

Expressing Reality through Spectacle and Dream in Baroque Art

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Abstract: *Diversity and unity, dream and reality, the constant struggle between opposites – these are some of the ideas which mark the Baroque, as art period in the history of Western art, but as a perpetual concept as well. The present paper aims to reveal and explain the philosophical ideas which influenced the creation of Baroque artistic creations. The outer splendour is a mask which hides the deep torment of the artist, lavishness and opulence express the complexity of the human soul, torn between contradictions, a tension which can be perceived in Baroque music as well. The alto arias in the “Stabat Mater” of G. B. Pergolesi were chosen to explain, from a musical point of view, some of the philosophical concepts which define the Baroque.*

Keywords: *Baroque, mask, splendour, Pergolesi, “Stabat Mater”*

1. Introduction

In her work *Infinita contemplazione. Gusto e filosofia dell’Europa barocca*, Rosario Assunto analyzes the importance of Leibniz’s philosophy in the process of defining the ideas which influenced Baroque Art. The principles of the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz focus on such concepts as diversity and unity: dividing unity and uniting diversity. Assunto believes that the philosophy of Leibniz may be regarded as a Baroque philosophy, which seeks to offer an answer and justification for those imperfections and irregularities often associated with the extravagance of Baroque art.

The German philosopher’s belief is that mankind lives in the most beautiful, most balanced and perfect of all worlds, following a harmonious path established in advance. The apparent imperfections one may perceive are also explained by Leibniz, who believes that behind all these flaws there lies a perfect justification: God would not have created an imperfect world if there could have been created a

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better one. These ideas have a soothing effect upon the soul of the Baroque artist, tormented by contradictions.

Baroque art is often associated with decline and decadence, its extravagance is considered a tool which seeks to hide a profound inner crisis. In her work Assunto refers to a fragment in which Leibniz, offering mathematical and rational arguments, explains that behind what one may view as *imperfect* and *irregular*, there lie myriads of reasons, which can explain these apparently flawed choices: “(...) *a line may be drawn in such a manner as to avoid a certain point or return to it, it may follow an ascending or descending course, it can change its direction and form, its continuity could be broken or it could suffer other changes, thus one cannot examine but one fragment in a line; despite this fact, we could still include this line in a construction in which a Geometer could find a purpose and an explanation for all the alleged irregularities: thus, this is the manner in which the so-called monsters and other flaws of this Universe must be judged...*” (Assunto 1983, 108). Assunto believes that the “*accusations of superficial sensuality and irrational imagery*”, often associated with the Baroque (Assunto 1983, 37), are offered an opposed interpretation through these ideas.

Despite the fact that life is viewed as predetermined, man can and must alter or transform the surrounding circumstances, and he may do so through his faith, ideals, the will and strength with which he seeks to accomplish his desires. This point of view may be an explanation as to why the Baroque artist perceives life as a magnificent spectacle, seeking thus to alter, at least in appearance, that which seems inevitable and impossible to change.

2. Spectacle, grandeur and dream

Life in its entirety is perceived as a great play, the world is the theater of the Baroque artist, whose final goal is not the *creation* of an artistic masterpiece, but rather the *effect* this work of art will produce upon the spectators. Beauty and splendour act as a shield, concealing the inner tragedy, the weakness of the artist, thus protecting the creator of this artwork. Gradually the artist himself is trapped by the beauty of his own creation: “*shimmering beauty must protect the one who creates it, it is destined to act upon an other being, to mesmerize, to amaze and create the state of «meravigilia», but these effects must be tested by the creator himself. This is the moment of the «mirror». Glamour becomes enamoured with its own beauty, often reaching the point of self-fascination, forgetting that it was not created for this purpose. (...) Glamour and splendour cease to determine a goal outside the creator, becoming the goal itself*” (Papu 1977, 211).

