

Rhetorical figures and symbols in the aria *Vidit suum* from *Stabat Mater* by G.B. Pergolesi

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Abstract: *The concept of musical rhetoric, closely connected with the affect theory, temperaments, and number symbology constituted one of the main preoccupations of composers and theorists in the Renaissance and Baroque eras. Rhetorical figures have developed in vocal music and had the role of underlining the significances of the text in an expressive way. Subsequently, they came to be used in instrumental music too, their interpretation being conditioned by the musical context. A perfect joining of rhetorical elements with religious text can be found in the work "Stabat Mater" by G.B. Pergolesi. The aria "Vidit suum" illustrates the dramatic moment of Christ death, through the music loaded with number symbols and suggestive rhetorical figures.*

Keywords: *G.B. Pergolesi, Stabat Mater, rhetoric, figures, symbols, significations*

1. Introduction

In the 17th Century, music went through an important stage by achieving many innovations that aimed at creating new content, corresponding to the aesthetic ideas that appeared during Renaissance. The Baroque era was a time when new genres and musical forms arise and develop, such as the suite, the instrumental concerto, the sonata, and opera, occurring from the beginning of the 16th Century, will synthesise all the achievements of music until then. Polyphony is replaced with a new musical practice in which vertical thinking, chords, and harmony are important melody support. In the same period, concepts of musical rhetoric develop too, the affect theory constituting the basis of treaties and supposing a close connection with the four temperaments and the number symbolism. René Descartes defines six fundamental affects: astonishment, love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness, considering that all the others are derived from them

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(Sandu-Dediu 2013, 78). Rhetoric appeals to the figures of speech, considered the most important way of communication (Pepelea 2019, 5). The symbolism of musical elements is based on expressive principles and specific techniques borrowed from literature: antithesis, contrast, hyperbola, anagrams, and emblems – BACH symbol (Sandu-Dediu 2013, 79). The rhetorical figures have developed in vocal music and had a role to underline, in an expressive manner, significance in a text. Considered to be elements of composition, they came to be used also in instrumental music, their interpretation being conditioned by the context. To compose and to create became synonyms, and that involves a close connection between the elements of the Baroque aesthetic (Toduță 1973, 67). The integration of rhetorical concepts into composition and musical interpretation becomes a fundamental feature of this great era, whose climax was the work of J.S. Bach (Banciu 2006, 70).

After 1720, one can talk in music about *the sensitive style*, also influenced by the affect theory, in which the melody full of emotion and subjectivity must impress the listener. The musical discourse becomes accessible, natural and cantabile, favouring the elegance of melody and ornaments, the expressivity and fantasy, the rapid change in affects. The style is characteristic to some composers in the transition period between Baroque and Classicism – *preclassicism* – and it can be seen in works by D. Scarlatti, C.Ph.E. Bach, J.Ch. Bach, G.B. Sammartini, J. Stamitz, and G.B. Pergolesi (Sandu-Dediu 2013, 93).

2. Giovanni Battista Pergolesi – *Stabat Mater*

Composer, violinist, and organist, Pergolesi is considered one of the first important *opera buffa* representatives, due to the success he had with the *intermezzo* in two acts, *La serva padrona*. Nevertheless, “his religious music and the cantatas are those that reveal his genius in the most convincing way” and offer him the credit for being “one of the greatest representatives of the 18th Century Neapolitan school” (Larousse 2010, 365).

Stabat Mater is the last and most well-known of the pergolesian works. The composition was finished a little time before his death (1736) and it is written for soprano, alto, string orchestra, and basso continuo. The text dates back to the 13th Century, being similar to the sequence *Dies Irae* from the requiem – that belongs to the same century – and symbolises the fate of Jesus, the personal participation, and the sacrifice for the redemption of mankind. Over the years, numerous

compositions of this text occurred, and the most well-known and sung works today belong to Pergolesi (18th Century), Rossini and Verdi (19th Century).

