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# RESEARCH AND TRADITION

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## MARKING THE JUBILEE OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE IN BELGRADE: 150 YEARS SINCE ITS FOUNDING (CZECH MUSIC AND MUSICIANS ON THE STAGE OF THE NATIONAL THEATRE IN BELGRADE UNTIL 1914)

**Abstract:** This year's jubilee of the National Theatre in Belgrade is an opportunity to remind ourselves of the presence and contribution of Czech musicians at that institution. We meet them as members of the orchestra, bandleaders, authors of operas, operettas, and stage music, and, to a lesser extent, as vocal soloists in numerous works of stage music and chamber musicians. Many of them showcased their concert activities on the stage of this institution, including even some who were internationally renowned musicians at the time.

**Keywords:** jubilee, National Theatre in Belgrade, Czech musicians in Serbia, stage-music works, Serbian music

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There are a number of avenues and approaches that we might and will take here in uncovering and surveying our national musical past. We will begin this study by reiterating, right at the start, an insight made long ago, that “the National Theatre is an indispensable institution in the constitution of a nation and its identity”.<sup>1</sup>

The ceremonial opening of this, at the time, royal edifice took place on 30 October (Old Style), that is, 12 November 1869 (New Style). The opening ceremony was dedicated to Prince Mihailo (Michael) – with the play *Посмртна слава кнеза Михаила* (The Posthumous Glory of Prince Mihailo).<sup>2</sup>

Right at the very beginning, the Theatre hired a Czech artist, though not a musician; this was Johann Jan Kautsky,<sup>3</sup> a distinguished Viennese scenographer and court painter of Czech origin. He painted the curtains, sets, and other ornaments and décor for the Theatre’s maiden production during his stay in Belgrade in the summer of 1869. On that occasion, the press noted that “a temple of the liberal arts was arising, a temple where the people will gather the fruits of a more noble culture, one that will bring inherent, spiritual liberation to our folk”.<sup>4</sup>

At the time, the theatre building was illuminated at night by gas lighting, which earned it the nickname “the house of light” (*кућа светлости*).

Older and, at the time, not quite expert critics were not always understanding of the many different endeavours and sometimes even great efforts that these Czech musicians undertook in our midst. Nevertheless, right from the very beginning it was clear that without those Czech musical immigrants there would not be enough adequately trained personnel in musical performance, not only in opera. “Starting around the middle of the previous century, Czech musicians aided the development of our music and, with all of their activities, became and remained not only our enlighteners in music, but also pioneers in a number of areas, including the domain of stage music.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Мирослав Тимотијевић: “Народно позориште у Београду – храм патриотске религије”, *Наслеђе*, 6, 2005, 9–44 / Miroslav Timotijević: “Narodno pozorište u Beogradu – hram patriotske religije” (The National Theatre in Belgrade: A Temple of Patriotic Religion), *Nasleđe*, 6, 2005, 9–44.

<sup>2</sup> This play by Đorđe Malerić was produced on this occasion with music by Dragutin Reš (Драгутин Реш). See the placard for this play in Appendix 2.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Wenzel Kautsky or Jan Vaclav Kautsky (Prague, 14 September 1820 – Sankt Gilgen, 4 September 1896) was a Czech scenographer, landscape painter, and co-owner of a state workshop for making décor in Vienna, inherited by his sons. Later, another Czech, architect Ladislav Tittelbach (Владислав Тителбах, 1847–1925) also worked at the National Theatre as a decorator and scenographer.

<sup>4</sup> *Видовдан* (Vidovdan), 30 October 1869, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Милица Гајић: “Допринос чешких музичара српској музичкој сцени до Првог светског рата (Са посебним освртом на капелнике СНП у Новом Саду) / Milica Gajić:

At this time of rising national awareness, especially popular were plays with nationalist themes – for the most part tragedies and dramatic plays taking inspiration from our history. During the Theatre’s initial few decades, its production runs were often short, frequently involving only the première and another two or three reprises.

Nonetheless, despite all sorts of difficulties, between 1882 and the beginning of World War I in 1914, the musical arm of the National Theatre in Belgrade produced as many as 31 works of stage music – whether operas or operettas. Surveying its repertoire from those years, we may conclude that it essentially veered between diverse aspirations, ambitions, and abilities.

