
PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL HISTORICISM IN MUSICAL ART CASE STUDY OF G. DONIZETTI'S OPERA 'THE GREAT FLOOD'

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Abstract

The article deals with the phenomenon of biblical historicism, which has been diversely embodied in the artistic space of various eras. The authors examine its fundamental principles, as well as their manifestation in the opera genre of the 19th century. The research is carried out through a case study of the opera 'The Great Flood' by G. Donizetti, created in 1830 based on the famous Old Testament plot. The authors' analysis of the opera makes it possible to conclude that the principles of the historicism of the Holy Scripture have played a decisive role in the formation of opera architectonics. The alignment of the work is determined by the opposition 'Heavenly vs Earthly' which forms both the figurative composition of the work and the means of its implementation. The religious and philosophical concept encompasses all levels of the musical work: thematic, figurative, compositional, and is also embodied in musical dramaturgy. The sacred figurative and semantic symbolism acquires a special role in the opera. The central place in this symbolism is held by the image of the Prophet, through whom God's Will is enacted. The composer builds the musical dramaturgy of the opera on the confrontation of two spheres - 'heavenly' (the sphere of the righteous) and 'earthly' (the sphere of sinners).

Keywords: Italian, opera, oratorio, Donizetti, dramaturgy

1. Introduction

Humanity became interested in understanding its history already in ancient times. By the end of the 6th century BC, two opposite ideas about the course of the historical process had formed. The first was related to the ancient Greek tradition of understanding current events through the prism of rational philosophical views. According to numerous researchers, the ancient Greeks were contemplators and, therefore, thought mainly in spatial rather than temporal categories. Such an approach to the cognition and understanding of the

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natural and social universe determined a special model of history, which was based on cyclical time and constantly repeating, identical events and phenomena: “man and history were always interpreted as being in motion, but this movement always returned to the starting point” [1].

The second notion of history originated in the ideology of the ancient Jews and was imprinted on the pages of the Old Testament. Its distinctive feature was a deeply conceptual, religious vision of the event process in the indissoluble unity of the past, present, and future. The universe created by God was conceived by the Jews as constantly moving and changing in an irreversible, dynamically directed linear stream of time. The world was understood as ‘*olam*’ (‘*ôlām*’) - “eternity [which] encompasses the whole Universe in spatial and temporal terms” [2]. Inside this eternity, God decides the fate of each person separately and of all mankind as a whole. Such an understanding of history in Science took shape in the concept of biblical (religious) historicism, in which the providential conditionality of the direction of historical movement is of utmost importance.

The concept of the historical fate of mankind and Divine Providence has repeatedly become the subject of close study in various sciences at all times. Thus, this topic is reflected in the works of historians Flavius Josephus [3], H. Graetz [4], M. Dimont [5], I. Shifman [6], O. Khazanov [7], Y. Yerushalmi [8], J. Weinberg [9], I. Tantlevskii [10], and others; philosophers J. Herder [11], G. Hegel [12, 13], N. Berdyaev [14], J. Ben-Schlomo [15] and others; theologians Eusebius Pamphili [16], Saint Augustine [17], P. Abelard [18], A. Men [19], H. Frei [20], and others; culturologists A. Gurevich [21], A. Lebedev [22], G. Bloom [23] and others; linguists: A. Militarev [24], G. Sinilo [25], S. Averintsev [26], and others. The relevance of this article consists in the study of this concept in the context of musical and theatrical art, which is still only partially developed in Musicology [27, 28]. This study will update the methodological system of Musicology and open up new opportunities for theoretical research on the implementation of biblical stories in the art of music.

2. Methods

The history of the development of the science of musical art has shown quite clearly that the rules and recommendations of the historical method of cognition are the most rational and efficient in the study of biblical historicism in opera [29]. Therefore, in the study, the focus is on determining the starting points for the analysis and evaluation of this phenomenon in art history. The methodological approach that we have proposed allows one to reveal the unique aspects and properties of the latter, illustrating with examples from the opera ‘The Great Flood’ by G. Donizetti. All this leads to the construction of an integral system of methodology for the study of biblical historicism in musical art, to its creation as a single apparatus of scientific research.

