



Opera-dystopia GAZ

Les Kurbas, Georg Kaiser, Pavlo Tychyna, Bohdan Khmelnytsky
and 990 kg of broken piano pieces

NOVA OPERA is a group of young Ukrainian artists the aim of which is search for new ways of developing of music theatre. Within the framework of the Culture Bridges International Cooperation Project grants, the artists reinterpreted the creative work of the Ukrainian theater reformer Les Kurbas, and together with director Virlana Tkacz created the **GAZ** opera-dystopia, which premiered at the Ivan Franko Drama Theater in Kyiv in June 2019. Composers Illia Razumeiko and Roman Grygoriv tell about the creation of the project from the idea to the presentation at the international festival for forward-looking music-dramatic projects **Musiktheatertage Wien** in Vienna.

The concept for the project came from Ukrainian-American theatre director Virlana Tkacz who has been researching the work of Les Kurbas for years. She curated a large exhibition at Mystetskyi Arsenal dedicated to the dramatist's life and work — **Kurbas: New Worlds**—and that's where we got acquainted. It was a huge event; nobody'd done anything like it here for a century. Virlana suggested we reconstruct one part of Kurbas's GAZ production—the explosion. This was a legendary production from 1923 with an avant-garde musical accompaniment based on the work of German author Georg Kaiser and put on at the Berezhil Theatre in Lviv. The performance was well-received by the public and travelled to North America and then disappeared from memory along with that entire generation of expressionist playwrights. The score didn't survive—all we have are audience reviews. We're inspired by the legend of the avant-garde theatre movement that existed in Ukraine in the 1920s and which would be eradicated under Stalin. That's how things started and from there—one element of one performance—this grew into a full-blown anti-utopian opera.



Roman Grygoriv
composer

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The composers, Roman Grygoriv and Illia Razumeiko, started asking about the music that accompanied the original production of GAZ at the Berezil Theatre. When they found out that the score had been lost they offered to write new music themselves. This was the starting point of a new international project. Once it became clear to me that in this opera the soloists weren't just going to be standing around singing, I decided to direct it. For the scenography we called on my co-curator for the Kurbas Exhibition, Waldemart Klyuzko. For the choreography we got the well-known Vienna choreographer Simon Mayer.

Virlana Tkacz, stage director



GAZ is a dystopian opera which creates a synthesis of dramatic performances and instrumental theatre, using experiences of "new" and electronic music in "composed theatre." GAZ presents the story of an explosion at a futuristic gas factory that produced all the energy for the world. At the center is a "prepared piano," which was the control center of GAZ.



Illia Razumeiko
composer

This is the depiction of an anti-utopia that is born, develops and eventually dies or is transformed into some other phase of existence. Kaiser's play is an expressionist work about an explosion at a factory of the future a hundred years from now and yet is a play relevant to the time we're living in. GAZ is this fantastical substance that society is entirely dependent upon; in our world it could be seen as a metaphor for electricity or the networks that connect us all.

The piano plays a multi-functional role in the opera; it's both the gas distributor and an instrument to play. Its relationship to the actors, the engines of conflict and the public runs through the entire performance. When the explosion occurs in the plant the workers destroy the piano

The opera consists of three acts without intermission and lasts about an hour and fifteen minutes. There isn't a lot of text in the performance, but it does employ four languages: Ukrainian, English, German and Italian. The opera draws on a range of source material: Georg Kaiser's original play; texts by Virlana Tkacz; the work of a famous Ukrainian poet, Pavlo Tychyna and one of his lesser-known verses from 1921 entitled "Comes the Spring, Speaking to Me" and a later poem, "The Party Leads".

The composers and six vocalists share the stage performing the roles of plant workers. Illia Razumeiko takes the role of an engineer who plays the piano, and Roman Grygoriv, who is directing the play as well as the orchestra, plays the son of a billionaire (the factory owner) who would do anything for his workers and who tries to relate to them at a human level. The NOVA OPERA vocalists are supported by a small orchestra—cello, percussion and trumpet, for a total of 15 artists on stage.



