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# *Baņuta* Resurrected: From National Romanticism to Contemporary Performativity

*Operos „Baniuta“ atgimimas: nuo nacionalinio romantizmo iki šiuolaikinio performatyvumo*

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## Abstract

*Baņuta* is a contemporary Latvian opera-film and music theater production based on the Latvian opera *Baņuta* (1920) by Alfrēds Kalniņš. This opera has not been staged in the new millennium due to its challenging status of the pearl of national romanticism and the first national Latvian opera. Before the centenary of *Baņuta*, an international team of Latvian and German artists came up with the research-based idea to create a contemporary music theater production. Using deconstruction as a method, they restructured the score and libretto, extending the borders of genre, style, and perception, offering a new aesthetic regime for *Baņuta*. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions for travelling and gathering in 2020, the first artistic result of the project was an opera-film in 2021, followed by a live music theater production performed in Riga and Berlin in 2022. Focusing on such themes as women in war, violence, traumatic experience, and otherness, the application of the contemporary performative strategies gives *Baņuta* a new level of relevance. The article offers insight in the artistic strategies or “new aesthetic regime” applied in *Baņuta*, analyzing the unprecedented case of transforming an opera of national romanticism in a contemporary opera-film and music theater production in the light of interart theory.

**Keywords:** *Baņuta*, Latvian opera, contemporary music theater, opera-film, deconstruction, interart aesthetics.

## Anotacija

„Baniuta“, šiuolaikinė latvių opera-filmas ir muzikinio teatro spektaklis, buvo sukurta pagal Alfredo Kalninio tautinę operą „Baniuta“ (1920). Naujajame tūkstantmetyje ši opera nebuvo statoma dėl sudėtingo „nacionalinio romantizmo perlo“ ir pirmosios tautinės latvių operos statuso. Artėjant „Baniutos“ šimtmečiui tarptautinė latvių ir vokiečių menininkų komanda pasiūlė moksliniais tyrimais grįstą idėją – sukurti šiuolaikinį muzikinio teatro pastatymą. Pasitelkę dekonstrukcijos metodą, jie pertvarkė partitūrą ir libretą, praplėtė žanro, stiliaus ir suvokimo ribas ir pasiūlė naują estetinį „Baniutos“ variantą. Dėl COVID-19 apribojimų kelionėms ir susibūrimams 2020-aisiais pirmuoju projekto meniniu rezultatu 2021 m. tapo opera-filmas, po kurio 2022 m. Rygoje ir Berlyne parodytas gyvas muzikinio teatro spektaklis. Tokios temos kaip moterys kare, smurtas, trauminė patirtis ir kitioniškas šiuolaikinių performatyviųjų strategijų taikymas pakelia „Baniutą“ į naują aktualumo lygmenį. Straipsnyje siūlomos įžvalgos, susijusios su „Baniutoje“ taikomomis meninėmis strategijomis, arba „naujuoju estetiniu režimu“, analizuojant beprecedentį nacionalinio romantizmo operos transformavimo į šiuolaikinį operos-filmo ir muzikinio teatro spektaklio pastatymo atvejį tarpmeninės (*interart*) teorijos kontekste.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** „Baniuta“, latvių opera, šiuolaikinis muzikinis teatras, opera-filmas, dekonstrukcija, tarpmeninė estetika.

## Introduction

Standing on a crossroads between Russian and German political and cultural influences, since the first Latvian opera troupe founded by Pāvuls Jurjāns in 1912, opera has been one of the cultural cornerstones leading to the national state and professional art in Latvia. The striving to put the representations of Latvian national identity on the opera stage appeared long before the proclamation of a national state, and even before the first Latvian opera troupe, when the libretto competition for a national opera was announced in 1903. The competition was organized by the Riga Latvian Society and aimed to build a national culture through professional art examples that would reflect history, traditions, and national characteristics within

the framework of “high culture.” As an institution, the Latvian National Opera was a Latvian cultural pillar both institutionally and artistically during the first Republic (1918–1939), two world wars, and the following Soviet occupation (1940–1991). Some Latvian original operas – *Baņuta* by Alfrēds Kalniņš, *Fire and Night* by Jānis Medīņš in the early 1920s – marked the endeavor to put Latvian national music and drama onto the level of European elite culture at least locally. The opera *Baņuta* has a notable performance history throughout the twentieth century and the Soviet occupation as a representation of Latvian national culture witnessed in its score and production aesthetics. However, in the late twentieth century with the National Revival, the interest in *Baņuta* (and opera as a genre generally – L.M.B.) faded, and no productions

