

**BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF LETTERS
CLUJ-NAPOCA**

**EXPRESSIONS OF THE SACRED IN THE
LIBRETTO OF GIUSEPPE VERDI'S *OTELLO***

- Doctoral thesis -

SUMMARY

Supervisor

Professor Mircea Muthu, PhD

Candidate

Letiția Goia

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Key words: sacred, opera libretto, *Othello*, *Otello*, William Shakespeare, Giuseppe Verdi, good-evil dichotomy, angel, devil

Summary

The present research was triggered by my passion for observing and studying the special relationship between literature and music. With every insight into this subject, the symbiosis between word and sound proved to be more seductive and meaningful. The admiration for William Shakespeare's work and the fascination with opera paved the way towards a complex, profound and enchanting universe.

The *Othello* tragedy has been read and interpreted countless times over the centuries, and it continues to be researched and analysed from various perspectives. However, what is specific for Shakespeare's plays is that they can also be studied in a subtler key, and Giuseppe Verdi can be counted among those who have understood the deep meaning of Shakespearean themes, and has also managed to express it in a musical mirror with the finest nuances. The whole opera *Otello* is not only a manifestation of the genius of the great composer, but a genuine hermeneutical endeavour, which resulted in a Shakespearean musical subtext. Apart from the libretto (which was adapted from Shakespeare's play), and the orchestral accompaniment, which serves it faithfully, Verdi's spiritual knowledge guided the composer towards the creation of a musical masterpiece that potentiates the text of the tragedy, so that the latter can be traced surprisingly well in the musical language. A few months of research in the field have revealed that there are a number of biblical and religious references in the play, while the opera libretto is in its turn beautifully worded to the same end. The discovery of a sacred thread sown into a work with no apparent religious subject opened the way to a more profound analysis than it appeared at first sight.

The sacred is found among the means used by musicians to convey their message and to express the writer's thoughts in a complex way. Although the notion of the sacred is currently considered to be a category of interpretation and assessment specific to the religious field, it is also present in other spheres of culture. People generally associate the notion of the sacred with literature or music in order to define or discuss religious literature or sacred music that has a spiritual message or is intended for performance in church. But even while the subject of musical works moves away from the sacred as Romanticism rises in Europe, the musical accompaniment continues to enhance even the slightest theological reference present in the text. In literary works

that at first sight are not at all related to spiritual themes, a moment, a symbol or even a single word with a religious sense, mentioned only in passing in the text, becomes for the composer an opportunity for ample musical achievements. Thus, it is interesting to note how Verdi, with the help of musical means, pauses on these aspects of the Shakespearean text and emphasizes them, sometimes creating such moments himself in order to valorise a certain type of artistic emotion. Sometimes a religious episode or situation that is briefly mentioned in the literary work is revealed and given a new meaning in the musical piece. Composers often explore these elements, as they are aware of the impact of the sacred on the human soul, thus creating exceptional music.

The testimonies of those who reflected on their spiritual experiences and then transposed them into art reveal that the sacred they were seeking actually represents the connection between their own being and divinity, as well as between their own being and the entire divine creation. The sacred is part of the whole universe, from the lowest level to the most complex manifestations. Art vibrates miraculously, revealing nuances of the sacred in any of its forms. Music and literature have grasped and have emphasized this phenomenon since ancient times, and the opera performance, which is based on these two components, has always brought on stage wonderful expressions of the sacred.

