

**OPERA AS SOCIAL MANIFEST:  
MADLENA ZEPTER'S PRIVATE OPERA HOUSE AND  
THEATRE AS CORPORATE GIFT TO THE SERBIAN NATION**

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**Abstract.** This article investigates the social and cultural facets of a very unusual operatic project from Belgrade, Serbia, related to the constitution of the Opera and Theatre Madlenianum, a private opera house officially founded in 1997 and opened in 2005 by Madlena Zepter as its single patron and donor. Here we discuss the reasons why a rich individual would build, hold and run her own opera house and theatre in these times when the tradition of such acts of giving by wealthy and powerful people seems to be more or less a far distant echo of previous centuries, if not almost an entirely extinct cultural practice. To better understand this contemporary operatic endowment, a rough historical outline of opera patronage throughout the centuries will be offered. Besides patronage studies, incorporated with the significant definitional contributions of some sociologists, historians, economists and musicologists, this interpretation brings into discussion certain interesting academic output, initially the anthropological about *gastarbeiters* and elites, and further on from the vast interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field of gift theory, represented here through its two fundamental conceptual aporias, reciprocity and generosity. The conclusion which is made is that Madlena Zepter's Madlenianum is a parasitical gift generating, paradoxically, her person of interests (reciprocity) through her philanthropic performances of disinterestedness for the Serbian nation (generosity), and by mixing these two contrasting identities successfully transforming economic capital into social, cultural and symbolic capital. More concretely, opera is used here as a personalised social manifest and as an ultimately visible seal on one's philanthropy, lifestyle and money.

**Keywords:** opera, patronage, gift, Belgrade, Madlenianum, Madlena Zepter

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### **1. Preparation**

In the heart of the old city of Zemun, a historical Serbian town along the Danube, today just one of the municipalities which constitute the extended city of Belgrade, there is the Opera and Theatre Madlenianum, promoted by its owner, as well as by Serbian and international media as “the first privately owned opera and

theatre company both in Serbia and in South-Eastern Europe”, “the first private opera house in Europe since the Second World War” (for instance, Glyndebourne was founded in 1934), “the first private opera in the Balkans entirely founded and endowed by a single person” or “the private opera house with its sole donor”. These highly glorifying slogans, which attract attention even more because they come from an operatic periphery of Europe, produce an even greater impression when we get deeper into the social context in which such an unusual and almost unreal project was carried out only recently. The Madlenianum was officially founded in 1997 by Madlena Zepter, born Horvat and married Janković, the wife of Milan Janković, who later changed his name to Philip Zepter due to the internalisation of his big business. Philip Zepter is a Serbian businessman and entrepreneur who is considered one of the richest Serbs in the world and one of the leading billionaires of the Balkans. He founded *Zepter International* in Austria, a family firm which has grown over time into an international corporation focusing on the production and sale of high-quality consumer products in kitchenware, cosmetics, medicine, jewellery, watchmaking etc. The Zepters own many luxurious villas and mansions; among them Villa in Cap Martine near Monte Carlo, one of the most splendid villas along the coast of the French Riviera which was in the past also owned by the Austrian Empress Sissy and the Egyptian King Faruk. They also own a spacious mansion in Paris with a meaningful historical connection as it belonged in the past to the Serbian royal Karadjordjević family (Karli 2007). The incredibly polished and sophisticated lifestyle of the Zepters involves their special interest in supporting projects in the domain of science, sports and arts. Besides financing education and cultural activities, it is written on the official web page of the Madlenianum, “*the most useful and the most expensive donor venture of Madlena Zepter is the establishment and financing of the operation of Madlenianum Opera and Theatre. The best thing to happen in Serbian theatre life since Prince Mihailo Obrenović built Belgrade’s National Theatre in 1868 was Mrs Zepter’s gift to her country ...*”.

For four hundred years, opera’s aim was to fascinate and create fantasies about cultures and societies in which it was invented, sponsored, produced, performed, consumed and appreciated. Its universally recognised form of sociality held a privileged status throughout the centuries, and which it still enjoys today. In these days, however, it would be difficult to find a more idiosyncratic example of opera’s ability to be considered a socially highly valued phenomenon than the one which will be discussed here. Namely, the story of Madlena Zepter is eminently a story of a very special “operatic mission”; a story which seemed almost forgotten and unseen today. There are numerous examples showing opera’s cultural prominence of being taken either as the showcase of social interests or as a place of different social positioning, but it is very rare that opera is used as a strong personalised social manifest as this was the case with the Madlenianum in Belgrade.<sup>1</sup> In this article, we would like to show how Madlena Zepter has used

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<sup>1</sup> A very small part of this interesting story was delivered first in Kotnik 2015:196–198.

opera to communicate or perform her relationships with different, sometimes even antagonistic social agents in Serbia and abroad, and how opera has well served her different tasks, business duties and public expectations.

Opera has always established the various types of relationships between itself and the social worlds in which, and for which it was created. The arts management specialist Ruth Bereson, who examined numerous examples of the cultural, financial and political investments and arrangements that have gone into the maintenance of opera and opera houses throughout history, argues that opera's nearly immutable form throughout princely festivities, wars, revolutions, political regimes, and vast social changes across the world, stays remarkably ageless (Bereson 2002:8). This is probably why it can be of special social use also for the powerbrokers of today, such as the Zepters.

## 2. Presentation

The Madlenianum (the name derives from Madlena Zepter's name) is located in the building that previously housed the second stage of the National Theatre of Serbia, but it took seven years of work and five different stages of reconstruction before a completely refurbished, reconstructed and conceptually enriched edifice opened its doors to the public on 19 April 2005. On Madlena Zepter's homepage, it is stated that in the 12 years since it has been in existence, more than 25 million Euros has been invested in this opera house and theatre. The vision of her operatic endowment can also be found there:

*The Madlenianum was established in 1997 during a very harsh period for my country, when what people needed was a little laughter, and especially music, in order to restore their strength and joy of life. In founding the Madlenianum, I wanted to create a meeting-place for artists of different kinds whose creative potential would be given an opportunity for full expression and at the same time enrich our cultural reality with a contemporary artistic experience. In saying this, I am particularly referring to opera, which, after a life spanning four centuries, and with all due respect to traditional values, demands a new modern type of staging. The fact that I succeeded in translating this idea into reality fills me with a huge feeling of satisfaction. We started out at a difficult and impoverished time, under an oppressive social system, and in an unsuitable space. What we created was modern building with a multifunctional stage, modern sound system, and professional recording equipment. Today the Madlenianum is an opera house and theatre, but it also contains exhibition space and a bookshop. In a word, it is a completely rounded artistic space. Many will say that this is a luxury, even an extravagance, yet the Madlenianum is a place for strengthening the human spirit, a creation born out of a love for man and his powers of creation, and the crowning glory of a lifetime dedicated to these values. During the 15 years of the metamorphoses of this space, I was involved literally on a daily basis. Opera requires huge investment, knowledge and love, and where Serbia is concerned, endless patience and understanding for the various ways in which people view my undertaking and the fact that the*

*private aspect of this cultural centre, even after the fifteen years of its existence, is still not truly valued (Zepter 2014a).*

In the above statement, she alludes to the difficult situation in which she entered the Belgrade operatic project as exactly in those years the tensions between Yugoslavia and the Western countries were increasing and finally escalated in NATO's military operation against Serbia. The strikes lasted from March to June 1999 and resulted in the bombing of several Serbian cities, particularly Belgrade. The establishment of a new opera house and theatre literally during a war, was a magnanimous but highly unpredictable venture. Madlena Zepter's message could not be more opposite to the reality of Belgrade at that time. For her, obviously, the opera house and theatre was a humanistic manifest, which promoted the notion that music and arts can have positive effects on humankind even in the midst of the difficult circumstances in which her country found itself. Her indirect reference to the difficult period under Slobodan Milošević can be understood as her attempt to create the distance she has obviously wanted in order to consistently promote her newly gained social etiquette as *"the cosmopolitan woman of letters, great expert in arts and aesthetics and the biggest benefactor of the Serbian people in our times"* (Zepter 2014b). Her husband was the target of the Serbian media many times, suspecting that his instant success in the 1990s could have been supported by his potentially good connections with Milošević's regime, accusations he has vigorously denied. And finally, when she elaborates upon her vision of the highest, if not even the metaphysical purpose of the Madlenianum complex, she quite honestly reveals her intimate disappointment in the fact that the Serbian social milieu is perhaps not fully prepared for such cultural adventure due to a lack of cosmopolitan cultural references where such generous cultural benefactors and donors would receive reputable recognition in broader society.

In her vision of opera, Madlena Zepter actually implicitly touches a fundamental social problem which seems to be inherent to opera throughout history; i.e. that opera has always aspired towards a sort of universality within a kind of social exclusivity. From the very beginning, it was caught between the demands of being exclusive and universal at the same time. As the Zepters live abroad, mostly in Monte Carlo, their opera house and theatre in Belgrade means a special relationship between their international money and national aspirations. The opera house and theatre is a demonstration of the strengthening of the social bonds between their cosmopolitan "exile" and provincial "home". In other words, the Zepters' private opera house and theatre is here to prove the utility of entrepreneurial wealth. This notorious example can be taken as a highly visible public statement that advertises the invisible union of art and business. The opera house and theatre is obviously one of the ways by which Madlena Zepter is able and willing to communicate with the community into which she was born and raised, but later became less familiar with as she achieved great success abroad. Her social status has changed radically from a teacher of Serbian language and literature into the greatest cultural benefactor in the country in recent decades. This discrepancy

between the private success achieved abroad and publicly visible investment in the native community can be additionally enlightened if compared to the phenomenon of Serbian temporary migrants who went to the countries of Western Europe to find employment and then constructed their new cultural identity and, particularly, felt or didn't feel the need to return home. This phenomenon, known as guest-workers or *gastarbeiters*, has recently been extensively explored by Serbian anthropologist Dragana Antonijević. Certainly not all her findings regarding the social particularities of Serbian *gastarbeiters* fit the story of the Zepters. However, some of her conclusions could help us understand why a person who reached immense business success on a global level would build an opera house and theatre in his or her peripheral homeland.

In the 1980s, the young Serbian couple went to Austria to search for work and a better life. Milan was an economist and was sent there to improve his German, while Madlena was teaching Serbian to the children of Serb immigrants. They quickly decided to remain in Austria and continue their business careers, which in short order were crowned by the foundation of their own business project, the Zepter firm in 1986. From then on, everything was directed toward a corporate "fairy-tale" bringing great money, success, status, prestige, and broader recognition. The Zepters are certainly not typical *gastarbaiters* if this term could even be used for them, as it mostly refers to unskilled and low-skilled workers and farmers leaving their native country to seek temporary work in Western Europe. Nevertheless, the way the Zepters themselves have constructed, negotiated and even in interviews publicly interpreted their liminal temporariness between Monte Carlo, Paris and Serbia, is something that brings their specific story closer to the world of migration itineraries and cultural identity dynamics typical for *gastarbeiters'* life stories. Antonijević's study shows that most of the *gastarbeiters'* life stories are marked by one fundamental myth – the myth of success, which is significantly determined by another recurrent *gastarbeiter* subject, the myth of homecoming: *"Either real or only imagined, homecoming constitutes an essential determinant of life strategies of temporary work migrants, even when this 'temporariness' extends over several decades ... we come to realize that all their efforts and money invested in big houses and lands in their homeland ... have been made absolutely relative"* (Antonijević 2013:350–351). The ideology of *gastarbeiters* is grounded in the constant need to justify the reason why working and living abroad is worth it. The main and only true reason imagined by *gastarbeiters* of how to be accepted in their native country is success which must become visible to all. Even if one *gastarbeiter* is fully integrated into the culture of their residential or domiciled country, it is still imperative for him or her to demonstrate his or her personal prosperity and newly gained economic and social status in his or her country of origin. One of the most salient indicators of showing new economic prestige and changed social status is usually expressed by home-comers or home-returns through the extravagant, conspicuous, big houses built in their native towns and villages, and through glamorous private family ceremonies, such as weddings, baptisms (Antonijević 2013:349). However, the idealised myth of homecoming

has its darker side as well. When one *gastarbeiter* comes home, particularly if they are very successful, it is quickly evident that people in his or her native town or village look at him or her differently, talk to him or her differently, and treat him or her differently. As a bearer of visible “success from abroad”, such an individual becomes too different for the native social milieu. The price of foreign success is that its public manifestation becomes vigorously debated and negotiated if not sapped and doubted. I have already stated that the construction of *gastarbeiter* cultural identity is perhaps not entirely applicable to the Zepters, but what could be assumed in this case is that the opera house and theatre in their native country functions as a kind of social balance between “here” and “there”. In other words, the Madlenianum may very well be an extravagant and pompous but highly original and eminently materialised way in which Madlena Zepter wishes herself to be valued, understood and accepted by her compatriots. Whether such a gift is a significant factor of cultural modernisation in Serbia, and if so, in what way, is an open question waiting for further ethnographic investigation. The irony of this extraordinary Belgrade operatic undertaking is that even such an impressive and expensive investment such as one’s own opera house and theatre, is not a guarantee of full and non-repudiated recognition in one’s native community.

