

Jūratė Katinaityė

Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre in Vilnius

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1951-4821>

Peculiarities and Limitations of Opera Criticism During the Soviet Era: the Story of One Review and the Outpouring of Responses it Provoked in 1978

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To Edmundas Gedgaudas, prominent music critic

Introduction

The field of Sovietology has developed on both sides of the former Iron Curtain for more than 30 years now. In many cases, such as the investigation and evaluation of repressive structures during this period or the crimes of Stalinism, scholars have been in unison. However, other seemingly straightforward topics, such as the periodisation of the Soviet

era, the issue of censorship, or the forms of regulation exercised by the Communist Party, have posed new challenges in scholarly debate. This is especially true when it comes to research in the cultural sphere. This is due to many factors. Firstly, Sovietisation assumed local variations, which were determined by both the cultural context as well as by when the Moscow regime began its occupation and how long it endured. The experiences of the Baltic States, which were the final areas to fall under Soviet control, differed from those of the “centre” or other peripheries of the empire. Secondly, the recent popularity of *oral history* and *egodocumentary* research has adjusted theoretical approaches and indicated more diverse ways of looking at phenomena. Thirdly, not only did the Soviet era leave its mark on several generations, but many of their representatives either actively participated in the regime’s structures or, on the contrary, were victims of its repressive measures. Hence, attitudes remain inevitably polarised due to personal experiences.

The present article, which focuses on an unexpected outpouring of critical opinion in 1978, examines the activities of the opera company that functioned as part of the State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic (hereinafter referred to as SAOBT) in the 1970s, including the peculiarities of its management, the state of opera criticism at the time, its possibilities and limits, and several other issues. As the great *Stagnation*¹ began to affect culture and art in the country people eventually became emboldened to express their personal views and thoughts a little more freely. The impact of these developments varied from one field of creative activity to another. The government censors continued to enforce strict control of the nation’s literature and theatre, which led to the emergence of *metaphorical* theatre and the use of *Aesopian* language, which in turn resulted in changes in artistic output, including in critical texts. The revival of critical discourse in Lithuania was also influenced by developments in the press of other Eastern Bloc countries, in particular Polish cultural publications.

1 Most scholars date the beginning of the Stagnation to 1964, when Leonid Brezhnev became General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR. Yet there are those who argue that the Stagnation can be traced back even further, i.e., to the 1962 exhibition *Novaya realnost* (*New Reality*, 1 December 1962), held at the Moscow Central exhibition hall *Manezh*. The exhibition aroused the discontent of senior party nomenklatura, which led to a campaign of condemnation of modern art.

The aforementioned proliferation in opera criticism in 1978 gives rise to a number of questions. What issues and factors were relevant to the artistic community at the time? How was this reflected in the press? How was the opera, the country's most important dramatical medium, evaluated in comparison with the other arts? In other words, can we judge the field of opera and its place and significance in the cultural system of Soviet Lithuania based on the critical publications of the time? Finally, what did this debate reveal about the power relations during this period?

The theory of the *cultural field*, originally developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's, is often employed in the study of the Soviet era. This present article accordingly draws on several of Bourdieu's methodological concepts such as a *field*, *agents*, *cultural capital*, *doxa* and *illusio*.² Firstly, the historical (political, ideological, socio-cultural) context of the 1970s is presented alongside various examples from different culture fields. The next section provides an overview of art criticism, its peculiarities and limitations during the period in question. This in turn is followed by an analysis of SABOT's activities: its management, ideological control, and repertoire as well as the social status of an opera soloist. The main section focuses on the problems that Gedgaudas raised in his article and how these issues were treated and appreciated by other participants in the discussion, according to their (in)dependence on the institution, nomenklatura attitudes, professionalism and personal beliefs.

The first thing to consider when assessing trends and achievements in art and culture during the Soviet period is the impact of the regime's censorship policy, which could be more or less repressive at different periods. In Lithuania, for example, Soviet censorship has been a subject of systematic research and analysis by the historian Arūnas Streikus, the

2 A *field* (a network of social, cultural, and other relations in which a certain logic operates), *agents* (individuals, groups or institutions acting and competing in the field) who have their own *habitus* – a mastered and perceived system of behaviours, attitudes, habits, and skills. The *cultural capital* of the agents – their validated knowledge, skills, education, and understanding of certain cultural codes – is of great importance for their performance (game). Depending on the characteristics of the field, capital can be of three other types: economic, social, and symbolic (prestige, authority). Each field has its own *doxa* (attitudes and values) and *illusio* (belief in the meaningfulness of the game). Bourdieu's key methodological concepts are described in his canonical work *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit, 1979); English translation: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard University Press, 1984).

literary scholar Rimantas Kmita, the theatre scholar Goda Dapšytė, and others. According to Kmita,

Literary censorship in the Soviet era did not mean simply control exercised by one or several institutions. Ideological vigilance could be exercised for various reasons by cultural employees at various levels, from party officials down to editors and proofreaders. Censorship was a political phenomenon involving all the agents involved in publishing, each with their own objectives in mind, and the rules of the game were not necessarily clearly defined and unchanging. Censorship began as early as in the consciousness of the author during the writing process itself.³

The same applies to the creative work of composers, painters, and other artists as well as critical reflections on such activities. Any kind of discourse, as long as it was not normative-regulatory, began with self-censorship.

Ideological Discourse and Changes in the Field of Art in the 1970s

As we mentioned above, the *Stagnation* had already set in by the late 1960s, and assumed distinct forms in different fields of artistic activity. In 1970, Vytautas Kubilius, a literary scholar who began his career as a critic in the final years of Stalinism, wrote in his diary:

There is no longer any commonness, no support, no effort to unify literature. There is no longer any dignifying element around which anyone would group. There is no direction of movement. There is no perspective. All that 1956⁴ had brought about is over. All that exists now is a bog, a quagmire, a beastly rampage of ambitions and the management of one's own affairs.⁵

3 Rimantas Kmita, "Cenzūra" ["Censorship"], in *Sovietmečio lietuvių literatūra. Sąvokos ir reiškiniai* [*Lithuanian Literature of the Soviet Period: Phenomena and Concepts*], ed. by A. Kalėda, R. Kmita, D. Satkauskytė (Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2019), 114.

4 Here the date is a consolidation of the political programme of the Thaw at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR in First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev's report *On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences*.

5 Vytautas Kubilius, *Dienoraščiai 1945–1977* [*Diaries 1945–1977*], ed. by J. Žėkaitė, J. Sprindytė (Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2006), 362.

