



Research Article

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## Catherine the Great's Influence on the Russian Opera Theatre Development and Paradox of Her Musical Ear: “Nothing More than Noise”?

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**Abstract:** In studies on the birth of Russian opera, the name of Catherine the Great is mentioned next to the first national playwrights' and composers' names. However, for a long time scholars primarily noted a negative nature of her acts that had been aimed at restricting freedom of thought and creativity in the field of musical theatre. Generally, there was a tendency to consider Catherine's activities in itself, unrelated to her Enlightenment reforms. Such an approach certainly diminished her merits. As some historical sources reveal, the contribution of this tsarina in the national opera theatre development was much greater than commonly believed.

Moreover, the study of the correspondence, in particular, between the Russian monarch and Baron Melchior Grimm led the author to a conclusion: a myth that Catherine did not have an ear for music has no grounds. As some letters prove, contrary to what the ruler claimed, she did have musical abilities. Nevertheless, with regard to her public statements about music, the Empress preferred to remain silent, having apparently weighty reasons for that. The purpose of the present article is to make some revisions to previous years' conclusions about this extraordinary person, who was one of the initiators of Russian Enlightenment.

**Keywords:** Catherine the Great, Paisiello, Enlightenment, Russian-French relations, opéra-comique, opera theatre, Russian comic operas

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Научная статья

# Влияние Екатерины Великой на развитие русского оперного театра и парадокс ее музыкального слуха: «Не более чем шум?»

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**Аннотация:** В исследованиях, посвященных рождению русской оперы, имя Екатерины Великой, как правило, упоминается наряду с именами драматургов и композиторов. Вместе с тем, на протяжении длительного времени в научной литературе преобладали негативные оценки ее деятельности; отмечалось, что Екатерина ограничивала свободу мысли и творчества, в том числе в области музыкального театра. Исследования последних десятилетий показали, что вклад Екатерины в развитие оперного театра России более весом, чем считалось ранее, что подкрепляется и рядом рассматриваемых в данной статье источников.

Кроме того, изучение переписки между императрицей и бароном Мельхиором Гриммом привело автора настоящей статьи к выводу о том, что миф об отсутствии у Екатерины музыкального слуха не имеет под собой оснований. Как доказывают некоторые письма, вопреки укоренившимся суждениям, основанным на заявлениях самой Екатерины, у нее были музыкальные способности. Тем не менее, она избегала публичных высказываний о музыке; по-видимому, у нее имелись на это веские причины. Цель настоящей статьи — уточнить представления о незаурядной личности русской императрицы и о ее роли в истории русского Просвещения.

**Ключевые слова:** Екатерина Великая, Паизиелло, Просвещение, русско-французские связи, opéra-comique, оперный театр, русская комическая опера

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The formation of Russian national opera theatre is closely related to the personality of Catherine the Great<sup>1</sup>. According to most sources, Catherine was fairly far away from music. Politics and defence of monarchical regime, accompanied by struggling against free thought—that was what interested her most. For quite a long time, Catherine's activities with regard to the cultural development of the society were underestimated by scholars. As maintained by more recent studies since the end of the twentieth century, the Empress's contribution in the state sponsorship

<sup>1</sup> An idea to write this article was born from a discussion about my paper at the 47<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the British Society for the Study of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (BSECS).

of the performing arts and cultural policies of the Empire was weightier [7; 38; 41]. In the course of my research, devoted to the Western influence on Russian opera theatre emergence, some curious and unexpected details have been discovered. They make it possible to better understand motives and reasons of the tsarina's acts with respect to the opera theatre. Summarized information, obtained when studying Catherine's letters and other historical sources, concerning eighteenth-century theatre in Russia, has brought me to the following conclusion. Catherine's activities regarding music, and the opera theatre in particular, had been more significant for the music history than it was considered till now. Thus, the present article purpose is to study the role of that sovereign in the development of musical theatre, while avoiding extreme judgments and a tendentious interpretation of facts.

During the eighteenth century, theatrical life, concentrated essentially in Saint-Petersburg and Moscow, was marked by extraordinary intensity. Some special interest in opera genre was noted from the 1730s.<sup>2</sup> Over a short period of time, the deeply feudal country went the way that led to the creation of the first comic operas. It turns out that the most interesting events in the field of opera took place during Catherine the II's reign known as "Russian Enlightenment." In the 1770s, an interesting phenomenon occurred: the staging of comic operas, composed by domestic authors. This new Russian genre, based on the model of French *opéra-comique*, became the medium of choice for representatives of Russian Enlightenment, because it disclosed social inequalities and the plight of people [16]. Aspiring to pursue enlightened imperial policy, Catherine nonetheless encouraged multiple theatre performances and paid special attention to the opera genre. Lurana O'Malley notes,

The ideological basis for Catherine's use of theatre was her Enlightenment belief in the value of education for her entire populace. That populace was symbolized by the public theatre audience (even if the actual audience composition, made up mostly of nobles, was more homogeneous). Education through the medium of theatre was by nature indirect, but this very indirectness was in itself a test of the audience member's readiness for enlightenment [29, 2].

Inna Naroditskaya also points out that the Russian Empress, understanding the importance of the role of theatre in the society, "endorsed native theatre as a means of education for her people" [28, 17].

The study of various documents revealed controversial character of Catherine's policy and, in particular, of her impact on the birth of opera in Russia [13; 21; 23]. On the one hand, she favoured the development of theatre and even wrote libretti for her own comic operas. On the other hand, being a defender of the autocratic regime, she did not really want serious social issues to be raised on the stage. Be that as it may, Catherine was also one of the most enlightened European monarchs, who could be considered as a "portal" through which

<sup>2</sup> Russian musical theatre owes to Peter the Great's niece Anna Ioannovna (1693–1740), who began to invite foreign opera troupes since 1730s. The activities of that tsarina contributed to the popularization of Italian *opera seria*, which became an official genre of the Russian court. According to Tamara Livanova, the reign of Italian opera on the Russian stage slowed down the emergence of Russian opera for several decades [23, 395]. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. In my opinion, this statement is pretty controversial, because in the first half of the 18th century the social and cultural conditions in Russia were insufficient for the creation of a national musical theatre. There were still no opera composers of Russian origin then. As known, the first national Russian operas, composed in the genre of comic opera, appeared only in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. By this time, some Russian composers returned from Italy, where they had been sent by Catherine for professional education.

the ideas of French Enlightenment arrived in Russia. Her sincere desire to make Russia a civilized country in the image and likeness of European countries along with her reforms in the wake of French Enlightenment highlight the greatness of that historical figure.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore important to ask: to what extent did sometimes the very contradictory actions of that Empress influence the birth of national opera? Which were the positive and negative consequences of that influence? To answer these questions, it is necessary to refer to sources describing Catherine's personality as well as her political convictions.



