Halka: Transfigurations of Polish Romantic Nationalism

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My thesis chronicles the strange career of Stanisław Moniuszko’s opera “Halka” documenting the transfigurations of Polish romantic nationalism through the Halka narrative as it adapted and responded to political and social aspects of life in Poland and the U.S. Midwest. While “Halka” has long been regarded as the most important operatic expression of Polish nationalism, my thesis is the first to explore the transformations of this national configuration in the Polish-American community, by recovering the lost story of Halka’s U.S. performances. Before exploring “Halka” in its transatlantic formulation, I must first set the groundwork by analyzing the narrative of Halka through its development in mid-nineteenth century Poland. The Halka narrative was a vehicle for romantic nationalism, from Wolski’s narrative poem to Moniuszko’s opera, and eventually to the Polish émigré community of Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the 1920s.

Romantic Nationalism in Mid-19th Century Poland

The particular configurations of romantic nationalism in Polish narratives were under distinct pressure by the imperial censors of the Russian, Prussian, and Austrian partitioning powers. Composer Stanisław Moniuszko (1819-1872) and poet Włodzimierz Wolski (1824-1882) expressed Polish romantic nationalism through the story of Halka in Moniuszko’s opera “Halka” (1847) and in Wolski’s narrative poem Halka (1846) on which the opera is based. Emerging in the second half of Polish romanticism and based on the 1846 Peasant Rebellion, Wolski’s poem focuses on the poisonous tension between the peasants and landowning nobles. In “Halka” the opera, Moniuszko’s compositional choices paired with Wolski’s libretto emphasize a national identity rooted in folk...
traditions while maintaining the element of social tension. The secret to the success of
Moniuszko’s opera lies in the emphasis on the Polish highlander culture, drawing on its
deeply rooted traditions and lack of immediate political relevance to help the opera pass
censorship and gain popularity as “the Polish national opera” (Krawczykowski 26).

The creation of the story of Halka took place in a politically and socially
oppressed Poland, one that was both externally pressured and internally divided.
Beginning in the late 18th century, Poland had undergone the three partitions of 1773,
1793, and 1795 by Russia, Prussia, and Austria. In God’s Playground: A History of
Poland, Norman Davies describes the perception of partitioned Poland:

During the five or six generations when it had no concrete existence,
‘Poland’, as an abstraction, could be remembered from the past, or aspired to
for the future, but only imagined in the present. It had not merely been
broken into three parts, it had been vaporized, transposed into thin air,
fragmented into millions of invisible particles. (Davies 7-8)

Poland’s identity could best be described through the arts, setting up a challenge for
Moniuszko and Wolski, the late Polish romantics who sought to express the origins of the
Polish nation while also portraying the reality of internal class conflict. The structure of
class and regional categorization of Poles in the variants of Halka is focused on the class
distinction between the szlachta (nobility or gentry) and the lud (non-nobles). These
‘non-nobles’ were in turn comprised of several groups. The stories of Halka refer to the
chłopi (peasant-serfs) or górale (Polish highlanders). The chłopi had no access to
education, were especially poor in the Austrian Galicia region of partitioned Poland, and
worked as laborers on the szlachta’s estates. The szlachta had access to education,
notably education abroad, and had the option of living largely undisturbed by the partitioning governments as long as they were interested in living in accordance with the government’s ideals. During the time of partitioned Poland, the lud were those who belonged to groups outside of the szlachta; they were members of the lower non-noble classes. The górale were Polish highlanders who largely focused, then as now, on maintaining strong traditions revolving around religion, garb, dance, and song. The górale lived in the mountainous region of Poland then occupied by Austria. Removed from the noble and peasant populations, they were not especially politically problematic. However like all non-nobles, they fell under the category of lud.