This period was characterised by a certain degree of regression, not only in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc states, but also in the West. Václav Havel has described the decade as follows:

John Lennon once said in an interview that the 1970s were not worth a damn. And, indeed, when we look back on them today – I'm thinking now in the world context – they seemed, compared with rich and productive 1960s, to be lacking in significance, style, atmosphere, with no vivid spiritual and cultural movements. The seventies were bland, boring, and bleak. <...> In Czechoslovakia, the seventies were perhaps even gloomier. After the Soviet intervention <...> a long period of moribund silence began.⁶

In January 1972, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union issued a resolution *On Literary and Art Criticism*, which put a stop to the criticism that had been partly tolerated during the Khrushchev Thaw, and tightened control over publications. Even more distressing was the aftermath of the “Kaunas events”, when on May 14 of that year, a 19-year-old young man, Romas Kalanta, burned himself to death in the city centre, leaving a note in his notebook stating that his death was entirely the fault of the system. A number of youth protests held on the day of his funeral were put down by Soviet troops. As a manifestation of resistance, the Kaunas events frightened the regime's ideologues, and as a consequence the latter introduced tougher censorship, dismissed the editors of the cultural weekly *Literatūra ir menas* [*Literature and Art*] and the magazine *Nemunas*, enforced stricter surveillance of artists' organisations, checked theatre repertoires, and exercised control not only over the texts of published books, but also the layouts of their covers and illustrations.

One consequence of more vigorous ideological interference, Jonas Jurašas, the most prominent theatre director of the time, was dismissed from his position as head of the Kaunas State Drama Theatre. On August 18 1972, and while still working at the theatre, Jurašas, wrote an open letter to the authorities and cultural institutions, in which he refused to obey the censors' demands to change the artistic presentation and direction of the institution's plays.⁷ In 1974, and following a two-year

6 Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, trans. P.Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 119.

7 At the beginning of 1972, Jurašas began to stage Juozas Grušas' historical drama *Barbora Radvilaitė*. More repressive censorship rules required numerous changes to be made to the production; among other things, the authorities forbade the appearance on stage of a reproduction of the painting of the Virgin Mary at Vilnius' Gates of Dawn.

campaign by the authorities to suppress his views, Jurašas and his wife, the writer Aušra Marija Sluckaitė, were at last given permission to emigrate to the West, an event that sent shockwaves through the cultural community. The performances staged by Jurašas had marked a qualitatively significant leap in the modernisation of Lithuanian theatre. The sheer determination of the director, who possessed huge symbolic capital, mobilised and inspired the cultural community in acts of resistance against the censor. In 1975, the poet Tomas Venclova, a member of the Helsinki Group, sent a similar letter to the Central Committee of the Lithuanian SSR Communist Party, in which he outlined his views on the political situation and censorship (“information barriers and the repression of those who think differently are pushing society towards stagnation and the country into backwardness”) and declared that he wished to leave the USSR with his family, as he saw no possibility of continuing his creative work in such conditions.⁸ Venclova was only allowed to leave the USSR in 1977.

In this context, new music was able to escape the harsher effects of the government’s clampdown because of the specificity (indefiniteness) of its content. An analysis of the extensive egodocumentation of Lithuanian composers’ (diaries, memoirs, and letters) led the musicologist Rūta Stanevičiūtė to conclude that music had enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy ever since the Thaw: “composers were particularly concerned with issues of creative self-expression and the technological resources for updating their individual style”.⁹ The specific situation of musicians is also highlighted by other researchers, such as the historians Valdemaras Klumbys, Arūnas Streikus, the art critic Skaidra Trilupaitytė and others.

As a consequence the premiere had to be postponed. Provoked by these restrictions, Jurašas wrote the aforementioned letter, in which he listed the plays that he had staged, the artistic quality of which had been undermined by the censors’ decisions. He also stated in the letter that he refused to stage ideological plays imposed on him by the nomenklatura in exchange for the opportunity to present his own choice of dramaturgy. The premiere of *Barbora Radvilaitė*, albeit in a censored version, took place on 9 September 1972, three weeks after Jurašas’ open letter, the full text of which is published in *Jonas Jurašas*, ed. by Audronė Girdzijauskaitė (Vilnius: Gervelė, 1995), 276–278.

- 8 Donata Mitaitė, *Tomas Venclova: biografijos ir kūrybos ženklai* [*Tomas Venclova: Traces of Biography and Creative Work*] (Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2002), 89–90.
- 9 Rūta Stanevičiūtė-Kelmickienė, “Lietuvių muzikos modernėjimo diskursas (XX a. 7 dešimtmetis–9 dešimtmečio vidurys)” [“The Discourse of Modernisation of Lithuanian Music (from 1960s to Mid 1990s)”] (PhD thesis, Lietuvos muzikos ir teatro akademija, 2011), 30.

However, at the beginning of the 1970s, the principal problem affecting the field of music was generational conflict rather than official censorship. This is especially true in the case of the confrontation between the composer Bronius Kutavičius, who at the time was writing his first ingenious works, and older composers.¹⁰ Noteworthy is the difficulty that Kutavičius experienced in getting his creative work recognised, which should be attributed primarily to changes in style and taste in the musical community, rather than to official ideology. The same applies to the official reception of the work of Osvaldas Balakauskas and Feliksas Bajoras. New works enjoyed a somewhat different fate at SAOBT, as here the issue concerned libretti (literary content), which the censors found incomparably more transparent than the rhetoric of music. The most striking example of censorship was the cancellation of the premiere of Julius Juzeliūnas's opera *Sukilėliai* (*The Insurgents*), based on Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas' historical novel about the January Uprising in 1863, which occurred at the beginning of the Thaw, in 1957, due to its allegedly inaccurate depiction of historical events. Juzeliūnas' second opera, *Žaidimas* (*The Game*, 1968), based on Friedrich Dürrenmatt's short story *The Breakdown*, was another failed production, not because of the censors' claims, but because of a conflict between the musicians' involved: the opera's soloists resisted the unusual atonal language of the music, and the composer refused to edit the opus. Most composers chose the path of self-censorship, plots that were ideologically neutral or compliant with socialist realism and librettists who pleased the authorities. Because composers were attracted to the opera stage, they were happy to compromise.

During the Soviet period (1944–1990), SAOBT staged 19 newly written operas by Lithuanian composers, 2 of them for children. Several operas

10 This conflict is illustrated by the following recollections of the violist and founder of the Vilnius Quartet, Donatas Katkus: "We did all of that not for the good of society or Lithuanian music but out of a desire to defend those composers since we saw that fantastic things were being born. I'll never forget when in 1970 Kutavičius's Pantheistic Oratorio was performed in the Philharmonic Society's Chamber Hall. The older composers and party activists simply tore into it. After the performance, I went up to Bronius, who no longer looked like a human being, and said to him in the corridor: "A work of genius! Don't listen to them! They don't understand anything. I saw Bronius' face light up!" For more on this subject, see: Jūratė Katinaitė, "In Music You Should Always Ask the Question: And What Does That Mean? An Interview with Donatas Katkus", Lithuanian Music Link, <https://www.mic.lt/en/discourses/lithuanian-music-link/no-20-january-december-2017/jurate-katinaite-interview-with-donatas-katkus/> (last accessed 30.10.2021).

were staged several times – Vytautas Paltanavičius' *Kryžkelėje* (*At the Crossroads*, 1967, 1975) and Vytautas Laurušas' *Paklydę paukščiai* (*Strayed Birds*, 1967, 1969), both of which satisfied the requirements of Soviet ideology set for their libretti. The opera that had the most productions was Vytautas Klova's historical work *Pilėnai* (1956, 1978, 1986), which described the heroism of 14th century Lithuanians in their battles against the Teutonic Order.¹¹ In 1977, Juzeliūnas' *The Insurgents* finally had its premiere, 20 years after its scandalous cancellation.

