

RESEARCH CHALLENGES CONCERNING THE LATE 20th-CENTURY ARTS IN LATVIA: CONTEXT FOR MUSIC THEATRE STUDIES

PhD **Lauma Mellēna-Bartkeviča**

Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, Latvia

Abstract

The article attempts to articulate a few research challenges and problems faced by a scholar working actively in the field of art and culture studies. The aim is to foster the discussion about common problems and opportunities dealing with relatively recent history (late Soviet period of the 1980s, the transition period (National Awakening) and the 1990s) of performing arts and musical theatre among them. Focusing on the necessity of critical assessment of the existing published sources, the structured interviews with the persons involved in the culture processes of the research period help in gathering important information, but do not exclude selective memories and “out of records” issues that lead to the ethical choices of the scholar on research design, content and potential outcomes. The case study of the history of the Latvian National Opera is contextualised with relevant theoretical approaches that discuss the decolonisation of knowledge and the activation of multidimensional critical thinking in musicology, theatre, and culture studies.

Keywords: *research challenges, musicology, Latvian National opera, opera, music theatre, 1980s and 1990s, transition period*

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Research on recent history tends to be both exciting and problematic. In particular, this premise applies to the late Soviet and transition periods in Latvian art, namely, the late 1980s and early 1990s. Currently, a small group of scholars at the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music together with other four research institutions implements the project “Cultural and creative ecosystem of Latvia as a resource of resilience and sustainability”/CERS, which is part of the State Research Program “Latvian Culture – a Resource for National Development” (2023–2026) funded by the Ministry of Culture. Dealing with the field of opera and musical theatre and relevant contexts, my research focuses on revising the existing discourse and uncovering the less-studied issues of the 1980s and 1990s from today’s perspective. Through interviews, press reviews, and a reassessment of the events from a relatively close time distance, the collected information transforms into recent history that has shaped the present and left footprints in today’s scene of Latvian musical theatre. This article is an attempt to articulate a few research challenges and problems faced by a scholar working actively in the field in order to foster the discussion about common problems and opportunities dealing with the relatively recent history of performing arts and musical theatre among them. The challenges listed in this article have been identified in the early phases of the research through the examination of available published and unpublished sources, interviews with respondents involved in the cultural processes of the transition period, and a hermeneutical assessment of the potential outcomes of the study.

The primary consideration is the researcher’s own perspective on to the period under study. Since the history in question (research subject) dates back a few decades, the researchers have the privilege of contacting eyewitnesses and contemporaries to collect their memories of the time. Besides, there is a high possibility that the researcher has direct experience related to the research period in one way or another. Therefore, strict generalisations are impossible due to the diversity of direct experience perspectives, conscious or unconscious inherited matrices of thinking and individual and collective memory. German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer writes about the intertwining of the experience and tradition (*Überlieferung*) that is inherited over generations [Gadamer 1999: 468]. The experience in this case implies awareness of the existence of several interpretations of the same phenomenon, thereby reducing categorical judgements and the development of unproductive confrontations over historical “truths”. It is essential to admit that every researcher’s understanding is limited, or at least influenced, by individual experience and the contexts that shape it. In the social sciences, this “kit” is sometimes referred to as pluriversity, in which different, inseparable experiences, knowledge, identities, or roles merge into a single individual. The understanding depends on many

components. According to Gadamer, the subjectivity is inevitable as the interpreter (the one, who interprets the history) is called to reflect on his own involvement in his age by ascribing to himself the projections of meaning – prejudices – caused by the encounter with the historical object [See: Gadamer 1975: 275].

The complexity of the research on the Soviet occupation period in the arts and related processes (such as institutional involvement, societal reactions, etc.) lies in the multi-layered, and not necessarily coherent, understandings, reception perspectives, and even paradigms represented, applied, and questioned by scholars of different generations and backgrounds. Sometimes, even in academic circles, the myth persists that first-hand experience of the Soviet period is necessary, claiming that only those who have lived through and coped with the “absurdities of the time” (i.e. social algorithms, subtexts, normalised double morality, and others) can provide the legitimate reflection and analysis. This is definitely false and has to do with the post-colonial or post-dependence specifics of knowledge and research traditions, often rooted in stagnant models of the Soviet period, where no alternatives to the single “truth” were accepted, impeding critical thinking and discourse-building around the facts and events of the time.

