



CASTALIA IN GRUNEWALD
VLADIMIR TARNOPOLSKI

Vladimir Tarnopolski, Russian composer, born in 1955 in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, educated at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory Moscow. Tarnopolski is a frequent guest at many Western contemporary music festivals, he has written pieces on commission for some of the world's leading orchestras, and his operas have premiered in Germany, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Norway. Tarnopolski plays a significant role in the development of contemporary Russian musical life. He founded the first Russian Centre for Contemporary Music (1993), the Studio for New Music Ensemble, the International Festival of Contemporary Music *Moscow Forum* (1994), the International Jurgenson Competition for Young Composers (2001), and the Contemporary Music Department at the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory (2003), where he is Professor of Composition. – Address: Scientific Artistic Centre of Contemporary Music, Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, Bolshaya Nikitskaya ul. 13/6, 125009 Moscow, Russia. E-mail: vladimir.tarnopolski@gmail.com.

I must acknowledge that I had not known anything of the existence of the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin – Institute for Advanced Study when I received the invitation to send for the consideration of the screening committee one of the projects on which I wished to work seriously in Berlin. Just like any other artistic person, I always have various ideas roaming in my head, but among those, there is one that I regard as especially important. It is the idea for the opera *The Abduction of Europa*, about which I have already pondered for a long time, but which I was unable to take on seriously. After all, work on a large opera takes years and, turning to such work, a composer must have at least a preliminary agreement with one of the opera theaters.

The idea to compose an opera on the subject of this ancient Greek myth, showing through its prism the present-day European political situation, first occurred to me back in the “golden years” of the early 1990s. At the same time, I hardly planned to retell the famous story familiar to us from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which since its creation has become one of the most favorite plots in the history of European art. Generally, I have a skeptical attitude toward opera that “illustrates” literature by musical means; for me, the “literary opera” is a purely historical genre that already exhausted itself in the first third of the 20th century in the operas of Richard Strauss and Shostakovich.

I always compile something like a musical scenario for my compositions for musical theater – this is not a *literary text*, but a certain plan for *stage action*, initially meant to be unfolded particularly in the space of music and developing according to music’s laws.

During the 25 years of my contemplations about *The Abduction of Europa*, I have had the time to write several compositions for musical theater, whose premieres have been successful in various countries – in Germany, France, England, and Norway. But for some reason, my most significant idea, the one I cherished most – that of an opera about Europa/Europe – was chronically out of luck! Each time I presented this scenario to directors of various theaters and festivals, at first it aroused the most positive, and sometimes even enthusiastic, reactions, but in the end, in virtue of various circumstances, each time everything ended similarly: “at present, unfortunately, it is not working out with this plot, so for now let us take on another idea”, and “we shall certainly take on the opera about Europa next time”. But this “next time” never occurred.

It is difficult for me to say why the affair always ended in this particular way; either a new opera with a large format – with a chorus and a large number of participants – presented too risky and costly an endeavor, or certain aesthetic notions of mine had not convinced the theater directors, although all of my previous opera premieres had gone very successfully. It was also possible that the conception of a “political” opera about Europe seemed too risky – who could have said at that time in what direction Europe would change on the way to its completion! In the meantime, in my view, with each passing year and month, the idea of an opera about Europe was becoming more and more topical, and it still seems rather strange to me that no contemporary composer had yet turned to this plot!

The invitation I received from Wiko to work for an entire year on this opera and the possibility to withdraw from the routine pedagogical and organizational concerns at the Moscow Conservatory, from the struggles of our Center for Contemporary Music, and

from the concerts of the Studio for New Music orchestra to realize our projects was an unexpected one, as if a chance sent from heaven. For the first time in my life, I had the opportunity to engage in only musical creativity for an entire year!

Having found myself in a remarkable, truly refined intellectual milieu of scholars, I was confronted with the necessity to formulate my “philosophy of opera” very simply and concisely for my colleagues who were not musicians. Frankly speaking, I had not expected to encounter such a vivacious interest in my work on the part of the Fellows of the Kolleg, and I immersed myself with enthusiasm in this peculiar “reflected self-comprehension”, attempting to look at my work from the perspective of an enlightened non-musician. Initially, I began preparing a musical-enlightening seminar of a general design, but during the course of close communication and regular “musical” conversations with my colleagues, I discovered that a number of them, while not being professional musicians, possessed a knowledge of music practically on a professional level!

