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THE WARSAW OPERATIC STAGE IN ENLIGHTENMENT EUROPE.  
ON ANNA PARKITNA'S *OPERA IN WARSAW*

**ABSTRACT** The operatic life of Enlightenment-era Warsaw has long been one of the classic fields of research in both Polish theatre history and musicology. Anna Parkitna's book is the first attempt to present the history of foreign and Polish operatic enterprises in Stanisławian Warsaw to an English-language readership. The innovative aspects of the author's narrative lie in her reframing of well-known facts by focusing on Warsaw as part of a transnational opera network, as well as in her efforts to define the socio-political significance of foreign opera performances in late 18th-century Warsaw.

**KEYWORDS** opera, Warsaw, Enlightenment, Wojciech Bogusławski, Stanisław August Poniatowski

**ABSTRAKT** *Warszawska scena operowa w oświeceniowej Europie. O książce „Opera in Warsaw” Anny Parkitnej.* Operowe życie Warszawy doby oświecenia od dawna stanowi jedno z klasycznych pól badawczych zarówno w historii polskiego teatru, jak i w muzykologii. Książka Anny Parkitnej to pierwsza próba przedstawienia historii zagranicznych i polskich przedsięwzięć operowych w Warszawie stanisławowskiej anglojęzycznym czytelnikom. Nowatorstwo narracji autorki polega na reinterpretacji dobrze znanych faktów poprzez ukazanie Warszawy jako części transnarodowej sieci operowej, a także na dążeniu do określenia społeczno-politycznego znaczenia zagranicznych spektakli operowych w Warszawie u schyłku osiemnastego wieku.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE** opera, Warszawa, oświecenie, Wojciech Bogusławski, Stanisław August Poniatowski

The operatic life of Enlightenment-era Warsaw has long been one of the classic fields of research into Polish theatre history as well as musicology – two disciplines equally interested in the vibrant activities of foreign operatic troupes no less than in the emerging Polish-language opera scene and the first fruits of its original operatic creativity. However, few of the findings were made accessible to an English-language readership. Hence a fundamental asset of Anna Parkitna's doctoral dissertation *Opera in Warsaw, 1765–1830: Operatic Migration, Adaptation, and Reception in the Enlightenment* (Stony Brook University, New York 2020) was to reveal this story to non-Polish opera studies – a contribution that by no means diminishes its substantial additions to the state of knowledge in this area, including the verification of some repertorial data, excellent insights into the nature of practices employed in Polish opera translation and adaptation, and discussion of stylistic features of original repertoire. Parkitna's finest achievement, however, was to demonstrate in full the very reason for bringing this part of Polish cultural history to global attention – by substantially widening our knowledge of foreign opera troupes active in Warsaw, and thus showing the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth's capital as a significant point in the transnational<sup>1</sup> operatic network during the European Enlightenment. The emergence of a comprehensive monograph based on the dissertation seemed only a matter of time.

Instead, a few years later, we are presented with a book decidedly modest in size, not expressly related to the dissertation. Parkitna's *Opera in Warsaw: A City of European Enlightenment*<sup>2</sup> appears in the series *Elements in Music and City*, part of the Cambridge Elements, whose format, in the publisher's words, combines 'the best features of books and journals to create a quick, concise publishing solution for researchers and readers in the fields of academic publishing and scholarly communication'.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 Both in the dissertation and in the book under review, the author seems to believe that the term *transnational* no longer requires any explanation or bibliographic reference. Be that as it may, let us recall that the term is used to describe phenomena that extend across state and language borders, but are more properly understood outside a nationally framed perspective, not as *international*. Thus, for instance, a transnational approach to operatic circulation focuses not so much on the original, fixed aesthetic meaning of the migrating – say, Italian – repertoire (as in the concept of cultural transfer), but rather on its fluidity, shaped by local contributions and aesthetic reinterpretations occurring throughout the process of movement. See especially: Axel Körner, 'Transnational History: Identities, Structures, States', in: *Internationale Geschichte in Theorie und Praxis / International History in Theory and Practice*, eds. Barbara Haider-Wilson, William D. Godsey and Wolfgang Mueller, Vienna 2017, pp. 265–290; and Axel Körner, 'Dalla storia transnazionale all'opera transnazionale: Per una critica delle categorie nazionali', *Il saggiautore musicale* 24 (2017) no. 1, pp. 81–89.
- 2 Anna Parkitna, *Opera in Warsaw: A City of the European Enlightenment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, pp. 86. ISBN 9781009323567. doi.org/10.1017/9781009323536.
- 3 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/publications/elements>, accessed 8 July 2025.

