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Interview with Ryszard Peryt by Layla Haroon

on the occasion of "Don Giovanni" premiere

during the 8th Al-Ain Classical Music Festival

'Opera as Oasis'

World tours and recording sessions aside, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's compositions has given a lot of fuel for performances to the musical personalities. So it has to the famous Polish opera director Ryszard Peryt.

Born on 9th March 1947 in Zielona Góra, Ryszard Peryt - the only artist to have performed all stage works of WA Mozart - adds more beauty to the original stage works of famous composers. The system of his work integrates the musical score with his assiduous visual percept; and this fusion together with captivating performance gives soul to the entire dramatic play.

Faces stired with emotions, souls soaked in passion, spirits drawing the decisive moments and receptors responding to the stimulus of the play are the contemplations one can sense of the spectators during his direction.

His opera performances is regarded as a body for the music; as he creates theatre from music, where music phrases, figures, structure of work are reflected in the movement, topography and stylistics of a performance.

On March 6th as the curtain raises on the 8th Al-Ain Classical Music Festival the most famous WA Mozart's opera "Don Giovanni" in Arabic will be performed under his directorship. The unique co production, whose libretto has been translated by an Egyptian musicologist Dr. Aly Sadek, is expected to introduce a new generation of Arabs to the art of opera.

It is joined by the Arabic singers from different opera companies of Europe, USA and the Middle East. A mixed choir from Lebanon and The Warsaw National Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra conducted by Maestro Zbigniew Graca will also participate in the performance.

Ryszard Peryt speaks to City Times about his unique sense of identity.

What actually fascinates you in music? How and where did you first start acting and stage performance?

I have been always fond of music and theatre. As a young boy in my hometown, I had, together with my mates, a court yard theatre called "Cranks". We got an old military tent to show circus tricks...I have a theatre bug. As a child I also played the violin.

Then, during my acting and directing studies at the Warsaw Theatre Academy, together with some of my friends we established the Academic Circle. We embarked on theatrical experiments and performed in the Academy. It was time of People's Republic of Poland. We played dramas forbidden by the authorities and the chancellor suspended our activity soon.

However, directly after the studies we decided to open our own theatre to continue the work. It was exciting job! We used to work twelve hours a day, rehearsing, performing, preparing costumes and sets, painting play-bills and hanging them in the city centre. We managed to work like this for a few years. Censorship in the province wasn't as efficient as in the capital of Poland. Finally the authorities closed down the theatre because of political reasons, officially because of artistic qualities. But the theatre was run by outstanding performers, acclaimed later in Poland and Europe...this is how I am here.

What is the difference between the both genres of acting – theatrical drama and opera?

The difference is cardinal. I know it from my own experience because I am also an actor. Theatrical acting is more “subjective” than the opera one, where we have a score with concrete intervals, specified duration of sounds etc. It is obligatory.

You either toss in tune or out of tune, sing either long enough, or too short/long. If this structure, created by a composer is followed by a conductor, director and singer, we have a common territory. We have a chance to communicate with each other objectively; unlike the drama theatre.

Whereas, a drama text is not as objective as a score; an actor can feel differently from a director. One can say a line shorter or longer, higher or lower, with breaks or without them. It is up to his or her intuition and sensibility.

What is more, even opera singing techniques, vocal exercises are more objective than in drama theatre, where training in fact consists in opening imagination and stirring up some imitative techniques. They can obviously be creative. And last, a big role in a drama theatre plays psychological thinking, which is secondary in the opera. Priority is here the structural thinking, as in mathematic.

Which one do you find more interesting?

I direct both: theatre and opera, as well as oratory works. But, music and especially opera is close to mathematic in this meaning. They both call immaterial reality. The metaphysics in music absorbs me greatly. Possibility of utter these realities, which can not be revealed neither in poetry, nor in the fine arts. Opera is for me the special space where one has a chance to incorporate spirituality. It happens very rarely and obviously there are also a lot of ugly productions contrary to the opera meaning.

But they say that opera libretti are banal?

Some of them are really like this, e.g. some of 19th century's libretti, but there are also clever ones. I try to look after the best works. There is a canon of three composers for me: Monteverdi, Mozart and Verdi. I reckon that everything in the opera history takes after their output. In these works even banal libretti are compliant with a supreme, spiritual structure.

Much of your repertoire is of Baroque and classic and sometimes early (contemporary music). In midst of this how do you figure out your interest in regards to contemporary and onetime music?

Early Baroque music is compliant with a word. It serves the word's expression. You can say that the music “incorporates” the word, or precisely its spiritual meaning.

As I said, everything in the opera is written out in the score. That is, while I'm planning a performance, I first read the score; not a libretto. I don't read it as a musicologist, composer, or conductor. I call my system of creating theatre from the score as “incorporating the score” where I pay utmost attention to its theatrical hints to make the work with opera similar to searching the body for the soul.

