The Specificity of Voice Leading in Elżbieta Sikora's Opera
*Madame Curie* from the Perspective of Performing the Part of Missy Meloney

**Abstract:** This article contains scientific reflections on the ways of performing vocal parts in a contemporary opera on the example of the opera by a living Polish composer Elżbieta Sikora entitled *Madame Curie*, telling the story of life and work of an outstanding Polish scientist and Nobel Prize winner, Maria Curie-Skłodowska. Based on her own experiences in performing one of the roles in the opera – an American journalist, Missy Meloney – the author analyses the vocal part in terms of melodic, intonation, rhythmic, articulation and acting difficulties and forms conclusions about the specifics of voice leading.

**Keywords:** contemporary opera, Elżbieta Sikora, Polish music, voice leading, Sprechgesang

*Madame Curie* is a contemporary biographical opera work created in 2011 by the living, acclaimed Polish composer, Elżbieta Sikora, an author of dozens of compositions performed and recorded around the world. The work is dedicated to Maria Curie-Skłodowska, an outstanding Polish scientist and Nobel Prize winner. The piece was commissioned by the Baltic Opera in Gdańsk. The author of the libretto is Agata Miklaszewska, a Polish writer and librettist whose musical *Metro* has not been off the stage for twenty years. The opera features ten soloists, a thirty-person choir and a dancer from the Baltic Dance Theatre. The musical layer features instruments such as saxophone, accordion and electric guitars in addition to a full symphony orchestra. Electronic fragments are played from a computer. The content of the libretto is inspired by the life of the two-time Nobel Prize winner, whose achievements have influenced the development of world science and technology. After her youth spent in Poland, Maria Curie-Skłodowska spread her scientific wings abroad. However, in addition to her world-class scientific achievements, the opera also portrays her private life, full of facts unknown to a wide audience.
In the work in question, I performed the part of Missy Meloney, an American journalist who appears at one point in Marie Curie’s life. What is new in the opera is a musical and poetic matter, which inspires in a special way the search for colour and artifice, releases special creativity and stimulates imagination. Contemporary operas appear quite rarely in theatre repertoires, which is why I gladly accepted director Marek Weiss’s proposal. The production was to be created as a project of Opera Gedanensis – the idea of director Weiss, who dreamt of presenting the Baltic Opera with new works every two years, which he would commission directly from the artists. The plans included operas about Schopenhauer (born in Gdansk) with music by Piotr Moss and a libretto by Antoni Libera (unfortunately it did not come to fruition) and about Hans Memling (his Last Judgement is the greatest treasure of the National Museum in Gdańsk), which was a success.¹

At the end of September we started to work on Elisabeth Sikora’s opera Madame Curie, and on 14 November 2011 the world premiere was held in Paris at the UNESCO Hall, which was received with great enthusiasm. It was the International Year of Chemistry and the centenary of the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Marie Sklodowska-Curie. On 25 November of the same year, that is 11 days later, we presented the work on the stage of the Baltic Opera in Gdańsk, also to great applause and appreciation of the audience. This is what director Marek Weiss said before the Gdańsk premiere, explaining the reason for choosing this work:

Nobody questions her (Marie Curie’s) greatness, but we know very little about her. Mostly it’s a collection of stereotypical information about the chemistry professor, gray hair, dry apparel, the Nobel Prize and her husband, who participated in it. Few people have read the books about her life, and even fewer realize what a milestone in science her discoveries were.

She has her rightful place in the pantheon of national heroes and we name streets, schools and universities after her. She is one of the seven global celebrities of Polish origin alongside Copernicus, Chopin, Wojtyla, Walesa, Pola Negri and Polanski. Every educated citizen of the world associates and recognizes her. Now, when 2011 was her year, the knowledge about her will deepen and spread. I hope so.

