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“A HERO OF NOT OUR TIME”:
GIACOMO MEYERBEER IN RUSSIAN ENCYCLOPEDIA NARRATIVES
OF THE LATE 19TH – EARLY 21ST CENTURIES ¹

«ГЕРОЙ НЕ НАШЕГО ВРЕМЕНИ»:
ДЖАКОМО МЕЙЕРБЕР В РОССИЙСКИХ ЭНЦИКЛОПЕДИЧЕСКИХ
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Abstract

The article analyzes the receptions of Giacomo Meyerbeer in Russia using the example of a corpus of encyclopedic publications ranging from the Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary to Wikipedia. The longitudinal analysis demonstrates both the normative perception of the composer's figure in a certain era, and the transformation of his image in a various historical and cultural context. During this period of time, the Russian image of Meyerbeer changes dramatically: from the genius whose operas everyone knew and loved, to a forgotten minor character, whose music is absent for the modern Russian public.

¹ Translation by Alexander B. Popov (Moscow).

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Аннотация

В статье анализируются рецепции Джакомо Мейербера в России на примере корпуса энциклопедических изданий начиная с «Энциклопедического словаря Брокгауза и Эфрона» и до Википедии. Лонгитюдный анализ демонстрирует как нормативное восприятие фигуры композитора в определённую эпоху, так и трансформацию его образа в разном историко-культурном контексте. За этот промежуток времени русский образ Мейербера резко меняется: от гения, чьи оперы знали и любили все, – до забытого второстепенного персонажа, музыка которого отсутствует для современной российской публики.

Keywords: encyclopedias, receptive analysis, Soviet canon, Wikipedia, Meyerbeer

Ключевые слова: энциклопедии, рецептивный анализ, советский канон, Википедия, Мейербер

In Russian science, and even more so in creative practice, the figure of Giacomo Meyerbeer can rightfully be called “*persona non grata*”. At the moment, there is no major monograph about the composer in Russian, and the whole corpus of works about him is meager. Nowadays he is represented mainly by popular science publications.

In 1892, the first monograph about the composer in the series “The Life of Remarkable People” was published; its author was *Maria Avgustovna Davydova*² (married to Shelley), the niece of the outstanding cellist, director of the St. Petersburg Conservatory Karl Yu. Davydov. More than 40 years later, in 1936, two brochures

² Davydova M. A. *Dzh. Mejerber. Ego zhizn' i muzykal'naja dejatel'nost'* [G. Meyerbeer, His Life and Musical Activity]. St. Petersburg: Tip. i hromolit. A. Transhel', 1892. 77 p. For authors and the models of biography of the composers in this series, see [6].

appeared – by *Ivan I. Sollertinsky*³ and *Yuly A. Kremlev*⁴, as well as a large article by *Valentin E. Ferman* in the journal “Soviet Music”⁵. This pool of papers was probably associated with the centenary of the premiere of the “The Huguenots”⁶ opera, which has become the hallmark of Giacomo Meyerbeer. To this extremely scarce list in the second half of the twentieth century, one should also add sections in monographs about the romantic opera by *Anna A. Khokhlovkina* (1962)⁷, *Marina R. Cherkashina* (1986)⁸ and a chapter from the textbook “History of Foreign Music” for conservatories by *Valentina J. Konen* (issue 3, first edition – 1970)⁹.

In the 21st century, among the special works about the composer, there are only three theses, where the focus of Russian researchers is mainly converged on the opera genre created by Meyerbeer: these are two PhD theses of the 2000s – the Kazan musicologist *Olga V. Zhestkova's* [2] and the Moscow researcher *Evgenia Yu. Novoselova's*¹⁰, as well as a recent doctoral dissertation by Zhestkova¹¹.

³ Sollertinskij I. I. *Dzhakomo Mejerber: ocherk o tvorchestve* [Giacomo Meyerbeer: An Essay on the Oeuvre]. Leningrad: Leningr. filarmonija, tip. im. Lohankova, 1936. 44 p.

