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OPERA – PARADIGM OF A CREATOR'S POETICS IN A GIVEN STYLE

The style of an artist is the sublimation of a particular style of conventions. It is apparent in observing conventions (recognizable style) and violating conventions (exceptions from general context=individuality) in inverse ratio in a creative way. In this way, two groups of artists are recognizable: synthetics (dominance of the first principle of creating) and revolutionary (stressed the second principle). It seems that Claudio Monteverdi's opus is in the cross section of these coordinates, and this will be obvious in the following discussion on his opera *Orfeo*.

Although Monteverdi's operatic works are not so numerous[1] it is in his operas that the basic ideas of his own poetics are to be found, with elements of Florentine opera. As a Mantua court musician's first opera was commissioned by Francesco Gonzaga, the duke's elder son, as a carnival entertainment, to a libretto by the court secretary Alessandro Striggio in collaboration with the composer.[2] The opera was first performed on 1607 very successful, partly because castratos appeared in all the female roles (five sopranos). As opposed to accepted rules of performing – a new opera was set through only one season – *Orfeo* was set several times in Mantua and other cities.[3]

The main character is an artist, the representative of a composer, a kind of self-portrait. He is a mythological hero, the musician Orpheus, customary in early baroque pastorale. The problem of creativity and inspiration is elaborated in the opera through a love story between an artist and his muse, in a particular social context, i.e. relating to the woman as Other.

The first operas (Peri's, Caccini's, Monteverdi's) had as their subjects the legend of Orpheus. The choice of this legend is interesting for different reasons.

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[1] Monteverdi wrote twelve operas, but left three of them incomplete. Six operas are lost, so we have only three: *Orfeo* (1607), *The Return of Odysseus* (1641) and *The Coronation of Poppea* (1642). This was not a large operatic opus at that time. It seems interesting that Monteverdi began to compose operas as a middle-aged man. Though he published his first opus already at the age of 15, he didn't write his first opera *Orfeo* until he was 40 (1607), the next one in 1630, and the last when he was 75.

[2] From 1590–1591 to 1612 Monteverdi worked for Mantuan duke Vincezno Gonzaga.

[3] Opera presented at Florence (1607, 1609), Cremona (1607), Milan (1610), Turin (1610), Salzburg (1614, 1619), Genoa (before 1646), etc. It is the earliest work on today's opera repertoire.

The first reason lies in the neoplatonic ideas on the revival of the classical Greek tragedy. Second, the Orpheus and Eurydice myth is considered a typical example of the propagation of monogamous marriage by European courtly societies at the beginning of the 17th century.[4] Third, it was felt that the so-called "realistic song" was necessary in order to establish a new musical-dramatic form, based on singing and not speaking the text. Namely, Edward Cone mentions the "realistic song" and the "operatic or conventional or expressive" song. The first means that a character really does sing a song on stage[5] and the second is analogous to dramatic speaking. In this manner, in Peri's, Caccini's, Monteverdi's operatic music, Orpheus is a hero, who "interpreted as engaging in realistic rather than operatic song", and thus "considerably reduced the instances of what might be thought of as prima facie absurdity."[6]

Dramaturgy of opera is in tune with the style of the period and the composer's particular style. *Favola in musica Orfeo* is divided into a prologue and five acts, like a classical tragedy, probably played without breaks. The first act includes pastoral lyric scenes – nymphs and shepherds celebrate Orpheus' and Eurydice's wedding. This idyll is interrupted by news of Eurydice's death. The third and fourth acts are placed in the Underworld. Orpheus succeeded in leading Eurydice towards the exit from Hades, again because by turning he has broken the law, Cupid's order, he lost her. In the fifth act – in the fields of Thrace – Orpheus is alone, lamenting the loss of Eurydice. The story has an unusual ending: Orpheus' father, Apollo, leads him to heaven, from where he can look upon Euridice's distinctions in the stars. Therefore, the myth of Orpheus is set in a conventional structural frame, with original proceedings (Leittheme, instrumentation, etc.). Monteverdi and Striggio intended Orpheus to represent the contemporary artist's identity. Unlike Peri – who adapted the myth to the social context of his time, and thus form this context[7] – Monteverdi and Striggio used the episodes of the hero's disobedience and the second loss of Eurydice. If we accept masculine-feminine symbolism as rationality-unconscious,[8] Jacques Lacan's opinion understood as the "twice-lost Eurydice" motive means that the unconscious is neither primordial nor instinctual (after Freud), but it is implicit in everything the subjects say and do, it is uncatchable.[9]

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[4] Klaus Theweleit, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*: The Technology of Reconstruction, *Opera Through Other Eyes*, edited by D. J. Levin, Stanford, 1993, 151.

[5] One of the best known examples is Cherubino's serenade *Voi che sapete* in Mozart's opera *Le Nozze di Figaro*.

