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The Image of Kuma from Pyotr Tchaikovsky's *The Enchantress* in Contemporary Opera Productions: Concerning the Question of Musical Rossica

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Abstract. In this article the attempt is made to examine the main protagonist of Pyotr Tchaikovsky's opera *The Enchantress* through the prism of musical rossica — a new trend in musical scholarship elaborated in Professor Liudmila Kazantseva's academic school. The author touches upon the questions of comparative analysis of the opera's productions and the performers' interpretations of the Kuma's arioso "Where are you, my desired one?" from Act 4. Among the analyzed examples is Svetlana Kasyan's operatic vocal performance at the Bolshoi Theater in 2014 and Asmik Grigoryan's performance at the Oper Frankfurt in 2022). The author arrives at the conclusion that both productions are concentrated on the extroversive peripeteia of the main heroine's life, as the result of which the formation of the image of Nastasya takes place to a great degree under the sign of visibility. On the other hand, the process of Kuma's inner transformation, revealing in this protagonist the archetypic features of the Russian national character manifested in Tchaikovsky's music, does not receive its due disclosure.

Keywords: Russian national archetype, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, *The Enchantress*, operatic vocal singing, Svetlana Kasyan, Asmik Grigoryan

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Introduction

Professor Liudmila Kazantseva in her programmatic article “*Muzykal'naya rossika*” *kak muzykovedcheskii termin* [‘Musical Rossica’ as a Musicological Term], analyzes in the most detailed manner the history of the formation of musical rossica within the framework of humanitarian scholarship presented by philology, the visual arts and cinema. It is referred to a special sphere of musical creativity that “depicts the perspective of Russia (in the narrow sense — of everything Russian) through the prism of foreign culture.” [1, p. 26] While noting that in these sphere of knowledge, a great amount of experience of work on the systematization and typologization of the works is demonstrated by authors from outside of Russia who turn to the Russian theme in their works, Kazantseva’s accentuates her attention on the angles of research prospective for Russian art studies realized along the lines of musical rossica. They include:

- the study of works of composers from outside of Russia who incorporate in their compositional works musical derivations undoubtedly pertaining to Russian culture;
- analysis of works by composers outside of Russia the musical content of which is connected in the most direct manner with Russian subject matter;
- demonstration of the authenticity of the musical material positioned by composers from other countries as being Russian. [Ibid.]

According to the researcher, such an experience would help arrive at the adduction in regard to how Russia and its people are perceived by Western people, and to what extent are these perceptions correspond to reality, or distort it, being conducive to the creation

of false stereotypes. It is obvious that the search for answers to these and other questions would bring the scholarly community to the necessity of arriving with a greater amount of responsibility to the evaluation of works by Russian composers who turn their gazes on remote shores, painting pictures of “overseas countries.”

In the present context, the most representative genre is opera. Our point of view is confirmed by the world acknowledgement of the Russian musical theater. Among the most popular compositions in this genre are the operas by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Modest Mussorgsky, Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, and Dmitri Shostakovich. This is indicated by the portal “Kultura RF,” which conducted research with the aim of disclosing the most popular Russian compositions in the West during the period from the 19th century to the present day.¹

No less important a role is played by the immensely high level of the Russian vocal school, due to which Russian musicians have performed on prestigious opera stages throughout the world, their repertoire having included Russian works. Here it is appropriate to mention the names of Aida Garifullina, Ekaterina Guseva, Larisa Dyad'kova, Natalia Semenyaka, Olga Perityat'ko, Ildar Abdrazakov, and a host of others. Finally, it is particularly in opera, which is inherently based on the synthesis of the arts, it is necessary to observe the balance between all the components of the synthetical whole, the disruption of which may result in the danger of distorting the authorial conception, which at times creates the precedent for broad polemics, maked by the confrontation of cardinaly opposing viewpoints.

¹ See: *Samye izvestnye russkie opery za rubezhom* [The Most Famous Russian Operas Abroad]. URL: <https://www.culture.ru/materials/253366/samye-izvestnye-russkie-opery-za-rubezhom> (accessed: 19.04.2025).

As for the People's Republic of China, here Tchaikovsky's music is widely known and loved. As a rule, the composer's most well-known compositions, which are especially revered by his compatriots, are — the opera *Eugene Onegin* and the ballet *The Nutcracker*. Along with this, present-day Chinese music scholarship has aspired towards a broadening of perceptions about the master's artistic legacy, having undertaken the attempts to study the operas *Iolanta* [2; 3] and *The Queen of Spades*, [4; 5; 6] among other things, actualizing the intertextual connections discovered in other examples of Tchaikovsky's musical theater. [7]

It is noteworthy that along with pursuing purely musicological goals, Chinese scholars have raised the question of Tchaikovsky's national identity manifested in his works. Thus, Zhang Lizhen in his article devoted to the opera *Iolanta* writes about the fact that this opera displays a combination of the Russian national tradition with universal human values. [8, p. 39] In his turn, the researcher of the opera *The Queen of Spades* Guan Peitian arrives at the conclusion, according to which a reflection of the Russian mentality is carried out in this synthesis of academic and folk music traditions. [9] This opinion is revoiced by Chen Ganyi, in whose opinion, Tchaikovsky in his opera *The Queen of Spades* was able to recreate the spirit of Russia of Catherine the Great's era. [10]

