

Opera-film *Baņuta* The Birth of a New Aesthetic Regime

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ABSTRACT

The opera-film *Baņuta* (2021) is a contemporary art project based on the Latvian national opera *Baņuta* (1920, music by Alfrēds Kalniņš, libretto by Artūrs Krūmiņš) that has not been staged since 1999. The film was made under the restrictions of Covid-19 that impeded the production of an interactive contemporary music theatre performance in presence. The project was implemented by an international team led by Latvian dramaturg Evarts Melnalksnis and German stage director Franziska Kronfoth.

In terms of approach to the source (score and libretto), content- and form-wise, the opera-film *Baņuta* is somewhat transgressive and offers a new aesthetic regime to a well-known example of so-called national classics. Using deconstruction strategies, the authors of the film replace representation with performativity, include the discourse of opera's performing history and contexts in the film narrative, and thus extend the relevance of the following topics: women in war, violence, otherness, and similarity. They introduce the contemporaneity in a performative artistic language and aesthetics, at the same time questioning the relevance of the opera genre in the context of the performing arts today. The article attempts to illustrate the challenges of the researchers facing the interart phenomena based on a particular case.

KEYWORDS

opera-film, *Baņuta*, Latvian opera, new aesthetic regime, deconstruction, transgression, interart

Opera-film *Baņuta*

The Birth of a New Aesthetic Regime

A hundred years after the premiere, Alfrēds Kalniņš' (1879–1951) national¹ romantic opera *Baņuta* (composed in 1920, last time staged in the opera house in 1979, the latest open-air staging took place in 1999) was revived for the public in the opera-film *Baņuta* (2021, 154') – an international project melting opera, music theatre (*Musiktheater* in German²) or, to some extent, even composed theatre³ and the conditionality of the performing arts embodied in film aesthetics. Due to the circumstances of Covid-19, namely, the restrictions related to people gathering that made impossible the rehearsal process of the international team in presence, the devised method of theatre making resulted in a project which is not an ordinary movie, nor an ordinary opera.

The interrelation between opera and film (on screen) has a long history in academic research. Marcia J. Citron has pointed out the wide range of types and behaviours of this interrelation, including cinema, TV, and online streaming among others, however, she resumes that “given the hybrid nature of the topic, theory draws on many disciplines (...) and most research avoids focus on any particular theory or ideology, and instead adopts an eclectic approach that is practical and tailored to the situation.”⁴ Deconstructed and transformed into a new artwork, *Baņuta* was resurrected in a form that failed to fit into any conventional genre categories, seeking new audiences and perceptual contexts as well as challenging critics and researchers of various fields and backgrounds. Czech scholar Tereza Havelková, in Chapter 3 of her monograph *Opera as Hypermedium* (2021), based on her PhD thesis (2017), discusses the liveness and mediatization in opera and the transition from the theatrical to cinematic mode in her case study about *Writing to Vermeer* by Louis Andriessen.⁵ My previous research about opera and mediatization explored various modes of opera-screen intersections,⁶ including Christopher Morris' writings on relatively recent Italian opera movies aimed at offering hyper-realistic experiences to the TV audience. Nevertheless, in this particular case of *Baņuta*, the theatrical and cinematic modes are combined simultaneously without distinguishing them, and, although this production bears the genre title “opera-film”, it differs from other exemplary cases of this genre starting from the legacy of Franco Zeffirelli (e.g. *La Bohème* (1967), *Pagliacci* (1982), *La Traviata* (1982) and others) to Marco Bellocchio's hyper-realistic TV series (*Rigoletto in Mantua*, 2010) and many other versions of “opera on screen” produced during last few decades by Penny Woolcock (*The*

1 In the case of *Baņuta*, the term “national” traditionally refers to an opera composed by a Latvian composer and a Latvian librettist. For a long time, *Baņuta* wore the label of “the first Latvian national opera”, however, recent research work and publications raise the discussion on this widely accepted status and corrects that it is actually the first completed (finished) and staged opera in the Latvian language (see Kudiņš 2019, 111).

