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# The Rock Opera *Lāčplēsis* (*Bearslayer*, 1988): Symbolic Meaning in the Historical Change Process and the Cultural Memory of Latvia\*

Roko opera „Lačplēsis“ („Lāčplēsis“; „Lokiazudys“, 1988):

simbolinē reikšmē istoriņu jvykiņ procese ir Latvijos kultūrinēje atmintyje

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## Abstract

The focus of this article is the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* (*Bearslayer*, 1988, text by Māra Zālīte, music by Zigmaris Liepiņš), which at the end of the 1980s in Latvia gained both significant artistic as well as political resonance; such significance is still reflected in the cultural memory of society. The article offers the opportunity to gain a deeper familiarity with *Lāčplēsis* as a symbolic hero in Latvian culture prior to the premiere of the rock opera in 1988 and provides an analysis of *Lāčplēsis*'s creation, the characteristics of the text and music stylistics, its socio-political resonance, and its place in the historical renewal of state independence and democracy. The article also highlights the reception of *Lāčplēsis* as an historically significant event in Latvian society's cultural memory of the last 30 years. This study uses multiple research methods: the clarification of past events through primary sources, periodicals and witness testimony, and comparison and overall generalization of facts and interpretations.

**Keywords:** *Lāčplēsis* (*Bearslayer*), Latvian history of culture, rock opera, Zigmaris Liepiņš, Māra Zālīte, 1988, historical change, cultural memory.

## Anotacija

Straipsnio tema - roko opera „Lačplēsis“ („Lāčplēsis“ / „Lokiazudys“, 1988, Māros Zālītēs tekstas, Zigmaro Liepiņio muzika), kuri devintojo dešimtmečio pabaigoje Latvijoje įgavo reikšmingą ne tik meninį, bet ir politinį rezonansą, vis dar saugomą kultūrinėje visuomenės atmintyje. Siūloma galimybė geriau susipažinti su Lačplėsiu, simboliniu latvių kultūros herojumi dar prieš roko operos premjerą 1988 metais, pateikiama roko operos „Lačplēsis“ sukūrimo ir teksto bei muzikos stilistikos analizė, apibūdinamas socialinis ir politinis operos rezonansas, taip pat vieta istorinių pokyčių procese, atkuriant valstybės nepriklausomybę ir demokratiją. Roko operos „Lačplēsis“ recepcija pristatoma kaip vienas iš reikšmingiausių istorinių įvykių Latvijos visuomenės kultūrinėje atmintyje per pastaruosius 30 metų. Straipsnyje naudojami tyrimo metodai: praeities įvykių aiškinimas pirminių šaltinių, periodinių leidinių ir liudininkų parodymų pagrindu, faktų ir interpretacijų lyginimas ir apibendrinimas.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** „Lačplēsis“ („Lāčplēsis“ / „Lokiazudys“), Latvijos kultūros istorija, roko opera, Zigmaras Liepinis, Mara Zalītė, 1988-iejį, istorinės permainos, kultūrinė atmintis.

## Introduction

When considering historical changes that began in the Baltic States in 1990 (this year is considered a symbolic point on the renewal of independence), the question about how music (music culture) participated in, formed, and reflected this process can be answered from various angles. These include both trends and changes in musical life, the events that influenced them, and the disappearance or transformation and rebirth of old structures. These are

music creation processes in varied genres and the reception of this process in music criticism and other sources. There are also the single musical works, which, in eras of social and political change, gain symbolic meaning, become significant testimonies of the time of their creation, and later obtain particular meaning for society's cultural memory. The focus of this study is the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* (*Bearslayer*), which at the end of the 1980s in Latvia gained both significant artistic and political resonance; such significance is still reflected in the cultural memory of society.

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It should be noted that *Lāčplēsis* is, through varied texts and other works of art, a broadly known hero in Latvian national culture. However, the question as to why, in the 1980s, a time of historical changes, it was specifically the image of *Lāčplēsis* that was realized in a rock opera that, today, is considered historically significant, even today has not been fully researched. This might possibly be because, over the course of time, many objective (contextually broader and more general) views of the symbolic meaning of this rock opera in the recent decades have only lately formed. That is why, in this article, when we consider the historical change in Latvia before and after 1990, in this article the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* will be characterized from varied aspects of local cultural-historical experience. The first section of the article offers the opportunity to gain a deeper familiarity with *Lāčplēsis* as a symbolic “hero” in Latvian culture prior to the premiere of the rock opera in 1988.

### **Lāčplēsis as a hero and symbol in the Latvian history of culture and art**

In 1888, the epic *Lāčplēsis* by Latvian poet Andrejs Pumpurs (1841–1902) was first published in Riga (Pumpurs 1888). In the second half of the nineteenth century, in the context of Romantic nationalism, national epics and the mythology represented within them were characteristic confirmation of self-consciousness for many nations in Europe. Pumpurs’s *Lāčplēsis* organically fit into this process and is called the first great Latvian national epic (Zelče 2018: 372, 373). This title and the related significance in Latvian history of culture was preserved and confirmed in the twentieth century, and the epic is characterized today as a national cultural treasure in official cultural memory (Kencis 2019: 681–684; Lāms 2008).<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, the symbolic meaning of the character of *Lāčplēsis* in Latvia is associated with another significant literary text. It is the play (symbolic drama) *Fire and Night* (*Uguns un Nakts*) by distinguished Latvian poet Rainis (real name Jānis Pliekšāns, 1865–1929), first performed in 1911 in Riga (Uzula-Petrovska 2020).<sup>2</sup>

Based on the Pumpurs’s epic, Rainis wrote *Fire and Night*, which gives the character of *Lāčplēsis* a new, philosophically dialectical message dimension. Rainis accented the need for synthesis of power and mind (intellect) in *Lāčplēsis*’s battle with the Dark Knight and highlighted the character of Spidola as an ally of *Lāčplēsis* in fighting evil.<sup>3</sup> The character of *Lāčplēsis* in the play *Fire and Night* provides a dialogical link between two significant cultural texts by Pumpurs and Rainis. Both texts, calling for the

formation of the Latvian nation in the twentieth century, stimulated links and the broad representation of the image of *Lāčplēsis* in the creation of multiple forms of art and cultural treasures.

After historically significant battles in Riga in the autumn of 1919, when the army of the Republic of Latvia, proclaimed one year earlier, battled against the Bermondts forces (armies from surplus parts of the German Empire and the Russian Tsarist Empire) and was victorious, the 11<sup>th</sup> of November in Latvia was officially recognized as *Lāčplēsis* Day (*Lāčplēša diena*, an official holiday and memorial day for all those who fought for Latvian independence).<sup>4</sup>

In both literature and theater (and not only in works by Pumpurs and Rainis) as well as visual art,<sup>5</sup> the character of *Lāčplēsis* has become an integral element of Latvian cultural history.

In turn, in music or in genres of art related to music, three compositions related to *Lāčplēsis* can be found prior to the premiere of the rock opera in 1988. In the spring (the first part of the dilogy) and autumn (the second part of the dilogy) of 1921, composer Jānis Mediņš’s (1890–1966) opera (dilogy) *Fire and Night* (*Uguns un Nakts*) premiered. Inspired by Rainis’s play, Mediņš’s opera *Fire and Night* is one of the two first operas in Latvian language that represent Latvian ethnographic elements and references to historical experience.<sup>6</sup>

Along with Rainis’s play, Mediņš’s opera is a culturally historically significant presentation of the character of *Lāčplēsis* in the opera genre. Continuing the late Romantic stylistic traditions of Wagner (a broadly developed musical leitmotif system for characters) and Richard Strauss (an extended symphony orchestra form and its specific sound), in his opera, Mediņš tells of *Lāčplēsis* and the development of his character in a very rich and expressive musical score. In its premiere in 1921, the first version of the opera *Fire and Night* was presented as two separate performances (parts). Even though there was a positive public interest and response, there were conflicting thoughts about the composition being made up of two performances. That is why, in 1924, the composer created an opera in one performance (removing one act and shortening the opera elsewhere). Still, the singers and music critics considered the overly loud orchestra sound a major flaw in the opera, as it drowned out the soloists.

In 1927, the composer created the final version of the opera, developing a new orchestral instrumentation for it. Still, for several reasons, the opera experienced no further performances until the Soviet occupation and the beginning of WW2 in Latvia in 1941 (Čeže [1] 2008). Today,

in Latvian music historiography, there is the opinion that, in this way, there was a lost opportunity to offer *Fire and Night* as a vivid musical and artistic treasure internationally, to stand beside the national operas of other nations that were created at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century (Čeže [2] 2008).

After WW2, the opera *Fire and Night* was staged three more times. Two stagings took place during the Soviet occupation, in 1966 and 1987. It is an interesting paradox that the performance of the opera in 1987 (during the beginning of historical change in Latvia) the staging of *Fire and Night* did not gain society's attention and experienced almost no resonance. *Lāčplēsis*, performed in classical opera style, did not form a metaphorical dialogue with the 1988 rock opera, which achieved phenomenal popularity, even though it would seem entirely possible in this situation. The main reason for this, which is confirmed by the critics' response to the performance of *Fire and Night* in 1987, was the weak and uninteresting stage version. "A grand style opera without grandness and style"—this was how the opera was critically regarded, and the reviews noted the pseudo traditionalism and ethnographicism in the scenography and direction (Zemzare 1989: 68). Along with that, a conclusion was formed—when taking on the vivid genre of classics representing national culture, to achieve a broader societal resonance, it is vital and important to have an entirely new artistic interpretation of all elements. There was no such novelty in the 1987 performance of *Fire and Night*. Only in 1995 was there a completely new view of this Latvian classic opera—an artistically provocative attempt to resolve the encoded questions of Latvian national identity and the symbolic image of Lāčplēsis. In other words, a time when the renewal of Latvian state independence was already to be found in a new historical situation. That is why we will return to this fact in the conclusion of the article.

