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“For me, this story is not about family conflicts, but about farewell”

Interview with Peter Etvös published in Rossiyskaya Gazeta

The editor of the Theater newspaper Ekaterina Ruzhyeva interviewed the composer of the opera Three Sisters, Peter Etvös. [The interview was published by Rossiyskaya Gazeta](#) . The Ural Opera will premiere on May 16/17/18.

You are known as a master of unusual sound solutions. What new sound did you invent for The Three Sisters?

I use traditional orchestral instruments. In the process of writing The Three Sisters, I consciously strove to create such orchestral and vocal material that would be available for repertoire theaters, and not just for those who specialize in modern music. The sounding peculiarity can be called the fact that the ensemble is located in the orchestra pit - and a larger orchestra plays over the stage. In the history of the opera, it used to happen that a small group of musicians played on the stage, but it did not have a structural role. In “Three Sisters” I need two orchestras in order for chamber material that sounds from an orchestra pit to follow the psychological side of what is happening on stage with absolute accuracy, while a large orchestra gives dramatic content. It reminds music for movies:

Another curious point is connected with sounding: harmony plays an extremely important role in opera. This instrument also appears in other world musical cultures, but I use it as a symbol of Russian music. In my childhood, the presence of Russian culture in Hungary was felt very strongly, I listened to a lot of Russian music - popular and classical, I watched a lot of Russian films. Regardless of the fact that I do not speak Russian, I absorbed Russian culture at the deepest level. Harmony plays a decisive role in the pictures of my memory related to Russian childhood impressions. At the beginning of the Three Sisters, the accordion plays for almost a minute and a half, becoming a sound decoration for the work. The opera story itself is full of situations where I attach specific timbral characteristics to individual characters. There are thirteen heroes on stage - and eighteen musicians playing in the orchestra pit represent thirteen instrumental groups (I took two instruments each). Natasha is represented by a soprano saxophone and bells; the descendant of the German aristocrats of Tuzenbach - two horns - in the spirit of the Beethoven-Schumann-Mendelssohn tradition; all three sisters together are symbolized by a string trio - however, each of the heroines is timbrely associated with one of the reed instruments: Irina - oboe, Masha - clarinet, Olga - flute. A similar technique is also convenient because there may not be a character on the stage, but it is worthwhile to sound the appropriate instrument, and the listener immediately understands who it is about. Natasha is represented by a soprano saxophone and bells; the descendant of the German aristocrats of Tuzenbach - two horns - in the spirit of the Beethoven-Schumann-

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To what extent is the use of two orchestras an attempt to experiment in an avant-garde manner?

I had the opportunity to work with Karlheinz Stockhausen and closely monitor the preparations for the premiere of his work "The Group" (*Gruppen*) written for several orchestras. It turned out to be important from a practical point of view. This was a huge advantage: in preparation for the premiere of "Three Sisters" in Lyon, working with two orchestras did not cause any difficulties at all. However, there is no question of any avant-garde experiments: a large orchestra behind the stage is an organic part of the concept of the work. Since the chamber ensemble plays in the pit, in the absence of a large orchestra, the work in its sound would turn into a chamber opera. At the same time, the play takes place in two places: in the salon and in the garden. Should I "open the door of the salon" or "go out into the garden", you can immediately feel the change in space in the sound, because thanks to the large orchestra, the acoustic environment also changes.

Why did you choose Chekhov's play as the plot?

The reason for choosing is very personal. I received an order to write an opera from the Lyon Opera House in the late eighties, and it appeared ten years later. Before that, I had not written traditional operas before, the first five years went into searching for a topic, and in the process of searching we reached Chekhov. In Budapest there was a legendary performance based on "Three Sisters" staged by Tamas Asher - the images from this production were literally imprinted in my memory.

The personal motive is due to the fact that I then lived in Paris with my son, he studied philosophy at the Sorbonne and was a completely Chekhov character. The son once threw: "Why don't you make Three Sisters?" Soon after, he committed suicide, and it became clear to me that the opera should be written in The Three Sisters. The main motive of the work was outlined: farewell. In Chekhov's play everyone says goodbye to everyone. I said goodbye to my son in this opera.

Over the past twenty years, the Three Sisters have been staged at least twenty times around the world. How do you explain the success of your opera?