Whatever this declaration may suggest generally, in Parkitna's case the adoption of the *Elements* principles has resulted in a compact essay with just 65 pages of text, in which the author offers a readable, eloquent narrative about operatic life in Stanisławian Warsaw (1765–94). Limiting the chronological scope of the book compared to the dissertation is well justified (the demise of Stanisławian theatre in the autumn of 1794 was soon followed by the fall of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and hence the end of Stanisław Poniatowski's reign, generally regarded as the core period of Polish Enlightenment), and some further thematic narrowing, resulting in the resignation from more detailed accounts of Polish original repertoire from the period, seems at least understandable. Still, the adoption of an essayistic tone, smoothly balancing between a synthetic narrative, vivid descriptions of sociopolitical realities in Warsaw and a presentation of many isolated historical facts, inevitably resulted in the omission of much – if not most – of the large corpus of detailed knowledge contained in the dissertation, especially in the extensive tables presenting the repertoire data, information about foreign singers performing in Warsaw theatres, the structure of original operas, comparisons of works adapted from Italian originals, and so on. Thus Parkitna's dissertation, easily available in digital form (ProQuest database), remains the chief source of basic knowledge for non-Polish opera researchers interested in Warsaw as part of the circulation of opera in Central Europe during the Enlightenment, or in the beginnings of Polish original opera, while the book promises rather an overview of these historical and musicological facts, supplemented by deeper insights into their local cultural or political significance, as well as the nature of Warsaw's participation in the transnational opera network.

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The structuring of the book leaves little doubt that the author intended it to be read from beginning to end, as an historical essay. The organization of the content skilfully combines chronological and topical principles, and titles of chapters and subchapters serve rather as welcome landmarks during a continuous reading than aids to finding specific information. After a brief introduction (chapter 1), the next four chapters focus respectively on the introduction of foreign operatic troupes as part of King Stanisław August Poniatowski's 'National Theatre' project, starting in late 1760s (2. 'The Domain of Enlightenment Opera'), the sociopolitical significance and didactic mission of opera shows in Warsaw (3. 'Towards Enlightenment: Warsaw and Its Opera Audience'), the city's participation in the transnational circulation of operatic troupes and repertoires (4. 'An Opera Centre between Vienna and Saint Petersburg') and the presence of operatic ventures in city life (5. 'Opera in Urban Life'). Besides detailed information about basic facts, a few more substantial passages of historical narrative about opera activities are interspersed throughout the book, as

well as short sketches presenting social, cultural and civilizational circumstances of late eighteenth-century Warsaw (2.1: 'A Noisy City', 3.1: 'A City of Contrasts' and 5.1: 'A City of Urban Transition').

While the book can be read as an essay in cultural history (it indeed invites the reader to such a perusal), its most universally instructive aspect, from the perspective of current trends in musicology and opera studies, lies in the reconstruction of Warsaw's role and position in the transnational opera network, primarily Italian, but also French and – much less obviously – German. Parkitna accepts the traditional view on eighteenth-century Warsaw as the operatic 'periphery', defining the term precisely by the absence of a local creative contribution to the transnational operatic canon, including a lack of interest in employing any internationally renowned composer, which might have been within reach of the Stanisław August Poniatowski's court (pp. 40–41). At the same time, the author provides ample evidence that in terms of opera performances the city stood nearly on a par with the foremost centres, thanks to the possibilities afforded by the king's patronage and support, as well as Warsaw's convenient location on the route from Vienna to St Petersburg. While the basic facts were largely known already, Parkitna's achievement lies in widening their transnational context. Thus, she presents Warsaw as an important station on the routes of operatic entrepreneurs (Domenico Guardasoni, Johann Kurz and Franz Bulla) well known in Central European capitals, highlights the movements of opera staff that resulted in the transferral of something substantially more than mere individual singers (the domination of National Singspiel performers in Constantini's troupe in 1781–82, or the cream of the Viennese comic opera company coming to Warsaw in 1767) and illuminates the effect of the appearances by leading singers in the roles that had already brought them international popularity.

While the activities of itinerant Italian and French troupes belong to the circle of paradigmatically transnational phenomena, the question of German spectacles appears as one of particular interest, as suggesting some participation of the Polish capital in the domain of specifically German culture. Parkitna accounts for the nature of German-language theatrical enterprises in Warsaw, dedicated mostly to the German diaspora that substantially contributed to the bourgeois stratum of Warsaw society (this target audience, as the author explains, is of crucial significance for determining the place of these spectacles in the social-theatrical hierarchy). The author argues that the Mozart premieres (*Die Entführung aus dem Serail* in 1783, *Die Zauberflöte* in 1793) exceeded that framework, insisting that, though they appeared in Warsaw 'by means of usual circulations of German-language works and performers within the established cultural and theatrical space, rather than on the wave of the composer's international fame' (p. 51), these spectacles should be seen as testifying to Warsaw's importance also in the context of the early dissemination of Mozart's singspiels in the non-German area. That those premieres transcended

