Exploration historical contexts in vocal art

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Abstract This comprehensive study embarks on a fascinating journey of exploration into the historical contexts intricately woven into the fabric of vocal art, spanning from the majestic realms of opera to the dynamic landscapes of contemporary rock music. With meticulous scrutiny and insightful analysis, the author unravels the rich mosaic of operatic masterpieces, highlighting their profound resonance with historical eras and social ideologies. From the echoes of ancient civilizations to the tumultuous narratives of modern revolutions, the evolution of operatic narratives reflects a kaleidoscope of human experiences and aspirations. The study also delves into the realm of popular music genres, particularly rock, revealing their role as channels for cultural, social, and individual narratives rooted in historical contexts. The methodological complexities of assigning works to historical plots are examined, alongside the transformative impact of technological advances on musical creation and dissemination. By elucidating the symbiotic relationship between historical environments and vocal expression, this research highlights the importance of contextual understanding in deciphering the broad mosaic of human culture and consciousness.

Keywords: vocal music, opera, rock-music, cultural narratives, technological advancements, societal ideologies

1. Introduction

The subject of vocal art has been extensively studied, with various aspects, such as performance and performance schools, pedagogy, genre, and stylistic diversity of vocal works, highlighted. One important aspect of this research is the historical context, which provides a backdrop against which musical ideas unfold. Exploring historical contexts can help us understand how music reflects the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of people in a specific historical period.

This can be achieved by studying the social, cultural, and religious aspects of the era, which helped establish connections between art and society at that time. The second aspect of exploration involves studying musical works, including the literary basis for vocal music. This allows for a better understanding of how historical events and ideas are reflected in music. The third aspect of exploration involves analyzing the reception and impact of vocal art on society. Studying the reactions of audiences and critics to vocal works can aid in understanding how they were perceived in different historical contexts and how they influenced the formation of the cultural image of the era.

Several research directions can be identified when exploring historical contexts in vocal music. The history of vocal art has been the subject of numerous publications, including several monographs, such as Lawson & Stowell (1999), Potter & Sorrell (2012), Abbate & Parker (2012), and Mason (2023), which provide comprehensive coverage of the topic. The history of the Italian opera and the Bel Canto style is covered in the monographs by Roselli (1995) and Stark (1999). Vocal music of the 20th century is explored in the monograph by Mabry (2002). Antonyuk (2017) and Bach (2023) consider the history of music in the context of vocal pedagogy. Cherkashyna-Hubarenko (2022) examines the three components of opera history: dramatic, immanently musical, and spectacular. Pompe (2007) examines the history of opera art "in the time of the Spring of Nations" and notes a key feature of historical operas: a reduced importance of solo scenes and an increase in the importance of mass scenes and visual elements. Everett's (2010) research revealed the key role of historical plots in the formation of national operas in the 19th century.

The analysis of historical plots in opera has been the focus of numerous articles. Recently, Longchuan (2019) introduced the term "plotology" (opera plotology) to describe the comprehension and logical presentation of the plot as a narrative method, its structure, and its functions in the system of folklore and literary works (p. 3). Bibo (2011) examines the literary foundations of operas from the Romantic era and concludes that there is a complex interaction between the composer and the writer. This is because the text of literary work does not always fully correspond to the composer's expectations and

aspirations. This quote from Bibo (2011) suggests that the composer should aim to create a musical interpretation that enhances the meaning of the verbal form, leading to a holistic understanding of the opera's artistic content.

2. Methodology

To explore historical contexts in vocal art, it is essential to identify a body of vocal works on historical themes and analyze the implementation of historical context in each work. This task requires compiling a tentative list of operas and examining previously published lists of small-scale works on historical subjects.

When attributing a work to a historical plot, it is important to consider the boundaries of historicity. This is especially relevant for musical works based on biblical narratives, which, while having historical foundations, are largely artistic creations of the authors. A problem arises with many classical literary works that depict events from Ancient Rome, Ancient Greece, and the Crusades in the spirit of heroic epic. These works may deviate significantly from historical accuracy, including mythical characters alongside historical figures. However, our tentative list includes all works that feature real historical figures as characters, as well as works whose plotlines revolve around historically significant events.

3. Results

Three epochs in the evolution of historical operas can be distinguished based on this table. Until the early 19th century, operas based on historical plots often explored events of the ancient world or the Middle Ages, which were more than 10 centuries removed from the time of composition. This significant time gap allowed composers to avoid direct associations with contemporary events and instead focus on more personal events.

However, from the 1820s onward, composers began to turn to historical plots from the 15th to 17th centuries. Consequently, the time interval between the era of the opera's plot and the era of its creation decreased to 2-3 centuries, thus increasing the relevance of historical events in their perception by the audience. According to Pompe (2007), in these operas, the historical essence acquires ideological power, and its role arises from mere decorativeness. Furthermore, the geographical scope of historical events depicted in operas has expanded to include Eastern European countries.

