

The Comical Situation Reflected in the Opera *Betrothal at a Monastery* by Serghei Prokofiev

Maria Carla GLIGA¹

Abstract: *The comic and sarcasm in Prokofiev's music mirrors his intolerance towards political and social conditions, as well as towards the cultural trends of that time. His career as a composer had been very exposed and labeled from a political point of view, which gave birth to many contradictory discussions. Many music lovers only consider the real Prokofiev creations the ones produced when he was outside Russia. On opposing sides are the ones who consider that the Soviet period (from 1933 until his death) was the one that conferred him the comfort of being himself through his creations. The opera *Betrothal at a Monastery*, composed in his Soviet period, was a truly remarkable achievement of Prokofiev. Although he choose to focus on the lyrical aspect of the subject, he did not omit the libretto parts which offered him the possibility to create comical situations.*

Key-words: *Russian Opera; 20th Century; Prokofiev; Betrothal at a Monastery; Comical situation.*

1. Introduction

In the XXth century, Russian art is becoming more and more important, gaining an leading role in the universal cultural sphere. Similar to other european cultural centers, new tendencies and artistic currents are developed in Russia which have their roots in the national specifics. In the first half of the century, we observe numerous composing styles being created, an aspect which results mainly from the national specificity, with echoes on large parts of the Russian musical creations. The socio-political and cultural context of the time leaves a heavy mark on the musical language and creation.

In an urban reality, which hard to be imagined today, around 1940 when the second World War was already starting to be felt, Prokofiev, reached a saturation regarding the soviet-inspired libret-subjects. He starts shifting his interest towards the endless, indispensable aesthetic category of the comic, the second conflictual value of the force field of the aesthetic. In this sphere we can find the ridiculous, ironic, farce, joke or satirical aspects². Shades of this category of aesthetics can be found in the satirical comic, as well as the ironic and humorstic ones. As seen through the field of aesthetics, the comic is a relatively narrow category, especially if we compare it with the sublime or the gratious. Being present more or less in most arts, the comic still finds it's place in the programmatic music or in the opera. Pure music is not capable of comic. Music needs to be accompanied by comic ground on the scene or in a text in order for this aesthetical category to be included clearly in the art of sounds. In it's primordial form, music could be brought near comic by arousing sentiments of good mood or joy, but these are both at the same time near the sphere of the gratious. Because of this, we can say that we need an additional element for the comic to be identified in music. For these attributes, the comic finds it's important spot in the opera. Other type of emotions woken up by the comic, like mercy or empathy for the situation somebody faces do not belong to the esthetic phenomena, but to the ethical attitude of the watcher.

¹ "George Enescu" National University of Arts, Iași, carlagliga@yahoo.com

² Anghi, Ștefan. 2004. *Prelegeri de estetică muzicală, Vol. 1, Tom 2*. Oradea: Editura Universității din Oradea, p. 378.

2. The aesthetics of comic in the opera

The history of the genre of comic opera does not provide us a certain date of its beginnings. With certainty, the opera buffa genre was born from a necessity of satisfying the public's taste of the time, especially the Italian one. Opera buffa has its origins in the intermediates of the serious operas, having strong roots in the Italian popular theatre tradition - *commedia dell'arte*. These types of operas, being very musical, full of fantasy and humour, exercise a justified attraction force for the public. From the buffa opera therefore is inspired from reality, extracting its subjects from daily life. We could say that the opera genre, including the comic-opera acquires a larger frame, almost a democratic one. In Venice, where in 1673 two musicians from Rome, Benedetto Ferrari and Francesco Manelli opened a public hall for the presentation of various spectacles at *The San Cassiano* theatre. Here the operas could be visioned by different categories of people, from noble folk to craftsman, therefore a mass taste for the genre was being developed³. The Opera *La serva padrona* (1733) by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi was the turning point for the genre assertion. Since then, many composers of the XVIIIth century excelled in this genre: Baldassare Galluppi, Niccolò Piccini, Giovanni Paisiello, Domenico Cimarosa (*The secret marriage*). Nevertheless, the true peak of the genre of buffa-opera takes place with the writing of the *Barber of Sevilla* by Gioachino Rossini.

In contrast to the serious opera, the buffa opera offers a scenic dynamic of the much more emphasized actions, and the preponderance of intonations and popular rhythms has ensured composers along the times an indisputable success. Although the buffa opera has its base in comical situation, even in embarrassing, this opera does not lack lyrical elements, and the end is always a conclusive, realist one. The success has ensured that this genre, achieved in short time a large geographical and chronological spread. Because of its success in Italy, composers from other countries started to adopt this style. In Germany, the type of popular opera with a funny subject was named *Singspiel*. In the same time, in France appeared the comic opera. This was born from the concept of theatre de la foire, where excluding the spoken or mimicked text, large circulating songs were being used.

