

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF OPERETTA ROLES

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SUMMARY. The journey of operetta performers in creating their role, from the initial preparations to the premiere. The personal, organizational, artistic and professional aspects of the preparation process: studying the score, individual practice, professional auditions, the casting process, individual rehearsal time with piano accompaniment, learning the stage direction, the staging of dramatic moments, collaborating with the orchestra, vocal synchronization with the stage partners, preservation of vocal accuracy and abilities, in all stage situations, creating and learning the stage movement and situations required, the importance of accurate diction while singing and uttering dialogues, singing and acting in costume, familiarizing one's self with the set, the rhythm of the scenes, stage orientation, establishing the rhythm of the stage portrayal, establishing a relationship with the audience, paying attention to their reactions, stage presence throughout the performance, the ability to improvise in unforeseen situations, appropriate reactions, gestures and behavior during applause. We will thus analyze a few *primadonna* and *grande dame* roles from the standpoint of the above-mentioned elements.

Keywords: *primadonna*, *grande dame*, cast, rehearsals, vocal accuracy and proper diction, acting abilities, relating to the audience, ability to improvise

The Role of Sylva in Imre Kálmán's *Die Csárdásfürstin*

It is one of the most beautiful and complex *primadonna* roles among those written by Hungarian operetta composers. Most female singers dream about singing this role from early on in their careers. It is a role that requires a fully formed and steady lyrical soprano voice, a suitable vocal technique, proper diction, good acting abilities for performing the role, as well as pleasing physical appearance.

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Obtaining the Role

In order to attend the professional audition that will lead to the casting of the role, the singer must prepare the most representative aria of the work, which is also the first appearance of the protagonist on stage: Sylva's aria. This scene is particularly complex because, in addition to the soloist, the choir and the corps de ballet are also on stage, and they have to work



together, since an orchestral part is included as well within the aria, in the form of a dance scene. The aria itself starts with a slow segment, built on long notes, and lengthy *legatos*, that challenge one's breath support using the diaphragm. The singer must not, however, neglect her clear and proper pronunciation: "Heia, heia,/In the lonely mountains is my home,/O heia, o heia/ There in childhood days I loved to roam".² The second part of the aria follows, with a fast paced, energetic, temperamental phrases, which must be rendered with impeccable musical accuracy, while the text must also preserve its clear, crisp, easy to understand qualities for the benefit of the audience. This fast-paced segment also includes the dance scene itself, which features the soprano soloist as well; however, she must preserve her energy for the glorious finish, in which her vocal qualities must be those of a virtuoso, brilliantly showcasing her explosive vocals.³

Another stage of the audition may be a test linked to the artist's ability to act out the text of the dramatic dialogues from in between the operetta's musical numbers. It is very important for a future leading lady of operettas to have the ability to evolve also as an actress on the musical theater stage, since operettas are works in which - unlike the specific genre of opera - have significant non-musical dialogue as well. It is well known that greatest opera and operetta divas in the history of these genres were also magnificent actresses, and have masterfully built the characters they were entrusted with (for example, Anna Moffo, with whom a special cinematic version of the operetta *Sylva* was filmed in 1971).

² Source:

https://www.naxos.com/education/opera_libretti.asp?pn=&char=ALL&composer=Kalman&opera=Gypsy_Princess&libretto_file=Act1_English.htm (accessed on March 20, 2019)

³ Kerényi Miklós György: *Az éneklés művészete és pedagógiája (The Art and Pedagogy of Singing)*. Magyar Világ Kiadó, Budapest, 1998. p. 74

Creating and Developing the Character

The actual work of creating and developing the leading character of the operetta begins, in fact, after the casting has been made and the soloist won the audition. In its initial phase, this consists in learning and immersing one's self in the music and the score of the work, as well as building the character based on the spoken dialogue of the piece. At this stage both individual practice and close and systematic collaboration with piano accompanist are crucially important. Accompanists are mostly very well acquainted with the repertoire of the musical theaters in which they work, and have extensive experience concerning the demands of the directors and conductors of such opera and operetta productions. At the end of the work with the accompanist, the soloist has to master the entrances of her characters, as well as the musical score as such, especially the scenes and segments where she will be featured. In other words, she must be prepared to "take her place" within the musical and dramatic framework of the work, and to be equipped to work together with the other elements of the ensemble so that together they will be able to carry out rendering the operetta production on stage.

As far as the work and the preparation needed for interpreting the dialogues, the spoken parts of the libretto, and the acting involved in rendering the work, it must be said that a true operetta performer does not consider these moments to be of secondary importance. On the contrary, she will be thoroughly prepared to meet these challenges by learning the text, by building the character, and creating ways of expressing her traits.