Despite the ideological constraints of the early 1970s, important changes took place over time in the field of art. The poet Sigitas Geda began to actively express himself in the field of literature by modernising poetic language. Kutavičius's oratorios (also based on Geda's libretti) were premiered one after the other, a factor proved not only mobilising for music, but also for culture in general. In 1972, Osvaldas Balakauskas returned to Vilnius from Kiev (where he had completed his education and lived for several years). In 1971, the director Dalia Tamulevičiūtė started working at the Youth Theatre in Vilnius, and in 1975 the Kaunas Drama Theatre welcomed into its ranks the director Jonas Vaitkus, whom the director Irena Bučienė called "an elemental expressionist" because of his innovative style of work.¹² Later, in 1978, the director Eimuntas Nekrošius made his debut, first at the Kaunas Drama Theatre and then at the Vilnius Youth Theatre. The theatre scholar Audronė Girdzijauskaitė noted in this decade that, "during a period of political and social stagnation, which seems so unfavourable to drama, a powerful Lithuanian dramaturgy movement, which had lasted for several decades, persisted".¹³ As can be

11 The censors were pleased by the portrayal of the Teutonic Knights as negative characters, as the Teutonic Order was identified with Nazi Germany, which the USSR claimed to have defeated, not by denying, but by de-emphasising the role of the Allies. Vytautas Klova (1926–2006) composed a total of 6 operas (historical and mythological), all of which were staged at the SAOBT, but none of them were as popular as *Pilėnai*. After the restoration of independence, *Pilėnai* remained in the theatre's repertoire, and in 1994, in Chicago, the opera was staged jointly by the Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theatre and the Chicago Lithuanian Opera (a company founded in 1956 with the help of Lithuanian soloists and musicians who had left Lithuania).

12 Irena Bučienė, "Kas ten, už slenksčio?" ["What's There, Beyond the Threshold?"], *Literatūra ir menas*, January 23 (1982), 6.

13 Audronė Girdzijauskaitė, "Kauno dramos teatras," ["Kaunas Drama Theatre"], in *Lietuvių teatro istorija. Trečioji knyga 1970–1980* [*The History of Lithuanian Theatre, Volume Three 1970–1980*], ed. by I. Aleksaitė (Vilnius: Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno institutas, 2016), 148.

seen, the generation of artists who first appeared on the scene in the 1970s played a significant role in reviving artistic discourse.

This enormous potential of the arts in the face of censorship gave birth to the strategies of Aesopian language and metaphorical theatre as by-products of official discourse. As the theatre scholar Goda Dapšytė observed,

alongside the Soviet discourse of imposed unified aesthetics, a new language of theatre emerged – it did not exceed the boundaries of official discourse, but at the same time it was an alternative aesthetic. <...> The totality of artistic means achieved its goals not in the text itself, but in the consciousness of the reader (spectator). Ideological censorship pursues similar goals.¹⁴

The arts during the Soviet era shaped a unique environment in which different agents with different *doxa* and *habitus* were in direct contact with each other. In other words, the most significant and distinctive features of the work of Lithuanian artists of the 1970s emerged as a result of resistance to censorship.

Art Criticism in the Cultural Press of the 1970s

Aesopian language exerted an influence not only over the arts, but also over critical expression. In the early 1970s, the prominent art critic Gražina Kliaugienė made her debut, developing an essayistic, eloquent style and addressing the problems connected with the revival of artistic language. Her texts carried great resonance and provoked controversial reactions from older art critics.

In the field of literary criticism, a metaphorical style of writing and aestheticised language became popular, developed by Vytautas Kubilius, Albertas Zalatorius, Viktorija Daujotytė, Valentinas Sventickas and others. As Elena Baliutytė has noted,

the treatment of literature as a self-regulating aesthetic phenomenon became the norm for the new generation of critics

14 Goda Dapšytė, “Sovietinės cenzūros poveikis Lietuvos teatro diskurso raidai” [“The Impact of Soviet Censorship on the Development of Lithuanian Theatre Discourse”] (PhD thesis, Lietuvos muzikos ir teatro akademija, 2015), 114.

who made their debuts in the mid-1970s (Algis Kalėda, Vytautas Rubavičius, Jūratė Sprindytė, etc.).¹⁵

The most prominent theatre critics during the 1970s were Irena Aleksaitė, Antanas Vengris, Irena Veisaitė, and Audronė Girdzijauskaitė. In the second half of the decade, the younger generation – Rūta Vanagaitė, Rūta Oginskaitė, Jūratė Visockaitė and others – arrived on the scene. It is noteworthy that both the weekly *Literatūra ir menas* and the monthly *Kultūros Barai (Fields of Culture)* were almost devoid of any examples of critique at the beginning of the decade. Critics wrote mainly essayistic pieces and profiles/portraits of artists, describing the values the latter professed in their art (literary works, performances, paintings, etc.), and the predominant format was an interview with an artist as well as laconic, retelling reviews of events and books. One of the most notable examples is the series of articles entitled *Teatras ir dramaturgija (Theatre and Dramaturgy)*, which appeared in the first half of 1975 in *Literatūra ir menas* featuring extensive in-depth interviews with directors and playwrights, from the oldest generation working in Lithuanian theatre – Juozas Miltinis and Kazimiera Kymantaitė – right through to the younger generation – Tamulevičiūtė and Nekrošius. Critiques of productions, works of music, fine arts or books were the subject of deliberations, broadcast sauditions, and plenums in specialised, academic journals or professional communities with decision-making authority, which without this “filter” would not have been suitable for the “broad masses”. Censorship limited critical evaluations of works of art, because before they could go on stage, be shown at an exhibition or be published, such works had already been checked and evaluated by censors and professionals who were members of the nomenklatura. However, the revival of art, especially in the case of theatre – for example, the performances staged by Jurašas and Vaitkus – also awakened the ambition of critics keen to publicly analyse performance ideas and their language of symbols – in other words, to decipher the Aesopian language and to re-encipher it within a critical text. In the second half of the 1970s, critiques began to appear in the cultural media. The theatre critic Egmontas Jansonas adopted a unique position on critical discourse, challenging both censors and theatre makers alike, writing sharp, sarcastic pieces and providing blunt assessments of works.

