

Stanisław Moniuszko – life and work

Stanisław Moniuszko was born on May 5, 1819, in Ubiel near Minsk. He was a composer, organist, conductor, and teacher. He began his musical education at the age of 8. Between 1827 and 1830 he studied with A. Freyer in Warsaw, and then with Dominik Stefanowicz in Minsk. He went to Berlin to study composition. Between 1837 and 1840 he studied in the class of C.F. Rungenhagen. In 1840 he settled in Vilnius and became the organist at St. John's Church. He was also active as a teacher – his students included Cezar Cui, who later became a member of the group of Russian composers known as *The Mighty Handful (The Mighty Five)*. The first opera composed by Stanisław Moniuszko was *Halka*. Initially, the opera had two acts. It was first performed in this version on January 1, 1848, in Vilnius. An expanded, four-act version of *Halka* was staged 10 years later, January 1, 1858, in Warsaw. The opera was received enthusiastically. After the success of the composition, the creator of *Halka* took up the position of opera conductor and continued his teaching activities. From 1864, he was a professor at the Music Institute. Among Moniuszko's students was the well-known composer Zygmunt Noskowski. In 1871, Stanisław Moniuszko wrote *Pamiętnik do nauki harmonii (Memoir on the Study of Harmony)*. The compositional activity of our school's patron focused on vocal-instrumental works. He composed over 300 songs and solo ballads, which were published in 12 volumes of *Śpiewniki domowe (Home Songbooks)*. Among the most popular songs are *Dziad i baba (The Old Man and the Old Woman)*, *Pieśń wieczorna (Evening Song)*, *Przędzniczka (The Spinner)*, *Znaszli ten kraj (Do You Know This Land)*, *O matko moja (Oh My Mother)*, *Złota rybka (The Golden Fish)*, *Pieśń wojenna (War Song)*, *Stary kapral (The Old Corporal)*, *Dwie zorze (Two Dawns)*, and *Kozak (The Cossack)*.

Stanisław Moniuszko is considered the creator of the national opera. Among the works composed in Warsaw, the following operas are worth mentioning: *Flis (The Raftsmen, 1858)*, *Hrabina (The Countess, 1860)*, *Verbum nobile (1861)*, and *Straszny dwór (The Haunted Manor, 1865)*. The last opera he composed, three years before his death, was *Paria (1869)*.

Other works by the creator of Polish national opera include:

- ballets: *Monte Christo, Na kwaterunku (At the Quarters)*, *Figle szatana (The Devil's Pranks)*.
- cantatas: *Milda, Nijoła, Madonna, Sonety krymskie (Crimean Sonnets, based on texts by Adam Mickiewicz)*.
- lyrical scenes *Widma (Specters, based on texts from Dziady (Forefathers' Eve) by A. Mickiewicz)*.
- choral ballads: *Florian Szary, Pani Twardowska*.
- *4 Litanie Ostrobramskie* for choir and orchestra.
- fantastic overture *Bajka (1848)*.

- operettas and vaudevilles: *Nowy Don Kichot*, *Jawnuta*, *Karmaniol*.
- 8 masses, including *Msza Piotrowińska*.

Key features of the Polish national style in Stanisław Moniuszko's music:

- Use of national dances: Moniuszko masterfully wove the rhythms of the polonaise, mazurka, and krakowiak, which became symbols of Polishness, into his operas. Examples include the polonaises from *Halka* and *The Countess*, as well as numerous mazurkas.
- Stylization of folklore and folk melodies: The composer drew inspiration from Polish folk songs, as he himself mentioned: "I wander through Polish lands, inspired by the spirit of Polish folk songs." His music is characterized by native melodies, often simple and melodious in nature. He also used quotations from folk melodies, e.g. in *Hrabina (The Countess)* – the hunting song *Pojedziemy na łów (Let's Go Hunting)*, in *Straszny Dwór (The Haunted Manor)* – the hunting song *Siedzi sobie zajęc (The Hare Sits)*.
- Patriotic and national themes: Operas such as *Halka*, *Straszny dwór (The Haunted Manor)* and *Hrabina (The Countess)* touch on themes close to the Polish heart, often referring to the customs of the nobility and the countryside, as well as social and national issues.
- Songs and sung poetry: Moniuszko wrote about 300 songs (including *Śpiewniki domowe [Home Songbooks]*), which have become part of Polish tradition. He set them to texts by the most outstanding Polish poets, such as Adam Mickiewicz and Jan Kochanowski.

Stanisław Moniuszko not only copied folklore, but also transformed it, creating his own recognizable musical language, which became the foundation of the Polish national school in opera.

Stanisław Moniuszko died on June 4, 1872, in Warsaw.

