

## THE INNOVATIVE ELEMENT IN THE GENRE OF OPERA OR THE MODERNITY OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN THE CONTEMPORARY LYRIC THEATER

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**SUMMARY.** This paper examines the evolutionary process of moving from traditional styles to pioneering directions in the opera genre. This phenomenon expressed itself in a mixture of styles and forms of language, in the integration of different types of artistic means of expression. Another issue would be related to the nature of the lyrical tradition, its need for preservation and continuity, and the extent to which innovation is tolerated in opera to ensure that artistic works do not cross genre boundaries. It is a new phenomenon for contemporary actors and audiences, the one present in the theater today. By examining the evolution of the art of opera, it was possible to identify the general pattern of development of innovative opera and to argue that artistic integration is the source of diversity on stage and the basis of innovation in opera production. For this purpose, a cultural-historical and historical-artistic approach was used. The academic novelty of the study consists, first of all, in the complex analysis of the sources related to the translation of meta-language in lyrical art, and secondly, the incorporation of these sources in the academic circulation as important and significant for the recognition of the reform of the opera genre.

**Keywords:** opera performance, opera direction, traditions, innovations, synthesis of arts, meanings.

The opera genre was created in an aristocratic environment and was always surrounded by an aura of wealth, an atmosphere of elegance, an aura of refinement. Contemporary culture emphasizes not only the conventionality of this genre, but also stereotypical beliefs about its old-fashioned, conservative

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nature and flattering bourgeois tastes, which translates into the view that the artistic importance of this art form is relatively low<sup>2</sup>.

The convention of opera performance, developed in earlier centuries, survived in most theaters until the end of the 20th century and still largely applies in our times. It can be said that the directors who follow this trend rarely propose anything other than an elegant staging of the opera, and their inventiveness is limited by the desire to faithfully present on stage what they find in stage directions.

Despite the elegance and meticulousness of staging, classical opera productions must be described as aesthetic tautologies, because the directorial frames in them are only the implementation of the supposed idea of the creators of the opera - the librettist and the composer. Individual creation, transformation of meanings, and attempts to illuminate less obvious meanings or contexts are lacking in such performances.

In the trend of tautological stagings, the director's creative strategy consists in the faithful reproduction of the original form of the presented work without considering the variability of the cultural and social historical contexts, which in modern times are no longer important or even legible for the recipient<sup>3</sup>.

This aspect is of particular importance today, because the opera theater of the 20th and 21st centuries functions differently from the previous three centuries, when new, contemporary and fashionable works appeared on the stage. They remained for some time in the repertoire of various scenes, after which they were consigned to the history books and, in general, did not have any reception. In the 20th and 21st centuries, most contemporary opera performances are in a similar situation, with individual stage performances reaching very small audiences. The repertoire of opera houses is dominated by the canon of operas primarily from the 19th century (but also the oldest - from the baroque and classical periods). The public knows them perfectly, because they had the opportunity to see them many times in various stage productions. Directors, aware of the difference in audience attitudes towards new and canonical opera titles, approach contemporary and classic operas differently<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Ichim, Traian. „Geneza și metamorfoza genului de operă” (*The genesis and metamorphosis of the opera genre*). In: Proceedings of the Art and Science. National Musicology Symposium, edited within the Transilvania University of Braşov, year 2011, pp.69–79.

<sup>3</sup> Pencak, William. “Cherubini Stages a Revolution.” In: *The Opera Quarterly* 8, nr. 1 (1991): pp. 8–27.

<sup>4</sup> Ichim, Traian. „Arta spectacolului de operă în secolul XX, între tradiție și inovație” (*The art of the opera performance in the 20th century, between tradition and innovation*). In: Art and Science, Symposium held as part of the artistic and scientific events dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the Faculty of Music in Braşov, Transilvania University Publishing House, Braşov 2010, pp. 88–96.

