

Chachulski, Jakub

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Models of Dialogue Opera in the Polish Theater at the Turn of the 18th and 19th Centuries: Józef Elsner's Works for Wojciech Bogusławski's Stage

Jakub Chachuski / jakub.chachuski@ispan.pl

Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Science, PL

Abstract

The article accounts for the most important trends in Józef Elsner's Polish operatic output from the years 1797–1814, as considered within the conceptual framework of dialogue opera research. The existing literature frames the "dialogue opera problem" primarily as an opposition of the French and North-German aesthetics – characterized by the awareness of problematic nature of juxtaposing singing with speech – and the South-German attitude that adhered to the Italian-inspired autonomy of music. While the Polish's theater belonging to this latter circle seems evident, deviation from this basic attitude comes rather from impulses of non-operatic genres and the aesthetic of the spoken theater. The most unique phenomena arose from conservatively classicist and literary rather than musical attitude prevalent among the most influential circles of the Warsaw cultural elite.

Key words

opera, Polish opera, dialogue opera, Józef Elsner, Wojciech Bogusławski, Franciszek Wężyk

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Introduction

The last few decades have brought a significant increase in scholarly interest in the 18th and early 19th-century phenomena of dialogue opera (i.e. opera with spoken dialogues). The term basically encompasses all the non-Italian repertoires from that time (excluding the Paris *Opéra*), including some of the most vital operatic genres, to mention only the German singspiel and the French opéra-comique. This turn has the twofold advantage of defining a previously overlooked though crucial point within the operatic aesthetics of the age as well as the rejection of a well-grounded albeit unjust presumption – one that views the presence of spoken dialogues between the musical numbers as a kind of aesthetic handicap. In fact, the older outlook seems to have undergone an almost complete U-turn, as evidenced by scholarly statements that acknowledge the leading role of opera containing spoken word in overcoming the limitations of the number opera and in the development of new forms of musical dramaturgy.¹

The wide-scale investigations of Thomas Betzwieser and David Charlton,² along a handful of other, more concise publications by other authors,³ indicate the main questions to be formulated when dealing with the issue of musical dramaturgy in a dialogue opera. These are: In the minds of opera creators, was the juxtaposition of music and the spoken word a problem to be solved or a genre convention that needed no justification? Is the moment of turning from speech to music a significant element or a conventional and asemantic junction? And, if the former is true, what justifies the presence of music in the spoken drama? Was the music part of the represented reality or a means of representation? Was the time of the music the same as that of the spoken dialogue, or were they conceived on two different axes?

Betzwieser's and Charlton's research projects focus on repertoires that, to express it metaphorically, were "most aware" of the problems concerning the fusion of speech and singing – namely, the French opéra-comique and the trends in the German singspiel influenced by these French attitudes. The German scholar constructs his wide investigations around the concept of *Motivation*, that is, the justification for every given appearance of music within spoken drama, drawing in particular on the idea of diegetic music (music as the part of represented world) but also the turn from speech to song as

1 DÖHRING, Sieghart and Sabine HENZE-DÖHRING. *Oper und Musikdrama im 19. Jahrhundert*. Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 1997, pp. 66–67.

2 BETZWIESER, Thomas. *Sprechen und Singen: Ästhetik und Erscheinungsformen der Dialogoper*. Stuttgart: Metzler 2002; CHARLTON, David. *Continuing Polarties: Opera Theory and opéra-comique*. In David Charlton, *French Opera 1730–1830: Meaning and Media*. Adlershot: Ashgate, 2000; idem. *Popular Opera in Eighteenth-Century France. Music and Entertainment before the Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2022, esp. chapters 2 and 12.

3 SCHANG, Marie-Cécile. «Chez elle un beau désordre est un effet de l'art». *Éléments pour une analyse dramaturgique de la comédie mêlée d'ariettes*. *Revue de Musicologie*, 2013, vol. 99, no. 1, pp. 61–78; THOMAS, Downing A. «Je vous répondrez au troisieme couplet»: Eighteenth-Century opéra comique and the Demands of Speech. In *Operatic Migrations: Transforming Works and Crossing Boundaries*. Roberta Montemorra Marvin – Downing A. Thomas (eds.). Farnham: Ashgate, 2006, pp. 21–39; ALTENBURG, Detlef, Beate Agnes Schmidt et al. *Musik und Theater um 1800: Konzeptionen – Aufführungspraxis – Rezeption*. Sinzig: Studiopunkt 2012, part 5: "Sprechen und Singen".

justified by expressive reasons.⁴ Charlton follows the development of the opéra-comique as the history of a process of refining musical dramaturgy resulting from the awareness of the problematic nature of combining spoken theater with music, which reaches his peak in Grétry's *art dramatico musical*.⁵

The opposite of these approaches can be found, as Betzwieser claims, in “the southern hemisphere” of the German-speaking area’s operatic culture – Vienna in particular – where the singspiel artistic practice functioned without any care for such “motivation”, due, as the author suggests, to the influence of Italian opera as a model of theatrical “autonomy of music”.⁶ In the absence of more ambitious critical theory or theoretical thought that would have any substantial impact on original productions,⁷ the flourishing practice of German dialogue adaptations of Italian operas⁸ probably had the value of chief inspiration. In search of the best formula to grasp this Viennese singspiel approach, one may think of a precept: Do not demand from an original dialogue opera any more deliberateness in mixing speech with singing than you would from a dialogue adaptation of an Italian work. Consequently, one may expect to find in Viennese singspiels those well researched conventions (regularly criticized as “undramatic”) that ruled the macrostructure of Italian operas,⁹ at work as the equivalent of Betzwieser’s “motivation”. And this turns out to be quite true, as exemplified by the advice for singspiel writing formulated in 1792 by Gottlieb Stephanie, who in most of his points repeats Italian operatic rules for the disposition and placement of arias and ensembles.¹⁰ The problems of dialogue opera as a combination of speech and singing, and those of Italian number opera as a combination of recitatives and closed musical pieces, turn out not to be entirely different.¹¹