In certain instances, these historical plots resonated with the nationalist aspirations of the audience. A prime example of this is Giuseppe Verdi's opera "Nabucco", which was used by theatres to express their stance on dramatic moments in history. The chorus of captive Jews from this opera has even been referred to as Italy's second national anthem (Vovkun, 2020). Although the opera's plot is set in ancient Babylon, which is more than 20 centuries away from the author's audience, the increased role of choral scenes and nonaristocratic characters, such as the priest Zaccaria and the soldier Abdallo, has created a greater sense of realism for the audience.

In Eastern European countries, the turn to historical plots in operas was associated with the growth of national consciousness and the struggle for the national liberation of oppressed peoples. The demand for nationality and historicity in music gave rise to two ideas: first, the identification of the nation with the nation and, later, references in operas to themes of significant historical events (Poniatowska, 2005). In this context, singing played a significant role, which, combined with the native language, acquired characteristic national features (Kuryłowicz, 1960). Examples of Eastern European operas based on historical plots include "Nikola Šubić Zrinski" by I. Zajc (Croatia), "Taras Bulba" by M. Lysenko (Ukraine), and "Bolesław Śmiały" by L. Różycki (Poland).

Historical plots in operas were often used for propaganda purposes in Russia, particularly to justify imperialistic interests. Pyotr Tchaikovsky's opera "Mazepa" is a striking example of this, as it portrays the Ukrainian hetman who resisted Russian occupiers in a negative light. The character Mazepa has been portrayed as a hero in the works of Victor Hugo, Lord Byron, and Franz Liszt. He embodies the truth in his struggle for an independent state but also experiences tragedy as he witnesses the beginning of the end of Ukrainian independence, according to Ye. Moreva. The poem "Poltava" by Alexander Pushkin, which served as the literary basis for Tchaikovsky's opera, presents an approach that aimed to justify the occupation of Ukrainian lands and the desire for further expansion of the Russian Empire in the western direction for the sake of Russian propaganda.

Historical operas of the 20th century continued this trend of minimizing the historical gap between the era of the plot and the era of the audience. In the operas "Shchors" by Borys Lyatoshynsky and "Nixon in China" by John Adams, this interval was reduced to 15-20 years. The propaganda of imperial interests, noted in Tchaikovsky's opera, continues in the works of authors who worked in the USSR. Events related to the armed aggression of Bolshevik Russia against people who fell under Soviet occupation became the basis for the plots of operas such as "Shchors" by B. Lyatoshynsky, "October" by V. Muradeli, "Arsenal" by H. Maiboroda, and numerous songs, oratorios, cantatas, and instrumental works dedicated to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and its leaders, which we will leave beyond the scope of this study.

It is worth noting that during this period, composers in Western Europe showed less interest in historical plots (Table 1). The emergence of the musical genre and rock opera did not contribute to the interest in historical plots, as these genres were intended to serve an exclusively entertaining function (Gordon & Jubin, 2016). Therefore, historical plots were generally not the best option for this purpose. However, there are several exceptions. One of the most notable rock operas is Andrew Lloyd

Webber's "Jesus Christ Superstar", which portrays the life of Jesus Christ. While the Christian audience perceives Jesus Christ as a historical figure, this rock opera stands out from others due to its extensive use of intonation, variable meters, and other expressive means (Bondarenko, 2022).

Table 1 The analysis of musical compositions identified the following 40 operas based on historical themes.