**Figure 1.** Virgilius Eriksen, *Profile portrait of Grand Duchess Catherine Alexeevna*, 1762. Oil on canvas, 54 × 42,5 cm. Hermitage, Saint-Petersburg

**Ил. 1.** Виргилиус Эриксен. Портрет великой княгини Екатерины Алексеевны в профиль. 1762 год. Холст, масло. 54 х 42,5 см. Санкт-Петербург, Государственный Эрмитаж

<sup>3</sup> As Jacob von Staehlin points out, for the first two years of her reign, the Empress seemed to care most about urgent state affairs and less about music. Only after establishing order for the church, state, army, marine, trade and industry as well as new regulations and instructions for each empire department, she turned her sagacious eyes towards the fine arts, which rise had been usually based on the state wealth and prosperity. Music that occupied a special place among the arts was not forgotten by Catherine; it began to shine at the court with unprecedented brilliance [39, 125–26].

## NAKAZ AS AN EMBODIMENT OF PROGRESSIVE IDEALS OF THE YOUNG EMPRESS

From the beginning of her reign on the Russian throne Catherine was full of ambitious plans how to reorganize the country and to propel it to a higher level of development. The former German princess set a goal: to love Russia, as if it was her country of origin and to do the best for its prosperity. As stated by some Catherine's contemporaries, her personality was marked by some particular charisma. Since her youth, she knew how to communicate with her entourage and to get in its good graces. Lev Engelhardt recalled that "the sovereign always had a kind, attractive, cheerful, and heavenly look" [11, 45]. In addition, Catherine was able to notice and promote people whose superior qualities, from a political point of view, could be useful to the state service.

Sharing the ideas, presented in the *Encyclopaedia*, Catherine considered herself as a pupil of Voltaire. According to Naroditskaya, "Advancing the age of Enlightenment, Catherine II produced abundant literary and legislative works, exhibiting her unnatural 'manly' reason and creativity, which were validated by her most distinguished correspondents, Voltaire, Grimm, Diderot, and Marmontel" [28, 11].

Thanks to intense intellectual work, she became an exceptional person in the Russian society.<sup>4</sup> As Sergei Platonov points out, the extent of her education and her theoretical dimension remind us of the vigour of Peter the Great. Furthermore, the scholar notes an ambiguous attitude of succeeding generations with respect to the tsarina's personality.

The duality of those traditions that she followed also determines the twofold attitude of the next generations towards her. If some people point to the fact that Catherine's inner work legitimized the abnormal consequences of dark periods of the eighteenth century, some bow before the greatness of the results of her foreign policy. Be that as it may, the historical significance of Catherine's epoch is extremely great precisely because, in this era, the results of the previous history were summed up, and the historical processes that had developed earlier were completed. This ability of Catherine to bring questions that history posed to her to a full resolution compels everyone to recognize in her the primary historical figure, regardless of her personal mistakes and weaknesses [31, 187].

Inspired by the idea of enlightened absolutism, borrowed from the writings of French philosophers, Catherine II desired to incarnate it in Russia at the legislative level. She sought to create new legislation, the application of which would be facilitated and would lead to order in the state. From 1765, the tsarina began to develop new legislative principles, working every day assiduously and regularly, without telling anyone about the content of her work.<sup>5</sup> Articles, containing Catherine's ideas, formed her famous *Nakaz*,

<sup>4</sup> Charles François Masson compares the role of Catherine in Russia with the role of Louis XIV in France. "La générosité de Catherine, l'éclat de son règne, la magnificence de sa cour, ses instituts, ses monuments, ses guerres, sont pour la Russie ce que le siècle de Louis XIV fut pour l'Europe ; mais Catherine fut personnellement plus grande que ce prince. Les Français firent la gloire de Louis, Catherine fit celle des Russes ..." [25, 83].

<sup>5</sup> Describing Catherine's ideas for state legislation, Vasily Klyuchevsky writes that she was free from political beliefs; she replaced them with tactics of politics. Without letting go of a single thread of autocracy, she allowed an indirect and even direct participation of society in governance and now called for cooperation in the drafting of a new code of people's representation. The autocratic power, in her opinion, which acquired a new look, became something of a personal constitutional absolutism. In a society that had lost a sense of law such a happenstance as a successful personality of a monarch could pass for a legal guarantee [18, 617].





ГОСПОДИ БОЖЕ МОЙ ! ВОНИ  
МИ , И ВРАЗУМИ МЯ , ДА  
СОТВОРЮ СУДЪ ЛЮДЕМЪ ТВО-  
ИМЪ ПО ЗАКОНУ СВЯТОМУ  
ТВОЕМУ СУДИТИ ВЪ ПРАВДУ.

*Domine Deus mi! exaudi me,  
et da mihi intelligentiam ,  
vt constituam iudicium genti  
tuae, quo secundum legem  
tuam sanctam dicatur ei ius.*

## НАКАЗЪ

КОМИССИИ О СОСТАВЛЕНИИ  
ПРОЕКТА НОВАГО УЛОЖЕНІЯ.

## INSTRVCTIO

Coetui ad condendam ideam  
noui legum Codicis conuocato,  
plenaque ad id donato po-  
testate.

І.  
**З**аконъ Христіанскій нау-  
чаешъ насъ взаимно дѣ-  
лаши другъ другу добро,  
скольکو возможно.

І.  
**R**eligio Christiana docet nos,  
vt alter alteri mutuo tan-  
tum boni faciamus, quan-  
tum quidem in cuiusque nostrum  
viribus situm est.

Figure 2. Title page of *Nakaz*

Ил. 2. Титульный лист «Наказа Уложенной комиссии» Екатерины II

a summary of instructions given to deputies. The content of this *Nakaz* was founded on a main source: *L'esprit des Lois* by Montesquieu.

Despite her efforts, Catherine did not manage to complete her project. Brilliantly conceived at the beginning and assuming the participation of all social strata in the legislative work, this project ran up against Russian reality. Most laws did not conform to the customs of Russia, and were therefore to be eliminated. The attitude of her entourage led Catherine to give up publishing the important instructions. Consequently, some of advanced French ideas were interpreted according to local conditions. The singularity of the *Nakaz*, translated into European languages, was undoubtedly noticed by the encyclopaedists. Thus, Denis Diderot writes in a letter of December 24, 1773 to Princess Dashkova<sup>6</sup>: "The ideas that are transplanted from Paris to Petersburg definitely take on a very different colour."<sup>7</sup>

However, this does not mean that Catherine's lawmaking efforts and reforms passed without a trace for Russian history. The *Nakaz*, cut and corrected, still made a strong impression in Russia as well as abroad [31, 167]. Certainly, Catherine's work became an act of exceptional government. Her great initiatives influenced Russian intellectual thought and contributed to a propagation of liberal and human ideas.

