The Willow Song in Verdi's Adaptation of *Othello* by William Shakespeare – an Interdisciplinary Approach

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Key-words: *libretto*, *Othello*, *The Willow Song*, *Shakespeare*, *Verdi*

William Shakespeare's work has been a constant source for adaptation in opera. There are over two hundred operas adapted from Shakespearean creations. But Schmidgall considers that within this repertory

> are perhaps fewer than a half-dozen masterpieces, a dozen or more that are estimable and stageworthy, several peculiar works that one would happily attend out of pure curiosity, a few dozen more that either boast brilliant moments or raise interesting historical or aesthetic issues, and, last, that cherrishably batty group of operas in which the Shakespearean source is so insouciantly disfigured as to create real hilarity and mirth (Schmidgall 1990: 237).

Verdi's *Othello* belongs to the category of masterpieces and therefore it is representative for a pertinent analysis of the opera libretto, such an investigation presenting a challenge to any literary scholar.

> The depiction of great passions in music, the skill to create passionate dramatic situations, the expressivity of the orchestra that subtly fixes psychological nuances, the beauty of daring harmonies, the sculptural clarity of melody, these most beautiful features of Verdi's art have nowhere manifested themselves with the power with which they manifested in *Othello*. It was only in *Othello* that Verdi succeeded in subordinating with much power of conviction all the elements of the musical language to his dramatic conception, to comprise them in the major lines of the subject (Solovtova 1960: 309).

Serving both text and music, *Othello*'s librettist, Arrigo Boito, is "the man who felt such trepidation at squeezing the great Shakespearean orange into an operatic container", because this is what composers and librettists do: "they *read* Shakespeare, then *translate* him into their own expressive media" (Schmidgall 1990: 237).

The work of a librettist represents an elaborate act of adaptation and transformation. Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works" which implies "a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context. [...] As a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both

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„Philologica Jassyensia", An X, Nr. 1 (19), 2014, Supliment, p. 491–498.

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re-interpretation and then re-creation" while "from the perspective of its process of reception, adaptation is a form of intertextuality" (Hutcheon 2006: 8). Andrew Blake sees adaptation as "the lifeblood of opera" (Blake 2010: 187). He considers that in working with a literary text,

> the principal tasks will include condensation, dramatization or re-dramatization for the operatic stage, and what might be called *vocalization* – preparing a singable text. Condensation is necessary even for the adaptation of drama, partly because singing simply takes a longer time than other forms of communication: this can merely involve making cuts in the original. [...] Second, condensation is necessary because opera functions best by representing psychological and emotional conflicts and their resolutions, rather than developing a long narrative. [...] Dramatization is also a vital part of the task in turning a work of fiction into libretto form, and many extant dramas have to be re-imagined for the operatic stage. The author's narrative voice will often have to be turned into speech, and sometimes into a narrative frame for the chorus or a narrator (though in many instances the orchestra acts as a chorus-like mediator between the audience and the drama, being a vital part of the narrative strategy [...]. Vocalization usually involves agreeing with the composer where the characters' emotions can be expressed at length and where a more immediate form of communication – such a recitative – is necessary (*Ibidem*: 193).

The opera libretto lacks the poetic function of a literary text and is thus reduced to its basic meaning, which depends on the intelligibility of the words. Therefore, ideas should be contained in keywords that may be easily recognized and that have no pretence to psychological refinement. Consequently, the opera libretto has to resort to stereotypes with the hope of reaching the depth of the archetype (*cf.* Tromp 1980: 96). "It is an error to judge the text of the opera with the criteria of literature [...]. The success of the writer depends on his capacity to imagine rich, symbolical situations, of an exceptional human significance" (*Ibidem*: 97).

In an interview which appeared in "Opera News" in 2008, the poet J.D. McClatchy, one of the most prolific contemporary librettists, considers that

> librettos cannot be as complicated or subtle as other kinds of writing, because they have to be sung, and because just the sheer physical nature of the theatre, with the huge orchestra, big theatres and voice types that get so high that you can't understand the words that are being sung. [...] You try to do the best you can to write language that individuates the characters. You try to give every character his own sound in the language and at the same time to have some kind of beauty or intelligence (Wasserman 2008: 31).