were staged between 1979 and 1999 (in 1995, for the opening of the Latvian National Opera after the capital repair work, *Fire and Night* by Jānis Mediņš was staged instead) as well as between 1999 and the early 2020s. This can be explained by the limitations of representation attributed to *Baņuta* previously and the lack of ideas about how to deal with a musical drama written in the Wagnerian tradition combined with Russian epic national opera features (emphasizing the importance of choir, typical scenes of folk celebrations accompanied by folk songs and dances, etc.) in the context of the contemporary performing arts. In 2020, due to the centenary of the so-called “first Latvian opera” *Baņuta*, the discussion about whether this opera is relevant for today’s audience was raised among musicians and academics. In order to celebrate the centenary of national opera as a genre, instead of *Baņuta*, the Latvian National Opera chose to stage *Hamlet* (1936) by Jānis Kalniņš (the son of the composer of *Baņuta*), which is more modernistic musically. However, *Baņuta* was resurrected in two inter-related contemporary art projects – an opera-film (2021) and a music theater production (2022) implemented by the same producer group consisting of Latvian and German partners (*Story Hub, biedriba Sansusi, Hauen & Stechen*). The article focuses on these two projects, which proved to be able to transfer *Baņuta* from national romanticism to contemporary performativity through deconstruction, transgression, and a post-operatic approach to the source; working with score, stage, and screen simultaneously; and providing new perception contexts to the audience and methodological challenges for the research. Today, the new interpretation of *Baņuta* is a perfect case study for problematizing the theoretical instruments for analysis of the contemporary performing arts and re-contextualization of well-known classics of any genre.

### One title, two formats, several analyzing perspectives

The increasing proportion of interdisciplinarity in musical genres of performing arts leads to the conclusion that the analysis of particular cases (productions) each time proves that the audience in most cases deals with a unique combination of elements in every single new example. *Baņuta* is a case that grows out of a classical opera with its own story that includes a purposefully constructed libretto, music influenced by national romanticism, choir culture, and the classical opera tradition, goes through the representational phase, and transforms into a new interpretation extending the former limitations (also those of the representation itself) into new formats and interactions among the involved parties (producers, performers, and audience). This article deals with two similar, but not identical, versions of *Baņuta*:

1) The opera-film *Baņuta* (2021), screened at the Riga IFF film festival;

2) The interactive music theater production *Baņuta*, performed twice in Riga in the contemporary art space Tu jau zini kur and four times in Berlin’s Theater im Delphi (2022).

Initially, the idea was to make a brand new contemporary and interactive music theater production of *Baņuta*. The idea originated with the dramaturg Evarts Melnalksnis, an enthusiast of contemporary music theater and other performing arts, and the music theater company *Hauen and Stechen* and stage director Franziska Kronfoth from Germany. However, after the research period, when the stage director was familiarized with the opera and its performance history as well as different contexts of Latvian culture, the Covid-19 restrictions of travelling and gathering in 2020 led to the mediatised distance co-working methods. The exchange of pre-recorded videos and sharing of ideas on Zoom in order to discuss the artistic approach and build the storyline of *Baņuta* later grew into the material for a film of 154 minutes. It was premiered in November 2021, a year before the music theater production was presented to the audience.

Historically, opera-films have followed stage productions aimed to reach broader audience and take advantage of new technologies of the time. Since the 1960s, the legendary stage director Franco Zeffirelli turned to opera-films that form a notable part of his artistic legacy with *La Bohème* (1967), *Pagliacci* (1982), and *La Traviata* (1982), to mention just a few. Today, this format typically refers to popular culture, if we think, for instance, about the uncountable screen versions of *The Phantom of the Opera* or similar titles. The opera-film *Baņuta*, though, emerged as a product of the Covid-19 time, re-orienting the artistic strategies towards a screen-based result or “the first ever Latvian opera-film” and complying with the task to mark the centenary of *Baņuta* and open a new page in the interpretation of Kalniņš’s opera. The production followed in summer 2022 in Riga (two performances) and early September in Berlin’s Theater im Delphi (five performances).

Playing with score, stage, and screen in *Baņuta* raises the discussion about the understanding of the notion of music(al) theater in the context of the second decade of the twenty-first century. In English, musical theater traditionally means a musical or musical comedy that is a theatrical production characteristically sentimental and amusing in nature, with a relatively simple plot, consisting of music, dance, and dialogues (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia 2023; Sadie, Tyrell (eds.) 2001). In other words, it means a dramatic production combining acting, singing, and dancing to tell a story. The proportions of elements are variable both in the historical genres (operetta, musicals, vaudeville, opera, and other) and in contemporary productions. Music theater, in turn, derives from German term *Musiktheater*

and refers to productions in which spectacle and dramatic impact are emphasized over purely musical factors, leading back to the tradition established in the 1960s and 1970s by such composers as Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, György Ligeti, Luciano Berio, Mauricio Kagel, and others (Sadie, Tyrell (eds.) 2001), meanwhile Walter Felsenstein and his students Götz Friedrich, Harry Kupfer, and Christoph Martahler (see further) among stage directors must be mentioned in the context of the contemporary productions of classical operas.

