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## STUDENTS' PAPERS

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### THE LIBRETTO OF PETAR STOJANOVIĆ'S MUSICAL DRAMA *BLAŽENKINA ZAKLETVA* IN RELATION TO THE MODELS OF 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY OPERA LIBRETTOS

The first analytical encounter with the old manuscript of a composition which for many years has lain forgotten in the dust of anonymity, far from the eyes of scholars, is a specific challenge. If the work in question is not based on the national heritage, it becomes more interesting to recognize the European models it followed, sometimes even finding only traces of the European tradition. Since Petar Stojanović's manuscript is not widely accessible, the first part of this paper offers a brief presentation of the dramaturgical concept and the historical references in corresponding operas. The second part deals with the separate characteristics of the libretto procedure, viewed in respect of the influence exerted by an overall operatic heritage, with special emphasis on Wagner's musical drama *Tristan und Isolde*.

Before specifying the dramaturgical model used to shape the subject of the opera, it should be stated that the text was written in prose, without repetitions, which makes the libretto significantly shorter, making it a Slavic type of drama rather than a Wagner-like musical drama. On the basis of the characteristic form of the dramatic text, one can discover that the librettist<sup>1</sup> professionally mastered the assigned form. The explanations offer a detailed description of the movements on the stage, detailed instructions concerning the psychological interpretation of the characters, then the respective information about stage lights and the influence of non-musical sounds coming from the stage, confirming that, as early as in this phase of writing the libretto, the author had a vision of the stage performance which was, unfortunately, never carried out. Throughout the whole drama, the action takes place at the Prince's palace and, as soon as "the curtain is raised for the first time", one can see on the stage all points at which the action will take place: the festive dining table, the celebration hall, the hall and chapel to which one goes up the three symbolic stairs.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the data provided by Vlastimir Peričić, the author of the libretto was Mirko Jelušić whose name was not recorded in Petar Stojanović's manuscript.

Instead of the instrumental overture or an introduction, the first to come on the stage are the singers, a court commander and a woman-servant, the minor characters in the drama – and the web of the plot gradually unravels. As if reading a tableau from a silent feature film, the commander introduces us to the beginning of the drama, the wedding of Prince Zvonimir. The Prince's parents oppose their son's choice of bride because the girl is beautiful, but poor and not of aristocratic origin. In his family's opinion, marriage is based on confirming power, honor and wealth, and Zvonimir knows of one virtue only: love which can 'bring him bliss'.

Love facing obstacles is the type of plot so common in the opera tradition that beginning with Scarlatti's *Griselda*, to many 19<sup>th</sup> century operas (*Norma*, *La Traviatta*, *Suor Angelica* and other operas), the plot did not essentially change; it was only the social aspect that changed – the social circumstances that were an obstacle to the lovers' happiness.

Everyone waits for the adorned bride to appear. The guests have already arrived, including the archbishop who, by telling an unusual story, spoils the festive mood. As if it were the beginning of the story, the knight, Prince Slavko goes from one wedding to another, all over the country, looking for an unknown female face. Like Wagner's haunted seaman, he appears and disappears, disappointed in the look the bride gives him as she is not the woman he seeks. Prince Zvonimir tells the court commander to use any means to prevent Slavko from attending the wedding ceremony.

A significant effect is achieved by a narrative introduction, describing the characters and postponing their appearance on the stage in the introduction to the dramatic action. Blaženka and Slavko are continuously mentioned, initially to arouse the audience's keen anticipation to see them, and then necessarily linking these two characters in the course of the impending plot.

Unwillingly, the parents give their blessing to the bride and bridegroom, and Blaženka, also unwillingly, obeying her mother's wish, becomes Zvonimir's wife. The wedding ceremony ended but the belated guests, including Prince Slavko and his companion, were not aware of that. By an unskilled dramaturgical move, the writer gives Slavko the opportunity to speak; Slavko sings enthralled by a fatal love for the girl he once saved but could only remember the look in her eyes; this was done in an unskilled manner because it interrupts the established rhythm of the dialogue for the sake of a long monologue aimed at revealing events from the distant past.

However, the wedding ceremony is not interrupted. The newly-weds come out of the church and Blaženka and Slavko recognize each other as lovers. That is how the introduction ends and the plot begins. According to the customs which are part of the wedding ceremony, the newly-weds give presents to each other. It is the episode on which the writer rightfully insists. Blaženka presents Zvonimir with a sword, which is not used as an element of knighthood, but becomes a dramaturgically relevant item in the further course of the plot.

