

Gogol's *May Night* as a Source of Inspiration and a Site of Intercultural Contact between Russian and Ukrainian Opera Composers

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Abstract:

The study deals with the opera adaptation and the form of artistic conception of Gogol's early story (skaz) "May Night, or the Drowned Maiden" in the works of Ukrainian and Russian composers with a particular focus on the national aspect, the intercultural relations, the use of folklore and the preservation of characteristic features typical of Gogol's skaz.

Keywords: N.V. Gogol, May Night, or the Drowned Maiden, opera, N. Rimsky-Korsakov, M. Lysenko, P. Sokalsky

In spite of the fact that there is a vast array of scientific and popularizing publications dedicated to N. V. Gogol's work, there is lack of a study that would systematically and comprehensively address the writer's works set to music. This paper attempts to at least partially fill in this gap, concentrating on the opera adaptations of Gogol's short story *May Night, or the Drowned Maiden* from his collection *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*.

Several operas have been inspired by skaz (specific short story) *May Night, or the Drowned Maiden* of Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol, a Ukrainian author writing in Russian. However, not all the operas were successful (A. Serov), some of them were merely sketches (B. Martinů, V. Kaprálová), and only three of them were completed: the opera *May Night* by the Ukrainian composer Petro Sokalsky was finished in 1876, but has yet never been staged; *May Night* by the Russian author Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, which was premiered at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg in 1880; and *The Drowned Maiden* by the Ukrainian Mykola Lysenko, the first performance of which took place in Odessa in 1885.

The aim of this paper is to compare the operas by Petro Sokalsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Mykola Lysenko, namely with respect to the national aspect, the intercultural relations and the use of folklore, and to show which of the three operas is the most true to the literary story of *May Night*. The study also examines how this Gogol's skaz is rendered in the opera libretti and music, to what extent and by what means of expression the authors succeeded in keeping and capturing the source text, the attributes of characters, and the artistic intention of the original literary work.

Having appeared within a short period of time, these musical works share some composing techniques (e.g. counterpoint); in certain compositional aspects, however, the authors differ, and they diverge somewhat in the artistic concept of Gogol's short story, too. Korsakov and Sokalsky wrote the libretto themselves, in Russian, while the opera lyrics of Lysenko's opus were created in Ukrainian by Mykhailo Starytsky. Both Korsakov's and Lysenko's compositions consist of three acts, but Sokalsky chose four acts. Among the composers, there are some parallels as well; especially between Sokalsky and Lysenko, and Rimskij-Korsakov and Lysenko.

All the three operas have some common characteristics. Their authors primarily draw on folklore – folk songs and dances; and choirs shape not only the music, but also the dramaturgy of the works. In Lysenko's and Sokalsky's opus, choir scenes dominate, and can be called "choir operas". In all the three operas, the so called "fantastic scene" with water nymphs, who behave like real girls, is accompanied by a gentle timbre of harp and the swinging rhythm of barcarolle. To set this scene to music, each of the composers used the children's folk game "rooks", however, Sokalsky was very

original and conceived this act as a ballet pantomime. The operas are based on Gogol's lyricism – they do not miss the loving couple Galja (Hanna) and Levko, and Levko's dream in a “magical scene” with water nymphs. In Lysenko's composition, all comic heroes (Golova, Scribe, Sister-in-law, Distiller and Kalenik), are retained; moreover, the character of Scribe is much more elaborate and is far more important for the plot of the opera.

1 The characteristic features of the three above mentioned operas

The Ukrainian composer **Petro Sokalsky** created the libretto for his opera *May Night* himself and wrote it in Russian. There were two reasons for this decision. Firstly, the desire to present his work on the stage of the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg and acquaint the Russian capital with the lives of Ukrainian people; secondly, to become famous and earn a place among the giants of Russian music. In the opera text, Sokalsky used the works of Ukrainian poets – Taras Shevchenko and Leonid Hlibov, and thus he emphasized the Ukrainian roots of the literary subject, but contradicted himself by translating their poetry into Russian.

In his libretto, the author highlights a social conflict, which is an unknown element for Gogol's story. Obviously, he wanted to depict contemporary social problems, but he did so in a very artificial and unnatural manner. Galja is portrayed as a pretty poor orphan chosen by rich and powerful Golova (the mayor of the village) as his future wife. Sokalsky mainly highlights the role of the age difference and social inequality in this relationship planned by the mayor. The quarrel of the son (Levko) with his father (Golova) and the simple clash of the village youth are depicted as a revolt which must be put down by city soldiers.

