

THE ARSENAL OF MEANS USED BY A CONDUCTOR IN DECODING AN OPERA SCORE

TRAIAN ICHIM¹

SUMMARY. For a conductor the text of the score is that building material used in the creation of “his own world”. This paper examines the system of means used by a conductor in creating an opera performance. A transformation of the “mobile” and “fixed” elements of the score into a magnificent world of opera performance. The study is based on material from a production of the opera *Orpheus by Claudio Monteverdi*, directed by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, conductor being Nikolaus Harnoncourt. This staging can certainly be considered one of the most striking examples of the remarkable interplay between conductor and director in an opera production. Each new revised edition of different opera titles, over the centuries, becomes the product of the personal vision of the creators, acting from the point of view of the aesthetics of its time.

Keywords: opera performance, conductor, compositional techniques, analysis, *Orpheus* by Claudio Monteverdi.

Pablo Casals said: “The performer, through the score he has in front of him, must strive to reconstruct, not a so-called objectivity, but the variety of mental states that generated this score, and this according to the deep resonance they awaken in his own to lie... The execution must give the work the fullness of sensible existence and transform its ideal existence into real existence”². For a conductor the text of the score is that building

¹ Conductor, Univ. Lecturer PhD, Transilvania University of Braşov, Faculty of Music, B-dul Eroilor nr. 29, Cod postal 500036, Braşov, România, traian.ichim@unitbv.ro

² Casals, Pablo - Corredor, José Maria. *Conversations avec Pablo Casals* (Conversations with Pablo Casals). Ed. Michel Albin, Paris, 1955, pp. 245-246.



material used in the creation of “his own world”³. The possibility of building this personal world different from others is due, first of all, to the presence of several interpretable or so-called “mobile” elements of the score. By these means we understand: the character (both the character of the work and the character of the opera characters, which the music plays), the *tempo* (and here we can include both pauses and caesuras), dynamic nuances, phrasing, articulation, but also the accents on which we find in an opera score. Such a transformation of the “mobile” elements of the score into a new world of the performance we set out to follow based on a material from an *Orpheus* production⁴, directed by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, conductor being Nikolaus Harnoncourt⁵. This staging can certainly be considered one of the most striking examples of the remarkable interplay between conductor and director in an opera production.

The general character is indicated in the score by terms from several languages: Italian, German, French, etc. Here we find notations such as: *Vivace* – lively, *Maestoso* – solemn, *Grave* – heavy, *Amabile* – graceful, *Dolce* – gently, *Lebhaft* – livelier, *Très modere* – very moderate, etc.⁶ Such terms also often appear in the middle of the work, showing adjacent shifts in character. Sometimes it refers to a particular phrase or motif, sometimes to a single chord or even a single note. These indications allow for a very subjective interpretation, giving a general idea of the nature of the music. Especially that *Adagio*, before the Orpheus aria in the third act of the work of the same title by Claudio Monteverdi, which only gives a general suggestion for the theatrical action since the meaning of the word *Adagio* is only “slow”. In this production Nikolaus Harnoncourt extends the meaning of the term *Adagio* only to the opening phrases, changing this character with each new plea of Orpheus.

Another element would be the *tempo*, which can be determined by the notations at the beginning of the work (*Moderato* – moderate, *Allegro* – fast, etc.). Interestingly, some notations give an idea of both tempo and character. This *adagio*, which we talked about above, can be not only slow, but also calm, as well as *vivace* – lively, *Lebhaft* – full of life, *Très modere* – very rarely, as well as many others. Each *tempo* indication is subject to

³ Ichim, Traian. „Conceptul de stil în interpretarea scenică a unei partituri muzicale” (The concept of style in the stage interpretation of a musical score). În: Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov – Supplement Series VIII: Performing Arts, Vol. 13 (62) No. 2 special issue, 2021, pp. 1-2

⁴ the first and most widespread plot in the history of the opera to this day

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8361qIY8wPk> (accesat pe 15 mai 2023)

⁶ Călin, Carleta-Steluţa *Dicţionar de termeni muzicali* (Dictionary of musical terms), Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, Bucureşti, 1984.