Stanisław Moniuszko's work is not widely known outside his native country. Most of his manuscripts and first editions are kept at the Stanisław Moniuszko Music Society in Warsaw. The most famous artistic events associated with the patron of our school include the annual Moniuszko Festival in Kudowa Zdrój, which has been held since 1962, and the International Competition for Young Vocalists in Warsaw, which was inaugurated in 1992.

The opera works of Stanisław Moniuszko. Summary of opera librettos

STRASZNY DWÓR (*The Haunted Manor*) – 4 acts

Date and place of premiere – September 28, 1865, Warsaw

The action takes place in the first half of the 18th century. Two brothers, Stefan and Zbigniew, returning home from a military campaign, vow together with their

companions to remain bachelors, so that they will always be ready to serve their homeland with their armed forces. Visiting the manor of Miecznik, an old friend of their father, they fall under the spell of his daughters, Hanna and Jadwiga. The brothers are encouraged by old Skołuba. Despite the efforts of the scheming Damazy (mocking the imitation of foreign costumes and customs), and despite the rumor spread by the young men's aunt that they are both cowards, love prevails and the opera ends with the breaking of their vows of celibacy. Miecznik – very reminiscent of the patriotic Chorąży from the opera "Hrabina" – explains that his court was called "terrible" by his neighbours because his great-grandfather's nine daughters had once found husbands without difficulty, to the envy and despair of the mothers of the young ladies in the area.

HALKA – 4 acts

Date and place of the premiere of the 2-act version – January 1, 1848, Vilnius

Date and place of the premiere of the 4-act version – January 1, 1858, Warsaw

Halka is a dramatic story about a seduced highlander (Halka) who is abandoned by a nobleman (Janusz) for his wealthy fiancée (Zofia). Despite the warnings of her faithful Jontko, the heartbroken Halka cannot come to terms with her loss. After Janusz's wedding, Halka throws herself into the river, choosing death over a life of shame. "Moniuszko's music, drawing on folk sources, is thoroughly national in character. All these factors – the courage of the subject matter, the portrayal of real people in the opera, the skillful use of musical means to achieve a grand design, and the Polish national character of the music – have determined Halka's enduring place in the Polish opera repertoire." (W. Rudziński, *Halka* by S. Moniuszko, PWM, Krakow 1954, pp. 35-39)

HRABINA (THE COUNTESS) - 3 acts

Date and place of premiere - February 7, 1860, Warsaw

A grand ball is being prepared in the Warsaw apartment of the countess, a young and beautiful widow. Among the guests, the young nobleman Dzidzi, who is trying to win the favor of the lady of the house, and his elderly uncle, Podczaszyc, are having a great time. The countess's relative, Bronia, and her grandfather, Chorąży, a nobleman who observes old Polish customs and traditions, do not feel at ease in this "high society." The plot revolves around the character of Kazimierz, a young nobleman, officer, and patriot, who at the beginning of the play is unfortunately in love with the titular Countess, succumbing to her salon charm. Ultimately, however, he realizes the superficiality of her feelings and chooses the modest and sincerely loving Bronia, Chorąży's granddaughter. Kazimierz and Bronia become engaged, and the Countess, as the words of her magnificent final aria say, will have to "wake up from her illusory dreams, suppress the grief that boils in her heart...". The world of national tradition triumphs, while the "fashionable crowd and empty

life" suffer defeat. The opera is a cheerful satire on uncritical submission to Parisian fashion. The music perfectly complements the satire in the libretto: it is full of wit, finesse, and melody. It features Polish national rhythms (the famous polonaise) and the style of the Italian opera school, with showy, impressive arias. List of tracks to listen to:

1. *Song of the Spinner*
2. Jontka's aria from Act IV of the opera *Halka*
3. Fantastic Overture from *Bajka*
4. Song *Evening Song*
5. Skołuba's aria from Act III of the opera *Straszny dwór*
6. Ballad *Dziad i baba (The Old Man and the Old Woman)*
7. Song *My przed wami dziś stoję (We Stand Before You Today)*
8. Polonaise in D minor
9. Waltz *Pohulanka*
10. Ballad *Trzech Budrysów (The Three Budrys)*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdhICdvDUGQ>

Song *Prząśniczka (The Spinner)*

– a strophic variation song for voice and piano, lyrics by Jan Ciecnot, dedicated to Achilles Bonoldi, the most famous singer in Vilnius at the time, with whom Moniuszko worked closely for a long time.

