

14. NEW FORMS OF SYNCRETISM IN THE OPERAS OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY. THE INTERTWINING GENRES

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Abstract: *Given the multiple aspects of the post-Wagner opera genre, with a history so heterogeneous and fragmented as to prevent detailed coverage, it would be superficial on our part to attempt a complete presentation of 20th century opera. Limiting ourselves to the new variety of stagings and their reception, we shall dwell on the numerous genre works, their chronological continuity, changes in the perception of syncretism (the various terms applied to the genre – lyrical drama, musical story, monodrama, musical or instrumental theatre, etc.), the particulars of the relationship with theme and dramaturgy types (the verist, post-romantic, impressionist, expressionist, neoclassical), approached languages (tonal, modal, atonal, serial or combinations of these) and the intertwining vocal (cantata, oratorio) or instrumental genres (poem, fantasy and typical structures of autonomous music – invention, fugue, sonata, etc.).*

Key words: *opera, syncretism, dramaturgy, the intertwining Genres, language*

By attempting to accomplish a thorough presentation of 20th Century opera, one may find oneself exposed to the risk of getting superficial, due to the multiple facets of post-Wagnerian performance, which has experienced a heterogeneous history, which is both fragmented and impossible to encompass in every detail. One must specify that the multitude of creations of the genre and their chronological continuity, the changes in perception over syncretism (the diversity in the terminology that defines the genre- lyrical drama, musical story, monodrama, musical theater or instrumental theater, etc...) the peculiarities at the level of their connection to types of thematic, dramaturgy (either veristic, or post-romantic, impressionistic, expressionistic, or neo-classical), the language adopted (either tonal, or modal, atonal, serial, or a combinations of the latter), the intertwining of vocal genres (cantata, oratorio), or instrumental (poem, fantasy and some structures typical to autonomous music- invention, fugue, sonata, etc...) are a mere few elements whose finality signifies a novel variety in stage settings, and their reception by the public.

After all, *the European symphonic tradition*⁶⁸ was predominant in the conscience of opera creators of the early 20th Century. In this sense, there stands proof the intertwining of the aforementioned vocal and instrumental genres. At the same time, we would mention that the possibilities of defining characters would undergo a dichotomy within the context of a different perception over syncretism, via the modification of either musical or extra-musical elements- choir, decor, pantomime, ballet, cinematographic projections- assembled within a unitary context. The new forms of syncretism in the opera and ballet of the first half of the past century were the result of both some traditions and innovations- unexpected combinations of genres, unfolding throughout the Italian, French and German cultural areas. In concordance with

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⁶⁸ Valentina, Sandu-Dediu : *Wozzeck – Prophecy and Consummation*, Musical Publishing House of the Union of Composers and Musicologists from Romania, Bucharest, 1991, p. 38

the aforementioned aspects, we've identified traditional vocal scene genres - opera, drama, comedy, tragedy- inspired by the theatrical themes in classical acceptance (subjects from antiquity, mythology, medieval legends, *commedia dell'arte* etc.).

Gradually, opera, as a self-standing genre, along the other aforementioned categories, would turn into a landmark from whence sub-genres would derive, according to the changes in the theatrical world (symbolist in the view of Maurice Maeterlinck, or expressionistic in the view of Franck Wedekind), in the area of expression, by adding the folklore, the mythology, the exotic space, and the archaic, in connection with the developing of character-defining techniques, that went from leitmotiv, to thematic, and to symbolism. Thus, the fundamental categories of esthetics- the comic, the dramatic, and the earnest- acquire multiple senses, conducive to various ways of reifying syncretism. In this sense, according to the varied musical interpretation of the libretto, according to significance, to the creator's own vision, the genre underwent subtle ramifications.