⁴ Kremlev Ju. A. *Dzhakomo Mejerber: ocherk zhizni i tvorchestva* [Giacomo Meyerbeer: An Essay on Life and Oeuvre]. Leningrad: Muzgiz, Leningr. otd-nie, tip. “Kr. Pechatnik”, 1936. 46 p.

⁵ Ferman V. *Tvorcheskij put' Mejerbera* [Meyerbeer's Creative Path]. *Sovetskaja muzyka* [Soviet Music]. 1936. No. 9 (38), pp. 23–42.

⁶ The premiere took place on February 29, 1836 at the Paris Grand Opera.

⁷ Hohlovkina A. A. *Romanticheskaja opera vo Francii* [Romantic Opera in France]. *Zapadnoevropejskaja opera: Konec XVIII – pervaja polovina XIX v.: ocherki* [Western European Opera: Late 18th – First Half of the 19th Centuries: Essays]. Moscow: Muzgiz, 1962, pp. 326–367.

⁸ Cherkashina M. R. *Glava 2: Zapadnoevropejskaja istoricheskaja opera jepohi romantizma* [Chapter 2. Western European Historical Opera of the Romanticism Era]. *Istoricheskaja opera jepohi romantizma* [Historical Opera of the Romanticism Era]. Kiev: Muzichna Ukraïna, 1986, pp. 36–83.

⁹ Konen V. Dzh. *Dzhakomo Mejerber* [Giacomo Meyerbeer]. *Istorija zarubezhnoj muzyki* [History of Foreign Music. Issue. 3]. Moscow: Muzyka, 1972, pp. 419–430.

¹⁰ Novoselova E. Ju. *Pojetika “bol'shih oper” Je. Skriba – Dzh. Mejerbera: avtoref. dis. ... kand. iskusstvovedenija: 17.00.02* [Poetics of Grand Operas by Eugene Scribe and Giacomo Meyerbeer: Author's abstract of the Ph.D. in Art History: 17.00.02]. Gnesin Russian Academy of Music. Moscow, 2007. 28 p.

¹¹ Zhestkova O. V. *Francuzskaja bol'shaja opera kak hudozhestvenno-jesteticheskoe i social'no-politicheskoe javlenie: 1820–1830-e gody: avtoref. dis. ... d-ra iskusstvovedenija: 17.00.02* [French Grand Opera as an Artistic, Aesthetic and Socio-Political Phenomenon: 1820-1830s. Author's abstract of the D. Sc. in Art History: 17.00.02]. N. G. Zhiganov Kazan State Conservatory. Kazan', 2018. 48 p.

At the beginning of the century, Zhestkova noted the controversial character of Meyerbeer in Russian historiography, naming two basic reasons for criticizing the composer in Russia:

1. the discrepancy between the biography and personality of the composer (widely considered to be a “minion of fortune”) and the canon (an “image” – as she calls it) of the romantic artist;

2. the criterion of “national”, which has become fundamental since the 1850s for Russian musicians (starting with Alexander Serov, under the influence of Richard Wagner's ideas in many senses) [2, p. 14–16].

Considering these conclusions as correct, however, I would like to clarify the image of Meyerbeer using the example of an array of texts of various orientations – encyclopedic publications from the Silver Age to the present day (Russian Wikipedia and the Great Russian Encyclopedia)¹². This choice of sources is not accidental: the longitudinal analysis of encyclopedic articles for more than a hundred years is exactly the way one can see not only the peculiarities of the perception of Meyerbeer's personality by each era but also its transformation. Besides, if we take into account that all these publications are available in the free Internet space, then we can present a very diversified picture of Master's faces for disciples; after all, all these articles were written specifically for a wide range of readers, thereby forming the image of the composer for the general public and our time.

