

ARTISTIC CAREER OF BASS JULIJ BETETTO IN LJUBLJANA OPERA

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Izvleček: *Basist Julij Betetto sodi med najpomembnejše slovenske in jugoslovanske glasbene poustvarjalce 20. stoletja, kot izjemen basist pa se je zapisal tudi v zgodovino evropske operne poustvarjalnosti. V pol stoletja trajajoči umetniški karieri je nastopil v več kot 3000 opernih predstavah ter poustvaril 175 vlog v 140 operah. Prispevek osvetljuje in nadgrajuje doslej znana védenja o Betetovem delovanju v ljubljanski operi, kjer je kar 36 let sooblikoval operne predstave, prav tako je kot predmet razprave izpostavljen njegov pedagoški vpliv ter pomen za to ustanovo.*

Ključne besede: *Julij Betetto, operni pevec, basist, ljubljanska opera*

Abstract: *The bass Julij Betetto is considered one of the most important Slovenian and Yugoslav musical performers of the twentieth century, also leaving a deep impression on the history of European operatic singing. In an artistic career spanning over half a century he appeared in more than three thousand operatic performances, interpreting 175 roles in 140 different operas. The article looks at Betetto's artistic career and expands previous knowledge about his thirty-six-year-long collaboration with the Ljubljana Opera, emphasizing his pedagogical influence and importance for that institution.*

Keywords: *Julij Betetto, opera singer, bass, Ljubljana Opera House*

The life and work of bass Julij Betetto has been so far covered in three monographic publications. Vilko Ukmar's *Meetings with Julij Betetto*¹ includes conversations with the artist, teacher and manager of music education, and Ciril Cvetko's *Julij Betetto – Artist, Teacher and Organiser of Music Education*² focuses mostly on his life and especially on his career, while his teaching is only partly outlined. In their works, Ukmar and Cvetko provide no reference sources, which makes their information unverifiable. A recent monograph of the author of this article titled *Julij Betetto (1885–1963) – Nestor of Opera and Concert Singers*³ – based on her doctoral dissertation – expands and complements both earlier books. This article provides an overview that includes the newest findings on the engagement of Julij Betetto in the Ljubljana Opera House based on previously ignored or unavailable sources, such as original reviews, his personal letters and his diary.

¹ Ukmar, *Srečanja*.

² Cvetko, *Julij Betetto*.

³ Bohak, *Julij Betetto*.

Julij Betetto (1885–1963) had his first contact with the opera at the age of eighteen. Encouraged by tenor Josip Pavšek, the first Slovenian Vašek in Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* and one of the first important figures who formed the basis for the singing culture in Slovenia,⁴ young Betetto joined the Dramatično društvo (Eng. Theatre Society) in the beginning of the 1903/1904 season and became a member of the opera choir. In the beginning of December 1903, he made his debut as a chorister in Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, while at the end of the month Hilarij Benišek, the then conductor of the Opera, engaged him in a solo part.⁵ With his full sounding bass, he debuted as Mícha in *The Bartered Bride*. Benišek revealed a singer with an exceptional voice and acting skill, who would prove himself on the Ljubljana stage in the following season's performance of *Eugene Onegin*. As baritone Jan Ouřednik dealt with health problems, Julij Betetto unexpectedly took the leading part.⁶ After the show, playwright and critic Adolf Rosiva wrote about Betetto: "[...] we bravely claim no Slovenian artist has recently earned such applause. We justifiably hope Mr Betetto will become the principal bass, as no man will easily be found with such a voice. [...] Such power – our own, Slovenian – would surely be an honour to our opera house [...]"⁷ It should be pointed out that eighteen-year-old Betetto was a tremendous theatre enthusiast, always true to his emotional instincts. Thus, it comes to no surprise that despite the favourable theatre administration and the promising prospects for his career in the Ljubljana Opera he wanted to acquire formal singing education. In 1905, he went to the conductor of the Vienna Court Opera Franz Schalk to test his vocal abilities. He achieved a positive grade and a recommendation to immediately pursue his education in Vienna; yet, his financial situation (he did not obtain a scholarship) postponed his studies for another two years.⁸

One of his key performances that greatly influenced the direction of his singing career took place in May 1907 in Ljubljana. Under the baton of Matej Hubad he appeared as a solo bass in Verdi's *Requiem* together with the Choir of the Glasbena Matica (Eng. Music Society). Not surprisingly, his voice fascinated and convinced four influential members of the Ljubljana Glasbena Matica to guarantee him a scholarship, and thereby to enable him to enrol into the Academy in Vienna in 1907.⁹ After studying singing for two years with renowned Professor August Iffert, he completed his studies with honours and took up a post in the eminent Court Opera, staying there until the end of the 1921/1922 concert season. Alongside his demanding work in Vienna, he was a regular guest on the Ljubljana Opera stage. On the day of his solo debut in the Vienna Court Opera, Betetto started writing his personal diary. The diary includes the dates of all the operas in which

⁴ Traven, "'Prodana nevesta' in Slovenci", 249–258.

⁵ Bohak, *Julij Betetto*, 21.

⁶ Hrovatin, "Julij Betetto – 40 let pevec", 3.

⁷ "[...] smelo trdimo, da tako burnega aplavza ni doživel kmalu kak slovenski umetnik. Naša gotovo opravičena želja je, da se v prihodnji sezoni angažira g. Betetto za glavnega basista, kajti izlepa se ne bo našel mož, ki se ponša s takim glasom. [...] Taka domača slovenska moč bo gotovo le v čast naši operi." Rosiva, "Slovenska opera", 59–60.