Creating the Mood of a Character

Each operetta role must also be created and developed from the point of view of the character's moods and dispositions. Being a performing diva (cabaret singer and dancer), Sylva is a person who has a lot of success and gains the admiration of those around her, but who also has an intense personal (and love) life that is filled with ambiguity, stemming from her social status. Her liaison with Prince Edwin of Lippertweilersheim is quite compromising for her partner, and his mother's intervention creates the main conflict of drama. The first love duet of the young couple from Act I is a scene where the two protagonists are going through a series of heavy and changing moods. The soprano who sings Sylva's role must be prepared to render this emotional turmoil on stage and be in perfect harmony with her stage partner both from a vocal as well as an acting standpoint.

Sylva's next moment is the quartet in which she sings alongside her three partners, Edwin, Count Boni (the comical character of the piece) and Ferko Kerekes, in which she has to showcase a truly Hungarian-style party demeanor, while at the same time also having to express the suffering she feels, a pain caused by the social difference between herself and her lover. This moment prepares the dramatic situation at the end of the first act, which leads to the temporary separation of the lovers. Therefore, the joy that characterizes the above-mentioned quartet must exhibit emotional subtext on two separate levels.

In the second act, after her having to play the role of Count Boni's false wife, a love duet of the two follows. The scene is perhaps the most profound, deep, emotionally charged moment of the two protagonists. This number begins in a nostalgic note, in which harmony is restored between the two young lovers, and continues with a passage leading to deepening the already existing conflict, all through a deeply desperate feeling caused by the imminent rupture of the bond between them. The singer portraying Sylva can



go through these emotional states by way of exhibiting a flexible vocal approach that mirrors the emotional strain that characterizes the duet. Towards the end of the act – a characteristic element for the genre of the operetta as such – this conflict is nevertheless resolved, and the young lovers find each other again. In the last part of the work,

Sylva has more dialogue than musical interventions, her voice intertwining with that of the other protagonists in the cheerful and overflowing finale of the operetta.⁴

⁴ Gál György Sándor, *Operettek könyve*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1976, pp. 287-289.

The Role of Ilona in Ferenc Lehár's *Gypsy Love*

It is not by accident that I chose to analyze this role, since it features perhaps the best example of *grande dame* in Hungarian operetta literature, a character that is present on stage almost continuously during the work,



and has a defining function in creation of dramatic situations. The appropriate voice for the role of Ilona is the soprano spinto voice, with a timbre that allows for engaging in both the spry and leggiero passages, but also in the dramatic rendering of her aria at the end of the operetta. Ilona's character is particularly complex, and her performer must be well prepared not only from a

musical point of view, but also from the standpoint of her acting abilities. The process of creating and molding this role illustrates quite well the importance of thorough preparation of the acting required, of clear and crisp diction, since without them the crucial moments of the melodrama could stay flat, and have no real effect on the audience. At the very beginning of the play, following a short musical segment, there is a highly dramatic and emotional scene that takes place between Ilona and the main male character, Józsi. After the emotional turmoil caused by the young man's refusal, the lead female protagonist switches into a different mood that is very different from the previous one, which includes a lot of humor, but also a lot of determination, foretelling the conflicting situations on which the operetta's plot will be built. In the core narrative of the work, Ilona naturally possesses these attributes, as she is indeed a celebrated diva of the theatrical world.

The Stage Movement's Complexity

The second appearance of the *grande dame* is a telling example of the crucial importance stage movement work, acting has for performers, as it leads to being able to perfectly sync to your partner, it makes way for showcasing one's vocal abilities, aiding leggero singing, and proper diction and impeccable pronunciation. It is a longer scene that starts with humorous dialogues and actions that must be played properly and with gusto, to the delight of audiences. Ilona arrives at the location where she would like to enact her plan for her lost lover. Her act is worthy of a theatrical diva, and contains a whole range of female tricks, from lying all the way to seduction. The musical part of the scene consists of a duet, as difficult to sing and act as it is light from the standpoint of its character, with a spry and *cantabile* melodic line, spliced with difficult notes. The text of the duet is apparently an innocent one, but it requires clear diction, because it bears the function of integrating the meaning of previous dialogues. Due to its dance-like quality, the music lends itself to being interpreted with a lot of movement, while dancing. It is, therefore, a moment when singers can demonstrate their multiple qualities of operetta performers, while also acting and singing in perfect sync with the orchestra and the other cast members.⁵

Another example of the need for thorough preparation regarding stage movement and synchronization in dramatic situations is the engagement scene, in which



Ilona struggles to save the marriage of her rival with the bridegroom who was destined to her in accordance with local customs and traditions. In addition to her intermittent participation within the narrative where she utters merely a few lines, she has two scenes in which she tries to minimize the drama of what takes place on stage. In

the first one, she apparently manages to save an engagement which is about to be broken off. The music is seemingly dramatic, however, thanks to Lehár's genius as a composer, it also has a tragicomic underpinning, thus