Włodzimierz Wolski was born in the small town of Pułtusk, but lived most of his life in the city of Warsaw, which at the time he wrote the narrative poem Halka in 1846 was part of the Congress Kingdom of Poland, and would remain so until it was officially absorbed into Russia in 1874. When the three partitioning powers created the Congress Kingdom of Poland at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, on paper it had “one of the most progressive constitutions of Central Europe” in the early 19th century according to Davies (Davies 309). However, in Polish it was referred to as the Kongresówka (the poor little creation of the Congress) (Davies 307), and in reality, the Russian Tsar had ultimate control and all uprisings were thwarted. The most prominent of these was the November Rising, otherwise known as the Russo-Polish war of 1831, which ended with the dissolution of many of the greater freedoms that the Poles enjoyed prior to the uprising. “Among the Poles, the defeat of the Rising caused the greatest single outburst of national feeling, and of literary activity in the nation’s history. Here was a catastrophe well matched to the talents of the Romantic generation.” (Davies 327)
Enter the poetic aspirations of Włodzimierz Wolski. In 1836, Wolski joined a group of young painters, poets, and musicians separate from traditional literary salons. Aleksander Niewiarowski chronicled their works and published them in the *Warsaw Curier* under the title “Bohemians of Warsaw” (Leśniewska 9). Wolski, known today only for his contribution to “Halka” as the librettist, was prior to the opera an avid poet and was relatively well-known in Warsaw in the 1840s when Moniuszko approached him. Wolski’s narrative poem *Halka* was based on the Peasant Uprising of 1846 in the Austrian-occupied region of Poland known as Galicia. The Austrian officers promised the peasants an end to their feudal obligations and encouraged them to turn on their masters; all of the noble’s estates were invaded and “before long, the peasant bands were offering the severed heads of their noble victims to the authorities as proof of their zeal.” (Davies 148)

Meanwhile, Stanisław Moniuszko had recently completed his musical studies in Berlin and had just moved to Wilno, a city that had been part of the Russian partition since 1795. There he was part of the emergence of intellectuals who had a new and different understanding of social relations although they were from the landed class. Though Moniuszko was born into a wealthy old Polish landowning family, his uncles managed their estates in a progressive way, actually caring about the wellbeing of the peasantry (Prosnak 9). As a young boy he lived a quiet countryside life southeast of Wilno in the small village of Ubiel, now part of Belarus. His mother taught him piano and he gained familiarity with traditional patriotic and folksongs. During his studies in Berlin in the late 1830s, Moniuszko became interested in German folk opera and the
belief that “music should serve educational purposes and help in the improvement of society.” (Prosnak 42)

Formulations of Polish Romantic Nationalism Through the Story of Halka

The origins of romantic nationalism took place in Germany with the emergence of a new concept of *das Volk* (the folk). The first opera to “discover” *das Volk* was Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute). In *Die Zauberflöte*, the peasant character Papageno is half-man/half-bird, a symbol of the “romantic mystique of *das Volk*” (Taruskin). Through his utterances, Papageno represents the origins of the human race, thus beginning the long career of the peasant in art, referred to by Richard Taruskin as a "symbol for the human race itself, differentiated by language into nations” (Taruskin). Romantic nationalists idealized peasant culture and searched for cultural and historical origins of the nation in the peasantry. In the Polish context, romantic nationalism celebrated folk traditions and asserted that the origins of the Polish nation belonged to the *lud*.

In their narratives of Halka, Wolski and Moniuszko formulate Polish romantic nationalism in ways that, despite their similarities, can be distinguished based on social and historical context, intended effect, and artistic medium. Beginning chronologically, Wolski’s narrative poem *Halka* tells the story of two mothers who seek revenge against the injustices created by class distinctions. While her son (he is nameless in the poem but is later known as Janusz in the opera) is away at war, the *szlachcianka* (noblewoman) mother uses his absence as an opportunity to get rid of his peasant fiancé Halka despite her pregnancy with his child. The *szlachcianka*’s public humiliation of the peasant girl
leads Halka to drown herself. Halka’s mother visits her daughter’s grave and wants to seek revenge, turning first to God and then to the devil, all against the wishes of Halka’s spirit. Upon the young nobleman’s return from war, Halka’s mother appears in his dream and tells him that his future wife and child are dead. She encourages the nobleman to kill his mother and then Halka’s mother rips the noblewoman’s heart out, bringing it to Halka’s grave as a sacrifice. This angers Halka’s spirit and she and her mother curse each other, but Halka ultimately forgives her.