Giving the immense amount of success that this kind of opera had throughout Europe, it is not surprising that this genre of comic opera is not without interest in the XX century either. Serghei Prokofiev composed *Betrothal at a Monastery* with the purpose of isolating himself from the socialistic ideologies imposed by the higher ranks of the time. Therefore, two centuries apart, the composer brings again in front light figures from the folk, and satirical elements that dominate the society's behaviours. Prokofiev has brought in musical theatre of the first half of the XXth century significant contributions, both in the opera and in ballet. The composer achieves a personal synthesis of language through his music, uniting neoclassical features with important innovative ideas.

Prokofiev had a weakness for the lyrical genre. His career as a composer has been influenced by his desire to compose operas and being appreciated for this particular genre. One of the reasons why he returned to The Soviet Union was his belief that here his operas will be played in scene more easily, because of the accessibility of the Russian language, a problem he had to face both in America and in Europe before. Another reason why his motherland represented an ideal place to expose his operas was the cultural climate of the time. Because of politics, the cultural environment was much more conservative and controlled than in other regions, which made from his opera a prestigious manifestation that attracted talented singers, conductors and directors.

Because of his love for this style, Prokofiev wrote opera genre containing both the comic as well as the lyrical-psychological, dramatic and historical categories: *Maddalena*

³ Bughici, Dumitru. 1978. *Dicționar de forme și genuri musicale*. București: Editura Muzicală, p. 218.

(dramatic), *The Gambler* (lyrical-psychological), *The Fiery Angel* (dramatical), *Semion Kotko* (historical), *Betrothal at a Monastery* (comical), *War and Peace* (lyrical-dramatical), *The Story of a Real Man* (historical).

3. Prokofiev's *Betrothal at a monastery*. History and context of the writing

The XIX-th century is marked by the Russian composers tendencies to use the biggest masterworks of the Russian literature as a source of inspiration for the opera's librettos. Prokofiev's opera share a common aspect, regarding the fidelity with which literature sources are respected. Excepting the opera *Betrothal at a Monastery* and *The Love of the Three Oranges*, the composer uses as base for the librettos the prose written by writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky or other contemporary authors of the composer. It is obviously understood that for creating an opera with comical character, Prokofiev needed another source of inspiration. The writing of a comical opera was determined by the exhausting period generated by composing workings with soviet and patriotic subjects. Before the premiere of the *Semion Kotko* opera, Prokofiev was inspired by the farce of Richard Brinsley Sheridan *The Duenna (The Governess)*, whose action is happening in Sevilla of the XVIIIth century. He read for the first time *Duenna* in 1940. There were few Russian translated versions of the play in the theatre's libraries which intended to produce this theatrical play. A characteristic of Sheridan's creations was the spontaneous and lively way in which different situations characteristic of comedies appear. *Betrothal at a Monastery*- the naming of the composer's opera was a „psychological muster after the high emotionally loaded sonatas and the perky style from *Semion Kotko*⁴“.

The Libretto is built by Serghei Prokofiev and Mira Mendelssohn in 1940. In original, Sheridan's libretto imposed both lyrics with rhyme as well as text in prose, so both of them shared their tasks, Prokofiev dealing with prose and Mira Mendelson with the lyrics. The composer was well known for the speed with which he wrote his music, so that his entire work was elaborated in the period of July-September 1940.

Prokofiev mentions in his autobiography that he choose to focus on the lyrical aspect of the subject, to portrait the feelings of the two pairs of lovers, their succeedings and their losses⁵. The comical situations of the opera are charmingly underlined by the lyrical background imagined by the composer. Probably this is also one of the reasons why Prokofiev choose to rename his original play *Duenna* (word of Spanish origin difficult to assimilate in Russian culture) with *Betrothal at a Monastery*.

Although the absolute premiere of the opera took place in 1946, his work was already finished by 1940, but because of the war, it was not possible for it to be put in scene. Therefore, five years were required from finishing the opera until it's first scenic premiere, on the date of 3rd november 1946 at the Kirov Theatre in Leningrad. At the premiere, the opera has received a considerable succes but unfortunately, Prokofiev was unable to attend it because of his worsening sickness. Shostakovici, at that time present in the hall, sustained that this was one of the most optimistic works of Prokofiev, comparing the opera with Verdi's *Falstaff* underlining the humor and humanity found there⁶. Even after the composers death, the opera gained an important role in the Soviet programs repertoires.

