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Behind the Curtains: Russian Opera in the Context of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Meda
Stankevičiūtė

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Abstract

In the present-day context, Russia is an explicit example where the external policies are known to be exporting culture as a form of soft power. Culture is an inevitable part of our humanity. Opera is considered by many to be the epitome of culture due to its prestigious reputation. This form of culture holds large swathes of power to be exploited as a soft power in politics. However, only a minority is aware and entering into a discourse about it. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the reactions regarding cultural sanctions within cultural institutions and artists differed strongly. Some theatres and opera singers were quick to refuse Russian repertoire while others continued to perform Russian classical music. Therefore, this paper attempts to answer how opera singers and theatres justify their decision to exclude Russian classical music from opera performances. The lack of academic literature on cultural diplomacy and opera as a soft power underlines the academic value of this thesis. Through the combination of digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews, research captures both the institutional and individual decision-making process. In particular, this research includes an analysis of eight theatre statements and ten interviews with opera singers. The findings suggest that political pressure, artistic expression and memory politics all play a vital role when justifying the decisions. Additionally, results revealed the significant importance of money used as a justification. The research concludes that operas, where language and music meet, although seemingly innocent, are capable of telling myths and stories in persuasive ways.

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Opera Glossary

Musical term	Definition
Ad libitum	freely as one prefers
Aria	solo piece of the main characters in opera
Chorus	part where more than one character is singing
Coda	a passage before the end
Finale	the ending, last movement
Interlude	a gap, a passage between the lyrics and the song
Overture	opening of the opera
Prelude	brief introductory passage before larger musical piece
Recitative	singing which imitates spoken words, emphasising the narrative
The score	a composition where all parts of characters and instruments a listed in one manuscript

"You are fighting in a way, you do not go to ask for a weapon, do not go into the trenches, do not sit through the bombings, but you take an instrument, take the poetry, write and throw it like a missile, like a bomb"

(Interviewee 8)

1. Overture

Ukrainian minister Oleksandr Tkachenko in December of 2022, 10 months after the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine stated: "As Ukraine's culture minister, I'm asking you to boycott Tschaikovsky until this war is over" (Tkachenko 2022). The war is ongoing, along with physical devastation, memory and culture lay shattered in the rubble. Understanding the complexity of this war as a "battle over culture and history", Ukraine's Minister of Culture asked the rest of the world to respond to Russia's instrumentalized culture and, at least for the context of this war, pause performing Russian classics (Higgins 2022). For some countries, this call was very straightforward. Cultural institutions and artists, even without a further explanation, removed Tschaikovsky's operas and other Russian composers' works from their repertoire. For others, art remains an untouchable artefact, and playing The Nutcracker or Boris Godunov, or listening to Rachmaninoff does not have anything to do with Putin and his regime. It is simply an art from the past (Zerka 2023: 11). Two years on from the war the debate remains at a standstill due to its complex and delicate nature.

Although after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 Europeans were quick to sanction Russia in various ways such as asset freezes and visa bans (Bianco 2023), cultural sanctions were left up for individual decisions. In Lithuania, national opera theatres and artists reacted rapidly and immediately removed Russian classical music from their repertoires (LNOBT 2023). Additionally, artists changed their programmes by excluding Russian composers' work and any music pieces in the Russian language (Jackūnaitė and Gaižauskaitė 2022). To show solidarity with Ukraine, the national theatre in Croatia also eliminated Russian composers' works from the repertoire (Zerka 2023: 15). In the Netherlands, planned Russian classical music concerts were replaced by concerts for Ukraine (ibid.).

However, these are just a few examples within many swathes of ignorance and inaction. In the summer of 2022, the hub of classical music La Scala Opera House made a public announcement to open the new season with Russian composer Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov" opera (Koval and Tereshchenko 2023: 11). The decision to choose this opera in the context of the ongoing war received a lot of criticism, especially since "Boris Godunov" was the first non-Italian opera in eight years (Imam 2022). La Scala season opening is one of the most important events in the world of opera (Teatro alla Scala n.d.), therefore, the choice

of Russian opera in the year of the war leaves us with more questions than answers. Why at this time? Although Ukrainian associations requested to reconsider the decision, the culture minister of Italy G. Sangiuliano responded: "Art should always be distinguished from politics, otherwise, we shouldn't have to read Dostoevsky" (Lyapustina 2022). Considering the criticism received and the discussions that arose from it, it seems like cultural institutions are only pretending that art does not have anything to do with the ongoing political events. It is particularly the case due to the Prima della Scala inviting politicians (Ursula von der Leyen, Georgia Meloni and Sergio Mattarella) despite claiming to be removed from politics (ibid.). Unfortunately, La Scala is not the only outlier in this situation. Many theatres decided to keep Russian operas in their repertoire, and continued to consciously perform them even two years after the invasion. For example, this upcoming season of 2024/2025, Vienna State Opera will perform Tchaikovsky's opera "Iolanta", Royal Opera House in London has scheduled to play another Tchaikovsky's opera, "Eugene Onegin", next fall, and opera houses in Hamburg, Avignon and Warsaw included "Boris Godunov" by Mussorgsky in their upcoming season agenda too (Operabase n.d.).

Whilst Russian operas are being performed worldwide portraying nationalistic ideals and myths about Russian greatness, Ukrainians struggle. Ukrainian artists and Ukrainian classical music are fighting to not only stay present in the classical music scene but also to protect their theatres and lives. Despite the fact that Russian missiles hit the Opera House in Kharkiv and the concert hall making literal physical attacks on Ukrainian culture (Hall 2022), opera singers of Kharkiv theatre found ways to continue. They switched to rehearsing and performing in the basement, proving that even being a target of the missiles would not stop Ukrainians from fighting (Hnidyi 2023). Some of the artists from opera theatres in Ukraine even have the courage to go to the battlefield and fight for their country's freedom despite many of them being killed (The Kyiv Independent 2023; Semko 2020; Blair 2022). However, the fight of Ukrainian artists does not stop by going to the battlefield. Their stories are made into films, documentaries and even operas to spread their narratives and keep the fight for resistance going (Semko 2020; Higgins 2024).

Russian opera has its reputation in the classical music world, on the other hand, Ukraine has to prove its worth in the opera world without having famous Ukrainian composers from hundreds of years ago. Additionally, Russia is propagating the notion that Ukrainian culture derives from Russian culture (Zerka 2023: 16). Constantly being mixed and merged with

Russian culture, Ukrainian classical music has to fight for its own space under the sun. Therefore, many contemporary artists take inspiration from recent events and present art inspired by it. For example, Opera Aperta, a Ukrainian founded contemporary opera, creates performances based on real events such as the Chernobyl explosion or Kakhovka dam destruction, and sends powerful messages through details on stage (Higgins 2024). Another example, the cantata "Daddy's Book" takes the form of a Ukrainian documentary on the classical music stage (LvivMozArt 2024). This cantata is based on a diary by Volodymyr Vakulenko, who was violently killed near Kharkiv at the end of the year 2022 (ibid.). The writings documented the details before the beginning of the full-scale invasion until his imprisonment. Thus, "Daddy's Book" serves as a powerful testament to history, showcasing the determination of the Ukrainian spirit. Such a way of documenting history appears to be a consistent pattern, proving how art becomes a canvas to express experiences and opinions, which are inevitably influenced by what is around us.

In my personal experience, I have been immersed in classical music since my childhood. Both my brother and I attended music school and played multiple instruments. Despite this, we did not attach more profound meaning to classical music nor were we aware of underlying hidden messages. However, as I grew older, now having adult conversations with my brother who is an opera singer inspired me to write this paper. Therefore, the choice of topic, puzzle and approach I am taking regarding music and politics are affected by my positionality. As Reyes writes: "Our backgrounds often shape the cases and theories to which we gravitate" (Reyes 2020: 227). Being raised in a patriotic Lithuanian household, I grew up with a critical view of the occupying forces and a constant reminder of the memory that Lithuania's history holds with Russia and the Soviet Union. Thus, even before Russia's war began in Ukraine, I was critical of the political environment Russia was advocating for. Therefore, the background knowledge and biases I have should be taken into account when reading this paper. However, I believe it gives me an advantage to not only understand this political topic from the musicians' side but also provides me with easier access to the data needed to carry out the research.

Noticing the hypocrisy and all the differing opinions, the ability and inability to spot the cultural war happening around us, and puzzling reality of action and inaction, led me to the research question of this paper: **how do opera singers and theatres justify their decision to exclude Russian classical music from opera performances?** This research aims to engage

in further discussion on the politicisation of classical music and reveal how opera is used as a soft power behind the curtains. More broadly, the project provides insights into the cultural diplomacy side of international relations which is often a forgotten area by political scientists (Einbinder 2013: 8). Although the field is growing, the scholarly attention that the field of cultural diplomacy receives remains limited, and is even considered neglected (ibid; Mark 2010: 62-63). Notably academic research on music within the field of cultural diplomacy is even more scarce (Williams 2020: 1). Thus, this research contributes to the barely existing academic literature on music and politics, by carrying out a study on opera and classical music in particular. Since it is easy to directly or indirectly access music as an ordinary person, the societal relevance of this study aims to foster the dialogue on the possibility of politicisation of music, potentially raising awareness within the society and classical music audience specifically. In addition, through the discussions on identity and memory politics, this study will help to understand how certain decisions, such as excluding or keeping Russian classical music, are being taken. It would then help the cultural institutions and individual artists apply those considerations when making their judgements and justifications for their conscious choices.

The structure of this paper is inspired by the elements of an opera, thus, each subheading reflects a musical term. In order to answer the research question, I begin by exploring the literature on the intersection of music and politics from a broader perspective, therefore, I denoted it as *the score* of the opera. This is followed by the conceptual and analytical frameworks in which I present the three main explanations based on the explored literature. Subsequently, I outline and motivate my methodology, using the musical term *ad libitum* - free as one wishes. The methodological section is followed by a detailed section on the process of data collection as well as describing data itself, which is labelled as a *recitative* to emphasise the narratives that start to build when analysing the data. Consequently, the culmination of analysis, where I consider how everything plays out together is referred to as the chorus part of this thesis. After analysing the main findings, I revisit the theoretical arguments with the findings in mind in the discussion section which I refer to as *coda*, a part before the end. Finally, the thesis is concluded with the *finale*, reflecting the last thoughts and implications of this paper.

