

**ARRIGO BOITO'S PROLOGUE IN THEATRE (MEFISTOFELE, 1868)
– A SHIFT IN CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES –**

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ABSTRACT

People tend to look at the educational process as a well-outlined set of manifestations within a given context involving teachers and students. However, throughout the history of music there are several composers who have viewed their craft as educational not by organizing seminars, or teaching in schools, but by trying to influence the way the audience relates to their art directly through their works. A perfect example is the Italian composer Arrigo Boito. His work's libretto was published two months before the premiere, thus allowing the future audience to get acquainted to the subject. It contains a Prologue in the Theatre, which was designed to be read, and not to be staged. In this part, he made the reasons for choosing Faust as the subject clear and gave an account of what it meant to him, all the while maintaining an educational aspect to it. Mefistofele was highly controversial at the time of its premiere (1868). Considering the Italian operatic world had lost its way along the road, Boito tried to abruptly change its course. At the time, the recipe for a successful opera consisted of an emotion-stirring subject, set to a captivating, energetic musical score. Boito chose to alienate his work from this pattern and made his opera unique by using the Faustian myth as a base subject (a philosophical quest, rather than emotional), wrote his own libretto, employed unusual compositional concepts, directed, and conducted the whole show. Knowing what the probable reaction to his new composition would be, he hoped it would reach that part of the audience that would be able to understand his conceptual endeavors, and then gradually be accepted by the other parts of the public, all the while remaining unmoved by his rather rough critics.

Keywords

Opera, Boito, audience, libretto, avant-garde, initiation

Introduction

Throughout music history – and art history in general – there is an easily observable reluctance to everything that is new. Thus, each composer that wishes to bring something new will encounter an amount of resistance from the audience and the critics equal to the dimensions of the novelty brought about by the respective works. In Boito's case, the subject matter was Italian opera, which was impregnated with conservatism at the time. Thus, *Mefistofele* had a disastrous first contact with the audience, which was not willing to get along with the composer's major operatic renewal proposals (SARTI, p. 187).

Boito's opera *Mefistofele* was highly controversial at the time it appeared. It presented at least three elements that were clearly not going to be easily accepted by the Italian audiences. Firstly, it was based on the Faustian myth, which, although very popular in the artistic milieu of Europe, was not easily approved of by Italians. Even in Arrigo Boito's cultural circle, the *Scapigliatura*, works based on Faust's story appeared only in the second half of the nineteenth century, and even then, treating the subject rather superficially (MAEDER, p. 175). Secondly, Boito's ambition to renew Italian music by reinventing the structural and harmonical standards of the time was not seen well, especially due to the "fears" of outside influences. The final element was the way in which he approached the subject. Instead of concentrating on a simpler, more direct plot and then write a passionate and emotional music in a typical Romantic fashion, he chose to be faithful to the very complex subject of the Faustian myth and delved deep into the philosophical aspect of it. From this point of view, he managed not only to synthesize both parts of Goethe's *Faust* and write music for them but did so without denting the original works in any way (MAEDER, p. 175). The change is notable in his music, too. He chose to use the normal structural formats, such as the overture, aria, duet etc. as rarely as possible. The first part of the opera was the *Prologue in Heaven*, and it had a symphonic structure in four parts. The usual harmonic techniques seemed to be avoided, and the orchestration was at times done in unusual ways. All this had a clear reason. It was done to give free way to the dramaturgical and philosophical aspects of the opera, which had to be the most comprehensive work of art possible (The concept was similar to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*).

The first version of *Mefistofele*

The first version of Arrigo Boito's opera *Mefistofele*, which premiered in 1868 at Teatro alla Scala in Milan, was a fiasco. It had stirred up and divided the public into two halves: one which defended the young composer's work and one which despised it. Of course, throughout history numerous composers had works which were viewed as not being good enough or even relevant, only to endure the passage of time and be part of the canon as *capodoperas* to this day. It certainly seems to be the case with Arrigo Boito's only finished opera: "Boito failed with his *Mephistopheles*. But it was one of those failures that is worth far more than the ephemeral triumphs of many other operas, received at their first performances with loud applause and dozens of curtain calls, only to be rejected by the publisher, neglected by the public, and eventually forgotten even by those who had applauded so sincerely." (GIRARDI, 2019, p. 290). Numerous articles and books that have been written on the composer, on the subject of *Mefistofele*, especially its literary and philosophical perspective, stand as proof of its importance both in regards to the opera genre, and the Faustian myth: "In retrospect, we can perceive that Boito produced a work of unquestionable originality, the elements of which support a coherent vision of its artistic mission and an overall aesthetic perspective that was ahead of its time..." (GIRARDI, 2019, p. 290)

