

OPERA *BALKANSKA CARICA* – FROM CREATION TO CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE

ANA PERUNOVIĆ-RAŽNATOVIĆ

Abstract: The following article is about the significance of the first Montenegro's opera *Balkanska carica* (*The Balkan Empress*) composed by Dionisie de Sarno San Giorgio, based on the drama of the same name – the piece by Montenegrin prince Nikola I Petrović, its importance for the given time (the end of the 19th century) and the territory (Montenegro), namely for when and where it has been created. Also, it is about the role of music and its connection with dramatic text, the contemporary adaptation of the opera and its performance.

Key words: the first Montenegro's opera; *Balkanska carica*; Dionisie de Sarno San Giorgio.

It has been over one hundred and thirty years since the publication of *Balkanska carica* (*The Balkan Empress*); a historical drama in verse, written by the last Montenegrin sovereign – Nikola I Petrović (1840–1921). From its very emergence, this piece has had a wide influence and significance for Montenegrin culture and the international affirmation thereof. Based on the said drama, Dionisie de Sarno San Giorgio (1856–1937) created opera *Balkanska carica*. It has been performed for a short period of time and then forgotten. At the beginning of the 21st century, this music piece again comes in the focus of attention. Radovan Papović (1950), a full-time professor at the Music Academy in Cetinje, has orchestrated the existing scores (originally for piano and voice) of opera *Balkanska carica*. After the premiere and performances in Montenegro, the contemporary version of the opera was first performed in Sarajevo, at the international festival “Sarajevo Winter” in February 2009.

Nikola I Petrović, the seventh and the last monarch of the Montenegrin dynasty Petrović-Njegoš (on the throne from 1860 to 1910 as a Prince, and since 1910 as a King) had a gift for writing patriotic poetry, epic poems, and drama in verse, with *Balkanska carica* as the most famous and most influential among them (Figure 1).

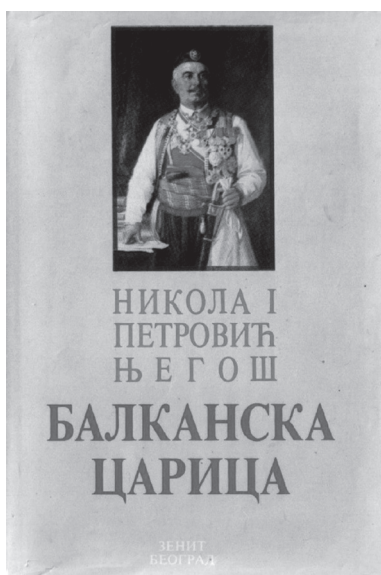


Figure 1. Front page of *Balkanska carica* drama by Nikola I Petrović Njegoš (Petrović Njegoš, 1989)

It is a romantic-patriotic drama, written in keeping with the national tradition, as well as with historical facts from the reign of Ivan Crnojević time (the second half of the 15th century). The drama is based on a historical tragedy, but also a noble and exalted ideal of love – between a man and a woman, as well as love for family members, the nation, and the homeland. The main characters are Danica (a daughter of prince Perun of Zeta), who is torn between the sense of duty and the feeling of love, and Stanko (a son of Ivan Crnojević, the governor of Montenegro and Zeta) who betrayed his nation, family, faith, homeland, and love for Danica. Nikola I dedicated *Balkanska carica* to Montenegrin women, giving them the recognition for their qualities and uniqueness. This is articulated in dedication at the beginning of the drama:

“But to you, Montenegrin women,
who can repay.
When only you can make
bitter tears to stop.

At the top of the thick smoke.
That weapon powder we burn.
Next to symbol: cross – freedom
we see your angelic figure.” (Antović, 2008, 21)

Another specificity of this drama is the way it got created. According to chroniclers, the Prince assembled his closest associates, intellectuals and aristocracy, during the evenings in 1883, and recited them parts of his *Balkanska carica* (Ivanović, 2012, 65). There were live debates about the drama text, and possible changes that would further enhance it, taking place in this group of people. During one of these literary gatherings, it got suggested that every one of the present ones should perform the drama as a reading rehearsal, and the Prince himself recommended who should perform which role. This drama, Prince's literary piece, full of romantic-pathetic verses, had its premiere public performance in the first days of January 1884 in Cetinje. That event marks the start off of organized and continuous theatre life in Montenegro, and can be tracked through documents (Latković, 1997/98, 105). Shortly thereafter, the construction of the first theatre in Montenegro called *Zetski dom* (completed in 1896) has been initiated. *Zetski dom* is still the only theatre in the country that has a "hole" for the orchestra, necessary for performing opera and ballet performances (Figure 2a and 2b).



