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“Life-writing” in Aleksander Nowak’s Operas: Sudden Rain and Space Opera

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Abstract

“Life-writing”, manifesting itself in the extremely personal character of the composition, is one of the most important features of Aleksander Nowak’s work, which clearly distinguish him from other composers. “Life-writing” conceals such creative inspirations as the methods and means of composing. Nowak very often draws topics or sound material of the composition from his own life experiences.

At the same time, he hopes to achieve a certain type of energy or emotions, which will then to evoke the feelings that are similar to those accompanying the writing of the piece. The issue of conveying in the work any or more specific, though significant, emotions is therefore the first-rate issue. For this reason, in his works, the musical tradition is often combined with the popular and well-known music.

A specific representation of the idea of “life-writing” are Nowak’s operas: *Sudden Rain* for soprano, baritone, mixed choir and chamber orchestra and two-act *Space Opera* for soprano, mezzo-soprano, countertenor, baritone, bass, mixed choir and symphonic orchestra.

Keywords

“life-writing”, opera, Aleksander Nowak, “Space Opera”, “Sudden Rain”, relation between text and music

Aleksander Nowak (b. 1979) is considered to be one of the most interesting and talented representatives of a middle generation. In his work several elements can be indicated that allow to identify him with the widely understood postmodernism, such as: discourse with popular music, using different styles, techniques and aesthetics and at the same time perceiving contemporary music as a specific “game of contexts”,¹ finally the interest in relations between humans. The highly individual feature of Nowak, which locates him in the circle of engaged composers, is “life-writing”, which is visible in the extraordinarily personal character of the compositions. The term itself was used for the first time by Henryk Bereza in the context of the work of Edward Stachura to underline the close connection between his life and artistic output. He said that “the whole life of Stachura was life-writing, he used to write engaging himself entirely”.² Referring to Nowak’s works, the term was used by the outstanding critic Andrzej Chłopecki, who wrote: “characteristic feature and a trademark of at least several important Aleksander Nowak’s works is a unique «life-writing»”.³ Therefore, it is worth investigating the relations between the true reality and created reality in the operas of the Silesian composer.

Nowak began his musical education by learning guitar and piano playing with Grażyna and Grzegorz Dierzgowsky, continued in the class of guitar of Bogusław Pietrzak at the State Primary and High Music School in his hometown.⁴ Simultaneously, he started composing under the guidance of the Ukrainian composer Uliana Bilan.⁵ He started his academic education at the Karol Szymanowski Academy of Music in Katowice in 2001, in

1 M. Trzęsiok, *Muzyka rzeczywistego świata. Rozmowa z Aleksandrem Nowakiem*, “Kwarta. Magazyn o polskiej muzyce współczesnej” 2011, No. 1 (16), https://pwm.com.pl/pliki/2/6/4/2637_2158_Kwartan1sierpien2011.pdf [accessed: 10.12.2016].

2 Orig. “Życie Stachury było życiopisaniem, pisał całym sobą”. M. Buchnowski, *Buty Ikara. Biografia Edwarda Stachury*, a fragment of a book, <http://www.polskatimes.pl/kultura/ksiazki/a/stachura-stworzyl-zyciopisanie-jego-pisarstwo-bylo-tozsame-z-jego-zyciem,12510960/> [accessed: 31.03.2018].

3 Orig. “Charakterystyczną cechą i znakiem szczególnym przynajmniej kilku znaczących utworów Aleksandra Nowaka jest swoiste «życiopisanie»”. A. Chłopecki, *MUZYKA 2.1: Aleksander Nowak*, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/1116-muzyka-21-aleksander-nowak.html> [accessed: 12.12.2016].

4 The website of the composer, <http://www.aleknowak.com> [accessed: 10.12.2016].

5 *Ibid.*

the composition class of Aleksander Lason—a composer and pedagogue, highly regarded in the Polish musical environment, who is included—together with Eugeniusz Knapik and Andrzej Krzanowski—in so-called “Stalowa Wola generation”, widely associated with the festival *Young Musicians for a New City* (in the 1970s) and cultivated at that time idea of the New Romanticism. Nowak graduated from MA studies with distinction in 2006, presenting the composition *Wyspa wichrów i mgieł* for choir and symphonic orchestra. In the same year, as a laureate of Moritz von Bomhard Fellowship Scholarship,⁶ he went to the USA for 2-year studies at the University of Louisville under the guidance of Steve Rouse.⁷ Right after the return to Poland (2008) he started working at his Alma Mater, teaching students (among others: instrumentation, composition, as well as contemporary compositional techniques, bases of composition and contemporary score).⁸ In 2010 he received the title of Doctor; in 2016—habilitation. Since 2011 he has also held the function of the head of Katowice’s branch of the Polish Composers’ Union.⁹

Nowak has quickly gained a strong position in the musical environment. His artistic activity has been noticed by music critics, including already mentioned Andrzej Chłopecki, who presented his opinion about the young composer in the following way:

Aleksander Nowak has already behind him the experience of spectacular debut in the landscape of the new, young Polish compositional activity,

6 “This unique fellowship offers a graduate composition student the opportunity to earn a Master of Music degree in Music Composition while focusing on composition for voice, with a particular emphasis on dramatic vocal composition. Composers chosen to participate in this program should show both an inclination and an ability to write for the human voice. These awards honor their namesake, Moritz von Bomhard, an early School of Music faculty member who was a gifted composer, conductor, pianist, and opera producer. Moritz Bomhard was responsible for virtually «creating» the Kentucky Opera in its earliest days”, <http://louisville.edu/music/academics/areas-of-study/music-composition/moritz-von-bomhard-fellowships-in-music-composition> [accessed: 26.04.2017].

