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Historical Dimensions of the Collective Character in the Opera Genre

Consuela Radu-Țaga

Abstract- **The collective character is a concept rising from the ancient Greek tragedy. The opera genre offers a wealth of examples of how to capitalize the choral ensemble, because it was widely used in different forms: male chorus, female chorus, children chorus, mixed chorus, double chorus. Way of expressing consequent to *opera seria*, from which develop later the lyrical tragedy and historical opera, the choir is a fundamental category in the musical and dramatic text. Its verbal contribution can bring about a lyrical or epical connotation, or can bear dramatic function.**

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I. The Scope

The collective character that thinks, reacts and comments upon the events is a concept rising from the ancient Greek tragedy. This syncretic form of artistic expressiveness (Aeschylus' plays, Sophocles' debates) represented the model to which composers referred to throughout time.

The group scenes are to be found in the medieval liturgical drama, the manifestations of the type *sacre rappresentazione* being distinctive for the fasting period before Christmas, and before Easter respectively. The path of this genre was opened with the work of Emilio de Cavalieri, *La rappresentazione di Anima e di Corpo*. Mysteries, miracles and moralities inmingled the truth with legends and paved the way for the professional drama. The religious stories were accompanied by laic elements, and from this intermingling stemmed theatrical formulas which were called by the name of *ludus* or *jeux.* The equivalent of the *mystery* from Eastern Europe, *Jocul Vicleimului* is a Romanian version of popular drama.

As a reaction towards the sacred presentations, Latin comedies appeared, having a satirical character, and being called by the name of *rappresentazione à l'antique.* The popular spirit and the suggestions of the folklore were caught up from the famous Italian May-play (in Italian called *maggio*); in England the *mask* was asserted, while in the meantime social entertainment in Spain was called *zarzuela,* thus corresponding to the French comic opera or to the German *singspiel.*

In what concerns the choral script, intermingling with different types of artistical manifestations, the madrigal played a decisive part. The end of the Italian Renaissance announced the creation of a late-phase madrigal, time in which the dramatical character was emphasised upon. The dramatic madrigal was generated by the flowering of Italian popular drama, whose typical expression was *Commedia dell'Arte.* Orazio Vecchi, an advocate of choral counterpoint, wrote the comedy *Amfiparnasso.* The true founding father of the opera, Claudio Monteverdi concentrated on the greatest mythology motifs. During the action of dramatic madrigals such as *Il Combatimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* or *Arianna*, the chorus takes part in the tensional performance.

On the Gaelic inland, the bucolic sketches were called *pastourelle.* That's how, so as to illustrate the purity of heart and the enchantment towards nature, Germi's *Orpheus* and Emilio de Cavalieri's *Arminta* resulted.

Serving the text in the vocal music field paved the way for a new syntactic structure, successfully objectified in Bardi's Camerata. The new way of expressing oneself musically and dramatically was called *recitar cantando* or *stile recitativo.* The history of the lyrical genre marked this moment as being the year 1600, when in Florence the opera *Euridice* by Jacopo Peri was performed. The story of the Thracian singer was restaged by Claudio Monteverdi, on the libretto of Alessandro Striggio, thus the first masterpiece of lyrical drama resulted. The scenic chorality of *Orpheus* conferred an organic balance to the the florentines' melodrama, because the creation of Monteverdi combined two different trends: the polyphonic madrigal and the opera.

II. Opera – Musical Genre with Collective Manifestations

Florence, Rome, Venice and Naples were the Italian cities of innovation and synthesis. From hereon, the syncretic genre spread around among all European capital cities, by means of the bands that toured.

The development of the opera in France had as starting point the court ballet, type of show which was transformed by the tandem Molière - Lully in ballet comedy and was continued by Jean Philippe Rameau. The structure of the ballet comedy included: arias, duets, tercets, etc, dances and choruses.

