

## NOTES ON *LE GRAND MACABRE* AND THE AESTHETICS OF CAMP

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**SUMMARY.** The article presents an analysis of the features of Ligeti’s opera *Le Grand Macabre*, indicating that it belongs to the camp aesthetics. The starting point for the analysis is the features of this aesthetic/sensitivity described by Susan Sonntag in her *Notes on Camp*. The opera’s libretto, its theatrical and musical layers, as well as Ligeti’s personal life experience as a composer – important for camp – are the subject of the analysis.

**Keywords:** Camp, opera, Ligeti, Sonntag, postmodernism

### Camp – a useful definition?

We will start these considerations by outlining the very concept of camp. It’s extremely difficult to do it in the form of a regular definition – this is probably the most characteristic feature of the phenomenon, which one of its most important researchers, Susan Sonntag, sometimes calls “sensitivity”, sometimes “taste”, and sometimes “aesthetics”<sup>2</sup>. Due to the existence of a huge amount of literature on the phenomenon of camp, in its various contexts and uses, for the purposes of this text we will primarily refer to Sonntag’s concepts, contained in her famous *Notes on Camp* (1961).

For the sake of this text, we will adopt practical version of the definition, that calls camp an aesthetics, “the essence of [which] is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration”<sup>3</sup>. The most important features of camp therefore include “travesty, impersonation, theatricality”<sup>4</sup> – however, not of every type, but only placed in a specific context. Camp transforms what is shameless, in its

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<sup>2</sup> Sonntag, Susan. *Notes on Camp*. Jouve: Penguin Books, 2018, pp. 1-5 et passim.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.



exaggeration, bizarreness and – in sum – in bad taste, into some positive aesthetic value. It does this – so to speak – in complete good faith and with solemn seriousness, with naivety, and even often with pathos<sup>5</sup>.

If something is too good aesthetically or too important as a monument of art, most probably it can't be campy. Sonntag says: "There is a sense in which it is correct to say »it's too good, to be Camp«"<sup>6</sup>.

Another important issue is the relationship between camp and queerness. Camp is historically and traditionally associated with the culture and behavior of queer community; many researchers even claim that it grew out directly of this culture<sup>7</sup>. This is important also to our text in the context of Ligeti's opera.

We want also to add, as it seems quite important in the context of our reflection, that Sonntag considers intentional camp as "less satisfying"<sup>8</sup>. We will return to this issue later. So, it's quite clear that camp, understood in this way, is the domain not only of art, but also of various aspects of the reality that surrounds us, but always the cultural one. "Nothing in nature can be campy", says Sonntag<sup>9</sup>.

### Camp and Opera: Genetic Connections

Already Sonntag, and other researchers after her, consider opera as a genre which is particularly susceptible to camp influences. "Sometimes whole art forms become saturated with Camp. Classical ballet, opera, movies have seemed so for a long time"<sup>10</sup>. However, in most cases the Sonntag's comments are too general and not entirely clear to serve our reflections. For example, when listing quite chaotically various typical camp works, she includes Bellini's operas among them<sup>11</sup>. We understand that in this case it is about the ostentatious and intentional kitsch of *bel canto*, which, especially to someone unaccustomed to this convention, appears fully camp. An outstanding opera researcher, Daniel Albright, also used this term in reference to Verdi's *Macbeth*<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, pp. 13, 15-16, 23, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Burston, Paul. *Queens' Country. A Tour Around the Gay Ghettos, Queer Spots and Camp Sights of Britain*. Boston (US): Little, Brown and Company. 2013. Lindsey, Richard. *Hollywood Biblical Epics. Camp Spectacle and Queer Style from the Silent Era to the Modern Day*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. 2015. Reynolds, Robert. *From Camp to Queer: Re-making the Australian Homosexual*. Carlton South: Melbourne University Press. 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Sonntag, S. 2018. Op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Albright, Daniel. *The Witches and the Witch: Verdi's "Macbeth" in Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 17(3), 2005 (pp. 225-252), p. 233.