7 The website of the composer, <http://www.aleknowak.com> [accessed: 10.12.2016].

8 A. Nowak, *Wizytówka Aleksandra Nowaka*, <http://meakultura.pl/publikacje/wizytowka-aleksandra-nowaka-771> [accessed: 12.12.2016].

9 [without author], *Nowak Aleksander*, <http://festiwalprawykonan.pl/kompozytorzy-nowak-aleksander.php> [accessed: 15.06.2018].

full of distinctive personas of his generation, who crystallise their aesthetic choices and artistic achievements. It is a generation—to put it metaphorically—“after Paweł Mykietyń” (born 1971). Nowak’s debut is a part of the time of an exceptional compositional activity of his contemporaries, the time of evident eruption of young compositional talents, observed by music critics. On the one hand this situation seems to be profitable, creating the intense period, the time of a particular ferment, the time of manifesting what is new and future-oriented in Polish work, on the other hand, it is indeed the time when recognising the particular talent and selecting it from the dense generational landscape can be problematic for the reception.¹⁰

A unique debut of the composer was *Sonata June-December* for violin and piano from 2005, but it was *Fiddler’s Green and White Savannas Never More* for male voices and chamber orchestra, composed a year later, what gave Nowak the wider recognition (also abroad: the premiere took place during the festival “Velvet Curtain 2”, on the 11th of October 2006 in Lviv, and a year later the work represented Poland during the 54th International Rostrum of Composers in Paris).¹¹ *Fiddler’s Green and White Savannas Never More* was the first so important commission for a composition received by the Silesian composer, which was made by the Warsaw Autumn Friends’ Foundation as a part of a scholarship project Förderpreise für Polen, financed by Ernst-von-Siemens Musikstiftung in Munich. He was then a

10 Orig. “Aleksander Nowak ma już za sobą spektakularne zaistnienie w pejzażu nowej, młodej polskiej twórczości kompozytorskiej, obfitującej w wyraziste i coraz bardziej krystalizujące się w swych estetycznych wyborach i artystycznych dokonaniach postacie jego pokolenia. Pokolenia—ujmijmy to umownie i metaforycznie—«po Pawle Mykietyń» (rocznik 1971). Debiut Nowaka wpisał się w czas szczególnej aktywności kompozytorskiej jego rówieśników, w czas ewidentnie następującej i obserwowanej przez krytykę muzyczną erupcji młodych talentów twórczych. Z jednej strony sytuacja ta wydaje się korzystna, tworząca okres intensywny, czas swoistego fermentu, czas manifestowania się tego, co w polskiej twórczości nowe i skierowane ku przyszłości, z drugiej strony przecież jest to czas, gdy rozpoznanie pojedynczego talentu i wydobywanie go z gęstego pejzażu pokoleniowego może sprawiać kłopot recepcji”. A. Chłopecki, *op. cit.*

11 *Fiddler’s Green and White Savannas Never More*, <http://ninateka.pl/audio/aleksander-nowak-fiddlers-green-and-white-savannas-never-more-aksamitna-kurtyna-2> [accessed: 19.03.2018].

student of the last year of composition at the Academy of Music in Katowice.¹² The first part of the scholarship was to help in financing sailing to Spitsbergen in 2005. As it appears, the next—beside music—passion of the composer is sailing: he has taken part in several long distance expeditions (besides the mentioned, a year later he was a member of a trip organised by North-West Passage from Poland to Island, documented in repeatedly awarded movie *W poszukiwaniu legendy* from 2007 made by Konstanty Kuklik, with music composed by Aleksander Nowak).¹³ The next part of the mentioned scholarship was to help in final shaping of this unique "sound diary of a journey", as Chłopecki called the composition.¹⁴

Nowak composes mainly instrumental and vocal-instrumental music. The significant role in his activity is played by opera theatre. Besides three operas: *Sudden Rain* (2008), *Space Opera* (2014) and *ahat ilī—Siostra bogów* (2018) he is the author of a multimedia installation: quasi-musical drama *Spoon River Anthology* for solo voices and video with the text of American poet Edgar Lee Masters from the volume *Spoon River Anthology*; it was written in the cooperation with Adam Dudek during the edition of the Festival "Warsaw Autumn" in 2012.¹⁵

The output of the Silesian composer has been recorded in several albums: two monographic ones: *Fiddler's Green* (published in 2009 by Silesian Musical Association and Polish Radio) and *3x4+8* (published in 2012 by CD Accord), as well as in Sound Chronicle of Warsaw Autumn (years 2008, 2009, 2011).¹⁶

"Life-writing"

The term "life-writing" includes both artistic inspirations and compositional methods or means. In Nowak's works, it is visible in the exceptionally individual character of the compositions. The artist very frequently takes the theme or musical material from his

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

14 Orig. "dźwiękowy dziennik podróży", A. Chłopecki, *op. cit.*

15 The website of the composer, <http://www.aleknowak.com.pl> [accessed: 10.12.2016].

16 *Ibid.*

own life experiences (“I perceive and appreciate the importance of the autobiographic element”),¹⁷ and sometimes he uses his own works (e.g. a fragment of the composition which was written in high school became the form-building material for *Sonata “June-December”* for violin and piano from 2005). More often, however, he refers to the quotations “from the outside”, what in one of the conversations with Marcin Trzęsiok he explains through the emotions felt during composing:

