1 – Introduction

1.1 Objectives and Aims

Initially, the objective of this study was to trace the evolution of female characters within Soviet Russian operas that deal with *Soviet* subjects and are set in *Soviet* space and time, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of female representation and the portrayal of Soviet femininity on the operatic stage. While the creation of a 'gendered' operatic sequence seemed sufficient to satisfy my personal curiosity, a significant realization emerged after a period of immersion in the material and interpretation of the selected operatic repertoire. A rather banal yet striking phenomenon suddenly became clear: The Stalinist operatic canon is predominantly marked by *male* leads, whereas the post-Stalinist operatic canon more often features *female* leads. In other words, the post-Stalin operatic subjectivity, although formulated by male composers, is commonly anchored in the perspectives of female agents. This simple observation led to a series of research questions, ultimately shaping the trajectory of this study.

Suddenly, the main objective shifted from creating a gender-focused overview of selected operatic narratives to specifically tracing the evolution of the Soviet protagonists and storyworlds, progressing from being male and masculinity-centered during the Stalin era to becoming female and femininity-centered in the post-Stalin long sixties. Beyond this gender shift, this study also aims to capture the evolution of Soviet female operatic *dramatis personae*, moving from peripheral figures accompanying the male hero during the Stalinist era to intricate, pensive, and reflective female heroines with their own agency in post-Stalin times. The central questions this study poses are: What cultural and societal circumstances led from the 'masculinization' of the Stalinist operatic canon to the subsequent

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'feminization' on the Soviet Russian stage during the long sixties? In what ways do these processes reflect and support broader political and cultural changes? How do male and female characters both support and subvert the monumental Soviet operatic system?

One might pose a question, and it would be a fair one: Why is a study on gender representation in Soviet opera necessary? The upward trend in research within the broader field of Soviet studies signals the need to simultaneously reconsider the significance of Soviet music, for a deeper understanding not only of the Soviet Union but also of our contemporary context. While a musicologist might acknowledge the potential 'value' of this study to the intersecting fields of gender and opera studies, it also aims to transcend this relatively narrow disciplinary affiliation and contribute to our understanding of global political, social, and cultural phenomena of transdisciplinary significance.

The power of music, particularly Soviet and Russian, and its political and cultural significance suddenly gained new relevance at the time of writing this study due to the Russo-Ukrainian war, which began in 2014 and escalated in February 2022. The political turmoil kindled a heated discourse on culture and cultural exports but also kick-started two simultaneous processes—the boycott of Russian music in the West and the revival of Soviet music on Russian stages. These ongoing occurrences not only raise inquiries about the role of music in today's society but also challenge the idea that music exists separately from ongoing political unrest or is devoidof ideological connotations. As written by musicologist Christoph Flamm in his study on the current-day boycott of Russian music: "To say that music is fundamentally unrelated to politics is not only naive; it is objectively false."[1] This being the case, research on music, and opera specifically, can never be about music only—it necessarily unveils an entire gallery of political, social, and cultural values, rules, and dogmas of the era in which it was created.

This study aims to not only provide a holistic perspective on the representation of women in Soviet opera and their role in the Soviet cultural imagination but also unveil the turbulent cultural dynamics of a specific period in Soviet history. The aim of integrating opera into the broader academic discourse on Soviet culture and the arts contributes to the ongoing research on Soviet ideology, Soviet subjectivity, and gender representation

1 Christoph Flamm, "'Ewiges Schandmal'? Musik-Boykott in Kriegszeiten," in: *Die Tonkunst* 16/3 (2022), pp. 344–353, here p. 353. Another interesting and relevant essay by the same author is his study on the enduring European tradition of depicting political and military aggression through music. See Christoph Flamm, "Der Krieg der Töne. Aus dem Giftschrank der Musikgeschichte," in: *Ruperto Carola* 17 (2021), pp. 16–23.

in Soviet arts and culture. Furthermore, this study aims to reintegrate Soviet Russian opera as a whole, moving beyond the relatively well-researched Stalinist operatic canon and the central figures of Soviet music history who have stood the test of time. Beyond contributing to the flourishing fields of cultural studies and gender studies focused on the Soviet period, as well as to the research on Soviet opera, this study aspires to enrich the musicological scholarship on gender and opera in general.

Transcending disciplinary boundaries emerged as the most appropriate strategy to effectively engage with the material at hand. While this research is rooted in the field of musicology, and traditional musicological methods and tools were employed to approach the topic and material, a more comprehensive overview and a convincing portrayal of the evolution of Soviet operatic female heroines required drawing inspiration from a broad spectrum of humanities and social sciences. Various disciplines, subdisciplines, theories, and methodological frameworks were incorporated to provide a holistic perspective, as the material, positioned at the intersection of music, text, gender, culture, and ideology, demanded a multifaceted approach from the outset.

