

The Crisis of the Opera?
A Study of Musical Hermeneutics

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By

Ion Piso

Translated by Ligia Tomoiagă

**CAMBRIDGE
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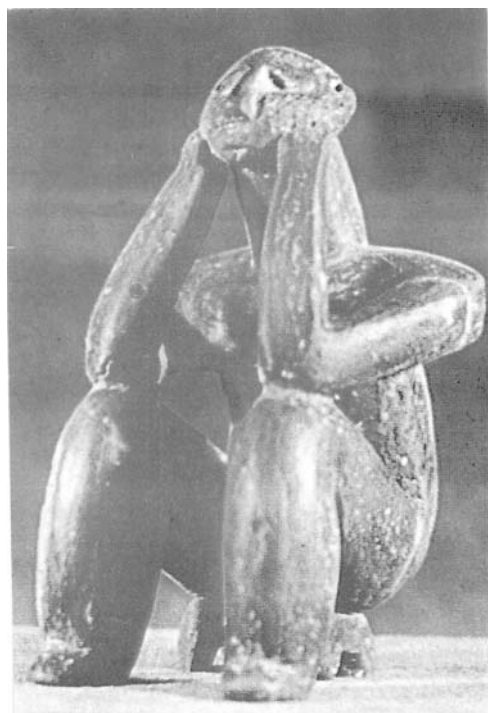
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INTRODUCTION

"Have you forgotten the song our whole being longs for?
Have you been forsaken by the godliness within you?"¹
(Lucian Blaga, *The Song of Fire – The Prologue*)

"When actions are led by ignorance,
these turn for the worse."²
(Plato: Euthydemus; 281, d)

The goal of this introduction is to justify to the reader the reasons why I finally considered to pick up the glove thrown by the avant-garde, with the *new movement* on which they engaged the opera. To be fashionable does not necessarily mean to be "out of sync" with immortal creations, with the masterpieces of the lyrical theatre.

In order to determine with clarity and precision the circumstances that led to this so-called *modernity* – which means that music itself is placed between brackets and is excluded from the performative process – this study undertakes to analyse the *normal* path, starting from the musical part (as an encoded message of the intentions of the composer, that is the *signifier*), and getting to the opera performance (as a de-coded message, that is, the *signified*).

In terms of methodology, I used the tools of maieutics, a methodology that I divided into three stages. The first stage attempts to partly identify the creation and the *musical* intentions of the composers, and when dealing with a masterpiece, to substantiate and determine the very strict and important elements of the composition. This strict classification can be examined to the finest ramifications where each branch is continuously linked with the others, thus forming a harmonically structured, organic whole, subject to the general plan of the work. Blaga calls this "consistency in the formal variation"³ and refers to the interdependence of the elements of a style. Consequently, there is nothing coincidental in a masterpiece, where everything has an intrinsic finality; Kant uses the term

¹ Lucian Blaga, *Poezii*, București: Cartea Românească, 1982, p. 267.

² Platon, *Opere*, vol. III, București: Editura Științifică și pedagogică, 1978, p. 82.

³ Lucian Blaga, *Trilogia Culturii*, București: Editura pentru Literatură Universală, 1969.

‘Zweckmässigkeit’, and Baumgarten, in order to explain the aesthetic beauty, defines it as ‘a convergence of plurality in unity’, due to which perfection can be achieved, and perceived by the senses.

The next stage highlights the principles which form the basis of musical analysis. I wish to supply each opera artist and interpreter – be they singers, directors, conductors, or art-directors with a list of specific values which they cannot, and ought not overlook when, for instance, an artist embodies a specific character, or, when a director is staging an opera. If these rules are respected then the relationship between the subject (the opera, *per se*), and the predicate (the scenic representation, the interpretation of the opera in its actual performance) makes sense. The composer transposes life onto the stage and makes use of the services provided by interpretation so that the world expressed in music should awaken the sensitivity of the audience, and thus, be understood.

The third stage of this study is dedicated to the audience – the final stop of the entire interpretative endeavour. I see the audience as active when participating in a performance. They have a real chance to partake in the thoughts and feelings of the composer. Compared to the performer, the spectator makes the reverse journey, that is, while the performer starts from the musical part – to render the encoded thoughts and feelings of the composer – the spectator starts from the performance he/she is attending, in order to re-trace the path and re-live the thoughts and feelings of the composer. When the spectator, as part of the performance, is not given the chance to understand what the composer wanted to express in his music, the show deflects from its function, and has no sense whatsoever.

My analysis does not contain anything extraordinary. On the contrary! It is a general, natural, and normal attempt meant to be understood by anybody, to clarify the role and value of interpretation and, at the same time, to provide the means to identify deviations from the *mission* of performing music.

*

I appreciate the fact that each new generation is trying for new, different means of expression, however, there is a certain degree of "normality" that we still expect them to respect, and, therefore, I cannot understand why nobody has tried to clarify and highlight the propriety or impropriety of what happens on our stages today. We can not allow *this* modern culture to degrade masterpieces of lyrical music which are naturally destined for the cultural and spiritual heritage of the civilised

world, extending way beyond Europe, where this art form was born and has evolved.

As Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting has been protected throughout time, so should Mozart's musical creation be protected from the perils provoked by the consequences of lack of knowledge in the domain. Unfortunately, the decoding and understanding of the musical script has become the responsibility of contemporaries who are not up to the task and this has led to the *miracle* that makes the impossible... possible. Modernity can take pride in an absolute radicalization and overthrow of the musical part, which is the ultimate consequence of the break with the past, professed by those who think that they are "superior to all those before them" (as H. R. Patapievici notices in *Omul recent* [The Recent Man]), and find their fulfilment in opera staging, where they are joined by absurdity, sordidness, and abjection (as will be demonstrated in the following chapter *Performing, a domain of the subjective*, with images from 2001 *The Masked Ball*, in Barcelona, and the 2005 performance of *Rigoletto*, in Munich). History will decide whether we should also blame the feeble reaction of the public, or even the public's indifference at these violations of the musical part, which promote the current state of cultural life, generally, and the opera, especially. These attacks have unfathomable consequences for our spiritual well-being, as well as that of future generations.

*

We live in a world that cannot be conceived without music, or, better said, without that which replaced it. Our ears are under siege, furiously, and ceaselessly, 25 hours in 24! We have *adapted to this* and we no longer even hear the music, physically, let alone perceive its deeper meaning or understand it intellectually, especially when appreciating what we may call great music. Our minds are no longer able to participate in more than what commercial music has to offer. Consequently, the singer is at liberty not to know what he is singing and not to learn his trade. The artist does not sing as the musical script requires, he/she is unable to perform it, to *transpose* its abstraction into live music, to express the artistic truth, a truth which is parallel to real life truth, and much superior to it⁴.

⁴ H. Delacroix maintains that "music departs and frees itself from common affectivity" (*Psychologie de l'art – Essaye sur l'activite artistique*, Paris: Alcan, 1927, p. 203).

The lyrical performance is the most suitable means to get closer to the *confession* of the composer, what he/she wanted to express. It touches the hearts and minds of the public, promoting openness, and spiritual awakening, thus bringing them face to face with their own selves, their consciences – a meeting that they rarely benefit from.

Unfortunately, today, performing has become the expression of *false* emotions, far removed from the character and the meaning of the *true* feelings and thoughts that the music contains and suggests. As to the director, the main quality of the modern, avant-garde type of director is that he just does not want to concern himself with the music, and this agrees with his objective.

Within this study, the reader will have the chance to convince himself/herself not only that *fraud* has replaced *authenticity*, but also that the directors are arrogant and overwhelmingly lack professional virtue. Almost all cases of opera productions range from patterns of mediocrity to the tyranny of the absurd and this horrifies us more than ever before. We live an age of violation that gives legitimacy to all kinds of deviations, institutionalizes lack of knowledge, and forges aberration as a principle to follow. All these are the result of lack of *judgement*. To be a performer means, firstly, to be able to understand, to penetrate. A commendable director has an insight into the symbolism⁵ of music, finds its analogous images, perceives its meanings through affinity, empathy, or even a sense of correspondence. The avant-garde director, lacking these qualities, only mimes originality, generates fundamental incompatibilities with the opera he wants to stage, and this de-contextualizes it and disconnects it (through inappropriateness) from the music. The music is mutilated by embarrassing grimaces; this is a sign that the directors, mystified by fashions of all kinds, have lost their judgement.

I intend to clarify the character of the most well-known repertoire choices of the opera by indicating what makes them different from the previous styles, and highlighting their particularities (necessary in order to justly understand their artistic dimensions). I am not doing this in order to clarify the mysteries of the avant-garde or their modern ideas but in order to give some helpful resource for the honest singer, or director, who is on

⁵ Blaga maintains that, different from allegory, the symbol, through image, highlights itself and thus reveals its depths; for Mircea Eliade, symbolic thinking, prior to language and discursive reason, reveals certain profound aspects of reality, while for Jung, the symbol, by installing a link between the conscious and the subconscious, is in the centre of psychological analysis. Thus, we can understand why the interpreter of text should not be a stranger to the symbolism of music.

top of his/her trade, and responsible for his/her cultural destiny (especially when he/she does not lose sight of what is important – music).

Perhaps I should have started with the examples even earlier, by showing the novelty of Palestrina in vocal music; his decisive steps towards overcoming *the obfuscation* brought about by the polyphonic style. This style made the understanding of the text very difficult, if not impossible, as it was drowned in the intricate *cobweb* of the musical script. Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (Preneste) chose for his *Missa for Pope Marcellus* the following solution – surprising, as it came in full-swing polyphonic era, but in conformity with the conclusions of the Trent Council that wanted to stop the *abuse of compositions that made words impossible to understand*⁶ – that each syllable should be paralleled with one note, that is just one sound, except certain situations when that was not possible... Had I chosen to write about those times, I would have taken the reader on too long a detour through the development of prior musical styles⁷, thus keeping him far from the subject of the present study, which is dedicated to the question of whether we live a crisis of the opera or not.

⁶ Cf. J. Samson, in *Les musiciens célèbres*, Edition d'Art Lucien Mazendo, Genève, 1948.

