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Operatic Genres in the Ouevre of Józef Michał Ksawery Poniatowski[*]

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The forgotten composer and opera singer, Prince Józef Michał Ksawery Franciszek Jan Poniatowski (1816–1873), was a well-known figure in the political and musical life of Italy and France. He came from the family of the last king of Poland, Stanisław August Poniatowski — his grandfather was the king's own brother. The family had connections with various powerful European houses and possessed estates throughout Europe, and so it should not seem strange that Józef Michał Ksawery Poniatowski was born in Rome, lived in Florence and worked as Tuscan ambassador in various European capitals. Subsequently, he became a senator of the French Empire at the court of Napoleon III, and on the emperor's abdication joined him in exile in England, where he died.

Poniatowski's musical activities intertwined with his political activities and were particularly linked to the genre of opera. He not only composed operatic works, but also performed their principal tenor parts on more than one occasion. One may assume that he sometimes also bore the costs of performances of his operas, although this and other information requires more exact verification. Thorough studies of his life and work have yet to be undertaken[1]. The bibliography numbers barely a handful of works[2], all of which carry the same — sometimes unverified — information[3].

My own research has yet to be completed, and the present text makes use primarily of my own analyses of selected operatic works by the composer. Accessible sheet music — the manuscripts of scores and piano reductions (published in the nineteenth century by Léon Escudier, a publisher friend of Poniatowski's, and, fragmentarily, by Ricordi of Milan) and also printed opera librettos — is held in various libraries and archives in France, Italy, the USA, the UK, Germany and Poland. The research I have carried out thus far has strengthened my conviction that Poniatowski's music has been forgotten: more than one piano reduction held at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris had uncut leaves, and the sheet of paper bearing the names of those who had studied the manuscript of the opera *Ruy Blas*, held at the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin, contains just my own name[4].

Poniatowski composed a total of twelve operatic works (see below, table 6.1); I gained access to musical material for ten. The other two operas (*Malek Adhel* and *Esmeralda*) are known solely from their librettos. However, on the basis of those books, published on the occasion of the operas' premiere productions, we can gain some idea of the character of these operatic works and determine the genres and traditions to which they belong. Taking into account the clear stylistic similarities among the particular types of opera in the Poniatowski oeuvre, it may be assumed that the rediscovery of the hitherto unavailable music to the missing two operas would not lead to any fundamental changes in the present characterisation of the operatic genres in the composer's legacy.

Poniatowski's oeuvre displays a marked variety with regard to the traditions of operatic genres on which he draws. The most easily discernible difference relates to the composer's references to two national traditions — of Italian and French opera. The generic distinction between operas from these two circles leads to distinctions in the stylistic solutions employed, different types of recitative, aria, ensemble or finale. However, the distinction between Italian and French opera in the Poniatowski oeuvre is not a sufficiently precise qualification, since a variety of operatic genres appear within each of the two national traditions.

	Title	Librettist	Premiere	Libretto (print)	Score (manuscript)	Piano reduction (print)
1	*Giovanni da Procida* dramma tragico 3 acts	Józef Ponia-towski	Lucca 1840	Florence 1840	New York, NY Public Library	
2	*Don Desiderio* dramma giocoso (opera buffa) 2 acts	Cassiano Zaccagnini	Pisa 1840	Venice 1841; Lviv 1878 (in Polish)	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale; Venice, Fondazione Levi	Paris *c.*1858; fragment Milan 1841
3	Ruy Blas tragedia lirica 3 acts	Cassiano Zaccagnini	Lucca 1843	Lucca 1843	Berlin, Staats-bibliothek	fragment Milan *c.*1845
4	*Bonifazio de' Gere-mei* tragedia lirica prologue + 3 acts	Józef Ponia-towski	Rome 1843	Rome 1843	Paris, Opéra	fragment Milan *c.*1845
5	*La sposa d'Abido* tragedia lirica 3 acts	Giovanni Peruzzini	Venice 1846	Venice 1846	Venice, Teatro La Fenice	
6	*Malek Adhel* melo-dramma 3 acts	Domenico Bancalari	Genoa 1846	Genoa 1846		
7	*Esmeralda* dramma lirico 3 acts	Francesco Guidi & Józef Poniatowski	Florence 1847	Florence 1847		
8	*Pierre de Médicis* grand opéra 4 acts	Jules Henry Vernoy de Saint-Georges & Emilien Pacini	Paris 1860	Paris 1860; Milan 1869 (in Italian)	Paris, Opéra	Paris 1860
9	*Au travers du mur* opéra bouffe 1 act	Jules Henry Vernoy de Saint-Georges	Paris 1861	Paris 1861		Paris 1861
10	*L'aventurier* opéra comique 4 acts	Jules Henry Vernoy de Saint-Georges	Paris 1865	Paris 1865		Paris 1869
11	*La contessina* opera [semiseria] 3 acts	Achille Lauz-ières	Paris 1868	Paris 1868 (in Italian & French)	Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale	Paris 1868
12	*Gelmina* dramma lirico 3 acts	Francesco Rizzelli	London 1872	London 1872		London 1872