1.2 Overview of the Relevant Literature: Opera—Culture—Gender

Systematic research on gender and opera is far from novel. In recent years, this trend has yielded fruitful results, with ongoing research and publications on the subject. Apart from edited volumes that offer a comprehensive overview of current opera scholarship, topically spanning different centuries and regions and exploring various aspects of gender representation in opera throughout history,[2] the last two decades have witnessed a surge in extensive and highly specialized publications. In recent years, musicologist Wendy Heller, specializing in the study of Baroque opera, authored a study on female representation in Venetian opera, approaching it as a reflection

2 See Mary Ann Smart (ed.), *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, Princeton, NJ 2000; Carmen Ottner (ed.), *Frauengestalten in der Oper des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts (mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der deutschsprachigen, italienischen und französischen Oper)*, Vienna 2003; Rachel Cowgill and Hilary Poriss (eds.), *The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century*, New York 2012; Ian Biddle and Kirsten Gibson (eds.), *Masculinity and Western Musical Practice*, Farnham 2009; Philip Purvis (ed.), *Masculinity in Opera: Gender, History, and New Musicology*, New York and Oxford 2013.

of real-life social contexts and political allegories and mythologies.[3] Another contribution to the field is musicologist Kristi Brown-Montesano's monograph on the portrayal of female characters in operas by W. A. Mozart.[4] Susan Rutherford, a musicologist specializing in nineteenth-century Italian opera, explored female representation in Giuseppe Verdi's operas, simultaneously addressing female performers and the reception of Verdi's operatic repertoire.[5] Similarly, Suzanne Aspden, a musicologist specializing in eighteenth-century opera, examined the public perception of prima donnas Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni while also delving into the question of gender codification on the operatic stage.[6] While the focus of opera and gender scholarship has been predominantly centered on Western operatic traditions, there have been certain departures from this dominant stream. An example is a recent study by Zhuying Li, scholar in the fields of gender and cultural studies, which examines female representation in opera films produced during the Chinese Cultural Revolution.[7] Although there are no recent monographs dedicated specifically to women, female characters, and the 'feminization' of Soviet opera, certain studies have partially addressed these topics vis-à-vis Russian imperial musical culture. For instance, literary scholar Julie Buckler's study focuses on the role opera played in nineteenth-century Russian cultural life, partially referring to Russian prima donnas and their characters' narrative functions within the operatic canon.[8] Ethnomusicologist Inna Naroditskaya's study explores the intersection of opera, theater, gender, and political power in Russia from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, focusing on the role of empresses, particularly Catherine the Great, in shaping cultural and political narratives through theatrical productions.[9] Cultural historian Anna Fishzon's study deals with the reception of opera in late imperial Russia and investigates the roles of audiences, opera producers, and the media in forming operatic 'fandom.' Interestingly, Fishzon also utilizes the

3 Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, Berkeley 2003.

4 Kristi Brown-Montesano, *Understanding the Women of Mozart's Operas*, Berkeley 2007.

5 Susan Rutherford, *Verdi, Opera, Women*, Cambridge and New York 2013.

6 Suzanne Aspden, *The Rival Sirens: Performance and Identity on Handel's Operatic Stage*, Cambridge and New York 2013.

7 Zhuying Li, *Gender Hierarchy of Masculinity and Femininity during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Revolutionary Opera Films*, Oxford and New York 2021.

8 Julie Buckler, *The Literary Lorgnette: Attending Opera in Imperial Russia*, Stanford 2000.

9 Inna Naroditskaya, *Bewitching Russian Opera: The Tsarina from State to Stage*, Oxford 2012.

term 'feminization' in her study, although in regard to the "feminization of fandom" and "feminization of consumption."[10]

Although an exclusive and all-encompassing history of Soviet opera is yet to be written, there has nonetheless been a stream of scholarship offering insights into the development and state of this pinnacle musical genre in the Soviet Union. For instance, Levon Hakobian's history of Soviet music seamlessly integrates the evolution of opera into the historical overview,[11] and so does Boris Schwarz's, which, though published four decades ago, remains a highly relevant study.[12] Additionally, the three-volume edition on the Soviet and Russian music of the twentieth century edited by Mikhail Tarakanov and Yelena Dolinskaya,[13] along with Dorothea Redepenning's two-volume edition dedicated to Russian and Soviet music history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,[14] offer specific chapters dealing with Soviet opera throughout the decades. The editions by Tarakanov, Dolinskaya, and Redepenning served as a particular source of inspiration for structuring this study, as they, in addition to providing a general historical overview, also offer analyses and interpretations of selected operas. Furthermore, important sources for examining specifically Sergey Prokofiev's Soviet operatic oeuvre are Simon Morrison's *The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years*[15] and Nathan Seinen's *Prokofiev's Soviet Operas*.[16]

In addition to music histories, there is a line of relatively recent scholarship addressing Soviet music, implicitly or partially including opera, in a more contextual, holistic, and interdisciplinary manner. In her book on the role of "classical music" in Soviet-era myth-building, Marina Raku delves into the questions of musical heritage and its reception, simultaneously shedding light on the development of Soviet opera.[17] Covering similar topics to Raku, musicologist Pauline Fairclough, in her work *Classics for the*

10 Anna Fishzon, *Fandom, Authenticity, and Opera: Mad Acts and Letter Scenes in Fin-de-Siècle Russia*, New York 2013.

11 Levon Hakobian, *Music of the Soviet Era: 1917–1991*, Oxford and New York ²2017.

12 Boris Schwarz, *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, 1917–1981, enlarged edition, Bloomington, IN 1983.

