

THE ITALIAN OPERA CREATION IN THE 19TH CENTURY, MEANS OF CULTURAL EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

We intend a short historical and stylistic insight in the Italian art in general, emphasizing some significant aspects of the opera creation: the theme, the structure of the opera in comparison to some previous and contemporary styles, general aspects of vocality and the voice-orchestra coordination. Approaching vocality from a technical and expressive-interpretative perspective, due to the roles of the characters, actions or music represents a sensitive, direct and emotional way of communicating and nurturing.

Keywords: *Italian opera, interpretative style, libretto, character.*

1. The 17th century and the delineation of the genre in the Italian musical culture have aimed at some fundamental problems:

- Adopting (and adapting) the metric system used in the literary theatre (especially in the pastoral fables of Tasso and Guarini), which has become the basic metric pattern of the librettos belonging to the Italian opera of the 20th century;

- Tracing the main ways of metric achievement, of the recitatives and of arias (*versisciolti* for recitatives and strophic structures in different combinations for arias and of the closed forms;

- Outlining some subject inspiration themes. Between 1600 and 1640, operas were mainly focused on the classical mythology, especially on *Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Starting with the year 1640, the inspiration zone became more different due to heroic subjects, which mainly focused on the Trojan war;

- Crystalizing a general structure of the *drama per musica* genre in three acts (Giovanni Faustini, Nicolo Minato, Matteo Noris, Jacopo Torelli, Giacinto Andrea Cicognini, Claudio Monteverdi); at the same time, the *arietta* type solo interventions gain a clear and formal outline, and they are made of two stanzas with *da capo*

repetition of the initial one, in which variation elements were introduced by the singer;

- From a dramaturgical and scenic viewpoint, the Italian opera was, in the last three decades of the 17th century under the influence of the Spanish comedy of Calderón and his contemporaries (especially in Milano and Naples, as well as in the noble theatres from Rome which had commercial and cultural connections with Spain), and in the last ten years it was influenced by *the French tragedy* of Corneille și Racine. Librettists have gradually abandoned the concept of distinct scenes, adopting the rationalist constructivist principle of the connections between the scenes (*liaison des scènes*): the junction between the different action moments was marked by an aria in which the character opens a new chapter of the plot before withdrawing in the backstage.

2. In the 18th century, the founding of the Arcadian Academy of Rome (1690) offered the Italian intellectual world the first collective program regarding the stylistic and ideological renewals which appeared in all the fields of arts. *Opera in musica* felt the influence of the Arcadian Academy in some significant aspects. In comparison to the classical French theatre of the time (which was preferred in the gatherings of the so-called *litterati* and on the academic scenes) and to the tragic Italian theatre of the 16th century, the *dramma per musica* genre seemed poor in versification, with an odd, exaggerated and monotonous dramatic texture related to priority of the love side on all the problems of the subject and the improper mixture between the serious and the witty characters. The 18th century's goal is to establish, within the opera, a sense of rational and an unitary artistic plan, belonging to the

unique vision of the playwright or poet, in order to supervise all the aspects of interpretation, staging, direction, starting from the locution of feelings in the aria and ending up with anticipating the effects of alternating the main and secondary characters.

As far as drama is concerned, the influence of the Arcadian Academy's supporters was felt in the preference for subjects that dealt with the history of Rome, Greece and even Persia, whereas the medieval and barbarian one which appeared in the previous century were excluded. Also, one could notice the tendency to extol the antic heroes as an impersonation of the supreme moral virtues, subjected to the harsh tests of destiny and politics, where they emerged from as winners. Due to limiting the buffa characters to just some secondary moments (in intermezzi), the dramaturgical deployment is centred on one vein. The main roles are held by two or three sopranos, one contralto, either a woman or aemasculate or sometimes a tenor (as in *Bajazet* de Francesco Gasparini -1719-, one of Händel's sources in *Tamerlano*), together with two or three secondary voices. The comic element becomes a stylistic diversification means, occasionally placed within in the plot or within the personality of one of the characters (Constantinescu & Boga, 2007).

From a stylistic perspective, the Arcadian movement pleaded for a formal structure of the poetry, for the accuracy and elegance of the music language. Aria da capo, which lasted up to the 1970s, enlarging its dimensions and later concentrating on the replay section, represented the element of formal order, offering a balanced pattern to the tumultuous emotional deployments.