I would argue instead that the experience and education are what form understanding and attitude towards research questions and discourse; therefore, the critical issue here is the researcher’s self-awareness of being involved in the turmoil of relatively recent history to a certain degree depending on their age group and personal experience. Postcolonial studies help deal with the complexity of research challenges, but it is not a panacea as stated by acclaimed Estonian scholar Epp Annus discussing the necessary reduction of one single “total interpretative paradigm” (a typical approach of “one single truth” prevailing during Soviet times) and activation of “an effort in multidimensional critical thinking” [Annus 2018: 36]. In the academic polemic with Estonian historian Kaarel Pirimäe Annus specifies: “(...) postcolonial paradigms don’t have the closure of dogma [or they shouldn’t] and they require a responsible revision of each scholar according to the exigencies of the material at hand and the disposition of the scholar him- or herself” [Annus 2018a: 171] The perspective of the researcher is what matters the most as it forges the disposition and constructs the discourse according to the exigencies of material and perspective of the person working with the material.

Culture theorist Madina Tlostanova points out the problem of the coloniality of knowledge in a new discourse, referring to Russia and the post-Soviet territories, which were previously occupied and dominated by the Russian language and Soviet ideological framing in all possible fields, including research in the humanities and arts. The scholar distinguishes several generations of academics and concludes that even younger generations are oscillating between two colonialities of knowledge –

the stagnating post-dependence persists in thinking and the Western monopoly of knowledge production. Tlostanova writes:

“Freeing oneself from coloniality of knowledge is a long and painful process which requires learning to unlearn in order to relearn but on different grounds and sometimes actually creating and remaking these grounds (Tlostanova and Mignolo, 2012). Post-Soviet space and particularly Russia are not ready to discuss their own previous experience or today’s unfortunate condition other than in the forms of nostalgic lacquered Soviet myth (as we find in today’s propaganda, including its scholarly versions) or in the form of the no less simplified but negative anti-Soviet annihilation, unconditionally idealising the West. What is needed instead is an honest critical discourse which would be able to finally get rid of the intellectual dependency and the catching-up modus and start to develop its own knowledge about itself that would be original and vigorous enough not to be immediately racialised and subalternized in the global North.” [Tlostanova 2015: 50]

Even though Madina Tlostanova refers to the situation in the social sciences, the situation in art research, i.e. musicology, is similar. This brings us to the discourse problem in music history scholarship and research traditions established precisely during the Soviet period. Latvian musicology developed under the wing of Soviet musicology in the 1970s. According to musicologist Mārtiņš Boiko, Latvian musicology, during its institutionalisation in terms of transmission, methodology, and values, developed as a local branch of Russian musicology [Boiko 2004], which makes it part of the sovietisation process and therefore has long-lasting consequences for music criticism and research. Boiko argues that further evolution of musicology in Latvia happened in almost total isolation from the processes outside the Soviet Union and the difficulties Latvian musicologists faced in the late 1880s, 1990s and following decades after the collapse of the USSR and regaining of the independence derive directly from this isolation and former “license” to be ideologically and politically appropriate, selective and mostly biased [ibid.]. Considering the aforementioned, the research challenges related to the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s stem from a deficit in discourse and critical thinking for articulating the problem of intellectual dependency on the Soviet occupation in music and culture research. In the third decade of the 21st century, the transition period remains a vast field to explore. Besides, the current educational system in Latvia keeps struggling with the coloniality of knowledge; therefore, several generations of scholars tend to have a hybrid base of knowledge and methodology floating between the Soviet and Western scholarly traditions and striving to establish that “honest critical discourse” mentioned by Madina Tlostanova. However, the awareness of

the necessity of decolonising knowledge and revising academic research traditions is a very recent trend in the humanities, especially in historical musicology.

Identifying and articulating my own challenges as an emerging scholar in my 40s has proven difficult. Compared with my elderly colleagues in music research, I am privileged to have been born in the late Soviet period, in 1981. This has placed me on a strange and paradoxical timeline: I was born in the 1980s, raised in the 1990s, and have made it to 2024. I have therefore lived through five different decades, two centuries and two millennia, and I am not even 50 yet. I had a happy Soviet childhood. Among other things, I got to wear the “Little Octobrist” pin badge for a couple of months at elementary school at the end of the 1980s. I swiftly replaced it with the Latvian national pin badge, *Auseklītis* (Morning Star), and was lucky enough to enjoy the company of two grandfathers who had returned from Siberian labour camps. Therefore, the idea of Lenin as the “grandfather of all Octobrists” did not resonate with me at all. I was raised during the period of “perestroika” (restructuring) and the National Awakening. I first learned to sing the anthem of the USSR in Latvian, which I believe was required in preschool, as well as the national anthem of the Republic of Latvia and other songs from the repertoire of what is known as the Singing Revolution of the 1990s. Recognising the complexity of these decades and the impossibility of a “single interpretative truth”, this article highlights a few research challenges in the field of musical theatre at the time, with the aim of contributing to a new discourse about the transition period for future generations. Building on the thesis previously advanced by Epp Annus and Madina Tlostanova, I have attempted to compile a list of the most significant research challenges in music theatre in Latvia during the 1980s and 1990s. This topic is of particular interest to me due to a project implemented by my academic institution. These include, but are not limited to the following:

- 1) limited sources of information;
- 2) methodological complexity and dynamic changes over a short period of time, and, last but not least,
- 3) research design and positioning, international compatibility of the results, motivational issues (who actually needs this and why?)