¹ The Last Judgment – an opera in two acts by Krzysztof Knittel. The Polish premiere took place on 8 November, 2017 at the Baltic Opera, directed by Pawel Szkotak. It was conducted by Szymon Morus.
I have been a fan of hers for many years and my admiration for her grows with my age and experiences. I set her as a role model for myself and my children. But do I really know who she was? Recently, there have been a number of publications attempting to deface her monument and restore a more human dimension to her memory. We decided to join these seekers of truth and, in our own operatic way, tell the story of this extraordinary woman who conquered the world overcoming incredible difficulties, resentment, hostility and her own weaknesses. Her iron character and brilliant mind were formed in a delicate body that was subjected to the trials of passion and temptations far removed from the puritanical image of the laboratory workaholic. A beautiful, dramatic character of flesh and blood. This is how we want to show her and love her.²

This is what Elżbieta Sikora, the composer, said about her reasons for creating the opera:

Over six years ago, while looking for a heroine for an opera I was going to compose, my friend, a physicist scientist, dropped these three words in a Warsaw café: Marie Skłodowska-Curie. It sparked. It was her! I was looking for a strong, contemporary woman with a strong character and I just found her.

As I read books, met with her granddaughter - Professor Hélène Langevin-Curie, talked to those who knew those who knew her, the initially hazy image of my heroine began to acquire more and more clear contours and colors. A strong Maria, but also a doubtful Maria, a Maria who devoted herself without limits to her work, but also a loving Maria, a Maria who was determined to do much to help others, but also a Maria with a decidedly strong ego, a Maria who assured me that when I want it, I want it, and a Maria who was resigned; such, in her contradictions, was my Madame Curie becoming clearer and clearer.

As I read books, met with her granddaughter Professor Hélène Langevin-Curie, and talked with those who knew those who knew her, the initially hazy picture of my heroine began to take on more and more contours and colors. A strong Maria, but also a Maria tormented by doubts, a Maria devoted to her work without limits, but also a loving Maria, a Maria determined to do a lot to help others, but also a Maria with a decidedly strong ego, a Maria assuring that when I want it, I want it, and a Maria resigned: such, in contradictions, appeared to me more and more clearly my Madame Curie.

The libretto, after having gone through a series of twists and turns, was entering a straight path, while I was already putting the notes written in small letters onto the score paper. Scattered fragments began to form a whole, the music emerged from the darkness. I did not run away from lyricism, emotions. Maria, who almost never leaves the stage, sings in broad phrases, often full of tension, her pain, her love, her determination, her joy in the scientific discovery of new truths of nature.3

The cast of the opera was as follows:

Maria Skłodowska-Curie – Anna Mikołajczyk
Pierre Curie – Paweł Skałuba
Paul Langevin – Tomasz Rak
Einstein – Leszek Skrla
Loïe Fuller – Joanna Wesołowska (voice); Elżbieta Czajkowska-Kłos / Iuliia Lavrenowa (BTT)
Ewa the Child – Weronika Weiss (violin solo)
Ewa child – Anna Michalak
Irena the child – Julia Robak
Irena child – Marta Siewiera
Missy Maloney – Monika Fedyk-Klimaszewska
Gustave Téry – Bartłomiej Misiuda
Henri Perrin – Szymon Kobyliński
Paul Painleve – Daniel Borowski
Vice President – Jan Szenk (recording)

Voices from the Choir:
Katarzyna Grajewska, Liliana Kamińska, Izabela Plath, Krzysztof Brzozowski,
Wojciech Dowgiałło, Marek Gerwatowski, Jacek Jasman, Andrzej Kosecki, Leszek Kruk,
Taras Kuzmych, Tomasz Potkowski, Krzysztof Rzeszutek, Adam Siebiera,
Łukasz Wroński, Witalij Wydra.

and
Choir and Orchestra of the Baltic Opera
Grzegorz Wieczorek – clarinet (solo)
Conductor Wojciech Michniewski

3 Ibid.
Here are the performers of the work:
Adaptation: Elżbieta Sikora, Gregor Blumstein
Staging and direction: Marek Weiss
Musical direction: Wojciech Michniewski
Set design: Hanna Szymczak
Choreography: Izadora Weiss
Lights: Piotr Miszkiewicz
Missy Meloney

