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OPERA – ORATORIO *OEDIPUS REX* BY STRAVINSKY AND THE GREEK ORIGINAL

ABSTRACT. Skwara Ewa, Opera – Oratorio *Oedipus Rex* by Stravinsky and the Greek Original.

This article is a voice in the discussion on the methods of stage implementation of Greek tragedy. The discussed staging of *Oedipus Rex* opera by Stravinsky (Tokyo'94) is dominated by non-verbal means of expression (music, set design, costume, stage movement), thus setting a supporting role for the libretto. Nevertheless, the performance arouses similar feelings and emotions as Sophocles' drama.

Keywords: Greek tragedy; Sophocles; *Oedipus Rex*; ancient performances; Igor Stravinsky; opera.

Classical philologists have for a long time struggled to reach a consensus about the methods of stage realisation of the Greek tragedy. Two opposite stances in this dispute are represented by two great philologists: Tadeusz Zieliński and Stefan Srebrny.¹

Srebrny was a proponent of showing possibly faithful re-enactments of antique performances. He believed that one should strive to reconstruct the original spectacle, or at least one that in its staging would be consistent with the poet's intentions. Zieliński, however, thought Greek tragedy should be given a new theatrical shape. He argued that the historical reconstruction of the performance Srebrny wished for would also require the resurrection of the ancient spectator. The fundamental difference between the audience of the 5th century B.C.E. and that of today consists primarily in a different way they perceive the world with their senses. In antiquity, the strongest stimuli were received by the sense of hearing, which, in addition, was the basis for transmitting scientific knowledge. Actors learned their roles by heart, repeating their lines after the poet, and not from written text; the whole of antiquity read aloud, as they did not know reading by sight. So, the spoken word had great impact in antiquity, a power to build plastic and colourful visions. Today's audience has been brought up in conditions of radical separation between that which is seen and that which is heard: the words bring only dialogue without any additional information

¹Axer 1991, 39–47.

about what is being shown as the image is cropped, focused, shown precisely on the screen and by itself acts on the sense of sight. It must be added that the contemporary spectator also reacts differently to gestures and words than the ancient one, although the gestures and words remained the same. Zieliński argued that since the audience had changed, the stimuli must be changed, too. He postulated a translation of one spectacle form into another, in which new, different means of expression would evoke the reaction intended by the author of the drama.

An excellent example of this practise is *Oedipus Rex* by Igor Stravinsky.² The idea of composing this opera-oratorio was conceived in 1925, when Stravinsky, coming back to Nice from the Venice Festival, stayed in Genoa, and there he bought a book by Johannes Jørgensen about St. Francis of Assisi. It became a source of inspiration, as he read in it that “the saint, in moments of grave solemnity and importance, or when his heart was to full of emotion to use coarse common language, spoke in Provençal dialect.”³ This gave Stravinsky the idea to use Latin which is “an object not inanimate, but petrified, statuesque, resistant to any vulgarization.”⁴ In his memoirs, he wrote: “What a joy to compose music for a language commonly received, almost ritualistic, with which grandeur appears spontaneously.”⁵ There was yet another reason why Latin proved to give a most graceful framework. Stravinsky dreamed of using syllabic chant, where the language would only provide phonetic material, and the composer would not be limited by the meaning of words and sentences. For this, Latin was perfectly suited – Stravinsky assumed that as a dead language it would be unintelligible through direct reception from the stage, and therefore he treated it as a perfect phonetic frame which would not stifle by any means his work. However, he had no idea which ancient drama to choose. He left the decision to his friend Jean Cocteau, who recommended Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, and Jean Danielou was committed to write the Latin libretto.

The opera version of Oedipus’ history was based most faithfully on the Greek tragedy. The sequence of events and arrangement of scenes were not altered, and even some phrases and expressions remained unchanged. And yet, the Latin libretto cannot match its model in any respect, because from the ample play of more than fifteen hundred verses the librettist left only some statements which, admittedly, inform about the development of events, but strip the text of the tragic irony so characteristic of Sophocles, and utterly deprive it of its suspense. The more than two-hundred-verse-long supplications of both the Priest and Chorus for Oedipus to free Thebes from the plague were reduced

² Stravinsky, *Oedipus Rex*, 1948.

³ Vlad 1974, 125–6.

⁴ Vlad 1974, 125–6.