Today, the increased theatricality and predominant visual elements in productions necessitate combining definitions and methods when dealing with the contemporary music theater, opera, and opera-film, which is the case of *Baņuta*. French theater theorist Patrice Pavis in the revised *Dictionary of Theatre* (2015) demonstrates the changes and uncertainties often observed in scenes. In many definitions even the style of expression points out the floating meaning of the term because often the phenomenon is described by excluding previous definitions as outdated in comparison to the actual situation today. According to Pavis, apart from stage music (*musique de scène*), opera, or musical theater (*théâtre musical*), the relationship between music and theater is complicated and conflicting:

The relationship between music and scene currently are changing, they do not serve each other, keeping their own autonomy instead, which makes benefit both of the disciplines. Music is not a servant or accompaniment to the stage action. This is not the case of the Romantic opera, where the music eats up the text and theatricality. The role of complementarity of the elements is constantly increasing, uncovering the musicality of the texts and the theatricality of the music. (Pavis 2015: 224–225)

It is more complicated than cinema, where each of the elements is created separately, and, nevertheless, the visual and audial parts work together. Today, says Pavis, the theory of stage music tends to claim that visual and audial perception are fully integrated and cannot be separated anymore (Pavis 2015: 225).

Pavis calls opera *théâtre d'excellence* that unites the "pathos of music and prestige of stage that are complemented by the systematic approach of directing that deliberates opera from the status of slave of the music and extends the borders of necessary and important skills of opera singers and achieves balance between voice and acting" (Pavis 1999: 226). In addition, Pavis questions "the operatization of theater" (*opérisation du théâtre*), meaning the integration of visuality and musicality (text and music) in order to address audiences simultaneously in several channels of perception. In addition, he emphasizes that music theatre still is a vast field, where all possible relationship models of performing arts and music material are explored:

This contemporary form of music theatre (to be distinguished from opera, operetta and musical comedy) endeavours to bring together text, music and visual staging without integrating them, merging them or reducing them to a common denominator (as in Wagnerian opera) and without distancing them from the another (as in the didactic operas of Kurt Weil and Bertolt Brecht). [...] The genre took hold during the 1950s, when composers such as Schnebel, Kagel and Stockhausen viewed their concerts as theatrical performances rather than renderings of a score or libretto. (Pavis 1999: 227)

In the case of opera as a genre, the integrity of the elements such as music and text as well as the order of the musical numbers is seldom questioned. In the relatively recent history of theater, there are few examples of the deconstruction of an opera, mostly related to particular individuals in the performing arts, for example, Christoph Martahler. Some of Martahler's works (*Big words anthem. An Impromptu for choir, orchestra, six important men and stowaway* (1885), *Faust Square Root of 1+2/Goethes Faust. Wurzel aus 1+2* [1993]) were even signed not "directed by Christoph Martahler," but "desorganized by Christoph Martahler" (Zieda 2011: 266). In the case of *Baņuta*, the main creative strategy of Latvian dramaturg Evarts Melnalksnis and German stage director Franziska Kronfoth is deconstruction. However, the deconstruction is implemented through a historically informed approach, researching the contexts and narratives and integrating them in the new artistic conception. And "desorganization" of the elements of an existing opera and integration of the discourses around it in the content is a conscious approach aimed to question the existing perception of the "national opera" and offer a new, extended, and humorous perspective via increased performativity. Performativity in this particular case applies to the new aesthetic regime both of the film and the music theater production. The mentioned "aesthetic regime" is the term used by French philosopher Jacques Rancière (Rancière 2011: 10), and for *Baņuta* it means the opening of new horizons of the representation previously limited by the "national romanticism" concept attributed to the style and social function of this opera historically. However, the new aesthetic regime does not liberate the art from the representation; rather, it liberates the representation itself from its previous limitations (Gubenko 2020: 47). Therefore, in opera-film and later music theater production, the audience deals with an intertextual collage that extends the contents of the source – the opera *Baņuta* by Alfrēds Kalniņš, its score and libretto, respectively – and goes beyond the stereotypical perception of this opera as an example of representative "national romanticism."

The new aesthetic regime of *Baņuta* reflects the blurring boundaries between traditional art disciplines and genres, such as music, theater, film, performance, opera, concert, or collective ritual practices, such as wedding, funeral,

Midsummer celebration. The interdisciplinary nature of the contemporary artworks is one of the main challenges of the researchers in terms of applied methodologies. German theater scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte writes:

The last decades, however, we have seen a tendency to blur the line between these traditional art disciplines based on fundamental new developments within the arts. [...] the increasing dissolution of boundaries between different art forms, i.e. between film, theatre, dance, performance, visual arts, music and literature; and, second, the aestheticization of everyday life, i.e. the fusion of art and non-art in such fields as politics, the economy, new media, sports, religion and everyday practices. Both tendencies transform art studies with regard to their respective subjects of research and challenge their methodology as well as their theoretical approaches. (Fischer-Lichte 2016: 12)

Referring to Fischer-Lichte, I would suggest that in the case of *Baņuta*, the new aesthetic regime corresponds to interart aesthetics and three related key notions: hybridity, intermediality and performativity (Fischer-Lichte 2016: 14). In *Baņuta*, all elements meld into a synergy enabling a unique aesthetic experience incomparable to ordinary film or ordinary opera production. The original opera and different contexts related to its history serve as a fundament for a new interpretation of *Baņuta* in terms of content and form commented on in detail further.