2. The score of the opera

The theoretical section of this thesis for the most part tries to grasp the discussion of whether music can be political. Therefore, literature discussed comprehends the reasoning behind the politicisation of music as well as discusses context-specific cases of the role of music in Russia. Since classical music and opera have been considered as high art, the literature argues that for this reason, opera is even more powerful for society as a manipulation technique.

2.1. Politicisation of music

Music is indubitably a language that every human can universally understand (Gottlieb 2019: 2). For this reason, it is one of the most powerful types of art that is inevitably part of every society and has the ability to affect people. Not only does it evoke certain emotions but also takes us back in time and helps us remember certain times or people in our lives (Way 2019: 476-477). Similar to politics, music has the capacity to convince people and take action (Donegani 2004: 6). Although music has the power to persuade, when it comes to discussing whether or not music can or cannot be political, opinions differ. Scholars tend to express claims that music is indeed very political and powerful in communicating political messages (Way 2019: 476; Thram 2006; Biasioli 2023). Nevertheless, there are opinions arguing that music, in particular classical music, as a part of free artistic expression is situated outside of the political realm, and is seen as purely part of culture without a (hidden) message in it (Mancini 2018; Buch 2021: 486; Lajosi 2018: 3). Russian composer Stravinsky once asserted that music is practically unable to communicate anything at all, thus, cannot be considered political (Way 2019: 476). However, his opinion was highly criticised. Stravinsky claimed that music is powerless to express meanings and is only able to express itself (William 2017: 138). Claims as such are very subjective and depend on the musician or the composer's stance (ibid.). Thus, the politicisation of music as a debate depends on the perspectives people are capable of noticing. As Lydia Goehr writes: “truly political things are non-political” (Goehr 1994: 102), paradoxically highlighting the innocent capacity of arts (for example, classical music) being considered apolitical when, in reality, it holds a lot of hidden political power.

However, the discussion on arts autonomy is worth exploring further. In the discourse on arts and aesthetics, there are two different approaches to addressing the autonomy dilemma: crude and critical solutions (Goehr 1994: 102). The first, crude solution, puts this into a

straightforward perspective by suggesting that music cannot be both autonomous and political, it has to be one or the other (ibid.). On the other hand, critical solutions claim that autonomous works and solely artistic expression are the ones to be truly political (ibid.). Therefore, the dichotomy between these two solutions supports the side of scholars claiming a complex relationship between music and politics. However, the aesthetics of music ontologically speaking are problematic since music does not manifest any terms or concepts that may be political or represent a political ideology (Tregear 1999: 36; Goehr 1994: 101). On the other hand, many studies claim that producing music under specific political circumstances, such as under a dictatorship, simultaneously must adhere to certain rules and practices (Tregear 1999: 36). For example, music made in Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy, reveals a way of composing music for it to be considered 'fascist' music (idem: 36-37). Similarly, in the Soviet Union, composed music had to be approved by the Soviet authorities and go in line with the cultural policy, which included controlling not only what music was released but also the education of musicians (Edmunds 2004: 4-5). Undeniably, it becomes clear that music as a form of art is not immune to politics, and, on the contrary, has the capacity to be manipulated and shaped to fit ideological standards. Therefore, going back to the main objective of this thesis, by having this complexity in mind, it becomes clear that the choices to exclude or include certain musical pieces in the repertoires are not merely artistic but may hide deeper political reasonings.

2.2. Projecting status through high arts

Classical music is widely considered to be a high art along with poetry, museums, sculpture and so forth (Fisher 2013: 473-474). The divide between high and low arts is criticised by many scholars as 'good' and 'bad' art divisions at the expense of making some cultures more 'cultured' and prestigious than others (Cohen 1993: 152; Fisher 2013: 474; Spencer-Oatey 2012: 15). Hence, classical music is categorised as 'higher art music' as opposed to popular mass culture and pop music which is seen as part of 'lower' culture (Sokka and Kangas 2007: 196). This categorisation of art is also highly determined by who can access it and implicitly symbolises a certain societal status, contributing to the elite vs non-elite divide in society. As Peterson and Simkus write, it is evident that musical taste indicates social status, for instance, attending what is considered to be high-arts cultural events such as opera is a sign of a high-status elite (Peterson and Simkus 1992: 152-154). Similarly, Anna Bull adds that through this 'sign' of higher status, people may even seek to belong to a certain occupational group and

be considered elite intellectuals by attending classical music events and opera (Bull 2019: 2-3). Furthermore, Bourdieau theorised, that the taste is not a preference of an individual but is deeply rooted in the class and social structures (Bourdieu 1984: 1). Particularly, individuals consume the type of culture that is socially recognised (ibid.). In essence, associating classical music as a high art goes beyond aesthetic distinctions of high and low culture, and becomes an important indicator that shapes social identities and contributes to the reinforcement of social hierarchies.

As a symbol of sophistication and prestige, classical music, and opera in particular, projects certain ideologies and societal values. The ruling class frequently uses music as a tool to perpetuate particular ideals meant to promote political indoctrination (Wang 2016: 195). Being associated with intellectuals, classical music has a reputation to be a sign of an educated society, despite being accessible to only a limited wealthy minority of people (idem: 196; Davis 2014: 5). Music culture holds a certain ideological value, reflecting and shaping both collective consciousness and individual social existence (Balzhyk 2021: 250). In the 1990s, it was believed that listening to classical music increases intelligence, which is described by the Mozart effect, thus, making people believe that listening to classical music is going to make people smarter (Hogstad 2024). That is an excellent example of domestic 'cultural diplomacy'. If music has a reputation to be associated with high rank and intelligence, it is not only desirable by individuals but also can be potentially used by countries to create or enhance a global image. In fact, the creation of the opera in Italy was a form of art projecting princes' power of the time (Zawisza 2015). Therefore, music is a tool for internal legitimation, national identity and patriotism promotion, which, to some extent, can be considered propaganda (Biasoli 2023: 682; Thram 2006: 75-76).

In Russia, opera had its prestigious high status since the early 18th century (Grinberg 2010: 61-62). During the rule of Catherine the Great, opera was financed by the wealthiest people of the society who belonged to the upper class and were exclusively the only ones attending operas (ibid.). Similar trends were also seen in other parts of Europe where opera had a 'high' status, such as Italy and Germany. Opera in Russia was made accessible to the rest of the public only in 1880 (idem: 62). Keeping in mind the Russian revolution in the early 20th century, since opera had such an elite status of being exclusively rich people's art, it became a target for Bolsheviks to discard opera and reform the opera houses (ibid.). Hence, opera being considered elitist high art makes it even more susceptible to being not only a target but

also an important cultural tool for Russia to export political messages and project the ideals it creates.

Furthermore, music not only promotes specific values internally but also projects a certain ideal and image globally. Externally, music aims to either strengthen the diplomacy between the states or in any way affect (confirming or contradicting) biases that already exist (Williams 2020: 2; Einbinder 2013: 5-6; Knights 2023: 5). Music as a form of cultural diplomacy takes part into exchanging knowledge, traditions, values, beliefs, and other facets of culture in order to promote understanding amongst people and nations (Cummings 2009: 1-2). Moreover, music, and in particular opera, often includes elements of heritage and history that are original to each nation, in that way promoting nationalism across borders (Arblaster 2002: 259). To add to that, language or even religion that is portrayed in opera symbolically attributes heroes or myths of the nations that play a vital role in nation-building (Lajosi 2018: 5; Viljanen 2021: 141). Myths tell stories and narratives that not only portray the past as a form of cultural and historical preservation but also help to find common grounds and collective identities (Malzer 2019). Similarly, opera narrates a story shaping attitudes or creating unity among nations. For example, the Russian opera Boris Godunov is a historical opera based on projecting narratives of violence, power and authority (Bianco 2023). Extreme efforts to secure the throne through the story of Tsar Boris Godunov can be assimilated to modern-day Putin's autocratic rule and his efforts to achieve absolute power (ibid.). Hence, it becomes clear how opera mirrors contemporary political dynamics, simultaneously reflecting and challenging political realities. With this in mind, the decisions that cultural institutions make by excluding or including certain operas play a significant role in reflecting the political considerations of those making the decisions.

2.3. Regulate to manipulate

Another aspect brought up by scholars arguing why music can be and is political is the fact that music is, at least in some way, regulated by the government, especially in non-democratic regimes (Frey 1994: 33). Therefore, when deciding what goes abroad, what is portrayed is a well-executed process of thought and a conscious decision to promote ideals and values, thereby establishing that music can be used as a soft power. This is a form of music censorship which either is used for propaganda or out of fear of oppression (Street 2013: 11-12). In particular, art censorship, including not only music but also ballet or theatre, was very strict

in the Soviet Union for what was broadcasted outside of the Union borders and for what gets inside (Street 2013: 11; Ezrahi 2012; Kara and Gunduz 2018: 103, 106). For example, in 1936 Stalin undertook the 'Soviet opera experiment' in which he not only tried to strengthen his personality cult but also to overshadow Western music influences on the development of Soviet music (Grinberg 2010: 61). This way, opera was used not only to glorify the dictator but also as a project of foreign policy inside and outside the Soviet Union. Furthermore, regulating music in any way only contributes to the politicisation of music as it loses the autonomy of the artists by including states' interests and makes it difficult for artists to be authentic (Nelson 2004: 6-9; Kim 2019). Censorship creates an environment where artistic expression becomes a negotiation, limiting artists, but increasing the power that the regulating authorities hold (Muller 2004: 16; O'Leary 2016: 1; De Baets 2008: 9-10). In summation, as these scholars agree, some form of regulation of the arts has implications for propaganda through, in this case, music. Ultimately, if music is so innocent and apolitical, why censor it?

When Marco Biasoli writes about cultural diplomacy strategies through music in Russia, he refers to it as songwashing (Biasoli 2023). The author uses the term "as a musical version of whitewashing", which involves excluding unfavourable aspects in order to make them admissible (idem: 685). Similarly, as the authors discussed above (Williams 2020; Einbinder 2013; Knights 2023), Biasoli indicates two ways of utilising music: internally used for deactivation inside the country such as civil protest, and externally, when music as a soft power is used globally as a virtue signalling (Biasoli 2023: 682). Comparably, L. C. S. Way (2019) and M. Biasoli (2023) both indicate that music has the capacity to distract or relieve unpleasant situations. Both ways of looking at music as a tool of soft power in cultural diplomacy - either deactivation and virtue signalling or escapism and engaging - jointly agree that internally music can help to mask internal political issues and internationally project a positive image different from reality (Biasoli 2023: 683). Just like Russia tends to portray itself positively in the media, it also projects a positive image through its communications and performance in other areas, including opera (Ononiwu 2023: 238; Jenkins 2023; McKay 2003: 14). Manipulation and distraction strategies are particularly typical for authoritarian regimes, just like Russia and China (Le Naour 2021: 131). Particularly to Russia, its propaganda has two different target audiences: near (post-Soviet space) and far abroad (the rest) (Gabdulhakov 2023: 9). Depending on the audience, Russia portrays different values to achieve a certain narrative for each (ibid.). Considering all of this, music becomes a convenient tool to 'songwash' people inside and outside the country. Its assumed innocence

makes it easier to employ manipulating and distracting strategies.