Wolski’s *Halka* was born out of the legacy of romanticism in mid-19th century Polish poetry. Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, whose most famous works include *Dziady* (*Forefather’s Eve*) and *Pan Tadeusz* (*Mr. Thaddeus*), established the model of romanticism in Poland. He was exiled from his birthplace in the Russian-partitioned territory of Poland in 1824 and after leaving Russia in 1829 worked from abroad, like many Polish romantics. The romantic model often stressed non-rational and supernatural elements, rejecting Enlightenment discourses through the celebration of folk culture. Wolski was a “domestic” romantic, mixing Mickiewicz’s romantic supernaturalism with an emphasis on the class distinctions in Polish society. Wolski’s *Halka* circulated in Warsaw in the late 1840s, but the only copy that I have been able to locate is from *Utwory Wybrane* (*Chosen Works*), a collection of selected works by Wolski assembled by Tomasz Jodelka and published in Warsaw in 1955. There is no sustained discussion of the poem in English criticism or in Polish, as far as I have been able to tell. In her introduction to *Utwory Wybrane*, Krystyna Leśniewska mentions that Wolski’s *Halka* was “mercilessly cut apart by the censorship” (Leśniewska 22). I have not been able to locate any other references to the censorship of Wolski’s *Halka*. It can be assumed that
officials who were approved by the Russian Tsar performed the censoring in Warsaw during the time when Warsaw was part of the Russian-controlled Congress Kingdom of Poland.

Romantically Fueled Social Commentary in Wolski’s Halka

Although Wolski’s poem as presented in Utwory Wybrane is the censored version, it is still full of romantic mysticism and manages to show a conscious effort to depict class conflict and the reality of an internally divided Poland. An analysis of Halka’s mother in Urywek I (Fragment I) of the poem shows how Wolski built on romanticism to create his version of romantically fueled social commentary.

Here, Wolski pairs a romantic description of nature with the hellish, wolf-like gaze of Halka’s mother before she carries out her plan of revenge against the szlachcianka.

“Like a she-wolf when they kill her cubs” is repeated multiple times in the poem and by attributing animalistic qualities to the peasant character, the phrase reinforces the

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1 “The clouds dispersed, goldenbloody moon turned its drunken eye to the grave, reddened the cemetery grasses with blood, And saddened everything with a cover of despair. But what is this hoarse and mournful voice, What is this figure bent over the grave, With wild windblown braids of gray hair, An insane gaze, hellish, horrifying – like a she-wolf when they kill her cubs.” (my translation)
romantic nationalist view of the origins of the nation in the peasant. Despite the frequently mystical aspects of Wolski’s romanticism, he also focuses in less florid terms on the anger the peasants feel toward landowning nobles. Wolski expresses this through this passage, spoken by Halka’s mother:

Ale pani... oj. diablice.  
Wy matki morderce.  
U was bieć. jasno lice,  
Ale czarne serce.  
U was żywa. łatwa mowa  
I słodycz spojrzenia,  
Serce martwe jak grobow.  
Figura z kaniienia.  
Bądzie bies was za to prażyć,  
Będą szarpać jędze,  
Będzie zgaga ciągle żarzyć  
Za uciek i nędzę.  
Ja cię sama szarpać muszę:  
Będę cię śelgała,  
Az rozgniotę. øż z duszę  
Pisk duszy i ciała.
Wolski’s message however, is not a call for aggressive action. Upon finding out what her mother has done, Halka’s spirit tells her mother to “Go away” (144) and Halka’s mother responds by cursing Halka’s grave. An angel figure holding a child appears and calls out, “Matko, przebaczenia!” (“Mother, forgiveness!”) (146) Though it is unclear who the spirit-angel is, the call for a Mother’s forgiveness symbolically yokes Halka’s forgiveness, Halka’s call for her mother to forgive, Halka’s mother’s forgiveness of the szlachcianka, and perhaps even a call for Poland as “the motherland” to forgive its internal murderers. Through this ambiguity, Wolski points to the internal chaos of Poland as the ultimate hindrance to a unified front against the partitioning powers. Social uprisings that buy into the “divide and conquer” mentality of the partitioning powers serve no purpose other than to tear apart the Polish people. Wolski’s poem shows the thirst for revenge as strong enough to even break the bond between mother and child. Halka’s spirit as the pacifier represents Wolski’s call for a Polish nation that, despite its struggles, can learn to turn away from violent internal reactions and band together against its true oppressors.