⁵ Stravinsky 1974, 123.

in the libretto to expressions “aedit nos pestis” and “serva nos a peste, libera urbem.” Furthermore, the subtle game played by Oedipus who by every means tries to force Teiresias to reveal the truth is reduced to one sentence: “takiturnitas t’accusat: tu peremptor.” The same holds for the famous scene in which Jocasta undermines Teiresias’ credibility, and tries to convince Oedipus that auguries do not always come true. As an argument, she uses a prophecy once obtained by Laius, that he will be killed by his own son, and yet, as Jocasta reveals, he died at the hands of some ruffins at the crossroads. Still, this prophecy stirs up even greater unrest in Oedipus’ heart, as he remembers that it was at the crossroads that he once killed an old man. So, there follows a series of questions about the age, dress, persons accompanying the king, witnesses to the murder. Tension mounts and a terrible suspicion arises. This is Sophocle’s original. The libretto, however, gives only two sentences: “pavesco subito. Ego senem kekidi cum Corintho exkederem, kekidi in trivio, kekidi senem.” And that is more or less the type of treatment all the scenes in the Latin version.

The Latin of the libretto is also quite wanting. Apart from spelling “c” as “k”, arguably introduced for the sake of the soloists, it is worthwhile to have a look at the lexis and syntax. A number of phrases and expressions were taken from Seneca’s *Oedipus*, like for instance: “peremptor Regis” (v. 217), “Laium ulcisci” (v. 218) or “tacere liceat” (v. 523).⁶ Most of the sentences, however, resemble linguistic exercises for the use of conjunctive in the main sentence (“Utinam ne dikeret”, “Creo ne commoretur”), or coniugatio periphrastica passiva or activa (“Cui rex interfakiendus est?”, “Non est consulendum”, “Reskiturus sum”). And the most familiar phrase by far is the greeting with which the chorus welcomes Creon: “Audituri te salutant” – not unfamiliar to even the greatest layman.

A story which sounds more like headlines of gutter press would surely be a failure in the ancient theatre. One must not forget, however, that in Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex*, the word was assigned a minor, not to say inferior, role. As a matter of fact, the composer assumed beforehand that the Latin libretto would not be the carrier of content, and the storyline will be furnished by a speaker-narrator who will explain in the audience’s native language (French in the original version) which scene will take place on the stage. So, Latin was hidden behind music, costume, set design, and stage movement, and only with all these elements combined was it supposed to create a spectacle matching Sophocles’ tragedy.

Stravinsky began writing the score in January 1926, and finished it on 14th March the following year. He was in a hurry, because its world première was scheduled at the time of Diaghilev’s Paris performances, which in May 1927 were to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Les Ballets Russes founder’s activity. In addition, *Oedipus Rex* was to be a stage design debut of Stravinsky’s son, Theodore. However, the rush and lack of money foiled the plans, and the work

⁶All quotations by Seneca, *Oedipus*, in: *Seneca’s Tragedies*, London 1960.

was only staged as oratorio, i.e. statically, without any costumes or set design, thereby focussing the spectator's attention on the text. To make matters worse, it was squeezed in between two acts of Diaghilev's vivid ballets, and only received chilly applause. This comes as no surprise, as the performance's greatness was based on its spectacularity, and not the libretto which by definition was only a pretext for the music and plastic effects.

Stravinsky had his own vision of antique drama; with minute accuracy he determined the shape of the opera, even leaving drawings and sketches. He wanted the stage to be deprived of any depth, and the characters to appear in masks, draped robes and cothurni. Any movement was to be reduced to a necessary minimum. The main figures of the drama, Oedipus and Jocasta, were to appear and disappear through a star trap. The composer wanted their passiveness to become a symbol of not being able to resist the fatal powers of destiny. Only Teiresias, the Messenger and the Shephard could enter as the only ones not subject to destiny, and acting as its tools. The chorus was to be nameless and faceless, so Stravinsky suggested covering them with parchment scrolls from the score. The composer envisioned this opera as a series of motionless pictures rendering through their static character Sophocles' feeling of the tragic destiny which reigns over human beings. These assumptions were not fulfilled by the first oratorio performance. The world première of *Oedipus Rex* as an opera was held only on 25th February 1928. It was produced at the Berlin Staatsoper by Otto Klemperer, who largely complied with the composer's remarks and hints concerning the staging. More than half a century later, in 1992, the Tokyo Opera prepared *Oedipus Rex* by strictly adhering not only to Stravinsky's hints, but also taking advantage of the anniversary of the world première and including ballet as well as their own theatre traditions into the production.⁷

The set design was reduced to a huge three-plane stage, whose main part is made up of a several-storey openwork podium. The centre-stage is located below and in front of it. Most of the dramatic events take place there. Over the stage, there hangs a huge shield on which the ballet conveys through gesture and movement what statically happens underneath. Hence, the performance unfolds in two planes: operatic and ballet ones, which intertwine when the opera singers enter, and dancers descend to the podium. The set design is complemented by extras, who wrapped in grey ragged bandages, as if struck down with raging plague, lie motionless at the foot of the podium in theatrical smoke. They constitute a vivid and plastic picture of what can be read in Sophocles:

You can see life after life speed away, like a bird on the wing, swifter than irresistible fire, to the shore of the western god. With such deaths, past numbering, the city perishes. Unpitied, her children lie on the ground, spreading pestilence, with no one to mourn them. (v. 173–178)⁸

⁷The performance was conducted by Seiji Ozawa (Tokyo 1992).

