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Hermann Wedekind and Georgian Musical Culture

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Summary:

In 2017 Georgia and Germany celebrate the 200th Anniversary of enduring friendship. These relations between the two countries had become more active over time. An important part of these relations is the significance of German culture in Georgia, the Germans' contribution to the development of Georgian musical culture, music education system, performing arts. One of the interesting episodes of these relations is German stage director, the intendant of Saarbrücken opera theatre, actor Hermann Wedekind, who was one of the initiators and leaders of Tbilisi-Saarbrücken, relations and cultural ties between the partner cities. For his contribution to Georgian culture he was awarded honorary citizenship of Tbilisi in 1995. The paper aims to introduce Hermann Wedekind's works, which are linked to Georgian opera and performance of "Daisi" in Saarbrücken.

Keywords: Hermann Wedekind, Georgian musical culture in Germany, Tbilisi-Saarbrücken, "Daisi" in Saarbrücken.

Introduction

In 2017 Georgia and Germany celebrate the 200th anniversary of enduring friendship. An important part in these relations is the contribution of the Germans to the development of Georgian musical culture, music education system, performing arts and activities of separate musicians in Georgia.

The paper touches only upon one episode of these relations – the role of Hermann Wedekind in the history of Georgian musical culture; he became the symbol of the relations between German and Georgian cultures; the person whose name is associated with the initiative to establish cultural links between Tbilisi and Saarbrücken – the cities of two countries with different ideologies and political systems for the first time in Soviet epoch; a German in love with Georgian culture, who was its great supporter and promoter in Europe.

Basing on the press and materials preserved at the [Stadtarchiv and Landarchiv Saarbrücken](#) the paper will touch upon Hermann Wedekind's activity, related to the first performance of Zakaria Paliashvili's "Daisi" in Europe, namely in Saarbrücken. Last few years of my life – closely linked with Saarbrücken, significantly helped me get familiarized with the afore-mentioned materials on the cultural ties between Tbilisi and Saarbrücken.

Hermann Wedekind (1910-1998)

Hermann Wedekind was an artistic director of Saarbrücken Opera House, actor, opera singer, decorated with many orders and rewards of Federal Republic of Germany, including Albert Schweitzer Peace and North-Westphalia Medals, Grand Cross for his services to Federal Republic of Germany and The Saarland Order of Merit.

He was born in [Coesfeld](#), in 1910. In 1932 he started working at Bielefeld Opera, as an amateur actor (playing racy roles); from 1943 he worked at Berlin National Theatre together with renowned German actor and theatre director [Heinz Hilpert](#), as his personal assistant; in 1943-1944 he was a singer at Dresden State Opera. The war and bombing of Dresden, which he suffered

himself, had great emotional impact on him, giving him impetus to stage “Katarina von Georgien” – a mystery drama written by baroque writer [Andreas Gryphius](#), about the martyrdom of Queen Ketevan of Georgia. Later he staged the same play at Kutaisi Theatre in 1946-1950; this was his first encounter with Georgian theme. Wedekind was Head of the theater in Bonn, he directed the theater in Münster in 1950-1954; Director of Basel Theatre in 1955-1956; Director of the town theater of Saarbrücken in 1960-1976 (later Saarland State Theater); artistic director of the Festival Balver Höhle in 1985-1996; Hermann Wedekind passed away in 1998 in [Wadern](#) (Saarland); Georgian St. Nino’s cross is embossed on his grave-stone.

Thanks to him Georgian opera was popularized in Europe and the 20th century German operas, Wagner, Beethoven and Mozart were performed on Georgian stage.

The creative tandem of Wedekind and chief conductor Sigfried Koehler made Saarbrücken Theatre famous; together they staged Wagner’s “Lohengrin” (1973), Mozart’s “The Magic Flute” (1975) at Tbilisi Opera and Ballet Theatre, in Saarbrücken on Wedekind’s initiative Zakaria Paliashvili’s “Daisi” was performed (January, 1973), we will touch upon this below; “Mindia” (1973-1974) and “Abesalom and Eteri” (1975-1976). With the support of Wedekind and his friend [Oskar Lafontaine](#) Saarbrücken and Tbilisi became the twin cities; his performances at Tbilisi Opera and Ballet House include: Wagner’s “Lohengrin”, “The Flying Dutch” for the first time in Georgia (1973, 1976), Mozart’s “The Magic Flute” (1975, in Georgian language), Gounod’s “Faust” (1978), Beethoven’s “Fidelio” for the first time in Georgia (1994).

