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Research article

From Eisenstein to Einstein: The Ultimate Guide to Mediaopera¹

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Abstract

Mediaopera is a new syncretic genre that inherits opera's ability to constantly change or adapt and thus prove its relevance to the times. The article examines the evolution of opera in the modern technological era, its relationship with cinema, video art and the digital technologies of the 21st century. The analysis covers key examples: from the early experiments of Georges Méliès and Sergei Eisenstein to Fausto Romitelli's psychedelic opera *The Metal Index* (2003) and the documentary projects of Steve Reich. Particular attention is paid to the Russian context: the role of Soviet cinema for the musical avant-garde (Schnittke, Artemyev), as well as the innovations by Iraida Yusupova whose mediaoperas combine cryptophony, mockumentary, and eclecticism of styles. The genre balances between irony in relation to operatic clichés and fidelity to its main themes – life, death, social problems. Mediaopera rethinks the elitism of traditional opera, using technology to expand accessibility while remaining a *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a total work of art that engages the viewer in a multisensory experience. The work highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the genre, its role in maintaining the relevance of opera through a synthesis of academism, pop culture, and media art, demonstrating new ways of dialogue with the audience in the digital age.

Keywords: Opera; Mediaopera; Gesamtkunstwerk; Syncretism; Multimedia technologies; Iraida Yusupova

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Научная статья

От Эйзенштейна до Эйнштейна: Полное руководство по медиаопере²

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Аннотация

Медиаопера является новым синкретическим жанром, наследующим способность к изменениям и соответствию времени, которые на протяжении своей истории демонстрировала опера. Статья исследует эволюцию оперы в современную технологическую эпоху, ее взаимосвязь с кино, видеоартом и цифровыми технологиями XXI века. Анализ охватывает ключевые примеры: от ранних экспериментов Жоржа Мельеса и Сергея Эйзенштейна до психоделической оперы Фаусто Ромителли “The Metal Index” (2003) и документальных проектов Стива Райха. Особое внимание уделено российскому контексту: роль советского кино для музыкального авангарда (Шнитке, Артемьев), а также новаторству Ираиды Юсуповой, чьи медиаоперы сочетают кристофонию, мокументалистику и эклектику стилей. Жанр балансирует между иронией по отношению к оперным клише и верностью её главным темам – жизни, смерти, социальным проблемам. Медиаопера переосмысляет элитарность традиционной оперы, используя технологии для расширения доступности, оставаясь при этом Gesamtkunstwerk – тотальным искусством, вовлекающим зрителя в мультисенсорный опыт. Работа подчёркивает междисциплинарность жанра, его роль в сохранении актуальности оперы через синтез академизма, поп-культуры и медиаискусства, демонстрируя новые пути диалога с аудиторией в цифровую эпоху.

Ключевые слова: Опера; Медиаопера; Gesamtkunstwerk; Синкретизм; Мультимедийные технологии; Ираида Юсупова

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WHAT IS MEDIAOPERA?

Once a genre for the masses, by the 21st century, opera has become an elitist genre “not for everyone.” Opera singers are no longer objects of worship for the general public, and fiddlers in restaurants hardly would play an aria from modern operas nowadays. However, throughout its four-century history, opera has always demonstrated amazing vitality, the ability to change and correspond to the spirit of the times, the development of new technologies and new aesthetic formats. Thus, as cinema and video art conquered the world, opera intertwined with it in various combinations, eventually giving rise to the new syncretic genre of “mediaopera.”

Mediaopera is a modern modification of the opera genre, in which the visual-staging component has moved to a multimedia format. There are several important features of this genre: the combination of acoustic music and electronics, video and live performance, recorded soundtrack and real performance – which vary from work to work, from composer to composer. Unlike a film opera or film music, the video component and the musical dramaturgy do not illustrate each other, but are full-fledged and often parallel participants in the process.

In Russia, this genre has been known for about 30 years. And although some works written before the 1990s come close to this definition, the official naming belongs to the Moscow composer Iraida Yusupova.