### Libretto – script

As mentioned before, the libretto of the opera *Baņuta* dates back to 1903. This is one of the cases in opera history when the libretto was created long before the music but for an eventual Latvian opera based on ancient Baltic (Latvian and/or Lithuanian) history according to the regulation of the competition organized by the Riga Latvian Society. Structurally, opera has four acts with a rather classical division of dramatic turns and twists in the style of nineteenth-century melodramas. The first act reveals the wedding celebration of prince Daumants and Baņuta, a stranger brought along from the war. The act ends with the arrival of Vižuts, who seeks revenge for his sister Jargala (from the text of the aria of Daumants, we discover that it was him who raped a young woman called Jargala and left her dying in the woods), and Daumants is killed. In the second act, the old king Valgudis accuses Baņuta of bringing bad luck to the tribe and orders her to be burned with Daumants's dead body. When the sign "from above" is given (a shield of Daumants falls), Baņuta is liberated under the oath to find and kill the murderer. The third act represents a typical mass scene – a Midsummer celebration with a choir singing and dancing. The highest priest of the tribe releases Baņuta

from the oath for the shortest night of the year (an element of carnival), and Baņuta meets Vižuts and they fall in love. After they spend the night together, the lovers uncover their identities, and it turns out that Baņuta is obliged to kill Vižuts. The opera in its initial version ends with a double suicide – first Vižuts stabs himself with Baņuta's dagger, and she decides to follow him.

In the course of time, the libretto of *Baņuta* has been subject to changes and even censored. The history of the libretto of *Baņuta* and its narrative in the lights of reflection of ancient history on stage is extensively analyzed in a recent article by Latvian musicologist Jānis Kudiņš (Kudiņš 2019). The research proves that the content of *Baņuta* was modified several times to some extent; however, the main and the most important transformation concerns the tragic finale, which is turned into a "happy end" in 1941 following the demands of the new Soviet rule and during the preparation of the new production for the Art Decade in Moscow. However, a few minor changes were also introduced in 1937 (cutting out "Lithuania" used as synonym for "Latvia" in the text, re-working the instrumentation, and adding the love duet; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Baņuta*), and the so-called "optimistic" finale, where the people release Baņuta from her oath and let love triumph, marks an unprecedented case in opera history as well as breaks the traditional structure of the libretto and score. Today, probably, we would rather easily accept that, for instance, Radames and Aida manage to escape from their dark grave or Romeo and Juliet happily flee from Italy to Thailand; however, these examples help us to understand the radical intervention in the traditional opera model. Jānis Kudiņš writes:

[...] it marked a major dissonance with the overall libretto structure and its references to the romanticized ancient Baltic mythology. (Kudiņš 2019: 123)

On the other hand, the legitimated two finales give the privilege to future interpretations of this opera to choose one or another version or create a new one based on the precedent. In the twentieth century, *Baņuta* has been staged seven times (1920, 1937, 1941, 1953, 1968, 1979, and 1999) and the tragic finale after 1941 was played only once (1979). Despite the censorship and "official approval" issues and obvious utterances of decorative "national characteristics" manifested under Soviet rule, *Baņuta* kept the status of the "first Latvian opera" for a century. In 1999, both finales were presented to audiences. The optimistic one was played in the open-air production held on August 2 in Zosēni Parish (a village in the region where the librettist Artūrs Krūmiņš was born) with the participation of local choirs, folk dance collectives, and folklore groups reaching in total 400 performers. The tragic finale was represented in the following concert-performance at the Latvian National opera on September 17 of the same year. In the context of

performance and research, the discourse of *Baņuta* was somewhat frozen from 1999 until 2019, when the approaching centenary of the opera activated the discussion about how to deal with this legacy and its representational status in the twenty-first century. First, Jānis Kudiņš specified the status of “first Latvian opera” (still present in his article published in *Ars et Praxis*, see Kudiņš 2014), introducing a notable correction – actually, *Baņuta* is the first completed and staged opera in the Latvian language (Kudiņš 2019: 111) as there were other operas composed in the current territory of Latvia, by Latvian-born composers, but the librettos were in German. Secondly, Kudiņš asks a question that was on the agenda of conductors and musicians since 1999:

Is the opera *Baņuta* now just a historical fact? What is the authentic version of its libretto nowadays? It is probably not possible to answer now, as we have not had any new staging of the opera. However, the opera itself, its libretto and encoded layered historical narrative in its dramaturgy are potentially intriguing elements for the creation of the new staging. (Kudiņš 2019: 125)

The answer to this question came in the form of the opera-film (2021) and music theater production (2022), where the opera *Baņuta* is a source and platform for a new, interdisciplinary artwork in the coordinates of film and music theater aesthetics. According to Evarts Melnalksnis, one of the driving forces for building the new story of *Baņuta*, was the conceptualization of the violent deed of Daumants

completed during the war towards Jargala – a character barely mentioned in the libretto – and *Baņuta*, another female stranger in the community, who is forced to revenge the murder of a rapist she just married (!). This brings in a new perspective never associated with this opera before – women in war, traumatic experiences, violence, vengeance, otherness, and similar themes opening the libretto in light of feminism and post-colonialism from the viewpoint of the twenty-first century (Melnalksnis 2021). For the script of the new production, the creative team used the following sources: the orchestra score of the opera, a piano score with the translations of the texts in four languages (English, German, Russian and French), and a full libretto and solo songs by the composer Alfrēds Kalniņš.

