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Teatro Polidittico

Classics-inspired contemporary Italian operas and the concept of openness

Conference Paper presented at:
Italy and the Classics
APGRD - Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, University of Oxford
10th June 2016

I will try to encourage a thought provoking connection between contemporary Italian opera and the Classics. Though, there could be the risk that, at some point in my talk, I will touch upon some ideas that may appear to neglect, at a first glance, Opera as a narrative genre and the Classics as that body of thought that have solidly impacted on Opera itself. Hence, I think it is a good idea to begin with two seemingly bizarre citations and the idea of *teatro polidittico*. The first citation is taken from Italo Calvino's novel *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973), which says, with a rather philosophical tone: 'the world does not exist, there is not a whole given all at once: there is a finite number of elements whose combinations multiply by billions of billions'.[1] The second citation was written by Marcel Proust, who, in describing Gérard de Nerval's novel *Sylvie* (1853), says that it is a tale in which 'at every moment [the reader is obliged] to go back [...] to check where he is, if it is the present or a return to the past'.[2] I would like you to keep these two quotes in mind, for now; I shall return to them. The *teatro polidittico*, literally translating as 'polydictic theatre', on the other hand, is a sort of fictional concept rather than an actual form of theatre. It is a fictional concept in that it does not really exist, but it is a peculiar imaginary theatre composed of specular images that is briefly alluded to in the novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979), also by Calvino. He describes it as part of this passage: 'My intent is to rebuild the museum put together by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, author of the *Ars magna lucis et umbrae* (1646) and inventor of the «polydictic theatre» in which about sixty small mirrors plastering the inside of a big box transform a branch into a forest, a tin soldier into an army, a little book into a library'.[3] Let us therefore image the polydictic theatre as a theatre able to show a multiplicity of images and perspectives through a system of kaleidoscopic reflections; a bit like the Swarovski's *Dome of Crystal*, a walk-in installation that wishes visitors to experience the inside of a diamond, and that you can find in the Swarovski's Crystal Worlds, in Innsbruck. Like the *Dome of Crystal*, the etymology of the word

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[1] Italo Calvino, *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, trans. Simone Spagnolo (Milano: Oscar Mondadori, 1994), 19.

[2] Marcel Proust, 'Gérard de Nerval' in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, trans. Paolo Serini (Torino: Einaudi, 1958), 178.

[3] Italo Calvino, *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggitore*, trans. Simone Spagnolo (Milano: Oscar Opere di Italo Calvino, 1994), 161.

‘polydictic’ has a kaleidoscopic implication: *poly* meaning ‘many’, and *dicticos*, from ancient Greek, translating as ‘showing’, indicate a theatre-that-shows-many-things, or perhaps better many-perspectives. Doesn’t this recall Calvino’s first citation, in that the kaleidoscopic reflections allow the world’s finite number of elements to multiply by billions of billions? - Calvino, by the way, is a very relevant author within the context of contemporary Italian opera, as he wrote the librettos for three operas by Luciano Berio. One of these is titled *La Vera Storia* (The True Story, 1977-81), which is an opera composed of two parts: in Part One a simple, and not particularly interesting story is narrated, whilst in Part Two the same story is told again, but from another character’s perspective. It is unavoidable to prefigure the existence of a third story, even if it is not actually there, within the opera. One can prefigure, as a matter of fact, the existence of as many stories as the characters on stage. Really, one can presage the existence of as many stories as there are spectators; each owning a different perspective. Exactly as those images representing impossible objects, like the funny cube in Figure 1, *La Vera Storia*, as the title itself suggests, questions the existence of one ‘true story’ and one point of view; and it is precisely in this sense that it functions according to a polydictic logic, showing how behind a story a multiplicity of other stories exist and are revealed.

