Monika Karwaszewska
University of Gdańsk
Stanisław Moniuszko Academy of Music
Poland

Bordering on Monodrama… *Madame Curie* by Elżbieta Sikora

Abstract: The subject of analysis is the contemporary opera *Madame Curie* (2010) by the Polish composer Elżbieta Sikora, premiered in 2011 in Paris. In an extremely emotional way, using innovative techniques for expression, the composer tells the story of the scientist Maria Skłodowska-Curie in the form of a script for the opera, with anxiety as the main idea of the libretto. This dramatic work is an example of an intermedia work in which the composer uses electronic media alongside traditional instruments. The composition is an intermedia spectacle revealing the symbolic significance of the sound emission interacting with the libretto, choreography, lighting, ancient Greek theatre form and an electronic medium.

Despite being divided into scenes, the piece was directed using a single set representing the laboratory of the Polish Nobel Prize winner. The director patterned the staging of this opera after Greek theatre: for action on stage, the whole proscenium was used, and the orchestra was seated at the back of the stage (not in the orchestra pit), the soloists at the front, next to the spectators, while the conductor led the ensemble with the help of a video camera, not seeing the soloists. The chorus was amphitheatrically seated on chairs on both sides of the stage to follow the action on stage with the eye of a censor. Every role required of its actor great craft, extraordinary skill and professionalism.

The aim of the presentation will have been a multi-aspect analysis and interpretation of the score and the recording of the opera, as well as a discussion of the characteristics of voice projection in this complex work.

The article presents a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the opera's score and recordng.

Keywords: contemporary opera, Greek theatre, Polish music, intermediality, ekphrasis, inphrasis

About the opera Madame Curie *by Elżbieta Sikora. Introduction.*

The subject of this study is a contemporary opera in three acts by the Polish composer Elżbieta Sikora, *Madame Curie*, written in 2011. Sikora attempted to compose another, this time large-scale, opera (in 1977 she wrote her first chamber opera *Ariadne* and, in 1992, a stage version of the chamber opera *Wyrywaczserc* ['Heartripper']). *Madame Curie* is an extremely expressive dramatic work in which Sikora used her already developed experimental music technique, albeit exclusively for expressing emotion and showing musical intensity. It is worth noting at this point that Elżbieta Sikora left for Paris in 1968 to study with the Groupe de Recherches Musicales under the direction of Pierre Schaeffer and François Bayle, gaining vast experience of the matter.

The opera, due to its contemporary music material and its composition, is an ambitious work both in its reception and its performance, having been performed worldwide only a handful of times. The world premiere was given on 15 November 2011 at UNESCO House in Paris as part of the International Year of Chemistry celebrations and the hundredth anniversary of awarding Nobel Prize to Maria Skłodowska-Curie. Ten days later, the Polish premiere of the work was presented in the Baltic Opera in Gdańsk. Twice in 2014, on 3 and 4 September, the work was performed in the Grand Theatre in Tianjin (China). In 2018 the opera was performed again during the 53rd International Andrzej Markowski Vratislavia Cantans Festival in the National Music Forum in Wrocław.

The composition. The selection of performance techniques and the contemporary message

Madame Curie is an operatic work with a large orchestra, soloists, chorus and scenic movement. The composition of the work includes the following:
- 11 soloists;
- a large symphony orchestra with a harp and percussion;
- an electric guitar, an accordion;
- a 30-person chorus;
- Baltic Dance Theatre dancers;
- an electronic layer (soundtrack played from tape and computer).

In terms of texture and tone, the orchestral parts resemble sounds generated from clear quasi-electronic expression equipment. Traditional sounds complement the sounds played from the speakers. Sikora thus combines, in a smooth way, the traditional media with the electronic ones.

However, the electronic layer does not serve a primary role in this opera. The former only influences the enrichment of sound in selected real locations, or signals supernatural phenomena in imaginary ones. The composer, with the help of sound objects played from tape or computer, introduces effects resembling the ones that accompany the image in a film, e.g. war sound effects, or complements the orchestral sound in dramatic moments. With the help of electronic sounds played from tape, Sikora shapes e.g. scene vi illustrating Pierre Curie's accident.

A separate commentary is needed for Sikora's use of two instruments which do not belong in the traditional composition of the orchestra, such as electric guitar or accordion. The use of electric guitar was supposed to symbolise modernity; an instrument non-existent in Maria's time, with whose help the story is 'told' today. The composer entrusted the electric guitar with e.g. playing glissandos, which heighten the tension and express horror. The sounds played by the accordion mean a return to the past: Maria knew the nostalgic and lyrical tone of this instrument from the Parisian streets. The accordion complements the musical planes of the symphony orchestra, increasing the density of texture.