The pergolesian *Stabat Mater* is divided in twelve parts, each of reduced dimensions, expressing affects, such as: sadness associated with crying (*Lacrimosa*), astonishment, indignation, fury, or resignation. For the performance of dramatic moments, numerous dissonances are used (an example would be the section *Fac ut portem Christi mortem*) and chromatisms (in moments such as *moriendo desolatum*). Contrasts are created by alternating major with minor keys and by musical writing: using rhythm as a meaning of expression (the strings accompaniment on *contretemps* in *Quae moerebat*, fugue *alla breve* in *Fac ut ardeat cor meum*), leaps with various significances, and distributing the thematic material to a sole accompaniment voice. The last part is perhaps the most surprising, and *Paradisi gloria* represents a humble prayer of the One waiting for his end. Unlike glorious endings of other compositions on the same text, *Amen* has a dramatic character by using descending chromatic alterations and cadences in the F minor key.

3. Aria *Vidit suum* – a rhetorical analysis

The soprano aria *Vidit Suum* represents part six and it expresses the most tragic moment: the death of Jesus on the cross under the aggrieved look of His mother. As a theological symbol, six represents an imperfect number (two times three), made up of two – duality Father-Son and three – Holy Trinity, also the symbol of Resurrection after three days. Here is the text in Latin and the translation:

Vidit suum dulcem natum

She saw her tender Child

Moriendo desolatum

Hang in desolation,

Dum emisit spiritum

Till His spirit forth sent.

(www.lyricstranslate.com)

Loneliness before death (*My God, why have You forsaken me?*) is presented from the beginning, in the orchestral introduction: a single voice in unison accompanied by short eighths. The aria is written in the 4/4 time signature in a *tempo giusto*, and the tonality is F minor, which expresses deep sadness, overwhelming, depression, suffering before death, the funerals, a quiet acceptance of fate (Schubart 1983, 319-325). The listener is introduced into the general atmosphere

by the *Exordium* which can be divided in three subsections (figure 1, bars 1-2; 3-5; 6-9) with different melodic characteristics, but with a common denominator: the descending musical sense (*catabasis*), underlining the affect of sadness, humility, and weakness. The rhythm marked in the melody with passage sounds longer than their preparation, corresponds to the *prolongatio* figure, and have a descending line – *catabasis/descensio*, with a dark, depressing sense. The painful affect is supported also by the delay placed on time three (D flat note), an *accentus/superjectio* that creates the m2 interval (*pathopoeia*) with the following sound (C). The motif is sequenced – *polyptoton*, and basso ostinato characteristic to the first two bars contrasts with the minims of the following passage and creates an *antitheton*.

The next motif is marked by the figure *suspiratio* (turned into *syncopatio*) and *trillo* on the m2 interval (*pathopoeia*). The entire fragment is supported by the descending chromatic line of the bass, *passus duriusculus* on minims between the notes F and C (figure 1, bars 3-5). Other rhetorical figures are used, such as: *saltus duriusculus* of aug4 (bar 3) turned into *salto semplice* (P4) in the following bar, *anticipatio*, with resolution on m2, *pathopoeia*, the sequencing on an inferior level (*polyptoton*), figures *messanza* and *hyperbaton* – the sound C (bar 5) is transferred to another register.

The third subsection (figure 1, bars 6-9) brings on a repeated motif in a varied form through *synonymia*, with an ending on the tonic arpeggio. The negative affect is maintained by the descending sense of the melody (*catabasis*) and by using many dissonance figures: *synaeresis*, through repetition and syncopation of the sound D flat, which creates a *pleonasmus* with the other voices harmony, *saltus duriusculus* of aug2 (D flat²-E²), dim5 (G¹-D flat² that precedes the resuming of the motif). The crying figure is used again – *anticipatio*, and the sound C in the bass creates an *extensio* through the transformation from consonance into dissonance (bar 7). The accompaniment is varied, by diminishing the values and their turning from fourths into eighths – *diminutio* (bar 8).