The Silver Age era is represented by two major editions: the Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary (ЭСБЕ) and the Great Encyclopedia edited by S. N. Yuzhakov (GEYu). In the ЭСБЕ, dated 1896, an article about Meyerbeer was written by *Nikolai F. Solovyov*, an authoritative professor from the St. Petersburg Conservatory, composer and practically the chief editor of many articles on music in

¹² See, for example, the specifics of the style of domestic encyclopedias in different historical eras [16].

this encyclopedia¹³. It is known that Solovyov was not among the fans of the New Russian School; on the contrary, he adhered to rather “anti-Kuchkist” positions and was closer to Alexander N. Serov. Due to that, perhaps, just like Serov, his task was to see “the national” as something between Richard Wagner and Mikhail Glinka. The assessment of Meyerbeer in the article is high: “the famous opera composer”, unusual musical abilities at the age of 4 (which effectively makes him child prodigy), “could count on the career of a first-class musical virtuoso” (like Johann N. Gummel), “complete originality and the ability to irresistibly act on the listener” (starting with “Robert the Devil”), the evaluations of texture, orchestration, drama are in the superior degree [15, p. 947].

Solovyov here, however, expresses an opinion (close to Serov's) about the shortcomings of Meyerbeer: “an eclectic – there is no independent ‘national’; a huge talent, but always under a strong search for success” [15, p. 948]. Nevertheless, the general summary of the Russian musician is as follows: “M.'s operas, despite Wagner's newest trends, reign in the operatic repertoires of all countries and the weakening of their prestige has not yet been noticed” [15, p. 948].

In 1903, an anonymous article about Meyerbeer was published in *BEYu*. Although the authorship has not yet been found, presumably it could have been written or at least “endorsed” by another professor of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, *Livery A. Sakktetti*¹⁴, who was the head of the Music Department of this publisher and the editor of articles. The degree of assessment of Meyerbeer's personality in this article is extremely high even without any references to possible shortcomings: he is called “an outstanding opera composer” [14, p. 779], the enormous success of many of his operas and the popularity of “The Huguenots” in the early 20th century are noted, the social status of the composer as the chief director of music in Berlin and his human

¹³ It is believed that he wrote more than 2,000 articles in this edition. For more information on his biography, see [3].

¹⁴ For more information, see [5].

altruism is emphasized: “he donated his fortune of 4000 thalers to the orchestra” [14, p. 780].

Thus, this era saw Meyerbeer in the array of great opera composers of the 19th century – “geniuses”, whose music deservedly enjoyed popularity and had been constantly shown in opera houses in Russia. The listener/reader of the encyclopedia was familiar with it quite well.

How did the situation around Meyerbeer develop in the encyclopedias of the Soviet era? The Great Soviet Encyclopedia (GSE) in its three editions is a vivid example of the formation of Soviet cultural policy in all areas, including music. Lack of alternatives, canonization and sensitive adherence to ideological trends are becoming the most important criteria for all editions of the GSE¹⁵.

In the *GSE dated 1938* an anonymous article on Meyerbeer is described as an interesting example of a new and highly balanced view on the composer, interpreted within the framework of early Soviet rhetoric. He is called “the largest representative of the French grand opera, a German Jew who achieved great fame in Paris” [12, col. 677]. Unlike Nikolai F. Solovyov, the word “eclecticism” (considered by Solovyov as a negative characteristic) is absent there; on the contrary, according to the author of the Soviet article: “In Paris M. finally found his musical and theatrical style, combining the most important achievements of the German, Italian, and French opera cultures” [12, col. 677]. The new thing here is the assessment of his creations in the context of the political situation in France (the July Revolution) and the requests of its audience – “a large financial oligarchy” [12, col. 678], i.e. an assessment of Meyerbeer's operas and style from the historical, political and sociocultural perspectives. An indicative and stable attempt to exonerate the composer: the influence of his operas on European music, including Wagner, is particularly emphasized. “The Huguenots”, in turn, are staged in the USSR as well, as reported in the article [12, col. 678]. Moreover, the author even inserts the last opera “The African woman” into

¹⁵ For more information, see [1].

the context of French lyric opera, evaluating it as one of the first examples of this new genre [12, col. 678]. It is symptomatic that the list of sources contains the freshest papers about Meyerbeer for that period: these are only three previously mentioned publications of 1936 in Russian (Sollertinsky, Kremlyova, and Ferman). This edition clearly shows an attempt to adapt the composer and his work to the Soviet canon of composers¹⁶.

