

Hermeneutics of Religious Symbolism in the Opera *Giovanna d'Arco* – Giuseppe Verdi.

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Abstract:

This study proposes a distinct approach to Italian lyrical theater, by means of an analysis of musical hermeneutics, which correlatively debates on the religious symbols identified in the music of the opera 'Giovanna d'Arco' and the socio-political setting in which this opera was written. Inspired by Friedrich Schiller's tragedy, Verdi will incorporate the topic of the opera within the music in such a manner as to reflect the drama of the contemporary man of the 19th-century Italian society. In full swing of the revolution, the Italian society of that time, more and more eager to find spiritual identity, is turning to the old religious legends. Joan of Arc, this religious symbol, will come to life in the pages of Verdi's opera, revealing numerous musical moments of sheer beauty, characteristic of the Italian style of the first half of the 19th century. At the same time, this opera brings together a series of religious symbols (divine apparitions), whose subliminal messages we will elucidate in this study.

Key-words: Opera, Verdi, Hermeneutics, Symbolism, Religious.

1. Introduction – an Outlook of the Religious Drama of Man.

The drama of man begins with the somewhat vague feeling of one's own person, with the somewhat vague realization that there are a number of similarities between himself and the world around him, but more particularly of the differentiations of essence, because for a long time it will not be possible to properly represent these differentiations; and for an even longer time, this essence will not be correctly understood. Whenever, in one historical era or another, man (or a human group, class, or even people) has deeply experienced the question "who am I" or "what am I," this has always been the delayed signal that he was faced with hostile forces: identified or unidentified, first natural, then social, that annihilated him one way or the other, that denied him to one degree or another in the mere setting of his material and spiritual existence. In the effort to escape these forces, man was forced to decide on his actual condition, to be aware of his relations with the world around him, with nature or society, as well as of the place he occupies in the frame of these relations. Thus, according to Alexandru Babeş: "History of man so far is, at spirit level, an epic, with pages full of drama, where all the dramas and tragedies of material existence have found ways of expressing themselves."² – in relation to the religious drama of man. The return of humanity to itself, to the natural fact of its unity, by annulling the split and extinguishing the conflict with itself, is a long and tormenting process. And this is not so much due to the effort that humanity, in general, as well as in its ethnic-national peculiarities, will have to make, going through the revolution of the material conditions of existence, but more particularly due to the daily struggle with itself and with the institution and defender of this split and conflict, namely the *Church*. We provide a definition of religion, relevant in the context of this research: "In other words, by religion, in the broadest sense, we mean the belief in the existence of" something"(anything) which is beyond the earthly world, outside it, but all-present ("real" or "virtual"), able to influence in one way or another ("good" or "bad") the destiny, the life of man and, as such, man, considering himself connected in one way or another to this supernatural "presence."³

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² Babeş Alexandru, *The Religious Drama of Man. Elements of Cultural Philosophy and Religion Anthropology*, page 9

³ Babeş Alexandru, quoted works, pages 44-45

2. Theology: a hermeneutic science

The idea of science does not respond to a single model. Of course, there are some similarities between the different scientific disciplines. We can express them by saying that science is a step that aims to develop a knowledge of the real that is both critical, systematic and capable of self-amplification. Human sciences have asserted themselves in their autonomy only to the extent that they have been able to free themselves from the model provided by empirical-formal sciences and to recognize similarities with hermeneutic methodology. In the family of sciences, theology occupies a truly singular place, insofar as it is not only, following the example of other human sciences, the outward study of religious beliefs. To the extent that it concerns a systematized knowledge, capable of deepening through its own methodological resources, theology deserves to be regarded as a science. In this context, the words of the great Romanian theologian Dumitru Stăniloie, who states that: "According to our faith, the rationality that exists in the universe is required to be completed, it demands an explanation in the rationality of the person."⁴The word of revelation and the word of faith make a new reality, the work of salvation, its meaning being reducible to that of the philosophical logos. "But both man and the cosmos are the product of an act of creation above the nature of God and are kept in existence by God through a conservation action, which also has a supernatural character."⁵To sum up, the theological effort can only be radical by conducting itself critically, systematically and dynamically, as any scientific effort, but it can only go to the discovery of specific science by relying firmly on what constitutes its giving. The experience of faith opens up to the free impersonal manifestation of the universal bond.