13 Mikhail Tarakanov (ed.), *Istoriia sovremennoĭ otechestvennoĭ muzyki*, vol. 1 (1917–1941), Moscow 2005; Mikhail Tarakanov (ed.), *Istoriía sovremennoĭ otechestvennoĭ muzyki*, vol. 2 (1941–1958), Moscow 1999; Elena Dolinskaía (ed.), *Istoriía sovremennoĭ otechestvennoĭ muzyki*, vol. 3 (1960–1990), Moscow 2001.

14 Dorothea Redepenning, *Geschichte der russischen und der sowjetischen Musik*, 2 vols., Laaber 2008.

15 Simon Morrison, *The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years*, Oxford 2009.

16 Nathan Seinen, *Prokofiev's Soviet Operas*, Cambridge 2019.

17 Marina Raku, *Muzykal'naia klassika v mifotvorchestve sovetskoĭ ėpokhi*, Moscow 2014.

Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity Under Lenin and Stalin, examines the political dynamics of repertoire within Soviet musical culture.[18] Two valuable contributions by musicologist Marina Frolova-Walker also touch upon opera in the Soviet period: *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* explores the codification of musical nationalism and the essence of the Russian national music style,[19] while *Stalin's Music Prize: Soviet Culture and Politics* focuses on musicians and composers who were recipients of the prestigious Stalin Prize.[20]

The scholarship offering a broader perspective on Soviet culture has been rather extensive in recent decades. In 2006, anthropologist Alexei Yurchak published his seminal study *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, which delves into the culture and society of late Socialism.[21] Katerina Clark, one of the pivotal scholars in the field of Russian and Slavic literature, arts, and culture in general—widely known for her study *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*,[22] which, despite first being published in the 1980s, continues to influence contemporary scholarship on Soviet literary and cultural narratives—recently contributed to the field with *Moscow, The Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941*.[23] This work offers a conceptual reading of the cultural history of the Soviet 1930s, exploring Moscow's transformation into a cultural and intellectual Mecca. Historian Michael David-Fox's study *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* dissects the conundrum surrounding the concept of Soviet modernity and aims to define its essence.[24]

In addition to examining the general cultural flux throughout the Soviet era, scholarship on gender and gender representation in Soviet culture and arts has been equally fruitful in recent times. The edited volume *Gender in*

18 Pauline Fairclough, *Classics for the Masses: Shaping Soviet Musical Identity Under Lenin and Stalin*, New Haven, CT and London 2016.

19 Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin*, New Haven, CT 2007.

20 Marina Frolova-Walker, *Stalin's Music Prize: Soviet Culture and Politics*, New Haven, CT 2016. Furthermore, Frolova-Walker co-edited a collection of essays providing heterogenous insights into various aspects essential for understanding Soviet musical culture and identity. See Patrick Zuk and Marina Frolova-Walker (eds.), *Russian Music since 1917: Reappraisal and Rediscovery*, Oxford 2017.

21 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton, NJ 2006.

22 Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, Chicago, IL and London 1981.

23 Katerina Clark, *Moscow, The Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941*, Cambridge, MA 2011.

24 Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union*, Pittsburgh, PA 2015.

Russian History and Culture delves into the question of gender in Russian society and culture from the late seventeenth century up to the Soviet period.[25] Similarly, *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, focusing on a slightly broader timeframe, examines—as insinuated by the title—men and masculine identities.[26] The volume *Gender and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Russian Culture* offers an extensive perspective on the interconnection between gender and the construction of Soviet identity through a set of interdisciplinary essays.[27] Furthermore, *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union* presents a similarly interdisciplinary collage on the status of women in the Soviet Union, exploring the changes and advancements in gender identities and roles as well as female representation in various narrative and discursive practices.[28]

Recent scholarship on gender representation in Soviet arts has proven particularly prolific in the fields of visual arts and film studies. Art historian Susanne Ramm-Weber dedicated her study *Mit der Sichel in der Hand: Mythos und Weiblichkeit in der sowjetischen Kunst der dreißiger Jahre* to the exploration of the codification of femininity in Stalinist visual culture during the 1930s.[29] Cultural and social historian Claire McCallum, in her study *The Fate of the New Man: Representing and Reconstructing Masculinity in Soviet Visual Culture, 1945–1965*,[30] delves into the evolving concept of Soviet masculinity after World War II, grounding her research in visual studies while situating it against the backdrop of broader historical and cultural narratives within the ever-changing Soviet cultural landscape of the post-war years. Historian Erica Fraser's *Military Masculinity and Postwar Recovery in the Soviet Union*,[31] which partially relies on visual materials, explores the notion of military identity as a pinnacle form of Soviet masculinity in the years following World War II.

When it comes to film studies, John Haynes's *New Soviet Man: Gender and Masculinity in Stalinist Soviet Cinema* offers a comprehensive overview

25 Linda Edmondson (ed.), *Gender in Russian History and Culture*, New York 2001.

26 Barbara Evans Clements, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healy (eds.), *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, Basingstoke and New York 2002.

27 Helena Goscilo and Andrea Lanoux (eds.), *Gender and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Russian Culture*, DeKalb, IL 2006.

28 Melanie Ilic (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, London 2018.

29 Susanne Ramm-Weber, *Mit der Sichel in der Hand. Mythos und Weiblichkeit in der sowjetischen Kunst der dreißiger Jahre*, Köln 2006.