The mirror has a symbolic meaning, often employed by writers and artists with the purpose of pointing out one's mistakes, encouraging the spectator or reader to revise his thoughts and actions. However, in Baroque Art the mirror ceases to represent an outer advice or warning, becoming a means for enjoying one's own beauty and splendour. This external spectacle is preceded by a complex phenomenon which lies at the very foundation of Baroque Art: inner tragedy. After a certain period of evolution a living being inevitably encounters a particular state of decline, which makes this being vulnerable both to inner dissensions and outer attacks. This weakness must be masked through splendour and glamour, beauty acting as a weapon, operating as *meraviglia*, enchanting those who behold this sparkle.

Life becomes a spectacle in which the artist, contemplating his own beauty, is deceived by his own creation, falsely assuming that the weakness he desperately sought to hide has vanished, but in fact the poison has spread even deeper in his being.

3. G. B. Pergolesi: *Stabat Mater*

The cathedral is destined to offer a harbor against the tempest of everyday life, a place for prayer and inner reflections. The Baroque cathedral aims to represent the splendour of the heavenly realm: the paintings and sculptures, the entire edifice in itself, through its monumental construction and heavy ornaments can be regarded as a *sacred theater*. Ideas related to life and death can be closely linked to the image of the cathedral and expressed through the artistic creations which adorn this sacred space. The works of the great Spanish dramatist, poet and writer Pedro Calderón de la Barca, himself a Roman Catholic priest, reflect this idea of life perceived as a dream and spectacle: *el gran teatro del mundo* (the great theater of this world) and *la vida es sueño* (life is a dream), fundamental ideas of the Baroque (Papu 1977, 50). Life and suffering is represented in the sacred work of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi as well, the well-known *Stabat Mater*, one the works for which the Italian composer is best known for.

Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* illustrates some of the fundamental ideas which define the Baroque, as art movement and as a perpetual philosophical concept. Pergolesi chose to evoke the tragedy of the crucifixion and the pain of Mary, the mother of Jesus, through the use of contrasts, often piercing and sharp, between the content and the music employed to describe certain verses, as well as through dissonances and powerful rhythmic patterns.

The Christian Hymn dedicated to the mother of Jesus, for soprano and alto soloist, string orchestra and basso continuo, was set to music by Pergolesi in 1736, shortly before the composer's death. Pergolesi divided his work into twelve movements, each of these bearing as title the first line of some of the verses. The style of the work differs from the operas the composer was well-known for during his lifetime, the light and charming structure of his works destined for the stage is replaced in the *Stabat Mater* by a certain melancholy and gloom. Through a well-established employment of the various instruments in certain movements of the work, the use of accents and dynamic changes, Pergolesi creates a powerful sonorous image of pain and grief, an overwhelming emotion one can almost physically feel.

4. Representing Baroque ideas: contrast and *meraviglia* in the alto arias

The alto aria *Quae moerebat* is a wonderful example regarding the use of contrasting elements. At first, the light, floating character of the music may seem striking if compared to the meaning of the latin text: "*Quae moerebat et dolebat, et tremebat, cum videbat nati poenas incliti./Quae moerebat et dolebat Pia Mater dum videbat nati poenas incliti.*" The meaning of these lines is: How the pious Mother mourned, and grieved, and trembled looking at the torment of her child. One would expect a much slower tempo and the use of a minor tonality, instead of the E-flat major employed by the composer. However, the use of the syncopation causes a certain disturbance of the musical flow, thus musically evoking the pain, the torment, the trembling.

Alto Solo

25 *p* Quae moe - re - bat et do - le - bat, et do - le - bat et tre - me - bat, *tr.* *tr.*
Wie sie um ihn leid - voll zag - te, leidvoll zag - te, als man ihn mit

p *pp* *p*

Fig. 1.

In a similar manner, the use of the *trill*, on the words *tremebat* in the first part of the aria, and again in the second part of the aria on each syllable of the words *Quae moerebat* and *et tremebat* (Figure 2), suggests the powerful, disturbing emotions provoked by the witnessing of the torments of Jesus.

65

et do-le-bat, et do-le-bat et tre-me-bat, cum vi-
leid-voll zag-te, leid-voll zag-te, als man ihn mit Mar-tern

Fig. 2.

