

*Music at the Turn
of the 20th and 21st Centuries*

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**Operas by Poul Ruders:
Artistic ideas, dramaturgy, style**

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Abstract. This article focuses on the operatic work of contemporary Danish composer Poul Ruders. His oeuvre includes five operas: *Tycho* (1986), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998), *Proces Kafka* (2005), *Selma Ježková* (2007), and *The Thirteenth Child* (2016). The article examines their key themes, compositional features, dramaturgy, and musical language. It is noted that the Danish composer favors dramatic stories reflecting contemporary social issues (gender inequality, misogyny, power, religion, guilt)

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and offering insight into the psychological world of complex human relationships. The plots of his operas are often ambivalent, lending themselves to conflict-driven dramaturgy. Virtually all his works are based on the principle of artistic duality, expressed through temporal contrasts (old world vs. new world, past vs. present) and artistic contrasts (life vs. creation, reality vs. dream). This conceptual duality results in stylistic pluralism. Ruders' operas blend high and low genres, classical and popular art, tonality and atonality, speech and singing, sound and noise. The composer employs stylistic allusions and quotations, often deliberately creating a tension between the meaning of the quotation and its context. The article concludes that Ruders continues the traditions of Alban Berg's expressionist drama in his operatic work and serves as an heir to the ideas of pluralistic musical theatre pioneered by Bernd Alois Zimmermann.

Keywords: Poul Ruders, Paul Bentley, Margaret Atwood, Franz Kafka, Lars von Trier, *Tycho*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Proces Kafka*, *Selma Ježková*, *The Thirteenth Child*

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*Музыкальное творчество
рубежа XX–XXI столетий*

Научная статья

**Оперы Пола Рудерса:
художественные идеи, драматургия, стиль**

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Аннотация. В центре внимания статьи — оперное творчество современного датского композитора Пола Рудерса. Его перу принадлежат пять опер: «Тихо» (1986), «Рассказ служанки» (1998), «Процесс Кафки» (2005), «Сельма Ежкова» (2007), «Тринадцатое дитя» (2016). В статье рассматриваются их ключевые темы, особенности композиции, драматургии и музыкального языка. Отмечается, что датский мастер отдает предпочтение драматическим историям, отражающим проблемы современного общества (гендерное неравенство, мизогиния, власть, религия, чувство вины) и позволяющим исследовать психологический мир сложных человеческих взаимоотношений. Сюжетам его опер свойственна амбивалентность, обусловливающая обращение к конфликтному типу драматургии. Фактически все сочинения базируются на принципе художественного двоемирия, действующего в разрезах времени (старый мир — новый мир, прошлое — настоящее) и искусства (жизнь — творчество, реальность — мечта).

Следствием концепционной раздвоенности становится стилевой плюрализм. В операх Рудерса смешиваются высокие и низкие жанры, классическое и популярное искусство, тональность и атональность, речь и пение, звук и шум. Композитор использует стилевые аллюзии и цитирование, нередко прибегая к намеренному рассогласованию смыслового поля цитаты и контекста. В статье делаются выводы о том, что Рудерс продолжает развивать в своем оперном творчестве традиции экспрессионистской драмы Альбана Берга, а также выступает наследником идей плюралистического музыкального театра Бернда Алоиза Циммермана.

Ключевые слова: Пол Рудерс, Пол Бентли, Маргарет Этвуд, Франц Кафка, Ларс фон Триер, «Тихо», «Рассказ служанки», «Процесс Кафки», «Сельма Ежкова», «Тринадцатое дитя»

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Introduction

Poul Ruders is a contemporary Danish composer whose recognition in the West has steadily increased. He is the creator of original compositional techniques, such as the “change ringing” method and the minimorphosis technique, which he describes as a personal form of “intellectual minimalism” (see [1; 2] for details). Ruders’ body of work includes five operas, six symphonies, over twenty orchestral pieces, numerous instrumental concertos, as well as chamber and choral music. His works are regularly performed in Europe and the USA and receive positive reviews from critics and audiences alike. In recent years, Russian musicology has also shown increasing interest in Ruders’ music [3, p. 186].