⁸ Bohak, *Julij Betetto*, 21.

⁹ Hrovatin, "Pregled dela", 169.

Figure 1

Julij Betetto as Kecal in Bedřich Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* in May 1919 (photo: Holdt; National and University Library Ljubljana, with permission)



Betetto performed and the list of the roles he enacted.¹⁰ In fourteen years he performed in no less than 1,220 shows on the stage of the Court Opera!¹¹

In the beginning of September 1922, he accepted the invitation from Matej Hubad and re-joined the ensemble of diverse nationalities of the Ljubljana Opera.¹² On this place, we might ask ourselves why an internationally acclaimed artist would want to return to his homeland. The reasons might lie in his personal view and his patriotic sense. Surely, he was aware of the provincialism of the Slovenian scene, the rather modest level of the Ljubljana Opera and, finally, of the poor educational system in Slovenia. He must have felt it his obligation as an artist and a teacher to work in his homeland. In the decades

¹⁰ For complete list of opera roles Betetto performed in his artistic career, see Bohak: *Julij Betetto*, 133–142.

¹¹ Personal diary of Julij Betetto, seasons 1907–1922, without pagination.

¹² *Ibid.*, season 1922/1923, without pagination.

to come his knowledge and experience gained on the stage in Vienna would leave an important mark on Slovenian art and education. Croatian conductor Friderik Rukavina, who led the Slovenski gledališki konzorcij (Eng. Slovenian Theatre Consortium), established in 1918,¹³ hoped to form a fine ensemble, but the lack of local artists forced him to engage acclaimed Czech, Polish, Russian and other foreign musicians.¹⁴ After returning to Ljubljana, Betetto first addressed the audience with Kecal from *The Bartered Bride*, which was no coincidence, as this was the role that had an enormous impact on his entire artistic career.¹⁵ His Kecal, which he first interpreted at the age of twenty-five, was an epitome for the most holistic and polished interpretation both in a vocal and technical sense as well as in terms of acting.¹⁶ It was with this role that Betetto marked the twentieth anniversary of his career, in the season of 1923/1924.¹⁷ His charisma and an exceptional voice made him the audience's favourite. When he sang, the seats were sold out. As the theatre's administration was well aware of Betetto's importance and put great faith in his roles, it was prepared to change the show or work out a plan to suit his demands, in case he was indisposed.¹⁸

In addition to his singing career, Betetto, invited by the committee of the Glasbena Matica, started working as a part-time teacher at the end of December 1924. He had some teaching experience, as he had worked in a private school in Vienna. His teaching career would soon reach new heights. In February 1925 he started teaching at the Jugoslovanski konservatorij (Eng. Yugoslav Conservatory), which was nationalised in January 1926 and on 1 April 1926 became part of public administration.¹⁹ He was teaching at all levels – preparatory, elementary, secondary and higher –, which indicates both that the Glasbena Matica made the right decision choosing a renowned individual with an international career and that his teaching was efficient.

In May 1925, Matej Hubad, who had a major influence on the Ljubljana music scene of the time, responded to the discrepancies between Slovenian composers and Friderik Rukavina concerning the repertoire by naming Mirko Polič the new head of the Opera.²⁰ His first season was promising and diverse, leaving Betetto enough room for guest performances. He sang in three operas in the Prague National Theatre and five in the Zagreb Opera, which, after Czech bass Arnold Flögl left, endeavoured to convince Betetto to sign a contract with them.²¹ Betetto was too attached to Ljubljana, however, and consequently never took regular position in Zagreb. With Mirko Polič, the conditions in the Ljubljana Opera somewhat improved; yet, the theatre was still in a grave financial situation. The administration decided to offer more operettas, as these traditionally attracted more audience and were as such an important means of increasing the theatre's budget. The

¹³ Ukmar, "Podoba slovenske opere", 173.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Personal diary of Julij Betetto, season 1922/1923, without pagination.

¹⁶ Bohak, *Julij Betetto*, 13.

¹⁷ Personal diary of Julij Betetto, season 1923/1924, without pagination.

¹⁸ Bohak, *Julij Betetto*, 13.

¹⁹ Ibid, 54–55.

²⁰ Grdina, "Slovenska opera v Ljubljani", 22–27.

²¹ Personal diary of Julij Betetto, season 1925/1926, without pagination.

given circumstances were too much of a burden for Betetto, who flirted with the idea of going abroad.²² It was probably the successful teaching career and an increased interest for singing education that kept him in his homeland.

Betetto should be credited with the rapidly increasing number of students at the Državni konservatorij (Eng. State Conservatory) in the 1920s. The most obvious proof were 46 students enrolled in the academic year 1926/1927 – a unique number in the history of music education, as it surpassed even the piano and violin, which had been most alluring before.²³