On the other hand, Sonntag makes also a remark: “There is a sense in which it is correct to say »it’s too good, to be Camp«. Or »too important«, not marginal enough”. Thus [...] the operas of Richard Strauss, but not those of Wagner”<sup>13</sup>. This last quotation seems at least controversial. Why can Strauss be campy, but Wagner – who, by the way, in popular culture has become somewhat synonymous with the bombastic and exaggerated style of opera – not? Another camp researcher, Mark Booth, also drew attention to this simplification in his analysis<sup>14</sup>.

However, despite the controversial nature of the examples given by Sonntag, we are inclined to agree that, historically, the essence of early opera is campness. This campness revealed in the spectacular, often tacky glitz of opera performances and opera halls; the overwhelming importance of erotic themes for opera – with a simultaneous tendency to change gender roles, in the form of *travesti* and, before, the phenomenon of *castrato*; the ostentatious banality of the libretto with the traditional disregard for any principles of probability – at least until the orchestral apparatus in German Romantic opera had developed to such an extent that it was able to take over part of the semantic burden of the work. The very important question for camp is question about the intention: “The pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious. [...] It seems unlikely that much of the traditional opera repertoire could be such satisfying Camp if the melodramatic absurdities of most opera plots had not been taken seriously by their composers. One doesn’t need to know the artist’s private intentions. The work tells all”<sup>15</sup>. Let us note already in this moment that this is an important problem that will have to be solved regarding Ligeti and his *Le Grand Macabre*: to what extent does he take his work seriously? Because this will clearly prove either for or against the camp nature of this opera.

However, there is, according to Sonntag, another feature of camp that seems much more important in relation to opera, namely:

What Camp taste responds to is “instant character” (this is, of course, in the eighteenth century); and, conversely, what it is not stirred by is the sense of the development of character. Character is understood as a state of continual incandescence – a person being one, very intense thing. This attitude toward character is a key element of the theatricalization of experience embodied in the Camp sensibility. And it helps account for the fact that opera and ballet are experienced as such rich treasures of Camp, for neither of these forms

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<sup>13</sup> Sonntag, S. 2018. Op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Booth, Mark. *Campe-toi! On the Origins and Definitions of Camp* in idem, *Camp*. New York: Routledge, 1983 (pp. 11-41), pp. 13-15.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 14.

can easily do justice to the complexity of human nature. Wherever is their development of character, Camp is reduced. Among operas, for example, *La Traviata* (which has some small development of character) is less campy than *Il Trovatore* (which has none)<sup>16</sup>.

This aspect of placing the operatic figure and its structure at the forefront in the context of the camp aesthetic will also be important in relation to *Le Grand Macabre*.

### **Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* and its camp revision**

Now that we have recognized the basic nature of camp and its connections with opera in general, let us consider the possibilities of applying this category to *Le Grand Macabre*: opera, which is a late work of Ligeti<sup>17</sup>: written already in 1977, however, it encountered a few obstacles with publication history. Unpublished original version comes from 1978, published version with revisions from 1996<sup>18</sup>.

We will present our conclusions in several areas, referring also to existing research on the aesthetics of aforementioned opera.

### **End of the genre?**

Surprisingly, *Le Grand Macabre* wasn't described very thoroughly: Jane Piper Clendinning already drew attention to this fact in 1993 when she wrote: "this composition [...] has received little attention in the analytical literature, and what has been written is either very brief or focused on a specific aspect of the composition"<sup>19</sup>. What is surprising is that it seems that the situation has not improved much significantly over the next thirty years. There are several noteworthy texts on this topic, but all of them are contributory, they don't provide complex analysis of the piece.

We can understand the reason for which this opera can be problematic in a sense: it's the very concept of that piece, which is very much pastiche, as Michael Searby noted. In his text from 2012, which is dedicated to *Le Grand Macabre* and has meaningful title *Ligeti's "Le Grand Macabre": How He Solved the Problem of Writing a Modernist Opera*, he mentioned several

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, pp. 21-22.