2.4. Interlude on “Russkiy Mir”

Yet, the topic of sanctioning culture or using culture in any political way can seem absurd for those who have not heard about “Russkiy Mir” and other Russia’s foreign policy projects. “Russkiy Mir” directly translates into “Russian World " and aims to promote Russian culture and language in the post-Soviet countries and is directly correlating with Russia’s government's foreign policy (Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2021; Koval and Tereshchenko 2023: 15, 19). It even became considered a quasi-ideology by the Kremlin (ibid.). In particular, in Ukraine after 2014, the organisation made sure to gain popularity in Donbas and Crimea by justifying illegal referendums in the media and promoting the “Novorossiya” (New Russia) project, which justified the annexation of Crimea (Jilge 2016). Additionally, there were around 20 foundation centres opened in Ukraine since organization’s establishment in 2007 (Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2021). The main “Russkiy Mir” goal is to use the Russian language in the post-USSR countries, keep promoting it as the unifying tool to be able to advocate pro-Kremlin narratives and maintain Russia-centric agenda (Koval and Tereshchenko 2023: 19). They say: “The Russian flag will be flown wherever Russian is spoken” (idem: 99). Additionally, through this project, Russia’s propaganda is convincing the rest of the world that culture from the post-Soviet countries is part of Russian culture (Zerka 2023: 15-16). “Russkiy Mir” also strongly collaborates with the Orthodox church, therefore, trying to ‘corrupt’ the people not only through the language but also through religious affiliation (Koval and Tereshchenko 2023: 106-107). Therefore, it does not stop with Ukraine or Belarus but also tries to export this ideology further (ibid.). It is an excellent example of how Russia is using culture as a soft power to influence the perceptions of Russia globally as well as strengthen ties with Russian-speaking countries.

All the above goes hand in hand with the definition of soft power by Nye (1990), who stated that soft power is a less coercive and tangible form of power, yet very effective in “getting others to want what you want” (Nye 1990: 167). Russia’s cultural diplomacy works hard to promote Russian understanding of the world by establishing representative offices outside of Russia, not only promoting the Russian language, and organising Russian studies, but also organising cultural events, funding artistic projects, and exchanges with one goal only - get the world want the Russian World (idem: 200). In the context of this policy, opera can be

understood as a significant export of Russian culture, with theatres all over the world desiring to include it in their repertoires due to its prestige. In a way, it can be said that the world wants the Russian World. As a prestigious art, opera allows for the Russian language and culture to be spread across borders, also facilitating the projection of ideologies and cultural dominance.

2.5. Cultural sanctions

However, after Russia invaded Ukraine, Russian culture became at the centre of the debate of whether or not it is appropriate to take any action against it. In other words, Russian culture should be sanctioned because of political reasons, bringing back the discussion on the separation and autonomy of culture and politics. Scholars say that war actions have inevitable effects on cultural diplomacy between countries (Ociepka 2022: 3-4; Vlaeminck 2017). Conflict creates a division between cultures, thus, pressuring to make a choice, for instance, including or excluding culture in the post-conflict landscape, signifies the position taken in politics, such as approving or disapproving (McEvoy 2011: 55-56; Ross 2009: 1). Sometimes, taking the position simultaneously means choosing one culture at the expense of another, such as choosing Ukrainian culture over Russian (Shulman 1998: 300). The post-conflict effects on culture not only impact the socio-political landscape but also shape the national narratives, and can even signify choices made on cultural diplomacy.

Together with the cultural sanctions, a frequently used strategy among non-state actors tends to be naming and humiliation, with an intent to create insecurity, targeting its self-perception inside the state and in this way challenging their identity and relations around that (Rosler and Press-Barnathan 2023: 721). Choosing to 'name and shame', can also be referred to as cancelling culture, which is what some may argue is happening with Russian culture after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Sheiko 2022). Aiming at ontological security, as Rosler and Press-Barnathan write, is effective because it challenges the perfectly stable image that a nation is portraying and does not actually cause any damage to another state, thus is symbolic (Rosler and Press-Barnathan 2023: 722-723). Other scholars add to the ontological security strategy by writing about academic boycotts in the context of Russia and Ukraine (Kangas et al. 2023). Moreover, the underlying premise from all of this remains that social norms are strengthened through stigmatising and pointing out inappropriate behaviours (Rogstad 2022: 4). However, Veebel (2021) tries to acknowledge the arising challenges between the cultural sanctions coming from the West and Russia being the target of it (Veebel 2021: 268-269). In

particular, as it is pointed out, the intention has to be well-thought-out and well-executed in order to reach the desired result as there might be potential misunderstandings due to the fundamental differences between West and Russia (idem: 271-272, 280). Some scholars argue in favour of boycotting and cancelling cultures, others remain more careful with maintaining the dialogue between the two sides for productive international diplomacy.

Sanctioning the 'wrongdoer' became a standard consequence for threatening international peace (Earl 2021: 1). Although historically sanctions were meant to be an instrument to uphold the law and protect the peace, throughout the years of an increase in the use of sanctions, the focus and goals of them shifted from safeguarding the sovereignties of countries to advancing political interests of individual states or even non-state actors (ibid.). Thus, in the context of Russia and Europe, the question remains whether the sanctions against Russia are appropriate or only aiming to benefit the interests of the West (Feklyunina 2012: 91). Consequently, such discussions and concerns in academia bring Russophobia, a negative attitude toward everything associated with Russia, into discussion (idem: 92; Boman 2023: 1324; Wahlang 2021: 120; Baraniuk 2023: 238). Perhaps, cultural sanctions against Russia are not so much about achieving peace and restricting Russia so it changes its behaviour, but more about the anti-Russian sentiments stemming from that (Wahlang 2021: 120). Therefore, as the scholars prove the complexity of cultural sanctions, political motivations need to be considered thoroughly.

The discussed literature above elaborately explores the dynamics between music and politics whilst considering the intentions and effectiveness of cultural sanctions in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, a noticeable gap emerges when looking at how different countries decide to employ cultural sanctions, which are often only recommendations, and thus leave a lot of freedom for interpretation and implementation. As some countries are very vocal about cancelling Russian composers' works in opera, it leads me to wonder what are the different motivating factors for deciding to take out Russian classical music from the repertoire. Therefore, the gap that emerges is the lack of recent academic exploration on how decisions to include or exclude Russian classical music, particularly in opera, are justified. As cultural diplomacy is becoming a more and more significant soft power in international relations (Kim 2017: 294), it still remains a highly under-researched field, especially when it comes to as specific a topic as opera as soft power. Given the high pressure for not only cultural institutions but also individual artists to take a

side, a more nuanced discussion and understanding of both perspectives would allow for better practical implications and hopefully lead to more productive conversations within the classical music community and society, minimising the misunderstandings.

3. Conceptual prelude

The literature discussed above leads us to arrive at the two most important concepts, soft power and crisis decision making, that are capturing the entirety of this thesis. Therefore, in the section below, I conceptualise soft power, which has been mentioned heavily in the previous sections. In addition, the formulation of the decision making, particularly, crisis decision making processes is a necessary foundation for the upcoming analytical framework.

3.1. Soft power

The overarching concept that allows us to understand the interplay between culture and politics is soft power. As a whole, power is the main objective of politics and what states or individuals aim for (Parsons 1963: 232). As Robert Dahl conceptualised it, it is when someone has power over the other to make them do what they would not do otherwise (Dahl 1957: 202). In other words, power is relations, or hierarchies, among people (and states), making some more influential than others (idem: 203). However, within the studies of international relations, soft power as a form of political power has been added fairly recently and, therefore, is still a growing field of study (Rothman 2011: 49). First conceptualised by Joseph Samuel Nye in 1990, the concept of soft power captures the co-optive side of power in politics (Nye 1990: 166). The soft power conceptualisation differs from Dahl's conceptualisation of power in that it focuses not on making the B do what A wants but on making the B want what the A wants (ibid.; Dahl 1957: 202). The concept became relevant since political modern trends started to change and means of power became less and less tangible and coercive (Nye 1990: 167). Therefore, with the use of diplomacy, philanthropy or information, states use manipulation to achieve the preferred outcomes (Rothman 2011: 50). Additionally, music as a part of culture is also a major tool for soft power (Quevedo-Redondo et al. 2023: 242; Schjønberg 2019: 43). Music, as well as other tools of soft power, is the most powerful when its purpose is not explicitly stated, hence, it becomes a "secret mission for the music" (Schjønberg 2019: 44). This is especially evident with the initiative of "Russkiy Mir" discussed earlier, which aims at subtle Russian ideals promotion through language and

culture. Russian propaganda is executing soft power tools well in order to make Russia appear tidier than it is (Zerka 2023: 16). In the context of this paper, opera is an excellent example of soft power, where the "secret mission" can be carried out. The stage of opera houses becomes a perfect place to send messages, show dominance and be a tool for broader geopolitical strategies.

3.2. Decisions at crisis

Considering the capacity of opera and understanding it as a powerful tool for soft power, it becomes even more important what decisions cultural institutions and artists make regarding Russian classical music in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Thus, to analyse the choices and outcomes better, it is important to conceptualise the decision making. In rational decision making, all the possible consequences of actions are weighed in order to choose the most optimal one (Eisenhardt and Zbaracki 1992: 18). Following this logic, the decision makers opt for the most beneficial and cost-effective option they can find (Archer and Tritter 2000: 5). However, this explanation for decision making has received a lot of criticism for not taking into account the political context (Farnham 1990: 84-85). Therefore, it is crucial to consider the political context in which those decisions need to be taken and what specific considerations within the decision making processes it encourages (idem: 89-90). Given the circumstances following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is important to examine the decisions within the framework of crisis decision making.

