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/ HISTORIES

Opera in Poland: At the Intersection of Class and Nationality

Marcin Bogucki | University of Warsaw

This article explores the history of opera in Poland through the lens of nationality and class. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of the archaeology of knowledge, I analyse canonical operatic works not only as individual artistic creations, but also as theoretical objects in which multiple discourses intersect. My point of departure is the project *Halka/Haiti. 18°48′05″N 72°23′01″W* by C.T. Jasper and Joanna Malinowska, which focuses on national themes while offering limited reflection on the class implications of staging Stanisław Moniuszko's *Halka* in Haiti. I focus on key operatic works, examining the tensions and ambiguities they contain. I raise questions about the changing reception of *Halka* – from a socially engaged poem to a national opera – as well as the possible readings of *The Haunted Manor*, whether through the lens of Polish Biedermeier culture or romanticised Sarmatism. I also consider the complex role of national identity in shaping the image of Moniuszko himself. In the case of *Krakowiacy i Górale* by Wojciech Bogusławski and Jan Stefani, I reflect on interpretations that emphasise either its national or class dimensions. Finally, I examine the early history of opera in Poland, looking at the court theatre of Władysław IV as both a source of entertainment and a tool of political ideology. By taking an 'archaeological' approach to opera, I show how discourse around Polish opera tends to highlight its national aspects while pushing questions of class to the margins.

Keywords: opera; class; nationality; Moniuszko; Bogusławski

‘Why bring an opera to the other end of the world?’ [1]

Stanisław Moniuszko’s *Halka* was first performed in Haiti on 7 February 2015. Excerpts from the opera were staged there by the soloists of the Teatr Wielki in Poznań, accompanied by the Holy Trinity Philharmonic Orchestra of Port-au-Prince and dancers of the village of Cazale, where the presentation took place. At the helm of the undertaking were a Polish conductor, Polish director, and Polish choreographer.[2]

The choice of location was no coincidence. Cazale is home to the *Polone nwa* (Black Poles), descendants of Polish legionnaires dispatched to the island by Napoleon to suppress the revolution. Although most likely only about a hundred lower-ranking soldiers from the several-thousand-strong contingent actually joined the revolt, there is a widespread belief in Haiti that Poles deserted en masse to side with the insurgents, a conviction rooted in the perceived affinity between the struggles of the two oppressed peoples (Pachoński & Wilson, 1986).

The prime movers of the *Halka/Haiti 18°48'05’N 72°23'01’W* project were Polish artists C.T. Jasper and Joanna Malinowska, who, together with the curator Magdalena Moskalewicz, developed it as part of the national pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The result was a film displayed as a panoramic projection reminiscent of nineteenth-century painted panoramas. *Halka* was staged on a road running through the village, with singers dressed in traditional noble and folk costumes and dancers wearing contemporary festive attire. At the centre of the scene stood a goat tethered to a post.

The juxtaposition of these two worlds produced a surreal effect, as the

performers' fur caps were entirely out of place in the local climate and culture. Jasper and Malinowska thus posed a question about the universality of classical music: is it an art form understood everywhere? On the one hand, the artists explained to the inhabitants of Cazale that the story of *Halka* echoed that of the nineteenth-century Haitian poem *Choukoun*, which likewise centres on a love destroyed by class difference; on the other, it is impossible to overlook in this claim to universality an element of colonialism, underpinned by the assumption of Western cultural superiority.

The Polish artists made no secret that their inspiration came from Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo*, the tale of an attempt to build an opera house in the Amazonian jungle. They took the risk of translating fantasy into reality. In Herzog's narrative, the mission ends in failure, albeit not without a makeshift operatic performance staged aboard a ship sailing the Amazon. One finds a similar ephemerality in Jasper and Malinowska's project: they adapted *Halka* to local conditions, reduced it to key scenes, and staged it without stage design at the heart of a village, with everyday life in the backdrop. In an interview, Malinowska defended herself against accusations of perpetuating the colonial impulses embedded in Fitzcarraldo's dream:

> One might construe the act of bringing opera – an emblem of the elite culture of former colonising powers – into a place with Haiti's history as a contemporary form of colonisation. Yet we differ from the colonisers in that we imposed nothing on the Haitian community. The performance could only take place upon their consent. We visited Cazale several times beforehand to discuss the idea with various local authorities: the headmaster of the secondary school, the village elders, the priest, the peacekeeper, and the youth. We explained the opera's theme and how and why we wished

> to stage it. They did not agree immediately, instead posing many questions, for example, about our output and credentials. Eventually we secured their permission. Given the circumstances, we were more akin to a travelling theatre passing through the village than to colonisers (2016).

Malinowska casts her project as a social undertaking, although it seems above all to have been an attempt to work through her own personal history:

> I grew up in a country that suppressed all forms of otherness. I was weary of that homogeneity and of Polish Catholicism. As a teenager I would travel through the countryside with a friend to listen to local dialects and witness manifestations of local cultures. I would read about North and South America. I was fascinated by different conceptions of the world, by alternative ways of thinking about religion, by the multiplicity of possible models of life (Malinowska, 2016).