Researching the *Otello* libretto from a theological perspective has proved to be even more justified since there are no publications focusing on its religious message. Most of the available literature deals with general themes touched upon by Shakespeare and then adapted by Verdi. Various biblical references, highlighted or just alluded to, have been discovered during the study of the libretto and Shakespeare's text. Therefore, the approach adopted in this doctoral thesis is that of the biblical sacred, with its later applications in the Christian era and illustrated both in the Byzantine and the Western liturgy. Biblical insertions in the play are echoed in the musical fabric of the opera, thus allowing a revelation of the sacred in a musical piece that does not have a religious subject. Beyond the pulsation of life with all its shades illustrated in the play, spiritual elements become apparent in the nature and behaviour of the characters, as well as in their relationships and verbal interactions. In the case of the opera *Otello*, by using religious references, the librettist and the composer strike a chord in our souls that resonates with the sacred dimension of being and mediates a new finding of the sense and of the self. By observing Otello's journey through life, the influences he is subjected to and the choices he needs to make, the audience gains a better understanding of their own path and possible options.

Following the dynamics of the sacred on its route from the seventeenth century play to the nineteenth century opera libretto, a fundamental dimension that will constitute the framework for the entire opera emerges to the forefront: the good-evil dichotomy. In a typical endeavour of the Romantic era, the themes of Elisabethan plays are potentiated by two antagonistic dimensions – good and evil – thus highlighting even better the troubled soul of *Otello*, always at a crossroads. The subject lends itself to analysis all the more as, after a thorough study, one realizes that from the staves rises the pulsation of life with everything it encompasses from the heart's troubles to the restlessness of the body and the vanity of the mind, in a fascinating entwinement of text and music, in a constant relationship with the transcendent. Those who listen to this music experience unique moments of grace while *Otello* has continued to be a reference point in the artistic culture for more than a hundred years.

The novelty of this research consists in identifying a category with aesthetic value – the sacred – in a piece of work that has no explicit spiritual subject, as well as underlining the rich diversity of religious aspects that developed from the play to the libretto. The originality of the present paper lies in the analysis of the aspects of the sacred in the *Otello* libretto from literary, theological, musical and aesthetic perspectives, and of the transformations undergone by the sacred during its transfer from the literary to the musical register. Moreover, in this process of adaptation, the sacred is highlighted by being placed in opposition with the devilish. Structurally, the two poles of the good-evil dichotomy benefit from the support of music that, in turn, potentiates them through its own specific means. Shakespeare's text and then Verdi's music were created with an obvious knowledge of theology, which we observed from the very first moments of in-depth research into the play and libretto. Various artistic experiences have proved that music and drama together have a great impact upon the audience and a powerful cathartic role. Based on the certainty that the sacred creates deep and powerful emotions in an opera and that it has a great impact on the artistic message of lyrical works, the aim of this research is to prove that *the sacred acquires aesthetic value in the lyrical music genre*.

As far as the available literature is concerned, there is no bibliographic material related to the purpose of our work. We managed to identify a few studies in connection with the subject of the sacred in the lyrical musical genre. Most research refers to sacred music, whether intended to be sung in the church, or based on religious themes or spiritual texts. The lack of a specialized

bibliography has thus constituted a challenge and indicated the need to investigate this area in more depth.

The first chapter of this research paper focuses on the notion of the sacred in order to provide a conceptual framework. In the second part, we present the works of the authors who devoted themselves to this topic: Rudolf Otto (*The Sacred*), Mircea Eliade, who distinguished the sacred from the profane, Aurel Codoban (*The Sacred and Ontophany*), Julien Ries (*The Sacred in the Religious History of Humankind*) and Jean Jacques Wunenburger (*The Sacred*). The concepts of sacred space and time, as well as that of the personal sacred, which is highly relevant for the analysis of the libretto, were also highlighted. The third subchapter discusses the sacred in the *Otello* libretto in terms of aesthetic sensitivity. In addition to using biblical and cultural elements in the text, the sacred is highlighted in the musical subtext of *Otello* either by association with suggestive melodic lines or by illustration with specific music. In the first case, a frequent example is the descending chromatic line, or *passus duriusculus*, which suggests the diabolical nature of Iago and its influence on other characters. Melodic lines from Verdi's Requiem are also employed to illustrate religious elements. Another way of proclaiming the sacred is the use of church music: Gregorian singing, chorale music or religious hymns induce a spiritual atmosphere.

