

THE LIFE ON THE STAGE: SYMMETRIC ATTITUDE IN BAROQUE OPERA

Guido Bimberg

Musicologist/music educator (b. Halle, Germany)

Address. Institute of Musicology, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Im Grund 25, D-58313 Herdecke, Germany, E-mail bimberg@mail fb15.uni-dortmund.de

Fields of interest European and Non-Western Music History, Music Education and Systematic Musicology

Publications. (1982) Die Bühnenanweisungen in Händels Opern, in: *Oper heute: Ein Almanach der Musikbühne*, vol 5, H. Seeger/M. Rink ed., Berlin Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 17-25,

(1985) Dramaturgie der Handel-Opern, Halle. *Schriften d. Handel-Hauses*, vol 3, (1988) Del piacere della scoperta, Uno sguardo alle opere di Händel, in: *Musica/Realtà* IX, no 27, Milan: Edizione Unicopoli, 131-140; (1992a) Festspiel des Barock. Die Ascanio-Opern von J. J. Fux und W. A. Mozart, in: *J. J. Fux Symposium Graz '91*, R. Flotzinger ed., Graz. Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 27-42, (1992b) Die Gesamtheit musikdramaturgischer Strukturen in Händels Opern, in *Georg Friedrich Händel*, Bonn Münster Hamburg Schriftenreihe der Freien Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften und Künste, 65-87



Abstract: *An analysis of the structure of the European Baroque Opera results in recognizing that this genre, which used to be an integral part of the public music life at the theatres in Europe as well in the overseas colonies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, reflects upon a multitude of political and philosophical ideas of that time. Apart from presenting a pure value of entertainment and education, it was an important medium of public opinion- building in the interests of the ruling classes. A clear-cut message was probably also mediated to the uneducated, yet even the more so to the aesthetically enlightened people of that time with the help and via symmetry. An analysis of texts, stage directions (including the modes of presentation that have been handed down to us) and the music shows very clearly how much Baroque operas were shaped by the symmetrical impetus, and how much they were carried by it dramaturgically. . This symmetry is to be seen in the text and musical structure in the horizontal and vertical arrangement as well as in the scenic presentation which was obliged to the aristocratic ceremony.*

Originally created as an aristocratic entertainment in the North Italian atmosphere of late Renaissance architecture, poetry and ceremony, the musical drama - as the Baroque opera was called - very soon became part of the public culture. The first Baroque operas appeared at the end of the 16th century in Florence and Mantua, but already in the first third of the following century public opera theaters started to come up in Venice, followed later by those in Rome, Naples and Milan. They permitted entrance to everybody, either for the very expensive box tickets in the theater round or for the cheap places in the middle of the auditorium.

Soon after that very successful start the new institution spread over the European continent and the European colonies overseas in Latin America, the Philippines etc. and became the most important status symbol of serious entertainment in the area of music. Every court and every distinguished bourgeois in the wealthy cities of Venice, Naples, Milan, London, Hamburg, Leipzig, Dresden, Vienna, St. Petersburg, Madrid, Barcelona, etc. strove to establish an opera house performing the Baroque opera.

It was, of course, not only a matter of light or serious entertainment. The theaters also had an important political and ideological impact, reflected in the architecture, the staging, and the reception of the opera performances. At the same time, many transitional elements remained. Much like Renaissance theatre, plots often looked back to the times of the Greek tragedy (which was the original example for the "invention" of the first operas in Florence as we know). The theatre experience also expressed the new deal of hedonism in the upper classes as well as of the new interest in education in the lower classes.

For thousands of middle- and lower-class inhabitants of the cities, the Baroque opera was the first contact with classical antiquity, with Renaissance poets and their successors. Historical, mythological and magical plots confronted the audience with a new understanding of history, society, ethic and aesthetic orientations, and the imagination of a (for those times) perfect, magnificent show. Here we find the ideal combination of general elements of the arts, nature, politics, and ideological strategies.

This new experience of entertainment could be so successful because all the best elements of the arts of the time were combined to establish the new genre. When we have a look at the pictures or the old opera houses today we see a tendency to brilliancy, pomp, in short, to a really baroque presentation.

One of the most important methods of demonstrating power and influence at that time was the reflection of the social structure of the society in the arts, and the Baroque opera was an excellent reflector indeed. Symmetry was one of the most important factors in constructing Baroque operas on the page and on the stage: in the architecture of the theatres and in the operas themselves we find a splendid mirror of the contemporary society. The opera libretti, the stage directions in the libretti and as well as the music itself demonstrates the ambivalent character of the new baroque feeling of a new rich and powerful life.