Unlike Gogol's story, the main character is a female protagonist – Galja, who is the most sophisticated and most developed character in Sokalsky's opera. In the libretto, she plays a very active and important role, which is, at the same time, reflected in music. She is far more mature, more resolute and more responsible than the literary prototype, and her psychological line is depicted in much greater detail. In this opera, a female protagonist of this type appeared in the history of Ukrainian music theatre for the first time, in which, among others, Sokalsky's innovation lies. In her vocal line, folk songs dominate. On the other hand, Levko's part is very varied. It contains not only folklore motifs; it is also influenced by melodies of Russian and Ukrainian romances, and classicist-romantic music. Recitatives, an imitation of a spoken word, are heard in it as well.

Sokalsky's Pannochka (the main water nymph) contrasts with real people, but she is not a supernatural creature, she is a terrestrial being. In her part, folklore elements dominate but declamation can be found too. The melodies of all water nymphs stem from folk song lyrics, but their characters lose the nature of gentle, extraterrestrial beings and they are a response to the tragic female heroines of Shevchenko's poems. They are living human souls that were thrown into despair, madness or death due to social injustice. Therefore, accented social context of the work sounds in the lyric-fantastic line, too.

Drawing on Gogol's text, Sokalsky mainly emphasizes the elements of a vaudeville character; however, the comic and lyric features of Gogol's work largely disappear. The author stresses social differences, which we do not find in Gogol's story. The opera contains both patriotic and democratic aspects, by which it gains national and social dimensions.

The elements common both to Sokalsky's opus and Gogol's story further include the incorporation of Russian and Ukrainian national songs and dances, recitatives based on the intonation of everyday spoken language, and following the tradition of a Ukrainian folk music comedy. However, in the opera, there are no typical features of skaz, such as lightness, spontaneity or playfulness.

The benefit of Sokalsky's work is the original use of a ballet pantomime in setting the children's game “rooks” to music. This composition is the first Ukrainian lyric-comic opera without spoken

insertions, and although it remained only in the manuscript, it is the oldest attempt at an operatic rendering of a topic by Gogol.

The second author that set Gogol's *May Night* to music was the Russian composer **Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov**. He wrote the libretto to the opera himself, in Russian. Working on the lyrics, he tried to preserve the writer's style as faithfully as possible. And although his intent was to reflect Gogol's topic and ideas in music as much as possible, he allowed himself to make a slight deflection from the original text at the end of the composition. He added a spectacular finale in the spirit of a Ukrainian folk comedy, where all the performing characters appear, including a small requiem for Pannochka, spring ceremonial songs and a scene celebrating both the young couple in love and sunrise.

The composer employed Gogol's idea of contrasting real and fantastic elements and developed the story based on parallelisms. Thus, the earthly Hanna stands in contrast with the supernatural Pannochka, and Golova has an analogy in the evil Witch. Even individual episodes are built in parallels; fantasy and reality live side by side, in symbiosis. For example, the Russian round dance *khorovod* and the spring ceremonial song of the real girls correspond to the choir song of the water nymphs that, like their real-world counterparts, make wreaths, let them drift on the water, and watch them float to predict who their future husband will be.

For almost all his creative life, Korsakov engaged in verbal folk art. With great love, he collected and studied ceremonial songs and songs to folk games. His interest in folklore, Slavonic mythology, the views of old Slavs on nature, and pagan and folk ceremonies and customs was reflected in his Gogol-inspired operas (*May Night* and *Christmas Eve*). Apparently for this reason, the composer, far more than the writer, paid attention to the depiction of folklore superstitions and described the "nymphs' ceremonies" in much greater detail. In contrast to Gogol, who included in his story only the folk game "rooks", at the very beginning of his opera, Korsakov added one more ancient folk game about sowing millet, which had a protective magical function in olden Slavic times.

Poetry, spring rituals, and the image of nature play a significant role in the skaz and the musical work. However, the relationship to nature is different in both the authors. The writer uses a poetic digression to describe spring night nature, but immediately returns to the scene of everyday life that has humorous overtones. And so, an excited hymn devoted to the Ukrainian night by Gogol culminates in everyday reality (a drunken man shouting on a quiet night street). On the other hand, the images of nature created by Korsakov appear as sceneries portraying a mysterious, fabulous fantasy.

