

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 19TH CENTURY FRENCH OPERA REFLECTED IN THE WORKS OF SAINT-SAËNS AND BIZET

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SUMMARY. The present paper aims to reveal the essential features of 19th century French opera, highlighting those aspects which contributed to the eventual crystallization of a dramatic work seeking to reflect the characteristics of French music and culture. The manner in which melody, harmony, rhythm, dynamics, tempo and timbres are used is analysed, focusing on two representative works of the French Romanticism: Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* and Bizet's *Carmen*. Harmonic innovations, floating melodies, strong rhythmic patterns along with the marked influence of folklore and Oriental culture contribute to the distinguishing of 19th century French opera. Finally, attributes of the French singing school and the role of the mezzo-soprano voice in the compositions of the 19th century French operas are revealed.

Keywords: opera, French, Saint-Saëns, Bizet, mezzo-soprano

Introduction

The artistic works of the 19th century was greatly influenced by the profound and complex philosophical ideas which inspired the artists of this epoch. Introspection and display of contrasting emotions gave birth to artistic works that reflected the turmoil and exacerbated sensitivity of the Romantic artist, lacking the coherence and clarity which characterize the creations of the Classical period. Marcel Brion believes that the terms Classical and the Romantic define not only dissimilar cultural, aesthetic and stylistic periods, but also “*two immanent and permanent principles which assist human destiny, the first extending like a malady, in its decadent phase, to «the phenomenon of excrescence» of the Baroque.*”²

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² Brion, Marcel, *Pictura romantică* (Romantic Painting), Editura Meridiane, Bucureşti, 1972,
p. 7.

The opposition between Baroque and Classicism is thus continued in the 19th century, for the Baroque is considered by some critics (Wölfflin, Focillon, Eugenio d'Ors) to be a constant typology, a style endowed with its own characteristics, representing decadence, decline, a state of inner crisis. The harmony and equilibrium that mark the Classical period, an epoch guided by the principles of rational thinking, are gradually replaced by a new era of turbulent emotions, anxiety and despair – the Romantic Era, considered by Marcel Brion “*an element of the Baroque aeon, born in a century of Baroque effervescence.*”³ Brion underlines the fact that despite this similarity Romanticism lacks the stylistic unity which distinguishes the Baroque.

This lack of stylistic unity is equally present in the visual arts (painting, sculpture), literature and music, manifesting itself in the stylistic diversity of the Romantic musical compositions. The idea of artistic freedom is emphasized, for art must express the artist's personal manner of viewing and perceiving the world. This belief in the unicity and individuality of every human being defines the philosophy of the Romantic artist, especially the point of view of the French artist.

Unlike German Romanticism, the ideas of which are based on a metaphysical view of the world and the longing for infinity, Sehnsucht, French Romanticism is animated by the ideas of the French Revolution (1789-1799), by the belief in humanity. The works of Camille Saint-Saëns and Georges Bizet reveal the manner in which French opera developed during the 19th century and clearly reflect the ideas expressed by French Romanticism.

Melody and the French Opera

Among the elements which form a musical creation the melody is the most significant one, especially when related to the composition of an opera. Musicologist Grigore Constantinescu emphasizes the importance of a careful analysis of the melody, as well as the establishing of a “*real diversity of the manifestations of melody in the romantic opera.*”⁴ The Romantic Era represents a period of great development of the melody, reflecting the perpetual transformations, inner unpredictability and complexity of the human soul. Most often the melody is closely associated with Italian opera, the melodic inspiration of the Italian composers being very much admired and appreciated. Referring to an article in which Gounod had been criticised for the lack of melody in his opera *Roméo et Juliette*, Saint-Saëns writes: “*So what was melody? We were never able to know; the Italians alone had the secret.*”⁵

³ Brion, Marcel, *Pictura romantică* (Romantic Painting), Editura Meridiane, București, 1972, p. 11.

⁴ Constantinescu, Grigore, *Diversitatea stilistică a melodiei în opera romantică* (The Stylistic Diversity of Melody in Romantic Opera), Editura Muzicală, București, 1980, p. 28.

⁵ Lacombe, Hervé, *The Keys to French Opera in the Nineteenth Century*, University of California Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles, 2001, p. 271.

