

Opera buffa, definition, origins and becoming until W.A. Mozart

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Abstract: *The comic opera or opera buffa, which could be scarcely found until the beginning of the XVIIIth century inside opera seria, through minor comic characters or between acts, as intermezzi, once with the first representation of the opera La serva padrona, by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (+1736), which is generally considered to be the first opera buffa, where music and poetry are happily mixed, fully accomplishes the dramatic function and becomes autonomous. At the beginning inspired by archetypal characters from comedia dell'arte, then more independent, with a powerful and sharp sense of sarcasm, drama and pathos, opera buffa becomes known and appreciated. Freed from the structure of the opera seria, opera buffa ignores the rules of the former, the musical and dramatic innovation dominate as well as the orientation towards the life of normal people. Until W.A. Mozart's works, opera buffa achieves the performance to overcome its own patterns, transforming them or adding new ones, the result being a hybrid between opera seria and opera buffa.*

Key-words: *opera buffa; intermezzi; the XVIIIth century; Pietro Metastasio; W.A. Mozart;*

1. Definition

*Opera buffa*² is the notion to define the Italian comic opera from the beginning of the third decade of the XVIIIth century. It was also known as *drama giocoso*, *commedia per musica*, *commedia in musica*, *burlesca*, a.s.o. It is believed it appeared especially thanks to the feeling of saturation which the public manifested more and more towards *opera seria*, whose mythological and historical subjects succeeded in boring the audience.

Synthetically *opera buffa* can be defined as being a gradual evolution of the *opera seria*, where authentic comic characters take part in burlesque scenes. When the difference between them and the attitude and candor of *opera seria* were clearly seen, the comic scenes were detached, usually without too much trouble, and were added independently between acts. The

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² „Verschiedene Aspekte der *Opera buffa* können mit dem Begriff des Spiels in Verbindung gebracht werden. In erster Linie ist diesbezüglich die gemeinsame Grundstimmung zu nennen, die gewissermaßen die Basis für diesen Annäherungsversuch bildet. Schon der Terminus *buffo* gibt darüber Aufschluss, dass es sich um eine komische Operngattung handelt, in der Heiterkeit und Fröhlichkeit die vorherrschenden Stimmungen sind, dieselben, die häufig mit dem Spielbegriff assoziiert werden. Es verwundert also nicht, dass der zeitgenössische Komponist und Theoretiker Vincenzo Manfredini in seinem Traktat (*Regole armoniche o sieno precetti ragionati per apprendere la musica*) im Kapitel „Dello stile buffo“ der *Opera buffa* den Zweck „divertire e muovere al riso“, wörtlich „vergnügen und zum Lachen bewegen“, zuschreibt. Ähnliches stellen Matteo Borsa („lo scopo è di commover soltanto lo spirito alla letizia“) und Giovanni Francesco Zulatti fest: „Lo stile vario, grazioso, piccante della Frascatana del Paisiello, del Convitto di Cimarosa, e di varie altre Opere buffe graziosissime risveglia al più melanconico l'allegrezza e il diletto.“ Die hier genannten Stimmungen der *letizia*, *diletto*, *allegrezza* sowie das von Zulatti mit Nachdruck verwendete Adjektiv *grazioso* entsprechen den mit dem Spiel üblicherweise assoziierten Begriffen: Freude, Vergnügen, „Fröhlichkeit und Anmut“. Ingrid Schrafl, *Opera Buffa und Spielkultur, Eine spieltheoretische Untersuchung am Beispiel des venezianischen Repertoires des späten 18. Jahrhunderts*, Viena, Böhlau Verlag, 2014, p. 64.

public's approval for these comic interludes led soon to composing independent comic plays, called *intermezzi*, which replaced the scenes taken from the opera.³

The plot in these operas is concentrated on two groups of characters: a male group and a female one and a pair, or more, of lovers. The dialogues are first *parlando*, later *recitativo secco*. The ending of the act, as well as the opera's, which claimed the presence of all the characters, are developed in *opera buffa*.