Opera *May Night* comprises an amazing variety of music content. Along with romantic scenes, it features comic situations, everyday life, fantastic episodes and the depiction of folk ceremonies. The music is predominantly lyrical, interwoven with melodies of Ukrainian and Russian folk songs; there are recitatives, merry dances (e. g. hopak), playful songs, or a parody of a ballad. The composer often uses counterpoint, especially imitation. In detail, polyphony is elaborated in a number of choirs.

The choral scenes, in which the melodies of folk songs are heard, occupy a very important position in the opera. They present scenes not only from the life of the peasants, but also of supernatural beings. Their scale of expression is very varied. However, all choral songs have the character of a ceremony or a folk game, allowing the composer to combine the content of Gogol's short story with his favourite themes.

In *May Night*, the composer used all the elements that organically make up Gogol's short story – the comic, lyricism, fantasy, genre lines. The power uniting reality with fantasy is the good that wins thanks to the help of supernatural forces. This work of chamber character and intimate poetry, where the finest details and nuances are exceedingly important, is built on a fairy-tale basis. A sunny spring atmosphere, full of dreamy, gentle, amorous emotions, shines through the whole composition.

Korsakov's *May Night* and Gogol's literary original have a number of features in common. For example, in the opera, the composer uses the imitation of intonation of lively speech captured by the writer, but the musical effect is somewhat deprived by the fact that the libretto is rusified and does

not contain all the Ukrainian words by which Gogol makes the sound imagery of his short story distinct. Although poetry, fairy-tale nature and fantasy dominate the composition, there is also humour, which is often achieved through musical exaggeration. All the comic characters that are captured very vividly and colourfully are permeated by subtle Gogol's humour. Each of these characters "speaks" in a very specific, distinctly juicy musical language – apt, apposite speech and funny, idiosyncratic instrumental characteristic.

Most of the choral scenes are based on Russian and Ukrainian folk songs (especially ceremonial), but in Korsakov's arrangement they sound too much like arias of a "big" opera style, lacking simplicity and the nature of folk singing. In addition to the game "rooks", the composer includes the old Slavic folk game "millet" performed during the spring sowing. At the same time, the author depicts and extols the beauty of Ukrainian nature and emphasizes its harmony with the people.

In this great Russian composer's opus, lyricism, poetry and ceremoniousness play a much larger role than in the literary original. Korsakov accentuates the music processing of old Slavic customs and rituals, and focuses on pagan celebrations of spring and nature. *May Night* is a high-quality opera; its composition is very detailed and carefully thought out, but perhaps this is the reason why it loses some of the spontaneity, lightness, and improvisation contained in Gogol's skaz. Compared to the character of the short story, Korsakov's musical concept is rather artistic and academic. And although Korsakov keeps to the literary text most faithfully of all the three composers, he does not achieve the liveliness and the freshness of the writer's work.

Folk verbal art was the most important source from which Ukrainian authors of *The Drowned Maiden* – **Mykola Lysenko**, the composer, and **Mykhailo Starytsky**, the librettist – drew all the richness of images and means of expression for their opera. However, the most important element, they took from folklore, were folk songs which were exclusively Ukrainian. Lysenko either used their exact quotes – both melody and lyrics, or he chose only a folk text and composed his own music, which is very close to the original folk tunes. Mainly by means of these melodies, and at their background, crucial moments of the dramatic development of the story are going on, and the characteristics of the peculiar heroes and the colourful scenes of everyday life of a Ukrainian village are emerging.

The composer himself called the opera "lyric-fantastic". Its libretto is in Ukrainian and contains both romantic elements as well as genre and ceremonial scenes. The moods of gentle dreaming mingle with dramatic and comic motifs. Each of the characters has their distinctive musical language, and the comic situations are entirely in Gogol's spirit.

