

## CONTEMPORARY MUSIC(AL) THEATRE IN LATVIA: PROBLEM OF DEFINITIONS AND FORMATS

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### Abstract

The article aims to discuss the existing problem in contemporary art criticism, when previous genre definitions and descriptions do not match to current phenomena in question. The contemporary music(al) theatre productions tend to be diverse and often produced as hybrids, interdisciplinary projects that do not allow a single method of analysis characteristic to one of the combined artistic disciplines. The three examples provided are defined by their authors as a contemporary chamber opera, a contemporary musical and opera-film, showing the diversity of music(al) theatre genres emerging today in new form. The author concludes that the hybridization of genres and the devised creation method implies the questioning of former analytical instruments and discourses in order to develop the criticism of performing arts along with the research subject.

**Keywords:** *musical theatre, music theatre, hybrid genres, definitions, criticism.*

The increasing proportion of interdisciplinarity in musical genres of performing arts often makes the defining of the genre problematic. However, the analysis of particular cases (productions) each time proves that the audience in most cases deals with a unique combination of elements in every single new example. Therefore, the typological classification in contemporary performing arts becomes more and more

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difficult. Subsequently, in order to analyse or describe a new piece or production, the authors choose the easy way to accept the genre invented by the authors. And here we come to the core of this article – the genres used for the subtitling are as diverse as the projects themselves. My aim is not to present any ready results of a research, but to initiate the research instead basing on few examples of music(al) theatre (the use of parenthesis will be explained further) on Latvian scenes of performing arts. The inspiration to research this subject comes from the colleagues working at Latvian Academy of Culture in the project of contemporary theatre glossary in Latvian. However, the strongest impulses to reflect about the potential analysis of the contemporary productions come directly from the projects, performances and symbiotic relationship of the elements allowing to define at least a few characteristic features. Unfortunately, many of contemporary music(al) theatre productions are project-based and performed only a few times, thus limiting the number of potential audience members and opportunities to become subject of academic interests as well.

First thing that is unclear is the distinction between the terms “musical theatre” (*muzikālais teātris*) and “music theatre” (*mūzikas teātris*) that also tend to cause certain confusion, at least in Latvian. In English, *musical theatre* traditionally is one of the alternatives to musical or musical comedy that is a theatrical production characteristically sentimental and amusing in nature, with a simple plot, consisting of music, dance and dialogues [Encyclopaedia Britannica]. In other words, it means a dramatic production combining acting, singing and dancing to tell a story. The proportions of elements might vary as it does both in historical genres (operetta, musicals, vaudeville, opera and other) and in contemporary productions. Music theatre coming from German term (*Musiktheater*) in its turn often refers to the productions in which spectacle and dramatic impact are emphasized over purely musical factors, leading back to the tradition established in the 1960s and 1970s by such composers as Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, György Ligeti, Luciano Berio, Mauricio Kagel and other [New Grove Dictionary of Music 2001: 543–535], meanwhile Walter Felsenstein and his students Götz Friedrich, Harry Kupfer, as well as Christoph Martahler among stage directors must be mentioned in this context.

Among theatre scholars, Patrice Pavis in his revised *Dictionary of Theatre* (2015) demonstrates the changes and uncertainties often observed on scenes. In many definitions even the style of expression points out the floating meaning of the term, because the phenomenon is often described by excluding previous definitions as outdated in comparison to today’s situation. According to Pavis, apart from stage music (*musique de scène*), opera or musical theatre (*théâtre musical*) the relationship between music and theatre is **complicated and conflicting** (emphasis mine – L.M.B.): the relationship between music and scene are currently changing, they do not serve each other, keeping their own autonomy instead, which benefits both of the

disciplines. Music is not a servant or accompaniment to the stage action. This is not the case of the Romantic opera, where the music eats up the text and theatricality. The role of complementarity of the elements is constantly increasing, uncovering the musicality of the texts and the theatricality of the music. In theatre space music is perceived differently from that in a concert hall. It is more complicated than cinema, where each of the elements is created separately, and, nevertheless, the visual and audial parts work together. Today, says Pavis, the theory of stage music tends to claim that visual and audial perception are fully integrated and cannot be separated anymore [Pavis 2015: 224–225].

