

The Opera Libretto – Adaptation of A Canonical Literary Text, The Opera *O Noapte furtunoasă* by Paul Constantinescu

Cristi AVRAM •

Abstract: The opera libretto, born very often through the adaptation of large texts, is the foundation of an opera composition. What interests us is how it can independently support musically a story, while also preserving its quality as a literary text. On the other hand, we raise the question whether the libretto should work in the absence of the integrative, complementary background, which defines, in fact, the genre of opera - music. The first part of the study focuses on the opera libretto and the adaptation of the literary text, while the second part focuses more on Romanian music and, in particular, on the libretto of the opera *O noapte furtunoasă* by Paul Constantinescu.

Keywords: libretto, adaptation, compromise, Romanian music, I. L. Caragiale

I

The patrimony of opera works, although it consists of a much smaller number of creations than the theatrical-dramatic ones and is enriched quite a bit, includes a number of compositions that have fascinated the general public over many centuries, the first specific works appearing, according to some exegetes, around 1600¹. The more impressive we are presented with the opera performance and the world that the curtain devours from the halls destined for this genre, the more impressive it is what it proposes, a universally valid and easy to receive story. Often called conservative and elitist, the lyric-music genre is joined by the attribute of syncretic, summing up, perhaps more than the dramatic genre, arts that coexist harmoniously beyond the fourth wall of the stage: "a genre of syncretic art, in which vocal music, instrumental, orchestral, movement, gesture, mime, dance, decoration and other elements specific

• Theater and opera director, Assistant professor PhD at UNAGE Iași, Faculty of Theater - Directing and assistant director at the Romanian National Opera House Iași.

¹ "The origins of the genre can be found around the year 1600, in Florence, when Jacopo Peri composed the opera *Euridice*, on the occasion of the marriage of Marie de' Medici with Henry IV." Mircea Muthu, *Expresii ale sacrului în libretul operi Otello de Giuseppe Verdi*, teză de doctorat, Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai, Facultatea de Litere, Cluj-Napoca, 2017, p. 40.

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to the stage show merge into a unitary whole, in order to develop and reveal a subject, and implicitly a dramatic action"².

What constitutes the subject of the present study is, in fact, the literary skeleton of an opera composition, represented by the libretto, by the sung text and placed by the composer and librettist on the musical notes, because not only the sonorities awaken impulses and emotions, but also the words, the edifying words that fulfill the melodic harmonies. At the same time, we aim to understand the mechanism of the adaptation process of a literary text for its transformation into an opera libretto. If we go back in time to the first forms of theater, to the ancient, ritualistic origins, we notice that this type of sacramental or secular manifestations were defined by the osmosis between words and sonorities, between the rhythmicity and cadences of the word that clothed musical forms, often having instrumental accompaniment. Thus, these two arts were in ancient times a unitary whole, even if they were reborn in our era at different intervals and are separated today as two different spectacular species.

Over time, disagreements arose between the composer and the author regarding the primacy and greater significance of the music, on the one hand, and the sung text, on the other. For example, Claudio Monteverdi argued in the 17th century that words give rise to music and, therefore, are not subject to harmonies. Perhaps that is why, out of the need to give primacy to the logos, recitatives unaccompanied by the orchestra appeared in the era, later accompanied by the harpsichord and/or orchestra. The support of the musical drama, easily reduced to its essence from the point of view of the unfolding of the action in the opera composition, rests on the word that gives it unity, giving the work an intelligible narrative thread. Thus, the recitative is imposed not only as a necessity to clarify the audience about the unfolding of the action, but it offers an extra breath to the audience accustomed to the dramatic performance, intended to make its reception easier. At the opposite pole, the composers associated with bel canto bring to light the beauty, suppleness, and subtleties of the human voice, focusing more on the sonority and melodiousness than on the word that serves as a support for the nibbles of agile voices.

Worthy of consideration is also the aspect related to the point of interest of the composers and librettists, who in the first stage of the evolution of the genre were close to mythological subjects and, with the succession of literary currents, interested

² Dumitru Bughici, *Dicționar de forme și genuri muzicale*, Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, București, 1974, p. 207.

