

# Priedas

## Supplement

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# The International Image of Lithuanian Composers after the Restoration of Independence

*Tarptautinis lietuvių kompozitorių įvaizdis atkūrus Nepriklausomybę*

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### Abstract

Culture is one of the most important tools of self-presentation for countries. Lithuania's independence was restored after the Soviet occupation and had to re-establish its cultural identity. During the last three decades, composers that started their work before the restoration of independence continued to compose, and new generations of composers emerged. The latter keep in step with the latest tendencies of contemporary music and create these tendencies themselves. Despite this fact, in the public discourse it is often believed that Lithuanian composers still have not established an international reputation equal to those of the other Baltic countries of Estonia and Latvia. So, this paper seeks to analyze the international image of Lithuanian composers through discussion of specific case studies, scientific literature, and the results of a survey of foreign musicians.

**Keywords:** international image, Lithuanian composers, popularity, criticism.

### Anotacija

Kultūra yra vienas svarbiausių šalių savęs reprezentavimo įrankių. Lietuva, atkūrusi Nepriklausomybę, turėjo susigrąžinti ir savo kultūrinę tapatybę. Per pastaruosius tris dešimtmečius ir toliau aktyvūs buvo kompozitoriai, pradėję savo veiklą iki Nepriklausomybės, taip pat išaugo ir nauja kūrėjų karta. Šie menininkai ne tik žengia koja kojon su naujausiomis šiuolaikinės muzikos tendencijomis, bet ir patys jas kuria. Nors vis dar atrodo, kad Lietuvių kompozitoriams nepavyko pelnyti tokios tarptautinės reputacijos kaip jų kolegoms iš kitų Baltijos šalių, Estijos ir Latvijos. Šiame straipsnyje stengiamasi aptarti šiandienos lietuvių kompozitorių įvaizdį tarptautinėje scenoje, naudojantis arvejų studijomis, mokslinė literatūra ir užsienio muzikų apklausos rezultatais.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** tarptautinis įvaizdis, lietuvių kompozitoriai, populiarumas, kritika.

### Introduction

The official Estonian website for tourist information greets readers with an ambitious slogan—"Arvo Pärt—most performing living composer." Winner of two Grammy awards, honorary doctor at the universities of Oxford, Sidney, and Freiburg, Pärt left his country in 1980 and returned in 2010. During that time he became one of the most well-known figures of Estonian culture throughout the world. For seven years and counting, the music by Pärt has been played in concert halls more often than any other living composer. Latvian composer Peteris Vasks, meanwhile, is considered one of the most impactful and popular contemporary composers in Europe. And what can Lithuania offer to add to these honorable ranks?

A 2004 article from *The Irish Times* states:

But when it comes to music and music-making Lithuania has little to be shy about, even if it hasn't yet produced a figure to match the prominence of Estonia's Arvo Pärt or Latvia's Peteris Vasks. (Dervan 2004)

Even though the article was written 15 years ago, it is still relevant today. Lithuania can indeed rejoice in having talented artists, but at the same time, we have to agree—Lithuanian composers have not received the worldwide critical acclaim similar to that of their Baltic contemporaries. Performances of Lithuanian music are often met with a pleasant surprise, positive reviews, and regret by audience members who had not had the opportunity to listen to such great music before, yet we have yet to gain prominence on the international stage.

This article is an effort to discuss the image of current Lithuanian composers on the international stage and to ponder which best represents Lithuanian music worldwide, what the image of Lithuanian music is that they form, and how we compare to the other Baltic countries. Additionally, based on specific case studies, scientific literature, and the results of a survey, I intend to offer my thoughts on what determines international success for a composer of academic music in the twenty-first century.

## The Phenomenon of Popularity

The phenomenon being famous has its roots in Antiquity. Back then, popularity was mostly reserved for politicians, war heroes and artists; this status was seen as leading to power and authority. The eighteenth century saw the rise of the concepts of high culture and low culture, and the term “popular” continued to be associated with the latter. Nonetheless, albeit different in nature, popularity in academic culture is equally inevitable, regardless of its difference in scope compared to popular culture. Journalist and literary critic Rolfe Arnold Scott-James defined popularity by the size of the audience and the produced benefit (Iglesia 2011: 34). Culturologist James Steel Smith has offered a qualitative systematization of the elements of popular culture, defined by abstractness, standards, simplicity, typical form and content, traditionalism, and optimism (Iglesia 2011: 37). And yet, these categories do not seem fitting when we discuss the factors that define the popularity of a composer of academic music. Artistic activity, by definition, is in opposition to such things as standardization, simplification, avoidance of polysemy, or superficiality. In that case, what are the key factors that determine the success of a composer of academic music?