**Compositional Choices and Social Commentary in “Halka” the Opera**

After meeting Wolski during a visit to Warsaw in 1846, Moniuszko asked him to write the libretto to an operatic "Halka" based on his poem. By 1847, “Halka” was written as an opera in two acts, and its first performance was in a private salon in Wilno on January 1, 1848 (Prosnak 88). The first staged performance was at the Wilno Theater on February 16, 1854 and “given with amateur singers and performers” (Samson). In 1856, Moniuszko expanded the opera and added highlander dances, among other
additions (Samson). The manuscript waited for several years in the office of the Warsaw theatres until 1857, “when the political atmosphere had somewhat relaxed and the opera’s theme became less objectionable to conservatives than it had been in the late forties.” (Prosnak 91) Namely, the Tsar of Russia Nicholas I, who was in power from 1825-1855, died and Alexander II took his place. Although Russia strictly implemented its three principles of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality in its partition of Poland and the Congress Kingdom of Poland, different tsars emphasized different principles. Tsar Nicholas I was very severe while Alexander II has “been pictured as a liberal ruler who through bent or necessity introduced a degree of flexibility” (Davies 84).

The opera begins with Stolnik, a very wealthy nobleman, hosting an engagement party for his daughter Zofia who has just been engaged to Janusz, the owner of the neighboring estate. Upon hearing cries from outside, Janusz investigates and finds Halka, who is now pregnant with his child. They profess their love for one another and he makes a false promise to her to see her later and returns to the party. Jontek, Halka’s childhood sweetheart who is still in love with her tries to convince her to leave the castle grounds and return home. After another confrontation with Janusz and other noblemen, Jontek finally takes Halka back to the village of highlanders. About a month later, the wedding procession comes through the village on their way to the church. Halka watches, feeling betrayed and hopeless, and thinks about setting fire to the church, but decides against it. She forgives Janusz before jumping off a cliff and drowning herself in the river. Jontek and other highlanders hear her cry out as she jumps to her death and rush out of the church, only to realize that she is already gone.
On the surface, the libretto of “Halka” has several attributes that must have been used in order to make it appear less politically divisive than Wolski’s poem. The opera is amenable to a politically neutral view of nationalism based on folk tradition. While the poem focuses on the poisonous relationship between the peasants and landowning nobles, the libretto places its emphasis on the górale (Polish highlanders) and their endearing and respected folk traditions. In the opera, Halka clearly belongs to the góral community, of which there is no mention in Wolski’s poem. Moniuszko even adds the highlander dances to the third act, presumably to further the emphasis on folk traditions. The added character of Halka’s childhood sweetheart Jontek also serves to reinforce Halka’s bond to the highlanders.

However, the element of realistic social conflict is not absent from “Halka”. Close textual analysis of the libretto and Moniuszko’s compositional choices shows how Moniuszko used dynamics (the volume of a given musical passage) to slip class commentary past the censors. The following analysis is of the song, “Co to za gwar” (What is this noise) from the end of the second act. Jontek is trying to convince Halka to leave the palace, but she continues to cry out and the male guests of the party come outside to tell them to leave. The vocal parts are: Halka, Jontek, and the male chorus of Dziemba (Stolnik’s steward) and party guests. On the surface level, this scene is simple. Halka desperately wants to go into the palace to see Janusz, Jontek urgently tries to stop her, and the nobles amid some confusion, make it known that Halka and Jontek must leave. However, what is unique about a libretto as part of a musical score is its ability to highlight aspects of the opera that could otherwise remain unnoticed in a live performance.
For example, midway through the song Halka says, “Oh to my master, to Jashko bring me now! To Jashko, our master” (107). Reading the text of Halka’s part as separate from the others makes the change from “my” master to “our” master obvious. In a live operatic performance it would be quite difficult to discern what an individual might be singing when she is singing her part at the same time as another soloist and a chorus are singing their respective parts. In this case, focusing on the change of “my” to “our” in the libretto as set to music yields some interesting observations. First, the libretto attempts to sneak in the information that even though Halka is madly in love with Janusz, he is still part of the politically and socially superior ruling class, the szlachta.

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The *lud* and *szlachta* class distinction is also enforced through Moniuszko’s setting of Wolski’s text to music and the other vocal parts. In the six measures where Halka sings the my/our master line, Moniuszko’s treatment of the chorus is revealing.

