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THE EVOLUTION OF OPERA PERFORMANCE FROM SCENOGRAPHIC MIRACLES TO THE OPERA PRODUCTIONS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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SUMMARY. The presentation of the book *The Evolution of Opera Performance*, *from Scenographic Miracles to the Opera Productions of the 19th Century*, offers a synthesis of our work as a musical theatre director. Our aim is to stimulate the public's interest in the opera genre and opera staging, by revealing aspects in the history of opera performance(s), as they have been shaped, century after century, by following the gradual effort and the tireless passion of its creators. Our aims are also to illustrate the original charm and the infinite resources of this genre, which continues to delight the public at large and the knowledgeable even today.

Keywords: opera performance, opera staging, liturgical drama, vernacular drama, secular drama, dramatic madrigal, *intermedi*, the Florentine Camerata, Claudio Monteverdi, *comédies-ballets, tragédie en musique, semi-opera, opera seria*, the comic opera, *opera buffa, ópera comique, ballad opera, Singspiel, tonadilla*, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

The book *The Evolution of Opera Performance*, *from Staging Miracles to the Opera Productions of the 19th Century*, published in 2018 by Eikon Publishing House and printed under the patronage of the ArtConcept Cultural Association, takes a unique approach to the evolution of opera as a drama performance, from the perspective of staging, considering, at the same time, the phases of development of the genre through all its fundamental elements. In this respect, our paper will be constantly looking to address the following parameters:

- the libretto – subject, structure, versification.
- the music - musical and choreographic performances (recitatives, arias, duets, ensembles/others; choirs; ballets; interludes/instrumental

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parts), orchestra, vocals, elements of musical drama and musical language.
- the scenery – stage space, scenography, settings/stage design.

The bibliographic resources we have used to draft our paper are diverse, ranging from some very old writings to the most recent research in the field. In addition, during our extensive research process, in order to increase the visibility of our paper at a national and international academic level, we have focused on accessing almost exclusively foreign sources written in English, Italian, French and Spanish. For instance, through the *Gutenberg Project* (www.gutenberg.org) we were able to access old and very old, scanned writings, which allowed us to widen the research of the phenomenon of Opera, as it was thought or imagined by its creators, by audiences and by the writers of that time. Such a writing is Angelo Solerti's *Le origini del melodramma*, in which the author collected "the notes made by Jacopo Peri in 1600, on the composition of the opera *Euridice*, along with those made by Marco da Gagliano in 1608, with reference to the creation of the opera *Daphne*, as well as a letter drafted by Pietro de' Bardi in 1634, regarding the beginnings of the "*Florentine Camerata*", that was established for the first time and emerged from the house of his father, Count Giovanni Bardi." (p.7).

In the process of drafting this volume, we used both musical and iconographic research sources, along with the specialized literature specific to our field. The musical sources are commonly used in performing dramaturgical-musical analyses, parts of them being sometimes included in such analyses as musical fragments or as examples concerning the manner of building the dramaturgical-musical composition of certain musical parts. The iconographic sources we have researched and introduced in this volume as images make up an extremely important element of the work. Based on these images we were able to gain a clearer insight and understanding on a series of fundamental aspects involved in the evolution of opera staging from its creation to the eighteenth century. The images provide concrete evidence to the specific manner of staging and organizing the spaces in which the opera phenomenon starting emerging (opera house buildings, dimensions of the halls, dimensions of the stages, the places destined for the orchestra pits), as well as to the scenography design (stage sets, costumes, lighting, theatrical effects).

Furthermore, the engravings also provide important information on the manner in which stage, vocal and acting performances were delivered. Such an example in our volume is image number 34, entitled *Engraving Depicting the Interior of Dorset Garden Theatre. A Scene from Elkanah Settle's Play,*

The Empress of Morocco (p.117), based on which we were able to observe that "the extended length of the apron stage, taken up from the tradition of the Elizabethan theatre, was clearly an aid that allowed the actors to move closer to the audience in order to make their voice heard". (p. 225).

On the matter of vocality, image number 42, depicting the interior of *Burgtheater* (p.198), reveals the fact that this theatre building had an architecture that created a specific acoustics that made possible a clearer sound and perception of the most articulate musical details and words in the fast-paced musical fragments" (p. 236).

As for the scenography, which was initially the most important aspect of the newly established genre, it is analysed in terms of the personal vision and achievements of the most important scenographers of the time, such as Bernardo Buontalenti, Ludovico Ottavio Burnacini, Carlo Vigarani, Giacomo Torelli, Gianlorenzo Bernini, Fabrizio and Bernardino Galliari, Lorenzo Quaglio and Josef Platzer. On the other hand, the vision of the scenic painter or of the stage designer seems to have been the main attraction of the public back then and rightly so, if we look at some of the images comprised in our volume, fully capturing the manner in which scenographies of the time were set up.