3. The principles of biblical historicism

Many scholars agree that the historicism of Holy Scripture precedes any other historicism. The idea of history as the existence of man, mankind, and their relationship with God is manifested from the first lines of Genesis and permeates all the chapters of the biblical narrative. The fundamental principles of biblical historicism, which will subsequently be reflected in the most diverse genres of artistic space are essential for understanding the phenomenon. Let us briefly outline these principles.

3.1. Theocentricism

In all the Old Testament books, the theocentricism of history is emphasized - the world and the events taking place in are created by God. Whether an individual or a whole nation stands at the centre of the sacred narrative, whether they honour the Almighty or not, all the same, their historical path will be completed under the rule of the God of Israel: "I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God" (Isaiah 45.5).

3.2. Linearity of the historical process

World history, controlled by the Divine Will, is in constant motion. The development of world history is an integral process that cannot be divided into separate historical periods. History appears as a single drama of the relationship between man and the Creator, in which "there is a starting point (the creation of the world and man); a number of subsequent acts still within the 'mythical time', the 'sacred history' (the Fall, the Expulsion, the Flood, the Babylonian scattering); entering the 'historical time' with a keen awareness of no less uniqueness and significance of historical events for the whole drama (this refers to at least the Exodus from Egypt or the construction of the temple by Solomon) than mythological events; and, finally, the expected eschatological denouement (the coming of Israel or all nations under the leadership of Israel to God)" [24, p. 99-100].

3.3. The design of the space-time continuum is based on binary (opposition-bifurcated) structures

"In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth" (Genesis 1.1) - these are the first words of the Bible that mark the appearance of the foundations of the Universe. Subsequently, a number of binary phenomena arise: light and darkness, day and night, the firmament and the Earth, the light of the day and the light of the night, etc.

Space and time, as two fundamental categories of the Universe, are presented in the Book of Genesis under the name of 'light' (Genesis 1.3). The light appears as a unique substance, personifying "the movement that carries the

most obvious image of eternity” [30]. The Universe is seen as infinite in terms of space and time. However, after the fall of Adam and Eve, time splits into two and acquires an oppositional pair: for humanity, the endless time of Eden is replaced by finite earthly time, and immortality gives way to the tragic finality of life. From now on, all earthly events become countable, and earthly history turns into a complete cycle from the Creation of the world to its end, when “man and the world return to the Creator, time returns to eternity” [31]. Thus, there is an ontological split of being into two oppositional worlds: heavenly (sacred, divine), which is unchanging, perfect, eternal, and earthly - changeable, imperfect and temporary.

3.4. The Covenant between God and man and its violation

The theme of the Covenant (contract) between God and man is one of the key ones in the Holy Scriptures. This concept reflects the relationship between God and an individual or a people, which are based on the fulfilment of certain obligations. Throughout the biblical narrative, an individual is faced with the task of maintaining loyalty to God, which is manifested in strict adherence to His instructions and commandments. Today, there are several opinions about the exact number of contracts made between God and man in the Bible. According to some scholars, the very first is the contract concluded in Eden between God and Adam about not eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Subsequently, Covenants were made with Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Compliance with the Divine canons is the key to a prosperous earthly life for both each individual and the whole people.

Non-compliance with the prescriptions established by God entails an indispensable punishment: “and <...> Providence fought with all such violations and disturbances, - every mistake was followed by punishment” [11, p. 435]. The punishment for the apostates was tragic events that radically changed their lives and world history. At the same time, the most important role in the course of the historical process was assigned to a person who, by his choice (following or deviating from the Divine laws), set the vector of its development. Given the variability of the repetition of these events at different stages of human history, one can talk about its spiral development, where with each tragic conflict its new turn appears - another instructive ‘dialogue’ between God and man.

3.5. Prophecy

Prophecy, as one of the forms of Divine Revelation, is found in all parts of Holy Scripture. That is why prophets are always at the centre of large-scale historical events in the biblical narrative - the chosen people through whom God conveys His will. They are a kind of ‘historians of the future’, as they predict upcoming events that will happen through the observance or violation of moral laws. In Holy Scripture, prophecy also arises through certain natural phenomena

which are characterized by “religious meanings and messages that are different from their own properties and content” [32, p. 117]. These include the rainbow as a symbol of the Covenant or the lightning bolt as a symbol of God’s Wrath.