The 20th century appears as a century of paradoxes in the sphere of creation, which included both text and artistic language, as well as artistic thought processes. The art of opera was at the epicenter of the reconstruction. The changes were reflected most significantly in the directorial process, which gave birth to innovative forms in an opera performance.

At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a revolutionary aesthetic change in the understanding of the meaning and message of theatrical art, under the influence of artists such as Adolf Appiah, Edward Gordon Craig, Vshevolod Meyerhold and Konstantin Stanislavsky. These great theater reformers emphasized the originality and timeliness of the director's interpretation and the audience's involvement in the performance<sup>5</sup>. However, this change eluded the opera, which remained a conventional show, detached from life's problems and whose main purpose was to express feelings through the beautiful singing of great artists.

The real revolution in the sphere of impact of the opera house took place only in the second half of the 20th century, when, especially in Berlin, experiments were undertaken that involved a complete departure from the conventional character of the performance and the universal extraction and qualities current. The directorial tradition of German theater, in which the director freely uses the contexts of the staged work to present it in a new perspective, was also implemented in the opera genre<sup>6</sup>. This can be considered the beginning of the "great opera reform", where a work in musical theater became a pretext or starting point for telling vivid stories, more suited to the sensibilities of contemporary audiences. This type of staging has become the basis of discussions about the director's opera theater (*Opern-Regietheater*), in which the opera is perceived as a place of dialogue with social, political and religious reality, and this is achieved through new aesthetic solutions<sup>7</sup>. One of the founding fathers of this trend should be Walter Felsenstein (1901–1975), who, as head of the Komische Opera in Berlin in the years 1947–1975, created his own version of the opera house. For Felsenstein, the topicality of the issues of the staged work was important, which is why he often introduced far-reaching changes not only in the place and time of the action, but especially in the ways of influencing the audience<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Braun, Kazimierz and Braun, Justyna. "The Great Theater Reform in Europe: A Historical Study, 1887–1939". Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Stadelmaier, Gerhard. „Regisseurstheater: Auf den Bühnen des Zeitgeists“ (*Director's Theater: On the stages of the zeitgeist*). Springe: Klampen Verlag, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Schläder, Jürgen. „OperMachtTheaterBilder: Neue Wirklichkeiten des Regietheaters“ (*Opera Makes Theater Images: New Realities of Directed Theater*). Leipzig: Henschel, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Koban, Ilse and Felsenstein, Walter. „Theater – Gespräche, Briefe, Dokumente“ (*Theater – conversations, letters, documents*). Berlin: Hentrich, 1991.

The ideas that Felsenstein implemented on the stage of the *Komische Oper*, although innovative and original, had a rather limited sphere of influence and were not reflected in the staging styles of the productions presented in the most prestigious opera centers, such as *La Scala* from Milan or the *Paris Opera*. However, over time, the traditional approach to staging opera began to change even in the most prestigious institutions. Maria Callas brought a breath of fresh air to opera from the early 1950s to the 1960s, emphasizing deeply personal interpretations. This ensured both emotional truth and highlighted the importance of the artist's individuality in constructing the expression of the opera performance<sup>9</sup>. Thanks to the new concept, opera became popular from the 1970s onwards, including among people who until then were only interested in the entertainment provided by other genres.

Therefore, it can be said that two contradictory trends coexist in contemporary lyrical theatre. One is tautological staging, the tendency to perpetuate the previous idea of the opera as a high art form, a form that remains acceptable and desirable to certain audiences, allowing social distinction and ostentation of status, while perpetuating conservative ideas about the function of art. The other is an innovative staging proposal, a kind of escape from the tautology of operatic conventions in the context of pop culture. The purpose of this type of artistic activity is to translate the problems and signs of the work into recognizable codes for an audience that is not necessarily familiar with the lyrical tradition. It is this second tendency that is the subject of these papers, and the examples that document the thesis of the disappearance of tautology are mainly works from the 21st century, especially in German-language theaters, where directorial work is already widely accepted. The dominant role of the Berlin opera scene in promoting the idea of modern musical theater is the result of Felsenstein's work<sup>10</sup>. The basic ideological assumptions of the director's opera theater can be expressed by two postulates: actualization and universalization.