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in the drama of the simple man, in stories from the society of the time, often making leaps to the reference dramaturgy of past eras. Literature did not always set the tone for innovations from which echoes resonated in the other arts as well. Richard Wagner is the composer who proposes a number of innovations, both in terms of the opera composition, the libretto, therefore the literary text, and the ways of performing the show. Wagner even dares to propose architectural solutions for theaters, he is interested in lighting and the magic of the stage, being one of the first true opera directors, in the modern sense of the term. Thus, the total work of art does not give primacy to any constituent element of the performance, but considers them significant only in tandem, for only the harmony of the parts gives birth to the whole: "The poet and the musician are like two pilgrims who set out from a parting point in order to from here on let each step straight ahead, without respite, in an opposite direction. At the antipode they meet again; each crossed half the planet. They now question each other and each communicates to the other what he has seen and found. The poet tells about the plains, hills, valleys, plains, people and animals that he encountered in his distant wanderings on land. The musician has traversed the seas and tells of the wonders of the ocean in which he often came near drowning, whose depths and monstrous apparitions gave him a voluptuous shudder. Stimulated by their mutual accounts, and irrevocably determined to know also the other side of what they themselves had seen, in order to convert into real experience the impression obtained by representation and imagination, the two parted again that each might -complete its journey around the earth. They finally meet again at the first starting point; floating, the poet also crossed the seas, while, in turn, the musician measured the land with his steps. So, they are no longer separated, for both know the earth; what before - in foreboding dreams - they had imagined to have one aspect or another, now became known to them in reality. They are now one being, for each knows and feels what the other knows and feels. The poet became a musician, and the musician a poet; now they both represent a perfect man of art"³.

In the continuation of the discourse on libretto and music, Richard Wagner does not establish a disagreement, or the primacy of one of them, because the conceptual dislocation is an inappropriate one. When the entire work is born under the care of the same author, the creative process works much better, but, more often at least two people collaborate when a composition appears. Without doubt, in a team consisting of a librettist and a composer the compromise is discussed, so how much

³ Richard Wagner, *Opera și drama*, Editura muzicală, București, 1983, p. 237.

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the creators can give up fragments of their imagination. Adjustments are inevitable, music has its demands, and the coherence of the phrase cannot be truncated or interrupted by musical structures. Letiția Goia noted in her article *Adaptation of literature to the musical environment*: the opera libretto that "although the union between words and music is conflicting, the existence of the opera is based on it. As fixed forms emerge in music, the encoding of music challenges that of text. The position of the vowels, the prosodic rhythm, all these details must be calculated according to the music that will accompany the lyrics. A good libretto is one that has simple language, limited vocabulary to easily recognizable keywords. The text no longer has the same density, the same richness of expression, because it is spoken or sung with or without musical support. Thus, the simpler the language, the richer the perceived meaning: this type of writing is the opposite of writing a literary text."⁴

The question arises, however, whether the opera libretto can be separated from its eternal companion; does it have intrinsic value independent of the music? Is the libretto, this miniature dramatic text, a form of literature, or does it merely serve the composition, without separately sensitizing? As we noted in Richard Wagner's remark, the two constituent elements of the opera are interdependent and impossible to separate. William Germano in his study *Reading at the Opera*⁵ mentioned the fact that the opera, in the absence of the text, would be just a long string of vocalizations, because only recognizable language can touch the human soul. The remark appears to be unbalanced, although partly it can be supported. In the absence of the voice and the spoken words, the voice in whose service the sonority and melodiousness of some musical passages are left, the opera music seems dull to us, it resembles an incomplete acoustic background. This is partly true, because the meaning of the music behind the voice is to express through other means, with another language, what words cannot say. What's more, the music behind the words doesn't just create an atmospheric or technical substrate, tonality and melodic line, but provides the subtext, the intentions, the state of the characters found in different contexts. From the point of view of reception, the words only sometimes form a recognizable context, because, as we well know, the operas are most frequently sung in the original language, foreign to the non-

⁴ Letiția Goia, *Adaptarea literaturii la mediul muzical: libretul de operă* în „Studii de știință și cultură”, vol. XIV, Nr. 3, septembrie 2018, Universitatea de Vest „Vasile Goldiș” Arad, p. 152.