Ruders’ operas have achieved the greatest success to date. They have been staged in Copenhagen, London, Munich, Umeå, New York, Santa Fe, Minnesota, and many other cities worldwide. His most famous work is *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which premiered at the Royal Danish Opera in 2000. The recording of this production by Dacapo Records was nominated for a Grammy and received the Cannes Classical Award in 2002 as the best work by a living composer. Since then, the opera has been performed repeatedly around the world.

The growing interest of musical theatres in Ruders’ operas makes a closer scholarly examination relevant, especially since this area of his work has yet to receive comprehensive coverage in musicology, being addressed only in a few articles on individual works [4; 5].

Themes of the Operas

Ruders first turned to musical theatre in 1986. Over forty years, he created five operas: *Tycho* (1986), *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1998), *Proces Kafka* (2005), *Selma Ježková* (2007), and *The Thirteenth Child* (2016).

His first opera, *Tycho*, was considered by Ruders himself an unsuccessful attempt, due partly to the libretto and a less compelling theme. The central character of the opera was the Danish astronomer and astrologer Tycho Brahe (1546–1601), known for his highly precise astronomical observations, including the recording of a supernova

(the so-called *Stella Nova*). The plot focused on Brahe's relationship with Johannes Kepler and included a discussion between the astronomers on the laws of planetary motion. In the opera's brief synopsis, Ruders emphasized that the confrontation between the two scientists formed the core of the dramatic narrative:

Tycho is in severe need of an intelligent challenge. Which he gets, and with a disastrous result for himself. The encouraging encounter with Kepler turns into Tycho's scientific and earthly death verdict. Slowly Tycho realizes that his own conception of the Earth as the indisputable axes of the Universe is shattered by Kepler's theory <...>. The ancient picture of the Universe collapses, Tycho feels deceived by Kepler who leaves the castle <...>. But they meet again and reunite... at Tycho's death bed.¹

The libretto, written by Henrik Bjelke, combined texts in Danish and Latin. In addition to historical figures (Kepler, Brahe, King Christian IV of Denmark, Emperor Rudolf II), allegorical characters, Urania (the Muse) and Time, were introduced to comment on the astronomers' debates. Some Danish musicologists (Ole Nørlyng, Per Erland Rasmussen) considered the libretto heavy and difficult to set to music, describing it as "a drama to be read only" [1, p. 182]. Indeed, the monologues and dialogues were filled with philosophical, scientific, and religious reflections, written in the elevated style of Renaissance poetry. Not surprisingly, alongside singing, the opera included spoken dialogues.

Ruders later admitted in an interview that writing Tycho taught him what an opera composer should avoid. Most importantly, he clarified his approach to subject matter: musical theatre should serve as a center for socially critical activity, with social or psychological drama at its core. Henceforth, Ruders preferred stories that would not merely excite but profoundly move audiences while highlighting contemporary issues. The themes of his subsequent operas addressed gender inequality, misogyny, power, religion, and the nature of creativity.

¹ Ruders, P. (n. d.). Poul Ruders. *Tycho* (1986). *Wise Music Classical*.
<https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/21492/Tycho--Poul-Ruders/>

His second opera, *The Handmaid's Tale*, was based on the eponymous dystopian novel by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, depicting a society governed by distorted religious laws. Set in the imagined Republic of Gilead, created in former U.S. territory after environmental disasters and declining birth rates, women were stripped of all rights and divided into classes: Wives, Aunts, Marthas, and Handmaids. The latter were forced to bear children for the Gileadean elite. Through the story of the protagonist, Offred, Ruders explored issues of female identity and oppression under a theocratic regime.

Ruders said in an interview: “This book has it all — forbidden love, hope, desperation, violence, tenderness, public executions, grandiose processions. It is a vast drama all the way through, one that begs to be set to music. Moreover, it is a highly visual novel. Full of colours: red, blue, green; the guardians are in grey. It is fit for the stage” [1, p. 377].