While Apostolo Zeno and Silvio Stampiglia usually use stanzas that amplify the pathos, Pietro Metastasio favours the constant metre, preferring the septet type versification, the most flexible lyrical form and suitable for the new musical style promoted, starting with 1720, by Antonio Vivaldi, Giuseppe Maria Orlandini and Giovanni Porta in the north of Italy and by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi and Johann Adolph Hasse in the south. The main features of this style were the reducing of the counterpoint progression of voice and continuous bass, with or without instrumental accompaniment (solo or

ripieno) and a clear assessment of the melodic role between the vocal line (open, capable of swinging between laughter and cry within the temporal space of a measure) and the orchestral accompaniment, consisting mainly of dashed harmonic successions, often diversified in repeated sound quavers.

The same stylistic evolution appears in *commedia per musica* from Naples, which treats the elements of the opera in a similar manner to those of the *dramma per musica*: an ample succession of aria de capos in different structures, with very few ensemble moments. In 1750, *dramma giocoso per musica* belonging to Carlo Goldoni and Baldassare Galuppi record two major achievements towards the musical representation of the dramatic aid, which will later represent the core of the *opera buffa*, whose plot is focused on family problems and financial interests which stand in the way of the love between two youngsters (who always have a duet in the climax of the third act, close to the happy ending). The first evolutionary aspect refers to the formal-structural diversification of the aria – if the arias and the duets of sober characters (usually noblemen) preserve their capo form, the ones played by comic characters or those belonging to the lower class gain bi-strophic or tri-strophic structures, emphasizing the successive stages of some reasoning, often ludicrous or caricatured (for example, in a direct approach to a character who remained without reply). (New Grove Dictionary of Opera, 2004)

The second fundamental aspect in creating the premises for the *opera buffa* is related to the drama side. Therefore, collations, wrangles and the scheming of the comic characters lead to, in the end of the first two acts, to a moment of ample vocal enssamble, asymmetrical at a structural level, made up from different sections in a metric design, agogic, tonal and expressive. The rigid separation, initially hierarchical and formal, between the two or three sober roles and the four or five comic ones has gradually become less delimited due to the use of some "juicy topics", appealing to values that are not related to social class, to the natural kindness of the human feeling and to those referring to the purity threatened by the false desire of the strong and by the cynic schemes of evil.

3. At the beginning of the 19th century, the revolution years and those of the Napoleonic domination have not succeeded in fully disturbing the activity of the Italian opera life. Although the political transformations themselves have brought changes at the level of the ruling class, some of them have spread to the conception of the public theatre, actually the rich Italians maintained their taste for luxury entertainment. After a long period of peace, the war and the political unrest have determined an unsettlement of the human feelings, clearly shown among those hit by the unfavourable fortune and the malicious actions of the usurpers. The dramatic form expressing these changes of the human feelings in a complete manner was the comic opera having semiserio as a subject. It depicts the tragedy in a modern way, accessible, instead of the heroic involvement, far from the concrete reality.

The same period sees an emphasis on the influence exerted by the French dramaturgy over the decisions of the librettists, a sense of domination, supported by the understanding of the French world among the Italian literary men, which was prevailing till the end of the century (not only *Otello* by Rossini, but also Giuseppe Verdi's and Arigo Boito's homonymous works originating from Jean-François Ducis' classic translation and the romanticist one of François-Victor Hugo, Victor Hugo's son). At the same time, the impact of the French dramaturgy has determined, on one hand, the awareness of the need for dramatic subjects determined by the enlargement of the creative activity in the field of opera, and, on the other hand, the reversal of the roles regarding the composer and the librettist. From that moment onwards, the real dramatist- the person to choose the subject and to assume the dramatic perspective from an existing dramatic source, adapting it to the context of the Italian opera- will be increasingly represented by the composer. The librettist will have a secondary role, becoming just the linking instrument between the literary work and the full body of a musical drama (Herman, 1982).

As it happened in France, the first years after the revolutionary period were emphasised by a large interest for the first controversial literary manifest of the Romanticism, the essay of the

writer so-called Madame de Staël (Anne Louise Germaine de Staël-Holstein (1766-1817), *De l'esprit des traductions*, which exposes the benefits the Italian culture could take from translating the German and English poetry, particularly Schiller and Shakespeare's plays, instead of the circular rummage of the Antiquity's relics. At that time, Italy saw debates concerning the romantic poetry which met the musical world only partially, but the essential topic of the aesthetic legitimacy of the musical drama has reached only a vital cord regarding the thematic selections in the field of opera. The conflict between the Classics and the Romanticists took a big turn in the 1830s, as a reflexion of the controversy originating from Victor Hugo's *Cromwell* and *Hernani* being performed in Paris. This time, opera was directly in the centre with the strong disputes for and against *Norma* (1831) by Bellini, and indirectly in Giuseppe Mazzini's essay *Filosofia della musica* (1836) which promoted the necessity of spiritualizing the Italian opera and the need for an historical element, authentic color and a *mise en scene* according to the characteristics of the opera.

