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## The English Operetta and Musical Comedy in German Guest Performances in St. Petersburg

During the reign of Tsar Alexander II an operetta appeared on the Russian stage and became very popular. On 9 April 1866, Offenbach's *La belle Hélène* was performed at the Imperial Mikhailovsky Theatre. Two years later the capital was gripped by a veritable mania for operetta: French operettas had become part of The Imperial Alexandrinsky Theatre's repertoire. Soon they made up one quarter of all performances. After the abolition of the state theatre monopoly (1882), the operetta flourished in private theatres.

Russian operetta theatre had always existed, with numerous performances of operettas that had been brought from Paris, Vienna and Berlin. The repertoires of the three European capitals were models for the Russians and Russian theatre directors were competing to adapt the latest foreign productions as quickly and luxuriously as possible. There were three important ways of repertoire migration from western Europe to Russia: personal relations among theatre people, directors' trips for repertoire purposes and, certainly, „tours of the European troupes“.

Touring operetta stars and companies were the usual thing for Russian audiences: Russia had long-standing cultural relations with Paris and Vienna. French and German were widely spoken in St. Petersburg. That is why the City was a favourite place for guest performances of Parisian and, later, Viennese operetta primadonnas<sup>1</sup>. The repertoire policies of the troupes differed considerably in that French companies performed only French operettas and German-language<sup>2</sup> troupes (from Vienna and Berlin) side by side with French and Viennese operettas introduced „the English operetta and musical comedy“<sup>3</sup> to the

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<sup>1</sup>The operetta company from Vienna performed in St. Petersburg for the first time in 1890.

<sup>2</sup>The term „German-language“ is used here because in the Russian tradition and perception of the period, the concepts „German“ and „Austrian“ were interchangeable.

<sup>3</sup>The first English operettas on the Russian stage were the Savoy operas of W.S. Gilbert (1836-1911) and A.S. Sullivan (1842-1900) *The Mikado*

Russian public. The article is devoted precisely to this aspect of repertoire policy.

Up to the late 1890s, guest companies for Russia were specifically composed of one or two stars and, otherwise, minor artists. A new era began in 1897 when the famous and brilliant troupe of the Carl Theatre from Vienna headed by Fr. Ritter von Jauner (1832-1900), arrived for its first tour in Russia.

1898 was the triumphant year of the musical comedy *The Geisha* (1896) by S. Jones (1861-1946) and O. Hall, when the Carl Theatre was on its second Russian tour. They had performed in St. Petersburg the previous year in The Aquarium Theatre and Garden for two months and earned the colossal sum of 80,000 gulden<sup>4</sup>.

In the subsequent year, Jauner's company was invited to Moscow by V. Schulz, the manager of Korsh's Theatre. The troupe then consisted of 115 people (including 60 members of the orchestra). For the title role of Mimosa, Jauner had invited Mary Halton, the London operetta primadonna. *The Geisha's* first night in Moscow took place on 9 March 1898. In April, the Carl Theatre troupe visited Odessa and then performed all summer in St. Petersburg. *The Geisha* was the highlight of the season.

*The Geisha* was also extremely popular in other countries. In Daly's Theatre in London it was performed in 760 times. During the 2 or 3 years after the first night's performance it was produced in the USA, South Africa, Germany, Hungary, Scandinavia, Russia, Austria, Switzerland, Latvia, Italy, Spain and France. In the context of this article it should be mentioned that the first four foreign productions took place in Berlin<sup>5</sup>, Vienna<sup>6</sup>, Budapest<sup>7</sup> and Moscow<sup>8</sup>.

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(1887, 1888), *The Yeomen of the Guard* (in the Russian version – *Captain Wilson*; 1889 1891), and *The Gondoliers* (1890, 1891). Only *The Mikado* met with an adequate response.

<sup>4</sup>Teatr i Ikusstvo [Theatre and Art], 1898, N° 29, p. 522.

<sup>5</sup>On 1 May 1897, Lessing Theatre, translation by E.M. Roehr and J. Freund.

<sup>6</sup>On 16 October 1897, the Carl Theatre, the same translation.

<sup>7</sup>On 16 October 1897, the translation by J.B. Fay and E. Makai.

