

MUSICAL SYMBOLS IN THE OPERA *THE THREE SISTERS* BY PÉTER EÖTVÖS

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SUMMARY. Opera, as a stage and acting genre, also uses theatrical elements (costumes, dramaturgy, etc.) to convey the work. Opera composers typically use musical symbols as well. I collected these devices of Péter Eötvös' best-known opera in my study based on literature research. Dramaturgically divided into three sequences, the work always examines its relationship with the other two central figures from the point of view of the central figure of the given part. One of the musical cornerstones of this is changing the internal relationships of triads. The two extreme notes of the triad are always constant (distance of a fifth), but the note located between them characterizes not only the quality of the chord, but also the state of the character connected to it. The unstable balance and reorganization of relationships is well represented by this construction principle. The author also uses the third-parallel, known since Mozart, as a classical musical representation of love. The choices of instrument also have symbolic power. The Prozorov family is represented by the group of woodwind instruments. A kind of irony on the part of the author is the use of cow bells to depict the behavior of the disgusting and unbearable Natasha. Soldiers are naturally represented by brass. Although Solioniy is a soldier, he is not accompanied by brass instruments, but by percussionists, hinting at his personality. The characters speak in different ways of the human voice. From prose to sung speech through to the melodies, there are all kinds of expressions of emotion.

Keywords: Péter Eötvös, opera, Three Sisters, libretto, musical symbolism, triad, third-parallel, instrumental symbolism, prose, sung speech, song

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Motto: *"There are moments in life when we must
be unwaveringly true to ourselves."*

Peter Eötvös

Born in Székelyudvarhely, Péter Eötvös had two important moments in his life. After graduating from the Academy of Music in Budapest, where he obtained a degree in composition, he received a scholarship in Germany (Cologne). He became a student of two giants of the musical avant-garde, Zimmermann and Stockhausen, whom he greatly respected, but did not follow in terms of composition. "...I laid down the burden of this heritage and found my own way of composing. From then on, I went my own way. And from then on, they began to recognize me as a composer."²

Péter Eötvös does not follow his scholarly predecessors, nor does he write studies on composition techniques or publish musical analyses. Eötvös considers himself a craftsman who creates a work of art from raw materials. Nomen est omen - His fate is in his name. [The old-fashioned spelling "Eötvös" in Hungarian language refers to the "goldsmith" profession. *Translator's note.*]

In addition to his studies in Germany, he gained important experience during his time in Japan. He did not write stage music for twenty years. He used to work as a tutor at the Opera House in Cologne, but he absolutely hated the genre of opera. The way he worked in the opera contrasted with his work with Stockhausen in the electronic studio, where concentrated attention prevailed. There was duality in him, he loved theater and film, but the genre of the opera, where both worlds were united, made no impression on him. The basic idea of *The Three Sisters* dates back to 1985, when a beauty queen election was held in Hungary 4 years before the regime change. The winner was Csilla Andrea Molnár, who could not bear the limelight, the burden of the public, the harassment, and therefore her severe anxiety and depression led to suicide. This tragedy shook Péter Eötvös so much that he definitely planned to set Csilla's story to music. As the author recalled this period: "...inside I clearly heard some really sad music, several female voices, which gradually die out, leaving Csilla's lonely voice alone on the scene."³

The same idea came to life, if only indirectly, in the prologue of *The Three Sisters*, where after Olga, Masha and Irina's tercet, Irina is left alone on the stage. The composer's encounter with the genre of opera was completely accidental, as Kent Nagano, the then chief music director of the Lyon Opera, approached the composer with the request to perform his

² Eötvös, Péter, Amaral Pedro. *Parlando – Rubato*. Rózsavölgyi és Társa, Budapest, 2015. p. 15.

³ Idem, p. 74.

Chinese Opera in the theater in 1986.⁴ The misunderstanding arose from the fact that the piece, which had not been heard by the chief music director, was an orchestral piece written by Péter Eötvös for the ten-year anniversary of the Ensemble Intercontemporain, where he acted as music director. This is where Kent Nagano came up with the idea to ask Eötvös to write an opera, to which the composer said yes. To write the libretto, he asked the already famous Claus H. Henneberg to prepare a text book from the story of Csilla. Due to his modesty, the writer did not consider himself prepared to write a new story. He preferred to write the script from a ready-made drama. After many arguments, in the end it was Eötvös' son Gyuri who recommended this work to him, as he knew how many times Eötvös had seen Chekhov's drama in many different settings. This is how the choice was made for this special drama, which is not an ordinary operatic story, since it is a Chekhov drama without heroes and plot. In a drama without a hero, what is important is not what happened, but what did not happen. An authentic interpretation of the complicated mental processes taking place in the souls of the characters is a serious task for the performers. According to Eötvös, this is the ideal drama, melancholic, missed encounters that permeate the entire drama. Henneberg did not know Russian, but he was willing to work from a German translation. In the abbreviated story, the Chekhovian atmosphere and the melancholic tension between the characters disappeared. The drama is gone. Eötvös rejected this version. "No sir, I'm truly sorry, but that's really not what I want."⁵ Henneberg was a wonderful person, an intelligent artist, he understood this and gave Eötvös free rein to rewrite the script even though he had already signed the contract. Claus H. Henneberg unfortunately died in 1998 two weeks before the premiere in Lyon. Eötvös's tribute is manifested in the fact that the name of Claus H. Henneberg is still displayed on the posters to this day. The text of the libretto was written entirely by Péter Eötvös with the help of his wife Mária Mezei.

