

THE SYMBOL OF THE SHADOW IN VERDI'S *OTELLO*

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SUMMARY. The tragedy of *Othello* has been read and interpreted countless times over the centuries, and it continues to be researched and analysed from various perspectives. However, what is specific to Shakespeare's plays is that they can also be interpreted in a subtler key, and Giuseppe Verdi appears to have discerned the deep meaning of Shakespearean themes, mirroring them musically with the finest nuances. The whole opera *Otello* is not only a manifestation of the genius of the great composer, but a genuine hermeneutical endeavour, which resulted in a Shakespearean musical subtext. This paper focuses on the last scene of the opera, with reference to the symbol of the shadow and its relevance in shaping the character of Otello. In *Otello*, Shakespeare's knowledge of the human nature meets Verdi's skill in exploring the psychological depth of the characters by means specific to the art of sounds: tonality, choice of voice type, melodic lines, leitmotifs, rhythm, selection of instruments, or orchestration.

Keywords: shadow, *Otello*, Shakespeare, Verdi, libretto

The last scene of the opera *Otello* exposes the protagonist in Desdemona's room, tortured and consumed by the criminal thoughts Iago has inoculated in his mind. The blaze of raging jealousy plunges him into unimaginable torments. His steps are accompanied, in the orchestral part, by Iago's musical motif, which triumphantly closes the *Credo* from the second act and which, from then on, becomes part of Otello's subconscious. Groups of semiquavers in *staccato*, which start with a leap of third followed by three adjoining sounds progressing in the opposite direction from the leap, have a grotesque, destructive character. This rhythmic-melodic fragment appears here as a mirror image of the one expressed at the end of the *Credo*. This is the mirror image taken over by Otello from Iago. The demonic evil has now become part of Otello's being. It possesses him and leads him towards the tragic outcome.

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On his way, the Moor stops for a moment, frozen by the image of Desdemona and the divine energies with which she is endowed. The kiss theme is heard in the orchestral background as part of Otello's subconscious, a fragment of his soul longing for the spiritual realm that she can offer. Here, the musical background reminds us of the last part of the love duet in the first act. As in every passage from Verdi's work, the theme of the kiss is not randomly chosen, and its symbolism goes far beyond the expression of love between two people. Indeed, the kiss is, first of all, a "symbol of union and mutual adhesion"³ but ever since Antiquity, it has acquired a spiritual meaning. Its origin might have derived from the rabbinical belief that:

[...] some of the righteous ones, like Moses, have been shunned by agony and death, and have left the earthly world in the full beatitude conferred by the kiss of God [...]. Kisses designate the adhesion of spirit to spirit. This is why the bodily organ of the kiss is the mouth, the gateway and the source of breath. Through the mouth as well, kisses of love are exchanged, which inseparably join a spirit to another spirit. Therefore, the one whose soul comes out through a kiss adheres to another soul, from which is no longer divided⁴.

The same dictionary mentions St. Bernard's opinion that "through kiss, man is bound to God and implicitly deified", situating himself "in the heart of kiss and hug between the Father and the Son, kiss that is the Holy Spirit", just as "the Incarnation is the kissing between the Word and human nature"⁵.

The *New Testament Dictionary* refers to the expression "holy kiss" used by the Apostle Paul in four of his epistles (Romans 16:16, I Corinthians 16:20, II Corinthians 13:12, and I Thessalonians 5:26), and explains that "it was about brotherly kissing that was pure among those who share the same faith in Christ"⁶. Here, too, we find that the Apostle Peter uses the expression "kiss of love" in his first Epistle: "Greet one another with a kiss of love" (1 Peter 5:14). The kiss appearing in Verdi's *Otello* is loaded with spiritual meanings, drawing the protagonist closer to the mystical ecstasy and proving to be, eventually, his gate to Heaven.

Verdi was particularly involved in everything connected to the actual opera performance, constantly laying scenic reference points for the musicians, and relating them to the music. In this particular case, the original staging

³ Chevalier, Jean and Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri (Dictionary of Symbols)*, volumul 3, București, Editura Artemis, 1995, p. 199 (n.t.).

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Idem*, p. 200.

