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## Art in the Age of Globalisation: Dialogue of Cultures (Ural Opera Ballet Theatre's Production of the Opera *Tri Sestry*)

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### ABSTRACT

The article explores the dialogics of art and the role of art as a tool of dialogue between cultures on the example of the Ural Opera Ballet Theatre's recent stage production of the opera *Tri Sestry* (Three Sisters), which demonstrates a successful interaction between different cultural traditions.

Interpreting Chekhov's play from a late 20<sup>th</sup> century perspective, Hungarian composer Peter Eötvös presented new responses to the questions that tormented the play's characters one hundred years ago. In his work, which blends French and German avant-garde techniques with structural elements drawn from film narrative and the Japanese Noh theatre tradition, he added a radically new dimension to Chekhov's play. As a result, he was able to open up latent meanings the play within the *great time* space proposed by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. In turn, Christopher Alden (USA), the Artistic Director of the Ural Opera Ballet production, merged voices from different artistic traditions into a new contemporary musical image.

### KEYWORDS

globalisation, dialogue of cultures, art, theatre, Ural Opera Ballet, *Tri Sestry*, Chekhov

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## Introduction

In the contemporary global and intercultural space, which implies a convergence of nations and states, a “turning of many into one”, the significance of art as a dialogue between cultures cannot be overestimated. Such an artistic dialogue is instrumental in the emergence of new cross-national audiences, which help individual cultures disseminate their values far beyond their national and traditional boundaries. Nevertheless, the as-experienced effects of globalisation remain controversial. While, on the one hand, globalisation undeniably promotes development in many economic, technological and political spheres of human activity, on the other hand, it can exacerbate isolation and lead to confrontation between competing cultures. According to Lyudmila Egle, in a time of globalisation, nations tend to preserve their cultural identities (see: Egle, 2009, p. 350). Golbarg Abutorabian notes that the unification of behavioural norms and cultural manifestations produces a protest mindset and promotes an intensive search for ethnocultural identification inside multiple cultures (see: Abutorabian, 2011, p. 52).

The protest mindset suggests that, while interacting and adapting to the new social environment, local cultures face the threat of being completely assimilated under the influence of stronger cultures. In attempting, on the one hand, to shut off themselves from the outside world, and on the other, to uncritically accept everything associated with globalisation, cultures can manifest extreme responses in the face of the possibility of their vanishing altogether. In this context, the only obvious way for cultures to ensure their preservation and development is for them to participate in a continuous dialogue that recognises their equal standing. Such a dialogue between equal cultures lays the foundation for a process of continuing acculturation, in which both parties adopt elements of each other’s culture, acquiring universal features, while simultaneously retaining their uniqueness. According to Mikhail Popov and Anna Akulova, awareness of one’s own identity sets the stage for a dialogue. The dialogue is a manifestation of one’s own, rather than the opposite identity (see: Popov, Akulova, 2009).

## Possibilities for Dialogue between Cultures in Art

Art is one of the means by which culture can be adapted to new environments. According to Marina Moskalyuk, on a global scale, the us-versus-them opposition in art produces an exceptionally promising dialogue, thus contributing to the development of universal culture (see: Moskalyuk, 2014, p. 411). The dialogue between cultures, which takes place during encounters with works of art, makes it possible to balance the aspiration for national self-identity with respect for other cultures and the perception of other nations’ values in all their uniqueness (Bakhtin, 1995). Such a dialogue relates to the inherent nature of art, which forms a space for mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue. Art effortlessly overcomes linguistic boundaries and time frames. At the same time, being present in the universal categories of ethical and aesthetic values, it is art that helps us understand

and perceive the uniqueness of a different culture, the individuality of a different mind, the fundamentals of a different religion (see: Moskalyuk, 2014, p. 413). A work of art that represents another culture can be understood through the revelation of timeless meanings and their aesthetic value.