This is due to the increasing internationalization of lyric art and the clear trend of globalization. This led to the belief that the circumstances and regional details of the plots depicted in individual productions should not necessarily be treated in accordance with the text of the libretto, but as a pretext to highlight more general and current issues. Thus, the original conflict, the tension axis of the drama, is replaced by new problems embedded in today's social relations. Directors strive to awaken the sensibilities and imaginations of pop culture audiences and demonstrate the importance of the issues addressed

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<sup>9</sup> Wink, Paul. "Prima Donna: The Psychology of Maria Callas". New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Brug, Manuel. „Opernregisseure heute: Mit ausführlichem Lexikonteil“ (*Opera directors today: With a detailed encyclopedia section*). Leipzig: Henschel, 2006.

thematically in their lyrical productions despite cultural changes. However, updated readings often cause anger among some viewers, who find it inappropriate to change some of the meanings of the original work<sup>11</sup>.

The universalization of the message is achieved by introducing symbolic, ambiguous and non-obvious theatrical solutions. The design of a stage space with abstract shapes, a suggestive selection of props and scenery, the use of varied colors and lighting - all this allows directors to go beyond the specific historical and geographical setting outlined in the libretto to stimulate the audience's imagination. When trying to build a universal message, filmmakers often have to abandon the solutions contained in the original work. This turned out to be easiest in the case of Baroque or Classicist works, whose plots are often based on myths. More difficult is the interpretation in this spirit of the works of Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi and the great bel canto opera authors of the 19th century. Romantic ideology and the flourishing of art intended for a bourgeois audience contributed to significant changes in the thinking of opera, and a new generation of composers created the aesthetic of realistic opera. The effort for a faithful and close to life presentation of the characters' problems, inherent in this aesthetic, is a challenge for contemporary directors.

One of the most outstanding Romanian representatives of this trend is the creator Andrei Șerban. In his work as a director, he creates thoughtful readings of old opera titles, creatively extracting their timeless meaning while respecting the expressive scope of the score. "Theatre must touch the human soul, calm it down, not brainwash it", says the Romanian director<sup>12</sup>. And in this capacity, he will absorb the most successful techniques and traditions that the field of global culture can offer him.

Theater is a remedy! And in this capacity, he will absorb the most successful techniques and traditions that the field of global culture can offer him. Multiculturalism, according to the modern Italian critic Carlo Maria Cela, is a phenomenon that promises to combine in a performance the musical, visual and dramatic stylistic achievements of different peoples and schools, without unifying them.

In 1971, Alfred Schnittke already foresaw the impending trends of polystylistics<sup>13</sup>. At the beginning of the century, the visual component and polystylistics firmly entered operatic reality. Creating such a harmonious unity in an opera performance required laborious directorial thinking.

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<sup>11</sup> Levin, David J. "Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky". Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> <https://culturaladuba.ro/andrei-serban-teatrul-trebuie-sa-atinga-sufletul-omului-sa-il-linistiasca-nu-sa-il-spele-pe-creier/> (Access date:09.15.2023).

<sup>13</sup> Schnittke, Alfred. "Polystylistic tendencies in modern music // Musical cultures of peoples. Tradition and modernity". Moscow: Soviet composer, 1973, pp. 230-238.

At the end of the 20th century, V. D. Konen, Doctor of Art History, speaking about the opera, said that, “music essentially has only two spheres of expressiveness - intonational and formative, which do not come into contact with the objective side of reality, and do not gravitate towards illustrative”<sup>14</sup>.

