

Biblical and religious symbols in Italian romantic opera. Perspectives of musical hermeneutics

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Abstract: *The 19th century brings in opera music new ways of thematic and stylistic approach. The escalation of revolutionary and political events influences the artistic life of the Italian nation, awakening in composers such as Rossini, Donizetti, Verdi another kind of spirituality. During this period, the Italian lyrical theater is moving towards new ways of expression, emphasizing the relationship between man and divinity. In these conditions, we can observe a stylistic evolution of the musical discourse, dominated by the influence of the biblical themes that the opera composers develop through dramaturgy. Numerous scenes taken from the Old Testament are found in the music of Italian operas from this period, marking an initiatory path of Italian spirituality and ethos of the nineteenth century. In this research we will present relevant musical examples from works such as Mose in Egitto - Rossini, Il diluvio universale - Donizetti, Nabucco - Verdi, Jerusalem – Verdi, highlighting the symbolic elements taken from the biblical text, rendered through music and stage action.*

Key-words: *Opera, Italian Romanticism, Biblical symbols, Hermeneutics*

1. Introduction: the science of hermeneutics and the understanding of opera music

According to historical evidence and testimonies, the hermeneutic sciences developed accordingly with the evolution of society. *“Plato approaches a hermeneutics of symbols, Aristotle leaves as a legacy a treatise on interpretation, Jewish and Christian theology deepens the understanding of holy books, and later, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance patristic theology and the art of interpreting philological texts stand out as branches of hermeneutic sciences”* (Coroiu 2018, 34). In the modern era, philosophers such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas are recognized for their contributions to the development of the hermeneutic sciences. In 2015, the famous Romanian opera singer, Ion Piso,

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published the book *"The opera crisis? Study of musical hermeneutics"*, launching a special invitation to both listeners and performers of opera, in order to better understand the opera performance and its role in contemporary society. Corroborating all this information, the idea of analyzing Italian opera from the early nineteenth century in terms of hermeneutics can only be an interesting exercise in understanding the musical language and the symbols resulting from it. The Italian opera of the eighteenth century was faced with a contradiction that seemed to threaten the existence of the genre: the static character of music was in contradiction with the dramatic action, which seemed to evolve according to the evolution of society. The diminution of the clerical power over the artistic life could facilitate the retrieving of certain historical and biblical themes from literature in order to be staged by composers such as Rossini, Donizetti, Verdi. The biblical and religious theme reflected in the music represents a success of Italian opera in the face of censorship and a way of rendering the ethos of the first half of the nineteenth century. Following this, monumental works remain in the history of music, innovations of the musical-dramatic language of the universal lyrical theater.

2. Jerusalem: religious symbol in Giuseppe Verdi's opera

The Old Testament and Jerusalem have been written countless times. Thus, the recent literature offers us two interesting readings. The first of these is Bianca Kuhnel's book, *From Earthly to the Heavenly Jerusalem. Representation of the Holy City* (1987), where she reconstructs images of Jerusalem throughout history, Jewish and Christian. The second proposal is a book by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *A Jerusalem!* (1993), which depicts the tireless struggle for the recreation of the state of Israel. We will dwell a little on this symbol, Jerusalem, to understand more deeply the centrality of Jerusalem in the history of the world, and its representations in opera music. For a better understanding of this research, we will interpret the meaning of the word "symbol". Veronica Gaspar offers an interesting definition of what can be considered a symbol in music: *"Any analysis can be equated with a translation into symbols. What can be considered a symbol in music? Anything, provided that its path is inscribed in an imaginary space, at the moment of detachment from the context in order to denote, analyze or, when the memory is grafted on our perception and we relive an older revelation"* (Gaspar 2000, 76). Another definition is presented to us by Rudolf Kassner, who argues that: *"Symbol is always the expression and sign of an indivisible and perfect Whole,*