FROM MONTEVERDI TO WAGNER

As is well known, opera is a syncretic genre. Music, theatre, words, fine arts and choreography at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries united into the type of performance that we now call opera (officially, the first opera is considered to be Claudio Monteverdi's “Orfeo,” which premiered in 1607, but before there was Jacopo Peri's mostly lost stage work “Dafne,” produced in Florence in 1598).

Since its inception, opera has constantly undergone all kinds of changes: opera forms and genres have been formed, the role of the coauthors of the complex genre has changed – the ancient Greek theatrical and ritual mystery slowly turned into a drama with music, then primacy was accorded to the composer, subordinating everything that happens on stage to the musical development, and in the last 50 years, the director and production designer have burst onto the scene. This rapid evolution has always allowed opera to stay “on trend” with contemporary socio-cultural changes and to keep up with the times, whether it was Mozart's revolutionary decision to turn to a libretto in his native language after a long dominance of Italian operas or the use of the most innovative machinery in opera theater.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, outstanding artists were involved in the creation of opera productions, and composers were turning to the most serious literary sources. Richard Wagner, one of the leaders of the concept of the unity of the arts (the mysterious *Gesamtkunstwerk*), called for a great fusion of the various components of the opera genre at the turn of the century. Wagner lamented that in contemporary opera the different arts were too “selfishly” isolated, instead of working together towards one common goal – “the musical drama of the future.”



IN SILENT-FILM HELL

Since the invention of cinema, its encounter with opera has only been a matter of time. The interaction between the opera genre and “the most important of the arts” in the twentieth century has been very active and diverse from the very beginning. The mutual attraction was due to the syncretic nature of both arts and the love of ecstatic experiences. The first timid steps towards bringing opera and silent cinema closer together were taken back in 1903: the owner of a Parisian variety show and president of the French Society of Illusionists, Georges Méliès (1903), presented to the public his film “Faust in Hell” – a sort of “screen adaptation” of Berlioz’s opera “The Damnation of Faust.”

Méliès was captivated by cinematography from the very first moment he saw a film screening by the Lumière brothers in 1895. He has bought a camera in England and began filming everything he could, using circus tricks and pyrotechnics in his films, becoming a pioneer of double exposure, editing, and even underwater filming. It is not surprising that opera did not remain on the sidelines of his experiments. A year after the “Faust in Hell,” Méliès made the film “Faust and Marguerite,” based on the opera of the same name by Gounod. The 15-minute silent film was accompanied by a musical score, composed by the director himself, in which individual fragments from the opera corresponded to specific scenes in the film (Méliès, 1903).

Similar experiments in combining video footage and live performances of certain fragments of operas became widespread – thus, in 1916, one of the pioneers of German cinema, Oskar Messter, made the film “Lohengrin,” the demonstration of which was accompanied by a performance of Wagner's opera by soloists, a choir and an orchestra. Later, in 1926, one of the founders of cinematic expressionism, Robert Wiene, made a film adaptation of Richard Strauss's opera “Der Rosenkavalier” – at the premiere of the film in Dresden, an orchestra was conducted by the composer himself. The author of the opera's libretto, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, slightly changed the plot line for the film version, and Richard Strauss also included fragments of his other works in the score.

SERGEI EISENSTEIN

A new era in the romance of opera and cinema began with the advent of sound cinema. And here we cannot help but recall the great innovative director Sergei Eisenstein, who, although he did not create a single opera screen adaptation, nevertheless approached the problem of “internal synchrony and counterpoint of image and music” as closely as possible. The pinnacle of this experiments was Eisenstein's collaborative work with Sergei Prokofiev (“Alexander Nevsky” and “Ivan the Terrible”) (Eisenstein, 1938).