### OPERA THEATRE EVENTS UNDER CATHERINE THE GREAT (1762–1796)

Aiming at pursuing the policy of an enlightened Empress and considering music as an integral part of the court lifestyle, Catherine had a serious attitude towards a choice of a court bandmaster. During her reign, she invited well-known Western musicians such as Manfredini, Galuppi, Traetta, Sarti as court composers [37, 408–433]. They were of Italian origin except Martín y Soler, who was Spanish. She also engaged various Italian and French theatrical troupes and encouraged multiple performances of foreign operas. As Richard Taruskin claims, "At its height under Catherine the Great, the court opera at Saint-Petersburg rivalled the best opera theatres in Europe and staged the premières of some important works, including Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*" [40, 130].

In fact, wishing to have a reputation as a ruler patronizing the arts, and in order to increase the prestige of Russian court, Catherine cared much about the opera theatre [19, 322–323; 36, 16–54]. In addition to paying the foreign composers' royalties, she spared no expense in financing of opera performances. Thus, she also generously gifted some opera singers. The Chamber-Fourier Journal of May 30, 1784 notes that, after a concert, Catherine offered diamond earrings to a famous Portuguese singer Luiza Todi. In the opinion of Livanova, to a certain extent, the tsarina even fawned over a celebrity. The reason for such Empress's behavior was a significant role of distinguished singers, which they play in different court circles abroad. The opinion of these artists, who made a career with great intelligence and diplomacy, had an influence on European monarchs. To offend

<sup>6</sup> Princess Yekaterina Romanovna Dashkova, born Countess Vorontsova (1743–1810), a remarkable figure of the Russian Enlightenment period and a founder of the Imperial Russian Academy.

<sup>7</sup> "Les idées qu'on transplante de Paris à Pétersbourg, prennent, c'est certain, une couleur très différente." Diderot, Letter to Princess Dashkova, December 24, 1773 [8, 136].

Todi meant for Catherine to offend international secular opinion and the court nobility of Europe. Apparently, the Empress had to consider the singer not only as an artist, but also as an important person [23, 417]<sup>8</sup>.

In the 1760s, she showed a special interest in the genre of comic opera and favoured performances of French troupes in Russia. According to my research, this genre, having come from France, was one of the most revolutionary genres on the stage and a bearer of the progressive ideas of Enlightenment. The spread and popularity of French comic opera are definitely related to Catherine's activities. The study has led to a conclusion that the opera theatre development took place in line with her Enlightenment reforms, as a result of her beliefs. It's necessary to note that some conclusions of earlier scholarly works regarding the Empress's attitude to the musical theater have been only partially true. For example, Kryukov writes that Catherine tended to like Italian *opera buffa* while she gave a negative assessment of French comic opera [19, 322]. I still beg to differ with this point of view. Indeed, in the last years of her life, Catherine expressed an unfavourable opinion on French comic opera. But certainly, it was not always so. The convictions of Catherine, who shared the ideas of European Enlighteners in her youth, evolved greatly. The long years on the Russian throne changed the tsarina, who supposed that French free-thinking could pose a certain danger to the autocracy. But at the beginning of her reign, being dissatisfied with Italian *opera seria* and *opera buffa* court performances, she started to invite theatrical troupes from France [37, 417]. Undoubtedly, the Empress was aware that the latter, which were met with great enthusiasm by a certain part of Russian audiences, would become hotbeds of freethought. It turned out that it was Catherine herself who contributed to the rapid spread of Enlightenment ideas by means of French comic opera performances.

A high audience interest in a new foreign opera genre led to its triumph on the Russian stage. In accordance with the research results of Livanova and Evstratov, presented below, in the late eighteenth century *opéra-comique* performances were much higher than *opera buffa* productions. The enormous popularity of French comic opera was explained by Russian audiences' peculiarities in perception of the music performances. That is to say, the presence of spoken dialogue was essential there. As a famous actor of that time Petr Plavil'shchikov writes, Russian spectators were not in favour of the *opera buffa* recitatives, but listened with pleasure musical numbers placed between natural conversations in the comic opera. To a certain extent, this explains why the first Russian operas were composed in the genre of comic opera.

As results from my study, the French comic opera played a special role in the history of Russian music. On the one hand, in terms of rapidity with which it spread the Enlightenment ideas, no other genre could compare with it. On the other hand, it served as a model for Sokolovsky, Bortniansky, Pashkevich and Fomin. In certain previous works scholars claim that the first Russian operas had a lot in common with *opéra-comique*. But at the same time they highlight the importance of other foreign influences. First of all, it was about Italian *opera buffa* [22, 18]. Thus, in preceding researches, the idea that the first Russian opera composers used French opera genre precisely as a model was not further developed.

<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, I should note that the Empress showed generosity selectively, not to all famous opera singers. For example, the fees of foreign composers and performers were several times higher than the fees of domestic musicians.



This conclusion is based on an exhaustive and comparative libretti and scores analysis of nine Russian and ten French comic operas. Firstly, the works of playwrights such as Yakov Knyazhnin, Mikhail Popov, Aleksander Ablesimov, Ivan Krylov, Mikhail Matinsky and Nikolay Nikolev have deep connections with the aesthetics of French Enlightenment. Their various plots, taken for the most part from everyday life, do not have an important feature that distinguishes *opera buffa*. According to Elisabeth Bartlet, *opera buffa* “differs from comic opera in its frankly humorous tone bordering on farce, using parodies and satires” [2, 684]. As research results show, Russian comic opera libretti do not fit this definition. Contrariwise, it is quite clear that they are entirely founded on French tradition, despite great Italian influence which certainly is manifested at the musical level. And secondly, there is another very significant aspect that indicates that *opéra-comique* was used as a model: that is the structure of comic opera genre. At the formal level it consists of musical numbers and conversations alternating with each other. In the opinion of Pierre Saby, that is the main and defining characteristic of a comic opera genre. I tend to share the point of view of this scholar, who asserts that in spite of a huge variety of plots, French comic opera is a play consisting of spoken dialogues, vocal and instrumental music, and sometimes dance episodes [34, 147].

