

## OPERA AS THE THEME FOR A MUSICAL-THEATRICAL OPUS

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**SUMMARY.** The article examines special theme of the opera genre, associated with the relationship between music and words in it. It became an impetus for the reformist aspirations of composers, while simultaneously revealing another hypostasis of opera as a special system of professional and psychological relations between participants in a creative project. The involvement of a genre-axiological approach, which is aimed at identifying the process of reassessment of values at each stage of the development of musical art, allows us to comprehend the originality of *Capriccio* by R. Strauss. The composer's latest composition appears as a rethinking of previous experience against the background of operas by F. L. Gassmann, A. Salieri and W. A. Mozart with various versions of a similar theme. The inconsistency with the concept of "chamber quality", the absence of a plot and character development in the traditional sense, the unresolved content motive of choice demonstrates the author's individual concept, which does not fall under the established genre-style models.

**Keywords:** the relationship between music and words, opera as a professional-psychological phenomenon, genre-axiological approach, reassessment of values, compositions by R. Strauss, F. L. Gassmann, A. Salieri, W. A. Mozart.

### Introduction

The origins and early development of opera shaped its genetic code: the interaction of various art forms and the inseparable connection between music and words. While the former provided the conditions for the genre's existence and identity, the latter played a decisive role in opera's self-definition within the system of theatrical-stage performances and in overcoming the crises that inevitably arise when cultural paradigms change.

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The path taken by opera has been reflected in encyclopaedic publications, monographs, and articles devoted to the creative work of outstanding composers and touching on a wide range of topics. The works of this kind served as a foundation for the research of subsequent generations. However, studied in various aspects as a sociocultural phenomenon, opera has also emerged as a unique system of professional and psychological relationships, without which the realization of a creative project is impossible. This refers to the partnership between the composer and the poet / librettist, singers with the authors of the composition and with each other, with the impresario / theatre director, and so on. The details of the “inner life” of opera as a functionally organized structure are known from a kaleidoscopic array of incidental observations by musicologists. For example, composers’ rework of arias at the request of singers, their rivalries, the need to take into account the specific capabilities of opera groups or the demands of theatre management, not to mention the tensions that arise between the composers and the lyricists. All this integral part of what is called opera typically remains outside the established notions of the genre and is preserved or perceived as anecdotes, in the broad sense of the word. Amusing stories that evoke smiles today reflect the far from simple world of theatrical life. It was precisely this world that inspired composers’ imaginations to create operas whose content revealed a different side of the genre’s existence and explored problems hidden from the public in assessing the existing traditions or implementing conceived ideas.

These reflections were prompted by R. Strauss’s last musical and stage composition *Capriccio* (1940/1941), subtitled as “a conversation play for music.” The German composer and conductor’s supreme professionalism and expertise in opera theatre, his embrace of diverse subject matter, and his openness to experimentation and innovation allow us to appreciate *Capriccio* as a romantic poeticization of operatic and theatrical life. While the Prologue *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1916) presents backstage life in an ironic and comic light, in *Capriccio* the recurring theme of choosing between love for music and love for poetry imbues the simple plot with the aura of an inspired story. Even a quick glance at R. Strauss’s operatic legacy evokes surprise at such an unusual “summary” of the path travelled.

The last opera is striking in its uncharacteristic elegiac quality. It is undisturbed by the young authors’ attacks on the seasoned theatre director, by parodying the clichéd ways of Italian opera, or by diminishing the operatic plot’s pathos with the details of everyday life and relationships. It is precisely this quality that imbues *Capriccio* with nostalgic notes of reminiscence. It seems this quality led R. Bletschacher to write of *Capriccio* as of the great composer’s farewell to everything he held dear as a musician, even to his life. In his opinion, “this is not simply R. Strauss’s farewell. It is the farewell of an era. During the

most horrific desecration of Western culture, surrounded by the nightmares of barbarism, an old man, unprotected from all the weapons of secular power, attempts to defend himself in the name of an eternal devotion to tolerance and humanity.”<sup>2</sup>

In the collection of critical reviews of the premieres of R. Strauss's operas, the last section summarizes the assessments of the composer's creative work existing at that time and his reaction to the position of critics.<sup>3</sup> Pointing out the mistakes of many authors, F. Messmer notes that the composer was considered either a modernist or an artist who took a “step back” in *Der Rosenkavalier* or resorted to unexpected experiments, as in *Ariadne auf Naxos*.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, the experience of direct perception of the master's operatic compositions, the author emphasizes, imprints their story as a cultural fact. Complementing this thesis, we can say that owing to this, musical history appears not in statics, but in the dynamics of changes in artistic and aesthetic guidelines and evaluation criteria. Against this background, the last two decades can be called a time of reassessment of the legacy and creative position of R. Strauss.