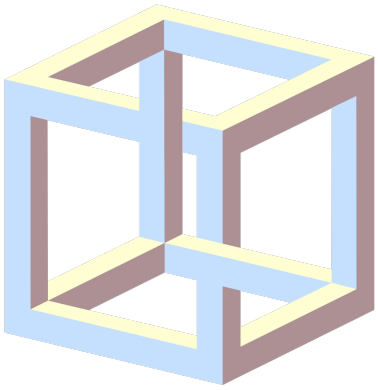

Figure 1: Impossible Cube

I have spent a bit of time investigating contemporary Italian opera, as part of my academic and creative researches, and I have found a striking and fascinating connection between this genre and the concept of openness to a plurality of interpretations; a connection that I have eventually theorised and elaborated in my doctoral thesis. To be precise, I should point out that the contemporary Italian operas I refer to include those examples of experimental, post-WWII music-theatre works that have played with narrative manipulation and indeed present at the fulcrum of their tales the concept of openness to multiple interpretations. Such examples are not few, and they certainly constitute the most relevant Italian operas of the last few decades. A brief list would include Luciano Berio’s *Passaggio* and *Un re in ascolto*, Luigi Nono’s *Intolleranza 1960* and *Prometeo*, Sylvano Bussotti’s *La Passion selon Sade*, Bruno Maderna’s *Satyricon*, and Azio

Corghi's *Blimunda*, among others.[4] All these operas contemplate the idea of openness to perspectives, in different ways; they all present a 'polydictic' narrative; and, to accomplish this, they all avoid a sense of linear narrative: linear in both chronological and logical terms. In these operas narratives are multiple, interwoven which each other, or constructed upon principles of references and allusions, or they proceed by unrelated narrative fragments, like photographic snapshots, that only acquire meaning in postmodern terms, through the intellectual cooperation of the audience. You can think of these contemporary Italian operas, if you like, as meta-operas, that be operas-about-Opera; which, as Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi say they are 'in effect a whole subgenre self-reflexive of contemporary opera'.[5]
But what about the Classics then? How do they fit within this polydictic, meta-operatic context?

I admit I found myself a bit puzzled when I was invited to give this talk about contemporary Italian opera and the Classics, in that the two, at least at a narrative level, would seem to contradict each other. Yet, not a few experimental Italian operas are inspired by Greek and Roman Classics and mythology. The aforementioned *Prometeo* (1981-1984) by Luigi Nono and *Satyricon* (1973) by Bruno Maderna are an example of this. And other instances include Luigi Dallapiccola's *Ulisse* (premiered in 1968), or Salvatore Sciarrino's *Perseo e Andromeda* (1991).
These Classics-inspired works, although they use Greek and Roman literature and mythology, they seem to ignore them from a narrative point of view, yet they use these sources as an opportunity to develop their polydictic representations. I would love to go through case by case, so to discover together a conceptual thread, though twenty minutes are clearly not enough and I will limit my talk to three example, which I find representative of the subject matter. Such examples are Luciano Berio's *Opera* (*Opera* being the actual title of the opera), Bruno Maderna's *Satyricon*, based on the eponymous work by Petronius, and *Prometeo* by Luigi Nono.

Opera (1969-1977) by Berio does not present a linear narrative, but instead a multi-narrative composed of three intertwined stories that constantly alternate. The title *Opera*, as Berio indicated, has to be understood as the plural of the Latin noun *opus*: *Opera* therefore meaning 'operas'. These are respectively the story of Orpheus, the sinking of the Titanic, and *Terminal*, a spoken play about the treatment of the terminally ill presented by *Open Theatre* in New York shortly before Berio's initial sketches of *Opera*. You can think of this work as a triple-narrative in which the *fabula* - the logical order of events - does not literally emerge from the three separate stories, but rather arises as

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[4] The composition dates of these works are: *Passaggio* (1961-62), *Un re in ascolto* (1979-83), *Intolleranza 1960* (1961), *Prometeo* (1981-1984), *La Passion selon Sade* (1965-66), *Satyricon* (1973), and *Blimunda* (1990).

[5] Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi, *The New Music Theatre: Seeing the Voice, Hearing the Body* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

a concept, which, in the specific case of *Opera*, is Death: the idea of Death. Orpheus, the Titanic and Terminal, in fact, do not eventually show 'one' narrative, but they function, 'polydicticly', as mirrors that reflect a concept: that of Death. The character of Orpheus that Berio presents, in this sense, does not have a literal narrative function, but a conceptual one. This Orpheus is not depicted as the 'singer par excellence, the musician and the poet',[6] as Pierre Grimal says. This Orpheus, in fact, does not really narrate the mythological story of the singer-musician that with his voice and lyre goes in the underworld to rescue his wife Eurydice, like in Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (from which, by the way, Berio draws some of his libretto and music): this Orpheus, instead, acts as a signifier for the underworld itself. *Opera*'s multi-narrative, therefore, invites the spectators to find a conceptual thread, in a polydictic way. And I guess it is in this aspect that we find Calvino's idea: *Orfeo*, the Titanic and *Terminal* epitomise that finite number of elements, whose combinations, in the audience's mind, multiply in billions of ideas - of which Death is probably only one of the possibles.