Another way of understanding this Belgrade example is to refer to systems of intersecting opera appreciators, interest groups and elites. Modern cultural organisations such as the opera company are, as British social anthropologist Paul Atkinson points out, among the many sites at which members of various elite or influential social groups intersect. The members of the elite who choose to support opera companies in terms of financial contributions usually get cultural value in return, as there is a strong convergence between regular cash flow and equally reliable the flow of cultural consumption. Opera represents one of the several domains in which the wealthy, influential and intellectual or aesthetic classes can come together on common ground. The *nouveau riche* may invest in opera not just as a display of conspicuous consumption, but in order to translate material capital into symbolic capital (Atkinson 2006:150–151), as is the case with Madlena Zepter. She, along with her husband, founded and built the *Zepter International* entrepreneurial empire which is strongly oriented towards preserving and promoting domestic Serbian culture, guarding and protecting Serbian national heritage and fostering education for young Serbians: “*The philanthropy of Madame Zepter is not limited to the Opera and Theatre Madlenianum only, she is also acting as director of a foundation which finances study scholarships for young Serbian musicians*”<sup>2</sup> (Janković Beguš 2013:136). Through each body of her opera house and theatre she tries to expose her personal social responsibility. Despite the fact that the Madlenianum has no permanent ensemble, it is more or less forced to function as a repertory theatre for quite banal reasons: all the artists who are engaged at the Madlenianum for opera, drama and musical productions are also

<sup>2</sup> Original (French): La philanthropie de Mme. Zepter ne se limite pas à l’Opéra et Théâtre Madlenianum: elle est aussi la directrice d’une fondation qui octroie les bourses d’étude aux jeunes musiciens serbes.

regularly engaged at other Belgrade theatres. So, the Madlenianum management team must follow the artists' availability and negotiate with them and with the management teams of other Belgrade theatres to fix dates for performances on a daily basis (Janković Beguš 2013:148). This administrative ritual, agreed among different Belgrade theatres, has served the Madlenianum to become a more equal member of the Belgrade theatrical landscape. However, as the Madlenianum is entirely private and receives no subsidies from the city or the government, it functions, Jelena Janković Beguš writes, like a "permanent festival" supported by donations from its single patroness (Janković Beguš 2013:151).

Adding to the above observations, Ana Stevanović, a Serbian researcher of public relations and communications in cultural and media institutions, investigated mechanisms of creativity, marketing innovation, management policy, leadership, working efficacy, organisational culture in three selected Belgrade cultural institutions in her doctoral dissertation. The cultural institutions she chose were the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra (founded and financed by the Ministry of Culture of Serbia), the Yugoslav Drama Theatre (founded and financed by the Municipality of Belgrade) and the Opera and Theatre Madlenianum. Her research interest was originally organised more broadly, as it was concentrated around the question regarding which cultural institutions located in Belgrade best used different marketing strategies, promotional campaigns and innovative communicational ways of public relations with audiences as well as the wider public. To obtain that information she sent a questionnaire by email to 179 journalists working in cultural editorial offices of different Serbian media, and received responses from 142. In the category of theatres, the Opera and Theatre Madlenianum and the Yugoslav Drama Theatre emerged the winners, while in the category of other cultural institutions the Belgrade Philharmonic earned the highest merit (Stevanović 2015:20). On the basis of this initial inquiry she carried out further empirical research made up of interviews with the staff at those three institutions. However, some of her results considering the Madlenianum were quite surprising. She, for instance, perceived a lack of so-called transformative impact of the leader on the administration which contributes, according to Stevanović, to the stagnation rather than the development of the Madlenianum's staff. Considering this matter, her general conclusion "*that transformation does not exist in this cultural institution at all*"<sup>3</sup> sounds brutal for the Madlenianum (Stevanović 2015:216). Further, she argues that the administration is not ready for any change or open to search for new solutions resulted in the fact that "*the creativity is entirely disabled in this institution*".<sup>4</sup> The administration is, according to the author of this research, close-minded as it is convinced that the creativity is a domain of artists only, not the working duty of management too. This is something which makes Stevanović observe critically that there is no awareness regarding the importance of teamwork at the level of the Madlenianum's management. To summarise, there is a sort of

<sup>3</sup> Original (Serbian): ... opšti zaključak je da transformacija u ovoj ustanovi kulture ne postoji.

<sup>4</sup> Original (Serbian): ... u ovoj ustanovi kulture [se] ne podržava pristup poslu na nov način, čime je svaka kreativnost onemogućena.

pessimism concerning the value of new ideas and the willingness among the staff to consider how things could be done differently and better. Concerning collective creativity, shared knowledge and team-work efficacy, the Madlenianum evidences much lower prospects than the other two institutions to which it was compared (Stevanović 2015:217–221).

Another set of questions tested the institutions' attitude towards the audience, marketability, communication strategy, and competitive position. In contrast to the Yugoslav Drama Theatre and the Belgrade Philharmonic, the manager of the Madlenianum stated that the program is made to a great extent with regard to the audience's taste, interest and request. As a result, the program is made up of the most popular works of opera, musical and drama. Here Stevanović is explicitly clear why that is so: *“Certainly, we should not forget the fact which is that this institution is privately owned. Right at this point we can find also the reason for such ‘playing the game safely’, because well-known works of composers and dramatists attract greater attention and please the widest audience. In contrast to the Madlenianum where profit and income from the box office are two important items in managing the opera house and theatre, the other two institutions have the opportunity and enjoy the relief not to think urgently of making profit only”*<sup>5</sup> (Stevanović 2015:223). What concerns the competition on the market, the Madlenianum's director Branka Radović mentions the National Theatre in Belgrade as their primary rival, because the Madlenianum's concept of the program is, according to her, similar to that at the National Theatre which has three artistic ensembles under its roof, Opera, Drama and Ballet companies. Further, the manager mentions some other competitors, such as the Ateliers 212, the Yugoslav Drama Theatre, and the Belgrade Drama Theatre. Stevanović suggests that the Madlenianum actively follows the production of other theatres for fear of not fulfilling the expectation of its own audience: *“Following the rivals and keeping pace with them is probably not the best strategy for the Madlenianum to take better position on the market as well as in public.”*<sup>6</sup> The author criticises the lack of innovation in the program and taking risks with less known works. However, after so many negative remarks the question is, what are the best assets of the Madlenianum, except for the reputation of its single donor. Fragmentally, Radović delivers to the author the following elements briefly summarised here: performing popular works on stage and avoiding the risk with lesser known works; inviting acclaimed directors and producers who had previously achieved success on the Madlenianum's stage; engaging well-known actors and singers who can also play an important role in promoting the Madlenianum's program in public;

<sup>5</sup> Original (Serbian): Svakako, ne smemo zaboraviti i činjenicu da je ova ustanova kulture u privatnom vlasništvu, stoga tu možemo pronaći i razlog ovog “igranja na sigurno”, pošto poznati komadi klasičnih kompozitora i pisaca privlače pažnju i interesovanja najšire publike. Prethodne dve ustanove kulture imaju tu mogućnost i rasterećenje da ne misle nužno o profitu, za razliku od poslednje u kojoj profit i zarada na blagajnama jeste bitna stavka koja utiče na poslovanje.

<sup>6</sup> Original (Serbian): Prateći konkurenciju i držeći korak s njima, Madlenianum ne može da napreduje, niti da očekuje bolju tržišnu i javnu pozicioniranost.

being housed in one of, architectonically, the most beautiful theatrical buildings in the city; offering operas, dramas and musicals; and finally, providing a kind of exclusive status and ambience in the Belgrade theatrical landscape due to the specific private character of the institution (Stevanović 2015:224–225). What is lacking in Stevanović's empirical study is a clearer image of the relationship between the Madlenianum's management and its donor, and particularly how, if at all, Madlena Zepter is involved in the process of creating the program.

However, matters of internal institutional nature stand, Madlena Zepter fulfils her symbolic liabilities towards the nation by also commissioning new musical works, as was the case with the comic opera *Mandragola* composed by Ivan Jevtić. Branka Radović, this time acting in the capacity of the professor of musicology at University of Kragujevac, asserts in her academic article that this work "*occupies a very special place in the history of Serbian music and the history of opera literature in our region, because attempts at reviving a character comedy are extremely rare*" (Radović 2010:152–153). By all these continuous cultural accomplishments, Madlena Zepter actually exposes her steady and determined humanistic pretension and dedication "*each and every day of her life to aestheticise the life around her and to promote and provide the way of living surrounded with beauty not only to her closest and loved ones, but also with the noble goal of making it accessible to a number of her compatriots*" (Zepter 2014b). In spite of journalistic praise that can be noticed in general, some media headlines and comments put her impressive cultural branding under critique as well:

*The institution of private patrons in culture is nothing new. Nonetheless, one should have in mind that the targeting investment into the domain of culture is one thing, the other thing is the creation of an entire cultural brand through one's own name which means also the creation of a kind of cultural micro world which looks snobbish within the context of branded kitchenware*<sup>7</sup> (M. P. 2009).

In Serbia, Madlena Zepter's cultural inclination is pure luxury for some people, but for others it is a precious gift to Serbian national culture. In an interview given to the major Serbian daily *Politika* she replies to such opposing opinions as follows:

*With our example, that is with the full name and surname in particular, we wanted to deliver a creative interpretation of the role which was played by the great merchants and enlightened industrialists of the past. Being initiated into the prosperity of one's own nation and at the same time being an active protagonist of sincere and concrete Europeanism, supported by the openness of creative freedoms and by the connection of our cultural milieu with the European, that was our goal. To achieve that, we have used our public image and business integrity in order to transform these ideas into a concrete work inscribing it into a collective memory. What kind of a name should I have then*

<sup>7</sup> Original (Croatian): Institucija privatnih mecena u kulturi nije novost, no treba imati na umu da je ciljano ulaganje u kulturu jedno, a stvaranje kulturnog branda preko svoga imena znači i stvaranje jednog kulturnog mikrosvijeta koji u kontekstu brendiranog posuđa zvuči snobovski.

*given to the Opera? Perhaps Serbian, Zemun, National ... It isn't like that. The "Madlenianum" is the biggest personal donation in culture in the history of Serbia till now and forever. It bears the name of its founder. The same was with the old patrons who gave their name to their foundations. It is a benevolent activity inspired by a very intimate feeling of duty and impulse of the patron, what is, as I can see, something entirely inconceivable to many people<sup>8</sup> (Trebješanin 2014).*

In other words, for the rich, their financial contributions can be considered the investment of a very small portion of their material wealth in order to transform it into cultural and symbolic goods. The cultural return on material investment is not readily calculable in purely monetary terms, but it is clearly very good cultural value in the sense that close association with the highest forms of cultural value, and highly visible excellence, "cost" comparatively small amounts of wealth, when compared to the turnover. Or indeed, the accumulated capital, as is the case of an organisation such as the Zepter corporative conglomerate. The Zepters' operatic project reminds us that opera is far from being a passé amusement of post-Renaissance princes, Baroque absolutist kings and Romanticist bourgeois parvenus. It is, in fact an arena in which present-day corporate powerbrokers and capitalist entrepreneurs, no less than ancient aristocratic dynasties, enlightened banking families and industrial millionaires, are able to legitimise their authority and power through cultural institution, operatic ritual, theatrical ceremony and artistic emblem.

### 3. Interpretation

Madlena Zepter's entrepreneurial foundation of the opera house and theatre is an example which leads far back to those years when cultural activities and arts of all kinds were perhaps much more significantly supported by different private patrons, benefactors and protectors compared to today. Her operatic story therefore raises the question of cultural patronage to rethink some of its meanings on a conceptual level. In recent decades, significant progress has been made in patronage studies<sup>9</sup> explor-

<sup>8</sup> Original (Serbian): Mi smo poželeli da upravo svojim primerom, znači imenom i prezimenom, damo kreativno tumačenje uloge koje su u prošlosti imali veliki trgovci i prosvetljeni industrijalci. Biti posvećen blagostanju sopstvene nacije, a biti aktivan protagonist iskrenog i konkretnog evropeizma, širini stvaralačkih sloboda, povezivanju našeg kulturnog miljea sa evropskim. To je bio naš cilj, a koristili smo javni imidž i poslovni integritet da bi sproveli ove ideje u delo upisujući ostvareno u kolektivno pamćenje. Kako je trebalo da nazovemo Operu? Srpska, zemunska, narodna... Pa nije. "Madlenijanum" je najveća lična donacija za kulturu u istoriji Srbije do sada i zauvek. Nosi ime svoga osnivača, upravo onako kako su stari donatori davali ime svojim zadužbinama. Reč je o slobodnom delovanju po intimnom osećanju dužnosti i impulsu mecene, što je, shvatam, mnogima nepojmljivo.