The development of the Polish-language operatic scene from its beginnings in the late 1780s to the second decade of the following century, linked mostly with the name of Wojciech Bogusławski,¹² was prolific enough to justify research interest concerning its

4 BETZWIESER, op. cit.; esp. pp. 19–30.

5 CHARLTON, *Popular Opera*, op. cit., chapter 12.

6 BETZWIESER, op. cit., p. 22, pp. 238–239.

7 HENZE-DOHRING, Sabine. Gattungskonvergenz – Gattungsumbrüche. Zur Situation der deutschsprachigen Oper um 1800. In *Oper im Aufbruch : Gattungskonzepte des deutschsprachigen Musiktheaters um 1800*. Marcus Christian Lippe (ed.). Kassel: Bosse, 2007, p. 46.

8 BETZWIESER, op. cit., p. 4.

9 Cf. for ex. DI BENEDETTO, Renato. Poetics and Polemics. In *Opera in Theory and Practice, Image and Myth*. Lorenzo Bianconi – Giorgio Pestelli (eds.). Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 2003, pp. 23–24.

10 See Gottlieb Stephanie’s advice for librettists, cited by Jurgen Kramer as the “positive *Gattungspoetik*” of the singspiel genre, while Sabine Henze-Dohring identifies them as the dramaturgic rules of opera buffa. KRÄMER, Jörg. *Deutschsprachiges Musiktheater im späten 18. Jahrhundert: Typologie, Dramaturgie und Anthropologie einer populären Gattung*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012, p. 49; HENZE-DOHRING, op. cit., p. 49.

11 Cf. BETZWISER, op. cit., p. 77. Stefano Artaega wrote on the conjunction of recitativo and aria in a manner that may well be applied to the dialogue opera problem: “*Che si direbbe d’un cotale, che, camminando lentamente per via, si metesse ad un tratto a spiccar salti e cavinolone?*” ARTAEGA, Stefano. *Le rivoluzioni del teatro musicale italiano dalla sua origine fino al presente*. Bologna: Trenti, 1785, p. 58

12 NOWAK-ROMANOWICZ, Alina. *The Classical Era: 1750–1830 (History of Music in Poland, vol. 4)*. Transl. John Comber. Warsaw: Sutkowski Edition, 2004, Chapter 2: “Opera”; PARKITNA, Anna. *Opera in Warsaw*,

position in the European dialogue opera scene outlined above. The present article focuses on the works of Józef Elsner, Bogusławski's music chief collaborator from the year 1796 onwards¹³. His output – the largest Polish-language operatic repertoire from the period – clearly testifies to the Polish theatrical culture's participation in the Viennese paradigm of dialogue opera. All the more interesting are its peculiarities, resulting mostly not from the impulses of the northern (French) approach, but rather from non-operatic theater practices as well as other trends present in the Polish Enlightenment culture.

The composer-based definition of the scope of repertoire studied in this paper does not imply any presuppositions as to the authorship of the discussed approaches or solutions, as most of them were determined by the libretti, and we know next to nothing about the details of creative collaborations between Elsner and Polish playwrights. The insights from my research thus apply collectively to the Warsaw operatic circle at the turn of the 18th century, as the field in which specifically native and local cultural impulses intermingled with inspirations derived from the assimilation of foreign European repertoires.

In the Viennese orbit: the beginnings of Polish opera and Elsner's first works

In its beginnings, the Polish dialogue opera situated itself relatively closer to Betzwieser's "southern hemisphere". The first decade of the Polish-language music stage was strongly dominated by Italian buffa repertoire in dialogue-form adaptations,¹⁴ while less intensive assimilation of French repertoire was the definite runner-up.¹⁵ Original local output consisted of unassuming, mostly peasant-themed works, whose musical scope can be compared to musically modest singspiels or *comédies mêlée d'ariettes*¹⁶. Though nothing can be found in their overall approach that would testify to the librettists' systematic adherence to French aesthetics, occasionally one comes across numbers that betray traces of a distinctly French stance on the dramatic anchoring of musical numbers.¹⁷ *Cud, czyli*

1765–1830: Operatic Migration, Adaptation, and Reception in the Enlightenment. PhD diss., Stony Brook University, 2020, Chapter 6: "Building National Opera Traditions". On the figure of Wojciech Bogusławski and the history of his theatre, one still relevant study is: RASZEWSKI, Zbigniew. *Bogusławski*. 2nd edition, Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1982.

13 The end of Bogusławski's directorship in 1814 coincided with a suspension of Elsner's operatic creativity, later he only composed three operas between 1818 and 1820. See also fn. 24.

14 RASZEWSKI, op. cit., pp. 80–120; PARKITNA, op. cit., pp. 149–169

15 PARKITNA, op. cit., p. 155

16 For more about original Polish operas from 1788–1793 see: NOWAK-ROMANOWICZ, Alina. *The Classical Era*, op. cit., Chapter 2; PARKITNA, op. cit., Chapter 6.

17 The sentimental diegetic soliloquy-song used in the opening of *Prostota cnotliwa*, and the dramatically inventive aria "Wraz, Stasięku" in the popular *Zoska* (Act I, sc. 1.) are two good examples. They are extremely short and sung by the title character offstage during their agitated downstairs run. For printed librettos, see "Bibliography". Both operas were set to music by Maciej Kamieński. Musical sources are lost, but some information about the music structure to be found in: LATOSZEWSKI, Zygmunt. *Pierwsze opery polskie Macieja Kamieńskiego*. Ph diss., Poznań, 1932, manuscript: PL-Wtm.