By an offensive gesture Slavko challenges the bridegroom to a duel in which Blaženka's sword is broken and Zvonimir, wounded, falls on the ground. This is yet another recognizable libretto procedure, to use the motive of a deadly weapon,

which one can find in Puccini's tragedies.. The motive of the sword is the symbol of a tragic fate and its every appearance, seemingly unimportant at first sight, becomes necessary. The knife which, at the very beginning of the opera, Cho-Cho Sun receives from her father is the knife she will use to commit suicide (*Madame Butterfly*). In the opera *Il Tabarro*, an unfaithful wife plays up to her husband wearing a coat in which, at the end, he will hide her dead lover.

Zvonimir, in his death rattle, pleads to God to take care that Blaženka never becomes Slavko's wife; and Slavko, leaving, takes an oath that he will admit that he is the murderer, thus announcing the outcome.

The wedding guests find the dead bridegroom, and his parents suspect that Blaženka killed him. She is compelled to swear that she will marry the man who avenges her husband.

Several years later, Slavko returns to the principedom of Zvonimir's father, finding Blaženka dutifully performing the tasks of a widow, while her 'beauty withers in the period of mourning'. Prince Slavko promises the Prince that he will find his son's murderer, and Blaženka hopes that she will finally be happy. Having found out about her vow, Slavko does not tell her the truth on the eve of only one night that will be filled with magic. The lovers' dreaming is permeated with the intentional repetition of the word 'blaženo' (blissful), ("...we shall blissfully wander... smiling blissfully... surrounded by blissful perfumes. Blissful is he who..., and even more blissful... Oh, sunshine, leave us a moment of bliss...").

When the first ray of sunlight appears, Slavko confesses that he is the murderer. While, for a moment, he lies relaxed 'daydreaming over lost happiness', Blaženka, thinking that he 'is dead', takes a dagger from under his belt and, deeply in love, dies too. Slavko wakes up and thinks that Blaženka is crying but he finds blood instead of tears. At the crucial moment the Prince and Princess appear. Slavko lifts the dagger and spitefully cries out with the last 'tour de force' effect: "Oh, no! She did as she swore she would!" Falling down beside Blaženka, he victoriously says his last words: "I am your son's murderer! She is mine!" They die in each other's arms. A misunderstanding, only as the cause of the heroes' tragic death is a common dramatic procedure in the outcome of romanticist and so-called romanticist dramas. If the best-known example in literature is Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, then the best-known opera with such an outcome is *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

In the last scene of Act I, the choir drink a toast to the newly-weds by singing these words: "Let us raise this wine-glass for the health of his wife, the most beautiful pearl on the coast of our sea." From the text of the libretto, one cannot find out about the place and time when the action of the drama takes place. Without quoting the source on which he relies, Peričić claims that the libretto's author is a certain Mirko Jelušić and that the drama takes place on the Croatian coast in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Although the libretto, in Petar Stojanović's manuscript, is written in German, the characters' names remain Slavic (Zvonimir, Blaženka, Slavko). The titles of Prince, Princess, then the role of the court commander, indicate a possibil-

ity that the drama may have been based on a historical event. In Croatian history, several persons by the name of Zvonimir were mentioned in historical documents, among whom the ruler Zvonimir was the most famous one. If the author of the libretto used historical books, it may be supposed that he chose better known chapters.<sup>2</sup> As the freedom of altering historical facts, to suit the poetic purpose of the texts, was “won” as early as in the first operas, the deviation from ‘historical accuracy’ is quite legitimate in this case too. In order to make the narration on the Middle Ages more convincing, the librettist used the ‘historical significance’ of the name Zvonimir, which exists as part of his people’s joint tradition, and gave the love story a once fashionable medieval character.

As the text, either in respect of its form (foreign language) or its content, does not correspond to our idea of the national, the opera’s national character can be appraised only after the musical analysis has been made. The drama’s ethnological layer can neither be used as an argument in favour of the national, because it contains general folk customs which rather tell of an ancient patriarchal morale than that of a particular people. Several phases of the wedding ceremony are presented in great detail (adorning the bride with jewellery, the parents’ blessing, the archbishop’s blessing, the guests’ toast, congratulations, men kissing the bridegroom and women kissing the bride, the ritual cutting of the bride’s veil, the first wedding night), but none of them reflect a national specificity. Only an inconspicuous sign, hidden in the fashion of the time, points to the local character – an ottoman covered with an oriental carpet.

