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Comic Operas of G. I. Banshchikov in Context of Development of the Domestic Musical Theatre of the Second Half of the 20th Century

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Gennady I. Banshchikov is one of the greatest composers of our time. His works captivated the audience long ago and now his works are attracting more attention of researchers now, opening the world of amazing musical masterpieces of this composer from St. Petersburg. The article presents some results of a study of musical- theatrical legacy of G. I. Banshchikov. The author focuses on the composer's first operas, considered not only in the context of the creative biography of the musician, but also in terms of artistic and stylistic processes of national musical art of 1960 – 1970-ies. The conclusions of the work convey some idea of the principles of theatrical thinking of the composer. Furthermore, we can conclude that the early stage works by G.I. Banshchikov, in correlation with socio-cultural processes and genre, form an important link in the diverse panorama of the musical theater of the second half of 20th century.

Keywords: G.I. Banshchikov, domestic musical theater, classical Russian literature, opera, ballet.

G. Banshchikov's Musical Theatre is a diverse world of art, featuring a wealth of images, ideas and senses of dramatic decisions. Stage works by this St. Petersburg author represent the leading domestic genres of musical theater of the last third of 20th century: drama, comic opera, tragedy and satire opera, ballet, children's radio-opera, and musical. They created a whole gallery of vivid, expressive images – Silin, Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Nikiforovitch, Commissioner, Chatsky, Hermann, Fyodor Volkov... This "motley" conglomerate reflects the breadth and richness of interest and search of G. Banshchikov.



Fig. 1. G.I. Banshchikov



Fig. 2 Kozma Prutkov



Fig. 3

However, whatever themes and subjects were disclosed, his theatrical creations were always in tune with the time, because they were born at a constant intersection of the author's own creative aspirations and social, aesthetic "demands" of the age, reflecting the achievements and current trends in the domestic musical theatrics in the second half of 20th century.

As a theater composer G. Banshchikov announced himself at the turn of the 1960s – early 1970s. His writing debut was the chamber opera "Love and Silin", based on the play by K. Prutkov, created in 1968 as a part of postgraduate training in Leningrad State Conservatory (Professor B. Arapov's class). This work opens a period of creative development in the field of musical theater, when the young author, along with comprehension of the internal laws of the genre of opera, creates his own individual theatrical "handwriting".

The proposal came from his fellow student and colleague S. Volkov. The libretto of the opera also belongs to him. As you know, Prutkov was a fictional character.

The scandalous name "hid" a group of authors represented by brothers Alexei, Alexander and Vladimir Zhemchuzhnikov and

A. Tolstoy. On the literary scene they appeared in the 50s of the 19th century. Almost immediately began a collaboration between K. Prutkov and the magazine "Sovremennik" (Contemporary) in the part "Literary Jumble" which promoted a humorous, satirical poetry. Released in the press "Dosugi Prutkova" (Prutkov's Leisure Time) devoted main attention to satirical comedy assessment of phenomena (genres, authors) of modern Russian literature, in connection with which the opuses by K. Prutkov caused much controversy in pages of the critics of that time.

The plot basis of the play "Love and Silin" is an anecdotal story with elements of phantasmagoria and adventure dénouement of the action. Certainly the fascinating twists and turns of the comedy are Silin's "bedazzling" love to the visiting Spanish lady Oslabella, the general's voluptuous wife Kislozvezdova's "detective" story, the "fatal" mystery of Vanya-finik boy, the mystical ending with a mysterious voice from the ravine was partly buffoonery "screen" behind which there were more serious intentions of K. Prutkov. Turning to the domestic realities of everyday life, the writer makes caustic fun of the middle-class environment, moral foundations of the modern society, stupid provincial nobility,

representing themselves as “significant” personalities.

Researchers gave the opera “Love and Silin” different, very colorful genre definitions: *opera-farce*, *vaudeville*, *opera-skit* (E. Ruchevskaya), *opera-epigram* (T. Voronina) In general, such definitions are quite valid because the composer refers to the genre of musical parody – or rather, a parody for the established art opera “clichés”. At the same time, the plot-compositional and dramatic features of “Love and Silin” reveal the author’s orientation for samples of the Italian *buffa*-opera. This obviously affects the deliberately confusing plot intrigue, dynamic development of the action, mobility of the scenic rhythm, number structure (though with signs of the through development), where short, enclosed numbers, marked with the genre household specificity, are bound with recitatives, which “promote” the action.