Table 6.1: The operatic output of Józef Michał Ksawery Poniatowski

In the domain of Italian opera, Poniatowski took as his main model the *bel-canto* opera of the nineteenth century, in the form elaborated by Gioacchino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini and, in particular, Gaetano Donizetti. This is opera on serious, usually tragic, subjects, yet devoid of the ancient and mythological strands that were characteristic of the tradition of *opera seria*, anachronistic by this time. These strands were replaced mainly by historical subjects, although the historical events constitute no more than a backdrop to the pre-

sentation of the fortunes of individual protagonists, which form the principal strand of the action. This model of libretto was developed by the well-known librettists of many operas by Donizetti and Bellini — Felice Romani and Domenico Gilardoni.

Poniatowski referred to this type of opera in seven of his works (see table 6.1, nos. 1, 3–7, 12). The librettos are preserved for all these operas, whereas the available music is for only five. Nonetheless, the stylistic similarities among them allow one to surmise that the same generic model of the Italian *tragedia lirica* inspired Poniatowski in the remaining two works as well (*Malek Adhel* and *Esmeralda*). Although the librettos and scores of all these operas contain a range of generic designations, such as *dramma tragico*, *tragedia lirica*, *dramma lirico* and *melodramma*, we are essentially dealing with the same, unified type of tragic opera indicated above[5]. The librettos of these works (some written by the composer himself) were based on then fashionable novels by George Byron (*La sposa d'Abido*), Victor Hugo (*Ruy Blas*, *Esmeralda*) and Sophie Cottin (*Malek Adhel*), the action of which takes place in former times. Romantic interest in the Middle Ages and the Orient mark the opera *La sposa d'Abido*, set in an Arabian seraglio, and the opera *Malek Adhel*, which deals with the Crusades. A late mediaeval setting (13th–14th c.) is also presented in the operas *Giovanni da Procida*, *Bonifazio de' Geremei* and *Gelmina*. The first of these, *Giovanni da Procida*, was probably familiar to Giuseppe Verdi, who took up the same subject in *Les Vêpres siciliennes* (1855)[6]. Poniatowski made use of some of the material from his first opera in the later *Bonifazio de' Geremei*, lifting several whole scenes from *Giovanni da Procida*[7].

In terms of musical solutions, Poniatowski's serious Italian operas are characterised by the domination of the vocal parts, linked to the cantilena type of melody and the virtuosic way the voices are used. The other elements of a work are treated subordinately: the rhythms are dominated by stereotypical dotted and dance rhythms, the harmonies rarely venture beyond the basic functional relations, and the instrumentation bears conventional traits. The preserved operas have a numbered structure, clearly drawing on the model proposed by Bellini. The numbers are considerably expanded; their proportions increase whilst their quantity decreases. For example, in *Giovanni da*

Procida and *Bonifazio de' Geremei*, besides the overture, there are only nine musical numbers (arias, ensembles and finales). The basic type of aria is the two-section *cantabile – cabaletta*, supplemented by initial *recitativi accompagnati* and linking passages, in which other characters (*pertichini*) or the chorus sometimes sing. Equally conventionalised is the structure of duets and other ensembles, usually displaying a two- or three-part pattern with changing tempo and changing types of interaction between the voices (alternating or simultaneous singing).

