

## Reflection

# Z-STEAM activities at 13<sup>th</sup> Socratic Lectures Symposium, Concert at City Hall and Opera Coronation of Poppaea

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## Abstract:

We report on the recent development within the Z-STEAM activities: the concert accompanying the 13.th Socratic Lectures symposium at the Trio Lorenz hall, palace Kazina on June 8, 2025, a concert at the City hall on May 9, 2025 and Opera Coronation of Poppaea at the Ljubljana Opera House on July 4 and 5, 2025. Two compositions were presented that were composed particularly for the 13<sup>th</sup> Socratic Lectures symposium, "Dedication to Science and the Arts", composed by the scientist Yelena Istileulova and "E = mc<sup>2</sup>" by the musician Lara Oprešnik. Integration of science and music was demonstrated at its best practice. Z-STEAM activities are focusing on defining the added value of integration of science and art and on the respective improvements of curricula.

**Keywords:** STEAM; Science and music; Education innovations

## 1. Z-STEAM activities

STEM Education is an approach to learning that uses Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics as access points for guiding student inquiry, dialogue, and critical thinking (Kralj-Iglič and Istileulova, 2025). STEAM integrates the Arts (music, poetry, visual arts, science (research and innovation) and culture (language, ideas, and beliefs) into the educational process with the aim to prepare workforce and literate citizens for a highly technology-based society (ESEP, 2025). It is stated in the European School Education Platform (ESEP, 2025) that understanding science, mathematics and technological and engineering practices, has become a global key priority for national education programmes (Kelley and Knowles, 2016). The United States' Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) enlist engineering design and practices into science education (NGSS Lead States, 2013). Germany created a national STEM forum to promote STEM education at all education levels, formal and informal (Nationales MINT (STEM) Forum, 2014). These activities are introduced with the aim to fulfill the contemporary needs that require strengthening the workforce in STEM areas to address global issues (Kelley and Knowles, 2016).

Socratic Lectures take part within the so-called Z-STEAM activities that include all possible support for effective scientific and educational performance. This includes adjustment of the curricula and examination methods, organization of Socratic Lectures symposia where students meet top scientists in the field, organization of cultural events, publishing activities and integration of art and science.

## 2. Z-STEAM activities at the Socratic Lectures symposia

Music was not integrated in the Socratic Lectures by planning or following some global educational trend. It happened by chance as in one of the early symposia around 2010, a chorus was practicing in a room next to the lecturing hall. Then, the symposia were centered on the undergraduate students of Medicine and the symposiums were in person, at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Ljubljana. Novelties in the examination process were already taking place. Scientists and experts generously donated their time and dedication to the students and the students were very supportive and active in discussion. They were completing the examination procedure, but the time of the symposium was already exceeded. By improvisation, the chorus Vox medicorum agreed to sing a song for the participants. After the last lecture, the chorus entered the lecturing hall and performed the song *Ko boš prišla na Bled*. It was a joyous song perfectly fitted for the occasion, to lift up the spirit of the exhausted participants. Moreover, to the pleasure of the participants, it was announced that after listening to the music, all the students were merited the highest grade at the subject Biomechanics of the hip, for their dedication and support to the lecturers. This great experience indicated the necessity to include music in the symposia also in the future and indeed, music has been a part of all events since. It survived also during the COVID isolation period, moving online - together with the scientific part.

# Concert at 13th Socratic Lectures

## 8.6.2025 at 18.00, Trio Lorenz Hall, Academy of Music, University of Ljubljana, Palace Kazina

### Program:

Aleona von Sultanova/Aleona von Sultanova: Hymn to science and the arts (first public presentation), piano and voice: Aleona von Sultanova

Claude Debussy: Reverie, piano: Lara Oprešnik

Marjan Kozina (transcribed by Jaka Pucihar): Mojca's song, piano: Marina Žigon

Emil Adamič/Oton Župančič: Da sem jaz ptičica, chorus Studenec Pivka

Gaetano Donizetti/Anon: Me voglio fa 'na casa, bariton: Neven Stipanov, piano: Elena Startseva Somun

