Music: a powerful tool for exaltation of the poetic word

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Abstract: - After a rapid view of symphonic music of the last three centuries and of the introduction of the word into it, the choral Finale of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony is analysed in detail, showing its great strength in exalting the meaning of the poetic text. Examining the union of Poetry and Music in the Twentieth Century, the author— also composer of symphonic, chamber and sacred music— describes his encounter with a wonderful poem by Giuseppe Ungaretti in particular, which inspired him with a Cantata for tenor and orchestra, and which has been much appreciated by critics and the public alike. Listening to this Cantata ends the presentation of the paper.

Key words: - Symphonic music, Ninth Symphony, Ungaretti, Cantata.

1 – Preface

From ancient bards of Homeric Greece to medieval troubadours, from the Psalter of Israel to modern songs, Man has always accompanied the poetic word with music, in order to exalt its meaning and provoke listeners’ emotions. Yet, in this paper I shall confine myself to dealing with the union between music and poetry in western culture in the last centuries, since the point when music reached its peak by introducing the tempered scale— a truly ‘universal’ set of sounds which includes any other scale as its subset. Of course, in Eastern and African culture too, fascinating music as well as authentic masterpieces exists. However, the true meeting of Art with Science, their more intimate union, is present in western music of the last four centuries. This has brought about those great works, from ‘The well tempered harpsichord’ to the ‘Ninth Symphony’, from ‘Don Juan’ to ‘Tristan’, which have elevated music to the highest level in Man’s history. Music has thus been able to exist by itself; it has ceased to be at the word’s service. Music has become independent, capable of directly stimulating feelings and of even suggesting ideas, without the need for words.

Great instrumental music was born in the Seventeenth Century when string instruments reached their perfection. Starting from the ‘Concerto grosso’, composers rapidly arrived at the Symphony that, through its bi-thematic character and its structure, became a kind of musical novel, capable of moving and charming the listener. From Franz Joseph Haydn— rightly considered the father of the Symphony— who gave the Symphony its modern characteristics, through the wonderful works by the great Mozart, this musical form found its highest achievement in Ludwig Van Beethoven. He pushed dialectics between contrasting themes to extremes, broadened the symphonic form and created true musical poems on the same level as epic poems.

The whole of the Nineteenth Century sees the triumph of the Symphony that increasingly becomes message and confession of the composer. Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms, Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, Brückner, just to recall the most famous composers of Symphonies, before the beginning of the Twentieth Century when we have the colossal works by Gustav Mahler, full of meanings going beyond music.

It is true that even in the Nineteenth Century songs flourished— songs by Schubert, who wrote real masterpieces in this field, and by many other composers, in Germany above all. However, the power of music in expressing even abstract concepts gave rise to the so-called symphonic poem: a poem without words but with characters and a plot. The symphonic poem, preceded by a Symphony such as the ‘Phantastic’ by Hector Berlioz or by the symphonic Ouvertures such as Beethoven’s ‘Coriolan’, found its greatest exponents in Franz Liszt and Richard Strauss.
In conclusion, we can say that since the middle of the Seventeenth Century there was, apart from opera, a substantial prevalence of music for the word, this being a contrast to what occurred in the previous centuries. Nevertheless, in spite of the power of pure music, many composers wished to give their message in a more explicit way, by using the word. Thus, the symphony with vocals was born: the ‘Finale’ of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was the first—and perhaps still unsurpassed—example.

2 – Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony

By the Fifth Symphony Beethoven had already given his message: against the adversities of a cruel destiny, Man finds the strength to fight and win. The famous and original passage from the funeral atmosphere of the Scherzo to the triumphal Finale marks the victory of Man, the victory of the hero, the victory of the composer himself who, beating the anguish of his dramatic destiny of deafness, has thus accomplished his great mission as artist.

