

The role of Euridice from Christoph Willibald Gluck's opera Orfeo ed Euridice. Interpretive vocal-stylistic aspects

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Abstract: *The big opera revelation overlaps XVIII century into new perspectives, which are built on an ethical judgement and a legitimate aspiration for perfection. The dramatic genre suddenly gets a vigorous reduction of the sound matter and an urgent adoption of the morally educative function. Cristoph Willibald Gluck, the opera reformer, achieves the great osmosis between the text and the music through the front screen restoration of the dramatic truth and the naturalness of expression based on the principle of unity of action and scenic cohesion. The role of Euridice from Gluck's opera Orfeo ed Euridice, designed by a classical configuration, claims rules of vocal-technical order keyed to the idealized principles of the era, in which the belcanto style and technique puts into light the clearest nature of the Gluck vocal score.*

Key-words: *opera; gluckian reform; vocal art; expressive and interpretative valences*

1. Introduction

Born from syncretism of art, from origins until our present days, the opera has crossed a long process of metamorphosis. Looking into its trajectory, middle XVII century opera was only going to pass through one of its reforms. Therefore, here we are, facing the first cold shower.

The opera regeneration which overlaps the century by social excellence is coming to separate the “reality-non-reality” game in which the baroque style was indulging in the last hour. No composer until Cristoph Willibald Gluck had in mind to step in and undo the magic according to which his opera would be ephemeral and could not be recreated.

Orfeo ed Euridice opera represents the first reforming opera from the trilogy of Gluck's opera. Euridice role, tintured inside lyricism and confused feelings reflects on one hand a testimony of purification of ornamental loaded music, and on the other hand, a new style of interpretation according to the dramatical expression.

2. Opera in the middle of the XVIII century

Inside a 1764 letter, the noble Coyer declares: *[opera] is for conversation, or for the reciprocal visit inside the lodge: we don't listen to it and we only get excited when the arias come on.*² Not a long time ago, C. W. Gluck was launching in Vienna the first reforming in the history of operas, *Orfeo ed Euridice*.

The stardom of the singers and not at all moderated taste of the baroque composers was going to be purified through the glimpse of the first shiny rays of the Classicism. The four cardinal virtues of the ancient times, the fertile ground from which the artistic creations of the

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² “[l’opéra] c’est pour la conversation, ou pour se visiter de loge en loge: on n’écoute, on ne s’extasie qu’à l’Ariette”, Lettre du 22 janvier, 1764, Gabriel-François Coyer, *Voyages d’Italie ed de Hollande*, p. 192.

XVIII century will take their lifeblood: *temperance, justice, prudence* or the *wisdom* and the *courage*, they are all coming to build the wall of reason, radically separating itself from the incoherence of the late baroque style. In the place of the colossal, the equilibrium is born, and in the place of the struggle the harmony is born through a permanent search of "utilis cum dulci" (Horatiu), the reunion of the etic and the aesthetic.

Strongly influenced by sculpture, the art excellence classical, renewed by the famous *dell'Arcadia*³ group, the opera obtains a vigorous reduction of the sound matter and also an imperious adoption of the moral educative function. The justice between matter and form, the balance between the subjective and the objective, together with the new moral content of the subjects, are only restraining the eccentric inclinations of the baroque style, creating a strictness for rules.

Beneath the "Sapere aude!" voice, the musicians' steps are magnetically going towards two big cultural centres: Vienna, the european musical cultures binder, and Paris, the host of the philosophical musical fights which began with *Querelle des Bouffons*⁴, which continued in the controversial position of the two sides: the "piccins" and the "Glucks".

In this climate of permanent artistic conquest, the genre of the opera knows a radiant development. *The opera seria* keeps the serious acquired personality but swipes away the vocal virtuosity arias of the despotic⁵ singers, detrimental to the order and coherence of the subject's development on the plan of the scene. *The opera buffa* is becoming an independent genre, seizing "humoristic" subjects with the purpose of mirroring the times' worries, bringing the "wild ones" into domesticity. *The comique opera* leaves the fair and starts to shine on the scenes of the Parisian theaters on the subversive satirical firmament, and the German lyrical theater unifies the humor, the moral, and the popular song into a new opera perspective called the *singspiel*.