In turn, in *the GSE dated 1954*, however, this canon is already getting distinct, although the newly anonymous article itself balances from the opinion of Solovyov to the characteristics from the GSE of 1938. The latter provides the assessment of Meyerbeer as the most prominent representative of the great opera, a Jew by nationality, the success of his operas with the public, high skill, with an opera being an important link in the development of operatic art [11]. The influence of Solovyov is manifesting in his negative mention of eclecticism as a style, as well as the composer's reproach for showiness and virtuosity [11]. Here in this article, clear markers of the Soviet canon appear in the assessment of any composition (adjusted for the political situation in the USSR in the 1940s – early 1950s) with recognizable Sovietisms and political clichés like the following ones: “signs of decline in operas of the 1940s”, “distortion character of the people's revolutionary movement in the opera *Prophet*”, “cosmopolitan tendencies”, etc. [11].

The list of literature has been expanded, but chronologically in the opposite direction (again, within the framework of the socialist-realist canon): it contains critical articles of the late 19th century by Vladimir V. Stasov, Alexander N. Serov, Pyotr I. Tchaikovsky, and even the opinion of such a contemporary as Heinrich Heine [11]. Quotes in the bibliography about (German and French) publications on Meyerbeer, published in the first decades of the twentieth century, have zero impact on the text of the article. As a result of such transformations, Meyerbeer ceases to be a promising hero of the Soviet era, as was the case in the previous edition,

¹⁶ About how it had been done, see [17].

and deliberately goes into the historical distance, becomes a misty past, breaking his connection with the USSR (and Russia as a whole).

In *the GSE dated 1974*, the volume of an article on Meyerbeer decreasing, signaling a further decline in the importance of this composer for the late Soviet era¹⁷. The author of the article is the authoritative Russian scientist *Tamara N. Livanova*, whose textbook (1940) on the history of foreign music is considered the first Soviet educational publication for conservatories¹⁸. Despite the fact that Livanova's professional qualifications are not in doubt, she, nevertheless, introduces Meyerbeer as a composer from a family of Jewish bankers without mentioning, though, his piano “virtuoso” childhood [8]. Just as in the previous encyclopedia, the Soviet reader does not have an opportunity to get to know about Meyerbeer's friendship with Karl M. Weber. When emphasizing the great influence of the composer on the European opera house of the 19th century, Livanova notes further that in the future there will be a reaction to “Meyerbeer”; by this concept she means “external effects to the detriment of truthfulness and emotional naturalness” [8]. Along with this, such Sovietisms as “eclecticism”, “cosmopolitanism” are absent in the text, being veiled by the following expression: “was associated with various composing schools (French, German, Italian)” [8]. Among the sources, the same publications are named as in the 1st edition of *GSE*, a chapter from the book by Anna Khokhlovkina and the German monograph of 1958 by Heinz Becker on the relationship between Heine and Meyerbeer, based on their correspondence. Nonetheless, partly due to the small volume of the article, Meyerbeer remained within the strict framework of the Soviet assessment of him as a composer of an unequivocally “second row” who was of no interest to the Soviet listener¹⁹.

¹⁷ In Russian science, time span of the late Soviet era has not yet been determined. There are at least three options for interpreting this period: 1945–1991, the second half of the 1950–1980s, 1970–1980s.

¹⁸ It was reprinted in 2 volumes in 1980.

¹⁹ This text from the BSE can be interpreted as a short outline for an extensive article on Meyerbeer in the *Music Encyclopedia (ME)*, a specialized edition designed mainly for professional musicians. It is significant that due to the large volumes of material, the image of the musician turns out to be different than that in *GSE*: Meyerbeer is rated extremely high as a composer, and all his possible “shortcomings” are veiled in every way and justified by the author of the article: Galkina A. M.