The Poniatowski legacy contains a single comic opera, *Don Desiderio*. This work was performed many times, in different Italian locations, and also abroad, including in Paris (1858) and Lviv (1878)[8]. Written in the published piano reduction is the designation *opera buffa*, and the score, preserved in manuscript form, has the term *dramma giocoso*, which confirms Poniatowski's reference to an earlier tradition of comic opera with the introduction of more serious strands or characters derived from *opera seria*[9]. In this particular opera, the more serious strand is linked to the supposed death of one of the protagonists, Riccardo, around which the dramatic tension is built. Two 'catastrophes' — the news of Riccardo's 'death' and the financial difficulties resulting form the premature opening of his will — give the composer the opportunity for musical characterisation drawn from serious opera, yet most of the happenings on stage are of a farcical character, filled with gags and ineptitude on the part of the titular don Desiderio, an absent-minded and extremely unlucky hero (see figure 6.1).

The musical construction of the opera *Don Desiderio* displays a number of allusions to earlier generic traditions of Italian *opera buffa*. One notes above all the conventional *recitativi secchi*, the notation of which still features a figured bass. The arias are generally of a two-part structure, whilst the means of comic characterisation they contain are reminiscent of solutions familiar from the operas of Mozart and Rossini. The presentation of the comic characters is served by a ubiquitous *parlando*, of eighteenth-century provenance, whilst the recitatives often portray humoristic and parodistic situations. The instrumentation is conventional throughout, lacking in concertante elements

Fig. 6.1. *Don Desiderio*, act I.

or attempts at linking particular characters and dramatic situations with specific musical procedures.

Particularly interesting with regard to its generic qualification is another of Poniatowski's Italian operas, *La contessina*. Although the composer did not write any generic designation into the score, the dramatic structure of the libretto and the work's musical narration point to the *semiseria* genre. This genre, derived from the French *comédie larmoyante*, was associated in the nineteenth century with genre scenes and sentimental content, and the protagonists' fortunes played out on stage, at times loaded with dramatic clashes, ended happily. The dramaturgy of such typical *semiseria* operas as Rossini's *La gazza ladra* or Bellini's *La sonnambula* corresponds to serious opera, distinguishing this genre from the *dramma giocoso*, which, in terms of structure and style, represents the category of comic opera.

Yet the case of the opera *La contessina* is somewhat more complicated. The main plot of the opera, relating to an attempt at marrying an impoverished duke with the daughter of the wealthy burgher Abbondio, constitutes a distant echo of an eighteenth-century comic opera of the same title and similar dramatic solutions, written by Florian Gassmann (1770)[10]. Gassmann's *La contessina*, however, constitutes an example of *opera buffa*, one in which the humour and satire — serving to present vices that are characteristic of the different social strata — are only too clearly discernible. In Poniatowski's opera, written one hundred years after Gassmann's work, the theme of class rivalry is supplemented with sentimental content. However, the calculated conjugal union, aimed at the duke's enrichment and the bourgeoise's social advancement, falls through. The duke falls in love with Stella, an unfortunate girl who has lived through a storm catastrophe at sea, but has paid for her survival with the loss of the faculty of speech. The character of Stella constitutes an unquestionable allusion to Fenella, the titular heroine of Daniel Auber's *La muette de Portici* (1828). Stella, like Fenella, communicates with the other characters by means of gesture and mime, and the scenes in which she participates abound in music of a clearly illustrational character (see figure 6.2).

Fig. 6.2. *La contessina*, act. II., mime scene of Stella.