Any work of art can be seen as a certain communication: It “speaks”, asks and answers, encapsulates “a message”, which can be “heard”, and which, when coming in contact with another text, will repeatedly become actualised in the entirety of cultural life (see: Averintsev, 1994, p. 105). Lotman compares a text (i.e., a work of art) with an information generator, having the characteristics of an intelligent individual and the ability to store different codes, transform received messages and generate new ones (Lotman, 2009, p. 71). Inside that text, the artist enters into a dialogue with other authors, from time to time using elements of their style, borrowing images and placing them into a new reality to facilitate dialogue. Whether this takes the form of a dialogue of agreement, i.e. when the artist takes up and develops another person’s idea, or a disagreement, the space of art hosts an endless conversation between creators of artworks; such? a conversation reveals cultural constants, facilitating interaction with other cultural systems and helping them to perceive their uniqueness along with the discovery of new meanings arising in the work. According to Alexander Medvedev (2020), the recognition of the dialogics of art, together with the ability to hear the conversation of artists representing different styles and time periods, provides deeper understanding of the content of a composition, gives insight into the logic of art’s self-motion, and, more importantly, makes it possible to understand the dynamics of the actual reality, for one of art’s missions is to serve as a means of cognising reality (see: Medvedev, 2020, p. 142).

A dialogue between cultures within the space of art is becoming increasingly feasible when it involves synthetic types arising within art structures that involve a fusion of their constituting components. In terms of an art form, theatre is intrinsically dialogic. Acting as a special channel of international communication, it generates a unique space that opens up across several dimensions – musical, verbal and visual. In contributing to the distinctiveness of a particular work, this multidimensionality shapes audience perception. An opera, which is typically born out of a dialogue between a composer and librettist, grows into a unique, multilayer and multi-subject polylogue conducted by the authors and directors of the musical work; it is an outcome of a successful dialogue between cultures in the space of the literary text. Alla Baeva notes that the opera, quickly and easily, makes inter and intra-genre contacts, thus becoming the joint creation of the composer, director and librettist (Baeva, 1996, pp. 7–8). Here it is emphasised that, in technical terms, the interaction of cultures takes place at the levels of libretto, musical score, director’s script, scenography and performance.

### **Opera Staging as a Specific Form of Intercultural Dialogue**

Taking place in Bakhtinian *great time*, the theatrical production of an opera comprises a form of a dialogue between cultures, through and by means of

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which each participating culture re-apprehends different meanings contained in the composition and discovers new meanings brought to life during different productions. The interaction of cultures within the musical performance space not only facilitates an appreciation of the values of other persons, nations and cultures, but also actively circumvents the tendency towards slavish imitation of foreign-born elements. Instead, through comparison of different patterns of thought and cultural values, possible borrowings can be selected and worldview concepts carried over from one culture to the semiotic system of the other culture.

The dialogue between cultures takes on a new dimension when the composer, author of the literary source and production team represent different cultural systems; in this case, the performance soaks up national and cultural features, its imagery and symbolic structure mirroring the different world views blended in the canvas of the literary text. In bringing the musical material to life, the director acts as intermediary between the authors of the musical work and the audience; on the other hand, the director is also a subject in the dialogue of cultures; when staging the performance, he or she expresses his or her attitude towards the musical work, toward the cultural values represented in it, as well as his or her own philosophy.

Audiences also have their own specific role to play in the dialogue of cultures, since any work of art, as Dmitry Likhachev points out, in its creation, suggests not only passive perception, but also active participation (see: Likhachev, 1983, p. 62). This is especially true of a performance in a musical theatre: when an individual audience member is drawn into the dialogic cultural space through his or her perception of art, a performance can have a specific effect on him or her. In the words of Sergey Isaev, the meaning comes into being once we start interpreting the performance. We do not decode the existing meaning or try to detect it; instead, we create it. Then, the analysis of the performance turns into a totally creative process, since the meaning is created from scratch, for the first time ever, rather than being retrieved from the place where it was kept hidden by the artist (see: Isaev, 1993, p. 26).

The fully-fledged perception of a musical performance constitutes the level of understanding of the “Other”, impacting on the level of empathy in comprehending of the values-based idea implemented by the composer in his composition. As Olga Bochkareva notes, the dialogic reflection helps the audience member leave the boundaries of his “Self” and connects the person with the other person. In this way, the dialogue triggers a successive movement of musical culture from one subject to the other subject, from “Self” to “Other” (see: Bochkareva, 2013, p. 199).

The audience perception is closely connected with the truth of art and the perceived “correctness” of its perception. For Umberto Eco, any work of art comprises an object offering infinite interpretative possibilities. However, it does not always please the creator of the work, who expects an adequate audience response to his or her artistic statement. Analysing his relationship with the audience, Anatoly Efros (1985) wrote that, most of all, he valued people with normal, natural vision and hearing – those people who see what exists, rather than what they imagine. Nevertheless, art seems to suggest that no two people will form the same impression of the same thing. Still, one wishes that the deviation from truth

would stay within reasonable limits, i.e. that one's work would be seen through normal eyes (see: Efros, 1985, p. 90).