15 Elena Baliutytė, *Laiko įkaitė ir partnerė: lietuvių literatūros kritika 1945–2000 [The Hostage and Partner of Time: the Criticism of Lithuanian Literature]* (Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2002), 119.

His disregard for censors' remarks, his uncompromising character, and his intolerance of dilettantism led to his dismissal from the weekly *Literatūra ir menas* in 1974.

Among the first individuals to write critical reviews of musical works were Juozas Antanavičius, Algirdas Ambrazas, Dana Palionytė, and Loreta Tamulytė. Edmundas Baltrimas, Jonas Bruveris, Jūratė Burokaitė, Edmundas Gedgaudas, Vaclovas Juodpusis, Daiva Kšanienė, Vytautas Landsbergis, Irena Mikšytė, Ona Narbutienė, Vytautas Venckus, Jūratė Vyliūtė, Adeodatas Tauragis, and others, who discussed problems of music performance, dissemination and reception, presented creative portraits of composers and performers and provided critiques of musical theatre. Živilė Ramoškaitė and Rūta Naktinytė debuted as authors of retelling reviews. However, Naktinytė also made attempts to go beyond simply descriptive pieces and embrace the criteria of qualitative evaluation, which soon led to the suppression of her work. We should note that, in addition to articles by musicologists, cultural publications also contained quite a few texts by performers who were encouraged to educate the public, to explain creative issues "from the inside", and to provide their own impressions of their tours abroad. Such individuals included the pianists Kęstutis Grybauskas and Mariam Azizbekova, the conductors Rimas Geniušas, Algimantas Kalinauskas and Saulius Sondeckis, the choirmaster Hermanas Perelšteinas, the violinist Jurgis Dvarionas, the opera soloists Eduardas Kaniava, Virgilijus Noreika and Zenonas Paulauskas, the organist Leopoldas Digrys, the cellist Silvija Nariūnaitė, and others. Some of them did so only to meet the requirements of self-criticism imposed on artists by the party authorities, while others enjoyed such tasks and preferred to speak their mind more openly. The most outstanding examples of the latter outlook are articles written by the pianist Gedgaudas and the violist Katkus, who eventually became two of the most influential music critics in Lithuania.

It should be noted that *Literatūra ir menas* and *Kultūros barai* published cultural news from other countries, mainly from the Eastern Bloc, in particular Poland and East Germany. However, they also occasionally featured Western European and American cultural news, and commentary on the cultural life of the left-wing Lithuanian diaspora, known as the Progressives. One of the most noteworthy examples is Algirdas Ambrazas's voluminous account of his journey to East Germany, published in 1973.

The author reviewed the repertoire of the Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden opera houses, the state of contemporary German opera, directorial trends, performances, and audience attendances.¹⁶ Gedgaudas would regularly presents Polish music news, making references to Polish cultural publications, such as a reprinted interview with Witold Lutosławski from the Polish weekly *Kultura*¹⁷ or an article about the Chicago Lyric Opera's production of Krzysztof Penderecki's opera *Paradise Lost*.¹⁸ There would also be news about the international opera scene when it concerned works by Russian composers (e.g. the republication of an abridged and censored 1975 *Time* magazine review of Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, which premiered at the *Metropolitan Opera* in New York).¹⁹

The Rise of SAOBT

In the 1970s, SAOBT became the most important representative cultural institutions of the Lithuanian SSR. Its significance and prestige in society were reinforced by a number of key developments. Firstly, beginning in 1965, the most prominent Lithuanian opera soloists of the younger generation took part in an exchange programme between the *Bolshoi* in Moscow and *La Scala* in Milan, whereby the USSR sent their young soloists to *La Scala* for apprenticeships and to improve their *bel canto* technique and style, while the Italians sent their ballet dancers to Moscow to develop their classical ballet skills. Among those to take up apprenticeships in Milan were Virgilijus Noreika (1965–1966), Vaclovas Daunoras (1966–1968), Giedrė Kaukaitė (1968–1970), Aušra Stasiūnaitė (1976–1977), Irena Milkevičiūtė, and Geham Grigorian (1978–1979), who, upon their return, not only began singing at a higher level, but also took up teaching posts at the Conservatoire of the Lithuanian SSR, where they were able to pass on their knowledge to young singers. It should be emphasized here that after the war, the most prominent opera soloists, conductors and vocal teachers departed from Lithuania, as a consequence

16 Algirdas Ambrazas, "VDR operos teatruose" ["In GDR Opera Theatres"] *Kultūros barai* Issue No. 10 (10.1973), 59–62.

17 "Pokalbis su Witold Lutosławski" ["A Conversation with Witold Lutosławski"], *Literatūra ir menas* (25.08.1979), 13.

18 Edmundas Gedgaudas, "Kšyštofo Pendereckio Prarastasis rojus Čikagoje" ["Krzysztof Penderecki's Paradise Lost in Chicago"] *Literatūra ir menas* (28.07.1979), 13.

19 "Borisas Godunovas JAV scenoje" ["Boris Godunov on the Stage of USA"] *Literatūra ir menas* (15.02.1975), 4.

of which vocal culture went into decline due to a lack of knowledge, methodology and qualified teachers. The experience that the singers gained in Milan and transferred to Lithuania brought about a significant qualitative change.

Another major event was the opening of a new seat for the theatre. In 1974, SAOBT relocated to a new building on Dujų Street (currently A. Vienuolio Street). This event marked another milestone in the history of the theatre. Compared to the old edifice on J. Basanavičiaus Street, the new theatre stage far surpassed its predecessor in size, and the number of seats more than doubled (450 seats in the old building vs. over 1 000 in its successor). Older opera singers were apprehensive about the physical challenges of the new venue, and struggled emotionally to come to terms with leaving the small and cosy old theatre, where they had spent the prime of their careers. Older audience members felt the same way. On the other hand, younger artists were attracted by the modern, spacious edifice and the new opportunities it offered for their careers.

As the company prepared to relocate, new premieres were being prepared and old plays adapted to the big stage. There had been no premieres for a year and a half before the move: the build-up commenced for the first ever productions on Dujų Street. The last play made its debut in the old theatre on May 19, 1973 (Massenet's *Werther*), while first staging in the new theatre took place on November 6, 1974 – Klova's opera *Ave Vita*, about the poet and revolutionary Julius Janonis, which was specially composed for the occasion. The performance was an invitation-only event, intended only for the party nomenklatura and other Soviet elite figures. It was preceded by a state-organized commemoration of the 57th anniversary of the October Revolution.