At a first glance, the fiasco caused at the premiere could be looked upon as something that happened to fall upon Boito's creation. Jay Nicolaisen calls the decisions made by Boito before the show "tactical errors". Among these there is the publication of the *libretto* two months before the premiere, his choice of conducting the performance himself, and the fact that he allowed his friends and supporters to organize themselves into what seemed to be a gang. Thus, he became an obvious target for the audience of Milan, which was known for its severity and taste for tradition. Boito's overtly critical attitude towards his contemporaries and their works, together with his avantgarde views made an eventual success of his work almost impossible, regardless of the quality of his music. (NICOLAISEN, 1978, p.222)

At a closer analysis it starts to look like a planned event on the composer's part, who took the whole responsibility as to the hostility towards his work. His totally calm attitude and lack of surprise which could be seen on his face during the premiere, despite the obvious unfavourable outcome is a strong indication in this regard ((MARTINO, 2018, p. 3-4). A more nuanced opinion is that of Ida de Michelis's: publicizing the *libretto* in January 1868, two months before the premiere, was meant to attenuate conflicts by allowing the audience to know the work before seeing the actual show, by reading it and becoming familiar with the subject. Thus, it would become a basis on which the audience to judge what they were about to see on stage.

On the one hand, it was unusual for a composer to publish the *libretto* before the premiere. However, in Boito's case, he took it a step further by inserting into the *libretto* a part called the *Prologue in Theatre* in which Boito explained his points of view upon the subject. Moreover, it seems as if Boito tried to educate the reader not only in regard to the subject matter, but also in the aspect of what the audience should be expecting to see on stage and how to judge that which is seen and heard. It was not destined to be played on stage, so it was directed only at that part of the audience that would read the *libretto* before the premiere. Although De Michelis's conclusion is that this decision was rather counterproductive, (MICHELIS, 2018, p. 47) it may be possible that Boito was targeting something other than merely a successful premiere.

Arrigo Boito's educational approach

Taking into consideration all the aspects that led to the events of the opening night in March 1868, it is almost certain not only that Boito was conscious of the results of his actions, but that he had intentionally stirred up the controversy. There are numerous clues to support this idea. The composer explained his views with reference to the audience multiple times. He accepted the idea that theatre audiences were large, and that they might admire the works of art just like they do a rainbow but being ignorant to the intricacies of the prism phenomenon that produces it; in the same way, there are people in the audience that could admire the work of art, but without truly understanding everything. However, there is that specific part of the audience that is educated and well cultivated, and which understands both Boito's points of view and

all the – subtle – allusions that are present in his works. This was the minority which Boito targeted first with his strategy of educating the audience.

After all, Boito wanted each spectator to judge his work individually, putting aside the impulse of evaluating under a bandwagon effect, which is oftentimes rushed, ruled by collective emotional impulses. The stake was to be found in the fact that the reader – and future member of the show audience – would discover a rewritten *Faust*, filled with philosophical, theological, and broader cultural implications.

Thus, it becomes obvious that the Faustian subject, and especially all the little subtleties which Boito introduced in his work, were observed, and understood by a rather small part of the audience. It is the part that likes finding the value in a philosophically rich opera which seems to be lacking narrative cohesion and understands that it is as valuable as any other successful operas which have an easy-to-follow narrative thread and a major emotional conflict, with a clear and definite ending. Next to this minority there stood the vast majority, which could be educated while admiring and appreciating the true qualities of a work of art, to eventually consider it as part of the canon. Even though Boito wanted to be successful, and he wanted his works to appeal to the vast audience, he did not want to use shortcuts, as he well could have (ANGELO, 2013, p. 108).

Another author that noticed Boito's interest in seeing the audience judge a work in an individual, analytic – non-emotional – way is Emanuele d'Angelo (ANGELO, 2013, p. 107). He explains that this way of approaching the opera is not necessarily made in a cold, strictly rational way, but put into context. In the sixties of the nineteenth century, opera audiences in Italy were used to the exacerbation of the emotions displayed on stage in a typical romantic way. This was due to the works that were being played, and the way they were built, a lot of which seemed to be made using the same pattern of a love triangle – which was dominating the play, while other narrative implications took a secondary role. Of course, there were operas that did not abide by these rules, but they were not too many, and they were not wandering far enough from the norm. Such is the case, for example, of Gounod's *Faust*, where the central part of the opera seems to be the love story between Faust and Marguerite, while the heavier elements constituted by the Faustian myth seem to be present only to support this love story.