The omission of this personal perspective in the final version of *Halka/Haiti* constitutes its greatest weakness. Deprived of its organisational context, one watches the film as a narrative of colonial fantasy, much like Herzog's work. In the words of Dorota Sosnowska:

> Watching *Halka/Haiti* video the viewer feels still trapped in the *Fitzcarraldo* context. White people dressed in beautiful, rich theatrical costumes singing with opera voice, and black, poor people dancing in amateur way or watching the show from plastic chairs. What happened? Why this image is still telling the colonial

> story without braking it’s schemes and critically lever the race category? (n.d.).

In Sosnowska’s view, a critical examination of nationality should be concomitant with an equally probing reflection on class: the artists arrived in Haiti as allies, yet they held symbolic and economic power in the form of cameras and financial resources. ‘By re-enacting famous Western film they re-enacted it’s capitalistic dimension reintroducing race as the effect of class divisions’ (n.d.).

Nationality and class in *Halka*

Despite the apparent universality of classical music, it operates at the intersection of various discourses, of which class and nationality seem the most significant. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s concept of the archaeology of knowledge – albeit in an unorthodox manner – I would like to examine how opera has functioned in Poland:

> Instead of seeing, on the great mythical book of history, lines of words that translate in visible characters thoughts that were formed in some other time and place, we have in the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility and field of use) (Foucault, 2010, p. 149).

The objects of my inquiry will thus be operatic works, though I shall not treat them as individual artistic creations, but rather as manifestations – at once

events and solidities – in which various strands of discourse converge (ibid., p. 161). Moreover, by reversing the chronological order, I will examine the superimposed layers of meaning that have accumulated over centuries and continue to shape contemporary perceptions of this art form.

Jasper and Malinowska chose *Halka* for their project as the first Polish national opera. It is worth considering how the story of a highlander girl abandoned by a young nobleman came to bear that designation, and why it achieved such success.[3] This story begins with Włodzimierz Wolski's socially engaged poem about a peasant girl's revenge, which the author refused to publish in a version hobbled by Russian censorship. Persuaded by Moniuszko, Wolski drafted the libretto for the first version of the opera (first staged in Vilnius in 1848), departing from the Romantic trappings and starkness of the original while also drawing inspiration from Daniel Auber's celebrated *La Muette de Portici*. Full success only arrived only with the Warsaw premiere of *Halka* at the Teatr Wielki in 1858: a full-scale, four-act production featuring virtuoso arias, choruses, ballet interludes, and visually striking scenery that appealed to audiences and critics alike (Zieziula, 2020). Did *Halka/Haiti* not meet a similar fate? The authors' radical intentions, initially expressed as a socially engaged project involving the Cazale community, ultimately crystallised as a static film screened within the elite framework of the Biennale and still operating within nineteenth-century national divisions.

Halka marked a breakthrough not only in Moniuszko's career but also in the history of Polish musical theatre (ibid., p. 141). Aiding the consolidation of *Halka*'s stature was its international recognition, driven both by its universal subject matter and by the ease with which the composer tapped into the intellectual frameworks of his era. Overnight, Moniuszko became the

‘founding father of Polish opera’ and the foremost representative of the national school (Allison, 2019). He earned his reputation through critical acclaim and praise from foreign authors. Particularly influential was a favourable review of *Halka* in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* by Hans von Bülow, a conductor of considerable stature in German musical circles. Less often discussed, however, is how the work came to Bülow’s attention: it was Maria Kalergis, a passionate advocate of Moniuszko, who introduced the conductor to the opera. Nevertheless, Bülow’s warm praise carried a note of condescension, as he dubbed *Halka* a work not entirely devoid of flaws, a composition by a novice forced to struggle heroically against external conditions that thwarted his full artistic evolution. This thread is absent from Jasper and Malinowska’s project. Whereas *Fitzcarraldo* invokes the most celebrated masterpieces of Italian bel canto – performed by none other than Enrico Caruso and integral to the operatic mainstream – *Halka* remains for most audiences a repertory rarity, lacking comparable symbolic weight.

It was also Jasper and Malinowska themselves who referred to *Halka* as an export commodity. Its international career in the twentieth century owed much to Maria Fołtyn, who took the piece to Cuba, Mexico, Turkey, Russia, Canada, and Brazil. Often referred to as ‘Moniuszko’s widow’ (Jasper & Malinowska, 2016, p. 64), Fołtyn became a key figure in consolidating the composer’s image, though less has been said about her not-always-conservative approach to direction. Fołtyn adapted *Halka* to the expectations of local audiences. For instance, in the Mexican version she altered the ending so that the grief-stricken Jontek kills Janusz with a highlander’s axe; she also allowed questions of race to resonate in the context of peasant suffering by casting a Cuban soprano in the title role. The potential for such universalisation of Moniuszko’s piece has been addressed by Agnieszka Topolska:

Maria Fołtyn's productions were thus an attempt to undo Moniuszko's localism, so as to detach him from an exclusive association with Polish 'domesticity,' instead branding him as a transnational artist. Yet could Fołtyn truly overcome that vision if, in the Cuban staging, the Black soprano Yolanda Hernández donned traditional Polish highlander shoes and floral kerchiefs? (2011).