In order to outline what may lead to the success of a composer, I would like to give a short analysis of the biography of Pärt. In the article by Christine Kanownik “How a 78-Year-Old Estonian Composer Became the Hottest Thing in Music” (Kanownik 2014), the author cites Björk speaking of Pärt as a composer who “has got the whole battle of this century inside him” (Kanownik 2014). Kanownik mentions that, due to his beliefs and the spirituality of his music, Pärt was forced to leave his country as he did not fit the needs of the Soviet regime. Kanownik considers that to be one of the key aspects to his success, as Pärt’s international career took off precisely after he left Estonia. At the time, ECM Records was looking for a new star and when Pärt came along, the company launched a massive publicity campaign in 1984, after one of the most famous musical pieces of the twentieth century, *Tabula Rasa*, was presented to the public. It was advertised not only in publications dedicated to academic music, but also in journals of popular music. Thus, we see the collision of several key elements—the creation of a new style (Tintinnabuli), significance being given to eternal values through music, and at the same time, the image of a creator as a hero that refuses to yield to the system, and finally, a good marketing strategy. Because Pärt maintained his high bar for quality as time went by, he became a superstar of academic music.

Meanwhile, the international success of Vasks is said to be connected with the work of the famous violinist Gidon Kremer. Sometime around the 1970s, the Latvian composer developed a unique style based on spiritual signs and the tragedy of ideals and historical reality. Similar to Pärt, Vasks was disliked by the Soviet regime; many of his biographies

state that he was repressed for his beliefs. Thus, the collision of human ideals and the historical context at the time describes the work of this composer as well.

### Survey: Do They Know Lithuanian composers?

At this point, I would like to discuss the survey of foreign musicians I conducted. The research included 47 professional musicians or students of music-related courses from 23 countries. The respondents were given ten questions on their knowledge of Lithuanian, Latvian, or Estonian composers they were asked to name them and indicate how they first heard about them. The participants were also asked to give their opinion on what determines the international image of a composer.

Twenty-four people answered positively when asked whether they knew any Lithuanian composers and 23 said they did not. Meanwhile, 35 said they knew composers from Latvia and Estonia, with only 12 answers to that question being negative. However, six respondents admitted they have only heard of Pärt.

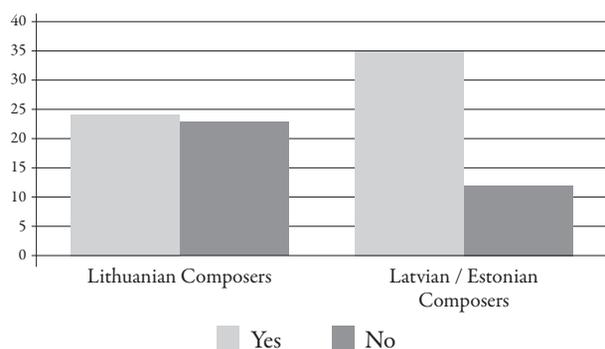


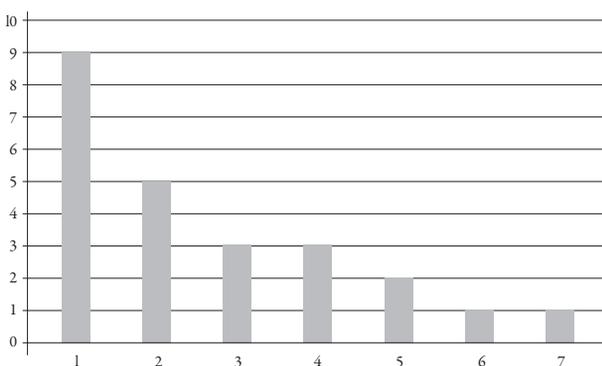
Figure 1. Do you know Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian composers?