The opera *Tri Sestry*<sup>1</sup> (Three Sisters) written by the Hungarian composer Peter Eötvös, inspired by Anton Chekhov's play and staged by the American director Christopher Alden at the Ural Opera Ballet Theatre, offers the possibility to analyse the dialogue of cultures within the space of the opera performance at a time of globalisation and to identify special characteristics of the audience perception.

Written by Eötvös in 1997 and premiered to critical acclaim, *Tri Sestry* was hailed as the most important new work of the year 1998 ("zum wichtigsten neuen Werk des Jahres 1998") (Beaujean, 2005). Its production at the Ural Opera Ballet Theatre offered an unexpected interpretation of the Russian classical play by, on the one hand, a European who is quite familiar with Russian literature and Soviet ideology, and, on the other hand, by a representative of American high culture. Thus, the Ural Opera production transformed Chekhov's play into intermediary between cultures of three countries, subjecting it to substantial structural and plot-related changes at the same time as replenishing it with new meanings. Implemented as an international project, the staging of the opera also involved the hosting a variety of events intended to explain the background of the opera to the audience and furnish clues to support its popular and critical interpretation.

The creative work of the composer Peter Eötvös (born in 1944) is influenced by a number of diverse cultures. His childhood in post-war Hungary was strongly influenced by Russian culture; he studied composition in Budapest and Cologne; he gained European-wide fame as a conductor of contemporary music. Eötvös worked as an assistant with Karlheinz Stockhausen, a German composer, conductor and one of the leading figures of the musical avant-garde. Later, in the 1980s, he held the position of Artistic Director of the French Ensemble InterContemporain (Paris) founded by Pierre Boulez and specialising in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century music. As Sergey Nevsky (2019) notes, Eötvös' interaction with modern culture caused him to dismantle his musical language only to reassemble it later using elements of the tradition learnt in his younger years. Eötvös builds a dialogue of multiple traditions, existing and bygone, like a big post-modern game. In this sense, Umberto Eco is his closest associate in art (see: Nevsky, 2019, p. 21). The use of elements borrowed from a variety of traditional sources helps the composer to avoid dramaturgical tropes typical of European music; at the same time, it allows him to show every facet of the emotional life of the characters.

### ***Tri Sestry*: Transformations from the Play into the Opera**

Commissioned by the Opera National de Lyon in 1997, *Tri Sestry* is Peter Eötvös' first large-scale opera and the one that made him famous in the theatrical world. Eötvös invited the German dramaturge Claus Henneberg to write a libretto. Although

<sup>1</sup> The performance is a laureate of the Russian National Theater Award "Golden Mask" in the nominations "Best Performance in Opera" and "Best Director in Opera", a laureate of the Russian Opera Casta Diva Award in the category "Event of the Year" and the Prize of the Governor of the Sverdlovsk Region. The national newspaper *Musical Review* recognized the production as the "Performance of the Year"; the Association of Music Critics included it among the best Russian productions of 2019.

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Henneberg did not know the Russian language, he was ready to work with the translated text to write a libretto in German, after which the libretto was to be translated into Russian. Although the abridged version of the libretto prepared by Henneberg differed greatly from Eötvös' understanding of Chekhov in terms of dramatic quality, tension between the characters and melancholic mood, the composer decided not to use the standard adaptation of the Chekhov's play but instead to transform it by showing all the events from the perspective of the different characters as was done in Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (inspired by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's story *In the Grove*). As such, Eötvös may be said to be the first composer to have used this technique in the context of opera. In the process of reconceiving the source text, he restructured it to present a version of Chekhov's play that was both condensed and creatively contrasting. Nevertheless, he retained all the main storylines, themes and general ambiance of the play. In his words, he casted his vision in the score; it was very specific in the case with *Tri Sestry*: he did not deny Chekhov, but he was translated into the language of opera (Surnina, 2019).