My role – Missy Meloney

Marie Mattingly Meloney (1878-1943), was one of the leading journalists of the United States, a magazine editor and social activist who in the 1920s organised a fundraiser to buy radium for Marie Curie and started a movement for better housing conditions in the United States. During the 1930s, using the pseudonym „Missy“, she was a friend and confidante of Eleanor Roosevelt. Marie was privately homeschooled and trained as a concert pianist, but an accident on horseback put an end to that endeavour, and she turned to journalism. She once declared: „I have been lame since I was 15 years old, and since 17 of that I have had a bad lung, and since then I have done the work of three men.“ In 1920, at the age of 42, she was described as „small, very frail, almost an invalid; a childhood accident had made her slightly lame. She had gray hair and huge, poetic black eyes set in a lovely pale face.“ In 1904 she married William Brown Meloney, an editor at The New York Sun and later executive secretary to New York City Mayor William Jay Gaynor. They had one child, William Brown Meloney, who became a writer and producer on Broadway.

Libretto

The libretto written by Agata Miklaszewska was inspired by the life of an outstanding scientist, a two-time winner of the Nobel Prize, Maria Curie- Skłodowska. Her achievements were a breakthrough in the field of science and technology. Elżbieta Sikora’s opera also focuses on her private life. Madame Curie is not only a story about the incredible life of a scientist, the discoverer of two elements – polonium and radium, but above all it is a portrait of an extraordinary woman, who thanks to her intelligence, knowledge and extraordinary skills, managed to convince the world of science, which had always been dominated by men, to her. She was the first woman in Europe to receive a doctorate. In 1906 she was granted a professorship and at the same time took her own chair at the Sorbonne in Paris, which was an unprecedented event in France. She was also the first scientist to win the Nobel Prize. In the history of this
prize, she is still the only double laureate, awarded in two different scientific fields: physics (1903) and chemistry (1911). However, the opera Madame Curie is, above all, a picture of Sklodowska-Curie as we did not know her – a tender mother, a loving wife, a charismatic woman, resolute, brave, courageous and brave, although at the same time full of dilemmas and contradictions.

The opera consists of 3 acts. Act I consists of 8 scenes. The action takes place in Maria Curie-Sklodowska’s chemical laboratory in Paris. We meet the main character of the work, dressed in an apron, focused on her work. It is night. Suddenly, the figure of Alfred Einstein appears, who is Marie’s mentor, a genius omnipresent in time and space, exerting a great influence on the scientist. His character plays an important role in the work. He warns Maria about the consequences of her research into the radiation of the elements. He spreads an apocalyptic vision of the doom of mankind (“You open the volcano, Maria...“). Einstein asks Maria a series of questions that run throughout the play: „What is it all for?“ „Is it worth sacrificing for others?“ „Will scientific achievements be used as their author intended?“ Maria idealistically believes that what she is doing is necessary for people, for the world, and at the same time, rational thinking makes her expect the worst, because she is aware of the negative effects that advice can have. Einstein’s warnings are not able to stop Maria’s creative passion. She shakes herself off, gathers her strength and keeps working. She is supported in this by her loving husband Peter Curie, with whom she has an extraordinary bond, both in the scientific field and in her personal, spiritual field. In Act I, we meet a very interesting character – Loie Fuller, an American actress and dancer who is a friend of Marie. She has asked the scholar for advice to illuminate her dance costume. The artist appears in Sikora’s opera in the form of a dancing white butterfly. It is a beautiful and poignant ballet scene, supported by the soloist’s singing, which expresses the dancer’s thoughts. Act I also features a dramatic accident – the death of her beloved husband, Peter, who is run over by a horse-drawn lorry on a rainy day. Maria experiences her husband’s death very painfully, she despairs, cries over his corpse, and breaks down within herself. Sikora introduces the figure of the Virgin Mary, with whom the woman, immersed in unimaginable grief, talks. Her two daughters, Irena and Ewa, support her in her suffering.