Neither Italian *opera seria*, with its grand representations based upon on Biblical and mythological subjects, nor *opera buffa* with its recitatives could take such a leading place in the repertoire. For example, Livanova asserts that in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, among 113 selected operas, played in Russia, she counted 83 opera representations of foreign groups. In accordance with that list, there were 22 *opere buffe* while 54 operas belonged to the genre of *opéra-comique*. It is obvious then that French comic opera occupied the main place on the stage [23, 279]. Alexey Evstratov also mentions the dominant role of French comic opera in the repertoire of that time [12, 329].

On the contrary, comic opera managed to attract Russian public. That opera, known as “la comédie mêlée d’ariettes”, was based above all on pretty, easy-to-remember motifs that alternated with spoken dialogues. In addition, news topics that were often related to people’s lives also attracted a spectator.<sup>9</sup> A durable life on the Russian stage is explained by the particularity of this genre; it was not perceived like too serious, it was a democratic kind, as they say “born on a square”. That is why comic opera dealt with acute social problems that could not be touched on by any other genre. In eighteenth-century Russia, French comic opera certainly played a key role in spreading the Enlightenment ideas. A large number of its performances that contributed to the implantation of new ideals, originating in France, at the same time led to the rise of Russian Enlightenment.

On the evening of September 26, 1764, the court theatre represented in Saint Petersburg a new French opera: *The Farrier* [*Le Maréchal-ferrant*] (F.A. Quétant – F. A. D. Philidor). Hardly did the spectators understand that they were attending an event of importance. That was a beginning of French comic opera that would have reigned on the scene until the end of the eighteenth century. A curious fact is that Russian nobility, which started to join the Western cultural values on the initiative of Peter the Great only half a century ago,

<sup>9</sup> In respect that many representatives of different European cultures resided in eighteenth-century Russia, Saint-Petersburg and Moscow were multilingual cities. However, the privileged classes of Russian society preferred French, as it was a court official language. As Gozenpud points out, the widespread enthusiasm for this language progressively aroused public interest in French comic opera performances [13, 85].

showed keen interest in the new opera genre. It was considered good form to follow the Russian court example and put French comic operas on other stages. At first, such performances took place at capital theatres and then they were played at private and public provincial theatres.

It goes without saying that the appearance of Third Estate's representatives on the imperial stage deeply impressed Russian audiences. Some plots of French comic opera, based on an amorous intrigue, were pretty inoffensive in nature as well as heroes, who were often simple shepherds and shepherdesses. Nevertheless, some noble persons, perhaps wishing to please the cultivated Empress, sought to stage first of all those French operas that represented progressive ideas. In the feudal society, which had not yet been familiar with the Enlightenment ideas, such an act looked like a very bold and unprecedented.

For example, how could it be possible that *The King and the Farmer* [*Le Roi et le Fermier*] (Sedaine – Monsigny) was staged in 1767 in the Buturlins' private theatre, located in a remote province near Penza? Is the choice of this work explained by a simple interest in the genre that was at the forefront of fashion in Europe? Despite the fact that the opera praises a king, who ultimately restores justice, this *opéra-comique*, denouncing social inequalities and opposition between authority and peasants, is basically directed against the abuses of monarchical regime.<sup>10</sup>

An opera, dedicated to a confrontation between a king and his people, was staged for the first time in Russia. In those years, the Buturlins needed courage to tackle such a topic earlier than the theatres of Moscow and St. Petersburg. We can only guess for what reason the Buturlin family members were interested in *The King and the Farmer*, full of daring dialogues.<sup>11</sup> Anyway, the performance of comic opera, dealing with issues of social inequality, had apparently been approved by the authorities. Undoubtedly, this music show was one of the first representations of "la comédie mêlée d'ariette" in Russia. That private theatre performance, given by noble amateurs, encouraged other theatres and became an example to follow for them.

Catherine not only contributed to numerous French comic opera performances, but also tried her hand at creating theatrical pieces. As O'Malley writes, the Empress used the stage for political purposes.

Given that the stage can be a potent means of shaping and reinforcing social values, the monarch-playwright is in a particularly powerful role. Catherine the Great as playwright deliberately exploited the stage's power to promote political ideas and ideology. Through her characters' perspectives and their dialog, through the constructions of her plots, through her use of imagery and symbolism, and through her adherence to classical models and her promotion of romantic ones, Catherine the Great the playwright advanced her own political agenda—an amalgam of Enlightenment philosophy, Russian cultural pride, and her belief in the value of authoritarian rule [29, 1].

<sup>10</sup> Mooser notes that the opera was performed in 1767 by noble amateurs at the Buturlins' property; see [27, 121]. Perhaps, thanks to a high social status of Alexandre Buturlin (1694–1767), Russian politician and marshal, the opera *Le Roi et le Fermier* (Sedaine – Monsigny), denouncing the vices of autocracy, saw the light of day in those years.

<sup>11</sup> Countess Anna Stroganov mentions preparations that took place in the house of the Buturlins for *Le Roi et le Fermier* performance. A part of her letter is cited below with the original spelling and punctuation: "Cela sera *Le Roi et le Fermier*. Il doit faire le rôle de Richard, et sa femme doit faire la mère, et la Bariatinsky le rôle de Jenny, et la princesse Troubetskoy Betsy, et m-r de Stroganoff le roy" [1, 109–110].

Five of her plays were written as opera libretti. The opera performances with the sovereign's libretti were very different from those whose creators had much more modest social status. These musical spectacles were luxurious. The splendour of decors and the richness of costumes impressed audiences as well as visual effects, which were conditioned by a high level of theatre technical equipment. The court opera performances, represented between 1786 and 1791, were marked by the Empress's own conceptions and ideas, full of politicized allusions. During wars against Sweden and Turkey a whole series of sumptuous and moralizing musical comedies appeared. Indeed, these magnificent performances, played on the stage of the Hermitage theatre, were aimed at glorification of the Russian Empire. Catherine's libretti emphasized the ideas of the inviolability of monarchical principles and Russian army's invincible power.

Catherine composed in various genres.<sup>12</sup> Two comic operas, *Fevey* (1786) and *The Brave and Bold Knight Akhrideich* [Khrabriy i smeliy vityaz Akhrideich] (1787) were founded on the genre of tale. A comic opera *Fedul and His Children* [Fedul s detmi] (1791) tackled a peasant topic. The libretto of *Boyeslavich, Bogatyr of Novgorod* [Novgorodsky Bogatyr Boyeslavich] (1786) relied on Russian epic. *The Unfortunate Hero Kosometovich* (1789) [Gore Bogatyr Kosometovich] was a pamphlet directed against King Gustav III of Sweden, who was Catherine's cousin. Although *The Early Reign of Oleg* [Nachalnoe Upravlenie Olega] (1790), titled like a historical show for the musical theatre, did not belong to the genre of comic opera, it deserves to be mentioned. It was some kind of historical fresco, distinguished by the originality of its idea and musical numbers [5; 17, 20–21; 20, 41].