30 Claire E. McCallum, *The Fate of the New Man: Representing and Reconstructing Masculinity in Soviet Visual Culture, 1945–1965*, DeKalb, IL 2018).

31 Erica L. Fraser, *Military Masculinity and Postwar Recovery in the Soviet Union*, Toronto 2019.

of Soviet masculine archetypes in Stalinist cinematography.[32] The edited volume *Women in Soviet Film: The Thaw and Post-Thaw Periods* presents a series of essays exploring the representation of women in Soviet films during the post-Stalin era,[33] offering new findings in the field beyond the similar volume, *Red Women on the Silver Screen: Soviet Women and Cinema from the Beginning to the End of the Communist Era*,[34] which appeared almost twenty years prior. In his study *Men Out of Focus: The Soviet Masculinity Crisis in the Long Sixties*,[35] historian and specialist in gender studies with an emphasis on the Soviet Union Marko Dumančić examines the crisis of masculinity during the Soviet long sixties through the lens of Soviet cinematography, addressing grand-scale cultural and political changes. While this study primarily focuses on music, specifically opera, it effectively contributes to and aligns with the findings of broader cultural studies, enhancing our understanding not only of Soviet music history but also Soviet culture in a broader sense.

1.3 Masculinization and Feminization

Although one might initially accept the argument of the 'masculinization' of the Stalinist opera project and the 'feminization' of the opera of the long sixties based merely on the enumeration of operas with male versus female leads, it is crucial to delineate these processes more thoroughly, as the usage of the two terms extends beyond mere quantitative justification. I conceptualize the 'masculinization' of opera as the process of emphasizing and reinforcing not only male operatic figures but also masculine roles, social arenas, practices, and values. In articulating this definition, I draw upon the writings of the prominent sociologist and pioneer of masculinity studies Raewyn Connell, who describes 'masculinity' as "simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture."[36] This definition is particularly fruitful in the context of this study, as it indicates that 'masculinity' is not something exclusively tied to male bodies, further implying the possibility of women/female

32 John Haynes, *New Soviet Man: Gender and Masculinity in Stalinist Soviet Cinema*, Manchester and New York 2003.

33 Marina Rojavin and Tim Harte (eds.), *Women in Soviet Film: The Thaw and Post-Thaw Periods*, Oxford and New York 2018.

34 Lynne Attwood (ed.), *Red Women on the Silver Screen: Soviet Women and Cinema from the Beginning to the End of the Communist Era*, London 1993.

35 Marko Dumančić, *Men Out of Focus: The Soviet Masculinity Crisis in the Long Sixties*, Toronto 2021.

36 Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, Berkeley, CA ²2005, p. 71.

characters likewise participating at 'masculinity.' Consequently, Connell's 'masculinity' can be understood as a social role and position, as well as a set of behaviors and practices that influences both personal identities and the broader culture. Specifically, within this study, the 'masculinization' of Soviet opera refers not only to a focus on male figures and the use of male bodies as principal agents in navigating and exploring Soviet operatic narratives, but also to a persistent display of masculinity, patriarchal values, and militant and martial positions and practices. Additionally, 'masculinization' emphasizes exteriority, physicality, and heroism, commonly at the expense of exploring the protagonists' inner and emotional worlds. While Stalinist opera typically portrayed strong and politically engaged figures embodying Soviet values of heroism and patriotism, the operas of the long sixties often featured protagonists who navigated social and political arenas with a nuanced and, at times, critical perspective. The emphasis on 'masculinity' in Stalinist opera can be seen as a tool for reinforcing a patriarchal and militaristic state ideology, whereas the emergence of 'femininity' in later operas attempts to explore and critique these same ideologies.

Connell rose to academic prominence by pioneering the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity,' which she describes as "constructed in relation to women and to subordinated masculinities,"[37] and "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees [...] the dominant position of men and the subordination of women."[38] She further explains that cultural ideals of masculinity often do not correspond to the realities of most men's lives, asserting that "the winning of hegemony often involves the creation of models of masculinity which are quite specifically fantasy figures."[39] Moreover, Connell rejects the notion of 'hegemonic femininity,' introducing instead the parallel term 'emphasized femininity,' which is defined as "compliance with this subordination [of women to men] and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men."[40] The phenomenon of 'emphasized femininity' aligns with the masculinization of opera, where many female characters are reduced to submissive and subordinate figures—gentle, passive, and perpetually oppressed companions to the Stalinist 'fantasy figures.'

Conversely, the feminization of Soviet opera represents a diametrically opposite process. The binary opposition of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine,'

37 Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*, Cambridge 1987, p. 186.

38 Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 77.

39 Connell, *Gender and Power*, p. 184.

40 Ibid., p. 183.

a concept famously deconstructed by Judith Butler,[41] serves as a foundational framework for understanding these developments. The phenomenon of feminization stands not only for a sudden pronounced interest in female protagonists during the long sixties and the creation of a line of 'gender-conscious' female leads, but also for interest in female societal position; deconstruction of the militant and martial values and practices as well as of the martial and heroic landscapes; and focus on interiority at the expense of exteriority and the corporeal, or, in other words, interest in the emotional and oftentimes tragic circumstances experienced by the protagonists in question.