In this regard, G. Brosche's monograph, in which the author seeks to characterize all of the composer's works, is instructive. He prefaces them with an examination of the musician's personality, an overview of the created work, the stages of his life and career, and the current cultural and musical situation, by giving a vivid title of “Richard Strauss and his ‘competition’” to the section.<sup>5</sup> This comprehensive nature of the research task explains the absence of detailed analyses of the operatic compositions themselves, although their substantial list is reasonably limited. The information is primarily limited to the story of their creation and the composer's intentions, a clarification of the orchestral composition, and a detailed description of the plot with quotations of the characters' lines. The research approach chosen by the scholar does not detract from the value of his monograph, which allows one to imagine the composer's musical and stage legacy in its diversity of narrative motifs and genre references.

L. Lütteken takes a different perspective on the life and creative work of R. Strauss in the short but rich in content book.<sup>6</sup> The composer's peculiar

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<sup>2</sup> Bletschacher, Richard. *Apollons Vermächtnis: vier Jahrhunderte Oper*. Wien, Ueberreuter, 1994, p. 437.

<sup>3</sup> Messmer, Franzpeter. *Kritiken Zu Den Uraufführungen Der Bühnenwerke von Richard Strauss*. Pfaffenhofen, W. Ludwig, 1989, p. 316–320.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 318

<sup>5</sup> Brosche, Günter. *Richard Strauss. Werk und Leben*. Wien, Edition Steinbauer, 2008, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Lütteken, Laurenz. *Richard Strauss: Die Opern. Ein musikalischer Werkführer*. München, Verlag C. H. Beck, 2013.

“exclusion” from the general artistic and aesthetic processes of the last century’s music, due to his music’s close connection to tonality, prompts the musicologist to examine the composer’s contradictory image that has emerged in the scholarly literature. For some, the scholar writes, R. Strauss “betrayed modernity,” while for others, he “embodies a musical mastery rooted in the Bavarian tradition, which, with this understanding of craft, rightfully distanced itself from the upheavals of the modern era and consciously rejected them.”<sup>7</sup>

From today’s perspective, the composer’s attitude toward the past of the culture appears as a reflection on the long path of development, not in the form of established and therefore predetermined forms, genres, methods of work with thematism, and so on, but in the constant process of transforming what was already discovered. In this context, his “farewell,” like the “farewell of an era,” should be understood as the completed cycle of metamorphoses of the archetypes that defined the musical and creative consciousness of the New Age. This extended historical period demonstrates not only the consolidation of what has been discovered, but also the plasticity of the transition to a new quality. L. Lütteken writes about the search for a “new form of plasticity” in the understanding of J. Goethe and explains: “Clarity in the sense of accessibility for understanding, dialogue and communication was meant.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, according to the researcher, R. Strauss preserves tonality “as a code of temporary sociability.”<sup>9</sup> Developing his observations further, the author points to the appearance of “gestural music” in the first compositions (*Feuersnot*, *Salome*, *Der Rosenkavalier*), understanding by this dance music that “can and should be communicative even beyond words (and yet not without them).”<sup>10</sup> The consequence of such new plasticity is the rejection of any genre norms, and “each opera appears as an individual, inexpressible form of such brightness.”<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, some other ideas of J. Goethe have shown their relevance for understanding the relationship between modern musical thinking and cultural experience. In particular, the well-known work of Goethe-nature philosopher *The Metamorphosis of Plants* allows us to comprehend the transformation of the initial thesis when artists repeatedly turn to similar plot motifs during a certain historical period. The involvement of a genre-axiological approach, which is aimed at identifying the process of reassessment of values at each stage of the development of musical art, including within the framework

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Lütteken, Laurenz. *Richard Strauss: Die Opern. Ein musikalischer Werkführer*. München, Verlag C. H. Beck, 2013, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

of composers' creativity, helps to understand the essence of innovations in the era of changing the artistic paradigm not only with a frank rejection of tradition, but also with the preservation of its obvious features.