Despite the fact that Catherine's musical plays were performed with an extraordinary sumptuousness, they as a whole were inferior to comic operas written by other Russian playwrights. According to scholars, sometimes her writings had a dilettante character.<sup>13</sup> In other cases, a failure was conditioned by the unsuccessful choice of a composer. For example, in the opinion of Rabinovitch, *The Brave and Bold Knight Akhrideich* is one of Catherine's weakest operas. Notwithstanding that the libretto text, based on the genre of storytelling, could be considered quite advantageous from a literary and dramaturgical point of view, Ernest Vanžura, a foreign composer, failed to write adequate music [33, 80]. In a later analysis of this opera score, Aleksandra Maksimova nevertheless indicates a number of interesting findings there [24]. On the contrary, the music of native composers gave liveliness to Catherine's libretti, which were quite modest from the artistic point of view. Thus, some musical numbers of *Boyeslavich*, written by Fomin as well as *Fevey* and *The Early Reign of Oleg*, composed by Paschkevich, are considered very good. The success of these musical numbers was

<sup>12</sup> Characterizing all Catherine's works, O'Malley notes, "her plays have a fascinating variety of genre, style, and subject matter." At the same time, the scholar points out that "in Catherine's many plays, the comic genre predominates" [29, 11–12]. The genre features of Catherine's comic operas have been studied in the Ph.D. dissertation by Yuliya Semyonova [36, 118–129].

<sup>13</sup> Livanova writes that Catherine's literary text does not bear comparison with the libretti of Ablesimov, Matinsky, Knyazhnin and Nikolev. She illustrated this statement with reference to the tsarina's opera *Fevey* where there was neither developed dramaturgy nor spoken scenes characterizing heroes. Instead of lively dialogues, the characters used brief and awkward explanations which commented on what was happening on stage [23, 155]. On the contrary, O'Malley claims that "the artistic value of Catherine's works for the stage has generally been underrated. For the most part, the plays display solid characterizations and skilful plotting, within a neoclassical esthetic" [29, 11].

due to their opera melodies, founded on Russian folklore. They were distinguished by novelty and originality [16, 98–113].

Researchers, analysing Catherine's works, note first of all a predominant motive in her comic operas: the defence of autocracy. A detailed study of the historical context as well as Catherine's comic operas makes it possible to re-examine her role at the time of emergence of Russian opera. As an amateur writer, she attracted professional musicians to stage her theatrical shows. This primarily applies to two Russian composers Yevstigney Fomin and Vasily Pashkevich. Along with some other composers, they laid the foundation for the national opera. On the one hand, thanks to their music, some of Catherine's libretti acquired significance. On the other hand, the Empress's patronage and financial support contributed to the promotion and popularization of the first Russian comic operas. It is important that Catherine sent some talented young composers to study abroad. For example, Dmitry Bortniansky and Yevstigney Fomin were instructed in Italy [37, 436–37]. As the activities of these musicians were very successful, their mastery in composing was recognized there.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, the tsarina's favourable attitude towards opera creators and executants began to change gradually. A follower of the Enlightenment ideas in the beginning of her reign, later, Catherine revised her policy in relation to any freethinkers. Documents concerning Russian age of Enlightenment reveal that Catherine's cultural policy was influenced by political events. Thus, in the middle of the 1770s, she brutally suppressed a popular uprising led by Pugachev. Subsequently, she exiled to Siberia Alexander Radishchev, who was writer, poet, philosopher, and the author of his famous anti-feudal work *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790). The initiatives of a talented publisher and an eminent figure of Russian Enlightenment Nikolay Novikov, were well supported at the beginning of his career. However, in the early 1790s, Novikov's activities were no longer funded by the authority. He was deprived of his printing house and was placed under an enhanced surveillance. In the spring of 1792, he was arrested and imprisoned at the Schlüsselburg fortress, from which he was liberated after the accession to power of Paul the First in 1796 [3, 84].

## PARADOX OF CATHERINE'S MUSICAL EAR

Catherine sometimes admitted in her letters that she was indifferent to music. As Robert-Aloys Mooser points out, "despite the fact that the former little German princess was very cultivated and endowed with truly exceptional intelligence, and, as a result, became the all-powerful mistress of a huge empire, she suffered from a strange insensitivity to music."<sup>15</sup>

According to Masson, "Catherine liked nor poetry nor music and often talked about that; she could not stand the orchestra music playing during intermissions and normally silenced it. This lack of sensitivity in the woman who is so well organized

<sup>14</sup> In the late 1770s, three operas of Bortniansky *Creonte*, *Alcide*, and *Quinto Fabio* were successfully performed in Italy [8, 7]. With respect to Fomin, the Philharmonic Academy of Bologna awarded him a prestigious title of *Maestro Compositore* in 1785 [10, 112].

<sup>15</sup> "Bien que fort cultivée et douée d'une intelligence réellement exceptionnelle, l'ancienne petite princesse allemande qui, de ce fait, devenait la maîtresse toute puissante d'un empire immense, souffrait d'une insensibilité étrange à l'égard de la musique" [26, 25].



seems astonishing.”<sup>16</sup> There are some examples of sufficient evidence to support these claims. In a letter to Baron Grimm, she noted in passing: “Don’t talk to me about comedy anymore; I don’t have any talent for theatre and music.”<sup>17</sup> Princess Catherine Dashkova writes in her memoirs: “I was enthusiastically fond of music, but she [Catherine the Great] was far from being so [4, 110]. In 1777 the tsarina declared her desire not to stay for more than an hour and a half at the court theatre [27, 1]. Elisabeth Lvov, a lady attached to the court, remembers that at a concert Catherine beat her hands by signs made by Count Platon Zubov. He was the last of her favourites, specially placed near her for these purposes [26, 26].

Even though Catherine positioned herself as a tone-deaf person indifferent to music, she paid much attention to music performances at court events. In any case, as I have said before, she sought to surround herself with famous composers, as well as brilliant virtuosos of her time [26, 27]. Magnificent music shows were represented on the occasion of important diplomatic negotiations. Thus, in May 1780, Russian court planned a whole program of musical events for a historic meeting of Catherine II and Joseph II in Mogilev. The both monarchs with their retinues intended to stay there for a week. Knowing that the Empress was fond of opera and wishing to please her Majesty, Count Zakhar Tchernyshev organized a grand performance. Although Mogilev was a tiny provincial town, Tchernyshev called a court opera troupe from St. Petersburg. The best musicians and soloists, including a famous singer Bonafina, had to perform before dignitaries. The count also built at his expense a theatre with a large hall, designed by a remarkable architect Briganti [11, 28].

