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ORIENTAL INSPIRATIONS IN RUSSIAN OPERA AT THE TIME OF CATHERINE THE GREAT

Abstract: During the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–1796) the problem of the Turkish threat over Europe had become an excuse for negotiations aiming at stabilizing the geopolitical balance between the European countries. This preoccupation was present in the diplomatic discourse, where after its ‘decline’, the Ottoman Empire was evaluated as a fake giant, incapable of representing a serious military menace.

However, the presence of ‘The Turk’ in the mind of Western audiences is attested by the diffusion of Oriental themes in different works of art. In the field of musical theatre, these can be found, among others, in such operatic performances as the opéra comique *La rencontre imprévue, ou Les pèlerins de la Mecque* by Christoph Willibald Gluck (1763), and Mozart’s *Singspiel Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782).

In Russia, the response to the Eastern Question was the ‘Greek project’ – a series of geopolitical plans that the Empress developed with her counsellors Aleksandr Bezborodko and Grigory Potyomkin, which foresaw the occupation of the Ottoman Empire, and its subsequent passing over to the rule of Catherine’s grandson Konstantin Pavlovich. According to those plans, in 1781 Catherine signed a secret alliance with the Austrian emperor Joseph II, which was to be confirmed by the subsequent journey of her son Pavel Petrovich to the Habsburg Court.

While creating secret coalitions at international level, Catherine undertook a propagandistic campaign putting an emphasis on her policy. Musical

theatre was involved in such initiatives, according to the traditional role of opera as a vehicle for the so-called ‘scenario of power’ (Wortman).

The following paper addresses the impact of the ‘Greek project’ on the Russian culture by examining some cases taken from the opera theatre, in which early oriental inspirations emerge. References to the East are understood in terms of subject, provenance of the characters, collocation of the action and the consequent *colour locale* evoked with set costumes and music. Four Russian titles will be considered in various ways: *Fevej* and *Načal’noe upravlenie Olega* [The Beginnings of the Reign of Oleg] on librettos by Catherine II, *Tomyris, reine des Massagets* [Tomyris, queen of the Massageteans] by Louis Dancourt, and *Zel’mira i Smelon* by Pavel Potyomkin. Apart from these, two Italian works will be addressed briefly: the cantata *Atene edificata* by Domenico Cimarosa and the opera *Alessandro e Timoteo* by Giuseppe Sarti.

Keywords: Russian opera, Eastern question, Greek project, Music orientalism.

During the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–1796) the Turkish threat over Europe became an excuse for negotiations aiming at stabilizing the geopolitical balance between the European countries. This preoccupation was present in the diplomatic discourse, where after its ‘decline’, the Ottoman Empire was evaluated as a fake giant, incapable of representing a serious military menace¹.

However, the presence of ‘The Turk’ in the mind of Western audiences is attested by the diffusion of Oriental themes in different works of art. In the field of musical theatre, these can be found, among others, in such operatic performances as the opéra comique *La rencontre imprévue, ou Les pèlerins de la Mecque* by Christoph Willibald Gluck (1763), and Mozart’s *Singspiel Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782)².

In Russia, the response to the ‘Eastern question’ was the ‘Greek project’ – a series of geopolitical plans that foresaw the occupation of the Ottoman

¹ See, for instance, K. A. Jr. Roeder, *Kaunitz, Joseph II and the Turkish War*, “The Slavonic and East-European Review” 1974, vol. 54, no. 4, pp. 538–556.

² The numerous sources for the subject of Mozart’s *Entführung* are discussed in W. Daniel Wilson, *Turks on the Eighteenth-Century Operatic Stage and European Political, Military and Cultural History*, “Eighteenth-Century Life” 1985, no. 9, pp. 79–92. On the ‘Turkishness’ of Mozart’s music see W. Osthoff, *Comicità alla turca, musica classica, opera nazionale: osservazioni sulla ‘Entführung aus dem Serail’*, in: *Opera & Libretto*, ed. by G. Folena, M. T. Muraro and G. Morelli, vol. 2, Firenze: Olshki, 1993, pp. 157–174.

Empire and the restoration of the Byzantine Empire, which according to the plans of the Russian rulers was to be subsequently governed by Catherine II's grandson Konstantin Pavlovich. The political background related to this project – which will be detailed further in the present paper – exerted its influence on many aspects of the Russian culture. In spite of this, yet in 2005 the historian Andrey Zorin underlined the fact that “research into the question [had] usually been confined to the sphere of diplomacy and court politics, paying almost no attention to its cultural dimension”³, in spite of the very important role played by the project in the intellectual life of Russia.