Yevgeniy Krylatov/Yuri Entin: Prekrasnoye Daleoko, voice: Arina Gusevskaya, piano: Aleona von Sultanova

Popular, transcribed by Walter Lo Nigro: Dekle je pralo srajčke dvej, chorus Studenec Pivka

Jaka Pucihar: Vrtljak, piano: Doroteja Poljanec

Popular, transcribed by Jaka Pucihar: La fiesta, piano: Doroteja Poljanec

Francesco Paolo Tosti/Giovanni Alfredo Cesareo: La Serenata, bariton: Neven Stipanov, piano: Elena Startseva Somun

Break

Lara Oprešnik: E = m c<sup>2</sup> (first public presentation), piano: Lara Oprešnik

Johann Sebastian Bach: Erbarme Dich mein Gott from Matthaus Passion, Soprano: Marina Igritskaya, flute: Veronika Kralj-Iglič, piano Aleona von Sultanova

Johann Sebastian Bach: Invention 4 in D minor BWV 775, piano: Matic Bogataj

Popular, transcribed by Hilarij Lavrenčič: Oblaki so rudeči, chorus Studenec Pivka

Gioachino Rossini: La Danza-Tarantella, bariton: Neven Stipanov, piano: Elena Startseva Somun

Heinrich Germer, Etude No 2 in D major, piano: Matic Bogataj

Aleona von Sultanova/Alfred Nobel: You say I am a riddle, piano and voice: Aleona von Sultanova

Vincenzo Bellini/Felice Romani: Vaga Luna, voice: Anna Romolo, piano: Elena Startseva Somun

Break

### Gifts

Edward Elgar: Salut d'amour Op. 12, violin: Branko Brezavšček, piano: Elena Startseva Somun

Davorin Zupanič Turković: Cantique de Baruch Spinoza from Mass in e-minor, piano: Lara Oprešnik and Aleona von Sultanova, voice: Veronika Kralj-Iglič

Camille Saint-Saens: Pianistes from Carneval des animaux, piano: Lara Oprešnik and Veronika Kralj-Iglič



Figure 1. Program of the concert accompanying 13<sup>th</sup> Socratic Lectures Symposium 8.6.2025.

### 3. Internationalization and globalization of the Z-STEAM activities

Furthermore, the musical part was organized also within separate events that took place at the Castle Fužine, Museum of Architecture and Design, and continued in Naples, Italy, at the Palace Venezia, Ars Domus, Academy Enrico Caruso, and Vilino Mannina, and ultimately at the Palace Kazina, Academy of Music, University of Ljubljana.

Anita Prelovšek contributed substantially to the Socratic Lectures from the very beginning, by means of organizing and chairing sections, presenting lectures, writing papers, inviting guests, and performing music. Holding a PhD in Musicology, as well as being an excellent flutist by profession, she embodies all the qualities of the integration of science and art. Moreover, she established a link with the Russian Center of Science and Culture in Ljubljana where many excellent musicians originally from Russia were gathering at the concerts and other cultural events. Unfortunately, devastating war caused the centre to close; however, creation and friendship within the Socratic Lectures participants continues, involving those originally from Russia and Ukraine, as well as from other countries formerly included in the Soviet Union.

Yelena Istileulova is originally from Kazakhstan, she holds a PhD in Economical Sciences, but also a degree in classical music. Furthermore, as STEAM activities are in her scientific interest, she introduced them into the Socratic Lectures. Her idea is to write music on the stories on famous scientists and on the texts of these scientists. She performed and published songs featuring Baron Valvazor, Francis Bacon, Alfred Nobel, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Mikhail Vasiljevič Lomonosov and James Clerk Maxwell. For the first time she interpreted her own compositions on the concert accompanying 2<sup>nd</sup> Socratic Lectures in 2019. She supported Socratic Lectures also by organizing and chairing sessions, writing papers and editing the proceedings. Importantly, due to her personal invitations to the colleagues all over the world, she contributed significantly to the internationalization of the symposium, bringing to the symposium universities (including groups of students) from Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Georgia, as well as the lecturers from South America and Indonesia, thus up-grading the event to the global level. She established a link with the institutions such as EASE (EuropeAn network of steam Educators). Also, she participated at two concerts in Naples in 2024.