The main difference in comparison to Gogol's skaz is that Levko only dreams about Pannochka, he does not meet her personally. A letter from Commissioner is secretly handed over to him by Scribe who, by doing good to the young couple, wants to win Gorpyna's favour. Without knowing it, he fulfils Pannochka's will and helps her keep the promise given to Levko. This makes the opera much more realistic than the literary original, because the loving couple manages to win with the help of an "ordinary" man rather than supernatural beings. Despite the fact that Starytsky diverged from the short story, he preserved much of the writer's artistic style. He did not break the storyline to the extent that would destroy the comic of the skaz and the impression of spontaneity. He also included Gogol's fantastic images with water nymphs and Pannochka, and so the poetic charm of the skaz did not disappear. Even realistic scenes from the Ukrainian countryside are pervaded by Romanticism. The composer imitates the ordinary bustle of a village as a life in which, besides everyday prose, there is always something poetic, higher and noble, and for this reason, in the choral scenes, he devotes such attention to ceremonial songs and dances (khorovods).

In the opera, we find one more deviation from Gogol: the final festive choir praising the faithful love of Levko and Galja, as opposed to the original silent night scene when the entire village, except for Levko, is calmly sleeping. However, this divergence does not disrupt the plot in any fundamental

way; it is in harmony with the artistic spirit of Gogol's skaz and gives a very natural and optimistic impression.

Even though Lysenko's opera *The Drowned Maiden* contains spoken insertions, which are the exact quotations of Gogol's text translated into Ukrainian, the main role belongs to music whose melodic-rhythmic base is folkloric. Lysenko transferred the symmetry of a Ukrainian folk song into his composition, capturing its tender lyricism, lively melodic contours and the peculiarity of its national colour. In the choirs, the author employs elements characteristic of Ukrainian folk multi-voice singing. (SHREYER-TKATCHENKO 1981: 81-82)

The folklore core of the opera consists not only of ceremonial elements, national songs, dances, legends and customs, but also of verbal phrases, bywords and sayings drawn from the purely Ukrainian folk lexicon, which the librettist selects exactly in the manner of the writer. In the same way, according to Gogol's creative principles (HORDIYTCHUK 1989: 204), comedy episodes of the opera, such as the funny song of the young men mocking Golova, the dialogue of Gorpyna and Scribe, or the scene with a dance of tipsy Kalenik, are created.

Although there does not appear to be any innovative concept in the composition of the opera, we can admire the author's original way of portraying the distinct life of a Ukrainian village – vivid folk scenes, comic situations and characters, earthy humour, fine poetry, romantic fantasy, the contrast of real and supernatural worlds, the charming image of the Ukrainian nature, spontaneity and immediacy depicting the Ukrainian national spirit. Together with the fresh national songs, rich in melodies, adapted by an experienced composer and tailored to specific dramaturgical goals, these elements represent the various aspects of means of expression of Gogol's short story captured in simple, uncomplicated and distinctly national Lysenko's music.

2 Parallels between Sokalsky's *May Night* and Lysenko's *The Drowned Maiden*

In Lysenko's *The Drowned Maiden*, we can see some influence of Petr Sokalsky's *May Night*, which had begun to be created almost twenty years earlier. For example, in both the operas, besides a similar sequence of the scenes in the fantastic image from the third act, we find the same text in the water nymphs' choir (*Ukh, ukh, solomennyi dukh*) from Shevchenko's ballad *Prichina*. In each of these compositions, the water nymphs behave like real girls, they are not extraterrestrial beings, and in Sokalsky's opera, they are young women who found themselves in a complicated social situation and fell prey to despair, madness or even death.

We can discover some other links between the two composers, too. Both Sokalsky and Lysenko are native Ukrainians, and their works carry a national aspect. However, each of them approaches it in a slightly different way. Sokalsky composed his *May Night* with the aim of staging it at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg and tailored all its aspects to the great scene. He created the libretto in Russian, translating not only the verses of the Ukrainian poets T. Shevchenko and L. Hlibov, which he used in his composition, but paradoxically also the Ukrainian expressions that made Gogol's story peculiar. His national sentiment was mainly reflected in the social and democratic aspects of the opera.

Unlike his older colleague, Lysenko had no ambition to stage his work in the capital, and from the very beginning he considered the possibilities of local Ukrainian performers and the tradition of the Ukrainian musical-drama theatre. He was a great patriot and never had the texts of his compositions translated into Russian, even though many Russian composers, especially P. I. Tchaikovsky and N. Rimsky-Korsakov (ROSENTHAL-WARRACK 1966: 225), were interested in his works and admired them, and their performance on the leading tsarist stages would have brought Lysenko more popularity and better financial security. Ironically, his librettist, Mychajlo Starytsky, translated Gogol's text from Russian into Ukrainian.