We encounter comedy as *musical extravaganza*, *Die Kluge* (*The Clever Girl*, 1942), *Der Mond* (*The World*, 1930, little burlesque), of *folk fantasy*- *Der Bernauerin* (*The Woman of Bern*, 1945), by Carl Orff -, of *opera buffa*, *singing and dancing*, *Salade* (1924), of *dancing opera closely related to operetta*, *Le Train Bleu* (*The Blue Train*), by Darius Milhaud. Remote transformations of the genre in the spirit of either irony, parody or satire, by intermingling either musical or extra-musical elements, are present in the work of Igor Stravinski – *Renard* (*The Fox*, 1916), a *burlesque story, sung and danced*, *Histoire du soldat* (*The story of a soldier*, 1918), especially composed for being both read, performed and danced. Some peculiarity reveals itself in the comic opera in one act *Von Heute auf Morgen* op. 32 (*From One Day to the Next*, 1929), by Arnold Schönberg, that may be interpreted from the viewpoint of the message conveyed as a *satirical drama*.

As well as Leoš Janáček touches the comic in his work- *The Travels or Mr. Broucek* (1917)-yet in a hypostasis of *sharp satire* of grotesque highlights, Darius Milhaud is mingling the typology of the buffo show with the dramatic, in *Esther de Carpentras* op. 89 (1927), whereas Serghei Prokofiev composes in 1940 *Engagement in a Covenant*, comprising the subtitle of a comical- lyrical opera.

Tragedy appears in either the acceptance of the lyrical – *Šárka* (Leoš Janáček 1888), *Semirana* (Ottorino Respighi, 1910), *Oedipus* (George Enescu, 1931)- or of the satirical- *Lady Macbeth of Mțensk County*- *Katerina Izmailova* (Dmitri Šostakovici, 1930-1933).

An important feature in 20th Century opera is related to focusing syncretism, aiming at relating closely and eventually replacing music with theater. Gradually, composers would give up on the idea of performance. The trend would manifest itself by the comeback of certain kinds of traditions- *the melodrama*, and *the cameral opera*, that would be later subjected to certain transformations. The melodic, the lyrical, the sentimentalist hue- specific to the

19th Century melodrama- were replaced by the restrained attitude, in the neoclassical style of works like *Amphion* (1931), by Arthur Honegger and *Persephone* (1934), by Igor Stravinski, aspects related to either the antique or mythological area of inspiration, and to sonority treated as decorative feature.

The reduction in the number of characters, the centering of action, the reduced orchestration, the abstracting of the elements of expression, the pronounced symbolism, are all features that characterize cameral opera, that oftentimes features various subtitles, in accordance with the particularities of the lyrics, and with the orientation of the composer or of the current he belongs to: Arnold Schönberg – *Erwartung* - *The Expectation* 17, 1909 (monodrama), *Die glückliche Hand* – *The Happy Hand*, op. 18, 1910-1913 (musical drama), Manuel de Falla – *El retablo de maese Pedro* - *The Dolls of Master Pedro*, 1922 (cameral opera), Béla Bartók – *A kékszakállú herceg vára* op. 11 - *The Castle of Prince Bluebeard*, 1911 (dialogue opera), Ferruccio Busoni – *Arlecchino*, *Die Fenster*(*The Window*), op. 50, 1914-1916 (musical theater capriccio).

The trend of concentrating is being brought to extreme essentiality in the so-called *short-operas*⁶⁹ by Darius Milhaud, in 1927: *L'Enlèvement d'Europe*, *L'Abandon d'Ariane*, *La Délivrance de Thésée*. At the antipode there's the scenic creations signed by the same author, built on the tradition of *grand-opera*, of ample unfolding, up to five acts, of many characters, choirs and numerous ensembles, in grand scene settings and visions: *Christopher Columbus*, op. 102 (1928), *Maximilian*, op. 110 (1930), *Bolivar*, op. 236 (1943).

Another characteristic of 20th Century opera relies on borrowing some sonorities of the European tradition- some subjects, rhythms, structures, of renowned works (for instance, some fragments of the works of Richard Strauss)- or of some entertainment music- some romance, rhythms and intonations borrowed from jazz, etc...- elements re-reified either in the form of quotation, either altered in the manner of a parody, ironical, or even grotesque, capable of either illustrating or symbolizing some act, situation, character, or sentiment.