Distrust of the theatre and the music community deepened as the party nomenklatura demonstrated their active interest in the new building as an attractive venue for Communist Party congresses and other events for the communist elite. Vytautas Laurušas, head of the theatre at the time, recalls how he planned "a beautiful opening scenario," hoping to organize a memorable celebration for the artists:

We thought about carrying the symbolic rue (a branch of the rue) from the old theatre in a solemn ceremony. We were going to gather together and honour all the senior members of staff who had worked in the theatre. I remembered the wonderful opening

ceremony of the Warsaw Grand Theatre–National Opera. After all, it was not the party nomenklatura that had been waiting so long for the new theatre, but music lovers. Everything was ruined. We could not organise the festival without authorization: the script had to be approved by the Party Central Committee. Valery Kharazov, the second secretary of the Central Committee and a Moscow stooge, did his best. He stubbornly insisted that the first event to be held at the theatre, and thus its opening event, should be a celebration of the October events... Of course, the audience was made up exclusively of members of the nomenklatura.²⁰

Two more premieres, staged especially for the new theatre, were held immediately afterwards – Charles Gounod’s *Faust* (conducted by Jonas Aleksa) on November 10 and Alexander Borodin’s *Prince Igor* (conducted by Vytautas Viržonis) on November 13, followed in turn by an updated production of Giuseppe Verdi’s *La Traviata* prepared for New Year’s Eve (conducted by Rimas Geniušas).

However, the greatest expectations surrounded the artistic approach to performances at the modern theatre, especially since the new stage facilities offered the possibility of more complex scenography. Some of the equipment was purchased in East Germany and Finland. Still, the staff lacked the skills needed to operate the machinery, and disasters were not unavoidable (on one occasion a 40-metre metal bar holding the scenery at a height of 42 metres fell – fortunately, with no injuries²¹).

The shape and content of the repertoire was also a concern. During the same season, two more premieres by Lithuanian composers took place: Vytautas Barkauskas’ *Legenda apie meilę* (*A Legend About Love*, March 29) and Vytautas Paltanavičius’ *Kryžkelėje* (*At the Crossroads*, May 9). The first season saw the staging of three new national operas, although they were artistically uneven in quality. Never since has the theatre paid so much attention to Lithuanian music.

The 1975–1976 season brought three more premieres: Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida* and *Rigoletto*, and the first opening performance in the Small Hall (Giovanni Batista Pergolesi’s *La Serva Padrona*), which proved disappointing as a venue both because of the acoustics and the awkward architectural design of the hall.

20 Rita Aleknaitė-Bieliauskienė, *Vytautas Laurušas: gyvenimo realybės ir kūrybos interpretacijos* [*Vytautas Laurušas: Interpretations of the Reality of Life and Creative Work*] (Vilnius: Lietuvos kompozitorių sąjunga, 2009), 158.

21 Aleknaitė-Bieliauskienė, *Vytautas Laurušas*, 159.

The euphoria surrounding the inauguration of the new theatre was overshadowed by the fact that the theatre's acoustics were completely unsuitable for singing opera. The performers had to force their voices, which sometimes resulted in damaged vocal cords.

The conditions prevailing in the theatre during this period, as well as the expectations of both performers and audiences have not yet been the subject of any specific study. However, many significant details are revealed in various sources, including the records of the meetings of the theatre's artistic management, monographs and memoirs by singers and conductors, etc.

One of the most famous opera soloists of the time, Irena Jasiūnaitė (mezzo-soprano), recalls the time of change: "You can, of course, look for spots to avoid sound pits. But what a huge difference between our old theatre and this one! The stage here is very big, the acoustics are poor. The audience is far away, they can't hear the real sound of the voice, and they can barely understand the words, let alone the nuances of the performer's acting."²² Acoustic improvements took a decade to carry out. However, even in the 21st century, stage structures had to be enhanced for acoustic reasons.

In July 1975 (and thus before the opening of the second season), Virgilijus Noreika was appointed head of the new theatre, and he remained in this position until 1991. His stewardship proved controversial. On the one hand, the highly qualified singer tried to freshen up the repertoire and raise both the artistic standard of his performances and the qualification requirements for singers, musicians and other staff. On the other hand, Noreika was especially loyal to the party nomenklatura, blindly adhering to its dictates, and was accused of being single-minded, of patronizing his wife, the ballerina Loreta Bartusevičiūtė, of envy, and of ruining the careers of young singers. The dual responsibilities of director²³ and his methods of leadership were sometimes a source of debate and dissatisfaction among some members of the creative staff. Although Noreika had many supporters, loyal heads of departments (who avoided contradicting the director, even if they had a different

22 Jūratė Vyliūtė, *Carmen dienoraščiai: Irena Jasiūnaitė: scenoje ir gyvenime* [The Diaries of Carmen: Irena Jasiūnaitė: on Stage and in Life] (Vilnius: Scena, 2005), 183.

23 During the Soviet era, the positions of head of theatre and artistic director were merged into one.

opinion on a particular issue)²⁴, many of the performers were unhappy, among other things, at the way in which roles were assigned as well as with the unilateral character of decision making. On many occasions discontented staff members approached the Ministry of Culture of the Lithuanian SSR with their complaints and demands. The most serious conflict took place between Noreika and the opera soloist Vaclovas Daunoras immediately after the appointment of the new director. As the confrontation dragged on, Noreika demanded that Daunoras' former students, who were already working at the theatre, choose sides. The resolution of the crisis then became the concern of the nomenklatura and party authorities, which led to Daunoras' decision in 1979 to write a letter to Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR, asking for permission for he and his family to leave the USSR. The conflict was smoothed over in Vilnius by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Lithuania: concessions were made to Daunoras, who was a famous and popular figure at the time, having won the *Grand Prix* at the prestigious Toulouse International Vocal Competition, and Noreika was instructed not to escalate the situation.²⁵ In the 1970s, Lithuanian opera singers acquired a more established status similar to that enjoyed by the nomenklatura. They were promoted by State Radio and TV, their recordings were released by the Soviet *Melodia* record label, performed concerts in the republic organised by the LSSR Philharmonic Society, as well as throughout the USSR and other countries on tours arranged by the Moscow-based state concert agency *Goskoncert* – although it must be pointed out that the agency pocketed the fees artists earned abroad and left them with only 10% of the sum.²⁶ The singers were given apartments in prestigious districts of the capital and received government grants to for cars, furniture, and other rare goods that were not available to ordinary citizens.

24 This is the assumption that we can make after listening to the testimonies of several generations of artists and participants on the opera scene in recent years.

25 The story of the confrontation between Daunoras and Noreika is described in the chapter "Kare kaip kare, arba Neįvykusios paliaubos" ["Á La Guerre Comme Á La Guerre, or The Armistice that Failed"], in *Karalių kuria aplinka: operos solistas Vaclovas Daunoras [It's the Retinue That Makes the King: Opera Soloist Vaclovas Daunoras]*, ed. by Jūratė Katinaitė (Vilnius: R. Paknio leidykla, 2015), 140–165.