If one manages to create theatrical reality of the opera in such way that it's fully submerged in the music, derives its all energy and shape from it, then the sung word - libretto - finds its right time and place.

What actually is opera directing?

"Opera" in Latin means "work" but also "serving". Once I found it out, I also understood that opera directing means "serving through the work". One should obviously know to whom he or she serves. For me it is God. This is my life's way.

Any music lacking this point of reference doesn't interest me. That's why I rarely direct contemporary operas. There are, though, in the midst of them a few works where this context is present.

Generally speaking, I think that in art most important than "how" you create is "what" you create. If you manage to call "what" you create, you will know "how" to do it.

The base of any successful operatic performance...

I reckon that a performance should be crystal clear as a clear glass. It doesn't have to focus our attention on its beauty but direct it to what is behind the window. The performance should show us spiritual reality written in the score. At the same time, it obviously has to be theatrically attractive, too. But, I feel, that is not essential. Like beautiful music, which reflects upper harmony?

In recent years you have been carrying out projects that are on the border of the theatre. How many projects do you have in your repertoire at the moment? What projects are you looking to work on in the near future?

I plan a premiere of "Via Sancta", jazz oratorio devoted to Holy Father John Paul II, which will be staged in April 2, for 3rd anniversary of his death in the National Theatre. It is very important project for me.

Next after this two chamber opera openings: "The Beggar's opera" by Britten and "Hansel and Gretchen" by Humperdinck, being prepared in the frame of my author project "Poor Opera". In the beginning of next season I have two stage adaptations of cantata-oratory works: recently discovered Mozart oratorio and cantata by Polish composer Stanislaw Moniuszko "Phantoms", to the texts of Polish classic, Adam Mickiewicz. All of them are in Poland.

What elements do you think are there is Mozart's music that fascinated you to such an extent that today you have mark your name as the only artist to have perform all stage works of WA Mozart?

Mozart works are full of the essentials we've been talking about. I came across his scores for the first time in a prison, where I was sent because of my oppositional activity against the government of People's Republic of Poland. It was nearly 40 years ago. My friends wanted to pull my leg and sent me a package with "Requiem" score...I started reading it and it fascinated me. Then I reached for more.

I noticed that in his opera, scores is not only music, but also theatre. It was my dream to carry out them whole my life...This dream has came true.

Of the many operas based on the legend of Don Juan, Don Giovanni is thought to be beyond comparison. What characteristic property defines the apparent individual nature of this opera?

“Don Giovanni” is one of the greatest music and theatre masterpieces. Its splendid libretto construction by Lorenzo da Ponte harmonizes with divine musical construction. “Horizontal” anecdote crosses “vertical” musical message of the work. The crosscut of “horizontal” and “vertical” gives the Cross. “Don Giovanni” is the opera, where this deep Cross structure is the best visible from the whole Mozart’s output.

In the philosophical meaning, questions set by Lorenzo da Ponte in the libretto and by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in the music, reaches the ultimate boundaries. The question of the opera is existence of God and presence of metaphysics in physical reality. The questions are also boundaries of human curiosity: how far is one allowed to explore reality in his subjective understanding of the Mystery.

Mozart answers that it should be bound by obedience and humility towards the Mystery. A man is allowed to discover only “secrets” of reality. The Mystery should be unsolved, if one is to keep his human-status. These are the questions which I together with my newly met Arabian culture friends, would like to raise as a matter of the performance.

"Opera in Arabic" is an international project which is going to present in future other Mozart's opera in the Arabic language like "Le Nozze di Figaro" and "The Magic Flute". What role are you playing in its realization?

I hope that the project will succeed in realization of my quiet dream: gathering people, for whom ultimate values are still important and vivid. Such meeting is possible between people of West Christian Culture and East Muslim Culture. It would be like a desert oasis, where the source of vivid water is Mozart. As the peculiar patron, who opens the two far sides to each other – in the spirit of the Truth – in short, Al Ain Mozart Centre, I am supposed to be the project’s artistic director and a spiritual guide of sorts.

IN THE KNOW

Don Giovanni, a young nobleman, after a life of amorous conquests, meets defeat in his three encounters: with Donna Elvira, whom he has deserted but still follows him; with Donna Anna, whose father, the Commendatore, Giovanni kills in escaping from a successful attempt at rape and as a result postpones her marriage to Don Ottavio; and with Zerlina, whom he vainly tries to lure from her fiancé, the peasant Masetto. All vow vengeance on the Don and his harassed servant Leporello. Elvira alone weakens in her resolution and attempts reconciliation and hope that the Don reforms. Don Giovanni's destruction and deliverance to hell are effected by the cemetery statue of the Commendatore, who had accepted the libertine's invitation to supper. Last supper...

Event: Don Giovanni opera in Arabic

Date: March 6th, 2008

Location: Al Ain’s Municipality Theatre.

Timings: 8.00 pm

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