

The Choir in the Romanian Opera

Consuela Radu-Țaga

”George Enescu” National University of Arts in Iași, Romania
Second Department (blowing instruments, percussion, and canto)
taga_consuela@yahoo.com

Abstract: The role and the purpose of the collective character in the Romanian opera encompasses very broad and diverse directions and layers of research. The investigation imposed the structuring of the Romanian opera according to the source of inspiration and to the themes. The paper bring to attention the functions of the choir in the opera, pointing out the melody and the diversity of the multi-vocal proportions, its expressiveness and image complexity. The individual portrait of the collective character is a forceful tool in the dramaturgical epic, a musical instrument, both poetic and plastic.

Keywords: choral ensemble, collective character, Romanian Opera, themes.

1 The beginnings of the Romanian lyrical drama

The contact between Terra Romana and the lyrical performance was done by means of foreign bands. The first indigenous lyrical and dramatic forms were crystallised by the end of the 18th century, through joint patriotic wishful thinking. The pastoral was the first performance in Romanian with literary materials accompanied by musical creations. The vaudeville genre met the needs of the Romanian drama and became the first ever form of expressing our Romanian classical music. The sung parts in a prose comedy were called couplets, and the final parts were performed in choir.

In the second half of the 19th century, the point of interest moved from vaudevilles to operettas. The birth certificate of the Romanian operetta was signed by Ciprian Porumbescu, with ”*New Moon*” [”Crai Nou”] and the use of the Viennese model did not exclude the elements of folklore.

The first professional band called *The Romanian Lyrical Society* was launched by George Stephănescu, canto professor and conductor. The process of creating the National school started with Eduard Caudella, who signs the first ever musical theatres. Along his operettas, the composer launched the popular ethos in the choral scenes, and the choral ensemble was used in different ways: women’s choir, men’s choir, mixed choir. The 20th century debuted with his opera called ”*Petru Rareș*” and continued with diverse genres in the lyrical drama, the utmost moment being represented by the lyrical tragedy ”*Oedip*” composed by George Enescu.

2 The Historical Opera

The first Romanian opera launched the historical theme, where the choral sounds support the epic-dramatic evolution; the peasants (people) and the noblemen

(bourgeoisie) were two types of characters in conflict. The historical opera proposed choral formulas with different expressions. The lyrical character was not avoided, which brought to light the necessary contrast for the dramatic evolution of the plot. The heroic accents were elaborated in an universal language, in which popular melodiousness adheres to the Romantic opera and some chorus scenes remind us of mass singing. The countryside and city folk melody were assimilated organically, the Romanian perfume being distinguishable in works of the type *grand opéra*, with huge amounts of performers. .

The historical past marked the debut of Gheorghe Dumitrescu's opera, accomplished by means of the popular drama "The Terrible Prince John" ["Ion-vodă cel Cumplit"]. Portraying the prince Ștefan cel Mare, Dumitrescu turned to two popular songs known since feudal times: "Come on, Brothers" ["Hai, Frați"] and "Stephen great Lord" ["Ștefan Domn cel Mare"]. Sung by the mixed chorus in the 4th tableau, as a call to battle, the march "Come on, Brothers" is reprised in men formula (Moldavians and Cassacks) and transformed in a praise song in the 5th tableau [1]. The ternary form affirms the vocal unison which develops up the melody and is completed harmonically at the end of the musical phrase. The marching execution does not exclude *legato*, as shown by the passages who renounce at the unison.

Using mostly the working class song on the basis of traditional language, the luminous aspect of the heroes, the specific Romanian atmosphere, the events that took place during the fascist war, the communist battle were illustrated. Strong interventions of men's choruses along with the delicate tone of the women's chorus, songs of the outlaws, labour marches, choral ensemble in a post-verdian manner, byzantine music, neobyzantine intonations were affirmed by Romanian opera.