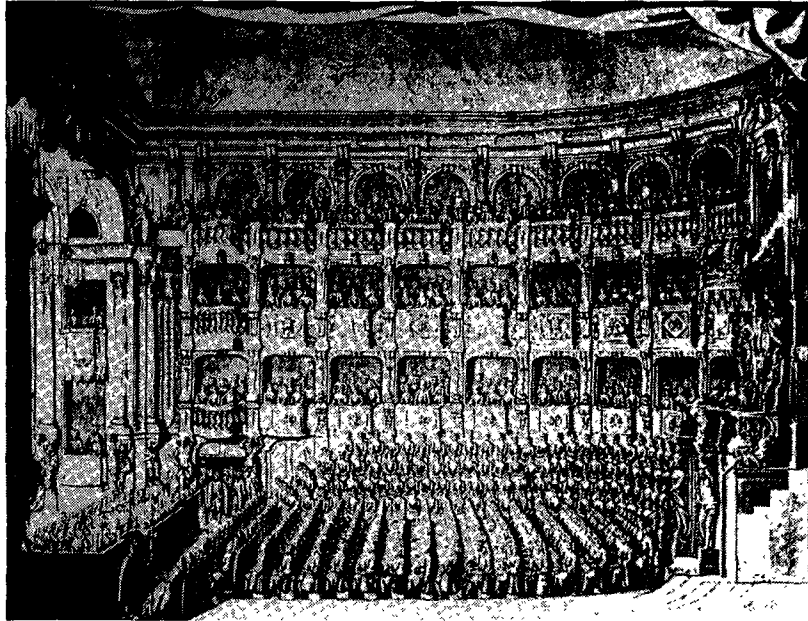


Figure 1: Stage and Auditorium of the Dresden Opera House in 1719

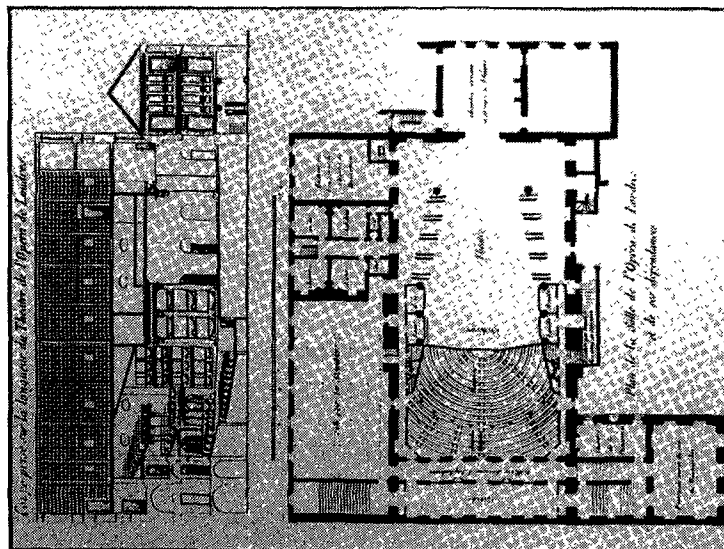


Figure 2:
Architecture of
King's Theatre
London in 1774

Stage paintings exhibited a decisively architectural perspective. In the sketches of stage construction of that time (until 1715) the so-called central perspective is the most commonly used. The central perspective presented a reflection of the social structure of the audience. There was a strong symmetric attitude on the stage as well as between the stage and the auditorium.

The operatic texts and music reflect the political and ideological influence of the ruling classes, but sometimes also ideas of opposition against the absolutistic society. The staging of the operas depended of course on the financial possibilities of the theatre owners and theatre-goers. All these elements of the opera performances are connected by a variety of special instruments to reflect the general life of the people at that time.

The *dramatis personae* reflect the feudal structure of the ruling part of the society, with the king or queen in the centre and the other figures around in a typically symmetrical attitude (see figure 3).



Figure 3: Parody of an opera scene on the London stage in 1723

Thus we find in most of the libretti of the Baroque opera a reflection of the aristocratic society in its noble and powerful impetus. The stories are full of kings, dukes and the aristocratic problems around peace and war and love and hate. "Guerra e amore" - this was the main theme of the Baroque opera, and that only could be represented by aristocratic figures on the stage. If lower class people appeared at all, they were mostly only servants, sometimes confidenti or attendants.