Krakowiacy i Górale (*The Miracle, or the Cracovians and Highlanders*, Warsaw, 1794), based to an unprecedented extent on Polish national rhythms and melodies that are mostly employed in the diegetic (vocal as well as dance) numbers, can perhaps be viewed as a unique response to the question of 18th-century dialogue opera,¹⁸ though it is disputable whether it was informed by foreign models and debates.

1794, the year of the fall of the Kościuszko Insurrection and the third Partition of Poland, brought a decisive new start. Most of the Warsaw troupe, along with their leader Wojciech Bogusławski,¹⁹ began its Lviv episode, which would result in the company's new fascination: that with the Viennese singspiel of the Schikanederian type. This genre, along with Italian "mixed" works such as Salieri's *Axur*²⁰ and *Palmira*, would dominate the Warsaw opera stage after Bogusławski's return in 1799. In Lviv Bogusławski also acquires a musical collaborator from the South German area in the person of a young Silesian, Joseph (later Józef) Elsner,²¹ from 1792 the musical director of the Austrian theater in Lviv, whose repertoire was closely linked to that of Vienna's both suburban theaters.²² Having joined the Polish company, Elsner became the composer of several heroic-comical operas that were the first Polish works to attain the musical scope of the *grosse* Viennese singspiel of the *Die Zauberflöte* type. These were: *Amazonki, albo Herminia* (The Amazons, or Herminia, Lviv 1797, to a libretto by Bogusławski), *Sultan Wampum* (Warsaw 1800, libretto by Bogusławski after August von Kotzebue's *Sultan Wampum*), *Wieszczka Urzella* (Warsaw 1806, libretto by Jan Baudouin after Charles-Simon Favart's *La fée Urgèle*, rewritten by Bogusławski) and *Leszek Biały, albo Czarownica z Łysej Góry* (Leszek the White, or the Witch from Łysa Góra, Warsaw 1809, libretto by Ludwik Adam Dmuszewski).²³ Despite some differences, all of them represent the Viennese approach

18 CHACHULSKI, Jakub. Genologia i Polityka: Swoistość „Cudu, czyli Krakowiaków i Górali” w horyzoncie gatunków operowych końca XVIII stulecia. *Muzyka*, 2021, vol. 66, no. 3, pp. 122–127. <https://doi.org/10.36744/m.976>

19 Apart from RASZEWSKI, op. cit., see also: GOT, Jerzy. *Na wyspie Guaxary: Wojciech Bogusławski i Teatr Lwowski 1789–1799*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1971; SZWANKOWSKI, Jerzy. *Teatr warszawski Wojciecha Bogusławskiego 1799–1814*. Warszawa-Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1956.

20 *Axur* was first staged in Polish in 1793; hence it can be viewed as a forerunner of the later vogue for the Viennese heroic-comical opera (if this term is applied jointly to Italian operas and Schikanederian singspiels of *Die Zauberflöte* kind). The Polish adaptation of Salieri's opera, however, was sung throughout, remaining the only exception to the formula of the dialogue-opera in Bogusławski's theater before 1807 (see fn. 42).

21 Elsner's previous stages of life encompass his education in his home area in Breslau (a Dominican school and Jesuit gymnasium), a more than a year-long stay in Vienna (1789–1791), and a year of work as first violinist in Brno theater (1791–1792). The composer had already had a major encounter with operatic aesthetics of the French type before meeting Bogusławski: Heinrich Gottfried Bretschneider's (1739–1810) libretto for *Der verkleidete Sultan*, set by Elsner in 1795, consist (apart from buffo-type ensembles) of an assemblage of diegetic numbers representing types idiomatic for the opera-comique.

22 For the repertoire of the Lviv theater in that period, see: GOT, Jerzy. *Na wyspie Guaxary: Wojciech Bogusławski i teatr we Lwowie 1765–1799*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1971. pp. 353–403. See also: GOT, Jerzy. *Das österreichische Theater in Lemberg im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert: Aus dem Theaterleben der Vielvölkermonarchie*. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997, vol. 1, pp. 16–201.

23 For basic information on the entirety of Elsner's operatic output, along with sources and a full list of music incipits, see: CHACHULSKI, Jakub. *Józef Elsner. Katalog tematyczny utworów / A Thematic Catalogue of the Works, część / part II: Utwory świeckie / Secular Music*. Warszawa: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk,

to the dialogue opera. The first of them keeps close to the purely Italian-influenced model, whereas the next two bear striking resemblance to the Viennese singspiel practice of adapting French and North German libretti. The medley-like macrostructure of the last opera, *Leszek Biały*,²⁴ still shows clear affinities to Viennese suburban music plays.

Elements of French-type thinking can nevertheless be found in some of Elsner's minor works created after 1805, when the import of Parisian opera repertoire to Warsaw was on the increase again.²⁵ During his stay in Paris (1805) the composer set to music Étienne Aignan's one-act libretto of *Chimère et réalité*, later staged in Warsaw in Polish translation. Some details of the score clearly depart from the Italian-derived opera aesthetics by breaking up the cohesion of musical numbers for the sake of creating semantic links or mediation between the spoken word and the music.²⁶ The fact that Elsner never returned to this approach clearly testifies to the Warsaw circles' unfamiliarity with this aesthetic, as well as to the composer's personal attachment to the southern concept of the autonomy of music – an idea that he articulated himself with utmost clarity when writing about Italian opera, in which, he claims, “every main section [= number] constitutes a separate entirety by itself”.²⁷

French influence can also be traced in the short intermezzo *Echo w lesie* (Echo in the Forest, Warsaw, 1808, libretto by Wojciech Pękalski), which ingeniously employs various models of diegetic music in all the four solo numbers.²⁸ This case can also be read as, in a way, negative evidence: by testifying to the Warsaw awareness of this aesthetic and at least some playwrights' ability to imitate it, it demonstrates that there was no demand for such an approach, especially in larger-scale and more ambitious operas.