Voices in particular vocal parts are treated both in a traditional way and in the form of vocal effects, phonemes, such as laughter, shout and whisper.

The libretto and the assumptions of the dramatic form

Libretto and direction

This operatic work was created to a libretto by AgataMiklaszewska in which she explores the subjects that are operatic *par excellence,* i.e. of love and death. The narrative of the opera is a story of one tragic night when Maria Curie received her second Nobel Prize and one of the professors of the Nobel Committee advises the heroine, in light of the scandal unfolding in Paris (her affair with her married friend), against collecting the prize in person and on leaving Paris. Maria has to make an important decision that night, relating future events from distant future and arguing in her mind with – already old – Einstein. The reading of this letter's content by the voice coming from the speakers opens the opera (Prologue), when the orchestra is still not visible on stage. The voice is accompanied by dramatic and deeply expressive music played from tape. The stage is revealed only after the chilling message and the orchestra begins to play on the note of B♭6,[1] which appears a number of times throughout the duration of the work.

1Octaves according to SPN (Scientific Pitch Notation) from C0 to C8.

The three-act opera *Madame Curie* is a neo-expressionist music drama which alludes stylistically to Richard Strauss's *Elektra*. The opera is directed in a homogeneous scenery representing the Nobel Prize winner's laboratory. The scenery is shaped by the leading and supporting characters from Maria Skłodowska-Curie's real dramatic life, as well as figures from her dreams, such as Albert Einstein and the tacit Mother of God who 'visits' Maria in her mind after Pierre's death.

It is on the audience to decide how to interpret particular passages in the libretto's action, as they may happen either in reality or in a dream.

As Elżbieta Sikora herself stated, this opera is an extended monodrama, as the main heroine is present on stage almost throughout its formal continuum, performing long and expressive musical phrases conveying a range of emotions: pain, nostalgia, suffering, love, helplessness, depression or joy. Maria Curie exits the stage only during short instrumental ritornellos and passages sung by the chorus. One could even claim that this opera was written for one singer who builds the dramaturgy of this work.

The setting of the opera by the director was modelled after Greek theatre; the whole proscenium was used for dramatic action, the orchestra was placed at the back of the stage (not in the orchestra pit) and the soloists at the front right next to the audience, whereas the conductor led the ensemble while facing the camera, without seeing the soloists.

Participating in the dramatic action, the choruses were placed on stage, as if in the amphitheatre, surrounding the main heroine from the side. Since the scenes take place in different locations, the choruses in the work discussed serve different roles, such as journalists, listeners of science lectures and science bodies at the Sorbonne, a crowd in the street, a chorus at a Parisian café.

The librettist entrusted the choruses with texts with emotional and dramaturgical overtones, placing them in an era. They are supposed to speak of futurism and the brink of war, which prompted the composer to give them not only a supporting or commenting role, but also primary, signifying and participating in the musico-dramatic action.

The dancer's – who depicts the character of Loïe Fuller, Maria's friend – dance became an important element of scenery. Fuller was the author of the avant-garde Serpentine Dance. For this purpose, the dancer created a special costume which, in motion, becomes a certain mobile. Fuller's dance and her original costume became an element of scenography. The librettist obtained the information that Fuller's innovative dance technique delighted the audience of Paris of the time. The dancer used spatial and spherical costumes for creating abstract forms in motion. For creating her newest choreography she used radium to paint her body and costume, which cost her her life.

The formal assumptions of the work

Contemporary opera is an extremely challenging high art form of a complex structure; it requires a fusion of libretto, music and what one sees on stage, tradition and the need for presenting modernity.

The large-scale structure of the drama has been divided in the score into 30 separate scenes which transition smoothly from one to another. The size of the acts varies. In Act I, besides the Prologue, the composer placed 8 scenes, in Act II 12 scenes, and in Act III 10 scenes ending with a brief coda.

ACT I
PROLOGUE (voice played from tape reading a letter to Maria from the professor).
Scene 1 Maria and Einstein; an 'old' dream.
Scene 2 The laboratory. Enter Pierre, it is still dark.
Scene 3 Paris. The great exhibition. Everyone present except Pierre and Maria.
Scene 4 Outside the laboratory. Perrin, Einstein and journalists.
Scene 5 The laboratory. Irena playing, Eve asleep.
Scene 6 The accident [electronics].
Scene 7 The house. Maria opens the door.
Scene 8 Empty laboratory.

