

THE THEME OF MADNESS IN THE ITALIAN OPERA OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE 19-TH CENTURY

Introduction: Rational – Irrational Reflected in the Bel Canto or Mental Disease between Hermeneutics and Musical Aesthetics

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Summary

As mentioned in “*Introduction: Rational – Irrational Reflected in the Bel Canto or Mental Disease between Hermeneutics and Musical Aesthetics*”, the research I have pursued in the doctoral thesis entitled ***THE THEME OF MADNESS IN THE ITALIAN OPERA OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE 19-TH CENTURY*** consists in a thorough and systematic analysis of the mental dysfunctions of the *bel canto* (mainly feminine) characters and the identification of their potential of aesthetic transfiguration on stage. My own musical experience has offered the ground for artistic experimentation and, since almost each new production involves a special complex of professional factors, I have to rethink, rebuild and rediscover my roles all the time. This has given me the opportunity to explore, in depth and from different angles, the personality of the heroines I embody on stage. In my opinion, this superior competence I have gradually acquired, as well as the constant widening of my vocal, interpretative and emotional ambitus account for my claim to propose – through this work – an original, well articulated, scientifically accurate and artistically valid perspective on the theme of madness in the *bel canto* operas.

The thesis is structured into four chapters ranged zoom-like, the research developing from the outside to the inside, in search of the most subtle mechanisms of the thematic constellation under analysis. In Chapter “***1. Romanticism: Literary and Artistic Movement***

and State of Mind” I put the hermeneutical machine into function, by approaching the largest, outer circle of the subject, namely the cultural and artistic context witnessing the success to opera-loving audiences, of heart-breaking musical dramas by composers such as Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, in which ethereal women are lead to insanity by paroxysmal suffering. The tragic *bel canto* heroines I studied illustrate the romantic typology perfectly, not only because they appeared as part of the Romantic musical movement, but also because they set, before and above anything else, in sensible and deeply emotional form, the *dramatic essence* of humanity itself, the conflictual, oxymoronic (thrilling, but intense and convincing, illustrating the eternally human *truth*) coexistence of good and evil, beautiful and ugly, sense and sensitivity, balance and imbalance, innocence and (sometimes tragic) guilt.

In Chapter “**2. Literature and Music – Music and Poetry**” I approach the complex (and sometimes complicated) relationship between the two arts (similar, from certain points of view, but different, from others), and also between two different forms of discourse, both of them much treasured in the first half of the 19-th century, for their quality of best illustrating lyricism and Romantic pathos. If both literature and music imply sensitivity, artistic gift, visionary force, phrasing craft, ingenuity, originality, they fundamentally (and irreducibly) differ in the material the artist uses: words, verbal language *versus* the pure art of sound.

In Subchapter “*2.1. Types of Interaction between the Two Arts. Competition, Dialogue, Syncretism*”, I determine the different ways in which the two leading arts relate to each other, special attention being paid to the opera *libretto* that mediates between the two.

The next stage of my research is, naturally, devoted to the study (and the inventory) of the Romantic themes favoured by both literature and music. In Subchapter “*2.2. Romantic Themes in Literature and Music. Theme Circulation*”, an aspect important to the *bel canto* singers is revealed: opera is simultaneously art of singing, word art, art of gesture and art of the body posture; it is not and it should not be a sequence of musical acts; it has to bring on stage living characters, convincing in their human truth, events and happenings melted into a “story” (rendered, though, by specific dramatic means). More often than not, the opera music composers draw their inspiration from stories made famous by outstanding writers. Characters created by Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, Walter Scott & c. are not destined to remain “paper beings”; on the contrary, they are animated by their creators’ genius and are perceived by the public as real beings. Certain characters’ *charisma* and certain spectacular literary subjects seem to “require” further approach (beyond literature), in other artistic media. A large number of literary works (stories, novels, plays), consecrated by tradition as hallmarks in the public conscience, are converted into *librettos* (sometimes they respect the original, sometimes they

don't; sometimes they do have an artistic value of their own, sometimes they don't), used by composers to create operas destined to stage representation. The same text-source might be approached and exploited by more than one composer – see the *Othello* case (Shakespeare's play inspired both Rossini and Verdi). But fascination works both ways: many literary texts evoke music magic or the impact that music might have upon the daily life of ordinary, uninteresting people. This case is well illustrated by the powerful emotional effect made by *Lucia di Lammermoor* on Emma Bovary, a woman aspiring to Romanticism and perfect love, but who eventually gets nothing better than cheap melodrama.

