

The Opera orchestra and great conductors in the 20th century

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Abstract: *During its history, the evolution of the orchestra has always been strongly connected to the development of instruments as well as to the evolution of vocal and instrumental genres in different epochs. In Opera, the role and the size of the orchestra has grown over time, from Romanticism and continuing through the 20th century, becoming the heart of drama itself. Its sonorities have been permanently enriched by exploring the resources of each instrument, the texture and combinations of different timbres, all destined to intensify dramatic situations, to deepen the inner life of the characters and valorise space. Here are some aspects of the opera's orchestra evolution through the 20th century, its impact on vocalism and the influence of the conductors in the destiny of lyrical theatre.*

Key-words: *opera, orchestra, vocalism, conductors, music development in 20th century*

1. Opera Orchestra in the 20th Century

Beginning with the 19th century, the orchestra gets a more complex role in the economy of the opera performance. Together with the main role of the orchestra in accompanying vocal speech and creating impressive ensembles together with soloists and choir, the composers start to give more importance to the symphonic moments (*overture, intermezzo, prelude*) which culminates in the huge Wagnerian orchestra and its final ambition to accomplish the *infinite melody*. In the 20th century, the improvement and diversification of instruments, the resized structure of the orchestra and the development of interpretation techniques (exploring new sound effects) also mark important steps in the orchestra's development. Some works signed by Richard Strauss (*Salomé, Elektra*) continue the way opened by Wagner's style of orchestration, being "symphonic buildings with voices without closed numbers" (Sandu-Dediu 1991, 43), while other composers assimilate various currents of modern western music, from the late *Romanticism* of Rachmaninov's

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works to the *Impressionism* of Debussy, from the folkloric inserts practised by the composers of different national schools, to the abstract sounds proposed by Boulez, Reich or Glass. The music landscape of the 20th century appears in a wide variety of styles, requiring a high degree of professionalism and versatility from the orchestras and the conductors. There are also significant changes in the structure, size and tuning of the orchestras.

While the basic structure of the compartments preserves the Romantic orchestra formula, the most noticeable change in instrumentation is the development of the percussion section and wind instruments. The orchestra is augmented with timbres of new instruments such as marimba, xylophone, glockenspiel, gong, drums, tubular bells, and the triangle.

The size of ensembles varies in the 20th century. The growing economic pressures, after various crises and the devastating impact of the two World Wars led to new orchestral formulas, from the symphonic and opera orchestras, both in expansion, to chamber orchestras and smaller instrumental ensembles. Composers such as Luciano Berio or Bruno Maderna dedicate orchestral pages to much reduced numerical ensembles in their operas. There were also other motivations, besides economic ones, to use smaller orchestras. Modern and post-modern age offer space for experimental music and also for a new revival of old masterpieces. This required new ensembles, like the famous *Academy of St Martin in the Fields*, *Musica Antiqua Köln*, *Hispèryon XXI*, that are searching for reconstitution of the authentic sound of Baroque music. Returning to operatic space, if the size of an orchestra has a certain impact on the audience (the sound effect can be spectacular or more intimate) it also has a strong influence on the quality of an opera singer's performance. New challenges for vocalism raised in the 20th century, when opera singers were forced to push their voices over new limits to face a larger and denser wave of sound that was rising from the pit. This fight between the human voice and the high volume of orchestras can cause vocal damage which can cause loss in time of the brilliance of high notes and flexibility and even premature deterioration. Opera singers have also adapted their vocal technique to other challenges in the 20th century: the musical discourse that becomes more complex and sometimes abstract (consider the development of *atonal* music); the orchestra weight increase (caused not only by enlargement in size but also by the development of the strings and the brass instruments that sound much brighter and have more power); and changes made in the tuning of the instruments. This last aspect had an important impact on the vocal technique of opera singers. In order to get a brighter sound of instruments and a higher orchestral efficiency, in time the tuning has raised for the reference sound, A, from 405 Hz (in the time of Lully) to 440 Hz (reference settled at the Congress of Stuttgart Physicists (Piso 2000, 26-28) in 1834). It seems that the process of raising

the tuning continued in the 20th Century, which also created more difficulties for singers in accessing the higher notes in the top registry. In an interview (Popa 2012), the coloratura-soprano Luciana Serra confessed her difficulties in reaching the top *tessitura* of Mozart's arias of the Queen of the Night, played at the Opera in Vienna, where the tuning of the orchestra was high (at 445 Hz). Serra chose to have her personal piano tuned at the same value and to study in this new sonority in order that her muscles got used to it and her vocal apparatus could face this sound challenge.