The late period of Soviet occupation and the beginning of independence were socially, economically, financially, and artistically complicated. Due to the proximity of the research period, the scholars experience several collateral effects related to each group of the aforementioned challenges. As my case study is closely related to the history of the Latvian National Opera, I focus on the above challenges based on my ongoing research.

The serious historiography of opera in Latvia in the 20th century culminates in the monograph *Latviešu operteātris* (*Latvian opera theatre*) by Vija Briede

[Briede 1987] followed by a handful of overviews in anniversary booklets of the Latvian National Opera, (the only opera house in the country since the 1950s), as well as some articles in the press or biographies of notable singers of the time. In 1995, a book compiling the experience stories of several Latvian opera singers of the 1990s was published by Silvija Līce [Līce 1995]. In the year 2000, a concise overview of the history of Latvian opera was provided in the book, which covered the story of the Latvian National Opera as an artistic institution (*Latvijas Nacionālā opera* 2000). In 2023, the musicologist Jānis Kudiņš published an extensive article that included the chronicle-catalogue of all finished and unfinished, staged and non-staged Latvian operas and related chamber opuses with brief descriptions. The catalogue comprised a total of 132 units composed by 30 September 2022 [Kudiņš 2023]. However, the history of opera and other musical theatre genres (including production, singers, social contexts, etc.) between the late 1980s and mid-1990s has yet to be satisfactorily addressed. The period of major repair works at the Latvian National Opera (1990–1995) is still referred to “the dark middle ages” due to the deficiencies in the compilation of relevant information, the paucity of extant written sources, and the incomplete nature of the photographic documentation, which is predominantly stored in personal archives., and the eye-witnesses who can offer first-hand accounts of the period are ageing, their memories are fading, and they are gradually passing away.

Additionally, a prevailing concern among contemporary and likely future researchers pertains to the questionable quality of published monographs and articles concerning the research period. As Latvian musicology as an academic discipline emerged in the second half of the 20th century and was rooted in Soviet musicology traditions, the texts were constructed according to the canon both in terms of content and style. The following two examples are offered in order to illustrate the problematic nature of the discourse:

- 1) “Latvian opera’s growth allowed it to conquer a considerable international level, which kept increasing gradually despite uneven developments. Today, [1987] our theatre is one of the typical academic opera houses focusing primarily on timeless world classics rather than experimental new works. However, since its inception, our theatre has explored the best examples of contemporary art. It is important to avoid the risk of becoming mired in tradition and conservatism, a pitfall that has been seen in several periods throughout the theatre’s history.” [Briede 1987: 203]¹

¹ Hereinafter the quotes from Latvian sources are translated into English by the author.

- 2) “A. Viļumanis is a master of juicy contrasts in musicality and artistic style, with a keen sense of dramaturgy. Under his baton, our theatre performed at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow (1980), bringing great success to our opera troupe (...). After the period of A. Viļumanis as chief-conductor at our Opera house, now the climate is rather moderate. The leadership of conductor and composer Leons Amoliņš brought a few interesting ideas, but at the same time emphasised the soloists’ theatre. However, “one-star shows” of this kind could rarely save the artistically rough productions. Besides, the coming winds of [political] changes brought other emotions and issues to the Opera house.” [Fūrmane 200: 145]

Both authors of the quotes adhere to Soviet musicology, which is oriented towards praising stable traditions and public recognition primarily in the USSR (Moscow); however, the analysis of the socio-historical contexts and circumstances as well as a critical approach is lacking. While it is understandable in the case of the first author since all texts to be published in the mid-1980s had to pass censorship and receive the necessary approvals, the second author, writing in the late 1990s, most probably aimed to avoid detailed criticism because both of the conductors mentioned were still performing occasionally at the time and would probably have reacted negatively to any criticism published in the anniversary edition of Latvian National Opera.

