

Compositional premises in approaching Suor Angelica role in the homonymous work of Puccini

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Abstract: *This article proposes to summarise some of the defining compositional and interpretive elements on which approaching Suor Angelica role from the lyrical artist perspective is based. Suor Angelica role is a vocal challenge of a complex type, with an extreme difficulty that is often underestimated, requiring a diversity of interpretive resources at the same time. Through this article, we aim to discover the elements on which the interpretation via compositional conception is based, on the level of the musical – vocal and orchestral – discourse of the text and the libretto. The building of the main features of Suor Angelica character is pursued via a dual approach. The article correlates the assessment of the solo parts – like ‘Senza mamma, o bimbo, tu sei morto’ – by following the music and scenic interaction of the main character with the other characters in the homonymous opera.*

Keywords: *Suor Angelica, role, compositional conception, interpretive approach*

1. Introduction

Suor Angelica opera initially unveils a compositional and interpretive range specific to the interiorised state found in a Catholic convent. This religious framework is different from the one in other Puccinian operas, highlighting especially the fully-female distribution, as the only opera of this type from all Puccinian operas. We can see the inner typology of characters debunked from the first notes played by the orchestra, imitating church bells and creating an angelic innocence and mystical character combination. The multiplicity of female voices creates a fully-female presence, of an unprecedented weight and profoundness. The juxtaposition of high and grave female voices creates a space, which, from a musical and interpretive perspective, stands for the new Puccinian era.

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From the melody sung by the angelic chorus at the beginning of the opera, a special voice arises – Suor Angelica – a lyrical soprano typology, with dramatic accents. The entire musical discourse evolves to dramatic representations adequately supported by the orchestration that is carefully adapted to the tension experienced. The orchestration used by Puccini in *Suor Angelica* includes an exceptional tonality. It needs many instruments for only a few interpreters, but they are all used creatively. On stage, there are three winds, three trumpets, four horns, a harp, four trombones, a timbale, a celesta, a triangle, and a glockenspiel. On the other hand, off-stage, Puccini adds two pianos, three trombones, brass and steel bells, an organ, and a piccolo. The strings usually accompany the sung parts, while the remaining instruments shape the nature of the entire orchestral discourse. This idea to use instruments for their tone, directly connected to the nature of the characters and the specific ideas in the opera, is highlighted as one of the signature features of the Puccinian technique.

2. Solo interventions of Suor Angelica character

The first two solo interventions of Suor Angelica character portray her as pious, both being prayers to Virgin Mary – ‘Prega per noi peccatori, ora e nell’ora della nostra morte’ [Pray for us, sinners, now and ‘til our death]. This musical theme is immediately taken over by the nun chorus, like a confirmation and a consolidation of the devoutness.

By far, the most important solo intervention of Angelica is *Senza mamma, o bimbo, tu sei morto...* [Without a mother, oh, child, you died] air.

The title of the air itself makes us understand the entire context of driving Suor Angelica to madness and interpreting this air of such special sensitivity. The libretto of the opera describes the fact that Suor Angelica was sent by her noble family to the convent to punish her, upon the illegitimate birth of her child. This ‘sin’ was condemned in those times by society and was unforgivable to the family. Suor Angelica had been at the convent for seven years, without any news of her child. When she finally receives a visit from her aunt, La Zia Principessa, she is told that her boy had died at the age of five. Suor Angelica resorts to the supreme sacrifice and takes her life, hoping that she could thus join her son in Heaven. Many details linked to Suor Angelica as a character are supplied even from the libretto, standing as an important base in building the interpretive vision by the lyrical artists, willing to provide a truthful approach to the role.

Senza mamma, o bimbo, tu sei morto air starts with parallel trisons that can also be found in the air of the Principessa, suggesting a family connection despite

the obvious temperamental oppositions between the two main characters (Figures 1 and 2).

