

Oleksandra Vasylieva

Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa (PL)

ORCID: 0000-0002-8072-3836

Aesthetic Transformations of the Image of the Opera Singer Vasyl Slipak in Contemporary Popular Culture

Abstract

The opera, whose nature is synthetic and spectacular, is sensitive to social upheavals and changing priorities in artistic interests. Thus, in the postmodern era, opera art is revealed to the mass audience and gets closer to popular culture; it adapts to new aesthetic trends and at the same time influences them. One of the bridges that connect opera with popular culture is the figures of famous composers and star performers. Contemporary culture uses and rethinks the images of real-life opera stars, as well as some collective generalized images of opera singers. The Ukrainian opera singer Vasyl Slipak became a hero of popular culture—his story fits perfectly

into the global pop cultural narratives of death in the battle for freedom. His image resonates with the current cultural *zeitgeist* and embodies the essence of Ukrainian society under the Russian invasion and its values. Modern artists skillfully incorporate his iconic persona into the realms of drama, theater, and music, showcasing their ingenuity and creativity.

Keywords

opera, drama, music, postmodernism, Ukraine

Abstrakt

Estetyczne przemiany wizerunku śpiewaka operowego: Wasyl Slipak we współczesnej kulturze popularnej

Przemiany społeczne i zmieniające się priorytety zainteresowań artystycznych oddziałują na operę jako sztukę syntetyczną i widowiskową. W epoce ponowoczesnej opera otwiera się więc na masowego odbiorcę i zbliża do kultury popularnej; adaptuje się do nowych trendów estetycznych i jednocześnie na nie wpływa. Jednym z pomostów łączących operę z kulturą popularną są postaci znanych kompozytorów i gwiazdorskich wykonawców. Współczesna kultura wykorzystuje i na nowo analizuje wizerunki gwiazd operowych, a także stereotypowe wyobrażenia o śpiewakach operowych. Ukraiński wykonawca Wasyl Slipak stał się bohaterem popkultury – jego historia doskonale wpisuje się w popkulturowe narracje o śmierci w walce o wolność. Jego wizerunek rezonuje z aktualnymi trendami kulturowymi i staje się uosobieniem wartości ukraińskiego społeczeństwa skonfrontowanego z rosyjską inwazją. Współcześni artyści umiejętnie włączają jego ikoniczną postać do sfery dramatu, teatru i muzyki, pokazując swoją pomysłowość i kreatywność.

Słowa kluczowe

opera, dramat, muzyka, postmodernizm, Ukraina

The art of opera, which for a long time had been considered elitist, has rightly become a part of popular culture with the advent of the post- (and post-post-) modern era. Unlike modernism, which was aimed at a limited audience, post-modernism is inherently secondary, as it draws from what has already existed, and is therefore accessible to a wider public. Within the new aesthetics, with its characteristic parody, playfulness, double coding, and secondary essence, the art of opera becomes closer and more accessible to the masses. This aesthetic seeks to incorporate the entire experience of world art culture into contemporary art by quoting it, often ironically. In this case, citation often involves the translation from one language of art into another, gaining a new expressiveness, which is largely based on the cultural and aesthetic background of the recipient. The musical-dramatic genre of opera in a certain way influences modern drama in particular. Post-dramatic theatre adapts and uses images and visual means, typical in particular to opera.

During the four hundred years of its existence, opera as a genre has shown absolutely amazing capability to adapt to social demands, needs, and ideas about the aesthetic absolute and the functions of art in society.¹ The opera, whose nature is synthetic, spectacular, and lately quite democratic, is sensitive to social upheavals and changing priorities in artistic interests. Thus, in the postmodern era, opera art is revealed to the mass audience and gets closer to popular culture, adapts to new aesthetic trends, and at the same time influences them.

One of the bridges that connects opera with popular culture is the figures of famous composers and star performers. Quite often they become prototypes for heroes of various works of art—from literature to dramatic theatre. The peak of popularity of composers can be traced to the 19th century, when their work became an expression of social and national ideas—as in the case of Mykola Lysenko in Ukraine, Stanisław Moniuszko in Poland, Giuseppe Verdi in Italy.

In our time, in the context of popular culture, the figures of opera singers are gaining more weight, continuing in some way the tendencies of the 17th and 18th centuries, when famous opera performers became real idols of society. Contemporary culture uses and rethinks the images of real-life opera stars. An interesting example is the image of the singer Florence Foster Jenkins, who became famous for her complete lack of musical hearing, sense of rhythm, or

¹ Liubov' Kiiānovskaia, "Opera kak rynok: Spektakl' kak marketingovyĭ khod," *Muzykal' naiā akademiā*, no. 4 (2008): 74–77, <https://mus.academy/articles/opera-kak-rynok-spektakl-kak-marketingovyĭ-khod>.

singing talent—her biography became the basis of five stage productions, two films, and an indie folk music album.