We identify the latter, either in the unfolding of some operas (like *Wozzeck*, *Lulu* - by Alban Berg), or by their being associated with some dramaturgy and by the composition of some independent works- *Johnny spielt auf* (Ernst Křenek, 1927) and *Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*, Kurt Weill). The work last mentioned is suggesting a new type of musical theater- the opera made of songs composed throughout the collaboration between Berthold Brecht and Kurt Weill- inspired by *The Beggar's Opera* composed by John Gay. We would highlight that its representations unfolded beside the musical, another genre of tradition, resembling the opera or the operetta of the *beggar*, built on the alternation between theatrical scenes and choreographic instances. Beside the mingling between jazz sonorities and experiments of the avant-garde- *Three penny Opera* has risen to domination as a particular genre

⁶⁹ Darius Milhaud : *Notes sans musique*, Julliard, Paris, 1949, p. 228

by converting the concept of lyrical dramatic theater, where the agitation, uncontrolled motion, direct connection, is involving the audience both implicitly and actually- in the epic theater, where the atmosphere of calm, the tonality devoid of passion, require some sort of objectiveness by the audience.

Throughout the 20th Century, opera performances were initially partially developing alongside the either laic or religious vocal-symphonic genres- the *cantata*, the *Mass*, or the *requiem*, - dramatic- the *oratorio* - and scenic- the *ballet*- which genres, gradually, would commingle as a consequence of the primeval nature of the concept of syncretism, of modern scene settings, where the choirs, the pantomime, the decor, and cinematic projections were converging in a unitary whole.

The vocal-symphonic genre of a dramatic character (soloists, choir, orchestra), displayed solely in concert, turned into a religious discourse performance accompanied by music. In the works of Arthur Honegger (*King David*, 1921 and *Cries of the World*, 1931), the genre is altering its structure, drawing nearer to a cantata, at Dmitri Šostakovič (*The songs of the Forests*) and at Serghei Prokofiev (*On Guard for Peace*) and subsequently at Arnold Schönberg (*Moses and Aaron*, 1930), Igor Stravinsky (*Oedipus Rex*), they are intermingling with the opera. Between the years 1930-1933, Carl Orff conceived some pedagogical-oriented opera – *Schulwerk* – where he emphasizes the idea of a synthesis between the opera and the Oratorium, based on the principle of unity between word, music and motion. At the same time, Honegger was composing the scenic oratorio *Jeanne d'Arc* (1935), some heterogeneous musical genre, where he was mingling the elements of performance with the spoken text, lyrical opera, the oratory, cantata and symphonic poem.

Similar to the aforementioned genre, at the beginning of the 20th Century, the cantata was being confused with either the oratory or the passion, distinguishing itself by its cameral orchestral nature, or by its being amplified according to its either laic or religious content, yet especially in its relation to its either festive or meditative expression: Arnold Schönberg – *A Survivor in Warsaw*, op. 46 (1947), written for a reciter, and for a male choir and orchestra, Darius Milhaud- *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1917), *The Cantata of Peace*, op. 116 (1937), *The Cantata of the War* op. 213 (1940).

Another syncretic genre, of utmost importance, of ancient tradition since the 16th Century- the ballet- would be revived in the 20th Century through some modern creations by the *Russian Ballets* (1909-1929) Company choreographers, managed by Serghei Diaghilev. The latter, alongside with some other personalities in the sphere- George Balanchine, Mihail Fokin, beside some remarkable dancers of the time- collaborated with some notorious names in the field of musical composition (Igor Stravinski, Serghei Prokofiev, Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Eric Satie, Francis Poulenc, Darius Milhaud, George Auric), and with some representative creative artists, from among which Pablo Picasso is absolutely worth mentioning, bestowing on the public numerous premiere art creations. There is worth mentioning the accomplishments by the

Russian and French cultural areas, the two focal points from whence syncretism sprung, entailing peculiarities as regards tradition-innovation in the art of ballet performance.