<sup>8</sup>On 9 December 1897, Shelaputin's Theatre, the translation by Lolo (L.G. Mundstein), A.E. Blumental-Tamarin's troupe.

The performances of the Carl Theatre struck the Russian public who had never seen such excellent performing and directing in operetta and had got used to frivolity and a lack of discipline. All their productions were the result of serious and thorough work. The artists carefully studied the score in rehearsals, and by the first night's performance they had developed their own distinctive style. Improvisation and special effects were not accidental, and the performance always had its appropriate tempo, which altogether produced an impression of elegance and ease: „Ms Stojan plays beautifully: a casual joviality and elegant ease are the distinguishing features of her acting. Our own primadonnas replace these qualities by unpretentious simplicity.“<sup>9</sup>

All the aforesaid was attributed not only to the soloists but to all the participants of the performance: „The chorus sings beautifully, all ensembles are of the best quality, the dances and movements which chorus performs during the singing are neatly choreographed by the famous Viennese ballet master Gundlach.“<sup>10</sup> Reviewers highly appreciated the „Japanese“ scenery, its picturesque magnificence and the virtuosity in Japanese group movements. It is interesting that it was Gundlach who also directed the dances in the operetta by Gilbert and Sullivan (*The Mikado*), which was produced by the Imperial German troupe in 1888. It was an extraordinary success<sup>11</sup>.

*The Geisha* of the Carl Theatre fully met the rules and demands of the operetta genre: „The operetta author and director must co-ordinate in an artistically convincing way the various stage elements and achieve a masterly performance by the actor, the vocalist, the dancer and the designer.“<sup>12</sup> The Viennese productions showed the Russian audience for the first time what the essence of the operetta is. They demonstrated an unprecedented unity of lyricism and farce, a sensual and masterly harmony of singing, spoken dialogue and dance.

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<sup>9</sup> *Peterburgskaya gazeta* [The Petersburg Gazette], 3 May 1898, N° 119.

<sup>10</sup> *Sanct-Peterburgskiye Vedmosty* [The St. Petersburg News], 4 May 1898, N° 120.

<sup>11</sup> *Der Mikado, oder: Ein Tag in Titipu*, translation of F. Zell and R. Geneé, 7 December 1888, directed by F. Bock.

<sup>12</sup> V. Konen, *Tretii plast. Noviy massoviy dжанr v muzyke XX veka* [The third layer. A new mass genre in 20th century music], Moscow 1994, p. 46.

The Russian première of *The Geisha* and the guest performances of the Carl Theatre in St. Petersburg and Moscow initiated the „Geishamania“ that reached its peak in 1898-1903 and lasted over 20 years. *The Geisha* productions followed one after another: on 9 December 1897 – the Russian version in Moscow’s Shelaputin Theatre, on 9 March 1898 – the Carl Theatre’s performance in Moscow, on 28 April 1898 – the Linskaya-Nemetty’s Theatre in St. Petersburg, on 2 May 1898 – the Carl Theatre’s performance in St. Petersburg.

The subsequent years may be defined as *The Geisha* years. In 1899, 1900 and 1901 the operetta was produced in St. Petersburg 10, 12 and 9 times resp. The overall number of evening performances alone was approximately 85, 80 and 110 (!). During the two years after the first night’s performance *The Geisha* was on in Moscow over 200 times<sup>13</sup>.

Jones’s musical comedy was in the repertoire of nearly every Russian operetta company. So during the summer season of 1899, the Petersburg public had the opportunity to see *The Geisha* in Russian (Nemetty’s Summer Theatre and Garden), in German (the Berlin Central Theatre) and in English (the London Gaiety Theatre). Reviewers wrote with enthusiasm about Mia Weber as „the best Geisha in Germany“<sup>14</sup> and they praised the production of The Gaiety. But the absolute favourites in St. Petersburg were the artists of the Carl Theatre.

Their performances were so successful (from an artistic as well as from a financial point of view) that the troupe of Jauner and Schulz became permanent guests of the Russian (and, in particular, Petersburg) stage. They came during every Lent or Christmas season for more than 10 years. After Jauner’s death Schulz, A. Ferron, H. Zeller and S. Ziehrer were the subsequent managers of the company and such artists as Bettie Stojan, Julius Spiellmann, Edmund Steinberger, Risa Nordström, Siegmund Natzler and Mizzi Wirth became the favourites of the City’s audience.

