

REVIEW

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on the dissertation

Specificity of the comic bel canto in the opera *Don Pasquale* by Gaetano Donizetti. Theoretical and directorial approaches

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The dissertation of Stefan Svetozarov Donev "Specificity of the comic bel canto in the opera *Don Pasquale* by Gaetano Donizetti. Theoretical and Directorial Approaches" consists of an introduction, seven chapters, conclusion and appendix - 347 standard typescript pages in total. The bibliography contains titles in Bulgarian, Russian, English, German and Italian. The set of materials submitted by Stefan Donev includes all the required documents (dissertation, abstract, list and copies of scientific publications, curriculum vitae, as well as all provided references, declarations and protocols). Three publications on the topic of the dissertation research have been submitted, which date from the last three years.

The seemingly narrow focus of the work - a single opera, *Don Pasquale* by Gaetano Donizetti - and a single aspect of it, the comic bel canto - does not seem to suggest an extended study. Donev notes that this opera, despite its stage popularity, has been largely neglected by scholars - his work, therefore, on the one hand fills a gap, but on the other hand, it cannot draw on a discussion in the already available literature. Donev's approach, however, is an example of how the 'unpacking' of a single work can overlay multiple historical, theoretical and practical - with regard to staging and stage realisation - perspectives to turn it into a synecdoche, a pars pro toto, for larger aesthetic concerns, while at the same time, through these larger levels, the specificity of the work's microcosm is highlighted as carefully as possible. In this case, this means focusing in later chapters on the staging of the work, both as an attempt to classify the history of its staging and, potentially, as a sketch of possible future stagings. In theoretical terms, the result of this approach is the philosophical and aesthetic elaboration of the notion of the comic bel canto, which is one of the main contributions of the thesis.

The consistent unfolding of perspectives that will frame the derivation of the aesthetic concerns of the work is accomplished through the precise structuring of the dissertation. The first chapter is the most expansive: it contextualizes Gaetano Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* in the "longue durée" of Romanticism. Both this chapter and the following one, which deals with an overview of the typical Romantic attitude towards the comic, humour and irony, do not claim to be innovative in themselves, but rather prepare the historical and theoretical framework for deriving the comic bel canto from Donizetti's opera. More generally, it is also the basis for the search for a bridge between the comic as an aesthetic category and art. The third chapter deals with the specificity of the musical image, which is brought out by classifying the musical image as lyrical, epic, dramatic, fairy-tale and abstract. Like the previous two chapters, this chapter prepares and contextualizes the analysis of *Don Pasquale* that will follow. The literature that could be brought specifically to these three chapters is of course vast. Donev's bibliography cannot be criticized in view of its length. However, some omissions seem strange - for example, while E.T.A. Hoffmann is

referred to both as a musician and as a man of letters in Donev's account, it is not sufficiently clear where the information about him is drawn from, and Hoffmann's own works (a number of them translated into Bulgarian) in some of which Gluck is a central reference point and where a number of observations have a direct bearing on the subject - have left no trace in the bibliography.

The fourth chapter focuses on Donizetti and *Don Pasquale*, again starting from a more general picture of nineteenth-century Italian Romantic opera. There is a biography of Donizetti, the libretto of the opera is included, and finally a dramaturgical and musical analysis is offered, as well as an analysis of Donizetti's musical language and style. The fifth chapter, 'The Comic and Beauty', finally turns to the exposition of the comic bel canto as an aesthetic category as promised from the outset. This is the central chapter of the dissertation. If structurally it is not literally in the middle, it is because of the accumulation of perspectives already mentioned to provide its historical and theoretical foundation. Here are undoubtedly the most insightful, and most beautifully written in the spirit of its musical-romantic problematic, pages of the dissertation, as can be seen from examples such as this:

"The ideal beauty of bel canto has an independent artistic meaning arising in the sense of the boundless creative power and imagination on the part of the composer and singer. Behind the concrete goal of astonishing virtuosity and the deliberate generation of the effect of stunning, unattainable artifice, extraordinary ability, talent and virtuosity, there lies the profound aesthetic romantic aspiration to overcome and exceed all limitations facing the creative person who is capable of transforming both itself and the world" (p. 249).

After examining the idealizing orientation of bel canto, Donev counters the view of opera buffa as a kind of critique and profanation of this idealization. For him - and I am inclined to agree - it is rather an extension, complement and enrichment of the romantic attitudes in bel canto, insofar as 'the romantic buffa is not merely an opposition, nor merely a mirror for the illusions of the ideal ... but a rediscovery of the bright beauty of vivacity, at the expense of the melancholy charm of mysterious shadows.' (p. 258) This statement applies with full force to Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*, where the comic image of the miser is contrasted with the romantically idealised infatuation of the young couple, the contrasts and transitions between one and the other finding expression with equal force through the means of bel canto.

Here, however, for me the most serious problem of the thesis emerges: although illustrated and defended through the analysis of *Don Pasquale*, the comic bel canto is not sufficiently theorised, but remains largely at the level of a phenomenological description. What exactly does it consist in, seen from the perspective of aesthetics? In the perspective of music theory? Technically, in terms of vocal techniques? How does the "stunningly virtuosity" become comic? How do the vocal particularities of bel canto change this switch - from poignancy to laughter? Donizetti's opera undoubtedly demonstrates this, and Donev's analysis of it shows it, but the demonstration is not sufficiently theoretically articulated in its delineation of the comic bel canto as an aesthetic category.

The last two chapters, which deal with directorial approaches - as historically realized and as potentiality - come to remind us that the dissertation is largely practice-oriented and that its subtitle promises not only theoretical but also directorial approaches. These chapters are somewhat schematic and could be expanded, but even as such they add to the overall understanding of *Don Pasquale*. They show how the knowledge of a historically and theoretically informed legacy deployed in the preceding chapters can fit into specific directorial work.

In conclusion: Stefan Svetozarov Donev's dissertation "The Specificity of the Comic Bel canto in the Opera *Don Pasquale* by Gaetano Donizetti. Theoretical and Directorial Approaches" offers an innovative reading of opera buffa and in particular of *Don Pasquale* by Gaetano Donizetti through the concept of the comic bel canto as an aesthetic category. The realisation of this interesting conception suffers from certain incompletenesses, from an insufficient derivation of the theoretical potential. Yet the overlay of different levels and perspectives of interpretation - historical, theoretical-aesthetic and practical - results in an enriching, in many places exciting and ultimately convincing study. I would also point to the poetic beauty of the style that Donev achieves at a number of key moments. The clarity of this style also seems to me essential, and would make his work accessible to a wider audience.

The extended abstract adequately presents the content of the thesis, though it must be pointed out that the style and engagingness of the overall presentation surpasses it. I agree with the contributions - with the caveat that in some cases - particularly as regards the comic bel canto - they sound like a logical but underdeveloped consequence of the overall analysis. In spite of my critical remarks, I believe that Stefan Svetozarov Donev's work, "The Specificity of the Comic Belcanto in the Opera *Don Pasquale* by Gaetano Donizetti. Theoretical and Directorial Approaches" offers a fresh, useful and innovative look at an important moment in the development of the opera and its aesthetic implications. Therefore, my assessment is positive and I will vote with conviction for the award to Stefan Svetozarov Donev of the scientific and educational degree of Doctor of Sciences for the scientific field 2. Humanities, professional field 2.3. Philosophy.

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