The present paper addresses the impact of the Greek project on the Russian culture by examining some cases taken from the opera theatre, in which early oriental inspirations can be noted. References to the East will be understood in terms of subjects, provenance of the characters, collocation of the action and the consequent *colour locale* evoked by means of set costumes and music. Four Russian titles will be considered in various ways: *Fevej* and *Načal'noe upravlenie Olega* [The Beginnings of the Reign of Oleg] on librettos by Catherine II, *Tomyris, reine des Massagets* [Tomyris, queen of the Massageteans] by Louis Dancourt and *Zel'mira i Smelon* by Pavel Sergejevich Potjomkin. Aside from these, a quick look will be addressed to two Italian works: the cantata *Atene edificata* by Domenico Cimarosa and the opera *Alessandro e Timoteo* by Giuseppe Sarti.

While being conceived in different contexts and by different authors, these operas show elements ascribable to the political trend inaugurated by Catherine II in her campaigns against Turkey, notably at the moment when Russian foreign-policy was shifting from the “Northern System” supported by Nikita Panin to the “Eastern System” fostered on initiative of Potjomkin and Bezborodko⁴. These examples will also serve as a further demonstration of the essential role opera had in the Russian culture as a mean of propaganda of the ruling class, representing the point of view of the Russian Crown on the stage.

³ A. Zorin, *Eden in Taurus: Catherine II's Journey to Crimea in 1787. Political and Cultural Intentions*, in: *Unravelling Civilisation: European Travel and Travel Writing*, ed. by H. Schulz-Forberg, Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2005, p. 225.

⁴ This deviation took place in the mid-1770s, and followed the conclusion of the first Russo-Turkish war with the Treaty of Küçük-Kaynarca (1774). Subsequently, it was confirmed by the dismissal, in May 1781, of the minister of foreign affairs Nikita Panin, whose position was covered by Prince Bezborodko.

The Empress developed the ‘Greek project’ together with her counsellor Aleksandr Andreyevich Bezborodko (1747–1799) and her former favourite and secret husband Grigory Aleksandrovich Potyomkin (1739–1791). According to their plans, the Ottoman Empire was to be replaced by the establishment of a new empire in the East, the identity of which was ascribed alternatively to a restored Byzantine Empire and to ancient Greece. The throne of the new empire was to go to Catherine’s grandson Konstantin Pavlovich (1779–1831) – Pavel Petrovich’s son – on the only condition that he and his descendants would forever abandon all claims to the Russian crown⁵. In such way, two state entities were to co-exist, ruled by two Russian brothers – Alexander and Constantine. The creation of a further, allegedly independent state – Dacia, incorporating Moldavia, Wallachia and Bessarabia, – was also envisaged. Dacia would act as a buffer state between Russia and Austria, which the Empress was trying to involve in the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire. Potyomkin himself strived for ruling the territory.

The idea never assumed the form of a public formulation, but it was fully expressed by Catherine in a memorandum addressed to the Austrian emperor Joseph II on 10 September 1782⁶. The letter followed a secret alliance Catherine signed in 1781 with Joseph II, which was to be confirmed by the journey of her son Pavel Petrovich to the Habsburg Court. A few months after the alliance was contracted (in the form of letters between the two sovereigns), the Grand Duke was received in Vienna – the main stopover of his European grand tour – with the staging of Gluck’s operas *Iphigénie en Tauride* and *Alceste*. Both these works are based on subjects connected with ancient Greece. For the reception of the grand duke they were associated to the staging of his *La rencontre imprévue, où Les pèlerins de la Mecque* based on a libretto by the French playwright Louis Hurtaut D’Ancourt (also spelled as Dancourt, 1725–1801), the plot of which takes place in the capital city of modern Egypt. During their second stay in Vienna, Pavel Petrovich and his spouse

⁵ A. Zorin, op. cit., p. 226.

⁶ The text of Catherine’s letter to Joseph II can be found in *Joseph II. und Katharina von Russland, Ihr Briefwechsel*, ed. by A. R. von Arneth, Wien: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1869, pp. 153–155. The correspondence between the Empress and Potyomkin is collected in *Ekaterina II i G.A. Potëmkin. Ličnaâ perepiska (1769–1791)*, ed. by V. S. Lopatin, Moskva: RAN, 1997.

Mariya Fedorovna were invited to the premiere of Mozart's *Entführung aus dem Serail* on October 16th 1782, in which the composer represented the 'Turkish music' by including a 'batterie turque' as a loose approximation of the janissary band. This association suggests an understanding of the staged repertoire as a 'message' addressed to the grand duke, who opposed the alliance between Russia and Austria, because this was detrimental to the interests of the Prussian King Friedrich the Great, for whom he nurtured an inextinguishable esteem. Even though the couple's journey officially had no political aims, the idea of recalling the Eastern question and rivalry between Russia and Turkey for the dominance on the territories at the north of the Black Sea, sounded like an invitation from the part of the Austrian Court to the unmovable Grand Duke to reconsider his positions. In this sense, the same political circumstance possibly inspired the commission of Mozart's *Entführung*, which was initially foreseen as part of the festivities planned at Viennese National Singspiel for the visit of the Russian couple scheduled for mid-September, and was only consequently postponed until the following year. Even clearer is the reference to ancient Greece in the operas that were actually performed on that occasion: Gluck's *Iphigenie en Tauride* and *Alceste*. As it was observed by Andrey Zorin, during those years the figure of Iphigenia was to become part of the Russian collective imagination and was associated with the Crimean Peninsula, which in turn possessed the double function of representing Christian Byzantium – the cradle of the Russian christening – and classical Hellas⁷.