SUOR ANGELICA *(sempre in ginocchio, con voce desolata)*

Andante desolato molto sostenuto **Lento grave** ♩ = 42

Sen-za mam-ma, o bin-bo, tu sei mor - to! Le tue lab - bra, sen - za i ba - ci mie - i, sco - lo -

Fig. 1. *Suor Angelica*, rehearsal 60, mm. 1-5

LA ZIA PRINCIPESSA

Andante molto sostenuto ♩ = 52

- len-zio di quei rac-co gli-men - ti, il mio spi - ri-to par che s'al-lon - ta - ni e s'in-

Fig. 2. *Suor Angelica*, rehearsal 50, mm. 4-7

We can interpret this part as a love song dedicated to Angelica's dead child, but also as a cry for the loss suffered. Angelica visualises her son as an angel from Heaven, who can finally see her ('Ora che sei un angelo del cielo, ora tu puoi vederla la tua mamma'). This vision transposes her into another world, the entire orchestration ethereally supporting the passing into another state.

Mosco Carner claims that the cry of Angelica shows three modifications of her state, as the accompaniment of the air suggests. The air starts on a minor tonality, exhibiting Angelica's anxiety. The median section, which displays the joy of seeing her boy like an angel, is in a major tonality, being 'based on a hymn-like, long-limbed melody' (Carner 1992, 492). The air's last section has a funeral rhythm and underlines Suor Angelica's desire to die and reunite with her child in Heaven (Carner 1992, 492). In the end, Carner opines that the only imperfection of the air rests in the 'the lack of emotional and musical contrast in so extended an aria' (Carner 1992, 493).

By more thoroughly assessing the air, we could ask ourselves if this cry of Angelica, *Senza mamma...*, manages, through its virtues, to help acknowledge *Suor Angelica* as a grand opera. It is clear that the air does not observe the monumental coloratura lines, popular amongst most lovers of opera; this is because Angelica's role was musically conceived for a true lyrical soprano. Moreover, the vocal phrases are as challenging in this air as in all the other airs composed by Puccini, requiring the adaptation of a lyrical-type voice to the grave and well-highlighted ambitus. Moreover, the length of the air itself poses issues, through its seven pages labelled *lento grave*, on an octave and a half ambitus, ending on a high *natural A*, labelled *pianissimo* and very difficult to sustain.

The melody and the harmonisation mostly observe the Puccinian style but the movement was excessively reduced and the rhythms lost their velocity; these changes help transform the music into a calmer one, with less-challenging features, closer to incantation. The orchestration is airier – for example, a usual party of winds and strings is substituted by a more ethereal set of instruments: mute strings, mute horn (labelled *con voce velata*), and a harp.

The mise en scène seems occult – candles flickering, nuns levitating – all prepare the scene for the pinnacle – namely *Senza mamma...* air, where Angelica sets off on a mystical monologue.

What differentiates this air is the raw emotion found in the text and its interpretation. Suor Angelica has been told about the death of her sole child, whom she loved so much that she decided to bring into the world despite the rigorous conventions and social prejudice that she would face. Her state must change from one of anxiety to one of ecstasy and then suicide within minutes – a challenge for any lyrical artist.

Another essential solo moment occurs when Suor Angelica, alone on the stage after her aunt leaves, decides to take her life. By contrast, this second part of *Suor Angelica* focuses not on the church but on the heroine. The mise en scène changes, Suor Angelica sings all by herself, without any other nun to keep her company; she only talks to the flowers. The suicide of Angelica by drinking a self-made potion of flowers and herbs is succeeded by a very difficult vocal part, sung as a heart-rending scream. The high ambitus reaches C³ and Suor Angelica thus begs forgiveness to Virgin Mary for the sin of suicide. The orchestration reaches a pinnacle, too; it only calms down with the miracle that saves the wretched nun from damnation: 'La grazia e discesa dal cielo' [Forgiveness has come down from Heaven] (Figure 3).

The image shows a musical score for the character Suor Angelica. It consists of two staves: a vocal line on top and a piano accompaniment on the bottom. The vocal line is in a soprano clef and contains the lyrics: "gra - zia è di - sce - sa dal cie - lo, già tut - ta, già tut - ta m'ac-". The piano accompaniment is in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The tempo is marked "Moderato con moto" with a quarter note equal to 72. The dynamics include a piano (*p*) marking. The score is for rehearsal 64, measures 1-3.

Fig. 3. *Suor Angelica*, rehearsal 64, mm. 1-3

3. The interaction of Suor Angelica character with other female characters

The role of Suor Angelica can also be understood through her interaction with the other characters.