⁵ William Germano, "Reading at the Opera", in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Summer 2010, Vol. 79 Issue 3, 2010, p. 882.

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speaking audience of the respective language. Therefore, the reception is not directly related to that of the word, translated into the theater and, therefore, it is mediated.

Just as opera music seems incomplete at an audition without the voices of the performers, so too some librettos, isolated from the integrative, complementary arrangement, have the shortcoming of being childish, of a simplicity that does not bring them closer to dramatic literary texts. Read and received outside of the music, they remain laconic attempts, in which both the subject and the psychological development of the characters come across as summaries of a much more complex work. Mutually supporting each other, the libretto and the opera music engage a functional mechanism only in its entirety.

"Gilles Tromp, on the other hand, in his study *Le texte d'opéra*, sees the libretto as a paraliterary genre: like the film script, the libretto is a text that exists only in relation to another means of expression that subjects it to the demands its. Thus, it cannot be a form of artistic expression by itself: it should not be judged by its intrinsic quality, but by the quality of its association with its partner. Corinne Desportes is of the same opinion, in an article published in 2006, where she brings up the involvement of contemporary writers in the writing of opera librettos and mentions that «disorientation, the change of habit imposed by the dimension of gathering and collective creation necessary for the conception of an opera; [...] entering into a relationship with other artists to create a common work of art.»⁶

However, the opera libretto has, as I mentioned before, its literary value, either original or inspired by novels, epics, poems, legends or plays. In the following, I will focus on the adaptation process and not on the analysis of the original librettos, in order to introduce the second part of this study, applied to the spoken text of the Romanian composition *O noapte furtunosă* which is based on the dramatic work of the same name by Ion Luca Caragiale. The process of adaptation, debated by a number of analysts and critics, among whom we mention here Linda Hutcheon - *A Theory of Adaptation* and Julia Sanders - *Adaptation and Appropriation*, involves the reinterpretation of an original work, an action that very often involves a change of the structure, of the ways of expression, a transition from one genre or literary species to another. Adaptation is sometimes a much more complex phenomenon, as "[Transposition] can also mean a shift in ontology from the real to the fictional, from a historical account or biography to a fictionalized narrative or drama".

⁶ Mircea Muthu, *Expresii ale sacrului în libretul operei Otello de Giuseppe Verdi*, op. cit., pp. 49-50.

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In the process of adaptation, in addition to translating the text from a generally larger piece of writing into a smaller one, the music summarizes a number of fragments that, in other circumstances, the author would have expressed through other literary or theatrical signs. In some passages, the music can include both the description of a space, it can make a leap in time, place and atmosphere, or it can summarize the action and emotions of the characters, essentializing, for example, whole pages of a novel to just a few measures of the bar. Through this, it is proven once again that the inseparable connection between words and music makes the adaptation work in the case of the opera otherwise than through a complementarity of them. Where words are superfluous, music sends the receiver beyond them, perfecting them. "Amin Maalouf, French-speaking Lebanese novelist, explains that <<in writing a libretto, one must always keep the place of the music, its space, not only between different passages, but also in the heart of each passage, of each phrase. [...] you have to put yourself in an extremely special state of mind, which is nothing like the ones I experience when I write other types of texts>>, and Pascal Quignard, writer contemporary French, admits that, when writing opera librettos, he looks for «the succession of silences to be as unpredictable as possible, to strengthen the contrasts and the effect of abandonment that they produce. The collected text, compressed, bears henceforth, engraved, the place of music.»⁷.