What is the image of Meyerbeer in modern encyclopedic narratives operating in the Russian-language Internet space? Without a question, the most fundamental source is *the electronic Great Russian Encyclopedia (GRE)*, which positions itself as a successor of *GSE*, thus attracting professionals to write articles. The anonymous article about Meyerbeer exists in two versions: the one, dated 2011 [9], and a modern one [10]. There is only one difference: the latter does not indicate the influence of Meyerbeer on Wagner's opera “Rienzi”, as it was in the former; as a result of which it immediately diminishes the composer's importance for European musical culture. The text itself is a kind of abbreviated rewrite of an article from *ME* published in 1976, supplemented by a list of soloists in the premieres of operas. The list of sources is guided by the already well-known Soviet triad (Sollertinsky, Kremlev, Khokhlovkina) and German-language sources about the composer of the 1980s–1990s.

If *GRE* can be considered an authoritative publication from the point of view of self-presentation and names of authors, then Wikipedia is the most read encyclopedia, the one that is addressed first²⁰. The *Russian-language Wikipedia* article on Meyerbeer differs drastically from the *GRE*: it is based on the translation of material from the *English-language Wiki* [18]. This is indicated by the structure, sections and illustrations. An exclusive addition are sections about Meyerbeer in Russia: Music of Meyerbeer in the Russian Empire (about performances and assessment of his music) and Meyerbeer in domestic and foreign musicology [13]. Paradoxically, this article can be considered the most fundamental glimpse at the phenomenon of the composer today in terms of thematic scope, volume and references to sources. The detailed biography and creative heritage recorded in it, different perspectives of his personality and work (for example – Meyerbeer and Jewry, Wagner against Meyerbeer, influences and reassessment of creativity in our days) – all this offers the modern Russian-speaking

Mejerber Dzhakomo [Meyerbeer Giacomo]. *Muzykal'naja jenciklopedija. T. 3: Korto – oktol'* [Music Encyclopedia. Vol. 3]. Chief Editor Y. V. Keldysh. Moscow: Soviet Encyclopedia, Soviet Composer, 1976. Col. 493–497.

²⁰ About the specifics of *Russian Wikipedia* and *GRE*, see, for example: [19].

reader actual “brain food”, creating for him the appearance of a brilliant, great composer, undeservedly forgotten, whose renaissance has just begun in the 2000s²¹.

* * *

Summing it up briefly, we can assert that the Russian image of Meyerbeer in universal encyclopedias since ЭСБЕ era has been exposed to substantial changes, actively adapting to one or another historical and cultural situation in the country. For instance, until 1938 Meyerbeer looks like a “hero of our time”, whose compositions are performed and of great significance for Russian and then early Soviet musical culture. But then, until 2015, he turns out to be an alien character for the Russian reader, a composer who has remained far in the historical past – exclusively in the “aural” experience of his contemporaries (as stated by the *GRE*) and with the pro-Soviet image of a composer who was criticized by Russian classics of the 19th century. Meanwhile, the Russian-speaking audience of Millennials and Alpha generations, referring to an article in the Russian Wikipedia, have the opportunity to see a different “Western” image of Meyerbeer and compare it with the “Russian” one in *GRE*.

The relevance of the analysis of encyclopedic texts is also remarkably increasing, as public (and often official) texts about music also construct the history of the emotions of the Russian listener²². Additionally, if we consider that Meyerbeer's operas on the domestic stage since the 1930s have been virtually sent into the oblivion, then these encyclopedic narratives have actually replaced them and are still replacing them in the musical picture of the world of the Soviet and post-Soviet public. As a result, they voluntarily or involuntarily create a textual image of the composer himself and his compositions, mainly the operatic ones.

²¹ Despite the basic anonymity of *Wikipedia*, the author of this article is known to me: it was written in 2015 as a part of the scientific and educational project “Wikipedia in Russian or Russian Musical Wikipedia” by *Anna Krivtsova*, a student of the Petrozavodsk Conservatory, now a graduate of the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music, a researcher at the Department of Documents and Personal Archives of the Central Museum of Music Culture (Moscow). URL: http://glazunovcons.ru/conservatory/newsarchive_main_page/wikipediya_po-russki

²² See more about this new research area: [4].

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