The New Grove Dictionary of Opera makes reference to the constraints on the literary freedom of librettists:

> the choreographer and composer agreed the steps and the music, and the librettist had then to write words suitable both to the intention of the dance and the phrasing of its tune – a teasing yet humble task, akin to that of a translator, which one might have thought beneath the dignity of an independent literary artist. [...] Music has its own powers of characterization, and a strong situation may remove the need for words altogether. [...] A composer sensitive to questions of personality and dramatic motivation may be visited by melodic compulsions independently of any words; or his melody, taking flight from the librettist's text, may demand a different

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> continuation; or an unused idea from some aborted work, or a borrowed tune better than anything he can contrive, may force its way into his mind, so that his librettist is required to produce verses that fit the phrasing and musical rhyme-scheme of an existing tune. An expert librettist will not find this compromising, but he has unquestionably lost his literary independence (*NGDO* 1994: 1196).

As McClatchy admits: "One of the most important things for a librettist to do is to know when to get out of the way of the music – when music can do something much more powerfully and effectively than language can" (Wasserman 2008: 28).

The study of the opera libretto has become a necessity as a growing interest towards the lyrical art has recently been observed. More and more famous writers, poets, or playwrights have expressed their interest in writing opera librettos or have been involved in adapting for the opera. Moreover, the number of people attending opera performances has increased considerably lately and a great part of the audience is represented by youth. Another aspect that enhances the opera libretto is the new technology that makes the lyrical art more accessible to the public: television broadcasting, the internet or subtitling during the opera performance, a very popular and useful practice.

By definition, the opera libretto is part both of the art of sounds and the art of words. Thus, it needs to be discussed from both an *inter-* and a *trans-disciplinary perspective*. The relationship between text and music is a particular one, as it consists in the interdependence of the two components within lyrical creations. And this is what makes the difference between an ordinary creation and a masterpiece: the talent of the librettist and the craftsmanship of the composer in rendering the genius of the playwright.

The particularity of *The Willow Song* from *Othello* is that it was conceived as a song in Shakespeare's play as well. On the Elizabethan scene, *The Willow Song* was performed on "a charming old English tune" (Elson 1900: 290). In Shakespeare, Desdemona's song is

> comprised of short, simple phrases, and includes numerous rests. But here the rests occur only between phrases or to illustrate sighs in the text, never in a novel, teasing manner to retain interest. They key is a much darker *D minor*, and nearly all phrases end at a lower pitch than they begin, as if to indicate that even music cannot heal the singer's failing psychological strength. Any breathlessness that might occur in a continuous performance is negated by Desdemona's singing in snatches between spoken lines, more indicative of her fragile, shattered state of mind than of an aggressive sexual artifice. What remains is a careful, restrained series of independent musical phrases, each one simple, direct, smooth, and oriented toward a specific melodic goal (Dunn 1994: 100).

The musical language of this piece is strongly related to the text and it illustrates the intense emotion and the feelings of Desdemona, from the strong love she feels for Othello to the great fright caused by his intentions. Peter Seng speaks of *The Willow Song* as "a kind of psycho-analytic therapy for Desdemona; what she cannot say, she sings… thereby revealing more of her subconscious awareness than any spoken words could indicate" (*cf*. Seng 1967: 199).

Songs were not very common in Shakespeare's plays and for this reason *The Willow Song* is so well suited in the Verdian creation. Boito chose to transfer the

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original text of the play into the opera with few changes needed for the vocalization of the words and their adaptation to the musical score. Verdi, in his turn, regarded the young woman's moment less as a typical operatic aria, but more as an emotional outburst. As mentioned before, in both Shakespeare and Verdi, Desdemona's song is spontaneous, lacking previous preparation. This indicates the fact that it is not a case of setting a scene, or preparing an expected performance, but a spontaneous moment of re-living the childhood. In order to emphasize this aspect, Verdi chose a melodic line similar to those in lullabies. Ballads and lullabies are situated at the deepest level of the human consciousness, raising feelings and emotions that cannot be triggered by anything else. Throughout the musical piece, Desdemona switches suddenly from her conversation with Emilia to the moments of her childhood when her mother's maid used to sing to her *The Willow Song*. Her melody is interrupted from time to time by a sort of restlessness or sombre apprehension caused by Othello.