Act II (12 scenes) presents the scientific community of the Paris Sorbonne. There is a heated argument among scientists over Marie Curie’s discoveries. The composer introduces a chorus still present on stage, which, like in Greek tragedy, provides lively commentary on the action. Scientists and journalists make Marie’s life miserable, unable to accept that it is a woman who is capable of such great deeds, such extraordinary scientific achievements. The pretext for the attacks also becomes Maria’s affair with the scientist Paul Langevin, a married man. Paul had been her devoted friend and co-worker.
for years, even during Peter’s lifetime. Unfortunately, in his marriage, he has not found an understanding. However, he becomes helpless in the face of the pressure of public opinion and the wickedness of his wife, who reaches a ragged magazine with the love letters of his rival. At the will of the scholar – „It will be better this way“ – the two lovers part away. Maria experiences this fact, but her steadfast nature does not allow her to collapse under the influence of life’s problems. She continues to work, supported by the love of her daughters. She receives the Nobel Prize. Her brilliant mind and strength of character made her continue her research, she did not lose contact with her homeland, she founded the Radium Institute in Warsaw. In the face of Maria’s unquestionable great scientific success, even her greatest enemies – the gentlemen of the Sorbonne – give up.

Act III (10 scenes), is the end of World War I. The screen above the scene shows archival footage of soldiers returning home from their wartime wanderings, the joy of villagers and townsfolk. Maria and her daughters rejoice at the end of the war. In the scientist’s laboratory, Missy Meloney, an American journalist, appears and wants to help her with her research. The result of their conversation is Missy’s declaration to get 1 gram of radium for the scientist in the USA. They decide together with Maria’s daughters to go to the States to get the radium. They arrive in Washington to receive the radium from the hands of President Warren G. Harding. Once again, the dancer Loïe Fuller appears in the play. As a result of radiation from the costumes used in the dance, she falls seriously ill and dies. Marie Curie also suffers from radiation sickness. For the last time Einstein appears by her side, comforting her and giving her support in her suffering. The heroine dies with the name of her husband Peter on her lips.

Campaigning for radium

In 1920, as editor of The Delineator, Meloney was given the opportunity to conduct a rare interview with radium pioneer Marie Curie in her laboratory in Paris. Meloney later wrote of her visit:

The door opened and I saw a pale, shy little woman in a black cotton dress, with the saddest face I ever looked at. Her kind, patient, beautiful face had the expression of a scholar. Suddenly I felt like an intruder. My shyness surpassed her own. I had been a journalist for twenty years, but I could not ask a single question of this gentle woman in a black cotton dress. I tried to explain that American women were interested in her great work, and I apologized for daring to take up her precious time.⁴

Dr. Ann M. Lewicki, who called Meloney „a trailblazing woman in the male journalism world,“ wrote in the journal *Radiology*:

During that first meeting, Mrs. Meloney learned that what Mary wanted most at this point in her life was to get some extra radium so she could continue her laboratory research. She, who had discovered radium, who had freely shared all the information about the process of obtaining it, and who had distributed radium to make cancer treatments possible, found herself without the financial means to purchase this expensive substance. Mrs. Meloney made Marie promise to obtain for her the 1 gram of radium Marie had requested.5

The price of one gram of radium in 1920 was $100,000, and Meloney mounted a nationwide campaign to raise the money, „largely through small donations and the help of many women across the country.“ Meloney also convinced a shy Marie Curie to travel with her to the United States to receive the gift. However, before the scientist agreed to do so, Meloney enforced a promise from editors across the country to suppress any reports of an alleged affair Maria Curie had after her husband’s death with the prominent French physicist Paul Langevin. Curie made the trip in the spring of 1921, accompanied by Charlotte and Vernon Kellogg, and she and her two daughters were met in New York Harbor by a retinue of journalists, including twenty-six photographers.6

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
After a series of public appearances, Meloney and Curie travelled together to Washington, D.C., to receive advice from President Warren G. Harding. On the evening before the meeting with the President, Marie Curie hesitated when she discovered that the deed of gift had been personally drawn up for her. She insisted that it be redrafted so that it was a gift from the American people to science. „I want it to be a gift to my laboratory,“ – she said. She asked Meloney, „Can we call a lawyer?“ He was found with some difficulty at this late hour. He drew up an additional document with Marie Curie, which she immediately signed.