Another pair of terms closely related to the processes in question is the 'male gaze' and the 'female gaze.' The 'male gaze,' famously coined by film theorist Laura Mulvey, "projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly," and in this view, the female figure serves "as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium."[42] As implied by this definition, the 'male gaze' is not solely tied to the male author, even though all the analyzed operas in this study were composed by men. The 'gaze' also pertains to the audience and, crucially for this argument, to the characters within the narrative.[43] While the composers of the long Soviet sixties were predominantly male, their use of female subjects and the operatic 'female gaze' illuminates the nature of not only Soviet but also 'universal' femininity. The 'female gaze' offers an alternative lens through which to view the world—one that the 'male gaze' may not fully encompass—allowing for a deeper inspection of the subliminal, murky, imperfect, and illusory aspects within specifically Soviet operatic realms. It is important to note that the masculinization and feminization of Soviet opera were not mandates of the political apparatus, artistic evaluative bodies, or theater directors. This shift reflects not only the individual interests of Soviet *male* composers but also a broader change in Soviet society and culture. Furthermore, it is important to address the fact that the dichotomy between Stalinist masculinization and post-Stalinist feminization serves as an ideal-typical framework, designed to capture the dominant characteristics of each era's operatic gender portrayal. While this model is not absolute, and deviations will be acknowledged throughout the text, framing it as an ideal type allows the norm, as well as the exceptions, to be highlighted and examined more effectively.

41 See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York 1990.

42 Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, New York 1989, p. 19.

43 Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 25.

1.4 Research Scope: Delimitations and Limitations

Despite the ongoing debate surrounding opera and whether it can be viewed as a narrative,[44] I nevertheless employ terms such as 'narrative,' 'narrative world,' and similar expressions within this study, albeit loosely; these terms serve to denote diegesis, the storyline, progression of events, or the story-world. This study will not contribute to the ongoing discussions on narrative and non-narrative music, nor is this academic dialogue productively featured within this project. Whether music can convey a narrative or not, or whether opera itself is a narrative or not, it nevertheless does convey a *story*, and in a more direct way than an instrumental genre does, and in a possibly more multi-medial or multi-layered way than a novel or a classic drama. While the narrative status of opera remains debatable, this study nevertheless draws inspiration and methodological insights from feminist narratology and literary criticism, as they point toward 'gender-conscious' readings of selected material and considering gender as a relevant category for analyzing textual structures and elements.

Throughout this study, the selected operas will be assessed through the lens of 'historicity,' a term central to understanding the operatic repertoire in question. Methodologically, the study partially draws on the genre of literary criticism known as new historicism,[45] which examines texts within their political, historical, cultural, and other contextual dimensions. As literary theorist Louis Montrose articulates, new historicism engages with "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history," further explaining "historicity of texts" as "the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing."[46] In addition to exploring the "historicity of texts"—in this case, musical texts—this study also investigates the 'historicity *in* texts,' specifically the historical actuality of characters, events, and concepts presented in the selected repertoire. This is not to say that this study will thoroughly dissect the historical accuracy of the episodes presented in libretti; in fact, it will not do that at all—I approach 'historicity,' defined as a "condition of being and thinking *in* history,"[47] as an intertextual tool to gauge

44 For material on this issue, see Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton, NJ 1991, and particularly Nina Penner, *Storytelling in Opera and Musical Theater*, Bloomington, IL 2020.

45 See Harold Aram Veeser (ed.), *The New Historicism*, New York 1989.

46 Louis A. Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," in: Harold Aram Veeser (ed.), *The New Historicism*, New York 1989, pp. 15–36, here p. 20.

47 Andrew Kalaidjian, "Historicities," in: John Frow (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Literary Theory*, print publication 2022, published online 2022, ‹https://www.

the prominence of historical settings in opera and the extent to which these settings influence narrative construction and character development.

The scope of this study is rather specific, which might lead one to argue that it is perhaps even excessively narrow. However, in defining the confines and considering the potential limitations of my approach, a careful negotiation took place, both with the material and its structure. Striking a balance between creating a coherent structure of the study, on the one hand, and effectively conveying the main point in the most concise yet persuasive manner, on the other, proved to be a challenge. Therefore, the following text serves not only to clarify the scope and boundaries of this research but also to provide a justification of a kind. Simultaneously, it defends my chosen approach while acknowledging that alternative avenues, whether broader or narrower, were possible.

The first aspect of my research in need of clarification is: why opera? Why is opera a particularly fertile ground for researching gender narratives? The choice of opera as a genre of interest stems from its multifaceted nature, encompassing both music and a literary template in conveying the story. The nature of opera, constrained by time and stage limitations, allows for a focus on only a limited set of narrative elements. Therefore, opera potentially provides insight into artistic gender codification in a more unambiguous and straightforward manner than the literary templates on which those operas were written (mind you, none of the operas interpreted for the sake of this study were written to original libretti). Furthermore, even more crucial for this study is the status opera held within the artistic hierarchy of genres during the Soviet era, which will be more thoroughly discussed in the introduction to the first section of this study, "The Masculinization of the Stalinist Opera." It is important to note that this study will focus solely on opera in the narrow sense of the word;[48] it will not cover operetta, comical opera, musical theater, monoopera, rock opera, or any other subdivisions that might have emerged on the Soviet stage at the time, especially in the post-Stalinist era.[49] The reason for this is to avoid the trap of thematic dilution and a 'breadth over depth' approach, and to maintain a focused analytical scope, as gender representation varies across genres, introducing different paradigms and requiring new sets of approaches.

oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780190699604.001.0001/acref-9780190699604-e-1069› 16 July 2026.