<sup>17</sup> Bernard, Jonathan W. *Ligeti's Restoration of Interval and Its Significance for His Later Works in Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 21(1), 1999 (pp. 1-31), p. 1a.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 2a.

<sup>19</sup> Piper Clendinning, Jane. *The Pattern-Meccanico Compositions of György Ligeti in Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 31(1), 1993 (pp. 192-234), p. 230.

times “rich stylistic range he [Ligeti] uses, his use of quotation of existing works, collage, and pastiche”<sup>20</sup>. He says also a lot about the subversiveness of this opera, speaking even about “plundering of past styles [...] Monteverdi, Rossini, and Verdi”<sup>21</sup>.

It seems possible that this parodic inclination may pose a problem for avant-garde scholars. Many of them would like to believe that Ligeti created something like an anti-opera and went far against the rules of the genre. Quoting Searby: “Originally Ligeti started *Le Grand Macabre* with the idea that he wanted to compose an anti-opera, and was highly influenced by Kagel’s *Staatstheater*, which was written for the forces of an opera house but was radically different to traditional opera”<sup>22</sup>. That’s exactly how Yayoi Uno Everett perceives *Le Grand Macabre*: “*Le Grand Macabre* constitutes an »anti-opera« *par excellence* because of its narrative ambivalence and double-voiced forms of parodic enunciation”<sup>23</sup>. Text of Everett is very insightful, detailed, and interesting, also from a cultural studies perspective, but we don’t have impression that the very use of parody and grotesque is any sign of anti-genreism. In fact, Ligeti is strongly influenced by postmodern tendencies in terms of the convention he adopted here. These trends are noticeable in many aspects of art in the second half of the 1970s. The fact is that Ligeti appears to be perhaps one of the first to appreciate this trend, but postmodernism has nothing to do with the radical avant-garde, quite the opposite. It takes pleasure in playing with conventions and genres, celebrates them – and especially celebrates the past, immersing historical objects in a kind of ahistorical magma, where they can exist together side by side with impunity. It seems to be exactly what Ligeti does in *Le Grand Macabre*, and the ludic nature of postmodernism is visible in it. In this sense, we embrace Searby’s use of the term *objet trouvé* in reference to this opera<sup>24</sup>, but we would like to understand *objet trouvé* here in a cultural sense, not as a compositional technique. Ligeti constantly allows us to find in his musical text various objects of different opera conventions of long-gone eras, and he does it in a rather playful way. And the very mention of these conventions helps to keep the genre in check, even if Ligeti does it in completely unpredictable way, as Searby also noted (“the structures of his music up to *Le Grand Macabre* have a high degree of unpredictability about them; the listener is never sure what is going to happen next”<sup>25</sup>).

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<sup>20</sup> Searby, Michael. *Ligeti’s “Le Grand Macabre”: How He Solved the Problem of Writing a Modernist Opera* in *Tempo*, Vol. 66(262), 2012 (pp. 29-38), p. 31. Cf. *ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> Searby, M. *Ligeti the Postmodernist?* in *Tempo*, Vol. 199, 1997 (pp. 9-14), p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Searby, M. 2012. *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> Everett, Yayoi Uno. *Signification of Parody and the Grotesque in György Ligeti’s “Le Grand Macabre”* in *Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 31(1), 2009 (pp. 25-56), p. 55a.

<sup>24</sup> Searby, M. 2012. *Op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> Searby, M. 1997. *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

Concerning the problem of anti-genreism, as a rule, we agree here with what Eric Drott writes about:

belief in genre's obsolescence has largely been internalized by the practices of music theory and analysis. As Samson observes, the kind of "work-centered perspective" to which these disciplines subscribe makes them largely impervious to the claims of genre. This is particularly true of analytic discourse on twentieth-century music (and post-1945 music more specifically), which has tended "to minimize the power of genre". Analyses that do continue to invoke traditional generic categories (concerto, opera, string quartet, oratorio, etc.) typically do so not in order to show how pieces exemplify their norms but to show how they transgress or repudiate them. But by far the most common way that analytical discourse deals with the question of genre with regard to this repertoire is to omit it from consideration in the first place<sup>26</sup>.