The capital mutation of the opera mid XVIII century, oriented into whole unity between lyrics and music, generates the most solid period from the history of the genre, in which the perfect justice between matter and form coexists, and the content of expression through expressivity triumph and the steady beautiful.

3. Christoph Willibald Gluck and his contributions to the development of the operatic genre

Christoph Willibald Ritter von Gluck (1714-1787), is described in the history of music as a proeminent figure through his unprecedented contribution to the world of opera.

³ In Rome, 1960, a group of people of letters, are founding dell'Arcadia Academy, a group which fights against the imbalance of the baroque taste and is imposing a decisive aesthetic rationalism.

⁴ Named "La quere des coins", it represents the controversy which took place during two years time (1752-1754) between the traditional italian opera followers ("jesters"), sustained in the front line by Jean Jacques Rousseau philosopher (1712-1778), and the sustainers of traditional french opera ("anti-jesters"), defended by Jean Baptiste Rameau (1683-1764).

⁵ "When the composer is working with the singers, especially with the castrated, he always sits on his left, with the hat in his hand, and with a step behind.... the composer will accelerate or slow down the arias' tempo according to the genie of the virtuous, repressing any unfavorable opinion, thinking that his reputation, his worth and interests are in their hands, and, because of this, if it will be necessary, he will modify the arias, the recitatives, the sharps, the flats, natural sounds, etc." "Quando lavora il compositore con virtuosi, particolarmente CASTRATI, da sinistra, darà sempre a loro la mano dritta, starà con capello in mano, un passo dietro...il compositore incalzerà, e lenterà il Tempo dell'Arie a genio de VIRTUOSI, dissimulando qualunque loro indiscretezza, col riflesso, che la propria Riputazione, Credito, ed interesse stà in le lor mani, che perciò, gli cambierà, occorrendo, Arie, Recitativi, Diesis, Bmoli, Bquadri etc." Benedetto Marcello, *Il teatro alla moda ossia metode sicuro, e facile per ben comporre, ed eseguire l'OPERE Italiene in Musica all'uso moderno*, Milano, 1720, p. 18.

The man who did an inscrutable childhood, a life as a composer adapted to the times, always in the service of the crowned heads and society, did not foresee the destiny of the work that himself would illuminate towards the end of life.

Gluck revitalizes the genre of opera by bringing to the fore the action, the dramatic truth and the sincerity of the expression, achieving the great osmosis between text and music. Dominated by the primacy of expressiveness, he purifies music from the baroque burden and puts it at the service of feelings on the principle of unity of action and stage cohesion.

Along with *Orfeo ed Euridice*, in collaboration with the poet and dramaturg Ranieri di Calzabigi (1714- 1795), Gluck uses the aesthetic thinking of the Enlightenment French lyrical tragedy, Rousseau's ideas about nature and naturalness, Handel's oratorios, Viennese music and Sammartini's instrumental style, creating a supremacy of expressiveness in a unitary musical-dramaturgical discourse.

The reformer of the opera achieves a discipline among singers accustomed to musical excesses. He purifies the vocal score, giving clarity and coherence to the libretto, at the same time aiming to overcome the simple understanding of the text by transforming it musically. In a letter to *Mercure de France* in 1773, Gluck made his goals very clear: "Always simple and natural, as I have endeavored to compose it, my music tends to be as expressive as possible and aims to consolidate the declamation in the picture. For this reason they do not use the trills, colors and cadences that the Italians use in abundance."⁶

He replaces the *secco* recitative with the *accompagnato* one, achieving an attenuation of the boundaries between the recitative and the aria, the former being entrusted with the task of preludeing the lyrical confession poured into the aria. It is the role of the overture as a component part of the drama with the participation of the orchestra in creating the psychological climate, being directly related to the first scene in which the choir is present, the real entity of the mood of the dramatic situation. He chooses topics from the mythological repertoire, and highlights the strength of the character's inner nature, simplifying the dramaturgy to 1-2-3 acts by reducing the number of characters.

