A LUDIC OPERA: *POST-FICTION*
BY DAN DEDIU

SANDA HÎRLAV MAISTOROVICI[1]

SUMMARY. The article *A Ludic Opera: Post-Fiction* by Dan Dediu comprises a short presentation of the composer's older opus, which was performed for the first time at *The International Week of New Music* in 1996. Starting from musicologist Irinel Anghel's remark that the opus has "a typically post-modern, opera-within-an-opera character", the article advances an analytical framework that leads to the idea that the structure of the libretto and the musical scaffolding manifest filiations from and connections with Pirandelli's outlook on theatre. The analytical inquiry highlights five arguments that support this hypothesis: the characters are entities that pertain to other operas; placed in another time and space, they behave as indignant characters; in their new stances, these characters undergo changes both at the level of their own personality and at the level of their image, reflected as if in a mirror, in the other characters' consciousness; between the composer and his characters there is an interrelationship, the composer himself being part of the imaginative play of the performance.

Keywords: opera-within-an-opera, Pirandelli's theatre, characters, *umorismo*, ludic, parody

The secondary title *chamber opera in two acts (own libretto) for 5 singers, 13 instruments and tape* is meant to offer the readership or the audience, right from the start, an overview of *POST-FICTION*, an opera by Dan Dediu. Composed between 1994 and 1995 using the composer's own libretto, this opera (opus 50) was performed for the first time at *The International Week of New Music* in Bucharest on 25 May 1996. In a concise presentation of this composition, musicologist Irinel Anghel noted its "typically post-modern, opera-within-an-opera character"[2], based on Pirandelli's "theatre

---

[1] *Associate Professor at The National University of Music of Bucharest, Romania, email: sanda11955@yahoo.com*

[2] Anghel, Irinel, *A VI a ediţie a Festivalului de muzică nouă - Pregnanţe valorice*, *(The Sixth edition of the New Music Festival – Valuable Highlights)* in S*pectacolul muzicii,* supliment al cotidianului *Azi*, *(The Music Show* – a supplement of the daily newspaper *Today)* Year I, no. 69, 26th June 1996, p. 3.

within the theatre" model. The present paper is an attempt at investigating in minute detail Dan Dediu's opera and Pirandelli's theatre (outlook on theatre), given some similarities between the two.

1) Dan Dediu's composition extracts its five characters from the works of several great masters of music and literature. If Pirandello "destroys the personal unity of the character in a play, as it was handed down by tradition, and removes the character from the social and historical environment in order to explore his or her dimensions on a spiritualist impulse"[3] (my translation), Dan Dediu does the same thing by lending his characters truly new dimensions, their identification being possible only at the visual level (through costumes) and by allusion. These characters are:

Faustus – Goethe – Gounod
Othello – Shakespeare – Verdi
Carmen – Merimée – Bizet
Brunhilde –from the epic poem *Niebelungenlied* – Wagner

and *Dracula*, the *Dark Avenger,* the only character that does not originate from a previous fictional space other than by allusion, being a hybrid character that surprisingly changes from maleficence to beneficence (i.e. from *Dracula* into *Orpheus*).

The five characters are placed by the composer inside a new frame which he calls *Post-Fiction*, a space which at first sight seems to be a kind of Promised Land, but later turns out to be a gloomy prison, a computer game where the characters are entirely deprived of freedom.

Othello introduces himself via a *rondò*-like aria to an accompaniment of a cavalcade (as in Verdi's *Rigoletto*) with occasional *brindisi* features (*Traviata*), but he slides into swing-like rhythms when he expresses the joy of having met Carmen. In a dialogue with Faustus, his reverberating discourse borrows the characteristics of the baroque *recitativo secco*, for example in Act II, scene III. As a matter of fact, Carmen simulates a sort of madness aria built on a musical motif which first appears Act I, where it has an aggressive, quarrelsome nuance, but in this later occurrence it acquires a nostalgic tone. The *ostinato* technique occurring in Othello's part is identifiable in the case of the other characters as well, such as *Faustus* (Act II, scene III, quartet). *Carmen* sings most of the time while waltzes unfold in the background, as in Act I, scene II. Verdi's stylistic universe represents the backdrop for the manifestation of two other characters, *Dracula* and *Brunhilde.* Out of Faustus's entire part, the most representative for musical identification is the prologue

---

[3] Pirandello, Luigi, *Scrieri despre teatru (On Theatre)* , în vol. *Teatru (Theatre),* Editura pentru Literatura Universală, Bucureşti 1967.

