

THE EVOLUTION OF ITALIAN MELODRAMA: FROM DONIZETTI TO VERDI

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SUMMARY. This study presents the evolution of the Italian melodrama of the nineteenth century, having as a major composer exponents such as Gaetano Donizetti and Giuseppe Verdi. The rich culture of the Italian Romantic space, as well as the socio-political events of the 19th century, influenced the mentality and style of opera composers. Thus, titles such as “La donna del lago” (1819), “Wilhelm Tell” (1829) – G. Rossini, “I Capuleti e i Montecchi” (1830) – V. Bellini, foreshadow the new directions of Italian romantic opera. The maturation process of Italian romantic opera is crowned by Gaetano Donizetti and Giuseppe Verdi, who, through melodrama, achieve important stylistic synthesis.

Keywords: Italian, melodrama, evolution, Donizetti, Verdi

1. Introduction

The rich Italian tradition reflects a temperament like the one that moulded the Gothic style in architecture five centuries earlier. It is worth noting that the greatest representative of the Romantic movement in Italy was an artist of good common sense and admirable wisdom, namely Alessandro Manzoni, a romantic that could have been sincerely appreciated even by Goethe. Because of a long tradition in classical education, and perhaps also because of the natural tendency shaped by the climate and the landscape, the Italian rejects the intoxicating depth of the “nocturnal” side of life and the search for the secrets of things, preferring the sensitive proof of phenomena to the investigation of their mystery.

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Thus, the mental and emotional universe of the melodrama in this period must be investigated in parallel with the musical analysis in order to better understand the semantic context of the works under analysis: “the same excessive passion, expressive emphasis reverberated later; (...) it is possible and appropriate to take this particular stylistic and narrative phenomenon of passionate excess seriously, trying to understand and explain it, searching for its likely origins by addressing the delicate terrain of emotional expression in its historical manifestations”³.

“Ideologically speaking and very broadly, Romanticism is a reaction to the type of thinking that served as theoretical preparation for the Revolution, in relation to the rationalism of the 18th century.”⁴ It possesses a positive element, that it must fully exploit, and not a painful limitation which fatally subscribes its possession and stimulates in it an implacable nostalgia for all that it does not possess. Thus, even if the Italian Romanticism meant the consolidation of the individual, placed to the fore in all of the domains of the arts and of moral life, this exaltation of the individual was not accompanied by a deep feeling of his limitation and by the irresistible need to dispose of it. Infinite desire, the desperate search for the absolute are elements which are missing from the Italian Romanticism; and the progressive disappearance of the instrumental music at the end of the 18th century deprives Italy of one of the most precious means to exploit those feelings.

The semantic uncertainty of instrumental music, which makes it a romantic art by excellence, the most naturally suited to deeply understanding the dark actions of the inner life, is not exploited by the Italian composers of the 19th century, for whom music is closely connected to concrete melodramatic events and the plasticity of the defined characters.

2. The evolution of the Italian melodrama

Melodrama derives from the composed measure of the rationalist rhetoric of the 18th century to enter a more passionate and ardent climate. Thus, the melodrama closely shapes every man’s interest and experience. “In Italy as well, Romanticism is in opposition to a prolonged Classicism in a version specific for Alfieri’s tragedies and even for a part of Foscolo’s and Lopardi’s work. In this case as well, the opposition classical-romantic is the pillar of the entire romantic theory.”⁵ The Italian music of the 19th century

³ Sorba, Carlotta, *Politics and Sentiments in Risorgimento Italy. Melodrama and the Nation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 3-4.

⁴ Călin, Vera. *Romantismul (Romanticism)*, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1970, pp. 7.

⁵ Idem. p. 37.

welcomes all that in Romanticism is rebellion against the omnipotence of the mind and the exaltation of the heart, of feeling.

The researcher Massimo Mila noted that: "In the 19th century, melodrama is no longer just spending free time. People go to the opera to intensely participate in the vicissitudes represented on the stage, to put themselves in the characters' place, to suffer and vibrate along with them, to confront ideally the misery and their behaviour with their sentimental experiences."⁶ But, out of the many ways explored by the German Romanticism to escape the limitation of the individual and to integrate him in the safety of the absolute, the Italian gives up those that do not always emphasize the human being: mainly, the extension of the individual falls within the infinity of nature and of religion or, in any case, of metaphysics.

The Italian music of the 19th century is poor in openings towards the landscape and cannot identify panic with nature, the revelation of the secret language of the water, of the plants, of the rocks, the murmur of the forest, the silence of things and the manifestation of their life. Exaggerating a little, one could say that the Italian does not know nature, but the rural environment, that is the land farmed by man and transformed by his civil presence. From this point of view also, the opera "*Guglielmo Tell*" by Rossini (preceded by the unique opera "*Donna del Lago*") represents a surprising exception. Definitely, the Italian melodrama of the 19th century will succeed in freeing itself from the idyllic artificial conventionalism and capturing, in idyllic shades, the authentic rural scent. Nevertheless, it still includes the impressive intuitions of the wild nature, specific of the Romantic music.