In Subchapter “2.3. *Prevalent Themes, Fashionable Stories in Italy during the Romantic Period*”, I focus on the large thematic variety of Romantic works. I have come necessarily to the conclusion that the leading theme of the period, well favoured above all the others, is love – first and foremost, unhappy, passionate, fatal love, bringing about mental alienation (and consequently, the most spectacular kind of love that may be acted on stage). The powerful emotional impact of the Romantic works evens off the otherwise simplistic plot. On the expressive level, the character, as an emotional-affective entity, is given emphasis by a peculiar musical style. The Romantic opera explores new voice, stage and composition techniques, with a view to fully expressing the ideal of the lyrical performance. Actually, it is still blooming at the beginning of the 21-st century, due to its perdurable ingredients: aspiration towards the absolute, sensitivity, the anxious quest of the life and art ideal, individual artistic and social freedom, the philosophical clash between idealism and realism.

In Subchapter “2.4. *Romantic Hero – Romantic Heroine*”, I try to identify the main features of the Romantic character: idealism, impetuous sensitiveness, the obsessive quest of the perfect love, the bias towards anxiety and suffering.

Chapter “3. *Tradition and Renewal: Italian Musical Opera in the First Half of the 19-th Century*” focuses on the evolution of the opera genre in the spatial and temporal context under investigation. The opera performances leave the small stages of the theatres by the royal courts for the recently built large theatres; they will thus address larger audiences hereafter. Opera “conquers” the whole Europe, first by the tours undertaken by the Italian opera companies, then by the opera theatres that appear in different cities. The lyrical theatre of the 19-th century Italy discovers the meaning of competition, since new schools, that will soon impose other models of musical drama, take shape in different parts of the continent. Faithful to the classic aesthetics, by the respect they pay, in the dramatic performance, to music (above anything else), by the cult they devote to music beauty and to the quality of the vocal technique, the Italian opera composers are seduced by the spirit of the century; they adopt the

“Romantic soul”, by stressing the pathos of the *opera seria*, and by endowing the lyrical moments in the *opera buffa* with much sensitivity. The flowing melody and the quick rhythm of their music still enchant the public, although this music – as it is generally considered – does not explore the depths of the human *psyche* and does not imply philosophical sophistry – or, in other words, the attraction towards the mystery of the universe and of the human being. In the Romantic opera, voices cease to be merely musical “transporters” and, through the words they are invited to utter on music, they create a new art – both lyrical and dramatic – in which poetry and music, joint together, show in progress not only the action on the stage, but also the large movements of the human soul driven by its tumultuous destiny. During this period of Romantic exuberance, music supports poetry to surpass the barriers imposed by time, space, linguistic and/or cultural coordinates, thus imposing itself as an authentic universal means of communication among people.

In subchapter “3.1. *The Music – Libretto Relationship. Outstanding 18-th Century Librettists; the Creative Relationship between Librettists and Composers*”, I focused on the “chemistry” between the *libretto* and the music inspired by the story in the *libretto*, which is the “chemistry” between the librettist (a writer specialized in writing *librettos*) and the composer. The examples are taken from the *bel canto* period. The *libretto* represents the verbal *pre-text* of an opera or of a musical drama. The plot of the story “created” by the librettist may be original, but, in most of the cases, it is taken over from pre-existent texts: dramatic texts or literature (stories, novels, famous mythic narratives; sometimes, poetry – mainly epic poetry, organized by the librettist like an epic or by employing consecrated prosodic and imagistic patterns). By words alone, the *libretto* conveys (like a dramatic text) a complex set of information ranging on two distinct levels (that complete each other and function together): 1. the level of the dramatic action; 2. the level of the stage directions. Vincenzo Bellini, Gaetano Donizetti, Giuseppe Verdi carefully explored the *dramatic* potential of the text and showed interest in *using* it in both its aspects, the verbal one (recitatives or prose) and the musical one (airs, duets, assembles). The *libretto* authors have a rather ambiguous socio-professional status. On one hand, some of them became famous during the *bel canto* years; they were appreciated in their domain, and collaboration with them was much searched for by the composers. On the other hand, their participation to the creation of an opera was taken into account only when reproaches had to be made. More often than not, in *bel canto*, librettists have a respected professional status, even if their collaboration with the composers of the time is not flawless when it comes to interpersonal relationships or professional quality. Generally, if an opera has (great) success, the whole glory goes, first and

foremost, to the composer (in the posterity, exclusively so), because the librettist is considered to be inferior, by comparison. As it looks, the perfect librettist should better be “invisible”: his mission is to do a good job and be discreet.