mere ‘Germanness’ and reached the mainstream of the Warsaw public sphere is evidenced convincingly in the case of *Die Entführung aus der Serail*, incorporated into the king’s name-day celebrations and then staged also in a Polish adaptation (the first translation of this work – an important fact that can only be derived from information given in the book but is not overtly stated). Still, when Parkitna says that these spectacles illuminate ‘Warsaw’s significance’ (p. 51), the reader may initially tend to understand it as acknowledging the mere fact that the Polish capital saw some of the first stagings of Mozart’s singspiels outside Vienna – certainly not as a claim about the actual significance of the city in the European dissemination of these masterpieces. Yet Parkitna successfully traces the later movements of some German singers who performed in Mozart’s works in Warsaw, linking them to subsequent stagings of these singspiels, as in Kraków or (back again) in Vienna. Even more illuminating evidence of this kind is given in relation to Italian troupes, including the special case of Guardasoni’s singers, who in Warsaw gained their first experience in *opera seria*, from which the benefits were reaped with the Prague premiere of Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito* (p. 51). This shift from the focus on the Warsaw stage’s receptive role toward considering the importance of Warsaw spectacles for the further activities of their performers can be seen as the hallmark of Parkitna’s attitude – perhaps not innovative in the context of contemporary opera studies, but apparently filling in a regrettable gap in the existing literature on Enlightenment Warsaw’s opera stage.

The almost total destruction of the musical operatic sources of Warsaw from the period severely restricts the possibilities of gaining a more detailed notion about the shape of the performed repertoire – versions, adaptations, added arias, etc. Parkitna nevertheless successfully signals the scope for further research in existing printed librettos or secondary materials. While her brief discussion of the Warsaw modifications to Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* is based largely on existing scholarship,<sup>4</sup> Parkitna’s truly original contribution to the topic includes an observation about ‘Polish arias’ being used to enhance Italian spectacles, which, according to extant testimonies, was not far from a regular practice among Italian singers performing here (at least six such arias, pp. 56–57). In light of this fact, however, one may be somewhat surprised by the absence of Dresden among the Central European opera hubs mentioned by Parkitna as important for Warsaw opera enterprises. Though indeed the direct link that existed in the times when the Wettins reigned over the Commonwealth was no longer active, it would still be worth observing that the very two operas played in

4 It is a pity that a book of this kind does not give a closer view of the topic or even mention a fact so inspiring as that the Warsaw Donna Elvira sang the famous ‘Odio, furor, dispetto, dolor’ from Joseph Haydn’s *Armida*. Parkitna discusses the Warsaw version in detail in her dissertation, see Anna Parkitna, *Opera in Warsaw, 1765–1830: Operatic Migration, Adaptation, and Reception in the Enlightenment*, Stony Brook University, New York 2020 (PhD dissertation), pp. 142–144.

Warsaw in 1774–76 with supplemented arias ‘in Polish style’ (*La sposa fedele, Il finto pazzo per amore* – p. 56) were performed earlier in Dresden (1768 and 1769) – a prominent centre of the Polonaise style outside Poland – with the same Domenico Guardasoni who led the Italian troupe coming to Warsaw in 1774.<sup>5</sup>

While generally convincing and insightful, Parkitna’s interpretations of the repertoire policy pursued by Warsaw entrepreneurs is occasionally dubious. Thus, while writing about the German troupe’s spectacles in the early 1780s, she observes that, though many of the singers came from the Vienna National Singspiel, that institution’s repertoire did not dominate the Warsaw opera stage, since Bartolomeo Constantini ‘conformed to the expectations of his target audience’ by inserting into the repertoire many German adaptations of French comic operas (p. 46). However, this reasoning seemingly overlooks the fact that the adaptation of French works accounted for a substantial part of the National Singspiel’s repertoire. That was the very case with *Der Hausfreund*, after Grétry’s *L’ami de la maison*,<sup>6</sup> mentioned by Parkitna as chosen only because its original French version had been played previously in Warsaw.

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Of the three foreign opera genres present in Stanisławian Warsaw, the French *opéra comique* was the only one whose fortunes decidedly faded with time. Though initially well supported by the king and very popular with the French-oriented elite, it failed to attract sufficient attention from the wider public and eventually disappeared well before the end of Poniatowski’s reign. In the last subchapter Parkitna accounts for this story, presenting well-known (at least in Polish scholarship) evidence about Poles being accustomed to the Italian style of music and singing, while reproaching the ‘screaming and bawling’ produced by French opera performers (p. 65). A shade of ambiguity appears when Parkitna quotes in this context the praise given to Jean-Paul-Égide Martini’s opera by a young Polish nobleman who had wrongly assumed the composer was Italian and so complained only that the good music had been ‘spoiled’ by French singers. Was it indeed the question of a certain ‘bias’ against the French music style, as Parkitna concludes, or of the Warsaw audience’s real tastes, as she argues shortly before? One crucial fact clearly not taken into account here is the keen assimilation of the Italian style by French *opéra comique* composers of the