⁵ Wikler Gábor, *Operett – Szubjektív kalauz egy varázslatos világban (The Operetta – A Subjective Guide into a Magical World)*, Tudomány Kiadó, Budapest, 2013, p. 693.

faithfully expressing the dishonest, dissimulated character of the *grande dame*. Here, alongside an impeccable vocal quality and proper diction, she must also possess the ability to express this type of ambiguity with regards not only to interests, but also to morality. At the end of the otherwise very complex scene, after the young couple's engagement is irreparably broken, Ilona has her second vocal intervention. With an identical musical background to that of the first intervention and with a very similar text, this time the main female protagonist finds herself in a controversial situation in which she tries, in vain, to preserve the appearance of normality, but fails, thus marking the end of the first act, in an atmosphere of utter despair. Hence, the performer must possess a great level of complexity in portraying a character, conveying her emotions and inner turmoil both in terms of acting, as well as her gestures, facial expressions and general expressivity.

In the second part of the Gypsy Love operetta, Ilona has a single appearance, characterized by a complex stage movement, which also includes a duet sung with the main male character, Józsi. Her presence in the Gypsies camp is a last desperate attempt to rescue her relationship with him. Her attitude is a nostalgic one, mixed with a lot of irony, envy and venom. At this level, the difference in character and attitude between the two is still manifested on an individual level, and their dialogue as well as duet is a mixture of irony and nostalgia that speaks through their gestures, words and musical elements. Ilona's behavior, however, foretells her attitude in the third act, which will then shift the conflict between them on a much more difficult plane.

Presence of Mind on Stage

For most of the last act, Ilona plays a more secondary role, but nevertheless a very important role by counterpointing some key moments of the narrative. Being an allegedly Gypsy wedding, to which she appears while escorted by the Romanian-Hungarian side of the characters, she tries to ridicule the traditions and customs according to which the ceremony takes place. Her brief interventions, which are now soiled by the rejection of the ethnicity of the main protagonist, go hand in hand with the emergence and increase of the bride's doubts, which eventually lead to the failure of the wedding. After the imminent breakup caused by the gap between Zorica's feelings and remorse and Józsi's wild selfishness, Ilona still makes another attempt to regain her lost lover: she resumes the merry and seductive song from the duet in Act I. The man's reaction is violent: an almost brutal gesture of rejection, he also resumes his great aria from Act II, expressing his Gypsy nature in an outwardly manifested way, his belonging

to this ethnic group, with all the characteristics and the social issues related to such a condition. The attitude of the *grande dame* character in these moments is that of experiencing a total failure, which is represented by her gestures, mimicry and stage movement.

In the last scene, that of forgiveness, Ilona appears as a resigned character who has played all her cards in a battle she hoped to win from the very beginning. Her partner, Józsi, is in a similar situation, but he decided to follow his own way in life. However, the bittersweet ending belongs to the two: the gypsy violinist plays one of her favorite songs to her, and Ilona has to sing one of the operetta's emblematic arias. This last musical number begins in an atmosphere of great pain and regret. Being a slow paced and a wide-ranging song, it must be sung with an ample, full voice, and a sustained breath. The melodic construction evokes Hungarian songs of celebration, so it should be sung with great depth. The second part of the aria brings about a gradual change of rhythm and emotional content. Here we are already witnessing the return of the heroine's zest for life, combined with the attitude best characterized by the saying "after me, the deluge". The last phrases and the end of the aria - and thus of the entire operetta - amplifies this atmosphere erupting into a triumphant frenzy. Hence, the singer who plays the role goes through a whole array of mood changes, and must synchronize perfectly at the beginning of the aria with a solo violin playing in a *rubato* style, then, with an entire orchestra that gradually accelerates its tempo, ending the scene in a visual high note, with the corps de ballet taking over the stage in a frantic dance, her voice rising above the density of instrumental accompaniment. The ending is thus a triumphant return of the *grande dame* character, an affirmation attesting her strength of character, which guarantees a exultant ending of the entire work.⁶

Conclusions

Through this short presentation of the path of a true operetta performer has to go down on from learning the role to the premiere of the production itself, I have attempted to demonstrate the complexity of preparing a successful performance in musical theatre. Operettas, though considered by most audiences to be of a lighter musical tone than operas, were created by talented composers, and their proper rendition on theatrical stages require as much work, skill and talent as do those pertaining to the

⁶ Németh Amadé, *A Magyar operett története (The History of Hungarian Operettas)*, Anno Kiadó, 2002, pp. 47-48.

genre of opera. By analyzing the two main female roles, a prima donna and a *grande dame* one, we have sought to illustrate the stages and characteristics of this work, which is somewhat similar to that of preparing an operatic role, while in some respects being also different, though it can be even more complex and difficult. I have wanted to write this article in order to draw the attention of future operetta performers to the specifics of the artistic work they will be engaged in throughout their careers.

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