The Ukrainian Opera Singer Vasyl Slipak

The idol of contemporary Ukrainian society is the world-famous Ukrainian opera singer Vasyl Slipak (1974–2016), soloist of the Paris National Opera. He had a uniquely wide vocal range—from F³ to A⁶; he sang counter-tenor and bass-baritone. He performed on the stages of European operas, starring in the works by Verdi, Bizet, Caccini, Falconieri, Scarlatti, Vivaldi, Mozart, and Berezovsky. He was known and appreciated not only by the art circles, but also by the general Ukrainian public; as a talented and charismatic performer, he gained fame and popularity. He was the subject of articles, interviews, and videos.

Slipak gained even more recognition and popularity due to his active social engagement as a volunteer and participant in the fight during the war on the East of Ukraine (where he fought in 2015–2016). With the beginning of the Revolution of Dignity, he led the volunteer movement—he coordinated public actions in support of Ukraine in France, organized regular public lectures for representatives of the media, education, and politics, which helped to cover the events in Ukraine. He organized the work of charitable associations and foundations, including Opera Singers for Children. Together with fellow musicians, he gave many charity concerts to provide humanitarian assistance to children.

As Slipak's favorite aria was the part of Mephistopheles in Charles Gounod's opera *Faust*, he came up with the call sign "Mephistopheles," which was shortened for convenience to "Myth." Slipak used it fighting on the front line. It was important for him to be where he was needed: on stage and at war. "As a man, I can be at war, and as an artist, I can do the maximum promotion of Ukraine in France," he said.² On June 29, 2016, while carrying out a combat mission, he was killed in battle by an enemy bullet fired by a sniper from a large-caliber rifle. Vasyl Slipak saved his comrades at the cost of his own life.

There are many examples in the history of world culture when death turned a hero into a legend. The tragic death of the singer shocked the society. The willingness to defend his ideals, fighting for them with the help of art and putting his own life for it, made him more than just a popular cultural figure, shifting

² "Paryzh ta L'viv proshchalysia iz maestro Vasylem Slipakom, shcho zahynuv na fronti," Eparchy of Saint Volodymyr the Great for France, Benelux, and Switzerland website, July 1, 2016, <https://ugcc.fr/news/paryzh-ta-lvyv-proshhayutsya-yz-maestro-vasylem-slypakom-shho-zahynuv-na-fronty/>.

the public perception of events to qualitatively different levels. The figure of Vasyl Slipak embodies the maxim of the inseparability of life from art and art from life. His extraordinary heroic story is known in Ukraine and abroad, and is retold in the language of journalism as well as film, drama, and music.

Reflections of the Image of Vasyl Slipak in the Monodrama *Otvīetka@ua*

The figure of the famous opera singer inspired a contemporary playwright to create a monodrama. This work in question is the Ukrainian author Neda Nezhdana's play *Otvīetka@ua*, dedicated to Vasyl Slipak, call sign "Myth." The playwright gave the play the subtitle *The Mono-bomb* and, in her own words, "This play is my feeling of a hybrid war and how to survive in it without becoming a victim or an executioner . . . His story was the impetus for the play."³ The monodrama evokes many biographical details—Slipak's volunteer work, his participation in the war, and his opera performances. The heroine of the play—a woman without a name, whose life is destroyed by the war and who loves the singer—voices his opinion about art and war:

You know, He was not a soldier, He was a singer, and He was not called up like others . . . He left. Once he was asked, why did He, the artist, took up arms? And He answered that artists often have a great sense of justice . . . Do you understand? Justice. This is what does not give you peace, does not allow you to breathe freely and even . . . live . . . It suffocates you when you lack it like air!⁴

The musical works mentioned in the stage directions make this monologue more expressive, revealing the mood and meaning more deeply, e.g. the song *Requiem* by Kozak System ("the skies are crying after you, soldiers").⁵

The play also features the theme of Vasyl Slipak's voice and his image—both as an opera artist and as an activist:

³ "U Kyīevi predstavliat' vystavu OTVĪETKA@UA, prysviāchenu Vasylīu Slipaku," Ukrainian Radio website, February 18, 2019, <http://www.nrcu.gov.ua/news.html?newsID=85274>.

