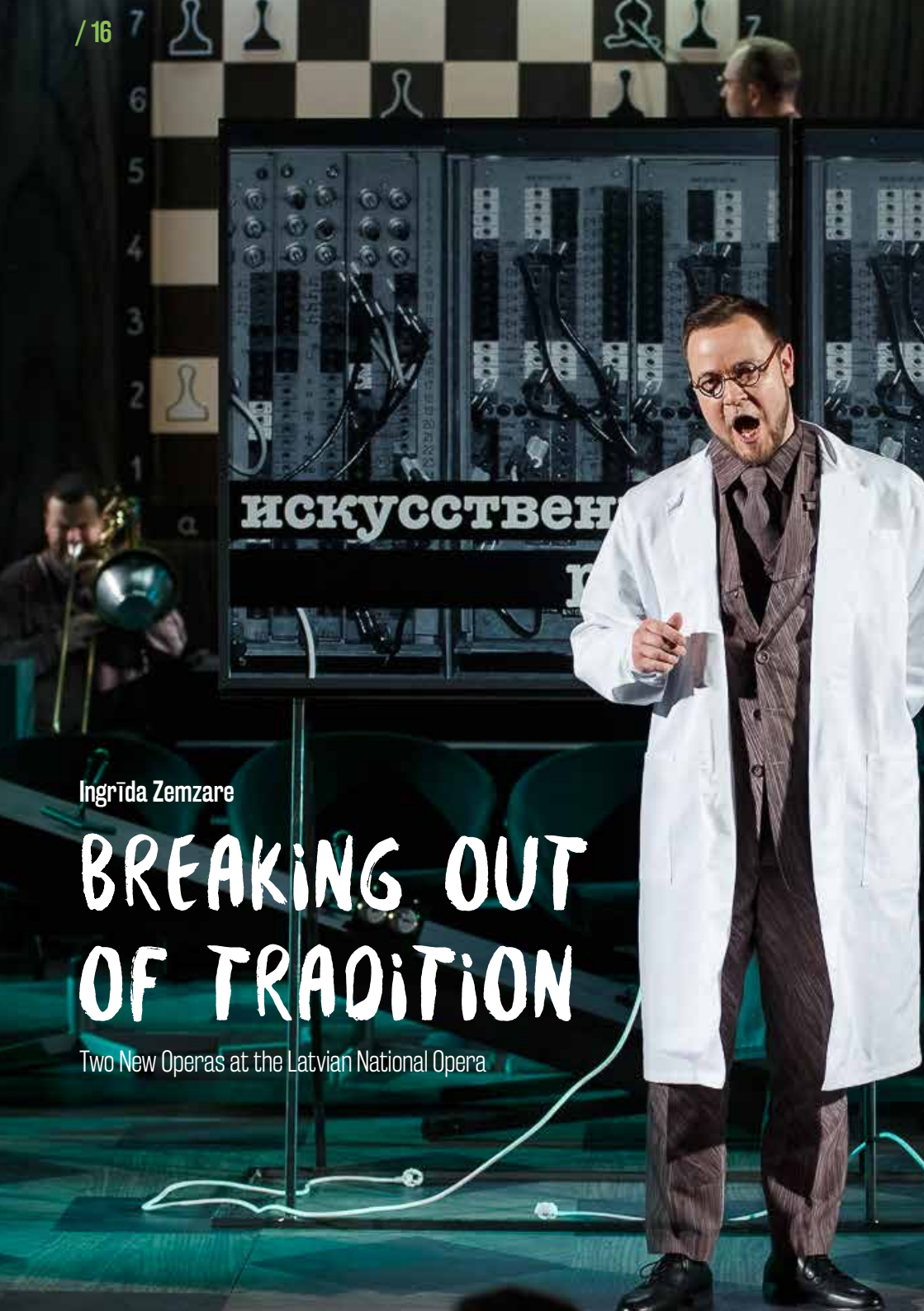


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# BREAKING OUT OF TRADITION

Two New Operas at the Latvian National Opera



When Rīga was the European Cultural Capital in 2014, among the most outstanding cultural events were the premieres of operas by two Latvian composers at the Latvian National Opera – Kristaps Pētersons' *Mikhail and Mikhail Playing Chess* and Artūrs Maskats' *Valentina*. They were long expected, because no new Latvian operas had been staged in Latvia for a critically long period of time (Andris Dzenītis' *Dauka* in 2012 was only staged as a concert performance, and the last premiere of a full opera was a decade before that).