Eötvös' main characters are Irina, Andrei and Masha, each of whom has their own "sequence" – or, in other words, a certain succession of elements or dramatic layers. Inside each sequence, the composer arranged those scenes associated with or related to the main character; these scenes have their own logic of development and dramatic expressiveness. Sequences follow one after another; each sequence is shorter than the preceding one. The triadic structure affects the conflicts between characters: the three sisters themselves represented by three sequences or triads. Relationships are similarly represented by triangles: Irina – Tuzenbach – Solyony; Masha – Vershinin – Kulygin; Andrei – Natasha – the sisters. Following the Western classical tradition, the core of the musical narrative is also represented by major and minor triads.

The opera has no choir; as in Chekhov's play, there are thirteen characters, whose voices comprise the narrative of the opera. In terms of character development, the composer intentionally confronts Chekhovian psychological drama with traditions drawn from the Japanese Noh theatre. The interaction between the real and dynamic character, typical both of Chekhov's plays and European theatre in general, and the mask representing the Japanese theatrical tradition, produces a peculiar "flickering" effect, creating the impression that the character is trying to break out of the boundaries of his or her assigned role. This interaction between the frameset and the character turns the character into a person of universal nature, which is especially noticeable in the original version of the opera in which all the parts were performed by men: even the three sisters themselves were sung by countertenors. Peter Eötvös said that in his opinion, it was a story about parting, rather than about family conflicts – he wanted to show not four women, but broadly speaking, four persons. In this case, countertenors had the function performed by cothurni in the ancient Greek theatre – they lifted drama above the everyday routine (Monolog Petera Etvesha, 2019, p. 25) – then, characters take on qualities of immaterial spirits of history, culture and geography. Abstraction of music and "gender neutrality" of the characters make it possible to create a certain ritual mystery play, notes Evgenia Krivitskaya (2019).

Peter Eötvös worked on the opera libretto together with his wife Mari Mezei. On the basis of Chekhov's original text, the Russian libretto was stripped into actor's lines, words and remarks; next, it was reassembled as a mosaic panel, though having its own order. Dialogues and soliloquies form a continuous flow, giving a sense of elusive reality; only on rare occasions the action comes to a stop, interrupted by monologues spoken by characters – Solyony, Andrei or Vershinin. The effect of this composition is very Chekhovian. Characters are agitated; they live in anticipation of events that never happen; all of them speak frantically, but remain unheard (see: Ryabin & Korolyok, 2019, p. 14). This continuous flow is supported by repetitions, oppositions, variations, reflections, cross-talks taking place at the level of the dramatical structure, musical tissue and narrative. For example, in Irina's refrain: "Where has it all gone? I have forgotten everything... I'm getting so forgetful..."; in the dialogue of Vershinin and Kulygin: "Splendid fellows! Splendid fellows! They are first-rate men! If it hadn't been for the soldiers, the whole town would've been burnt down..." – "What..." – "Splendid..." – "What time is it?". Eötvös places emphasis on the recurrent theme of the fire and a tangle of familiar phrases, fragments, recalls. Chekhov's characters do not hear and do not understand each other; they have no cause-and-effect relationships whatsoever (Biryukova, 2019).

The composer assigns specific timbral characteristics to all the characters, represented by thirteen groups of orchestral instruments. For example, the oboe and English horn stand in for Irina; Masha is represented by the clarinet, while the flute and alto flute identify Olga (the three sisters together are represented by the string trio); Andrei is identified with the soprano saxophone etc. The orchestral space is also doubled. Here, Eötvös borrowed Stockhausen's idea of two orchestras: the ensemble of soloists – the characters' counterparts – is located in the orchestra pit, while the main orchestra is hidden behind the stage (or, in the Ural Opera production, above the stage). The traditional orchestral instrumentation was complemented by tom-toms, cymbals, gongs, cowbells, and a rainmaker (an instrument simulating the sound of rain), as well as by a custom instrument imitating a lion's roar consisting of a small tub with crushed porcelain and plastic foam blocks: all these instruments are also located in the orchestra pit. In addition, the third sequence is accompanied by sounds of metal spoons the characters use to stir their tea in porcelain cups – all these sounds are also included in the score.

### **Eötvös's Opera in Different Musical Traditions**

The system of mirrors, mirror images and reflections is continued in the musical text, saturating it with multiple external musical associations, as well as sometimes with direct quotes. Musicologists note that the *Tri Sestry* opera features universal formulas and techniques of the European academic music of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: jazz intonations, the influence of the New Viennese School, techniques of minimalist composers, the stylistic ambiance of the madrigal comedy, Verdian detective and psychological drama, pastorale and New Viennese cabaret, Berg's expressionist dramas, the music of Stockhausen and Boulez (Krivitskaya, 2019).