(Scene I, Act I), in which the character represents the land of *Post-Fiction* and which ends in the sound effect of a broken gramophone record, thus announcing that this land will prove to be a space connected to the cold and inert world of technology and computer science. The idea of *opera aperta* emerges towards the end of the opera, where Faustus's prologue is resumed.

2) From the very beginning condemned to immortality by their initial authors (themselves mortal beings), these characters, outliving their creators, win their own identity, which gives them the right to independent behaviour. Consequently, these entities, placed by *another author* into *another space*, behave like disgruntled characters, as in Pirandello's play, *Six Characters In Search of An Author*. They refuse to remain forever caught in the mould that was meant for them and which they cannot escape from.

a) Faustus announces this bitter revolt from the very prologue:
"*Death…Madness…wilderness…/Darkness…and ghosts everywhere / We are condemned to end / Our life with every book that closes/ And opens nevermore.*" (Act I, scene I)
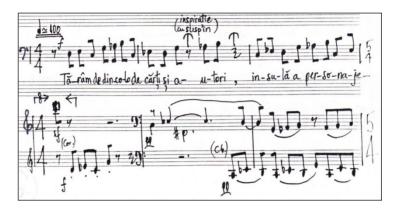
E.g. 1[4]

Evoking the hope for freedom in the new space offered by the new author:
"*Post-Fiction, a land beyond books and authors, an island for characters only, a treasure of their freedom, a land where to rest.*" (Act I, scene I)
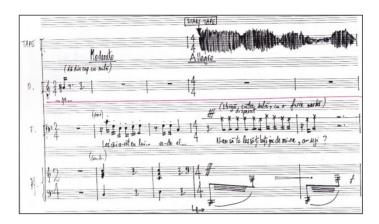
---

[4] Published with the permission of the author.

E.g. 2

He is determined to confront his opponent, namely the new author:
"I will not have you mock at me!" (Act I, scene I)

E.g. 3

But the moment when he finds out that he has been victimised again and that he is no more than a character in a computer game, his revolt takes the form of maximum lucidity: he unveils behind the "terminator" (*Dark-Avenger*) the programmer of the latter, who, in his turn, has been programmed etc.:

"For if this computer game is our world, in which we keep on crying and loving, then who commands the programmer? He is the subject of a greater game" (Act II, scene II).

E.g. 4

b) *Othello* mimics the same indignation against authors: *"Remove this dagger which Shakespeare has thrust into my bosom, which Verdi for the second time has twisted inside me with unconcern"* (Act I, scene I)
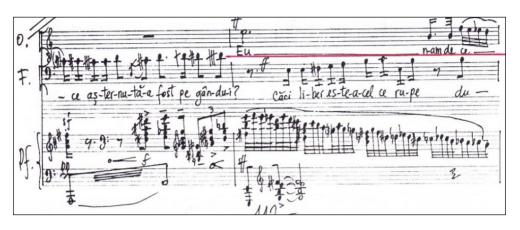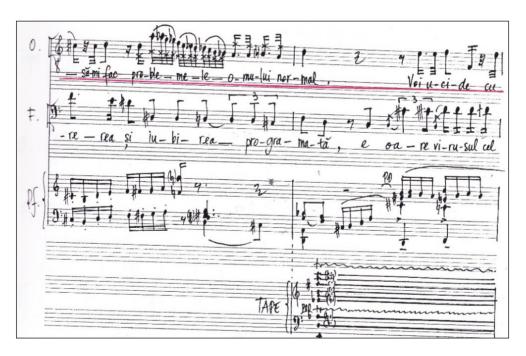
E.g. 5

At first sight, in Dediu's opera Othello appears to be a frivolous, facetious, completely no resentful character, lacking the sense of responsibility characteristic of human beings, due to his very nature of having been created by someone else *("I needn't worry as a normal person does"* - Act II, scene II). His indignation is equally acute when he presents Faustus with a dilemma: *"Have you wondered what freedom a character has to ask himself a question"* (Act II, scene II), but it becomes, just as in the case of Faustus's revolt, a form of profound lucidity: *"There is no such thing as an idea which you have that had not existed before you had it, which had not existed before you uttered it"* (Act II, scene II).
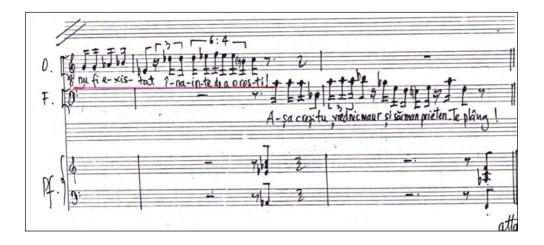
E.g. 6

c) Brunhilde, the character who in the beginning plays the role of a confused person, has her own fits of revolt and lucidity: *"In the book we were the characters of a ruthless game. Now we have come to be puppets trapped in the cage of a microprocessor"* (Act I, scene II).