The creation of the “Ivan the Terrible” (1945) proceeded in parallel with the Prokofiev’s work on orchestrating his opera “War and Peace,” and the co-authors, who understood each other perfectly, came up with the idea of working together on staging the opera at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. Eisenstein even began making sketches, but due to illness he was unable to carry out the production (the opera eventually premiered in Leningrad in 1946, directed by the young theater director Boris Pokrovsky). The conductor of the production, Samuil Samosud was convinced that if Eisenstein was able to accomplish his planned production of “War and Peace” in the theater, this performance would be for



him a sketch for the future film-opera. The only experiment by Eisenstein of staging an opera was the production of Wagner's "Valkyries" at the Bolshoi Theatre in 1940, right before the war. Witnesses of the production were divided in their assessment of the staging. It is only known, that the director set the most daring plans: he intended to introduce an additional cinematographic plan in the scene of Siegmund's story and to broadcast the scene of the flight of the Valkyries (the sound of the orchestra was to be broadcast through a series of amplifiers, arranged in a stereophonic manner around the circumference of the hall). For various reasons (mostly technical ones), none of these ideas could be realized, but all of them were successfully implemented in the modern opera house several decades later.

FELLINI, HERZOG AND VISCONTI: OPERA IN A CLASSIC ART HOUSE

With the development of sound cinema, directors rushed to meet opera with all their enthusiasm. Opera's magical world, its recognizable characters, music quotations and stage allusions – all these themes have flourished in the sound cinema. Opera arias sound in the films of Fellini and Godard, Visconti and Rivette, enchanting viewers with the marvelous veil of operatic cliché. There are several famous films, even dedicated to passionate operamania. Sam Wood's (1935) "A Night at the Opera" tells the story of a young chorister's rise to operatic fame; Werner Herzog's "Fitzcarraldo" (1982) tells the story of a music lover's 2,000-mile journey just to hear Enrico Caruso; and Federico Fellini's (1983) film "And the Ship Sails On" follows the passengers of a cruise ship as they bid farewell to a famous opera diva. And, of course, the most important place in the series of cinematic homage to opera is occupied by the film "Ludwig" by Luchino Visconti (1972), dedicated to the King of Bavaria, Ludwig II, who was obsessed with the operatic universe of Richard Wagner. A separate chapter in the love-story of opera and cinema is made up of famous film adaptations of operas: Shostakovich's "Katerina Izmailova," directed by Mikhail Shapiro (1966), Mozart's "The Magic Flute," directed by Ingmar Bergman (1975), Verdi's "La Traviata," directed by Franco Zeffirelli (1983) etc.

In the middle of the twentieth century, television quietly crept into the relationship between opera and cinema. The first work written specifically for television broadcast in America was Gian Carlo Menotti's opera "Amahl and the Night Visitors" (1951). For a long time, it was always staged "live" on television, and only in 1963 the performance was recorded on tape. Menotti's magical opera is still an absolute hit that has been on American television channels on the night before Christmas for many years: it is believed that more Americans have seen "Amahl" than any other opera in the world repertoire.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MEDIUM: OPERA AND VIDEO-ART

Within a few years the video camera would get into the hands of everyone, becoming an integral element of the American avant-garde. Composer Dick Higgins, a participant in the Fluxus movement (an international art movement founded by George Maciunas and including Yoko Ono and Joseph Beuys), begins to work in the field of "intermedia" – an artistic form at the intersection of different types of art (actionism, cinema, and music).



Video art pioneer Nam June Paik made the video camera an “accessory” to all of his musical performances. In 1963, Paik demonstrated his first “electronic opera.” The video was shown on Boston television in the program “The Medium is the Medium.” Distorted images of unnatural colors flashed on the screen, and a voice-over gave viewers commands: “Close your eyes,” “Turn off the TV.”

One of Paik's followers in combining video art with music (a sort of American *Gesamtkunstwerk*) was the avant-garde composer Robert Ashley. All of Ashley's operas take place in the American countryside, instead of arias he uses long monologue-recitatives (an original mix between Schoenberg's *Sprechgesang* and American hip-hop), and in the place of an orchestra, there is electroacoustic sound. His television operas, like silent movies, have subtitles, but here their function is less utilitarian – they set the rhythm and give visual accents. One of Ashley's best-known television operas is “Perfect Lives” (Sanborn, 1983) in seven acts, whose genre Ashley describes himself as “a comic opera on the theme of reincarnation.” (as cited in Gutkin, 2014, p. 23).