The connection between Berio's *Opera*, contemporary Italian opera in general, and the matters of openness and narrative non-linearity is actually more explicit than my propositions, as it resides in Umberto Eco's concept of *opera aperta*, translating as 'open work'. Presented in 1962, when Eco and Berio were colleagues at Milan's RAI studios, the concept of *opera aperta* has been very influential for numerous Italian authors. Berio's *Opera*, in fact, was originally titled *Opera Aperta*, and it was the outcome of a *rappresentazione* that he had previously planned in collaboration with Eco himself and writer Furio Colombo. In short, the concept of *opera aperta* maintains that any 'work of art is a complete and *closed* form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an *open* product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity'.[7] Doesn't this statement, again, recall Calvino's finite number of elements generating billions of combinations, as well as the idea of polydictict theatre itself?

My second example, Bruno Maderna's *Satyricon* (1973), similarly articulates in a narratively open way. Yet, it develops on a twofold level: whilst using Petronius original text and its depiction of Roman immorality to metaphorically represent the contemporary Italian socio-political condition (and as it was relevant in the 1970s, it would probably be even more relevant today), it is presented in the form of what we can call a collage. As Raymond Fearn explains in his book *Italian Opera since 1945, Satyricon*'s intent is that of 'containing at its heart a metaphor, a picture of late Roman

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[6] Pierre Grimal, *Enciclopedia dei Miti*, Italian Ed. Carlo Cordié (Brescia: Garzanti, Paideia Editrice, 1987), 463.

[7] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*. trans. Anna Cancogni. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4.

decadence and depravity which represents, at the same time, a grotesque image of present-day society, with its money-grubbing materialism, capitalism, and corrupt self-serving'.[8] However, this metaphorical representation is proposed through sixteen unordered numbers, in a sort of open form that would reflect Maderna's predilection for semi-improvisational music-theatre practices. In these sixteen scenes, peculiarly, the four characters - the host Trimalchio, his wife Fortunata, Criside and Eumolpus - display only narrative fragments from Petronius' *Satyricon*. And, even more peculiarly, the singers employ various languages, including English, German, French, Latin, and wordless vocalisations. At the same time, Maderna's music heavily relies on musical citation and pastiche, and most of the numbers have, as Fearn says, 'no obvious musical threads linking them together'.[9] Some of these citations include for instance *Che farò senza Euridice*, an aria from Gluck's *Orfeo*, Tchaikovsky's Bb Minor Piano Concerto, and passages from Puccini's *La Boheme*, among others.

What should we make of this? What should we make of Maderna's *Satyricon* from a musico-theatrical narrative point of view? Why would he bother, in the first place, using Petronius' *Satyricon* if he was going to rip it apart? Well, I think this has to be seen in a polydictic way: the unordered numbers, the seemingly random musical citations, and the overall linguistic disorder precisely functions as those mirrors plastering the polydictic box, as those finite number of elements leading to a billion combinations; combinations that anyhow, within *Satyricon*, wish to address a socio-political reflection.

Alongside this, however, another consideration has to be made, and it regards narrative temporality. The continuous bouncing forth and back between non-chronological fragments, between musical styles from different eras, and most importantly from Petronius' Rome to modern Italy, destroys the idea of operatic narrative as a series of chronological and logical events. *Satyricon*, exactly like Berio's *Opera* - and exactly like Proust's description of Nerval's *Sylvie* - is a work that obliges the spectator, at every moment, to check where he is, if it is the present or a return to the past. *Satyricon*'s polydictic theatre, in this way, not only opens toward kaleidoscopic interpretations, but also toward a kaleidoscopic time.

My third and final example, *Prometeo* (1981-1984) by Luigi Nono, operates through a further different polydictic logic. Firstly, there is no precise plot, but a sequence of nine sections that seem to be *cantatas* rather than operatic scenes. These are composed of a Prologue, two Interludes, two sections called *Tre Voci* (Three Voices), and five Islands: *Prometeo* somehow proceeds by islands, as if the opera were a map and the sections its journey. The libretto, assembled by the philosopher Massimo Cacciari, includes a selection of texts by several authors that present different versions of

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[8] Raymond Fearn, *Italian Opera since 1945* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), 139.