In this context, we must mention Bernardo Buontalenti, the Italian stage designer who created "the most impressive theatrical effects ever presented to the public", for the interludes of Girolamo Bargagli's comedy *La Pellegrina* (Picture 1). As depicted in the sources we have explored, "in the first interlude, Armonia seemed to have been sitting on a cloud, singing a high and richly ornamented melodic line, accompanied on lute, while the background was opening to depict the starry skies and a finely ordered Cosmos populated by celestial bodies and mythological figures sitting on clouds and singing nuptial blessings to the young couple" (p. 69). Another example in this respect is Ludovico Ottavio Burnacini's impressive stage design for the opera *Il pomo d'oro,* by Marc'Antonio Cesti. This opera performance given in Vienna in 1668, staged at the *Hoftheater auf der Cortina* implied the design of no less than 24 different stage sets.

> "Under the umbrella of the metaphorical concept of *theatre as a micro-universe*, the scenographic vision essentially encompasses the entire iconography of time: the forest as a place of mystery, the cedar grove as a solitary place for dreaming, the garden as an extension of the palace and therefore, as the image of the upper class, the temple as an external sign of religious power, the battle camp as a projection of the past, the present and the future, the brink of hell as a visual metaphor of the terrifying Lucifer" (p. 76, Picture 2).

Picture 1

Bernardo Buontalenti, Intermedio 1, *L'armonia delle sfere*

Picture 2

Burnacini, *Bocca d'inferno*

Our book is structured in four chapters, each of them comprising a synoptic table that can be found at the end of the book, summarizing the information provided therein and capturing the evolution of the opera genre throughout the centuries. We can thus observe how, "from its very first forms of manifestation to its definitive shaping as an acknowledged musical genre, the lyrical theatre was in an ongoing reform process, in which the efforts of so many creative artists were directed towards its establishment as a *total show*, where the literary, musical and spectacular elements blend perfectly" (p.11).

The next chapter, entitled **Prefiguration of the lyrical performance,** describes the winding process through which opera was created. In this context, our aim is to point out that opera as theatrical performance "could not have come into being without going through the complex grinding process that involved the plethora of already existing creations trying to join together theatre, music, dance and stage settings in a unique and comprehensive visual and audible artistic act" (p. 11). When examining how these elements manifested in most previously created similar works, we decided to select and address only the most illustrative, as follows:

- the liturgical and vernacular medieval religious drama (*sacre rappresentazioni, mistere*);
- the secular theatre (*chanson de gestes, l'aube, reverdie, pastourelle, jeu, dramma pastorale, favola pastorale, intermedi, trionfi, canti carnascialenschi*);
- the dramatic madrigal

We are examining the main ideas of this chapter in the following next points of this study:

1. The liturgical drama emerged due to the religious practice of introducing dialogued evangelical texts that can be set on music and sung, into the liturgy, and it was considered as the main source of propagation of the medieval musical performance tradition of the Christian Church. Consequently, during the main holiday celebrations or on the days when certain saints were celebrated, the religious ceremony turned into small performances inside the places of worship, for which churches offered both the necessary space, as well as the officiating clergy. After a thorough analysis of the phenomenon, we have noticed, however, a propensity and desire to increase the spectacular attractiveness of these types of performances, so that "the texts gradually lose their evangelical content, the

Latin used in church being replaced by the language commonly used in the communities, dance pieces are also included in the ceremonial, the music diversifies its expressiveness by introducing instrumental accompaniment and folk songs, the performers are no longer part of the clergy, but amateur actors, and finally, the performance moves outside the church" (p.18).

2. The vernacular drama developed around the thirteenth century and is defined by "the way the recited sequences are merged with various dance scenes and melodic parts: praises, hunting songs, psalms, pastoral songs, lamentations, instrumental songs, etc. Its texts are usually composed in *ottava rima* (eight 11-syllable lines) and is traditionally assigned to a soloist or a whole group (usually a choir). The function of the music in this case is symbolic and ceremonial, the songs that are sung use both secular and sacred texts, are both monodic and polyphonic, and among the instruments used in this type of performance, we can mention the horn, the trumpet, drums, etc. From the perspective of the transformation and evolution of the genre, one element we find fascinating in this context is the addition of dance scenes, known as *ballo*, which are highly imaginative, with staging details described down to the smallest detail" (p. 19). These performances, mostly held in front of the churches or in public squares, seem to have gradually become more and more extravagant and developed into the main means of attraction of such artistic displays, just as it happened later with the opera itself which, in the early stages of development, owed its success to similar impressive stage *tricks* and theatrical effects: flying vehicles, secret escape hatches for the appearance and disappearance of characters, tunnels, pulleys, magnificent costumes and so many other captivating theatrical props. The extent and scale of the process of creating and staging religious dramas implied the existence of a person who took the role of organizing and coordinating the staging from the ground up. Such a role was played by the "leader of secrets" (*le conduiseur de secrets/le meneur du jeu*), who took on specific tasks regarding the manner of staging in the French vernacular dramas.