48 I am hesitant to use the term 'opera seria' here, as it would potentially be read as both an anachronism and an anatopism.

49 Alla Baeva, "Opera," in: Elena Dolinskaĭa (ed.), *Istoriia sovremennoĭ otechestvennoĭ muzyki*, vol. 3 (1960–1990), Moscow 2001, pp. 186–256, here p. 192.

The second aspect requiring deeper elaboration is the decision to focus exclusively on Soviet Russian opera, excluding operatic cultures from other Soviet countries. This choice was driven by practical considerations, of both personal and technical nature. Initially, at the outset of my research journey, I aspired to encompass operas from across the entire USSR in this study. This approach would have allowed for a multi-faceted examination of gender construction within the operatic genre, considering its intricate geopolitical, societal, and cultural variations. However, that turned out to be a rather ambitious endeavor. The first challenge arose when I grasped that delving into operatic materials from other Soviet countries would necessitate proficiency in the local languages, to some extent at least. Working with the lyrical and poetic language found in libretti and the literary templates they were based on without a command of the local language seemed impractical and daunting.

Furthermore, analyzing such an extensive operatic corpus, comprising operas from all over the USSR, appeared highly challenging from a purely practical perspective. Selecting representative material from such a vast pool (as the study would entail the representation of all operatic cultures to some extent) was a borderline precarious task, and making certain necessary cuts would lead to a difficult-to-justify dilemma. Additionally, it is important to note that not all Soviet operatic cultures were uniform; in fact, assuming uniformity across all regions of the Soviet empire and its musical cultures would be a mistake. Operatic gender representation was strikingly different closer to the 'center' than in, for instance, Azerbaijan or Uzbekistan, due to cultural and political circumstances, as will be partially touched upon in the text. While creating a heterogeneous and multi-angle approach was a possibility, the nature of this critical analysis, requiring in-depth work on the material and its integration into specific political and societal circumstances, made this quest overly ambitious.

Amid full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the imperative to decentralize and decolonize Soviet, Russian, Eastern European, and Eurasian studies gained momentum, with the academic community advocating for a departure from the Russian-centric research focus. Yet this study does not reflect this notion, in the sense that it still focuses on Soviet *Russian* operatic culture. Nevertheless, the title of this monograph already reflects my urge not to equate the 'Russian' with the 'Soviet,' and I am not claiming that the 'history' I am writing is embodying the whole variety of musical cultures and different expressions existing under the Soviet umbrella. In the main text of the study, the attribute 'Soviet Russian' might get shortened to merely 'Soviet,' but that decision is influenced purely by practical reasons and the need to keep the text flow, not because Soviet Russian music history is the exclusive trajectory of the development of Soviet music in general.

Furthermore, and equally importantly, the choice of words accentuates the fact that the operas in question are written on Soviet subjects and are set in a Soviet chronotope.[50]

However, even if one were to accept this argumentation (or justification), the question of 'Soviet' or 'Soviet Russian' opera is still not as unambiguous as one might hope. What defines a Soviet Russian opera? What makes this line of Soviet operas 'Russian'? Is it simply that they were composed by individuals ethnically labeled as Russian? And where does this labeling originate? Is it based on the composer's family, or is it perhaps his place of birth? If so, how much weight should be given to the place of birth, considering the ever-changing Eastern European political landscape? Alternatively, does the place where a composer worked carry more significance than their origin? Can an opera be considered Soviet Russian if written in the Russian language, the lingua franca of the Soviet Union, even if composed by someone non-Russian? For example, Vano Muradeli (1908–1970), born in the Russian Empire in the territory of modern-day Georgia to an Armenian family, identified himself as Georgian[51] and wrote his opera *Velikaya druzhba* (*The Great Friendship*, 1947) to a Russian-language libretto. Is this opera Soviet Russian or not? While this study won't answer questions about nationality and ethnicity in the Soviet Union or the status of minority composers, nor does it aim to do so, it is essential to keep these notions in mind. Although the focus of this study is on Soviet Russian composers in a general overview, it will occasionally reference operas outside this specific group of names. Moreover, all the operas subjected to deeper interpretation will be those written in the Russian language by composers commonly perceived as both Soviet and Russian.

The third aspect requiring justification is the chosen timeframe. As suggested by the title, this study does not encompass the entire history of Soviet opera, from the inception of the Soviet state in 1917 to its dissolution in 1991. Two main factors influenced the selection of this time frame. Firstly, it is

50 A term famously developed by literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), referring to the temporal and spatial disposition of a narrative.