## Results

The author's preface to the score of *Capriccio* contains a veiled hint about the meaningful idea chosen by R. Strauss. We are talking about the libretto of the abbot de Casti *Primo le parole, dopo la musica*, which is mentioned in connection with the reformation of Ch. W. Gluck. Giving advice to performers, the maestro asks to pay attention to the importance of words in his composition and demands clear pronunciation.<sup>12</sup> More detailed explanations can be found in the monograph by G. Brosche. Citing information from the composer's long correspondence with St. Zweig, he points to the writer's proposed different version of the title than de Casti's – *Prima la musica, poi le parole*.<sup>13</sup> Expanding the emerging parallels, the scientist names the opera of the same name by A. Salieri and *Der Schauspieldirektor* by W. A. Mozart. Among other interesting details, R. Strauss mentions works by E. T. A. Hoffmann that are similar in their problems. The relevance of this theme for the famous romantic writer is reinforced by his composing practice and experience as a musical director of an opera group. Thus, the accumulated facts testify to the relevance of questions regarding the essence of opera as a special professional and psychological phenomenon, the integrity of which is based on the co-creation of artists of different professions and roles, starting from the 18th century.

According to the preserved information, one of the first references to this issue can be considered the composition *L'opera seria* (1769) by F. L. Gassmann, the revival of which is demonstrated by the performance practice of the present. Owing to this, the past appears as a process of searching for the new through rethinking / reassessment of the established. A similar trend can be traced in musicology, since the experience of studying the accumulated opera legacy allows us to evaluate the composer's achievements in a broad artistic and aesthetic context. As an example, we will cite a thorough article by L. Tufano<sup>14</sup>, which, first of all, provides brief information about the

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<sup>12</sup> Strauss, Richard. *Capriccio*. Ein Konversationsstück für Musik in einem Aufzug von Clemens Krauss und Richard Strauss, op. 85, Orchester Partitur. [Musical score]. Mainz, B. Schotts Söhne, 1942.

<sup>13</sup> Brosche, Günter. *Richard Strauss. Werk und Leben*. Wien, Edition Steinbauer, 2008, p. 201.

<sup>14</sup> Tufano, Lucio. "Sulle Tracce Di Oranzebe. *L'Opera Seria* Di Calzabigi E Gassmann (Vienna, 1769)." *Antonio Boroni E Il Suo Dramma Giocoso "L'Amore in Musica"*, edited by Milada Jonášová, Praga, Český Krumlov, 2016, pp. 137–164.

availability of primary sources for *L'opera seria* by F. L. Gassmann / R. Calzabigi and modern performances. However, the research idea is focused on revealing the genre features of this composition as one of the examples of the so-called metatheatre characteristic of the Baroque era. The presence of two plots, the combination of comedy and opera seria, which is supposedly inscribed in a comic frame, the close interaction between them due to the participation of the leading characters, the inconsistency of the chosen role and timbre, the choice of names with meaning for the characters in order to mark their fate or nature, etc. are aimed at discrediting the established tradition of opera seria, its "stilted" plots, frozen vocal forms that did not correspond to the dynamics of the course of stage events, and the difficult position of those who sought to create a new opera performance. But from a historical distance this polemic between the effectiveness of the comic and the pathos of the "serious" is perceived as a struggle for the renewal of the existing tradition beyond the declaration of reformist ideas (which were emphasized by Ch. W. Gluck / R. Calzabigi in *Alceste*, staged in 1767 in Vienna). At the same time, the "meta-" technique allowed F. L. Gassmann / R. Calzabigi to critically illuminate the relationships formed in the theatre and opera environment between members of a creative group gathered to implement a certain project. Actually, comic opera, drawing on the experience of *commedia dell'arte*, full of improvisational inventions, clashes and misunderstandings in outlining masked characters, revealed the genre multifunctionality. At the plot level in *L'opera seria* it manifests itself in revealing the flaws of human nature, at the compositional and dramaturgical level – in avoiding statics due to the activation of the ensemble and the approach of a mosaic change in the stage situation, the rejection of the traditionally interpreted piece structure, and the reliance on a stage free from clear structural regularities. F. L. Gassmann demonstrates the jewel-like perfection of the composer's writing, adhering to the features inherent in Baroque opera: the breadth of cantilena phrases, brilliant virtuoso technique, flexibility of recitative-aria expressions, accuracy of the portrait image of the character. However, attention to the word and acting create that "dissonance" of meanings, through which the grotesque is generated, and with it the comic nature of the situations and the lowering of the high tone of "serious" opera.