⁴ Neda Nezhdana, "Otvīetka@ua," in *Labirynt iz kryhy ta vohniū: Antolohiia aktual'noi dramy, Revoliūtsiia hidnosti ĭhibrydna viina, upor*, ed. Neda Nezhdana and Oleh Mykolaichuk-Nyzovec's (Kyiv: Smoloskyp, 2019), 402.

⁵ Nezhdana, "Otvīetka@ua," 403.

I heard it earlier, in the square, during our actions against the war. You see, others went there with megaphones, and he didn't need to—his voice sounded so powerful that he could block out all the noise and all the voices, as if it were a voice from heaven. He was the tallest of them all—a giant. Not a man, but a mythical hero. Living Myth . . . There was such power in this voice—not only sound—spirit.⁶

Not surprisingly, the play, which features an opera singer, is very musical in nature. Contemporary postmodern drama, borrowing the language of opera, receives new instruments and artistic means with its help. Popular and well-known opera arias illustrate the ideas expressed in the play.

Mephistopheles's aria generally accompanies the whole play—according to stage directions, the heroine sings it at the very beginning. In the first part, in her monologue, the heroine says: “this aria is now often inside of me.”⁷ According to stage directions, “she sings it; she can turn on the music’ she imitates the conductor; she moves to the rhythm of the music.”⁸

The opera *Faust* is one of the masterpieces of world opera classics. Not surprisingly, it is often quoted in modern popular culture. The legend of Doctor Faustus is probably the perfect plot, which attracts both playwrights and composers. Marlowe and Goethe wrote great tragedies on this subject. In addition, about thirty lesser-known playwrights reworked the theme. Beethoven was once fascinated by the idea of composing an opera based on this plot. Wagner wrote the *Faust Overture*. Liszt wrote a cantata. Berlioz, Boito, and Gounod each created their own wonderful operas. Less popular operas are those by Spohr and Busoni. There is even a rare opera by a female composer, Louise Bertin. Gounod's interpretation of this plot is certainly the most popular of all, and in many ways the best. It is based—to a greater extent than most critics admit—on the first part of Goethe's tragedy, and its theme is, of course, the theme of the old German scholar-philosopher's sale of his soul to the devil. Mephistopheles's verses (“Le veau d'or est toujours debout!”) create the image of a spontaneously elusive, cruel force that dominates people.⁹

There is a world war. But it is different, hybrid. The war is not for the territory. Not only cities are being bombed, but to a greater extent the brains. . . . There is a war for souls: Mephistopheles—Faust. (The music from *Faust* opera begins to

⁶ Nezhdana, 410.

⁷ Nezhdana, 397.

⁸ Nezhdana, 397.

⁹ Mihail Druskin, “Opera Guno *Faust*,” Belcanto.ru, accessed November 3, 2021, <https://www.belcanto.ru/faust.html>.



PHOTO LAURENT BUGNET

Laurent Bugnet

Vasyl Slipak performing at the Verdi Bicentenary Gala with the Orchestre de Chambre de la Nouvelle Europe conducted by Nicolas Krauze, Dijon, 2013

sound softly.) Everything is very simple. If they conquer your soul, then you will give everything else anyway. There is an eternal war. For the soul. And how can it be bought? There are hundreds of ways.¹⁰

Interestingly, the motif that came to Gounod's opera from Goethe's tragedy is quoted in contemporary postmodern drama from the language of opera. Apparently, Mephistopheles's aria from Gounod's opera was that vividly reflected in popular culture. Not the least important factor in the playwright's choice to use operatic references is certainly the opera singer's connection to the subject. The playwright compares his image with the image of Faust:

¹⁰ Nezhdana, "Otvietka@ua", 414.

“Heroes do not die!” Is that true? Heroes die . . . Like Faust . . . Do you know when Faust gave his soul? For what? For “free people on free land.”¹¹

This image is generalized, because Vasyl Slipak is the personification of a heroic Ukrainian warrior:

But he did not know that it was an illusion . . . That in fact it was the gravediggers digging his grave . . . But the angels retrieved his soul from the devil. For when a man gives his soul for it, even the angels protest. Even they enter the battle! So do our boys . . . I believe that their souls are taken away by angels and carried into the whirlpool of heaven, away from vanity.¹²

There are other operatic references in the play. Continuing the theme of Mephistopheles’s battle for souls, the author uses a musical quote from another opera—the Toreador aria from Bizet’s *Carmen*, which had also been performed by Slipak.