Contesting the Viennese model: The aesthetic of spoken theatre

The Viennese circles' indifference to the “dialogue opera problem” can be interpreted as resulting from the well-established idea of the opera as a principally musical genre; not spoken drama incrustated with musical insertions, whose heterogeneity would demand some justification, but, conversely, a fundamentally musical spectacle, which for reasons of inevitable practical necessity has to include scraps of spoken dialogue here

2019), pp. 44–49, 61–195. Perfunctory introduction of these works can be found in NOWAK-ROMANOWICZ, Alina. *Józef Elsner*, op. cit., p. 59–68, 106–120.

24 It is perhaps worth noting that a Warsaw critic categorized *Leszek* as a “melodrama” on the basis of its heterogeneous macrostructure, at the same time naming *Die Zauberflöte* as an example of this genre. *Gazeta Warszawska*, [Warsaw Gazette] no. 98, 9. 12. 1809, p. 1817

25 CHACHULSKI, Jakub. *Chimère et réalité* (1805): Józef Elsner i jego paryska opéra-comique. In *Długi wiek XIX w muzyce: Pytania – Problemy – Interpretacje*, vol II. Ewa Bogula – Małgorzata Sulek et al. (eds.). Warszawa: NIFC 2022, pp. 147–152.

26 CHACHULSKI, op. cit., pp. 143–197.

27 “(...) gdzie nareszcie każda z główniejszych części opery składa sama przez się oddzielną całość”. *Gazeta Warszawska* [Warsaw Gazette], 1812, no. 85, October 31, p. 1644.

28 CHACHULSKI, Jakub. Valentino Fioravanti i duet z opery „Echo w Lesie” Wojciecha Pękalskiego i Józefa Elsnera. *Muzyka*, vol. 67, no. 1, pp. 162–163.

and there, just as the Italian opera cannot do without its *recitativi*. Though the Warsaw artists did not show any inclination toward transcending this aesthetic for French-type reasons, their adherence to the Viennese model as defined above was sometimes incomplete when the spoken theatre element became emancipated, which turned the spoken word into an independent and primary component of a play's appeal.

The first example is *Sultan Wampum*, based on August von Kotzebue's oriental *Lustspiel mit Gesänge* that was absurdly consistent in its approach to the problem of the dialogue opera.²⁹ All of Kotzebue's numbers are intended as diegetic: some as (fictively) pre-existent songs, other as a result of the eponymous Sultan's ridiculous order which forces all his servants and petitioners to express themselves in song. Moreover, an exclusively (likewise diegetic) sung role distinguishes Genius as a supernatural character. Conversely, vocal inaptness seems to be a reflection of the Sultan's rudeness, cruelty and stupidity. Bogusławski and Elsner showed little understanding for this intricate construction, though. By adding Italian-type arias and large finales, the Polish adaptation was moulded in a way much akin to Viennese singspiels.³⁰ The concept of the Sultan's role as (significantly) *unsung* was, however, not only retained but also ingeniously elaborated upon when near the end of the play the oriental monarch expresses his sympathy towards the young couple he previously persecuted, and this moral improvement is articulated with Wampum surprisingly starting to sing, which the same time breaks the theatrical illusion in a vaudeville-like breach of the fourth wall:

Że tak śpiewacie pięknie,
Aż serce we mnie mięknie,
Więc was śpiewaniem łączę,
Śpiewając wszystko kończę.

Because you sing so beautifully,
So that my heart has been softened,
Now I am uniting you with song,
And by singing, I put an end to the whole.

Despite this, the eponymous role remains almost entirely spoken, and as such it presented the chief attraction of the Warsaw production, shaped by the outstanding *vis comica* of Alojzy Żółkowski – the leading comic actor and one of the favorites of the Warsaw audience,³¹ for whom the role of Wampum was the first one to establish his enormous popularity. The Warsaw theatregoers' appreciation of Żółkowski as the grotesque Sultan was confirmed by including the oriental monarch in a theatrical quodlibet spectacle written by Dmuszewski in 1801,³² among a handful of the most successful roles of the

29 BETZWIESER, op. cit., p. 211.

30 See detailed account in: CHACHULSKI, Jakub. „Zły smak i gminna przesada”. Kilka uwag o muzyczno-dramatycznej konstrukcji opery *Sultan Wampum* Józefa Elsnera na tle oryginalnego libretta Augusta von Kotzebue. *Muzyka*, vol. 64, no. 4, pp. 3–39.

31 SZWANKOWSKI, Eugeniusz. *Alojzy Żółkowski ojciec*, Warszawa: PIW, 1956.

32 DMUSZEWSKI, Ludwik Adam. *Aktorowie na Elizejskich Polach: dzieło teatralne oryginalnie wierszem napisane*, Warszawa: Le Brun, 1802. The play introduced onto the stage the most popular characters from the previous year's repertoire of the Warsaw theater. Cf. CHACHULSKI, Jakub. *Zły smak i gminna przesada*, op. cit, pp. 3–4. (About a similar case from 1807. see fn. 5 there).

season. Also later, some of the shorter press accounts of the stagings of this opera only mentioned Żółkowski's acting.³³

In *Leszek Biały* we find an even more interesting case.³⁴ The last of Elsner's operas listed above was a bold combination of a plot from a fairy-historic novel about a Polish prince from the twelfth century³⁵ and the dramaturgical framework of the extremely popular Viennese singspiel *Die Donauweibchen*, though the latter's preference for diegetic Lied-type (which made it one of important titles in Betzwieser's research on the dialogue opera³⁶) was substituted in Warsaw by a much freer disposition, resembling that of the older Viennese singspiels.