The script was developed after thorough exploration of the content, contexts, and production history of the opera, including the use of *Baņuta* in the context of power representation. In addition, a few new elements were used to emphasize the chosen perspective: the documentary evidence of woman-partisans *Daughters of Forest* collected by folklorist Sanita Reinsone, texts from the novel *The Unwomanly Face of War* by Belorussian writer Svetlana Aleksievich, poetry by Inga Gaile, songs by Alfrēds Kalniņš, and Latvian folklore (ancient wedding and funeral rituals, traditional Midsummer songs, etc.). These elements create a multi-layered story that extends the narrow national



**Figure 1.** A scene from the music theater production *Baņuta*. From the left: live camera operator/Vižuts – Āris Matesovičs, Magician – Gina Lisa Maiwald, *Baņuta* (in white headgear) – Angela Braun, *Baņuta* – Laura Grecka, Vižuts – David Ristau. 30 August 2022, Berlin, *Theater im Delphi*. Photographer Thilo Mössner.



**Figure 2.** The second (*optimistic*) finale of *Baņuta* ironically performed as a body installation of the sculpture *Worker and Peasant* by Vera Mukhina. Vižuts – Āris Matesovičs, Baņuta – Angela Braun. 30 August 2022, Berlin, Theater im Delphi. Photographer Thilo Mössner.

representation context of *Baņuta* to another level of generalization and relevance.

The combined aesthetics, genres, and methods, where we can track opera, popular culture, folklore, feature film, silent movies, live performance, and social rituals in *Baņuta* opens new horizons in dealing with cultural heritage today. Irony and grotesque as well as some of the typical opera clichés (*mad scene*, *Venetian scene*, double-suicide scene, etc.) are used as the means of expression aimed to uncover the absurdity of any single meaning attributed to a character, action, or deed without questioning it deeper (Figure 1).

The new script of *Baņuta* includes both a tragic finale and a “happy ending” or “optimistic” finale played in turn and even offers a third (contemporary) finale. The tragic finale of the double suicide of the protagonists is represented by Baņuta and Vižuts drinking a plant-based poison (as *Romeo and Juliet*) and dying on the picturesque bank of a lake. The “optimistic” one is represented by the slogan *Love*

*is a battle* (written in Latvian, but using the Cyrillic alphabet as a hint to the Soviet influence over the content of *Baņuta* and Latvian culture in general) and visually illustrated by the protagonists imitating the famous sculpture *The Worker and Peasant* by Vera Mukhina performed on a bar counter (in the film) or on stage (in the production; see Figure 2). The third version of the finale appears in an “open ended” format with Baņuta taking a boat trip of unclarified symbolic meaning. The audience is who decides whether it is the River Styx or a metaphor of flowing history that conducts Baņuta and the opera *Baņuta* to an unknown future.

### Music rearranged

Musicologist Arnolds Laimonis Klotiņš in an interview presented on classical music radio Latvijas Radio 3 Klasika says as follows:

In the perception of many people, *Baņuta* is the symbol of Latvian classical music, because it contains all features of ancient legendary past – a magician, folk beliefs, fundamental values of human lives such as love, death, competition of two men, a conflict between love and obligations. Besides, it is great music! Non-obtrusive, measured and poetic – in the style of Alfrēds Kalniņš' songs for choir [...]. (Paula 2017)

This is a typical opinion of the older generation Latvian music professionals regarding *Baņuta*. Without denying the beauty of the music, Jēkabs Nīmanis, the composer involved in the new version of *Baņuta*, states that due to having “museum value” and being “an item from the list of mandatory music literature” the situation in the second decade of the twenty-first century is as follows:

Possibly, *Baņuta* needs us more than we need *Baņuta*. [...] we want to show this opera to the audience, because it contains a very rich world of sounds and dynamic dramaturgy. (Žilinska 2023)

Changes affect opera as a genre more slowly than the dramatic theater due to the narrative as a basic structural element of the genre, which makes a whole together with music and libretto and can be subject to aesthetic or conceptual transformation in the production, but traditionally cannot be ignored, replaced with something else or deconstructed. The idea of an opera is to tell a story in a syncretic way in organized music and text. Traditionally, the score and libretto form a constant unit comparable to a piece of literary work. Meanwhile, the production is a changeable segment that depends on interpretation by the stage director and the creative team. The practice of twenty-first century opera direction proves that the libretto can be changed, but normally these changes never affect, for example, the text sung by the actors, because the text is adapted to the score. The new version of *Baņuta* goes further and shows that even the score in opera is not an unchangeable element. It is not “disorganized” in Martahler's sense (see previously), but modified in terms of instrumentation and supplemented by added musical numbers composed, arranged, and combined by the Jēkabs Nīmanis, one of the most successful Latvian composers working mostly in theater genre, where the music melds into the totality of the production instead of regulating the tempi and rhythm as in opera. The score is partially deconstructed and re-instrumented for piano, double-bass, percussions, vibraphone, clarinet, bass-clarinet, and flutes. Considering the work with the score of *Baņuta* a challenge, Jēkabs Nīmanis says:

I try to keep as much of Kalniņš as I can. But I feel sometimes we [musicians] act as the illustrators of the scene. (Žilinska 2023)

Musically, the new *Baņuta* includes the highlights of the opera score, keeping the main arias of the characters, a few signature choir scenes, and the overture, which is displaced to the end of the production (!). Similarly to the libretto, the musical content is modified through the addition of a few solo songs by Alfrēds Kalniņš, which are integrated into the script contextually. It is a reference to the rich legacy of the composer, who in total wrote 250 songs for voice and piano. There are three songs included in the film and new production – *Brīnos es (I wonder)*, *Vakara ilgās (Evening longings)* and *Mysterious Cat* (the latter was originally in English and composed in the USA, where the composer lived and worked between 1927 and 1933). *Mysterious Cat* is used in the mad scene” of Valgudis, the old king, when he is informed about the death of Daumants, his son. Jēkabs Nīmanis has both composed some original music and made arrangements for instrumental quintet, carefully respecting the original composition and style of Kalniņš. As *Baņuta* is a project produced in three languages simultaneously (Latvian, German, and English), the composers have taken into account the existing translations of the libretto in German and used it for German singing actresses Angela Braun and Gina-Lisa Maiwald, who are involved in the production. The use of the overture at the end of the opera deserves particular attention. This is probably one of the most daring moments related to the original score – a new melody rises from the harmonies of the overture and musically leads to the third finale of *Baņuta*, a song where the main protagonist sings about passing from the past to the present and looking into the future through the eyes of a curious child, while the opera overture in rich string instrumentation is played in the recording. The ending with the overture opens a new gate to *Baņuta* crossing the borders between genres, centuries, and countries, transforming its symbolic status into a live, contemporary performance.

In contradistinction to the historical productions of *Baņuta*, the vocal performance in the film and new music theater production differs due to the diverse training background and voice qualities of the cast members. The title role is “tripled,” namely, the title protagonist Baņuta is interpreted by three performers: Angela Braun, Laura Grecka, and Sniedze Kaņepe. All are both singers and actors who share the leading role in turn, interchanging the live singing, live-camera recording and performing in pre-recorded videos. In terms of male role performers (Daumants and Vižuts), the cast slightly differs in the film and opera production. For instance, actor Reinis Boters, who performs the role of Vižuts in the film, is replaced by singer Gustavs Melbārdis in the opera production. Thus, the signature duet of Baņuta and Vižuts *Nāc, manu liego ilgu tēls (Come, the image of my sweet longing)* in the new production loses the comic effect it had in the film. This is caused by the fact that Boters is not a classically trained singer and therefore in the film, the



**Figure 3.** Outdoor participatory scene from the music theater production *Baņuta* in Riga, 18 August 2022, patio of the culture space Tu jau zini kur. Act II Midsummer night celebration enriched by folk songs of a naughty character. Photographer Didzis Grodzs.

vocal interpretation distorts the traditional operatic balance of tenor and soprano voices. In the opera production, due to the soloist's training in the musical theater genre, the style of the interpretation comes back (or closer) to the classical operatic canon. Although none of the formats offered by the creative team of the new *Baņuta* is aimed to be a classical opera production, the comparison of the film and music theater production leads to interesting conclusions from the perspective of perception – the combined aesthetics of this artwork produce a different effect through the screen and in person.

### **Film vs. music theater production**

Despite the same title and script, the opera-film and the music theater production of *Baņuta* are two separated artworks that are interrelated, but the interrelation can be noticed only by that (I believe, very limited) part of the audience familiar with both formats. While the film provides immersion available through the engineered image and sound, the music theater production channels contemporary performativity through interactivity

and participation. Combining the pre-recorded material from the film, live-video projections, and on-site action in several transformable “stages” outdoors and indoors, the production invites the audience to participate in the wedding rituals as regular wedding guests meeting the bride and groom at the door of the house, makes them attend Daumants's funeral around the pyre, and in the next act observe the Midsummer celebration around the bonfire accompanied by the *a capella* folk songs of a naughty character (Figure 3).