But for some, the buzz is hunting. For people. The whole earth is like a coliseum or a bullfight to them . . . (Toreador’s aria from the opera *Carmen*, she dances in the style of a bullfight.)¹³

The directions also mention *La Traviata*, the aria from which Slipak performed:

There is an opera aria from *La Traviata*; she moves to the music of the aria; it’s not exactly a dance, but a movement. Then she starts beating the drum to the beat of the music, louder, no longer to the beat. A sharp stop.¹⁴

Thus, the famous opera arias, which have long been a part of popular culture, become a part of the narrative of the play.

In the language of music, the playwright speaks of the most horrific things—loss, despair, war, death. But at the same time—about hope, beauty, and love. Music and opera arias in particular become a mechanism for fighting the evil, a way to find inner integrity and peace, to cling to reality:

¹¹ Nezhhdana, 422.

¹² Nezhhdana, 422.

¹³ Nezhhdana, 414.

¹⁴ Nezhhdana, 411.

And I got myself a drum. Here. It's too late to start learning music. And the drum—not so bad. (Beats.) And when you want to beat someone, it also helps. (Beats more intensely.) Isn't it cool? So everything is fine: there is music, and the worst is behind . . .¹⁵

The heroine says that now—in the reality of war and death—she fell in love with classical music: “I listen to operas. Can you imagine? Me and opera. Can't you believe it? Here, listen—pa-pa-p-a. . . . This is *Faust*.”¹⁶ The quoted musical, operatic images (Marseilles, Toreodor's aria from, the aria from *La Traviata*, the Opera Bastille, *Faust*) seem to connect the heroine with her past.

Music becomes a symbol of faith in the future, in which harmony will prevail and there will be no war, in which the child of the theatrical character Vasyli Slipak will grow up: “I will educate him with music, because music is intelligence, music is the language of souls, music is harmony. . . .”¹⁷ In music, the heroine sees the possibility of the baby's connection with the dead father, in music there is his continuation:

Maybe the baby can't see yet, but he can hear! After all, firstly they begin to hear. And I figured out how to make him have a dad. Music! His songs . . . His voice . . . Do you know how painful it is for me to hear that voice? How it cuts my veins! But the baby needs it. Let him learn to sing! That's the only thing I can give him yet. And I grit my teeth and listen. . . . The song is his dad's soul . . .¹⁸

Thus, the author departs from the principle of biographical portrayal of the opera singer Vasyli Slipak, adding artistic details and thus embodying new ideas. In music, the heroine finds support and meaning of life: “The song is what keeps us on the edge of the abyss. If there is music, then this world is not in vain . . . I no longer feel guilty, I have my ‘answer.’”¹⁹

The play *Otvietka@ua* was presented by the Les Kurbas Theatre and Zaporizhzhia Municipal Theatre Vie. The voice of Vasyli Slipak is heard in the play. The director of the play Nataliia Mostopalova-Hapchynska deliberately searched for his repertoire, so that the audience would know more about this hero. As the actress Anna Mironova noted: “Although he is not in the play literally,

¹⁵ Nezhdana, 397.

¹⁶ Nezhdana, 397.

¹⁷ Nezhdana, 423.

¹⁸ Nezhdana, 423.

¹⁹ Nezhdana, 424.

his songs live with us.”²⁰ The director used the works by Philip Glass, as well as arias from the opera *Faust* and parts from *Requiem* performed by Slipak. One of the central questions of the play is how to respond to injustice, despair, and death. The question is not easy or unambiguous, but after analysing the play, we can see how music becomes the answer in a certain way. The voice of the dead singer does not subside.

Although the play was written about a hybrid war on the East of Ukraine, the full-scale invasion actualized its meaning to an even greater extent—just like Vasyl Slipak, hundreds of artists joined the fight. So, its new productions followed—it became one of the first premieres after February 24, 2022 in Ukraine, staged at the Transcarpathian Academic Regional Theater, directed by Mykhailo Fishchenko who updated it to today’s events and presented it from a different perspective. Another successful premiere of the play was held in Poltava, directed by Bohdan Cherniavskyi —the finale included a screening of documentary footage along with an aria by Vasyl Slipak, in memory of the artist and all those who were killed at the front.

The image of the opera singer Vasyl Slipak, who was a legend during his lifetime, is artistically reinterpreted, and “Myth” is increasingly getting mythologized. Against the background of the story of his life and death, we see the history of the whole country, and even more—world history during the war in Ukraine. The image of Vasyl Slipak in the play is biographical, but at the same time we see in it as an artistically generalized symbolic figure of a Ukrainian patriot who fights for freedom both by force of arms and by force of art.