Similarly to the Viennese case, in Parma, Catherine's son and his spouse were greeted with the staging of an opera based on a Greek subject, *Alessandro e Timoteo*. The libretto was written by Count Carlo Castone Della Torre di Rezzonico (1742–1796), and the music was commissioned to the Italian composer Giuseppe Sarti (1729–1802), who was to be called upon at the St Petersburg Court in 1784. The urge to establish a link with the Greek musical culture is expressed by the librettist himself in a preface to the libretto printed in 1782, where he theorizes the use of Greek modes that the ancient Greek poet Timotheus of Miletus used to arouse passions in Alexander the

⁷ As it was noted by the historian, in 1784 *Iphigenia in Tauris* was to be an image exploited by the court poet V. Petrov in the ode *On the capture of Crimea* (A. Zorin, op. cit., pp. 230–231).

Great⁸. As we shall see, references to the affinity between ancient Greek tragedy and operas will be observed in the aesthetic choices Sarti was to apply in another opera of his, *Alessandro e Timoteo*, almost a decade later⁹.

Apart from creating secret coalitions at an international level, within her country the Empress undertook a propagandistic campaign putting an emphasis on the expansion of her Empire. That argument was used as a main criterion of identification of the country, where according to the historian Richard Wortman,

Imperial patriotism with a Great Russian coloration was a theme of late eighteenth-century history and literature. Catherine the Great, the only Russian ruler since Riurik to have no Russian parent, extolled the glory of the Great Russian elite, who had achieved the conquest of empire¹⁰.

The emphasis on conquests was part of the image of Russia that Catherine kept constructing during her reign as a means of self-legitimation. In particular, the Russian expansion toward the South was accompanied by a series of propagandistic initiatives and emphatic statements of Russia's equivalence with ancient Empires. According to Wortman, "Russia's expansion to the south was glorified not merely in terms of national greatness of interest, but as a recreation of Hellenic antiquity"¹¹. Zorin highlighted the

⁸ C. C. Della Torre di Rezzonico, *Alessandro e Timoteo. Dramma per musica da rappresentarsi nel R. D. Teatro di Corte nella primavera dell'anno 1782*, Parma [1782], p. VIII. In an article advertising the forthcoming premiere, the local press wrote: "The ancient Greek modes will be presented with all the modern knowledge, and will be joined, as in those distant times, with poetry and dance. Thus it can be said that this drama can be defined as an effort of the music and of Italian arts to approach that of the Greeks, and also to acquire confidence in those marvels reportedly done by Timotheus in the epoch of Alexander". "[...] i Modi dell'antica Grecia si udiranno rivestiti di tutto il moderno sapere, e congiunti, come furono un tempo, alla Poesia, ed alla Danza, talché potrà dirsi questo Dramma uno sforzo della Musica, e dell'Arti italiane per agguagliare i Greci, ed acquistar fede a portenti, che si narrano operati da Timoteo nel secolo d'Alessandro" ("Gazzetta di Parma", 29 March 1782).

⁹ Moreover, it was after being highly impressed by Sarti's opera in Parma, that the Grand Duke Pavel Petrovich suggested to his mother to offer Sarti a position as director of the imperial chapel in St Petersburg in order to replace Giovanni Paisiello, who was to leave Russia in 1783.

¹⁰ R. S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy. From Peter the Great to the Abdication of Nicholas 2*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 66.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

“sort of equal-sign [that] was put between Constantinople and Athens”, and the “mixture of Byzantine and antique themes, in particular in the whole iconography of the project, including the ceremonies on the occasion of Constantine’s birth and the programme for his education”¹². In accordance with that policy, the birth of Konstantin Pavlovich was celebrated with the forging of a new coin showing the image of the Saint Sophia Cathedral on the reverse, and Greek poetry was recited in original on special events dedicated to his birth. In order to prepare the Grand Duke to become the emperor of the restored Byzantine Empire, he was raised by a Greek nanny, and his first servant and childhood friends were Greek.

