4 – Conclusion

When I would share the intricacies of my research with fellow musicologists or philologists, one was never surprised by the alleged masculinization of the Stalinist operatic stage I would aim to explain. Even to a Soviet-music-lay, this seemed beyond obvious. On the other hand, when I would try to engage in a discussion on the subsequent feminization of the post-Stalin opera, after a brief moment of reflection, most would say that it surely must be directly related to the gender politics and the status of women in Soviet society. Although at first glance, it would seem most straightforward to conclude that the change in the legislation directly led to the transformation of the operatic landscape and its protagonists, which in turn led to a shift in the dominant gender on the stage, I am reluctant to conclude that this is the main reason standing behind the processes I aimed to explain in this study. A crucial link between politics and opera is culture itself, not only in the sense of collective artistic expression but, more broadly, in the sense of 'distilled politics,' social climate, a set of everyday behaviors, practices, and ideas. Although the changing status of women played a role in the collective everyday culture, it is not what directly influenced the masculinization, and particularly not the feminization of the opera. Although this argument might seem provocative, especially since one could easily say (and I would agree) that the space between politics and opera during Stalinism was way tighter than I might suggest now, and that the politics of hegemonic and martial masculinity directly influenced the construction of male-centric operatic environments and the peripheralization of women, the argument sort of stops here. Indeed, how can one then explain the feminization of the opera expanding on the same argument? Could one really say with complete certainty that it is truly the changing status of Soviet women that directly led to the abundance of female operatic leads and

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'feminized' perspectives on the post-Stalin operatic stage? Would that mean that with the Thaw, the Soviet Union entered a brief period of hegemonic femininity—akin to the hegemonic masculinity of the Stalinist era—which then got reflected onto the dominance of female leads? Probably not, and if so, it is still too redundant of an argument. There was no official directive instructing composers to steer towards either the masculinization or the feminization of operatic landscapes; instead, this impetus arose from partly subtle, partly quite explicit cultural codes embedded in Soviet society and cultural imagination. I would argue that it is precisely the combination of the transformed Soviet culture and updated cultural imaginary, collective gender imagination, and the traditional operatic conventions that led to the feminization of the post-Stalinist opera.

While the resurgence of female-centric operatic landscapes, the emergence of intricate female protagonists, and the introduction of the female gaze may initially appear subversive, they still rely on, support, and perpetuate rather old-fashioned understandings of gender and its regressive binary codification. It seems that in this new artistic trend of exploring the deep, hidden, imperfect, and flawed aspects of Soviet society and existence, authors tended to avoid employing male protagonists for this exploration. In other words, if the new operatic environment demands a pensive, reflective, and emotionally complex protagonist, then the observer and analyzer of the surrounding world must be female, further implying that female gaze is embedded with a supreme power of seeing beyond the surface. It is almost as if a male agent, traditionally tied to the active role and the public domain, and ostensibly lacking the capability for reflection and emotion, would be tarnished when placed in the environment of collapse. Not to mention that making *him*, the perfect Stalinist hero, multifaceted would unavoidably expose him as imperfect and flawed.

The evolution of gender representation on the Soviet stage appears to be a straightforward binary code, deeply rooted in perfect symmetry. Indeed, if the transition from a stable and monolithic world to an unstable and fragmented one also signified the demise of the hero and his inability to function or even exist in a world detached from mythos, how can a male protagonist effectively navigate its exploration? In theory, of course, he could, but within this simple chain of dichotomies, he seemingly cannot. This explanation goes hand in hand with the post-Stalin crisis of masculinity experienced in Soviet culture already elaborated by numerous scholars in the field of Russian and Soviet studies, particularly Goscilo, Lanoux, Prokhorova, and Dumančić. Much like the male-centric operatic landscape was the logical choice for depicting martial and heroic scenarios with active heroes, perhaps the female-centric operatic landscape turned out to be the only viable approach when delving into the psychology of the Soviet subject

and exploring the post-Stalinist landscape with newfound freedom and a critical lens.