[6] Edwarda T. Cone, "The World of Opera and its Inhabitation", in: *Music: A View from Delft*, ed. Robert P. Morgan, Chicago 1989, pp. 125–138; according to: Peter Kivy: *The fine art of repetition. Essays in the philosophy of music*, Cambridge, CUP, 1993, 141.

[7] In view of Peri's opera performed for dynastic celebrations, the story has changed by omitting Cupid's order and by Orpheus' success to bring Eurydice back.

[8] Madan Sarup, Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva: French feminist theories, *Post-structuralism and Postmodernism*, New York, London, 1993, 117.

[9] Slavoj Žižek, Lakanov „povratak" Frojdu, *Kultura*, Beograd, 1982, No. 57–58.

Woman's-Eurydice's place as the place of Other in patriarchal society is stressed in Monteverdi's opera. It confirms Helen Cixous's opinion that the woman in the theater, in the past, was silenced and repressed. Thus, the theater reflected fantasy where women characters functioned as reflection of male heroism.[10] In that manner, the woman (Eurydice) – absent Other, constitutes the subject of the man (Orpheus), and she is a non-existent subject. Certainly, it is not a coincidence that Eurydice appears alone only twice – in the first and fourth acts. At the beginning of the opera she speaks to Orpheus about her love. Later, before leaving the Underworld – when she realizes that her return to earth is forever thwarted – she bitterly accuses Orpheus because of his exaggerated love, condemning her to death. Taking into consideration that this wish arises from a lack of or missing shortage, it has dramaturgically been necessary for desiring Other (Eurydice) lost forever, for the second time.

Orpheus' reactions to two Eurydice's deaths are unparticular. Namely, when the messenger Sylvia announces Eurydice's death, Orpheus doesn't believe and becomes speechless with horror. The unusual moment of silence, interruption (signifier)[11] of action was, after Hölderlin, "*necessary* for the tragic truth to appear" and for the tragedy's plot.[12] Only dead Eurydice becomes truly an inspiration to the artist Orpheus, who then entirely dedicates himself to his music, as well as Monteverdi himself (after the death of his own wife, Claudia Cataneo).

Like a Lacanian subject, divided because of traumatic loss, Orpheus returns to his missing Other: first, descending to the Underworld and, then, through his art, his music. The frustration of unfulfilled desire causes feelings for symbolic pleasure in pain, or *jouissance*.[13] Consequently, the question is: did Orpheus intentionally turn, i.e. was Eurydice's second death his own decision?[14] This would lead to his complete devotion to music (his essential love), i.e. using woman as a sublime inspiration, desired absent Other. Leaving the Underworld, he speaks to his "omnipotent" lyre and turns, wishing his self-realization. In other words, the Lacanian subject exists only in the interpretation of others – Orpheus' identity constituted by Eurydice's look,[15] by recognizing in the field of Other.

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[10] Madan Sarup, Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva.., 114.

[11] A pause is a text addition without meaning, but it changes the meaning structure.

[12] Philippe Lacoue-Lebarthe, The Caesura of Religion, *Opera Through Other Eyes*, edited by D. J. Levin, Stanford, 1993, 74.

[13] David Schwarz, *Listening Subjects – Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture*, Durham and London, 1997, 68–69.

[14] After Neoplatonism, "Orphic love" is blind, and Orpheus wished to see Eurydice (physical desire), breaking the highest form of love and he hadto be punished. Cf. Klaus Theweleit, op. cit, 255. According to the Hegelian story of Master and Slave: Slave breaking order and doesn't get Master's mercy. Cf. Mladen Dolar, "If music be the food of love" and Slavoj Žižek, Rojstvo totalitarnega subjekta iz duha wagnerjanske perverzije, in: *Filozofija v operi*, Ljubljana, 1993.

[15] "...he is seeking the glitter in her eyes as a form of applause for his song.", Klaus Theweleit, ibidem, 162–163.

"Desire... moves to action. Action tends to satisfy desire but can do so only by the 'negation', the destruction or at least the transformation of the desired object..."[16] A destructive act like this is analogous to a Freudian death instinct. Indeed, Orpheus' reaction to Eurydice's second death is different: now, when he is aware that he cannot bring her back, he sings about his tears and suffering, resolves to reject all other women.[17] At that very moment, there was a demonstration of mercy of Other (deity) – Apollo descends from heaven and consoles his son. It is obvious that Monteverdi's mythical story conception is a result of the author's poetics, as well as autobiographical elements.