5 Information according to the Corago Project website, [http://www.ilcorago.org/WPcorago/cantanti\\_scheda.asp?ID=IDCAN0462500](http://www.ilcorago.org/WPcorago/cantanti_scheda.asp?ID=IDCAN0462500), accessed 8 July 2025. The cast for the Dresden performance of *Il finto pazzo* is not known, but we can take Guardasoni’s participation in the event for granted, as between 1765 and 1772 he sang in virtually all the buffa spectacles there. For more on this topic, see Jakub Chachulski, ‘Johann Gottlieb Naumann’s “Pria che all’amato bene”, or the Dresden Trail at the Origins of the Polish Polonaise Aria’, *Muzyka* 70 (2025) no. 2, pp. 63–99, doi.org/10.36744/m.4452.

6 Played in a German translation by the National Singspiel in 1788, see Martin Nedbal, *Morality and Viennese Opera*, London 2017, p. 55.

time, imaginatively described by Charles Burney as ‘plundering’ Italian scores.<sup>7</sup> Only recently did Julia Doe argue that the enormous popularity of Egidio Duni’s *Two Hunters and a Milkmaid* was due partly to its Italian-derived musical style.<sup>8</sup> Another fact apparently relevant and not recalled by Parkitna is that the expressions used in the Warsaw complaints about French opera – especially ‘screaming and bawling’ – were by no means original: they had obviously come directly from the Europe-wide wave of anti-French censure dating at least from the time of Rousseau’s famous *Letter on French Music*, enthusiastically repeated by so many authors, Burney included. The French manner of singing was almost unanimously rejected by the enlightened *communis opinio*, but the resulting prejudice did not necessarily extend to the style of more up-to-date French operas as such. In this light, one should not take some of Bogusławski’s anti-French statements at face value or be too quick to draw conclusions from his refraining from adapting French works himself. Though inferior to *opere buffe*, as an imitation must be inferior to the original, compact Italianate *opéras comiques* like *Les deux chasseurs et la laitière* or *Le milicien*, de-Frenchified by Polish translation and performance, turned out to be quite usable repertoire items for Bogusławski’s troupe (almost totally lacking in one-act Italian operas), and were staged quite frequently during Bogusławski’s second stint in charge (1790–94).<sup>9</sup> Here Parkitna’s conjecture that the (so-called) father of Polish theatre ‘dismissed the Polish adaptations of French operas’ (p. 65) should perhaps have been formulated with more care.

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Though Parkitna acknowledges the emergence of the Polish-language stage as one of the essential phenomena in the operatic landscape of Warsaw, she gives little in the way of detailed information about these spectacles and repertoires. The most substantial passage is devoted to the line of ‘rustic’ original operas that combined a presentation of the hardships of peasant life with the motif of the ‘good master’ (pp. 24–26). Though the emphasis is placed on the moral and social message of these works, considered within the narrative about the didactic mission that dominated in the National Theatre in the late 1770s, some sparse information about the style of these works is also included, and some of it could perhaps have been given with more precision. The sentence that opens this topic (p. 24) may be understood as

7 Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, The Netherlands, and United Provinces...*, London 1773, p. 53.

8 Julia Doe, ‘Two Hunters, a Milkmaid, and the French “Revolutionary” Canon’, *Eighteenth-Century Music*, 15 (2018) no. 2, pp. 177–205, doi.org/10.1017/S1478570618000040.

9 Ludwik Bernacki, *Teatr, dramat i muzyka za Stanisława Augusta* [Theatre, drama and music under Stanisław August], vol. 2, Lwów 1925, pp. 224, 270.



suggesting that the presence of spoken words in this repertoire was something specifically Polish, regardless of the fact that the formula of dialogue opera was a default option for virtually all the vernacular opera genres that emerged in the eighteenth century. Also the ‘musical naivety’ attributed to the music of *Nędza uszczęśliwiona* (described on p. 25 as ‘the first Polish opera’, contrary to current knowledge,<sup>10</sup> as well as to Parkitna’s own words from p. 31) seems inadequate, at least to the extent that elements of Italian vocal virtuosity appear in this score more frequently than in any other surviving original Warsaw opera from before 1794.<sup>11</sup>

One may also doubt whether the account of the specificity of Szymański’s libretto for *Zoska* – which, Parkitna writes, ‘strikes an ominous note of warning against a revengeful peasant rebellion’ (p. 25) – was indeed fortunately worded. In fact, the idea of settling the score with the master’s malicious steward with fists and clubs is formulated by the main characters of the play without the intention of any social revolt (Stach presumes that the master will forgive the violent deed and may even be grateful for removal of the dishonest servant<sup>12</sup>). Even more interestingly, the whole scene strictly corresponds with the overall style of the libretto, much more realistic in the vulgarity and rudeness shown by the language and customs of the country folk than the somewhat idealized representation of peasants in *Nędza uszczęśliwiona* and *Prostota cnotliwa*.<sup>13</sup> That such an opera was a clear favourite with Warsaw audiences<sup>14</sup> (among local original productions) is a fact notably absent from Parkitna’s socially-oriented narrative.

