

UNIVERSITY OF PÉCS,
FACULTY OF MUSIC AND VISUAL ARTS,
DLA PROGRAMME

Themata of the dissertation titled

**Female characterisation in nineteenth century comic
opera: origins, interpretative issues
and stylistic interpretation**

Norina, a complex representation of a comic opera character

by Zita Váradi-Horváth

Supervisor:

Nora Keresztes,

Doctor of Liberal Arts, choral conductor, Senior Lecturer

2018

I. Preparation of the research

With its simple playfulness, comic opera seems like an easy genre to master at first, however it offers many challenges both in directing it or shaping the characters as a performer. Although the performance itself could come across as effortlessly light and bright, it can only be the result of serious and careful preparation. This is often confirmed and documented in many biographies and interviews of those great opera singers who built their reputation in comic opera performances.

The interpretation of opera is a very specific area of the performing arts. What makes it extraordinary and fascinating is the fact that on top of combining music and theatre, or as Paul Henry Lang put it, being “a stage play written in music; everything visible on the opera stage is just as much part of the musical fabric as the audible becomes a part of the narrative” (Walter Felsenstein) the complexity of the genre is further compounded by the voice quality, personality and knowledgebase of the performing singers. How notable and unique the end result is mostly depends on the quality, ability and level of preparation of the performers.

As a genre, comic opera is an area of opera in which a very different approach is needed from the performers in terms of stage presence, shaping the character and musical realisation.

II. Research resources

Becoming one with the character just as crucial in comic opera as in any form of portrayal. Unfortunately the perception is very often that the lighter subject of the opera means that it is easier to perform it, both musically and as an actor. “Everywhere in the world the suggestion is that the comic genre is an easy genre” wrote Stendhal in his *Life of Rossini*. Fodor Géza thinks that “a comic opera has a certain built in preference towards a lighter, carefree, unconcerned, playful, soft-hearted, casual treatment of musical norms. But be warned: to give into temptation could be fatal, especially for the gems of this genre.”

It is of crucial importance to me as an opera singer, that the *opera buffa*, this slightly neglected part of today’s operatic life, gains back its place on the pedestal where it was once put by those composers who left a legacy in this genre.

To build a convincing case, apart from my own knowledge and experience I called upon on expertise of many resources as a reference. One of them was Walter Felsenstein’s book on *Musical Theatre*, in which he describes his own process of staging an opera and his views on directing, which brought fundamental changes to opera as we know it today. Another source was Stanislavski’s autobiographical opus, *The Actor Prepares*, description of his theory blended with his experiences as an actor. I used it as a support material on many occasions while preparing for my own

performances, therefore it seemed natural to use it as one of the main references for my thesis. *I haven't laughed yet today* by Bagdy–Pap caused a revelation in my perception and understanding of the phenomenon of laughing. After familiarising myself with the writer couple's analysis on the subject, my whole perception of the comic opera shifted somewhat. Stendhal witnessed Rossini's rise in popularity in Italy. His book, *Life of Rossini* is a spellbinding chronicle of the 19th century Italy, a captivating travelling diary, a penetrating account of contemporary operatic life with some critical discussions on operas and libretti, one of the most irresistible works of Stendhal's prose style. Beside these references, continuous visits to the library, some research on the internet and endless analysis of audio and visual recordings of many operas were the continuous source of inspiration for my research work.

III. Method

It is important to point out that by reflecting on interpretative questions of comic opera I obliged myself to exhibit areas of skill and proficiency which are very difficult – if not impossible – to describe. Mastery is not just a simple sum of theoretical awareness and practical experience. It is possible to analyse interpretation on theoretical level to a certain point, and I certainly make an attempt to do so, however there are layers of performing of which one can only be described in metaphors and by bringing in analogies and examples.

Given that the subject of my thesis is one which I explore every day in my profession, at some point I had to face the dilemma so well put by Fodor Géza: “Is it possible to talk about opera without any subjectivity?” My answer would be „no”. For that reason I tried to collect many external perspectives as well as examining the subject from within amalgamating my own views with more objective theoretical principles.