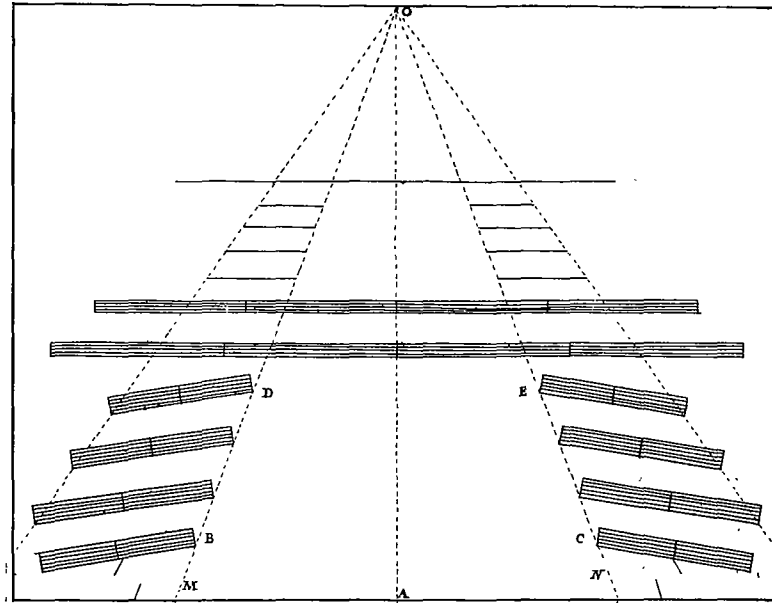


Figure 4: Wing Symmetry of the opera stage

The movement of the singers on the stage was strictly organised. Special books and other writings and printings defined their movements in great detail: the staying on the spot, the movements, the facial expression, the gestures. The arrangements of the singers on the stage was not accidental; they had to follow exactly the stage directions.



Figure 5: Examples for singer arrangements and stage directions in a Baroque Opera Guide of 1727

The social structure was also reflected in the music: special dances presented the different social levels of the court, the bourgeois or the servant. The horizontal and vertical structure often demonstrate the variety of social differences. We know about the quarrels of famous opera singers concerning the number and quality of their arias in an opera, but the essential laws of composing a Baroque opera were determined not by the occasional demands, but by the basic *opera seria* conventions of that time.

There was a strong symmetry in the structure of the libretto: recitatives and arias are often arranged palindromically, and textbooks usually have three or five acts, the climax being in the centre of the plot, i. e. in the 2nd (of a three act libretto) or 3rd act (of a five act libretto). The symmetric layout of the text finds its equivalent in the music. The chain of recitatives and arias (or duets, trios etc. which in the Baroque opera are all in the same structure as an aria) reflects symmetric attitudes, too. And even within the arias themselves, symmetry is to be met: although they usually have a two-part text structure (A B), the musical composition organises that textual basis in a palindromic form: A B A'. This means that the music offers part A and B and then repeats part A (originally as A, or in a variant as A'). That conception gave the singers a wonderful opportunity to show their talent of improvisation, the idea being that they not just repeat part A but embellish it with ornamentation. In the dramaturgy of a Baroque opera, the recapitulation allows a new level of dramaturgical development in the characterisation of the *dramatis personae* in the plot.

The proportion of arias, duets, trios etc. in a Baroque opera is close connected with the requirements of its dramaturgy. A character with a high social level, normally performed by the *prima donna* or the *primo uomo*, has more arias than a second- or third-level figure (which would be performed by a second- or third-level singer). The tables of typical Baroque operas show the distribution of the main arias of a main character in a Baroque opera.

The analysis of the texts, the stage directions (including the modes of presentation that have been handed down to us) and the music shows very clearly, how much the Baroque operas were shaped by the symmetrical impetus and how much they were carried by it dramaturgically. The symmetry is to be seen in the text and music structure in the horizontal and vertical arrangement as well as in the scenic presentation, which was obliged to the aristocratic ceremony.

While much of the striving for symmetry was artificial, construed by the creators of the Baroque operas, other parts - like the architectural basics, the paintings, decorations and simple structures of singing and instrumental performance - are shaped equally by the natural symmetry of the arts. The architecture of the Baroque opera houses was not acceptable without the golden section. The decorations used the natural symmetric perspective in the central perspective of the early Baroque opera as well as in the oblique perspective of the late Baroque opera.