A similar ambiguity pervades Jasper and Malinowska's screening: do they treat opera as a symbol of the Western world, or as a national monument erected for Poles who happen to lack Polish passports?

This brings me to the notion of *Halka* as a national opera. How is it possible that the tragic story of an abandoned girl could acquire such a designation? Moniuszko employs *couleur locale*, evident in the rhythms of Polish dances (the polonaise, the *mazur*, and highlander dances). Yet his opera is not a celebration of Polishness or of Sarmatism; one can decipher it as a vehicle for social critique. Rüdiger Ritter, the German author of a monograph on Moniuszko, reflects on the issue, asking whether *Halka* is a political manifesto, a genre painting, or a national monument (2019, p. 256). There is no single correct answer to this question, for the opera's reception has shifted over time. Initially far from being regarded as a Romantic melodrama, the audiences saw it as a social drama, although it was the patriotic interpretation that prevailed over time. But what did the adjective 'national' entail in the nineteenth century? As Ritter observes, *Halka* reflects contemporary debates concerning the concept of nation in its political sense (construed as an affiliation to a particular social group), as well as in a broader national sense (defined by birth and irrespective of social stratification). It was not until twentieth-century productions, however, that questions of social justice first began to resonate.

The Haunted Manor: A Polish Biedermeier Piece or a Case of Romantic Sarmatism?

The second opera Jasper and Malinowska considered staging was Moniuszko's *Straszny dwór* (The Haunted Manor), a work of major significance not only to the history of Polish music but also to the Polish cultural imagination. In 2018, on the eve of the lavish celebrations marking the composer's bicentennial, Jacek Kowalski published *„Straszny dwór", czyli sarmackie korzenie Niepodległej* (The Haunted Manor, or the Sarmatian Roots of Independence). This opulently illustrated A4-format volume of more than five hundred pages, its cover adorned with a traditional Slutsk sash, focused entirely to that single opera and its contexts. As the title indicates, the author argued that *The Haunted Manor* was the most important work for the generation of 1918, the year of recovery of the sovereign state, because of its Polish features, epitomised by the Sarmatian tradition.

Kowalski directs his criticism towards Dobrochna Ratajczakowa (2005) and Alina Borkowska-Rychlewska (2014), who had characterised Moniuszko as a representative of the 'Polish Biedermeier' style. The Romantic hero is hard to find in Moniuszko's oeuvre; instead, predominant therein is a search for an idyll impervious to the threats of civilisation, while society is portrayed as an affectionate family. This corresponds to the composer's own disposition: guileless, devout, and closeted against modernity, as painted by Kowalski. As a nobleman living a bourgeois life, Moniuszko seemed a perfect match for the Biedermeier ideal. And yet, Kowalski inquires as to why *The Haunted Manor* places such emphasis on Sarmatian elements and how it acquired the status of a national drama performed at major state occasions. His answer is

straightforward: despite features that one might term ‘sentimental’ or ‘domestic,’ the opera manifests the influence of Romantic Sarmatism. Although Polish nobility was initially associated with ‘obscurantism’ (a view shared by Enlightenment thinkers and early Romantics), the nineteenth century saw a rehabilitation of Sarmatism, including in the work of Polish national poets. In view of this, Kowalski proposes a compromise explanation: librettist Jan Chęciński sought to combine melodrama with a Biedermeier plot and the *kontush* style, i.e., a stylised language connoting the tales of the Polish nobility.

The opera’s reception, however, testifies to the ambiguity of its interpretation. Before allowing the work to be staged, the censors intervened in the text of this seemingly innocuous tale of the amorous adventures of two young noblemen and two young women, excising every allusion to Polish history. Further alterations were mandated after the premiere itself, yet none of this dampened the public’s enthusiasm: audiences flocked to performances, and the opera was taken off the bill after the third showing. This undoubtedly points to the possibility of a patriotic reading. Quite different reactions emerge when we trace the opera’s reception abroad, for example, in Russia. César Cui discerned no heroic elements, instead praising *The Haunted Manor* as a deft comedy framed in idyllic Biedermeier imagery (Kowalski, 2018, p. 140).

Grzegorz Zieziula identifies *The Haunted Manor* as a comedy infused with epic elements, inviting comparisons with *Pan Tadeusz*, Polish national epic, although Jan Chęciński’s immediate inspiration came from the aristocratic traditions known from the tales of Kazimierz Wójcicki. Zieziula also points to another interpretative avenue, not national but class-based:

For many sitting in the Teatr Wielki audience who were descendants of petty

nobility, the evocation of Sarmatian times served as a kind of analgesic. Thirty years earlier, following the failed November Uprising and the Tsar's introduction of a new heraldic statute, they had been deemed 'illegitimate' and stripped of their estate privileges. Thanks to the opera's neo-Sarmatian myth, they could for a moment return to the realities of a vanished world and forget the humiliation of their social demotion (Zieziula, 2020, p. 188–189).

As with *Halka*, Kowalski returns to the question of the piece's translatability beyond its local context: 'Is this quintessentially Polish opera also – or can it become – a European one, or is it doomed to remain merely parochial?' (Kowalski, 2018, p. 472).

Moniuszko as a national composer?