Both the composers, Sokalsky and Lysenko, wanted to emphasize the national character of Gogol's story. For this reason, they drew on folklore sources – folk songs and dances. Sokalsky used both

Ukrainian and Russian songs; Lysenko, on the other hand, exclusively Ukrainian ones. The sensitive choice of these songs reflected the composers' good knowledge of past and contemporary national culture. For example, unlike Korsakov, neither of them used the "hint" from Gogol's text (the lyrics of the Ukrainian folk song) and did not include the song *Sonce nyzen'ko* in Levko's part, because in Ukraine, this melody was associated with the character of Petro from the stage play with songs *Natalka Poltavka*¹ by I. Kotljarevsky. In Sokalsky's opera, Levko sings a romance based on the poems of L. Hlibov; however, Lysenko decided to paraphrase a Ukrainian folk song – *Nich taka misiachna*. IZVARINA (2003): 118-120)

Sokalsky's opera consists of several style layers – the European Romantic prototype, Russian romances and Ukrainian folk songs, using them as an eclectic juxtaposition rather than integrating them into an organic synthesis. On the other hand, Lysenko's composition is based on a single style, namely folk songs which are able to authentically depict the Ukrainian national characteristics. At the same time, the authors included in the libretto a romantic rendition of folk customs and legends, providing the audience with an idea of the everyday life of a village and the traits of character that are typical of the peculiar Ukrainian temperament. (HORDIYTCHUK 1989: 203-204)

Lysenko strengthens the comic line of the story, making it independent and parallel to the lyrical one. Sokalsky's comic is not a counterpoint to lyricism; it is only a background for its development. His dramaturgy exploits, in particular, the vaudeville situations of Gogol's storyline. However, he is the only one to choose the female heroine (Galja) for the main character of his opera. The composer endows her with a much deeper psychology than Gogol does. She is a very energetic, decisive and mature girl who plays a more important role in a couple with Levko. Sokalsky highlights and escalates social conflicts, such as the element of social inequality (Galja and Golova) or the rebellious spirit of the story (Levko and rural youths).

3 Parallels between *May Night* by Rimsky-Korsakov and *The Drowned Maiden* by Lysenko

The similarity between *May Night* of Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov and *The Drowned Maiden* of Ukrainian author Lysenko is obvious. The influence of Korsakov's opera is, for example, particularly clear in the last act of *The Drowned Maiden* built according to the scheme of the third act of Korsakov's *May Night*. In addition, Lysenko (or more precisely his librettist Starytsky) uses for the dance (khorovod) of water nymphs in the third act and for the songs of ceremonial character ("green holidays") in the first act the same lyrics (based on Ukrainian folk poetry) as Korsakov. However, Korsakov gives these verses in Russian translation and keeps only a few words in Ukrainian. (GOZENPUD 2005: 557) In the "fantastic scene" of both operas, water nymphs behave like real girls. They do not act as supernatural beings, but like their real counterparts, they dance "khorovods" and sing ceremonial songs.

The same choice of the folk texts and the dramaturgical concepts in both works is hardly an accident. However, it remains a question which of the composers was the source of inspiration for the selection of particular songs used in both operas, for at the time when Korsakov planned to make up *May Night*,² Lysenko was his student (1874-1876) at St. Petersburg Music Academy. (SMOLKA 1983: 385) It is very likely that, as a native Ukrainian, Lysenko helped his teacher to choose the appropriate Ukrainian songs for his opera. Lysenko had been collecting ceremonial, wedding and other

¹ On the base of this stage play, in 1889 Lysenko wrote his opera *Natalka Poltavka*. (See SMOLKA 1983: 385)

² Korsakov started to write opera *May Night* in summer 1877. (See RIMSKIY-KORSAKOV 1936: 103–104 and YAKOVLEV 1971: 203)

folk songs since 1861, and in 1867, ten years before Korsakov began working on his opera, he published his first collection of Ukrainian national songs.³

The whole conception of the third act, including the interconnection of two choirs – the female one (*Homin, homin po dibrovi*) and the male one (*Sviataia nedilia*), on whose background the final choir develops, brings Lysenko's and Korsakov's operas very close together. The inspiration for the festive finale of Korsakov's opera *May Night* and Lysenko's *The Drowned Maiden*, where the choir sings "Glory" ("Slava") in honour of a young couple, is nowhere to be found in Gogol's story. The whole scene was added to his opera by Rimsky-Korsakov, and undoubtedly, Lysenko was inspired by Korsakov and took this idea from him. GOZENPUD 1954: 77)