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The author himself admits that he intentionally relies on the tradition of the western artistic music to form a link between the musical past, present and future. This correlates with the *great time* concept introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin speaking about the infinite and never-ending dialogue full of undying meanings. The culture of the past is asking us questions and is answering our questions, while restating its meaning and revealing its new facets to us. During this dialogue, people representing different time periods can become time peers. *Great time* indiscriminately hosts Homer and Aeschylus, Sophocles and Socrates. You can meet Dostoevsky there, for nothing vanishes without trace; everything restores to a new life. When a new period begins, everything that happened previously, everything experienced by humankind, sums itself up and acquires a new meaning (see: Bakhtin, 1995, p. 8).

The *Tri Sestry* opera is nurtured by the European and Russian opera traditions. First of all, these are compositions of Mussorgsky with their dramaturgy of non-melodious vowels, percussive consonants (“zhzhzhzhzhda”, “zhzhal”, “zhzhzhisn”) and remarkable expressiveness of instrumentation. Eötvös takes the genre pattern from Tchaikovsky as well as his method of turning an opera into a succession of love songs (“It is close on midnight already, but still no sign of Herman, no sign!” in *The Queen of Spades*). Eötvös also uses associations (Tuzenbach’s and Solyony’s quarrel and duel bear a resemblance to the Lensky and Onegin storyline from *Eugene Onegin*). The haunting tune of the lost time and the clock breaking to pieces remind us of Prokofiev’s ballet *Cinderella*; Andrei from *Tri Sestry* triggers associations with Andrei Bolkonsky from Prokofiev’s *War and Peace*; his vocal part is characterised by a narrative thoughtfulness and rationality that is fundamentally different from the overall style of Eötvös’ composition; his monologue contains the direct tune quote from the anthem of the Soviet Union (“I believe in freedom” to the tune of *Unbreakable Union*), at the end of which Andrei laughs. There are also similarities with *The Nose* by Shostakovich and *Dead Souls* by Shchedrin. Thus, the composer’s postmodernist strategy brings about a dialogue in the musical space, which forms the perception of *Tri Sestry* as a Russian opera. The sounds of the accordion at the beginning of the opera are clearly associated with Russian music.

Director Christopher Alden, when analysing Eötvös’ compositions, said that it looks as though Chekhov was mixed up and recooked (Monolog Kristofera Oldena, 2019). Nevertheless, Eötvös’ work tends to be seen in terms of having added a new dimension of Chekhov’s play. By using different – and not only musical – methods, the composer tries to uncover the meanings embedded by the writer; he translates the play into the language of opera, while using structural elements of narrative filmmaking as well as avant-garde music techniques to build Russian art’s dialogue with French and German avant-garde. As a result, the composer examines Chekhov’s play from the perspective of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century author, initiating a dialogue in *great time*, giving his answers to the questions tormenting characters of Chekhov’s play one hundred years ago, and his answers are destructive and destroying. As the critic Ekaterina Belyaeva asseverates, while Chekhov’s *Tri Sestry* is an open-ended drama incorporating elements of comedy and, despite everything, leaving a feeble glimmer

of hope, Eötvös' interpretation turns it into a completely cheerless absurdist tragedy intensified by elements of grotesque (Belyaeva, 2019).

The opera *Tri Sestry* was first performed in Lyon in 1998, one year after it was written. It was staged by the Japanese director Ushio Amagatsu as an opera with an all-male cast, in the tradition of Japanese kabuki, which is related to cothurni and the symbolism of the ancient theatre and thus echoes the vision of the composer. Ural Opera, however, opted for a different approach, which was informed by the artistic vision of the opera's stage director Christopher Alden.

In terms of stage direction, Alden, like Eötvös in music, ranks among radical theatre directors known for their modernist views regarding the opera artform, drawing inspiration from modern visual art – first and foremost, from cinema. In his creative work, he was influenced by the more abstract than realistic Europe poetic theatrical tradition, namely by such great modernists as Pina Bausch, Peter Brook, Peter Stein. The director admits that he eventually settled on opera as the most “unnatural” of all the art forms. Alden launched his directing career with Long Beach Opera (California), where its founder and general director Michael Milenski was building a director's theatre whose repertoire featured non-mainstream names. Alden wanted his performances to be “exciting and appealing to a mass audience, like a good movie.” He tried to find connections between stories taken as a basis for opera librettos and composers' biographies, looking for similarities between the storylines of opera characters and various historical personalities, as well as employing elements of cinematic art.