This story started as follows in the 1960s Hermann Wedekind (then-Head of Saarland State Theatre) organized the days of Yugoslavian, Polish, Bulgarian, Romanian and Russian Theatre in Saarbrücken. In 1972 Wedekind, already-renowned theatre director, received an invitation from “Goskoncert”(State Agency of Soviet Actors) to visit the Soviet Union. He was very surprised, when nobody met him at Sheremetyevo airport. Sightseeing Moscow and Leningrad was mandatory part of the program. He was allowed to choose the third city. His response to Furtseva’s (The USSR Minister of Culture) question which city he would like to visit, he responded not to send him to Siberia, but somewhere to a warm place.....He liked the warmth of the South. For this reason he chose Tbilisi. So started the way to the Golden Fleece, in search of artistic perspectives he flew from Moscow to Tbilisi. In 1972 he first stepped foot on Georgian soil. Wedekind met a number of kindred spirits in Georgia – “I’m back home; I left my heart in Tbilisi, in Georgia; There was everything I dreamed of – sincerity, hospitality, inflexible Homo ludens. Nowhere else people sing as there! It is a treasure for an opera director!” He left the will to be interred in Kutaisi, but his children never fulfilled the will of the artist who was in love with Georgia.

Georgian music in Saarland

Intensive collaboration between the theatres of Georgia and Saarland started in the 1970s. This initiative was supported by the governments of both countries. At one official reception, Otar Taktakishvili then-Georgian Minister of Culture suggested to stage Wagner’s “Lohengrin” at Tbilisi Opera House, which was performed here only in 1890/1891 and had never been performed again after that. Wedekind agreed and in response suggested to stage “Daisi” in Saarbrücken. He listened to the recording of “Daisi” and immediately started negotiations with the Georgian Ministry of Culture concerning the performance of Paliashvili’s opera in West Germany.....But at the time such issues were not solved in Tbilisi. The Soviet Ministry of Culture suggested the Germans to stage Soviet Russian operas, but the German side refused. In addition, West German philosopher Wolfgang Offermans visited Tbilisi. Offermans promised Taktakishvili to have finished translating the libretto of “Daisi” before returning to Germany and have included the German text into the clavier. “I fell in love with Paliashvili, when the composer’s friend of youth, a 86-year-old catholic

priest from Tbilisi, told me about him and helped me meet his brother¹” Wolfgang Offermans wrote.

It took eight months to translate the libretto. A creative team, headed by conductor Didim Mirtskhulava was formed to stage “Daisi” in Saarbrücken. It was decided that Georgian singers Nodar Andghuladze, Lamara Chqonia, Shota Kiknadze would sing in the first three performances.

At Wedekind’s invitation Georgian theatre figures went to Saarland at the end of 1972. They worked with the team of Saarbrücken Theatre choir, orchestra, soloists and ballet. Both the Georgians and Germans were united and obsessed with the idea of “Daisi”. The result was very successful – after overcoming many obstacles Zakaria Paliashvili’s music was played in Europe for the first time on 14 January, 1973, on 18 January again in Georgian and on 26 January in German.

Music director of the performance was Didim Mirtskhulava, director – Gizo Zhordania, set designer – Teimuraz Sumbatashvili, choreographer – Vakhtang Gunashvili, distinguished constellation of soloists: Lamara Chqonia, Nodar Andghuladze, Shota Kiknadze; Vakhtang Gunashvili (solo dances), German troupe members: Keiko Yano, Yaro Daniel, Helmut Tromm and the choir directed by Werner Wilke; translator Wolfgang Offerman greatly contributed to the success of the performance. The premiere was attended by Georgia’s Deputy Minister of Culture Vakhtang Kuprava, Bundeskanzler Willi Brandt and Germany’s Minister of Culture Werner Scherer.

In Nodar Andghuladze’s words: “they were well-received. A Baroness even said, that this was rather praying, than singing Wonderful were the dances directed by Vakhtang Gunashvili (an excerpt from an interview with Nodar Andghuladze).

Vakhtang Kuprava who personally attended the European premiere of “Daisi” later mentioned, that a large group of Wedekind’s opponents, who would adroitly use the failure of “Daisi” against Wedekind for being carried away by Eastern contacts and having discovered an unknown opera in the mysterious country beyond the Caucasus, fervently applauded the German premiere of “Daisi”. Next day, local press noted that the audience heard not oriental, but absolutely European Music.

Concerning the premiere Journal “Saarheimat” wrote: “A very interesting event took place in Saarland on 14 January 1973 – Georgian Troupe visited Saarbrücken State Theatre as part of cultural exchange with the Soviet Union. Georgia – the country at the crossroads between East and West was an interesting discovery for Saarland. Musical language of the opera is presented by strange sounds, and very interesting intonations, at the same time, provoking public admiration and good reference in the local press”.

“Tages Anzeiger” (Zürich): “The impetus for staging Paliashvili’s opera “Daisi” was Hermann Wedekind’s visit to Georgia. However there arises the question: Who is Zakaria Paliashvili, whose name cannot be found in any European dictionary? In short, he is Manuel De Falla”.