We suppose this is also the case of Ligeti, who absolutely doesn't feel overwhelmed by, so to say, the "weight" of this opera genre heritage, which in many cases, as we know, is quite shameful in its shoddiness. This is proved by Everett, who, following Richard Toop, calls *Le Grand Macabre* literally pop art. In this sense, pop art is understood as adapting the worst features of Gaetano Donizetti, Giuseppe Gioacchino Rossini, but also Baroque opera or even Richard Wagner (Everett shows all these influences and many others) and presenting these influences proudly as something noteworthy by placing them in a new, original context. In this way, Ligeti points to the historical "trash" character of the opera genre, which, however, has always had and still has a huge impact on the popular recipient. The question Ligeti seems to be asking is: is it possible to make somehow this trash opera equally attractive to listeners of avant-garde music?

### **Problem of narrative and character's structure**

A continuation of this approach to opera matter is Ligeti's treatment of the characters in *Le Grand Macabre*. We will use a quote from Searby again as a starting point: "The underlying principle in Ligeti's compositional approach in the opera is to bring the characters to life through the music – consistency of style and technique seems to be less important"<sup>27</sup>.

However, we cannot agree with the opinion expressed by the researcher, on the contrary – we think that the characters in *Le Grand Macabre* are absolutely superficial and sketched in bold lines, and their presence on the

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<sup>26</sup> Drott, Eric. *The End(s) of Genre* in *Journal of Music Theory*, Vol. 57(1), 2013 (pp. 1-45), p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Searby, M. 2012. Op. cit., p. 32.

stage is merely a pretext. In addition, Ligeti's characters are aware of their own façade and superficiality, and that they are constantly acting. Nekrotzar says, "Give me my requisites, slave!"<sup>28</sup>. Mescalina calls Astradarmos "dolly" ("Püppchen")<sup>29</sup>. Let us note that this feature is absolutely consistent with the camp nature of the opera, the essence of which was always to manifest the bizarreness and overwhelming nature of affect, and not to delve into the psychology of the characters. It was described by Carl Dahlhaus in his famous study on opera, where he showed that the dramatic order of the libretto in an opera has no significance, because it's always about a network of relations and connections between individual affects represented by the characters<sup>30</sup>. Dahlhaus even went as far as to say that if the order of the arias in Mozart's *Mitridate re di Ponto* were changed, it wouldn't disturb the order of the work at all<sup>31</sup>. Similarly, in Ligeti's work, where exaggerated, mannered, and in some cases also emanating queerness (as in the case of Nekrotzar) characters, express primarily one central affect: namely, the fear of death and nothingness. This is what Peter Edwards writes about it:

There is little in the way of resolution in the narrative plot of György Ligeti's opera *Le Grand Macabre* [...]. The grotesque comedy plays on the fear of death: Nekrotzar, the personification of death, threatens the people of the hedonistic and gluttonous world of Breughelland with the apocalypse. In the event, Death himself shrivels up and dies, having failed to deliver on his promise<sup>32</sup>.

The open ending of the opera serves the same affect; even if it ends, like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, with a quasi-moralizing, mocking sextet. The similarity to the finale of *Don Giovanni* is striking in this context, although Mozart wanted to classically soften the metaphysical and pathetic tone of the opera. Ligeti has no such intentions, even if the horror of death in his work is authentic. We are not sure, however, whether this horror wasn't deeply rooted in the composer himself and his life experiences.

Let us return to the alleged issue of queerness, which has particular significance in the figure of Nekrotzar. On the popular geek website for RPG gamers, world anvil, this character is described as "born in Breughelland into

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<sup>28</sup> Ligeti, György; Meschke, Michael. *Le Grand Macabre. Oper in vier Bildern*. New York: Schott, 1999, p. 72.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78.