The advice was handed to her in a lead-lined mahogany box on Friday, 20 May 1921, by Harding, in the presence of Missy Meloney. Eight years later, in October 1929, Marie Curie returned to the United States for another tour, and, accompanied by Meloney, spent several days at the White House with President Herbert Hoover. She stayed with Missy at her home and spent her 62nd birthday with her. She rode her motorcycle through Central Park with her, and then they visited the J.P. Morgan Library. Marie Curie and Missy Meloney, despite their difference in characters and temperaments, formed a friendship between them for the rest of their lives.

**Missy in Sikora’s opera**

Elizabeth Sikora introduces the character of Missy in Act III. It is a passage following Marie Curie’s tumultuous affair with Paul Langevin, after the end of World War I (1918). Missy’s entrance follows a joyous orchestral passage symbolizing the excited crowd of a Paris street. Scene 24 („Inside. Meeting Missy“) appears. Missy enters Marie Curie’s laboratory on the words: „I am a journalist, my name is Missy Maloney, I want to invite you to the United States“ (Example 1).

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8 Ibid.
Getting into sound after very difficult, complex dissonant chords is a real challenge. We notice dissonances in the chord structure: the „C“ sound and the „C#“ sound at the same time. Going on stage in the Curie lab, I would hear these chords as sound spots and complete dissonances, but thanks to my perfect pitch, I always had my „E2“ sound in my head, which I entered without any problems. I think a singer without perfect pitch would have to ask someone in the orchestra to drop the sound. My entrée, „I’m a journalist, my name is Missy Maloney...“, was constructed with a triplet rhythm, slightly swinging. I think the composer wanted to give this part an American character, after all it was the 1920s, the swing era in the USA. The end of that first entrance of mine on the words: „I want to invite you to the States“, betrays chromatic features, which also creates quite a performance difficulty. The descent to the „F4-B3“ tritone is difficult, and then the chromatic march up again to the F4 sound: (Example 2).


9 Octaves according to SPN (Scientific Pitch Notation) from C0 to C8.
Example 2. E. Sikora, *Madame Curie*. Opera in three acts, piano score, PWM Kraków, 2011, Scene 24, bb. 190-191

After this first phrase, Missy develops her theme on the words: „I know you don’t have enough radium in your lab.“ (Example 3).

This new phrase, initiated from the B4 sound, taken practically out of thin air, has an ascending character, then a descending character, everything from the B4 sound and back to B4, also shows chromatic characteristics. Singing these phrases, one has absolutely no sense of tonal centre and no reference in the orchestra. The conductor’s movements focused on the orchestra part and showing the musicians their entrances, visible to the soloists on monitors set up at the sides of the stage, are no help or indication. I was actually on my own, focused on my internal rhythmic pulse, so as to be even and not disrupt the flow of the piece, not make the partners precipitate rhythmically. The next phrase, „America Loves the Lord,“ is a clear reference to the US anthem (Example 3).
The next phrase ,,American women admire you infinitely” is in fast rhythmic values, in semiquavers, on notes from B4 to E5 and back again. The composer creates the part on the basis of a monologue taken from natural female speech, based on a slightly higher register. It is a lively and expressive monologue. The excited journalist is trying to make a good impression on the scholar and establish the best possible contact with her. The last phrase in this sequence on the words ,,I will do anything for you“, runs on the note ,,B4“; Words: „You must visit America!“ are a summary of this first entry by Missy. The composer used interval leaps here, reflecting expression, character energy, and ecstasy (Example 4).

Example 4. E. Sikora, *Madame Curie*. Opera in three acts, piano score, PWM Kraków, 2011, Scene 24, bb. 201-204

Missy’s words arouse the enthusiasm of both Maria and her daughters, Ewa and Irena, who accompany the two women in conversation. The composer creates a quartet fragment on the words ,,We’re going together!“, illustrating the joy at the news of going to the US for radium (Example 5).
Scene 26 shows Marie Curie-Skłodowska’s stay in the United States, her meeting with the President, and the receipt of radium. Missy accompanies her throughout. The image of the President (played by Szenk, a fellow choir member and deceased artist), appears on a monitor. As the piece continues, Marie Curie is besieged by journalists in the US, and questions are asked, „What will you do with radium?“ An excited and happy Marie says: „I cannot express what my heart feels at such a moment. I accept this special gift with the hope that I can make it serve the world. Thank you in the name of France, thank you in the name of humanity, whose happiness each of us desires. I love you all my American friends very much!“ (Example 6).