The mediator between singers and orchestra is the conductor. He can establish a standard of quality in the opera performance and a good balance between the sonority of voices and the orchestral accompaniment. The conductor's role grew in the first decades of the 20th century and his personality gradually monopolised the first position in the lyrical theatre, dethroning the supremacy of the singers (Rémy 1982, 94) (*evirati, primadonna*) and gradually establishing a new relationship between the demands of the musical drama and the interpretative freedoms of the lyrical artists. "Santi, Muti, Patané, creators of divine atmosphere in the opera performance ...can crush you with their exigence during the rehearsals. However, during the performance the same conductors become the «soloists' slaves» and their batons, protective." These are the thoughts of the Romanian baritone David Ohanesian in a dialogue with Iosif Sava published in 1986 (Sava 1986, 235). But beyond the tremendous artistic benefits reflected in the collaborations of the opera singers with great orchestra conductors, there are also less positive aspects of the ascension of their influence in the landscape of the lyrical theatre. Although the conductors caused a notable increase of interest in stylistic accuracy of scores, stimulating also the musicality of singers and their interest in constructing a better sound architecture in opera, many of them led to less beneficial effects on singer voices because of their zeal to monumental sounds. Beyond the more spectacular orchestral sound effect, it is dangerous to put the human voice in competition with an orchestra, because under the pressure of singing "in force", the singers can degrade their voices. Conductors who appreciate the value of human voice know how to create a balance between the stage and the pit so that the music should be equally valorised in the opera performance.

2. Great conductors of the 20th Century

There are many prestigious conductors who made international careers in the 20th century, but only few of them had a notable impact on the Opera. Although most of them shared their careers between concert and lyric stages, their contribution to the

lyrical theatre was significant, imposing new and higher standards of musical performances, promoting the singers' careers and making important recordings, some of them becoming discography references.

The composer **Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)** never wrote operas, but he was among the most influential personalities of the lyric theatre of his time, as a conductor and later in life as stage director. Rejecting the stereotypical gestures and the *cliché* of the singers, Mahler emphasised the acting expression of singing and a new vision of the performance. In his view, "what is seen" was closely related to "what is heard", as the stage action derives from the dramatic content of music. Being influenced by the ideas of Richard Wagner and Adolphe Appia, Mahler assumed also the role of stage director in 1903. He paid a special attention to the overall arrangement of the performance, from the setting of scenes to the use of light in the service of expression (colouring affective states, not just day light or night). Mahler introduced a real reform to the Vienna Opera House, as a manager between 1897 and 1907, requiring the distribution of roles to be made according to the vocal and acting qualities. He also abolished the system to buy applause ("*claque*") and made a rule of turning off the lights in the hall during the show (according to the model proposed by Wagner at Bayreuth). The managing board of the Viennese Opera House marks a turbulent moment in his life and career, Mahler converting from Judaism to Catholicism in order to maintain his position in the Theatre, during many attacks in the anti-Semitic press of his time. In his long career, he conducted in the Royal Opera House in Budapest, the Hamburg Opera, and the Metropolitan Opera in New York, being particularly appreciated for his performances in works of Mozart and Wagner.

Arturo Toscanini (1867-1957) was one of the most influential conductors of the early twentieth century, having an extensive career in Europe and America. He owned for many years the musical direction of *La Scala* in Milan, of the Metropolitan Opera House in New York and of the famous NBC Symphony Orchestra, where he made numerous radio and television recordings and broadcasts. As Puccini's friend, Toscanini conducted several of his premieres: *La Bohème* (1896), *Fanciulla del West* (1910) and *Turandot* (1926), as well as other contemporary works such as *I Pagliacci* (1892) and *Zaza* (1900) by Leoncavallo. He conducted for the first time in Italy *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* (Wagner), *Salomé* (Strauss), *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Debussy) and in America *Tristan and Isolde* (Wagner), *Madama Butterfly* (Puccini) *Boris Godunov* (Mussorgsky). His large musical activity together with the impressive number of recordings brought him the international recognition as one of the most interesting musical personalities of the century.

Tullio Serafin (1878-1978) was one of the elite Italian conductors, with a long career in which he held the musical direction of the famous *La Scala* in Milan and later of the *Teatro Reale* in Rome and the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. He had a significant contribution in bringing back to the audience many of the *bel canto* masterpieces by Bellini, Donizetti and Rossini, as well as in expanding the repertoire of theatres, conducting in Italy for the first time operas by contemporary composers like Alban Berg, Paul Dukas and Benjamin Britten. Another constant mission assumed by Tullio Serafin was to train and to promote the careers of many gifted artists, including Rosa Ponselle, Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland. Among his favored singers, with whom Serafin made notable recordings, there are Maria Callas, Giuseppe di Stefano, Tito Gobbi, Maria Caniglia, Nicola Rossi-Lemeni, Ettore Bastianini, Carlo Bergonzi and Renata Tebaldi.

Victor de Sabata (1892-1967) is a resonant name in the gallery of opera conductors of the 20th century, known mainly for his performances in operas of Verdi, Puccini and Wagner. With a distinctive personality and a prodigious memory, conducting rehearsals and concerts without a musical score, Sabata imposed himself as Toscanini's successor at *La Scala* after 1929. His international career reached great heights after the Second World War, conducting in London and America, recording for record houses such as Decca and HMV. The sound recording of *Tosca* by Puccini made in 1953 (HMV) with Maria Callas, Giuseppe di Stefano and Tito Gobbi is considered one of the most important recordings of the last century.