In the early stages of this important institution, without a more clearly defined and long-term programming policy, in terms of repertoire, the National Theatre focused on images from folk life, with singing – *комади са певањем* (“plays with singing”, somewhat similar to the German *Singspiel*), which were rather popular. Since its founding, the Theatre cultivated plays with incidental music (vocal and instrumental), which, over time, gave rise to this specifically Serbian genre of musical theatre. To illustrate this, one could cite the dramatizations of two plays by Stevan Sremac (Стеван Сремац), *Zona Zamfirova* (*Зона Замфиорова*) and *Ivkova slava* (*Ивкова слава*), *Đido* (*Ђидо*) by Janko Veselinović (Јанко Веселиновић), as well as *Koštana* (*Коштана*) by Bora Stanković (Бора Станковић), which has remained a fixture on the National Theatre’s regular repertoire ever since its première in 1901. Over time, songs from these plays became so popular that they spawned a new genre – theatre songs. This tight bond with drama was forged by making music, whether vocal or instrumental, an integral part of many theatre plays at the time. In addition, it was customary to perform individual numbers between the acts or between two or three shorter plays featured on the same evening. Before the beginning of the play as well as during the intervals between the acts, the Theatre orchestra often performed shorter pieces. “There was music even in works where it was not necessary, because the audience demanded it.”<sup>6</sup>

Over time, the musical arm of the National Theatre in Belgrade developed, gradually but increasingly – there was a sort of expansion, which enabled the

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Doprinos čeških muzičara srpskoj muzičkoj sceni do Prvog svetskog rata (Sa posebnim osvrtom na kapelnike SNP u Novom Sadu) / Czech Musicians’ Contribution to the Musical Scene of Serbia until the First World War (With a Special Focus on the Kapellmeisters of the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad), *Srpska muzička scena / Srpska muzička scena*, collection of essays, Belgrade, 1995, 114.

<sup>6</sup> Роксанда Пејовић, *Srpsko muzičko izvođaištvo romantičarskog doba*, Београд, Универзитет уметности у Београду, 1991, 180. / Roksanda Pejović, *Srpsko muzičko izvođaištvo romantičarskog doba*, Belgrade, Univerzitet umetnosti u Beogradu, 1991, 180.

production of our first operetta, the magical operetta *Vračara* (*Врачара*; The Fortune Teller) as early as 21 October 1882, with music by Davorin Jenko. Regarding works by Slavic or, more precisely, Czech composers, the first production was *U bunaru* (*У бунару*; In the Well) by Vilém Blodek in 1895; then, there was also *Jabuka* (*Јабука*; The Apple), a comic opera by Hugo Doubek. In 1911, there was a production of *Prodaná nevěsta* (The Bartered Bride), the popular opera by Bedřich Smetana. This was made possible by the growing number, frequency, and studiousness of interpretations of musical works, in line with the performing capabilities of the entire ensemble. Also, there was a growing number of dramatic plays 'set' (*удесили*) to music or arranged by some Czech musicians as well.

The link between these plays and the later development of opera is reflected in the fact that the Theatre's dramatic actors received their music training in these Serbian Singspiels, *комади са певањем*. In addition to foreign visiting artists, they were the first interpreters of these operas and operettas in our country. Thus opera and operetta productions attracted more and more public interest every year and in time, some of them became quite popular.

At this time, the orchestra comprised members of the troupe as well as members of the military band, *Војна музика* (*Vojna muzika*; literally "Military Music"), where a considerable number of instrumentalists, especially among the winds, were of Czech origin. Singing roles were performed by musically and vocally gifted actors. And "numerous conductors, that is, Kapellmeisters, overlapped their main vocation with pedagogy and, occasionally, editing and composing as well. They were assisted in that by their countrymen as members of orchestras that were never entirely formed nor complete, or as visiting vocal artists".<sup>7</sup>

Thanks to these Czech musicians, the status of music at the National Theatre kept improving. As members of a fellow Slavic nation, they had no major difficulties adjusting to the general Romantic need to revive the nation's musical past in Serbia as well, and to take part in the overall movement to assert the spiritual and cultural heritage of the Serbian people. On the other hand, the epoch of realism, which saw the foundation of the National Theatre, believed in a stable, communicable, and cognitive image of the world, as well as in the domain of shared experience *qua* universal values.