Upon examining the selected material, it almost seems like a mandate to explore tragedy, defeat, and anxiety while avoiding the portrayal of the perfect male Stalinist hero, or at least refraining from placing him in the spotlight. Furthermore, what sets female protagonists apart from male ones is their gender consciousness. This does not mean that male characters are not shaped and influenced by gender expectations—quite the contrary. However, they tend to lack *awareness* of their gender and do not actively participate at understanding how their gender and gender roles affect their life trajectories. In contrast, female characters, especially during the long sixties, do engage with these notions. Additionally, gender consciousness in female characters commonly goes hand in hand with an awareness of their gender-induced societal limitations and burdensome positions; this connection, however, transcends the Soviet canon in question. Although earlier in the text I have proclaimed the hero's demise, the following question still remains: has he truly been completely erased from the landscape of the long sixties? The answer is, no, he has not. In fact, the post-Stalinist feminized operatic environments still hosts perfect male heroes, albeit on the periphery. In the case of *Mother*, it is naturally Pavel, the same as his namesake in *Virineya*, but also Vaskov in *The Dawns Here Are Quiet*. They continue to exist, symbolizing order and stability, guiding and assisting from behind the scenes, serving almost as symbols, ensuring that the grand Soviet narrative does not veer completely off course. While it might seem that the Thaw and the long sixties had brought about a radical change in gender codification, if we follow this theory, it appears that during this limited window of time, the only thing that changed was the artistic focus. In a broader perspective, could it be that the only change taking place was the mere act of shift of focus from male to female protagonists, while everything else, including the heroines themselves, stayed untouched? Perhaps the Soviet landscape, the hero's existence, and representations of tortured Soviet female psyches had always been present, untouched, but it was suddenly the female protagonist that came under the spotlight, offering a different perspective on the monumental Soviet landscape. By mediating the artistic interest through the female gaze, the audience gained a new, non-heroic outlook on the grand Soviet operatic narrative, and to a female agent, unburdened by the heroic expectations, it might have seemed nothing less than anxiety-inducing, terrifying, but also illusory.

The post-Stalin era was marked by a cultural turn toward trauma and tragedy. When talking about the Stalinism-induced trauma and the modes of coping with it during the Thaw, Polly Jones asserts that the press and the propaganda showed "a keen concern with exposing and repairing

Stalinism's damage to people's hearts and minds."[686] She further concludes: "What was new in the Khrushchev era was not the emergence of trauma *per se*, but the greater—though not total—willingness to explore mental, rather than physical, trauma and the deeper, more prolonged debate about healing."[687] Jones's intriguing suggestion, although she applies it to literature, could also be easily applied to opera—perhaps operas too, in their own way, supported the post-Stalinist 'healing' discourses, serving as cathartic rituals used for purging the audience from the trauma and the distress through freely portraying it on the stage.

However, it is not only that female characters (and through them we as well) see the tragedy and experience the Soviet landscape as dangerous and illusory, possibly because of their alleged superior capability to reflect and feel—they also quite literary suffer under it. As it was already discussed earlier, none of the male Stalinist operatic protagonists are tragic, nor are we, as the audience, made to believe that they live in a tragic landscape, despite its martial, dangerous and anxiety-inducing nature. However, the situation is rather different when it comes to the female protagonists of the long sixties. Although Khrennikov's Pelageya Nilovna is not trapped in a deteriorating grand Soviet operatic landscape, as it is still heroic and victorious, the Revolution unfolding in front of her eyes is nevertheless a cause of her great confusion, distress, and anxiety. Shchedrin's Varvara Vasil'yevna, on the other hand, *is* trapped within the perfect Stalinist narrative, only highlighting and fueling her tragedy of very personal nature. Slonimsky's Virineya is a tragic figure stuck in the whirlwind of the revolutionary anxiety permeating every pore of her society, and Molchanov's soldiers bravely sacrifice their lives for the victory of their motherland. All of the mentioned protagonists are tragic in some regard—and even if they do not lose their lives to the Soviet operatic landscape, it is still a source of great sadness or anxiety, something they need to actively work toward blending into. One could even state that female protagonists are almost like foreign bodies of the post-Stalinist Soviet operatic landscape—although central, they just do not quite fit in.

However, did women ever fit into the monolithic Soviet operatic landscape? Is the link between women and tragedy something applicable only to the long sixties, or was it present also during Stalinism? If one traces female heroines of the operas presented in first section of this study, suddenly it becomes clear that they also suffered and experienced their own

686 Polly Jones, "Memories of Terror or Terrorizing Memories? Terror, Trauma and Survival in Soviet Culture of the Thaw," in: *The Slavonic and East European Review* 86/2 (2008), pp. 346–371, here p. 349.

