

THE SPIRIT OF SHAKESPEARE IN THE MOZARTIAN OPERA*

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The generality of men have little regard for gracefulness. Vulgar minds esteem only what they fear. Hence arises the universal passion for military glory, and the partiality for tragedy at the theatre.

Stendhal

The parallel between Shakespeare and Mozart is justified by the great number of their dramatic creations, as well as by their value and diversity of genres. Although none of Mozart's works drew its inspiration directly from Shakespeare, Mozart's admiration for the great playwright is widely known. The two lived under similar historical conditions, though two centuries apart: Shakespeare⁵⁶ lived during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I of England⁵⁷, and Mozart, during those of Maria Theresa⁵⁸ and Joseph II, two periods marked by political stability and cultural and economic growth.

* This paper was presented at the symposium held within the 14^s Edition of the Mozart Festival, Cluj-Napoca, December 2004.

⁵⁶ William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is considered the greatest writer of the English language and one of the greatest playwrights of all times.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth I became Queen of England and Ireland in 1558 and her reign lasted 45 years. Upon her death in 1603, she was succeeded by James I of England, who continued Elizabeth's policies of reconciliation between Catholics, Anglicans and Protestants.

⁵⁸ Maria Theresa was Empress of Austria between 1740 and 1780. 6-year-old Mozart gave his first concert in front of Empress Maria Theresa.

Little is known about Shakespeare's childhood and teenage years, and even the information we have is often confusing and contradictory. His vast creation reveals a writer who was intimately knowledgeable of the ancient literature and dramaturgy. He was a studious reader of Ovid's 15 *Metamorphoses* Books, of Vergil, Horace, Cato, Lucretius, Titus Livius, Caesar, Tacitus, Plautus, Terence, or of the tragic Seneca.⁵⁹

Young Mozart's prodigious musical talent was soon recognized and fostered by his father Leopold, a noted musician in his own right. Thus, ever since his first public appearance in a theatrical performance set to Eberlin's music and held at the Salzburg University in September 1761⁶⁰ (at the age of 5), Mozart's life was an open book. Many aspects regarding the itinerary of his concert tours, or the musical personalities he learned from are well documented, some of the information being taken from his own letters, kept by his father.

Due to the decline of drama in the 18th century, librettists started to look for inspiration in the classics of the genre. Metastasio, one of the greatest librettists of the time, was complaining of the restrictions imposed on him when shaping his opera subjects: „In the first place, I am prohibited from all Greek or Roman subjects, because our chaste nymphs cannot endure those indecent costumes. I am obliged to find recourse to oriental history, in order that the women, who perform the characters of men, may be duly wrapped up from head to foot in Asiatic drapery. All contrasts between vice and virtue are of necessity excluded, because no lady will choose to appear in an odious part.” In his libretti, Metastasio avoided anything that could cause the slightest distress to his spectator: „His pieces never terminate tragically, nor do they ever exhibit the gloomy realities of life”.⁶¹

Thus is delineated a typology of drama, as seen by Hegel, divided on the one hand into the abstractness of the tragic figures of the French and Italians, arising from the imitation of the ancient Greeks and Romans and representing simple embodiments of passions: love, honor, glory, passion, thirst for domination, tyranny, and on the other hand, into the „the appearance of concretely human individuals and characters”. This latter portrayal belongs to the English authors, and especially to Shakespeare.

The philosopher's admiration for the great playwright is revealed by the expression „striking and sublime”, used in the description of Shakespeare's tragic characters: „individual, real, directly living, extremely varied, ... a depth of feeling and gift for invention in images

⁵⁹ Anthony Burgess, *Shakespeare*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2002, pp. 34, 36, 38.

⁶⁰ *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. XII, edited by Stanley Sadie, Macmillan Publishers, London, 1992, p. 681.

⁶¹ Stendhal, *Viețile lui Haydn, Mozart și Metastasio*, Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, București, 1974, p. 229.

and similes produced on the spur of the moment; ... of a rhetoric issuing from the actual feeling and outpouring of the character – take all this into account, this combination of directly present life and inner greatness of soul, and you will scarcely find any other modern dramatist who can be compared with Shakespeare”.⁶²

All these, we would add, are in perfect harmony with the Mozartian spirit, worthy of standing beside the image of the great playwright.

Some confessions made by Shakespeare's great contemporary artists claim that when he was writing, Shakespeare „would never erase a line”.

He wrote with an „overflowing ease” and sometimes „he needed to be stopped”.⁶³ According to his own confessions, Mozart, in his turn, could compose at an amazing speed⁶⁴ (the opera *La clemenza di Tito* was written in one month), using his own piano.⁶⁵

The similarities between Shakespeare's and Mozart's works are multifarious and, sometimes, striking:

1. Historical subjects are preponderant in the first period of their creative lives: *Henry VI, Richard III, King John, Henry IV, Henry V, Julius Caesar*, in Shakespeare, and *Mitridate, Rè di Ponto, Ascanio in Alba, Il sogno di Scipione, Lucio Silla*, in Mozart.