Later, the institution's work grew more differentiated, even though its managing directors were often replaced. Over time, the administration came to occupy a clearer position regarding the repertoire and its national character,

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<sup>7</sup> Milica Gajić, *op. cit.*, 116.

and especially its cultural and artists mission. Thus under the management of Đorđe Maletić (Ђорђе Малетић), the Theatre's choir and orchestra, with Karel Dragutin Čížek as Kapellmeister (*капелник*, bandleader or music director), were reinforced with additional members and became more active. At the time, during the intervals between the acts of dramatic plays, the Theatre's musicians performed overtures and excerpts from various operas that were popular at the time, as well as favourites by various opera composers. The realization of this segment of the repertoire for the most part involved the orchestra of the National Theatre. Among the Czech Kapellmeisters who ran the orchestra as well as the entire musical apparatus of the Theatre, in addition to Dragutin Čížek, mentioned above (1870–75, before the arrival of Davorin Jenko), one should also note Josef Svoboda, who led the orchestra as a visiting artist in 1894, as well as František Dragutin Pokorný, the most active and versatile among them. He led the orchestra from 1897 to 1902 and during this considerable time, he worked as a conductor who paid close attention to the tastes of the theatre-going audience and therefore performed many operettas, which some cultural workers held against him. Then, there was also Oskar Malata from 1895 to 1897, as well as Emil Milan Sachs, although only sporadically. Despite criticisms, the management likewise had much understanding and appreciation for the tastes and demands of the audience at the time, so they tolerated artistically less worthy productions "as plays that helped save the budget". Still, in his term at the helm of the National Theatre, already Milan Simić (Милан Симић) decreased the number of these kinds of premières and productions, although his repertoire selections were still ridden by compromise – responding to the artistic level attained by the Theatre up to that point as well as to the demands and tastes of Belgrade's audiences.

It was only the modern epoch at the National Theatre, from 1900 to 1914, that truly saw a wholesale national and cultural transformation and a general Europeanization and awakening of the creative and visionary powers of the Serbian people. Even though the period saw no fewer than eight changes of management, it was still marked by significant artistic breakthroughs and achievements in the National Theatre's musical arm, in terms of repertoire and performance quality alike, which was the best way to begin writing the prehistory of the founding of a genuine opera house in Belgrade.

The present jubilee of the National Theatre is not only a reminder of but also an obligation to undertake a proper survey of this initial stage in the highly diverse and dynamic cultural-artistic chronicle of this institution's musical division, teeming not only with vitality, but also an inextinguishable creative spirit among Serbian as well as numerous Czech artists.

Let us remember that the first operetta staged at the National Theatre in Belgrade (on 21 April 1882) was *Vračara* (*Брачара*; The Fortune Teller), with music by Davorin Jenko. Notwithstanding the genre's exceeding popularity with Belgrade's audiences at the time, every administration at the National Theatre occupied a rigorous position regarding the cultivation of operettas, a stance partly supported by the professional public. Due to competing opinions, this period also witnessed considerable debate regarding the artistic level of and need for producing works in this musical genre.

In addition, the National Theatre or, rather, its stage was often treated as a concert podium on various occasions including performances by visiting foreign artists. At the time, Belgrade lacked a proper concert hall, which made this stage one of the main venues of the city's musical life. Surveying all the activities of this institution, one simultaneously encounters information about the organization and also functioning as well as, especially, the progressively more demanding and diversified repertoire not only of its soloists, but also its increasingly developed music ensembles. They attest to a continual process of musical professionalization at the National Theatre, so much so that one may observe a partial conquest at the National Theatre of standard stage-music repertoires that were pursued at major opera houses at the time. On the other hand, when it comes to the genre of Serbian stage music, one may also observe a sort of general stratification of the musical culture of the Serbian capital city at the time.

