

The musical dramaturgy of Erkki-Sven Tüür's opera *Wallenberg* and its connections with the stage interpretation

—
Maris Pajuste

Opera is a genre which consists of many different components that reach their final realization on the stage; for this reason, when analysing an opera the researcher is faced with the constant challenge of finding the most appropriate analytical method. The first question that comes to mind when analysing an opera is whether it is enough simply to concentrate on the score, or whether one should also consider the theatre-specific side, namely the staging.

The German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus argued that, especially in the case of contemporary opera, it is essential first to explore the musical dramaturgy of the composition so as to create a clear sense of content and structure by finding the most important connection points between the drama and the music. Stage production analysis is a fairly new phenomenon in the operatic field; however, as the visual side of musical theatre is nowadays becoming more and more significant, this naturally calls for descriptions of the staging and scenography of a production.

Focusing on Erkki-Sven Tüür's opera *Wallenberg* (2001), in my analysis I will attempt to connect the musical dramaturgy to the staging. I will consider the libretto and its connections with the music, and then examine how these lines are interpreted in the staging. In doing so I will concentrate first on the structure of the opera/staging and then on the characters or character groups. For the staging I have chosen Dmitri Bertman's production at the Estonian National Opera (2007).

The opera is divided into two acts and nineteen scenes: eleven scenes in the first act, eight in the second. One of the most important aspects in examining the opera's structure is the juxtaposition of real/unreal, German/Russian and Wallenberg/non-Wallenberg across the two acts (i.e. from the first to the second). In the first act the events follow a chronological order; the second act is governed by a more abstract progression of time.

In the music as well as in the stage production, this contrast between the two acts is largely defined by the position of the main character, Wallenberg. As the "real" Wallenberg gradually disappears in the second act, his vocal intervention also decreases. The staging offers a profound interpretation of this idea: to show the incapability of the "real" Wallenberg to take action in what is happening around him – eventually becoming a made-up media martyr – he is "imprisoned" in a cage separated from the rest of the stage throughout the second act (until his full disappearance after the contact with his pop-version, Wallenberg 2).

Surprisingly, Bertman's stage production does not emphasise the contrasting planes of reality and unreality between the two acts, but rather uses generalized figures. Nevertheless, the second act has noticeably less busy stage activity; this contrast is also defined by the music, which becomes temporally more static.

Despite the use of generalized figures, however, the thematic distinction between the acts is still profoundly marked. At the end of the first act, with the phone call from the Russian officers, the stage is gradually filled with red light – symbolizing the Soviet Union – and a red cloth falls from the ceiling. The maintaining of the tension is also implied by the music: the nervously rising *glissando* passages in the strings and the high trills in the woodwind create a sense of anxiety which culminates in the heavy chords of the brass.

In the opera's treatment of character the principle of contrast turns out to be the most important aspect, clearly differentiating Wallenberg from the other characters. The libretto highlights the contradiction between Wallenberg and each of his enemies: while he is dynamic and humane, they are, in turn, mechanical, technical, bureaucratic, and cruel. The contrast is firmly accentuated in the music: the negative characters are portrayed by motoric, pulsating rhythms (mechanic one-sidedness), vigorous brass motifs, and grotesque musical material. Wallenberg's music, on the other hand, is exemplified by a flowing and diversified sense of metre.

As one of Wallenberg's most important characteristics is his contrast with the other characters, a close connection with the Jews and the Woman stands out. Wallenberg and the Jews share a static orchestral background, while his characteristic instrumentation is shared with that of the Woman.

The principle of contrast is also exemplified in the stage production – most profoundly by the costumes, which serve to create both connection and contrast between the characters. Negative characters are portrayed in shiny, pompous clothing and make-up. The Germans wear a futuristic-looking black military uniform and carry light sabres; the diplomats wear golden ball gowns; and the Russians, glittery red costumes. The mechanical and calculating character of the Germans is most extremely exemplified in Eichmann's costume and baroque wig as well as in his slow, tense movements.

In contrast to these characters, Wallenberg's simple and laconic white suit creates a recognizable antipode. However, Wallenberg does not wear the white suit throughout the whole opera. From the final scene of the first act onwards, the main character changes from his suit into the robe of the Jews; this stresses the connection between the Jews and Wallenberg, which is also heard in the music. The connection between the Woman and Wallenberg is made apparent by a very interesting detail: in both scenes of the first act in which the Woman appears, she leaves something of hers to Wallenberg.

Another very important keyword in considering the negative characters is *grotesque*, which is most clearly shown through the ironic character of Wallenberg 2, his pop version. Even the music refers to popular music – motoric rhythms, the use of a bass-synthesizer as a leading instrument, and the rather "nice" sounding musical material. Wallenberg 2 is presented as the epitome of pop, an admired star: he takes the stage dressed in an Elvis costume.

The ideal opera production reveals the composition as a series of dramatic events derived from all aspects of the written text, that is, both the libretto and the score. An analysis of an opera production should therefore unveil the research object in a similar manner to reveal how the musical dramaturgy and the concurrence of staging and scenography are in a state of symbiosis. The musicality of the stage production at the Estonian National Opera – its metaphorical language and the knowledge of how to work with the singers to accentuate the relationship between the different roles – has served to bring the interpretation of *Wallenberg* to a new, deeper level of discussion.