Also, lacking in real openings towards religious transcendence, the Italian musical Romanticism focuses on the changing nature of the human being. This also applies to the masterpieces of the sacred music of the 19th century, namely Verdi's "*Messa da Requiem*", whose hero is man and not God, and the two compositions from Rossini's late creation, "*Stabat Mater*" and the surprising "*Petite Messe solennelle*", in which the sacred nature is more of a very refined stylistic element than a real inner participation. Out of the wide range of topics proposed by Romanticism, love is the element that the Italian music of the 19th century approaches immediately, but it subjects it to a realistic simplification.

In the Italian melodrama of the 19th century, the psychological and emotional aspects of love, investigated in a naturalist way, acquire truth, intensity and importance. The romantic exaltation of the heart, at the expense of reason, is understood by Italians as an apology to love. Love is the only truth of life, the only positive thing: what hinders it is deceit, lie, malice and

⁶ Mila, Massimo, *Breve storia della musica*, Giulio Einaudi editore, Torino, 1960, p. 253.

abuse. Bellini and Donizetti's creations exploit the pathology of wretched love. Bellini composed an opera about "*I Capuleti e i Montecchi*", but really the entire production of this opera is a variation on the topic of Romeo and Juliet. Surely, these operas present a different love than the one in the serious melodrama of the 18th century, their romanticism consisting in this diversity of love, in its passion range – reflected at the sound level.

3. Donizetti's melodrama

Puccini's contribution to the development of the Italian melodrama must be analysed in its political, historical and social context, as an active factor in bringing forth the ideas of the time from other perspectives than the strictly musical ones: "the detailed investigation of the reception and cultural contexts of Puccini's music offers a fresh view of this historically important but frequently overlooked composer. Puccini's music and persona were helped up as both the antidote to and the embodiment of the decadence widely felt to be afflicting late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Italy, a nation which although politically unified remained culturally divided"⁷.

Donizetti's melodrama is the product of the Italian bourgeoisie from before the Unification of Italy. The tender and pathetic melancholy of his dramas (*Linda di Chamonix*, 1842), the sombre darkness of his tragedies ("*Anna Bolena*", 1830, "*Lucrezia Borgia*", 1833, "*Maria Stuarda*", 1835) are a little insipid and often dissolve in well-shaped arias, dominated by the easiness of the tireless melodist. "In the studies about the history of Italian romantic opera, Donizetti's creation is usually presented as a succession of four creation stages. The first stage – from "Il Pigmalione" 1818 up to "Anna Bolena" 1830, the second stage – from "Lucia di Lamermoor" 1835 up to "Maria de Rudenz" 1838 (...) The last two stages of Gaetano Donizetti's career can be described by the label "European"."⁸

In the love passion, Donizetti's heroes sometimes find ("*Lucia di Lamermoor*", 1835; "*La Favorita*", 1840) nuances of human despair, where the simplified music reaches the naked and nostalgic truth of popular music. Some secondary scenes of important operas ("*Lucrezia Borgia*" 1833) are connected to the truly rich inspiration of the musical comedies "*L'elixir d'amore*" (1832) and "*Don Pasquale*" (1843), valuable because of the characters' consistency and unaffectedness, for their vivacity and musical richness, while

⁷ Wilson, Alexandra, *The Puccini Problem. Opera, Nationalism and Modernity*, Cambridge Opera studies, Cambridge, 2007, p. 2.

⁸ Constantinescu, Grigore. *Gaetano Donizetti*, Didactică și Pedagogică Publishing House, R.A., Bucharest, 2013, pp. 16-17.

“*La figlia del reggimento*” (1840), written for the Comic Opera of Paris, was one of the brilliant theatrical essays. “A reliable proof of Donizetti’s popularity and his novel way resides in the fact that his similar creations opened the Carnival a La Scala season for three years in the mid-1830s (“*Fausta*” in 1832, “*Lucrezia Borgia*” in 1833, and “*Gemma di Vergy*” in 1834)”⁹.

Unlike Bellini and Verdi in their youth, for Donizetti the elegance of his instrumental work, the wise and refined use of the instruments, the spontaneous intuition of the expressive potential of the timbers, were an innate gift. “Donizetti’s opera style materializes in his faithfulness to a manner and, at the same time, in an impulse and an extension of the music which perhaps has no equal in the history of Italian melodrama.”¹⁰

E.g. 1

Aria “Era desso il figlio mio” from opera “Lucrezia Borgia”, bars. 18-25.

⁹ Abbate, Carolyn & Parker, Roger. *O istorie a opere: ultimii patru sute de ani (A history of opera: the last four hundred years)*, p. 178.

¹⁰ Baroni Mario, Fubini Enrico, Petazzi Paolo et al., *Storia della musica*, Giulio Einaudi Editore, Torino, 1999, p. 317.

4. Verdi and the new paradigms of the Italian melodrama

The political awakening of Italy towards ideals of freedom transformed the orientations of the melodrama around 1830-1840. The season of the love melodrama was nearing its end. Rossini's conservative joy was cynical from the perspective of Goffredo Mameli's generation, of the students who would die on the battle fields of Mantova and Montanara. Italy expected something innovative of its own music (that is, the melodrama), something virile and heroic to reflect the patriotic enthusiasm of the liberal youth. This is the novelty of the platform on which Giuseppe Verdi's melodrama is based as compared to the Donizetti's love melodrama.