The stage director made his Russian debut in 2012 when he staged Britten's opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Musical Theatre. Thus, the Yekaterinburg production of *Tri Sestry* was his second work carried out in Russia. The production team included the set designer Irakli Avaliani (New York), the costume designer Doey Lüthi (Berlin) and the lighting designer Seth Reiser (Rochester, New York State). The principal conductor of Ural Opera Oliver von Dohnányi oversaw the musical interpretation of the opera. *Tri Sestry* mirrored the director's attempt to find an innovative, abstract and not too straightforward approach, which the opera itself, in fact, implies. Alden wanted to recapture his attitude toward Chekhov's story and Russian history from the perspective of Chekhovian characters. Nevertheless, while keeping an eye on Chekhov's story, his work is primarily an interaction with Eötvös' composition.

### ***Tri Sestry* from Three Eras: Alden's Directorial Concept**

Alden transferred the opera's action into a surreal space between heaven and earth, looking like a waiting hall and almost exactly duplicating the interior design of the famous *Haus des Rundfunks* (Broadcasting House) in Berlin (Eötvös' creative life was closely connected with Germany). In Alden's concept, the two-level structure, whose upper level hosts the orchestra, is shown as a dream house from the time when the father of the sisters was its master. In his words, the long dead actors are locked in a certain purgatory. They recall significant moments in their life, replaying them over

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and over, while being trapped in the *Groundhog Day* loop (Monolog Kristofera Oldena, 2019, p. 55). The directing solution was driven by the author's implied closedness and circling nature of the story; at the same time, it fits in with Chekhov's perception of time that flows relentlessly, while staying in the same place: Changeable, but unchanged. Something happens, but nothing comes. A truly Russian collision. And there is more than that. Time always drags everyone into its vortex, like it happened to the sisters staying in the province (see: Krylova, 2019). As can be seen from the above, the idea suggested by Chekhov was picked up and developed, first by the composer, and then by the stage director. While in Chekhov's *Tri Sestry*, a beautiful, unknown life is passing by the characters, though somewhere outside the house it exists and can be enjoyed, in Alden's version (and in Eötvös' opera) time stops (the clock broke down). Everything that happened keeps coming back. Chekhov's characters coexist together, like in the Great Beyond, playing back their past (or their present) over and over again: the fire, Natasha with Bobik in the carriage, Protopopov, Masha's bidding agonising farewell, the nervous breakdown of Olga who is in love with Vershinin, Andrei's pathetic monologues about his ruined life, the loud sound of the gunshot fired by Solyony (Oleg Budaratsky). This emotionless grotesque absorbs everything that fits into present-day actual reality (see: Muravyova, 2019).

The movement of time in the opera and performance, as envisioned by the stage director, should be the same as the feeling of time, which exists in human nature, when life is more than a chain of events succeeding one another. Human experience is multilevel. The opera makes an attempt to communicate the idea that all of us live our lives at different levels at the same time (Monolog Kristofera Oldena, 2019, p. 55). The persistent recollection of the same events correlates with Alden's perception of the Soviet regime with its endless absurdity of bureaucracy.

Following the concept offered by Eötvös and working around the symbolism of the number three, Alden transforms the opera's characters into representatives of three periods of the Russian history. Irina, the youngest sister, is a classic character; in her early 20<sup>th</sup>-century long dress, she belongs in the Chekhovian times; Masha, the middle sister, is from the Soviet 1960–1970s, representing a type of a wealthy married householder; Olga, the eldest sister, is our contemporary, a single and unfettered, ambitiously career-minded person, a businesswoman. As envisioned by the stage director, *Tri Sestry* remains relevant in any time. He said that the more they rehearsed, the better he realised that it was absolutely unimportant what time period the costumes came from to be used by thirteen characters in the world of the Prozorov family. It is not important in what time they live; they cannot get out of this story. This story tells that we may not be as free as we would like to think; that we, pretty much, are a product of the beliefs, religions, doctrines and myths of the society we live in. This story also tells us what we inherit from our parents and how this colours our lives (Monolog Kristofera Oldena, 2019, p. 55).