The National Specificity of Tchaikovsky's Music

In the context of musical *rossica*, of special interest is the opera *The Enchantress* — the composer's favorite work, which essentially manifests in itself the quintessence of Russianness. It suffices to remember the words of Boris Asafiev, who highlighted that this composition became “the first Russian orchestral and everyday novel in Russian musical theater, according to its consistency

of aims.” [11, p. 163] The deeply Russian folk character, “inseparable from the ways of life and the nature surrounding Nastasya,” was also noted by Yuri Keldysh. [12, p. 172] It seems that such a description corresponds to Tchaikovsky's own character to the fullest extent. This is how he expressed himself in that regard in one of his letters to Nadezhda Filaretovna von Mekk: “I have still not met any person more in love with Mother Russia, in general, and with its Great Russian parts, in particular <...> I love passionately the Russian person, Russian speech, the Russian attitude of mind, Russian faces, Russian customs.” [13, p. 104]

Nonetheless, just as before, also at present, the question of the specificity of the composer's music remains debatable. As an argument, let us bring a few comparisons that belong, on the one hand, to the composer's contemporaries, and on the other hand, to his descendants:

– “the national element does not always come off successfully for Tchaikovsky” [14, p. 192];

– “of all the Russian artists, he [Tchaikovsky] forever remained a cosmopolitan, even when he tried to think in Russian, to come closer to the well-known peculiarities of the emerging Russian musical culture” [15, p. 48];

– “although Tchaikovsky is a national composer for Russian music lovers, among Western European musicologists... there still remain doubts. In evaluating him a less nationally oriented, in comparison with such representatives of the Russian school as ... Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, they suggest that he was primarily committed to German and French music, which created an obstacle for him in regard to reaching their level.” [16, pp. 4–5]

Nonetheless, we deem it possible to assert that, overall, the heroine of the opera *The Enchantress* embodies by herself the national archetype, the inseparable components of which are represented by: a thirst for freedom; a soul-cleansing selfless devotion;

an aspiration towards a genuine intrinsic life imbued with sacredness and penetrated with the idea of freedom. Moreover, the feeling Nastasya experienced for the Prince's son, disclosed in the context of the philosophy of love, corresponds to the conception of Russian philosophy as it is presented in the works of Vladimir Solovyov and the idea of transfiguration relevant for Orthodox Christian culture (for more detail see: [17; 18]).

In our opinion, the penetration of the sought for archetype into the latent depths of Kuma's image is what adds difficulty to the opera's stage productions, whereas the so-called "outer person" completely subdues the "inner person" appearing within the context of musical theater. While establishing a system of argumentation, let us settle upon a number of stage versions of the opera *The Enchantress*, concentrating ourselves on the Kuma's arioso "Where are you, my desired one?"²

The Image of Kuma in Tchaikovsky's Opera

To forestall the comparison of the interpretations of the operatic vocalism, let us turn to its artistic singularity and original interpretation inherent in the primary source (the original version of the composition), as created by the composer Tchaikovsky and the librettist Shpazhinsky.

The arioso is a constituent part of the number listed as the Scene and Arioso of Kuma, No. 20. Being important in terms of the dramaturgy, it bears two functions. On the one hand, the Scene depicts a picture of the preparation of the meeting of Kuma with the Prince's son a day before their planned flight from Nizhny Novgorod to escape the wrath and threats of the Prince, in order to preserve their love

and their lives. Thereby, the scene describes the stemming action preceding the plotline's further development. On the other hand, it prepares the figurative-emotional context (the mood and the color) for the subsequent Arioso of Kuma and to a certain degree forebodes the drama's forthcoming tragic outcome (the heroine's death and the events following it).

The scene opens up with the arrival of a boat approaching the shore of the Oka River, carrying Kuma and her friends, who are frequent visitors of Nastasya's wayside inn. Potap (bass-baritone) and Lukash (tenor), Kichiga (bass) and one (nameless) Visitor from Nizhny Novgorod (tenor). The beginning of the scene shows the setting of the action: a gloomy, wild, dark forest, a pathway from the bank of the Oka River, not far away from that, an entrance to a cavern, nearby — a tree struck by lightning.

The atmosphere of the action is imbued with an austere, gloomy color. The fractured tree is perceived as a menacing sign: its deformation, angular fractures and lifeless appearance symbolize the close tragical denouement of the drama. The "dead" tree in the forest logically "rhymes" with the powerful living tree in the scene at Kuma's accommodation house from Act I, where under its sprawling roof there stood a table and a bench for receiving guests from Nizhny Novgorod (piano-vocal score, Folk Scene No. 1, p. 14). In the first scene of the opera, it is perceived in the diametrically opposite meaning — as a symbol of hospitality, a sign of life and its joys.

The central section of the scene is devoted to the heroine's farewell to her friends. The mood of this episode is endowed with a mournfully lyrical character expressing the sorrow of Kuma herself. After the departure of the men from

² Here and onwards, cit. from: Tchaikovsky P. I. "Charodeika." Opera v chetyryokh aktakh. Libretto I. Shpazhinskogo. Novyi tekst S. Grodetskogo. Klavir [*The Enchantress*. Opera in Four Acts. Libretto by Ippolit Shpazhinsky. New text by Sergei Gorodetsky. Piano-Vocal Score]. Moscow: Muzyka, 1970. 428 p.

the stage, Nastasya remains alone in a wild forest and in complete darkness waits for a meeting with the Prince's Son, imbued with love, longing expectation and, at the same time, ambiguous agitation.