The title of the opera bears the name of its main female character and not the male protagonist, which was quite common in the opera tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, proving that the heroine in the (mezzo) soprano role pushes into the background the male protagonist (sometimes it was a castrato), making him a partner-accompanist. The interest in women’s psychology in romanticist literature was marked by Goethe’s (*ewigweibliche*) (ever-feminine) principle described in several types of heroines. If Meyerbeer’s *African* and Verdi’s *Violetta* represent a type of women who sacrifice themselves for love, and Bizet’s *Carmen* personifies the beauty of a *belle dame sans merci*,<sup>3</sup> then the character of Blaženka connects these two antipodes. The beauty of a pale complexion has a fatal effect, and “that is the kind of beauty called human in hell, Faustina”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Latin documents, Suenimir or Suinimir, also called Demetrius, was the Croatian king Zvonimir (1075–89) from the Svetoslavić dynasty. It is known for certain that he was the son-in-law of the Hungarian King Bela I. By joining the Byzantine Dalmatia to the Croatian territory (“our country on the sea coast”) and the neighbouring Croatian continental lands, Zvonimir was granted the title of Croatian *ban*. Under the circumstances, which are not quite clear, he was provided the protection of the Pope Gregorius V, who, beside granting the obligations arising from the status of a vassal, crowned him the King. The historical sources differ in describing the circumstances under which Zvonimir died. According to the Croatian edition of priest Dukljanin’s chronicle, Zvonimir died in the Kosovo Polje, near the town of Knin. Responding to the Pope’s call to join the Crusade, Zvonimir convened the national assembly and was murdered on that occasion. Other sources submit to the common Croatian legend which explain the rulers’ death as God’s punishment. The group of authors, *Istorija Jugoslavije*, Belgrade, 1972, pp. 42–43.

<sup>3</sup> Mario Praz, *Agonija romantizma*, Belgrade, 1974.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

Petar Stojanović's 'Viennese experience' did not cause an expressionist psychological intensification of the dramatic conflict in *Blaženkina Zakletva* – there is no trace of applying the psychoanalytical method on the dramaturgy of the musical drama. In the type of character that Blaženka personifies, *Eros* and *Tanatos* meet on the surface of the dramatic action, in a strictly dramaturgical relation between the plot and the outcome, and not in the layers of the heroine's complex psychological portrait. The writer attempted not to disregard, for a single moment, the heroine's name because its original form, Blaženka, and then a number of derivatives (blažen, blaženo, blaženstvo / bliss, blissful, blissfully, etc.), which are repeated many times, undoubtedly reveal the semantic intention the author had in choosing the name. The type of character based on the very name of the heroine is a procedure one frequently comes across in romanticist opera.<sup>5</sup> The name Blaženka creates an image of an angel-like aura which protects the character from sinful love until the very last moment; Blaženka did not break an oath and thus the author agrees to a compromise with the Metastase-like opera ethics, according to which love still recognises moral considerations. A more detailed comparative explanation of libretto procedures in the musical drama *Blaženkina Zakletva* in relation to those of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* will, after all, shed light on various nuances of the relation towards the model.

Certain details from the story about Stojanović's *Blaženka* point to a direct similarity with Wagner's *Tristan* in respect of the dramatic concept. The fatal encounter of lovers from the introduction to the drama, not played on the stage but narrated, predestines the birth of love and its tragic outcome – 'Medusa's' fatal look.<sup>6</sup> The story begins several years later, when the main characters meet for the second time, 'their love encounters obstacles', and it is doomed by the heroes' moral conscience. At first, Tristan's fidelity towards King Marke, puts up a morale barrier towards his love for Isolde, the king's bride to be. Blaženka and Slavko face the fatal choice between honourable (Slavko swore that he would admit he had killed Zvonimir, and Blaženka swore that she would only marry the man who avenged Zvonimir) and sinful love.