Crisis decision making theory helps to predict and understand the behaviours of the events of various levels of severity (Sweeny 2008: 61). What makes decision making in crisis different is that it often has a surprise element and the necessity to take critical actions (Rosenthal and Kouzmin 1997: 279). Critical situations increase the uncertainty and risk, making the choice not only more difficult but also more important and impactful (idem: 280). Consequently, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, opera houses and artists faced a lot of pressure to make decisions in a limited time frame. Crisis decision making process involves evaluating the seriousness of the negative event, identifying possible response strategies, and assessing these response options (Sweeny 2008: 70). Furthermore, although crises often force us to make decisions, they also create opportunities to make decisions (Rosenthal and Kouzmin 1997: 279). Hence, the need to assess the situation and gather more information in order to evaluate both the pros and cons for crisis decisions also creates an occasion to realise the

implications of Russia's soft power strategies. Therefore, although the process of decision making in crises by cultural institutions and artists is left behind the curtains, it is extremely important because it reflects broader political dynamics and how connected music and politics are.

4. Main character arias

There are two possible observations when first looking at the overall trends in the decisions made: theatres and artists who choose to exclude Russian classical music or conscious inclusion, the decisions to leave it in the repertoire and continue to play Russian composer's work by keeping it in the opera houses' repertoires. Having discussed that music can be political, and the efforts Russia uses as a soft power to export their foreign policy, I formulate three main explanations when considering the exclusion of Russian classical music that possibly explain the motivations to not include Russian classical music in opera repertoire and individual artists' programmes: political pressure, historical reasoning through memory and identity, and artistic expression.

4.1. Political pressure

First and foremost, the event that sparked the consideration of the exclusion of Russian classical music is Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Along with other sanctions that the European countries were quick to react with, cultural sanctions were considered as being more effective and persuasive to the Russian society than exclusion from SWIFT (Bianco 2023). The political events increased the tensions across Europe, encouraging European countries to cut any form of ties and relations with Russia as a form of showing that they do not support Russia's crimes in Ukraine. The international community was trying to pressure Russia in all possible ways to stop the war against Ukraine, even through boycotting Russian culture (Sheiko 2022). Furthermore, as Russia's actions are destroying Ukrainian culture, not only bombing their architecture but also damaging their cultural capital, any form of cooperation can be understood as a support and normalisation of the war crimes that Russia is undergoing (ibid.). Therefore, the decision to exclude Russian classical music from opera is a way of taking into account the political events. In particular, sanctioning culture is a way of challenging the possibility of diplomatic relations and pointing out inappropriate behaviours (Rosler and Press- Barnathan 2023: 721; Rogstad 2022: 4).

Considering what is happening, a possible justification for why decisions to exclude Russian classical music could be taken is the political pressure that is triggered by the context. What is happening in the world makes us question politics, what and who is being supported, and what our politics are. These considerations are important in order to avoid the hypocrisy of decision-making. For instance, if artists continue to perform Russian composers' pieces, they might be asked to explain why they are showing support for Russia instead of Ukraine. In the heat of the moment, showing solidarity with Ukraine by pausing not only Russian classical music but also collaboration with Russian opera superstars seemed like an easy decision at first (Marshall and Hernandez 2023). In the first months of the war, thousands of artists condemned war crimes not only in Europe but also inside Russia (Huhmarniemi and Sharova 2022: 2). The focus of Ukrainian diplomacy amid the war was to have as many countries on their side as possible, thus, by pointing out the horrible crimes of Russia in Ukraine to receive the support that is crucial for Ukraine's defence (Klyszcz 2023). In a way, Ukraine's call for support to 'Stand with Ukraine' is pressuring countries to choose the right side results in a divided Europe with no option in between (Stolle 2023: 3-5). Additionally, most of the sanctions were imposed on the EU level, calling for a collective and united reaction from the EU member states (Maurer et al. 2023: 219-222), in effect removing an alternative option but the pressure for the member states to follow the orders. The EU did not impose any direct sanctions on Russian culture and music and left it up to individual-level decision-makers, such as cultural institutions and artists to decide behind the curtains (European Council 2024). Therefore, if countries partake in support of some sanctions, they are more likely to show support for Ukraine with a sanctioning culture as well to avoid hypocrisy. Thus, the political pressure might directly affect the decision to also stop playing Russian classical music in opera as a way of showing support for Ukraine.

4.2. Artistic expression

The idea that art is separate from politics can be grounded in the theory of aestheticism, which sees art as detached and autonomous from the empirical world (Adorno 1997: 1-2). At the end of the 19th century, this idea turned into a movement called 'l'art pour l'art' (art for art's sake) that argued for art without content – the idea that art can be appreciated on its own for aesthetics, without any social, moral or political hidden meanings (Morgan 2010: 732-733). However, modern-day theorists, arguing for aestheticism, although prioritise beauty in artistic

expression, also claim that art creates a space to think critically and reflect (Mouffe 2013: 88, 95; Rancière 2013: 22). Thus, it suggests that while art can be appreciated for its aesthetics, it paradoxically allows for discussions on political or societal matters. Aestheticism allows music to maintain the innocent appearance, however, for this reason, music becomes an even more powerful tool of soft power. As it was stated earlier, in order for music to hold power, it cannot be explicitly political, its mission is a secret (Schjønberg 2019: 44). Hence, the space to think critically is also not explicit, making music an effective medium for cultural and political influences.

Furthermore, cultural governance and decisions made regarding culture also impose dominance and exercise power on society (Lears 1985: 568). The ruling class, or the cultural institutions making decisions in this case, maintains the power to decide what is shown, setting the trends and allowing certain directions for the social life of the broader society (ibid.). This refers to the concept of cultural hegemony, explaining that society is controlled not by force or fear but by ideas that society must accept (Cortes-Ramirez 2015: 129). In the case of classical music and high arts, the historically prestigious position of culture plays in favour of dominant groups in their decision-making, thereby perpetuating societies' subordinate position (Lears 1985: 568). This is happening without society being conscious of it, therefore, it is an excellent space for exercising soft power. Cultural hegemony additionally allows for the authority of certain ideals and actors at the expense of the exclusion of others (Romashko 2024: 111). For instance, the continued performances of Russian classical music allow the propagation of Russian myths and perspectives to be portrayed, marginalising and overshadowing other cultures and viewpoints, such as those of Ukraine. Therefore, choices become crucial, especially in the time of crisis. However, what becomes problematic is that people viewing culture and music, as merely an artistic expression and advocating against its politicised reality, overlooks the hidden powers of art. As a result, the arguments opposing cancelling Russian classical music in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, often labelled as Russophobia, contribute to Russian cultural diplomacy strategies (Koval 2024). Thus, denying that art does not have a political dimension benefits the dominant groups of the cultural hegemony seeking to utilise culture for geopolitical influence. As a result, the argument that art is *just* art may be an indication of hidden power dynamics that are not seen behind the curtains.

4.3. Memory and identity

Among other motivations that play out when deciding if Russian classical music is appropriate to exclude from opera, historical experience in national or even individual contexts is highly important. The experience from the past allows not only the political leaders but also the society and individuals to draw their conclusions and make their judgements on the situation based on what already happened (Verovšek 2016: 529). This can be explained by memory politics when the past events and memories of them are shaping the way actors and institutions respond to current political events (idem: 530). Memory politics is especially important in the case of post-Soviet space and the Baltics, as the memory of the Soviet Union experience often causes anti-Russian sentiments. In particular, the number of occupations and deadly Soviet experiences throughout the history of Lithuania is a possible explanation of why Lithuania and the Baltic States took such a drastic stance in the context of Russia's occupation of Ukraine. In this instance, another explaining variable, vicarious identification, occurs that is specific to the Baltic States. To put it simply, "living through the other" or vicarious identification theorised by D. Budrytė, is a further explanation of why Russia's actions in Ukraine affected people from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia more than others (Budrytė 2023: 83-84). Although this concept is taken from psychology, it explains how people make stories and experiences of others as a part of their own lived experience (ibid.). Thus, memory politics and vicarious identification might explain why certain countries are more outspoken against Russia, which, in the context of this research, would explain the exclusion of Russian classical music in the theatres of the post-Soviet countries.

Memory politics refers to processes in which memory and collective remembrance shape a nation's identity within the society and affect public consciousness (Molden 2016: 127; Verovšek 2016: 529). In other words, historical experiences can become the defining point of collective identity, such as strong feelings towards a certain nation or a certain topic. It is also referred to as a "weight of the past" (Bernhard and Kubik 2014: 9). Common examples of collective memory are often related to war such as the Japan-China conflict during World War II or Soviet Union trauma in post-USSR countries (Verovšek 2016: 530; Mälksoo 2021: 490). Memory politics theory builds on the conceptualisation of the collective memory by Halbwachs, Bergson and even Freud, who stated a collective memory is a state of a group, socially constructed provided historical imagination, which shapes the interpretation of events (Verovšek: 531). Therefore, the nationality, context and the type of society an individual

belongs to may significantly affect their views and prejudices towards certain political topics. Understanding "the prism of 'local'" (Mälksoo 2021: 493) is especially important for this thesis when noticing different reactions towards the topic of Russia from Eastern and Western European countries.

Taking these motivations into account, investigating theatre statements and talking to artists allowed me, as a political scientist, to understand how such decisions are made in the opera world and also potentially uncover other motivations that play out in these situations. Additionally, speaking to opera singers provided me with first-hand perspectives on deciding whether to sing or not to sing Russian classical music.

5. Methods ad libitum

As this study aims to grasp how decisions to exclude Russian classical music are justified, through the methodology I am aiming to look at the institutional (music theatres and opera houses) and individual (opera singers) level. As cultural sanctions are left up for individual decisions, these levels are where exclusion happens. Moreover, as opera singers sing all over the world, I am not binding my research by selecting a specific theatre or country that I am analysing, however, the national context of the theatre will be kept in mind to situate the decisions better.

5.1. Data collection

The analysis is, hence, divided into two parts: the analysis of theatre statements and interviews with the artists. To grasp the institutional-level explanations, I incorporated digital ethnography, which is a method of observing digital interactions online (Pink 2016: 161-162). In particular, this method allows me to notice and analyse any form of digital communication by the theatres regarding the topic of my study. Thus, with the help of digital ethnography, I observed statements and press releases by the opera houses and their directors regarding their stance on the Russia-Ukraine war situation. I have looked through the websites of 20 opera houses, including the largest theatres in different European countries, and selected eight statements to analyse (see Table 1). The selected press releases and statements were chosen based on the availability of data and content that provides an overview of the main trend of the various opera houses in Europe. It is important to mention that not all theatres released a

statement and declared their political stance after the invasion of Ukraine, therefore, the absence of statements or any online communications with their audience to justify theatre choices is also taken into account. I believe this method allows me to grasp a broader overview of the position rather than relying on one responsible person's interview and opinion.