> Through its interrupted, unaccompanied performance and simple style, all trace of seduction is eradicated and Desdemona becomes an object of pity and noble femininity. By placing her within a completely feminine frame and allowing her a seemly hesitancy of performance, Shakespeare allows Desdemona's vocality to seem a genuine and admirable feminine product (Dunn 1994: 102).

The terrible struggle in her soul is illustrated by the musical accompaniment.

> Verdi's melodics with its intonations taken from everyday life and with its rhythmical richness acquires particular dramatic features. The orchestra's theatrical expressivity is also increasing. The voice is given [...] the main role. Contrarily, the orchestra – owing to its laconic, but always appropriate attributes – emphasizes what is important, finishes what hasn't been said completely. Each character has its own circle of intonations which creates vivid musical depictions. [...] Verdi knew how to invest all the characters in his opera, even the secondary ones, with specific personal features (Solovtova 1960: 158).

The composer adds psychological depth to the character framed by the librettist by means of vocal colours and the choice of sonorities.

> The fourth act has the greatest importance in characterizing Desdemona. Tormented by the imminence of death she sings a song that she remembers from her childhood, *The Willow Song*. At the onset of the work on the libretto, Boito offered a first draft of the song – a lyrical and calm sentimental song, but Verdi rejected it. He intended Desdemona's tormented soul and her despair and grief to be rendered by a simple, common song. The charming purity of Othello's wife is given by the touching innocence of *The Willow Song* and the modal freshness of its splendid melody (*Ibidem*: 321).

The Romantic period in which Verdi created this masterpiece provides the opportunity to describe characters and situations by musical means such as great differences in vocal intensity, the exquisite *legatto* which carries the voice away – in this case back in time, suggesting the absence of reference to time, extreme vocal expressive nuances – from a warm and delicate voice to shattering interjections. Moreover, the vocal range comprises both very high and very low notes. Music expresses the words that are not uttered, becoming a language in its own right.

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The use of the willow in *The Willow Song* is symbolical in the economy of the *Othello* libretto. The willow is a fragile plant, its branches seem vulnerable in the wind or if submitted to any outside influence, but they have an extremely strong interior structure, they cannot be easily cut. All these features are wonderfully represented by the musical accompaniment and the vocality of the performer, and are suggestive of Desdemona's character.

The *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* states that

> the willow, especially the *weeping willow*, has from time immemorial been associated with sorrow and taken as an emblem of desolation or desertion. Fuller says, *The willow is a sad tree, whereof such as have lost their love make their mourning garlands*, and the psalmist tells us that the Jews in captivity hanged their harps upon the willows in sign or mourning (*DPF* 2006: 1162).

In *Dictionnaire des symboles* "the *weeping* willow is sometimes, in the West, associated to death, the structure of the tree raising feelings of sadness" (*DS* 1992: 849). Shakespeare relates the willow with lost love: in *Hamlet*, for example, Ophelia drowns among willows, while Desdemona sings *The Willow Song* before dying. Peter Seng notices that,

> it was the custom for those who were *forsaken in love* to wear willow garlands. This tree might have been chosen as the symbol of sadness from (verse 2) in psalm 137… or else from a coincidence between the *weeping* willow and falling tears (Seng 1967: 193).

Verdi has an unparalleled skill in rendering all these features by means o musical devices, creating a sound space appropriate to Desdemona's emotional state. In the orchestral part that opens the fourth act of the opera, the atmosphere created by the *c sharp minor* tonality is one of deep sorrow. The repeated pentatone induces a state outside time limits which will later on materialise in the childhood space created by the lullaby. The vocal utterance is prepared by three bars of orchestration delivered in unison, suggesting a touch of implacability similar to an irremediable sentence. Julian Budden notices the lack of tonal consistency in the opening of the fourth act: the prelude for woodwind and horns is in *C sharp minor*, while the song itself is rooted in *F sharp minor* (*cf.* Budden 1992: 389). This only adds to expressing the emotional unbalance of Desdemona.