When Halka says “Oh to my master, to Jashko bring me now!” she and Jontek are the only two characters singing along to the music of the orchestra. It is the only time in the song that the chorus does not sing along with them. When Halka begins the second line, “to Jashko our master,” the chorus enters with a very loud fortissimo “Go!” This brings our attention to what follows between Jontek and Halka; he tries to persuade her to listen to him and leave, but all she keeps singing about is Jashko. Specifically, when Halka sings the word “our” (in both the English translation and original Polish) the chorus and orchestra drop down to pianissimo as the chorus sings the line “What is the plaint of

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3 The score used is a piano-vocal score published in Chicago in 1949 and translated by Halka enthusiast and producer, Anthony J. Lukaszewski. The vocal parts and Polish text are original and the piano part is meant to represent that of the orchestra.
peasant girl?” (107). This is the only time in the entire scene that the dynamics change so drastically. This excerpt shows the chorus of nobles pausing for a moment to question the situation, but then immediately returning to “Ejected you will be! Ejected you will be” (108), without resolving the issue behind Halka’s mania. The return to “Ejected you will be” is paired with a crescendo in the chorus that builds from piano to forte and cumulates with a fortissimo rendition of “Go! Be gone! Now be gone!” at the end of the song (109). The choice of having the nobles refer to Halka as a peasant girl indicates the szlachta’s mentality of thinking that everyone who was not a member of the nobility was beneath them. It does not matter that Halka is a highlander; she is referred to as a peasant because she is of a lower class.

(Moniuszko 108)
Power relationships within the ruling class can also be observed in the way Moniuszko uses the chorus throughout the song. The scene opens with only Dziemba and a few male guests along with some servants, but by the end of the scene the full chorus is on stage. Interestingly, the entrance of the rest of the chorus (105) initiates a change in attitude. Up until their entrance, the few guests on stage seem to genuinely care about the reason behind the "peasant girl"’s lament. However when the full chorus starts singing, they burst into: “Eject them! Be gone, leave this party!” (105-106). The “peasant girl" is a nuisance; she needs to leave and go home. Even if some of the nobles want to know more about Halka, the influence of the rest of their clan makes it nearly impossible to voice an opinion other than “Leave this party!” (106). Later in the song when the chorus returns to its feelings of concern for Halka, the line “What is the plaint of peasant girl” might have no other option than to be at the pianissimo dynamic level. Moniuszko could be showing that any views other than those of the ruling class were hard to express and scarcely heard. Wolski’s heavily censored and thus barely-known poem _Halka_ is an example.
In their respective stories of Halka and in joining together to create “Halka” the opera, Stanisław Moniuszko and Włodzimierz Wolski evoke the ways in which Polish romantic nationalism expressed itself through shifting notions of social and class division. Wolski’s social commentary overrules any emphasis on Polish folk traditions, but he points to national origins in the peasant culture, stressing that an ideal Polish nation would need to put its poisonous internal aggression aside. Moniuszko’s “Halka” seems to take Wolski’s advice. The focus shifts from the *chłopi-szlachta* tension and instead emphasizes strong folk traditions in the Polish highlander culture. “Halka” the
opera even suggests subtly that the entirety of the szlachta may not be doomed to always despise all peasants.

“Halka” and its Transatlantic Formulation in the American Midwest

Nearly seventy years after its first performance in Poland, “Halka” reappeared as a means to express the voice of the Polish national community across the Atlantic Ocean in the American Midwest. For purposes of length, available archival materials, and its status as the first unabridged performance of “Halka” in the U.S., I will be focusing on the Milwaukee Polish Opera Club’s 1923 production. This part of my thesis will address why a working class Polish immigrant community in Milwaukee, Wisconsin would attempt to stage a complete production of this opera and why it was so successful as indicated by its reception. I will proceed by explaining the significance of 1923 as a turning point in Polish history, the importance of góral culture, and the history of the Milwaukee Polish Opera Club, focusing on the details of the “Halka” production and its reception. As far as I am aware, there is no secondary knowledge or discussion of this production and I am basing my analysis on my interpretation of evidence that I have gathered through archival research at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries’ Archives Department made possible by a Northwestern University Undergraduate Research Grant.