This propagandistic campaign was to permeate various fields of the Russian public life. In architecture, buildings were erected in memory of the military triumphs: among these, many examples figure in the park of the residence of Tsarskoye Selo, whose landscape seems to be conceived as a celebration of Catherine’s success over the Ottoman Porte: the Tower Ruin by Yury Fel’ten (the court architect that succeeded to Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli since 1762), the Kagul Obelisk dedicated to marshal Rumyantsev by Antonio Rinaldi in the years 1771–1772 to commemorate the Russian victory over the Turks gained near the river that carries that name; the Chesme Column, built between 1774 and 1778 on Rinaldi’s project, which commemorates the naval victory of the Russian army led by admiral Aleksey Orlov in the Aegean Sea during the Russo-Turkish war of 1768–1774. The St Sophia Cathedral [Sofijskij Voznesenskij Sobor] was designed by Cameron as a small-scale replica of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Anthony Cross defines it as the first example of Byzantinism in Russian architecture¹³. In St Petersburg, it finds a correspondent in the colossal Pella Palace [Pellinskij Dvorec] on the bank of the Neva river, which was named after the birthplace of Alexander the Great.

Apart from the aforementioned initiatives, the annexation of the Southern territories was celebrated with a six-month journey, during which in the first half of 1787 the tsarina dramatized the military and cultural successes

¹² A. Zorin, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

¹³ A. Cross, *By the Banks of the Neva: Chapters from the Lives and Careers of the British in Eighteenth-Century Russia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 292. See also P. Angelini, *Caterina ii e la cultura dell’antico, Dal mito al progetto*, in: *La cultura architettonica dei maestri italiani e ticinesi nella Russia neoclassica*, ed. by N. Navone and L. Tedeschi, vol. 1, Mendrisio: Mendrisio Academy Press, 2004, pp. 43–59.

of her reign in the territories gained with the help of general Grigory Potyomkin. In the synthesis offered by Wortman, a

spectacle of happiness and transformation was presented to an audience of court dignitaries and foreign envoys – of Britain, France and Austria.

On the way to and from the new territories, Catherine participated in numerous staged demonstrations of mutual fealty between herself and the Russian nobility¹⁴.

Among the Russian and foreign ministers that accompanied the Empress, the most distinguished guest was the Austrian Emperor, who travelled incognito under the name of Count Falkenstein. As highlighted by Zorin in his article, all details of the journey were worked out with extreme care and carried a symbolic value. Among the range of associations of the journey that guided this demonstration, Zorin highlights the “theme of the Scythians”, the superposition of the images of Christian Byzantium and classical Hellas, and the role of the Crimean city of Kherson as a substitute for Constantinople as the capital of the new empire, while that was still impossible to be achieved¹⁵.

Some of those points were to be theoretically considered in operas that were produced with the aim of enriching the celebration. It was probably during Catherine’s absence from St Petersburg that the court composer Domenico Cimarosa (1749–1801, active in St Petersburg from 1787 to 1791) set to music the cantata *Atene edificata* [The Foundation of Athens], on a libretto by the official librettist of the Empress, Ferdinando Moretti (?–1807), which he completed in 1788. By evoking the foundation of Athens, the work metaphorically celebrates the foundation of Kherson, the city on the river Dnepr that Potyomkin built in 1778 on Catherine’s order, which was named after the ancient Greek colony of Chersonesos, on the Crimean Peninsula¹⁶. In the cantata, the main male character is Cecrope, the mythical founder and first king of Athens, as well as a culture hero who taught the Athenians to reading and write, but it also refers to such civic institutions as monogamous marriage and ceremonial burial. As Yamada highlights, Potyomkin was called “the Cyclops” because he had lost an eye in a fight with the Orlov

¹⁴ R. S. Wortman, op. cit., p. 70.

¹⁵ A. Zorin, op. cit.

¹⁶ See D. Cimarosa, *Atene edificata*, musical revision C. and F. Quattrocchi, Bologna: Bongiovanni, 2009.

brothers¹⁷. The female protagonist Aglaurus with Cecrops pray the Gods for the prosperity of their kingdom and are granted their protection by Minerva and Mars, under whom it is easy to recognize the figures of Potyomkin and Catherine. The legitimation is provided by the Oracle:

Popoli questa impresa è gradita al Ciel
d'Atene i muri seguite ad inalzar
Chiara sia questa sopra ogn'altra città.
Minerva e Marte v'avran soggiorno
De' più grandi Eroi sia questo suol fecondo
e in Guerra e in pace darà legge al mondo¹⁸.

Similar celebrations followed the Empress along her journey. As a stopover of the itinerary, Catherine paid a visit to count Nikolay Petrovich Sheremetev (1751–1809), the descendant of a distinguished dynasty of functionaries of the Russian Empire, and a gentleman-of-the-bedchamber of the Empress. Sheremetev received the delegation in Kuskovo, one of his estates in the surroundings of Moscow. In the same period the Count, who led an outstanding private company consisting of serf-singers, was staging a Russian opera based on a libretto written by the Empress herself, and titled *Fevej*. It is highly probable that he offered his guest the staging of exactly that work, which can be understood as an allegory of the imperialist tendencies of Catherine's rule¹⁹. The opera is based on a moral fairy tale, which the Empress had turned into an operatic libretto²⁰. In the story the protagonist, Prince Fevej, son of the Tsar of Siberia, asks for permission to travel all over the world. Tsar and

¹⁷ T. Yamada, *Domenico Cimarosa in Russia*, in: *Atene edificata. Coro dei guerrieri*, CD booklet, Bologna 2008, p. 21.