3. The secular drama of the Middle Ages coexists alongside the liturgical drama. The subject matters are narrated in verses that are recited, sung, and often accompanied by dance and performed in front of an audience in public squares. This type of performance contains a series of means of expression like those specific to lyrical theatre. Along these lines, similarities with the later comic opera can be also found "in the way in which Adam de la Halle combines the sung parts with the spoken pieces, as well as with the dancing musical passages, in the *pastourelle*. Furthermore, the Italian *intermedio* of the Ferrara region in Italy seems to have been the source of many future opera performances, as well as an

important influence in the developing of a taste for extravagant staging. As a related point, the *canti carnascialenschi* (carnival songs) were a source of inspiration for many subsequent plans to design an eminently vocal theatrical and musical composition" (p.205-206).

4. The dramatic madrigal emerged in the 16th century, when the secular vocal music entered a new stage, due to a new, ground-braking compositional vision, namely, that "there must be a clear connection and an expressive relationship between the sound uttered and the declaimed text" (p.28). As a result, "the vocal compositional art was freed from fixed strophic variations (stanza-refrain), in which several verses belonged to the same musical phrase, and takes a new polyphonic form, with a free, non-strophic prosodic construction" (p.29). The *Madrigali drammatici, rappresentativi, dialogici* or *comedia madrigalistica* are the names that will mark the first step of the dialogue in the field of secular vocal music. A clear narrative thread connects and provides coherence and oneness to the madrigals, in which various stories are depicted, from masquerades, soirées and parlour game evenings to boat trips or meetings of women doing the laundry. Regarding the characters, they are permanently engaged in the action that takes place in the monologues and dialogues that are developed between groups of voices or between distinct, individual voices. As for madrigal-specific comedies, composers seem to have taken over situations and characters from the *Commedia dell'arte*, just as it happened later in the case of the comic opera.

Another chapter in our book, entitled **The Birth of Opera** tries to answer some important questions intended to make us understand the way the opera show came into being and eventually crystallized as a fully-fledged genre, from a literary, musical and staging perspective. In this context, the analysis we gave on the artistic works belonging to the artists affiliated with the *Florentine Camerata* and on Claudio Monteverdi's creations, aims to clarify a series of aspects, such as "the conditions and tendencies that boosted the genesis of opera as a genre, the personality and the activity of the first opera composers, the principles that formed the basis of their creations, the composition patterns they were using, as well as the groundwork and premises of opera staging" (p. 205).

The following section of this study aims at outlining the main ideas of this chapter:

1. The Florentine Camerata is a group of Florentine artists active at the beginning of the seventeenth century, who created "a different and new type of musical and theatrical performance, namely the *melodrama* or *dramma per musica*", from a genuine desire to revive Greek tragedy and its music" (p 205). The Florentine artists saw the model of the Greek tragedy

as a return to the simple, monodic melodic line which, accompanied in a low-key manner, was strictly subordinated to the poetic text. This new form gradually replaced the polyphonic practice of the time, which, "because of the exacerbated increase in vocal densities, had reached a point of cancelling the much-needed literary support of vocal music" (p.14).

Consequently, a new musical style emerged, known as *stille recitativo*, *recitar cantando* or *stille rappresentativo*. The first compositions based on this style were produced and performed in the palace of Giovanni Bardi and are the result of a close collaboration between librettists, composers and sometimes the singers themselves. Ottavio Rinuccini's *Favola di Dafne* (1597), set to music by Jacopo Peri, was the first opera performance trying to combine melody lines with speech, while *Euridice* (1600) is their entirely preserved first composition that was represented as entertainment, on a stage, with sets, stage effects, dances, choirs, vocal and instrumental music" (p. 206). "The transition to a type of performance that begins to resemble opera as we know it from the eighteenth century onwards (namely a complex structure resulting from the interweaving of poetry, music, dance, scenery and costumes) is marked for the first time by the composer Emilio de' Cavalieri. His emblematic creation is entitled *Rappresentazione di Anima e di Corpo* (1600) and is the first religious drama written in the style of *recitar cantando*" (p. 206).