The organizing principle of the libretto

Eötvös reorganized Chekhov's four-act work into three sequences. The entire text was printed on separate sheets and the scenes that belonged to the main character of the sequence were collected. In the three sequences, the same event is shown from the perspective of Irina, Andrei

⁴ Grabócz, Márta. *Eötvös Péter Operái – Kelet és Nyugat között (The Operas of Péter Eötvös - Between East and West)*. Parlano 2013/1. 2013.

⁵ Eötvös, Péter, Amaral Pedro. *Parlando – Rubato*. Rózsavölgyi és Társa, Budapest, 2015. pp. 76.

and Masha. We could ask why he didn't intend the third sequence for Olga, to which Eötvös's answer was that Olga doesn't have her own life because she lives for others, so she couldn't become the center of the play. There are scenes that appear in separate acts in the original Chekhov drama. A good example of this are the two love confessions belonging to Irina. The confessions of Baron Tuzenbach and Captain Solyony are given in two different acts (Tuzenbach's first act, Solyony's second act), but in Eötvös's opera, the two scenes take place one after the other in the first sequence belonging to Irina. In this form, the differences between the two characters stand out better, as he juxtaposes the two characters. Irina rejects both of them, Tuzenbach with her mind, and she is afraid of Solyony because he affects her physically. Between the two confessions of love, military doctor Chebutikin appears, who is probably Irina's real, biological father, since he was in love with their mother. This sign is not in the original work. During Tuzenbach's confession of love, the doctor grabs the baron by the shoulder and leads him off the stage, while looking into Solyony's eyes, he encourages the captain because he sympathizes with him. Solyony can provide Irina with a passionate and adventurous life, with Tuzenbach, Irina could only live a dull, gray life. Chebutikin wants to prevent Irina from her decision to support the baron.

Chekhov's special elementary form is the triangle

One character always interacts with two other characters. Conflicts arise between three people. This organizing principle can be seen in every sequence. In the first sequence, Baron Irina Tuzenbach and Captain Solyony form the triangle. In the second sequence, Masha, Kuligin's high school teacher, Masha's husband, who adores his wife, but is a boring, passionless person. The third person in the triangle is the military officer Vershinin, who is a true skirt-wearer, a romantic figure who affects the female soul. In the third sequence, the persons or group belonging to Andrei are the three sisters themselves and his irresistible wife, Natasha. The number three can be seen as an editorial structure throughout the work. Péter Eötvös divides the four-act Chekhovian drama into three sequences. He describes the events of the characters in a specific order. He originally divided each sequence into scenes divisible by three. Irina's sequence of the first sequence was 12 scenes, Masha's sequence of the second sequence was 9 scenes, Andrei's sequence of the third was originally planned for 6 scenes, but in the end the composer left one scene. Thus, the work ends with a kind of levitation. The drama remains open. It is a special director's idea that at the very end of the opera, the curtain is not drawn according to the usual

order, only the lights go out. This also symbolizes the unanswered questions, the story is not closed, it remains open. In the original work, Chekhov reveals the diagnosis, raises the problems of humanity, but the questions remain unanswered. The young writer who died at the age of 44, who also practiced as a doctor, could not find a solution to humanity's problems.

"Because here they only eat, drink, sleep and... die..." Andrei's monologue (Chekhov Act 4)⁶.

The tripartite division of the scenes

Two-thirds of the scenes take place inside the drawing room, one-third outside in the garden. In the first sequence, 8 scenes in the drawing room, 4 scenes in the garden, in the second sequence, 6 scenes in the drawing room, 3 scenes in the garden, in the third sequence, 4 scenes inside the drawing room, 1 scene in the garden. The composer composed acoustically differently for the two different locations. Inside the drawing room, Eötvös uses more concentrated instrumental effects, while outside in the garden he worked with longer time values, richer orchestral sound and echo effects.