### 4. Creation of new music within the Z-STEAM activities

For the 13th Socratic Lectures symposium Yelena Istileulova composed a new song originally entitled: Hymn to Science and the Arts, and later – renamed to the Dedication to Science and the Arts (for voice and piano). She performed it herself as an opening composition of the concert. The text is written in English and in Latin, and considers science, arts, music and Socratic questions. The presentation included also the video created by Yelena Istileulova.

The composition  $E=mc^2$  by Lara Oprešnik was written for solo piano, inspired by the notorious equation, and interpreted into a musical, symbolic, and philosophical language. Using letters for the theme was previously done by Johann Sebastian Bach, directly or transposed, as his name is composed of the letters that have a meaning in music (Stegall, 1965). Such approach was used also by others, and the idea of introducing scientific contents was previously implemented by taking the letters of the genetic code (FEBS Communications, 2021). In the composition  $E = mc^2$ , symbols E (for energy), twice the C (for the speed of light), and E flat – mi (for mass), were used. From the initial sound of atoms, "nothingness," where the sound material only hints at the beginnings of energy, the composition gradually takes shape, gaining form, mass, and power. The various motives depict diverse forms of life. It develops into tonality, rhythm, harmonic, melodic, and dynamic clarity, while the strength of inner expression continuously shapes and builds until it reaches the peak of potential—the audio embodiment of the transformation of energy into matter. The ending signifies the disintegration of this matter, a return to the ineffable where the original theme appears as a reminiscence—changed through the experience of one's own process (in philosophy—through the experience of one's own life). The work thus is not only a study of a physical principle but also a contemplation on the cycle of life: on creation, existence, and transformation that transcend the physical (FE, 2025). The composition was performed by the author on the piano.

The third piece composed by integration of science and music was *Cantique de Baruch Spinoza*, by the author of this contribution. *Cantique* is a part of the Mass in E minor, which was written and performed publicly for the first time in 2017 at the Church of Assumption, Tromostovje, Ljubljana, and again at the 12th Socratic Lectures concert in January 2025. Originally, the mass was written for organ, orchestra, chorus and soloists, however, the partiture had to be adjusted for the musicians that were available at the event. As in January 2025 the concert was held at the Julij Betetto hall, the partiture was adjusted for organ, piano, flute, timpani and voice, while in June, the concert was held at the smaller Trio Lorenz hall and the partiture was adjusted for 2 pianos and voice. The text of the *Cantique* expresses the contents of the axiomatic presentation of Spinoza's philosophical model. It is written in Latin language: »Quid quod est in Deus est et nihil sine Deus esse. Deus est in omnium rerum causa imanens. Deus sive omnia. Dei aatributa sunt eterna.« Spinoza's Ethics (Spinoza, 2004) expresses deep connection between science and religion. It is hard to understand why he was considered an apostate to the faith. Also it is hard to understand from where came the idea that science and religion are in contradiction. Considerable effort is needed to put on stage a new work written for an ensemble. The first performance in 2017 included organ (Dušan Ješelnik), two flutes (Anita Prelovšek and Veronika Kralj-Iglič), timpani (Špela Cvikl), soprano (Metka Penko Natlačen), tenor (Marjan Jarnjak) and a 4 voice chorus (Zimzelen). At the first glance the rhythm seems demanding and at the rehearsal, the musicians protested and required a conductor to help decrease the chaos. The success was partial and can be heard on the recording (Kralj-Iglič, 2025). The second performance at the Betetto hall included organ, timpani, flute and voice, and piano was