Hamburg with its representatives Reinhard Keiser and Georg Philipp Telemann constituted the grounds for the German opera. In Vienna Johann

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Adolphe Hasse was highly active, being a promoter of the neo-Neapolitan opera, which maintained the interest on the choral ensemble.

At the Anglican Court the musical drama arrived a little later. The rising from the ground of the English opera was done by means of Henry Purcell's masterpiece: *Dido and Enea.* His polyphonic culture helped him create impressive choruses, anticipating Händel. Less known than the oratorios, the operas of Händel are essential to the Italian style in London. The performances designed for the choruses engender the profound psychology in epic moments.

In the second stage of the development of French opera, Christoph-Willibald Gluck gave up on the ornamental side of the chorus and raised its dramatical function. His first opera, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, brings about choral formulas in all three acts, the acting people fill the scene in the opera *Alcesta*, and the Greeks and Scythians are the two main groups in *Iphigenia*.

In order to define the classical musical drama, Joseph Haydn headed towards mythological themes, but also wrote buffooneries. Summing up the artistic current of his time, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart deepened the psychological characterisation, *Idomeneo, Re di Creta* proving themselves to be of great originality and artistry.

As to fight for its right, the 18th century ingrained to the musical theatre the combative spirit, affirming itself as a genre distinctive for the revolution. The collective expression is common to the salvation opera, because the choral moments affirm courage, patriotism - *Fidelio* by Ludwig van Beethoven.

For the german cultural space, Carl Maria von Weber represents the creator of the Romantic opera, intermingling the models *seria* and *buffa* with elements of *singspiel*. The dramatic impact interfered with the world of popular dance and singing resulting in an emotional expressive language. Among Weber's successors are Friedrich von Flotow and Otto Nicolai.

At the interference between classicism and romanticism, the grand scenic performances appeared, bearing the name of *grand-opéras*. The pompous enactment and the revolutionary fervour offered to the audience special sensations and effects.

In the romantic Italian opera, the choral ensemble was used in multiple and diverse situations. The choral effects, pervaded by patriotic and heroic accents, resonated in Vincenzo Bellini's or Gaetano Donizetti's melodramas. The impetuous force of the Rossini-like style appealed to choral moments even in the comic opera. Giuseppe Verdi continued the path of his predecessors and affirmed the expressiveness of the highly-melodious widespread patriotic singing.

The crowds were entertained by Hector Berlioz with a colossal force in his hybrid works, which mixed the oratorium with drama. In the second half of the 19th century France, the elements of lyrical tragedy merged with the pompousness of grand opera. French romanticism was illustrated by Gounod, Massenet and Bizet.

Moving farther from the Italian and French drama, the German culture was reformed by Richard Wagner. On the background of legendary tales with mythological characters, there were altogether peoples, priests, sailors, spinners, pilgrims and vassals, and the vast sonority of the ensemble were integrated into the dramatic discourse, characterised by symphonic unity. On the path launched by Wagner's opera, Richard Strauss made his way, with more of a Southern melodic style.

At the crossroads of the 19-20th centuries, the musical drama proposed a totally new stylistic attitude. The Italian verism evolved towards the symphonising of the musical discourse, and the choral ensemble was integrated in the plot, with more or less dimensioned articulations. Illustrating the natural beauties, etnographic reenactments, songs or religious scenes diversified the dramatic context and brought to fruition the shaking stories told by Pietro Mascagni, Ruggero Leoncavallo and Giacomo Puccini.

The agglomeration of national schools enriched the entertainment business with historical operas, popular dramas, comic operas, or characters from the sci-fi world and from legends. The Russian school enriched the historical themes with *Ivan Sussanin* by Mihail Ivanovici Glinka. In the same way Alexandr Porfirievici's *Prince Igor* was integrated. The problematics of the collective character was launched by Modest Petrovici Musorgski, along with the dramatic character of the opera *Boris Godunov.* The mass popular scenes, which highlighted different separate groups are also to be found in *Hovanscina.* The Russian nobility environment was described by Piotr Ilici Ceaikovski, who also put together a synthesis of classical Western operas and The Five.