The range of problems accumulated in the opera house, both purely genre-related and professional-human, raised in *L'opera seria* was reflected in two subsequent compositions, written by order of Emperor Joseph II for a holiday in honour of the Governor-General of the Netherlands. These are the operas by A. Salieri / G. Casti *Prima la musica e poi le parole* and by W. A. Mozart / J. G. Stephani *Der Schauspieldirektor*. Their competition-premieres took place on February 7, 1786 in the exquisitely decorated Orangery of

Schönbrunn Castle in Vienna. It is believed that the general theme and comic genre were suggested by the customer and were supposed to reflect theatrical life behind the scenes. At the same time, a comparison of Italian opera buffa and German singing play was envisaged, that is, the emphasis in the genre aspect compared to the composition by F. L. Gassmann was transferred to the plane of national priorities. Without retelling the generally known information, we will focus only on the authors' disclosure of the everyday life of everyone involved in the creation of "Her Majesty Opera."

The unity of the theme determines the attention to various substantive moments while maintaining the dependence of the operatic composition on the performers. Therefore, their struggle for engagement and recognition of their primacy in art is invariably accompanied by a clash of interests. A. Salieri / G. Casti focus on the motive of finding agreement between the composer and the poet in the conditions of the need to write an opera in four days, which, firstly, excludes any possibility of a creative approach to a new composition, pushing the authors to combine random poetic lines to the finished music according to the principle of component correspondence, and secondly, reflects the established dependence of artists on unexpected offers. W. A. Mozart / J. G. Stephani follow the path of showing similar situations during the casting of actors and opera singers for a new theatrical project: competition, patronage, bargaining for payment for participation in performances, belittling the advantages of other applicants, etc. Therefore, the action is divided into a purely "dramatic" one, when the actresses and their partners demonstrate their skill in dialogues of different nature, and the one of a "singing play", which combines singing with spoken lines. The turn of the authors of *Der Schauspieldirektor* to well-known texts refers to the existing practice of the so-called pasticcio, predicts the recognizability of the content, the nature of the passage and the roles of the characters. Similarly, the lyrical and insightful Ariette (No. 1) with its motifs of separation and resolute devotion is contrasted with the joyful and inspired, full of love Rondo (No. 2).<sup>15</sup> However, if the reconciliation of the applicants for the participation in the performance occurs in *Prima la musica e poi le parole* due to the recognition by the prima donna of opera seria of the skill and breadth of the acting role of the young representative of opera buffa, then in W. A. Mozart's singing play only the director's threat to abandon his plan brings everyone to their senses. One way or another, all the considered 18th-century operas end with a finale-reconciliation.

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<sup>15</sup> Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus. *Der Schauspieldirektor*. Klavierauszug mit Text von Aug. Horn. [Musical score]. Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel, [ca. 1890]. Retrieved from: [https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/1/1b/IMSLP846808-PMLP56725-Mozart\\_-\\_Der\\_Schauspieldirektor\\_\(Vocal\\_Score,\\_Horn\).pdf](https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/1/1b/IMSLP846808-PMLP56725-Mozart_-_Der_Schauspieldirektor_(Vocal_Score,_Horn).pdf) (accessed 21 Feb. 2026).