During the research stage and then the writing of the first chapter, we noticed that from time immemorial up to the present, literary scholars and artists, irrespective of their cultural space, chose subjects that attempted to reveal the mystery of creation and people's relationship with the divinity. The need of the human soul to re-establish the connection with the original spiritual space has always marked artistic creation. Thus, in all artistic domains we can find works that, since ancient times, have tackled the theme of the sacred and highlighted the importance of the relationship with the Spirit from which we came as well as the recovery of the divine spark of our soul. By discovering - through art - the divinity in us, we come to manifest our true nature. After narrowing our field of research to the Christian area, we began to notice how art – painting, sculpture, architecture, music, etc. – is strongly influenced by spirituality. Christianity abounds in sacred works of art or in works, such as *Otello*, that tackle the subject in a non-religious context, but in a very profound way. The study of the libretto makes the necessary pauses where the aesthetic vibration of the sacred plays a substantial part in the vibration of the spectator's soul and analyses the contribution that each element of the universe of

sound has in shaping it. The orchestration, the timbre colours, the melodic lines, the tonalities, the leitmotives, the rhythms, the palette of intense nuances, the vocality of the interpreters are means of expression by which aesthetic emotion is awakened.

The second chapter of the thesis brings forward the lyrical musical genre – the opera. First, we provided a brief overview of the history of opera from a literary perspective, naming a few key figures in the development of the libretto. In the beginning of opera, the libretto was more important than music and composers would pay great attention to the text. As time passed, the musical foundation gained in importance, the singing technique evolved and the text became less important in the creation of the opera. Yet, at the end of the Romantic period, composers increasingly turned their attention, once again, to highly significant texts, which increased the quality of librettos.

The next sub-chapter delineates the literary perspective of the concept of libretto, with emphasis on the musical and literary constraints encountered in its adaptation process. Specialized dictionaries and reference volumes were used. While studying the opera libretto, we discovered the depth of the themes put forward by various composers. More often than not, librettos have a pretentious and complex subject matter, irrespective of their source (literature-based or original). In the same line of intriguing discoveries, one could add the difficulty of dressing such a text in musical attire; in other words, the talent to create literature in the bar of three quarters and the shape of a sonata, for example. The ability to cover great themes, such as the mystical ecstasy or the Christly sacrifice in a few musical phrases represents another milestone for librettists. While analyzing the *Otello* libretto, in addition to the obvious literary features and the faultless adaptation to the musical register, we detected a profound network of sacred symbols, which spreads through the entire text. It reveals pertinent biblical references, disclosing the superior spiritual pursuit of the two creators of the opera: the composer Giuseppe Verdi and the librettist Arrigo Boito. The perfection of the work that came out of their hands is the result of a unique collaboration in the history of opera performance. We discovered the details of this relationship while reading the correspondence between the two in the volume *The Verdi-Boito Correspondence* edited in English by William Weaver. The letters exchanged between Verdi and Boito reveal not only the professional relationship between the two, but also their personal interaction, thus illustrating the numerous transformations that Shakespeare's text underwent in order to become an opera libretto.

Moreover, the Verdi-Boito correspondence underlines the importance of an aspect often considered secondary in the process of creating an opera or libretto, thus proving its literary value. Getting to know the universe in which the composer and the librettist conceived the libretto and the music of *Otello* is essential in order to understand and fully appreciate this artistic experience.

The human voice, the expressive force of lyrical music represents an essential factor discussed in this second chapter of the thesis. Literature is not only read, it is also listened to, nowadays possibly more than ever. The literary text reaches the audience by means of the human voice. Besides simply rendering words, the singing voice envelops them in a unique set of traits, it accompanies them with its specific vocality and charges them with its expressive force. In the context of the present study, the human voice proved to be a means of highlighting the sacred, especially since the voice directly renders both spiritual and aesthetic emotion. As noticed in the samples analysed in this thesis, the infinite expressive nuances of the human voice contains and is able to wonderfully convey the mystery of the sacred.