2. Origins

The dictionary of musical notions, shows that *opera buffa* has its origin in the *intermezzi* of the opera seria. Extremely musical, full of fantasy and humor, these operas attracted the public in an irresistible way.⁴

The soprano and professor of singing Ank Reinders, after stating that opera buffa appeared in Italy, shows that: „There is no wonder that the need to relax appeared during the opera performance, which lasted for five hours, up until six in the Baroque period. These literary *hors d'oeuvre*, were the first *buffe*, they appearing for the first time in Naples in 1639, occupying public's time between the acts: short works, complete, small, with comic or romantic elements, most of the time in people's language.”⁵

The same professor underlines that this comic intermezzo needed „a simple story: a young lady, who is interested in an older person for money or the old man who stalks a young one. These were not the elements frequently used and always with great success. It is also essential that the tunes are attractive and the text accessible.”⁶

The musicologist and professor Hugo Riemann asserts that „The highly *coturn*⁷ tragic character of the first operas has completely eliminated the comic elements. Out of the need to adapt the Venetian opera to the taste of a diversified audience it allowed the introduction of secondary characters. But at the same time with the opening of the permanent opera season at the theater, musical comedy was being composed and not only from the beginning of the XVIIIth century in Naples but even since 1639 in Rome with the commedia *Chi soffre, spera*, written by Giulio Rospigliosi (the future Pope Clement the IXth), composed by Virgilio Mazzocchi and Marco Marazzoli⁸ (represented at Barberini Palace).”⁹

³ cf. Otto Jahn, *Life of Mozart*, vol. I, trad.de Pauline D. Townsend, Londra, Novello, Ewer & CO., 1882, p. 203.

⁴ *Dictionar de termeni muzicali*, coordonator: prof.univ.dr. Gheorghe Firca, Editura Enciclopedică, 2010, p. 392.

⁵ „Es ist kein Wunder, dass schon bald ein Bedürfnis nach etwas Entspannung während der Opern aufführung entstand, die zur Zeit des Barock fünf bis sechs Stunden dauern konnte. Buchstäblich als sein „Hors d'oeuvre“ wurden die frühen „Buffe“ zuerst 1639 in Neapel in den Pausen zwischen den Opern aktenaufgefüllt: Kurzevollständige kleine Werke mit komischen oder sentimentalen Elementen, meistens in der Sprache des Volkes.” Ank Reinders, *Atlas der Gesungkunst*, Bärenreiter, Kassel, 1997, p. 135-136.

⁶ (...) „eine einfache Geschichte wichtig: Die junge dame, die des Geldes wegen einen älteren Herrn für sich interessieren will, oder der ältere Herr, der einen jüngeren Ding nachrennt. Das waren viel fach gebrauchte Motive, die immer Erfolg hatten. Wesentlich war auch, dass die Melodien eingängig waren und der Text verständlich war.” *ibidem*, p. 136.

⁷ Figuratively, the notion is used for tragedy.

⁸ Giulio Rospigliosi (+1669), Virgilio Mazzocchi (+1646), Marco Marazzoli (+1662).

⁹ „Der Höhe Kothurn der ersten Opernschloß komische Elemente ganz aus. Der Zuschnitt der venezianischen Oper auf den Geschmack eines gemischten großen Publikums gestattete aber den selben für Nebenfiguren Eingang. Aber schon gleichzeitig mit den ersten Anfängen ständiger Operntheater entsteht auch, zuerst außerhalb Venedigs, das Musiklustspiel, die Opera buffa, nicht erst zu Anfang des 18. Jahrhunderts in Neapel, sondern bereits 1639 in Rom mit der Commedia „Chi soffre, spera“ gedichtet von Giulio Rospigliosi (nachmals Papst Clemens IX), komponiert von Virgilio Mazzocchi und Marco Marazzoli (aufgeführt im Palazzo Barberini);“ Hugo Riemann, *Kleines Handbuch der Musikgeschichte mit Periodisierung nach Stilprinzipien und Formen*, Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel, 1922, p. 153.

