

RYSZARD DANIEL GOLIANEK (Poznań)

## *Sexual Scenes Depicted Musically*

Music aestheticians have often emphasised that music is ideally suited to depicting emotions, moods or passions.<sup>1</sup> Because of the lack of any referential or descriptive meaning, music cannot imitate any element of reality accurately, but it can depict the dynamics of such events as emotional fluctuations, or the rise and fall of emotional tensions. These qualities are a result of the specific features of music, of its process-like character and its dynamic variety. In combination with elements from other arts, such as a visual presentation or literary text, music gains the ability to be understood in terms of referential meaning. The process-like character of music strengthens the effects that musical works exert on the listener. It may be assumed that the erotic and sexual spheres of human life are well suited to the nature of music: in music and in sexual intercourse the increase and decrease of tensions follow a similar scheme. Indeed, as Søren Kierkegaard underlined, musical eroticism may be regarded as the most direct type of erotica.<sup>2</sup>

It goes without saying that love and eroticism have always been the main subjects of European culture, music included. The scope of the present article, however, is restricted to the particular way in which sexual scenes are depicted (or represented) musically. Thus, we will describe only those musical works and traditions which deal with the musical depiction of erotic situations and the feelings experienced by humans during sexual intercourse.

Eroticism and love scenes have appeared in musical creativity since the Middle Ages, but for a very long time they were present in the lyrics only. Quite often the texts of the troubadours and trouvères contained allusions to erotic life; the authors had a wide range of verbal media at their disposal, ranging from sophisticated metaphors to naturalistic,

---

<sup>1</sup> The key text on this subject is of course Leonard B. Meyer's *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago, 1956), but there are many other publications.

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, 'The Immediate Erotic Stages', in *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 3: *Either/Or* (1843), trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, 1979).

sometimes even obscene, descriptions. The tendency towards the omnipresence of sexual allusions reached a climax in the texts of Italian madrigals in the Renaissance period. In these works, metaphor and implied meaning were a kind of a social game and could be easily interpreted by audiences accustomed to court life.<sup>3</sup> As Laura Macy's analysis of the words and music of three Italian madrigals has shown, the implied meaning was the real intended result of the artistic communication. The court public of the Renaissance period were well familiar with the ancient metaphors such as the parallelism between death and erotic orgasm. In this perspective, the popular madrigal by Jacob Arcadelt *Il bianco e dolce cigno* becomes a description of sexual intercourse, as does the narration of the madrigal *Tirsi morir volea* by Giovanni Battista Guarini, in which the dynamics of intercourse is metaphorically presented. The suggestiveness of its verbal description secured the incredible popularity of this text, which was suitable for many different musical settings.<sup>4</sup>

Other erotic images depicted musically can be sought in the realm of opera, as this genre usually deals with love affairs, and the stage performance enables the public to follow the details of the intrigue. Love scenes are often an intrinsic part of the plot of traditional operas of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but librettists and composers normally refrain from a pointed depiction. However, lovers' passionate encounters are often the pretext for composing operatic love duets in which the erotic tension and sexual desire of the characters are accompanied by an intense musical elaboration. The duets of Poppea and Nero from *L'incoronazione di Poppea* by Claudio Monteverdi probably mark the starting point in the great panorama of this phenomenon in the history of opera. It seems symptomatic that a love duet (in the operas of Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, Giuseppe Verdi and other Italian composers) usually concludes a scene or an act of the opera, thus leaving the audience in a state of suspense regarding further developments between the two protagonists – kept out of the lovers' alcove, as it were.

The love duets concluding the first act of Verdi's *Otello* or Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* diffuse a kind of sensual atmosphere and sexual desire. The musical features of these duets make the audience feel prepossessed or even (maybe!) erotically aroused. However, the traditional opera never crossed the borderline of voyeurism or pornography. It seems interesting that even Richard Wagner followed this old rule in his

<sup>3</sup> Laura Macy, 'Speaking of Sex: Metaphor and Performance in the Italian Madrigal', *Journal of Musicology* 14 (1996), 1-34.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

musical dramas. The sexual intimacy between Siegmund and Sieglinde in the finale of the first act of *Die Walküre* is shown neither on stage nor in the musical setting of this scene. The audience is made aware of the fact only in the next act of the drama, on hearing the news of Sieglinde's pregnancy. The same method was employed in *Madama Butterfly*; and the conceived son had enough time to grow a bit between the first and second acts of the opera... Even in *Tristan und Isolde*, a work so powerfully linked to the erotic sphere, only a symbolic transposition of sexual intercourse can be found, whilst the plot revolves principally around the emotional moods of the characters, the tension and erotic ecstasy. Although no sexual intercourse as such is presented in the story, the score of *Tristan und Isolde* undoubtedly displays an extreme point of musical eroticism.