¹⁸ "Peoples, this enterprize doth Heaven please / Of Athens the walls continue to raise. / Let Athens be clear above all other cities. / Minerva and Mars shall here have their seat / Of the greatest of Heroes let this fertile ground be / And give law to the world in war and in peace". [F. Moretti], *Atene edificata*, in: *Atene edificata [CD booklet]...*, op. cit., p. 31. The English translation is quoted from the same source.

¹⁹ We have no evidence of the precise dates when the opera was staged by the Sheremetev theatre, but according to Elizarova, costumes from Kuskovo were later brought to Moscow, and then to Ostankino, where the opera was planned for staging. N. A. Elizarova, *Teatry Šeremetevykh*, Moskva: Izdanie Ostankinskogo dvorca-muzeâ, 1944, p. 142; L. A. Lepskaa, *Repertuar krepostnogo teatra Šeremetevykh. Katalog pes*, Moskva: GCTM im. A. A. Bahrušina, 1996, pp. 90–91.

²⁰ Catherine was not the sole author of the text, the verses of the vocal numbers being composed largely or entirely by her private secretary, Aleksandr Khrapovitsky. The song texts are arranged from materials in Chulkov's collection.

Tsaritsa beg their counsellor Reshemysl to convince the young prince to abandon the idea of the journey: he suggests that the Tsar does not permit him to travel abroad until he has shown himself to be obedient, firm in heart, bold and generous, magnanimous and modest. Confronted by various tests and challenges, Fevey acquits himself with distinction and, in so doing, reflects his father's own tolerance, wisdom and restraint. It was suggested that Catherine conceived the tale and the opera as an instruction for her son and heir to the throne, Pavel Petrovich²¹. Still, the first staging of this opera dates back to 1786 (19 April, at the St Petersburg Kamenny Theatre, and at the Hermitage Theatre three days later)²². At this time Pavel Petrovich had already had his grand tour (1781–1782), so it is hardly possible that the message of the opera was addressed to him. Rather, it was more probably addressed to Paul's children, the grand dukes Alexander and Constantine who, as it was said, were at the centre of Catherine's plans for the future of her reign. They were among the audience at the St Petersburg premiere, while their father is not mentioned by any coeval recollections. Suggesting a derivative interpretation to all details of *Fevej* is likely beyond the scope of the present study due to the unavailability of relevant sources. However, it is possible to discuss some moments of that play in the light of the contemporary political situation, notably the Russo-Turkish war of 1787–1792, and the events that had preceded the conflict. Particularly significant is the name of the tsar's counsellor, 'barin Reshemysl', which corresponds to the nickname that Catherine had given to Prince Potyomkin, who, as has already been mentioned, was among her nearest persons and political counsellors in the Greek project.

The opera was staged with great opulence. An exceptionally effective moment in the staging was the chorus of the third act, where a Kalmyk delegation enters the Tsar's palace to make offers to him²³. Here is how the

²¹ According to the musicologist Nadezhda Elizarova "в ней дается мудрое назидание царевичу Павлу слушаться матери, во всем покоряться ее воле и не мечтать попусту о заграничной поездке" (N. A. Elizarova, op. cit., p. 140).

²² A subsequent staging on 24 August 1786 is attested by a letter of Catherine to Potemkin, in which she reports to have seen the opera the day before writing. *Ekaterina II i G.A. Potëmkin. Ličnââ perepiska...*, op. cit., Letter No. 782 (pages not numbered), 24 August 1786. On the opera and its stagings see also G. Seaman, *Catherine the Great and Musical Enlightenment*, "New Zealand Slavonic Journal" 2003, pp. 129–136.

²³ The Kalmyk were members of the Mongolian Oirats people who derived their name from a Turkish word. They lived in the Russian Empire, where they had created a Khanate in the territory of the Northern Caucasus.

French envoy Valentin Estherházy de Galantha describes the event in a letter to his wife:

Hier, j'y ai été encore à un opéra russe dont la musique est toute des anciens airs du pays. Au loin, on fait des accompagnements ; il y en a de fort jolis, mais d'autres fort baroques. L'Impératrice en a fait graver la partition et je tâcherai d'en avoir un exemplaire, car il ne se vend pas. Les paroles sont de Sa Majesté. Le spectacle est superbe. La scène se passe en Russie dans l'ancien temps. Tous les costumes sont de la plus grand magnificence, faits d'étoffes turques de ce temps-là et comme on les portait alors. Il y a une ambassade de Kalmouks qui chantent et dansent à la manière tartare, des Kamtschadales vêtus à la manière du pays et dansant aussi les danses du nord de l'Asie, enfin une ambassade chinoise qui amène au prince, fils du Tzar, la princesse qui lui est destinée²⁴.