The Image of Vasyl Slipak in Contemporary *Vertep*

It is also interesting to see the image of Vasyl Slipak as a Cossack in *vertep* travelling puppet theatre²¹ in the play by Liudmyla Kolosovych *Christmas Dream of a Black Mare*. She created a synthetic play using the texts of Ostop Vyshnia

²⁰ Eduard Ovcharenko, “Shchob vyzhyty, potribna otvietka?”, I-ua.tv website, February 25, 2019, <https://i-ua.tv/culture/14932-shchob-vyzyty-potribna-otvietka>.

²¹ *Vertep* originated in Ukraine in the Baroque era. The name comes from sacred texts, which used that name to refer to the cave in which Jesus was born. *Vertep* is genetically and structurally polyelemental: it is generated at the crossroads of folk and refined culture, and built on the principle of installation. It is mosaic in its universal genre quality. *Vertep* is mainly functionally related to Christmas, which primarily determines the nature of its artistic model. Subsequently, the Ukrainian *vertep* drama became the infallible source that fed new Ukrainian literature, and, especially, the theatre. In the art of *vertep*, the literary artistic skills, original techniques of folk puppet theatre, verbal folk art, music, and fine arts were synthesized. The performance consisted of two actions: religious, which arose under the influence of Christmas school dramas, and secular (folk), which resembled interludes in these dramas. Both of them had their own musical elements.

and Panteleimon Kulish along with authentic Christmas carols of the Poltava and Donetsk regions.

In general, the figure of an avid Ukrainian soldier—a Cossack—is quite common in Ukrainian *vertep*. It is connected with the prototype of heroic Zaporizhzhian knights in historical Ukrainian dramas. Writing about the popular image of the Cossack in *vertep* drama, Petro Ponomarev notes:

The central image of *vertep* drama is Zaporozhets [Cossack]. It reminds us of the image of the Cossack Golota from the Ukrainian People's Dumas. Zaporozhets' monologue characterizes him as a warrior hardened in battle, marked by huge physical strength, courage and military experience. He is full of initiative and energy. Zaporozhets skillfully plays a bandura [Ukrainian string instrument], thus showing his musical abilities. He speaks of his military feats in poetic language. His image in *vertep* is heroic.²²

As we can see, this image perfectly coincides with the image of Vasyl Slipak, as formed in pop culture—his extraordinary initiative and energy, fearlessness, poetry and musicality, intolerance of oppressors and his heroism all correspond to the archetypal image of the Cossack. The image of the opera singer unexpectedly perfectly fitted the centuries-old popular cultural image.

Opera—Pop—Culture

The aesthetic circle closed in an astonishing way with the opera *Ukraine: Terra Incognita*. The *opera-myth* (which is how the genre is defined by the author) is dedicated to Vasyl Slipak and combines archaic singing, ancient Ukrainian songs, symphonic music, free jazz, video art, and future-folk costumes. The authors—Uliana Horbachevska, Mariia Oliinyk, and their crew—have collected lullabies and ritual, recruiting, Cossack, and love songs that date back hundreds of years. All these songs are intertwined in a single plot in five myths: the Myth of Kin, the Myth of Home, the Myth of Love, the Myth of the Steppe, and the Myth of the Iron Heart. They all are a part of a simple, age-old myth of mankind about the warrior, his formation and his deeds—the warrior-defender protects his family, love, and home. Rather than following a linear plot, the opera is composed of microforms that create a volumetric structure. The myth in the author's genre

²² Petro Ponomarev, "Narodna drama," in *Ukrains'ka narodna poetychna tvorchoist'*, vol. 1, ed. Maksym Ryl's'kyi (Kyiv: Radyans'ka shkola, 1958), 722.

subtitle thus acquires a double meaning: it is both the myths that make up the meaning of the opera and the pseudonym of Vasyl Slipak. It makes sense that Vasyl Slipak became a hero of popular culture—his story fits perfectly into the global pop-cultural narratives of death in the battle for freedom.

The motive of freedom and the struggle for freedom has permeated the Ukrainian culture for centuries. The events of recent years have made this topic even more relevant. Contemporary art resonantly presents this problem in a somewhat broader light—not only as a struggle for physical freedom and protection of territorial integrity, but also spiritual freedom. The motive of the struggle is now embodied not only by soldiers but also by artists. The opera singer Vasyl Slipak combines these two incarnations, becoming an ideal hero of pop culture, who corresponds to the social trends of our time and national ideas.



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OLEKSANDRA VASYLIEVA

Master’s degree in philology, doctoral student at Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa at the doctoral school in the humanities in the discipline of literary studies. She participated in academic conferences in Poland, Italy, Belarus, Estonia, and Ukraine. Her main research interests include intermediality in drama, musicality of contemporary drama, and contemporary literary fairy tale.