The opera's libretto was written by the British actor, singer, and writer Paul Bentley. It is worth noting that, beginning with *The Handmaid's Tale*, all of Ruders' subsequent musical-theatrical works were written in English, an important point that reflects the composer's desire to overcome the language barrier and reach as wide an audience as possible. Nevertheless, this focus on accessibility did not prevent him from including texts in Latin and employing verbal counterpoint, with several scenes drawing on a mix of different texts.

Themes of existential human experience, social alienation, guilt, and communication difficulties are fully explored in *Proces Kafka*. Ruders continued collaborating with Bentley, adapting Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial*, which had been staged in various operatic adaptations in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (notable examples include Gunther Schuller's *The Visitation* [1966]; Luca Mosca's *K.* [2000]; Philippe Manoury's *K.* [2000]; Salvatore Sciarrino's *La porta della legge*

[2009]; Philip Glass' *The Trial* [2014] (for more details see [6]). Ruders and Bentley's originality lay in linking the novel's plot with Kafka's private life, especially his relationships with Felice Bauer and Grete Bloch, an observation first noted by Nobel laureate Elias Canetti [7, p. 168]. In 1969, he published the book *Der andere Prozess: Kafkas Briefe an Felice* (*Kafka's Other Trial: The Letters to Felice*), in which he attempted to demonstrate that Kafka's engagement to and break-up with Felice were reflected in the novel. In particular, according to Canetti, "the engagement became the arrest in the first chapter, the 'trial' — the execution scene in the last" [6].

Fragments of Kafka's letters to Felice were included in the opera's libretto, forming the basis for the extensive prologue as well as the counter-scenes that alternated with scenes from the novel. The reinforcement of these links and parallels was aided by role doubling. Thus, the parts of Kafka and Josef K. were intended for the same singer (lyric-dramatic tenor). The same applied to the roles of Felice and Miss Bürstner (lyric-dramatic soprano), and Grete, Miss Montag, and Leni (lyric-dramatic mezzo-soprano). In this way, the opera contained at least two love triangles featuring characters doubled in this manner. The connections established between fictional characters and real-life figures allowed the opera to illustrate how lived experiences are transformed within the artistic world of the writer.

The absurdity, which is an integral feature of Kafka's creative universe, received a stage expression. The opera included three mute zanies who grimaced, danced, laughed, and carried letters from one end of the stage to the other, among other antics; their presence introduced elements of farce into the dramatic story. The composer noted that, alongside the novel's pessimistic view of the world, Kafka's work is filled with black humor and satire, so he intentionally made the opera balance between tragedy and comedy, horror and laughter.

For his fourth opera, Ruders drew inspiration from cinema. The libretto of *Selma Ježková*, prepared by Henrik Engelbrecht, was based on the screenplay of Lars von Trier's film *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). Interest in the world of screen arts represents a notable trend in the development of 21st-century opera and increasingly captures the attention of contemporary researchers [8].

Ruders became the first composer to bring Trier's experimental cinema onto the academic stage.²

The Danish director, as is well known, has acquired a controversial reputation as a genius-psychopath, a disturber of public calm who strives to wrench the spectator out of their comfort zone and trap them in peculiar ethical snares. *Dancer in the Dark* formed the concluding part of his *Golden Heart* trilogy, which included *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and *Idioterne (The Idiots)*, 1998).

In various interviews, Ruders noted that what attracted him above all to the film was its dramatic element: "The most important thing, though, is the EMOTIONS! I repeat: the EMOTIONS! That's where music is far and away superior to the other arts. There has to be a strong human story behind the realistic scenario, as there is in both Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and in Lars von Trier's film *Dancer in the Dark*. That's why I chose exactly those two stories"³. The composer deliberately drew no parallels with the film per se, using its plot as if it were a book. It would seem, however, that along with its emotional potential, the film's problematic themes also played no small role for him. Ruders noted that the boundary between altruism and egoism in this story is extremely thin, exposing a moral dilemma: by sacrificing herself for her son, Selma imposes an intolerable burden on his shoulders. Does he need the sight gained at the cost of his mother's life?