4. Biblical historicism in musical art

The embodiment of the theme of mankind’s historical fate and the Divine Will in the artistic space has been shaped into a religious-ideological (religious-philosophical) tragedy. Its reflection in musical art determined a special type of dramaturgy in various genres - spiritual song, oratorio, cantata, mass, opera, symphony, ballet, etc. The opera holds a special place on this list, which includes not only musical drama but also literary and stage drama. It was the opera as a complex synthetic genre, most of all associated with the plot-event-based side of the biblical narrative, that made it possible to embody its complex religious and philosophical problems in a multidimensional way, at various compositional levels.

The 19th century became the culmination in the embodiment of the plots from the Holy Scripture in the musical theatre. The Old Testament narratives recreated in the opera genre appeared on the stage in a new, romantic sound, but at the same time retained an undoubted connection with the deep idea of Holy Scripture. These are the operas ‘Cyrus in Babylon’ (1812), ‘Moses in Egypt’ (1818-1819), ‘Moses and the Pharaoh or the Crossing of the Red Sea’ (1827) by G. Rossini, ‘The Great Flood’ (1830) by G. Donizetti, ‘Nabucco’ (1841) by G. Verdi, ‘Samson and Delilah’ (1869-1876) by C. Saint-Saëns, ‘Judith’ (1863) by A. Serov, ‘Maccabees’ (1874) by A. Rubinstein and others.

In this study, we shall turn to the Italian opera school [33] and analyse the embodiment of the principles of biblical historicism in G. Donizetti’s opera.

5. Biblical historicism in G. Donizetti’s opera ‘The Great Flood’

The opera is based on events from the First Book of Moses, Genesis (6.5-9.29): God, seeing the wickedness of the human race, punishes the people with a worldwide flood. The only survivors in the terrible disaster are the family of the righteous Noah, who, on the instructions of God, built the ark in advance. Together with them, the rescue ship was boarded by animals and birds, “as God had commanded Noah” (Genesis 7.9).

However, not all the events of these chapters were included in the libretto of the opera. The action begins at the foot of the already built ark and ends with the start of the flood. Thus, the authors choose only one episode from a large chain of events for the plot - the death of sinful mankind and the salvation of the righteous Noah and his family. This event develops according to the laws of historical drama with its characteristic ratio of three times:

- the past, which contains the cause of the present event;
- present, where the tragedy occurs;
- the future, describing events after the flood.

All three times are embodied in the text of the libretto, reflecting the key principle of biblical historicism - the violation of moral principles by mankind and the subsequent Divine punishment.

For example, the reason for the real tragic events is voiced in the second scene of the first act: Noah, listening to the story of the unrighteous life of the head of the satraps, calls all sinners 'the tribe of Cain'. Thus, the prophet recalls the first most terrible crime in the history of mankind - the murder of his brother Abel by Cain. Forever cursed by God, Cain became the first person to sow the seeds of lawlessness and evil on Earth, which soon sprouted abundantly, "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of mankind was great on the Earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. So the Lord was sorry that He had made mankind on the Earth, and He was grieved in His heart." (Genesis 6.5-6) The idea of God's repentance in His Creation is revealed by Noah in the third scene of the first act: "Man, who is hardened in sin, forced the One who created him to repent" [34].

Through Noah as a Prophet, the future is also actualized. In the sixth scene of the second act, Noah predicts punishment for the wicked - death under the power of the elements, which will happen at the end of the opera: The waves have no more banks, all people died within! Everything is demolished by the water wave, flooded, buried! The prophecy about life after the flood occurs in the second act in two scenes at once: first in the fourth, when Noah sees the curse of his son Ham (Genesis 9.18-9.29), then in the sixth, where he talks about the emergence of new peoples.

Thus, the opera appears open in the space-time continuum, which is fully consistent with the idea of the linear nature of the historical process: "Dramatic action is always open, being only a part that was arbitrarily taken out of a continuous global flow of events" [35].

According to the Italian theatrical traditions of the 19th century, the biblical events in the opera are overgrown with fiction, which is associated with the introduction of new heroes and typical romantic themes into the concept of the work: love affairs, betrayal, personal torment of the personas. Thus, in addition to Noah and his sons Japheth, Shem and Ham, their wives, the librettist Domenico Giraltoni included the chief of the satraps Cadmo, his wife Sela and her confidante Ada, as well as several groups of people representing different peoples. These are African Copts, European priests, Brahmins of Atlantis, and satraps of Sennar. Comparing this varied number of peoples with a map of the countries of the ancient world, one can assume that in this way the librettist tried to present in the opera the image of all mankind as if collecting it from all over the world.