[9] Fearn, *Italian Opera since 1945*, 138.

the myth of Prometheus as well as reflections on the concept of history. These texts range from Walter Benjamin to Aeschylus, from Euripides to Goethe, from Sophocles to Hölderlin, from Schoenberg to Cacciari himself, among others. Rather than a conventional libretto, all these sources seem to contribute to a polyhedric depiction of the character of Prometheus, who is narrated without any literal version, and therefore inviting the spectators to find a relationship between the various mythical elements without a route-map. Also, Nono opted for an idea of flexible staging, in that the space had to contain several musico-theatrical environments, each representing an island, allowing the listener to explore the aural landscape. And I am sure this brief outline of the opera has already led you to polydictic thoughts.

There are numerous interesting aspects about Nono's *Prometeo*, but I will mention only one, which I find, possibly, the most radical and at the same time the most fascinating. In the two Interludes, which are structurally central to the piece, the music is directed to be performed 'ppppp' - *pianissimissimissimissimo* - and Nono explicitly indicates in the score to play 'on the limit between audibility or inaudibility' (Figure 2). This element is not just a decoration originating from the composer's scrupulousness for details, but it epitomises, I think, the limit between existence and non-existence. Exactly like in the polydictic box plastered with mirrors the forest, the army and the library do not exist, yet they exist as projections of the branch, the tin soldier and the little book, so Nono's *pianissimissimissimissimo* reveals a music-theatre narrative on the borderline between existence and non-existence; between reality and representation.

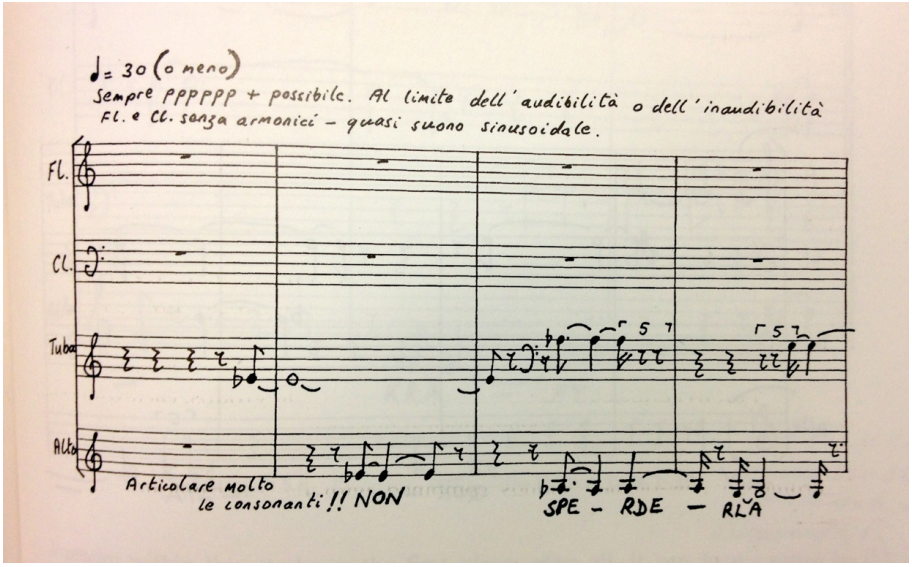

Figure 2: *Luigi Nono. Prometeo, 'Interludio Primo', bar 1-4*

Nono's *Prometeo*, which is subtitled *Tragedia dell'ascolto* (Tragedy of the listening) has to be considered, as Jürg Stenzl says, 'a form of invisible theatre to be listed to';[10] a definition that can

[10] Jüng Stenzl, *Prometeo*, essay in CD booklet. EMI/Ricordi.

help us grasp how the polydictic process, here, does not simply reveal a multiplicity of perspectives (as in Prometheus' mythological versions), but rather the multiplicity of the void, of the existence-nonexistence void.

To return to our original point, and to conclude, what is the connection between contemporary Italian opera and the Classics? Well, it seems to be a polydictic one, in the sense that the Classics have functioned as a pretext to reflect on the concept Openness itself and, at the same time, to demonstrate that, as Calvino wrote, the world does not exist, as there is not a whole given all at once.

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