Calzabigi, who played a decisive role in the crystallization of the work, describes the fruitful collaboration with Gluck in a letter from 1761 to Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz, as follows: "everything is nature here, everything is passion; there are no sentimental reflections, no philosophy or politics, no standards of virtue, and none of those exaggerated descriptions found in all the librettos. The duration is limited so as not to make others tired or lose their interest. The plot is simple, not romanticized; a few verses are enough to inform the spectators about the evolution of the action which is never complicated, reduced to the dimensions of the Greek tragedy, therefore having the unique advantage of arousing terror and compassion in the same way as the declaimed tragedy. [...] Music has no other function than to express what results from words, because it is ridiculous to extend for example "I love you" with a hundred notes when nature has restricted it to three (I think a note can never have the value of several syllables)."⁷

Gluck's reforming creations intertwine truth, naturalness, sincerity, in a simple and expressive melodic line, as he himself confesses: "Imitation of nature is the recognized goal to which all artists must aspire. That's what I tried to do."⁸

⁶ „Toujours simple et naturelle, autant qu'il m'est possible, ma musique ne tend qu'à la plus grande expression et au renforcement de la declamation de la poésie. C'est la raison pour laquelle je n'emploie point les trilles, les passages ni les cadences que prodiguent les Italiens.”

⁷ H. Hammelmann, M., Rose, M. 1969. „New light on Calzabigi and Gluck”. In *The Musical Times*, p. 2.

⁸ „L'imitation de la nature est le but reconnu qu'ils doivent tous se proposer. C'est celui auquel je tâche d'atteindre.”, (Lettre de M. le Chevalier Gluck à l'auteur du *Mercure de France*) G.M. Leblond, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la révolution opérée dans la musique par M. le Chevalier Gluck*, Paris, 1782, p. 9.

4. The role Euridice of the opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*

The musical-dramaturgical characterization of the role of Euridice reveals the symbiotic connection between text and music in the unfolding of the dramatic action, springing essentially from love. Conceived according to a classical configuration, it imposes on the interpretive art strict rules of vocal and stylistic nature, accorded to the idealized principles of the 18th century.

Consulting the vocal singing treatises of the time, we notice that the most important qualities of the sung voice were naturalness and suppleness, in aspiration for beautiful singing.

Although the term *Belcanto* (beautiful singing) has received many interpretations over time, often associated with the castrated era, a certain virtuoso style of singing or certain composers and their style of composition, its significance is found in the method of singing propagated by the great Schools of Italian canto since the 17th century, considered the ideal weapon in the singer's struggle with vocal imperfection. Since its definition has been a constant concern among specialists in the field, we want to highlight that of James Stark, considering it the most appropriate for the given context: "Bel canto is a concept that encompasses two separate issues, but which are correlated. First of all, bel canto is an extremely refined method of using the sung voice, a method in which the source of voice emission, the vocal apparatus and the respiratory system interact to create *chiaroscuro*, *appoggio* and register equalization effects, a better malleability of the tone. and intensity and a pleasant vibrato. Careful use of the sung voice includes various forms of vocal training, legato, portamento, glottis joints, crescendo, decrescendo, *messa di voce*, *mezza voce*, ornaments and trills and tempo rubato. Secondly, bel canto refers to any style of music that involves this kind of singing, expressive and tasteful."⁹

If until recently a singer was allowed to "change the pitch of his voice and highlight all the means of pronunciation, doubling more [certain sounds] or barely pronouncing [others], depending on the type and degree of passions that animate him" or to take advantage of "many inequalities in voice and gestures that make the action strong, [we] understand by inequality the contrast"¹⁰, the new classical trends aspired to an imperceptible passage for the ear of the two registers: the head voice and the chest voice, their fusion becoming a goal of primordial singing. It is obvious that in order to obtain certain vocal effects, it is necessary to juggle the characters of each register, but it is essential to avoid the ruptures that are against the first objective of the classical style, that of beautiful singing (*belcanto*).

The famous pedagogue, Giovanni Battista Mancini in his treaty *Pensieri e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato*, published in 1776, describes the quality of the ideal voice with the term *chiaroscuro*¹¹, namely, each note sung must have a light tone as well as a dark color, in a complex texture of vocal resonance. In accordance with this principle, we find that vocal emission was expected in the naturalness of sounds, without the use of force¹². His predecessor, Pier Francesco Tosi states in his collection, *Opinioni de cantori antichi e moderni*, 1723 that the voice had to have a certain ease to sound "clean and bright". Therefore, from a technical

⁹ Stark, J. *Bel canto: A History of Vocal pedagogy*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2008, p. 189.