An important step towards the establishment of the genre was the work of the family tandem of composer Steve Reich and his wife, video artist Beryl Short. Their first project was the mediaopera “Cave” (1993), which combined instrumental score, non-operatic singing, speech and documentary video. Reich and Short called their invention “documentary music video theatre.” A few years later, another joint multimedia project based on documentary materials appeared – “Three Stories” (2002). Each of the three acts of the opera corresponds to a certain “story” from the life of humankind at the beginning, middle and end of the 20th century. The first tells the story of the creation and crash of the largest airship in history, the Hindenburg. The second story is about the testing of atomic bombs by American troops on the Bikini Atoll in 1946-1954, which led to an ecological catastrophe. And finally, the third act (“Dolly”) is a “discussion” of influential American scientists on the topic of cloning, new biotechnologies, the creation of robots and artificial intelligence. The video sequence of “Three Stories” is realized on a single large screen, which is divided into parts from time to time, and the musicians are located live in front of it (Reich, 2002).

Almost simultaneously with Reich, the New York composer Michael Gordon also came to the genre of video-opera, collaborating with the video artist Elliot Caplan to create several works in this format. Their first project was the video-opera “Van Gogh” (Gordon, 1991) for three voices and a chamber ensemble, based on the letters of Vincent Van Gogh, and several years later the premiere of the video-opera “Weather” (Gordon, 1997) took place. This multimedia work is a visual and musical journey along a weather map – the score combines a wide variety of styles: the rhythmic pulse of classical minimalism, dissonances in the spirit of Ligeti, modality and quotations from pop music. The composer provided his score with a program note:

I imagined history as being not so much like a timeline, but like an elevator where I could stop at whatever floor I wanted, and everything was going on simultaneously. The elevator went up to eight, where I found Vivaldi, who of course wrote a massive string piece based loosely on the same subject. Then I went down to the fourth floor, where I found Jimi Hendrix, back up to nine for some 1990's London club music,



then to five for the noise of battleship sirens. (Gordon, as cited in “Manchester Collective’s video premiere: Weather,” 2022)

OPERA AS SOUNDTRACK

While new video technologies are gaining ground in the traditional opera house, contemporary composers, in turn, have not forgotten the good old cinema. One of the patriarchs of American minimalism, Philip Glass (the author of not only a huge number of operas, but also a large number of film scores – from Daldry's “The Hours” to Zvyagintsev's “Elena”), wrote a chamber opera (Glass, 1994) for orchestra and film “The Beauty and the Beast” (1995). It is a musical paraphrase of the famous film of the same name by Jean Cocteau (1946) with Jean Marais in the leading role. The film is shown on the screen without a soundtrack, and a small orchestra and singers performing their parts in sync with the actors' speech on the screen.

Another operatic homage to cinema is the video-opera “Lost Highway” (Neuwirth & Jelinek, 2003) by Austrian composer Olga Neuwirth, based on the film of the same name by David Lynch. The libretto for the opera was written by Elfriede Jelinek, Neuwirth's long-term collaborator and Nobel Prize laureate in literature. Together they came up with a grand experiment on the edge of cinema, computer animation, and musical theatre. The production at the English National Opera combined the stage performance with several screens, showing fragments of the film, and live music performance was combined with a recorded soundtrack.