In criticism of performing arts, we often experience the problem of defining the audience members, since in Latvian we have to choose between *listeners* and *spectators* marking the distinction, that is completely irrelevant for music(al) theatre as a syncretic phenomenon. None of these words include complete meaning of what is an audience member in music(al) theatre, and each of them used separately loses the syncretic nature of the genre. Sometimes I have intuitively used the slash (listeners/spectators) allowing the reader to catch this important nuance. Pavis applies the compound *spectauditeur*, which automatically melts spectator and listener in one. Besides, he says, historically this problem has come up in opera as the competition between the conductor and stage director, whose perspectives often differ due to their distinct opinions on hierarchy of the elements of the piece, namely, which is more important – the musical score or libretto, music or words or, in one word, content [Pavis 2015: 225]. Paradoxically, opera, the most conservative genre of performing arts already shows the problem of the contemporary music(al) theatre, and at the same time *Gesamtkunstwerk* defined by Richard Wagner, where all elements melt together in order to achieve better artistic result at the end of the day, appears in increasing number of examples on today's scenes. And yet, it is not that simple as it seems. One element can uncover the ideas hidden to other, if we speak about the interconnections between music, text and movement. In music(al) theatre all elements are interconnected in horizontal co-existence that language is not able to reflect as the words are written in rows, following each other and the order of words normally matters.

Discussing the term *opera*, Pavis calls it *theatre d'excellence* that unites the pathos of music and prestige of stage that are complemented by the systematic approach of directing that deliberates opera from the status of slave of the music and extends the borders of necessary and important skills of opera singers and achieves balance between voice and acting. Pavis questions also “the operatization of theatre” (*opératisation du théâtre*), meaning the integration of visuality and musicality (text and music) in order to address the audiences simultaneously in several channels of perception.

Pavis defines music(al) theatre as follows:

*“This contemporary form of music theatre (to be distinguished from opera, operetta and musical comedy) endeavours to bring together text, music and visual staging without integrating them, merging them or reducing them to a common denominator (as in Wagnerian opera) and without distancing them from the another (as in the didactic operas of Kurt Weil and Bertolt Brecht). (...) The genre took hold during the 1950s, when composers such as Schnebel, Kagel and Stockhausen viewed their concerts as theatrical performances rather than renderings of a score or libretto”* [Pavis 1999: 227].

Pavis resumes that music(al) theatre (the definition in French and English versions of the dictionary gives *musical theatre* and *Musiktheater* as analogue terms – L.M.B.) **still is a vast field where all possible relationship models of performing arts and music material are explored.**

Hence, the debate on where the contemporary music(al) theatre exactly starts – music, text, movement, visual image of the idea, composer or librettist, stage directors, designer or choreographer – leads into U-turn and creates the uncomfortable feeling of human brain tending to interpret long lists hierarchically, where the most important elements come first and the rest follows. For instance, let us recall the notorious problem of choreographer in contemporary theatre – in 2020, the dance scholar Inta Balode debated it with five young choreographers in her article “Towards Invisible Choreography” [Contemporary Latvian Theatre: 2020: 99–117], uncovering an important issue related to the underestimation of choreographer’s contribution in contemporary theatre criticism, which roots exactly in this hierarchical perception of the elements that form the stage production and their authors. We will see the perfect illustration of this in the experience integrated in the libretto of the contemporary musical “A Voice from the Belétage”, where one of the choreographers and performers tells about her first dance performance.

In this article my idea is to uncover the problem of definitions and formats in contemporary Latvian music(al) theatre, analysing a few examples among contemporary Latvian music(al) theatre productions of 2021: the contemporary chamber opera *Tagadne/Time present* by Kristis Auznieks and Reinis & Krista Dzudzilo, the contemporary musical “A Voice from the Belétage” by Platon Buravicky and Maija Treile, and the opera-film *Baņuta* by Franziska Kronfoth and Evarts Melnalksnis based on Latvian original opera *Baņuta* (1921) by Alfrēds Kalniņš and Artūrs Krūmiņš. These productions demonstrate very different conceptual and aesthetical approaches to the music(al) theatre today and stimulate reflection on potential transformations regarding the approaches of performing arts criticism.