An exotic ballet closed the scene in national customs. According to Estherházy's recollections,

On y voit tous les peuples différents qui composent l'empire, chacun avec ses habillements. Je n'ai jamais vu un spectacle plus varié et plus magnifique ; il y avait plus de cinq cent personnes sur le théâtre et quoique les petits Grands-ducs et les quatre petites Grandes-duchesses y fussent, avec leurs gouverneurs et leurs gouvernants, nous n'étions pas cinquante spectateurs, tant l'Impératrice est difficile pour ceux qu'elle admet dans ses Ermitages²⁵.

Estherházy's letter refers to the staging of *Fevėj* he attended in St Petersburg in 1791. However, the evidence attested at the archives of the Sheremetev family testifies to the grandness of the event and the attempt to create, in Kuskovo, a production whose visual aspect was tinged with national overtones. According to the musicologist Nadezhda Elizarova, who reconstructed the activity of the Sheremetev theatres from archival sources,

Постановка оперы отличалась большой красочностью. Было стремление создать национальный спектакль. Массовые сцены были многолюдными и феерическими благодаря исключительному богатству костюмов и декораций. Гардероб к этой пьесе был очень богат и разнообразен. В нем среди русских боярских нарядов кафтанами, душегрейками, мишурными бисерными повязками и кокошниками были также многочисленные турецкие янычар-

²⁴ V. Estherházy, *Lettres du comte Valentin Esterhazy à sa femme, 1784–1792*, ed. by E. Daudet, Paris: Plon, 1907, p. 318, 11 October 1791.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 318–319.

ские платья из оранжевой крашенины с желтыми шароварами и голубыми крашенинными кушаками, с чалмами, украшенными цветными перьями. Имелся большой ассортимент костюмов, названных почему-то «римскими платьями», они были из дорогой роскошной парчи, украшены позументом и мишурой; особенно много костюмов было «польских», сшитых из пестрых дорогих тканей, обложенных черной меховой опушкой. Сам царь был в золотой роскошной глазетовой шубе и мантии²⁶.

The visit of the Kalmyk delegation can be put in connection with the annexation of the Crimean Khanate of 1784. The Kalmyks, who were to be assimilated to the Cossacks of the Don no later than 1798, in the opera are represented as eager to be part of the Russian intentions in reference to the northern coast of the Black Sea. We can sense the staged visit of all the delegations in the All-Russian perspective, with peoples of the geographical peripheries willing to be subject to the Great-Russian control.

As for the music, this episode is considered one of the first examples of Orientalism in Russian opera. It gave a pretext to the court composer Vasily Pashkevich (1742–1797) to couple music Orientalism with folkloric tunes, which he included in the score on the basis of the libretto. Catherine herself, in a letter to Grimm, had announced that the opera was “tout composé d’airs et chansons et motifs russes”²⁷. The result is a productive allegory representing the Great-Russian imperialistic ideology: an aesthetic function that was to be exploited in the next century by Mikhail Glinka in his opera *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842), whose plan for the final scene included a similar scene: a ballet representing the national entities comprised within the Empire²⁸.

Some days after the performance of the Hermitage, which the French envoy was allowed to attend, the diplomat was invited to visit the St Peter and Paul Fortress in St Petersburg, where he could admire some decorations à la *turque* that had been imported during the military campaign in the South, and had been put to cover the tombs of the Russian rulers of the past, in a sort of allegory establishing a relationship that put emphasis on the Russian rights over the former Greek territories, now belonging to the Turks, but deemed to be given ‘back’ to this envisaged ‘Oriental’ Empire.

²⁶ N. A. Elizarova, op. cit., p. 142.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 141.

²⁸ At this regard see M. Frolova-Walker, *Glinka's Three Attempts at Russianness*, in: *Russian Music and Nationalism, From Glinka to Stalin*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007, pp. 74–139.

The superposition of Turkish and Greek elements recalls similar features that characterize the performance of another opera by Catherine II: the 'historical representation' *The Early Reign of Oleg*. This was a dramatic play with music composed by Carlo Canobbio (1741–1822), Vasily Pashkevich and Giuseppe Sarti. This latter was asked to compose the music while he was at service of Prince Potyomkin in the newly conquered southern territories; after that the music composed by Cimarosa did not fulfil Catherine's expectations²⁹. *Oleg* is a celebration of pre-Petrine Russia, in line with the discovery of national values that characterized the second part of her rule. In the plot, after the death of Rurik his son Igor rules under the regency of his uncle Oleg. The play rapidly represents the foundation of Moscow by Oleg (Act I), his journey to Kiev (Act II); the wedding of prince Igor and princess Prekrasa (Act III); Oleg's campaign against Constantinople (Act IV); his victory, and the celebrations organized by the Greek Emperor Leo in his honour. In the final scene, Oleg hangs the shield of Igor in the hippodrome, so that it can be admired by his descendants, and Emperor Leo declares him a wise and courageous ruler. Indeed, the performance extolled Russian military power – the recent victories in the Turkish War, and the preparation of the invasion of Constantinople. The performance premiered on 15 October 1790 at the Hermitage theatre, in the presence of a very selected audience, and with an extraordinary pompous staging. As well as in the case with *Fevéj*, Estherházy attended the performance, and in a letter to his wife testified the full comprehension of the value of the Empress's work and its propagandistic aim:

Je n'ai pas pu juger des détails de la pièce: mais, on est sûr qu'elle est pleine d'esprit, de grands principes d'administration, mis dans la bouche d'Oleg pour l'instruction de son pupille, et je conçois l'enthousiasme qu'elle produit sur des spectateurs qui savent quel est l'auteur de l'ouvrage³⁰.

Musically, the opera is built on episodes composed by Canobbio and Pashkevich that include direct quotes from the repertoire of popular tunes collected in coeval anthologies. This was the typical way composers tried

²⁹ Catherine's letters to Potyomkin reveal details on the commission, including negative comments on the composer in charge. An independent piece, a *Coro dei guerrieri* [Chorus of warriors], is in all likelihood what remains of the music that Cimarosa had composed for the Empress's play. See T. Yamada, op. cit., pp. 18–27.

³⁰ V. Estherházy, op. cit., p. 337, 28 October 1791.

to embody the growing need for national character in coeval music theatre (*Fevaj* was not an isolated case). Differently, the apex of the performance is represented by a play in the play, in which Sarti composed the music according to the ancient Greek modes. This choice, which recalls the aesthetics of the already mentioned *Alessandro e Timoteo*, is conceived as a ‘historically informed’ performance of Euripides’s *Alcestis*, the performance which, as a play within the play, is offered to Oleg by the defeated emperor Leo. At the same time, this combination lays on the coeval belief that Russian folksong derived from the music of the ancient Greeks. This relationship, theorised at that time in early pioneer musicological works by scholars near to the Crown, is nowadays discredited, but during Catherine’s rule served as a theoretical pillar supporting the idea of kinship between the Russian and the ancient Greek people³¹.

In the same period, probably as a consequence of Catherine’s journey to Crimea, Count Nikolay Sheremetev was to exploit such propagandistic themes in an opera he commissioned in 1790 to Gluck’s poet Louis Hurtaut Dancourt (1725–1801) – the librettist of the above-mentioned *Rencontre imprévue* – through his French correspondent and agent for all theatrical matters in Paris, Marie François Hivart (1745–1815), an employee of the Opéra who had been his cello teacher in the early 1770s in the French capital city³². Here is how Monsieur Hivart announced to him that the libretto of the commissioned opera was ready (27 March 1791), revealing to the modern historian the desire to celebrate the Empress:

Это произведение, являющееся по своему характеру работой серьезной и политической, нельзя сравнивать с комической оперой «Самнитские браки».

Есть от чего воспламениться таланту композитора, которому г. гр. поручил написать музыку на эту поэму. Вам остается судить,

³¹ On the music representing the ideal identification of Russian and Greek values, see A. Giust, *Gli inizi del governo di Oleg di Caterina II: Sarti, Canobbio e Paškevič al servizio di un’idea*, “Studi musicali”, 2016, no. 1, pp. 39–66; L. V. Kirillina, *Sarti, Evripid i Tretij Rim*, “Naučnyj vestnik Moskovskoj gosudarstvennoj konservatorii” 2012, III/1, pp. 12–41; B. Brover-Lubovsky, *The “Greek Project” of Catherine the Great and Giuseppe Sarti*, “Journal of Musicological Research” 2013, no. 32/1, pp. 28–61.

³² On the collaboration between Hivart and count Sheremetev for the provision of musical goods that served the count’s desire to manage a theatrical activity, I have recently submitted an article to be included in a special issue on mobility towards Russia in the ‘long 19th century’. See A. Giust, *Networks of Russian Music Theatre around 1800: Grand Tours, Diplomacy, and Patronage*, *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* (forthcoming).

насколько автор оперы г. Данкур держался истины и выполнил Ваши желания увековечить славные и памятные деяние, которые характеризуют царствование Екатерины II, особенно те из них, которые имеют отношение к нашему моменту и делают честь ее редкой доблести и добродетели³³.

According to the short description offered by Nikolay Petrovich's collaborator, *Tomyris, reine des Massagets* [Tomyris, queen of the Massageteans] – as was the title – is a big three-act opera, composed to the precise instructions received from the Count:

Четыре главных действующих лица оперы следующие: ея императорское величество – под видом царицы Томирис, его императорское высочество великий князь и великая княгиня под именами Федора и Пентазили, г. гр. под именем губернатора Барнес³⁴.