Despite this fact, when analysing the French operas of the 19th century, one cannot help but notice the generous phrases built up from sinuous melodies and the gentle, sensitive songs, reminiscent of the French *mélodie*. These particular features of the French melody can be easily traced in the works of composers such as Gounod, Saint-Saëns, Bizet or Massenet, the latter being acclaimed for his powerful and touching melodies. In his work on French opera, musicologist Herve Lacombe cites the count Louis de Romain, himself a composer, referring thus to Massenet: *“The world is full of learned contrapuntists who, loaded with fugues and drudgery, would happily trade a year of their lives for an hour’s inspiration. For Massenet, that hour lasted a lifetime. Here is the secret of his charm, the reason for his successes, the source of his talent. His melodies go straight to the heart; they delight us, move us, and embrace us. Vigor abounds to overflowing. Dazzled by the constantly refreshed brilliance of youthfulness and love, we never dream of probing the depths of the idea. His lightness is enough, for it consists of smiles, tenderness, and grace.”*⁶

His fellow composer, Camille Saint-Saëns describes the melodies of Massenet with these words: *“He had charm, attraction and a passion that was feverish rather than deep. His melody was wavering and uncertain, oftentimes more a recitative than melody properly so called, and it was entirely his own. It lacks structure and style. Yet how can one resist when he hears Manon at the feet of Des Grieux in the sacristy of Saint-Sulpice, or help being stirred to the depths by such outpourings of love? One cannot reflect or analyze when moved in this way.”*⁷

A New View on Harmony

The rules regarding the vertical aspect of music, harmony, established by the composers of the Classical period, as well as the musical constructions based on the tonic, subdominant, dominant progression were gradually relinquished by the Romantic composers. The complexity of the subjects these composers wished to express in their creations, as well as the intensity of their emotions reclaimed the use of new, unusual harmonic structures. Grigore Constantinescu believes that *“the gradual emancipation of the melody from the harmonic structures is a distinguishing sign for the evolution and stylistic diversity of Romantic music.”*⁸

⁶ Lacombe, Hervé, *The Keys to French Opera in the Nineteenth Century*, University of California Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles, 2001, p. 284-285.

⁷ Saint-Saëns, Camille, *Musical Memories*, Small, Maynard & Company Publishers, Boston, 1919, p. 215.

⁸ Constantinescu, Grigore – *Diversitatea stilistică a melodiei în opera romantică* (The Stylistic Diversity of Melody in Romantic Opera), Editura Muzicală, București, 1980, p. 39.

Often the melody is embellished and gradually chromaticism is employed in the composition of certain phrases. In his opera *Carmen* Georges Bizet uses numerous elements which can be referred to as *exotic*, because of their foreign sound, reminding the listener of the Spanish folklore with its Arab influence. The composer achieves a harmonious balance between the Western musical writing and the exotic, one might say at times *oriental* character of the music in the depiction of the setting where his opera takes place. Bizet often employs chromaticism (for example in the *Habanera*) and chooses to adorn the phrases of his main feminine character, Carmen, with various ornaments, at times emphasizing the improvisatory nature of the melody. His works differ from those of his contemporaries precisely because of his particular musical language and harmonic innovations, perceived by the audience of his epoch as overly bold, even dissonant. The following musical example, a fragment from the *Entr'acte* which precedes the final act of the opera *Carmen*, clearly illustrates the above-mentioned facts:

E.g. 1

Excerpt from the opera *Carmen*: The *Entr'acte* preceding Act IV

Folklore and modalism also bring innovative solutions for composers: sonorous constructions belonging to other cultures are employed in the operas, with the aim of suggesting the placement of the plot in a foreign space, one which differs greatly, even in sound, from the familiar surroundings. The purpose of this approach is an accurate representation. Thus, in the third act of the opera *Samson et Dalila* Saint-Saëns employs modal writing reminiscent of the Arab musical modes.

E.g. 2

Excerpt from the opera *Samson et Dalila*: the *Bacchanale* in Act III, scene 2

Polyphony is also employed by the 19th century French composers in their operas, where it fulfils a dramatic function: for example, in key moments of the plot, when several characters are on stage expressing their thoughts and feelings simultaneously. Conceived by Saint-Saëns as an oratorio at first, the opera *Samson et Dalila* is reminiscent of the works of Bach and Händel. The choral parts of the first and third act of the opera illustrate the great composing skill of Saint-Saëns, the composer employing contrapuntal compositional techniques, such as the fugue (in the first act of the opera), or the canon in the hymn to Dagon (the third act), the latter “*suggesting festive music of the Baroque*”⁹, according to musicologist Ralph P. Locke. An example regarding the simultaneous revealing of the characters’ feelings, above mentioned, could be the trio in the first act of the same opera, where the sensual phrases of Dalila are entwined with Samson’s vocal line and the warning the old Jew addresses to Samson.