It is well known that in the beginning the state of Serbian music was rather less than enviable, for the most part owing to a lack of professionally trained musicians throughout the country. Therefore, for a number of years, the music ensembles of the National Theatre were likewise stuck "half-way to a professional performing body". This dearth of professional performing forces was especially pronounced whenever works in large-scale and more demanding musical genres had to be performed. Therefore, although almost negligible, the handful of Czech musicians hired at the National Theatre still made a positive impact on the gradual and systematic professionalization of its music ensembles. "At a time when numerous plays involving music, vaudevilles, melodramas, operettas, and operas were staged, these Czech musicians, with a remarkable ability to adapt, joined in a not entirely artistic process of getting the audience accustomed in practice to a systematic and thorough adoption of increasingly complex works of stage music. Surveying the repertoires, one comes under the impression that the theatres were operating without a clear conception, other than trying to attract the audience and turn a profit. This entailed performing works that were light in content and bereft of higher aesthetic demands. Running in parallel with this struggle for audiences, there was another struggle, meticulously and persistently led by the Czech musicians in the domain of profession-

alizing the performing forces as well as forming a repertoire worthy of larger centres of music.”<sup>8</sup>

Thanks to these Czech music pioneers who came to work in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Serbia, music itself still managed to acquire a better, more favourable status at the Theatre. At first, even solo numbers were sung mostly by amateurs, then by actor-singers, who were talented but, unfortunately, had no training in singing. The (small) choral ensemble was mostly composed of individual members of various choral societies, as well as young members of the acting ensemble. At the time, singing (scales) at the acting school was taught by the Kapellmeister and the National Theatre staged almost exclusively “Serbianized” plays (i.e. translated to Serbian).

Already at the founding of the National Theatre, its ensemble included an orchestra and a choir. The Theatre’s “singing and orchestral company” (*певачки и свирачки збор*) were featured already in its first performance, when the orchestra performed *Serbian Overture* (*Српска увертура*) by Dragutin Reš (Драгутин Реш), who was also “head of the playing ensemble” (*начелник збора свирачког*). Aware that new plays could not be properly presented without quality music, the theatre orchestra often performed various pieces during plays as well as between the acts. At first, it only had 12 members, although both the choir and the orchestra gradually grew in size. Between 1882 and the beginning of World War I in 1914, the stage of the National Theatre saw 31 productions in the domain of musical theatre (operas and operettas). Highly popular before operas and operettas, and for a long time performed alongside them, were “plays with singing” (*комади са певањем*), that is, with music.

The beginning of the 1880s was marked by financial hardship, which forced the National Theatre to suspend its activities for a period, which were also disrupted by political turmoil and war. The period between 1880 and 1900 was the Theatre’s so-called realist age, when its repertoire featured an increasing number of plays with singing and music as well as operas. The orchestra still performed between the acts of plays. As for plays with singing, they were paid according to the number of songs in them, that is, musical numbers, up to 5% of the total royalties. At the time, the Kapellmeister’s salary was 400 Thaler or 1,920 dinars, while the choirmaster was paid 300 Thaler or 1,440 dinars.

Dragutin Čížek was the first Czech hired by the National Theatre. The first Theatre payroll listing Čížek as Kapellmeister of the National Theatre dates from 2 December 1885, which makes him one of the first among the entire cohort of Czech musicians who came in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to help improve our stage-musical culture.

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<sup>8</sup> Milica Gajić, *op. cit.*, 116–117.

We may also note that 29 November 1894 saw the première of a one-act comic opera by Vilém Blodek, *U bunaru (V studni; In the Well)*, directed by Andrija Fijan. The libretto for this opera by this contemporary of Smetana was composed by Karel Sabina, and the opera had been premièred at Prague on 17 November 1867 following the opening of the Provisional Theatre in that city, where it was reprised 39 times. This opera is considered the first through-composed Czech comic opera without spoken dialogue. At the time, it was also advertised as an operetta, a one-act opera, and a short opera. It was one of the first Czech operas to be performed abroad.<sup>9</sup> Due to the tragic fate of its author, his overall position in Czech music history is seldom fully appreciated, since it is usually viewed against the backdrop of this work.

This première was not met with universal acclaim among Belgrade's musical public at the time. Unhappy with the performance, the unsigned critic of *Dnevni list (Дневни лист)* wrote: "Mr Svoboda turned out to be a poor Kapellmeister and an incapable choirmaster. He showed he has no musical ear or sense – one of the main prerequisites for music and song". These words may have stemmed from the critic's personal enmity for the Kapellmeister, Josef Svoboda, who had replaced the highly popular Davorin Jenko.