The production continues indoors in relatively ordinary circumstances, splitting the attention of the audience between the action on stage and the live-camera or video projections on the screen placed above the heads of the spectators. One more feature that makes *Baņuta* different from other productions is its flexibility under temporary conditions and its ability to deal with the blurring boundaries between art and life with ease. There are only two *Baņutas* instead of three, because Sniedze Kaņepe resigned her participation in the production due to her pregnancy. This fact as the explanation for the re-structured cast is integrated in the dialogue of two other *Baņutas* in the manner of epic theater:

But where is the third Baņuta? Oh, there she is, our third Baņuta, sitting among you, and she is expecting a baby! At least some good news after all! (Mellēna-Bartkeviča 2022)

The musicians – pianist Kārlis Tirzītis, double-bassist Staņislavs Judins, flutist Andis Klučnieks, percussionist Ernests Mediņš, and multi-instrumentalist and composer Jēkabs Nīmanis (present both in the film and live production) – instead of being just the providers of music, most of the time act as performers as well. They perform as “wedding musicians” at the beginning, greeting the arriving motorcycles of Baņuta and Daumants, and in the continuation of the wedding party, they act around the bar counter in another scene or sing some refrains of the chorus. Seven young singers led by the choir conductors Patriks Kārlis Stepe play the role of the choir (people of the Romove) and manage to create well-balanced sound effects. In the style of contemporary theater, the cast of actors and musicians manages to combine the reality of *Baņuta* with the discursive meta-level about the opera *Baņuta* – similarly to the film, all versions of the finales are performed in turn and question the status of this opera in the context of contemporary Latvian society and culture. The artistic strategy applied in the music theater production *Baņuta* is “everybody is a performer” and the attempt to break the “fourth wall” untypical to the opera genre – it makes the spectator’s experience more intense and focused. The new aesthetic regime offered by the creative team liberates *Baņuta* from the previous burden of representation of Latvian national identity cultivated throughout the twentieth century and resurrects it through contemporary performativity and in new contexts, keeping the hand on the pulse even during the relatively short stage life of this project linking the film and opera production. Namely, the video projections used in opera production included a prophetic gesture regarding the meaningful historical event – the audience of the August 18 and 19 performances burst in the applause, when the video showed the dismantling of the most visible monument representing Soviet power (the Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia or so-called Monument of Victory) located on the left bank of the river Daugava. In reality, the monument was broken down the following week – on August 25.

## Conclusions

A hundred years after the premiere, the Latvian opera *Baņuta* (1920) by Alfrēds Kalniņš (1879–1951) has been resurrected in a new international project melding opera and musical performance, the conditionality of the performing arts and contemporary performativity first embodied in film aesthetics and then by an interactive music theater

production, avoiding the previous limits of representation often attributed to this opera as a representation of Latvian national identity in the opera genre throughout the twentieth century and breaking the spell of “national romanticism” in terms of reception. Deconstructed and transformed into a new, contemporary artwork, *Baņuta* does not easily fit into any conventional box of genres. It addresses new audiences and new perception contexts as well as creates new methodological challenges for researchers due to the complex approach to the score, libretto, and theatrical interpretation on screen and stage or, to be more precise, the performance space. The research-based artistic strategies employed by the dramaturg Evarts Melnalksnis, composer Jēkabs Nīmanis, and stage director Franziska Kronfoth provide *Baņuta* with a new aesthetic regime in the Rancierian sense, extending the previously set limits of representation to a new level of relevance.

Without breaking the code of *théâtre d'excellence* (Pavis 1999: 226), *Baņuta* acts according to the principles of contemporary music theater, blurring the borders of the genres and increasing the proportion of performativity in the content (script) and form (techniques applied by the singers/actors, means of expression, and principles of composition used).

Playing with score, stage, and screen in *Baņuta* raises the discussion of the understanding of the notion of music theater in the context of the second decade of the twenty-first century, leading to the conclusion that the unique aesthetic experience of this film/production corresponds to the process of interart developments discussed in recent publications of the German theater scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte. The applied artistic approach includes the interplay and interaction of different arts (Fischer-Lichte s. a.: 13), and through the intertextual manifestations extends the formerly narrow representational field of *Baņuta* to the social criticism perspective. In her reflections on the interart approach, Fischer-Lichte offers three key concepts: hybridity, intermediality and performativity (Fischer-Lichte 2016: 14). The analysis of the contemporary version of *Baņuta* in the film and music theater production shows that aesthetically it clearly embodies all three mentioned concepts as well as reflects on conventions of representation and perception, including the discourse “on *Baņuta*” in the performance. The intermediality in the wide sense is obvious in two different formats and their interrelation, while the self-referentiality that makes transparent particular states, conventions of representation, and perceptions of the different media involved (Ibid.) allows us to state that the creative team of *Baņuta* have found the most satisfactory and honest way to transform the example of national romanticism opera into a contemporary artwork. However, only the future will show whether such an approach in music theater can last similarly to the conceptual and aesthetically diverse re-interpretations of many classical titles in dramatic theater.