2.1. Hermeneutics and creative interpretation

It is obvious that hermeneutics understood as a method of reading and re-reading texts is co-extensive to Christian theology from its origins. In this study we want to highlight the fact that faith is not faithful to its ilk population except to the extent that it leads to a creative interpretation of Christianity. "In Greece, the art of acting (*hermeneutike technē*) designated the activity of carrying messages from the gods to men."⁶It is about taking seriously the hermeneutics understood as the intrinsic dimension of knowledge and drawing all the consequences for theology as the intelligence of the faith. The mission of the theologian-hermeneut and the artist-hermeneut is to restore this fundamental experience by dissociating it from the representations and interpretations that belong to an experience that has now become revolutionized. "Even if there is no argument against wealth historical and conceptual that hermeneutics has been able to develop over time, one has to wonder if part of its pretence of universality it will not depend precisely on the variety (and ambiguity) of senses we have listed."⁷At equal distance from biblical positivism as well as conceptual dogmatism, hermeneutic discourse must also explore the resources of poetic language as the best means of manifesting the universality of the Christian message.

3. Italy of the 19th Century: Between Spirituality and Romantic Nationalism

In this epoch, nationalism consisted in capitalizing on the historical past, the one that united the entire nation and that provided them with a goal in terms of cultural development, creating this parallel which existed in the subsidiary of the collective vision: glorious past - independent future. The development of nationalism is one of the most important aspects in terms of cultural evolution and the evolution of the arts, written press and scientific activities of the time. Italy's past was represented in art through ominous, fervent political messages, which were deliberately placed in another historical and temporal context, so as not to be subject to censor. "In the revolutionary and Napoleonic period, Cesare Alfieri's romantic tragedies and Ugo Foscolo's poems also claimed a cultural (linguistic) sense of nation and national identity long before they became legitimate political concerns."⁸The ideas of the Risorgimento period fuel the Italian romanticism, which, in meeting the way of thinking, the feelings and the contrasts of the great movement for Independence, finds its original voice. In Italy, Renaissance cosmopolitanism, the voices, the movements, the examples of a national legend were extinguished, faded away; the past still dominates the Greco-Latin world or, rather, a vision of it, that excludes more modern others.

⁴Stăniloie Dumitru, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, Vol. I, pag. 20

⁵Stăniloie Dumitru, op. cit. pag. 10

⁶Ferraris Maurizio, *La hermeneutica*, pag. 7

⁷Ferraris Maurizio, op. cit. pag. 28

⁸Riall Lucy, *Italy in the Risorgimento Era*, pp. 124

“The representatives of the Enlightenment and the Romantics, although in contrast, gradually find, confirming the power of reason, the freedom of research, the awareness of the modern world and its origins, the features of a national legend; it is not just a literary recovery, the background of feelings, of human and historical interests, of legal and political and complex ideals, sometimes closed in patterns and contradictions, or released in a hurry, always between people and culture, reality and memory, past and present, between old and ancient contradictions.”⁹The romantic age brings with it “that profound movement, from the worship of God, to the exaltation of the individual and, similarly, from the fear of God, to the fear of man”¹⁰. This artistic attitude has been imposed since the Renaissance, centered around the idea that “man is the measure of all things”¹¹, and man's creations are a proof of the beauty and purity of the world. Following the example of the ancient Greek art, through the opera music of the 19th century, the artist, the creator, resumes his role in the heart of things.