Although the idea with the mute Stella shifted the opera's dramaturgy in a more serious direction and lent the work melodramatic accents, the composer did not completely abandon the typically comic characterisation of characters and situations. In *La contessina*, this sphere is connected with the figure of Abbondio, who, in line with eighteenth-century comic tradition, has a meaningful name[11] and is characterised in a humorous way, with the use of *parlando*, with passages imitating lamentation, chuckling or buffoonery. Indeed, the very presence of the part of a *buffo* bass is regarded as one of the fundamental determinants of the *semiseria* genre[12].

In spite of their generic differences, Poniatowski's Italian operas display a number of references to the norms and compositional procedures that were prevalent in his day. One is struck by a certain conservatism in the composer

— the comic opera genre in that traditional eighteenth-century version seems rather backward-looking around the year 1840, as is indicated by the clear move away from composing comic operas observed in Italian output. Produced in that same year was Verdi's unsuccessful comic opera *Un giorno di regno*, and Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* (1843) should probably be seen as marking the end of the *opera buffa* tradition (1843).

Like *opera buffa* in the 1840s, so *opera semiseria* constitutes a less than current category towards the end of the 1860s. In comparison with his Italian operas, Poniatowski's French operas, meanwhile, appear more up-to-date in their apprehension of genre and style. It is also worth pointing out their much more carefully elaborated instrumentation, and also the more interesting harmonies and signs of the composer aspiring to an individualised treatment of subject matter.

Poniatowski's French operatic output comprises three works composed at the beginning of the 1860s, in which the composer draws on two basic generic traditions of French opera: *Pierre de Médicis* is an example of *grand opéra*, modelled on the style of Giacomo Meyerbeer, whilst the other two works — *Au travers du mur* and *L'Aventurier* — are examples of the composer taking inspiration from the generic tradition of *opéra comique*. The librettos to all three compositions were written by Jules Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges, an esteemed poet and author of librettos to stage works by Auber, Donizetti, Halévy, Adam and Flotow, who collaborated on several occasions with Eugène Scribe. The construction of the librettos to these works and an analysis of their dramaturgy has already been presented in part by Matthias Brzoska[13], although this author did not look at their music.

The performance of the opera *Pierre de Médicis* on the stage of the Paris Opera (1860) was Poniatowski's greatest triumph. In accordance with the *grand opéra* tradition, the individual fortunes of the protagonists — the love triangle of Laura and the two brothers Julien and Pierre de Médicis — were presented in the context of events of a political and social character, since the brothers' rivalry concerns not only Laura's hand, but also rule over the state. The canvas for the libretto was a fifteenth-century story in which a key role was played by the Dominican Girolamo Savonarola, present in the

opera as Fra Antonio, the Grand Inquisitor. Introducing the figure of a Grand Inquisitor into the action of a *grand opéra* was quite a common device in those times; suffice it to mention such examples of operas produced in Paris as Donizetti's *Dom Sébastien de Portugal* (1843), Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* (1865) and Verdi's *Don Carlos* (1867). In *Pierre de Médicis*, too, the Grand Inquisitor has demonic features, and his musical parts are marked by a serious, dramatic character. The gloomy tone of the Grand Inquisitor's utterances are emphasised by deep-sounding instruments in the orchestra — trombones, ophicleides and bassoons (see figure 6.3).

Fig. 6.3. *Pierre de Médicis*, act III., tercetto.

Another feature in keeping with this generic tradition is the use of expansive ballets and grand tableaux — scenes in which many people (soloists, chorus and extras) take part. The whole of the second act of *Pierre de Médicis* was planned as one grand operatic finale, presenting the celebrations of the feast day *La Luminara* taking place in Pisa. The central moment in the feast is marked by a shot from a cannon — the signal for all the citizens to light a lamp. In the Paris production, a bright gas light was used, to applause

from the audience. That is just one of the opera's many attractions: there are
also a dice-playing scene (with the participation of the chorus), an extended
allegorical ballet and a refined ensemble bringing the act to a close, in which
we see the first serious confrontation between the brothers.