26 A few prominent Lithuanian musicians (including the opera singers Virgilijus Noreika, Vaclovas Daunoras, and the conductor Saulius Sondeckis) revealed this fact in many interviews for LRT KLASIKA channel.

The Explosion in Criticism in 1978

The euphoria surrounding the opening of the new theatre building was soon replaced by disappointment with the repertoire and artistic standards. The choice of operas, the lack of stylistic knowledge of the soloists, clichéd directing and other problems motivated Edmundas Gedgaudas, an expert commentator on the theatre, to publish an article entitled *How to Stay Beloved*²⁷ in the cultural weekly *Literatūra ir menas*, whose music editor was the well-known pianist, music lover, and record collector Edmundas Baltrimas (1930–2006). Gedgaudas (b. 1933) is an eminent Lithuanian musicologist and a brilliant columnist whose interests and reflections cover a much broader cultural field than just music. After gaining considerable experience as a practicing pianist and teacher, he began to make a name for himself as a music critic in 1970. A few years later, he began to write about musical theatre. Gedgaudas eventually became one of the most insightful and influential music critics in Lithuania.

Gedgaudas and Baltrimas were close friends. Both were interested in record releases around the world, both were also well-versed in the opera. However, Gedgaudas genuinely loved live performance, while Baltrimas enjoyed audio recordings of operatic works by famous artists. The idea of writing an article came to them in a conversation about the state of things at SAOBT. It is important to note that in the late 1970s censorship had relaxed and become more passive, and debate in the press was tolerated more, including in the form of “round table” conversations about theatre issues, choral culture, amateur art, etc. The culture of debate was a relatively new phenomenon in the public sphere and stimulated greater interest among participants in the cultural matters. As expected, Gedgaudas’ article attracted a great deal of attention in the music community. In less than 4 months, 10 articles appeared, shedding light on the state of the theatre at the time, the power relations within it, and the culture and limits of discussion.

The following participants took part in the discussion:

1. Edmundas Gedgaudas (critic), *How to Stay Beloved*, March 18;

²⁷ Edmundas Gedgaudas, “Kaip likti mylimai” [“How to Stay Beloved”] *Literatūra ir menas*, March 18 (1978), 6. The metaphor in the title refers to the old theatre building where opera was beloved by audiences. The author raised the question of what kind of problems prevented opera from remaining beloved on the new stage.

2. Rimas Geniušas (SAOBT conductor, and chief conductor from 1958 to 1975), *Critics Suggest, the Audience Waits...*, April 8;
3. Adeodatas Tauragis (musicologist, educator, researcher on 20th-century music), *Both Verdi and Monteverdi*, April 22;
4. Jonas Aleksa (chief conductor of the SAOBT, appointed by Noreika when he became head of the theatre. Aleksa had just returned from an apprenticeship in Vienna), *To Attract and Interest the Audience*, April 29;
5. Vaclovas Daunoras (vocal professor, singer, former SAOBT soloist, dismissed from his post at the time due to a conflict with the head of the theatre), *Voice is a Specific Instrument*, May 6;
6. Zenonas Paulauskas (vocal teacher, head of the Singing Department of the LSSR State Conservatoire, former head of the SAOBT and long-time soloist), *To be Worthy of Love*, May 3;
7. Kostas Šilgalis (former soloist of many years standing at SAOBT and head of the local branch of the Communist Party), *Cherishing the Legacy*, May 20;
8. Vytautas Landsbergis (musicologist, pianist, and teacher), *Repertory and the Whole Story*, June 3;
9. Jonas Bruveris (musicologist, head of the Literary Section of SAOBT), *One Path*, June 10;
10. Virgilijus Noreika (opera soloist, head and artistic director of SAOBT), *Our Path*, July 1.

As we can see, some of those involved in the debate were SAOBT employees (Geniušas, Aleksa, and Bruveris), directly dependent on the head of the theatre and possibly encouraged to participate and defend the theatre's position, although no documents have been found to show that the matter was brought up in meetings of SAOBT's artistic board. The fact that Noreika's text was sent to the editor of the weekly was not noted in the SAOBT's correspondence with other institutions²⁸, although copies of several other letters from the theatre head to the Editorial Board of *Literatūra ir menas* have been found. The authors of the other texts were either former theatre employees (Daunoras, Paulauskas, and Šilgalis), who thus knew the specifics of the situation, but were now able to express their views more freely, or representatives of the music community who

28 SAOBT documents are stored in the Lithuanian Archive of Literature and Art.

were not directly involved in theatre, but who were interested in music matters (Gedgaudas, Tauragis, and Landsbergis).

In his publication, Gedgaudas raised the following 5 main issues, not all of which received equal attention:

1. Live performance or perfect record?

The author pointed out that there was a growing tendency among music lovers to enjoy opera recordings at home thanks to the availability of excellent equipment.

But when the components of music, art and drama meet in common consonance, mutually reinforcing each other, they create an artistic manifestation that can only occur in the opera house, and the spectator feels himself not only a witness, but also almost a participant – this is an impression that vinyl will not replace²⁹.

This topic did not directly affect the participants in the debate, but instead revealed the listening habits of music lovers. In the 1970s, higher quality sound technology was being introduced, and the Soviet record company *Melodia* started to release records featuring famous Western singers, in particular soloists from Milan's *La Scala*, which broadened the horizons of music lovers, shaped their preferences, and fostered disillusionment with Lithuanian vocal culture and SAOBT performances.

2. Lopsided repertoire.

Gedgaudas stated, somewhat satirically, that

the theatre posters currently feature eight Italian operas, two French, two Russian and two Lithuanian operas, and one Soviet opera for children. That's it. Two-thirds of them date from second half of the nineteenth century, in other words, one-eighth of the history of opera. How true we sometimes are to the opinion we once formed!³⁰

Geniušas responds by defending the standard repertoire of the theatre as follows:

it has become the case in most opera houses around the world that critics propose one kind of repertoire (usually focusing on the

29 Edmundas Gedgaudas, "Kaip likti mylimai", 6.

30 Ibid., 6.

18th and 20th centuries), hile the audience expects, as statistics for attendances show, a different, more traditional repertoire. But the opera houses take their own path, trying to take into account the challenges of the time, the demands of the audience, and the actual staging possibilities.³¹

Tauragis, who agrees with Geniušas that 19th century works dominate in the repertoires of all opera houses, pointed out that Verdi wrote 32 operas rather than the three that are constantly being restaged there, and that Puccini wrote not only *Madama Butterfly*, *La Boheme* and *Tosca*, but also *Il Trittico* and *Turandot*. Tauragis was a man of education and an enthusiast for innovation, who was interested in 20th-century music and read all the foreign music magazines available in libraries. He pointed out that Beethoven, Carl Maria von Weber, Richard Strauss, and Leoš Janáček had never been performed at the theatre! Nor had the works of such famous 17th and 18th century opera composers as Claudio Monteverdi, Luigi Cherubini, Christoph Wilibald Gluck, George Frideric Händel, and Henry Purcell, who had never been introduced to the Lithuanian public. Tauragis also mentioned operas from his adored 20th century repertoire (Benjamin Britten, Dmitri Shostakovich, Bohuslav Martinů, Gian Carlo Menotti, Arthur Honegger and others).