Agnieszka Topolska has analysed the myths surrounding *The Haunted Manor*, rooted in the perception of Moniuszko as a national composer writing to raise the people's spirits. For many years, it was commonly assumed that Moniuszko composed *The Haunted Manor* in direct response to the January Uprising of 1863, although documentary evidence shows that the process began as early as 1861 and was merely interrupted by political events (Topolska, n.d.). The killing of the 'five martyrs' during an anti-Tsarist demonstration on 27 February of that year prompted an atmosphere inconducive to visits to the theatre or opera. A spontaneous boycott evolved into a general prohibition, disseminated through an anonymous circular calling for a period of 'national mourning.' The battle over the theatre between the Tsarist administration and the Polish underground lasted three years: the former sought to maintain theatre life as a tool of education and entertainment, while the latter warned that attending performances would symbolically legitimise the regime. The situation attains even more

complexity when viewed from Moniuszko's own perspective as a patriot, albeit apparently unsympathetic to the idea of an uprising, and the father of a large family struggling with financial difficulties, which may have shaped his attitude towards armed resistance.

Topolska is also the author of a penetrating doctoral dissertation on the myth-making surrounding Moniuszko (2014). She points to the Romantic clichés embedded in his biography, highlighting the figure of the national bard: an artist who speaks for the collective and envisions the future in a time of lost independence. Considering Moniuszko's modest reputation before the Warsaw premiere of *Halka*, and the difficulties he faced in staging it at the Teatr Wielki, one wonders why he should have become a central figure in Polish musical life. Reportedly dubbed 'an amateur from remote Lithuania' by his Varsovian contemporaries (Topolska, 2020, p. 583), biographers often overlook just how unexpected Moniuszko's rise in stature was. The composer himself once characterised his music as intended for 'domestic use,' although this view would later shift, or at least became ambivalent, as he also sought recognition abroad, both in the West and in the East.

Magdalena Dziadek highlights the difficulties involved in reconstructing Moniuszko's worldview (2020, p. 53). The challenge stems not only from the fragmentary nature of his surviving correspondence, but also from the shifting expectations of the public and the various perspectives of his successive biographers. According to Dziadek, 'it is easy to discern that these interpretations vary from one era to another, always aligning with the current expectations of readers and sometimes even anticipating them, be it in the name of political correctness or simply to satisfy the public' (p. 54). For this reason, Moniuszko was able to take on many different roles over

time: a national bard, celebrant of the noble traditions of the Polish gentry, composer of folk inspiration, and defender of the oppressed.

Elements that do not fit a strictly national narrative were often downplayed or omitted in Moniuszko's biographies. One cannot gloss simply ignore the fact that, after his studies in Berlin, Moniuszko travelled to St. Petersburg, where he unsuccessfully sought a position at the imperial court; that he dedicated some of his works to Russian dignitaries: *Milda* to the heir to the throne (future Tsar Alexander II) and *Nijoła* to Grand Duke Konstantin; that he welcomed the positive reception of his operas in Russia; or that in 1856, during the Crimean War, he composed the *War Overture*. Leaving out such facts simplifies his portrait. As Magdalena Dziadek notes, Moniuszko should be viewed not only through the lens of patriotic sentiment but also through the prism of personal artistic ambition:

> Toward the end of Moniuszko's life, the instinct that had guided his 'national' orientation—first Lithuanian, later broadly Polish—seemed to weaken. The prospects of an international career, whether born of his own aspirations or inadvertently encouraged by friends and patrons, pressured him into conceiving works with more cosmopolitan overtones, intended as more palatable to non-Polish audiences (n.d.).

Moniuszko is readily referred to as a patriot, yet his own national allegiance is considered far less commonly. 'Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian, or Russian?' asks Rüdiger Ritter (2019, p. 117), pointing to the different understandings of the word *nation* (ethnic, political, historical). Born in Ubiel (now in Belarus), Moniuszko was a subject of the Russian Empire and a member of

the nobility. He regarded himself as both Polish and Lithuanian – politically rather than ethnically – and grew up in a pro-Polish milieu, with a sense of strong ties to his local homeland. These identities did not always go hand in hand, and today it is also Belarus that claims Moniuszko as its own national composer.

One can attribute Moniuszko's ambivalent stance to his position in musical circles in partitioned Poland. His works were performed within the Warsaw opera scene, which unlike the city's academic institutions remained active in the wake of the post-1830 repressions, allowing the Russian authorities to project an image of normality. Starting in 1833, the opera was administered by Russian officials as part of the Warszawskie Teatry Rządowe (Warsaw Theatre Directorate). Because it offered performances in Polish and carried considerable prestige, the opera house became an important arena for the Polish independence movement. Yet politics were not the only source of frictions. Alongside the struggle between imperial policy and national aspirations, aesthetic disputes flared between progressive and conservative camps (Ritter, 2019, p. 77). Moniuszko's situation improved in the 1850s during the post-Crimean War thaw: the Warsaw premiere of *Halka* and his appointment as conductor of Polish operas were both products of this more lenient climate. Ironically, measures intended by the authorities to defuse subversive ideas proved counterproductive, turning the theatre into a venue for patriotic fervour and outright acts of sabotage.