Figure 2a. Royal theatre *Zetski dom* at the beginning of the 20th century (Anon., n.d.^a)



Figure 2b. Royal theatre *Zetski dom* today (Anon., 2016)

With the beginning of active theatre life, among other accomplishments, Nikola I Petrović wanted to have the Principality of Montenegro internationally recognized as a country that strives to peace, development and cultural prosperity in general, for that would bring it closer to progressive Europe. The most significant indicators of such intentions and aspirations were the main cultural and public events of that time: *Balkanska carica*, theatre performances, concerts, the beginning of the theatre building construction, and many other events of importance. All these activities have had a far-reaching effect on the overall social, cultural and musical life of Montenegro.

After the first public performances, the story about *Balkanska carica* spread rapidly across Montenegro, and then across European countries. The drama was first printed in 1886, and in the following decades translated into ten world languages (Petrović Njegoš, 1989, 219). Both the Montenegrin and the foreign newspapers wrote about the prince-poet, initiator and organizer of cultural events in his country. Moreover, it has been written about the translations of his drama, especially about its setting up on the scene and the reactions of the audiences.

Historically, it cannot be said with certainty where and when Prince Nikola met Dionisie de Sarno San Giorgio, an Italian diplomat, who arrived in Trieste from Kotor in 1886. (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Dionisie de Sarno San Giorgio (Anon., n.d.^b)

He lived in this area for seven years and made a strong influence on musical culture of (then Austro-Hungarian) Kotor and Montenegro. De Sarno San Giorgio has worked as a conductor, composer, pedagogue, and organizer of musical life.

While watching the performance of *Balkanska carica* drama, he got a vision of its musical adaptation. As it was written in the verse, it was very suitable for music processing. Some historians suggest that the Prince himself has made the selection of parts from his drama thus giving the basis for libretto. With his approval, de Sarno begins composing and in 1891 he completed the first Montenegrin opera *Balkanska carica*, which was printed in the same year, and performed in Cetinje, Kotor, and Trieste (Crnogorka, 1884). The complete score for soloists, the choir, and orchestra, as well as the opera libretto, have not been found so far, but the printed version of the piano and voice scores of opera *Balkanska carica* is kept in the Archives Department of the Museum in Cetinje. The content of libretto is as follows:

The action takes place in the 15th century, in Zabljak Crnojević – the capital of the Crnojević dynasty.

Act 1: Ivan-beg Crnojević, the Lord of Montenegro, together with tribal leaders, sent his younger son Stanko on the journey in order to form an alliance with neighbouring nations, so they could successfully fight together against invaders. Stanko is unsatisfied because he, as a second-born son, cannot be the heir to the throne, yet he craves for glory and power. Before leaving, he makes love promises to Danica, the daughter of one of the nobles, and they secretly engage.

Act 2: Stanko has concluded an alliance, but then receives an offer to change the side in the conflicts. He finally decides to betray Montenegro and his people, for he got promised the crown of the whole of Balkan – the fictitious Balkan Empire. During that time, Danica suffers for she thinks that Stanko is in captivity. When they finally meet, Danica who is dedicated to her people, faith, and the homeland, despises Stanko and his betrayal. He reminds her on their love and engagement, offering her to become a Balkan empress. Finally Stanko realizes that he cannot have both her and the Balkan empire, and in the act of jealous rage and despair, he wounds Danica and escapes.

Act 3: Ivan-beg mourns for his son, yet orders the retaliation for the betrayal of the homeland. In the battles that follow, the Montenegrins win and wound Stanko. Danica has recovered, and takes care of the wounded from the battlefield. She founds wounded Stanko. Through their dialogue, deep emotions are expressed for one another, but also the discord between their respective goals – Stanko's desire for fame and power, regardless to methods by which this would be achieved, and Danica's pure love for him, her nation, and the homeland. Deadly wounded Stanko begs Danica for forgiveness; she swears to fidelity and, after his death, throws herself in the river Morača, unable to simultaneously fulfil her duty to her homeland and to her fiancé – the traitor.

In the capital of the Crnojević dynasty people celebrate the victory of Montenegro and Montenegrin nation, and the first-born crown prince who had led the army to the victory. At the end, there is a prayer to God to maintain honesty, heroism, and patriotism in Montenegro, with the true exemplars (Sarno, 1891, 5-6).