The 1928/1929 season was entirely subordinated to the staging of Marij Kogoj's *Črne maske* (Eng. *Black Masks*), and this was a demanding task for the Ljubljana ensemble as well. After the premiere, Govekar wrote a few lines again, praising the entire performance: "[...] the splendid and demanding part of wine manager Cristoforo was interpreted by Mr Betetto [...], with artistic delicacy and extremely effective. [...] To wrap it up: the remarkable success, of which the author, the administration and the critics should be pleased."²⁴ The staging of *Črne maske* can surely be considered one of the peaks under the Polič's leadership (1925–1939). Furthermore, it was in this period that the Ljubljana Opera received first greater acclaim outside Slovenia, for performances across various towns in Yugoslavia, Trieste, etc. In this way, the Ljubljana Opera managed to survive.²⁵ After his interpretation of the role of Oče Samorod (Eng. Father Samorod) from Risto Savin's *Lepa Vida* (Eng. *The Fair Vida*) in November 1928, Emil Adamič placed him on a pedestal in the daily newspaper *Jutro*: "In every aspect, Oče Samorod – Mr Betetto was the champion of the evening. Unfortunately, his role is perfect only in the first act. In the third, it is grateful enough. But we want to listen to him again and again."²⁶ Such a raving review comes to no surprise, as even after completing his official singing education, Betetto had been constantly taking lessons from eminent Viennese teachers, including Eduardo Unger, Philip Forsten, Martin Greif and Otto Iro, with whom he would exchange letters of advice in many years to come.²⁷ The eminent Viennese teachers had a great impact on his teaching methods, influenced his artistic views and helped him grow not only into an exceptional artist but also into an excellent and dedicated teacher.

Numerous intrigues in the Opera, a poor financial situation and great rivalry in the ensemble must have made Betetto think again about leaving Ljubljana. He went to his agent in Vienna, who suggested doing an audition in Munich. He passed it and in September 1930 started working in the Bavarian State Opera, focusing for two seasons mostly on the operas of Wagner, with which he had already become familiar to a lesser

²² Ukmar, *Srečanja*, 109.

²³ Bohak, *Julij Betetto*, 55.

²⁴ "[...] imenitno in težko partijo vinskega upravitelja Cristofora pa je podajal g. Betetto [...], z umetniško delikatnostjo ter močno učinkovito. [...] V celem: resničen uspeh, ki je ž njim lahko avtor, uprava in kritika zadovoljna." Govekar, "Kogoj Marij: 'Črne maske'", 3.

²⁵ Grdina, "Slovenska opera v Ljubljani", 39.

²⁶ "Oče Samorod – g. Betetto, ki mu je šlo danes v vsakem oziru prvo mesto. Žal le, da je njegova vloga v prvem dejanju perfektna. V tretjem pa je dovolj hvaležna. Vendar bi ga želeli slišati še in še." Adamič, "Lepa Vida", 4.

²⁷ Personal diary of Julij Betetto, without pagination.

extent while working in Vienna and Ljubljana.²⁸ After leaving for Bavaria, his contract with the Ljubljana Opera was still valid. They settled for an unpaid leave of absence, and after two seasons the administration requested his return to Ljubljana.²⁹ We know that Betetto was not particularly fond of Wagner's roles, but managed to perform them perfectly nonetheless.³⁰ Despite that or maybe because of that his abilities and aptitudes were evidently developing, both in terms of vocal technique as well as stage movement.

Even during his years in Munich, Betetto, the tireless theatre enthusiast, found time for guest appearances on home stages; among others, he performed in Mozart's *Così fan tutte* at the end of January 1931. The critics were increasingly in favour of Betetto. His voice was maturing and developing, and, at the same time, he complemented his singing with an excellent stage presence and outstanding articulation. Among reviews worth pointing out is one by Emil Adamič in *Jutro* on his role of Don Alfonso: "After a longer break, the role of hard-headed, experienced and cunning bachelor Don Alfonso was sang by guest artist Mr Betetto. With his role, an opera stands or falls. Betetto's interpretation of Alfonso was masterful. It was not just his smooth, so to speak, conversational singing so fitting to Mozart's music that enthralled us, but, even more so, his lively acting, polished to the last gesture and combined with amusing facial expressions, full of mischievous humour, highlighted by his great routine knowledge. For all this, he was an object of endless ovations, lasting long after the final act of the opera."³¹ He concluded his review with the awareness of Betetto's importance: "After the repeat performance of *Così fan tutte*, Mr Betetto is bidding us farewell anew. But I am sure Ljubljana will soon beguile him again and will not let him go from its embrace so easily. Until then – goodbye and see you soon!"³² We noted that due to the high artistic level of the Bavarian Opera, honest and respectful relationships with stage colleagues, conductors and directors Betetto was caught in a dilemma about whether to break the contract with Ljubljana and find work in one of the foreign opera houses or return home. He was interested in Zagreb and Belgrade and was also thinking of Lyon. Nevertheless, he was well aware that by working in the Ljubljana Opera he would be financially secure at retirement. This was one of the main reasons why he returned to Slovenia in 1932.³³

In Ljubljana, Betetto concentrated mainly on teaching while resuming his artistic

²⁸ Personal diary of Julij Betetto, seasons 1930–1932, without pagination.

²⁹ Slovenski gledališki inštitut, Fund "Julij Betetto", II. Letters, no. 185.

³⁰ Bohak, *Julij Betetto*, 36–37.

³¹ "Po daljšem presledku je vlogo zakrknjenega, izkušnega in z vsemi mazili namazanega samca Don Alfonsa pel kot gost g. Betetto. Z njegovo vlogo opera stoji ali pade. Podal je g. Betetto Alfonsa mojsterski. Presenetil nas ni vnovič samo s svojim lahkotnim, tako rekoč konverzacijskim petjem, kakor se ta prilaga Mozartovi muziki, temveč še bolj z živo, do zadnje geste premišljeno igro, pri kateri sodeluje z amuzantno obrazno mimično igro, z vsem svojim objestnim humorjem, z vsem svojim velikim rutiniranim znanjem. Bil je zato tudi predmet neskončnih ovacij, ki je še dolgo po sklepu opere ni bilo konca." Adamič, "Cosi fan tutte", 6.