Against this background, the emerging parallels with *Capriccio* by R. Strauss, where the creation and staging of an opera for the birthday of Countess Madeleine is envisaged, only enhance its unique originality. Despite the clashes between the poet Olivier and the musician Flamand, each of whom considers his art to be the most important, moreover, the poet does not hide his dissatisfaction with the setting of his sonnet to music, which “destroys” the harmony of rhyme he found, this confrontation is shrouded in feelings of love, rivalry for the hand and heart of a young beauty. So the problem of the final verdict in favour of music or words turns into a problem of Madeleine’s choice between the admirers. Actually, her reflections, although voiced in the last monologue of the heroine, who is looking for answers and is in a dialogue with her other “self” in the mirror, are the emotional and semantic core of the author’s concept. Therefore, the attacks with unflattering criticism on the director of the La Roche theatre, the Count’s rejection of the opera and his inclination towards the maids of Melpomene, the satirical illumination of the Italian duet, the story of the prompter Monsieur Taupe about his difficult life, etc. do not violate the lyrical-romantic mood of the composition. On the contrary, all such scenes, skilfully inlaid into the plot of the one-act composition and argued by the sequence of its development, are perceived like pages from an album or a cycle of novellas. By the way, the plot is also rethought, which, based on the established tradition, should provide for the presence of intrigue, the sequence of resolving the declared conflicts, the development of characters, the relationships of the heroes, etc. From this point of view, nothing happens in the plot of *Capriccio*. The competition of the poet and the musician in talent not for the sake of recognition or success with the public, but for the sake of conquering the female heart, which determines the exposition phase, undergoes a metamorphosis at the end of the opera due to the motive of choosing the beloved one. The change in the vector of meanings reveals the hidden symbolism of the two figures that are key to the main theme of the composition, because they personify the eternal question for the opera genre “Is the word or the music first?” – a question that has no answer due to the inseparable integrity of these two beginnings. It is no coincidence that the authors of *Capriccio* – R. Strauss and C. Krauss – put the insoluble dilemma, which gave rise to many disputes and initiated reformist searches, into the mouth of the Countess, who must decide on her choice: “I was covered with their love, like with a light net connected with poems and music. And must I break it? Haven’t I become entangled in it? Choose one? The generous Flamand with his wonderful eyes? The passionate Olivier with his extraordinary intelligence? <...> Choose one and lose the other. But maybe gains are always associated with losses? <...> Oh, reflection of Madeleine in love, can you give me

advice, can you help me to find an ending for their opera? And is there such an ending that would not be trivial?"<sup>16</sup>

The wheel of plot events made its turn, but has not exhausted its energy, putting three dots at the end, as if in anticipation of a new impetus to the movement. Therefore, it remains unknown who the Countess will prefer, because in his philosophical understanding of the essence of the opera R. Strauss creates a situation of constant intellectual and psychological balancing between the conditionally real relationships of the characters with their complex feelings and the virtual-mental process of understanding the inseparability of two essential components of the genre – words and music/music and words. Regardless of the emphases and chosen priorities, their relationship determined the paths of the development of the opera genre.

## Conclusion

The genre-axiological approach proposed in the article allows us to comprehend the reassessment by the masters of the current cultural experience. For F. L. Gassmann / R. Calzabigi, the main thing was not only to show the moral and psychological deformation of the established relationships among performers, but also the exhaustion of the aesthetic and artistic principles of opera seria, for which the audience (conditionally present) was introduced into the second plot, which contributed to the failure of the new composition. A. Salieri / G. Casti decline a complex plot intrigue and a large number of characters. Flexible recitative mono-dialogical statements in the conditions of a dynamic stage do not exclude the use of cavatina, aria, rondo. The leading idea becomes the possibility of combining both "seria" and "buffa" in one composition. Finally, W. A. Mozart / J. G. Stephani emphasize the promising positions of the singing play, within which a natural interaction of the dramatic and musical principles is achieved. All the compositions, as a conclusion, affirm the ability of the participants in the opera project to reject their own ambitions for the sake of art.

In such a historical context, *Capriccio* appears as both a creative imitation of previous experience and a visualization by means of opera of the composer's reflections and response to one of the most polemical questions in the history of the genre's development. The result is the compositional uniqueness of the composition which in terms of time does not correspond to the concept of "chamber quality", and the unhurried stringing of individual scenes, connected only by the external circumstance of preparation for a

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<sup>16</sup> Strauss, Richard. *Capriccio*. Conversazione per musica in un atto. Libretto di Clemens Krauss e Richard Strauss. Versione italiana ritmica di Fedele D'Amico. Retrieved from: [https://www.dicoseunpo.it/S\\_files/Capriccio.pdf](https://www.dicoseunpo.it/S_files/Capriccio.pdf) (accessed 21 Feb. 2026), p. 67–68.

hypothetical performance, does not fall under any known opera model. Therefore, *Capriccio* by R. Strauss / C. Krauss draws a line under previous creative discussions and at the same time opens one of the new pages in the history of opera owing to an individual concept that contributed to the transformation / reassessment of genre forms.

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