were reinforced by the development of musical criticism: articles on performances and concerts appeared in local press almost daily. The musicians of the "Partnership of widely accessible opera" supported Palchinsky's initiatives and actively participated in the project: "I am glad that the Popular theatre is now more privileged than it used to be. But if you head it, the theatre should be all the more interesting for the audience – it was demonstrated last year, when the audience used to come to the opera so eagerly", – writes a musician from Saratov, the vocalist of the troupe, Alexandr Mikhailovich Kabanov [22].

In the following years Palchinsky did not abandon the ideas to create a widely accessible theatre in Saratov. An indirect proof of that is the director's 1917 correspondence. In the letter to M. Kudasova we read the following: "I am extremely flattered and deeply

touched by your proposal and my answer is: I want and I will work for you. ... Now as for the conditions: I do not want to work as an actress, I have had enough of it; however, I would gladly assume the role of a stage director..." [23]. Another addressee, A. Kabanov, performing on Saint Petersburg's stages, indicates to Palchinsky some worthy singer candidates for the 1917 summer season and asks him for information concerning an approximate repertoire, wages etc. [24]. However, the instability of the situation, as well as the political and military events of those years did not allow these ideas to come into being.

In 1920s Palchinsky assumes the role of a stage director in various musical and theatrical events. In 1920 he works in the New drama theatre as the main stage director, and in 1923 the trade union of artists asks him to take part in organising and holding the October celebrations and concert. In these years he was also in charge of the artistic direction of performances in the Opera theatre, and a member of the Club affiliated with the Cultural-educational committee of the Union of Architectural and Construction Workers and the theatre of Cultural-Educational Committee of the professional council of loaders [25]. He receives the invitation of collaboration from his former enterprise colleagues. Thus, in the years of the 1920 severe famine, Palchinsky is invited to live and work to the village of Balanda, Saratov province, by his former employee, composer M. Nekazachenko: "Theatre has almost ceased to exist here, but if you are willing to organise something, we will find workers and helpers; there is everything – venue, stage and decorations – and we could benefit from it." [26]

The most outstanding and the last creative project by Palchinsky that we know of is the organisation of "Travelling opera" in Saratov in 1923. During all the years of his activity, Palchinsky established a creative contact with the professors of Saratov conservatoire (N. Speransky, A. Paskhalova, M. Medvyedev, S. Kozolupov, A. Sklyarevsky etc), this project becoming the result of such cooperation. Together with the conservatoire professor G. Belotserkovsky, he organised an operatic troupe with the participation of famous musicians from Saratov, as well as the alumni of the conservatoire. They prepared operatic performances meant for 'field' conditions: in village clubs, open stages, factories and plants. Even in difficult material situation, with the lack of orchestral accompaniment (operas were not infrequently performed accompanied by pianoforte), old costumes borrowed from other productions, the absence of decorations and professional stationary stage etc. could not hinder a sincere interest towards the performances by "Travelling opera". The educational ideas of this troupe were in line with the spirit of that time and contributed to the initiation of new groups of population into the art of the opera.

V. CONCLUSION

A stationary theatre, with a constant group of employed performers, finally opens in Saratov in 1924. This is the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Saratov's musical theatre. We do not possess any data on Palchinsky's activity during this year and the ones that followed – probably, his active artistic phase of life was over. However, the projects realised in Saratov by this director, administrator and musical critic accumulated the leading trends in the development of musical life of contemporary Russia and played an important role in local culture. The orientation of musical theatre towards vast strata of listeners, their familiarisation with the academic art, the accessibility (not only from the financial point of view) of theatre and the topicality of the productions – all these evolved in the following decades of the development of Russian musical theatre.

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