Wolski’s call for a Poland that would band together against Russia, Prussia, and Austria rang true in 1918 when Poland broke from its partitioning powers and regained independence for the first time in over a century. The year of the Polish Opera Club’s “Halka” production, 1923, also represented an important time in Poland’s history and for its immigrant community so far away from home. Although Poland regained
independence in 1918, it had to uphold that independence throughout six wars, culminating in 1921 with the Soviet War (Davies 394). Finally undisturbed, the Poland of 1923 was celebrating its independence and working to build itself back up as a country. Even though Poland had been torn apart politically, the partitioning powers were never successful in destroying Polish culture. Celebrating the resilience of Polish culture and the existence of an independent Poland was an enormous source of pride for the Polish community. In Milwaukee’s Polish Fine Arts Club papers, an essay titled “Polish People: Their Customs, Habits, Religion, and Classes” stresses that although “the name Poland presents only fragmentary pictures and misleading mirages to many people in this country,” the resilience of Polish people expressed through their traditions of folk dance and song along with religious faith “has made it possible for Poland to endure through all these centuries of struggle and persecution” (Polish). To these people, the góral traditions foregrounded in “Halka” were likely a showcase of these resilient Polish traditions.

In the 1880’s, the górale began to immigrate to the U.S. It is estimated that one out of every three Polish immigrants returned to their homeland (Gromada 66). Those who stayed worked in stockyards, slaughterhouses, iron foundries, coalmines, steel mills, textile mills, and rubber factories across the Midwest and Northeast. They tirelessly worked long hours to earn as much money as possible, but made a point of getting together to sing góral songs, listen to góral music, and dance (Gromada 66). By the early 1900’s, góral social gatherings moved from tiny flats to local taverns, owned and operated by górale (Gromada 67). These taverns also became the backdrop for weddings, christenings, and Mardi Gras celebrations, arranging for góral musicians and
dancers to perform. Before the 1910’s, the górale were afraid of being laughed at for wearing their costumes in public. The turning point was when a young góral arrived to Chicago fully clad in his góral costume and “became something of a celebrity, photographed everywhere with his picture appearing in newspapers” (Gromada 67). Shortly after, the górale began importing their costumes from Poland and organizing formal highlander music and dance groups to perform publicly (Gromada 67).

Regardless of their regional background, the working class Polish immigrants in Milwaukee likely shared a similar experience to that of the immigrant góral community. However, they decided to take the expression of Polish culture much further when they decided to stage a national Polish opera as opposed to smaller scale evening of Polish song and dance, for example. Their decision to stage “Halka” endorses it as an expression of Polish romantic nationalism and as a celebration of Polish culture through góral traditions.

The Polish Opera Club of Milwaukee staged Moniuszko’s “Halka” in May of 1923 at the Pabst Theater (O Jednym). Hailed by local Polish and American critics and journalists alike, the May 1923 production led to an October performance in Chicago of the same year, a 1925 film, and eventually to another Chicago revival of “Halka” in 1949 in English translation. Milwaukee’s Polish Opera Club formed in 1920, only three years before the production of “Halka”. Encouraged by his pastor at St. Vincent de Paul’s Church in Milwaukee, church organist and choir director, John C. Landowski (1879-1961) created a “musical organization [that] would give Milwaukee Polish young people recreation, education, and solidarity” (Biographical sketch). Landowski did not hesitate to take on the extra commitment, and began assembling the Polish Opera Club by
traveling to various Polish parochial choruses and church choirs, “picking out a voice here and there which, however rough, held essence worth training” (Pettibone). Over the course of the three years leading up to the “Halka” production, the Opera Club performed Michael William Balfe’s “The Bohemian Girl”, Friedrich von Flotow’s “Martha”, and Giuseppe Verdi’s “Il Trovatore”. Landowski and the Opera Club were the first to produce “Halka” in the United States in its entirety without cutting or simplification (Milwaukee).