I start by introducing the reader to *commedia dell'arte*, an old craft of comedy which played a crucial part in the birth of comic opera as a genre. I draw special attention to the advent of female characters. I then explore the origins and circumstances around the emerging of *opera buffa*. I then start to outline the development of female characters from the earliest comic operas, analysing their qualities in detail and produce examples to reveal their characteristics and follow the evolution of the parameters of their portrayal. I then focus on some major works from this era investigating the then available comic palette for composers and breaking it down to the core question: what can be a source of humour in an opera.

In the second part of my thesis I give a brief account of Donizetti's life, highlighting those events which had the biggest impact on his work as comic opera composer. Don Pasquale being the last and most important in the chain of comic operas of 19th century receives the most

attention in my thesis: its libretto, musical solutions, dramatic structure and characters encapsulate the genre perfectly. Norina, the main female protagonist of *Don Pasquale* is a superb example of female characters of *opera buffa*, with all the qualities and stylistic attributes to represent not only the contemporary female role but also the whole genre itself.

Although my research concentrates mainly on the Italian roots of comic opera, Mozart – for his all-embracing musical legacy – could not be excluded from my analysis. In order to gain a full picture of the evolution of female characters it was vital to examine some of his operas. Finally I will review the problems of interpretation and stylistic execution and outline the indicators of a memorable and enjoyable performance. In order to validate the statements made in connection with stylistic approach and interpretation it seemed essential to undertake deeper theoretical (melodic, harmonic and tonal) analysis of the excerpts of dramaturgic importance.

IV. Outcomes

In choosing the subject of my thesis I was naturally inclined towards the repertoire I previously mastered myself on stage; since the beginning of my career, I had a keen interest in this specific area of opera repertoire and I believed that this combination of interest and experience could put me in the position of being able to provide unique insights into this area of study.

My vocal abilities and artistic characteristics provided me with plenty opportunities to participate in *opera buffa* as a performer, therefore my motivation for exploring the subject in depth comes not only from personal involvement and experience but also from passion and admiration for this genre.

In my thesis I reveal the journey of a female character from the birth until its flourishing in the 19th century. From numerous documents of history of music and theatre combined with my own

knowledge and experience I attempted to highlight the specifics of performing *opera buffa*. By concentrating on one specific part (Norina) I outlined the numerous possibilities of a *prima buffa assoluta* character. To my knowledge there is no investigative work written about this vibrant and delightful character, who at the same time not as light-hearted as it is so often made out in staging conceptions. Hopefully, through the introduction to female characters I managed to give a balanced view of the genre itself.

As I was trying to define the specifics of performing *opera buffa*, I observed and evaluated many performers – including even myself – in order to pinpoint what's unique about the nature of that particular character. I compared talent and ability to other components of the performance and after leaving the complicated details behind, through analysing the aesthetics of

commedia dell'arte I finally arrived at the universal quintessential truth of comic genre as a whole. It is a confirmation of my previous experiences and its simplicity is sometimes accepted with hesitation: the performer must preserve the *anima allegra* (joyful soul), without it the performer is not a performer any more. (A. K. Djivelegov)

The validity of this renaissance expression is eternal. It reinforces my hypothesis that a good performer should always look for the child inside and find and preserve playfulness as the invaluable attribute for successfully interpreting a comic opera.

V. Bibliography

Bagdy Emőke és Pap János (2011): *Ma még nem nevettem*. Kulcslyuk, Budapest.

Dzsivelegov, A. K. (1962): *A commedia dell'arte*. Ford.: Siklósi Mihály, Gondolat, Budapest.

Felsenstein, W. (1979): *Zenés színház*. Ford.: Ormay Imre, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest.

Fodor Géza (2012): *Mi szól a lemezen? I. Operafelvételek Monteverditől Lisztig*. Typotex, Budapest.

Lang, P. H. (1980): *Az opera. Egy különös műfaj különös története*. Ford.: Gergely Pál, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest.

Stendhal, H. B. (1958): *Rossini élete és kora*. Ford.: Rónay György, Bibliotheca, Budapest.

Sztanyiszlavszkij: *A színész munkája*. Ford.: Morcsányi Géza, Budapest: Gondolat, 1988.