In his ballets, Serghei Prokofiev (for instance, *The Clown*, op. 21 – 1921, *The Prodigal Son* op. 46 – 1928, *Romeo and Juliet* op. 64 – 1935-1936, *Cinderella*, op. 87 – 1940-1944, *The Stone Flower*, op. 118 – 1948-1950), is resuming the path outlined by Piotr Ilici Ceaikovski, that of danced performance, emphasizing the dramatic expression and creating a special connection between action, music, and the dancer's gesticulation.

Novelty asserts itself from the very first shows by Igor Stravinski – *The Firebird*, 1909 (danced fairy-tale), *Petruška*, 1911 (burlesque scenes in four tableaux), *Le Sacre du Printemps*, 1913 – focused on highlighting the extrovert expression of syncretism via some powerful contrasts of timbre, harmonic, rhythmical, by the thickening and the rarefying of sound mix, which are elements related to the sphere of inspiration laden with color and significance- the fairy-tale, the puppet-show, and the archaic folklore.

In the next two ballets- *Les Noces* (1914-1923), Russian choreographic scenes composed for soloist, choir, piano and drums, in reality some intermingling between cantata and ballet, and the *Pulcinella* (1919), written for voices and small thematic orchestra, based on fragments and melodies by Pergolesi -, the author transforms the traditional acceptance of ballet, and, implicitly, the concept of syncretism, drawing the genre nearer to cameral opera, made of fragmented intertwining between music and dance. We find particularly special the abstract fashion of creating syncretism in the opera *Apollo, the inspirer of the Muses* (1928) (concept that is also encountered in the Oratorio-opera *Oedipus Rex*), in that case the ballet being made up of intrinsic musical structures, derived from fixed choreographic numbers of classic ballet: *Pas d'action, Pas de deux, Variations*.

In the French cultural area, the genre undergoes some unprecedented refreshment, via the nonconformist syncretism in connection with the surrealistic theater of the *Parade* (1916) ballet, sprung from some interesting collaboration between Eric Satie (music), Pablo Picasso (decors, costumes), Léonide Massine (choreography), and Guillaume Apollinaire (audience scheduling). The score, bearing influences of jazz and recollections of the *musical-* and unconventional instruments- the typewriter, sirens, pistol, and sound pipes- which are elements that create a bizarre atmosphere- is suggesting some heterogeneous society turned into Carnival theater.

As opposed to the pragmatic conception of *The Parade*, Francis Poulenc is suggesting some new stage in syncretism, via that performance called *The Hinds* (1923), devoid of choreographic argument, that is solely mentioning the décor. Even though that type of *white ballet*⁷⁰ would allow for some limitless freedom in regard of stage setting, the very strict organizing of music on numbers requires a lot of rigor from the part of choreographers.

⁷⁰ Jean Roy: Francis Poulenc, Paris, Seghers, 1964, p. 32

Pantomime asserted itself beside the ballet, a different way of artistically expressing feelings and sentiments via bodily motion, and by gestures and facial mimic. Originating in the antique syncretism, pantomime gradually got included into ballet, distinguishing itself in the 20th Century by the stylization of motion and by the symbolic concentration of gesture, impregnated over the *choreographic element*⁷¹ in a special fashion. The genre, that throughout modern times was the foundation of silent movies, was to be found in combinations between the art of mimes and dance, in the most diverse forms of syncretic performance.