When writing a work, I am in the circle of emotions connected with quotations that refer to them. They come from songs, works or styles that were important to me at some moment of my life. And when I refer to memories, the process of writing intensifies. I hope that if it happens during creating, also at the level of reception it will be somehow mirrored, despite the fact that the listener does not have a key which identifies all quotations.¹⁸

It also implies the fact that conveying more or less concrete, but significant emotions in the work are the most important issue for Nowak. Therefore, the autobiographic elements in his work are natural and inevitable. At this moment, it is worthy to recall the work *Last Days of Wanda B.* for chamber orchestra from 2006, dedicated to the deceased grandmother, in which there are the traces of religious songs, popular hits, such as *Ciggle pada* by Czerwone Gitary, and folk songs, e.g. *Głęboka studzienka*. In the commentary to the composition, the artist explained:

17 Orig. “Dostrzegam i doceniam znaczenie zwrotu autobiograficznego”, J. Topolski, *Nowe otwarcie: jesteśmy kosmitami, rozmowa z Aleksandrem Nowakiem*, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/5917-nowe-otwarcie-jestesmy-kosmitami.html> [accessed: 23.02.2018].

18 Orig. “Pisząc utwór, znajduję się w kręgu emocji, z którymi się te cytaty wiążą. Pochodzą z piosenek, utworów czy stylów, które w pewnym momencie życia były dla mnie istotne. A kiedy odwołuję się do wspomnień, proces pisania staje się intensywniejszy. Mam nadzieję, że skoro tak jest na etapie tworzenia, to również na etapie odbioru w jakiś sposób znajdzie to swe odbicie, mimo że słuchacz nie ma klucza identyfikującego wszystkie cytaty”. M. Trzęsiok, *Muzyka rzeczywistego świata. Rozmowa z Aleksandrem Nowakiem*, “Kwarta. Magazyn o polskiej muzyce współczesnej” 2011, No. 1 (16), p. 2, https://pwm.com.pl/pliki/2/6/4/2637_2158_KwartanR1sierpien2011.pdf [accessed: 10.12.2016].

The piece is most of all a sonic impression, but also a record of emotions accompanying a farewell, as well as a set of fragmentary memories mixed with quotes from the favourite melodies of Wanda B., to whom it is dedicated.¹⁹

Commentaries, many times metaphorical, allusive and ambiguous, seeking for a lost uniqueness in ordinary life, are another proof for the fact how strongly "life-writing" is present in Nowak's poetics. Their little surprising and not obvious role is summarised by the composer: "I try to say rather not enough, even basically nothing, than too much".²⁰ On the contrary, the music theorist Agnieszka Nowok aptly noticed that "short notes show the world seen by the insightful observer of the reality".²¹ So, for example, the work *Dark Haired Girl in a Black Sports Car* for chamber orchestra from 2009, written as a commission of the festival "Warsaw Autumn", has a commentary, in which the composer described how, when waiting at a red traffic light, noticed the title dark haired girl in the car next to him, who nodded her head to the rhythm of the song heard in the radio (it is worth mentioning that in the final culmination of the work the wind instruments perform the motif from the song of a popular pop singer—Rihanna).

Slightly humorous statement of the composer, regarding somehow the issue of "life-writing", clearly indicates that especially his two first operas, one-act *Sudden Rain* from 2008 and *Space Opera* from 2014, strongly belong to this trend:

Agnieszka Nowok has recently written on [the online journal] "MEAKULTURA" that one of the main themes of my "life-writing" is the crisis of communication between people, referring to *Sudden Rain* (the opera about the lack of understanding) or *Widok z górnego piętra* (the note about loneliness). Similar commentaries appeared after the premiere of *Space Opera*, in which truly one of the main themes is the

19 A. Nowak, *The Last Days of Wanda B.*, <http://www.aleknowak.com/en/music/orchestral/> [accessed: 23.02.2018].

20 Orig. "Staram się powiedzieć raczej za mało, choćby w gruncie rzeczy nic, niż za dużo". A. Nowok, *Aleksander Nowak*, <http://musicfrompoland.eu/arttykul/aleksander-nowak-7> [accessed: 08.08.2017].

21 Orig. "Krótkie notki ukazują świat widziany oczyma wnikliwego obserwatora rzeczywistości". *Ibid.*

crisis in the marriage. Then, I felt confused what my wife was going to say, as we understand each other perfectly... I can say that despite the great married life I am fascinated by the issue of the loneliness in the world, the potential linking everybody with anybody, which finally does not happen. Or maybe it is why I can explore this area potentially “with impunity”...²²

Aleksander Nowak’s operas

For Aleksander Nowak, writing an opera seems to be a natural result of compositional activity since 2008, when he created the one-act opera *Sudden Rain*. It is worth mentioning that the author was one of the laureates of the TVP Kultura award *Gwarancje Kultury 2011* (category: classical music) thanks to composing the piano concerto and mentioned *Sudden Rain*, the works in which—as jury of the Competition stated—“he was courageous to join the known stylistic idioms with the freshness of the compositional sight”.²³ The first official attempt to write for a voice was his diploma, finishing the study at the Academy of Music in Katowice—*Wyspa wichrów i mgieł* for mixed choir and symphonic orchestra from 2005. At the same time, he composed afore-mentioned *Fiddler’s Green and White Savannas Never More* (*notabene* the work is the perfect example of “life-writing” because,