51 Leah Goldman, "Nationally Informed: The Politics of National Minority Music During Late Stalinism," in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 67/3 (2019), pp. 372–400, here p. 380. The question of Muradeli's national and ethnic affiliation is rather perplexing. Although he is commonly regarded as a Georgian composer, some nevertheless describe him as Russian. See Galina Grigor'yeva, "Muradeli, Vano Il'ich," in: *Grove Music Online*, print publi-cation 2001, published online 2001, ‹https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.19369›; Geoffrey Norris and David Nice, "Muradeli, Vano," in: Alison Latham (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Music*, print publication 2011, published online 2011, ‹https://www.doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001›.

related to the nature of the material. This study aims to depict the evolution of female roles in Soviet Russian opera written specifically on a Soviet subject, which necessitated a specific period that aligns with the predetermined criteria. As will be further elaborated in the main body of the study, the early Soviet operatic culture of the 1920s was still experimental and heterogeneous. Operas centered on Soviet themes did not emerge until the second half of the 1920s, and these early operas, largely forgotten today, merely served as a prelude to their more definitive form in the 1930s. This transformation was marked by the advent of Socialist Realism in 1932 and the establishment of the Soviet or Stalinist opera project in 1936.

Contrasting the Soviet or Stalinist opera project with the opera of the 'long sixties,' a term commonly applied to the time period spanning from the early 1950s to the early 1970s (although sometimes with certain variations),[52] appeared particularly productive, as both periods share roughly the same duration, and the rather striking contrast between them provides a fertile basis for critical and comparative analysis. Moreover, the upper limit of the chosen timeframe is the early 1970s, a significant turning point characterized by a visible return to older cultural and artistic norms, accompanied by the marginalization of female voices within the Soviet operatic canon. The specifics of this timeframe will be further elucidated in separate introductions written for each major section of the study.

The fourth point pertains to the decision to focus on Soviet operas with a distinctly Soviet subject or topic in a narrow sense. Once again, this choice was not arbitrary and can be elucidated by the arguments used thus far in justifying the scope of the research. The history of Soviet opera during the

52 For example, cultural historian Arthur Marwick, in his exploration of youth and protest cultures across the Western world, defines the long sixties as spanning from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s. Arthur Marwick, "Youth Culture and the Cultural Revolution of the Long Sixties," in: Axel Schildt and Detlef Siegfried (eds.), *Between Marx and Coca-Cola: Youth Cultures in Changing European Societies, 1960–1980*, New York and Oxford 2006, pp. 39–58, here p. 41. See also Arthur Marwick, "The Cultural Revolution of the Long Sixties: Voices of Reaction, Protest, and Permeation," in: *The International History Review* 27/4 (2005), pp. 780–806. When examining Western Germany, historian Christina Von Hodenberg places the long sixties from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. Christina Von Hodenberg, "Mass Media and the Generation of Conflict: West Germany's Long Sixties and the Formation of a Critical Public Sphere," in: *Contemporary European History* 15/3 (2006), pp. 367–395, here p. 368. When talking specifically about the Soviet long sixties, historian Robert Hornsby situates them from Stalin's death in 1953 to 1968, marked by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Robert Hornsby, *The Soviet Sixties*, New Haven, CN and London 2023, p. 4. Alternatively, Dumančić insinuates a slightly broader timeframe, extending from Stalin's death to the early 1970s—a timeframe I will adhere to for the purpose of this study. See Dumančić, *Men Out of Focus*.

chosen time period is, in general terms, the history of opera with a Soviet subject, if we adopt a broad approach to the canon. However, this still does not mean that every Soviet opera was set in Soviet chronotope. There were operas with historical themes and operas depicting revolutionary events abroad, not to mention those based on classical literary templates. However, these operas constitute a minority, as operas with a strictly Soviet topicality represent the prevailing trend in operatic development of the era, especially during the Stalinist period.[53]

Moreover, the primary question I asked myself when delineating my interests and research boundaries was: How were *Soviet* women represented on the operatic stage, rather than women in a broader sense? Particularly during the Thaw period, operas set outside the Soviet chronotope had a greater potential for a certain flexibility in portrayal, as the characters were not Soviet citizens and thus potentially subject to a different evaluatory criteria. While examining female characters in settings beyond the narrowly Soviet context would also illuminate our understanding of the women's position in Soviet opera, in order to maintain a clear analytical nucleus and avoid diluting the focus by blending too many different trends within the confines of one single study, I opted to keep my attention on one specific thread of Soviet Russian operatic development.

The final point in this necessary chain of justifications is the selection of operas to represent the evolutionary trajectory of female roles during this turbulent period, spanning a little over three decades of Soviet Russian opera history. Limiting the pool of representative material involved an ongoing process of contemplation of, and negotiation with, the material. The first aspect of negotiation centered on determining the appropriate number of interpretations to include in the study. Ultimately, the decision was guided by the nature of the canon itself. Including an excessively small number of operas could risk underrepresenting the various nuances that emerged within the main canon, potentially oversimplifying the main thesis and affecting its persuasiveness and credibility. Conversely, an excessive number of operas could lead to repetition of already examined phenomena and result in an overly lengthy and monotonous read. The second aspect of negotiation revolved around which operas to include in the research sample. The chosen operas effectively represent the dominant artistic and cultural tendencies on the Soviet Russian operatic stage and beyond. Simultaneously, each of them showcases a particular phenomenon or peculiarity that sets it apart within the chosen repertoire, offering a productive base for discussion, methodological heterogeneity, and broadening of

53 See Marina Frolova-Walker, "The Soviet Opera Project: Ivan Dzerzhinsky vs. Ivan Susanin," in: *COJ* 18/2 (2006), pp. 181–216, here p. 182.

the masculinization/feminization typology. I consistently sought out these 'striking peculiarities,' or 'differentia specifica,' which were inherently tied to how composers and librettists portrayed the female protagonist in each opera. It is important to note that not all operas of the selected period fit into the proposed ideal-typical framework, but such cases have nevertheless been recognized and contextualized in the introductory chapters.