Some attempts have been made in opera at realistically depicting sexual activity. Zerlina's call for help in the first act finale of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Don Giovanni* makes the audience aware that at that very moment in the story a sexual act is taking place. This attempted rape is presented, not on the stage, but rather behind the scenes. There are, however, a few operas in which spectators have the opportunity to watch a kind of quasi-sexual situation, involving the erotic dance of a female character trying to arouse sexual desire within a man. In Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen*, the titular character plays the role of temptress to Don Jose twice. Firstly, in the seguidilla, she hints at her sexual temperament, and then, in the castanet dance from the second act, she evidently tries to get her partner aroused. In a similar way, through the erotic Dance of the Seven Veils combined with a strip-tease, Richard Strauss's *Salome* provokes Herod's perverted sexual desire.

All these examples bring us closer to the subject of interest to us here, although no actual depiction of sexual intercourse itself has taken place. Sexual images appear relatively rarely in musical works, and can be found in only two types of musical creation: in the programme music of the nineteenth century and in twentieth-century opera. Sexual images are usually depicted in a naturalistic or grotesque way, mainly in modern operas, but sporadically realistic presentations can be found as well, for instance in *Symphonia domestica* (1903) by Richard Strauss and in the opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (1934) by Dmitri Shostakovich.

In *Symphonia domestica*, a typical example of programme music, an extra-musical background (commentary) explains the course of events. The work is a musical depiction of twenty-four hours from a family's life: the action starts on one day and finishes the next morning (at the family breakfast). The depicted story is characterized by an apparently realistic method of presentation, accompanied by the use of musical elements that

imitate real events, thus enabling the audience to grasp, in a comprehensive way, the full story of the family's life. Such compositional methods that consist of a thorough and literal copying of the domestic atmosphere may be treated as representative of so-called 'musical prose', a term discussed by Hermann Danuser.<sup>5</sup> Strauss employed similar subject matter in his opera *Intermezzo*, the story of which is also focused on depicting family life, with its bourgeois commonplaces such as tie selection or buying fresh bread for breakfast. Both these works were criticized and treated as tactless and unrefined. However, if we look at the two works together, we find that in *Symphonia domestica*, contrary to the opera, Strauss did not limit the plot to the conventional sphere only. He proposed more intimate events, such as the presentation of a sexual scene between the husband and the wife.

The main element of the programmatic characterisation in this work are the two musical themes that represent the husband and the wife. In the original version of the score, Strauss wrote down a few verbal descriptions corresponding to the husband, the wife and their son, but he later abandoned this idea and noted only the numbers of the themes used: 1, 2, 3. The similarity of themes 1 and 2, corresponding to the husband and the wife respectively, could be interpreted as a conjugal link. On the other hand, the keys of these two themes are not interrelated (theme 1 appears in F major, theme 2 in B major), which symbolises the distinction between the sexes. The key of theme 3, D minor (sometimes D major), mediates in a logical way between the two unrelated keys, linking them and bringing them closer together. From the programmatic point of view, such mediation corresponds with the family function of the child, who inherits characteristics from both his parents and becomes the fruit of their love.

The junction of the musical themes of the two parents occurs in the sexual scene, taking the form of a symphonic Adagio. Strauss composed this chapter of his symphony in E major, the key typically employed in music of the nineteenth century to represent love situations. In order to strengthen the musical effect, the composer links this key to a very sophisticated orchestration and suggestive musical dramaturgy. The musical energy increases gradually, reaches a climax, and quickly abates; thus, the dynamics of sexual intercourse are demonstratively depicted. The music of this scene illustrates all the phases of intercourse: the initial caresses, the increase of desire, the sudden orgasm and the atmosphere of relaxation, followed by a static phase that suggests that both

---

<sup>5</sup> Hermann Danuser, *Musikalische Prosa* (Regensburg, 1975).

protagonists have fallen asleep. This musical image gains its suggestive qualities because the outline of the musical energy resembles the dynamics of sexual intercourse. It is obvious that this extra-musical meaning can only be achieved when the listeners are familiar with the programme. However, this problem concerns the very idea of programme music in general; thus, it seems unreasonable to ask whether the listener is able at all to realize that the music describes a sexual scene. Without knowledge of the programmes, nobody could understand the stories depicted in such musical works as Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* or Franz Liszt's *Mazeppa*.

Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, on the other hand, could easily be called a naturalistic drama, due to the drastic presentation on the stage of many shocking and repellent scenes such as assassination, bullying or dying. The plot even has a decaying corpse in the cellar! No wonder that the erotic sphere in this opera is also depicted in a similar, vulgar way – the characters simply follow their sexual instinct rather than trying to evoke an atmosphere of love and subtle fascination.

All this gave *Lady Macbeth* a singular aesthetic quality in the history of opera in the twentieth century, but it was the depiction of sexual intercourse in music that provoked serious trouble for the composer. As various biographers of Shostakovich write, Stalin saw the spectacle at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. Having seen the sexual scene, he became angry and left the theatre furiously and ostentatiously. The next day, the Moscow press published numerous articles attacking Shostakovich. Further performances were called off, and the composer was forced to express self-criticism and to change the style of his creative work. He started to compose in a more objective manner, as his Fifth Symphony soon demonstrated. As for the opera *Lady Macbeth*, it did not appear in the repertoire for a long time. However, at the beginning of the sixties, the composer announced he had improved the piece. He removed a few of the more brutal dialogues and slightly changed the music, especially in the scene of sexual intercourse between Katerina and Sergey. The title of the opera was changed as well, to *Katerina Ismailova*. After the premiere of this version (1963), the opera began to be played in various operatic theatres. It seems clear that for the aims of the present article we should deal with the original (1934) version of the score, as it was this version that involved suggestive and unconventional types of musical narration. Even in the lyrics of this original version, the sexual allusions were marked more strongly. Katerina feels her frustration and boredom could be overcome if she had a child; on hearing that, Sergey willingly offers to help. In the new, censored version, instead of speaking of a child, Katerina expresses her discontent with the fact she is illiterate. If she were able to read, books would become her entertainment.

There are a few erotic and quasi-sexual scenes in the plot of *Lady Macbeth*: the lads pinching the girls in the scene with Aksinya, Sergey and Katerina practising a kind of wrestling, or Sonetka's frivolous jokes in the last act of the opera. The most important scene for our considerations would appear to be the erotic encounter between Sergey and Katerina and its musical depiction. The musical effects applied by Shostakovich strengthen its suggestiveness, the composer thereby imitating the physiology of sexual intercourse in a naturalistic way.

The crucial sexual scene that concludes the first act of the opera is preceded by the sorrowful monologue of Katerina. She is unhappy because she has not found any love in her life. Sergey's arrival marks the beginning of a longer phase of sexual tension between the two characters, starting with the conversation in which they both complain of boredom. Striving for sexual contact, Sergey makes her a brazen proposal and reminds her of their 'wrestling'. He grasps Katerina in his arms. The dynamics of their sexual act is presented musically in an extremely suggestive way. The omnipresent galloping rhythm depicts the primitive energy of actual sexual intercourse, and the grotesque dance melody renders the mood of this scene automatic. The tempo is accelerated and the dynamics increased, thus leading to the fierce climax that depicts the orgasm in an extremely pointed way. The relief of the sexual tension is accompanied by a sudden reduction of the energy level, by a calming and halting of the musical narration.

The examples presented here provoke reflection on the range and sense of depicting sexual scenes musically. An aesthetic appreciation of this phenomenon has to deal with the opinion that music illustrates these sexual images in too strong a manner. Surely, the majority of musical works represent life-like events in a symbolic manner only, and manifestations of a literal depiction seem alien to the nature of music. Furthermore, we can even expect the senses of which the music treats not to be ostentatiously revealed. However, twentieth-century artistic works often focus on sexual matters, and the literal depiction of this sphere has long since been an everyday occurrence. On the other hand, both nineteenth-century programme music and opera strove for a realistic depiction of extra-musical events. Various composers (such as Robert Schumann) and musical critics (such as Eduard Hanslick) tried to oppose this tendency, but bourgeois listeners accepted this comprehensible and obvious method of artistic communication. In the realm of opera, such tendencies appeared both in Italian *verismo* and in expressionistic musical dramas depicting primitive human emotions and passions. The sexual revolution that swept through Europe in the second part of the twentieth century had been prepared considerably earlier.

*Translated by Ryszard Daniel Golianek*