The Arioso from Scene No. 20 carries out two functions in the musical dramaturgy. First of all, it provides the chief lyrical culmination in the development of the image of the opera's main heroine, characterizing the power, plenitude and sincerity of her love. Its culmination significantly emphasizes the thematicism, that is striking in its expressivity and beauty, of the Arioso, which has been included in the treasury of world opera classics. Second, from the perspective of dynamic relief of musical dramaturgy, the present scene presents a cessation of the action before the phase of the sharply tragic outcome of the operatic conflict.

This kind of technique is frequently employed in dramatic operas and in dramaturgy, in general, manifesting the principle of a "compressed spring": its compression (the stop prior to the subsequent rectification) provides a special dynamicity to the further development, aspiring to the denouement and the chief — tragic — culmination of the composition, as a whole. In the present case, the culmination coincides with the scene of the death of Kuma poisoned by the Princess (No. 23 the Final Scene) beginning the phase of the dispersed denouement (the death of the main heroine is followed by the scene of Yuri being killed by his father, the Princess' despair and the scene of Prince Kurlyatev's madness).

The Kuma's Arioso "Where are you, my desired one?" is performed after a succession of dramatic events of the operatic action, the development of which is characterized by a consistent congestion of dramatism and an exacerbation of the conflict. The pre-death *solo* — the main heroine's swan song — is preceded by two episodes of the drama that are crucial

in their meaning. The first of them is the dialogic scene of Nastasya and Prince Kurlyatev (No. 15), essentially presenting a single combat scene, reflecting Kuma's character and the feeling of personal dignity inherent in her. The second is the Scene and Duet of the Princess and Kudma "It grows in the forest" (No. 19), in which the Princess receives the poison from the sorcerer prepared by him from rainbowweed.

These two indicated sharply dramatic numbers are divided in the operatic action by the Love Duet of Kuma and the Prince's Son, correlated with the enframing episodes according to the principle of antithesis: darkness vs. light, death vs. love, and hate vs. love.

Kuma's Arioso, No. 20, brief in its duration and simple in its form, is discerned by the most abundant emotional palette. The three stanzas supplemented with a few additional extra lines, comprising the foundation of its structure, presents a genuine poem about love, manifesting the heroine's grief, sorrow, impatience and trepidation (the first two stanzas are in the key of *E minor*); passion and an exstastic elevation of feelings (the third stanza is in *E major*); longing and a submergence into amorous distraction in the forestalling of the heroine's meeting with her beloved (the supplementary conclusion with the "glimmering" tonic of *E major – E minor*).

A preparation of the intonational contour of the theme is given in a short orchestral introduction (two measures long) to the Arioso, based on an adhesion of flagging motives with the initial secundal "sighs" (the theme of the solo flute against the background of string instruments). At the same time, the first two motives consist of tritone endings (augmented fourths), which is emphasized by the inner tension intrinsic to the lyrical, elegiac mood and the inner state of the heroine waiting for a meeting with her beloved. A progression of a tritone is also included in the melodicism of the first sentence of the first stanza:

on the connection of the phrases: “Light of my soul” and “Beauty, joy of my eyes.” The tension and disequilibrium of the heroine’s state of her soul is also emphasized by the chromaticisms appearing in the orchestral part: the alteration of scale degrees IV and VI with their subsequent disalteration. The thematicism of the Arioso in its vocal part combines a romance-arioso intonational complex and declamatory quality, which endows Kuma’s musical speech with the character of an intimate utterance unaffectedly pouring out from the depth of her soul.

Most illustrative is the choice of the tonality for the Arioso, endowed with a special meaning in Tchaikovsky’s music. *E minor* is the tonality in which a number of the composer’s most significant works of the lyrical-tragic vein have been written, determining the essence of his music. Among them, we must highlight, in particular, the *Fifth Symphony*, the overture *Francesca da Rimini*, the pre-mortem aria-elegy of Lensky “What the forecoming day is preparing for me?” (from Scene 5 of *Eugene Onegin*), as well as one of Herman’s most heartfelt and dramatic ariosos from *The Queen of Spades* “When I would be bereft of gratifying doubt” (from the Scene 1) foreboding his death. The key of *E minor* in the thematicism of Kuma’s part appears long before her farewell Arioso, corresponding to the through principles of musical dramaturgy characteristic for Tchaikovsky’s compositional method, in general, and in the symphonized dramaturgy of *The Enchantress*, in particular.

It is perceived to be possible to define the semantics of *E minor* as a tonality manifesting in the opera (and, most likely, in Tchaikovsky’s music, on the whole) the closest conjugacy of Love and Death as the leading categories of the poetics of the composer’s music.

In the development of the heroine’s image, the third stanza of the Arioso, written in the key of *E major*, comprises a bright contrast to the first two and is connected

with them by the tuneful themes of the solo English horn (highlighted by the comment in the score *dolce espress.*). The instrument’s inimitable timbre emphasizes the profoundly national — Russian nature of Nastasya’s image. The grace-notes and descending seconds in the sequential motive are conducive to the creation of a lamenting character, contrasting to the unexpectedly “iridescent” color of the third stanza and disclosing the grievous subtext of the heroine’s thoughts of happiness.

In conclusion of the analysis of the musical style of Kuma’s Arioso, mention must be made of the intonational formula of the descending second followed by the ascending fourth: at the words “faster” (mm. 4–5) and “light of my soul” (mm. 5–6). It seems that, considering the tragic character of the plotline, the idea of Love curtailed by Fate, and the heroine’s death in the final scene of the opera, it may be examined as a certain forestalling of the fatal motive of the three cards from Tchaikovsky’s opera *The Queen of Spades*.