different interpretations since such notations do not show the relation of this *tempo* to the actual time (minutes or seconds)⁷. In addition, it is difficult to play in the same *tempo*, indicated at the beginning of the work, the dramatic and psychological changes that take place in the musical drama. In Ponnell – Harnoncourt's production, the performers demonstrate a lively, creative attitude to the *tempos* indicated by the composer. The rhythm within the numbers accurately reproduces the nature of the action, but also the state of the characters. In this sense, the transformations and *tempo* changes in all of Orpheus' arias are suggestive. Another characteristic episode is – the reaction of the shepherds to the tragic message of the Messenger. Even though at the beginning of the scene there is only one *tempo* indication of the author, within the soloist statements the tempo undergoes changes related to the reaction of the characters within the action. The meaning of the notations that require changes in *tempo* is also relative: hastening – *accelerando* or rarefied – *ritenuto* (or the corresponding terms from French, German, etc.). Therefore, with the invention of the metronome⁸, composers began to display *tempo* indications in both musical terms and numbers⁹. However, it is almost impossible to get a *tempo* that exactly matches the metronome indicated. Thus, all methods of *tempo* determination that have been used so far offer a great deal of freedom to the performer.

An important element in musical discourse is breaks (*pauses*). The score text indicates a certain duration of each break. In practice, the break may be longer or shorter (for various artistic or technical reasons). Equally important in musical dramaturgy are caesuras, the so-called delays or stops on certain notes or pauses, which are not regulated by a certain time. This is a very important, efficient, and effective procedure in carrying out the action. In Ponnell – Harnoncourt's production, in the scene where Orpheus leads Eurydice out of the underworld, there are some interesting episodes in this regard. In the first of these, Orpheus breaks the caesura and in complete silence¹⁰ he tries to turn to Eurydice. The chorus screams, warning him. In the next episode, the break already occurs after Orpheus turns to Eurydice. And here, the pause is not indicated by the author¹¹ –

⁷ By the way, there was a system for determining the tempo, based on the ratio of the number of beats of the human pulse to a unit of time. Its author was Joachim Quantz, who pointed it out in his work „Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversière zu spielen“ in 1752. For more information about this system, see Fritz Rothschild. *Musical Time of Mozart and Beethoven Performance in the*. (The Lost Tradition in Music). Part II. London. 1961.

⁸ It was patented by German inventor Johann Nepomuk Mälzel in the early 19th century.

⁹ The figure represents a number of beats per minute that a certain duration contains.

¹⁰ Here there is no pause in Monteverdi's score.

¹¹ A small caesura is however used by the director and conductor when changing a chord and to lengthen it, wanting to emphasize the drama of the situation.

here it is appropriate and understandable – Orpheus is shocked, he sees Eurydice again. And the third break in this short episode will last longer than the previous ones, because after it one of the spirits of Hades enters with the final decision: “you have broken the law and are not worthy of mercy.”

As for the nuances, in the early works dynamic notations appear very rarely in scores. For a long time, only *forte* and *piano* indications were used almost exclusively. Over time, more and more gradations appear, as well as signs of transition from one shade to another – signs of amplification or fading of sonority: *crescendo* and *diminuendo*. The conductor, first, should clearly understand what is “loud” or “slow” in a given work, in a certain aesthetic context, in a certain historical period and in a certain interpretative vision. Moreover, how this dynamic can be expressed in different spaces, on a certain instrument and by a certain performer. The conductor will pay special attention to creating a sound balance both in the orchestra and in the pit–stage relationship. Orchestral instruments have different sound powers. For example, in classical orchestration composers used to balance the sonorous power of one trumpet with the sonority of two horns or four wind instruments (flute, oboe, clarinets, bassoon). For a long time, the nuances written by the composer in the score had a general character, being valid for the entire orchestra. And the task of the conductor was to create a sonic balance in a perfect ratio of the dynamics of different orchestral groups where the wind instruments did not cover the string group and the trumpets did not blur the woodwind instruments. Later we see that Brahms and Tchaikovsky even began notating different shades in various orchestral groups, and Mahler and other composers after him wanted to differentiate shades within instrumental groups as well.