Ruggero Vené, in the article *The origin of opera buffa*,¹⁰ believes that the source of the opera buffa is to be found at the end of the XVIth century,¹¹ when *commedia dell'arte* accomplished its full splendor, one of the representatives being Orazio Vecchi (+1605), composer from Modena, with his dramatic madrigal¹² *L'Amfiparnaso, commedia armonica*. The performance took place in 1595, the work being printed in Venice no sooner than 1597. „*L'Amfiparnaso* is the most complete and ambitious example of madrigal *drammatico* which once with its tendency to mix poetry and music in a histrionic art, foresaw the musical drama. The poetic text of the opera, divided in acts and scenes and with its dialogue given to the masks, was a derivation of *commedia dell'arte*. The music, treated polyphonic, (...) did not ask for new methods of performance. (...) Music and poetry combined, but without fulfilling their special dramatic function they might have. Music did not have questions and answers, both necessary to the dialogue and plot.”¹³

If at the beginning it is timidly found inside opera seria, through minor comic characters or between the acts, the so called *intermezzi*, in time it will become more and more known and appropriated, earning its right to be independent, adding a new element (which enriches it aesthetically): the sarcasm.

3. Becoming until W.A. Mozart

Since Orazio Vecchi a century will have passed by until new attempts to revitalize the genre because, freed from the structure of the opera seria, opera buffa leaves aside the old rules, its main characteristic being the musical and dramatic innovation and the orientation towards day-to-day life, presenting almost exclusively ordinary people's life, but who sang, like in the opera seria, recitatives and arias.

At the beginning of the XVIIIth century, in Naples, we find again the playful spirit in the opera, now dissociated from Vecchi's old form, an original Naples product, natural and sincere.

The first representation of an opera buffa is considered to be *La serva padrona*, composed by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (+1736), the premiere took place at the theater *San Bartolomeo* in Naples, on the 28th of August 1733.¹⁴ After it is performed in Paris, in 1752, „it gives birth to a conflict of opinions called *querelle des Bouffons* (the buffoons' quarrel), where the partisans of the traditional French opera opposed and fought the new appearances. The

¹⁰ Ruggero Vené, jurnalul *The Musical Quarterly* Vol. 21, Nr. 1 (Ianuarie 1935), p. 33-38.

¹¹ The same opinion has the musical historian Elena Maria Șorban, *Muzica veche, o istorie concentrată*, Cluj-Napoca, editura Eikon, 2014, p. 95.

¹² *Madrigale drammatico* was an experimental artistic form at the end of the XVIth century which represents the adapting of madrigal to the needs of the theater. The most beautiful of these works was *L'Amfiparnaso* by Orazio Vecchi. The characters, the dialogue, the plot clearly show that this genre is derived from *comedia dell'arte*. The dramatic madrigals were a first attempt to mix comedy and music, favoring the popular vitality of *comedia dell'arte* against the aristocratic *favola pastorale*.

¹³ „*L'Amfiparnaso* is the most complete and ambitious example of the "dramatic madrigal," which, with its tendency to fuse poetry and music into a histrionic art, prefigured the music-drama. The poetic text of the work, with its divisions into acts and scenes and with its dialogue entrusted to masks, was a derivation of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. The music, treated in the vocal polyphonic-style (...) called for no new methods of performance. (...) Music and poetry merged, without either's fully performing the special dramatic function of which it was capable. The music lacked statement and answer, both necessary for dialogue and for action.” Ruggero Vené, jurnalul *The Musical Quarterly* Vol. 21, Nr. 1 (Ianuarie 1935), p. 33.

¹⁴ Werner Felix, Wolfgang Marggraf, Vera Reising, Gerd Schönfelder, *Musikgeschichte, ein Grundriß*, Teil I, Leipzig, VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik Leipzig, 1989, p. 272.

polemic ended once the comic opera genre crystallized, first in plays with music, for example *The Village's Fortune Teller*¹⁵ by Jean Jacques Rousseau (+1778),¹⁶ or in the works of the new composers.¹⁷

We also remember Domenico Cimarosa (+1801), „for the classic type opera related with the Mozart's theatre (the unquestioned celebrity belongs to the opera buffa *Il matrimonio segreto*).¹⁸