2 Music theatre (*Musiktheater*) traditionally refers to productions in which spectacle and dramatic impact are emphasized over purely musical factors, leading back to the tradition established in the 1960s and 1970s by such composers as Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, György Ligeti, Luciano Berio, Mauricio Kagel, and others (see Sadie & Tyrell 2001, 535–43). In the context of the contemporary stage directors approaching classical sources in this context Walter Felsenstein and his students Götz Friedrich, Harry Kupfer, and Christoph Marthaler serve as notable examples.

3 See Rebstock & Reosner 2012.

4 Citron 2013.

5 Havelková 2017, 111.

6 Mellēna-Bartkeviča 2018, 77–8.

Death of Klinghoffer, 2003), Robert Dornhelm (*La Bohème*, 2008), Michael Haneke (*Così fan tutte*, 2013) to mention a few.

In Latvian art history, the opera film *Baņuta*, created by Latvian dramaturg Evarts Melnalksnis and German stage director Franziska Kronfoth, is an unprecedented case, where an existing opera serves as raw material for a new piece, at the same time partially keeping the original storyline and musical score for the grounding of the plot. The deconstruction applied to the “indivisible whole” of the score and libretto as well as to the narrative which transgresses the previous limits of opera films. The research of the creative team transgressed the limits of the historically informed approach in relation to the source opera as a musical and/or theatrical phenomenon, and explored further the history and cultural heritage of the Baltic states and tribes in order to broaden the perspective of the story that *Baņuta* can tell today – including, but not limited to, reflections on women in war, women among strangers, dealing with prejudices and superstitions, as well as important collective memory issues.

What Are We Dealing With?

The applicability of the terms “transgression” and “performativity” in arts and related discourses is a subject of another discussion. However, my claim is that both of them are the keywords for the opera-film *Baņuta*. Opera is one of the most conservative genres among the performing arts, and the integrity of the elements such as music and text as well as the order of the musical numbers is seldom questioned or modified. Thus, any deconstruction strategies transforming this integrity are automatically transgressive as they break the presupposed order, rules, and established state of affairs. While opera productions over the last decades feature many strategies of deconstruction depending on the stage directors’ vision and conceptual approach (e.g. Christopher Martahler, Romeo Castelluci, Calixto Bieito, Marie-Eve Signeyrole, and others), opera films mostly tend not to break the rules of music and text integrity and the sequence of events regulated by the libretto and score. The opera-film *Baņuta* is transgressive on several levels: on the level of approach to the initial material, content- and form-wise, questioning the integrity of the elements of the opera (the score is fragmented and re-arranged), adding new texts and discourse (the opera *Baņuta* historically has two different finales, both of them are included in the film and the third version is added) to the libretto as well as taking advantage of various film techniques and means of expression.

Performativity, in its turn, is a complex term. It derives from John. L. Austin’s language theory⁷ and leads to Judith Butler’s concept of social constructs regulating the performance and perception of gender⁸ etc.; however, in this particular case, the increased performativity does not apply either to linguistics or gender manifestations, but more likely tackles the narrative and the aesthetical perspective chosen by the creative team to tell the multi-layered story of the opera *Baņuta*. Live camera videos included in the film contribute to the impression of penetrating into the liminal spaces between reality, theatrical reality, and film. The montage and use of pre-recorded videos in various outdoor locations allows visual storytelling simultaneously to the acting, music, and opera arias performed in the main shooting location, creating a dense multi-layered informational field that can include past flashbacks, current inner feelings, and *ad hoc* actions of the characters. Nevertheless, it is not a smooth movie-like immersion for the spectator; the focus jumps from perfectly pure film episodes to rough “home-video” type camera-recorded theatre performance, clearly demonstrating that the mediatized experience here is actually a substitute for the music theatre production to be experienced in presence. Therefore, opera-film is a kind of interim state of the artwork, and, nevertheless, gives a new perspective in dealing with the opera *Baņuta* today.