By bringing representatives of different eras together into one space, the stage director points out that anticipation of coming changes was typical of people not only on the eve of revolution, but also in the Soviet times and in present-day Russia. In broader terms, such sentiments are in people's nature, in any country of the world,

including the United States; therefore, the reference to Russian realities was rather conditional. It was mainly manifested in the characters' costumes and attributes assigned to them by the stage director (in the same way that Eötvös associates them with different timbres of instruments). For example, Tuzenbach walks with a portable radio pressed to his ear; Solyony never parts with his gun; Irina is always with her books; Olga is never seen without a laptop; Masha leafs through a *Burda* fashion magazine; Andrei, holding a pillow, wanders around the house; Chebutykin takes the clock off the wall, drops it, breaks it and puts it back on the wall to break it again in the next sequence; Natasha struts around the house with Bobik's smoking carriage, as if illustrating Masha's comment: "She walks as if it was she who started a fire".

While in the opera, the sound of accordion is associated with the Russian ambiance (in addition to quotes and allusions to Russian classical music art), in the staged action, its alternative is introduced in the third sequence when the stage director brings the voiceless guests of Irina's name-day party to the stage: a ballerina representing "high spheres", a metaphorical bear ("a symbol of Russia"), three little girls with whitened faces, who are associated with the sisters' childhood, with coming death, and with a mysterious princess wearing a head-band and dying, being shot by Solyony like Aleksandra Fyodorovna<sup>2</sup> who was killed in Yekaterinburg one hundred years ago.

Continuing the game that was started by Eötvös, Alden used mirror images and counterparts to produce the visual manifestation of the composer's musical ideas. Having, by his own admission, listened to the opera music at least forty times, Alden came to understand all its subtle nuances. Following the music and its transformations, he transforms the on-stage world from the humorous and light-hearted to vicious and horrible. The dreamy intonation well-remembered from the previous Russian performance staged by Christopher Alden does not bring relief; on the contrary, it emphasises the endless torment of being horror-stricken by living through the nightmare of one hundred years of surrounding reality (see: Ovchinnikov, 2019).

Thus, a new conceptual level was presented by the stage director who, inspired by the American reality, decided to turn the opera into a story about women living in a man's world and having to become stronger and more assertive. Alden is keenly aware of the increasingly central role played by women not only in Russia or America, but also worldwide. As he describes, the world is going through very serious historical changes – for him, it is very important to show it in staging of *Tri Sestry*. It is a story about women who live in the world of men, who start wars, commit, assault and force their way into love. In handling this world as well they can, women have to remain strong. The opera *Tri Sestry* is a powerful portrayal of sisterhood relations of the women supporting each other (see: Monolog Kristofera Oldena, 2019, p. 55). In the opera, the stage director focuses on two extremes – strong women endowed with commitment, for example, to go to Moscow, like the Prozorov sisters, or to become the householder, like Natasha (Alden does not see her as a negative personality) –

<sup>2</sup> Aleksandra Fyodorovna, original German name Alix, Prinzessin (princess) von Hesse-Darmstadt, (born June 6, 1872, Darmstadt, Germany—died July 17, 1918, Yekaterinburg, Russia) was consort of the Russian emperor Nicholas II.

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and weak men. For example, in Alden's performance, Andrei is associated with Oblomov. Dressed in pyjamas and a robe, he stays at home, reads newspapers and drinks vodka. Chebutykin, an army doctor, feels helpless and keeps repeating: "I have forgotten everything... I do not know how to treat people... I can do nothing to help anyone." This new conceptual level, which, to some extent, can be noticed in Chekhov's play, does not cause any internal conflict in terms of the play's structure. In our opinion, the anticipation-imbued play (even though the anticipation is tedious and impossible), the farewell opera and the performance about strong women surprisingly blended in, being fully compatible and giving birth to new meanings incorporated in characters – slightly different from the Chekhovian prototypes, but easy-to-understand by a modern audience familiar with the artworks of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, the opera soloist Olga Tenyakova introduced Natasha as "a stunning monster-blonde" reminding Angela from Godard's movie *A Woman is a Woman* or a "typical American woman" from the *Sex and the City* television series. The role Masha, performed by Nadezhda Babintseva, turns her into a "lady of the art nouveau period" – stately, stylish, with a cigarette in her mouth, a broken-down voice and Carmen's impulsive temperament. Vershinin, according to the director's vision, comes onto the stage in a riot police officer's uniform – as if right off the street, where, during the period of the premiere performances, people spontaneously gathered to protect the park at the Drama Theatre.