Under the German influence, the Czech school was represented by Bedřich Smetana, Antonin Dvořák and Leoš Janáček. Ferenc Erkel, the founding father of the Hungarian Opera School was followed by Zoltán Kodály, and the Polish theatre enriched the musical repertoire with Stanislaw Moniuszko and Karol Szymanovski's works.

Receiving the Wagnerian declamation, Claude Debussy translates it into French style, turning to the association of colours and contours. He gives up the extended acts divided into musical numbers and opts for fluid episodes. The ingenious appearance of the chorus, in front or behind the scenes, bring forward the necessary contrast and sound effects.

In the Austrian cultural environment dramas are expressionist. In *Moses und Aaron*, Arnold Schőnberg uses the *sprechgesang* also in the score of the collective character represented by the Jewish people.

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III. The Beginnings of the Romanian Lyrical Drama

The contact between Terra Romana and the lyrical performance was done by means of foreign bands. The first indigenous lyrical and dramatic forms were crystallised by the end of the 18th century, through joint patriotic wishful thinking. The Pastoral *Mirtil and Hloe*, by Gessner and Florian was the first ever performance in Romanian, played by Asachi's band. Its footsteps were followed by other literary materials accompanied by musical creations, the collaboration between Vasile Alecsandri and Alexandru Flechtenmacher being one of the most famous in this respect.

A great number of foreign composers were connected to the Romanian musicals. The first vaudeville was composed by Ioan Andrei Wachmann, while Ludovic Anton Wiest set the stage for the first instrumental bands in Bucharest, preparing the upcoming orchestra conducted by Eduard Wachmann.

The vaudeville genre met the needs of the Romanian drama and became the first ever form of expressing our Romanian classical music. The sung parts in a prose comedy were called couplets, and the final parts were performed in choir.

In the second half of the 19th century, the point of interest moved from vaudevilles to operettas. This genre evolved simultaneously with the affirmation in Europe of the respective genre, through the contribution of 2 schools – French and Vienese. The birth certificate of the operetta in Romania was signed by Alexandru Flechtenmacher, with the operetta/sung wizardry *Baba Hârca* [*Dirty Hag*], in which the choral theme was connected to popular music.

On an ever sparlking national and patriotic background, Ciprian Porumbescu brought to fruition the operetta *Crai Nou* [*New Moon*], crafted after a popular legend. The use of the Vienese model didn't exclude the elements of folklore. The national character of such works was noted in Tudor Flondor's operas, him being the author of such operettas as *Rusaliile* [*The Pentecost*], or *Noaptea Sfântului Gheorghe* [*The Night of Saint George*].

Among the Romanian music's classics we note Eduard Caudella, who signs the first ever musical theatres. Along with the operetta *Olteanca*, the composer launched the popular ethos in the choral scenes, and the choral ensemble was used in different ways: women's choir, men's choir, mixed choir.

The first professional band called *The Romanian Lyrical Society* was launched by George Stephănescu. Being a canto professor and conductor, Stephănescu was also involved in the creative process, leaving as legacy the extravaganza called *Sânziana şi Pepelea.* The classic scheme was kept by Constantin Dimitrescu in his two works, the operretas *Sergentul Cartuş* [*Cartridge Sergeant*] and *Nini*. In the process of creating the National School, composers Mauriciu Cohen Linariu, Ionel Brătianu and Iacob Mureşianu joined.

The 20th century debuted with the opera called *Petru Rareş* and continued with diverse genres in the lyrical drama. Life in the countryside was described by Tiberiu Brediceanu, who glorified popular music. This path will later on be followed by Sabin Drăgoi and Marţian Negrea, and the utmost moment will be represented by the lyrical tragedy Oedip.

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