Both 2014 operas speak to something that is of essential cultural and historical importance in Latvia – the role and importance of Jewish culture in Latvia's multicultural environment during the historical twists and turns of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both focus on distinguished individuals – global chess champions Mikhail Tal and Mikhail Botvinnik (Pētersons) and the film critic and World War II survivor Valentīna Freimane (Maskats). The librettos of both operas are based on documentary materials – archival evidence and eyewitness comments about the playing style of Tal and Botvinnik, and Valentina Freimane's 2010 autobiography, *Adieu, Atlantis*, which has also been translated into Russian, Lithuanian and Finnish. Its German translation was released in 2015 together with performances of *Valentina* in Berlin on May 19, 2015.

So much for what the two operas have in common. We have to look at each of them separately, of course, because they are completely different phenomena.

*Valentina* is a traditional opera with a large orchestra and choir alongside the soloists.

*Mikhail and Mikhail Playing Chess*, in turn, is a modern multimedia performance, a wonderful chamber opera with a symphonic sweep in spite the fact that the opera's orchestra does not take part. It is a realm of sound in which there is every opportunity for directing, set design and the performances of the actors to manifest themselves. It is, first and foremost, a theatrical event.

### **Mikhail Against Mikhail: Drama XXI**

*Kristaps Pētersons and Sergejs Timofejevs. Opera-lecture "Mikhail and Mikhail Playing Chess," conducted by Ainārs Rubiķis and Atvars Lakstīgala, directed by Viesturs Meikšāns. World premiere in the New Hall of the Latvian National Opera on March 12, 2014.*

At the centre of the opera is a legendary game of chess that changed the entire world of chess and more. On March 26, 1960, at the age of 23, Mikhail Tal, who was born in Rīga, beat the Soviet chess legend Mikhail Botvinnik, who was the world champion at that time, thus becoming the youngest world chess champion in the history of the sport.

The authors have declared this multimedia performance to be an opera-lecture. A breath-taking dramaturgical intrigue interchanges there with a biography of the two players, a sociological examination of the particular importance of chess in forming Soviet ideology, a presentation of documentary photographs and authentic eyewitness statements, and an essay about freedom as an inviolable component of creativity.

Richard Wagner, author of *Opera and Drama* (1851), probably would welcome *Mikhail and Mikhail*. His ideas about the confluence of music, poetry and myth have manifested in this case with all of the resources that are available in our century. We face a perfect performance in which all components are equally important. The music cannot be separated from the text or the drama representing an eternal contradiction between the maximalism of youth and the balance of maturity, between the dizzying aspects of talent and patient work, and between artistic intuition and scientific pragmatism. The team behind the opera has succeeded in presenting these contrasts as an issue that was of great importance during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – creative freedom in a totalitarian society.

The score by Kristaps Pētersons is brought to life by two ensembles of vocalists and instrumentalists, each conducted by a different conductor. The chess game between the black pieces (Mikhail Tal) and the white pieces (Mikhail Botvinnik) is conducted by two conductors – the Kings – Ainārs Rubiķis on the black side and Atvars Lakstīgala on the white side. The whole chessboard is subject to them – the bishops, rooks, knights and pawns, as well as, of course, the two Queens – Ieva Parša and Baiba Berķe.

There are no star-making roles for the soloists in this opera, and the instruments, too, have specific “roles.” The composer himself, for instance, plays the role Rook H8, which is for a double bass, while the other black tower, A8 is sung by baritone Jānis Ādamsons. There are 32 participants in the performance – 14 chamber musicians, eight vocalists, eight dancers and two conductors, or just as many performers as there are pieces in a game of chess. There are no major arias, no individual solos, and it is all but impossible to get a really good idea about this opera just by listening to fragments from it.

Two years ago, at the 9<sup>th</sup> International KREMERATA BALTICA Festival, Ainārs Rubiķis conducted a fragment from *Mikhail and Mikhail Playing Chess*, but it was very clear that the music was not yet complete. The orchestra requested Kristaps Pētersons to supplement the work. The fragment grew from four to six or seven minutes, Kremerata Baltica played it again, but the sense of incompleteness was still there.

I understand now that it was not possible to overcome this, because the total opera-lecture must be heard, seen and experienced from the first measure to the last. Only then can we understand the intention of that refined music and its implementation as a way of breaking out of tradition and creating an excuse for the revival of tradition. In *The Composer's Part*, Pētersons writes that “it is important that chess has a very strict network of traditions, and those who ignore it simply cannot win the game. The history of chess (just like that of music, by the way) has very much to do with the present. It seems that nothing new is possible and that there are only variations on everything that is old. It is important that sometimes we can break through this draconic and systemic network and thus rejuvenate it. Such moments are sacred. Mikhail Tal achieved that in his game against Botvinnik in 1960.”

The foundation for Kristaps Pētersons’ pragmatically structured construction of sound is an original system that transfers the moves of chess pieces into the language of music. Accordingly, the music itself seems to be as “boring” as a game of chess if it is watched carelessly from the sidelines. If, however, we take an in-depth look at the chess game, we can experience unprecedented passions, and that is exactly what happens in Pētersons’ opera.