Of course, it is debatable how much the original work suffers in the various stages through which a complex work is revealed by some details. Silhouetting the characters, diminishing the action and reducing the events is inevitable. Even the language is changing. One resorts to simplifying the words, opting for the most easily perceptible variants and, above all, fitting into the musical measures, in interdependence with the phrasing of the performers. As Andrew Blake notes, "composing, transposing into dramatic form or re-transposing into dramatic form appropriate to the stage of the opera, and what might be called vocalization - the preparation of the text for singing"⁸ is the only way to make librettos of opera. The impression that an original text loses its robustness is not unfounded, but, going beyond this first level of reception, one deduces the meanings within the music that encompass the apparently lost meanings of the text. Furthermore, being a deeply

⁷ Apud Letiția Goia, *Adaptarea literaturii la mediul muzical: libretul de operă* in "Studii de știință și cultură", *op. cit.*, p. 153.

⁸ Andrew Blake, 'Wort oder Ton'? *Reading the Libretto in Contemporary Opera*, in "Contemporary Music Review", Vol. 29, No. 2, April 2010, p. 55.

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symbolic and assumedly conventional art, rather than the dramatic one we sometimes associate with an overlap with real life, opera has the strength to support supple, diluted librettos.

II

Famous opera composers approached the great texts of literature from which they started creating masterpieces of the genre. Both medieval and ancient legends, which inspired Richard Wagner - *The Ring of the Nibelungs*, *Walkyria*, etc., Luigi Cherubini - *Medeea*, George Enescu - *Oedipe*, the classic French comedies - W.A. Mozart - *The Marriage of Figaro*, G. Rossini - *The Barber of Seville*, or the great Shakespearean tragedies, Giuseppe Verdi - *Macbeth*, *Otello*, *Falstaff*, Charles Gounod - *Romeo and Juliet*, Benjamin Britten - *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, were cornerstones in the development of musical opera compositions. And in the Romanian space, librettos are built on valuable creations of universal and/or local literature. The tradition of opera compositions from the Romanian space, much more recent than the date of the debut of the opera genre in Europe, still has some significant works that, unfortunately, rarely find musical theaters in which to be represented. Being stylistically part of modernity and the techniques that define this period, the Romanian compositions can be placed in the category of less popular music, in which sonority and melodicity approach forms that are not imprinted in the audience's auditory memory with great ease.

Grigore Constantinescu mentioned in the work *Four Centuries of Opera* that through *Oedipe* by George Enescu, the cornerstone of modern Romanian opera is laid: "(...) *Oedipe*, who saw the light of the stage in Paris (1936), before starting, decades later, an impressive international career, to be considered, to be considered one of the first masterpieces of opera theater of the era. Not only the destiny of the artist, but the very destiny of the Romanian musical theater bears this unmistakable stamp of a creation that appeared as a sign of the maturity of a creator and of a culture."⁹ In the 20th century, Romanian opera was composed mostly inspired by local literature, folklore and national legends or Romanian history. The adaptation of already classicized texts is more within the reach of the librettist when the source of inspiration is already a dramatic text, because the dialogue is closer to the genre of the opera, related to the theatrical one.

⁹ Grigore Constantinescu, *Patru secole de operă*, Editura Operei Naționale București, București, 2014, p. 425.

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In defining modern Romanian opera, the deeply Romanian subjects, which capture the national atmosphere and specificity, will play an important role. Here we can distinguish at least three different categories: 1.) the work of historical inspiration - *Petru Rareș* by Eduard Caudella, *Stejarul din Borzești* by Theodor Bratu, *Ecaterina Teodороiu* by Emil Lerescu, *Alexandru Lăpușneanu* by Alexandru Zirra, *Heroes from the Ruins* by Nicolae Bretan and 2.) the work inspired by Romanian mythology and folklore – *Năzdrăvăniile lui Păcală* by Sabin Drăgoi, *Decebal* by Gheorghe Dumitrescu, *Traian and Dochia* by Dimitrie Cuclin etc and 3.) the work of religious inspiration, which is based on texts from Romanian literature – *O noapte furtunoasă* by Paul Constantinescu, *O scrisoare pierdută* by Dan Dediu, *Năpasta* and *Ovidiu* by Sabin Drăgoi, *Neamul Șoimăreștilor* by Tudor Jarda, *Domnișoara Cristina* by Doru Popovici, *Zamolxe* by Liviu Glodeanu etc. In order to narrow the horizon of interest on the topic of the study, I will focus on the Romanian opera *O noapte furtunoasă*, which has as its framework the eponymous theater play by Ion Luca Caragiale.