It is true that there have not even been 20 performances of Britten's great production *Peter Grimes* in Leningrad, and there have been even fewer in Riga. However short-lived, these productions have played their part, revealing to the listener new possibilities for vocal, orchestral and general musical expression, and new principles of musical dramaturgy. That alone has made them necessary and justified.³²

Tauragis also highlighted the lack of Russian, Estonian, Latvian and Georgian operas, and proposed initiating creative exchanges.

Aleksa, like Geniušas, defended the standard repertoire of the theatre and countered criticism of its limited repertoire:

the opera house is not an institution that teaches music history. <...> Of course, a variety of styles is necessary here. <...> However, the repertoire is developed not on the basis of a catalogue of operatic

31 Rimas Geniušas, *Kritika siūlo, publika laukia...* [Critics Suggest, the Audience Waits], *Literatūra ir menas* (08.04.1978), 7.

32 Adeodatas Tauragis, "Ir Verdi, ir Monteverdi" ["Both Verdi and Monteverdi"], *Literatūra ir menas* (22.04.1978), 10.

literature, but according to the specific conditions of the opera house today and its troupe of soloists.³³

On the other hand, Daunoras proposed that the repertoire should be seen primarily as a tool for furthering the professional development of singers. Naturally, Daunoras rejected Tauragis' ideas for the repertoire. In his opinion, an opera repertoire should first and foremost take into account the health of the singers' voices. As a former head of the theatre, Paulauskas noted the inexperience of the theatre management and the absence of any repertoire policy:

...even now, when preparing a plan for new productions over the next five years, the theatre seems to be floundering, without a definite opinion on this important issue.³⁴

As far as Šilgalis' was concerned, the theatre should take into account Lithuania's legacy; it should revise Lithuanian operas and include Lithuanian composers in the critical editing process. Landsbergis agreed with Šilgalis, referring to pre-war Lithuanian operas. On the one hand, Landsbergis expanded on Tauragis' idea that audiences should be introduced to a repertoire they were not familiar with, while on the other hand, he agreed with Aleksa that this repertoire should be determined by the specific conditions, the theatre's possibilities, and the capacity of the singers. In defending the theatre's repertoire as optimal, Noreika reminded them that not everyone that Tauragis had listed among the most prominent opera composers of the 20th century (Berg, Honegger, Hindemith, etc.)

is suitable for the Soviet theatre. The theatre in our country expresses and propagates socialist ideology. It is not and cannot be a representative of "art for art's sake". <...> Our main task is to help educate people in the communist way and to smash the relics of bourgeois ideology. <...> Our principle is very clear: do not stray from the main road for the sake of the path.³⁵

This ideologized rhetoric conveys the director's anger and resentment at criticism rather than his personal attitude to the repertoire, because in the nomenklatura-dictated hierarchy that Noreika followed, there could be

33 Jonas Aleksa, "Patraukti, sudominti žiūrova" ["To Captivate and Interest the Spectator"], *Literatūra ir menas* (29.04.1978), 9.

34 Zenonas Paulauskas, "Būti meilės vertai" ["To be Worthy of Love"], *Literatūra ir menas* (13.05.1978), 6.

35 Vigilijus Noreika, "Mūsų kelias" ["Our Path"], *Literatūra ir menas* (01.07.1978), 6–7.

no comments “from below” or “from the side”: only criticism “from above” should be responded to.

3. Qualification of soloists.

As an advocate of theatrical aesthetics, Gedgaudas stressed that interpretation should be in accordance with style, and not just vocal technique:

the theatre often gives us a chance to reflect not only on the importance of vocal and acting levels, but also on the musical knowledge of the singers and their competence as true interpreters. <...> There is also an illustrative quality, which, without categorically rejecting it, does not make the role a process that evolves from one performance to the next.³⁶

However, all those who considered this problem (Daunoras, Paulauskas, Aleksa) understood it solely in terms of vocal professionalism and believed it could be solved by improving the quality of vocal teaching at the conservatory. Only Bruveris admitted that the real issue at stake was a faulty tradition caused by a limited repertoire and a lack of erudition. However, as a SAOBT employee, he appeared to blame the soloists themselves, who should endeavour to improve their chamber repertoire by exploring different styles. It is possible that the musicologist was referring here to Giedre Kaukaite, a singer of exceptional erudition, who, at that time, had just left the theatre to devote herself to chamber and contemporary music.

4. Direct allusion to the Opera of pre-war Kaunas.

Although the values of independent, pre-war Lithuania were considered to be bourgeois relics during the Soviet era, theatregoers managed to uphold the spirit of the State Theatre in their community, including even some traditions, the most prominent of which was the annual New Year’s Eve performance of *La Traviata*, in this way commemorating the opening of the national opera theatre (December 31, 1920).

There is no doubt that V. Kuprys is perfectly and clearly able to continue the priceless traditions associated with the role of Mephistopheles in our theatre. But it is not only in this respect that

³⁶ Edmundas Gedgaudas, “Kaip likti mylimai”, 6.

so much can be said about *Faust* and *Carmen*. They are, in their own way, historical or “museum” productions. It is a pleasure for both the theatre and the audience to have them in the repertoire. But only if they adequately represent the aspirations and achievements of this phase, which has already become historical³⁷,

Gedgaudas openly wrote about his longing for “bourgeois relics”. Landsbergis continued this line of thought, emphasising a repertoire comprising Lithuanian operas from the first half of the 20th century not only as a reserve, but also as an matter of cultural self-consciousness and duty. Paulauskas also referred to the importance of the pre-war opera traditions of the State Theatre, complaining that

we will soon be celebrating the 60th anniversary of Lithuanian opera, and yet young people know next to nothing about its history and traditions.³⁸

Those participants in the discussion who were also employed by the theatre did not expand on this narrative.

5. Scantiness of directorial ideas.

The arguments forwarded by Gedgaudas were not echoed by the respondents to the debate. The musicologist declared that

the style of a performance is determined only by a unified idea shared by all the staggers and performers. <...> The style is created through selection, through limitation. True art does not emerge when these things are ignored.³⁹

At the time, staging was not a significant aspect of an opera performance, as long as it was not an embarrassment to anyone. All productions were staged in the traditional manner, i.e. as historical costume dramas. However, Gedgaudas admired the scenography of the famous stage designer Liudas Truikys and the idea of musical synthesis that it implied, where the action and musical rhythm of a performance are echoed in the set design, which adds additional connotations of meaning. On the other hand, the drama scenes were already embracing the style of metaphorical theatre, which appealed to a more intellectual audience. This marked the beginning of a boom in directorial theatre in Lithuania,

37 Ibid., 6.

38 Zenonas Paulauskas, “Būti meilės vertai”, 13.

39 Edmundas Gedgaudas, “Kaip likti mylimai”, 6.

while opera continued the old directorial tradition in this respect. This also alienated the younger generation from opera, as drama – especially at the Kaunas Drama Theatre and the Youth Theatre in Vilnius – was undergoing significant, immersive processes.