Example 6. E. Sikora, Madame Curie. Opera in three acts, piano score, PWM Kraków, 2011, Scene 26, bb. 410-416
Suddenly, Maria realises that she needs a lawyer to draw up a notation that the advice is to belong to her. She fears that she may lose it. Again the duet with Missy follows, this time full of tension and emotion. Maria is agitated, upset, and tells Missy to look for a lawyer in the middle of the night. The journalist tries to control the situation and reassures the scholar: „I’ll take care of it tomorrow“ (Example 7).

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However, Maria does not let go and tells her to look for a lawyer immediately. The desperate Missy explains: „It is night, it is night, it is night“ (Example 8).

The composer creates an interesting chromatic structure with a leap of the major seventh. A very difficult motif, without any tonal or rhythmic references. The
atmosphere is full of tension. Maria does not yield to Missy’s explanations to postpone the matter until tomorrow. She declares that she will wait all night for a lawyer and will not go to bed. Once again an upset Missy speaks up: „It’s night, it’s night“ (Example 8). We see the major seventh leap up and down. This is followed by a very difficult vocalisation – a duet between two women filled with emotion:


Maria slides to the ground from exhaustion, and Missy runs offstage.

*Performance Difficulties*

When I took a closer look at the music contained in Elżbieta Sikora’s work, I found it to be a very avant-garde sound matter which I had never encountered before. However, I was attracted to this difficult world of sonorism, punctualism, electronic music. It is music full of anxiety, tension, some kind of inner expression. The composer herself said in interviews that she started her work on the score from three sounds: F-sharp, G, and C-sharp. Then she used them to create combinations, multiplications, and transpositions, reaching the full chromatic scale.

The opera used one and the same set design – modest, grey, picturing the study of Marie Curie-Skłodowska. The production was modeled on Greek theatre, with the entire proscenium used for the stage action, and the orchestra was placed at the back of the stage, behind the soloists. The conductor was Wojciech Michniewski, a wonderful Polish conductor specialising in contemporary music. Working with him
was demanding, but he was a patient, thorough, and warm-hearted man. He was not irritated by our mistakes, at least he did not show it. He was focused on correcting our mistakes and he did not get upset even when we had to repeat difficult bars over a dozen times. He strived for perfection and he infected us with this aspiration. The positioning of the orchestra and the conductor at the back of the stage was a great obstacle for us soloists, due to the lack of direct contact with his movements. Yes, there were monitors at the front, on both sides of the stage, but with such a difficult sound matter, when the conductor had to focus on showing the inputs to the orchestra, each soloist had to rely mostly on themselves, on perfect musico-rhythmic control of their part. Playing on the proscenium, close to the audience, in full light, required perfect concentration, as well as excellent vocal and acting preparation. The audience could see everything, every sight, every gesture, every slightest body movement. You could not hide behind your partner, the equipment, the decorations, the choir. None of that. The choir sat amphitheatrically on chairs on two sides of the stage and watched our action on the stage with a censor’s eye. That is how it was designed. It was a true dramatic theatre. Each role, from the largest to the smallest, required great artistry and extraordinary musico-vocal-acting skills, professionalism in every sense of the word and great versatility in creating on stage. The most important role was that of the title character, Maria Skłodowska-Curie, played by an extremely talented singer from Warsaw, Anna Mikołajczyk. She even bore some physical resemblance to the scientist. She also had her determination, passion, modesty and focus on work. There was a 30-person choir, which commented on the action and sometimes participated in it – like in ancient theatre.