⁹ Locke, Ralph P. - *Constructing the Oriental ‘Other’: Saint-Saëns’s “Samson et Dalila”*, Cambridge Opera Journal, Vol. 3, No. 3, Nov. 1991, p. 286.

Rhythm, Dynamics and tempo

The emergence and development of melody is closely linked to the rhythmic patterns used by the composer. The unfolding of the melody reflects the particularities of the employed rhythmic structures. The influence of folklore is very powerful in the Romantic Era, while the fascination regarding faraway, exotic cultures leads to numerous rhythmic innovations. In French operas of the 19th century rhythm can be used either to musically represent the setting in which the opera's plot takes place, or to aid in achieving a more complex psychological description of the characters. Bizet often uses complex rhythmic formulae and triple metre in his opera *Carmen* for a more veridical depiction of the Spanish temperament of his characters, as well as the passionate environment of the setting where the action takes place. The following example, a fragment from Carmen's song to Don Jose in the second act of the opera ("*Je vais danser en votre honneur... La...la...la...*"), evokes, through the rhythmic formulae and accompaniment chosen by the composer (castanets), the image of an exotic place and a foreign woman, perceived at once as sensual and alluring, but dangerous.

E.g. 3

190 Allegretto. (♩ = 108.)
(dancing, and accompanying herself with the castanets.)

The musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is the vocal line in G minor, with lyrics 'La la la la la la la'. The middle staff is the castanet accompaniment, showing a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The bottom staff is the piano accompaniment, starting with a piano (*pp*) dynamic marking and a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes.

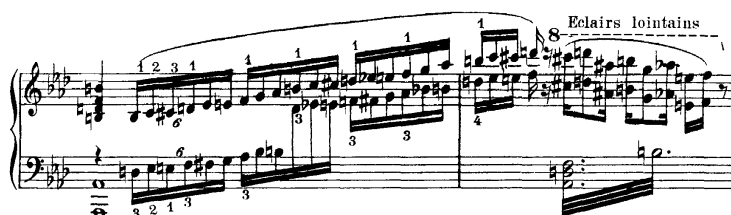
Excerpt from the opera *Carmen*: "*Je vais danser en votre honneur... La...la...la...*" (Act II)

In relation to French opera one must also refer to declamation, the principles of which serve as basis for the development of a distinct melody, remarkable for the harmonious union between music and speech. The melody has a great need for the direction imprinted on it by the rhythm, but at the same time it influences the contours of these rhythmic structures.

The manner in which musical ideas are expressed is affected by the use of certain dynamic indications. The composer may use dynamics as a means of revealing the inner transformations of his characters and also for the musical depiction of the atmosphere of a certain setting. Dynamic indications bring colour to a work, the wealth of shades employed by romantic composers

contributing to a complex portrayal of characters, places, eras. French composers of this epoch, in particular, distinguish themselves through the refined and delicate, yet powerful effects used in their works. The wealth of dynamic indications used by Saint-Saëns in *Samson et Dalila*, along with the timbres chosen by the composer, reveal a coloured, yet mysterious world. The instrumental introduction at the beginning of the second act of the opera closely resembles programme music, the phrases evoke the sensual and luxuriant image of an oriental setting and foretell the events which are about to unfold. The approaching storm is anticipated by the sound of thunder and lightning, the latter evoked by the music of Saint-Saëns in a remarkable manner and indicated in the score of the opera (*Eclairs lointains*).

E.g. 4



Excerpt from the opera *Samson et Dalila*: the instrumental phrases concluding Dalila's aria, "*Amour, viens aider ma faiblesse*" (Act II)

The use of dynamics, the *p*, *mf* and *f* indications in the first bars of the instrumental introduction of Act II evoke the approach of an important event, at the same time suggesting the tension before the storm, the natural phenomena being a reflection of the characters' inner emotional strain (E.g. 5).

The contrast between various scenes of an opera or the alteration of a character's emotional state is often marked and emphasized by changes of the tempo and dynamics. Such is the case in the *Chanson bohème* from Act II of the opera *Carmen*, where Bizet employs the amplification of vocal and instrumental sound, while at the same time the tempo is gradually accelerated: *Andantino* at the beginning of the aria, *tempo animato* just before the refrain following the second strophe, *Più Mosso* and *sempre animando e crescendo* at the third repetition of the refrain after the third strophe, gradually culminating in *Presto*, where the music explodes with all its force, expressing the fiery outburst of emotions (a perfect musical representation of the Latin temperament, perceived as *exotic* by the audience of the period).

