

# Travelling through times and spaces : the opera-novel *Sverliyty* in the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre in Moscow

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# Travelling through times and spaces

## The opera-novel *Sverliytsty* in the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre in Moscow

Monika Pasiecznik

*A new generation of artists is currently reinventing contemporary music in Russia. In a complex political context, the director Boris Yukhananov and six composers from the group Structural Resistance (StRes) realized an ambitious opera project at the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre in Moscow that revives the radical tradition of Russian Futurism. Monika Pasiecznik analyzes this remarkable work and talks with one of its composers, the musical director of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre Dmitri Kourliandski.*

When in 1913 Mikhail Matyushin, Kazimir Malevich and Aleksei Kruchenykh were preparing the premiere of their futuristic opera *Victory over the Sun*, the circumstances were not exactly favorable. There were endless misunderstandings between the artists and the administration of the Luna Park Theatre in Saint Petersburg, where the premiere was going to take place. The theatre did not even offer them a rehearsing space and, instead of an orchestra, the artists were provided with a destroyed, completely out-of-tune piano that remained inaccessible until the day of the premiere. Yet the important artists' society The Union of Youth (Soyuz molodezhi) disregarded the whole project and assigned amateur musicians to perform the piece – Malevich had to endure unimaginable humiliation while working on his ground-breaking set design.<sup>1</sup>

In the summer of 2015, again a group of Russian artists was preparing an ambitious opera project: the opera-novel *Sverliytsty*, premiered in the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre in Moscow. But the circumstances had improved: Boris Yukhananov was leading the theatre since 2013 as artistic director and had changed it for some months into an opera laboratory, bringing together composers, musicians and stage artists. Yukhananov is not only the manager, he also initiated and conceptualized the *Sverliytsty* project, he is the author of the libretto and is responsible for the staging. Even though he has a long experience in underground theatre, visual arts and film, he is emphasizing the role of music in his work. In 2012 he started a collaboration with Dmitri Kourliandski, who now is the musical director of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre. Together they

created an opera that was shown in the ARTPLAY gallery in Moscow and which inspired Yukhananov to continue the collaboration in a series of operas.

### STRUCTURAL RESISTANCE WILL BURN THE TRADITION

In the following years, writing the text for *Sverliytsty*, he invited another five Russian composers to collaborate – Boris Filanovsky, Alexey Sioumak, Sergej Newski, Alexey Sysoev and Vladimir Rannev – as well as the experienced new music performers from the Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble, the vocal ensemble Questa Musica and three soloists from the group N'Caged. He entrusted Philipp Chizhevsky with the musical conducting and a kind of fairy-tale set design was commissioned from Stepan Lukyanov, with costumes from Anastasia Nefedova.

The composers, well known on the international new music scene, are members of the group Structural Resistance (StRes). In 2005 they formulated their program in a manifesto:

“We are against the simplification of language, against the academic use of the means of expression of the past, dalliance with the audience which, seemingly facilitating perception, in fact makes the level of communication significantly lower. The domination of academism in the music of our time causes reaction. [...] Music is the most powerful machine of memory among all produced by cul-



Sverliytsy / The Drillalians, Part II (by Boris Filanovsky) © Andrey Bezukladnikov

ture. Music, just as sex, can reach the bottom of the unconscious. Any machine of memory, even the most avant-garde one, runs on the fuel of remembering. That is why StRes is against the preservation of tradition. StRes will burn tradition in the sound furnaces of the new machines of memory. This is how tradition has always been preserved. To live an experience together does not mean to preserve an object of remembering. To preserve is to surrender. One can preserve a piece of architecture or a museum collection, but not music. Music stays alive only in motion.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite their common announcement, each of the composers is of course developing his own musical language. But if someone tried to define a common denominator of the contemporary music in Russia, it would probably be a desire to revisit the Russian avant-garde of the beginning of the 20th century in order to break with the “eschatological conservatism” of “Soviet music” that has dominated the musical landscape in Russia for the last decades. Some of the composers mentioned above, like Kourliandski or Filanovsky, explicitly accept the heritage of futurism, constructivism or suprematism, composing music for sirens, drills or concrete mixer and dedicating

their pieces to Malevich, Tatlin or Avraamov. Others like Rannev or Newski explore the given musical material in search for new means of expression, without any direct reference to the historical avant-garde movements. Besides aesthetic concerns, the StRes group also has the important social goal to set up a larger support for avant-garde projects in Russia, where subsidies and patronage for new music are notoriously lacking.