⁴ Popa, Florinela. 2012. *Serghei Prokofiev*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, p. 131.

⁵ Prokofiev, Serghei. 1960. *Autobiografie. Însemnări-articole*. București: Editura Muzicală, p. 116.

⁶ Popa, Florinela, *op. cit.* p. 131.

4. The comic reflected in the opera *Betrothal at a monastery*

The subject of the opera, exposed into four acts and nine scenes is dynamic and complex, similar to a theatrical play which is joined by music. It is represented by forbidden love and false identity. The characters are Don Jerom (tenor), noble from Sevilla, Ferdinand (bariton) and Luisa (soprano), Duenna (contralto), Don Antonio (tenor), Don Carlos (bariton), Mendoza (baz), the rich tradesman, Clara (mezzosoprano), Luisa's confidant, Augustin (bariton), the monastery's singer, monks, servants, villagers of Sevilla, guests. We can say about Prokofiev's characters that they are authentic and convincing from psychological point of view. Through some male characters, the author chooses to satirize the manners of society: the ignorance through Don Jeron, greed through Mendoza and jealousy through Ferdinand.

The action takes place in Sevilla, where Don Jerome intends to marry his daughter to Isaac Mendoza, an ugly but rich man. Such a premise of action where a young beauty does not marry from love, but because of different considerations, offers a possibility of creating multiple comic situations. Through different diversions, the two couples manage to defeat the opposition of their parents against their desired marriage.

The intrigue represents the strict traditions marriage of the Spanish nobility. These used to isolate the girls of marriage-appropriate ages until a favourable pretendant showed up. Following this aspect, Mendoza never really saw Luisa from close, so that he was susceptible of being fooled by Duenna. The intrigue is one specific of comic operas with multiple aspects of the genre: conflicts, misunderstandings, assuming false identities and the most important one- love situations both comic and complex. Luisa- Don Antonio and Clara-Ferdinand are two young pairs of lovers who manage to defeat by various actions the opposition of their parents against their marriage. Everything ends well, except the situation for the miser tradesman Mendoza, who is fooled into a marriage with Duenna, a poor, but resourceful girl.

Laughter is provoked by the manifestation of human weakness, portrayed through evilness, arrogance and even stupidity. By highlighting these aspects through various mechanisms and conjunctures the aesthetic category of the comic is portrayed, provoking laughter in the audience. Another modality through which this state of laughter is obtained is the exteriorised conjuncture in which we find clumsiness, mistake and accident. Multiple scenes provoke laughter and reveal the comic imagined by the composer: Luisa and Antonio who make from the fooling of Don Jerome a real game; Don Jerome, blinded by anger provoked by the nurse, banishes Luisa from the house which was dressed in her clothes, making her plan to run away with the man she loves easier; the miser Mendoza, blinded by the idea of wealth, is fooled and instead of marrying the young and beautiful Luisa, he gets to marry her old nurse; the jealous Ferdinand seems to see Clara cheating on him, being everytime joined by a man.

5. Conclusions

In operas, the comic appears under the form of an amusement provoked by characters and situations in which these go through. This is the „easier” side of the phenomenon. The humour in the *Betrothal at a Monastery* opera is a gentle one, never before met in Prokofiev's creations. Specific to the buffa-opera genre, this presented intrigue reveals the underlining of misunderstanding, assuming false identities, but also the desires of the heart. The genre of comical opera is not representative for the creation of the great Russian composer, maybe this being one of the reasons why this opera is not as much analysed as the masterpiece *Love of the Three Oranges*. *Betrothal at a Monastery*, joined by other 3 operas, are part of the series of Soviet operas. From these ones, only *War and Peace* and *Betrothal at a Monastery* have reached a remarkable international success. From a musical point of view, this opera features

an out of ordinary melodic inventivity, by taking over elements from the melodic and architectonics of great composers such as Mozart, Verdi, Strauss and of course , Rossini⁷. The opera is a remarkable achievement of the composer, through the greatness with which he mixes humour with lyrism. In the series of his scenical creations, this work happily illustrates the neoclassical aspect of his style.

6. References

- *** *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, second edition*. 2001. vol. 20. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Angi, Ștefan. 2004. *Prelegeri de estetică muzicală, Vol. I., Tom 2*. Oradea: Editura Universității din Oradea
- Bughici, Dumitru, 1978. *Dicționar de forme și genuri musicale*. București: Editura Muzical
- Popa, Florinela. 2012. *Serghei Prokofiev*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.
- Prokofiev, Serghei, 1960. *Autobiografie. Însemnări-articole*. București: Editura Muzicală

⁷ *** *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, second edition*. 2001. vol. 20. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 414.