The phenomenal success of *The Geisha* (despite very high prices, performances were always sold out) encouraged the director of the Carl Theatre to include it into their tour repertoire

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<sup>13</sup> *Kurier* [Courier], 29 November 1899, N° 330.

<sup>14</sup> *St Petersburg Herold*, 23 June 1899, N° 172.

again and again<sup>15</sup>. The title part was sung alternately by Mary Halton (1898, 1900, 1901) from England, the Viennese singers Bettie Stojan (1900-1902, 1908) and Mizzi Wirth (1905), the German Mia Weber (1904, 1907) and the Swede Risa Nordström (1903). In 1900 the company also performed *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan<sup>16</sup>. Jones's musical comedy *San Toy* was the hit of the 1901 touring season<sup>17</sup>. Between 1898 and 1902 music editions of *The Geisha* were published in St. Petersburg and Moscow, which also contained Freund's German text.

A Viennese performing style was quickly adopted in Russia, and from the end of the 19th century the Russian operetta troupes tried to imitate it. Thus, in the same way as Offenbach's artists were teachers of the genre for all Europe, the Carl Theatre troupe during their frequent tours of Germany, Russia and Scandinavia became the champions of the new operetta.

The diagram shows the development of the English operetta and musical comedy performances in St. Petersburg between 1896 and 1916. It is obvious that the peak of their popularity coincides with the first tours of the German-language companies with *The Geisha* in their repertoire.

There is another astonishing aspect concerning *The Geisha* during the Russian-Japanese war of 1904-1905. The slump in the number of performances is obvious from the diagram, which is believed to be the result of the fact that the „Japanese operetta“ simply did not feature. Exactly at the outbreak of the war, the old favourites of the Petersburg audience, the Carl Theatre troupe, came to the City. Of course, they brought *The Geisha* with them, wishing to repeat the triumphant success they had had half a year earlier. However, their first *Geisha* performance on 27 January 1904 coincided with the Japanese armed attack of Port Arthur, one of the most tragic events of that war.

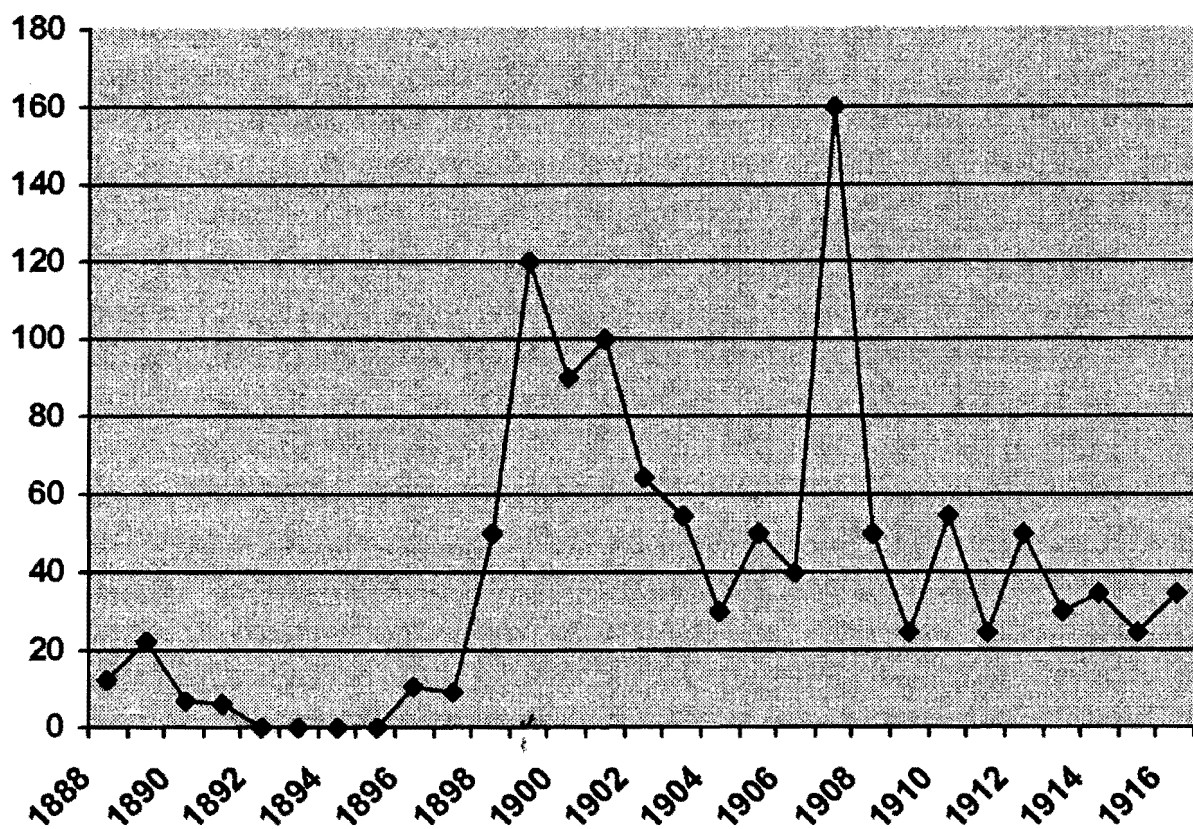
Confirmed evidence of an official prohibition of *Geisha* performances has not been found yet. However, the facts show

