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Context and the Stage Dramaturgy of the Main Character**

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Opera “Eugene Onegin” by P. Tchaikovsky: The Historical Context and the Stage Dramaturgy of the Main Character

ABSTRACT

The article considers the historical context and the dramaturgy of the character of Onegin in Tchaikovsky's opera with the same title, and the change of his image during the opera performance. The article defines the meaning of terms “context” and “text”. The opera libretto composed by K. Shilovsky and P. Tchaikovsky, is compared with Pushkin's novel “Eugene Onegin”. Understanding of the problems inherent in the opera can guide the singer to more accurate implementation of the performing tasks. They include fluent knowledge of the musical text of P.I. Tchaikovsky's opera, penetration into the figurative structure of this character, modelling the psychological nature of the role pattern, knowing of the historical and cultural context of the opera work as a whole. All these components are constituents of acting, which young singers need to learn.

Keywords: opera, image, character, act, emotion, nature, psychology, dramaturgy, acting.

Introduction

The opera “Eugene Onegin” is one of the most popular theatrical productions in the world opera repertoire. The leading theaters of the world, such as the Metropolitan Opera (USA), Grand Opera (France), La Scala (Italy) and others, as a rule, prefer to invite Russian singers to play the lead in Russian operas. Lyubov Kazarnovskaya and Anna Netrebko, Sergey Leiferkus and Dmitri Khvorostovsky, Maria Gulegina and many other Russian opera “stars” who provided and provide the success – and hence profitability – of performances staged abroad. It is quite difficult for foreign vocalists to enter the Russian opera repertoire because of the phonetic structure of the Russian language, vocal hurdles, inherent in the nature of the length of the Russian musical phrase. Drama development of the image on the stage is inevitably associated with the concept of “Russian soul”, “Russian nature”, with the psychology of image development in theatrical action, and many other components necessary for the singer’s presence on the stage of the opera house.

China is currently in the process of “mastering” the European and Russian opera repertoire. Thus, since 2014, Russia and China have been holding the Year of international exchange. In St. Petersburg, the Russian-Chinese youth orchestra conducted by Valery Gergiev performed at the Mariinsky theatre-2, and in Beijing, the premiere of Tchaikovsky’s “Eugene Onegin” was held in a joint theatrical performance of the Mariinsky theatre and the National center for performing arts (NCPA) of China. The famous St. Petersburg theater was the first foreign guest of the largest opera scene in China, which opened in 2007. Today, this ultra-modern complex, built on the main square of the Chinese capital, Tiananmen, competes with the largest music centers in the world, producing 15 performances a year. During the four nights of 2014, in Beijing, more than 8,000 spectators watched the opera “Eugene Onegin”. For Chinese youth, new prospects for “entering” the world of Russian music, opera and vocals open up. For this purpose, Chinese young musicians need to accumulate knowledge about the Russian culture, Russian composers and certain opera masterpieces, which include Tchaikovsky’s opera “Eugene Onegin”.

The Purpose of the Article

The purpose of the article is to determine the historical context of the opera “Eugene Onegin”; to reveal the dramatic outline of the opera, focusing on the image of Onegin, which is a serious performing task for the opera singer; to find changes in the hero’s psychological state, which will need to be solved on stage; to characterize the main semantic and figurative components of the musical image of Onegin. In Chinese musicology, the problem of the historical context in Russian operas has not yet obtained theoretical coverage. The aim of this article is to fill the gap.

Literature Review

In our study, we based on Russian scientists' well-known works on Russian opera, which provide a fundamental basis for researching this problem: Asafyev B.V. Selected works on P.I. Tchaikovsky, "About Opera". Leningrad, 1976; Alshvang A.A. Selected works in 2 volumes. Moscow, 1963; Bogatyrev V.Yu. Interaction of drama and music. Vocal aesthetics of an opera performance. St. Petersburg, 2013; Neyasova I.Yu. The Russian historical opera of the XIX century. Magnitogorsk, 2000; Nilova T. Typology of stage situations in the Russian classical opera. Methods of morphological analysis. Moscow, 1993; Lotman Yu.M. Conversations on the Russian culture. The Russian nobility's life and traditions (the XVIII – early XIX centuries). St. Petersburg, 1994; Lotman Yu.M. Novel "Eugene Onegin" by Alexander Pushkin. Comments. St. Petersburg, 2008.