The dramaturgical parallel between *Blaženkina Zakletva* and *Tristan und Isolde* ends with the initial situation, a determined polarisation between inner freedom and external necessity as the primary cause of the conflict in the classical model of tragedy.<sup>7</sup> Tristan and Isolde drink a magic potion which, according to the rule of tragic circumstances, does not result in the desired death, but becomes an 'alibi' for morally prohibited behaviour. Under the effect of the magic potion, instead of choosing between love and friendly loyalty, love makes them escape into

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<sup>5</sup> For example: *Carmen*, derived from the Latin word *carmen*, -inis – a song; Suor Angelica derived from the Latin word *angelicus* – angel-like.

<sup>6</sup> Mario Praz, op. Cit., see the first chapter.

<sup>7</sup> August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Predavanja o dramskoj umetnosti i književnosti* (Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature), from: Vladimir Stamenković, *Istorija dramaturgije XVIII i XIX veka*, Belgrade, 1980, p. 430.

the nothingness of night. Wagner created a counter-balance to immorality in the characters of Brangena and Kurwenal, the very representatives of friendly loyalty, as noble as Tristan and Isolde's ideal of love. Unfortunately, in Stojanović's work, Blaženka and Slavko's companions are minor characters, introduced more for musical reasons than for the sake of dramaturgical need.

The solution to the conflict in *Blaženkina Zakletva* follows the pattern of the classicist tragedy. Even if they yielded to a Tristan-like night, Blaženka did it in blissful ignorance, a misunderstanding, because, until the last moment she believed that Slavko would avenge Zvonimir's death, not knowing that he is the murderer. Indicating that their love is impossible, is the sign of their respect of the morale code. For Blaženka and Slavko, love has no sense if it is not complemented with the other virtues of a knight, honesty and honour, courage and loyalty. Taking the potion as an excuse, Wagner, indeed, allowed his characters to 'taste the forbidden' in this world; in the stupor of the night, he created for them Novalis' world, too close to death.

The comparison of the aforementioned musical dramas from the stylistic aspect perhaps more vividly illustrates their 'inner' differences. In *Tristan und Isolde*, the beauty of the poetic language and the abundance of metaphorical narration not only justifies the monologue-like length of the dialogues, but distinguishes the speech from narration, retelling and individual texts. "The tragedy writers 'graft' poetry on another poetry: from the very beginning they were able to use it, they were allowed to use whatever was dignified, magnificent, remote from all petty, marginal terms."<sup>8</sup> The story of Blaženka and Slavko, neither of mythical nor historical origin, creates a fictional historical event and a fictional myth, following Wagner's model. Written in 1934, it had to take on something of the spirit of the 1920's, the experience of the first post-war 'coming to one's senses' and technological progress in the world. From the viewpoint of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the turning point, the return to the late-romanticist idealisation *a priori* had to count on the historicist status, and not one of novelty. A new 'practical' spirit of the 20<sup>th</sup> century hides in the absence of Wagner's "remoteness from the issues present in everyday life".<sup>9</sup> There is no more time for Wagner-like 'rhetoric' and, instead of long tirades on love, we find conciseness and the specific efficacy of dialogues. The text Stojanović's character speaks is concrete and directed towards the action, purposeful with practical results, sometimes colloquial and, even when the author has an opportunity for the lyrical 'extension' of time, he still uses concise, direct expressions which are not characteristic of the opera's poetic language in the quasi-archaic style, which such opera subjects make an obligation. The everyday manner to which the author often succumbs make it impossible to use the stylised language of sublime emotions so that the listener often feels uncomfortable when he recognises the odious phraseology of the odious everyday life, the 'general phrases of love': "She is the only one and I cannot live without her. Without her, every new day is nothing but new suffering. The sun's

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Wagner, *Opera i drama*, *ibid.*, p. 504.

rays do not shine for me, I feel tormented by desire. Oh, I wish I could find you, oh, what a bliss to be yours forever. I would give everything, everything for you". It would be inappropriate to compare this to the respective excerpt from a dialogue conducted by Wagner's lovers.

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The story of Tristan and Isolde is of legendary provenience, which in advance gives Wagner the possibility to go beyond the limits of a love story. The myth having the power of an undeniable conviction served as a luxurious, monumental scene on which Wagner conducted a debate about love. His *Tristan* became a paradigm whose perspective always implies the prefix *Welt*. Despite its non-originality and anachronism, the libretto of *Blaženkina Zakletva* will remain recorded in the history of Serbian opera as a sole attempt to establish a dialogue with Wagner's musical drama *Tristan und Isolde*, which is worthy of musicological interest.

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