The opera-film *Baņuta* seeks to reactivate a chrestomatic Latvian opera long time imprisoned in the stigmatic box of “national romanticism” for today’s audience, broadening the scope of relevant issues to be addressed through the artwork. Instead of a rather melodramatic love story, the spectator is involved in the ironic *pasticcio* of traumatic war experiences, ambivalent historical events and rich cultural heritage performances (wedding rituals, Midsummer singing, and dancing around the bonfire, traditional naughty teasing songs between men and women

⁷ Austin [1955] 1975, translated in Ostins 2011.

⁸ Butler 1988.

etc.).

German theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte in her writings discusses not only the performative turn widely associated with the second half of the twentieth century arts, but also the “aesthetic of the performative”⁹ derived from the varied interactions of the performance and audience. Moreover, the term ‘interart aesthetics’ offered by Fischer-Lichte seems methodologically appropriate to frame such contemporary interdisciplinary art projects as the opera-film *Baņuta*. In her essay “From Comparative Arts to Interart Studies”, Lichte claims that for a long time, musicology or theatre studies, art history, literature or film studies, each discipline clearly defined itself against the others through its specific subject, respective methodology and theoretical approaches, but lately, the borders between traditional art disciplines tend to blur, implying the transformation of art studies in terms of methodology and theoretical approaches.¹⁰ Thus, the single discipline instruments and methods are insufficient to deal with most contemporary artworks. This idea, in the context of opera, echoes in Marcia J. Citron’s *Opera and Film*.¹¹

The mentioned dissolution of boundaries between traditionally separated art disciplines is exactly the new aesthetic regime chosen by the creators of the opera-film *Baņuta* – dramaturg Evarts Melnalksnis and stage director Franziska Kronfoth (Germany), and it challenges the previous impressions, established conventions, and even prejudices related to the opera *Baņuta*. On the other hand, transgressing the traditional structure or relationship of the genre-defining or constituting elements, *Baņuta* slides towards (but does not entirely reach) postopera¹² where the borders of the opera world are extended. There is a strong impact of new media, a de-synchronization between image and sound, or a redefinition of body-voice-gender relationships, in short – the previous set of rules and strategies in staging and perception are modified. In the opera-film *Baņuta*, the original score is modified (partially arranged for an instrumental quintet by composer Jēkabs Nīmanis), restructured and amplified by other material, the characters have several identities and simultaneous activities. There are three singing actresses playing the title character, several editions of the score and two historical opera finales integrated in the plot, there are songs, readings of poetry, prose and even Wikipedia, aesthetics borrowed from *spaghetti* movies, stylized black-and-white silent film scenes etc. I will look at the opera-film through the perspective of a new aesthetic regime established by the creative team and with transgression as a transformative strategy driving *Baņuta* from a national romanticism opera to a contemporary multidisciplinary artwork.

Iconic National Status of the Source Extended

The opera *Baņuta* (1920) by the composer Alfrēds Kalniņš (1879–1951) and librettist Artūrs Krūmiņš (1879–1969) used to be widely considered to be the first original Latvian opera, often generalized in writings as the first Latvian national opera. Although currently this status has been slightly corrected by musicologists, namely, it has been specified that it is the first completed and staged Latvian opera in the Latvian language,¹³ in general discourse, the canonical value of this opera has always been emphasized over its artistic qualities. The libretto of *Baņuta* is based on ancient Baltic (Latvian, Lithuanian, Prussian) legends about the life and wars between Baltic tribes. The libretto focuses on a young woman, Baņuta, and her ability to choose between individual happiness and vengeance claimed by the people. Baņuta is the wife of Daumants, the leader of the tribe, who is killed by a young man of another tribe shortly after his wedding. People mourn him and Baņuta swears to take revenge. Ironically, Vižuts, the killer of her husband is the man Baņuta meets on Midsummer night when everybody “is allowed to love” according to the words of the old wise priest Krīvu krīvs, encouraging Baņuta to enjoy the celebration during the shortest night of the year that somewhat equals a carnival-type festival in other cultures. Baņuta and Vižuts both declare their love for each other. The next day, they discover each other’s origin and Baņuta, according to her oath, has to kill Vižuts while being in love with him. The original (first) version of the opera finale is tragic – the opera ends up with a double suicide