Sparse as they are, the sections of Parkitna’s book devoted to the emergence of original Polish opera will probably serve many English-language readers as an introduction to a previously neglected or simply unknown part of the eighteenth-century European operatic universe. From this point of view, it appears rather unfortunate that the author gives a very incomplete picture of the scope of the existing literature. When mentioning the first Polish operas that originated at magnatial courts, Parkitna refers only to a short note in Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz’s diary (p. 36), ignoring research on surviving librettos and other sources by Irena Bienkowska or Barbara Judkowiak<sup>15</sup> – and even a substantial discussion of the topic in Nowak-Romanowicz’s

10 Irena Bienkowska, ‘*Filozof zmieniony*’ Michała Kazimierza Ogińskiego’ [Michał Kazimierz Ogiński’s *Filozof zmieniony* (The changed philosopher)], *Muzyka* 68 (2023) no. 2, p. 78, doi.org/10.36744/m.1772.

11 Alina Nowak-Romanowicz, *The Classical Era: 1750–1830*, transl. John Comber, Warsaw 2004 (= History of Music in Poland 4), p. 215; Zygmunt Latoszewski, ‘Pierwsze opery polskie Macieja Kamińskiego’ [The first Polish operas of Maciej Kamiński], Uniwersytet Poznański 1932 (PhD dissertation, MS in PL-Wtm), p. 64.

12 [Stanisław Szymański], *Zoska, czyli wiejskie zaloty* [Sophie, or country courtship], Supraśl 1797, pp. 49–50.

13 Z. Latoszewski, *Pierwsze opery polskie*, p. 28.

14 Zbigniew Raszewski, *Bogusławski*, Warsaw 1982, p. 253.

15 I. Bienkowska, ‘*Filozof zmieniony*’; Barbara Judkowiak, ‘Śpiewo-gry w polskim teatrze XVIII w. przed Bogusławskim: Wczesny epizod ze sceny magnackiej w Nieświeżu’ [Singspiel in eighteenth-century



fourth volume of *The History of Music in Poland*.<sup>16</sup> The reader has no opportunity to learn that the scores of Maciej Kamieński's operas which were destroyed in 1944 had been discussed thoroughly by Zygmunt Latoszewski in his dissertation from 1932.<sup>17</sup> Most astonishingly, Parkitna seems to conceal from the reader even the fact that extensive English-language presentations of *Nędza uszczęśliwiona* and *Cud, czyli Krakowiacy i Górale* (or for example some issues relating to Bogusławski's techniques for adapting Italian operas) can be easily found in her own dissertation, never mentioned in the book.

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If Warsaw's presence within the transnational circulation of opera can be regarded as the first key topic of Parkitna's book, the second concerns the social, political and ideological aspects of the Warsaw music stage – especially in the context of King Stanisław August Poniatowski's reformist efforts. Traditional views on Warsaw's Stanislavian theatre have generally followed a clear demarcation line: they seek didactic or openly propagandistic intentions in the spoken Polish repertoire, while interpreting the presence of the operatic theatre segment primarily in terms of its attractiveness, financial viability or prestige.<sup>18</sup> Parkitna takes great pains to break with this interpretation, arguing that the opera shows given in Warsaw by French or Italian troupes also had a profound significance in the king's enlightened reformist agenda. 'Carrying moralistic or otherwise instructional overtones, operas presented by the foreign performers served to bolster a special educational mission of a newly established public theatre (1765) prescribed by King Poniatowski at the outset of his propagandist reformist actions' (p. 2) – insists Parkitna near the start of her book. Some part of her argument follows predictable paths, underlining the didactic impact of sentimental strands present in the popular Goldonian *buffa* repertoire imported in the 1770s (pp. 26–27, 33–34) and the element of social criticism (or at least an ap-

Polish theatre before Bogusławski: An early episode from the magnatial stage in Nieśwież], *Wiek Oświecenia* 12 (1996), pp. 43–59.

