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The Modification of the Genre of Mystery Play in the Wagner's, Schoenberg's and Messiaen's Compositions

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The aim of this essay is to understand the role and variety of the main theatrical genre, mystery play, in the theatrical art of the 19th and the 20th century, by examining Wagner's *Parsifal*, Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* and Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise*.²

In the historical perspective, the genre has never preserved its first pure features, especially when social and cultural context is changed; however, during developing process, some features of a genre might be revealed in a different context and with different characters. In case of mystery play, we can observe the reincarnation of the genre or synthesis of mystery play with another genre such as opera, where the last one has also not preserved its "pure" stylistic features, and as

¹ The many Latin terms used by medieval writers to refer to dramatic representation include *ordo*, *officium*, *ludus*, *festum*, *miraclum* (rare), *misterium* and, most frequently, *representatio*. Each vernacular has an equivalent variety. None of these terms is used consistently, nor is any used exclusively (*cf.* English "play") to denote a drama. The terms tragedy and comedy are very rare and are not applicable in their traditional meanings. Of the above terms, *ordo* and *officium* are commonly used to describe liturgical ceremonies as well as plays; this draws attention to a fundamentally important but elusive distinction between ritual and drama. J. Stevens, R. Rastall, *Medieval Drama*, Oxford 2001.

² All titles and names of heroes in the whole article are used in original heading.

a result, the mixed genre—opera-mystery play—was created. The main stylistic sign of this mixed genre is religious plot and phenomenon of ritual. Therefore, all religious rituals (which are the main features of mystery play) such as faith, stigmatization, preaching, resurrection etc., are modeled on the opera stage.

The mystery play was a medieval musical-dramatic genre established on the basis of European religious theatre. When describing vernacular plays, medieval writers used the terms "miracle" and "mystery" without distinction; in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, in the article about Medieval Drama,³ the term "miracle" denotes a play based on the life of a saint, and "mystery"—a play on a biblical or apocryphal subject. These may both be categorized as "historical" as opposed to the "fictional" character of the morality plays.⁴ The main goals of mystery plays were to invoke the spiritual-religious categories, strengthen faith and reach catharsis. Therefore, the main character of them was Christ and his life: the birth, preaching, crucifixion, death and resurrection.

Our aim is to determine the role of the mystery play genre in the musical culture of the 20th century and to sort out the most important stable characteristics of the genre of mystery play that became dominant in the end of the 19th and in the 20th century, according to different national schools.

There are a lot of works about the phenomenon of the genre of mystery play in the West European musicological literature which could be divided into two groups. In the first group, there are works particularly about medieval drama. Scholars describe medieval drama from the context of historical development, revealing the problem of terminology, as in, for example: J. Stevenson's *Medieval Drama*; R. Rastall's *The Heaven Singing: Music in Early English Religious Drama*; P. King's *Coventry Mystery Plays* etc. In the second group, there are books and materials about specific model of the genre in accordance with the composer's ideology, social context and the specifics of the genre, for example: R. Bell's *Wagner's Parsifal: An appreciation in the*

³ The corpus of medieval drama in Latin and the major European vernaculars is huge. Essentially, there are two types of religious drama. In the first one, traditionally called the "liturgical drama", the whole text of the play is sung monophonically in Latin. In the second one, vernacular drama, the main action is conducted in the spoken vernacular, with songs and instrumental music, plainchant and polyphony, introduced as appropriate.

⁴ J. Stevens, R. Rastall, op. cit.

Light of His Theological Journey, S. A. Weor's Parsifal Unveiled: The Meaning of Richard Wagner's Masterpiece, W. Kinderman's Wagner's Parsifal, C. Dingle's Messian's Final Works, K. Wörner's Schoenberg's Moses and Aaron etc.

In my opinion, the best models demonstrating the stable characteristics of the genre of mystery play in the 19th and 20th century are:

- Wagner's *Parsifal*—the idea of transfiguration and ascension, redemption;
- Schoenberg's *Moses and Aron*—the mystery as a way of solving the social conflict:
- Messiaen's Saint François d'Assise—apotheosis of Catholic faith, kenosis of Christ.

The important issues were outlined during the research:

- What type of mystery is being created in the theatrical art of this period?
- What stable characteristics do the composers invoke?
- What type of dramaturgy do they use?

The following instructions would be the leading stable characteristics of the genre of mystery play.

- 1. Foresee the myth from the religious point of view.
- 2. Consider the essence of religion in the social context.
- 3. Perceive the universe from the perspective of the concrete religious faith.