The characters of “Love and Silin” get colorful musical characteristics – “cartoons” by mimicking the traditional vocal forms of lyric opera, as well as samples of “high style”. The comic effect is created by the deliberate emotional-semantic “mismatch” between verbal and musical series, and by the exaggeration of typical intonation formulas. The striking comic and burlesque techniques include playing on stage situations, which is inherent for fabulously romantic operas. For example, the “mysterious” episode of Don-Merzavets’ abduction by Kislozvezdova the general’s wife, or the final scene of the opera, where the raging force of nature symbolizes the “tragic” dénouement – after a powerful thunderclap a mysterious voice from the ravine tells Silin that he was “no longer the leader of the nobility”.

At the end of the composer masterfully uses the device of the genre and semantic inconsistencies of intonation and musical series, ultimately sharpening the comedy perception of the situation – the solemn proclamation of the

prophecy by Kestner (the disclosure of the “fatal” mystery) was shaped by G. Banshchikov in the form of couplets, which are quotations from the famous aria of Mephistopheles from the opera “Faust” by C. Gounod. Such musical-dramatic solutions confirm the genre genesis of “Love and Silin”, for the show of the “vile”, purely domestic through the mystical, fantastic shell, is *a characteristic property for comedy operas*.

The original, somewhat polystylistic language of the work aims to create a satirical effect – a kind of “cocktail” that blends seemingly mutually exclusive intonation allusions and style samples of Italian and Russian opera of the mid 19th century, typical genre rhythmical intonation “patterns” of the Spanish dance music, quotations from C. Gounod and P. Tchaikovsky. Sometimes in the opera it is difficult to see G. Banshchikov’s own handwriting. However, in this cunningly twisted stylistic game lies an important idea of the author, aimed at maximizing the spirit of Prutkov’s parody-play by musical means.

The composer was one of the few who picked up the comic and satirical “baton” from his great predecessors, writing in 1968 the opera “Love and Silin”. Righteously feeling a certain degree of “being the pioneer”, G. Banshchikov admitted that as a guide to him was “Mavra” by Igor Stravinsky. Indeed, there is a certain similarity between the works (this affects the peculiar story “continuity”, as well as the related genre and stylistic and dramaturgical principles). L. Danko is right by emphasizing the significant impact of “Mavra” on the development of Russian opera, which covered comic-satirical operas of both the first and second half of the 19th century (Danko, 1986, 78-79).

The premiere of the opera “Love and Silin” in 1968 by the youth experimental ensemble of the chamber opera of the Leningrad Conservatory attracted the attention of St. Petersburg’s musical community, which noted witty artistic

ideas, undoubted talent and originality of G. Banshchikov's music. Thus, this work became a lucky "ticket" of the young author to the theatrical life, demonstrating the extraordinary and unique creative personality. Moreover, the original literary source "saturated" with the spirit of humor and parody, helped to discover new facets of G. Banshchikov's artistic personality. A talent of the master of *comic and satiric genre* reflected in the first opera was developed in the subsequent writings.

In 1971 the leadership of the Leningrad State Theatre named after Kirov requested



Fig. 4. N.V. Gogol

G. Banshchikov to write a chamber opera. This request he could not refuse – the libretto was written by one of the brightest Mirgorod stories of Nikolai Gogol.

"The Opera of How Ivan Ivanovich quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich" (the second, unofficial name is "Quarrel") was completed in a relatively short time – just after three months the composer gave the score to the theater for approval. The opera stage life turned out to be successful: in 1972 it was filmed on Sverdlovsk television, a year after it was successfully put on the stage of the Leningrad Theater named after Kirov (director – M. Vysotsky, actors – V. Zhuravlenko, N. Strezhnev) Furthermore, "Quarrel" was repeatedly performed in its concert version in different cities of our country.