⁷ I will briefly mention something from the polyphonic era, with reference to H. Finck's studies (*Practica Musica*, published in 1556 in Wittenberg), when the so-called "ars suaviter et eleganter cantandi" appeared. We will note the fact that this kind of singing was not based on a genuine technique of sound emission, but more on innate qualities. In the treatises of those times these were called *dispositione*, that is, the quality of singing *con dolcezza*, as well as the possession of an agility in the medium ambitus of the voice. Between 1630 and 1650, the castrati, especially those in the Roman school, representatives of the avant-garde of those times, started to apply the *sul fiato* singing and the register of passage, but neither Bacilly, nor Mersenne, the theoreticians of the epoch mention anything about the mechanisms of registers. Until the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th, the elegiac-pathetic style dominated, which favoured (through the voice of the castrati) the sweet emission and the *false tone* in passages of virtuosity, in which notes of a longer value were transformed in an increased number of notes, with a shorter duration, the so-called *diminution*; another term for this technique was that of *blackening*, or *colouring in black*, from where the term *coloratura* comes, i.e. instead of *La, Si, Do* (minims), they used to sing *La, Sol, La, Si, Do, Si, Si, La, Si, Do* (crotchets, and quavers), these being – in a simplified form – the first formula that Josquin de Prés taught his students (cf. A. P. Coclio, *Compendium Musices Descriptum*, Nürnberg, 1552). Between 1715 and 1729, the chest, sonorous, and manly emission appeared (Bernacchi, Farinelli, Carestini), without losing anything of its velocity and coloratura, and through *smorzature* (that is, *decrescendo*), neither did it lose from its flexibility. At its turn, the Camerata Fiorentina, through its *recitar cantando* intended to strike a balance between the

Any ongoing phenomenon in musical life could be described as a continuous crisis of fall and recovery, similar to walking, which could be considered as a permanent loss of equilibrium, which is re-installed by making the... next step. In order to find the (best) next step, we should set on our journey in the hope that we will find our way out from *modernity* as if emerging from a long and awkward convalescence, which, in my opinion, the future will not remember with great pleasure.

song with purely acoustic effects, and the rhythmical rigour imposed by the polyphonic music, using the *rubato*, which gives value to the note according to the meaning of the word; thus the musical phrase became *expressive*. This principle was introduced by Caccini, through his so-called *spezzatura* (*Novo Musiche*). In time, though, the recitative style of the Florentini became monotonous and arid (see also R. Celletti, *Histoire du Belcanto*, Fayard, 1987).

PART ONE:

HAS THE OPERA PERFORMANCE BECOME AN OBSOLETE GENRE?

CHAPTER I

THE OPERA SINGER

1

"So d'Ouden songen, so pepen de Jongen"
[What the forefathers sang, the descendants whistle].
(Old Flemish proverb)

Today, the opera performance is less appreciated by the public than it used to be, and this is an un-explainable anomaly¹, blamed on the following three factors:

1. The operas are less accomplished artistically.
2. The synthesis of arts within the opera performance is not harmonious, and thus the elements that should be finely tuned seem to just be thrown together, and no longer complete each other and collaborate to correspond to the exigencies of the musical part.
3. The cultural background of the audience is lacking in substance. Still, I tend to think that our contemporaries have not gone so far as to think that commercial music can replace the beauty of the arts in the age of Pericles.²

Only when one or all of these situations appear, can we understand why the opera has become less popular; only then can we ask ourselves the question if the opera faces a crisis.

*

¹ As anomalies seem to be very trendy in our culture these days, living together with them, even finding support in them, it appears they do not need any explanation...

² Various polls show that the greater public does not name any opera singer in the top five of their favourite singers, but I think that they just do not think of opera singers as top performers, they automatically think of tops only related to commercial music. If one takes the time to watch opera singers on YouTube, for instance, one will notice the millions of watchers and supporters of the genre...

The crisis, when it appears, is obvious, and very easy to identify, as it manifests itself in the indifference of the public to the opera performance. If we adopt a contemporary expression, we might say that the lack of popularity is nothing but a sign of the fact that the consumer³ demands less of that particular 'merchandise' – the lyrical art in our case. For the time being, I do not wish to explain this crisis only by referring to the tastes of the audience, or the superficial whims of fashion. On the contrary, I think that the public's reaction has more serious reasons, which go beneath the surface.

Taking the three above-mentioned cases one by one, I wonder if it is possible that the artistic value of the music in some operas, which have been successfully staged for centuries, has become less interesting for the contemporary listener. This would be very difficult to believe, because some of these musical parts, when compared with other artistic 'peaks' in domains such as painting, sculpture, architecture or literature⁴ represent works of art belonging to musical geniuses, and have a comparable cultural appeal.

Is it possible that the opera, as an audio-visual representation, has become less appealing? Not probable, as the *genre* satisfies the elite as well as the common viewer. The first will be attracted by the extraordinary idea, and the superior harmonization of the arts, a virtue that is defining for the opera performance. The average viewer, even if less knowledgeable, will always find great attraction in the audio-visual type of performance a performance which has become a way of life today. Consequently, the genre is not anachronic in any way. It should not be in crisis. Nevertheless, the opera does not attract people as it once did and what is more, it even alienates the public. What is the reason⁵ for this situation, then? I will not believe that the public demands to see on stage

³ In the philosopher C. Noica's vision, culture and art, implicitly, is not consumed but subsumed, and, therefore, the person who enjoys it does not exhaust it, but, on the contrary, enriches its life.

⁴ These art forms can survive in a state of hibernation, in museums, libraries, etc., and are always at the disposal of those who wish to have a 'taste'. The opera, though, as well as all music, if confined to remain on paper, will just die. The opera needs the stage in order to exist.