However, Beethoven intended, with the Ninth Symphony, to take an enormous step forward: that of using the word in order to not generate misunderstandings in listeners and to express his message with absolute clarity. He used a poem, the ‘Ode to Joy’ (An di Freude) by Schiller, which is one of the most original works by the poet. He imagines Joy as one of Man’s conquests, in the sense that he can enjoy and suffer with all other men. It is like a great embrace of brotherhood that found an ideal correspondence in Beethoven. He loved this poem for this reason and had since his youth ardently wished to set it to music. When this wish finally became reality, Beethoven did not create a Cantata but a Symphony; a great Symphony that gives the same message as the Fifth, one that is not only more explicit, but is also deeper and more detailed, as only the word can be.

For this purpose Beethoven planned the whole Symphony taking into account that the poem would constitute its last part. Therefore, the three first movements would be, if possible, an introduction to the Finale. They, in fact, describe: 1 (Allegro non troppo, un poco maestoso), the dramatic course of Man’s life from conception to death, through pain and suffering and rare moments of happiness and love; 2 (Molto vivace), the useless abandon to a carefree life (Scherzo) or to the calmness of nature that cannot give him the desired Joy (Trio); 3 (Adagio molto e cantabile), the re-entry into himself, in an intimate relationship with the divine Spirit who finally lets him perceive the truth (in interiore homine habitat veritas, S. Agostino had said) and reach eternity. Only by means of this course does Man become ready to face adversities without fear, to plunge into the joyous ocean of a fraternized mankind.

Yet, it is necessary to bridge the gap between the purely instrumental part of the work and its choral Finale. It is necessary to establish a connection that can explain what the composer did and that justifies the entry of the word in the Symphony. This connection is created by a 226-bar instrumental introduction. The composer’s invention is very original: he speaks directly to the listener by means of a recitativo of cellos and double-basses (we know that this recitativo is the composer’s voice: when indeed the baritone enters on words belonging to Beethoven himself, he repeats the bass introduction note by note). In this recitativo we find the key to reading the whole Symphony.

First of all, a jarring, dissonant chord takes us once again—after the serene end of the Adagio—to terror and despair. Here the composer personally enters the field, showing, by the violent protest of basses, an absolute aversion to these terrible sounds (‘no more these sounds’, the baritone will sing before long). Then, we listen again, successively, to the fundamental themes of the preceding three movements, intercalated by the composer’s comment. Beethoven wants to remind us of the long distance covered from the dramatic beginning to the conquest of inner peace. Indeed, the comment to the sweet theme of the Adagio is more serene and is like an invitation to continue along that path. The woodwinds reply to this invitation and their coming in hints at the ‘Joy’ theme. ‘Finally we are on the right road’, the basses seem to say with their glad descending scale (the same that in the following entrance of the baritone will correspond to the words ‘Let us sing more cheerful songs, more full of joy’). After a brief cadenza, cellos and double basses can finally start with the ‘Joy’ theme in the key of D major, the famous theme which has become the European anthem. It is introduced piano and without any accompaniment. Then, passing to violas and then on to violins, it grows in strength until the triumph fortissimo in woodwinds and brasses, whilst strings and timpani emphasize its rhythm. However, this is a Symphony, and thematic developments cannot be absent; thus a brief development starts, going rapidly to the return of the outburst of terror—the initial dissonant chord— which is now even more
terrible with its seven notes. This is now no longer followed by the recitativo of cellos and basses but by the baritone, who makes its meaning clear, as mentioned above. Now Beethoven can finally begin the choral part of the Symphony: Freude (Joy), the baritone sings, Freude, the choir answers and the beautiful ‘Joy’ theme can rush towards the sky on Shiller’s lines: ‘Joy, bright spark of divinity, daughter of Elysium... All men become brothers under the sway of your gentle wings’.