The most revealing interaction is the one with her aunt, La Zia Principessa. This dramatic encounter signifies the intrusion of the modern world into the convent world. The princess comes to give the news to Suor Angelica over the imminent marriage of her sister, who needs Angelica to renounce her part of the family fortune. The confrontation scene that follows shows Angelica as a character totally uninterested in these daily businesses but fully interested to learn news about her son.

The dialogue between the two protagonists is at its beginning faithful to the conventions of 19th-century Italian melodrama (Davis 2010) – namely scenes with agogics under continuous change, designed to turn the dramatic progression of the character or group of characters more effective through music. For example, the encounter between Principessa and Angelica in *parlatorio* paves the way for what conventional melodrama would consider a *duet*: a scene of four movements for two characters, including an initial *tempo d'attacco*, kinetic from a dramatic perspective; a dramatic static *adagio*; a kinetic *tempo di mezzo* rendering a fresh dramatic dynamism and a lyrical static *cabaletta* operating as a formal objective and taking the scene to an emphatic ending.

The scene between Principessa and Angelica includes an initial dialogue (between rehearsals 44.1-50), operating as a *tempo d'attacco*, while future lyrical statements (between rehearsals 50.4-52) are analogue to parallel stanzas of the two characters, which evolve to a prescriptive *adagio*. Subsequently, the entire scene collapses, in line with the main character: Angelica exteriorises her inner troubles through an outburst, crying 'mio figlio' [my son], like a violent and chromatic motif of the orchestra unveils, while the latter repeats sixteen times, showing the uncontrolled hysteria of Angelica: in the end, Principessa gives the news of the child's death and then exits the room, refusing this scene any possibility for the *tempo di mezzo* or *cabaletta* to occur. As Angelica finds herself alone on the stage, this is a second opportunity for the composer to start a melodramatic conventional dialogue – this time, *aria solo*, a form parallel to the duet, replacing the *tempo d'attacco* with a solo recitative. As expected, the scene continues with a recitative (of Angelica – *Senza mamma...*, rehearsal 60.3), followed by an *adagio* ('Ora che sei un angelo del cielo', rehearsal 61), and then an interlude (rehearsal 63) designed for Suor Genovieffa and the nun chorus, analogue to a *tempo di mezzo* (which is the most conventional of those that usually include choral interjections) and culminating with a movement for *cabaletta* ('La grazia è discesa, dal cielo', rehearsal 64). All these moments are compositionally built in a way that highlights the temperament of Angelica: even though she is initially portrayed as pious and respectful, she becomes bold and mad when she hears the news of the death of her child.

We also notice the scenic and musical interaction with the other nuns. The closest to Suor Angelica seems Suor Genovieffa, who, through the innocence of her young age, shows her support for the suffering of the protagonist. At her turn, Suor Angelica replies thankfully: 'Grazie, sorella, grazie' [Thank you, sister, thank you].

In her relation with other nuns, Suor Angelica wishes to be helpful. When a nun gets stung by a wasp, Suor Angelica immediately prepares a healing plant

potion. She is described by the Nursing Nun as always having a flower remedy for the suffering nuns: 'Suor Angelica ha sempre una ricetta buona fatta coi fiori' [Suor Angelica has a good recipe using flowers at all times]. Not by chance, the potion in the suicidal scene is created from flowers and plants, which suggests the suffering in the heart of the protagonist, who also needed a cure.

As far as the musical discourse in the interaction parts between the nuns is concerned, Spike Hughes highlights the charm of the scenes and underlines the passages that give off clues to the public as to what is going to happen next. Hughes also shows that Puccini, a composer well-known for faithfully representing animals in music, beautifully describes the scene involving wasps. These are 'characterised by piquant sounds from three muted trumpets and pizzicato figures from the strings' (Hughes 1959, 189).

When Angelica is again the main focus, she can regain her forces to sing a final high C; this is not 'her' song anymore but one of the intrinsic voices of her harmonisation. At the beginning of the first rehearsal, she gives off two sighs without frequency. They seem the sounds of a human body reduced to particles and scattered via an electrical force, which extends the voice of the woman who is now dead, as the last sounds issued by her.

During the miraculous scene, where the angelic voices of the nuns blend with the high sounds of the protagonist, we encounter an orchestration that supports the final levitation of the voices (Figure 4).