Given his official exposure, Moniuszko kept music and overt politics carefully apart. He worked in the idiom of 'Aesopian language,' encoding patriotic messages in subtle ways and sometimes condensing them, as is the case in *The Haunted Manor*: the chimes echoing Ogiński's late-eighteenth-century polonaises, the noble motifs reminiscent of *Pan Tadeusz*, the heroic tenor

aria mourning a lost mother (a transparent shorthand for the lost homeland), the national costumes, and the playful revival of the age-old fashion debate between tailcoat and *kontush*. Although his works are routinely labelled 'national,' Moniuszko emerges as a far more complex figure, woven from the strands of patriotic and political engagement.

Cracovians and Highlanders: between national and public theatre

Moniuszko is celebrated as the father of the Polish national opera, an art form shaped by the urge to seek and preserve the 'spirit of the nation.' Yet the impulse to harness opera for patriotic and political purposes predates him. One prime example is *Krakowiacy i Górale* (Cracovians and Highlanders, 1794) by Wojciech Bogusławski and Jan Stefani: a didactic Enlightenment *śpiewogra* (a Polish inflection of the *Singspiel*) in which music played a secondary role. What mattered first and foremost was the words and the political impact of using the Polish language. Thus, in the words of Agnieszka Topolska, Moniuszko built on these early experiments:

> Before him, Poland only knew 'proto-operas,' since pieces such as *The Supposed Miracle* [alternative title of the *Cracovians and Highlanders* – M.B.] or *Poverty Made Happy* were not operas in the strict sense. *Halka* was the first piece to put Polish opera firmly on Europe's musical map, no longer the embarrassed novice when measured against the age-old and profound traditions of Italian or French opera (Topolska, 2011).

As with *The Haunted Manor*, what we encounter in *Cracovians and*

Highlanders is the mythologisation of the premiere. Adding to the legend was Bogusławski himself, although not without the aid of theatre scholars. From the very first performances, the piece became tightly entwined with political events.

Bogusławski claimed to have written *Cracovians and Highlanders* in response to the Battle of Racławice during the Kościuszko Uprising (4 April 1794), although the premiere had actually predated the clash by a month, with the piece first stage on 1 March. Zbigniew Raszewski offered a vivid account of that first production in his book on Bogusławski (2015, p. 278 ff.), piecing it together from the scant surviving evidence: a copy of the libretto (subsequent to the Warsaw premiere), a list of stage sets, and a watercolour depicting the final scene, as Piotr Morawski points out (2017, p. 474). Raszewski's reconstruction is essentially a literary creation assembled from scattered remains, although according to Morawski, the end result was 'a reconstruction of everything but the audience.' What must have been frustrating for a historian seeking hard facts, however, proves intriguing for a cultural historian examining the affective nature of the performance, and the more elusive tension between stage and spectators. After all, why were songs from *Cracovians and Highlanders* taken up and sung in the streets of a rebellious Warsaw?

At the surface level, the plot of *Cracovians and Highlanders* seems a simple romance: Stach loves Basia, Basia reciprocates the feeling, yet she is meant to marry the Highlander, a match encouraged by her step-mother, who herself flirts with the bridegroom. The quarrel between the Cracovians and the Highlanders over the aborted wedding is resolved not through violence but by the 'supposed miracle' devised by the student Bardos (perhaps a subsequent addition to the libretto). Morawski wonders how to interpret the

piece given that, in his view, the real drama unfolded not on the stage but in the audience. He does not regard *Cracovians and Highlanders* as a self-contained work, because doing so obscures the emotional charge it gained when 'dissolved,' as it were, into the context of the Kościuszko Uprising. For example, the vaudeville song with the incipit, *Wy uczeni, co dla cnoty cierpicie niemało* (You scholars, who suffer so much for the sake of virtue) served the same function as *Ça ira* or the *Marseillaise* in France. Strikingly, by changing a single word – *wy uczeni* ('you scholars') to *wy uczciwi* ('you honest folk') – the student's complaint about the hardships of learning turned into a revolutionary anthem. Another Bardos aria, with the opening lines, *Świat srogi, świat przewrotny* (A cruel world, a treacherous world), likewise transcended the stage, as the two verses resonated with the mood of the streets.

Just how open the work was for interpretation is evident in its subsequent reception: between 1794 and 1847, Warsaw audiences saw it performed 144 times. The piece could both fire insurrectionary zeal and help mourn defeat after the uprising's collapse. Bogusławski and Stefani's opera sparked hopes for a native musical theatre, though later composers such as Józef Elsner and Karol Kurpiński never matched its impact. Critics noted the music's limitations, as the nascent Romantic aesthetics demanded that 'national character' emerge not only from text but also from the music itself. It was only Moniuszko that would fulfil that expectation, as stressed by critics who linked *Halka* to *Cracovians*, highlighting both the contiguities and the differences between the two: decoded from this perspective, Stefani's opera appeared as a tentative first step towards full musical fruition, which came more than fifty years later.