The work is scarcely documented, and no evidence demonstrates it was never produced on the stage, since the archives of the Sheremetev estates do not include relevant sources³⁵. However, another celebration based on a 'Turkish' subject was to be composed a few years later, becoming one of the most interesting achievements of these theatres, and once more reflecting the actuality of the Eastern Question on the opera stage. On 22 July 1795, the drama *Zel'mira i Smelon, ili Vzâtie Izmaila* [Zelmira and Smelon, or The capture of Izmail] was staged in Ostankino, where the Sheremetevs had their most outstanding theatre building. The libretto was commissioned to Pavel Sergeevich Potyomkin (1743–1796), a statesman, soldier, writer, and a cousin of Grigory Aleksandrovich. The music by Osip Antonovich Kozlovsky (1757–1831) is nowadays lost, but the author possibly conceived it in the spirit of the celebre polonaise *Grom pobedy, razdavajsâ!*, the hymn he composed on the occasion of the farewell-party organized by Grigory Potyomkin for Catherine at the Tauride Palace in St Petersburg a few months before the death of the former favourite. The libretto evokes the taking of Izmail, stating the eagerness of the defeated enemy to submit to the government of a ruler who showed himself courageous and powerful in battle, but also reliable, piteous and enlightened towards the new subjects.

³³ Hivart's letter to Sheremetev, 24 March 1791. N. A. Elizarova, op. cit., p. 145. The first mention dates from 14 December 1790.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 145.

³⁵ The identity of the composer is not known, nor are primary sources about this work.

The action is set in Izmail, the city-fortress that the Russian army commander Aleksandr Suvorov stormed in 1790, and which was so strategic for the outcome of the Russo-Turkish war. In the plot Zel'mira is the daughter of Osman, a captain of the army that defends the city. She is in love with the Russian leader Smelon, who is a highly esteemed friend of Osman in private life, but an adversary on the battlefield. After begging Osman to surrender to the Russians for the sake of the population living in Izmail, Smelon takes the city, and with his exemplar bravery and pity leads the proud opponent to recognize the superiority of the conquerors. In the final scene, the characters express their position toward the new ruler, which recalls the recognition offered by subjects in *Fevėj* (the Kalmyk delegations) and *Oleg* (Emperor Leo). As typical of Catherine's populism, the choice of embracing the new rulers comes initially from the low people, in a bottom up progression. Moreover, similarly to the case of *The Founding of Athens*, the supremacy is legitimated by the recognition of excellence in terms of good government. Zel'mira's confidant Fatima acknowledges the Russian enlightened customs:

Если верить разным слухам,
Мы не можем пострадать,
Коль в России нельзя Евнухам
Жон в серали запирать³⁶.

As well as Fatima, Chaush eagerly accepts a life in the new Russian country:

Как хотят в Стамбуле судят,
Им там ловко рассуждать;
А меня уж не принудят
Против Русских воевать.
А когда женою ссудят,
Рад и век там проживать³⁷.

So does the chief of the city, Mukhafis, who exhorts his fellow-countrymen to celebrate the "Brave Russians" ("Khrabry Rossy"). The opera ends with a dance and a chorus where the Turks are finally brought together with the Russians.

What emerges from this quick survey is that the 'Greek project' was more prolific in the cultural dimension than it was on the political level, even though it exerted a strong influence on the balance between European

³⁶ [P. S. Potëmkin], *Zel'mira i Smelon, ili Vzätie Izmaila. Liričeskaâ drama*, St Petersburg 1795, p. 56.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

countries, sometimes modifying traditional alliances. Music offered an interesting contribution to support the cultural line dictated by the Crown. Stage works were conceived in different contexts; but they demonstrate common features from the point of view of the allegorical message. Apparently distant people involved in Catherine's plans due to their military, diplomatic or cultural functions, shared the Empress's interests, and despite their different professionalization equally participated to the creation of a system of cultural structures and symbolic texts that can be ascribed to the myth of Potyomkin's villages.

The titles considered in the present essay once more attest to the function of opera as a vehicle for the 'scenario of power'. This was traditionally carried out by Italian performances throughout Europe, but in Russia, the opera had assumed a more explicit political connotation with direct references to coeval political events, from the time of the earliest opera performances, in the 1730s³⁸. For several reasons, the present paper does not include a complete study of the aforementioned scores, so that the number of considered works is maybe too limited to allow for building a systematic theory of the musical strategies employed to fulfil this objective. Still, they demonstrate that Catherine's interest in discovery of national values made her develop such a tradition also in the Russian opera. The impression is that in this phase of the history of Russian culture, music theatre was faithfully serving the Crown in the frame of an early nationalism with a strong loyalist connotation. Anticipating Romanticism, the opera was displaying both national and imperialistic features.

³⁸ This is true, for instance, for the opera that was produced for the coronation of empress Elizabeth Petrovna (1742), *La clemenza di Tito* by Hasse-Dall'Oglio. See my *Cercando l'opera russa: La formazione di una coscienza nazionale nel repertorio operistico del Settecento*, Milan 2014 (notably pp. 41–68).