> *Emilia, te ne prego, distendi sul mio letto la mia candida veste nuziale. Senti. Se pria di te morir dovessi mi seppellisci con un di quei veli. [...] Son mesta, tanto, tanto. Mia madre aveva una povera ancella, innamorata e bella. Era il suo nome Barbara. Amava un uom che poi l'abbandonò; cantava un canzone: la canzon del Salice. Mi disciogli le chiome... Io questa sera ho la memoria piena di quella cantilena...* (Verdi 1964: 326).

The recitative in which Desdemona asks Emilia to prepare her wedding dress and expresses her desire to wear it in case she dies is transferred by Boito with little change from the play:

> I cannot weep; nor answer have I none, but what should go by water. Prithee, tonight lay on my bed my wedding sheets: remember; and call thy husband hither. [...] If I do die before thee prithee, shroud me In one of those same sheets. [...] My mother had a maid call'd Barbara: She was in love, and he she loved proved mad And did

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> forsake her: she had a song of "willow;" An old thing 'twas, but it express'd her fortune, And she died singing it: that song to-night Will not go from my mind; I have much to do, But to go hang my head all at one side, And sing it like poor Barbara. Prithee, dispatch (Shakespeare 1996: 849).

This recitative represents Desdemona's double reversion back in time: to the marriage to Othello and in her childhood, when she listened to Barbara's songs. The temporal regression is typical in the time of death, when moments from the past are revisited. The obsessive repetitions of the interval of fifth three times in a row may be seen from different perspectives. On the one hand, this suggests the motif of destiny, of the fate that is accepted by Desdemona with serenity, yet while being completely overwhelmed by a deep sense of loneliness. The interval of fifth also suggests the sound of warning bells, preparing for what is to come. Julian Budden considers it "merely establishes an atmosphere of gloom and foreboding" (Budden 1992: 389).

The modulation from the *C sharp minor* key to the *B flat minor* emphasizes the passage to deeper levels of profundity on different layers of the soul. Desdemona's feeling turns from premonition into certainty, the musical accompaniment becoming more sombre. The syncopated rhythm that accompanies her discourse on death are like spasms and indicate her inner anxiety or "a flood of suppressed tears" (*Ibidem*): *Son mesta, tanto, tanto* (*I am so, so sad*). A new modulation (in *F sharp minor*) signals the passage to childhood. Desdemona begins Barbara's story, her mother's sad servant that used to sing *The Willow Song*.

> Recollection and melancholy also characterize Desdemona's *Willow Song* in *Othello*. The association of music and love-melancholy is a standard one: more interesting here is the way the ballad is placed in terms of social class – it is the maid, not the mother, who sang it. It is important, too, that it is offered as an old song, a song heard in childhood, which forces its way into Desdemona's memory, and then into her voice as she sings it to accompany her preparations for bed (Lindley 2006: 149).

The musical discourse is introduced by the same empty interval repeated three times. The story of the servant is similar to Desdemona's story and each sound is experienced by the young woman at utmost intensity. The acoustic space vibrates as her thoughts are overwhelmed by memories. The voice sings in unison with the orchestra and the melody has the structure of a lullaby. Step by step, the atmosphere of childhood is brought on, and by means of a picardy third the sound space opens completely towards this new realm of *The Willow Song* and at the same time of childhood.

Desdemona's voice goes beyond words and, owing to her vocality, it transcends the linguistic space. The vocal expressivity becomes extremely refined: the harmony created by the orchestral chords is entwined with the melodic line and the words, creating thus the multiple dimensions of the thoughts of the character. By means of a specific harmony and a swaying rhythm, the composer suggests the fact that the soul experiences a state of reverie created by the willow song overlapping Barbara's lullaby: in Desdemona's past, there was an intersection between sleep and awakeness, while the current overlap is between life and the premonition of death. The extremely simple chorus, similar to a lullaby, is rendered in *pianissimo*.