However, the concept of imposing the plot structure of *Die Donauweibchen* onto a tale about Polish prince must have met with some resistance at least at one point. In Karl Friedrich Hensler's play, the Danube nymph Hulda is both a seductress and a sorceress, whereas in Krajewski's novel *Irena*, the grand duchess of Kiev who strives to win Leszek's love, must rely on the magic aid of the witch Paraska. Elsner and Dmuszewski's solution to this problem was, in a way, an ingenious one. All the original attributes that made Hulda the main musical and stage-theatrical attraction of the Viennese play, such as an extreme coloratura soprano part and eleven appearances in different magic disguises, were given to Paraska, *Irena's* role, however, was saved from any comparison by being transferred to a distinctly separate aesthetic realm: It was conceived as entirely spoken and given to Józefa Ledóchowska, a leading dramatic actress who had never participated in operatic spectacles and was soon to become the most renowned Polish tragic artists, praised for her Shakespearean roles.³⁷ Press reviews mentioned "*the serious role of Irena*" as one of chief merits of the Warsaw spectacles³⁸. Since it was not only one of the central, but also most emotionally charged roles, it seems justified to see its spoken form as a token of genre hybridity in Dmuszewski and Elsner's play, as well as its distancing itself from the best grounded concept of the function of music in opera – that of expressing feelings.

33 *Gazeta Warszawska* [Warsaw Gazette], no. 57, 17. 07. 1804, p. 1001.

34 We only know this work from incomplete and secondary sources (see "Bibliography"), but the observations presented here are hardly questionable.

35 KRAJEWSKI, Michał Dymitr. *Leszek Biały Xiążę Polski, Syn Kazimierza Sprawiedliwego*. 2nd ed., Warszawa: Groblowa, 1806.

36 BETZWIESER, op. cit., pp. 239–247.

37 LIPIŃSKI, Jacek. *Józefa Ledóchowska*, Warszawa: PIW, 1963, pp. 48–61.

38 "(...) *poważna rola Ireny*". *Gazeta Korrespondenta Warszawskiego y Zagranicznego* [Warsaw and Foreign Correspondent Newspaper], no. 98, 9. 12. 1809, p. 1529; compare similar epithets in *Gazeta Warszawska* [Warsaw Gazette], no. 98, 9. 12. 1809, p. 1818.

Polish Enlightenment Classicism and the dialogue opera in verse: *Kabalista* (1813)

The most peculiar aspect of the early development of Polish dialogue opera concerns not so much the relation between speech and singing as specifically the problem of the aesthetic status of the former, mirrored in the choice between prose and verse. In the French *comédie mêlée d'ariettes* around the middle of the eighteenth-century dialogues in verse, inherited from the spoken high comedy, were the default option, and the later shift toward prose was not a sign of declining literary ambitions but an influence of the realistic attitudes of sentimental and bourgeoisie drama.³⁹ The Polish-language Warsaw opera that originated in the late 1780s, both original and adapted, accepted prose dialogues as the only option available to a national theatre that had not yet built its own tradition of stage verse declamation. Still, when Warsaw's classically inclined literary circles overcame this limitation,⁴⁰ the libretto-writing practice assimilated dialogues in verse as a mark of literary ambition in such significant libretti as *Żółta Szlafmyca* [*The Yellow Nightcap*] by Franciszek Zabłocki (1781) or *Cud, czyli Krakowiacy i Górale* (already mentioned above) by Wojciech Bogusławski (1794)⁴¹. The Polish dialogue opera thus followed the *opéra-comique's* course of development, but in the opposite direction, and demonstrated literary ambitions unknown to the Viennese singspiel (which stuck to prose dialogues exclusively).

The dominations of the Viennese repertoire in the first decade of Elsner's career as a Polish opera composer made the choice of verse dialogues virtually out of the question in the Polish practices of opera production or adaptation. Toward the end of the first decade of the 19th century, however, the postulate of using poetic language as a token of the opera's elevated status in the hierarchy of genres returned. When the first three Polish adaptations of Italian *opere serie* appeared on the Warsaw stage, the second and third of them took the sung-through form⁴², but the first one – Ferdinando Paer's *Achille* (1808) –

39 CHARLTON, op. cit., p. 316–318; cf. also CASTELVECCHI, Stefano, *Sentimental Opera: Questions of Genre in the Age of Bourgeois Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013, p. 44–47. On the German practice, where the use of spoken dialogue was generally tantamount to the choice of prose, see: BETZWIESER, op. cit., p. 269; BAUMAN, Thomas, *North German Opera in the Age of Goethe*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985, pp. 88, 275, 292, 314.

40 RATAJCZAKOWA, Dobrochna. Projekt scenicznego ukształtowania słowa w komedii czasów stanisławowskich. In *Kultura żywego słowa w dawnej Polsce*. Hanna Dziechcińska (ed.). Warszawa: PWN 1989, pp. 218–243; RASZEWSKI, Zbigniew. [Discussion statement]. In *Teatr Narodowy w dobie oświecenia*. Ewa Heise – Karyna Wierzbicka-Michalska (eds.). Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1967, pp. 35–36

41 On these two works, see resp.: KLIMOWICZ, Mieczysław, “Wstęp.” In Wojciech Bogusławski, *Cud albo Krakowiacy i Górale*. M. Klimowicz (ed.). Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków: Ossolineum, 2005; idem. Libretto „Żółtej szlafmycy” na tle rozwoju opery komicznej w Polsce XVIII wieku. In *Dramaty Franciszka Zabłockiego: interpretacje*. M. Cieński – T. Kostkiewiczowa (eds.). Wrocław: Ossolineum, 2000.

