



ITALIAN OPERA AND ITS PLACE IN WORLD OPERA ART

Yuldashov Asliddin Paradaevich

Teacher of Uzbekistan-Finland Institute of Pedagogy

Abstract

Opera semiseria is a genre of Italian opera of the first half of the 19th century, among the best examples of which are works by the greatest composers: The Thieving Magpie by G. Rossini, La Sonnambula by V. Bellini, Linda di Chamounix by G. Donizetti, etc. These operas are presented in the repertoire of modern theaters, they are studied in courses on the history of music. However, the genre itself has been very little studied in our time, the idea of it is vague. Moreover, in domestic reference publications and educational literature, the issues of the origin and existence of the genre are interpreted differently, even the term itself has different definitions. The article considers the history of the origin of the term "opera semiseria" / "dramma semiserio" and its interpretation in Western and domestic musical science of the 19th - 21st centuries.

Keywords: Music history education, dramma semiserio, opera semiseria, italian opera.

INTRODUCTION

The Italian opera house of the first half of the 19th century is one of the most important topics studied in the course on the history of foreign music in higher music educational institutions. In the process of mastering this topic, using the works of G. Rossini, V. Bellini and G. Donizetti as an example, the importance of Italian operas for the development of national opera schools is shown. No less important is the practical aspect of the topic: Italian opera of the early Ottocento is the basis of the repertoire of most modern theaters, a potential place of work for graduates of higher educational institutions as future vocalists, choir and orchestra artists.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Among the masterpieces usually considered when studying this topic are the operas of the greatest Italian composers of that time: The Thieving Magpie by G. Rossini, La Sonnambula by V. Bellini, Linda di Chamounix by G. Donizetti, etc. These works are considered the best examples of the opera semiseria genre, popular in Italy and other European countries in the first half of the 19th century. Nevertheless, when analyzing these operas in lectures and seminars, the genre itself is rarely mentioned, only





occasionally indicating that it is characterized by an everyday melodramatic plot and a combination of dramatic and comedic elements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Unfortunately, the history of music course taught in higher education institutions ignores the origin and time limits of the genre, as well as its poetic and musical features. Moreover, in domestic reference publications and educational literature, these issues are interpreted differently, even the term itself has different definitions. It is clear that such discord and inconsistency of opinions complicate both the study of operas related to this genre from the standpoint of musicology, and their assimilation in the educational process. There is a pressing need to clarify these issues and specify the genre “portrait” of the opera semiseria. This article explains the history of the origin of the term opera semiseria (as well as its synonyms – drama semiserio / melodramma semiserio) and comments on their interpretation in scientific thought of the 19th–21st centuries.

In the following decades (1780–1790s) the term was used rarely. In some cases it was accompanied by an additional commentary, for example *semiserio e bernesco* (playful), as in the libretto of the opera *Stordilano, Prince of Granada on the Enchanted Island* (*Storidilano principe di Granata nell’isola incantata*, 1785) by Bertati-Traetta. In other cases, the phrase *dramma semiserio* appeared as a replacement for the designations *dramma giocoso* or *dramma eroicomico* in new productions of operas, as was the case, for example, in the libretto of the opera *Love Affair* (*L’intrigo amoroso*, 1795) by Bertati-Paer, which, as A. Jacobshagen asserts, “was staged in 1799 in Dresden as *dramma giocoso*, but a year later in Mantua it was given as *dramma semiserio*” [1]. At the turn of the 18th–19th centuries, the subtitle *dramma semiserio* was used to designate *mezzo carattere* operas. Other terms were also often used (*farsa sentimentale*, *dramma eroicomico*, *dramma giocoso*, etc.), and, as A. Jacobshagen emphasizes, such a subtitle in that period “does not yet represent a typical example of the dominant profile of the genre, but only confirms the genre terminology that has not yet been strengthened.”