4. Verdi versus Schiller: Universal Religious Drama

Giuseppe Verdi, in the highest soaring of his compositional mastery, proves that Schiller's drama has urged him to make a complex study of dramaturgy, so that the result of this syncretic work could not disappoint the public of that time, who was beginning to fully enjoy the spiritual character of Verdi's drama. We note Grigore Constantinescu's observations: “From *Giovanna d'Arco* to *Don Carlo*, we do not find only sequences of excessive progressions. There are also more than two decades of searches, come-backs, confirmations and abandonments. The composer is always eager for heroes, but, as he feels, the plot is the basis of the construction, and Schiller is a vigorous, dynamic creator, able to draw him emotionally.”¹²Verdi's lyrical drama begins to take on new dimensions in terms of dramaturgy, polishing the psychological portrait of the characters through specific musical structures. Following the dramaturgical specifics of those times, Temistocle Solera rewrites Schiller's drama, reducing the number of characters. However, the traditional soprano-tenor-baritone formula, on which the action is centered, remains valid. Grigore Constantinescu adds: “Jeanne d'Arc, as a symbol of faith, courage and love of her country, has captivated several musicians through the theatrical spectacular of the legend (...)Verdi's opera *Giovanna d'Arco*, which was a remarkable success at the time of its appearance, will impress rather through its scenes of emotional tension.”¹³Both in history, and in art, man's closeness to God in times of hardship has taken many forms. Verdi speculates on the emotional needs of a declining society and puts them into music, so that his operas from 1842-1850 will combine a variety of religious symbols - some metaphors - through which he will infuse in his compatriots the feeling of belonging to the spirituality of a united Italy.

5. Analysis of Religious Symbols Reflected in the Musical-Dramaturgic Setting

The transformation of the opera into musical drama must be considered as a victory of music, which reiterates the generous tumults of history. The exigency of music, together with the new type of Italian lyrical drama, provides Verdi's drama with that monastic simplicity. Temptation, suffering, victory, collapse, are the solemn themes illustrated in 19th-century Italian opera. In this context, the interpretations resulting from the analysis of the operain terms of musical hermeneutics reflect only a great outpouring of the Italian spirit, through this traditional genre - the opera. Before we ascertain the religious symbols in ‘*Giovanna d'Arco*’, let us reflect on the following ideas: “As real music gives the body a quiet magnificence, it also preserves from passion only that majestic unrest through which the spirits withdraws from it; it seems like, because of music, everything is always beforehand revoluted and overcome, forgiven, resumed, finally, in a more natural order and in the spirit of human introspection.”¹⁴

The religious symbols present in this opera are related to the divine apparitions of the Virgin, the prayers dedicated to Her and also the divine message that the protagonists receive after these apparitions, carrying parables of victory. In the first scene of the prologue, Charles VII, King of France, confesses that the apparition of the Virgin, who came to him in a dream, led him to victory. Thus, the dramatic perspective merges with the music, the latter representing an example of lyricism, candor and purity.

⁹ Ferrante Luigi, *Risorgimento*, pp. 10

¹⁰ Menuhin Yehudi and Davis W. Curtis, *The music of man*, pp. 105

¹¹ Idem

¹² Constantinescu Grigore, *Giuseppe Verdi*, pp. 36

¹³ Constantinescu Grigore, *op.cit.*, pp. 36-37

¹⁴ Alain Emile-Chartier, *A system of the Fine Arts*, pp.118

The indication of tempo - *Andantino* - and the one that illustrates the character of the vocal discourse - *mezza voce* - are accompanied by accents of expression, staccato - legato notes, fioritura, preserving the character of the opera music of that time. We note underlined in musical terms the expression *posar la fronte mesta* (an upward quarter jump followed by a gradual descent and a *fioritura* on the word *mesta* - forehead, in the context meaning a sad forehead (referring to the Virgin). We distinguish the highest tone at the end of the word *Vergine* (G 2).

The musical score is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a vocal line (C) and a piano accompaniment (P). The tempo is marked 'ANDANTINO' and the vocal style is 'mezza voce'. The lyrics are: 'Sotto u-na quer - cia par - vemi po-sar la fron-te me - sta; splen-dea di-pin - ta' Ver - gi-ne in mezzo al-la fo - re - sta... mosse di là co-man - do che, sorgi, dis-se, o'.