A HIDING PLACE FOR THE MUSICAL AVANT-GARDE

Speaking of the development of mediaopera in the Russian art scene, one should mention the very strong connection between the musical avantgarde and the cinema back in Soviet times. For reasons of censorship, film music was the only source of income for many nonconformist composers. The history of Soviet cinema knows remarkable director-composer tandems: Grigory Kozintsev and Dmitry Shostakovich (“Hamlet” and “King Lear”), Alexander Mitta and Alfred Schnittke (“The Crew” and “The Tale of Wanderings”), Andrei Tarkovsky and Eduard Artemyev (“Stalker” and “Solaris”), Georgy Danelia and Giya Kancheli (“Mimino” and “Kin-dza-dza!”). If in live action films music played a secondary role, animation provided the possibility of a much more subtle synthesis of music and video. A Soviet and Russian animator Andrei Khrzhanovsky not only cooperated for many years with Alfred Schnittke (“The Glass Harmonica,” “Butterfly,” “My Favorite Time”), but also released in 2020 the full-length film “The Nose or the Conspiracy of Mavericks” – a full-fledged animated film adaptation of the opera “The Nose” by Dmitry Shostakovich (Khrzhanovsky, 2020).

PSYCHEDELIC METALS BY FAUSTO ROMITELLI

Therefore, at the heart of any mediaopera is a music soundtrack that finds new life in a new genre. Authors of various stripes work on the work – a composer, librettist, director, cinematographer, media artist, performing musicians, singers and actors. As a rule, the video



sequence is created directly in the process of working on the opera, but in any case, the strings are pulled by musical dramaturgy (as it should be in a staged opera). This genre organically combines classical and avant-garde music, cinema and video art, performance and animation, and traditional operatic forms (aria, duet, choir), naturally coexisting with electronic music and elements of improvisation.

On European soil, one of the classic examples of the genre is Fausto Romitelli's mediaopera "The Metal Index" (2003) for instrumental ensemble (including bass and electric guitar), soprano, three screens and electronics – this is the last opus of the Italian composer, who passed away at the age of 41. The aim of the work, according to the author, was "to transform the secular genre of opera into an experience of total perception, immersing the viewer in hot matter, glowing and sounding, in the magma of floating sounds, shapes and colors, telling nothing, but hypnotizing, taking possession and putting into a trance" (Romitelli, 2003). The literary basis for the opera were the texts of the Croatian writer Kenka Lekovic, saturated with allusions and quotations (from Georges Bataille to Jim Morrison). The music is imbued with similar associations – there are greetings to Romitelli's older comrade, the spectralist Georges Grisey, and quotes from Brian Eno and even Pink Floyd.

The authors of the video series are artists Paolo Pachini and Leonardo Romoli who created psychedelic visions of different states of metal on the screen – from scorching melt to industrial debris and all sorts of damage to the metal surface. The opera consists of five scenes, conventionally divided into three hallucinations, representing a slow, viscous deadly immersion – not in water, however, but in metal. The source of inspiration for Romitelli was Roy Lichtenstein's painting "Drowning Girl," also known as "I Don't Care! I'd Rather Drown" (1963) in the pop art genre (a comic strip made on a huge canvas). The music and video sequence were created in parallel, but what was important was their connection in a common continuum and reliance on the same physical characteristics – "iridescence, corrosion, plastic deformation of the surface."

The traditional "operatic" quality of this very unusual composition is given by Romitelli's musical aesthetics itself, as a product of the synthesizing hearing of "high" and "low" – a genuine *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the early 21st century. Along with the electroacoustic spectral technique, the composer was always inspired by psychedelic rock, which, as it seemed to him, developed according to similar sound parameters: Aphex Twin, Sonic Youth and, of course, the electric guitar of Jimi Hendrix. Romitelli (2003) often speaks of his fatigue with "scientific," "pure" music and invents a new language. "The Metal Index" also naturally slips out of all classical genre categories – states of aggregation become the main mode of this composition on the visual, sound and conceptual levels.

Another impressive example of a multimedia opera is the large-scale project "Amazonas," (2010) shown at the Munich Biennale. The main character of this opera trilogy is the tropical Amazon forest, and the main theme is the problem of "catastrophe in paradise": climate change, endangered indigenous cultures, and the destruction of the habitat. In this multi-hour performance, composers Klaus Schedl, Tato Taborda, and Ludger Brummer, as well as media artists from Brazil and Germany conceptually rethink the very concept of multimedia musical theatre: opera and media art flow into each other, music becomes visible, and the visual series acquires sound.