Relying on different testimonies, most scholars tend to assume that Catherine’s efforts in the field of opera theatre were determined by her political ambitions, and not by her love for music. Indeed, as I have mentioned earlier, she wanted to impress significant persons with the magnitude of opera representations. And it is not by chance that the patronage of musical theatre was considered by Catherine as an integral part of state policy. Therefore, in my opinion, it is essential to find out: was she really indifferent to music as it has commonly been believed?

Discussing Catherine’s attitude to music, scholars normally quote her letters where she characterized herself as a person not sensitive to music: “I’m dying to listen to and to love music, but no matter how I tried, it’s just noise and that’s it. I want to send an award to your new medicine company for those who will invent an effective remedy for insensitivity to the sounds of harmony.”<sup>18</sup> Due to frequent quotes, a judgment about Catherine’s insensitivity to music, based on her own statements, has become a tradition among researchers. Nevertheless, there are evidences that prove the opposite. For example, musicologists do not usually refer to the following Catherine’s letter to Grimm, where she admitted to being impressed by a famous

<sup>16</sup> “Catherine n’aimait ni les vers, ni la musique et le disait souvent; dans les entr’actes même elle ne pouvait souffrir l’orchestre, qu’elle faisait taire ordinairement. Ce défaut de sensibilité dans une femme d’ailleurs si bien organisée paraît une chose étonnante” [25, 88].

<sup>17</sup> “Ne me parlez plus de comédie; je n’ai aucun talent pour le théâtre et la musique.” Letter of Catherine to Grimm, October 30, 1778 [14, 108]. Catherine’s spelling and style have been retained.

<sup>18</sup> “Je meurs d’envie d’écouter et d’aimer la musique, mais j’ai beau faire, c’est du bruit, et puis c’est tout. J’ai envie d’envoyer à votre nouvelle société de médecine un prix pour celui qui inventera un remède efficace contre l’insensibilité aux sons de l’harmonie.” Letter of Catherine to Grimm, November 19, 1778 [14, 111].

Italian composer: “Do you know that Païsiello’s opera was a charming thing? I forgot to tell you about it; I was all ears for this opera despite my eardrum’s natural insensitivity to music; I put Païsiello next to Galuppi.”<sup>19</sup> In 1776, Giovanni Paisiello arrived in Saint Petersburg as a court composer. He had a resounding success with his opera *Nitteti* (1777), written in Russia on a libretto by Metastasio. Two years later, Paisiello staged his *opera buffa*, *I Filosofi Immaginari* (“The Imaginary Philosophers”), which was received with enthusiasm by the court. The music, filled with sparkling joy and fun, captivated the audience.<sup>20</sup>

On July 14, 1779, Catherine remarked in particular in her letter to Baron Grimm:

I must speak to you about Paisiello; Monday ... he regaled us with his opera *Les Astrologues ou les Philosophes*<sup>21</sup> for the second time here, and I wanted to see this in broad daylight the third time today, and the more I see it, the more I am amazed at his singular ability to create tones and sounds: and a cough, for example, becomes harmonious and full of sublime madness, and you do not know how this magician can awaken organs least sensitive to music, and these organs are mine. I come out of his music, my head is full of music; I recognize and almost sing his composition: oh, it is only Paisiello who has a singular mind!<sup>22</sup>

A letter, written a few weeks later, clearly shows that *The Imaginary Philosophers* definitely became one of Catherine’s favourite operas:

By the way, you should know that in all this opera there is no any aria that I do not know by heart, and ... I believe that Paisiello can make people laugh, cry and give to the soul, mind, and heart such a feeling that will be needed ... he is a magician. I will make a copy of this for you and I firmly believe that it is his masterpiece, given that neither *l’Idole Chinoise*, nor *Démétrius*<sup>23</sup> approach to that music.<sup>24</sup>

*The Imaginary Philosophers* was performed several times on the court stage. The Empress obviously preferred Paisiello to all other court composers in those years. As is clear from her correspondence, the tsarina liked to hum some arias from his operas.

<sup>19</sup> “Savez-vous bien que l’opéra de Païsiello était une chose charmante? J’ai oublié de vous en parler; j’ai été toute oreille pour cet opéra malgré l’insensibilité naturelle de mon tympan pour la musique; je mets Païsiello à côté de Galuppi.” Letter of Catherine to Grimm, December 22, 1777 [14, 74].

<sup>20</sup> As I mentioned earlier, there was a musical performance, organized on the occasion of a meeting between Catherine II and Joseph II in Mogilev in 1780. It was Giovanni Paisiello who created an *opera buffa*, *The Fake Lover* (“La Finta Amante”), which was a huge success [15, 123].

<sup>21</sup> Speaking of *Les Astrologues ou les Philosophes* Catherine surely implies *I filosofi immaginari*.

<sup>22</sup> “Il faut que je vous parle Païsiello [*sic*]; lundi ... il nous a régalez ici de son opéra «Les Astrologues ou les Philosophes» pour la seconde fois, et j’ai voulu voir cela au grand jour une troisième fois aujourd’hui, et plus je vois cela et plus je suis étonnée du singulier emploi qu’il sait faire des tons et des sons : et la toux, par exemple, devient harmonieuse, et tout plein de folie sublime, et vous ne savez comment ce magicien fait pour faire prêter attention aux organes les moins sensibles à la musica, et ces organes sont les miens. Je sors de sa musique, la tête remplie de musique ; je reconnais et chante presque sa composition: oh, la singulière tête que celle de Païsiello!” Letter of Catherine to Grimm, July 14, 1779 [14, 152].

<sup>23</sup> She is apparently writing about two other operas by Paisiello: *L’idolo cinese* (1767) and *Demetrio* (1765).