In 1973 when “Daisi” was performed in Saarbrücken, Georgian musicians hoped that other Georgian operas would also be performed in Europe in near future. “Daisi” was selected because it had the properties, which later became characteristic of Georgian opera dramaturgy – lyrical combination of dramatic and epic initials, melodiousness, and wide application of the stylistic layers of Georgian rural and urban musical folklore.

¹ Apparently he is talking about Zakaria’s younger brother, Levan Paliashvili



And indeed, subsequent seasons in Saarbrücken were marked by the premieres of Georgian operas: Taktakishvili's "Mindia" on 1973/1974 and Paliashvili's "Abesalom and Eteri" on 1975/1976 theatrical seasons.

In 1973 "Lohengrin" as directed by Wedekind was staged at Z. Paliashvili Tbilisi Opera and Ballet House. Here emerged the idea of holding a week of Georgia in Saarland. In March Wedekind went to Tbilisi together with the "Lohengrin" production group. Despite much work and little time, he managed to communicate with and meet his friends and like-minded people. At the premiere in Tbilisi among the audience were Saarland Minister of Culture and Mayor of Saarbrücken, here also planned was to hold a week of Georgia in Saarland and to formalize the partnership between Tbilisi and Saarbrücken.

First week of Georgia in Saarbrücken entitled "Georgian Week of the Soviet Union" took place on 29 May-9 June, 1974; over 100 representatives of various art branches such as Opera, Rustaveli Theatre, classical music, fine arts, literature were invited from Georgia – a true celebration and fireworks in Saarland, which the people still remember there; it is not accidental, that the Georgians are most loved and respected in this part of Germany. On 20 September, 1978 the square in Saarbrücken where there is Theater was named Tbilisser Platz.

A large banner with the inscription in Russian and German languages: "Welcome Soviet cultural workers" was stretched across the Theatre Square. A few days later there appeared another banner in German and Georgian languages: "Welcome Georgian cultural workers". On 30 May, 1974 at the opening ceremony of the week Wedekind suddenly announced to the audience that the Georgian Government approved the initiative of Saarbrücken and Tbilisi being twin cities. After this historical announcement the guests offered amazing opera, theater, folk song and dance performances the hosts during 10 days. On Wedekind's initiative "Samanishvili's Stepmother" was first performed in Georgian, then the local troupe performed it in German language. The media widely covered the ongoing events. The audience admired fiery dance performances; nobody had ever heard such strong sound of Georgian multi-part singing before.

Wedekind himself hosted the Georgian artists in his country house, met them with a signboard writing in Georgian "Vederkidashvili's cottage". Georgian actress Iza Gigoshvili recollected the success of Brecht's "The Caucasian Chalk Circle" directed by R. Sturua: "each tour was happiness

for me, because we brought Georgian culture with us, I would particularly note the tour in Saarbrücken.... We were applauded for 30 minutes, German actors came on the stage, Wedeking took me in his hands, exactly like Simon Chachava did in the performance. He kept me half-hour on his shoulder. If my creative activity had ended then, I would still have been happy”.

On 22 may, 1975 the official document of twinning Tbilisi and Saarbrücken was signed in Tbilisi City Hall, this was attended by *Oskar Lafontaine* – Mayor of Saarbrücken. In May-June 1976 a Week of Saarland culture was celebrated in Georgia, on 5-12 June, 1983 Week of Georgia was held again in Saarland. A new stage in the relations between the two cities started.

A short summary of the then German press was as follows – a cleft has appeared on the iron curtain, the ice has melted and inevitable process for the collapse of the Soviet Union has started.

The tradition continues

The cultural relations, that Hermann Wedekind laid the foundation for, continue today, however on a smaller scale. Over the years, there was Georgian Mimodrama Theatre in Saarbrücken; to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the partnership Exhibition “The way to Golden Fleece” was held here, with the exhibits of the golden treasure, many of which were exhibited in West Europe for the first time. Saarbrücken Waldorf School made significant contribution to the development of cultural links by opening Waldorf School in Georgia. Both schools, especially their orchestras still have close ties. The city is often visited by Georgian musicians, they participate in annual Saarbrücker Altstadtfest.

The 2010-2011 open concerts held in Georgia – Placido Domingo’s concert together with Tbilisi Opera, New Year’s concerts with the participation of Andrea Bocelli and Jose Carreras became also technically possible thanks to the inclusion of the Saarland side, more precisely with the help of the Saarbrücken-based Georgian Company Art-Transfer.

References:

The archival material of the 1970s on the tour of Tbilisi Opera Theatre preserved at Saarland Theater Museum

The documentary material preserved at Saarland Archive, Germany.

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