

SLONIM PERIOD IN PRINCE MICHAŁ KAZIMIERZ OGIŃSKI'S LIFE AND ARTISTIC CREATIVITY

Prince Michał Kazimierz Ogiński (1730–1800) was a renowned statesman, composer, writer and art patron. He is rightly considered one of the brightest persons of the Age of Enlightenment in the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. His input to the social, economic and cultural development of several regions of the Commonwealth was very significant, which was specifically the case for Slonim, a town now in the west of Belarus.

It was due to his marriage with Princess Alexandra Sapieha née Czartoryska that Prince Ogiński became an owner of a large property in Slonim which he later turned into his main residence. Having settled there, he started creating his famous “Manor of Muses” which was to take a lot of the Prince’s inspiration and effort. In 1765 his orchestra and opera team were assembled. A few years later, following the 1770s’ trend of rapid increase in the scenic art, a construction of a proper opera house in Slonim started. The new building had a large stage able to accommodate many singers and dancers. Some shows were held on a floating stage slowly moving down the river while enthusiastic spectators were all on boats sailing around. If needed, the floating stage would be easily extended onto the shore which allowed theatrical re-enactment of episodes of famous battles both on land and the sea⁷.

Apart from the Prince’s court theatre, there was another theatre for the young; it was created as an extension to the local Jesuit College’s activities. Slonim in those days was full of busy musicians, singers, ballet dancers, scene painters, propmen, tuners and menders of musical instruments. A school of music and a school of ballet offered tuitions by acknowledged

⁷ В. П. Пракапцова, *Спасціжэнне майстэрства*, Мінск, 2006, с. 82–83.

maestros invited by Prince Ogiński from different European countries – musician D. Grabenbauer, composer F. Marini, choreographer F. Szlancowski and orchestra conductor G. Pauli were ones of them. The Prince paid for his artists' studies abroad and those grants were offered both to his court musicians and those invited by him to work in Slonim.

The repertoire of the Slonim artists did impress. We know about it from survived inventories. The best pieces by Giovanni Piasello, Egidio Duni, André-Ernest Grétry, Christoph Willibald Gluck and others were frequently performed in the Slonim Opera House, which was getting close by its artistic level and repertoire to those of the theatres of Munich, Manheim, Baden or Stuttgart. The centre of musical art created by Prince Ogiński was justifiably called an affiliate of the world-famous Manheim School in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This was not only because the music by Manheim composers (such as Haydn, Boccherini and others) was played in Slonim, but also because the main principles of their art were replicated in Slonim as well.

Prince Ogiński was a virtuoso himself, very fluent in playing violin, clarinet, harp and clavichord. Nearly every day he played either the first violin in his orchestra or even as a soloist in violin concertos with the orchestra's accompaniment. He managed to gather a wonderful collection of musical instruments made by acclaimed masters in different countries. In addition to that, as some history researches believe, small workshops manufacturing grand pianos and clavichords existed in Slonim in those days as well⁸. Also there were purposefully built premises for storing musical instruments.

As a statesman, Prince Michał Kazimierz was a Great Lithuanian Hetman which was the highest rank of military commander in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Notably, due to his extensive activity in music, his nickname was *Clarinet-Hetman*. As a composer, the Prince wrote operas *Modified Philosopher*, *Les Champs-Élysées*, *Forces of the Light* and *Condi-*

⁸ А. П. Грыцкевіч, Міхал Казімір Агінскі, *Славутыя імёны Бацькаўшчыны*, Мінск, 2003, с. 191.

tions of *Social Classes* as well as numerous pieces for violin, various romances and polonaises; equally prolific he was in writing poetry.

Through his efforts a library and a printing house were opened in Slonim as well as several manufactures making silk fabrics, Persian-style tapestries and carpets. His greatest endeavours were initiation of and making huge investments into creation of a shipping canal that connected river basins of the Niemen and the Dnepr and thus the Baltic and Black Seas as well as construction two public roads connecting Slonim and Pinsk and then Pinsk and Volhynia. The waterway still exists in Belarus to this day being called Ogiński Canal.

Alexander Andrzejewski when visiting the already deserted Slonim manor and surrounding ruined developments in 1798 wrote, “Here you can see how brilliant examples of the highest civilisation of the eighteenth century have been equally preserved with old traditions and the fear of the Lord. Slonim was a cradle and centre of sciences and fine arts offering a spiritual shelter to the dejected mankind... What you would continuously see, feel and infer there were exuberance, aristocraticism, generosity, and, first and foremost, all-embracing tolerance and faith”⁹.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, due to a long absence of the Prince in Slonim as well as political and economic turbulences, the Manor of Muses which had been one of the major cultural and economic centres of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth for decades, gradually dilapidated and eventually became eradicated from the cultural map of Europe.

Prince Michał Kazimierz Ogiński was a classic example of statesmen and art patrons contributing a great lot to achieving the ideals of the Age of Enlightenment who – to follow Professor Andrzej Ciechanowski’s hyperbola – “the brighter they flared and glowed the sooner they had to fade forever”¹⁰. Having left a magnificent footprint in history Prince Michał Kazimierz Ogiński died in 1800 in Warsaw.

⁹ А. Цеханавецкі, *Міхал Казімір Агіньскі і “яго сядзіба музаў” у Слоніме*, Мінск, 1993, с. 93–94.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 153.