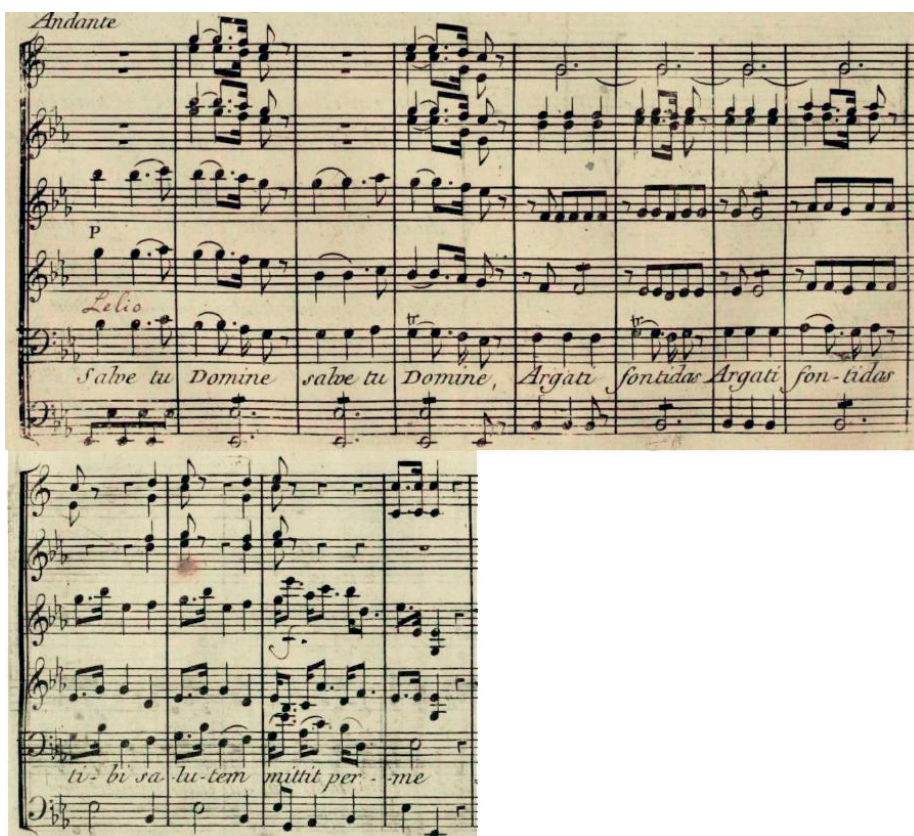
<sup>24</sup> “Il faut en passant que vous sachiez que dans tout cet opéra il n’y a pas un air que je ne sache par coeur, et ... je crois que Païsiello peut faire rire, pleurer et donner à l’âme, à l’esprit et au coeur tel sentiment qu’il voudra, ... c’est un sorcier. Je fais copier cela pour vous et je crois fermement que c’est son chef-d’oeuvre, vu que ni l’idole chinoise, ni Démétrius, ni etc. n’approchent point de cette musique-là.” Letter of Catherine to Grimm, August 23, 1779 [14, 156].

The quotation below proves that Catherine was not at all insensitive to music. Moreover, contrary to her own statements, she had a musical ear.

Yesterday we were given here again, in my lovely theatre that accommodates five hundred people, *la pulmonia*, and I laughed holding my sides at that aria, and at one another whose lyrics are *Salve Tu Dominer, Argathifontidas salutem Tibi per me*. I sing this aria so well that July 22, at the masquerade, I accosted Païsiello singing his aria to him ... The Holy Synod attended this performance yesterday and they laughed to tears at it with us.<sup>25</sup>

Possibly, she did not have great musical abilities. Nonetheless, as follows from her letter, some pieces of music made a big impression on her. In addition, she was able to sing melodies by heart. As can be seen from a musical example below, the aria to which Catherine refers does not have a complex melody and rhythm. However, it is difficult to imagine that a person totally “insensitive to music” could without any effort learn, memorize and hum it.

**Example 1.** G. Paisiello, *Le philosophe imaginaire*, aria of Lélío (Act II), measures 9–20. [30]



<sup>25</sup> “Hier on nous a donné de nouveau ici, sur mon charmant théâtre, où il peut y entrer cinq cents personnes, la pulmonia, et j’ai ri à me tenir les côtés de cet air, et d’un autre dont les paroles sont *Salve Tu Dominer, Argathifontidas salutem Tibi per me*. Je chante celui-ci si bien qu’à la mascarade du 22 juillet j’ai accosté Païsiello en lui chantant son air ... Le saint synode a assisté à cette représentation d’hier, et ils en ont ri aux larmes avec nous.” Letter of Catherine to Grimm, July 30, 1779 [14, 155].

It turns out that, according to her own statements, on the one hand she had absolutely no ear for music. But on the other hand, she showed interest in Paisiello's *The Imaginary Philosophers* so that, as she claimed, there was no aria there that she did not know by heart. Why did she state in one letter exactly the opposite of what she wrote in the other? How can be explained such a selective attitude towards music? As already noted above, Catherine's initiatives in the musical field are first of all conditioned by her political convictions and projects. We can assume that the main purpose of her attending concerts and opera performances was most likely not pleasure and entertainment. She did not perceive that pastime as recreation. Contrariwise, she considered these events as a part of her everyday work. Being an outstanding politician and a brilliant diplomat, Catherine benefited from musical performances, communicating with important persons. In my opinion, she had a musical ear, which allowed her to feel and understand music much deeper than is commonly believed. But, putting the state interests above all, the Empress preferred not to waste her time discussing musical works. This fact explains why orchestra was normally asked not to play during intermissions. It interfered with speaking. As regards her response to music, on the one hand Catherine expressed her emotions restrainedly, in accordance with her status. On the other hand, positioning herself as a person who is not versed in music and theatre, she kept a low profile on purpose. Most probably, she did not want to waste her time on empty talk. For this reason, she shied away from making judgments about music topics. Such restraint helped her to always stay friendly with people of art without offending anyone. At the same time, if Catherine did not like a composer or a performer anymore, those musicians were quickly replaced by others, who were more talented from her point of view.

It is important to highlight that Catherine's attitude to musical theatre evolved significantly during her reign. Having ascended the throne, she showed an interest in the genre of French comic opera, which spread the Enlightenment ideas through its performances. In my view, this can be explained by the fact that the young Empress was deeply influenced by the ideas of her famous correspondents, especially Diderot and Grimm. Therefore, since the early 1760s, she greatly supported the arrival of French troupes and the diffusion of their shows in the society. In spite of that, Catherine gradually became less and less favourable for French troupe performances. Why did her theatre policy change over time? Undoubtedly, this was due to the fact that she began to perceive free thought as a potential threat to the autocracy. Thus, she wrote in one of the letters to Baron Melchior Grimm:

Listen, cultivated man, explain me the following question: for what reason the music of this buffoon [Paisiello] makes me laugh, while the music of French comic operas fills me with indignation and contempt, me, who neither love nor know music at all?<sup>26</sup>

In this letter Catherine also mentioned her own insensitivity to music. At the same time, her judgments about French comic opera were sharply negative. Why did *opéra-comique* provoke such a reaction of the Empress? Does it really matter for a person who is not capable of understanding music, which opera performance to be present at?

<sup>26</sup> "Écoutez, homme à développement, développez-moi la question suivante: d'où vient que la musique de ce bouffon [Paisiello] me fait rire, tandis que la musique des opéras comiques français m'inspire de l'indignation et du mépris, à moi qui n'aime ni ne sait point du tout la musique?" Letter of Catherine to Grimm, December 22, 1777 [14, 74].