E.g. 7
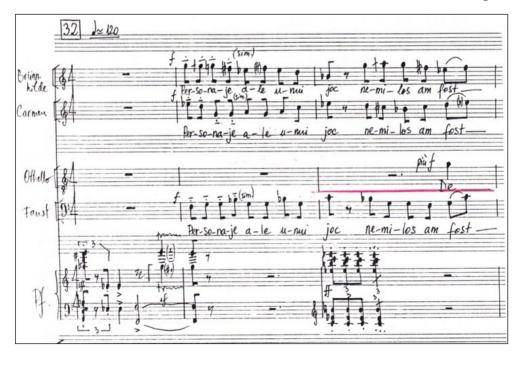
d) *Dark Avenger*, the negative character, the trigger of all evil, finds himself in revolt against the other characters, who, after all, are his peers. As such, they state *"We, vampires, do have our pride"* (Act I, scene II),

E.g. 8

when his student, Othello, did not prove enough *"imagination, spontaneity, abyssal inventiveness".* Even from his stance of wrongdoer and supreme virus, because of whom *Faustus, Othello, Carmen* and *Brunhilde* become mere minerals, Dracula joins in these characters' revolt, urging them to "*Rise, you forlorn of the game, you damned to the virus, rise!"* (Act II, scene II).

E.g. 9

3) It has been noted that, in Pirandello's plays, there is a permanent manifestation of the dualism Life = Form.[5] Life is seen as a continual flux in a permanent movement, and Form is concretized in mental constructs intended to put an end to this stream. According to Adriano Tilgher[6], this dualism consists in Life's necessity to take a Form and the impossibility to run dry in this Form. In this situation the individual does not have only one personality, for this is only one of the moulds into which life has been cast. Every individual is *one(-sided)* for himself or herself, but in fact one can have *hundreds of personalities* born out of the images the others create about oneself. We therefore witness individual adjustments to the destiny one has been predicted: "Life is a continuous flow which we try to stop, to cast into fixed, clear forms, inside and outside us, because we already are fixed forms that move inside other immobile forms and yet can engage into the flow of life until, freezing little by little, all movement stops" (my translation). This line of thought goes on to state that: "the individual soul is not unique. How could it be unique if passion and reason, instinct and will, tendencies and ideals in a way make up an equal number of different and mobile systems that enable the individual, who lives at times one or another of these systems, or a compromise between two or more psychic orientations, to emerge as if inside him or her there were many distinct, even opposite souls?"[7] (The Author' Translation)

According to Pascal's principle, "there is no man so different from another man as he is from himself over the course of time": the individual has the possibility to embrace a multitude of forms in a lifetime.

Dan Dediu's characters, just like Pirandello's, undergo spectacular changes both at the level of their own personality and at the level of their image created as if in a mirror in the others' conscience.

---

[5] Potra, Florian, *Elemente ale poeticii teatrale pirandelliene (The Poetics of Pirandelli's Theatre),* in vol. *Teatru* (*Theatre*) de Pirandello, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, Bucureşti 1967.

[6] Tilgher, Adriano, *Umanita e disumanita nell arte di Pirandello*, in: *Studi sul teatro contemporaneo*, Roma, 1928.

[7] Pirandello, Luigi , l'*Umorismo,* Firenze, Luigi Battiselli-Editore, 1920.

a) *Carmen* identifies Faustus with Mephistopheles, Nero, Caligula, Hitler, Stalin, even Dracula, calling him using the invective *"old, idiotic he-goat, scamp"* (Act I, scene II),

E.g. 10

while *Brunhilde* identifies Faustus with Casanova, Don Juan, a *"mild, delicate"* (Act I, scene II)

E.g. 11

224

226

character to whom she can offer her new love in this new play. *Faustus* himself, the fullest character from the point of view of human consistency, at some point loses his identity, mistaking himself for Socrates, Oedipus, Prometheus, i.e. characters belonging to the same semantic sphere of wisdom serving goodness.

      b) *Brunhilde* ever since her appearance on stage lacks an identity, but she evokes it with nostalgia (*"I used to be a Valkyrie full of vital energy, as Bergson put it in one of his works"* - Act I, scene II)

E.g. 12

and she believes herself to be, in turn, Traviata, Aida, Manon, or Miss Universe, her appearance being so confused and devoid of any distinctive marks that Othello takes her for *Cio-cio-san, Carmen* takes her for *Juliet,* and *Faustus* calls her *Lulu.* Nor does *Brunhilde* stand out from a musical point of view.

c) Although in love with *Othello*, to which she is bound by the destiny of having died, killed with a dagger, in their previous existence, in other works, Carmen, united to *Othello* for life in Dediu's work, proves that she does not know him enough since she easily mistakes him for *Dracula*.