⁵ Although people from outside, called to save the opera have tried all kinds of weird and wonderful 'solutions' by adding new ideas, the opera has arrived on the threshold of collapse. As we shall see, many directors and singers are to blame for this situation.

what they see in horror movies⁶, that is blood scenes, violence, countless victims, etc.

I will avoid the first and the third points (operas that are less than accomplished, whose frequency is insignificant when we are dealing with a prestigious repertoire, and a public too ignorant to want real aesthetic value in the performances they choose to 'consume') as they are extreme cases. I will concentrate on the second problem, thus, the focus of this analysis is on the interpretation itself, that is, on the level of the performance, seen as an audio-visual representation. In my view, this is where we can trace back the real causes that contribute to make this genre obsolete or unpalatable for many. It is important that we analyse some of those cases in which the contribution of the opera singer, of the conductor of the orchestra, of the director, of the choreographer, or of the art director, within the whole that is the opera show, has drifted away from the musical-dramatic part, or has betrayed it altogether. The intentions of the composer are misinterpreted and therefore misrepresented in the performance.

In order to identify the cases of erroneous interpretations, and find the possible issues, their nature and their seriousness, I should start this search with the musical parts that constitute the main basis of the opera repertoire, especially those operas belonging to the musical style that came after the Baroque⁷. By determining their dominant characteristics, we will be able to conclude how much the interpretation succeeds in transposing them and making them speak of artistic value, or, on the contrary, whether the interpretation neglects the specificity of the text, which justifies the very existence of this style⁸.

*

The style appeared around the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries and we could call it a style with *expressive* tendencies, that

⁶ We mistake the artistic truth for the truth of life, too often, or we use an over-exaggerated 'veracity', as a cheap means of mediating reality, and this does not flatter the cultural level of either the producers or the consumers of such 'artistic' expressions.

⁷ The feeble re-enlivenment of the Baroque opera in the repertoire of some theatres and festivals (in England, in Germany and France), cannot be considered more than a... fashion wave, which has almost passed. P. Valéry defines fashion as something that becomes very rapidly out of fashion.

⁸ Starting with the Florentine Camerata, the opera has gone through many stages until today, and interpretation, in its turn, has always accommodated such changes.

is, it gives up most of its ornaments to the excessive embellishments of the Baroque music (see footnote 3 above). This was a reflection of a stylized kind of pathos, therefore an impersonal one, whose subject had abstract connotations; it was replaced by an attitude that placed great emphasis on the individual's⁹ subjective sensitivity. This is why this style wanted to be attractive and dynamic, full of energy, of tension and movement, that is, full of drama. As the engine of this musical drama has in its centre the human psyche, which is preoccupied with itself, we may even call it a *psychological* style.

While Bach is (still) talking to God, the *expressive* style, with romantic connotations, is mainly addressing the fellow being, divinity being excluded from this equation. Thus, the new musical style will express thoughts, feelings and passions linked with the prior life and the psychology of the individual, being a language that is subjectively¹⁰ emphasized by man who, once with the Renaissance and the Reform, occupies the place from where he deposed the Supreme Being.

In anticipation of my study, the following remark can be made about the consequences of this new attitude, which became more radical as it evolved. In the creation of the brilliant elite generation that followed J. S. Bach, the universe of spiritual height and nobility was still echoed – even if in a paler, softer manner – thus keeping that heritage of the objective and impersonal affect. In comparison, most composers and singers of today see only themselves in art, as an exercise of self-appraisal, which in time led to the crisis of the opera that we witness today. Our contemporary artist cannot set aside his own self, cannot diminish his ego. He cares for

⁹ We will see as we go on, how the increase of intensity of a sensation through interpretation, also can mean a qualitative change of that sensation – as Bergson pointed out.

¹⁰ It might be interesting for us to note that even starting with Monteverdi (in his letter dated December 9, 1616, sent from Venice to A. Striggio – cf. Celletti) there is a preoccupation for "making a difference between the *spinato* singing, which people like, that is for Orpheus and Ariadna, while gods express themselves *emblematically*, in *tirate* (passaggi), which are quavers, or *gorgheggi*, that is allegorically, non-realistically", by using symbolic embellishments, as poetics of the miracles, in which the colour of the voice is surreal, transparent. Mozart, in his turn, also obeys this formula, when in the *Magic Flute* he writes the part of the Queen of the Night, who is a less real character, and has a baroque kind of text, in which ornaments play a major role; meanwhile, 'real' characters, like Tamino or Pamina, have a part which is typical for the expressive style, in which the musical phrase is predominantly *cantabile*, that is, *spinato*. It is most interesting that the same 'rule' can be encountered in Shakespeare's theatre, where the prince speaks in verse, while the average street-man speaks in prose!

himself more than he should. This is where the greatest danger hides, as the singer can over-participate and overflow the artistic, passing into a kind of gross *naturalism*, which is alien to music or art, for that matter. This is why, the opera singer, by virtue of a badly understood tradition, sometimes will value the musical text he performs dependent on his own individuality, and thus, independent from that particular musical creation. Being held prisoner by his own egocentric view, he will look to his own life, where from he will draw more *arguments*, which are very often far from the musical part that he/she is about to perform. We are confronted with the autonomy of the performer, who, paradoxically, becomes independent from the music he interprets, to the point where he does not even care about the musical part anymore. His interpretation represents less and less the *creative* rendering of the musical-dramatic contents of the opera, the subjectivity of the singer becoming a substitute of the object that needs to be interpreted; this is a symptom of a *sui generis* phenomenon, frequently encountered, and this study will also deal with it in detail.