The second opera, despite the ordered nature, which coincided with G. Banshchikov's internal aspirations, his special attitude to the artistic world of the genius writer. Ambiguity of "Gogol's smile", obviously stood out in the story, was surprisingly close to the musician's worldview. No coincidence that he gives his author's definition to



Fig. 5. The final scene of Gogol's opera

“Quarrel” as “a sad comedy”. Just like Gogol, the composer at the same time loves his characters and mocks them, convicts and, at the same time, shows compassion about their empty, worthless existence. Following the restrictions that had been put by the theater management (the request was to write a chamber type of opera), the composer used only two chapters of the novel in the libretto, having finished the act with the first climax – the shameful exile of Ivan Ivanovich by his former good friend. The scandalous and hopeless foolishly longstanding litigation between these Mirgorod landowners remained outside the short 30-minute opera.

The structure and organization of the literary source determine the composition of the work. G. Banshchikov refuses to use a closed structure and opts for the (thread) end-to-end principle of development. The one-act structure “Quarrel”, in fact is a most deployed *opera-scene*, almost entirely built on the dialogues of the main characters. The vocal language of this work, having absorbed achievements of Russian declamatory recitative opera, however, reveals the enrichment of expressive resources of modern recitative and declamation. The author demonstrates both: his comedic talent and his ability to act as a subtle psychologist seeking for a deeply truthful voice intonation embodiment of a wide variety of emotions, and “spiritual” movements of the characters.

Having given the opera “life” to the novel, the author, on the one hand, expands the boundaries of this musical Gogol’s story (As far as we know, the story about “Two Ivans” had not been put on the stage by that time). On the other hand, the emergence of “Quarrel” in 1971 organically was integrated into the mainstream of social and artistic processes of musical art. It is well known that the period of “thaw” gained rapid oblivion even though it had opened all the “gateways”, which gave the opportunity to speak about “urgent”

problems after the long domination of the domestic culture of socialist realism settings. The erupted interest for N. Gogol, who had been one of the first to open conspiracy and to speak on the social contradictions of his time, was symptomatic in this paradoxical sociocultural situation of the mid 1960s. It was at this historic turning point of two eras – the “Khrushchev’s thaw” and Brezhnev’s “stagnation” – a deep philosophical meaning of “Gogol’s accurate words” began to open, which attracted the attention of many creative theater directors, filmmakers and composers.

The domestic opera practice started a “triumphant march” (an expression by V. Smirnov) of Gogol’s stories – we shall name them: “Diary of a Madman” by Yu. Butsko, “The Overcoat” and “Carriage” by A. Kholminov, “Dead Souls” by R. Shchedrin, “The Portrait” by M. Weinberg. Having turned to “The Novel of How ..” G. Banshchikov stood in line with the artists, who reflected in their work the spiritual and moral state of Soviet Russia in the late 1960 – 1970ies. The composer, as well as a writer, ridicules the vices of modern human society – only this time it was the 20th century: the pettiness of life priorities, meanness, the spiritual poverty of the inner world, hidden behind the “wonderful” outer shell of human wretchedness of daily existence: “Gogol is always relevant. From a very remote from us time he was able to see Russia as it remained today...” (Smirnov, 2010, 86).

Now we shall enumerate some substantive provisions, which can help us to fit the first theatrical works of the composer, opening the central period of his creative life, in the mainstream of relevant searches in domestic opera in 60-70-ies of 19th century. Of course G. Banshchikov’s interest to the chamber genre was largely due to changes that transformed the face of domestic musical theater at the time.

The well-known situation of the opera crisis determined the need for active overcoming

of genre, figurative, intonation and dramatic stereotypes, which had accumulated in Soviet music by the mid-1950s. The composers had a difficult task – without a radical break with tradition to build a new “*coordinate system*” that would go beyond the established template framework and would provide an opportunity to find new prospects, uncover “inexhaustible” potential of the opera genre.

These ideas find their embodiment since the mid 1960s – a time when the domestic art was captured by the “wave” of experiments, which was largely a result of the unique creative atmosphere of “Khrushchev’s thaw”. Artistic processes which were marked by the “spirit of frivolous thinking” took place in musical theater, particularly in opera, which was subjected to a severe test, but experienced a major turning point. Despite the negative burden of sustainable socialist reality “clichés”, it became the object of attention of a number of composers, who were safely and most importantly very successfully testing the operatic genre in new social and cultural conditions.