VI. Project based documentation in support of the subject of the thesis

To inspect *opera buffa* repertoire from a performer's point of view is something I have had an opportunity to do on many occasions.

Susanna – Mozart: *Marriage of Figaro*. – 2002–2012. Hungarian State Opera (MÁO), cond.: Kovács János (KJ), Vashegyi György (VGy), Hamar Zsolt (HZs), Halász Péter, Oberfrank Péter (OP), Kocsár Balázs (KB), Kaposi Gergely – 2009. Palace of Arts (MÜPA), cond.: Fischer Iván

“Susanna’s almost impossibly difficult character was performed with thousands of nuances, everything from flirty, piquant, sensual teasing through masterful intrigue to loving tenderness, all represented in imaginative voice quality, a real rarity for the homegrown opera. Váradi Zita’s portrayal of Susanna is a real gem of the Hungarian operatic life.” – 2009. MÜPA (opera-vilag.hu – Bóka Gábor)

“Váradi Zita sang Susanna just the way one wants it: lively, bright, beautifully vocalised, multi-dimensional.” – 2009. MÜPA (*Népszabadság* – Fáy Miklós)

“She was extremely convincing at both performances, her interpretation was best in exhibiting how a part can be shown in different context in comparison to others. Musically speaking Váradi Zita was superb, expressing every nuance of Susanna’s part.” – 2012. MÁO (papirusz-portal.hu – szabói)

“It might shock you, but Váradi Zita and Bretz Gábor were equal partners to the two star guests. Váradi Zita not only pretty, cunning and a marvellous actress, it felt as if Mozart envisioned Sussanna’s part specifically for her.” – 2012. MÁO (Népszava – Várkonyi Tibor)

Norina – Donizetti: *Don Pasquale* – 2003. Bregenz Theater am Kornmarkt, cond.: Pázmány Tibor – 2008–2012. MÁO, cond.: Kesselyák Gergely (KeG), Mészáros György, Bartal László (BL), Török Géza (TG), Szennai Kálmán

„In Zita Váradi’s interpretation Sofronia turns into a real beast... her voice is a couple of shades more dramatic than we are normally used to hearing in this role... the darker quality of her voice brings out new or different qualities of the character and gives the opening book-scene a more dramatic tone.” – 2011. MÁO (Opera-Világ – Fülöp Károly)

Adina – Donizetti: *L’elisir d’amore* – 2002–2004. MÁO, cond.: TG, KeG – 2002. Szombathely Summer festival, cond.: Rózsa Ferenc

Clorinda – Rossini: *La cenerentola* – 2001–2011. MÁO, cond.: KeG, KJ, VGy

“Her Clorinda becomes a guaranteed main part, a corner stone of the performance.” – 2008. (opera-vilag.hu – Bóka Gábor)

„As Cinderella’s step-sister, Zita Váradi applies her comic talents with freedom unrestrained by the constraints of a main role (although having seen her as Norina, playing a main role doesn’t seem to put her under any limitations), and making use of all her options within the boundaries imposed on her by the costume designer and the overall direction.” – 2008. (opera-vilag.hu – Bóka Gábor)

Rita – Donizetti: *Rita* – 2009. MÁO performing in the Baroque Theatre of Gödöllő, cond.: Köteles Géza

Mademoiselle Silberklang – Mozart: *The Impresario* – 2002. Summer Festival, Fót, cond.: Sándor Szabolcs – 2008. MŰPA, cond.: Németh Pál (NP) – 2014. MÁO, cond.: KB

Gasparina – Haydn: *The Songtress* – 2008. MÜPA, cond.: NP

Zerlina – Mozart: *Don Giovanni* – 1997. Csokonai Theater of Debrecen (DCsSz), cond.: KB, HZs

Despina – Mozart: *Così fan tutte* – 1998. DCsSz, cond.: KB, OP

Lauretta – Puccini: *Gianni Schicch* – 1998. DCsSz, cond.: BL

Cherubino – Mozart: *Marriage of Figaro* – 1995. DCsSz, cond.: KB, BL

Papagena – Mozart: *The Magic Flute* – 1994–2004. MÁO, cond.: Fischer Ádám, KJ, TG, OP