In his dramaturgical introduction to Michał Kmiecik's production at Teatr

Polski in Poznań, Piotr Morawski dubbed *Cracovians* as a work that ushered in Polish modernity, envisioning a society gathered around both the myth of concord and the spectre of revolution (p. 439). The challenge of interpretation lies in its very simplicity and deliberate ambiguity. What conflict is really at stake? Are Cracovians and Highlanders a cipher for Poles and Russians, or for rival Polish factions uniting against an external foe? For Morawski, while productions to-date have routinely emphasized the need for harmony, the opera equally opens a space of latent conflict. One must recall the revolutionary fervour sweeping Europe – and Poland – during the Kościuszko Insurrection. How emphatically, then, does *Cracovians and Highlanders* speak of national liberation (freedom), and how much of social struggle (equality and fraternity)?

Morawski views *Cracovians and Highlanders* through the lens of public rather than national theatre. Joanna Krakowska discusses the debates surrounding these two notions in the context of the 250th anniversary of the founding of Teatr Narodowy (National Theatre). She defines the former as follows:

> Thus, the public […] is not divided by class or economy, does not appropriate and does not limit access to cultural heritage, does not apply economic profitability as the main criterion of valuation and does not reduce theatre to the theatre industry and radical artistic creation to a fad of the very wealthy or niche and the shunned[4] (2015, p. 6)

According to Krakowska, the anniversary celebrations were justifiably held under the auspices of this broader, more inclusive category, one that – as

she enumerates – presupposes diversity, accessibility, freedom of expression, shared responsibility, and communal participation. She also enumerates the reasons for which the category of nationality no longer fulfils its purpose: it is too exclusionary, tied to an essentialist understanding of identity and to traditional values; what Krakowska stresses instead is the theatre's openness, discursiveness, and modernising dimension. She wrote her text in response to calls for cultivating the idea of a programmatically 'Polish' theatre involving the interpretation rather than deconstruction of the classics and unstrapped from the muzzle of political correctness.

The question remains to what extent *Cracovians and Highlanders* embodied the idea of a national theatre and to what extent a public one. Raszewski points to the opera's use of folkloric elements, although its language is a synthesis of various regionalisms created by Bogusławski, and in terms of legal and economic realities the libretto is relatively thin (2015, p. 285). Arguments can certainly be made for the work's social engagement, yet the national dimension resonated far more strongly in its public reception.

Opera as a national art?

To what extent, however, can one regard opera as a national art form in the Polish context? The genre's origins stem from the work of humanists at Italian courts of the late sixteenth century. Opera reached Poland very early, owing to the personal fascination of Władysław IV Waza, which he first developed as the heir to the Polish throne during his grand tour of 1624–1625 and subsequently nurtured as King of Poland. The question of nationality is uncertain here: determining it in an era before the modern understanding of 'nation' is somewhat problematic (Markiewicz, 2019, p. 8). Yet one can also argue for a more political conception of national

community: although the works were performed in Italian, they were commissioned by a Polish ruler, identified with the state itself, and served as a vehicle for diplomacy through art (Żukowski, 2013). It was not merely a matter of prestige but of genuine aesthetic and intellectual engagement. In the grain of Western European courts, Władysław sought to create the nucleus of a proto-academy. He personally read and evaluated libretti, tampered with texts, music, costumes, and staging, and supervised the reconstruction of the theatre hall. Opera thus formed part of a broader, theatricalized courtly life that encompassed not only art but also public spectacles, such as entrance pageants, diplomatic ceremonies, even pyrotechnic displays. Through his intermediaries, Władysław recruited musicians, commissioned composers, and searched for singers who matched his taste.[5]

The first documented opera performance in Poland took place on 27 February 1628 at the royal castle in Warsaw. That year's Carnival festivities featured the staging of *Gli amori d'Aci e Galatea*, with a libretto by Gabriello Chiabrera and music (most likely) by Santi Orlandi. Although the work had premiered in Mantua in 1617, the Warsaw production added both a prologue and an epilogue bearing allusive meanings that referred not only to current political circumstances (such as the Jagiellon–Waza lineage) but also to historical and even legendary narratives (invoking figures like Krakus and Lech), thus effectively 'Sarmatizing' the work's substance (Żukowski, 2023, p. 24).

An aesthete and devoted theatregoer, Władysław used opera to enhance both his personal stature and the prestige of the Polish court in Europe, a strategy consistent with his dynastic ambitions, including claims to foreign thrones and the idea of reviving the Jagiellon-Waza lineage. The most vibrant

period for opera under Władysław's rule fell after his coronation in 1633, in particular after the 1635 peace with Russia, inaugurating a period of roughly thirteen years that saw the staging of approximately thirty *drammi per musica* and ballets. Initially, the repertoire was imported from Italy, but from 1636 onward new works were created locally, courtesy of a triumvirate of artists: Agostino Locci as stage director, Virgilio Puccitelli as principal librettist and impresario, and Marco Scacchi as composer, supported by other musicians. Yet the chief architect of the theatrical meanings was Władysław himself. The productions favoured mythological and romantic as well as religious subjects, with occasional historical pieces tied to the king's domestic and international policies, e.g., his dynastic marriage plans (*The Abduction of Helen*, 1636), potential alliances (*The Story of Judith*, 1635; *Andromeda*, 1644), or political sympathies and antipathies (*Daphnis*, 1635; *Supplicant Africa*, 1638; *Aeneas*, 1641; *The Marriage of Amor and Psyche*, 1646). Although few musical sources survive – mostly in the form of scattered libretti – the extant evidence suggests that Władysław's theatre was not merely an imitation of Italian models but their equal. One striking case was *Saint Cecilia* (1637), staged for the royal wedding as a deliberate response to *Saint Alexius*, sponsored by the influential Barberini family in Rome. That same year marks the opening of the first permanent opera house north of the Alps. Despite the esteem Władysław's opera enjoyed across seventeenth-century Europe, the phenomenon is largely overlooked in mainstream Western histories of opera, a neglect attributable both to the loss of musical sources and to Poland's shifting position on the political map.