Before the 1988 rock opera, we should note two more musical compositions—programmatic symphonies. Latvian composer Ādolfs Ābele<sup>7</sup> (1889–1967) composed the symphonic poem *The Grave of Lāčplēsis* (*Lāčplēša kaps*) in 1933. The composer indicates that the poem was inspired by Pumpurs's epic. Additionally, a further source of inspiration is the place where, in accordance with Pumpurs's epic and Rainis's play, the final battle between Lāčplēsis and the Dark Knight took place. This place is inhabited and bears the ancient name of Lielvārde.<sup>8</sup> Ābele's symphonic poem, being a miniature musical form, does not illustrate all the events of the epic, but sketches a situation in the musical mood or sound painting genre, with a look into the depths of the

Daugava, where, during the battle with the Dark Knight, Lāčplēsis fell in. The poem was performed multiple times in concerts in Riga in the 1930s. However, after the end of WW2, Ābele fled from his occupied homeland, and, for a long time, his music was officially forgotten. That is one of the reasons why *The Grave of Lāčplēsis* is not well known today in Latvian musical life.

During the Soviet occupation, a new symphonic image of Lāčplēsis was created by the distinguished Latvian symphonic music composer Jānis Ivanovs (1906–1983). In the 1950s, in the ideological socialist realism atmosphere of the post-war Stalinist regime, Ivanovs was still very stylistically reserved in his music, mainly basing his music on a foundation of a Classical-Romantic music language (Kudiņš 2015). In 1957 Ivanovs composed the poem *Lāčplēsis* in this musical stylistic, and in the musical expression realized a programmatic goal which reflects the poem (created in 1948) with the same title by Latvian poet Jānis Sudrabkalns (1894–1985).<sup>9</sup> The composer's biographer, musicologist Ludvigs Kārklīšs, on Ivanovs's composition within the context of the Soviet occupation commented the following:

The symphonic portrayal was inspired by the poetry of Jānis Sudrabkalns, where the character of *Lāčplēsis* gained a humanistic generalization in the light of Soviet patriotism, and the happiness and friendliness of the peoples. (Kārklīšs 1973: 159)

In Ivanovs's symphonic work the portrayals of Lāčplēsis, Spīdola, the Dark Knight, and Laimdota are expressed in symbolical musical themes, developed, and finally repeated, highlighting the approach of the victory of Lāčplēsis in accordance with the principals of the classical sonata form in composition. This symphonic poem today is a lesser known opus of Ivanovs in the background of other symphonic works (mainly his symphonies).

Altogether, we can conclude that, until the premiere of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* in 1988, the symbolic image of the hero was already deeply rooted in Latvian cultural history. In accordance with the context of varied eras (the first period of Latvian independence in the 1920s and 30s, the period of Soviet occupation and being in a totalitarian political regime in 1940 and 1941, and from 1944 until 1991), the image of Lāčplēsis has been interpreted with varied ideological accents in Latvian culture and art, but at the same time it has always been recognizable and present. That is why, in the next section of this article, I review the motivation for the creation of the rock opera's libretto and music in the 1980s.

### Characteristics of the creation and composition of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis*

The creation of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* reflects a story that illuminates many indications as to how, at the end of the 1980s, historical changes occurred in society and culture in Latvia. Today, from a retrospective viewpoint, it is important to not just restore facts and their sequence in the birth of the rock opera as a significant cultural and socio-political event in the reception of society. The testimonies of the creators of the rock opera regarding how a spotlight was shone on the symbolic *Lāčplēsis* image are also interesting.

The composer Zigmars Liepiņš (b. 1952) has actively worked as a composer in the field of popular music (Soviet Estrada art) since the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> In an interview on Latvian television thirty years after the premiere of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis*, he noted that he first had the idea to compose a rock opera based on *Lāčplēsis* in 1981 and had considered that the libretto could be written by Latvian poet Viktors Kalniņš (brother of the famous Latvian popular, rock, and academic music composer Imants Kalniņš). At that time, however, considering his difficult relationship with the Ministry of Culture (the dissatisfaction of the regime with him), he realized that this plan was not possible. However, a few years later, the situation changed:

Strangely, I should thank Gorbachev. The so-call thaw—*perestroika*, declared in 1985 by Mikhail Gorbachev—was a time when we had a bit more freedom. I decided that I must return to this idea and I should begin again my search for someone to write the libretto.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, regarding the question about why he had the idea for a rock opera based on *Lāčplēsis*, Liepiņš commented:

I decided on *Lāčplēsis* since Latvians do not have any more epic or greater theme than the Bearslayer. Any opera requires a broad theme and scope. This idea was also influenced by the world-famous rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Lloyd Webber), which I had seen. I had also seen the epic Hungarian rock opera *István, a King* (*István, a király*). That was an impressive work involving many singers. And then I found poet Māra Zālīte's telephone number and address and knocked on her door.<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting that Māra Zālīte (b. 1952), the poet and rock opera libretto's author, initially was apprehensive about the composer's idea:

My first thought was—aren't you aiming a bit too high?! And the composer answered— either that or nothing!<sup>13</sup>

In that way, to the authors the libretto and the composer of the music, *Lāčplēsis* and his story were a self-explanatory symbol in Latvian cultural mythology. Was it possible then to even discuss another cultural hero or create a new hero in art in this period of historical changes? This question, based on information available today about recent events, was not raised publicly then. It is possible that it was the successful creative collaboration between Liepiņš and Zālīte that, in the late 1980s, during the cultural, social, and political changes occurring in Latvia, allowed the symbolic image of *Lāčplēsis* to be vividly updated and actualized. As Liepiņš said in the rock opera premiere booklet in 1988 and later in interviews:

It is our seriousness, our history, and our legend. It is our tragedy, it is our hope. (Liepiņš, Zālīte, 1988)

Liepiņš turned to Zālīte with the offer to write the libretto for the rock opera in 1986, and at that time, in the early *perestroika* era, the selection of Zālīte was due to the poet already being known in Latvia for her poetry, which reflected topical socio-political issues. Zālīte herself considered the idea to use Pumpurs's epic as a foundation for the rock opera libretto to be a great challenge. Using Pumpurs's epic as a starting point, Zālīte, from one angle, preserved the main points of the *Lāčplēsis* story, but from another angle, concentrated the development of the story, removing multiple characters and subplots. For example, the rock opera does not have a scene from the pantheon of the ancient gods, which is broadly developed in the first canto of Pumpurs's epic. The symbolic character of Spīdala (at the beginning she is a servant of evil forces who later regrets this) has also been removed from the rock opera. It should be mentioned here that, along with that both Pumpurs's epic as well as the rock opera's libretto, the main difference compared to the interpretation of the story of *Lāčplēsis* in Rainis's play *Uguns un Nakts*, is that Spīdola (a variation of the name Spīdala in the Pumpurs's epic, the personal name Spīdala/Spīdola is derived from the word *spīdēt*—"shine") is a significant symbol of a person's intellectual development. Zālīte commented on this aspect in the staging process of the rock opera in an interview in 1988 following:

I do not want to explain everything. For example, I would like for people to think about why Spīdala is not there. I do not want to reveal it fully now, but I will note a few aspects: in Rainis's play, *Lāčplēsis* is a symbol of physical strength, the strength of matter [...] But to be able to deeply resolve these problems of the spiritual world, Rainis needed to create Spīdola. To separate the spiritual world from the physical, so that, based on this character, he could deeply and dialectically resolve spiritual problems. In our work, Spīdala has not been

separated from Lāčplēsis. To us, he is not just an unconscious physical strength. His listening to this nation and the strength of his ears are not just in a physical sense. That is one of the motives. Another—in the epic, Spīdala does not have the same significance as in Rainis's work. I still focus on the epic. Overall, Spīdala's absence here (in the rock opera libretto) is conceptual. (Priedīte 1988: 7)

It should be noted that the absence of the character of Spīdala/Spīdola aroused interest in Latvian society at that time. In an interview, Zālīte mentioned letters that both she and literature and cultural periodicals received from readers, expressing confusion about this decision. Immediately after the premiere of the rock opera, the poet commented:

The absence of Spīdala in this work can be considered conceptual, since, in the fight for survival, she often becomes secondary. Even now, in my opinion, there is a situation, that, in all our cultural and social work Spīdala (Spīdola!) is missed. Unfortunately. (Zālīte, Liepiņš 1988)

An almost identical opinion was expressed in critics' discussion after the premiere of rock opera:

Let's call louder for Lāčplēsis! And, along with him, Spīdala-Spīdola too, since we miss her in both life and in the staging. (Sauciet mani skaļāk! 1988)<sup>14</sup>

Using Pumpurs's epic, Zālīte created her own version of the epic in modern Latvian language, with her own literary individuality.<sup>15</sup> To preserve and stress the link to the primary source of the inspiration for the libretto, the conclusion of the libretto uses a direct quote from Pumpurs's epic (Pumpurs 1888):<sup>16</sup>

Laik' no laika laivnieki  
Braukdami pa Daugavu,  
Pusnaktī redz divus vīrus  
Stāvā krastā cīkstoties.  
Tas ir Lāčplēšs, kas še cīkstās  
Vēl ar svešo naidnieku.

Un ar reizi nāks tas brīdis,  
Kad viņš savu pretnieku  
Vienu pašu lejā grūdis,  
Noslīcinās atvarā. –  
Tad zels tautai jauni laiki,  
Tad būs viņa svabada!

From time to time boaters,  
travelling the Daugava,  
can see two men at midnight,  
fighting on the steep shore.  
It is Bearslayer that battles here,  
with an unknown enemy.