9 Fischer-Lichte 2008, 162–4.

10 Fischer-Lichte 2016, 12.

11 Citron 2013.

12 Novak 2015.

13 Kudiņš 2019, 111.

of the protagonists. The opera *Baņuta* has been modified several times by the composer and librettists themselves due to censorship issues. The first-time dates to 1937, when, upon the request of the authoritarian Ulmanis' regime in the libretto, more precisely in the choir part, "Lithuania" (used as a synonym for "Latvia" with no particular distinction between the two) was replaced by the term "Motherland" and the love duet of Baņuta and Vižuts was added to soften the otherwise doomed love story. The second time, the finale was censored upon the request of Soviet authorities preparing *Baņuta* as a representative example of Latvian national opera for the Art Decade in Moscow in 1940, ordering the composer to transform the tragic finale into a happy ending,¹⁴ where the people [collective will – L.M.-B.] release Baņuta from her oath and let the happy couple march into the bright [socialistic – L.M.-B.] future. This is a fundamental turnover of the initial content of the opera; but, nevertheless, this version played an important role in the representation of Latvian national identity in the realms of professional arts during the Soviet times. As such, the opera *Baņuta* has a notable performance history throughout the 20th century. National particularities are represented in the score and also in the opera productions. One of the exemplary scenes is the Midsummer celebration in Act 2 and the accompanying arrangements of Latvian folk songs, choir, and soloists dressed in stylized national costumes, the main protagonist and ladies wearing spectacular artificial braids and crowns or flower wreaths. On the one hand, the described scene, among many others, contains clear references to national romantic aesthetics aimed at emphasizing the peculiarity of the national heritage in the professional arts as a part of "high culture"; on the other, the accentuated decorativeness of the "indigenous" culture of the Baltic states was the only way to include any visual elements representing Latvian identity during the Soviet occupation.

Latvian musicologist Arnolds Laimonis Klotiņš states: "In the perception of many people, *Baņuta* is the symbol of Latvian classical music, because it contains all features of ancient legendary past – a magician, folk beliefs, fundamental values of human lives such as love, death, competition of two men, a conflict between love and obligations. Besides, it is great music! Non-obtrusive, measured and poetic – in the style of Alfrēds Kalniņš' songs for choir (...)." ¹⁵ This is one of the typical interpretations of what the opera *Baņuta* actually means in Latvian culture and musical history – a museum item to be cherished and, in a way, left unquestioned.

In the course of a hundred years, *Baņuta* has been staged seven times (1920, 1937, 1941, 1953, 1968, 1979, 1999) and has had several concert performances in the Latvian diaspora in the USA and Germany during the 1980s. The table below lists the productions in chronological order and shows that during the Soviet times, *Baņuta* was normally staged with the "happy ending" or "optimistic" finale with a single exception in 1979.

1920	1937	1941	<i>1945</i>	1953	<i>1955</i>	1968	1979	1999
Trag.	Trag.	Opt.	Opt.	Opt.	Opt.	Opt.	Trag.	Opt./ Trag.

Table 1. Historical productions of the opera *Baņuta* and the chosen endings (trag. – tragic, opt. – optimistic).¹⁶

The difference between two of the productions (seven and nine) is the result of the different counting used by the researchers. While Kudiņš takes into account only new productions, Fūrmane counts the seasons with the opera *Baņuta* in the repertoire of the Latvian National Opera, including the revivals (marked in italics). The production of 1945 was based on Nikolai Okhlopkov's stage version of 1941, but in 1955, the stage director Kārlis Liepa revived his own production of 1953.¹⁷

In 1999, both finales – tragic and "optimistic" – were presented to the audience in two different