42 Giovanni Simone Mayr's *Ginevra di Scozia*, (1809), and Domenico Cimarosa's *Gli Orazi e i Curati* (1812). Cf. SZWANKOWSKI, *Teatr warszawski*, op. cit., pp. 267, 245. A year before, the Warsaw theater celebrated the arrival of Napoleon Bonaparte by staging Elsner's *Andromeda*, the only sing-through opera by that composer (now lost) and the second one staged in the Polish theater after *Axur*, which ran continuously from its premiere in 1793 till 1814 and later. The four operas listed in this footnote remain the only exception to the rule of the dialogue-opera paradigm on the Warsaw Polish-language stage in the whole period under study.

was staged with verse dialogues replacing *recitativi*.⁴³ Poetic transfiguration of the speech was thus employed as an equivalent of its musical setting required by the elevated style, in the way known from Luigi Cherubini's *Medea* or Étienne Mehul's *Stratonice*⁴⁴. In those latter works, however, verse was employed as a substitute for *recitativi*, forbidden by the Paris law that gave the Opéra an exclusive license to stage sing-through operas. In Warsaw, this problem did not exist. We may thus assume that verse can sometimes, or by some artists and circles, be preferred even to *recitativi*.

In fact, the main axis of the aesthetic debate which then took place around the Warsaw theatre ran between the popular stance of Bogusławski's circle and the higher aesthetic ambitions of Warsaw's literary elite, eager to dictate the aesthetic rules for the stage but much more interested in the literary value of staged works or conservatively Classicist phenomena such as theatrical verse declamation than in developing any genuinely operatic aesthetics. In the years 1815–1819 this latter group expressed itself collectively as an influential anonymous theatre critic, signing their reviews with the letter X.⁴⁵ The rising influence of the Classicist circle was to bring its most evident operatic fruits in the 1810s, when successive works staged in Warsaw combined a more serious attitude (often a patriotic intention) with dialogue verse (usually the Polish equivalent of the alexandrine, characteristic of French Classicist tragedy).⁴⁶ In the decade that led the German opera to *Freischütz* and *Euryanthe*, the more highbrow variety of the Polish musical stage sought to refine the genre in purely literary terms, at the same time working within the eighteenth-century paradigm of number opera in dialogue form.

Though Elsner's literary competence and taste is hard to assess for lack of reliable evidence, and he entered the Polish theater as Bogusławski's close collaborator, there are reasons to suspect him of sympathizing with Warsaw's Classicist circles, at least for reasons of social prestige. In 1805 he became an honorary fellow of the Warsaw Society of the Friends of Sciences (the chief organization of Warsaw's literary elite)⁴⁷, and in 1805–1806 he twice chose to set entirely verse-based libretti without any apparent

43 Ferdinando Paer's *Achille* (Warsaw premiere 1808), Cf. SZWANKOWSKI, *Teatr warszawski*, op. cit., p. 263.

44 BETZWIESER, op. cit., pp. 256–269

45 There is extensive Polish-language literature on the subject. For a general discussion of several aspects of the Warsaw Classicism at that time, see ŻBIKOWSKI, Piotr. *Klasyzm postaniławowski. Doktryna estetycznoliteracka*. Warszawa: PWN, 1984; BAJER, Michał. *Klasyzm, przekład, prestiż: Oświeceniowe spolszczenia tragedii Corneille'a i Racine'a (1740–1830) w perspektywie historycznoliterackiej*. Warszawa: IBL PAN, 2020; FABIANOWSKI, Andrzej. *Towarzystwo Iksów*, Warszawa: NIFC, 2019. On that circle's admiration for the practice of classical alexandrine declamation, see PRZYBYLSKI, Ryszard. *Klasyzm czyli prawdziwy koniec Królestwa Polskiego*. Warszawa: PIW, 1983, pp. 74–80.

46 In the first decade of the century, stage works that combined vocal music (then almost exclusively choral) with lofty verse declamation appeared only as occasional pieces composed for public celebrations, and thus remained outside the day-to-day practice of the theater. They were pieces such as Elsner's *Karol Wielki i Witykind* (1807) and *Rzym oswobodzony, czyli powrót wojowników* (1809). In the 1810s, verse dialogues are found in almost all original operatic productions: *Jadwiga* (Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz / Karol Kurpiński, 1814), *Król Łokietek, czyli Wiśliczanki* (Dmuszewski / Elsner, 1818), *Jagiello w Tenczynie* (Aleksander Chodkiewicz / Elsner, 1820), *Nadgroda* (Dmuszewski / Kurpiński, 1815), and *Aleksander i Apelles* (Dmuszewski / Kurpiński, 1815).