The ballet-pantomime genre was approached differently in various composer's creations. In his opera, *The Miraculous Mandarin* (1918-1919) Béla Bartók touches the climax of violence and rhythmic motorism for the purpose of creating some psychologically tense atmosphere. As opposed to Béla Bartók preoccupations of accentuating sonority of a constitutive purpose, aimed at achieving the shock of either emotion or breakup, Darius Milhaud, on the other hand, in his modern ballets *Man and His Desires* op. 48 (1918), *The Ox on the Roof* op. 58 (1919), is reuniting aspects of daily life, mingling various intonations- dance, folk songs, rhythms and melodies from jazz, music of an illustrative character, appropriate for constituting the background of some cinema motion picture. One should not overlook the fact that throughout the 20th Century, the art of opera contributed to making syncretic performance, whereas numerous composers approach in their creation motion picture music (Serghei Prokofiev: *Lieutenant Kije* – 1933, *Queen of Spades*, by Alexandr Nevski – 1938, Arthur Honegger: *The Wheel* – 1923, *Les Misérables* – 1934).

Previously we were mentioning the intermingling of vocal genres of different feature (opera-oratorio, opera-cantata), viewed as a consequence of the performance's primeval nature, and of the concept of syncretism. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning the question of vocal and instrumental genres intertwining, fact that required a different approach of dramaturgy and therefore of syncretism from the part of the composers.

As opposed to the 19th Century, when composers were specializing in creating opera works, applying themselves exclusively to the genre, the first few decades of the 20th Century were defined by the importance of European symphonic tradition over the author's own conscience. In this sense, we note that the influence of pragmatic music symphonism over the second half of the 20th Century scene genres, was conducive to a new type of dramaturgy, based on *integrating freely the developing pages in a poem-like unfolding*⁷², mostly present in one-act operas, specific to the modern era (*Salomeea*, *Elektra* by Richard Strauss, *The Expectation*, *Happy Hand* by Arnold Schönberg, *The Castle of Prince Bluebeard* by Béla Bartók, *Gianni Schichi*, *The Mantel*, *Sister Angelica* by Giacomo Puccini)⁷³.

⁷¹ *Dictionary of Musical Terms*: Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1984, p. 363

⁷² Laura Vasiliu: *Articulation and the dramaturgy of musical form in the moder era (1900-1920)*, Artes Publishing House, Iași, 2002, p. 203

⁷³ Idem

Those works, called *opera-poem*⁷⁴, represent no less than the mingling between *scenic dramaturgy and the dramaturgy specific to pure music*⁷⁵, based on the model of symphonic poem moments intertwining. At the structural level, we noticed that on one hand, there is a continuation of traditional vocal forms- recitative, aria, arioso, Wagnerian declamation-, whereas, on the other hand, due to the influence of instrumental music over opera throughout the 20th Century, the scenes or the acts making up the performance, were built in either classical or baroque architectures (fugue, passacaglia, intervention), encountered for instance in *Ariane* and *Bluebeard* by Paul Dukas, *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* by Alban Berg. Beside the other genres characteristic to the modern era, the ballet, in particular, displays several *formal-dramaturgic types of segmenting*⁷⁶. By that, we meant the delineation which is subject to *scene genre criteria in acts and tableaux- Petrușka* by Igor Stravinski, *suite organized on choreographic numbers- The Celebration of Spring* and the *ballet-poem* based on the continuous progress of scenic moments (*The wood-carved Prince, The Miraculous Mandarin*, by Béla Bartók, *The Waltz* by Maurice Ravel and *Plays* by Claude Debussy). Particularly special there appears the combination between the structure of the concert- classic tradition genre- and the structure of the ballet in *Aubade (Song at dawn, 1929)* by Francis Poulenc. Conceived as a choreographic concert for piano and 28 instruments, the author intended to *simultaneously highlight a dancer and a pianist*, therefore the work was conceived in 7 movements from the concerto-symphonic viewpoint (based on the model of the *concerto –grosso*) *Toccata, Recitativ et Rondeau, Presto, Recitativ, Andante, Allegro feroce, Conclusion*, every of the latter being subjected at the same time to both choreographic and concerto conception⁷⁷.

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⁷⁴ Laura Vasiliu: *Articulation and the dramaturgy of form...*, op. cit., p. 208

⁷⁵ Idem

⁷⁶ Idem

⁷⁷ Jean Roy: *Francis Poulenc*, op. cit., p. 32