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## Santrauka

„Baniuta“, šiuolaikinė latvių opera-filmas (2021 m.) ir muzikinio teatro spektaklis (2022 m.), buvo sukurta pagal Alfredo Kalninio (1879–1951) „tautinę“ latvių operą „Baniuta“ (1920 m.). Naujajame tūkstantmetyje ši opera nebuvo statoma dėl savo sudėtingo statuso Latvijos operos istorijoje – tai buvo nacionalinio romantizmo pavyzdys ir „pirmoji tautinė latviška opera“, pasižyminti gana painia komponavimo ir atlikimo istorija. Pasitelkusi dekonstrukcijos metodą, tarptautinė latvių ir vokiečių menininkų komanda pertvarkė partitūrą ir libretą, praplėtė žanro, stiliaus ir suvokimo ribas ir pasiūlė naują estetinį variantą turinio ir formos atžvilgiu. Tokios temos kaip moterys kare, smurtas, trauminė patirtis ir kitoniškas šiuolaikinių performatyvių strategijų taikymas suaktualina „Baniutą“. Straipsnyje supažindinama su „Baniutoje“ taikomomis meninėmis strategijomis, analizuojant precedento neturintį nacionalinio romantizmo operos transformavimo į šiuolaikinį operos-filmo ir muzikinio teatro spektaklio atvejį tarpmeninės teorijos kontekste.

Dekonstruota ir transformuota į naują, šiuolaikinį meno kūrinį, „Baniuta“ vargiai telpa į įprastą žanrų sistemą. Ji kurta naujam žiūrovui ir naujiems suvokimo kontekstams ir kelia naujų metodologinių išbandymų tyrėjams dėl kompleksinės prieigos prie partitūros, libreto ir teatrinės interpretacijos ekrane ir scenoje, arba tiksliau – atlikimo erdvėje. Dramaturgo Evartso Melnalksnio, kompozitoriaus Jekabo Nimanio ir režisierės Franziskos Kronfoth taikomos tyrimais grįstos meninės strategijos suteikia „Baniutai“ naują estetinį režimą ransjeriškąja prasme, praplečiantį anksčiau nustatytas reprezentacijos ribas.

Scenarijus buvo parengtas nuodugnai išstudijavus operos turinį, kontekstus ir pastatymo istoriją, įskaitant „Baniutos“ panaudojimą galios reprezentacijos kontekste. Be to, siekiant pabrėžti pasirinktą perspektyvą, įtraukti keli nauji elementai: dokumentiniai moterų-partizanių liudijimai „Miško dukrose“, surinkti folkloristės Sanitos Reinsonės, baltarusių rašytojos Svetlanos Aleksijevič romano „Karo veidas nemoteriškas“ tekstai, Ingos Gailės poezija, Alfredo Kalninio solinės dainos, latvių folkloras (senoviniai vestuvių ir laidotuvių ritualai, tradicinės vidurvasario dainos ir t. t.), galiausiai sukuriant daugiasluoksnį pasakojimą, kuris pakelia siaurą tautinės „Baniutos“ reprezentacijos kontekstą į kitą apibendrinimo ir aktualumo lygmenį. Muzikine prasme naujoji „Baniuta“ įtraukia ryškiausias operos partitūros akcentus, išsaugodama pagrindines veikėjų arijas, kelias svarbiausias choro scenas ir uvertiūrą, perkeltą į spektaklio pabaigą. Partitūra iš dalies dekonstruota ir naujai instrumentuota fortepijonui, kontrabosui, mušamiesiems, vibrafonui, klarinetui, bosiniam klarinetui ir fleitoms; ji taip pat praturtinta Alfredo Kalninio solinėmis dainomis. Naujajame „Baniutos“

scenarijuje paeiliui atliekamas ir tragiškasis finalas, ir „laiminga pabaiga“, siūlomas net trečiasis (šiuolaikinis) finalas.

Partitūros, scenos ir ekrano panaudojimas „Baniutos“ pastatymuose skatina diskusiją apie muzikinio teatro sąvokos supratimą XXI a. antrojo dešimtmečio kontekste ir leidžia daryti išvadą, kad unikali šio filmo / spektaklio estetinė patirtis atitinka vokiečių teatrologės Erikos Fischer-Lichte naujausiose publikacijose aptariamą tarpmeninės raidos procesą. Taikomoji meninė prieiga apima skirtingų menų tarpusavio sąveiką, o per intertekstualias apraiškas praplečia ankstesnįjį siaurą „Baniutos“ reprezentacinį lauką iki socialinės kritikos perspektyvos. Naujojoje „Baniutoje“ įkūnijamas

hibridiškumas, intermedialumas ir performatyvumas, taip pat apmąstomi reprezentacijos ir suvokimo sąlyginumai, įskaitant diskursą „apie Baniutą“ pastatymuose. Intermedialumas plačiąja prasme akivaizdus dviejuose skirtinguose formatuose ir jų tarpusavio sąsajose, o savireferentiškumas, išryškinantis pastatymuose naudojamų medijų būsenas bei reprezentacijos ir suvokimo sąlyginumus, leidžia teigti, kad „Baniutos“ kūrybinė grupė rado tinkamiausią ir sąžiningiausią būdą transformuoti nacionalinio romantizmo operos pavyzdį į šiuolaikinį meno kūrinį.

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