<sup>9</sup> For artistic, literary and musical patronage, see: Guy Fitch Lytle and Stephen Orgel, eds. (1981) *Patronage in the Renaissance*. Princeton, NJ: Folger Institute Essays; Hugh Redwald Trevor-Roper (1976) *Princes and Artists: Patronage and Ideology at Four Habsburg Courts 1517–1633*. London: Thames & Hudson; Francis Haskell (1963) *Patrons and Painters: A*

ing in particular women's patronage and examining their contributions as patronesses of writers, artists, craftsmen, musicians, architects, and scientists from ancient times until today. When we deal with cultural patronage, musical patronage, arts patronage, or narrowly speaking, with theatre and opera patronage, we touch upon related topics and cognate phenomena, such as sponsorship, benefaction, maecenasship or the ownership of cultural goods as well. In identifying different kinds of patronage, the literature which is mostly based on the perspectives of sociologists, cultural managers and arts administrators, frames two major patronage structures, direct patronage and indirect patronage; the first can be divided further to three different structures, direct patronage by private individuals, by private institutions, and by state institutions; and the second one splits into two structures, indirect patronage by cities and by state institutions (see Balfe 1933). In light of the heated controversies over cultural funding in recent years on the global level, our interpretation by choosing mostly private patrons or their private institutions as the article's focus actually avoids important debates indicating the alarming erosion of state subsidies which has posed a serious threat to the survival of cultural practices and their communities all over the world. Through the concrete example of Madlena Zepter's opera patronage, it will be quite clearly established how patronage and self-promotion by influential people were and remain quite instrumental in shaping the values and meanings of cultural goods.

From what recent patronage studies have offered in the field of opera patronage we can summarise that opera patronage always went far beyond the pure economic definition as "*a private commission by one or more wealthy people who pay a disproportionate amount of the costs of an opera*" (King 2001:23). British professors of sociology Nicholas Abercrombie and Stephen Hill define patronage as a set of several coping relationships which are "interstitial" between the main institutions of any society. Throughout history, private patronage filled the functional gaps in the social fabric and protected individuals or groups against insecurity. This particularly held in the case of artistic, musical and literary patronage. In non-industrial or pre-industrial societies where other forms of protection or support were not available, patronage was mostly a substitute for the inadequacy of formal institutional arrangements. This was particularly noticeable when patronage was underpinned on the part of the patron by strong cultural sanctions which were mostly based on aristocratic ideals of honour, generosity, favours or *noblesse oblige*. However, patronage does clearly exist also within advanced contemporary society, particularly in those areas where formal institutional regulation or support is inadequate for any reason (Abercrombie and Hill

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*Study in the Relations between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque*. New York: Chatto & Windus; Michael Levey (1971) *Painting at Court*. London and New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson; Arthur Geoffrey Dickens (1977) *The Courts of Europe: Politics, Patronage, and Royalty, 1400–1800*. London and New York: McGraw-Hill; Francis William Kent and Patricia Simons with J. C. Eade, eds. (1987) *Patronage, Art, and Society in Renaissance Italy*. Canberra: Humanities Research Centre; Judith Huggins Balfe, ed. (1993) *Paying the Piper: Causes and Consequences of Art Patronage*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

1976:415, 421). Patrons have always been perceived as individuals who have a command over recourse which they are able to use on behalf of others. In many cases, patrons' most tangible benefits in return are deference and admiration from clients, together with esteem from their peers, political support from their authorities, or honour and social recognition from the broader public. In societies, where notions of honour, generosity, reciprocity and philanthropy are highly valued, patrons gain a great deal of honour, admiration and prestige by being generous to those less well-favoured than themselves. In short, Abercrombie and Hill have argued "*that patronage is a form of social relationship found in different societies and in many different areas of social life. [They] suggested that it was partial, individual not collective, generally asymmetrical, dependent on sharp inequalities, and often underpinned by values of generosity or prestige and the use of an extended kin terminology*" (Abercrombie and Hill 1976:425). The patronage of art, music, theatre and literature from the late sixteenth through to the mid-seventeenth century in Europe provides fairly well documented examples of patronage, today called sponsorship, which was, as a form of relation, generically characterised as interstitial, private, mostly non-market and highly eminent. Historians such as Werner L. Gundersheimer agree with the definition of patronage as "*the action of a patron in supporting, encouraging, or countenancing a person, institution, work, art, etc.,*" and as "*one of the dominant social processes of pre-industrial Europe*" (Gundersheimer 1981:3) due to the numerous historical indications that patronage of all kinds has been clearly established as virtually a permanent structural characteristic of all early European material high culture. Patronage studies as a branch of cultural history have been undertaken as an alternative to the study of political and economic history, and in the arts as an alternative to the study of great works and great men in isolation (Mayer Brown 1991:28–29). To the differences between *mecenatismo* (patronage of the arts) as opposed to *clientelismo* (political patronage), studies of musical and theatrical patronage at northern Italian courts in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries stressed the importance of the individual prince or governor in guiding the development of artists' policy in particular places, the phenomenon that Werner Gundersheimer described as Big Man systems (Gundersheimer 1981:13–16). As Big Men or Big Women usually determined not only policy but projected the path of societies' development in general, Big Men and Big Women also saw their patronage, sponsorship or protection as means to connect the past, present and future social order of things. Patronage was a fashionable act, and Gundersheimer makes it even clearer why this was so by linking it to a kind of social anthropological approach ("Big Man systems"), by defining it as a "dominant social process," and by introducing it as a complex cultural practice which seemed able to subsume almost everything from the hierocratic Middle Ages through the absolutistic Renaissance, gallant Baroque and humanistic Classical to the early industrial Romantic worlds.

In Ancient times and Middle Ages, the full import of patronage usually associated the patron or benefactor with the process by giving him (or her) an

elevated role in the discovery and propagation of knowledge that afforded both patron and author a special status in the divine order that transcended everyday economies. The patron who commissioned a work and the author who created it were linked in a common effort to demonstrate the patron's divine purpose or vision and the author's adherence to that plan. In the times in which either the ancient gods or one supreme God ruled the world, the patron of sciences and arts was a mediator between heaven and earth. Sponsoring scientific or artistic endeavours and executing them were both acts of participation in the quest for the secrets of life, religion and history. Throughout the Middle Ages it was believed that the patron was spiritually connected with Heaven's forces, if not with God himself. His patronage over human activities and cultural goods was understood as divine protection:

*Hierarchically, [patronage] reinforced the concept of an asymmetry of power inherent in the divine order, by which God ruled humans and the world; that same asymmetry inhered in the patronage compact, with the important difference that in the human version power was not uniform but divided (for example, into artistic ability and economic means). Socially, patronage affirmed the need for humans to work together to accomplish, dimly, what God could do resplendently alone. In these senses patronage as symbolic creation reflected medieval social organization (Nichols 1996:xiv).*

Contributors of the collection *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women* (1996) have demonstrated how female patrons of the Middle Ages impacted the cultural heritage of the time throughout Europe, not simply as patrons of letters but of the visual and decorative arts, architecture, and religious and educational foundations. It is also worth noting that like such allegorical figures as Fortune, Reason, and Nature, in the medieval pantheon of personifications, Patronage was also a woman (Nichols 1996:xvi). The patronage of medieval women was a subject long ignored. Even though the public roles for women were strictly sanctioned, patronage was nevertheless an area that provided rich opportunities for women to make their voice heard and their ideas realised. Because engaging in patronage was one of the few ways in which women were permitted to assert their power openly and in a public forum, they took advantage of it as much as possible and used it effectively toward a variety of ends, whether cultural, artistic, political, religious, social and educational. Some patrons and patronesses were active in the creative process, directing artists to sources and prescribing subjects and interpretations, while others played a more passive role, becoming patrons only after the fact by compensating an artist for a work already completed. A number of women were able to enjoy the role of patron only indirectly and by virtue of their ability to further the works they supported by imposing their will upon the male figure, usually the husband, on whom they depended for financial support (Hall McCash 1996:1–3).

For many centuries, from medieval to modern times, cultural patronage was a form of support or backing of a prosperous or powerful sponsor or benefactor for an artist or an institution. It could take the form of gifts, money, political

influence, personal encouragement, a household position for an artist, employment, or assistance in helping to gain currency for a particular work, idea, or project. In the early medieval period, when a gift-giving economy prevailed, patronage manifested itself most often as support and encouragement, rewarding artists with gifts rather than money for their work. As the shift began in the twelfth century toward a mercantile economy, artists and performers tended to be more frequently compensated with money. Later on, when the medieval gift-giving economy had given way to a system of monetary exchange, artists were more frequently paid on the basis of a contract which was agreed upon by the patron and the author in advance (Hall McCash 1996:4–6). Among the medieval women who sought to make their voice heard through their cultural patronage were powerful women such as Eleanor of Aquitaine. She was certainly extraordinary in many respects, due to her unique role as queen of two kings, her wealth and highly cultured background, her longevity of eighty-one years, her exceptional good health and energy, her irrepressible interest in politics, and her literary patronage. Women who practiced cultural patronage tended to be women of means and of relative independence who could control their own fortunes to a significant extent. They had the resources or the prestige to commission or command artists, writers or architects to create beautiful works for them. Most belonged to the nobility, although toward the end of the Middle Ages some wealthy bourgeois women also had the means for patronage. Most frequently, important female patrons were widows who had gained control of their dower properties. Some were women of the church, abbesses, nuns, or wealthy noblewomen who for a variety of reasons had retired to a convent. Relatively few married women were able to assert their individual influence through cultural patronage without the assistance of their husbands (Hall McCash 1996:6–7). Many socially mobile and powerful medieval women had been effectively eradicated by the seventeenth century. The Renaissance provided a new generation of famous patronesses of the arts. Among them the noble Medici women were probably the most influential, such as the murdered Duchess Isabella from the sixteenth century, and later on in the seventeenth century, the electoral princess Anna Maria Luisa who patronised musicians. The role of women as patronesses or Maecenasses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could be essential, to some extent at least, in such fields as theatre, music or opera. William Prizer, among others, has made clear the crucial influence of the cultured intellectual and prolific writer Isabella d'Este as Marchesa of Mantua in shaping the history of music in Mantua (and, arguably, therefore the history of music throughout Italy during the sixteenth century). Her sister-in-law Lucrezia Borgia, the Duchess of Ferrara after her marriage to Alfonso I d'Este, the Duke of Ferrara, and the mistress of Isabella's husband and Lucrezia's brother-in-law Francesco II Gonzaga, the Marquess of Mantua, was another famous woman who enjoyed the status of musical patroness during the Italian Renaissance (Prizer 1985:1–33). Such figures as the Parisian noblewoman Mme de Retz come to mind, whose influence and importance in the musical life of sixteenth-century Paris is remarkable, though just what she did and how she

engaged in patronage in her salon are a subject still to be investigated (Mayer Brown 1991:31; see also Brooks 1994).

When opera began at the end of the sixteenth century, theatres and opera houses were immediately patronised – whether through the ownership of court theatres, through the private commission of works, or through employment of artists, librettists, dramatists and musicians<sup>10</sup> – by different royal and even church authorities across Europe, such as kings and queens, popes, princes and princesses, cardinals, dukes and duchesses, marquises and marchionesses, margraves and margravines, counts and countesses. Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria, the youngest son of Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II and Maria Anna of Bavaria and younger brother of Emperor Ferdinand III, became one of the greatest patrons of the arts among the Habsburgs:

*Though opera appears to have reached the Habsburg by 1618, Leopold Wilhelm may be regarded as outstanding in his sponsorship of opera. By 1650 he had built an opera theatre and commissioned/staged an opera requiring a huge apparatus. None of the other preceded Habsburgs seem to have preceded Leopold Wilhelm in his massive sponsorship of opera* (Kory 1995:18).

As the governor of the Spanish Netherlands from 1647 to 1656, the Austrian Archduke owned two opera theatres in Brussels, one created as a permanent theatre in 1650 at Montagne Sainte-Elisabeth, and another built as an opera theatre in the imperial palace. The inauguration of the new opera theatre was the performance of Giuseppe Zamponi's *Ulisse nell'isola de Circe* on February 1650. Leopold Wilhelm commissioned this opera to celebrate the marriage of Philip IV of Spain and Maria Anna of Austria (Kory 1995:21–22). The eighteenth-century *Teatro Real di San Carlo* which was built in 1737 and named according to Charles III to glorify the Bourbon dynasty in Naples, was placed next to the king's palace and connected to it by private corridors.<sup>11</sup>

In early-seventeenth-century Rome opera productions were ordered and subsidised by the very influential Barberini family whose members, from the election of Maffeo Barberini as Pope Urban VIII in 1623 (papacy 1623–1644), were in effect the ruling house of Rome. Urban VIII was not only the longest reigning pope of the seventeenth century, but also one of the century's great musical sponsors and cultural patrons. By his political, religious, cultural and symbolic domination, Urban VII eminently influenced Baroque music. Any judgment of his patronage in his private Barberini Theatre must take into account the pope's family network, especially his two nephews, both cardinals, whose meteoric rise to power exemplifies the exercise of both the nepotism and profligacy for which Urban VIII was condemned in his own century.<sup>12</sup> As a social contrast to the uniform single opera patronage of the Barberini family, a radical change in the

<sup>10</sup> See John Rosselli "From Princely Service to the Open Market: Singers of Italian Opera and Their Patrons, 1600–1850." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1(1), 1–32.