Methodology

In the article "Opera "Eugene Onegin" by P. Tchaikovsky: the historical context and the stage dramaturgy of the main character", the methods of historical, source studies, musical-theoretical and comparative analysis are applied. We also used the methodology of hermeneutics, in which the theory of text interpretation is closely related to the science of understanding the meaning.

Main Part

Russian opera of the XIX century is a significant musical event, which is included in the Golden Collection of the world musical culture. Let us turn to the historical context of Tchaikovsky's opera "Eugene Onegin". First, let us clarify the terms we use: "context" and "text" of an opera, what is the difference? In our understanding, "context" means knowing, in a broad sense, the historical and cultural environment in which the opera characters exist; this also includes the obligatory knowledge of the history of creating the opera work, its basic dramatic, aesthetic and musical ideas. "Text", in our opinion, is a narrower concept; it is determined primarily by the literary libretto, which is the base for the composer to write the music for the whole performance. From these positions, let us take a detailed look at the text of the opera "Eugene Onegin", at the libretto of the opera, and find out what determines the context of the opera. The opera "Eugene Onegin" was created in 1878, based on the novel in verse by the outstanding Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837). During his short life (the poet tragically was killed in a duel in 1837), Pushkin gained fame as a brilliant poet, writer, critic, publicist and founder of the modern Russian literary language.

A.S. Pushkin wrote his novel "Eugene Onegin" for 7 years – from 1823 till 1830. The peculiarity of the novel is that it is written in verse. The novel "Eugene Onegin" consists of 8 chapters. This is a cult work of the Russian literature. In Russia, the novel is studied at school, and many Russian people know the lines

from “Eugene Onegin” by heart. There are several lines of the plot in the novel. Main characters – Tatiana, Onegin, Lensky, Olga – have different literary features, and are involved into a single dramatic knot of relationships. Tatiana’s unrequited love for Onegin is dramatic, Lensky’s death is tragic, and Onegin’s belated passionate love for Tatiana, at the end of the novel, no longer finds a response. The characters suffer, painfully crave happiness, but – “And happiness was not unlikely, and so near!” – happiness becomes impossible for them. The plot of the novel develops against the background of various pictures of the Russian nature and the Russian life: it is a noble estate, hospitable Moscow, cold capital St. Petersburg. Pushkin’s contemporaries called his novel “the encyclopedia of the Russian life” [2, pp. 431-472]. From the novel, as from an encyclopedia, you can learn almost everything about the era of the XIX century, how they dressed, and what was in fashion, what people valued most, what they talked about, what interests they lived. Very quickly, after its publication, the novel “Eugene Onegin” became favorite and popular in Russia. In turn, in the 70-ies of the XIX century, Russian people knew well the music of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1896). His operas “Undine” and “Oprichnik”, the ballet “Swan Lake”, the symphonic poems “Romeo and Juliet” and “Francesca da Rimini” brought him fame. Tchaikovsky was a respected Professor at the Moscow Conservatory. When he created the opera “Eugene Onegin”, Tchaikovsky wrote to his student-composer Sergei Taneyev, “I am looking for an intimate, but strong drama based on the conflict of positions that I have experienced or had to watch, which could touch me to the quick” [8, p. 67]. Tchaikovsky turned to the novel “Eugene Onegin” in 40 years after its publication, when Pushkin was long dead. Tchaikovsky asked his friend Konstantin Sergeevich Shilovsky to reduce Pushkin’s intricate and large novel and adapt it into an operatic libretto. In May 1977, at a dacha in the Moscow region, Tchaikovsky and Shilov, together, wrote the libretto of the opera based on Pushkin’s novel. From Pushkin’s novel, they took only the lyrical line of main characters and their relationships – sisters Tatiana and Olga, friends Lensky and Onegin, Gremin, Tatiana’s husband. The authors of the libretto “compressed” the action of the novel to the minimum, combined the II and III chapters of the novel, some chapters omitted altogether, minimally used Pushkin’s quotes. The librettists followed not “the letter of the text” but its spirit. Therefore, Tchaikovsky did not accidentally call his opera “lyrical scenes”, entrusting the premiere of this performance to students of the Moscow Conservatory, and not to the Imperial theaters of St. Petersburg and Moscow.

Let us focus on the text of the libretto [10] and its implementation in music by P.I. Tchaikovsky. In parallel with the text of the libretto, we will pay attention to the cultural and historical context in this opera work.