### ***Tagadne. Time present***

*Tagadne. Time present* is a unique, multimedia artwork with genre defined by the authors as follows: a **contemporary chamber opera** in one act, four scenes. It was performed only twice on 15 and 16 August 2021 in *Hanzas perons* (Hanseatic platform) – a modern indoors venue in Riga and the organizer of the series of contemporary performing arts events *Pārmijas*. The authors of the idea are Reinis and Krista Dzudzilo, well-known Latvian artists, stage designers and videoartists, who often stage their own performances, choreographer Elīna Gediņa, the music written by Yale graduate Latvian composer Kristis Auznieks was played by the chamber orchestra Sinfonietta Rīga under the baton of Normunds Šnē and the solo part for a countertenor was interpreted by Jānis Šipkēvics, who also acts as performer together with trained contemporary dancers Ģirts Bisenieks and Rūdolfs Gediņš. According to Dzudzilos, the first impulse to make a chamber opera of various compositions by Kristis Auznieks came from the opus “Fire and Rose”, the laureate of the Great Music Award of Latvian in 2017 as the best new composition of the year, which has also become a part of this chamber opera. It is an interesting case as being technically a compilation or a sequence of separated compositions, *Tagadne. Time present* still keeps the dramaturgical line leading from silence to opera, creating a subtle and deep philosophical story. In a way, the case of this chamber opera is similar to a miniature Wagner’s Ring cycle, where every opera of the four is an independent artwork, yet only performed in turn the idea of the whole reveals to the audience.

The dramaturgy of the production takes the audience into journey from contemplation of silence through music and poetry towards an opera (birth of silence, birth of word, birth of music, birth of opera). From the silence in dark room of the first scene, where the performers in spotlight slowly move to a ticking clock on the wall. The people sit on the benches, walk around, stand and listen to the silence. The ticks of the clock in the space become a metaphor of time. After the first scene the audience is led to the concert hall, the poems by Thomas Stearns Eliot and String Quartet No 1 by Auznieks followed by “Fire and Rose” and the culminating opus *Ir viens* (“Are One”) – the birth of the opera in voice of Jānis Šipkēvics joined to the orchestra. The music in combination with visual and performing arts melt into an instantly present synergy emanating in transcendental spatial and time coordinates and enabling the aesthetic experience that Erika Fischer-Lichte calls *interart* and resumes that artistic practice is what must serve as a starting point for art studies’ endeavour today to develop interart aesthetics [Fischer-Lichte: 8]. *Interart aesthetics* analysed by Fischer-Lichte seems to be the most appropriate term to deal with the contemporary hybrid forms of music(al) theatre, however the concept should be developed and approbated as a term. *Interart* eventually is subtler and more precise term than multimedia art or any other.

In an interview, the composer Kristis Auznieks confessed that he has always been afraid of multimedia and cooperation with non-musicians as his perception of time in music differs from the majority of Western music in terms of so called “*canons of the orchestral and operatic scores*”. “*People tend to react easier to visual stimulus than sound stimulus. Music touches us instantly, but we do not understand it instantly, because the touch is non-verbal and non-representative... If the visual art combined with the music is not attentive enough, it kills the music (..)*” [Lagzdiņa 12.08.2021]. He admits that Reinis and Krista Dzudzilo feel the music deep inside and are very cautious in order not to make the visual art dominate over music as a fundamental yet fragile ingredient in interart aesthetics when it comes to the perception. The use of spatial transformations of the scene/walls, use of videos, letters and “traffic signs” of TIME and ~~TIME~~ (strikethrough used on sign) as symbolic boundaries of entrance and exit of the time dimension offers a minimalistic, but conceptually fulfilled set design that leaves not much to desire for a chamber scale music(al) theatre project.