Ruders' most recent opera to date, *The Thirteenth Child*, stands apart in the composer's oeuvre. Unlike the preceding works, whose themes touch on social and ideological problems and whose narratives are shaded in dark tones, it is distinguished by an optimistic finale. The libretto, written by Becky and David Starobin, draws on the Grimm Brothers' tale *The Twelve Brothers*, in which, as is proper to the genre, good triumphs over evil. Ideas of fidelity

² In addition to Ruders, three other composers have turned to the films of the Danish director. In 2016, Missy Mazzoli, commissioned by the Philadelphia Opera, composed the opera *Breaking the Waves*; in 2023, the German composer Gordon Kampe presented his adaptation of Trier's controversial film *Dogville*; and the Swedish composer Mikael Karlsson created an opera based on *Melancholia*.

³ Beyer, A. (n.d.). Selma's Songs. Poul Ruders. Selma Ježková (*Dancer in the Dark*). <https://www.dacapo-records.dk/en/recording/ruders-selma-jezkova-dancer-in-the-dark>

and love, which help overcome any hardships and trials, resonate importantly in the opera. At the same time, the story is filled with sinister, at times dramatic, events that afford the composer broad imaginative scope. These include Drokan's slander, Hjarne's paranoia, Gertrude's death, the transformation of Lyra's brothers into ravens, and Benjamin's death in a duel with Drokan.

Thus, as the review undertaken shows, the themes of Ruders' operatic works reflect the problems and contradictions of contemporary society while concentrating on the psychological world of complex human relationships. The main characters of his works, whether historical figures or fictional persons, are extraordinary individuals experiencing deep emotional crises or finding themselves in difficult life situations. Tycho Brahe suffers the collapse of his scientific ideals; Offred lives in an atmosphere of psychological and physical violence; Kafka is consumed by a sense of guilt; Selma Ježková unconsciously seeks death; and the fairy-tale Lyra chooses a sacrificial path. Moreover, most of these characters (with the exception of Lyra) cannot be called unambiguously positive. Brahe, in reality, is a narcissistic, embittered despot unwilling to acknowledge his scientific defeat. Kafka is portrayed as a mentally unbalanced neurotic whose actions toward Felice and Grete are immoral. Selma, in effect, commits indirect suicide, burdening her son with guilt. Offred pays in the present for a past affair with a married man.

Composition and Dramaturgy

In his work, Ruders builds on operatic models developed in the classical-romantic tradition while introducing a number of authorial features related to the specifics of each plot, its realization, and the particularities of musical dramaturgy. As a result, practically every composition has a distinct genre orientation: Ruders himself described *Tycho* as a tragic operetta, *The Thirteenth Child* carries the subtitle "fairy-tale opera", *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian opera, *Kafka's Trial* can be considered a tragic farce, and *Selma Ježková* is defined as a cinema-script drama (or drama based on a cinematic plot).

The orientation toward different genre models dictates the variety of compositional solutions. Ruders' operas include one-act works (*Proces Kafka*, *Selma Ježková*), two-act works (*The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Thirteenth Child*), and a three-act opera (*Tycho*). The originality of each structure directly depends on the artistic concept. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are the compositional structures of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Proces Kafka*. Initially, Bentley intended to make the structure of *The Handmaid's Tale* completely symmetrical. By condensing Atwood's novel without significant loss of meaning, he fit the entire story into two acts with a prologue, prelude, and epilogue. Each act was further divided into 15 scenes that corresponded to each other in terms of location and events. In the final version, full symmetry was not maintained, but partial correspondences remained. Overall, the symmetry helped reveal thematic and symbolic intersections arising between characters and situations, while simultaneously illustrating how our past shapes the present and the future [5].