The role of Kuma, performed by a dramatic soprano, requires an immense amount of emotional output, psychological mastery, and a powerful voice. Traditionally, the range of a dramatic soprano is defined by the boundaries of *A* of the small octave on the bottom and *C–D* of the third above on the top. In the present Arioso, the ambitus of the vocal part is more modest: from *E* of the first octave to *B* of the second octave. In our opinion, such a limitation presents a conscious economy of the singing resources on the part of the composer. First, because the figurative-emotional palette of the Arioso, in which there is a predomination of the states of elegiac agitation, sorrow, and hidden inner tension, ruptured in the culmination by a brief estatic elevation of feelings, does not require any redundant expression or engaging of the entire fullness of possible performing resources. Second, the present Arioso may

be perceived as a representation of Kuma's characteristic features, marked by a restrained expressivity, which corresponds to the Russian feminine character with the inner power, depth of passions and, at the same time, the certain degree of "closedness" intrinsic to it.³ This special feature of the heroine's nature it is very important, in our opinion, to preserve in the interpretation of Nastasya's image.

Other important components of Nastasya's character are her cordiality, warm-heartedness, and tendresse, which arouse the willingness on the part of the dwellers of Novgorod to "stand by" her during difficult times. In this connection, especially noteworthy is her by-name — "Kuma." That circumstance that "kuma" is how a godmother is addressed makes it possible to reveal the interaction of the female national archetype with the archetype of a mother and, overall, of Russia. A similar connection is traced in the following set of lexemes: *kindred mother*, *mother-earth*, *mother damp earth*, *Russian land*, *native land*. Moreover, in the poems of both Alexander Blok and Vassily Lebedev-Kumach, notwithstanding the extreme difference of scale of their talents and the temporal frameworks in which they wrote their poetry, Russia presents itself as a wife ("O, my Rus, my wife!"), and as a bride ("We love our homeland as a bride").

It is not by chance, therefore, that Boris Asafiev's words in regard to Tchaikovsky's *The Enchantress*, that the music, in its depiction of the history of the death of the main heroine, reflects the "resistance on the part of the Russian woman to violence and predation" characteristic of Russian everyday life, [19] written at the beginning of the previous century, sound in unison with the positions of the contemporary philosopher. "During the course of a lengthy period of time," as Clarissa Pincola Estés states,

"the female instinctive nature was subjected to persecution, plunder and abuse. Similar to any type of wild nature, it always suffered from injudicious treatment... During the course of history, the spiritual lands of the Pristine Woman were devastated and scorched, her sanctuaries were torn down by bulldozers, while her natural cycles were transformed into artificial rhythms for the sake of appeasing others." [20, p. 2]

We presume that particularly the interconnection of the archetypes of the native land and woman became determinative for the composer in his work on his conception of *The Enchantress*. In other words, Nastasya, who embodies Russian nature, is conducive to the contingency of the audience member with the native land, endowing it with human attributes. Moreover, all the manifestations of Kuma's female nature — the breadth of her soul, her willfulness, her thirst for freedom, etc., are dictated by the element of nature. Precisely just as "the will is equivalent to large space along which it is possible to go on further and further, wend one's way, or swim following the currents of large rivers and crossing immense distances, to breathe unrestricted air, the air of open places, to breathe in the wind broadly with one's chest, to feel the sky over one's head, to have the opportunity of moving in different directions..." [21, p. 159] "the vastitude of the earth ... is transferred to the female character, in which its main chief merit — the vastness of the soul — is fixated." [22, p. 21]

In the present context, Asafiev's thought, according to whom "the uncanny passion of strong, austere characters, with their veneration of beauty and, along with it, with wild hatred, blind to it," [11, p. 163] as profound and penetrating as possible, finds its manifestation.

³ The latter is derivative from the modesty and restraint in the expression of emotions intrinsic to the Russian female archetype.

First, the image of Nastasya seems to form itself out of the primeval natural elements — water, air, fire and earth. Second, those who address the hostess of the coaching inn as Kuma, undoubtedly manifest solid characters capable of going into raptures from the incomprehensibility of beauty and, for this reason, striving toward it as a source of light, enkindling with its warmth. On the other hand, those people, in whose eyes Nastasya is an enchantress are individuals bereft of souls.⁴ Taking into consideration that fact that beauty is, first of all, harmony, their hatred towards it is a sign of their own inferiority. Its reverse side is the ineptness to accept that to which the heart permeated with living feeling responds, but what is beyond the power of bare rationality.

Let us focus our attention on the interpretation of the image of Kuma in the directorial productions of Alexander Titel (2012) and Vassily Barkhatov (2022). Our choice is stipulated, first of all, by the cardinal oppositeness of the two producers' views on Tchaikovsky's work.

The Production at the Bolshoi Theater (2012)

As it has been produced by the Bolshoi Theater, the opera *The Enchantress*⁵ in its stage version manifests the “grand style” of the chief musical theater in Russia. Broadly acknowledged throughout the entire world, representing the values of national art, on the one hand, it bases itself on the traditional Russian culture; on the other hand, it makes use of the possibilities of the scenography of contemporary theater.

This presents the creators of the production with the possibilities of emphasizing both the deeply “grassroots” character of the artistic conception of the performance and the “eternal,” extratemporal meaning of its content and, first of all, the tragedy of the two protagonists' unfulfilled love and their confrontation with the implacable fatal forces and the circumstances of their destinies.