¹⁰ Maligny, B. *Théorie de l'art du comédien ou manuel théâtral*, Paris, 1826, p. 49, apud. James Stark, *Bel canto: a history of vocal pedagogy*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1999, p. 184.

¹¹ "Chiaroscuro, which literally means the bright/dark tone, and which designates that basic timbre of the singing voice in which laryngeal source and the resonating system appear to interact in such a way as to present a spectrum of harmonics perceived by the conditioned listener as the balanced vocal quality to be desired - the quality the singer call *resonant*.". Miller, R. *Quality in the Singing Voice, in Transcripts of the Fourteenth Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice*, New York, The Voice Foundation, 1986, p. 135. Apud James Stark, op. cit., pp. 33-34.

¹² "...che lo sforzare la voce è sempre uno dei maggiori errori, che possa commettere un cantante." Mancini, G. B. *Pensieri e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato*, Viena 1774, p. 86.

point of view, the interpretation is required to be conditioned by the intonation of the sounds in a light-dark way, without going beyond the accuracy of the sounds.

The vocal sentences are required to be rendered in a supple, easy way, according to the dramatic arc, led permanently *sul fiato* - on breathing - and *appoggiato* - sustained -. The vocal intensity evolves in accordance with the text, the aesthetic effect of the high pitch being followed not in the intensity with which they are emitted but in the sense for tension, depending on the nuance of the feeling that is required to be expressed. In terms of strength, the well-known aphorism "it's good to sing from the interest of the voice, not from its capital" fits exactly the conditions of the classical style.

The vocal melody of the role, although purified by the ornamental load in favor of poetic expression, it carries qualities specific to the Baroque style such as apoggiatura, trill and messa di voce. For a stylistically accurate rendering, the voice assumes the role of an instrument of content expression, plausible only through an awareness of the expression of emotion. Thus, the vocal technique it is in a synergistic relationship with thinking, the vocal ornaments finding their way only in the service of the expression of words, harnessed by the sonic beauty.

The interpretation of the role of Euridice feels called to be framed in the "buon gusto" style, but precisely this rigorous framework numbs the extravagant beginnings of the baroque style, leaving room for vocal polychromes as a valorization of the expression of emotions. The stylistic interpretation, related to a dignity towards the character, supports the truth that the philosopher Diderot formulated: "In life, as on stage, the one who shows more than he feels, instead of moving, makes the world laugh."

If until recently the performers possessed a whole package of acting "faces" that they used to suit the appropriate states when they suited certain situations, with great use in extremities, the nature of the gluckian pages only decorset the stage rigidity and sheds the most clear light on the nature of the character through play, interpreted in the most natural way possible. Thus, the internalization in the process of transformation in the soul matter of the depicted character creates a double tension towards order and spontaneity.

The importance of the outfit represented by the body position, the inclination of the face, the way of moving the head and hands is assumed according to the feeling that is required to be expressed, putting it in the clearest light through a sincere and chiseled attitude, without affectation.

A homogeneous song, clarity and firm diction, supported by a chiaroscuro emission, dressed in the robe of dramatic sincerity, will not let the distortions that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought to the music of this period to intervene in the art of plausible interpretation.

Along with the Alceste and Elena, Euridice represents a role of an unusual beauty, in which the vocal discourse invites the performer to a superior artistic knowledge, dictated by the dramatic frankness.

5. Conclusions

The opera in the middle of the 18th century underwent substantial changes. Determined to move away from her baroque relative, the dramatic genre asserts itself in the connection between text and music, in the poetic message of the libretto and its translation through the musical effect.

Christoph Willibald Gluck, recognized in the history of music as an illustrious figure in the world of opera, is both the personality and the composer who saves the dignity of the opera through the triumph of dramatic expression. Located on the bridge between baroque and

classicism, Gluck brings a new perspective to the operatic genre starting with the first reforming opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, dissolving the drama in the content of music on the principle of unity of action and stage cohesion.

The phenomenon related to the stylistic-expressive valences of Euridice's role in the opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*, reveals certain meaningful effects that are expected from the close connection between poetic and musical discourse in the development of the dramatic action, in which the character of role is being brought to light.

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