and symbolic art is exactly in the degree to which it is perfect. Music is more symbolic than any other art because in its form and content, meaning and sign overlap, in fact they are one and the same from the very beginning" (Kassner 2019, 113). Throughout history, biblical symbols have often served as inspiration for many creators in both universal art and opera music. Among the Italian composers, we note the following: Monteverdi - *Vespro della Beata Vergine* (concert composed for six voices and six instruments, 1610), Carissimi - *Jephte* (oratorio, 1648), Rossini - *Ciro in Babilonia* (opera, 1812); *Mose in Egitto* (opera, 1818), Donizetti - *Il diluvio universale* (opera, 1830), Verdi - *Nabucco* (opera, 1842); *Jerusalem* (opera, 1847), Ildebrando Pizzetti - *Assassinio nella cattedrale* (opera, 1958). Referring to the symbol "Jerusalem", Verdi offers an example of innovative lyrical theater among Italian music, following the example of Rossini in mastering the requirements of the grand opera style. The treated subject represents an invocation of the distant past (11th century), respectively the first crusade, the beginning of the holy war. The action is centered on the characters Gaston - Viscount of Béarn, Helene - daughter of the Count of Toulouse and Roger - brother of the Count of Toulouse. The work takes place in four acts: the action of the first act takes place in France and the other acts take place in Palestine. We notice musical fragments such as: "Le Seigneur nous promet la victoire! O happiness!" - trio and horn, "God separates us" - trio, "The battle is won" - final ensemble. In essence, the battle to save Jerusalem from the Verdi opera is a metaphor that mirrors the political situation in Italy in the first half of the nineteenth century. Viewed from a Christian perspective, Jerusalem remained bound to God forever, as the supreme place of prayer, being considered the center of the world. An interesting parallel in the context of this research can be found in Bianca Kühnel's writings: "*With a few debatable exceptions, in medieval Christian iconography before the Crusades, we find only ideal representations of the heavenly Jerusalem*" (Kühnel 1987, 59) and Verdi's work, which reflects another image of Jerusalem. All of Verdi's works composed between 1839 and 1849 are centered around the idea of freeing a people or an individual from some oppression. From a musical point of view, Verdi's work from the first stage of creation has a mobilizing effect on the public, being deliberately composed for this purpose. Regarding the conception of the work *Jerusalem* (the transformation of the work *I Lombardi* in a manner of the style of the French "great work"), Julian Budden states: "*the diffuse drama that Solera had distilled from an epic poem is replaced by a much more concentrated, which not only requires less credibility than*

I Lombardi, but also avoids the problem of a second tenor who must be harder and more heroic than the first" (Budden 1984, 343).

ACTE IV 267

CHŒUR DE LA PROCESSION

Andante

PIANO

ROGER *Recit*
Voi -

_ci de Jo_saphat la lugu_bre val_lé_e de_ru_sa_lem ou vont flot_ternos é_ten_darts que je trouva_o mon Dieu la mort sur ses rem_parts

Fig. 1. G. Verdi, "Jerusalem", *Recitative Roger* (act IV)

From the perspective of musical hermeneutics, the work "Jerusalem" is an interesting exercise in mirroring a musical style, approached mainly by Giuseppe Verdi. The work abounds in symbols - the musical / literary text relationship consolidating this atmosphere of finding a divinity on earth. Relevant are the words

of Paul Ricoeur: *"This is the fundamental hermeneutics of Christianity. It coincides with the spiritual understanding of the Old Testament. Of course, the spiritual meaning is the New Testament itself; but because of this detour through a decipherment of the Old Testament, "faith is not a cry, but an understanding"* (Ricoeur 1980, 36). The Italian romanticism of the nineteenth century, strongly influenced by the Risorgimento, will make some historical and Christian incursions, which musically (like the opera), will materialize by introducing new elements in the disposition of vocal-instrumental discourse and in the choice subjects that truly reproduce the ethos of an era.