added, to take advantage of the availability of both, the organ and piano. However, the ensemble had only 15 minutes for rehearsal before the performance, which was not enough even to decide on registration of the organ. Therefore, the piece was performed again in June by an even smaller group (this time two pianos and voice). Timpani are crucial for this piece, however, the Trio Lorenz hall is rather small and the organ counterpart was missing, so it was decided to perform without timpani. It can be concluded from these experiences that practice and performance are necessary elements in obtaining feedback and improving the partiture in order to optimize the quality of the music performed. Furthermore, one can understand why there are multiple historical versions of scores that show significant differences between them, as the scores have to be adjusted to the cast and limitations (Kralj-Iglič and Prelovšek, 2025).

### 5. Slovenian vocal music

We outline the contribution of Elena Startseva Somun who performed in different ensembles as a pianist and also as a singer in the chorus Studenec Pivka (Irena Rep, Mateja Zadel, Elena Startseva Somun, Rafael Zorko, Renato Adam). The chorus presented Slovenian vocal music at its best.

### 7. Excellence in music

Notable were performances of professional musicians at the 13th Socratic Lectures symposium: Marina Igritskaya (soprano) accompanied by Yelena Istileulova, Neven Stipanov (bariton), and Branko Brezavšček (both accompanied by Elena Startseva Somun) and Lara Oprešnik (piano) (Figure 2). The performances were excellent, to the pleasure of the public.



**Figure 2.** Performances of excellent musicians were a true gift to the public. From the left: Lara Oprešnik, Elena Startseva Somun, Neven Stipanov, Marina Igritskaya in Yelena Istileulova at the rehearsal for the concert accompanying 13th Socratic lectures symposium 8.6.2025. Photo: Drago Videmšek.

### 6. Young musicians

Young musicians from Musical school in Idrija, (Marina Žigon, Doroteja Poljanec, Matic Bogataj) performed on the piano. Arina Gusevskaya sang accompanied by Yelena Istileulova, Lan Stražišar Lamovšek played piano together with Alenka Stražišar Lamovšek, and Nuša Levec (who is supporting Socratic Lectures for many years) sang. Creations of young participants (Figure 3) are highly warranted.



Figure 3. Children played beautifully at the concert. From the left: Marina Žigon, Matic Bogataj, Arina Gusevskaya and Doroteja Poljanec at the rehearsal for the concert accompanying 13th Socratic lectures symposium 8.6.2025. Photo: Drago Videmšek.

At May 9, 2025 a concert within the Z-STEAM activities took place at the Red hall of the City hall, Ljubljana featuring Anita Prelovšek (flute), Branko Brezavšček (violin), Elena Startseva Somun (piano) and the author of this contribution as a guest. The program of the concert included Trio-sonata in B minor for flute, violin and piano by Georg Friedrich Handel, Old style suite for violin and piano by Alfred Schnittke, Sonatine for flute and piano by James Rae, Meditation from Souvenir d'un lieu cher op. 42 for violin, piano, Five small duettes op. 46 for flute, violin and piano, and Prelude in A-minor for piano by Davorin Zupanič Turković (first public presentation).



Figure 4. Concert at the City hall 9.5.2025; from the left: Elena Startseva Somun, Branko Brezavšček, Anita Prelovšek and Veronika Kralj-Iglič. Photo: Nevenka Gajšek.