The music attributed to Suor Angelica and the on-stage orchestra are outweighed by the off-stage orchestra: the children's voices are supported by sopranos and subsequently by an entire chorus, plus by a group of cold virginal instruments – two pianos playing arpeggios in the highest register, mute cymbals, mute trumpets, and organs. Angelica is quiet as the miraculous music starts and the orchestra stops, except for some pinched melodies of the strings. This compositional decision highlights the rip between the new world of sounds, by also suggesting that Angelica's voice was simply taken, pulled out of her body, allowing it to echo only through the air.

The image shows a musical score for rehearsal 81, measure 1 of *Suor Angelica*. The score is arranged in five systems. The first system is for the *Ragazzi* (Corno Interno) and Soprano (Sop.), both marked *pp*. The lyrics are "O glo - - rio - - sa". The second system is for the Organ, also marked *pp*. The third system is for the Piano, marked *pp* and *Poco più mosso*, featuring a melodic line with slurs and a steady accompaniment. The fourth system is for the Bass, marked *Andante appena mosso* (♩ = 72) and *pp subito*. The fifth system is for the Bass, also marked *pp subito*.

Fig. 4. *Suor Angelica*, rehearsal 81, measure 1

4. Conclusions

For several years, the critics of Puccini depicted his female characters as ‘suicidal or morally tainted’ (Greenwald 1994, 233). Mosco Carner wrote a critical biography of the composer. Carner finds that *Suor Angelica* is characterised by ‘an irremediable weakness; this is the sense of quietism and passivity inseparable from a cloistral atmosphere and therefore intrinsically un-dramatic’ (Carner 1992, 487). Carner goes on by claiming that the most inspired music scenes are those that follow the interaction between Angelica and her noble aunt, but also the cry of Angelica – *Senza mamma*. Carner insists: ‘the score bears signs of creative fatigue and sameness of tone, with melodic invention halting and often thin’ (Carner 1992, 488).

Carner also discusses the fact that quite a few critics consider *Suor Angelica* monotonous through the lack of male voices and the belief that this position is fake. He reasons that ‘Puccini’s treatment of the female voices is remarkably flexible and individual’ (Carner 1992, 488).

By contrast, in 2009, Iris Arnesen published a book – *The Romantic World of Puccini* –, which included a study dealing with all the Puccinian operas and the relations between them. This provides a fresh perspective on the works of Puccini. Arnesen even claims that the operas of Puccini are interconnected by something that she calls ‘The Cycle of the Rose’. Recurring passages and musical themes can be indeed found in all Puccinian operas. There are also recurring items – the red rose. Puccini got criticised many times for his creations that were considered emotional but not intellectual; however, Arnesen claims that these aspects were intentional (Arnesen 2009, 1-2).

Arnesen defends all of Puccini’s creations, particularly *Suor Angelica*. She traces connections between all the protagonists of the Puccinian operas and places each opera inside a ‘continuing and rather shocking story, one with a beginning, middle and an end that runs beneath the opera’s obvious surface plots’ (Arnesen 2009, 13). Arnesen stands up for Puccinian heroines, too, claiming that Puccini did not portray the Evil in women, showing, on the other hand, women as strong beings, by using the usual elements employed to depict them during that period – mainly, the moon and the flowers.

These antithetical opinions and many others, among which the compositional and interpretive elements shown in this article, may provide certain directions or personal hypotheses designed to understand the role of Suor Angelica, without claiming to fully reach the profoundness of the character and the compositional intentions set only in the Puccinian consciousness.

We can notice the complexity of Suor Angelica role within the context of an atypical opera both via the assessed compositional intentions and the power of the interpretive elements. Despite being portrayed as a nun in a Catholic convent, Suor Angelica is first of all defined as a grieving mother, a victim of ill faith – in this case, represented by bigoted social conventions –, who manages, in the end, to find peace only through supreme sacrifice, by taking her life and requesting divine mercy to get her to Heaven, together with her son.

The acknowledgment of these Puccinian compositional accomplishments, like the long-talked-about recurring reasons, correlated with a truthful stage interpretation, based on the profound understanding of Suor Angelica as a role, contributes to the creation and recreation of the musical message and the compositional unit.

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