"A true masterpiece, Paul Constantinescu's work reveals a subtle understanding of Caragiale's theater, with fine nuances in the musical interpretation."¹⁰ The action takes place, as in the original text in two acts, connected by an intermezzo that captures, on the one hand, the atmosphere of the entire text and, on the other hand, connects the two acts, without the technical necessity to take a break. Moreover, the composition is small, lasting a maximum of one hour and follows the chronology proposed by Caragiale. In the spirit of modern compositions, Constantinescu's work begins abruptly, with only a few orchestral measures before the first lines of the characters, measures that describe the tension of Jupân Dumitrache retelling the story from Iunion. Moreover, the opening music punctuates as if a moment of respite in the narration of what happened, in the spirit of Caragiale's captions: "following a speech already begun."¹¹ Jumping through the lines of the first scene from the original play, Paul Constantinescu extracts the essentials, outlining the most consistent scene in two characters in the entire opera. The other scenes, as will be seen, are of very medium and small extent, a fact that only offers a fragment of Caragiale's universe. Even if in the libretto, for example, we do not distinguish the deep disgust that Dumitrache has towards Rică, from the alternation of the sung lines with the parlato ones the mood and the frown captured in the original text are coughed up. In support of this psychological and character characterization comes the

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 431.

¹¹ I. L. Caragiale, *Teatru*, Editura Facla, Timișoara, 1983, p. 13.

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precipitated music, in which the values of the notes sung are frequently six-sixths, a fact that emphasizes the heat and anger of the character, capable of wrenching the one who dares to attack his honor as a family member in public.

Paul Constantinescu resorts to musical themes specific to each character, the leitmotifs being well differentiated and introduced both in the ensembles, in the intermezzo and, especially, when the characters enter the scene. The most notable subtleties that outline the characters are left to the music, because the insufficient lines speak very little about the world that Caragiale proposes. Moreover, in all opera compositions, for a more thorough documentation, it is necessary to retrace the path of the librettist and return to the original text.

A new element in the context of the libretto adapted from Caragiale's universe and text, but already a tradition in the history of the lyrical theater, is that the character of Spiridon, an adopted boy in Titircă's house, is performed by a female, mezzo-soprano voice. It is well known that in pre-classicism, classicism and the musical romantic period, young teenagers or characters with uncertain sexuality were performed by female voices that marked the vocal suppleness and youth specific to the age. Like the young Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro* by W.A. Mozart, the role of Spiridon, a character who is everywhere and nowhere, who confuses and untangles things, sometimes maliciously, is given to a mezzo-soprano. In the case of Spiridon, although Constantinescu opts for composing an aria as an exponent of the monologue in scene V, act I, the size of his score is reduced, and the importance given to the character is diminished. In the very next scene, that of the dialogue with Zița, Spiridon is a silent presence, he has no intervention, and the Caragialian humor is eluded. Moreover, many comic passages are lost in some places, due to the shortening of the text, leaving the task of recomposing the savory universe of the original text to the director. What's more, the problem of later confusion, in which Rică mistakenly ends up at Veta and Titircă's house, is not anticipated by the Zița-Spiridon scene.

Spiridon is a clever character, he knows the secrets of the house, the adventure between the Chiriac and his mistress, as well as all the strengths of the people in Jupân Dumitrache's entourage. Moreover, he is actively involved in the dialogue between the two protagonists, inciting their suspicions, urging them to believe that the love between them is strong and still burning, because in the absence of the affair between them, Spiridon would lose his only salvation from the hands of the tyrant. All this is, unfortunately, but naturally, lost in the opera. Chiriac will appear in Veta's eyes by chance, because she does not send him the sewn world through Spiridon.