Cultural Institution	Statement
Bavarian State Opera	**Yes**
Croatian National Theatre	No
Dutch National Opera and Ballet	**Yes**
Finnish National Opera and Ballet	No
Graz Opera	No
La Monnaie	**Yes**
La Scala	No[1]
Latvian National Opera and Ballet	**Yes**
Lithuanian and Estonian Opera Houses	**Yes[2]**
Madrid Royal Theatre	No
Norwegian Opera and Ballet	No
Paris National Opera	**Yes**
Royal Danish Opera	No
Royal Opera House (London)	**Yes**
Salzburg State Theatre	No
Sofia Opera and Ballet	No
Theater Bremen	No
Tirana Opera House	No
Vienna State Opera	**Yes**
Warsaw Opera House	No

Table 1. Cultural Institutions' Statements regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[3]

[1] La Scala did not release an official statement regarding the situation in Ukraine, however, in their communications, the theatre was defending the choice of "Boris Godunov" for the opening of the season. Source: Salazar (2022).

[2] Lithuanian and Estonian opera houses released a joint statement, therefore, are included together. Source: Martell (2022).

[3] The statements of the theatres selected for the analysis are marked in bold.

The second part of the analysis section grasps the individual level - opera singers - through the method of interviewing. Interviews as a research method have become the key choice of method in social science, through which it is the quickest to find out about individual experiences and gain knowledge (Brinkmann 2014: 424). Moreover, by using semi-structured interviews, I am leaving space for leeway and follow-up angles that might emerge from talking to the interviewees (idem: 437). In this way, the choice of semi-structured interviews as one of the methods for this research gives me the advantage of being open to alternative hypotheses that did not come across through the discussions in the literature earlier. In other words, it allowed me to see the perspective of the artists 'from the other side of the curtain' better.

In particular, this study analysed ten interviews with opera singers working in European theatres. Out of a total of ten interviews, eight were conducted online, while two were interviewed in person. The selection of the interviewees was done in three different ways: some of the intended interviews were recommended by the network links I have in my personal life, familial relations, and teacher's suggestions, two of the selected interviewees were found by doing research on the Operabase website, where all the current plays and roles are listed. Thus, I contacted opera singers who are known in my network or whose names I came across while working on this project. Thirdly, four of the interviewed opera singers were found through the snowballing technique. It was observed that the snowballing technique made the interviewees more willing to talk to me. It also allowed me to access 'hidden' stories that make my data more diverse and open to other than my initial judgement (Browne 2005: 49). However, I targeted reaching out to opera singers who had previously or still performed Russian music, although they were the least responsive. Additionally, I prioritised interviewees who I heard positive feedback from others, some were discovered by a randomised browsing on the Operabase website.

The process of collecting data through interviews was a challenging task through which I began my observations for the findings section. As expected, contacting opera singers was way easier through the connections and mutual links, either through familial relations or through the snowballing method, which helped to get responses better and quicker. Most of the interviewees I contacted through social media platforms like Facebook or Instagram due to the quicker time of response taking into account the time I had for this project. In total I

contacted 41 opera singers, however, I finally agreed to interview ten of them. A lot of the interviewees did not agree to speak, reasoning that as opera singers, they do not want to engage in politics or do not see their contribution as valuable towards the discussion. The interviewees were informed about confidentiality and complete anonymity was ensured in all interviews. With the consent of the interviewees, the conversations were recorded and transcribed. Most of the interviews were conducted in English, however, four of them were in Lithuanian. These were first transcribed in Lithuanian, and then later translated to English. Transcriptions of the interviews can be provided at the request.

Another point that is important to mention is that the majority of people willing to talk were more outspoken on the war beforehand, and/or affected by it personally. Therefore, most of the opera singers that I managed to interview had either Ukrainian or Lithuanian nationality or had their careers in these countries. Although I expected more variety in the nationalities of the interviewees, the unwillingness to discuss by opera singers of other nationalities may suggest that the topic is only relevant in those areas and may add to the explanation of why opera houses in the West are not so outspoken on this issue and still plan their repertoire around Russian classical music. Moreover, opera singers also saw themselves as not educated enough to be able to speak about political issues, resulting in abstaining from voicing their opinions. Nevertheless, the combination of interviews and the analysis of press releases and statements from opera houses in different European countries serve a valuable and diverse data set.

5.2. Coding

In order to analyse theatre statements collected through digital ethnography and interviews conducted, the data is systematically examined through the process of thematic coding which helps to identify recurring themes and patterns. In particular, the texts from theatre statements found online were coded through two-cycle coding, by first implementing initial coding and proceeding with a second-cycle coding which is also known as hypothesis coding (Saldana 2013: 100, 147). In this way, patterns in the content of different theatre statements were identified more easily. Semi-structured interviews were analysed similarly. While transcribing, I omitted the personal parts of the interviews to anonymize the interviewees. For both theatre statements and interviews, I followed in an inductive manner of coding. This way, I was open to alternative explanations for excluding Russian classical music from the

repertoire that I have not perhaps considered in the theoretical part of this paper. The two-cycle coding process is an advantage in qualitative research as it strengthens the validity and reliability, allowing an in-depth study of the same data and a more accurate representation (Golafshani 2003: 601). Eventually, the second-cycle codes[8] (see the appendix) are created.

6. Recitative - emerging narratives

The study aims to understand the justifications for excluding Russian classical music from opera repertoires at both institutional and individual levels, taking into account three analytical reasonings: political pressure, artistic expression and memory and identity. After analysing theatre statements, four label categories from the theatre statements emerge (see Table 2): peace advocating, response, apolitical art and role of culture. The section further explains each second-cycle code category and its relation to the theoretical arguments.

Code category	Theoretical explanations
Peace advocating	Political pressure
Response	Political pressure
Apolitical art	Artistic expression Memory and identity
Role of culture	Artistic expression

Table 2. Second-cycle code categories of the theatre statements linked to the theoretical

Peace advocating

All of the statements communicated from the theatres in some way or another stated that they condemned the war happening and acknowledged how unacceptable it was. “Our house is a cultural institution that is fundamentally anti-war and pro-peace” which is a quote from Brussels La Monnaie Opera statement by general director Peter de Caluwe, highlighting the peace advocating position the theatre is taking (De Caluwe 2022). Additionally, La Monnaie

Opera was projecting images on its walls of the destroyed theatre in Mariupol, which was bombed on the 22nd of March in 2022, along with other photographs of destroyed buildings in Ukraine (Ruel 2023). It is important to note that all of the theatres communicated anti-war and peace messages in their statements or media releases. Some took a more politicised stance taking sides: "Russian tanks and missiles are targeting innocent civilians, cannot be justified in any way" communicated by the general music director of the Bavarian State Opera V. Jurowski in the press release (Jurowski 2022), others more general: "The widespread destruction and human suffering are intolerable" (Nationale Opera and Ballet 2022) and "Opera (...) affirms its solidarity with all those who are its victims" (Neef 2022). Peace advocating and the need to express solidarity with Ukraine align with the political pressure rationale. In particular, theatres may feel compelled to express their stance against aggression to avoid accusations of not standing with Ukraine and being insensitive to their suffering.

Response

This code category refers to the parts of statements and press releases where theatres refer to the actions they are taking regarding the situation. Although closely related, this label is separated from the pro-peace and political stances categories because it codes the initial reactions as actions. For example, the Dutch National Opera and Ballet stated: "We have ended our relationship with organisations and individual artists that have expressed, in word or deed, their support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine" (Nationale Opera and Ballet 2022) or more symbolic actions of solidarity such as: "We will be lighting our building in the colours of the Ukrainian flag", as communicated by the Royal Opera House in London (Beard 2022). This code category also refers to the political pressure theoretical reasonings, especially with the examples of symbolic support where theatres signal their solidarity by projecting their buildings in the colours of the Ukrainian flag. Response label, in particular, helps to pinpoint the actions (or lack of actions) by theatres, who make a stance regarding the war. However, their responses attempt to remain as neutral as possible.

Apolitical Art

The label referring to theatres stating that art is apolitical appeared in almost most of the statements. Theatres and theatre directors felt the need to separate art from politics and not take responsibility by claiming that art is untouchable and should not become a tool of propaganda, such as in the Dutch National Opera and Ballet statement: "Culture should never

be a pawn in war, and cultural heritage should never be used as a weapon on the battlefield" (Nationale Opera and Ballet 2022). This label fits with the theoretical explanations of artistic expression that emphasise the autonomy and aestheticism of the art, separating it from politics.

What is interesting is that the apolitical art label did not appear in the joint statement by Lithuanian and Estonian Opera houses. Instead, they took a well-structured call and demanded that opera members openly condemn Russia's aggression: "If Russian and Byelorussian members refuse to condemn the aggression, their Opera Europa membership must be cancelled" (LNOBT 2022). Similarly, in a short public communication, Latvian National Opera and Ballet specified to "only work with guest artists who clearly, unequivocally, and publicly express their condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine" (Latvijas Nacionala Opera un Balets 2022). On the other hand, others abstained from side-taking demands and remained on the 'apolitical' side: "Reading Russian literature or listening to Russian music does not mean that we wish to create propaganda for the Russian regime" which is justified in the statement by Brussels La Monnaie Opera (De Caluwe 2022). It could be interpreted that the opera houses of the Baltic states are aware of the hidden soft power that Russian classical music holds through the decisions of the theatres. Demanding to take a clear stance against Russia's aggression against Ukraine, is challenging the cultural hegemony and the influence that Russian music might be using. Therefore, it becomes clear that by abstaining from stricter decisions, theatres such as La Monnaie Opera or Vienna State Opera, continue to use the apolitical art argument and see opera as an artistic expression separate from politics simultaneously allowing music to be exercised as a soft power. Additionally, more radical reactions from the theatres of Lithuania and Estonia may also reflect the memory and identity argumentations, considering their historical experiences and the collective memory of the Soviet occupation.

