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Narrativity in contemporary opera - a case study

Literary theory has developed various concepts of narrativity. For our purpose, the voice of the narrator seems less important than the plot, or the fact that something is told (or represented on stage). Since we are dealing with theatre, and particularly with opera, we may emphasize that the narrative presupposes fictitious, human (or anthropomorphic) characters in a fictitious universe subject to the categories of time and space. In fact, the singing voices are embodied in figures that generally act on stage, and they sing to express human feelings, thoughts, or reflections.

Of course, speaking actors on stage, in the movies or on television express the same things without singing. Music is not absolutely necessary in the narrative. Nevertheless, music (mainly instrumental music) was used in romantic melodrama, and is used up to this day in musical comedy and film to emotionalize the situations. The whole story is told in the dialogue; the music has only to underline the dramatic tension, to indicate the excitement or distress of the characters, etc.

Today's opera, chiefly in the United States, often tries to imitate film music. A growing number of new operas are written by film composers. Other operas take up the plot of a popular film. In this way, the composers, or the managers of opera houses, hope to attract the attention of people who think that opera is complicated and old-fashioned. However, there is a problem: In these kind of works, music doesn't take an active part in the narrative. The story runs perfectly well without it, it's only a kind of accompaniment that emphasizes the crucial moments. For instance, Eugene O'Neill's play *Desire Under the Elms* doesn't need music. The characters express clearly what they feel and what they

want to do. In Edward Thomas's "American Folk Opera" based on this play, the music intensifies the feelings of the characters and heightens the dramatic situations, but it has no meaning of its own. Likewise, the execution scene is mere melodrama in Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*. Such works have more in common with musical comedy than with opera.

If music is to be more than a background sound, it must be part of the narrative. In this case, it may express things that words cannot say, or summarize long explanations in three or four bars. In a narrative opera, there must be a level of musical expression as an indispensable complement to the words. For instance, in Philip Boesman's *Reigen*, as in the play of Arthur Schnitzler, the remarks of the characters are mainly commonplaces, they are not able to articulate their desire which is expressed fully and exclusively in Boesman's composition.

In this paper, I shall discuss succinctly four types of narrative opera that occur frequently in current theatre. I have called them generically *opera as folktale*; *opera as biography*; *opera as literature*; and *opera as opera*. I shall present some examples for each type that may not be representative in a strict sense, but they will help to illustrate the potentialities and the problems of musical narrative.

1. Opera as folktale

From the 18th to the beginning of the 20th century, folktales, or literary fairy-tales, were transposed to the operatic stage without great changes. In our post-modern times, opera for children may work like this, but composers and librettists that address a grown-up audience must either deconstruct the folktales, or treat them with irony. Here I have some examples, but I skip them for reasons of time. I shall discuss only the last one:

In traditional (eastern) societies, folktales were told until recently in public places. John Adams's opera *A Flowering Tree*, conceived as a response to

Mozart's *Zauberflöte*, stages the performance of such a professional storyteller. The utterances of the characters are cited in direct speech, but only the poor girl Kumudha and the prince, her lover, are impersonated by soloists. The other parts, sung in Spanish (Kumudha's mother and sister, the beggar minstrels and, of course, the crowd) are taken by the chorus. The lovers and the storyteller sing in English.

The plot is derived from an old Indian fairy-tale, marked by sharp contrasts that are underlined by the music. The prince falls in love with Kumudha, the beautiful daughter of a poor woman, because she has the power to change into a flowering tree. He marries her, but his love is not true. All he desires is the marvel of the flowering tree. His sister is jealous of Kumudha's beauty. By her fault, the young woman cannot turn back into her human figure, and becomes "a 'thing' with no legs and no arms". The prince, who in the meantime has learned to love Kumudha, sets out to find her and finally arrives to give her back her former beauty. The poor girl is first raised to a royal position, then degraded to a mere "thing" but, finally, the prince and his wife reach stable happiness. The metamorphoses of the girl give the opportunity of musical interludes (played by the orchestra, sometimes accompanied by the vocalising chorus).

The distance is great between *A Flowering Tree* and, for instance, Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*. The presence of the storyteller, the fact that only the main parts are impersonated by singers, and also the intertextual reference to Mozart establish considerable distance between the tale and the audience. The tale is rather quoted (from the literary tradition) than enacted. We cannot forget that Kumudha and the prince are characters from a folktale, and that all their actions have a ritual, or mythical, dimension. When they sing, we perceive the story and, simultaneously, its symbolic meaning.