The production of *The Enchantress* at the Bolshoi Theater unified together two conceptions — namely, that of the nationally characterized operatic realism, presenting in a conventional manner the historical Russian life of medieval Nizhny Novgorod in the final quarter of the 15th century and contemporary directorial opera. In this connection, let us quote the utterance of the director-producer of the performance Alexander Titel, who admitted in one of his interviews “close to the premiere” that his conception in *The Enchantress* was to “play with a drama in a Russian style.”⁶

The manifestation of the “Russian code” in the stage version by the producer is expressed by many of his solutions. First of all, the depiction of the river Oka, extolled by Kuma in the first Arioso “To Glance from Nizhny” (No. 4), as a symbol of Rus-Russia and its vast dimensions, the Russian expanses. The river provides a constant background of the eminent action, since its chief events unwrap near the ferriage through the Oka, where Kuma's wayside (coaching) inn is present, and in the forest, close to the river bank.

⁴ Let us emphasize that, in this case, it is referred to the lack of the anima, which in Carl Gustav Jung's conception, presents the archetype of the female element in the subconscious man. That circumstance that “it [the anima] is usually projected outwardly to the personality of the mother <...>, and then of other women,” [19, p. 66] is clearly proven by the relationship of the Prince's son and his mother.

⁵ The recording of the production is from October 2014, with Alexander Lazarev being the conductor, Alexander Titel — the director-producer, the scenography — by Valery Levental, and the performer of the role of Kuma being Svetlana Kasyan.

⁶ “Charodeiku” postavili s shekspirovskim razmakhom [*The Enchantress* was Produced with a Shakespearean Calibre]. Anna Kacharova. *Vesti FM*. URL: smotrim.ru/audio/1463180 (accessed: 19.04.2025).

Thanks to the mastery of light artist Damir Ismagilov, the surface of the water constantly changes (flowing suavely, billowing or becoming immobile). Also noteworthy is its coloristic redyeing: at the beginning of the opera it is blue and impassive; after that, the color deepens: the dark tones appear, then the black and crimson ones. And in Act IV, the water landscape, against the background of which the tragic denouement occurs, acquires an ashy tint as the symbol of death and dust.

The decorations on the stage stem to the traditions of Russian wooden architecture: Prince Kurlyatev's wooden mansions, Kuma's house (a simple wooden lodge), the table and the bench in her wayside inn, the wooden roadways and bridges are all constructed of wood. At the same time, practically all the constructions are discerned by an intentional asceticism and angularity. It is noteworthy that the stepped boardwalk on the stage is built in the form of a cross, presenting an apparent plastic symbol of the operatic tragedy (for this reason, this construction remains on the stage, notwithstanding all the other changes of decorations).

The costumes are distinguished by historical veracity and are differentiated according to the respective social status of the respective characters. The Prince and the Princess are dressed in clothes made of expensive fabrics decorated with wool. The Prince wears a cloak padded with gold-cloth, with a belt, weapons, a massive golden decoration on a chain, as well as in a kaftan-chain armor, which emphasizes his status of a princely regent and his previous military merits. The Princess wears a dress with folding sleeves, a sarafan, a tunic fringed with furskin. An important detail of her costume is her palatine hat, which is soft and spheric with a fur band. The Prince's Son, who acquired fame and glory due to his military valor in his battles with the Tatars, is clad in a mailed shirt with a belt and a head-mounted leather bandage.

The people in the crowd are dressed in bast shoes and leg-wrappers. The men wear grey linen clothes, replicating the historical peasant coarse-wooled undyed cloth. The women wear linen shirts decorated with welt and dresses with aprons, the young girls are adorned with garlands and pigtailed, and the older women have kerchiefs on their heads. Most noteworthy is the motley assemblage of costumes of the dressed-up skomorokhs supplemented with the masks of the animals in their dance from the Final Scene of Act I (No. 7).

Nastasya's costumes are also presented in a historical vein and demonstrate a national spirit marked out by separate ethnographically precise details. Thus, in the beginning of the opera, she appears in ornate clothes, the bright colors of which are called to emphasize her beauty and her "specialness" among the masses of people: a white shirt (i.e., body shirt) with embroidery and appliqued ornament to match the color spectrum of the ensemble (black — golden — red); a sarafan from black fabric decorated with vermeil ribbons and the golden brocaded insets along the lower hem and the center; a brocaded kirtle on the top, bead necklaces on the chest, and a vermeil kerchief matching the costume in its color (since she is not a young girl, but a widow).

In the Scene and Arioso "Where are you, my desired one," Nastasya's apparel comprises a bright contrast to her stage attire from the first act. The gloomy colors of the night landscape drawing a murky wildwood on the bank of the river illusively illuminated by moonlight create a background for the Scene of Kuma bidding farewell to her companions and her previous life (on stage this is expressed by a removal of the steps from the roadways, which supposedly, represent bridges into the past).

Nastasya is dressed in a grey dress with a black shawl on her shoulders, a headband of a grey color made of fabric, and a knapsack with a knot (Il. 1). Upon first glance, it seems



Il. 1. Pyotr Tchaikovsky. *The Enchantress*. Production of the Bolshoi Theater (recording from 2014).

Svetlana Kasyan in the role of Nastasya

that the appearance of the headband presents a certain infringement of the “historicity” in her stage costume, since according to Russian customs, headbands were worn by young girls. However, taking into account her inner transfiguration, as a consequence of which “the outward person” and the widow status connected with it have remained behind, while the encounters with the Prince’s Son are sought for by an inwardly renewed Nastasya, such a violation is seen as being justified.