Of course, there are some fundamental differences between the two composers, too. Lysenko had deep Ukrainian roots,⁴ and the music of his opera *The Drowned Maiden* clearly reveals them. Gogol's topic was immensely close to him, because he understood the distinctive Ukrainian temperament very well – from his own experience. Lysenko was familiar with similarly peculiar characters and scenes from the life of a Ukrainian village that Gogol was telling about. Therefore, for him, setting Gogol's *May Night* to music was an entirely natural matter, coming directly from his soul. In Lysenko's melodies, the characters and the situations from Gogol's skaz come to life. Radiating unbridled energy, joyful mood and pure human emotion, Lysenko's story of a spring night unfolds like a gripping film work and fully intrigues the spectator.

Korsakov, unlike Lysenko, composed on the topic that he had carefully studied, but he was, not only because he was a native Russian, rather distant from it. His highly cultivated work and music in the "great" Russian opera style sound, compared to Gogol's story from a Ukrainian village, is somewhat artificial and mannered. And although his compositional procedures are perfectly mastered and the whole composition reaches a high-quality level, his music is not entirely consistent with the spirit of Gogol's story. It lacks the lightness and freshness of the colour of the Ukrainian countryside depicted by the writer.

The arrangements of folk songs from Lysenko's pen are very sensitive. They sound natural, entirely in accordance with Gogol's story, and totally in the spirit of rural folk singing, music and environment that Lysenko, born and grown up in a village in the Poltava region, knew intimately from his early childhood. Furthermore, he had been collecting Ukrainian folk songs since the age of nineteen (VASILENKO 1972 and GOZENPUD 1954: 68, 137–152), so at the time when he composed the opera *The Drowned Maiden* (the premiere was held in 1885), he had a more than twenty-year enriching experience with folklore and its adaptation.

Korsakov studied folk songs too, but he did so much later. He published his first collection of folk songs in 1877,⁵ only at the time when he began composing his *May Night*. But it was Russian folklore, and Korsakov's contact merely consisted in collecting it; he had no first-hand experience with it because he had never lived in a village. Korsakov was born in the little town of Tichvin, but he lived in St. Petersburg from the age of twelve. (SMOLKA 1983: 542–543) The life in the countryside, in particular the Ukrainian one, was strange to him.

Lysenko's instrumentation is much more sober than Korsakov's academic score for a symphony orchestra. And apparently it was not only the modest conditions of Starytsky's theatrical company which led Lysenko to a smaller cast. The "modest dress" suits his "folk" melodies, both the original and the author's ones, much better. The same holds for the choirs, which are much less majestic but much more intimate than Korsakov's, and their parts are composed in the spirit of traditional Ukrainian polyphony. The dance melodies arranged in the style of folk musicians sound very lively –

³ Rimsky-Korsakov did not publish his first collection of folk songs *Сто русских народных песен* until 1877. (See KELDYSH 1990: 462 and GOZENPUD 1954: 68, 137-138)

⁴ Lysenko was a great Ukrainian patriot who fought against rusification of Ukraine. For his patriotic activities, he was arrested by tsarist regime, which suppressed using the Ukrainian language, several times and in 1907 he was even shortly imprisoned. (See KUBIYOVITCH 1962: 1295)

⁵ Collection *Сто русских народных песен*. (See KELDYSH 1990: 462)

they are playful, cheerful, temperamental, and by their joyful mood it is as if they invite the spectator to dance. Lysenko seems to have been inspired directly by the musical and sound environment of Gogol's work, in which songs, dances, and everyday tones resound with a Ukrainian village.

4 Summary – the evaluation of the adaptations of Gogol's *May Night, or the Drowned Maiden* for operas

In our opinion, in all aspects, Mykola Lysenko's opera adaptation of the Gogol's skaz is the most sensitive of all three. As a native Ukrainian, he understood the soul of the nation very well and therefore highlighted the most characteristic features of the Ukrainian nature and intensified them by the most striking elements which are used, to describe the everyday rush of a Ukrainian village, by Gogol. On a musical background, Lysenko portrayed peculiar comedic characters and depicted not only humorous situations but also lyrical and fantastic scenes. He combined an array of varied – both everyday and festive – moments from the life of distinctive Ukrainian peasants.