Illia Razumeiko
composer

Musiktheatertage Wien is Vienna's sole international festival for contemporary music theatre and it takes place in the city I'd been living in for six years and where I graduated from the conservatory not long ago. It is an extension of contemporary operatic theatre practices, independent production companies and international music festivals in the Austrian tradition, positioning itself as a showcase for new progressive music and drama. While still in the production stage we approached them with a proposal to perform GAZ there. The Austrian premiere in Vienna was performed under the **bilateral Year of Culture Ukraine-Austria 2019**. The **Ukrainian Institute**, a state institution that represents Ukrainian culture and promotes a positive image of Ukraine internationally, provided us with organizational and financial support.

We got to know this Austrian choreographer, a former soloist with the Vienna Opera, Simon Mayer, at the 2018 Porto Franko Festival where we asked him to work with our classical soloists. This is a story about factory workers and so it was important to get the physicality and the gestures right of people that are turned into a machine. We collaborated with **The Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre**, which was the home for our Ukrainian premier in June 2019, for the first time. An event agency **Inshi** helped us with production, documentation and a range of organizational issues. **The Ukrainian Cultural Foundation** provided the funds to film the production and for our promotional campaign.



Roman Grygoriv
composer



Illia Razumeiko
composer

The performance begins with the process of choosing a piano. We choose each instrument personally. It had to be in good condition because it's got to be played for the whole opera. We learned a lot about old instruments and found that the model that best suited our needs was one we liked to call the "Bogdan Khmelnytsky" because of this huge portrait of the Hetman that had been etched into the body of the piano. It was part of a limited production release at the end of the 1950s commemorating the 300th Anniversary of the Pereiaslav Council. This massive "Ukraina" piano that stands 15 centimetres higher than a typical piano and comes in at 260 kilograms. We used it for the Kyiv premiere.

For Vienna, we brought a piano from Kyiv like stage scenery. It's a complicated procedure getting it through customs where you're required to bring back the same weight you shipped out. So, after the Vienna performance we put the pieces of the broken piano into bags so that the shipment back to Kyiv came in at 990 kilograms. Somewhere near the Polish-Ukrainian border the piano disappeared, and the truck showed up without it. Our theory is that the truck driver is really a conceptual artist who was putting together a broken-instrument art installation.



In December 2019, three performances of GAZ were staged in New York at the world-renowned experimental theatre venue, La Mama. [The Yara Arts Group](#), headed by Virlana Tkacz, the director of our GAZ Opera, undertook the organization of performance and the search for funding. They have their own studio at [La Mama](#), a fact that provided the opportunity to rehearse and perform the opera without the need to rent space. GAZ earned a good critical reception in New York.



Illia Razumeiko
composer

We're hopeful that the performance can help revitalize the creative oeuvre of Les Kurbas, something Virlana Tkacz deserves credit for and has been working at for years. There's a statue to Kurbas in the centre of Kyiv and you hear his name everywhere but too often the theatre scene itself doesn't know exactly what he was all about. So, this is an original tribute to Kurbas and his work and a demonstration to both domestic and foreign audiences that the Ukrainian theatre can be modern and, in fact, a century ago, was esteemed on the same level as theatre in France or Russia. We were also looking to stimulate interest in the experimental theatre of the 1920s and the new track of Ukrainian opera among local art critics and musicologists as well as international partners.



NOVA OPERA continues with the European tradition of showing opera in the cinema. Dystopian opera GAZ, producer by the independent internet-channel [BeTV](#), was screened last December at the Kievan Rus Cinema. It can be played in theatres internationally, allowing for a high-quality production of our work to tour at very low cost. The behind the scenes documentary of the opera is being finished, but there is some financing needed for this so that it can get out on the film festival circuit.

We're already working on our next big project along with our partners at [Musiktheatertage Wien](#) and our Austrian producer Georg Stecker with support from House of Europe. We've set performances for the new piece at Mystetskyi Arsenal in the autumn of this year and after that in Vienna.

[Rotterdam's Opera Days festival](#), where we previously showed IYOV [*in 2020 opera-requiem IYOV was awarded Shevchenko prize, the highest state award of Ukraine in the field of culture and art*], showed interest in the new project right from the beginning of production, immediately including it in its 2022-2026 programme.



Roman Grygoriv
composer

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