³² "Po ponovitvi 'Cosi fan tutte' se g. Betetto se zopet poslovil od nas. Preverjen pa sem, da ga bo Ljubljana kmalu zopet potegnila k sebi in ga nato iz svojega naročja ne bo izlepa izpustila več. Tedaj – do skorajšnjega, končnega svidenja!" Adamič, "Cosi fan tutte", 6.

³³ Slovenski gledališki inštitut, Fund "Julij Betetto", II. Letters, nos. 186 and 189.

career by working as a permanent guest in the Ljubljana Opera, where in September 1932 he interpreted the role of Potepuh (Eng. Vagabond) in the opera *Hlapec Jernej* (Eng. *The Farmhand Jernej*) by Alfred Mahowski. While the show was dedicated to the fortieth anniversary of the Ljubljana opera theatre, the return of the great artist overshadowed the jubilee. Vilko Ukmar wrote about this event in the newspaper *Slovenec*: “Mr Betetto captured Potepuh fully and interpreted it lifelike. The return of an artist of such singing and acting skills to our opera will be of great benefit to the latter.”³⁴ All this proves that Betetto was the key figure, the champion of the Ljubljana Opera, so to speak. The highly successful premiere of *Parsifal* in April 1933, when Betetto enacted Gurnemanz, confirms this observation.³⁵ Fran Govekar regarded the premiere as a great event in the history of the Ljubljana Opera: “As conductor and theatre director, Mr Mirko Polič did a truly magnificent job with Parsifal for our opera, which will not be forgotten. With Parsifal our opera reached the highest peak so far.”³⁶ Furthermore, he pointed out Betetto: “The soloists with Betetto in the foreground – the classical singer, the artist, the Wagnerian with his polished and beautifully performed Gurnemanz – all, with no exceptions, deserve our praise and a hearty thanks.”³⁷ Quite likely, it was Betetto who was responsible for increased production of Wagner’s works in Ljubljana, even though it was known that Polič was fascinated by them as well.³⁸

In November 1933, Betetto took up the post of the head of the Državni konservatorij and consequently cut down on his work on opera stages in the following seasons but still remained an indispensable guest in his signature roles (Kecal, Lothario, Cerkovnik).³⁹ After several years of preparations of the Ljubljana ensemble, March 1936 saw the premier performance of the opera *Der Rosenkavalier* by Richard Strauss. New findings reveal that due to Betetto’s rich international career (Vienna, Munich) and experience he brought in the Slovenian culture, he should be considered one of the key figures of Slovenian opera performance in the first half of the twentieth century and one of the most notable personalities on the Slovenian music scene in this period. We deem that as an educated and well-read enthusiast, he surely contributed significantly to the success of the staging of new works that had not been performed before. The following review by Emil Adamič confirms the above-mentioned observations: “If Maestro Betetto had not come to help, *Der Rosenkavalier* in Štritof’s exemplary translation would probably still be in a drawer. Baron Ochs von Lerchenau is [...] a central figure of the comedy, and Mr Betetto knows

³⁴ “Potepuha je g. Betetto zajel močno in ga podal življenjsko. Da se je igralec takih pevskih in igralskih kvalitet vrnil v našo opero, bo slednji v velik prid.” Ukmar, “Mahovsky: Hlapec Jernej”, 2; Cvetko, *Julij Betetto*, 113.

³⁵ Personal diary of Julij Betetto, season 1932/1933, without pagination.

³⁶ “Kot dirigent in režiser je gospod Mirko Polič s ‘Parsifalom’ dognal zares vedelodelo za našo opero, ki mu ostane nepozabno. ‘Parsifal’ je višek, ki ga ni dosegla naša opera še nikoli, odkar obstoja.” Govekar, “Ogromen uspeh”, 3.

³⁷ “Solisti, vsem na čelu Betetto, ta klasični pevec umetnik wagnerijanec s svojim dovršenim, čudovito podajanim Gurnemancem, zaslužijo vsi, brez izjeme vsi, našo srčno zahvalo in pohvalo.” Govekar, “Ogromen uspeh”, 3.

³⁸ Sivec, *Dvesto leto slovenske Opere*, 25–27.

³⁹ Personal diary of Julij Betetto, seasons 1933–1940, without pagination.

Der Rosenkavalier up to the last beat from his work in the Vienna Court Opera. The theatre director and conductor Dr Švara as well as the entire opera owe a big thanks to Mr Betetto for the well-rounded, smooth and lively performance.⁴⁰ Rave reviews could be read also after the staging of Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* in April 1936. Betetto interpreted the role of Lucia's tutor Raimondo, about which Vilko Ukmar wrote: "The tutor by Mr Betetto, the head of the conservatory, whose voice is so well suited for bel canto, was noble and accomplished and he knew how to use his artistic energy to carry the listener to a world of a genuine and powerful artistic experience."⁴¹ It needs to be highlighted that Betetto's entire artistic creation was a reflection of the so-called Viennese singing school, which was evidently influenced by *bel canto*. He advocated a rounded and forward-focused sound as well as an expressive and a deeply-felt interpretation of both opera roles and art songs, which was also evident from favourable reviews.