When people were asked to name the Lithuanian composers they knew, the results revealed an interesting tendency. Twenty-four names were given in total, with classic composers being mentioned most often. Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis was mentioned 11 times, while 10 mentions went to Stasys Vainiūnas and nine to Balys Dvarionas. Juozas Gruodis and current composers Onutė Narbutaitė, Bronius Kutavičius, and Rytis Mažulis were all mentioned twice. The classic composers Jurgis Karnavičius, Vytautas Bacevičius, Juozas Tallat-Kelpša, and Eduardas Balsys as well as the currently active Faustas Latėnas, Mindaugas Urbaitis, Gintaras Sodeika, Nomeda Valančiūtė, Raminta Šerkšnytė, Vytautas Barkauskas, Anatolijus Šenderovas, Marius Baranauskas, Vytautas Miškinis and Gediminas Gelgotas were each mentioned once.

When asked to name Latvian and Estonian composers, the respondents produced 25 different names. The general tendency showed that as opposed to Lithuanian composers,

the respondents were more familiar not with the classic composers of Latvia and Estonia, but rather those who are currently active. Pärt received 28 mentions, Peteris Vasks and Erkki-Sven-Tuur four mentions, and Eriks Esenvalds and Helena Tulve were each mentioned twice.

The part of the questionnaire where the respondents had to explain how they came to know Lithuanian composers was especially relevant to the topic. Most respondents (nine), said that they first heard Lithuanian music during international competitions that took place in Lithuania, five mentioned personal contacts, three credited the knowledge to school classes or exchange programs, two people simply heard the music online, one person mentioned participation in choral music contests, and one more mentioned their work with an international orchestra.

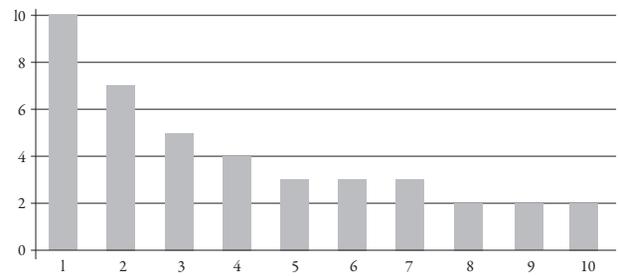


- 1 – International Competitions
- 2 – Personal Contacts
- 3 – School
- 4 – Exchange Programs
- 5 – Internet
- 6 – Choral Music Courses
- 7 – Activity in International Orchestras

**Figure 2.** How did you get acquainted with the music by Lithuanian composers?

The participants were also asked to consider the main factors for the international success of composers. Ten answers cited originality; seven mentioned pieces of the composers being performed in prestigious concert halls; five gave performances by famous performers as a main factor; four thought the personality of the composer was important; three mentions each went to the richness of the music, the spread of information online, and the marketing strategy; and finally, music quality, accessibility to records and scores, and political circumstances were each mentioned twice. As we can see, participants mentioned non-musical factors even slightly more often than musical ones.

Based on the research and the biographies of the composers that have been discussed, several main aspects can be highlighted that seem to have the largest impact on the international image of a composer. These aspects include the originality and accessibility of the music being created (a



- 1 – Originality of Music
- 2 – Performances by Famous Performers
- 3 – Richness of Music
- 4 – Marketing Strategies
- 5 – Accessibility to Records and Scores
- 6 – Performances in Prestigious Concert Halls
- 7 – Composers' Personality
- 8 – Spread of Information Online
- 9 – Quality of Music
- 10 – Political Circumstances

**Figure 3.** Main elements of composer's international success

unique technological method/versatility of music); famous performers; performances at prestigious concert halls; the personality/the personality versus the system; attention from high-end media outlets; and marketing and PR.

Using these aspects as a foundation, I will now discuss composers, who, in my opinion, are the most prominent Lithuanian music composers on the international stage.

### Onutė Narbutaitė

Several years ago, when musicologist Richard Taruskin was attending a conference in Lithuania, I had the pleasure of interviewing him. My first question was whether he was familiar with any Lithuanian composers. He mentioned one name, Onutė Narbutaitė, whose music he first heard at the Baltic Music festival that took place in Seattle in 2004. Taruskin was impressed the most with Narbutaitė out of all the participants, and he expressed his admiration in an article in *The New York Times*. There, Narbutaitė was described as a “joyful discovery” and “the great composer,” and the vivid and professional musical thinking of the composer as well as the characteristic consonance were highlighted (Taruskin 2004). Such praise from an influential musicologist in an influential publication could have been the breakthrough in the international career for the composer, and maybe that did happen, just not quite to the most desirable scale.