Music journalist Orests Silabriedis claims that one of the elements justifying the term applied by the authors – a contemporary chamber opera – is the large dark room instead of an opera house, traditional concert hall or top of the hill).

*“Opera is defined by an orchestra, conductor, voice and staging. The music language is contemporary, the stage production is symbolic and therefore contemporary. And, writing all this, I feel myself trying to argue with potential opponents who will say that this piece has nothing to do with opera. However, this is an outdated theme. What is and what is not a symphony? What is and what is not an opera? The answer probably depends on our expectations regarding the artwork in comparison to what we actually receive”* [Silabriedis 2021].

In mid-October, the opus “Are One” premiered as a final of this chamber opera won the Grand Prix in the composition contest ROSTRUM held in Belgrad, Serbia, in category of young composers praising the value of this music apart from performative expressions. It indirectly reassures that in terms of contemporary music(al) theatre, music is still the core value and the fundamental of the artistic quality of any *interart* attempt. Nevertheless, keeping in mind that this chamber opera is combined of actually four independent compositions initially performed separately, the genre definition and interpretation is still questionable.

### ***A Voice from the Belétage. Contemporary musical***

This project subtitled as “Three found voices, one lost opera, different misunderstood authorities and two suicides” is another example of contemporary



music(al) theatre in Latvian. Music has been composed (and performed among other involved musicians) by Platon Buravicky, and the libretto has been written (and performed) by dramatist Maija Treile and three contemporary dance choreographers and dancers – Agate Bankava, Agnese Bordjukova and Inta Balode. This a typical case of devised theatre, where the material is created and performed together. The score is written for keyboards, electronic, soprano, mezzo-soprano, saxophone, clarinet and French horn, where singers Monta Martinsone and Laura Grecka, saxophone player Aigars Raumanis, clarinetist Anna Gāgane and horn player Kārlis Rērihs join in not only as musicians, but also actors/performers, who move, talk and play.

First, a short comment regarding the note of genre and the subtitle. Nowadays in Latvian theatres there is a trend to give a subtitle to the productions. Sometimes it is just a hint regarding the genre, sometimes a short description to evoke interest of the audience (for instance, *playing people* – MUMU dir. by Viesturs Kairiņš in Mikhail Chekhov Riga Russian Theatre, 2017; *sonata piano four-hands for stage* – *Based on Book* dir. by Valters Silis at *Dirty Deal Teatro*, 2019) and other. In this case we deal with a *contemporary musical*, which otherwise would be a regular genre description, but here expresses the oxymoronic playfulness of the composer, known for his avant-garde and beyond-canon composition techniques. And as if it was not enough with the title “A Voice from the Belétage” (a distant, passive voice of an observer?) the extensive subtitle “Three found voices, one lost opera, different misunderstood authorities and two suicides” form a trailer/teaser that partially describes the dramaturgical structure and content of the production.

“A Voice from the Belétage” was performed four times – in culture space *Totaldobže* as a part of Viskaļi Contemporary Art Festival in Riga, on Melluži open-air stage in Jūrmala, in culture centre *Devons* in Sigulda and Matīši culture centre. The reason of four events is related to the funding received from the State Culture Capital Foundation of Latvia in the programme “Support for the development of musical theatre genre” prescribing that the new production has to be showed at least four times. The format of the project is an interdisciplinary feminist art project defined as *contemporary musical*. It portrays such issues as the role of women in the society and culture, especially in the context of underestimation as well as the place of opera in the context of performing arts. On the level of basic elements, the musical still is a dramatic stage or film consisting of spoken dialogues, melodic songs, music and dance. However, in this case the genre definition seems to be added rather as a description of the result achieved during the creative cooperation than part of initial plan. The artwork is a collective creation by talented and professional artists, combining non-academic approach to composition by Platon Buravicky and the devised theatre method for the libretto created by dramatist Maija Treile and three choreographers dealing with their own experience as female artists and uncovering

to the audience the forgotten opera “Blow, the Wind!” (1960) by Latvian female composer Felicita Tomšone written in the 1950s. There is plenty of references to historical attempts of the women to fight for equal rights starting from British suffragists, Latvian female poet Aspazija combined with the recent experience of the authors, for instance, the choreographer and performer Agate Bankava:

*Dancer No 1: On 2 June 1960, the State Opera and Ballet Theatre of Latvian SSR premieres the opera “Blow, the Wind!” by Felicita Tomšone. It is the first opera composed by Latvian female composer that has ever been staged. The composer is 59 years old and it is her debut in opera genre. I was 29 when I staged my first dance performance. It was called “3/4 water”. After the premiere people told me that the music was great [Treile 2021: 2].*

Each of the involved persons acts as a performer, changing the roles on stage and increasing the performativity, especially when musicians and dancers turn into stage workers, adjusting lights, regulating sound and similar. Also, the production content is a contemporary collage of different styles, elements and performing methods: melo-declamation, vocalization, *recitativo*, two-voice singing, instrumental soundscapes with elaborated solo parts, ensembles with electronic sound effects and other. The interaction of text and music often includes paradoxes of form and content. For instance, in the episode, where the composer performs rap or singers vocalize different kind of documentation, like meeting minutes or press reviews related to the premiere of the opera by Felicita Tomšone. The choreography and dance is a simultaneous expression of sense instead of being any kind of *illustration in movement*. The language of contemporary dance that nowadays still often faces the insufficient preparedness of the audience, in this production is a dynamic structure element, which sometimes adds some ironic theatricality to the music and text. The choreographers and dancers extend their performing to acting, using the spoken voice, playing with intonations and dialects. However, the subject is serious. The amount of facts and numbers included in the libretto is impressive, but the most remarkable is the proportion 51:2, the current data on male and female composer operas staged at the Latvian National opera so far. The estimations say that the next opera composed by a female composer could reach the audience in 2050. It is definitely a speculation, and nevertheless provides a fertile soil for the discussion on gender equality in Latvian performing arts, turning the musical into a social drama.

### **Opera-film *Baņuta***

Opera-film *Baņuta* (2021) is a particular case in Latvian recent music(al) theatre productions. First of all, it is the only piece based on previously written classical opera, namely the opera *Baņuta* (1920) by composer Alfrēds Kalniņš (1879–1951)



and libretto by Artūrs Krūmiņš (1879–1969). The source opera is considered to be the first Latvian original opera based on ancient Latvian/Lithuanian legend, and it has a notable performing history throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the new production initially was planned to be an interactive performance, which transformed into film due to Covid-19 restrictions, when the international creative team was not able to meet and rehearse, exploring the distant-working methods, filming and discussing the script on *Zoom* and the like. In terms of form opera-film *Baņuta* can be considered a postmodern interpretation of classical work, however, due to the approaches used by the creative team, it aims to become a brand-new artwork of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is an international project merging opera, music theatre, contemporary performativity and artistic deconstruction and recontextualization that transforms the traditionally national-romanticist story into a social criticism, non-sentimental psychoanalytic reflection on paradoxical humour. The cooperation with German artists – director Franziska Kronfoth and music theatre troupe *Hauen un Stechen*, the story of *Baņuta* is put in lights of traumatism of war, violence and personal relationship. Latvian dramatist Evarts Melnalksnis and composer Jēkabs Nīmanis interpret the source material, adding new contexts and contents. *Baņuta* (interpreted by three performers – German actress Angela Braun and Latvian singers Laura Grecka and Sniedze Kaņepe) takes part in partisan battles, bringing with her the collective experience of the women who have suffered through the wars in 20<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe (and, today, with spreading war over Ukraine, the subject seems to become even more relevant – L.M.B.). The plot has been slightly changed, adding feministic and post-colonial discourse to the previously purely national-romanticist piece. Fighting as a partisan in the mythical Baltic past and in wars in 20<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe at the same time, *Baņuta*'s life is saved by weary and disenchanted Lithuanian prince, Daumants. Speeding away on a motorcycle, he brings the fighter back to his homeland in Romove, a holy Baltic site. There is about to be a wedding, but the preparations are interrupted by ravens. Their black feathers are mirroring Daumants' conscience and act as a reminder of his crime against Jargala, a girl he raped and killed during the war. Soon Daumants is killed by Vižuts, the revenging brother of Jargala and the one, who falls in love with *Baņuta* afterwards. Being a stranger in Romove, Daumants' community, *Baņuta* is caught up in sacrificial rituals and eventual revenge. However, she is strong-willed and not ready to accept the fate without saying her word and fighting for her own happiness despite all possible external and internal struggles. Irony and grotesque are used as means of expression to uncover the absurdity of any single meaning attributed to a character, action or deed. The combined aesthetics, genres and methods, where one can track opera, popular culture, folklore, feature movie and music theatre, provides a unique artistic experience opening up new horizons in dealing with cultural heritage