And the moment comes,  
when Bearslayer will push  
his opponent down,  
to drown him in the whirlpool. –  
Then a new era will blossom for the people,  
then will be them freedom!

Still, in contrast with the epic, after this quote from Pumpurs's epic, there is an addition to the text by Zālīte, which gives the tragic battle situation a notable balance. With this Zālīte text, which can be considered a stylization of or allusion to Latvian folk song lyrics, the rock opera begins and ends, giving it a peculiar circular composition (Zālīte 1988):

Gauži raud saulīte  
Ābeļu dārzā,  
Ābelei nokrita  
Zeltābolītis.  
Neraudi, saulīte,  
Dievs dara citu.  
No vara, no zelta,  
No sudrabiņa.

The sun cries bitterly,  
in an apple grove,  
a golden apple has fallen  
from the apple tree.  
Do not cry, the sun,  
God will make another.  
From copper, from gold,  
from shining silver.

Also interesting is Zālīte's commentary about what new accents she searched for and found in the portrayal of Lāčplēsis:

I searched for a poetic form for the message. For the message, that poetic form was already ready. Still, the most important thing was for me to understand—why is Lāčplēsis' strength in his ears? None of the interpretations up until now had explained this. Also, Rainis did not explain this in his play *Fire and Night*. And then one evening it came to me and I understood—Lāčplēsis can hear! He can hear his country with his ears! He has perfect pitch for his homeland. Kangars understood this—that, if you cut off his ears, then an unknowing, unloving, unbelieving, deaf Lāčplēsis can be defeated.<sup>17</sup>

Zālīte's position reflects the unique symbolic significance of Lāčplēsis in Latvian culture and mythology over the course of the past century and in the historical changes of the 1980s. What stylistic characteristics can be found in the music score of the rock opera? Liepiņš, for whom this was the first large-scale work in the genre of musical

theater, referred to Andrew Lloyd Webber's (b. 1948) first work in this genre (*Jesus Christ Superstar*) and other well-known rock operas of the 1970s and 80s, and offered such comment in 1988:

Rock operas are united by historic, epic, serious, and even tragic themes. Rock music, which has evolved from dance, from brief songs, has always endeavored to go beyond its boundaries. And that is what happens. Ballads, cycles, serious theatrical programs, and finally operas appear. Rock operas. (Zālīte, Liepiņš 1988)<sup>18</sup>

An interwoven development principle in separate themes is realized in the musical dramaturgy. The musical theme of the prologue, with the text previously mentioned in this article "The sun cries bitterly in an apple grove" (in a video recording sung by Mirdza Zīvere, a well-known Latvian popular music singer and Liepiņš's wife) returns in Laimdota's arioso ("Come on, Sun" — "Teci, saulīt") in Act I and then as transformed, hymnal music in the episode of the Castle of Burtņieki's resurrection (as a metaphor for the significant image of the Castle of Light in Latvian culture).<sup>19</sup> This theme also returns at the end of the rock opera, first in the culmination of the battle between Lāčplēsis and the Dark Knight, and afterward, in the epilogue, concluding the rock opera.

Another (second) leitmotif is found in Lāčplēsis's song with the words "I Hear My Fatherland" ("Es Tēvzemi dzirdu"), which is heard at the beginning and end of Act I, and then returns in the middle of Act II (a time of more rapid story development, and an increase in dramatic tension).

A third leitmotif in the rock opera score is the song "A Small Child at a Crossroads" ("Mazs bērniņš krustcelēs"), which has its own unique semantics in the libretto text, metaphorically telling the story of the Latvian people and their search for freedom with these words (Zālīte 1988):

Mazs bērniņš krustcelēs  
Kā laiks tam smiltis  
Tek caur pirkstiem.  
Tā mūsu dzīvība.  
Tā mūsu brīvība.  
Uz krustcelēm mazs bērniņš.

A small child at a crossroads,  
Time flows through his  
fingers like sand,  
that is our life,  
that is our freedom.  
The little child is at a crossroads.

In Act I, these lyrics are sung by Lāčplēsis's ally, Lielvārdis (the ruler of Lielvārde). In Act II, with an increase in tension in the story and with the approaching battle with the

Dark Knight, a choir sings these lyrics with Lielvārdis, while Lielvārdis, as a solo voice, sings symbolic lyrics about the approach of tragedy and the nation being under the influence of multiple powers (Zālīte 1988):

Latvju zeme vaļā stāv.  
Tā kā dzīsla, pušu rauta.  
Izteks asins, izteks spēks.  
Latvju zeme vaļā stāv.  
Vēji staigā iekšā, ārā.  
Izplēš sēklu, izrauj saknes.  
Latvju zeme vaļā stāv.  
Krustaceļiem pienaglotā.  
Krustavējiem caurvējotā.  
Latvju zeme vaļā stāv.

The land of Latvians stands open.  
It is like a vein, ripped open.  
Blood and strength flow out.  
The land of Latvians stands open.  
Winds walk in and out.  
They tear out seeds and roots.  
The land of Latvians stands open.  
It is open to the crossroads.  
Winds walk in the crossroads.  
The land of Latvians stands open.

At the conclusion, Lielvārdis's lyrics and melody from the finale of Act I are also sung by Lāčplēsis, supplementing them with words which are a request to never forget him and to fight for the nation's freedom (Zālīte 1988):

Sauc mani skaļāk, bērniņ, sauc!  
Es dzirdu vēl.  
Man vēl ir valoda un vārds.  
Sauc mani, bērniņ!  
Sauciet mani skaļāk!

Call me louder, children!  
I still hear.  
I still have my language and words.  
Call me, children!  
Call me louder!

In accordance with the stylistic characteristics of the genre, the opera score is dominated by the rock music stylistic, which offers both particularly rhythmic accents, a pulsating musical expression (for example, in the song "Atgriešanās" [The Return] from Act II, which is also, in its own way, a musically stylistic allusion to Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar*), as well as vocal numbers with lyrical characteristics (for example, the Lāčplēsis and Laimdota duet in Act I), as well as the psychological exacerbation and the internal conflict of the characters, and the contradictory

portrayals (for example, the scene with Kangars's betrayal in Act II).

The opera also offers a very broad display of the varied stylistic layers of rock music, using both stylizations and allusions. For example, in an Act I scene, where, during their travels, Lāčplēsis and Kangars arrive at the Castle of Aizkrauklis, they are greeted by girls (witches), who invite them inside, and then tempt and attempt to seduce them, singing and dancing with boys in a stylized rock-and-roll music accompaniment. At the beginning of Act II, when Lāčplēsis finds himself in the presence of the mythical Ziemeļmeita (the deity the Northern Maiden), her solo song has the characteristics of a rhythm and blues (R&B) style.

Still, it is not just rock music (with a distinctive vivid, often even sticky melodic line, characteristic of pop music) that is a trait of the opera *Lāčplēsis*. The episodic involvement of the choir in the rock opera's music creates, to a certain degree, the presence of a static, classical chorale texture, for example, the song "That Is Time" — "Tas ir laiks" (in the Prologue and Epilogue of the rock opera):

Tas nav ūdens, kas Daugavā plūst,  
Tas ir Laiks.  
Tā nav asins, kas dzīslās tev tek,  
Tas ir Laiks.  
Tas nav vilnis, kas apskalo mūs,  
Tas ir Laiks.  
Tas nav atvars, kas gredzenu griež,  
Tas ir Laiks.  
Tas nav ūdens, kas Daugavā plūst,  
Tas ir Laiks.

That is not the water flowing in the Daugava,  
That is Time.  
That is not the blood that flows in your veins,  
That is Time.  
That is not the wave that surrounds us,  
That is Time.  
That is not the maelstrom, that cuts the vortex,  
That is Time.  
That is not the water flowing in the Daugava,  
That is Time.

Additionally, the stylization and quoting of folk music creates an interesting supplement to the dominating rock music style. The previously characterized prologue main theme is a melodically vivid example of a Latvian folk music stylization, creating an allusion to the well-known folk song *Pūt, vējiņi* (*Blow, Winds*), with a characteristic fifth interval highlighted in the initial motif. A compilation of stylized folklore texts and folk music is also a feature of *Lāčplēsis*'s and Laimdota's wedding scene in Act II. Additionally, with *Lāčplēsis*'s arrival at Castle of Burtņieki in Act I, an authentic

folk song recording—a performance by the famous Latvian folklore ensemble Skandinieki—was used in the first staging of the rock opera.

Altogether, in the rock opera *Lāčplēsis*, composer Zigmaris Liepiņš concentrated on using the popular musical trends which in the 1970s and 1980s were characteristic in Latvia both in his and other composers' and ensembles' work. These trends culminated in the second half of the decade with the beginning of historical change, or what is known as the Third Awakening in Latvia. Social and political protest songs were characteristic of that time; they were heard with a musical expression that could be harsh, lyrical, or full of romantic pathos (Gronow, Daugavietis 2020). It is possible that because of a more dominant romantic pathos in its musical expression and its corresponding stylistic form, the performance of the rock opera in 1988 became a significant event in both cultural as well as socio-political processes.

### The socio-political resonance of the first staging of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* and its role in historical change in Latvia

The modern view in Latvia and the Baltics of the historical time of change in the second half of the 1980s—the achievement of freedom from the totalitarian Soviet occupation and the renewal of state independence—is, overall, primarily related to the most significant political events that took place during that era. That reflects a gradual achievement, in 1991, of the goal to be free of the occupation (when the three Baltic States gained their *de facto* independence). In Latvian historiography, this period is called the Third Awakening.<sup>20</sup> The many events of the Third Awakening caused fundamental changes. However, a unified and comprehensive breakdown of all the events by their corresponding significance has not yet been done. Usually, the most important events in the Third Awakening are considered the following, and this is, of course, not meant to be a comprehensive list (Dreifelds 1996; Eglitis Stukuls 2002):

- June 1, 1988—during the enlarged plenary session of the Latvian Writers' Union, the well-known publicist Mavriks Vulfsons publicly pronounced, that, in 1940, there had been no socialist revolution in Latvia, but an occupation.
- October 8, 1988—The congress of The People's Front of Latvia (Latvijas Tautas Fronte—LTF) was founded. At the time of its founding, it had already brought together more than 100,000 people. Ideas of Latvian democracy and self-determination were proposed.