16 A. Nowak-Romanowicz, *The Classical Era*, pp. 192–198.

17 Z. Latoszewski, *Pierwsze opery polskie*.

18 For a classic view on the beginnings of the National Theatre, linking the foreign, mostly operatic, stage with prestige and the domestic stage (at that time confined to drama) with didactic purposes, see Karyna Wierzbicka-Michalska, *Teatr w Polsce w XVIII wieku* [Theatre in Poland in the eighteenth century], Warsaw 1977, p. 74. Generally, this stance is expressed by the almost total omission of foreign operas when discussing the didactic mission of theatre in Stanislavian Warsaw; see *ibid.*, pp. 184–192, 233–246; Jan Kott, 'Główne problemy teatru w dobie oświecenia' [The main aspects of theatre during the Enlightenment], in: *Teatr Narodowy 1765–1794* [The National Theatre 1765–94], ed. Jan Kott, Wrocław 1967, pp. 13–18; Zbigniew Raszewski, 'Teatr narodowy w latach 1779–1789', in: *Teatr narodowy w dobie oświecenia* [The National Theatre during the Enlightenment], eds. Ewa Heise and Karyna Wierzbicka-Michalska, Wrocław 1967, pp. 59–60; Dobrochna Ratajczakowa, 'Polski Tęspis i polski Pizystrates' [The Polish Thespis and Polish Pisistratus], in: *Wojciech Bogusławski – ojciec teatru polskiego* [Wojciech Bogusławski: father of Polish theatre], ed. Krzysztof Kurek, Poznań 2009, pp. 18–19.

preciation of middle and lower social strata) in French *opéras comiques* (p. 28). This line of argumentation is not without its shortcomings. Much of this kind of moral content was common to both spoken repertoire and operas. To borrow Mary Hunter's formula, foreign operas functioned on the Warsaw stage primarily as a 'counter-genre'<sup>19</sup> to the spoken repertoire and were therefore perceived mostly through their otherness compared to the latter. Thus, even if the well-grounded opposition of 'instructive' spoken plays and 'entertaining' operas appears to be a simplification when confronted with detailed analyses of librettos, it could still mirror the real difference between the reception of the two genres and their intended functions. A yet more crucial circumstance in this context is the language barrier – surely a handicap for Italian opera's potentially didactic tasks. In this respect, one fact apparently missing from Parkitna's account is the king's persistent reluctance regarding the possibility of Bogusławski's translations competing with the original Italian spectacles.<sup>20</sup> As for supposedly moral content most closely linked to the music – that is, sentimental traits and motifs, especially well suited to the medium of music (see p. 26) – one can justly ask whether operatic 'sentimentality', as a manifestation of the stance that would soon be transformed into the ideology of the bourgeoisie,<sup>21</sup> did not occupy a somewhat ambiguous position between the domain of pleasure and that of moral learning, or at least (as Hunter demonstrated<sup>22</sup>) remain quite distant from any message of real social change.

Parkitna is not unaware of these problems, eventually admitting that any straightforward didactic impact of the Warsaw stagings of these works remains mere conjecture (p. 30) and the moral instruction (if any) carried by these spectacles far from revolutionary (pp. 28–29). All the more astonishingly, she makes at this point a sharp turn, insisting that operas from the transnational European canon

conveyed something more profound than straightforward social didacticism: [they] signalled participation in a shared domain of operatic reception, which may well be deemed a universal domain of the Enlightenment. In grappling with an impasse of ideological ossification among the Polish nobility, repertoire programming had the capacity to not only affect customs and attitudes but also reconfigure reality by situating Warsaw near Enlightenment rationality and creativity. (p. 2)

19 Mary Hunter, *The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna: Poetics of Entertainment*, Princeton 1999, pp. 6–7.

20 Dobrochna Ratajczakowa, 'The Birth and Death of the Eighteenth-Century Myth of the Polish Public Stage', in: *A History of Polish Theatre*, eds. Katarzyna Fazan, Michał Kobiałka and Bryce Lease, Cambridge 2022, p. 90; Z. Raszewski, 'Teatr narodowy w latach 1779–1789', pp. 71–72.

21 Cf. e.g. William M. Reddy, 'Sentimentalism and Its Erasure: The Role of Emotions in the Era of the French Revolution', *The Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000) no. 1, pp. 109–152, doi.org/10.1086/315931.

22 M. Hunter, *The Culture of Opera Buffa*, pp. 52–69.

The idea that foreign operatic repertoire in Stanisławian Warsaw could by its mere presence act (or at least be perceived) as a vehicle of enlightened sociopolitical change underlies many pages of Parkitna's book, reappearing explicitly in statements like:

[...] the incoming operas did not even need to deploy explicit didactic maxims and conclusive morals in order to manifest affiliation with forward-looking socio-intellectual and aesthetic currents: the very presence of opera buffa and opéra-comique on stage located Warsaw, and by extension Poland–Lithuania, within the Enlightenment world. (p. 32)

Warsaw's incorporation into the shared operatic domain of enlightened ideals and aesthetics, guided by the far-reaching authoritative vision and thereby serving to combat the problems surfacing in social contrasts and prejudices, had a profound significance. (p. 35)