### 8. Coronation of Poppea at Slovene National Theatre Opera and Ballet

Within the interdisciplinary preparative project Nanostructurome led by the Faculty of Health Sciences, collaboration between science and music was officially established involving 9 partner faculties and Academy of Music of the University of Ljubljana. Within this collaboration, Academy of Music has put on stage at the Ljubljana Opera House the work composed by Claudio Monteverdi on the text of Francesco Busenello: Coronation of Poppea. The premiere was on July 4, 2025 and the next day there was another performance. Representatives of the faculties involved at the project attended the performances. Music director and conductor was Egon Mihajlović, stage director Eva Hribenik, set designer Jaro Ješe, costume designer Andrea Quadri, lighting designer Andrej Hajdinjak, stage manager Višnja Fičor, make up artist Marijanka Sešek, hair stylist Tjaša Pugelj, women's hair stylist Meta Podkrajšek, language consultant Lucia Rizzello, assistant conductor and repetiteur Branimir Rezić, production assistant Vedran Kirin, assistant costume designer Neža Plestenjak, producers were Simon Dvoršak, Theresa Plut, Polona Kante, Katja Bogovič, Rebeka Dobravec, Maryna Dolibets, Lara Malenić and Črt Vodopivec. Technical team of the Opera and Ballet Ljubljana was led by Mislav Kuzmanić. Mentors of vocal soloists: Egon Mihajlović, Branimir Rezić, Pia Brodnik, Barbara Jernejčič Furst, Theresa Plut, Nuška Drašček and Matjaž Robavs.



**Figure 5.** Cast and a part of the orchestra of the Coronation of Poppea at Slovene National Theatre Opera and Ballet, July 5, 2025. Photo: Veronika Kralj-Iglič.

Baroque Orchestra of the Academy of Music consisted of Monika Toth, Vasilij Meljnikov, Hanna Kryvtsova, Marija Terezija Kolman, Zala Eva Kocjančič and Neža Feguš (violin), Tina Trivunović (viola), Kaja Kapus, Urša Roš (baroque cello), Stevan Jovanović (double bass), Domen Gvozdebovič, Eva Pišek (theorbo, baroque guitar), Branimir Rezić and Egon Mihajlović (harpsichord, portative organ).

Cast: Poppaea: Katarina Zorec/Talita Sofija Komelj, Neron: Ireneja Nejka Čuk, Octavia: Alessandra Tessaro, Ottone: Velten Schroeter, Drusilla: Isabel Gale, Seneca: Blaž Stajnko, Arnalta: Janja Teržan, Octavia's nurse: Eva Lavriha, Amor: Brina Vučković, Venus: Ronja Praprotnik, Virtue: Eva Kokot, Mercury: Aljaž Kolenko, young girl: Nives Hadžić, Lucan/first soldier/consult: Oleksandr Nastasiichuk, Freed man/second soldier/first student of Seneca: Fabijan Trbara, third student of Seneca/lictor/tribune: Bor Brenkuš Porenta.

The score features 28 singing characters and the production can use role-multiplying; the original Venetian production reported 11 singers: two female sopranos, three male sopranos (castratos), two contraltos (castratos), two tenors and two basses (Kralj-Iglič and Prelovšek, 2025). The production in 2025 reports 17 singers, 11 female (with Poppaea in alternation) and 6 male, however, 7 male singers can be seen in **Figure 4**.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, it was a hot day; the reported temperature in Ljubljana was about 33 degrees. Elena Startseva Somun and myself were seated at the 2<sup>nd</sup> balcony (former standing area). Hot air is traveling up and it was gathering at the top. The sight on the stage from there is only partial and one cannot see the details for being high up, so the music is more exposed, in particular as the acoustics at this place is very good.

In preparation for the premiere, I was listening to different interpretations of the Coronation of Poppaea, and with time have accepted the peculiarities of the male soprano. The pitch of the Nero's part (being written for the castrato) surprised me when I heard the opera for the first time. Today, technique allows men to sing the castrato parts, however, in this case, the color of the voice indicated that Nero was interpreted by a woman. On 5<sup>th</sup> of July, the temperatures went down to enable sharper listening, and my seat was in the first row of the parterre, in front of violins. I wished to see the performers closely. The orchestra shell was lifted so one could follow playing the instruments too. I noticed baroque instruments on the other side, and was sorry that I could not be closer to them.