*

The new style of opera composing and singing was prefigured in the preoccupations of the musicians¹¹, by employing some elements of novelty, even towards the end of the previous style. Let us enumerate a few examples.

In 1787, Karl Philip Emmanuel Bach (1714-1788), Bach's second son who was contemporary with the *Sturm und Drang* movement in literature, and who was an exponent of the *Empfindsamkeit* trend, composed a fantasia, which he entitled *Empfindungen* (feelings, sensations). The composition has an obvious subjective character, suggesting by its title a nuance that marks the inclination towards giving free way to the fantasies of the moment, to the intimate, personal feelings. A remarkable characteristic is also that within the text of this musical composition there are parts where the beat bar does not appear, to give even more freedom to the overwhelming *impressions* of the composer. What an immense

¹¹ Let us underline the fact that great personalities always exceed their age, they have artistic premonitions, and therefore they are never enlisted mathematically in the style of their times; on the contrary, they have an anticipatory type of thinking, and examples are abundant. Michelangelo, for instance, who created during the full swing of the Renaissance, is, in fact, opening the gate for the Baroque.

difference between father and son! The father is the author of a manual entitled *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* (1753)¹².

I would like to remind the reader's that Thalberg, a famous pianist and teacher (frequently compared to Liszt, himself) has a study entitled *Arta cântului aplicată la pian* [The Art of Singing Applied to the Piano], by which the *arid* technique of the ivories should be enriched with the suggestions coming from the overtones of the human voice. A very significant suggestion! At the same time, the composer and theatre director¹³ J. Mattheson, Haendel's friend and initiator in the secrets of singing when he was in Hamburg, was the author of the theory of the affects, *Affektenlehre*, applied to instrumental music. Mattheson speaks about the "sound of the seductive or pompous horns, the proud bassoon, the harsh trumpet, the modest flute, the heroic timbale, the caressing lute, the mumbling double-bass, etc., etc."

Let us also mention that in Paris, at approximately the same time, François Tourté revolutionized the bow technique. Leopold Mozart, Mozart's father, also writes a violin manual *Violinschule*, and in the introduction he writes: "Conducting the bow is everything [...] the bow, if mastered with sensitivity, offers the violinist the chance to arouse feelings in the soul of the listener".

This is how they explicitly declared the wish of the performer to impress¹⁴ his public directly. Violinists in Bach's epoch had a different bow technique: they would hold the bow at its middle (P. Casals), which contributed considerably to a diminished handiness in its use, especially

¹² K. Ph. Em. Bach, *Versuch über die ware Art das Klavier zu spielen*, Leipzig, 1753-1762, I-II vol. (cf. A. Schweizer, *J. S. Bach*, Wiesbaden: Breikopf & Härtel, the French edition I used was published in Lausanne: Chez Maurice et Pierre Fœtisch, 1953).

¹³ Mattheson, who composed an opera entitled *Boris Goudunow*, stated: "... a good opera theatre has to be an Academy of many arts: architecture, painting, dance, poetry... and, above all, music". About Haendel he affirmed that "although he was a great master in the art of organ playing, in the fugue and the counterpoint, he did not know much about *melody*, until he came to the Opera in Hamburg..."

¹⁴ This particular wish to *impress* becomes stronger as we approach the peak of the Romantic epoch. Hector Berlioz, who is probably most eloquent representative, announces his well-known Fantastic Symphony with the words: "je prépare [...] une immense composition au moyen de la quelle je tacherai d'impressionner fortement mon auditoire" [I am preparing an immense composition by which I am trying to impress my listeners] (cf. A. Bocholt, *Hector Berlioz*, vol. I – *La jeunesse d'un romantique*, Plon, 1946, p. 218). Later, in an article of the journal *Correspondant*, he starts explaining his "programme": "La musique est l'art d'émouvoir par les sons..." [Music is the art of moving by sounds...] (p. 265).

when it came to nuances of expression. Likewise, the mechanics of the harpsichord had much reduced dynamical possibilities, as compared to the piano; thus the technique limited the obtaining of certain effects, even if the performer would have liked to transmit them to the audience. It is really difficult to obtain with a harpsichord a musical phrase in a genuine legato, as the fine touch cannot be considered to be part of the technique of the harpsichord, but it is so much a mark of the pianist. When we speak about the vocal technique, we will have to keep in mind both the fine/light touch, and the syntagm "bow hold"¹⁵.

Mozart, sharing with his sister his impressions on a few opera performances in Mantua (1770) expresses his wish that the singers should acquire a vocal technique that would help them gain pithiness and force by a more intense participation: "... the tenor Ottini does not sing badly, but he does not hold the sound, neither do other Italian tenors, in fact". About Cicognani (*il musico primo uomo*), whom he heard in the same year in Cremona, he affirmed: "... he has a pleasant voice, and a beautiful cantabile". Consequently, even in those times this need for a more tense and impressive musical phrase was felt, even by a child (Mozart had not turned 14, yet); this need encouraged singers to impress especially by a *cantabile* quality, by an expressive *legato*, that is by elements of the musical interpretation that I will elaborate on in future musical examples.