Prologue in Theatre – a genuinely creative teaching tool

Not only was Arrigo Boito conscious about these aspects, but he chose to address them directly in his *Prologue in Theatre*. The Spectator tells the Critic and the Author that their discussion is well off tracks regarding what the audience wants. (BOITO, p. 37)

The *Prologue in Theatre* is a six-page discussion which, although not lengthy, contains essential information about the way Boito views the subject. The three characters are the Critic, the Spectator, and the Author. The text is rather polemic in

nature, and it contains both questions that could arise from the audience, as well as explanations that the author wished to give. We could say that it reflects an internal dialogue of Boito's, which took form in the guise of the three characters.

The text starts with the author enumerating all the major works that have the Faustian model as a basis. It is a list of the works Boito had studied in order to write his work, and it is particularly impressive given the fact that in the nineteenth century such works were rather scarce and difficult to find. He then proceeds, being provoked by the Critic, to demonstrate how Faust's story is a universal, inexhaustible and "eternal subject" (BOITO, p. 33-38.). He explains how each of the two main characters, Faust and Mefistofele represent two basic elements throughout human history. This part of the *Prologue in Theatre* represents a synthesized history of the subject, as well as more profound explanations for its importance.

After listening to The Critic and The Author discussing the subject, The Spectator warns them to lower their voices: „Woe if the public were to hear these dissertations!" (BOITO, p. 37). He compares the Critic and the Author with two aeronauts who are fighting around a hot air balloon, one of them wanting to cut it, emptying it of the air, while the other one wanting to inflate it to the point of explosion. In other words, he finds their discussion full of redundancies. He then explains that he needs art to communicate with him without the use of science or any sort of explanations. He also says that he is not going to read the preface of a *libretto* or the side comments, but that he expects to be able to give his "...ears to the music and my memory to the drama" (BOITO, p. 37). The Spectator concludes with a line that Boito seems to have written in a prophetic way: "... I am a small part of that whole that sooner or later ends up being right" (BOITO, p. 37).

The mutual influence of composer and audience

Boito ended up rewriting major parts of his work, trying to both maintain his views and appeal to the expectations of the audience. Even if now, at more than a century and a half after the premiere, we are looking up in admiration to Boito's creation, back in his time, one of the main reasons he rewrote his opera was exactly the taste and the expectations of the audience. An example of the concessions made in this regard is the fact that he rewrote Faust's part in a tenor clef, after being criticised for having written the part for a baritone. Salvatore Farina wrote a critique for the second version which was first seen at La Scala in 1881 (the premiere of the second version had been in Bologna in 1875) in the *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano*. With regards to the modifications that Boito made to his opera between the 1868 version and what he had seen in 1881, he wrote: "... we will notice a change that will seem capital to anyone who has any training in today's melodrama, we are talking about the transformation of Faust's part, which is now entrusted to a tenor, instead of a baritone. Does it seem a small fact? The tenor voice was missing from the score; he who was seducing Margherita in the garden, who was prostrating himself in front of the *eternal beauty* of Elena was a baritone. We do not deny that anyone who has a baritone organ the right to love and to declare it to the lover, but, as much as

possible, do it in backstage. In the limelight, we want love to sing in a tenor clef” (FARINA, 1881). The role of Faust had been attributed, contrary to all expectations, to a baritone. According to the norms, this type of voice had to represent a “mature thinker” and so it can be read as a clue from the composer that his work is centred around the philosophical, religious, and cultural implications of the subject. By making Faust a tenor in the second version of the opera “... the conventions of melodrama were reinstated with sufficient clarity, signalling to the public that the hero acts out of love for the soprano – whether she is called Margherita or Elena is of little importance – and not for Knowledge” (GIRARDI, 2019, p. 291).

Although the composer seemed to be adamant in maintaining the radical aspects of his work, the second version of his opera clearly contains elements of a concession towards the audience. Nonetheless, his opera, *Mefistofele*, represented a major step toward changing the paradigm in the Italian operatic world, and widening the perspectives from a musical, dramaturgical, and cultural point of view. In this process, the conception of the *Prologue in Theatre* not only was a brilliant way for the composer to expose his thoughts on the Faustian myth and the situation of the spectacular world in the nineteenth century, but it certainly was a very important educational tool.

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