In Scene I of Act I of the opera, we can see the country estate of the landowner Larina, and Pushkin’s lines of the beginning of Chapter II from “Onegin” sound as a subtext, “The village where Eugene missed, / was a charming corner”. Applying very accurate musical means, Tchaikovsky “draws” the charm of the noble life in the countryside, in which beauty and harmony are everywhere. Modern stage directors exercises in innovations that distort the idea of the historical era. According to Pushkin and Tchaikovsky, this scene of Act I should present the

Russian XIX century, the village, the Larins estate, the house and the adjacent garden. In the libretto, there are the following words, “evening falls, the hostess Larina and the nurse cook jam; from the house, Tatyana and Olga’s singing is heard” [10]. The opera begins with Tatiana and Olga’s famous duet “Have you heard, behind the grove, the voice at night / of the singer of love, the singer of your sadness?”. Listeners and spectators immediately “immersed” in the atmosphere of the Pushkin era, home music and soft singing. Act I of the opera presents the exposition of the main characters.

We would like to recall that since the birth of the opera genre (1600), in the dramaturgy of any opera performance, there were key moments that carried a great emotional and semantic load. They were expressed in arioso and arias. It is telling that two significant solo numbers of Scene I do not contain Pushkin’s text. They are Lensky’s arioso “I love you, Olga, as a mad soul of the poet” and Olga’s arioso “I am not capable of languid sadness / I do not like to be sad in silence...” Here the librettists created their texts, close to Pushkin’s versification, based on the vocal nature of these ariozos, melodic lines, which were necessary for the composer to create musical descriptions of these characters. Next to Lensky’s and Olga’s ariosos, in which emotions and the characters are presented with bright, beautiful melodies, Onegin’s solo arioso “My uncle was a man of virtue, / When he became quite old and sick...” is quite small, “passing” (Tatiana and Onegin walk along the stage to the house). However, the exact musical touches marked the character of the main hero: it is a secular man, arrogant, courteous, and indifferent. For this purpose, Tchaikovsky intendedly choose the rhythm of minuet, emphasizing with orchestral and vocal means Onegin’s secular courtesy and coldness.

Scene II of Act I – the scene of Tatiana’s letter – is a complete musical exposition of Tatiana as a character. It is a passionate monologue of a girl in love, which is the dramatic culmination of Act I. It is telling that for the libretto, Pushkin’s text is used with almost no changes, “I write to you, what else...” [6, p. 61-63]. Pushkin’s poetic lines surprisingly plastically coincided with the vocal part. The musical description of Tatiana is extremely attractive musically and aesthetically, and the change of her states, moods and impulses create a deep, psychological image. Great Russian singers have created unsurpassed models of the scene with the letter on the opera stage: Galina Vishnevskaya, Lyubov Kazarnovskaya, Anna Netrebko.

Scene III of Act I presents Onegin and Tatiana’s meeting in the garden. The librettists solved it in a similar way. Pushkin’s text is taken only for the chorus of girls, “Girls, you, girls ‘n’ beauties...”, and for the rebuke given by Eugene to Tatiana (Onegin’s aria “To me you wrote, Do not deny...”). Here Pushkin’s text from Chapter IV of “Onegin” is fully applied. Onegin’s image invisibly contains Pushkin’s lines of “morality”: “With womankind, the less we love them, / the easier they become to charm, / the tighter we can stretch above them / Enticing nets to do them harm”. In Onegin’s arias, the XII, XIII, XIV, XVI verses of Chapter IV are successively taken, which created a surprisingly integral line of musical development, where the sound of the word coincided with the melody, and the word “chants” in a natural way. Onegin’s aria “If I would wish to have

restricted / my life by family, you see” is a courteous lesson to Tatiana, sounding confident and unhurried, in a measured, even rhythm. Tatiana’s confession touches Onegin in some way, but he is alien to a village girl’s love feelings. In the measured and wonderful musical flow of this aria, there is a calm restraint, and softness and courtesy, due to rounded beautiful musical phrases. This aria of Onegin is extremely important in the dramatic respect, because it shows how Onegin changes under the influence of a genuine feeling of love, which arose so late. This will show us the finale of the opera.

In Scene IV of Act II “The dancing party at the Larins” the dramaturgy of the opera performance and the main characters’ relationship are “pulled together” in a tight knot, receiving as a tragic outcome the friends’ quarrel and Lensky’s challenge to Onegin to a duel.