I'm not sure that this question should be asked specifically for me. I can only state that, judging by everything, the musical-dramatic concept that I invented works. I know that critics highly appreciated the dramatic construction of the work - the way my wife, Maria Mesev, and I completely transformed the structure of the play for the libretto. Events unfold in the same order as Chekhov's. Each of the central characters has its own line of action, as in some Kurosawa films. Instead of four actions, we introduced three sequences: the whole story flows in each, but each time from the point of view of a new character. Three sequences are tied to Irina, Andrey and Masha. Olga did not receive a separate sequence, since farewell does not play a role in her life, and for me in the play this was the most important thing. Ultimately, it is an opera of two sisters and one brother. If you leave critics aside, I can't say how much the novelty appealed to the public, but the music clearly has a strong emotional content. In addition, I deliberately rely on the tradition of Western music, that is, if a person feels at home in the history of the opera, it will not be difficult for him to understand "Three Sisters". It is important for me to become a kind of connecting link between the musical past, present and future.

I think the success of the work was also facilitated by the fact that at the premiere, four female parties sang four counter-tenors. This is due to the fact that for me this story is not about a series of family conflicts, but about farewell. I wanted to show not four women, but four people in the most general sense of the word. In this case, the countertenors became for me the same as they were in the Greek Greek theater - they elevate the drama over everyday life. Since I understand very well that repertoire theaters cannot afford to invite four counter-tenors at once for a performance, I prepared a version of the score that allows us to stage the opera with female voices. This version will sound in Yekaterinburg.

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As a composer, creator of a musical work, how do you feel about different productions, directors?

For me, in this respect, only one thing is important: the director should not go against the opera. I'll give a negative example (I won't specifically say in which city it happened): one director installed revolving doors on the stage, despite the fact that during the preliminary discussion, when this was discussed, I specifically asked him not to do this, not to close back of the stage where the orchestra was located. He closed it and thereby completely destroyed the acoustics, ultimately destroyed the music of the opera. If the director does not destroy the music, then the space for movement can be quite large: I am very interested in various approaches, I always curiously expect what the director will add to my opera.

In the case of opera, the relationship between the composer and the director is also complicated because it is me, the composer, who is the first director of the drama that serves as the basis for the performance. I create a sounding form from the text. Such a transformation has certain laws, some things can be done, others not. Music is an art with a length of time, time in opera flows differently than in a prosaic play, and it is very important that the director feels what the nature of this different current time is. And each opera in this sense is

unique. History is very important for me: my ideal of opera is far from abstract, I always like to tell a story. For me, history becomes an appropriate topic for an opera if it starts to sound in me. This does not mean that I suddenly hear specific melodies or harmonies, rather a certain sound mass, sound quality. If the sound image of an opera, say, Mozart is a ball placed in my palm, the sound image of Mussorgsky's opera has completely different sizes and shapes. Each of my operas has its own sound image, because the stories are also not alike. After *The Three Sisters*, I wrote an opera based on Jean Ballet's play *Balcony*, and critics did not understand why it was so different from *The Three Sisters*. I can ask this: why should it not be different? The story there is completely different, it happens in a different era, in another place - I create separate, unique works, not variations on the topic. After *The Three Sisters*, I wrote an opera based on Jean Ballet's play *Balcony*, and critics did not understand why it was so different from *The Three Sisters*. I can ask this: why should it not be different? The story there is completely different, it happens in a different era, in another place - I create separate, unique works, not variations on the topic. After *The Three Sisters*, I wrote an opera based on Jean Ballet's play *Balcony*, and critics did not understand why it was so different from *The Three Sisters*. I can ask this: why should it not be different? The story there is completely different, it happens in a different era, in another place - I create separate, unique works, not variations on the topic.

You will be at the premiere in Yekaterinburg and will be one of the conductors at the first performance. What do you expect from the Russian premiere?

As a conductor, I have participated many times in the preparation of soloists and orchestra - then we could work together for weeks or months, but there were already so many productions of *The Three Sisters* - there were performances where I could only come to the premiere, so that with joyful curiosity observe the end result. In a certain sense, those performances in the preparation of which I do not have the opportunity to participate, cause more excitement than those where I was from beginning to end, because it is in this situation that it turns out whether the work works without me, whether it's viable that I invented. In Yekaterinburg I will conduct a large orchestra on stage, Oliver von Dohnanyi will conduct an ensemble in an orchestra pit and soloists. The piquancy of all this gives the fact that the first performance I will not see from the audience. Of course, I will stay on the second performance, which I'll see as a spectator. Expectations regarding the Yekaterinburg production are the most positive: you really don't have to worry about the pronunciation. But I'm sure both the singers and the orchestra will perform very well. It's a special joy to me that this production of "Three Sisters" - premiere of opera in Russia. I have long been waiting for this minute.

["Russian newspaper"](#)

The editors thank for the help in organizing the interview with Gergely Fazekas.