The Arioso in performance of Svetlana Kasyan is carried out in the spirit of a passionately permeated love monologue. It is distinguished not as much by elegiac qualities, inner agitation and a collapse of the soul as by its temperament and strong emotions, which essentially contradicts the aforementioned restraint and “closed nature” intrinsic to

the character of the Russian woman. [18] The performance of the Arioso is carried out on a high level of expression, and at the same time, the dynamic marks are practically devoid of the intricate nuances reflected in the score and called upon to characterize the “living” changeability of the heroine’s thoughts. For example, there is an absence of the mark of *p* at the beginning of the Arioso necessary for providing a sense of intimacy to Kuma’s speech and the reflection of a further accumulation of emotions in the second stanza. In addition, Kasyan’s operatic vocal style is distinguished by a deficit of *diminuendos*, especially at the end of the third stanza and in the conclusion, where they are important for emphasizing the “dazzling” brightness of the culmination.

The Arioso sounds in a tempo that is rather mobile for an *Andante*,⁷ which is held virtually

⁷ Very well-known is the performance of this arioso by Galina Vishnevskaya in a much calmer tempo and “fluid” character. This endows the character of the music with a gentle dreaminess, tremulous character of feelings, the effect of “outpouring” of emotions seemingly from the depth of the soul. But, at the same time, their passionate acclivity in the culminations receives a more relief manifestation.

during the course of the antire number, whereas the third stanza in the opera's original text bears the indication of a livelier tempo — *Poco piu andante*, which provides the possibility of reflecting the accumulation of the agitation and the afflux of passionate feelings. The original musical text also indicates tempo accelerations and broadenings (*stringendo* and *allargando*).

The heroine's behavior on stage is rather static and predictable for the context: she peers into the darkness, trying to see the Prince's Son, and takes a few steps on stage. In the final scene, after a passionate culmination, she closes her face with her hands, which, in all possibility, is meant to reflect her immersiveness in herself, the world of forebodings of love. At the same time, the impression is created that the psychological complexity of the image and its inner emotional richness are disclosed rather on an outer than an inner level, since the initial premise of the producer in regard to the Shakespearian sweep contradicts the specific features of the archetype of the Russian woman as manifested in Kuma.

The Production of the Frankfurt Opera Theater (2022)

The production of *The Enchantress* in one of the most well-known European opera theaters presents a striking example of contemporary directorial opera.⁸ It seems that the Russian opera producer Vassily Barkhatov placed this composition with a view of European and, even broader — Western audiences, presenting essentially a reinterpretation of Tchaikovsky's opera, rather than manifesting the tragedy of the Russian soul in a dramaturgical context relevant to it. In the Frankfurt production, the opera, seemingly transferred into a conditionally

present-day world (in its costumes, hairstyles, decorations, details of stage requisites, etc.), turned out to be devoid of the original national founding core, its genre-related, stylistic and dramaturgical conception, as well as its artistic organicity and integrality. Indeed, according to the brochure distributed at the premiere, the producer presents in the opera two worlds: instead of the 15th century dwellers of Nizhny Novgorod, the contemporary world of Kuma's gallery featuring her friends among the artists; this is contrasted to the world of the Kurlyatev Princes shown by their mansion. For this reason, the stage context demonstrates an absence of the "speaking signs" of the original text of the opera: the "open" world of Russian nature (the bank of the Oka River, the cave, the stone boulders, the hillocks) in general and the image of the great Russian river, the Volga, associated with the vast expanses of Rus-Russia, in particular. The forest in this production is represented by a short video installation shown while the music of the interlude leading to Act IV is performed, bereft of any kind of logical connection with the subsequent stage solutions. Instead of this, there is the isolated character of "rooms," wherein the doors resemble boundaries between the worlds: Kuma's salon vs. the Kurlyatevs' suite of rooms. In this connection, most illustrative is the stage decorations at these premises recreating the objects of contemporary everyday use familiar to every audience member. Thus, Kuma's salon contains a couch, an armchair, a floor-lamp, and paintings placed with their backs to the audience. At the Kurlyatevs' mansion, where, at the director-producer's will, the scene with the Princess also features the appearance of the sorcerer Kudma with

⁸ The recording of the production took place in December 2022. The conductor was Valentin Uryupin, the director-producer was Vassily Barkhatov, the scenography featured the decorations of Christian Schmidt and costumes by Kirsten Dephoff. The performer of the role of Kuma was Asmik Grigoryan.

the poison, there is a cooler box with canned drinks present on stage. A peculiar “rhyme” to it is provided by an imposing goblet, in the vein of German operas about medieval chivalry (for example, Wagner’s operas), containing the poisonous drink for Kuma.

The stage costumes recreate the life of contemporary people, and most of them lack any national color. Thus, the Prince is dressed in an elegant modern man’s suit (with trousers of sand color, a black jacket with a jaunty corner of a handkerchief, a light or dark shirt, and a tie).

In a number of scenes, the Princess and the Prince’s Son appear in knitted athletic suits. In the number with the Princess Nenila (No. 8), both of them, dressed in athletic suits, are engaged in gymnastics (simultaneously, there is a chorus of knitting ladies singing). Subsequently, after the two ladies’ sports activities are over, during their conversation about alluring herbs that bring death, both of them sit on the floor on sports mats, with a bottle of wine placed next to them. The Princess has a cigarette in her hand, while Nenila holds a glass. The contemporary “glamour” of the images is enhanced by a virulently pink color (Nenila’s costume, the mats, the tee shirt and the band on the Princess’ head are all pink).