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<sup>15</sup>The Carl Theatre performed it 73 times altogether.

<sup>16</sup>On 28 November 1900.

<sup>17</sup>On 15 January 1901. On the manuscript of the Russian translation of *San Toy*, which was produced in The Shabelskaya's Petersburg Theatre on 16 July 1901, one can see a note: „A translation made from the exact production by the Carl Theatre“.



that the performance of 27 January was the first and the last within the Carl Theatre's tour. Up to September 1905 it had entirely disappeared from the repertoire. The war ended on 5 September 1905 with the signing of the Portsmouth Peace Treaty. Three weeks later *The Geisha* was performed in St. Petersburg in The Summer Bouffe Theatre: „After the long interruption *The Geisha* has been reviewed. The operetta swept the stage again without any incidents, as though The Russian-Japanese war had never happened.“<sup>18</sup>

Thus we have seen a distinctive example of the Russian-German cultural and musical relations concerning an English musical comedy. Now we will emphasize the English operetta's life in Russia.

It is evident that any work being transplanted into alien ground, into a foreign cultural context, gradually becomes part of this culture. However, for the Russian public, the French operetta

<sup>18</sup>Cited from: Yu.L. Alyansky, *Veselyatschijsya Peterburg: Po materialam sopbraniya G.A. Ivanova* [St. Petersburg enjoying itself: From the documents of G.A. Ivanov's collection], vol. 2, St. Petersburg 1993, p. 228.

was always „part of Paris“, the Viennese operetta personified „the spirit of Vienna“, but the English musical comedy at that time was not apprehended as a phenomenon of English culture. During the German-language companies' guest performances between 1898 and 1908 it was perceived as „part of the German culture“.

There are several factors which contributed to this. First, *The Geisha*, *The Mikado* and the *San Toy* were just three examples from a number of French and Viennese operettas performed in German. Second, the musical styles of Jones (popular) and Sullivan (eclectic) were not as strongly nationalist as were Offenbach's or Strauss's tunes. The specific „English“ features of the three operettas were mixed in the public's and in the critics' perception with the familiar ones of the Viennese operetta. All this was counter-productive to their identification as being typically English. Third, the English operettas and musical comedies performed in Russia by German-language companies followed immediately after their premières in Vienna and Berlin. So they were perceived like previous operettas by Strauss, Millöcker, Suppé and Zeller as novelties from Vienna or Berlin but not from the London stages.

Finally, in the performing styles of the Viennese and Berlin artists at the time of their Russian tours a number of settled devices and character types were firmly established. In rehearsals any French, Viennese or English operetta was adapted to them. In this context it is not surprising that *The Geisha* performed by the Carl Theatre troupe was much more successful than its original English style, which was experienced as alien and incomprehensible.

The tours of the German-language companies became important events in metropolitan cultural entertainment especially for the German Diaspora. They fully reflected the duality of St. Petersburg as the official capital of Russia and as a diverse cultural centre.