#### THE DRILLALIANS – A NEW MYTHOLOGY?

Some of the particularities of today’s music scene in Russia can be found in the opera project *Sverliytsy*, already in the concept of an opera-novel and its hermetic, unusual content. Since 2007 Yukhananov was writing a kind of mythological or cosmological poem that gave the philosophical frame of the whole opera-novel. It is a holistic description of the project’s concept including the libretto. Yukhananov created a fantastic story about a land called Sverlia, inhabited by many strange creatures like the Hetaearas, Mermaids, Derrickmen, Legionnaires, LordHaveMercies, The Lace Maker, The Werewolf, The Centaurus – a taxonomy worthy of “some Chinese encyclopedia” quoted by Borges! The name of the land could be



Sverliytsey / The Drillalians, Part III (by Alexey Sioumak) © Andrey Bezukladnikov



Sverliytsey / The Drillalians, Part V (by Vladimir Rannev) © Andrey Bezukladnikov



Sverliytsey / The Drillalians, Part III (by Alexey Sioumak) © Andrey Bezukladnikov

translated as "Drillalia" and its symbol is a drill. The civilization of the Drillalians crosses borders and epochs, it functions as a parallel reality infiltrating our world. Some protagonists visit the earth and leave traces in the form of drills, like the Babel Tower, the Leaning Tower of Pisa or the double helix of the DNA. The Drillalians are a unity in a multiplicity of manifestations, and Yukhananov's text is a kind of syncretic mythology containing elements of many different cultures: from Judaism to ancient Mycenaean civilization or Brahmanism. Drillalia has two capitals: Saint Petersburg in the north and the present, a proto-Venise, covered with meadows, in the south and far in the past. Its history is marked by catastrophes and destruction.

Based on this mythology, the libretto focuses on the story of the Prince, born to rescue the Drillalians' civilization from the mysterious Lace Maker who embodies the cruelty of fate. Yet it is not this dramatic action but rather the philosophical reflexion that is in the core of this opera-novel, its acts are rather poetic than narrative. The first part *Overture (Beginning)* is composed by Kourliandski. It is the introduction to the world of Drillalia and shows the birth of the Prince. A man is holding a baby in his arms; in the fairy-tale Venetian background gondolas slowly move around and the music, based on one tone, explores glassy sounds, flows slowly and changes shape wavily; the chorus of the Drillalians, wearing fantastic costumes with their characteristic caps, produces drilling sounds with plastic pipes, granting us the grace of initiation.

The second part called *Overture (Ending)* is composed by Filanovsky. It introduces the Jewish line of thought, explaining how the Jews became Drillalians. This episode of the opera-novel is the longest one and has probably the most self-referential elements. The young Chasid called The Last Drillaliet – Yukhananov's alter ego? – is studying the Talmud in his kitchen and is listening to the words of the Prophet. At the same time, the old and grotesquely fat Chasid called The Silent Gondolier is crossing slowly the scene sitting astride on a big letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Inside of this fantastic world, elements of realism occur: a documentary film in which Yukhananov and Filanovsky are discussing over artistic solutions and the meanings of the Hebrew letters as a set design element. The second act of the opera just contemplates on the word, considerations of its mystical meaning and its creative potential and can be read as a credo of Yukhananov, who has himself created a new world out of words. The chorus mutters, whimpers, babbles, alluding to the magic power of language. The music by Filanovsky is full of mystery, and sometimes even sinister. It's based on some apocalyptic rhetoric gestures (chorus, organs, synthesizer, trumpets), going into low instrumental sounds accompanying the bass voice of the old silent Gondolier (Andrei Kaplanov) who is singing at the bottom of his range, stretching each word, producing a slow motion effect. The young Chasid (the moving tenor of Sergey Malinin) draws on one frequency, producing a sobbing lamentation and crying that marks the whole opera and resonates with the lamentations of Jeremiah the Prophet who foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem – one of the Drillalian catastrophes. As the film projection starts showing meteor showers, the young Chasid changes his clothes and transforms himself into the Drillalian Prince: the initiation has been completed.

## DARKNESS AND DESINTEGRATION

The atmosphere of the third part of the operatic cycle – *Act One* written by Alexey Sioumak – is completely different and alludes to early horror films or the aesthetics of Ligeti's opera *Le Grand Macabre*. Polystylistic, eclectic, grotesque and camp music gives it a typical theatrical nerve and illustrates perfectly well the circumstances of the Prince's birth: he has been conceived by a Werewolf and Lady Lyadi on a holy haystack. Everything here is obscene and bawdy, and the vulgar atmosphere is emphasized by the costumes and the red light. The Prince encounters the Lace Maker, his fate, for the first time. This part of the opera-novel is most theatrical in the sense of dramatic action, it shows a parade of ghosts, the dark side of the Drillalian identity.

In the next, fourth part of the series – *Act Two* composed by two composers: Sergej Newski and Alexey Sysoev – we find ourselves in a world of darkness for good, but this time it's closer to reality: a blinking neon Animal Planet, a red light district, and a suburb scenery build the background for some poetic, hermetic considerations of the Prince, wearing an impressive red cloak. The beginning of the part shows a mysterious and

menacing tableau of hanging people. The music written by Newski is very calm and softened, the most ascetic of the whole opera-novel, as if the composer intended to leave the space for words, not drowning them in the sounds. Silences, quiet noises, clattering of glasses, sighs, but also a distant memory of Venice in long vocal sounds recalling the late music of Luigi Nono, next to some stylized court dancers accompanying a Centaurus. The continuation by Sysoev is more vivid, and recalls Jewish history again. The main person is Rabbi Zalman Shneur from Lyadi, the author of the book *Tanya*, who we see drowning in volcanic lava ...