- published in the Third Home Songbook as the seventh piece, it has a simple harmonic structure, based mainly on triad chords, with the last two stanzas of each verse serving as the refrain. The piano accompaniment figurations reflect the movement of the spinning wheel on which the yarn is spun.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6WYIfppKVs&ab_channel=Tenordream

Jontek's aria from Act IV of the opera *Halka*

- a dramatic aria for tenor voice with symphony orchestra, in three parts (ABA) preceded by a recitative. The piece delicately combines elements of highlander folklore with romantic cantilena.

Recitative ("Unfortunate Halka, remember"): a dramatic introduction in which Jontek recounts Halka's situation and warns her against Janusz.

A (Andante, "Szumią jodły..."): a melancholic cantilena, which wistfully evokes memories of home

B (piu mosso): dynamically and expressively contrasting, it reflects Jontek's growing emotions and despair.

A repetition of the main theme and expressive conclusion of the aria.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_aG-4KWWvA&ab_channel=PolaAdam

Fantastic overture *Fairy Tale*

– a one-movement programmatic work composed in 1848, with the characteristics of a symphonic poem, in which the composer used the form of a sonata allegro. The rich melody, varied instrumentation, and musical narrative reminiscent of an opera score come to the fore. The atmospheric, mysterious character, enriched with dynamic contrasts, refers to the original title *Conte d'hiver (Winter Tale)*.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6yeFlnD6LY&ab_channel=ArielWoy

Song *Evening Song*

- a verse song in the form of a confession, to lyrics by Ludmiła Wrotnowska-Marja. The illustrative piano accompaniment reinforces the emotional message of the text and emphasizes the calm, contemplative mood of the piece. The recurring melodic line in successive verses of the text reinforces the lyrical character of the piece, the tranquility of the evening and the intended simplicity of the song.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHbIGI8TpFA&ab_channel=LukaszKonieczny%2CBass

Skołuba's aria from Act III of the opera *Straszny dwór*

- Skołuba's bass aria *Ten zegar stary (This Old Clock)* from Act III of the opera *Straszny dwór*, with libretto by Jan Chęciński. Composed after the defeat of the January Uprising, the opera was intended to sustain national spirit, patriotism, and the cultivation of Polish traditions. The content of the aria is a story told by the court steward, maintaining a tone of horror with elements of comedy, about a clock striking chimes and a gallery of portraits on the maternal side, i.e., the female part of the Miecznik family.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRzWkj6rECA&ab_channel=PolskieWydawnictwoMuzyczne

The Ballad of the Old Man and Woman

- based on a text by Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, which combines elements of a calm narrative describing the autumn of two spouses' lives with a dynamic, humorous account of their argument over who should be the first to let death into their home. The composer conveyed the character of the text and the diversity of the characters – the old man, the old woman, death – through agogic, dynamic, and emotional contrasts, emphasized by illustrative figures in the piano accompaniment. The expressively varied structure of the ballad

perfectly accompanies the gradual build-up of emotion in the main characters' parts, ultimately calmed by the adynamic ending illustrated by the entrance of death, which takes both spouses at the same time.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-v-SHiuyIQ>

Song *We stand before you today*

- Christmas carol with lyrics by Ludwik Kondratowicz (pseudonym Władysław Syrokomla), for two female voices: soprano and alto with piano accompaniment, three-part periodic structure, with duet sections interspersed with solo passages. The piano accompaniment, with its delicate arpeggiated chords, emphasizes the text, which is imbued with wishes for prosperity and blessings for Christmas and the New Year.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRAiaz3AUys>

Polonaise in D minor

- a piano composition with an ABA1 structure, contrasting harmonically A (d) B (D) A1(d) and expressively, with a predominance of compositional techniques using figurations, rich ornamentation, and dense chord textures. A solemn piece, its motivic structures refer to Fryderyk Chopin's polonaises, fitting into the style of Polish musical creativity of the Romantic era.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1e6ieyln7E>

Waltz *Pohulanka*

- a composition in A-flat major for solo piano, with an ABA1 structure, representing a segment of lighter instrumental music from the second half of the 19th century, with a functional and entertaining character. The Waltz *Pohulanka* in A-flat major represents salon instrumental music and is characterized by a dance-like, light style typical of waltzes of the era.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-c2S-arDJY>

Ballada Trzech Budrysów (The Ballad of the Three Budrys) – to a text by Adam Mickiewicz, a ballad for baritone with piano accompaniment, characterized by a recomposed verse song. The drama and narrative of the text are reflected in the piano part, which is adapted to the expressive requirements of the song's lyrics. The accompaniment supports and dynamically illustrates the plot – the journey of three sons and their return with their wives from distant lands to their native Lithuania – carried out in the melodic line of the solo voice. Elements of over-composition are also evident in the use of motifs to energize the narrative (the clatter of horses' hooves, the sounds of battle) and to clarify the nature of the events recounted in the text (the heroism and chivalry of the characters).