<sup>11</sup> Robinson *Naples and Neapolitan Opera*, 7–8; also Bereson *The Operatic State*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Hammond (1994) *Music and Spectacle in Baroque Rome*; also Murata (1981) *Operas for the Papal Court*, 1631–1668.

conception of opera patronage emerged in mid-seventeenth-century Rome referred to by Valeria de Lucca as a collective patronage representing not just one but a number of social agents involved in the commission and production of opera works. De Lucca reveals a tightly knit network of Roman patrons behind the commission and subsequent production of opera. Under the collective sponsorship of a group of aristocrats which included Prince Agostino Chigi and Cardinal Flavio Chigi, Prince Lorenzo Onofrio Colonna and his wife Maria Mancini, and of course, Queen Christina of Sweden<sup>13</sup>, the most famous of the patrons of music, theatre and opera in Rome at the time, notable operas were commissioned, produced and performed in private aristocratic or private commercial theatres (De Lucca 2011:195, 197, 204, 211). Irrespective of whether opera was patronised by a single individual or a single noble family or rather a group of some of Rome's most enthusiastic noble opera patrons and patronesses, it

*aptly functioned as an important means of self-fashioning, displaying the patron's social status, wealth, and intellectual refinement, as well as celebrating family events, diplomatic achievements, and political alliances. [...] A new, collective form of patronage rises in and outside of Rome toward the end of the century, and we witness the dissolution of the patron as the sole agent responsible for the creation of a new work that embodies and displays exclusively his or her ideals, tastes, and family names. [...] Forms of aristocratic collective patronage, often under the auspices of a society or accademia, were fast spreading throughout Italy, and experiments of joint commercial ventures involving rulers, patricians, impresarios, and intellectuals emerged in Bologna, Florence, Pistoia, Genoa, Reggio Emilia, Palermo, and Naples (De Lucca 2011:202, 224, 203).*

Of course, where there was a single patron, it is reasonable to assume that decisions about opera were very heavily influenced by the preferences of the patron, although not all patrons have been able or willing to devote a great deal of their own time to operatic details. One who did was the Prussian king Frederick the Great, who in 1742 built a new royal opera house *Unter den Linden* in Berlin for the performances of Italian *opere serie*. Admission, limited to the court, army officers and the upper levels of Berlin society, remained free until 1789. Frederick involved himself extensively with operatic affairs. He participated in the selection of librettos and wrote an initial draft for a particularly interesting one himself. He composed arias for insertion into other operas. Occasionally, he also used his despotic powers to intervene in the labour market for performers. The Berlin Opera House was closed during the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), after which Frederick had largely lost interest, and Italian opera never regained its pre-eminence in the cultural life of Berlin. The individual patronage or ownership of an opera house was often subject to discontinuities and interruptions in func-

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<sup>13</sup> The question of Queen Christina's patronage of singers and composers in Rome is addressed, as cited by Valeria de Luca (1998) in Arnaldo Morelli *Il mecenatismo musicale di Cristina di Svezia: Una riconsiderazione*, and *idem* (1997) "Mecenatismo musicale nella Roma Barocca: Il caso di Cristina di Svezia".

tioning as few individual patrons had the willingness or capacity or both to finance regular operatic seasons over a long period. Often opera flourished for a time, but then lapsed due to military distractions or economic problems. Frederick the Great's successor, Friedrich Wilhelm II or Frederick William, who first instituted admissions charges, had a personal preference for German opera, and founded a *Nationaltheater*, while retaining Italian opera at the Royal Opera House. The new theatre soon proved profitable because the wealthy citizenry tended to support German opera while the court and nobility preferred Italian and French opera. This historical example indicates, as stated by economist Timothy King, that once an individual owner or patron started to rely on the market to cover some of his costs, he could no longer ignore its preferences.<sup>14</sup> Frederick's older sister Wilhelmina who was married to the Margrave of Bayreuth also built her own court opera house when she moved to a remote little Franconian town. There, she continued to be a great patroness of opera composers, musicians, poets, philosophers and French enlighteners. Her private opera house became crowded in the mid-eighteenth-century by distinctive European nobility and famous intellectuals of the time. Everybody was personally invited as the *Markgräfliches Opernhaus* was accessible only to a selected few.

Perhaps a slightly more complicated and stressful version of opera patronage and finance appeared in almost the same period in London where Charles Sackville, the Earl of Middlesex and later the second Duke of Dorset, was the principal director of the Italian opera during the 1740s. Carole Taylor delivers a meaningful account on the real problems of Lord Middlesex's opera patronage:

*Enthusiastic and outgoing, he undertook the direction of the Italian opera for the social and cultural prestige it promised. ... But the opera in London declined in status under his direction. Attitudes were changing towards the Italian opera in the mid eighteenth century: the fashionable rage for the genre that had prevailed in the 1720s<sup>15</sup> and early 1730s had abated, and Middlesex was also hampered by his own shortcomings. [...] Middlesex combined a concern for the credit of the opera with a single-minded dedication to keeping it*

<sup>14</sup> King "Patronage and Market in the Creation of Opera Before the Institution of Intellectual Property", 23–24; Gaxotte *Frederick the Great*, 235–237; Terne *Friedrich II. von Preußen und die Hofoper*.

<sup>15</sup> The rise of Italian opera in England at the beginning of the eighteenth century raised the key question where the capital necessary to support continental opera was to come from. If opera productions would not have been privately supported under royal or noble patronage, as was the case with Charles II's one lavish indulgence in such direct sponsorship in 1675, then who else would have supported notable opera productions. The popularity of Italian opera in London raised the question under what auspices continental opera should be produced: "King William had been interested in neither plays nor operas. Queen Anne, though a music lover, evidently had no inclination to see opera, let alone underwrite it. Conceivable noble patrons could step forward and finance private performances in the Continental style – though no such tradition had existed in England within living memory. That anyone should found a new company to perform opera can hardly have been imagined. Special license from the monarch and massive funding would have been required" (Hume 1988:422). For more about English operatic dilemmas from the vantage point of sponsorship and auspices, see Robert D. Hume's article.

*on the London stage ... It was an elaborate and complicated undertaking, and Middlesex and his fellows were repeatedly criticized for inexperience and extravagance ... While the opera's patrons never doubted that the opera was very expensive to run, there emerged in the 1740s a greater awareness that it was enormously complicated to run. The experience of the preceding decades brought this about and contributed to the financial difficulties Middlesex had to face. On a more general level, Middlesex's historical position as a patron of Italian opera was significantly determined by these changing attitudes towards the genre. By the late 1730s the opera had outlasted the novelty with which it was first perceived, and the venue was becoming less an occasion per se than an exclusive venue for occasion ... In this context Middlesex's success, particularly in gaining the support of the £200 subscribers, represents little more than a lucky moment in a fragile effort. Middlesex was a young spark, exuberant, expansive and impetuous. He was also cultured and intelligent, and he could be sincere. His combination of recklessness and good intention disarmed until it ultimately disaffected some of his most influential supporters, who then refused to come to his financial rescue (Taylor 1987:1, 21).*

Opera was mostly associated for many with exclusivity, extravagance and highly fashionable "entertainment of noble friends" throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Those who financed it or opened their own private opera theatres for princely pleasures usually tried to surround, as this was the case with the impresarial operatic adventure of Lord Middlesex, the responsibilities of opera patronage in a glow of social status.

At the other extreme we find profit-seeking opera houses of the seventeenth-century Venice where opera soon became a selling commodity on the market. In its heyday, the lagoon city of *La Serenissima* boasted no fewer than about twenty public theatres and opera houses. Most of them were built and owned by a noble family and were usually known whether by the name of their parish or a nearby church or by the name of the families who owned them.

Venetian theatres and opera houses were strongly identified with their proprietors. Indeed, they were often referred to by names such as "Teatro Grimani" and "Teatro Vendramin" after the families who owned them. For those families they represented more than a building housed in a certain parish. Due to the fact that Venice always attracted large numbers of tourists and visitors from abroad, theatres and opera houses functioned as significant identification points as they helped to focus attention on the crowded world of the patricians of Venice, and reminded the people of their contributions to the city. All the main Venetian theatres and opera houses were owned by important patrician families who combined business with cultural pleasure in the city with the most crowded and competitive theatrical and operatic culture in Italy, if not Europe. Economic prospects and a desire for exhibitionistic display, as well a decline in their traditional overseas trading attracted the best Venetian families to invest in the theatre and opera house during the seventeenth century. In 1637, the *Teatro di San Cassiano* opened its doors as the first public opera house. The theatre takes its name from the neighbourhood where it was located, the parish of San Cassiano

near the Rialto. Among the locals it was called *Teatro Tron* as it was owned by the famous Venetian Tron family. The proprietor of this important theatre was the nobleman Ettore Tron who originally came from a wealthy merchant family having among its members also Nicolò Tron, the 68th Doge of Venice, reigning two years, from 1471 to 1773. Another famous opera house was the *Teatro di San Luca*, also known as *Teatro Vendramin* in reference to the Vendramin family who were the owners. It was founded in 1622, in 1883 renamed the *Teatro Apollo*, and since 1875 it has been called the *Teatro Goldoni*. The Vendramins were a rich merchant family who were among the *case nuove* or “new houses” that joined the patrician class of Venice in the late fourteenth century. Among its most famous members is Andrea Vendramin who served as the sole Vendramin Doge from 1476–1478, at the height of Venetian power. The Vendramins, who as the owners had a considerable direct involvement in the management of their theatre, had a sometimes uneasy relationship with a series of noble tenants who rented the theatre from the 1630s through the 1660s. The owners argued over money and the style of performances in their theatre. The most famous opera and theatre entrepreneurs were members of the prominent Grimani family, including three Doges of Venice, one cardinal and several bishops. The Grimani family were dominant, owning what is now called the *Teatro Malibran*, and then referred to as the *Teatro di San Giovanni Grisostomo*, or simply *Teatro Grimani*. When it opened in 1678, the theatre was appraised as “the biggest, most beautiful and richest theatre in the city” and its operatic importance throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century led to an even grander description by 1730 as “a true kingdom of marvels”. Several decades earlier this family also owned the *Teatro di Santi Giovanni e Paolo* from 1630s as well as the *Teatro di San Samuele* from 1656. At its peak, the *SS. Giovanni e Paolo* was celebrated as the most comfortable and spacious theatre in the city. Some members of the Grimani family were actively involved in the opera business, such as nobleman Vincenzo Grimani, who was a cardinal and opera librettist, or Vettor Grimani Calergi, a cousin of the theatre owner Giovanni Grimani and a passionate lover of opera.

Like any business, opera production required capital. Patrons and owners who provided the funds were willing to do so either for the love of opera or in order to be seen as artistic patrons. However, the importance of noble owners to the functioning of the most successful opera houses and theatres becomes more evident when we look at other Venetian more ephemeral or non-noble theatres. Even an artistically successful theatre, with the support from a variety of noblemen could suffer from the lack of a single noble family’s backing. Ownership seemed to be crucial for the longevity of the theatre’s functioning. Only the commitment of an extremely financially powerful family was sufficient to ensure the long-term success of the opera as a business. In Venice, noble ownership and continued success in operatic or theatrical ventures often went hand in hand (Glixons 2006: 3–10). Accordingly, these opera houses were privately owned but highly commercial and publicly oriented by making potential profit as well. One might describe this Venetian-style opera business as “subscriber-subsidised” or “market-

driven”, which was quite different from the dominant “court-owned” or “patron-subsidised” opera business known elsewhere in Europe from the seventeenth century until the First World War.