4) In his preface to *Six Characters In Search of An Author*, Pirandello notices that *"the multiple personality of everyone corresponding to the possibilities of being to be found in each of us"* in interaction with *"the fact that these characters, having by now life in their veins, do not resign themselves to remaining excluded from the world of art"* and with the *"author who refuses to let some of his characters live"* generates *"a mixture of tragic and comic, fantastic and realistic, in a humorous situation that was quite new and infinitely complex".*[8] [6]

The same thing happens to Dan Dediu's opera characters who, before belonging to him, had belonged to some classical authors, and now they are not fully his own for they are owned by the *Dark Avenger*, spectacularly transformed from Dracula into Orpheus, and they are not even his property, but another author's high above them:

"If you don't know this yet, Post-Fiction is a game in which you have been sent in order to undermine it – says Dark Avenger.
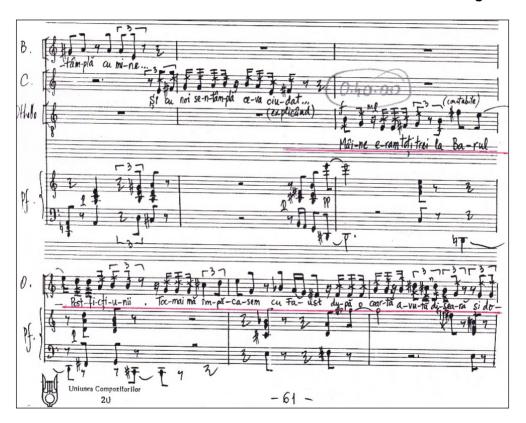
Who has sent us? asked Othello.

---

[8] Pirandello, Luigi, *Preface to Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1925), translated in English by Eric Bentley, 1950, in *Naked Masks*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1952. Available online at the address: *http://www.eldritchpress.org/lp/sixp.htm*, 10 March 2015.

Why are you asking this? The programmer, at another programmer's beck and call, who is himself a character in a greater game, in a larger computer… said Dark Avenger.

A computer the size of the Universe?" wondered Brunhilde (Act II, scene III). In the general chaos due to the conflictual state in which the characters find themselves, time loses its meaning: *"Tomorrow we were all at the Post-Fiction Bar. I had just made up with Faustus after an argument we had tomorrow night"* (Othello - Act I, scene IV).

E.g. 13

The only permanence seems to be the feeling of love which all the characters long for in their own way: Othello and Carmen with the daggers thrust in their hearts, the confused Brunhilde, Faustus himself and Dark Avenger: *"I do nothing else with the virus I have got than by means of it share love with those who are worthy of it"* (Act II, scene I).

E.g. 14

The scenes in which the tension rises to a maximum are those in which the characters simultaneously sing their own arias, just like in the theatre of the absurd.

5) Pirandello defined *l'umorismo* as "a phenomenon of doubling oneself in the act of artistic conception. The conception of a work of art is nothing else but a kind of organization of images"; "reflection becomes a little devil that dismantles the mechanism of every image, of every phantasm superimposed on a feeling; it dismantles it so as to see how it is made inside; it takes out the spring and the entire mechanism screeches spasmodically"[9] (my translation). It follows that *umorismo* includes the presence of reflection in the act of creation, and the most representative writer for the aesthetic category of *umorismo* is, according to some critics[10], Cervantes, "who has lived most dramatically the alternations between illusion and disillusion, between reality and fiction", being sometimes himself, sometimes his own character, Don Quixote. The "humorist" Dan Dediu (in a musical sense) can distance himself from his own experiences, as well as from his own characters, whom he displaces from their fictional world, and whom he decomposes into pieces of their egos, highlighting precisely their incongruities. Dediu's characters move and act like in the shadow theatre. Depending on the angle from which the light is projected, the shadows acquire different shapes, they become grotesque caricatures of the characters that generated them, mocking at the original counterparts. They are characters who make up their own drama, distinct from the one they previously lived, with so much force and will that from their place on the stage they seem to penetrate the real space, indulging in colloquialisms addressed to the author, reckoning whether their score is satisfactory or not and if the plot the author has in mind for them suits them or not:

"Faustus: I don't like the way your aria sounds at all. It is too
pompous, too romantic, too much like Verdi's.

