

The Application of Polish Dance Rhythms in Opera *Halka* by Stanisław Moniuszko

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Abstract

Stanisław Moniuszko's opera *Halka* is a quintessential work of Polish national music, renowned for its innovative incorporation of traditional Polish dance rhythms. These rhythms are creatively adapted into special musical melodies, highlighting a distinct Polish national style and earning global acclaim. Moniuszko masterfully integrates the rhythms of dances such as the mazurka, polonaise, and krakowiak, reflecting the personalities of different characters and enhancing the emotional and dramatic depth of the narrative. These dance rhythms not only emphasize the folkloric elements of the story but also vividly portray the social context of Poland at the time. By blending these traditional dance forms with operatic conventions, Moniuszko offers audiences a unique experience of Polish national-style opera, making a significant contribution to the sense of Polish national identity in 19th-century music. *Halka* stands as a perfect fusion of Polish folk traditions and classical artistry.

Keywords: *Halka*, traditional dance rhythms of Polish, Mazurka, folkloric elements

1. Introduction

Stanisław Moniuszko was an important composer of the Polish Romantic period, hailed as the "Father of Polish National Opera". His works are imbued with the cultural essence of Polish traditional nationalism. Drawing on the history and cultural characteristics of Poland, he drew inspiration from traditional Polish folk music, incorporating a large number of rhythms from Polish folk dances. Moniuszko reworked these rhythmic patterns and used them in his operatic compositions. In his operas, the music featuring the rhythmic characteristics of Polish traditional dances are not merely a stylistic element, but also a manifestation of his patriotism, reflecting his deep love for his nation and homeland.

The opera *Halka* is regarded as the progenitor of Polish national opera, which skillfully integrates Polish folk music and dance rhythms. In performance, the actors not only display the elegance of Polish dance but also use these elements to enhance the dramatic atmosphere and delineate the characters' emotions, thus advancing the narrative.

2. Characteristics of Rhythmic Patterns in Polish Dance

2.1 Mazurka

The structure typically employs a binary form (A+B), with the time signature generally being in 3/4 (Figure 1).



Figure 1.

Its characteristics are:

(1) The first beat is finely divided, for example, into a dotted eighth note or an eighth-note triplet (Figure 2).



Figure 2.

(2) The syncopated rhythm emphasizes the beat by altering the regular pattern of accents in the music, shifting the emphasis from the strong beat to a weak beat or the weaker part of a strong beat. The tempo gradually increases from slow (*kujawiak*) to fast (*oberek*).

(3) The style of the Mazurka is more lyrical. During the Romantic period, the Mazurka created by artists was closer to instrumental lyricism, characterized by contemplation and melancholy.

2.2 Polonaise

The Polonaise is a ceremonial dance characterized by its graceful and stately movements. It typically follows a binary form (A+B) and is commonly in 3/4 time with a moderate to slow tempo (Figure 3). The characteristics of Polonaise are:



Figure 3.

(1) A repetitive rhythmic pattern featuring an eighth note followed by two sixteenth notes on the first beat of the measure, with the accent typically falling on the second beat of each measure.

(2) The distinctive rhythm gives the music a majestic and powerful sound, and the dancers move as if they are strolling. Originally designed for men, the Polonaise developed in the 18th century and incorporated the typical characteristics of the “*chodzony*” (walking dance) that had become widely popular by the 20th century. The Polonaise combines the characteristics of a military march and the solemnity of a ceremonial ritual. It is characterized by its elegance and dignity, and it reflects the national pride of the Polish people, which is a dance performed on important festive occasions.

2.3 Krakowiak

It is a dance originating from the Krakow region of Poland, characterized by a fast 2/4 time signature (Figure 4).

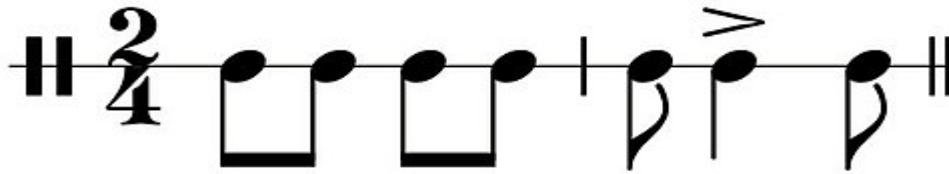


Figure 4.

Its characteristics are:

- (1) Syncopated rhythm, where the accent is shifted from one part of the measure to another. In dancing, the alternation of heel and toe strikes, combined with body rotation, characterizes this dance, which was popular in social settings in the 19th century.
- (2) It is imbued with the local color of the Krakow Highlands, often used to depict the relaxed and cheerful life of the countryside.