The first two strophes are carried out quickly, by alternating the choir and the four soloists, always keeping on the main theme until the words der Cherub steht vor Gott (‘the Cherub stands before God’), with a solemn crescendo which from the main key of D major lands on a powerful chord of F major on the word Gott. The third strophe leads us into a gay and heroic atmosphere: ‘Gladly, like the heavenly bodies which run through the splendour of the firmament, thus, brothers, you should run your race as a hero going to conquest’. Beethoven’s attention to the text is scrupulous and the correspondence between music and words is perfect. The lowest B flat of the Bassoons, accompanied by the faint blows of the Bass Drum, heralds the arrival of young men (male chorus) with the solo tenor rising to the high B flat. The iambic rhythm of this part is kept in a phantastic instrumental development that flows into the rhythmic unison of the orchestra on F sharp. Once more we should appreciate Beethoven’s way of alternating voices and instruments, Cantata and Symphony. Although instrumentation and voices for this Finale are the same as for the ‘Missa solemnis’, their structure is completely different. While the ‘Missa solemnis’ is constructed on juxtaposition of different episodes, the choral Finale of the Ninth Symphony has a main theme that runs through it, often varied by purely instrumental developments.

The iambic rhythm passes to Horns in a diminuendo and the F sharp becomes one of the highest moments of all music. On the tremolo of strings and the triplets of high woodwinds, the steadfast chord of brasses and the pedale of timpani, the choir repeats, pp, Uber sternen muss er wohnen. It is a magic moment, elevating men ‘above the stars’. Here is the power of music, when a great composer can accomplish it. The voice of Man, the voice of God who uses Man to raise him to Himself. Beethoven’s faith in God is in Man, but brotherhood of mankind is possible because all men are sons of the same Father and the greatness of Man is in being son.

In the following, the Ninth Symphony celebrates the triumph of Joy, the triumph of a mankind fraternized by an embrace that becomes ‘a love agreement in the general, irresistible desire of all men for Freedom’ (Mittner). And, in fact, the Ninth Symphony was performed as the Anthem to Freedom (Freiheit) in a memorable concert in front of the Brandenburg gate after the fall of the Berlin wall.

3 – After Beethoven

The example of the Ninth Symphony stimulated other composers to use the word in symphonic music even if the greatness of Beethoven’s work constituted often a restraint, the comparison being too hard even for talented composers. We cannot however be silent on Franz Liszt, a renewer of symphonic form, who in his great symphony ‘Faust’ introduced the male
chorus into the last movement. Liszt was considered a ‘modern’ composer, whilst Brahms, who defended pure music, both chamber and symphonic, was on the contrary judged to be a conservative, unlike another ‘modern’, Bruckner—opinions that, after more than a century, have completely lost their meaning.

We can say that it is necessary to arrive at the Twentieth Century to see Poetry entering the symphonic works in grand style; a century where there was a great impulse to change, to even turn against the art of the preceding century. However, in the Nineteenth Century songs with orchestra were not absent, a major example being the ‘Wesendonck Lieder’ by Richard Wagner.

Many significant works of this kind were emerged at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. Let us remember the ‘Song of the Earth’ by Gustav Mahler, a true Symphony (although Mahler did not classify it as a Symphony, as instead he did for the second one with chorus). The six orchestral songs’ by Arnold Schoenberg give evidence of his romanticism and of his love for Wagner. Even more significant is the monumental ‘Gurre Lieder’ which includes moments of moving inspiration and, together with other works of his early period such as ‘Verklaerte Nacht’ and the two Chamber Symphonies, make Schoenberg loved far more than for the following dodecafonic works. Author of many orchestral songs, Richard Strauss gave us, in his old age, an authentic masterpiece, the ‘Last four songs’.

Going forward into the Twentieth Century it is impossible to cite all the composers of symphonic music with vocals. Among the greatest composers of the Century, let us remember Dimitri Schostakovic whose 14th Symphony is actually a set of songs on death, written by various poets, from Apollinaire to Rilke. This is a painful work, evidence of a ‘laïc’ consistency which reaches a dismal pessimism.