From its very beginnings, opera in Poland operated at the intersection of national identity and social hierarchy. On the one hand, it served as a tool of diplomacy, projecting the country's stature abroad; on the other, it became entangled in domestic power struggles between the king and the magnate

elite. In the eighteenth century, this tension only intensified. By then, the royal court no longer held a monopoly on opera, which had become an instrument of cultural rivalry, wielded in the contest for dominance between the monarch and the magnate families.

A story to be written

Debates on inclusivity and representation in opera have held a prominent place in Western scholarship since the 1980s, inspired by new musicology, which foregrounds the social context of music. Research has focused on how opera stages gender, national, and racial stereotypes, as well as on questions of access to opera in relation to social background and financial means. In Poland, by contrast, these topics remain peripheral to mainstream opera studies. Moreover, in part because music education is not considered a priority in general schooling (Paprocki, 2020), opera tends to function as a 'temple of art,' one surrounded by an aura of reverence, inaccessible, yet enjoying the highest cultural prestige.[6] Despite recurrent inspirations drawn from the so-called *Regietheater*, which emphasises the vision of the director, the conviction still prevails that contemporary interpretations desecrate sanctities rather than nurture tradition. This is less evident in the reception of *Halka*, which, thanks to the universality of the story of an innocently wronged woman, lends itself to diverse contexts, with its action transposed both to the period of the Polish People's Republic and to the present era. Conversely, the far more idiomatic *The Haunted Manor* continues to ignite controversy, e.g. the scandal surrounding Andrzej Żuławski's 1998 staging of the piece.

Żuławski, who had previously directed a film version of Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, received an invitation to stage Moniuszko's

work from Ryszard Pietkiewicz, General Director of Teatr Narodowy (National Theatre) in Warsaw, who was also in charge of Opera Narodowa (National Opera). As Żuławski recalls with characteristic bluntness, the purpose of his invitation was plain: 'That it was high time to blow the dust off this rot, and that maybe if that lunatic Żuławski showed up, he'd give this bloody termite mound a good kick up the arse and shake things up' (2008, p. 415). The director accepted the proposal, as he himself had fallen victim to the national indoctrination with Moniuszko's oeuvre:

> [And] what was the primal source of my interest in this opera? I remembered it from childhood, when we were dragged, in primary school, to those folksy, compulsory Moniuszko shows. I even saw one in Paris before my school-leaving exams, because some ghastly Polish theatre company had turned up, and I found it absolutely dreadful, since it was obvious this was second-rate culture, second-rate music, and that everything about it was somehow shabbier, duller, sort of hulking and jolly good at the same time: the old clock, the decrepit trash, the very spirit of decrepitude. And it made me curious as to why this was the case (p. 411).

Without entering into polemics with Żuławski over the misleading interpretative tropes tied to a mistaken reconstruction of the opera's genesis – allegedly composed in Paris rather than in Warsaw – one may infer that his aim was a critical reflection on the idealisation of the operatic idyll conceived by Chęciński and Moniuszko on the basis of the Soplicowo from the national poem *Pan Tadeusz*. The director set the action in 1863, at the moment when the insurgents return to the 'quiet little manor house of larch,' which in fact no longer exists, as it was burnt down. This iconoclastic

interpretation, combined with the cuts to the score introduced by the director, caused a scandal that resulted in the production being performed only fifteen times.

When considering the reception of Moniuszko's oeuvre, it becomes apparent that the national discourse prevails. One needs only to quote a passage from the resolution of the Polish parliament, grounded in this very rhetoric, which proclaimed 2019 as Moniuszko's anniversary year:

> Stanisław Moniuszko was a model patriot and, as Zdzisław Jachimecki, an early scholar of his oeuvre, wrote in 1921, 'a Pole through and through.' The composer's works – his great operas such as *Halka* and *The Haunted Manor*, which address the very essence of Polishness on both textual and visual planes – continue to inspire artists to this day. In Moniuszko's own time, they offered a palette with which Poles painted the most vivid shades of patriotic sentiment and national identity (*Resolution*, 2018).

The aforementioned research demonstrates the various attempts to marry the class discourse with the national one, and how thoroughly such efforts came to naught due to the shifting political circumstances and the conflicts brewing within the artistic milieu. Nevertheless, these moments highlight the fundamental interpretative contexts within which the history of opera in Poland has been embedded, ones that foreground its national dimension while relegating the class element to the fringes.