47 NOWAK-ROMANOWICZ, Alina. *Józef Elsner*, op. cit., p. 100.

reason and rather contrary to common practice.⁴⁸ Later, near the end of the 1810s, he would compose two national operas with verse dialogues, musically based on the Polish national folk style⁴⁹. But the most striking fruit of the composer's hypothetical involvement with the Warsaw Classicists' stance was his comic opera *Kabalista* (Cabalist) of 1813. Rather than from the circle of popular playwrights most closely associated with the Warsaw stage, such as all of Elsner's previous collaborators – Ludwik Adam Dmuszewski, Wojciech Pękalski, Wojciech Bogusławski – its libretto came from Franciszek Wężyk (1785–1862), a young and successful poet who was close to the Classicist circles. He already had some stage successes to his name, with two tragedies in verse based on themes from the history of Poland (*Barbara Radziwiłłówna*, *Gliński*). *Kabalista*, however, is a comic opera, and one quite untypical of the Warsaw stage practice of the time. Not only does it feature verse dialogues, but also in many other respects it harks back to late eighteenth-century models, one of which – the above-mentioned *Żółta Szlafmyca* – was apparently emulated here.⁵⁰

Kabalista is based on the well-established eighteenth-century comedy topic of false magic. Czesław, a wealthy nobleman, returns from his travels in the disguise of a cabalist renowned for his prophetic insight. In this manner, he intends to teach a lesson to his superstitious wife and expose her four false friends (Doctor, Lawyer, Poet and the young skirt chaser and playboy Walery) as cheats. The plot type and the dramaturgy of ensembles bring the libretto close to the classic buffa models. Elsner responded to it with music strongly resembling the late eighteenth century Italian comic style. Wężyk's attitude towards libretto structure betrays, however, apart from his literary inclinations, also notable innocence of (or at least indifference to) the Italian number opera dramaturgy – all the more astonishing since this paradigm, though in form of the dialogue opera, was perhaps the best founded model pursued on the Warsaw stage. The vast majority of musical numbers belongs to the category of action (dialogue) ensemble, with solo singing limited to just one number per person (see the structure of the opera in Table 1, at the end of the text). Moreover, only two of the latter are genuine arias. Apart from these we have one strophic song and four short solos integrated into the first act finale. Conversely, the monologue mode astonishingly dominates the spoken parts, more than a half of which⁵¹ are long (23 to 38 verses) statements by Czesław and his servant Jędrzej. Given that the spoken part is written in the Polish equivalent of alexandrine verse, the

48 *Chimere et realite* and *Wieszczka Urzella*. The verse form of Aignan's libretto was a highly unusual element also in the Parisian context (CHACHULSKI, *Chimere et realite*, op. cit., p. 158). We do not know whether the Polish translation preserved this feature. *Wieszczka Urzella* was a translation of Charles-Simon Favart *La Fee Urgèle*. It was the first and only opera adaptation known to us translated entirely in verse for the Warsaw theatre before the 1800. The translation by Jan Baudouin was published in 1782.

49 *Król Lokietek, czyli Wisliczanki* (1818, libr. L. A. Dmuszewski), *Jagiello w Tenczynie* (1820, libr. Aleksander Chodkiewicz).

50 RATAJCZAKOWA, Dobrochna. Franciszek Wężyk. In *Pisarze polskiego oświecenia*, vol 3. T. Kostkiewiczowa – Z. Goliński (eds.). Warszawa: PWN, 1996, p. 314.

51 189 from a total of 358. To this trend we should add also the last scene, which is in fact Czesław's long monologue interrupted only sporadically by short questions from other persons (68 lines out of a total of 76 belong to Czesław).

stage delivery of which was for the Classicist theater (and for the Warsaw Classicist circles, too) an autonomous aesthetic value comparable to singing⁵², the differentiation between song and speech no longer corresponds to the opposition between artistically transformed and realistic representations of speech. Well-composed and long-winded tirades become a kind of poetic “numbers” in a sense analogous to musical ones; most of them could easily be turned into well-known aria types – Jędrzej’s exposition of intolerable curiosity about his master’s plans, two “cabalist” monologues presenting the powers of the cabala, and Czesław lofty appeal to Walery’s patriotic sentiments near the end of the opera.

Considering Weżyk’s frequent use of ensemble writing for musical articulation of dialogues and action, in a true *buffa* style, the final resolution of the play comes as a surprise. The *stretta*-like octet (10) representing the growing agitation of all the *dramatis personae* gathered together ends before the beginning of the long last scene that brings the fake Cabalist’s self-disclosure and the exposure of the four villains. Events typical of *buffa* finales, such as unmasking, recognition, general astonishment, thus occur later in spoken dialogue strongly dominated by Czesław voluble speech. His subsequent judgement of the four cheats, articulated in regular verse stanzas, is also derived from the comedy convention that usually took a musical form when transferred to the opera.

These decisions reflect the librettist’s attitude to music as a dramatic tool and consequently – his distance from the traditional operatic aesthetic. Music is seen here as an appropriate means of propelling comic action or creating the suggestive atmosphere of fake cabala, but not for those elements that are crucial to the moral message of the play: the exposure of vice, ethical self-knowledge, forgiveness, moral instruction. These apparently called for a loftier medium, and that, in the eyes of Weżyk the Classicist, was the art of lofty verse declamation, treated as a high-art tool and a counterpart to the music. If this approach can be called “anti-musical”, it contrasts all the more strangely with Weżyk’s evident predilection for containing long strands of action in multi-sectional musical structures (segments (2)–(4), (5), (6), (7), (10) in Table 1), which makes the impression of progressively-motivated innovation, transcending the limitations of the traditional number opera.