Generally speaking, there were two styles of opera business which can be classified as “patron-driven” and “market-driven” throughout centuries. The first style was more common in Northern Europe, particularly in German-speaking countries, while the second can be more attributed to the Mediterranean countries, particularly Italy<sup>16</sup>. Although there were significant exceptions everywhere, as in the court at Parma which was court-driven, and some civic and commercial German opera houses which depended on the market, enthusiastic individual donors and a ticket-buying public (King 2001:24). The seventeenth-century Venetian-style opera business mostly relied on “boxholder-rental” opera houses and theatres. The initially required subsidies were normally provided by theatre owners who were usually members of great patrician families. However, the owner’s profit in income might come in the form of a fixed rent on the theatrical building or from the rental of opera boxes. In Venice, opera houses functioned on the basis of a mixed financing pattern. On the one hand, pure profit-seeking was a driving force in Venetian opera business; on the other individual noble patronage was also a matter of family’s recognition and prestige. Here, patron-subsidised and profit-seeking opera were two financing models complementing each other. One might think that private patronage and the public market exclude all possibilities to work together. This was not the case in seventeenth-century Venice: *“Even though the ostensible model of the Venetian opera house was that of a profitable business, it was a business that did not usually make a profit and perhaps was not even expected to”* (Bianconi and Walker 1984:226). For those unimaginably wealthy noble families, it was more important to provide a constant and highly visible position on the cultural map of competitive patrician society than to make a profit from opera houses. Usually, these wealthy patrician families were in the opera business as a hobby or to enhance their social standing. To secure their constant relevance in the city, they displayed “operatic selves” or “theatrical selves” by using the logic of a gift-giving economy. By having a private opera house or theatre for public use, the message was clear: what the city gave them through the holding of different prestigious governmental, religious or civic positions, they gave back with cultural patronage, sponsorship and ownership. Theatres and opera

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<sup>16</sup> The Italians financed and staged opera mostly on the basis of three patronage models in the seventeenth century – that of the single noble patron in a non-profit private family theatre or royal theatre, that of the collective patronage under the auspices of *accademie* in for-profit aristocratic or commercial theatre, and that of the privately run and for-profit public theatre, most famously represented in Venice. The leading cultural entrepreneur and opera founder Pierre Perrin under the French king Louis XIV created, with the king’s permission, the hybrid nature of for-profit and privately owned Paris Opera’s identity, part public theatre, part royal academy in order to accord well Perrin’s academic hopes for a French operatic genre with Louis XIV’s political ambitions to raise France above all countries in cultural production. For more see Victoria Johnson, “What is Organizational Imprinting? Cultural Entrepreneurship in the Founding of the Paris Opera” (2007).

houses were their gifts for the citizens of Venice. This was the manner in which they built relationships with the city and its people. Their opera ownership or patronage was far from being anonymous. It was vitally important that all people knew about their cultural and entertaining contributions to the city. This is why the presence of owners in their theatres was crucial for their promotional purposes. The owners of the theatres reserved certain privileges for themselves, for instance, by singling out the best boxes in the theatre and keeping them for decades for private use. When the tenant Antonio Boldù rented Vendramin's *Teatro di San Luca* in 1660, for example, Andrea Vendramin cited his rights as owner to two boxes, number 15 and numbers 7 or 8 in the second order. The Tron family kept six boxes in their *Teatro di San Cassiano* for their own use. At the *Teatro di Santi Giovanni e Paolo*, its famous opera impresario Marco Faustini reserved two boxes, numbers 24 and 25, for "casa Grimani" as owners of the theatre (Glixons 2006:295–301).

It seems that nowhere is this seventeenth-century Venetian-style opera business more evident or better reflected than in nineteenth-century New York. Here, too, the opera house was negotiated as a "special gift" of aristocratic powerbrokers and the newly emerged industrial millionaires to society, like in patrician Venice of the seventeenth century. Perhaps this was more a gift to themselves and to their newly gained social status. The Astor family, otherwise of German origin, appearing in North America during the eighteenth century, were America's first aristocrats. Throughout the nineteenth century, the members of the Astor family were known as "the landlords of New York". As a result, the city was marked with many family namesake places, including the Astor Place in Manhattan where the Astor Opera House erected in 1847. The theatre was built with the intention of attracting only the best patrons or the "uppertens" of New York City. Built by 150 wealthy New Yorkers, this sacred temple of elitist or snobbery-style opera business was there to welcome only the city's elite. The people therefore saw the opera house as a symbol of the yearning for aristocratic distinctiveness among the rich. Limiting the attendance of the lower classes resulted in the deadly Astor Place riot in 1849 that caused twenty-two deaths. The Astor Opera House became not only a national but a social question: "*It was the rich against the poor – the aristocracy against the people*" (McConachie 1988:185). After the riot, the theatre was unable to overcome the negative reputation of being the "Massacre Opera House" at "DisAster Place" and was torn down in 1853. However, the demise of the Astor Opera House spurred New York's elite to build a new opera house that same year, with enough boxes to satisfy the social needs of the oldest and most prominent American Victorian families for the next three decades. The house took the name Academy of Music as this term gave it "respectability". If the term *opera house* countered the stigma of the theatre, then the term *academy* countered the stigma of the opera house. Respectability, however, did not ensure the fluidity or cultural adaptability of the institution and within a period of two decades the house was overstretched socially. New York was changing and in three decades the "academic" opera house became too small to accommodate the growing numbers

of well-to-do families and the industrial *nouveaux riches*. When Mrs Vanderbilt found herself turned down after applying for a box, she and many other new capitalists simply joined together to build and finance an alternative opera house which would accommodate their social needs. It was necessary to build a new opera house for, as the chronicler of the Met Irving Kolodin put it, "*the two Roosevelts, Iselins, Goelets, the Astors, the three Vanderbilts, the Morgans, and others*" (Bereson 2002:132). The first Metropolitan Opera House was thus conceived in 1883 as a social gesture by a score of New York millionaires, businessmen and wealthy families who could not obtain boxes at the old Academy of Music. More precisely, as the growing number of new rich Victorian families, such as Vanderbilts, Roosevelts, Rockefellers, Morgans, Goulds, Whitneys, Wilsons, Goelets, and others, were unable to purchase boxes at the old opera house, they built their own theatre. The new house, with its unprecedented complement of boxes in a "golden horseshoe" was a symbol of the seriousness of the new capitalists' high culture in New York. The new opera was twice as large as the Academy of Music and far more luxurious. After the opening of the new opera the old New York families, such as the Astors, Fish, Van Alens, Mortons, Livingstons and the Barlows, all moved to the Met as it was called. Eulogistically and egoistically, the opera house was a bold auto-gift; a gift with which the new American rich elite complemented itself, and its generation of the wealthy on its massive corporate success and prosperity.

The ambiguous philanthropic motives of cultural patronage often remain rooted in the self-proclamation and self-fulfilling prophesies of the true and sincere value of powerbrokers' commitment to arts and culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Recently, one such "operatic charity" took place in New York in 2008 and was hotly debated in terms of the superficiality of massive financial donation to the arts. American businessman David Koch, the richest man in New York and one of the city's most prominent philanthropists, was criticised by media commentators for his \$100 million gift to the New York City Opera and the New York City Ballet for the renovation that resulted in their state theatre taking his name. Some commentators interpreted Koch's donation through his political activity. Accordingly, by his cultural interests he tended to soften the edge of his political objectives. Many thought that by patronising the New York's opera and ballet theatre, he had tried to minimise his public image as a venal, greedy and overly ambitious entrepreneur in order to get a more communal, cultural and legitimate face. Even more, writes Zachary Woolfe: "*That Mr. Koch's gift was to City Ballet and City Opera, and not to the Met, was a statement. A huge gift to the Met would have offended other people, including, perhaps, the Besses, who give heavily to the Met and are active in the Republican political circles Mr. Koch seems destined to dominate*" (Woolfe 2010:44). Koch's recent patronage challenges the same issues of egoism and altruism as in the times of Caroline Astor or Otto Hermann Kahn, two of the Metropolitan Opera's great Gilded Age patrons. Caroline Astor was a prominent American socialite who dominated New York operatic life in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Famous for being

referred to later in life as “the Mrs. Astor” or simply “Mrs. Astor”, she used the opera house for social rather than artistic reasons. As the queen of society, she carried herself as though she were the queen at the opera house too. The first tier of boxes, the most prestigious part of the auditorium, was called the “Diamond Horseshoe”. And Mrs. Astor always maintained that it was named because of her famous 200 stone diamond necklace, while the other tiers housed the nobodies according to Great Society. After Mrs. Astor’s death, Grace Wilson Vanderbilt, wife of Cornelius Vanderbilt III became the strongest New York operatic patroness. When the era of Mrs. Astor ended, Mrs. Wilson Vanderbilt took over as the queen of society and one of her entertaining spots was in her private box at the Met, where she could receive prominent guests and foreign dignitaries. Her habit of inviting selected people to her private opera box functioned as a kind of gift through which she could generously display herself, her personality and exceptionalism to others.

It thus seems that through all these historical examples of opera patronage and ownership mentioned above from the ancient to modern times, one idea is found at the base, that being the idea of an opera house as a gift to others. It is exactly this idea that relates Madlena Zepter’s contemporary opera patronage, materialised in the form of the Madlenianum, to cultural and operatic patronage in the past, as she herself refers to that by saying “*The same was with the old patrons who gave their name to their foundations*”. When she tried to justify her unusually distinctive cultural contribution to her community or origin, she had recourse, interestingly, to the concept of a gift. In her public appearances and several media releases, she wanted to make the purpose of her private opera house clear. It is her personal gift to the Serbian nation, to her people and the country. However, as such cultural contribution is quite unusual, if not nearly unthinkable nowadays not only in Serbia but in far more metropolitan places too, she had to make a link to the past in order to make her gesture natural, communal, authentic, and legitimately altruistic. When her operatic and cultural patronage receives a proper naturalisation, contextualisation, essentialisation, autochthonisation and historicisation, then it seems she has done something that many influential, wealthy and powerful individuals of their time did before. Opera, which was born in Florence at the end of the sixteenth century, actually started as the special gift of the Medici family to the magnificent wedding festivities of Grand Duke Ferdinand I and Christine of Lorraine in 1589, and later the marriage of Maria de Medici to King Henry IV of France in 1600. This was also the case with the first Monteverdi opera *Orfeo*, sponsored by the Gonzaga family of Mantua to celebrate the wedding of heir to the throne Prince Francesco Gonzaga to Margherita of Savoy. Madlena Zepter did something similar as the French king Louis XIV when he incorporated his private opera house in the palace of Versailles and this act was understood at that time as his gift to his vast Versailles court and French nobility. It was also what national elites of the nineteenth century did when they rewarded the emancipatory political aspirations of their populations across European continent with new cultural temples of national opera. The same could be said of famous Russian industrialist

and philanthropist of the late nineteenth century Savva Mamontov did when he established his Private Opera north of Moscow where he financed opera productions, trained orchestra, taught the most talented Russian singers, invited renowned Russian composers and paid all the expenses.<sup>17</sup> Another Russian merchant and music lover Gavril Solodovnikov also did the same when he opened his Solodovnikov Theatre in Moscow in 1895. The American philanthropist and passionate opera lover Sybil Harrington, the largest individual donor to the Metropolitan Opera in the 1980s and 1990s, also made her mark by giving a single gift of \$20 million, financing 16 new productions in total, making possible some of the Met's most lavish and popular productions, such as Franco Zeffirelli's *La Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Turandot*, supporting television broadcasts, and by donating more than \$30 million in overall to the Met.<sup>18</sup> Another American female philanthropist Ann Ziff did so by giving \$30 million to the Metropolitan Opera in 2010, which was the largest single gift ever given by an individual in its history.<sup>19</sup>

After this rough historical outline of some opera patronage examples we are about to establish a strong relationship between the cultural patronage and the social duty. Accordingly, when we talk about what makes the arts and culture possible in general, the winning combination comes from the web of money, power and ambiguous motives that has for a long time successfully convinced the very rich and powerful that it is their duty to patronise, donate or sponsor large sums of financial capital to support performing arts and opera culture. Some made donations to opera for pragmatic and political reasons, such as self-creation and image management among them; some for economic reasons, such as investing in opera houses to seek new channels of potential income; and some for the truly compelling cultural and artistic reasons, such as a genuine passion for opera. Some donors typically earmarked their big gifts for building projects that would ultimately bear their names, such as Naples's King Charles III in the eighteenth century, the industrial Astor family of nineteenth-century New York, or Madlena Zepter and David Koch. Some gifts, like the one made by Ann Ziff on behalf of her family, were given without any conditions attached.