today. For instance, the opera score is enriched by several songs by Alfrēds Kalniņš (he has written about 250 songs for voice and piano, however, only a few of the most popular are used in the film – *Brīnos es/I wonder*, *Vakara ilgās/Evening longings* and *Mysterious cat*, the last one was composed in the USA with lyrics originally in English – L.M.B.) put in the context or contrasting it according to the plot. The composer Jēkabs Nīmanis has both composed original music and made arrangements of operatic score for instrumental quintet. The most daring issue is probably the end of the film using the overture of the opera and adding to it a new song melody sung by Baņuta, thus showing the symbolic path from the past through the present and to the future, representing the whole idea of the project. Probably being the most complex of the mentioned examples of contemporary music(al) theatre, *Baņuta* is at the same time the easiest to research in terms of correct methodology, because technically it is a film and thus can be analyzed within the framework of film criticism, meanwhile the other two remain in floating interdisciplinary space.

### Conclusions

The three examples provided here form only a small part of contemporary music(al) theatre in Latvia during the last few seasons, including the hectic time of temporary Covid-19 restrictions. All of them undoubtedly show interdisciplinary characteristics and unique combination of elements that makes difficult the classification basing on similar features. This leads to the statement that currently ongoing process of contemporary performing arts, especially music(al) theatre, is diverse and continuously developing, experimenting with new formats and showing flexibility towards unprecedented situations during the creation and rehearsing phases. On the one hand, nothing is strictly limited or regulated in terms of genres and formats as far as the audience is interested to see it. On the other – the traditional genre definitions do not serve anymore to classify the artworks and criticism lacks adequate, methodology, language and tools to cover the intertwining genres and formats of the contemporary performing arts. The reason roots in the specifics of performing such productions as aforementioned. Firstly, the contemporary music(al) theatre projects are often shown once, twice or a few times and enjoyed by a limited number of audience members. Secondly, due to the limited number of performances, they are not extensively reviewed in music and theatre critics. Thirdly, the methodologic approach is questionable. The hybrid forms are typical for contemporary performing arts, including music(al) theatre, but the uniqueness of every production often does not allow to surpass the descriptive approach, which is not sufficient for academically analytical discourse. Nevertheless, current cultural agenda shows new formats emerging and developing throughout the ecosystem of performing arts. Erika Fischer-Lichte resumes:

“For a long time, art studies departments have led solitary lives. Be it musicology or theatre studies, art history, literature or film studies, each discipline clearly defined itself against the others through its specific subject, respective methodology and theoretical approaches.

The last decades, however, have seen a tendency to blur the line between these traditional art disciplines based on fundamental new developments within the arts. Two developments in particular stand out in this respect: **first, the increasing dissolution of boundaries between different art forms, i. e., between film, theatre, dance, performance, visual arts, music and literature; and, second, the aestheticization of everyday life, i. e., the fusion of art and non-art in such fields as politics, economics, new media, sports, religion and everyday practices.** Both tendencies transform art studies with regard to their respective subjects of research and challenge their methodology as well as their theoretical approaches” [Fischer-Lichte 2016].

In Latvia, we experience and document these transformations in more and more contemporary productions. Therefore, it is essential to figure out the way to deal with them analytically, in the context of terms, definitions and methodological approaches.

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