The Ponnell – Harnoncourt performance contains many examples of creative and meticulous work in dynamic notation. In this sense, the diverse palette of nuances in the stage action in Orpheus’ aria from the third act is particularly interesting. Orpheus begs Charon to carry him. An echo effect occurs several times in the score, when the first violin performs a short motif, which is then repeated by the second violin, but more slowly. There are two violinists on stage at this moment. They stand with their backs to each other. We see the face of one of them, the face of the other is a death mask. One actually sings a phrase, the other barely moves her hand, only imitating the singing, while the barely perceptible sounds of the orchestra can be heard from the pit. The same scene is repeated by two cornets. In both cases the philosophy would be that: sound is opposed to silence, the earthly world to the underworld, and life to death.

Another component of the “mobile” elements of the score is phrasing, the semantic division of a musical text, which is often marked by the author with large *legatos*. A ligature joins together a group of notes that

render a relatively complete musical idea called a phrase. And when these *legatos* do not appear in the score, the phrasing becomes entirely a personal vision of the performer. Phrasing clearly demonstrates the performer's understanding of the content, meaning and construction of the musical text and is a characteristic of one's own performance style. In opera, the performer who imposes his musical concept is the conductor. He is the one who forms and phrases the musical discourse both in the orchestra and on the stage. But when working on phrasing, the conductor can only start from the character, from the image of the character, the one invented by the director. And here a full mutual creative understanding between them is required. This is precisely the kind of collaboration that Ponnell and Harnoncourt have and demonstrate it to the full in their production. If Ponnell's Messenger is conceived as a statue, his phrases also being as if carved, then the phrasing in *Orpheus's* score has a completely different character, which corresponds perfectly to its stage image.

An important element of musical speech is articulation, it represents ways of attack and transition from one sound to another. The articulation is usually marked by the composer with special articulation marks: *legatos*, dots, or lines above the notes, but also various types of accents or marks (*sf*, *fp*, etc.). Each of these notations carries certain information about the nature of the sound on a particular note or group of notes. At the same time, the line connecting several notes requires a unified and inseparable interpretation. A dot above the note shortens the sound, taking from one-third to three-quarters of its length¹². However, the degree of linking of the notes, the amount of reduction in their duration, and the nature of the accents largely depend on the performer. Articulation is the most vulnerable phenomenon in relation to the author's text because it is associated with the language and phonetics of speech. In Harnoncourt's version, the articulation of the musical text comes from the character of the opera personage and the state he is reliving at that moment. The Messenger, for example, presents a somewhat detached overall picture of pain. This image corresponds to the nature of the articulation of the phrases – firm and unified, emphasizing the character of the drama that has just happened. On the other hand, in *Orpheus's* arias, especially in the aria from the third act, his suffering is rendered more subtly, through phrases that are articulated much more diversely.

An important resource in the architecture of the sound edifice is concerned with the various features of the bow, or in other words, the ways of producing sound on stringed instruments. They are based on a certain nature of the bow's movement (smooth, jerky, vigorous). The bow strokes can give the sound a very different character and color. In the score, composers do not always write all the bow technique they want, leaving some freedom

¹² Depending on the style of the work and the period in which it was written.

to the performers. The conductor must use bow strokes as one of the tools with which he creates an image, outlines the character and the scene of the action. Harnoncourt, for example, skillfully uses this instrument, emphasizing and highlighting the character of the dances in Monteverdi's *Orpheus*. Thus, in the dance in the second act, the bowing strokes of the string group reveal the transition from a binary pulsation to a ternary one, and in the final moresca dance we get closer to its leaping and galloping character.

All the above applies to the conductor's work with the so-called "mobile" elements of the score. But even the "fixed" elements of the score, such as pitch, rhythm, orchestration allow some freedom in their interpretation, which gives additional possibilities to the conductor as a creator.

As regards to pitch, the conductor, of course, like any other performer, has no right to change any note written by the author, except for obvious typographical errors. However, some changes are possible within the melody. By slightly lowering or raising the intonation of certain notes¹³, the performer can somewhat change the relationship of the notes within the melody, or the force of their resolution in the reference tones. Together with a slight change in tempo and rhythm (a slight slowdown before the resolution) this can be a very effective dramatic device. And such examples, regarding the treatment of the musical text, we find a lot in the performance conducted musically by Harnoncourt, especially in the role of *Orpheus*.