Among them was Lisa Herzog, Professor of Political Philosophy and Theory, who turned out to be a wonderful cellist! I engaged in combined music-making with her and even risked performing at the farewell amateur concert in ensemble with maestro Andreas Staier himself, an outstanding musician of our times, with whom I am presently bound in a steadfast friendship. There was also Carola Lentz, Professor of Social Anthropology, who has sung in a chorus all her life (frequently performing very difficult compositions!), has a brilliant knowledge of chamber music, even the most rarely performed compositions, and attends, as it seems, all the musical premieres! Then there were the enlightened lovers and connoisseurs of music, Victoria and Ostap Sereda, and many other colleagues.

I wish to say a few special words about my colleague Andreas Staier. Communication with him was a great pleasure for me, both professionally and humanly, and comprised the most vivid moments of my stay at Wiko. His brilliant concerts, amazing, greatly detailed erudition not only in the sphere of Baroque and Classical music, but also in the most contemporary trends and his overall exclusive astuteness as a musician, have left an immense trace in my soul.

Obviously, we communicated seriously not only in the field of musical subjects – we discussed the professional positions of our colleagues in the most varied spheres of knowledge! And as the result of such meetings, it became more and more apparent that in this communication, just as in preparing my Tuesday Colloquium, there was absolutely no need to “lower” the professional bar or to “simplify” anything; it was necessary only to try to find very precise wording and to choose vivid musical examples.

Unexpectedly for me, this work turned out to be even more instructive than I had thought! I made the attempt to perceive and to formulate more precisely, not only to my colleagues, but also to myself, my own intuitive presentiment of the future opera, both in its entirety and in some of its concrete details. I attempted to answer such a “simple” question as – what is it that properly constitutes the “plot of the opera” (is it only a conventional plot?) – and to discuss such a “naive” theme as why people sing in the opera at all, if it is simpler and more “understandable” to declaim the text. In my perception, the mission of the opera is to realize a special image of the human being that, by analogy with *Homo ludens* (playing man) and *Homo sapiens* (man the wise), could be defined as *Homo cantans* – singing man.

My insufficient knowledge of English prevented me from participating on an adequate level in the general seminar discussions, but in numerous private conversations and especially in my German lessons, since my knowledge of German is somewhat better than my knowledge of English, the arguments raised about the most diverse questions were very heated ones. Our remarkable German teacher Eva von Kügelgen additionally invited interesting lecturers to our meetings, and the latter acquainted us with new ideas from the most varied spheres. A special impact was created by the ardent lecture about Max Weber presented by Stephan Schlak, the editor of *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte*, who literally astounded us with his depth of thought and ... the dexterity of his speech. Eva always reserved part of her lesson for free communication, and very quickly we developed a fabulous group of humanitarians, who made desperate attempts to discuss in German (!) all the insoluble problems of the universe.

My colleagues among the attendees of these seminars were: James Simpson, a wonderful specialist in Medieval and Renaissance English literature, who was able to extract in a remarkable way a profound philosophical meaning from the etymology of words; Paweł Machcewicz, a preeminent, principled historian, the former Director of a conceptually new Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, who had first-hand knowledge of all the pressure of Poland’s nationalistic government; two wonderful, stunningly profound and refined philosophers – Catherine Wilson, at the core of whose scholarly interests are issues of ethics and aesthetics, which she analyzed with special intellectual finesse, and Jean-Philippe Narboux, a specialist in Heidegger and Wittgenstein, who instantly captivated everybody with his brilliant discourse on logic and anthropology; and, finally, my wife, Irina Snitkova, musicologist and culturologist. Our heated discussions, which passed within the “overflowing” space of aesthetics-ethics-morality-politics-philosophy-culture-art,

frequently felt cramped by their limitation to a small group, and they “poured over” into a broader circle of our colleagues, who were interested in discussing a particular subject.

These discussions helped me to a certain degree to answer questions that musicians frequently hear from intellectuals from other fields. I attempted to the best of my abilities to speak about music in the language of aesthetics and philosophy. My position was that the main conceptual content of an opera is not in the least constituted by its plot. The meaning of opera is Music itself! In a phenomenological sense, Music is the main heroine of ANY opera, since each opera, each instrumental composition is ultimately a piece about Music and about how, within the framework of the play’s logic of the art of music, it becomes possible to present any plot on stage. In other words, the content of a musical composition is HOW Music plays in any plot by the specific means of its art. For me as a composer, all the sham operatic killings of Carmen, all the sufferings of characters like Aida and Radames, the dramas of Boris Godunov, and the heroic feats of Siegfried, which are known to the listener *a priori* – this is all merely the outer content and the outer form of some opera. The inner, profound content is stipulated by Music itself, its sensuous-emotional and intellectual energy. It was particularly within the frameworks of such an understanding of the genre that I wished to approach the process of composing my opera.