3 The Mythological Opera

Dimitrie Cuclin was the first Romanian composer who developed the theatre of Aeschillus in the tragic play "Agamemnon", following the footsteps of the abstract and universalist direction. It was followed by George Enescu's "Oedipe", this being one of the crucial moments in the evolution of lyrical genre in Romania. The myth of Prometheus marked the debut of Doru Popovici, whose musical discourse organised after the serial technique required the presence of the choral ensemble, bearing short interventions.

The Biblical myth of Iona was developed by Anatol Vieru during the years of creational maturity. His modal world stems from mathematical calculations, in which not very wide melodic patterns are present. The timbral approach facilitates a synthesis between singing and speaking, and the secondary role of the chorus brings away colour through some characters as fishes, stomach walls or fishermen.

Aurel Stroe also approached the opera genre since youth times. Investigating the philosophical and mathematical field, Aurel Stroe brought to life the morphogenetic concept. The wise old men from Argos pass from speaking to singing in "Orestia I – Agamemnon", whereas in "Orestia II Choefores" are developed by a feminine group, and the "Eumenides" mix three feminine voices with three masculine voices.

The myth intermingled with reality in "Orpheus – The Thracian Prince" ["Orfeu – Prințul Trac"] by Gheorghe Dumitrescu, an Apollonian hymn with imposing choral

scenes. The traditional pattern was maintained by Dumitrescu's epopee; his collective characters have offered leitmotifs and climactic moments have been marked by pages of choral harmony.

The feeling of redemption was emphasised by Doru Popovici in the opera *"The Prostitute Mary Magdalene"* ["Prostituata Maria Magdalena"]. The solemnity of the mixed choir and the male choir were affirmed in a modal language, with an harmonico-polyphonic technique, encompassing folkloric elements, and following Enescu's pattern. Quasi musical developments and insertions of antique sing-songs type are designed for the choral group in *"Oreste-Oedip"* by Cornel Țăranu.

3.1 The participation of the Choral Ensemble in "Oedipe" by George Enescu

The atmosphere of feast of Laios' palace in act one debuts with the three praises (Theban women, warriors and shepherds) followed by the gift giving. The countrapuntal line of chorus *"Divine Child, Royal Child"* ["Enfant divin, royal enfant"] concludes a certain stage of the ceremony. A new choral segment is added, Theban women, which initiates an antiphonic singing with the whole choir. The pious atmosphere continues with surmoning the spirits. At the end of the first act the disconnected cues of the chorus complete the dialogue between Laios and Tiresias; the whole crowd weeps over the catastrophe brought over to the royal family.

The three-stages division is also presents in the second act. The chorus appears in the Corinthian and the festive moment of the Coronation. The two appearances are contrasting: invisible choir and choir on the stage. The gallant procession of the Corinthian part highlights the feminine timbre, to which tenors in treble are added. Once Phorbias enters the scene, the chorus gives up to the articulation of the text and chromatic elements color the melodic demarche.

The *solo* individualities detached from the choral ensemble announce the saving of the fortress and the presence of a new king. Two choral structures, the small and the big chorus are engaged in a counterpoint which suggests the crowd's effusiveness. By superimposing the two choruses we have 16 resulting voices, the unison intersecting itself with cut-and tuning [2]. The ceremony of placing the crown on the king's head introduces the soft sonority of the women's chorus. The melody *Evohé* with a winding route of the big tierce is specific to the Theban virgins; Jocasta appears, accompanied by the children's choir with the motif *Hyménée*. The closing of the coronation tableau reiterates the theme of glorification, accentuating the festive character of the celebration, by reuniting three choruses.

The crux of the entire opera is act three, which maintains the choral ensemble permanently on the stage. The people overwhelmed by grief see to the tomb their dead kin. The collective mourning appeals to choral destratifying, on the background of a polyvalent language. Vigorous, thrown overboard like swords, precipitated or whispered, the people's rebuffs accompany each step of the mystery debunking. *"Oh! Palace of Laios"* ["O! palais de Laios"] is a choral fragment which closes the act and prepares the epilogue.