It is noteworthy that in the opera, in line with the religious concept, there are dramas not only for biblical characters but also for fictional ones. That is, the stories of all destinies are absolutely theocentric. Sela's personal drama can serve as an example. The life of the heroine is filled with suffering and contradictions. On the one hand, Sela becomes an unwitting participant

in a love triangle, in which the character faces the betrayal and intrigues of her friend, on the other, a victim of the wicked husband Cadmo. Sela does not share his pagan beliefs, honors the God of Israel, and helps Noah and his family to be saved. However, the woman herself refuses the offer to climb the ark, unable to leave her little son on the flooded land. The librettist emphasizes the drama of this moment by introducing the voice of God, which is reproduced through the Prophet Noah (the ninth scene of the first act): "This is the last time God speaks to you again; and through Noah gives you the way to salvation!" Cadmo, trying to punish Sela for spiritual betrayal, separates her from her son, forces her to renounce God and curse Him. The climax and denouement of this drama take place in the third scene of the third act - after uttering a few words of a curse, Sela dies. Thus, the lyrical drama of the character ends in accordance with the religious and philosophical concept. This episode is accompanied by thunder and lightning flashes, symbolizing the manifestation of God's Wrath.

In the context of the above, the symbolism of the characters' names in this drama also plays an important role, which is fully consistent with their activities in the libretto. Thus, the name Sela comes from a term used in the Book of Psalms and means 'praise'. Until the end of the third act, the woman honors and glorifies the One God. However, the name of Cadmo is absent in the Bible. It is probably of Greek origin and is associated with the myth of the legendary founder of Thebes, Cadmus, who turned into a snake. Such a semantic allusion reveals even more deeply the image of the opera character who does not believe in the power of God and mocks Him.

The principles of biblical historicism are reflected directly in the musical dramaturgy of the opera. These principles are manifested in the use by the composer of certain genre and intonation means, with the help of which the sacred time-space is built.

Let us start the reflections on the features of the musical dramaturgy of the opera with an analysis of its genre definition. The composer titled his creation as *azione tragica-sacra* - 'a tragic-sacred performance'. This notion, on the one hand, demonstrates the connection of Donizetti's opera with the traditions that have developed on Italian soil in reproducing the plots of Holy Scripture. By the beginning of the 17th century in Italy, the tendency to write 'sacred dramas' was firmly established. Such dramas were meant to be performed on the theatre stage during fasting, religious holidays, and other events significant for the Catholic country. On the other hand, this definition sheds light on the even deeper origins of this genre, rooted in distant eras. First, these are the genres of the European Medieval theatre - liturgical dramas, miracles, and mysteries, affecting "the religious and mystical side of the consciousness of medieval man" [36, p. 111]. The main mission of these genres was to reproduce biblical scenes with indispensable proof of the omnipotence of Divine Providence.

The complex synthetic genre structure of the opera 'The Great Flood' is complemented by a spiritual oratorio. The tendency to oratorize the opera becomes clear when referring to the etymology of the word 'oratorio': from the Latin Oro - 'I say, I pray'; Oratorium - 'prayer house'. Obviously, it was the oratorio genre that was originally associated with religious themes [37], and by the Baroque era the genre became "an ideal representative of the divine picture of the world", reproducing "the relationship of two coordinates - horizontal (the *unity* of the concept of God and Man) and vertical (*antinomy* of the concept of God and Man)" [38, p. 49]. In 'The Great Flood', the genre features of the oratorio are clearly outlined and associated with the special role of the choir, which performs various functions. This includes a commentary on current events (choral episodes in No. 4 'This Ark in the Fury of the Winds', No. 6 'Intoxicated with Foolish Insolence' from Act I; in No. 10 'Godless Surround Him' from Act II), the presence of edifications characteristic of a sermon (choral episode in No. 2 'Among Ignorance', Act I), and prayer episodes (No. 1, Introduction, five-part prayer 'O Merciful God', Act I).