In the entire opera, drama takes place at the front of the stage, at the table of scientific experiments and research. It is full of instruments, tools, test tubes, lights and scales. We see beautiful, young Maria, engrossed in a slingshot, wearing an apron, busying herself at the table with enthusiasm and passion for creative work. In my opinion, I would like to mention the most important elements specific of performing this music:

1/ instrumental voice leading
2/ handling the technique of Sprechgesang, i.e. spoken singing
3/ perfect pitch. (My perfect pitch allowed me to sing sounds without any references and in difficult, atonal music I always felt like a fish in water. I tossed notes to my classmates on stage, correcting rhythms and intonation when needed during duets and ensembles).  
4/ excellent sense of rhythm and rhythmic discipline
5/ ability to lead my part autonomously regardless of dissonances in the orchestra and

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in the parts of my colleagues. Not allowing oneself to be precipitated.
6/ ability to adjust articulation, vocal emission, timbre and tone color to one’s part
7/ sensitivity to music, sound, timbre
8/ talent and courage of acting, ability to create expressive characters on stage, whose
movement and behaviour is intertwined with music and its expression
9/ ability to exaggerate characters, grotesque, change of voice timbre
10/ melorecitation, declamation – ability to use the spoken word on stage, with an erect
but very natural voice, without artificiality
11/ perfect diction and articulation of words (a specific feature of contemporary opera is
the use of a very good spoken word, audible even in the last rows)\(^{11}\)
12/ handling varied dynamics from \textit{ppp} to \textit{fff}.
13/ using such means of expression as: whispering, shouting, sighing, moaning, etc.

The part of Marie Curie-Sklodowska, the main heroine of the work, is extremely
difficult and complex. Few singers would be able to sing it, taking into account the
enormous musical, rhythmic, technical, expressive and intonational difficulties. Anna
Mikołajczyk performed this part perfectly, using proper vocal emission, instrumental
manner of conducting and the ability to speak to the music. The whole role of Maria
was composed in a very complex way musically and rhythmically. Her character on
stage in the performances was very real and authentic, full of emotion, expression
and truth. Anna Mikołajczyk built a great vocal and acting creation, for which she
was honoured with many awards. She received for this role the Theatrical Award of
the City of Gdańsk in 2011. Together with the composer Elżbieta Sikora, she was
awarded in the poll of Gazeta Wyborcza Trójmiasto Storms 2011. In 2013, the DVD
we recorded for the DUX label, was awarded the prize – Orfeusz Liryckiego Prestiż
from the Academy of Lyrical Discography. In May 2012 we performed a show at Opera
Nova in Bydgoszcz as part of the 19th International Music Festival. On 3 September
2014, we travelled with the performance of \textit{Madame Curie} to China, where we played
at the Tjangin Grand Theatre for the inauguration of the International Opera and Ballet
Festival. The Chinese people gave our performance a standing ovation. In September
2018, we presented the opera at the invitation of the Vratislavia Cantans International
Festival in Wrocław, Poland.

Among other performers of the opera, Leszek Skrla, who created the role of
Alfred Einstein, certainly stood out. The complicated melodico-rhythmic construction
of the part, full of asymmetry, dissonances, Sprechgesang and declamation, required
great artistry and precision. The artist managed to cope with all the difficulties and
created a very noble figure of a concerned friend – a physics genius, who surrounds the
heroine with constant support and care.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 161-163.
A companion in life and in research is Maria’s beloved husband, Peter Curie. This role was played by Paweł Skaluba, who beautifully and romantically sang and played the character of the scientist, young husband in love and fascinated by Maria. Paweł Skaluba, gifted with a beautiful tenor voice, continues to add many expressive qualities to his part. He created a beautiful, lyrical character of a husband in love, completely devoted to his wife, full of understanding and care. The happy life of Maria and her husband, love and scientific cooperation leading to a great, far-reaching common goal, is interrupted by the tragic death of Peter. Maria despairs over her husband’s corpse lying on the laboratory table, has a conversation with his spirit, broken down, says that nothing will please her anymore and promises to remain faithful to him forever. Again, she is painfully alone, she has no one to share her misfortune with, no one to lean on. Then the figure of the Virgin Mary emerges, as if taken out of a painting. She walks beside the heroine, separated from her by a hard, invisible wall, she does not look at the distraught woman and does not hear what she says to her. Maria Skłodowska-Curie utters into the void a kind of prayer composed of questions and doubts, requests – “Is there any hope?”, „Have you interceded for me before your God?“ Our Lady remains silent, disappears. Maria finds a salvaged glowing vial of Radium in Peter’s pocket, rises and throws herself back into her studies. The heroine fights and is no stranger to doubt. Surrounded by a nosy crowd – this role is perfectly played not only by the orchestra, but most of all by the omnipresent chorus (specific characters – soloists – emerge from it), which at one time is a sensation-hungry, intolerant, primitive crowd from the street, at another moment – a group of ossified right-wing activists, envious of the success of a woman scientist, or a bunch of tabloid journalists satisfying the lowest reader instincts.