3. Mosè in Egitto, Il diluvio universale: biblical symbolism in the early romantic opera

The group of Italian composers whose works were performed in the lyrical theaters of Italy at that time consisted of names such as Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, Gaetano Donizetti, Nicola Zingarelli, Federico Ricci, Nicola Vaccai, Giovanni Pacini. Some of their works have enjoyed an ephemeral success, which draws the attention of critics and writers of the time on the need to adapt the genre of opera to the current artistic requirements of the nineteenth century. In this sense, we must mention the work of Giuseppe Mazzini, *Filosofia della musica* (1836), through which the issue of the relationship between music and the educational influence that it must capitalize on the people is debated. The innovative spirit of his time, Gioachino Rossini stands out especially for the specifics of the series. With the first works of revolutionary origin (*Tancredi* - 1813, *Moses, Mohammed II* - 1818, *Semiramide* - 1823) he dramatically encompasses the heroic theme, so necessary for today. About the opera *Mose in Egitto*, George Sbîrcea, states the following: *"It was no longer a simple opera, but a great stage oratory, which to satisfy the megalomania of the Neapolitan public, bore on the poster the subtitle of" tragic-sacred action". It was then said that it was Rossini's most complete victory in the opera series - both in Italy and abroad"* (Sbârcea 1960, 125). The subject of the work speaks about the Second Book of the Old Testament, attributed to Moses, in which the exodus of the Jews from Egypt is related. In the context of the present research, the work of *Moses* abounds in symbols, the most significant being the biblical, aquatic ones. Mircea Eliade makes some observations in this regard, relevant to our study: *"In any religious ensemble we meet, the Waters retain their function unabated: they disintegrate, abolish the forms," wash away sins "-purifying and regenerating at the same time"* (Eliade 2019, 168). From a dramaturgical point of view, the original version of the opera from 1818 (Naples)

suffered certain shortcomings, so that in 1827 the opera *Moise et Pharaon* (Paris) will be born. The work will be resized, and if the 1818 version was structured in three acts, the final version of the work will be structured in four acts. Regarding the perspective of musical hermeneutics, act IV of the work abounds in biblical symbols.

The image shows a page of a musical score for G. Rossini's opera "Moise et Pharaon", Act IV, Recitative Moise. The score is written in bass clef and includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "Obbliaste, E-brei, che Iddio guida Mo-sè, ch'èi pu-nisee gl'ingrati?" and "Sulliquido e-le-mento me seguite, e vedrete il gran portento." The score includes markings for "REC. no", "ALL.º", and "Recit.".

Fig. 2. G. Rossini, "Moise et Pharaon", Recitative Moise (Act IV)

Rossini's music is characterized by refinement and achieves in the opera *Moise et Pharaon* - completely rebuilt in 1826 for Parisian theaters - a resounding success in his work as an opera composer. Rossini introduces new elements of expression, being concerned with some aspects of creation such as: increasing the dramatic function of the recitative or amplifying choral polyphony. Viewed from another perspective, this work provides a landmark in following the evolution of Rossini's artistic personality. In the context of our research, the elements that are the subject of our hermeneutic analysis are centered around the aquatic symbol - Moses parting the waters of the Red Sea - realistically rendered through music and dramatic action. Relevant are the remarks of George Sbircea: "in the scene of Moses' invocation of God, the composer introduces a new discovery of his: the twenty-six times repetition of the same musical idea in an increasingly intense

dynamic and instrumental range, until the stirring accents of the stage overwhelm even the most indifferent listener” (Sbârcea 1960, 126), thus rendering the spiritual character invoked by Rossini's music in the revolutionary context of Italy at that time. Gaetano Donizetti traveled the path of contemporary opera composers almost simultaneously with Rossini, but only after Bellini's death did his works manage to gain consideration in all European capitals between 1830-1850. Donizetti's romantic melodramas remain in the history of music archetypes of composition of the opera genre, through simple melodic-dramatic towers (from lyricism to dramatic conflicts), being recognized and appreciated by contemporaries. Through the opera *Il diluvio universale* (1830), Donizetti follows the compositional route sketched by Rossini, giving birth to another work considered tragic-sacred action. William Ashbrook, musicologist and researcher of Donizetti's opera argues the following: *“The generic term then in common use for works like Il diluvio universale was 'tragic-sacred action' rather than 'opera'; the same cumbersome term had been applied to Rossini's Mose in Egitto, first given at the San Carlo during Lent 1818, which suggested this direction to Donizetti”* (Ashbrook 1982, 57).