In spite of exhausting seasons in the Ljubljana Opera, Betetto was well aware of the importance of systematic singing education in twentieth century Slovenia. His comprehensive knowledge enabled him to develop curriculum for the entire vertical alignment of singing education, which was completed in 1936.⁴² Betetto's curriculum laid groundwork for quality singing education in Slovenia and was the basis for the current singing curriculum.

Throughout his career, Betetto had recurring vocal cord problems; likewise, in the 1937/1938 season when he was forced to cancel many performances. The audience did not bear him any grudges, welcoming him warmly each time he went on stage. At the end of June 1938, he played the role of inquisitor Alvisè in Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*. Fran Govekar's review provides details of his superior singing and perfect acting:

On Saturday evening, the part of inquisitor Alvisè was first performed by Julij Betetto. With Alvisè, Betetto demonstrated once again how a strong artistic personality, combined with masterful singing and brilliant acting, appearing merely three times on stage, can be at the core of interest and success. This is a creation that I unquestionably deem perfect, a model for all those who are not sure what opera acting means. A mask of ruthless slyness and jealousy provoked by vengeance in a performance rich with Betetto's majestic gestures expressed a personality of an iron will – a black costume would have given the dark, daemon-like souls an even better framework. Unfortunately, the wardrobe department does not possess such. The fury makes the murderous judge restless, and Betetto expressed precisely this with his walk, mimics and look. Hypocritical gallantry, with which he approaches his victim, and a tiger-like sudden attack, with which he throws the victim on the floor and forces him with terrifying suggestiveness to surrender to a death sentence, were excellent and expressed brilliantly in Betetto's performance. The

⁴⁰ "Ako bi mojster Betetto ne priskočil na pomoč, bi nemara 'Kavalir z rožo' še danes s Štritofovimi vzornimi prevodom ležal v arhivu. Baron Ochs von Lerchenau je [...] centralna figura komedije in g. Betetto pozna izza svojega umetniškega delovanja na dunajski dvorni operi 'Kavalirja z rožo' do zadnje note. Nemalo se ima nemara zahvaliti za tako zaokroženo in gladko ter razgibano živo uprizoritev z režiserjem in dirigentom dr. Švaro vred cela opera g. Betettu." Adamič, "Straussov 'Kavalir z rožo'", 7.

⁴¹ "Plemenit in dograjen je bil vzgojitelj g. ravnatelja Betetta, čigar glas se belcantu tako lepo prilaga in ki je znal tudi s svojim umetniškim zanosom dvigniti dojemalca v svet pristnega in močnega umetniškega doživljanja." Ukmar, "G. Donizetti: 'Lucia di Lammermoor'", 7.

⁴² Bohak, *Julij Betetto*, 79.

role suits perfectly to his singing – his resounding, but focused voice and exemplary vocalisation express the long-developing myriad of emotions and thoughts, condensed into one single aria, that fill him and lead him to a crime. There is drama in every single tone and gesture. This is art, mature singing and acting culture, tradition of the highest school of his former Vienna and Munich Court Operas. He who cannot hear it or feel it is blind and deaf, even if he might be a singer himself – but he is merely a singer, not a dramatic opera artist. What about the rhythm? A composer writes, a conductor leads, but an artist expresses himself, in his own rhythm of emotions and through his singing. It is the rhythm that most strongly expresses a singer's ownness that most beautifully conveys a singer's individuality. Surely, to develop your own rhythm you need to possess a great deal of knowledge, taste and routine. A beginner must submit to the conductor's baton, which is not ignored even by the greatest singers. Just like Caruso can say, 'I sing!', so can Betetto. And he sings magnificently, triumphantly.⁴³

It seem that elderly Betetto continued to perform just because of the grateful audience and glowing reviews, even though in this time he focused intensively on teaching and running the conservatory.

Before the start of the 1939/1940 season, a change of the administration of the Ljubljana Opera was about to take place. Liberally oriented Mirko Polič was substituted by lawyer and musicologist, historian and aesthete of the left Christian orientation Vilko Ukmar.⁴⁴ The new administration brought some minor changes to Betetto, as for some of "his" regular parts (Tommaso, Povodni mož (Eng. The Water Man)) his former student Friderik Lupša was engaged, who proved himself in the previous three seasons with his deep voice and convincing acting. Nevertheless, Betetto still studied new, minor roles that were appropriate for his age (55) – his era as a performer was slowly coming to an end.