The musical fabric based on the triad

The three notes of the triad represent the relationship of three persons. The triad is divided into two different thirds, a major third and a minor third. The distance between the two extreme points of the triad is always the same, one perfect fifth, but the middle note moves. You can move the middle note further away from one to get closer to the other. If the middle note moves closer to one of the outer notes, a new interval is created. Major second and perfect fourth or minor second and augmented fourth. The unstable balance and reorganization of relationships is well represented by this editing principle. The configuration of the triad can be clearly perceived in the accordion sound that opens the prologue. Between the notes A-E as extreme poles, the middle note, which is constantly moving, forms the triad. The three notes personify the three sisters, but we find a D sharp note that forms a tritone with the fundamental note of the triad, which embodies Andrei. The distance between the extreme notes of the block is a minor ninth, which is exactly 13 semitones. This represents the 13 characters.

⁶ Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich. *Three Sisters* (translated by Dezső Kosztolányi). Ed. Akkord, Budapest, 1992.

The use of the parallels of thirds in the work is also a symbolic element, which on the one hand is linked to soldiers, who often sang in parallels of thirds, and on the other hand originates from Mozart, who was happy to use this element as a means of expressing the feeling of love, for example in the duet of Don Giovanni and Zerlina ("Andiam, andiam, mio bene ..."). In the penultimate scene of Eötvös's opera, the parallels of thirds of the two clarinets express Masha's feeling for Vershinin in the form of a final confess of love, to her sisters. The peculiarity of the rhythm is that it is connected to a character, to a psychological moment. Irina is left alone in the terrible silence after the baron says goodbye. In the tension, Irina suddenly talks about how she has never been in love, but always dreamed of it and that she will be a faithful wife. The music narrows to a single note while Irina taps a Morse code rhythm with nervous hand gestures. The mechanical movement of Irina's right hand is unconscious, because she is a telegraphist at the post office, so she expresses her state of mind with this physical gesture, just as a nervous person tics in a stressful situation. Olga and

Andrei is not changeable by nature, so a calm rhythm symbolizes their individuality. Solyoniy is unpredictable, as is Andrei's wife Natasha, so they are characterized by sudden, sharp rhythms, followed by unusual silence. As we can observe in the movement of wild animals.

The orchestration of *The Three Sisters*

The accordion is a typically Russian folk instrument, used besides by Péter Eötvös, other great composers as well in their works (e.g. Stravinsky: *Petrushka*). It is practically one of the symbolic instruments of Russia. Each character is represented by an instrument. The Prozorov family is represented by the group of woodwind instruments (Olga – flute, Irina – oboe, Masha – clarinet, Andrei – bassoon). Masha's husband, Kuligin, is represented by bass- and contrabass clarinet. Natasha, Andrei's wife, is personified by the saxophone. A kind of irony on the part of the author is the use of cow bells to depict the behavior of the loathsome and insufferable Natasha. Soldiers are naturally represented by brass. As a feature of the German opera sound, he uses horns to portray the German-born Baron Tuzenbach. He portrays Vershinin with a trumpet or flugelhorn, Chebutikin with the characteristic glissando of the trombone as an expression of his physical and mental instability and uncertain personality.

Although Soloniy is a soldier, he is not accompanied by drums, but by percussion instruments. This clearly shows the difficulties of establishing a relationship. He only sings during the confession of love, otherwise he

always speaks, but then he is accompanied by timpani, which can also play a melody. The special feature of the opera is that, in addition to the ensemble in the orchestra pit, there is also an orchestra behind the stage. The accordion is located in the orchestra pit, its sound is amplified on stage with two microphones, as if using the instrument as a musical décor. Apart from the tuba and the electric piano, there is a classical symphony orchestra behind the stage. The stronger sound is provided by the band behind the stage. For example, in the scene of the fire, the sounds of the firefighters and the commotion are shown. The two conductors follow each other via monitor. The lead conductor is located in the orchestra pit, but during the last sequence, the second conductor takes over the lead position for a moment.

Human voices

The characters speak in different ways of the human voice. From prose to sung speech to melodies, there are all kinds of expressions of emotion. Eötvös was led to this solution by his memories of Hungarian folk culture.⁷ During the funeral ceremony, the mourners tell the events of the deceased's life in prose, but later they switch to a sung speech while involving the emotions, which they express more and more loudly as if symbolizing crying. At the performance in Lyon, the female roles were also played by men. This solution is also symbolic, since universal human questions are independent of gender.

his is the most popular of Péter Eötvös' operas. This is an opera of farewells, at the very end an empty fifth is heard, the middle note is irreplaceably missing, the inevitable emptiness of existence. The personal tragedy of Péter Eötvös is what gave the work even more personal meaning. His son died in December 1994, and he began the work in January 1995.

"The Three Sisters would certainly not have been the same work if it had not had such a personal meaning for me, if it had not echoed a pain I experienced. My music and dramaturgy helped to sublimate the personal tragedy." (Peter Eötvös)

⁷ Tallián, Tibor. ...*És újrakezdjük az életünket...* (... *And we start our lives anew...*) in *Muzsika* 43/6. 2000.

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