Indeed, Italian *opera buffa* and French *comédie mêlée d'ariettes* had some differences on a formal level and on a level of musical language. However, there was a major difference between these two opera genres. *Opera buffa*, founded on an obligatory love story, was mainly limited to entertaining and deeply hedonistic plots in contradistinction to French musical comedy that tackled serious social issues. Certainly, during French comic opera performances, it was not music that annoyed the tsarina, but an action, which took place on the stage. Thus, the letter to Grimm, quoted above, was not at all about Catherine's musical insensitivity. Attending French opera troupes performances, she could not help but notice freethinking ideas there, in particular the criticism of a king and of nobility. These ideas were definitely accepted by the Empress as a veiled threat to herself and to the monarchical system that she stood guard over. Her latent anxiety expressed in her letter to Grimm was surely not accidental. Having great intuition, she probably had a presentiment of the impending events of 1789 which would occur in France twelve years later.

Against the backdrop of spread of Enlightenment ideas and after Pugatchev's revolt (1773–1775), *opéra-comique* could not play anymore an important role at the court. Negative Catherine's attitude towards this genre, obviously considered as a propagator of free thinking, was intensified at the end of her reign. In January 1792 Valentin Esterházy writes: "they gave the day before yesterday at the Hermitage *Blaise and Babette* which was unsuccessful. The Empress doesn't like music very much and as for French music, she doesn't like it at all."<sup>27</sup> As we can see, this letter also testifies to Catherine's restrained reaction to French comic opera. On the contrary, Italian *opera buffa*, which was intended primarily to entertain the Empress and her entourage, did not cause such a negative reaction. In fact, Catherine's favourable attitude towards this opera genre had nothing to do with her musical preferences. An explanation of this phenomenon is simple: *opera buffa* was not dangerous in terms of political censorship unlike French comic opera [13, 88–89].

A few years later, Catherine began to take French actors, performing in Russia as a sort of bearers of free-thinking ideas. These ideas, diffused through musical performances, could potentially threaten the autocracy. Empress's warm welcome of French comic opera in the early 1760s gradually gave way to strong mistrust. Her cooling towards this opera genre was directly related to the information on revolutionary moods spreading in France [21, 149]. The position of the French troupe became particularly painful in 1793, after the execution of Louis XVI. Frightened by French Revolution, the tsarina ordered a thorough inspection of the troupe, and the artists were enjoined to "take the oath" and disapprove an activity of the revolutionary government. Those who did not want to sign this document were then to be deported immediately [35]. As a result of this event, Catherine was absent at any French shows for a whole year.

<sup>27</sup> "On a donné avant-hier à l'Ermitage *Biaise et Babette* qui n'a eu aucun succès. L'Impératrice aime peu la musique et point du tout la musique française..." [6, 390–391].

## CONCLUSION

At the time of emergence of Russian musical theatre, which took place in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Empress did not succeed in everything. Thus, she did not manage to complete her socio-economic reforms based on the Enlightenment ideas. This happened because Catherine's entourage had suggested her that most society changes would be impossible by creating new legislation. That is why, she was forced to retreat. Besides that, Catherine's rule was not without contradictory and even cruel events that she initiated. Nonetheless, her contribution to the development of national culture was enormous. Since Catherine, demonstrating her extraordinary abilities, did her best to promote the theatre development of Russia, her role in that field can hardly be overestimated.

First of all, it concerns her educational activities, aimed to disseminate the ideas of French Enlightenment. Sharing ideals of the Encyclopaedists, she really wanted to enlighten her subjects.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, realizing that art may play an important role in cultivating the society, Catherine paid particular attention to the development of musical theatre. Therefore, she engaged different Western opera troupes. In the early 1760s, thanks to the young Empress, *la comédie mêlée d'ariette*, which was a main bearer and a propagator of Enlightenment ideas in Europe, appeared on Russian stage. This opera genre reigned there until the end of the century. Numerous French comic opera performances doubtlessly influenced the formation of Russian Enlightenment playwrights. Dramatists such as Knyazhnin, Ablesimov, Krylov, Matinsky, Nikolev became librettists of the first Russian operas. Finally, Catherine not only took seriously the choice of court bandmasters of foreign origin, but was also interested in educating young national composers. Wishing to have domestic musicians, capable of composing music at her court, the Empress provided financial support to the most talented of them. Two composers, mentioned above, Bortniansky and Fomin, along with others such as Sokolovsky and Pashkevich, became the founders of Russian national opera. The attraction of autochthon composers to write opera music gave a powerful impetus to Russian musical theatre development.

It is an undoubted fact that Catherine's acts in all areas of activity and, in particular, in the music field, were determined by a desire to satisfy her political ambitions. For example, she took advantage of opera representations and concerts to communicate with important persons in an informal and easy going atmosphere. However, it would be wrong to say that she was indifferent to music, as it has been assumed earlier. A revision of Catherine's own statements, taken from her personal correspondence, allows to conclude that she had a musical ear, but rather consciously avoided value judgments regarding music. Being primarily a pragmatic monarch, she considered music as a means of helping to establish diplomatic contacts. Her own affirmation about her incompetence in music and theatre most likely helped her not to distract from business conversations

<sup>28</sup> Since the Empress was open and sociable, she did not mind other society members joining the theatre art. For example, her favourite Hermitage theatre, characterized by Philippe Weigel as "l'un des canaux par lesquels la puissance de la France commença à entrer chez nous, (one of the channels through which the power of France started coming to us)" was open to the general public in the summer period. When her son Paul became emperor in 1796, he abolished that tradition. Henceforth, performances in the theatre, constructed by his mother, were intended for him and his retinue only [21, 150].

during music shows and opera performances. Thus, the statement, deeply rooted among musicologists, that Catherine was pretty poorly versed in performing arts and music, is not true. Speaking of her insensitivity to theatre and music, the Empress made it clear that she did not want to touch on such a theme.

The reign of Catherine the Great coincided with the formation of national musical theatre, which culminated in the birth of Russian opera. I would say that Russian opera, to some extent, owes its birth to Catherine, because she was fond of the theatre and wrote theatrical plays herself. Although most of her libretti were pretty weak and did not bear comparison with Russian playwrights' libretti, her keen interest in musical performances stimulated the work of opera creators. A serious approach and an active involvement of the tsarina in relation to her own operas, as well as the introduction of some folk scenes in her libretti, place her among the authors who partook in the creation of the first comic operas and contributed to the development of Russian musical theatre.

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