Since the beginning of the 19th century, the designation *dramma semiserio* was given mainly to libretti of Italian adaptations of French “operas of salvation”. For example, the famous and influential Italian composer Ferdinando Paer chose this subtitle over others for his *mezzo carattere* operas (most of which were adaptations of French operas), written and staged outside of Italy. The German musicologist came to the conclusion that “with the introduction of the new term *dramma semiserio* (or *melodramma semiserio*), various other designations clearly disappear or disappear





completely” [3]. By 1820, the subtitle opera semiseria / dramma semiserio was used everywhere, and not only in Italy: operas in Italian with the corresponding designation appeared in Spain and France. Such are, for example, the semi-seria operas of the Spanish composer R. Carnicer "Adele of Lusignan" (1819), "Elena and Constantine" (1821), "The Punished Libertine, or Don Juan Tenorio" (1822), "Elena and Malvina" (1829), as well as the semiseria opera of the French composer J.-F. Halévy "Clary" (1828). However, even at this time there was no uniformity in the use of the term: "Numerous operas, which in content belong to the genre, also have the single designation melodrama" [2]. In the 1830s, more and more preference was given to the word melodrama, and the addition semiseria practically disappeared from librettos and scores.

Scientific interest in the genre and attempts to characterize its features appeared only in the middle of the 20th century, when the bel canto repertoire was revived in musical practice and opera semiseria returned to the opera stage. Before that time, references to the genre itself in scientific or reference literature were rare. Thus, in the "Dictionary and Bibliography of Music" by Pietro Lichtenthal (1836), the term opera semiseria appears without further explanation in the list of genres of Italian opera. "There are four types of Italian opera," writes P. Lichtenthal, "opera sacra, opera seria, opera semiseria and opera buffa" [4]. In the book *Lessons in the Composition of Any Poem or Work Related to Music* (1841) by the respected Italian aristocrat and fine connoisseur of the arts Count Carlo Ritorni, there are several mentions of the genre of opera semiseria. In a note about G. Rossini's *The Thieving Magpie*, he writes that this opera is "neither a serious opera buffa nor a comic opera seria" [2], its plot "is neither funny nor comic, but touching, which makes it sentimental and semi-serious (semiserio)" [Ibid.]. In another place, he calls the genre of opera semiseria "urban opera" and emphasizes that it does not mix two different genres (seria and buffa) [2]. Since the second half of the 19th century, the term opera semiseria has begun to appear more and more frequently in various music reference publications (for example, in the "Riemann Musical Dictionary"), and at the same time its interpretation, known to us now as "designation of a serious opera with isolated comic scenes," was also consolidated [4]. The situation did not change in the second half of the 20th century. In musicological literature (Western and domestic) in the 1960s and 1970s, information about the opera semiseria genre was presented again only in reference literature (encyclopedias, dictionaries, glossaries). For example, the Russian musicologist V. E. Ferman, in a book of articles published in the collection "Opera Theatre" in 1961, but written back in the 1930s–1940s, points out that "Italian opera semiseria should be classified as an opera semi-genre... since it mixes the





characteristic features of different opera genres” [2]. In a special article from the “Musical Encyclopedia” (1978), T. N. Solovyova notes that the term opera semiseria is “not strict”, “auxiliary”, and is used to conventionally designate operas “occupying an intermediate position between opera seria and opera buffa” [3]. In 1969, the German musicologist F. Lippmann wrote that the genre of opera semiseria is “nothing more than opera seria with comic inserts” [4], and a decade later, K. Dahlhaus, in the glossary to the book “Music of the 19th Century,” defines opera semiseria as “a music-historical term for a variety of opera buffa, which originated from the “sentimental play,” com die larmoyante” [2].

CONCLUSION

All this is still only a prospect, but already now, relying on the latest research on the history and theory of the opera semiseria genre will allow students to more clearly imagine its “portrait”, and therefore – to come closer to understanding the operatic masterpieces themselves.

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