22 Orig. “Agnieszka Nowak napisała ostatnio na „MEAKULTURZE”, że jednym z głównych tematów mojego «życiopisania» jest kryzys komunikacji międzyludzkiej, powołując się na *Sudden Rain* (operę o braku porozumienia) czy *Widok z górnego piętra* (notkę o samotności). Podobne komentarze pojawiły się po premierze *Space Opera*, w której faktycznie jednym z pierwszoplanowych wątków jest małżeński kryzys. Zrobiło mi się wówczas nieswojo, co powie na to moja żona, z którą świetnie się rozumiemy... Mogę powiedzieć, że mimo bardzo udanego pozycja małżeńskiego fascynuje mnie kwestia samotności w świecie, potencjalnego połączenia każdego z każdym, do którego w końcu nie dochodzi. A może właśnie dlatego mogę potencjalnego «bezkarnie» eksplorować te rejony...” J. Topolski, *op. cit.*

23 Orig. “wykazał się odwagą w łączeniu znanych idiomów stylistycznych ze świeżością kompozytorskiego spojrzenia”. *Gwarancje Kultury—Telewizja Polska*, <http://www.tvp.pl/kultura/wydarzenia/gwarancje-kultury/laureaci-2011> [accessed: 11.12.2017].

as Chłopecki said, it is the musical diary of travel to the Arctic, where the composer-sailor "takes the appropriate—under the circumstances of «life-writing»—repertoire of sea shanty, written by John Connolly, white-bearded bard of sea songs").²⁴

In 2007 two cycles of songs were created: *Songs of Caress* for mezzo-soprano, violin, cello and piano with the texts of the 19th- and 20th-century Polish and American poets, and *Three short songs* for tenor and piano with the texts of Polish poets of the 20th century. The additional impulse to undertake the compositional challenges created by voice can be also two-year studies at the University of Louisville, which, as granted with the Moritz von Bomhard Fellowship Scholarship, Nowak took right after graduating from the Karol Szymanowski Academy of Music in Katowice. This scholarship provides young composers with the possibility to defend the MA diploma in composition.

Sudden Rain

Sudden Rain—the operatic debut of the young composer—was presented publically in 2010, two years after finishing it, during one of the meetings with contemporary music organised by Polish National Opera in Warsaw.²⁵ The inventors of the cycle *Territories* describe their main aim as:

[...] help in the attempt to find and sketch the new face of opera.
The genre that changes its definition today, conquering new territories,
drawing different meanings, proposing new aesthetics.²⁶

The main issue around which the composer built the content of *Sudden Rain* is the misunderstanding or the lack of understand-

24 Orig. "sięga po właściwy w tych okolicznościach «życiopisania» repertuar szan-
tów autorstwa niejakiego Johna Connolly, siwobrodego barda morskich songów".
A. Chłopecki, *op. cit.*

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Terytoria*, <http://teatrwielni.pl/activity/artistic-projects/territories/> [accessed:
07.08.2017]. During the same concert, besides mentioned composition, Agata
Zubel's opera *Between* was performed as well.

ing between the two closest people—husband and wife. Nowak knew that the opera would concern the issues of relations between people from the very beginning, what he admitted during one of the conversations between him and Marcin Trzęsiok.²⁷ The problematic issue was, however, the choice of the libretto. In opposition to the quite “artificial” construction of the language present in the opera, he searched for the text which would remind the colloquial speech.²⁸ So, the work on the libretto was preceded by the long reconnaissance in the circle of theatre art. Bad experiences resulting from it forced the composer to make an attempt to write the libretto by himself. Finally, he cooperated with Anna Konieczna.²⁹ Together they created the dialogue of the marriage (She and He), in which they included the statements of the choir, abstracted from the main plot, using the notes written down by a person with Asperger’s syndrome:

We created a quite short libretto—a dialogue between married couple who do not understand each other. I added a unique counterpoint, a little like in Philip Glass’s opera *Einstein on the Beach*, written partly with the texts of the autistic poet Christopher Knowles. [...] following this trace, in quite a different way I used the notes of an autistic person in the libretto.³⁰

In accordance with Nowak’s idea, the text of *Sudden Rain* consists of a dialogue of a married couple, summarising their relationship at the day of the wedding anniversary and “counterpointing” (the composer’s term) notes of the person with Asperger’s syndrome (as in Glass’s opera). In reality, the libretto does not give much information neither about the main characters nor situation, in which the action of the work takes place. She and He are seemingly an ideal marriage, what is confirmed by the statement of the choir from the first scene of the opera:

27 M. Trzęsiok, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

28 *Ibid.*

29 English philologist, lawyer and sociologist. Privately, the sister of Nowak’s wife.

30 M. Trzęsiok, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

It is their wedding anniversary today.
Wed on a summer's hot day,
still wed through winter's long nights,
wed when growing basil in the pot,
still wed when doing shopping in the mall,
fighting, small graces, anger, embraces.
It is their wedding anniversary today.³¹

The whole story takes place in the park and at the station during the wedding anniversary day of the main characters. The husband and wife, talking about the weather, in reality discover the truth about their marriage; the unnoticed conflict arising between them, the forecast of which was the title rain coming. According to Magdalena Stochniol, this seemingly trivial plot becomes