I should mention one more aspect. In a letter to his father, dated December 28, 1782, Mozart wrote:

... das Mittelding zwischen zu schwer und zu leicht [...] angenehmen in die Ohren – natürlich, ohne in das Leere zu fallen – hier und da können auch Kenner allein Satisfaction erhalten – doch so – dass die Nichtkenner damit zufrieden seyn müssen, ohne zu wissen warum [... the middle way, between too difficult and too easy, should always remain pleasant for the ear, without sliding down to gratuity, or superficiality, of course; it can give here and there satisfaction to the connoisseur, too, but in such a way as to keep the amateurs happy as well, even if they do not know why].

The new style was not created solely for those already initiated, the ones familiar with musical theory, but also, for the amateurs, the lay people, although Mozart was conscious that a few aspects would only be noticed by the professionals. Could there be another, shorter path than

¹⁵ The bow hold is a domain in which Enescu excelled, some comparing it, even equalling it, with the sonorous exhalation in the professional performative vocal technique.

emotion to the heart of the amateur? (We must admit, though, that there are all kinds of emotions, if we think of what we hear on stage sometimes.)

Mozart's music contains the entire range of states of mind, which it *stirs* in the audience. He was fully aware of this quality when, in 1782, he told his father about the "measure which is the truth", the artistic truth that lives in his spirit. He assumed this truth, and distilled it in the *athanor*¹⁶ of his intellect (his spirit), and transformed it, no matter its nature, in unmistakably genius music – sometimes "unleashed"¹⁷, explosive, but always refined, aerial, distinguished, and especially, profound, and thus, elative.

Saint-Foix, speaking about the manner in which Mozart gave musical flesh to the characters populating his operas, noticed that: "Mozart's characters live all passions, but they do not have that high spirituality that makes us feel that they do not live at the same level as we do. An ethereal wind of purity, of spirituality has touched each of them to a certain degree; they all live under the miracle that his music has produced"¹⁸. Any singer that tries to approach Mozart's creation will have to take into consideration this remark made by Saint-Foix, as he was one of the most knowledgeable and authoritative critics and commentators of the great composer.

¹⁶ The *athanor* was an alchemist's furnace, in which the *corruptible* was transformed into the *incorruptible*, that is in pure gold – in this case feelings are transformed in art.

¹⁷ In a letter to his father, speaking about a scene in *Idomeneo*, Mozart wrote: "Man hört das mare und das mare *funesto* und die Passagen sind auf *minacciar* angebracht, welche dann das *minacciar*, das Drohen gänzlich ausdrücken" [One can hear the sea, the sinister sea, and the passages suggest the *menace* that it fully contains]. As to the romantic wilderness of his native character, we have an interesting observation of the naturalist Danies Barrington (in a letter published in 1770 in his *Philosophical Transactions*); in 1765, being in London, after he had made sure that Mozart was really a child (getting his information from Sazburg), he tests little Mozart, aged 9 (but already very much appreciated, as he had learned, by the soprano-singer Manzuoli), and analyses him (in the presence of Leopold) regarding his capabilities and his musical knowledge; on this occasion, Wolfgang played two improvised arias on the piano, one based on the word *affeto*, and the other on the word *perfidio*. Barrington expressed his amazement at how, in the middle of this latter aria, the little player was so excited that he almost hit the ivories with fury, and at times he would jump on his feet (apud T. De Wyzewa & G. de Saint-Foix, *W. A. Mozart*, Paris, chez Desclée De Brouwer & cie. 1936, 3rd edition, vol I, p. 119).

¹⁸ G. de Saint-Foix, op. cit., vol. IV, pp. 162, 165 (starting with volume III, Saint-Foix remained the only author, as T. de Wyzewa had died)

In 1790, another critic, Schinck, a contemporary of Mozart, had a very interesting opinion regarding opera music: "Music... is thought and felt profoundly, representing in all its details, the characters, the situations and the feeling of the heroes... each note being born out of feeling..."; at about the same time, B. A. Weber considered that Mozart had "besides an unencountered talent to invent melodies, a deep knowledge in the field of art, in general."¹⁹

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This style of music, which we called *expressive*, evolved in time, and in the 19th century it was an established Romantic style²⁰, characterised by a more obvious confrontation of opposing forces that struggle for the human soul. Its musical representatives, like Weber, Beethoven, Schubert, Liszt, Berlioz, Schumann, etc., are as famous as the composers before them.

In terms of novelty, Romanticism brings about a specific nuance by introducing within the contents of music certain elements that could even be called extra-musical (alongside the characteristics that it inherited from previous times, which it deepens by a participation whose subjectivity is as intense and as intimate as possible²¹). These elements are an expression of the same essential and dominant factor – sensitivity. Furtwängler rightfully maintains that Beethoven expresses in art everything that in nature has a catastrophic form – which would be a manner in which nature expresses itself²². In time, these *extra-musical* elements (the "catastrophic" ones) will take over more and more, sometimes even to the detriment of music itself, hence making it its complete opposite, as happens with any exaggeration. It takes a genius, like Beethoven, to master the proportions in which such elements should make way in music.

The exigencies of Romanticism, reflected fully in the intentions of the composers, become, implicitly, the main requirements for interpretation, especially regarding the relation between word and music. They will live

¹⁹ See Marcel Beaufils, *Comment l'Allemagne est devenue musicienne*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 1983, p. 311

²⁰ The term was used for the first time by E. T. A. Hoffmann, in a critical study of Beethoven's 5th Symphony.