- August 23, 1989—the Baltic Road event was staged. The event was organized to mark the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and created a 650-kilometer-long human chain that reached from Vilnius to Tallinn via Riga. 1.8 million people participated.
- May 4, 1990—The declaration of the independence of the Republic of Latvia, which established a transition period until the complete (factual) renewal of independence, was ratified.
- January 13–27, 1991—barricades were erected to protect important objects in Riga (as well as to protest the violence in Lithuania on the night of January 12, when Soviet military forces killed 14 and wounded 110 civilians).
- August 19–21, 1991 and later in the autumn—the *de facto* renewal of the independence of the Republic of Latvia.<sup>21</sup>

The presence of cultural processes in the disruption of the totalitarian system and the renewal of national independence is reflected broadly and in varied ways, and, if the question is raised about how music was integral to and helped influence historical change, then, of course, the main focus of research up until now has been the All Latvian Song Festival events as well as the folklore ensemble movement (Šmidchens 2013). One of the culmination points of these national cultural awakening ideas was the international festival *Baltica '88* in Riga.<sup>22</sup>

In the context of the song festival tradition, the 19<sup>th</sup> All Latvian Song Festival in Riga in 1985 is considered one of the harbingers of the Third Awakening. During the concluding concert, to protest the decision by the Soviet occupation to remove from the joint choir concluding concert program the song “Castle of Light” (“Gaisms pils,” 1899, text by Auseklis, music by Jāzeps Vītols), thousands of choir singers and audience members requested the singing of this song and it was performed. That, in 1985, was in fact one of the first spontaneous expressions of cultural and political protest in Latvian society in the context of *perestroika*. Similarly, to protest the Soviet regime’s plans to build a gigantic hydroelectric plant on the Daugava River, which raised fears of serious ecological damage, two publicists published an article in the Latvian press in 1986, which can also be considered one of the earliest stimuli for historical change in Latvia. This event was also one of the reasons why a Latvian folk song, which references the nation and the culturally significant Daugava River titled “Blow, Winds” (“Pūt, Vējiņi”) became and, until 1991, was sung as, an unofficial national anthem in the various public gatherings with a political context (Kudiņš 2019).

And how did the staging of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* in 1988 fit into this process? When attempting to reconstruct the main points of the reception of this event, of interest are Zālīte’s and Liepiņš’s memories about the preparation for the premiere of the rock opera in Riga at the end of August 1988. In 1987, it was not just a matter of completing the libretto and music—just as important was the ability to properly formulate the request and convince the occupation government to accept the performance of the rock opera:

1988 was the best time. Those days you had to submit a request (to those in power). Luckily, it was the 100th anniversary of Andrejs Pumpurs’s epic and the (occupation) power confirmed (accepted) this (as a fact).<sup>23</sup>

Liepiņš was able to come to an agreement about the staging and performance of the rock opera with the Culture Ministry and the Latvian Philharmonic (at that time, the State Concert Agency). Based on the composer’s recollections, we can conclude that, when Gorbachev’s *perestroika* allowed private entrepreneurship to be developed in the service field, the staging was realized as collaboration with the Latvian Philharmonic and Liepiņš’s own personal initiative. Zālīte has also strongly praised the composer’s abilities in the preparation process for the premiere:

That was Zigmars’s great managerial talent. We had a strategy—we could not allow any kind of political censorship from the regime that would potentially halt our work. For example, all theatre performances had an acceptance process, and that was political censorship. We succeeded in joining hands, like Paulo Coelho wrote, and we succeeded.<sup>24</sup>

In the spring of 1988, at various events such as concerts and poetry readings, the poet and composer gradually began to introduce the public to excerpts from the libretto and music of the rock opera, in that way creating an informal marketing campaign. Liepiņš also recalls that, in accordance with events of that time, he had to get the approval of the Culture Ministry through an acceptance process. During this process, the composer himself sang the solo parts accompanied by a recording of the rock opera’s music in front of the commission. That succeeded, much like the idea to organize the premiere of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* on August 23 in Riga. Liepiņš has noted that one of the most significant events at the beginning of the time of socio-political changes was in 1987, when the political organization Helsinki-86, to remind everyone of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, organized the first unsanctioned political protest in Riga at the Freedom Monument, which resonated widely. He was able to convince the Latvian Philharmonic to accept this date for the premiere of the rock opera with this explanation:

My suggestion was to organize the premiere a week prior to the 1st of September (the traditional beginning of the school year in Latvia), when students still are free. When asked what the proposed date was, I replied—August 23<sup>rd</sup>. And everyone agreed. There were no further questions.<sup>25</sup>

Tickets to the rock opera performances were sold out approximately six months ahead of time. To a certain degree, that guaranteed that the performances could not be cancelled. Additionally, before the premiere in Riga, a musical performance of the rock opera (without the stage performance) was organized outside of Riga, in the Burtnieki region. That was planned as a dress rehearsal for June 24. The premiere of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* took place on August 23, 1988, at the Sports Arena in Riga.<sup>26</sup> After the premiere, varied opinions were expressed by critics regarding the music, composition, and performance of the opera. Music and theater critics noted where ambiguity and uncertainty appeared in some solutions to showing mass gatherings of people. They also indicated the static scenography and direction, which illustrated the score (libretto and musical composition) of the rock opera, rather than offering original ideas and solutions for the stage events (*Sauciet mani skaļāk!* 1988). Additionally, there were differing opinions about the singers. The performances of the men's roles were considered more successful (*Lāčplēsis*, *Kangars*, *Lielvārdis*, and *Likcepure*, *Ditrich*), but the performance quality of the women's roles (*Laimdota*, *Ziemeļmeita*, and *Staburadze*) was considered musically (vocally) and artistically weaker (*Mazvērsīte* 1988).

According to the opinion of music and theater critics, this was a successful work of art. Still, there were many aspects that inspired discussion about the problems in the

dramaturgy and performance of the composition. Today, anyone can offer their own opinion by viewing the publicly available video recording of the 1988 performance of the rock opera. Still, disregarding certain critical comments about the varied aspects of the rock opera libretto and musical composition and the performance, the public reception at that time was dominated by an unprecedented level of interest.<sup>27</sup>

The statistics of the rock opera's popularity confirms that society considered the rock opera to be an artistic manifestation of political ideas. The video recording of the 1988 performance allows us today to see and be certain that the story about the significant character of *Lāčplēsis*, which was realized in the rock opera, was metaphorically linked in Latvian national culture to the fundamental change processes, with a particular underlining of the performers' and the public's attitudes after each performance.<sup>28</sup> Overall, the performances of the rock opera and its reception reflects a clear link to future socio-political changes in Latvia. For example, at one of the most grandiose political manifestations of that time, on October 7, 1988 (one day prior to the founding congress of The People's Front of Latvia), *Zālite* presented such a thesis in her speech:

I hope for a *Lāčplēsis* gene in our nation, but also see a *Kangars* gene. We will look for that in ourselves first.<sup>29</sup>

In an attempt to schematically compile how varied significant historical change events chronologically integrate with and are supplemented by varied musical events, a possible place for, and role of, *Lāčplēsis* can be seen in this way in the socio-political and cultural processes in the second half of the 1980s:

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July 15–25, 1985, XIX All Latvian Song Festival in Riga

The spontaneous singing of the choir song "Castle of Light" ("Gaismas pils") at the closing concert, protesting the decision by regime censors to remove this song from the joint choir concert repertoire. One of the first stimuli for the development of the idea of the Singing Revolution in Latvia

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On October 17, 1986, the periodical *Literatūra un Māksla* publishes an article by poet and publicist Dainis Īvans (later the leader of the Latvian People's Front) and Artūrs Snips entitled "Thoughts on the Fate of the Daugava River" / "Par Daugavas likteni domājot" (Īvāns, Snips 1998). A broad socio-political resonance in society follows as well as spontaneous protests (petitions and letters) against the building of the new gigantic hydroelectric power plant.

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On August 23, 1987, the informal human rights protection group Helsinki-86 organized a protest at the Freedom Monument in Riga to condemn the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The security forces of the occupying Soviet forces brutally assault and detain the participants.

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June 1, 1988—the full plenum of the Latvian Writers' Union, during which the well-known publicist Mavriks Vulfsons publicly announces that, in 1940, there was no socialist revolution in Latvia, but an occupation by the Soviet Union.

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From June 10 to 18, 1988, the international folklore festival *Baltica '88* takes place in Riga, which highlights the significance of national culture and folklore during a time of historical change.

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**On August 23, 1988, the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* premieres at the Sports Arena of Riga. Twenty performances take place by the end of September, with a similar number of performances in May 1989. Total attendance is between 160,000 and 180,000. The reaction of society allows us to conclude that the message contained in this performance (the cultural text) is considered to also reflect current socio-political events and is an inspiration for their further manifestation.**

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October 8, 1988—the founding congress of The People’s Front of Latvia (LTF). At the time of its founding, the movement unites more than 100,000 people. Ideas of democracy and Latvian self-determination are raised.

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August 23, 1989—the Baltic Road (Baltijas ceļš) event. Organized to remember the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, it forms a 650 km long human chain which reaches from Vilnius to Tallinn via Riga. 1.8 million people participate.