We must underline that „in drama there is a dialectical relationship between form and content- in opera, between the musical form and the scene content”and that „the specific manifestations of this relationship are historically determined, because in the historical process, the form as well as the content suffer structure and substance changes.”¹⁹ Through all this I wish to underline the role of the librettists, who had a respected position, even if they didn't always have the perfect collaboration with the great composers, from the human relation perspective or from the professional point of view.²⁰

The most famous of them is fairly considered to be Pietro Metastasio (+1782). He „didn't have a passive contribution to the evolution of the opera, but had precise ideas about the opera's structure, about the librettist's and the composer's role.”²¹ He fought to create an authentic *opera buffa*, adapted to the style of his epoch, but without elements from the *opera seria*. The opera of the XVIIIth century, in Metastasio's opinion, was nothing but an amalgam of tragedy and comedy, and their separation was absolutely necessary. The comic inspiration had to become autonomous, (*opera buffa*), and in *opera seria*, had to be eliminated all the gods' and allegorical creatures' intervention in human conflicts, the result being as simpler style and less complicated images from the XVIIth century texts.

All over the XVIIIth century, „the opera buffa genre, with themes taken from day-to-day reality, becomes more popular”²² and, especially at maturity, surpasses the idea of *exclusively comic* and introduces characters who offer more *weight* to the composition. The result was a hybrid between the two genres, as representatives there are the two creations inspired by Pierre Beaumarchais (+1799): *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1782), by Giovanni Paisiello (+1816), *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786)²³, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (+1791), as well as *Il matrimonio*

¹⁵ *Le Devin du village*, operă într-un act de Jean-Jacques Rousseau. A avut premiera în 18 octombrie 1752 la castelul Fontainebleau, în fața regelui Ludovic al XV-lea și a curții și la 1 martie 1753, la Academia Regală de Muzică din Paris, cu Pierre de Jélyotte în rolul lui Colin, Cuvillier în rolul ghicitorului și Marie Fel în rolul lui Colette.

¹⁶ Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

¹⁷ Carmen Stoianov, Mihaela Marinescu, *Istoria muzicii universale*, ediția a doua, București, Editura fundației România de mâine, 2009, p. 81.

¹⁸ Grigore Constantinescu, Irina Boga, *O călătorie prin istoria muzicii*, ediția a doua, revăzută, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 2008, p. 53.

¹⁹ „Nel drama intercorre un rapporto dialettico tra forma e contenuto - nell'opera tra forma musicale e contenuto scenico - e le manifestazioni specifiche di tale rapporto sono storicamente determinate, giacché nel processo della storia tanto le forme quanto i contenuti mutano di struttura e di sostanza.” Carl Dahlhaus, *Drammaturgia dell'opera italiana*, traducere de Lorenzo Bianconi, editura EDT, Torino, 2005, p. 29.

²⁰ Nicoleta Ardelean, *Opera romantică italiană de la începutul secolului al XIX-lea reflectată în creația lui Vincenzo Bellini*, București, Editura Muzicală, 2016, p. 71.

²¹ Allan Kendall, *Cronica Muzicii Clasice*, Oradea, Editura Aquila, 2007, p. 79.

²² Elena Maria Șorban, op.cit., p. 127.

²³ „Another such category is more abstract but nevertheless crucial to any understanding of opera buffa wherever it was performed. It involves the dialogue between individual operas and generic conventions of plot, character, dramatic function, musical “type,” and vocal behavior. The idea that these operas “converse” with the conventions of the genre is, of course, related to the broader notion that eighteenth-century music - both vocal and instrumental - signifies in large part by means of a complex dialogic world of intra - and extra-musical references, or topoi. ” Mary Hunter, *The Culture of Opera Buffa in Mozart's Vienna*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 5-6.

segreto (1792), by Domenico Cimarosa. One of the obvious characteristics of this mixed genre was elaborating the ensemble numbers with quick rhythm at the end of the acts.

4. Conclusions

The opera *buffa*, and here we mention *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786) and *Così fan tutte* (1790), which use, and this is of utmost importance, one of the favourite themes of this genre, preferred also by Mozart, the feeling of love, in different circumstances of course, goes through a new stage of development, because the connection between text and music facilitates the growing of the opera *buffa*, Mozart being not only a huge composer but also a great dramatist.

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