²¹ Intimacy in music is more obvious in the Lied, in Schumann's and Wolf's creations, especially. For the latter, the melody does not need to take into consideration the *laws* of the vocal line, but it is just a coat for the direct expression of feelings.

²² W. Furtwängler, *Entretiens sur la Musique*, p. 48

within opera performances linked together, more and more organically, feeding from each other by an intense and refined osmotic exchange. This is why the new genre of the opera will gradually give up the *autonomy* of musical numbers. Towards the end of the epoch, the great technicians of interpreting and playing Baroque music transformed the opera performance in a certain type of *concertanto*²³ – especially the *spadones* – in their quest to bring to full value all the possibilities and performances of their craft²⁴. Therefore, the opera ceased to be a concert, with stage-support of a pseudo-dramatic action, in which the text, with its meaning, was only a pretext; the new style had another approach to action and plot, and the art of the singer gained a new dramatic load. Hence, a new vocal technique was required, and that will be brought about by the *belcanto*²⁵.

²³ This is how Benedetto Marcello, *il musico*, presented the Baroque singer: “Il Divo moderno canterà in teatro, tenendo la bocca mezzo chiusa, i denti stretti, cioè farà il possibile perché non s'intenda una sola parola di quel che dice, procurando nei recitativi di non fissare né punti, né virgole; e se sta in scena con un altro personaggio, mentre questo parla con lui per esigenze del dramma, il Divo saluterà frattanto gli abituati dei palchi, sorriderà ai musicisti di orchestra, o ai coristi, o alle comparse, affinché il pubblico comprenda molto chiaramente ch'egli è il signor Alipio Forconi, non il principe Zoroastro che rappresenta...” (see J. Piso, *Cibernetica...*) [The modern male-diva will sing on the stage keeping his mouth half closed, his teeth clenched, that is, he will do his best so as not a word of what he is saying is understood, and so as not to obey the rigours imposed by the commas and full stops of recitatives; and, if he is on stage with another character, while the latter speaks to him, according to his role, the Diva, will greet his acquaintances in the hall, at that very moment, he would be smiling towards the members of the orchestra, the choir on stage, so that the public may get it clear that he is Mr. Alipio Forconi, and not Prince Zoroaster, whom he is supposed to incarnate] (cf. Alfred Hoffman, *Drumul operei, de la începuturi până la Beethoven* [The journey of the opera, from the beginnings till Beethoven], Bucuresti: Editura Muzicală, 1960, pp. 85-86). Unfortunately, we often meet today with close relatives of this *Alipio Forconi*, although the vocal performance of our contemporary lacks too much in mastery.

²⁴ The Baroque style, as well as its offshoot, the Rococo, is apparent in various domains. We should just take notice of the penmanship of the time which is a very good example – handwriting was so elaborate, so adorned, so suffocated with ornaments, showing the imagination of the writer, that it is very hard to actually understand the letter and decipher what it says.

²⁵ The last great *belcanto* composer, G. Rossini, author of a study in the domain, also manifested great regret regarding the disappearance of the Baroque manner: “Oggi, che non v'è piu una scuola nè interpreti, nè modelli [...], bisogna convincersi che il «belcanto» è partito senza speranza di ritorno” [Today, when the school has disappeared, there are neither singers, nor role-models, and we see how

Let us remark that even in the vocal technique of the spadones Bernacchi, Carestini and Farinelli (whose real name was C. Broschi, a name that was mentioned by Mozart, who knew him from his travels in Italy), this new technique started to make its way, by the singers giving more attention to the masculine vibrato of the emission of the voice, especially by a more intense participation, and the *chest* high notes which will replace the *head* high notes, or the falsetto, which are so impersonal, aerial, even sterile, in a sense. The tenor Raaf, one of Bernacchi's students, justly²⁶ expressed his wish that the musical text should give him more possibilities for a voice legato, by remarking "Non c'è da spianar la voce!"²⁷ [There is no room for me to unfold my voice] (this remark appears in one of Mozart's letters). The singer in those times felt the need to have more space, to have longer phrases that he could sustain by the vibrato, and resented the Baroque musical phrases that were drowned in ornaments to which the audience had become less receptive. Logically, Gluck's reaction was also understandable, his reforms stipulate the pre-eminence of the text over the music, which had to serve the poetry by rendering its expression and its dramatic situations (see Gluck's preface to his opera *Alceste*, a true revolutionary artistic manifesto).

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Going through Bellini and Donizetti, to Verdi, and then reaching Wagner's musical epoch²⁸, the character of romantic music imposed its rules to musical interpretation. Thus, the singer had to adapt to the subjective sensitivity, to render the dramatic mood, the dynamics, and the tension of a more energetic and expressive melody. The great Verdi, speaking about voices and singers, once remarked: "It does not matter if the voice is big or small, suffice that it is audible. What it needs is a spirit

the "belcanto" died, without any hope for us meeting with it again] (see *Cibernetica fonatiei în canto*, J. Piso, Editura Muzicală, 2000, p. 19, and the following, regarding the performances of the belcanto singers).

²⁶ Nevertheless, inappropriately, as he was speaking about a vocal assembly, a quartet.

²⁷ See our volume on the cybernetics of phonation in singing, p. 21.