[...] the introduction to asking important questions: about the relation between people, loneliness in the relationship, finally—about condition of the institution of the marriage, sacred in the past, but unstable and insignificant today.³²

Besides the mention about the anniversary, the libretto gives the information about the gift for the beloved prepared by Him for the anniversary. It is something what, as he thinks, is the most important thing for the wife—freedom, materialised in the form of a one-way plane ticket. She reads it wrongly—not as a symbol of love, but rejection. The existing situation is commented by the choir of random people gathered in the park. Therefore, in its function it refers to the choirs from Greek tragedies—commenting and carefully watching the plot and characters' actions. In the libretto four scenes can be distinguished, in which the classical structure of a drama with

31 A. Nowak, A. Konieczna, *Sudden Rain*—libretto (materials shared by the composer).

32 Orig. "[...] przyczynkiem do zadania ważnych pytań: o relacje człowieka z drugim człowiekiem, o samotność w związku, w końcu—o kondycję instytucji małżeństwa, niegdyś uświęconą, dziś nietrwałą i dla wielu bez większego znaczenia". M. Stochniol, "Sudden Rain" (2008) Aleksandra Nowaka. *Niezwyyczajna opera o zwyczajnych problemach*, "Res Facta Nova" 2013, No. 14 (23), p. 140.

the division into exposition, development, culmination and tragic end can be noticed. So, the content of the opera conveys the universal message about the crisis of the relation between two people, strengthened by the sudden ending and anonymity resulting from the fact that the main characters do not have any names (She, He). It provokes the deepened, individual reflection, because of which the place of the action, time etc. can be interpreted freely. The most important is not what was “before” and will happen “after”. “Here and now” is what matters—this short moment, the conversation of the couple. On the other hand, the problem is more complex, shown from the perspective of reasons and consequences of the actions undertaken by the characters. Libretto is accurately called by Stochniol, who compares it to the mirror, which “[...] is put by the composer in front of the listeners, allowing them to look into it and maybe see the pictures from their own life”.³³ In order to break the “triviality” of the conversation of the main characters, the side stories were introduced to the main text. The first of them is the already mentioned “counterpoint”, which consists of the texts of an autistic person, culminating the effect of misunderstanding between the couple. It can be read as a symbol of “[...] disorientation, getting lost in the world of human relations, full of interpretational, painful misrepresentations”.³⁴ It is a whole new quality, read by Magdalena Stochniol as a hint opening the interpretation of the composition:

33 Orig. “[...] kompozytor postawił przed słuchaczami, pozwalając przejrzeć się im i być może zobaczyć obrazy z własnego życia” *Ibid.*, p. 144.

34 Orig. “[...] zdezorientowania, zagubienia się w świecie ludzkich relacji, pełnym interpretacyjnych, bolesnych przeinaczeń”. A. Nowok, *op. cit.*

Structure of a drama	Exposition	Development		Culmination	Ending
	Scene 1	Scene 2	Scene 3	Scene 4	
Main plots	Conversational about the weather. Confirmation about handing in the anniversary gift.	The promise of freedom.	Indirect farewell of the couple.	Handing in the ticket. The summary of the marriage. Definite breaking up.	Definite breaking up.
Characters	She, He				
Side plots		Scene 2 (beginning) I side plot , counterpoint: Notes of the person with Asperger's syndrome.	Scene 3 II side plot , stopping the action: Reflections of the characters.		Scene 4 (ending) III side plot , counterpoint: departure board.
Characters		Choir	She, He		Choir

Table 1: The structure of the drama including the existence of side plots.

[...] it has a completely new context, on the one hand, with the problem of the existence of people suffering from the spectrum of autism, on the other—metaphorical view on the lack of understanding between two people.³⁵

35 Orig. "[...] ma zupełnie nowy kontekst, związany, z jednej strony, z problemem egzystowania osób obarczonych chorobami ze spektrum autyzmu, z drugiej zaś—z metaforycznym ujęciem braku porozumienia między dwójem ludzi". M. Stochniol, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

The director Maja Kleczewska made the autism a unique leitmotif of both *Sudden Rain* and—presented during the same evening—the opera *Between* by Agata Zubel, presenting the illness as the key to the interpretation of both performances, “[...] the metaphor of contemporary relations between humans: alienating, the lack of contact and wish for the mutual understanding”.³⁶ The notes of the autistic person appear at the beginning of the second scene of *Sudden Rain*:

There are about a billion sheep in the world,
there are over three hundred thousand diseases,
there is fuel produced from hydro oxygen,
There are forests, highways, seas, and wireless networks,
Yes!
Light travels at over a billion kilometers per hour speed,
astronauts reach thirty thousand kilometers per hour
and human-less capsules three hundred thousand,
they’ve invented intelligent dust, it thinks!
there are car races, there are swimming, dancing, cooking
and beauty contests,
Yes!³⁷

The mentioned notes are the collection of facts and curiosities recited by the choir and not connected with the main topic of the opera. There, enumerations and different numeral data dominate. The following side text is the statement of the choir closing the last, fourth scene, and at the same time the whole opera. It is the board of departures and arrivals at the airport, read aloud. In the opposition to the autistic elements, to some extent it is the reference to the main topic of the libretto because the ticket indeed was the bone of contention between the two characters.