What is outlined is the unity of necessary components of the genre of the mystery play: multidimensional sources of libretto; a mission of the main hero; the author's interpretation of the mystery; the abundance of ritual scenes; the relationship between the internal and external dramaturgical processes; synthesis of the different theatrical genres; static dramaturgy. All of these features suggest a specific type of musical dramaturgy, where the categories of time and space contain three main mystic spheres: divine, terrestrial and demonic. Consequently, the dramaturgy of opera staging contains three levels of activity: superficial, inner and upon time.

Foreseeing the Myth from the Religious Context

At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the processes in the European artistic thinking, the new review of religious, ethical and esthetical issues, Schopenhauer's philosophy and existential sadness recovered the genre of mystery play. General religious themes, multi-layer dramaturgy and theatrical stage, simultaneity of the categories of time and space became essential in the opera staging of that period. The European musical culture looked back to the past once more and called forth the most important medieval musical-dramaturgical genre—mystery play.⁵

Richard Wagner writes:

When a religion loses potential, it seems to become a refugee and causes spiritual expression. At such time, only art can return the lost function to the religion. The use of religious or sacral symbols in the artistic pieces makes the art equal to the truth and enables it to preach in such a persuasive way as only religion can.⁶

It is remarkable that in his last years the composer wrote the opera *Parsifal*, in which the idea of the Christian religion is generalized by the medieval legend. Wagner created his own myth about Parsifal that he called "a story about the European civilization in front of destruction".

The uniqueness of Parsifal derives from its philosophical-symbolic content and the definition of the genre: Wagner called the operas "Scenic Action for Celebration", although the drama is a real mystery play. Like the medieval mysteries, the composer used different sources in his libretto: the medieval legend about the Holy Grail, Eschenbach's, Kyot the Provencal's mythological histories about Holy Grail, conceptions of Eastern and Western religions, historical facts about knights' lives, the Song of Nibelungs. Like medieval mysteries, the dramaturgy of *Parsifal* includes the following main mystic spheres of the time and space aspects: divine, terrestrial and demonic. Each one is embodied in the concrete character of the opera. The Grail is connected with

⁵ We can call the whole process the neomedievalism.

⁶ S. Weor, Parsifal Unveiled: The Meaning of Richard Wagner's Masterpiece, New York 2013.

⁷ A. Batta, Opera: Composers, Works, Performers, Germany 2009.

Titurel and Amfortas, magic gardens with Klingsor and Kundry, terrestrial sphere with Parsifal. The historic time and space in the opera are tightly connected with knightly life, meetings and rituals. They affect the author's time and space. The actuality of the mystery in the reality of the composer is apparent as in the words of Gurnemanz: "Du siehst, mein Sohn, zum Raum wird hier die Zeit" ("Do you see, my son, in this realm time becomes space").8

The specific combination of time components helps the audience foresee the eternity on the whole, eternity inside themselves and thus, realize the essence of the universe.

The dramaturgy of operatic production includes three levels:

- External—fight for the mission of Grail; fight with Klingsor's world; destruction of Klingsor's kingdom by Parsifal; life of the Grail Knights;
- 2. Internal—ethical, religious-philosophical: Parsifal's understanding of the essence of life; lyrical-psychological: Amforta's regret, passion and Kundri's transfiguration.
- 3. Timeless: Mystic ritual of the Grail and its symbolism. For example, the Holy Grail is not just a symbol of divine existence, but also the main attribute of the Grail mystery it is dedicated to Eucharist. Like in medieval mysteries, the understanding of the truth in the opera derives from the idea of self-sacrifice. However, the composer discusses the divine world from the mythological point of view that causes the illusionary perception of the Christian mission.

The German philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno writes:

The idea of mystery—it is the idea of the religion of art, as modern people think about it. Such perception itself—the religion of art—is an old term and belongs to Hegel. By its essence, the esthetical consciousness is committed to awake the essential being by following the secret regularities of its style. This is a kind of metaphysical essence which is unable to substantially reach the prosaically loaded, enchanted world. Parsifal is conceived in a way to create a sacred atmosphere. The aura of music and characters are subject to this. The piece of work believes in the strength of redemption that according to Schopenhauer is

⁸ R. Wagner, Parsifal Libretti, Bayreuth 2013.

characteristic to the artistic expression of the essence of the universe. It believes in glorification of Quietism, prevention of will by union with God—blind will. But we can say that the vanity of exactly these hopes stipulates the implausibility of Parsifal and gives him a common religious character.⁹

The Social Context of Religion

The artistic aim of Schoenberg's opera *Moses und Aron* is different from Parsifal. According to Schoenberg:

Modern man, who has passed through materialism, socialism, anarchy, who is an atheist yet has held on to a residue of his old faith (in the form of superstition); this modern man strives with God (in The Wrestling Jacob by Strindberg), and eventually finds God and becomes religious. He learns to pray! A change of heart [is] not to be brought about by a dramatic event, or a calamity, or least of all, a love story. [...] Above all, it should be in modern man's idiom of speech, thought, and expression; it should show the problems that oppress us. For those in the Bible who strive with God also express themselves as people of their age; they speak of their affairs and conform to the social and mental standards of their environment. They are therefore good artistic subjects; yet they cannot be characterized by a present day composer who is committed to his task.¹⁰

The main basis of the dramaturgy of the opera is a conception of a philosophical-religious tragedy with several outlined aspects:

- Theological, mystic—that is connected to "sacred" time and is built in mythological space with the categories of sacrifice, belief, divinity and miracle;
- 2. Ritual, the cult ceremony—where the dance around the golden calf is a secret of understanding the divine essence of being.
- 3. Social—a conflict between people and their spiritual leader, an artist and his contemporary society.

⁹ Т. Адорно, Krotov library [online:] http://krotov.info/library/o1_a/do/orno2o3. html#Заметки о партитуре "Парсифаля" [accessed: 8.10.2016], English translation by N. Katsia.

¹⁰ K. H. Wörner, Schoenberg's "Moses and Aaron", London 1963.

The musical dramaturgy and composition of the work is built around one universal idea. The idea of true God that Moses has to revive in the consciousness of the chosen people.

The German researcher, Karl Worner writes in his book *Moses und Aron* that Schoenberg shows special interest in the Old Testament Scriptures¹¹ during the last period of his artistic work.¹²

The composer managed to finish the two acts and the first scene of the third act of the opera, the dramaturgy of which contains three levels:

- Conflict between God and people;
- Conflict between God and a person;
- Conflict between a person and a society.

The dialogue between Moses and Aron starts and reaches its culmination in the episode of collision with people. The mystic sphere and time is broken through the dramatization of the conflict. We can say there are three types of similar time and space "breakthrough" in the opera:

- Present continuity—time-space continuity: in the culminating moment of the first act, where Aron carries out a miracle to make the people believe in God, who is the one and almighty God, unknown to them;
- Hope for the future—dreaming about a new life, being on earth, true God;
- Sphere of the past—people's memory, land of Egypt, where years have passed in slavery, a miracle and ritual.

Unlike in the Wagner's composition, here the accent is made on the transformation of one universal idea into dramaturgical and musical

¹¹ Assaman thinks that Schoenberg treats the Bible matter as a canonical text in the classical sense. Schonberg's opera is not *exegesis* or *midrash*. The Bible texts are not interpreted, but re-thought as figures of remembrance, in line with the liberation of the biblical texts by the Enlightenment and by historicism, for the purpose of de-mythologizing them, on the one hand, and for the artistic work with mythos, on the other. See: A. Bø-Rygg, *The Finished Fragment: Arnold Schoenberg's Moses* und Aron, in: *Transcendence and Sensoriness. Perceptions, Revelation, and the Arts*, S. A. Christoffersen et al. (ed.), Boston 2015, p. 265.

¹² K. H. Wörner, op. cit.

parameters. In particular, the opera is based on one 12-tone series which symbolically reflects that one true, sacral idea.¹³

The fight of different models of belief and their modifications in the consciousness of the characters determine the different levels of the concrete religious mission. Particularly, Moses strived for being in the service of only one God. Aron tried to make God real, tangible. The dialogue-dispute between Moses and Aron should be ended with Aron's death and Moses' long monologue.

The social context of the opera and the inclusion of the details of autobiography were typical for the late medieval genres: miracle, allegorical moralities, folk farces, etc. Mainly, the social problems and didactic issues were presented in the productions of this type. Therefore, unlike Wagner's *Parsifal* which foresees the universe from the religious context, Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* are similar to such mystic productions.

Foreseeing the Universe through the Concrete Religion

The Messiaen's opera *Saint François d'Assise* pays special attention to Christian view and religion. The two main aspects of the composer's ideology, time and Christian belief, are presented from two different perspectives in the opera: the diversity of religious-literal sources of the libretto gives a general nature to the piece, while the essence of music is unified and is reflected with different intensity at the levels of genre, form, harmony, dynamics and rhythm. The main essence of religious concept of the opera derives from the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas, who thought of music as the supreme form of art. Thomas Aquinas followed the idea of St. Augustine of Hippo about the essence and destination of music on the way to God and considered music as the language of God and angels. Therefore, an angel and his musical "word" becomes the companion of St. Francis on his way to the acknowledgement of the truth.

