

Mazepa Mania

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The story of the legendary Hetman reaches into the collective imagination of Western culture

This March, music performances in three North American cities brought one of the great heroes of Ukrainian history, Hetman Ivan Mazepa, to the fore.

Were three productions focusing on Mazepa in one month simply a coincidence, I wondered? What are the reasons for the recent interest in Mazepa?

The first of the recent concerts to take place was the Metropolitan Opera production of Tchaikovsky's *Mazeppa* (the Russian spelling). The opera, based on Pushkin's poem about Mazepa, got music critics buzzing and writing about the charismatic 17th-century Hetman, and Ukrainian history. Tchaikovsky's "epic nationalist drama" as Opera News magazine called it received not only a run in New York for almost a full month, but was also heard on the radio on March 18 as part of the popular and venerable Live at the Met broadcast series.

Then, towards the end of the month, two other concerts featuring works focusing on Mazepa took place. Toronto's Opera in Concert presented an in-concert version of Tchaikovsky's opera as part of its regular season lineup on March 26. On the same day in Winnipeg, the Centre for Ukrainian Canadian Studies at the University of Manitoba put on a concert featuring the North American premiere of the 1862 cantata, *Mazeppa*, by Irish composer Michael Balfe.

"The Centre for Ukrainian Studies at the University of Manitoba is 25 years old, and we wanted to have a celebration to mark the anniversary, and didn't want to have the usual banquet or lecture. So, we came upon the idea of a concert based on archival material," says Denis Hlynka, the director of the centre and a Mazepa enthusiast.

Hlynka has been researching references to Mazepa found in North American popular culture for years. He found the libretto for the Balfe cantata in a box of archival materials someone had sent to him.

When Hlynka showed the libretto to Henry Engbrecht, a well-known music professor and conductor at the University of Manitoba, and suggested a performance of the cantata, Engbrecht was keen to take part, says Hlynka.

At the concert, presented by the centre with the assistance of the St. Andrew's College and the university's faculty of music, the *Mazeppa* cantata, which was written for female voices, was sung by the University of Manitoba Women's Choir. (The other half of the concert featured rare archival choral song arrangements of Olexander Koshetz, drawn

from a variety of cultures, including French-Canadian, Scottish and Hawaiian, performed by the Olexander Koshetz Choir.)

With music reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, the cantata tells the story of the young and vibrant Mazepa in words written by librettist Jessica Rankin. The finale is an anthem. Its words: “Long live Mazepa, the ruler of our choice, we bid you join with heart and hand in one glad shout rejoice. Friend or foe has never known a heart so bold and free, we choose thee brave Mazepa, our lord and king to be.”

In the final line, “His charmed life was spared to be our nation’s guiding light, long live Mazepa!” Parallels can be made between Mazepa and the role of Victor Yushchenko during the Orange Revolution says Hlynka.

Ivan Mazepa was born on March 20, 1639, near Bila Tserkva to a noble family. Thanks to the connections of his father, who was an otaman of the Bila Tsevk regiment and a military envoy, the young Ivan was accepted as a page into the court of King Jan Casimir of Poland in Warsaw. While in service as a page he was sent to Holland for military studies and later visited Germany, Italy and France.

Back in Warsaw he served as a royal courtier and was sent on diplomatic missions.

According to legend, Mazepa allegedly had an affair with the wife of a count who had him stripped and tied naked to the back of a wild horse, which was released into the steppes. The horse, with Mazepa still on his back, was chased by wolves and hounded by vultures. Finally, as the romantic story has it, Mazepa was found by a group of Zaprozhian Kozaks, who nursed him back to life. He joined their ranks and ultimately became their leader and the Hetman of Ukraine.

Another legend also focuses on Mazepa’s amorous conquests. It is said that the elderly Mazepa fell in love with his goddaughter, Maria, and made plans to marry her against the wishes of her father, his friend, Kochubei. It is on this story that the Russian poet, Pushkin, based his literary work. Tchaikovsky, in turn, based his opera’s libretto on Pushkin’s poem.