Fig.1. *Exordium*

The soprano entrance marks the section *Confirmatio* (A), also divided in three subsections: *a*, *a1*, and *a2* (figure 2). The first two bars resume almost identically the initial motif in the *Exordium*. The basso keeps the ostinato line on eighths, with a transformation in minims, which creates an *antitheton* effect. This augmentation of the values in each subsection represents the most interesting aspect between music and text, with an obvious contrast between the two musical phrases. We note a considerable difference between the melody assigned to the first lyric – *Vidit suum dulcem natum* and the more static line of the *moriendo desolatum* moment. Both, the rhythmic contrast and the harmony, create *antitheton*. We note a descending (*catabasis*) sequencing (*polyptoton*) of the three repeated sounds motif, followed by the figures *subsumptio* and *pathopoeia* (figure 2, bars 3-6). If we orient by the number symbolism, the three repeated sounds in the motif sequenced three times make reference to the divinity symbol, or to the Resurrection on the third day. The violins double the soprano by the figure *syncopatio*, which illustrates the wailing, and the bass completes the saddening image by a descending chromatic line – *passus duriusculus*.

In subsection *a2* occurs a musical fragmentation of the discourse by introducing pauses – *tmesis/sectio* (figure 2, bars 7-9). The method used at this moment symbolises the difficulty of breathing before the end. The *antitheton* effect reoccurs by augmentation of the melodic line that descends chromatically, and the minor half steps preserve a painful affect (*pathopoeia*).

Fig. 2. *Confirmatio* (A)

Two bars attributed to the orchestra make the transition to the section *Confutatio* – B. The passage is characterised by three identical repetitions of a motif that underlines the *pathos* and has the significance *exclamatio*, due to the ascending leap of m6 (C²-A flat²) supported by the basso ostinato. The fragment corresponds to the figure *anaphora/repetitio* and it ends with the A flat major cadence (figure3).

Fig. 3. *Transition*

The section *Confutatio* – B resumes the initial motif with a marked rhythm and the equal eighths line for the bass, but in the new tonality and with a more salient chromaticism. The figure *pathopoeia* is used on the words *suum*, *dulcem* and

natum (figure 4, bars 1-2). To underline the sadness and the pain, the latter is preceded by an ascending leap of m7, then by *anticipatio* and *extensio* on the word *moriendo* (figure 4, bar 3). We note *saltus duriusculus* of descending aug2 between *suum* and *dulcem* (A¹-G flat¹). The motif is sequenced in an ascending manner (*polyptoton*), following a tension increase towards the *exclamatio* moment (ascending leap of m7, G¹-F²), corresponding to the word *desolatum* (figure 4, bar 4).

In the following subsection – *b1* – the third motif from *Exordium* is resumed, for the text *dum emisit spiritum* (figure4, bars 6-8). The figure *antitheton* occurs again through the augmentation of the bass values and by the melodic performance of the phrase. Thus, for *dum emisit*, dissonance figures such as *synaeresis* are used in accompaniment, *saltus duriusculus* or *pathopoeia* in the melody. In antithesis occurs *spiritum* (*pleonasmus* on A flat), on the gradually descending line towards the F minor tonic. This fragment corresponds to the figure *catabasis*, also supported by the descending scale in the accompaniment.

The image displays a musical score for the aria 'Vidit suum' from Stabat Mater. It consists of two systems of music. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the text: 'Vi - dit su - um dulcem natum mo - ri - en - do de - so - la - tum, de - so - la -'. The second system continues with 'tum, dum e - mi - sit spi - ri - tum, vi - dit su - um dul - cem na - tum'. The score includes various musical notations such as clefs, key signatures (B-flat), time signatures, and dynamic markings like *sf* and *b1*, *b2*. The lyrics are written below the vocal line.