In the one-act composition of *Proces Kafka*, a prelude precedes the main action, demonstrating the history of Kafka's relationships with Felice and Grete. The main action itself is built on parallel narration. The alternation of scenes and counter-scenes, which shifts the viewer's attention from the events of the novel to the twists of the author's private life, forms two independent dramaturgical and stage planes.

Ruders' operas are marked by a unity of dramaturgical techniques. The composer is foremost an heir to the traditions of Wagnerian musical drama. He adheres to the principle of a freely structured scene, combining monologues, dialogues, ensembles, and choral episodes. The development of material is driven by a variety of leitmotifs, leit-chords, and recurring themes. Orchestral interludes are often inserted between scenes, sometimes reaching genuine symphonic proportions. At the same time, Ruders rejects orchestral introductions: only *Selma Ježková* opens with an overture, while *Tycho* begins with an instrumental ritornello labeled *Hofmusik* (*Court Music*). The other operas omit this traditional component of musical theatre.

The composer pays special attention to the orchestral ensemble. In his early work, he relied on accompaniment typical of the opera genre at its inception (the action of *Tycho* is set in 1601). Instead of a full orchestra, Ruders used an instrumental ensemble including clarinets in *B flat*, in *E flat*, bass clarinet, French horn, harp, guitar, violin, double bass, piano, harpsichord, celesta, DX-7 synthesizer, and a variety of percussion instruments (tambourine, pedal-bass and snare drums, vibraphone, marimba, timpani, tam-tam, metal-wind chimes, suspended cymbals, antique cymbals, tubular bells, and others, including unusual instruments such as a talking drum and hi-hat). As is evident, the instrumental accompaniment combined both historical and modern instruments; this duality reflects the ambivalence of the world (old and new), embodied in the views of Brahe and Kepler.

Ruders expanded to a triple orchestra in *The Handmaid's Tale*, adding organ, digital piano, and an Akai sampler capable of reproducing rare instruments (such as waterphone, kalimba, didgeridoo, etc.) as well as various noises (frightening sounds, scraping, humming, hissing, footsteps, and more). A quadruple orchestra was employed in *Proces Kafka*.

The unusual sound of *Selma Ježková* and *The Thirteenth Child* is due, on one hand, to the omission of flutes and oboes (replaced by saxophones), and on the other, to a broader use of synthesizers. In *The Thirteenth Child*, synthesizers create the sounds of various instruments (harpsichord, church organ, guitar, accordion, etc.) without additional musicians, and contribute to a mystical, magical atmosphere⁴ (forest scenes, the mother's ghost, transformation of the brothers into ravens, etc.). In *Selma Ježková*, synthesizers are often used to reinforce the string section.

The emphasis on drama leads the composer to adopt a conflict-oriented type of dramaturgy. Ambivalence is present in the plots of virtually all works, making the principle of dual worlds the dramatic core. As is known, this type of conflict emerged

⁴ Ruders also resorts to special acoustic effects. In the scene with the ghost of Gertrude, a pre-recorded countertenor voice is projected into the auditorium through speakers and reinforced with multiple echoes. The impression of the "non-living" voice is enhanced by its juxtaposition with ordinary singing (Lyra's soprano).

in Romantic art and took many individual forms, each with its own coordinates and artistic toolkit [9]. In Ruders' operas, the dual-world concept functions primarily along the axes of time and art, usually without affecting space. For example, *Tycho* is based on the antithesis "old world – new world," embodied in Brahe's and Kepler's cosmological views. A temporal dual-world model is also used in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The opera unfolds across two temporal planes: present (life in Gilead) and past (memories of the former world, often chaotic), whose events frequently intersect in the same location⁵. The narrative strategy entails several radical solutions for musical theatre. Offred's role is divided between two singers, representing different aspects of her consciousness and different temporal perspectives. Constant flashbacks produce a dual-stage effect: in many cases, the stage is split into two parts reflecting different temporal events, occurring both sequentially and simultaneously. The climax of this duality is Offred's aria from Scene 9 of Act II, *How could you so betray her?*, a duet of Offred in the past and Offred in the present.