With this idea in mind, the preparation for rehearsals turned out not to be an easy task, as the orchestral music sent from Warsaw had missing parts. In order to make usable orchestral scores, Landowski had to rewrite approximately 4,000 pages of music (Biographical sketch). The Opera Club’s costumes for the production were all handmade with the utmost attention to detail (Historia). According to a newspaper article

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4 Cast of May 13-17, 1923 Polish Opera Club production of “Halka” with Rose Saskowski in title role (seated extreme left); Anton Lukaszewski as Jontek (seated to the right of Saskowski)
anticipating the Chicago performance of “Halka”, “every cent taken in for tickets was used to pay expenses, which ran high, what with really good costumes and scenery and a paid orchestra” (Milwaukee). As the singers and actors were all volunteer amateur performers, the Opera Club’s income was also used to pay for voice lessons for the leading singers. Ticket sales “generally more than paid expenses” (Milwaukee).

**Shopgirl Turned Opera Singer**

The Polish Opera Club’s production of “Halka” would not have been possible without the dedication of its members. Both musical director John C. Landowski and stage director Anthony J. Lukaszewski (1882-1956), who was also an actor and editor of a Milwaukee Polish newspaper, gave selflessly without pay. Assembling from church choirs across Milwaukee, it is important to note (as most of the newspaper reviews and articles did) that these were all amateur singers and actors with blue-collar jobs during the day and strenuous rehearsal schedules at night. An article by Harriet N. Pettibone from June 3, 1923 entitled, “Butcher, Baker and Candlestick Maker Go In for Grand Opera as Side Line” highlights the lives of these working class people turned opera stars. The subheading of the article reads, “Musical Critics Astonished by Remarkable Success of Milwaukee Polish Working People in Difficult Operatic Roles – Tinsmith and Shopgirl Rival Scotti and Galli Curci” (Pettibone). Soprano Emilia Klebanski’s (who played Zofia) “coloratura soprano—a real Galli Curci voice, predict[ed] Mr. Landowski, when it is trained and its velvety softness strengthened by stage experience—[was] employed eight hours every day saying ‘Fifteen cents a yard.’ And ‘These Russian lines make you look slender, ma’am,’ in a department store on Mitchell Street” (Pettibone). Leading
lady Rosa Saskowska had similar astounding skill, “capable of making a name for herself could she find an opportunity to study, [sat] silently as a book binder in a downtown print shop” (Pettibone). Eugene Stachowiak, who played Janusz, would close the windows of his truck so he could practice his part on the way from work to rehearsal, sometimes forgetting to wipe the smut off his face (Pettibone). The dedication of the working class to this production confirms the status of “Halka”, an opera that emerged out of Polish romantic nationalism, as the best expression of Polish nationhood. Moniuszko’s emphasis on the uniting factor of cultural traditions worked even in this unexpected context of working class Polish immigrants in Milwaukee.
Pettibone’s article also suggests an answer to “How is it accomplished?”; a question she posed to Landowski and Lukaszewski in search of an reason behind the professional caliber of their amateur production. According to Pettibone, in addition to Poles being “innate lovers of music”, “there is also a strong nationalistic feeling among Poles, an ambition to have the name of their country stand high, which, in view of their musical tendencies, naturally takes this form of expression. So much is music a part of their nature that they are willing to undergo almost any sacrifice. It keeps them working at rehearsals for six or seven months a year” (O Jednym). The “History of the Polish Opera Club” section of the 1923 “Halka” program notes confirms the performers’ nationalistic motivations. The program notes pride the Polish Opera Club for being equipped enough to stage the “national opera of Poland” and celebrate the use of a professional orchestra and attention to detail necessary to perform “Halka” in the “way this eternal work of Moniuszko deserves. Nowhere else in the entire country is amateur theatre produced on such a large scale, as in our dairyland” (Historia).

Although the idea of Poles as nationalistic lovers of music might partially explain the unwavering commitment of Polish immigrants to stage a professional-quality production of “Halka” for the first time in the U.S., it only represents a hint at why the amateur production was so successful. “Halka” was the Polish Opera Club’s first staging of a Polish opera, and it is no coincidence that Landowski decided to produce it at a time when Poland was reestablishing itself as a liberated country. The unwavering