Belgrade's theatre-goers seldom requested a revival or re-staging of this opera – it had its 13<sup>th</sup> reprise only in 1908, with a new cast, of course, and a new conductor. On that occasion, it was conducted by Dragutin Pokorný (1868–1956).

During the Serbo-Bulgarian War of 1885 the National Theatre suspended its activities from 7 November to 25 December.

October 1895 saw the production of *Jabuka (Јабука; The Apple)* by Czech composer Hugo Doubek, a three-act comic operetta showing images from folk life. The libretto was written by Velja Miljković (Веља Миљковић) and the music composed by Hugo Doubek, a composer of Czech origin who by then had been living in Serbia for some time. As for the indefatigable Josef Svoboda, he conducted a staging of Gounod's *Faust* in 1892, when, due to the Theatre's inadequate orchestra, the wind parts were rendered on an upright piano.

Starting in 1895, the Kapellmeister (music director) position at the National Theatre was occupied by Oskar Malata. Between 1895 and 1898 he assisted Davorin Janko, just as Dragutin Čížek had done before, and then also Josef Brodil.

From that time on we may already observe significant and sudden improvements at the National Theatre's musical division. Due to varying programming

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<sup>9</sup> After Prague, it was staged in Saint Petersburg in 1879, Sofia in 1881, Zagreb in 1885, Ljubljana in 1889, Leipzig in 1893, Vienna in 1893, Berlin in 1902, and New York in 1920.



directions, one may note increases in size as well as professionalization and modernization among the Theatre's ensembles and repertoires, as well as, occasionally, reversals to the earlier, inferior state.

At the time, the management often resorted to hiring musicians from the army, later also the entire ensemble of the King's Guard (*Краљева гарда*). Therefore, this "unity" between the civilian and military orchestral music spheres persisted at the National Theatre in Belgrade right until the beginning of World War I in 1914.

According to an unwritten rule, whenever the Theatre hired the army band, it would be conducted by its military Kapellmeister, usually a Czech: first Dragutin Čížek and then Josef Brodil. Later Kapellmeisters were Dragutin Pokorný, who was an army Kapellmeister before his hiring at the National Theatre from 1897 as second conductor. From that time on, Jenko entirely relinquished running the orchestra as well as conducting to Pokorný, especially from 1897 to 1904 and from 1906 to 1910, when he was one of the primary conductors at the National Theatre in Belgrade.<sup>10</sup> Due to a repertoire that also included plays with singing, melodramas, and operettas, the orchestra comprised a modest number of instrumentalists, as well as a certain number of choir singers, who were invariably reinforced with actors.

Dragutin Pokorný's achievements in the performance of operas and operettas at the National Theatre from the 1880s onwards could not have materialized without his highly committed efforts in terms of study, pedagogy, and organization. Operating in conditions that were not always stimulating for professional work, he still managed to form a pool of musicians and secure a sort of permanence in the functioning of the orchestra and the choir. This allowed Belgrade's audiences to hear works from the standard repertory of Western classical music, following lengthy, solid, and professional preparations. Ultimately, however, the performing quality of musical plays shown at the National Theatre in Belgrade reflected the realistic capabilities and available performing forces of its ensembles.

As Kapellmeister of the National Theatre, Pokorný had multiple duties as well: to train and prepare the actor-singers and members of the choral ensemble, to lead the orchestra, to compose musical numbers for theatre plays, to adapt or arrange music by other composers, and to conduct the orchestra and choir during performances.

This was a time when the music sector of the National Theatre underwent sudden and frequent changes, largely thanks to Pokorný. After studying French

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<sup>10</sup> Dragutin Pokorný, a conductor of Czech origin. In our country, he is most credited for his work as a conductor, reformer of military music, and the founder of the Military School of Music (*Војна музичка школа*) in Vršac in 1919.

horn in Vienna, he worked in Serbia as a military bandleader (Kapellmeister) and led the chamber ensemble of the Academic Music Society (*Академско музичко друштво*). He was most active as conductor of the National Theatre orchestra between 1897 and 1909. He performed pieces from the standard opera repertoire, which were meant to establish continuity in the cultivation of opera even before its formal establishment at the National Theatre in 1919. His conducting repertoire comprised the following operas and operettas: *Die schöne Galathée*, *The Mikado*, *Der Vogelhändler*, *La mascotte*, *La Belle Hélène*, *The Geisha*, *The Doll* (*Лутка*), *Orphé aux enfers*, *Les cloches de Corneville*, *Der Bettelstudent*, *Cavalleria rusticana*, *Pagliacci*, and *The Bartered Bride*.