All these goals of the new Italian operas could be achieved exclusively through stage elements without affecting the construction of the primordial element of language, the melody. Thus, although the literary sources of the masterpieces of the genre of the time are diverse in terms of geographic and cultural space, the sound discourse keeps the impress specific to the Italian Cantilena: *Amor conjugale* by Simon Mayr (1805 after opera comic *Léonore de Bouilly*) *La sonnambula* by Vincenzo Bellini (1831, after a ballet-pantomime by Eugène Scribe) *Semiramida* by Rossini (1823, after Voltaire), *Lucia de Lammermoor* by Gaetano Donizetti (1835 after the dramatization of the French short-story by Walter Scott), *Ernani* by Verdi (1844 after Victor Hugo). Also in the first half of the nineteenth century, the composers and the librettists take over from the contemporary French drama the use of so-called *coups de théâtre* - sensational and dangerous events that trigger conflicting reactions that slow down, rush or redirect the course of action. This technique was in direct line with the romantic vision of the theatrical effect, with which the Italian drama will get familiar

with the translation in 1817 of Schlegel's work, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*. This *coups de théâtre* is integrated into the musical form, giving rise to moments of rich melodic voice. The formal structure of the musical numbers is amplified, and eventually made more complex, the alternation of tempos is highly valued in the dynamic sections the action unfolds continuously the musical substance serving the fast succession of the dialogues and events, the orchestra plays an active role and the climactic moments are marked by changes of tonality and meter (sometimes introducing stops of the sound flow). In the static sections the course of action is interrupted the "real" time is suspended, with the emphasis on dialogue, gesture, stage movement, the solo execution accompanied by orchestra support (the metric becomes regular and the harmonic context centers around a tone clearly, stated).

The basic structure of the Italian melodrama in the first 70 years of the nineteenth century contained an orchestra prelude in *adagio*, an introductory choir in single tempo, the tenor cavatina (character entrance aria), soprano cavatina, a duet soprano-baritone becoming trio by adding the tenor, the bass cavatina at the beginning of the final scene and the end itself. The connecting element of the whole is given by scenes with free versification, achieved in recitative manner with orchestra accompaniment or its sporadic interventions (the *secco* recitative accompanied by the cello and basso continuously with or without harpsicord disappeared around 1820). Not rigid in itself, this system of conventional structures, equally valid in *opera seria* and *opera buffa* dominated the audience expectations as well as the needs of achieving the suspense in the dramatic act. In principle, any section belonging to the mentioned pattern could be omitted without impeding the musical-dramatic relationships. For example, in *Il trovatore*, an opera formally considered conventional, half the component numbers do not conform to the pattern and the end of the work *Maria Stuarda* by Donizetti starts directly with *Largo concertato*.

An important element of diversity was constituted by the formal structure of numbers, that, after the disappearance of *da capo* aria, were

organized either in one or in two movements - slow / fast (arias, duets, tert/third etc), in the same tone or in different tones. In terms of tone, there are outlined two distinct ways of achieving the expressive dramatic contrast: the relationship of tert (large or small) upward or downward, used inside the same movement or between successive movements and the cadence on the major tonic for the numbers and movements in minor tonality (except for the terminal number of operas with tragic end, as Bellini's *Norma*).

In the nineteenth century, the variety of forms and the increasing of the number of the ensembles to the detriment of arias has led to the establishment of an agreement between composer and librettist regarding the distribution of the dramatic material, which is clear from the letters and diaries of composers of the time (Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, Rossini, Cammarano). This decisive stage in the structural organization of the genre and implicitly of the creative process took the form of an agreed plan, which bore different names, according to the preferences of each creator: *programma* (Giovanni Ferretti, Salvatore Cammarano, Giuseppe Verdi), *schizzo* (Severio Mercadante, Giuseppe Verdi), *traccia* (Severio Mercadante) *orditura* (Felice Romani, Salvatore Cammarano) *tessitura* (Cesare Sterbini) *ossatura* (Giacomo Rossi), *piano pezzi* (Vincenzo Bellini) *scheletro delle situazione drammatiche* (Nosedà) and *selva* (Donizetti, Francesco Maria Piave, Verdi) (New Grove Dictionary of Opera, 2004). There were several stages to go through before the librettist devised the versification: list of sections, taking into account the so-called "convenienze" - the preferences, specialty and the prerogatives singers - and of the dramatic situations, the creation of a scenario that should contain the important moments of dialogue and in the end the achievement of the text in prose. The music color (*tinta musicale*) represents a part of this complex process of devising the musical drama, which more than the mere application of an intelligent technical means intelligent to weld the whole (tone relations, motif changes), represents the unifying principle of a construct that includes a multitude of closed numbers, endowed with a remarkable morphological autonomy (Balea, 1969).