There is yet another appearance of Other – on the musical, compositional plane, in accordance with the meaning of the text. The woman (Eurydice) as Other has a habitat of her own, the world of Other – Underworld, as opposed to the idyllic reality of the earth (Gonzaga court) with shepherds and nymphs (habitants of court), Orpheus (court musician Monteverdi) and unearthly god Apollo (Mantuan duke). The existence of two worlds causes a specific music language, and both worlds are represented by different music means, according to theory of affects.[18] Perhaps just this balance of word and tone, finally achieved, inspired music writers to state that Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo* is "the first authentic opera" and "the first work of genius in the history of opera."[19]

Polarization of music means is achieved both in vocal and in instrumental parts. Mainly, the music of Other is particular by the soloist's dramatic declamation, choir singing, dissonance. The changes of vocal parts are most obvious in Orpheus' appearances, because he is present in both worlds. Thus, lyrical recitative is alternated by virtuosity, representing the supernatural, magic. Orpheus tried to achieve the Underworld habitants' mercy with incomprehensible singing and playing on the lyre, performing unheard, rich coloraturas, long melisms.[20]

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[16] Madan Sarup, Lacan and psychoanalysis..., 17.

[17] "True, he has lost her as a flesh-and-blood person, but from now on, he will be able to discern her beautiful features everywhere, in the stars in the sky, in the glistening of the morning dew. Orpheus is quick to accept the narcissistic profit of this reversal: he becomes enraptured with the poetic glorification of Eurydice that lies ahead of him". In other words, Orpheus loses Eurydice intentionally in order to regain her as the object of sublime poetic inspiration. Slavoj Žižek, "The Wound Is Healed Only by the Spear That Smote You": The Operatic Subject and Its Vicissitudes, *Opera Through Other...*, 178–179.

[18] Later, in 1638, Monteverdi, in the preface of his eighth madrigal book, talks of three main affections: 1. Molle (the Soft), 2. Temperato (Moderate) and 3. Concitato (Agitated). He produced *stile concitato*, which used in the opera *Orfeo*. Cf. Michael Robinson, *Opera Before Mozart*, London, 1966.

[19] Theodor W. Adorno, Bourgeois Opera, *Opera Through Other...*, 33; John Whenham, Monteverdi, *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, vol. III, New York, 1994, 445.

[20] Monteverdi used coloraturas, a common feature of a later opera phase (in Venetian, Naples), even writes them literally!

A large orchestra[21] and choice of instrumental colors, which is completely atypical in the early 17th century, are a result of the composer's intention to embody the polarization mentioned earlier. The sound of flutes, strings, harpsichord dominate in the pastoral scenes, while the underworld is depicted by trumpets, trombones, portative organ. Monteverdi, an outstanding master of instrumentation of his time, is the first to line out character and the meaning of the libretto by music means.

As mentioned earlier, the problem of creativity is underlined in the opera, i.e. the idea of music being "omnipotent." This idea is realized both in the libretto (especially in Orpheus' aria on the "omnipotent" lyre), and in the music with Leittheme. An allegorical figure appears in the prologue – La Musiche, in the role of Other – as well as in the works of Monteverdi's predecessors and contemporaries. Five stanzas of her song are separated by ritornello for strings. This ritornello is performed at the end of the second act and at the beginning of the fifth act, as musical embodiment of music alone – a very ingenious solution. After the first appearance of Leittheme in the prologue, it follows the lamentation of the astonished Orpheus, shepherds and nymphs because of Eurydice's death. In that way, this theme hints at the idea of the power of music, enough to bring Eurydice back. It is not a coincidence; the ritornello appears between lamentations and the occurrence of Speranza (Hope) at the entrance to the Underworld. The same theme follows the second loss of Eurydice, too. At the beginning of the last act yet another nuance of meaning is added to that: since Eurydice's return is impossible, as a living being, Monteverdi's message that music alone is salvation, as a means of communication with Other, or incorporeal embodiment of Other is stressed.

Ever since its founding, the opera as an institution, reflects and constitutes the social context of the epoch. At the beginning, operatic music was part of aristocratic, court entertainment, then it was set in public opera houses, and, in some way, today it is an elite art. In Monteverdi's opera one may see style in the context of the author's time, as well as the forming of his individual style.[22] Monteverdi's style is established in the polarization of earth-underworld, idyllic pastoral-dark, and with complex hints of Other In the opera *Orfeo*.

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[21] Monteverdi gives a list of instruments in the printed score: two Harpsichords, two string double-basses, ten arm viols, one double-strung harp, two treble violins (violini piccoli), two Archlutes, two organs with wooden pipes, three bas viols, four trombones, one small (Regale) organ, two Cornetti, one small flute, one trumpet in C. Cf. Adam Carse, The History of Orchestration, New York, s. a, 38–40.

[22] "From Adorno's perspective, the great achievement of human history took place during the bourgeois era, which in music he dates back approximately to Monteverdi. This was the crystallization of reason and self-consciousness into the concept of the free individual, a self-conscious human being with the freedom to determine his or her own destiny..." T. W. Adorno, Bach Defended against his Devotees (transl. by Samuel and Shierry Weber), *Prisms*, London, 1967, 137, according to: Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Developing Variations – Style and Ideology in Western Music*, Minneapolis, Oxford, 1991, 17.