2. Opera as biography

In contemporary opera, a growing number of composers prefer some striking episode from the life of a modern celebrity to literary subjects, just as today's readers are generally more interested in (auto-)biographies of film actors, professional football players, or even politicians than in novels. We may recognize a new phenomenon that should be called 'people opera': In the last years we have had, among others, operas on Rudolph Moshhammer, an eccentric fashion designer from Munich, murdered by a male prostitute and, recently, *Anna Nicole*, Mark-Anthony Turnage's opera on Anna Nicole Smith, "the small-town American blonde who transformed herself into an international sex symbol", as states the homepage of Covent Garden Opera House, where this (another quotation) "celebrity story of our times that includes extreme language, drug abuse and sexual content" was played for the first time four months ago.

Obviously, music cannot confine itself to summarize the stages of a biography (even in spoken drama, the result would be rather boring). The composer and his librettist must find a personal point of view. They should concentrate upon a feature, or an incident, that may shed light on the character of their protagonist.

To point out the problems of a biographical approach in the music theatre, let us compare two operas that both stage Russian poets from the Stalinist era. Bruno Mantovani's *Akhmatova* was first staged at Paris, in March 2011. The three acts show Anna Akhmatova's difficult life, the persecutions by the police and the Union of Writers, her anguish and depressions and, mainly, the painful relation to her son who gets arrested several times and, at the end, will reproach his mother for having neglected him. In fact, we find the conflict between art and individual life that was so popular in the 19th century. But the essence of a poet's personality lies in his or her poetry, and Akhmatova's poetry does not

occur in this opera. There are strong feelings and rather pathetic situations illustrated by the music, but the voice of the *poetess* Akhmatova is not heard.

On the other hand, Michael Schindhelm approached the poet Osip Mandelstam in *Schwarzerde*, music by Klaus Huber. Here, the outlines of Mandelstam's story are taken for granted. The protagonist is called Parnok, but we are not told that Parnok is the author's double in Mandelstam's story *The Egyptian Stamp*. We may recognize the stations of the poet's way of the cross, domiciliary visits, journey to Armenia, deportation, but also the constant love for his wife Nadeshda. Instead of telling Mandelstam's story, the libretto gives a kind of psychograph, where all his experiences and emotions are present simultaneously.

The libretto quotes intensively from the poetry of Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova and Marina Zwetajewa, and from Nadeshda Mandelstam's memoirs. The quotations are given in Russian, or even in Armenian. The motif of breathlessness resumes Mandelstam's situation (literally – his cardiac disorder – and metaphorically – the persecution by the Stalinist system), as well as the state of Russian society. It's up to the music to elucidate the hidden meaning of this tight, allusive, poetic libretto.

3. Opera as Literature

From the early 17th century to our times, most opera libretti have been based on pre-existing literary texts. Before *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Salome*, the plot had to be adjusted to the conventions of opera. So, the librettist reduced the number of parts to an average opera cast, introduced arias, ensembles and choruses, etc. In the 20th century, we find what in German is often called *Literaturoper*: A spoken drama (or even a narrative) is set to music in its

original form, nevertheless important cuts are generally inevitable because the musical version of a full-length play would greatly exceed the time of a standard representation. In most cases, more than half the original text is omitted. Paul Méfano's "action lyrique" *Micromégas* seems an almost unique exception: The composer set to music Voltaire's whole *conte philosophique*, with all the interventions of the narrator, as Claudio Monteverdi did with a passage taken from Tasso in *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*. Unlike Monteverdi, Méfano splits up the part of the narrator, taken alternatively by a reciting actor, a soprano, or a sextet of three male and three female voices.

Literaturoper was very popular in the fifties and sixties, but it has remained alive up to this day. The most prolific and successful German librettist in this range was Claus H. Henneberg, who collaborated with composers such as Aribert Reimann, Manfred Trojahn, Matthias Pintscher, and others. The adaptation of Shakespeare's *Lear* for Aribert Reimann remains his most popular libretto, evidently because the plot focuses on existential crises and extreme states of mind, such as Lear's mental disorder or Edgar's feigned madness. Henneberg's adaptation of Luigi Pirandello's *Enrico quarto* for Manfred Trojahn was equally successful. The plot (twenty years earlier, the protagonist lost his mind in an accident during a masquerade; as a result he identifies with the German emperor, Henry IV, and persists in playing this part when he recovers his reason) allows the protagonist to be distinguished from his company by means of music; as well as the mad Enrico from the sane one.