1.5 Structure

In order to effectively communicate the main thesis, arguments, and key concepts, I have chosen to base the study on analyses of selected operas and structure the text into two main sections, giving the entire study a dual quality. To enhance the clarity of the structure and improve the comprehensibility of the analyses, each section begins with a distinct introduction offering the historical and cultural background. These introductions will provide the necessary context and highlight the key points essential for understanding the material. The decision to organize the text in this manner stems from my desire to emphasize the contrasting natures of Stalinist and post-Stalinist opera, both in terms of the operas' structural elements (including the text and music) and, importantly for this study, the contrasting way in which female protagonists were formulated. Establishing a diachronic continuum and tracing the gradual historical development of female operatic characters over the tumultuous three to four decades of Soviet Russian opera history also entails the creation of a 'new' history of Soviet opera, thus from an alternative perspective. Each main section of the study, whether the "Masculinization of the Stalinist Opera" or the "Feminization of the Post-Stalin Opera," in addition to illuminating the masculinization and the subsequent feminization of the Soviet operatic system, will also provide deeper insight into selected representatives of the operatic repertoire that have been chosen to highlight certain tendencies as much as anomalies of interest.

The first section of the study, titled "Masculinization of the Stalinist Opera," includes four interpretations of selected operas. The first two, Tikhon Khrennikov's (1913–2007) *V buryu* (*Into the Storm*, 1939) and Sergey Prokofiev's (1891–1953) *Semyon Kotko* (1940), represent the early phase of the development of the Stalinist opera project. The other two, Prokofiev's *Povest' o nastoyashchem cheloveke* (*The Story of a Real Man*, 1948) and Dmitry Kabalevsky's (1904–1987) *Sem'ya Tarasa* (*The Taras Family*, 1947, rev. 1950), represent the operatic development following the war years, also reflecting the newfound World War II topicality. Selecting only four operas posed a challenge, but I aimed to choose ones that were similar enough to demonstrate the main trends of Stalinist opera while also showcasing unique

qualities in the portrayal of female characters. All the composers chosen for this section played crucial roles in developing the operatic style of the Stalinist era, albeit in different ways. While Khrennikov and Kabalevsky represented particularly loyal positions to the regime and Socialist Realist dogma, Prokofiev and his oeuvre reflected a unique position within the Soviet musical landscape. While achieving recognition on the global musical stage, Prokofiev nevertheless struggled to satisfy the taste of the ruling Soviet elites.[54] Despite the varying fates of their operas, all of them shared a common goal: to align with the dominant taste and artistic requirements of the time, thereby reflecting, with varying degrees of success, the prevailing aesthetic and ideological preferences. An illustrative example of a 'less successful' attempt to gain approval, included in this study, is Prokofiev's *Povest' o nastoyashchem cheloveke*. Its critical failure was not solely due to aesthetic reasons but predominantly political ones.

The second section of the study, titled "The Feminization of the Post-Stalin Opera," delves into the musical culture of the long sixties, reflecting the transitional period from Khrushchev's Thaw to the early Brezhnev era. Despite the commonly held notion of increased artistic freedom during this era, it cannot be characterized as entirely subversive or devoid of ideological constraints. Therefore, the selection of operas aims to depict, as accurately as possible, the prevailing artistic climate. To illustrate this, I chose to commence with Khrennikov's *Mat'* (*Mother*, 1957), which serves as a corroboration for the Thaw not radically transforming Soviet operatic and musical culture and liberating it from ideological confines, or at least not as quickly as, or to the degree that, one might anticipate. Rodion Shchedrin's (1932–2025) opera, *Ne tol'ko lyubov'* (*Not Love Alone*, 1961), while initially successful, ultimately faced an early dismissal, highlighting the persistence of conservative cultural and artistic policies. Notably, one of the main reasons for its cancellation was the provocative portrayal of the female protagonist, a point of particular interest within the context of this study. Accompanying Shchedrin's work is Sergey Slonimsky's (1932–2020) *Virineya* (1967), equally distinctly encapsulating the essence of Khrushchev's Thaw, even though it premiered after the Thaw officially concluded. The final opera in this section, Kirill Molchanov's (1922–1982) *Zori zdes' tikhiye* (*The Dawns Here Are Quiet*, 1973), marks a fitting conclusion to the study's scope. It represents the last prominent Soviet opera on a Soviet subject with a dominant female perspective. It also symbolizes the return of Soviet opera to certain bygone Stalinist narratives, illustrating the cyclical nature of Soviet musical production and culture as a whole.

54 See Morrison, *The People's Artist*; Seinen, *Prokofiev's Soviet Operas*.