The national musical art of the second half of the 20th century put forward a brilliant assemblage of nominated composers of the “sixties” – S. Slonimsky, R. Shchedrin, A. Petrov, A. Schnittke, A. Kholminov, G. Banshchikov, Yu. Butsko, N. Karetnikov and others. In the multifaceted searches of the authors aimed at expanding and enriching content-semantic boundaries and genres of dramatic possibilities of the national opera there were two major trends. One of them was connected with the idea of “*pluralistic form*”. A striking result was achieved by the genre hybridization that was multidimensionally expressed especially in the traditional “high” opera, which proved its uncanny ability to accumulate various artistic phenomena. The internal rethinking of genre-composite components occurred under the active

influence of the adjacent Arts – Drama Theatre, cinema, literature, whereby the opera began to lose its typological stability. The following genre-“hybrids” take more active role: operaballad, rock opera, opera-ballet, television opera and musical.

The operatic genre begins to draw new expressive possibilities from outside, sharing “resources” with instrumental, vocal and symphonic forms. As a result, it creates, for example, works marked by the genre synthesis between operas and oratorios – these were “Peter I” by A. Petrov, “July Sunday” by A. Rubin, “Ten Days That Shook the World” by M. Karminsky and other writings. This period was marked by not only compositional and genre, but intonation and stylistic “openness” of the national opera, which started to lead an active dialogue with cultures of the past eras, folklore and “intonation fund” of the modern mass musical culture.

Another important trend, reflecting the breadth of creative searches in Musical Theatre 1960 – 1970’s, associated with the activation of attention to the genre of *chamber opera* (monoopera, duopera) – became a kind of “ground”, because the absence of clear rules and regulations opened promising prospects for the most daring artistic experimentation.

As you know, this genre for the national opera was not new – a solid foundation had been laid by writings of the Russian school of composers in the second half of 19th – early 20th century (“The Stone Guest” by A. Dargomyzhsky, “Marriage” by M. Mussorgsky, “The Miserly Knight” by S. Rachmaninoff, etc.). However the updates of chamber opera in different periods of Russian music had always been associated with *public and social events* or *musical and stylistic processes* occurring in our country. In such a context, an extraordinary flowering of the chamber genre, since the second half of the 1960s, was conditioned by several reasons.

On the one hand, this was due to an attempt to get away from the monumental, epic scope, and pathetic “big” opera. At the same time, the active “development” of the chamber opera was associated with the revival of interest in the extraordinary creative composers to the works of *Russian (and Western) classical literature*, many of which had been until recently in undeserved oblivion, or just under the ideological ban. In an effort to comprehend the depth of the human person, to maximally comprehend the moral and psychological problems of the present, to replace the “collective” monolithic character and worldview of the hero-fighter in musical theater (and art in general) together with the domestic classics comes another romantic hero, doubting and reflecting. In this context, the chamber opera was the most popular, as embodied a rich opportunity to expose complex emotional and psychological states, subtle nuances of the human soul.

In other words, the chamber genre could meet the spiritual needs, reflected the depth of ideological and philosophical ideas of the modern artist. It was symptomatic that the plots for chamber operas were drawn by the composers mainly from the Russian classical literature, which became *an aesthetic “bridge”* between the past and the present. In less than ten years appeared a number of bright, talented works, representing, on the one hand, a new genre of cultural and social conditions. On the other – showing striking timeliness of their appearance.

The most active musicians turn to lyrical psychological drama embodied in great operatic works of Yu. Butsko (Diary of a Madman), A. Kholminov (The Overcoat), G. Sidelnikov (Poor People), G. Fried (The Diary of Anne Frank), etc. However, creative searches of the authors were not confined only to the lyric and dramatic sphere. Mainly within the chamber genre in this period the *comic opera* was being

developed, which proves its organic inclusion, not exclusion from general artistic, genre-style processes in the national musical theater.