The musical schemata remained the same; the Italians were not deceived, they recognized in Verdi's voice a new timbre, a different human quality, more energetic and animated. Thus, he created new vocal typologies: the dramatic agility soprano (Abigaille in "*Nabucco*", Elvira in "*Ernani*", Odabella in "*Attila*", Gulnara in "*Il Corsaro*" etc.), the spinto-dramatic tenor (Foresto in "*Attila*", Corrado in "*Il Corsaro*", Rodolfo in "*Luisa Miller*", etc.), the dramatic baritone specific for Verdi (Nabucco in the opera with the same name, Macbeth in the opera with the same name, Simone Boccanegra in the opera with the same name, etc.), the dramatic mezzo-soprano (Giulietta in "*Un Giorno di Regno*", Cuniza in "*Oberto, conte di San Bonifaccio*", Azucena in "*Il Trovatore*", etc.)

A new world opened for Verdi in the field of serious opera: of choral grandiose opera, close to the oratorio-opera, introduced by Mayr and perfected by Rossini through "*Mosè*", "*Semiramide*", "*Guglielmo Tell*". It appears that Verdi, in the rigidity specific to the first stage of his creation (1839-1849), was strongly drawn to it. But on this road there were great practical obstacle: only very few theatres were able to stage these choral operas, with a complex and expensive construction. "It was typical of Verdi to keep control over any suggestion for vocal elaboration, limiting his interpreters to communicating through a rigid sequence of symmetrical phrases. Verdi wanted, above all, to sculpt the musical discourse"¹¹.

Thus, after his success with "*Nabucco*" (1842) and "*Lombardi*" (1843), Verdi abandoned this type of Rossinian choral opera, where the heroes are almost "absorbed" from a vocal point of view by the vocal discourse of the masses. Hence, through "*Ernani*" (1844), he reaches the profile of Donizetti's melodrama – operas with characters who are strongly individualized and highlighted through intense contrasts. "The history of

¹¹ Op. cit., p. 191.

Verdi's melodrama takes place within all the consecrated techniques and forms, which are exploited in any way by expanding them beyond the limits of their possibilities. Verdi never formulates an aesthetic (...) even the stylistic and dramatic problems are approached with discretion and common sense, and are never ideologically or intellectually overloaded."¹²

E.g. 2

ELV. (da sè)
 (Tut - to spre - zzo che d'Er -
 na - ni non fa - vella a que - sto co - re, non vha
 gem - ma che in a - mo - re pos - sa l'o - dio tra - mu.

Cabaletta "Tutto sprezzo che d'Ernani" from opera "Ernani", bars. 8-17.

¹² Cresti, Renzo. *La Vita della Musica*, Feeria Publishing House, Firenze, 2008, p. 418.

5. Conclusions

There is no doubt that, during Italy's Unification, Verdi sought a formula of national melodrama, working actively with the vocal and theatrical elements exploited by Donizetti, his illustrious predecessor. Donizetti's death (1848) gave Verdi the first place in Italian opera, freeing him from the competition, even a quantitative one, of his rivals. At the same time, the nation's climate changed irrevocably.

After the euphoric enthusiasm of 1848 faded, a new era of disappointment and retreat followed: the patriotic anger of the topics presented in "*Nabucco*" and in "*Battaglia di Legnano*" would not have been accepted any longer, and Verdi, attuned to the state of spirit of the society, distanced himself from political problems and gave more importance to the characters' psychology. And yet, in this theatrical stage, in addition to the continuous refinement of the contact with practical achievements, of the efficiency of his vocal creation, he composed his melodramatic masterpiece, the popular trilogy: "*Rigoletto*" (Venice 1851), "*Trovatore*" (Rome 1853) and "*La Traviata*" (Venice 1853).

This creation was dictated by his dramatic instinct or, to put it differently, by his desire to promote the continuity of the action to the maximum despite the decomposition of the opera into arias, duets, concerts and recitatives. This melodramatic styling consisted in a concentration of the drama to very few essential characters, living in the imaginary world of the stage, kept under a harsh light focused on one point. Far from all the ornaments, far from any contour, the secondary characters and moments of the drama were abandoned to their irremediable conventionality, by concentrating the power of inspiration on the nucleus of the dramatic action.

At that time, Verdi did not see the possibility of an opera without arias and recitatives. However, unavoidably, the continuity of the musical discourse, was of utmost interest and was considered a way of refining the recitative – the introduction of musical content in that empty space. And without expressing another deviation from the regular type of opera, he created the "popular trilogy", rich in extraordinary dramatic scenes. They are achieved by directing the attention to the scenic intuition and by the efficiency of contrasts, new additions, high notes, orchestra preparations, loaded with the pure emotion of vocal melody perfectly adapted to the drama. Moreover, the three popular masterpieces present a typical moral story which highly inspired Verdi, thus confirming his stylistic safety: the hero, distorted by enormous and disproportioned passions regains his humanity through love and pain.

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