The tensions between Madlena Zepter's individual operatic endowment and the environmental constraints that have followed her project in Serbia is captured in the idea of cultural entrepreneurship. In this case, this refers both to the initiative and patronage of the Madlenianum's founder and to the constraints represented by the specific cultural and social conditions that structure the historical context in which Madlena Zepter as the founder of her opera house and theatre is embedded. The case of the Madlenianum therefore sheds light on the nature of Madlena Zepter's vision to build a powerful personal cultural legitimacy through the non-collective nature of opera patronage with no backing for her operatic and theatrical

<sup>17</sup> Olga Haldey (2010) *Mamontov's Private Opera*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Tommasini "Sybil Harrington, 89, Supporter of Opera and Medical Charities", *The New York Times*, 19 September 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Robin Pogrebin "Metropolitan Opera Receives \$30 million Gift", *The New York Times*, 26 March 2010.

enterprise. This single act of cultural entrepreneurship suggests that opera can be created today in the organisational context of a privately owned for-profit opera house sponsored by a single patron but devoted prestigiously to the patron's national community. The Madlenianum as a creative place of cultural meeting is in accordance with Madlena Zepter's ambition for Serbian excellence in arts and sciences. The tie of the Madlenianum to its founder is felt not only economically, in receiving money from the entrepreneur's treasury, or organisationally, in providing the opera house and theatre with its explicit and primary goal to present operas, dramas and musicals directly to the general public for money, but also symbolically. Madlena Zepter, in a way, centralised all her dispersed philanthropic projects around the opera house and theatre and raised her personal name above other her corporate names, like "Zepter". Producing opera in this fashion entailed great expenditures for the patroness, whose sheer philanthropic grandeur is meant to affirm the entrepreneurial power of both her and her family. This interpretation will try, in the spirit of the above-mentioned most resonant historical examples of opera patronage, to correct an overemphasis on the economic resources needed for opera entrepreneurs, such as Madlena Zepter, by demonstrating the importance of cultural and symbolic resources such as social circumstances, cultural characteristics and national symbols to her creation and maintenance of new opera house and theatre in Serbia. By making a parallel with Prince Mihailo Obrenović – supposedly the most enlightened Serbian ruler, who built Belgrade's National Theatre in 1868, the year he was assassinated, in an otherwise quite autocratically run country of two replacing Serbian princely dynasties of the nineteenth century, the Obrenović and the Karadjordjević – Madlena Zepter indicates that cultural and symbolic resources appear in her entrepreneurial efforts not only in the form of strict opera patronage that can be strategically mobilised for her own good but also in the form of national myths, models and symbols whose discourses might remain unrecognised by the broader Serbian public. This suggests that her cultural entrepreneurship, including opera and theatrical patronage, is at least in part "cultural" in nature, not economic or corporate. Such personal imprinting on the foundation of an opera institution is important in particular when the opera house and theatre depends upon a single entrepreneurial individual whose cultural imprinting is a complex social process that always involves an entrepreneur's relations with different cultural constraints of the environment. In this light, Madlena Zepter's cultural entrepreneurship and opera patronage must be understood as a way to imprint the dysfunctionality of her private wealth on the utility of Serbian national community. If, as it is argued in this article, Madlena Zepter's opera patronage is related to the reproduction of certain "imprinted" elements of past cultural entrepreneurship in Serbian society and beyond, then it becomes easier to specify what kind of "tradition" is invented in this case, why it is carried, whose "interests" become vested, under what conditions and by what devices. For the Madlenianum's founder, this individual process of opera patronage and cultural entrepreneurship involves the following consequences: first, a patroness with a firm cultural vision for the creation of a highly distinguished cultural

products which can be behind the hidden political goals of pacifism, pluralism and altruism “democratically” offered to the operationally remote country of Serbia; second, a philanthropist whose opera house and theatre represents an extraordinarily generous “gift” to the Serbian nation; and third, an entrepreneur whose private and perhaps in public negatively-contested economic capital is transformed into a communal and positively-coloured cultural and symbolic capital.

To answer the question why it is easier to understand and accept Madlena Zepter’s private operatic endowment when it is interpreted by people as an altruistic gift to society rather than an egoistic project of image self-creation, then the foregoing comments afford further reference to the gift theory which will be incorporated in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary manner in our interpretation through two, to use philosophical vocabulary, aporias of gift-giving phenomenon: first, through reciprocity (characterised by functionality, interest, referentiality); and second, through generosity (founded by non-functionality, disinterestedness, non-referentiality). In what follows, I discuss both aporias by referring to notable theoreticians in order to see how these aporias function in our operatic example from Belgrade. In order to test the value and the meaning of these two aporias, two hypothesis related to them will be discussed.

*1. Madlena Zepter’s Opera and Theatre Madlenianum is a self-interested gift complementing her own corporate success in order to achieve wider social recognition; a gift generating a carefully designed positive image of the philanthropic patroness while masking the real, interested nature of her exchange behind complicated artifices of generosity.*

Ever since French sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss published his seminal work *The Gift* in 1924 (originally entitled *Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques* [An essay on the gift: the form and reason of exchange in archaic societies]), sociologists and anthropologists tend to understand gifts as forms of reciprocity, or from the perspective of gift exchange. When investigating and comparing the economic practices of various so-called archaic societies, Mauss found that their exchange systems centre on the obligations to give, receive, and most importantly, to reciprocate. According to Mauss, the gift-economy is governed by the norm of reciprocity, as a gift always comes with the expectation of a counter-gift. Gift-giving is therefore an economic transaction which creates a debt to give a gift in return. Some anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, connected gifts with social control, strategic manoeuvring and the calculating mind. Lévi-Strauss wrote that “goods are not only economic commodities but vehicles and instruments for realities of another order: influence, power, sympathy, status, emotion; and the skilful game of exchange consists of a complex totality of maneuvers, conscious or unconscious, in order to gain security and to fortify one’s self against risks incurred through alliances and rivalry” (Lévi-Strauss 1965:76, as quoted in Schwartz 1967:3–4). In other words, the regulation of one’s bonds to others is part of the matter of the exchange of goods.

The principle of reciprocity may thus be used as a tool in the aspiration for gaining social recognition, fortifying status and protecting honour.

Whereas the idea of a socially integrating Maussian gift exchange and of a socially controlling Lévi-Straussian gift reciprocity resonated dominantly among anthropologists, those ideas have provoked many academic reactions within various disciplines of social sciences and the humanities, particularly in philosophy. As the author of *The Gift* must have himself admitted that gift-giving and exchange practices could often be self-interested and not oriented toward others, this obscure controversy within the gift-giving economy has certainly not left philosophers indifferent. If Mauss understood the gift as a collective practice and even a prototypical social contract which helps integrate society and optimise people's behaviours, Jacques Derrida's understanding of the gift is in direct opposition. In his seminal work entitled *Given Time 1: Counterfeit Money* (1992), Derrida centres his position around this crucial paradox of the gift: the gift is impossible because a true gift would presuppose the total absence of return (counter-gift). The true gift, according to Derrida, is the unconditional gift, and entirely gratuitous: "For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter gift or debt" (Derrida 1992:12). A pure gift is, therefore, by definition non-economic, non-calculable, non-tactical and irreconcilable with reciprocity. In other words, the gesture of giving a gift or donating must not be suspended on the condition of any donor's or giver's context, dependence, affiliation or relationship (see also Champetier 2001:15, translated according to the French original *Home Consumans*, 1994; also Bajde 2005:177). Such a position places Derrida in direct opposition to the anthropological and ethnological tradition.<sup>20</sup>

Even though Derrida takes a very idealistic and often contested position, his incontestable equation of the gift with gratuity opens an interesting avenue of reflection. If public gifts are calculable, or egoistically given in order to compliment the donor themselves, then such patronage could be defined as an incentive system through which gifts are nothing but a strategic currency with which donors can "purchase" their philanthropic activities and responses to them. Following this, a self-interested gift is focused on the donor, not on those to whom the gift is given. Patronage based on self-interested gifts or auto-gifts is usually seen as unproductive, destructive or even a corrupt activity that cannot contribute to the progress or improvement of society as its goal is only to build the auratic or fake "cult of personality" around the donor's name and person. Expectedly, self-interested, egoistic and calculable patronage is, in most social situations, accompanied with a suspicion and negative valence, if not entirely demonised. This negative valence is supported by an idea that a patron or Maecenas uses or could use patronage as a strategic tool to achieve certain goals or effects in public, and in return expects or would expect a degree of loyalty and of dependence from the recipients or of acceptance and recognition from the broader society. This can

<sup>20</sup> See Caillé 2000; Godbout 2000; Godbout and Caillé 1992; Graeber 2001; Komter 1996; Magnani 2007; Osteen 2002 and 2005; Sherry 1983; Vandeveld 2000.

become so strong and pervasive in some places that patronage can produce counter-effects and consequently be discredited. This often happens in cases of so-called “tactical patronage”, to paraphrase Domonic A. Bearfield (2009:70). Tactical patronage is a means not only for consolidating power in ways that allow patrons to increase or maintain their scope of power or influence but for transforming his or her latent, private, egoistical intention into a visible, public, altruistic good or service. Returning to our operatic example, Madlena Zepter’s operatic patronage has often been interpreted through the cult of personalism and self-glorification. This has turned her legitimate operatic gift, packaged in the form of a private opera house and theatre, into a highly contested narrative of suspicious if not excessive and unacceptable form of public management of her philanthropic personalism. Initially, the ex-Yugoslav media had great difficulty understanding her operatic gift as a truly altruistic and sincere act. Many thought of her operatic patronage as a way to put a philanthropic mask on the Zepters’ greedy entrepreneurial face. For those most critical and doubtful views, she was just the wife of a tycoon who took the advantage of his closeness to the then political regime and adapted resourcefully to the turbulent economic situation in Serbia which existed at the time.

The aporia of reciprocity that surrounds the Madlenianum as a private gift to the nation revolves around the suspicion that an opera house and theatre simply cannot be a genuine gift. More concretely, an opera house and theatre cannot be understood as a true gift without expecting any kind of return from the donor. Seen through a Derridian perspective, a private opera house and theatre as gift to the community already contains an implicit demand that such a “genuine gift” can reside only inside the corporate logic of giving and taking. Therefore, the Madlenianum is hard to imagine beyond any mere self-interest or calculative reasoning. If a private opera house and theatre is recompense for public recognition, then it cannot appear to be a true gift, because it implicitly or explicitly involves reciprocity. Significantly, in the eyes of critical viewers, the Madlenianum as a private gift to the community is drawn into the cycle of giving and taking, where a philanthropic deed is expected to be accompanied by a suitable response in the form of public recognition, social acceptance, and perhaps subsumes audience attendance to the opera too. As Madlena Zepter’s operatic gesture is indispensably associated with a command to respond, it can be seen as an imposition upon the community which perhaps is not willing to understand or ready to accept such gift from the donor. This is perhaps the main reason why her gift was understood by some people in Serbia only as an opportunity to benefit the donor, who gives just to receive acknowledgement from others. There are undoubtedly many other points of view through which her gift can be considered, and not necessarily deliberately be understood as receiving by egocentric and excessive giving.

However, Maussian, Lévi-Straussian and particularly Derridian perspectives on reciprocity are instructive in order to query the very possibility of philanthropic giving that can be unequivocally disassociated from the logic of receiving and

taking. Still, the disturbing question about Madlena Zepter's operatic gift remains open to debate. Is it the excessive visibility, publicity and materiality of her cultural gift? Let us respond to this dilemma in a Derridarian manner. For Derrida, a genuine gift requires the anonymity of the giver so that there is no accrued benefit in giving nor is there expectation of reciprocity. The donor who would reabsorb his or her gift to others as some kind of testimony to the worth of his or her self, according to Derridarian perspective, actually abolishes his or her gift. Among the ways in which Madlena Zepter communicated her unique operatic gift to the community in the media was the kind of self-congratulatory rhetoric, her opera house and theatre could logically be taken as a self-interested gift complementing her own corporate success in order to gain wider social acceptance and public recognition. This hypothesis would persuasively find its supportive argument in Pierre Bourdieu's early gift theory. For him, gift exchange based on reciprocity is repeatedly addressed as a paradigmatic part of "the economy of symbolic goods" in general (e. g. Bourdieu 1994:184, 1998:98 in Silber 2009:175) and specifically, of the fundamental operation of social alchemy that transforms any type of capital into symbolic capital (e. g. Bourdieu 1972:348 ff, 1977:192; also 1980:110, 1990:188, 209–231 both in Silber 2009:175). What he sees in gift giving as reciprocity are two contradictory aspects or opposing "truths" about gift exchange. On the one hand, the gift exchange sustains the fiction of spontaneous, disinterested giving, but on the other hand the gift represses the actual truth of reciprocity and its ultimate basis in economic capital. Accordingly, Madlena Zepter's operatic gift has a "double truth". Argued in a critical and debunking Bourdieuesque tone, the Madlenianum is about the coexistence of two contradictory "truths" by making it possible to sustain the fiction of her disinterested, altruistic, benevolent cultural patronage while masking or dissimulating the actual truth of the founding the opera house and theatre and its ultimate basis in capital, corporate logic and self-interest. Here, the opera house and theatre are not just a function of how one's immense economical capital can be successfully transformed into a symbolic in form of public recognition, but they represent a "fiction" indicating that such a gift needs or expects no counter-gift. Behind Madlena Zepter's media attempts to persuade the Serbian public about her true, sincere and benevolent cultural patronage and philanthropy was hidden a subtler demand and strategic plan on how to gain wider public recognition. Thus, rather than framed as two equally valid "truths" of the Madlenianum, the non-reciprocal truth could actually be invalidated as "fiction" or a "masque" covering the other, which is represented by a reciprocal economy. The opera house and theatre as one's private gift to the community is only a fiction trying to persuade others that such eminently "on-stage" social action is not supported by "off-stage" or "back-stage" interests.

