

## Drama-Music communication in Opera performance

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**Abstract.** *The study “Drama-Music Communication in Opera Performance” builds on my 35-year experience of lyric drama in opera production. In my career as a director, which spanned from Baroque opera to contemporary opera, I was intrigued by the multiple connections between the musical dramaturgy, vocal expressiveness, stage image and impact on the audience. Consequently, I realised that all these elements which rely on musical scores are connected by something similar to the principle of communicating vessels: with genuine and intense musical-dramatic communication, the artistic emotion may reach the same level in all the components of the connections mentioned above.*

Key-words: *musical dramaturgy, communication, vocal expression, stage image, artistic emotion*

### 1. Musical Dramaturgy - Crucial Decoding in the Opera Performance

Opera holds a special place in the European culture and since its very beginning it has been regarded as the most complex musical genre, which encompasses singing, instrumentation, stage action, visual arts, choreography, cinematography and, more recently, special video effects, while the human voice remains “the crucial driving force of the stage expression” (Enciclopedie de la musique 1959, 325). The new musical-drama genre, defined by the French musicologist René Dumesnil as a “fusion of poetry and music in a drama which is song, play and performance” (Dumesnil 1961, 5), rediscovered the expressive powers of the word. The musical structure which resulted from the interference of melody and declamation was defined by a strong intonational, rhythmic and formal dependence on the literary text. Thus, the relationship between word and sound became, in opera music, the core of the dramaturgical-musical analysis against the background of the epochs, styles and schools which generated them. While with theatre the literary text is of the essence to decipher the playwright’s ideas to enable stage performance, the

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opera includes two main coordinates which must converge in the musical score analysis for stage performance. Thus, the specificity of the lyric genre coined the concept of MUSICAL DRAMATURGY which, despite the two terms it encompasses, should be understood as a whole, “as a specific notion related to lyric drama performance” (Arbore Ionescu, 1992, 105). In the development of the lyrical genre, the musical logic followed the meaning of the word, which gained varying levels of importance in the musical-dramatic structure of the phrase, seen from a horizontal perspective (vocal line), from a vertical perspective (harmony, polyphony, and timbre of instruments) and from an expressive perspective (dynamics and agogics). *The dramatic power conveyed by the opera - in the musical score - is the result of the cooperation between the composer and the librettist. The act of musical-dramatic communication is the result of the cooperation between conductor, director, scenographer and lyric artist.* The re-composition of the musical score, its transposition into stage images through an in-depth analysis of the musical dramaturgy may create a performance which will impact on the conscience of a community due to emotional, aesthetic, moral and cultural motivations. Consequently, we believe that each transposition into stage image may be a genuine act of creation and an act of culture for the audience. As musical dramaturgy may be defined as *the development of a musical language with expressive justification by the composer, to render an action, a conflict, the depiction of a character or the expression of an emotion, the performers and the creators of the opera performance - the director, the conductor and the scenographer - should intuitively identify this justification, should analyse it and turn it into stage image.*

A certain type of opera requires a certain musical-dramaturgical approach:

- a) **By type of performance** - monumental opera, chamber opera, grand-opéra, instrumental theatre, lyric-dramatic poem, lyric monodrama.
- b) **By period**: baroque, classical, romantic, post-romantic, contemporary opera.
- c) **By source of libretto**: original libretto or one inspired by a play, a poem, a novel, a legend or a historical fact.
- d) **By dramatic genre species**: opera seria, opera buffa, dramma giocoso, lyrical melodrama, musical drama, fantastic opera, etc.

In their analysis of the musical dramaturgy of the opera score, the performers and the producers always answer the question **WHY?** The deeper this WHY is analysed and then justified in stage image and interpretation, the more valuable the performance.

## 2. Vocal expressiveness in the semantics of musical dramaturgy

In the evolution of the opera as a genre, opera performers have displayed more and more interest in vocal expressiveness, both for the accurate rendition of the nature of the characters, of their psychological states, and for enhancing the relationship with other characters involved in the musical-dramatic plot. A vocal expression as close as possible to the composer's intentions would generate high interpretative performance. The best example to illustrate this statement is the interpretative performance of Maria Callas. Even though her great "rivals" Renata Tebaldi, Montserrat Caballé and Joan Sutherland posed a very serious competition from a technical perspective, Maria Callas was unique due to her vocal expressiveness and was called the "Callas phenomenon" due to the strong impact of her expressiveness on the conductor, director and, first and foremost, on the audience.