<sup>30</sup> Dahlhaus, Carl. *What Is a Musical Drama?*, transl. Mary Whittall, in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 1, 1989 (pp. 95-111), pp. 96-100.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100.

<sup>32</sup> Edwards, Peter. *Resisting Closure: The Passacaglia Finale from György Ligeti's "Le Grand Macabre"* in *Music Analysis*, Vol. 35(2), 2016 (pp. 258-278), p. 258.

the Order of Sarastro but has since turned against the Order due to their cruelty and homophobia and sworn to bring about their destruction"<sup>33</sup>. His orientation is characterized as "gay, but probably on the gray-ace spectrum to some extent"<sup>34</sup>. The character of Prince Go-Go is even more queer<sup>35</sup>. The white and black ministers call each other "sodomites", and their entire dialogue in this scene is strikingly queerly bizarre<sup>36</sup>. The narrative of the opera is, in general, suspended between spectacular, manifested eroticism (exactly as predicted for camp) and an equally manifested desire for cruel death<sup>37</sup>. Edwards connects this tendency with the general idea of carnivalesque, as follows:

These musical references contribute to the grotesque trope, which, in accordance with Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism, resists closure and mirrors the lack of resolution in the opera's narrative. In his study, Bakhtin argues that Rabelais' imagery of the body depicts hybrids of the natural and the artificial to underscore the irresolvable nature of such binary categories. Bodies depicted in the throes of death were accompanied by images of another body. [...] The semantic narrative of Ligeti's opera displays a negation of abstract meaning and resistance to closure comparable to that described by Bakhtin. Death dies and humanity is given a new chance – or chances, given the potential repetition of the ritual ad infinitum. Moreover, the process of becoming and renewal arises from Ligeti's representation of a fragmented and negated past in music<sup>38</sup>.

Of course, there are similarities between Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque and idea of camp, mainly related to the fact that in both cases it concerns primarily area of popular culture or alternative culture (counterculture), and both carnivalesque and camp use subversiveness as the basic mechanism. Most of the studies on *Le Grand Macabre* signal this aspect as especially valid for Ligeti's opera. "Seherr-Thoss cites the literary and artistic influence of grotesque realism in the work of Rabelais (as interpreted by Mikhail Bakhtin) on Ligeti's development of the narrative in the opera, whereas Everett ties the grotesque more closely to the transformation of musical quotations and stylistic references"<sup>39</sup>. However, concepts such as grotesque or parody, which are associated with carnivalesque (and most often used in context of Ligeti), are not suitable for

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<sup>33</sup> *Nekrotzar Oakenheart*. Entry in <https://www.worldanvil.com/w/operaquest-mezzopatria/a/nekrotzar-oakenheart-person> (last access: 08.11.2023).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Ligeti, G.; Meschke, M. 1999. *Op. cit.*, p. 124.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 112-116.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 88.

<sup>38</sup> Edwards, P. 2016. *Op. cit.*, pp. 261-262.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 262.



camp, because camp is not about parodying or sneering through bizarreness. On the contrary: it's about valuing, showing off with pride and affirming what is bizarre. Therefore, we consider this concept more appropriate for *Le Grand Macabre*.

### **Camp and musical language**

The same applies to Ligeti's musical language. The extremely rich sound of the opera includes listener-friendly diatonic music that, in a way, flatters popular tastes, but at the same time doesn't subordinate this music to any clear tonality. This Ligeti's "diatonicism without tonality", as Jonathan W. Bernard called it, without any recognizably functional progression, appears in concluding *Passacaglia*<sup>40</sup>. As in the case of Béla Bartók, this tonality must be understood in a very broad sense<sup>41</sup>. Paul Griffiths calls it "dislocated tonal harmony"<sup>42</sup>, and further: "a harmony in which simple consonances return, but not in the right order, producing a disturbing or comic effect of tilting"<sup>43</sup>.