Fig. 4. *Confutatio* (B)

The climax of the aria is placed between the bars 28-30 – *b2* –, on the text *vidit suum dulcem natum* (figure 4, bars 8-10). An ascending leap of m9 to a minim marked by accent (G flat²), in *fortissimo*, means a cry of pain associated with the figure *hyperbole*. The moment can also be attributed to the figure *emphasis*, due to the dramatic underscore of the text. The contrast occurs again – *antitheton*, not only through the augmentation of values and the extremely dissonant harmony,

but also through the fact that Pergolesi adds a single voice in the accompaniment, in unison. The harmonic support of the bass occurs on the following time, through a dim7 chord (*consonantiae impropriae*). The melodic line is descending (*catabasis*), underlining the tragedy of the moment and it inscribes in the ambitus of a m6 – G flat-B flat, enharmonic with F#-B flat, considered “the interval of death” because of its characteristic roughness (figure 4, bars 8-9). For intensifying dramatism, the sequencing is made in an ascending manner – *polyptoton*. Thus, after an ascending leap of m7, also in *fortissimo*, pain and despair are expressed through a pathetic accent placed on the highest note in the ambitus of the aria – A flat² – corresponding to the word *dulcem* (figure 4, bar 9). An obvious contrast is created between music and the significance of the word, which deceives the expectations.

Section A reoccurs partially, but in an incomplete and varied form – *Confirmatio* (A'), by resuming fragments *a1* and *a2* (figure5). The same idea of value augmentation and static line on notes and repeated motifs is preserved, which occurs in *antithesis* with the previous fragment. We note again the symbolism of the number three and the end of the word *desolatum* which is resolved on m2, reminding always of the painful affect – *pathopoeia* (figure 5, bars 1-4).

In the final subsection – *a2'* – *tnesis* is resumed, by inserting the notes with pauses for both the soloist and the orchestra, symbolising the difficult breathing of the One who is dying (figure 5, bars 5-6). *Antitheton* with the previous section is created, but also with the following fragment, made up of minims and a static line both in the melody and accompaniment. The text *dum emisit spiritum* is musically built on repeated sounds (figure5, bars 7-10), with a last movement to an ascending m2 – *pathopoeia* and the returning for the F minor cadence. It is interesting how Pergolesi attributes a dotted minim in *pianissimo* to the word *spiritum*, on the final cadence (figure5, bar 9). It is accompanied by the *cadentia duriuscula* and it has the significance of the moment in which the soul separates from the body.

The aria ends with a *Coda* (figure 5, bars 10-14) which preserves a chromatic and then a static motion of the bass, while the melodic line transfers certain sounds in a superior register – *hyperbaton*, performing leaps of m10 or P8. We note the figure *suspiratio* in melody, *cadentia duriuscula* on a dominant pedal point and the general pause after the final chord – *homoioleuton*, which has the significance of silence and meditation.

The image shows a musical score for the aria 'Confirmatio (A')' from the 'Stabat Mater'. It consists of two systems of music. The first system has a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is marked 'A' al' dolce' and 'a2' perdendosi'. The lyrics are: 'na - tum mori - en - do deso - la - tum, deso - la - tum, dum e - misit, dum e - mi - sit spi - ri - tum.' The piano accompaniment is marked 'dolce' and 'pp'. The second system is a 'Coda' section, also marked 'pp'.

Fig. 5. *Confirmatio* (A')

4. Conclusions

The entire aria is built on the *antitheton* principle, by a contrasting approach of each lyric, and *affectus tristitiae* is created by the descending line (*catabasis*) of each phrase or motif. Here, the descending associated with a minor key, has the significance of passing away, it is the image of the journey from the Earth to the tomb, illustrating also prayer, humility, and weakness. Also, disjunctive melodic movements such as leaps of m6, m7 or the dissonant ones – *saltus duriusculus*, the ascending or descending chromatic bass – *passus duriusculus*, the augmented or diminished chords – *consonantiae impropriae*, the numerous minor half steps – *pathopoeia* and *cadentia duriuscula* in the end, contribute to the maintaining of the painful affect and the saddening atmosphere, and they underline the drama, the agony, the torment, the ordeal, the tragic, and the death.

This *Stabat Mater* continues to inspire both soloists and conductors over the world. The melodies richly ornamented, but also very suggestive in relation to the text, will reveal their real significances only to the one who has certain technical skills, which will allow for a semantic deciphering. A detailed knowledge of the characteristics of Baroque music, in close connection to the passions and affects rendered in music by means of rhetorical figures, represent a necessity for each interpreter who approaches this type of repertory.

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