14 See Kudiņš 2019.

15 Klotiņš 2017.

16 Fūrmane 2000, 137.

17 Fūrmane 2000, 137.

events. The optimistic one was played in the open-air production held on August 2st in Zosēni (a village in the region where the librettist Artūrs Krūmiņš was born) with the participation of local choirs, folk dance collectives, and folklore groups reaching a total of 400 performers involved. The tragic finale was represented in the following concert-performance at the Latvian National opera on 17th September of the same year. After 1999, *Baņuta* disappears from the list of operas staged in Latvia. In his comprehensive article dedicated to the analysis of the narrative provided by the libretto of *Baņuta*, musicologist Jānis Kudiņš asks a rhetorical question: “Is the opera *Baņuta* now just a historical fact? What is the authentic version of its libretto nowadays? (...) the opera itself, its libretto and encoded layered historical narrative in its dramaturgy are potentially intriguing elements for the creation of the new staging.”¹⁸ In 2021, the answer comes in the form of opera-film, where the opera *Baņuta*, through deconstruction, thorough research, and reinterpretation of the libretto, extends the iconic status of Latvian national opera to the worldwide relevant reflection on the traumatic experience of war and its footprint in after war lives of men and, especially, women. In order to support the feministic spirit of the new *Baņuta*, the script of the film includes excerpts from the book *The Unwomanly Face of War* by Svetlana Aleksievich, the Belarussian essayist, journalist and Nobel Prize winner 2015.



Figure 1: The poster of the film *Baņuta* by Jānis Krauklis. On the left the caption “First national opera film”, under the title – “Happiness Love is the battle”, on the right: director Franziska Kronfoth (in Latvian transcription). Riga IFF film festival, 2021

Referring to the status of “the first Latvian national opera” mentioned before, the authors of the film rephrase it as “the first nationalopera-film”. Such a strategy attracts the attention of the audience and hides the fact that the idea to create an opera-film emerged as a solution to

18 Kudiņš 2019, 125.

the problem of producing the opera on stage during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Initially, the idea was to make a music theatre production of *Banuta*, eventually interactive or participatory, enhancing the involvement of the audience. The idea belongs to Latvian dramaturg Evarts Melnalksnis, an enthusiast of contemporary music theatre, the music theatre company Hauen & Stechen, and stage director Franziska Kronfoth from Germany. However, the Covid-19 restrictions for travelling and gathering led to new distance co-working methods, including filming videos and sharing them on Zoom in order to discuss artistic strategies and build the storyline. These distance working sessions and recorded videos later grew into a material for a film.

The script was developed after a thorough exploration of content, contexts, and production history of the opera *Banuta*. In terms of form, the opera-film *Banuta* can be considered a postmodern interpretation of a classical work, however, due to the approach applied by the creative team, it transforms the traditionally national-romanticist story into social criticism, a non-sentimental psychoanalytic reflection full of references to different layers of locally and internationally relevant contexts, such as women in war, the traumatism of war, violence, otherness, social pressure of the community, and others. The cooperation with German stage director and German actresses Angela Braun and Gina-Lisa Maiwald provided a new perspective of the necessity to explore the libretto's details that would probably never be questioned by Latvian theatre makers (although it is a speculation). For instance, some of the research findings lead to exploring the ancient Baltic wedding and Midsummer celebration rites with Latvian folklorists Vidvuds Medenis and Iveta Medene and at the end of the day, results in a historically informed approach, enriching the film by authentic folk songs and dances added to the score and libretto instead of faking national characteristics in decoratively stylized national costumes and similar elements used in the productions of the opera *Banuta* in the past. Furthermore, these folklore elements and rituals as well as the costumes without any single reference to national costume emphasize the performativity over the representation, meanwhile the camera angles and use of live camera projections on a screen contribute to the immersive effect of presence in the audience.