Ural Opera prepared two main casts, the difference between which, according to Morozov (2019), is in colours and accents: in the first case, sharper and more intense; in the second, smoother and softer. Yet, the overall quality of work in both cases is quite high. Almost all the soloists act thoroughly, neatly and at their best, performing in the highly sophisticated vocal design of Eötvös and the sadness-laced stage-set grotesque of Alden (see: Bederova, 2019); the Mussorgsky-and-Prokofiev recitative declamation is very expressive, when performed by them; multiple non-vocal fragments (conversational phrases, exclamations of various pitches) are worked out with dedication and commitment. The challenging score is compiled by the conductor and musical director Oliver von Dohnányi and his assistant Alexei Bogorad, who aimed to achieve the preciseness and mathematical coordination in performance (see: Matusevich, 2019).

## Conclusion

Getting ready to stage the opera *Tri Sestry*, the theatre did a lot to prepare the audience – not only through brochures and the website, but also through a chain of pre-premiere interviews, coverage reports and meet-the-artist events. Shortly before the premiere, on May 14, 2019, the Yeltsin Presidential Centre hosted the Hungarian musicologist Gergely Fazekas reading the lecture "Love and Other Demons: Music by Peter Eötvös." On May 15, the *Piotrovsky* book store (in the Yeltsin Center) welcomed the audience to a presentation of the compilation book "How Opera Should Be Watched", which was introduced by its compilers – musical critics Alexey Parin and Aya Makarova. During the days of the premiere, the oval

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foyer of the theatre hosted meetings with the stage director Christopher Alden (May 16) and the composer Peter Eötvös (May 17); the prominent critic Aya Makarova was invited to moderate the meetings. The educational efforts of Ural Opera Ballet focused not only on information about the future performance, but were also aimed at transforming the attitude of the audience toward the opera genre. As the composer Vladimir Rannev notes, the opera genre is stylistically very flexible; its potential is not limited to the familiar format of the classical opera of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which has come into our time as a conservative form of leisure activity. Today, it can be a multilayered, intellectual or showy, encompassing boundless conceptual and aesthetic fields (Ganiyants, 2019), which, to the full extent, can apply to the opera *Tri Sestry*. This multi-layeredness focusing not only on the emotional and sensual, but also on intellectual perception, is a result of interaction between and among the different artistic and national cultures in the performance.

The professional community assessed *Tri Sestry* as a flawless product of world class and significance. It is a very sophisticated, beautiful, clever, emotionally charged performance completed with the respect for the audience – without arrogance, though without simplification. It follows and maintains the non-trivial, mathematically rational and enthralling interpretation of Chekhov's play, which was outlined by Eötvös in the score (see: Bederova, 2019). Alden and his team offer masks we can accept or turn down; in any case, they are highly informal; they ask questions; they excite and wound (see: Biryukova, 2019). At the same time, the performances showed that, despite the educational programme and theatre's efforts aimed at popularisation of contemporary opera art, the mainstream Russian audience was not quite ready for such experiments with the Russian classical work of literature, seeing it as an integral part of the specific time and their own culture. Therefore, the interaction with Chekhov's text, especially when it is done by foreign stage directors, can be seen as an attempt to destroy the work's cultural integrity. Such an audience may have a very general idea about the plot and content of Chekhov's play; its expectations from the performance may largely be connected with filling gaps in school education involving a traditionally reverential attitude toward the writer's works. Therefore, *Tri Sestry* being introduced by Ural Opera may seem embarrassing to the audience: they offer a present-day narrative of Chekhov, which is adequate to his work and the scale of his talent. For our part, in this case, the performance can be seen as the goal and the outcome of the completed cultural dialogue of the writer – composer – stage director, in which the play, music and theatrical production are equal in their impact on the audience; the dialogue, in which they enrich and complement each other.

Thus, the opera *Tri Sestry* introduced the vision of the classical plot of Russian literature and Russian history from a present-day perspective. It is an avant-garde interpretation of Chekhov's drama from the standpoint of the Hungarian composer, whose formative experiences were dominated by the Soviet Union, and the American stage director who has his own independent view of Russian history and culture. Thus, the opera staged in the Ural Opera Ballet Theatre is a remarkable example of artistic traditions from different cultures and their creative interaction.

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