Of a completely different, lighter, character with regard to content and
musical setting are Poniatowski's two other French operas, referring to the
generic tradition of *opéra comique*. This is marked above all in the presence
of spoken texts or melodrama (the recitation of a text against a musical
background) and in the simplified construction of the aria and ensemble parts,
generally based on the principle of stanzaic couplets. In line with the idea of
opéra comique, the opera's subject matter is dominated by genre scenes, not
necessarily comic, although humorous moments do occur several times over
the course of the work.

In the action of the one-act opera *Au travers du mur*, most important is
the love plot, yet a fundamental role in the relationship between the lovers is
played by music and song, thanks to which the couple fall in love and then
get to know one another. Although the construction of this opera, as Brzoska
notes, displays certain influences from the style of works by Nicolas Isouard
from the beginning of the nineteenth century[14], the key role of music compels
one to treat this work as one of many examples of the lively tradition of 'op-
eras about opera', present from the eighteenth century onwards[15]. The most
interesting scene is the duet between two musicians, Pascal and Thomassini,
discussing an aria composed, and presented, by Pascal. Thomassini criticises
the aria for its prolixity, proposing, and performing, in its place his own ver-
sion (see figures 6.4 a and 6.4 b).

Fig. 6.4. *Au travers du mur*, duet, air *Ombre d'une fille si chère* by Pascal (a) and Thomassini (b).

Despite the fact that the opera *Au travers du mur* had the character of an occasional composition[16], its style seems interesting, and the themes presented with an awareness of the spirit of French opera. Meanwhile, the parodistic element that surfaces throughout the course of the work should be considered within the context of the operettas of Jacques Offenbach. This similarity is also testified by the generic designation *opéra bouffe* which appears on the title page of the piano reduction of Poniatowski's opera published in 1861[17].

L'Aventurier, meanwhile, is characterised by a lively tempo to the events presented and an attractive shape to the libretto. The action takes place in Mexico, where the titular globetrotter — the Spaniard Don Manoel — arrives with his compatriot Anita, whom he has met on the way there. But the love interest concerns Manoel and Donna Fernanda, niece of the Spanish viceroy (governor) of Mexico. This provides a pretext for introducing over the course of the opera a number of musical allusions to Spanish style: a dashing *bolero* performed by Fernanda and also a hot-blooded *seguidilla* sung by Manoel and Anita (see figure 6.5).

Fig. 6.5. *L'Aventurier*, act I., Spanish seguidilla.

One interesting feature of this opera is the presence of a plot line concerning the subject of social inequality. This is linked chiefly with the character of the old Mexican miner Quirino, who speaks in hostile terms of the colonial exploitation of his countrymen by the Spanish. The problem of imperialist capitalism and social inequality clearly surfaces in a number of places in the opera, including in the musical-theatrical creation of Don César Annibal de Monte Coucoulos, a rich Mexican acerbically characterised in both language and music.

In his forgotten operas, Prince Poniatowski comes across as a connoisseur of nineteenth-century Italian and French operatic traditions. Through his contacts with outstanding figures of his era and his friendships with the likes of Napoleon III and Rossini, he certainly had many opportunities to acquaint himself with current operatic repertory, from which he drew a number of inspirations for his own output. The question arises as to the Polish dimension of this output and possible Polish elements in the composer's musical language. Well, Poniatowski was not active in Poland; he was every inch an international figure, and in his music he turned to a variety of European inspirations. And if a lively polonaise from the land of his fathers appeared among them, as in Julien's *cabaletta* added to the Italian version of the opera *Pierre de Médicis* (see figure 6.6), it undoubtedly signifies no more than a wish to embellish the musical language of his operas, as in the case of the bolero (*L'Aventurier*) or Tyrolean ländler (*Gelmina*).

Fig. 6.6. *Pierre de Médicis* (Italian version), act II., cabaletta of Julian.

Notes

1 'Poniatowski's oeuvre has yet to be subjected to detailed research' (see Irena Poniatowska, 'Poniatowski, Józef', in: *Encyklopedia Muzyczna PWM*, ed. Elżbieta Dziębowska, vol. viii. Kraków 2004, p. 153.