Three choral formulations on equally voices appear in the final act. The Athenian old men's ceremony is brought forward, Creon's Thebands bring a contrasting element

submissive to the idea of conflict, whilst Eumenides' seldom calls, favouring and good-doing deities, are present in order to embellish the clear tableau of the fortress of Athens.

4 Legends, Ballads and Popular Heroes

Popular literature passed through beautiful changes, the ideatic substrates being noted upon with finesse and refinement. Heroes pertaining to national mythology were brought on the stage. Intersecting the line of the historical drama the Romanian composers wrote musical-dramatic legends, in which the choral ensemble was active. The personal interpretation of the myth of creation with the price of human sacrifice is to be also found in Gheorghe Dumitrescu's work. The ballad-like tone deconspired a modal world in which choral mastery submitted to the sobriety of the ancient theatre. A essential Romanian ballad was exploited by Corneliu Dan Georgescu, a theorist of sonant archetypes, in the opera-ballet "*Mioritic Model*".

Sigismund Toduță includes the essence of the Romanian mythical universe in the opera "*The Master Builder Manole*" ["*Meșterul Manole*"]. The choral ensemble is widely used in different forms: the male chorus is representative for the nine stonemasons, the mixed chorus expresses the weeping and actively participates to the climactic episodes of act three, and the women's chorus with byzantine sonorities has symbolical function in the beginning and ending acts. Determined or undetermined sounds, *parlato*, *mormorato*, *glissando*, alphorn sounds, chanting or prayer are inserted in the constructions of the masons' choir [3]. The moment of walling Mira appeals to the mixed choral ensemble with sentences penetrated by unimaginable grief, and also by philosophical meanings. The authentic atmosphere of the musical discourse is projected in a modal world, with polyphonic style accompanied by elements of folklore and psaltic music. The Romanian national composer, George Enescu, a minstrel of the land, became a legend through Doru Popovici's opera "*Meeting with George Enescu*" ["*Întâlnire cu George Enescu*"], where the sweet sounds of the chorus affirm this idea that music is an art of divine inspiration.

5 The Musical and Dramatical Array of Literature

The operas following this pattern maintained the realistic character of the narrative. The musicality of this works is of folkloric origin, the citations and the personal invention being the two ways of expressing oneself. The choral descriptive scenes, rhapsody-like dances and singing outlines the entourage of the main characters. Lives, riots and anxieties of the peasants were brought up-front; the actions of the positive collective hero lead to rising the choral background in a wide manner. The creative spirit was glorified in romantic works, expressed through a remarkable symphonism. Replacing the overture, Sabin Drăgoi introduces in "*The Plague*" ["*Năpasta*"] a rhapsodic sequence in the background of cobza and bones. The kinetic character of the atmosphere of feast creates a programmatic ambience specific to the traditional pattern, the dancing melos infiltrating in to a free rondo form. The rhythmic configuration of the alternative measures illustrates the characteristics of the system

giusto-syllabic. The homophonous writing of the mixed chorus is sprinkled with thematic taking-over that affirm different vocal coupling. The light execution, the accentuation of the weakened beats, the mobility of dynamics and the prompt enunciation of the text are elements which impose the rustic freshness [4].

Getting farther from traditional form, the pantomime "*The engagement*" ["Logodna"] of Nicolae Brânduș reunites three choral-instrumental bands, and shows suggestive imagery through resorts specifically to the dodecaphonic serialism.

The hilarious atmosphere paved the way for the tragicomedy of Anatol Vieru in "*Beggars' Feast*" ["Praznicul calicilor"]; the sounds of the vocal group consisting of 5 singers (the court's employees) were integrated to the chamber spirit. By placing the chorus on backstage, Sergiu Sarchizov constructed a musical background in "*Three generations*" ["Trei generații"]. In an environment lacking drama, the choral interventions from "*To Gipsies*" ["La Țigănci"] by Nicolae Brânduș supported the emotional world of the main character. In chamber opera "*Giordano Bruno*" Doru Popovici uses the *à cappella* chorus, which opens and closes the composition. In the recent comic work "*A lost letter*" ["O scrisoare pierdută"], Dan Dediu mixed melodies and motifs from everywhere in a postmodern music carnival.