687 Ibid., p. 368.

personal tragedies, but since being reduced to the function of an observer more than of an active protagonist, it is easy to overlook their oftentimes gore circumstances. Krennikov's Natasha was deceived by the enemy that she was abandoned by Lyonka, was left alone pregnant amid the revolutionary turmoil, lost her father, and even contemplated her suicide. Sof'ya is used as a pawn in political machinations including even her own father, who eventually also gets killed, and is forced to marry an enemy. One of the most striking portrayals in the whole *Semyon Kotko* is Lyubka, numbed by pain from losing her lover, subsequently becoming completely hysteric. While Ol'ga's tragedy can only be left to assume, as she is not only symbolically but rather literally a peripheral figure in Prokofiev's opera, Kabalevsky's Nastya loses not only her childhood to the turmoil of World War II, but also eventually her life.

Why do female characters seemingly go hand in hand with tragedy? Although this discussion, to why female characters turned out to be better-suited agents to explore and unveil tragedy in the Soviet operatic landscape, might seem reasonable, the connection between women and tragedy goes even beyond that, and it is already written into our cultural imagination and the operatic conventions themselves. Perhaps it is highly appropriate to end this study with a mention (as I am certain that this emblematic text does not need a particular introduction) of the pinnacle monograph on gender and opera, and that is Catherine Clément's 1979 *L'Opéra ou la Défaite des femmes*, translated into English as *Opera, or The Undoing of Women*.[688] As written in the prelude to the main text: "Opera is not forbidden to women. That is true. Women are its jewels, you say, the ornament indispensable for every festival. No prima donna, no opera. But the role of jewel, a decorative object, is not the deciding role; and on the opera stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing."[689] So what is it—is the feminization of the post-Stalinist opera a product of the new Soviet subjectivity and the more unrestrained array of possibilities which female agents offered in artistic dissection of the inner spheres of the Soviet being? Or is it the changed perception of the monolithic martial and anxiety-inducing Soviet operatic landscape that suddenly required a view from the observer's eyes? Is it the death of the hero and the crisis of masculinity that led to the dominance of post-Stalinist operatic femininity? I believe that it is a combination of all the factors elaborated in this brief final remark. However, inspired by the words of Catherine Clément, one cannot help but wonder: perhaps this shift from masculine to feminine Soviet operas is nothing more than a product

688 Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, Minneapolis, MN 1988, original edition: *L'Opéra ou la Défaite des femmes*, Paris 1979.

689 Ibid., p. 5.

of the natural cycle of the cultural pendulum, which, after a brief period of dominant masculine operatic perspective, and rapid, earth-shattering political, societal, and cultural push, returned to its previous state—to the state of operatic effeminacy, allowing female characters to take a central stage while performing "their eternal undoing," but this time with Soviet undertones.

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Naturally, it would be naive to conclude that this study has completely illuminated the gender codification of the Soviet Russian operatic stage, and that the discussion can now be considered over, as if all the answers have already been provided and elaborated upon. Not only is it necessary to delve into the operatic cultures of different parts of the USSR to gain a clearer picture of how gender and femininity were portrayed during the Soviet era, but it would also be productive to explore the canon that is not directly linked to Soviet topicality. Furthermore, while extending the timeframe beyond the Stalinist opera project and the long sixties would certainly contribute to a better understanding of the topic, a crucial step forward would be to include a larger sample size in the ongoing discussion and established framework. Although introductory texts have provided an overview of the significant cultural and artistic movements within the operatic scene, as well as the operas themselves, the enumeration of the operas was reduced to a mere list containing a sentence-brief summary of the libretto, thus serving more as a quantitative argument supporting the thesis of the dominance of male and female-centric operatic trends. A more in-depth reading and analysis of the broader pool of materials would undoubtedly strengthen the argument and reveal further peculiarities and subtle nuances in Soviet operatic gender representation.

Although this study was intended to dissect and explore the evolution of gender representation, the formation and utilization of female voices in operas on a Soviet subject, it inevitably became a story of the broader evolution of Soviet opera and culture. It became an account of the search for composers' voices, the transformation of Soviet operatic plots and music, and a quest to find the most suitable operatic representation of Soviet individuals, society, values, and ideas.