2. Comedies also abound in this period (*The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew, The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in Shakespeare, and *La finta semplice, Bastien und Bastienne, La finta giardiniera, Il Rè pastore*, in Mozart), and so do mythological subjects (*Venus and Adonis, The Rape of Lucrece*, and, respectively, *Apollo et Hyacinthus*).

3. Their creative maturity came with the crystallization of archetypes: *Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* and *Coriolanus*, in Shakespeare, *Idomeneo, Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, in Mozart.

4. The philosophical themes are prevalent during the last period of their creative work: *Winter's Tale, The tempest* in Shakespeare, and *The Magic Flute* in Mozart. Shakespeare is less interested in conflicts than he is in the deployment of the story, no matter how implausible it may be. „To a tragic *catharsis*, he prefers a consolation based on vicissitudes

⁶² Hegel, *Despre artă și poezie*, vol. II, Editura Minerva, București, 1979, p. 327.

⁶³ Cf. Leon Levițchi, *Studiu introductiv*, in: Shakespeare, „Opere complete”, vol. I, Editura Univers, București, 1982, p. 71.

⁶⁴ In his short life of 35 years, 10 months and 9 days, Mozart composed 626 works. Cf. Ovidiu Varga, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*. Editura Muzicală, 1988, 173-234.

⁶⁵ „My room that I'm moving to is being prepared. I'm just off now to hire a keyboard, because I can't live there until that's been delivered especially as I've got to write just now, and there isn't a minute to be lost.” Vienna, August 1, 1781, to his father. Cf. Mozart, *Scrisori*, Editura Muzicală, București, 1968, p. 135.

with a happy ending, while the public almost certainly shared this preference”, wrote Vito Pandolfi.⁶⁶

5. Both of them cover the entire range of dramatic genres: Shakespeare wrote historical dramas and comedies (during his first period of creation), the great tragedies (during the second period of creation) and the philosophical dramas (during the third). Mozart composed a mythological comedy, *singspiels*, operas *buffa* and *seria*, *dramma per musica*, theatre serenades, pastoral serenades, ballet music, *drama giocoso*.

The typology of the characters also enables a comparison between Shakespeare's and Mozart's works.

Don Giovanni, Tirso de Molina's Renaissance hero, appears in Mozart as the demonic knight, the embodiment of beauty disguising the evil. To attain his purpose, Don Giovanni cheats and kills. By ignoring the moral values, he will perish in the fantastic scene imagined by the librettist (Lorenzo da Ponte) in a „Deus ex machina” manner.

„I am very proud, revengeful, and ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in.” These words could well be Don Giovanni's, when they in fact belong to Hamlet, who then adds „What should such fellows as I do, crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves all. Believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery!”

In Mozart's opera, Don Giovanni does not make confessions, except in the lines: „Give up the women! They're my first necessity of life, more than the bread that feeds me, or the air I am breathing!” (act II, scene 1):

La-sciar le don-ne! paz-zo! la-sciar-le don-ne! Sai ch'el-le per me son ne-ces-
sa-rie piu del pan che man-gio, piu del-l'a-ria che spi-ro!

Hamlet, the unhappy prince of Denmark, is confronted with a murder similar to that in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, namely the murder of his father by his brother Claudius, and the latter's marriage to Hamlet's mother. Unlike Aeschylus' hero, Hamlet postpones his immediate vengeance on the King, by resolving to seek stronger evidence of the deeds described by the ghost of Old Hamlet. Therefore he will become a victim of his own indecisiveness.

⁶⁶ Vito Pandolfi, *Istoria teatrului universal*, vol. III, Editura Meridiane, București, 1971, p. 106.

Thus, Don Giovanni's reckless boldness is contrasted with the inner struggles of Shakespeare's character (as a matter of fact, this is what Mozart wrote in one of his letters: „If the ghost's monologue in Hamlet were not so long, it would be much more effective”⁶⁷).

The tragic female characters allow further comparisons; Ilia's moral beauty and spirit of sacrifice in *Idomeneo* enable her to be likened to Julieta. Like her, the daughter of Priam (king of Troy), fallen in love with the enemy's son, Idamante, son of Idomeneo, is ready to save her lover's life, by sacrificing hers.

In comedy, Shakespeare borrows Plato's Latin model, adapting the conventional patterns to his own temperament. He combines the melodramatic with the fabulous, and the elegy with the farce. At times, it is the imaginary that predominates, at others, it is the Romanesque and the melodramatic.

An examination of Mozart's operas shows a close resemblance with Shakespeare's comedy in the development of the action and in the creation of the situations in which the characters are involved. Aristotle argued for a clear distinction between the tragic and the comic: in tragedy, man should be represented as better than he is in actual life, whereas in comedy, worse than he actually is.

Ben Jonson, English Renaissance dramatist and contemporary of Shakespeare, stated that „the parts of the comedy and of the tragedy are the same, even the end is to a great extent the same”.

The burlesque, a reminiscent of the medieval theater, is found in Shakespeare's character Falstaff, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, as well as in Mozart's Osmin, in the *singspiel The Abduction from the Seraglio*.