36 Orig. “[...] metaforę współczesnych relacji międzyludzkich: wyalienowania, braku kontaktu czy chęci dogadania się”. M. Fuzowski, *Sudden Rain, Beetwen*, <http://www.newsweek.pl/recenzje/sudden-rain-between,59314,1,1.html> [accessed: 13.04.2018].

37 A. Nowak, A. Konieczna, *Sudden Rain*—libretto.

In the libretto of *Sudden Rain* one more side fragment can be distinguished, in which the action stops. It is the third scene—the shortest and the most pessimistic one. The opening words are the clear reference to the future:

SHE:

All the World falling asleep
all the words fallen.

HE:

All the World falling apart
all the words fallen.

TOGETHER:

Fallen, fallen, falling, fading, failing, falling.³⁸

What seems the most suggestive is the phrase "All the World falling apart", referring to the appearing problem of the couple, which results in ending the relationship and their bonds. Perhaps the whole scene is a symbolic farewell of the characters (true farewell will take place only at the end of the fourth scene).

Despite the tragedy of both characters, it is clearly suggested that She and He still love each other, what is visible in the statement finishing the scene one:

HE:

I trace the lines of your fingerprints,
searching for the meaning in their labyrinths,
to find what makes you, you.

I look into your eyes when you sleep,
studying the landscapes of your dreams,
to find it.

I listen to you when you speak to me,
and stow what you said in my memory,
to remember and to use at times like this.

38 *Ibid.*

SHE:

The curves of my fingerprints uncurve to let you through,
the gates of my dreams swing open when you approach
I am opened to you,
you are welcome to,
to see me, to read me, totally meet me.³⁹

What is more, in the ending scene She clearly underlines that He was supposed to be her only companion until the end of the life:

SHE:

I chose you when I met you
I looked at you and I chose you when we got married
everyday I look again and choose again and again you!⁴⁰

The libretto of *Sudden Rain* makes the special impression mainly due to the commonness of the situation, thanks to which it perfectly correlates with the idea of “life-writing”. It is a platform of communication between the creators of the opera and its listeners, and the possibility to create the special emotional and intellectual connection with the audience is a unique *credo* of Nowak.

Melody of *Sudden Rain* balances on the border between two different worlds. On the one hand, there are echoes of music from the beginning of the 20th century (according to Dorota Kozińska-Nowak “he showed a neo-sonorist face”),⁴¹ and on the other, it is characterised by novelty and freshness of the sound. In the harmonic solutions there are distant references to the tonal system, which are often more visible in the score. It is also possible to notice that music is the companion of word, being the superior value. Music underlines its content, symbolism and message. The statements of the main characters are usually melodeclamation, the melodic line of which mirrors the natural intonation of the

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

41 Orig. “pokazał oblicze neosonorystyczne”, D. Kozińska, *Dziwny przypadek dwojga nocą*, <http://www.dziennikteatralny.pl/artykuly/dziwny-przypadek-dwojga-noc-na-pora.html> [accessed: 01.08.2018].

voice, what results from their construction in the reference to the “everyday situations” in the libretto of the opera. Therefore, there is a lack of typical virtuoso solo parts. What is a very important aspect are numerous marks and commentaries defining quasi-free rhythm, emotions and dynamics. There are also the solutions that refer to the traditional music rhetoric—figures among which *interrogatio*, *emphasis*, *anabasis* and *katabasis* predominate (Example 1).

The image shows a musical score for two voices: 'She' (Soprano) and 'He' (Bass). The time signature is 4/4. The vocal line for 'She' is marked *mf* *plain*. The lyrics are: "It looks like it might rain to - day don't you think?". The phrase "don't you think?" is enclosed in a red rectangular box. The bass line for 'He' is mostly silent, with a few notes at the beginning and end of the phrase.

Ex. 1: *Sudden Rain*, first scene, She, rhetoric figure *interrogatio*, bb. 30–37.

Space Opera

Finished in 2014, *Space Opera* was commissioned by the Stanisław Moniuszko Great Theatre in Poznań as a part of the programme of composers' commissions of the Institute of Music and Dance. It was premiered also there in 2015. The libretto was written by Georgi Gospodinov, Bulgarian writer of a middle generation, sometimes called as “the ironist of the despair”. The main topic of the opera is the first crew flight on Mars, transmitted by the television in the format of reality show, the members of which are Adam and Ewa, chosen from the candidates. However, it appears that they are not alone in the sterile prepared capsule of a spaceship. Except the camera there is also somebody else, about which the composer mentions in the commentary to the piece:

The foreground theme of the libretto, written by Bulgarian writer, Georgi Gospodinov, is the first crew mission to the planet Mars and back to Earth. Characters in the story are a couple of astronauts: mid-aged marriage, stowaway: seemingly ordinary fly, flight director being also a reality show host, and chorus providing a commentary from two perspectives: crowd of people back on Earth, and souls of animals sent to space

on different stages of cosmic exploration. Episodically appear also Laika, the first dog in history sent into orbit and Bedouin leading a caravan of animal souls through Martian desert. The spouses trapped in a tiny capsule for long months have to make a life for themselves in the new, cosmic reality. Soon, usual, earthly affairs come to the fore. But present are also the unearthly... [...].⁴²