The words of St. Thomas about the importance and power of art that are the leitmotif of the libretto express Messian's artistic faith. According to the researcher examining Messiaen works, philosopher S.V. Maas, the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas had a deeper effect on the

¹³ The whole composition based on the one single Twelve-tone row: C#, D, G#, F#, G, F, B, A, B b, C, E b, E. This row is first heard when Aron enters in act 1, scene 2.

composer's works, as it touched the fundamental side of Messiaen's consciousness. Maas outlines three analogs of Aquinas' esthetics in Messiaen's works:¹⁴

- 1. Gothic theology of light;
- 2. Striving for structural details;
- 3. Sequence of logic.

An Angel's phrase in the fifth *tableau* "God blinds us with the sparks of truth" is derived from the understanding of Concordantia that St. Thomas gave him. Aquinas speaks about three levels of beauty: proportion (*proportio*), clarity (*claritas*), and integrity (*integritas*). Therefore, it is clear that for Thomas Aquinas the category of light is connected with the truth.

The complex, multidimensional musical-scenic idea of the composer causes the genre diversity of the work: mystery, liturgy, and symbolic drama. Franciscan scenes are transformed into opera genre with liturgical nature that is presented in the opera with a row of genres and forms of catholic traditions: continuous alteration of narrative scenes and the worship ritual stipulates the feeling of impersonal preach and embraces the universum. Besides the catholic-liturgical tradition, Messiaen uses elements of non-European ritual theatre—Japanese Noh drama and Balinese religious performances. As a result, the genre of opera is enlarged and presented in a new quality—a genre of spiritual opera is revived.

Like medieval mysteries that contained all existing genres and forms, the Olivier Messiaen's opera *Saint François d'Assise* represents the universal model of the 20th century mystery from the perspective of action, word and music, ritual syncretism. Like spiritual opera, the libretto of *Saint François d'Assise* is based on the Bible, the Holy Scriptures, theological works and ecclesiastic allegoric texts. Preaching and static time in the Messiaen's opera dominate over action and processuality. These genre-characteristics cause the alteration of scenic action with the worship ritual in the opera, where the second picture *Lauds* is a morning Mass.¹⁵

¹⁴ S. Maas, The Reinvention of Religious Music, Fordham 2009.

¹⁵ See: Example 3.

Conclusion

So, the stable characteristics of the genre of mystery play remain in the operas of all three composers in point of view libretto:

- Wagner includes particularly multidimensional sources: myth, monotheist, Christian sources, as well as the facts from history and present time according to the legend of Parsifal;
- Schoenberg does it according to the story of Moses and Aaron from the Old Testament;
- Messiaen—from the book Fioretti about the life of Saint Francis.

Meanwhile, these basic sources are enriched with the conceptions of Christian and Buddhist religions in case of Wagner. Schoenberg presents the abstraction of the contemporary social conflict, whereas Messiaen uses the theology of Thomas Aquinas about the comprehension of God with art and beauty; the unity of story and the mission of the hero.

Also, in all of three operas we can see following stable features of the mystery play genre:

- the story unified by the exposition of the importance of the hero's spiritual mission;
- libretto shown in the author's point of view;
- abundance of ritual scenes: confession, preaching, prayer, miracle;
- complexity of internal and external dramaturgical actions: simultaneity of processes, revealing the main hero and his feelings at the expense of shortening the scenic time;
- synthesis of different theatrical genres on the stage and parallelism during action;
- · epic and lyrical dramaturgy;
- foreseeing the myth from the religious point of view; foreseeing the religion from the social point of view; foreseeing the universe from the concrete religious point of view.

Finally, three different types of mystery play are created that truly express the religious, philosophical and ethical problems of the epoch and are in the close relationship with the medieval genre of mystery play. In *Moses und Aron* Schoenberg left the open conflict between a person and the society, God and people; Wagner created *Parsifal*, an illusory hero fighting for an idea; Messiaen's hero, *Saint François d'Assise*, shared the Thomistic ideas with his ascetic life and found the truth with the help of art and nature.

Abstract

The purpose of my paper is to reveal the main features of the mystery genre in the European musical culture of the 19th and the 20th century on the basis of the genre features established in the Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The mystery play genre, as we know, in essence means the firm unity of certain stable features. The complexity of those features consists of two specific elements—religion and social, and a general one—the model of the world for a certain epoch.

If in the mysteries of Ancient civilizations and the Middle Ages, the aforementioned components operated as a firm unity of inseparable elements; later, in the period after the "new times", especially at the end of the 19th century and in the 20th century, the stable elements were disintegrated from each other. This process is discussed on the examples of the following operas:

- The common religion and ethical model—Wagner's Parsifal;
- The code of moral rules and principles in the social context— Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*;
- The explication of Thomistic ideas in the modern world—Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise*.