Let us dwell on the concept “duel”, which has a long history in Europe. The “opera duel” and the real duel in Russia in the XIX century are not the same. After a duel, the opera hero goes out to bow to the audience, alive and unharmed, and in real life, a duel, as a rule, can bring death to one of its participants, that is, a duel is a tragic phenomenon in human relations. As a connoisseur of the Russian culture of the XVIII-XIX centuries, Yu.M. Lotman gave such a succinct description of the Russian duel of the XIX century, “the Duel (combat) is a pair fight, taking place according to certain rules, with the aim of restoring honor, removing from the offended a shameful stain caused by an insult. Thus, the role of the duel is socially significant. Duel represents a certain procedure on recovery honor and cannot be understood beyond the specificity of the concept “honor” in the general system of ethics of the Russian Europeanized post-Peter the Great noble society <...>. The ideal that the noble culture creates for themselves, implies complete banishment of fear, and assertion of honor as the main regulator of behavior <...> danger, drawing closer, face to face, to death becomes the cleansing means of removing the insult from the person” [3, p. 164-165].

In the XIX century, in Europe, fashions on duels went on wane. In Russia, “dueling passions” flared up with unusual force, dueling became “a sign of time”, peculiar fashion. A.S. Pushkin participated in several duels, in the last one he was mortally wounded (1837). The poet Mikhail Lermontov was killed in a duel on the Caucasus (1841); Alexander Griboyedov, diplomat, playwright, composer, pianist, was wounded in a duel, his finger being shot through. Writers Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, Maximilian Voloshin, Nikolai Gumilev, Mikhail Zoshchenko participated in duels, without serious consequences. The list could go on. We would like to note this special sign of time. It is tragic, and P.I. Tchaikovsky brilliantly expressed it by musical means.

In the context of historical truth and the sign of time, we can consider the duel between Lensky and Onegin, where a fatal outcome was inevitable. The drama of the whole performance is focused on the finale of “The dancing party at the Larins” (Act II). Here the orchestra plays an important role, and, according to the famous Russian musicologist I. Sollertinsky’s apt remark, “Continuous action on the stage corresponds to the continuous symphonic fabric of the orchestra” [7, pp. 29-30]. We can hear music for fashionable dances of the time: waltz, ekossez, mazurka, but against this background, by means of a kind of polyphonic and

psychological *srtetto* (*ital.* “acceleration”), the choir and soloists bring the dramatic climax to the quarrel between Lensky and Onegin. The orchestra creates a kind of dialogue between the symphonic sound and the vocal part. The musical fabric of the orchestra and singing is in constant motion; the whole dynamics enhanced, the tempo accelerated, and the overall feeling of anxiety and excitement pumped up. Here it is quite often possible to hear transition of the musical theme of the vocal part into the orchestra, as if the orchestra “narrated” the speech of the main characters. Moreover, vice versa, a typical technique is appearance of a vocal melody out of the instrumental theme.

The tragic outcome of Lensky’s drama comes in the scene of the duel in Scene V of Act II. Lensky’s aria “What does next day for me prepare?” is one of the melodic and lyrical peaks of opera. This aria is P.I. Tchaikovsky’s vocal masterpiece; it is an indicator of the Russian art of singing. Outstanding Russian tenors left incomparable versions of the recordings of this aria: Ivan Kozlovsky, Sergei Lemeshev, Vladimir Atlantov, Nikolai Gedda.

After the aria “What does next day for me prepare?”, it sounds duet of Lensky and Onegin based on Pushkin’s lines, “The foes! / Shortly each from other / Were drifted they by thirst of blood”. Lensky and Onegin’s duet “The foes!” is a gloomy reflection of both heroes on life and death and is full of dire forebodings. The duet has the form of a canon. Onegin’s melody echoes Lensky’s part, which conveys in general feeling of sorrow, regret and foreshadows an inevitable tragic outcome. Further, in the orchestra, the rapidly accelerating movement of the music is interrupted by a shot. Struck by a bullet, Lensky falls. This shot not only fatally strikes Lensky, it morally kills Onegin, forcing him to experience the tragedy, the possibility of which, it seems, he could not even think, following the established conventions in the high society, not implying genuine human feelings. This moment is very important in terms of the actor’s performance. At this time, Onegin remains alone on the stage, in front of the body of his friend killed by him. Tragic music sounds in the orchestra, and the opera singer must show the maximum of his acting skills so that the audience believed in the power of his experiences.