3. The Application of Polish Dance Rhythm Patterns in the Opera *Halka*

3.1 Mazurka's Application in *Halka*

The Mazurka is one of the most important dance rhythms in *Halka*. It runs through several key scenes, primarily appearing in the rural life scenes and *Halka*'s solo arias. It is used to portray the simple life of the rural people and the emotional ups and downs of *Halka*, as well as to highlight the contrast between different social classes.

(1) Mazurka in village dance

In the Act IV, set in a village life scene, the villagers sing and dance. The Mazurka rhythm appears in the banquet scene in the form of a lively triple meter, reflecting the folk music colors.

The accompaniment employs syncopated rhythms and leaping notes, which not only reflect the simplicity of the peasants but also express their love for life.

(2) *Halka*'s aria

In *Halka*'s arias, the Mazurka rhythm is slow, highlighting the tragic nature of the female protagonist.

In her arias where she pours out her innermost feelings, the Mazurka rhythm is rendered in a minor key, with the melody being lyrical. The musical color is more melancholic and sorrowful, expressing her pain and despair.

The use of syncopation and accentuation enhances the emotional tension in the music. This variation in rhythmic pattern reflects the dual role of the Mazurka: it serves both as a lively folk dance and as an expression of *Halka*'s complex inner emotions.

(3) Dramatic function

a: The use of Mazurka highlights the dramatic character of *Halka*: As a dance performed by peasants, the Mazurka contrasts sharply with the Polonaise danced by the nobility. Through variations in the rhythm of the Mazurka, the opera reflects *Halka*'s emotional ups and downs, emphasizing the conflict between her rural background and her involvement with the young nobleman. This contrast vividly depicts her loneliness in the chasm between social classes and foreshadows her tragic life, where she is deceived and abandoned by the nobleman.

b: Displaying Polish folk culture: Moniuszko's use of Mazurka in his compositions vividly portrays Polish rural life, infusing the opera with a strong folk character and serving as an expression of national identity.

3.2 The Application of Polonaise in *Halka*

The Polonaise rhythm primarily appears in scenes depicting the aristocratic class, reflecting their lifestyle and status. This stands in stark contrast to the Mazurka, which symbolizes the peasant class. The juxtaposition of these two musical elements creates a powerful dramatic conflict.

(1) Polonaise in aristocratic banquet scenes

In Act II, where the aristocrats are holding a ball, the background music employs the typical Polonaise rhythm, creating an atmosphere of grandeur and elegance. The graceful and unhurried triple meter reflects the nobility's poise, composure, and sense of high social standing during their social interactions.

The dance scene of the aristocratic ball forms a stark contrast with the peasant class represented by *Halka*. It also depicts, in a deeper sense, her helplessness in feeling out of place in the noble society.

(2) Aria of Janusz

Janusz is a noble male character whose solo arias incorporate elements of the Polonaise rhythm, symbolizing his high social status and noble identity. However, as the plot unfolds, his thematic melodies gradually deviate from the solemnity of the Polonaise. The composer seems to imply Janusz's inner turmoil and his feelings of guilt for betraying *Halka*'s love.

(3) Dramatic function

a: Highlighting the aristocratic atmosphere: The distinctive rhythm of the Polonaise endows the noble social occasions with a sense of ceremony, reflecting the upper-class individuals' confidence in their possession of power.

b: Foreshadowing *Halka*'s tragedy: The liveliness of the ball contrasts sharply with *Halka*'s inner pain, highlighting her tragic situation.

c: Deepening dramatic conflict: The contrast between the Polonaise rhythm and *Halka*'s tragic musical language satirizes the class contradictions in Polish society at the time. It reveals the hardships of the lower-class people and criticizes the arrogance of the upper class.

3.3 The Application of Krakow in *Halka*

The Krakowiak rhythm is lively and rich in variations. Moniuszko skillfully employs the Krakowiak rhythm to portray character traits and enhance dramatic emotions, highlighting the unique characteristics of Polish national culture.

(1) Village dance scene

The most evident application of the Krakowiak rhythm appears in the villagers' celebration scene in Act IV. This scene fully displays the folk customs as well as the enthusiasm and vitality of the rural people.

The lively 2/4 time dance rhythm of the Krakowiak, with its syncopated accents, infuses the scene with a sense of dynamism. The use of syncopated rhythms in the accompaniment enhances the dance's rhythmic drive. The cheerful melodies create an atmosphere of villagers singing and dancing in celebration. The short, forceful musical lines, combined with rapid spinning and stepping movements, embody the traditional characteristics of the Krakowiak.

(2) Description of *Halka*'s emotions

When the villagers dance the Krakowiak, *Halka* stands aside, lonely and reminiscing about her life. Her musical theme, based on the Mazurka rhythm, is mournful and lyrical, forming a stark contrast with the lively Krakowiak. This contrast underscores her psychological state and highlights her tragic fate.