ACT II
Scene 9 Paris, at a café. A few years have passed since Pierre's death.
Scene 10 Sorbonne, after Maria's lecture. Langevin approaches the entrance and opens the door.
Scene 11 The sewing of the robes for Loïe; they become Maria's white robe.
Scene 12 A scientific congress. Maria surrounded by men. A mid-talk reception.
Scene 13 A scandal on the street.
Scene 14 Maria and Langevin's flat.
Scene 15 Maria's dream.
Scene 16 A hall in the Sorbonne. A crowd is gathering.
Scene 17 The Borels' house, hall. Enter Margarette Borel and Paul Appel, Irene and Ève are already there.
Scene 18 Work at the laboratory.
Scene 19 The duel and the parting.
Scene 20 The café. The futurists.

ACT III
Scene 21 The railway station, empty and dark. Clouds of steam.
Scene 22 The war.
Scene 23 The end of the war. Maria, Irène and Ève are sewing flags.
Scene 24 Inside. A meeting with Missy.
Scene 25 Loïe Fuller's disease.
Scene 26 United States.
Scene 27 Maria's dream. Bitterness.
Scene 28 Film projection.
Scene 29 On the Vistula River bank. Maria alone.
Scene 30 A sanatorium room. Maria's death.
CODA

The three-act opera opens with a Prologue in which a voice played from the speakers reads a letter, like a narrator in an oratorio. Also, assigning the choruses a prominent role makes it possible to pinpoint oratorio features in this work.

Sikora moved away from the traditional meaning of the formal components such as the aria, recitative, choruses and duets. The recitative, whose task in the early opera was to enliven and explain the dramatic action, was replaced with the soloists' declamation and melorecitation. The composer also omitted the classical aria. Any of its functions may be fulfilled by the following two excerpts of *Madame Curie*: the lyrical, expressive and moving Maria's singing on her husband's grave and her singing showpiece in scene xxix, when Maria raves about radium. One may also mention Maria's beautiful duet with Pierre. One will also find in the piece discussed short instrumental ritornellos that appear either in the openings or endings of the scenes.

The music material used deserves special attention. Elżbieta Sikora decided on a gradual expansion of the musical universe by starting with three key notes – F♯, G and C♯ – which she then subjected to permutation and transposition until achieving a full whole-tone scale. There are also moments in the opera (e.g. opening on a B♭6 note), where Sikora limits herself to a single pitch.

Madame Curie and the theory of intermediality

The concept of intermediality […] gained currency in the 1980s in German- and French-language studies of theatre performance, and in scholarship on opera, film, and music, in order to capture the notion of the interconnections between different art forms (Faber, 2018: 1).

The opera is a fusion of three arts: music, ballet and theatre and, by the same token, of different means of communication: singing, movement, speech, acting, lighting, choreography and electronic media, creating the so-called media hybrid. In this case the medium, in its wide sense, includes not only sound generators – a classical or electronic medium – but also elements of musical theatre choreography or scenery. The interrelationships (or fusion) emerging among particular media in the opera may be referred to a type of overt intracompositional intermediality, as proposed by Werner Wolf in his classification (Wolf, 2002: 22, 28).

The following words by Claus Clüver confirm the aformentionedintermedial relationships in the opera:

> …an opera is a multimedia text that is meant to be performed. One can buy and read the libretto separately or as part of the score. To be studied as an adaptation of a literary source text and its intertextual contexts, it will have to be approached with the tools and background of literary studies; treated as part of the score, the libretto will be approached as a component of the operatic text. But a full study of an opera's reception will have to include not only the musical interpretations it has received, but also the ways it has been staged, and that involves everything that makes theatre a multimedia enterprise, besides the frequent inclusion of ballet interludes. This means considering the collaborative efforts of stage director and set, lighting, and costume designers, conductor, choreographer, and the performers on stage and in the orchestra pit. […] A comic strip is a mixed-media text; an opera score that contains the libretto is a multimedia text (Clüver, 2007: 25).

For defining the hybridization process in the opera, the category of scenicality – which conditions pageantry – proves fundamental. It is the stage that enables the different media, which shape action or the narrative, to fully coexist.

The dancers' participation and their role in shaping on-stage action cause the opera to acquire traits of such a hybrid that demonstrates the relationship among the media. The dancer does not have a secondary role here; she becomes a carrier of emotions of the words sung by the soloists and of instrumental and electronic music.

Creating music to the text whose content includes words related to dance or music (interpreting the medium of dance or music in the libretto content), ElżbietaSikora presents in her opera a stage in its visual form which includes the interpretations of these media in the verbal text.