Conclusion

The perspective of dialogue opera research enables us to trace back the various agents and aspects of the Polish opera development between the Classicism and Romanticism with much more precision than that allowed by more traditional approaches, focusing on musical style and form as well as thematic or topical (both literary and musical) issues. The refined heritage of the pre-revolutionary *opéra-comique*, though in many ways influencing the Polish pre-Partitions stage, had no substantial impact on the Polish operatic output from the time of Elsner, when the Viennese model of the heroic-co-

52 JORY, D. H. Tragic Declamation in Eighteenth-Century Paris. *The Modern Language Review*, 1989, vol. 84, no. 1, pp. 37–50. On its cultivation in the Polish Classicist circles see fn. 45.

mical opera became the dominant paradigm. Also the second wave of French operatic imports, beginning in 1805, seems to have had no decisive influence on the more ambitious productions of the Warsaw opera. On the other hand, the Viennese paradigm as an overall, well-defined model of opera spectacle received destabilizing impulses from the non-operatic genres and trends present within the Warsaw theater. This process, already observable in the above-discussed cases of the emancipation of spoken theater (*Sultan Wampum* and *Leszek Biały*), becomes the most evident in the Warsaw Classicists' projects of elevating the Polish opera's status, aimed at enhancing the literary qualities and privileging the art of stage verse declamation (*Kabalista*). The openness to non-operatic influences seems to testify to the Polish opera having relatively little generic independence within theatrical life as such, but it also highlights the lack of influential circles that would be competent in specifically musical or operatic aesthetics and at the same time capable of shaping the Warsaw musical scene beyond the level of a mere response to the demands of the wide and mostly unrefined audience.

Table 1. *Kabalista*: Structure of the opera

Persons:

Czesław (Cz.) a wealthy nobleman in the guise of a cabalist, tenor	Poet (P.) one of Wife's false friends (bass)
Jędrzej (J.) his servant, in the guise of a cabalist's assistant, bass	Doctor (D.) one of Wife's false friends (tenor)
Wife (W.) Czesław's wife, soprano	Walery (Wa.) one of Wife's false friends, flirting with her as well as with Czesław's daughter (tenor)
Agata (A.) Jędrzej's wife, soprano	Lawyer (L.), a dishonest attorney, one of Wife's false friends (bass)

Note: Figures (1), (2) etc. stands for musical numbers, followed by the number of measures in the given segment. Letters (A), (B) etc. stands for spoken monologues (i.e. "poetic numbers"), followed by the number of lines of verse. Spoken fragments that are not monologues are marked as "dial." (for "dialogue"), likewise complete with number of lines. For all these entries, the persons appearing in the given segment are listed, their names abbreviated and placed in brackets. Moreover, the musical numbers are identified with text incipits and type (aria, duetto, etc.).

	Singing	Speech	Action
Act I			
Sc. 1	(1), 191: duetto (introduzione) „Prędzej, prędzej” (Cz., J.)		Preparing the room for cabalist practices.
		(A), 38 (J.) (B) 38 (Cz.) dial., 10 (J.)	Jędrzej's curiosity and Czesław's explanations.
Sc. 2	(2), 104: quartetto „Panie, panie, ktoś kołacze” (Cz., J., W., A.)		Wife and Agata enter.

	Singing	Speech	Action
Sc. 2	(3) , 72: aria „Utrapiona, nieszczęśliwa” (W.) (4) , 9+100: rec. – aria „Słuchajcie mnie, śmiertelnicy” (Cz.)		Wife’s complaint Czesław assures them of his powers as cabalist.
		(C) , 27 (Cz.) dial., 9 (Cz., J., W., A.)	Czesław lists the powers of cabala.
	(5) , 347: quartetto „Zaczynajmy naszą pracę” (Cz., J., W., A.)		The first session of cabala.
Sc. 3		dial., 20 (Cz., J.)	Wife and Agata exeunt.
Sc. 4–7	FINALE: (6a) , 470: • duetto „Któż to z was był tak zuchwały” (Cz., P.) • solo: „Mój dowcip wieki przeżyje” (P) • rec. (Cz., J., D., P.) • solo: „Jestem Doktor” (D.) • solo: „Przez wszystkie karczmy, hotele” (Wa.) • duetto: „Któż to przed nosem sędziego, prawnika” (Cz., L.) • solo: „Nikt nie zrówna mojej chwale” (L.) • rec.-sextetto „By poznać losy niestałe” (Cz., J., D., P., Wa., L.)		The guests enter one by one: Poet Doctor Walery Lawyer The guests argue about who should come first in cabalistic divination. They agree to be locked up in separate cabinets and wait.
Sc. 8	(6b) , 220: scene with chorus: „Hola, dla Boga” (Cz., J., D., P., Wa., L., choir SSTB)		Warsaw people storm cabalist’s door.

	Singing	Speech	Action
Act II			
Sc. 1-2	(7) , 202: quartetto „Droga kabało” (D., P., Wa., L.) – quintetto „Lecz póki będzim siedzieli” (the same + J.)		Poet, Doctor, Walery and Lawyer complain about being kept under lock and quarrel with Jędrzej.
Sc. 2 cnd		dial., 17 (D. P. Wa. L., J.) (D) , 33 (J.)	The guests quarrel with Jędrzej.
	(8) , 109: song „Gdybym kiedy rządził światem” (J.)		“The world as a madhouse”: Jędrzej mocks the men in their confinement.
Sc. 3	(9) , 75: quintetto: „Już północ blisko” (Cz., P., D., Wa., L.)		The “witching hour” begins
		(F) , 30 (Cz.) dial., 34: D., P., Wa., L.	Czesław summons the ghosts and instructs the guests. The guests confess their desires, thus betraying their vices.
Sc. 3 cnd	(10) , 257: ottetto „Jak jest widzę, poznaję” (Cz., J., P., D., Wa., L., W., A.)		The first series of divinations: Czesław offends his guests but promises more. Wife and Agata enter. General agitation.
Sc. 3 cnd		dial., 76 (all persons; 68 lines belong to Cz.) [fragment of spoken text missing in ms.]	Czesław releases Poet, Doctor, Walery and Lawyer and denounces them before Wife; then he reveals his true identity. Czesław’s final judgement on guests.
	(11) , 64: ottetto „O ty kabało przeklęta” (Cz., J., P., D., W., Jr., Ż., A.)		Final sung number; some praise the cabala while others curse it.

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