²⁸ Wagner will perfect the musical drama by using the *durchkomponiert* form, thus the composition should not be interrupted by musical "numbers", a form that had already appeared in some of Mozart's Lieder, like *Das Veilchen* (See the Atlas Musik), as well as Beethoven's entire cycle of lieder *An die ferne Geliebte*, op. 90, which he composed later on, in 1816 (cf. *Atlas Musik*, Munchen, 1977, vol. 2, p. 360).

and a soul..." Not surprisingly, in a letter to Boito (his librettist for *Othello* and *Falstaff*), in which he wanted to convince him that the intensity of the dramatic mood should not be sacrificed to any other consideration, he wrote:

I think that the talent of not making music, sometimes, of being able to efface itself is commendable [*s'effacer*, that is to disappear, to be in the shadow, thus the composer does not insist on beautiful singing at times]; likewise, it is commendable that the poet should use, from time to time, instead of the beautiful verse the right word, clear, and useful on stage [...], a word that makes the audience prick up their ears.

To this, Boito answered: "... I totally agree with you, dear Maestro, about the theory of sacrificing the euphony of the verse and of the music in favour of the dramatic accents and the stage truth. You wish three or four lines, rambling and ugly, but clear."²⁹

Due to this great Verdian innovation, singing will gain a special intensity of the musical participation³⁰, with all its benefits, without suffocating the typically Italian melody. On the contrary! His genius allowed him to not alienate music from one of its most specific characteristics (so dear to the public), and not to *harshen* it beyond the aesthetics and the charm of the peninsula, while at the same time giving it new life. Thus, the opera reached its peak³¹. During this evolution, progressively targeted towards the implication of a sensitiveness that is filled with dramatic feeling, new technical means were developed, to provide the singer with the appropriate vocal strength. These resources enabled him to serve this kind of dramatic melody and, at the same time, express feelings in such a way as to give an impression of simplicity, following the principle which considers that the simplest way is also the best (mentioned by U. Michels). Such melodic music suits best the expressive and dramatic needs of the new style, especially when it is composed with the inspiration of a genius³².

²⁹ Cf. *Carteggio Verdi-Boito*, Parma, 1978, pp. 31-32; see also J. Piso and D. Popovici, *Antifonar Epistolar*, Albatros, 2004, p.82.

³⁰ Within Verdi's musical phrase, we will meet with a notation that suggests and even imposes to the singer a tension of the musical phrase, in *legato*, that is, each note is accentuated, and, at the same time, linked with the next; or, instead of such accents, there appear dots, over which there is also the connective arch.

³¹ Further on in this chapter, I will try to prove that the masterpiece of the genre is *Don Giovanni*.

³² Puccini is a brilliant representative of this principle, by his words "*Contro tutto e contro tutti, fare opere din melodia*", a retort that is characteristic for his creation

The new vocal style had to obey the rules imposed by music, which went through successive changes as it passed from the Baroque to Classicism, to Romanticism and Verism, that is, from Haydn and Mozart, to Verdi and Puccini. In its turn, music also had to bear the consequences of the new singing technique, which is so different from the baroque *belcanto*.

Let us remember that many composers, of whom Haendel³³ could be considered a good example, adapted their composition by taking into account the exceptional vocal capacities of some singers (although for today's tastes they may seem less than ideal, they were in vogue in those times). This is a true model of symbiosis between the creator and the interpreter. What is more, Gluck, in 1763, did not agree to compose the music for the opera *Trionfo di Clelia* until he had met the future interpreters and studied their manner of singing³⁴. Mozart's understanding of the singers' possibilities³⁵ and wishes was well known. Constance's aria "Martern aller Arten", from *The Abduction from the Seraglio* was conceived by Mozart in the style of the Naples opera, a form which was alien for the German *Singspiel* character of this opera. He sacrificed his musical intentions, as he confessed in a letter, to satisfy the usual vocal *gargle* (read: coloratura) of the diva Katharina Cavalieri, the interpreter on the opening night: "... der geläufigen Gurgel der Cavalieri aufgeopfert"³⁶ (Mozart's own words). He did the same for the singer Ludwig Fischer, the interpreter of Osmin of the same opera, who had a real bass voice in Mozart's view, and, therefore, he thought that: "... so muß man so einen

(see picture nr. 1, of the signed page, in Leopoldo Marchetti's, *Puccini nelle immagini*, Milano, 1968)

³³ The close connection, even the interdependence, between the composer and the singer could be illustrated by the fact that almost all roles in operas belonging to Porpora (who was also a singer), Haendel, Hasse, and others, were dedicated to great singers, especially the women-singers of the epoch. For Faustina Hasse-Bordoni, the illustrious Venice Mezzo, there are quite a few composers who write music: Gasparini, Lotti, Leo, Da Vinci, Haendel, as well as her own husband, Hasse. Haendel "dedicates" to her the roles Rossana, from *Alessandro*, Alceste, from *Admeto*, or Elsa, from *Tolomei*, *Re di Egitto*, etc, (see J. Piso, *Cibernetica fonatiei in canto*, Bucuresti, 2000, p. 18).

³⁴ R. Rolland, p. 209.

³⁵ Saint-Foix emphasizes, and for a good reason, the knowledge Mozart had regarding the resources and the limits of the human voice, which he had learned from the great singer Manzuoli, during his first visit in London. (cf. De Wyzewa & Saint-foix, idem, vol. I, pp. 96, 120).

³⁶ The letter he sent to his father from Vienna, dated September 26, 1781.