The last and most extensive chapter is entitled "Literary and musical developments of the sacred in the opera *Otello*" and represents the original research contribution as part of the attempt to highlight the aesthetic values of the sacred in lyrical music creations. The review of the libretto used by the Romanian Opera in Cluj with the help of native Italian speakers constituted the first stage in the analysis of *Otello*. The literary and theological analysis of libretto passages with rich religious meanings was the next and most important stage. On this occasion, we discovered a sacred thread linking the two poles and the troubled path of Otello - the man. Throughout this journey, we made use of Shakespeare's original play and Verdi's orchestral accompaniment. When studying a libretto based on a literary work – such as *Otello* – an in-depth examination of the text is extremely complex and involves the study of the original play so as to gain a more extensive perspective on the characters and the sociocultural context. To this end, both Shakespeare's *Othello* in original English and Ion Vinea's translation into Romanian proved extremely helpful. In order to easily identify the two masterpieces with the same title, throughout our research we used *Othello* for the play and *Otello* for the opera, as they were named by their creators. For the musical subtext we used the orchestral score and the voice and piano reduction edited by Ricordi in Milano.

For biblical references we consulted different editions of the Holy Scripture, especially *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură* edited by Societatea Biblică Interconfesională in Romania. The rigorous analysis of the *Otello* libretto and the musical subtext that complements it revealed new interpretation meanings that are not obvious when attending the performance for the first time, or at a first reading of the original play. Nevertheless, they can be felt even by an audience which has not been previously prepared in this respect. They are also felt by the interpreters who carry out considerable work in order to research and decipher profound meanings. By textually and musically illustrating the two registers of the sacred, Verdi's opera emphasizes the presence of the divine influence of the angel and the malefic influence of the devil in the life of a human being. In order to provide arguments in support of this thesis, we extracted and analysed the biblical references in the play and their transposition into the musical piece. The good-evil dichotomy is present throughout the opera, from the storm that opens the first act to its final chords.

A thorough study of the role, both musically and textually, revealed that Desdemona illustrates the ultimate sacrifice, similar to those impressive moments rendered in works of art, such as the offering of the lamb or redemption through sacrifice, respectively. At the other end of the spectrum, Iago represents the "theology of hell" with everything that the influence of the evil brings upon humans. Otello is constantly under the influence of both good and evil, therefore the transformations that he undergoes are remarkable. They are clear in the text, but surprisingly powerful in the musical language. Otello teaches us the sanctity of life and how it can be lost when vanity and pride distance us from the bright path. As human beings living our earthly lives, we constantly mirror ourselves in the people around us and in those we interact with. This reality is rendered in the opera by Otello's relationship with Desdemona – the angel and with Iago – the demon and it is constantly reflected by the accomplished universe of sounds created by Verdi's music. The great impact of *Otello's* opera performance upon the audience is due to the acknowledgement of the relationships we build and the choices we make in our lives. If we pay heed to the response we get as a result of our thoughts and actions, we have the possibility to correct our course in order to touch on the ideal. In such moments, we understand that our soul reaches its original purity. Our spiritual nature allows our souls to vibrate when watching scenes with a sacred content, and that is when the aesthetic emotion becomes certain.

Listening to *Otello* audio recordings and watching video performances from all over the world, we were surprised to discover that sacred images always surface one way or the other, not only in music and text, but also in stage directions or the conduct of the interpreters. Through music, the sacred is given a framework, so it may more easily be perceived, due to the expressiveness and emotional qualities specific to the art of sounds. The title chosen – *Expressions of the sacred in the libretto of Giuseppe Verdi's Otello* – concentrates the essence of the proposed approach, while Giuseppe Verdi's *Otello* is representative for the subject of our research. Nuances of the sacred in lay opera creations and their impact on the audience confer aesthetic value to the sacred.