Sergejs Timofejevs, who is a “real” poet, has created a libretto that is interesting to hear and understand. Timofejevs has published four books of poetry in Rīga and three in Moscow and St Petersburg. His expressive and modern Russian language is another bridge to join the black-and-white sides of the game, and this bridge involves high-tension wires. The documentary and biographic facts form lively lines, and that gives room for the viewer’s own conclusions. Mikhail Tal was born into the family of a Jewish physician in 1936 in “bourgeois” Rīga, while Mikhail Botvinnik was born into the family of a Jewish physician in 1911 not far from St Petersburg during the era of the Russian Empire. There were probably different experiences in their lives, though both chess players spoke Russian at home. Sergejs Timofejevs writes about an era in which intellect was still of value even though the personal freedoms of individuals were so very much limited. The librettist has succeeded in the role of a very objective observer and story teller, while the audience is brought into the adventure in a seemingly indirect way. This is similar to the way in which sports commentators talk about both sides – the black, the white, the points that have been scored, the opportunities that have been missed.

In his review of *Mikhail and Mikhail Playing Chess*, the critic Jegors Jerohomovičs wrote that “the new opera has been staged in a modern and stylish way that would also be appreciated by Gerard Mortier.”<sup>1</sup>



The creative team behind the performance includes set designer Reinis Suhanovs, choreographer Kirils Burlovs, video artist Carlos Franklin, and costume designers from Mareunrol's. Along with the instrumentalists, roles are performed by opera soloists Dana Bramane, Armands Siliņš, Juris Ādamsons, Ieva Parša, Andris Lapiņš, and others.

The set design is laconic, but surprisingly impressive. Have you ever noticed that the "black-and-white" elements of a chessboard actually is manifested as a "creamy brown" appearance, because chessboards are usually veneered? That is exactly what all of the characters on the 32 squares of the board are wearing. Mareunrol's has dressed all of them in individually modelled marbled apparel that creates the sense of a compact chess board and increases associative links to the generalisation of the game of chess. During the second act of the opera, the most ordinary pieces of furniture turn into an expressive element of stage art. The surface of the table is deformed, and the benches are angularly broken. The players sit down on those benches, and the viewer sees an optical illusion of the type that is seen in the deep subway stations of Moscow, where the people who are sliding down the escalator seem to be tilted at a 45 degree angle. This sudden deformation sharpens up attention, surprises the viewer and, most importantly, raises to a new level the spark of humour that occasionally manifests in the dialogues, the music and the choreography.

This is by no means the first musical performance that is based on chess. Last year, the Matt Charman play *The Machine* was staged in Manchester and New York, featuring the game played by Garry Kasparov

against the Deep Blue IBM supercomputer that was built by Taiwanese-born Feng-Hsiung Hsu. "A piece of software beat the best and the brightest," Charman told the BBC after the first performance. It may be that after arriving in America, the two geniuses – Garry Kasparov and Feng-Hsiung Hsu – experienced a collapse of their dreams. It is also possible that the game between the two Soviet chess Grandmasters – Mikhail Botvinnik and Mikhail Tal – caused a transformation in their value system.

The team of director Viesturs Meikšāns has succeeded in visualising these simultaneous human dreams and fears on stage in a playful, light, but not careless manner. The dream of artificial intellect that is so close to Mikhail Botvinnik's exacting approach to the game of chess, and the dream of free and soaring creativity, as represented by Tal's talent. I suspect that we are all afraid of Pygmalion, of the independence of a robot, of the possible human catastrophe due to our helplessness in relation to machinery or software, and of the idea that Google's mission is to know everything that you want even before you realise that you want it.

I believe that the creative team behind *Mikhail and Mikhail Playing Chess* is not only indirectly pointing us toward this existential fear, but also forcing us to think about who we really are and about how the world is changing. What is the drama of the future or *Drama der Zukunft*.

### Valentina

Composer Arturs Maskats, libretto by Liāna Langa and Arturs Maskats, conductor Modestas Pitrenas, director Viesturs Kairiņš, set designer and costume designer Ieva Jurjāne, lighting artist Nicol Hungsberg. World premiere at the Latvian National Opera, December 5, 2014.

*Valentina* is an opera that depicts essential and very dramatic elements of Latvian history and culture between 1939 and 1944 and the way in which these affected various nationalities in the country. Valentīna Freimane spent her childhood in Riga and Berlin, where her father was a lawyer for the UFA Film Studio, and her mother was an enchanting social figure around whom the greatest stars of global cinema gathered. After returning to Rīga, Valentīna's family was caught unprepared by the Holocaust. Her parents and young husband perished, but she herself was hidden by various saviours all the way until the end of the war. Today Valentīna Freimane is 93 and lives and works in Berlin and Riga.