As it can be noticed, the incentives to composing *Space Opera* came from the authentic actions of the organisation Mars One—a private project of the Dutch entrepreneur Bas Lansdorp. Its main assumption is to send a group of people on Mars, where their task will be to survive on an unknown territory. Among hundreds of applications, almost a hundred of candidates were recruited to the first in history crew mission to the Red Planet. To make its financing possible, the organisation is planning to create reality show, selling the copyright to the televisions around the world.⁴³

Mars One is a global initiative whose goal is to make this every-one's mission to Mars, including yours. If we all work together, we can do this. We're going to Mars. Come along!⁴⁴

However, in the conversation with Michał J. Stankiewicz the composer mentions another, although very similar project, being a unique inspiration for *Space Opera*.⁴⁵ It is a mission announced by the foundation of the American millionaire Dennis Tito *Inspiration Mars*, which also plans to colonise Mars in the further perspective. According to the information from the official website of the endeavour, the organisers planned to send a pair of astronauts on the both-way trip in 2018 to check the strength of the human during such an attempt.⁴⁶

The plot of *Space Opera* consists of the preparation and travel of the married astronauts into the orbit of Mars. It is seemingly

42 A. Nowak, *Space Opera*, <http://www.aleknowak.com/en/music/stage/> [accessed: 23.02.2018].

43 Mars One, *Mission*, <http://www.mars-one.com/mission> [accessed: 28.02.2017].

44 *Ibid.*

45 M.J. Stankiewicz, *Odkrywać nierozpoznane*, https://opera.poznan.pl/media/uploaded/SPACE%20OPERA/spaceopera_web.pdf [accessed: 30.04.2018].

46 *Ibid.*

a simple story, inspired by the true events—the first sign of “life-writing” in the opera—but nothing is unambiguous, thanks to which the space for many considerations and speculations opens (as it is unknown if the cosmonauts can return and what will be their further future like). Gospodinov’s libretto contains on the one hand elements of the realistic world, on the other fantasy and fairy tales. According to Maria Majewska “the libretto has some features of magical realism of Márquez or Vargas Llosa”.⁴⁷ The appearance of animals with feelings and memory intensifies this impression. They are not only the episodic but full-fledged characters of a key influence on the action. Fruit Flies (because they are these characters) are “careful observers of human’s actions, they often comment events seen through the prism of their own, complex eyes”.⁴⁸

In the libretto three independent, but mutually complementing plans can be distinguished. So, there is the history of Adam and Ewa—the first cosmonaut couple in the history who are going to spend five hundred days in cosmos, in the journey to Mars and back. They represent people who have a crisis in the relationship, who want to self-develop and realise dreams, but they often have to compromise, like Ewa, wishing for a child and a normal family life, who decides to go on a trip which is an unfulfilled dream of her husband. On the second plan, there is a reality show—a unique theatre within theatre. The role of a master of ceremony is played by the Producer, for whom the primary value is the number of people gathered in front of their TV (in the score there are parts of the choir of the audience, lively reacting for the transmission from the space journey of Adam and Ewa). On the third plan, there is a story of animals who were killed for realisation of human dreams about the universe (the choir of Fruit Flies in the prologue to the first act of the opera, *arioso* of Laika in the prologue to the second act, the choir of all living creatures that have been sent to cosmos,

47 Orig. “Libretto posiada pewne cechy realizmu magicznego spod znaku Marqueza czy też Vargasa Llosy”. M. Majewska, *Małe historie pomiędzy science a fiction*, https://opera.poznan.pl/media/uploaded/SPACE%20OPERA/spaceopera_web.pdf [accessed: 30.04.2018].

48 Orig. “[...] baczni obserwatorzy poczyną człowieka, często komentują wydarzenia widziane przez pryzmat własnych, jakże złożonych oczu”. *Ibid.*

so both flies and dogs, monkeys, and also humans, who are led by Martian Beduin in the epilogue).

This seemingly simple story in the libretto is, in fact, a complicated amalgamate. Yet the title itself—*Space Opera*—can suggest the references to the sub-genre of scientific fantasy, focusing on romantic adventures in the space as well as interstellar journeys or space battles, what the composer admitted himself in one of the interviews conducted on the occasion of Poznań's premiere:

[...] the title *Space Opera* refers directly to one of the genres of “science fiction”, popular in the 1970s and 1980s, usually showing the love troubles of the characters in the surroundings of all fantasy-scientific attributes—lasers, capsules, foreign planets, aliens.⁴⁹

The action of Gospodinov's libretto also resembles the screening of Arthur C. Clarke's novel *2001: Space Odyssey* directed by Stanley Kubrick. Similarly to Nowak's *Space Opera*, the plot comprises the journey to the future. For many years Kubrick was unsurpassed ideal and became an inspiration for many creators. Therefore, several movies arguing with *Odyssey* can be distinguished, such as Ridley Scott's *The Martian*, the action of which takes place in 2035 and tells the story of the astronaut Mark Watney or Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar*, based on the scientific theory of wormhole of the American physicist Kip Thorne.

Staying in the sphere of television, it is worthy to consider the issue of reality show being the one of three plans of *Space Opera*'s libretto. One can find the analogy with once-popular programme *Big Brother* (and at the same time the concept of reality show of the organisation of Dennis Tito), which right after the premiere in Poland became the topic of a national debate and scientific discussion, what resulted in writing the collection of texts in the volume *Podglądanie Wielkiego Brata* edited by Wiesław Godzic—the specialist in the field of film, media and sociology.