In the 2005 publication *Lithuanian Music Link*, musicologist Rūta Stanevičiūtė mentioned Narbutaitė and Vyktas Baltakas as the most prominent purveyors of the New Lithuanian Sound on the international stage, contrasting their style to how Baltic Sound, that is, the styles of Pärt and Vasks, is currently seen by the world. She connected

Narbutaitė's music more to the tradition of Eastern Europe and the influences of Witold Lutoslawski and Sofia Gubaidulina. Stanevičiūtė highlighted the transformation in Narbutaitė's music that took place after independence was restored—it was a transition from chamber music to large-scale symphonic and vocal pieces. Even back then, the author noticed, music by Narbutaitė was more often desired by foreign festivals and institutions (Goštautienė 2005).

Today, Narbutaitė has an even stronger footing on the international stage, owing largely to her success last year. A collection of her music was published by Naxos, which presented the composer as “one of the outstanding Baltic artists of recent decades” (American Record Guide 2017). Talking about said recording, the reviewer Raymond Bisha pointed out signs of political and cultural resistance in Narbutaitė's music. In a review of the recording, published in the online journal *The Art Music Lounge*, her orchestral music is dubbed “unusual,” “tense” and “edgy,” and having “dark qualities,” and the orchestral score and the harmonic language are called “astringent.” Lynn René Bayley, the author of the piece, even considers Narbutaitė a predecessor of such composers as John Pickart or Thomas Ades. However, she criticizes her for the repetition of patterns, sonic environment, tempos, and ideas (Bayley 2017). Narbutaitė's growing international recognition is also exemplified by the fact that she was the only composer chosen from the Baltics to participate in the *Kronos Fifty for the Future* project initiated by Kronos, one of the most famous string quartets in the world. Narbutaitė participates in the project alongside stars such as Philippe Glass, Terry Riley, and Laurie Anderson. On May 8, her piece premiered at the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg. As part of the project, her composition was included in the 2017–2018 season of Carnegie Hall.

Narbutaitė is also included in the “propaganda” program for Lithuanian music, managed by one of today's top young conductors, the Lithuanian Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla. In 2017, Gražinytė-Tyla became the artistic director for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and has been a prominent current figure of the music world for the last several years, regularly appearing in prestigious concert halls. Gražinytė-Tyla was called “The New Queen of the Baton” by *The Times* (see Fisher 2016).

Gražinytė-Tyla's success is extremely important to Lithuanian composers, as she regularly includes their music in her programs. The conductor has explained on more than one occasion about how sorry she is about Lithuanians not being recognized internationally to the same extent as their contemporaries from other Baltic countries and how she wants to show the world what they are missing. Onutė Narbutaitė is one of the composers whose music gets promoted by Gražinytė-Tyla—she has called Narbutaitė's pieces “tastefully emotional” (Nalivaikaitė 2016). This spring Narbutaitė's *La Barca* premiered in the United Kingdom, where it was performed by the City of Birmingham

Symphony Orchestra. Before the concert, she was called “one of the best currently active Lithuanian composers,” and her composition “a stunning discovery” (Morley 2016).

Narbutaitė is undoubtedly one of the brightest Lithuanian composers on the international stage today. Her compositions appear increasingly in the programs of concerts by world-famous performers and as part of season line-ups for prestigious halls, which may eventually contribute to a more prominent Lithuanian identity on the world stage of contemporary music.

### Raminta Šerkšnytė

Raminta Šerkšnytė finds herself in a similar situation to Narbutaitė. Her music has ties to post-romantic aesthetics, supplemented by inclusions of post-minimalism, jazz, and avant-garde. In the aforementioned article from 2005 by Stanevičiūtė [Goštautienė], Šerkšnytė is mentioned alongside her peers Marius Baranauskas and Vytautas V. Jurgutis as a breath of fresh air in Lithuanian music (Goštautienė 2005).

Three bright flashes by Šerkšnytė on the international stage can be highlighted today. The composer first drew attention to herself in 2010, when the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra commissioned from her a piece called *Fires*, which later appeared in a series of recordings of Beethoven symphonies and reflections published by the radio. *The Gramophone* offered a brief opinion on the piece: “*Fires* explores sounds which she associates with hearing failure” (Osborne 2013). The second key international appearance by Šerkšnytė was for a recording prepared by Gidon Kremer and Kremerata Baltica called *De Profundis*, where her music was played next to compositions created by Franz Schubert, Jean Sibelius, Dmitri Shostakovich, Michael Nyman, and Pärt. Kremer chose to name the entire collection *De Profundis* not only for the cultural significance of the title, but also because of his personal affection towards that particular piece by Šerkšnytė. He has called *De Profundis* “the finest calling card of Baltic music,” and the composition has indeed become a sort of manifesto by Šerkšnytė, having been performed hundreds of times.