The librettist Mychajlo Starytsky translated Gogol's *May Night* into Ukrainian and apparently, for this reason the opera text is more emphatic, sounds more credible and more natural and has a faster cadence. Each of the characters has his/her own "contour of speech" and a melodic line that usually stems from folk tunes. Both the language and the speech of the comic heroes abound with earthy humour, while the characters of the lyrical storyline are portrayed with a wide range of gentle tones.

The opera dialogues and monologues that cite the text of Gogol's short story in Ukrainian allowed the authors to better capture the writer's artistic principles and bring this work closer to the Ukrainian folk theatre, from which Gogol derived. At the same time, the spoken insertions speed up the flow of the plot and contribute to the greater gradation of individual scenes. In the vocal parts, Starytsky used both the texts of Ukrainian folk songs and his own lyrics. Once, in the scene with water nymphs, he included Shevchenko's verses, too.

The originality and distinctness of the language of the opera is underlined by the inclusion of the sayings, bywords and phrases drawing on the Ukrainian folk verbal art. That is why the musical language of Lysenko's *The Drowned Maiden* is more resonant and more authentic than Sokalsky's and Korsakov's *May Night*, and achieves a stronger expression in accordance with the characteristic signs of the skaz, thanks to its unreserved adherence to the original.

Lysenko's music contains parody and humour, but at the same time it is able to portray the romantic atmosphere of the "fantastic scene" with Pannochka and the water nymphs, as well as the lyrical moments of the tender love between Galja and Levko. In *The Drowned Maiden*, Ukrainian folklore, national customs, traditions and legends play a key role. However, folk songs dominate the whole composition. Lysenko, unlike Sokalsky and Korsakov, is the only one to use solely Ukrainian folk songs (mostly ceremonial) and dances (khorovod, hopak, kazachok), thus further emphasizing the national spirit of the opera.

As in both Lysenko's music competitors, choir scenes have a significant part in his opera. Separately, the author uses female and male groups, but mixed choirs do not stay aside. Lysenko mastered the technique of counterpoint at a high level and made great use of it in the arrangement of the traditional Ukrainian folk multi-voice singing. In this way, he created an original polyphony, in which the principle of classical composition is organically combined with a centuries-old folk tradition. Compared to the above-mentioned composers who also knew the technique of counterpoint very well, and perhaps better (especially Korsakov), and used it in their *May Nights*, Lysenko's concept of counterpoint outstripped them in many ways, mainly in terms of materializing Gogol's ideas. The reason is that Lysenko, as a long-time collector and arranger of Ukrainian folk songs, was deeply familiar with the specific method of Ukrainian multi-voice singing and could naturally incorporate it into his choir polyphony. Moreover, in the opening act of his *The Drowned Maiden*, as the only one of the three composers, Lysenko included a playful, funny polyphonic conversation

between rural boys (*Dobryi večir, divchatochka*) and girls (*Zdorovi, kozachen'ky*). This talk in the village square on a warm spring evening is very spontaneous and the sound image resulting from this scene could be aptly described with the original Stankovych's term "street polyphony".⁶

For all these reasons, Lysenko's music and opera sound much fresher, more joyful and more real than those of Sokalsky's and Rimsky-Korsakov's. The striking features of *The Drowned Maiden* are the overall naturalness, immediacy and playfulness, in which the vivacious gestures and the salty language of comical characters and situations are organically interconnected with a soft, gentle lyricism full of deep emotions and fairy-tale fantasy. Lysenko's genuinely national, uncomplicated, pure music seems to be in symbiosis with the folk singing and music of the Ukrainian countryside, which both the composer (Lysenko) and the writer (Gogol) had in the subconscious, and therefore they are both so related. The beauty and the true essence of the life of Gogol's characters are hidden in the simplicity and clarity of Lysenko's music close to the folk culture. Thus, all the stated facts and the features that are typical of Gogol's skaz lead us to conclude that Lysenko's work *The Drowned Maiden* is, of all the three above mentioned operas, the most true to the literary story of *May Night*.

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⁶ For the explanation of the term "street polyphony", see (LUNINA 2013: 89).