Another element imposed by the composer, which cannot be changed by the performer, is the rhythm. At the same time, the performer can allow himself some freedom within the measure. For example, he can slightly stretch one note while slightly shortening the other. In this case, the absolute time of the measure remains unchanged. These deviations, together with some changes in *tempo*, are called agogics and give impetuous life to the musical text. The use of agogics is an effective dramaturgical technique and allows for a more intense psychologization of the musical discourse. With Harnoncourt at the lectern, the singers often use such deviations from the original *tempo* and rhythm. This is especially noticeable in recitatives, that is, where the intonation, *tempo* and rhythm of the music should be as close as possible to the same parameters of human speech.

Orchestration is another invariable element of the score. The tendency to note in the score all the instruments involved in the performance of the work can be traced back to the time of performances of *Orpheus* under the direction of Monteverdi¹⁴, however, the opera's orchestration often undergoes changes.

¹³ Naturally, within the limits of the vibrations allocated by the acoustics of the respective note.

¹⁴ Schonberg, Harold C. *Viețile marilor compozitori (The Lives of the Great Composers)*, Editura Lider, București, 1997, pp.15-30.

In the first two stages of the history of opera conducting¹⁵, orchestration changes were often dictated by the lack of necessary instruments required by the score, but also by space in the theaters. For example, up to forty instrumentalists participated in the performance of Monteverdi's Orpheus in the orchestra. Huge for those times, such an orchestra could not be used in any space. These causes are also effective in the third period. The original instruments from the 16th–18th centuries have almost fallen out of practice. Instruments that were used (and marked by authors in scores as obligatory) in the late 19th – early 20th centuries have disappeared or are on the verge of extinction. The tools that disappear are replaced by other, much more evolved ones. Thus, in Ponnell – Harnoncourt's production, the orchestra is missing ten violas *da braccio*, as well as other ancient instruments notated in Monteverdi's score.

The increase in the size of the performance halls makes it necessary to amplify the orchestral formula. First of all, the string group, and after that, to maintain a dynamic balance, the wind instruments have to be doubled. On the other hand, there are more and more small, chamber opera houses whose size of the orchestra pit makes it necessary to use orchestrations specially created for this small space. From the end of the 19th century, modifications of the original orchestrations become a frequent artistic practice.

The most radical means in the hands of a conductor is to approach a new version, in which many “mobile” and partly “fixed” elements of the score are subjected to various transformations. And here we are not only talking about changing the order of the numbers in that edition, but also possible jumps within the musical numbers. There is also the possibility of canceling some numbers or even entire scenes. It is also the conductor who can enter several new numbers. In the production signed by Ponnell – Harnoncourt, for example, at the beginning of the fifth act after the text of Orpheus: “All the other women were obsessed with envy for the one who was so gifted. They are devoid of reason and noble thoughts, and reasoning is unknown to them. Now Cupid will never pierce my heart with love for a base and contemptible race”, a scene of Orpheus torn apart by the Bacchantes (interestingly, they are joined by the women in the chorus) will follow, which is not found in score. The scene unfolds to the music of a moresca, the dance that concludes the entire opera. At the end of the scene, one of the “symphonies of hell” plays, but at a much slower pace than in its previous

¹⁵ The process of the evolution of opera conducting seems to be, at least today, divided into three semantic periods. In the first period, which takes place during the 17th century – and the first half of the 18th century, the composer himself serves as the musical coordinator. The appearance of a professional conductor belongs to the second period, starting with the second half of the 18th century - at the turn of the 19th - 20th centuries. The third period, starting with the 20th century, is directly related to directing and is open for semantic saturation to this day.

performances. Here it has the character of a funeral march. However, such a concept does not seem to be very convincing. First, because it contradicts the idea of using an invariable leitmotif – and the “symphony of hell” should appear in the opera’s dramaturgy as an unchanging leitmotif that characterizes the underworld. In the original, this music, interpreted after Orpheus’s laments, sounds like a memory of the world Eurydice has gone to forever.