MEDIAOPERA-EXPERIMENTS IN RUSSIA

On Russian soil, all new trends begin to modify without the time to become a tradition. In 2018 the premier of Olga Bochikhina's mediaopera "Face" took place – a "Mute opera" for ensemble, electroacoustics, and video projection that was commissioned by the VI International Festival of Contemporary Music "Another Space" (Bochikhina, 2018, the author of the video sequence is photo-artist Ivan Sakharov). Olga Bochikhina does not write tonal music as a matter of principle, the entire musical universe of her composition consists of vocal and instrumental "whispers and screams." In fact, the main "representers" of the opera-genre, the singers, do not appear on stage – their voices sound through loudspeakers. This very "inside out" of the opera-genre (in the opera about a person who never shows up), the concept of losing and finding a face, raises an important question about the border zones of art.

Another example of the genre mediaopera in Russia are the works of Dmitry Kurlyandsky. The opera-installation "NEKYIA" (Kurlyandsky, 2019) is based on the plot of Homer's epic poem, combining a musical score and video-art by artist Elena Nemkova (a sequel appeared a year later – NEKYIA 2.0, created in collaboration with video artist Alexey Nadzharov). The subsequent mediaopera "Letters of Happiness" (2020). This work was created during the pandemic – forced isolation and prolonged sitting in front of a computer screen. The plot is based on letters that usually end up in spam. The composer himself made the videos for the five acts of the opera. The second act features the work of musician and media artist Alexander Serechenko, based on the principle of chance. The sixth act features the work of video artist Marina Chernikova, inspired by the ideas of psychogeography.

A fusion of academic music and media-technologies in the works of contemporary composers (regardless of their geographical and national affiliation) has been actively expanding and developing in recent decades, delighting us with the diversity of forms and genre subtypes. Video art has become another powerful tool on the path to achieving that absolute synthesis, desired by Scriabin in the "Prometheus" or Stockhausen with his 29-hour opera project "Licht" – in the score of both works, the visual part plays an important, full-fledged role. Among the contemporary Russian composers working today at the crossroads of academic and electronic music and video art, we should mention Elena Rykova's "Under Construction", accompanied by an animation, created in collaboration with the artist Maria Korol (Rykova & Korol, 2016-2017). A lot of the compositions by Alexander Khubeev are syncretic at their core – his scores often capture both light and video (in the multimedia project of Alexander Khubeev and Nikolay Popov "Biomechanics.NEXT" media technologies are combined with instrumental theater). Nikolay Popov – is the author of the multimedia-futuristic opera "Curiosity" (2018), based on the Twitter account of the NASA space agency's Mars rover (Mizonova, 2024).

IRAIDA YUSUPOVA

A true founder of the mediaopera-genre in Russia is Moscow composer and filmmaker Iraida Yusupova. Iraida Yusupova was born in Ashgabat in 1962 and graduated from the Moscow State Conservatory, composition class of composer Nikolai Sidelnikov. During



these years, Yusupova's unique compositional technique was formed: cryptophony. This mode of composing combines different language codes and ciphers; it relies on the superimposition of different language systems and styles, based on a system of alphabetic-tone correspondences, arbitrarily set by the author. A guiding premise of this approach is that the language system participates in this symbiotic practice in which semiotic structures and generative composing are mutually enriching (Yusupova, 2025, p. 24-26, appendix). Together with her fellow composers Ivan Sokolov and Sergej Nevraeyev, Yusupova launched this method in the form of the stage opus "Opera-Cryptophonica," which was performed at the "Alternative-95"-Festival in Moscow in 1995. Besides cryptophony, Iraida Yusupova deploys a related musical method, namely "wholly spontaneous polyphony" – the composer herself came up with the term. This is not, as the phrase might imply, aleatoric with meaning reliant on random acoustic association, but consists in improvisation within a fixed time span or using harmonic segments; the resulting outcome becoming a mosaic of sampled sounds. These compositional techniques – cryptophony and wholly spontaneous polyphony – imply a mechanical approach to music-making that in no way corresponds to the euphonic and emotionally-charged quality of her work. Both performers and listeners cherish the music of Iraida Yusupova. She has always enjoyed writing for unusual instruments and for singers with a unique timbre, and the performers have often become not only long-life friends, but also faithful interpreters of her work, ready for all of the daring experiments she puts together. In her recordings (or rather soundtracks, speaking in the mediaopera idiom, all the voices and musical layers are carefully recorded and then compiled.