The score of the opera is very expressive, nuanced, abundant in different musical genres and forms. Linguists tell us that place names survive for the longest period of time and can be used even to discuss migration of peoples. Likewise, in the history of music, the genre is like a driving belt among the various eras. Whether a waltz has been composed 200 years ago or yesterday, it is easily recognised and brings its own message. In the history of Russian music, for instance, the waltz represents unfulfilled love. The waltzes of Johann Strauss, by contrast, represent the full enjoyment of life. In any case, a waltz, march or song immediately creates a specific nuance of expression. Maskats has used a great many genres and relevant signs in his opera, and so the music really does tell a story in and of itself. *Valentina* can be listened to on the radio or on a recording, and the music itself will conjure up the image of the era. Music clearly is independent and of decisive importance in *Valentina*.

When it comes to the libretto and staging of the opera, however, there are a few ambiguities. One might ask which opera has a good and literary valuable libretto. In Latvian music, I can only name a few – the Ojārs Vācietis libretto for Romualds Kalsons' *The Prodigal Son* (after a short story by the Latvian author Rūdolfs Blaumanis), Jānis Mediņš' *Fire and Night*, for which the poet Rainis produced the libretto, Imants Ziedonis' libretto for Imants Kalniņš' *I Played and Danced* (also based on Rainis), and Ilona Breģe's *Living Water* (after a play by Māra Zālīte). All of these operas were basically dramas of symbols.



Inga Kalna and Jānis Apeinis as Valentina and Dima. The voice of the internationally renowned soprano Inga Kalna served as the inspiration for Valentina's part and image.

Arturs Maskats: "Valentīna Freimane's life story is closely linked to events in the history of Latvia and Europe, allowing us to reveal the panorama of the era in all of its colourfulness and contradictions. The most dramatic moments in Valentina's life coincided with major 20<sup>th</sup> century events, including the loss of Latvia's independence, when there was a need for enormous spiritual strength to survive in physical and moral terms. The opera is not just about politics, though. It is interwoven with a brilliant love story and deep emotions."

Unfortunately, in representing these vivid events and emotions, the authors have gone down a certain path of indecisiveness. Valentina's deeply personal experiences seem to compete with a yearning to offer an excessively detailed historical background. It really seems that the producers of the opera have not agreed among themselves on a unified key to the production. Even if the key were the indecisiveness of post-modernism, I got the impression that the producers did not really have a clear sense of what they were doing and how. The opera would have gained a lot if it had been produced in a more indirect, less specific and symbolic way.



For that reason, I was most touched by the summarizing choral scenes, particularly in terms of the children's chants at the beginning of the opera, as well as the march to nowhere – Valentīna's separation from her parents, who join the Jews on their way to the ghetto, along with her difficult choice to leave them so that she would survive. By the means of brilliant genre-related contradictions music shows survival as heroism. The march had something that very much reminded me of the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem, where one room is devoted to murdered children. The room is completely dark, but lit by a panoply of stars on the ceiling. You walk through the dark, starlit room, where the names of the dead children are called one by one. In Jewish culture, it is very important to name people. It is something that could be called the naming of the destiny of a specific people, because a person who is named is alive and has an influence on us. Perhaps that is why the opera is titled *Valentīna*. This had to be a very personal story to represent the destinies of all of those people who were involved in the war and the Holocaust in one way or another. If this personification exists, then the viewer and listener lives along with the story.

I cannot really understand the set design of the opera, which emphasises the realities of the era, but does not really offer an idea of the Rīga in which Valentīna's family lived in the 1930s. The narrow two-level streets and the set decorations created the impression of a very different Rīga, one more reminiscent of the Jewish ghetto. Valentīna Freimane, however, has written about a very different Jewish social level to which Gidon Kremer's parents also belonged. For them, Paris and Berlin were certainly much closer than the Latvian countryside, which also appears in the opera.

I plucked up the courage to recommend the composer to translate the text of the opera in various languages, depending on the character and the situation. The first scene is set in the flat of Valentīna's parents, and the sung conversations could have been in German. The duet with Dima, Valentīna's first husband, who perishes while trying to save Valentīna, could have been sung in Russian, while the visit by Valentīna and Dima to a farm could have been presented in Latvian. That would allow the opera as an artwork to confirm Valentīna's arrival and growth in the multilingual Latvian environment of Rīga and in Latvian culture, in which, at the end of the day, she remained. After all, *Adieu, Atlantis* was written in Latvian, too.

<sup>1</sup> Jerohomovičs, J. "While You are Alive, Checkmate is not Possible," *Kultūras Diena*, 1 April 2014.