Without a doubt, the *Halka/Haiti* project sought to challenge this narrative, which – as is evident – proved to be an arduous task. Yet it seems to me that Jasper and Malinowska focused too heavily on the question of Polishness,

thereby overlooking the dimension of class, which might have helped to account more fully for the opera's phenomenon in all its complexity. Symptomatic, however, is the trajectory followed by both *Halka* itself and its Haitian reinterpretation: from social engagement to ossification within the national discourse, which, as I have tried to demonstrate, similarly characterises the reception of *The Haunted Manor* as well as *Cracovians and Highlanders*.

An 'archaeological' reading allows one to consider this art form from a different perspective: not so much through the lens of a teleological history centred on musical transformations, but rather through the categories of nation and class, as an institution constituted by overlapping discourses. Opera is most often perceived as a vehicle for love stories; yet, when examined more thoroughly, it emerges as a potentially important function in public discourse. In its earlier days, opera performed a variety of roles: it affirmed Poland's belonging to the foremost European powers, which is why it was so quickly imported as an artistic novelty; it was also employed as a direct instrument of political struggle in the Enlightenment politics of the eighteenth century; and it became entangled in ideological disputes after the loss of independence. To my mind, recognising the social dimension of opera is the key issue in diagnosing its contemporary role, i.e., the extent to which it can serve in the twenty-first century as a means of constructing and deconstructing identity discourses.

Among the research incipient towards a more in-depth reflection on the class dimension of operatic theatre in Poland has been the work of Sławomir Wieczorek on the Workers' Opera (Opera Robotnicza) – a short-lived and now forgotten institution run by Stanisław Drabik in Wrocław (1947–1949) and Cracow (1954–1957), in whose repertoire Moniuszko's works *The*

Raftsman (*Flis*) and *Halka* featured prominently (Wieczorek 2017; 2020). Wieczorek's studies reveal a number of attempts to combine the class discourse with the national one, and how such efforts ultimately fizzled out due to shifting political circumstances and conflicts within the artistic community. At the same time, however, Wieczorek highlights the basic interpretative frameworks within which the history of opera in Poland has been embedded, ones that underscore its national dimension while effectively sidelining the class element.

Translated by Józef Jaskulski

In 2026, the Jagiellonian University Press will release the Polish-language edition of the collective volume *A History of Polish Theatre*, originally released by Cambridge University Press in 2022 under the editorship of Katarzyna Fazan, Michał Kobiałka, and Bryce Lease. The following text—previously unpublished—was commissioned as a supplement to the English-language volume and will feature in its Polish edition.

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Author

Marcin Bogucki (mbogucki@uw.edu.pl) is a graduate of cultural studies, art history and musicology. He is currently assistant professor with the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw. His research focuses on the cultural history of music and opera directing. He is the author of *Teatr operowy Petera Sellarsa. Inscenizacje Händla i Mozarta*

z lat 80. XX wieku (The Opera Theater of Peter Sellars. Productions of Handel and Mozart from the 1980s) (2012) and *Szaleństwo w operze. Dzieje motywu w epoce nowoczesnej* (Madness in Opera: The History of a Motif in the Modern Era) (2024), as well as co-author of *Chopinowskie igrzysko. Historia Międzynarodowego Konkursu Pianistycznego im. Fryderyka Chopina 1927-2015 (*The Chopin Games: A History of the International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition, 1927–2015) (2020). Lately, he has also developed projects on queer performance and the Eurovision Song Contest. A member of the Polish Society for Theatre Studies, of which he served as secretary in 2016–2020, he is also affiliated with OGAE Poland, the Polish branch of the Organisation Générale des Amateurs de l'Eurovision. ORCID: 0000-0002-5349-1208.

Footnotes

1. One of the questions posed to participants in the project *Halka/Haiti 18°48'05'N 72°23'01'W* (Jasper, Malinowska, 2015).
2. The list of participants is available in the project catalog (Jasper, Malinowska, 2015, p. 213).
3. The pieces in question constitute part of the Polish opera canon, hence only a brief summary of their plots is provided here. Those interested may consult the summaries available, including Józef Kański's *Przewodnik operowy*, published on the Polish Theater Encyclopedia website: https://encyklopediateatru.pl/sztuki/3608/halka; https://encyklopediateatru.pl/sztuki/2309/straszny-dwor;https://encyklopediateatru.pl/sztuki/3047/krakowiacy-i-gorale-wojciech-boguslawski-jan-stefani [accessed: 24.05.2025].
4. Another among the organizers of the anniversary, Dariusz Kosiński, took a different approach in responding to the emerging polemics, opting for a conjunction rather than an alternative with respect to the terms 'public' and 'national' (b.d.).
5. For the most recent bibliography of the subject, see the latest study *Triumfalna harmonia. Teatr Władysława IV. Eseje* (2023, p. 319-333).
6. According to the National Centre for Culture's report on participation in cultural life in 2023, opera houses and concert halls were the least frequently visited cultural institutions in Poland (Głowacki, 2024), https://nck.pl/upload/2024/08/komunikat_z_badania_uczestnictwo_w_kulturze_2023422.pdf [accessed: 9.02.2025].

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