According to Stanislavski's definition, in the opera the word means WHAT and the music means HOW (Stanislavski 1958, 454). The melodic line determines the logic of the phrase, and the vocal expressiveness supports the emotional charge of the logic. In his treaty about singing, Manuel Garcia stated that ornaments were cultivated so that they may render the "nuances of the soul" (Garcia 1911, 50). The structure of the treaty includes a first part dedicated to vocalisations, and a second part to "the word united with music". In his vast study "La voix chantée", Raoul Husson analysed the expressive vocal technique and its efficiency in expressing what is characteristic and significant to render the composer's and the librettist's intentions. The numerous possibilities to express nuances, the quality of the pronunciation, the identification of the accurate vocal colours for the emotional states (either stimulative or depressive) of the character in the dramatic action discovered through the expressive vocal technique - used as a means, not as an end in itself, are ways for the lyric artist to become an OPERA ACTOR. The variety and quality of the interpretation of an opera score largely depend on the ability of the actor-singer to render through his/her vocal expressiveness the poetic-musical idea of the composer. In the study "The Work of the Director and of the Actor in the Opera Theatre", the great director Boris Pokrovski mentioned that it is not advisable that the voice impostation and sound emission exercises should acquire an independent importance, but to become a means of expression, a supple mechanism to render the intentions in the interpretation of musical scores and to create authentic characters (Pokrovski 1960, 56).

*Vocal expressiveness can be defined as a seamless combination of singing science, voice quality and the art of the actor. Vocal expressiveness is the result of*

an in-depth analysis by the performer, conductor and director of the connection between the word, the musical phrase and the stage action, and the main means of capitalizing on the musical dramaturgy contained in any score belonging to the lyrical genre. Romantic and verist composers have created new terms in order to be as plastic as possible in describing the vocal colour they want in a certain musical phrase, on a certain accent or in building a dramatic climax. The frequent and extensive instructions describe with great accuracy the composers' intentions, and support a strong and significant musical-dramatic communication.

Studies have been written that reveal the connection between vocal expressiveness, emotion and acoustics. In "Communication of emotions in vocal expression and music performance: Different channels, same code?" published in Psychological Bulletin by the American Psychological Association on September 1st 2003, Patrik Juslin and Petri Laukka provide a classification of the level of emotions rendered by vocal expressiveness and analyse the connection between the acoustic cues and the communication of each emotion.

### 3. Levels of musical-dramatic communication

In opera, we may speak of musical-dramatic communication on different levels:

- a) word-sound ratio level
  - b) emotional level
  - c) at conceptual-scenic level
- a) The word-sound ratio** - the horizontal level of the musical score - is the result of the cooperation between the librettist and the composer. The history of the opera provides examples of famous couples of librettists and composers who, due to their vast knowledge of literature, music, theatre and vocal technique, created masterpieces which became models of the lyric genre. We mention here several such couples from the musical baroque period until the 20th century:
- *Antonio Caldara and Pietro Metastasio*: 1731 - Demetrio, 1732 - Adriano in Siria, 1733 - Demofonte, 1733 - L'Olimpiade, 1734 - La clemenza di Tito, 1736 - Achille in Sciro, 1736 - Ciro riconosciuto, 1736 - Temistocle
  - *W.A. Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte*: Le nozze di Figaro (1786), Don Giovanni (1787) Così fan tutte (1790)
  - *G. Verdi and Francesco Maria Piave*: 1844 - Ernani, 1844 - I due Foscari, 1846 - Attila, 1847 - Macbeth, 1848 - Il corsaro, 1850 - Stiffelio, 1851 - Rigoletto, 1853 - Traviata, 1857 - Simon Boccanegra (prima variantă), 1862 - La forza del destino

- *Giuseppe Verdi and Arrigo Boito*: 1881 - Simon Boccanegra (second version), 1887 - Otello, 1893 - Falstaff
- *Giacomo Puccini and Luigi Illica*: 1896 - La bohème, 1900 - Tosca, 1904 – Madama Butterfly
- *Charles Gounod and Jules Barbier*: 1860 - La Colombe, 1859 - Faust, 1858 - Le médecin malgré lui, 1860 - Philémon et Baucis, 1888 - Polyeucte, 1862 - La reine de Saba, 1867 - Roméo et Juliette.
- *Richard Strauss and Hugo de Hofmannsthal*: 1909 - Elektra, 1911 - Der Rosenkavalier, 1912, rev. 1916 - Ariadne auf Naxos, 1919 - Die Frau ohne Schatten, 1928 - Die ägyptische Helena, 1933 - Arabella
- *Benjamin Britten and Eric Crozier*: 1947 – Albert Herring, 1949 – The Little Sweep, 1951 – Billy Budd

Depending on the evolution of the musical language in different periods, in the vertical plane of the musical score, there is a musical-dramatic communication at the *voice-orchestra level*, where the second each other (accompanied monody), complement each other (accompanied recitative), accompany each other (the arioso-type recitative), or merge (the Wagnerian musical drama). The expression of vocality depends on the instrumentation and on the consistency of the orchestration. The concern to fulfil the the three dimensions of the lyrical performance - MUSIC-TEXT-ACTION - for the purpose of a perfect dramatic logic, is common to all periods, from baroque to contemporary opera. Nevertheless, each composer, in each period, relates them to their personal attitude on how they work together.