Searby says: "*Le Grand Macabre* [...] explores tonality, but there it is driven by quotation and pastiche, rather than the forging of a new musical language"<sup>44</sup>. But Ligeti's intention in this case probably wasn't to create a new musical language, but rather to show in a new light what is known and what opera audiences are aurally accustomed to. This "new intervallic vocabulary"<sup>45</sup> is exactly a gesture that Ligeti makes to the internalized musical habits of the wide public. put some effort into organizing known elements in a new configuration. And it's campy in spirit, too.

### **Camp as the personal experiences of Ligeti**

What is particularly important for camp is its connections with real life. Camp art shouldn't abstract from reality<sup>46</sup>. In the case of *Le Grand Macabre*, Everett claims that there are deep connections between opera and the composer's own experience of reality:

From a biographical perspective, the narrative discourse of this opera constitutes an intertext that mirrors Ligeti's own artistic habitus of exile; as a survivor of the Holocaust and Hungarian Uprising, the theme of death and survival has

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<sup>40</sup> Bernard, J. W. 1999. Op. cit., pp. 25b, 28a.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Kerékfy, Márton. "A 'New Music' from Nothing": György Ligeti's *Musica ricercata* in *Studia Musicologica*, Vol. 39(3-4), 2008 (pp.203-230), pp. 214-215.

<sup>42</sup> After: Edwards, P. 2016. Op. cit., p. 258.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, pp. 258-259.

<sup>44</sup> Searby, M. 1997. Op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> Bernard, J. W. 1999. Op. cit., pp. 28b.

<sup>46</sup> We disagree with Sonntag's opinion that camp is apolitical (cf. Sonntag, S. 2018. Op. cit., p. 5).

been an integral part of his life experiences. There is a profound message that Ligeti communicates in *Le Grand Macabre* that far surpasses its capacity to elicit laughter: by situating the audience inside the fantasy-world of Breughelland, the opera forces us to confront our own fears and pretensions as we grapple with the existential chaos of the human condition<sup>47</sup>.

In this way, camp can be an elitist and sophisticated way of dealing with the experience of trauma – in an extreme case we could even say that Ligeti is telling us “Death is fancy”. More campy would be probably “death is bizarre and fancy”. It’s worth wondering if this message is as profound as Everett writes about it. The way of telling this, however, is most certainly impressive and dazzles us with its richness. At the same time, he talks about it in a highly inappropriate, theatrical and humorous way. According to Esther Newton, these are three extremely important camp strategies<sup>48</sup>.

## Conclusions

Let us systematize once again, in one place, all the features and values of camp that allow us to think of *Le Grand Macabre* as a camp text.

First of all, it is intentional stylistic exaggeration, theatricality taken to the verge of absurdity.

Secondly, the appreciation of what is impressive and bizarre, even kitschy, especially those elements referring to retro aesthetics (in this case, the early, romantic and pre-romantic opera convention).

Thirdly, queerness, which in this case reveals itself very strongly at the level of language.

Fourthly, kind of “marginality” of the work – in the sense that it’s not at the very center of the widely-known opera genre, and it doesn’t belong to the strict canon of the most important and popular opera pieces (which, of course, says nothing about quality of the work).

Fifthly, open flirtation with popular culture and transgression into a realm of popular culture – also at the level of musical language and numerous allusive textual references.

Sixthly – the undeeened and clearly pretextual structure of opera characters.

Seventhly – the postmodern technique of “plundering” on various levels, freely borrowing from various cultural texts (in this case, especially opera), which the author simply finds attractive for some reason.

And last, but not least (but also most unclear of all) – sincerity, which comes from personal experience.

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<sup>47</sup> Everett, Y. U. 2009. Op. cit., p. 55a.

<sup>48</sup> Newton, Esther. *Role Models* in idem, *Mother Camp. Female Impersonators in America*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1972 (pp. 97-111), p. 106.

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