The Prince’s Son with his hair cut in the style of buzzcut performs one of the most heartfelt of his love Ariosos “Dearer to me more than everything in the world she is now” (No. 18) while wearing an Adidas bathrobe and athletic shorts, unreeling his hands wrapped in elastic bandages, similar to a boxer after a fighting round or a training session. The athletic outfit of the Prince’s Son also includes a tee shirt with a depiction of an athletic man with the inscription “Glory to the Motherland” and high sneakers of a gold color, the latter insinuating at the character’s distinguished birth.

At the beginning of the opera, Nastasya appears in a non-national costume consisting

of green athletic trousers, a white shirt and a black jacket, as well as short boots in the style of a kazachok. In the scene with the Prince (in Act II), she is dressed in a short brilliant waistcoat revealing her neck and her arms and the same athletic trousers.

At the same time, the production of the Frankfurt Theater does include separate signs of Russian culture broadly disseminated in the Western world and presenting sturdy attributes of Russia: onstage casings colored with matryoshkas; a furniture showcase at the Kurlyatev’s mansion with icons (including that of the Mater Amabilis or Glykophilousa) and an icon lamp, a bearskin hat in the manner of a sheepskin hat and fur boots, both belonging to the Princess in the opera’s final scene. Deacon Mamyrov’s costume is quite traditional — featuring a black exorason, headware resembling a calotte, as well as a beard.

In this connection, most illustrative is the replacement of the image of the bear mentioned in the episodes of the hunts undertaken by the Prince’s Son Yuri at the beginning and the final scene of the opera, traditionally associated with the Russian world, its fairy tales and everyday life, with the image of the wolf, broadly represented in both Russian fairy tales and in Scandinavian-German mythology. In our opinion, the wolf is demonstrated in the opera (in the skomorokh’s masks, in the scene of farewell with Kuma in the opera’s final scene, in the adornments of the Kurlyatevs’ mansion) not as a national, but as a mythological symbol — as the defender of the kingdom of the dead, protecting the gates of the netherworld. Particularly in this image it appears in the scenography of the examined opera number — the Scene and Arioso of Kuma (No. 20). In the Frankfurt production, it is transformed by the producer into a funeral rite carried out according to the Russian Orthodox Christian custom.

In Nastasya’s room-salon, besides the aforementioned objects of furniture, there is

a pannier placed on two chairs, around which the participants of the ritual are sitting: zoomorphic creatures — men with woves' heads and bared torsos in magnificent black gas skirts (from the scene with the skomorokhs in Act I), there are lighted garlands hanging on their mighty necks. Lukash, the Guest, Potap and Kichiga stand on stage, seeming to say farewell to the “deceased,” i.e., to Kuma's previous life. They touch the pannier-coffin with their hands and place into it Kuma's belongings (in fact — objects meant to produce effects of shock: an axe, a helmet, a large bottle of wine, a kerchief, etc.). After the mourning lyrical farewell phrases pronounced by the quartet, the participants of the rite raise the pannier-coffin with their hands and take it offstage. At the beginning of the procession, one of the men carries a microphone upside down in the form of a cross, while another one bears a wreath (with the depiction of a yellow smiley face); a similar wreath rounds it out at the end.

Against the background of this funereal procession — in a darkness illuminated by the light of the garlands directed at the fantastic characters — Kuma's Arioso is sounded “Where are you, my desired one?” (with the text from the original libretto by Shpazhinsky).

The performer, Asmik Grigoryan, is dressed in a white shirt with a long tail, arousing associations with a shroud (Il. 2). Barefoot and bareheaded (incidentally, just as she is throughout the entire performance), she either moves around the room, showing herself in a state of unrest, or sits in the armchair; or, when standing, remains stockstill, immersing into herself. A noteworthy detail must be presented: on the second stanza, during the words “I burn with impatience to see you,” Nastasya turns the paintings so that they would face her (and the audience), but these paintings have no depictions on them — only a sheer black background, which seems to forebode misfortune.



Il. 2. Pyotr Tchaikovsky. *The Enchantress*. The Production of the Frankfurt Opera Theater (2022).

Asmik Grigoryan in the Role of Kuma

The interpretation of the Arioso is distinguished by an intricacy of nuances, an aspiration to follow the composer's instructions, a gentleness and expressivity of the soprano timbre. In this connection, we recall the words of the singer herself, who once said: "I will never be a dramatic singer, because my voice is not dramatic, but soprano, lirico-spinto."⁹ The melodic intoning, the precise articulation, the expressive accruals of the dynamics and their fading recessions, and, at the same time, the bright and saturating culminations, the intense timbral qualities of the voice — all of this endows the performance of the arioso by the singer with a charm and characterizes the emotional richness of the image. A special type of expressivity is characteristic of the heartfelt ending of the Arioso: the phrase "I burn with impatience to see you" (with the "flickering" colors of the parallel tonalities of *E major* – *E minor*) fails to sound on a forte (as indicated in the score), but instead is sung on a waning sound — in the manner of an intimate confession. One expressive stage detail, which enhances the dramatic character of the situation, is the lengthy caesura in the vocal part following the highest note on the culmination on the word "radost'" ["joy"]: at that moment, Kuma passes out of one room into the next — an empty, gloomy one — as if into another world (that of nonbeing, death), but then returns and concludes the performance of the Arioso in the previous, real world.