From 1890 on, Pokorný also worked in Belgrade as a military bandleader (Kapellmeister) and later as conductor of the National Theatre as well. At the same time, he composed incidental music for a number of theatre plays and trained actors in singing. Those activities qualify him as “one of the most significant figures in our stage music”. He composed musical accompaniment for the dances and songs in *Zla žena* (*Зла жена*; *The Wicked Woman*), a theatre play by J. S. Popović (J. C. Поповић). He was also the author of a stage revival of *Carica Milica* (*Царица Милица*; *Empress Milica*), a historical drama by Dimitrije Đukić (Димитрије Дукић). Then, he was also involved in *Potpporučnik Mikica* (*Потпоручник Микица*; *Sublieutenant Mikica*), a comedy with singing inspired by Belgrade life, by Velja Miljković (Веља Миљковић), and *Koštana* (*Коштана*) by B. Stanković (Б. Станковић) from 1900. All these works, shows, as well as working with the choir and orchestra and training actors to sing are a testament to his great ambition, wholehearted efforts, talent, and diligence. Miloje Milojević (Милоје Милојевић), a major Serbian composer and critic, wrote the following lines about Pokorný: “A Kapellmeister with a steady hand, an unforgiving and strict rhythmist, Mr Pokorný, during Davorin Jenko’s tenure, introduced operetta to the repertoire of the National Theatre (not necessarily an improvement in terms of culture), but also brought opera (from 1907). He conducted *Cavalleria rusticana*, *Pagliacci*, *The Bartered Bride*, *In the Well*, as well as two works by Serbian authors: Parma’s *Ksenija* (*Ксенија*) and Binički’s one-act opera *Na uranku* (*На уранку*; *At Dawn*). Hailing from an age that believed that the proper way to develop and educate the musical public in the domain of drama led via ‘light operetta music’, he maintained and performed such a programme with a religious commitment, as the first musician who systematically performed an opera (that is, operetta) repertoire at the National Theatre. Mr Pokorný should be especially credited for producing Binički’s opera *Na uranku*”.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Милоје Милојевић, “Тридесета годишњица музичког рада г. Драгутина Покорног”,

Still, there were some who maintained that Pokorný took up tasks for which he was not competent enough, which made him a target of criticism. The choir and orchestra were seriously understaffed, which was one of the reasons why they could not reach a satisfactory artistic level.

To be sure, Pokorný staged and conducted a number of operas and operettas, at the same time gradually putting together the standard repertoire of the National Theatre, even before the establishment of the Opera as a separate division of this national institution.

One should at least mention here that the famous actress, the “unofficial queen of the Serbian stage” and Davorin Jenko’s life companion in Belgrade, Avgusta Vela Nigrinova was of Czech origin through her father. She was born in the family of Avgust Nigrin, a Czech railway worker temporarily employed in Ljubljana.

Marking this great jubilee of the National Theatre in Belgrade is certainly an occasion to remember and thus recognize the Czech musicians who were among the first musical figures that worked toward the establishment and professional development of this institution’s musical arm. Furthermore, over time, they not only formed, but also, to a high degree, improved the Theatre’s choir and orchestra.

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## **Summary**

This jubilee of the National Theatre in Belgrade is an opportunity to remind ourselves of the presence of Czech musicians at this institution. We encounter them as members of the Theatre orchestra, Kapellmeisters (music directors), authors of operas, operettas, and incidental music, and, to a lesser extent, as vocal soloists in many works of stage music, as well as chamber musicians. In particular, the text brings to light the contributions of Hugo Doubek, Josef Svoboda, and Dragutin Pokorný, as three multifaceted figures, performers, and composers.