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May 4, 1990—the ratification of the declaration of independence of the Republic of Latvia (with the majority of the votes of The People’s Front of Latvia deputies), which specifies a transition period until the full (de facto) renewal of independence.

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June 30—July 8, 1990, The 20th All Latvian Song and 10th Dance Festival in Riga, which is a symbolic meeting of singers and dancers from both Latvia and the Latvian diaspora and has a record number of singers (20,000) in the closing joint-choir concert. The festival is dominated by an atmosphere hopeful for the renewal of independence and a national cultural manifestation of pathos.

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January 13–27, 1991—the establishment of barricades to protect strategically important objects in Riga.

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August 19–21, 1991 and autumn—the *de facto* renewal of the independence of the Republic of Latvia.

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Of course, this schematic overview is not exhaustive and does not pretend to be an attempt to characterize all of the cultural (including musical) events that formed the atmosphere during this time of change, and which, publicly, was dominated by discourses about national freedom and ideas of self-determination. Still, the uniqueness of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* is the circumstance where one specific musical stage work included a message and gained great socio-political resonance. That differentiates this rock opera from the song and dance celebrations, which due to their format, were events that formed differently. Additionally, the resonance of the rock opera was slightly different than for many popular songs written during that time, which had different possibilities for representing themselves in the Latvian cultural historical experience—for example, in the song competition *Mikrofons*, organized by Latvian Radio (Gronow, Daugavietis 2020).

## Conclusions

The culmination of the fundamental changes occurred in 1991, when Latvian state independence was renewed. Of course, as the changes continued, the 1990s clearly indicated a transition or post-totalitarian situation, where many new social institutions and traditions were formed (Dreifelds 1996). In turn, today it is interesting to analyze the changes

of the recent past as well as individual events and how they are reflected in society’s cultural memory.

The rock opera *Lāčplēsis* has regularly been actualized in Latvian society’s cultural memory, which is confirmed by new performances that took place in 1998, 2008, 2013, and 2018 in Riga as well as in 2008 as a concert performance in Burtņieki (where, in 1988, the dress rehearsal and concert performance took place) on the initiative of Zigmars Liepiņš (in 1998 there was also a DVD release of the 1988 recording). In 2013, at the Riga Congress Centre (Rīgas Kongresu Nams), there was a new staging of the rock opera (with many singers of the younger generation), but there were diverging critical opinions of this performance. In turn, for the 100th anniversary of the Latvian state, in 2018 there was again a new staging of the rock opera at the Riga Arena.

Altogether, over the course of the new staging of the rock opera, there was a gradual crystallization in the discourse that culminated in 2018. The title of a Latvian Radio broadcast and publication in 2017, a year prior to the most recent staging, clearly expresses a thesis that has had various formulations over the last 30 years: “The Rock Opera *Lāčplēsis* (1988)—a Cultural Manifestation and a Socio-Political Statement.”<sup>30</sup> This allows the understanding of a reference to the formulation of the rock opera, which was expressed in 1988 by musicologist Inese Lūsiņa in a critics’ discussion after the historical world premiere:

The rock opera cannot simply be evaluated as a work of art. It must also be evaluated—and mainly in the current situation—as a social phenomenon. We must understand that *Lāčplēsis* is not just an artistic fact, but a fact of the nation's public life and an awakening of collective feelings. It is a real stimulus for a renaissance in spirituality, thought, and evaluation abilities. (Sauciet mani skaļāk! 1988)

The relation of this thesis with the performances of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* and public mentions of it stimulate a view of it from the angle of cultural memory. For instance, the well-known researchers Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann have defined cultural memory as being marked by a distancing from the everyday. Memories of events in the past (including works of art and their reception) are maintained in texts and their purposeful distribution, ritual activities, and the maintenance and actualization of memorials. Additionally, the actualization of historical facts and communication about them are performed in varied ritual activities (for example, concerts for major anniversaries, special events, etc.) (Assmann 1995: 129–132).

The rock opera *Lāčplēsis*, after its first staging in 1988, was periodically performed again in the following three decades, and this has confirmed its conformance to the noted six traits in societal cultural memory. Additionally, discourse or public discussions in social media and print or online media and the theses regarding the rock opera with regards to the time of change in Latvia approximately thirty years ago has strengthened the belief that it is both a work of art as well as a testimony to historical events. Still, there is also the vital question about to what degree today does the dominating discourse reflect all the cultural-contextual aspects that characterize this testimony. Here we should mention the term *mnemohistory*.<sup>31</sup>

It is interesting that, today, when reflecting on the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* and its first staging in 1988, in public discussion (which, to a certain degree, has a certain orientation towards representation of mnemohistory), certain questions are still in the shadows, questions that indicate other aspects that characterize the cultural context—in what kind of recent past these works of art appeared. One of these aspects relates to the expressed retrospective view in the atmosphere of cultural and socio-political change at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. That is directly noted in musicologist Daiga Mazvērsīte's review after the rock opera premiere:

Now we have great pride and satisfaction about the work we've done. A great and significant work. Analyzing, discussing and defending the essence of the evaluation remains unchanged. That is, it is not just a rock opera. It is a view over one's shoulder of the travelled road both in music and in all history. At the same time—it is freezing this present moment in time. Also,

at the same time—a realization that fate is relentless. That is amazing. (Mazvērsīte 1988)

The phrase “It is a view over one's shoulder of the travelled road both in music and in all history” signals that the realization of the image of *Lāčplēsis* in a new textual-musical composition could have been, at that time, one of the echoes of the overall atmosphere of a romanticized view of the idealized past of Latvia and its people in which historical changes took place. It could be said that the image of *Lāčplēsis* in the 1988 rock opera was mnemo-contextualized—its meaning in cultural history gained a new symbolic link to the change process, and at the same time, it accented an expressed retrospective view of the image.<sup>32</sup> Attributing this moment to the entire era of the Third Awakening was an idea also postulated by academician Jānis Stradiņš (1933–2019), an intellectual authority in Latvia at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century:

Today [*the beginning of the 1990s—JK*] we live in an era of national romanticism. It is like we have returned to the era of the “new Latvians” like Auseklis, Pumpurs [*the second half of the nineteenth century—JK*]. We idealize the six happy years of Ulmanis [*1934–1940, six years before the Soviet occupation, when Latvia was ruled by the authoritarian political regime of Kārlis Ulmanis—JK*] [...]. That is also understandable, since the main goal of the era—*Förderung des Tages*—is centered on regaining independence, accenting national values. [...] But in terms of culture, there is also the nation's internal self-criticism. Its goal is to not only highlight its mission, to convince one's own people and outsiders about it, but also to sense dangers, to warn about those (Stradiņš 1992: 99).

It can be concluded that, a little more than thirty years ago, the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* and the message of the libretto and music organically integrated into the atmosphere of national romanticism of that time in Latvia. That is why it is naturally characteristic that the actualization of the symbolic image of *Lāčplēsis* expressed the almost literal return of the story of the past. Basically, Māra Zālīte's libretto repeated the story of the Andrejs Pumpurs epic, where at the conclusion, the hero battled with the Dark Knight and both fell into the Daugava River. The people (nation) can only wait (without an answer as to how long) for the hero to return. There was no new story of *Lāčplēsis* being the winner of the battle. On this topic, the cultural sociologist Sergejs Kruks expressed the sensitively resonating and polemic opinion, that as a result of the placing of the mythical hero *Lāčplēsis* in the foreground of the Pumpurs epic, in the end, the nation becomes passive, without the possibility or desire to demonstrate a collective action or take risks in difficult situations. In Kruks's view, this narrative represents

a metaphor for trauma that could not be overcome, which can also be attributed to the message in the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* in 1988:

Ernest Gellner claims that “nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness,” but the invention of “nations where they do not exist”. The ideology of nationalism has not succeeded in inventing solidarity and social cohesion. Though often considered as a natural phenomenon, in reality nationalism must always be created from scratch. In the Latvian case, Pumpurs and subsequent literary historians have ignored the social dimension of *Lāčplēsis*. Epic as a genre has been understood only as an artifact, as a compulsory attribute of a community and as that which makes it distinctive from other communities. In the 1880s as in the 1980s the discourse of ethnonationalism required compiling a checklist of cultural things, but it failed to realize the full implications of the cultural process of creating social meaning. Culture embodies a potential pattern of meanings inherited from the past, immediate or distant. As Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood contend in *The World of Goods*, culture is a canopy for the interpretative needs of the present. *Lāčplēsis* steers its readers toward understanding the present through the prism of failure, passivity, and self-victimization. [...]

Whenever Latvians read *Lāčplēsis* or see it performed or otherwise indexed, they are reminded that the hero perished without hope of fulfilling his duty. They are asked to wait for his return instead of concerning themselves with figuring out ways to assume responsibility and undertake redressive action themselves. Perhaps *Lāčplēsis* once provided relief for a nation subjugated to foreign power. Perhaps by inviting readers to accept the lack of freedom, the epic secured authoritarian political ideologies with a passe-partout cultural frame that downplayed civic activity. Today civic society requires a cultural frame that supports the imagination of an active, confident community. (Kruks 2004: 26, 28)

In contrast, Zālīte gave one comment about why, at the end of the 1980s, the actualization of the mythological story of *Lāčplēsis* did not consider the different accents of battle, growth, and finale:

I was asked—why cannot *Lāčplēsis* be victorious this one time? Of course, we could show that. But then, with that, everything would end—then it would no longer be necessary to anyone. The power of the epic is that it is (and remains) open.<sup>33</sup>

Examining the varied cultural contextual aspects of the story of *Lāčplēsis* and their interpretation possibilities confirms that, from the premiere of the rock opera in Latvia in 1988 until today, in society’s cultural memory there is the potential for varied views. The rock opera also provokes such questions. Was it a unique case in Latvia that there was a dominating atmosphere of the idealization of the past and a romanticized view of it at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s? Or is it a characteristic situation

in periods of fundamental change elsewhere in the world? These questions remain open for further research, where the experience of periods of change in the cultural processes of varied nations can be compared.