In Italy this kind of music is rare, in comparison with opera, which prevailed during the whole century. Modestly, I believe I am the composer who has more tested himself in this musical kind by writing several Cantatas for soloists and orchestra, with or without chorus. Some of them (‘Mysterium amoris’, ‘Our Lady of Heavens’, ‘Hymni’, ‘You’ve always known me’), being on sacred text, may be classified as ‘sacred music’, even if their style is perfectly similar to ‘profane’ works, so to say. From these latter, I should like to recall ‘A sign getting beyond life’, a poem by Salvatore Quasimodo and, above all, ‘My river’, on the lines of the homonymous poem, drawn from the volume ‘Il dolore’ (The pain), by Giuseppe Ungaretti.

4 – The author’s meeting with Ungaretti: ‘My river’ (Saint who suffers)

This poem was composed by Ungaretti during the second world war, in German-occupied Rome. The pain of war fills everything, a sad moan rises from the suffering city while the poet speaks with the river, the ‘fatal Tiber’ which saw centuries of glory and greatness of a City now in danger of being destroyed. Everything seems to be about to collapse and Man rebels: ‘Christ, thoughtful love, why has your goodness gone so far away?’ So the moaning starts again, stronger and more desperate. But finally the poet is enlightened: ‘Now that other cries are vain, now I see clearly in the sad night’. Presaging words on the ‘other cries’ that history would have revealed as vain in comparison to the only one that remains to give a sense to human life. ‘I see in the sad night, I learn, I know that hell opens wide in the Earth in the measure that man withdraws, mad, from the purity of your Passion’. Not you, Jesus, have you gone far from men, Man is who escapes your love, that ‘true love’ which has ‘its passionate seat’ in your heart. So, the wonderful prayer begins, to ‘the Saint who suffers to free the dead from death and support we unhappy living’. Not even a theologian had ever expressed the meaning of salvation with so much power of synthesis. Then the poet, saved by the faith in the suffering Christ, no longer cries but calls Him who supports all the pain of the world.

This beautiful poem, this sublime prayer has touched my soul since my youth, when I heard the poet himself reciting it, in the 50s. However, only thirty years later did I finally find the inspiration to set it to music. The first musical idea was the ‘Christ’ theme: a descending seventh, F-Gflat, to emphasize the enormous distance that the ‘Word of God’ has covered to lower Himself to our poor humanity, followed by an ascent of thirds (F, A, Dflat) like steps of a stairway that He, holding our hands, helps us to climb, in bright union rendered by a chord of ninth (Dflat, F, Aflat, C, Eflat) which is like a sudden light illuminating the Man’s dark path. From that idea all the others followed, trying to exalt the admirable poem meaning with music.

Permit me to quote William Clyde’s comment on the cover of the LP produced by
Romanian Firma Electrecord, including the Cantata:

‘The initial magic atmosphere brings the poet’s anguish to life before the Eternal City oppressed by war, and the music’s admirable adherence to the words succeeds in illuminating their full meaning in the climb from sadness and sorrow to the sublime final prayer, musically rendered through progressive liberation of the singing until the explosion of the melody, pre-announced in the soft chant of the oboe, launching itself at last, no longer reticent, in that act of love which is the creative act for the artist who feels himself to be the bearer of an elevated spiritual message, as with Simoni, a man of deep faith who has found in Ungaretti’s poem perfect correspondence to his feelings.’

After the first performance in Targu-Mures, Mariana Florea wrote:

‘The Cantata by Italian composer Luciano Simoni impressed the listeners for its capability to make the feeling that inspired it musical and poetic. The composer has used the poetic text by Giuseppe Ungaretti in book “Il dolore” to achieve it. The writing is refined, delicate and discreet. Simoni’s pain is not a cry but rather inner ascertainment. Everything sings, everything is poetry. At the same time both romantic and modern, Simoni has composed a work of great refinement, of undoubtable quality.’

The reviewers’ comments on the LP in musical Journals were also excellent. Moreover, many listeners have expressed their satisfaction regarding this Cantata. Therefore, I leave judgement as to confirmation of these favourable comments to the participants in this Conference, upon listening to it directly. The Targu-Mures Philharmonic Orchestra is conducted by Lorant Szalman and the tenor is the Hungarian Thomas Daroczi.