(3) Dramatic function

a: It symbolizes the simplicity and optimism of the peasants, contrasting with the solemnity and complexity of the aristocratic class.

b: It further highlights the loneliness and tragic nature of the heroine *Halka*, clarifying the opera's theme and allowing the audience to more profoundly feel her despair and inner pain.

c: It emphasizes Polish national cultural elements, highlighting the Polish folk colors and making the opera a truly national work.

4. The Ethnicity of Polish Dance in *Halka*

(1) Mazurka: The embodiment of rural culture and ethnic emotions

The Mazurka is one of the most representative Polish folk dances, depicting the rural life of Poland and portraying scenes of the peasant class, which imbues the opera with a rich rural flavor. At the same time, it expresses *Halka*'s inner world: her musical themes, characterized by the Mazurka rhythm, are imbued with strong national emotional hues, symbolizing the image of the ordinary Polish people and enhancing the sense of Polish national identity.

(2) Polonaise: The Polonaise is emblematic of the aristocratic image and a symbol of national pride

The Polonaise is one of the most representative Polish aristocratic dances, and an important part of court ceremonies and formal celebrations, symbolizing the dignity and power of the nobility and reflecting Poland's history. In the opera, the Polonaise reinforces Polish cultural history and evokes a sense of national belonging among the audience.

(3) Krakowiak: The symbol of Polish national freedom spirit and national vitality

The Krakowiak is famous for its brisk tempo and vigorous energy, commonly performed at festivals and social

gatherings. It reflects the joy and solidarity of the Polish common people, forming a striking contrast to the aloofness and detachment of the aristocracy. This juxtaposition vividly illustrates the cultural differences between social classes in Polish society and symbolizes the Polish national spirit of resistance.

5. Research Significance

5.1 Methods to Enhance Dramatic Tension and Character Emotions

In the opera *Halka*, the alternation of different dance rhythm patterns and tempo variations not only enriches the expressive means of musical language, but also helps to create a dramatic atmosphere. Moreover, it highlights the characters' traits and reveals the deeper meanings of the plot, such as class issues and wealth disparities. This enhances the dramatic infectivity and the tension produced by musical changes, allowing the audience to empathize with the characters while enjoying the opera, and to experience the charm of music and drama. This is also a technique in musical composition.

5.2 Promote Polish Dance

Moniuszko's use of dance rhythm patterns in the creation of national music imbues *Halka* with a rich Polish national musical character. This not only highlights the regional characteristics of the music but also enhances the opera's national recognizability. His approach has inspired other composers to explore dance rhythms in their compositions, such as Fryderyk Chopin's piano pieces, the Mazurkas, which draw on Polish dance rhythms and folk traditions.

5.3 Strengthen the Identity of the Polish People

In 19th-century Poland, Moniuszko's music played a significant role in shaping national cultural identity. The extensive use of dance rhythms in *Halka* has made it a symbol of Polish national culture. This musical language not only strengthened the Polish people's identification with their homeland but also established a unique position for Polish music on the European operatic stage.

5.4 Promote the Development of Polish Ethnic Music

Stanisław Moniuszko is considered the founder of Polish national opera. His masterpiece *Halka* fully demonstrates the characteristics of Polish national music, not only shaping the national musical style and deepening dramatic emotions, but also strengthening Polish cultural identity and enhancing the artistic appeal of the work. This opera has promoted the spread of Polish musical traditions in Europe.

6. Conclusion

Stanisław Moniuszko skillfully employed traditional Polish dance rhythms in his opera *Halka*, endowing the work with a distinct national character. These dance rhythms not only enriched the portrayal of the characters and heightened dramatic tension but also addressed issues of social class, thereby strengthening the Polish people's sense of cultural identity and national spirit.

In the opera *Halka*, the Mazurka deeply portrays *Halka's* emotions. Its distinctive syncopated rhythms and melodically rich, folk-inflected tunes add a dramatic dimension to *Halka's* tragic fate.

The Polonaise is primarily used to depict the cultural life of the Polish nobility in the opera, highlighting class differences and reflecting the social injustices in Polish society.

The Krakowiak, with its brisk tempo, vividly displays the vitality and free-spirited nature of the Polish peasants. Particularly in the village celebration scenes, it adds to the lively and vibrant atmosphere, symbolizing the resilience and indomitable spirit of the Polish people.

Overall, Stanisław Moniuszko's integration of traditional Polish dance rhythms in *Halka* has imbued the opera with a distinct national character. These dance rhythms not only enhance the musicality and drive the narrative forward but also shape the national image of Poland. Against the historical backdrop of Poland's partition in the 19th century, *Halka* evoked a strong sense of national pride among its audience. Moniuszko's opera, with its powerful sense of national identity, became deeply cherished by the Polish people and emerged as an important symbol of the Polish national spirit, which also laid a solid foundation for the development of Polish national opera.

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