The last part is entitled *Act Three. The Final Act* is composed by Vladimir Rannev. The performers form a solid group, recalling the island situation, surrounded by waves in the shape of turning drills. Above the musicians, three vocal soloists are standing, this time lacking roles, occurring just as abstract figure-voices: a soprano (Alyona Parfyonova), a tenor (Sergey Malinin) and a bass (Andrei Kaplanov). This opera epilogue is quite static and probably the most abstract moment of *Sverliytsey*. The theatre is reduced to a minimum. Beside some changes of light, nothing is happening during the hour and a half of performance, the whole dramaturgic weight resting upon the music. Even the text is completely subordinated to a music in which it undergoes its own dissipation. Rannev's music is full of neurosis, it is frantic and shivering. The whole composition is based on a regular pulse while its density and intensity is changing – from subtle sounds of voices and instruments to an aggressive culmination in which the neurosis seems to transform itself into protest: the chorus starts chanting and shouting through megaphones while the musicians are hitting percussion objects and the wind instruments are howling like sirens; as if only in this moment, the real, brutal life broke into the fairy-tale world of the *Sverliytsey* opera-novel, leading to a continuous disintegration of all sound elements: the hitting is more and more seldom, the voices wane away, only the pulse remains regular as in the beginning, persisting only in a slightly audible rubbing of a bow on the viola.

## FUNDAMENTAL INFANTILISM

This passage through the operatic series may have shown that *Sverliytsey* is a remarkable and surprising contemporary opera project, and this not only in Russia. Its fantastic concept and extensive realization perhaps recalls Stockhausen's operatic cycle *LICHT*, a comparably unreal and syncretic world of meanings set into a cosmic music. Moreover, like Stockhausen, Yukhananov identifies himself with this imaginative world and tries to convince his interlocutor that he belongs to Sverlia. The almost childish aesthetics of the late Stockhausen has similarities to Yukhananov's scenic language, that he calls himself "fundamental infantilism". We could understand this naïve visions as an act of escapism, but also as a longing for authentic creation, as the desire to recreate the world from scratch – and there are not many artists that have the courage of such a dream today.

In this dreamlike world we recognize some classic futuristic attributes like the drills or the derricks, clear motives coming from the industrial era. But in his writings Yukhananov is also referring to the computer scientist and futurist Raymond Kurzweil, who described, in his famous books *The Age of Intelligent Machines* and *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, the coming unity of man and machine when artificial intelligence will exceed human cognition.<sup>3</sup> All these topics are wrenched from their historical, political or social context and translated by Yukhananov into a fairy-tale space of mythology. This also concerns the artistic means of the opera-novel, that are rather conventional and symbolic. While in the era of the digital revolution, when many of the futuristic scenarios about the extending of human possibilities by the machine already have become real, in the world of *Sverliytsey* there is a complete lack of new media, as if it was replaced by the strong spiritual element and catastrophic aura. In contrast to the Italian futuristic machine, this Russian one is rather an abstract mystical machine, driven by the power of its symbolic mechanism and aiming to its own decay. This is not the only way in which the Drillalians continue the tradition of the *Victory over the Sun* and the Russian futurism, a link that is already present in the name of the Stanislavsky Electrotheatre. First, it refers to the origin of the institution at Twerska Street, which in 1915 was one of the first cinemas in Moscow, at the time called "Electrotheatre" – a word that evokes the multimedia approach of Yukhananov's work. The second part refers to another interesting moment in the turbulent history of the theatre, namely to the short period when Konstantin Stanislavsky, one of the most important reformers of staging and acting practices in the early twentieth century, worked there as its theatre director. Even though he was not part of the futurist movement, Stanislavsky stands in for the renewal of theatre and opera in the beginning of the last century. But the most important point that the Drillalians share with the protagonists of *Victory over the Sun* is time travel. While the futuristic strongmen from 1913 tried to radically break with the past to reach for the unknown, the protagonists of Drillalians are searching for possible bridges between past and future, striving for their consolidation in a fantastic mythology.

The score of *Victory over the Sun* as well as the essential set design elements and costumes have perished, nobody cared for their preservation. Only decades after, some artists and historians arduously tried to reconstruct and re-inact the legendary futuristic opera. Fortunately, Yukhananov's project is not threatened by that same danger: at least the music of the opera was recorded during rehearsals and released on an excellent CD from the Russian label Fancy Music immediately after the premiere.

- 1 Cf. Jeremy Howard, *The Union of Youth. An artists' society of the Russian avant-garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).
- 2 <http://www.stres.iscmrussia.ru/manifest.html> (24.3.2016).
- 3 Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Intelligent Machines* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990) and *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).