A different question is about if the retrospective, mnemo-contextualized view of the symbolic image of *Lāčplēsis* at the end of the 1980s in Latvia significantly influenced the romanticized expression of the music of the rock opera. Was it possible that an image of fundamentally “new cultural hero” could have emerged in the atmosphere of the Singing Revolution? In that case, would there have been the stimuli to create a different, perhaps in terms of stylistic innovations, more radical rock opera music? Of course, those are rhetorical questions. Still, raising questions like these places more attention on the rock opera *Lāčplēsis*, which in the context of a specific cultural and socio-political process, became one of the most significant musical testimonies of a time of change in Latvia.

It is interesting that, in the opera genre, after the demonstration of romantic pathos that permeated the 1988 rock opera, the symbolic image of *Lāčplēsis* soon returned to the stage of the Latvian National Opera Theatre in the fifth staging of the Mediņš classical-style opera *Fire and Night* in 1995. The Mediņš opera, composed in a late Romanticist musical style, was staged in a different historical atmosphere—Latvian state independence had been reinstated and a democratic political regime had been once again established. At the same time, in this new situation in Latvia, society had already experienced the initial disappointment characterized by learning how to regularly express wishes for the development of the nation in elections as well as due to the consequences of the first economic crisis. The interpretation of the symbolic portrayal of *Lāčplēsis* in Rainis’s play in Mediņš’s opera gained a new cultural contextual resonance because it was the first representation of postmodern theater direction on the stage of the National Opera in thirty years.

*Fire and Night* was the first opera production by the internationally well-known theater and opera director Alvis Hermanis (b. 1965). Hermanis himself has expressed self-criticism about his first production in the opera genre:

Every specific piece of music has its own blood type and mentality which is determined by the spirit of the music. The visualization should not contradict the spirit of the music. It often happens that a director finds a very attractive and interesting approach to tell the story, to make it interesting, but often it is in clear contradiction with the spirit of the music. My suspicion is that, at the time, in the case of *Fire and Night*, I was not yet able to manage one or the other. I approached this only as I would to stage a theater performance, but the musical dimension was lost on me. The result might not have been bad, but that happened unconsciously. (Lūsiņa 2014)

Still, on the other hand, the director also stressed that, at that time, it was important to highlight new and innovative views of the well-known Latvian myth in Latvian cultural history:

*Fire and Night* can and should be staged in a modern way, updating both the content of the original and the questions regarding national identity. (Čeže [1] 2008)

Thanks to its direction, the story of Lāčplēsis in the opera *Fire and Night* reflected the idea that, through the encoded questions of national identity in Rainis's play and the libretto, it is possible to artistically interpret these analytically, also illuminating them with a bit of postmodern irony. In the video recording of the opera *Fire and Night* from 1995, we can see that in the visual aspect (scenography, costumes, the makeup of the main characters), there are varied references, allusions, and paraphrasing regarding the legendary staging of Rainis's play in the first half of the twentieth century. It is interesting that Spīdola's stylized costume, of a dark red, and the snow-white color of Lāčplēsis's and Laimdota's costumes are a reference to the arrangement of colors in the Latvian flag: red-white-red. There are other perceptible plays on other well-known symbols of Latvian ethnography in certain other stage solutions.

Discovering the need for a powerful, mythical strength to not only defeat enemies, but also to strive for growth in personality and intellect, Hermanis created a very provocative finale for the opera. The five main characters—Lāčplēsis, Laimdota (Lāčplēsis's wife), Spīdola (a symbol of intellectual growth and change, initially supports the dark powers, later becomes a supporter of Lāčplēsis), Kangars (eternal symbol of the betrayal gene), and the Dark Knight—deals with their interpersonal relationships and Lāčplēsis goes to battle with the Dark Knight. The choir, symbolizing the nation of Latvia, tears to pieces a large map of Latvia and remains in a passive waiting position, falling to their knees. With Spīdola's symbolic phrase "The battle is not over and will never be over! Spīdola will help you, Lāčplēsis!" (*Vēl cīņa nav galā un nebeigsies! Tev, Lāčplēsi, Spīdola palīgā ies!*), the opera concludes, and a message is displayed on the stage (a quote from the text of Rainis's play)— "Change [*the world*] and change upward yourself!" (*Maini un mainies pats uz augšu!*).<sup>34</sup>

Still, in contrast with the rock opera by Māra Zālīte and Zigmars Liepiņš, Jānis Medīņš's opera, specifically in the musical expression in conclusion, offers not a quiet resignation, but dynamic growth in C major. Together with Alvis Hermanis's innovative direction the expressiveness of music in the conclusion of the opera *Fire and Night* emphasizes the artistic (metaphorical) *view towards the future* (forming a

slight similarity with the orchestral postludium of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*). Thus, the symbolic image of Lāčplēsis is still open to many new artistic and research interpretations. In its turn, the version of the story about Lāčplēsis, implemented in the rock opera genre in 1988, still retains its lasting significance in the Latvian cultural memory.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lāčplēsis, the hero of Pumpurs's epic, is a powerful man of mystical origin, who is blessed with unbelievable strength. Referencing Latvian, as well as other cultures' myths, Lāčplēsis is found nursing on a mother bear's milk by the mythological Latvian king Lielvārdis, who raised Lāčplēsis as his own son. The vague origins of the main character of Lāčplēsis explain his fantastic strength and physical power, which are hidden in his bear's ears. Thanks to his strength, he is able to slay a bear. Altogether, the story of the epic reflects both folklore (myth and fable) motifs and references the beginning of the Christianization of the Baltic territories in the thirteenth century.

Over the course of the six parts (cantos), the epic tells how ancient gods selected Lāčplēsis to defend the Baltics and the Latvian people and how he, along with his defenders, battles enemies within his own people as well as invaders led by the monk Ditrich and the Dark Knight (indicating the entrance of German soldiers and the Christian Church into the Baltic territories in the thirteenth century). Lāčplēsis achieves many victories and frees Laimdota from evil forces, and she becomes his wife. However, the traitor Kangars reveals the source of Lāčplēsis's strength (his ears) to Ditrich. The Dark Knight (in Latvian *Tumsāis bruņinieks*) discovers this and challenges Lāčplēsis to a duel. During the battle, the Dark Knight cuts off one of Lāčplēsis's ears. Lāčplēsis strikes back and, as the battle continues, both fall into the Daugava River (the largest river in Latvia, which is broadly reflected in Latvian folklore and national mythology). In this way, there is no clear ending to the epic. Lāčplēsis's battle with evil remains unresolved and encourages us to wait for victory in the future, when "the time will come, and Lāčplēsis will drown all the evil in the river" (Pumpurs 1888).

Since its first publication in 1888, the *Lāčplēsis* epic has been published more than ten times, and retellings for children of the epic story have also been published. The epic has been translated and published in Russian (the first time in 1945), Lithuanian (1959), Estonian (1973), Finnish, English and German (1988), Danish (1991), Polish (2003), Armenian (2013), and Spanish (2017). The retelling of the epic has also been published in Japanese (1954) and, together with excerpts from the text, in 1987 was published in Czech (Kalnačs 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Rainis was not only a distinguished Latvian poet and author at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also an active politician (he was a sympathizer of the left or social democratic movement). Up until the foundation of the Latvian independent state in 1918, many of his literary works (including plays) manifest ideas of the right to Latvian political self-determination and Latvia's right to found its own independent state (Mawhood 2020).

<sup>3</sup> The character of Spīdola abandons serving the dark powers and becomes Lāčplēsis's ally and vividly symbolizes change,