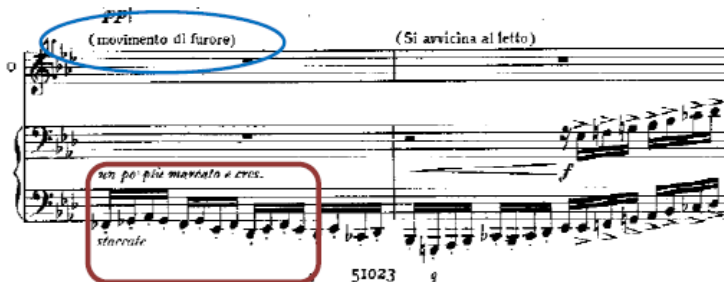
⁶ Mircea, Ioan, *Dicționar al Noului Testament (Dictionary of the New Testament)*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1995, p. 460 (n.t.).

book for Otello “reveals an astonishingly precise coordination among music, words, and the movements and gestures of the actors on stage”⁷. The specifications in the staging book are the following:

Just when Desdemona has fallen asleep and precisely as the first note of the contrabass solo is struck, the secret door opens quickly and Otello appears at its threshold. He takes a small step forward, and then stands still, quickly closing the door behind him. He holds a scimitar in his right hand. The actor must know the contrabass solo by heart since the entire action must be coordinated exactly with the conductor’s beat. It will be useful – especially in early productions – to have the same person who prompted the “Ave Maria” stand behind the closed secret door with score in hand, so that he can softly prompt the actor as to just what movements are to be made. We will later summarize these movements, although it is solely up to the actor at such a dramatic climax to make them effective on stage and not forget that Desdemona is asleep and must not be roused by accidental noises⁸.

The meticulousness with which Verdi noted down every movement corresponding to each note is remarkable:

E.g. 1



The composer’s indications for this part, as they appear in the staging book, are: “Otello is gripped by anger. He makes vehement motions, then, with sudden decisiveness, goes with agitated steps to the bed and stops for a moment precisely at the chord shown.”⁹ The last indication in this fragment is also present in the musical passage below:

⁷ Simms, Brian R., *The original staging of Otello*, http://www.cengage.com/music/book_content/049557273X_wrightSimms/assets/ITOW/Ch56_ITOW_Staging_Otello_fn.pdf, accesat în ianuarie 2019.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

E.g. 2

Once Otello enters Desdemona's sanctuary, his anger dissipates and he is enfolded in the energy of the sleeping angel, recognizing thus the divine purity on her countenance. He "long contemplates" Desdemona who is asleep, and "is seized by a sad tenderness"; he "bends down and gives Desdemona a light kiss" only to contemplate her once more¹⁰. His last gestures in this scene are accompanied by the musical background of the kiss theme.

As shown in the fragment below, from a musical perspective, the kiss theme is uplifting. The melodic line, resumed three times, contains an ascending interval that, with each new reprise, is rising as if uplifting the protagonist more and more towards the sky. Otello kisses Desdemona three times (Verdi's notes: *Dà un bacio a Desdemona. Altro bacio. Un altro ancora*). In Shakespeare's play, the same three kisses prepare her death: "O balmy breath that dost almost persuade Justice to break her sword! – One more, one more: – Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee, And love thee after: – one more, and this the last: So sweet was ne'er so fatal"¹¹.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Shakespeare, William, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Othello V.2.*, Kent, Wordsworth Edition, 1999.

E.g. 3

(Dà un bacio a Desdemona)

PIÙ ANIMATO $\text{♩} = 88$

dolce

DESDEMONA (si desta)

(altro bacio)

(un altro ancora) Chi è

pp

4 51023 4

Detailed description: This musical score consists of two systems. The first system features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has a blue box around the instruction '(Dà un bacio a Desdemona)'. The piano accompaniment has a red oval around a section marked 'PIÙ ANIMATO' with a tempo of '♩ = 88' and the word 'dolce' below it. The second system also has a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has two blue boxes: '(altro bacio)' and '(un altro ancora)', followed by the text 'Chi è'. The piano accompaniment has two red ovals around sections marked 'pp'. At the bottom, there is a small number '4 51023 4'.