In addition, the inclusion of three finales – tragic, “optimistic” and a new, open-ended finale, added by this particular creative team in the film, appearing one after another – opens the discussion on the status of the “national opera” under the rule of different political regimes (including authoritarian in the 1930s and totalitarian between 1940 and 1991) and the responsibility of the following generations facing and reinterpreting the cultural heritage in their own time. In this particular case, the dramaturg helped guest artists to explore the local contexts and historical content of the opera *Banuta* and transformed the libretto for the script, meanwhile, the composer Jēkabs Nīmanis not only arranged the orchestral score by Alfrēds Kalniņš for a smaller ensemble, but also added several new parts to the film soundtrack that did not belong to the opera score. The deconstruction and recontextualization of the source material rejuvenates *Banuta* from its stagnant status of a “museum item” into a vivid, dynamic and, I believe, unique and internationally perceivable opera-film.

New Aesthetic Regime of *Banuta*

The term “aesthetic regime” recalls the discussion developed by French philosopher Jacques Rancière, regarding modernism and postmodernism as problematic concepts due to the limited perspectives they impose to broader transformations in art throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁹ He juxtaposes the “representative regime of art” to the “aesthetic regime”, where the art ceases to be a representation. Departing from this juxtaposition, the term “new aesthetic regime” suits the opera-film *Banuta* due to the approach applied by its authors to the original opera that previously used to carry a representational function in Latvian culture. Likewise, the contemporaneity in this context manifests itself in multiple conceptions and meanings that coexist in the same artwork and can be perceived together, simultaneously or separately, bridging the liminal space between art and non-art.

19 Rancière 2011, 10.



Figure 2: Screenshot from the film: *Baņuta* taken to the wedding party on a motorcycle. Publicity image of Riga IFF film festival, 2021

Besides, the new aesthetic regime of *Baņuta* reaches the audience through the cinema, which, according to Ranci re, results from two different regimes: the representative and aesthetic.²⁰ And hybrid aesthetics is what legitimizes the coexistence of various subjectivities, meanings, and directions in the same art product or practice.



Figure 3: Pre-recorded flashback of Daumants raping and killing a young girl called Jargala during the war. In the film, this video is mixed with the ad hoc shots with Daumants performing his aria live. Publicity image of Riga IFF film festival, 2021

²⁰ Tanke 2011, 80.

Taking into consideration the above mentioned, let us look at the new synopsis or annotation of the film: "Fighting as a partisan in the mythical Baltic past and in wars in twentieth-century Eastern Europe at the same time, Baņuta's life is saved by the weary and disenchanting Lithuanian prince, Daumants. Speeding away on a motorcycle, he brings the fighter back to his homeland in Romove, a holy Baltic site. There is about to be a wedding, but the preparations are interrupted by ravens. Their black feathers mirror Daumants' conscience, and act as a reminder of his crime against Jargala, a girl he raped and killed during the war. Shortly after, Daumants is killed by Vižuts, the revenging brother of Jargala, and the one who falls in love with Baņuta afterwards. Being a stranger in Romove, Daumants' community, Baņuta is caught up in sacrificial rituals and eventual revenge. However, she is strong-willed and not ready to accept her fate without saying a word and fight for her own happiness despite all possible external and internal struggles."²¹

The determined mood in the last sentence shows the feministic intentions of the creative team regarding the main female character – she is given the voice and the choice instead of being subject to one or another historical finale of the opera, which is either death or dependence based upon the collective decision of the community.

According to the dramaturg Evarts Melnalksnis, the mentioned Jargala, who is actually barely mentioned as a contextual character in the libretto, is the initial key for the new focus of *Baņuta* that caught the attention of the director Franziska Kronfoth. Despite her function as a marginal side character in the libretto, Jargala is the real trigger of the central dramatic turn. Vižuts, the brother of Jargala, raped and left dying in the woods by Daumants (in the film this episode is visualised as a silent movie during Daumants' aria), arrives at the wedding to seek revenge. He is still unaware of the following Midsummer night affair with the young widow Baņuta who has sworn to find the murderer of Daumants and kill him. Both Jargala and Baņuta carry the collective experience of the women who have suffered through the wars in twentieth-century Eastern Europe. This is where the texts from *The Unwomanly Face of War* fit in very well to bridge the experience of today's Belarus and Ukraine, thus uncovering the unescapable interconnection between art and politics typical for the Rancierian "aesthetic regime". The multi-layered structure and previously omitted aspects of the libretto transformed into the film script open the door to a context and relevance of narrow national representation and global scenes.