49 Orig. “[...] tytuł *Space Opera* nawiązuje wprost do jednego z gatunków «science fiction», popularnego w latach 70. i 80., ukazującego zazwyczaj perypetie miłosne bohaterów w otoczeniu wszystkich fantastycznonaukowych atrybutów—laserów, kapsuł, obcych planet, kosmitów”. M.J. Stankiewicz, *op. cit.*

Snooping—the starting point for the programmes of the type of reality show—is a significant desire of a human, which at the same time can be a danger for his development.⁵⁰ It is not a new social phenomenon; it gained popularity only in the middle of the 20th century, mainly in the USA, where reality shows started to appear, in which the crucial issue, as Godzic indicates, is “the lack of the knowledge of a subject about the fact that he or she is watched”.⁵¹ Reality show or wider—reality TV comprises the programmes showing “the real life” of people-actors of the spectacle sold at the time of transmission. For the fame in media and material profit, they are ready to leave the real society. The specialist of culture, historian of culture and cultural anthropologist Roch Sulima indicates: “in the consumptive society the social life became theatricalised, became the spectacle that we watch, but rarely we can really join”.⁵²

It appears that the literary prototype for such programmes was George Orwell's *1984*—anti-utopia published in 1949, full of political subtexts. The novel describes London in the close future seen by Orwell, in which the human life is completely subordinate to the state governor. The space travel of Adam and Ewa simultaneously makes associations with the session of psychoanalysis. This is a specific vivisection of relation between the married couple. In the foreground, there are interests and desires of both people, which appear to be different (Ewa wants a child, Adam wants his childhood dreams about travelling to Mars to come true).

Maria Majewska aptly described music of the opera, comparing it to the emotional guide through the meanders of the libretto.⁵³ Similarly to the earlier discussed *Sudden Rain* it accompanies word, through which it is possible to read both the irony of the statements and the sincerity and movement. In the harmonic solutions, the references to emotional states of the characters and gravity in the

50 W. Godzic, „Wielki Brat” a sprawa polska, [in:] *Podglądanie Wielkiego Brata, idem* (ed.), Kraków 2001, p. 15.

51 Orig. “[...] brak wiedzy przedmiotu spojrzenia o tym, że jest oglądany”. *Ibid.*

52 Orig. “W społeczeństwie konsumpcyjnym życie społeczne steatralizowało się, stało się widowiskiem, na które patrzymy, ale rzadko realnie się w nie możemy włączyć”. R. Sulima, *Oko „Wielkiego Brata”*, [in:] *Podglądanie Wielkiego Brata...*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

53 M. Majewska, *op. cit.*

given scene can be found: the higher is the space, the smaller the harmonic centres are, and the closer the Earth is, the closer are the references to the tonal system.

What seems extremely interesting is the introduction of the double cast playing the role of the Fly (countertenor and soprano), what underlines its double nature, as well as some superiority to the remaining characters (Example 2). This refers to the literary output of the author of the libretto, Georgy Gospodinov, in which small, often ignored creatures often takes the special position, and *musica domestica* is a returning character.

Ex. 2: *Space Opera*, scene 6—the part of Fly, bb. 1163–1171.

Conclusion

The conclusion aims at sketching the main features of the titled “life-writing” in the operatic works by Aleksander Nowak, and at the same time an attempt to characterise his operatic style. Both in *Sudden Rain* and *Space Opera* under the cover of action there is the story of common people with the baggage of experiences. The composer searches for inspirations in everyday life, somehow indicating the condition of the contemporary human, often lost in the world full of opposite values and authorities.

Music is not concentrated on one technique or style. To the great extent, it results from the desire to follow the specific states and the “circle of emotions”, which Nowak would like to evoke in recipients. Therefore, he uses means and techniques as well

as forms and genres known from the history of music: numerous quotations (e.g. the melody of the prayer *Our Father* or the motif from the overture of Richard Strauss's tone poem *Also sprach Zarathustra* in *Space Opera*), grotesque and popular music (when characterising the Producer and the world of television, which he represents), compositional technique from the distant past (imitation, fugue) and the 20th and 21st centuries (aleatorism, serialism), as well as conscious references to the opera or oratory.

Jadwiga Paja-Stach distinguishes two artistic attitudes to the musical tradition, treating the "heritage of the past" in a different way. The first one is called as *buffo*, as she understands playfulness and distance to the history of music, what is often expressed by the parody of old styles, grotesque or joining old and new in the form of some kind of a game, checking the familiarity with different conventions of a listener.⁵⁴ The second one, called as *seria*, is

[...] treating technique from the old epochs and the 20th-century techniques as a fusion of styles; and even in the case of the quotation from the traditional music it functions rather as a symbol than the playful element.⁵⁵

In the operatic work of Aleksander Nowak, the deep rooting in the tradition is noticeable, which is a sign of the postmodern idea in *seria* attitude.

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54 J. Paja-Stach, *Kompozytorzy polscy wobec idei modernistycznych i postmodernistycznych*, p. 57, [in:] *Modernizm i postmodernizm w poetyce kompozytorskiej i w refleksji o muzyce*, A. Jarzębska, J. Paja-Stach (eds.), Kraków 2007, pp. 55–74.

55 Orig. "[...] potraktowaniu technik z dawnych epok i technik dwudziestowiecznych na zasadzie fuzji stylistycznej; i nawet w przypadku cytatu z muzyki tradycyjnej funkcjonuje on raczej na zasadzie symbolu, a nie—elementu ludycznego". *Ibid.*

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