In Subchapter “3.2. *The Bel Canto Masters and Their Specific Contributions to the Development of the Opera Genre*”, the emphasis is laid on the specific contribution of the important composers of the epoch to the evolution of opera as a genre. If Rossini (a composer worshipped by the public) becomes conspicuous by his ingenuity and enthusiasm, by his fine musical inspiration, Vincenzo Bellini (a Romantic *character* himself) is the composer who manages to radically change the concept of *bel canto* opera, by merging the pure *bel canto* influences of the previous period with the Romantic spirit of the 19-th century. With Bellini, melancholy and total self-renunciation become common themes, obsessions almost. Several characters in Bellini’s operas suffer from delirium; an idealization process is thus initiated (by making use of a typical Romantic mechanism): the ruthless (and not charming at all) reality of the *cureless* psychic disease is converted on stage into an emotional lability which is *curable* by the partner’s love (a possibility later shunned by Donizetti, whose protagonists, in their large majority, abandon themselves to their tragic destiny). Bellini’s compositions are not remarkable by their variety and have an apparently banal phrasing; nevertheless, they are so touching and so spontaneous, that they manage to awaken intense and *real* emotions, thus taking advantage of a quality lacked by most of the composers – this actually saved Bellini’s operas from oblivion. Gaetano Donizetti’s musical works are impressive not only by their number, but also by their variety. His musical style is characterized by sparkling, elegant melodies that might be approached only by virtuosic musicians. His art preserves its greatness even when, by abusing his native gift, he composes work after work, like an automaton. Donizetti’s creation conforms to the model of the total composer, who attacks with the same grace all the musical-theatrical genres, from the operatic farce to *opera buffa*, from the *opera seria* (melodramatic) to the *opera semiseria*. Last, but not least: Giuseppe Verdi – another name on the select list of the *bel canto* masters. He creates *drama per musica*, a genre that ignores the rigid limits between airs and recitatives, action and music going hand in hand to the (sometimes tragic) denouement; music complies submissively to the text; the drama, the story itself, the characters’ psychological tension make up the core of the performance, the explosive virtuosity of the orchestra or of the interpreters coming only on a second place. This is the new face of the opera which Verdi raises to the rank of a “music queen”.

Chapter “4. *Representations of the Madness in the Italian Opera between 1800-1850*” is conceived as a minute, thorough and consistent study, from different angles, of the central

issue under investigation: madness as manifested on the opera stage. The chapter includes two sections: the former, “4.1. *Losing One’s Mind from the Perspective Opened by the Sciences of the Psyche*” serves as a theoretical platform to my analyses developed, on different levels, in the latter, “4.2. *Losing One’s Mind – An Obsessive Theme in the Italian Opera of the 1800-1850*”.

The theoretical section includes a sequence of issues: a brief general picture of the mental diseases (“4.1.1. *Psychic Dysfunctions – A Short Presentation; Clinical Forms and Symptoms of Insanity*”); a taxonomy of the psychic dysfunctions according to the criterion of (ir)reversibility (4.1.2. *Permanent versus Temporary Madness. Favourable Causes and Factors; Patterns of Evolution; Types of Manifestation*”); the moral implications of the temporary insanity (a temporary escape to the irrational) and the association with the guilt complex (“4.1.3. *The Loss of Reason and the Return to Reality / the Conscious Level. The Post-Processing of the Moment / Period of Alienation – Guilt, Remorse, Repentance, (Self)Punishment*”); the distribution of mental illnesses according to the cultural stereotypes related to *masculinity – femininity* (“4.1.4. *‘Masculine’ versus ‘Feminine’ Madness. Socio-Cultural Contexts and Conditions*”).

After the punctual analysis of the main operational concept (“4.2.1. *The Mad Scene in the Italian Opera of the First Decades of the 19-th Century*”), the applied section deals, first and foremost, with the panorama of the drifts-off the path of reason, illustrated by Rossini’s, Bellini’s, Donizetti’s and Verdi’s operas, in the first half of the 19-th century (“4.2.2. *A Panoramic View – A Gallery of the Most Famous Mad Scenes in the Greatest Italian Composers’ Operas*”). It deals afterwards with a number of case studies focusing on three characters, illustrating the “feminine insanity”, a generalized obsession in the *bel canto* epoch (4.2.3. *Bel Canto Heroines Losing Their Minds – Three Case Studies, Viewed from the Perspective of My Personal Stage Experience*”). Comprehensive and minute studies devoted to Linda di Chamounix (4.2.3.2), Lucia di Lammermoor (4.2.3.3) and Elvira in *The Puritans* (4.2.3.4) – roles I know well from my own stage practice – are preceded by a short presentation of the methods and instruments employed in the stylistic analyses (“4.2.3.1. *A Number of Theoretical Marks: the Musical Language as a Means of Communication; Melodramatic Opera and Bel Canto; Basic Principles of the Music Analysis; Writing Styles*”).