⁴³ "V soboto zvečer je nastopil v partiji inkvizitorja Aloisa prvič J. Betetto. Kar ustvari močna umetniška osebnost, ki združuje mojstrsko petje z izrazito igro v partiji samo treh nastopov in se ž njo postavi prav v ospredje zanimanja in uspeha, je Betetto znova pokazal z Aloisom. To je kreacija, ki jo brez pomišljanja označujem za idealno, za vzorec vsem, ki si še niso na jasnem, kaj pomenja operna dramatičnost. Betettov majestetnih kretenj bogati nastop z masko okrutne zvitosti in iz ljubosumja kipeče maščevalnosti izraža osebnost železne volje, a črni kostum bi bil temni, demonški duši dal še pravilnejši okvir. Žal, da ga garderoba nima. V besnosti nemirni sodnik morilec nima obstanka, in Betetto je to točno izrazil v svoji hoji, mimiki, gledanju. Hinavska galantnost, s katero sprejema svojo žrtev in kakor tigrovski nenadni naskok, s katerim jo vrže ob tla, ter s strašno sugestivnostjo prisili, da se vda smrtni obsodbi, sta bila v Betettovi kreaciji odlična ter uprav doživljana. Pevski se mu uloga imenitno prilega, da svojim zvonkim, a jedrovitim glasom ter vzgledno vokalizacijo izraža vso dolgo, na eno samo arijo stisnjeno skalo čustev in misli, ki ga polnijo in ženejo v zločin. Dramatičnost kipi iz vsakega tona vsake geste. To je umetnost, zrela pevska in igralska kultura, tradicija najvišje šole bivše, dunajske in monakovske dvorske opere. Kdor je ne sliši in ne občuti, je slep in gluhi, čeprav morda sam poje, a le poje in ni dramski operni ustvarjatelj. Ritem? Skladatelj piše, dirigent vodi, toda umetnik ustvarja iz sebe po lastnem ritmu čustvovanja in pevskega podajanja. V ritmu se pač najbolje izraža pevčeva svojskost, z lastnim ritmom se izliva najlepše pevčeva individualnost. Seveda je treba za samolastni ritem ogromno znanja, okusa in rutine. Začetnik se mora pokoriti dirigentski palčici, ki je niti največji pevec ne ignorira. Toda kakor Caruso tudi Betetto lahko pravi: 'Jaz pojem!' In poje krasno, zmagovito." Govekar, "Opera 'Gioconda' z Betettom", 4.

⁴⁴ Grdina, "Slovenska opera v Ljubljani", 39.

As a man of many talents, he collaborated on the foundation of the Glasbena akademija (Eng. Music Academy) in 1939. He was one of the first three named professors, in addition to Anton Trost and Stanko Premrl. From 1942 to 1945 he was the rector of the institution.⁴⁵

Duo to political turmoil in former Yugoslavia and hostile intentions of Nazi Germany, drastic changes took place in the Ljubljana Opera in the season of 1940/1941. Male members of the opera ensemble were called to arms, and the opera was consequently unable to function. After Germany had attacked Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941, the work in the drama and opera theatre was halted. Nevertheless, Puccini's *Tosca* was still staged in April.⁴⁶ In 1942, the so-called cultural silence was imposed for the majority of artists, writers and musicians; yet, it did not affect the Ljubljana Opera. The uninterrupted activity of the National Theatre provided safe haven for numerous artists and other employees and was at the same time responsible for continuous performances.⁴⁷ With his signature roles, the 57-year-old Betetto was still hailed by critics.⁴⁸ In December 1941, he interpreted Kecal, which Dragotin Cvetko considered unsurpassable: "The masterful creation of Kecal by Betetto was vocally so fresh and so deeply felt that perhaps no one imagined that this was not a real life Kecal. I am certain that it would be nearly impossible to find an artist who would capture and crystallize Kecal with greater vocal and acting depth, ease and love than Betetto."⁴⁹ Encouraging news by Fran Govekar could be read also after the opening performance of the 1941/1942 season, when Betetto took on the role of the high Priest in Verdi's *Aida*: "The line-up of soloists was great throughout, and all the parts were performed with energy and intelligence. Well-known creation of Ramfis, the high Priest, by Julij Betetto, the master of singing and acting."⁵⁰ It seems rather unusual that he managed to perform opera roles with such perfection even in the so-called mature singing period. Reasons for his exceptional vocal confidence were probably his constant care for his voice, meticulous study of opera roles and vast knowledge of quality and contemporary singing literature of the time, which he also used in his teaching.

The season of 1943/1944 was a turning point in Betetto's artistic career, as his students were gaining their acclaim: tenors Rudolf Francl and Miro Brajnik, sopranos Nada Vidmar (née Stritar) and Valerija Heybal among others. That his students would come on the stage of the Ljubljana Opera was expected and completely appropriate, as Betetto was a charismatic artist and a singing teacher who had a very direct and genuine relationship with his students. He understood their artistic potential and enabled them to sing on the

⁴⁵ Bohak, *Julij Betetto*, 64–65.

⁴⁶ Neubauer, *Ljubljanska Opera*, 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 17–23.

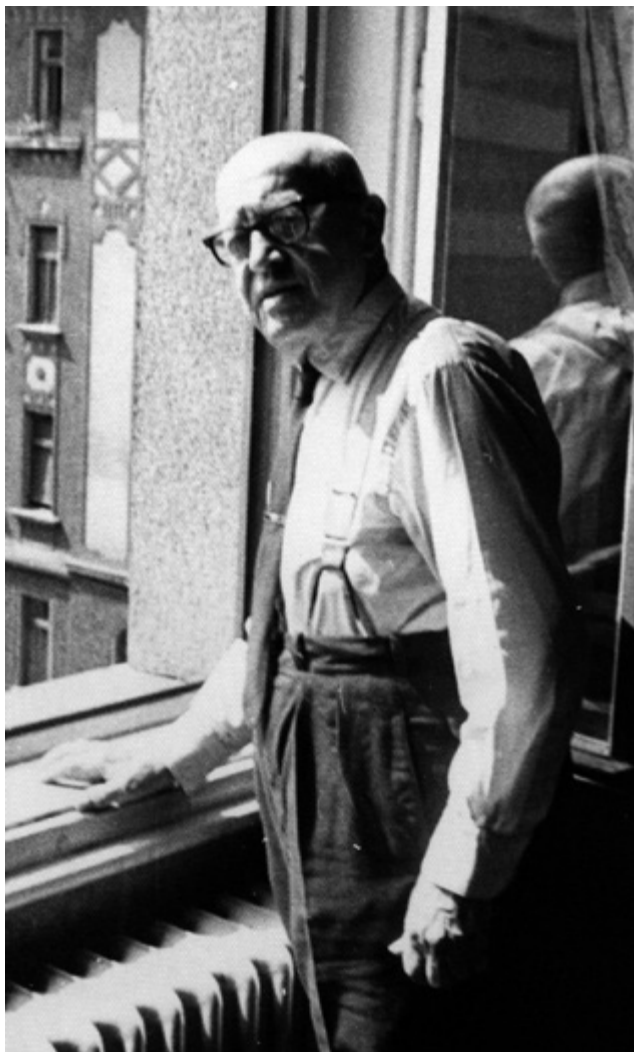
⁴⁸ Personal diary of Julij Betetto, seasons 1940–1950, without pagination