Such a complex phenomenon is currently arousing interest among scholars and is creating a set of theories about the definitions, typologies, properties and manners of using ekphrastic inserts and issues relating to their perception.

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In this case, relevant is the concept of ekphrasis that Claus Clüver defined as 'verbalization of real or fictitious texts composed in a non-verbal sign system' (Clüver. 1999: 187-204). 'Ekphrasis refers to the literary and rhetorical trope of summoning up – through words – an impression of a visual stimulus, object, or scene. The concept has been fundamental to late 20th- and early 21st-century scholarship on the interface between visual and verbal media' (Squire, 2021).

Traditionally, the term 'ekphrasis' was used to describe visual works, to present in words something that is mostly imaginary or represented in images (Rusieshvili, 2015: 1-8).

> Particular forms of ekphrasis amount to intermedial or intersemiotic transposition, the transformation of a text into a self-sufficient text in a different medium or sign system. Such transpositions can also occur from word to image (e.g., certain illustrations), from word to music (e.g., tone poems, but not songs), and from the visual arts to music and vice versa besides other media (Clüver, 2007: 24).

This opera addresses the issues of employing ekphrasis in intersemiotic systems involving not only literary ekphrasis but also musical and choreographic ekphrastic inserts. It introduces examples of musical and choreographic ekphrastic inserts. The keywords used in the libretto are semantically loaded; its content includes general references to music and dance.

In the musical and choreographic layer (the non-verbal medium) of the opera, the words that are an example of reverse ekphrasis – i.e. musical or choreographic artistic inphrasis – have been interpreted using the principle of expressive experience of text.
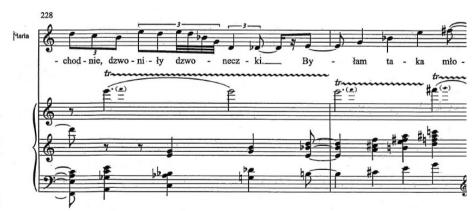
The essence of this inphrasis, similarly to an intermedia work using visualisation, is an 'interpretation' of the music notation that is conveyed through the dancer's expressive movement, and 'supplementation', or enriching the work by means of emotional categories (Karwaszewska, 2021a: 66-67).

In scene iii of the opera (b. 352) the dancer Loïe Fuller dances and sings semantically loaded words which refer to the non-verbal medium that is dance: 'Only me and the light… I can dance wherever I want to dance, only for the two of them'. At this point in time, the composer additionally used dance-like rhythms facilitating the interpretation of the hidden meanings in the verbal medium (libretto). This passage is an example of a simultaneous use of ekphrasis and inphrasis. The music at this point becomes 'tangible', and Fuller's dance sounds on stage, emanating almost tactile sensuality (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. A scene from a performance of *Madame Curie* directed by Marek Weiss (2011). Pictured: Iuliia Lavrenova (Fuller), photo by Sebastian Ćwikła, Baltic Opera[2]
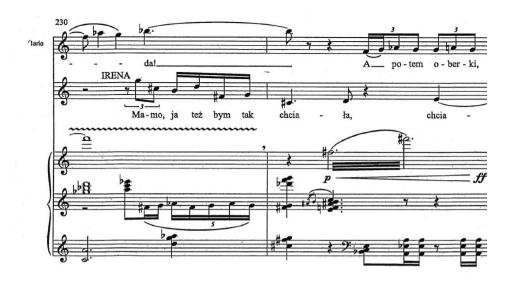
Scene xi is another example of the presence of these intermedial phenomena. The dancer in a white dress grabs Maria for a dance. Maria sings about her youth. In the verbal text, words appear of musical overtones – 'little bells rang', b. 228) – and dance overtones ('And then obereks, mazurs, krakowiaks' [bb. 231-233], 'I danced the waltz, I danced' [bb. 236-238]). In these passages the composer introduces rhythmic patterns characteristic of these dances. At the end of the scene, the dancer dances to a melodic line played by solo clarinet (Examples 1,2,3).
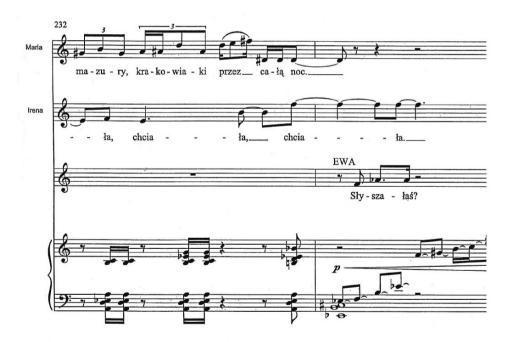

Example 1. E. Sikora, *Madame Curie*. Opera in three acts, piano reduction, PWM Kraków, 2011, scene xi, bb. 228[3]

2 Photograph reproduced by permission of the Baltic Opera in Gdańsk.
3 The reprint of excerpts from sheet music examples by permission of PWM Edition.