Already the opening accords at the premiere announced energetic interpretation of the timeless music composed by Monteverdi. I sensed the essential frame interpreted by Egon Mihajlović at the harpsicord embedding the idea of the *spiritus movens* of the production. As described below, all the elements of the opera matched the excellence of the music written. Both days the music (the composition, singing and playing) was supreme. It was a pleasure to be immersed in the musical substance during the performances and also between them, listening in the memory the motifs so clearly and plastically presented. In particular, the bars of the arias such as *Pur ti miro, pur ti godo*; *Non morir, Seneca, non morir, Seneca*; *Oni mal, oni mal diventa gioia*, etc. It was a perfect combination: first to acknowledge the work as a whole feeling mostly the energy and the musical substance as a whole, then listen in mind to the echoes for one day, and finally consume the music again,

but closely and with more details (individual singing, acting, moving, playing, and the elements of directing and scenography). The stage directing complemented music in a sense that it outlined beauty and elegance. Rude and vulgar gestures were absent as well as annoying noises or screams. There was only one sound sticking out – i.e. Ottone throwing away a (fake) weapon, the object hitting the ground and producing a hollow noise. Light was focused on the singers. It enabled effortless following of the happening on stage. Some modern productions shock the audience with featuring blood and violence of murders taking place behind the libretto. Here everything was done classically: the person to be removed (even Seneca) was taken away in full standing, by moving the stage. By adjusting the story to the point to which the data were followed, the audience was left to believe that all but Seneca were alive. The acting upgraded the music considerably. While Poppaea's aspirations were fulfilled due to Nero's love for her, Octavia turned out desperate and vicious – conspiring the murder of Poppaea out of jealousy - and failing it. Ottone's miseries (being pressured to murder Poppaea in frustration between love, and offense for betrayal) were evident and the voice of Velten Schroeter was optimally suited for the role. Prologue outlines the ethical issues of Poppaea's rise to the throne. In contradiction, here they were not challenged but justified with the arguments of all three: Fortune, Virtu and Love. The costumes were made to original images (**Figure 4**), revival of shoes was lovely, sandals appeared more like jewels to complete the looks. The fashion of old Roman aristocrats allowed men to expose feet and legs which could, in particular in youth, add to the beauty and elegance of the ambient. Attention has been paid to the hairdo and accessories. From close, I could resolve widened shoulders and facial mask of Nero exhibiting a beard, but I could not overcome the fact that Nero was a woman disguised in a man, which was even more apparent from close by. Scenography was minimalistic and seemed more Shakespearean than Venetian. It is a question whether such scene was actually exposing the cast and the music even more than a hypothetical opulent one. The floor was bare, as used in rehearsals, exhibiting lining on the black-painted wood which made a particular impression, as there is a lot of content in those lines. All the cast and orchestra were excellent, in technique and in interpretation. Singing and playing was mutually supportive which contributed to the unification of music. The two nights devoted to Monteverdi/Busenello Coronation of Poppaea will be remembered as one of the best productions I have witnessed at the Ljubljana Opera House since I first set my foot in it more than 50 years ago.

## 9. STEAM and STREAM

Since the spontaneous onset of the STEAM approach, generous support of all who have donated to the Socratic Lectures, have led to focusing the activities to the benefit of students. An important element is involvement of the students in scientific production – i.e. publication of scientific results. Students are being actively involved in writing (STREAM) and publishing in the Proceedings of Socratic Lectures. While publication in scientific journals and participation in scientific meetings by default requires funding to cover the costs of editing, reviewing, formatting and publishing in open access mode, the Socratic Lectures since 2019 provided these services free of charge. The largest share

in these activities is merited to Anna Romolo who has designed, edited and formatted all 13 volumes of the proceedings. She is a custos of the Gallery Marguerite de Saint Champs featuring visual art between the scientific papers, yet another dimension of the collaboration between science and arts, which will be considered in more detail elsewhere.

## 10. Conclusions

While STEAM principles have been already widely implemented in the education up to high school level, their introduction into university teaching has been only recently gaining an increasing interest. Our integration of science and arts has hitherto led to involvement of undergraduate students in scientific and artistic activities. Also it includes composing of music inspired by science and pursuing excellence in science and music in joint projects. We envisage these achievements as an incipient stage of the process, and are looking forward to their development in the future.

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