History books maintain, however, that in 1663, Mazepa returned from Poland to Ukraine to help his ailing father. Soon after, Mazepa succeeded him as the hereditary cupbearer of Chernihiv. Ivan took part in and served in various Kozak campaigns and was elected Hetman in 1667.

During Mazepa’s reign, Ukraine’s economy grew and Ukrainian scholarship, art, architecture and literature flourished as a result of his patronage.

A supporter of a pan-Ukrainian state, Mazepa aimed to unite all Ukrainian territories in a unitary state. Though at first he supported Russia’s wars with Turkey and the Crimean Khanate, Mazepa later formed an alliance with the King of Sweden. Mazepa’s forces fought together with the Swedes in a war against Russia in 1708, but they were defeated.

Seen as a symbol of Ukrainian independence, Mazepa was vilified by both Russian and Soviet propagandists and historians.

It is clear why Mazepa has become a Ukrainian hero. But, he also captured the imaginations of many European Romantic artists. Among them are composer Franz Liszt, French writers Voltaire and Victor Hugo, painter Eugene Delacroix and poet Lord Byron.

“People are always searching for heroes who have survived superhuman tests. Byron saw this in Mazepa,” says Ukrainian-British opera singer Pavlo Hunka explaining what the Ukrainian historical figure’s appeal was to the Romantics.

Hunka too admits to having a fascination with Mazepa. He asserts that Mazepa is a character that artists are inspired by because his legendary story represents for people a connection with the emotions. “There is too little emotion in the world today...People love free spirits, although most dare not to be so,” says Hunka.

Under Hunka’s artistic direction, The Bulava Chorus in England presented a concert featuring a musical dramatisation of Lord Byron’s epic poem *Mazepa*.

Artists are attracted to the “idea [in Mazepa’s story] that you can rise from nothing to everything,” adds Winnipeg’s Hlynka.

In Ukraine, film director Yuri Illienko’s wildly surreal film, *A Prayer for Hetman Mazepa*, got mixed reviews when it was released in 2002, but it contributed to the discourse on and interest in the Hetman.

Denis Hlynka says that the recent flurry of interest in Mazepa in Ukraine and Western countries is in part a result of the Orange Revolution, which spawned an interest in Ukraine generally.

He also identifies three other factors. The current archeological excavations in Baturyn, in Ukraine, where Mazepa is supposedly buried are creating renewed excitement. Ukraine’s independence in 1991 and the subsequent drive to identify galvanizing national heroes is another factor.

Thirdly, in North America, the Kirov Opera contributed to the interest in Mazepa when they brought over their lavish production of Tchaikovsky’s *Mazeppa* to New York in 1998. The hitherto little-known opera—and the history of its title character—began to get significant attention in the classical music community.

The interest in Mazepa in North America is, however, a revival and not a discovery. Hlynka points out that as early as the 1860 to 1880s, the legendary story in which Mazepa was tied to a horse—was featured in many theatrical and circus productions. “The story of Mazepa was the most often performed play in the American west,” says Hlynka.

In fact, in the 1950s movie *High Noon* with Gary Cooper, there is one scene where a poster advertising a *Mazepa* theatrical production can be seen. “As a kid who liked cowboy movies, I was intrigued,” says Hlynka.

Hlynka’s early curiosity about why the character he knew from Ukrainian history was in an American cowboy movie developed into a continuing exploration into Mazepa.

The material on the subject is plentiful. References to and knowledge of Mazepa in Canada, says Hlynka, preceded the arrival of the first Ukrainian immigrants. For example, in the 1880s, there was a ferry that traveled between Toronto and Hamilton. In Alberta, there’s a town called Mazeppa founded by a fan of Lord Byron’s poetry in the early 1900s.

Mazepa mania, it seems, goes back far into history, both in Ukraine and beyond its borders. The reach of the story of Mazepa goes deep into the collective imagination of Western culture. Says Hlynka: “Mazepa’s story is European story...a world story.”

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