Role of culture

The last code category from theatre statements refers to a common storyline stating that culture, although apolitical as highlighted through the previous category, is meant to bring people together, educate or send a message, thus, culture has a purpose. La Monnaie Opera in Brussels even called their statement "culture as the cement of Europe" (De Caluwe 2022). It is a common explanation and justification by the theatres, in particular, Brussels La Monnaie

Opera, Dutch National Opera and Ballet, the Bavarian State Opera in Munich and the Vienna State Opera, to explain why they are still performing Russian classical music or why they do not continue with a blanket boycott or a demand from their artists to openly condemn the war. For instance, "to boycott would be to neglect the important role that cultural personalities from Russia can play in raising awareness and resistance in Russia and beyond" (Nationale Opera and Ballet 2022). Through this category, the theatres shine in their true lights by revealing the irony of taking a political stance, however, still believing that music has the power to achieve certain goals. "Politics fail to bring us closer together, culture still can" (De Caluwe 2022). Again, this code category aligns with the artistic expression rationale, however, in this case noticing the capacities of art as the stage for dialogues. However, as a paradox, theatres, although acknowledging that culture is capable of being the unifying factor, still turn a blind eye to music's hidden political powers. Thus, this puts the decisions of the artists in the spotlight. Their choices to exclude or include Russian classical music in the context of political events become more important and politicised reflecting how they navigate political nuances.

The second part of data collection was conducting semi-structured interviews. The process of coding was similar to the theatre statements, however, the code categories emerged slightly different. It is important to reflect on the fact that in the interviews, as a researcher I had control over the angle of the conversation, whereas the theatre statements and communications were written and released almost two years ago. Thus, it is notable that in the statements, the angle that theatres took regarding Russia's war against Ukraine, was mostly justifying the reasons for not changing contracts or repertoire. On the other hand, the interviews complement this data set with a view from the artists themselves providing more personal reasoning and political stance on the matter. For this reason, I conducted two separate codebooks[9]. The code categories that emerged after analysing the interviews by two-cycle coding[10] are as follows (see Table 3): history and identity factors, contextual influence, convenience-inconvenience, ethical and moral considerations, art is art and financial factors.

Code category	Theoretical explanations
History and Identity	Memory and Identity
Contextual influence	Political pressure
Convenience-inconvenience	Political pressure
Ethical and moral considerations	Memory and Identity
Art is art	Artistic expression
Financial factors	-

Table 3. Second-cycle code categories of the interviews linked to the theoretical explanations.

History and identity factors

Firstly, the code category that emerged is strongly related to the memory politics theory discussed in the theoretical part of this thesis. The code category refers to a variety of points made in the interviews that include personal and family experiences, nationality aspects, generational trauma, and other cultural reasoning that interviewees mentioned. For instance, "we [Lithuanians] are very sensitive, for example, my grandparents were exiled to Siberia twice. There are so many affected people as such" (Interviewee 5). The narratives shared in the interviews reflect national and cultural memories impacted by the historical events, therefore, closely linking it to the memory politics theory. A lot of attention is drawn to the fact that for countries that experienced the USSR and Russia's imperialist politics, this is a clear situation: "because we already know this" (Interviewee 4) or even referring to Russia as "we know the enemy" (Interviewee 7). Additionally, this category encompasses the nationality-specific aspects which were specifically mentioned in two of the interviews, where interviews highlighted the problem: "When you are going to the audition people will expect from you that you can sing this [Russian] repertoire" (Interviewee 10). Overall, this label gathers the insights from the interviews which directly mention history and identity related

factors, linking it to vicarious identification and memory politics concepts discussed in the theoretical part of this paper.

Contextual influence

As discussed in the theory part of this paper, the matter of the context also appeared in the interviews, in particular, "it is impossible not to be involved" (Interviewee 2) and the political pressure to decide because everyone else is making decisions. The need to respond is created by broader contextual factors, highlighting the external political pressure for decision making. Hence, this code category strongly resonates with the political pressure explanations. Under this label, I also include the timing aspect, which appeared in most of the interviewees stating: "It is clear for everyone, for this time we need to forget this music and to not glorify Russia through it" (Interviewee 7). The timing aspect together with the political situation caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine especially points out the need to act urgently, suggesting that the choices made refer to the crisis decision-making theory. Moreover, contextual influence code includes not only the political pressure or the timing aspects but also comments referring to contextual political situations, such as recommendations, expectations and anything referring to the war context. These influences accentuate the political pressure on cultural institutions and artists even more when making decisions regarding Russian classical music exclusion.

Convenience-inconvenience

Under this label, I coded the quotes that referred to any practical considerations that could affect the decisions of the individual artists. The practical matters include anything from language or voice capacity, however, as pointed out by one of the interviewees: "It is part of your job, it is part of your profession, it is hard, but you need to be a professional" (Interviewee 1). For example, one such convenience-inconvenience could be not having any Russian pieces scheduled in the future anyway or personal music choice even before the political situation worsened. On the other hand, it can go the other way too: "You have contracts, you do not have a right not to sing if theatre's policy is different" (Interviewee 8). This highlights that the decision-making may not always depend on the artists' decisions but be bound by contracts and theatre policies. Moreover, the decision to avoid singing Russian opera can be also driven by fear: "They [activists] could break the windows, you never know" (Interviewee

5). This code category includes practical considerations, which may also be linked to the political pressure rationale. Contracts or the fear of repercussions emphasise that external factors play a role in the final decisions.

Ethical and moral considerations

Morals and ethics appeared to be a justification as well. These considerations appear to be linked to the memory and identity factors since they include personal experiences and depend on the individual moral compasses. “My parents will not understand, my friends will not understand me and this is not the right time” (Interviewee 3). These considerations are rooted in familial relations and broader expectations which particularly appear for certain nationalities and cultures. In other words, the expectations to not sing Russian classical music are higher for Ukrainians or singers from the Baltics because of the collective remembrance of Soviet repression by those nations. In some cases, unfortunately, there is no other choice and the individual artists, even though are left by the theatre to decide for themselves, have to evaluate not only their political stances or professional capabilities: “If I cancel my work because of Russians then in a few years nobody will invite any Ukrainians to perform” (Interviewee 1). Therefore, the decisions depend on their personal ethics and emotions arising from this context.

Art is Art

Although most of the interviewees whom I talked with acknowledged the politicisation of opera in general or consciously made a choice to not perform Russian operas, three out of ten of the interviewees separated music and politics stating: “I do not like that we would give direct ideas with art, because I think all art and music is a way for people to think” (Interviewee 2). This particularly points out the elements of artistic expression arguing that art and culture should be left outside of politics and appreciated for their aesthetics (Morgan 2010: 732-733). Similarly, like in the theatre statements, these artistic expression and apolitical art arguments were grounded in the argument that: “Russian culture is great, one of the greatest cultures in the world” (Interviewee 6), therefore, should not be excluded. Rather, it should be embraced for its greatness. However, this opinion among opera singers was relatively rare and appeared in only two of the interviews. Furthermore, the interviewees who were arguing that opera is not connected to politics were mostly justifying it by not

considering themselves as political persons. The general sentiment seems to be one of diffusing or passing on responsibility to avoid being wholly accountable.

Financial factors

Throughout the process of coding, the financial reasoning appeared in almost all of the interviews, therefore, this code category was separated as a separate label from the other coded categories. Money seemed to be one of the factors that opera singers either considered for themselves or assumed other artists or even theatres would consider. “So many Russian stars who bring money to the companies, and the companies selling tickets” (Interviewee 1). Thus, it highlighted the actual inability of an artist to stand up for himself especially considering this is the job in question, which is providing a livelihood: “A life of an artist is very difficult, one day you can have a lot of work, the other day less” (Interviewee 7). In addition, money also was claimed to determine the power you have as an artist to say anything, for instance, the more famous singer you are, the more options you have to say no: “For sure you have the possibility to say no, this depends on the money” (Interviewee 3). The financial factors appeared to be one of the most important decision-making factors for the artists. However, considering the theoretical rationales, this code category does not align with the three possible argumentations making it a significant finding of this research. Therefore, further discussion on the findings that relates to the three rationales also delves into the financial factors in the following section.

7. Chorus - how everything plays out

Throughout the coding process of both the theatre statements and interviews conducted, the code categories that emerged fit into the theoretical explanations as well as provide alternative explanations greatly contributing to the findings of this research. Thus, from the labels discussed above, a few points of analysis emerge that will be discussed in this section. All of the motivations that emerged through this process contribute to answering the main research question of this paper: How do opera singers and theatres justify their decisions to exclude Russian classical music from opera performances?

7.1. (A)political stances and shifting responsibilities

"I am a singer, I need to know what is going on in the world" (Interviewee 3)

The process of coding theatre statements and press releases in particular revealed that theatres tend to not take bold political stances, which would indicate standing with one or the other side. Overall, it seems that for the institutions it is important to justify their decisions to keep the repertoire as it is planned. In particular, the statement by the Brussels La Monnaie Opera House was the longest statement out of all analysed and mostly focused on how opera is apolitical, therefore, suggesting that they do not take out Russian-composed opera performances (De Caluwe 2022). In fact, the statement by Peter De Caluwe, the director of La Monnaie, starts by acknowledging that their decision to have three Russian operas in their repertoire in the context of the war is surprising (ibid.). Thus, it shows that the decision either received some criticism already or is trying to prevent that in the future, hence making the statement sound like there was a need for justification of someone who is guilty. The political and social pressures appear to be a considerable factor in this situation. Perhaps not the deciding one, but it can be assumed that it at least crossed some of the theatre directors' minds.

However, the throughline in all of the public communications and statements by theatres is that they seem to avoid the responsibility to make political stances. The furthest they could go is to condemn the Russian invasion happening in Ukraine, and, only in the case of Lithuanian and Estonian Opera Houses, to take a political side. Other theatres did not do that or did not communicate any stronger political stances than that. It seems like the support most commonly appeared to be symbolic, like singing the anthem and projecting the houses in the colours of the Ukraine flag (see images below). Symbolic support rather than substantive action is a more attractive and 'easier' way of showing support since it does not require making commitments directly engaging with the conflict. Additionally, without making a strong political stance, theatres still visibly show that they are not quiet about the current situation yet remain as 'apolitical' as they desire with communications. As a result, however, the responsibility is then shifted to the individual artists. The theatres offer the opportunity to sing Russian opera, however, the artist is the one accepting and performing it. Each decision comes with a price: a singer has to accept the potential repercussions such as having to explain why or why not they have accepted it. The assumptions of shifted responsibility then were

later confirmed in the interviews too. In one of the interviews, the interviewee was talking about their colleague who recently sang Russian Opera and had to face the repercussions of having to justify the actions and lose future offers: “he tried to explain that he did not do anything wrong (...), do we [opera singers] (...) have to work as researchers?” (Interviewee 5).