In this musical passage the tempo is animated, which reveals the soloist's amplified emotion, while the intensity of the music resembles Desdemona: delicate, soft, starting from *dolce* and going through slight *crescendo* but rebounding to *pianissimo*. Their communion lasts little. The demonic theme presented by Iago, with *staccato* semiquavers troubles Otello again.

E.g. 4

AA LO STESSO MOV.to $\text{♩} = 80$
un poco accent.

pp *e staccato*

Detailed description: This musical score shows a piano accompaniment in 3/2 time. It starts with the tempo marking 'AA LO STESSO MOV.to' and a tempo of '♩ = 80', followed by the instruction 'un poco accent.'. The music is marked 'pp' and 'e staccato'. The score consists of two staves, treble and bass clef, showing a rhythmic pattern of semiquavers.

He rises and brutally provokes Desdemona into their final confrontation. Verdi writes: “Desdemona, who, in her innocence, thinks she has nothing to fear, replies with a naive calmness. She then goes from indignation to terror to pleading. In this way, the feelings of the two characters undergo a dramatic crescendo that unfolds with lightning speed and force. This is the crux of this scene”¹². Verdi’s care for the nuance and the colour of the sound or the theatrical gesture that accompanies it are present throughout the score. But his persistent preoccupation with each feeling the performers express on stage, in perfect agreement with the music and in a continuous exchange with the other characters, is what pertains to that Verdian genius which makes the audience go through an intense and possibly even life-changing experience during the performance and long afterwards.

Otello is now completely entangled in Iago’s web. The entire confrontation takes place with the orchestral accompaniment dominated by the familiar sarcastic descending motif of evil. The rest is atrocity and Otello is left with no other path than the tragic one. He becomes Desdemona’s physical executioner and then his own, not knowing that, in reality, Iago is their spiritual tyrant.

Was Desdemona’s sacrifice necessary? Even though Otello discovers the truth, his soul is still tormented, deprived of identity, and driven by malefic forces, as Solovțova remarked:

The laconic dialogue between Otello and Desdemona, accompanied by a funereal phrase that is constantly repeated in the orchestra leads to the inevitable fatal denouement. In Otello’s words: *And thou, how dost thou look now? So pale, so still, so beautiful!* – words rather uttered than sung, in the total silence of the orchestra, Verdi knew how to emphasise with a rare force the depth of Otello’s tragedy bent over Desdemona murdered by him¹³.

Otello’s final monologue is preceded by the familiar descending chromatic line, similar to the evil spirit that drops everything into the abyss: heavy grave chords, barely perceptible, like a funereal march that threads the faraway universe.

¹² Simms, Brian R., *The original staging of Otello*, http://www.cengage.com/music/book_content/049557273X_wrightSimms/assets/ITOW/Ch56_ITOW_Staging_Otello_fn.pdf, accesat în ianuarie 2019.

¹³ Solovțova, Liubov, *Giuseppe Verdi*, Editura Muzicală, București, 1960, p. 323 (n.t.).



The sombre tone of the brass winds, as well as the impressive declamation of the general who is triumphant in fights but defeated by his own demonic confrontations brings forward the worthlessness and even the destructive power of his preceding glory.

The glacial utterance of the word *Gloria* is loaded with the fatality of fate:

*Niun mi tema s'anco armato mi vede. Ecco la fine del mio camin ...
Oh! Gloria! Otello fu. [Do not fear me, Though I still have a weapon.
Here is my butt, here my journey's end. Ah! Glory! Otello's gone].*¹⁴

Then, Otello lets his spade fall and heads towards the dead angel, singing an unaccompanied melody, which reminds of the tune of their first love duet. He conjures Desdemona crying her name, this time with no musical background, revealing the complete emptiness of his soul. Only now does Otello realise what happened, his declamation suddenly reaching paroxysm, and gradually going down towards nuances of *pianissimo*, with the intonation of a succession of broken, descending sounds, while repeating the word *dead* three times:

*E tu. . . come sei pallida! e stanca, e muta, e bella, pia creatura nata sotto maligna stella. Fredda come la casta tua vita. . . e in cielo assorta. Desdemona! Desdemona!. . . Ah. . . morta! morta! morta!. . . [And thou, how dost thou look now? So pale, so still, so beautiful! Oh ill starred wretch and noble, Battered by evil fortune. Cold now yea e'en as cold as thy chastity, most fit for Heaven. Oh Desdemona! Desdemona! Ah dead, dead, dead!].*¹⁵

¹⁴ Verdi, Giuseppe, *Otello*, Ricordi, Milano, 1964, act IV.