By extending his negative approach to the gift into the context of modern societies, Bourdieu stresses the development of a fictive ideology of pure, autonomous, strictly cultural, artistic or aesthetic "disinterested" interests as the historical product of capitalism, and opposes a restricted definition of material

interests (Bourdieu 1977:177, 1972:361 in Silber 2009:178). Furthermore, it is worth noting his equally critical interpretation of modern forms of the gift, such as foundations and corporate philanthropy which are berated as symptomatic of “*a return to forms of symbolic violence again based on dissimulation of the mechanisms of reproduction through the conversion of economic into symbolic capital,*” and as a “*private form of legitimacy-giving redistribution through which the efficacy of the mechanisms of reproduction is exerted*” (Bourdieu [1972]1977: 196, 1990:133, 1980:230 in Silber 2009:178). In pejorative early-Bourdieu-esque terms, Madlena Zepter’s Madlenianum should be taken as part and parcel of all those social “evils” and masking mechanisms, turning self-interested interests into “disinterested” interests, perhaps even partly rooted in “sincere”, “benevolent”, “spontaneous” and shared fictions.

2. *Madlena Zepter’s Opera and Theatre Madlenianum is a generous gift delivered to her nation altruistically and disinterestedly; a gift which magnanimously transforms private wealth into public good and entrepreneurial ambition into artistic pleasure.*

In spite of the fact that Mauss constructed his gift theory fundamentally around the “economic” concept of reciprocity as a specific symbolic system of exchange among individuals and groups, some of his followers subscribe to narrower depictions of gifts as more harmonious, altruistic social contracts and exchanges often disguised as disinterested generosity. Here arises the key question whether the operatic gesture of Madlena Zepter can be treated as a generous act. Is the Madlenianum opera house and theatre just an unusual way in which a private or intimate intention of a rich and high-minded person can become the material manifestation of her magnanimous generosity? The aporia of generosity was highly praised within certain academic disciplines, particular in philosophy. The American philosopher Lester H. Hunt, in one of his earlier articles, searched for an answer to what is the generosity about that several notable philosophers concerned with it so distinctively. The philosophers of the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance periods often treated generosity as an important subject. Though Plato ignored it, Aristotle devoted a substantial chapter to generosity, as did Thomas Aquinas. Indeed, in Book IV of *The Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle recognised two different virtues that could be regarded as subspecies of generosity: *eleutheria* (“freedom”) and *megaloprepeia* (“magnanimity”). A generous act is done, according to Aristotle, because of the value of the act itself, not for the sake of some other good it will bring the giver in return. In the treatise *The Passions of the Soul*, the French philosopher René Descartes suggested that generosity is “*the key of all the virtues, and a general remedy for all the disorders of the passions*”. The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza discussed generosity in his *Ethics* and treated it as intimately connected with freedom. After that, philosophers seem to have lost interest in the idea of generosity, until the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche reaffirmed it as “the highest virtue” calling it a “gift-giving virtue” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Hunt speculates that most likely, Spinoza’s *generositas* and

Nietzsche's gift-giving virtue are best understood as a super-virtue, a sort of generous-mindedness, of which the trait that we ordinarily call generosity is a natural consequence. Following Descartes, and Spinoza, French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre also connected generosity with freedom by stating, "*I call a feeling generous which has its origin and its end in freedom*" (Hunt 1975:235, 242, also Schrift 1997:1–7).

Due to these philosophical definitions and remarks, it seems that a generous act cannot be simply treated as an act of giving something to someone. What features does the aporia of generosity have that other ways of giving do not have? Or, in other words, what are the characteristics which seem to distinguish generosity from virtues that have received far more attention from philosophers, such as justice, charity, tolerance, mercy, solidarity, altruism, philanthropy and similar ethical concepts? Giving, donation, patronage or sponsorship done in order to fulfil one's "obligation" or "duty", for instance, is not a generous act. The same would be true of a person, Hunt writes, who gives to charity because he or she has a neurotic feeling of guilt about the suffering in the world. Charity is not generosity. If a rich entrepreneur or a powerbroker donates money or material wealth because he or she feels guilt toward someone or toward his or her community, his or her act of giving can be compared to an attempt to pay a debt. Making a donation, sponsorship or patronage aims at giving someone what is owed to him or her. In other words, to feel guilt toward community means partly to feel that the entrepreneur or patron owes other people something, and to give them something in atonement is to give them what is thought to be his or her due.

There is another sort of giving or donating which can be distinguished from generosity; that in which something is given to someone because the giver is thought to deserve it. Such act of giving may be just, but not generous. Hunt claims that generosity, as perhaps tolerance and mercy as well, includes a certain disregard for merit, reward or remuneration. In comparison to justice, generosity is a sort of disregard which can be liable to criticism at times. There is a sort of tension between generosity on the one hand and justice in the form of recognising and rewarding personal or collective merit on the other. Generous acts can be just but sometimes can go beyond justice. More concretely, it is not unjust to benefit oneself less than one deserves nor to benefit someone else more than they deserve, but only the reverse. Between the ideals of justice and generosity is not, according to Hunt, merely a difference but more a tension, also supported by the very familiar fact that persons who are remarkably just are not likely to be especially generous, and vice versa. The point of generosity is that what is given is not given because it is the recipient's due (Hunt 1975:236–237).

There is another distinction made by Hunt, between generosity and altruism. Some people believe that one always ought to act in such a way that one's own interests are subordinate to the interests of others. This doctrine is called altruism which is a very different sort of act from generosity. Generous acts are not internally related to the patron's interests, and so do not necessarily involve subordination of his or her interests to those of anyone else. Accordingly, they do

not, as such, represent sacrifices. Also, when someone follows the principle of altruism, he or she necessarily acts on the basis of some beliefs he or she has about the particular situation of the recipient or other people, and this is not true of acting generously. Altruism is a concept of giving which, unlike generosity, could be used by someone who managed to see all meritorious action as instances of doing what is required of us according to a moral system of rules, duties, commitments, or social responsibilities. As Hunt asserts, no such moral requirements are compatible with generosity (Hunt 1975:243–244).

Now that we know what generosity is not, the question of what it is still remains. In order to give the answer Hunt refers to the ancient Greek concept of generosity or *eleutheriotēs*. We learned from ancient philosophers, for instance Aristotle, that the *aporia* of generosity has something to do with the “intention” or “reason” for which a generous act is done, in the restricted sense of what the giver is trying to accomplish. The ancient Greeks believed that a person who gives something generously intends by that act to do some good for the individual or the collective to whom it is given. This is necessary, whatever may be true about what the giver feels. The intention is the most important thing in identifying generosity. If the intentions of an entrepreneurial patron or sponsor are to please people, to flatter them, or find out what other people want and believe about his or her act of giving rather than toward what is good in his or her act of giving, or toward giving in order to gain benefits in return, such a patron, sponsor or donor fails to be a generous person. Hunt is clear, the intention in generous acts is and must be gratuitous: “*The contrast between generosity and these other ways of acting is not a matter of having two different intentions, or standing in certain relations to other people and having certain emotions; it is a matter of having certain intentions and not having them*” (Hunt 1975:239). Accordingly, the generous intention is gratuitous or groundless. The act of generosity must be free of expectation and never a means of public recognition and self-promoting behaviours. When Madlena Zepter founded the opera house and theatre, the majority of the Serbian community believed that she was not being generous to them because of her actions. They thought she was acting in order to receive their recognition. In general, no act can be generous in which one thing is given in order to receive another, in which an attempt is made to purchase something. This principle applies not only to securing Madlena Zepter’s potential material benefits coming from the operatic and theatrical enterprise, but to securing any benefit at all. No one would call it generous, for instance, if Madlena Zepter was to give an opera house and theatre to the Serbian people only in order to win the nation’s affection. If so, then she was or would be trying to purchase the recognition of the Serbian community. Such an intention would also go with acts that are ordinarily called selfish, egoistic or self-interested. In several interviews, Madlena Zepter categorically denied such criticism by claiming that her cultural patronage has always been based on her true philanthropy only. Some critics nevertheless have doubted that is it generous to build an opera house and theatre as well as provide the funds necessary to run them in a community wherein the majority of people have needs much more

fundamental than the social and existential need for opera, drama or musicals. Regardless of this fact, whether her intention to donate an opera house and theatre to the Serbian people was truly generous or was entirely corporate, she has successfully purchased her philanthropic lifestyle, cultural self and charitable identity directly through her major operatic and theatrical creation. In certain interviews one can note Madlena Zepter's subtle attempts to place her incredible cultural patronage in the Serbian pantheon of great men. By referring to them, she actually wanted to show how her contribution to the nation should be understood and evaluated. Her financial generosity was therefore often contested if not entirely denied because her public acts of cultural patronage have not consistently indicated that she had no other calculable or hidden reason in supporting culture or the arts except simply enjoying being generous.

Here we see that generosity as an ethical idea can represent an inexorable public arena of morality where the acts of the rich are evaluated according to the highest standard of social judgement. No matter how true Madlena Zepter's personal devotion to culture, opera, theatre or arts really is, there will always be a grain of scepticism regarding her altruistic cultural patronage and benevolent philanthropy. If there is any motive behind giving an opera house and theatre, then her gift remains perceived as ungenerous. If she did this because giving was an opportunity to do some good for others and so display virtue, then there is another obstacle as generosity should not mean successfully rendering benefits to people. Her opera house and theatre will be perceived as a generous gift to the nation only when she successfully proves that she had no reason at all for acting as she did. Paradoxically, her gift becomes an ethical or moral act only when the Madlenianum appears to be something entirely non-functional in the eyes of others. Here it is therefore possible to parallel Hunt's idea about the gratuitousness or groundlessness of generosity with another interesting concept, namely with the idea of disinterestedness as defined by Pierre Bourdieu.

In his earlier works, it seems that Bourdieu related the "gift paradigm" primarily with very critical epistemic terms, such as *illusio* or obfuscating fiction and did not believe that disinterested or truly generous giving is possible in reality. However, Alain Caillé identified a significant turning point in Bourdieu's writing in the late 1980s. The "second" Bourdieu, as Caillé sees it, seems to replace his earlier use of the notion of "interest" increasingly with the issue of disinterestedness. Even though the epistemic frame through which disinterested giving is bound to return in the shape of symbolic capital and thus also ultimately of social and economic capital (Caillé 1994:244 in Silber 2009:179) the issue of disinterestedness remains much the same, his revisiting of the gift and bringing it in line with new theoretical developments in his work made him to consolidate and reframe his earlier interest-oriented gift theory. Ilana F. Silber sees the most relevant feature in this regard as a systematic theoretical link between Bourdieu's earlier ideas on the gift and more generally, the economy of symbolic goods, of which the gift is held as paradigmatic, and other key concepts, mainly habitus and field. The result is a new focus on the social conditions that make disinterestedness

possible by generating adequate internal predispositions in the form of a generous habitus, and by providing for a corresponding structure of rewards mainly in the form of symbolic capital. In contrast to Derrida, for whom the gift is impossible, *“Bourdieu proffers that disinterestedness is indeed sociologically possible; not as a matter of conscious choice or deliberation, but rather as a sort of spontaneous, automatic, or irresistible practice, limited to social informed by a habitus of generous dispositions, and in the contexts of social structures making it plausible and worthwhile for many actors ... to behave in a generous, disinterested fashion”* (Silber 2009:180). Thus, for Bourdieu of the second phase there is a real possibility for truly disinterested behaviour without any hidden intent to maximise some sort of profit or particular interest. However, generosity as an entirely disinterested act needs a certain social context, as Bourdieu himself establishes: *“If disinterestedness is sociologically possible, it can be so only through the encounter between habitus predisposed to disinterestedness and the universes in which disinterestedness is rewarded”* (Bourdieu 1994:164, 1998:88 in Silber 2009:180). For Derrida, for instance, the gift does not really exist since it loses its disinterested, generous or non-calculable dimension from the very moment the donor perceives or represents it (even if only to himself or herself) as such. Bourdieu nevertheless admits the existence of certain practices through which sincere, generous or disinterested giving is possible. Even more, he supposes a form of interest that he describes as *“interest in disinterestedness”* (Bourdieu 1998: 85). It can be said, according to Bourdieu, that the social practices we execute subjectively in our lives are able to create the objective social conditions for social actors to bear interest, paradoxically, in disinterestedness. Moreover, in one of his later texts Bourdieu equates disinterestedness and generosity by stating that the question of *“whether generosity and disinterestedness are possible should give way ... to create universes in which ... people have an interest in disinterestedness and generosity”* (Bourdieu 1997:240). Bourdieu’s late positive and prescriptive valorisation of disinterestedness by equalling it with some other expressions of concern such as kindness, consideration, advice, generosity, charity, devotion, pity and love, also offers a productive theoretical context in which Madlena Zepter’s operatic and theatrical sponsorship can be interpreted as a generous act seeking to achieve democratic or egalitarian goals using patronage. Paraphrasing Bearfield, *“democratic patronage”* seeks to use the patronage function as a means for providing access and opportunity in the distribution of cultural goods (Bearfield 2009:70–71). The Madlenianum was constituted to serve this democratic and pluralistic goal in Serbia, as Madlena Zepter herself implicitly stated in some newspaper interviews.