Images of national theatres and opera houses showing symbolic support (from top left: Dutch National Opera and Ballet (Amsterdam), source: Opera Europa (n.d.); Teatr Wielki Opera Narodowa (Warsaw), source: Opera Europa (n.d.); La Monnaie (Brussels), source: Ruel (2023))

Moreover, although theatres emphasise remaining apolitical and separating art from politics, they demand artists to condemn the war and claim to not continue working with artists who support the war. Hence, such claims suggest that apolitical claiming theatres require their staff to be political. However, as an example, in the press release by the general music director of Opera House in Munich Vladimir Jurowski, he points out that “all artists who condemn this unlawful war and withhold support from the regime responsible for it, whether publicly or

privately to avoid retribution, should be allowed to continue their artistic activities and thus reaffirm the universal message of peace", suggesting that it is not necessarily needed to publicly voice condemning the war due to fear and repressive regimes of their origin countries. Although this seems to be considerate, it remains unclear how silence and 'private condemn' suggested are different. Following the news, Ukraine was sending a very clear message "to not stay silent" (Kussainova 2022), thus, such non-demanding demands even more confirm how the pressure to make decisions as an institution is passed on to the individual. As one interviewee stated: "the easiest is to say do not mix politics and culture, this is the easiest way to get out of the situation" (Interviewee 8), and it seems like theatres are taking the easiest way out.

However, as the empirical observations suggest, still a great number of opera singers and theatres continued to play Russian classical music or reintroduced it into their repertoire over time. Immediately after the war, some opera houses like the Metropolitan Opera stopped their contracts with Russian artists who openly endorsed Putin such as Valery Gergiev and Anna Netrebko (Sheiko 2022; Tsioulcas 2022). Despite Netrebko later publicly condemning the war and denying any ties with Russian political leaders, she continues to attract controversy (Walker 2022). For instance, her concert in Lucerne was cancelled in May this year (Salazar 2024). However, other famous Russian stars continued to perform across the world with little problems (Marshall and Hernandez 2023). Such decisions might be supported by the music and politics separation discussion, suggesting that opera singers' careers do not have to do anything with Putin's actions in Ukraine. Furthermore, Russian opera is considered to be one of the most famous opera houses in the classical music world, making it more complicated to stop playing Russian opera but also collaborate with Russian artists, thus, the immediate boycott did not last long (ibid.).

The complexity of excluding Russian opera from the repertoires also has to do with the status of the opera houses. The reputation of privileged high art opera always seemed sacred and innocent in our society, something that is touching yet untouchable (Jankovic 2023). The immortality of art is also reflected in the statements by the theatres: "Great and immortal artworks confront us with ourselves, bring us face to face with ourselves within our own time" (De Caluwe 2022). Therefore, it is seen that opera is deeply appreciated for the status that it has. Not only is it artistic prestige but also aims to reflect a social standing and exclusivity.

The appreciation of prestige also appears in the theatre statements to justify the continuation of performing Russian operas. For example, the Paris National Opera pointed out the close and long-lasting links between Russia and France throughout history in this way motivating their current (and possibly future) choices to have Russian operas in their repertoire: "The Opera will continue to keep its heritage alive" (Neef 2022). This only confirms that opera is viewed as untouchable high art reinforced by historical significance and a sense of tradition. Thus, the decision to keep Russian operas in the repertoires shows the importance of status and commitment to uphold it within society.

7.2. In Memoriam

"We will never be brothers, neither by fatherland nor by mother" (Dmitruk 2014)

Although there are many things that artists and theatres consider when making a decision, the interviews assuredly confirmed that history and personal experience are influential factors. It not only shapes the attitudes about the ongoing Ukraine invasion by Russia but also impacts the stances of the artists and even the likeliness to be outspoken. Eastern European countries, which were more initiative and supportive towards Ukraine when the war happened through their national politics, also share the common historical trauma of being a part of the Soviet Union. Interviewees from Eastern European countries (Lithuania and Ukraine specifically) prior to the war saw Russia as a sensitive subject and common enemy. This meant that swiftly after the war started they removed singing the works of the Russian singers. This decision was made with more ease than their non-Eastern European counterparts due to their past relationship with Russia. "It is clear for everyone, for this time we need to forget this music and to not glorify Russia through it" (Interviewee 7). Interestingly, some interviewees did not expect artists or theatres from the West to take a stance or decide to not sing Russian classical music simply because they did not share a history with the 'enemy' that 'we know' (Interviewee 4; Interviewee 7; Interviewee 10). Therefore, it highlights the role of collective memory and confirms that memory shapes contemporary discourses on politics as well as public consciousness (Molden 2016: 127; Verovšek 2016: 529). "I noticed that countries that have suffered recently, still remember and feel all the pain, have responded more strictly than other countries" (Interviewee 7), and as another interviewee responded: "They do not understand, they do not have more than fifty years of all of this" (Interviewee 5). These quotes not only confirm the theory of memory politics but also put into practice and prove the

concepts of vicarious identification, through which Eastern European countries are more likely to feel the pain of Ukraine and live through the other (Budrytė 2023: 83-84).

On the other hand theatres from the West, that, according to the responses of the interviewees, are not responding and staying apolitical due to the lack of understanding and experience, try to be as emphatic as possible: “We do not believe in ‘cancel culture’ and cannot accept the ‘cancel history’ strategy. Slavic culture, in all its diversity, is part of our shared heritage” (De Caluwe 2022). Again, trying to be as inclusive as possible, avoid as much critique as possible, and keep justifying their choices not to impose blanket sanctions or a stricter political stance. It can be assumed that theatres might be avoiding political statements to avoid polarising their audience and their staff, out of fear of further repercussions or any negative consequences and perhaps avoiding having to change the contracts and potentially risk losing money.

7.3. Money rules the world

The reasoning that I did not include earlier in the theoretical part of this paper is concerning finances, which almost all interviewees mentioned. Although theatres explicitly did not communicate their concern about money, it was one of the strongest most often mentioned arguments that interviewees specified when considering taking personal roles or justifying theatres continuing to keep performing Russian operas. From the theatre's position future contracts are in question, therefore, cancelling Russian operas (if they were planned) and swapping them for something else seems to be financially inconvenient for them: “There are contracts signed with foreign artists (...) in advance” (Interviewee 5). And not only contracts but also: “There are so many Russian stars which bring money to the companies, selling tickets because of the Russians” (Interviewee 1). Thus, it is not only inconvenient for theatres to change the repertoire but also to cancel the contracts with Russian artists. For this reason, most of the communication from the theatres focused on the fact that they do not discriminate based on nationality, repeatedly stating that culture unites and brings people together and justifies why they keep working with Russian opera singers. To illustrate, Vienna State Opera’s statement says: “We are happy and proud to unite artists from the most diverse nations on our stage - including Ukraine and Russia” (Vienna State Opera 2022). They also state: “We strictly reject these demands for separation as well as a worldview that classifies people as “good” or “bad” only on the basis of their origin” (ibid.). Although in the official communications, it appears that theatre is a considerate and uniting place, it is important to

consider that financial incentives may have an upper hand in the decision process, and ethical and moral considerations appear depending on the convenient context. It is important to note that the repertoire is usually made one or two years in advance, therefore, considering that the war happened more than two years ago and we still are seeing Russian Operas in a lot of the Opera Houses being performed this year or scheduled for next season, does not suggest a considerate opera community. Therefore, the money argument, although very convincing in the first years of the war, does not remain so in the contemporary context.

For the artists, however, it is not so easy to say no when your career, family and living are dependent on the performances you do: "The life of an artist is very difficult, one day you can have a lot of work, the other day less" (Interviewee 7). As this interviewee pointed out, the uncertainty of future possibilities for an artist does not ensure financial stability and even creates financial anxiety. Therefore, it is hard to judge the situation when it can be the question of survival. Economic dependency shows the duality of money, while in one way it gives you power, and freedom, and allows you to voice your opinion, in the other way it may limit your capacity to decide without considering finances. Opera singers, who are well-known and have an established career already, have the capacity to decline easily: "If you are a person at this level for sure you have the possibility to say no, this depends on money" (Interviewee 3).

The financial considerations were revealed to be a significant factor for both the individual artists and theatres. While theatres worry about future contracts, individual artists are navigating their personal political stances with financial stability. Thus, being able to voice political opinions and refuse a role is a privilege that not all artists can afford. It becomes evident that the decisions regarding the exclusion of Russian classical music are not made in a vacuum. The decision making process appears to be affected by not only political and social factors but also economic ones, which directly influence the motivations and justifications of both cultural institutions and opera singers.

8. Coda

The findings of this study revealed that factors such as political pressure, memory and identity, and artistic expression are all at play when considering whether to exclude or include Russian classical music. Even though artists and theatres motivate their reasoning slightly differently, it remains clear that theoretical rationales affect motivations in complex and diverse ways.

The decision to refuse a role or consciously decide not to sing Russian classical music requires courage and bravery. Although the content of the operas might also be a platform to portray myths and idealised stories, the true power of music remains a secret, successfully fulfilling its mission as a tool of soft power. However, there is a juxtaposing stance. The decisions to exclude Russian classical music by Ukrainian artists or opera singers from the Baltic States may also suggest that there was no other choice. Due to strong memory and identity relations, the collective memory of traumatic experiences during the USSR results in stronger feelings against Russian sentiments. Therefore, artists from ex-Soviet countries may experience higher pressure to exclude Russian classical music, otherwise would be lynched by society.

In light of the theoretical considerations and empirical findings of this paper, there are a few important things to be discussed. First, decisions excluding Russian classical music often receive accusations of being Russophobic and, therefore, require a careful evaluation. This correlates with the project of "Russkiy Mir" (the Russian World), which is a clear cultural diplomacy strategy of the Russian state, where culture is used as a soft power tool. In particular, considering the findings of both theatre statements and the interviews it can be confirmed that opera is undeniably one of the most powerful tools to manipulate and distract. The innocence of the opera and arguments that it is just an artistic expression allows for the distraction techniques whereas manipulation happens in the hidden messages. However, it is exactly the objective of Russian propaganda. Framing decisions to exclude Russian classical music as Russophobic effectively distracts the audience from the 'real problem' of allowing Russian music to be played further. This is part of the plan to continue Russian cultural dominance.