It should be noted that Ponnelle – Harnoncourt’s *Orpheus* is not performed by a tenor as the score suggests, but by a baritone. Incidentally, in all productions and recordings with this title, the role of Orpheus is performed by a tenor. Perhaps, for the creators of the show, the dramatic skill of the singer was more important than the vocal color. Or maybe the authors of the production wanted to emphasize the masculinity of the character, escaping from the sphere of castrated tenors, so familiar to the 17th-18th centuries.

Moreover, an interesting phenomenon appears in the 20th century when we discover editions whose purpose was to adapt old works to the new conditions of existence: modern instruments with different acoustic and technical capabilities, modern stages with the entire complex of modern theatrical equipment, but also the new vocal and physical standards that an opera soloist must have. Such editions include, for example, R. Strauss’ adaptations of Gluck’s *Iphigenia in Tauris* and Mozart’s *Idomeneo*, as well as B. Britten’s version of H. Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*.

Another method used by the conductor can be the conscious movement of the orchestra in the theatrical space. Thus, Ponnelle and Harnoncourt use as an archetype a general participation in the performance, the aesthetics of that moment in the history of opera (the first decades of the 17th century) when the instrumentalists come out from behind the curtain and are placed on stage: such a moment is the wedding scene, where a musician appears among the singers, who accompanies them from time to time on different instruments – using various lutes¹⁶. Instrumentalists appear on stage in this show several times¹⁷.

Changing the place of the orchestra in the pit can also be used to create certain dramatic effects. For example, a group of brass instruments might be placed directly in front of the conductor, with the bells of the instruments facing the hall. Thus, the brass will sound brighter, louder, which, of course, will change the overall dynamic balance of the orchestra, change the timbre ratio, and ultimately, of course, influence the character of the sound discourse in the score. On the contrary, the harshness and

¹⁶ Voileanu-Nicoară, Ana. *Contribuții la problematica interpretării muzicale (Contributions to the issue of musical interpretation)*. Editura MediaMusica, 2005, pag. 22-23

¹⁷ For example, in the third act, in the aria of Orpheus - two violinists, then two trumpeters.

excessive brightness of the brass instruments can be mitigated by placing them at the left or right end of the orchestra pit, pointing the bells of the instruments towards the stage. Of course, all these procedures, as well as other possible changes in location within the orchestra, even more so moving it to the theater space, are impossible and even lose their meaning without an agreement with the director of the show.

Jean-Pierre Ponnelle and Nikolaus Harnoncourt often use the orchestra pit itself as a figurative element of the performance. Into the pit descend the shadows that carry Charon across the Styx. Orpheus also goes there in search of Eurydice. Eurydice also appears from the orchestra pit brought back to life. In the last act, Orpheus emerges from the pit as if from a dungeon. Thus, the spatial parameters of the hall become the spatial coordinates of the show.

In conclusion, we can say that the mission of musical interpretation, its higher purpose, is the authentic revival of the soul profile of the musical creator and the era he represents. At the same time, the purpose of the artistic act is the interpretation of the human character, generally valid, of the artistic message enclosed in the musical notation, but also the revelation of the higher, aesthetic, and ethical meanings, immanent to the work of art. The performer must discover the individualizing, humanizing and transfiguring potential of the art of sounds.

The problem with the aesthetics of today's opera performance is not that it is outside the context of contemporary theatre. The performances of recent years on the best stages of the world are not inferior to dramatic performances in the boldness of scenographic decisions, in the novelty of directorial concepts. Today, when the opera has abandoned, without regret, its previous aesthetic principles, the question is different, to what extent these innovations correspond to the content, form, and language of this type of theater. Moreover, how these innovations relate to the capabilities of the performer, relying on music in the stage transposition of his role¹⁸.

We cannot conclude our study without recalling the statements of Karl von Pidoll in his book *Thoughts on Being an Artist*, in which the author claims that "The performer stands in the middle between the composer's vision – the objective work of art without material reality – and the soul the listener, where, over the bridge of the material sound he creates, the composer's vision is born in his immaterial reality"¹⁹.

¹⁸ Ichim, Traian. *Op.cit.*, p. 6-7

¹⁹ von Pidoll, Karl. *Elly Ney. Gedanken über eine Künstlertum (Thoughts about being an artist)*, Helling'sche Verlagsanstalt, Leipzig, 1942, p. 119

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