⁴⁹ "Mojstrsko stvaritev je iz Kecala oblikoval Betetto, glasovno svež in po doživljajski globini tako močan, da pač nikdo menda še pomislil ni, da ne gleda Kecala iz pravega življenja. Prepričan sem, da bi bilo težko najti kjer koli oblikovalca Kecala, ki bi to vlogo znal zajeti in izkristalizirati z večjo glasovno ter igralsko poglobitvijo, sproščenostjo in ljubeznijo kot Betetto." Cvetko, "Premiera 'Prodane neveste'", 4.

⁵⁰ "Zasedba solistov je bila vseskozi kvalitetna ter so se vse partije podajale z naponom in inteligenco. Dobro znana je impozantna kreacija velikega svečenika Ramfisa po Juliju Betettu, mojstru speva in igre." Govekar, "Verdijeva 'Aida'", 2.

Figure 2

Julij Betetto around 1950
(National and University
Library Ljubljana, with
permission)



stage of the Ljubljana Opera when they were still students. The future opera singers had an opportunity to become familiar with opera performance firsthand, what was surely an invaluable experience for them. In parallel to Betetto, bass Anton Orel, who performed leading bass and baritone roles⁵¹ in the Ljubljana Opera before and after the war, was gaining ground. Younger and more vital Orel had the advantage in selection criteria for new roles; as a consequence, elderly Betetto would not study new roles any longer.

In the first post-war season, the head of the Opera once again became Mirko Polič (until 1948), who seemed a more appropriate candidate, ideologically speaking, than Vilko Ukmar. One of more visible novelties was a rejuvenated opera ensemble with

⁵¹ Samec, *Slovenski gledališki leksikon*, 485.

numerous Betetto's students – such as baritone Samo Smerkolj, bass Ladko Korošec and the aforementioned Francl and Brajnik. We need to point out that Betetto taught most of the soloists of the Ljubljana Opera who worked before or after the World War II. An artistic career can indeed be an excellent foundation for successful and quality teaching and its universally important mission.

In the second half of the 1940s, the number of Julij Betetto's shows gradually decreased. In the season 1947/1948, in celebration the 45th anniversary of his career, he enacted the role of Rocco in Beethoven's *Fidelio*.⁵² The Ljubljana Opera was flourishing in the post-war years and became a popular meeting place – to some for their sincere interest and fulfilment of artistic desires, and to others as a form of affiliation to the elite.⁵³

In the 1940s and especially in the 1950s, Betetto focused even more intensely on teaching. In January 1946 the Music Academy was renamed Akademija za glasbo (Eng. Academy of Music), and this was where Betetto worked until his retirement in 1962 as a head of the department and full professor. He was the rector of the institution from 1947 to 1950 and from 1957 to 1962.⁵⁴ One of the peaks of his artistic works in the 1950s was the celebration of the 50th anniversary of his artistic career in the 1953/1954 season. The Opera organized a jubilee performance for him, Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, in which he enacted Don Basilio. The audience gave him ovations, not knowing that it was his last performance. A few days later, the Opera administration led by Dr Valens Vodušek sent him the letter saying he was not needed any longer.⁵⁵ The main reason was Betetto's personal dispute with the Opera administration. It needs to be pointed out that the artist was sixty-nine years old and could not be compared with fresh voices of younger soloists anymore; nevertheless, it seems rather inappropriate to dismiss someone by letter after fifty years of excellent and successful work.⁵⁶ In such manner he completely stopped performing in 1954, ended his artistic career and focused entirely on teaching.⁵⁷

Bass Julij Betetto, a singer of tremendous quality and sense for stage movement, left an indelible mark in the history of the Ljubljana Opera. A cosmopolitan, yet at heart belonging to his home stage, achieved success after success wherever he appeared. He was a meticulous, a successful and, in many ways, an unsurpassed interpreter till this day and the favourite of the audience and critics alike, both home and abroad. Over years, he gradually developed and systematically expanded his bass repertoire – from smaller to larger, leading roles, written for *basso cantante* and *seriöser Bass*; in addition, he successfully interpreted Wagnerian and *buffo* roles. He brought German singing culture to his home stages and often collaborated in the direction of performances after a model from the Vienna Court Opera. His vast experience on stage helped him develop his own methods of teaching, which, considering the success of his students, proved modern and comparable to those used across Europe. Many of his best students, among them several

⁵² Personal diary of Julij Betetto, seasons 1940–1950, without pagination.

⁵³ Grdina, "Slovenska opera v Ljubljani", 45–48.

⁵⁴ Bohak, *Julij Betetto*, 66.

⁵⁵ Ukmar, *Srečanja*, 108 and 126.