The dual-world structure of *Proces Kafka* is defined by the antithetical model of "life versus creativity," reflecting the twofold nature of the writer's world, in which his phobias undergo artistic transformation. As in the case of Offred, this leads to the emergence of a double (Kafka/Josef K.); but here Ruders adopts a different strategy, the two roles are performed by the same singer. The composer also turns to the possibilities of stage counterpoint. An example is the conclusion of the Prologue (the Prelude), where Kafka and Grete's engagement and love scene are fused into a single moment. The immorality and absurdity of the situation are emphasized not only scenically (the characters make love in full view of their gathered relatives, including Felice) but musically as well, the background to their actions is a chorus of guests singing Psalm 127 in Hebrew, a text that speaks of God's blessing and family happiness bestowed upon one who lives in fear of the Lord and walks in His ways.

⁵ For instance, the Gilead brothel Jezebel is located in the hotel where Offred would meet with Luke.

A similar dual-world structure appears in the opera *Selma Ježková*. As in Trier's film, the heroine inhabits two realms: the real and the imagined. A passionate admirer of Hollywood musicals, she frequently withdraws into fantasies, constructing in her mind an artificial, glossy world without flaws, a world where everyone is carefree and happy. Here, the conflict is closest to Romantic aesthetics, reflecting the tension between dream and reality. In Trier's film, it is realized both visually and aurally. The artistic space is clearly divided through the mode of delivery: speech (reality) versus singing (the vocal-dance numbers). Most of the film is shot with a live (handheld) camera in a muted color palette, which lends the events a documentary quality. The musical episodes, by contrast, use a static (tripod) camera and heightened color saturation. Ruders, however, differentiates the two worlds through stylistic means.

The dramaturgy of *The Thirteenth Child* differs substantially from that of the earlier operas. Despite an antagonist in the figure of Drokan, this work is essentially free of ambivalence; its dramatic development obeys a classical logic, "from darkness to light." The trajectory of this movement is palpable on the acoustic level when comparing the beginning and the end of the opera. The work opens with the despair of Hjarne, who has believed Drokan's slander. Notably, in the score, alongside the indication of the vocal type (soprano, tenor, etc.), an original emotional-imagistic epithet is added that designates a defining trait of the character⁶. King Frohagord's voice, for example, is marked *paranoid bass*. The orchestral accompaniment draws heavily on the low register (bass and contrabass clarinets, bassoons, trombones and tuba, cellos and double basses); the musical material is dark and tonally unstable. The opera concludes, however, with the sound of organ, high strings, and horns reminiscent of pealing bells. The ensemble of singers and the chorus intone in unison a vision of healing from sorrow, the restoration of hope, unity, and love. The leading

⁶ Earlier operas appealed to traditional voice types: dramatic soprano, lyric soprano, lyric-dramatic soprano, heroic tenor, buffo bass, and so on. In *Proces Kafka*, an unusual designation appears for the washerwoman's voice – "sluttish" mezzo. In *The Thirteenth Child*, each character's voice receives a specific designation: Gertrude is a tragic contralto, Drokan is a scheming bass-baritone, Frederic is a proud tenor, Benjamin is a good-hearted tenor, Corbin is a worried bass, and Toke is a worried tenor.

lines are assigned to Lyra, whose voice is described as an *innocent soprano*. The music is set in D-flat major, a key long associated with the semantic field of happiness, love, and the ideal. The thematic material is borrowed from the first scene of Act II, where the brothers, together with Lyra, sang of beauty, love, and devotion to their mother.

Stylistic Pluralism

The conceptual duality forming the dramaturgical foundation of Ruders' operas also plays a defining role in his stylistic strategy. A crucial aspect of all compositions, with the exception of *The Thirteenth Child*, is stylistic pluralism.