*De Profundis*, naturally, attracted the attention of the high-end media outlets. *San Francisco Classical Voice* wrote:

It's hard to describe the combination of excitement and gravitas from the program-opening work Lithuanian composer Raminta Šerkšnytė's *De Profundis*, this is an intense colorful journey through tempestuous landscape. (Gereben 2010)

A reviewer from *The New Yorker*, however, was not particularly fascinated by the piece and called it “distinctly disappointing,” emphasizing his negative opinion with positive reviews of other pieces in the collection. After the program was performed in Toronto, *De Profundis* was called a reminiscence of Pärt, and Šerkšnytė a neoromantic composer by Michael Johnson from The Classical Music Network.

The third and likely the most important channel through which Šerkšnytė presents her music is through the work of the aforementioned Gražinytė-Tyla. The conductor has confirmed multiple times to having a personal relationship with Šerkšnytė's music. In 2016 Gražinytė-Tyla performed *Fires* when debuting on stage in New York. Back then, *The New York Times* critic James Oestreich called the piece fitting to the program, subtly hiding the motifs of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and added that the orchestral texture was "dense and colorful" (Oestreich 2016). David Pinego, a writer for *Opera Today* called *Fires* "intriguing and enticing a desire to listen to more pieces by this composer" (Pinego 2016). Ryan Evans from *The Guardian* wrote:

Her explosive and fiery nature is worthy of attention in and of itself, but it is even more prominent due to their coupling with Mahler's instrumentals and the intentions of her expression. (Evans 2016)

When debuting as the artistic director for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Gražinytė-Tyla also chose to conduct Šerkšnytė's *Fires*. *The Birmingham Post* then wrote:

This is a surely-constructed purposeful score, deservedly in succession to the tone-poems of Šerkšnytė's great Baltic predecessor Sibelius. (Morley 2016)

In 2018, *Fires* was included in the program for the summer tour of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and is further climbing up the ranks to its rightful place in the pantheon of contemporary music.

### The Opera *Have a Good Day!*

The last example I would like to mention has become a key example of contemporary Lithuanian music worldwide, and it is one of the most prominent examples of modern musical theater in the world today: the opera *Have a Good Day!* The success of the opera includes many of the aspects that I mentioned in the beginning of this article, such as originality of style (the post-modernistic musical language of Lina Lapelytė), the versatility and accessibility of the piece (the main theme—excessive consumption, the heroines are mall cashiers), prestigious concert halls (the award at the contest "Music Theatre NOW" led to the performance being a part of the world's most prestigious opera festivals in Shanghai, Rotterdam, and New York, as well as being broadcasted on BBC Radio 3, and having been performed 56 times in total, 41 of which were abroad); marketing and PR; attention from high-end media outlets (*Have a Good Day!* has been noticed and positively reviewed by *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Wallstreet Journal*, Italy's *ArtTribune*, *OperaClick*, and other publications).

When *Have a Good Day!* was shown at the Prototype Festival in New York, the Lithuanian opera in particular

caught the eye of famous critic Alex Ross. *The New Yorker* critic wrote of the opera:

The music, by Lina Lapelyte, combines the unsentimental minimalism of early Philip Glass with hints of folkish melody. [...] All told, it is a tightly constructed, multi-layered creation, its humor pierced by melancholy. (Ross 2014)

The composition was also noticed by Steve Smith, a reviewer for *The New York Times*, who dedicated an entire article to the Lithuanian opera (Smith 2014). *Have a Good Day!* was also labelled "strong" by *The Wall Street Journal* critic Heidi Waleson (Waleson 2014).

In May 2018, *Have a Good Day!* represented Lithuania at the Lithuanian art festival, Flux, in Rome. There, works of Lithuanian artists from different fields were presented, but judging from the resounding responses by critics, we can confidently guess that *Have a Good Day!* interested the Italian cultural community the most. *ArtTribune* critic Mariagrazia Pontorno wrote:

*Have a Good Day!* is so refined, its contents merge with reality and then take revenge on it through its form. (Pontorno 2018)

Italian cinema critic Roberto Canziani has resoundingly dubbed the opera "an epic for consumption," while comparing Lapelytė's music to the style of Philippe Glass in the 80s (Canziani 2018).