⁸Sophocles, *The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles*, 1887.

Props play a considerable role. When the chorus grieves over the plague-stricken city, huge birds, which seem to fall down like vultures and circle over the dying Thebes, descend from above. And when Oedipus is calming down his subjects by mentioning that once he liberated them from the Sphinx, there appears a huge mythical monster on the stage, elevated by means of a frame used for Japanese dragons. This is not the only instance of intertwining and mixing of the antique and oriental traditions. It's best visible in costumes.

The opera soloists are dressed in robes resembling kimonos. Costume shoulders are enlarged and raised up to ear level, and broad sleeves reach palm tips. The Greek theatre tradition has left its mark here, too. On the top of their heads, the singers carry big face-masks showing the protagonists they play, and from the sleeves there appear equally big, yet proportional hands. The entirety gives the impression of full harmony. Raising and broadening the shoulders, adding big hands, topping the face-mask half a metre above the actor's face gave the same effect that cothurni had given to ancient Greeks. Particular attention should be paid to the costume of Teiresias, who as a blind man has his eyes painted not on the mask, but inside his palms. The chorus, like the extras, are wrapped in ragged bandages also covering part of the face. This way, they become a nameless crowd deprived of their faces, as requested by Stravinsky.

In addition, the costume becomes an important element of acting. This is the case in the scene of Jocasta's suicide. Both in the Greek drama, and the Latin libretto, the queen's death is only reported on, and the spectator does not see her on stage. In the Japanese performance, Jocasta appears during the part of the chorus describing this dramatic event. Servants bind her face-mask with sashes hanging from the ceiling, and the Oedipus-dancer takes out big pins stuck in her headgear. Suddenly, the sashes are raised, and the huge mask with a long veil shoots into the air to dramatically depict the type of death the queen chose – hanging.

Thanks to the set design and ballet, the show gains the Sophoclean suspense of which the libretto was deprived. Throughout the performance, the opera and the ballet planes are getting closer to each other, to be united in the last scene of the eye gouging. The Oedipus-dancer, holding Jocasta's hairpins, approaches the Oedipus-singer and stabs the pins into the mask's eye sockets. After both Oedipi unite, muslin curtains in colours ranging from signal red to deep purple fall down. The Oedipus-dancer with bleeding eye sockets leaves the city which has finally been bestowed with rain by the gods.

Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, although being a modest substitute of the Greek original with respect to the libretto, as a whole presents feelings and emotions intended by great Sophocles. Arguably, this is so because of combining word with music, set design, costume, and stage movement, which act upon the modern spectator more expressively. This depiction of the tragedy must be treated as yet another form of "translation", not the first one and not the last. To

this day Greek theatre fires up the imagination of composers who are looking for new ways to convey the contents and emotions found in Greek tragedy. Worth mentioning here is the opera by Mikis Theodorakis, *Elektra*, in which the composer, faithful to Sophocles' version, used a wide range of other non-verbal means of expression.⁹

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Summary

The article analyzes the Japanese production of Stravinsky's *King Oedipus* in context of Tadeusz Zieliński's (1858–1944) theory on staging ancient tragedies. This Greek theater researcher and one of the greatest Polish classical philologists was opposed to the idea of faithfully reconstructing the original performance one might have seen in antiquity, and strongly advocated the use of modern, contemporary means of expression to achieve the same effect on the audience as would have been achieved in the ancient theater.

Stravinsky's opus staged in Tokyo (1992) provides a good example of this practice. The libretto itself comprises of one-sided statements that inform the viewer of the developments in the story and of the characters of the protagonists, but in no way does it reflect the complex issues of Sophocles' tragedy. It is only in combination with the musical side of this work that the audience can understand the atmosphere of the dying city and the dramatic entanglement of the heroes. In the Tokyo staging, the traditions of ancient theater and Japanese theater are merged together: in addition to typical ancient masks, placed, however, on the top of the head, the actors appear with painted faces, and the costumes refer to traditional Japanese attire like the kimono. The additional introduction of ballet, which by means of gestures simultaneously presents the plot points played out between the singers, gives the opera the form of a multidimensional spectacle.

This staging of Stravinsky's *King Oedipus* evokes the feelings and emotions intended by Sophocles.

⁹The première was held at the Poznan Opera House, October 1994.