Karl Böhm (1894-1981) had a rich symphonic and opera discography and a long-lasting and appreciated career. He conducted at the Vienna Opera House, Teatro alla Scala, Teatro Colón, the Metropolitan Opera, the Royal Opera House Covent Garden and opera festivals (Salzburg, Bayreuth). Karl Böhm, a close friend of Richard Strauss, was also one of the most constant promoters of his music all over the world, as well as the world premieres of two titles of the composer's work: *Die Schweigsame Frau* (1935) and *Daphne* (1938). Between 1965 and 1967, Bayreuth conducted a production of the Wagnerian *Ring des Nibelungen* directed by Wieland Wagner. The recordings of these shows, together with *Tristan and Isolde*, enjoyed a great deal of appreciation. Karl Böhm also signed the first recordings with *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* by Alban Berg, when these works had not inserted yet into the theatres' repertoire.

The Romanian conductor and composer **Ionel Perlea (1900-1970)** managed the Opera Houses from Cluj and Bucharest, getting a great international reputation in the opera world as a permanent employee at *Teatro alla Scala* in Milan (1947-1952). From 1949, he was conducting in America (New York, San Francisco). In 1951, he is the director of the Texas Opera Festival and he collaborates with the NBC Symphony Orchestra, where he meets Arturo Toscanini, whose good friend he

became. Besides, upon Toscanini's recommendation, who will nominate him as his successor, giving him his own wand, Ionel Perlea will sign a permanent agreement with the Connecticut Symphony Orchestra (1955-1965). During his career, Ionel Perlea was the conductor of numerous opera shows in Vienna, Paris, Florence, Rome, Buenos Aires, and Chicago, with some prestigious orchestras. He made recordings for the RCA with the Opera House of Rome, with prestigious artists such as Zinka Milanov, Montserrat Cabalé, Fedora Barbieri, Jussi Björling, Alfredo Kraus, Robert Merrill, Leonard Warren and Boris Christoff. Having suffered a stroke followed by partial paralysis of the right arm, Ionel Perlea learned with great effort to conduct only with his left hand, still achieving remarkable performances.

The Austrian conductor **Herbert von Karajan** (1908-1989) built his international reputation both as a permanent conductor of the famous Berlin Philharmonic (1955-1989) and by an impressive number of audio and video recordings with opera and symphonic repertoire, being a dominant figure in the world of classical post-war music. Since 1933, he collaborates extensively with the musical festivals in Salzburg, Bayreuth, Lucerna, Teatro alla Scala and the Vienna Opera House (where he is an artistic director between 1957 and 1964). Herbert von Karajan was a very influential personality in the world of lyrical theatre; he conducted and directed operas, and his discography heritage was immense, with audio or film recording of some of the most important symphonic and opera titles, collaborating with many prestigious artists of his time.

The vision of the Hungarian conductor **Georg Solti** (1912-1997) about his role in the Opera, as a decisive mediator between the scene and the pit, is found in an interview in 1988: "I always seek the right balance between direction, music, movement. Having a clear idea about drama, about theatre is what defines an opera conductor. Only when knowing the stage, the subject of the opera, the lights, the movements, everything that belongs to a show, you can say that you deeply know it." (Duffie, 1995)

Working as a répétiteur of the Hungarian State Opera and then as an assistant of Arturo Toscanini at the Salzburg Festival, Georg Solti fled to Switzerland after 1938, because of the restrictions imposed by the Nazi regime, playing the piano to earn his living. After World War II, he was hired as a conductor of the Munich State Opera House (1946), where there was a "lack of wands" after the *denazification* that affected conductors such as Wilhelm Furtwängler, Clemens Krauss, and Herbert von Karajan. Between 1952 and 1961, Solti managed the Frankfurt Opera (rebuilt after being destroyed in WW2) and in 1961 he became the musical director of the Covent Garden Opera House. A tendency of the time (met throughout Europe, including

Romania) was for the opera to be sung in the language of that country and not in the original language. Although a follower of that current, Georg Solti was forced to take over the original language in Covent Garden to coordinate the distributions that put together international guests with great difficulty. He also adopted the *stagione* system, which was different from the traditional one, characterising “repertory theatres. From 1962, Solti took the leading of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, for 22 years, where he performed numerous opera titles and made several symphonic recordings as well. Extremely prolific in the record industry, Solti recorded more than 45 opera titles with various ensembles.

Other prominent conductors in the lyrical theatre world of the twentieth century were **Erich Kleiber** (1890-1956), **Dimitri Mitropoulos** (1896-1960), **Oliviero De Fabritiis** (1902-1982), **André Cluytens** (1905-1967), **Francesco Molinari Pradelli** (1911-1996), **Carlo Maria Giulini** (1914-2005), **Georges Prêtre** (1924-2017), **Alberto Zedda** (1928-2017), **Carlos Kleiber** (1930-2004), **Nello Santi** (n.1931), and **Giuseppe Patanè** (1932- 1989). Among the notable conductors at the end of the last century, who enjoy prestigious careers at present as well, there are **Riccardo Muti** (born in 1941, conductor at Teatro alla Scala for 19 years since 1987), **James Levine** (born in 1943, conductor of the Opera House Metropolitan of New York for 40 years, 1976-2016), and **Valery Abisalovich Gergiev** (born in 1953).

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