For instance, the opposition between the “old” and “new” worlds, reflected in the confrontation of Brahe’s and Kepler’s views, is primarily realized through a complex array of musical-stylistic means. Brahe is characterized by arias in the spirit of Monteverdi. “Tycho, so to speak, dies throughout the entire performance, which is why I turned him into a singing mausoleum, implying pomp and archaic tension,” Ruders commented [10, p. 296]. Kepler, in contrast, speaks in the language of “modernist music” [ibid.]. In addition to stylistic references to the Renaissance, Baroque, and the contemporary world, the composition contains elements of music hall and operetta culture (for example, in the depiction of Brahe’s servant, Jeppe the dwarf), traits of the “Russian style” (in the characterization of Tycho’s wife, Christina), and Viennese waltzes and mazurkas (in the dialogue between Tycho and Emperor Rudolf II). Ruders somewhat ironically described his pluralistic strategy as follows:

For me, a significant part of any musical experience is connected with ‘internal images’ and rapidly changing associations, so when I began working, I had no choice but to try to offer a box of assorted chocolates, in which each delightful piece corresponds to a stylistic facet that underscores the mood of the current flow of action [10, p. 296].

According to Rasmussen, the use of stylistic clichés created an ironic distance in the music of *Tycho*, so “the ideological drama was doomed to fail as a serious opera” [1, p. 183]. Subsequently, the composer agreed that his work hovers between “immense sadness and extreme ridicule,” representing a “tragic operetta”⁷.

A wide stylistic palette is present in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The musical language of the opera is defined by at least three different stylistic layers: sacred hymns, representing the internal politics of Gilead; jazz music, used in scenes set in the Jezebel brothel; and expressionism, reflecting the disharmony of Offred’s inner and outer worlds. Among these, expressionism functions as the leading stylistic domain.

The opera is filled with quotations and allusions; in their use, the composer follows the strategy of the literary original. The intertextual space of Atwood’s novel is permeated with citations and reminiscences of texts from the Old and New Testaments, which are invoked by the Gilead regime. However, in the hands of the political elite, the interpretation of the Scriptures always acquires a distorted meaning. Quoted fragments are often removed from context, taken literally, or even falsified. Ruders’ handling of quotations is based on the principle of dissonance between the semantic level of the quotation and its original source. For example, the composer incorporates the Christian hymn *Amazing Grace*, considered the unofficial anthem of the United States, into the opera. The text of the original celebrates divine grace descending upon a person and cleansing them of spiritual blindness. In the opera, however, the context of the song is always linked to sexual activity. Ruders calls the theme of *Amazing Grace* “sickly, hypocritical” [1, p. 378], designating it as a leitmotif of sex, both “licit,” undertaken in the name of the fundamentalist Christian regime, and forbidden (vicious, sinful). The dynamic interaction between the semantic field of the quotation and the musical context helps Ruders expose the hypocrisy of Gilead’s policies and its inversion of Christian values [5].

⁷ Poul Ruders. *Tycho*. In *Wise Music Classical*. Retrieved October 26, 2025, from <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/21492/Tycho--Poul-Ruders/>.

Among other quotations subjected to semantic and musical distortion are the Protestant chorale *Wer hat dich so geschlagen* from Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, appearing in Scene 16 of Act II, and the refrain of the famous song *Tea for Two* from Vincent Youmans' musical *No, No, Nanette*, opening Scene 11 of Act II. In the first case, the chorale is sung by a male choir *bocca chiusa* with organ accompaniment, while simultaneously the string section of the orchestra plays the chorale with an eighth-note delay, and each note is extended by a quarter of its original value, producing a temporal divergence between the two layers (chorale and orchestra). In the second case, Ruders preserves the harmonic support and rhythmic formula of the refrain of *Tea for Two* but alters some intervals and, in essence, inverts the main motif. In both cases, a dynamic coupling arises between the quotation and the context. Bach chorale underpins the brutal murder of a man in the Center for Salvation, while the light jazz song about idyllic happiness for two lovers plays during a scene of forced sexual activity. Ruders' strategy aims to recontextualize cultural associations of quoted material and to provoke a sense of psychological discomfort in the listener confronted with the contradiction between what is seen and what is heard. References to widely known music, semantically distorted, also serve as a reminder of bygone eras and of the spiritual purity and innocence irretrievably lost to humanity.