The “wild” 1990s have left their mark on the history of Latvian music theatre with several significant decisions that contributed to the overall insecurity of all many communities involved in the industry. As for the documented history, it is rather fragmentary. The first half of the 1990s is partially covered by the memory book *Bez Baltā nama*² (*Without the White House*, 1995) by Silvija Līce [Līce 1995]. This compendium of interviews and memory stories uncovers the experiences of selected singers in the early 1990s. Many eyewitnesses of the time refer to this period as “a time of survival” or “a test of resistance” [ibid.: 18], when the considerable theatre troupe led the life of a travelling opera company based in a TV studio without heating. Performances, concerts, ballets and symphonic concerts took place

² The term ‘The White House’ may cause confusion in English. In Latvian, ‘Baltais nams’ is a poetic metaphor for the Latvian National Opera house, and also the actual name of the official residence of the President of the USA. The term was invented by Latvian opera tenor Mariss Vētra (1901, Tirza parish, Latvia – 1965, Toronto, Canada), who wrote extensive biographical prose covering the interwar period in Riga and Europe, as well as the singer’s life in exile after 1944. In his book *Mans Baltais nams* [Vētra 1954/1991], he refers to the Latvian National Opera as “my White House”. In the title of her book, Silvija Līce refers to this metaphor, describing the period of fundamental reconstruction works (1991–1995) as “years without the White House”.

in St Peter's Church, the Daile Theatre, the Operetta theatre, the Congress House and other venues. The Opera archive contains the testimonies of Latvian singers who toured the USA in 1991 (soprano Inessa Galante, tenor Kārlis Zariņš, bass Aivars Krancmanis, and concertmaster Māris Skuja). There are also accounts of guest performances in Germany in 1991 and 1993, and in Spain in 1995, curated by Ieva Plaude. She was the entrepreneur who curated the Latvian art exhibition in Berlin in 1988, as well as the producer of the opera festival in Dreieich, near Frankfurt am Main, Germany, in 1991 and 1992. Some memories are documented here:

"In Dreieich, a small German town no larger than Jelgava, our opera singers performed for two consecutive summers. The audience was particularly impressed by Inessa Galante's extraordinary interpretation of the role of Mikaela in *Carmen* in 1991, which brought the Latvian soprano her first international recognition." [Līce 1995: 16]

Insufficient experience of the practices and rules of the European opera industry, including discussions about the terms and conditions of guest performance contracts, often caused misunderstandings and led to the unfavourable conditions for Latvian artists [Līce 1995: 17]. Radio journalist Ināra Ancāne spent a week travelling with artists from the Latvian National Opera who were performing *Carmen*, *Norma* and *La Traviata*:

"The artists do not feel satisfied with these guest performances in Spain as they feel they do not recognise their professionalism and skills. The Spanish work organisation and planning were a total mess. Almost every day, a group of 140 people got on buses to travel 200 to 800 km on the beautiful but winding Spanish roads. They performed every evening. The show started at 9 or 10 pm and ended about 1 or 2 am. After the performance, they were taken by the same buses to the hotel located in another town. They only got to bed around 3 or 4 am, having been instructed to have breakfast at 8 am in order to depart for the next place (...). The stages differed and many of them were disappointing. We were told that those were not the real Spanish theatres typical of this culture. But our artists mostly performed in these old, abandoned cinemas. Of course, there were also a few great theatres with appropriate stages in Madrid, Zaragoza, etc., but these were the exception." [Līce 1995: 17]

Nevertheless, when asked about these guest performances in 2024/2025 (approximately 30 years after the events), most respondents recalled them as a positive experience abroad. For many of them, travelling outside the USSR and "friendly" countries to Southern Europe was an unusual experience. This situation illustrates the distortions of memory that make researchers' work particularly challenging,

given the limited published sources about the 1990s. Mostly, the only available sources are printed copies of programmes and flyers of guest performances abroad, a few press reviews (if collected as physical copies and deposited in the Latvian music archives, such as the Latvian National Museum of Literature and Music) and the slightly faded memories of participants who experienced the events first-hand.