⁵⁶ Bohak, *Julij Betetto*, 49.

⁵⁷ Personal diary of Julij Betetto, seasons 1953/1954, without pagination.

from other parts of former Yugoslavia, had glittering opera or concert careers. For this reason, not surprisingly, only few of them worked as teachers. As a highly respected artist with an outstanding voice, rich knowledge and invaluable experience he had a profound influence on the development of the Slovenian opera scene and helped close the gap to more developed European centres of that time. Moreover, he left an important mark as a teacher and manager of music education in Slovenia, laying foundations for systematic singing education in the entire vertical alignment and setting standards comparable to those of notable European learning institutions.

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UMETNIŠKO DELOVANJE BASISTA JULIJA BETETTA V LJUBLJANSKI OPERI

Povzetek

Basist Julij Betetto (1885–1963) je s pevskim talentom, izrednim smislom za odrski gib in trdo voljo za delo pustil neizbrisen pečat v zgodovini delovanja ljubljanske opere. Kljub bogati in uspešni karieri je pri 37 letih zapustil dunajsko dvorno opero in se leta 1922 vrnil v Ljubljano, kar se zdi nenavadno. Kot človek izrazitih nazorov, pri katerih je izstopal domovinski čut, se je zagotovo zavedal provincialnosti slovenskega prostora, pomanjkljivosti sistematičnega glasbenega izobraževanja in dokaj skromne ravni ljubljanske operne hiše. Žrtvoval je lastno kariero, da bi s svojim znanjem vplival na kvalitetnejše delovanje Talijinega hrama, in se zadovoljil z delovanjem v majhni Ljubljani. Gotovo je čutil poklicanost umetniškemu in pedagoškemu delu na domačih tleh, kjer je v nadaljnjih desetletjih s pevskim znanjem ter z odrskimi izkušnjami, pridobljenimi na Dunaju, pomembno sooblikoval slovenski umetniški in izobraževalni prostor.

Bettetova vrnitev je za ljubljansko opero pomenila začetek novega razvojnega obdobja. Basist evropskega kova je z bogatimi izkušnjami korenito pripomogel k dvigu kvalitete uprizorjanja opernih predstav, ne samo s pevskega vidika, ampak tudi režijskega, saj je marsikdaj predstavo sooblikoval v smislu, kot so počeli na Dunaju. Konec decembra 1924 je na povabilo odbora Glasbene matice pričel delovati tudi kot pevski pedagog na tej ustanovi ter s svojo prepoznavnostjo in zavidanja vredno mednarodno kariero vplival na strmi vzpon zanimanja za pouk solopetja v 20. letih 20. stoletja in tudi kasneje.

Čeprav izredno predan pedagoškemu poklicu, je bil v prvi vrsti umetnik. Kljub pogostim težavam z glasilkami je bilo njegovo delovanje na ljubljanskem odru zelo plodovito. Svetovljan, a v srcu zapisan domačemu odru, je nizal uspeh za uspehom. Bil je ljubljenec občinstva in kritike tako doma kot na tujem. Vse svoje življenje je bil predan odrskemu nastopanju, med drugim zato, da bi povzdignil ljubljansko opero in ne nazadnje slovensko gledališko in pevsko kulturo na primerljivo mednarodno raven. Z leti je operne vloge nadgrajeval in svoj basovski repertoar sistematično širil, od manjših do večjih in glavnih vlog, pisanih za *basso cantante* oz. lirični in seriozni bas, uspešno pa je poustvarjal tudi wagnerjanske in buffo vloge.

Ob zaključku svoje umetniške kariere leta 1954 je vse svoje znanje in izkušnje usmeril v pedagoško delo. Iz bogate umetniške poustvarjalne prakse je izpeljal lastne metode poučevanja, ki so se, glede na poustvarjalne uspehe njegovih učencev, izkazale za sodobne ter povsem primerljive z načini poučevanja v širšem evropskem prostoru njegovega časa. Na podlagi širokega znanja je kot ravnatelj Državnega konservatorija in pevski pedagog osnoval učne načrte za celotno vertikalo solopevskega izobraževanja; ti so pravzaprav pomembno ustoličili smernice kakovostnega solopevskega izobraževanja v slovenskem prostoru. Na podlagi le-teh so bili zasnovani tudi aktualni učni načrti za pouk solopetja. Izšolal oz. pevsko izpopolnil je večino solistov ljubljanske opere, delujočih pred 2. svetovno vojno oz. po njej, med katerimi so bili tudi številni iz drugih delov bivše

Jugoslavije. Le-ti so zgradili bogate operne in/ali koncertne umetniške kariere, le redki pa so se udejstvovali kot pedagogi.

Julij Betetto sodi s svojo bogato domačo in mednarodno umetniško kariero ter z izkušnjami, ki jih je prinesel v slovenski kulturni prostor, med osrednje osebnosti slovenske operne poustvarjalnosti 1. polovice 20. stoletja. Kot spoštovan umetnik je s svojim izjemnim glasom, z bogatim znanjem in neprecenljivimi izkušnjami odločilno vplival na dvig ravni slovenske operne scene in njeno približevanje razvitejšim sredinam tedanje Evrope. Prav tako je pomembno sled zapustil tudi kot pedagog in organizator glasbenega šolstva na Slovenskem, saj je postavil temelje sistematičnega poučevanja solopetja v celotni vertikalni izobraževanja ter visoka merila, ki so povsem primerljiva s pomembnimi evropskimi študijskimi ustanovami.