Moderato assai 69 = ♩

PIANO

Excerpt from the opera *Samson et Dalila*: the first bars of the instrumental introduction (Act II)

Voice and colour – the mezzo-soprano voice in opera

The wealth of colours or timbres, vocal as well as instrumental, used by the Romantic composers increases the possibilities of dramatic expression. In French Romantic opera colours have an important role in the musical portrayal of characters. The voice type chosen by the composer, the vocal colour of the character, as well as the instruments used to accompany the vocal line of the singer, all contribute to the evocation of a specific atmosphere.

It is well known that Italian singing and voice teaching was the supreme model which was closely followed by the other schools of singing, especially in the preceding centuries. In his work on the history of vocal pedagogy, singer, voice teacher and musicologist James Stark states the following: “When French, German, or English singing is discussed in the historical literature, it is almost always compared to the superiority of Italian singing. This is most pointed in discussions of French singing, from the seventeenth century onwards.”¹⁰ However, the author argues that the differences between these two schools of singing, Italian and French, are derived also from the different aesthetic tastes and the characteristics of each language. Although the French singing school gradually adopted the Italian manner of singing, one must bear in mind the fact that “the French took special interest in the language itself, with the subtleties of pronunciation and articulation having priority over the artifices of the singing voice.”¹¹

¹⁰ Stark, James A. – *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, University of Toronto Press Incorporated, Toronto Buffalo London, 2008, p. 206

¹¹ Stark, James A. – *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, University of Toronto Press Incorporated, Toronto Buffalo London, 2008, p. 211

During the 19th century an improvement in French singing can be observed, a balance between the importance of speech and sound emission, which is probably due to the influence of teachers like Manuel Garcia and the Italian school of singing.

Among the French singers of the 19th century the mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot, daughter of the celebrated vocal pedagogue Manuel Garcia, was the one who inspired composers and artists of the epoch due to her extraordinary vocal range and exquisite technique, as well as her portrayal of dramatic roles. The title role of Gounod's opera *Sapho* was first sung by her at the premiere of the opera in 1851 and she was the singer whom Saint-Saëns wished to portray Dalila in his upcoming opera. Although she did not sing the role of Dalila at the premiere of the opera, she did perform the second act of the work at a private reunion, preceding the completion of Saint-Saëns' masterpiece. The rich, mysterious and sensual colour of the mezzo-soprano voice has inspired French composers of the century to create feminine roles like Sapho, Dalila, Balkis - the Queen of Sheba, Carmen, Cléopâtre or Charlotte. The middle register of the mezzo-soprano range is especially preferred by composers, the upward leaps emphasizing the most passionate moments of the dramatic action. The smoky colour of this voice type, with its changing shades, is the perfect vehicle for representing passion, mystery, the unknown and even that which is perceived as 'evil'.

In *Samson et Dalila* Saint-Saëns replaces the familiar *recitativo* with phrases which resemble dramatic declamation, a sung speech filled with passion, which favours the middle register of the mezzo-soprano voice. This is the case with the phrases which precede the aria "*Amour, viens aider ma faiblesse*", and also with the sung dialogues, duets with other characters (the scene with the High Priest of Dagon or the love duet with Samson, in Act II).

The innovations brought about by Bizet in *Carmen* regard the use of an extended vocal range of the mezzo-soprano voice and the endowment of this voice type with a highly expressive function. Chromaticism is used by the composer to accentuate the sensuality of Carmen, while the vocal flexibility required by some parts (*Seguidilla* or *Chanson bohème*) express her playfulness and love of freedom.

Conclusions

The operas of Camille Saint-Saëns or Georges Bizet, along with those of other French composers of the 19th century, mark a new era in the evolution of French opera. These works strive to eliminate mannerism and superficiality, while the elements employed by the composers must have, first of all, a dramatic function. The evolution of vocal pedagogy, as well as

the continuous search for the perfect means of expressing the essence of the French spirit and character will eventually lead to a new type of musical drama, crystallized especially in the works of Jules Massenet. Inspired by the Italian ideal, French opera aims to express, through a refined and sensitive manner of singing, the sophisticated and elegant nature of the French culture.

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