In my scenario, departing from the motives of the plot from Ancient Greek mythology, I wished to present the struggle of various *ideas* within Europe and *around* Europe during the course of the past century. The ancient Greek myth presents the prism, the *camera obscura*, that makes it possible to glance at the events of European life of the last few centuries in a new light.

It seemed to me that I arrived in Berlin with practically a completely ready scenario, but at Wiko, my naive presumption in this question was dealt a heavy blow! The employees of the Wiko library delivered this “blow” with their remarkably professional work! Already a week after my arrival, I was approached by librarian Stefan Gellner, who graciously offered me assistance in selecting literature on the subject of the opera. Very soon my desk became filled with a massive selection of new original materials about the myth of Europa, from Antiquity to the present day, which led me to break away from my music and to immerse myself completely in the study of this question. During the course of the entire year, Stefan Gellner helped me very keenly not only with the search for the necessary literature, but sometimes also with the selection of concrete poetic fragments with the consideration of the parameters “set” by the music. An immense amount of assistance

with the source materials was constantly provided to me by Anja Brockman and, in general, the entire team of the Wiko library!

What is more, Daniel Schönpflug, the academic coordinator of Wiko, told me that, in the wedding ceremonies of the German Kurfürsten of the 17th and 18th centuries, the myth of the abduction of Europa was one of the favorite plots of theatricalized festivities and pageants. It turned out that an immense chapter of one of his books is devoted to this.

As the result of my yearlong study, with the assistance of the remarkable associates of Wiko, I researched around 400 books and several hundred articles, which may be somewhat redundant for a composer. On the other hand, now I can consider myself a specialist on the question of the historical reception of this European myth.

As a result of this work, I introduced several fundamentally new scenes into my initial scenario. I was struck by the fact that, in the present-day political reality, the motifs of the myth acquire absolutely new, unexpected, and paradoxical meanings, which I could not have thought of at any time before. Here are just three vivid examples.

In the narrative of the ancient Greek poet Moschos, Europa has a dream in which two women struggle for her: her mother Asia and, on the other bank of the sea, another woman, unfamiliar to her. Today, in the context of growing political tensions, this scene fits absolutely naturally into a new symbolic set – as an allegory of the complex struggle for Europe between the various world systems of the East and the West.

Interestingly, according to the myth, Europa is by birth a Phoenician princess. The historical Phoenicia was situated on the territories of present-day Lebanon and Syria. And today it is particularly here in Syria that the confrontation between the two struggling women – the East and the West – is taking place in the sharpest and most dangerous form.

The bull that abducted Europa has in the present also obtained day an absolutely new symbolism: it is the emblem of the stock exchange, symbolizing faith in the rising value of shares (sculptures of the bull adorn the plazas of the Stock Exchanges in New York and Frankfurt). The bull also presents a reincarnation of the biblical “Golden Calf”, around which the entire world’s financial and political elite dances.

The play of paradoxical juxtapositions and deflected reflections of the classical myth building upon its present-day interpretation are the source of my scenario. The abduction and the love story of Europa and Jupiter the bull are transformed from allegories into a large-scale historical grotesquerie.

An additional symbolism for me lay in the fact that I began my serious work on the opera specifically in Berlin. This city, like no other, had experienced all the dramatic

vicissitudes of the most recent European history, and today it has turned into one of the most important symbols of New Europe. During the course of an entire year, I had the opportunity to enjoy the riches of its cultural life, having attended about a hundred concerts, exhibitions, theater plays, and opera productions. It was very pleasant for me that, during my stay in Berlin, several of my compositions were performed in various venues. I have the most heartfelt gratitude to the associates of the Kolleg, Katharina Biegger, Petria Saleh, Katharina Wiedemann, and Frank Johannsen, for their enthusiasm and for their assistance in the preparation of my concert-lecture in the venue of Wiko!

Having returned to my routine, bustling life in Moscow, when a difficulty arises I sometimes catch myself with the impulse to automatically call Vera Pfeffer, who seems to be capable of solving any mundane problem. In cold Moscow, I remember with great warmth (and always with a wonderful appetite!) Dunia Najjar and her incredibly tasty dinners! In general, in my thoughts I most frequently return to “my” Grunewald. And unwittingly I remember what Wiko presents in the very restless contemporary world: a utopian Castalia as lyricized by Hermann Hesse – or is it the portent of a future world filled with artistic creativity?

Most likely, in the long run, this depends on each of us, and maybe especially for those who constitute our Institute for Advanced Study brotherhood.