2. The Italian composer **Claudio Monteverdi** is the one who condensed all the compositional achievements of his predecessors, managing to establish the defining features of opera as a stand-alone genre and to set the pattern that it has followed ever since. The themes of his opera compositions are inspired by mythology and history, and his dramas are structured in acts and scenes, being preceded by prologues and sometimes by instrumental parts (*toccata, sinfonia*). "With Monteverdi, the style of *recitar cantando* (speech in song or recitative) evolved towards shaping the *recitative-aria* pattern, the instruments being used to shape and subtly express the infinity of feelings experienced by the characters, or to create a specific atmosphere, while the actors' performance becomes more and more important, and their body expression tends to become more and more appropriate and adapted to the dramatic sense intended. Furthermore, Monteverdi is also the creator of the *concitato* style, meant to transpose the feelings of tension, anxiety or turmoil of the characters into music" (pp. 206-207).

The chapter entitled **The Emergence of Opera as a Performance** covers the factors, composers and compositions that contributed to the dissemination of opera as a new artistic genre to the Italian cities and abroad, starting from the premise that, in the seventeenth century, the opera was a "*spectacular spectacle*" (p. 207).

The main ideas of this chapter are presented in the following section:

1. In Italy, the spectacularly visual elements of opera were, to some extent, an "inheritance" passed down from the Florentine intermedio (*intermedi*). The specific pomp and ostentatious display were captured in sketches and drawings made by the very painters and scenographers of these performances; these true works of art managed to survive throughout time, until today, in the form of engravings. "Another important factor that led to the rapid dissemination of opera throughout Italy was the opening in Venice, in 1637, of the first public theatre, the *Teatro San Casiano"* (pp. 207-208). This first event was followed by the opening of other public theatres, with initially unforeseen, but immediate consequences on the structure and content of the genre. Thus, "from a performance that was exclusively dedicated to an aristocratic audience at first, the opera became accessible to anyone who could afford to buy a ticket to such a spectacle" (p. 208). Later, the genre is enriched by new forms of musical and theatrical composition such as the Roman sacred opera (*dramma musicale*) and the Neapolitan comic opera.

2. In France, the opera originates from the multitude of types of dance performances. "With Lully, Molière and their ballet comedies (*comédies-ballets*), the dancing parts of these performances were merged together for the first time with the comic theme, in a fluent and cohesive artistic display" (p. 208). Lully's *Tragédie en musique* is a model of syncretic performance combining music, speech, dance, and stage performance in equal proportions. Staging is an essential aspect in this respect, being the result of a close cooperation between choreographers, musicians (concerning voice and stage directions) and the librettist (about diction, attitude, etc). On the other hand, the sumptuousness of opera productions was preserved, the stage scenery being designed and installed by the same Italian scenographers.

3. In England, opera performances failed to make a significant impact initially, having landed on a less favorable and *fertile* ground compared to Italy or France, due to the long-established and rooted tradition of theatre, of the spoken drama, respectively, and the popular drama, the so-called *masques*.

The composer who led the way towards the establishment of musical theatre in England was Henry Purcell, who created the *semi-opera* or the *dramatick opera*, a peculiar English form combining singing, the spoken dialogue, music, drama, and scenography (Italian-inspired). Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* is considered his greatest work and the first English opera in the true sense of the word, consisting of overture, arias (songs), ariosos, duets, choirs, and dances.

> "The opera performance of the seventeenth century is characterized by a marked heterogeneousness that combines the tragic and the comic at a dramaturgical and a musical level, thereby constantly mixing the serious scenes with various comic episodes. This practice was maintained until the beginning of the eighteenth century when the old *dramma per musica*, an aristocratic form in its essence, excluded the comic element from the librettos, since it has been perceived as irrelevant to the subject and inappropriate to the tragic style. This was also the moment when the need to rediscover the reasonableness and simplicity of life finds its refuge in comic operatic forms, originating from the everyday lives of the people. The two distinct tendencies will mark the definitive separation between the serious and the comic as artistic styles, which from this point onward will grow into two different and independent genres of opera, the *opera seria* and the comic opera" (p.121).

The chapter entitled **The Two Subgenres of Opera in the Eighteenth Century: The Opera Seria and the Comic Opera**, aims at highlighting the way the fundamental features of opera as a standalone artistic form of expression were definitely established, up to the synthesis made by Mozart.

The next section of this analysis outlines the main ideas of this chapter

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the opera genre was divided into two new subgenres: opera *seria* and the *comic* opera.