Throughout the 20th century and under different political regimes, opera was considered a representative art. Therefore, the Opera and Ballet Theatre of the SSR of Latvia (1944–1989) and the Latvian National Opera (1989–2015) had a somewhat special status among other theatres and in society. However, it was not the only stage for music theatre. Based on the Workers' Theatre, which was established by the Central Council of the Trade Unions, the State Theatre of Musical Comedy was developed in the second half of the 20th century. This theatre was later known as the State Riga Operetta Theatre (1963–1992) and the Riga Musical Theatre (1992–1995). It is referred to hereinafter as the Operetta Theatre. The Operetta Theatre was a popular venue for working-class musical entertainment, particularly from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, as it maintained high artistic standards in terms of musical interpretation and ballet. The theatre hosted Latvian and Russian singing troupes that performed different repertoires simultaneously and toured the Soviet Union, with guest performances during the summer. However, at the end of the 1980s, the popularity of the genre declined for various reasons. The “perestroika” in the USSR and the emerging National Awakening movement stole the spotlight. The financial crisis impacted the purchasing power and choices of the audience. The history of the Operetta Theatre at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s remains a sensitive subject due to the administrative and financial crisis that led to its closure in 1995. The only published source that documents, to some extent, the history of the theatre is the memoirs of the former artistic director and chief conductor Jānis Kaijaks (1931–1991), titled *A little bit about myself and the Operetta Theatre* (*Mazliet par sevi un operetes teātri*). However, the book lacks precise references for quotes, and the tone of the text is auto-reflective, selective, and subjective, particularly in its interpretation of the facts and events of the time related to the planned liquidation of the Operetta Theatre [Kaijaks 2007: 185]. Methodologically, this memoir can be used as a source only when compared with the archive files and documents, which takes a lot of time. The story of the Operetta Theatre deserves a separate article and will be part of larger research in the near future.

In the transition period between 1988 and 1995, both the Latvian National Opera and the Operetta Theatre underwent a series of uneasy changes. The political situation was unstable and unpredictable, and the administration and artistic leadership changed year on year. Financial conditions were poor, the cooperation between the Ministry of Culture and the arts institutions was chaotic. The Latvian

National Opera House was under reconstruction; therefore, other venues were used for the performances and concerts. The documents of the time do not provide a complete overview of the processes; most of the written testimonies are incomplete and have not yet been digitised. Some of the personalities involved in decision-making at the time are currently acclaimed musicians of the older generation. Furthermore, the uncomfortable question of collaboration with “Cheka” curators via the KGB informant system by several leading personalities in the field of music theatre remains unanswered and often involves individuals of high professional standing and merit. In my research, I use structured interviews to gather the most complete information possible. However, a considerable share of crucial information has been disclosed to me as “off the record”.

All of the above leads to the third group of research challenges – the design of the research and the estimated results. Academic work ethics do not allow the disclosure of “off the record” information known to the researcher, creating a dilemma – either skip some important details and deliver incomplete research results, or betray the trust of the respondents. The anonymity of the respondents in this case does not help, because in specific situations, the deduction does not require much effort. I have concluded that at least some of the information currently gathered from eyewitnesses of the 1980s and 1990s regarding the activities and deeds of some of the key figures of the time should remain “off the record” for ethical reasons. This does not preclude the possibility of integrating it in later presentations and publications, providing the due comments and contexts according to the current state of affairs.

The international relevance of research into the culture, art and society of the late Soviet period, the transition period and the National Awakening in Latvia (or the Baltic States in general) is debatable. On the one hand, given the current geopolitical situation on the eastern border of the European Union, decolonisation topics (including the decolonisation of knowledge, research traditions and the activation of multidimensional critical thinking) seem important. On the other hand, the importance of decolonising knowledge and creating new critical discourse regarding the research period between the 1980s and 2000s is greater in the local academic environment and society. The above-listed research challenges in the context of music theatre research represent the common issues that should be addressed by every scholar working in the humanities, culture, and society.

In conclusion, there are a few points that academics specialising in the field of performing arts of the last decades of the 20th century could discuss further:

- 1) The fieldwork in music theatre proves that the previously collected and published information about the late Soviet period, the transitional period and the first years of the regained independence, as well as the personalities

and processes involved should be critically assessed and analysed in the context of specific socio-historical conditions. Due comment should be provided and all kinds of “self-evidences” derived from the personal experience of scholars or respondents should be avoided. It is essential to acknowledge the scholar’s perspective and position during the research period, especially when the scholar is a contemporary of the processes being examined.

- 2) It is essential to gather the testimonies and memories from people directly involved in the research field (in my case, opera, operetta, and music theatre) – including administration, artists, producers, organisers, public administration representatives (Ministry of Culture), etc. Despite the selectiveness and subjectivity of memories, the cross-referencing among contemporaries provides a more complete overview than published sources. Interviews are time-consuming and sometimes contain sensitive, personal, and even unflattering information about prominent figures in Latvian culture. The scholar’s challenge is to find an appropriate strategy to present the information without breaching ethical standards.
- 3) Scholars of different generations should work together and discuss differences in viewpoint, as well as potential prejudices and stereotypes related to the research period. Activating multidimensional critical thinking and articulating discourse problems can lead to productive cooperation and relevant research results despite the difficulties faced in the research process.

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