Musically, the opera-film contains a partially rearranged operatic score for an instrumental quintet by the composer Jēkabs Nīmanis, enriched by several solo songs by Alfrēds Kalniņš (the author of the opera), aforementioned folk songs, and a few other musical numbers integrated in the film soundtrack. Despite it often being stated that "film-operas' style is always determined by the operatic source"²² in comparison to the previous "musical drama in Wagner traditions combined with Russian epic national operas, emphasizing the importance of choir, typical scenes of folk celebrations accompanied by folk songs and dances, symphonized music and expressive *leitmotifs*",²³ this is something absolutely different, despite the recognizable melodies, motives, and lyrics. Furthermore, the voices that sing the opera material differ in terms of received vocal training and experience. Apart from the obvious technical issue of recording the singing separately, the conscious choice of the creative team was to keep a diversity of vocal performance styles (operatic, choir, folk, cabaret, popular music etc.) of the involved opera singers and actors. This decision is also transgressive from the point of view of opera tradition. Thus, for instance, the lyric duet of Baņuta and Vižuts in the third act, acquires a somewhat ironic mood due to the fact that the tenor's part is sung by the actor Reinis Boters in plain voice, whereas Baņuta's voice sounds purely operatic interpreted by the opera singer Laura Grecka. However, Grecka is not the only Baņuta in the film, there are three performers playing the title role in turn in different episodes and they sometimes appear even simultaneously. German actress Angela Braun interprets Baņuta emphasizing her "otherness" or being a stranger in her late husband's Romove community. She mostly speaks or sings in English or German, and a few lines in Latvian are pronounced with a strong accent. Sniedze Kaņepe, the third Baņuta, is another Latvian opera singer sharing the role. The splitting of the

21 *Baņuta*. Film annotation. 2021.

22 Citron 2013, 44.

23 Miķelsone 2005.

protagonist into several performers/bodies is a typical aesthetic strategy employed by Hauen & Stechen, exposing different angles and experiences of the character. The company used the same strategy in their production *Salome. Der Totentanz* (2022) with the character of Salome. In *Baņuta* it is also a way to merge a supporting role of Maiga, a friend of Baņuta, with the main character – Maiga simply becomes the third Baņuta as one of her alter-egos, which does not contradict the original libretto.

The languages used in the film are Latvian, German, English, and Italian (the latter applied as a humorous tool to illustrate melodramatic opera clichés in the “Venice scene”, where the performers imitate the gondola rides in Venetian channels riding on wheeled pallets). While Baņuta is “multiplied”, other actors play several characters in this opera-film. Switching roles in both opera and film is not a widespread practice, although in opera, it is sometimes practiced for minor supporting roles. Irony and grotesque are extensively used as a means of expression aimed at uncovering the absurdity of any single meaning attributed to a character, action, or deed performed with seemingly clear intentions.

Composer Jēkabs Nīmanis has added to the operatic score three popular solo songs by Alfrēds Kalniņš – *I wonder* (*Brīnos es*, 1901), *Evening longings* (*Vakara ilgās*, 1943) and *Mysterious cat* (1930); the latter was originally composed in English in the USA where the composer lived between 1927 and 1933. Nīmanis has rearranged parts of the opera score for an instrumental quintet (Jēkabs Nīmanis – clarinet, oboe, mandolin, Andis Klučnieks – flutes, Ernests Mediņš – percussions, Staņislavs Judins – double-bass, and Kārlis Tirzītis – piano), carefully respecting the original composition. The existing translation with the piano score with the libretto text in English, French, German, and Russian (published in 1968, repeated issue in 1999) is used in the film – in the wedding of Baņuta and Daumants, German actress Gina-Lisa Maiwald (the Magician and later – the Raven), for instance, performs an aria from the opera *Baņuta* in German.²⁴ Every participating person, including the accompanying musicians, is a performer – they act, sing, talk, play and interact theatrically. The music, in combination with the visual and performing arts, melts into an instantly present synergy emanating in transcendental spatial and time coordinates which enables the aesthetic experience that Erika Fischer-Lichte calls *interart*²⁵, and the film thus becomes a medium to bring this experience to the audience.