Othello: But I think it is good. I have taken pleasure in learning it. It sounds
so beautiful! Faust: Yes, yes… Maybe excessively beautiful.
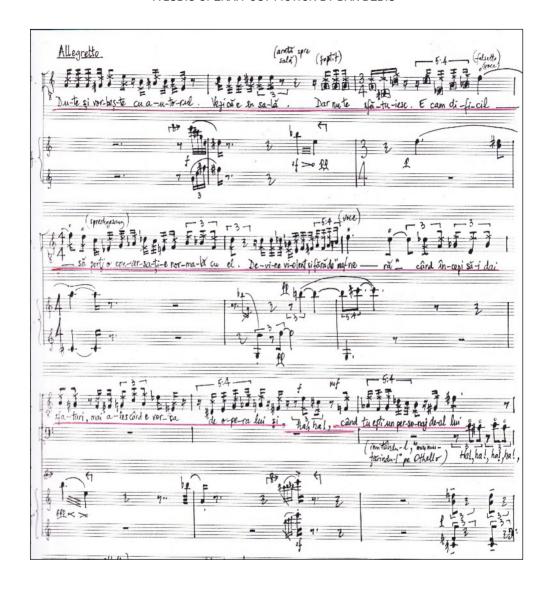
Othello: If you don't like it, I can't help you. Go and talk to the author. You'll
find him in the theatre hall. But you'd better not. It is rather difficult to
have a normal conversation with him. He tends to become violent
and to forget his manners if you start to give him advice, especially
when it comes to his work" (Act I, scene II).

---

[9] Pirandello, Luigi , *l'Umorismo,* Firenze, Luigi Battiselli - Editore, 1920.
[10] Vartic, Ion, *Spectacol interior (Inner Show)*, Editura Dacia - Cluj Napoca, 1977.

E.g. 15

234

The meaning of the author's keeping his distance from the characters can be regarded from the reverse perspective as well: the author tries to enter his own work – to this testifies the finale when he himself performs the silent movie piano accompaniment and the characters resume the same opera *da capo*, on a different plane, in which the events unfold at high speed, as if someone had pressed the fast-forward key in order to quickly go through a much too familiar video tape.

And if "parody designates a comic imitation of a serious, famous work whose topic or means of expression is targeted at"[11] [9], one can draw the conclusion that in Dan Dediu's opera the parody mode is fully exploited, busting myths, "unmaking heroes", minimizing the legend that surrounds the protagonists like an aura; the characters become the "mimes" of their own personalities, "mechanical characters". Being human, they are used as manoeuvrable and manoeuvred objects (in Ionescu's terms) precisely on account of the human need to play. Repetitions, automatisms, the means of achieving the comic mechanization of the musical discourse are the various modalities employed by Dan Dediu in order to create a kind of "Kasperlespiele für große Leute" opera, where humour and the human need to engage in games interfere with the puppet or the machine and at times border on the tragic.

Translated into English by: Adina Oana Nicolae

REFERENCES

Anghel, Irinel, *A VI a ediţie a Festivalului de muzică nouă - Pregnanţe valorice (The Sixth edition of the New Music Festival – Valuable Highlights)* în S*pectacolul muzicii - supliment al cotidianului Azi (The Music Show – a supplement of the daily newspaper Today)*, Year I, no. 69, 26th June 1996, p. 3.
Pirandello, Luigi, *Scrieri despre teatru (On Theatre)*, în vol. *Teatru (Theatre),* Editura pentru Literatura Universală, Bucureşti 1967.
Pirandello, Luigi , *l'Umorismo,* Firenze, Luigi Battiselli-Editore, 1920.
Pirandello, Luigi, *Preface to Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1925), traducere în limba engleză de Eric Bentley, 1950, in *Naked Masks*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1952. Available Online at the Address: *http://www.eldritchpress.org/lp/sixp.htm*, 10 March 2015.
Popa, Marian, *Comicologia (Comicology),* Editura Univers, Bucureşti, 1975.
Potra, Florian, *Elemente ale poeticii teatrale pirandelliene (The Poetics of Pirandelli's Theatre),* in vol. *Teatru (Theatre) de Pirandello*, Editura pentru Literatură Universală, Bucureşti 1967.
Tilgher, Adriano, *Umanita e disumanita nell arte di Pirandello*, în *Studi sul teatro contemporaneo*, Roma, 1928.
Vartic, Ion, *Spectacol interior (Inner Show)*, Editura Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1977.

---

[11] Popa, Marian, *Comicologia (Comicology)*, Editura Univers, Bucureşti, 1975.