The play touches on all aspects of the heroine’s life. After losing her husband, she takes care of her little daughters, Ewa (played by the charming Weronika Weiss, who plays the violin beautifully) and Irena (Julia Robak). Maria has a romantic relationship with the physicist Paul Langevin. The role was played by a wonderful young Polish baritone, Tomasz Rak. The handsome man is completely in love with the scientist, leaving his family for her without an agreement with his wife. The affair ends at Maria’s will and the lovers part. The baritone voice of Tomasz Rak as Paul Langevin sounded beautifully in the performance. The composer entrusted him with difficult and innovative sound runs, especially in the duets with Maria. Despite the complicated melodico-rhythmic structures, the singer was able to lend a warm and lyrical character to Sikora’s contemporary music.

Maria is fascinated by a dancer – her American friend Loïe Fuller (beautiful singing of Joanna Wesołowska and dancing of Elżbieta Czajkowska-Kłos, also Julia lavrenova). The women confide in each other, and when Maria recalls the period of her
early youth, Loïe dances – impersonating her, transporting her back in time. The dancer dreams of performing the butterfly part as lightly and beautifully as possible, lubricates her body with Radium, and dies from radiation sickness. Maria has a big breakdown and feels guilty about the tragedy. Further meetings with Einstein follow, documentary film images of war, atomic explosion flash on the screen, the scientists’ conversation has an eschatological meaning. Life or death, however, faith in goodness wins. Maria succumbed to depression and fought against an ailment that robbed her of her strength. Fame, from which Maria does not want to benefit, flees from the publicity, does not want to give interviews. Once again Albert Einstein arrives from the afterlife and says to Maria: „Do not stop, your children will change the world.“ Radioactively irradiated during her long research, Maria deteriorates and dies.\(^\text{12}\)

**Conclusion**

Elżbieta Sikora’s opera is an extraordinary, poignant work with a profound message. The very subject of the life and work of a wonderful, indomitable, wise woman, our great scientist, Maria Curie-Skłodowska, is very noble, inspiring and valuable. The work hides many timeless values, concentrates a great deal of emotion and dramatic charge. We, the soloists, were very happy and moved by the opportunity to participate in this project and create this performance. It was a very difficult and responsible work, but at the same time it was a vocal and musical education, developing the skills of creating and performing expressive characters on stage, building mood and tension and skillful use of voice. We enjoyed each performance and had the satisfaction of being received by the audience who rewarded us enthusiastically. Each performance was an extraordinary event and each was magical. We believe that we will still be able to revive this wonderful opera.

**REFERENCES:**

Specifičnost vođenja glasova u operi Madam Kiri Elžbjete Sikore iz perspektive izvođenja uloge Misi Meloni

Apstrakt: Ovaj rad sadrži naučna promišljanja o načinima izvođenja vokalnih deonica u savremenoj operi na primeru opere Madam Kiri aktualne poljske kompozitorke Elžbjete Sikore, koja govori o životu i radu istaknute poljske naučnice i dobitnice Nobelove nagrade Marije Kiri-Sklodovske. Na osnovu sopstvenih iskustava u izvođenju jedne od uloga u operi – američke novinarke Misi Meloni – autorka rada analizira vokalnu deonicu bazirajući se na njene melodijske, intonativne, ritmičke, artikulacione i glumačke poteškoće i formira zaključke o specifičnostima vođenja glasova.

Ključne reči: savremena opera, Elžbjeta Sikora, poljska muzika, vođenje glasova, Sprechgesang