2 The main biographical study is Andrea Busiri Vici, *I Poniatowski e Roma*, (Florence 1971), in: particular the chapter 'La discendenza di Stanislao Poniatowski', pp. 452–480. Poniatowski's works, meanwhile, have thus far been the subject of only one analytical study: Matthias Brzoska, 'Die französischen Opern Poniatowskis', in: Christoph-Hellmut Mahling and Kristina Pfarr (eds.), *Deutsche Musik im Wegekreuz zwischen Polen und Frankreich: Zum Problem musikalischer Wechselbeziehungen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Tutzing 1996, pp. 45–55.

3 E.g. the fact that the opera *Gelmina* is a revised version of the opera *La contessina* (see I. Poniatowska, entry 'Poniatowski, Józef', in: *Encyklopedia Muzyczna PWM*; I. Poniatowska, 'Poniatowski, Józef', in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, vol. xx, London 2002, p. 92; also Biancamaria Antolini, 'Poniatowski, Giuseppe', in: *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Neue... Auflage*, ed. Ludwig Finscher, Personenteil, xiii, Kassel 2005, p. 760).

4 I. Poniatowska ('Poniatowski, Józef', in: *The New Grove*) makes no mention of this manuscript.

5 It must not be forgotten, however, that the notion 'lirico' in Italian signifies a work to be sung (teatro lirico = operatic theatre).

6 See 'Vêpres siciliennes, Les', in: *Dizionario dell'opera*, ed. Piero Gelli, Milan 2002, p. 1309.

7 I have yet to carry out comparative studies concerning these two operas, although I intend to address this issue over the course of further research into Poniatowski's operatic output. At the present stage, therefore, I am unable to state to what extent the composer made use of earlier music in the new opera. One may presume, however, that he took not only the text, but also the musical setting.

8 The Biblioteka Narodowa in Warsaw is in possession of a copy of the Polish translation of the libretto, made by Leon Sygietyński: *Don Desiderio, opera komiczna w 3 aktach, słowa Kassjana Zaccagnini, muzyka ks. J. Poniatowskiego, przekład Leona Sygietyńskiego*, Lviv 1878. A piano reduction published by Escudier (Paris, n.d., plate no. L.E. 1734) carries the designation 'opera buffa in due atti', whereas the manuscript score (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale D.14.136) has the division into three acts.

9 In the second half of the eighteenth century the term *dramma giocoso* can be regarded as equivalent to *opera buffa*. See Jarosław Mianowski, *Afekt w operach Mozarta i Rossiniego* [*Affect in the operas of Mozart and Rossini*], Poznań 2004, pp. 146–147.

10 Libretto by Carlo Goldoni in arrangement by Marco Coltellini.

11 In Italian, 'abbondanza' means abundance, wealth, affluence.

12 See Julien Budden, 'Opera semiseria', entry in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Stanley Sadie, vol. iii, London 1997, p. 696.

13 M. Brzoska, 'Die französischen Opern Poniatowskis', op. cit.

14 Ibidem, p. 45.

15 E.g. Florian Gassmann, *Opera seria* (1769), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Der Schauspieldirektor* (1786), Antonio Salieri, *Prima la musica poi le parole* (1786), Albert Lortzing, *Die Opernprobe* (1851), etc. See also Marcin Gmys, *Technika teatru w*

teatrze i jej operowe konkretyzacje [*The technique of theatre in theatre and its operatic concretisations*] (Toruń, 1999).

16 It was intended for the farewell performance of the singer Battaille, who was leaving the Théâtre Italien. See M. Brzoska, op. cit., p. 51.

17 It is interesting that the cover of this same edition of the piano reduction of the opera features the generic designation *opéra comique*. This testifies the kinship between these two lighter operatic genres. As for the generic notion of *opéra bouffe* itself, it only appeared towards the end of the 1850s to denote the style of Offenbach's works for stage, full of satire, which only later began to be called operettas. See M. Elizabeth C. Bartlet, 'Opéra bouffe', entry in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, xviii, 472–474.