In societies or cultural milieus, the “third” Bourdieu reminds us where generosity is framed by a context in which the demand for gift return or reciprocity is so foundational to social practice that economic capital is transfigured into social capital and symbolic capital, acts of disinterested generosity are usually tested by some sort of social “hermeneutics of suspicion”. In other words, in communities where all disinterested behaviours are constantly

put under suspicion of hidden interest or calculable intent, social agents are often neither well informed by a habitus of generous dispositions nor well equipped to take a position in such habitus and perform generous acts. Madlena Zepter herself gave some hints in her public statements, particularly those referring to the reception of her philanthropic acts in Serbia, expressing a certain degree of personal dissatisfaction or disappointment that her philanthropic generosity is often perceived as calculated, egoistic, self-interested. Such social hermeneutics of suspicion has created certain collective modes of interpretations in Serbian society that systematically suspect any of the Zepters' actions for the sake of a universal, public, or altruistic interest as in fact rooted in their particular interests and as masking their corporate intentions. Today, disinterested or generous giving emerges as something that has been unduly suppressed by neo-liberalism or turbo-capitalism and that needs to be cultivated once again. Having this strikingly untypical Bourdieuesque view in mind, Madlena Zepter's Madlenianum appears to be possible as a generous gift only where there are social conditions capable of nurturing and rewarding the dispositions that make people durably "interested in generosity". Contextually, even though the whole Serbian community has perhaps not been entirely ready to appreciate the Zepters' praiseworthy cultural patronage and estimable philanthropy, Madlena Zepter persuasively took the eminent position of a generous person who broke new ground with her impressive operatic and theatrical endowment in Belgrade, as there has been no one like her in Serbia for a very long time.

#### 4. Conclusion

Madlena Zepter's Madlenianum is a parasitical gift generating her person of interests through social performances of disinterestedness, and by mixing these two contrasting identities successfully transforming economic capital into social, cultural and symbolic capital. Madlena Zepter's operatic gift can also be seen through its relevance for the development and maintenance of her identity. The acceptance of a gift, as is suggested by Barry Schwartz, is in fact an acceptance of the giver's ideas. In other words, gifts are generators of identity and expressions of social standing. Gifts are one of the ways in which the pictures that others have of givers in their minds are transmitted (Schwartz 1967:1). Slovenian sociologist and theoretician of communication Tadej Praprotnik draws his attention to the "active", "negotiating" and "changeable" ways in which individuals create their identities as they constantly seek to class themselves and others in establishing relationships. When "*individuals ascribe meanings to things and relationships and make sense of them, they do not necessarily, by doing that, place themselves into a certain 'prescribed' or anticipated identity, but (also) co-create their identities*" (Praprotnik 2012:31). This is why a gift always imposes an identity upon the giver as well as the recipient. As a result, we could conclude that the Madlenianum is Madlena Zepter's interestedly disinterested way of belonging to an identity that

she shares and actively co-creates with others through her pragmatic actions. The Madlenianum as a gift not only embodies her character, humanistic education, social standing, and economic affluence, but impose an idea which people evoke in their imagination of the donor. Even more, the Madlenianum appears to be Madlena Zepter's prestigious source of her self-concept. Her opera house and theatre is her "idea of herself" which, when made public and communicated through media, is found between self-defining and other-defining.

We have seen throughout the history of opera patronage sketched earlier in this article that patrons, donors or sponsors presented themselves publicly by the conspicuous presentation of opera houses, composers, or operatic works as gifts. Such interestedly disinterested contributions to societies and communities have always been a source of prestige, but also a very useful tool of a powerful interiority and exteriority of a libidinal economy and its indisputable social inscription on people. This was especially true when such gestures were made by individuals rather than official authorities or corporations, and were carried to an extreme by the members of European or North-American opera society, for whom owning an opera house or sponsoring an excellent opera composer or famous singer was an aspect of public relations. Madlena Zepter belongs to this high-minded tradition. She has affixed her cultural patronage and operatic identity to the front door of the Zepters' entrepreneurial capital in order to certify the family's willingness and ability to give away wealth. Opera has thus become an important mode of the public presentation of herself. Further, the Madlenianum is a status gift which is publicly presented as an achievement gift. The Madlenianum, whether be taken as a status gift or an achievement gift, represents a material objectification of Madlena Zepter's social bonds and the degree of prestige and honour. The ceremonial display of such objectifications is a powerful element of the Zepters who not only sought to make their international bonds and success known in the homeland through the opera house and theatre but also to transform private wealth into public good. At this point, the Madlenianum as a gift appears to be an idea of performativity and theatricality. It belongs, to paraphrase Jean-François Lyotard, to semiology of the patroness and her property, "*and the generous transgression of this property*" (Lyotard 1993:123). This is particularly so when it comes to the ownership of an opera house and musical theatre the running of which has always been a costly business often accompanied by inherent managerial tensions, financial problems and economic difficulties.<sup>21</sup>

Opera houses are almost exclusively run as non-profit institutions which need the charity, philanthropy and patronage of individuals and collectives. Most

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<sup>21</sup> See William J. Baumol and William G. Bowen (1966) *Performing Arts – The Economic Dilemma*, 28–30, 305–387. New York: The Twentieth Century Fund; Thomas Auvinen (2001) "Why Is It Difficult to Manage an Opera House? The Artistic-Economic Dichotomy and Its Manifestations in the Organizational Structures of Five Opera Organizations," *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 30, 4, 268–282; Jennifer Kuan (2001) "The Phantom Profits of the Opera: Nonprofit Ownership in the Arts as a Make-Buy Decision" *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization*. 17, 2, 507–520.

researchers assume that non-profit ownership or patronage of an opera house or musical theatre is driven by some purpose other than profit maximisation. Accordingly, those who finance opera today pursue social goals rather than economic, since most people consider charity, generosity and philanthropy to be important parts of the makeup of wealthy individuals. There is no question that wealthy individuals have charitable or philanthropic intentions. It is just not always directly observable when and how the economic capital of today's donors, patrons and trustees is efficiently transformed into social, cultural and symbolic capital. Donations and charitable support of opera houses and theatres are often covered by several ideological mechanisms of "transcendental illusions", including social goals such as preserving the arts for posterity, promoting culture among young people, increasing access to opera for the poor, bringing "different social agents to common ground"<sup>22</sup>, binding people and making *communitas* in a proper ritualistic manner, equating donors and patrons with non-donors and the rest etc. The social status of donors and patrons is always associated with charity, generosity, altruism and philanthropy. Among donors and patrons, pure personal consumption of opera is rarely given as the only explanation for their philanthropic activities. Interestingly, it has been observed that some people who donate money to opera houses or musical theatres are not necessarily also consumers of this art form. For opera donors as non-consumers, there are certainly other motives, perhaps the pressure to spend money according to one's peer group or the desire to behave appropriately according to one's professional identity that brings them cultural benefit and symbolic profits in the social nomenclature.<sup>23</sup>

The central point of our interpretation otherwise divided into two aporias of gift theory, reciprocity and generosity, did not corroborate whether the story of Madlena Zepter's Madlenianum belongs more to the first aporia or the second. On the contrary, our task was to conclude that this special operatic gift behaves parasitically in both aporias at the same time. Reciprocity is, in this case, burdened by several negative notions, such as egoism, self-interest, illusion, fiction, masque, calculability, and corporativism. Generosity is a positive counterpoint entirely, and with a very special quality evocating altruism, benevolence, disinterestedness, truth, sincerity, principles, devotion to arts, noble-mindedness, charity, solidarity. Our interpretation evidences that reciprocity and generosity, as two central aporias of gift giving, contrast more significantly to each other than with other concepts. However, whether we are preoccupied with the reciprocity or generosity of Madlena Zepter's giving, it is important to see that the two relate differently to her behaviour. Whereas reciprocity is an aspect of the person, generosity applies to an act only. However, since both reciprocity and generosity are ascribed through social interactions and discourses, any assessment of either must be anchored in a

<sup>22</sup> See Vlado Kotnik (2013) "The Adaptability of Opera: When Different Social Agents Come to Common Ground," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 44, 2, 303–342.

<sup>23</sup> See Francie Ostrower (1998) "The Arts as Cultural Capital Among Elites: Bourdieu's Theory Reconsidered" *Poetics* 26, 43–53.

contextual analysis to determine the nature of social circumstances and relationships through which people reach the competence to understand and appreciate or to ignore and disregard Madlena Zepter's practice of reciprocity and generosity in the field of opera and theatre patronage. The analytical reason here is implied in the understanding of Madlena Zepter's generosity as an elementary property of her action in opera and theatre patronage, as long as she is successful in following the prescriptions of moral behaviour such as philanthropy and charity. However, generosity as her strongest symbolic capital can be depleted in a moment by any improper conduct of her reciprocal affairs. Both reciprocity and generosity are inherent ingredients of Zepter's operatic gift. If the strongest argument for her opera and theatre patronage goes with generosity, then the gift is the proof that her generosity is more with her person than with her act. If, however, the gift is predominantly perceived as the product of reciprocal logic, then her generosity is with her act only, while reciprocity is attributed to her true person. In other words, the reciprocity and generosity of Zepter's gift are neither a form of belief (through presentation of one's self) nor a condition of social standing (through performance of one's social superiority), but situational concepts which are located in the context of different select discourses.

The Madlenianum as a gift crosses several contrasting lines: emotional, psychological or motivational (egoism vs. altruism, interest vs. disinterestedness); social, political or cultural (private vs. public); economic, financial or managerial (artistic vs. entrepreneurial); and moral or ethical (sincere vs. false, truth vs. fiction). The complexity and fluidity of social descriptions, inscriptions, ascriptions and self-ascriptions do not allow construction of a simple antagonism between positive and negative correlates. This does not suppose a total lack of correlation, but rather that a negative and positive correlation between the sources of Zepter's reciprocity and generosity is not a matter of simple deduction. For instance, her self-ascribed altruism is interchangeable with ascribed egoism; private wealth is counter-changed with public deed; ascribed self-interest or whatever interest inscribed is treated as a lack of her disinterestedness by others; her patronage is seen as a masking mechanism for her entrepreneurial money; generosity is placed on the other side of reciprocity; honour is contrasted with suspicion; esteem with calculability; nobleness with artifice; prestige with social exclusiveness; self-ascribed and ascribed dignity with inscribed contestable provenience of wealth; ascribed respect with ascribed doubt; self-ascribed and ascribed glorification with inscribed repudiation; self-ascribed and ascribed eulogy with inscribed misunderstanding; her personal cosmopolitanism with the community's provincialism; her declared devotion to arts with ascribed corporativism; her philanthropy with business; her indispensable reputation as opera patroness with the flat image of the wife of a tycoon; her self-ascribed aestheticism with ascribed tastelessness of corporate success; the visibility of the opera house and theatre with mysteriousness of great money; the opera house and theatre as an objective gift to the nation with the patroness's subjective or partial reality of her generosity; the placement of the patroness's name in the centre of Serbian cultural

scene with mode of domination and superiority; individual commitment to the collective good with potentially intrusive social control of donor with her own, particular agendas; the positive role of her philanthropic foundation with negative forms of symbolic violence based on dissimulation of the mechanisms of reproduction through the conversion of economic into symbolic capital; the media spectacle of her operatic gift with a lack of anonymous charitable giving; sponsoring opera in circumstances of great social distance between the patroness and recipients with ideological imposition of becoming a respectable member of the community; etc. Each of these discursive correlations mentioned above may convey a sense of respect or insult, represent a gesture of elevation or degradation, and execute a practice of praise or critique. Moreover, those correlations may have much less to do with Madlena Zepter's actual wealth or actual devotion to opera and theatre than with the extent to which she is treated as a privileged individual through categories of public evaluation and judgement of others.

The Belgrade operatic example affirms the conclusion that opera was and remains an eminent social domain for the rich and powerful to display their cultural selves, financial and symbolic exchanges as well as social statements or manifests. Opera enables contemporary powerbrokers, financiers, sponsors, patrons, benefactors, philanthropists and appreciators to legitimise their power, hierarchy and social standing. Thus, the private operatic temple in Belgrade, no less than the operatic projects of the Vanderbilts, Roosevelts, Rockefellers, Morgans, Astors and their vast Victorian families in late 19th century corporate New York, of the imperial electorate of Bavaria from the king Maximilian I to the king of Ludwig II, of the last king of Hannover George V, of the Brandenburg-Bayreuth ruling couple in 18th century Franconia, of the Hohenzollern dynasty in Prussian Berlin, of Bourbon Naples under Charles VI and Charles VII, of the magnificent Louis XIV's court in Versailles, of the influential Auerspergs in late 17th century Ljubljana, of the independent and with republicanism inspired patrician oligarchy of 17th century Venice, of the Gonzaga House in Mantua and the Medici family in late Renaissance Florence, serves the Zepters to navigate their social status and positioning.

Madlena Zepter's philanthropic project suggests how an opera house and theatre can be a meaningful performative act that surrounds and contributes to the "cultural performance" of her family name, or her personal lifestyle and values, of her internationally composed circle of rich peers, or of the Serbian society to which she would like to more authentically belong than probably Serbian citizens would consider her. In other words, opera can be a very transformative cultural practice, even when it is owned, patronised, produced and donated at the cultural periphery of Europe.

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