Yusupova has worked in a vast range of genres: operas, symphonies, compositions (chamber music, symphonic, electroacoustic, choral and vocal), music for films, and theatrical productions. Since 2003, Yusupova has also been known as a director of art-house cinema and an author of media projects, for which she coined the term "mediaopera." Her love for cinema and theater led her to attend courses at GITIS (The Russian Institute of Theatre Arts, Moscow), where she mastered the basics of directing. In 1991 she met cameraman and video-artist Alexander Dolgin (1958-2019), who later became her permanent collaborator and husband. In 1996 they began working on multimedia projects together. According to Yusupova, this artistic journey began when they discovered a shared, long-standing love for black-and-white movies.

This deliberate combination of not just different stylistic layers, but also of fictive and documentary elements is rooted in another one of Iraida Yusupova's passions, namely mockumentary (a fake parodistic documentary), where the real and the pseudo-real, the high and the low are united into a single lampooning pastiche. An impressive example of this technique is Yusupova's film "Theremin's Last Secret" (Yusupova & Dolgin, 2003) about Anna Theremin – a fictional sister of the brilliant Russian inventor Leon Theremin (the thereminvox is one of Yusupova's preferred, unusual instruments), a singer and artist who, according to the film, became the muse of the young Dmitry Shostakovich and Kasimir Malevich. The plot's pseudo-documentary style also finds expression in the soundtrack – the main song, imitating Soviet jazz of the 1920s, was written by Iraida Yusupova herself. Some elements of the mockumentary-style can be found in the mediaopera "Einstein and



Margarita” (Yusupova & Dolgin, 2006): images of Ingrid Bergman, Greta Garbo, the Kremlin towers, footage from pre-war films, etc.

THE PINK MOUSE

“Pink Mouse” is one of the latest mediaoperas of Iraida Yusupova (2021). Based on the fairytale-novel of the same name by Viktor Erofeev, it was written after a prior “pen-test”: Yusupova setting to music Erofeev’s mocking poem “The last lover.” Both collaborators were highly satisfied with the result, so they ventured to tackle a bigger project.

“Pink Mouse” is not just a piece of experimental artwork, but also an excellent example of how one literary style can be faithfully recreated in another form of art. Viktor Erofeev is very fortunate to have such significant composers evoking his work in musical form. In the opera “Life with an Idiot” (Schnittke, 1992), based on Erofeev’s (1980/2020) famous story of the same name, Alfred Schnittke deliberately goes beyond the limits of his own language, following the style and the concept of the text. Scraps of Soviet and folk songs and marches appear in the musical score, merged with the aesthetics of soz-art, a communal dump of musical associations; these are combined with Schnittke's unique music style (complex harmonic clusters in the orchestra score and his archetypal, though “cruel,” tango-theme which appears here as a symbol of tempting banality). Something similar happens in “Pink Mouse,” where Iraida Yusupova consciously experiments in a territory somewhat alien to her, combining different musical languages and layers: rap and electronic techno, punk, academic vocals and jazz. Both Schnittke and Yusupova diligently and fearlessly set to music the tart obscene vocabulary of Erofeev’s novels.