Opera *Balkanska carica* is like a smaller romantic opera with a tragic note. It synthesizes elements of *opera seria* and Italian sense of melody with Montenegrin historical-national theme and elements of musical folklore. In relation to the original drama, the opera *Balkanska carica* saved the division into acts and scenes. Dionisie de Sarno San Giorgio made the concept of three acts that contain twelve scenes in which there are forty one music *numera* in the form of: aria (two-part form, three-part or developed form), *recitativo* (fragmentary form), combined *numeras*, choral *numeras* with or without a vocal soloist. The treatment of the *numera* lyrics is usually syllabic, and the facture is homophonous. *Balkanska*

carica is largely based on music sentence structures, which often integrate forming periods or sets of sentences. At the beginning of each act, there is an instrumental introduction with role of preparing the atmosphere for the further action in opera. De Sarno composed numeras to reflect the psychological states of the characters and to present the atmosphere in which the drama action takes place.

If the opera is critically analyzed and juxtaposed to the original drama of Nikola I, it should be noted that, due to the shortened text, the libretto is less dramatically persuasive. From the musical point of view, all the numeras in the opera are separate, complete segments that constantly carry new thematic materials, with frequent changes of tempo.

In the decades of the 20th century, marked by turbulent and frequent war events, as well as the marginalization of cultural events, both drama and opera *Balkanska carica* were eventually forgotten. At the beginning of the 21st century, with the renewing of state independence and returning interest in national cultural values, several respected Montenegrin artists-enthusiasts came up with the idea of revitalizing this piece of art and preparing it for music-stage performance. Radovan Papović, a full-time professor at the Music Academy in Cetinje, accepts a long-standing and demanding task of orchestration and writing music-scores for the symphony orchestra, choral ensemble, and soloists, on the bases of the piano score which is the only remaining document of *The Balkan Empress* opera existence. When this process was brought to an end, the prospect of performing this music piece became more realistic. *Balkanska carica* was about to be brought back to life. Radmila Vojvodić (1961), a full-time professor at the Faculty of Drama Arts in Cetinje, who is known for writing drama pieces and directing of theatre plays based on Montenegrin historical events and characters, entered this project by working on the adaptation of lyrics and later directing the opera. She accentuated: desire for power, fatal love, betrayal, revenge and death, as the most important topics summarized in this libretto.

In 2008, The Montenegrin Music Centre and the Montenegrin National Theatre¹, in cooperation with the Royal Theatre *Zetski dom*, the National Museum, and the Music Academy from Cetinje, finalized the most complex theatrical project that is of historical importance for Montenegro. One hundred and seventeen years after it was composed, the first Montenegrin national opera *Balkanska carica* was finally performed. The performance took place in the atrium of the former Government House in Cetinje, the night before July 13th (Montenegro National Day).

The contemporary version of this music piece begins with a gusle player on the stage, dressed in a modern ceremonial outfit. The sound of gusle, and loud

¹ Those are the most important cultural institutions in Montenegro.

steps of the dance ensemble after that, introduce elements of musical folklore through distinct melody and rhythm (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Performance the first Montenegrin national opera *Balkanska carica*, in Cetinje, Atrium of the former Government House, 2008 (dance and choir ensemble) (Miljanić, 2008)

The overture follows, and flow of sound-visual images afterwards lead through the scores. Past and present come together through music, historical theme, and modern interpretation. Solo roles were performed by guest singers from Serbia: Dejan Maksimović (?), Dragoljub Bajić (?) and Vladimir Andrić (1972), Croatia: Vedrana Šimić (1979), and Bosnia and Herzegovina: Ivica Šarić (1952), but members of the choir, the dance ensemble, and symphony orchestra were talented artists from Montenegro.

The further theatrical life of this libretto, score, and orchestration continues in Podgorica, at the Great Hall of the Montenegrin National Theatre, throughout 2008, 2009, and 2010 (Figures 5 and 6). As for the outside the Montenegrin borders, the opera was performed in Sarajevo at the National Theatre in 2009.



Figure 5. Opera *Balkanska carica*, in Podgorica, Montenegrin National Theatre, 2009 (soloists and the choir) (Miljanić, 2009a)



Figure 6. Opera *Balkanska carica*, in Podgorica, Montenegrin National Theatre, 2009 (soloists and the choir) (Miljanić, 2009b)

Balkanska carica project has shown that such a complex form of musical-stage production can be successfully realized in Montenegro, but the sustainability being a big question. The project significance is reflected through cultural and national identity, through the research and preparation of this project, and finally its realization, but also in the opportunity for contemporary artists to participate in such a masterpiece. The opera has been performed with a lot of success and always in front of a large audience. However, due to the lack of funds, since 2010 *Balkanska carica* hasn't been on the repertoire of Montenegrin theatres. Just occasionally, some of its parts have been performed; mostly solo-arias with the piano or chamber orchestra accompaniment.

Despite the need of keeping *Balkanska carica*, or having any other opera on theatre repertoires, it hasn't happened again so far. The opera remains waiting for some new enthusiasts and new theatre life, although that kind of art and performance are educationally and artistically necessary for the modern society.

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