- eternal creativity, and the search for new ideas. Rainis's play, much like Pumpurs's epic, also concludes without a clear resolution—Lāčplēsis and the Dark Knight battle and fall into the Daugava. Spīdola utters the final phrase: "The battle is not over and will never be over! Spīdola will help you, Lāčplēsis!" [*Vēl cīņa nav gala un nebeigsies! Tec, Lāčplēsi, Spīdola palīgā ies!*] (Rainis, 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> In the Latvian capital of Rīga and other towns, some streets bear Lāčplēsis's name. It is interesting that, in 1930, the silent movie *Lāčplēsis* was filmed in Latvia (director Aleksandrs Rusteikis). The events take place in a mythical past and during the 1905 revolution as well as both in WWI and during the battles in defense of independent Latvia in 1919. In parallel, the love story between Lāčplēsis and Laimdota is developed. The movie *Lāčplēsis* is an interesting example of the fact that, since the founding of the Republic of Latvia in 1918, the character of Lāčplēsis has gained an even more visible meaning in Latvian cultural history.
- <sup>5</sup> In visual art, Lāčplēsis's image has long been reflected in paintings, drawings, stained glass, and other art, including comics. One of the most significant visual depictions of Lāčplēsis can be seen today on the Freedom Monument (*Brīvības piemineklis*) in the centre of Rīga. Sculptor Kārlis Zāle (1888–1942), who sculpted the Freedom Monument which was presented in 1935, includes references to varied Latvian motifs and images of Latvian folklore, mythology, and historical events. Among them, *Lāčplēsis* is also chiseled into the composition of the monument. The image of Lāčplēsis (1922, reconstructed in 2007) created by sculptor Rihards Maurs (1888–1966) in stone is also on the facade of the Latvian parliament (*Saeima*) historical building.
- <sup>6</sup> Besides the opera *Fire and Night* is the opera *Baņuta*, created by poet and architect Artūrs Krūmiņš (1879–1969) and composer Alfrēds Kalniņš (1879–1951). The historical world premiere of *Baņuta* took place in 1920, one year earlier than the premiere of the opera *Fire and Night*. Both Kalniņš's as well as Mediņš's operas were composed at approximately the same time and, today, both operas share the title of first national opera in Latvian music history (Kudiņš 2014: 14, 15).
- <sup>7</sup> Representing the "contemplative romantic" trend with "a turn to a music stylistic characteristic of impressionism," Ābele is notable in Latvian music history in varied genres with his refined lyrical musical expression.
- <sup>8</sup> In accordance with Pumpurs's epic and Rainis's drama, it was there where, prior to his final battle with the Dark Knight, Lāčplēsis had planned to live with Laimdota, and today we can find a massive and interesting stone form with the title *Lāčplēša gulta* (Lāčplēsis's Bed). Until 1938, Lāčplēsis's Bed was located slightly further away, but, after the building of a hydroelectric plant, the rock was brought to Lielvārde, and, in 1976, became an exhibit at the Andrejs Pumpurs Museum.
- <sup>9</sup> J. Ivanovs. Simfonija Nr. 17. Simfoniskā poēma *Lāčplēsis*. Latvijas PSR Valsts radio un televīzijas [Filharmonijas] simfoniskais orķestris [Latvian SSR Radio and Television [Philharmonic] Symphonic Orchestra]. Dirģents Vasilij Sinaiskis [Conductor Vasily Sinaisky]. *Melodija*. Rīgas skaņuplašu rūpnīca [Vinyl LP record factory of Riga], 1980. Mx/Ctr No. C10132634.
- <sup>10</sup> More detailed information on Zigmars Liepiņš can be found online at the webpage <https://www.lmic.lv/en/composers/zigmars-liepins-383#!/> [viewed on 20 09 2020].
- <sup>11</sup> Latvian Television program *National Treasures* (*Nacionālie dārgumi*), November 11, 2018, <https://ltv.lsm.lv/lv/raksts/11.11.2018-nacionalie-dargumi.100-g-kulturas-rokopera-lacplesis.id143808/> [viewed on 23 09 2020].
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> A different interpretation of the character of the traitor Kangars, as compared to Pumpurs and Rainis, can be found in the rock opera libretto. If in the epic Kangars is more a rival for Lāčplēsis, then in the rock opera libretto, the two are friends, and the theme of the curse of betrayal is developed on that basis. Initially, Lāčplēsis and Kangars are best friends and work together. Still, Kangars turns out to be more easily manipulated and gives in to temptation for power and riches, which is why he agrees to betray Lāčplēsis, revealing the secret of Lāčplēsis's magic strength—his ears—to Ditrich, Likcepure (Skew Helmet), and the Dark Knight. It is interesting that Kangars, as an always threatening symbol of betrayal, is seen behind Lāčplēsis (having jumped on his back, both adorned in vivid white) on the placard for the premiere in 1988, as a visual metaphor for the main hero's possible alter ego.
- <sup>15</sup> The rock opera libretto has two acts, and the main lines of the story develop in the following way:
- ACT I: Lāčplēsis, along with his childhood friend Kangars, say goodbye to Lielvārdis and Lielvārde and travel to Burtnieki. At the same time, Ditrich arrives with his forces. On the way to Burtnieki, Lāčplēsis and Kangars spend the night in Aizkrauklis Castle. Lāčplēsis is enchanted, but Kangars is taken hostage by Likcepure (Skew Helmet) and his demons. Lāčplēsis is thrown into the whirlpool. He is rescued by the ancient god Staburadze. Arrival at Koknese. The heroes arrive at the Castle of Burtnieki. Lāčplēsis and Laimdota fall in love. Kangars also desires Laimdota. Lāčplēsis raises the sunken Burtnieki Castle. Kangars kidnaps Laimdota.
- ACT II: Lāčplēsis in Rīga. He travels to meet Ziemeļmeita (also known as the deity "the Northern Maiden"). Ziemeļmeita awakens his desire to return, but the demons do not allow this. Battle with the demons. Lāčplēsis awakens the people who were turned to stone. Lāčplēsis returns to his homeland. Likcepure (Skew Helmet) searches for the traitor Kangars. The meeting and wedding of Lāčplēsis and Laimdota. Lāčplēsis and his allies Lielvārdis and Koknesis begin the decisive battle with the invaders. Kangars betrays Lāčplēsis, telling Likcepure (Skew Helmet) about the strength found in Lāčplēsis' ears. The battle with the Dark Knight (in the rock opera libretto, the Dark Knight has a silent, wordless role).
- <sup>16</sup> A video record of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* (staging of 1988) is available via YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUnXeJip62Y> [viewed on 25 09 2020].
- <sup>17</sup> Latvian Television program *National Treasures*...
- <sup>18</sup> Reflecting the main genre and stylistic characteristic elements of rock music, the foundation of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis*'s score is solo guitar, electric bass guitar, percussion, and keyboards, which, with characteristic rhythm figures, are interwoven with the vocal parts and choir. The opera is formed based on the principal of musical numbers (separate scenes), which are episodically supplemented by narration or linked by brief instrumental interludes. The composition of the score available today is made up of 31 musical numbers—soloist songs, ensembles, and choir either separate or together with soloist or soloists. Rock opera *Lāčplēsis* piano sheet music is available in print at the Latvian National Library, cat. no. N93-3/217; online at the composer's site: <http://www.zigmarsliepins.lv/rokopera-l257269pl275sis.html> [viewed on 23 09 2020].

<sup>19</sup> Please see and listen to opera excerpts mentioned here and below in the text, on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUnXeJip62Y> [viewed on 25 09 2020].

<sup>20</sup> This is a symbolic reference to and continuation of the First Awakening, the name given to the national movement in Latvia from 1850 to 1880, when Latvia was still a part of the Czarist Russian Empire, as well as the Second Awakening, which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, resulted in the founding of the Republic of Latvia in 1918 and then the development of the nation up until 1940 (Blūzma 2008).

<sup>21</sup> The listed historical events were characterized by grandiose national manifestations with the participation of hundreds of thousands. There were also counter-reactions from the Communist Party and its supporters, who created their own political movement The Workers' International Front (Darbaļaužu Internacionālā Fronte—Interfronte) and established their own parallel activities (meetings, popularization of their ideas in the press).

<sup>22</sup> Of course, the song festivals in all three Baltic nations were one musical and, more broadly, cultural manifestation, which in the second half of the 1980s gained a particularly symbolic meaning and resonated in the time of change and gave the famous description to the revolution: “people were laughing and smiling, unanimous, with no malice, no hate (...)” (Valk 1988: 3; Brüggemann 2015: 221).

<sup>23</sup> Liepiņš's memories, Latvian Television program *National Treasures...*

<sup>24</sup> Zālīte's memories, *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Zālīte's memories, *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> The stage performance included three well-known and popular Latvian rock groups—Opus, Remix, Jumprava—and many of the musicians of those groups also had stage roles. The performance included the folk dance ensemble Vektors and the youth choir Daugaviņa and included recordings by the folklore ensembles Skandinieki and Ilģi. The performance also involved scenographers, costume and metal artists, choreographers, light artists, and sound directors. The director of the performance was Valdis Lūriņš (1951), and the conductor (playing the electric keyboards) was Zigmaris Liepiņš (Liepiņš, Zālīte 1988).

The main hero or lead role (Lāčplēsis) was played by singer Rodrigo Fomins (b. 1962), a rising star in the 1980s on the Latvian popular music scene. His involvement in the rock opera was one of the preconditions of his success—he was a young, charismatic pop music singer who had already achieved public recognition and singing the role of Lāčplēsis, which was important considering the symbolic significance of this character in Latvian culture. Additionally, one can clearly see in video recordings of the 1988 performance that the visual image (a vividly white costume) of Lāčplēsis (Igo) references the lead roles of Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* and the popular Soviet Russian composer Alexey Ribnikov's (b. 1945) rock opera *Juno and Avos* (1981).

It is interesting that, together with many other popular music singers of that time (Maija Lūsēna as Laimdota, Imants Vanzovičs as Kangars, Žaneta Ondzule as Ziemeļmeita [the Northern Maiden], Aivars Brīze as Koknesis, Niks Matvejevs as Ditrich, Zigfrīds Muktupāvels as Likepure, and Daiga Blaua as Staburadze) participating in the rock opera *Lāčplēsis*, there was also the famous Latvian opera tenor Jānis Sprūģis in one of the roles (the ruler Lielvārdis—Lāčplēsis's main supporter and ally). The fascinating timbre of his voice and bel

canto performance style was a particularly successful aspect of the 1988 performance. To a certain degree, the participation of an opera singer resulted in an echo of “crossover” trends in the rock opera performance and, in this way, highlighted the meeting of popular and classical opera music and the synthesis of their elements.

<sup>27</sup> Much information can be found online about the phenomenal popularity of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* in 1988, 1989, and 1990. Still, over the course of the following thirty years, a few varied inaccuracies have appeared in the outline of the facts. For example, in Latvian social media, there is a statement that the rock opera was performed 45 times in 1988. However, on Māra Zālīte's website (in Latvian), there is contradictory information—it first mentions 43 and then 45 (!) performances. At the same time, in these and other sources, there are contradictory notes about how many people attended the rock opera's performances in the Sports Arena in Rīga—some sources say 160,000 attendees and others 180,000.

The contradictions and inaccuracies regarding the number of performances and attendees has resulted due to the fact that the production was a partly private business project (with Zigmaris Liepiņš as the manager) and complete and accurate data and testimonies about all the performances have not been preserved. Additionally, as can be confirmed by the available information in the press, the performances of the rock opera took place in two periods of time—the first time from August 23 until the end of September in 1988, and the second in May, 1989. In an interview from the autumn of 1988, Liepiņš noted that in the first period there were 20 performances (Pujēna 1988). Additionally, based on published advertisements in the press, in the spring of 1989 there were an additional 20 performances, which confirms that the total number of performances may have been from 40 to 45 (according to the advertising in a newspaper *Padomju Jaunatne*, 1-4-1989).