Both characters are grotesque, conceited, presumptuous to the point of stupidity, immoral and revengeful. The „merry wives” and their husbands turn Falstaff into derision, playing tricks on him in an attempt to cure the old and dissolute lover of his habits.

The portrait made by Mozart is that of a repellent and cruel character, in love with the charming Blonde. Osmin's first aria was composed prior to the completion of the libretto. A unique, until then, figure in the history of the opera, Osmin is suggestively characterized by slow, repeated ostinato rhythms (act 1, no. 3 - Aria):



⁶⁷ Mozart's letter dated November 29, 1780.

The same character exhibits his unrestrained anger when Blonde regains her freedom, through rhetoric ascending octave leaps (act 3 - final):

Schleicht nur säu - ber - lich und lei - se, ihr ver -
damm - ten Ha - rem - säu - se, un - ser Ohr ent - deckt euch schon

Here we reencounter Mozart's declaration: „violent passions should never be expressed to the point where they arouse disgust; even in situations of horror, music should never offend the ear and cease to be music”.⁶⁸

Mozart was surrounded by drama even when one of his greatest masterpieces of the musical comedy, *The Marriage of Figaro*, was about to be staged. Having been thrown out of his house, Mozart wrote: „In the hell where I live, I am unable to work”. Nevertheless, on May 1st, 1786, his opera triumphed in the Imperial Court Theatre, in Vienna.

The comedies bring on stage character couples in continuous motion, causing misunderstandings and unexpected turns and twists of situations. In Shakespeare's comedies, this turmoil and trouble of action can be felt in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It*. Mozart borrows this model in *The Marriage of Figaro*. The most suave plot ever written is the plot against the Count, illustrated by the Countess and Susanna's duet *Sull'aria* (act 3). This is actually a symptomatic stylistic trait of Mozart's, i.e. that of musical lyricism in contrast with the action and situation:

Act III, Scena X, Nr. 21 Duettino

(dettando) Allegretto (scrivendo)
Susanna Can-zo - net-ta sull' a-ria... sull' - a-ria...
La Contessa (dettando)
Che - so - a - ve zef - fi re - to

The female characters of the comedies, however, do not have similar traits. The prototype of Shakespeare's heroine takes on masculine personality traits, is witty and at times

⁶⁸ Letter to his father, Vienna, September 26, 1781.

aggressive, a fast decision maker and extremely keen on throwing back witty retorts. The most obvious examples are Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Rosalind in *As You Like It*. Disguised as boys, they play their roles so convincingly that they conquer the women's hearts.

Mozart's heroine, on the other hand, is embodied by cheerful Suzanne in *The Marriage of Figaro* and by inventive Despina in *Così fan tutte*.

This latter work was contested due to its subject, although its commissioner had been no other than Joseph II himself. History seems to repeat the case of *Cymbeline*, inspired by Boccaccio.

The last opera, *The Magic Flute*,⁶⁹ is a blend of poetry, buffoonery, fantastic story and wisdom. The librettist was Schikaneder, a writer, actor and theatre director, whose theatrical repertoire included musical comedies and pantomimes, but also tragedies and dramas by Lessing, Goethe, Calderon, Gozzi, Beaumarchais and, especially, by Shakespeare: *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Richard III*.⁷⁰

Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*, is closer to Mozart's subject in that the subject is often venturing outside the realm of reality. Prospero, the main character of the play, resorts to magic to defeat his brother's greed, vileness and hypocrisy. He will subject Ferdinand, son of Alonso (Antonio's friend), to difficult trials before offering him his daughter's hand in marriage. Wise Sarastro, the High Priest of Isis, will do the same with Tamino, who will undergo trials of silence, fire and water. The evil is embodied by the Queen of the Night, a demonic beauty, Pamina's mother, who is kidnapped by Sarastro. She will try to turn her daughter into a tool for revenge and is the counterpart of Sycorax the witch, in *The Tempest*. In the opera, the forces of evil receive harsh and fair judgment, but while Shakespeare forgives, Mozart does not: the Queen of the Night will fall into eternal darkness.

The grave, solemn and dramatic character of the action is in permanent contrast with the ludic spirit, as illustrated by the humorous couple of Papageno and Papagena. Papageno's babbling, punished with the trial of silence, leads to the creation of the comic effect:



⁶⁹ Although in the Köchel Catalogue, *La Clemenza di Tito* (created – after a text written by Metastasio in 1734 – to celebrate the coronation of Emperor Leopold as King of Bohemia) comes after *The Magic Flute*, the premieres of the two operas were held on September 6, 1791 (Prague) and, respectively, on September 30, 1791 (Vienna).

⁷⁰ Liebner János, *Mozart a színpadon („Mozart on the Stage“)*, Zeneműkiadó Vállalat, Budapest, 1961, p. 151.

Finally, to illustrate the appropriateness of the parallel between Shakespeare and Mozart, we will conclude with Prospero's words:

*A solemn air and the best comforter
To an unsettled fancy cure thy brains,
Now useless, boil'd within thy skull! There stand -
For you are spell-stopp'd.*