On the other hand, when Henneberg adapted Chekhov's *Three sisters* for Peter Eötvös, this collaboration did not work. The composer explained recently that in Chekhov's play, all is expressed in words. Henneberg had abridged the play, but in its shorter form it was still too explicit to leave room for music. *Three Sisters* deals with the time that passes, and with characters overwhelmed

by their daily routine and therefore unable to realise their dreams. There is no madness or disaster that demands a non-verbal language like music. In the end, Eötvös did not compose Henneberg's version but compiled his own libretto from the Russian original: He established three sequences showing to some extent the same events, each time from the point of view of one character. The changing perspective gives the music the opportunity to depict reality as perceived by Irina, Andrei, or Masha.

4. Opera as opera

The purpose of my first three sections was to point out that a good opera plot should include a dimension not fully accessible to logical thought and argumentation, (for instance, psychic reality), which leaves room for music. Music may emphasize or elucidate the meaning of the plot, but it may also be part of the plot itself – for instance, when the opera deals with musicians, or when the performance of a song or of instrumental music decides the fate of the protagonists. In this last section, I shall briefly mention three very different examples of music as topic, or medium, of operatic discourse.

Jules Verne has rewritten to some extent the libretto of *The Tales of Hoffmann* in his novel *Le Château des Carpathes*. The prima donna Stilla (!) dies while she performs, at Naples, the part of Angelica in an imaginary operatic adaptation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (as Antonia and her mother died by singing). Five years later, her ex-fiancé finds out that his demonic rival (some kind of Lindorf) has recorded Stilla's voice and image with entirely new technologies, and can see and hear her last performance every day. In Philippe Hersant's opera *Le Château des Carpathes*, the *Lamento d'Angelica* performed by Stilla, (in Italian), is the center of the opera. We hear it first in the prologue, at the San Carlo theatre, when Stilla dies on stage. Later on, the 'recording' is played twice. *Le Château des Carpathes* is an opera about love, music and

stardom, but also about the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, as becomes evident when the demonic Gorz states: “Elle [i.e. Stilla] ne meurt plus. Elle chante. Elle n’était que sa voix.” (She cannot die, she will sing forever, because she was nothing other than her voice).

In our postmodern times, many musicians like to quote music of their famous predecessors. The Dutch composer Robin de Raaff was inspired by the differences between Mozart and the first singer of his *Idomeneo*, the celebrated tenor Anton Raaff. In his opera *Raaff*, the composer “M.”, the singers, etc. are transferred to the early 21st century (the new opera is a festival production, the artists arrive by airplane...). The dissensions between “M.” and Raaff are caused by jealousy: The young soprano ‘Dorothea Wendling’, Raaff’s lover, is fascinated by M. At the first rehearsal, Raaff sings Idomeneo’s first aria, Dorothea Idamante’s recitative and aria, both in Italian, (the libretto is partly in English, partly in Dutch). Robin de Raaff combines Mozart’s vocal line with a new accompaniment in his own style. M. criticizes harshly the famous tenor, but is quite enthusiastic about the young woman. Rather than an approach to Mozart, *Raaff* is a meta-opera that depicts (quite amusingly) today’s opera business, and at the same time a *Künstlerdrama* that continues ingeniously the 19th-century tradition.

My last example is more complex and, at the same time, more fun. The well-known German dramatist Tankred Dorst wrote *Yolimba oder Die Grenzen der Magie*, at the beginning of his career, with the composer Wilhelm Killmayer. Here music, or more precisely singing, equals seductive power and erotic attraction.

Möhringer, the magician, is a Puritan who hates love and wants to exterminate the ‘vices’ of our time. Therefore, as a new Frankenstein, he creates

Yolimba, a beautiful young woman. Yolimba does not speak but vocalizes. Her singing has no meaning, it is pure seduction. Yolimba will allure all men, but when they pronounce the word “love”, she will shoot them. For a while, she proceeds (very efficiently) according to Möhringer’s scheme. It is true that, if singing means seduction, Yolimba herself who incorporates the purest manner of singing cannot resist forever the temptation of love. She chooses Herbert, a bill-sticker who declined obstinately to pronounce the fatal word in her presence. Möhringer, who speaks in the beginning but can’t help singing when Yolimba’s achievement makes him happy, is defeated.

In this farce, singing is the true expression of desire. Dorst and Killmayer organize a surrealistic universe governed by the power of music. They demonstrate once more that realism is rather inappropriate to the music theatre. In the past as in the present, its true domain is the fantastic.