Example 2. E. Sikora, *Madame Curie.* **Opera in three acts, piano reduction, PWM Kraków, 2011, scene xi, bb. 231-233**

Example 3. E. Sikora, *Madame Curie*. Opera in three acts, piano reduction, PWM Kraków, 2011, scenexi, bb. 236-238

In scene v (bb. 499-508), Maria's children (Irène and Ève) make sounds by hitting bowls. In the text sung by Pierre, the following musically-loaded words were used: 'To cloud my mind with little bells when I want to think… My little bell, Irène, give me a little quiet'. The interpretation of the verbal medium thus found its expressive reference in the musico-visual layer (Example 4).

Example 4. E. Sikora, *Madame Curie.* **Opera in three acts, piano reduction, PWM Kraków, 2011, scene v, bb. 499-508**

Conclusion

In Polish music, few contemporary composers take to composing intermedia music theatre works. Besides Elżbieta Sikora, the issue of intermediality in opera, both within each media and their interrelationships, was explored by Krzysztof Knittel (*b* 1947) in his *Heart Piece – Double Opera* from 1999 based on Heinrich Müller, co-written with John King, and Agnieszka Stulgińska (*b* 1978) in her *Trzy kobiety* for three women and ten instruments (2017), using performance art and interaction among sound, text, choreography, lighting, theatrical form and electronic medium (Karwaszewska, 2021b: 136-54). In 2011 Agata Zubel (*b* 1978) wrote her *Oresteja*, a dramatic opera for solo singers, actors, choir, percussion and electronics. Aleksander Nowak (*b* 1979) created a musical layer for the intermedia quasi-musical drama *Spoon River Anthology* (2012), a type of multimedia installation, a spatial arrangement of [a] video projection with sound (the projections present operatic artists performing recitative arias composed to selected poems by the American poet Edgar Lee Masters).

The opera being discussed – Elżbieta Sikora's monodrama – is among the dramatic works that raise the most crucial issues of contemporaneity. By means of expressive music in her composition, Sikora offered the audience a deep reflection on the pursuit of truth and experimenting with novelty. Placing the accent on one role (Maria's) was supposed to show the intensity of the main character's emotions. The composition is firmly rooted in contemporaneity; not only musically and due to its message, but also scenographically. In *Madame Curie*, the composer focuses not only on the key parameters of the traditional opera such as singing, speech and music; in this case the theatre, the dance and the electronic media participate in the creation of the artefact.

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Na granici s monodramom… *Madam Kiri* Elžbjete Sikore

Apstrakt: Predmet analize je savremena opera *Madam Kiri* (2010) poljske kompozitorke Elžbjete Sikore, premijerno izvedena 2011. godine u Parizu. Na izuzetno emotivan način, koristeći inovativne tehnike izražavanja, kompozitorka u formi scenarija za operu priča priču o naučnici Mariji Sklodovskoj-Kiri, sa strepnjom kao glavnom idejom libreta. Ovo dramsko delo je primer intermedijalnog dela u kome kompozitorka uz tradicionalne instrumente koristi elektronske medije. Delo je intermedijalni spektakl koji otkriva simbolički značaj zvučne emisije u interakciji s libretom, koreografijom, rasvetom, starogrčkom pozorišnom formom i elektroniskim medijem.

Iako je podeljeno na scene, delo je režirano tako da pozornica predstavlja laboratoriju poljske dobitnice Nobelove nagrade. Reditelj je postavio ovu operu po uzoru na grčko pozorište: za radnju na pozornici korišćen je ceo proscenijum, a orkestar je sedeo iza pozornice (ne u orkestarskoj rupi), solisti ispred, pored gledalaca, dok je dirigent vodio ansambl uz pomoć video kamere, ne videći soliste. Hor je bio amfiteatralno smešten na stolicama s obe strane bine kako bi pratio radnju na pozornici okom cenzora. Svaka uloga zahtevala je od svog glumca veliko umeće, izuzetnu veštinu i profesionalnost.

Cilj rada je analiza iz više aspekata, interpretacija partiture i snimak opere, kao i diskusija o karakteristikama projekcije glasa u ovom kompleksnom delu.

Rad predstavlja sveobuhvatnu analizu i interpretaciju partiture i snimka opere.

Ključne reči: savremena opera, grčko pozorište, poljska muzika, intermedijalnost, ekfraza, infraza