This conflating of the foreign opera spectacles with the Enlightenment as an moral and socio-political project reverberates in many more places as 'a link to the European enlightened community' (p. 32), a 'connection with the Enlightenment sphere of influence' (p. 47) or an 'Enlightenment mission' (p. 52). By insisting that this significance was to be achieved by the mere symbolic function or, at most, the aesthetic qualities of the foreign operatic repertoire, but not by its actual discursive moralistic content, Parkitna seems to be assigning to it a role somewhat comparable to that of Italian *opera buffa* during the second Paris *querelle*. Such a claim, however, would require substantial historical evidence on opera reception in Warsaw, which is apparently lacking. In fact, much of the existing knowledge testifies to the contrary: Italian opera, initially in original and then in translated form, turned out to be the most easily marketable theatre segment, the popularity of which reached far beyond the city's enlightened elite.<sup>23</sup> The lack of any surviving voice of ideologically motivated remonstrance clearly indicates that if any precise social-reformist intention lurked behind the introduction of this repertoire, in the practice of theatrical reception it was successfully neutralized.<sup>24</sup>

Paradoxically, Parkitna's statements on the topic resemble the simplifications she previously warned against (pp. 15–16, 23–24): too straightforward an equating of any trait of the cosmopolitan or Western-oriented cultural formation with the social and political stance of the enlightened reformist camp. The problem is not only that the Polish socio-political stage was much more complicated and diverse (Parkitna's expla-

23 On the strong preference for Italian *buffa* spectacles in 1770s Warsaw among the wider audience, see the book under review, p. 52 n. 223. Later, translations of Italian *opere buffe* became the mainstay of Bogusławski's company, both in Warsaw and elsewhere, until at least 1794, see Z. Raszewski, *Bogusławski*, pp. 134–152; K. Wierzbicka-Michalska, *Teatr w Polsce*, p. 199.

24 In 1778–79, the *Journal Littéraire de Varsovie*'s criticism of the idea of the theatrical ennoblement of lower social strata could only be based on drama and comedy, see Mieczysław Klimowicz, 'Teatr narodowy w latach 1774–1778' [The national theatre from 1774 to 1778], in: *Teatr narodowy w dobie oświecenia* [The national theatre during the Enlightenment], eds. Ewa Heise and Karyna Wierzbicka-Michalska, Wrocław 1967, p. 51.

nations on the topic on pp. 22–24 seem especially beneficial for the non-Polish reader); surely the culture of the European Enlightenment, even its mainstream, cannot be taken as a formation of such cohesion and homogeneity that any part of it could stand for the entirety of ‘enlightenment’ as a specific philosophical, social and political project. Ultimately, it was not just predominantly aesthetic phenomena (like opera itself) that could be easily appropriated to purely prestigious ends by monarchs who we would rather not choose to describe as ‘enlightened’; phenomena from the very core of the enlightenment project could also be used in a merely instrumental way (vide the case of Catherine the Great’s intercourse with Diderot and Voltaire).

It perhaps goes without saying that musical connoisseurship was especially susceptible of such ambiguity. Somewhat symbolically, among the persons whom Charles Burney met on his travels through Germany in 1772 and found worthy of noting on the pages of his diary on account of their musical knowledge and taste, we find only two Poles, both key figures in the two opposing camps at the heart of the strife in the Commonwealth. One was Prince Andrzej Poniatowski, brother of the king, a Polish diplomat in Vienna, who – as we learn from Parkitna’s book – actively contributed to the king’s opera project with his advice on selecting the Italian repertoire to be imported to Warsaw.<sup>25</sup> The other was Józef Sapieha, one of military leaders of the Bar Confederation – a ‘rebel of traditionalist nobility’, as Parkitna puts it, against the reformist efforts of the king’s camp – who retained two German musicians among his travelling entourage, playing the violin himself (including his own compositions), attended the same opera spectacles as Burney and later became the only Pole among the subscribers to *A General History of Music*.<sup>26</sup> And again Parkitna knows full well that ‘traditionalist nobles were often acquainted with the most recent cosmopolitan fashions while indifferent to philosophical debates and sociocultural advancements’ (p. 24). The question is whether she gives us sufficient reason for accepting her claim that the Warsaw opera was at least symbolically influential in the latter sphere. The evidence given in the book seems to me far from sufficient, albeit the hypothesis is fresh and inspiring, and – if more carefully nuanced, perhaps – could still offer valuable insights for future research.

25 C. Burney, *The Present State of Music*, pp. 258, 283. Burney only mentioned Poniatowski as ‘a great lover of music’, but the prince’s presence at several musical meetings arranged for Burney by the British ambassador in Vienna (Lord David Stormont) testifies to the king’s brother’s musical interests and knowledge.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 164–168. The entry ‘Prince Sapieha, of Poland’ is the first entry under the letter ‘S’ on the list of subscribers (on the eighth page of the list, pages unnumbered) in the first volume of Burney’s *General History of Music*, London 1776. For more on the topic of this meeting, see Jakub Chachulski, ‘Wstęp’ [Introduction], in: Charles Burney, *Obecny stan muzyki w Niemczech, Niderlandach i Zjednoczonych Prowincjach*, ed. and transl. Jakub Chachulski, Warsaw 2018, pp. 12–16.