The two finales of the opera in the film appear in turn, referring to famous opera clichés and the historical contexts of the opera *Baņuta*. In one episode, the film ironically questions the first finale showing a Romeo-and-Juliet-type double suicide represented by the couple drinking a plant-based poison and dying on the bank of a picturesque lake, another includes a performative staging of the second finale mocking the social realism and “optimism” required by the Soviet powers – using large Cyrillic alphabet letters to form the slogan “Love is a battle” and making a body installation on a bar counter – Baņuta and Vižuts take a hammer and a sickle and freeze in the pose that imitates the famous statue “The Worker and Peasant Girl” by Vera Mukhina.

However, the most daring issue in terms of deconstructing the operatic score is probably the end of the film: over the orchestra recording of the overture of *Baņuta* sounds a new song melody performed by Baņuta as a symbolic path from the past through the present and to the future, representing the whole idea of the project and showing the third (contemporary) finale of *Baņuta* offered by the authors of the film. The overture at the end of the film opens a new gate to *Baņuta*, crossing the borders of the centuries and challenges the “museum value” of this opera. The orchestra recording of the overture accompanies Baņuta in the early morning walking in the streets of Riga. It is spring and she goes to the river Daugava to take a boat trip. The lyrics of her song, sung over the rich string passages in the original orchestration by Alfrēds Kalniņš, are as follows: “Listen carefully! You are as a child looking into the darkness of the past...” (in Latvian). The combined aesthetics, genres, and methods open new horizons in dealing with cultural heritage today.

24 The text of the opera was translated in 1936 by Baltic-German translator Martha von Dehn-Grubbe (1898–1967).

25 Fischer-Lichte 2009, 8.

Conclusions

Erika Fischer-Lichte, referring to twentieth century artists in general, writes: “the artists, in particular, reflected on boundaries and differences between the arts by transgressing them; the act of transgression served as an act of self-reflection.” And resumes that “artistic practice must therefore serve as a starting point of art studies’ endeavour today to develop interart aesthetics.”²⁶ Project *Banuta*, in its new aesthetic regime as a hybrid of music theatre and film, is an example of an artistic practice that is not opera, not film, nor even an opera-film in the traditional sense. *Banuta* clearly demonstrates the tendency to blur the lines between traditional art disciplines and dissolve the boundaries between opera, performance, and film. Music journalist and researcher Edgars Raginskis, in his review on *Banuta*, writes: “I have to say that the result of the creative co-working of Evarts Melnalksnis and Franziska Kronfoth is probably the most adequate way of interpreting/commenting/reflecting [slashes used in the original text] the masterpiece of Alfrēds Kalniņš – add the opera to the effervescent whole of different artistic and extra-artistic processes, where the linearity of time and dialectics of the events are sacrificed to the simultaneous poly-phenomena.”²⁷ Researchers, including myself, face challenges dealing with this complex, multi-layered artwork which is hard to fit in one box and thus risk the loss of a great deal of simultaneously perceptible meanings and contexts. The new aesthetic regime in the form of opera-film (as defined by the authors) has extended the relevance of *Banuta*, the first completed Latvian opera in the Latvian language, and its performing history to wider generalizations related to the collective memory and current social history. This reminds us that opera as a genre of the performing arts only lives when questioned, researched, recontextualized, and otherwise “bothered” by theatre and filmmakers with the aim of being performed and put into interaction with audiences and critics.

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²⁶ Fischer-Lichte 2009, 8.

²⁷ Raginskis 2021.

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