Today, using the example of the experience of successful dramatic directors (P. Brook, D. A. Bertman, or that of the Romanians A. Șerban, I. Caramitru, S. Purcărete etc.) it has been proven that soon it will rarely be possible to see a successful performance without using diverse visual possibilities, the ability to surprise, and the manifestation of the ability to combine music with “objectivity”, without interactivity, that is, the inclusion of the viewer in the act of creation.

T. Adorno, arguing with F. Nietzsche from the position that the main element in music is the phenomenological component, and not the connection with poetry<sup>15</sup>, said: “Dramatic music will become possible only when the art of sounds conquers the vast sphere of symbolic means with the help of song, opera and several complex attempts at sound painting... after, in a long development, both types of art became interconnected, and in the end, the musical form turned out to be well-stitched with threads of concepts and feelings”<sup>16</sup>. What is this if not a justification for innovative work at the expense of traditionalism?

Directing the dramatic theater has its own tradition, which determined the development of theatrical and cinematographic approaches in opera. The interpenetration of the branches of art has been the source of a variety of production solutions and a source of innovation in opera direction. This diversity allowed the directing process to invade the closed system of musical theater in the last third of the 20th century. The potential of dramatic direction lies in the achievements that were formalized by the developments of the schools of K. S. Stanislavsky (Russia), Bertolt Brecht (Germany) or through the political theater of Erwin Piscator (Germany). Such actor training laboratories have opened up new possibilities to dramatically improve the embodiment of the stage image, an individual approach suited to each performer and focused on a holistic picture of the interpretation of the material by the director.

Many time directors who have established themselves on the stages of dramatic theaters are given the chance to contribute, through the visions of their lordships, to opera projects. The general director of the Metropolitan Opera Theater explains this policy as follows: “... I think that someone who

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<sup>14</sup> Konen, Valentina. “Theatre and Symphony”. Moscow: Music, 1974, pp.101-105.

<sup>15</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. „Philosophie der neuen Musik” (*Philosophy of new music*). Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2003, pp. 227-228.

<sup>16</sup> Schlechta, Karl. „Friedrich Nietzsche Werke in drei Bänden” (*Friedrich Nietzsche’s works in three volumes*). B. II. Hanser, 1977, pp.891-892.

has staged operas all his life would have forgotten what kind of impression an opera should leave”<sup>17</sup>.

Entering the musical genre, directors from the field of dramatic theater had to abandon some of its techniques for objective reasons, mainly due to the characteristics of the genre or the performers. Sometimes this is a rejection of the director’s most important tool, namely the dramatic element, which seems not to go unnoticed by critics. “I have attended several opera performances, writes opera director David Freeman, most of the productions are unimaginably outdated! Moreover, in an opera performance, the habit of not touching one another is so strong that even at the moment of the crime, the performer who plays the role of the criminal can float in the air about two meters from the hero, and he, screaming “pain,” he dies in convulsions, though no one has touched him!”<sup>18</sup>.

What phenomenon do we call “modern opera” and what do we call reform, modernization? The process of modernization depends on the changes taking place in society, how the landscape of life changes, how the moral values of the society change and the inner spiritual life that guides human beings. The specific feelings of a person do not depend on the historical era, the sensual view of the world prevails over rational thinking precisely in the text of the opera. But is modern opera just a work about modern people, written by a contemporary composer, or is the concept of “opera modernization” just a feature of modern stage versions of classical operas? Let us compare the range of opinions and understandings of the meaning of the concepts of “modernization” and “reform” of modern opera.

No one doubts the importance of the latest technologies in the stage versions of the shows<sup>19</sup>. The question of “how to surprise” remains important for creators of live shows.

A novelty in theatrical art is the possibility of finding unusual solutions for the stage space. Multimedia technology creates a sense of realism. The aesthetic perception of works of art on a media screen cannot be identical to direct sensory contact; and although modern digital technologies cannot convey the energy of the live performance, their reality provides ample opportunities for the viewer to familiarize himself with the varieties of art in media spaces with the best examples of operatic creativity.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.classicalmusicnews.ru/interview/intervju-s-piterom-gelbom> (Access date: 19.12.2023).