Another interesting aspect is the use of upward leaps on the words *nati poenas*: a leap of an octave (*e-flat1 – e-flat2*) in the first part of the aria, and a leap of a sixth (*a-flat1 – f2*) in the second part (Figure 3). These upward leaps may suggest Mary's inner screams of pain upon seeing the sufferings of Jesus and acknowledging the fact that these torments cannot be undone or stopped.

81

de-bat na-ti poe-nas, na-ti poe-nas in-cly-ti. Et tre-
klagte, als man wand, zum Spott ihm wand die Dor-nen-kron. Wie sie

Fig. 3

The following aria for the alto voice *Eja mater, fons amoris* is written in the triple meter of 3/8, the composer choosing the tonality of c minor for the music of these verses: "*Eja Mater, fons amoris, me sentire vim doloris fac ut tecum lugeam*" (Thou Mother, fountain of love, let me partake in your sorrow, let me grieve with you). The gentle pulsation of the triple meter and the soothing character of the c minor tonality evoke Mary, the mother of Jesus as a fountain of love.

Here as well, as in the previous aria, the upward leaps (even an upward leap of a tenth between the notes *c1* – *e-flat2*, may evoke the cries of pain, while the repetition of the note *g1*, through seven bars on the words *fac ut tecum lugeam*, produces a certain inner tension which eventually culminates on the note *d2*, followed by a sudden downward leap of a sixth on the note *f1* (Figure 4).

43
 mo - ris, fons a - mo - ris! Me sen - ti - re vim do - lo - ris fac,
 Gna - den, Quell - der Gna - den! Auf der Trau - er Dor - nen - pfa - den will

51
 ut te - cum lu - ge - am, fac, ut te - cum
 ick all - zeit bei dir sein, will ick all - zeit

Fig. 4.

This descending motion continues, touching the lower register of the voice on the notes *b* and *c1*. The sudden change of registers may suggest that through pain and suffering man can be redeemed, however the use of the low register of the singing voice can be interpreted as an indication regarding the difference between our present state as humans, exposed to sin and mistake and our desire to ascend to that holy state where Mary, as the mother of Jesus, abides.

The rhythmic patterns employed by Pergolesi in the third aria for the alto voice, *Fac ut portem*, evoke the painful, almost unbearable sound of the crucifixion: the hands and feet of Jesus are nailed to the cross. A pattern similar to the one used in the instrumental introduction is restated by the alto voice, in a sequence which is repeated for three times, each time a tone lower.

The image shows a musical score for an Alto Solo. The top staff is the vocal line, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The lyrics are written below the staff: "Fac ut por - tem Chri - - sti mor - tem," and "Will nicht sa - gen. mit - - su - tra - gen,". The music features various ornaments and dynamics, including a piano (*p*) dynamic and a section marked *p assai*. The bottom two staves represent the piano accompaniment, with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a key signature of one flat. The piano part includes dynamics like *f* and *p*.

Fig. 5.

The latin verses are the following: “*Fac ut portem Christi mortem, passionis fac consortem et plagas recolere./Fac me plagis vulnerari, cruce hac inebriari ob amorem filii*” (May I be granted to bear the death of Christ, the fate of his Passion and commemorate His wounds. Let me be wounded by his wounds and be inebriated by His cross, for the love of your Son). The suggestive introduction is followed by a more tranquil part, the voice supplicating to take part in the suffering of Christ. The beautiful vocalize on the word *plagas* suggests the holy nature of this pain, while the ascending pattern of the ornaments seem to evoke (once more) the redemption which is possible after the Passion.

5. Conclusions

Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater* offers wonderful opportunities for meditation: the music translates, in a most subtle manner, the profound meaning of the Passion of Christ, the performing musician, as well as the listener, are encouraged to empathize with the pain and torment which eventually lead to redemption. The profound symbolism of the *Stabat Mater* is translated into music by Pergolesi, using a complex and rich musical language. The work mesmerizes and stirs, both the performer and the audience, thus the double goal of the *meraviglia* is accomplished: the magic of this splendour can mesmerize the spectator, for it has already mesmerized its creator. The passing nature of earthly life is represented in Pergolesi’s work, through the harmonic constructions, musical intervals, rhythmic patterns and timbres employed.

6. References

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