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5 The Sentinel Sunday Magazine, “Butcher, Baker and Candlestick Maker Go In for Grand Opera as Side Line” by Harriet Pettibone; Eugene Stachowiak, baritone also known as “Gene the tinsmith” with Zofia, sung by Emilie Klebanski
commitment of the amateur performers to produce “Halka” suggests that they viewed it as an expression of the enduring sense of Polish identity. Their desire to celebrate and uphold Polish traditions found a home in Moniuszko’s “Halka” and an outlet through the opera’s emphasis on góral culture. This photograph of the 1923 Milwaukee Polish Opera Club production of “Halka” shows authentic góral costumes, from the men’s embroidered wool pants and capes to the women’s flowered skirts and coral bead necklaces (Piskorz-Branekova 197-201). Clearly, the visual aspects of the operatic production were just as important as the libretto and music. In addition to showing that góral culture is part of the larger Polish culture, the Opera Club’s production emphasizes the idea that Polish national identity originated in Polish folk culture.
The Opera Club’s decision to produce “Halka” on such a grand scale shows that they were serious about the existence of Polish high culture and also implies that they wanted to bring their national identity to a larger stage than the local church or tavern. An operatic production, not to mention a shockingly successful one, would have the ability to reach past the local community, which it clearly did.

An article about Lukaszewski describes him as passionate about amateur theater and states that Lukaszewski’s fascination with “Halka” was more than just a hobby; it was a “passionate patriotic fervor” (O Jednym). According to a visitor’s account of one of the Opera Club’s rehearsals, Lukaszewski ordered the amateur actors about “with the cut finality of a dictator…but there was no sign of that usual attitude of amateurs of doing the directors a favor by coming. Each member of the club seemed jealous of belonging to it and willingly adhered to the strictest discipline as if only too glad of the opportunity for serious development” (Pettibone). This goal of perfecting the production likely arose from the goal of making it artistically impressive so that it would reach as many people as possible. This was the Polish immigrant community’s opportunity to organize a far-reaching propagation of Polish culture. Their remarkable dedication, attention to detail in the costuming, and the decision to hire a professional orchestra on a tight budget show that they were serious about proving the existence of high art in Poland and that it could have an impact in the United States.

Hats Off to Polish Milwaukee!

6 Highlander (góral) village scene from May 1923 Milwaukee Polish Opera Club production of “Halka”
Both Polish newspaper articles and reviews written by English speakers in non-Polish publications spoke very highly of the production that left critics in awe of the capabilities of the working class amateur performers and more broadly, of the Polish community in Milwaukee and the Midwest. A review by well-known music critic Herman Devries from the Chicago Evening American of the same production in Chicago praises the performers as giving “all they have of enthusiasm and talent to the interpretation—and their best is very good—more than that, excellent, legitimate song and legitimate theater—the work of zeal and time as well as ability.” He also refers to the production as “an example for us Americans. Hats off to Polish Milwaukee!” (Devries). The Chicago performance was sold out and additional seats had to be placed in the boxes (Devries). Pettibone’s article also stresses the success of the production, calling it a “grand opera that not only astonished the city’s musical critics but brought Polish leaders of the musical world from Chicago and elsewhere looking to Milwaukee to scoff, but leaving with praise on their lips: ‘We want to thank Milwaukee for showing us what Poles in this country can do!’” (Pettibone). A later 1927 article in a Polish publication continues to praise the Opera Club, stating that the Polish community of Milwaukee can be proud that they have such a group (Polski). A Polish publication’s article about Lukaszewski clarifies any discrepancies in reviews of the opera, noting that American music critics were amazed at the level of performance of the amateurs, and that only some of his fellow Poles thought it could be better, but that is because Lukaszewski worked at a competing newspaper (O Jednym). Perhaps it is to be expected, but none of these negative reviews exist in the Polish Opera Club, Lukaszewski, or Landowski archival collections.
The astonishment and enthusiasm in these reviews paired with the subsequent revivals of “Halka” in the Midwest is proof that the Polish Opera Club’s production of “Halka” was as successful as they hoped it would be. The decision to stage a “Polish national opera” by a late romantic composer is only a fraction of the importance of the opera to the Polish immigrant community. Milwaukee’s production of “Halka” followed Wolski’s advice to focus on internal unification and furthered Moniuszko’s emphasis on Polish folk tradition. Both Wolski’s poem and Moniuszko’s opera end tragically, reflecting a history of internal class conflict and its impending consequences. The Polish immigrants of Milwaukee took what had been a tragic opera during the time of partitioned Poland and turned it into a triumphant expression of Polish resilient identity at a turning point in Polish national history.


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