<sup>18</sup> Meilakh, Mikhail. “Euterpe, is that you? Art notes. Conversations with Russian artists in exile and the metropolis”. In: Volume II. Music. Opera. Theater and the Tenth Muse. Art. Moscow: New literary review, 2011, T. II. p. 319.

<sup>19</sup> The modern viewer is already accustomed to visual effects on the computer, with 3D, with Full HD in TV shows with HDTV resolution or in movies recorded on Blu-Ray Discs and HD - DVD.

Perhaps the reformism or modernization of opera productions is achieved only through obligatory associations and allusions to political and social issues in a particular society? The modernity of the opera production is given by the philosophical flavor of the director's concept. In recent decades, opera performances by directors have evoked more and more associations with human tragedies, exploring such moral and philosophical issues as the evil in the human soul, the violence of power, the cruelty of crime, the problems of surviving cataclysms and wars.

We believe that the "modernization of the opera" is, first of all, the search for a modern musical and theatrical language to conduct a dialogue with the opera audience and to clarify the differences or similarities of one's own life experience with the opera characters, even from the most distant times. The composer can take as a basis a plot from the past, refracting it in accordance with his own experience, with current events, since true art is always connected to the emotions of life. This is the democracy of the lyrical genre, accessible to all viewers regardless of their training.

In conclusion, opera, as a musical and philosophical form that reflects the archetypes of human emotions, has existed for more than four centuries and has been frequently "updated" to adapt to changing ideas about the world around us and, most importantly, to the characteristic's memorable aspects of our worldview.

We can say that the main achievement of today's innovative opera is the opening of the genre to the broad masses of the public and its connection to information processes in society, establishing an active exchange of information between opera houses and a wide audience. The formation of a favorable media environment for opera productions is an opportunity to convey to the masses the principles and norms of building harmonious forms of operatic art for the sake of spiritual enrichment and the development of a culture-oriented social environment. Musical theaters of the beginning of the XX-XXI centuries are looking for new ways of development, experimenting, reviving masterpieces of the past repertoire, reviving traditions, trying to get rid of "operatic realism", connecting archetypal moral conflicts with modern realities. That is, they try to find their own methods of communication with the viewer, their own forms of synthetic visual language in the stage embodiment of the works.

The presented examples of directorial strategies that illustrate different ways of approaching classical works are related to abandoning the exact reproduction of the circumstances suggested in the libretto and stage directions, breaking with stage tradition and using pop culture codes as elements to influence the viewer. The multitude of these proposals and their diverse nature



demonstrate that the possibilities for combining realistic 19th-century works of opera with a contemporary aesthetic rooted in pop culture are relatively wide, and public approval sanctions such activities.

Other directorial options and proposals that can be distinguished in the opera house include deepening the symbolism by highlighting contemporary contexts and elements of recent history, introducing a meta-theatrical perspective through the “theatre within the theater” or focusing on details and props as carriers of effect theatrical. All these methods are alternative solutions to the tautological propositions of the traditional opera house. They are also a testimony to the vitality of classical works and the possibility of their impact on modern audiences.

In the current conditions of advanced development of virtual theater technologies, multimedia scenographic effects, electronic versions of productions, penetration of “comprehensive show business”, this great synthetic art, which combines elements of: music - theater - plastic arts - visual art - operatic art, does not reject the main purpose of its impact on the listener/spectator, namely, the achievement of an “emotional boom”, an emotional empathy for the existence of a human personality. It is impossible not to admit that the modernization of the opera exceeds our desire and that, to one degree or another, much needs to be modernized: starting with the theater buildings and the acting skills of the opera artists, and ending with the most important, the need to replenish the repertoire opera houses with works of modern music and modern librettos.

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