Despite its modest size and the doubtful points addressed above, *Opera in Warsaw* is a book of substantial value and importance. Though not aspiring to the role of a full-length monograph, it not only successfully introduces the reader to the specificity of Enlightenment Warsaw as one of the opera hubs of late eighteenth-century Europe, but also outlines the topic's significance for several important areas of opera studies.

Endeavouring to situate Warsaw's operatic life within the main socio-political movements of the Polish Enlightenment, Parkitna's book faces two related challenges: first, how to reengage with a once-canonized field of study whose golden age passed a few decades ago; secondly, how to convey at least some of the richness and complexity of interpretations developed by earlier Polish scholars in the sphere of international English-language discourse. In this respect, *Opera in Warsaw* stands close to the two texts on the Polish Enlightenment included in *A History of Polish Theatre* published three years earlier (2022) also in Cambridge.<sup>27</sup> The author of the former, Piotr Olkusz, starts with a short introduction on the political factors behind the post-war boom in Polish Enlightenment theatre studies, in this way somewhat distancing himself from the existing research tradition. His narration focuses on Poniatowski's National Theatre as one of the pillars of the king's Enlightenment project, though underlining the ultimate failure of the enterprise, which proved unable to transcend the sphere of the narrow cultural elite,<sup>28</sup> and even hinting at the possibility of seeing the Enlightenment camp's educational efforts as a kind of colonialist usurpation – a view that decisively overturns the established discourse.<sup>29</sup> In the second text from *A History of Polish Theatre*, Dobrochna Ratajczakowa complements that narrative with the missing element – by no means new, though successfully supported by an up-to-date theoretical framework. Though the king's camp failed to establish the public stage as a theatrical component of Habermas's 'public sphere' – not surprisingly, given that such a thing cannot be arbitrarily imposed by the state – it emerged from below on the intersection of the emancipation of the audience, the wave of patriotic feelings that accompanied the Great Sejm (1788–92) and the skill of Wojciech Bogusławski, who successfully combined concessions to spectators' tastes with his own ideological agenda: essentially enlightened but focusing not so much on the propaganda of socio-political change as on notions of individual ethics (the dignity of universal human nature, the brotherhood of man, irrespective of nationality or social rank, the ideal of personal independence based on diligence and self-denial).<sup>30</sup> In contrast to the clear finality of Olkusz's narrative, Ratajczakowa demonstrates the continuity between late Stanisławian theatre and the post-Partition Warsaw stage –

27 *A History of Polish Theatre*, eds. Katarzyna Fazan, Michał Kobiałka and Bryce Lease, Cambridge 2022.

28 Piotr Olkusz, 'Poniatowski's National Theatre: The Idea and Institution of Enlightenment', in: *A History of Polish Theatre*, pp. 80–82.

29 Ibid., pp. 72, 80.

30 D. Ratajczakowa, 'The Birth and Death', p. 94.

increasingly egalitarian, gradually opening up to low-brow genres, but still rooted in Bogusławski's achievement of the public stage as a vehicle of the 'citizenship ethos' – 'a space, in which one could declare oneself a human being'.<sup>31</sup> Remarkably, in Olkusz's narrative, music theatre is virtually absent, while Ratajczakowa's account recalls several titles of works that in some way used the medium of music and underlines the significance of musical theatre genres in the Polish theatre tradition that spreads from Bogusławski's theatre over more than century.

In the context of these two recent influential texts, the value of Parkitna's specific contribution to research into the history of Stanislavian theatre appears to lie predominantly in her efforts to define the independent place and function of the foreign opera spectacles within the Polish Enlightenment project. However, given her inclination toward social and political history, one must be slightly astonished by her relative lack of interest in Polish-language opera, and above all her nearly complete indifference to the individual path of Wojciech Bogusławski, so crucial to the enduring heritage of Stanislavian theatre. Bogusławski appears in the book scarcely, and even then more frequently as a witness than as a protagonist. To some extent, Parkitna's stance can be understood as sharing with Olkusz's the rejection of the traditional teleological and national-oriented view that privileged the emergence and emancipation of the Polish-language stage (though a trace of this way of thinking appears in the last paragraphs of the book, where the twilight of French music spectacles in Warsaw is linked, rather arbitrarily, to the flourishing of Polish opera). Above all, however, it seems that Parkitna's decision to focus on transnational opera circulation (undoubtedly the most revealing aspect of *Opera in Warsaw*), alongside her interest in the sociopolitical context, results in two thematic vectors that are too divergent to coexist in so compact a book. In this, as well as in some other respects, the disproportion between the ample content of Parkitna's dissertation and the modest volume of *Opera in Warsaw* may give us reason to hope that it is not the final word from the author on that matter.

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31 Ibid.



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