What is outlined is the unity of necessary components of the genre of the mystery play: multidimensional sources of libretto; a mission of the main hero; the author's interpretation of the mystery; the abundance of ritual scenes; the relationship between the internal and external dramaturgical processes; synthesis of the different theatrical genres; static dramaturgy. All of these features suggest a specific type of musical

dramaturgy, in which the categories of time and space contain three main mystic spheres: divine, terrestrial and demonic. Consequently, the dramaturgy of opera staging has three levels of activity: superficial, inner and upon time.

Keywords

mystery play, social context, musical dramaturgy, Arnold Schoenberg, Richard Wagner, Olivier Messiaen, 20th century music

Abstrakt

Modyfikacja gatunku misterium w kompozycjach Wagnera, Schoenberga i Messiaena

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ukazanie głównych cech gatunku misterium w kulturze muzycznej Europy XIX i XX wieku na podstawie jego podstawowych wyznaczników, które ukształtowały się w starożytności i średniowieczu.

Gatunek misterium opiera się przede wszystkim na kilku zasadach. Na złożoność jego cech charakterystycznych składają się: przede wszystkim model świata z danej epoki, a także dwa dodatkowe czynniki – religijny i społeczny.

W misteriach powstałych w starożytności i średniowieczu wymienione komponenty funkcjonowały jako spójna całość współtworzona przez nierozłączne elementy; następnie, w epokach późniejszych, a zwłaszcza pod koniec XIX i na początku XX wieku, stałe części składowe misterium uległy dezintegracji. Proces ten został omówiony na przykładach z następujących oper:

- wspólna religia i model etyczny: *Parsifal* Richarda Wagnera;
- kodeks zasad moralnych w kontekście społecznym: Moses und Aron Arnolda Schoenberga;
- rozwinięcie myśli św. Tomasza z Akwinu w świecie współczesnym: Saint François d'Assise Oliviera Messiaena.

W moim artykule została podkreślona jedność elementów niezbędnych dla powstania gatunku misterium; wielorakie źródła libretta; misja głównego bohatera; interpretacja samej tajemnicy przez autora; obfitość scen rytuału; relacja pomiędzy wewnętrznymi a zewnętrznymi procesami zachodzącymi w dramaturgii dzieła; synteza wielorakich gatunków teatralnych; statyczna dramaturgia. Wszystkie te cechy nasuwają na myśl specyficzny typ dramaturgii muzycznej, w której kategorie czasu i przestrzeni tworzą trzy główne sfery mistyczne: boską, ziemską i diabelską. W konsekwencji dramaturgia inscenizacji operowej dzieli się na trzy poziomy aktywności: powierzchowny, wewnętrzny i ponadczasowy.

Słowa kluczowe

misterium, kontekst społeczny, dramaturgia muzyczna, Arnold Schoenberg, Richard Wagner, Olivier Messiaen, muzyka XX wieku

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Appendix

	Wagner	Schoenberg	Messiaen
Multidimensional Sources	Myth	Monotheist	Christian source
The unity of the story and the mission of the hero	Exposition of the importance of the hero's spiritual mission		
Mystery with the author's interpretation	Parsifal	Moses und Aron	Saint François d'Assise
Abundance of ritual scenes	Miracle Confession	Confession Preach Prayer	
Complexity of internal and external dramaturgical actions	Simultaneity of process; revealing the main hero and his feelings at the expense of shortening scenic time		
Epic and lyrical dramaturgy	Synthesis of different theatrical genres on the stage and parallelism during action		

Table 1: The stable characteristics of the genre of mystery play in the operas of all three composers.

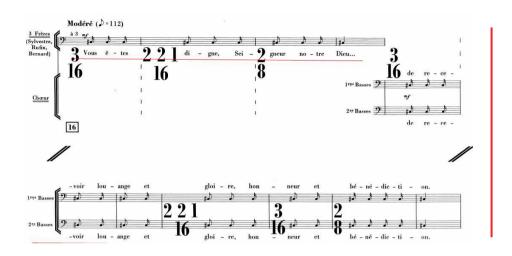




Ex. 1: R. Wagner, *Parsifal*, act 1: "Recht so! Habt Dank!" (Ed. Broude Brothers, New York).



Ex. 2: A. Schoenberg, Moses und Aron, The golden culf and Altar (Ed. B. Schoot and Co.).



Ex. 3: O. Messiaen, Saint François d'Assise, Morning Mass (Ed. Leduc).