In *Proces Kafka*, expressionism, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*, becomes the dominant style. Exalted agitation and nervous tension constitute the prevailing type of musical expression. At the same time, a distinct stylistic layer of the opera consists of passages in the spirit of klezmer music (for example, in the engagement scene in the Prologue) and dance melodies reminiscent of Hollywood film music (scenes with Miss Bürstner).

The confrontation between dream and reality in *Selma Ježková* is also created through various stylistic means, with the composer juxtaposing popular music against expressionism. The opera's intertextual space consists of references to musicals, with quotations and allusions being both musical and strictly verbal. For instance, Selma's very first words in the opera, *So long, farewell*, are lines from the eponymous song from *The Sound of Music*, but Ruders sets the text

to his own melody. A musical allusion to the song *Edelweiss* from the same musical appears in Selma's phrase *I remember thinking to myself* (Scene 2), when she recalls her life in Prague. The opening motif of Selma's monologue *Hear the Magic* (Scene 1), is based on the refrain of the song *Ol' Man River* from the musical *Show Boat* (1927). Unlike in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the semantic field of this quotation does not contradict the context but deepens it. The song's text addresses hard labor and the social position of African Americans. Its central image, the Mississippi River, calm and indifferent, contrasts with the lives of African Americans, full of deprivation and hardship. This social subtext and the contrast between the two worlds correlate with Selma's life situation as a Czech immigrant forced to work from dawn to dusk in a factory.

Ruders' most recent opera, *The Thirteenth Child*, differs stylistically from his previous works. It lacks pronounced stylistic contrasts, with the composer organically combining atonal-dissonant elements with extended tonality. Reviews of the opera's production in Santa Fe noted the neo-Romantic orientation of Ruders' musical language. Atonal-dissonant elements often serve a vividly expressive function, for example, the chorus of mourners in Scene 2 of Act I, whose pointillistic, echoing texture between male and female voices imitates the sound of funeral bells; or the chorus of little princes in Scene 1 of the same act, based on clusters that reflect the cacophony of quarrelling children and, simultaneously, through their tense sound, pierce the consciousness of the anxious Hjarne, poisoned by Drokan's suspicions.

Conclusion

Despite the neo-Romantic and lyrical tendencies emerging in *The Thirteenth Child*, in his musical-theatrical work as a whole, Ruders primarily stands as an heir to the expressionist drama of Alban Berg. As with the great Austrian master, his music embodies an atmosphere of psycho-emotional tension, tragic hopelessness, often absurd existence, and social alienation. Stylistic pluralism does not prevent the expressionist mode from being the leading musical-stylistic type.

The engagement with various genres of domestic, popular, sacred, and other music introduces contrast into the dominantly emotionally tense sphere, highlighting the intensity of life's conflicts.

Ruders' operatic output can also be regarded as a further development of the ideas of pluralistic musical theater pioneered by Bernd Alois Zimmermann. Numerous parallels can be found between the Danish composer's works and Zimmermann's *Soldiers*: mixing of temporal events (*The Handmaid's Tale*) or mental events (*Proces Kafka*, *Selma Jezková*); collage of stylistically heterogeneous musical material; included quotations; diversity in vocal-executive techniques (singing onstage and offstage, speech, shouting, whispering); amplification and recording equipment (*The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Thirteenth Child*); orchestra expanded with unusual instruments; incorporated film footage (*The Handmaid's Tale*); and use of mimes and acrobats (the zanies in *Proces Kafka*). Ruders and Zimmermann are also united by their distinctive orientation toward cinematic aesthetics: essentially, all of their works approach the form of "film operas."

Thus, in the musical-theatrical works of the Danish composer, the traditional and the new, the familiar and the alien, the academic and the popular, the everyday and the artistic, the transient and the eternal converge. Despite the heterogeneity of the components listed, this synthesis is quite organic and defines one of the key qualities of Paul Ruders' operatic style.

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