

## 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 works:

1. Mazur from the opera *Halka*
1. Mazur from the opera *Straszny Dwór (The Haunted Minor)*
2. Recitative and Miecznik's Aria from Act II of the opera *Straszny Dwór (The Haunted Minor)*
3. Stefan's Aria from Act III of the opera *Straszny Dwór (The Haunted Minor)*, (*Chimes Aria*)
4. Polonaise from the opera *Hrabina (The Countess)*
5. Fantastic Overture *Bajka*
6. Ballad *Czaty (The Ambush)*
7. Ballad *Trzech budrysów (The Three Budrys)*
8. Introit *Requiem aeternam* from Requiem in G minor
9. *Agnus Dei* from *Litanies of Ostra Brama No.3*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6Xnc9z6GmQ&list=RDN6Xnc9z6GmQ&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N6Xnc9z6GmQ&list=RDN6Xnc9z6GmQ&start_radio=1)

Mazur from Act I of the opera *Halka*

The mazurka closing Act I is one of the most famous fragments of this work. It plays a key role in the opera's plot, closing the scene of Janusz and Zofia's engagement. The dance is in D major, with a lively tempo and  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter, with accents on the second or third beat of the bar, characteristic of the mazurka. The piece has a three-part ABA1 structure. The introduction is followed by part A – the energetic main theme repeated twice in tutti, with strong accents on the second or third beat of the bar. Rhythmic motifs based on dotted figures dominate. Part B provides a contrast, being calmer, more lyrical, with a reduced orchestral setting. Two melodious melodies are presented in the oboes, clarinets and cellos. The third part (A1) is a repetition of the main theme in tutti, with

increasing dynamics (crescendo) leading to the climactic finale. The full orchestra consists of: piccolo, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, French horns, trumpets, trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, and string quintet.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9UIA8XcPrQ&list=RDJ9UIA8XcPrQ&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9UIA8XcPrQ&list=RDJ9UIA8XcPrQ&start_radio=1)

Mazur from Act IV of the opera *Straszny Dwór* (*The Haunted Minor*)

The mazur serves as the climactic, joyful, almost solemn finale of the work. The dance is fast, in the typical  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter of the mazurka, using the characteristic mazurka rhythm (two eighth notes, two quarter notes) and numerous accents on the second or third beat of the bar. Moniuszko used the full symphony orchestra, and the opera version also features a choir. The form of the piece is based on a three-part ABA1 reprise form; it is complex and consists of several contrasting themes. The piece combines the elegance of ballroom dancing with folk energy. It is a symbol of the Polish nobility – joyful, proud, and full of bravado.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoEsbsZy4aE>

Miecznik's recitative and aria from Act II of the opera *Straszny Dwór* (*The Haunted Manor*) ("Kto z mych dziewczek serce której" / "He who hopes to make a catch and my daughter's heart enslave").

This is one of the most important and representative baritone arias in Polish opera literature. The piece perfectly characterizes the character of Miecznik, who is a model of an old Polish father and patriot. In the aria, he sets out the conditions that candidates for his daughters' hands must meet (courage, patriotism, willingness to fight for the homeland, respect for national traditions). The aria is set to the rhythm of a polonaise. This is a key device – the polonaise is a solemn, noble dance, which emphasizes Miecznik's Sarmatian character. The polonaise is a dance in triple meter, moderate tempo, and eighth-note rhythm with two sixteenth notes on the "i" of the first beat.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SU4MZHnCbl&list=RD9SU4MZHnCbl&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SU4MZHnCbl&list=RD9SU4MZHnCbl&start_radio=1)

Stefan's aria "Cisza dokoła" ("Silence All Around") (with chimes) from Act III of Stanisław Moniuszko's opera *Straszny Dwór* (*The Haunted Manor*)

This is one of the most famous Polish tenor arias, combining personal memories with longing for a lost home and homeland. The famous stylized polonaise motif imitates an old clock, and the aria is the emotional climax of the opera. It is a

lyrical, longing song in which Stefan sings about his mother and family home. The characteristic chime motif is played by the flute, harp, piano, and bell.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CtnUdADiJI&list=RD7CtnUdADiJI&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CtnUdADiJI&list=RD7CtnUdADiJI&start_radio=1)