Izorhythmia - applied to voice line provides an original musical system of an original economy that confers a significant clarity to the melodic sentence. Rossini capitalizes the process in a personal manner, balanced by the constant respect for prosody and impeccable elegant phrasing subsequently adopted by Donizetti too, while Verdi with his tumultuous nature exploits its shrill, penetrating valences, sometimes with distortions of emphasis or distortion of tapering of the division into syllables. At the same time, Rossini designs and widely applies a structural principle distinct from the vocal phrasing/sentencing in symmetrical elements: the obsessive mechanical, reiteration of a motif, in regular groups of two or four steps, alternating between tonic and dominance functions. The procedure represents the systematic extension of a technique previously used by Haydn and Mozart in the final or transitive sections, called by Berlioz *reproduction continue d'une cadence* or *cadence de retour périodique*², which gives birth to an energetic pulse with a hypnotic character in the slow tempos (eg in Largo, the end of Act I from *L'italiana in Algeri*) and mobilizing, nervous in the fast ones (as in the end of Act I of *Tancredi*). With Rossini, the process is amplified by the dynamic participation of the orchestra, achieving almost physical sensations among the audience, which led to his appreciation as the *new Napoleon, the undefeated, musical conqueror of Europe*.³ Regarding the human voice the early nineteenth century saw a revolution in the development of its capabilities with momentous implications for the musical drama. At the onset of Rossini's career the era of castrated was completely bygone (Veluti, who had played the leading roles in *Aureliano in Palmira* by Rossini's, *Tabaldo e Isolina* by Francesco Morlacchi and *Il crociato in Egitto* by Mayerbeer was an unusual relic when he left the stage at the age of 48 in 1829). The castrated voice quality, agility, elegance and the prevalence of dramatic expression were transferred to the female counterlist, equally used in opera *seria* and *buffa*. At the same time, in the same way that counterlist at Rossini gave birth, by extension of the ambitus, the romantic soprano, the tenor will achieve robustness and baritone depth and through agility and by accessing the falsetto technique will reach amazing register heights.

The same evolution applies to bass voice by change of the ambitus of the modern baritone.

4. Conclusions

The road of music through time remains essentially tied to the destiny of mankind from the most remote epochs. It is perhaps the most natural way to communicate feelings, emotions, a way to enter the spirit world without hindrance. It is a road that keeps its secrets, as long as the music, live art by definition and subject to the passage of time, does not reach us. For Charles Darwin the problem of the apparition of music correlates with the evolution of species, Herbert Spencer assumes a relationship of the sound manifestations with accumulation of energy and other naturalists (Daines Barington, Weissmann) assumed as essential the imitation of nature noises. The German economist Karl Buechner prefers the relationship of rhythm with the human physical work and the Austrian jurist Richard Wallaschek underlines the poignancy of the rhythms coming from the magical rituals - an idea taken over by the French historiographer Jules Combarieu too. More realistic the theory of the German philosopher Karl Stumpf sees the dimensions of interpersonal communication as existing fact and Italian musicologist Fausto Torrefranca considers the cry as a result of affection. Opposing these ones the theories of Kurt Sachs moves towards the spiritual force of "the superior cultural circle", and as can be seen from the oldest civilizations it is said that in the people's lives, the music accompanies the many opportunities related to ceremonies, celebrations, entertainment, creating the ambient sound space. The aesthetic issue of opera music witnessed a continuous debate, launching polemics on to which the artists of the time took part. Backed by kings or political leaders, some polemics were the effect of policy issues. The fight in London between Handel and Bononcini was nothing else but the pretext for the rejection of Handel's dense drama which did not suit to those seeking only a hedonistic end in an opera performance. And debate between the Lullysts and Ramists in Paris was not so much a dispute regarding the defense of Lullyst simplicity and expressive melody as the opposition to the new means of expression, to which the audience was reluctant

at first. These controversies did not approach substance issues of the opera that still kept mythological themes. Rich in general human conflicts and passions the subjects were used as a pretext for an abundant music and for the display of vocal virtuosity of the singers. We may consider that the reality of this music, especially the opera, encompasses a vast thematic area, was transformed gradually into a logical process of evolution of the means of communication through art.

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