Second point, if no decisions to exclude Russian classical music are made, it can be assumed that the soft power of the opera is working and Russia is winning the cultural war. Although such claims are bold, they highlight the influence of culture as a tool for soft power, thus they need to be taken seriously and considered thoroughly. Opera has the capacity to send hidden messages through its plot, staging, choice of music or choice of the performers. Through the performances, opera can subtly manipulate the audience without appearing too political. Although it is possible that by performing Russian operas theatres are creating space for discussion and critical thinking, it is unfortunately not the case in most instances. The reasons to explain this are a few. First, theatres do not communicate these choices before performing the operas. As it was observed through the analyses of theatre statements, most of the cultural institutions feel the need to explain their decisions after they have received criticism. Therefore,

it can be assumed that it is just an excuse but not a motivated and conscious choice to make society think critically. Second, most people attend operas as a fun cultural activity where they want to relax and spend time with their family or friends. Furthermore, because of its privileged reputation as a high art, opera is also seen as a special occasion to attend, therefore, targeting a very limited audience. Consequently, it creates an environment where the critical analysis of the opera is not the first thing that motivates them to go. Therefore, taking all this into account, the context of the opera performances is a perfect environment to songwash people rather than make them think critically.

Although the theoretical implications at the beginning of this paper were correct, the findings suggest an area that has been overlooked: the question of money. The aspect of finances was revealed during interviews, however, obscured in theatre statements. It has been shown that the already complex situation of navigating decision making amid high political and social pressure is further complicated by financial considerations. This once again confirms that decisions are not made in a vacuum and proves that multiple contextual variables come into play. It seems that money plays a role in decision making processes even during crises, by making direct manipulation and distraction more accessible. In particular, considering dependency on finances, money can become an easier entry point for propaganda machines to exercise their power on individuals. Hence, the soft power can be 'bought'. Akin to reputation and financial stability which allow artists to voice their opinions, financial instability can come at the cost of individual values and political stances. The weight of this trade-off can be high emotionally and financially. Therefore, it is important to account for the fact that money can corrupt decision makers, often at a moral and political cost. In taking this into account, I hope the findings of this research from the interviewees themselves will foster a broader discussion on the decisions made in music, spaces often naively claimed to be apolitical.

9. Finale

While travelling back to the airport after conducting an interview in Lithuania, I spoke with a passionate taxi driver. He was particularly devout to Rachmaninoff's music, stating that the Russian composer was his 'god'. In perceiving me to be an inexperienced and naive young girl he quickly dismissed me and positioned himself as an 'experienced' connoisseur. As I sat silently and indifferently after being rapidly and patronisingly shut down, he monologued about how a ban on Russian music would censor his 'god'. He ended by claiming that I should

get more knowledge. The experience led me to ruminate on the fear of appearing offensive. Theatres making decisions, releasing statements feeling the need to focus on promoting peace with beautifully written sentences claiming how music unites, culture brings people together, and art does not include politics at the cost of substantive action and political claim that would help for resistance. However, ignorance is not an explanation for the context. Silence is also a stance. Sometimes, it says even more than words.

In concluding this work, I want to say that the more time I spent reading about the topic, talking to opera singers, analysing and observing theatre actions, the more I understood. It is so much easier to say that art is separate from politics when clearly it is not. Opera has always been political. It is so much easier to separate those things in order to not make decisions and have less responsibility. Opera singers receive a lot of pressure to make choices amidst the absence of clear stances from the governments and cultural institutions. In effect, they find themselves in a silenced position. Particularly, those most affected by the war often have to sacrifice being politically outspoken because their livelihood depends on singing. Thus, it is often the most vulnerable individuals who have to bear the burdens of these circumstances. However, one does not need to be overly opinionated to make a statement. Sometimes it is simply choosing not to sing. This type of 'silence' by opera singers is more powerful than anything else. This type of silence is motivated and has a reason.

The deeper I got into the topic and theoretical explanations, the more I understood that it was the opposite of what that taxi driver was telling me. He should be the one acquiring more knowledge. If I understood one thing, it is that the more you read, the more you are aware of things. How such an innocent tool as music, which is even considered godly for some, can manipulate ordinary people. And, ironically, they also consider themselves "well educated" based on the fact that they attended one opera show in their life. Or perhaps, attended regularly, but never questioned what is happening behind the curtains. Considering themselves as experts in arts yet simply do not understand the possibility of being manipulated. Of course, not every context is like this. However, that is where the power of opera as a high art lies, so prestigious, marking social status and showing knowledge. Ideal to be one of the easiest platforms to execute soft power.

Akin to the many parts of an opera and possible consequent series, I finish this paper with the hope for it to be continued. Firstly, I believe that this research could be strengthened by a

longer and more extensive investigation which would include talking to more artists from each European country. Moreover, in a broader context, the research on opera and classical music as a tool for soft power should be continued, in particular, with a focus on authoritarian regimes. Since the field of cultural diplomacy is under-researched, I believe it is a relevant field in need of more attention to raising public awareness and critical thinking in society. Additionally, for future research, I propose focusing on the financial aspect of the decision making in music.

Applause

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Appendix A: List of the Interviews

Number of the interview	Description of an interviewee	Date	Medium
1.	Ukrainian opera singer based in Austria	2024-03-16	Online
2.	Non-EU opera singer based in Lithuania	2024-03-25	Online
3.	Ukrainian opera singer based in Switzerland	2024-03-27	Online
4.	Lithuanian opera singer based in Lithuania	2024-04-03	In person
5.	Lithuanian opera singer based in Lithuania	2024-04-04	In person
6.	Latvian opera singer based in Latvia	2024-04-12	Online
7.	Lithuanian opera singer based in Lithuania	2024-04-12	Online
8.	Lithuanian opera singer and composer based in Lithuania	2024-04-14	Online
9.	Ukrainian opera singer (not based)	2024-05-01	Online
10.	Ukrainian opera singer based in Germany	2024-05-05	Online

Appendix B: Theatre Statements Codebook

Code category	Quotes	First-cycle codes
Response	"We have ended our Relationship with organizations and individual artists that have expressed (…) their support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine"; "It is our belief that removing Russian cultural expressions from our stages and museums is not the right way forward"; "We do not believe in 'cancel culture"; "We will be lighting our building in the colours of the Ukrainian flag"; "If (…) members refuse to condemn the aggression , their Opera Europa membership must be cancelled"	No boycott, end collaboration, Opera Europa guidelines, need to explain, symbolic solidarity
Peace advocating	"The widespread destruction and human suffering are intolerable"; "Our house is a cultural institution that is fundamentally anti-war and pro-peace"; "We would like to express our unconditional commitment against violence and for peace in view of the current events"; "Russian tanks and missiles are targeting innocent civilians, cannot be justified in any way"; "Affirms its solidarity with all those who are its victims"	Help Ukrainians, condemn war, urgency to act, solidarity, war is unacceptable
Apolitical art	"Culture should never be a pawn in war, and cultural heritage should never be used as a weapon on the battlefield"; "Culture offers many paths to this goal. But not culture used as propaganda"; "To maintain a critical distance from political demagogues, to act in the spirit of humanity"; "Reading Russian literature or listening to Russian music does not mean that we wish to	No exclusion, continuation, art is not political, justifications, immortality of art

Role of Culture	“The power of art and culture lies precisely in the unifying role it can play”; “Culture as the cement that binds Europe together”; “Politics fail to bring us closer together, culture still can”; “We must be offensive and empower people to learn about their history”; “To boycott would be to neglect the important role that cultural personalities from Russia can play in raising awareness and resistance in Russia and beyond”; “All have left deep imprints on the (...) repertoire of our institution and the Opera will continue to keep its heritage alive”	Awareness, culture unites, togetherness, Slavic culture, heritage

Appendix C: Interviews Codebook

Code category	Quotes	First-cycle codes
History and Identity Factors	“My generation, we can feel the past somehow because my parents were there so I took everything from the mother’s milk”; “We are very sensitive, for example, my grandparents were exiled to Siberia twice. There are so many affected people as such”; “Because we already know this”; “when you're going to the audition people will expect from you that you can sing this [Russian] repertoire”; “We know the enemy”	Generational trauma, Soviet Union, Historical examples, Family history, Cultural superiority, Personal history, Ukrainian culture, Russian culture
Contextual Influence	“Afraid of everything like what they will say and that's why they don't have democracy”; We have to learn from them how to do that because they're really monsters in that and spread good propaganda”; “It is impossible not to be involved”; “We cannot at this time, we need to wait”; “It is clear for everyone, for this time we need to forget this music and to not glorify Russia through it”	War context, temporality, political interest, theatre policies, democracy, propaganda, political game, quick decisions, future considerations, Ukraine’s request, recommendations, position of the West, expectations, context importance
Convenience-Inconvenience	“There is no Ukrainian operas in this kind, we don't have that many operas first of all”; “It is part of the of your job it's a part of your of your profession it is hard but you need to be a professional”; “We have to put something new and those new things were not good, because it was in the rush”; “To not abstain, they could break the windows, you never know”; “You have contracts, you do not have a right not to sing if theater’s policy is different”	Contracts in advance, blind contracts, other options, quality, language, personal experience, misunderstanding, avoidance, too many artists, connections to Russia, indirect benefit, talent, professional career, threat, media, capacity to act, political interest

Ethical and Moral Considerations	“It's also our responsibility not to this again”; “Russians will stay and Ukrainians will disappear”; “My parents will not understand, my friends will not understand me and this is not the right time”; “The whole world is living like on a powder keg, you do not know when it will explode”; “I can live without it, it is not a problem”; “If I will cancel my work because of Russian then in few years nobody will invite any Ukrainians to perform”;	Emotions, context importance, risk, assumptions, responsibility, unforgivable, relationships, solidarity and support
Art is Art	“Russian culture is great, one of the greatest culture in the world”; “I do not like that we would give direct ideas with art, because I think all art and music is a way for people to think”; “It is the easiest to be apolitical”; “For me music is not connected to politics”; “You are fighting in a way, you do not go to ask for a weapon, do not go into the trenches, do not sit through the bombings, but you take an instrument, take the poetry, write and throw it like a missile, like a bomb”	Voice specificity, high art, right way to present, apolitical, art for consciousness, art connects
Financial Factors	“Money is very important thing, it rules the world”; “So many Russian stars which bring money to the companies people the companies selling tickets”; “For sure you have the possibility to say no, this depends on the money”; “A life of an artist is very difficult, one day you can have a lot of work, the other day less”;	Money, Russian funding, Sacrificing finances, losing job, requirements, money power