So, following the “serious” opera, it also turned to the subjects of the Russian classics, through the prism of which tries to make sense of human characters, to perceive their relationships, to solve complex moral and ethical questions, to reveal social contradictions of the modern society. This circumstance gave rise to tendency for plays of a satirical comedy-type, which had assimilated rich experience in domestic comedigraphy in figurative intonation, compositional and dramaturgical aspect (meaning primarily operatic works by M. Mussorgsky, I. Stravinsky, S. Prokofiev, D. Shostakovich).

However, it must be noted that, despite the composers’ interest to the comic opera at the turn of 1960 – 1970-ies, “pure” samples of the genre in the national music of this period are not many (as well as in subsequent years). G. Banshchikov’s operas of this period were beneficial to practically fill in the vacant niche. However, clownish images refracted in a satirical, grotesque way, played a significant role in the modern opera, creating a critical layer of dramatic works. As illustrative examples we may enumerate the operas “Dead Souls” by R. Shchedrin, “The Master and Margarita” by S. Slonimsky, “Mayakovsky Begins” by A. Petrov, “Woe from Wit” by G. Banshchikov, etc.

If you go back to the works of G. Banshchikov, it becomes obvious that the first stage operas of the young author revealed a close relationship with social and artistic genre and stylistic processes occurring in the national musical theater of 60-70-ies of the 20th century. At the same time, active work in the genre of chamber opera was for G. Banshchikov not only attuned to the aesthetic aspirations of the era, but also was the most favorable in the mastery of professional skills.

From the number structure and arioso-song type of vocal intonation in “Love and Silin”, he comes to “Quarrel” and its “end-to-end” (*thread*) type of composition, flexibility to combine recitation, recitative, arioso form elements. Intonation development of the second opera becomes based on an extensive *leitmotiv system*. The musical language of “Quarrel” compared to Prutkov’s “medley” opera demonstrates such an important for the author stylistic unity – now quoting of “foreign words” will always be expressed in a single topic related to the disclosure of key artistic ideas.

Thus, Banshchikov’s first theatrical works became a significant step in the development of opera. They found important composer dramatic techniques, formed some individual style features. They revealed new facets of talent of the young musician: a keen sense of humor, attention to the word, characterological interesting findings in the transmission of speech intonations, the pursuit for symphonization of the operatic score.

On the other hand, we can talk about identifying the author’s artistic and philosophical position: plots of the operas (as

well as unrealized plans) and their musical interpretations determine the “setting” of Banshchikov’s theatrical creativity in socio- psychological perspective, which finds embodiment in almost all writings of subsequent years. The developed by the musician comic, grotesque, satirical techniques will further become a component of a broader method in uncovering serious dramatic collisions and exacerbation of the tragic figurative-intonation drama. In such a context, “Quarrel” was G. Banshchikov’s turning point. The stage musical creations of the following decades fully revealed the composer’s skill as a dramatist; they obviously showed the increasing inclination toward acute dramatic collisions and toward the study of human character and relationships, social contradictions.

Thus, G. Banshchikov’s musical theater is a bright and original artistic phenomenon of the domestic arts. This St. Petersburg author’s writings in terms of socio-cultural and genre-stylistic processes form an important link in the diverse panorama of the musical theater of the second half of 19th century.

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**Комические оперы Г.И. Банщикова
в контексте развития
отечественного музыкального театра
2-й половины XX века**

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Геннадий Иванович Банщиков – один из выдающихся композиторов современности. Его творчество давно покорило слушателей и сегодня начинает постепенно привлекать внимание исследователей, открывающих удивительный музыкальный мир сочинений петербургского автора. В статье изложены некоторые результаты исследования музыкально-театрального наследия Г.И. Банщикова. В центре внимания автора – первые оперы композитора, которые рассматриваются не только в контексте творческой биографии музыканта, но также художественно-стилевых процессов отечественного музыкального искусства 1960–1970-х годов. Выводы, сделанные в статье, позволяют сформировать представление о некоторых театральных принципах мышления композитора. Кроме того, можно заключить, что ранние сценические произведения Г.И. Банщикова, коррелируясь с социокультурными и жанровыми процессами, формируют важное звено в многоликой панораме музыкального театра второй половины XX века.

Ключевые слова: Г.И. Банщиков, отечественный музыкальный театр, русская классическая литература, опера, балет.