The emergence of *opera seria* occurs in two stages:

1. The first reform of the 1700s, also called the *Arcadian Reformation*, due to the fact that it had been initiated by members of the *Accademia dell'Arcadia*, was perceived as a major aesthetic and moral revival, "pushing forward considerable efforts of purging the opera of the heavy load of scenographic ballast and of the elements that were considered "immoral" at that time and had no place in a stage performance, since the new reform envisaged a clear separation of genres and the coherence of the libretto" (p. 209).

2. The second reform took place in the middle of the eighteenth century and was pushed through by a series of composers such as Niccolò Jommelli (in Stuttgart), Tommaso Traetta (in Parma and Mannheim) and Christoph Willibald Gluck (in Vienna). In this respect, the operatic reform considered revising the miscellaneous mixture between the genres, as well as the stage performance of opera artists. As we have already indicated in this

paper, although this second reform is known as "Gluck's reform", due credit cannot be given entirely and exclusively to Gluck, as has long been claimed. "Animated by the same reforming aspirations, Jommelli and Traetta have also contributed greatly to the metamorphosis of the operatic phenomenon, although their ideas seem to have materialized in a different manner; they came up with a series of original solutions that enabled them to eventually save *opera seria* and maintain it among the public's preferences, which was not exactly easy to achieve at a time when the rapid emergence of *comic opera* was a difficult success to match" (p.149).

In England, the continued, considerable efforts to create a genre of opera specific to the English culture and people, were not entirely successful and appreciated by the public, as revealed by the sources we have consulted, which indicate that in the eighteenth century, "opera performance is still dominated by Italian productions, which exerted a powerful attraction on the public, mainly for the spectacularity of their installations". The same sources tell us that Händel, on the other hand, managed to compose *opera seria* in the traditional style, although reshaping it and giving it a new look.

The *comic opera* emerged as a necessary spectacular alternative, its themes reflecting people's everyday life, its style being obviously different from the pretentious format specific to *opera seria*. "From a simple form of entertainment at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the *comic opera* soared to an artistic form that was as highly appreciated as *opera seria* in the next fifty years, dominating the scenes of lyrical theatres everywhere in the second half of the century. Stemming from the flourishing cultural realm of Italy and from the style of the *opera buffa*, comic opera developed independently in other countries as well, thus creating various national forms, such as the French *opéra comique*, the English *ballad opera*, the German *Singspiel* or the Spanish *tonadilla*. All these forms share characteristics of a common origin, involving comic subjects, characters and situations taken from popular comedies or from real life, including spoken dialogues (except for the *opera buffa*) and interfering with songs in a simple and often parodic musical style" (p.149). "With the rapid emergence of *comic opera* and with the increasing importance of librettos, especially those written by Carlo Goldoni, the role of the librettist expanded considerably, as well. Despite having been heavily involved in organizing the opera performances already, in the past, the range of their tasks broaden to training the actors or to the re-adapting of the libretto and the music of new productions to the participating performers" (p.210). The deep involvement of librettists in this extensive reforming process of opera was also closely supported by the composers of the time, who used their best endeavors to create an integrated whole opera performance.

In this context, our research examines the activity of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart from a double perspective, namely his compositional contribution and his active involvement in the whole process of creating, adapting, amending, and completing opera performances. W. A. Mozart is "the first to compose in the Italian style of *opera seria*, *opera buffa* and *dramma giocoso* (cheerful drama), as well as in the specific style of the German *Singspiel*, bringing an unprecedented naturalness, genuineness and balance to the opera and its intrinsic components. With Mozart, composers began to assert their rights to intervene in the choice of the libretto, of the distribution and even in rehearsals, on stage. They were not mere composers, but also stage artists, primarily concerned with meeting the public's expectations, the needs and vocal capabilities of opera performers, as well as with the wider dimension of stage performance and interpretation" (p. 210).

> "One of our greatest desires during the research we have conducted for the purposes of this volume has been to foster and stimulate the general public's interest in opera and opera performances, by highlighting some essential facets and major dimensions in its history, as they have been shaped throughout centuries. At the same time, our approach wouldn't have been complete without accurately portraying the relentless pursuit, the tireless effort and passion of its creators, the revelation of its original charm and the infinite resources opera can mobilize, as a fully developed artistic genre. In this context, we would also like our research to advocate for a different approach to this type of performance that would bring more clarity, more structure, and more awareness, both from its creators, whether they are directors, conductors, stage designers, choreographers, or opera performers, as well as from music lovers and connoisseurs. We sincerely believe that adopting such a perspective would add the pleasure of intellectual understanding to the delightful aesthetic appreciation of opera as life experience" (p. 10).

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