In turn, when considering that, for example, at the beginning of the 1990s, the population of Latvia was 2.6 million and, in this numerical parameter, Latvia can be considered a “small nation”—in this context, the number of rock opera performances and number of attendees (from 160,000 to 180,000 over eight months) can be considered significant when evaluating its popularity. In addition, when, at the beginning of 1990, many thousands of copies of the Melodyia company's rock opera LP recording were released in Rīga and immediately sold out, this also confirms the rock opera's great popularity at that time. See more: *Lāčplēsis*. Rokopera. Z. Liepiņš, M. Zālīte (3 x Vinyl, LP). *Melodija*. Rīgas skaņuplašu rūpnīca [Vinyl LP record factory of Riga], 1990. Mx/Ctr No. C6029341009, C6029343009, C6029345009. It is possible to listen to the vinyl disc recording of the 1988 staging of the rock opera *Lāčplēsis* via YouTube.]

<sup>28</sup> In the video recording, we can see that after the show, all performers highlighted the placing of flowers based on the contours of the map of Latvia, which was an element of the performance's scenography, and often the arrangement of the colors of the flowers and costumes formed reference to the Latvian flag (red-white-red). Additionally, at the very end, the performers, together with the public, spontaneously began to sing the Latvian folk song “Pūt, vējiņi” (“Blow, Wind,”). The song's symbolic meaning in the historical change processes in the second half of the 1980s has already been mentioned.

<sup>29</sup> “Mežaparka Lielā estrāde”, 1988. gada 7. oktobris [“The Grand Stage of Mežaparks”, October 7, 1988], in: *Padomju Jaunatne*, No. 193, 1988.

<sup>30</sup> 2017 Latvian Radio broadcast available at <https://klasika.lsm.lv/lv/raksts/100-latvijas-pirmizrades/rokopera-lacple-sis-1988--kulturas-manifestacija-un-sociali-polit.a95954/> [viewed on 27 09 2020].

<sup>31</sup> Mnemohistory is not related to the past in a direct way, but with a past that is developed in the process of remembering. From this angle, as noted by Jan Assmann, a society's or its sub-section's modern beliefs are formed as a persecution of the past, while the past is modelled in the present—it is imagined and is made to correspond with today's beliefs. In this way, mnemohistory illuminates and analyzes the presently given meaning to the past and does not avoid the inclusion of mythical elements in the context of the analysis of specific traditions. Additionally, the goal of historical positivism (an objectively distanced approach to the outline and explanation of facts of the past) is to create a clear division between historical and mythical elements in the memory of society (Jan Assmann 1997: 8–10).

A. Assmann, working with the terms *inhabited* and *uninhabited* memory, indicates that an inhabited cultural memory is directly linked with its carrier: that can be a certain group in society, institutional structure, or a specific individual. That attempts to create a link or bridge between the past, present, and future. It is expressed selectively, with the assistance of remembering and forgetting to highlight certain values, which potentially can facilitate the formation of a specific identity (also identifications) as well as the associated norms (views) as a representation of mnemohistory (Aleida Assmann 2011: 122–123).

To be able to offer a broader illumination of a past fact or event aspect, one option is to use the approach of the twentieth-century sociologist and systems theoretician Niklas Luhmann. In a particular society or sub-group, objective analysis of leading narratives including self-references (to a certain topical, significant fact, event, or personality and identifying with it) requires a researcher to be a *second level observer*. This is a researcher who does not have a system's required *blindness* and disposition to the simple repetition of the leading self-reference message and who intentionally realizes the concept of distance, and will separate the analyzable information from a defined social system (Luhmann 1999: 439–440).

<sup>32</sup> The term *mnemo-contextualization* is borrowed from Laura Ardava's doctoral dissertation *Media Discourse on the Social Memory and Commemoration of the Third Latvian National Awakening (1988–2014)*. According to Ardava:

The Awakening discourse in the media is also characterized by layering of current social, political, and economic situation on the perception of the past or *mnemocontextualisation*, the narrative of ‘paradise lost’ and minor emphasis on rational and institutional benefits of the independence period. (Ardava 2015: 4)

The actualization of Lāčplēsis' symbolic image in the rock opera also reflected a strong experience of the past, metaphorically applying it to the processes of the present.

<sup>33</sup> Māra Zālīte's and Zigmaris Liepiņš's memories, Latvian Television program *National Treasures...*

<sup>34</sup> Please see and listen to Jānis Medīņš's opera *Fire and Night* video record (staging of 1995) online: <https://replay.lsm.lv/lv/ieraksts/ltv/144592/uguns-un-nakts-1996gads> [viewed on 27 09 2020].

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### Santrauka

Prisimenant istorinių pokyčių, prasidėjusių Baltijos šalyse 1990-aisiais (laikytiniais simboliniu nepriklausomybės ir demokratijos atgavimo laikotarpiu), į klausimą, kaip muzika (muzikinė kultūra) dalyvavo, formavo ir atspindėjo šį procesą, gali būti atsakoma žvelgiant iš įvairių perspektyvų. Jos apima tiek muzikinio gyvenimo tendencijas ir pokyčius, jiems įtaką dariusius įvykius, tiek senų struktūrų išnykimą ar transformaciją bei atgimimą. Tai įvairių žanrų muzikos kūrimo procesai ir šių procesų recepcija muzikos kritikoje ir kituose šaltiniuose. Esama taip pat muzikos kūrinių, kurie socialinių ir politinių pokyčių procese įgijo simbolinę prasmę, tapo reikšmingais jų sukūrimo laiko liudininkais, o vėliau įgijo ypatingą prasmę visuomenės kultūrinėje atmintyje.

Straipsnio tema – roko opera „Lāčplēsis“ („Lokiažudys“), kuri devintojo dešimtmečio pabaigoje Latvijoje įgavo reikšmingą ne tik meninį, bet ir politinį rezonansą, vis dar saugomą kultūrinėje visuomenės atmintyje. Pažymėtina, kad Lāčplēsis yra latvių nacionalinės kultūros herojus, puikiai žinomas iš įvairių literatūros tekstų ir kitų meno kūrinių. Tačiau klausimas, kodėl devintajame dešimtmetyje, istorinių pokyčių laikais, kaip tik Lāčplēsis įvaizdis buvo realizuotas roko operoje, šiandien laikomas istoriškai reikšmingu ir vis dar nėra iki galo iširtas. Taip gali būti dėl to, kad dauguma objektyvių (konteksto požiūriu platesnių ir bendresnių) nuomonių apie šios roko operos pastarųjų dešimtmečių simbolinę prasmę atsirado visai neseniai. Štai kodėl straipsnyje, nagrinėjant Latvijos istorinius pokyčius iki 1990-ųjų ir po jų, roko opera „Lāčplēsis“ apibūdinama įvairiais vietiniais kultūriniais-istoriniais patirties aspektais.

Latvių poeto Andrejo Pumpuro (1841–1902) epas „Lāčplēsis“ pirmą kartą išleistas Rygoje 1888 metais. XIX a. antrojoje pusėje romantinio nacionalizmo kontekste tautiniai epai ir juose reprezentuota mitologija tapo būdingu daugelio Europos tautų savimonės įtvirtinimu. Lāčplēsis, Pumpuro epo herojus, yra galingas mistinės kilmės žmogus, pasižymintis neįtikėtina jėga. Latviškajame mite, kaip ir analogiškuose kitų kultūrų mituose, Lāčplēšis, mintantį

motinos-lokės pienu, randa mitinis Latvijas karalius Lielvārdis, kuris imasi auginti Lačplēsi kaip savo sūnų. Neaiški pagrindinio „Lačplēsis“ herojaus veikėjo kilmė paaiškina jo fantastišką jėgą ir fizinę galią, slypinčias lokiškose ausyse. Dėl tos jėgos jis gali nugalėti (nužudyti) lokį. Eposo tema atspindi tautosakos (mito bei pasakėčios) motyvus, ji taip pat sietina su istorine Baltijos teritorijų atvertimo į krikščionybę pradžios XIII a. tema.

Pumpuro „Lačplēsis“ vadinamas pirmuoju didžiu Latvijos nacionaliniu epu ir, atsižvelgiant į įvairių epochų kontekstus (pirmasis Latvijos nepriklausomybės laikotarpis 1920–1930 m., sovietų okupacijos laikotarpis ir totalitarinis politinis režimas 1940 m. ir 1941 m. bei nuo 1944 m. iki 1991 m.), iki pat devintojo dešimtmečio Lačplėsio įvaizdis

Latvijos kultūroje ir mene interpretuotas su įvairiais ideologiniais akcentais; tuo pačiu metu jis buvo visada gyvas ir atpažįstamas.

Straipsnyje analizuojami roko operos libreto (garsi latvių poetė Māra Zālīte) ir muzikos (latvių kompozitorius Zigmars Liepiņš) kūrimo motyvai devintojo dešimtmečio pabaigoje. Apžvelgiama roko operos „Lačplēsis“ kūrimo istorija, teksto ir muzikos stilistiniai ypatumai, socialinis-politinis rezonansas ir vieta istorinių pokyčių procese, taip pat recepcija visuomenės kultūrinėje atmintyje per pastaruosius 30 metų. Straipsnyje naudojami tyrimo metodai: praeities įvykių aiškinimas pirminių šaltinių, periodinių leidinių ir liudininkų parodymų pagrindu, faktų ir interpretacijų lyginimas ir apibendrinimas.

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