The cheerful madness both of the text and music, its seething eclecticism is a kind of “postmodernism of a healthy person,” which combines irrepressible children's fantasy, translucent reality, obscenities and a gentle haze of sentimentality (the cultural references of the story swing from the “Divine Comedy” to the “Snow Queen” – Marusya’s daddy does not recognize her at the Bottom). Not only the musical score, but also the video-part (“Pink Mouse” is dedicated to Alexander Dolgin and includes many of his video and photographic works) is compulsively eclectic: it is replete with recognizable images of glamorous mainstream characters with basic children's mythology of all sorts (Mowgli, Alice, Winnie the Pooh, characters of famous Soviet cartoons) and references to specific artworks and personalities of Moscow conceptualism (images of the late artist: Dmitri Prigov in the role of a high priest and performance artist German Vinogradov as a clown). Both on the screen and in the musical score the visual image and sound of the piano (Yusupova considers this instrument her lyrical “alter ego”) play an important role. In this connection, the shooting location takes on symbolic meaning – all the performative scenes are filmed in the memorial apartment of the outstanding pianist Sviatoslav Richter (The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts).

The childish, provocative and political (“Only clowns want democracy,” “Let's not be cannibals! Let's sit in the hallway instead”) suggestions in the book have been combined – and scrambled – in the ambivalence of the musical text. Omnivorous stylistic elements are fused: different types of singing (opera singing, recitative, children's voice, vocal jazz,



chanson, rap, pop, folk, sugary rock music), speech, electronic audio samples, a choir, and a symphony orchestra (State Capella of Moscow named after Vadim Sudakov), a folk choir (soloists of the Dmitry Pokrovsky Ensemble) and an eclectic combination of solo instruments (cello, guitar, electric guitar, keyboard gusli, harp, piano, organ). At the same time there's no doubt that this score belongs to the genre of musical theater – it includes a system of leitmotifs, and some deliberately “operatic” fragments, as the dramatic scene of the sinking yacht with a big dramatic choir (chromatic “Lacrimosa”) and a mystical interlude to Act II (Bottom).

Like most of Iraida Yusupova's mediaoperas, “Pink Mouse” is a unique experiment at the crossroads of genres, styles, languages and contexts. The work remains “open,” constantly acquiring its meaning in the process of contact with the viewer, who at the same time becomes a co-author. In 2021 the mediaopera “Pink Mouse” received the Special Jury Award of the “Anatoly Zverev Art Prize.” The motto of the award is Zverev's statement: “*Life is shackled, art is free*” (Zverev Art Prize, 2021).

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Looking back at such different origins and variants of realization of the genre of mediaopera, one can conditionally divide the approach to this phenomenon into two main perspectives – as a syncretic expansion of contemporary music regardless of its genre affiliation (a tradition actively developed in the 20th century by performative practice, verbal music, instrumental theater, the merging of electronic and acoustic sound) and as a variety and transformation of the genre of opera itself.

While recognizing the significance of both perspectives, we would like to especially highlight the second one – the generic connection with opera. What are the core characteristics of the opera nowadays? A plot or a narrative? The “anti-operas” of Morton Feldman and Maurizio Kagel proved otherwise a long time ago. A text libretto? The only lyrics of the choral vocal lines in Philipp Glass’s opera “Einstein on the beach” are “do re mi” and “one two three.” The video-opera “Weather” by Michael Gordon does not have a vocal line at all. What remains as an important part of the genre is a balance between elitism and accessibility which manifests itself in the fusion of completely different musical styles and languages, and in the very idea of bringing the cumbersome stage genre of opera closer to the perception of modern audiences.

On the one hand, media opera often acts as an ironic commentary on its historical prototype – the very concept of “cheapening” the most expensive form of art thanks to modern technology and cleansing it of all traditional operatic “tricks.” On the other hand, despite all the ironic detachment, this genre demonstrates a generic attachment to the “big” opera themes: life and death, love and loneliness (as in the works of Fausto Romitelli and Olga Bochikhina), social issues (documentary video operas by Steve Reich and Robert Ashley, the multimedia project “Amazonas”) and playing with opera archetypes and mythologemes (mediaoperas by Iraida Yusupova, Nikolai Khrust and Nikolai Popov).



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