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Moreover, the indications of the composer are highly suggestive throughout the musical piece: *come un eco* (*like an echo*) indicated for the orchestra, as if coming from afar, transposes everything in the past. It is followed by *piu piano* and *morendo*, and the notes for the voice are: *come una voce lontana* (*like a faraway voice*).

By means of a soft and serene vocality, the voice of the performer that repeats the refrain manifests itself as in a dream, rendering the young woman's inner breath. This passage has a distinct cantability, the main feature of this vocal manifestation being the sensation of abandonment in the swaying of the branches of the willow tree – feeling that corresponds to the rocking of the child while singing a lullaby.

In the next passage, the musical discourse of the young lady is interrupted by her thoughts regarding Othello and his intentions, but she comes back to the ballad of the willow. Her voice and the melodic line of her song betray this duality: the nostalgia and purity of the childhood on one hand and the cruel reality that she senses on the other hand. Each vocal twitch, each nuance invested in the tune by the performer, comprises the great variety of her feelings and the accompaniment enhances the vocal part by means particular to the art of sounds, from the tonality indicated by the composer, the rhythm, measure, harmony, orchestration to the melodic line chosen for each moment.

> The idyllic and luminous phrase of Desdemona that abandons us to memories is a perfect example of fusion between song and orchestra, of melodic declamation and delicate psychological harmonies (Solovtova 1960: 313).

In the Shakespearean play, the servant dies singing *The Willow Song*. Desdemona's memories take shape: *My mother had a maid call'd Barbara: She was in love, and he she loved proved mad And did forsake her: she had a song of "willow;" An old thing 'twas, but it express'd her fortune, And she died singing it: that song to-night Will not go from my mind* (Shakespeare 1996: 849). Boito didn't take this detail over from Shakespeare, but the imminence of a death appears both in the orchestration suggested by Verdi and the vocality of the performer.

The last verses are loaded with inner restlessness and emotion. The ballad that she sings will turn into her own story: *Solea la storia con questo semplice suono finir: Egli era nato per la sua gloria, io per amar...* (*Usually the story ended with these simple words: He was born for glory, I was born to love him…*) Each sound betrays one form or another of the feelings the girl experiences, and the great range of those feelings is manifested in an extremely suggestive game of timbres. The ending is overwhelming: using her last powers, Desdemona says goodbye to Emilia and the orchestra ends its discourse with a descending chromatic line that reminds of the evil which is thus marked throughout the opera.

The musical part of *The Willow Song* is very generous and, owing to the countless valences of the human voice, music doesn't dress the text in too tight a garment, does not limit or repress it, but follows a pure musical discourse that bears the message of a deep emotional frame arisen from the soul of the character.

Like Desdemona, most characters from the lyrical stage, due to the miracle of vocality, succeed in rendering poetic messages, illustrating *the love between these two forms of art: music and poetry*, as Wagner said.

Literature is not only read, but also listened to, now more than ever. With the use of the human voice, the literary text reaches the public. Nevertheless, beyond the

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mere utterance of words, the voice enriches them with a set of unique features, accompanies them with the specific vocality and charges them with its expressive force.

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The Willow Song in Verdi's Adaptation of *Othello* by William Shakespeare – an Interdisciplinary Approach

The opera libretto hasn't attracted too much critical attention from a literary perspective until very recently. One of the major qualities that renders the genre challenging to literary scholars is its ambivalence, as it pertains both to literature and music. Hence, beyond the literary component there is also the musical subtext which enriches and complements the words, and which is as valid a part of the discourse as the textual one. This paper seeks to discuss the entwinement of the two types of language – literary and musical – in the *The Willow Song* from Giuseppe Verdi's *Othello*. It also focuses on the relationship between text and music and the role of music in enhancing the literary language. In *Othello*, Shakespeare's knowledge of the human nature meets Verdi's skill in exploring the psychological depth of the characters by means specific to the art of sounds. The playwright conveys personalities and situations by means of words, while the composer renders features and actions with the use of musical devices: tonality, choice of voice type, melodic lines, leitmotifs, rhythm, selection of instruments or orchestration.

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