Figure 1 – Carlo's aria, *Sotto una quercia parvemi...* (Prologue)

Further, another religious symbol is revealed to us, namely the invocation-prayer that Giovanna addresses to the Virgin. In this musical moment, the listener or performer, as the case may be, is presented with a characterization of the protagonist: at this moment, Giovanna's call to fight leads her to prayer, creating a genuinely moving moment. She asks the Virgin to provide her with the weapons that she needs to fight against the English intruders in order to save France. The vocal-instrumental writing betrays the tense character of the moment, inserting a series of contrasting elements in the vocal discourse: legato, accents in punctuated rhythmic formulas, altered sounds, interval jumps, short pauses of expression - expressing a sigh, like a real sigh in the middle of a prayer. Broadly speaking, Verdi preserves the elements characteristic of the belcanto writing, however accumulating a greater number of accents and chromatic inserts - which betrays the beginning of a new Verdi writing, which characterizes the coming years, namely the dramatic belcanto.

Verdi — Giovanna d'Arco — Prologue

spa - da d'una spada e d'un ci - mier! Sem - pre al - l'al - ba ed al - la

se - ra qui - vi in - nal - zo a te a te pre -

- ghiera; qui la not - te mi ri - po - so, e te so - gna il mio pen -

Figure 2 – Giovanna’s aria, *Sempre all’alba ed alla sera...* (Prologue)

The finale of the opera is marked by the symbol of the *opening of the heavens*: *s’apre il ciel discende la Pia*. Temistocle Solera adapts the text of the libretto in a poetic way, so that its juxtaposition of music renders a monumental, sacred character. The religious symbolism resulting from this last fragment finds its support particularly in the development of the vocal discourse, much simplified compared to the first interventions of Giovanna from the beginning of the opera. The dynamics is reduced - *pp* - the vocal discourse is homogeneous, mostly linear, in an extended ambitus (*B flat 2*). We notice in the last measure of the provided example (Fig. 3) the gradual tempo followed by the arpeggio, in staccato - which symbolically expresses a kind of liberation, a descent of a light; the chromatic scale in the accompaniment gives an extra tension to this outcome. "She is still living even today. And she will live forever. For Joan is the embodiment of supreme heroism, and heroism remains immortal over the centuries."¹⁵

¹⁵ Levandovski Anatoli, *Jeanne d’Arc*, page 280

The science of hermeneutics will also be applicable in the context of 19th-century opera music, given the new orientation of Italian opera composers, who will bring important Old Testament scenes, as well as the lives of saints, to life through music.

7. Conclusions

It is little likely for artists or writers to represent or describe an era, so that the conveyed message reaches all the social classes. It is also little likely that an opera composer succeeds in conveying, through music, feelings as pure or as violent as Verdi succeeded in his first period of creation. At a time when the common man longed for some spiritual sense, Verdi rose like a titan, and the creation that he left behind remains unique by the very simplicity it conveys in terms of intercepting symbols. For a long time, romantic artists tried to immortalize this connection between man and God. Eugène Delacroix in painting, Torquato Tasso and William Blake in literature, etc., providing certain landmarks in capturing the relation between man and divinity. In the opera, this tradition is older, the invocation of the gods being one of the most common topics of *opera seria*. With the 19th century, Italian opera took on other dimensions, dealing with certain topics - taken over from the Bible or from universal literature - in a realistic manner. The socio-political setting of the time awakens in the Italians that sentiment of belonging, thus generating an era of great enquiries. Mircea Eliade speaks of this phenomenon and points out: "Beginning from a certain stage of culture, man considers himself a micro-cosmos, namely a part of the Creation of the gods or, in other words, he finds in himself the "sacredness" that he recognizes in the cosmos."¹⁸ In terms of analysis of musical hermeneutics, Giovanna d'Arc represents a bridge to a world of religious symbols (presented in this study), being one of the most relevant musical works that capture the ethos and the religious expression of mid-19th century Italy.

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¹⁸ Eliade Mircea, *The Sacred and the Profane*, page 124