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And Veta's character suffers from the reduction of the text. The lost state she is in, the drama she lives in secret due to Chiriac's mistrust, the superstitions that do not give her peace, all the signs that are shown to her and drive her crazy are summed up only by a funeral march that anticipates the scene of Veta- Chiriac (scene IX, act I). Thus, Veta's monologue is reduced to a few words: "Well, if the man doesn't want it, he doesn't want it! You can't do it with pure love... It's better that it was like that... why does God give happiness, if he gives it and then takes it away!? Why did I live to end up like this!?"¹² In her case, the contrast between the existential reflection and the oppressive music that portends an imminent end, the mortuary accents of the orchestration and the drama of Veta are of real humor, although the circumstance in which the character finds herself entitles her to experience her suffering in this way. The greatest loss of this scene, condemnable by any lecturer attached to Caragiale's writing, is Chiriac's declaration of love for Veta, singular in *O noapte furtunoasă*: "I wanted to kill myself just now in the courtyard, but I saw you passing the shadow over the window curtain, I wanted to see you once more."¹³ Even the groping, the game of lovers who obviously hide their suffering, who want to die at the end of their unique and unrepeatable love, are greatly reduced in Constantinescu's work. Caragiale's comically flavored scene, however, has as its summary the intermezzo between the acts in which the tumultuous passion and reconciliation of the two lovers is rendered by the passionate orchestration, metaphorically depicting an intimate moment between Veta and Chiriac, the conclusion of the dispute and the consequence of their reconciliation.

The scenes in the second act are also small, even the characters' arias remain short. Thin is the character of Rică, who entered Veta's room to a music reminiscent of the sound of cuckoo clocks, an allusion to the purposes with which this law student enters the rooms of the landlord's wife. Barely running up an improvised staircase, Rică doesn't manage to get far because he is turned off the road by the three men maddened either by jealousy or by the spirit of justice. In the opera, scenes III, IV, V, VI, VII and VIII of Caragiale's play are drastically reduced to fragments of lines. In the pursuit of the intruder, there is no room for dialogue. Spiridon no longer tries to

¹² Paul Constantinescu, *O noapte furtunoasă* – reducere pentru voce și pian, Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor din R.P.R., București, 1958, p. 47.

¹³ I. L. Caragiale, *Teatru, op. cit.*, p. 33.

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save Rică, although I believe that there would have been room in the anatomy of the opera at least for the negotiation of the rescue, as only an adopted boy can do.

Beyond all these remarks, gathered in the lines above, the libretto of the opera *O noapte furtunoasă* fulfills the purpose it has in the structure of the composition. Being a well-known text in the Romanian space, any intervention destructures the resonances that the public expects to hear. For the uninitiated viewer, the confusion is, however, greater. The sequence of events may seem unclear, and therefore any director who proposes to approach such a composition must resort to additional explanations to bring clarifications regarding the unfolding of the action. Caragiale's texts aroused the interest of Romanian composers, being among the important works of the genre. Both Sabin Drăgoi's *Năpasta*, Dan Dediu's *O scrisoare pierdută*, Aurel Stroe's *Un pedagog de școală nouă*, *Groaznica sinucidere din strada Fidelității*, *Două loturi*, *Articolul 214*, *Amici la...Five o'clock* by Leonard Dumitriu, as well as the musical *D'ale canavalului* by Hary Béla give added value to Caragiale's dramaturgy, bringing him not only to the dramatic scenes, but also to the lyrical ones. The adaptation of the original texts does nothing but put valuable texts on the page that lend themselves to the lyrical repertoire as well. Carefully captured through the musical language, the words are enveloped by a melodic background that completes them, refers to the subtext, substituting an unsuccessful acting intention. Thus, if the line is blinded by unfortunate tones or intonations, the well-made musical substrate only gives dimension to a possible interpretation of the text, because the adaptation of a text to become an opera libretto is, in essence, nothing more than a reading of the original, an interpretation of it, a game in which everything is silhouetted by the desire to point out the essential.

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