Although Gedgaudas did not touch upon the subject of opera criticism, those respondents who had worked in the theatre complained about the poor state of criticism, unreviewed performances and debuts, etc. Noreika counter-attacked on this point, making it clear that he did not take the negative comments of Gedgaudas, Tauragis and Landsbergis seriously:

We have not received any substantial criticism on the work of the musical theatre, which would be capable of analysing and stimulating the development of opera and ballet. The Artistic Board of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR (of which I am a member) has made it clear that an opera performance should be evaluated by a musical theatre critic (in Russian there is a specific term for this person – an “operoved”.⁴⁰ Most “universal” critics speak in generalities or express only subjective thoughts about the kind of theatre they are trying to imagine. Of course, our most important task is to make the performance artistic and professional, but it should not only be appreciated and understood by the 40 musicologists in the Republic, but also by the 1100 spectators who come to the theatre every night.⁴¹

Despite the rigorous conclusion of the debate, which lasted several months, it constituted a clear outpouring of free expression, of opinions reflecting the concepts, attitudes, preferences, intellect, and culture of dialogue of the musical elite at the time. Simultaneously, it was the largest public debate on opera and the activities of SAOBT during the Soviet era.

Because of the controversial issues addressed in his article, Gedgaudas cultivated substantial symbolic capital and attracted the attention of other participants and commentators on the arts who involved him in their own games, having recognised the totality of values (*doxa*). A year later, *Literatūra ir menas* hosted a “round table” conversation, *Theatre: Common Criteria and Specificity*⁴², to which theatre critics invited Gedgaudas together with other theatre critics, commentators and artists.

40 Operalogist.

41 Virgilijus Noreika, “Mūsų kelias” [“Our Path”], *Literatūra ir menas* (01.07.1978), 6–7.

42 “Teatras: bendrieji matai ir savitumas” [“Theatre: Common Criteria and Specificity”], *Literatūra ir menas* (03.11.1979), 6–7.

He became an influential critic and public intellectual and has remained active and respected to this day.

We ought to mention that this sudden outburst of critical freedom would soon be suppressed. On January 15, 1980, a talk on music criticism organised by Sigizmundas Šimkus, head of the Culture Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Lithuania, took place in the House of Composers, and was attended by, among other musicians, Noreika, Aleksa, and Sondeckis, along with representatives of the nomenklatura. The musicologist Vytautas Venckus, who took part in the talk, later described it in his diary, referring to it as the “execution” of music criticism.⁴³ Criticism, in his words, was labelled unprofessional and disrespectful of authority, and *Literatura ir menas* was condemned as a tabloid. It was in the face of this grim fact that Lithuanian music criticism entered the final decade of the Soviet era.

Conclusions

Lithuania entered the 1970s in an atmosphere of increased censorship, repression, and disillusionment among artists with the promises made during the Khrushchev Thaw. Eventually, artists adapted to the restrictions of censorship, managing to get around it and tread a fine line between what was allowed and not allowed. This gave rise to the use of Aesopian language and metaphorical theatre. Contemporary music also went through a period of significant stylistic renewal.

This breakthrough in the arts also led to a renewal of critical discourse. In the second half of the 1970s, cultural publications contained more and more texts containing freer, uncensored (and to some extent, self-censored) criticism.

In this context, SAOBT served as a kind of citadel: although it had moved to a new ‘palace’, the creative problems remained the same – the one-sidedness of the repertoire, the artistic standard of the performances, and the lack of professionalism of the singers. These issues provoked Gedgaudas’ controversial article, to which 9 respondents replied – a public debate of unprecedented intensity on the arts in the Soviet era. The discussion, which lasted 4 months, revealed the narrow range of

43 Vytautas Kubilius, *Dienoraščiai*, 230.

SAOBT's repertoire, its artistic limitations, the problems of training young singers, the passive approach to stage directing, etc.

The reserved opinions of those participants in the discussion who were members of at SAOBT's staff, together with Noreika's categorical closing letter, with which he brought the debate to an emphatic end, reveal the idiosyncrasies characterising the management of an arts institution during the Soviet era: a collective philosophy, a disregard for critical opinions, and the use of instruments of power to deal with opponents.

Nevertheless, the discussion had a significant impact on the further development of opera criticism and consolidated Gedgaudas' symbolic capital in the cultural field.

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**Peculiarities and Limitations of Opera Criticism During the Soviet Era:
the Story of One Review and the Outpouring of Responses it Provoked in 1978**

Summary

The article, which focuses on an unexpected outpouring of critical opinion in 1978, examines the activities of the opera company that functioned as part of the State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic in the 1970s. Among other things, it looks at the idiosyncrasies of its management, the state of opera criticism, its possibilities and limits. The treatment of art in Soviet Lithuania varied considerably from field to field, and state censorship enforced the strictest controls on literature and theatre, which led to the emergence of metaphorical theatre and Aesopian language, which in turn resulted in changes not only in the style and content of creative work, but also in the form of critical texts. The present research shows how these issues were treated and appreciated by representatives of the music community, shaped by their dependence on, or independence of, the institution in question, the absence or existence of a nomenklatura mentality, their professional approach and personal convictions. Nevertheless, the discussion had a significant impact on the further development of opera criticism in Lithuania.

Jūratė Katinaitė, MA - musicologist, graduated from the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre (LAMT) in 1998 (Master of Arts). In 2018, she began her PhD studies at the LAMT. Between 1994 and 2020 she worked as a radio producer and presenter at LRT. She still collaborates with LRT as a freelance opera producer and host. She regularly writes reviews and essays on the topics of opera, contemporary music, and cultural policy. Katinaitė's book *Karalių Kuria Aplinka: Operos Solistas Vaclovas Daunoras* (The King Is Created by his Environment: Opera Soloist Vaclovas Daunoras, 2018) was awarded the Ona Narbutienė Prize. The musicologist is a member of the Lithuanian Council for Culture, the Art College of the Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theatre, and the State Commission on the Lithuanian Language. Between 2010 and 2017 she was the Chairperson of the Musicological Section of the Lithuanian Composers' Union. In 2021 the government awarded Katinaitė the Culture and Art Prize of the Republic of Lithuania. Her research interests include opera, contemporary music and Soviet culture studies.