Year of creation	Composer	Composition	Place and time of action
1642	C. Monteverdi	L'incoronazione di Poppea	Ancient Rome
1686	J. B. Lully	Armida	Jerusalem, the First Crusade
1711	G. F. Handel	Rinaldo	Jerusalem, the First Crusade
1713	G. F. Handel	Lucio Silla	Ancient Rome
1771	A. Salieri	Armida	Jerusalem, the First Crusade
1772	W. A. Mozart	Lucio Silla	Ancient Rome
1777	C. W. Gluck	Armida	Jerusalem, the First Crusade
1818	G. Rossini	Mosè in Egitto	Ancient Egypt
1820	G. Rossini	Maometto II	Venice, 15th century
1829	G. Rossini	William Tell	Switzerland, 13th century
1830	G. Donizetti	Anna Bolena	England, 16th century
1835	G. Donizetti	Maria Stuarda	Scotland, 16th century
1836	G. Meyerbeer	Les huguenots	France, 16th century
1837	M. Glinka	A Life for the Tsar	Russia, 17th century
1842	G. Verdi	Nabucco	Ancient Babylon
1843	G. Verdi	I lombardi alla prima crociata	Jerusalem, the First Crusade
1845	G. Verdi	Giovanna d'Arco	France, 15th century
1866	B. Smetana	The Brandenburgers in Bohemia	Bohemia, 13th century
1867	G. Verdi	Don Carlo	Spain, 16th century
1874	M. Mussorgsky	Boris Godunov	Russia, 17th century
1876	Ivan Zajc	Nikola Šubić Zrinski	Croatia, 16th century
1880	M. Mussorgsky	Khovanshchina	Russia, 17th century
1881	P. Tchaikovsky	Maid of Orleans	France, 15th century
1882	A. Dvořák	Dimitrij	Russia, 17th century
1883	C. Saint-Saëns	Henry VIII	England, 16th century
1884	P. Tchaikovsky	Mazepa	Ukraine, 18th century
1890	A. Borodin	Prince Igor	Kyivan Rus'
1890	M. Lysenko	Taras Bulba	Ukraine, 17th century
1909	L. Różycki	Bolesław Śmiały	Poland, 11th century
1926	K. Szymanowski	Król Roger	Sicily, 12th century
1936	P. Vladigerov	Tsar Kaloyan	Bulgaria, 12th century
1937	B. Lyatoshynsky	Shchors	Ukraine, 20th century
1950	K. Dankevych	Bohdan Khmelnytsky	Ukraine, 17th century
1951	T. Szeligowski	Bunt żaków	Poland, 16th century
1960	H. Maiboroda	Arsenal	Ukraine, 20th century
1964	V. Muradeli	"October"	Russia, 20th century
1966	Y. Meitus	The Ulyanov Brothers	Russia, 20th century
1972	Y. Meitus	"Yaroslav the Wise"	Kyivan Rus'

1973	H. Maiboroda	"Yaroslav the Wise"	Kyivan Rus'
1987	J. Adams	Nixon in China	China/USA, 20th century
2016	Yin Qin	The Great Campaign of the Chinese Red Army	China, 20th century

Another example of a musical on a historical subject is the rock opera "White Crow" by H. Tatarchenko, with a libretto by Ju. Rybtschynskyj The main character is the French national heroine Joan of the Arc, which is considered symbolic for all people dreaming of freedom (Shpakovska, 2005). Simultaneously, title choice, a common Ukrainian idiom equivalent to the English "black sheep", may have positive or negative connotations (Sazonova, 2014). When applied to the national heroine, it suggests a somewhat superficial or even ironic approach by the authors to the historical theme, which is generally characteristic of the entertainment genre. V. Polyansky's musical "Solomon and Shulamith" also employs a similar approach, allowing performers to entertain rather than evoke a tragic atmosphere (Bondarenko, 2022).

In the 20th century, historical contexts found new incarnations in popular music, such as boogie-woogie and jazz, which emerged during the Great Depression in the USA as a means of expressing solidarity and providing distraction from economic and social problems. Later, rock and roll and hip-hop emerged as forms of protest and responses to political conflicts and social inequalities.

Pacifist anti-war themes gained significant popularity in the USA, particularly during the confrontation between the USA and the USSR, which led to both countries arming themselves with nuclear weapons and during the US's involvement in the Vietnam War.

Research conducted by contributors to the English-language list of anti-war songs (Wikipedia) at the time of writing includes the following:

- 263 songs with a general anti-war theme, written between 1950 and 2023,
- 214 songs about the events of the 9/11 terrorist attack on New York and the subsequent events of the anti-terrorist operation in the Middle East,
- 143 songs are dedicated to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, 134 songs to the events of the US war in Vietnam (years of composition: 1962-2022),
- 56 songs are about the conflict in Northern Ireland, 31 songs are about the events of US colonization and wars against the local Indian population (1960-2010),
- Thirty-five songs are dedicated to events of the First World War (years of composition: 1914-2015), 27 songs are dedicated to wars during the process of Yugoslavia disintegration (years of composition: 1991-2006),
- 26 songs are dedicated to the conflict between Argentina and the United Kingdom over the Falkland Islands (composed of 1982-1998), 25 songs are dedicated to the events of the American Civil War (composed of 1959-2013),
- 24 songs are about the events of the Second World War (years of composition: 1945-2016),
- 22 songs are dedicated to the Spanish Civil War (1963-2003),
- Eighteen songs are related to Russian armed aggression against Ukraine (since 2022).

The comprehensiveness of research by English-speaking Wikipedia contributors is limited, as it mostly focuses on English-language songs and therefore represents only the culture of the English-speaking world. However, the section on the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war is an exception, featuring predominantly Ukrainian songs, including "Hey, Hey, Rise Up!", which gained worldwide popularity through Pink Floyd ft. Andriy Khlyvnyuk's interpretation.