Elvira and Lucia exhibit similar symptoms (both of them are victims of the depressive delirium), but the nature of their dysfunctions is different: Elvira’s delirium is internalized; her insane acts and manifestations are directed towards herself and not towards the others; her

return from madness to reality is possibly due to the fact that she does not commit violent, irreparable actions; Elvira does not destroy and, consequently, does not put her human essence in jeopardy; she only takes refuge inside herself and cuts all the bridges leading to the reality that has hurt her. She manages to conquer her mental disease thanks to the support she gets from the people around her, but particularly due to Arturo's return – a happy dramatic contingency, unusual for the Romantic vocal creation, but so dear to Bellini. Apart from Elvira, Lucia does not manage to pass unharmed through the “purgatory”, through her main test to redemption. For her, redemption is possible only through death. She misses (not entirely because of her own fault) every chance to get fulfilled on a human level. But, once she abandons her “human condition”, by sacrificing herself for love, she can eventually redeem herself and attain a state of felicity. Hence, in Lucia's case, the climax is not touched during the mad scene itself, but *after* the cessation of the delirious crisis, when she acquires a “superior conscience”. As to Linda, she is the only one of the three heroines who has a tragic prognostic, despite an auspicious fate. This development is unexpected, contrary to the logic of both character and situation (“the law of contrast” seems actually to mark *Linda di Chamounix* at several levels; the atmosphere itself is joyful, in sharp contrast to the protagonist's ordeal); besides, Linda's destiny follows a dramatic trajectory diametrically opposed to those of all Donizetti's other heroines. Linda, like Elvira, is cured due to the return of her lover in her life; the state of psycho-emotional normality seems then to be conditioned, for the *bel canto* heroine, by the presence of the man she loves – in other words, it is ineluctably determined by her *feminine* condition. As a “redemption” on an ideal(ized) plane, the woman – dependent and marginal in society – becomes the centre of attention in the *bel canto* opera. Her dramatic destiny of subordinated, dominated being is artistically transfigured into a tragic preeminence – homage paid by the *man* (composer, writer or librettist) – and changed into an exponent of the human condition, in general.

The Conclusions are drawn from my direct professional experience, but also from my applied research work. In my opinion, a very good (vocal and emotional) interpretation of this role typology (the romantic heroine – victim of her destiny and in prey to insanity) is conditioned by several factors. As the interpretative process starts with the decoding of the text and of the musical message, the success of this enterprise depends tremendously on the degree of intuition, intelligence and musical experience of the artist who “attacks” the role. But musical competence by itself is not enough; it should be integrated into the deep and thorough knowledge of the cultural context that generated the *bel canto*. Romanticism as a state of mind, but also as an attitude and an artistic choice, must be studied and assumed, so

that the character might be created from the inside, from the core of its potentialities and dispositions, in full agreement with the “spirit of the epoch”. Being in the *service* of the *bel canto* heroines I have embodied on stage, I endeavour to understand all the mechanisms of their attitude and behaviour. Since they are alienated women, I am naturally interested in discovering the nature of their psycho-emotional dysfunction, and also the factors that activate the process of their mental disintegration (I am aware that only a person characterized by psychological strength can successfully act such a part, be the simulated insanity temporary or permanent). The clear distinction between temporary and permanent madness is necessary, because either of them imposes a specific type of interpretation.

To understand these mentally disturbed women, extensive, minute and unprejudiced documentation is needed. To this end, information from different sources and fields – music, literature, culture, anthropology, science, medicine – should be corroborated. The fatal aura of the *bel canto* heroine is vowed to eternity; this is because her existential mystery inspires new and new interpretations and motivates generation after generation of lyrical artists to assume such musical parts. It is extremely difficult, but it holds a tremendous potential of human and professional satisfaction. Each time I step on the stage, I happily answer to this irresistible call. Beyond the textual (literary, musical and theatrical) construction, a character is (or tends to be) a “flesh and bones” human being, a *living* entity that attaches itself to the actor. To accomplish this artistic desideratum (the bringing of the opera character to life) is, to a great extent, the interpreter’s task – it is in this capacity that I dare express my opinions on the matter.