¹⁵ Verdi, Giuseppe, *Otello*, Ricordi, Milano, 1964, act IV.

Otello ends his life, and the agony that follows his gesture is disconcerting. The orchestra moves from harsh, frightening sonorities to softer, warmer ones, that are sentimental and pitiful at the same time, and that characterise the last page of the opera. Otello's troubled soul eventually rediscovers his identity, remembering the moments of the kiss as a last hope of redemption and reconciliation with God.

The words from the last passage of the libretto bring to mind the belief according to which a distinct sign of the redemption of a lost soul is the recovery of the shadow with which it fuses for eternal rest. In the universal symbolism, it is considered that a human being without a shadow is a body without a soul, inhabited by demons. The dictionary of symbols states that "shadows are not only an indication of the lack of light, but also entities of a particular kind. They are a secret alter ego of man and are often considered as a reflection of his soul (in certain languages, the face, the soul and the shadow are named by the same word). [...] The lack of shadows, after selling the soul to the devil, for example, expresses the loss of the soul"¹⁶. Otello's last moments find him in the divine embrace of the angel: *Pria d'ucciderti, sposa, ti baciai. Or morendo nell'ombra in cui mi giaccio. Un bacio ... un bacio ancora ... ah! ... un altro bacio [I kissed thee ere I killed thee, now no way but this, killing myself, a kiss, another kiss, and yet a kiss]*.¹⁷ His soul is redeemed, as his shadow "is spreading" (*nell'ombra in cui mi giaccio*).

¹⁶ Biedermann, Hans, *Dicționar de simboluri (Dictionary of Symbols)*, Saeculum I.O., București, 2002, p. 470.

¹⁷ Verdi, Giuseppe, *Otello*, Ricordi, Milano, 1964, act IV.

OTELLO

Pria d'uc - ci - der - ti... spo - sa... ti ba -

- cia - i. Or mo - ren - do... nel -

- l'om - bra in cui mi gia - cio... QQ *con espressione* un ba - cio...

pp

pp

In the musical passage illustrated above the nuance of *pianissimo* is dominant, while the musical background is consonant, in *E minor*, and the melodic line of the orchestra played in the bass by woodwinds. It is a warm and soft melody, bringing peace and even hope. Othello has found his shadow, which is a sign that God, in his infinite goodness, opens the skies even for the sinner, when he repents.

The motif of the kiss is reprised almost identically from the final part of the love duet in the first act when the two lovers identify with each other in the heavenly bliss created by Desdemona's divine space. The last scene is a true accomplishment in terms of complexity of feelings, and the emotional weight that the music and the scene convey. Otello dies, managing to escape from Iago's grip in the land of terror, and emerge in the land of peace and serenity he experienced aside the angelic Desdemona.

The music turns from tempestuous to tranquil: the unison sound on *E* used as a pedal sustains a chain of soft harmonies in a low intensity. The opera ends on an *E major* key, the same tonality found in the love duet from the first act. The musical correspondence is more than suggestive: beyond any mental process used to explain such links, music touches the most sensitive chords of the soul, leaving a mark on the audience that is beyond their understanding. The composer recreates here the sacred space from the first act, and the ecstasy Otello then felt in the presence of Desdemona is now promised to him for eternity.

The emotions Otello experiences throughout the opera can hardly be described in words. The range of feelings which the performer conveys, and which the orchestral accompaniment transmits is so varied that it truly encompasses a great part of the emotions a person experiences in a lifetime. The sense of the tragedy is most valuable: "the luminous forces triumph. The motif of love that is heard twice at the end of the opera acquires new meanings. It is present for the last time when Otello commits suicide. Iago has been exposed. Otello is persuaded of Desdemona's innocence and finds his peace with revived faith in her moral perfection"¹⁸. The complex transformation of Otello's spirit throughout this musical passage is sublime, just like the music that accompanies it.

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¹⁸ Solovțova, Liubov, *Giuseppe Verdi*, Editura Muzicală, București, 1960, p. 323.

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