Unlike operas, songs generally have titles that are not tied to specific historical events. Historical references are often absent from the lyrics themselves but can be inferred from the context.

For instance, in Creedence Clearwater Revival's song "Fortunate Son", the American flag is mentioned, but Vietnam is not. However, the song's release in 1969 during the Vietnam War suggests that its pacifist message may be related to the involvement of American soldiers in the conflict, against which the song's authors speak out.

Some songs specify the historical context in the lyrics themselves. For example, Billy Joel's song "We Did not Start the Fire" (1989) mentions the names of more than 10 political leaders of countries that waged wars between 1945 and 1989. The repeated chorus of "We did not start the fire" gives the song a sharp tone of historical and political satire.

Similarly, in the song "Civil War" by Guns N' Roses, the assassination of American President J. Kennedy and the US war in Vietnam are referenced, with the line "I do not need your civil war". In a fully concrete-historical context, the specification of the historical context is often a characteristic of Ukrainian rock songs from the 2010s-2020s. For instance, the song "Stands in Subotiv" by the band "KOMU VNYZ" is based on T. Shevchenko's poem, in which the poet critically examines Bohdan Khmelnytsky's policy in 1654, which later led to the more than 300-year occupation of Ukraine by the Russians. It is unusual for rock music to reference the poetic work of a 19th-century author, as is the case with this band. The band also has sung songs such as "To Osnovianenko", "Seamstress", and "Dug-up Grave" to the words of T. Shevchenko. The name of the band,

which literally translates into English as 'downward for whom' but phonetically resembles the word 'communism', also provides a reference to a certain historical context.

Another unique example of a double historical context in rock music is the joint album "Mickiewicz. Stasiuk. Haydamaky". This is an example of imagological discourse aimed at consolidating the Polish and Ukrainian peoples against the threat of Russian aggression (Riegievich, 2018).

4. Discussion

In the contemporary world, popular music genres serve as a platform for expressing various cultural, social, and individual identities, reflecting the cultural and social realities of our time. Technological advancements, such as the use of phonograph records, radio, tape recorders, compact discs, and digital media, have revolutionized music culture, altering the creation, recording, distribution, and consumption of music. These innovations have empowered musicians to experiment with sound and introduce new genres and styles.

Historical context plays a crucial role in the development of musical performance, impacting the formation and evolution of genres, styles, and lyrics. Understanding this context is vital for assessing the significance and impact of musical culture on society, illuminating its role in shaping collective and individual consciousness. It not only influences musical and performance techniques but also determines themes, styles, and modes of presentation. Vocal artistry serves as both an art form and a reflection of the spirit of the era, embodying cultural and social aspects of society.

Our analysis revealed the significant influence of historical context on the development of vocal art. By examining how music reflects historical events and their societal impact, we uncover shifts in the perception of historical events within musical contexts. For instance, we observe a reduction in the temporal distance between the era depicted in music and its creation, indicating evolving perceptions of historical events.

Further investigation underscores the role of vocal art in expressing political and social views, shaping collective consciousness, and forming cultural identity. For example, operas created during national liberation movements often mirror peoples' aspirations for freedom and independence. These findings align with previous studies, affirming the importance of historical context in vocal art and its profound influence on society (Abbate & Parker, 2012; Potter & Sorrell, 2012; Vovkun, 2020; Mabry, 2002; Stark, 1999).

5. Conclusion

References to historical contexts in vocal art can be traced back to the inception of opera and continue to be relevant in contemporary popular songs. Notably, these observations should be objective and free from bias. The evolution of vocal genres allows for observations of historical contexts.

The time interval between the literary source material and the author's epoch decreased from over 20 centuries in classical operas (such as C. Monteverdi's "L'incoronazione di Poppea") to 15-20 years in 20th-century operas (such as B. Lyatoshynsky's "Shchors" and J. Adams' "Nixon in China") and to contemporary events in late 20th and 21st-century rock music.

In opera, the historical context is often specified in the title itself. In contemporary songs, however, it is usually determined only by occasional mentions of historical figures in the song's full lyrics or even by their absence, based on the context of the time when the song was created.

Examples abound in the operatic works of the 19th to early 20th centuries when the historical context inspired the audience with ideas of national liberation struggles, such as in G. Verdi's "Nabucco". However, in Russia (and later the USSR), opera began to be used to justify imperialistic policies, as seen in works such as P. Tchaikovsky's "Mazepa" and H. Maiboroda's "Arsenal".

Historical themes have also been explored in rock music, which often responds to contemporary military conflicts such as the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the breakup of Yugoslavia, and Russia's aggression against Ukraine. In some cases, rock music also refers to past events and the writings of past authors that have striking historical similarities with the present.

Ethical considerations

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Conflict of interest

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