The dramaturgy of the opera is based on the conflicting opposition of two opposite spheres: the first symbolizes the images of the departing, perishing world of sinners, the second reveals the images of the new world, the righteous, corresponding to a new era in the history of mankind. The first sphere includes all the characters associated with the head of the satraps Cadmo, the second - Noah with his family. It should be noted that the musical fabric does not contain intonational and modal features characteristic of various peoples represented in the opera. The opera demonstrates the typical features of G. Donizetti's style, largely based on the Western European opera and oratorio tradition. However, each of these spheres has its own set of musical and expressive means.

Thus, the sphere of Noah receives a dual musical characterization in the opera. The first side is connected with the embodiment of the idea of the high spirituality of the Prophet and his family, their righteousness. This idea is shown by the composer through an appeal to church tradition. This is manifested in the use of the genres of solo and choral prayer, as well as traditional methods for Western European church music: polyphonization of choral episodes, the use of psalmody (recitation on one sound), and the strengthening of the role of chorality. It is through the prayer genres in the opera that the effect of the vertical is built, connecting the earthly space with the heavenly, Divine. Indicative in this sense is the fact that in the prayer scenes (Noah's Prayer No. 10 and the final aria of Noah from Act II), Donizetti introduces a harp into the orchestra, an integral attribute of the biblical musical arsenal. This instrument is first mentioned in the Old Testament and is a kind of bridge between Heaven and Earth.

The second side of the characterization of the sphere of the righteous reflects the heroic idea: the themes of Noah are permeated with marching declamation, which manifests itself due to the inclusion of sharp dotted

rhythms in them. This effect is enhanced by the introduction of a chorale of wind instruments. The themes acquire a lyric-heroic character, embodying the heroism of the spirit. The unifying component for these two characterizations is the duple meter, in which all the scenes with Noah are written. This composer's decision does not seem to be accidental. Let us explain: the duple meter is based on natural phenomena associated with uniform movement, and its use in measured prayer episodes creates a feeling of complete harmony and unity with the Universe.

As an antithesis to this sphere, as a force of counteraction, another, polar world arises in the opera: carefreeness, fun, and boundless hatred for the God of Israel and the family of Noah reign in it. It is significant that the idea of another world is emphasized by the composer both at the intonational and metro-rhythmic levels. The intonational formula of Cadmo's sphere is characterized by a tendency to generalization, representing a complex of the most striking features of lyrical-romantic operatic intonation with its melodic virtuosity and perfect cantilena. At the same time, an important role in the characterization of this sphere belongs to triple dance genres. Triple meter, fast tempo, and short durations in the themes of the satraps create a sense of fuss and expression. In this context, the transformation of Sela, who refused to enter the ark and betrayed God, is very vivid. Her 'musical image' loses its duple meter and moves into a different metrical context: the final aria sounds already in triple meter and at a fast pace.

Symphonic episodes in the opera 'The Great Flood' deserve special attention, as they very subtly illustrate episodes of divine intervention. These include, first of all, the scene of Sela's death. It is accompanied by diminished harmonies that symbolically recreate the idea of shrinking space and a trembling sound from a group of percussion instruments that mimics thunder. The flood scene is also vividly brought to life in the symphonic dramaturgy of the opera. The minor key, fast tempo, and soaring passages of the orchestra picturesquely 'paint' streams of rain and stormy waves that sweep away life in their path. However, the opera does not end tragically - the ark floating on the horizon is accompanied by a dramatic yet bright theme in the major key. The latter traditionally embodies the idea of light in musical art, which replaces the 'minor' darkness. In this context, it signifies the idea of the beginning of a new era in the history of mankind, which replaced the antediluvian times.

6. Conclusions

All in all, one must reiterate that the concept of biblical historicism has been vividly implemented in various musical genres, among which a special place belongs to opera. As a complex synthetic genre, opera embodied the religious and philosophical problems of the biblical narrative at various levels - the libretto level, the musical thematic level, and the genre level. Considering the principles of biblical historicism on the example of the opera 'The Great

Flood' by G. Donizetti, one can note their embodiment through characteristic qualities. These include the structure of the libretto and musical dramaturgy being based on the opposition 'top - bottom' (heavenly - earthly), revealing the belonging of figurative spheres to the divine or earthly sinful worlds. The procedural logic of the events unfolding in the opera is completely determined by the conflict between God and humanity, who violated His instructions and plunged into evil. This conflict is revealed in the opera through oratorio and symphonic dramaturgy. The first forms the idea of a vertical uniting the righteous people with God, the second, using 'figurative techniques', allegorically recreates the idea of Divine punishment.

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