It seems that Asmik Grigoryan rightfully merited the rapturous acknowledgement

of the critics with her performance of Kuma's Arioso. Moreover, it was particularly the Arioso "Where are you, my desired one?" that turned out to be the most effective, although in this case, too, for the representatives of Russian musical culture, the singer's manner was deemed to be somewhat cold, as the result of which in her performance "there was an insufficiency... of feminine heartedness." The justifiability of such a criticism expressed by Boris Bloch¹⁰ to a certain extent lies in the fact, in our opinion, that, as the singer herself said in her interview given to Irina Nikitina (the leader of the program "Enigma," broadcast on the "Kultura" channel), in light of her mentality, differing from those of Russians, she would never be able to adhere to the standards of a Russian heroine.¹¹

Presumably, the success of the singer's operatic vocalism lies in the fact that, besides the unquestionable mastery and highest professionalism of Asmik Grigoryan, the stage version is directly connected with the production of Vassily Barkhatov, the singer's husband. Analogous to the way that in Act I Kuma's personal characterization turned out to be blurred due to the conglomeration of the characters and the event line, which essentially took the expressivity away from its titular Arioso song "To View from Nizhny," which ideally should be performed simply and in a heartfelt manner, as folk songs are sung, likewise, the mise-en-scene of Act IV, wherein the main heroine, previously dressed in trousers, appears in a white shirt, not as much concealing her corporeality as emphasizing her

⁹ See: *Opernaya pevitsa Asmik Grigoryan: Ne sleduet stremit'sya k uspekhу* [Opera Singer Asmik Grigoryan: It is Not Proper to Aspire Towards Success]. URL: <https://rg.ru/2020/01/11/opernaia-pevica-asmik-grigorian-ne-sleduet-stremitsia-k-uspehu.html> (accessed: 19.04.2025). A spinto-soprano is distinguished by a light, transparent sound, which when necessary may achieve great dramatic expressivity.

¹⁰ *18 dekabrya vo Frankfurte-na-Maine mne poschastlivilos'...* [On December 18, in Frankfurt-an-Main, I Had the Fortune to...]. URL: https://vk.com/wall251941326_84 (accessed: 19.04.2025).

¹¹ "Enigma": Irina Nikitina's Interview with Asmik Grigoryan. Aired on 12.12.2019 ("Kultura" channel).

femininity, is marked out by a special intimate character. It is obvious that upon different decorations, including that of the wildwood, situated at a close proximity from the river bank, such an attempt would hardly be deemed as successful, especially because the dynamic marks present in the score in this context are justified by the fact that with the words “I burn with impatience to see you,” Kuma is calling out for her beloved.

As an argument for this, let us present the following table, arranged on the basis of the auditory and visual signs researched by Tadeusz Kowzan within the framework of the semiotics of theater, [23] turning our attention to the obvious prevalence of information addressed to the visual channel of perception (see Table 1).

In other words, the predominance of the visual element, intrinsic to opera performances from the advent of this genre, in the case of Vassily Barkhatov’s production endows this element with virtually aggressive attributes, ignoring the attitude of Tchaikovsky himself,

who emphasized: “We must think about effects and worry about the stage element only up to a certain point.” [13, p. 21] Correspondingly, when the entire visual element was brought to a minimal degree, the most beneficial setting was created for Kuma’s Arioso, as the result of which Asmik Grigoryan received the opportunity to reveal her singing talent in all its fullness.

Conclusion

While concluding our research, let us note that, in our opinion, both stage versions of Tchaikovsky’s opera *The Enchantress* are remote from the composer’s conception. In the case of Alexander Titel’s production on the stage of the Bolshoi Theater, it would have seemed that particularly the operatic vocalism, which in many ways had preserved its Russian color, turned out to be the least convincing in this regard, in comparison with the visual element. We believe that the problem consists in part in the fact that the producer geared the performers to experience their operatic stories with an perspective of the lives

Table 1. The Correlation of the Visual and the Auditory Signs in the Musical and Stage Action

1. Words 2. Intonation	Pronounced Text	Auditory Signs	Time	Auditory Signs (the Performer)
3. Mimicry 4. Gesture 5. Motion	Expressivity of the Actor’s Body	Visual Signs	Space and Time	Visual Signs (the Performer)
6. Face-paint 7. Hairstyle 8. Costume	The Actor’s Appearance	Visual Signs	Space	Visual Signs (the Performer)
9. Requisite 10. Scenography 11. Lighting	Appearance of the Stage Venue	Without the Performer’s Participation	Space	Visual Signs (Without the Performer’s Participation)
12. Music 13. Sound effect	Articulated Sounds Unarticulated Sounds	Auditory Signs	Space and Time	
			The Time	Auditory Signs (Without the Performer’s Participation)

of the people surrounding them.¹² However, taking into consideration the fact that for contemporary Russians the problem of identity has remained the most acute one, it becomes clear that such an attempt has been made while ignoring the Russian national archetype as a marker of “the inner person.”

In its turn, the obvious imbalance in the direction towards the visual element has also become a serious obstacle for producer Vassily Barkhatov, which has also resulted in a hypertrophy of the outer at the expense of the inner element. The dissonance between the one and the other was so significant, that

it is possible to absorb this production only with “widely shut eyes.” However, because the performers cannot permit themselves such a luxury, their mastery at times becomes a victim to the producer’s “finesse.”

Nonetheless, as it seems, in both cases, it is particularly the lack of interest in any work on manifesting the national archetype that has made both productions fallible both in regards to the visual element, and in terms of the musical realization. Unfortunately, the indicated issues, which violate the integrality of the synthetic artistic whole, as a rule, are ascribed to the composer.

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