The adaptation of the play by Bertholt Brecht, "*Galileo Galilei*", was musically arranged by Corneliu Cezar; in a tono-modal system, the piece was created on the basis of nine sounds, a theme which is also reiterated in canon by the men chorus. The Castilian expressive theatre offered to Doru Popovici the subject of the Spanish fighter for freedom; the choral segments of "*Mariana Pineda*", an expressionist Viennese opera, are performed by the female chorus which portrays the nuns.

The only Romanian opera inspired by the Shakespearian "*Hamlet*" was created by Pascal Bentoiu. The content of the overture are renewed by the choral prelude *à cappella*, an aerated sonority with thematic disentanglements by heterophonical substance performed on vocalizes [5]. The cues on sliding tunes remind of antique choir and the aggregation through the division of choral partitions helps to enhance the dramatic impulse. Scene 6 places the chorus on backstage; the Danish rioter's mob approaches, this episode bearing loud sounds. The choir's mourning sing-song accompanies the solo of Ophelia. At the end of the opera a madrigal arises, as a symbol of the man's aspiration to the highest heavens.

The writings of Vladimir Soloviev determined Aurel Stroe to compose the mystery-comedy "*The World Council*" ["Das Weltkonzil"] in which the presence of the council and peoples countours increases the dramatic plot. With the work "*The last few days, the last few hours*" ["Ultimele zile, ultimele ore"] Anatol Vieru promoted the idea of the hourglass-opera; the transcendental dimensions of tragic expression are obtained through the allusions to Mozart's *Requiem*. The love story in Dan Dediu's "*Eva*" included the episode of the male chorus ceremony. The choral ensemble was also exploited by Nicolae Brânduș in the opera buffa called "*Tarr & Fether*".

6 The Radiophonic Opera

The Romanian radiophonic opera appeared in the second half of the last century. Pascal Bentoiu was the first who blazed this way with "*The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*"

[”Jerfirea Ifigeniei”]. Following the path opened by Euripides, the chorus (formed of women voices) adapted the vibrations of the word from chanting recitative to melodic articulations.

From the same year we have the work of Liviu Glodeanu – ”Zamolxe”. Returning to the ancient mysteries world, the composer created an abstract reality, the accent being on interior action. In ”Zamolxe” the chorus appears in two configurations: the priestesses and the people represented by the mixed chorus. Peripheral character, with passive emergences in outside tableaux, the priestess accompany the Magus while performing rituals, with a texture marked out by the vocal parameter. The *legato* singing, on softness and rotundity is specific to this group, in the parts where the text is articulated, and also on vocalize. Unlike the priestesses, the people is a central character, bearing the most extended score. It results a large range of expressiveness with mixes the sung sounds with those spoken. The upper dynamics implies a certain roughness necessary for the moment of blinding and killing of Zamolxis [6].

In the fresque-opera ”Steps of the History” [”Trepte ale istoriei”] Mihai Moldovan balances between the old balladesque chant and the imminent events; to this conflict correspond two contrasting sonorous plans: the *concertino* group and the big ensemble.

7 Conclusions

Way of expressing consequent to *opera seria*, from which develop later the lyrical tragedy and historical opera, the chorus is a fundamental category in musical and dramatic text of the Romanian opera. Its verbal contribution can bring about a lyrical or epical connotation, or can bear dramatic function.

The chorus can evolve from positive to negative character, right balancing the whole ideologic and emotional essence. The choral formulations can accompany solo parts, pointing out some musical articulations and special sound effects can be obtained backstage, onstage or in front of the curtain.

From tided numbers to brief responses, with wide sonorities accompanied by the whole orchestra, or fine pastels intoned *à cappella*, the choral part brings contrast and imposes dynamism or synthesizes the musical and dramatic progress. The tracing of the collective character in the opera genre is the result of teamwork, following the path choristers, masterchorus, stage manager, scene painter and conductor.

References

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