The case of *Have a Good Day!* illustrates a situation where the creator (in this case, a team of creators: Lina Lapelytė, Vaiva Grainytė and Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė) is represented through their creation, which has become its own brand.

### Conclusion

To conclude, it can be stated that after Lithuanian independence was restored, neither composers of the older nor of the younger generation have formed a more coherent international image and up to this day remain but "unfamiliar pleasant discoveries" to the international community. Based on the results of the research, contemporary Lithuanian composers are still not well-known, while classic Lithuanian composers are better recognized abroad; that could also be considered a reflection of the cultural policies of Lithuania—it should be noted how the promotion for composers of modern music receive little attention (even in schools familiarization with contemporary composers is minimal). Following the analysis of feedback from critics, it can be concluded that we are highly regarded when it comes to originality and quality of music, yet there is a lack of effective promotion, marketing, and formation of a coherent image to help talented Lithuanian artists gain strong footing in the international scene of contemporary music. Nonetheless, the continuously growing attention top foreign performers give to our composers, which helps

their music to be played in prestigious concert halls, as well as ideologically strong and musically effective works like *Have a Good Day!* coupled with great management may be a sign that in the near future the names of Lithuanian composers will increasingly be heard mentioned by foreign artists and seen in the programs of world-class concert halls and the pages of top-notch magazines.

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## Santrauka

Daugelį metų diskutuojama, kodėl Lietuva, turėdama daug talentingų kūrėjų, vis dar neturi kompozitorių, kurie būtų plačiai žinomi tarptautiniu mastu. Klausimas tampa tik aštresnis, kai pradedame lyginti situaciją su kitų Baltijos valstybių, Estijos ir Latvijos, kurios gali pasigirti visame pasaulyje žymiais kompozitoriais. Straipsnyje siekiama išanalizuoti esamą situaciją, remiantis mokslinė literatūra, kritiniais užsienio spaudos straipsniais, taip pat užsienio muzikų apklausa.

Rengiant straipsnį, buvo atliekama apklausa, kurioje dalyvavo 47 muzikantai iš 23 valstybių (profesionalai atlikėjai / kompozitoriai arba muzikos specialybių studentai). Apklauskos duomenų analizė parodė, kad lietuvių kompozitorius žino beveik pusė – 24 respondentai. Savo ruožtu estų ir latvių kompozitoriai buvo paminėti 35 respondentų, tačiau daugiausia dėl Arvo Pärto žinomumo. Duomenys taip pat atskleidė, kad užsienio muzikams geriau žinomi seniau kūrę lietuvių kompozitoriai, tokie kaip Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis ar Balys Dvarionas. O kalbant apie estus ir latvius, apklauskos dalyviams geriau žinoma šiuolaikinių kompozitorių muzika.

Apklauskos dalyvių buvo klausama, kaip jie susipažino su lietuviška muzika. Daugelis jų minėjo tarptautinius Lietuvoje vykusius konkursus, asmeninius kontaktus, paskaitas aukštojoje mokykloje ar mainų programas, internetą, dalyvavimą chorinės muzikos konkursuose ir veiklą tarptautiniuose orkestruose. Taip pat apklauskos dalyvių buvo pasiteirauta, kas, jų nuomone, yra svarbiausia kompozitoriui siekiant tarptautinio pripažinimo. Daugelis atsakiusių tvirtino, kad svarbiausias elementas – kūrybinio stiliaus originalumas, taip pat kūrinių atlikimas prestižinėse koncertų salėse, žymių atlikėjų dėmesys, kompozitoriaus asmenybė, muzikos turiningumas, informacijos sklaida internetu, rinkodaros strategijos, muzikos kokybė, įrašų ir natų pasiekiamumas bei politinės aplinkybės.

Toliau straipsnyje, remiantis minėta apklausa, kritinėmis recenzijomis, tarptautiniais atlikimais ir įrašais, aptariamos vienos ryškiausių šiandienos lietuvių kūrėjų – Onutė Narbutaitė ir Raminta Šerkšnytė tarptautinės scenos kontekste, taip pat vienas ryškiausių pastarojo meto šiuolaikinio muzikinio teatro pavyzdžių – Linos Lapelytės, Vaivos Grainytės ir Rugilės Barzdžiukaitės opera „Geros dienos!“.