b) **At emotional level**, we believe that the musical-dramatic communication is two-fold: *at stage level*, between characters and at the *stage-audience level*, between performer and audience. The characters are the “engine” of the action and of the dramatic conflict. There is a permanent exchange of emotions between characters, depending on the tension of the dramatic action. So, there is a permanent musical-dramatic communication between performers, achieved through singing, gestures, body and facial expression determined directly by the (already existing) communication between the librettist and the composer - through the musical score. The degree of emotion that is transmitted from the performer to the audience depends on many factors: the compositional style and the musical language, the species of dramatic genre (drama or comedy), the interpretative power of the actor-singer, his/her ability to convey all the nuances of the musical score and the intentions of the dramatic text through vocal expression and the stage performance.

**c) At the conceptual-scenic level**, the musical-dramatic edifice will be transfigured into performance through the director-conductor-scenographer relationship and the outlining of the general idea of the scenic images. *The coherence of the conceptual thinking of the three creators is directly proportional to the emotion it conveys to the audience.* Any dysfunctions between the concept of the conductor and that of the director will minimize the emotion of the audience, or more than that, it will create two totally different manifestations of emotion: at the end of the performance, the performers and the conductor are applauded and acclaimed, and the presence of the director on stage will cause dissatisfaction manifested by uproar and invective. There are many such examples in the 21st century opera. Over time, artistic phenomena change their perspective, as this is related to the specific context of the period and has a crucial role in the solution selected for stage transposition. In the act of creation, the composer starts from a clear structure. The performance producers - the triad made of conductor, director, and scenographer - design the re-creation from this precise structure. An example in this respect is the collaboration between the conductor Daniel Barenboim and the director Patrice Chéreau for the "Tristan und Isolde" performance in 2007 at Teatro Scala di Milano. Their discussions about the design of this performance were collected in the volume *Dialoghi su musica e teatro* and can be considered a model in the deep re-thinking of a score to become a sequence of stage images: "The opera performance needs complete agreement of ideas between the director and the scenographer, otherwise the performance should not happen. The stage and the rehearsals cannot become a battlefield or a fight between two artists" (Barenboim, Chereau 2008, 12).

In the history of opera performance, there were periods dominated by performers, then by conductors, and in the 21st century, by directors. There has always been musical-dramatic communication between them, sometimes at ideal parameters, sometimes otherwise and this has expanded more and more in the field of scenography, with the development of stage technique and video-audio experiments.

## 2. Conclusions

To summarize the ideas of this study, we propose the following scheme for the musical-dramatic communication, similar to the principle of the communicating vessels in the opera performance (Figure 1):

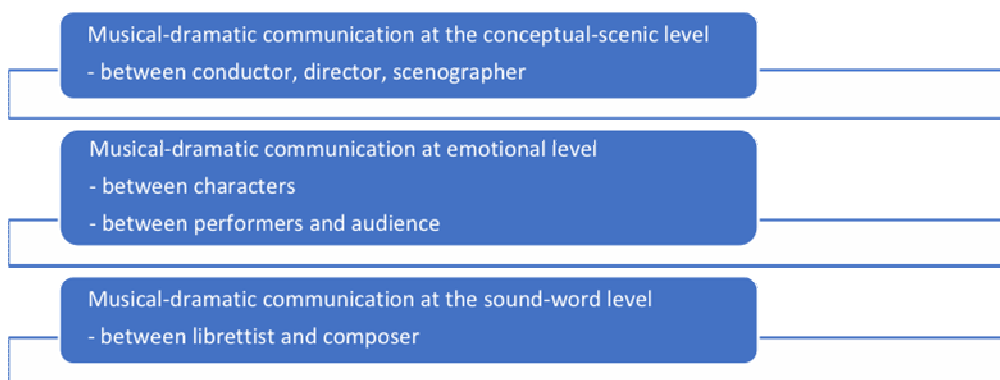


Fig.1. Scheme - The principle of the communicating vessels in musical-dramatic communication

The intertwining of artistic genres, especially music, theatre, literature, painting, and, more recently, cinematography and digitization, has generated a new vision of the lyrical performance art; nevertheless, the analysis and understanding of musical drama developments remain crucial in the interpretation of opera scores and in their transposition on stage. In the 21st century, the opera performance achieved richer forms of musical-theatrical expression, presenting unique aspects of syncretism, but, at the same time, it often fractured the musical-dramatic communication between the performance creators. Can there be musical-dramatic communication in the relations between authors, performers, performance creators and the audience? Of course, and the strength of this communication depends not only on the musical-poetic thinking of the composer and librettist, but also on the difficult but passionate and noble mission to highlight or re-emphasize the musical-dramatic ideas of the score at all levels specific to performing arts.

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