Fig. 3. G. Donizetti, *“Il diluvio universale”*, Noe's aria (final act II)

The subject of the work is a biblical one and deals with the events of Noah (the events of Noah are recorded in *Scripture*, passages 6-8 of the first book of Moses) who at the urging of God builds a huge ark to save his family and the animals of the earth. From a dramaturgical point of view, Donizetti builds impressive paintings, rendering a monumental biblical drama. For a better understanding of our hermeneutic analysis, we quote Mircea Eliade: "*both cosmologically and anthropologically, immersion in water does not equate to a final disappearance (...) in terms of structure, the flood " it can be compared to "baptism", and the funeral feast with the sprinkling of newborns with virgin water"* (Eliade 2019, 99). From a hermeneutical point of view, we witness a special interpretation of the old biblical texts in terms of music, leaving a rich vocal and orchestral color. We also notice that both the role of Moses and that of Noah are distributed to the bass voice, a custom not very common among opera composers of that time, which reveals the solemn character of the music.

4. Nabucco: biblical and revolutionary drama

The revolutionary impulse also materialized in the works of Verdi's predecessors, but the milanese public did not encounter any opera with the enthusiasm displayed at the beginning of Nabucco's opera. The public hears in this work new elements of musical-dramatic order, although Verdi was still following the path of his predecessors. We are dealing in this stage of creation with austere music, dominated by simplicity in terms of the vocal discourse of the protagonists. The drama of the situations described through music - most of them with a revolutionary touch - is outlined mainly by music, the librettos of that period being often inferior to music, from a qualitative point of view. The opera Nabucco represented an innovation in the Italian opera of the time, which, through its melodic unity and the force of dramatic conception, traces the new premises of the Italian romantic opera. The sacredness of Zaccarias' songs will lead to a particular construction of bass parties, which will go beyond the traditional vocal patterns of Italian opera (Simon Boccanegra, Philip I - Don Carlos, Ramfis - Aida). Once again, the subject of the work is inspired by a biblical theme, and tells the story of the Jews enslaved by the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. The opera is divided into four parts: *Jerusalem - The Impious One - The Prophecy - The Broken Idol*. In the context of the present research, the most important musical moments, which abound in symbols, are: the prayer of Zaccaria, *Vienna, oh Levita*, the prayer of Nabucco, *Dio di Giuda*, as well as the prayer of Fenena, *Oh dischiuso è il firmamento*. In the musical language found in Nabucco's opera, we encounter

many common features with the melodic richness of Verdi's predecessors (Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti), especially in the solo episodes. In *Nabucco* we feel the connection of succession with Rossini's opera *Moise in Egitto*, Moses' aria, *Dal tuo stellato soglio* "is often considered the direct predecessor of the choirs of *Nabucco*" (Solovtova 1960, 59). In the context of this study, the biblical legend that serves as the play's dramatic support is rendered through music in an innovative, revolutionary way, so that the national liberation movement in the first half of the nineteenth century in Italy resonates in Verdi's biblical drama.

The image shows a musical score for Nabucco's prayer. It consists of two systems of music. The first system features a vocal line in bass clef and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'LARGO (s'inginocchia)' and the dynamics are 'p'. The lyrics are 'Di - o di...'. The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment, with the lyrics 'Giu - dal... l'a - ra, il tem - pio a te.....'. The piano accompaniment includes a prominent melodic line in the right hand and a supporting bass line in the left hand.

Fig. 4. G. Verdi, "*Nabucco*", *Nabucco's prayer* (act IV)

5. Conclusions

The journey of Italian opera until the consolidation and recognition of this musical genre was often marked by social and political factors. According to Alfred Hoffman, "at its appearance, the work meant the act of maturity of an artistic process that had begun many centuries before, leading to the final detachment of secular music from that handcuffed in the strict canons of the church" (Hoffman 1960, 7). Starting with the 19th century, Italian composers developed in the creation of opera a new type of drama that manages to bring man in front of a source of divinity. We are therefore witnessing a staging of some important

moments revealed in the Holy Books. This biblical hermeneutics not only served to enrich the means of expression in the Italian lyrical theater, but urged the audience over time to look to the past, to reflect, to perceive opera music as a mirror of society.

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