Polonaise from the opera *Hrabina (The Countess)*

This piece is the introduction to Act III of the opera, which premiered in 1860. According to contemporary reviews, the polonaise is characterized by modesty a dreamy mood, and simplicity, reflecting the atmosphere of idyllic rural life. In Moniuszko's original version, the piece was written for an unusual combination of instruments: three cellos, a viola, and a double bass. The work has been arranged numerous times, including for piano, cello and piano, and full symphony orchestra (e.g. in Grzegorz Fitelberg's instrumentation). Formally, the piece resembles a rondo, in which the main musical theme returns four times.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v\\_aG-4KWWvA&ab\\_channel=PolaAdam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_aG-4KWWvA&ab_channel=PolaAdam)

Fantastic Overture *Bajka (The Fairy Tale)*

– composed in 1848, this is a one-movement programmatic work, resembling a symphonic poem, in which the composer used the sonata allegro form. The rich melodies, 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 (The Winter Tale)*.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhqtaHa3LQY&list=RDvhqtaHa3LQY&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhqtaHa3LQY&list=RDvhqtaHa3LQY&start_radio=1)

*Czaty (The Ambush)* - words by Adam Mickiewicz

*Czaty (The Ambush)* is one of Stanisław Moniuszko's most famous ballads, written to the lyrics of Adam Mickiewicz's ballad of the same title. The song was published in *Śpiewniki domowe* (Home Songbooks, Book IV, 1846), which formed the foundation of 19th-century Polish vocal poetry. The piece is written for baritone with piano accompaniment and is in C minor. There are also arrangements for orchestra. Mickiewicz's text tells the story of the betrayed Voivode, who, together with a Cossack, plans revenge on his wife and her lover. Moniuszko's music is dramatic and illustrative, which is typical of his ballads.

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

Ballad *Trzech Budrysów (The Three Budrys)*

- based on the text by Adam Mickiewicz, a ballad for baritone accompanied by piano with the characteristics of 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 overcomposition 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).

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7RzuJRX5O4&list=RDn7RzuJRX5O4&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7RzuJRX5O4&list=RDn7RzuJRX5O4&start_radio=1)

#### Introit Requiem aeternam from Requiem in G minor

Requiem in G minor for four voices with organ accompaniment was probably composed at the turn of 1870 and 1871. The mass consists of six parts (introitus Requiem aeternam, graduale Libera animas omnium, offertorium Hostias et preces, Sanctus, Benedictus, and Agnus Dei). It is an incomplete mass cycle intended for performance during the liturgy. In the introit Requiem aeternam, the composer entrusts the text of the antiphon to the choir, accompanied by the organ. The harmonic layer plays a key role in this part, which is emphasized by the dominant homophonic chord texture. It is the only part kept entirely in the main key of G minor. The mood of prayerful reflection, felt from the very first bars, is created by a calm quarter-note pulse, a regular succession of harmonic functions, dynamics maintained mainly at the piano level, and the dark tone of the organ, which provides the accompaniment in the low register. The structure of the form is subordinated to the verbal layer. Moniuszko attaches key significance to the imploring phrase *dona eis Domine* – 'grant them, Lord', which is given a special sound in each instance in the composition.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giUqKz5O2VY&list=RDgiUqKz5O2VY&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giUqKz5O2VY&list=RDgiUqKz5O2VY&start_radio=1)

#### Agnus Dei from *the Litanies of Ostra Brama* No. 3

The four *Litanies of Ostra Brama* for solo voices, mixed choir, and orchestra were composed in honor of Our Lady of Ostra Brama between 1843 and 1855 and performed during the composer's lifetime at the Gate of Dawn in Vilnius. They have Latin lyrics and are intended for soloists (SATB), mixed choir and orchestra (woodwinds, horns, trumpets, trombones, percussion, strings). The most acclaimed is the Litany No. 3 in E minor, which Moniuszko himself particularly valued, as evidenced by numerous references in his correspondence. The work consists of five parts (*Kyrie eleison*, *Christe audi nos*, *Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis*, *Janua coeli, ora pro nobis*, *Agnus Dei*). Although based on religious text, this work, due to its grandeur and emotional tension, functions mainly as a concert piece.