Scene VI of Act III of the opera, “The dancing party in St. Petersburg”, depicts a different environment, with a different domestic and social context. This is “resplendent Petersburg”, with its conventions of relations in the high society, in which a sense of measure, restraint of feelings, so called secular decency are decisive, as evidenced by the ceremonial polyphonic “Polonaise” and Gremin’s aria “For love all ages are submissive”.

Onegin’s monologue “And here I am bored...” shows us very different Onegin, who experienced painful reassessment of his life because of his friend killed in that duel caused by a stupid quarrel at a village dancing party. Tatiana’s appearance at the dancing ball is accompanied by a calm and noble lyrical theme of waltz, which creates her new image of affably restrained and stately beautiful Princess Gremina. In Onegin’s arioso “Alas, no doubt...”, the image of the main character resolutely changes: ardent love for Tatiana flashes in his heart. His musical speech becomes passionate, emotionally rich and is based on the theme of the scene with Tatiana’s letter. “Let me die!” is the result of the main character’s psychological rebirth.

Scene VII of Act III is the second dramatic climax and the finale of the opera. The orchestral introduction expresses Tatiana's mournful thoughts by means of the sad elegiac theme. During Tatiana's monologue, when she is reading Onegin's letter, the theme of her girlish dreams sounds in the orchestra as a memory of her youth. Onegin's impetuous appearance interrupts her reflection. Their dialogue is the last explanation of the characters, full of emotional contrasts. It conveys the hard struggle of their feelings, striving for happiness and inability of achieving it. Arioso episodes – Onegin's and Tatiana's phrases – follow each other. In the musical development of the scene, their duet of harmony "And happiness was not unlikely, and so near!" becomes a brief expressive stop. Onegin's last appeal to Tatiana "Oh, don't drive away! You love me!", full of pleading and passion, emphasizes the tragic doom of their feelings and destinies.

As many musicologists noted, "The final scene of "Eugene Onegin" is one of Tchaikovsky's highest achievement (and, perhaps, of the entire Russian Opera) in developing a duet-duel – a kind of dialogue, fully and vividly characterizing its participants" [1, p. 204]. In the final scene, Onegin is not a jaded cold reasoner as he appears in the first scenes. Onegin's passionate speech is sincere; the music of his appeal to Tatiana is beautiful, noble and full of deep feeling. The psychological line of this character is voluminous, which Yu.M. Lotman confirms in his study, "Onegin's soul awoke to a vivid and bright feeling, and the dramatic end of the history of their relationship leaves Eugene unhappy in love, but, due to the experiences of real deep feelings, makes him a truly alive and full-fledged person capable of suffering, feeling, and thinking. For Onegin, the latest meeting with Tatiana is simultaneously harsh retaliation and an act of mercy. The final scene (first of all, the image of Tatiana in it) embodies the idea that even the most unfavorable circumstances do not constitute an insurmountable, fatal obstacle to preservation, restoration, consolidation of "the order in the human soul" <...>" [4, p. 352].

For the singer who acts the role of Onegin, this path of the hero's psychological passage through the entire opera, with concentration on the internal change of feelings and emotions, is very important.

Finding Result

The genius of Tchaikovsky's music is that it allows the performer, the conductor and the director to interpret variatively subtleties of moral and psychological conclusions of the events that happened to the characters, while not destroying the author's and figurative outline. Tchaikovsky describes the characters in the language of feelings born of music, leaving the performer, the conductor and the director the opportunity to individually study nuances of the characters' dispositions.

There is a belief that any work of an outstanding composer is a message. The opera "Eugene Onegin", performed in all opera houses of the world, is P.I. Tchaikovsky's message to the XXI century. The composer wrote, "I seem to be really gifted with the property of truthfully, sincerely and simply expressing by

means of music the feelings that the text suggests. In this sense, I am a realist and a native Russian person <...>” [9, p. 111]. “These “precepts” of the great Russian composer should be studied by all performers wishing to comprehend the opera “Eugene Onegin” in the concert hall, in the opera house or at educational concerts in musical institutions. Truthfully, sincerely and simply is the meaning of touching the music of P.I. Tchaikovsky” [5, p. 16].

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